

THE WORLD FOOTBALL LEAGUE'S "DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH"

by Mark Speck

One could write volumes on the negative aspects of the ill-fated World Football League of the mid 70's: bouncing paychecks, confiscated uniforms, empty stands, phony attendance figures, pre-game meals consisting of bread and water, players using T- shirts to dry off after practice, etc., etc. The list goes on and on.

But there were positive things about the WFL, not the least of which were the number of careers that got their start in the WFL.

While NFL teams draft and sign hundreds of players each year, many others slip through the proverbial cracks and never make it. Perhaps they are an inch too short, or a step too slow. For whatever reason, they're not stamped with the NFL seal of approval. These are the players who jumped on the WFL bandwagon, hitching their careers to a maverick league in hopes it would lead to the football promised land -- the NFL.

For quite a few, it did.

Although the exposure in the WFL was limited, it was exposure nonetheless, and coaches and scouts who had written these players off now had to change their point of view. The WFL, they had to admit, had polished and honed some hidden gems, gems they had previously thought were rocks (or belonged under them).

This article doesn't include those players who used their WFL experience as a springboard to careers in the CFL, of which there were many. It will deal only with those who went on to careers in the NFL.

Quarterback Gary Danielson was overlooked in the 1974 NFL draft when he came out of Purdue. He signed as a free agent with the New York Stars and played backup for them in 1974 and with the Chicago Winds in 1975. He didn't play much but it was enough to earn a tryout with the Lions in 1976. He wound up playing quarterback in the NFL for 10 years, twice throwing for over 3,000 yards.

Defensive Tackle Charles DeJurnett was drafted as an afterthought by the Chargers in 1974, on the 17th round. He chose instead to sign with the Southern California Sun. He was one of the WFL's top defensive tackles, making 77 tackles and five sacks in 1974 and 54 tackles and 4 more sacks in '75. DeJurnett's career was just starting as the WFL's ended, as he signed on with the Chargers and played 10 solid seasons in the NFL.

Wide Receiver Jack Dolbin was not drafted by the NFL when he left Wake Forest. Too small, the scouts said about the 5'10" 185-pounder. Too slow. So Dolbin, who knew he couldn't get bigger or get faster, worked on getting better, playing on sandlots for the semi-pro Pottstown Firebirds and Schuylkill Coal Crackers. In 1974, it was a stint with the WFL's Chicago Fire. He caught 54 passes for 742 yards and 7 TDs and was earning a reputation as a reliable, sure-handed receiver. When the Fire went out, Dolbin joined the Broncos and played five good seasons in Denver, including the 1977 Super Bowl team.

Because of his height (only 5'11") and his desire to go to Oxford University and fulfill his Rhodes scholarship, Pat Haden was not looked on too favorably by NFL scouts, so he lasted until the 7th round, when the Rams picked him. He signed on with the Southern California Sun instead and led the WFL in completion percentage before he left for Oxford. He joined the Rams in 1976 and helped lead them to the NFC playoffs in '76, '77 (when he was the second-rated passer in the NFC), '78, '79 and '80.

Wide Receiver Alfred Jenkins was ignored by every NFL team on Draft Day 1973. He was too small (5'11", 169 pounds) and from a small college (Morris Brown). He hooked up with the Oilers and lasted

three days in camp. Three days. Not much of a pro football career to write home about. But the WFL and the Birmingham Americans offered Jenkins another chance. He took it and ran -- all over the fields of the WFL. He caught a team high 60 passes for a league leading 1,326 yards and 12 touchdowns. He was named the Americans' Offensive M.V.P. and was awarded with having his uniform confiscated when the Americans folded. He latched on with the Atlanta Falcons and proved those skeptics wrong who said a small player from a small school couldn't make it in the NFL. He was the Falcons leading receiver in 1975, '76, '77 and '80 and went over 1,000-yards in receptions in both 1980 and '81.

Ron Rydalch wasn't drafted until the 8th round by the Jets in '74, so he played in the WFL with the Houston Texan/Shreveport Steamer franchise. His play in the WFL led to a six year stint with the Bears.

Kickers Benny Ricardo, Richie Szaro, Rusty Jackson, and Duane Carrell were avoided on NFL draft day like the plague, or like a white cornerback at least. All four joined the WFL and used their experience in the Wiffle as a lead-in to a job in the NFL. All four did well, with Ricardo scoring a team-high 108 points with the Vikings in 1983.

