
From Lion Tamer to Bulls and Bears: The Story of George (Potsy) Clark

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Proclaimed in the 1930's as “. . . the best coach in professional football,” and in 1940 as “. . . one of the most colorful figures in the sports world today,” Potsy Clark has been largely forgotten in 1980. Coach, teacher, administrator, athlete, this 5'7” 147 pound product of an Illinois farming community left an indelible record in amateur, professional, and military sport history.

As an athlete Potsy Clark was best described as a champion. In amateur football, he led eight successive teams to championships - at Carthage (Ill.) H.S., William and Vashti College (Aledo, Ill.), and the University of Illinois. Coach Bob Zuppke called Clark “. . . the best football player turned out in the history of the Zuppke reign at the Urbana institution.” In 1951 Clark was named the mid-century quarterback of an Illini backfield with Grange, Young, and Crangle. In WWI Potsy led his 89th Division team to the U.S. service title in 1917 (over Great Lakes) and to the A.E.F. crown in Paris in 1919 -a game, witnessed by royalty and General Pershing, in which Clark scored all his team's points in a 14-6 win. While a lieutenant in Kansas in 1917, Potsy served as a coach of the 89th's

basketball team that played major college opponents and won the service title of the U.S. with a 23-3 record. In baseball Grover Cleveland Alexander, who served as a sergeant in Lt. Clark's field artillery unit, was impressed enough with Clark's diamond potential to recommend him to the Cubs. After the war Alexander assisted Potsy one spring in coaching the baseball team at Illinois. As a college baseball mentor Potsy was assisted by and developed a number of major leaguers. His baseball talents earned him contract offers with three major league teams. However, his final playing experience was in France in 1919. Clark's competitive nature took him into a career as a coach and/or athletic director.

During his college coaching years Potsy made stops at Illinois, Michigan Agr., Kansas, Minnesota, Butler, Grand Rapids, and Nebraska. In all he coached fifteen years of college football and eight years of college baseball. He served as an athletic director/coach for five years and as an athletic director alone for ten more. Much in demand. Clark earned fees in summer coaching schools, and as a skilled public speaker, author of magazine articles, and as a radio broadcaster. At the untimely death of Potsy's friend Knute Rockne (1931), one writer opined that Potsy was the heir apparent as the best known coach in the country.

In 1931 Clark became the first college coach to enter the professional football coaching ranks as head of the Portsmouth (Ohio) Spartans. After directing them for three seasons (23-10-4) against the finest "big-city" teams in the National League, the team moved to Detroit to become the Lions in 1934. In 1934-35-36 Potsy led them to a 25-10-3 record and the world title in 1935. Following a dispute with owner Richards, Clark moved to Brooklyn to rebuild the downtrodden Dodgers. With little material, his teams of 1937-38-39 were 11-17-5. In 1940 he returned to Detroit for one more season; quarterback Byron White of that Lion team was destined to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. In all, his pro coaching record read 66-21-12. Clark's teams were imaginative, colorful, well trained, and known for being physical on the field and gentlemen off. A New York writer (1940) stated, with Halas, owner of the Bears, Lambeau of the Packers, and Owens of the Giants, "... Clark has been one of the league's coaching cornerstones." Potsy's Dodgers appeared in the first televised game in October 1939. The use of a color engineer in selection of uniforms (by Clark) was a forerunner to the colorful panoramic NFL events taken for granted in the 1980's.

Among his educational contributions Clark could include teaching the first summer school classes for coaches in 1916; teaching in the first four-year program for coaches at the University of Illinois, 1919-20; writing four books on sports; collaborating with Major John Griffith in writing the Wilson series and starting the ATHLETIC JOURNAL; and teaching alongside such famed sport figures as Zuppke, Phog Allen, Clair Bee, and Gerald Ford. He directed the construction of the outstanding Butler fieldhouse and stadium in the late 1920's and earned wide recognition.

After exceptional service in WWII, heading programs at North Carolina, Pensacola, and St. Mary's pre-flights and in the Pacific, Potsy Clark returned to teaching, administration and/or coaching for eleven more years - at Grand Rapids, Nebraska, and California Western. Known for his slouched hat and ready quips in earlier years, Potsy traded college sports for a place in a brokerage firm in 1956. After 12 successful years in this challenging arena, Potsy retired in 1968. A heart attack claimed him on November 8, 1972, at age 78. As an author, an innovator in coaching tactics, and as a creative developer of young men, athletic facilities, and programs, Potsy Clark indeed left his mark.