

Death on the JHS Gridiron

By Randy Anderson, President, Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame



Jamestown High School has been playing interscholastic football since 1893, one of the first high schools in Western New York to take up the sport. In the succeeding 123 years just over 1,000 games have been played by the JHS teams resulting in many glorious moments for the Red Raiders and their supporters. However, one game did not result in glory. In fact, the game of October 25, 1902, played at the Cricket Grounds on Chandler Street, ended in tragedy. In that fateful contest, George Edwin McClurg became the only Jamestown footballer to die of an injury.

This article will examine the death of McClurg using the actual newspaper accounts and other sources reporting on the accident. The first report is from *The Buffalo Courier*, Sunday, October 26, 1902 which extolled the quality of the play, the lack of undue roughness

and briefly mentioned the “unfortunate accident.”

CENTRAL PLAYED A TIE GAME

Battle Between High School Teams Resulted in a Score of 11 to 11

Jamestown, Oct. 25.—The football which was played in this city this afternoon between the Jamestown High School team and the Central High School team of Buffalo was one of the best exhibitions of the college game ever witnessed here. Barring the unfortunate accident to George McClurg, one of the Jamestown players, the game was free from undue roughness, and resulted in a tie score of 11 to 11. The Jamestown team was exactly the same as that which lined up against Masten Park at Buffalo last Saturday, the men averaging 161 pounds each.

Within a very few minutes after play began Vannerhoff of the Centrals was sent over the line for the first touchdown. The goal was missed. Later in the game Strunk's shoulder was injured and his place was taken by McClurg. Jamestown quickly made gains and Heath was sent across the line for the locals' first touchdown. Fisher kicked goal. The half ended with the ball in Central's possession on Jamestown's 30-yard line. Score: Jamestown 6, Buffalo 5.

In the second half Jamestown carried the ball rapidly along the field until on a fumble Stamler of the Centrals secured the ball and carried it ahead for a touchdown and followed it with a goal. Jamestown took another brace and forced the visitors back, crossing the line, but failed on kicking a goal. This was the last score of the game, the result being a tie with each team credited with 11 points.

During the latter part of the game McClurg was seriously injured and was carried from the field. Egbert Crum took his place. The lineup:

JAMESTOWN (11)		BUFFALO (11)
Nelson	Center	Murphy
Martin	Right guard	Phillipbar
Carlson	Left guard	Vanderhoff
Fisher (capt.)	Right tackle	Stamler
Heath	Left tackle	Nasmith
Durnin	Right end	Cochran
Murphy	Left end	O'Connor
Kilpatrick	Right halfback	Lawrence
Strunk/McClurg/Crum	Left halfback	Johnson (capt.)
Jones	Fullback	Joky/Stamler
Shaw	Quarterback	McClure

Umpire: Batterson (Buffalo); referee: Griffith (Jamestown); linesmen: Roberts (Buffalo) and Blanchard (Jamestown).

One day later, the *Buffalo Evening News* of Monday, October 27, 1902, presented a different version of the game focusing on the rough play, a size differential between the teams and offered speculations as to the cause of McClurg's death.

TRAGEDY ON FOOTBALL FIELD AT JAMESTOWN

George McClurg of That City Killed in Game Against the Central High School of Buffalo

JAMESTOWN , Oct. 25 - In the football game here today between the Jamestown High School team and the Central High School eleven of Buffalo an accident occurred which resulted in the death of George McClurg, 18 years old, a member of the Jamestown team.

Young McClurg had played only a few minutes, having taken the place of Strunk, who had a shoulder dislocated.

The accident occurred in the first half of the game. It was not supposed that McClurg was seriously injured and the game was continued to a finish.

His father, who is a widower, was almost prostrated with grief when he heard of the accident.

Game Was A Rough One

The game was one of the interscholastic series and was fast from the first. The Central eleven outweighed the locals, the visiting team averaging 165 pounds to Jamestown's 151. Jamestown played a plucky game when the best Central could do was to tie the score, which was 11 to 11.

