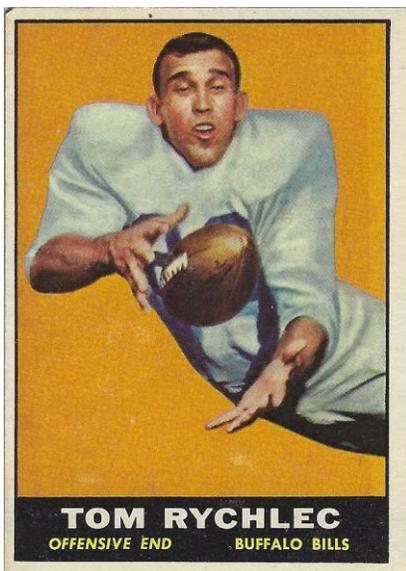




Tom Rychlec

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Tom Rychlec was a tall, strong, 6-foot, 3-inch, 220-pound offensive end. He starred at American International College in Springfield, Massachusetts for four years, played one year in the National Football League (NFL) with the Detroit Lions and four years in the American Football League (AFL), three of those with the Buffalo Bills. He led the Bills in receiving in their first year of 1960. He finished his football career playing three years in the Atlantic Coast Football League, one with the Hartford Charter Oaks and two with the Hartford Knights. He won an ACFL Championship with the Knights in 1968.



Thomas Richard Rychlec was born on September 11, 1934 in Meriden, Connecticut. He grew up in Meriden and has spent almost his entire life in the quint village.

He attended Meriden High School where he starred in basketball and football, lettering for three years in each sport. He played tackle and running back in football and center in basketball. He spent one year at Monson Academy, Monson Massachusetts, starring in football at tight end and basketball.

Rychlec entered American International College (AIC) in Springfield, Massachusetts in the fall of 1953. He played football all four years at the school and was team captain as a senior. He led the nation in pass receiving in 1956, catching 40 passes that season for 353 yards. He was named to the 1956 Associated Press Little All-America Football



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Team. In addition, he was named All-New England and All-East. In his career at AIC he caught 88 passes. He graduated from the school in May 1957.

Rychlec was drafted by the Detroit Lions in the tenth round of the 1957 NFL Draft. He was the tenth pick in the round and the 119th overall selection. He was selected on the second day of the draft that occurred on January 31, 1957. He signed his rookie contract with the Lions on June 27 for \$6,800 and a \$500 signing bonus. Rychlec spent the entire 1957 training camp with the Lions and saw action in their preseason encounters. However, he was released by the team on September 24 in the final cutdown prior to the start of the regular season.

One of the primary reasons that Rychlec did not make the team is he faced a military commitment. Following his release by the Lions, he fulfilled his military obligation, spending six months in the Army.

He was back with the Lions in 1958 and this time with a solid training camp, he made the club. He played in all 12 regular season games for the Lions as the team finished with a sub-par 4-7-1 record. He played some special teams and was a back-up end playing behind Dave Middleton, Jim Gibbons and Jim Doran.

He made his professional football regular season debut, wearing jersey #81, versus the Baltimore Colts on September 28. The Lions lost 28-15. He caught his first professional pass, on Thanksgiving Day November 27, for 23 yards from Tobin Rote in a 24-14 Lions win over the Green Bay Packers. It was a key reception on the Lions scoring drive in the third quarter. He snagged the Rote pass and carried it to the Packers 12-yard line. Two plays later the Lions scored a touchdown to take a 17-14 lead on their way to the victory. Rychlec caught his second professional pass on December 12 from Rote for minus 2 yards at Chicago in a 21-16 loss. He finished his first professional season with two catches for 21 yards, in limited playing time.

Rychlec was back with the Lions for their 1959 training camp, however he did not make it out of camp. He was released on August 25, the first veteran let go. The Lions had a strong pass receiving group, making Rychlec expendable. He played semi-pro football for the Springfield Giants later in the fall of 1959.

Rychlec's professional football career was at a crossroads when a fortuitous event occurred. The American Football League was founded in the late fall of 1959, creating eight new teams and many new football jobs.



