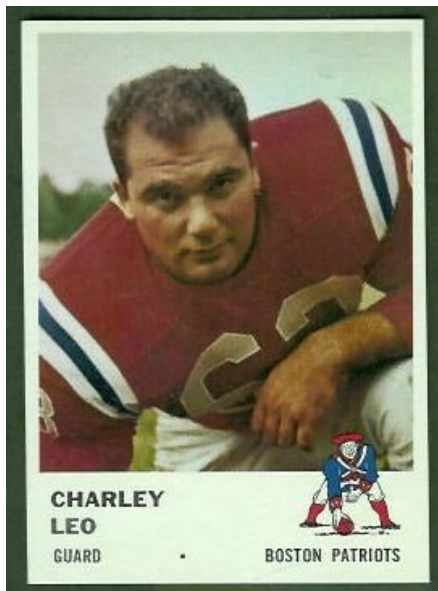


Charlie Leo

This article was written by Budd Bailey.

Bishop Duffy High School in Niagara Falls, New York, could never be called a football factory. It had exactly two of its graduates play professional football. The fun part is that they were brothers, and their paths even crossed once for a short time. This is the story mostly about one of them, Charlie Leo.

Charles James Leo was born on August 29, 1934, in Niagara Falls, the son of John and Mary Leo. It's odd that sources differ on what Charles used as a first name over the years in less-formal circles. He is listed in publications as Charlie, Charley and Chuck, which covers the obvious possibilities. Charlie appears to be the most popular, so it will be used here. No matter - he went on to play football for Bishop Duffy. The boys from Niagara County went there if they sought a parochial education, while the girls attended Madonna High School; the two schools eventually merged into Niagara Catholic – which closed in 2018. Leo was said to be an excellent player during his time at Duffy; he graduated in 1952 – well ahead of younger brother Jim.



From there it was on to Indiana University in Bloomington, thanks to an athletic scholarship, and it took him a little time to finish his college career. The offensive lineman earned letters in 1953 and 1954, when times were tough for the Hoosiers. They finished 2-9 in 1953 under coach Bernie Crimmins, and a 3-6 record a year later was only a slight improvement. Then Leo joined the United States Army, serving in the Military Police. Along the way Charlie married his childhood sweetheart, Colleen, in 1957. Leo finally came back to Indiana and played for the Hoosiers again in 1959. The team finished a more respectable 4-4-1 under coach Phil Dickens. Charlie's best teammate probably was defensive end Earl Faison, who became a four-time AFL All-Star with the Los Angeles/San Diego Chargers.

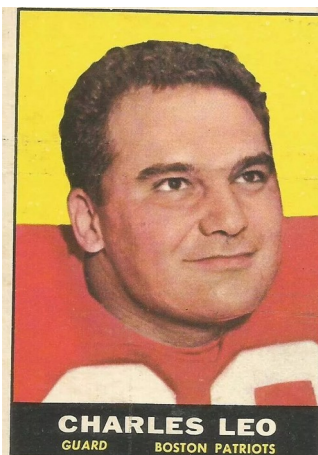
After that season, the American Football League started to plan its debut in 1960. Eight teams took part in a draft, and the Boston Patriots selected more than 50 players. Charlie was not one of them. However, the 6-foot, 240-pound offensive lineman signed with the Patriots as a free agent. The coach there was Lou Saban, who would play a big role in Charlie's football future.

It is worth noting that brother Jim was drafted by the Buffalo Bills in the late fall of 1959 out of Cincinnati. But he was also a third-round pick of the New York Giants of the established NFL. Jim signed with the Giants instead and spent a season there before moving in a preseason deal to the expansion Minnesota Vikings. The defender played for the Vikings for two seasons.

Returning to Charlie, he beat the odds and earned a starting job as an offensive guard for the Patriots in 1960. Leo was one of three rookie linemen in the starting lineup, joining George McGee and Jack Davis. They protected quarterback Butch Songin, who had a good year with 2,274 yards passing and 22 touchdown passes. Leo was named as a second-team all-star in the AFL for his efforts, but the team only could manage a 5-9 record, closing the season with four straight losses.

