

LaVerne Torczon

This article was written by Budd Bailey.

We can only guess that LaVerne Torczon probably spent much of his life shaking his head at his good fortune. He came from a very small town in rural Nebraska that had little use for traffic lights in its commercial district. Yet he used his athletic gifts to play pro football in major cities for seven seasons – only to return to his homeland for the final 50 or so years of his life.



LaVerne Joseph Torczon's arrival on the planet gave his parents, father Joseph and mother Vera, something to celebrate in the middle of the Depression. He was born in Columbus, Nebraska, on January 1, 1936. Two other sons had preceded him into the family, and two more children arrived after him. All of the children were born in the eastern portion of Nebraska. We don't know much about father Joseph, except that he was born in nearby Tarnov in 1898. Mother Vera was born in the same town, but her parents were both born in Poland. Vera lived until age 98 – one year longer than her mother.

Columbus is about 95 miles west of Omaha, and it has an interesting history. The area only was the home to 75 people when the fateful decision was made to run the brand-new Transcontinental Railroad through it when construction began in the late 1860s. Some thought at the time that since Columbus was right in the middle of the United States, it



would be a natural pick for a new nation's capital. That, of course, never happened. But it did have a bit of a boom when the Lincoln Highway came through the town in the 1910s.

But the Torczon family apparently spent much of its time in a much smaller city. Platte Center was up the road a bit north from Columbus – so named because it is right in the middle of Platte County. A railroad essentially created the municipality, which never grew much in terms of population. It only had 336 people in the 2010 census after peaking a little above 500 in 1930. German and Irish immigrants made up most of the original settlers.

LaVerne – and yes, he is the only pro football player as of this writing to have that exact first name – must have been quite something at Platte Center High School. He started for three seasons on the varsity football team, playing end as a sophomore and running back as a junior and senior. The team only lost one game during his junior year in 1951. Torczon might have been even better in basketball, since he started for four years and averaged more than 20 points per game in his final two seasons. Considering that LaVerne was growing into a frame that eventually reached 6-foot-3 and 250 pounds, he must have been a handful for opposing players at such a small school.

LaVerne graduated from high school in 1953. It would be easy to guess that Torczon is the only professional athlete to come from Platte Center High School. The school closed in 1969, when it merged into the Lakeview School District. Even with that sort of prep record, college recruiters apparently didn't spend much time trying to find Platte Center on the map. One reason might be that he played six-man football for his alma mater, no doubt because it was tough to field 11 students to fill out the starting team. Torczon opted to head to the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, and walk on to the football team.

On the way to school for the first time, he gave a ride to a then-stranger from nearby Columbus. It was a fateful meeting. "I was hitching a ride to school on the Platte River bridge and LaVerne and his dad picked me up and got me to Lincoln," Jim Murphy later told Seth Ashby of the Columbus Telegraph. "The next time I saw LaVerne was on the practice field and we stayed in the same class and our senior year, we became co-captains. LaVerne and I were good friends through the whole time."

There Torczon eventually met Bill Glassford, the head coach of the team. The Cornhuskers were coming off something of a lost decade in the 1940s, as they only had one winning season. For a program that had never had two straight losing seasons until then, eight in a row was a bit tough to take. Glassford got Nebraska to 4-5 in 1949, and then he directed the team to a 6-2-1 season that was good for a No. 17 ranking in the Associated Press poll. But that was followed by some mediocre seasons. The team went



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3-6-1 in 1953, and clearly needed some help in order to compete in the Big Seven Conference.

Torczon made an impression as a freshman while playing 11-on-11 football, and earned a scholarship. It didn't take him long to move into the starting lineup in the line as a sophomore in 1954. The Cornhuskers had a decent 6-4 regular season, which was good for a trip to the Orange Bowl. (Footnote: Nebraska played in the Miami game because Oklahoma wasn't allowed to represent the conference in that game in back-to-back years.) If the Cornhuskers needed a reminder that they were a long way from competing with the best, a 55-7 regular-season loss to Oklahoma provided one.

