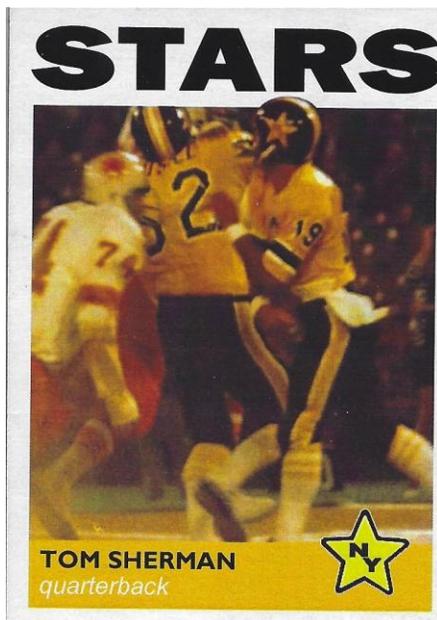




Tom Sherman

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Tom Sherman broke passing records playing quarterback at Penn State under Joe Paterno, leading the Nittany Lions to coach Joe's first ever Lambert Trophy and bowl game as a head coach. Sherman was a journeyman professional quarterback with stints for the AFL's Boston Patriots and Buffalo Bills. He also played four years with the Atlantic Coast Football League's Hartford Knights, appearing in three Championship games, winning one. Sherman finished his career with two years in the World Football League, and a single season in the Canadian Football League.



Thomas Joseph Sherman was born on December 5, 1945 in Bellevue, Pennsylvania. Sherman starred at Union Joint High School in Rimersburg, PA, leading them to back-to-back undefeated football seasons, and the Southern Conference District IX, PIAL Championship. He was named All-Conference first team both seasons, and in his senior year he was a unanimous selection at quarterback and was a first team defensive back, in addition to being named Back of the Year. He was also named as honorable mention on the Associated Press Pennsylvania All-State football team. His career statistics included 3,796 total offensive yards for his career, of which 2,610 yards were passing on 143 completions of 292 passes. He also, ran, passed, or kicked for 343 points.



Sherman starred on the Golden Knights basketball team and was named third team United Press International All-State as a senior. He also threw the javelin and discuss for the track team while competing in the broad jump, too.

He was offered a football scholarship to attend Penn State and he jumped at the chance to stay in Pennsylvania and play for the Nittany Lions. He was the starting quarterback for the Penn State freshman team in 1964. He lettered as a backup quarterback, wide receiver, and placekicker in 1965 as the Nittany Lions finished 5-5 in Rip Engle's last season as head coach.

Sherman got his first start at Penn State on October 2 against nationally ranked UCLA. He replaced an injured Jack Curry and started at split end. He had a splendid game in the Nittany Lions' heartbreaking 24-22 loss to the Bruins. In his first start he contributed three receptions and did an excellent job blocking in the running game.

Another highlight from Sherman's sophomore season was kicking three field goals and five extra points in a 44-6 win over arch-rival West Virginia. Sherman booted 21- and 29-yard field goals for the Lions' first two scores and added a 28-yard field goal in the second half to go along with his five perfect extra points after each Penn State touchdown.

Sherman ended his sophomore season as the team's second-leading scoring with 36 points on 21 extra points, and five field goals. He finished 16th in the nation for kick scoring. His best games as a receiver were the two games he started, three receptions vs UCLA and four vs Boston College.

Joe Paterno took over as the Penn State head coach for the 1966 season. He shifted Sherman to defensive back with incumbent Jack White at quarterback because he wanted to get Tom on the field. Paterno said about Sherman, "Tom's one of the best football players we have, but more than that he's a real take-charge guy. He's a leader, he's alert, he keeps talking to the kids all the time."ⁱ

Sherman made Paterno's decision look brilliant. He intercepted a pass, returning it 47 yards to kill Maryland's last drive, in the Nittany Lions' 15-7 victory in Paterno's first game as head coach. After scoring only two touchdowns in their first three games, Paterno replaced White at quarterback with Sherman. In Tom's first start as the Penn State quarterback, he fired two touchdown passes to Ted Kwalick, one covering 49 yards, sparking the Nittany Lions to a 30-21 victory over Boston College.

