

The Pro Football Career Of Cookie Gilchrist

By Brian Marshall

Part I: From High School to the Senior ORFU

It was the 1953 WPIAL (Western Pennsylvania Inter-scholastic Athletic League) Class AA Championship game and as a member of the Har-Brack Tigers "Triple Terror Backfield" it was a given that Carlton Chester "Cookie" Gilchrist would have a big day against the Donora Dragons. The individual numbers didn't materialize for Cookie, who was held to only 2 yards rushing, on that late November day at Pitt Stadium and as a matter of fact the game ended in a scoreless tie.

Nevertheless, the 1953 season was a good one for Cookie as he led the WPIAL in scoring with 186 points, in 9 regular season games, and had a huge day rushing, 294 yards on 15 carries and 5 touchdowns, in a game against Vandergrif on October 30. The game was chosen, in 1994, the top game in Alle-Kiski Valley history. Cookie also received the most votes in the balloting for the All-Pennsylvania Team.

Cookie turned 19 years of age in 1954 and was ineligible to compete at the WPIAL level so he took his 6'1", 215 lb frame and headed for the big time, the Cleveland Browns of the NFL. In order to become a member of the Browns, a special ruling was required from then NFL Commissioner Bert Bell. Cleveland's coaching genius, Paul Brown, welcomed the many newcomers, 36 to be exact, to the Browns' training camp at Hiram College on Sunday July 25th.

Cookie didn't make it to the first preseason game on August 21st against the Green Bay Packers as he was part of the cut that reduced the Browns training camp roster to 46 players on August 3rd. Cookie was on the move again but this time he was heading to the Canadian League where both his offensive and defensive skills would be required.

Cookie landed in Sarnia, Ontario with the Sarnia Imperials of the Senior ORFU (Ontario Rugby Football Union) and successfully displayed his wares to the coaching staff to become a member of the team. The ORFU regular season was comprised of 12 games which for the Imps began on August 25th against the Kitchener-Waterloo Dutchmen and ended on October 31st against the Toronto Balmy Beaches. Two exhibition games were also thrown in for good measure during the regular season. The playoffs began on November 3rd and were a best of three format.

Cookie Gilchrist played in 11 games and led the league in rushing (118 carries for 945 yards and 8 touchdowns), was second in scoring with 73 points and was named to the 1954 Canadian Press Senior ORFU All-Star Team at halfback. Gilchrist, who wore number 27, was voted the winner of the Jimmy Shanks Memorial Trophy as the Most Outstanding Player on the Sarnia Imperials.

Cookie was valuable to the Imperials for a number of reasons, he kicked field goals (one a 45 yarder), boomed kickoffs, played defensive halfback and led his team in rushing and scoring. Keep in mind that the Canadian League has three downs, not four, touchdowns were 5 points (at that time), not 6 and the field was 110 yards (goal-line to goal-line), not 100. Unfortunately Cookie couldn't do it all himself and the Imps suffered two straight losses, one in overtime, to the Dutchies in the playoffs.

Gilchrist reported to the Sarnia Imperials training camp on Friday, July 29, 1955, and was cut from the team on Saturday, July 30. Then Cookie was slapped him with the hotel bill that the team was apparently paying for. Gilchrist was cleared by a Sarnia court and headed for Kitchener-Waterloo to play with the Dutchmen.

Cookie starred for the "Greens" in the Green-White intra-squad game on August 12th by setting up the winning score with a 60 yard run with a couple minutes remaining in the game. The whites were led by quarterback Bob Celeri, the former NFLer and the Senior ORFU MVP award winner in 1954.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 2 (2000)

The Dutchies played an exhibition game against the semi-pro champion Buffalo Bills on August 19th and Gilchrist made big gains on "sweeps" as did his running mates while on their way to a 60-0 drubbing. Then on September 21 against the Imps Gilchrist picked up a loose ball and went 80 yards to score. The loose ball was the result of a poor handoff by Imp quarterback Gino Cappelletti, who would later star in the AFL for the Boston Patriots.

In the game against the Toronto Balmy Beaches on September 25th, Gilchrist was slugged during the last Beaches point after touchdown attempt and proceeded to take on the whole Beaches team as he was walking off the field.

