

# INDIANS OCCUPY FADED SPOT IN BUFFALO'S FOOTBALL SCRAPBOOK

By Joe Marren

Reprinted from *The Buffalo Bills Insider*

They are as easily forgotten today as the Bills' 1977 draft picks, but as the world slid deeper into war in 1940 the Buffalo Indians offered relief from front page news of Japanese aggression in China and the war in the skies over Britain.

Sometimes, the Indians provided unexpected comic relief as they changed names, coaches and players while only managing a 4-14 record through two dismal American Professional Football League seasons in 1940 and 1941.

The league itself also lasted just two seasons before folding and is now remembered mostly by trivia addicts, history buffs and relatives of its several hundred players. Despite suffering such a gloomy end, the league's birth was as wild as a summer storm blowing off Lake Erie.

At 10 a.m. on Sunday, Aug. 4, 1940, representatives from six Eastern and Midwestern cities met in Buffalo's Hotel Lafayette to hammer out the mundane details and scheduling of the proposed new league.

No one present thought the wrangling would last until 2 a.m. Monday. Even then, the six delegates and their entourage of Lawyers weren't through arguing. Recessing to sleep, cool off and build alliances in private for seven hours, the delegates met again at 9 a.m. Monday, Aug. 5, and finally announced an agreement at 4 p.m. After 30 hours of negotiation, the AFL was reborn and articles of incorporation were signed in the hotel's Club Room.

Newspaper accounts didn't say exactly what the problem was, but suggested the discord centered on one member's refusal to cooperate with scheduling concerns, probably because almost all the members shared a stadium with a baseball club in late September and early October.

(The Indians would share 35,000-seat Civic Stadium with the Buffalo Bisons, the Boston Bears would play in Fenway Park, New York Yankees in Yankee Stadium, Columbus Bullies in A.A. Ball Park, Milwaukee Chiefs in the Dairy Bowl and Cincinnati Bengals in Crosley Field.)

Each team was scheduled to play five home games and five away games, either on Wednesday nights or Sunday afternoons to ease stadium congestion. William D. Griffith of the Columbus Bullies was named league president; Philip Bucklew, also of Columbus, vice president; and Frank Dalton of the New York Yankees, secretary and treasurer.

Elected to one-year terms on the board were Earl "Red" Seick (Buffalo), Jack McBride (New York), Dana King (Cincinnati), Sheldon H. Fairbanks (Boston), George M. Harris (Milwaukee) and J. Fred Schmidt (Columbus).

An article by Mickey Rowe buried in the sports section of the Aug. 4 *Courier-Express* introduced Buffalo to its newest team: "The Buffalo club will be known as the Buffalo Indians and will be financially sponsored by the Buffalo Drum Corps, American Legion, which entered the local sports promotional field only two months ago with the introduction of midget auto racing.

"F. Earl (Red) Seick, former Lafayette High School and University of Buffalo player who also saw scholastic and collegiate gridiron service at Cook Academy and Manhattan College, is coach and business manager."

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The group that Seick signed within the next few weeks before training camp included a handful of local stars, castoff pros from the NFL and the recent failed AFL, and a smattering of former college players unwilling to start their real lives just yet.

For example, the Olean *Times Herald* wrote on Sept. 18; "Two Olean athletes will play for the Buffalo Indians in the game against Milwaukee on Sunday. Coach Earl Seick said Walter (Horse) Padlo, former Olean grid star and guard with Duquesne, and Steve Gilbert, who played end for three years for St. Bonaventure University and later played professional basketball for the Socony Vacuum team will play."

Gilbert, who wore No. 6 for the green-jerseyed Indians, started at left end and Padlo (No. 39) was a starter at left guard. Some of the other locals signed were: starting center Henry Bogacki (No. 40) of Canisius College, who also played for the 1936 New York Yankees and Rochester Tigers of the second AFL; reserve end and quarterback (No. 28) Steve Hrycyszyn, who later changed his name to Hersey, a 1940 graduate of St. Bona from Lancaster; reserve tackle Maurice McGrath (No. 32), from Niagara University; and starting halfback (No. 14) Joe Szur from Canisius.