The 1955 season was an odd one for Nebraska. It was 0-4 in non-conference games, even losing at Hawaii in the season opener. But the Huskers ran five straight conference wins, setting up a season-ending showdown with Oklahoma for the Big Seven title. The game was something of an anticlimax in a dramatic sense, as the No. 1 Sooners ran up a 41-0 victory. It was Oklahoma's 13th straight win over Nebraska, meaning the rivalry had turned seriously one-sided. Torczon earned all-conference honors as a lineman for his play.

Glassford stepped down after that season, and Nebraska raided Oklahoma in selecting its next coach. Pete Elliott had been the backfield coach for the Sooners. The team's luck under Elliott in 1956 didn't improve much. The Cornhuskers finished 4-6 and 3-3 in the conference. They closed the season with a 54-6 loss to Oklahoma, which was one of the great teams in college football history. The Sooners (10-0) gave up a total of only 51 points in 10 games (with six shutouts), and scored at least 40 points in seven games as they defended their national championship.

At least the co-captains maintained order during their senior seasons. "He was very competitive, and was also good at basketball, and he was competitive in the classroom." Murphy said about Torczon. "He was also a good captain of the team. We had to enforce the rules, so we didn't have any trouble. You had no excuse. If you were going into a bar, you had better turn your (letterman) jacket inside out to hide the N."

A consolation prize for Torczon for the year was another all-league selection, as well as academic All-American status by one organization. The guard also earned Nebraska's Tom Novak Award, which is given "the senior who best exemplifies courage and determination despite all odds in the manner of Nebraska All-America center Tom Novak."

Despite a good college record, Torczon didn't receive much attention at draft time. The Cleveland Browns used their 18th round draft choice on LaVerne, calling him a defensive



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end at the time. He went to training camp under legendary coach Paul Brown and showed some ability in covering kickoffs, but didn't make the team. The Browns only kept five defensive linemen that year, and Torczon couldn't beat out future All-Pro Henry Jordan for the last spot. "I was the last cut in Cleveland," Torczon told author Jeffrey Miller. "I finished out the year in Montreal (of the Canadian Football League), but it was only a few games because the pro football league (in the U.S.) didn't start until the last Sunday of September. I think they had about four games left, and then I went home."

Torczon wanted to give football another try in 1958, but the Army had other ideas. LaVerne was drafted and spent 21 months there. Along the way Torczon married Lu Foltz in Platte Center on August 9, 1958. They had first met when they were the school's homecoming king and queen, but the relationship reportedly did not turn serious until after college.

Once his time in the military had been served, Torczon discovered the football world was about to change. The American Football League was about to be born in 1960, and that meant a couple of hundred jobs were available. LaVerne decided to give the pros another shot, and signed with the Buffalo Bills. "The guy that signed me at Cleveland – Dick Gallagher – became the general manager at Buffalo. They called me, and Cleveland was after me too, so I had two choices – either go to Cleveland or go to Buffalo. ... I chose Buffalo (signing on April 20) primarily because of the new league and a better opportunity to make the team. So, I was happy about that. Cleveland offered me less than Buffalo, but back in those days everybody played for nothing. Nobody made much."

Not only did Torczon make the team, he was in the starting lineup at defensive end for the Bills' first game in history – a September 11 loss to the New York Titans (27-3). On the defensive line, LaVerne and Mack Yoho were in charge of pass rushing, while tackles Chuck McMurtry and Jim Sorey were the run-stuffers. Buffalo dropped four of its first five games, and never was able to get any traction. The Bills' season might have been summed up by a November 27 game in Denver. Buffalo was up, 38-7, in the third quarter, but gave up the final 31 points in a 38-38 tie played in a snowstorm.

"The biggest problem teams had in the early years was the lack of numbers," Torczon, a team captain, said later. "You had to play on defense, kickoffs, run down on punts, extra points, so by the end of the third quarter and into the fourth quarter Denver was able to capitalize on their ability to overwhelm the opposition."

The Bills finished 5-8-1 under coach Buster Ramsey in their first year. Torczon was named a first-team All-AFL performer for his work in 1960. That earned LaVerne a ticket back to the Bills, in 1961, and it was a similar story. Torczon, who had picked up the nickname of "Tarzan" along the way, started all 14 games for the Bills that year.



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Torczon also was picked for the league all-star game. But Buffalo only improved by a half-game in the standings to 6-8, and Ramsey was fired by owner Ralph Wilson.

