

Art Rooney, Jr. - Director of Player Personnel /  
Vice-President Pittsburgh Steelers (1964-1986), Part 1

*An Interview by Tom Danvluk. July 19, 2002*

*"I am a choreographer. A choreographer is a poet. I do not create. God creates. I assemble, and I will steal from everywhere to do it. "*

*- George Balanchine, former director of the New York City Ballet*

*"You can lose with good football players, but you can never, ever win without them. " - Art Rooney, Jr*

*From a hill overlooking downtown Pittsburgh known as Mount Washington, you have a very clear look of what used to be.*

*"Right down there," said Steelers Vice President Art Rooney, Jr., looking out from his window seat in a noisy restaurant. "That's where it all happened."*

*"Where" is the plot of ground on which Three Rivers Stadium once stood. The former domain of the Pittsburgh Stee/ers. An arena of concrete that housed a team of steel, and the words scratched into its tempered metal read, "Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here."*

*A place where champions and football heroes once dwelled. Cars and buses now park there.*

*"I watched the stadium implode on TV that day," he said.*

*"They showed it over and over. The first seven or eight times, it didn't really faze me. Then after the ninth time, something hit me . . . I began to think of all the players and the coaches and the workouts and the great games. I spent so much time down there, trying to build something good, and then it was gone. I needed a moment, I really did.*

*"It's funny. I go down to Heinz Field, where the team plays now, and nobody there knows me anymore."*

*But, oh man, do people still remember those fearsome, conquering units that Rooney helped construct during the early 1970s. "Probably the greatest collection of football talent ever assembled, " said George Young, the late general manager of the New York Giants. "A team with no weakness."*

*He started out simply as a member of a pro football family, son of team owner Art Rooney, a man they called "The Chief." That, in Art Jr's mind, is where the football privileges ended.*

*"People think that if you were a Rooney you automatically could work for the Stee/ers. That wasn't true. You had to really show some genuine interest and dedication. Going through school, I had interests in history and acting, but I really wanted to be a part of that football team. My mom finally got me a job selling tickets. Hey, it was a start."*

*By the mid-1960s, Art Jr. had worked his way into world of college scouting and was given the title of Director of Player Personnel. The Steelers had always been run as a Jenga-type operation, the way it collected and secured its young talent - bring in the players, erect the foundation while . at the same time pulling out potentially key parts and throwing away gobs of valuable draft choices. Coaches came and went, but*

*inevitably by each season's end the inspectors would come and hammer up the condemned signs on a teetering structure.*

*One thing was consistent in Pittsburgh - it was always a good time to rebuild. Same old Stee/ers.*

*From 1958 through 1967, the Steelers owned 70 choices in the first seven rounds of the NFL draft. They used only 26 of them and frivoled away the rest. It was frustrating to Art Rooney, Jr., who had finally seen enough.*

*"Ridiculous," he remembers. "We were always trading away our future and getting players other teams didn't want. That had to stop or we were never going to get better. I don't think we had more than one complete draft between 1958 and 1970."*

*The bleeding finally ended in 1969 in the form of a raging obstruction from North Texas State named Mean Joe Greene and his rookie head coach, Chuck Noll, who'd been given final say over the team's draft decision. The Steelers were to be built on defense, around their new, prized ciefensive tackle. Pittsburghers scratched their heads. The papers asked, "Joe Who?"*

*"They'll find out who he is," answered Noll.*

*The Steelers had their first significant draft in years that winter, adding defensive end LC Greenwood and tackle Jon Kolb. It had begun. The first bolts had slammed into the frame of a coming juggernaut. Pro football shuddered as an ominous roll call continued to ring out through the Steel City:*

*Terry Bradshaw and Mel Blount in 1970.*

*Jack Ham, Dwight White and Mike Wagner in '71. Franco Harris in '72, JT Thomas in '73.*

*1974 brought Lynn Swann, Jack Lambert, John Stallworth, Mike Webster and Donnie Shell, who they called Torpedo. Then Noll looked around and saw that all his men were ready, and the march of champions commenced.*

*It began that season as the Steelers won their first-ever championship, stopping Minnesota in Super Bowl IX. It ended on the turf of the Rose Bowl five years later, as Art Sr. held up his team's fourth silver trophy.*

*"My dad loved that football team, and I wanted to do the best job for him I could do," says Rooney. "My goal was to give the coaches too many great football players. I wanted them to lose sleep at night thinking about who they had to get rid of because our talent was so deep. No easy cuts."*

*Roy McHugh, the former sports editor of The Pittsburgh Press, feels he understands the key to Rooney's success. "Hard work, that's how. Art was extremely devoted to his job, almost obsessed by it. He didn't want any player that could help the Steelers to slip by him. People who knew Art outside of his job always saw a friendly, very personable man. But when he was working, he was a completely different character - intense and driven."*

*Eight of those men Rooney helped collect now have busts in the Hall of Fame. Noll is a member, too. Art Rooney, Sr. was inducted in 1964, the year his son was hired. There are those that feel Junior and his eye for talent belong in there with them.*

*"I've campaigned for years to get him elected," says Sports Illustrated's Paul Zimmerman, a member of the*

*Hall's selection board. "I don't vote for owners and administrators very often. They should have their own wing, separate from the players. But Art Jr. would get my vote in a heartbeat. Look at all the talent he assembled. His '74 draft is the greatest in NFL history."*

*"I'd be honored even if they just considered me," admits Rooney. "but I'm getting old now, and people are starting to forget. Besides, there are still some Steeler players that belong in there ahead of me." All of those statements are likely very strong truths.*

*Society often builds monuments to its exalted and their glorious achievements. I've passed by this proud, neglected statue of a soldier in Chicago's North Side for years. Most people ignore it, but one day I stopped to take a look. It was General Phillip Sheridan, a Civil War hero, the man who cut off Lee's retreating forces at Appomattox. He helped rebuild the city of Chicago after its great fire.*

*The statue was done by the same artist who chiseled the faces at Mount Rushmore, Gutzon Borglum. A nod to history, but nobody really knows of these men anymore. Time has marched on for too long.*

*In the world of pro football, those great men were the Pittsburgh Steelers of the 1970s. Chuck Noll was their leader. Art Rooney, Jr. was the artist.*

*And then they tore his monument down.*

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***What was the path that led you from the Steelers ticket window to becoming the man behind team's legendary drafts of the 1970s?***

AJR: Scouting was something that always interested me. When I joined the scouting department in '64, Buddy Parker was the head coach and we didn't have any draft choices. He traded them all away! No firsts or seconds or thirds. It was awful. The team was always starting over, so when I started there was nothing for me to screw up! Parker was a great guy, a real character. He wanted his scouts to take pictures of the top prospects because he didn't want any stupid-looking players. He once said, "If I knew how ugly that [#1 choice in '62] Bob Ferguson from Ohio State was, I never would have drafted him!"

I felt the scouting department was the one place where I could really make a difference, to do something good for the team. Working for the Steelers was a family thing, so it quickly became a passion. To me, it was an honor and a privilege just to be involved. Eventually, I asked my dad for a job in the scouting department. Later I remember talking to one of my father's friends, an older gentleman who was very successful himself. He said, "You don't want to get into that scouting business. You're a family man, Art. You're going to be away from them all the time, and that's not good." He was right. I was never home. Man, I put a lot of time on the road, but I didn't care. I was willing to make the sacrifices. My wife really should've kicked me out. People talk about having priorities. Well, my priority was that fucking football team. Football was like a narcotic to me, and I got addicted. My family really wasn't a priority, but it should have been.

***Who do you credit as being your most valued teachers in learning how to evaluate football talent in those early days?***

ARJ: Two scouts we named Willie Walls and Jack Butler come to mind first. They started taking me around the country with them to watch players. Butler was once a top Steeler defensive back who never even played high school ball. He started out in the seminary, then went to college at St. Bonaventure. My Dad's brother Dan was the athletic director there, so he put a fix in for Butler to get a football uniform. Jack became a fine player, and

eventually signed as a free agent with the Steelers in 1950. Then he hurt his knee real bad and became a Steelers coach. He was a good coach, but he kept getting run over all the time in practice by the players. I could relate to that. I could be run over on a wide sweep, too. Athletically, I was a reject. Jack's problem was a gimpy knee, but mine was being a fat-ass without any lateral movement. Coach Parker finally told Dad to get Butler off the field before he got killed. Lucky for me, Butler then became a Steeler scout and really helped me. We traveled a lot together, talking about what made good prospects and good organizations.

### ***Tell me about Will Walls?***

ARJ: A big, good-looking guy - part Indian, part Texan. That is, until right after JFK was shot in Dallas. Then he'd tell me, "Ya know, Arty, I'm really from Arkansas." Take a look at Roy Blount's book *3 Bricks Shy of a Load* for good picture of Willie. He was Sammy Baugh's top target at TCU, then he played for the Giants. He went to Hollywood and had a few parts, even turned down a screen test for Gunsmoke. As a scout, Will logged more miles than a professional truck driver. He had a big 01' car, loaded with things like hot plates, coffee makers, projectors and a sill camera, so much stuff that he crushed the damn springs. He always carried light bulbs because the motels skimmed on them back then and he couldn't read at night without them. He also took a great big bar of soap because the motels had those little bars for skinny-assed folks. And, of course, his .38 pistol.

Will was forever putting the cart before horse. His priorities were all mixed up. Ken Stillely, our head scout at the time, said that if Will was a stable boy, he'd spend more time cleaning up the little clump of horse shit in the corner than the big pile in the middle of the stable. He spent more time taking pictures of players for Buddy Parker than evaluating them, but he did log the miles and cover the schools.

I ran into him once at Colorado U. He came into the film room and watched a reel of a top prospect with me. "Artie," he said, "did ya see that fella flinch there?" He ran the picture back ten times in a row. "Remember, Artie - once a flincher, always a flincher." Later, I asked him where he was headed next. "I'm movin' on, going to Utah," he said. "Then the Northwest." I said, "That's a lot of driving, Willie." "Yep," he said, "but I gotta cover these fellas."

Willie was very well loved by a lot of top people in the game. I liked him a lot, too, but I learned to discount his reports a bit. In terms of sophisticaion, they were comparable to the old World War I barn stormer or a two-winger. Don't ask him for the details about why a guy can play - he just felt it. Will Wall worked with BLESTO [Bears Lions Eagles Steelers Talent Organization] until he retired, and he passed away when he was about 75. As the scouts would say, [laughing] "He-died with his boots off."

### ***Were you a quick learner?***

ARJ: I'd say so. I never, ever stopped asking questions about what to look for. It was always, "Why? Why? Why?" I was probably a pain in the ass to a lot of people, but I made all the stops.