Cookie had another long run on October 15th against the Imps when he returned a Gino Cappelletti kickoff 86 yards to the Imp 13 yard line. The Kitchener-Waterloo Dutchmen ended the regular season with a 10-1-1 record and won the ORFU title in a best of three playoff format against the Sarnia Imperials who finished with a 6-5-1 record on the season.

Cookie Gilchrist finished the season as the league rushing champion with 129 carries for 806 yards and 10 touchdowns and third in scoring with 61 points (behind teammate Bill Graham with 71 points and Gino Cappelletti with 63 points) and was named to the 1955 Canadian Press Senior ORFU All-Star Team at halfback for the second year in a row. While Cookie did not win the Auchterlonie Memorial Trophy as the team MVP, that went to Bobby Kuntz, he again was a tremendous threat with the ball, a super kickoff man, ferocious on defense and a champion.

Part II: The CFL

After experiencing great success in the Senior ORFU, Cookie Gilchrist graduated to the CFL (Canadian Football League) with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats for the 1956 season. On July 15, 1956, Cookie had reported to the training camp of the Tabbies for the medical exam and general check-up along with another first year CFLer, Zollie Toth, the former NFLer with the New York Yanks, Dallas Texans and Baltimore Colts. Coach Jim Trimble also had a guy by the name of Sammy Baugh in camp to work with the quarterback candidates.

Cookie had a good performance for the "Gold" team, by scoring a touchdown in the Intra-Squad game on Wednesday evening July 25th and was successful in making the team as did both Ralph Goldston and Zollie Toth. Incidentally, the Gold team opposition was the "Black" team, coached by Sammy Baugh.

As a matter of fact Cookie, who only rushed the ball in twelve of the fourteen games, managed to finish second on the season to Pat Abbruzzi in Big Four Rushing. Gilchrist finished the season with 130 carries for 832 yards rushing, 18 receptions for 279 yards receiving, 15 kickoff returns for 344 yards and had 2 interceptions for 7 yards which led to Cookie being selected to the 1956 Canadian Press Big Four Offensive All-Star Team at halfback.

Ralph Goldston, the former Philadelphia Eagle and first year CFLer, was selected to the Canadian Press Defensive All-Star Team at halfback.

In 1957, Gilchrist had another great season for the Tiger-Cats by finishing fourth in scoring and second in rushing, this time to teammate Gerry McDougall. Cookie finished the season with 204 carries for 958 yards rushing, 8 receptions for 82 yards receiving, 7 kickoff returns for 104 yards and had 3 interceptions for 65 yards. The season's performance led to Gilchrist being selected to the 1957 Canadian Press Big Four Offensive All-Star Team and also being selected to the Eastern All-Star Team by the fans.

The 1957 season was extra special because it marked the first of three consecutive Grey Cup appearances for the Hamilton Tiger-Cats who led the Big 4 with a 10-4 record and a bye into the Eastern Finals. The 1957 Grey Cup game was played in Toronto on November 30th and it was to be a special game for Cookie Gilchrist, who scored two touchdowns as the Tabbies beat (32-7) the Winnipeg Blue Bombers led by quarterback, Kenny Ploen. Cookie was now a CFL champion.

After having been sold for the unbelievably low sum of \$5,000 to the CFL's Saskatchewan Roughriders of the WIFU (Western Interprovincial Football Union), Cookie had another fine season in 1958. Gilchrist played for the "Greens" in the intra-squad game on July 23rd and carried the ball 9 times for 51 yards. Again Cookie finished second in rushing, this time to Johnny Bright, former NCAA great at Drake, of the

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 2 (2000)

Edmonton Eskimos and he also ranked second in kickoffs. Cookie led the WIFU in 1958 with the most yards rushed for in a single game with 173 yards (Bright's best was 168 yards) on 15 carries against the British Columbia Lions on September 1st.

The season numbers for Cookie were 235 carries for 1,254 yards rushing, 16 receptions for 144 yards receiving and 17 kickoff returns for 436 yards. Gilchrist was again selected as an All-Star along with teammates Ken Carpenter, former Cleveland Brown, and Jack Hill, former NCAA great at Utah State.