Only 20 Buffalonians accompanied the Centrals to this city. Fisher kicked off for Jamestown. The ball changed sides several times and after six and one-half minutes of play Vanderoff made a 39-yard run for a touchdown, Strunk having his shoulder dislocated during the final scrimmage. The goal was missed.

McClurg went into the game, Fisher again kicked off and after a few minutes' play McClurg was knocked insensible, and a short time later was taken off the ground in an ambulance dead, though it was not known on the grounds.

Reports differ as to the actual cause of the lad's death. One report is that his neck was broken by a fall during a scrimmage. Another is he received a kick which caused concussion of the brain. A third is to effect that the injury was to his chest and affected his lungs.

Reaction to McClurg's death came swiftly. The *Jamestown Evening-Journal* of Monday, October 27, 1902 contained this report:

The rector of St. Luke's Church spoke of the desire in the breasts of most young men to be considered manly and to this end risks were often run unadvisedly. Reference was made to the untimely death of George McClurg and the risks run by many of our young men in order to be manly - that whilst sports are needful to promote physical ability, there is something nobler than sport. A manly young man was one who reached after the Bible ideal, that true manliness was true Godliness. God said, "Let us make man in our image," and it was so, and he is the best and truest man who reaches after the ideal there presented, a man in the likeness of God.

An *Evening-Journal* editorial in the same October 27, 1902 issue read:

KILLED BY FOOTBALL

The list of those killed, maimed for life or otherwise grievously injured on the football field is a long one, every year. These fatalities, however, do not come home to a community until one of its own young men is the victim. Then there is a shocking realization of the danger of a pastime which has numbered its scores of victims. In proportion to the number who play football this casualty list is small, maybe, but that a real peril exists will not be disputed. The chances of accident are always present and no one knows what a game may bring forth in the way of death or injury. These things did not occur to us as long as our Jamestown boys escaped. Now that a bright youth, a member of the High School team, has lost his life in a football game, the fact that there is too great risk in the sport will appeal to almost all. The terrible fate of George E. McClurg, cut down on the threshold of his career, is more eloquent than any words as to the dangers of football. While his death may have been purely accidental it is well known that roughness and even brutality may characterize a game and put in hazard the lives and limbs of the players.

Coroner Bowers is justified in probing to the bottom the circumstances attending the unhappy death of young McClurg. It should be known officially just how he was killed and this may serve to rouse the public as to the danger of the game which surely is not worth so many deaths and maimings. The sympathy of the community goes out to the family thus cruelly bereft

of a most promising member. The football team has wisely disbanded for the season and its action may well be made permanent.

That same day, Monday, October 27, 1902, The *Buffalo Courier* reported that the Chautauqua County Coroner issued a cause for McClurg's death and that the District Attorney would begin an investigation in response to public demands.

CORONER TO PROBE FOR FACTS

Officials of Chautauqua County to Make Rigid Inquiry Into the Details of Football Player's Death, as Demanded by the Public

Members of Elevens to Be Subpoenaed

Jamestown, N.Y., Oct. 26,—The sentiment of horror and grief which filled this community on learning that George McClurg had been killed in the football game with Central High School of Buffalo Saturday afternoon has in a measure been supplemented by a sentiment which demands of the officials of the county a rigid investigation of the death and the causes which led to it.

District Attorney Green and Coroner Bowers were appealed to this morning to take official action in the matter. They have both decided to comply with the requests, and an investigation will be conducted in such a manner as to go into all the details. To this end it is the intention of Coroner Bowers to subpoena the members of both football teams to give testimony before him. The Coroner did not begin his investigation until this morning.

"I find," said he to The Courier, "that McClurg's neck was not broken as was first reported. Death was the result of the formation of a clot of blood on the brain at the back of the head, due, doubtless, to an unusual straining of the neck, which might have occurred by the head being pushed very severely forward or backward.