All those old scouts were terrific to me. They taught me everything from not forgetting foul weather gear to how to run a film projector. Stillely told me to make sure I was always invited back to a college the next year. He said, "Never be an asshole like that guy out west. What's his name? The guy from The Citadel ... Al Davis, that's it. Stay away from him, Artie. And by the way, always send the guys a postcard saying, 'Thanks for being so nice.'" He stressed how the small things were so important.

### ***What were some of your early observations about the art of scouting professional football talent?***

ARJ: All football players are good athletes, but I had to learn to make distinctions in quickness, control, playing strength and playing speed. Then there are the intangibles - football intelligence and football character, which are

important. Take, for instance, a guy like Bobby Layne. Maybe he wasn't the greatest Christian in the world, but Layne had football character. He was never late for practice. He was always there early and stayed late, and some guys followed his lead. After the season was over, I sat down and added up all his extra practice time. I couldn't believe it! Layne had practiced an *entire month* longer than the rest of the team. Now *that's* football character.

I believe in *good* citizenship, but you can't have too many cherubs on your team. Players have to be tough guys because football is a violent, emotional game. The intelligence part? They still give that Wunderlick test to players, but does that translate to how they think and react on the field? Not always.

As I became more and more involved, I could see changes had to be made. We still didn't have any significant draft picks until around '68 or '69, but we started to run our scouting department like we did have them. We were trying to develop a system we felt would work. My attitude was to bring in so many good players that the coaches couldn't fuck the team up. That might've been an immature approach, but that's exactly how I felt. We were trying to build a team, but we wanted it to be a lasting team. Always trading away our draft picks hurt us, so I became a terror on insisting we build through the draft, almost to the point of being crazed. In 1970 we were offered a bundle for the pick we used on Terry Bradshaw, but we turned it down. When you have the chance to pick a great football player like Bradshaw, you pick him. In the old days we might have made that deal.

### ***Did you often seek advice from scouts or personnel men from other teams?***

ARJ: Occasionally I would. One summer my dad sent me over to see Wellington Mara of the Giants. He was a serious draft guru in those days. One bit of advice he suggested was having a strict spring meeting to get the college prospects slotted in order. He told me, "Most of the players will remain the way you rated them in the spring, so that will become your map once the fall season starts. Barring any injuries, the good players should still be good." The Steelers had never done that, so that meeting with Wellington Mara became one of the stepping-stones we used to help mold our scouting department.

Eventually we learned that wasn't good enough, either. Our system still needed refining. Butler suggested ranking players by their skill on the football field, regardless of position, and draft them accordingly. The idea was not to draft out of need. We helped Jack develop a preferred 200 player list that would be our guideline during the draft. Mel Kiper and those TV draft gurus all do it now, but it wasn't common back in the '60s. The school of thought is, if you need a tackle and the best one available is rated the 15<sup>th</sup> best overall player, you can't pass up a cornerback or a *receiver* who is rated the 6<sup>th</sup> best overall player. You're leaving too much on the table. You're giving up the chance to draft a great player to take a good one, to fill a need, and that's not the way to build a team.

### **Art Rooney, Jr. on one of the old timers, Fido Murphy**

Fido Murphy was a BLESTO scout, one of the real characters from way back. Buddy Parker claimed that before the days of film exchange in the NFL, Fido was a special talent, that he had a real knack of putting together defenses. I saw him in action once doing a number on Joe "the Jet" Perry and the 4gers. I didn't know if he was the reason Pittsburgh won the game, but Perry only gained a small number of yards and Fido took all the credit to the dismay of our coaches.

Dad used to say, "That guy is tetched in the head. He's nuts!" Lots of other people said that too.

I was with Fido a number of times at different schools and I pretended I didn't know him, but to no avail. He'd show up and say, "Artie's old man sent me here to teach the kid the ropes." That was a bunch of baloney. Dad wouldn't

do that to me.

Fido had the guts of a burglar. He would introduce me to all the big shots at the All-Star games, people that I mostly had already met. "Coach so-and-so," he'd yell, "this is Artie Rooney, Art's boy. Taught him every thing he knows."

Murphy would bum the college stationary from the coach's secretary and send letters out to Coach Halas or dad or Jack Butler or George Allen - who was the Bears' personnel director and assistant coach - just to show that he'd been there.

His wife was a movie actress, Iris Adrian. She was Jack Benny's secretary on his show. Sorta pretty. Played a curt, smart aleck character on the show, but when you talked to her on the phone she was very nice. She loved Fido, always called him "Ray." He would send me player reports on the back of her Benny show scripts.

Fido wasn't bad at evaluating quarterbacks. He once told me when we were looking at a player, "Kid, watch the quarterback's feet, not just his arm. Watch how well he sets up, steps up and how he escapes."

That was the only positive thing I ever got from Fido in terms of rating players. But I learned a lot about other things by watching him - how not to act, how not to scout.

After we made it to the first Super Bowl, he had already been sent back to the Bears by BLESTO. All of us were happy about that, including Fido.

But remember, one did not *fire* one of Coach Halas' scouts. The goods were just "returned to sender."

***By the late 1960s, you were confident in your eye for talent?***

ARJ: I'd say that was true. But I learned an early lesson, too. Occasionally I'd run into scouts who'd brag about all their draft picks who made the team. I confess ,I was equally as bad until one of our assistant coaches straightened me out real quick. His name was Jim Doran, He once said to me when I was boasting, "It's not only who made the team, Art, but what kind of a contribution did the player make? Did they become starters that the team could win with?" It was a good point I never forgot. You don't want stiffs who you're replacing with other stiffs every other year.

***In the early 1960s, the Steelers began scouting many of the small, black colleges around the country - unknown, mysterious places like Bethune-Cookman and Florida A&M and Jackson State - that eventually yielded big benefits to the team in the following decade. How did the Steelers talent department get pointed in that untapped direction?***

ARJ: I had been on the road since 1964 and after a few years I developed some confidence in myself, in my ability to spot talent. The one thing that I saw was the great number of athletes at these black schools. I mean, you wanna talk about athletic bodies! These guys had great movement and skills and willingness, and they were just begging for the league to give them tryouts and jobs. The old white scouts would agree that these guys had ability, but they kept coming up with excuses as to why they couldn't play. "They can't be quarterbacks, they can't be centers." All this "can't, can't can't." It was bullshit! I never fell for that. The black coaches and kids kept saying, "We can play! All we need is a chance." Well, the league is now 70% black, and you know what? They were right! They could play!

Bill Nunn was the scout who really opened us up to the black schools. He is black, too. Nunn either scouted or

signed - or both seven guys who started on a Steeler Super Bowl team: Donnie Shell, Mel Blount, Fats Holmes, LC Greenwood, Frank Lewis, Glen Edwards, John Stallworth and Sam Davis. Not bad work for an exsports writer. Of course, there were also players like Joe Gilliam, who started at times but not during the Super Bowls. Maybe we could have done that without him, but I wouldn't bet on it.

### ***How did Nunn find his way into the organization?***

ARJ: Dad had a friend named Rick Roberts, who was a writer for *The Pittsburgh Courier*. He talked Dad into hiring Bill Nunn, the paper's sports editor, as a part-time talent scout for the Steelers. I was pissed purple. I knew we needed a scout, and I had come to realize how important the black schools were going to be for us, but I wanted to hire the scouts. Bill had been covering the black schools for the papers and visited them all the time. He had outstanding contacts. He even named the Black College All-Star football team for *The Courier*, but he was not my "A" guy.

Well, Dad got us both together one evening. Nunn seemed like a nice guy who wanted to do well. He didn't seem to be a bull-shitter. *I gave Dad a qualified "okay,"* not that it made a difference. Well. Nunn very quickly became very important to me. At first it was just his contacts, then it was his insights, then his dry humor. Before long he became a fine scout of all players. His agenda matured. He had to win, no matter if the prospect were black, white, blue or green. He even consented to toss Dad an Irishman now and then, but that's another story.

### ***You're gonna have to tell the story now, you know that?***

ARJ: [Laughing] A player like Tyrone McGriff. What a great Irish name! Except he was from Florida A&M, an all-black school. I was a big pain in the ass as far as wasting draft picks, even if they were used late on Irishmen or relatives of Dad's friends or politicians. Free agents, maybe, but draft picks? No way. You only had twelve them and I didn't want to waste a single one. Nunn would say, "Hey, it's a late pick, Artie. And besides, The Chief owns the team!" Haley, another important scout for us, would say, "Yeah, lighten up a little with The Chief, will ya? Don't you know we can't set a precedent here?"

Then after the draft, Dad said to me, "You said it was going to be an Irish kid in the 11th round. McGriff's not even white!" I said, "Well, Dad, you know the South - those black kids with Irish names. The kid probably had an Irish ancestor." He seemed to understand. But the next year he got me and said, "I agree with what you said about those black Irish kids, but could you please get a white Irisher on a late round this time?"

Nunn had a knack of cutting through all the baloney. He understood people and their ways, the human condition. One year there was a big murder case in Pittsburgh. Bill told me, "The broad did it." I said, "C'mon, Bill, you're too damn cynical. She's not even a suspect." "Yeah?" he said. "Just watch and see." A number of years later there was a big headline in the morning paper - the broad did it! Bill told me it was all there for you to see.

Nunn was just as insightful in his eye for football. John McMakin was a southern kid who only lasted three years with us. He was a tough, slug-it-out type. McMakin made a nice contribution while we were still building the team. Near the end of his time as a Steeler he walked into our camp office. Nunn was the camp manager at the time. McMakin's hair was longer and he had a stylish bag over his shoulder, almost like a purse. A number of younger men were carrying them in those days. Nunn checked him in. He was very nice to the kid, but after he left Bill said to me, "McMakin's finished here - done." I said, "We haven't even seen him on the field yet! Why would you say that?" He replied, "McMakin's a biter and scratcher. Did you see that bag he's carrying? That's not his style. He was a fighter and now he's lost his edge. Without it he won't make the team." Well, Nunn was right again. He didn't make it.

### ***Let's talk about the events that led to the Steelers hiring Chuck Noll as head coach in 1969?***

ARJ: Bill Austin had been our coach, and his teams weren't doing very well. We were 2-11-1 in his last year and it was obvious we needed to look for somebody else. My dad and Dan had me asking people I met on the road the question, "Who are the best three people out there who would make a good NFL head coach: A lot of the other scouts I knew from the road were pretty good guys, honest guys who wouldn't steer you wrong, and this Baltimore assistant coach named Chuck Noll was always mentioned in the group. Maybe not as the top guy but still in the group of three. Chuck Knox also was mentioned a lot but not as much as Noll.

