

Fantastic Finishes

Three Weeks with the 1960 New York Titans

By William J. Ryczek

When the AFL commenced operations in 1960, it was difficult to predict the performance of each team. The clubs had no track record, they ran hundreds of prospects through their training camps, and many players they were depending on had little or no professional experience. Prior to the start of the season, *Sports Illustrated* ranked the Chargers, Oilers and Patriots as the three best teams in the league, based upon their performances during the exhibition season. The Broncos and Titans were judged the weakest. Denver not only played bad, they looked bad, sporting hideous socks with broad vertical stripes. The stockings were so unattractive that Joe Pagliei, a fullback who wound up with the Titans, refused to negotiate with Denver after he saw their uniforms. "I didn't like the way Denver's socks looked," he recalled. "They looked like hell. I said, 'I've got big legs, they won't look good on me.'"

The Broncos lost all of their exhibition games, one to the Patriots by a 43-6 margin, and were outscored 200-53 overall. Boston was therefore established as a 16 point favorite when they played Denver in the new league's first game on September 9. The underdog Broncos surprised everyone by taking the lead on a 76 yard punt return by Gene Mingo and a 59 yard screen pass and run from quarterback Frank Tripucka to Al Carmichael. The defense thwarted a late Patriot rally and Denver held on for a 13-10 upset win.

In the season's second week, the Patriots bused down to the Polo Grounds for a Saturday night game with the Titans who, along with Denver, were projected to be the weak sisters of the AFL. The Titans had gone to training camp in Durham, New Hampshire without an experienced quarterback and with precious few players with professional experience at any position. As other AFL and NFL teams made their cuts, New York general manager Steve Sebo skillfully acquired players who filled the gaping holes in the Titan lineup.

A New Team

He signed 29-year-old former NFL and CFL quarterback Al Dorow, who was on the Titan negotiating list but had been holding out attempting to force a trade to the LA Chargers, close by his home in Altadena, California. Sebo traded a little-used linebacker to the Dallas Texans for Dick Jamieson, another serviceable signal caller. He picked up a number of quality linemen, but perhaps the key acquisition was split end Art Powell, who had been cut by the Philadelphia Eagles. "The thing that made our season," said Titan coach Sammy Baugh, nearly forty years later, "was when we got Art Powell."

Powell departed from Philadelphia under unusual circumstances. The Eagles had scheduled an exhibition game in Norfolk, Virginia, where segregation was the law of the land. When Powell discovered he would not be allowed to stay at the same hotel as his white teammates, he refused to go. "All your life," Powell said recently, "as an athlete, you're told that this is a team sport. You play together. Well, you can't just play together on the field and then send me off somewhere else to stay. The places they sent us to were places you wouldn't send your worst enemy. They were horrible."

Although the other black players on the Eagles told Powell they would join his boycott, all bowed to management pressure and went to Norfolk. Perhaps they were wise to do so, for in retaliation for Powell's defiance, he was waived out of the NFL. Despite his obvious talent, no other team put in a claim.

Powell signed with the Titans, who had lost their first four exhibitions, and joined the club in Buffalo for the final pre-season game. One of the Titan assistants warned Baugh about Powell's reputation as a troublemaker and asked how he intended to deal with his new player. "If he can help this football team," Baugh supposedly replied, "I don't care if he sleeps with my wife."

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If one took the coach's remark literally, Powell was entitled to several nights with Mrs. Baugh, for he caught four touchdown passes against the Bills, leading the Titans to a 52-31 win.

Number One

The following week, in the first game of the regular season, New York defeated the Bills again, 27-3 at the Polo Grounds, a sloppy game played in the mud and rain that was the residue of Hurricane Diana.

The rain accentuated the sorry conditions at the old ballpark, which had been virtually dormant since New York's baseball Giants left for San Francisco following the 1957 season. When the Titans arrived at the stadium prior to their opening game, they found the grass overgrown in some areas, and the turf barren in others. The press box was covered with three years worth of pigeon droppings and many of the seats were broken and encrusted with grime. "It was the dirtiest damn place you ever stepped in," said Sammy Baugh.

The first professional night game played in New York in fifteen years, the Titan-Patriot clash exposed another deficiency in the Polo Grounds. When the lights were tested earlier in the week, it was discovered that the Giants had removed about 300 bulbs and sent them to their Phoenix training site. Other bulbs had simply burned out, necessitating a number of replacements prior to game time.

