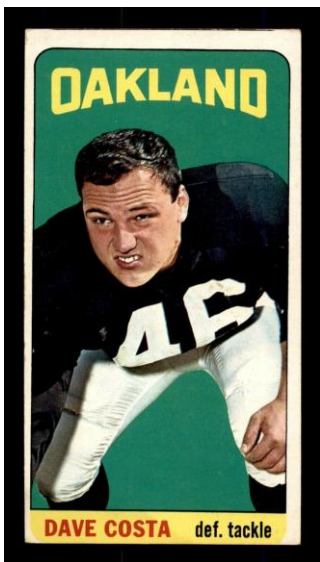# Dave Costa

This article was written by Budd Bailey

It's easy to mix up Dave and Paul Costa.

They were born about six weeks apart in the same part of the world (the northern suburbs of New York City). They were both big, both played college football well away from their hometowns, and both landed in the American Football League in the 1960s to have good careers. They were even on the same team once, and one obituary of Dave erroneously referred to them as brothers. Still, they went on very different paths to get to their eventual destination. Let's look at the football life of the defensive part of the duo, Dave.

David Joseph Costa was born on October 27, 1941, in Yonkers, NY. Dave opted to leave an academic high school after his freshman year and move over to Saunders Trades and Technical High School in order to learn how to become a carpenter. Costa sawed wood, had some good times with his buddies, and threw passes as a quarterback. He was named to the All-Westchester County team. Costa helped Saunders win its first conference championship in 33 years as a junior. Dave also was All-City in basketball and track. You might be surprised to know that the school had one other graduate reach the NFL. Rich Ranglin played with the Kansas City Chiefs in 2012 after some time in the Arena Football League.

Recruiters did not beat down Costa's door in an effort to lure to him to a particular college. He received one scholarship offer: Northeastern Junior College in Sterling, Colorado. Dave took it and hopped on the bus to go to the West. Costa told Sports Illustrated that he saw a lot of green and white in his playing days there because the uniforms were from army surplus stocks. "I remember my first game," he said. "It was at night. We put on our uniforms and got into the back of our canvas-covered truck. When we reached the fairgrounds, a voice on a microphone shouted, 'The Northeastern Junior College Plainsmen!' The truck backed up, and we piled out into the night. The day before there had been a rodeo, and we had to dodge land mines to get across the field."

His quarterbacking days over, Costa played fullback and defensive tackle at Northeastern, which is located near the Nebraska border. From there it was on to the University of Utah, where the Utes used him almost everywhere: center, offensive tackle, defensive tackle, and linebacker. In 1961, Utah was part of the Skyline Conference, which included Utah State, Wyoming, New Mexico, Brigham Young, Montana, and Colorado State. A year later, Utah became part of the Western Athletic Conference, with New Mexico, Arizona State, Arizona, Wyoming, and BYU. The Utes went from 6-4 to 4-5-1, and Costa was named the WAC's lineman of the year. That earned him invitations to the East-West and North-South all-star games. Dave's best teammate probably was Ed Pine, a linebacker who was taken in the second round by the San Francisco 49ers in 1962. While at Utah, Costa met his future wife, Lori – the daughter of a Mormon farmer.

Costa that year became a relatively high draft choice – twice. The Rams took him in the third round of the 1963 NFL draft, while the Raiders of the AFL grabbed him in the seventh round. Oakland signed the defensive lineman to a contract worth $12,000, and Costa vividly remembered one of his first conversations with legendary Oakland coach Al Davis. First, Davis said that while there was a great Italian lineman across the bay in Leo Nomellini of the San Francisco 49ers, he thought Costa could be even better than that. "Furthermore," Davis went on, "you are going to be so great they'll have to build another bridge to handle the crowds that come to see you play."

Suitably inspired, Costa went on to have a fine rookie season. He finished second in the voting for AFL Rookie of the Year to Denver's Billy Joe, and he was picked for the AFL All-Star Game. He apparently only added to his reputation as a free spirit with the Raiders. Future Hall of Famer Jim Otto remembered Costa this way in his autobiography: "Dave Costa was a football player from Utah who caused Brigham Young to turn over in his grave." Dave helped the Raiders improve to 10-4 on the season. Costa went back to Davis in the offseason to ask for a raise, and Davis only offered him $500 extra for the year. "Gee, Coach, are you saving the money to build the bridge?" Costa asked.

In 1964, the defensive tackle had a new partner at right defensive end in Ben Davidson. The pair couldn't help the Raiders from slipping to 5-7-2 for the season. The team bounced back in 1965 to an 8-5-1 record, thanks to a rookie class that included Fred Biletnikoff , Harry Schuh, Gus Otto, and Kent McCloughan. It looked like the Raiders were going places, but Costa didn't come along for the ride. He was traded to Buffalo for Tom Keating and George Flint to complete the deal that sent Bo Robertson to the Bills.

The news probably was reasonably well received by Costa at first. After all, the Bills had won the last two AFL championships. He would be a teammate of Paul Costa, who had averaged an amazing 19.1 yards per catch as a tight end in 1965. But the deal came with a big catch. Where was Dave Costa going to play? The Bills already had Tom Sestak and Jim Dunaway lined up at defensive tackle, and they were coming back in 1966, Defensive ends Tom Day and Ron McDole were back too.

