

THE ROCK ISLAND INDEPENDENTS

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

On an October Sunday afternoon in 1921, the Chicago Cardinals held a 7-0 lead after the first quarter at Normal Park on the strength of Paddy Driscoll's 75-year punt return for a touchdown and his subsequent extra point. If there was a downside for the 4,000 assembled Cardinal fans, it was the lackluster performance of the visitors from across state--The Rock Island Independents. But the Independents were not dead. As a matter of fact, their second quarter was to be quite exciting--and certainly one of the most important sessions in the life of their young halfback, Jim Conzelman.

It would be nice if we only knew in what order the three crucial events of that second quarter occurred, but newspaper accounts are unclear and personal recollections are vague.

Certain it is that the Islanders rucked the ball down the field to the Chicago five. At that point, Quarterback Sid Nichols lofted a short pass to Conzelman in the end zone. After Jim tied the score with a nice kick, the teams lined up to start all over.

At the kickoff, Conzelman was down the field like a shot--the Cardinals were to insist he was offside. Before any Chicagoan could lay hand on the ball, Jim grasped it and zipped unmolested across the goal line. Another kick brought the score to 14-7, as it was to remain through the second half.

The third event of that fateful second quarter was the most unusual, but whether it happened before Conzelman's heroics to inspire him or after them to reward him is something we'll probably never know. But, somewhere in the midst of the hectic second period, Big Ed Healey lumbered onto the field to replace tackle and coach Frank Coughlin, former Notre Dame star under Rockne. Once Coughlin was safely on his way toward the sideline, Healey delivered a message to Conzelman from team manager Walt Flanigan: Coughlin was fired! The new coach was Conzelman!

The NFL has seen some imprudent team bosses in its more than 60 years, but none has yet duplicated Flanigan's act of hiring a new coach in the middle of a game.

Walter H. Flanigan wasn't the kind to leap before he looked, but he'd take a chance when he thought it was warranted. In his choice of Jim Conzelman, he tapped a winner. Jim went on to coach his way into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, posting championships with Providence in 1928 and, ironically, with the Cardinals in 1947.

The Rock Island Independents were not so durable. They won more often than they lost, but ultimately big time pro football outgrew them. Their last NFL game was in 1928.

But, along the way, Walter Flanigan took some other chances, and enough of them worked out to earn Rock Island a secure niche in the history and folklore of pro football.

* * *

About 150 years ago the U.S. government pushed most of the Sauk and Fox Indians west of the Mississippi River to make room for white settlers in northwest Illinois. When a stubborn chief named Black Hawk and some of his followers refused to budge, the resulting unpleasantness went into the history books as the Black Hawk War. By 1833, Black Hawk had been subdued and a settlement called Stephenson could be safely built on Rock Island in the Mississippi River. Eventually, someone decided a more appropriate idea was to rename the budding town after the island. And so it has remained.

At the turn of this century Rock Islanders had long since given up fighting Indians. A popular replacement was the more civilized warfare of the football field. Neighborhood elevens flourished. Most favored of foes were the athletically inclined from nearby Moline or Davenport across the river in Iowa. Each fall many fine, rough-and-tumble contests took place among the Tri-Cities' amateur teams.

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Rock Island's main industry was farm tool manufacturing, and that was all well and good for making ends meet and paying the rent and such. But it couldn't swell the heart like a good gridiron victory over Moline, nor swell the wallet like collecting a wager on the winner.

By 1920, it was time to organize. A neighborhood team took the name of Independents, collected the best Rock Island players, and roared through a five game season undefeated.

Muscatine, Iowa	43- 0
Clinton, Iowa	24- 0
Rockford, Ill.	12- 0
Peoria, Ill., Socials	18- 0
Moline East Ends	18- 0

After a year's regression into loose sandlot activity again, the Independents reorganized for 1912. Captain John Roche led a 19-player squad through another undefeated season, this one of eight games.

