

WHEN THE BUFFALO BILLS RODE HIGH

by Stan Grosshandler
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"Count me in with Buffalo!" These words, spoken by Ralph Wilson Jr. to the founders of the American Football League, heralded the return of Buffalo to the pro football scene after an absence of 11 years.

The metropolis on the shores of Lake Erie has had a long and distinguished place in the history of professional football. The city's first team, the Buffalo All-Americans of 1920, was a member of the American Professional Football Association, forerunner of the NFL. This club lasted until 1927 and was also known as the Bisons and Rangers. Some of the finest players of that period played for Buffalo, stars such as Eddie Casey, Lud Wray, Elmer Oliphant, Tommy Hughitt, Lou Little and Tiny Thornhill.

The second team to represent the city was in the third abortive AFL of 194-41. This team was called the Indians and then the Tigers. A third and more substantial team appeared in 1946, the Bills of the All-America Conference. Playing the entire four years of the AAFC, they won their division the third year.

After Wilson obtained the franchise in October of 1959, he selected his first draft choice, Richie Lucas; named the team the Bills, and signed his first player Joe Schaffer. The name had infinitely more success than the players.

When Wilson got around to naming his coach he selected Garrard "Buster" Ramsey. Ramsey had been a fine guard for the Cardinals and for the previous eight years had been defensive coach of the Lions. Dick Gallagher, a man of vast football experience, was chosen general manager. Ramsey failed to produce a winner his first two years and was replaced by Lou Saban.

Saban had been a linebacker for Paul Brown and was well schooled in his methods. His first season he brought in two men who were to play lead roles in the glory years to follow.

Cookie and Kemp

For the ground game he obtained a 6'21/2", 243-pound fullback who had gone straight from high school football to Canada. Carlton Chester "Cookie" Gilchrist, who had played with five teams in the Canadian league, was a punishing runner, superb blocker, and excellent receiver. His favorite saying was, "There isn't anything I can't do with a football."

Cookie led the league in rushing with 1,096 yards his first year and repeated again in 1964. When he retired, he had set seven rushing records, the most notable being achieved on the day he rushed for 243 yards and five TD's.

The air game was to rest on the arm of Jack Kemp. Jack had quarterbacked the San Diego Chargers in their first two title games, yet Saban was able to obtain him on injured waivers.

Presently a U.S. Congressman from Buffalo, Jack holds the distinction of being the only quarterback who was a starting signal caller the entire 10 years of the AFL. He played in five of 10 title games, was the league's top passer in 1960, and its MVP in 1965.

Saban led the team to its first season over the .500 mark. However, the next year they fell to exactly .500, tying Boston for the Eastern Division lead. Though they lost to the Pats in a playoff, better days were just around the corner.

The Bills opened their 1964 season by crushing the Chiefs, 34-13. They did not lose until their tenth game when Boston took them, 36-28. Their only other loss was to Oakland by three points; thus a margin of 11 points kept them from a perfect year.

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This was a solid club both on offense and defense. Behind Kemp was Daryle Lamonica, a scrambler like Jack with a powerful arm. Six times that season, Daryl was to come to the rescue to either win or save a game. He ended up as the third best rusher on the club. Though Gilchrist did most of the carrying, the Bills had fine runners in the vet Wray Carlton and rookies Willie Ross, Bobby Smith, and Joe Auer.

The receivers were Glenn Bass, Elbert Dubenion, and Ed Rutkowski with Ernie Warlick the tight end. Stew Barber and Dick Hudson held down the tackles, Al Bemiller and Billy Shaw, the guards; and Walt Cudzik, center. Joe O'Donnell and Dave Behrman were the backup men. The brilliant Shaw, a wizard at leading interference, has been called the best offensive guard in the history of the AFL.

It was a cold, bleak day when the Bills met the Chargers for the league title. Things got even darker for the Buffalo fans as the Chargers jumped off to a 7-point lead. Things began to improve when the rookie soccer kicker Pete Gogolak hit with a field goal. An off-tackle slant by Carlton put the Bills in front to stay, making superfluous another Gogolak field goal and a one-yard sneak by Kemp after he had hit Bass with a 48-yard pass. Buffalo now had its first title after many, many years of patient waiting.

The defensive line that yielded only four TD's rushing all season was composed of Ron McDole and Tom Day at ends and Dave Dunaway and Tom Sestak, tackles. Dudley Meredith was the swing man. Sestak, a 17th round draft choice from McNeese State, was the mainstay of this great line and has been named to the all-time AFL team.

Linebackers were John Tracey, Harry Jacobs and Mike Stratton. All received all-league mentions. Tracey was one of the 10 men in the famous Ollie Matson deal of several years previous. Jacobs is a member of the exclusive club composed of men who played the entire 10 years of the AFL, and Stratton is now in his 11th year with the club. The fourth linebacker was the resident humorist of the team, Paul Maguire. His constant sense of the ridiculous kept the club loose, and he also happened to be one of the best punters in the game.

The deep defense had Butch Byrd and Booker Edgerson at cornerbacks with Hagood Clarke and George Saimes, the safeties. George, an All-American running back, was shifted to free safety and became one of the all-time greats at this post. For a period of 17 games between 1964 and '65 this defense did not allow one touchdown by rushing.

'63 - '64 - '65

Dick Gallagher, later director of the Hall of Fame in Canton, felt that a great deal of the Bills' success was due to their 1963 draft. "That was a great draft," recalls Dick. "We got Dave Behrman, Jim Dunaway, George Saimes, Gene Sykes and Daryle Lamonica."

"I felt our '64 club was the best all-around physical team," said Jack Kemp. "It had the best weapons. We were tops in scoring and rushing and our defense allowed the fewest yards and points in the league. The '65 team had the tenacity and spirit to overcome many obstacles to win. We had some severe injuries but managed to go all the way. That year we lost our three top receivers, Bass, Dubenion and Warlick by midseason. However, Charley Ferguson, Bo Roberson, and Paul Costa took over nicely."

"I felt the 1965 team was the best for overall experience and had better depth," said Tom Sestak. "This club had a better attitude and more confidence. Both clubs had different personalities. For example, we did not have Gilchrist. He felt that he was not getting to carry the ball enough so he took himself out of a game without the coach's permission. After the season he was sent to Denver for Billy Joe."

The Bills did not clinch their second consecutive Eastern Division crown until the 11th game when the clever scrambling and adept passing of Kemp salvaged a tie with San Diego and the division title. Their all-over record for 1965 was 10-3-1.

The only difference in the 1965 championship game was that it was played under sunny California skies and the Bills beat the Chargers by a wider margin. This time the Bills struck first as Kemp hit Warlick with a 28-yard pass and then Byrd brought a punt back 74 yards. The three Gogolak field goals were hardly needed as Buffalo won 23-7.

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Lou Saban returned to college coaching after that season and was replaced by his assistant Joe Collier. Kicker Gogolak also left by defecting to the Giants. This turned the "cold war" into a hot one with the eventual merger of the two leagues.

Under Collier the Bills were able to repeat for the third time as rookies Bobby Burnett and Bobby Crockett had spectacular years, but lost the opportunity for a trip to the first Super Bowl by losing to Kansas City.

Lou Saban later returned to Buffalo with some success, but he couldn't make O.J. Simpson and Dennis Shaw into the Gilchrist and Kemp of a new dynasty.