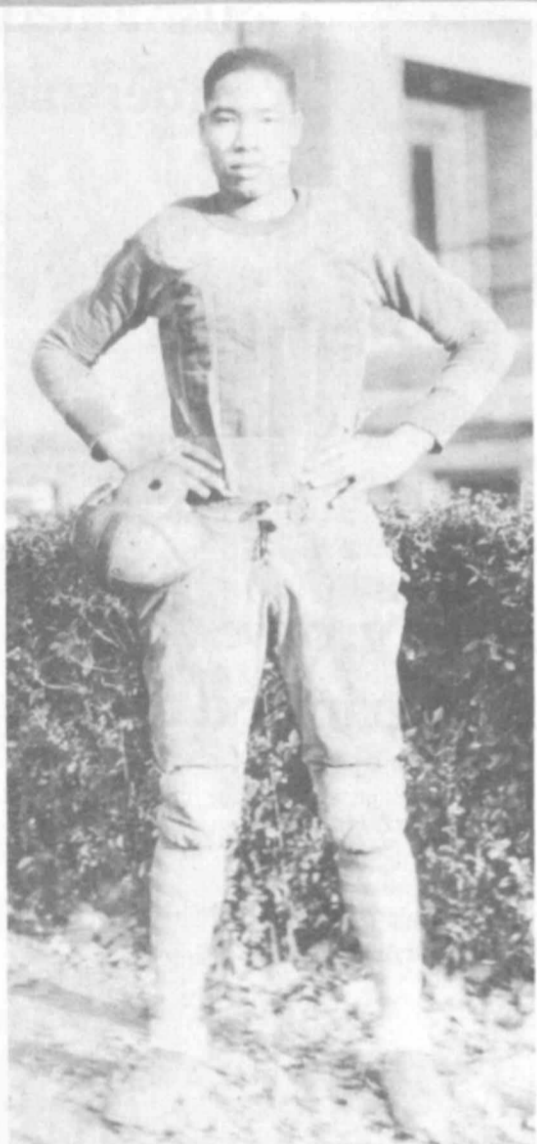


1925-1950

A SPORTS ALBUM OF THE PAST



DOC KELKER
An all-sport standout



DOC (11) GETS READY TO MAKE A TACKLE
Action from the Dover fairgrounds



KELKER AT YMCA JOB
He will retire in December

Kelker's great talent 'restricted'

By REA TAICLET
Sports Editor

He won 23 letters in four varsity sports.

He was "all-everything" in high school and college football and basketball.

He ran the 100-yard dash under 10 seconds before anybody thought up the term "The World's Fastest Human."

Had he the chance, some folks think he might have been able to rival the home run exploits of Babe Ruth and Henry Aaron.

Jim Thorpe — Carlisle. Right?

Wrong, Doc Kelker — Dover.

THE "CARLISLE INDIAN" is revered worldwide even today as history's greatest athlete. The scope of Kelker's fame is pale in comparison. His feats are known only in Tuscarawas County — where time has turned him into a legend — and to long-time sports fans in Northeast Ohio, only because he picked little Western Reserve University over mighty Ohio State to continue his education.

Yet, 40 years after his graduation from WRU, he remains the "Jim Thorpe" of this area to those who know him. After all, the big difference between them was more ethnic than athletic.

Thorpe was red, Kelker black.

THERE WAS A bold color line in the 1930s. Even the sports writers of his hometown Dover Daily Reporter took exception to his complexion as they chronicled his daring-do. They called him "the dusky one." Or "Dover's Negro forward."

And, when it came time to choose a college, it was Western Reserve — not Ohio State, where he really thought he'd like to go ("all my friends were there") because the Big Ten didn't accept black athletes.

The possibility of becoming a professional football player was easily eliminated. When he played with a group of Ohio college all-stars and nearly defeated the pro Cleveland Rams, he was offered the opportunity to try out. But the forerunner of the National Football League — the same one that helped propel Thorpe to everlasting fame — simply did not permit "coloreds" in its ranks.

Major league baseball wasn't ready for them, either, and the rugged suitcase existence of the Negro leagues "just wasn't for me," Kelker recalls.

