

Football Feast



Prep Football Once Took Center Stage On Thanksgiving Day, Especially In Flint

Football on Thanksgiving Day – it's as traditional as, well, turkey, stuffing and pumpkin pie. In the NFL, the Detroit Lions have battled with the league to preserve that tradition, pointing with pride to their streak of hosting a Thanksgiving Day game dating back to 1934.

At the prep level in Michigan, football on Thanksgiving has its origins prior to the turn of the century. High school squads played on the holiday as early as the 1890s. The date was a natural, since in the early days of high school athletic competition, the football season often did not start until late September.

In most major cities, and in many small towns, a Thanksgiving Day contest hosted at the local high school became an annual affair. The season-ending showdown usually guaranteed a huge gate, as crowds swelled to record size for many of these contests. For the majority of schools, the date would feature a marquee opponent, a traditional rival or the chance for a pair of unbeaten squads to determine superiority on the gridiron.

In Saginaw, the intra-city rivalry between the Trojans and Saginaw Arthur Hill dates back to 1894, when the schools operated in separate districts. Saginaw, then referred to as East Side High, faced West Side High, renamed Arthur Hill in 1902, for local bragging rights. Between 1909 and 1953, the contest was played on Thanksgiving Day. In Grand Rapids, the Thursday afternoon contest featured Union and South. In Muskegon, it was the Big Reds versus Grand Rapids Central.

But times change. By the 1930s, many

schools abandoned the holiday contest in favor of an earlier end to the season. However, the formation of conferences, allowing for a structured and predictable schedule, might have had even greater impact. By the mid-50s, a shift to an early start in the season and a general disinterest by the student body and the public in attending games played over a holiday were cited as the primary reasons for the move away from the Turkey Day contest.

Very few schools continued with the tradition into the 60s, and by 1975, when it was announced that the Michigan High

Guy Houston scored a 7-0 victory over their crosstown opponent, as Joe Supak's second-quarter touchdown gave the Vikings the win. In 1929, Frank "Puffy" Mitoraj kicked field goals of 34 and 36 yards in the blustery confines of a frozen Viking field, to lead upstart Northern to its second victory in the series, 6-0.

In 1930, the contest was moved to Atwood Stadium, where it remained. Northern also won the third meeting, 18-0, again earning possession of the Dr. A.J. Wildanger Trophy, awarded to the victor in the annual battle between the two schools.

The win gave the Vikings an undefeated and untied season – the first in the school's short history – and a share of the state's mythical gridiron crown.

Central secured its first victory in the series as Sherwood Moore picked off an errant Northern pass and returned the ball 81 yards for a touchdown and a 6-0 win by Indians in 1931.

Nevertheless, it was Houston's Northern teams that found the greatest success throughout the 30s and 40s. Under his guidance, the Vikings completed undefeated seasons in 1933, 1934 & 1935, and again in 1938, 1939, 1940 and 1942, and claimed at least a share of mythical state crowns in 1933, 1939 and 1940.

However, his success certainly did not go unchallenged. In 1939, Coach Howard Auer began a 15-year reign at Central, and his addition to the coaching scene added a new dimension to the rivalry.

In his first season, Auer led the Indians to an undefeated mark through seven games, setting the stage for a showdown in the holiday season finale. A crowd of 17,426 witnessed a game effort by Auer's



photo courtesy of Flint Journal

Flint Central's Sherman Wallace plunges over for the lone score of the game in 1962, a 7-0 win for the Indians.

School Athletic Association would sponsor playoffs, only one Thanksgiving Day game remained: the annual contest between Flint Central and Flint Northern.

The series was born in 1928 with the opening of Northern High School. This natural rivalry was an instant fan favorite. That first game, hosted at Central's Dort Memorial Field, attracted an estimated crowd of 8,000. Northern and head coach

Central squad, but third-quarter touchdowns by Northern's Eddie Krupa and Leonard Sweet allowed the Vikings to steal away a 14-6 victory.

The 1947 contest was certainly one of the classics. For only the second time in the 20-game series, fans would watch a pair of unbeaten teams square off. Northern entered the game with only a 6-6 tie against Kalamazoo Central in the season opener marring their record. The Indians were unbeaten and untied through eight encounters, and had rolled up 198 points, while allowing only 20 by the opponents.

According to the *Flint Journal*, fans and opponents were greeted by playing conditions "more suitable for dog sledding." The frozen playing field was covered with a layer of snow that offered no footing for cleats. Auer had his team switch to basketball shoes after the first quarter, allowing the Indians to negotiate a 20-6 win over the Vikings. The win gave Central its first perfect season in 22 years. Flint players Don Coleman and Bart Jenniches of Central; and Shaheen Shaheen and Leo Sugar, of Northern, occupied four of the 11 spots on the 1947 Associated Press first-team all-state team.

Attendance at the contest remained strong throughout the 50s and into the late 60s, with annual attendance averaging well over 10,000 spectators.

In 1950, a crowd of 20,600 – the largest to ever witness the Thanksgiving Day event – gathered at Atwood to watch perhaps the most exciting game of this long-running series. Northern, featuring an all-state backfield comprised of Leroy Bolden, Ellis Duckett and Duncan MacDonald, squeaked out a 20-13 victory. Bolden emerged as the hero, scoring on a 79 yard touchdown scamper in the final minutes of the game to seal a perfect 9-0 season and another mythical state crown for the Vikings and Houston. The veteran mentor retired one year later, with 15 wins in 26 meetings with the crosstown rivals, and a 7-5-1 mark against Auer.