Lou Saban took over as coach of the Bills for 1962, and it would be an understatement to say the team started slowly. Buffalo lost its first five games in taking itself out of the division race before September was over. Torczon was playing next to a rookie named Tom Sestak, who needed no time to show that he was going to be a great player. But Saban thought some other roster changes were needed, and Torczon was sent to the Titans for an 11th round draft choice on October 1. In addition, four other players were waived.

“The Bills weren’t doing so good, and I think Lou Saban took it upon me to be the scapegoat,” he said. “A bunch of us were watching the 10 o’clock news when, lo and behold, the sports announcer said, ‘LaVerne Torczon has been traded from the Buffalo Bills to the New York Titans.’ And Lou never did talk to me about releasing me. That kind of bothered me.”

The Titans, coached by Bulldog Turner, put Torczon into their starting lineup, and the defensive end stayed there for the rest of the season. New York lost its first three games with LaVerne in the lineup, meaning that he had gotten off to a personal 0-7 start. The Titans finished 5-9 and in last place in the AFL East.

The franchise was falling apart by the end of 1962, and received a new ownership group after the season. One of its first moves was to hire Weeb Ewbank as coach; Ewbank had been the coach of the Baltimore Colts when they won the NFL championship in 1958. Torczon started 13 games in 1963, but the newly-named Jets – another change by ownership – finished 5-8-1. LaVerne did have the first interception of his career that year. On opening day against the Patriots, he picked off a pass by Babe Parilli. Boston went on to a 38-14 win that day.

The Jets moved from the Polo Grounds to Shea Stadium in 1964, but Torczon only played in nine games in that 5-8-1 season. One of them on November 22 provided him with the biggest individual thrill of his career. He intercepted a pass by Oakland’s Cotton Davidson, and ran 40 yards for a touchdown. It was the only such score of LaVerne’s career, and it opened the scoring in 35-26 loss to the Raiders.

Torczon still wasn’t getting rich playing football, but he and his wife did enjoy a few fringe benefits for playing football in New York. “The teams treated us very well in the pros, because in those days, the players didn’t make much money,” Lu said. “As a wife, I got to go to a lot of Broadway shows when the guys were out of town.” As for LaVerne,



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he appeared on NBC's "The Tonight Show" when he helped star Johnny Carson put on football equipment in a skit.

The Jets made several moves in the offseason before the 1965 campaign. The most obvious one was signing rookie quarterback Joe Namath to a rich contract. As for Torczon, he lost his starting job to rookie Verlon Biggs and only played in three games. He no doubt figured out that his time as a starter with the Jets had ended.

Again, luck was on LaVerne's side. The AFL had decided to expand to Miami for the 1966 season, and the Dolphins needed players. Torczon was exposed in the expansion draft and snapped up by Miami. The most memorable part of his stay might have been in training camp in Boca Raton, as the dorms hosted not only players but insects. "Never forget the bugs in that dorm," he said. "Big! Wake up and the floor would be full of them."

The first-year Dolphins weren't very good – a 3-11 record – but Torczon started in 13 of the team's 14 games. That was the final chapter of a seven-year career. He finished with 98 games played, 80 of them starts.

It was time to get on with the rest of his life. Torczon went back to Nebraska, and got into the real estate business in Columbus. "Raising a family in New York was not going to be easy," Lu Torczon said later. "He loved family and wanted to be around family." LaVerne opened an appraisal business in 1981, and retired from his second career in 2006. He piled up some honors along the way, Torczon was picked for the Nebraska Hall of Fame in 1987 and the Nebraska High School Hall of Fame in 2012.

Football never did completely leave his system. He remained a huge fan of the Cornhuskers for the rest of his life, attending as many home games as possible and making one road trip per year. Torczon also followed the Bills, since he thought he received the best treatment of his career in Buffalo.

LaVerne's heart gave out in 2015, and he died in Lincoln, Nebraska on April 18. Torczon was buried in a cemetery in Columbus. When the ceremony ended, his good friend Murphy had one last gesture to make – singing "The Cornhusker," the Nebraska fight song, over his casket.

"We sang it before every game," Murphy explained. "We were the captains, so we were the song leaders. I waited until everybody cleared out (of the funeral) and we held hands along the casket and I sang the song. It was just a deal for me and LaVerne, so I could say goodbye to him."



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