

THE FIRST AFL GAME

by Larry Bortstein

Originally published in the *Denver Post*

Seconds after 8 o'clock the night of Sept. 9, 1960, Tony Discenzo, a 245-pound Boston Patriots' tackle from Michigan State University, ran a few steps and kicked a football to the Denver Broncos.

Though few who took part in the occasion -- or who watched from the stands, press box or broadcast booth in Boston University Field -- can recall the specific sights, sounds and actions of the event, Discenzo's boot kicked off an adventure called the American Football League that would span 616 regular- season and championship games totaling 39,977 minutes and 54 seconds of playing time during the next decade -- before the once-upstart league was merged into the once-almighty National Football League.

It was Denver at Boston when the AFL began on a warm, muggy night -- the temperature was 77 degrees at game time -- close to the banks of the Charles River. And, looking back over two decades, it seems appropriate that these two aggregations somehow should have been fated to be represent at the awkward birth of this new sporting league; surely, no two sports franchises ever had a more complex and exasperating time being born than those fledgling Broncos and Patriots.

There never had been a pro football team in Denver up to that time, at least none with big-league pretensions. "And we really had no intentions of getting into football at that time," recalls Bob Howsam who, with his father, Lee, and brother, Earl, successful had operated the Denver Bears minor-league baseball team since the late 1940s. In the late 1950s, the Bears were rolling along as one of the most successful of all minor league operations.

"Our interest was in getting a Denver franchise in a new, third major baseball league called the Continental League that Branch Rickey was forming," recalls Howsam, now 62. Rickey, once the innovative major domo of highly successful franchises such as the St. Louis Cardinals and Brooklyn Dodgers -- and who also had presided over a sick Pittsburgh Pirates club in the early 1950s - - had taken due note of the fact that the Dodgers and Giants had abandoned New York City in 1958, and realized that the most populated American city was starved for more baseball.

He also realized that many newly emerging big and/or growing cities -- Denver, Dallas, Houston, Minneapolis, Atlanta -- might be willing and ready to support big-time baseball. He approached sports personalities in these cities to solicit their interest in becoming part of the new Continental League. Howsam, a LaJara, Colo., native and perhaps the most visible sportsman in his home state, was Rickey's man in Denver.

"I had several meetings with Mr. Rickey in Columbus, Ohio," recalls Howsam, "and we were very much a part of the Continental League picture. He told us that Bears Stadium was too small, and we made plans to enlarge it so it would be ready for the new league. It wasn't until later that I found out Bill Shea was operating behind the scenes with Mr. Rickey to get a new National League team to replace the Dodgers and Giants in New York. That team turned out to be the Mets, of course, and they ended up naming the new Mets' stadium Shea Stadium. I think a new National League team in New York is really what Mr. Rickey had in mind all along. He was just using the Continental League as a means toward that end. When the National League agreed to add New York -- and subsequently, Houston --as expansion franchises, the Continental League idea died. Those new clubs didn't begin operating until 1962, but the National League approved them more than two years before that."

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Not long after the demise of the Continental League, Howsam moved to St. Louis as general manager of the Cardinals, a job Rickey recommended him for, and which Howsam freely acknowledges was a move engineered to repay him for the troubles he had endured in the Continental League debacle. For more than a decade now, he has been a top-ranking executive with the Cincinnati Reds.

The collapse of the "third baseball league" left sports operators in Dallas, Houston and other locales besides Denver with hyped-up interest in placing a sports team in their cities that could be endowed with a major league label, even if that label would be largely ersatz in the beginning. But the sports operators didn't know where to look.

Into this breach stepped a bespectacled 26-year-old multimillionaire named Lamar Hunt. Most people knew of his father, H.L. Hunt, an oil-rich Texan who supposedly earned \$200,000 a day and worked diligently for conservative causes. Few ever had heard of Lamar, aside from the fact that his father was helping him to accumulate a vast fortune of his own. Young Hunt certainly didn't look the part; he wore modest clothes and had the air of a poor soul who didn't know enough to come in out of the hot Dallas sun. He hardly projected the image of a league-builder, much less a former third-string end from Southern Methodist University, which he had been.

But Lamar Hunt had a mind and strong will of his own, as it turned out. Not that he needed permission from anyone else to play with sports teams or leagues. Shortly after the AFL lurched into being, someone reminded H.L. Hunt that son Lamar stood to lose about \$1 million a year operating his Dallas Texans -- later to become the Kansas City Chiefs. What did the fearsome elder Hunt think of that?"