A trade saw Gilchrist back in the Big Four with the Toronto Argonauts for the 1959 season. After leading the Big Four in scoring for the 1959 (75 points) and 1960 (115 points) seasons and ranking second in kickoffs during the '59 season, Gilchrist was selected to the Big Four All-Star Team. As for team laurels, Cookie was second to Dick Shatto in the rushing department for both the '59 and '60 seasons.

Beginning with the 1961 season, Cookie signed an unprecedented five year contract, through the '65 season, and he responded with his best season rushing the ball for the Argos by racking up 709 yards on 105 carries in the ten, of fourteen, regular season games he rushed the ball. The 709 rushing yards was good enough to rank fourth in Big Four rushing and to lead the Argos. Gilchrist set the all-time Argo team record for most points in a single game with 27 on October 30, 1960 and in 1961 tied the all-time team record (Dick Shatto in 1958) for the number of consecutive 100 yard rushing games with three.

The 1962 CFL season began as the previous three seasons had, Cookie was not only on the roster of the Toronto Argonauts he was part of what the front office referred to as the "million dollar backfield" which, in addition to himself, consisted of Dave Mann (former Chicago Cardinal), Dick Shatto and Gerry McDougall. Gilchrist led the Argo rushers, with 55 yards, in the opening game of the exhibition season against the Hamilton Tiger-Cats on July 18th.

After the exhibition game against the Edmonton Eskimos on July 25th Cookie was suspended indefinitely by head coach Lou Agase for a violation of the team's curfew regulations. The incident was not Gilchrist's first infraction with the Argos and on July 30th the team Managing Director, Lew Hayman, announced that Cookie had been placed on waivers subject to recall.

Cookie's contract was a major stumbling block to other CFL clubs because it still had four years to run and his salary was such that most CFL clubs could not afford him. All the same, Gilchrist had been made available to other CFL clubs for the ridiculously low \$350 waiver price and when the 72 hour waiver period expired without a taker the Argos were in a position to transfer him out of the league.

Cookie had been talking with Harvey Johnston, former Kitchener-Waterloo coach, of the AFL (American Football League) Buffalo Bills and on August 4th Cookie signed a one year contract to play for the Bills. The Argos were to be compensated with the \$5,000 they had advanced Gilchrist on his '62 salary. And so marked the end of an impressive CFL career for the 240 pound, non-conformist, all-star fullback and linebacker named Carlton Chester "Cookie" Gilchrist.

Part III: The AFL

If Cookie's CFL career was impressive then his AFL career can only be described as fantastic. In 1962, the 27 year old, 243-pound fullback, who reportedly was paid a salary of \$20,000, made an immediate impact on the AFL by winning the rushing title, becoming the first AFL back to rush for a 1,000 yards in a single season. Cookie also set AFL records for the most 100 yard rushing games in a single season with six, the most consecutive games scoring a rushing touchdown with seven and, along with Abner Haynes, the most rushing touchdowns in a single season with thirteen.

In addition to the records, Cookie finished the season tied for second, with Gino Cappelletti, by registering 128 points in the scoring department. All of the preceding accomplishments led to Cookie being voted the "AFL Player of the Year" by the Associated Press (AP) along with being named to the first All-AFL Offensive Team by the AP, UP (United Press) and the league.

The 1963 season was kind of a mixed bag for Cookie due to his being hampered by a series of injuries to his ribs, ankle and toe that did not allow him to operate at full capacity for the first half of the season.

"We didn't have enough outside speed," said Bills Coach, Lou Saban, which was largely due to Wray Carlton and Wayne Crow being injured very early in the season. Even so, Gilchrist still managed to rank as the third leading rusher, the fourth leading scorer, the rushing carries leader with 232, the rushing

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 2 (2000)

touchdowns leader with twelve and he set new league single game records, on December 8th against the New York Jets, for rushing carries (36), yards (243) and rushing touchdowns (5).

