

The AFL: A League Too Often Misremembered

by Greg Thomas

1960 was a time of expansion in every phase of American life. People were expanding their houses to include bomb shelters that often became forts for pre-adolescent boys. We were expanding our known universe with flights circling our seemingly smaller planet. We were expanding our nation with a northern star, Alaska and a southern haven, Hawaii. We were expanding the danger of being a fighting man with a little booboo called Vietnam, and we were expanding our country's still youthful vision with the election of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Beyond our growth in these noted areas was the growth of pro football. For it was during this decade, the seventh decade of the twentieth century (1960-1970), that pro football would supplant major league baseball as the favorite of the fan. New names like Unitas and Starr and the great Jim Brown would begin to overshadow even legends like Mantle and Mays. America was a contact country and football was a contact sport. The good ole USA was a place where people could not just stand around and wait; passivity had no place in American life in these times. For one to succeed, he must go full-throttle for sixteen hours and then huddle in sleep for eight hours, repeating the pattern for as many days as possible until hard work reaped its expected reward.

Out of the unending work ethic and expanding dreams of this era was born the American Football League. The AFL was Tucker going after Detroit's big three and winning. It was Sony kicking RCA's tail in the electronics market. It was Twiggy taking Liz Taylor's place on the cover of Life. It was a football field of fun, at times substituting for lack of talent, at other times taking talent to a new zenith. It was great at times and sometimes less than great, but more than anything else the American Football League was a league that was too often misremembered.

The first name one thinks of when remembering the AFL is that of Joe Namath. How important was Namath to the AFL? No more important than Mick Jagger to the Rolling Stones. He was the savior of the league. He was perhaps, well no actually it was Lance Alworth, the most naturally talented man to play in the league. He became the first man in football to earn a six-figure salary. He "earned" it as a rookie before he ever took a snap. The city of Houston eagerly awaited his September, 1965 debut against the Oilers. I was among the 52,680 that day that watched Namath, wearing No.12, talk on the phone to the coaches upstairs for the game's duration as the inept Mike Taliafero piloted the Jets to a crash landing, 27-21, against the equally hapless Houston team.

Namath was able to atone for that nonperformance later in the year in the league's All-Star game, held January 15, 1966, also in Rice Stadium, again with this eight-year-old megafan in attendance. On that cool afternoon, Namath, relieving an ineffective John Hadl, led the AFL All-Stars, a team that would have fared well against the best of the NFL, to 17 third-period points in a come-from-behind 30-19 conquest of the league champion Buffalo Bills in this uniquely formatted game.

Namath's presence in the AFL enabled the league to obtain a princely price in their TV contact with NBC. He also gained instant respectability to a league that was often thought of as Triple A level football. His arrival in New York let the AFL franchise Jets compete favorably with the established Giants on the field, in the stands, and perhaps most importantly, in media attention.

Without a doubt, Namath was the most important player in the history of the AFL. He was the sexiest for sure. He titled his autobiography I Can't Wait Until Tomorrow 'Cause

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I Get Better Looking Every Day. He had the quickest set-up and release this side of Dan Fouts and Dan Marino. He could wrong foot the ball to receivers with power. But Namath was far from the best player in the league. He wasn't even the AFL's top quarterback. That honor belongs to a man rejected by the NFL, Len Dawson. A statistical comparison of the two quarterbacks would embarrass even Namath's mother.

Player	Att	Comp	Comp Pct	Yds	Yds		Td	Int	Int Pct
					Per	Pct			
Namath	2043	1026	50.2	15,487	7.58	97	4.75	104	5.09
Dawson	2352	1335	56.8	18,899	8.04	182	7.74	117	4.97

Namath was the first in football history to pass for 4,000 yards in a single season and the first AFL quarterback to lead his team to a Super Bowl victory. But, day in and day out, Dawson was the better man. Len Dawson also led one of his teams, the '69 Chiefs to a Super bowl win while in addition quarterbacking two other Chiefs squads to AFL championships. He was the master of the roll-out and play-action pass. Dawson wasn't as exciting on or off the field as Namath, who would party hardy the night before the Super Bowl; he was just more efficient, tremendously so.

As Namath, along with Oakland Raider boss Al Davis, embodied the league's rebellious spirit so did even the numbers on the back of players' jerseys. In the NFL, it was considered sacrilegious to give a player any number that did not fall between 10 and 89. During the early 1960s, I was given by Saint Nick my first Tudor Electric Football game. The numbering instructions for the players given by Tudor went as follows:

- 10-19 Quarterbacks
- 20-49 Offensive and Defensive Backs
- 50-59 Centers and Linebackers
- 60-69 Guards
- 70-79 Tackles
- 80-89 Ends

The NFL lived by these rules as if they were given by divine inspiration. The AFL laughed at these same dictums. In the AFL, "00" was given to Jim Otto (get it): "1" was the number worn by the tiniest man in AFL history, Nolan Smith; "2" was the digit given rumbling fullback Cookie Gilcrest. "3" was the number of the "mad bomber" Daryl Lamonica; "19" was not a quarterback number in the new league, it was the number of the league's top receiver and best player, Lance Alworth; throwing to Alworth was "21" quarterback John Hadl. What a breath of fresh air in a white-shirt black-tie shined shoes IBM Chevrolet kind of world.

