

THE OTHER BUFFALO BILLS

By Joe Marren
Reprinted from *The Buffalo Bills Insider*

America yearned for a return to normalcy at the end of World War II in 1945, but what America got was unlike anything it would have thought normal before the war. Those were giddy times for returning servicemen and civilians alike with money to spend and a hankering to go west. So their games had to keep up with the hurly-burly pace of the day or risk becoming quaint anachronisms like cricket or nine-pins.

If a modern Rip Van Winkle drank from a keg while playing some old-fashioned nine-pins in the 1930s and awoke in the America of the late 1940s, he would have been just as bewildered as his great-great-great-grandpa, especially if he was a football fan. Football juked conventional wisdom, shed Eastern tackles and became the first sport with major-league teams on the West Coast. The 1945 National Football League champion Cleveland Rams drove into the Los Angeles market in 1946 and a new league, the All-American Football Conference, put the Los Angeles Dons and San Francisco 49ers on the coast that same season.

Our modern Rip would have also witnessed a social revolution. In 1946, the Rams signed two UCLA graduates, halfback Kenny Washington and end Woody Strode, to be the first black players in the NFL since 1933. The AAFC Cleveland Browns also showed that a man's ability was more important than his skin color when it hired fullback Marion Motley and guard Bill Willis in '46.

Both Motley and Willis played on all four AFC championship teams in Cleveland during their Hall of Fame careers. Motley was elected to the Hall in 1968 and Willis joined him in '77.

Although Motley and Willis helped Cleveland dominate the short-lived league, the Browns had plenty of good competition from the 49ers and, in 1948, from a team called the Buffalo Bills. That AAFC team was Buffalo's third attempt at getting a professional football team for the city. The Buffalo All-Americans were part of the original NFL, fighting for the league's first championships in 1920 and '21, but the team disbanded in 1929. In 1940, one of several leagues that called itself the American Football League was formed during a raucous meeting in Buffalo's Lafayette Hotel. Buffalo's entry in that ill-fated league was the Buffalo Indians and won only four games in two seasons before the league folded in 1941.

But owner Sam Cordovano ignored history and brought some hope for Buffalo football fans with an AFC franchise in 1946. He first called his team the Bisons and it did well enough for a new team in a new league, finishing third in the Eastern Division with a 3-10-1 record in 1946. What proved to be the team's undoing was its defense. The Bisons gave up 370 points and more than 2,000 yards apiece against the rush and the pass.

There was more to cheer about on offense with the running of fullback Vic Kulbitski (605 yards) and halfback Steve Juzwik (455 yards). That backfield duo helped tough out identical 17-14 wins against the 3-10-1 Brooklyn Dodgers and San Francisco 49ers (9-5). Sandwiched around close losses to the Miami Seahawks, the Bisons got their wins against Brooklyn and San Francisco and then clobbered the 5-6-3 Chicago Rockets, 49-17. After the second Miami loss, Buffalo dropped its last two games, 42-17 to Cleveland (12-2) and 62-14 to the Dons (7-5-2). Coach Red Dawson's squad earned a 21-21 stalemate with the Dons early in the season.

If there was any measure of revenge for the Bisons, it was that the Miami franchise folded after that season because of low attendance.

There was also some consolation in the running of Kulbitski and Juzwik. Only Spec Sanders of the New York Yankees (709 yards) and Norm Strandlee of the 49ers (651) gained more yards than Kulbitski that

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 19, No. 1 (1997)

year. Motley (601) and Special Delivery Jones (539), both with the Browns, and John Kimbrough of the Dons (473) finished ahead of Juzwik.

Write this down 50 times if you must, memorize it, or use whatever mnemonic device you need to remember in case you're ever asked in a trivia game: "What was the first pro football team in Buffalo to be called the Bills?"

The answer is the 1947 AAFC Buffalo Bills (8-4-2), which almost won the Eastern Division crown against the 11-2-1 New York Yankees.

Behind the quarterbacking of rookie George Ratterman (124 of 244 for 1,840 yards) and the running of halfback Chet Mutryn (868 yards), the 8-3-1 Bills invaded New York to play the 9-2-1 Yankees in the second-last game of the season. New York won, 35-13, and edged Brooklyn, 20-17, to win the Eastern crown and the right to lose to the 12-1-1 Browns in the AAFC championship game. After the New York loss, Buffalo fell to second-place in the Eastern Division with a 21-21 tie against the 49ers in the last game of the season.