Our friend Upton Bell - [former NFL commissioner] Bert's son was with the Colts and mentioned Noll's name to us more than a few times. They said he was Don Shula's right-hand man. I told Dad and Dan I was hearing the same name all over the country. If you think about it, that was sort of remarkable because Noll was anything but political or a hale fellow well-met. Dad finally called Shula, and Shula said he was real high on Noll, so they brought him in for an interview.

### ***Were you directly involved in the hiring process?***

ARJ: Dan and my Dad were the ones who really handled the interviews with the coaches. I had a lot of ideas about who we should bring in, but they handled it. One day I stopped by our offices at the old Roosevelt Hotel in downtown Pittsburgh. It was a character place, like something out of Damon Runyan. We had real crummy offices there, but we were waiting for Three Rivers Stadium to be built to get our new quarters. I was told that Chuck Noll was in the hotel restaurant, The Sylvania Room, being interviewed by Dad and Dan. I wasn't invited to be there but I sorta elbowed my way in. They were at the big front table where Dad held a lot of his conferences. I was introduced to Chuck and sat down and listened. Dad and Dan were very much the proper gentlemen, and all the proper business questions were being asked. All the appropriate statements were being made. It wasn't a lively event at all.

Well, I had my own agenda that day. I wanted to talk about the draft and committing to build the team through the draft. I wanted to talk about the Negro players - did Noll have a quota system in mind? I think I made a statement that you couldn't win doing that. Although Dad and Dan didn't say so, they gave me the impression that I was homing in on their party. The looks, the glares and the body language told me, "Hey rube, know your place and shut up." I got it all but the kick under the table.

Noll was this intelligent, mild, soft-spoken guy, but then all of a sudden he came to life on the subject. He was vehement in his position. With a forceful tone he said, "I don't care what color my players are. I want great athletes, not good athletes. I want good people, and I want smart people. I will not make decisions based on race or the school they player attended. You find good players where they are." I absolutely agreed.

*Who were the runners-up for the job?*

ARJ: We were interested in several other people. Dan really liked Cleveland's Nick Skorich, who was a good, old football guy. All man. We also looked at Ara Parseghian at Notre Dame. I actually called Parseghian from a pay phone and was able to get right through to him. Got his number right from the operator. Ara said he was honored we would think of him, but he was doing very well at Notre Dame and wasn't ready to leave. Those are the two names that come to mind as being the other serious candidates.

***You mentioned that Noll a definite idea of what kind of players he wanted on the Stee/ers. Was that a pretty obvious indication that he was going to command a large part in making personnel decisions, decisions that likely would've crossed into your area of responsibility? You remember Bill Parcell's famous quote about "being responsible to make the dinner but not being allowed to buy the groceries."***



ARJ: I got that impression right away. Noll said he was a teacher, and that his players had to be teachable. They had to be decent men, and he wanted nothing to do with troublemakers. He was saying exactly what I wanted to hear. But then he started saying words I didn't want to hear, and those were about the draft. He said he needed the final say on draft picks, and that his coaches had to be involved in a big way. He also said he would be making the trades, although he was committed to building primarily through the draft. I started to debate these points vehemently with him. It meant a lot to me, and I wanted to get right into it with Noll. Dad finally put me in my place and shut me up with something short and sweet. Then as fast as it became a real meeting, things returned to being quiet and proper and then it soon ended. I kinda felt that I had queered the whole thing.

I wanted to have the last say in the draft. I told my Dad afterwards, "I'm doing all the work out there, so I want all the responsibility." I was still at the age where I had these noble ideas. Dad wouldn't go for it. He said, "You're in charge of the scouting department, the bookkeeping on players. The coach is the one who's going to get fired if he doesn't win, so he should be the one making decisions on his players." So I was given the job of collecting, organizing and interpreting the information, while trying to get along with the coaches. I would follow Dad's orders, but I didn't intend to be a flunky. I made my opinions very clear and would sometimes get into it with the assistant coaches.

### ***How so?***

ARJ: Usually over personnel issues. What kind of players we were looking for. Which guys we wanted to keep. Not so much with Noll as with his assistants. The assistant coaches helped me in a lot of ways but they were always so inconsistent. Also, they answered to the head coach, not to me, so I'm sure some of them thought I was just getting in the way. "Two levels of responsibility," as George Young would put it. That friction existed up until my end times with the team.

Some of the coaches were indeed good, some were okay, and others didn't give a damn. They wanted to spend all of their time coaching. Some assistants were just bad judges of talent. Now and then you'd get one who was a mischief maker, who put in no work at all and waited till the day before the draft to call Bo Schembechler or Woody Hayes and get the scoop. Then they'd push that player real hard. Hey, it was okay to talk to the college coaches, but be timely about it. Give us a chance to check those sources out.

### ***How long into Noll's tenure did you realize he was going to be an asset to your scouting department?***

ARJ: Not long at all. Hey, I'll never deny that Noll was the man. When Noll came in, we became great drafters. Before him we weren't. Our methodology was in place, but he was the balance that made the difference. He was very, very difficult to work with because he was so exacting. He'd come in at night after practice at St. Vincent's and talk to the scouts for an hour and a half. He liked working with the scouts. Do that four nights a week during camp, year after year after year, that's a lot of hours spent with the coach, so we knew exactly what he was looking for.

Chuck Noll really had brass balls. Once he told me that's what was needed to run a successful football team. There wasn't a bit of phony in him. The Rooney's were all people people. Noll was like General George Marshall, and that was just what we needed. Eventually Dan took on some of Noll's characteristics in running the team. I was always more like my mom. She's the one who got me the damn job anyway. I was always afraid of being an asshole.

**Who Was That Moustached Man?**

I was at a football banquet in New York with my Dad back in 1972. It was springtime. Toward the end of the evening, some guy with a big, handlebar moustache comes over and hands him a piece of paper. I didn't know who he was. The Chief took a look at it and said, "Oh, that's very nice. Thank you, thank you ..." then handed it to me. It was a drawing of my Dad, a quick sketch. I just folded it up and put it in the pocket of my sportcoat and forgot about it.

About a year or so later, I was out at Yonkers Racetrack in New York, watching a few of our horses run. Walter Sullivan was there. Walter was in the printing business and a relative of Billy Sullivan, the Patriots owner. He did a lot of programs for the racetracks. We were standing there talking, and for some reason I reached into the pocket of my sportcoat. There was a piece of paper in it. I pulled out, thinking, "What the hell is this?" and I opened it up.

"Whatcha got there, Art?" Walter asked me.

"Oh, just a sketch some guy did of my Dad. I must've been wearing the same sportcoat the night he gave it to him." He asked to see it then took a look at the drawing. It was a picture of my Dad in a tux, puffing on one of his cigars.

He stared at it for a moment. "Where did you get this again?" "At a dinner in New York, maybe a year ago. Jeez, I'm lucky I didn't send this coat to the cleaners with that in my pocket."

"You're right about that," he said. "I'm sure there aren't very many Art Rooney sketches like this one around. "At least not ones done by Leroy Neiman."

• Art Rooney, Jr.

***You didn't have to wait long to get acquainted with Noll; he was hired the night before the 1969 draft.***

ARJ: We sure didn't. Noll arrived in Pittsburgh and we went right to our draft boards. We reviewed every single guy on there. All that was listed was the player's name, rating, height, weight, speed and school. Without a note, I stood there and talked about every one of them. Afterward, Dan told me it was my finest hour. "How could you recall all that stuff," he asked me. I didn't make anything up either. I had been a history major at St. Vincent's College, so I had to memorize a lot. I was dead on with any of the movies I saw, and could recall just about everything from them. But I was far from having a photographic memory. We liked Joe Greene a lot and so did Noll, so there was immediate agreement over whom to take in the first round. Joe became the cornerstone of our defense. I still remember the headlines in the paper the next day - "Joe Who?"

***The Steelers went 1-13 in a purge year for Noll. The reward came in the form of a cointoss with the 1-13 Chicago Bears over the right to draft a fireballing Louisiana quarterback named Terry Bradshaw. Bradshaw was widely regarded as the top collegiate talent in the 1970 draft. After winning the toss, were you convinced using the first overall pick on him was the right thing to do?***

ARJ: Absolutely. We heard all the talk about him being a "dumb quarterback," but that was way overblown, obviously. He was a real talent. We had a lot of scouting reports on him, even the IQ test. Haley, who was working

for BLESTO then, gave it to him. Terry's score was okay. Not MIT stuff, but okay.

Noll actually wanted to test the waters on a trade for Terry's rights, which bothered me. I had preached like St. John the Baptist about building the team through the draft. I was like a man possessed every time I talked to Dad or Dan about it. Dan was onboard with me, but Dad was thinking like Noll. He was leaning toward trading that pick to acquire some depth for the team. I really got into it with him once. We were in the car with my brother John, and I was almost crazed, really yelling at Dad. John had to calm me down, I was so fired up. But I knew we had to take Bradshaw.

### ***Which teams showed the most interest in trading for Bradshaw?***

ARJ: Several of them were very interested, including the Cardinals and the Atlanta Falcons. Atlanta's president, Frank Wall, bypassed Noll and called Dad directly trying to make a deal. Dad listened to Wall's offer, which was an attractive one - a bunch of players and draft picks - but he wanted Atlanta to toss in Claude Humphrey, a powerful defensive lineman, too. Dad loved Humphrey and wanted to play him next to Joe Greene, but Wall said, "We can't do that, Mr. Rooney. We're trying to build a championship team." Dad thought about that for a second, then said, "Frank, we're trying to build a championship team here, too." That's when Dad seemed convinced we should hold onto the pick and go for Terry.

If you trade that pick for, say, five to seven players, here's what you'd get - a couple of good players, a couple of injured guys, a troublemaker or two and another gingerbread they're trying to unload. By adding so-called this "depth" to your team, at best you're buying respectability, not a championship. Jack Butler told me that there wouldn't be another player like Bradshaw around for 10 or more years. I felt the same way. Remember when the Cardinals traded Ollie Matson to the Rams? What was it, nine players for one? Matson was great, and the guys the Cardinals got were just okay. So, were the Steelers after respectability or greatness? Let's go for the big one.

[To be continued]

# The King of Siberia: Bill Howton

By John Maxymuk

Adapted from *Packers By the Numbers*, Prairie Oak Press, 2003.

From 1948 through 1958, the Packers record was 37-932 a winning percentage of .288. If we lop off Lambeau's last two years as coach, the record from 1950 through 1958 improves the winning percentage to .306. If we look at the entire decade of the 1950s including Lombardi's first year of 1959, the percentage leaps to .333. The Packers won only one third of their games throughout the decade. It was the most embarrassing decade in team history, widely surpassing the prolonged mediocrity of both the 1970s and 1980s.