In 1941 the team was renamed the Tigers and new coach "Tiny" Engebretsen only kept area holdovers Bogacki and Hrycyszyn. Other local players added were guard Ed Blodzinski, end Levant Dahl and guard Nick Toth, all from Canisius, and Larry Yurkonis, a back from Niagara.

Thrown into the mix with the locals were players like Steve Banas, 25, a 6-foot, 190-pound defensive back and blocking back (quarterback) from Notre Dame. He last played professional football in 1935 for coach Lud Wray with the Eagles (2-9) and later that same season with the 7-3-2 Lions.

Things were so bad for the Eagles that Wray (who played with the 1920 and '21 Buffalo All-Americans of the NFL) gave Alabama Pitts, just out of Sing-Sing Prison, a chance in his backfield.

Ed Karp (No. 79, a starting left tackle), who was born Ed Karpowich, played for Pittsburgh from 1936-39. Karp, 27 in 1940, had his career intertwined with several area players and coaches.

He played for Coach Joe Bach at Pittsburgh, but in 1940 Bach would be coaching at Niagara and would also be St. Bona's last football coach in 1951. Karp, a graduate of Catholic University, was also a Pittsburgh teammate of St. Bona alumnus Johnny Gildea in '36 under Bach and in '37 under Hall of Famer Johnny Blood.

The 6-4, 223-pound Karp in 1938 was on the line that opened holes for Byron "Whizzer" White to lead the NFL in rushing with 567 yards (White also played a spirited game of pickup basketball after being appointed to the Supreme Court by President Kennedy.)

A teammate of Karp's on the '39 Steelers was back Carl "Moon Eyes" Littlefield (No. 43). The Washington State alum also played for the 1938 Cleveland Rams. By 1940, at age 24, the 6-foot, 200-pound back had carried the ball 58 times in his NFL career for 210 yards and caught two passes for 27 yards.

Reserve back Larry Peace (No. 34), 24 (5-11, 185), didn't have any professional football experience when he came out of the University of Pittsburgh. But he would be one of the few players to briefly play in the NFL after his AFL days. Peace was a substitute for the '41 Brooklyn Dodgers before going into the armed forces during World War II.

Starting right tackle Alex Shellogg (No. 44) was 24 when he played for the Indians. The captain of the 1938 Notre Dame team, Shellogg (6-0, 215 pounds) had already played for both the Brooklyn Dodgers and Chicago Bears in 1939.

Added later that season was Orlando "Ole" Nesmith, a Kansas graduate who played for the New York Yankees of the second AFL in 1936-37. Nesmith would replace Seick as coach later that season.

In 1941, the team added Baylor grad Sherm Barnes, who played end for the Milwaukee Chiefs in '40; Detroit Tech's Bob Holstrom, a quarterback for the Boston Bears in '40 and who started the '41 season with Milwaukee; Andy Karpus from the University of Detroit, a back in 1937 with the New York Yankees

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and Los Angeles Bulldogs of the old AFL and also played for the 1940 Boston Bears and '41 Yankees; and N.C. State's Fred Matriola, a guard with Boston in '40.

Also on the '41 squad were center Joe Ratica, 24 (6-0, 205), a St. Joseph's graduate who was a teammate of Shellogg's on the 1939 Brooklyn Dodgers and also played for the 1940 Boston Bears; and back Ernie Wheeler (6-1, 190), 26, who was a teammate of Karp's with the '39 Steelers.

Wheeler, a North Dakota State grad, was traded to the Chicago Cardinals in 1939, played for the AFL Boston Bears in 1940, and returned to the Cardinals in '42 before going into the armed forces.

