

ROTE & BLANDA: TALE OF 2 QBS

Birth of the AFL in 1960 changed the course of two careers

By Bob Gill

Any reasonably attentive sports fan is aware that chance can play a significant role in a player's career. An injury can give a backup his big break, while bringing a veteran's career to a premature end. A star's ill-timed holdout can be another player's ticket to fame and fortune. And so on - it happens every season.

Usually, breaks like these benefit rookies or younger players who haven't had a chance at a regular job. But one of the most interesting "right-place-at-the-right-time" stories involves a pair of ten-year veterans whose places in football history were determined after their NFL careers ended.

It happened in the 1960s, and the players involved were a couple of pretty fair quarterbacks: George Blanda and Tobin Rote.

But let's start at the beginning ...

Blanda broke in with the Bears in 1949, but the 12th-round draft choice saw little action behind Johnny Lujack and aging Sid Luckman. He played even less at QB for the next two years, throwing only one pass and spending most of his time as a linebacker and kicker.

Meanwhile, Rote had been taken by the Packers in the second round of the 1950 draft and suffered through a tough rookie season, throwing a league-high 24 interceptions. Facing a challenge from a talented passer named Bobby Thomason in 1951, he improved his passing stats and really shone as a runner, leading the team with 523 yards and leading the league with an average of 6.9 yards per carry. Exit Thomason.

The Packers took Babe Parilli with their first choice in 1952, and Rote faced another battle for the QB job. He responded with one of the best passing performances of his career while sharing time with the new challenger. In fact, the current NFL passer rating system would rank this as Rote's best season. But a year later he reverted to the level of his rookie year, and the only thing that saved him from being benched was the fact that Parilli, who again shared the job with him, was even worse.

As for Blanda, Lujack's premature retirement gave him a shot at a regular job in 1952, but he averaged a mere five yards per pass while sharing time with journeyman Steve Romanik. A year later, with Romanik joining the crosstown Cardinals. Blanda had his best year, leading the league, in attempts and completions. The only real negative was his 23 interceptions, second-highest total in the league.

Blanda had another good year in 1954, improving his average gain per pass and his ratio of TDs to interceptions as the Bears improved to a second-place finish. A year later, though, he slipped badly and lost his starting job to Ed Brown. Blanda continued as Brown's understudy as the Bears won the Western Division in 1956, then dropped behind Zeke Bratkowski on the depth chart in 1957. He spent that year and the next as kicker and third-string QB before drawing his release at age 30.

In the meantime, Rote's career had taken a different course. When Uncle Sam called Parilli before the 1954 season, Rote took over as the Packers' full-time QB, and for the next three years he starred for a series of mediocre Green Bay teams, leading the NFL twice in attempts, completions and TD passes, and once in passing yards. His best year was 1956, when he led the league in all those categories and also ran for 11 TDs.

The Packers were going nowhere, though, and in 1957 they handed the QB job to young Bart Starr and sent Rote to Detroit, where he figured to serve as a backup to Bobby Layne. But Layne broke his leg during the season, and for the first time the veteran Rote found himself leading a team with a chance for the title. The Lions tied the 49ers for the western title, then fell behind 27-7 in the divisional playoff game

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before coming back to win 31-27. Rote completed 16 of 30 passes for 214 yards and a touchdown while directing one of the NFL's greatest comebacks.

The championship game against Cleveland was probably Rote's finest hour. He completed 12 of 19 passes for 280 yards and four TDs and ran for another as the Lions demolished the Browns 59-14.

That game marked the end of a quasi-dynasty that the Lions had sustained since 1951. Or maybe the end should be dated sometime in the offseason, when the team sent Layne packing to Pittsburgh. Without their long-time leader, the Lions quickly fell out of contention. Rote played well in 1958, passing effectively and leading his team in rushing for the fourth time in his career (and the last); but he fell apart in 1959, posting his worst stats since 1954. In the offseason, like Blanda a year earlier, he found himself without a job.

At this point Rote and Blanda had each played ten seasons in the NFL, and there's no question that Rote had been far superior. He had passed for 9,208 more yards and 71 more touchdowns, with a lower interception rate and a higher average gain per pass. Aside from passing, Blanda had scored 541 points with his kicking, but Rote had rushed for 3,078 yards, a record for QBs until Fran Tarkenton broke it in the mid-'70s, and 35 touchdowns, which may still be a QB record.

