

Princes of the Prairies

By Ray Schmidt

It has often been said that the history of college football is littered with great teams and players that have been all but forgotten today. A case in point is the story of the 1926 Haskell Indians and their outstanding fullback, Mayes McLain.

The Haskell Indian Institute was located in Lawrence, Kansas, and had been playing college football since 1896. But despite racking up a number of fine records, until 1918 Haskell was overshadowed by the reputation of the famous Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, which definitely was playing big-time football. In 1904 mighty Carlisle had even condescended to travel to St Louis to administer Haskell a 38-4 trouncing. But when Carlisle was closed after the 1917 football season the best Indian players, and the sole responsibility for upholding the pride and dignity of the redman on the football field, fell to little Haskell.

In 1922 Haskell took a step toward becoming a national power when they hired Dick Hanley as the athletic director and coach of the football team. Hanley had played quarterback at Washington State before going into coaching after graduation, and he brought one of his brothers, Pat, along as an assistant coach. In the seasons of 1922-25 Hanley had led the Haskell Indians to a composite record of 33-9-3. But more importantly, he had already turned out one major star in John Levi (subject of a future Journal article) and had moved the Haskell Indians into inter-sectional schedules that saw them playing major teams from around the country. The school had taken another step into major college football in 1926 with the building of its first concrete modern stadium during that summer. Previously, few home games had ever been played since there had been no grandstands, and any fans had to stand along the sidelines or sit in their cars. Many of the players had worked all thru the summer on the stadium construction gang, and this had obviously put them in great physical condition.

In early September of 1926 Hanley took the team of nearly 50 players, representing eighteen different tribes from all over the country, to a one week training camp at Bean Lake, Missouri. Besides working on football fundamentals, Hanley emphasized the team's physical training with a strict regimen of running, rope-skipping and shadow boxing. At the end of the week the team staged an all-out 40 minute scrimmage.

Any coach would have been pleased with the armada of talent that filled the Haskell squad. The team was led by Captain Tom Stidham, who played right tackle and was considered the best lineman, especially on defense, to ever play for Haskell. His running mate at the other tackle spot was the giant (245 lbs) Theodore "Tiny" Roebuck, "whose speed is what might be termed remarkable", and at center was the "iron man" Albert Hawley, who was widely considered to be "a tower of strength on defense". Roebuck and Stidham were "classed by their coach as the best pair of tackles in the country".

But it was in the backfield that Haskell was really loaded, as they had two sets of equally talented stars that the papers called "an array of siege guns". Hanley expected to start Egbert Ward at quarterback, along with halfbacks George Levi (who was considered an "exceptional passer" besides being the brother of the famous John Levi) and the speedster Elijah Smith, while the outstanding Louis Colby would open at fullback. The second backfield included halfbacks Ted Sallee and Joe Cross with the Irish-Cherokee youth Mayes McLain at fullback. It was said that "everyone of the numerous Haskell

Indian backs can punt, pass or run." Despite the abundance of talent, "Coach Hanley announced that his team would not flash an elaborate attack in the early games. The eleven will be elevated slowly...to be on edge for the big contests" against the likes of Bucknell and Boston College.

Coach Hanley knew he had something special in McLain, "a triple-threat man". The Lawrence Journal-World described the fullback as "a pleasing appearing youngster, well over six feet in height, 200 pounds in weight, 19 years old and in whose features one can see the struggle of the Indian and Irish for first place...He has thick auburn-colored hair." McLain had played well in 1925, especially in the Boston College game, and in him "Hanley believes he has one-of the-best fullbacks in football today."