Those decades featured disturbing winning percentages of .413 and .438 respectively; .333 is a grotesque record of a club slowly going out of business although they were only the *second* worst team of the 1950s. The Cardinals finished 33-84-3 for an all-time low winning percentage for a full decade of .288. Other teams that won less than one third of their games over a full decade are limited to the 1960s Broncos .293, the 1970s Saints .306, the 1980s Bucs .299, and the 1990s Bengals .325. In the 1950s, opposing coaches threatened underachieving players that they would be shipped to Green Bay to finish their career in snowy, losing oblivion. Between the weather and the hopeless performance of the team, Green Bay was considered the NFL's Siberia.

The facilities were substandard and the coaching was spotty, but the Packers did have some good players at the time -- just not enough of them. Of the dozen hearty souls who played most of the decade in Green Bay, Al Carmichael and Howie Ferguson, two running backs, experienced the worst of the losing from 1953 through 1958. Their years as Packers produced just 20 wins and two ties in 72 games for a .292 winning percentage.

The other 10 trapped players included Breezy Reid, Tobin Rote, Fred Cone, John Martinkovic, Bobby Dillon, Billy Howton, Hawg Hanner, Jim Ringo, Bill Forester, and Gary Knafelc. The three biggest stars of the group were defensive back Bobby Dillon, quarterback Tobin Rote and wide receiver Billy Howton. With a 26-56-2 record from 1952 through 1958, Howton's Packers achieved the lowest winning percentage (.321) of those three stars giving him the dubious crown of the King of Siberia.

Billy Howton was a fast and shifty end who was a twotime team MVP in college at Rice. He was selected in the second round of the 1952 draft by the Packers and reunited in Green Bay with Tobin Rote who graduated two years ahead of Howton at Rice.

Bill burst into the NFL with flair. As a rookie, he caught 53 passes for a league-leading 1,231 yards and 13 touchdowns. The 13 touchdown receptions in a 12-game season was a league rookie record not broken until Viking Randy Moss caught 17 in a 16-game season in 1998. Howton quickly was called the "new Don Hutson," and he would end his Green Bay years seven years later second to Hutson in most team receiving categories.

In a game against the Rams in 1956, he caught seven passes for 257 yards. He was a master

of the deep pass and would be named to two All-Pro teams and four Pro Bowls in his 12-year career, but the team around him was awful.

Things would change dramatically for "Siberia" at the end of the decade, but not for its King. When Lombardi arrived, one of his first moves was to trade Howton to Cleveland for halfback Lew Carpenter and defensive end Bill Quinlan.

Why was he traded? Many theories have been espoused. Howton felt it was due to his being the team's player representative, but Lombardi got along fine with New York Giants player representative Kyle Rote. A popular story told by Howton's roommate Gary Knafelc is

that Howton took an aggressive attitude into his first and only meeting with the new coach and found out too late that Lombardi was fully in charge. Defensive assistant Phil Bengtson wrote that Lombardi was originally offering Howton to the Colts for Johnny Unitas' backup George Shaw because the Packers had a pressing need for a starting quarterback, but that deal fell through. Of more importance, Bengtson noted that Lombardi felt that Howton was slipping and should be traded while his value was still high. Furthermore, Howton was not that big and was not noted for his blocking which was something at which Lombardi's ends needed to excel.

Take all those factors together and you get a situation where a player on the downside with a bit of an attitude can be used to obtain players to fill other holes. Lombardi was absolutely correct about Howton -- he had averaged 18.7 yards per catch on 303 receptions in seven years in Green Bay, but would average only 14.4 on 200 receptions in his last five years in the league. He would never again be named to an All Pro or Pro Bowl team after he was traded from Green Bay. In addition, the Packers defensive line that Lombardi inherited was a sieve that Bill Quinlan would help plug for two championships while Lew Carpenter was a capable fill-in at several positions.

Teamwise, things would not improve much for Howton outside of Wisconsin. His one year in Cleveland the Browns finished 7-5, the only winning season he would have as a pro. He was selected in the expansion draft by Dallas and would spend four losing years as a Cowboy. His team's total winning percentage in those last five years was .311, even worse than his time in Green Bay.

At least the native Texan ended up playing in his home state. He was still a moderately effective receiver, but not the same flashy star of his early years. He was now known as the Red Fox for his red hair and craftiness in getting open. As he put it at the time, "When I started my first game as a rookie in Green Bay in 1952 and I stood at that line of scrimmage and looked at that defense, I knew I could beat them ... Now, 12 seasons later, I wonder if this game isn't passing me by."

After his playing career ended in 1963, Howton was briefly the All-Time league leader in both receptions with 503 and receiving yards with 8,459. As president of the NFL Players Association, he had successfully fought to have a pension plan instituted for retired players, even testifying before Congress in 1958. He moved on in retirement and did some coaching at Rice before becoming a building contractor.

Years later, he got involved in financial investments and in 1981 was sentenced to five years in federal prison for a fraud case involving \$8 million in misappropriated funds. He and his partner were later ordered to repay \$1 million of that money to an Ohio Savings and Loan. After serving

two years in jail, Howton was released.

On vacation in Yugoslavia in the late 1980s, he fell in love with an employee of Iberia Airlines and moved to Madrid to retire and write his memoirs. As of 1990, he was said to have written about 600 pages on his life in the NFL and intended to shop the manuscript to publishers. At this time though, it has the same publishing status as fellow former Packer great Johnny Blood's rumored economics tome *Spend Yourself Rich*.

Today, Howton is largely forgotten. Had he had the opportunity to play with some better teams, he might have had a Hall of Fame career and found a buyer for those memoirs. In football, as in many other endeavors, the company you keep is of vital importance.

**RECEIVING**

<b>Year</b>	<b>TM</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>Ree</b>	<b>Yards</b>	<b>Y/R</b>	<b>TD</b>
1952	GB	12	53	1231	23.2	13
1953	GB	8	25	463	18.5	4
1954	GB	12	52	768	14.8	2
1955	GB	12	44	697	15.8	5
1956	GB	12	55	1188	21.6	12
1957	GB	12	38	727	19.1	5
1958	GB	12	36	507	14.1	2
1959	Cle	12	39	510	13.1	1
1960	Dal	11	23	363	15.8	4
1961	Dal	14	56	785	14.0	4
1962	Dal	14	49	706	14.4	6
1963	Dal	11	33	514	15.6	3
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>142</b>	<b>503</b>	<b>8459</b>	<b>16.8</b>	<b>61</b>

# Greg Pruitt

By Roger Gordon

Originally published in *The Orange and Brown Report*, February 2006.

It was Greg Pruitt's rookie year of 1973, the Sunday before Thanksgiving. The former Oklahoma speedster had just dashed 19 yards for a touchdown with less than a minute to go in the game to give the Cleveland Browns a 21-16 lead over bitter rival Pittsburgh. The Browns went on to win, pulling within half a game of the AFC Central Division-leading Steelers. Nearly 70,000 fans in Cleveland Municipal Stadium erupted in pandemonium. Thousands rushed the field as Pruitt, the little rookie halfback, was engulfed in a sea of worshippers. Fans even tried to tear down the goal posts.

"You would have thought we just won a championship," Pruitt said. "It was then that I realized just what the rivalry with the Steelers means to Browns fans, how important it is. It was really something, the way those fans went crazy. It reminded me of my days at Oklahoma, where football is like a religion. I had thousands of people hitting me, slapping me, on the helmet. It was nuts!"

Pruitt had one thing on his mind -- get to the safe environs of the locker room.

"I was able to get to the dugout and into the tunnel," he said. "I figured once I got into the locker room, there would be a whole lot of press and media people wanting to interview me and ask me questions. So while I was walking to the locker room, I was planning out what I was going to say."

What followed not only didn't happen to Pruitt in his days as a Sooner, it seemed to be out of some nevernever land that even the finest Hollywood scriptwriter couldn't imagine. It bordered on the absurd. At the same time, it was amusing and even a little frightening. When Pruitt arrived at the locker room and opened the door, he was in for quite a shock.

"It was the Pittsburgh Steelers locker room!" he exclaimed. "I went to the wrong locker room! Right as I opened the door, Chuck Noll was screaming at his players; when I walked in, it got so quiet, you could hear a pin drop."

There was Pruitt, this rookie who had scored the winning touchdown to beat the Steelers minutes earlier, standing there with 45 angry, black jersey-clad Pittsburgh Steelers staring at him.

"I got out of there pretty fast," said Pruitt, who headed back toward the field. "The fans were still out there, though. On one end of the tunnel were thousands of fans going berserk, and on the other end was the Pittsburgh Steelers' locker room. I was stuck! So I just stood in the tunnel, waiting for the fans to leave."

By the time Pruitt made his way across the field to the Browns' locker room, the press was long gone; Pruitt's planned remarks went for naught as his exciting day concluded quietly.

Pruitt's rookie season included several other thrilling moments. On October 28, he scored on a spectacular touchdown run against the Chargers late in the game in which he altered his path while trapped in the backfield. It went in the books as a 7-yard run but it seemed as if Pruitt ran 50 yards to do it. Two weeks later he burst down the right sideline for a 53-yard touchdown run that helped defeat the Oilers. On December 2, Pruitt sped down the right sideline again for a 55-yard score that helped tie Kansas City and keep Cleveland's playoff hopes alive and well. Unfortunately, the Browns fizzled at the end and lost their last two games, denying them a postseason berth.

Some seven months before the 1973 season began, on the day of the NFL Draft, the Cleveland Browns were the last thing on Pruitt's mind. He was sure he was headed for New England.

"Chuck Fairbanks was the new head coach up there," Pruitt recalled. "He was the head coach at Oklahoma the year before when I was there. The Patriots had three first-round picks. I thought for sure they'd take me in the first round."

Not only didn't New England select Pruitt in the first round, nobody did. Pruitt was bewildered. "I was shocked," he admitted. "I thought for sure I'd go to New England, and for sure that I'd go in the first round. I mean, I finished second in the Heisman Trophy voting!"

Pruitt's small stature - 5-10, 186 pounds - was the likely reason, he thinks.

"I don't know what else it could have been," he said.

Pruitt enjoyed a stellar career at Oklahoma in which he gained nearly 1,800 yards rushing and scored 18 touchdowns on the ground his junior year in 1971. He rushed for more than 1,000 yards and scored 13 rushing touchdowns his senior year. Pruitt led the Sooners to 11-1 records, two Sugar Bowl wins and a pair of AP NO.2 rankings in '71 and '72. The Sooners' lone defeat in 1971 came at the hands of archrival Nebraska, a 35-31 thriller that has been dubbed "The Game of the Century."

When the first round of the draft came to a close and Pruitt had not received the "phone call" yet, he left for the links. (There was no ESPN then and thus no daylong draft day television coverage like there is today.)

"I decided to go play golf," he said, "and I hate golf, always have. But I just needed to get away from all the hoopla and the press, so I went and hid on the golf course."

