

Up the P.A.C.

The 3A's are Challenged: 1891

By PFRA Research

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Yale dominated the gridiron news throughout the fall of 1891. Led by the incomparable Pudge Heffelfinger, the Elis bulldozed undefeated and untied through thirteen games, scoring 488 points to -- incredibly -- none.

Equally incredible was the crowd of 40,000 that showed up for Yale's finale with Princeton on Thanksgiving Day. That figure made promoters all over the country sit up and take notice. It proved incontrovertibly that football could be a "big" sport.

Yale alumni O.D. Thompson and John Moorehead must have enjoyed the grid news coming out of New Haven; they found precious little to their liking on the local scene. It was a curious and disappointing year for the Allegheny Athletic Association's football team. They began their season recognized as the premier eleven in western Pennsylvania. This coupled with the club's admission to the A.A.U., had so increased the prestige of the Three A's that their membership of more than 330 now equalled -- perhaps surpassed -- the P.A.C.'s. More than \$27,000 had been subscribed toward the purchase of a site and the erection of a clubhouse. Messrs. Thompson and Moorehead had good reason to expect the 1891 football squad to raise the club's glory even higher. It was generally agreed among those purporting to know such things that the manpower on the team was superior to that of any local rivals.

But, by the end of November, it was the football team of the Pittsburgh Athletic Club that was the toast of western Pennsylvania. Meanwhile, the Three A's squad and even the heretofore sacrosanct leadership of O.D. Thompson, Esq., had become the objects of public criticism.

On the first Saturday in October, while the A's were still talking about turning out for their team, the Pittsburgh Athletic Club opened its grid season. The opponents -- the on-again-off-again boys from the Shadyside Academy had undergone another change of heart and decided to take one more shot at football. They bolstered their lineup with two members of the Three A's -- regular backfielder A.S. Valentine and a sub guard named Billy Kountz -- but to no avail. The Gyms rolled over them with no discernable difficulty, the final count standing at 26-0.

Harry Fry, who held memberships in both the A's and the Gyms, chose to play for the latter in '91, and his performance in the opener brought rave reviews from the local press. An end named Schwartz and halfback Grant Dibert were also commended. Other familiar names in the Gyms' lineup included Professor Kirschner, Doc Proctor, and Charles Heppenstall, known as one of the area's foremost bicyclists.

How teams scheduled in those days is shown in an article that appeared directly below the Pittsburgh *Press* account of the game:

MORE GAMES WANTED The East End Foot Ballers Address Themselves to Other Clubs

The East End Gyms foot ball players are practicing hard to be able to hold up the prestige of the club. Games have been arranged with the Washington and Jefferson college team, and the Three A's. The boys are anxious to hear from Indiana (Indiana, Pa., Normal School) and Greensburg. They would like to have a game with Greensburg on Oct. 17, and with Indiana on the 24th inst.

Although no research has yet uncovered the scores, it is believed that both Greensburg and Indiana accommodated the Gyms by hosting games, though perhaps not on the requested dates, and that both games resulted in Gym victories. Curiously, the "natural" against the Three A's, supposedly already scheduled, never took place. The A's backed out, to the disgust of many of their fans.

The Three A's finally got underway at Exposition Park on Saturday, October 24, against lightly regarded Greensburg. The A's presented an interesting lineup that included veterans Valentine, Ed Brainard, Harry and John Oliver, and O.D. Thompson at guard alongside his pal center John Moorehead. Surprisingly, Schwartz and Proctor of the Gyms were in the backfield. Another Yale man, Norman McClintock, opened at end and showed himself to be an outstanding player, but he narrowly missed being the goat.

The invading Greensburg squad proved stronger than expected from the start, carrying the game to the A's. Near the end of the first half, disaster struck. McClintock fumbled the ball. Moorehead made a grab for it and seemed to have it safe, when Coshey, Greensburg's center, kicked it out of his hands. Guffey of the visitors swooped in, picked up the ball, and raced into the end zone.

Greensburg claimed a touchdown, but the referee vacillated until a copy of the rules could be found. Finally, after some careful reading and much loud discussion from both sides and spectators, the official ruled that, while the ball might indeed be kicked, it was just not fair to kick it when an opponent was holding it. The touchdown was disallowed.

Proctor went in for the Three A's in the second half and scored a touchdown. Valentine got another and the A's had a 10-0 victory. Greensburg showed its sportsmanship by cheering the hosts after the game, and everyone commended the Greenies for putting up a

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game fight. But, the other side of the coin was that the A's had been more than a little disappointing in their opener.

