

WHEN HOUSTON STRUCK OIL

by Stanley Grosshandler
(Originally published in *Pro Football Digest*)

It was to be a whole new game when the American Football league started in 1960 with such innovations as the two-point conversion, names on the jerseys, stacked defenses, and the introduction of the pro game to five new cities. The first power to emerge in the new league was the Houston Oilers, winners of the Eastern Division three consecutive years and the league crown twice.

"One of the secrets of the Oilers' success," recalled Dave Smith, Oiler fullback, "was good organization. Our director of player personnel, John Breen, did a fantastic job in getting quality players. He got veterans like George Blanda, John Carson, and Willard Dewveall along with such rookies as Billy Cannon, Dan Lanphear, and Charley Hennigan."

"George Blanda was a terrific asset to the Oilers in those days. He could do it all. He passed, place kicked, and was a superb field general. George really knows the game and I think he would be an excellent coach. Everyone knows about his kicking and for years he had a shoe in his home that he had used in his earlier years. It was the old high topped type and was full of stitches where it had been repaired. George was somewhat of a loner as he was about 10 years older than the rest of us and had little in common with us other than football." George Blanda played the entire 10 years of the AFL and was the top passer in 1961, the highest scorer in 1967 and established 39 records.

Billy Cannon was not only important to the Houston team, but to the entire league. By signing the 1959 Heisman Trophy winner, the Oilers had struck a major blow for the AFL against the rival NFL.

"Billy's running and receiving ability also played a big role in our success. He was an intelligent ball player and good competitor," added Smith.

Cannon's 948 yards rushing in 1961 was the best in the league and he set six championship game records.

First Champs

The 1960 Oilers finished with a 10-4 record blending a fine passing and hard running attack. Cannon logged 644 yards and Smith, 643, as they finished third and fourth among the rushers. The title game was with the Los Angeles Chargers. The Chargers broke on top with field goals by Ben Agajanian. (Ben is one of two players to have played in the NFL, AFL, and AAFC). A Blanda to Smith pass put the Oilers on the board and enabled the rookie Smith to claim the distinction of scoring the first touchdown in an AFL title game. Later an 88-yard Blanda to Cannon pass gave Houston their first championship.

Dave Smith went to small Ripon College and was drafted by the Packers. "I had played all the exhibition games and was one of the last men Lombardi cut," said Smith. "Playing under Lombardi was one of the best things that could have happened to me. I do not think I could have made the grade with the Oilers the next season if I had not had the benefit of his training camp. He really taught us what self discipline is." Recognition for Dave's brilliant freshman year came in the form of selection to the All-league team.

Repeat

"I really think our '61 team was the best," Dave went on. "If nothing else we had a year of experience together. We lost five of the first six games and Lou Rymkus was replaced as coach by Wally Lemm. Wally was a terrific coach who got us together and we won the next nine straight. We were a high scoring team. Blanda got 112 points, Bill Groman scored 18 TD's, Cannon, 15, and Charley Hennigan, 12."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 18, No. 5 (1996)

Blanda had three very talented receivers in the veteran Willard Dewveall who defected from the Bears; young Bill Groman from Heidelberg College and Charley Hennigan from Northwest Louisiana. Hennigan became one of the all-time top AFL receivers.

"Besides Cannon," Dave said, Charley Tolar had a great year rushing. He was listed as 5-7 and 195; but I think he was really about 5-5. He ran like a run-away bowling ball. One of the funniest stories I can recall involved Tolar. One day we stayed at a hotel where there was a convention of midgets. As a group of us players got off an elevator there stood Charley waiting to get on surrounded by several of the delegates to the convention. 'Look!' yelled Billy Cannon, 'Charley brought his whole family to the game.' This really broke us up."

"We had a good offensive line with Bob Talamini, one of the best, at one guard and Hogan Wharton at the other. Bob Schmidt was the center and Al Jamison and Rick Michael, the tackles. On defense were Delva Allen and Don Floyd, ends, and George Shirkey and Ed Husmann, the tackles. We had three real rugged linebackers in Ray Cline, Dennit Morris and Mike Dukes.

In the backfield were Fred Glick and Jim Norton, both great interception artists, and Tony Banfield and Mark Johnston.

"Dennit Morris was the practical joker of the team. In training camp we lived in army barracks - the offense in one and defense in another. One day he caught two of those big Texas rattlers and left them loose in the offensive team's barracks. You can guess what kind of a commotion that caused."

The Oilers captured the East again and met the Chargers, now out of San Diego, for the crown. This was again decided by a Blanda to Cannon pass.

Almost

"My biggest thrill," said Dave, "was the overtime game in '62 when we went into two overtime periods before the Dallas Texans beat us on a field goal by Tom Brooker. We were down, 17-0, at the half and came back on a 15-yard Blanda to Dewveall pass. George kicked a 31-yard field goal, and then he completed three passes to get us to the one where Tolar carried over. That 25-yarder by Brooker sure cost me a lot of money, getting me a loser's rather than a winner's share."

"The Texans were the forerunners of the Kansas City Chiefs and were they a tough crew! They had guys like Len Dawson, Chris Burford, Jack Spikes, and Jerry Mays. That E.J. Holub was healthy then and what a linebacker he was. They also had a real tough back in Abner Haynes. One day I went down under a punt and that Haynes turned me around so many times I didn't know which way I was going. Two other real good ones in those days were Paul Lowe, a back on the Chargers, and Larry Eisenhauer, a defensive end on the Patriots."

Smith was forced to retire by injuries after the season, and he became a full-time scout. After a term with the Saints, he returned to the Houston Oilers and scouts the Midwest for them. He travels over 35,000 miles a year combing the colleges for prospects. "I felt that around 1967 the AFL was equal to the NFL" he stated. "With the common draft and so many good young quarterbacks in the AFL they just had to gain equality."