Coach Andy McDonald led Northern to two more unbeaten seasons with victories in the '56 and '60 games. Bill Doolittle, who replaced Auer as head coach at Central following the 1953 season, led the Indians to a 51-0 victory over Northern in the fall of 1958. The total was the most scored by a single team in the series. The victory gave the Indians an 8-0-1 record and ensured Central a share of the mythical state title.

The 1967 game, the last played on natural turf before an artificial surface was installed at Atwood, was known as the

"Mud Battle." Played before 11,933 fans in near impossible conditions, it was won by Northern, 6-2, on a late fourth-quarter touchdown by William Wallace.

Coach Glen "Dutch" Schotenshoer and his top-ranked Central squad entered the 1970 battle undefeated. Fred Crawford, in his seventh year at the helm for Northern, led his Vikings into battle 5-2-1 mark. The crowd, which had slipped in recent years, surged to nearly 10,000, including North Farmington's Ron Holland, the head coach of the state's No. 2 ranked team, and Mike Gow, his star running back.

"Our turkey dinner could wait," said Holland. "We had to see this one for ourselves."

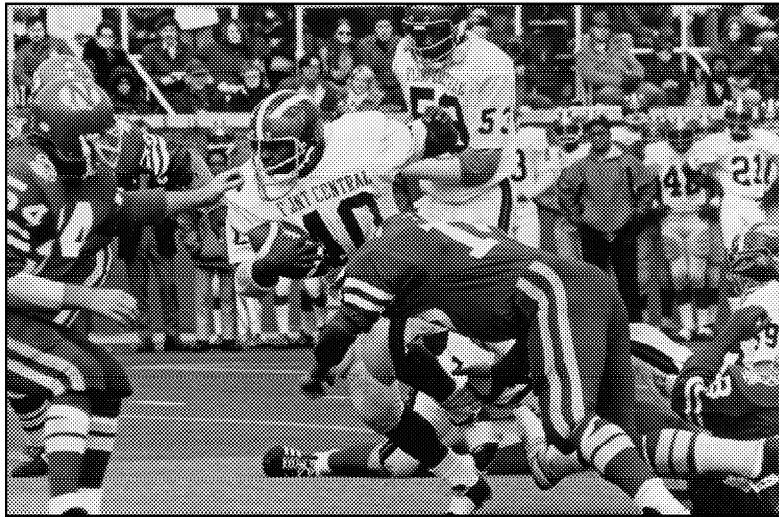


photo courtesy of Flint Journal

Doug Arthur of Flint Central fights for yardage in the 1971 game, won by Flint Northern, 20-10.

They witnessed a dandy, as an unlikely hero emerged. Larry Brown, Northern's 5-foot-5, 155 pound quarterback, tossed three touchdown passes to lead the Vikings to a 32-13 third quarter lead, and a 32-27 win over Central. He finished the day with five completions in 10 attempts for 168 yards. With the loss, North Farmington ended the year with the mythical Class A title.

Slowly the glimmer was coming off the long series. Local officials stated that as long as the schools could make money on the game, they would continue the Turkey Day tradition, but many felt it was just a matter of time before the Thursday afternoon contest would be retired.

In 1973, a new threat to the annual contest arrived. In East Lansing, a blue-ribbon committee was assembled to study the creation of a football playoff system. Flint Northern principal Donald J. Gaviglio was a member of the panel, and discussed the issue with the *Flint Journal* at the time.

"Understand that we are still in the 'if' stage of the study," said Gaviglio, "but most everyone on the committee agreed that the Thanksgiving Day game could go on as

scheduled." At the time, the group was proposing a system that featured championship contests on the third Saturday of November.

"(The game) would come after the playoffs, so there would be nothing to interfere with it," concluded Gaviglio.

But in 1975, the MHSAA began a play-off system that featured championships on the Saturday following Thanksgiving. While the playoffs did not directly compete with the annual contest in Flint, the playoffs, combined with the widening gap between the end of the "regular season" and the holiday contest, was the final nail in the coffin for the annual showdown.

Central and Northern played on Thanksgiving in both 1975 and 1976. The '76 contest, the 49th meeting between the schools, required overtime to determine a winner.

Central scored first in the extra frame, as Frank Nagy slipped over the goal line on fourth down. Jody Smith, who had missed a potential game-winning field goal from 20 yards out with 12 seconds remaining in regulation, added the extra point for a 7-0 lead.

Northern scored on its overtime possession as quarterback Michael Ivory dazzled the crowd with a ten-yard scamper for the touchdown on third down. The Vikings lined up for the kick, but opted for a fake in an attempt to win with a two-point conversion.

Ivory, acting as the holder, lofted a pass that was batted away at the last second by David Gibson, giving the Indians their 20th victory in the series.

Although it had not yet been officially decided, this classic contest marked the end of the annual Thanksgiving Day game. The following day, Doug Mintline, longtime sportswriter for the *Flint Journal*, summed up the series with a poetic remembrance that paid tribute to the individuals that made the this annual game one of the state's greatest events.

In 1977, to mark the 50th year, former players from both schools helped organize the "Nostalgia Bowl," a homecoming of sorts, and a fitting tribute to that holiday event. A touch-football game at Atwood, it featured a host of schools past gridiron greats honoring the glory days and reliving the past. The Central alumni downed Northern representatives, 12-0.

In proper fashion, the long-running tradition of playing prep football on Thanksgiving Day in Flint and in the State of Michigan was both celebrated and retired.

— Ron Pesch