The 1926 season opened on a very hot Sept 18 as Haskell hosted Drury College in the first game played in the new stadium. Not once did Drury have the ball in Haskell territory as the purple-and-gold clad Indians, paced by McLain's two TD's and a 65-yard punt return TD by Elijah Smith, coasted 65-0. Hanley then led the Indians on the road to take on Wichita at their Island Park and in the words of the Wichita Eagle paper, "the doughty Braves scalped the Wichita grid warriors" by a count of 57-0. Early in the game Wichita moved to the Indian 18 yard line, but that was the Wheatshockers only scoring threat of the day. Haskell used nothing but their routine single-wing formations, only running off-tackle smashes and line bucks off their customary criss-crossing backs. Smith broke loose for several long runs, but it was McLain who was the big star as he scored all eight of the Haskell TD's and kicked seven PAT's for good measure. The Wichita Eagle noted that "McLain put up the most astonishing exhibition of football ever seen in Wichita ...and Smith was almost as good."

On one play McLain tallied a TD "by kniving through the line for a fifty yard run with a string of would-be tacklers decorating the turf in his wake...He tackled in a way that made the Wichita players stay tackled for some time to come and was a big Bertha when it came to clearing a path for a play. Coach Hanley modestly admitted he had developed in McLain a man worthy to wear the mantle of John Levi." The Eagle commented that "McLain can punt better than John Levi, plunge as well but isn't the passer or broken field runner the great John was."

The next week, with a very wet and muddy field, Haskell got a six touchdown performance from McLain, as "the husky Cherokee fullback thrilled the fans by his broken field running and his vicious tackling" in pacing the 55-0 victory over Still College. Next up was Morningside College and on the Indians second possession McLain broke loose for a 35 yard TD gallop, and shortly after George Levi dashed 30 yards to set-up the next McLain TD. Later in the game Levi tallied on a 27 yard run up the middle, McLain "wiggled 33 yards thru the entire Morningside team" for a score, Joe Cross raced a punt back 55 yards for a Redskin TD, and when McLain added his fourth TD it capped

ed off Haskell's 38-0 win.

The Indians then headed to Dayton, which was "fully expected to be the first real test", as Haskell sought revenge for a 6-2 loss in 1925. The Dayton Daily News noted that "Eleven red-skinned warriors from Haskell will lineup minus the proverbial regalia of their ancestors but clad in the garb of the modern football player anxious to return to their native haunts in Kansas with the scalps of the men of Dayton". The Dayton Flyers sported a 3-0 record and they were unscored on. But everyone recognized the greatness of the Haskell team, and the Dayton Journal said that "the most feared man on the westerners' eleven is Mayes McLain, giant fullback, who is a terror with the ball, and one of the hardest hitting backs".

The largest crowd in Dayton history watched as mid-way in the first period Dayton's end Hipa blocked a punt by Ward, and recovered it in the end-zone for a TD and a 7-0 lead. But later in the quarter Haskell began a 70 yard march behind the running of Ward, McLain and Levi, with McLain scoring the TD on a 4-yard plunge to tie it at 7-7. The rest of the game Dayton spent battling "against overwhelming odds", as Roebuck and Stidham "stopped the Dayton running attack in its tracks", but "it was the terrific line smashing of McLain which provided the balance of power...McLain, a modern Goliath of strength, proved almost unstoppable against a fierce defense massed against him on every play". McLain tallied four TD's and added a field goal from the 35 yard line, as Haskell pounded a good Dayton team by a score of 30-14. The Dayton Journal summed it up with: "If ever there was a one-man football team Ted M. McLain is that individual."

Back home the next week, the regulars played only a short time but still Joe Cross was the big star of the day as he tallied four TD's and kicked five PAT's, to go along with McLain's four TD's, as Haskell racked up 795 yards of rushing offense on the way to a 95-0 win over hapless Jackson College. But this was just a tuneup for the big game with Bucknell, which was considered "a power in eastern football circles". The Bucknell game was to be the feature of the first-ever Homecoming at Haskell, and over 2,000 Indians from around the country converged on Lawrence for the four day "pow wow". While the media had a great time writing about "redmen and palefaces", the Indian students obligingly donned head-dresses and posed for pictures to keep the tourists happy. More pertinent to the football team was the presence of many of the great names of Haskell's football history, most especially the legendary John Levi. To keep the team from being distracted by all the festivities, Hanley took them to a secret location for the last three days of practice. On the day of the game the new stadium was formally dedicated and presented to Haskell Institute by Senator Curtis of Kansas as numerous old-time tribal chiefs looked on, and they were wearing "real" indian outfits.

