

The Stolen Championship— The Saga of the 1925 Pottsville Maroons

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The tiny coal town of Pottsville, Pennsylvania, managed to raise the funds to enter its local football heroes, the Maroons, into the fledgling National Football League in 1925. The League then consisted of familiar names like the Chicago Cardinals, as well as entries such as the Frankford Yellowjackets and Duluth Eskimos. The NFL teams, like the league itself, were struggling to achieve identity.

The Maroons had a fabulously successful year. The team from Pennsylvania's anthracite area entered the last week of the season trailing the first place Cardinals by one-half game. Ironically, the Maroons' final game was against the Cardinals in Comiskey Park. Since there was no radio coverage of the game, the rabid fans from the Pottsville area had a direct wire run from Chicago to a movie house in Pottsville. The fanaticism of these followers was well rewarded. The Maroons easily defeated the Cardinals 21-7 and were proclaimed NFL Champions of 1925. Then the glory—and the disaster—rapidly followed.

The Maroons were invited to play a college all-star team called the "Four Horsemen" one week after their Chicago triumph. The "Four Horsemen" featured the original four-horsemen who had just recently (June, 1925) graduated from Notre Dame. The rest of the squad consisted of Notre Dame alumni. The game was billed as the "Pro-Champions vs College All Star" Game. (Many considered it the forerunner of the Chicago based game of later years.)

The game itself was won by the Maroons 9-6. Charley Berry, future umpire-in-chief of the American League, booted a last second field goal to clinch the contest. However, after the game was played, the Frankford Yellowjackets protested the site of the game—Philadelphia's Shibe Park (later Connie Mack Stadium). The Frankford team (forerunners of the Philadelphia Eagles) claimed the game violated their "territorial rights." The Yellowjackets were obviously seeking some type of money to help their struggling franchise.

Joe Carr, president of the NFL, agreed that the Maroons had wronged Frankford. His rather extreme punishment was to take the Maroons' NFL title. He did this in a curious manner. Carr made the protesting Cardinals play two more games against weakened opponents. These victories then gave the Cardinals a higher victory percentage than the Maroons. The commissioner then awarded the 1925 NFL title to the Chicago team! Hence, the legend of the "stolen championship" was born. Residents of the Pottsville area have waged a battle with the NFL for over a half a century to have the title restored. The NFL bureaucracy has consistently turned a deaf ear to all appeals.

The Maroon story offers an opportunity to study the early bureaucratic development of the NFL. It also affords an insight into why a small mining region identified so strongly with a professional football team. It must be noted for example that about seventy-five

per cent of the 1925-26 Maroon games were held at home because of their local gate appeal.

The Maroon saga also produced an incredible legacy of post-football success for many of its players. As many as six 1925 Maroons became millionaires. One, Frank Bucher, rose to the chairmanship of the A & P Corporation. The legendary “Stein Brothers” achieved notoriety in the steel and development businesses. The remainder of the list is too long to detail at this point.

The Pottsville Maroons also stood for football innovations such as an elaborately designed screen pass and required daily practices which virtually precluded “coal miners” from moonlighting as football players. They also served as an example of how professional teams of this era were merging “recruited” college talent with “local” products.

The Maroon tale is simply an intriguing story from many angles. However, clarification of the confused 1925 NFL title picture in the minds of students of the early NFL is of great value standing alone.