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Luke Urban

This article was written by Jeffrey J. Miller.

Luke Urban did it all. Football, basketball, baseball, hockey, even golf. There were, of course, several athletes who played multiple sports, and many of them played at a high level. Urban, however, was able to letter in four sports at his alma mater, Boston College, and play professionally at two, football and baseball. Some seven decades before such modern-day two-sport superstars as Bo Jackson and Deion Sanders captivated fans with their legendary feats, Urban was traversing diamonds and gridirons with none of the notoriety and a fraction of the earnings.



Granted, there were other two-sport pros in Urban's day, but such an accomplishment was then, as it is now, reserved for the extraordinarily gifted, such as Jim Thorpe, Ernie Nevers, Greasy Neale and George Halas (all members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame). Without a doubt, Urban was in exclusive company. Urban's story begins at Fall River, Massachusetts, where he was born Louis John Urban to Polish immigrants on March 22, 1898. He attended BMC Durfee High School, where he played football, basketball and baseball. After graduating in the spring of 1916, Urban entered Boston College, and quickly established himself as a star athlete, excelling in four sports (in hockey, Urban played goalie). In his senior year, 1920, Urban was named captain of both the baseball and football teams. Though he stood just five feet, eight inches, and tipped the scale at 165 pounds soaking wet, Urban was a rugged player who never backed away from a fight. Urban led the Maroon and Gold to an undefeated season and the Eastern



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championship. That same year, Urban became the first Boston College gridder selected to Walter Camp's All-America squad, making the second team at the end position.

After graduation, Urban signed a minor league baseball contract to play catcher for the New York Yankees' affiliate at Charlotte. He had 55 game appearances in 1921, batting a very respectable .355.

That fall, Luke signed a pro football contract to play for the Buffalo All-Americans, runners up to the American Professional Football Association title the previous season. The All-Americans of 1920 were blessed with two outstanding ends in Heinie Miller from Pennsylvania University and Murray Shelton from Cornell. Both had been selected to Walter Camp's College All-America squad and played a major role in the Buffalo franchise's success that first year. But Shelton decided not to return to the team for a second season. Luke Urban would be Buffalo's new left end.

The leadership skills he learned at BC would be valuable not only to the All-Americans but also to Canisius College, which hired Urban to coach the Griffins' football and basketball teams. As with many of Buffalo's early pros, Urban would have his hands full with preparing a team during the week, coaching on Saturday, then playing on Sunday.

The All-Americans were a stacked team, led by player/coach Tommy Hughitt and featuring several actual Walter Camp honorees including backs Ockie Anderson (Colgate), Pat Smith (Michigan) Elmer Oliphant (Army), guard Swede Youngstrom (Dartmouth), end Heinie Miller (Pennsylvania), and tackle/end Bob "Nasty" Nash (Rutgers). They were certainly one of the favorites to win it all after finishing 1920 with a 9-1-1 record, losing the league title on the last day of the season by tying the eventual champs, the Akron Pros.

Urban saw his first action with the All-Americans in a 28-0 win over the McKeesport Olympics on September 25 before some 3,500 fans at the All-Americans' home field at the Canisius College Villa (this game would later be declared an "exhibition" and discounted from the final standings). Spectators and reporters alike were immediately impressed with the Buffalo's new end. "The fans quickly appreciated the value of Luke Urban," the *Buffalo Evening News* reported. "Time after time he went through the visitors to make the tackle before they had gained a yard. Several times he was found on the bottom in scrimmage, showing he was sizing up the Olympics with uncanny judgment."

As the season progressed and the All-Americans experienced an unbelievable string of lop-sided victories, Urban continued to be a crowd favorite. On October 16, he scored his first touchdown in a Buffalo uniform in a 55-to-0 shellacking of the New York Giants. His performance on October 30 in a 21-to-0 defeat of the Detroit Tigers was especially



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noteworthy. “Luke Urban got some lucky breaks yesterday,” wrote the *Buffalo Times*, “and he made the most of them. He had the large crowd on its feet when he caught a fast forward while sitting on the field, and right after that another which he had to jump up in the air after. He was fast at getting around the Detroit line and smearing the play before it actually got started.”

On November 20, Buffalo faced the Canton Bulldogs at the Villa. End Heinnie Miller, along with four other All-Americans, left the team in a labor dispute. Bob Nash was moved to the left end position, and Urban moved over to the right side (where he would remain for the rest of his pro career). He was once again singled out for special mention: “Urban was good yesterday,” wrote the *Buffalo Evening News*. “Urban is one player who seems to improve with each game. He never fails to get down the field and get the man with the ball after a punt.”