That is where Pruitt received the news that the Browns had drafted him. They selected him in the second round with the 30<sup>th</sup> overall pick. Pruitt was rather unfamiliar with the Browns, but he did recognize they had loads of tradition at the running back position. In fact, when Pruitt was growing up in Houston, he and his friends would watch on television highlights of Jim Brown, then try to emulate him in their pick-up games.

"One day," Pruitt said, "a kid named Charles Law was running around left end and could have gone in for a touchdown. But on TV he had seen Jim Brown run to the left and then cut to the right and score on an amazing play. So the kid tried that. He could have scored easily had he stayed to the left, but instead he wanted to be Jim Brown. He cut back to the right and ended up with two broken legs, a broken right arm and a bruised sternum."



Pruitt admitted he arrived in Cleveland as a cocky rookie who thought he knew it all. Leroy Kelly set him straight.

"At first," said Pruitt, "I thought to myself, 'I finished second in the Heisman voting, I'm just as good as Leroy Kelly and any other back here.' But soon I realized Leroy had been in the pros a long time and knew a whole lot more than me, like some of the intricacies of the game. I started to listen to him."

That was a smart move, as Pruitt's second-half surge his rookie season attested. He finished third on the Browns in rushing yards and second with four rushing touchdowns. He led the team in rushing yards the next five years. In 1975, Pruitt became the main man by gaining 1,067 yards, the first of three straight 1,000yard seasons. He nearly made it four, falling just short in 1978 with 960.

Pruitt's running style never allowed defenders to get straight hits on him.

"I always was kind of shifty," he said. "I would never try to be physical with a guy or take a guy on. I would always try to fake a guy. I'd only be physical if I had to be because of my size."

Pruitt's famed tear-away jersey didn't hurt. Defenders already had a hard enough time catching the little "water bug," as Howard Cosell called him. The tearaway jersey, made of delicate material that would tear easily when defenders attempted to grab Pruitt, allowed him to gain a few extra yards here and there. The tear-away seemed to be an "unwritten" rules infraction but not enforced at the time (it was banned in 1979). Although the tear-away jersey helped Pruitt, it hindered him at the same time.

"I personally did not like the tear-away," Pruitt said. "More and more people realized that I wore it and understood that I played a big part of the offense, that I was a primary receiver, or primary person, that the Browns went to in key situations, and they would just tear my jersey off and tell the referee. I'd have to leave the field to put a new jersey on. So I found myself running to and from the sideline more than I liked, and I couldn't really get into the flow of the game."

"One time, before a game with the Dallas Cowboys, I was walking out of the tunnel with [Cowboys receiver] Bob Hayes. He said, 'Hey, is that a tear-away you got on?' He walked up and tore it off! And he said, 'Oh, I guess it is.' I had to turn around and go back to the locker room and change my jersey."

"It enhanced my style, but I did alright without it."

Pruitt was piling up impressive numbers despite the Browns experiencing their worst era ever (up to that point). They were 4-10 in 1974 and 3-11 in 1975, only the second and third losing seasons ever for Cleveland. In 1976, the Browns rebounded to finish 9-5 and were in playoff contention all the way to the final weekend. The next fall, it looked as if the team was on its way when the bottom fell out in the second half of the season. The team finished in the AFC Central Division basement at 6-8.

As the Kardiak Kids were taking shape, Pruitt was dealt a major blow when he suffered a serious knee injury against the St. Louis Cardinals in Week 9 of 1979. He was out for the rest of the season. The Browns, with the "other" Pruitt - fullback Mike Pruitt leading the wayan the

ground, barely missed the playoffs at 9-7, the seventh straight year the team failed to qualify.

With Greg Pruitt back in 1980, now used mainly as a receiver out of the backfield, the Browns continued their thrill-a-minute ride and finally captured the AFC Central title, dethroning the two-time Super Bowl champion Steelers. Pruitt was on the receiving end of a clutch 21-yard pass from Brian Sipe on the final Browns drive of the "Red Right 88" loss to the Oakland Raiders that brought the 1980 season to a screeching halt. Pruitt's final year with the Browns was 1981. He caught 65 passes that year, but the Browns plummeted to a 5-11, last-place finish.

Pruitt was traded to the Oakland (soon-to-be Los Angeles) Raiders on April 28, 1982, where he spent three seasons mainly as a kick returner, duties he also assumed his first three years in Cleveland. He was not exactly elated with the deal.

"I got so depressed, I contemplated retirement," he said.

After some encouragement from Browns running backs coach Jim Garrett, Pruitt decided the Browns were wrong about him and that he still had some gas left in the tank. He accepted the move that sent him out west. Pruitt will never forget when he and defensive end Lyle Alzada, traded from the Browns to the Raiders the same day Pruitt was, first walked into the Raiders' training camp that summer.

"They introduced all the veterans from all the other teams first" Pruitt recalled. "And they introduced us last. They all clapped and gave us a standing ovation. Lyle said, 'They must think we still can play!' They heard him and said, 'No, no, no ... because of you guys, we've got these,' and they started holding their [Super Bowl] rings up."

The Raiders' players were referring to the "Red Right 88" play two years before that helped propel them to the Super Bowl XV title. Along with Alzada, Pruitt exacted a little revenge on his old team as he helped Los Angeles to a playoff win over Cleveland his first season there, and even earned a Super Bowl ring of his own the next season as the Raiders won Super Bowl XVIII over the Washington Redskins.

Pruitt's finest rushing performance as a Brown came against the Kansas City Chiefs on December 14, 1975, when he gained 214 yards on 26 carries in a 40-14 Browns' rout. Others included a 191-yard display against the Falcons in 1976 and a 182-yarder in 1978 against the Bengals. Overall for the Browns, Pruitt rushed for 5,496 yards and 21 touchdowns. His longest run was a 78-yarder for a touchdown against the Chiefs in 1977. In addition, he caught 323 passes for 3,022 yards and 17 touchdowns. Pruitt, once a quarterback in high school, even passed for six touchdowns, the longest a 60-yarder to Gloster Richardson against the Bengals in 1974. He also returned a kickoff 88 yards for a touchdown against the Patriots the same year.

These days, the 54-year-old Pruitt runs his own contracting business called Pruitt and Associates. He resides in Shaker Heights with his wife Mary. He has a son, Greg, Jr., stepdaughter, Bridgette, and one grandson, Andre. Greg, Jr., is following in his father's footsteps. He is a star running back for North Carolina Central University, an historical black school.

Perhaps one day, Greg, Jr., will give this generation of Browns fans the same thrills his father once did. That would be just fine with Greg, Sr., who offers high marks to the Cleveland faithful. "Those fans are better than anybody," he said.

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 28, No. 3 (2006)

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Year	TM	GM	Rushing				Receiving			
			Att	Yard	Y/A	TD	Rec	Yard	Y/R	TD
1973	Cle	13	61	369	6.0	4	9	110	12.2	1
1974	Cle	14	126	540	4.3	3	21	274	13.0	1
1975	Cle	14	217	1067	4.9	8	44	299	6.8	1
1976	Cle	14	209	1000	4.8	4	45	341	7.6	1
1977	Cle	14	236	1086	4.6	3	37	471	12.7	1
1978	Cle	12	176	960	5.5	3	38	292	7.7	2
1979	Cle	6	62	233	3.8	0	14	155	11.1	1
1980	Cle	16	40	117	2.9	0	50	444	8.9	5
1981	Cle	15	31	124	4.0	0	65	636	9.8	4
1982	LARd	9	4	22	5.5	0	2	29	14.5	1
1983	LARd	16	26	154	5.9	2	1	6	6.0	0
1984	LARd	15	8	0	0.0	0	2	12	6.0	0
TOTAL		158	1196	5672	4.7	27	328	3069	9.4	18

## The Birth of Modern Football

"In the beginning was the single wing."

Ralph Hickok, [www.billsbackers.com](http://www.billsbackers.com)

By Tom Benjey, [www.LoneStarDietz.com](http://www.LoneStarDietz.com)

Much has been written about how American football became a game of mass formations, brute force and, all too often, thuggery. In 1905 Penn resolved to neutralize Swarthmore's talented, giant-sized guard, Robert W. "Tiny" Maxwell, by throwing as many of their blockers at him as possible. Maxwell survived the onslaught somehow, possibly by divine intervention, and legend has it that an alert newspaper photographer snapped a picture of the battered and bruised lineman. President Theodore Roosevelt is said to have recoiled at the sight, but it is more likely true that it was a description that triggered his reaction. Not one to overlook something he thought amiss, Teddy ranted, "Brutality and foul play should receive the same summary punishment given a man who cheats at cards."

Maxwell's maiming plus the 18 deaths and almost 150 serious injuries to football players that year led T. R., not overly concerned with inconvenient constitutional limits on Presidential power, to threaten to ban the game. Before the season had ended, he summoned the presidents of Harvard, Yale and Princeton to the White House to hear his displeasure.

Several colleges discontinued the game but 62 schools met and formed the organization that would become the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). That organization's rules committee made several rule changes that would go into effect in the 1906 season. It was these rule changes that caused modern American football to be created. However, this writer has found little written about the modernization of the playing of the game.

Many have been credited with introducing the forward pass, but almost nothing on modernizing the running game. This dearth of articles may be attributed to a lack of innovation at this time. It may well be that most coaches simply rehashed their old formations to conform to the new rules. The use of the T-formation was so widespread that it was often referred to as the regular formation and continued to be so, at least for a while.

Football's old guard opposed the 1906 rule changes but accepted them rather than have the game banned. Amos Alonzo Stagg complained that they would turn football into a "parlor game." The visionary Walter Camp found the rules "so radical they would practically make a new game." And Hurry Up Yost prophetically vowed that Michigan would never throw a forward pass. Glenn S. "Pop" Warner took a different tack.

Whereas other coaches merely adapted older mass formations to accommodate the new rules - 6 men on the line of scrimmage, forward pass, neutral zone, 3 downs to make 10 yards, 2 so-minute halves, etc. Warner designed an entirely new formation from scratch.

Under the old rules brute force and size ruled, but the new rules made speed and deception valuable. Although he was head coach at his alma mater, Cornell, in 1906, Warner spent a week in early September at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School teaching coaches and former stars Bemus Pierce and Frank Hudson his new offensive scheme, before teaching it to The Big

Red.

Carlisle's teams were always lighter than their opponents but offset that with speed. The 1906 squad was particularly small, even for Carlisle, but tailback Frank Mount Pleasant was the fastest player Warner would ever coach at the Indian school.

Warner's new approach, the single-wingback offense or as Walter Camp dubbed it, the "Carlisle Formation", was designed to maximize the number of blockers at the point of attack, emphasize fakes to deceive defenders, and to capitalize on the foot speed of the players, pulling linemen as *well* as backs. Single wing and Carlisle players were a perfect match. Two undersized Indian blockers could match the largest defenders in the land.

