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Bob Brodhead

This article is written by Budd Bailey

As of 2020, fans of the Buffalo Bills know the name of the last quarterback to wear No. 17. It's Josh Allen, who they hope will be using that number for years to come.

Most of those same fans would be stumped if asked what Bills' quarterback was the first to wear No. 17. The answer goes back 60 years to the Bills' original season. Bob Brodhead wasn't around for long in Buffalo, but he certainly had an unusual career path in the sports business that essentially ended with something of a thud at Louisiana State University.

Robert Edgar Brodhead was born on December 20, 1936 in Kittanning, Pa. The town is about 45 minutes northeast of Pittsburgh. That part of the world has become known as something of a breeding ground for quarterbacks. The list includes players like Joe Namath, Johnny Unitas, Joe Montana, Dan Marino, and Jim Kelly.



Brodhead didn't play at that level, but he was very good. He was a standout for the Kittanning Wildcats during the early 1950s, and was an all-state selection at quarterback in 1953 under coach Jim Rearic. Bob had 30 scholarship offers from colleges at that point, and opted to accept one from Duke. Kittanning High School retired his uniform number (87) at a ceremony in 2001. The high school closed in 2015.

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When Brodhead moved on to the varsity at Duke for the 1956 season, it took a Hall of Famer to keep him out of the lineup at quarterback. Sonny Jurgensen was the starter for the Blue Devils that season. Still, Brodhead threw 31 passes in a relief role for the 5-5-1 Duke team, and he also was the squad's third-busiest rusher with 66 carries (175 yards). A familiar name for Bills' fans was on that team: sophomore running back Wray Carlton.

Jurgensen was gone in 1957, and Brodhead took over the starting job. He handed off a lot to Carlton that season (833 yards rushing), and Bob was 30 for 62 through the air for 392 yards when he did throw the football. Duke went 6-3-2 and finished 16th in the final Associated Press poll. The Blue Devils made it to the Orange Bowl, where they lost to Oklahoma – a team that saw its 47-game unbeaten streak snapped by Notre Dame earlier in the season. Duke gave Oklahoma a game for a while, trailing by 21-14 in the fourth period. Brodhead was supposed to fake a quick kick and pass the ball, but the ball was snapped instead to halfback George Dutrow. He fumbled, the Sooners recovered, and rolled to a score and eventually a 48-21 win.

Brodhead was a 12th round “future” draft choice of the Cleveland Browns in January 1958. In his senior season at Duke, the quarterback again teamed with Carlton to lead the offense. Carlton ran for a team-leading 636 yards, and Brodhead passed for 651 yards and also ran the ball frequently on option plays. The Blue Devils went 5-5.

Brodhead went into the Armed Forces for six months after finishing at Duke. He arrived late for the Browns' training camp in 1959, and apparently couldn't catch up and was cut. Brodhead journeyed north from there, signing with the Saskatchewan Roughriders of the Canadian Football League. The 6-foot-2, 207-pound athlete served as the starting quarterback for a while, completing almost 50 percent of his passes but throwing 15 interceptions in 129 attempts. That wasn't good enough, so he was released in favor of Don Allard.

The Roughriders stumbled to a 1-15 record that season, in part because their quarterbacks threw 41 interceptions. That team even lost a game via forfeit. Injuries had wiped out the Roughriders' players at that position, and head coach Frank Tripucka had to activate himself to play the last two games. Saskatchewan beat Winnipeg (coached by future Vikings coach Bud Grant), 37-30, on the scoreboard in the finale, but the win didn't count because Tripucka was technically an ineligible player.

When 1960 rolled around, Brodhead found himself with options. It was the first year for the American Football League, and they were looking under every rock for players.

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Brodhead earned a job on the opening day roster, reuniting with Carlton in the process, and found himself in the Polo Grounds in New York for the Buffalo Bills' first-ever game against the Titans. Tommy O'Connell was the starter at quarterback, and Brodhead probably thought he was in for a relaxing day.

Then on the Bills' fifth offensive play of the game, O'Connell was injured by a hit from Titans' defensive tackle Sid Youngelman – who went on to play for the Bills in 1962 and 1963. Brodhead entered the game, led the Bills on a drive, and moved the ball to the New York 28. Darrell Harper kicked a 35-yard field goal from there, and the Bills' first official points in history gave them a 3-0 lead. It was downhill from there. The Titans scored the game's final 27 points for an easy win. Brodhead finished 3 of 13 for 15 yards and an interception.



QUARTERBACK B. BRODHEAD BUFFALO BILLS

O'Connell was back at quarterback for week two, the home opener with Denver. (The Broncos' quarterback, by the way, was Tripucka, as he came out of retirement for the chance to play in the AFL.) Brodhead came in long enough to throw two incompletions in that game, but he did catch a pass for a two-point conversion in the 27-21 loss. In Buffalo's first win on September 23 against Boston, Brodhead started the game and ran the ball twice for 11 yards, and then was replaced by O'Connell. Bob finished the game with four runs for 21 yards.

