

Elyria Out of Nowhere

1912

By PFRA Research

The 1912 season saw a number of important and drastic changes in the rules of football. Ten-yard zones were established beyond each goal line creating for the first time actual "end zones;" a runner scoring a touchdown had merely to cross the plane of the goal line but, as the forward pass became more popular, it necessitated allocating a "space" for a receiver to legally catch a pass over the goal line. Apparently because the new end zones would extend the length of the field beyond the space available in some college stadiums, the playing field itself was shortened from 110 yards to 100 from goal line to goal line.

Offenses were aided when the number of downs allowed to gain ten yards and a first down was increased from three to four. The value of a touchdown also increased from five to six points. These two changes had the effect of reducing the importance of kicking, and, although it would take many years for strategists to catch up, they produced a game that would be more easily recognized as "football" by a modern fan.

The quality of pro football played in Ohio in 1910-11 was probably of no higher grade than that played in several other states. However, 1912 has been referred to as the "rebirth year" for Ohio pro football. No great teams emerged, but there were more good teams than ever before. In the south, the Cincinnati Celts improved and the Columbus Panhandles and Dayton Oakwoods could be relied upon. To the west, Toledo had a couple of representative semi-pro outfits. But the main upgrading took place in the northeast section of the state.

Fans often referred to the "Ohio League" as though it was a real entity. There was never anything official about it, and its makeup changed from year to year. Essentially, the "league" was made up of those teams that were strong enough to be considered "major". In any given year after 1912, that usually involved from three to five teams in northeastern Ohio and, depending on their fortunes, one or two from Columbus, Cincinnati, Dayton, or Toledo.

The so-called "championship", which was every bit as unofficial as the "league," was granted by a consensus of sportswriters and other "experts" along lines that had been used ever since the 1890's, and are similar to the criteria used by the wire services in their college polls today. Rank depended more on which team defeated what other team than it did on total won-lost record. For example, a win over Canton was worth two or three victories over lesser teams. Sometimes timing played a part. If two teams with equal records split a pair of games, the winner of the second was usually ranked higher. Under these circumstances, several seasons saw more than one team claiming the championship after its final game.

By now, Peggy Parratt had become the main force in Ohio pro ranks. He decided to leave Shelby in 1912 and accept an offer to coach and star for the Akron A.C. Indians. When Key Wilson, the Indians' manager, died during the season, Parratt took over that role too. Some of his Shelby players went with him to Akron. Others split off to join the Elyria Athletics. The Athletics never made a ripple in the football stream before or after 1912, but for that one season, stocked with former Blues, they won all eight of their games to become state champs. Meanwhile, a strong team remained in Shelby and Parratt put together a winner at Akron.

Some historians have credited Parratt with having a "master plan," predicated on the idea that a number of competitive teams in the field would spark fan interest and increase crowds. Whether he went so far as to have a hand in Elyria's sudden strength is doubtful, but his method in building a team showed that he had one eye on the gate. He kept a cadre of loyal stars to fill a few key positions. The rest of the lineup depended on the caliber of opposition. If his Indians faced a weak team, he'd employ inexpensive locals. Against a stronger opponent, he'd bring in better players. He would play with just enough to win, so the scores of his games were usually close. Occasionally, he'd miscalculate and lose, but such errors of judgment were rare. The result of all his dealing was that every other team wanted to "beat Parratt." And because such a result was a possibility, his games drew good crowds.

Parratt's major rival as a football entrepreneur was Jack Cusack of Canton. Indirectly, Parratt played a part in putting him in charge of Canton's football fortunes. During the 1912 season, Canton's Manager H.H. Halter could not reach agreement with Parratt to arrange a Canton-Akron game. Small wonder! After the way Halter had withheld Shelby's \$250 in 1911, Parratt plainly didn't trust the man. On the other hand, Parratt was "a hard man to do business with when it came to dividing the gate receipts," according to Jack Cusack. "He liked to divide the money half-horse and half-rabbit, his preference being the horse end."

Finally, Parratt refused to talk to Halter at all and met instead with Cusack, who was Canton's unpaid secretary-treasurer. After five hours, they hammered out a satisfactory contract. Instead of thanking Cusack, Halter was highly miffed at Cusack's presumption. He called a meeting of the team and demanded that they choose between him and Cusack. At this point Cusack let it be known that he had personally secured a five-year lease on League Park, the only really adequate football arena in town. Only a couple of Canton players decided to sink with Halter; the rest welcomed their new manager, Cusack.

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Before the season began, the Elyria A.C. was not considered a candidate for state honors. In truth, they weren't considered at all. As far as Akron, Shelby, and Canton were concerned, the Elyria Athletics football team didn't exist. When the Athletics opened their season in early October with a 39-0 win over the Erin Braus of Cleveland, it barely rated a mention in the newspapers in the contenders' cities. The Erin Braus figured to be a soft touch for any self-respecting team. Canton had opened against them in September, and though they'd only managed a 13-0 win, the scoring was held down more by a muddy field than by the Erin Braus' defense.

