

THE 1974 FLORIDA BLAZERS: A STUDY IN "FOCUS"

By Mark Speck

One of the most popular words in sports today is "focus". It has become the reason for victory, the excuse for defeat. "We won because we maintained our focus," the winning coach will say. "We lost our focus, and lost the game," the losing coach will explain. Teams nowadays must remain "focused" against any distractions they might face. It is the catch-word in sports for the '90s.

But the team that perhaps best epitomized the word "focus" was a team that chased a championship in a bankrupt league almost 20 years ago. The 1974 Florida Blazers of the World Football League should be listed under the word "focus" in the dictionary. The Blazers, you will see, didn't have to remain "focused" against distractions such as agents, shoe deals, TV commercials, free agency, multi-year contracts and a sometimes suffocating media crunch. The Blazers had to stay "focused" amid bouncing paychecks, eviction notices, car repossessions, apathetic fans, and a lack of toilet paper in the locker room.

The team began its odyssey in Washington, D.C., owned by Joseph Wheeler, owner of a marine biology and engineering company. At first, he wanted to name his team the "Americans", but the Birmingham franchise beat him to it. So he settled on "Ambassadors".

Then Wheeler found out he couldn't obtain a lease to use RFK Stadium. So he tried Baltimore. Same story. He tried to find a home in Annapolis. No soap. Then he came up with the idea of having his team play home games at a different site each week, but the thought of a "Brother Wheeler's Travellin' Football Show" went over like a lead balloon. Next, it was on to Norfolk, Virginia. By this time, head coach Jack Pardee must have been wondering if he needed a geography degree to coach in the W.F.L. The Virginia Ambassadors would not last long either.

By now, Wheeler was running out of patience and money. So in May of 1974, he sold the team to David Williams, who owned several Holiday Inns, and former A.F.L. player, assistant coach and player personnel director Rommie Loudd. They promptly packed up the team and moved it to Orlando, Florida. First they called the team the "Suns", then the "Blazers". So far, if the reader is keeping score, this franchise had gone through three owners, three states, four nicknames and five cities. And they still hadn't played a single game.

When the team arrived in Harrisonburg, Virginia, for training camp at the beginning of June, they found the dorms locked and the electricity turned off. The front office scraped up the money for tickets, and everybody piled into a train for the trip to Florida.

When they got there, they found they didn't have much of a home. The Tangerine Bowl was hardly a major league facility, and 14,000 seats were hastily added to raise the seating capacity to 28,000. The new bleachers weren't declared safe by city officials until the day of the opening game. When the Blazers scrimmaged Philadelphia, the players had to cart their benches from the locker room to the sidelines.

Managing General Partner Rommie Loudd called the Tangerine Bowl a "pig pen" and tried unsuccessfully to move the team to Tampa and Atlanta.

On June 28, Gary Collins, the former Cleveland Browns All-Pro receiver and one of the few "name" players the Blazers had managed to sign, broke his collarbone and was out for the first half of the season.

Through it all, the Blazers maintained their -- that word again! -- "focus." Jack Pardee, general manager as well as head coach, had signed a mostly veteran team of players John Madden would now call "blue collar, lunch pail" type of guys.

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On offense, there were quarterback Bob Davis, running backs Jim Strong and A.D. Whitfield, linemen Roger Anderson and Rich Buzin, and receivers John Hilton, Matt Maslowski, and Billy Walik. On defense, Pardee's specialty then as now, the Blazers lined up with linemen Mike McBath and Louis Ross, linebackers Billy Hobbs, Larry Ely and Larry Grantham, and deep backs Billie Hayes, Chuck Beatty, W.K. Hicks and Rickie Harris. To this mix Pardee added such talented rookies as tight end Greg Latta, center Dan Peifer -- who didn't miss a down all year --, kick returner Rod Foster, and a brilliant running back named Tomy Reamon.

