

Jim Kendrick: The Man with the Plan

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Could a football team made up entirely of men from Texas and Oklahoma colleges out-perform teams composed of players from eastern colleges?

According to one Jim Kendrick it could! And in 1926, he had the chance to prove it when he was charged with compiling a team made up of players from southwestern schools to represent the city of Buffalo in the National Football League. Sure, there had been other teams with “themes,” such as the Oorang Indians (Jim Thorpe’s 1922-23 contribution made up entirely of Native American ball players) and the Columbus Panhandles (composed mainly of railroad workers), but this would be the first time the idea was posited that players from a certain geographic area were somehow exceptional. And Kendrick, the man who conceived the whole thing, was darn near proven right!

Jim Kendrick was a member of the 1925 Buffalo Bisons. He was one of the few bright spots on an otherwise dreadful 1-6-2 team. After finishing near the bottom in league standings, Buffalo management felt the time was right to try something radical—and Kendrick provided them with just the thing.

James Marcellus Kendrick was born in Hillside, Texas on August 22, 1893, the youngest of nine children to J. M. and Lura Kendrick. In 1904 the family moved to Waco, where Jim attended Douglas Select School. As best as the family can ascertain, Douglas Select had no football team at the time, but Jim did star on the school baseball team. He began to assert his leadership skills there, being named senior class president in 1911.

It appears that Jim did not play organized football until he got to Texas A&M. He learned fast, garnering All-Conference honors as an end in 1915. Jim played a huge role in helping the Aggies upset the favored Texas Longhorns that year by a score of 13 to 0. Kendrick and teammate John Garrity were credited with causing at least 10 fumbles during that game. While at A&M, Kendrick also played basketball and baseball.

In 1916, a portion of the Texas National Guard was called up to track down Mexican bandit Poncho Villa. According to Kendrick’s son, Gardner, Jim served in the US forces under the legendary General Blackjack Pershing. “Pershing was the general in charge,” the younger Kendrick explains. “Jim was a lieutenant and was stationed at McAllen and Pharr, Texas. He was part of the Second Texas Infantry Regiment. As such, a football team was organized and that team was the US National Guard Champion for 1916-17. That team won eight games and was only scored on once.”

Jim joined the regular Army in 1917 and was in France during the latter part of World War I. While overseas, Kendrick played for the 36th Division in the 1919 American Expeditionary Force championship game in Paris.

After the war, Jim took a job as an assistant football coach at Baylor University in Waco. In 1922, Jim made the leap to professional football when he signed on with the mighty Canton Bulldogs of the National Football League. The Bulldogs compiled a record of 10 wins, no losses and two ties in capturing the league title that year. Jim appeared in four games with Canton, and also managed to sneak in two tilts with the cross-state rival Toledo Maroons.

The following year, Jim accepted a job as an assistant coach at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. He also coached the baseball and basketball squads. Jim played Sunday for the hapless Louisville Brecks, who compiled an 0-3-0 record in league competition.

Although Jim continued as an assistant at Centre in 1924, he signed on to play pro ball with the Chicago Bears. Jim played nine games for the Bears, who at 6-1-4 fell one game short of the title (won by the 7-1-1 Cleveland Bulldogs). During the off season, Jim managed and played for the Cleveland (baseball) Indians minor league affiliate in Bradenton, Florida.

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Jim began the 1925 football season as a member of the Hammond Pros. However, Buffalo managed to wrest him from his contract and sign him on October 1 to play in the Queen City. The Bisons, led by former Columbia star and Buffalo native Walter Koppisch, were already 0-2 on the season, and were looking to add talent to bolster their titular aspirations. Kendrick's first game with Buffalo came on Sunday, October 4, 1925 against the Rochester Jeffersons.

The game was Buffalo's home opener, and was preceded by parades and fanfare as the home crowd feted Koppisch upon his triumphant return to the Queen City after his all-American years at Columbia. Despite the fact that the Herd managed not to lose their third consecutive game, the Jeffersons handed them their second consecutive shutout. It was a tough game from start to finish. Koppisch and Kendrick were able to break free for a few dazzling runs, but the Jeff defense stiffened when it had to. The Bisons were held to just nine first downs for the game, and never got closer than 12 yards from the Rochester goal line.

