

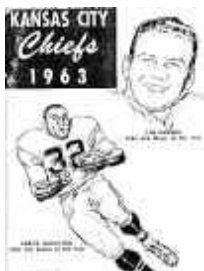
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## The big uneasy

When the Dallas Texans moved some 40 years ago, they nearly became the New Orleans Saints. Ain't it great they ended up in KC? If not for Lamar Hunt's decision, we may have never been major league.

By RANDY COVITZ  
The Kansas City Star



1962 photo

The Dallas Texans celebrated after they won the AFL title in 1962, and Kansas City celebrated after Lamar Hunt (right) moved the franchise here.



H. Roe Bartle,  
sitting at unfinished  
Arrowhead.

**H**ere's the funny thing about history: It can be scary to look back sometimes.

Think about Kansas City without the Chiefs. Close your eyes and really think about it. No Super Bowl. No Red Fridays. No Len Dawson. No identity as an NFL town. Oh, and by the way, your team would instead be called the New Orleans Saints or something like that.

Too scary to contemplate? Well, it almost happened.

Kansas City was teetering as a major-league sports market when Lamar Hunt came to town 41 years ago. The city had a musty old baseball stadium built in 1923, and its tenant, Kansas City Athletics owner Charles O. Finley, annually toyed with the community's heartstrings by threatening to move.

Weary of battling with the Cowboys in Dallas, Hunt sought another city for his fledgling AFL franchise that was an easy commute from his Texas home. Hunt would love to say now that he conducted an extensive market-research study before relocating the team, but it was simply a matter of convenience.

So he picked a city only 447 air miles from Dallas. He picked New Orleans — a little-known fact today, even among the most die-hard Chiefs fans.

But then providence interceded. Hunt couldn't secure Tulane Stadium as a venue for his team. So he turned to Kansas City, whose mayor, H. Roe (Chief) Bartle, had been courting Hunt since the day after the Texans won the 1962 AFL championship.

"That might have been a naïve way to look at things," Hunt says now of his decision-making process. "Kansas City was very much a baseball town then, and that stands to reason because they had a major-league team. They didn't have a pro football team, and they didn't have any college teams that played right in Kansas City.

"But I understood there was a potential of a six-state area to draw from."

This decision, made almost casually in retrospect, altered the course of major-league sports in middle America.

"The impact was deep and lasting," says state senator and former Kansas City mayor Charles B. Wheeler. "The team coming here was the difference between being big-league and minor-league, and it's been that way ever since."

Finley eventually bolted for Oakland after the 1967 season, but by then, the Chiefs had won their second AFL championship and played in the first AFL-NFL championship game, later dubbed the "Super Bowl" by Hunt.

"Lamar saved our town," says longtime broadcaster Bill Grigsby, who has been part of the Chiefs' broadcast team since the club came to Kansas City. "First, when he came in, everyone wondered what this new league was. Then, in three years, they showed us what it was.

"It changed the personality of the town. It's the single biggest thing that ever happened for him to bring the team here. We didn't know it at the time. We didn't realize this team would get in the National Football League."

Indeed, thanks in part to Hunt's efforts, the AFL and NFL announced a merger in 1966, major-league baseball granted Kansas City an expansion team for 1969, and the Truman Sports Complex that would house both the Chiefs and Royals was soon on the drawing board.

"To have the Chiefs here maintained the status we needed and helped us get a new major-league franchise after a one-year absence," Wheeler says. "Then we began to think in terms of each owner having his own stadium, and that's the way it worked out."

The building boom wasn't over. The success of the Chiefs and Royals led to the building of Kemper Arena, which opened in 1974. Soon thereafter, the NBA and the NHL came to town.

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Many of the Texans players were from the Dallas area or were college stars in Texas, and they were not eager to move to Kansas City.

"I didn't know where Kansas City was," says Len Dawson, the team's first quarterback. "People asked where are you going to play — Kansas City, Mo., or Kansas City, Kan. — and I said, 'There are two of them?' I had no idea.

"Watching TV back in those days, they had the cowboy things, and Kansas City was the Cowtown. And I think the first event I went to was the American Royal parade, and I said, 'By gosh, they're right, there are horses right in front of us,' and they were (pooping) all over the streets."

The 1963 Chiefs draft class included defensive tackle Buck Buchanan, linebacker Bobby Bell and guard Ed Budde, who all arrived in Kansas City for training camp after participating in a 20-17 upset of the NFL champion Green Bay Packers in the annual College All-Star Game in Chicago.

"The song 'Kansas City' came out," Budde recalls of the 1959 classic, "and I really got with that song, 'I'm going to Kansas City.' There was a feeling that we were wanted."

Once the newly christened Chiefs arrived, the club marketed the area. The team's first logo — emblazoned on the huge stadium scoreboard at old Municipal Stadium — depicted an American Indian running across the outline of Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Arkansas.

Expectations ran high that first year, but the hurried season-ticket drive fell nearly 10,000 short of the goal. And the first preseason game at Municipal on Aug. 9, 1963 drew a crowd liberally announced at 5,721.

The reaction to the lack of interest in the first game depended on one's perspective.

Jack Steadman, then the club's general manager and now chairman of the board, says: "My thought that first night was, 'Oh boy, did we get ourselves into something here?' That first year was an eye-opener."

Howard McHenry, an early season-ticket holder, sat in the bleachers for the big debut. He has a different view.