Two weeks later, Sherman led Penn State to a 38-6 win over West Virginia, throwing for 181 yards and scoring 17 points, on a five-yard run, kicking three field goals, and two



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extra points. He closed out his junior season, leading the Nittany Lions to a 48-24 domination of arch-rival Pittsburgh, throwing three touchdown passes as Penn State finished with a 5-5 record. They were 4-3 with Sherman at the helm.

He was named to the Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC) Division I first team at quarterback. He led Penn State in passing with 943 passing yards on 58 of 135 passes with six touchdown passes and four interceptions. He also led the team in total offense with 1,058 yards and contributed five rushing touchdowns. He was the team scoring leader with 57 points, including five touchdowns, seven of ten PATs, a 2-point conversion and six of eight field goals.

Penn State opened the 1967 season with two tough losses in their first three games, losing to Navy by a single point, 23-22, and to #3 ranked UCLA by two points, 24-22. However, Sherman righted the ship and the Nittany Lions reeled off eight consecutive victories. Penn State finished the regular season with an 8-2 record, and they earned an invitation to the Gator Bowl. Included among the eight victories were impressive wins at Syracuse 29-20, and at Maryland 38-3. In addition, their biggest win came on November 11, when Sherman steered the Nittany Lions to a stunning 13-8 win over third ranked North Carolina State.

Sherman starred in the first half of the Gator Bowl game versus Florida State on December 31, 1967. He staked the Lions to a 17-0 lead with a 27-yard field goal, two touchdown passes, one for 9 yards to Jack Curry and another to Ted Kwalick for 12 yards and converted both extra points. Florida State came back to tie the game in the second half as the teams finished in a 17-17 deadlock. Sherman was voted Penn State's player of the game.

Coach Paterno made a controversial decision that likely cost his team the victory. Penn State faced a fourth and one from its own 15-yard line in the third quarter, leading 17-0. Paterno decided to go for it, and Sherman failed to convert a quarterback sneak for a first down. Florida State grabbed the momentum and reeled off 17 unanswered points to tie the game. Paterno admitted after the game it was probably a poor decision. But it showed his players he had confidence in them and for the next two years, Penn State did not lose or tie a game. He told Penn State historian Lou Prato, years later, "It may have been the best thing I ever did."ⁱⁱⁱ From that point forward the Penn State football program propelled itself to become a national power.

Sherman completed his senior season leading the team in passing on 104 of 205 passes for 1,616 yards with 13 TD passes and 9 interceptions, his total offense was 1,761 and he had one rushing touchdown. He set Penn State records for passing yards, passing completions, passing touchdowns, and total offense in a single season. His total offense



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numbers were among the nations' leaders. He left Penn State as the career leader in total offense.

Penn State finished ranked 10th in the country in Paterno's second season and they won the Lambert Trophy emblematic of the best college football team in the East. Sherman was named ECAC first team quarterback for the second year in a row and was also named first team quarterback on the All-Pennsylvania College football team by the Associated Press. Sherman lamented at the conclusion of the season, "We were just three points away from a potential national championship," with the close losses to Navy and UCLA. He graduated from Penn State in the spring of 1968 with a degree in Health and Physical Education.

Sherman surprisingly was not drafted by either an AFL or NFL team in the draft of college players. He was unheralded, unwanted, and undrafted, and he was uncertain about his pro football future. Sherman finally signed a free agent contract with the Boston Patriots and would get to attend their training camp to try and earn a job. He had to compete with two long time AFL veterans, Babe Parilli, and Don Trull. Part way through camp the Patriots traded Parilli to the Jets for quarterback Mike Taliaferro. Sherman played well in the preseason and when head coach Mike Holovak made the final cuts, he kept Sherman and released Trull. Sherman began the season as Taliaferro's backup.

Sherman made his debut in the opening game of the season at Buffalo on September 8. He was the holder on field goals and extra points. He held on Gino Cappelletti's 10-yard field goal early in the second quarter, cutting the Bills lead to 7-3. Later in the second quarter, Cappelletti was ready to attempt a second field goal, but the snap was errant, and Sherman fumbled it, recovering for a 12-yard loss. So, Sherman's first official play in the scorebook is a minus 12-yard rush. His holds for the remainder of the game were excellent as the Patriots kicked two more field goals, scored a touchdown, and added the extra point for a 16-7 opening day win behind Taliaferro's quarterbacking.