After an early exchange of punts, Haskell got the ball on Bucknell's 33, and on the first play Elijah Smith broke loose and raced for 28 yards. In short order McLain plowed in for the TD and a 6-0 lead. Then late in the first quarter Haskell started on their own 26. On the first play Smith slanted off tackle, "squirmed and wiggled thru the entire Bucknell team" and took off on a 76 yard TD dash. After an interception early in the second period Smith, playing like a man possessed, swept around end and dashed to a 21-yard TD to make it 20-0. By now Bucknell must have wondered why they made the trip as "each time found it could do nothing against the Indians."

There was more of the same in the second half as McLain ("on the rampage, tearing crazily thru the Bucknell line") and Levi added Td's to round off the 36-0 win over shell-shocked Bucknell. For the day McLain had tacked on

two TD's and rushed for 129 yards in 27 tries. Smith had rushed for 140 yards in 17 tries, as Haskell piled up 521 yards of Total Offense. The Kansas City Star noted that the win "sent the crowd of Braves back to their tepees to narrate the deeds of valor done by their off-spring upon the modern battle ground... Watching the Redskins smash into the White Man makes one glad America was Americanized before the Football Era."

The following Friday (Nov 4) a Haskell squad of 22 players departed for Kansas City and the first stop on an odyssey thru the East and Midwest that would see them on the road for 23 days. The next day the Indians took on Loyola of Chicago at Muehlebach Field, as they sought revenge for yet another of their 1925 defeats. Possibly suffering a let-down, Haskell played a sluggish first period and found themselves trailing 7-0 after Loyola had stung them with a 58 yard TD pass from Ed Johnson to "Ma" Norton. But in the second period Simon Gurneau blocked a Loyola punt and recovered it in the end-zone for a TD to tie it at 7-7. The crowd was greatly disappointed when McLain suffered a knee injury in the second quarter and saw no further action. But the heavier Haskell line began opening "huge holes for the dazzling, thrusting smashes" of the Haskell backs, and with Louis Colby plowing in for 3 TD's the Indians came away with a hard-fought 27-7 win.

The Indians then traveled to Boston to tangle with the unbeaten Eagles of Boston College, who were considered in some circles "as about the class of eastern football". Boston College featured the "Heavenly Twins", in star backs Al Weston and Jack Cronin, and were coached by Major Frank Cavanaugh. This was the game Hanley had pointed for all year and he was forced to play it without McLain, whose knee injury kept him out "in spite of the fullback's pleas". More than 20,000 spectators jammed Braves Field, and they saw what the Boston Globe called "probably the most thrilling and hair-

raising finish that has ever been seen in many years. It was evident from the very start of the game that Boston College had the smarter eleven, a team that was playing for the 'breaks'. It was just as plain that the Indians were the more powerful."

On Haskell's second possession of the game Levi threw a pass that Weston intercepted and raced back 50 yards to a TD and a 7-0 lead for BC. The rest of the period saw Haskell moving the ball, once getting to Boston's 10-yard line, but they turned it over on downs. In the second period Cronin boomed another of his long punts of the day to Elijah Smith who fumbled it, and Bud Dower recovered for BC on the 17 of Haskell. On the fourth play Cronin dove 1 yard for the TD and a 14-0 lead for Boston. On the last play of the half Jennings of Haskell tried a drop-kick from the 47 but it hit the crossbar and kept the Indians scoreless.

Boston came out aggressively in the third quarter and ripped off a march of three first downs before being stopped by an interception by Levi on the 15. A short time later Ward, standing on his goal line, attempted a punt but it was blocked by the entire BC line, and the bounding ball was recovered by Whelan for a TD and a 21-0 lead for Boston. From then on Haskell's line, led by Roebuck and Stidham, began to dominate the BC line and the Haskell offense started to "smash the Boston defense to smithereens". Ward took the kickoff and sprinted it back 50 yards to the BC 40, and a roughing penalty put it on the 25. Louis Colby then carried the ball seven of the eight plays needed to plow it in for the first Haskell TD; 21-7. Boston came right back, led by Weston's 25 yard run, but Haskell recovered a fumble on their own 24 as the third period ended.

