



WASHINGTON AND LEE GENERALS IN THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE

by Neely Young

THE FIRST-EVER college football match was played on November 6, 1869, between Rutgers and Princeton. At the time, football was a sort of cross between soccer and rugby — a pretty slapdash affair. There could be as many as 100 men on a side; the scoring system was erratic; and a “try” was recorded only when the ball was kicked into the opposing team’s goal.

In the South, the first recorded football game was played between Washington and Lee and Virginia

Military Institute on November 2, 1873, with W&L winning, 4 to 2. Between the fall of 1873 and spring of 1874, W&L and VMI played a total of four games, and Washington and Lee won all of them.¹ The two squads met again in the fall of 1874, but the game ended in “bitter feeling.” A Washington and Lee publication suggested a “truce” between the two football teams, and there is no evidence that W&L played another football game until 1882, when the team again met VMI.²

It was in the 1890s that Washington and Lee began to play a regular schedule against several teams. The rules

Neely Young is a 1966 Washington and Lee graduate who earned a Ph.D. in history from Emory and spent his career mainly in secondary-school teaching and administration. He is the author of *Ripe for Emancipation* and *Transatlantic Sojourners*, both about the last days of slavery among Rockbridge people who had experienced it. His grandfather was Harry K. “Cy” Young, who loomed over W&L athletics for much of the 20th century.

Above: A W&L football game in a 1916 photo from the student yearbook, *The Calyx*.

- 1 Melvin I. Smith, *Evolvements of Early American Football: Through the 1890/91 Season* (Bloomington, Ind: Author House, 2008), p. 62; “Foot-Ball,” *The Southern Collegian* (Washington and Lee student publication), November 1873; “Football,” *The Southern Collegian*, April 4, 1874.
- 2 “Football,” *The Southern Collegian*, October 24, 1874; “Football with the V.M.I.,” *The Southern Collegian*, November 1882.

of the game had been made clearer by then — the line of scrimmage had been established, for example, and so had the concept of downs and the 11-player team — but games were still far different from today's, and much more brutal. By 1912, however, most of the broad rules we know today had been adopted.

The period from 1912 forward also coincides with the so-called “Golden Age” of W&L athletics, especially in football. From 1912 through 1928, W&L only had one losing season, and that came in 1918 when the team went 1-2 in abbreviated schedule. From 1912 to 1922 the team's success was better than 75 percent. From 1912 to 1916, W&L won an astounding 83 percent of its games and had one of just two unbeaten teams in its history.

And throughout these years, W&L was playing some of the top teams in the country, including the Ivies, Army, Navy, Indiana, Auburn and Georgia Tech.

No wonder that the university produced several pro football players in those days.

Professional football emerged in the late 19th century and early 20th, mostly in Pennsylvania and New York. Many of those football clubs soon faded away, and players began to migrate to Ohio, where teams were being formed in cities such as Canton, Massillon and Akron. Despite a betting scandal in 1906, the Ohio League became undoubtedly the best pro football conference in the country by 1915, a precursor of the National Football League, which was formed after World War I.³

JOHNN F. “JOHNNY” BARRETT was the first professional football player from W&L. Entering the university in the fall of 1915 from Chicago, he was a star on what many consider W&L's greatest team, the only loss that year coming from Cornell, which became the consensus national champion. In the Cornell game, Johnny scored three touchdowns. He also ran back the opening kickoff 99 yards, made a 60-yard touchdown

³ Jack Cusack, “Pioneer in Pro Football,” *The Coffin Corner, Pro Football Researchers Association Annual*, no. 8 (1987), https://profootballresearchers.com/archives/Website_Files/Coffin_Corner/09-An-320.pdf.

Ring-tum Phi, Oct. 19, 1915



Barrett

In 1918, Johnny Barrett enlisted in the American Expeditionary Forces and was sent to St. Nazaire, France, and played football there. After his World War I service, Johnny returned home to Chicago and played for the Chicago Tigers in 1920. The team belonged to the newly formed American Professional Football Association, successor to the old Ohio League. The APFA comprised teams from Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, New York and Michigan.

After two seasons, the APFA was renamed the National Football League, and players from 1920 onward are considered to have played in the NFL. Thus Johnny Barrett became an NFL player — and W&L's first in the league.