The defining feature of Warner's single wingback system was the direct snap to a back who could run, pass or kick. He replaced the quarterback, who stood a couple of yards behind the center in the T formation, just received the snap and then handed it off or lateraled it to the ball carrier, with the blocking back (player 9 in the diagram).

The snap or pass (as Warner called it) from center generally went to the tailback (left halfback - player 11) or fullback (player 10). Any back not carrying the ball was available to block in Warner's system. Replacing the quarterback with a blocking back who would occasionally carry the ball, but would usually run interference, gained him a blocker on most plays. This allowed Warner to increase force at the point of attack.

Next, Pop used an unbalanced line with two blockers to the left of center and four to the right. The players immediately adjacent to the center (guards - players 2 & 4) pulled from their positions to provide additional blockers at the point of attack. In his scheme on any given play three of the backs were available to block for the one who was carrying the ball.

His 1912 book, *Football for Players and Coaches*, shows a balanced line but Pop could have been recommending a simpler version of his scheme for inexperienced teams or may have been holding back some of his tricks. His 1927 book showed the unbalanced line but by then his opponents would have been fully aware of that wrinkle.

The right halfback (player 8) was moved outside the right end and just behind the line as a wingback. The wingback provided an extra blocker for the defensive end. The single wing emphasized double-teaming at the point of attack to improve the likelihood of opening a hole. It also allowed the lightweight Indians players to compete with the much heavier players on the Big Four teams.

### **Putting theory into action**

Carlisle normally started the season by playing a few home games in which they pummeled local small colleges to entertain their fans who could not travel across the country to see them play their big games.

The 1906 season started differently. Villanova was their first opponent in what the Carlisle school paper called, "the first important game of football played under the new rules in the United States." The first modern American football game was kicked off at 3:00 p.m. Wednesday, September 26, 1906 on Indian Field at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. Cornell *would* open its season the following Saturday with a scoreless tie against Colgate.

The *Carlisle Volunteer* hyped the game by saying, "There is seldom seen on a football field such a dazzling array of athletic talent of all types as will be present on the Indian Field this afternoon in the Indian Villa Nova game." Carlisle Indian School Publicist Hugh Miller put forth a maximum effort promoting the game to both coaches and the general public and was rewarded with the largest crowd to attend a game at Indian Field to that time.

The overflow crowd of 2,000 to 2,500 included many high school and college coaches who were eager to see what a game looked like when played according to the new rules. The *Carlisle American Volunteer* painted the scene in colorful terms, "The reader can not appreciate such a game unless he sees it. He can not appreciate the brilliant dress and colors which add so much to the beauty of the occasion. To the left, the bleachers were occupied by the Indian girls in white, the cadets in full uniform and the band in bright regalia, to the right the field was lined with spectators and reinforced by a row of automobiles."

Fullback Little Boy's first-half touchdown (5 points) and Mt. Pleasant's kick after (1 point) were the only points scored in the 6 to 0 Carlisle victory over their heavier opponent. According to the *Philadelphia Record*, the Indians were inside Villanova's five-yard line twice in the second half but both drives stalled due to penalties.

*The Arrow* reporter wrote little about the style of play, perhaps because he didn't approve of the rule changes. "The general opinion of the football authorities present as to the new rules was that the game is brought much closer to a basketball game and the only good feature is that it permits a closer observation of the details for spectators." He did say that, although the game was never in doubt, Villanova had a better forward passing offense.

*The Philadelphia Inquirer* was also unimpressed, " ... the hundred or more football experts and well-known players who took in the game were rather unfavorably impressed with the effect of the new rules, inasmuch as they believe the new rules tend to effeminate the game .... " (Apparently the rule changes did not reduce football to a parlor game as the number of football-related deaths increased to 33 two years later.)

The *Carlisle Sentinel* attributed the large number of penalties to the new rules. It also reported that the second half was only 15 minutes long but did not mention why it was shortened. *The [Philadelphia] Evening Bulletin* gave credit to " ... referee Dr. Harvey Smith for the promptness and certainty with which he inflicted penalties for violations of the new rules. When, after a minute of play, he penalized Villanova for the use of hands by one of its players the lesson was taken to heart and the game was the cleanest ever seen here."

That paper also observed that "The ten yards necessary to be gained in three downs this year was noticeably harder to cover than was five yards in the same number of downs last year." The *Carlisle Daily Herald* reporter called it "one of the finest games of football ever witnessed on a Carlisle field .. ,,"

Carlisle then beat her two warm up opponents, Albright College and Susquehanna University by a combined score of 130-0!

Saturday of the first week of the season, Warner's Cornell team opened with a scoreless tie at home to Colgate. In spite of this inauspicious start, Cornell players must have eventually learned the single wing pretty well. They ended up with an 8-1-2 record, with the loss and one of

the ties coming in their two road games. In case there is any doubt The Big Red was using Warner's new system, the reporter covering the October 27 Princeton game observed, "The Cornell backs grouped for the attack in two different formations. In one they were spread out, and in the other raised like steps, one behind the other."

The spread formation may have been Warner's punt formation from which he also ran pass plays. The step analogy was a fairly accurate description of the Old Fox's single-wing running formation, starting with the wingback farthest to the right of just behind the line, proceeding to the blocking back, fullback and finally to the leftmost and deepest player, the tailback. When compared to the old formations the single-wing was quite open.

This writer is convinced that Carlisle used the single wing in 1906 and that Cornell may have. Regardless, because of scheduling, Carlisle played its first game three days before Cornell played its. In his 1927 book Warner wrote, "This offensive formation [single wingback] has often been referred to as the 'Carlisle formation' because it was first used by the Indians," In 1951 Warner wrote Col. A. M. Weyend, "As to the single wing formation I started using this in 1906."

Pop needed an offensive scheme that accommodated the rule changes and it seems unlikely that he would design entirely different systems for Carlisle and Cornell. Also, as soon as the season ended, Pop left his alma mater due to internal strife that resulted when he benched his star player for disciplinary reasons, and returned to Carlisle as athletic director as well as coach of football and track.

Soon other teams were copying what Walter Camp dubbed "the Carlisle Formation" and modifying it to suit their preferences. The single wing became the dominant offensive scheme for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is still in use today in youth and high school programs. Various implementations of the single-wing dominated the NFL well into the 1940s. Almost everyone but the Chicago Bears used some version of the single-wing. Single-wing concepts can currently be found in schemes in use today such as the shotgun offense.

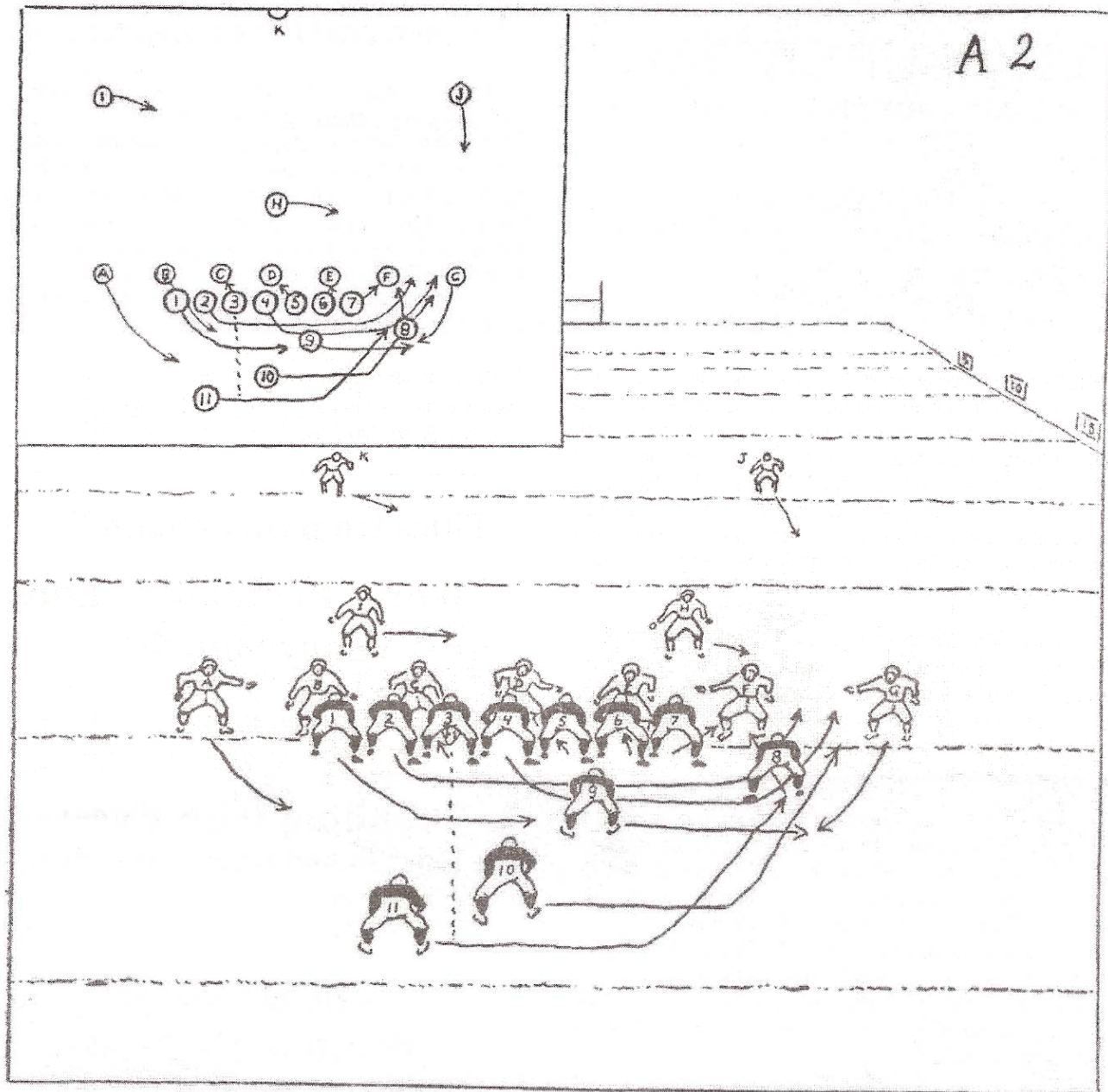
So, 100 years ago this fall, on a beautiful autumn afternoon in the Cumberland Valley, the modern game was born in full view of some of the leading lights in Eastern football. The play was not elegant, penalties were many as were fumbles, and completed passes were few. But a revolutionary system that would dominate the game for half a century was unleashed. The Carlisle Indians would dominate most of their opponents over the next decade losing only occasionally and then to the best teams in the land, unless conditions were wet or muddy. This event needs to be properly commemorated.

