

FOOTBALL'S FERTILE CRESCENT III

High-caliber talent featured on local sandlot fields

By Eric Poole

Reprinted from *The Record*

Walt Kiesling's ability as an offensive lineman for six teams from 1926-38 got him into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

But as coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers from 1954-56, he may be best known for cutting John Unitas, often regarded as the best quarterback in pro football history.

"The biggest story, of course, is that we cut him," says Steelers' president Dan Rooney.

"We did draft him, now. We deserve a little credit for that. But he never got a chance. Never got a chance at all. Never got in a game, got in very few scrimmages."

As legend has it, Rooney and his brothers, who shagged passes for Unitas in training camp, attempted to intercede with their father, Steelers' founder Art Rooney, on Unitas' behalf. Dan Rooney confirms the legend.

"They said to my father, 'This is the best quarterback up here and he's going to get run,'" he remembers.

"He was such a good guy, he wanted to work out. He would stay out after practice and he would throw to my brothers after all of the other players had gone in. He was really good, it was obvious he could throw."

Cutting John Unitas is regarded as one of the most boneheaded moves in sports history. But in retrospect, it might have been the only decision to make.

In 1955, when NFL teams carried 40-man rosters and most teams kept two quarterbacks, the Steelers held onto three.

Jim Finks was an All-Star on a team that often finished last, today's Baltimore Ravens coach Ted Marchibroda was a backup and a third guy was kept as much for his punting as for his quarterbacking.

Eventually, it all worked out far better for Unitas than it did for the Steelers. After he was released from his hometown team, Unitas got a construction job as a "monkey man," so named because his job required him to climb up the shaft of a pile driver as high as 125 feet to apply lubrication.

For fun, and to stay involved with the game, he played semi-pro football for \$3 a game, at Dean Field, which is now an artificial-turf field beneath the Bloomfield Bridge in Pittsburgh. But in 1955, it was the home of the Bloomfield Rams, and John Unitas was the Bloomfield Rams quarterback.

"I was just playing to keep my hand in the game, because I was scheduled to go to Cleveland's camp the next year," says Unitas of playing for the Rams, then part of the Honus Wagner League.

"It was like a pickup team, but they were excellent players and excellent guys."

Unitas never made it to Cleveland. Instead, he got a phone call from the Baltimore Colts when Gary Shaw broke his leg, and before the 1955 season ended, he was the Colts' starting quarterback.

Three years later, Unitas led two field-length drives, one in the final two minutes of regulation and one in the first overtime contest in NFL history, to propel the Colts to a 23-17 victory over the New York Giants in the 1958 NFL Championship Game.

More importantly, from the standpoint of the NFL, the Steelers' reject propelled pro football into the consciousness of the American sports fan and became the league's first true superstar.

After Unitas' retirement in 1973, the one-time "monkey man" was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, joining Kiesling, the man who had judged him not good enough for the Steelers 20 years earlier.

Veins of gold

Dan Rooney remembers Unitas' rise from the shadows of the Bloomfield Bridge to the NFL spotlight as unusual.

"He was a tremendous player, but it was a miracle he ever got picked up, because they didn't do that very often in those days."

Professional teams plucking athletes from the western Pennsylvania sandlots may have been more common than Rooney realizes, though.

While Unitas was building a national legend with the Colts, a young man from Hazelwood was creating a certain status of his own.

Although he never achieved the fame Unitas did, Dave "Rooster" Fleming did become a sandlot legend, as a player and a coach.

Fleming, a schoolboy star, tried out for the Steelers and almost made the team.

"He had the team made if it wasn't for Jim Butler (a Steelers', draft choice)," says Ed Brosky, who played for Fleming and later coached against him with the Carnegie Bulldogs.

"The Steelers had him go down and play on the (Pittsburgh) Ironmen, hoping for him to continue to develop and when they needed him, they could call him up."

But before the Steelers had a chance to utilize Fleming's talents, the Hamilton Tiger-Cats of the Canadian Football League did, using the Pittsburgh native as a halfback and receiver.

While Brosky, a Carnegie native, was at the University of Pittsburgh from 1974-77, he did double duty, often playing for the 15th Ward (Hazelwood) Volunteers of the Greater Pittsburgh Football league, as well as for Pitt.

"I would go down on Friday nights, play the (15th Ward) games and then sneak back into the hotel until Johnny Majors caught wind of it," remembers Brosky, who was a member of Pitt's 1976 National Championship team.

Mark Capuano, the football coach at Moon Area High School, played against Fleming-coached teams as a member of the Sto-Rox Rangers in the mid-1970s.

"He was a fiery guy and he would get into some of that verbal thing with some of the coaches. He was crazy."