THE SECOND W&L ALUM to play pro football was Karl Hilmer “Pike” Johnson, class of 1920. Pike played as a freshman in 1916 but then left college to join the Army Ambulance Corps. He played for the United States Army Ambulance Corps team in

⁴ “Former W&L Star equals Grange's Record,” *Washington and Lee Alumni Magazine*, January 1925, p. 22.

run a few minutes later, and caught a pass for a 40-yard touchdown — all in the just the first quarter. Barrett's may have been the greatest single game performance in W&L history.⁴

After his freshman year, Johnny returned to his hometown of Oak Park, Illinois, and in 1916 played pro football with the Evanston North Ends of the Ohio League. In 1917 he signed to play with the Youngstown Patricians. Almost immediately, the Hammond (Indiana) Clabbys hired Johnny away.

In 1918, Johnny Barrett

Allentown, Pennsylvania, in 1917. A fellow W&L man, Lindsey Moore, was a teammate there. Pike Johnson was selected to an All-United States Service team at tackle in 1917 by the *New York Times*.⁵

In 1918 Johnson was sent overseas, and was awarded the Purple Heart. The next year Pike appeared on the roster of the New York Brickley Giants, where he played in one game. (Why just one game? Charlie Brickley had formed the Giants as an independent pro team but ran afoul of New York's blue laws and had to disband the team after a single game. Later, the re-formed Brickley Giants played in the new APFA.) Two other W&L alums, Fred “Buck” Sweetland, class of 1918, and Al Pierrotti, B.A., 1923, were listed on the Giants roster that year.⁶ in 1919, following his time in New York,

WHO'S ON FIRST?

In addition to the Allentown ambulance team, Pike Johnson also played professionally in 1917 for the Massillon Tigers in the Ohio League, even making an Ohio League all-pro team.ⁱ How was this possible? Jack Cusack, an influential figure in the Ohio League and a manager of the Canton Bulldogs, explained in a 1987 article.ⁱⁱ Charlie Brickley, a former All-American at Harvard and player-coach for Massillon, brought in Pike and others from Allentown to play against Canton and Jim Thorpe in a November game. The use of “ringers” such as Pike was common in the Ohio League at that time, and many played under assumed names. For example, there is a “Jones,” without a given name, from Washington and Lee listed on the roster of the Massillon Tigers for 1917. Although Pike Johnson is listed as playing in only one pro game that year, “Jones” is reported to have played in five games. Could this have been Pike under an assumed name? Or, perhaps, Lindsey Moore (page 4), who played with Pike in Allentown and may have wanted to preserve his amateur status?

ⁱ “All-Pro, 1917,” *The Coffin Corner*, v. 4, no. 7 (1982); Hammond Clabbys Roster, 1917, *Pro Football Archives*, <https://profootballarchives.com/1917hamcl.html>.

ⁱⁱ Cusack, “Pioneer in Pro Football” (see footnote 3 on page 2).

⁵ Chris Serb, *War Football* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), pp. 129–31, 137; Walter Camp, ed., *Spalding's Official Football Guide, 1919* (New York: American Sports Publishing Co., 1919), pp. 266–67.

⁶ “Giants in First Workout,” *New York Times*, October 6, 1919.

Pike returned to Massillon and played in five games.

Pike's greatest year in the pros came in 1920, when he played for the APFA Akron Pros, considered the first NFL championship team. Other W&L alums on that team included Mark “Buck” Miles, class of 1915, Buck Sweetland and Al Pierrotti. A highlight of the season occurred when Akron played Canton. Both teams were undefeated. Pike scored the only touchdown of the game on an interception and 55-yard run, and the Pros won, 10 to 0, on their way to an undefeated season.⁷ In 1921, Pike again played for Akron, appearing in all 12 games, but he hung up his shoulder pads at the end of the season.

The 1920 Akron team was distinguished by the play of halfback Fritz Pollard, an All-American from Brown. Fritz was one of two African Americans to play in the APFA/NFL in its inaugural season. In 1921, he became the first Black player-coach in the league for Akron. That year he recruited fellow All-American and African American, Paul Robeson, from Rutgers, to play for the Pros. Paul Robeson went on to become a lawyer, renowned bass singer, and civil rights activist. In 1922, three African Americans, Pollard, Robeson and Duke Slater, played with the Milwaukee Badgers. Al Pierrotti of Washington and Lee was also a member of the Badgers that year. There is some irony in all of this. On October 14, 1916, W&L had been scheduled to play Rutgers and Paul Robeson. But the W&L team refused to play against a Negro, and Robeson was held out of the game.⁸ Now, just a few years later, former Washington and Lee players Johnson and Pierrotti were teammates of African Americans Pollard, Robeson and Slater.

