

## The 'Other' League

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John Hadl to Lance Alworth leading the Chargers. Len Dawson to Otis Taylor making it happen for Kansas City. Daryle Lamonica to Warren Wells for the explosive Raiders. Joe Namath to Don Maynard dominating for the Jets. George Blanda kicking game-winning field goals in Houston and in Oakland. Jim Nance powering up the middle for the hardluck Patriots. Paul Lowe turning the corner on the sweep in San Diego with running mate Keith Lincoln providing the blocking.

These are the lasting images of the American Football League, a league that survived on its own for 10 years before it was swallowed up when it merged with its rival, the NFL. In its early years, the AFL was known for high-scoring games that featured spectacular offensive play and almost a total lack of defense. While it did not provide the NFL staples of a tough running game, solid blocking and bone-crunching defense, it did have a certain flair and excitement that made football fans all over the country take notice.

The idea for starting a new league came from Chief owner Lamar Hunt, who was totally enamored with the game as a 27-year-old man sitting in a Houston hotel room in 1958. It was there he saw the Giants and the Colts meet in the NFL championship game, a contest that ended with the Colts winning in overtime and is considered one of the turning points of professional football.

Hunt thought the game was so compelling he went out and started his own league.

"I loved it, and I wanted to be involved," Hunt said. "I spent the next few months talking to businessmen about starting a new league; asking them if they'd be interested in a new league if I could find six or seven other willing partners. We got six together pretty quickly, and, by the summer of 1959, we were able to make our announcement that the AFL would commence playing in 1960.

"From there, we went on to have our first draft in November of 1959, and then came the business of putting together football teams in all of our eight cities," said Hunt. "Nobody really knew what we were doing. None of us had ever been in the football business before, so we were just going by instinct. It was as far from the way things are done today as you can imagine."

The roster of original AFL owners, who often referred to themselves as members of "the Foolish Club," included Ralph Wilson in Buffalo, Billy Sullivan in Boston, Bob Howsam in Denver, Bud Adams in Houston, Barron Hilton in Los Angeles, Max Winter in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Harry Wismer in New York and Hunt in Dallas. Before the 1960 season, Winter pulled out of his AFL commitment in Minneapolis when the NFL voted to expand to the Twin Cities. The AFL replaced Minnesota with Oakland and a group headed by Chet Soda.

While Joe Foss, a former war hero and governor of South Dakota, was named the first commissioner of the league, Hunt was the glue that kept the league together. He basically bankrolled the operation and was instrumental in the AFL's original TV contract, a five-year pact with ABC.

That TV contract was miniscule compared to the stratospheric deal signed by the NFL last year, but it gave the NFL football establishment cause for concern. The ABC deal was one that was based on advertising sales and eventually paid each team \$112,000 during the 1960 season. At the time, the NFL let each team negotiate its own TV deal, and, in some cases, the AFL teams received more money than their established counterparts. Green Bay and Philadelphia, for example, had particularly poor deals, and the NFL took note of the AFL deal and soon changed its way of doing business.

In its first year, the AFL averaged 16,000 fans a game, and the Houston Oilers emerged as the league's first champion when it beat the Los Angeles Chargers 24-16 in the title game. George Blanda, who would later go on to be a legend with the Raiders, was the Oilers' quarterback and kicker. His receivers included former Heisman Trophy winner Billy Cannon, Charley Hennigan and Bill Groman.

While the AFL was getting its feet wet, it had to endure the slings of the NFL establishment. While officials from the league rarely said anything for public consumption, the sniggering on Park Ave. could be heard across the country. Well-entrenched NFL columnists got great mileage out of deriding the quality of play in the AFL, and those comments stuck in the minds of anyone whoever played, coached or ran a team in the league.

"Sure, we heard those remarks," said former Jet and Bronco PK Jim Turner. "If you look back, all they did was rally us and get us to look at things from the perspective of the league as a whole. We

started out with players who were older or maybe not good enough to play in the NFL, but, by the time the two leagues merged, we were better. They laughed all they wanted, and all it did was make us better down the road."

The criticism also bonded everyone associated with the league. From front-office people to PR men, from scouts to coaches, from players to play-by-play announcers, the AFL was truly an extended family. Hunt, who moved his Dallas Texan franchise to Kansas City, where it became the Chiefs in 1963, recalled his own long-term goals, and the league's, as well.