"At that rate," H. L. reportedly blustered, "Lamar would go broke in about 150 years."

Lamar Hunt may not have known much about football at that time, but he had a lot of money and a deep interest in getting into professional sports -- plus, he knew several other people of like means and desires; people like Kenneth "Bud" Adams in Houston and Barron Hilton, son of hotel giant Conrad Hilton, of Los Angeles.

"There were a lot of very wealthy people involved in the league at the time," says Howsam, "and that got us credibility. But our family and Billy Sullivan in Boston were about the only ones involved in the beginning of the AFL who didn't have unlimited amounts of money. My father, brother and I had made our livelihood from baseball, running the Bears and Bears Stadium. We didn't have unlimited wealth like some of the others."

But oddly, when the AFL organizers threw a party in New York early in 1960 to parade its existence before the nation's media, Howsam and Sullivan were the most recognized personalities in the new league because of their many years in baseball. The Bears had known several very successful years as a farm club of the New York Yankees, and Sullivan, a native Bostonian and Notre Dame alumnus, had served as public relations director of the old Boston Braves baseball team, and also had worked in producing sports programs for television.

"I had known Bob Howsam for many years through baseball," says Sullivan, now 64. "If anyone had told either of us back then that pro football would become as big in our areas as it has become, I wouldn't have believed it for a minute. Pro football had been a failure in Boston several times."

The first was in 1929, with a club called the "football Braves," which shared in the baseball team's facility. When the baseball Braves raised his rent in 1933, George Preston Marshall moved his team to Fenway Park, home of the Red Sox, and renamed it

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the Redskins. Four years later he moved the club out of Boston altogether, to Washington and great success.

Boston, meanwhile, was to try the NFL again in 1944 with a team called the Yanks. But after five highly unsuccessful seasons -- both on the field and at the gate -- owner Ted Collins, best known as the manager of singer Kate Smith of God Bless America fame, threw in the towel and moved the club to New York for 1949. So Boston had been without pro football for a dozen years by the time the AFL opened shop. "And this town was very skeptical about trying it again," says Sullivan, a man who seems amused and bemused at the good fortune life has dealt him. "The media and the public both were equally skeptical about our chances. This was very much a college football town, with Boston College, Boston University and Harvard. And besides, in pro football, the New York Giants, who televised all their games into New England every Sunday, were the big team up here. Nearly everyone who cared about pro football in Boston was a Giant fan. Because of the popularity of the college teams on Saturdays and the Giants on Sundays, we played our home games on Friday nights for the first few years we operated, including that first AFL regular-season game against Denver."

Those first few years of playing Friday night home games, Sullivan recalls, hurt his team's credibility and exposure nationwide since, unless it played on the road, it couldn't appear on national television. It is hardly acknowledged or recognized anymore, but the AFL had a national network TV package before it played its first game -- at a time when the NFL still didn't have one. ABC, then trailing CBS and NBC by a huge margin in national esteem and ratings, took a gamble when it entered into a five-year contract with the new league for a reported \$10 million.

"That's something the AFL was always proud of -- that we had national TV every Sunday," Sullivan says, "even when our teams weren't drawing well, and people didn't know who we were. And the man most responsible for getting us that national TV contract was Harry Wismer, who ran the (New York) Titans."

Wismer, who had been a sportscaster and once owned stock in the Washington Redskins and Detroit Lions at the same time -- that practice later was outlawed -- still exists as a standing sports joke among people who knew only his erratic side, which constituted a very large side of him. He certainly wasn't a sympathetic figure, and there are people still working in sports around the country to whom he still owed money when he died. Until he ran out of money and was forced to give up the team he christened the Titans -- which was to become the Jets -- Wismer operated the franchise out of his Manhattan apartment. People who had to associate with him in football and other areas knew his personality was fueled by alcohol and often manifested in violent outbursts at people he considered his enemies.

But, as Sullivan points out: "Without Harry getting us that TV contract, there's really no way the AFL could have stayed in business those first few years. He may have had his weaknesses - - and he was not a well-liked person -- but he did that one thing for the AFL which can never be overlooked."