Finally, on October 2, Brodhead relieved O'Connell against the Chargers. The Pennsylvania native went 4 for 10 for 60 yards in a 24-10 loss. "I'm dissatisfied with the number of interceptions (13 in four games)," coach Buster Ramsey said about his quarterbacks.

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Buffalo had a bye week on the schedule at that point, and Ramsey heard that quarterback Johnny Green was a free agent after he was cut by the Steelers' head coach Buddy Parker. "Buddy called me in and said, 'You can go to Buffalo if you want to, or you can stay with us on the taxi squad if you want, but you're not going to play here.' So, I went to Buffalo," Green recalled. "They worked me out for a week and decided to let Bob Brodhead go, and I wound up in his spot."

Brodhead's career passing totals in the NFL were 7 for 25 for 75 yards with no touchdowns and three interceptions. He headed back to the CFL, signing with the Edmonton Eskimos – although there's no sign statistically that he got into a game. That was it for Brodhead's time in the major professional ranks.

Brodhead returned to the United States to play so-called minor league football. He suited up for the Canton Bulldogs and the Cleveland Bulldogs for the United Football League, and for the Philadelphia Bulldogs of the Continental Football League. He was the league MVP in leading Canton to a title in 1964. In his last game in 1966, he led Philadelphia to a championship win over Orlando. By the way, he also was the team's business manager, as those accounting classes he took at Duke started to pay dividends. "Brodhead was one of those guys that would just pick you apart," rival quarterback Lee Grosscup said. Brodhead eventually was elected to the Minor League Football Hall of Fame.

His playing career over, Brodhead quickly made the transition to football businessman. He landed in the Cleveland Browns' front office in 1967 as the team's business manager. Bob became a vice president there and stayed through 1970, when he moved into the general manager's job of the Houston Oilers. Brodhead only had the chance to spend a year in that spot. After the Oilers went 3-10-1, Brodhead was replaced by John Breen.

In 1975, Bob landed with Portland of the World Football League as the team president and general manager. He even became head coach for a game after firing Greg Barton, stepping aside when he gave Joe Gardi the job. The Thunder and the rest of the WFL folded in October 1975. Brodhead went back to behind the scenes work in sports administration, eventually landing a position as the Chief Financial Officer for the Miami Dolphins. That seemed like a secure, uncontroversial position, and Brodhead probably could have stayed there indefinitely.

Instead, he took a high-profile job in 1981 when he was hired as the athletic director at Louisiana State University. Paul Dietzel, the former occupant of that position, had run up

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a deficit that peaked at \$1.4 million, and Brodhead was needed to restore financial order. It didn't take long for him to make an impact. Reporter Ron Higgins of the New Orleans Times-Picayune wrote, "Nicknamed 'Bottom Line Bob,' he had the finesse of a rhino and the charm of a rattlesnake."

Brodhead's first job was to put the school's financial house in order. "The internal audit had not been ordered to uncover problems with the Athletic Department and make suggestions to help solve them; it had been ordered to find fault with Paul Dietzel," he wrote later.

The study showed problems with season ticket accountability and concessions revenues – among other issues. "I investigated more types of business establishments than I knew existed, and I uncovered more bogus business practices than I cared to believe were possible. But I had never seen a more financially corrupt situation than the one I had walked into at LSU," he said.

Athletic directors often are remembered for their coaching hires. Brodhead reached back to his Miami roots for a couple of high-profile coaches. In football, Brodhead dismissed Jerry Stovall after a 4-7 season in 1983, and hired Bill Arnsparger, the defensive coordinator of the great Dolphins teams of the early 1970s. Arnsparger was the Southeastern Conference coach of the year twice in his three years there. In baseball, Brodhead brought in baseball coach Skip Bertman from the University of Miami, and the Tigers won five national championships during Bertman's time there. The former baseball coach, Jack Lamabe, found out he was unemployed by seeing a want ad for his position.

Brodhead's situation started to turn sour in 1985. The NCAA began an investigation into the recruiting practices of Dale Brown and the men's basketball team at LSU. It turned out that Brodhead had bugged his own office in order to listen to the NCAA's interviews after the fact. Soon bumper stickers reading "Brodhead Bugs Me" popped up around Baton Rouge. In April 1986, he pled guilty to charges of a misdemeanor count of conspiracy to intercept radio communications. He was fined \$1,000 and ordered to serve 1,000 hours of community service. Brodhead said later that he wanted to hear an interview with a recruit, Tito Horford. Judge John Parker reminded Brodhead that "playing by the rules of the game is the minimum to be expected of a person in your position."

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Brodhead hung on to his job for a few more months. Then his name came up in ethics charges including a paid vacation from a media executive and improper payments involving Brodhead's radio show. He resigned as athletic director in October 1986.

Brodhead essentially stepped out of the spotlight for good at that point. He wrote a book on his time at LSU called "Sacked!" and did some radio work. Brodhead also served as the athletic director at Southeastern Louisiana University.

He died on February 11, 1996 at the age of 59.

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