



Booth Lusteg

This article is by Budd Bailey

For those of you who don't know about Booth Lusteg, you are in for a treat. You're about to learn about one of the great characters in pro football history.

For those of you who do know about Booth Lusteg, you'll still enjoy this thoroughly. The stories about him are still hilarious, more than 50 years after his playing days. Besides, this biography comes with a money-back guarantee that you'll learn something new about the kicker along the way – probably by the second sentence of the next paragraph.

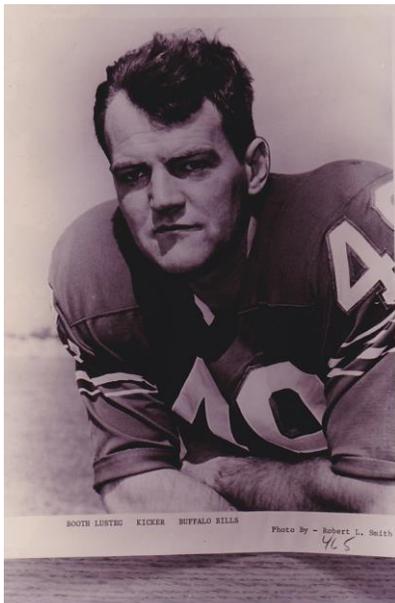


Photo Credit: Robert L. Smith

Gerald Booth Lusteg was born on May 8, 1939, in New Haven, Connecticut. His great-grandfather was William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army in London in 1865. Lusteg settled in at his hometown of Branford, about eight miles east of New Haven right along the shore. The family lived in a trailer that Lusteg's father – a sign painter by trade - planned to use to drive his family to the West Coast, but they never left Connecticut. Jerry attended Branford High School from 1952 to 1955. He might be the biggest success story of any athlete to attend that school; Lusteg's only competition probably is Jen Toomey, a world-class middle-distance runner in the 2000s.

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Lusteg was a good all-around athlete in high school. In football, he played running back (averaging more than five yards per carry) and defensive back, and also did some punting (averaging more than 40 yards per kick). One article says that Jerry only played one year of football in high school. He was an all-star basketball player, and once was an All-State selection. In baseball, Lusteg hit .350, led the team in homers, and was a team captain of the Hornets.

From there it was on to college at the University of Connecticut. He was the punter on an undefeated freshman football team, but never earned a varsity letter in the sport. Lusteg played guard as a freshman and sophomore on the Huskies basketball team, which won a Yankee Conference championship.

He graduated with honors from UConn in 1960. From there it was on to professional baseball. Lusteg was an outfielder in the Twins and Angels' organizations, and played in the Western Carolina League in 1961 and 1962. Available statistics for his time there are very sketchy, but the first baseman/outfielder never climbed the ladder in organized baseball. Lusteg told Sports Illustrated that he had been cut by eight teams in this part of his life. In the meantime, Lusteg took all sorts of odd jobs to pay the rent – short-order cook, carpenter, Bible salesman, and piano mover.

With his athletic career seemingly over, Lusteg made an odd part-time career choice from there: acting. But that didn't go particularly well. He did make an appearance in the play, "The Brig." By 1964, Hollywood and Broadway were not knocking down his door. And he didn't like being a high school math teacher on Long Island by day when he wasn't in drama school at night.

Then came his eureka moment. Lusteg was playing touch football with some other teachers when he boomed a punt that left the rest of the players gasping. Cries of "ringer!" were heard on the field. Booth soon decided to return to football and try to make it as a kicker; he had discovered that the path to pro football was easier for place-kickers than punters.

Jerry took some lessons in kicking and put in plenty of practice time at Bower Field in New Haven with his wife doing the holding. Lusteg got a brief look in the Jets' training camp in the summer of 1964 but was quickly shown the door by coach Week Ewbank. He made an impression, though; vomiting out the window of the second floor of the dormitory will do that. From there, he went to the Jersey Jets of the Atlantic Coast Football League, and was rejected without a tryout. Lusteg did better with the Ansonia

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(Conn.) Black Knights. He lasted for a game and was cut. From there it was on to the Boston Sweepers of the same league, and he found a home with that team.

