

1945 GREAT LAKES THE BEST FOR LAST

By Jack Scott

World War II had just ended a few weeks prior to the opening of the 1945 season, and many of the service bases had closed down their football operations; but many, including Great Lakes, continued playing football throughout 1945. The material on hand was perhaps not as rich or deep as the base had been accustomed to, but Paul Brown made excellent use of the people at his disposal and kept improving the squad until it was one of the nation's best elevens. For 1945, Great Lakes cut back to a 10-game schedule, with five slated for Ross Field on the base. Three of the off-base games were played within the state of Michigan, as the Tars visited Michigan State, Western Michigan and the University of Michigan.

Earlier in the year, Brown had been confident that he would enjoy the services of a number of prime players who had entered the armed forces at the conclusion of the 1944 season. He was especially looking forward to coaching Buddy Young, the Illinois flash, who had made such a favorable impression in the exciting 26-26 tie at Ross Field the year before. However, the surrender of Germany in early May dictated a widespread transfer of facilities and naval personnel to the West Coast as the war with Japan continued into the summer. Young and a host of other top performers were fated to play in 1945 at Fleet City and other California bases.

Members of the Great Lakes team that avoided the West Coast manpower dragnet were probably spared by the unexpectedly early V-J Day. The starting Great Lakes back field for 1945 included George Terlep, quarterback from 1944 Notre Dame; halfback Marion Motley from obscure Nevada, who combined speed, power, and excellent blocking in one package; halfback Grover Klemmer, a former track star and backfield ace for California; and Frank Aschenbrenner, a speedy halfback from Marquette who later transferred to Northwestern. Motley was destined to become one of the cornerstones of the new Cleveland Browns organization the following year, while Klemmer was to become a well respected NFL official for many years.

The usual strong line featured two more Notre Dame aces from 1944, Bucky O'Connor at end and center-linebacker Marby Wendell. Joining them was a precocious 18-year old from Superior, Wisconsin, named Bud Grant, who developed rapidly at his end position toward the end of the year. Grant matured into a genuine All-American at the University of Minnesota, and later became a top-notch coach for the NFL's Minnesota Vikings.

The 1945 opener at Ann Arbor on September 15 found a still somewhat tentative Great Lakes team running into a buzzsaw, as Fritz Crisler was still turning out excellent Wolverine teams. This 1945 Michigan edition will ever be identified with the birth of the modern two-platoon system, which Crisler unfolded the following month against Army. The ploy worked for awhile as the Wolves staved off a superior Army team for the first half, before Blanchard and Davis asserted themselves for a final 28-7 win. Michigan struck fast against Great Lakes with a brace of touchdowns in the first quarter, followed by another pair in the last. The only points for Great Lakes in the 27-2 loss were registered in the first quarter, when Michigan had to recover a fumble in its own end zone for a safety.

The first game of 1945 at Ross Field was played in horrific weather conditions, as 23,000 sailors and several hundred civilians sat through a 40 mph gale and heavy rains off Lake Michigan. Understandably the Tars and Wisconsin sloshed and splashed their way to a scoreless tie, as the field turned into a vast quagmire. Frank Aschenbrenner turned in the longest run of the day in the fourth period, when he fielded a punt on his 12 and gingerly stepped his way to a 45-yard return to the Badger 43. Roth teams were forced to punt 11 times under the appalling conditions. In the next game against Purdue, sailor adherents were enthused by Great Lakes scoring its first touchdown of the season in the opening stanza, as Terlep flipped a scoring pass of 38 yards to Bob Sullivan, offsetting an earlier score by Ed Cody of the Boilermakers. Both conversions were missed and it was 6-6. After that it was all Purdue, as new quarterback Bob DeMoss showed superb generalship in pacing the Boilermakers to a 20-6 victory.

The Bluejackets appeared somewhat improved on October 6, but it still added up to another loss as the doughboys of Fort Benning, Georgia took the measure of Great Lakes by a score of 21-12. The Army lads had the services of two ex-Alabama stars: halfback Russ Craft, who was an excellent pass-catcher as well as runner, and George Hecht, an efficient place-kicker. Both men had been sparks on the Crimson Tide's 1941 and 1942 teams that won the Cotton Bowl and Orange Bowl games, respectively, with Hecht registering crucial field goals in both games. Great Lakes and Benning were scoreless with just 90 seconds left until intermission, when former St. Louis star, Dick Weber, connected on a 19-yard pass to Monk Edwards.