Sherman's debut as a quarterback came in the Patriots' second game on September 22. He came in to relieve Taliaferro with 5:26 left in the fourth quarter and the Patriots trailing the New York Jets, 47-24. Sherman completed his first pro pass to Jim Whalen for 14 yards, and his second pass was caught by Art Graham for 15 yards. After his first incompletion, he fired a 44-yard pass to Jim Colclough who carried the ball to the Jets one-yard line. The Patriots scored a touchdown on the next play on a one-yard run by Gene Thomas. Sherman's first pro drive went 74 yards in five plays for a touchdown. He had one more series in the final minute of the game and had three incomplete passes to end the game. His professional quarterback debut ended with 3 of 7 passing for 73 yards.



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Sherman tossed his first touchdown pass against the Jets five weeks later in mop-up duty as the Patriots were blasted 48-14. With the Patriots trailing 41-0, Sherman fired a deep pass to Jim Whalen, who snared it, and then lugged the pigskin the rest of the way for an 87-yard TD. It was the longest touchdown pass in Patriots history at that time. Later in the fourth quarter Sherman tossed a 33-yard touchdown pass to Bob Scarpitto. He had two touchdown passes among the eight passes he threw with four completions for 146 yards.

Following Sherman's impressive finish against the Jets and with Taliaferro playing poorly, Holovak made the switch at quarterback with Sherman getting his first AFL start on November 3 against the Denver Broncos. It did not go as Sherman had hoped as the Patriots lost 35-14. Sherman completed only 11 of 32 passes for 119 yards with one short touchdown pass, but four interceptions.

Holovak stuck with Sherman, as he was learning to play the pro position, despite the Patriots losing consecutive games to San Diego 27-17, at Kansas City 31-17 and versus Miami 34-10. In each game Sherman had at least two interceptions, though in the latter two games he threw for 212 and 228 yards, respectively.

His best game in 1968, as the starting quarterback, came on December 1 against Cincinnati. He threw three touchdown passes and was 12 of 25 for 142 yards with only one interception in leading the Patriots to their first victory with him as the signal caller, 33-14.

In all he started the last seven games for the Patriots and had a 1-6 record. The team finished with a disappointing 4-10 mark. Sherman appeared in all 14 games as the holder, and 12 games as a quarterback with the seven starts. His final statistics in his rookie year were 90 completions in 226 attempts, with 12 touchdown passes and 16 interceptions. He also rushed 25 times for 80 yards. He showed some flashes of promise and there appeared a lot to build upon for the future.

In the off season Holovak was let go as the head coach and was replaced by Clive Rush. Taliaferro, who Rush knew well, was given the reigns as the starting quarterback in 1969. Sherman was relegated to back-up duty and holding on kicks. He only appeared in four games without throwing a pass before being "fired" by Rush with the Patriots sitting at 0-6. Sherman was let go on October 17.

Sherman had been interviewed by the Boston Globe and a story ran in the paper that day. He was quoted in the story that, "I didn't get my chance with the Patriots."ⁱⁱⁱ When Rush heard about the story and the quote, he confronted Sherman about it. When Sherman answered that it was true, Rush said to him "You're fired, you'll never play for me



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again.”^{iv} Sherman was not at all happy with how he had been treated. He said after being fired, “The thing that bothers me was that I didn’t get a chance and we were losing. If Mike had done well, I wouldn’t have minded, but we got beat, 31-0, and I didn’t even get into the game. When that happened, I knew I wasn’t getting a fair shake.”^v He was replaced by taxi-squad QB Kim Hammond.

Shortly after he was waived, the Buffalo Bills signed him to back-up Jack Kemp as they had lost quarterbacks Dan Darragh, and James Harris to injuries. He was activated for the November 16 game versus the Miami Dolphins, but did not see action. He remained Kemp’s back-up for the rest of the season. His only action came in the Bills’ final game of the season on December 14 against the San Diego Chargers in mop-up duty.

With the Bills trailing 45-0 in the fourth quarter, Sherman played the last two series for Buffalo. He ran twice for 14 yards and completed two passes for 20 yards, his last pass a 19-yard touchdown to Willie Grate with 1:25 remaining in the Bills 45-6 loss. That TD pass was the last pass Sherman would throw in the AFL. His pro football career would continue for several more seasons, but he would never return to the AFL or NFL.

