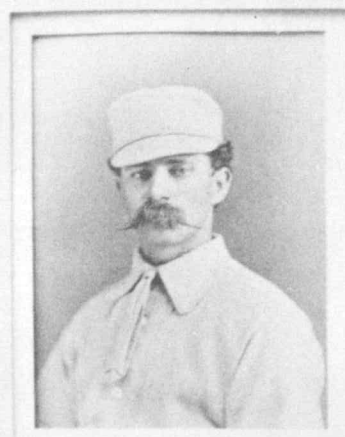
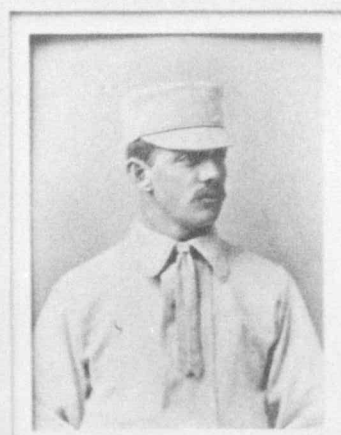


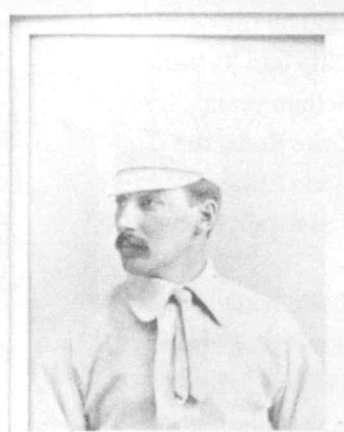
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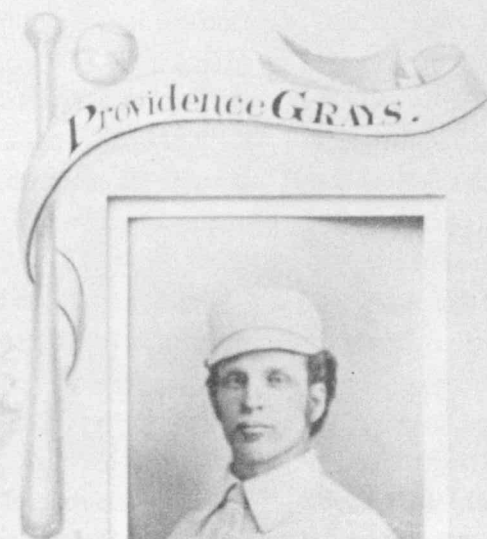
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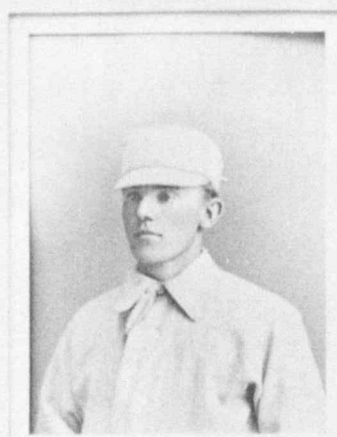
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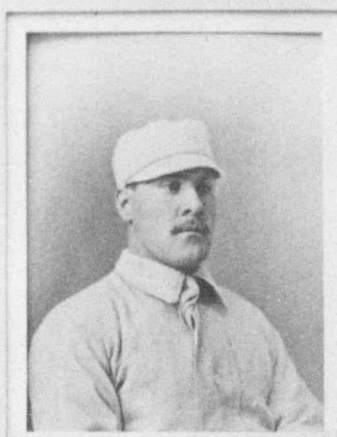
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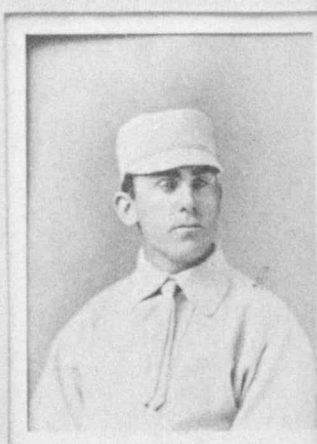
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ERIC ETHIER

What Once Was and What Might Have Been Big-Time Sports in Rhode Island

THESE FOUR PIECES were commissioned to celebrate and support our 2019 theme of “Rah! Rah! Rhodi: the history of sports in Rhode Island.” —*The Editor*

The Grays

By the 1870s, Rhode Island, like much of America, had baseball fever. The state boasted numerous town and men’s club “nines,” a standout squad at Brown University, and even an early semipro club called the Rhode Islands. In 1878, the nation’s top professional league, the National Association of Professional Base Ball Clubs (the forerunner of today’s National League), awarded the state a franchise and welcomed the new Providence Grays to its stable.