Buffalo's defense showed marked improvement over the previous weeks, allowing the Jeffersons just two first downs. In describing Kendrick's performance, the *Buffalo Courier* reported, "Of the newcomers, Kendrick stood out as a wonderful all-around player. His kicking was accurate and consistent. He ran hard and proved a good gainer through the line while there was no better defensive back on the field. Kendrick will do."

The following week, the Bisons played host to Fritz Pollard's Akron Pros. Some 3,500 fans turned out in an unrelenting downpour at Bison Stadium. Playing on a field described by the *Buffalo Courier* as a "slushy, slithering quagmire," the Herd extended its unbeaten string to two games in battling the Pros to a scoreless tie. The Bisons' stingy defense held Pollard in check throughout the contest, allowing the Pros just seven first downs for the entire game.

Akron's defense, however, proved even more miserly by allowing Buffalo's impotent offense just two first downs. Despite the scoreless outcome, both the *Buffalo Courier* and the *Buffalo Express* lauded Kendrick's punting and backfield work.

The Bisons extended their unbeaten string to three games by pulling off their first victory of the season with a 17 to 6 drubbing of the Columbus Tigers in front of 5,000 faithful at Bisons Stadium. Kendrick led the Herd charge, kicking a 15-yard field goal to give his team a three-point first-quarter lead and the Bisons' first points at home this season. Doc Bruder then scored on a four-yard plunge to extend the lead to nine points. Kendrick's conversion made the score 10 to 0. The Texan clinched the game in the fourth quarter, tossing a long pass from a spread formation to end Harry Curzon for the touchdown.

The appreciative crowd was still cheering as Kendrick booted the extra point, putting the Bisons up 17 to 0. Columbus managed to pierce the Buffalo goal late in the fourth, thus ending the Bisons' streak of shutout quarters at eleven.

On October 22, the Bisons were dealt another blow when captain Walter Koppisch was involved in an automobile accident. He received some bad cuts and bruises on his legs, and was advised to sit out a few games to allow his injuries to heal. It was just another setback for a team suffering through the worst season in its short history.

November 1 saw the Bisons in a rematch with the Frankford Yellow Jackets. Kendrick booted a 12-yard field goal in the opening quarter to give his team a 3 to 0 bulge. But Frankford managed two six-pointers in the second, and that was all they would need as they held on for the 12 to 3 victory.

Just two days later, the battered Bisons faced the New York Giants at New York's Polo Grounds in the much-ballyhooed return of Wally Koppisch to the Big Apple, where he made his name as a collegian. But Koppisch was able to play just a couple of series, and the Bisons failed to generate an offense as the Bisons fell, 7 to 0.

It would be Koppisch's last appearance in a Buffalo uniform. Consecutive losses to Providence (10 to 0) on November 8 and Paddy Driscoll's Chicago Cardinals (23 to 6, with Kendrick scoring Buffalo's lone touchdown) on November 15 mercifully brought Buffalo's disastrous season to close.

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In July 1926 it was announced that Walter Koppisch would not be returning to manage the Buffalo Bisons in the upcoming season, and Jim Kendrick would be taking over as manager/coach/player. It was revealed that Kendrick had met with the management of the Buffalo team shortly after the 1925 season and laid out his ideas for bringing together a team made up almost entirely of men from the southwest, mainly Texas and Oklahoma.

After a recruitment tour through the southwestern states, Kendrick reported to his superiors in July that he had secured contracts with about a dozen ruffians who shared his beliefs. Buffalo in 1926 would be home to one of the most interesting experiments in the early days of professional football--an era rife with experimentation.

Because most of the players were Texans, the team was nicknamed the "Rangers" in reference to the legendary peacekeeping force of the Lone Star State. Local papers alternately referred to them as the "Bison Rangers," combining the old moniker with the new so that fans might more easily identify the team that was on its third name in seven years.

The new enlistees, 14 in all, came into town under much fanfare, making the 1,300-mile trek from Waco, Texas, in five Ford automobiles over six days. To stay in top physical condition, the team put in a two-hour practice session each day of the trip.

