

Carlisle Indians: A Story of Champions

Luke Brown

Senior Division

Paper

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Our National History Day advisor approached me about doing a research project about the Carlisle Indian Industrial School football team earlier this school year because of passion for sports, particularly local sports. Since 2021, I've been a freelance sports journalist, doing sports broadcasts for my school's live streams, as well as work for the Patriot News in Harrisburg, NFHS Network covering Pennsylvania high school championships and other local sports. This project was perfect because it incorporated a national, larger aspect of sports but related it to a local setting. The first part of my research was going through digital record books to find out what types of teams the Indians played, what players and coaches they had, and how successful they were. After lots of research on more historical data, another big piece of research was finding articles either written at the time or long after by credible sources who not only covered what the team did on the field but also the historical impact they left. Through lots of historical information and stories, I'm pointing out that the Carlisle Indians left a huge stamp on our local society by exhibiting a strong work ethic and innovative creativity in order to see success in their sport.

Across the United States of America, football is everywhere. The annual Super Bowl in February summons millions upon millions to watch, and weekends in the fall into winter are dominated by a sport so many are obsessed with. Central Pennsylvania is no different. With two professional teams in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, a college team in State College with a huge following, and the nearby Baltimore Ravens, many Pennsylvanians clear their weekends to root on their favorite teams or enjoy the sport they love. While some fans know lots of statistical and historical information about the sport, few understand the local tie-in to football. Few understand that every time there is a passing play in the game, a part of that is due to what happened in the late 1800's to early 1900's in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. A college football schedule including opponents of Harrisburg High School, Navy, York YMCA, Bucknell University and more would seem impossible, due to the vast differences in competition, size, and NCAA division. It was a reality for the Carlisle Indians.

In 1879, an American Cavalry officer Richard Henry Pratt had an idea. His goal was to create a sense of nationalism in the minds of Native Americans. To this point, Native Americans had been considered separate from the Americans from Europe. Just over 200 years removed from the very first Thanksgiving meal, this task didn't seem reasonable. The end goal for Pratt was to civilize the "Indians" and make them US Citizens. He would go about this by creating an Industrial School called the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Of course, the school had a field outside for athletics, and that's where history was made.

In 1894, football was not a national game. The first ever college football game between New Jersey and Rutgers had been played just 16 years earlier, and there were only three conferences in Maryland, Michigan and the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association (SIAA) with the majority of schools being listed as Independent, like Notre Dame still is today. The school only had a total of 1,000 students, and ages of students ranged from 12-25, meaning the school was often overpowered by bigger and stronger, older students at other schools. This would explain why the only win for the Indians came against Harrisburg High School in their opening game on October 6, 1894. Of course, in 2024, the guidelines set in place by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and Pennsylvania

Interscholastic Athletic Association (PIAA) would never allow a matchup such as this to occur again. The Indians went on to tie Dickinson and York YMCA, and lost to Lehigh, Navy, Franklin and Marshall, Bucknell, Pittsburgh Athletic Club, and Columbia Athletic Club.

The Indians settled for average for a few more seasons, until a revolutionary head coach would begin his time as the Indians' skipper. Pop Warner was part of the inaugural class of the College Football Hall of Famers, and his contributions to youth football were so legendary that youth football entirely is often referred to as "Pop Warner Football." Warner coached football from 1895 until 1940 at eight different institutions, including Pitt, Stanford and Cornell, but his two separate stops in Carlisle may be the most notable. Warner recognized immediately that Carlisle was undersized to compete with some of the national powerhouses on their schedule. He immediately began experimenting with trick plays, reverse plays, end-arounds and perhaps the most iconic, the flea flicker. The flea flicker is still commonly used in every level of football, a play in which the ball is snapped to a receiver, usually the quarterback, the quarterback then passes the ball backwards to a receiver who is able to still either pass the ball or run forward himself. At the time, the only eligible option for the second receiver would be to run, since forward passes would become legal later on. The very idea that the quarterback would pass the ball backward to the receiver was still an innovative idea that led to the success the Indians hoped.

Their hopes would be answered in Warner's first season as the head coach. In 1899, Carlisle went 9-2, the sixth best record in the country. Their only two losses came from Harvard and Princeton, who were named co-champions of the season. Another innovative facet of the Carlisle game was their field goal attempts. They all came from Quarterback/Kicker Frank Hudson, who would often line up on a play as if he was gearing up to throw the ball, but as soon as he received the ball from the center, he'd kick it through the goal posts for three points. He did this in a 22-10 loss to Harvard in the 1899 season, compelling the New York Times to write "Now came the feature of the game, for which everybody had been waiting. The Indians advanced the ball to Harvard's thirty-five-yard line, when Hudson dropped back for a goal from the field. A second later and the pigskin went straight through the goal posts, and everybody was digging his neighbors' ribs and saying 'I told you so.'"

Hudson went on to dropkick four field goals in a Thanksgiving day win over Columbia in Manhattan, New York. Despite a holiday, many fans were intrigued with the new look Indians and 6-2 record leading up to the game. 10,000 fans were in attendance and they saw a show from Isaac Seneca, a running back for the Indians. He had two 30+ yard rushes, and one 40+ yard rush.