The first of several Rhode Island teams to bear the Grays name, these first Grays were, from the start, one of the nation’s best. They took their name from the nontraditional tone of their home uniforms and played in a sharp new ball park, Messer Street Grounds, on Providence’s west side. Here, Grays devotees watched their team tangle with its chief rival, the Boston Red Caps, and marveled at some of the game’s great early stars. In the club’s second season, future National Baseball Hall of Fame pitcher John Montgomery Ward won 47 games in leading Providence to the pennant. (Pitching staffs of that era consisted of just two men.) The Grays’ feat set off a celebration unlike any-

thing seen in the capital city since the end of the Civil War. Mayor Thomas A. Doyle, while admitting he was “wholly ignorant of the mysteries of base ball,” commended the “Providence Nine” for having “gone from city to city, from State to State, bearing the name of our city, and writing it from week to week higher and higher, until at last they have placed it at the mast head.”¹

By 1884, the sore-armed Ward had moved on to New York, replaced by another future Hall of Famer, salty, rubber-armed right-hander Charles Radbourn. When the Grays lost pitcher Charlie Sweeney in July, Radbourn volunteered to throw every day, risking his arm for a shot at a pennant. Crowds flocked to Messer Street Grounds, eager to see the weary Radbourn will the Grays to glory. “Providence is a fairly good town to umpires, although they swear by their club,” umpire Billy McLean told *The Sporting Life*. “I don’t know of any town so utterly struck on their team as is the Clam Eating City on the bay.”² By season’s end, Radbourn had gritted his way to an astounding 59 wins and earned the moniker “Old Hoss.” His marathon effort would shorten his career, but Providence got its second pennant.

On the evening of October 17, the Shore Line train carrying the league champs home from Philadelphia squeaked to a halt in Union Station. Thousands of jubilant locals awaited them. “A large squad of police was on hand,” the *Providence Journal* reported, “but failed to control the crowd, which packed the station and overflowed on to the tracks.” The celebrants could not be contained but proved entirely benign. “When the players stepped off the train,” the *Journal* added,

OPPOSITE: Portraits of Providence Grays Baseball Team players in 1879. Clockwise from upper left: Hines, O’Rourke, York, Start, McGeary, Brown, Ward, Mathews, Hague and George Wright (center). RIHS Collections RHI X32199.

“the rush swept the police away and hand clasps and back-patting ruled for several minutes. A crowd of Brown students grasped [rookie infielder Charley] Bassett and gave a dozen rah-rahs for the son of Brown.”³

The Grays subsequently accepted an invitation from the New York Metropolitans of the three-year-old American Association to play for what newspapers trumpeted as the “World’s Championship”—two decades before what is recognized today as the first World Series. Set in New York’s Polo Grounds, the series proved anticlimactic, with the Grays sweeping the three games, two of which were cut short by darkness.

A year later, everything had changed. The team’s location in the league’s smallest market meant, for its financial backers, a very tight profit margin. In 1885, the club’s play slipped, and attendance fell. The team’s antsy directors sold Radbourn to Boston and closed up shop. Within a few years all traces of the Grays, and their proud park, were gone.

By 1914, professional baseball was booming. The major leagues had been established, as had numerous affiliated minor circuits. Another incarnation of the Providence Grays was in business, this time as the International League farm club of the powerful Boston Red Sox. Providence’s latest nine boasted major league-caliber pitching, led by right-handed submarine pitcher Carl Mays, and played their home games at Melrose Park, on the Providence-Cranston line.

