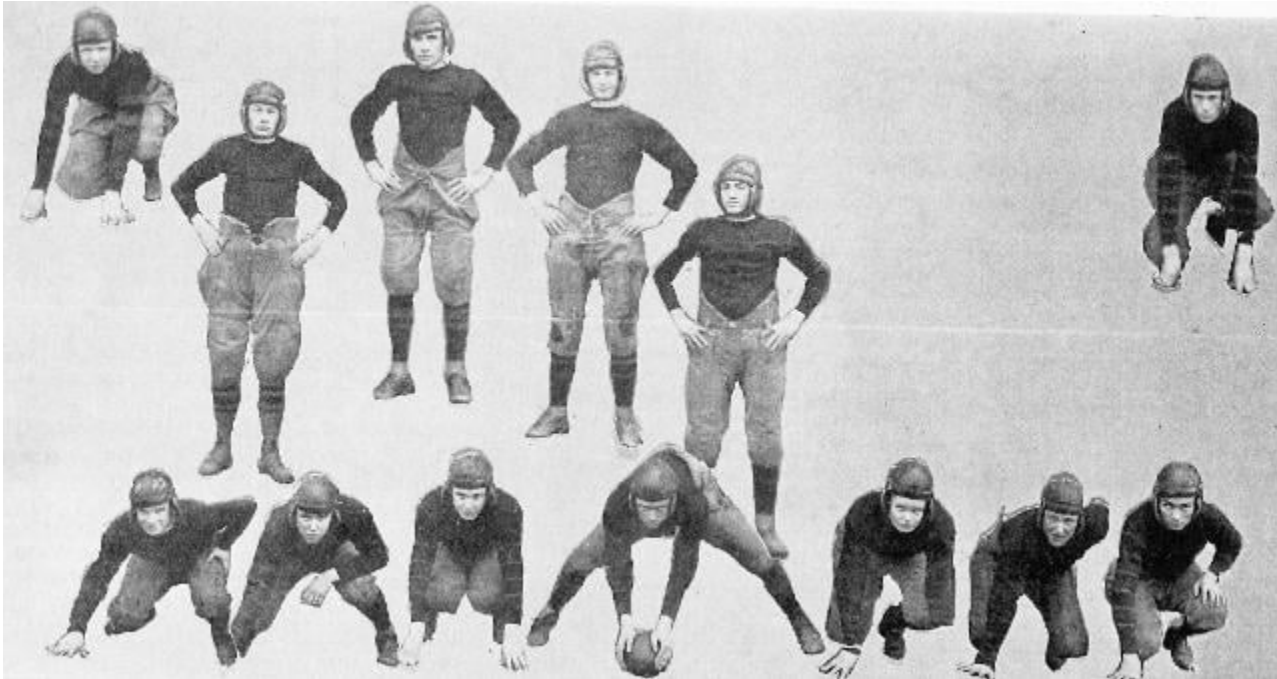


233-0: Legendary Staunton-Gillespie Game Was 100 Years Ago On November 24

by Tom Emery
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STAUNTON - No high school football game was ever quite like this one. A century later, the thought of it still boggles the mind, and captures the imagination.

November 24 marks 100 years since Staunton beat Gillespie 233-0, setting multiple state scoring records that still stand. The outcome of the game attracted national attention and set southern Macoupin County buzzing, even overshadowing an NFL exhibition game in the area a few days later.

Oddly, there is debate now about some of the basic aspects of the game. But a century later, the towns of Staunton and Gillespie are still talking about it. Indeed, the legend of the 1923 Staunton-Gillespie matchup isn't going away any time soon.

In retrospect, the 1923 meeting was a mismatch. Gillespie was mired in a down stretch, as the Miners had managed only a combined 7-15-2 record over the previous three seasons. The Miners were similarly mediocre from 1924-26, going 7-13-4.

The 1923 campaign was the worst of the decade, as Gillespie finished 1-9 in its lone season under head coach James Dilbeck.