Sherman served six months of active duty with the Army Air National Guard during the offseason. He had an uphill struggle to make the Bills club in 1970. Though Jack Kemp retired, the Bills brain trust brought in five quarterbacks to compete. They had three holdovers from 1969 - Sherman, James Harris, and Dan Darragh, signed free agent veteran Virgil Carter, and drafted Dennis Shaw in the second round.

Sherman practiced daily with the club in training camp, but he never was really given much of a chance, as he did not see any action in the Bills three preseason games that he was on the roster. Following Buffalo’s third preseason game, and after the Bills came to contract terms with rookie Dennis Shaw, the Bills released Sherman on August 22.

Sherman was not on the street for long, signing a contract with the Atlantic Coast Football League’s Hartford Knights on August 26. “Buffalo team officials recommended Sherman highly to the Knights, remarking that they still felt Tom had a major league future.”^{vi} The Knights were the Bills minor league affiliate, so it made sense he would sign with Hartford.

Sherman began his time with the Knights as the back-up quarterback, to incumbent starter Benny Russell. He saw his first regular season action in the Knights opening day loss to the Indianapolis Caps on September 5. Trailing the Caps 13-0 head coach Fred Wallner inserted Sherman. He was able to engineer one touchdown drive, throwing a six-yard TD pass to tight end Dan Andrews, however, he also threw two interceptions and was not able to rescue the Knights, as they lost 13-6.



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He got another relief appearance on September 19 against the Orlando Panthers and this time he delivered. Sherman rallied the Knights, in the second half, as they trailed the Panthers 17-10. He tossed a four-yard touchdown pass to wide receiver Bob Stohrer early in the fourth quarter, tying the game at 17. Later in the final quarter he engineered a Knights' drive that set-up the game winning field goal by Wes Bean with nine seconds left.

Following that game, Sherman was given the starting assignment for the Knights' next game on September 26 against the Jersey Jays. He did not have one of his better games, completing only 7 of 18 passes for 90 yards but he led the Knights on a game-winning field goal drive in the fourth quarter for a 10-7 victory. Sherman could be forgiven if he was a little distracted. His wife, Ruth, delivered their first son early Saturday morning at St. Francis Hospital in Hartford. It was a 9-pound, 9-ounce bouncing baby boy that the couple named Tom Jr.

Sherman again was the starter the next week against the Bridgeport Jets, but he again got off to a slow start, and was relieved by Russell. The Knights lost 37-28 and Russell was re-instituted as the starting quarterback and remained that way for the rest of the season.

The Knights won the Northern Division title with a 7-5 record and qualified for their third consecutive ACFL Championship game. Hartford, playing in a two-foot snowstorm, lost to the Pottstown Firebirds at Dillon Stadium in Hartford, 31-0. The Knights could not get anything going on offense. Sherman relieved Russell to start the second half with the Knights trailing 16-0 but was unable to engineer any offense either. For the game he completed 7 of 23 passes for 97 yards and scrambled three times for 24 yards as the teams' leading rusher for the game.

Sherman finished his first season with Hartford throwing 86 passes, completing 35 for 397 yards and three touchdown passes along with seven interceptions. He also rushed for 98 yards on 16 carries.

Russell hung up his spikes in the offseason and Sherman became the starting quarterback for the Knights' 1971 campaign. He led the team back to the Championship game, steering Hartford to a 9-3 record, and a tie for first place with the Norfolk Neptunes.

Sherman had many highlights throughout the season. He threw two touchdown passes in their opening day win over the Roanoke Buckskins, 24-7. He threw two more touchdown passes in leading the Knights to a 44-13 rout of Norfolk on September 11. On October 17 in a key game against Bridgeport he threw two TD passes in leading the Knights to a 37-



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21 victory. He came back two weeks later with three more touchdown passes in a 41-7 rout of the Jets.

The Knights performance in the 1971 Championship game was better than 1970, but still not good enough as they lost to the Neptunes 24-13. Sherman was harassed throughout the game completing only 9 of 26 passes for 64 net yards in the loss. Two fourth quarter fumbles killed the Knights, turning a precarious 14-13 Neptunes lead into the 24-13 final score.

Sherman was the third leading passer in the ACFL in 1971, completing 101 of 248 passes for 1,539 yards with 14 touchdown passes and only 9 interceptions. His interceptions were by far the fewest by any of the starting quarterbacks in the league.

