

## History of Central High Football

### Part II. Recovery and Growth of Central 1919-1929

The Fall of 1919 saw a return to normalcy at Central; enrollment was up following the close of World War I and Central had hired, for the first time, a full-time athletic director/coach with no teaching duties. For this position, Central had chosen Harper “Rusty” Cornelius, a key member of Central’s undefeated 1913 football and 1914 basketball teams, who had previously coached Jasper’s football teams and officiated local basketball and football games. Cornelius had immediate success, as the 1919 football team compiled a 5-1-1 record, outscoring opponents 167-33. Included were five shutouts: 59-0 over Decherd, Polk County 39-0, Knox Central 24-0, Etowah County (AL) 13-0 and the season-ending Thanksgiving Day Game over City 26-0. The only blemishes were a 0-0 tie with Coach Rike’s first team at Baylor and a 33-6 loss to Fitzgerald-Clarke Military Academy of Tullahoma (led by a 27-year old coach named Wallace Wade). [Coach Cornelius first basketball team of 1919-20 was undefeated at 13-0 with only one win, 25-16 over McCallie, being less than a double digit margin.]



“RUSTY”  
HARPER CORNELIUS

Harper “Rusty” Cornelius

Head Football Coach and Athletic  
Director 1919-1925

In 1920 Central shut out six of eight opponents –Marion County 38-0, Polk County 13-0, St. Andrews 34-0, Winchester 40-0, Knoxville Central 23-0, and City 24-0. Again Central tied Baylor 14-14 and beat Bradley County 25-6 for a record of 7-0-1. The 1921 Champion reported that Central won the Billy Long Cup for winning the city championship three years in succession. Cornelius’ 1921 team slipped a bit, going 6-3-1 with a season opening tie, 0-0, with Marion County, then reeling off 7-6, 68-0, 27-0, and 66-6 wins over Darlington, Tennessee River Institute (Bridgeport, AL), Sparta, and Madison County (Gurley, AL). Then, three consecutive shutout losses to Baylor 7-0, Morgan Institute of Fayetteville 31-0, and Rhea County 7-0, dimmed the season somewhat; but a strong finish with 21-0 and 21-6 wins over Tracy City and City High salvaged a successful season.



**1919 - Coach Cornelius' First Football Team at Central, 13 strong**

In the Fall of 1922 Central added two assistant coaches –J.H. Nicholson and W.P. Bales, the latter also assuming head basketball coaching duties. However, the 1922 team slipped some more with a 4-4-1 record, starting strong with shutouts over Marion County, Etowah County (AL) and TMI. 6-0, 6-0, and 13-0, but then losing to Baylor 20-7 and Athens University 7-6. Central then traveled to Knoxville and beat Knox Central 13-6, but completed the season with a loss, and key injuries suffered, to Morgan Institute 39-0, a scoreless tie with Birmingham Ensley (who was unscored upon for the season), and a disheartening 6-0 loss to City. By 1923 the coaches had a full year to work together, and the results showed with 7-1-1 season, the only blemishes being a 26-19 loss to Baylor and a 7-7 tie with Birmingham Phillips High. Central's victims were Marion County 12-0, Stevenson (AL) 40-0, Rockwood 19-0, Birmingham Ensley 14-6, Rhea County 6-0, Knoxville Central 13-7 and City 19-2.

Coach Cornelius, unlike his predecessor Coach Rike, had an increasing number of boys coming out each Fall. Whereas Rike's teams seldom had more than 15-20 bodies, by 1920 Cornelius had upwards of 30 players and the numbers were steadily increasing, as was the size of the student body overall. The senior class of 1918 with 79 students (19 male) was the low point; by 1922 there were 126 seniors (44 male), by 1925 184 seniors (75 male), and by 1929 270 seniors (124 male). After the war, Ridgedale and the surrounding area was undergoing unprecedented growth. The original central structure, designed for 500 students was no longer adequate, so a new auditorium and south wing (extending original building south to Bailey Ave.) was begun in 1922 and completed in 1923. By 1927 a north wing

had also been added (extending the building north to Chamberlain Ave.) and the campus could, by then, accommodate 1500 students. Also, a new principal, Stacey E. Nelson, came to Central in 1921. Unlike his predecessor, Nelson was a strong proponent of student-athletes and initiated the first Letterman's Club at Central on January 25, 1922 (picture below) to promote athletics at Central.



Despite these successes, Central still had no athletic facilities for outdoor sports, and considerable time was being spent traveling to and from remote practice facilities. Football pads and helmets were now in full use, so considerable practice time was sacrificed getting dressed for practice at the school, then walking to a vacant lot for practice, then returning to school and showering, all before dark. During Coach Rike's era, the nearby McCallie practice field saw numerous scrimmages between Central and McCallie, but the teams never met during the regular season. During the 20s and up until 1938, Central used a vacant lot on East Third Street between Derby and Kilmer Streets for practices.

