

Ockie Anderson

This article was written by Jeffrey J. Miller.

Buffalo has a long tradition of great running backs, from LeSean McCoy to Thurman Thomas, from Joe Cribbs to O.J. Simpson, and from Cookie Gilchrist to Chet Mutryn. But before all of them there was Ockie Anderson.

Though he may not be well-known today, Anderson was a college superstar during the World War I era and later the star halfback of the Buffalo All-Americans of the fledgling American Professional Football Association (the forerunner to the National Football League). Ockie Anderson was the first great pro running back in Buffalo's history, his speed and elusiveness making him one of the top backs in the entire league. Had his career lasted more than the three stellar seasons he managed before being forced by injury into early retirement, there is no telling what Anderson could have accomplished.



Oscar Carl “Ockie” Anderson was born October 15, 1894, in Erie, Pennsylvania to Swedish immigrants. Ockie attended Erie Central High School before moving on to Colgate, where he became a three-letter man, starring in football, basketball (he was captain of the 1920 team), and track (competing in the 100- and 220-yard dash events).ⁱ It was said that had Ockie not damaged his knees playing football, he would easily have been a world class sprinter. But football was his best sport, a fact Walter Camp acknowledged in selecting Anderson as a first-team All-American in 1916. The following year, Anderson got caught up in the martial fervor sweeping the nation and enlisted in the Army. In 1917, Camp selected to his elite squad only players serving in the military, and Anderson again made the team. He served two years in France during the first World War

ⁱ Robert Anderson interview with Jeffrey J. Miller, 2002.



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before returning to his native Erie, Pennsylvania, where he landed a job as athletic director in the Erie city school system.

In the fall of 1920, the five-foot, nine-inch, 165-pound halfback signed on with the Buffalo franchise of the new professional football league being put together from a ragtag collection of former semi-pro teams from across the Great Lakes states. The Buffalo team, led by Barney Lepper and Tommy Hughitt, was to be made up of former college stars, many of whom had also been named to Walter Camp's All-American squads. Among the signees were guard Adolph "Swede" Youngstrom of Dartmouth, ends Murray Shelton of Cornell and Heinie Miller of Pennsylvania, halfback Bodie Weldon of Lafayette, and several others. Ockie Anderson fit right in. Dubbed the All-Americans, the team was one of the most aptly named in NFL history.

Right from the get-go, Anderson was the AAs featured back. In Buffalo's inaugural game, October 3 vs. West Buffalo, Anderson made several spectacular runs in leading his team to a 32-6 victory. The following week, Anderson scored two touchdowns and ripped off several long runs against All-Buffalo. Buffalo faced the Toledo Maroons in week four, and Ockie continued his brilliant work by scoring four touchdowns, including dazzling back-to-back returns of 60 (punt) and 50 (kickoff) yards.

As Anderson was establishing himself as one of the top runners in the new pro league, his team was also establishing itself as one of the best. The All-Americans extended their winning streak to six games by thrashing All-Tonawanda in front of 7,000 at their home site of Canisius Villa. Ockie again stood out for Buffalo, scoring three touchdowns in a 35-0 victory. Columbus was the next victim, receiving a 43-7 thrashing at the Villa. Pat Smith led the way for Buffalo with four TDs, while Ockie was relatively quiet with just one.

The All-Americans faced their first real test on November 21, when Jim Thorpe and the Canton Bulldogs came to town. Anticipating a large crowd for Thorpe's Queen City debut, Buffalo management moved the game from the Canisius Villa to the larger Buffalo Baseball Park. The move proved a wise one, as the largest crowd ever to witness a pro game in Buffalo to that point, some 15,000, showed up. Yet for all the hype leading up to this contest, it proved to be a rather dull affair, as the field had been rendered a veritable quagmire by heavy rains. Canton came out on top, handing Buffalo their first shutout and first loss, 3-0.

Buffalo was back on the beam the following week against the Cleveland Tigers, however. Ockie scored the lone touchdown, a 15-yard scamper off a fake pass, as Buffalo won 7-0.



