

Before the Iggles . . .

The Yella Jackets ruled

by William C. Kashatus

Having been raised in Northeast Philly, where football is a way of life, I can truly appreciate the wild ride local gridiron fans are taking this season.

Our hometown Iggles (Phillyspeak for "Eagles") have shocked the hell out of us by going 10-5.

Who would've figured they'd be playoff material?

In fact, the Iggles' turnaround from the depths of the Ray Rhodes era has been so complete that it raises the question, "Yo, Jeff! Wanna buy the Phillies?"

Such a magical season brings to mind those thrillin' days of yesteryear when another Philly team ruled the NFL.

It was a time when pigskin heroes lived in the same neighborhoods as their fans and played for little more than \$200 each week and the sheer love of "da game."

Back then, for under a buck, Philly fans could boo Jim Thorpe, Red Grange and other leather-helmeted greats as they galloped their way into the Hall of Fame.

Ya think I'm kiddin' yous?

Well, those things really happened in 1926, when the Frankford Yellow Jackets captured the NFL championship.

Long before Philadelphia embraced the "Iggles," the old industrial neighborhoods "up er 'round" Frankford could boast of the Yellow Jackets.

Founded as an amateur team in 1899, the Jackets were a bunch of preppies, mostly from Penn, Lehigh and Penn State. Since they lived in the Greater Northeast, the team was sponsored by local merchants and played other amateur teams.

By 1924, the Yellow Jackets had "done real good." So good that they were invit-

ed to join the National Football League. Among their toughest competitors were the Canton Bulldogs, New York Giants and "da Bears" of Chicago.

Hundreds of thousands of fans (well, maybe not that many, but a lot) made their way by bus, trolley or El up to the Jackets' home field at Frankford and Devereaux to watch the team play.

Because the city's blue laws prohibited sports on Sunday, the Jackets were the only team in the NFL to play its home games on Saturday. (The Quaker peaceniks who made those rules had an "attytood" when it came to violence . . . like football.)

In 1926, Frankford was a team of destiny.

After chalking up an 11-1 record with three games left, the Jackets faced the Bears, who had a perfect 12-0 record.

Since Frankford's remaining games were almost certain wins against weaker teams in the league, the Bears contest would essentially determine the NFL championship.

Played on Saturday, Dec. 4, the Jackets-Bears game attracted such national attention that it had to be moved to Shibe Park to accommodate the anticipated crowds.

For three quarters, the Jackets held the Bears to a scoreless tie. Then, midway through the fourth quarter, Chicago rallied for a 6-0 lead.

If the extra point hadn't been blocked by Frankford's player-coach, Guy Chamberlain, the Jackets might well have been accused of choking. But with five

minutes remaining, they still had a chance at victory.

Quarterback "Two Bits" Homan, all of 142 pounds with his pads on, took the Jackets to the Bears' three-yard line.

On fourth down with seconds remaining, Homan took the snap from center, faked to his right and handed off to his fullback, Roger Stockton, for an Andy Reid-like surprise play.

As Stockton dropped back deep into the pocket, Homan sprinted into the Chicago end zone. Eluding two tacklers, Stockton fired a strike to Homan to tie the game at 6-6. After the extra point was kicked to put the Jackets ahead 7-6, the Frankford faithful went wild.

A week later, when "da Bears" suffered a second loss, the Jackets clinched the NFL title with a 14-1-1 record.

Those 14 victories stood as a league record until 1972, when the Miami Dolphins eclipsed it by posting 16 wins.

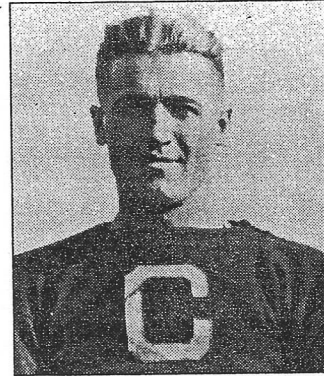
The Yellow Jackets never captured another NFL title. They folded shortly after the stock market crashed in 1929.

Four years later, in 1933, the franchise was acquired by Bert Bell and Lud Wray for \$2,500.

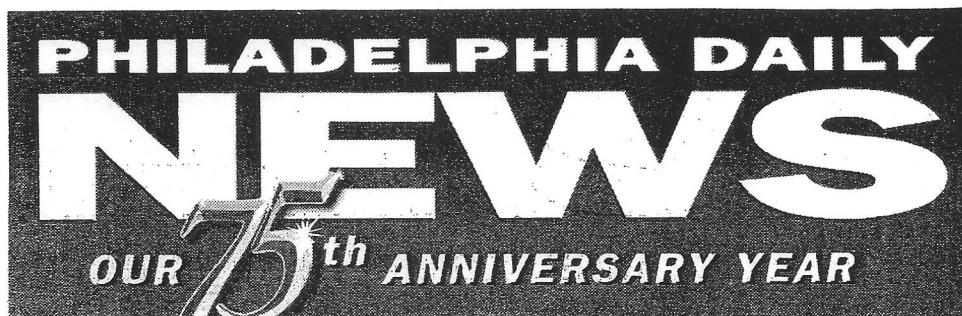
The new owners moved the team out of Frankford and into the heart of the city, renaming it the Philadelphia "Iggles."

"Da rest," as they say in the Greater Northeast, "is histree!" ■

William C. Kashatus is a professional historian who works at the Chester County Historical Society.



PRO FOOTBALL HALL OF FAME
Player-coach Guy Chamberlain: Key to win.



THE DAILY VIEWS ~ OP/ED

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2000