It seemed as if it would be more of the same in 1961. Leo was back in the starting lineup on the offensive line, and Saban again was coaching. The Patriots started the season 2-3, and hopes for a better season seemed slim. Boston's front office fired Saban at that point and elevated assistant coach Mike Holovak to become Saban's successor. Midseason coaching changes rarely cause dramatic turnarounds, but Boston finished the 1961 season 7-1-1 to finish 9-4-1. That was a game behind Houston's 10-3-1 record. As for Leo, he was a first-team all-AFL selection and played in the league's All-Star Game.

Optimism surrounded the Pats in 1962, and they had playoff hopes after a strong start. But Charlie wasn't around to see most of the season. He reportedly (United Press International) was injured in an October 6 game against the New York Titans, and aggravated the injury in practice later that month. Another source reported that Leo's hamstring problems began with a non-football injury. In any event, the team officially ruled him out for the season at the end of October. Tony Sardisco was plugged into Leo's spot in the lineup for the rest of the season. The Patriots were 9-4-1 again at the end of 1962, and they finished behind the Oilers again.



As for Leo, the Patriots thought he'd be physically unable to perform at his former level. Therefore, they decided to move him. The good news was that Charlie still had a friend in Saban. The former Boston coach had moved on to Buffalo to coach the Bills, and led his new team to its first-ever winning season (7-6-1) in 1962. Saban thought Leo might have something left in the tank. Besides, it was a natural acquisition. Leo and Colleen along with young daughter Mary still spent offseasons in Niagara Falls. In those days when the AFL was struggling for attention, an appearance on the local team by a native couldn't hurt. A deal for a future draft pick was completed with Boston on August 27. Since the Patriots owned the Bills' eighth-round draft choice in the 1963 college draft later that fall, that probably was the price tag for the veteran.

There was one other reason that Leo was happy about the deal – brother Jim was waiting for him. The Bills were looking at him at training camp, and the brothers played against each other when the Patriots played a preseason game in Buffalo on August 24. If both men had been on the Bills' opening day roster on September 8, they would have been the first brother combination on the same team in a regular-season game in AFL history. But Jim was cut on September 3.

If Leo expected to have a chance to grab a starting job, he was mistaken. The team's starting left guard was Billy Shaw, and that spot was taken for the rest of the decade. Shaw eventually ended up in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Leo played in four games that season, with no starts. The other starting guard for the Bills that year was Tom Day, who moved to the other side of the line of scrimmage in 1964 to play defensive end.

The 1963 Bills turned in the same record as the '62 squad, going 7-6-1. The difference was that the division became mediocre that year, and the team finished in a tie for the division title with Boston. Buffalo hosted the playoff game to determine which team would play San Diego for the AFL championship, and Boston came away with a 26-8 win. The Patriots, by the way, lost to the Chargers by a 51-10 score.

Leo missed out on some fun in Buffalo in the next few years. The Bills won the AFL championship in 1964 and 1965, and lost in the title game to Kansas City the following year. As for Charlie, he was not invited back to the team's 1964 training camp but received a tryout with the Denver Broncos. That team cut him in mid-August. Leo took the year off and joined the Toronto Rifles, a minor-league team in the Continental Football League, in 1965. He spent three seasons there, playing under three coaches who have good-sized reputations in Canadian football – Sam Etcheverry, Leo Cahill and Jackie Parker. Charlie Leo's football career was over after the 1967 season.

It was time to move on with the rest of his life. Charlie and his family (including two more daughters, Sonnie and Julie) moved to Canandaigua outside of Rochester. He became the Sales Manager of Heavy Equipment for L.B. Smith Inc., which still sells construction and building equipment to contractors.

Leo died at the age of 75 in Rochester on October 7, 2010.

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