The 1940 squad that gathered Sept. 6 in Buffalo was officially welcomed by band and drill units of the Buffalo Drum Corps and paraded to City Hall, where at a noontime ceremony, Mayor Tom Holling gave coach Seick a football. The team departed for a two-week training camp at the Empire State Hotel in Alden. Opening day at Civic Stadium was scheduled for Sunday, Sept. 22, against the Milwaukee Chiefs.

Buffalo had an offensive line that averaged just 216 pounds and a quickly assembled backfield that played injured much of the season.

So an article in the Sept. 18 *Courier-Express* by Ray Ryan tried to paint the best picture possible by saying the Indians' attack was made for razzle-dazzle plays.

"An aerial game with laterals tacked on to forward passes catches the eyes of spectators and box office appeal is vital," Ryan wrote. "With four good passers, the Buffalo squad seems made to order for this type of attack."

On Sept. 19, a *Courier* article continued preparing Buffalo fans: "The Indians will use the spectacular buck pass ... this deceptive maneuver sends a back crashing into the line. At the last moment he leaps into the air to whip a pass over the heads of the drawn-in defenders. Also, the check play has the passer faking the throw, then diving through."

But all the fancy plays in the world aren't enough when the other team plays smashmouth football. The first professional football team for Buffalo since 1929 took the Civic Stadium field at 2:15 p.m. and walked off the field dejected later that afternoon.

Milwaukee controlled the line of scrimmage and intercepted seven Buffalo passes for 138 yards, setting up all three touchdowns in the Chiefs 23-0 victory. There were 12,448 fans who paid \$1.65 for box seats, \$1.10 for reserved seats and 55 cents for general admission. Never again that season would the Indians draw as many fans in Buffalo.

There was still some hope for the season. The Olean Times Herald on Sept. 23 wrote: "The Buffalo Indians will play their first game under the lights in the American Professional Football League schedule Wednesday, October 2, when they face the Cincinnati Bengals in Civic Stadium. Kickoff is at 8:15 p.m.

"The Indians feature a Southwest 'hipper-dipper' aerial attack and will place three sets of backs on the field behind a line averaging 220 pounds.

"John Stylianos, former Temple star, and Art Gottlieb, Rutgers ace, are rated two of the greatest passers in major professional football today. Working in alternate backfields, these two slinging specialists are constant threats when the Indians move on the offense.

"In Jack Farris, of Wyoming University, leading passer in the Rocky Mountain Conference in 1938, the Indians have probably the longest-range passer in pro football today. Farris can throw 60 to 70 yards.

"The ground game is strengthened by the return of Carl Littlefield, a former member of the Cleveland Rams and Pittsburgh Steelers. In college, he averaged 4.5 yards per carry."

After the Milwaukee loss, Seick worked his team hard during three-hour practices at Delaware Park meadows. He promised the fans that "the boys will look like a new club against Cincinnati."

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And they did, for one game. Buffalo beat the Bengals, 17-7, before a crowd of 8,462.

In an article on page 3 of the Courier's sports section, Ray Ryan wrote: "Heroes of the night were Carl Littlefield and Turk Stylianos. They stole the show when the Indians raced 62 yards to their first touchdown, the first time they had the ball.

Principal play in the advance was a 27-yard fleaflicker, Stylianos faking and handing the ball to Littlefield, who later hauled off to Larry Peace for another 15 yards. Littlefield then scored from the 4."

The Bengals tied the score at 7-7 in the second quarter when Jack Rogers passed to Bill Carnes from the 6. But Stylianos returned the opening kickoff of the second half 62 yards and team captain Alex Drobnitch kicked a 35-yard field goal for a 10-7 Buffalo lead. Buffalo closed out the scoring in the fourth quarter when Szur passed to Gottlieb for 16 yards and Gottlieb lateralled to Gilbert for another 14 yards and a touchdown.

Littlefield averaged 4.6 yards per carry and Stylianos 4.4, while the Indians' defense held Cincinnati to minus-1 yard rushing in the second half.

