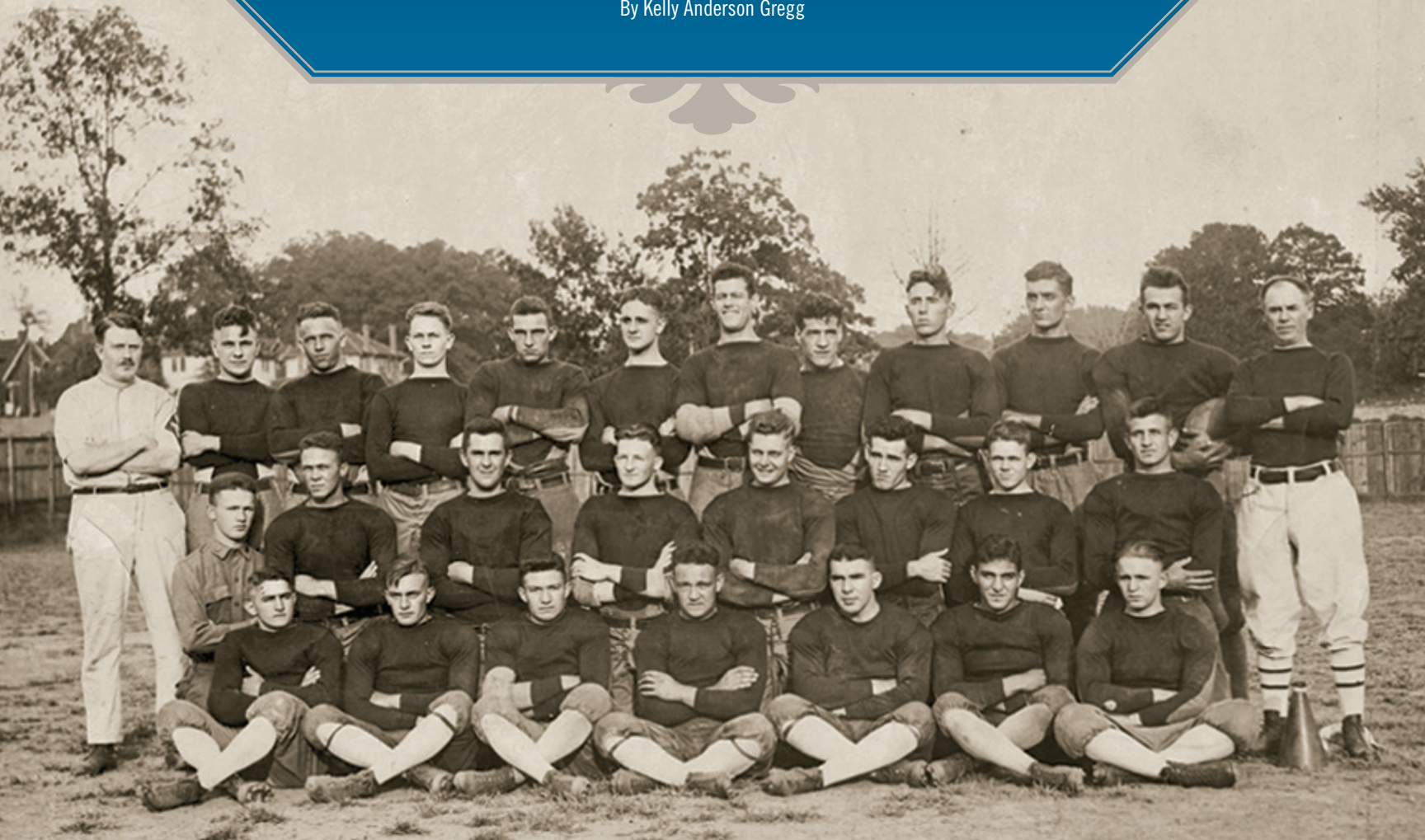


“GRIDIRON TITANS”

John Heisman versus the Pitt Panthers

By Kelly Anderson Gregg



 **Coach John Heisman, standing on right, with his Georgia Tech team, 1918.**

Georgia Institute of Technology Library and Information Center,
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Football would not be what it is today without the genius of John William Heisman. He is the Father of the Forward Pass, the champion of the center snap, the audible, and the use of the scoreboard. His name lives on in the eponymous trophy annually awarded to the best college football player for the past eight decades. And it's fair to say that John Heisman

would not have become the player and coach that he was without the experience he gained in Western Pennsylvania.