The Blazers opened the season with an 8-7 win over The Hawaiians as Chuck Beatty batted down an action point pass and defensive tackle Paul Vellano batted down a 46-yard field goal try at the end of the game. They made it two in a row by nudging Detroit 18-14 on Reamon's 5-yard run with 1:37 left and a goalline stand at their own one-yard line with 10 seconds to go. Houston was victim #3, 15-3 a week later in Orlando. Two weeks later, the Blazers pummeled the undefeated Chicago Fire 46-21, scoring on a punt return, an interception and a blocked punt. The team nipped Jacksonville 33-26 and Portland 11-7. On September 6, the Blazers, playing their third game in the span of two weeks, edged New York 17-15 in a quagmire at Downing Stadium. Reamon, in his first start of the season and rumored to have been unpaid all year, rushed for a league-record 179 yards.

Florida was 7-and-3 and in first place in the Eastern Division. Financial problems continued to plague the franchise -- the players hadn't been paid in four weeks -- but the players remained "focused" on the task at hand -- winning games.

"Our players make up their minds to separate their problems off the field from their problems on the field," Jack Pardee said, "They're not worried about pay. Maybe adversity is bringing them closer together."

It seemed to be. "This is an incredible bunch of people," said Bob Davis.

"I've found out what the game is all about with these people," added Rickie Harris. "I love these guys."

So, despite the distractions, the team continued to win in the second half of the season. The players had simply made up their minds to win no matter what happened to them. They kept their "focus".

"We've made up our minds that we're going to win the championship," offered wide receiver Hubie Bryant, "They've done everything else to us, but if we win the championship, they can't take that away from us."

On September 18, Davis hit Greg Latta with three straight passes for 66 yards, the last a 21-yard scoring strike with 17 seconds left to lift Florida past Philadelphia 24-21. A week later, the Blazers clobbered Chicago, 29-0. Philadelphia fell again, 30-7. Florida exploded for 30 points in the fourth quarter to whip Chicago, 45-17.

But as the wins piled up, so did the debts, and so did the weeks without pay. The players threatened a strike, but the league sent along paychecks for the team. The Blazers played. The checks bounced.

"I had written checks for bills I owed," stated Hubie Bryant, "Now all those checks are no good."

The team's Xerox machine broke down, and the team couldn't afford to make repairs. The league tried to take over the franchise, but Rommie Loudd wouldn't let them. David Williams sued Loudd, Loudd sued Williams. Williams evicted the team's offices from a Holiday Inn in Orlando. The city of Orlando asked the team to leave. The county was suing the team in an effort to terminate the club's lease with the Tangerine Bowl. Atlanta businessman David Pendley filed a \$150,000 suit in U.S. District Court claiming he had not been repaid a loan he had made to the club.

Fifteen weeks had now passed without paychecks. Linebacker Larry Grantham joked that before one game the Blazers won the coin toss and elected to keep the coin. Jack Pardee and his assistants took turns supplying the locker room with toilet paper and inviting players into their homes to make sure they had an occasional hot meal.

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"I went into a store and handed the man a \$20 bill, but the guy even questioned that," said Pardee, who himself had not been paid in four months, "He looked it over and made some remark about it possibly being counterfeit."

But the Blazers managed to stay "focused" on winning. Reamon broke his own record with 189 yards rushing, and Bob Davis' TD pass to Jim Strong in the last quarter beat Charlotte, 15-11. The team then hammered Portland, 23-0, and ended the season with a last-second 27-24 win over Southern California. Linebacker Eddie Sheats blocked a punt to set up Dave Strock's 25-yard field goal with four seconds left to edge the Sun.

The Blazers had won the Eastern Division title, with 14 wins in 20 games.

In the first round of the playoffs, Florida was originally supposed to play in Charlotte, but less than 1,000 tickets were sold, so the game was scrubbed. The game was moved to Orlando and Philadelphia was named to face the Blazers.