Blanda had two seasons of full-time duty and one other in which he shared the regular QB job. Rote, on the other hand, was never less than a "co-starter," and had spent five seasons as a full-time QB - which doesn't include 1957, when he led the Lions to the championship.

This is not to cast aspersions on Blanda, who had enjoyed a respectable NFL career. But it's clear that no one at the time would have put him in Rote's class, or anywhere near it.

Then came 1960, and suddenly the plot thickened.

The birth of the AFL revived many careers, but none so dramatically as Blanda's. He joined the Houston Oilers and led them into the league's first three championship games, winning the first two. And he hung on to the Oilers' first-string job through 1966, when he was 38 years old.

The Oilers easily won the Eastern Division title in the league's inaugural season, then beat San Diego 24-16 in the championship game. This was Blanda's best postseason performance, as he threw for 301 yards and all three touchdowns. He had his best season a year later, throwing for 3,330 yards and 36 TDs as the Oilers edged the Boston Patriots for another eastern title. But the championship game was another story: Though he threw a pass for the only touchdown in a 10-3 win (over the Chargers again), Blanda's stats that day would have embarrassed Bobby Douglass: 18 of 40 for 160 yards, with five intercepted.

Those five interceptions were a harbinger of things to come. Though Houston managed to win the division again in 1962, Blanda had an incredible 42 passes picked off, plus five more in a 20-17 overtime loss to Kansas City in the title game.

Though he never threw as many as 42 interceptions again, Blanda really wasn't very effective over his last few years in Houston. He threw a lot, leading the league in attempts and completions three years in a row, but the results were nothing to write home about. His Oilers never had a winning season after 1962 and never lost fewer than 10 games after 1963. Maybe Blanda was more a victim of the decline than a cause; on the other hand, when the immortal Pete Beathard replaced him in 1967 the Oilers won another division tie with a 9-4-1 record.

It's a fairly common misconception that Blanda, the old pro, burned up the AFL in its early years; a close look at his record won't support that view. He had a great year in 1961 against the AFL's admittedly weak pass defenses, but that season was clearly a fluke. In '61 he averaged 9.2 yards per pass and had 14 more TD passes than interceptions; he never averaged more than seven yards per pass in any other season, while throwing for 129 TDs against 167 interceptions.

Again, this isn't meant as criticism of Blanda. It's not a bad record, especially for a guy whose career began in 1949 - and his team did win two championships. But he was no Sonny Jorgensen, even though some people might have thought so in 1961.

OK, so what about Tobin Rote?

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In 1960, while Blanda was testing the waters in Houston, Rote signed with Toronto of the Canadian Football League and led the Argonauts, a 4-10 team in 1959, to the Eastern Division title with a 10-4 record. In the process he led the CFL in virtually every passing category and set a record with 38 TD passes.

The Argos missed out on a trip to the Grey Cup, though, losing in the eastern finals; a year later they dropped to a 7-6-1 record, then got hot in the playoffs, but not quite hot enough, falling one game short of a Grey Cup appearance again. Rote was the league's second-best passer that year, but he fell off in 1962 and the team went with him. As a result, he was ready to listen in the offseason when the San Diego Chargers asked him to come back to the States.

After losing the AFL's first two title games to Blanda and the Oilers, the Chargers had fallen to 4-10 in 1962. In John Hadl they had a promising young quarterback, but coach Sid GiUman apparently didn't think he was ready quite yet. The idea was that Rote could put the Chargers back on top while they waited for the young star to develop.

And that's exactly what happened. Rote led the AFL in passing and San Diego rebounded to an 11-3 record and a return trip to the championship game. It was Rote's second chance in the Big Game, and again he didn't let it go to waste, completing 10 of 15 passes for 173 yards and two touchdowns and running for another score. The result was even more one sided than the 1957 title game: Chargers 51, Patriots 10.

Rote wasn't as effective in 1964, and during the course of the season the 36-year-old veteran gradually turned the QB job over to Hadl. The Chargers dipped to 8-5-1, but managed to sneak into the championship game again, this time against the Buffalo Bills. Rote got the start and threw a touchdown pass on the Chargers' first possession, but it was all downhill from 'there. For the game he completed only 10 of 26 passes in a 20-7 Buffalo win.

Hadl hit only three of ten in the same game, but it was clear that he was ready to take the reins now, and Rote bowed out in the offseason. Though he returned to throw eight passes for Denver in 1966, his career really ended when he left San Diego.

