

# The Giants First Game

By Michael Moran (as first published in [Gridiron Greats Magazine](#) Autumn 2006)

When you look at the NFL 2007, you see a centrally organized, well planned schedule – but back in 1925 it was a very different affair. Each NFL team was obligated to play at least eight different league teams, but they were also free to play non-NFL teams as part of their regular schedule. Those games would not count towards the NFL standings, but the practice of including non-NFL teams in some NFL schedules was common in the 1920s and continued until after World War II.

One of the non-NFL teams that played a number of NFL teams was from New Britain, Connecticut. The Providence Steam Roller team played against New Britain starting in 1921. In 1926 and 1927 the NFL Frankford Yellow Jackets played “All New Britain” several times. But it’s 1925 that is the focus of this article, and in 1925 the All New Britain team played both the Yellow Jackets and a new NFL franchise called the All-Collegian Professional Football club, or, more commonly, the New York Football Giants. That game, on October 4, 1925, in New Britain at Willow Brook Park, should be remembered as the first scheduled game in Giants’ history.

The game against New Britain had been announced on September 9 at a luncheon at the Hotel Alamac in New York City. The New York Times reported on September 10, “The New York Giants will open their season on Sunday, Oct. 4, in New Britain, Conn., against an independent team, and on the following Sunday will open their league season in Providence against the Providence Steam Rollers.”

## **NEW YORK PRO ELEVEN TAKES OPENING GAME**

**Overwhelms Ducky Pond's New  
Britain Team by 26 to 0  
Before Crowd of 10 000.**

*Special to The New York Times.*

On October 5, 1925 the New York Times reported “New York Pro Eleven Takes Opening Game – Overwhelms Ducky Pond’s New Britain Team by 26 to 0 Before Crowd of 10,000. Raymond Pond was know sometimes as “Ducky” for his performance in the mud playing for Yale against Harvard in 1923, and also known as “Bus.” It might well have been the connection between Pond and former Yale teammate and Giants’ tackle Century Milstead that set up this contest, but whatever the genesis, the game generated great excitement and was covered

thoroughly by Connecticut’s leading newspaper, The Hartford Daily Courant, as well as daily coverage in the week leading up to the game by the local New Britain paper.

Both Century Milstead and John McBride were Giants players pictured in the Courant prior to the game: McBride was “one of the greatest backfield players at Syracuse, known for his kicking and all-around work with the Orange eleven;” Milstead was “Yale’s great tackle of 1923 and an All-American selection now with the New York Giants.” Although Jim Thorpe played in the game, his name does not show up in the pre-game press, which beside touting McBride and Milstead also spoke glowingly of Coach Bob Folwell, Heinie Benkert of Rutgers, Hinkey Haines of Penn State, Ed McGinley of Penn, Art Carney of Navy, and Joe Alexander of Syracuse.

Joe “Doc” Alexander should not be confused with John Alexander from Rutgers who played for the Giants in 1926 when “Doc” was the player/coach. But John has a part in this story, because he organized a team to scrimmage with the Giants before they went to New Britain. According to Chris Thorne on the Professional Football Researchers Association web site ([www.footballresearch.com](http://www.footballresearch.com)), John gathered 12 of his "pals" to face the tough Gothamites on September 27, 1925. The pickup players called themselves the Red Jackets. They faced the Giants at Newark's Dreamland Park (in the Weequahic section of town). The game drew more than 3,500 fans and the Jackets displayed a tough

**ALL-AMERICA STARS  
PLAY NEW BRITAIN**

**New York Giants Composed of Former College Brilliants.**

**BOB FOLWELL COMES WITH VISITING TEAM**

**Dailey Signs New Players to Strengthen Nutmeg State Eleven.**

**AT NEW BRITAIN.**

All-New Britains New York Giants  
Bean ..... lb ..... Nash  
O'Neill ..... lt ..... Milstead  
Dully ..... lg ..... Carney  
Rogers, Capt. .... c ..... Alexander  
Humphries ..... rg ..... Williams  
Donlin ..... rt ..... McGinley  
Warner ..... re ..... Bomar  
Radzewich ..... qb ..... Hendrian  
Barnikow ..... lhb ..... Haines  
Zahrer ..... rlb ..... Benkert  
Yarnell ..... fb ..... McBride  
Game starts at 2:30 o'clock.

(Special to The Courant)  
New Britain, October 3.  
With a rushline averaging 192 pounds and two complete backfields, the New York Giants will...

defense, but fell to the Giants, 3-0. The Red Jackets, who did nothing more than a few exercises before the game, earned \$50 for their efforts.



The team in New Britain was quite a different story from the Newark pick-up team. New Britain had a history, a regular schedule, a coach, and possibly even a program for the game, although no program is in the archives of either the Pro Football Hall of Fame or the New Britain Historical Society. The Hall of Fame does have a program from the October 11, 1925 game between the Giants and the Providence Steam Roller team, a game where they Giants traveled from New York to Rhode Island by boat. Barry Gottcher, in “The Giants of New York,” tells the story: The boat began to list badly in the North River, almost turned over near the Battery, and barely made it to Providence the next day. Heine Benkert fell asleep with a cigar in his mouth and almost set the boat on fire. Only Jim Thorpe seem untroubled, playing solitaire under a dim deck light. It was a sick football team that arrived in Providence and lost to the Steam Rollers 14-0.”

So Giants fans, if you are looking to make a pilgrimage to the very ground where the Giants began their legend and legacy, get out your Connecticut map and look up New Britain – it’s under two hours out of New York City along Route 9 South of Hartford. It’s still called Willow Brook Park and they still play football there – or go to [www.mapquest.com](http://www.mapquest.com) (599 S Main St, New Britain, CT) for an aerial view.

## First Home Game Program

If programs for the Giants first game against New Britain with 10,000 spectators are non-existent and for their second game against Providence with 8,000 in the stands are extremely rare, the Giants first home game where 25,000 fans attended are seemingly common – but that is only because it was reprinted by the Giants and given out as part of the opening day festivities at the Meadowlands. This has caused more than a little confusion even with experienced dealers, not to mention innumerable eBay auctions.

The Giants first home game was at the Polo Grounds on October 18, 1925, against the Frankford Yellow Jackets. When the Giants played their first game at the Meadowlands in New Jersey on October 10, 1976 the opponent was the Dallas Cowboys and a souvenir gift pack included a bumper sticker saying “Giants Stadium I Was There Opening Day,” a stadium picture, a small New Jersey Sports & Exposition Authority flag, and a reprint of the October 18, 1925 program.

The sheet with the stadium picture says the program in the souvenir pack is “an exact reproduction of the original game program,” but there are some significant differences that help the collector sort out the original from the reprint.

In the original the first inside page is all text and entitled “New York’s First Eleven in the National Football League.” In the reprint the first inside page has a picture of Senator James J. Walker and the full text page is now page 5.

In the reprint the vertical and horizontal fold marks are actually printed in the photo rather than the result of folding, and they are identical in every reprint whether they’ve been folded or not – as in the Walker picture (right). Finally, on the back cover of the original at the bottom of the page there is a “union made” symbol and it says M. B. Brown Printing and Binding Co, 17-41 Chambers St. NY, which does not appear on the reprint. Even established auction houses have offered the reprint as an original, and it happens every few weeks on eBay, so buyer beware!



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