

The Story of *Rube Appleberry*  
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Radio's Golden Age produced its share of super men, from the stoic Lone Ranger to the high school superstar Jack Armstrong, from *I Love a Mystery's* rugged Jack Packard to the death-defying Shadow. The average male radio listener could hardly hope to live up to the medium's definition of manhood. Another demi-god who strode across the airwaves during this era was the inaptly named Rube Appleberry, star of *Big Leaguers and Bushers*, later renamed simply *Rube Appleberry*. By the time Rube left the air he had played professional baseball, football, hockey, and taken his lumps as a boxer and wrestler.

The forgotten series *Big Leaguers and Bushers* debuted on Chicago's WGN on Tuesday, May 17, 1932, in the 9:30 evening time slot. Initially it aired Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays at that time; months into its run the broadcasting days were switched to Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at the same time. The program was produced by Paul Fogarty and Louis Wolf and starred Lawrence Read as Appleberry, Gordon Sprague as Tommy Malloy, Fogarty as “Mac” McConnell, and Jeanne De Lee as Malloy's girlfriend, Betty Deering, as well as Pearlie, a cigar counter girl. As its theme song *Big Leaguers* used “How Would You Like to be the Umpire,” sung by WGN's Leonard Salvo, a tune published by Charles J. Harris in 1905. The song had gained a small bit of fame when it was included in a musical comedy during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The thrice-weekly show revolved around Rube Appleberry, “a lean and lanky” southpaw pitcher with a fastball dubbed “Hurricane Hannah” and a curveball called “Dippsey Dew.” He hailed from the town of Pin Point in Posey County, IN, and, along with chum Tommy Malloy, the two were attempting to win spots on the fictional Panthers professional baseball team now that their college days were over. The Panthers were not associated with any city but the storylines followed their ups and downs against real baseball teams. The club was managed by McConnell, described as “peppery” but “practical” and based on the late football coach Knute Rockne, who knew writer Fogarty. Adding authenticity to the

sports-themed sketch was co-writer Wolf's time as a minor and major league player.

Episode descriptions and even story arcs are not known to have survived via scripts so modern old time radio fans must be content with brief teasers published in the *Chicago Tribune* radio schedules. One early broadcast focused on dinner with Rube, Tommy, and the lovely Betty Deering. "Comedy galore" was in store as it was supposed that baseball players could hardly be romantic. During the third week the pitcher's hometown of Pin Point declared a Rube Appleberry Day in honor of its native son. The whole town planned to watch his big league performance. Pleased at the attention from Rube Appleberry Day, Appleberry was dismayed to find out that the car with which he was presented by a group from Pin Point turned out to be a financial and mechanical liability.

Onfield antics were also central themes for the serial. In typical Rube fashion he ends up in a situation that is "a new one in the annals of baseball history's queer plays." Likely this refers to an episode in which Appleberry literally chases an opposing player out of the ball field in a desperate attempt to tag him out. On another broadcast he is "bombarded to the showers" by the Cincinnati Reds when his "Hurricane Hanna" fastball and his "Dippsey Dew" curveball fail him during a game.

In the meantime, Appleberry's good chum Tommy Malloy was a more solid rookie who continued to make "major league history." He, too, experienced problems, some of which involved his main rival, Butch Grogan. Rube found himself dragged into the feud and the boys were eventually called to account for the dissension the rivalry created in the locker room. A level of drama underlaid the storylines, with the prospect of being sent back to the minors always lurking in the background. However, by mid-summer 1932 both Appleberry and Malloy had proven their worth to the Panthers and saw their salaries double as a result.

Professional ball players took a hankering to the show and not infrequently promoted the program. On June 5, 1932, Lawrence "Appleberry" Read was photographed with Chicago Cubs player/manager Rogers Hornsby (who was fired two months later). Connie Mack, iconic manager of the Philadelphia Athletics, quipped that the program provided an "accurate picture of baseball and

baseball players' psychology.” During a fictional series with the Pittsburgh Pirates, buccaneer brothers Paul and Lloyd Waner were written into the story. In another story arc Appleberry faced down the sluggers of Brooklyn's Dodgers, including Hack Wilson and Lefty O'Doul, who hit .297 and .368 that year respectively. In following weeks the Panthers took to the field against the New York Giants, Boston Braves, Philadelphia Phillies, and Washington Senators.

