



## **Manch Wheeler**

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Manchester “Manch” Wheeler was a standout collegiate football player at the University of Maine in the early 1960’s, propelling him to an opportunity to play professionally for the Buffalo Bills. Buffalo became interested in Wheeler while watching film of another prospect but were intrigued by Wheeler’s tenacity and throwing arm. The Bills signed the undrafted free agent for \$8,500 in 1962. The Bills 1962 game program described Wheeler as “an exceptionally fine passing and overall quarterbacking prospect.”

During the Bills training camp, the 6-foot, 200-pound Wheeler, battled six other quarterbacks including veterans Johnny Green, Al Dorow and Warren Rabb. Wheeler received his first game action in a “Meet the Bills Night” scrimmage between the Bills veteran players and the rookies. He completed 5 of 14 passes for 50 yards, though his team threatened to score they were defeated by the veterans 14-0. One of the two veteran’s TD’s was a pick six against Wheeler by Carl Taseff and a 27-yard return for the touchdown.



Wheeler made his Buffalo preseason debut on the last drive of the Bills first exhibition game versus the New York Titans at Bowen Field in New Haven, Connecticut on August 12. Wheeler ran the ball on his third play from scrimmage, bulling his way for five yards and a Bills first down. One play later he threw his first professional pass, firing the ball over 50 yards in the air, just barely bouncing off the fingertips of halfback Jim Hold at



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the goal line. He finished the game 0-1 passing and with one rush for 5 yards in the Bills 20-10 victory.

He received more playing time in the Bills second preseason contest on August 16 vs the Boston Patriots at War Memorial Stadium. He entered the game in the second quarter and completed his first AFL pass to running back Carey Henley for 18 yards. He also played in the fourth quarter, leading the Bills on their only scoring drive of the game. On the Bills final drive, Wheeler orchestrated a 42-yard march in ten plays, capping it off with a one-yard TD sneak for his first professional touchdown. The Bills lost 12-7 but Wheeler acquitted himself well, completing 5 of 8 passes for 57 yards and his rushing touchdown. He did not see action in the Bills next preseason game on August 23 versus the Houston Oilers.

He could not overcome the experience of both Rabb and Dorow, though he played well enough to be the Bills third quarterback. However, they only kept two quarterbacks on the active roster thus he was released on August 28 and re-signed to the Bills taxi squad. He remained on the taxi-squad until October 2 when he was promoted to the active roster with the release of Dorow. He joined newly acquired Jack Kemp and holdover Warren Rabb as the Bills quarterbacks.

Wheeler made his AFL debut on October 13 coming into the game in the fourth quarter with the Bills leading the San Diego Chargers 35-10. Wheeler ran the ball for two yards on his first play from scrimmage, he ran again for a loss of two and on third and 10 he scrambled for seven yards as the Bills tried to run out the clock. He finished the game rushing three times for seven yards. He did not attempt a pass.

Wheeler appeared in three more games throughout the remainder of the season for Buffalo with limited playing time, neither throwing a pass nor running the football.

He re-signed with the Bills on April 13 for the 1963 season. Wheeler came into training camp hoping he could secure the back-up quarterback job behind Kemp. He played in a team scrimmage on July 31 but was cut on August 2 with Kemp securing the starting role and Rabb along with rookie QB Daryle Lamonica fighting it out for the number #2 role.

Wheeler signed with the Boston Patriots and attended their training camp in 1964. He played in a rookie scrimmage against the New York Jets on August 9 and played extremely well. He completed 19 of 22 passes for 90 yards with two touchdown passes in the Patriots 21-7 win. Wheeler received some limited playing time in the Patriots first preseason game vs Houston on August 5 in a 38-7 drubbing by the Oilers. He was released by the Patriots on August 12.



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He immediately signed with the Atlantic Coast Football League's (ACFL) Portland Sea Hawks and began a circuitous minor league football career. Wheeler put up some big passing numbers in his first minor league season, throwing for 2099 yards and 15 touchdowns on 198 of 417 passes. He led the league in pass attempts, was second in completions, and third in passing yards. However, he also fired 28 interceptions in the Sea Hawks 5-8-1 season.