Alongside the Hunts, Adamses and Hiltons and some of their other brethren who comprised the ownership of the eight original AFL teams in 1960, the Howsams and Sullivans were poor relatives indeed. Sullivan, in fact, had no real wealth to speak of but, because of his viability and recognition within the sports world -- and unchallenged integrity in his hometown -- Hunt, the ringleader among the AFL owners, had Sullivan assemble a group of other Bostonians who would cooperate with him in owning and operating the Patriots. One of the partners Sullivan brought into the deal was Dom DiMaggio, former Red Sox center fielder and younger brother of the great "Yankee Clipper," Joe DiMaggio.

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The big stumbling block in getting the Patriots off the ground was finding a stadium in which to play. For months after the franchise had been welcomed as one of the AFL's original eight, the team still had no home to call its own. The Patriots had been turned down at Fenway Park, Harvard and Boston College. Old Braves Field, which became Boston University Field after the baseball team left for Milwaukee in 1953, truly was the last hope. Other than memories, the BU field had little to recommend it, but the Patriots could hardly afford to be picky when the university relented after months of pressure and allowed the team use of the facility. It took considerable persuasion on the part of Boston Mayor John Collins, who pleaded the case to BU president Harold Case, and even today Bostonians wonder just how much arm-twisting was necessary in the transaction. Even at that, the Patriots had to stage a crash three-month renovation of the facility to get it ready for big league football -- a project that literally was a 90-day wonder.

In Denver, of course, the Howsams had no trouble finding a place to play. In fact, with a little luck and better timing, the Broncos could have become the first major-league sports franchise in the country to play in a domed stadium -- a fully covered Bears Stadium.

"Before the Broncos came about, we had been talking with executives of the Reynolds Aluminum Co. about putting an aluminum covering over the stadium for baseball," recalls Earl Howsam, Bob's brother. "The president and some of the other Reynolds executives were interested in the idea, and we had diagrams made up and studies done on what would be involved in building this dome. But," says Howsam, who for the last three years has been director of business development at Denver's Metro National Bank, "the idea finally was abandoned, and eventually Judge Roy Hofheinz got the Astrodome in Houston as the first domed stadium for baseball."

The Patriots, appropriately enough, were allowed to open their first training camp earlier than any other team -- on July 4. On July 30, they would play the Buffalo Bills -- owned by Detroit millionaire Ralph Wilson -- at Buffalo in the first exhibition game in AFL history. Boston won, 28-7.

The Pats had hoped to sign a big-name college coach as their first head coach and had offered the job to Ben Schwartzwalder, whose 1959 Syracuse team had won the national collegiate championship; Otto Graham, who coached at the little-known Coast Guard Academy but had been a great quarterback with the Cleveland Browns; Rip Engle of Penn State, and Wally Butts of Georgia. All turned down the job. "They all felt they were secure in their jobs in college, and didn't want to risk coming to a new league that might never get off the ground," says Sullivan.

Finally, on the recommendation of Paul Brown, the Patriots signed an unknown, but highly successful 38-year-old small college coach from Western Illinois named Lou Saban. An articulate and poised man, Saban had played guard for the Browns under Paul Brown, and had done radio work in Cleveland at a time he also was coaching the Case Tech football team in the same city.

"It was a chance to get into pro football," recalls the peripatetic Saban, who later coached the Broncos for five years and recently left his latest of many jobs, the head coaching position at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point. Among the assistant coaches he asked to join him in Boston that first year were a couple of young Western Illinois assistants named Robert "Red" Millere and Joel Collier.

"There was no way I was gonna pass up a chance at a pro job," recalls Miller, the head Bronco coach since 1977. "I knew it would probably be rough for a while and the money sure wasn't very good. But it was the pros, and my family and I figured it was worth the chance."

Collier, who generally is regarded as the mastermind behind Denver's successful defense, was only 27 when he accompanied Saban to Boston. "It sure wasn't for the

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money," he says in agreement with Miller. "In fact, during the off-season, we had to work as ticket sellers to keep on the payroll."

He isn't certain of this -- but research seems to bear him out -- but Collier believes he may be the only man who has been active in pro football since the first AFL season of 1960 who always has been associated with a team that carried either the AFL or AFC (American Football Conference) label. After two years in Boston, Collier went to Buffalo in 1962 and remained through 1968, serving as head coach of the Bills his last three years there. In 1969 he came to Denver -- originally to work with Saban again -- and has remained with the Broncos ever since.

