

PITT'S UNKNOWN GREAT

By Ray Schmidt

The 1999 football season brought an end to the glorious history of Pitt Stadium on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh. The stadium, with a seating capacity of 62,000, was dedicated on October 24, 1925 as the Pitt Panthers knocked off their cross-town rival from Carnegie Tech, by a score of 12-0. Except for the glory days of 1974-1981 under the direction of head coaches Johnny Majors and Jackie Sherrill, the stately old stadium was forced to watch in silence as Pittsburgh football labored in mediocrity over the last six decades of the twentieth century.

But once upon a time, in the days before 1940, the Pitt Panthers were one of college football's perennial powers. Already with a tradition of gridiron excellence that dated back to the pre-World War I years under Coach Glenn (Pop) Warner, Pittsburgh teams really scaled the heights of college football between 1929 and 1938 under the direction of Coach Jock Sutherland. Over that stretch of ten seasons, Sutherland led his Pitt teams to a combined record of 79-11-7 that

included three trips to the Rose Bowl, at that time generally considered to often be a national title game. Those Panther gridiron machines were led by a dazzling array of outstanding backfield men, ranging from Gibby Welch in the late 1920s, to the hard-nosed Marshall Goldberg of the late 1930s. With the many All-Americans produced by Sutherland during this period, it should come as no surprise that one of Pitt's greatest backs of that era has been virtually forgotten.

His name was Warren Heller, and on Pittsburgh teams that were usually known for their devastating powerhouse ground attacks, the slightly built left halfback (tailback) was a dazzling ball-carrier and an excellent passer. In his junior season Heller had been one of the standouts on Pitt's 1931 outfit that compiled an 8-1-0 record, but in 1932 he exploded across the gridiron skies as a unanimous First Team All-America backfield choice. Pittsburgh opened its 1932 season with a trio of routine wins, as the Panthers used just enough of their offense to romp past Ohio Northern (47-0) West Virginia (40-0) and Duquesne (33-0). Heller scored a total of five touchdowns (2-1-2) in the three wins, but more significant was his 35-yard pass completion to end Joe Skladany (an All-America in 1932-1933) that set up one of the scores.

Then on October 15 came the first big test of 1932 for the Pitt Panthers, as they traveled to West Point to tangle with Army. The Cadets were on their way to an outstanding season (8-2-0) and the two teams hooked up in what Alan Gould of Associated Press called, "a thrilling, desperately-fought football battle . . . where Army's hard-charging forces had the answer for everything Pitt offered except the combination of Warren Heller and Joe Skladany."

In the first quarter, with Pitt running from the double wing formation, Heller came around end on a reverse sweep, and behind some great downfield blocking, galloped 54 yards for the touchdown. Then in the second quarter Heller struck again, this time through the airways, with a 30-yard scoring pass to Skladany deep in the end-zone, to push Pitt's lead out to 12-0.

But Army came fighting back, and after being turned away by a great goal line stand by Pitt on the first series of the second half, the Cadets slowly pounded their way into a 13-12 lead. It was still in the third quarter though, when Pitt answered with a 76-yard scoring drive. A long pass completion from Heller to Skladany was good for a gain of 48 yards, and moved the ball to Army's 25. Several plays later Isadore (Izzy) Weinstock (an All-America in 1933 and 1934) plowed in for the touchdown that finally held up to give Pitt an 18-13 win over Army.

The following week the Panthers played host to Ohio State, and despite the running and passing of Heller, the teams were still deadlocked with time running out. Then Heller connected on a long pass to Mike Sebastian for a 52-yard gain to the Ohio State 33, and Pitt then continued to a first down at the one yard line. But the Buckeyes then turned away three straight shots into the middle of the line by Pitt, and then batted down a fourth down pass in the end-zone. The Panthers had to settle for a O-O tie that sportswriter John Dietrich of the Cleveland Plain Dealer called "one of the thrillers of a lifetime."

In week six of the 1932 season the Panthers knocked off Notre Dame (7-2-0) by a score of 12-0 in Pittsburgh. This game began a run of six years from 1932-1937, during which Sutherland's Pitt

teams would defeat Notre Dame in five of their six games. The Associated Press writer, clearly uninformed about 1932 college football, said that the Irish came into the game “hailed as the greatest in the land”, and he called Pittsburgh’s win, “one of the greatest upsets of all time.”

The two teams battled into the fourth quarter in a scoreless struggle, with Notre Dame having the edge in field position for much of the time, and then Pitt struck quickly. After Bob Hogan intercepted a Notre Dame pass at the Pitt 27, the Panthers pounded the ball up to midfield. Then, from the single wing formation, Sebastian swept around left end and took off on a dazzling broken-field dash of 45 yards and a touchdown. After the following kickoff Notre Dame went back to the airways, but on their second play Ted Dailey of the Panthers intercepted a pass, and in a flash he covered the 25 yards to paydirt to finish off the Irish.

Pittsburgh then extended its record to 6-0-1 with a hard-fought 19-12 win over Pennsylvania (6-2-0) at Franklin Field in Philadelphia. Heller scored one touchdown, and then rifled a 27-yard TD pass to Sebastian to finally put the game out of reach in the fourth quarter. The Panthers then headed for the Midwest, where they fought to a O-O tie with a very rugged and talented Nebraska outfit (7-1-1). Heller and Sebastian led the Pitt attack, but only had one good scoring chance, while Nebraska was turned away once at the Pitt two yard line.

The November weather in the East then turned decidedly colder, and the Panthers had to work hard for a 6-0 win over Carnegie Tech and a 7-0 decision over Stanford. Early in the first quarter of the Stanford game, a short punt into the wind gave Pitt the ball just 31 yards from paydirt. It wasn’t easy to cover the distance, but a big fourth down pass from Heller to Dailey was good for 10 yards and a first down at the two yard line. Then three plays later Heller sliced the last yard to the end-zone for the score, to produce the hard-fought win over the Pacific Coast visitors.

Pittsburgh’s outstanding 8-0-2 record, against what the Associated Press called “the most severe schedule in Pitt’s gridiron history”, was good for an invitation to the Rose Bowl and a matchup with the powerhouse from Southern California. This 1932 Trojans team has never garnered much historical respect, despite its final 10-0-0 record, but most writers and fans of the time considered the New Years Day game to be a showdown for the national championship. USC proved to have too many weapons though, especially when helped along to three scores by Pitt turnovers, and the Panthers closed their 1932 season with a 35-0 loss to the Trojans in the Rose Bowl.

When the various All-America teams were announced it was clear that Heller had made a big impression on gridiron followers everywhere. The slippery Panther tailback was named to the First Team All-America backfield of every major selector, while teammate Skladany also received many First Team selections as an end.

In the seasons following, the great run of Pittsburgh teams, featuring waves of top-notch backfield men, continued right on through the 8-2-0 record of 1938. But after the 1938 season Sutherland would resign as head coach when the university administration decided to deemphasize the football program at Pittsburgh, and he would eventually move on to serve as a head coach in the NFL with the Brooklyn Dodgers (1940-41) and the Pittsburgh Steelers (1946-47). Then followed the long dry spell for the Pitt Panthers, almost uninterrupted, except for the glory days of the late 1970s.

The defenses of Stanford in 1942 and Army in 1944, each intercepted 36 opposition forward passes.