Johnnie Walton was a talented quarterback with all the physical tools required by the NFL -- 6'2", 200 pounds, a bazooka for an arm. But NFL scouts turned a cold shoulder for two reasons -- Walton was from a small college and he was black. Black quarterbacks just didn't have a chance in the NFL of the late 60s and early 70s. He wasn't drafted by anyone and he was cut twice by the Rams and once by the WFL's Chicago Fire. He was forced to play for minor-league outfits in Indianapolis and Columbus. Then in 1975, he signed on with the WFL's San Antonio Wings and had a great season, leading the league in completions, attempts, passing yards and touchdown passes. His performance was good enough to earn him a spot with the Eagles. After coaching his alma mater, Elizabeth City State College in North Carolina, he came back and tore up USFL defenses like he did those of the WFL, setting league standards along the way.

There were many others. Idaho State Guard John Roman, who wasn't drafted by the Colts until the 13th round in 1975, played with the Wiffle's Philadelphia Bell and went on to play seven solid seasons with the Jets. UCLA Center Art Kuehn lasted until Round 15 in '75, signed instead with the Southern California Sun, did well enough to get a shot with the Seahawks, and lasted seven years in Seattle. Jeff Sevy, a guard from Cal, waited around until the 12th round in 1974, joined the Wiffle's Hawaiians, and then moved on to the Bears for four years, the Seahawks for two, and the USFL for one year.

Hal Stringert, Glenn Hyde, Gary Shirk, Gerard Williams, and Greg Stemrick weren't drafted at all in 1974. Stringert played two years for the Hawaiians, had a great year in 1975 -- 5 interceptions, 119 yards in returns and a touchdown -- and went on to six years with the Chargers. Hyde, after getting cut by the Falcons, played for the Chicago Fire and the Charlotte Hornets in the WFL and then had a 12-year career in the NFL and USFL. Shirk had two good seasons as a tight end for Memphis which led to an 8-year stint with the Giants. Williams was cut by the Cowboys, so he signed with Birmingham and had two solid seasons in the Wiffle. The Redskins liked what they saw and Gerard wound up playing five years for them. Stemrick was cut by the Oilers, joined the Chicago Fire, and his performance led to a second chance with Houston. Stemrick played 8 years in the Oilers defensive backfield, leading the team in interceptions in 1981.

A chance, or a second chance. That's all these players had asked for, and the Wiffle had given it to them. The league had given them the opportunity to prove their mettle on the field, to show the NFL that they did indeed have what it takes, and that the NFL had been wrong about them.

Yes, it's easy to laugh at the WFL, to joke about all the negative things that happened in 1974 and '75. But one positive aspect was how the league helped launch the careers of players who might otherwise have never had the chance. That fact shouldn't be forgotten, and shouldn't be allowed to drown in the same sea of red ink that the league did.

OTHER NFL PLAYERS OF NOTE WHO STARTED OUT IN THE WFL

Steve Foley, DB, Broncos, 76-86
Ike Harris, WR, Cardinals, 75-77, Saints 78-81
Matt Herkenhoff, OT, Chiefs 76-85
Keith Krepfle, TE, Eagles 75-81, Falcons 82
Frank Marion, LB, Giants 77-83

James Scott, WR, Bears 76-80, 82
J.T. Turner, DE/G, Giants 77-83, Redskins 84
Danny White, QB, Cowboys 76-88

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NFL ACHIEVEMENTS OF WFL ALUMNI

Gary Danielson

- Set Lions record for most passing yards in a season with 3,223 in 1980
- Set Lions record for most touchdown passes in a game with 5 on Dec. 9, 1978

Jimmy Edwards

-Led NFC in kickoff returns (40), kickoff return yards (1,103) and kickoff return average per return (25.1) in 1979

Steve Foley

- Set Broncos record for most interceptions in a career with 44

Pat Haden

- Named to 1977 Pro Bowl

Alfred Jenkins

- Led NFC in yards per catch average (20.2) in 1975
- Named to 1981 All-Pro Team
- Played in two Pro Bowls
- Led NFC in yards receiving (1,358) and touchdowns (13) in 1981
- Set Falcons record for career receptions with 359 and receiving yards with 6,257

James Scott

- Led NFC in yards per catch average (19.3) in 1980

Greg Stemrick

- Named to 1981 Pro Bowl

Richie Szaro

- Tied for lead in NFC in field goal percentage (78%) in 1976

Danny White

- Led NFC in completions (334) in 1983
- Set Cowboys record for most passing yards in a season with 3,980 in 1983
- Set Cowboys record for most touchdown passes in a season with 29 in 1983
- Tied Cowboys record for most touchdown passes in a game with 5 on Oct. 30, 1983
- Set Cowboys record for most touchdown passes in a caeer with 155
- Ranked #15 in latest NFL Quarterback Lifetime Ratings list

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