Moline, Illini	6- 0
Columbus Junction	12- 0
Davenport Ind.	6- 0
Kewanee Regulars	52- 0
Moline West Ends	53- 0
U.S. Regulars	47- 0
Moline Olympics	32- 0
Spring Valley	7- 0

In the third game in 1913, a team--the Peoria Socials--finally scored on the Independents. Not only that but one week later the Moline Olympics even held them to a scoreless tie. Then Captain Roche's men righted themselves and went on to their usual undefeated year.

Davenport Ind.	20- 0
Moline Illini	13- 0
Peoria Socials	26- 9
Moline Olympics	0- 0
Moline Olympics	10- 7
Peoria Socials	12- 6
Columbus Junction	13- 0

In retrospect, the single most important happening of 1913 was when a 21 year old substitute end joined the team. He didn't play much, but he was bright and willing. Before the season was over, he had become assistant to team manager Joseph Smith. The new recruit was, of course, Walter Flanigan.

Things began normally in 1914 as the team rolled through its first five games in its usual masterly fashion. Then on November 15, the Moline Red Men--an Independents' victim earlier in the season--shocked the Islanders with a 9-0 upset. A few days later, the Evanston North Ends, one of the midwest's better teams, defeated them 6-0.

Those two losses were not what was expected from the Independents, but--in truth--they were a sign that the team was branching out, moving beyond its Tri-Cities phase and toward a national spotlight.

Moline Red Men	13- 0
Davenport Ind.	39- 0
Moline Olympics	18- 0
Aurora All-Stars	38- 0
Des Moines Champs	52- 7
Moline Red Men	0- 9
Evanston North Ends	0- 6

In 1915, Walter Flanigan took over from Smith as full team manager. His schedule took in teams from as far away as the west side of Iowa, but the Independents found their nemesis closer to home. In an otherwise all-winning season, Rock Island could show only a tie for two meetings with the Moline Red Men. Black Hawk himself had been less trouble!

900 Block	63- 0
Moline Red Men	0- 0

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Dubuque Hawkeyes	74- 0
Aurora Greyhounds	10- 0
Des Moines Champs	7- 0
N. Henderson A.C.	66- 0
Moline Red Men	0-10

Flanigan expanded his schedule to nine games for 1916, but things started badly with three losses in the first four games, including still another defeat by those pesky Moline Red Men. Then, on November 12, the Independents enjoyed sweet revenge by 21-3 over the Red Men. The triumph launched a closing drive of four straight wins.

The competition was growing but the Independents were improving themselves.

Rockford A.C.	0-25
Moline Red Men	0- 3
Aurora Greyhounds	21- 0
Davenport A.C.	0- 6
Davenport A.C.	0- 0
Moline Red Men	21- 3
Maywood A.C.	14- 0
Rockford A.C.	34- 6
Spring Valley Moose	13- 0

Flanigan hoped for national attention in 1917. As a step in that direction he booked home and home games with the recognized "North West Pro Champs"--the Minneapolis Marines. On November 4, the famous Marines came to Rock Island, and 6,425 fans turned out at Douglas Park to watch the undefeated Independents take on the bruisers from the north. It was the biggest crowd the Independents had ever drawn.

The record crowd justified Flanigan's goal of big-time pro football for Rock Island. Unfortunately, the Marines showed that the team still had a way to go as they topped the Independents, 7-3. Only Quarterback Walter Brindley's 53-yard dropkick kept the locals from being shut out.

Two weeks later, the rematch at Minneapolis wasn't even close.

Sterling Ind.	33- 0
Alton Tigers	33- 3
Davenport A.C.	3- 0
Peoria Socials	49- 0
Moline Indians	20- 0
Racine F.B.A.	12- 0
Minneapolis Marines	3- 7
Davenport A.C.	10-12
Minneapolis Marines	14-33
Davenport A.C.	23- 7

World War I and the military draft put a temporary halt to Flanigan's expansion plans, but his Independents still managed a bob-tailed schedule against area clubs in 1918.

Rock Island Tigers	20- 0
Peru A.C.	64- 0
Camp Grant	79- 0
St. Paul A. School	6- 0
St. Paul A. School	13- 0

But all sights were on 1919 and a national championship.