The Indians then staged a sensational 14-play, 76 yard drive behind the running of Colby, Smith and Ward. Colby carried it in on a 3-yard run to make it 21-14 and "the Boston fans were getting restless". A short time later Haskell got a break when Weston fumbled on a fake punt and Roebuck recovered it on BC's 15 yard line. Levi hit the line twice and then Colby, "carrying several Boston tacklers with him", went 10 yards for the TD, with Smith's PAT tying it at 21-21. Boston came pounding back twice again late in the game, but with only minutes left Ward scooped up a BC fumble and raced to a touchdown, only to have it called back by an off-side call against Haskell. So the struggle ended in a 21-21 tie. The Journal-World said that "the Indians comeback against the Boston Eagles is something that escaped from the ranks of fiction...The Indians simply would not be conquered...It was a heroic task and it left a huge crowd awe stricken."

Hanley then led his Indian team to Lansing, Michigan to take on Michigan State in a game played on a snow-covered field, with McLain again seeing no action. In the first quarter Smith dashed 25 yards for a TD, and a few minutes later he raced a State punt back 70 yards for another TD to start Haskell on the way to a 40-7 victory. Ward and Colby also chipped in a pair of Td's to the win.

Next it was down to Cincinnati for a Thanksgiving Day game with unbeaten (9-0) Xavier, which had the greatest team in its history. The Haskell team was quartered at the famous Havlin Hotel, a popular stop for show business people, and the staff of the inn gave the royal treatment to the visiting "Princes of the Prairies", as the papers were now calling them. During the week before the game there were numerous rumors circulating about the possibility of an end-of-season game between Haskell and Notre Dame, but these were put to rest when it was reported that the athletic authorities were not pursuing such a game because of the expected financial guarantees that Notre Dame would require.

Xavier featured a powerful backfield and a strong defensive line for the game the Cincinnati Enquirer called "the modernized version of warfare between the paleface and the proud representatives of the Indian empire of the past". Unfortunately for the Musketeers "McLain, the ranting, dashing, plunging, driving fullback" was returning to action, and the Lawrence paper noted that "little imagination is required to hear the distant roll of drums." The game was played thru a constant rain but this didn't stop McLain from scoring three TD's (the longest on a 21 yard run) and Colby chipped in another, as Xavier was "outclassed from beginning to end" in the 27-0 Haskell victory. The travel-weary Braves returned home at last on Nov 27.

Besides their return home, there was news on two other fronts concerning Haskell football. The biggest news was that Dick Hanley confirmed the announcement made in Boston, that said he would not be returning to Haskell

for the 1927 season. Instead, he would be moving to Northwestern as head coach. The other announcement was that the Haskell players had voted to refuse an offer to travel to Honolulu for games with Hawaii U on Christmas Day and an All-Star squad on New Years Day. The players were said to be tired of traveling, and they still had the chance of playing a game in San Francisco.



On Dec 4 the Haskell Indians were in Oklahoma to take on an outstanding Tulsa U team that featured a wide-open aerial attack. With hundreds of Indians from all over the state helping to fill the stadium, Haskell staged a drive of 85 yards on its first possession, with Colby crashing thru left guard for the 11-yard TD run and a 7-0 lead. The teams began battling back and forth until midway in the second quarter when Levi intercepted a pass on the Tulsa 27. The Indians then pounded it in, with McLain going in on the 1-yard run and it was 14-0. The Indians took the second half

kickoff and staged a nice drive of 75 yards behind the running of Smith and McLain, with Levi sliding off tackle for the 15-yard TD run before he pitched a 33-yard TD pass to Smith in the final period. The Journal said that Levi "played the game of a lifetime. His terrific smashing of the highly advertised Tulsa tackles was largely responsible" for the 27-7 win.