The 243 yards rushing was a huge accomplishment since it shattered the previous AFL mark of 216 yards by Billy Cannon set in 1961 and also bettered, by six yards, the NFL mark of 237 yards by Jim Brown set in 1957 and repeated in 1961. The all-time professional football record for rushing yards in a single game was 287 yards set by Ron Stewart of the CFL Ottawa Rough Riders in 1960. The 36 carries broke the previous AFL single game record of 31 carries by Art Baker set in 1961 and five touchdowns broke the previous record of four by Abner Haynes set in 1961. Cookie was named to the first All-AFL Offensive Team by the New York Daily News and the second All-AFL Offensive Team by the AP and UP. Is it any wonder why Cookie was referred to as the "the AFL's Jim Brown".

The 1964 season saw Gilchrist back on top again as he led the AFL in rushing with 981 yards, led in rushing carries with 230, and tied for the league lead in rushing touchdowns with six. Cookie was named to the first All-AFL Offensive Team by the AP, UP, the league, the New York Daily News and the NEA (Newspaper Enterprise Association).

The biggest prize of 1964 was to come in the form of a championship as the Bills defeated the San Diego Chargers, led by Tobin Rote and Kieth Lincoln (Lance Alworth was out with a leg injury), to win the AFL Championship. Cookie led all rushers in the game with 16 carries for 122 yards, including runs of 32 and 36 yards. Cookie was now an AFL champion.

The 1965 season brought new colors to the forefront as Cookie, who didn't always agree with how he was being used, was now a Denver Bronco after being traded on February 24th for Billy Joe. Bills Coach, Lou Saban, had said, "It had to come. The situation between Cookie and the Bills had become impossible".

Gilchrist was the second leading rusher and the rushing carries leader with 252 for the third year in a row. The 252 carries was a new single season AFL record and broke the previous record of 244 carries set by Charley Tolar in 1962. Cookie was named to the first All-AFL Offensive Team by the AP, UP, the league, the New York Daily News and the NEA. Is it any wonder why Cookie Gilchrist was referred to as the "AFL's Jim Brown"?

The 1966 season did not go well for Gilchrist where according to an article in the Denver Post dated September 4, 1966, Cookie refused to report to the Broncos training camp in Golden, Colorado then staged a public resignation. The Broncos then placed Gilchrist on the reserve list which meant they could not use him for the '66 season although he could be traded. The article goes on to say Cookie had claimed the Broncos owed him \$59,000 on a no-cut contract plus bonuses. The Broncos filed a \$20,000 suit against Gilchrist for money claimed to be advanced against Cookie's '66 salary. As of an article dated October 10th the Denver Post was reporting that no deals had been made for Gilchrist and he was still Denver property.

Then in mid-October of 1966 Gilchrist, known as a troublemaker, became a member of the fledgling Miami Dolphins and played his first game for them on October 23rd against the Houston Oilers. Cookie only managed to rack up 262 yards rushing on 72 carries and 110 yards on 13 receptions in the eight games he played for the Dolphins. The Miami experience did not work out well for Cookie. Was this the beginning of the end of Gilchrist's football career?

The end was indeed just around the corner for Cookie, who in 1967 was back with the Denver Broncos and only played in one game, the first game of the season, due to knee problems. As much as Cookie wanted to show he was the Cookie of old he was forced to face the reality of his knee problems and accept a low profile exit from the game he loved while at the same time it allowed him to escape the team and management issues that gave him so much anguish.

All in all, in the 65 games he played over six seasons, Cookie ranks fifth on the all-time AFL career rushing yards list with 4293 yards and a very healthy 66.05 yards per game average. Only Jim Nance acquired more rushing yardage (4338) in less seasons than did Cookie and only Gilchrist and Nance won the AFL rushing title twice each. Cookie is also one of only four players, others are Jim Nance, Clem Daniels and Abner Haynes, to lead their respective AFL divisions three times each in rushing yardage.

No one can deny Carlton Chester "Cookie" Gilchrist his due as a football player, both on offense and defense, nor his desire to win and be a champion. Without question it is clear to this football historian that

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 2 (2000)

Cookie Gilchrist, an all-star selection in eleven of the fourteen seasons he played, a champion three times, league MVP, team MVP and record-setter, left his mark on pro football.

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