If there was no team glory for the '47 Bills, there were at least some personal achievements for the players. Ratterman, a 20-year-old from Notre Dame, tied for third in the league's quarterback ranking with Spec Sanders of the Yankees. Sanders, who also rushed for a record 1,432 yards, was 93 of 171 for 1,442 passing yards. Otto Graham of the Browns led the league with 163 completions in 269 attempts for 2,753 yards. Frankie Albert of the 49ers was second, 128 of 242 for 1,692 yards.

Among Ratterman's favorite receivers were ends Fay King (26 catches for 382 yards) and Al Baldwin (25 for 468 yards). Mac Speedie of the Browns led all receivers that year with 67 catches for 1,146 yards. Mutryn was fourth in the league in rushing, behind Sanders, Johnny Strzykalski of the 49ers (906 yards) and Motley (889).

Among the leading scorers after Sanders (114 points) and Mutryn (73), was a 28-year-old back and linebacker with the Yankees named Harvey Johnson, who was 49 of 51 on PATs and seven of eight in field goals for 70 points.

A new team called the Baltimore Colts replaced Miami in 1947 and fought to beat Brooklyn and Chicago and tie the 49ers to finish 2-11-1. After its lousy maiden season, Baltimore drafted a quarterback from Louisiana State University named Y.A. Tittle for the '48 campaign. Tittle only went on to lead the league with 161 completions in 289 attempts for 2,522 yards his rookie season. Largely due to his efforts, Baltimore tied Buffalo with an identical 7-7 record in '48. Since each team beat the other at home that year, they squared off in Baltimore for the only AAFC divisional playoff game in history.

The Colts were leading, 17-7, in the fourth quarter before 27,327 happy fans. But that's when Ratterman went to work, hitting reserve halfback Bill Gompers on a 66-yard touchdown pass to bring the Bills within three, 17-14. The Bills were driving after a Baltimore punt when disaster seemed to strike as Mutryn apparently caught a pass and fumbled. Baltimore pounced on the ball, but the officials ruled it an incomplete pass. Granted the reprieve, Baldwin caught a 35-yard touchdown pass six plays later to put the Bills on top, 21-17. Buffalo added an insurance touchdown for a 28-17 win.

The win did Buffalo no real favors, though, because the Bills had to face the 14-0 Browns in Cleveland for the '48 AAFC title. As an omen of what was to come, the Browns had beaten Buffalo 42-13 and 31-14 that season. Because the Browns proved themselves by beating the tough 49ers (12-2) by the slim margins of 14-7 and 31-28 that season, not even the brashiest of gamblers put their money on the Bills in the '48 title game. Who would? The Browns had eight all-stars: Graham (173 of 333 for 2,713 yards), Motley (the league leader with 964 rushing yards), Speedie (58 receptions for 816 yards), Dante Lavelli (25 catches for 463 yards), linemen Willis, Ed Ulinski and Lou Rymkus and a linebacker named Lou Saban.

Buffalo countered with Ratterman (168 of 335 for 2,577 yards), Mutryn (823 yards), halfback Lou Tomasetti (716 yards rushing), and Baldwin (54 receptions for 916 yards).

It was no match. The Browns jumped out to a 28-0 lead and drove Ratterman from the game in the second half (he finished five of 18 for 24 yards and three interceptions). Jim Still came in to quarterback the Bills in the third quarter and found Baldwin in the end zone for a 10-yard touchdown pass as the

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 19, No. 1 (1997)

quarter ended. It was as close as the Bills would ever get and just seemed to make the Browns madder. Cleveland went on to add three fourth-quarter touchdowns on two runs by Motley and a 39-yard interception return by Saban.

"I thought I was tackled on the one, but they gave it to me," Saban joked earlier this year when asked about the game.

That Dec. 19 game before 22,981 fans in Cleveland was probably Buffalo's best memory from the AFC years. The Browns would win one more championship before merging with the NFL. Buffalo? Well, the Bills just suffered.

As money got tighter and fan interest waned in '48, the AAFC struggled to cope with deserting players and failed franchises. For example, Branch Rickey persuaded the baseball Dodgers to buy the football Dodgers, but a 2-12 record and empty seats soured their enthusiasm and the owners returned the franchise to the league. In '49, the football Dodgers and Yankees did something their baseball counterparts would never do, they merged rosters and played in '49 as the New York Yankees. The 8-4 Yankees of '49 played without Spec Sanders, who had injured his knee, but saw a lot of promise in a rookie defensive back named Tom Landry.

The hapless Chicago Rockets (1-13) had their third owner in as many years in 1948. Things only got worse when star halfback Elroy "Crazy Legs" Hirsch was lost early in the season with a fractured skull. In 1949, a fourth owner changed the team's name to the Hornets and the team improved to 4-8, even though Hirsch jumped to the NFL Los Angeles Rams for more money before the season began.

