

Buffalo's 2-Sports Guys

By Joe Marren

Before Deion went neon or Bo knew much about anything, the Buffalo All-Americans of the American Professional Football Association boasted of several two-sport stars back when the league changed its name to the more marketing-friendly National Football League.

Luke Urban started at end for the 9-1-2 All-Americans of 1921, the 5-4-1 squad of '22, and then played end and blocking back during the 5-4-3 season of '23. Along the way he also played minor league baseball with the Buffalo Bisons and major league baseball with the Boston Braves.

Tillie Voss began the 1921 APFA season with the Detroit Tigers before the reserve end/tackle came to the All-Americans that year. In '22 he was a starter with the Rock Island Independents but ended the season with the Akron Pros. He was a starter again in '23 with the Toledo Maroons, in '24 with the Green Bay Packers, '25 with the Detroit Panthers, '26 with the New York Giants, and 1927-28 with the Chicago Bears. He ended his NFL career in '29 as a starter with the 1-7-1 Buffalo Bisons, coming from the 0-6 Dayton Triangles. Voss must have liked traveling, because from 1925-30 he also played with several American Basketball League teams.

Mike Wilson was a baseball player with the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1921. By '22, he was a reserve end/blocking back with the All-Americans but finished the season with the Rochester Jeffersons. In '23, he went from the Jeffersons to the Rock Island Independents. He was a starter with them in '23 but a reserve in '24. Out of football in 1925, he was a starter again in '26 with the Independents of the first American Football League, featuring Red Grange. (That AFL, nicknamed "Grange's Showcase" because Grange's agent, C.C. Pyle, couldn't get an NFL franchise in New York, disbanded after its only season when Grange's New York Yankees were absorbed into the NFL.)

In the '20s, when football and baseball only overlapped in the fall, it was easier for a player to be in two sports. So far, more than 70 football players have also played big league baseball, 60 played major league basketball, 20 were wrestlers, two were pro golfers, three were professional soccer players and there were about 12 boxers, according to Bill Himmelman, the owner of Sports Nostalgia Research.

There have also been 150 pro basketball players who have played other sports, he said.

According to statistics from the Society for American Baseball Research, there have been 77 baseball/football players, 64 baseball/basketball players, and one who played baseball and was a referee and coach in the NHL. There have also been many others who played major league football and minor league baseball or other sports. Among them:

The late Art Rooney, who joined the Pittsburgh Steelers, was in the outfield for Flint of the Michigan-Ontario League in 1922. Playing the outfield for Wheeling in the Middle Atlantic League in 1925, he led the league in games (106), hits (143), runs (109), and stolen bases (58).

Don Hutson, Green Bay's Hall of Fame receiver (1935-45), was an outfielder for Pine Bluff of the Cotton States League in 1936. In '37 he was with Albany of the New York-Penn League and Selma/Jacksonville of the South Atlantic League.

Hall of Famer Sammy Baugh quarterbacked the Washington Redskins from 1937-52. But he also played shortstop for Columbus of the American Association and Rochester of the International League in 1938.

Cleveland Hall of Fame quarterback Otto Graham (1946-55) played with the Rochester Royals of the National Basketball League in 1945-46.

TV analyst Tom Brookshier, a defensive back with the Philadelphia Eagles in 1953 and 1956-61, also was a 7-1 pitcher with Roswell in the Longhorn League in 1954.

Denver Broncos quarterback John Elway was an outfielder for Oneonta of the New York-Penn League in '82.

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So it was not all that strange when Urban, Voss and Wilson decided they wanted to be fulltime athletes in the so-called off-seasons of their youth.

Louis John Urban, born March 22, 1898, was 23 when he began his pro football career with the All-Americans. The 5-foot-8 athlete weighed 165 pounds when he started at left end for Coach Tommy Hughitt's squad that challenged George Halas' Chicago Staleys for the championship of the 2-year-old league in 1921. The Staleys (9-1-1) were crowned champs after beating Buffalo (9-1-2), 10-7, Dec. 4 in Chicago.