"I wanted to play good, competitive football, and I wanted the Chiefs to win," Hunt explained. "The key was making sure we improved every year, because that represented progress. But I was just as happy to see the Jets sign a top draft choice or the Bills do the same, because as each team got better, it made the whole league stronger. It wouldn't have made sense if we made ourselves into a super team, and our partners were languishing. We all had to make progress in order to strengthen ourselves."

Curt Gowdy, who was the voice of the AFL on both ABC and NBC, thought the high-powered offenses around the league were the key to its growth. "In the early years, everybody knew the football was inferior to the NFL," Gowdy explained. "But it was exciting, offensive football and it got better every year. We knew the NFL was laughing, but we also knew that AFL football was able to stand on its own and do it a lot faster than anyone thought it could. All that laughing did was solidify the AFL and make sure everyone had a league-wide perspective."

While the early years of the AFL were not representative of the football the league would play in the middle and latter part of the 1960's, there were still some owners who wanted to see the AFL champions face their NFL counterparts at the end of the season. Wismer, the owner of the Titans, was the most vocal of those looking for a championship matchup, even though his team was among the worst in the league. He had little support from any of his fellow owners, and Foss thought it would have been a disaster.

"If the NFL had paid attention to old Harry's cries for a championship in those first couple of years, we'd never have lived to see the day of any merger," said Foss.

"Harry only wanted the publicity. But they'd have handed us our heads. The AFL would have been left in the dust for the buzzards to pick at our bones. As it was, the AFL got some time to get some hair on its chest. Our teams got stronger, our original young players became veterans. It certainly made a difference by the time the first Super Bowl game was played."

The Oilers won the league's first two titles--both over the Chargers--and met up with Hunt's Dallas Texans for the third championship game. It turned out to be a game that the league had to have. The kind of contest that silences critics and wins new fans.

The Texans took the AFL title game by beating the Oilers 20-17 at Houston's Jeppesen Stadium. The game was the league's first epic contest, a double-overtime win that ended when rookie PK Tommy Brooker connected on a 25-yard field goal at the 77:54 mark. In addition to the drama of two overtime periods, the game was notable because RB Abner Haynes, the Texans' team captain, embarrassingly blew the coin flip at the start of overtime. Because of extremely windy conditions, Dallas head coach Hank Stram wanted to force Houston to go against a strong wind. But instead of choosing to defend the proper goal, Haynes said, "We'll kick to the clock." That was the direction Stram had envisioned, but because Haynes said; "We'll kick ...," before he gave the direction, he put his team in the hole.

That game turned out to be the Texans' last in Dallas. They ended their war with the NFL's Cowboys and headed for Kansas City. Shortly after Hunt moved his team, a New York businessman named David A. "Sonny" Werblin bought the struggling Titans from the league and renamed them the Jets.

Wismer had been undercapitalized as the Titans' owner, and the league had to take over the operation of the club during the 1962 season: Werblin headed a group of five that purchased the team, and he explained how he planned to make the New York franchise viable.

"I believe in the star system," Werblin said. "It's the only thing that sells tickets. It's what you put on the stage or the playing field that draws people."

Werblin proved his point less than a year later by signing the gem of the 1965 draft crop, Alabama QB Joe Namath. Namath had a great arm and tremendous physical talent, and he coupled his abilities with a tremendous off-the-field flair. Werblin signed Namath to a record \$427,000 contract, thereby beating the NFL's St. Louis Cardinals in their pursuit of football's hottest young property.

"When Joe walks into a room, you know he's there," Werblin said. "When another rookie walks in, he's just a nice looking kid. Namath's like Babe Ruth or Lou Gehrig."

The other AFL teams followed Werblin's lead in promoting their superstars. Namath's presence gave the league a shot in the arm, and Werblin's forceful ownership made other owners feel secure about the league's presence in New York.

"Once Sonny came on board in New York, we felt a lot better about our chances," explained Hunt. "He provided some real strength financially, and he also had a plan to make his team successful. People think the Namath signing made the New York franchise, but it was actually the 1964 season that saw the Jets turn the corner. They averaged 44,000 in paid attendance that season, and that was before they had Namath. We had some stability in New York and that made everyone in the league feel a lot better."

As Werblin gave the league a strong anchor in the make-or-break New York market, Al Davis was about to do the same on the West Coast with the Oakland Raiders. Davis, a former assistant with the Chargers who had developed a reputation for always being a step or two ahead of the competition, brought life and fresh thinking to a previously dormant franchise.

