

THE VISIONARY CHIEF

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Lamar Hunt is a man of perseverance, and a man of character. Most importantly, however, he is a man of vision. Not a vision in the sense of a sign or a miracle, but rather in the sense of an uncontainable desire. In the 1960's, Lamar Hunt's irrepressible gaze into the state of professional football helped to restore the sight of the blind hierarchy of the National Football League. His views and persistence changed the course of the game, and his innovative ideas soon became the corrective lenses for many of today's pro football franchises.

Hunt's visions often became realities. His child of tomorrow, the American Football League, was founded out of his prolonged desire to own a pro team. Within a decade, this often-laughed-at new kid on the block achieved equality with the street-wise NFL. The AFL's success was predicated on the many unselfish efforts of Lamar Hunt.

"Lamar Hunt was the cornerstone, the integrity of the AFL," remembers Billy Sullivan, the owner of the New England Patriots. "Without him, there would have been no AFL."

Today, as the owner of the Kansas City Chiefs and as a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Lamar Hunt has seen his old league merge with the older league. He has also seen his Chiefs win a World's Championship in Super Bowl IV.

Perhaps the most remarkable sight to the eyes of Lamar Hunt, however, was in viewing obstacles, then overcoming them. Although many walls have confronted him over the past three decades, has always believed that whatever stood behind those walls was always worth a good look.

In 1959, Lamar Hunt's view of a future in pro football was obstructed by the governing body of the NFL, its owners. "I wanted to buy an expansion franchise in the NFL pretty bad," recalls Hunt, "but the owners got together and told me (and several others who were interested) that it wasn't the right time for expansion."

Confronted with the Goliath NFLers, Hunt decided that David's slingshot could be used again, this time in the 1960's. Hunt's retribution came in the form of a new league that consisted of eight teams, all of which had one thing in common: they were all ridiculed for standing up to the established NFL. Ten years later, Goliath wasn't laughing anymore.

"The NFL owners weren't really biased in their choices for team expansion," claims Hunt. "It was just that they weren't really knowledgeable about the parts of the country that were growing. Places like Dallas, Houston, and Atlanta all had sound abilities to support and expansion franchise."

The teams of the new American Football League represented many parts of the United States. Harry Wismer bought a team in New York City and called them the Titans. Three years later, Sonny Werblin took over the helm after Wismer had gone bankrupt. Werblin transformed the team to fit the modern image of the times, in the age of continual improvement. He moved his new team into Shea Stadium, which was just south of La Guardia International Airport. The Titans became the Jets, and Werblin became the focal point of a very successful front office.

In Oakland, California, a group of four investors (Y.C. Soda, Ed McGah, Robert Osborne, and Wayne Valley) bought a franchise in the AFL. The Raiders, as they were known, became the last team to earn a charter in the new league. Al Davis joined the Raiders as their head coach in 1963, and he eventually bought out the majority ownership in the club. Under Davis, the Raiders have become the most successful pro football franchise in the past quarter century.

Other teams that rounded out the AFL roster of clubs were the Houston Oilers, Buffalo Bills, Boston Patriots, and Denver Broncos. The Los Angeles Chargers played in the City of Angels for only one season. In 1961, the Chargers moved to San Diego, and their attendance soon rose up to the heavens.

While it was true that the eight teams of the AFL built their houses out of brick, Lamar Hunt's team, the Dallas Texans, continued to get "blow your house down" attacks from the big, bad wolves of the National Football League.

"The NFL decided to give a franchise to Dallas in 1960," recalls Hunt. "They were called the Cowboys, and we were the Texans. With two teams in Dallas, you knew that something had to give."

In 1963, something did. The Texans moved north to Kansas City, Missouri, and were renamed the "Chiefs." Lamar Hunt's team moved for the sake of finding a place to play that they could call their own. "The market for pro football franchises in Dallas was only suitable for one team," remembers Hunt. "Neither team was attracting spectators. After 3 years, the average paid attendance was only in 10,000 range for both the Texans and the Cowboys."

Despite the lack of fan support, Lamar Hunt knew that the game was still growing, with opportunities abounding for change and improvement. He also knew that with time, many fans would accept the AFL as a legitimate league in pro football. Certainly, many sportswriters around the country already did. "Media coverage was very good in any city that the AFL had a team in," said Hunt. "In Dallas, the Texans and the Cowboys both got a great deal of exposure from the press. The problem was that neither team was established with the ticket-buying public."