The Bell out-gained the Blazers, Claude Watts shredded the Florida defense for 131 yards on the ground, and Bob Davis completed only 6 of 19 passes. Somehow, as always, the Blazers found a way to win. A Watts fumble in the first quarter was picked up by Rickie Harris and returned for a touchdown. The Blazers forced three other turnovers, and staged a goalline stand on the 2-yard line. Only 9,712 people bothered to show up. Florida won, 18-3. Later, it was revealed that the Blazers did not receive any money for their victory.

Florida was now set to travel to Memphis for the second round of the playoffs. During the week before the game, Cape Canaveral businessman Robert Prentice produced a check for \$1.5 million he said he was ready to pay for the team. Several days later, however, the sale was voided when it was discovered that a member of the investment group was a convicted felon. The Blazers had to face the cold reality that they might never get paid.

"We're going to take it out on Memphis," said Jack Pardee.

Somehow, they did. Despite the fact that the game was played in a cold, driving rain; that Memphis had not lost at home all year; that they had beaten Florida twice; that the Southmen grabbed a 15-0 lead; that Bob Davis suffered bruised ribs and the Blazers had to rely on rookie Buddy Palazzo to play quarterback; despite all that and everything else, Florida kept their "focus" and somehow, took it out on Memphis.

Dave Strock kicked a field goal and Tommy Reamon scored from the 21-yard line to make it 15-11. With three minutes left, Dave Thomas fumbled a Blazer punt and Luther Palmer fell on it for Florida. With 1:13 remaining, Richard James scored on a 4-yard run to put the Blazers up, 18-15.

Memphis had one last shot, but defensive end Louis Ross blocked a last second field goal try. The Blazers were going to the World Bowl, the W.F.L. championship game.

They faced the Birmingham Americans at Legion Field. A crowd of 32,376 was announced, but later it was revealed that only 22,918 people had actually been there, and only 20,985 of them had paid to get in. What was worse, most of them sat in the cheapest seats.

In the first quarter, Florida, ripped off by practically everyone in the W.F.L., was denied by the officials. The Blazers drove to the 5-yard line, and Reamon plunged over from there, but the officials ruled he had fumbled before he had crossed the goalline. Instant replays revealed he had lost the ball AFTER crossing the goal stripe.

Birmingham took command, and slowly built a 22-0 lead. But, ignoring the missed paydays, the bounced checks, the empty promises and empty seats, the questionable calls and the questionable decisions, the Blazers maintained their "focus" and rallied. Bob Davis, who hadn't completed a pass all evening, found the range and promptly hit Hubie Bryant for 13 yards and Jim Strong twice for 21 and 15 yards. On the

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first play of the last quarter, Davis avoided a blitzing linebacker and lobbed a pass to Reamon, who carried it all the way for a 39-yard TD, 22-7.

The Blazers held the Americans, then drove 73 yards in six plays. The last 40 yards came on a scoring strike from Davis to Greg Latta. 22-14.

Florida held Birmingham again, and Earl Sark lofted a punt to Rod Foster. The rookie from Harvard gathered it in at his own 24 and stunned the crowd by racing 76 yards to the end zone. 22-21.

On the action point attempt to tie it, the Blazers went to Reamon. But Tommy got nowhere. Linebacker Warren Capone, defensive end Larry Estes, and safety Randy Lee smothered Reamon before he could reach the end zone. Florida still trailed by one point.

An on-sides kick try by the Blazers failed. Birmingham recovered, and with Matthew Reed at the controls and scrambling for a key first down, the Americans ran out the clock.

Despite all that had happened to them, all the problems and all the distractions, the Blazers had never lost their "focus." But they had finally come up empty. They had run out of miracles.

Nowadays, that word "focus" is overused and overemphasized. With the 1974 Florida Blazers, however, it couldn't be emphasized enough. The next time an announcer or coach mentions the word "focus," think of the Florida Blazers. They were what the word is all about.