Down south, Staunton was rolling in several sports. Girls' sports were exactly fifty years away, born under Title IX in 1973. Like many schools, the athletic menu at Staunton consisted of a handful of boys' sports, and the Bulldogs were good in most of them in 1923. That spring, the baseball team reeled off a 9-0 record with many of the same players from the football team that hammered Gillespie.

In the 1922-23 academic year, all of the Bulldogs' sports – football, baseball, basketball, and track – were coached by the principal, Paul G. Miller, who was in his first year at Staunton after coming from St. Louis Cleveland High School. He remained in Staunton for five years, then continued his career in Alton and back in St. Louis.

Staunton entered the 1923 football season with plenty of optimism. There was good reason for it; the Bulldogs were coming off a 9-1 campaign in 1922. The only loss was a 33-13 setback to Carlinville and the Cavaliers' star, Leland "Tiny" Lewis, who played on the 1926 Big Ten champion team at Northwestern before a brief career in the NFL. The 1922 Carlinville team was highlighted by a 141-0 win over Edwardsville, which ranks ninth on the IHSA single-game scoring list.

No one remembers that game now, thanks to Staunton and the 233-0 outcome. The nucleus of that 1923 Bulldog squad had some of the earliest generations of the greatest names in Staunton history. They included halfback Cliff Stiegemeier, the son of a coal miner with eight siblings including brother Melvin, a quarterback.

Joining them in the offensive backfield were George Oehler, Roland Sawyer, Glen Hastings, and Nick Bahn. Ends included Fred Arnica and Art Ruffini, while the line consisted of tackles Dan McGaughey and Roy Melton, guards Gerald Roberts and Bob

Tietze, and center Dave Wilson. Other key contributors included Erwin Grabruck, Harris May, and Delbert Lloyd. Many of those players were multi-sport athletes, and several, including Oehler, Hastings, Sawyer, and Cliff Stiegemeier, had won individual titles at the Macoupin County Track Meet the previous spring.

Some of the Staunton players were the sons of immigrants. Oehler's parents were born in Germany, while Arnicar's parents had immigrated from Italy. Arnicar's father died of pneumonia three months before Fred was born.

For all their talent, Staunton did not have a lot of size. One account reported the Bulldogs "were not a heavy team, as they averaged 160 pounds per man." Though most Americans were smaller then than today, that was still not a lot of weight. But Staunton featured "hard work of the line," which opened up a deep backfield.

The Gillespie game was second-to-last on the Staunton schedule. By then, the Bulldogs had flexed their muscle, though most of their victories did not come easy.

The 1923 Staunton team is legendary, if for no other reason than the Gillespie game. But the Bulldogs actually had to work for most of their wins.

Many games were defined by the Bulldogs' overpowering defense, which recorded eight shutouts on the year. With a couple of exceptions, the Staunton offense was efficient in most games, but not spectacular in an era that was still dominated by the run.

The opener was against Western Military Academy, a now-defunct institution from Upper Alton, and Staunton ground out a 7-0 win.

The second game was a rematch with Tiny Lewis and Carlinville, and some 2,000 fans converged on Staunton High School for what, in any other season, would have been the game of the year. Staunton raced out to a 20-0 halftime lead, but Carlinville roared back in the second half, keeping the huge crowd on pins and needles until the Bulldogs pulled out a 26-20 victory. That would prove to be Carlinville's only loss of the year.

Bolstered by the huge win, Staunton went down to St. Louis in Week 3 and prevailed in another defensive struggle over Cleveland High School, Coach Miller's former employer, in a 10-3 outcome. It would be the last time anyone scored on Staunton in 1923. The streak of shutouts began in Week 4, an 18-0 victory over Benld.

In Week 5, the Staunton offense caught fire against Litchfield. Unlike the first four, the game was never in doubt, as the Bulldogs coasted to a 113-0 win. The Litchfield team of 1923 was no slouch outfit; they finished with a respectable 4-5 record.