Urban came to the All-Americans from Fall River, Mass., where he starred in football, baseball and basketball at B.M.C. Durfee High School, according to Buffalo Bisons historian Joe Overfield.

In his book, "Athletics at Boston College," Nathaniel Hasenfus wrote that Urban lettered in football, baseball, hockey and basketball at BC. Urban was the Eagles' first football All-American and the basketball team's player/coach before graduation in 1921.

"Never was Urban boxed out," Hasenfus wrote about Urban's football days. "His catches were miraculous ... in his meteoric career at BC."

Signed by baseball's New York Yankees after graduation, the catcher was sent to Charlotte of the South Atlantic League that summer. In 55 games, (28 behind the plate, eight playing shortstop and 19 at third base), he batted .335, with two home runs and added eight stolen bases.

Urban then spent the fall with the All-Americans, catching two passes for 23 yards and one touchdown. This was in the era when players lined up on both the offensive and defensive sides of the ball. There are no available stats to show how Urban played defensively, but a Buffalo newspaper clipping after the All-Americans' 7-0 win at home against the Dayton Triangles on Nov. 27 gives a good idea:

"Voss and Urban were down the field like mounted chargers ... Urban's tackling was the deadly never-miss type, while Voss took two or three men out of the plays with the utmost ease," it said.

Hyperbole aside, Urban wasn't one to rest. He also kept busy by coaching basketball and football at Canisius College in Buffalo. In two stints as basketball coach, from 1921-24 and 1925-31, his teams went 68-49. He coached 146 football games, losing 27 with six ties, said John Maddock, the college's sports information director. His best teams were the 8-1 squad in 1923 and the 7-1 team in '27.

When baseball season rolled around in 1922, Urban ended up with the Buffalo Bisons of the International League. Joe Overfield's book, "The 100 Seasons of Buffalo Baseball," said that the Bisons sold catcher Benny Bengough of Niagara Falls to the Yankees for cash and four players, including Urban. The Bisons would finish third (95-72) as Urban played in 72 games, catching 56 and playing third base in 10, batting .299 with one homer and five stolen bases.

(Buffalo was rich with two-sport stars that year because a baseball teammate of Urban's was Cecil "Babe" Dye, a .311 hitter who was also a hockey player. Dye was inducted into the NHL Hall of Fame in 1970.)

The '22 professional football season would be as disappointing for Buffalo fans as the baseball season had been because the All-Americans finished in ninth place with a 5-4-1 record. But Urban may have been pleased; he had eight receptions for 203 yards and rushed once for seven yards.

In 1923, Urban played in 106 games -- catching 104 -- for the Bisons. Although the team slipped to fifth place with a 83-81 record (.506), Urban had a better year with a .310 batting average, one home run, 27 RBI, and two stolen bases.

Buffalo again finished ninth in the NFL that '23 season with a 5-4-3 record as Urban caught six passes for 44 yards, rushed once for five yards and returned one punt for 20 yards.

That season was the end of Urban's NFL career, but he broke into baseball's big leagues July 19, 1927, with the National League Boston Braves. The 60-94 Braves finished in seventh place as Urban played in 35 games, collected 32 hits and scored 11 runs with a .288 batting average. He played 15 games for the 1928 last-place Braves (56-98), had three hits and batted .176. In two years in the majors, Urban played in 50 games, got 35 hits (including five doubles), scored 11 runs and had a .273 batting average.

Urban was back with the Bisons in '28, when Buffalo (92- 76, .5476) finished second to Rochester (90-74, .5487) on the last day of the season. He caught 44 games, belted out three homers with 16 RBI and batted .275. The 31-year-old Urban's last season playing pro baseball was with the 83-84 (.497) fifth-place Bisons in '29. He caught 84 games, batted .233 with three homers and 22 RBI.