Now that we've finished the second phase of each man's career, let's compare Blanda and Rote again. It's harder to do this time, since they were in different leagues for three key seasons.

But if we forget about that for the moment and just compare the numbers, it seems hard to avoid the conclusion that Rote was more effective again, though maybe not by as much as he had been when they were both in the NFL. His average gain per pass is considerably higher, as is his ratio of TD passes to interceptions.

As for leadership, each guided his team to three first-place finishes, but Blanda won two championships to one for Rote. You might want to balance that with the fact that two different 4-10 teams vaulted into first place when Rote arrived.

One big question remains: How did the CFL compare to the AFL? Of course that's hard to answer, but consider that quarterbacks like Babe PariUi, Al Dorow and Cotton Davidson all had good seasons in the early AFL after failing to do anything of note in the CFL. In fact, the only CFL-AFL crossover (other than Rote) who had some success above and below the border was Frank Tripucka.

OK, no more hedging: It seems to me that the CFL was at least as good as the AFL from 1960 to '62, and quite possibly better. And if you accept that, I don't see how you can avoid giving Rote the edge over Blanda in the 1960s too.

But as you know, there's more to the story. Blanda still wasn't through.

In fact, the trade to Oakland in 1967 was probably the best thing that ever happened to him, other than the birth of the AFL. Backing up (and occasionally bailing out) Daryle Lamonica on a succession of strong Raider teams, he acquired a reputation as a "super-sub," something like Don Strock or Frank Reich. The fact that he was in his 40s at the time only increased his appeal.

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Meanwhile, he kept kicking field goals - often game winners on national TV - until at last he had shattered the career scoring record.

And when it was all over he took his well-deserved place in the Hall of Fame.

Still, you have to wonder: What if Tobin Rote had been the one who joined the Oilers in 1960?

TOBIN ROTE: NFL PASSING

<u>Year</u>		<u>ATT</u>	<u>COM</u>	<u>YDS</u>	<u>AVG</u>	<u>TD</u>	<u>IN</u>
1950	Green Bay	224	83	1231	5.5	7	24
1951		256	106	1540	6.0	15	20
1952		157	82	1268	8.1	13	8
1953		185	72	1005	5.4	5	15
1954		382	180	2311	6.1	14	18
1955		342	157	1977	5.8	17	19
1956		308	146	2203	7.1	18	15
1957	Detroit	177	76	1070	6.1	11	10
1958		257	118	1678	6.5	14	10
1959		162	62	861	5.3	5	19
NFL Totals		2450	1082	15144	6.2	119	158

GEORGE BLANDA: NFL PASSING

<u>Year</u>		<u>ATT</u>	<u>COM</u>	<u>YDS</u>	<u>AVG</u>	<u>TD</u>	<u>IN</u>
1949	Chi Bears	21	9	197	9.4	0	5
1950		1	0	0	-	0	0
1951		0	0	0	-	0	0
1952		131	47	664	5.1	8	11
1953		362	169	2164	6.0	14	23
1954		281	131	1929	6.9	15	17
1955		97	42	459	4.7	4	7
1956		69	37	439	6.4	7	4
1957		19	8	65	3.4	0	3
1958		7	2	19	2.7	0	0
NFL Totals		988	445	5936	6.0	48	70

TOBIN ROTE: CFL & AFL

<u>Year</u>		<u>ATT</u>	<u>COM</u>	<u>YDS</u>	<u>AVG</u>	<u>TD</u>	<u>IN</u>
1960	Toronto CFL	450	256	4247	9.7	38	25
1961		389	220	3093	8.0	16	16
1962		348	187	2532	7.3	12	17
1963	S.Diego AFL	286	170	2510	8.7	20	17
1964		163	74	1156	7.1	9	15

GEORGE BLANDA: PHASE TWO

<u>Year</u>		<u>ATT</u>	<u>COM</u>	<u>YDS</u>	<u>AVG</u>	<u>TD</u>	<u>IN</u>
1960	Houston AFL	363	169	2413	6.6	24	22
1961		362	187	3330	9.2	36	22
1962		418	197	2810	6.7	27	42
1963		423	224	3003	7.0	24	25
1964		505	262	3287	6.5	17	27
1965		442	186	2542	5.8	20	30
1966		271	122	1764	6.5	17	21