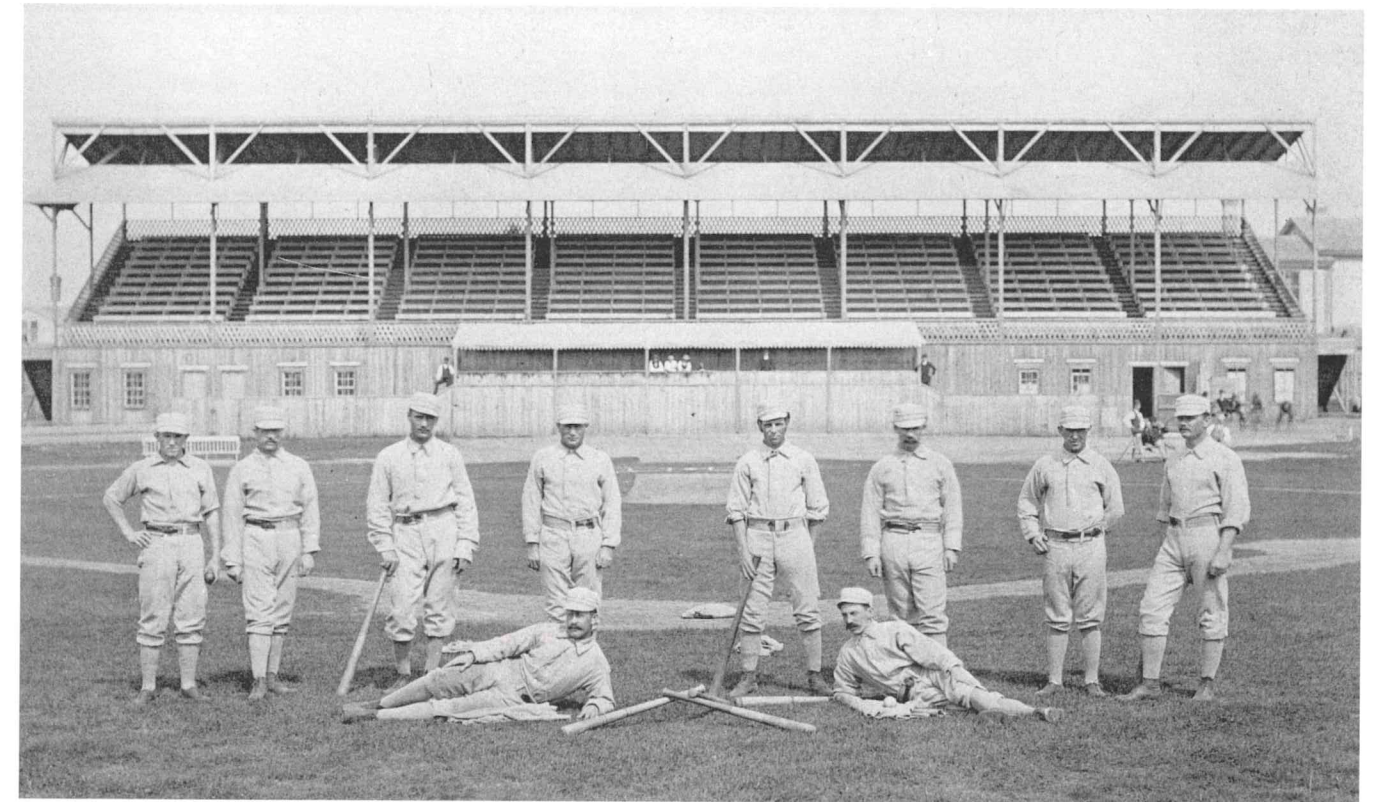
The Grays were in the midst of a three-team duel for first place when, on August 19, the *Providence Journal* laconically noted the arrival of a new player: “Pitcher Ruth reported to Manager [Bill] Donovan yester-

day morning, the Red Sox having secured waivers on the big left-hander, who was bought from Baltimore about a month ago when [Orioles owner Jack] Dunn began unloading his star players.”⁴ The pitcher was 19-year-old George Herman “Babe” Ruth, a rookie left-hander sent south to put the second-place Grays over the top.

The Grays’ ferocious battle for league supremacy kept full streetcars rumbling to Melrose Park. Three days after Ruth’s arrival, a crowd of 12,000 (by comparison, Pawtucket’s McCoy Stadium holds about 10,000) swarmed the park for the Grays’ doubleheader against their chief antagonists, the Rochester Hustlers. “They went to the park in every conceivable way,” the *Journal* reported, “electric cars dropping their loads at the rate of one a minute, automobiles rolling in by the dozens until the usual parking space was filled and the late comers were forced to store their cars in front of the Elmwood car house; on foot, in horse-drawn vehicles and on bicycles. It was a case of any-way to get there.”⁵

With Ruth and Mays doing the pitching, the Grays thrilled their fans with a dramatic doubleheader sweep that vaulted the club into the league lead. Ruth, whose pitching would overshadow his hitting until the end of the Dead Ball Era (roughly 1920), provided a hint of things to come with a prodigious clout amid a memorable game one Grays rally. “A thousand straw hats were lost in the wild demonstration of joy that signaled the longest hit ever made at the ball park,” noted a *Journal* scribe.⁶

The Grays wrapped up the pennant in late September, ending Ruth’s pit stop in the minor leagues.



He and Mays joined the Red Sox. Forty years later, Jack Onslow, the Grays backstop who had caught both hurlers in Providence, mused about the amazing 1914 team: “I believe that if we had that kind of a ball club today, right in the American League or National League, it would be a contending ball club.”⁷

Steam Roller

On December 2, 1928, telegraph wires across the United States buzzed with an Associated Press news flash: “The Providence Steam Rollers [sic] won the championship of the National Professional Football league for the first time here today, when they played the Green Bay Packers to a 7–7 tie in their final game of the season.”⁸ Incongruous as this bulletin sounds today, it was nonetheless a fact. Rhode Island was home to the National Football League (NFL) champs.

Organized in 1916 by *Providence Journal* staffers Pearce Johnson, Charles Coppen, and Edward Whalen, the Providence Steam Roller started out as an

independent club beating up on regional semipro competition. In 1925, team owners, led by Providence real estate developer and sports promoter Peter Laudati, paid a \$500 franchise fee and entered the Steam Roller in the fledgling NFL, which had begun play (originally as the American Professional Football Association [APFA]) in 1920.