That financial war between the leagues drained the resources of most teams, even though attendance was high in both Buffalo and San Francisco and was averaging 57,000 in Cleveland. The postwar economic boom fizzled by 1948 and AAFC Commissioner Scrappy Kessing opened merger talks with the NFL in 1949. By then, the NFL had lost \$3 million in the war of the pocketbooks.

The '49 season was a bust for the Bills, who finished fourth at 5-5-2, and Coach Red Dawson was replaced by Clem Crowe before it ended. Events off the field caused Buffalo fans to get even more upset, but they still could cheer for Ratterman, Mutryn and Baldwin.

Ratterman finished second among league quarterbacks in 1949 with 146 completions in 252 attempts for 1,777 yards. Otto Graham of the Browns (9-1-2) was the top quarterback, completing 161 of 285 passes for 2,785 yards. Mutryn ran for 696 yards, second only to Joe Perry (783) of the 49ers (9-3). Baldwin caught the football 52 times for 719 yards, finishing behind the Browns' Speedie (62 catches for 1,028 yards).

Any list of Buffalo accomplishments for '49 is a short one, but add to it the games against the champion Browns. The Bills became the only AAFC team in its short history to finish a season without losing to Cleveland, playing the champions to two ties, 28-28 and 7-7. To give an idea of what that means, on Dec. 11 that year, in Cleveland, the Browns beat the 49ers, 21-7, for their fourth AAFC title.

While Cleveland wrapped up another championship, the rest of the league was having problems. For instance, things went from bad to worse for the Baltimore Colts. In 1948, the Colts battled Buffalo for the Eastern Division crown, but in '49, they fell to 1-11, the only win a 35-28 mid-season squeaker at Buffalo. Yet off-field events made Colts fans happier than Bills fans in '49.

When the NFL dictated its merger terms to the AAFC it was agreed that only the Browns, 49ers and Colts would be allowed to join the NFL. Players from the four junked teams would be distributed throughout the NFL in a draft. Buffalonians were outraged since the Bills' average attendance was 26,600 and the NFL average was just 23,200.

Pittsburgh owner Art Rooney knew that and said not including Buffalo was "a sad mistake."

But Dan Daly and Bob O'Donnell, in their book, "The Pro Football Chronicles," said Buffalo's fate was sealed when new owner Jim Breuil told other AAFC owners he had lost \$700,000 during the past several seasons and was pulling out of the league.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 19, No. 1 (1997)

Then the roof fell in for suffering Buffalo fans. Ratterman signed to play with the NFL New York Yanks; Breuil sold guard Abe Gbron, halfback Rex Bumgardner and defensive tackle John Kissell to the Browns for a 25 percent share in that team; and coach Crowe was hired by Baltimore.

Despite it all, Buffalo rallied and people were slightly optimistic when a delegation went to the annual NFL meeting in January 1950 in Philadelphia with more than 15,000 season ticket pledges (more than twice the number of season tickets sold in '49) and \$175,000 from selling \$5 shares in The Buffalo Bills Football Club, Inc. But the NFL owners still turned Buffalo down because Commissioner Bert Bell did not produce a schedule that included Buffalo.

As Los Angeles Rams owner Dan Reeves explained in Daly and O'Donnell's book, "It was silly to vote in a new city without first having a good idea where my teams would be playing and when."

And so football again died in Buffalo. The city wouldn't have a professional team to cheer for until 1960, when another team called the Bills finally won championships in 1964 and '65.

What of the teams from the old AAFC? The Browns opened their 1950 season by playing the NFL champion Philadelphia Eagles before 71,000 fans in Philly. It proved to be no real contest as Cleveland stunned the proud NFL with a 35-10 win. Cleveland finished 10-2 that year, beat the 10-2 New York Giants, 8-3, in an American Conference playoff game and went on to face the 9-3 Los Angeles Rams for the NFL title. But it wasn't anything like a grudge match between the old and new Cleveland teams because while fans may have remembered their old heroes, only guard Mike Lazetich and quarterback Bob Waterfield were left from the 1945 champion Cleveland Rams.

The 1950 title game between the Rams and Browns, played Christmas Eve before 29,751 fans in Cleveland, came down to a field goal try with 28 seconds remaining. Trailing 28-27, Browns' kicker Lou Groza hit a perfect 16-yard field goal to give Cleveland a 30-28 win and its first NFL championship after winning all four AAFC titles.