"Kansas City wasn't known for having big crowds for anything in those days," McHenry says. "We were just in a state of shock. I think people truly didn't believe we were getting professional football. It took a little time for that to happen."

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The Chiefs went 5-7-2 and 7-7 in their first two years in Kansas City, and their season-ticket base eroded from 15,000 the first year to about 9,400 in 1965. After a 7-5-2 season in 1965, the club kicked off a major season-ticket drive that included the creation of the popular Wolfpack section in the temporary bleachers at Municipal. Also, the Redcoaters, a group of civic leaders and businessmen, served as voluntary season-ticket salespeople.

"I always thought it was interesting that businessmen in the Kansas City area would spend their time, free of charge, to promote and sell tickets to an organization that was not a non-profit organization with the hope the team would sell enough season tickets to remain in Kansas City," Dawson says.

"There were other cities vying for professional teams — Atlanta, Miami, New Orleans. By 1965, you could see it was catching on. More folks were coming to the ballpark."

Season-ticket sales increased from 9,000 to 22,000 for 1966. The Chiefs, meanwhile, improved as a team. They claimed AFL titles in 1966 and 1969, and won Super Bowl IV in January 1970.

"We brought the first world championship in any sport to Kansas City," Dawson says. "Before that, Kansas City was not known.

"We got on television so many times across the nation in big games with the Raiders, in particular, and got involved in championship games, and people from all over the country could take a look and see what city we represented."

The Chiefs players and their families of that time wove their way into the fabric of the community. When the club first moved to Kansas City, black players had difficulty finding adequate housing in some suburban neighborhoods, but those barriers soon came down.

The AFL and the Chiefs, in particular, were at the forefront of integration in pro football, and the club drafted many of its key players from historically black colleges, including future Hall of Famers Buchanan (Grambling) and Willie Lanier (Morgan State).

Because NFL salaries at the time were so meager, players held off-season jobs and, in some cases, went to other jobs after practice during the season. Players from the early Chiefs teams made Kansas City their year-round homes.

"Because we loved the people and loved the town," Budde says. "The people took us under their wings, and it was a great place to raise a family."

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Shortly after the first Super Bowl, the leadership of the community was beginning to plan a \$102 million county bond issue. Through discussions with business and civic leaders, Steadman was able to get the Truman Sports Complex on the ballot with \$43 million going toward dual stadiums, one for baseball, one for football.

Voters approved the bond issue in 1967, and in an era of multipurpose, cookie-cutter stadiums that began in the mid-1960s, Kansas City voters approved a first-of-its kind, side-by-side, dual-stadium complex.

"I didn't feel the multipurpose stadiums were right for football," Steadman says. "They were more for baseball. Baseball wanted 40,000-seat stadiums, and we wanted a bigger one, 75,000 seats. Through the process, I was able to sell the leadership and the community on two stadiums."

The original plans called for a rolling roof for each stadium, but cost overruns and delays caused by a strike forced the roof concept to be put on hold. Still, Arrowhead was completed in time for the 1972 season. Royals Stadium — now Kauffman Stadium — opened in 1973.

"Without the Chiefs, without the sports complex, Kansas City would not be a major-league city," Steadman says. "It's the smallest city in major-league sports with two major-league teams — baseball and football. Because of the interest in sports throughout the metropolitan area and the Midwest, the complex has kept Kansas City major league."

The Chiefs sold 72,000 season tickets for their debut season in Arrowhead, but they fell onto hard times on the field and eventually at the gate during 1974-88. The franchise enjoyed a renaissance after the hiring of general manager Carl Peterson and coach Marty Schottenheimer in 1989, and football games at Arrowhead now are as much social events as they are athletic contests.

"The Chiefs," says McHenry, the super fan, "energized Kansas City quicker than anything Kansas City has been associated with."

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Here's the funny thing about history: It can be helpful to look back sometimes.

The Truman Sports Complex was a marvel of construction in the 1970s, but the Chiefs desperately want to renovate the Arrowhead Stadium of today. Hunt points out that only four stadiums in the NFL are older.

Kansas City voters approved a new downtown arena earlier this month, and will in some part use the success of the Chiefs as a reason for the NBA or the NHL to return to town.

The Chiefs are hoping voters will be as kind to them.

A bistate measure has been postponed once as a ballot issue, failing to get through the Missouri legislature, and a new bistate package teaming renovations at Arrowhead and Kauffman stadiums will go before the voters on Nov. 2.

"We'd really like," says Peterson, "to replace 30-year-old concrete."

The Chiefs say a yes vote will, literally, cement their future in Kansas City. Hunt envisions an Arrowhead with wider concourses, more concession stands, a climate-controlled club section and more restrooms. The quarter-cent sales tax increase would give the Chiefs and the Royals each \$177 million for the renovations.

In return, both teams say they will extend their stadium leases through 2029.

"Stability in the market is important," Hunt has pointed out before. "I've seen the Baltimore Colts go off in the dark of night and move to Indianapolis."

Not that the owner is threatening to leave town. Not that he can with this kind of fervor still driving football fans across the Midwest and the nation to Kansas City.

"We're in the heart of an incredible college-football area and a pro-football area now," Hunt says, weighing the impact of one decision back in 1963. "That didn't exist 41 years ago when the Chiefs moved here."

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By *RANDY COVITZ* \* *THE KANSAS CITY STAR*