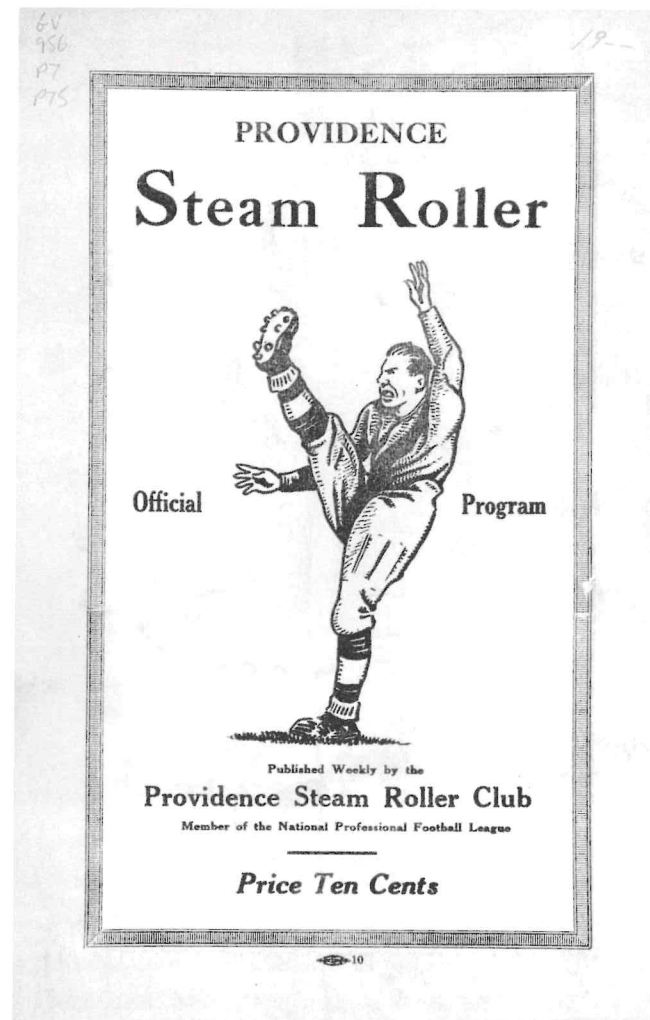
In its first two NFL seasons, the ‘Roller went a respectable 11–12–2, stocked partly with Rhody-based talent such as quarterback Olaf “Curly” Oden and bruising lineman (and Olympic wrestling champion) John Spellman, both of whom had starred for Brown University. Then, in 1927, Laudati lured future NFL Hall-of-Famer Jimmy Conzelman to Providence as player-coach and signed former University of Washington All-American George “Wildcat” Wilson—a multipurpose back hailed by one sportswriter as “one of the finest players of this or any other time.”⁹ Laudati also imported tough NFL veterans like “Dynamite” Gus Sonnenberg to anchor a rock-solid line (players then played both offense and defense), and

former Boston College halfback Jack Cronin, who moonlighted as a teacher and coach at La Salle Academy. The much-improved 'Roller finished the 1927 season 8-5-1.

By 1928, the Steam Roller was a championship-caliber club in a league struggling to survive. Sporting-crazed Americans of the Jazz Age spent much of their leisure time shouting themselves hoarse at athletic contests of every imaginable type, from baseball and college football games to boxing and wrestling matches and even bicycle races. But only a handful of them even knew the NFL existed. Of those who did, many dismissed the professional game as an unsavory racket—a refuge for down-on-their-luck ex-college gridders.

No NFL venue better reflected the toddling state of the league than the Steam Roller's quirky home field. It encompassed the infield of Providence's Cycledrome, a 10,000-seat bicycle racing arena off of North Main Street, on the Providence-Pawtucket line. Laudati had built it three years earlier to capitalize on the nation's cycling craze. Its wooden course cut off one end zone and sat almost atop the sidelines—ensuring splinters for any player driven out of bounds. But for the hard-nosed 'Roller, a defensive juggernaut that allowed just 42 points in the entire 1928 season, it worked.

On December 2, some 12,000 raucous Rhode Islanders packed the Cycledrome to watch the Steam Roller's season-ending struggle with the Packers. For Providence, the tie secured an 8-1-2 record, the NFL's highest winning percentage, and championship laurels. (The first NFL championship game wasn't held until 1933; the first Super Bowl was four decades away.)

