



What a setting for an outing!

From “Prairie” Ball to the NFL: The Hammond, Indiana, “Pros,” 1917–1926

Lance Trusty

Purdue University Calumet

The Hammond Professionals was one of America’s first professional football clubs. The team’s roots were planted between 1911 and 1916 in the Hammond Athletic Club Athletics and Maroons, the Heimke Steam Rollers, the Hammond Clabbys (sponsored by a local saloonkeeper whose son Jimmy was the reigning middleweight champion of the world), and other semi-pro “prairie” teams. The Pros, variously nicknamed Hippos, Bobcats, Parduhn’s \$20,000. Beauties, and Parduhn’s All-Stars) were part of the emerging world of professional football between 1917 and 1926. Paul Parduhn, a local merchant and avid sports fan, the founder and manager of the Pros until 1920, is known as “the father of Midwestern professional football.” Dr. Alva A. Young, a local surgeon and Parduhn’s assistant and successor, carried the team until it collapsed in 1926.

The Hammond Pros compiled a surprising record: Chicago’s first professional football game (Wrigley Field, 1918); indoor games in Chicago’s International Amphitheatre, with a jazz band for halftime entertainment; charter membership in the American Professional Football League (1920) and in the National Football League (1922). Mayo “Ink” Williams, one of professional football’s first

black players, played for Hammond from 1919 to 1926. Frederick “Fritz” Pollard, professional football’s first (and only) black head coach, guided Hammond’s affairs in 1925. Other blacks also played for Parduhn and Young’s color-blind teams.

A galaxy of All-American, All-Western, All-Southern, and All-Eastern ex-college stars played for Hammond during the team’s ten seasons. Paddy Driscoll played in one year for Hammond, the Chicago Cardinals, and the Chicago Cubs. After playing end for Parduhn’s “Beauties” in 1919, George Halas moved to Decatur to coach the Staleys, then moved the Staleys to Chicago. A year later, the Staleys became the Bears, with a nucleus of pirated Hammond players. Ralph Jones played occasionally for the Hammond Pros while coaching the locally more popular semi-pro Hammond Scatenas, and coached the Chicago Bears in the early 1930s. The many-talented Paul Robeson probably also passed through the Pros’ very elastic rosters.

Hammond played other pro teams, semi-pro teams, scratch teams, and occasionally renamed college teams on weekends and holidays. Big city teams and small town franchises (of which only Green Bay survives) were scheduled according to the pleasures of owners, players, and fans before the season, during the season, and after the “regular” season, despite attempts by the APFA and the NFL to publish and follow schedules. They competed for ill-defined, but prestigious “Midwestern” and “national” championships.

Early professional football was at once brutal and raffish, and the Hammond Pros helped carve the mold. Games were scheduled and cancelled according to convenience, weather, and ticket sales. Arguments among coaches and owners over “the gate” were not rare. Contracts were signed but rarely enforced, and players came and went according to the offer of the week. Injured players were simply dropped from the roster. Players were paid in cash immediately after each game according to some interaction among the owner’s promises, ticket sales, and the final score. Team members played four quarters, two or even three times a week, for fun, money, regional and national championships, and, according to one early lineman, for the “atavistic, trogdolytic satisfaction” of pushing “his fellow man flat on his derriere.” One Hammond player actually played against his team in a league game, another had a Thanksgiving Day contract to play for another pro team. “Ringers” were widely employed. Purdue’s quarterback Linn Howard played for his alma mater on Saturday afternoon, and on Sunday for Hammond as “T. Howard Gangway.” Hammond favored Boilermakers, while arch-rival Fort Wayne employed Notre Dame stars. Both teams freely complained about the other’s peccadillos. Injured players were simply dropped from the team. Franchises rose and fell according to success, attendance figures, and the purses of local “sports.” Some teams, like the Hammond Indians, or the “Notre Dame Boys,” were invented for a single game.

The contrast between this hell-for-leather era in professional football and the sleek, modern NFL is startling and fascinating. This paper will sample those lively times with a look at the owners, players, and seasons of the Hammond Professionals, and offer some conclusions about the passing of Hammond’s age of professional football.