Also on the '28 Bison team was Tom Nash, who played for the Green Bay Packers from 1928-32 and the football Brooklyn Dodgers in 1933-34. Joe Overfield wrote that Nash hit safely only once in 13 at-bats before being let go. But he was an All-League defensive end three times with the Packers.)

After Urban left Canisius, he stayed in Buffalo until 1940, once working as a golf pro at a local course. B.M.C. Durfee hired him as its football, basketball and baseball coach in '40. According to Overfield, his teams eventually won state championships in all three sports before he retired as coach in 1960 and athletic director in '67. The Fall River Herald News said his basketball teams were 247-91, winning two New England titles. His baseball teams won 17 Bristol County championships and several state tournaments.

In recognition of his life's work, Urban was named to the Canisius College Hall of Fame on May 5, 1976. He was also later named a charter member of the Durfee High School Athletic Hall of Fame and the school's fieldhouse was named after him in 1979. Among other honors: He was named to the Boston College Hall of Fame and was picked as the end on the All-Time All-Star Eagles' football team; and he was named to the Massachusetts Schoolboy Coaches Hall of Fame in baseball and basketball.

Urban died Dec. 7, 1980, in Somerset, Mass. The picture with his obituary in the Herald News praised him for "attributes that have helped his 'boys' to be victorious in the game of life."

Walter C. "Tillie" Voss was born under a wandering star March 28, 1897. Although he lived most of his life in Detroit, he played for six professional basketball teams in five years and with 11 football teams in nine seasons.

The 6-foot-3, 207-pound end/tackle from the University of Detroit began his football career with the 1921 Detroit Tigers before coming over that season to the All-Americans. Playing mostly as a reserve in four games for Buffalo, the 24-year-old caught one pass for 15 yards.

He didn't again don a Buffalo uniform until 1929, his last year in the NFL, when he caught three passes for 60 yards in eight games with the 1-7-1 Buffalo Bisons. It would also be Buffalo's last year in the NFL until the modern AFL merged with the established NFL on Feb. 1, 1970.

In his NFL career, Voss played 35 complete games, catching 37 passes for 747 yards a 20.2 yards-per-catch average, and scored six touchdowns. Also, in 51 incomplete games, he caught 20 passes for 376 yards and one touchdown.

But that wasn't the whole Tillie Voss story. He also played independent professional basketball with barnstorming teams in the winters from 1922-25.

Himmelman of Sports Nostalgia Research said Voss was among the players recruited by the professional American Basketball League when it debuted in the 1925-26 season. The ABL is regarded as the first nationwide league, though its franchises were only in the East and Midwest. NFL President Joe Carr, also a minor league baseball executive in Columbus, Ohio, was named president and secretary. On the executive committee were George Preston Marshall, owner of the Palace Laundry in Washington D.C., and later owner of the Washington Redskins; George Halas, owner of the Chicago Bears; and Max Rosenblum of Cleveland.

Voss started that first ABL season with the Detroit Pulaski Post but later played with the Rochester Centrals and Brooklyn Arcadians. In 30 games he scored 44 field goals and sank 52 free throws for a total of 140 points, a 4.7 points-per-game average.

He played 31 games for Marshall's Washington Palace Five during the winter of 1926-27, scoring 39 field goals and making 66 free throws for 144 points, a 4.6 average.

Voss was back in Detroit with the woeful Detroit Cardinals (5-1-3) for 1927-28 before the team folded. He then signed with the Fort Wayne Hoosiers, which lost the title to the New York Celtics, three games to

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one, and ended the season with Halas' Chicago Bruins. In 27 games, he had 17 field goals and 10 free throws for 44 points, a 1.6 average.

He closed out his basketball career with the Bruins. In the 1928-29 season, he played 27 games and had 16 field goals and eight free throws for a total of 40 points, a 1.5 average. Voss played 32 games in 1929-30 and had 15 field goals and six free throws for 36 total points, a 1.1 average.