But the stands erupted at the outset of the third quarter when Bob Sullivan returned the kickoff 98 yards for a Great Lakes touchdown. Shortly thereafter the Bluejackets capitalized on a soldier fumble, when Motley slammed over from two yards out for a 12-7 lead, as Motley had missed fire on the two extra point attempts. Then, still in the third quarter, Fort Benning regained the lead at 14-12 when Weber launched a mighty heave from midfield, which Craft gathered in at the 10 and went in for the score. The two teams showed a lot of punch the rest of the way, but no scores were yielded until 35 seconds were left, when Weber flipped his third touchdown pass of the afternoon. Hecht added his third PAT, and Fort Benning had a 21-12 win. After four games of 1945, Great Lakes now was saddled with an 0-3-1 record, and the Tars had been outscored 68-20 in the process. Followers of the game were convinced that Paul Brown was going to have the worst season of his illustrious coaching career, and the future appeared unpromising as the Tars faced four consecutive road games before concluding the season with two final games at home.

And now came the big turnabout, as Great Lakes reeled off six straight wins and outscored its opponents by a cumulative 201-61 points. After the Ft. Benning game the Sailors had an open date, which gave Brown an extra week to reload and drill his team with some new offensive schemes for the Marquette game at Milwaukee on October 20. The Hilltoppers were a familiar opponent, this game marking the sixth in the four year series. As usual, Great Lakes won, this time by a score of 37-27 as the Tars fired a six-touchdown salvo, three by Aschenbrenner, in a contest that was more one-sided than the final score suggests. The Tars had a 23-point lead by the fourth quarter, at which point Marquette scored twice against the Sailor reserves. This marked the first time of the season when the Great Lakes backfield had really melded into a smoothly functioning unit. The only thing wrong was missing five of six PAT attempts.

Western Michigan's tiny Waldo Field in Kalamazoo was the next venue, where 9,000 fans turned out for what might have been the first "big time" opponent to ever play there. Western Michigan had gamely kept its football program alive when most schools of its size had suspended operations during the war. The Broncos were definitely no match for the Sailors, as Great Lakes breezed to a 39-0 win. Aschenbrenner continued in good form with two touchdowns, the second coming on a 55-yard punt return. Four touchdowns were tallied in the second quarter alone. The final score in the fourth quarter was registered by Bud Grant, who received a pass from sub

quarterback, Dick Ottele, a former star from the University of Washington.

The third win of the season came hard at Champaign, as Great Lakes just squeezed by Illinois, 12-6. Illinois had lost most of its 1944 attacking potency, but had developed a very tough defensive line. Proof of this came in three previous games against Midwest powerhouses Indiana, Notre Dame and Michigan. The Illini had suffered shutout losses in all three games, but managed to hold the rugged opposition to a total of just five TD's. Great Lakes managed to push across two first period scores, but was held at bay for the remainder of the day. Aschenbrenner did the honors, scoring both touchdowns, the first of which was set up by Motley's 77-yard romp with the opening kickoff. The Illini only scored in the final quarter when a Bluejacket fumble put them in scoring range. Great Lakes continued its inability to convert PAT's; in fact the 1945 team was to convert less than 50% of its extra point attempts.

The long road odyssey ended on November 10 in East Lansing, where Aschenbrenner put on an almost surreal running performance as the Tars swamped Michigan State, 27-7. Frank scored three touchdowns, the first coming on an 80-yard jaunt from scrimmage. Almost immediately he topped this, with a 90-yard dash to a touchdown. His third tally came on a five-yard plunge. The Spartans were almost completely impotent this day, scoring only at the end of the game when a Sailor fumble near its goal line put State in business at the one yard line.

After a six-week absence, Great Lakes finally took the field before its always enthusiastic home supporters on November 17. Displaying a fearsome attack in crushing Fort Warren, 47-14, the Tars put four touchdowns on the board in the second quarter alone, two of which were recorded by the rapidly maturing Bud Grant. His first score came on a pass reception from Terlep, and the second came on a 39-yard interception return. Terlep sat out the fourth quarter but the beat went on, as Ottele tossed for two scores to other reserves.