A week later, Elyria slaughtered the Toledo Broadways 102-0. With that, everyone had to take notice. The Canton *Repository* identified the Athletics as one of "Canton's rivals for professional gridiron honors." Others were the Akron Indians, Shelby Blues, and the Toledo Overlands. Although all the contenders had won on that particular Sunday, the *Repository* insisted that none of the others "had opponents as strong as the [Columbus] Panhandles," whom Canton had downed 25-6. Peggy Parratt's Akron club had stopped the Toledo Maroons 27-3 with "a strong attack." Shelby added several college players and ran off 68 points against a weak Kenton A.C. club. The Overlands defeated the Detroit Wolverines when the ubiquitous "Bullet" Riley grabbed a fumble at Detroit's three and ran it across for a touchdown. Victories over Detroit teams always sounded more impressive than the deserved to be, and the Overlands were soon out of the race.

Elyria's topping the century mark in points was the surprise of the day. The *Repository* article noted it took fifteen touchdowns and twelve goals (PAT's) to total 102 points in case anyone forgot that the worth of a TD had gone up from five to six points for the 1912 season. "Forward passes and trick plays gained well for Elyria," the article said. "Koehle, end, once grabbed a forward and ran 85 yards for a touchdown.

"Collins, the Notre Dame fullback who starred with Shelby against Canton last fall, was the star Sunday. Several times he got away for long runs of 40 to 70 yards. Once he carried the kick-off to the Toledo five-yard line." Also starring in the Elyria backfield were Ed Kagy and Dwight Wertz, both from Western Reserve, and Homer Davidson, the famous quarterback-kicker. Davidson, Kagy, Wertz, and Collins had all been counted in the Shelby camp at the beginning of the season.

A week later, Canton got its chance to run up a big score, defeating hapless Willoughby 105-0. The losers came to League Park touted as one of the strongest aggregations from Cleveland. Obviously someone lied. One Canton newspaper called the parade of touchdowns against the visitors "sickening." When it became obvious that no competition was being provided, Canton coach Harry Blythe ordered his quarterback Pat Steiner to go to the passing game exclusively. Steiner threw and threw until his arm got tired, piling up six TD throws.

Meanwhile, the Shelby Blues went to Akron and handed Peggy Parratt's Indians a 14-7 defeat. A good crowd of 4,000 showed up to see a game that turned more on muscle than skill. Joe Collins,

the former Notre Dame fullback who had run wild for Elyria the week before, appeared for Akron. He was knocked out of the game when he was "accidentally" kicked in the face causing a gash that required six stitches over his left eye. Each team scored a touchdown on a forward pass, but the key play of the game came when the Akron quarterback playing in place of Parratt mishandled a punt at his own twenty. Shelby recovered and pushed over a cheap touchdown.

The fact that Collins and halfback Dwight Wertz who appeared earlier for Elyria were in the Akron lineup raised some suspicions. The Canton *Repository* insisted for most of the season that Elyria's Coach Homer Davidson was only a front man. Parratt was behind the team, the *Repository* said, and he would combine the Athletics with his Akron Indians when it came time to play Canton.

However, when Parratt brought his team to Canton's League Park for the game he'd arranged with Jack Cusack, he had nary an Elyrian in his lineup. Frank Nesser of the Columbus Panhandles and Stan Wells, a well-known end from Michigan, were on the field for the Indians, but the star of the game proved to be Pendleton, a big tackle from Oberlin. His bull-like, tackle-around rushes in the second half were the difference as Akron came from behind to win 19-6.

A week later, Pendleton and Wells were both in the Elyria lineup, along with Collins and Wertz, when Elyria came to Akron. Pendleton was the defensive star of the game, personally crunching the Akron ground attack. After a scoreless first half, Ed Kagy of Elyria circled end and raced 85 yards to a touchdown. Later, Wertz sealed the 14-0 win by galloping 90 yards with an intercepted pass. The win proved costly. Coach and quarterback Homer Davidson went down with a shoulder injury that practically ended his season.

Meanwhile, Canton got back on the winning track by besting previously unbeaten Shelby 25-13. The feature of the game was a seventy-yard touchdown run by Canton halfback Dick Van Allman, but the real key was Shelby's propensity to fumble.

By mid-November, Elyria was 4-0; Canton 7-1; Shelby 5-1, and Akron 5-2. Despite their undefeated record, Elyria's only victory over an important team was their defeat of Parratt's Indians. The championship race was still up in the air.

On November 17, Elyria easily topped the Toledo Maroons 21-0; the Maroons had moved back in as the top Toledo team over the slumping Overlands, and Elyria's victory eliminated that part of the state from the championship race. At the same time, Shelby edged the Dayton Oakwoods 7-3. With the Columbus Panhandles limping through an off year, the Oakwoods had become the only title threat from southern Ohio.