"He was a pivotman and never really called upon to score except on offensive rebounds," Himmelman said.

"In his day, they still had the center jump after every score and the pivotmans job was primarily to get the tap to a teammate. So a pivotman was judged on how much he could control the tap." (It wasn't until 1937 that pro leagues eliminated the center tip-off after every basket.) "Remember, the Chicago team was owned by Halas and Halas wouldn't have kept him around if he didn't do his job. He was a decent pro player, not a Hall of Famer, but a decent player," Himmelman said.

The Bruins released Voss after the 1929-30 season and the league itself suspended operations in '31. It was reorganized as an Eastern league in '33, according to Robert Peterson's book, "Cages to Jump Shots."

Voss died Dec. 14, 1975, in Boca Raton, Fla.

Neither the football nor baseball halls of fame have much information on Samuel (Mike) Wilson, who was born Dec. 2, 1896, in Edge Hill, Pa. The 5-foot-10, 167-pound end/blocking back graduated from Lehigh University and played briefly for the National League Pittsburgh Pirates in 1921 before turning to pro football. In fact, "briefly" might be an understatement. A catcher, he debuted June 4, 1921, and in five games had four at-bats without getting a hit.

Wilson next turned his attention to football and had a bit more success. The 25-year-old blocking back started the 1922 season with Buffalo but finished with the 0-4-1 Rochester Jeffersons. He had one carry without any yards in one complete game.

Wilson was a starter with the 2-3-3 Rock Island Independents in '23 and had two interceptions and 13 catches for 200 yards and a touchdown.

A sub with the Jim Thorpe-led Independents (5-2-2) in '24, he intercepted one pass and caught five passes for 126 yards and a touchdown.

Wilson wasn't with the Independents in '25, but when the team switched leagues to the ill-fated AFL in '26 he was listed as a starter with the 2-6-1 squad.

After that Wilson disappeared as a player from the sports books. His New York Times obituary said he was an NFL official from 1945-56 and supervisor of officials from '56 until he retired in '62. He died May 16, 1978, in Boynton Beach, Fla.

Buffalo had a few more brushes with two-sport stars both in the old days and in the modern era with the NFL Bills.

Larry Bettencourt played in the infield and outfield for the American League St. Louis Browns in 1928, but was with the Buffalo Bisons for part of the 1929 baseball season. In 20 games playing third base for the Herd, he had a .234 batting average. During his time in Buffalo he had 15 hits -- including four doubles and a homer -- scored 10 runs, knocked in another eight and stole two bases. He played in 168 major league games, all with St. Louis, and 1,390 minor league games with 10 different teams.

But Bettencourt also played football. At age 27, the 5-11, 205-pound center and linebacker from St. Mary's College was on Green Bay's 1933 team (5-7-1), Coach Curly Lambeau's first losing season with the Packers. Bettencourt disappears from pro football rosters after that, but he was named to the College Football Hall of Fame later in life.

In the modern NFL, according to Sal Maiorana's book, "Relentless: The Hard-Hitting History of the Buffalo Bills," there are also a few two-sport players. Among them:

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Wide receiver Glenn Bass decided against a baseball career to sign as a free agent with the Bills on Sept. 8, 1961. Also, baseball umpire Ron Luciano, a former Syracuse football player, was briefly a Bill before he became an International League umpire Nov. 14, 1964.

And, as any St. Bonaventure University basketball fan knows, the Bonnies' George Carter was selected as a halfback in Round 13-B of the 1967 college draft by the Bills. Carter was also picked by the Detroit Pistons in the eighth round of the NBA draft that year.

Carter would play one game for the Pistons before going on to a seven-year career in the American Basketball Association with six teams, which also included a brief appearance in the 1971 ABA All-Star Game.

Whether in the modern era or back in the Roaring '20s, athletes such as Urban, Voss and Wilson all had two things in common: A thirst for competition and a love of sports that drove them to continually test themselves against the best in their professions.