The 1924 season began with a 7-7 tie with Hearn Academy (GA), followed by a 26-0 defeat of Rockwood and 12-6 victory over Fort Payne (AL). In a scheduling quirk, Central then faced in succession, the two most formidable teams in Alabama, an undefeated and unscored on Baylor team, and an undefeated Knoxville Central team, losing to Birmingham Ensley and Phillips by 7-0 scores, to Baylor 20-0 and to Knoxville Central 40-0. An injury-depleted Central team then struggled to a 0-0 tie with Rhea County, before recovering with wins of 14-6 over Lafayette (GA) and 10-6 season-ending game with City High. Soon after, Coach Cornelius announced that he was accepting a position with T.H. Payne and would not return, compiling a 33-13-7 record for his six seasons at the helm.

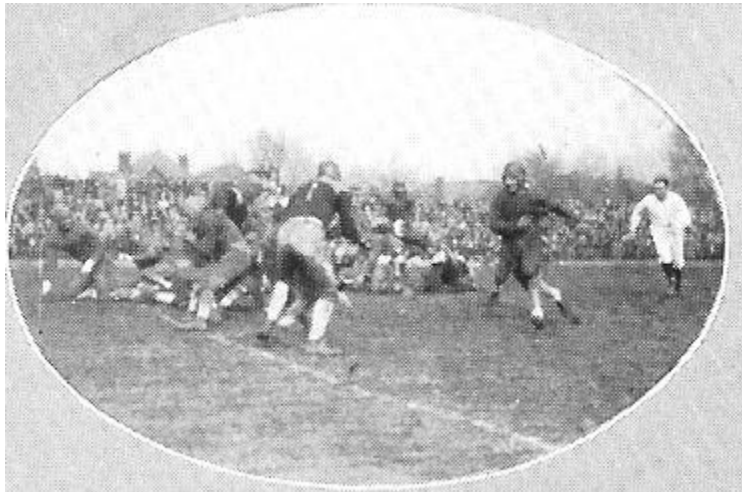
Before the 1925 season, Central hired Cornelius' replacement – S. Dean Petersen, captain of Central's 1920 undefeated football team, and a recent graduate of Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn), where he also played quarterback and captained the football team his senior year. Petersen's first year, however, would not be a memorable one. After opening with a 15-0 shutout of Rhea County, Central then lost to Tech High of Atlanta 13-0. After rebounding with a 33-0 pasting of Rockwood, Central would not win another, losing to Gadsden (AL) 19-0, Baylor 13-0, Tennessee State champion Knoxville Central 13-0, Birmingham Phillips 6-0, and City 19-13, with a 13-13 tie with Harriman sandwiched between the Phillips and City losses. Petersen's first year showed two wins, six losses, and one tie.