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On December 4, Buffalo met Canton at New York's Polo Grounds for what was to be a showcase for the new league, pitting two of its top teams in the media capital of the nation. Led by Swede Youngstrom's heroics, Buffalo came out on top, 7-3. Anderson was knocked out of the game briefly by a vicious Jim Thorpe tackle. The All-Americans tried to get fancy with a "Statue-of-Liberty" play in which Ockie took the ball from Tommy Hughitt's outstretched hand. The play was working fine until Anderson had proceeded about 15 yards downfield, at which time Thorpe intervened. "Big Jim wasn't to be fooled," Anderson recalled several years later. "He smacked me down like a ten-ton truck. That tackle must have jarred loose every tooth in my mouth, and I honestly believe that's why I've lost so many since then."ⁱⁱ

Immediately following the game, the AAs jumped the train for Buffalo and a game with Akron for the APFA title scheduled for the following afternoon. But with the Buffalo players tired and worn from the previous day's game and the long train ride, summoning the energy for this tilt with the tough Akronites was a tall order. Buffalo had an overall record of 9 wins and 1 loss. Akron boasted a record of 7 wins, 3 ties, and no losses. All they had to do was tie and the championship was theirs. Buffalo failed to muster an offense on the rain-soaked field, and Akron managed to hold on for a 0 to 0 deadlock. Undefeated Akron was awarded the championship.

Ockie led the All-Americans in touchdowns (11) and total points (69) in 1920.

The 1921 season was one of great promise. By now, Anderson was earning \$200 per game, which was good scratch for that time.ⁱⁱⁱ Buffalo bolstered its already powerful offense by adding Army halfback Elmer Oliphant. With Oliphant, Anderson, quarterback Tommy Hughitt and fullback Pat Smith, Buffalo had the best backfield in the league. Once again, the AAs came out smoking, with lop-sided victories over Hammond, Columbus, New York, Rochester and Detroit all in succession. Anderson tallied three TDs against Columbus and scored one and threw for another against Rochester.

The All-Americans went into their final game of the season, December 4 versus the Chicago Staleys, sporting a 9-0-2 record. Once again, a victory on the season's last day would give Buffalo the title. But Buffalo was in poor shape to take on the Staleys after playing the Akron Pros at home the day before and then riding all night on the rails for this game at Cubs Park. Despite the fact that the AAs had beaten the Staleys two weeks earlier in Buffalo, Chicago came out on top in this one, 10-7, and claimed the 1921 title with a 9-1-1 record. Buffalo manager Frank McNeil disputed the Staleys' claim, but the league affirmed Halas' assertion that the second game of the season series, won by the

ⁱⁱ Jack Laing, "Buffalonians Remember Ol' Jim," *Buffalo Courier-Express*, April 1, 1953.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anderson's Uniform Player's Contract, signed August 25, 1921



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Staleys, carried more weight than the first. Just as the All-Americans had come within one victory of winning the championship in 1920, the team fell one short again in 1921.

Buffalo's Elmer Oliphant led the league in scoring with 47 total points, while Ockie finished tied for second (with Akron's Fritz Pollard) with 42. Anderson and Pollard also tied for the league lead in touchdowns scored (7).

Expectations soared as the 1922 season approached. The All-Americans were coming off back-to-back 9-1 seasons and were considered one of the top contenders for the title. Buffalo started off the campaign by going 3-1 in its first four games. But Ockie Anderson was not his old self—it was not until the fourth game of the season, October 29 against Dayton, that Ock scored his first touchdown. It would also be his last. Anderson's knees were shot, and he was forced out of the lineup just three games later. He played his last game on November 19, 1922, a 3-3 tie with the Akron Pros.

There is no telling what Anderson could have accomplished had his knees not given out. In three seasons with the All-Americans, he played 29 games and scored 117 points, an average of 4.0 points per game!

Ockie Anderson retired after the 1922 season. In 1933, he entered the hardware business with his father-in-law, H. B. Koenig in Tonawanda. Years of heavy smoking, coupled with the after-effects of poisonous gas inhaled in France during the first World War, left Anderson with severe emphysema in his later life. He kept a sense of humor about his condition, however, joking to friends that it was "hard to spell and expensive as hell." He was still active in the family business when he succumbed to the disease in January 1962.^{iv} He is a member of the Colgate University Hall of Honor.

Notes:

^{iv} Robert Anderson interview with Jeffrey J. Miller, 2002.