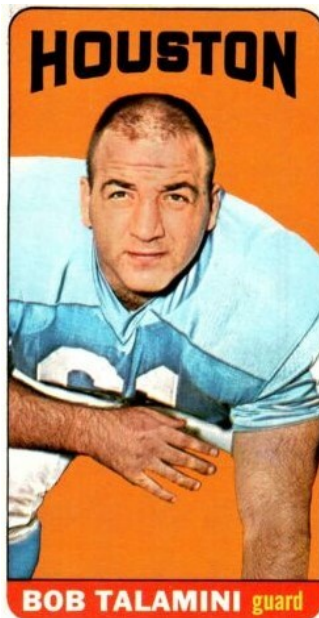


Bob Talamini

This article was written by Jim Marino.

Robert “Bob” Guy Talamini played in five of the ten American Football League championships played in the circuit’s history. Talamini’s nine year career set the standard for playing guard in the AFL. He earned Pro Bowl recognition in six of his nine seasons. Talamini was first All-AFL six times and he was selected to the All-Time All-AFL second team in 1970. He played in several significant games in the course of the sixties - the first AFL championship game; the longest overtime playoff game in NFL history; and the AFL’s first victory in the Super Bowl. Talamini, whose program size was 6-1 and 255, was an ironman from the old school. He played as many games as his teams played from 1960-68 — all 116 regular-season and playoff games (110 starts) with the Oilers from 1960-67, and all 14 games and two postseason games (10 starts) for the 1968 Super Bowl champion Jets.



Talamini was born January 8, 1939, in Louisville, Kentucky. Along with his sister, Nancy, Bob grew up in a devout Roman Catholic, Italian-American family. He played football at St. Xavier High School graduating in 1956. Bob attended the University of Kentucky where Blanton Collier was head coach. “(Collier) was a very organized person,” Talamini recalled. “He was very cranial and was astute at breaking down game film and devising a game plan each and every week.”ⁱ Under the tutelage of line coach Bill Arnsperger, Talamini became a starter in his sophomore year and remained a starter



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for three years. At his University of Kentucky Hall of Fame Induction speech, Talamini credited Arnsperger in making him the football player he became calling him a “fundamental fanatic.”

Talamini played both ways, a full 60 minutes, as both an offensive guard and middle linebacker, and was known for his hard work, drive, and technique. He earned Honorable All-American his senior year. Bob also was named to the All-SEC Third Team at the conclusion of the year. He was drafted by the fledgling Houston Oilers, in the twenty-fourth round of the first AFL draft held on December 2, 1959.

Talamini signed a \$7,000 a year contract which would only be paid if he made the team. He arrived in Houston, where over 300 players were at the first camp and only 35 made the roster. His hard work and drive stood out and head coach Lou Rymkus informed Talamini that he made the team. Rymkus was impressed so much that he penciled Talamini in to start at left guard.

John Spencer, Oilers’ line coach from 1961 to 1965 said, “As a football player, Bob was a self-made man.”ⁱⁱ His Oiler teammates and coaches claimed that Talamini had a great work ethic; always giving 100% in both games and practices. Teammate Jerry Helluin said, “Bob picked up the fundamentals and physical aspects of the game as quickly as anyone who ever played in the Houston organization.” Although only 225 pounds when Talamini started his pro career, teammate Dan Lanphear remembers, “Talamini was all muscle, and when he came to block you, he came growling!”ⁱⁱⁱ He earned the nickname “The Big Paw.”