The first move Flanigan made was to invite Rube Ursella, the Minneapolis Marines' barrel-chested quarterback, to come to Rock Island to--uh--talk. Within an hour after Rube arrived on a hot August day, he was hired as coach. Predictably, a whole platoon of Marines came trooping behind Ursella to upgrade the R.I. lineup. Other good players like hometown boy Jerry Mansfield, a hardnosed fullback or end who had stared at Camp Grant, Ill., came back from the service to lend their might to the Independents.

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The Rock Island rep had grown so over the years that any number of young hopefuls turned out for the first practice each year. Flanigan had developed a sure-fire way to weed out the chaff. For the first couple of days he held foot races and wrestling matches until all the pretenders had wilted and only the real ironmen remained. The they started learning plays.

The 1919 schedule was considerably upgraded with several tough Ohio and Indiana teams added. Flanigan was going for broke!

But after a fine beginning, trouble arrived in the third game. Hammond's "\$20,000 team" boasted so many stars they couldn't all get on the field at once. At one end was George Halas who was to become to Rock Island over the next couple of years something like Grant was to Richmond. He helped Hammond to a 12-7 nipping of the Independents before 7,000 fans at Douglas Park. In that just about everyone west of Canton, Ohio, had already conceded the national championship to Hammond's high-priced pros, the game was both a moral victory and damaging loss to the Islanders.

From there on, the Flanigan men went undefeated, although the famous Pine Village eleven held them to a scoreless tie. The Sunday before Thanksgiving they destroyed the legendary Columbus Panhandles, 40-0, with nearly 8,000 reported at Douglas Park.

The Islanders closed with a smart, 17-0, win over the touring Akron Indians. Because Akron was closely associated with Canton, Rock Islanders jumped to the conclusion that beating one was the same thing as beating the other. As a matter of fact, one news story referred to the Akron Bulldogs!

But on the same Sunday, the Canton Bulldogs were licking the Massillon Tigers to make their claim on the U.S. title. The Bulldogs were undefeated with two wins over Akron and one over Hammond's \$20,000-ers.

Nevertheless, Flanigan challenged Canton to a game to "settle" the national championship. At first, the Bulldogs expressed an interest. After all, Flanigan had impulsively offered a \$5,000 guarantee. But, a day later Jim Thorpe, the Canton star and coach, wired to call off any game. He said his team had disbanded for the season--a lame excuse since few key Bulldogs stayed in Canton during the week anyway. Perhaps he simply decided that the Bulldogs had nothing more to prove. More likely he had learned in the interim that Akron had drawn only 1,700 to Douglas Park. The Bulldogs had more than once seen big guarantees evaporate when the gate was counted.

From the Rock Island viewpoint, of course, Canton had chickened. That was enough for the Independents to claim the U.S. pro title.

The claim held up almost to Peoria.

Rockford A.C.	21- 0
Cornell-Hamburgs	21- 0
Hammond All-Stars	7-12
Davenport A.C.	33- 0
Cincinnati Celts	33- 0
Pine Village	0- 0
Moline F.A.	56- 0
Hammond A.A.	55- 0
Columbus Panhandles	40- 0
Davenport A.C.	26- 0
Akron Indians	17- 0

In 1920 Flanigan took another chance. Managers of many of the best teams agreed to meet in Canton on September 17 to talk about forming a pro league. The result was the American Professional Football association, the forerunner of the NFL, and Flanigan made his team a card-carrying charter member. The assembly named Flanigan to a committee charged with framing a constitution.

The 1920 Independents were a tad disappointing--not quite up to championship caliber--but they posted a respectable 6-2-2 record and gave the fans their money's worth. The high--or low--points of the season were tow games with George Halas' Decatur Staleys, both played at Douglas Park.

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The first, a hard fought, 7-0 loss to the Halasmen, saw Staley halfback Jim Conzelman (yes, the same one) dash 43 yards for the game's only touchdown. Flanigan was impressed with Conzelman, but most of Rock Island was outraged by the rough play of the Staleys. Both Ursella and star tackle Walt Buland were knocked out of the game with injuries. Staley center George Trafton was considered the prime offender.