Denver launched its AFL operation with appeals to civic pride and a logo that most likely would draw loud howls of protest today, but perhaps reflected Denver's image of itself 20 years ago as a Western cowboy and mining town. The logo depicted a broncobuster badly in need of a shave and wearing a mining cap backward on his head and picking his teeth.

Bob Howsam recognized that his only chance to keep afloat in the new league was to operate his team on a shoestring. He hired as the first Bronco general manager a man well equipped to get the most out of very little -- Dean Griffing.

A veteran executive of Canadian football, Griffing not only knew how to operate on a shoestring budget, but he could nickel-and-dime anyone to death. "I still remember the time he went into the stands to get the football back from a kid who caught an extra point," says Bill Reed, who broadcast the Bronco games over Howsam-owned radio station KHOW from the beginning through 1963. Reed left his seat behind the microphone after that and took a position as a sales executive at KBTV, Denver's Channel 9, where he still holds forth. During 17 years as a sportscaster, Denver native Reed also broadcast Bears games, CU football games and many other area events.

Reed also well recalls the man Griffing brought down with him from Canada to coach the 1960 Broncos -- Frank Filchock. A product of Indiana University, Filchock once had been an acclaimed NFL quarterback. For several seasons, he was a backup behind Sammy Baugh with the Washington Redskins, and later starred for the New York Giants before being barred for life from the NFL for failing to report a bribe attempt while a member of the Giants. (Ironically, Baugh was also a pioneer AFL coach in 1960, guiding the fortunes of Wismer's New York Titans.)

Filchock was sorely lacking in coaching skills and techniques. According to sportscaster Reed, Filchock also may have been lacking in total dedication to the task at hand. "I remember him having the guys practice mornings, never afternoons," recalls Reed. "He wanted afternoons off to go pheasant hunting."

Even before the regular-season AFL inaugural between Denver and Boston the second Friday night in September, the Pats and Broncos enjoyed what could best be called a "simpatico" relationship. There were old friends Howsam and Sullivan as operating heads of the respective clubs, and the problems each club had experienced in putting a team on the field seemed to link the two teams even more closely.

Competitively, the Patriots had all the better of the early aspects of the relationship. On August 5, 1960, in Providence, R.I., in the Patriots' second and Broncos' first, exhibition game, Boston had mercilessly manhandled the Broncos by the score of 43-6. Denver was to lose all five of its pre-season games in 1960 by the collective score of 200 points to 53. The Patriots had a 4-1 pre-season won-loss record before launching their first regular-season schedule.

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By the time Denver and Boston met on September 9, both teams had undergone many changes in personnel -- particularly the Broncos, who had adopted a policy of giving virtually any individual who came to camp under his own strength a player tryout.

The teams also had figured in an odd pre-season trade. "Cowboy" Jim Crawford, a fine running back from the University of Wyoming, had agreed to join the Broncos for their first AFL season. However, he never signed a contract with Denver, but did sign to play with the Patriots. "It was a sticky situation for both teams," recalls Billy Sullivan. "Crawford really wanted to stay with us after he came to camp, even though he could have been a drawing card in Denver since he had played college ball in the area. So we made a trade. Denver let us keep Crawford, and he became one of our top runners in the early years, and we gave them Bob McNamara, another running back."

McNamara had played at the University of Minnesota, where he had been a teammate of a wide receiver-placekicker named Gino Cappelletti. McNamara's lasting contribution to pro ball was suggesting to Lou Saban that he give his college teammate Cappelletti a tryout with the Patriots.

McNamara also makes for a good historical tidbit, because when Boston's Discenzo made his historic first-ever AFL kickoff, it was fielded by McNamara, who thus was the first man ever to handle the ball in an AFL game.

He couldn't have handled it for very long, since the play-by-play account of the contest shows that McNamara fielded the ball in the end zone and -- without saying if he got out of the end zone or not -- ran a reverse and handed the ball to Al Carmichael.

Perhaps even odder than the two men combining to handle the AFL's first kickoff was the fact that the Patriots, who had won the coin toss, elected to kick off rather than receive. The Patriots were playing the game without the services of Ron Burton, a fleet running back from Northwestern who had been their most heralded rookie signee.

"But we were pretty cocky about the game," recalls Saban. "We thought after beating them so badly in the exhibition game, we could do it again. We counted on making them punt from deep in their territory and getting the ball and going in for a quick touchdown."