MAYBE IT'S just as well. Had things gone differently, there would be thousands of men and women, who as underprivileged youngsters on Cleveland's East Side, would not have had the benefit of Kelker's abilities, experiences and wisdom.

The city and the now Case-Western Reserve campus community would not have had him to consult, to speak, to serve.

But what became a career of "teaching" instead of "doing" will come to an end when he turns 65 Dec. 9.

Kelker will retire from the Cedar av. YMCA, where he has occupied the same office for 39 years — the last 22 of that as executive secretary.

"Yes, I'll definitely retire . . . I'm sure of that!" Kelker emphasizes, his still-muscular 6-foot-2, 190-pound frame striking an imposing stance.

WHAT THEN?

"Well, I'll sell real estate part-time," he reveals, "and we'll stick around here (his home is in Shaker Heights) for at least a year. I've got relatives in Florida. Maybe we'll visit there, then go out West and look around. Nothing for certain yet."

Kelker and twin brother, Fred, who became known as "Spider," were born in Florida. They moved to Dover with the family "when Dad found out that they were hiring in the mills there."

Fred, who passed away last summer, was the one who pinned "Doc" on his brother. Nobody knows for sure how or why, but later, his high school classmates expanded the nickname to "Doctor," and urged from the sidelines during games, "Come on Doctor, operate on 'em."

WITH THE SKILL of a surgeon, Kelker knifed his way to the kind of statistics that most aspiring athletes can only dream about.

Before he graduated from Dover in 1934, he won 14 varsity letters in football, basketball, baseball and track. He also served as secretary-treasurer of the senior class.

He made All-Ohio twice in football and once in basketball "because I got a late start in it . . . I never saw a basketball game until I got to high school."

Kelker explained his indoctrination on the hardwoods: "Trevor Rees got hurt and the coach (Herman "Bup" Rearick) asked me to play. I didn't even know what a sucker shot was," he laughed, using the old-time word for a layup.

"But I was determined to play, so I practiced every night in the school gym until they came around and put me out."

In his third year under Rearick, who coached football, basketball and baseball, Kelker became an All-Ohio cager — the same year he won his second straight statewide honor for football.

Rearick earned his own place in Dover's sports history, having played on the Tornadoes' 1927 state championship team, and fresh out of college, coaching Kelker's 1933 titlists.

"Rearick had a lot of talent himself," Kelker said of his prep mentor. "But even more importantly, he understood boys and the ability they had. He could develop their potential."

"He was young enough to execute what he was trying to teach us and old enough to command our respect. He was a good leader . . . our friend . . . A nice fellow."

ONCE HE LEARNED to catch passes properly, Kelker became one of the state's most-feared gridiron stars.

The 1932 Dover yearbook reports that Kelker had a "tough luck season. He hurt his knee against Coshocton and was used after that only in the hardest games."

Mrs. Juanita Abel of Dover remembers walking by the Tuscarawas County fairgrounds, where the Tornadoes played their games, and seeing Doc "kicking the football over the goal posts from out in the middle of the field — nobody believed me."

In baseball, the slugging first baseman averaged a home run a game.

In track, he "didn't do much," according to his recollection. His definition of "much" must be different from the dictionary's. He ran the 100, 220, 440 and threw the shot put and discus. He clocked the century in 9.9 seconds.

But even as the little kids around town looked up to him, Kelker had his own secret heroes. "Dick Klar was a great basketball player," he says emphatically of his former teammate.

COLLEGE WAS more of the same.

Nine varsity letters in football, basketball, baseball and track. No doubt, there would have been more, but freshmen were ineligible for interscholastic sports then.

He made the Big Four Conference football and basketball all-star teams and was named to six All-American football squads, including Sports Illustrated and the then-prestigious Collier's Magazine.

He was a scholar-athlete in the strictest sense. He won both an Honor Key and the Warion Key while being named one of six outstanding students at Western Reserve — besides being the school's outstanding athlete.

It was obvious that Ohio State, even with its rich traditions, missed out on one of Ohio's best.

"I think I could have played there," Kelker says in his typical low-key style. "I just didn't believe that I ever would."

Dover's Ernie Godfrey, who was at OSU when Kelker was ready for college, urged him to become a Buckeye. "He assured me that I would be the first black to play sports in the Big Ten," Kelker explained.