During this game Coach Brown noted the talent displayed by Fort Warren's left end, Mac Speedie, who had formerly played at Utah. The intuitive Brown resolved to obtain Speedie's services for the projected Cleveland Browns professional team. Speedie and Dante Lavelli would eventually become one of the most feared pass-catching duos in pro football history. The opportunistic Brown, always alert to the potential of rival players, was even now projecting Otto Graham as his future field leader on the 1946 Cleveland team. Graham's three-year playing career at Northwestern (1941-1943) coincided exactly with Brown's stint at Ohio State. The Wildcats, under Otto's leadership, beat the Buckeyes twice in three meetings and Brown was suitably impressed. One of his first acts after leaving the Navy was to lure Graham away from the Detroit Lions, who had originally selected him in the league draft.

Now, with another fortuitous open date, Great Lakes prepared for the ultimate showdown with Notre Dame on December 1 at Ross Field. Brown had to confront a serious crisis when it was

revealed that several team members, including mainstays Motley and Klemmer, were eligible for immediate discharge from the Navy. But the players announced their intention to delay their separation until after the season had been completed. It was rumored that Notre Dame had little regard for the importance of this game, the five-game winning streak of Great Lakes notwithstanding. The Irish enjoyed an imposing 7-1-1 record to date, the only loss coming at the hands of Army by a score of 48-0. A strong Navy team had been tied, and seven other opponents were easily dismissed. The crack Notre Dame backfield included quarterbacks George Ratterman and Boley Dancewicz; halfbacks Terry Brennan and Elmer Angsman; plus Steve Ruggerio at fullback. The smashing 39-7 victory by Great Lakes came as a complete surprise, and rounded off the comeback 6-3-1 record for the 1945 Tars.

The fired-up Bluejackets received the opening kickoff, and the ineffable Aschenbrenner returned it 54 yards to the Notre Dame 29 yard line. After eight plays, Terlep sneaked over for the touchdown, and Sullivan then missed the extra point which seemed crucial at the time. Then the Irish scored their sole touchdown of the day in the second quarter, when Motley lost the handle on the ball to produce an Irish fumble recovery at the Tars' 21. Six plays later Ruggerio plunged over from one yard out for the score. The successful conversion gave the Irish a 76 lead, which was quickly erased after a 10-play drive by the Tars advanced 63 yards to a score. The key play was a long heave from Terlep to Grover Klemmer, who outran the ball and snagged it with a diving catch at the one yard line. Aschenbrenner then slid over, and Sullivan converted for a 13-7 lead, which is how the score still read when the deluge came in the second half.

Great Lakes dictated the flow of the game, mounting a long drive in the third stanza that carried over into the fourth. The drive consumed 18 plays, featuring an 18-yard smash by Motley that set up Aschenbrenner's 11-yard run for the score. Then Motley appeared to be at his season's peak when he climaxed another drive with a 44-yard burst in which he actually trampled the safety man enroute to the end zone, as the score mounted to 26-7. Then two ex-Irish luminaries, Terlep and O'Connor, combined on a short pass for the fifth score of the day. The final tally came about when sub quarterback Ottele romped through a thoroughly disorganized Irish team for a 50-yard touchdown, after faking a pass behind crushing interference. No one could remember when and if Notre Dame had ever surrendered four touchdowns in a single quarter before, with even the one-sided victories by Army in 1944 and 1945 not accomplishing the feat.

Ross Field was scheduled for dismantling the day after the game, but the joyful mob of sailor spectators almost performed the job on the spot, except for the restraints of the shore patrol units present. Authorities were not interested in trying to recruit a 1946 peacetime football team for Great Lakes. Maybe they recalled the mistake made in 1919 when the Navy, basking in the glow of Great Lakes' undefeated Rose Bowl aggregation of 1918, gave the go-ahead signal for a 1919 team. Naturally the talent flow had virtually ceased in post World War I peacetime, and Great Lakes had little to offer in the way of accomplished players. The Bluejackets were served up as the University of Chicago's opening day foe, and they were buried by the outrageous score of 123-0! Coach Amos Alonzo Stagg had obviously determined not to spare the horses as he prepared for another demanding Big Ten schedule.

Thus, the four-year run of Great Lakes World War II football had to be considered a success. The overall record compiled by the Bluejackets came to 33 wins, 10 losses, and three ties. Against Big 9 conference teams, they went 11-7-2; against Notre Dame they were 2-1-1; Marquette was swept in all six meetings; and Great Lakes went 7-1 against other service teams. The Tars scored well over a thousand points, outscoring the opposition by better than a 2-1 ratio. It was the end of service football's greatest era.

In 1925 Wisconsin shocked Iowa 6-0, while a blizzard raged over the snow covered Iowa field.