The most important game of the day was at Nolan's Park in Akron where the Indians defeated Canton 14-7. The game wasn't as close as the score. Akron's "Muff" Portmann, a tackle from Western Reserve, opened large holes in the Canton line and halfbacks Frank Nesser, imported from the Panhandles, and Tony Wein tore through for a pair of second half touchdowns. The Indians were on the verge of scoring a third touchdown in the final minute of play

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when Canton's "Ducky" Terrett picked off an Akron pass at his own fifteen and ran 85 yards for a cosmetic touchdown.

On the Sunday before Thanksgiving, Akron hosted Shelby and put the Blues out of the race with a 13-0 drubbing led by Wein, Nesser and Parratt. Shelby's quarterback and coach, former All-Ohio player from Wesleyan Orville Littick, suffered a broken leg during the game.

Meanwhile, Elyria came to Canton. Despite having lost twice to Akron, Jack Cusack's team could get back into the race with a victory over the undefeated Athletics.

The conspiracy theory that Parratt was really running the Elyria show became a harder sell when the Athletics came in with no new imports from Akron in their lineup. Homer Davidson was injured so Ed Kagy took over at quarterback. The Athletics grabbed the opening kickoff and moved right down the field on the running of Dwight Wertz. Kagy squirmed over for the touchdown and Wertz kicked added the extra point. After that, the Canton defense led by "Dutch" Speck and Harry Turner stopped Elyria. Turner had retired in a huff after the 1911 season but unretired in the off-season.

Canton was unable to mount any kind of offense, but in the third quarter, "Smoke" Smalley intercepted an Elyria pass and sped 60 yards to a touchdown. Pat Steiner missed the PAT, and the Athletics held on the rest of the way for a 7-6 win.

The Athletics weren't out of the woods yet. For Thanksgiving Day, Elyria was back in Akron. For many high schools and colleges, the big Thanksgiving Day game was the wind-up of the season. That made holiday games tricky for pro teams because many players had regular jobs as high school or college coaches and might find those duties taking precedence. Elyria was minus Pendleton, their star tackle, and brought "Dutch" Speck up from Canton to fill in. Akron had an even greater problem. Both of their regular tackles, the brothers "Muff" and "Doc" Portmann, chose to skip the game to go to watch their younger brother perform for Western Reserve.

The first half was scoreless until the last play. Then, with the Athletics having reached the Akron 15, Homer Davidson trotted onto the field. Davidson's shoulder injury still kept him from playing but his kicking leg was okay. On his only play of the game, he booted a field goal to put his team ahead 3-0 at the half. In the second half, "Dud" Schriener, a Cleveland playing for Elyria, ran for a wrap-up touchdown.

The 10-0 win over Akron cinched the Ohio crown for Elyria, but the Athletics added a little icing by beating Canton 14-7 on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. That gave them two victories over Canton and one over Akron within eight days, certainly more than enough to

cement their championship claim when added to their November 10 win over Akron. Although the Athletics had not played Shelby, both Canton and Akron had defeated the Blues.

All the important Elyria players were imports, albeit mostly from nearby places in Ohio. Apparently they were paid well because the Athletics were able to maintain much the same lineup for their big games. On the other hand, it's also likely the team lost money. By midway through the 1913 season, most of the Athletics' stars were scattered to other teams, and Elyria disappeared forever as a factor in the championship race.

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Before the season began, the Shelby Blues raised their ticket prices for home games: men were charged 50 cents, women 25, and an extra ten cents were required for a seat in the grandstand. The increases were necessary because the team planned to rely on so many imported players and had to match offers from other clubs. Apparently, they were outspent by Elyria which ended up with Homer Davidson and others.

The Blues closed their season by losing first to the local high school team and then to the local Tigers, a semi-pro squad that had been badly beaten earlier by several nonentities. Probably neither game should be counted against the Blues who sent out a lineup of locals for both games and actually played the Tigers with only ten men. The games were exhibitions staged as benefits for Coach Littick, who was laid up with a broken leg.

Rebirth year or not, pro football in Ohio was still a losing proposition for many entrepreneurs. Shelby insisted it had dropped \$400 in hosting the Dayton Oakwoods on Thanksgiving. Peggy Parratt usually landed in the black in his teams' ledger books. He always insisted on a hefty guarantee when traveling to a rival's lair but seldom gave much in return when teams visited his ballpark. Nor was he ever accused of overpaying the stars he imported. He was a master at winning on a shoestring. Jack Cusack also regularly turned a profit in Canton. In 1912, when he fielded a team of locals, most of whom had no college training, he probably had the lowest payroll among the contenders. But if Canton and Akron stayed above water, they were surely in the minority.

Nevertheless, on December 10, an article appeared in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* claiming plans were underway once more to form a pro football league. Herman Schlemann of Elyria was listed as the head man; the league was to be made up of the Akron Indians, Canton Pros, Cleveland Hinkles, Youngstown, Columbus Panhandles, and Dayton Oakwoods. As usual with such reports, nothing ever came of it.