In July, 1932, the characters of *Big Leaguers and Bushers* were popular enough for WGN to send the actors out around the Chicago area to make personal appearances, pose for pictures, and sign autographs. As a change of pace the Panthers club around the same time began to venture into American League territory, squaring off against the Philadelphia A's, Cleveland Indians, and New York Yankees. This, of course, was at a time when inter-league play did not exist. In a separate set of adventures the Panthers took a break from major league play and accepted the challenge of a team from the Illinois State Reformatory, then located in Pontiac, IL. This plot twist engaged listeners enough that Fogarty began writing in numerous exhibition games against semi-pro and amateur municipal teams between series against major league opponents. The Panthers' fictional manager McConnell felt such exhibitions would keep Appleberry out of the trouble in which he tended to get himself during his days off pitching.

During their inaugural season the Panthers were successful enough to earn a spot in the fall classic against the Pittsburgh Pirates. There was no ready explanation as to what happened to the real-life World Series qualifiers, the Cubs and Yankees. After the first week of October the series was knotted at two games apiece, with the Panthers winning the first, dropping the next two, and tying the series after four. Unfortunately, there is no indication which team finally won this mythical 1932 World Series.

The next week, with baseball over, Appleberry and Malloy demonstrated their athletic prowess by turning to professional football. Despite the sports change, the baseball-themed title stuck as did the three-a-week schedule, though it now shifted to Tuesdays and Thursdays at 9:15 and Fridays at 7:00.

By the middle of November Appleberry, Malloy, and manager McConnell were ready for the gridiron. The Panthers' first games were against Chris "Red" Cagle and his New York Giants and then Benny Friedman's Brooklyn Dodgers. Soon after, to drum up listener interest, the Panthers decided to play the best college team in a charity game and WGN accepted votes as to which team that would be. Nothing is known of their football efforts beyond this.

Appleberry, not content with his conquests of professional baseball and football, began flirting with wrestling and ice hockey promoters by December. The only obstacle to sure glory on the ice was the league's refusal to let him use double runner skates; only single blade skates were allowed. By early January, 1933, the Panthers' football season was over so Appleberry turned his attention to boxing where he faced off with one Shanty Hogan in his first bout. Hogan was a real life baseball catcher who played for the Giants between 1928 and 1932 and had just a few weeks earlier been sent to the Braves.

As February, 1933, rolled around Fogarty, having run Appleberry and the gang through every professional sport, looked for new subject matter to liven up the sketches. He decided upon the theatrical stage and Rube tried his hand at singing before departing for Spring training in the southern ball club camps. With Malloy as his sideman the duo tried the tune "Posey County Moon" but finally settled on a new song, "Big League Rookie Blues." Their singing careers were short-lived and in March the boys joined their Panther teammates for training in Florida. Appleberry took his mind off the game, however, and wound up in trouble. First, he picked up a questionable new girl, Mary Lou, on the train ride down to Florida and once there he fell for the pitch of a shyster real estate salesman.

By May, 1933, after a year on the air, Fogarty dropped the unwieldy title *Big Leaguers and Bushers* in favor of the simpler *Rube Appleberry*. Information about the series after this point becomes much more scarce. Evidence suggests that stories strayed from the sports themes which predominated during the first year. In September Appleberry found himself in trouble with the law and termed a kidnapper. He had only just gotten out of that predicament by capturing the true criminals when a suspicious character named Tom Byron approached Rube with a new proposition. It appears that Rube

Appleberry began to adopt the more standard thriller stories and cliffhangers common among serials of the time. During the spring of 1934, after two years on the air, the program picked up a sponsor, the identity of which remains elusive. *Rube Appleberry* left the air some time next year, 1935. The three-year run was not the end of Appleberry, however. In 1936 the gang was introduced to the funny pages in a syndicated comic strip drawn by Al Demaree, himself a former baseball player. The comic ran until 1937.