By halftime, the Patriots perhaps wished that the game was being played in semi-darkness, for with the Titans holding a 17-7 lead, the Boston club was in danger of suffering a second straight loss to the two teams rated the worst in the league. New York added a touchdown in the third period and held a 24-7 advantage entering the final quarter. Titan middle linebacker Bob Marques was enjoying himself tremendously at this point. A graduate of Boston University, Marques was well-acquainted with Boston assistant coach Mike Holovak, the former Boston College star and coach, and Alan Miller, the Patriot fullback who had also played at BC. Marques shouted a number of uncharitable remarks across the field to Holovak as the Titans built their sizable lead and was quite vocal about the poor performance of the Patriots. During one Boston drive, on fourth down and one, Marques blitzed and tackled Miller in the backfield. He laid on top of him after the whistle, holding Miller down and forcing the cursing fullback to wrestle himself free.

In the fourth quarter, the Patriots came storming back, closing the gap to 24-21 on a fourth down pass from Butch Songin to Jimmy Colclough with 1:50 left. When the ensuing on-side kick was recovered by the Titans' Thurlow Cooper on his own 46, however, it appeared as though the game was safely in the Titan win column. On the first play from scrimmage, the overeager Patriots jumped offside, giving New York a first down on the Boston 49, leaving them only five yards to gain on three plays to get a first down and run out the clock. Pete Hart, the Titan fullback, ran to the left and was dropped for a four yard loss. Approaching the sideline and knowing he had to stay in bounds to keep the clock running, Hart dropped to the ground, then was rolled across the white boundary line. Despite the protests of Sammy Baugh, the officials stopped the clock.

Two more runs by Ted Wegert failed to move the ball past the Patriot 48, and the officials stopped the clock when the Patriots were slow to get up from a pileup, again over Baugh's objections. This brought up fourth down and four with about 30 seconds left in the game. The Patriots were out of timeouts and the clock continued to tick. Rather than attempt to run out the clock with another play from scrimmage, Baugh sent Rick Sapienza in to punt.

Sapienza played his college football at Villanova as a halfback and flankerback and was drafted by the Eagles following his graduation in 1958. He was cut during the exhibition season and played for the semi-pro North Attleboro Jewelers in 1959. A native of the Boston area, Sapienza was signed by the Patriots when the new American League was formed, but was released early in camp. This was a great disappointment, since he had dreamed of playing with the local club and felt he was performing better than many of the running backs in camp. Reportedly, the Patriots had twenty players with no cut contracts, many of whom were running backs. Sapienza was picked up by the Titans, who were in desperate need of a punter, prior to the first exhibition game. Now, playing against the Patriots, by whom he still felt he had been treated unfairly, he had a chance to experience revenge.

Sapienza moved slowly onto the field and into the huddle. On the sideline, Bob Marques was unwrapping the tape from his hands, still yelling at the Patriot side of the field. The Titans broke the huddle and deployed into punt formation. Sapienza looked up at the clock. When he opened his hands, giving the signal to center Mike Hudock to snap the ball, there were seven seconds remaining. Hudock

delivered the snap knee high. Watching the film later that week, the Titans saw that, just as the ball was approaching Sapienza's hands, he lifted his head and looked up to check the heavy Patriot rush, taking his eyes off the ball for a precious second. The snap hit Sapienza right in the hands, and he dropped it. He reached down to try to pick it up. "You know when you bend down to pick something up, your foot gets in the way and you accidentally kick it away from yourself," Sapienza said, "people have done that a lot of times, but not during a football game."

The Patriots poured in on Sapienza. One of the rushers knocked him away from the ball and fell on top of him, removing any chance of the punter recovering his own fumble. There was a mad scramble in the backfield, with six or seven players touching the ball and losing it.

Boston middle linebacker Tony Sardisco kicked at the ball with his left foot, squirting it free and sending it toward the Titan goal line. As Sardisco attempted to fall on the ball, he was hit by New York's Bill Mathis and the elusive pigskin was free once more. Chuck Shonta, a Boston defensive back, chased the ball, picked it up at about the New York 25, and with a half dozen teammates as a trailing escort, carried it in for the touchdown that gave the Patriots a 28-24 victory as the final gun sounded.

