



(Princetontigersfootball.com)

Princeton's "Team of Destiny" in 1922. Oil City High graduate Jack Cleaves is fifth from the left.

It's about time someone remembered the great Jack Cleaves, and I'll take it upon myself to do that.

Cleaves was a great player for the Oil City Oilers from 1914-16. He later served in the Navy for a few months during World War I and then attended Mercersburg Academy before becoming an All-American at Princeton (not consensus, but a first-teamer on a squad selected by Fred A. Hayner, sports writer of the Chicago Daily News) as a member of the Tigers national championship team (National Championship Foundation, College Football Researchers Association) in 1922.

Cleaves' name can be associated with "Team of Destiny," Grantland Rice, "one of the greatest (college) games ever played" and the first college game broadcast on radio, among other things.

But first he starred at Oil City. Although a lot of his stats are scarce, as are those of many players of his day, he did account for 18 touchdowns -- including eight passing -- for the 1916 Oilers, and at least 30 overall.

His greatest game in 1916 came in a 54-0 rout of rival Franklin in which he scored four touchdowns and passed for two more against the Nurserymen. His TDs came on runs of 40 and 23 yards along with a 60-yard fumble return. His 45-yard interception return set up his fourth touchdown, which came on a short run.

The 5-8, 155-pounder had several big games as a junior in 1915. He found the end zone three times against Rouseville on a 60-yard interception and runs of 50 and 45 yards. He had a 60-yard punt return, a 45-yard run for a TD and threw a 35-yard scoring pass against Emlenton. Cleaves also scored two touchdowns apiece against Titusville and Franklin. Cleaves first broke into the Oilers' lineup in the second game of his sophomore year.

Stats from his era are sketchy, but we know of 30 total touchdowns -- 20 scored and 10 passing, with all but one during his junior and senior years .

But his real claim to fame came at Princeton, where as a senior, he helped the Tigers to an 8-0 record, five shutouts and victories over four teams in the top 25.

Princeton wasn't supposed to do anything that season, since it had hardly anyone back from the 6-0-1 team of 1921 -- but they fooled all the experts. What's more, at an average of 5-11, 180, they were smaller than most teams of the day. The speedy Cleaves was considered to be Princeton's best back, and one of only three returning players from 1921..

The Tigers were coached by Hall-of-Famer Bill Roper who wasn't big on playbooks and believed football was "90% fight." A lot of the times, the players made up the plays as the game moved along.

After Princeton blanked Virginia in its opener, Cleaves started at halfback against Colgate, which for the most part outplayed the Tigers. But Princeton won, 10-0, as Cleaves returned an interception 70 yards for a touchdown in the second quarter and caught a 28-yard pass from Whoops Snively late in the fourth to set up a field goal.

Colgate drove to the Princeton 7 in the first quarter when Cleaves knocked away a fourth down pass in the end zone. Colgate outgained Princeton in every phase of the game, except punting where Cleaves again had a good game.

The Tigers were 3-0 when they traveled to the University of Chicago, coached by Amos Alonzo Stagg. Chicago was a 9-0 winner over the Tigers the year before, and was heavily favored again in 1922. The intersectional matchup had the country captivated, and drew 32,000 into Stagg Field.

According to the football firsts section of goldenrakings.com:

“It was the first football game heard coast to coast. The broadcast was carried on phone lines to New York City, where the nationwide transmission originated. People with receivers could listen in their own homes to one of the 200 radio stations across the nation. Countless others gathered around radios in Western Union offices and speakeasies. Back at Princeton, students crowded into the physics lab. It seemed as if everyone in the New Jersey town was within earshot of a radio tuned to station WOR in Newark.”

Chicago took an 18-7 lead. Cleaves again had a great day punting. But his one bad kick gave the Maroons the ball at the Princeton 28 where they drove for the TD that put them up 18-7. (Princeton's TD came on a run by Cleaves after a 33-yard option pass by Snively.)

The fourth quarter, however, belonged to Princeton. First, a bad snap caromed off the shoulder of the Chicago punter, and Howdy Gray picked the ball up and scooted 42 yards to cut the lead to 18-14. The Tigers went ahead 21-18 on a scoring drive the next time they had the ball, taking advantage of some Chicago penalties.

Chicago completed three passes to reach the Princeton, but four plunges into the line netted it nothing, and the Tigers had held on. That led Grantland Rice to coin the phrase ‘team of destiny’ as he reported the Princeton victory.

Now, it was reported in his obituary in The Derrick that Cleaves completed a pass of almost 100 yards vs. Chicago to win the game, but I found no such evidence that that happened...but, maybe this -- taken from princetonigersfootball.com in an article written by Jay Greenburg and released on Aug. 31, 2019, -- is what the newspaper was talking about.

*“For most of three quarters, the descriptions weren’t heartening. Princeton, who trailed 18-7, had lost Snively to injury, and the Tigers were starting a series at their own one. Standard for the day in such predicaments was a first-down punt. Practically unheard of from the minus side of the 50 was a pass. But Gorman and Jack Cleaves ’23 privately conspired to a fake kick that was not even in Roper’s playbook. **Cleaves threw to Gorman and the fooled Maroons took 40 yards to run him down.***

*“Gorman was injured on the tackle and Princeton, which stalled at midfield, punted. But Howdy Gray ’23 ran in a touchdown off a bad snap and the Tigers trailed only 18-14. They then got the ball back on a punt at their 43 and drove to the one, where after three failed tries, substitute running back Harry Crum ’24 was found on the bottom of a huge pile with the nose of the ball over the goalline.”*

Chicago would go on to post a 5-1-1 record and a No. 8 ranking at season's end.

After Princeton topped Swarthmore, the next game, against Harvard, appeared even more daunting than Chicago, but the Tigers took care of business, 10-3. Princeton closed with a 3-0 win over Yale.

Footage of some of these games can be seen on YouTube, Princeton Class of 23 class film. Cleaves can be seen running with the ball against Yale in the first minute and footage of the Chicago game starts at about the 11th..

On New Year's Day 1926, Cleaves and his former Princeton teammates took on the 1924 Notre Dame alumni, of Four Horsemen fame, in an exhibition in Miami.

The two teams were scoreless for the first 59 minutes, 50 seconds when the Fighting Irish scored a controversial touchdown to win 6-0. An offside penalty allowed Notre Dame an extra play. Much later, John Heisman wrote that he completely disagreed with the proceedings late in the game.

Cleaves entered the oil business in Oklahoma after graduation from Princeton and eventually moved to Bradford. He also served in the military during World War II Cleaves was forced to retire due to health reasons and died June 24, 1968, in Buffalo, N.Y., at the age of 70. He's buried at Grove Hill Cemetery in Oil City.

Cleaves also starred in basketball at Oil City, playing on the undefeated team in 1915-16. His family, which included three brothers -- Dick, Steve and Gene -- and a sister, Ardelle, lived at 15 West Front St., now the site of the Oil City Library's "new" wing before apparently moving to Bradford. Judy Etzel of The Derrick said (Dec. 4.) that, yeah, there used to be a big house there.



CLEAVES TACKLED FROM BEHIND as He Is Cutting in Past the Chicago Line Attempts to Continue His Run. Baker in the Foreground Is Making Interference. Underwood & Underwood

(goldenrankings.com)

Posted 12.03.19