And so, the Texans migrated north to claim their new land. Lamar Hunt's first major encounter with the windy forces of the NFL left him bloody, but unbowed. Despite the Texans' relocation, Lamar Hunt and the rest of the AFL owners discovered that this was just the beginning of a pro football feud.

For the NFL owners, their minor victory over territorial rights left no real cause for celebration, for as they soon found out in the coming years, blowing down Lamar Hunt and his AFL brick house was going to take more than just a huff and a puff.

In the tradition of the great arguments throughout history, the likes of the Hatfields and McCoys, the Cowboys and Indians, and the Democrats and Republicans probably had nothing on the AFL and the NFL. The feud between the two leagues warmed up with the ongoing fight for college seniors. A volatile bidding war erupted, with scouting directors from every team doing their best to sell their product. Big money was on the line, and big business was its calling card.

"Pro football is a business in the context of a game," said Hunt, referring to the game on the field. "The AFL won its share (and lost its share, too) of the talent. We had a major advantage in that the AFL had only 8 teams, where the NFL had 14 teams. We only had to sign about 1 out of every top 3 players to get our share. This we did easily, but expensively."

Under commissioner Joe Foss (a former pilot and South Dakota governor), the AFL went full steam ahead into the guts of the bidding war. Their efforts were rewarded when players such as Billy Cannon, Cookie Gilchrist, Lance Alworth, and Joe Namath all signed contracts to play in the new league. Namath gave the league instant credibility in 1965 with every appearance of this superstar rookie, as sellouts soon became the rule around the AFL, rather than the exception.

The pressure on the draftees was quite discomfoting to their train of thought. Influences on their decisions were numerous, from bonus money to league loyalty. Moreover, let's not forget that everybody who talked to these young prospects had an opinion as to which offer to take. Many of the draftees tried hard to decide between the two leagues, hoping to gain a piece of information that could make the decision easier.

"Our goal with the AFL was not really intended to establish a more wide-open type of game," recalls Hunt. "We were basically just trying to copy the NFL's format, and the format of the American and National Leagues in baseball. There were a few differences in our style of play, as opposed to the NFL's. But football is football, no matter how you look at it."

Realizing that the two leagues were exchanging vital blows in recruiting players that could eventually tear the sport apart, it became obvious to Lamar Hunt, and to a few others as well, that the two leagues must bind their wounds. A truce was about to take place, and its occurrence would mend the seams of the sport, in a time when the game was growing into the national spotlight.

Lamar Hunt was able to see the oncoming train before the collision. He knew that the future of pro football rested in the promise of youth. Along with Tex Schramm, the General Manager of the Dallas Cowboys, Hunt helped form a merger in 1966 that would provide more stability for the younger players, as well as the game itself. By 1970, the two leagues would become one.

"The merger was good for all," claims Hunt. "It consolidated the game, helped get talent costs in better perspective, equalized the opportunity for all teams to get 1/24th of the talent [2 teams were added at the time of the merger], and most importantly, it gave the public what they wanted -- a true championship game."

Super Bowl I was more than just another football game. It was a new beginning, an aurora of hopes and dreams for the future. Only fitting was the fact that Lamar Hunt's team, the Kansas City Chiefs, represented the league he founded out of a dream. The Chiefs' opponents in the Los Angeles Memorial

Coliseum on January 15, 1967 were the powerhouse Green Bay Packers, led by their soon-to-be-immortal head coach, Vince Lombardi. The Packers dominated the second half of the game, eventually winning the first encounter with the new league, 35-10. It was a lesson to be learned for Kansas City, and for the entire AFL as well.

"We trailed by only 14-10 at half-time, and we actually led in first downs and total yardage," remembers Hunt. "Unfortunately, we didn't play as well in the second half. It took awhile for our team and our league to build up talent-wise, and it was not until Super Bowl III that the AFL finally beat the NFL -- at that point, we were equal."

Joe Namath brashly predicted victory over the Baltimore Colts before the big game, much to the chagrin of diehard NFL fans and oddsmakers, who placed Namath's New York Jets as an 18-point underdog in Miami's Orange Bowl that Sunday. Namath made good on his word.

"It was an extremely exciting day," recalls Lamar Hunt. "I can remember it vividly to this very day -- probably more so than when the Chiefs won the Super Bowl a year later."