A fitting tribute for this auspicious occasion would be a game between Villanova and Haskell Indian Nations University played on Indian Field. Carlisle Indian School closed in 1918 when Carlisle Barracks was used as a hospital during WWI, and their mantle was passed to Haskell. Those Indian's ran roughshod over the elevens from larger schools in the middle of the country.

The Haskell Indians also ran the single-wing and Warner's later innovation, the double-wing because those Indians were coached by Warner's protege, Lone Star Dietz, and Dietz's protege, Richard Hanley. Reductions in government funding necessitated by the Great Depression stopped the Indians teams, a feat their opponents were incapable of. Who knows, a few great-grandsons of players from both Villanova and Carlisle, or Haskell, might just be playing for Villanova or Haskell now.

Indian Field is still there but more bleachers would be needed for the crowd the game would attract. Cars can still park opposite the bleachers but there is far too little space for the room than would be needed if spectators were allowed to watch the game from their cars as they did that first game. Room would also be needed for the ghosts of the Carlisle stars of a century ago.





A-2: This play has been variously named the off-tackle play, short-end run, or "the three-out-and-up" play, and is one of the strongest plays ever developed. Nos. 8 and 7 turn F in. 6, 5, and 3 block E, D, and C to the left. 2 and 4 pull out of the line and turn down the field as they pass F. 9, 10, and 11 start parallel to the line as though they were going around end. This brings G in rather deep. 9 hits G and drives him out, and 10 leads 11 inside of G. 3 leads the ball to 11 by an easy lob pass. 11 and 10 take three steps out, starting with the right foot, then turn sharply up the field. This turn is made just as 9 is hitting G. 1 follows up the play as safety man.

# Ricky Bell

## The Heart of a Champion

By Denis Crawford

Ricky Bell may have been the most star-crossed running back to ever play in the National Football League.

An anemic youth, Bell almost passed away early in life and struggled to build himself into an athlete. While at USC Bell became the second leading rusher in PAC-10 history and finished second in the 1976 Heisman balloting. Despite these accomplishments Bell didn't generate the excitement former Trojan greats Mike Garrett, O.J. Simpson and Anthony Davis had. During his five-year NFL career, Bell was always criticized for who he wasn't rather than who he was. To his lasting credit, Bell proved that if one had heart, one could overcome any obstacle and become a champion.

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers used the first overall choice of the 1977 NFL Draft to select Bell. His selection caused a great deal of controversy and consternation in the Tampa Bay area. Most pundits and fans had their sights set on Tony Dorsett, the electric 1976 Heisman Trophy winner out of Pitt. Shortly after the draft, a newspaper poll showed that Tampa Bay fans were against the pick by a 3-1 margin.

One person who questioned the pick was former USC star and Buffalo Bills running back O.J. Simpson. Simpson felt Bell depended too much on trying to run through people rather than around them, a style that would not work in the pros.

"Ricky won't be able to run that way (straight-ahead) in pro football," Simpson stated. "You shouldn't give everybody a shot at you. If you keep trying to run through the pros, you won't last long and you will start talking funny."

Buccaneer Coach John McKay defended drafting his former college running back by stating that Bell's size and style was a better fit than Dorsett's for his coveted I formation, power running game.

Bell's first two seasons worked to prove his critics right as he struggled with injuries and missed significant portions of the 1977 and 1978 campaigns. The fact that the Buccaneers lost their 26<sup>th</sup> game in a row in 1977 didn't help matters.

Despite the losses and injuries, Bell won the respect of his teammates because he kept on playing through the pain as best he could and didn't complain or blame the injuries for his woes. Winning over the critics was another story. With the losses piling up, fans looked for a whipping boy and they focused on the man in the orange #42 jersey.

One day the insults and complaints got to be too much for Bell and he finally snapped back. In week eleven against the Atlanta Falcons the Buccaneers were in the process of being shut out again, 17-0. This was a particularly abysmal loss as the Bucs offense produced only 78 yards the entire game.

Late in the game, the fans behind the bench were taunting Bell, who was sidelined with an injured knee after gaining only 11 yards. Bell, sitting with ice on his aching knees, turned to the fans and shouted "Come on down here! If it's that bad, just come on down!"

When his hecklers didn't move and increased the volume of their taunts, Bell charged the retaining wall and began climbing up into the stands, intent on throttling his attackers. Teammate George Ragsdale and members of the

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Tampa Police kept Bell from hitting the fans, and Bell stormed back to the sideline and sat quietly, his face a dark mask of anger for the rest of the game.

In 1979 everything changed for Bell and by association the Bucs. With future Hall of Fame defensive end Lee Roy Selmon spearheading the number one ranked defense in the league, the Buccaneers put together a five game winning streak to start the season.

While Selmon and defensive cohorts garnered the national attention, Ricky Bell quietly enjoyed his greatest season. With a talented but inexperienced quarterback in Doug Williams, Coach McKay loaded the burdens of the offense on his former Trojan tailback and asked him to carry the team to the playoffs.

Showing that a healthy Ricky Bell was the equal of any back in the league, the third year player rushed for 1,263 yards on 283 carries for an average gain of 4.5 yards and seven touchdowns. Those statistics led Bell to be named Tampa Bay's MVP for the 1979 season.

His quarterback definitely appreciated Bell's play. Looking back on that magical year Doug Williams admitted that Bell was the wheel upon which the Buccaneer offense moved. "We rode Ricky Bell, we literally rode Ricky Bell," Williams said. "I can honestly say 700 to 750 of his yards were Ricky Bell yards after his first initial hit."

As the season wore on, Buc fans began to change their attitude towards Bell. He had gone from goat to hero and to his credit Bell never viewed the change cynically. In fact he viewed his struggles the first two years as necessary growing pains and went out of his way to become active in Tampa Bay charitable causes.

Not seen by the fans were the leadership qualities that Bell demonstrated during the week. The key to Bell's success according to Lee Roy Selmon was that he treated a Wednesday practice with as much intensity as a Sunday game. "Ricky would always run every play to the end zone," Selmon recalled. According to Selmon, Bell's attitude toward practice became infectious and the team found themselves following his lead. "That made you think to yourself, maybe I need to run all of my angles to the sideline."

Not measured in the statistics was the impact Bell's running style had on demoralizing opposing defenses. That was never more apparent than in the season finale against Kansas City when Bell almost single-handedly ran off the last seven minutes of the game in the 3-0 playoff clinching victory.

Two weeks later Bell showed the nation that he was worthy of inclusion among the NFL's elite when he carried the ball a playoff record 38 times for 142 yards and two touchdowns in a 24-17 victory over the Philadelphia Eagles. The national reporters who were seeing Bell for the first time were stunned by the achievement but wondered if McKay had overburdened his protege. When asked if he was asking too much of Bell, McKay replied that he had no qualms running Ricky 40 times a game "because the ball isn't that heavy."

McKay added that this coming out party was a reward to Bell's dedicated service to a team that before this year couldn't protect him properly. "Ricky did some outstanding running to find holes but at least this year we usually have a hole for him somewhere. A few years ago the only holes were on the way out of the tunnel."

Doug Williams stated the true reason for building an offense around a steady diet of Ricky Bell. "When you hand off to Ricky Bell you know you are going to get 95 percent out of him."

The Buccaneers fell short of the Super Bowl, losing by a score of 9-0 to the Los Angeles Rams the following Sunday. With an elite running back in Ricky Bell however, the future for the Bucs appeared to be bright. And then everything went horribly wrong.

1979 proved to be the high point of Bell's professional career. After rushing for over 1,200 yards Bell's productivity

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fell by more than half in 1980. Limited by a variety of injuries, Bell managed only 599 yards on the season. The 1981 season would be even worse for the former Trojan star. Carrying the ball just a scant 30 times, Bell gained only 80 yards the entire season.

There were disturbing reports that Bell was having a hard time bouncing back from his injuries. Confusion spread among the community with some fans and reporters feeling that perhaps Bell was dogging it, that he had lost his hunger after proving the critics wrong in 1979. Others feared that Bell's success in 1979 was a fluke and that he had fallen back to the form he had showed in 1977 and 1978.

Not sure of the reason, Coach McKay only knew that Bell was not the back he had been and reluctantly traded away his former pupil to the San Diego Chargers before the 1982 season so he could be closer to his California relatives. Bell's stay in San Diego was very brief as he only appeared in two games during the strike-shortened season. He complained of acute pain in his knees and joints and the Chargers put Bell on injured reserve when it became apparent he simply could not handle the strain of football anymore. The Chargers sent Bell to see an arthritis specialist and it was then that he learned why he couldn't regain his strength.

Bell was diagnosed with dermatomyositis, an inflammation of the skin and muscles. It is a very rare disease and it was preventing Bell from building and retaining the muscle mass he had acquired during all his years of training for football. The disease was also slowly sapping away all of his strength as well.

After the 1982 season Bell decided that he would treat the disease as he had always treated opposing defenses: head on. He started a training regimen in the hopes of returning to the Chargers in 1983. The training regimen didn't produce the desired results. Bell's weight plummeted from 225 pounds to 196 pounds.

Reluctantly, the proud Bell realized he would have to give up football so that he could tackle the disease. The now former football star engaged in a variety of treatments while also earning a real estate license. Buoyed by his wife Natalia and his daughter Noelle, Bell kept his optimism and would constantly tell anybody who asked him that he was doing fine and was going to beat the disease. Bell was so convincing that many people who didn't know of his disease couldn't even tell that Bell was a sick man.

As the year 1984 progressed Bell's condition worsened. Doctors informed him that the disease had spread to his heart and that he might have as little as six months left to live. Undaunted, Bell continued to meet with friends, help his wife with her work on a master's degree and look after his daughter.

One of his visits in 1984 was back to Tampa to look in on some old teammates. Bill Kollar was a defensive assistant on the Buccaneers coaching staff that year and recalled being surprised by the physical change in Ricky. "He came back and had lost a bunch of weight, had that sickness."

While Bell's physical stature may have changed, it was apparent that even five years removed from his best professional season, he still had great presence at One Buc Place. "He was a great guy," Kollar recalled. "Struggled initially, but then had a huge year. All the guys liked him, a heck of a guy and a heck of a teammate. He was well respected."

On a typically beautiful Southern California day in late autumn of 1984 Natalia kissed Ricky good-bye and headed out to class at Cal State Los Angeles. She recalled that Ricky was in a lot of pain but wasn't particularly down or depressed. During her class Natalia was informed that Ricky had been rushed to the hospital.

After Natalia had left home, Ricky was felled by a heart attack triggered by his disease. The medical term for what struck Bell was cardiomyopathy, a muscular disease of the heart that was related to his dermatomyositis. Medical professionals were called to his home and raced him to a Los Angeles hospital but there was nothing more that could be done.

