

Football in Petoskey in 1893

Fred Newberry was 15 years of age when he came back to Petoskey in 1893. He brought with him the football his father had given him the previous year. The arts of the game he had acquired the previous year, from a member of the Bechtel College football team. One day, as young Fred was booting the football about, the new Episcopal rector, Rev. E.W. Jewell chanced by. Rev. Jewell had just been graduated from Hobart College where he had played football. Without more ado Rev. Jewell and Fred Newberry started scouting the town for material for two teams. The teams were soon organized, practice sessions followed and the first game was played in the cow pasture on the corner of Mitchell Street, between Kalamazoo and Lockwood Avenues.

Captain Newberry and his squad were the victors. Miss Bontecou, daughter of the editor and publisher of the Petoskey Record, wrote the newspaper account of the game. She was not on hand to see it, but got her information after the game from the captain of the losing team, Rev. Jewell. According to her published story, "Kilborn was to play fullback but was laid up with a sprained ankle and helped to win the game by umpiring and refereeing." The line-up shows no substitute for Kilborn as fullback on the Newberry team. Apparently 10 men and a referee was just as satisfactory a combination. Miss Bontecou mentioned that a large crowd of business-men, ladies and children saw the game and concluded the account thus: "The boys did some fine tackling but were weak on their team work and as they all became a little rattled the next game will be more interesting. The same teams will line up on Thursday at 4:00 sharp for a second match game."

For these who do not remember the "good old days" of football the following is a condensed explanation of the game as written by Rev. Jewell and published in the Petoskey record on November 8, 1893:

Football got off to a slow start in American colleges in the 1870's. In 1873, for example, the University of Michigan challenged Cornell to a game. Andrew White, President of Cornell University at that time replied to the challenge thus: "I will not permit 30 men to travel 400 miles merely to agitate a bag of wind." This lack of enthusiasm for the game was quite general. In one college a player was hooted-down by his teammates when he suggested that they all run around the block a couple of times each night to keep in condition. That would be over-emphasizing sports, they said.

However, Yankee inventiveness went to work and made a hash of a variety of English rugby and soccer rules. The resulting brand of American football gained so fast in popularity that by 1893 it was even being played in the northwoods of Michigan.

November 10, 1893 is the historic date when the first football game was played in Petoskey. From the early newspaper accounts it appears that the Petoskey teams played the up-to-date brand of football. They employed the flying-wedge which Harvard had first demonstrated to an amazed football world only the previous year. There may have been a couple of purely Petoskey innovations. In the Petoskey game the brawny guards wore leather belts equipped with a handle in the back for the half-backs to grab as the flying-wedge tried to get through the line. For head protection the players simply let their hair grow—the longer and bushier it got the better. While this is not a matter of official record, the information came from a reliable source—the late Fred Newberry, the man who introduced football in Petoskey and the Captain of one of the two teams who played the historic first game of November 10, 1893. With merriment crinkling his eyes, he recalled how his shaggy appearance mortified his mother. His hair had a tendency to grow straight up, he said, and was bushier than a Ubangi's.

“The science of the game consists in blocking, tackling, and hitting the line hard and team work. Blocking is preventing the opponents from getting through the scrimmage line and downing the runner

before he gets up to his own line. The ball is snapped by "center-rush" to "quarterback" and he passes it to the runner who is usually one of the halfbacks or the fullbacks stationed behind the rush line and who catches the ball and runs full speed, head down, straight at the center of the rush-line, or toward the weakest spot—which can only be found by trial. He makes no attempt to run around the line, nor to dodge, until after clearing the line and he finds a clear field with only one or two opposing backs to tackle him. If the line blocks well he has a chance to gain two or three yards through the line before being downed. If five yards be gained in three such trials the ball still remains "on side." But, if the ball is not advanced five yards toward the opponents goal, or carried back twenty yards, it goes to the opponents who begin the same tactics.

"Tackling is more difficult to learn. Tackle low is the rule. A good tackle means a tight grip about both thighs of a runner which renders him helpless, forcing him to the ground backward. A tackle about the waist or shoulders is useless, since the runner will gain many yards before being downed. The tackler throws himself headlong at the runner, very much as one diving in the water. He must be sure of eye to gauge the distance and perfectly fearless as to the results to himself. A man who is timid will never do as a tackle. Any runner who stops to dodge, or runs backward toward his own goal to avoid a tackle, ought never to be allowed on the field. The rule is "hit the line hard" by running straight ahead at full speed. But the crowning glory of a team is to play together. Let every man hear the command of his captain so every player knows who will run with the ball, where he will hit the line, and where all the strength of the team is instantly applied to make a breach in the enemy's line. Then, when the runner gets clear of the line one or two players should run ahead of him to ward off the tacklers and nurse down the field toward the opponents goal. If this is reached a touchdown is scored by falling on the ball behind the line of the goal posts. This counts four points. The ball is next carried out directly parallel with the side line, and try at goal

made by one player holding the ball in the air while another runs at it to kick it over the crossbar on the goal posts, or the ball may be passed directly to the kicker who then lets it drop to the ground and kicks it as it rises. This method is called a drop-kick. A good goal counts two more points. The drop-kick may be tried when the ball has been advanced to within a safe distance, to wit: five yards from the opponents goal and if it passes over the cross-bar it counts five points. Either the captain or the fullback, standing back of the line, are eligible to try for it. It is a very difficult kick and is rarely tried, it being much safer to try for a touchdown.

"The ball is never batted or passed forward toward the opponents goal. An infringement of this rule gives the opponents 25 yards or a free kick at their discretion. No tripping or attempt to injure a player is allowed. No one may hold a player who has not the ball, but can only block with his shoulder. Any slugging calls for the removal of the offender from the game if seen by the referee. The bad reputation the game enjoys with ignorant outsiders is derived mainly from the fact that Yale and Princeton aim to win their games at any cost and deliberately try to disable the best players. Statistics show that fewer are injured at this game in comparison, than in baseball and other sports, or even by railroad accidents."