Whoever was establishing a "line" on AFL games in those days had made Boston a 16-point favorite. Not only did the Patriots appear clearly the superior team, but the Broncos came into the game in something less than prime condition.

Paul Manasseh, the team's public relations director at the time, and for the past 14 years the sports information director at Louisiana State University, remembers the ordeal the Denver players had endured before getting to Boston:

"After breaking camp in July, they took to the road for five exhibition games, never returning to Denver once during those weeks. They flew into Denver overnight on Tuesday night, September 6 and attended a buffet dinner at the Petroleum Club the night of September 7. I was already in Boston 'advancing' the game and didn't attend the function and am having to trust my memory on the exact location. After the function they boarded a commercial flight to New York, changed planes at LaGuardia and flew into Logan Airport in Boston at about 11 a.m. Thursday morning. The team went immediately to the stadium and worked out, then returned to the hotel, which I believe was the Belmont, located on Beacon Hill just by the State House -- an old hotel, but a very prestigious address for proper Bostonians."

Carmichael, who got the ball from McNamara on the reverse following the kickoff, advanced the ball to the Denver 17 and on the very first play from scrimmage, Carmichael got the ball again on a running play and moved it five more yards to the 22.

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A darkly handsome athlete and Hollywood stunt man, Carmichael had played six seasons with the Green Bay Packers, who drafted him in 1953 out of the University of Southern California, where he had been a roommate of Frank Gifford. His largest claim to fame was a 106-yard kickoff return for Green Bay against the Chicago Bears on October 7, 1956, a record that has been tied -- by Kansas City's Noland Smith, against Denver at Mile High Stadium December 17, 1967 -- but never broken.

"I saw the AFL as a chance to play more pro football," recalls Carmichael, now a real estate executive in Laguna Niguel, in Southern California's Orange County. "I didn't think it was a step backward to play in the new league. Though some of the conditions were bad, much worse than we were used to in the NFL, the caliber of football was tough. I'll say this, and I've said it all along: It never mattered to me who was hitting me when I was playing. You felt it just as hard in the AFL as you did in the NFL."

The first Denver drive stalled and George Herring punted to Boston at the Pats' 29. Butch Songin, who had been a Boston College hero as a football and ice hockey star, took over the controls at quarterback and immediately began a drive that carried to Denver's 34. Of immeasurable help in prolonging the drive was a 15-yard penalty against Denver for roughing Boston punter Tommy Greene. Like Denver's Herring, Greene was a backup quarterback. There is no account of who roughed Greene on his punt attempt, but regardless of who was guilty, the Pats kept the ball at Denver's 46 and moved 12 yards further downfield. Then, with fourth down and 4, Cappelletti entered the game to attempt a field goal. Walt Cudzick snapped the ball from center; Fred Bruney, a defensive back, held the ball down, and Cappelletti kicked the ball through the uprights. Cappelletti was very happy, but not for the reason one might expect.

"At that time, I didn't have the luxury of thinking I had made history by scoring the first AFL points ever," recalls Cappelletti, now the special teams coach with the Patriots. "We didn't have much time for history. We were more concerned about surviving. I knew that if I messed up that first kick, I might not get a chance to try another one. In the beginning you never really knew if you had made the team. I had made the team. I had been out of college since 1956. Then I played ball in the Army in Oklahoma for two years. When Bob McNamara mentioned me to Lou Saban, I was working at my brother's bar in Minneapolis, wondering if I'd ever get a chance to play pro football. I was glad I got the chance at the age of 26, and after that first kick it worked out OK."

Cappelletti, who would go on the score 1,130 points, including 176 field goals in an 11-year career, also was a defensive back for the Pats in that first game. Later in the season he was switched to wide receiver. "You couldn't just be a kicker then, because the teams carried only 33 players and you had to play a position, too," he says.

Carmichael of the Broncos claims he had a role in switching Cappelletti from the defensive backfield to a spot on the flank.

"We gave Gino a lot of trouble in that first game," says Carmichael, laughing, "and we beat him a few times. I'm not saying I did anything particularly great against him, but he was out of position a few times, and I think the team finally realized he'd be better as a pass receiver. He had good hands and though he was slow, he was like Fred Biletnikoff (an Oakland Raider star of later vintage), because he ran good routes and managed to catch anything thrown near him."