It got worse. The following week, the Three A's scheduled their first game ever away from friendly Exposition Park, traveling to Cleveland to meet that city's A.C. The Ohioans had improved their team from the year before, particularly by the addition of Captain Billy Rhodes, a Yale man named by Whitney as an All-America tackle in 1890. Even so, neither the A's nor their fans were prepared for the trouncing they received. The only points the Alleghenys could get came on a fluke. Three minutes before the end of the first half, with a two-touchdown lead already, Cleveland had the ball an eyelash-width away from another score. Billy Rhodes took the pigskin and crashed head down into the line. As his noggin got to the goal line, it came in sudden contact with the goal post there situated. The post remained firmly fixed, but Rhodes bounced backward and the ball bounced sideways. It came to rest in the arms of Norman McClintock of the A's. With no Clevelanders in front of him, he scampered the full 110 yards to a touchdown.

Although they proved unable to run over goal posts, the Clevelanders happily ran over the Three A's all during the second half to wind up 22-4 victors.

On the same day -- October 31 -- that Allegheny was getting its A's whipped in Cleveland, the P.A.C. continued its winning streak with a 14-0 win over Washington & Jefferson at East Liberty Park. The game was marred by constant arguments and wrangles. At one point, the college boys only agreed to go on with the game after Professor Kirschner of the Gyms gave up a touchdown already scored by his team. Despite this gratuity, the Presidents continued to accuse the P.A.C. of slugging and other illegal tactics as the score mounted against them. At last, with about twenty minutes left to play, W. & J. stomped off the field for good. Doc Proctor, back with his own team, and Heppenstall, the bicyclist, were acclaimed the stars of the game.

A week later, the Gyms continued a growing tradition by lambasting the W.U.P. eleven, this time by a 24-0 count.

Arguing so that players might catch their breath was a part of every team's "game plan". But serious arguments of the kind that could cause Professor Kirschner to "return" a touchdown were sometimes the result of one side or the other or the referee not knowing the rules. More often, the right rule did not exist. Football was so new and -- even in its 1891 form -- so complex that unanticipated situations came up almost every game. Still, the game played on November 7 between the visiting Dayton A.C. and the Three A's may have set some sort of record for disputes. When it was over, the score stood either 10-6 Dayton or 10-6 Three A's, or possibly 6-6, depending on just how the rules were applied.

In desperation, an account of the main disagreements was submitted to His Holiness, Walter Camp, for final dispensation. Undoubtedly, there were Three A's members who smiled knowingly, remembering that O.D. Thompson had disciplined in Camp's backfield at Yale.

But where Camp was concerned, there was friendship and there was football. And, when the twain met, there was only football. He

sifted through the testimony and, after a few days, delivered his verdict. 10-6 Dayton.

After losing two in a row, the Alleghenys were able to climb back to .500 with a come-from-behind 8-4 win over the argumentative young men from Washington & Jefferson College on November 14. To put a full team on the field, the A's had to convince two brothers, Ross and Lawson Fiscus, to come all the way in from Greensburg. The Fiscus boys -- a third brother was named Newell -- would become famous locally for their gridiron exploits over the next few years. Ross and Lawson began building their reputations with this game, for without their staunch contributions to the Allegheny line, the A's most likely would have lost once more.

Over at East Liberty Park, the Gyms had a much easier time in defeating the Altoona A.A. 20-0. The visitors brought along a couple of Penn State halfbacks, but the additions were little help. Harry Fry played a bang-up game for the winners, scoring three touchdowns.

Pressure was mounting all over Pittsburgh and Allegheny City to see the two athletic clubs settle their pigskin pretensions with a championship game. The P.A.C., riding a six-game winning streak, was all for it. They offered to play the A's "for fun or money on any day or grounds that Allegheny people may elect."

Many of the A.A.A.'s members were also after Thompson to schedule the Gyms. But O.D. continued to avoid the issue, even when crass critics accused the Three A's of outright cowardice. In truth, there may have been an element of fear in Thompson's refusal to meet the Gyms -- fear of what a one-sided loss to their arch-rivals might do to the Alleghenys' memberships and clubhouse subscriptions.

Thompson certainly knew a good football team when he saw one; the Gyms had come on much faster than anyone had expected. They practiced regularly and were able to present virtually the same lineup in every game. As a consequence, they exhibited teamwork that O.D. could only envy.