So, he spent the summer playing in pickup games with the varsity football and basketball players on campus. However, football coach Sam Willaman and assistant Bill Edwards departed for Western Reserve.

FEARING THAT the OSU promise would not materialize, and in the back of his mind not really wanting to be a major college conference "test case," Kelker was ready to listen to other offers.

"Colleges wanted me because I was an athlete. It's that simple," he says.

Willaman, already familiar with Kelker's potential, went to work and convinced the family that Doc would be accepted in Cleveland on his merits. The clincher was that if Doc would go to Western Reserve, he "would play everything."

"That did it. Dad said that's where I was going to go."

It was a wise choice. His association there made him a "big fish in a small pond." His academic and athletic accomplishments led to seats on advisory and trustee boards at Cleveland area colleges, courts, service clubs and hospitals.

"I didn't make a mistake," Kelker says of the path he followed. "I've enjoyed it tremendously."

After earning a degree in political science and sociology, Kelker spent two years as a teacher at Central High — now Cleveland East Tech.

During that span, he spent much of his spare time either participating in athletics or instructing youngsters at the YMCA.

IN 1940, with the encouragement of his former coach "who wanted me to go into youth work," Kelker made his most momentous decision. He took a job at youth secretary at the Cedar av. Y.

Except for a six-year stint in Kansas City's YMCA program, he has been there ever since.

The rewards have been many, but the real satisfaction for Kelker has been in watching young people wander in off the street, then leave to make their own successful way in life.

He remembers in particular, the day a woman confronted him pleading, "Please, Mr. Kelker, will you care for my boys?"

Her name was Stokes, and her son, Louis, was to become a leading Democrat in the U.S. Congress. His younger brother, Carl, ("he was a little hard to handle . . . you had to watch him") would go down in history as the first black mayor of a major city (Cleveland), then move on to a network television broadcasting position in New York.

Among the most memorable awards are a testimonial scroll citing his "outstanding community service" to Cleveland, presented by the Order of Elks, and an American Red Cross Overseas Certificate signed by President Harry S. Truman.

IN DECEMBER, he leaves the mainstream of his career for the quieter, but still active, tributaries of retirement.

Besides real estate and traveling, Kelker will be trying to improve on his mid-70s golf game.

It was during a round on the links last summer when he realized he needed his first pair of glasses. "But I can read perfectly well without them!" he is quick to demonstrate.

He will continue to watch today's athlete, whom he calls "much better than we were . . . more skillful, especially because they're making their living at it."

And, he'll remember the past "when there wasn't so much individualism in sports."

Television brought the big change, in Kelker's opinion. "Kids see the superstar and they want to identify with him . . . copy him. It has made them better, but each guy is trying to go someplace on his own after he leaves what he's doing. After high school, college. After that, the pros. In our day, there wasn't much jealousy. We cooperated with each other. The teams I played on were families."

What made him the exceptional performer he was?

"Natural ability," is the simple and honest reply. "There was no sport I liked better than another. I played them all equally well."

"In a small town like Dover, you learn to do everything," he grinned. "We even used to jump off the Wooster av. bridge to swim in the (Tuscarawas) river."

"I worked at it, but it came easy to me," he admits, "probably because I was bigger and faster than most everybody I played with or against."

"It was embarrassing to have people come up and congratulate me on a good game. I guess it's because even if you're good at something, you don't always know it or appreciate it."

"I never thought I was as good as people said I was. In degrees, maybe I could run faster, but that didn't necessarily make me better."

"I did what I had to do, and the other guys on the team did what they had to do. We put it together and we were lucky enough to be winners."

Were you as good as the stories go? Kelker is pressed for a straightforward evaluation. "Maybe," he allows, a faraway gaze momentarily freezing his face.

Dover thinks so. Its citizens put their feelings for Doc on a plaque. It hangs proudly on the office wall in the Cedar av. Y.

It says, in part: "Frank L. Kelker. In recognition of a brilliant record in scholastic football, basketball, baseball and track, which shall always stand as incessant challenges to the youth of this community. The Dover Tornado Club. March 24, 1953."