After graduating from Pitt, Brosky helped form the Pittsburgh Colts, who played in the Mid-Atlantic Football League, which featured a number of players who were waiting for the same phone call Unitas once received to summon them to the NFL.

There were also a number of ex-NFL stars, including one-time Steeler Joe Gilliam, who played for the Pittsburgh Wolfpack, the Colts' crosstown rivals.

"From a competitive standpoint, a skill stand-point, we would have matched up with Duquesne, IUP, California (of Pennsylvania)," says Brosky. "The reason I say that is that many of our players played at those schools."

In the Colts' five years of existence, 17 players got tryouts with teams in the NFL, CFL or the United States Football League.

Quarterback Tom Averill, who played for Brosky on the Colts and later on the Carnegie Bulldogs of the GPFL, was one of the last players cut by the Los Angeles Rams when they had two legitimate starters at that position, James Harris and Ron Jaworski.

On the other end of some of Averill's tosses for both the Colts and Bulldogs was Averell Harris, who made the Minor League Football Hall of Fame, located in Chambersburg, after finishing his career with more than 1,200 receptions.

With its 220-pound weight limit, the GPFL boasted fewer professional prospects. But they were still there.

Capuano, a graduate of Neville Island High School and a two-time All-Atlantic Coast Conference player at standup defensive end for North Carolina State University, won a free-agent tryout at linebacker with the Steelers in 1969.

Three years later, Jack Ham, an outside linebacker from Penn State, began a Hall of Fame career with the Steelers, in spite of concerns about his lack of size.

Ham's listed weight was 225; Capuano's was 205, which sent him to the sandlots and into coaching. Ironically, Capuano had the opposite weight problem before he left the GPFL's Sto-Rox Rangers.

"When I tried out for the Steelers at outside linebacker, they had guys who were about 235, 240 and I was about 210," says the Moon coach.

"So size was always a problem for me, but as I got older, of course, I put weight on and then I had to worry about trying to make that 220-pound limit."

That limit was enforced with a pregame weigh-in. Both teams lined up at midfield and each coach would select opposing players to be weighed. Those players would then be taken to a scale provided by the home team.

"At the Rocks, we had a scale that you could have put a cow on and it would have weighed 220," says Capuano. "We had a center, Billy Morrow, who probably weighed 240. But he always weighed 220 down at the Rocks."

Of course, that meant the other team's heavyweights were safe too, and in the league's final two seasons, most teams winked at the weight restrictions, realizing a weigh-in probably would have hurt both teams equally. But that would not be the only example of lawlessness in the final days of the GPFL.

A murder of one

In a GPFL memo dated Feb. 19, 1987, Brosky, writing as Carnegie Bulldog's coach, requested disciplinary action against the East End Raiders.

"I believe their conduct in games played between our two teams on Saturday, October 4 and Saturday, November 8 (1986) went beyond the normal acceptable aggressiveness usually associated with a football game. It is my opinion these actions represented a flagrant display of contempt, not only for the rules that govern the GPFL, but each and every player and team exclusive of the East End Raiders."

Almost a year and a half after Brosky wrote those words, the Raiders were at the center of a tragedy even he could not have foreseen.

On Saturday, Aug. 20, 1988, four men waited at Willie Stargell Field in Homewood, where the Raiders practiced and played, for Jonathan "Boo" Bailey of Monroeville, a 24-year-old defensive back who was the Raiders' defensive MVP in 1986.

According to reports in the Pittsburgh Press, the men attacked Bailey and shot him as he attempted to escape.

Bailey died from gunshot wounds and blunt force trauma to the head.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 21, No. 3 (1999)

Two men, William Long and Curtis Brandon, were convicted of third-degree murder. Brandon, who had been on parole for the 1976 strangulation murder of his then-girlfriend, is spending the rest of his life in prison.

At the time of his death, Monroeville police had an arrest warrant for Bailey, who was wanted on a sexual assault charge filed by Long's niece.

Brosky, now a counselor at Holy Family Institute, believes the problems that brought violence to Willie Stargell Field on Aug. 20, 1988, are the same problems that make existence so tenuous in the Homewood streets around the field.

"The family is just a microcosm of society and when the family breaks down, society breaks down," he says. Remembering the GPFL, he adds, "You had kids teaching kids, you had kids coaching kids."

Today, Brosky works with troubled youths, doing his part to make sure there are fewer stories like the tragic tale of Bailey, Long and Brandon.

"A lot of kids we end up with, they're in similar situations. Their family life sucks, their parents might be separated, one might even be dead," he says.

"We hug them when they need hugged, we discipline them when they're not so good."