Talamini started in Houston’s first ever game against Oakland in Kezar Stadium on September 11, 1960. The 37-22 victory, set the Oilers on the road to an 11-3 record. During the season, Bob pass blocked for George Blanda and opened holes for Billy Cannon. One of thirteen rookies starting on offense and defense for the Oilers, the team captured the AFL championship against the Los Angeles Chargers 24-16. They repeated as champions the next year, again defeating the Chargers. Bob faced All-Pro Ernie Ladd in the game. Talamini was named to the All-AFL Second Team by both the UPI and the players in 1961. By 1962, *The Sporting News* called Talamini “a fine pass blocker” in the AFL.^{iv} Kevin Carroll, in *Houston Oilers – The Early Years*, declared, “Talamini

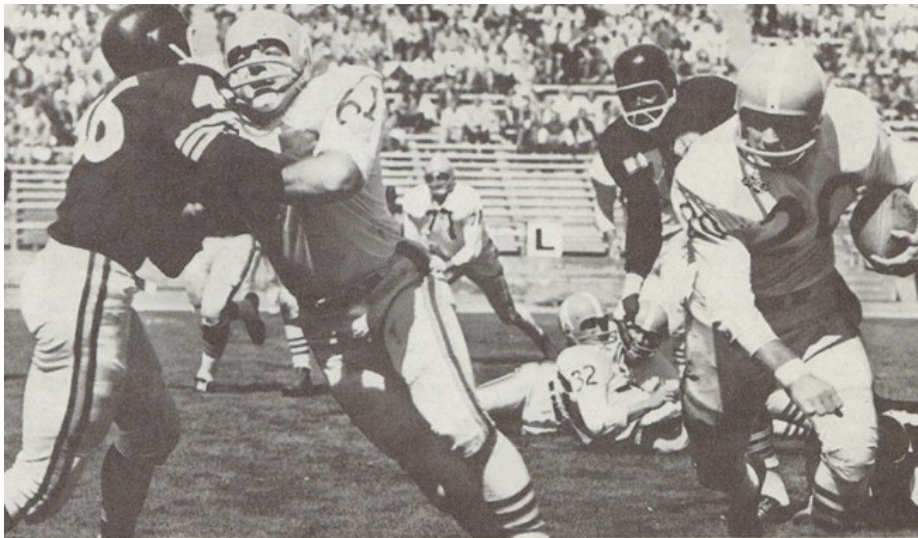
ⁱ Maloney, Ray. “Bob Talamini Fulfills Dream in Iconic Game.” *The College Sports Journal*, February 24, 2012. <https://www.college-sports-journal.com/bob-talamini-fulfills-dream-in-iconic-game/>.

ⁱⁱ Carroll, Kevin. *The Houston Oilers, The Early Years*, 107.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carroll, Kevin. “A Hall Of Fame Comparison – Bob Talamini,” *Tales From The American Football League*. December 7, 2012 <https://talesfromtheamericanfootballleague.com/a-hall-of-fame-comparison-bob-talamini/>.

developed into one of the league's premier lineman and remained a standout during his eight years with the Oilers."^v

In 1962, Talamini played in his third AFL championship game, remembered as the double overtime game. He battled All-Pro Jerry Mays in that game. The Oilers were driving for the winning score in the first overtime when Houston reached the Dallas Texans' 35 yard line. Bob recalled what happened. "We were playing at Jeppesen [Stadium], which is where they played high school and college games, and it was a field of dirt," said Talamini, "We were driving the ball and went back to the huddle and I remember it like it was yesterday. Blanda said in the huddle, 'OK guys, let's run one more play and get a little closer and win the game,' and he threw an interception."^{vi} Texans defensive end Bill Hull intercepted Blanda at his own 26 yard line and returned it to the fifty. The interception set up the Texans for the win.



AGAINST OAKLAND AT SAN FRANCISCO

Billy Cannon on a power sweep that gained 35 yards with guard Bob Talamini clearing the way past Raider Defensive Back L. C. Joiner. The Oilers won 37 to 22 in their first League Game.