In any other year, a 113-0 victory would have been a highlight for Staunton, or anyone else. As it was, that score was less than half the output of the Gillespie matchup, four weeks later.

Two more shutout wins, 9-0 over Virden and 20-0 over Girard, followed. The eighth game was against Gillespie, which was decimated by injuries.

And in that day, there was no “mercy rule,” implemented by the IHSA in to reduce unnecessary blowouts. Unfortunately for the Miners, everything was working against them on that afternoon in Staunton.

Saturday, Nov. 24 was the last weekend before Thanksgiving and in Staunton, everyone was looking forward to that afternoon’s tilt between their beloved Bulldogs and Gillespie. The game set records that raise eyebrows today.

The 233 points scored by Staunton is an Illinois high school record – *by a full 48 points*. The next highest is the mark that Staunton shattered, a 185-0 win by Taylorville over Tuscola in 1916.

High school sports were underdeveloped in the period, as structured conference affiliations, sophisticated coaching, and adequate funding and facilities were far in the future. Of the twenty highest-scoring games in IHSA football history, seventeen occurred before 1930.

But Staunton’s feat would stand out in any era. The 233 points were also a national record that remained for years.

The Bulldogs scored thirty touchdowns, another IHSA record that still stands. Only three other Illinois high school teams have scored as many as twenty in a single game. Ten of those touchdowns were scored by Oehler alone. That mark is tied for second on the all-time IHSA list.

Oehler is one of only seven individuals to score ten or more touchdowns in a single IHSA game. Even the incomparable Red Grange, who played high school ball in Wheaton, never did it.

In an interview for the Associated Press in October 1943, Oehler attributed the Staunton outburst to “an explosive T-formation” with a backfield that was loaded with talent. He also remembered that Gillespie never quit on the game, “but they just kept on kicking.”

Oehler added that “when we got to 150-0, Coach Miller put in the subs.” If Oehler’s memories were accurate – and it was only twenty years after the game – those subs kept on scoring, too. Staunton used thirty players in the game, a high number in a time when most participants played all sixty minutes, usually on both offense and defense.

Oehler was more gracious than some in the Staunton contingent, including Paul Miller, the Bulldogs’ coach, who actually missed most of the game. He spent most of the day in Champaign at a teacher’s meeting with -- of all people – Earl McNeely, the Gillespie superintendent. The pair didn’t get to Staunton until the fourth quarter.

When asked, Miller attributed the blowout not only to “a much superior team,” but that “Gillespie quit, and many touchdowns were scored on kickoffs or punts without Gillespie players trying to stop them.” Miller’s haughty, and unnecessary, comments repudiate the words of the well-respected Oehler, and reflects poorly on the undermanned Gillespie squad.

The *Staunton Star-Times* also tweaked Gillespie, crowing that the Miners “presented a very sorry sight when play was finally stopped” and that the Staunton boys, “had they been provided with speedometers...would show that every one of them travelled several miles in carrying the pigskin about the field.” With a dose of grandiosity, the *Star-Times* called the final score “a world’s record.”

McNeely wrote in the *Gillespie Area News* that his school had informed Miller of “our condition,” and the Staunton coach “had assured us” that the game would be played “with a secondary team” from Staunton, presumably the JV.

Gillespie then “went to Staunton with its second team, to play a second team.” To their dismay, the Miners arrived to find “practically no preparations were made for the game,” and the Staunton “first team” was ready to play.

There was only one official present for the game, and he kept time on the field. Some observers, including the Gillespie contingent, believed that the official made intentional errors in timekeeping, to stretch out the quarters.

McNeely concluded that “as to the score, we have nothing to say. But we do wish to go on record as a school that we do not care to play another school which for its own glory is willing to do such a thing that was done Saturday.”

Gillespie did not schedule Staunton in any sports for several years afterward, even after both schools became charter members of the South Central Conference in 1926. Reportedly, the SCC finally had to step in, and force the two schools to play.

Strangely, many of the basics of the game are either lost to history, or debated today.

