The AFL

'The other league' is no more but its legends go on and on

By Bob Kravitz of the Pittsburgh *Press*

Never has there been a more aptly named sports facility – War Memorial Stadium in Buffalo. On good days, this scarred and snowy battleground resembled the Russian front during World War II.

"It was the worst," said Ron McDole, who began his 18-year professional football career with the American Football League's Buffalo Bills. "If two showerheads worked and you got warm water, you considered yourself fortunate."

The locker room, easily the worst in organized sports, was matched by an equally shoddy field. The Bills shared the field with the Bisons, a minor-league baseball team, and the turf often was torn up. So a special seed for winter grass was developed.

Problem was, all the pigeons were eating the seeds," McDoIe said. "So one day, the city sent a bunch of guys out with guns to shoot the pigeons. We're there practicing, and these guys are running around like lunatics shooting pigeons.

"Finally, our coach, Lou Saban, gets this idea that they should put poison in the seeds to kill the pigeons. Next day we're at practice, and we spend half the time picking dead pigeons up off the field. It was a helluva sight."

The American Football League would have been 25 years old this year. It's pioneers have become legends, and the stories about them still course as the old league's lifeblood.

The tales, however tall, tell of clubhouse cross burnings, locker rooms where players dressed two to a stall, and parties that lasted until morning's early light. They tell of bounced checks, wild games, and practices on the ice of a local hockey rink.

The men of the AFL suffered together, played together and caroused together, in the end altering the course of sports history.

These are their stories.

The AFL was built on guts and guile, but little credit. Little good credit, anyway. There were no multibillionaires running around signing Herschel Walkers and Brian Sipes.

Take New York Titans owner Harry Wismer. Please.

"We were playing the San Diego Chargers back when they had a great team – Jack Kemp, Keith Lincoln – and we were beating them, like 17-14," said "Curley" Johnson, a New York Titan and a member of the Super Bowl-winning New York Jets. "There were about three minutes left in the game, and it was getting pretty dark out. So the official comes over to our coach, 'Bulldog' Turner, and tells him to phone upstairs and get the lights turned on.

"Anyway, Bulldog calls up, and Harry tells him, 'We're doing just fine in the dark. Keep it that way.'

"See, it would have cost Harry $8,000 to turn those lights on. He didn't have that kind of money to spend."

It was not the first time Wismer, who ran the franchise from his apartment, had to cut corners.

"I got a check for $1,500 for coming to the Titans' camp," Johnson said. "So I went to cash it, and the thing bounced …

"Later in camp, the team was scrimmaging, and Turner told me I couldn't scrimmage. So I asked him why, and he said, 'Between me and you, we're gonna make like you're a troublemaker and get rid of you, because we can't pay that bonus.'"

In time, the Titans took care of the check.

But money was scarce throughout the AFL.

"In some places they paid you $50 for each exhibition game," McDole said. "But what they'd do is when you played at night, they'd slap a curfew on you about 11 o'clock. Hell, the games didn't end until 10:45. They did it so they could fine you $50 and not have to pay you.

"Guys were running back to the hotel in full uniform."

Billy Cannon was the league's highest-paid player in the early years, having signed a three-year contract for $100,000.

"After Billy played in the championship game his first year, his championship check was less than his game check," said Paul Maguire, formerly of the Chargers and Bills and now an ESPN announcer. "So he went to his owner, Bud Adams, and told him, 'Here, you need this more than I do,' and gave him back the check."

The Denver Broncos could have used the money for uniforms.

Their vertically striped socks were purchased second-hand from a sporting-goods store that was going out of business.

"And the pants – I'll never forget," said Lionel Taylor, former Broncos wide receiver, assistant coach with the Steelers and now head coach at Texas Southern. "One day you'd be wearing a size 34, the next day a 46. They never fit right. I think they got 'em cheap."

Former Boston Patriots great Gino Cappelletti remembered sitting on milk cartons at the team's practice field and using bedsheets as a screen for viewing films.

"One trip, the plane stopped in Buffalo where we picked up the Bills, we were dropped off in Denver, and they went on to the West Coast," Cappelletti said. "(Bills owner) Ralph Wilson and (Patriots owner) Billy Sullivan had some kind of deal."

Did the players mind?

"Are you kidding? When I played in Canada, they were wrapping guys' ankles with black friction tape," Cappelletti said. "What did we know from luxury?"

Ernie Ladd was not a good man to cross. At 7 feet tall and about 300 pounds, the former Chargers lineman occasionally possesed the disposition of an enraged grizzly.

But Maguire never possessed too keen an instinct for self-preservation.

A former teammate of Ladd's in the early 1960s, Maguire was not about to let Ladd get away with taping all his football equipment together in his locker.

So Maguire did the only thing a man can do – he got even.

"One day, Paul came into our locker room with some white tape, and he started to tape this big cross on the floor in front of Ernie's locker," said Lance Alworth, former AFL receiving great and now a real estate salesman. "Next thing, he got out some lighter fluid.

"Anyway, Ernie came into the locker room, so Paul put down that fluid and set fire to it. He burned that cross right in front of big Ernie."