Like Walter Koppisch just one year earlier, Kendrick optimistically sized up his team for the local media prior to the start of the new season: "Here I have fourteen husky young fellows who have never been east of the Mississippi River. They are boys who know football, for in the Texas universities you have to fight for a place on the team and then fight all the time to keep it. There's no baby, silk-pillow football in the west or the southwest. These boys want to see something of the world before they set down to kick a living or a fortune out of life. They accept generous terms and a chance to trek east to and see New York, Niagara Falls, Atlantic City, Boston, and other cities they've read and dreamed about. All right, we furnished that opportunity, and all we ask in exchange is that the boys show us their kind of football, give us a real fight on the field and be gentlemen off of it. I know they can play football as good as any pro team, or better, because they all have their hearts in it. I only ask they show the Buffalo fans what they can do and all they can do."

Making the trip from down South were three gridders from Kendrick's alma mater, Texas A&M, in guard Barlow "Bones" Irvin, back Roger Powell, and all-Southwestern Conference fullback Fay "Mule" Wilson, as well as center George Kirk and lineman Guy "Cop" Weathers of Baylor, tackles John "Firpo" Wilcox and Roy Guffey of Oklahoma, end Ralph Nairan of Rice, tackle Vance "Firpo" McGilbra of Haskell Indian, end Alton "Judge" Swain of Trinity, and guard Ted Swarzer of Centenary. The only player retained from the previous season, aside from Kendrick himself, was Canisius end Lou Feist.

As a warm-up to the upcoming season, the Rangers arranged an exhibition game on September 19 with members of the local 174th Regiment at Bison Stadium. A decent crowd of approximately 2,500 was treated to an exciting game, with the soldiers putting more than a little scare into their professional opponents. The Rangers managed to prevail by a score of 13 to 6, but their tepid showing left some observers doubtful of the team's prospects for the coming season. The fears were not unwarranted.

The Buffalo Rangers officially opened the 1926 season against the Akron Indians on September 26 before some 2,500 loyalists at Bison Stadium. The Rangers passed their first test by defeating the Akronites 7 to 0 in front of the curious home crowd, holding the Indians to just two first downs for the entire game. Jim Kendrick notched the lone marker for the home team, scoring on a line smash from two yards out in the second quarter.

Despite the impressive start the Rangers had made in defeating Akron, coach Jim Kendrick was not about to stand pat with his roster. During the week prior to the October 3 tilt with the Dayton Triangles, Kendrick busied himself with recruiting some new players to help solidify his team's title chances. Signed on during the week were yet another Texas Aggie, end Neely Allison, as well as quarterback Elmer Slough and center Van Edmonson of Oklahoma, and "Chief" George Nix, a guard from Haskell Indian School.

The new additions were of no immediate help to the Buffalo pros, however, as the Dayton boys had their way throughout this contest before 5,000 fans at Bison Stadium. Although the 3 to 0 score suggests that this was a defensive struggle, the fact is that both teams played well offensively--Dayton scoring 15 first

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downs to the Rangers' 12--but neither was able to find the other's end zone. "The game was just chock full of thrills and sensations from the start until the final whistle," reported the *Buffalo Courier-Express*, "play swinging from one end of the field to the other at such a rate of speed that it was almost difficult at times to follow the progress of the teams." Dayton's points came in the second quarter on a 15-yard field goal by Art Beckley.

Few people were surprised to read the wire dispatches in the October 10 morning papers reporting that the Bison Rangers had lost to the Frankford Yellow Jackets the night before. After all, in four previous starts against the Hornets, Buffalo had never come close to winning, having been outscored 108 to 17.

And to exacerbate matters, Buffalo's greatest player, Swede Youngstrom, had defected to the Yellow Jackets prior to the start of the 1926 season. Local fans were not expecting much out of their team in this one. And so it was. The Rangers were never in it, surrendering points in each quarter en route to a 30 to 0 whitewashing.

On October 17, the Bison Rangers traveled to Dayton for a rematch of the game played against the Triangles at Buffalo on October 3, in which the visiting boys were victorious. This time, things would be different. The Triangles took an early first-quarter lead on a short touchdown pass, but the missed conversion left them with a tenuous six-point advantage.