After outscoring opponents 383-46 in 1899, the Indians went on to compile 39 wins, 18 losses and three ties during the five year tutelage of coach Pop Warner. They'd continued success with Warner, but things changed for the better in 1907. The forward pass was now legal in the game of football, after President Theodore Roosevelt stepped in to change the rules due to over 100 injuries and 18 deaths because of a lack of protection and a run-only offense, consisting of head to head contact on every play. Many in the game disliked the idea of the forward pass, because it wasn't the traditional football they were used to. Some football programs still feel this way, like the service academies Air Force, Army, Navy, who ran the ball 85.4%, 75.7% and 71% of the time in the 2023-24 season. Warner compared the forward pass to basketball, saying "It may be basketball, but it's in the rules, so let's try it." Among those "trying it" was Jim Thorpe, the newest addition to the team, and the most valuable. Thorpe persuaded Warner to allow him to try out for the team, looking for just a chance to participate. His tryout blew Warner away, earning not only a spot but a starting spot. The 1907 team, forward pass and Thorpe included, finished with a 10-1 record, the fourth best in the country behind Penn, Dartmouth and Yale. The Indians beat Lebanon Valley College, Susquehanna University, Villanova, Penn State, Syracuse, Bucknell, the defending National Champion Penn Quakers, Harvard, Minnesota and Chicago. Their lone loss came 16-0 at Princeton. Their upset win over Penn came at the first-ever college football stadium, Franklin Field, which is still used to this day in the city of Philadelphia. That day, the place held 20,000 people, who saw a big win for the Indians, including a rare 40-yard pass from Pete Hauser. It shocked a crowd who was used to short passes, which took up the vast majority of passing attempts across the nation. The moment is described as "the sporting equivalent of the Wright Brothers taking off at Kitty Hawk." wrote Sally Jenkins in her 2008 book *The Real All Americans: The Team That Changed a Game, a People, a Nation*. In today's football, throwing a ball in anything but a spiral movement would be

considered a bad throw, but Hauser's spiral motion to his throw was considered his secret to success. Pop Warner officially credited Hauser in being the first football player to throw a spiral pass and could "hit his ends on the dead run with uncanny accuracy." In 1907, Albert Exendine, Frank Mount Pleasant and Pete Hauser were selected as All-Americans by Walter Camp, Caspar Whitney or the New York Herald.

Aside from an eight win, one tie, zero loss Penn State Nittany Lion team, the 1911 Indians put together the best overall performances in the Eastern college football independents standings, consisting of 34 teams across the region. Pop Warner was in his tenth season as the Indians coach. The team put up an 11 win season, and one loss. They beat Lebanon Valley College, Muhlenberg, Dickinson, Mount St. Mary's, Georgetown, Pitt, Lafayette, Penn, Harvard, Johns Hopkins and Brown. They took one loss at Archbold Stadium in Syracuse, New York to the Orange, 12-11. The biggest game for the Indians came at Harvard Stadium in Boston, Massachusetts. Carlisle defeated the Crimson Tide, 18-15 in what is still considered one of the biggest upsets in college football history. It stunned some 25,000 fans watching. Jim Thorpe proved to be one of the greatest players in college football, making a gigantic difference in the rushing game, and kicking four field goals, accounting for 12 points. It is often believed Thorpe accounted for all points scored for Carlisle, but NCAA records indicate that Alex Arcasa scored the lone Indian touchdown. Sampson Bird, Jim Thorpe and Possum Powell were all selected as all-Americans in the season.

Over the next two seasons, Carlisle tallied up 22 wins to two losses and two ties. They beat well-known programs like Villanova, Syracuse, Pitt, Army, and Georgetown. 1914 was the final season for the legendary Warner as head coach, a timely exit after a 5-10-1 season, losing to many of the teams that would give Carlisle a good game in years prior. The Indians were shut out 21-0 by Cornell, 7-0 by Penn, 24-3 by Syracuse, and a win against Alabama, who now dominates college football every weekend, was the highlight of the season when Carlisle traveled to Rickwood Field in Birmingham.

A 3-6-2 season in 1915, 3-4-1 in 1916 and 3-6 in 1917 were the final three seasons for Carlisle. Deed Harris had taken over for his first two seasons as his head coach, and he started off with two wins at Indian field against Albright and Franklin & Marshall, but the coming games would not be so nice, losing

21-0 to West Virginia, 61-0 to Navy, 10-0 to Bucknell, 28-0 to Army, and 26-0 to Penn. What really stung was their 98-0 loss to the Yellow Jackets of Georgia Tech in Atlanta. This loss would prompt a clever cartoon by Georgia Tech's student newspaper, *Technique*, showing a cartoon of a Native American running from a fallen yellow jackets' nest, yelling "This is no happy hunting ground for 'um big chief." The caption read "STUNG 98 TIMES." The United States' entry to World War I closed the school due to low enrollment, and the land was turned over to the United States Department of Defense, and is now part of the U.S. Army War College.

The experiment of these men on a school athletic field became one of the top assemblies of players in the country, and drew thousands upon thousands just for a glimpse of them to make history. Before a game, Pop Warner once told his team "Your fathers and grandfathers fought (the opponents') fathers. These men playing against you today are soldiers. They are the Long Knives. You are Indians. Tonight, we will know if you are warriors." This speech from Warner valued the same principles that were in place long before this stretch for Carlisle, and are still in place now. The principles to compete, give all the effort you have, and try to win over your opponent, whether it's Native-Americans fighting for their land, the Indians battling Cornell, or someone in the present day fighting the latest challenge on their hands. In fact, the Indians battled so hard that they became innovative within their ways, attempting an extremely rare long pass, the first ever spiral pass, one of the first teams to implement the pass entirely, or the first team to implement trick plays, just because they were often overmatched with size that they couldn't compete against. The Indians embodied the spirit of never giving up, being creative, and giving continuous effort, and they continue to provide lessons for us, over 100 years later.

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