Ladd's reaction? A body slam, like the ones he practices on the pro wrestling circuit these days?

"He laughed. We all laughed," Alworth said.

"In those days, there wasn't any black and white. We were all in the same boat. We were all a bunch of poor nobodies, all playing in that other league."

In the early years, the nobodies gathered at training camps with the hope of becoming somebodies. Teams maintained a revolving-door policy, shuttling players in and out "like it was Grand Central Station," Johnson said.

Maguire remembered having "seven or eight roommates that first summer.

In those halcyon days, hundreds of would-be professional athletes tried out.

"We had every bartender in Massachusetts trying out," Cappelletti said. "They all saw the games on TV, thought, 'Hey, that's easy,' and came out for the team."

Lamar Hunt, who owned the Dallas Texans and now the Kansas City Chiefs, developed a barometer for measuring a player's worth. It was the 40-yard dash in 5.1 seconds.

Anyone over 5.1 was automatically cut. Anyone under 5.1 stayed.

"Before we opened the first training camp (with the Texans), they had a tryout camp for about 100 guys," Johnson said. "They kept one – Clem Daniels."

Alworth had a theory to explain the success of the Chargers:

"We practiced out in the desert, about 60 miles east of San Diego. It was completely dry. The only water came when they watered the field at night.

"So at night, all the animals came out for the water. The coyotes, the wolves, some rattlesnakes, the whole bit. The guys on the team – especially Paul Lowe – were terrified to go out at night. I think that's why we had such good camps.

"Nobody wanted to sneak out for a couple of drinks. They were too scared."

When the games were played there was little fanfare. And few fans. The AFL did not begin averaging 25,000 a game until its fifth year.

"When we played in the Polo Grounds, they should have introduced the fans to the players," Maguire said. "It would have saved time."

Johnson said the Titans used to draw about 5,000 paid fans.

"But it always ended up about 25,000 because Mr. Wismer would open up the gates and let people in free," Johnson said. "Nice crowd, too. People walking in off the streets of Harlem."

Eventually, the fans would come.

"We offered a different style of football," Taylor said. "We spread defenses out, we threw downfield. No more of that 4-yards-and-a-cloud-of-dust stuff. We knew we had to offer something different than the NFL, and the people enjoyed it."

The names are familiar to those who lived through that era – Charley Hennigan, George Blanda, Babe Parilli, John Hadl and others. Legends grew.

Abner Haynes was one. He forever will be remembered for misunderstanding his coach's advice and electing to kick off into the wind in overtime of the 1961 playoff game between his Dallas Texans and the Houston Oilers. His humility was saved when the Texans won anyway, 20-17.

Then there was the time Blanda kicked Miami linebacker Jerry Hopkins square in the behind.

“Apparently, George thought he (Hopkins) had been a little too rough when he tackled him,” Taylor said. “So as he was walking back to his huddle, George ran up behind him and kicked him.”

Maguire, who later joined the Bills, remembered a pregame speech that rivaled Knute Rockne’s.

Before the 1964 championship game between his Bills and the Chargers, assistant coach Jerry Smith nervously told his team, “The last bit of advice I can give you is … Don’t forget remember.” The players snickered.

Saban, the head coach, was next.

“He gets up on a table all ready to give this rousing pep talk, and he’s real nervous,” Maguire said. “So he says, ‘The last bit of advice I can give you, men, is … ‘Heads up, toes down.’

“We were hysterical. We’re walking down the tunnel toward the field laughing like mad. What were these guys saying? But it loosened us all up. We were 15-point underdogs that day, and we kicked their butt.

“It was the most inspirational thing I’d ever heard.”

The “other league” would become part of “the league,” the National Football League.

The AFL had revolutionized the game. It brought new excitement. It created opportunities for black players and coaches. It gave the people of new cities football teams they could call their own.

From its crazed, embryonic days in the early ‘60s, the baby had grown up. Joe Namath signed with the Jets. The AFL played the NFL in the Super Bowl. The Jets beat the Baltimore Colts in 1969.

And the leagues merged.

Such was the AFL’s stated goal from the very beginning.

But the AFL’s old warriors could not help but feel a twinge of sadness. A valuable family keepsake had been relegated to the stuffy attic of sports history.

“Looking back, I wish there never had been a merger,” Johnson said. “We had our own identity. It was nice.”

There was a peculiar camaraderie, a peculiar love among the guys in that “other league.”

“Nobody got per diem the way they do now,” Maguire said. “We all ate together at the hotel, then drank together at night. We were family.”

Cappelletti warmed with the memory.

“We were doing speaking engagements for a few bucks and a roast-beef dinner. We went to booster-club parties. It was very personal and very sincere.

“We were overcoming the same things. We had a bond.”

One day, a helicopter hovered over the field to help dry the turf. Another day, a player disrobed and joined a mermaid show in a tank that could be viewed from the hotel bar. Another day, players boarded a school bus and ate popcorn, scouring the city for a field on which to practice.

“We relied on each other. We were brothers,” Cappelletli said. “We played because we wanted to play.

“Because we loved the game.”