But the worst was yet to come. In the rematch no fewer than four Independents were kayoed. Most seriously hurt were nifty halfback Fred Chicken with a broken leg and center Hal Gundreson who was "nearly killed when Trafton slid across his face." The Rock Island *Argus* headlined: "Staleys Win World's Dirt Title!" For all the bruises, Rock Island earned a 0-0 tie.

It was after this game that Halas said he handed a sack containing his team's share of the gate to Trafton just before a mob of more than a hundred angry Rock Island fans came storming after the big center. Off went Trafton with the mob at his heels. "I knew I'd be running for the money," Halas said later, "but George was running for his life!"

Sure enough, Trafton and the money got safely back to Decatur.

St. Paul Ideals	48- 0
Muncie Flyers	45- 0
Hammond Pros	26- 0
Decatur Staleys	0- 7
Chicago Cardinals	7- 0
Chicago Tigers	20- 7
Decatur Staleys	0- 0
Thorn Tornadoes	7- 7
Dayton Triangles	0-21
W. & J. All-Stars	48- 7

In 1921, the year that Conzelman took over as coach in mid-game, the Independents lost only twice--both times to the Staleys, by then in Chicago and on their way to becoming Bears.

Detroit Tigers	0- 0
Chicago Staleys	10-14
Chicago Cardinals	14- 7
Detroit Tigers	14- 0
Green Bay Packers	13- 3
Minneapolis Marines	14- 3
Chicago Staleys	0- 3
*Duluth Kellys	28- 0

**Non-league*

And, in an almost unbelievable repeat, the Islanders went undefeated in 1922--except for two losses to guess who!

*Moline Indians	26- 0
Green Bay Packers	19-14
Chicago Bears	6-10
Evansville C. Giants	60- 0
Rochester Jeffs	26- 0
Green Bay Packers	0- 0
Dayton Triangles	43- 0
Chicago Bears	0- 3

Walt Flanigan took another chance in '22, but this one didn't work out. He had a big tackle who'd been erratic in his first couple of years--great one game and so-so the next. Since the Islanders had a couple of other linemen who could handle the position, including rugged rookie Duke Slater, Flanigan took a chance that the erratic tackle never would mature and sold his contract for \$200.

Of course, good ol' George Halas shelled out the money, and, of course, the tackle was Ed Healey who went on to Hall of Fame heights for the Bears.

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After the '22 season, Walt Flanagan turned from pro football to devote his time--successfully--to real estate and insurance.

The Independents went on. In 1923 they had their first and only losing season in the NFL (although non-league games gave them another winning season overall), despite some fine work by Slater an quarterback Johnny Armstrong. Actually, the year started great when they finally beat the Bears on Dale Sies' 21-yard field goal, but the Bruins came back later to clobber them twice.

*Moline Indians	9- 6
Chicago Bears	3- 0
Cleveland Indians	0- 0
Rochester Jeffs	0- 0
*Hibbing, Minn.	56- 0
*Omaha Olympics	27- 7
Milwaykee Badgers	3-14
Minneapolis Marines	6- 6
Chicago Bears	3- 7
Minneapolis Marines	6- 6
*Durant, Mich.	7- 6
Chicago Bears	7-29

The great Jim Thorpe, 36 years old and only a shadow of what he once had been, took a spot in the Rock Island Backfield in 1924, along with ageless Rube Ursella. The two old pros had enough good days left between them to lead the Islanders to a successful season and even a left-handed claim to the NFL title.

That was the year the NFL decided to end its official season on November 30. When that day arrived, Cleveland had the league's best percentage and apparently the title, but hardly anyone stopped playing.

George Halas challenged Cleveland to play his Bears in December and won. Then he made the mistake of scheduling Rock Island for the following week. Thorpe, Ursella, Slater, et. al. ambushed the Bears, 7-6, with old Rube kicking the winning PAT.

