

Mike Holovak: The Forgotten Founder

By Harold Aurand, Jr.

In 1999 it will be forty years since the first AFL season. In the beginning, the teams were new, insecure, and often run on a shoestring. Today, they're such an integral part of the National Football League it's hard to imagine what our autumn Sundays would be like without them. For Lamar Hunt and the other league founders, who've seen and contributed to this growth, it must be a source of great pride. Recently, with the retirement of Mike Holovak, the number of AFL founders still active in the game got a little smaller. While Holovak is not as well known as Hunt or Al Davis, he was still instrumental in the early growth and success of the league.

Mike Holovak was born September 19, 1919 to Polish immigrant parents in Lansford, Pennsylvania. His father was a coal miner, working in the anthracite mines of the Panther Valley. Unlike many miners' children during the Great Depression, Mike Holovak was able to graduate from high school, earning a football scholarship to Boston College. There he played fullback and linebacker, winning All-American honors during his senior year, and was chosen in the first round of the draft by the Cleveland Rams. Before he could start his pro career he entered World War II, seeing action in New Guinea.

By the time the war ended, the Rams had moved to Los Angeles. Holovak played one year there, and two with the Chicago Bears. He was a dependable linebacker, and while he didn't carry the ball much, could provide good offensive production from the fullback slot. In 1948 he averaged 7.6 yards per carry and scored two touchdowns.

After three years in the NFL Holovak ended his playing career and went into coaching. In 1951 he was named head coach at his alma mater, Boston College. The Eagles had gone 0-9-1 the season before Holovak arrived. In their first year under him they improved to 3-6, and then went eight consecutive years without a losing season. 1954 was Holovak's best year at Boston College. The Eagles finished 8-1, with a 19-14 loss to Xavier of Ohio being the only blemish on their record. Holovak's nine year record at Boston College was 49-29-3.

In 1960 Holovak joined the staff of the Boston Patriots in the new American Football League. The next year, when the team started 2-3-1, head coach Lou Saban was fired and Holovak took his place. The Patriots finished the season with seven victories in their last eight games. The transition to winning was essential for the weak Boston franchise and the overall stability of the new league. In a recent article Will McDonough wrote, "Billy Sullivan founded the Patriots, but the guy who saved them was Holovak. It was his personality, and the love his players had for him, that kept the team afloat in its first decade of existence. The team won consistently with the lowest payroll in the league and the worst practice conditions imaginable." Had the Patriots collapsed, the credibility of the AFL as a major league would have been called into question.

Although it wasn't their best year from a won-lost standpoint, 1963 may have been the most memorable for Holovak's Patriots. The team finished the year at 7-6-1, tied with the Buffalo Bills for the Eastern Division Championship. After beating the Bills in a playoff game 26-8, the Patriots went west to play the San Diego Chargers for the league title. While Holovak's team came out on the short end of the stick, the offensive fireworks of the game, and warm California weather provided a stark contrast to the NFL's championship, won by the Chicago Bears in near arctic conditions. The AFL began to develop a reputation for wide-open, exciting football, something which would serve it well in attracting fans and financial stability.

1968 was Holovak's last year as the Patriots' head coach. He then served as an assistant coach and scout for the Patriots and Jets, including one game as interim head coach in New York after Lou Holtz's resignation. During the last nineteen years of his career Holovak was Player Personnel Director and General Manager of the Houston/Tennessee Oilers. In Houston Holovak was responsible for bringing Warren Moon from Canada, and making him the centerpiece of the Oilers' run-and-shoot offense. Moon led the Oilers to the playoff eight years in a row, but was never able to get them to the Super Bowl. Holovak said that was the biggest disappointment of his career. It was a career that didn't have many.

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Mike Holovak retired at the end of the 1998 season. During his long career he did a great deal, but nothing may have been more important than turning the Boston Patriots into winners. Had the franchise collapsed, others in the AFL might have followed. His strength of leadership then marks him as one of the people who should be considered among the league's founders.