If Cleveland was the successful new partner from the rebel league, then the 49ers and the Colts were at the other end of the equation. San Francisco struggled to a 3-9 record while the hapless Colts finished 1-11. Baltimore had no defense, losing games by scores of 55-13 to the Chicago Cardinals, 70-27 to the Rams, 55-20 to the Giants, 45-21 to the Detroit Lions and 51-14 to the New York Yanks. Its only measure of revenge was a 41-21 win against visiting Green Bay. Owner Abraham Watner sold the franchise back to the league at the NFL meeting in February in 1951 and the players were distributed through a draft. The draft wasn't too horrible for the players, though, because the 49ers were able to save the career of Y.A. Tittle.

In 1951, the woeful New York Yanks finished 1-9-2. The league transferred the franchise to Dallas and renamed the team the Texans. But Cotton Bowl crowds could probably fit into a concession stand and the new owners abandoned the team. Dallas (1-11) played its remaining games in the second half of the season on the road in '52 and used Hershey, PA, as a base for practices.

So in 1953, Carroll Rosenbloom was awarded a franchise for Baltimore to replace the failed Dallas venture and used 13 of the Texans as a nucleus of the new Baltimore Colts.

Players from the old AAFC also did well.

Saban closed out his playing career with the '49 Browns and went on to a successful pro coaching career with Boston, the new Buffalo Bills in the 1960s and '70s, and in Denver. He's also coached just about everywhere else and has more frequent flier miles than probably anyone else on the planet.

After four seasons with the New York Yankees, Johnson played for the 1951 NFL New York Yanks and got a front office job with the new Bills. He was also pressed into two disastrous coaching stints with the Bills in 1968 and '71, finishing 2-23-1.

Gbron played in the NFL until 1959 with Cleveland and Philadelphia. He also coached the Chicago Bears from 1972-74.

Landry had his one season with the AAFC Yankees and then played for the NFL Giants from 1950-55. His coaching tenure at Dallas lasted from 1960-87.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 19, No. 1 (1997)

Former Notre Dame Coach Ara Parseghian was a reserve with the champion Browns from 1948-49.

A reserve quarterback with the 1946 Buffalo Bisons named Al Dekdebrun played with the AAFC Chicago Rockets in '47, the AAFC New York Yankees and NFL Boston Yanks in '48, and was in the Canadian Football League in '49.

Ed King, a lineman with the Buffalo Bills from 1948-49, hooked on with the NFL Colts in '50. But Massachusetts voters will remember him as their governor from 1979-83.

Of that last AAFC Buffalo Bills squad, 19 of 37 players went on to play in the NFL and three in the CFL. Baltimore got King, Mutryn (1950), Vito Kissell (1950, with the Yank in '51). Bob Livingston (1950) and Bob Oristaglio (1950) with Cleveland; Cleveland picked up Hal Herring (1950-52), John Kissell (1950-52, '54-56, and with the CFL in '53), Gibron and Bumgardner (1950- 52); Green Bay grabbed Carl Schuette (1950-51), Alex Wizbicki (1950) and Baldwin (1950); Detroit drafted Bill Schroll (1950, with the Packers in '51) and Ollie Cline (1950-53); the Rams selected Art Statuto (1950) and Vic Vasicek (1950); the New York Yanks went for Ratterman (1950-51) with Cleveland from '52-56 and Chet Adams (1950); Philadelphia snagged Joe Sutton (1950-52); and playing in the CFL were Buckets Hirsch (1950), Vince Mazza (1950) and John Kerns (1950).

Finishing their careers with the '49 Bills were: Bob Logel, Bill Stanton, John Maskas, Vin Scott, Rocco Pirro, Odell Stautzenberger, John Wyhonic, Jim Still, Jess Freitas, Lou Tomasetti, Larry Joe, Wilbur Volz, Tom Colella, Jim Lukens and Paul Gibson.

Finally, the AAFC was kind to area college players, with six making a brief mark in the league: From Canisius College, lineman Jerry Whalen played for the Bills in 1948 and back Colella first was with the NFL Detroit Lions (1942-43) and Cleveland Rams (1944-45) before hooking on with the Browns (1946-48) and Bill (1949). Niagara University produced end Bob Stefik, who played with the Bills in 1948, and tackle Roman Piskor, who was with the New York Yankees (1946), Cleveland Browns (1947) and Chicago Rockets (1948). Offensive and defense back Hugo Marcolini from St. Bonaventure University played with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1948. An Alfred University student before transferring to the University of Vermont, back Frank Trigillo was with the Los Angeles Dons before being traded to the Miami Seahawks in 1946.