With the growth of the AFL through its first four years, came a decision by the established league to go to war. The weapon of choice in 1964 was the draft-eligible college seniors whom both leagues coveted. Officials from the NFL clandestinely tried to keep top college players away from their AFL counterparts by literally hiding them. This secret project was known as Operation Hand Holding, and the operatives were 26 NFL scouts and club officials. While the AFL was able to sign some of its top draft choices, the NFL signed 22 of the top 35 players and appeared to be on a path that would bring on a long-term victory, even if it was a lengthy process.

That changed on Jan. 29, 1964, when NBC announced a \$36 million deal with the AFL to televise its games. According to Hunt that was truly the league's turning point.

"We had some good moments before that contract was signed, and we had some rough ones after it, but that was basically the time we knew we would survive," Hunt explained, "The contract gave us some security. It gave each team about \$800,000 per season and it allowed us to plan for the future. We could compete with the NFL on a more equal footing."

It also served notice to the NFL that the other league was just not going away. The NFL came to grips with the fact that the AFL was not only going to survive, but was also going to thrive. The NFL brought up merger talks with the AFL in 1966, because it wanted to put an end to the costly signing wars going on for rookies and some star veterans. NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle dispatched Dallas GM Tex Schramm to talk with Hunt about a merger. Talks grew serious quickly.

At the same time, the AFL owners made the bold move of replacing Foss in the commissioner's office with Davis. Foss had served his purpose of helping to provide the league with an identity; Davis would increase the league's stature even further with his aggressiveness.

"I didn't take this job with any concern about the other league," Davis said at the time. "I'm interested in winning the war and believe me, it will be a good scrap."

"I have the authority to do the things necessary, and we intend to be aggressive. I have been assured that all the clubs are in the mood to sign ballplayers and that's vital. In the past, we have not operated as a league in this area."

Davis was clearly saying that the AFL would now look to sign top NFL veteran players whose contracts had expired, and that lit a fire under Rozelle and Schramm. The secret talks with Hunt escalated, and the two sides were soon able to come to terms on a merger.

On June 8, 1966, Rozelle, Hunt and Schramm announced publicly that the two leagues had merged. The key elements to the merger agreement included:

- A combined draft, starting in 1967.
- The leagues playing a world championship game every year.
- All existing franchises remaining at their present sites.
- Interleague preseason games would be played beginning in 1967 and a single-league schedule commencing in 1970.
- Pete Rozelle remaining as the commissioner of the combined leagues.
- AFL clubs paying an indemnity fee of \$18 million over a 20-year period.
- Two franchises added by 1968, one in each league, with entry fees paid to the NFL.

The plan was approved by only a 6-3 vote of the AFL owners, but that majority was enough to push it through. As a result, the war between the two leagues came to a peaceful, productive end.

"When Tex and I talked, we were very serious," Hunt explained. "We met in Tex's car at Love Field in Dallas, and we got things done. The signing wars were costly for both leagues, and there was a desire to put it behind us before it got worse. That's why we were able to reach an agreement so quickly."

Davis was one of the AFL owners who was not pleased. After the merger was completed, he left the league's New York office and returned to Oakland. He wanted the AFL to stand and fight, at least so it could get more favorable merger terms. He was replaced as commissioner by Milt Woodard.

The off-field cooperation between the two leagues did not result in on-field respect of the AFL product. NFL players continued to look down their noses at their AFL counterparts. Still, the NFL really had nothing to base its superiority on until the first championship game between the two leagues. That meeting, between the AFL's Chiefs and the NFL's Packers, took place on Jan. 15, 1967, at the Los Angeles Coliseum.

The Chiefs came into the game as major underdogs against Vince Lombardi's awesome Packers. Many expected the Chiefs to be intimidated by the two-time NFL champions, but Kansas City played an impressive first half and trailed by only a 14-10 margin after 30 minutes. Dawson had kept the Packers off balance with his short passes. However, in the second-half the Packers dominated as their defense stifled Dawson and RB Mike Garrett while QB Bart Starr made things happen. Starr had a red-hot second half and tormented the Chiefs with his pinpoint passes. Green Bay emerged with a 35-10 victory. Lombardi puffed his chest out like a proud rooster as he accepted the championship trophy. He had upheld the honor of his league with a convincing second-half performance. He also praised Kansas City's team speed, before reporters pressed him to compare the Chiefs with top NFL teams.

"I do not think they are as good as the top teams in the National Football League," Lombardi said. "They're a good team, but I'd have to say that NFL football is tougher. Dallas is a better team, and so are several others."

That statement would burn in the minds of the Chiefs, as well as the rest of the teams in the AFL.