Haskell then played their season finale on Dec 18 in San Francisco against the Hawaii All-Stars. The Stars were led by ex-Cornell player Charley Cassidy, and they claimed the title of Hawaii and the club championship of the Pacific by virtue of wins over Hawaii U. and the Olympic Club. Early in the first quarter McLain smashed over tackle for a 6-yard TD, and then later tallied two more TD's to round off the 40-7 victory. So the season ended with a 12-0-1 record, and most never knew how great a team Haskell was.

The Haskell team was led in scoring (obviously) by McLain with 38 TD's, 19 PAT's and 2 FG's; Colby had 13 TD's; Smith had 8 TD's and 27 PAT's; Cross scored 6 TD's and 7 PAT's; Ward had 3 TD's and 1 PAT and Levi scored 2 TD's. In the important area of the All-America selections the Indians were unbelievably ignored! Only the All-America Board, considered to be the premier selector of the time, gave the Indians any mention, as "Tiny" Roebuck was given a Second Team berth at Tackle, while Mayes McLain was named the Third Team fullback. Roebuck went on to star in the Shrine game at year-end.

The 1926 Haskell team was highly regarded everywhere they went. Some of the typical things said by those who saw them play: Kansas City Star-"the greatest of all Haskell teams, a team with devastating offense"; Boston Post-"the most sensational team that has appeared here for years, an aggregation of stars that brought back the time when Carlisle was in its prime"; Dayton Journal-"a formidable football machine. They have everything that goes up to

make up a championship aggregation." Jack Clinton, an Eastern referee, said after the Boston game that "this year I have seen West Virginia, Penn, Lafayette, West Point, Syracuse, Bucknell and Lehigh in victories. Haskell could defeat any of these teams by several touchdowns."

Of the teams on Haskell's schedule, eight of them were considered as "major" opponents in the mid-20's, therefore it is historically correct to consider that the Indians were a "major" college team in 1926. The Tulsa Daily World noted how "the Indians are shunned annually by the Missouri Valley elevens despite efforts to schedule games." So the Haskell win in 1926 over Tulsa was particularly important because the Hurricanes had earlier in the year defeated the Valley champs, Oklahoma A&M, by a score of 28-0.

The prodigious scoring feats of Mayes McLain have long gone unrecognized.

The first problem in verifying them was that the newspapers of the time kept getting confused about his running total. But within a week or so the mistakes would be corrected. By the time of the Tulsa game the intense media interest had caused his figures to be maintained for the year with no further confusion. At the end of the season the story was widely released in the papers that McLain had tallied 253 points in his 11 games, and this figure was also recorded in the 1927 Spalding Football Guide. Over sixty years later this figure has been developed game-by-game, and cross-checked in non-wire service papers. Mayes McLain DID score the astounding total of 253 points in 11 games in 1926, and this is the "ALL-TIME" Single Season Scoring record.

While I am a great admirer of Barry Sanders of Oklahoma State, the fact is that his 234 points in 11 games did NOT break Mayes McLain's all-time mark of 253. Further, when Sanders tallied 39 TD's in 11 games to set a new one-season TD record, he broke McLain's record of 38, not a figure of 29. Mayes McLain STILL holds the all-time college records for "Average Points Per Game" with 23.0, and the season record for "Most Touchdowns Rushing" with 38. Its about time that the NCAA stops pretending that college football didn't exist prior to their "magical" date of 1937, as far as records and statistics are concerned. What's needed is for the NCAA to establish a section in their annual record book for the recording of documented pre-1937 records, so that these great accomplishments are not lost.

(Editor's Note: A complete game-by-game chart of Mayes McLain's scoring and the Haskell team stats will appear in the May issue of the Journal.)

It was a magical season for Mayes McLain and the rest of the 1926 Haskell Indians. College football today is a lot less colorful than it was when the "Princes of the Prairies" walked gridirons around the country.