Buffalo struck back in the second, quarterback Jim Kendrick hooking up with Alton Swain for an exciting 38-yard touchdown pass. Kendrick then kicked the extra point, giving the Rangers the 7 to 6 lead. From there the game degenerated into a defensive struggle, with no team able to score. The Rangers held on for the victory, improving their record to 2-2.

The Los Angeles Buccaneers, a new NFL franchise, came to town on October 24. Because of the remote location of their nominal home city, all of the team's games were played on the road. Composed mainly of graduates of California institutions, such as the team's star end and captain, Harold "Brick" Muller, the Bucs had thus far amassed a respectable 2-1 record despite the grueling schedule which required their players literally to live out of suitcases.

A crowd of 3,000 showed up, despite the driving rain that left the field in an awful condition, the mud rendering the players virtually unrecognizable even to their own teammates. A humorous picture of the two captains--Kendrick and Muller--appearing in the following day's *Courier-Express* shows the duo caked with mud, their smiles and the whites of their eyes the only contrast to the otherwise all-brown figures. Neither team was able to mount much of an offense. How could they? Punts and fumbles dominated the proceedings, which more resembled a greased-pig race than a football game. The final score said it all: 0 to 0.

The Buffalo offense gave no indication that it was going to be emerging from its hibernation any time soon as it turned in yet another pathetic performance the following Sunday against the tough Pottsville Maroons. The Rangers threatened to score just once, late in the third quarter, but the Maroons held on for the shutout victory, dashing whatever slim hopes the Rangers might have had for a title run.

Returning home to play the hapless Columbus Tigers at Bison Stadium on November 7, the Rangers finally found the offense that had been missing nearly the entire season, scoring four touchdowns in pummeling the Ohio invaders, 26 to 0. Buffalo's first touchdown--and first in three games--came in spectacular fashion, with Jim Kendrick hitting Elmer Slough for a beautiful 30-yard strike in the first quarter. The crowd of 3,500 was still cheering as Kendrick kicked the extra point, giving the Rangers a 7 to 0 lead. The former Aggie struck again in the second quarter, connecting with Roy Guffey on a short touchdown pass, then adding the conversion to extend the lead to 14 points.

Kendrick continued the onslaught in the third, hitting end Neely Allison with a spectacular 40-yard strike as Allison streaked into the end zone. Unfortunately, Allison's momentum took him right out the back of the end zone and crashed him into a retaining fence. He was knocked unconscious, but retained his grip on the ball to give Buffalo its third passing touchdown of the game. Upon coming to, the lanky Texan drawled, "Ah held that ball, didn't ah?" Kendrick missed the extra point try, and the Rangers led by 20. Benny Hobson closed out the scoring with a short touchdown plunge in the fourth quarter.

The team made its first foray into the state of Connecticut on November 14 to take on the Hartford Blues, a new franchise struggling through a 2-5 start. With the exception of former Kansas City Cowboys

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quarterback Chuck Corgan, the Blues were a team made up almost entirely of rookies. It showed in their record.

Buffalo grabbed the lead early in the first quarter, Kendrick hitting Slough for a long touchdown catch and run. Kendrick's extra point put the Orange and Black up by seven. Kendrick extended his team's lead with a 3-yard touchdown plunge in the second. His conversion attempt was blocked, and the score stood at 13 to 0. The Blues rallied in the fourth, scoring on a seven-yard run to pull themselves within six points. They were threatening to tie the game late in the fourth, but the Rangers defense held fast. The victory put Buffalo a game above .500 (4-3-1).

Back at the friendly confines of Bison Stadium to take on the Kansas City Cowboys on November 21, the Bison Rangers once again found themselves in a mud bath.

According to the *Buffalo Evening News*, the game was “. . . staged under the most trying and adverse playing conditions ever to be offered at the Bison stadium. The field was a grand quagmire--a combination of snow, slush, water and mud, which had a depth of at least two inches. Any attempt to display the fine points of the game, or even a general idea of the many spectacular phases of the sport, were absolutely ridiculous because of the miserable ground condition.”

Neither team could find decent footing in the bog. The only points of the game were scored by the Kansas City defense, which nailed Jim Kendrick in his own end zone for a two-point safety in the third quarter. The Rangers winning streak was halted at two games.