On August 30, 1937, Rube Appleberry returned for one last aural trip around the bases. All the principle actors were back, with Read once again taking Appleberry's part, Sprague as Malloy, and Fogarty as manager McConnell. Connie Will took Jeannette de Lee's place as the female interest. The new series was aired not just on WGN this time but over the Mutual Broadcasting network. Within a month it picked up a sponsor that, as with the original run, remains unknown. The rejuvenated Rube appears to have been little changed from the original, even transitioning to football later in the fall. Records of the show end in the fall of 1937 indicating the series left the air after a short run. Only one episode of *Rube Appleberry* is known to exist, as documented on Dave Goldin's website. Dated 1937, it is likely from this second series but the broadcast is not known to be in general circulation.

Concerning the series' primary actors, nothing is known of Wolf and Sprague beyond their participation in this series. Of De Lee there is evidence she also performed on WBBM's *Chickie* and *Myrt and Marge* at the same time she worked *Big Leaguers*. Just a bit more is known of lead performer Read. Born around 1895, Lawrence Read, the voice behind Rube Appleberry, was bit by the performing bug early in life while a boy in Kentucky. With a ragtag quartet he earned his first singing job with a traveling circus, a gig that lasted four years before he managed to get into vaudeville and finally, with *Appleberry*, radio. It is Read's only known radio work; he died in 1960.

Of all the cast members Paul Fogarty's career can most fully be documented. Fogarty graduated from the University of Notre Dame in 1917 whereupon he went to officers training camp located at Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis, IN. During the last year of the first World War and for some

time after (1917 – 1923) he served as an infantry captain and instructor of calisthenics and bayonet work at various officers training camps around the country. After being discharged from the army Fogarty taught military science at Culver Military Academy before he attempted a career in Florida real estate. Finding no success there he began publishing poetry in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1928 and by 1930 was announcing over KFKX while booking entertainment for the Edgewater Beach Hotel. Two years later he made a small name for himself composing the song “Betty Co-Ed” in 1930, a tune made popular when it was recorded by Rudy Vallee that same year, eventually reaching #4 on the recording charts. The next year he composed “Charlie Cadet” with Vallee, a song that did not achieve the popularity of the earlier effort.

Forgarty joined WGN in 1932 and soon began writing *Big Leaguers*, believed to be his first attempt at writing for radio. Beginning in September, 1932, and lasting through 1933 he played the part of Commander Dailey on WGN's daily children's serial *Devil Bird* and, as Captain Paul, led a regularly scheduled fitness program called *The Keep Fit Club* every morning except Sunday at 9:00. His show kept Chicago-area women exercising through 1935. In 1941 Fogarty joined John Griffith and the *Tribune's* Bob Elson to bring *At the Sports Desk* to WGN listeners and several weeks later began producing a quiz show put on at various military bases. Called *Ask-It-Ball*, the program quizzed soldiers about sports, motion pictures, geography, and military topics. During this time he wrote a comic strip called *Draftie* which ran until the end of the war. Later in 1941 he served as producer for an hour-long program which featured sports broadcaster Bob Elson and musician Bill Anson.

A decade after beginning his original fitness series Fogarty returned to the air with a follow-up effort called the *Keep Fit Corps*, a daily fifteen-minute broadcast. His main work continued to be on the production end with such programs as *Your Chapel in the Valley*, *The Deacon*, and *Chicago at Night*. By 1948 Fogarty was working as the sports producer for WGN-TV. He wasn't done with fitness, however, and in 1950, now around 50 years old, began a television calisthenics series called *Your Figure, Ladies*. The program chugged on and in 1957 was renamed *The Paul Fogarty Program* because

of the number of men who had become regular viewers. Fogarty retired from WGN in 1963 and passed away in 1976.