Dave didn't start a game for the Bills in 1966 – the only season in his career that he couldn't crack the lineup - although he did play in all the team's games. Buffalo won the AFL East for the third straight time, but missed a chance to take part in the first Super Bowl. The Bills lost to Kansas City in the AFL championship game.

Buffalo didn't waste much time in moving Costa after the season, trading him to Denver only eight days after the Super Bowl between the Chiefs and Packers. The Broncos gave up a third-round pick in 1967 and a fourth-rounder in 1968. It turned out to be a steal for Denver, as Tom Rhoads (from 1967) never played a down in the NFL. The other pick, Edgar Chandler spent five years with the Bills.

Costa played five seasons with the Broncos, and never missed a game. He started in all 70 of his team's games from 1967 to 1971. He was picked for the AFL All-Star Game three straight times in 1967, 1968 and 1969. Dave was a defensive captain for Denver in all five of his seasons there, and had 37.5 sacks in that time. By unofficial count, he had 12 sacks in 1969, and was part of a defense that set 15 team records in 1970.

One memorable moment came in 1969 against the Jets. Costa hit New York quarterback Joe Namath so hard that Namath was photographed flying backwards through the air. It is considered one of the great pictures of that era. Namath said, "Dave Costa gave me the worst (legal) hit of my entire career. I could hear the entire crowd (of 50,583) cheering."

Costa also was involved in an offseason project that kept him and his teammates in shape. He started a basketball team called "Dave Costa's All Stars." Dave and about 17 of his Bronco teammates took turns heading out into all sorts of towns throughout the region to build up good will and raise money for charities. Wife Lori served as the team's general manager, Dave said, because "when I tried booking games, all the guys on the other end

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of the phone wanted to do was to talk football." The All Stars were so popular that sometimes they drew more fans than Denver's team in the American Basketball Association.

The football players did better in basketball than they did in football. Costa spent five seasons in Denver, and never had a winning season there. His coach at the time was Lou Saban, who had led the Bills to those two AFL titles before leaving just before Costa arrived. That meant there was always a bit of drama around.

Take, for example, a 1968 game between Denver and Buffalo. The Broncos were behind, 32-31, in the final moments when kicker Bobby Howfield was getting ready to go in and kick a go-ahead field goal. Saban called Howfield over for a talk. "Bobby, do you see that traffic up there?" asked the coach, pointing to the cars lined up outside the stadium. "That's Colfax Avenue. If you miss this kick, don't even come into the dressing room to change out of your uniform. Just keep walking out of the stadium and join that line of traffic, then keep going into the mountains."

Howfield made the kick, but Saban's "pep talk" stunned the Broncos. Buffalo Evening News writer Larry Felser asked Costa in the locker room why there was no celebrating the close victory. "Don't ask," he replied. "This is Saban at his looniest."

Early in training camp in 1972, Costa was on the move again. He was traded to the Chargers for Eddie Ray and a third-round draft pick. According to one report, Costa was dealt away because he complained about training camp. New coach John Ralston thought the Broncos needed a new mental approach, and Costa was an early victim of the need for change. Dave went right into the starting lineup for San Diego, and stayed there through two years and 28 games. Costa's luck was still bad when it came to teams, as the Chargers didn't have a winning season during Dave's time there. But he had some fun – his roommate was Tim Rossovich, considered one of the great characters in football history.

While in San Diego, Costa had a famous teammate in 1973 by the name of Johnny Unitas. He had come from Baltimore to finish out his career with the Chargers. Naturally, he wanted to stay with the high-top football shoes that had been part of his gear throughout his career. San Diego ordered some special shoes for Unitas, and Costa picked up a pair too. The defensive lineman said to Sports Illustrated that he was a member of the "high-top society" chaired by Unitas.

Costa came back to San Diego for training camp in 1974, but he didn't make it to the start of the regular season. The defensive lineman was dealt back to the Bills for a fifth-round pick in 1975. Waiting for him there was his old coach, Saban. Costa did start six

games that season, usually when the team used a 4-3 defense instead of a 3-4. The Bills made the playoffs, going 9-5. It was the first and final stop in the postseason for Costa, ending in a loss to Pittsburgh.

Costa's NFL career was over at that point. He had played in 168 games, starting 141. The defensive tackle recovered 13 fumbles in his career, and was named to the Broncos' all-time team of top 100 players in 2019.

Costa gave football one more shot in 1975, playing for the Portland Thunder in the World Football League. One of the reasons Costa signed with the Thunder was that one of his teammates and good friends from the Denver days, Jerry Inman, was already there. Costa played eight games for Portland, and then left the team after deciding he didn't want to play 18 games for $9,000. From there, Costa was traded to the Memphis Southmen on October 17 for future considerations. There's no record that he played a game for Memphis. And that was it. Dave spent some of his time in retirement in Cardiff by the Sea, California; it's located between Los Angeles and San Diego.

Football turned out to be Costa's salvation, at least from his point of view. He once said that many of his childhood friends got into serious trouble, and that football kept him from turning out the same way.

Costa died of leukemia on May 20, 2013.

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