Meanwhile, his own team had become a patchwork quilt. Not only had he been forced to turn to Greensburg for the Fiscus brothers, but -- to crown his embarrassment -- he had to recruit Proctor and Dibert of the Gyms to fill out his backfield for the final scheduled game. Under the circumstances, a game with the P.A.C. could only lead to humiliation for the Three A's.

The last game was a November 21 rematch with the Cleveland A.C. at Exposition Park. Fortunately, the Gyms were not scheduled, allowing Proctor and Dibert to join the A.A.A. lineup. Just as fortunately, Ross and Lawson Fiscus arrived from Greensburg before game time. But, most fortunate of all, Captain Billy Rhodes did not make the trip from Cleveland. The combination of Allegheny additions and a Cleveland subtraction made the teams just about equal in ability.

The first half was evenly played and scoreless. Several P.A.C. players were in the stands and they cheered lustily for Dibert and Proctor. Dibert's punting was the main feature for the A's; as he kept the visitors back on their heels. Five minutes into the second

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half, Cleveland made a touchdown and added the goal to go in front 6-0. Three A's fans braced for still another defeat.

The game had begun at three o'clock, but the Clevelanders turned out to be almost as adroit and long-winded at argument as O.D. Thompson. As the second half progressed, darkness began to envelop the field. It became obvious that the game would have to be called before the full time had elapsed. Suddenly, one of the Fiscus brothers -- accounts differ as to which -- flashed into the open lugging the football. With both teams in hot pursuit, he galloped better than half the field's length into the end zone. Grant Dibert added the all-important goal. When darkness ended the affair a few minutes later, the A's had salvaged a tie and -- at least for some of their fans -- the season.

The shocker came after the game was over. O.D. Thompson announced he was quitting both as a player and as the team's manager. He cited his age, his growing family, and his busy law practice as reasons. Henceforth, he said, he would confine his football activity to watching the games.

Two days later, an article appeared in the Pittsburgh *Post*, shedding new light on O.D.'s retirement. An "official of the organization" who preferred to remain anonymous was highly critical of the way the Three A's team had been run. Insisting that "individually the team was a very strong one," he maintained that "it cannot be said that the football season has been a success in any sense." The reason was the "apparent lack of enthusiasm" and absence of teamwork among the players because they "never practiced together."

Speaking of Thompson, the official complained: "There was no one to insist on practice and compel the sluggards either to report on the field or quit the team. The players did just as they pleased. A few of them spent some time every day at practice, but the majority never saw the field between games." That several P.A.C. men had been employed during the season also galled the official, but the team "was run by two men ... who did as they pleased, never once consulting the committee appointed to take charge of the team." The bottom line was "at the end of the last season there was a balance on the right side, but at present there is not a cent in the

treasury, which indicated bad management. Most of the members were in favor of giving the East End Gyms a game which ... would have put some money in the treasury. Why the Gyms were not accommodated ... is something the two bosses alone can explain." Moorehead, the second "boss", was not in the habit of making public pronouncements; his silence in the face of criticism was predictable. Thompson, however, might have defended his stewardship by pointing out that the manager of an amateur team had few ways to compel his men to do anything, that had he not used P.A.C. players he might have had to ask for volunteers from the crowd, that the falling attendance was mainly due to falling rain and snow throughout the autumn, and that a game with the Gyms might have hurt A.A.A. prestige more than it would have helped the treasury. Instead, like Moorehead, he chose to step aside and let the loud talkers try to run things.

Unable to coax the A's into a game, the P.A.C. scheduled the Media College eleven for a season-ending Thanksgiving Day tilt. Although the Medias were not a particularly strong team, they were expected to arrive full of "eastern tricks" and give the Gyms a run for their money. East was still synonymous with superior football, and any team hailing from that direction gained automatic respect on Pittsburgh gridirons. A selling point for the game was that the progress of the Yale-Princeton game would be displayed on the grounds.

However, the game needed no extra gimmicks. With their winning streak, the Gyms had become the darlings of Pittsburgh's fans. A crowd of 2,000 showed up at muddy East Liberty Park to cheer them on, and the *Post* devoted an unprecedented 26 column inches to its account of the game. Media's "Rags" Brown impressed everyone with his exciting running, but he had to take a back seat to a brilliant performance by the Gyms' George Proctor. All the doctor did was score five touchdowns. The P.A.C. led all the way, the final being 30-12.

After the game, each member of the P.A.C. team was presented with a gold watch in the shape of a miniature football, a trophy well within the limits set by the A.A.U. The footballs may have been tiny, but spurred by the area's first perfect-record team, football had become big in western Pennsylvania.