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Buffalo Bills head Coach Buster Ramsey created a list of “must get” players and Rychlec was on that list. Ramsey went after Rychlec and the Bills signed him to a contract on February 23, 1960 for \$9,500.

Rychlec joined 100 or so other players trying to make the newly formed Bills in the 1960 training camp. He had a good camp, playing in each of the teams five preseason encounters. He caught a pass on the Bills only scoring drive in the Bills preseason opening game versus the Boston Patriots on July 30. His reception set-up Maurice Bassett’s one-yard TD run, the first score in Bills history.

Rychlec solidified the starting position at left end with his solid blocking and four catches for 44 yards in the Bills second to last preseason game, a 26-21 loss to the Oakland Raiders on August 24. He also caught two passes for 15 yards in the Bills final preseason game, a 52-31 thrashing by the New York Titans.

Rychlec was the starting left end in the Bills first ever regular season game on September 11 in the Polo Grounds versus the Titans. Late in the second quarter with the Bills trailing the Titans 17-3, Rychlec caught an 11-yard pass from quarterback Bob Brodhead for a first down on the Bills 25-yard line. It was the second complete pass in Bills history and the first to an end. It was his only catch in the Bills 27-3 opening day loss.

Rychlec had a breakout game the following week. He caught six passes from Bills quarterback Tommy O’Connell for 78 yards. Buffalo lost a tight game to the Denver Broncos 26-21.

His best game in 1960, was a monster outing with Rychlec catching 10 passes for 123 yards at Kezar Stadium against the Oakland Raiders on November 13. The Bills alternated quarterbacks between Johnny Green and O’Connell with both consistently finding Rychlec for completions. However, the Bills were unable to complete drives and lost to the Raiders 20-7 despite Rychlec’s heroics.

Rychlec started all 14 games for the Bills at left end during the 1960 season, catching passes in 12 of those games. He led the team in receiving, catching 45 passes for 590 yards. His one disappointment was not catching a touchdown pass. The Bills finished a disappointing 5-8-1 and third place in the AFL East Division.

Rychlec was known as an irrepressible character. He “entertained teammates by biting the tops off Coke bottles, swallowing nightcrawlers and performing hook slides into goal posts.”ⁱ He helped keep the team loose and made it a fun atmosphere. His nickname was “Hands” both for their size and his ability to snatch passes out of the air and hang on to them. He was also “considered one of the finest third down ends in football.”ⁱⁱ



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Rychlec re-signed with the Bills on April 5. He had another solid training camp, but the competition was heightened in 1961 with the addition of Glenn Bass and the improvement of Monte Crockett. Crockett took over his starting position at the start of the 1961 season. Though Rychlec did not start at left end he had an excellent opening game, catching five passes for 48 yards in the Bills 22-10 loss to Denver.

He scored his first two professional touchdowns on October 22 at Boston University Field versus the Boston Patriots. He caught a 10-yard touchdown pass from Warren Rabb at the 12:40 mark of the fourth quarter for his first TD. Two minutes and four seconds later he was in the end zone again, snaring a 21-yard TD from Rabb. Rychlec's late game heroics were of limited benefit as the Bills were drubbed by Boston 52-21.

Despite starting only four games, Rychlec finished second on the team in receptions with 33 and third on the team in receiving yards with 405, along with his two TDs. He played in all 14 games for the 6-8 Bills.

Following the 1961 season Rychlec wed his sweetheart, Holly Ann Bunnell, on February 17 at St. Stanislaus Church in Meriden. He re-signed with the Bills on May 14 for his third season with the club.

Rychlec was having another good training camp. He caught three passes for 33 yards in the Bills August 15 preseason 12-7 loss to Boston. In the Bills next preseason game, Rychlec scored on a 10-yard TD pass from Wayne Crow. His good camp came to a premature end when he dis-located his shoulder in practice and was placed on the injured reserve list on August 29.

He returned to the line-up on September 30 versus the Dallas Texans. He did not catch a pass but had a punt return for 24 yards in the Bills 41-21 loss. He re-injured himself and was lost to the team until he returned on November 11 at the San Diego Chargers. He caught one pass for 11 yards in his return. Upon his return he roomed with Bills quarterback and future U.S. Congressman and Vice-Presidential nominee Jack Kemp when the Bills were on the road.