"I find a severe bruise on the boy's nose and another on the right cheek, but neither of these injuries was serious enough to cause death. There were no external evidences of injury on the back of the head or neck, and the rupture at the base of the brain must have been caused from a strain rather than from a blow on that part of the body.

"I shall investigate the case as fully and thoroughly as possible," concluded the Coroner, "both for the purpose of satisfying the public and in justice to the football players."

George McClurg was a member and one of the ushers of the local Christian Science Church, and the fact that a number of the leading Christian Scientists of the city hastened to the saddened home when the serious injury to the boy was first announced, gave rise to the rumor that he did not have the attention of a physician, but was entirely in the hands of the Scientists. This was not true. A physician examined him as soon as he was carried from the field and another was called to the house as soon as he reached home.

The *Jamestown Evening-Journal*, also on October 27, 1902, reported the following:

WILL NOT HOLD AUTOPSY

George McClurg's Father Objected to It and Coroner Gave It Up

This morning Coroner Bowers and District Attorney Green decided to have an autopsy conducted on the body of George McClurg, who was killed in the football game Saturday, and at the request of the coroner, Drs. Morris N. Bemus and A. E. Myers went to the McClurg home on North Main Street this afternoon for that purpose. Mr. McClurg, father of the dead boy, was very much opposed to the autopsy and the coroner decided on this account to conduct the investigation without it.

Who was George Edwin McClurg? His death certificate reveals that he was born in Buffalo in to Edward and Charlotte McClurg. At the time of his death he was 19 years, 1 month and 28 days old, reportedly weighed 131 lbs. and was living at 804 North Main Street with his father and two younger sisters, S. Alice and Edna McClurg.

The Jamestown High School Yearbook of 1903 reveals that McClurg, was a very popular and beloved student. The junior was President of the Class of 1904, Vice-President of The Athletic Association, and Captain of the Second Football Team (substitutes). An account from the Tuesday, October 28, 1902, *Jamestown Evening-Journal* tells the details of his funeral:

GEORGE E. M'CLURG

FUNERAL HELD THIS AFTERNOON FROM FAMILY HOME

Universal Bereavement Among the High School Students — Kind Remembrances From Buffalo and Warren Students — Sympathetic Resolutions Adopted This Morning



GEORGE EDWIN McCLURG.

Monday evening a committee composed of the following high school students met at the home of Principal M. J. Fletcher: Sheldon Jones of the first football team; Albert Hooker of the second football team; Harold L. Rogers of the high school athletic association; John Kilpatrick of Eta chapter Alpha Zeta fraternity, Frank Shearman of the Beta Kappa society, and J. Harold Swanson of the class of 1903. The meeting was for the purpose of taking action on the death of George Edwin McClurg. The following resolutions were drafted, the entire student body giving its unanimous approval this morning:

"Whereas our friend and associate George Edwin McClurg met a most tragic and untimely death while upholding the honor of our school in the football game of October 25, 1902 between the Buffalo Central High School and the Jamestown High School, therefore be it resolved;

"I. That in the death of our fellow student we mourn the loss of a true and loyal friend whose qualities of Christian character were such as to endear him to his associates, and whose honesty, self-reliance, courage and manliness were worthy of our praise and emulation.

"II. That out of love and respect for the memory of our departed friend it is our desire that the football teams of the high school should be disbanded.

"III. That we express our sincere and heartfelt sympathy to the bereaved family of our associate in this hour of their deep sorrow and affliction.

"IV. That these resolutions be entered upon the records of the respective organizations of the school of which George McClurg was a member, that they be published in the papers of the city and that a copy be sent to the family of our lamented friend and schoolmate."

Before the assembled students this morning Principal Fletcher read the following communication addressed to Daniel K. Fisher, captain of the first football team:

"The members of the Warren High School Athletic Association mourn with you and your team mates in the sad accident that has befallen one of your players, George McClurg. We send a slight token of our feelings which you will send to the bereaved parents with the sympathy of the W. H. S. Athletic Association. Earle R. Morrison, President."