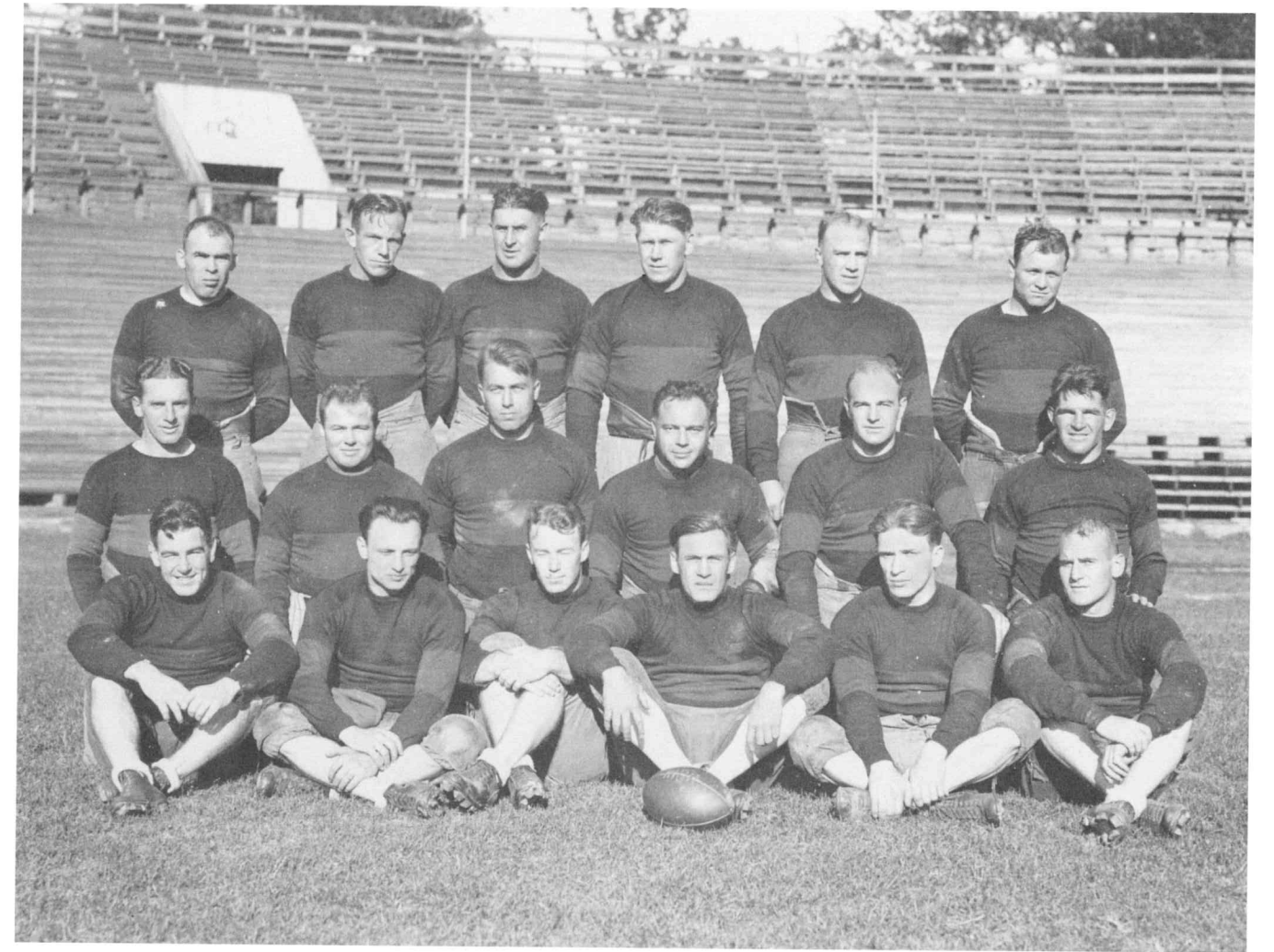


Providence Steam Roller club, official program. Providence, Rhode Island, ca. 1920. RIHS Collections RHi X3 7206.

Each player earned a \$500 bonus, an engraved gold watch, and a lifetime of autograph requests.

Two nights later, Providence Mayor James E. Dunne, Governor-Elect James G. Connolly, and some 200 revelers paid homage to the "World's Champions" in a banquet in Providence's glittering new skyscraping hotel, the Biltmore. Among those to speak was Attorney General Charles P. Sisson, a former All-American center at Brown. "I think the day is coming," he said, "when pro football, if it follows the example set by the 'Roller, will take its place with baseball as the great national professional sport."¹⁰

Unfortunately for Providence, few of Laudati's players could afford to wait for that, especially after the



Providence Steam Roller team (n.d.). The wooden track of the Cycledrome is visible in the background. RIHS Collections RHi X3 6826.

stock market crash of October 1929. Sonnenberg, by then wrestling's heavyweight champion, switched to grappling full time. Wilson short-circuited a brilliant NFL future by joining him. Oden traded the gridiron for the world of insurance, while Cronin turned his full attention to La Salle. The result was a weaker team and even weaker ticket sales. By 1931, the Steam Roller's all-too-brief NFL run was over. The Cycledrome didn't stick around much longer. In 1937 Laudati leveled it in favor of the latest new thing, an E. M. Loew's Drive-In Theatre. (This was eventually replaced by a Sears store and a shopping plaza.)