It was to be the last big win for Buffalo as the team lost its next five games, getting shut out in three of those games. By mid-October, Buffalo's weaknesses were well evident and no newspaper article could paint any bright picture.

"The line needs heft and fight," *Courier* columnist Billy Kelly wrote Oct. 12. "Four Red Granges wouldn't be worth four cents in the backfield unless the forward wall holds now and then ... The Indian defense just didn't exist in the first 20 minutes of Wednesday's game (a 17-7 loss to the Columbus Bullies), the Bully forwards sifting through to smear and smother the ball carriers just as though the line was made of no sterner stuff than ticker tape."

### BUFFALO INDIANS 1940

S-22	H	Milwaukee Chiefs	0-23	L
O- 2	H	Cincinnati Bengals	17- 7	W
O- 9	H	Columbus Bullies	7-17	L
O-16	H	Boston Bears	0-10	L
O-20	A	Boston Bears	0-20	L
N- 3	A	New York Yankees	0-17	L
N-10	A	Columbus Bullies	7-13	L
N-17	H	New York Yankees	0- 1	L
N-21	A	Milwaukee Chiefs	13-30	L
N-24	A	Cincinnati Bengals	1- 0	W
D- 1	A	Kenosha Cardinals	Canceled	

### BUFFALO TIGERS 1941

O- 5	A	Cincinnati Bengals	0-29	L
O- 8	H	New York Americans	7-26	L
O-19	H	Cincinnati Bengals	16- 0	W
O-26	A	New York Americans	14-31	L
N- 2	A	Columbus Bullies	7-24	L
N- 9	H	Columbus Bullies	14- 7	W
N-16	A	Milwaukee Chiefs	14-41	L
N-23	H	Milwaukee Chiefs	0-14	L

Seick brought in Johnny Fedorchak of the 1939 undefeated Duquesne squad, "rated in the East last year as one of the outstanding blockers and linebackers in college football," according to the *Courier*. He also shifted his lineup, moving 215-pound Ed Siminski from end to tackle and starting Hrycyszyn at quarterback.

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"The rangy Siminski should prove able to handle an opposing tackle single-handed, thereby setting the ground attack off to a running start," a *Courier* reporter wrote.

"The other change will see Steve Hryczyszyn, a 200-pound St. Bonaventure alumnus, starting at quarterback. Mr. H, as he is known to the gridiron faithful, has been a jack of all trades with the Indians, having seen service at halfback and end. In this instance also, ability to deal out decisive blocks prompted Seick's decision."

It didn't work. In a home-and-home series, Boston beat the Indians both times, by a combined 30-0.

But the final indignity of the season was yet to come.

The scheduled home finale Nov. 17 against New York, when 1,000 Bethlehem Steel workers were scheduled to honor fullback Steve Banas, was indefinitely postponed when four inches of snow froze the tarpaulins to the turf.

A page 1 article in the *Courier* said the field and stands were covered with snow and slush and only the tarp in the northwest corner was rolled up by 2:15 p.m. game time.

"The fans, few in number, proceeded to select the seats with the smallest amount of snow or water and watched the crew of workmen work on the next canvas," the *Courier* reported. "The tarps were frozen to the turf Saturday and forced cancellation of two high school games.

"Edwin R. Kenngott of the Indians' board of directors and Jack McBride, owner of the Yankees ... authorized announcement of the postponement ... in all likelihood the game will be cancelled."

The Indians reportedly lost \$6,000 to \$7,000, including a \$2,500 guarantee to the Yankees. In December, the Buffalo City Council disallowed a \$5,424 damage claim by the team.

The council, according to an article in the *Olean Times Herald*, said the club wanted damages because the stadium had not been properly cleared of snow. But the council disagreed, saying the weather, and not the city, was at fault.

By the end of the '41 season, everyone was at fault as the league folded and football again left Buffalo.