The students of Central High School of Buffalo have sent a mammoth wreath of roses and lilies of the valley and the Warren High School Athletic Association sends with its letter of sympathy a wreath of pink and white roses.

The last scene in the tragedy which began late Saturday afternoon was enacted this afternoon when the form of George E. McClurg was consigned to his last resting place in beautiful Lake View cemetery. In his memory the high school closed during the afternoon and shortly after 2 o'clock the students assembled in their respective study halls. George F. Hale, of the faculty, had charge of the formation and two abreast the teachers and students marched out Third Street to Main and up Main to Eighth where, while waiting to view the features of the young man for the last time, the entire concourse assembled on the lawn in front of District School No. 1.

At the close of the private funeral services in charge of Martin F. Jackson, first reader of the Church of Christ Scientist, the room in which the body lay was thrown open and for an hour the stream of friends passed through with sorrowing hearts, was almost unbroken. The floral offerings from relatives and friends, from the city and without were piled high, about the casket. The football squad sent an elegant spray of lilies; the high school athletic association, a bunch of yellow chrysanthemums; the ex-members of the high and grammar school cadets, a silk flag and a bunch of white roses; the Beta Kappa society, a floral piece in the shape of a vase bearing the monogram "B. K." and the Junior class, a large bunch of roses. Eta chapter of the Alpha Zeta fraternity sent beautiful floral tokens Sunday, Monday and today, and R. Ralph Lockwood, T. Gordon Brown and G. Harry Wade, the three members of Eta chapter who are studying at Yale, gave a bunch of white chrysanthemums. The various classes at the high school also sent offerings. The students of Central High School of Buffalo sent a mammoth wreath of roses and lilies of the valley and the members of Warren High School Athletic association, a wreath of white roses.

Professor Mellen and the following students of Central High School of Buffalo, arrived in the city this morning and attended the funeral this afternoon: Robert McEachren, Jacob Schau, George Cochran, Leo Weter, Merritt Smith, Louis Fehr and Herbert Zimmerman. A few minutes before 4 o'clock the casket was borne to the hearse by the bearers: Daniel B. Fisher of the first football team; Delos K. Bucklin of the second football team, W. Arthur Stowe of the high school athletic association, J. Harold Swanson of the Junior class, John Kilpatrick of Eta chapter of the Alpha Zeta fraternity, and Frank Shearman of the Beta Kappa society. Then with the football squad at the right of the line the procession started in this order of march from the house to the

cemetery walking on the sidewalk: Marshal, George F. Hale; Junior Class; delegation from Central High School; Faculty in a body; High School Girls; High School Boys; Eta Chapter, Alpha Zeta Fraternity; Beta Kappa Society; the hearse; football squad on either side; the bearers; and carriages. The services at the grave were conducted by Martin F. Jackson, the high school chorus singing *Nearer My God to Thee*, as the body was lowered into the grave.

The death of George E. McClurg was picked up by newspapers across New York State and beyond. The day after McClurg's funeral the *Niagara Falls Gazette*, ran the following story:

North Tonawanda Team Cancels Its Games and Disbands

The football eleven of the Niagara University went to Buffalo today where this afternoon the players lined up against the Holy Angels Academy team. The University men were booked to play the North Tonawanda High School team at the University grounds this afternoon but this morning Father O'Brien, manager of the University team received word that the North Tonawanda team had disbanded because of the fatal accident to young George McClurg which occurred in the game between the Central High School team of Buffalo and Jamestown High School team. The North Tonawanda men have decided to give up the play and they have cancelled all their games.

Coroner A. H. Bowers issued his report on November 1, 1902. It read simply "George E. McClurg came to his death in the city of Jamestown, NY on the 25th day of October, 1902 from a hemorrhage at the base of the brain, the cause of which was by some means and some manner received while playing football."