⁷ Bob Carroll, “Akron Pros, 1920,” *The Coffin Corner*, v. 4, no. 7 (1982).

⁸ October 14, 1916: “Paul Robeson Excluded from Football Team,” *Zinn Education Project*, zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/paul-robeson-football/



Johnson with the Akron Pros

BUCK SWEETLAND entered Washington and Lee in 1914, having previously played halfback and fullback for Fordham University.

He left the university in 1916 to join the Navy and played on the Naval District football team stationed in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1917.⁹ After the war, Buck played for the Brickley Giants in 1919 and also for the Cleveland Tigers. The 1919 Tigers also had W&L alums Buck Miles, Samuel Mercer Graham and Al Pierrotti on their roster. In 1920, the Tigers joined the APFA, but by then Mercer Graham had quit pro football, so he is not considered an NFL player. Buck, on the other hand, played for the champion Akron Pros in 1920 and for the Brickley Giants in 1921.



Sweetland with the Akron Pros



Miles at W&L

BUCK MILES, class of 1915, was like many other W&L and college players in only having a “cup of coffee” in the NFL. Buck entered the university in 1911, playing right tackle and fullback. He served in an Army medical unit during World War I¹⁰ but apparently did not play service football. After the war, Miles played in five games for the Cleveland Tigers (1919) and in one game for the Akron Pros (1920).

THE CASE OF LINDSEY MOORE, class of 1922, is intriguing. Lindsey entered Washington and Lee in 1916 and played varsity ball that year. In 1917, he left the university and joined the ambulance corps, playing on the Allentown team, alongside Pike Johnson. In 1919 he returned to W&L and played foot-

ball for three more seasons, mostly at tackle. A *Ring-tum Phi* article on March 1, 1922, said that Lindsey had played pro football after the Generals’ 1921 season, and the Cleveland Indians roster for 1921 shows a “Moore” on the team as a rookie at tackle, playing in one game.¹¹ In spring 1922, Moore ended his brief pro career and returned to W&L as a coach.



Moore at W&L

MARVIN “MONK” MATTOX, B.A., 1924, entered the university in fall 1919 and played varsity football for four years. He was the younger brother of major leaguer, Jim Mattox. He played for the Milwaukee Badgers in 1923 along with Al Pierrotti, a fellow alum.



Mattox at W&L

AL PIEROTTI, of W&L’s class of 1923, was the most successful football player in W&L history, at least until the 1950s. He played both offense and defense at center, but was best known as a defensive player. In a game against West Virginia during his freshman year, Al threw a Mountaineer halfback for an 8-yard loss and knocked him unconscious.¹² In 1917, the Washington and Lee team was depleted because of the war, and Al was forced into playing offense as well, scoring two touchdowns and kicking 31 points-after-touchdown. Al made the All-South Atlantic football team for four seasons and was team captain of his senior year year.¹³

Al played professional football for nine seasons between 1919 and 1929, eight of them in the NFL. He played for and against some of the greatest pros of the time, including Jim Thorpe, Fritz Pollard, Paul Robeson,

11 “1921 Cleveland Indians,” *Pro Football Reference*, pro-football-reference.com/teams/cti/1921_roster.htm

12 “Generals Gain a Decision over West Virginia by a Narrow Margin,” *Ring-tum Phi*, November 17, 1914.

13 “Generals Second in High Scoring,” *Ring-tum Phi*, December 11, 1917; “Count Pierotti will Report to Braves soon,” *Ring-tum Phi*, February 22, 1922.

George Halas, Curly Lambeau and Red Grange. As a coach and player he was on the roster of seven NFL teams.

Al joined the military in early 1918 and played for the Boston All-Stars football team that fall.¹⁴ He played one game for the Brickley Giants and nine for the Cleveland Tigers in 1919. In 1920, Pierotti played one game for the champion Akron Pros, and was a player-coach for the Tigers as well. He was not only a center for the Tigers but a punter and extra-point kicker.¹⁵ In 1921, he played with the Brickley Giants along with fellow W&L alum Buck Sweetland. In 1922, Al joined the Milwaukee Badgers, one of the most famous teams of the early NFL, and played for them again in 1923, appearing in three games. Then he played a game for the Racine Legion, but in 1924 was back with the Badgers for four games. In 1926 Pierotti played with the Boston Bulldogs.



