

BEHIND THE WALLS or Doing a 10 year Slide for Murder Two
by Steven M. Brainerd

See the movie CHARLEY VARRICK to find out why Al Dutcher was in Joliet, maybe on the football team.

Football isn't always played before 70,000 screaming fans in a beautiful \$1,000,000,000 domed stadium. Sometimes it's played before 500 guards and prisoners "behind the walls". Most of us have seen THE LONGEST YARD, the movie in which Burt Reynolds runs wild on the gridiron while serving time in prison. There is more truth to this than is first evident. Research has turned up 34 prisons that fielded football teams. Several of them played in semipro leagues and at least two teams were league champions.

Prison football goes back to the 1930s, when progressive penologists (no snickering, please) decided that the physical activity and teamwork would be good for the inmates. Unfortunately, most of the prisons have little or no information regarding their sports programs in general, and football in particular. One of the main problems is when there was a prison riot, one of first places burned was the prison library and up in smoke went the records.

One of the earliest and best-known teams was the Sing Sing Black Sheep, with Ed (Alabama) Pitts as their big star. Upon his release, Pitts joined the 1935 Philadelphia Eagles, but had a disappointing season. He did somewhat better the following year with the New Rochelle Bulldogs of the American Association, but give up football after that. Pitts didn't change his bad ways and was knifed to death in a barroom fight in 1942.

Another early team was at the Iowa State Prison in Fort Madison. The Bulldogs, as they were known, started play in 1935 and continued thru 1972. Throughout the '50s they played strong schedules featuring many of the top Midwest semipro pro teams, including the Dayton Triangles, Roseland Mustangs and Kansas City Rockets. The '60's saw the Dogs play mostly Iowa teams and the Midwest Semipro League.

Their prewar record was an excellent 33 wins, 3 ties and 11 loses and their postwar record was near to .500. Playing against Midwest semipro clubs, they went 60-65-5 and this included a 15-0-1 streak.

They paid visitors \$500 and this was enough to attract the Triangles from Ohio. Interestingly enough the local paper treated this team like a small college team with great coverage. The program cost the state of Iowa very little as the prison gates were opened and civilians were allowed in, paid for their seats, bought soft drinks, snacks and prison printed programs. Uniforms were second hand provided when Iowa State got new gear.

The Bulldogs even played a road game every year as they traveled to the Anamosa minimum security prison for their contest with the Hornets.

The Hornets played on the road and often had home and home games with clubs. When the Triangles came west to play the Bulldogs on Sunday, they would play a Saturday game against the Hornets.

The Walla Walla Prison Stealers started playing in 1950 against the Seattle Ramblers and continued the rivalry until 1964. They mostly played against area Military clubs and JCs. The Sealers weren't the only prison team in Washington. The state Reformatory also fielded a team. The Tigers started in the late 50's through the mid-seventies playing in the 1963-65 Cascade League and again in the 72-4 Northwest League. When not a league, they competed against the Seattle Cavaliers and Ramblers and other assorted Washington semipro. Wethersfield (Connecticut State Prison) Somers Trojans started play right after World War II and continued throughout the Fifties playing several years in the Interstate League against other CT clubs. The team made a comeback in the 1984-5 Atlantic League, but was did not win a game in two seasons.

League membership was nothing new to the Statesville Prison in Joliet. The Raiders have been a very unsuccessful team in both Metro and Midwest Leagues and have playing since at least 1977. One of their head coaches was AFA HOF member Jesse Vail who was very successful "on the outside" with the Joliet Explorers and Chargers in the late 1960's and early 70's. The Loudon (Ohio State Prison) Falcons were a member of the Hearts of Ohio League (HOFL) and won the championship in 1989. The HOFL was a member of the AFA, but because the Falcons couldn't travel, they were not eligible for the national playoffs. The Connors Cobras, from the state prison in Hominy, OK, played several years in the Mid-American League. Their playing days came to an abrupt end. While preparations were going on for the 1983 season, the general prison population rioted and destroyed the prison. Not surprisingly the Cobras haven't played since.

The California Prison League has had as many five members with teams at San Quentin, Chino, Vacaville, Tehachapi and Tracey Institute. They just didn't play any road games.

The San Quentin Pirates were the most known CA prison team, starting in 1954 and played for 11 seasons. They played a very catholic mix of Bay Area teams including military, semi-pro, small college, junior varsity and freshmen teams. Their best season was 1956 when they went 8-1. The only loss was in the Rock Bowl to San Francisco State Gators.

Chino's Wolves (men's minimum security prison) started playing after World War II in the semipro teams, small and small military teams. In 1959 they joined the Southern California Semipro Association as an associate member (not full time.) The 1961 team got four members on the all-star team including the quarterback Shorty Kirtman and defensive tackle Elbows Fuller. In 1964, the Western League had only five squads and the Wolves filled in one of the open dates for each team, but still no road trips. Chino played until 1974 in the High Desert League, but never managed again to get someone on the all-league team. They were the only prison club to get anyone on an all-star team. Connors, London and Joliet were not the prisons with a team in an organized League, the Gratersford Buccaneers did a five year stretch (1981 thru 85) in the Delaware Valley League. Pennsylvania had several other prison teams in with the Camp Hill Cons, Alleghany County Jail and the Western Penn (Pittsburgh) outfit.

This article covers only some of the many teams that are known, but the problem is that most of these teams get little or no coverage in the local newspapers either that or the prison records have been destroyed. Several of them have told me that they have nothing about their sports endeavors.