The 5-foot-11, 190-pound Lusteg played for the minor league team for two seasons, which moved to New Bedford in the second year. His coach was Butch Songin, a former quarterback in the American Football League. A player-coach for the Sweepers was Rommie Loud, an original member of the AFL who ended up as the owner of the Florida Blazers of the World Football League in 1974. Almost remarkably, Lusteg was a pretty good kicker in his pro debut. He led the team in scoring with 70 points, and had 31 extra points and 13 field goals. Lusteg also played a little defensive back for the Sweepers.

Things weren't always good with the team. Once Booth missed an extra point and a field goal for New Bedford, and tried to walk home – to Boston, about 65 miles. He got more than 20 miles down the road to Brockton before a state trooper took him the rest of the way. By the way, the Sweepers won the ACFL championship both years, including a 13-9 win over the Jersey Jets in the 1965 title game.

Now this story takes another interesting twist. Pete Gogolak had been the Buffalo Bills' kicker in 1964 and 1965. He made history as pro football's first soccer-style kicker, approaching the ball from the side instead of the back. Gogolak started a revolution in kicking that continues to this day. In the meantime, after two seasons in the AFL, Gogolak jumped to New York Giants of the National Football League. He was the first important veteran to jump to another league, as the teams in both the AFL and NFL had stayed away from signing each other's veterans until that point.

The AFL started throwing major dollars at the NFL's quarterbacks, such as John Brodie and Roman Gabriel. Eventually, the two sides figured it was easier and cheaper to merge rather than continue to fight. That's what happened in the summer of 1966. The leagues agreed to honor each other's contracts, have a common draft, and stage an AFL-NFL championship game.

Meanwhile, back in Buffalo, the Bills still needed a kicker. Almost 100 people applied for the job, and Lusteg was one of them. He took the unusual step of taking the identity of his younger brother, Wallace, in the football world. He was three years younger than Booth (24 vs. 27) and thus more of a "prospect." There was one problem with this plan. Wallace went to Boston College, and taking his identity meant there was the potential for conflicts down the road. After all, football is a relatively small community. This also was the moment when Mr. Lusteg started using his own middle name exclusively, as he

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thought “Booth” (which was his mother’s maiden name) sounded more like the name of a powerful kicker than Jerry.

Some of the applicants for the Bills’ kicking job were clearly unqualified, like the player who couldn’t get the football higher than five feet off the ground on kicks. The competition narrowed down to three people: Lusteg, a German bricklayer by the name of Wolfgang Felgemacher, and Bob Hight, who had one arm and one eye. And now we come to the time when Lusteg’s white lie almost came back to haunt him.

The Bills played their first preseason game of 1967 at, yes, Boston College – Lusteg’s alleged alma mater. Naturally, the team bus got lost on the way to the stadium, so everyone asked Lusteg for directions to the stadium. After all, he said he went to school there.

"I slid down in my seat. They asked again," Lusteg told the New Haven Register in 1999. "I had only been to Boston College once to visit Wally and it was hard to find. I had never been to the athletic complex."

Lusteg frantically looked around the area, hoping for a clue on how to navigate the team to its destination. He somehow got the bus to the right spot and found the locker room, thanks to a chance encounter with Songin. Then Lusteg kicked four field goals in a 19-13 win by the Bills. Naturally, New England’s sports writers couldn’t wait to tell the story about how the Patriots had overlooked this local sensation. "What a shame the Boston College coaches let cum laude graduate and star place-kicker Booth Lusteg slip through their fingers," one Boston story read.

Lusteg exhaled and went on with the effort to make the Bills. When the final cut was made, Booth had won a job in the American Football League – a Cinderella story if there ever has been one. Felgemacher went back to bricklaying for the next 34 years, and Hight became a teacher.

Lusteg missed his first couple of field goals in the regular-season opener against San Diego, but converted on a pair in the next game against Kansas City. He tied a record with seven extra points in a 58-24 win over Miami; Lusteg also added a field goal. Then he kicked a pair of field goals and two extra points against Houston, and went three for three in field goals against the Chiefs. Booth was one for four against the Patriots. At a time when 50 percent on field goals was considered quite decent, Lusteg was doing quite well – if a bit discouraged by the results in the Boston matchup.