Marques, greatly embarrassed, sprinted to the clubhouse before Holovak and the rest of the Patriots could find him. Sapienza sat disconsolately in the dressing room, suffering through the lowest moment of his young life. Baugh came over and told him not to worry, and recounted the story of the 1945 NFL championship game, which his Redskins lost to the Cleveland Rams, 15-14. Early in the game, Baugh attempted a pass from punt formation in his own end zone. The ball hit the goal post, which under 1945 rules resulted in a safety and the deciding points of the game. Sharing the story was a noble gesture on Baugh's part, but it did little to console Sapienza.

By the time the reporters entered the locker room looking for him, Sapienza had exited through a back door. Numbly, he walked to the subway station to catch the train back to his hotel. "I looked down at the tracks and I wanted to jump in front of the train," he recalled. "I was 23 years old and I was crushed. It was the most devastating thing that had ever happened to me."

Upon returning to the hotel, he took a call from his father and assured him, with false courage, that he was fine. A reporter from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, who knew Sapienza from his days at Villanova and with the Eagles, appeared and asked for an interview. "Rich," he said, "let me tell you something. You become famous two ways, when you do something real good or when you do something real bad." After a pause, he added, "Tonight, I think you did something real bad."

There was no practice scheduled for Sunday. On Monday, it rained and practice was cancelled. For those two days, Sapienza secluded himself in his hotel room, seeing no one and replaying those fatal seven seconds over and over in his mind.

Meanwhile, bombastic Titan owner Harry Wismer, not a man to accept defeat gracefully, sprang into action. He had called Baugh's decision to punt "stupid football." "They didn't build guided missiles with that type of thinking," he said in the locker room. "I don't give a g--d--- what Mr. Wismer thinks or says," Baugh responded. He told reporters that, in the same situation, he'd do the same thing again, with one exception. He'd tell his punter not to fumble.

The next day, Wismer filed a protest with the league office, claiming that the Patriot touchdown should be voided, since their players had kicked the ball before picking it up. Paradoxically, in this game called *football*, any kicking of the ball in such a situation, intentional or not, was illegal. Bob Austin, a fifteen year veteran NFL official who was the AFL supervisor of officials, reviewed the game film and found a double foul. "The Titans have a legitimate beef," he said. Sardisco had indeed kicked the ball, as had the Patriots' Gino Cappeletti, but so had Sapienza, although a bit earlier and for a much shorter distance than he had intended. The double infraction should have resulted in a replay of the down, and another punt by the Titans.

Austin said he would inform Commissioner Joe Foss of his findings. He did so and Foss, while essentially admitting that the Titans claim was valid, disallowed the protest. "There has never been a result changed in the history of pro football. If I should rule in the case it would make history," Foss said. "The game films showed there was an error in judgment by the officials on the game's final play, but our games will always be decided on the field and not by viewing movies after the contest."

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On Tuesday, Sapienza appeared at practice and, due to an injury to Art Powell, worked with the first team as a flanker. He expected to start that week against Denver. On Wednesday, however, Baugh called the young man in and informed him he was being released. It was Wismer's directive, the coach told him. General manager Steve Sebo insisted that Sapienza was dropped because of his poor punting, not because of his fumble. In two games, he had averaged only 32.4 yards on eight kicks.

Sapienza approached Denver coach Frank Filchock, in town for that week's game, and asked for a tryout. Filchock, who had been involved in a gambling scandal before a championship game in 1946, told Sapienza that Denver couldn't sign him because there had been rumors that Sapienza had thrown the game against the Patriots, a ridiculous assertion, but another blow to the poor man's ego.

Returning home, Sapienza signed with North Attleboro once again for, according to him, more money than he had been making with the Titans. He played semi-pro ball in the ACFL until he was 36 years old, while pursuing a full-time career as a physical education teacher and coach. Yet, the specter of the Saturday night game with Boston, his last major league football game, remained with him. "There hasn't been a single month that I haven't thought about that game," he said 36 years after the event. "I hear people talk about it and I say to myself, 'I wonder if I was ever there? Maybe it was just a dream.' It was the most traumatic experience."

It was not a dream. The Patriots had gained the first win in their history and the Titans had suffered their first loss.