But the uniform revolution didn't simply stop with funny numbers. Although Joe Namath didn't introduce white football cleats, he was the man to popularize them, and before you could say Pat Boone three times, teams in both leagues were donating their old-guard black high-tops to the Salvation Army. But that's not all. The Kansas City Chiefs decided to sew the names of their players on the back of their uniforms. This had not ever been done before in pro football, or even in baseball or basketball. The rest of the league followed "suit" and thus the AFL became the first league in which you didn't need a playbill to identify the actors.

Another thing we must offer thanks or perhaps curses to the AFL for is the soccer-style kicker. Pete Gogolak, was the first. He initially kicked for the champion Buffalo Bills during the mid- sixties. If he wasn't also the best kicker in the league, perhaps this side-saddle form of kicking wouldn't have not only caught on but completely taken over. Roll over Lou Groza, tell old Jim Thorpe the news.

During the 1960s, inroads, albeit sometimes followed by funeral processions, were being made in the field of racial relations in America. The American Football League did its part. In 1968, coincidentally the same year we buried King and Robert Kennedy, Marlin

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Briscoe, a black, took snaps as the starting quarterback of the Denver Broncos. The world did not end, but the Broncos did not win, and Briscoe soon found himself as a star wide receiver. Considering Briscoe's lack of signal calling success, the NFL did not hasten to replicate the AFL's "experiment."

Probably the most far-fetched and inaccurate remembrance of the AFL is that of it being a passers' haven, a place where defense, especially pass defense, was practically nonexistent, a league where teams threw nearly every down, completing almost every pass, most of them for touchdowns. Nothing could be farther from reality. Here's how a typical year in the AFL stacked against a typical 1960s NFL season. A "typical year" was figured by averaging all 10 AFL seasons, giving each year equal weight.

Statistic	AFL	NFL
Points per team per game	22.8	21.7
Rushing yards per attempt	3.93	4.02
Passes per team per game	31.4	27.7
Passing completion percentage	47.7	51.7
Passing touchdown percentage	5.0	5.3
Passing interception percentage	6.0	5.6
Yards per passing attempt	6.80	7.26
Yards per passing completion	14.3	14.0
Punt returns	9.27	7.67

To summarize these statistics, the AFL teams outscored NFL teams every year but 1965. The AFL attempted more passes than the older league in all 10 seasons. But boy did they pass less efficiently. In every one of the 10 years, the NFL had an overall higher passing rating than the AFL.

To further dramatize this statistic, in each of its 10 seasons, the AFL had a completion percentage of under 50% while in each of those same years, the NFL's completion percentage exceeded 50%. In all 10 seasons, the NFL averaged more yards per pass attempt than the AFL. In 9 of 10 years, the AFL had a lower touchdown pass percentage than the NFL; also in 9 of 10 years, the AFL had a higher percentage of intercepted passes. Pretty conclusive, huh!

The bump-and-run originated in the AFL and when defensive demons Freddie Williamson and Willie Brown bumped receivers, the receivers often had trouble running.

What people forget is that the AFL was a great league for punt returners, or rather that the best punt returners in the game, like Speedy Duncan of the Chargers, played in the newer league. The AFL did better than the NFL in punt returns in all 10 seasons. Only in 1962 and 1964 was the margin less than a full yard per punt return!

Although the AFL had no running back like Jim Brown, it did have the top tandem of runners in the Chargers' Keith Lincoln and Paul Lowe. In 1963, they put together, by far, the best dual running performance of the decade. While Lowe rushed for 1010 yards on 177 carries for a 5.7 average, Lincoln averaged an amazing 6.5 yards per rush, gaining 826 yards on just 128 carries. What's most amazing about their performance is that the Chargers' coach, Sid Gillman, is not noted for his expertise on the subject of rushing, only passing. Vince Lombardi, Mr. "Run to Daylight" himself never enjoyed such a season from his Hall-of-Famers Hornung and Taylor.

People remember George Blanda's 36 TD passes for the Houston Oilers in 1961, but what they fail to remember are the superior seasons enjoyed by his two six-foot, 25-year-old wide receivers, Charley Hennigan and Bill Groman. Never put into the same category as the Browns' Warfield and Collins, the Cowboys' Hayes and Rentzel or the Colts' Berry and Orr, during the 1961 14-game season, Hennigan and Groman went wild like no receivers before them and like none since. Hennigan, the "possession receiver" caught 82 balls, 12 for touchdowns, averaging 21 yards a catch for 1746 yards. The dangerous "speed receiver" Groman pulled in 50 passes, averaged 24 yards a catch for 1175 yards, and scored 17 TDs. Together they accounted for over 200 yards a game!

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Unfortunately, the AFL never competed favorably with the NFL in the two statistics that matter most, attendance and TV ratings. Thus, after 10 years of relative success, they merged with the established league. But even in defeat, there was victory. Can you name a league that merged an amazing 10 teams into another? Not the World Football League, not the All-American Football Conference, not the United States Football League, or even the World Hockey Association or the American Basketball Association. The AFL lives on today in spirit if not in flesh. Is Christian Okoye not Really Cookie Gilchrist in disguise? And who is that guy in the broadcasting booth saying "boom?"