Looking Back at the OHIO Football Championships - No. 1

A centennial moment - **Popularity**

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The first game of what is considered American football was played between Rutgers and Princeton in November of 1869, with Rutgers winning by a score of 6-4. The game, at both the college and high school level, remained pretty much confined to the East for some years after that, but gradually started to spread across the rest of the country. By the late 1880s football had made its way to Ohio, where a few college teams were starting to play the new game.

The first high school football game in Ohio, in fact, the first high school game in the Midwest, was played between the oldest public high school in the state, Cleveland's Central High School, and the newest high school, Cleveland's University School, which had been open for barely six weeks. The game was played on October 25, 1890, and was won by University School by a score of 20-0. Football gradually spread throughout the rest of the state as interest in it grew. For example, Massillon High School (now known as Massillon Washington) played its first interscholastic game in 1893, Canton High School (now Canton McKinley) staged its first game the following year, and Fostoria High School kicked off its interscholastic program in 1896. By the turn of the century most public schools in the state, as well as some private and parochial schools, were also fielding teams.

Before we get much further along in our story of Ohio's high school football champions, it should be mentioned that the game being played back in those earliest days had little resemblance to the game we now watch every weekend during the Fall. Football was all very new - and very basic - back then. There was no high tech equipment, no fancy scoreboard in a stadium for upwards of 20,000 people, the players had no uniforms to speak of, and coaches were not yet "invented." The football field was just that, a field, hopefully pretty flat and open (although one college in the South in the early 1900s actually had a large oak tree sitting in the middle of its football field just short of the 50-yard line), on which a gridiron was laid out with crushed chalk. If you wanted to watch the game you just stood along the sidelines, or pulled your horse drawn carriage up to the edge of the field. This "seating arrangement" could cause a problem or two, as games were often interrupted after a touchdown or field goal when fans ran out onto the field to congratulate their team. There was no passing either; the forward pass was not legalized until 1906 and did not gain wide acceptance until almost 1920.

Nor was there anything like a statewide poll ranking the best teams. However, even if just two teams are playing, one usually has to be known as the best. That first game in Cleveland, for instance, was known as a "game of the championship series," the championship being that of the city of Cleveland. It stands to reason, therefore, that a best team in the state would eventually be named, and that occasion first came about in 1895. However, when something like this is done for the first time, the method used can seem to be just a bit "unusual" when compared to how it is done today. The naming of that first state high school football champion is a case in point. On November 23, 1895, in the final game of the season, University School defeated Cleveland Central by a score of 14-0. University School's record stood at 4-0-0, while Central slipped to 3-2-1. However, Central was declared the champion of the state of Ohio, the first team so named. By the standard then used, a distinction was made between University School, a "prep" school,

and Central, a “high school.” University School was considered to be the “prep” champion of northern Ohio, while to Central High went the title of “high school” champion of the state.

Saying that Central High was “declared” the state high school football champion is the key here. As mentioned, there were no polls, and certainly no statewide playoffs, at this time. If a sportswriter or group of them said that a team was the state champions, then they usually were unless someone came along to challenge it. Quite often, too, a school that felt that its team was the “king of the hill” often issued on open invitation to any team from around the state that wished to challenge it on the gridiron for the state championship. This quite often resulted in some exciting last minute, end of the season games to settle the issue of who was the state’s champion that year. For all practical purposes, this system of a popularly declared state football champion remained in effect until the era of the AP and UPI polls, which began in 1947.

For about the next 10 years following Cleveland Central’s state championship in 1895, those teams named as state champion are not what we would consider household names in the current era of Ohio high school football. In 1896 Sandusky High School (5-0-0) was named state champion. No team was declared state champion in either 1897 or 1898, but 1899 saw the state’s first football “power” named champion, with the honor going to Oberlin High School. At this time the city of Oberlin was a hotbed of high school and college football, with both Oberlin High School and Oberlin Academy among the state’s better schoolboy teams, while the Oberlin College eleven pretty much dominated the state’s college ranks. (The legendary John Heisman, a Cleveland native, was the head coach at Oberlin College in the early 1890s.)

The year 1900 was interesting for the fact that three different schools claimed to be the state champion. Cleveland Central defeated Columbus North, 6-0, in mid-November. Since North was considered the champion of southern Ohio, Central (4-1-1) felt that this win gave them the right to claim the championship for the whole state. However, both Oberlin High School (5-0-1) and Youngstown Rayen (4-1-1) were also claiming to be state champions. Much arguing went on back and forth, especially between Oberlin and Central, who had played to a 5-5 tie earlier in the season. It was eventually decided that all three teams would share the state championship.

A similar situation occurred the next season, when Rayen and Toledo Central shared the title. In 1902, Fostoria High School (8-0-1) was declared the state champion, the opening round of what would prove to be the first great dynasty in Ohio high school football. Kenyon Military Academy of Gambier, Ohio, was named the state champion for 1903, while Toledo Central claimed the title in 1904. No team was named the state’s high school football champion for 1905, but the following season would see the arrival of the state’s first truly dominating team, the Redmen of Fostoria High School.

The Fostoria football team played only eight games in 1906, winning seven, but dropping a 19-8 decision to Oberlin Academy. Even so, Fostoria was still declared the state champion that season. In 1907 they repeated as state champions, but it was again a team from Oberlin that ruined an otherwise perfect season. The Redmen finished with an 8-0-1 record, with only a 5-5 tie with Oberlin High School keeping the Redmen from enjoying a perfect season.