The Great Depression, followed by World War II, all but extinguished memories of New England's first NFL

champion. But in happier postwar years, countless Providence-area semipro and amateur football teams dubbed Steamroller or Steamrollers would spark recollections of the original 'Roller and its one magical year. "Most of the time we lost money," Laudati said years later, "but not in 1928. In other years, we sometimes took in only \$800 or \$900 a game, but in '28 we were pulling in \$9,000 or \$10,000 toward the end of the season. It was quite a year."¹¹

Providence Reds

Long after his retirement, Hockey Hall of Fame goaltender Johnny Bower mused over his experiences in

Providence as a member of the Cleveland Barons. In particular, he remembered the home team's goal judge. "Every time they'd score a goal, he'd shoot chewing tobacco at you," Bower wrote. "When they were just about to take a shot at you, there was an opening in the chicken wire and he'd let me have it. He didn't actually hit me in the neck, but he hit me all over the back of my sweater. I asked him once why he did that and he said he just didn't like goaltenders. 'I'm a Rhode Island Reds fan,' he told me."¹²

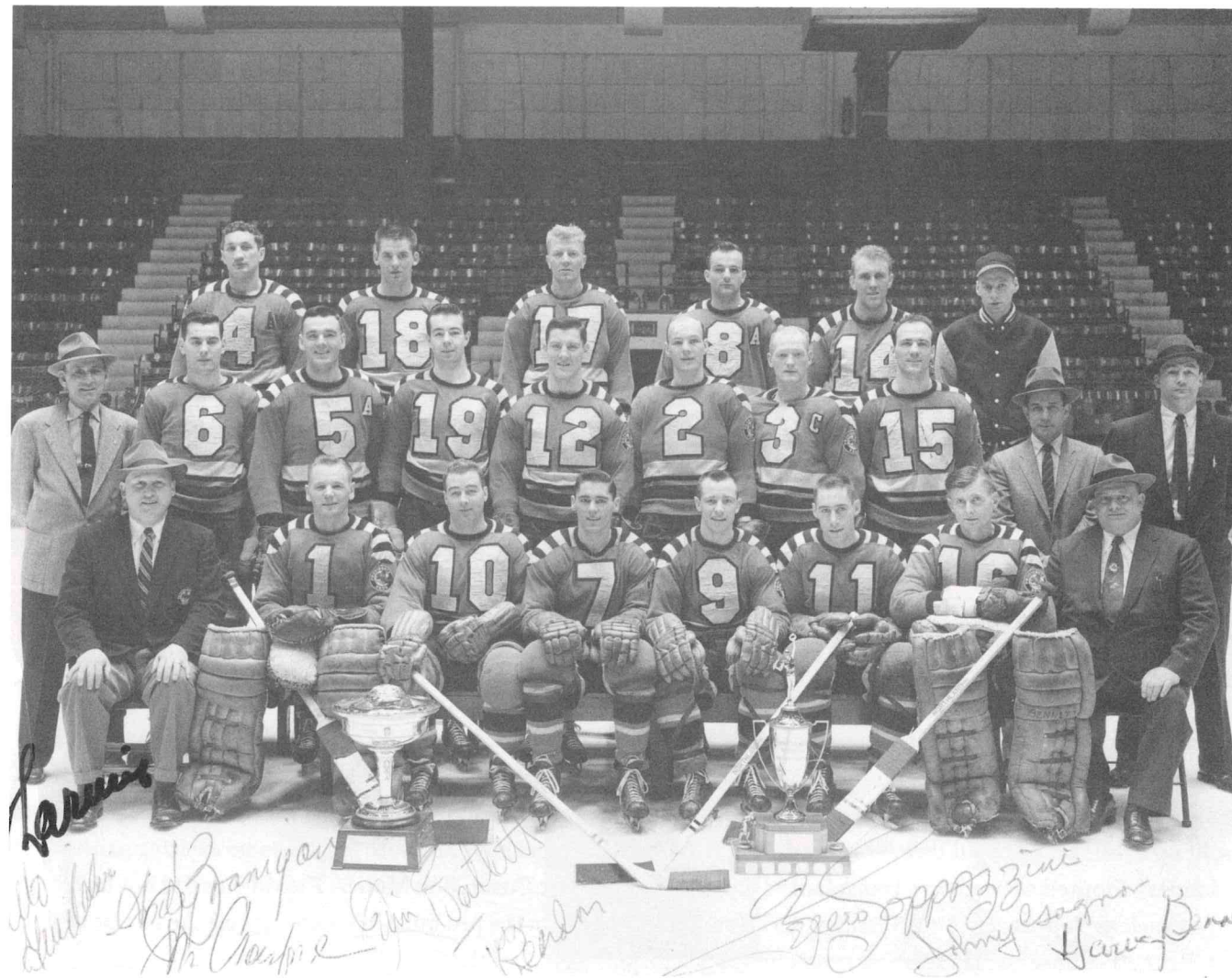
For a half-century, the Providence Reds (technically

the Rhode Island Reds during their final season) inspired this kind of passion in the state's notoriously rabid hockey fans. The team's 1977 departure broke supporters' hearts and ended an unforgettable era in Rhode Island sports history.