Even the final score is cloudy. Though most sources, including the Illinois High School Association, list the final as 233-0 today, various media accounts of the time reported it as 232-0. Similarly, though the game was played in Staunton, some newspapers stated the contest was at Gillespie.

The halftime score is also debated. In his 1943 interview, Oehler remembered the score at the break was 125-0. Several accounts reported that Staunton racked up 104 points in the second quarter alone. In the decades since, some accounts wrongly claim that Staunton scored all 233 of its points in the first half.

McNeely wrote that Gillespie, “at the last blow of the whistle, held the Staunton team at the goal line.” So it could have been even worse. (McNeely’s words also contradict Miller’s claim that Gillespie “quit” on the game).

Whatever the case, the game launched little Staunton into the national spotlight. In the days before cell phones, texting, and message boards, the score of the game swept the country.

Newspapers across America carried news of the game, usually one or several paragraphs. The game seemed to particularly strike a chord in the West, as numerous papers in California, Montana, and surrounding states took an interest.

In Racine, Wis., the *Journal-Times* carried the news under the headline, “They Call 232 to 0 Tilt a Football Game.” It was apparently off the wires, as the *Bartlesville Daily Enterprise* had exactly the same article.

According to that report, the Staunton players were “weary on Saturday night and in no mood to celebrate their victory over Gillespie.” That fatigue had set in after the massive second quarter, as the Staunton “backs became so exhausted that the linemen took turns running with the ball.”

If Staunton was that tired, imagine how Gillespie felt. The *Chicago Tribune* twisted grammar in its wry headline: “Twasn’t Football, It Was a Foot Race.”

In Alton, the *Telegraph* pondered that “it must have been just one straight touchdown after another, but we don’t see how they could find time in a game to get so many points.” The *Telegraph* report gives credence to Gillespie’s accusation of suspect timekeeping by the lone official.

Still, the *Telegraph* noted that “we cannot help but think of what a wonderful value for the money those who saw Staunton steamroller the helpless Gillespie team by the 232 to 0 score.”

The *Decatur Daily Review* made light of the outcome in a one-sentence report on November 27. “Staunton High 232, Gillespie 0,” cracked the *Review*, “and where were the police while all that slaughter held the boards?”

With a game like that, it would have seemed appropriate if the Gillespie date was the last one for Staunton in 1923. However, there was still more football to be played.

Five days after the Gillespie game, Staunton had a matchup with Mount Olive in the annual Thanksgiving Day game, though there was doubt whether the contest would take place. A downpour of rain resulted in wet conditions, and Staunton suggested that the game should be postponed.

Mount Olive, according to its local newspaper, “intended to play even though they were compelled to use boats in which to get about the field.” They may have thought better of that decision.

The score was 38-0 at the half, and what happened next is a matter of debate. Oehler said that Mount Olive “quit...during the third period.”

Steve Moore, the unquestioned historian of Staunton sports, wrote that “about halfway through the contest, Mount Olive’s coach and players reacted to a perceived bad call by walking off the field, resulting in a forfeit.” At any rate, the Bulldogs had notched another win.

Staunton was considered the champion of the central district of Illinois, but wanted more. The school scheduled a matchup with Carbondale, the winner of the southern district, in early December. The Bulldogs were again up for the challenge, rolling 20-0 to finish off a perfect season at 10-0.

Some in the media awarded Staunton the mythical state title. The Stiegemeier brothers, along with Ruffini, were first-team all-Central Illinois selections, while Roberts was a second-team pick. Oehler and Wilson were honorable mention.

Of course, few today recall any of that, including the 10-0 season. All they remember is the final score of the Gillespie game.

Eight days after the Staunton-Gillespie game, there was another noteworthy gridiron event in the area. Today, it would seem that the other game should have been a big deal.

On December 2, an NFL team, the St. Louis All-Stars, traveled to Benld to play the Independents, a local semi-pro team.