The following Letter to the Editor appeared in the November 29, 1902 *Jamestown Evening-Journal*:

A Mother's Protest

Against This Game of Football — Must Not Educate the Heels Higher Than the Head

To the Editor of The Journal:

In view of the latest local casualties on the football field will you permit me to ask a few questions?

How many more maimed bodies, how many more murders must there be, how many blasted homes and bereaved hearts before this football craze ceases to be held up as laudable in our schools and colleges, and the reports of the brutal game relegated to their proper place, instead of flaunting in large type on the front page of the daily papers from Maine to California?

As parents do we not have hard problems to meet and sacrifice enough through the long years while rearing our sons for our nation, and our declining days, without the additional peril of this brutal football, set forth as an alluring form of manly exercise in our intellectual and athletic circles?

For what do we rear our sons in this day of grace? How long will it be before there are stringent laws to prohibit and prevent these perilous and degrading exhibitions? Twenty-two thousand paid to see a few men kick a dirty ball over a miry field in Philadelphia on the day when we are summoned to our churches to return thanks for prosperity by our president

We regard bull fights as disgraceful, while we calmly sanction boy fights, and when one after another is injured, and falls in our midst on the promising threshold of a brilliant career. For George McClurg, we heap garlands on the grave and talk about a "Mysterious Providence!" All honor to the professor in Illinois who has the bravery to set his Influence and is voice against this horror that is rapidly brutalizing our young people more than the prize ring.

It is time that our editors and our instructors lead the way to a higher level of popular amusement. It is time that we mothers protest against this seductive tide that is paralyzing all our aims and ambitions for a higher and better type of character for our country and our God. Surely we need vigorous, manly song, but we must insist upon a safe moral standard and not educate the heels higher than the heads of the rising generation.

New England Mother

Jamestown, NY

The fraternity brothers, friends and fellow students of George McClurg collected monies to finance a monument to their fallen comrade. A report in the March 30, 1903 *Jamestown Evening-Journal* tells the story.

McClurg Monument

Memorial to Unfortunate Young High School Student Is In Place In Lake View Cemetery



Since the ill-fated 25th of October, 1902, when George Edwin McClurg lost his life in the football game between Jamestown High School and Central High School of Buffalo on the Cricket grounds in this city, fellow students in the high school and fellow members of Eta chapter, Alpha Zeta fraternity and the Beta Kappa society have been quietly at work securing funds for the erection of a monument to the memory of the young man who was so anxious to uphold the honor of old J. H. S., and who passed away even as the cheers of his comrades rang across the field at the close of the contest.

Little indeed has been said about the progress of the movement, but nevertheless it was received with such entire satisfaction by the school and fraternity boys that a sufficient sum for the object in view was readily obtained and already the memorial is in its place at the grave in Lake View Cemetery.

The monument itself, in keeping with the very methods employed in securing its construction and erection, consists of a slab of Quincy granite, mounted on a base of the same material, the whole being about three and one-half feet in height. There is very little of

decoration, three sides of the slab being rough-faced and the fourth a highly polished surface bearing in raised letters the simple inscription;

George E. McClurg
1883—1902

There will be no exercises of a dedicatory nature in connection with the erection of the monument, the wish of those interested in raising the funds being that the entire affair be conducted in as simple and quiet a manner as possible.

The Jamestown High School football team was reorganized for the 1903 season and had a fine comeback season of 6-1-1. And with the exception of 1916 when the season was cancelled because of the lack of a suitable practice facility, Red Raider football has been an institution in the Jamestown community.

Whenever Red Raider alumni and fans gather to reminisce about the New York State AA Championship teams of 1994, 1995, 2000 and 2014, or talk about the two dozen First Team All-State players who have had their numbers retired to the Wall of Fame at Strider Field, let them also pause to remember the only player to die on the JHS gridiron, George Edwin McClurg.