Pierotti as a W&L senior



Pierotti in 1915

Perhaps inspired by this or just feeling more comfortable in his hometown, he had a great game on October 9, 1926, when the Bulldogs played Red Grange’s New York Yankees. Although Boston lost, Al was a defensive star.¹⁶ Al played with the

14 Serb, op. cit., *War Football*, p. 198.

15 “Akron Champs Receive Surprise,” *Rock Island Argus and Daily Union*, v. 70, no. 25 (November 15, 1920).

16 Nelson “Chip” Greene, “October 9, 1926: Red Grange Returns to Boston with Upstart Pro Football League,” Society for American

Providence Steam Rollers in 1927 and finished his pro career in 1929 back with the Boston Bulldogs.

CHARLIE VAN HORN, class of 1927, played for Washington and Lee in 1924 and 1925. He was a back for the NFL’s Buffalo Bisons in 1927 and played for the Orange (New Jersey) Tornadoes in 1929. He appeared in eight pro games, four of them as a starter. A teammate of Charlie on the 1929 Tornadoes was Phil Scott, one of the last Black players before the NFL secretly banned them from 1933 through 1946.

After Charlie Van Horn and Al Pierrotti completed the 1929 season, there were no more W&L alums in the National Football League until after World War II.

The years following World War II brought turmoil and opportunity to pro football, as had the period before and after World War I. A rival professional league, the All-American Football Conference, AAFC, was formed in 1946 and lasted through the 1949 season. Three teams from that league — the Cleveland Browns, the San Francisco 49ers and the Baltimore Colts — affiliated with the NFL in 1950.

Several W&L players who did not make it to the NFL played pro football during this era, either in the so-called minor leagues or in the AAFC.

BRIAN BELL, a 1949 B.A. graduate, was drafted by the Washington Redskins in 1948, but does not appear to have played for the team. He is listed on the 1949 roster of the Wilmington (Delaware) Clippers of the American Football League.¹⁷



Bell

Baseball Research, sabr.org/gamesproj/game/october-9-1926-red-grange-returns-to-boston-with-upstart-pro-football-league/

17 “1949 Wilmington Clippers (AFL),” *Pro Football Archives*, pro-footballarchives.com/1949aflwil.html.

THREE W&L MEN played in the AAFC:

- Robert “Dyke” Norman, class of 1945, was a back for the Baltimore Colts in 1948.
- So was Dick Working, B.A., 1945. Dick began spring training as the starting quarterback for the Colts, but was soon replaced by Hall of Famer Y. A. Tittle.
- Jim Lukens, a 1948 law grad, played end for the Buffalo Bills in 1949. The Bills did not become a part of the NFL until 1970, after the American Football League merger with the NFL.¹⁸

THE FIRST W&L PLAYER to make it to the NFL after World War II was Bill Chipley, a 1949 graduate, who was an All-Southern Conference end in 1946. He was drafted by the Boston Yanks in 1947 and played for them in 1947–48. In 1949, when the team moved to New York and became the Bulldogs, Bill had his finest season — in no small part thanks to the Bulldog



Chipley and Layne

quarterback, future Hall of Famer Bobby Layne, of Texas. At one point in the season, Chipley led the league in receptions, and he finished the season third in receptions and ninth in receiving yards.¹⁹ Bill’s retirement after the 1949 season may have had several causes. First,

18 Lethbridge and Laupheimer, “Three Former Generals now Starting in Pro Game,” *Ring-tum Phi*, November 15, 1949; Jacques Kelly, “C. Richard Working,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 15, 2015.

19 “Bill Chipley is No. 1 Pass Receiver in National Football League: Has Snared 44 aerials from Bobby Layne for Total of 508 Yards,” *Ring-tum Phi*, November 23, 1949.