Number Two

New York's next game, against Denver, featured, by an incredible co-incidence, an exact reversal of the ending of the prior week's contest. The Broncos, after their miserable showing during the exhibitions, had won their first two regular season games, and were a team to be taken seriously. Like the Titans, they had picked up a number of key players as other teams made their cuts, and now boasted a potent offense. In addition to long time CFL quarterback Frank Tripucka (in his 12th professional season), the Broncos had versatile Gene Mingo, a professional rookie who never attended college, honing his football skills in the Navy. Mingo ran from scrimmage, caught passes, returned kicks, could throw the option pass and was one of the league's top field goal kickers. Al Carmichael, his running mate at halfback, spent six years in the NFL, and held the league record for the longest kickoff return (106 yards).

Denver led the Titans 10-7 at halftime. Late in the third quarter, they widened the lead on a four yard touchdown run by Bob McNamara. Following the score, Leon Burton, the Titans' speedy 5'9" running back, dropped back to receive Denver's kickoff. Burton, as a halfback at Arizona State, led the nation in rushing in 1957, gaining 1126 yards and averaging a phenomenal 9.6 yards per carry. He had supposedly been clocked at 9.6 for 100 yards, but, ignored by the NFL, had been a \$75 a week department store clerk before signing with the Titans. In warmups prior to the Bronco game, Burton collided with Roger Ellis. Ellis was knocked silly and Burton limped off the field with a leg injury. He was well enough to play, however, and took the Bronco kickoff straight up the middle, then stumbled toward the sideline, regained his balance and covered 88 yards to once again bring his club within a field goal at 17-14.

Midway through the final period, New York quarterback Al Dorow (who averaged 44 yards a punt in Sapienza's absence) led the Titans on an eleven play, 68-yard drive culminating in a ten yard TD pass to tight end Thurlow Cooper, putting New York in front 21-17. With just under three minutes remaining, Tripucka hit Lionel Taylor, a former Chicago Bear from little New Mexico Highlands, who had been signed earlier in the day, with a pass that gave the Broncos a 24-21 advantage.

Dorow had one more chance to win the game, and passed his club to the Denver 42. With 1:15 to go, however, he was intercepted, seemingly snuffing out the Titans' last hope. The New York defense held, and by calling all their timeouts, forced Denver into a punting situation at their own 26. Only sixteen seconds remained.

The Titans knew their only chance of winning the game was to block the kick. They put on a ferocious rush, and Nick Mumley and Roger Donahoo pulled a stunt, Mumley going inside and Donahoo to the outside. Mumley, 6'6" and a former All-State basketball player in West Virginia, found a clear path to rookie punter George Herring. He leaped high and smothered the ball on the ten yard line. "The halfback who was supposed to take me just ran by," he said. "He missed the block and the ball just hit me on the chest." It bounded off to the side, where Donahoo picked it up. He looked up, saw no one between him

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and the goal line, and sprinted in with the winning touchdown. For the second week in a row, the game had been decided by a botched punt on the final play. "This time," wrote Al Buck in the *New York Post*, "the Titans got the girl."

"When I plan a game," said Baugh in the locker room, "I plan it right."

Number Three

The fourth week of the season found the New York club in Dallas to face the formidable Texans, meticulously assembled with Lamar Hunt's sizable bankroll. Said Sammy Baugh, "They've had a strong bunch since the beginning. They haven't had to pick up players cut by the other league like most of us have had to do." Dallas won all six of their exhibition games, including a one-sided 38-14 victory over New York, and was favored by 13 points over the Titans.

The Texans' offensive backfield was loaded with talent, including running backs Abner Haynes of North Texas State, Jack Spikes of TCU and Johnny Robinson, Heisman Trophy winner Billy Cannon's backfield mate at LSU. Haynes was the backbone of the Texans' offense, a speedy, shifty breakaway threat who could run, return kicks and catch passes with equal skill. "He was there one moment, gone the next," remembered former Titan Paul Hynes. "He left me tackling the air a couple of times." At the end of one game at the Cotton Bowl, the public address announcer cautioned the departing fans, "Drive carefully on the way home. The life you save may be Abner Haynes'."

For the trip to Dallas, the Titans added a permanent replacement for poor Rick Sapienza, punter Joe Pagliei, the same Joe Pagliei who had spurned Denver because of their striped socks. The Titans' stockings passed his inspection but their helmet did not. Pagliei bought his own and spray painted it in his hotel room, rendering a good portion of the drapes Titan blue in the process. "The boys want this one awful bad," said Baugh the week before the game. "I think we'll play a real good game." It was not only the boys who wanted to win. The *New York Times* reported that during practice that week, Baugh "frequently gave his commands with a bark. Everything the coach said seemed to have more bite than was his custom." Baugh was returning to his native Texas, and wanted to make up for his team's poor showing in an Abilene exhibition game less than two months earlier.