The score on Boston's first series served to convince the 21,597 persons who had paid their way into BU Field -- "more than we had expected," recalls Billy Sullivan -- that the game would be a rout for Boston, just as the pre-game "line" had forecast. But the next seven points to go on the board were by Denver. On the first play of the second quarter, Frank Tripucka threw the ball to the right flat to Carmichael who reversed his field and went down the left sideline to complete a 59-yard touchdown play, the first six-pointer in league history.

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Tripucka, who threw that first AFL TD pass, had been another product of Canadian football and didn't think he would be playing for the Broncos -- just coaching.

"After Filchcock had gotten fired from Saskatchewan the year before, they made me the player-coach," Tripucka recalls. "And when they asked me to come to Denver the next year, I thought I would be only a coach. I thought I was through with playing ball. The Broncos said I was 29 years old, but I was really 33, and I had been playing pro ball since 1949 when I started in Detroit. I was drafted by the Philadelphia Eagles after I played four years at Notre Dame, but the Eagles traded me to the Lions right away. Then I went to the Chicago Cardinals and the Dallas Texans, when that was an NFL team for one year, and then finally to Canada for seven years.

"So they tell me when they ask me to come to Denver that I'm not gonna play, just coach, and I signed a \$15,000 contract with Dean Griffing as a coach. I was making \$35,000 as a player in Canada. Then the intra-squad games come, and you gotta have four quarterbacks, two on each side for that, so I play and then come the exhibition games, and I'm still playing. I was in shape to play and I always could throw the ball. I never doubted my ability to throw the ball, and since we didn't really have much coaching on plays and things, I'd make up stuff in the huddle and draw plays in the dirt before I'd call them. I ended up playing every single down on offense that first year for \$15,000, and of course, I knew there was no way I was ever gonna get more out of them that year because I had signed that contract. But the team made it up to me the next three years until I finally retired."

Following the Tripucka-Carmichael TD connection, Gene Mingo, who had come to the Bronco camp directly out of the Army and never had played college football, converted (the first of a league-leading total of 123 points he would score that season), and Denver led 7-3. The largely partisan Boston fans in the stands -- which had been decked out in red, white and blue for the occasion -- started to get a little impatient.

Six plays before the Bronco score, Boston coach Saban, who was to invite more than this share of controversy over the next two decades, hatched what proved to be the first controversy in AFL history when he inserted his ace receiver Jim Colclough, another Boston College product, in twin-safety tandem with Fred Bruney as the Pats prepared to receive a Bronco punt. George Herring promptly spiraled a towering kick toward Colclough at the Boston 12. By the time the ball descended, four Broncos were taking dead aim at Colclough, who eschewed the fair-catch option and hauled in the ball, whereupon he immediately was clobbered. He was knocked cold and couldn't be revived for several minutes. Though Colclough returned in the third period and caught a TD pass from Songin in the fourth, Saban later drew severe criticism for risking his star pass catcher, a slim 180-pounder, on hazardous punt return duty, especially since Saban never had used Colclough in that role during the exhibition game.

Even without Colclough, the Pats had much the best of the action in the second quarter after Denver had scored its touchdown. Three times Boston roared down the field, once moving to the Denver 29. But Songin was sacked by Mike Nichols for a 17-yard loss back to the Bronco 46.

The next time Boston had the ball, it drove to the Denver 33, declined to try a field goal, and subsequently lost the ball on downs. Shortly before the end of the half, the Patriots were on the march again. With seconds ticking away on the scoreboard clock, Songin passed from the Denver 40 directly into the hands of safety Austin "Goose" Gonsoulin, who ran the ball back 17 yards. The second quarter ended precisely as it began -- Carmichael hauling in a long pass, this one for 51 yards, from Tripucka. But Carmichael finally was hauled down at the Boston 15 as the half ended.

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At Baylor, native Texan Gonsoulin had starred as a wide receiver and defensive back when the colleges still operated under the single-platoon system. "I guess the best game I ever had in college was against Rice when I caught six passes for about 140 yards and prevented Buddy Dial, who was an All-American receiver, from doing anything," recalls Goose, who became a premier safety for Denver in the early AFL days. "I played in the Copper Bowl in Phoenix when I was a senior. That was an all-star game, and Chuck Fairbanks was one of the coaches. I wanted to remain in Texas, and when Dallas drafted me for the AFL and San Francisco for the NFL, I signed with Dallas. But then they traded me to Denver, so I didn't get my wish to stay in Texas," says Gonsoulin, now a successful 41-year-old businessman in Nederland, Texas.