Despite the 20-17 loss, Talamini earned the All-AFL First Team left guard slot after the season, and garnered the award each year until 1967. He also attended his first All-Star Pro Bowl game. *The Sporting News* named Talamini an AFL All-Pro, writing, "The

iv Gallagher, Jack. "Oilers Boomed To Repeat As Champs of AFL," *The Sporting News*, September 1, 1962, 18.

v Carroll, Kevin. *The Houston Oilers, The Early Years*, 107.

vi Wilson, Aaron. "A bitter loss for the Oilers, a win for pro football and the AFL" September 13, 2016. <https://www.chron.com/local/history/major-stories-events/article/A-bitter-loss-for-the-Oilers-a-win-for-pro-9202213.php>.



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guards Tom Mix and Bob Talamini have been top hands, on top teams since their rookie years.”^{vii}

During the middle of Talamini’s career with Houston, the team went through bad times and floundered near the bottom of the Eastern Division. However, Talamini maintained his all-pro quality and consistently made first team squads on multiple newspaper selections. Despite the team record of 4-10 in 1965, middle linebacker Nick Buoniconti of the Boston Patriots said, “He’s the best pass blocking guard in the league.”^{viii} He had legendary battles with San Diego Chargers Ernie Ladd. He faced some of the best players at defensive right tackle in the AFL - All-Pros Tom Sestak of the Buffalo Bills, Houston Antwine of the Boston Patriots, Dave Costa of the Denver Broncos, and the Oakland Raiders Tom Keating and Dan Birdwell. His toughest assignment may have been blocking Hall of Famer Buck Buchanan of the Kansas City Chiefs.

By 1967, only seven players remained on the Oilers roster who played in the 1962 championship game. Talamini remained the pillar on the front line when Houston made the turn around to return to the championship game. In 1967, Jerry Mays of the Kansas City Chiefs, said the Eastern Division champion Houston Oilers had the “best combination of guards and centers in the league with Talamini, Sonny Bishop, and Bobby Maples”.^{ix} Another All-Star year for Talamini helped Houston lead the AFL in rushing, yards per carry, and second in fewest sacks. The championship game loss to the Raiders caused Talamini to miss the Super Bowl.

After the 1967 season, Talamini, and the team split. The *New York Daily News* reported at the time that he quit the Oilers after the season ended in part because he sought to renegotiate his contract and general manager Don Klosterman declined the request. Talamini’s concern about his wife’s illness and the contract stalemate with Klosterman resulted in Talamini announcing his retirement at the age of 29. Larry Felser, *Buffalo News* reporter, said that Talamini still ranked as one of the best guards in the league.^x Joe Spencer, an assistant coach with the New York Jets, convinced Weeb Ewbank to get Talamini. Ewbank told Spencer to explore the possibility with Talamini. Spencer called him and asked if he would be interested in joining the Jets. Talamini would agree to play for New York if he got a pay raise. Ewbank swung a trade with Houston, giving up a third round draft pick. Talamini signed with the Jets for a \$19,000 annual salary and a \$5,000 signing bonus.

vii Blair Sam, “Dawson and McClinton Sweep AFL Honors,” *The Sporting News*. December 22, 1962, 34.

viii Gallagher, Jack. “Lance Alworth Spearheads AFL’s Stars,” *The Sporting News*. December 25, 1965, 39.

ix Felser, Larry. “Around The AFL,” *The Sporting News*, September 30, 1967, 44.

x Felser, Larry. “AFL East,” *The Sporting News*, August 10, 1968, 44.



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Similar to Dave DeBusschere's trade to the New York Knicks, many players on the Jets called the trade for Talamini a significant factor in the Jets' championship. "Bob Talamini's nickname should be 'The Missing Piece,'" said longtime Jets public relations director Frank Ramos, "because the Jets players all referred to him as the missing piece for the Jets to win the World Championship. He improved both the running and passing game with his quality blocking."^{xi} The strongest endorsement comes from Joe Namath more than fifty years later. "Bob was a gift from the football gods," Namath said. "That was one of the greatest moves Weeb ever made, getting Bob to come out of retirement and join our team in '68. If it wasn't for having Bob Talamini, we don't win the championship."^{xii}