The All-Stars were not properly named; the squad was not a collection of all-star players, and limped into Benld with a 1-4-2 record behind an offense that scored only 39 points on the year.

But the NFL was a fledgling outfit, in only its fourth year of existence. Like many of the early NFL teams, the All-Stars needed money, and looked to play exhibition games – anywhere – for payoffs. So they came up to Benld, where they actually ended up losing to the Independents, 9-7. It would prove to be the lone season of existence for the All-Stars.

Despite the appearance of pro football in Benld, the game was nothing special to anyone in southern Macoupin County. The nearby Staunton and Carlinville papers offered no coverage of the game, and only a three-paragraph article appeared in the next issue of the *Gillespie Area News* – on the back page.

The game was likely bumped aside by awestruck local high school fans, who were humming about Staunton's record-breaking win over Gillespie. It may have even left an NFL game in the dust.

A quarter-century after the game, the *Staunton Star-Times* printed a letter from Pete Patten, who wrote from the Panama Canal Zone with a request for help. He related that he was in "the midst of a bull session" with some other guys and "everyone was telling yarns."

Patten then tried to tell the story of the 233-0 game, but apparently, no one believed him. "It is needless to try to repeat the terms," lamented Patten, "they used in denouncing me as a teller of falsehoods." Fortunately, the paper set Patten straight, though whether his buddies believed it is not known.

Patten's cohorts may not have been the only ones who didn't think the outcome was possible. In 1930, the contest was featured in newspapers nationwide by the popular syndicated feature *Ripley's Believe it or Not!*

For many of the Staunton players, the Gillespie game was not the pinnacle of their athletic glory. George Oehler continued his playing career at Washington University, where he studied dentistry. He practiced for twelve years in Benld, then moved to Springfield, continuing for thirty-six more years until his retirement in August 1976.

Oehler also owned some of the top field trial dogs in the nation, and was a two-term President of the American Field Trial Clubs organization. He died in March 1977.

Cliff Stiegemeier won four letters in both football and track at Millikin University in Decatur, then returned to Staunton as the head coach in football, track, and basketball from 1933-36. He reeled off a 25-11-2 combined record in football, and helped Staunton to a share of the 1935 county track team title. In basketball, Stiegemeier's 1934-35 team was 21-5, followed by 24-6 the next season.

He later enjoyed a long career as an assistant principal in Decatur, and was inducted into the Millikin Athletics Hall of Fame six weeks before his death in June 1979. His brother, Melvin, was a clothing store manager in Decatur before his death in 1974.

Ruffini and Arnicar both were standouts at Centre College, a renowned academic institution in Danville, Ky. Ruffini's career was cut short by injury, and he later returned to Staunton, following Stiegemeier as the Bulldogs' football coach from 1937-42. He also coached Staunton's track team from 1938-40 before becoming a respected official in multiple sports. Ruffini died in 1986.

Arnicar was the co-captain of Centre's 1931 football team, and later served as the school's business manager. In 1995, he was posthumously inducted into the Centre College Athletic Hall of Fame.

Today, an annual award bearing his name is given to an outstanding senior football player at Centre. Arnicar died in March 1962.

Jim Peele, one of the "second-team" players on the 1923 Staunton squad, later played at Purdue. He went on to spend nine years as the head football coach at the University of Buffalo, now an NCAA Division I school, and was Buffalo's athletic director for twenty-two years. Peele died in 1976.

Glenn Hastings was eventually the school superintendent at Mount Olive, where he also coached. Hastings suffered a fatal heart attack while playing golf on the second hole at Gillespie Country Club on July 4, 1970.

Today, the 233-0 game has taken on almost mythic proportions in Staunton and Gillespie. Ask any fan of the Bulldogs or Miners, and they can probably recite the particulars. Their fathers, grandfathers, or great-grandfathers may have even played in the game, or watched from the bleachers with the girls. Most people on either side can shake their heads now, and laugh about it.

One hundred years later, no one who was there is around to remember. And yet, no one ever forgets.

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