The ACFL did not return in 1972 as it could not assemble enough teams to have a competitive league. Hartford joined the Seaboard Professional Football League. It was not at the same level of quality of the ACFL, but for Tom Sherman it was a chance to continue playing a game he loved. Knights head coach Fred Wallner retired and was replaced by Nick Cutro.

Sherman led the Knights to an undefeated 14-0 season including a championship game victory over the Chambersburg Cardinals 17-7. For the season he completed 100 of 185 passes for 1,900 yards and 20 touchdowns.

The ACFL returned in 1973 with a six-team league and the Knights rejoined the higher quality league. Sherman had another solid season, completing 104 of 228 passes for 1,360 with 10 touchdowns and five interceptions. The Knights finished with an 8-4 record and second place in the Northern Division, however they missed the championship game for the first time in six years.

Following the 1973 season, the ACFL disbanded and did not return. Sherman had played four years for the Knights while simultaneously working as part-time accountant for Knights owner Pete Savin's construction company. It worked out great for him and his family as they enjoyed their time in the Insurance Capital.

In 1974, the World Football League (WFL) was founded, and Sherman jumped at the chance to join a team and continue his football career. He signed with the New York Stars on April 9. The Stars became the Charlotte Hornets part way through the season. Sherman was the team's starting quarterback throughout their inaugural year. They finished with a 10-10 overall record and a second-place finish in the Eastern Division. The team was 8-5 as the Stars, and 2-5 as the Hornets. They qualified for the playoffs, but when the ticket sales were poor, they were replaced by the Philadelphia Bell.



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Sherman liked his first season in the WFL. He was firing passes to ex-NFLer George Sauer, Jr., and handing the ball to former Patriots teammate Bob Gladieux. Sherman finished seventh in the league in passing throwing for 2,311 yards with 172 completions on 377 passes, 15 touchdowns and, 16 interceptions. He also rushed for 376 yards on 97 carries and scored six touchdowns.

Sherman returned to the Hornets for the 1975 season. The league folded 11 games into the season. Sherman had Charlotte in third place in the East Division with a 6-5 record when play was halted.

He played his final season of pro ball with the last place 2-12 Calgary Stampeders of the Canadian Football League. He shared the quarterback duties with another former Penn State alumnus, John Hufnagel, and future NFL quarterback Joe Pisarcik, who would become famous for his fumbled handoff to Larry Csonka, costing the Giants a game against the Eagles that became known as the Miracle in the Meadowlands in 1978.

Sherman completed 59 of 116 passes for 596 yards with three touchdowns in his farewell season. He was cut late in the season by Calgary. After 17 years of high school, college and pro football, Sherman felt it was time to call it a career. He announced his retirement at the conclusion of the season.

In March 1977 Sherman joined the Buffalo Bills as a college scout replacing Stew Barber who was promoted to assistant general manager. He served as a Bills college scout for two seasons, 1977 and 1978.

Sherman had quite an eventful football career, playing for five different teams in four different leagues, appearing in three Championship games and winning one. But he will be most remembered for two moments. He was the Penn State leader that began Joe Paterno's immensely successful head coaching career by winning the teams' first Lambert Trophy and playing in the first bowl game with Joe Pa as head coach. Sherman will also be remembered for being "fired" by his head coach in Boston for telling the media he wasn't getting a fair chance to compete.

Sherman and his wife Ruth Ann have three adult children Heidi, Tom, Jr., and Tim.



End Notes:

ⁱ Associated Press, "Paterno System Makes and Rebuilds Quarterbacks; Sherman an Example," *The Express* (Lock Haven, PA), September 20, 1966, p12

ⁱⁱ https://www.collegian.psu.edu/football/article_f75aeb2e-3467-50ce-a5d7-c5fd6c012b90.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Madden, Michael, "Clive Rush is Dead at 49," *Boston Globe*, August 23, 1980, p21

^{iv} Madden, Michael, "Clive Rush is Dead at 49," *Boston Globe*, August 23, 1980, p21

^v Montville, Leigh, "Marching Orders Heat up Sherman," *Boston Globe*, October 22, 1969, p63

^{vi} "QB Tom Sherman Signs Contract with Knights," *Hartford Courant*, August 27, 1970, p62