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Then came the game and incident that made him famous. A week after the Patriots' game, the Chargers arrived in Buffalo to face the Bills in War Memorial Stadium. San Diego scored the first 17 points of the game, but Buffalo rallied to tie the score in the fourth quarter. They could complete the comeback if Lusteg could kick a 23-yard field goal to win the game in the final moments. But he missed. Bills' owner Ralph Wilson told him after the game, "You'll make them forget that miss."

"I felt pretty bad about it," Lusteg told the Press-Gazette years later. "After the game, you had to go through the stands to get to the dressing rooms. The people would think nothing of throwing things, grabbing, or swearing at you after a bad game. The fans were pretty robust up there, as they are in most places. I went into the dressing room and the vice president of the team came up to me and said I had better go out the back door. I didn't feel like doing that. I went out the front door and was escorted by a couple of police. They escorted me part of the way home.

"After they left me off, I walked the rest of the way. A couple of kids jumped out of a car and ran after me. They were yelling obscenities – the usual stuff – and one kid roughed me up a little bit and hopped back in the car."

Lusteg didn't write down the car's license plate number or take any other action. When asked why, his answer would live forever as it spoke to the frustrations of a kicker: "I felt I got what I deserved."

(Postscripts to that story: The entire Bills roster started practice the next day taking turns at kicking 23-yard field goals. Most of the kicks were good. Later, Lusteg was asked by a friend soon after the game how he was doing. "I can't kick," came the reply.)

Booth bounced back after a bye week to kick four field goals against the Jets in a 33-23 win. "In one way, I benefited from that missed kick against the Chargers," he said. "I studied the films over and over and spotted a minor flaw. I corrected it and I think the correction helped. It has been a long two weeks."

The Bills never had another close finish in 1966. They galloped through a five-game winning streak and took six of their last eight games. Lusteg ended up leading the team in scoring with 98 points – tied for second in the league. He was 19 of 38 on field goals and 41 for 42 in extra points. Booth wasn't as good as Gogolak had been in 1965, but he was a decent NFL kicker that season.

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Along the way, Lusteg's double identity was uncovered by a Boston newspaper reporter, Al Hirshberg, on December 2. He had called Booth's Mom, who told the full, true story. "I didn't know Wally Lusteg when he was here," Boston College sports publicist Eddie Miller said when told of the switch. "I met Booth last summer when he came to Boston with the Bills. Y'know, now that I think of it, the guy didn't look at all like his picture in the yearbook. And I wondered how he got the name Booth out of Wallace S." Coach Joel Collier called Booth "Whats-his-name" for the rest of the season, but added, "I don't care if he's Brand X, as long as he keeps kicking field goals."

To add to the circus-like atmosphere surrounding the kicker that season, the Sweepers sued Lusteg and the Bills for a reported \$50,000 each for breach of contract. All sides soon reached a settlement.

Lusteg just missed on a chance to kick in the first Super Bowl, as his Bills played the Chiefs for the AFL title. Kansas City got in the way and beat Buffalo, 31-7. Still, it was a heck of a rookie season, particularly under the circumstances.

Sadly, for Lusteg, there was no fairy tale ending to his time in Buffalo. The Bills had loaned kicker Mike Mercer to the Chiefs under some odd circumstances in 1966, and they took him back in 1967. Mercer had been the most effective kicker in pro football in 1966, and he won the kicking competition in training camp. Lusteg was released and waited for another chance to play for a pro football team.

It took him a few months. Miami had watched Gene Mingo miss five of six field goals in the first part of the 1967 season, and had seen enough. Lusteg was signed in midseason to replace him. Booth was even better than he was in 1966, going 7 of 12 on field goals for a 58.3 percent conversion rate. Booth even led the team in scoring with 39 points as the Dolphins finished 4-10. Even so, he lost his job to Jimmy Keyes in training camp in 1969. (As a consolation prize of sorts, Lusteg did play for the Dolphins' charity basketball team for eight years.)

