

Have You Seen This Trophy?

We tried tracking down the holy grail of American sports memorabilia — the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Cup, given to the first pro football champions — which has been missing since 1920.



By [Bill Pennington](#)

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AKRON, Ohio — Here you see a precious 100-year-old trophy. It is made of sterling silver, lovingly created for a team championship, and first presented at a prominent gathering inside an old-world hotel. Shaped like a cup, the award has handles, which made it easy for the gleeful recipients to hoist it overhead. Their achievement? Winning the first N.F.L. championship, in 1920.

The trophy has been missing ever since.

Its whereabouts have been unknown since it was handed to the Akron Pros in 1920. Largely forgotten, the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Cup is the holy grail of American sports memorabilia.

It could be in someone's attic or chock-full of pencils on a schoolkid's desk.

"At this point, the chances are not very good that anyone will ever find it," Joe Horrigan, the former longtime executive director of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, said in an interview.

It sounded like a challenge.

And so began the mission to solve this whodunit, this where-is-it, a quest that hinged on finding that person who, when shown the only existing, shadowy photo of the trophy, would say: "I've seen that. My mother uses it as a doorstep."

It was a journey that meant knocking on doors, poring over library collections, tracking down interview subjects in 12 states and spending at least one dusty afternoon searching behind the drywall of several abandoned Ohio buildings.

But first, a few facts:

The N.F.L. has no idea where the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Cup is. The archives of the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, contain the original, typewritten minutes of league meetings that authenticate the existence of the Cup, named for the early-20th century sporting goods company that donated it. But the trail goes cold by 1921.

The one known picture of the trophy, published in newspapers at the time, is grainy. As far as anyone can tell, the trophy was formally bestowed upon the 1920 champions, who were supposed to hand it over to the next year's winners.

The only known photo of the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Cup.



Except there is no record of that happening. Which means the last place the trophy was seen was in Akron, and that is unquestionably where the search had to begin.

A Place of Honor in Akron

In 1920, Akron was a city whose fast growth had been spurred by the demand for rubber tires during World War I. Goodyear and Goodrich operated 24 hours a day and filled boardinghouses with laborers who rented beds in eight-hour shifts to match the schedules of the factories, whose smokestacks cloaked the city's wide boulevards with smoke and ash.

"It was a grubby city — a wide-open town with lots of bars, taverns and gambling," David Lieberth, a former president of the local historical society, said of Akron, which is 40 miles south of Cleveland.

Pro football at its dawning was no less rough around the edges, and it was roundly dismissed as a poor substitute for college football. But on Sept. 17, 1920, the Akron businessmen Frank Nied and Arthur Ranney, the owners of the Akron Pros, traveled 23 miles south to Canton, where they convened with coaches and managers in an automobile dealership to form the American Professional Football Association with other pro teams representing industrial centers. Two years later, the group became the National Football League, which has come to recognize the 1920 season as its first.

At the meeting, the owners voted to thank the Brunswick-Balke-Collender company for presenting the league with, as the meeting minutes called it, "a loving cup" that would go to the association's champion every year. According to newspaper accounts, throughout the inaugural season, the cup had a place of honor in the meeting site, the auto dealership owned by Ralph Hay, who also owned the A.P.F.A.'s Canton Bulldogs.



Top, an artist's rendition of the trophy the Akron Pros received for winning the professional football title in 1920. Frank Nied, above left, and Arthur Ranney owned the team. Lyndon French for The New York Times

Karl Hay Jr., whose father, Karl Sr., was a partner in the dealership with his cousin Ralph, snickered when asked if he had ever heard about or seen the trophy.

"All I remember is that my dad, who was the company bean counter, considered the football team a waste of money," Hay, 91, said in his living room in an Akron suburb in November. "Maybe he was right, because the whole operation went bankrupt in 1929."

Asked if his father kept any mementos of his time linked to the genesis of the N.F.L. — like, say, a silver loving cup trophy — Hay laughed loudly.

"Not a chance — all that was passed down to me was a box of dealership stationery and an old blanket used by Jim Thorpe, the star of the Canton team," Hay said.