Heisman was born in football enemy territory (i.e., Cleveland) to Michael and Sarah Heisman in 1869. His family relocated to Titusville, Crawford County, in 1874 to take advantage of the thriving oil industry.¹

After the 1859 drilling of the world's first commercial oil well, Titusville offered opportunities in petroleum and an array of supporting industries, and Michael's barrel-making business prospered.² His children attended the local schools, and it

was at Titusville High School in 1884 that young John was first introduced to football. Heisman recalled playing on the team, studiously examining a 10-cent rule book he had purchased to familiarize himself with the relatively new game.³ Football at the time was rough and tumble, resembling a combination of soccer and rugby. Heisman noted, “With the exception of a couple prohibitions such as running with the ball and murder, we had few rules.”⁴

After graduating from Titusville High School as salutatorian in 1887, Heisman enrolled at Brown University, where he continued his football career. Brown dropped its football club partway through his studies, so he finished at the University of Pennsylvania. Only five feet, eight inches tall, and 158 pounds, Heisman was small but strong, thanks to time spent working in his father’s cooper business.⁵ After graduating he took a coaching position at Oberlin, and quickly established a reputation for fielding winning teams. Subsequent work at Akron Buchtel College, Auburn, Penn, and Washington & Jefferson made it clear that Heisman had a vision for how football should be played. Personally, he was one part athlete, one part academic: he played multiple sports, pursued Shakespearean acting during the off-season, and held a law degree. Even in high school, where he gave his class’s commencement speech, Heisman was known as a prolific orator.⁶

Heisman’s greatest coaching stint solidified his legacy, and also brought him back to Western Pennsylvania, though this time as an antagonist. In 1904, he signed on as head football coach at the Georgia Institute of Technology. He immediately turned the team around from its previous losing season, and his win percentage at the school has yet to be eclipsed.⁷ By 1917, Georgia Tech was one of the top three teams nationally. Along with Ohio State University and the University of

Pittsburgh, Tech was undefeated and looking to claim national glory.⁸

On November 23, 1918, the *Pittsburg Press* declared, “Gridiron Titans to Battle,” as Georgia Tech faced off with the Panthers at Forbes Field in an effort to decide who was the true champion of collegiate football. Future legendary sportsmen took the field. The coaches, Heisman and Glenn “Pop” Warner, were visionaries in the game and longtime rivals.¹⁰ The game itself wasn’t just for national honors, but also acted as a fundraiser for the war effort.¹¹ It was a veritable battle royale.

It was fitting, then, that Heisman’s locker room speech captured the heightened spirit of the day. Already known for poetic turns in his game-day speeches, Heisman waxed eloquent about the glories of ancient Greece’s heroes and the soldiers of the Roman Empire.¹² His high view of football, a sport that he believed made young men into scholars, gentlemen, and patriots, could not help but be evident in his words to his team that day.¹³ However, unbeknownst to the Tech coach, the walls at Forbes Field were rather thin. While he exhorted his own players, the Panther team sat on the other side of the wall and listened, enthralled by Heisman’s every word.¹⁴ After his speech, Tech took the field, and Coach Warner looked laughingly at his Pittsburgh team, “Okay, boys. There’s the speech. Now go out and knock them off.”¹⁵

In the end, the Panthers won the day. Though “their resistance was more stubborn than the score would indicate,” Georgia Tech lost to Pitt 32-0 in front of a crowd that filled Forbes Field beyond capacity.¹⁶ One referee remarked that “the game was one of the best played and hardest fought in years.”¹⁷ Warner was thrilled with his team and Tech held its head high in its loss. It was clear from that match-up that football could be played at a high level with precision and strategy, not just brutality, and it was Heisman’s vision that

made such play possible. His beloved football wasn’t merely a sport—it was a way, as he later wrote, to “learn how to govern, to control, to conquer yourself.”¹⁸



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¹ David L. Weber, “The John Heisman Story: ‘Father of the Forward Pass,’ Titusville’s Most Noted Sports Figure,” *The Titusville Herald*, 13 June 2015, http://www.titusvilleherald.com/sports/article_fab04f06-1184-11e5-a4e2-ef3c2f62e574.html (accessed 18 September 2017).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Heisman, “Rules Rush In,” *Collier’s Weekly*, 10 November 1928, 12.

⁵ Edward J. Rielly, *Football: An Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 163. See also “John W. Heisman,” Heisman, http://heisman.com/sports/2014/9/10/FB_0910145750.aspx? (accessed 20 September 2017).

⁶ Weber.

⁷ Matt Bowers, “John Heisman (1869-1936),” *New Georgia Encyclopedia* at www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/sports-outdoor-recreation/john-heisman-1869-1936 (accessed 17 September 2017).

⁸ John M. Heisman with Mark Schlabach, *Heisman: The Man Behind the Trophy* (New York: Howard Books, 2012), 159-160.

⁹ “Gridiron Titans to Battle: Great Throng Will See Pitt Tackle Georgia Tech Today,” *Pittsburgh Press*, 23 November 1918, 7.

¹⁰ John M. Heisman, 83-84.

¹¹ “Gridiron Titans,” 7.

¹² Francis J. Powers, *The Life Story of Glen[n] S. (Pop) Warner: Gridiron’s Greatest Strategist* (Chicago: Athletic Institute, 1969), 42.

¹³ John Heisman, *Principles of Football* (Athens, Ga.: Hill Street Press, 2000, original 1922), “Benefits of Football.”

¹⁴ Powers, 42.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ralph S. Davis, “Panthers Crush Southerners,” *Pittsburg Press*, 24 November 1918, 21.

¹⁷ Robert W. Maxwell, “Maxwell Says Panthers are Real Championship Outfit,” *Pittsburg Press*, 25 November 1918, 28.

¹⁸ John Heisman, 5-6.