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At 11 :06 on the morning of November 28, 1984 Ricky Bell's heart, which had powered him through turmoil to the greatest triumph of his professional life just five years before, gave out. Ricky Bell, who was considered the perfect teammate by his Buccaneer brethren, was dead at the age of 29.

John McKay and the rest of the Buccaneers received word of Bell's death later that day while practicing in Tampa. Linebacker Richard Wood told the Los Angeles *Times*, "One of the trainers came and told me. I didn't know what to do so I got down on my knees on the field and said a little prayer. I wish they could have waited until after practice before they told me. But, at the time, nothing else mattered. I still think of him once a week. I look at his picture and think of the good times."

Bell's unselfish commitment to team, his refusal to be cowed by injury or illness and his charitable works in Tampa Bay led the Buccaneers to honor him by creating the Ricky Bell Award. The Award is presented to the Buccaneer player who best exemplifies his spirit in performing community works.

For refusing to knuckle under to criticism, injury or illness and becoming, if for too short a period of time, an elite NFL running back, Ricky Bell should be remembered for having the heart of a champion.

### RICKY BELL

Bell, Ricky Lynn

USC

B: 4/8/1955, Houston, TX

Drafted: 1977 Round 1 TB

### RB

6-2, 220

HS: John C. Fremont [Los Angeles, CA/

D: 11 / 28 / 1984, Los Angeles, CA (29)

Year	Tm	G	Rushing				Receiving			
			Att	Yards	Y/A	TD	Rec	Yard	Y/R	TD
1977	TB	11	145	436	2.9	1	11	68	8.0	0
1978	TB	12	185	679	3.7	6	15	122	8.1	0
1979	TB	16	283	1263	4.5	7	25	248	9.9	2
1980	TB	14	174	599	3.4	2	38	292	7.7	1
1981	TB	7	30	80	2.7	0	8	92	11.5	0
1982	SD	4	2	6	3.0	0	0	0	0.0	0
Totals		64	822	3036	3.7	16	97	842	8.7	3

# **WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN IN COLORADO**

By Timothy Holland

The Denver Broncos AFL history was nothing to write home about. One of the reasons was their inability to sign draft picks who instead would go on to play in the NFL. FouLoUhorse picks, \_ including three first-rounders, would go on to become all-pro.

In 1960, the Broncos drafted an offensive tackle by the name of Charlie Cowan out of New Mexico Highlands with their fifth pick. Cowan chose to play for the Los Angeles Rams of the NFL. The next year, Denver drafted a defensive tackle named Merlin Olsen out of Utah State with their first pick. He, too, opted to play for the Rams. 1962 would be no different. First pick, Kermit Alexander, halfback, UCLA. Like the first two, he signed with the older league when he was picked by the San Francisco 4gers. And in 1963 the pattern continued when another down lineman, Bob Brown of Nebraska, was picked first by Denver, but signed with the Philadelphia Eagles. No wonder the Broncos had so much trouble winning.

To make matters worse, Brown and Alexander would eventually end up joining Cowan and Olsen with the Rams in 1969 and 1970 respectively. So the Broncos would finally see what a team would look like with these four players in the lineup, just not with them.

What they would learn was that their scouts were pretty good. The Rams won 11 games and made the playoffs in 1969 with Brown and Cowan on the offensive line and Olsen on the defensive side anchoring the famous "Fearsome Foursome." And in 1970, with Alexander joining Olsen as a defensive back, they won ten and just missed the playoffs.

# **Tom Sestak,**

## **The AFL's Best All Time Defensive Player**

**By Greg Tranter**

Tom Sestak, of the Buffalo Bills, one of pro football's best defensive tackles, has been forgotten because he played in the wide open offensive minded American Football League. Also, Tom's career was cut short by injury and he died prematurely young in 1987. Thus, Sestak has never received the recognition nor the accolades that a career of his could have garnered.

Sestak was the cornerstone of the Buffalo Bills great defensive teams that led the Bills to AFL Championships in 1964 and 1965 and fell one game short of Super Bowl I losing to the Kansas City Chiefs in the 1966 AFL Championship game.

He played with the Buffalo Bills from 1962 to 1968. Sestak was named All-AFL four times in his career and recorded 51 career sacks. He was named to the Buffalo Bills Silver Anniversary team in 1984. Sestak was placed on the Bills Wall of Fame in 1987. He was only the third Bills player placed on the Wall, following O.J. Simpson and Jack Kemp. Sestak also was named to the All-Time All-AFL Team.

Tom Sestak was born March 9, 1936 in Gonzales, Texas. He was a rangy 6'4" 270 pounder. Sestak played his college football at McNeese State where he was All Conference and Little All-America as a tight end. He was a 17th round draft choice of the Buffalo Bills in 1962.

In his rookie season of 1962 he was inserted as the starting defensive tackle from the opening game and went on to be selected "Rookie of the Year" by Pro Football Illustrated. He helped lead the Bills to there first winning season (7-5-1) as he averaged 7 tackles per game. He was also voted to the second team AFL All Star team and to the Associated Press's second All League defensive unit.

The 1963 season was a breakout year for Tom Sestak. He was the American Football League's outstanding defensive lineman, considered by many the best in all of pro football. He was voted to the All-AFL first team by everybody, A.P., U.P.I., N.E.A. and the Sporting News. He averaged 9 unassisted tackles per game and was considered the best interior pass rusher in football. He also helped lead the Bills to a tie for the Eastern Division Championship and a playoff versus the Boston Patriots which the Bills lost 26-8, but the team was clearly on the rise.

Sestak led the Bills to the American Football League Championship in 1964 with the league's number one rated defense. The Bills finished the season with a 122 won lost record, the AFL Eastern Division Championship and then defeated the high powered offensive juggernaut San Diego Chargers 20-7. The victory over San Diego brought the first AFL Championship to Buffalo. The Bills defense allowed an average of 65 yards per game rushing and allowed only 4 rushing touchdowns for the entire 1964 season. In the Championship game, they held the Chargers to a single first quarter touchdown and only 259 yards in total offense.

Tom Sestak, captain of the Bills, was considered the "best defensive tackle in football"(1) in

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1964. He again was named to all the All-AFL teams, A.P., U.P.I., N.E.A. and the Sporting News. Hall of Fame guard, Billy Shaw said at the time "When you play against Sestak in practice everyday, you either improve or Retire" (2)

The Bills defense was so dominate in 1964 and 1965, they went 17 consecutive games from October 18, 1964 to November 7, 1965 without allowing a rushing touchdown.

Despite off season knee surgery, Sestak again had an All-Pro season in 1965 and helped lead the *Buffalo* Bills to their second consecutive AFL Championship. He was once again named to all the All-AFL teams, A.P., U.P.I., N.E.A. and *The Sporting News*.

In the 1965 season during a 7 game stretch, Sestak displayed his enormous talent. He blocked three field goals, knocked down at least one pass in each game, made outstanding individual plays to preserve a victory against the Oakland Raiders and to propel a change in momentum that led to a come from behind win versus Kansas City.

The Bills won the 1965 AFL Eastern Division Championship with a 10-3-1 overall record. They led the league in allowing the fewest points, 226. In the AFL Championship game they played the vaunted San Diego Chargers. The Chargers had the number one *offense* and defense in the AFL in 1965, the championship game was played at their home field, they had beaten the Bills 34-3 earlier in the season and they were seeking revenge for their Championship game loss to the Bills in 1964. However, none of that mattered, as the Bills, led by Tom Sestak and their suffocating defense totally throttled the Chargers and won the AFL Championship with a convincing 23-0 victory. The Chargers were only able to garner 12 first downs and 226 yards in total *offense*.

Lou Saban, the Bills head coach said "I don't care who or what league you want to talk about, Tom Sestak is the best defensive tackle in football. For strength, interior pass rush, ability to read offensive keys, instinct to fight off traps and raw courage, Tommy is the absolute best." Saban added, "and on one leg, too", (3) in reference to his serious knee injuries.

Though Sestak was again slowed somewhat by injuries in 1966 he still helped lead the Bills to their third consecutive AFL Eastern Division Championship and the opportunity to play in the AFL Championship Game with the winner going to Super Bowl I

The Bills were 9-4-1 in winning the Eastern Division crown. They still had a strong defense led by Sestak. They again allowed the fewest points in the AFL, 255. Sestak was named first team All-AFL by N.E.A. and second team by the Sporting News.

The AFL Championship game did not turn out like Sestak and Bills fans had hoped. They lost to the Kansas City Chiefs at Buffalo's War Memorial Stadium by a score of 31-7 and the Bills were denied the opportunity to play in Super Bowl I.

Again hampered by injuries in 1967 the Bills defense was still strong as it finished second in the league in yards allowed. However, the success the Bills had in previous seasons was not repeated in 1967 as the team finished with a 4-10 record. Sestak was not named to any All-AFL teams in 1967 because of his injuries and the poor overall performance of the team.

The 1968 season proved to be Sestak's last season in pro football. He had a good season, but the Bills had their worst season in franchise history with a 1-12-1 record, though their lone win came against the Super Bowl Champion New York Jets by a 37-35 score. Following the 1968 season the Bills hired new coach John Rauch and during training camp in 1969, Sestak decided



to call it quits. He had undergone 5 different knee operations and decided that his body could just not respond like it had.

Had Tom Sestak not been felled by so many knee injuries he would have been regarded as one of the best Defensive Tackles of All Time, and certainly would have made the Pro Football Hall of Fame. However, since his career was only seven seasons he has not gotten the recognition that he deserves. Hall of Fame Quarterback Len Dawson said about Sestak, "I played for a long time, in three decades. I played in two Super Bowls. I saw a lot of very good players. But Sestak was -one-of-the-greatest defensive players-I-ever -played against."(4)

Eddie Abramoski, the Bills long time trainer, said about Sestak, "He's so tough, you couldn't believe it. Sometimes he hurts so bad that he can't lift weights, like he used to everyday. Sometimes the pain is so severe, he can't sleep. Most guys couldn't play under those circumstances. But the Big Ses, he never says a word, he just keeps playing."(5)

Following his football career, he settled in Buffalo, NY. For a time he operated a restaurant in the Buffalo suburb of Cheektowaga with his long time teammate, Paul Maguire. The name of the restaurant was SestakMaguire's.

Sestak's life ended at the age of 51 when he died of a heart attack on April 3, 1987.

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Footnotes:

1. 1965 Buffalo Bills Press-Radio- TV Yearbook.
2. 1965 Buffalo Bills Press-Radio-TV Yearbook.
3. NFL Gameday program, Nov. 8, 1987
4. NFL Gameday program, Nov. 8, 1987
5. NFL Gameday program, Nov. 8, 1987