After the trade, Bob backed-up and mentored the starting left guard, second-year Randy Rasmussen. He provided the Jets with depth. Talamini started seven games during the season to help rest Rasmussen. Matt Snell reminisced, "The acquisition of Bob Talamini put our offense over the top. He was "my man," tough, ornery, and he had a winning attitude."^{xiii} Talamini played in the second half of the famous "Heidi" game when Ewbank benched right tackle Sam Walton and moved right guard Dave Herman to right tackle. Ewbank then flipped Rasmussen to right guard and inserted Talamini at left guard. This was a line up not used all season and was not used the last four games of the season. But Ewbank went back to using the 'three-guard' lineup for the AFL championship game against the Raiders and again against the Baltimore Colts in Super Bowl III.

Throughout the Super Bowl, Talamini faced Baltimore's All-Pro Fred Miller. Talamini recalled the key moment in the huddle, "We felt we could handle their defense after the first couple of series. They had used up their repertoire, and we were blowing them out."^{xiv} He and left tackle Winston Hill's domination paved the way for Matt Snell's "19-Straight," (a power run to the left). Rushing for 120 yards, Snell hailed the offensive line, "They were great, just great. There aren't any better [blockers] in the game than Talamini and Hill."^{xv}

After the game in the locker room, Talamini reflected to the sports writers, "You beat your head in for years blocking some of the toughest tackles in football and no one appreciates it. Well, I'll say this: I've played against a lot of better tackles in the AFL than

xi Lange, Larry. "LG Bob Talamini, 'The Missing Piece' To The Jets' Super Bowl III Puzzle, Has Died." June 4, 2022. <https://www.newyorkjets.com/news/lg-bob-talamini-the-missing-piece-to-the-jets-super-bowl-iii-puzzle-has-died>.

xii Serby, Steve. "Joe Namath On Jets Moves, His Super Bowl Protectors, Coronavirus 'Monster'" *New York Post*. April 10, 2020 <https://nypost.com/2020/04/10/joe-namath-on-jets-moves-his-super-bowl-protectors-coronavirus-monster>.

xiii Lederer, Joe. *Beyond Broadway Joe*, xvii.

xiv Gruver, Ed. *From Baltimore Top Broadway*, 204.

xv Lange, Larry.



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I played against in the Super Bowl.^{xvi} He dedicated this victory to the general manager (Klosterman) of the Houston Oilers who, the previous year, said that Talamini was finished as an athlete.^{xvii}

Though he was just 30 years old, and had been on three championship teams in nine years, Talamini decided to retire from the game. He was slightly worn out from a difficult season. Making \$19,000 that season, he had to spend over \$2,000 to commute from New York City to his family throughout the entire year. He decided to get on with his life after football, and to be with his family.

After retiring Talamini began his next career working as a Certified Financial Planner back in Houston. He served as president of the Houston Touchdown Club and president of the NFL Alumni Association. After settling in Las Cruces, New Mexico, Bob became a member of the Las Cruces (NM) Symphony board.

In 2011, he was inducted in the Kentucky Pro Football Hall of Fame. He is also a member of the All-Time Kentucky NFL Team. At the induction when asked his advice to aspiring football players Talamini said, “You have to have confidence in yourself. Get in there and do what you can to improve and do not let anything break yourself.”^{xviii}

xvi Shrake, Edwin. “Now The AFL Owns The Football.” *Sports Illustrated* January 27, 1969, 29.

xvii Batella, Fausto. “The Italian-American Stars in U.S. Sports: Football.” August 19, 2017.

<https://wetheitalians.com/index.php/web-magazine/italian-american-stars-us-sports-football-2-3-50s-70s>.

xviii Maloney.

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<https://getzfuneralhome.com/book-of-memories/4938630/talamini-robert-guy/obituary.php>

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Bob had a large family. He and his first wife Charlene had four children. With his second wife of 41 years, Mary, he had seven children, fourteen grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren.

Talamini passed away at the age of 83 on May 30, 2022, in Las Cruces.

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