

FOOTBALL'S FERTILE CRESCENT II

In football, professionalism is a question of attitude

"A pro, Danny? A pro is how you think of yourself."
-- from the movie "About Last Night. . .", as adapted from the
play "Sexual Perversity in Chicago," by David Mamet.

By Eric Poole

Reprinted from *The Record*

In Ed Brosky's opinion, professionalism in football is about much more than getting a paycheck. And he is uniquely qualified to know.

As a college player, the Chartiers Valley High School graduate was a teammate of NFL and NCAA Hall-of-Famer Tony Dorsett on the University of Pittsburgh's national championship team.

A decade coaching on Western Penn-sylvania's sandlots and three seasons as the head coach at Canon-McMillan crystallized his opinion on that subject.

"Professionalism is a state of mind," he says. "That should be the philosophy of any football program."

It's the philosophy of the new Pittsburgh Colts, revived this season with Brosky as coach.

Last Saturday, the Colts played their second home game, more than a decade after the team disbanded and 16 seasons since they played for the national championship of minor league football.

In 1981, the Colts won the right to meet the Twin City (Calif.) Cougars, who became the Oakland Invaders of the United States Football League.

"They beat up on us pretty good," is all the player-coach remembers about the game, won by the Cougars. The accommodations, which were in no way minor league, were another -- longer -- story.

The Colts spent the week in preparation for the game as professionals -- not just in attitude, but in prerequisites.

"(The Cougars) picked up the entire trip, plane fare for 55 people, because we had players, coaches and some of the other people, advertisers, investors went out there. We were there for five days at a resort and they paid for all of our meals, all of our rooms."

A year later, the Colts defeated the Canton Patriots, 37-6, to win the championship of the Ohio Semi-pro League, which featured teams from South Carolina, West Virginia, New Jersey, Ohio and Kentucky, and folded after the 1984 season.

"The league folded because it was too expensive to travel to some of those games. We also had to play at (Lt. J.C.) Stone Field (in North Park) and we just weren't able to generate a strong enough gate," remembers Brosky.

For the 1984 season, Brosky, along with the Colts' players who could make the GPFL's 220-pound weight limit joined the Carnegie Bulldogs.

They made an immediate impact, by qualifying for the GPFL championship game, which they lost to the Penn Hills Titans, 20-14, in overtime at Honus Wagner Field.

A year later; Brosky again played and coached the Bulldogs into the league title game against Sto-Rox. This time Carnegie lost, 28-15, in a quagmire at Sto-Rox High School.

But on Saturday, Nov. 15, 1986, the Bulldogs broke through, bringing the title to Carnegie in one of the greatest games in GPFL history, although it didn't look that way at the end of the first quarter.

The North Side Express had established a 21-7 cushion at Stone Field and it appeared Carnegie would be "threepeat" championship game losers.

But the Bulldogs' defense held the rest of the way. In fact, it would keep the Express from scoring for the rest of the game, as the fourth quarter ended with a 21-21 tie.

With six minutes to go in the second overtime, Bulldogs' placekicker Larry Litman gave Carnegie a 24-21 victory with a 28-yard field goal in front of the approximately 800 fans who had remained at Stone Field through the five-hour game.

"We started the game at 7:30 and the game wasn't over until 20 after 12, " remembers Brosky. "That was one of the most physically draining games I've ever been in."

Quarterback Pat Hahey threw for 347 yards in that game and receiver Averell Harris caught 12 passes for 212 yards.

But as far as Brosky was concerned, the hero of the evening was running back Al Robinson, who ran for 153 yards on 28 carries, including nine carries for 64 yards on the game-winning drive.

"Al Robinson was an ironman that night. He was one of those quiet, unassuming, un-pretentious gentlemen. He was a gentleman, beyond a shadow of a doubt."

According to GPFL financial records, the Sto-Rox team divided \$1,316.33 for winning the championship in 1985, approximately \$30 per player. Second place was worth less than \$20 per player.

In all likelihood, the money wasn't actually divided among the team members, but spent on a massive celebration. In the waning years of the GPFL, few players actually realized any money for their efforts.

Instead, they were focused on their football dreams.

No place to go

Brosky hopes a Colts revival can provide something that has been missing in the Greater Pittsburgh area since the GPFL slipped beneath the waves in 1989 -- a place where adults who dream of playing football have a chance to do so.

By his account, that dream, that hunger to play, makes would-be players potential victims for unscrupulous promoters who lack the resources to start a team, but have a field and players willing to pay for the privilege of trying out.

"They're taking this dream a lot of these guys have to play and they're using it to extract exorbitant amounts of money. They're charging players up to \$65 a man. . . under the pretext that they're running this tryout to recruit players for these different leagues."

One of the cruelest ironies in this story is that, in western Pennsylvania, hundreds of thousands of people gather every fall Friday night to watch what may be the best high school football in America.

On Saturdays, they turn to their television sets to watch Penn State, Notre Dame and -- in spite of its recent failures -- The University of Pittsburgh.