Sunday, October 2, was a beautiful day in Dallas, with bright sunshine and temperatures reaching 85 degrees. The Titan offense was as hot as the weather, taking less than two minutes after the opening kickoff to reach the end zone. Following two penalties against the Texans, Dorow hit Art Powell, who was several strides behind Dave Webster, for a 36-yard touchdown. Dallas, however, countered with seven points of their own less than two minutes later. The key play was a 72 yard pass from Cotton Davidson that bounced off the hands of New York's Chuck Dupre and into the arms of Dallas' Johnny Robinson. With 11:37 left in the first period, each team had a touchdown. The Titans regained the lead when flanker Don Maynard leaped high in the end zone and wrestled the ball away from Dallas' Don Flynn for a 26-yard touchdown. The defenses finally rallied and there was no further scoring until midway through the second quarter.

Powell again got behind the Dallas secondary and hauled in a 49-yard pass from Dorow, setting up a five-yard touchdown toss to halfback Bill Shockley. Dallas countered with a quick touchdown, but Leon Burton ran the ensuing kickoff back 50 yards to set up a 37 yard scoring pass to tight end Dave Ross which made the score New York 27 Dallas 14 at halftime.

In the second half, the Titans had to fend off Abner Haynes. Haynes ran from scrimmage, caught passes, returned kicks and almost single-handedly brought his team back. For the game, he carried the ball five times for 46 yards, caught six passes, some on spectacular grabs, for 80, returned two kickoffs for 58 and three punts for 74.

With about a minute to play in the first half, he took a punt from Pagliei on his 13-yard-line. He started to run with the ball, then lateralled to Johnny Robinson. Robinson danced around, then tossed it back to Haynes, who was finally tackled on the 35. On New York's first possession of the third quarter, Bill Shockley attempted a 53 yard field goal. The kick was short, and Haynes fielded the ball on the seven yard line. He ran straight up the middle, burst out of a pile of players and went 93 yards. Fortunately for the Titans, one of the Texans was detected clipping and the play was called back.

In spite of the penalty, Davidson led his club to a score, but New York came right back on the running of Shockley, who gained 45 yards on a drive that put the Titans ahead 34-21. New York's second half

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offense consisted principally of a ground attack as Dorow, who had completed 16 passes in the first half, connected only once in the second.

Despite a 36-yard kickoff return by Haynes, the Titans held on Dallas' next possession. Early in the fourth quarter, however, Abner scored on a five-yard run to bring the Texans within six points. The next time New York had the ball, Shockley kicked a 32 yard field goal that turned out to be the margin of victory. Dallas countered with a touchdown, and the Titans got the ball on their 20 with 2:25 left, needing to run out the clock to preserve a two point victory. On third down, Dewey Bohling picked up a first down on a pitch to the right side.

Two plays later, with fifteen seconds left, Bohling carried again and was hit hard by defensive end Mel Branch. The ball came loose and began rolling toward the Titan goal line as a mad scramble ensued, and the prospect of a third consecutive bizarre ending flashed in front of Baugh's eyes. On the six-yard-line, Branch tried to pick the ball up and run with it. He dropped it, and finally, on the eight-yard-line, as time ran out, New York guard John McMullan outwrestled a Texan for the ball.

New York fans watching the game on television were spared the nerve wracking ending, as the local affiliate, WABC, cut off the telecast at precisely 6:30 p.m., with the Titans leading 37-35. "The (switch) board lit up like a Christmas tree seconds after the game went off," said a network executive. It was a presage of the "Heidi" game of 1968, when NBC cut away from a dramatic Jet-Raider game to begin the showing of the classic movie.

Anticlimax

Unlike the Heidi game, there was no further scoring in the New York-Dallas match, and the Titans, at 3-1, were in first place in the Eastern Division. This was the high point of their season, as they faded to 7-7 and finished second behind the Houston Oilers. New York led the league in excitement, however, scoring more points than any other professional club, and in three dramatic weeks early in the season, the Titans had three consecutive fantastic finishes.

Sammy Baugh and Bill Parcells are the only two Titans/Jets coaches to have .500 or better career records with the team.