The next year, things did not get much better. The Raiders won the AFL championship and gained the right to oppose the Packers in Miami's Orange Bowl. The Raiders were a more physical and offensively explosive team than the Chiefs the year before, but they were never really in the game. Green Bay rolled to a 33-14 triumph, dominating in the third period and snuffing out any hopes the Raiders had.

With two one-sided Super Bowl losses under the AFL's belt, few observers thought anything would change when the Jets met the Colts on Jan. 12, 1969 in Miami. The Jets had come off a fine season, one in which they had beaten the Raiders in the AFL championship game to gain their Super Bowl berth. They had an aggressive, hard-hitting defense led by DE Verlon Biggs and LB Al Atkinson, but it was their offense that got most of the headlines. Namath had fulfilled his promise with his spectacular passing ability. He threw with power and flair and had a fine group of receivers. George Sauer was Namath's top possession wideout, while Maynard had game-breaking speed. RB's Emerson Boozer and Matt Snell were both good individual runners, but they were even more impressive as a combination. Jet head coach Weeb Ewbank, who had led the Colts to two NFL titles in the 1950's, was a great strategist and motivator.

The Jets had a nice team, but most people felt the Colts were just too awesome. The defense, led by DE Bubba Smith, MLB Mike Curtis and S Rick Volk, had blanked Cleveland 34-0 in the NFL title game. The offense was a methodical group led by QB Earl Morrall. The Colt offense was thought to be too physical for the undersized Jets. Baltimore was installed as 18-point favorites.

In the days leading up to the game, the Jet players grew frustrated by their underdog status. Namath, speaking at a Miami Touchdown Club Luncheon days before the game, made a series of nondescript remarks and then dropped a bombshell. "We'll win the game on Sunday -I guarantee it."

Namath had not planned to make such a ballsy statement, but he had been goaded into it by Baltimore fans who were chiding him. While it was expected the intemperate remarks would fire up the Colts, it was the Jet players who became motivated.

"There wasn't a guy in our lockerroom who didn't believe we could beat the Colts," recalled Tumer, who was the Jet kicker at the time. "Joe said what everybody believed. Sure, we knew the Colts were good, but we all felt we were better. We had just come off a huge win over the Raiders, and that did a lot for our confidence. Weeb prepared us perfectly. We were not intimidated in the least."

The Jet offense started slowly, but when Lou Michaels missed a 27-yard field goal for the Colts in the first quarter, and Jet CB Randy Beverly intercepted an early second quarter pass in the endzone, the Jets knew they could compete.

Instead of trying to dazzle the Colts with Namath's downfield passing, the Jets relied on Snell's off-tackle running and short passes from Namath to Sauer. With the Jets on the Colt four, Snell rolled around left end for a touchdown and the Jets led the Colts 7-0 at the half.

In the second half, the Jet defense continued to frustrate the Colts. At the same time, Namath and Snell milked the clock, and the Jets added three Turner field goals for a 16-0 lead. The Colts didn't get on the scoreboard until FB Jerry Hill scored on a one-yard plunge in the fourth quarter. The final score was 16-7 Jets.

The New York lockerroom was delirious. The Jets had not only won for themselves, but for their league as well. "We heard from every team in the league," Turner remembered. "Telegrams from the Chiefs, Patriots and Broncos. I remember seeing Buck Buchanan (of the Chiefs) a couple of days later as we got ready for the Pro Bowl, and he had tears in his eyes. It was a day all of us had waited for so long. It vindicated us and justified our existence."

"Without a doubt, it was the biggest game I ever worked," recalled Gowdy. "The Jets were playing for the entire league."

One year later, the Chiefs returned to the Super Bowl and lined up against another supposedly superior foe in the Minnesota Vikings. The Vikings were led by an attacking defensive front four manned by DT Alan Page and DE Carl Eller, while QB Joe Kapp provided toughness and leadership for the Minnesota offense. The Chiefs, however, followed the Jet example and registered a 23-7 upset. Dawson played a flawless game at quarterback, and WR Otis Taylor broke the game open with a long TD reception.

"It was a day we were simply ready to play football," Dawson said. "We remembered what it was like to lose that game, and we didn't want to repeat it. We kept our poise, we made plays and we took care of business. "

With that victory by Kansas City in Super Bowl IV, the AFL squared the record between the two leagues at 2-2. And with that victory came the end of the AFL. The 1970 regular season marked the beginning of a common schedule and the official marriage of the two leagues. Since that time, the NFL has enjoyed unprecedented growth, and it's owed in no small part to the long-departed, but never-to-be-forgotten "Other League."