In 1908 Fostoria again won eight games, including a 110-0 victory over Defiance, but a 14-5 loss to another top team of the day, Cleveland’s East High, prevented the Redmen from winning a third consecutive state title. As it was, no team was awarded the championship that season. In 1909, Massillon High School interrupted Fostoria’s run of state titles by winning it’s first, posting a record of 9-0-1 in the Tigers’ first true winning campaign.

For the next half dozen years the Fostoria Redmen pretty much owned the state as far as high school football was concerned. Under head coach Lawrence C. Boles, who had been guiding the Redmen since ’07, Fostoria regained the

state championship in 1910 despite a 2-0 lost to Findlay in an otherwise great 8-1-0 campaign. In 1911, coach Boles' team finally did what it had come so close to doing in the past, posting a perfect 10-0-0 season to win another state title. (Akron Central High School, 8-0-1, shared the state crown with Fostoria that year.)

If the Fostoria fans liked the 1911 season, then they must have been truly overjoyed with the results of 1912, a season that was literally one for the record book. The Redmen won all eight of their games, and all by shutout, making it 14 consecutive shutout victories. For the season they outscored the opposition 596-0 (twice scoring more than 100 points), one of the most dominating seasons in the history of high school football in the U.S. Adding not a little, but a lot, of icing to its championship cake, Fostoria was also named the national champion in 1912, the first in a long line of Ohio teams to be so honored.

Fostoria's bubble temporarily burst in 1913, as the team dipped to 5-3-0, but no state champion was named that season. In 1914 and 1915 the Redmen were coached by George M. "Red" Trautman, his only two years directing Fostoria's football fortunes, but he made them count. In 1914 the Redmen, 10-0-0, posted their third perfect season out of the last four. This was another shared championship, however, as Bellaire High School (9-0-1) and Lisbon High School (9-0-0) were also accorded state championship status. In 1915, with a 0-0 tie with Columbus North as the only blemish on their otherwise perfect 8-0-1 season, the Redmen again captured the state championship.

For the next nine years the center of Ohio high school football would shift to the state's extreme northwestern corner. Toledo Scott High School reigned as state champion in 1916, 1918 and 1919. (Strangely, there was no state champion named in 1917, while there was one in 1918, even though most teams had at least half of their games cancelled due to the great Spanish Flu epidemic.) That 1916 title was shared with Massillon Washington, even though Scott High School was also declared the national champion that same season.

The Bulldogs lost their state championship crown in 1920 (shared by Canton McKinley and Cleveland East Tech), and no champion was declared for 1921. However, the Bulldogs came back even stronger in 1922 and 1923. Going 19-0-0 those two seasons, not only were they named state champions (sharing the honor with Massillon Washington in '22 and East Cleveland Shaw in '23), but each season Toledo Scott was also named the national champion. (East Cleveland Shaw also shared in the 1923 national championship.) And, unlike today, Scott High School won those national championships on the gridiron. In 1922 the Bulldogs defeated the team from Corvallis (Ore.) High School, 32-0, and in 1923 defeated both Washington High School of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 24-21, and Columbia Prep of Portland, Oregon, 20-17, to earn the national title.

While Scott High School did not win either the state or national championship in 1924, those two championships did not leave the Glass City. Scott's archrival, Waite High School, went 10-0-0 and was named both the Ohio and the U.S. champion that year.

Over the next 24 years before the advent of the AP and UPI polls, two teams would rise to dominate Ohio high school football. In 1924 and 1925, Paul Brown was the quarterback of the Massillon Tigers, leading his team to a record of 15-3. Good, but not nearly as good as his record would be when he returned to the school in 1932 as the Tigers' head coach. Taking over a team that had been just 2-6-2 the year before, coach Brown led the Tigers to a 5-4-1 record in 1932, 8-2-0 in '33 and 9-1-0 in '34 – and then they got really good. From 1935 to 1940, Paul Brown's Massillon Washington Tigers posted a record of 58-1-1, going a perfect 10-0-0 in five of those six seasons. That record earned for the Tigers six consecutive state championships and four national titles (1935-36-39-40).

As we know, Paul Brown was just getting stated on his brilliant coaching career. After leaving Massillon he took on his "dream job" as head coach of the Ohio State Buckeyes, where in his second season he led the Buckeyes to a national championship. After serving in the military during WWII, Brown became the head coach of the newly established Cleveland Browns, winning championships in each of his first five seasons, four in the All American Football Conference and one in the NFL.

One of the truly great coaches and innovators in the game of football, and the only coach in U.S. history to ever win national championships at the high school, college and professional levels, in 2001 Student Sport Magazine named Paul Brown the "Coach of the Century."

Massillon's success did not end with the departure of Paul Brown. Playing for new coach William "Bud" Houghton, the Tigers went 28-1-1 from 1941-1943. The Tigers were named state champions in both '41 and '43, giving Massillon eight titles in nine seasons.

The second of the two great teams at this time were the Lions of Cleveland's Cathedral Latin School. Playing for the legendary Herb Eisele, who had been the coach of the Lions since 1928, Latin had pretty much dominated Cleveland area football. In early 1937, coach Eisele signed an unprecedented 10-year contract to coach football at his alma mater, and the Lions got even better. From 1943 to 1947 the Lions won a record five consecutive Cleveland city championship Charity Games, putting together a string of 38 straight games without a loss (36-0-2). In 1944, 1945 and 1946 the Lions added state championships to their trophy case, giving Latin a total of four state titles (1927) in its history. The Lions are one of only two non-public schools (Kenyon Military Academy being the other) to win a state title over the first 62 years in which a state football champion was named.