When the 1920 season began, the Akron Pros played as if they could not wait to get their hands on the cup, compiling an undefeated season and an 8-0-3 record. The league champions, however, had to wait to get their trophy until the team owners reunited on April 30, 1921, at the Portage Hotel, a stately building at the nexus of Akron's downtown district. As soon as the meeting began, Nied and Ranney were presented with the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Cup. Ranney, who as the league secretary recorded the minutes of the meeting, made no mention of what happened next.

Perhaps, in that moment, he was too busy running around the room in joyous celebration, a hand wrapped around one handle of the trophy as an exultant Nied clung to the other.

We will never know. After more league business, Ranney noted that the group adjourned to have dinner at the hotel. While Prohibition was enacted months earlier, it was still common for dining establishments, especially in hotels, to make accommodations for guests to furtively enjoy alcoholic libations. Could Nied and Ranney have toasted their 1920 championship with the other team owners, who were happily feting the inaugural season, and in all that revelry, could somebody have accidentally left the trophy behind?

Because 99 years later, the minutes of the meeting on the night of April 30, 1921, contain the last documented mention of its whereabouts.

"I suspect he stuffed it in an attic and then one day threw it out."

"Doesn't it make more sense that the trophy ended up in my grandfather's cigar store, where athletes hung out and there was a separate room just for gambling?"

Rick Ormsby, Nied's grandson, said from his home on a quiet street in Medina, Ohio, 25 miles northwest of Akron. "That place was the perfect spot to show off a trophy. The gambling room was very popular."

O.K., now we were getting somewhere.

Nied was a noted Akron sportsman with ownership interests in boxing, minor league baseball, football and horse racing. In addition to the gambling parlor, which was legal, his cigar store had a long wooden bar and blackboards used by clerks to regularly update the scores of Major League Baseball games.

Jeff Modlin, another of Nied's five grandchildren, who lives in Lake Forest, Ill., inherited pictures of the cigar store interior. Alas, the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Cup is not front and center, or in the background, of any of those pictures. Modlin also inherited a football-shaped gold fob, a popular jewelry item in the 1920s that would have attached to a watch chain, which was awarded to each of the 1920 Akron Pros and owners.

"But I've never heard anything about a championship trophy," said Modlin, whose mother was the sister of Ormsby's mother. "My grandfather was around, we saw him. It never came up."

Nied died in Florida in 1969. He was 75.

Suffice to say, neither Modlin nor Ormsby has the trophy. Ormsby even double-checked every last dresser drawer and old trunk in his house, rummaging through anything passed down from his mother or grandparents.

"I wish I found it," Ormsby later said. "Wouldn't it be cool to have that turn up 100 years later in an old box in my basement?"

Yes, very cool.

So the Nied descendants did not have the trophy. That still left Nied's partner, Art Ranney.

Ranney, who played football at the University of Akron, stayed involved with Nied until their football team began to falter on the field and at the gate in the mid-1920s, when the duo gave up their N.F.L. franchise. Ranney became a county engineer and a leader in local Democratic Party circles. He retired to Florida, where he died in 1970.

One December morning, a ray of hope in the hunt for football's holy grail arrived in texts from some of Ranney's four grandchildren, who admitted they were well versed in the legend of the lost trophy, which they had first heard about in the 1960s. They said it was family lore that Ranney might have had the cup decades after the 1920 championship.

"But everybody also knew that Grampa Ranney was not a sentimental guy," Arthur Ranney, who lives in Platteville, Wis., said of his namesake in an interview. "I suspect he stuffed it in an attic and then one day threw it out. Or someone got it in a yard sale."

Another child, Elaine Roy of Lakeside Park, Ky., had a different theory.

"The trophy was talked about by our parents, but who knows, our grandfather might have hocked it," said Roy, who has scores of newspaper articles and other

keepsakes related to her grandfather, including diaries. She said there was no mention of the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Cup.

And no, none of the grandchildren said they had the trophy. Arthur Ranney did have a last thought about it.

“Grandpa lived on the intercoastal when he retired to Florida and he had a boat,” he said. “Maybe he used the trophy as an anchor.”