By the time Buffalo faced the Chicago Staleys on December 4, ostensibly for the league title, the All-Americans had amassed an impressive record of nine wins, no losses and two ties. George Halas’ Staleys had put together a record of 7-1-0, with their only loss coming against Buffalo on November 24. Halas scheduled this rematch with Buffalo in the Windy City, hoping to exact a measure of revenge against the team that marred his perfect record. Buffalo owner Frank McNeil made the mistake of scheduling the two games (which he believed were to be exhibitions) on the same weekend, the first for December 3 against the Akron Pros, after which his team would take an all-night train to Chicago to play the Staleys the next day. After dispatching the Pros on Saturday, the All-Americans rode to Chicago, where they detrained the next day in no condition to take on the tough Staleys. The AAs fought hard, but eventually lost to the Halas’ well-rested charges, 10-7. The All-Americans had fallen one game short of the title for the second straight year.

For Luke Urban, it was an auspicious beginning to his pro career. The *Buffalo Evening News* picked the end to its All-Pro squad, along with teammates Bob Nash and Elmer Oliphant.

The following summer, Urban was a member of the Buffalo baseball Bisons of the International League. In 72 games, he hit a respectable .299.

In 1922, the American Professional Football Association was renamed the National Football League. The All-Americans were again considered a top contender. The loss of several key players hurt the team’s performance, however, and the AAs were out of contention by mid-November. The team finished ninth overall with a mediocre record of 5-4-1. For the second straight year, though, Urban was selected to an All-Pro team (this time one made up by George Halas), along with teammate Tommy Hughitt.



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Urban remained with the Buffalo Bisons for the 1923 baseball season, appearing in 106 games. His batting average improved to .310.

The All-Americans of 1923 were no better than the previous year as the team limped to a 5-4-3 finish. The highlight of the season for Urban came on October 7 against Akron when he returned an interception for a touchdown in leading the AAs to a 9-0 victory. Another memorable moment came two weeks later when Buffalo trounced Jim Thorpe's Oorang Indians, 57-0. Urban saw some action at quarterback in that one. Once again, he was named an All Pro, with two publications (*Collyer's Eye* and the *Canton Daily News*) selecting him to their respective first teams. Coach Tommy Hughitt borrowed a page from Urban's Canisius playbook, employing the Griffins' spread formation offense in a game against the Canton Bulldogs. The *Buffalo Evening News* noted, "Hughitt has watched the Canisius squad use this method of attack so successfully." Though the scheme only produced three points (the game ended in a 3-3 tie), it was certainly revolutionary and can be seen as a forerunner to the wide-open formations of today's game.

Nineteen twenty-three was also the best year for the Canisius football squad under Urban, as the Griffins posted a stellar 8-1 record. Their only loss? To Urban's alma mater, Boston College.

Urban walked away from pro football after three solid years with the All-Americans in which he missed just one game. He played a total of 32 games, scoring two touchdowns. Because statistics from the early days of pro football are notoriously unreliable, there is no accurate record of his receptions and yards on offense, or his tackles and interceptions on defense. He remained in Buffalo and continued to coach at Canisius. In July 1927, Urban was finally called up to the big-league Boston Braves, where he played in 35 games, batting a respectable .288. As a catcher, he had a fielding percentage of .947.

He split time between the minor league Bisons and the major league Braves in 1928. He appeared in 15 games with the parent club, batting just .176. His fielding percentage, however, was a solid 1.000!

Urban's overall record in ten years as coach of the Canisius football squad was an impressive 46-27-6. The Griffins' basketball teams went 68-49 in Urban's nine seasons at the helm.

He remained in Buffalo until eventually becoming club pro at the Grover Cleveland Golf Course (making him a pro at three sports?). He moved back to his native state of Massachusetts in 1940, and was hired to coach the football, baseball, and basketball



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teams at Durfee High School. His teams won two New England basketball championships and a state title in baseball. Urban retired from coaching in 1960 but held the position of athletic director until retiring for good in 1967. He passed in 1980 at the age of 83. Urban was elected to Boston College's all-time football squad, was an inaugural enshrinee to the Boston College Varsity Club Hall of Fame in 1970, and is enshrined in Canisius College's Athletics Hall of Fame (Class of 1976).