Rychlec played the final five games of the season for Buffalo. His one highlight was a one-yard TD pass from roommate Kemp on December 2 in a 23-14 victory over the Dallas Texans. It was the third TD reception of Rychlec's career and staked the Bills to a 6-0 lead in the game. He finished his injury plagued season with six catches for 66 yards and one TD in six games.



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Rychlec re-signed with the Bills for a fourth season on April 17, 1963. He was in the Bills training camp until August 14, when he was traded to the Denver Broncos for a player to be named later or a high draft choice to be determined.

Rychlec did not last long with the Broncos as he was waived on September 3. He was re-signed and played in three games for the Broncos, starting two, while catching one pass for seven yards.

Rychlec resigned with the Broncos in the off-season, attended training camp, but was released on September 1, 1964 essentially ending his AFL career.

He latched on with the Hartford Charter Oaks, an expansion franchise, in the Atlantic Coast Football League. He played his first game for the Charter Oaks against the Springfield Acorns on September 12 in a 16-6 Oaks victory. He was the teams' starting tight end throughout the season.

He caught a 22-yard TD pass in his last game with Charter Oaks on November 14, a 41-6 romp over the Portland Sea Hawks. For the season he caught 19 passes for 290 yards and the one touchdown. The Charter Oaks finished the season with an 8-5-1 record, third place in the Northern Division.

Rychlec played semi-pro football for his hometown Meriden Shamrocks in 1965 and 1966, helping lead them to the New England League championship in 1965. They finished tied for second place during the regular season with an 8-4 record. Rychlec scored 11 touchdowns for 66 points, second best in the league. Meriden beat Nashua 24-12 in a playoff game to decide who would play in the championship game. The following week, Meriden won the Championship, defeating first place Portland, ME 28-6 in the title game.

Rychlec played for the Connecticut Rockets of the semi-pro North Atlantic Football League in 1967, his final season of semi-pro ball.

The Hartford Knights were an expansion team in the Atlantic Coast Football League in 1968. A full-fledged minor league professional football team. They had a working agreement with the NFL's Green Bay Packers in 1968. The Knights signed local Connecticut product Rychlec to a contract.

During the 1968 season, Rychlec played throughout, catching seven passes for 99 yards and one touchdown in head coach Fred Wallner's run happy offense. Rychlec's excellent blocking skills helped the Knights lead the league in rushing on their way to an 11-1 regular season record and the Northern Division championship. In the ACFL



Championship game on November 30 versus the Virginia Sailors, Rychlec caught a seven-yard TD pass from Knights quarterback Dick Faucette putting Hartford ahead 7-3 on their way to a convincing 30-17 victory.

Rychlec returned to the Knights in 1969, who were now an affiliate of the Buffalo Bills. Rychlec's professional football career at come almost full circle. He contributed his terrific blocking skills along with catching seven passes for 117 yards and scoring a single touchdown as the Knights again won the Northern Division championship with a 10-2 record. Hartford lost the ACFL Championship game to Pottstown 20-0. He caught one pass for 14 yards in the championship game.

As much as he loved playing football, Rychlec decided to retire and announced he was stepping away from the game and the Hartford Knights on July 16, 1970. Upon Rychlec's retirement, Knights Head Coach Fred Wallner said about him, "Tom has made a valuable contribution to the Knights and is one of the finest individuals that I have had the pleasure of coaching. We will not only miss his ability; but also, his contribution as a person."ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1969, Rychlec was named to the American International College All-Time Football Team. He was elected to the AIC Athletic Hall of Fame in 2005.

Rychlec makes his home in Meriden, CT where he worked for many years as a Sales Manager at a local auto dealership.

End Notes:

ⁱ Pitoniak, Scott, "Spartan conditions greeted 1960 campers," *Democrat and Chronicle*, July 16, 2000, p83

ⁱⁱ Buffalo Bills 1962 Media Guide, p26

ⁱⁱⁱ Lee, Bill, "Knights Roster 47, Tom Rychlec Retires," *Hartford Courant*, July 17, 1970, p53