Gonsoulin recalls the first thing that struck him as unusual about the Broncos was the team's small coaching staff. Behind Filchuck were only Dale Dodrill and Jim Cason. "Heck, in high school in Texas we had five or six coaches on a staff," says Gonsoulin. "It was very odd to come to a pro team and have only two assistant coaches. And besides that, the conditions in camp weren't very good. I was pretty disappointed about being in Denver in the beginning, thinking I had come in for a bad deal. Of course, we had no way of knowing if things were any better anywhere else in the AFL. It turned out that they probably were in some ways -- the living accommodations, the food and things like that. But I had great years in Denver, and my only regret was being cut before the 1967 season even started when Lou Saban became the coach and decided to get rid of all the 'old guys' and start over with a whole new bunch."

With Boston trailing going into the second half, Saban inserted Tommy Greene at quarterback in place of Songin. "The fans started calling for Greene," Saban remembers, "and after I put him in and we didn't do anything for two series, they started yelling for Songin again. You know, Greene was a local hero, too from Holy Cross in Worcester, so he had a lot of fans at the game, as well as Songin."

The veteran Songin was back in the lineup again for Boston's third series of the third quarter, but by that time the Patriot deficit had increased to 10 points.

Mingo, who would be used in various roles throughout his Bronco career, displayed his versatility when he fielded a Greene punt and sped 76 yards along the right sideline for a touchdown - - brushing aside several would-be tacklers and benefiting from two crunching blocks as he tightroped the distance. Mingo was wide on his point-after try, leaving the score 13-3 with 2:48 left in the period.

Mingo, who still resides in Denver where he is a receptionist-clerk for the Western Weighing Inspection Bureau, which checks freight going in and out of Denver's Union Station, always was an anomaly to Denver fans and his own teammates. "He had tremendous ability," recalls Tripucka. "He was an excellent runner. He was very strong, and he was a great kicker. But somehow he never achieved all that he could have."

"I'm disappointed I didn't do more during my career," admits Mingo, who was dealt to Oakland amid controversy during the 1964 season and later saw NFL service with Washington, Miami and Pittsburgh. "But I'm proud of some of the records I did set, and people here in Denver still recognize me and know me from the years I played here. I was born and raised in Akron, Ohio, but I never lived anywhere else after I first came to Denver to play."

Mingo's two most significant Bronco records are his 82-yard run from scrimmage against Oakland on October 5, 1962, and his five field goals against San Diego on October 6, 1963. He also still holds the Denver record for most field goals in a season -- 27 in 1962.

In the AFL inaugural Mingo had the distinction of providing Denver with its winning margin.

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"I didn't expect to be returning punts that night," Mingo says. "But someone else had gotten hurt, so the coach asked me to go in and return kicks. After I ran it back for the touchdown, I was so tired I couldn't get the full leg strength I needed for the extra point, and I hit it weak and it went off."

So with 2:48 remaining in the third period, Denver led 13-3. The Broncos would score no more that night, but Boston could record only one TD. That came quickly following Mingo's long punt return.

Denver got the initial break after Mingo's TD when Colclough fumbled and the Broncos recovered on the Boston 38. But two plays later Chuck Shonta intercepted a 12-yard Tripucka pass and returned it 52 yards to the Denver 10. On first down, Songin rolled right and spotted Colclough alone on the right side of the end zone, and the Patriots had their first AFL touchdown. Cappelletti followed with the first of his 342 career conversions.

Boston managed several good drives in the fourth period, but never could score. Late in the game, Songin flipped a screen pass to Crawford, the former Wyoming star, and "Cowboy Jim" raced 40 yards to the Denver 13. Frank Bernardi, who had been a University of Colorado player before joining the Broncos, dragged Crawford down just when it appeared he was on his way to the lead touchdown.

Crawford tried again on first down, but got nothing. So Songin called another screen -- this time to Alan Miller, yet another former Boston College standout -- but the Broncos saw this one coming and dropped Miller seven yards back at the 20. On third and-17, Songin attempted another pass, thinking that if it failed, Cappelletti could be called in to try a fairly simple field goal and tie the score.

There would never be another chance for Boston. Songin's pass was intercepted -- again by Gonsoulin -- at the 2, and the Broncos held the ball for 18 plays to kill the clock and the Patriots.