So Cleveland claimed the championship on percentage, the Bears claimed the title on a win over Cleveland, and Rock Island jumped in to claim the crown on their win over the Bears. Quite properly, the league decided to follow its own rules and gave the diadem to Cleveland.

Undaunted, the Independents toured Texas into January to the tune of easy wins and middling crowds.

*Moline Indians	7- 0
Chicago Bears	0- 0
Racine Legion	9- 0
Hammond Pros	26- 0
Dayton Triangles	20- 0
Kansas City Blues	7-23
Chicago Bears	3- 3
Racine Legion	6- 3
Kansas City Blues	17- 0
Duluth Kellys	0- 9
*Kenosha-Hammond	10- 6
*Clinton, Iowa	13- 0
*Chicago Bears	7- 6
*Beaumont, Texas	31- 0
*Houston, Texas	13- 7
*San Antonio, Texas	14- 0
*Galveston, Texas	18- 0

Although R.I. didn't know it yet, the NFL passed them by in 1925. Naturally, Halas was at the root of it. He induced Red Grange to turn pro on Thanksgiving Day. With Grange as the feature the Bears began drawing record crowds all over the league.

The two-to-four thousand that usually turned out at Douglas Park seemed pretty small potatoes compared to the 30- or 40 thou available in the big cities. The Islanders could only watch in envy as

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lesser teams in bigger towns raked in big money as Grange made his triumphant tour through the league. Rock Island was not one of his stops.

The closest the Independents came to sharing the Red Wealth was when they were hired as team to play against Grange & Co. in Tampa Bay on the Redhead's post-season tour. Billed as the Tampa Cardinals, they lost on January 1.

Chicago Bears	0- 0
Dayton Triangles	0- 0
Green Bay Packers	0- 0
Duluth Kellys	12- 0
Green Bay Packers	0-20
Kansas City Cowboys	3- 3
Chicago Bears	0- 6
Kansas City Cowboys	35-12
Milwaukee Badgers	40- 7
Detroit Panthers	6- 3
Chicago Cardinals	0- 7

When Grange was refused a franchise of his own by the NFL in 1926, he and his manager C.C. "Cash and Carry" Pyle decided to form their own circuit--the American Football League.

How could they miss? More than one observer figured the Grange charisma would bring the NFL to its knees. Rock Island, under the care of subquarterback Vince McCarthy and local businessman Dale Johnson, jumped the NFL to follow the Redhead's siren call into the new league.

Nothing worked. They hired Elmer Layden, late of Notre Dame's Four Horsemen, for one home game at a hefty \$500. His performance was such that he wasn't invited back the next week. Then, while the team was touring the east, AFL franchises began to fold like so many deck chairs. The Grange League came down around the Islanders' ears and they staggered home virtually broke.

Wilson Wildcats	7- 3
New York Yankees	0-26
Chicago Bulls	7- 3
Cleveland Panthers	7-23
Philadelphia Quakers	0- 9
Newark Bears	0- 0
New York Yankees	0-35
Philadelphia Quakers	0-24
Chicago Bulls	0- 3

That finished Rock Island for major league pro football. McCarthy reorganized and tried to run a semi-pro outfit in 1927, but the only part of that worth remembering was when future Chicago Bear star Keith Molesworth played a few games for a modest \$25 per contest.

After that, the Independents closed up shop for good. Their green jerseys faded and so did local memories. 1919 became "that championship season" and, to some extent, so did 1924. In memory, good players become great and great players become demi-gods. As a matter of fact, the Islanders had more than their share: Thorpe, Armstrong, Fred Chicken, Slater, Healey, Buland, and many more. Perhaps the greatest single-season performance was by old Rube Ursella who quarterbacked and coached the 1919 squad while scoring 99 points himself.

During their tour in the big time, the Islanders won a lot more often than they lost, but when the NFL moved out of its town team stage, the Independents were doomed to be a pleasant memory. Walter H. Flanigan, the real heart of the team, continued his successful business career, operating a real estate and securities reclaiming business for many years. He died in 1962 at the age of 70. According to the Rock Island *Argus* one of the mourners at his funeral was Jim Conzelman.