The Jets defeated the Colts on January 12, 1969 by a score of 16-7. Namath was chosen as the game's most valuable player. Pete Rozelle, the commissioner of the NFL, met Lamar Hunt after the game and told him something that Hunt already knew: "This was the best thing that could happen to pro football."

The following year, Hunt's Chiefs were in a heated battle for the AFL title, finishing the 1969 regular season with an 11-2-0 record. In the AFL's final championship game, the Chiefs met the Oakland Raiders to determine the last AFL champion. As it turned out, it was only fitting that the man who built the league from scratch watched on as his Chiefs systematically dismantled the Raiders to claim the crown, 17-7.

The following week in Super Bowl IV, Kansas City dominated the NFL's Minnesota Vikings to become the second AFL team to beat the rival league in a title game, 23-7. "Really, to me the most memorable moment was the parade that was held for the team back in Kansas City," recalls Hunt. "One hundred fifty thousand people lined the streets the day after the game. It was a wonderful outpouring of public pride for their team."

Like the old saying goes, however, "all good things must come to an end." All the good things did for the Kansas City Chiefs after Super Bowl IV. Visualizing future events or occurrences requires a certain depth perception, available only to the wise. We are all foolish at times, and we all make mistakes.

The distance between ourselves and what is right can often take up a very long space, and from our vantage points, it can often be very hard to see. As with all the elements of human nature, however, seeing and doing are two very separate things.

"We [the Chiefs] had our problems during the 1970's," said Hunt. "The biggest one that we could point a finger at was the fact that the talent pool ran out."

The Chiefs made a steady decline after the pro football merger in 1970, but Lamar Hunt held strong to his beliefs. Despite his failures, Hunt still was man enough to admit his mistakes, learn from them, and press on.

"It was a bad management decision on my part," says Hunt, "in that I let our head coach [Hank Stramm] take over the talent-scouting and the drafting procedures. He was an excellent coach, but the talent end of the game is a full-time job."

Lamar Hunt's dream had come full circle. He had seen a merger come about, when years before, just the thought of a merger would have been regarded as ridiculous. He had seen his team rise out of the depths of obscurity into the blinding sunlight of a Super Bowl title. He then spent the decade of the 1970's watching his team struggle in virtual anonymity due to their constant failure on the gridiron.

It is said that "all good things come to those who wait." Lamar Hunt has proved his patience in trying times, and out of the murky despair of failure soon arose a deep conviction for victory. "I believe that the Kansas City Chiefs have laid down a new foundation for achievement in the NFL," claims Hunt. "I truly believe that we are well on our way to becoming a playoff caliber team."

Although they have few, if any superstars, the Chiefs have proven to be a possible contender in 1985, with stunning victories over the Raiders and the Seahawks in the first month of the season. As it appears to many observers, a few more good drafts and the Kansas City Chiefs could be crowned as champions once more.

While always being optimistic about the chances of success, many owners of NFL clubs have trouble separating themselves from the internal affairs of their respective clubs. Lamar Hunt keeps a delicate

balance between the two -- sort of a one-foot-in, one-foot-out proposition. He doesn't involve himself with player contracts or renegotiations (General Manager Jack Steadman is in charge of that) unless it is on a grand scale. He also favors the 45-man roster, for two reasons -- economics, and equality of competition in the league. "The lower limit of players makes for a much better game competitively," says Hunt.

Separating the game from the business is hard to do during the 1980's. Most people would agree that pro football is not a game anymore. Lamar Hunt has separated the two, all the while still believing that the game is still a game.

"Pro football is a game in a business format," says Hunt, who speaks like a true owner. "The only 'game' is the entertainment output. It's like a movie -- a 'movie' is still a 'movie' -- but it has to be run as a business. The same goes for pro football -- it is entertainment, but first and foremost it is a business."

Pro football has been a long-running feature film for the past 68 years. Lamar Hunt has been a supporting actor in this major drama for the last 28 of those years. His experiences and remembrances have been both fond and fragile, and those experiences have built the game up to compare with the heights of the silver screen. "I had no idea that the AFL would turn out as it did," said Hunt. "I had no idea that the game itself would grow so big."

Indeed, the game has grown. But so has Lamar Hunt. His penchant for overcoming failure has given many men after him the courage to try harder when climbing over the obstructive walls that stand between ourselves and what is right. Although many new walls may confront Lamar Hunt in the 1980's and beyond, he still has the courage to take that look beyond, much like a true visionary man.