And every day of the year, denizens of the area discuss the Pittsburgh Steelers in a tone normally reserved for church on Sunday mornings. But for those adults who actually want to play football, the only outlet is flag-football games.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 21, No. 2 (1999)

The GPFL provided that release for current Moon Area High School football coach Mark Capuano, whose desire to play didn't end when he was cut by the Steelers in 1969, just out of North Carolina State.

With the promise of a job, he went to Richmond, Va., a year later, to play for a minor league team affiliated with the New Orleans Saints. But when the job fell through, so did Capuano's enthusiasm for Richmond.

"I'm in camp, it's 110 degrees, I went through probably the toughest camp in all the years I played football and the coach (J.D. Roberts, who would go on to be the Saints' head coach) was crazy; he had us out there four, five hours a day," remembers Capuano.

"So I said to my roommate, 'You know what, I've got to get me some kind of job,' so I decided to quit. I came back up here and luckily I got back into Moon and the next year, I started playing for the Rox Rangers."

Capuano is now the chairperson of Moon Area High School's mathematics department and was named 1994 coach of the year in the Mid-American Conference, a high school conference including schools in Beaver and Western Allegheny counties.

Today, he resembles a younger version of actor Jack Palance, both physically and vocally, his voice lowered to a growl by 25 years of Friday nights on the sidelines at high schools across Western Pennsylvania.

While he was playing for Sto-Rox, Capuano was an assistant coach at Moon while it was going through some tough times. Playing for the Rangers, one of the top teams in the GPFL, took some of the sting from many Moon losses in the mid-1970s.

"What was great for me is that I was coaching up here and I would get frustrated. Moon was struggling, we'd be losing games and I felt that we could play a lot better," he says.

"Well, I could just go down on that Saturday or that Sunday and play a football game and just try to beat somebody up, the guy playing over me or whatever and just kind of take out my frustrations with a good group of guys."

Game day preparation was strictly no-frills.

"We're talking low-budget thing here," says Capuano about GPFL game days. "So you go and get your equipment, you get dressed in the parking lot, you just put your pads on, you probably came with your pants already on."

"You went out there and warmed up, played the game. When the game was over, you threw your stuff back in the trunk, kept your pants on, went down to some local tavern and celebrate a win or a loss."

The great escape

To Capuano, the GPFL may not have been the NFL, but it was football. For those who played for the team at the State Correctional Institution-Pittsburgh, it was much more than that.

In the short time they spent on the field, their lives weren't confined by iron bars and cement walls, but by the chalk line on a field 100 yards long and 50 yards wide.

"It was an escape for two hours," says Quaker Valley High School football coach Tom Liberty, who coached at SCIP for three seasons. "They got to put on the hat, strap it up and see their dreams."

Escape for the football-playing inmates came in another form. Activities director Leo Nobile sponsored an athletic banquet, which gave the players a rare privilege.

"They were allowed to bring a guest to the banquet," remembers Liberty. "Just playing gave them the opportunity to see a woman once a year."

Job cuts at Beaver Falls High School brought Liberty to the coaching job at the prison.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 21, No. 2 (1999)

"In the paper one day it said that the state was looking for a physical education teacher. When I found out it was at a prison, I nearly flipped. But my unemployment was running out and my wife was pregnant."

According to the coach, discipline wasn't much of a problem on the prison team because practice and game time spent out of lockup was too valuable to risk incurring the coach's wrath.

"In my time there, I can really remember only one person who was a pain," he says. "Usually if I had a discipline problem, I wouldn't let them back (into practice) until the situation changed."

Ultimately, the situation changed for the SCIP football team -- when construction for a new cell block precluded use of the football field in 1985. Today, that cell block sits where the football field used to be.

Just uphill from the prison, at Northgate High School's field, semiprofessional football is making its return to the place it was born 105 years ago, when William "Pudge" Heffelfinger was paid \$500 to play for the Pittsburgh Athletic Club.

However, the Colts' return is bittersweet at best. In the 1970s, approximately 500 men played in the GPFL. Due to roster limitations, the Colts can realize the competitive desires of less than one-tenth that number.

But for quarterback Mauro Monz, who played defensive back at Duquesne and was expecting to line up there for the Colts, the idea is to play some football at a relatively high level and have a resume entry for an Arena Football league tryout next year.

For most of the rest of the team's players, such as WTAE-TV reporter/defensive back Sheldon Ingram, the distance between the Pittsburgh Colts and Pittsburgh Steelers is much greater than the 2 miles that separate Northgate Field and Three Rivers Stadium, and the attraction is just the opportunity to play football the way it was intended.

For the young fans who saw the Colts' 43-6 victory over the Cleveland Gladiators on July 19, it was a chance to get autographs from a group of men who dressed, looked and acted like professional football players.

For western Pennsylvania, the Colts are something that hasn't been seen for a long time, and maybe a return to its football past.