One game into the new 1968 season, Lusteg landed a spot with the Pittsburgh Steelers. Bill Shockley only tried one field goal for the Steelers in the opener, and missed it. That was enough for coach Bill Austin to make a change. Lusteg stayed with the Steelers for the rest of the season.

Lusteg finished the year with 50 points, but only hit on 8 of 20 field goal attempts. Two of them came in a 6-3 win over Philadelphia, but even that didn't work out well for the

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Steelers. Pittsburgh's chances of landing O.J. Simpson in the college draft were damaged by the unexpected win. From there, Booth lost his job to Mingo in training camp the next year, but he apparently made an impression on one Steeler great.

Lusteg had the unusual habit of warming up by kicking taped paper cups. Fans near the sideline actually cheered when he did it. One rainy day, Lusteg started his preparations for a field goal. "The ground was soaked and treacherous, and as I took a hellacious swing at the upright cup, my left foot slipped and my right foot slid under the cup and kicked an enormous hunk of mud that sailed through the air and hit (rookie) Mean Joe Greene between the eyes," Booth told the New Haven Register. "He screamed out, 'Lusteg, you kick one more paper cup this year and I'm gonna break every bone in your body, all 210 of them.'

"Two thoughts hit me. One, there's 206 bones in the human body, not 210. But I didn't think this was a good time to correct Mean Joe; and second, I'm dead meat; cold, wet, ripped-up dead meat."

Lusteg had one more stop in his NFL career, at least in terms of playing time. He signed with the Green Bay Packers when Mercer was hurt. Yes, kickers in those days bumped into each other regularly. Lusteg stayed for four games, telling people upon arrival that "I feel that I'm better than (former Packers kicker) Don Chandler at his best." He didn't back up that talk, going 1 for 5 in field goal attempts. Lusteg lost his job to Dale Livingston the following summer.

It was time for him to answer the most difficult question in a football player's life: "Now what?" Luckily for Booth, he had a ton of different responses during the next 40 years or so:

- Acted in such movies as "Black Sunday" and "The Greatest."
- Was ranked in the top 15 of Florida tennis players over the age of 40.
- Earned a Masters degree in teaching.
- Started the G. Booth Lusteg kicking camp, "Kicking for Christ," which was free for underprivileged children.

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- Wrote articles on sports and social issues for a variety of newspapers and magazines.
- Wrote an autobiography called “Kick Rejection ... and WIN!!”
- Earned a real estate license and a certificate in psychology, was ordained as a minister, and gave motivational speeches.

Still, Booth kicked for as long as he could. Lusteg apparently turned up in the ACFL again in 1973, kicking for the Long Island Chiefs and Hartford Knights. A year later he tried out for the Detroit Wheels of the World Football League, but was quickly cut. Lusteg moved on to the Portland Storm of the WFL, and was signed on July 30.

The Storm finished 7-12-1, using such familiar names as Pete Beathard and Ben Davidson. Lusteg kicked five field goals for Portland that season, according to most statistical recaps. He is in some places credited with kicking four game-winning field goals, although Portland only had two wins by three or fewer points. Lusteg won them both. One came on Sept. 18 against Jacksonville, as a 28-yarder that gave the Storm a 19-17 win. The other took place on October 16 against the Hawaiians, a 37-yarder in the third quarter that led to a 3-0 win. The team apparently was headed for the playoffs when the league changed the postseason rules at the end of the regular season to admit only the top six teams, leaving the Storm out.

Lusteg was out of football in 1975, but gave kicking one last try in 1976. He tried out for the new Tampa Bay Buccaneers expansion franchise in the NFL. Booth lasted a week, and was cut.

In 1997, Lusteg was involved in a car accident and suffered broken ribs, a gash in his head, and a collapsed lung. He eventually recovered. About 12 years later, Booth was diagnosed with fourth stage lung cancer. He fought the illness for more than three years. However, he died on July 12, 2012 in Plantation, Fla., leaving wife Carol and daughter Lisa.



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