Wheeler joined the Hartford Charter Oaks of the Continental Football League (CoFL) for the 1965 season. During that season he played for head coach Fred Wallner, developing an important relationship with him. Wheeler saw limited playing time at quarterback playing behind Lee Grosscup for the 2-12 last place Charter Oaks. Wheeler signed with the Waterbury Orbits, of the ACFL, joining Wallner and played for them in 1966 and 1967. Wheeler shared quarterback duties with Hank Schichtle, leading the Orbits to a second place 8-3-1 finish in 1966. He completed 49 of 127 passes for 933 yards and 9 TD's. Throughout the 1967 season he played behind quarterback Jim "King" Corcoran, thought to be the Joe Namath of the ACFL.

Wallner joined the new Hartford Knights ACFL franchise in 1968 and recruited Wheeler to join him. It was a match made in heaven. Wheeler was the ideal quarterback for Wallner's run heavy offense. The Knights, a Green Bay Packers affiliate, won their first five games and finished the regular season with an 11-1 record and Northern Division championship. Wheeler completed only 69 of 176 passes for 1244 yards and 10 TD passes for the season, but the Knights led the league with 333 points, 96 more than any other team. However, Wallner replaced Wheeler as QB for the ACFL Championship game vs the Virginia Sailors with back-up Dick Faucette. Despite the change, the Knights won the league championship with a 30-17 victory. Wheeler retired from his playing career after the game.

Dick Savin, owner of the Knights, hired Wheeler to be the clubs General Manager and team with head coach Wallner. Over the next three seasons the duo led the Knights, now an affiliate of the Buffalo Bills, to three consecutive championship games. They lost each, finish as a runner-up each season. They lost 20-0 to Pottstown in 1969, against to Pottstown in 1970, 31-0 in the Snow bowl and 24-13 to the Norfolk Neptunes in 1971. The ACFL folded before the start of the 1972 season and Wheeler's professional football career was over.

Following his pro football career, he got into sales in Enfield, Connecticut for several years and then ran an appraisal company in Maine for 20 years.

Wheeler's football reputation began at the University of Maine when he became the starting quarterback in his junior season. Wheeler had a solid junior year leading the



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Black Bears to a 4-3-1 record. They had a chance to win the Maine state championship on the final day of the season, but despite two TD runs by Wheeler the Black Bears came up short, losing 28-21 to Bowdoin. The Black Bears season was highlighted by a victory over arch-rival Colby, 28-12 with Wheeler scoring one rushing TD and firing a 60-yard TD strike to scatback Wayne Champeon for another.

Wheeler was fueled by coming up short in 1960 and led the Black Bears to one of the school's greatest football seasons, only their second undefeated season in the University of Maine history in 1961. He set the school's all-time career passing record with 1457 passing yards. In his senior year he completed 43 of 96 passes for 715 yards and rushed for 221 yards. He also totaled eight TD's between running and passing as the Black Bears finished 8-0-1, winning both the Yankee Conference Championship and the Maine State Title.

Wheeler was an all-around star for Maine. In addition to playing quarterback he played safety and was the teams' punter. He led the team in interceptions in 1960 and 1961, was second on the team in scoring in 1960 and led Maine in punting in 1960, setting a school record with a 75-yard punt against New Hampshire. He was selected to the 1961 Yankee All-Conference team and was named to the All-New England team as well.

Walt Abbott, a Maine assistant coach when Wheeler played for the Black Bears said about Manch, "He just had a winning attitude and winning desire. He was a competitor, no question about it. A real tough competitor, and he made everybody around him play harder because of it."

At the time of his graduation from the University of Maine he held several career offensive records including total yardage, passing yardage, completed passes, touchdown passes, and longest touchdown pass. In addition, he held records for most career pass interceptions and the longest punt. He was inducted into the University of Maine Sports Hall of Fame in 1989 and the State of Maine Sports Hall of Fame in 2013.

Manch was born in Augusta, Maine on August 2, 1939 to Manchester Haines and Martha (Fontaine) Wheeler. He grew up in Manchester and attended Phillips-Andover Academy. He enrolled at the University of Maine in the fall of 1958. Wheeler met his future wife, Sandra Van Aken at the University and they were married for 52 years. They had three children, Jay, Jeff, and Stephanie along with six grandchildren. He was an avid booster of the University of Maine his entire life. Manch died at 79 years-old, on August 11, 2018 after battling a stroke and cancer.