‘We Were Proud of That Cup.’

Sifting through the Pro Football Hall of Fame’s 1920s files in November at the request of The New York Times, the archivist Jon Kendle wondered if Brunswick-Balke-Collender might know anything about the trophy. Maybe it bounced back to them?

Brunswick-Balke-Collender, primarily based in Chicago and Cincinnati, had been a major manufacturer of billiards tables and other sporting goods in 1920 and later played a leading role in the midcentury bowling boom in America. Today, what is left is Brunswick Corporation, whose products are marine related. Fortunately, the company has a resident historian, Joe Newell, who remembers a foreman at the company’s Kansas City, Mo., plant asking in 1960 about what had happened to the N.F.L.’s first championship trophy.

“His name was Carl Peterson and he’d been with the company since 1909,” Newell said. “He said, ‘We were proud of that cup.’”

Newell knew the exact inscription on the cup, “Donated by the Brunswick-Balke-Collender company to further the interests of American professional football,” and said that the company would have sponsored scores of similar sports trophies during the 1920s.

“I know we had it made; it’s a true story,” Newell said. “But I’ve exhausted my research and I never could find out where it went.”

Kendle, the archivist at the Hall of Fame, suggested that the trophy could have made its way to the 1921 A.P.F.A. champions, the Decatur Staleys in Illinois, even if the league meetings never mentioned it. The team was named for A.E. Staley, the owner of a prominent starch company whose football franchise eventually became the Chicago Bears.

The Staley family made such a lasting impact on the Decatur community that there is now a Staley Museum there, which — eureka! — would be a natural place to store a 100-year-old trophy.

“Never heard of such a thing,” said Mark Sorensen, a historian who has extensively researched the Decatur football team for the Staley Museum.

Sorensen has read 40 years of internal company documents as well as hundreds of Decatur and Chicago newspaper articles pertaining to the team.

“A championship trophy does not come up,” he said. “And honestly, they put every little thing in those papers back then.”

Back to Akron

On a return trip to Akron, Lieberth, the city’s unofficial historian, showed me an old newspaper clipping that mentioned that Nied owned not one, but three, Akron cigar stores. The buildings that housed two of the cigar stores were torn down years ago, but the structure where the last of Nied’s stores had been on the ground floor escaped demolition and was being redeveloped.

The building, which would have been cater-corner to the old Portage Hotel (razed in 1992), is owned by Tony Troppe, an Akron developer who is turning the property into a hotel with a rooftop bar. Brought up to speed on the history of the missing trophy, the adventurous Troppe was happy to lead a search amid the bones of his 1870 neo-Classical style building. We found a beautiful wood-paneled basement room that had served as a humidor. There was old china and bronze doors and elevators. Drywall was being installed. Walls had been torn apart. But nothing popped out — at least not a trophy.

“Anything like a sterling silver cup, we certainly would have noticed,” Troppe said. Standing on the street outside Nied’s last cigar store, I started to feel desperate.

Doesn’t the fate of the trophy have to be known or understood by someone?

Undeterred, I had one more idea for where to look for the trophy, although I considered it a last gasp. According to county and city directories for the area from 1920 to 1960, Nied and Ranney lived at six addresses in Akron and a nearby suburb, Cuyahoga Falls.

Knocking on the doors of each house while holding up the grainy picture of the trophy, it was time to ask startled strangers if such an object looked familiar. I vowed to resist the urge to ask if I could search their crawl spaces.

In two cases, it appeared there were no longer homes at the address. At one house, no one answered the door. Twice, people listened politely and then laughed since they had been living in their houses for only 10 or 12 years.

“You’re asking about something from 100 years ago?” they said.

“Well, yeah.”

“Where’d you say you were from again?” they said.

At the last house on my list, a man who was probably in his 70s, said he had found a large box of very old football and baseball equipment in the basement when he moved in 25 years ago.

My heart raced.

“Did you keep any of it?”

“No, threw it in the garbage,” he said, closing the door.

So, in the end, as the Super Bowl of the N.F.L.’s 100th season approaches, I have not found the holy grail of America sports memorabilia.

Yet.

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