S. Dean Petersen, Head Football  
Coach and Athletic Director 1925-30;  
1933-43

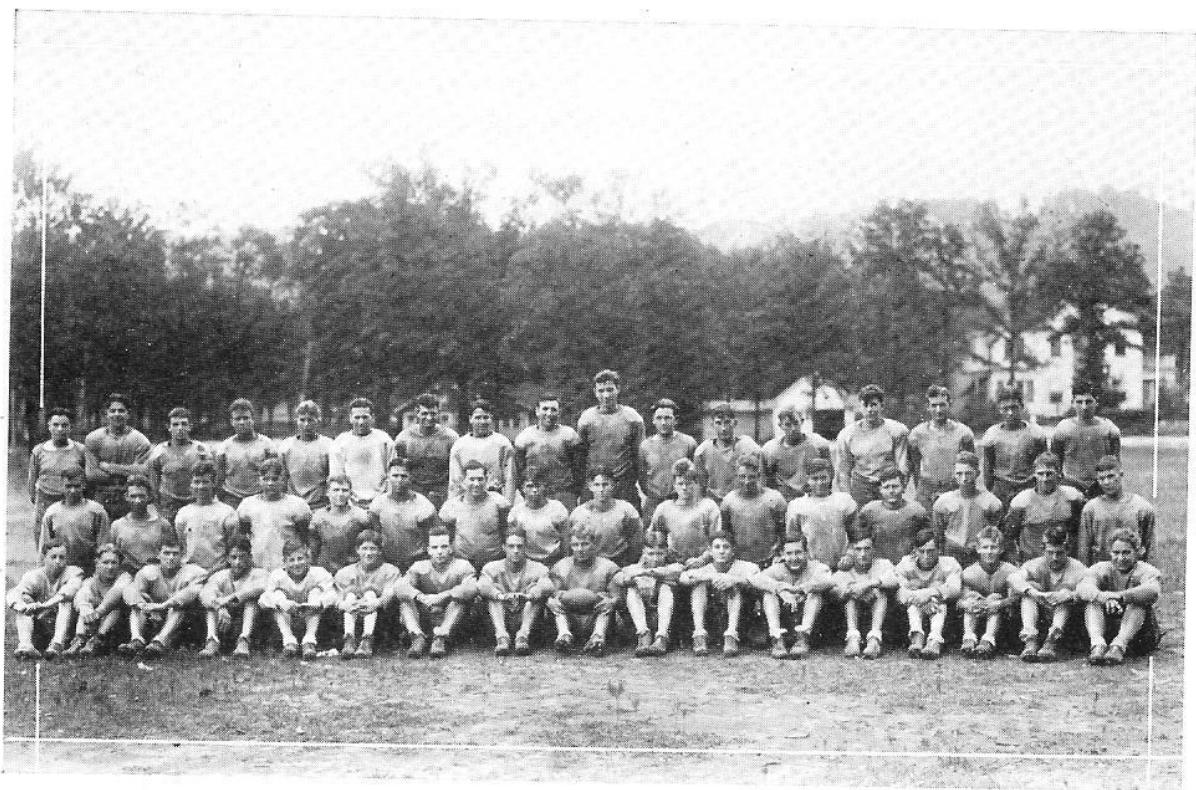
Coach Jeff Setliffe, a recent grad and decorated athlete from Chattanooga U. replaced Coach Nicholson as one of Petersen's football assistants and head track coach for the 1926-27 season, and with seeming immediate influence. Central started with wins over Fort Payne 14-0 and Bradley 19-3, then avenged the previous season's loss to a strong Tech High 18-14. Central's win streak continued with five impressive victories over Darlington 34-6, Baylor 33-0, Gadsden 44-0, Rhea County 39-0, and Alabama Military Institute (Anniston, AL) 20-0. Playing at Birmingham, Central allowed a 60-yard pass to the one yard line by Phillips High with two minutes left in the fourth quarter, held for three downs, but allowed a last-gasp run for touchdown, the game ending in a 7-7 tie, for the only blemish that season. Central then dispatched City 19-0 to cap a 9-0-1 record and the City Championship in Petersen's second year. The 1927 team, by now a squad of 49 strong, almost equaled the '26 squad with a 7-2-1 record with wins over Fort Payne 34-6, Kingsport (Dobyns-Bennett) 26-6, Notre Dame 6-0, Baylor 7-6, Birmingham Phillips 26-6, Alabama Military Institute 18-6, and City 7-0. Two losses to Darlington 13-7 and Knoxville Central 18-7, along with a scoreless tie at Bradley, were the only setbacks in another City Championship year.

In 1928 Central again nearly ran the tables with a 10-0-1 season, the only blemish being a mid-season 6-6 tie with Notre Dame. Central's victims included Geraldine (AL) 33-6, Etowah 13-6, Branham-Hughes (Spring Hill, TN) 28-0, Polk County 31-0, Winchester 27-0, Baylor 7-2, Bradley 19-6, Rhea County 45-0, Decherd 40-0 and City 19-7. J.F. Lewis replaced Coach Setliffe for this one season. In 1929 George McCoy, another celebrated UC athlete, replaced Coach Lewis, and Central continued to thrash opponents, going 8-1-1, with the only blemishes a 7-6 heartbreaking loss against Etowah and a 12-12 tie with Baylor. Central's victories were 13-0 over Decherd, 18-6 over Lafayette (GA), an 18-0 shutout of University High of Atlanta, a 13-12 squeaker over Memphis Tech, 13-6 over Bradley, 13-7 over Winchester, a 26-0 whitewash of Notre Dame, and a 39-0 thrashing of City. After only five seasons, Petersen had compiled a record of 36-9-5 with four consecutive City Championships, but stunned everyone associated with Central by announcing he was accepting the head coaching job at Roanoke (VA) college effective the end of the 1929-30 school year.



1928 Central-City Game





1929 Football Team

## Football Squad

*Back row, left to right*—DOE, JOHNSON, WEEKS, KELLEY, BRYAN, JACKSON, CLINGAN, UNDERWOOD, HEADRICK, OLINGER, HOLLY, BUMPUS, LACEWELL, WEITZEL, F. SMITH, GIST, KOPE.

*Middle row*—HARRIS, FOX, MCPHERSON, ROY, GARMANY, JOHNSON, GREEN, JONES, PORTER, CARTER, WHITESIDE, ADAMS, ANDERSON, LENON, SCHWIER, KING.

*Front row*—ELAM, HALL, ENGERS, BRADFORD, JOHNSTON, PHILLIPS, SWAFFORD, HEIDER, CAPTAIN PETERSEN, ETTER, L. MILLER, TEMPLETON, WILLIAMSON, A. MILLER, CHILCUTT, RUCH, BUNN.

**NEXT: Part III. Rise of the Purple Pounders (1930-1942)**