The Reds debuted in 1926 in the brand-new, 5,500-seat Rhode Island Auditorium, at 1111 North Main Street, one of countless arenas and stadiums erected around the country during America's golden age of sports. After joining the American Hockey League (AHL), the team became a fixture in the capital city's



Providence Reds, ca. 1949.
RIHS Collections RHi X17 3750.



entertainment scene under the guidance of visionary owner Louis A. R. Pieri, a Brown grad who also owned the rink (and during its brief history, the Providence Steamrollers basketball team).

Part of the lure was the high caliber of play. "Back in those days, when I was there, you got the very best of the leftovers from the NHL," recalls former Reds general manager Sylvester "Buster" Clegg. The limited number of jobs in the six-team National Hockey League (NHL) meant some of the game's best players had to wait their turn for a shot at the big time in AHL cities like Providence. Locals, therefore, regularly got to watch future NHL legends such as Frank Brimsek, Eddie Shack, Ed Giacomin, and Rick Middleton. Even Bower called the Auditorium home, backstopping

the Reds to the Calder Cup in 1956 and being named Rhode Island's athlete of the year in 1957.

The stability of the Reds' roster inspired fan loyalty, and the cozy confines of the Auditorium bred friendly familiarity between fans and players. "That rink was built for hockey—no question about it," says Clegg. "You could almost feel like you were on the ice with them because of the pitch of the stands, and stuff like that. You knew the people sitting next to you. The season ticket-holders. So friendships were made there. It was very inviting."¹³ A Reds game became a family affair. "People went to the same section and saw the same people all the time," recalled former Reds goalie Ross Brooks. "The same guy would go to the same hot-dog stand or the same beer stand every game."¹⁴

By the 1960s, each Sunday night game was a special event, with sharply dressed fans entering and exiting the arena alongside their hockey heroes. "There was only one door, the front door, and we had to go through it," recalled Zellio Toppazzini, a longtime member of the Reds whose name alone endeared him to Providence's heavily Italian population. "We often spent 30 minutes or three-quarters of an hour signing autographs after a game." Public access to players extended into the city. "If Lou Pieri said you were going to a banquet, you went," Toppazzini said. "You built up a following of your own."¹⁵ Indeed, Rhode Islanders adopted as their own transplanted Canadians such as Toppazzini, Fern Flaman, and Harvey Bennett, whose surname is now synonymous with Rhode Island hockey.

The bond between team and fans made the Reds a Rhode Island institution. By the 1970s, however, times had changed. Thanks to NHL expansion and the new World Hockey Association (WHA), the Reds roster was constantly in flux, sapping the team's identity. The quality of play dipped. Then, in 1972, the team's new owners moved the team into the squeaky-clean, 11,000-seat Civic Center. Attendance fell off, and in 1977 the team relocated to Binghamton, New York. The now-ancient Auditorium stood as a somber relic of the Reds' glory years until 1989, when it was torn down.

Three years later, Rhode Island hockey fans got something new to cheer about when the Providence Bruins (formerly the Maine Mariners) took up residence in the Civic Center. The Reds' legacy, meanwhile, lives on in the 450-member-strong Rhode Island Reds Heritage Society and in the state's numerous

school hockey programs, many of which were a by-product of the Reds' popularity.

Steamrollers

Chatting with a *Providence Journal* sports writer in 1972, Boston Celtics general manager Red Auerbach flashed back to pro basketball's early days—in Providence. "Remember in 1946 when Providence had the Steamrollers, with Ernie Calverley, Earl Shannon, Dino Martin, George Mearns and Bob Shea? They were all local boys and sure played some exciting games under Coach Bob Morris. Providence did not last long in the pro ranks but fans around the circuit still remember the team."¹⁶

Few fans remember the Providence Steamrollers today. But they were indeed one of the nation's first major professional basketball teams—one of the founding "fives" of the Basketball Association of America (BAA). The BAA was formed amid America's post-World War II sports boom in 1946. Two other pro hoops leagues, including the National Basketball League (NBL), already were in operation. But sports promoters and businessmen such as Rhode Island's Louis A. R. Pieri, who owned the Providence Reds and the Rhode Island Auditorium, gambled that the war-weary country was ready for another. Pieri had once coached the Brown University squad and shared the state's love for basketball. He also was eager to fill open nights on the Auditorium's calendar. The result was the Steamrollers.

It was an uphill battle from the start. "The hockey team had a lock on all the Friday night and Sunday

STEAM ROLLERS

SELECT CIRCLE

SHANNON —



— MARTIN



BEENDERS —



— MEARN'S



SHEA —



— ROSENSTEIN



GRIMSHAW —

— WEBER



GOODWIN —



— PASTUSHOK



CALVERLEY

BOB MORRIS
CoachJOE FAY
Basketball Director

afternoon dates at the Arena,” team director Joe Fay said later. “That left us with mostly Thursdays and Saturdays. Because we didn’t have the prime dates, we didn’t expect to draw enough fans to turn the red ink to black. We hoped we’d win enough games, however, to keep the turnstiles clicking enough so we’d at least break even. Making the playoffs would be a huge help.”¹⁷