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## NFL CALLED ON BUFFALO IN 1940

By Joe Marren

The American Professional Football League Indians weren't the only football game in town in 1940. For the second time in three years, the Chicago Cardinals scheduled a game in Buffalo.

In 1938, the Cardinals and Green Bay Packers played an exhibition game here and in 1940 the Cardinals, thinking about moving, decided to audition Buffalo and so scheduled a regular game Sept. 15 against the Detroit Lions.

*Courier-Express* sports columnist Billy Kelly wrote in the paper August 25 that former NFL and college star Byron (Whizzer) White would play for the Lions that season as they opened their 1940 campaign in Buffalo. White played for Pittsburgh in 1938 and led the National Football League in rushing with 567 yards on 152 carries. A Rhodes scholar, he studied at Oxford in '39, returning to the U.S. when World War II broke out in Europe. White served in the Navy from 1942 to '46, writing the official medal commendation for Lt. (j.g.) John F. Kennedy after PT 109 was sunk and Kennedy helped rescue his crew. Kennedy later appointed White to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1962.

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But all that awaited White in his future. His present in 1940 was focused on helping the Lions beat the Cardinals. And the Detroit fans supported him in his efforts.

The game, originally scheduled for Comiskey Park, was moved after a conference between Buffalo promoter Charles Murray and Cardinals owner Charles Bidwell, who arranged accommodations for 50 Chicago fans. Not to be outdone, Detroit booster A.L. (Tony) Owen bought 400 tickets on the 40-yard line and had a special train chartered for his entourage. According to a *Courier* article on Aug. 29, Owen's people would parade from a downtown hotel to Civic Stadium, marching to the tunes of their own band.

"We've got to give Whizzer White plenty of moral support," Owen told a *Courier* reporter. "The Cardinals have Marshall Goldberg, but we'll take Whizzer against Goldberg anytime, anyplace, under any conditions."

Kelly and other *Courier* reporters continued to say a crowd of anywhere from 20,000 to 30,000 was expected as tickets were requested from Rochester to Erie and other Pennsylvania cities.

Mother Nature, though, had other plans for the fans as what was called one of Buffalo's "worst electrical rainstorms" in years ruined the game. Only 18,000 turned out in the downpour and just 10,000 braved the weather to stay to the end of the 0-0 tie.

*Courier* reporter Ray Ryan wrote: "A genuine cloudburst, accompanied by jagged flashes of lightning, made a swamp of the gridiron.

Rain fell heavily 30 minutes before gametime, then relented somewhat. After the teams had run off a few plays, the skies fairly opened, and for some time it was all but impossible to distinguish individual players, so hard did the rain beat down. To cap the climax, it was so dark at this juncture that the stadium lights were turned on, to remain on for the duration of the proceedings.

"The ball quickly became treacherously slippery, and the gridiron turf ... quickly was covered with puddles and torn up by the players' cleats. Passing was strictly a gamble. Fumbles were frequent. The vaunted aerial attacks of each team were rendered null and void."

The only real scoring chance of the game came late in the third quarter when the Cardinals punted poorly and the Lions took over on Chicago's 44. Churning out the yards through the mud for a first down on the Cardinals' 31, the Lions gambled with a pass. Lloyd Cardwell caught the ball on the 1 and appeared to slip into the end zone but referee Bill Halloran ruled he was tackled on the 1.

Detroit opened the fourth quarter with a first down on Chicago's 1. The Lions, though, lost 11 yards on two plays. Facing a third-and-goal from the 12, Detroit tried a pass that was intercepted in the end zone by Chicago.

"Official NFL stats reveal that Goldberg, with 26 yards gained in eight tries, had a 3.25 yard average, highest of the game," Ryan wrote.

"White had a bad day, winding up with a deficit of 50 yards in 15 attempts. In justice to the Whizzer, it must be pointed out that he was the victim of errant passes from Alex Wojciechowicz, who was flinging the ball all over the premises."

After the scoreless battle in the rain, it would be a long time before the NFL trusted the weather in Buffalo again.