Of his two interceptions in his first pro game, Gonsoulin says: "That was OK, but I got four the next week in Buffalo, which tied the all-time record, and I thought things were real easy. It never was quite that easy, of course, but I well remember those six interceptions in my first two games."

Though his exploits weren't recorded in that first game -- the old occupational hazard of the offensive lineman -- Eldon Danenhauer at right guard was another member of that winning Bronco team in the AFL inaugural. He and his older brother Bill, both products of Emporia State College in Kansas, had created some excitement from the inception of camp as the very first brother act in the league. Bill played sparingly in Denver's first three games, and was then traded -- ironically enough, to Boston. Eldon remained a Bronco stalwart through 1965.

"I don't miss the contract," says Eldon, now a Coors distributor in Wichita, "but I do miss the camaraderie of being in the pros. I stay close to the game as one of the guys who looks after the pension plan for the retired players. I never thought I would play as long as I did. I wasn't really too big until my senior year in high school. Then I got up to 250 pounds. Bill, who was a year ahead of me, didn't fill out until even later, and I think that eventually hurt him."

Bill, who now makes his home in Omaha, had been with the Baltimore Colts in 1956 and 1957, missing out on the Colts' two consecutive NFL championships in '58 and '59. "When the AFL started, I decided to give football another try," he recalls. "But it took me longer than I thought it would to get back into shape, and after I got traded to Boston from Denver, I didn't play very much, and I gave it up after that."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, No. 11 (1980)

Denver may have won the first AFL game ever played, but it still took some time before the Broncos won a wide following. "You have to remember, the population here (in Denver) was small compared to other cities (491,409)," recalls Sam Lusky, long-time Denver advertising man.

"People would go to a college game on Saturday, and go visiting on Sundays, and it was difficult to break the old habits," says Starr Yelland, a sportscaster in Denver for nearly four decades.

When the Broncos began their first season, Denver sports fans were more interested in the exploits of the baseball Bears who, under manager Charlie Metro, were driving to the American Association regular-season pennant. Carrying big bats for the '60 Bears, a Detroit Tiger farm club, were first baseman Bo Osborne, third baseman Steve Boros, and outfielder George Alusik.

Area sports fans also were interested in how the University of Colorado Buffaloes, in their second year under Coach Sonny Grandelius, would do after a 5-5 record in 1959. The players from whom CU supporters were expected big things were junior quarterback Gale Weidner, who had broken all the school passing records as a sophomore, plus guard Joe Romig and end Jerry Hillebrand, both also juniors. The Buffs would finish 7-3 that year.

"We knew it would be a difficult sell," recalls 80-year-old Orville Rennie, who operated the Ball-Davidson advertising agency when the AFL began, and became the Broncos' first promotion director. Rennie has retained a veritable trove of Bronco memorabilia, including numerous memos and photos.

Patsy (Mrs. Ted) Ellis, who was Patsy Laprade in 1960, and one of the leaders of the Petticoat Quarterback Club, a women's booster organization, remembers attending dances and dinners, arranged by promotion man Rennie, at which the players would get up and sing and dance. "One of the players had such a nice voice," recalls Mrs. Ellis, a long-time executive of a small Denver oil firm. "I wish I could remember who he was."

And there was, and still is, Ronnie Bill, whose term of employment with the Broncos began even before the team first took the field for a practice, and has continued to the present day - - making him the only Bronco staffer who can claim that distinction. Bill began as an equipment boy and assistant ground crew member for the Bears while in high school in 1959, and performed the same duties for the Broncos when the football season started. He never has worked anywhere else. "I always liked working outdoors," says Bill, now 40.

Another oddity among several involving the Patriots and Broncos is the fact that both clubs finished in fourth and last place in their respective divisions in 1960, after Boston had opened the year looking as if it might be one of the league's early powerhouses. The Patriots finished 5-9-0 to bring up the rear in the Eastern Division, while Denver, after winning its first two games, tailed off badly to a 4-9-1 mark and last place in the West. Two of the Bronco victories came over Boston, as the October 23 rematch between the two clubs in Denver produced a 31-24 victory for the home team.

By that time Lionel Taylor had come to Denver, after having been waived out of the NFL by the Chicago Bears, and he and Tripucka began their great passing-catching collaboration. Many people will recall Taylor as a member of the '60 Broncos, which he was, but he wasn't a member of the original Broncos who suited up -- vertical-striped socks and all -- that muggy Friday night in Boston when the AFL got its start.