Pieri quickly assembled a roster heavy on local talent. He signed a handful of former Rhode Island State College (now the University of Rhode Island) players, including local legend Ernie Calverley, who had mastered the fast break of innovative coach Frank Keaney. For his own coach, Pieri hired former Pawtucket Senior High (now Tolman) coach Robert Morris. Morris commandeered the Hope High gymnasium and drilled his new team in what he called “Civil War basketball.” (“We shoot and run,” he joked.)¹⁸ Then, on November 2, 1946, before a curious Auditorium crowd of 4,400, the young Steamrollers ran past the Boston Celtics 59–53 in their BAA debut. Providence would continue to keep Auditorium ticket-takers busy and surprise slower-playing opponents. But by year’s end, the team’s lack of size had caught up to it. The Steamrollers’ final record of 28–32 was respectable but worrisome.

South County native Hank Soar took over as coach for season two. Soar had starred in three sports at Pawtucket Senior High and gone on to play pro football for the New York Giants. He would later become one of Major League Baseball’s great umpires. Now, though, he had his hands full with a fluid and defensively challenged lineup. He was so short on players

one night that he inserted the team’s publicity man—George Patrick Duffy, the long-time Providence Reds broadcaster—onto the floor. “I played for six minutes without touching the ball,” Duffy remembered years later with a chuckle.¹⁹ “We had a 2–17 record when I was fired at midseason,” Soar said later. “But my successor [Nat Hickey] was 4–25, so I think the problem may have been the players and not the coaching.”²⁰

Getting better and, more specifically, bigger, players was no easy trick at a time when far fewer of them were around. Fluctuating draft rules left BAA and NBL teams in a ceaseless war for college recruits. At the same time, most experienced pros looking for new homes preferred to play in big cities, such as Washington, DC, New York, and Boston. This left Pieri and Fay in a relentless search for hardwood help. Still, with the Steamrollers going into a make-or-break third season, a *Journal* sportswriter declared that Pieri and his staff had made upgrades. “Having learned through experience—and a bitter experience it was last year—that basketball as played in the Basketball Association of America is for the most part a big man’s game, the Providence Steamrollers have at last rounded up a squad that is studded with altitudinous operatives.”²¹

Unfortunately, new players and yet another new coach, Ken Loeffler, helped only marginally. After the Steamrollers lost their nineteenth straight game late in the spring of 1949, a frustrated Loeffler left the team in the hands of Fay (who doubled as the assistant principal at Central Falls High School) and departed on a two-week “scouting mission.” The third edition of the Steamrollers finished 12–48. “Despite the sorrowful showing,” *Journal* sports columnist Earl Lofquist

noted, “a nucleus of roughly 2,000 fans remained loyal to the bitter end.”²²

It wasn’t enough. After three years of play, Pieri had reportedly lost \$150,000, and the death knell sounded for the Steamrollers. Lofquist pulled no punches in assessing blame: “What killed professional basketball in what may be the best basketball town in the United States was league politics so stacked that the Steamrollers could not get the players they needed to improve their fortunes on the court, and, incidentally and otherwise, at the gate.”²³

In August 1949, the BAA merged with the NBL, creating the National Basketball Association (NBA). Too late for Providence, the game-changing 24-second clock and the arrival of television almost instantly transformed the game’s popularity. Pieri did manage to secure a consolation prize for Rhode Island by buying a piece of the Boston Celtics—a deal that brought Red Auerbach to Boston and ensured regular Celtics visits to Providence.

NOTES

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2. *Sporting Life*, October 8, 1884, 5.

3. Society for American Baseball Research, Inc., *Days of Greatness: Providence Baseball, 1875–1885* (Cooperstown, NY, 1984), 52.

4. *Providence Journal*, August 19, 1914, 8.

5. *Ibid.*, August 23, 1914, 10.

6. *Ibid.*, August 23, 1914, 7.

7. From interview with Warren Walden, May 15, 1955, courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

8. Associated Press, December 2, 1928.

9. Eskenazi, David, “Wayback Machine: George ‘Wildcat’ Wilson,” <http://sportspressnw.com/2194917/2014/wayback-machine-george-wildcat-wilson>, accessed January 5, 2019.

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11. *Ibid.*, May 21, 1971, page 16.

12. Duff, Bob, with Bower, Johnny, *The China Wall: The Timeless Legend of Johnny Bower* (Wayne, MI: Immortal Investments Publishing, 2006), 33.

13. From interview with author, January 12, 2019.

14. *Providence Journal*, September 28, 1977, 15.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Providence Journal*, December 24, 1972, 24.

17. Rosen, Charley, *The First Tip-Off: The Incredible Story of the Birth of the NBA* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 67.

18. *Ibid.*, 68.

19. *Providence Journal*, April 28, 1974, 44.

20. *New York Times*, December 30, 2001, Section A, 1.

21. *Providence Journal*, October 19, 1949, 10.

22. *Providence Journal*, December 20, 1951, 8.

23. *Ibid.*