New York had a terrible year in 1949, winning only one game. Second, the Bulldogs were re-formed as the New York Yanks in 1950, and only four players from the 1949 team were chosen for the new team. Perhaps most important, Layne was traded to the Detroit Lions at the end of the 1949 season. Following his retirement, Chipley pursued a career in business, but fate intervened in the spring of 1954 when a cheating scandal broke out at W&L, involving numerous football players and causing the university to cancel the 1954 football season. That fall, the university decided to end subsidized athletics entirely. Football resumed with an entirely amateur football team in fall 1955. Chipley volunteered to be the coach and held the post for two years, helping to make the transition to a non-subsidized program. As a player and coach, together with his overall contributions to his alma mater, Bill Chipley is in the W&L Hall of Fame.



Chipley as W&L’s head coach, 1956

MIKE BOYDA, who graduated in 1949, was next to reach the NFL. Not many folks know Mike Boyda, but he was an outstanding quarterback on the 1948 W&L team. He was drafted by the New York Bulldogs in 1949 and played alongside Bill Chipley. Unfortunately, he did not get much playing time at quarterback because he was a backup to Bobby Layne. His primary role was as a punter, and there he was outstanding.



Boyda

In 1949, he was second in the league in punting average to the great all-around player Bob Waterfield, and third in total punting yards, which tells us something about the Bulldogs’ offensive woes.²⁰ He could have undoubt-

20 “1949 NFL Punting Statistics,” *The Football Database*, footballdb.com/statistics/nfl/player-stats/punting/1949/regular-season.

edly had a longer career in the NFL as a punter, but after the Bulldogs’ woeful season he decided to retire.



Michaels at W&L

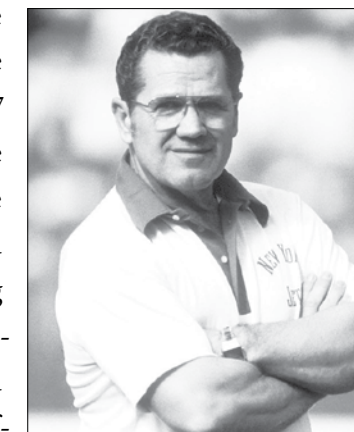
THE LAST NFL PLAYER from Washington and Lee — and the greatest — was Walt Michaels of the class of 1951. In his senior year W&L had its finest team since the 1910s. The Generals won the Southern Conference and went on to play Wyoming in the 1951 Gator Bowl, Washington and Lee’s one and only bowl appearance. Walt played full-back and linebacker on that team and was named to the second team in the All-Southern Conference.²¹ He was drafted by the Cleveland Browns but was traded to the Green Bay Packers. After the 1951 season, he was traded back to the Browns and played linebacker from 1952 to 1961. The Browns, under legendary coach Paul Brown, played in five NFL championship games during that period, winning in 1954 and 1955. Notable players on those teams included Lou Groza, Otto Graham, and perhaps the greatest back of all time, Jim Brown. Walt himself was no slouch, playing in five consecutive Pro Bowls, from 1955 to 1959.

In 1962, after his college playing days, Walt became an assistant coach first with the Oakland Raiders of the new American Football League and then with the New York Jets from 1963 to 1973. In 1969, the Jets, under

21 “Walt Michaels,” Washington and Lee Hall of Fame website, generalssports.com/honors/hall-of-fame/walt-michaels/152.

Walt as defensive coordinator and the player leadership of “Broadway Joe” Namath, won Super Bowl III over the Baltimore Colts. Michaels moved on to become an assistant coach with the Philadelphia Eagles from 1973 to 1975 — and moved back to the Jets as an assistant in 1976–77.

And then he became the Jets’ head coach. In the Michaels years, from 1977 to 1983, the Jets made the playoffs twice, in 1981 (the Jets lost in the wild card game) and 1982, reaching the AFC title game but losing to Miami. He resigned as coach of the Jets soon after and accepted the head job with the New Jersey Generals of the upstart United States Football League (USFL). At the end of the 1985 season, despite having compiled a successful record of 11-7 over two years, he was dismissed by the team’s owner, Donald J. Trump, not the last person to be fired by Trump. Thus ended Walt Michaels’ 34-year career in pro football.



Michaels as Jets coach, 1982

ALTHOUGH Washington and Lee was never a hothouse intent on cultivating players for the big time, it produced, all told, 12 major league baseball players and 11 National Football League players between 1877 and 1961 — not counting other alumni who played pro baseball and football in the minor leagues. Since the mid-1950s W&L has moved in a different direction, stressing strictly amateur competition, but the student-athletes who represent Washington and Lee have continued a proud heritage.