The final game of the season pitted the Rangers against the Pottsville Maroons, who came to town sporting an impressive 10-1 record (including a victory over the Rangers in Pottsville earlier in the season). Playing for little more than pride at this point, the hometown boys could not have been expected to put up much of a fight against the Maroons, who were in a dead heat for the league title with the Frankford Yellow Jackets and the Chicago Bears.

But perhaps the opportunity to play the spoiler piqued the Rangers, who came prepared to give the Maroons a dogfight. The few faithful fans who chose to show up for this tilt went away pleasantly surprised, as their heroes managed to eke out a 0 to 0 draw, dealing Pottsville's title hopes a mortal blow.

An exhibition game with a local semi-pro outfit scheduled for Sunday, December 5 was cancelled due to inclement weather, and the 1926 season was officially closed. The tie with Pottsville left the Rangers with a final record of 4-4-2, and though it wasn't a championship season, it was a vast improvement over the 1-6-1 record posted the previous year.

When the season ended, all indications pointed toward Jim Kendrick returning with his team of Texans for the 1927 season. “We will be going back to where the air is balmy, the weather is God's kind, and there's no snow to freeze your nose and toes,” Kendrick told a *Buffalo Courier-Express* reporter after the cancellation on December 5. “I hate to leave you folks, for Buffalo and all its people have been mighty kind to me and my boys. We have had the best of treatment, and while the crowds could have been larger, I blame the weather entirely, and the poor condition of the field. These are things which we could not control. The boys are all solid on Buffalo and the men who backed us. They'll all be glad to come back next year.”

But that was not the end for the Buffalo Rangers. Boss Kendrick assembled his charges for a post-season road trip through the southwest. A three-game series was arranged with the Hominy (Oklahoma) Indians (a semi-pro outfit represented by no less than twelve Native American tribes), to be played in three different cities over a three-week period. Game one, played at Pawhuska, Oklahoma, on December 20, was won by the Indians, 6 to 0. The Rangers evened the count when they defeated the Indians (at San Antonio, Texas) on Christmas Day by a score of 17 to 6. Kendrick's men took the series by winning the rubber game (at Tulsa, Oklahoma) by a 14 to 6 score on January 9.

Though it was expected Kendrick and his Rangers would be returning to the Queen City for the 1927 season, things would not work out as planned. Kendrick opted to cast his lot with the New York Giants, and most of the remaining players went their separate ways. It would have been interesting to see what Kendrick's team could have done with a full season under its belt. Instead, Buffalo fans were to endure yet another rebuilding campaign.

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Jim played eight games for the New York Giants in 1927. The Giants roster was loaded, with four future hall-of-famers playing key roles (Joe Guyon, Steve Owen, Cal Hubbard, and Wilbur "Fats" Henry). It was no surprise that they finished with the best record in the league (11-1-1) and took the NFL title (Jim's second championship).

Jim left the NFL behind after 1927. He played some semi-pro ball in Texas the latter part of the decade. In 1928, Jim was hired as head football coach at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. He remained with the Rattlers just one season before resigning in early 1929. His successor as head coach was Bones Irvin, his former assistant at the school and a teammate 1926 Buffalo Rangers.

In 1933 Jim was coaching the Blanco Tree army reserve football team for the Civilian Conservation Corps. On November 24, the vehicle carrying the team to a playoff game at Stephenville, Texas, was involved in a bad accident. The truck overturned and two of Jim's players were killed and several others badly hurt. Jim suffered severe injuries to his right arm, but selflessly insisted that doctors attend to his men first. As a result, the arm became infected and had to be amputated two inches above the elbow. For this act of heroism, Jim Kendrick was awarded the Soldier's Medal by the War Department. (The Soldier's Medal is awarded to army personnel for heroic deeds performed during peacetime.)

He was not deterred by his injury, however. Jim joked that he would return to the playing field with a "brass nub on this stub I have here, and I'll have the best stiff-arming machine you ever heard of." Although he did not return to the gridiron as a player, Kendrick became a college game official, presiding over several major games during the mid-to-late 1930s.

Jim entered the oil business during his post-NFL days. He remained in that profession for the remainder of his life.

Jim died in his hometown of Waco, Texas, on November 17, 1941, as the result of a stroke. He was just 48 years old. He was survived by his wife Lucille and four sons.