

The Longest Football Game Ever Played

by Don Smith

"We'll kick to the clock!"

With those words at the coin tossing ceremony that started a historic overtime period, Abner Hayes, the star halfback and captain of the Dallas Texans, almost talked his club out of the 1962 American Football League championship.

Haynes may not have fully understood coach Hank Stram's instructions and it is certain that he said the wrong thing on the field, so his team was confronted with both a unfavorable wind position and the loss of the ball, not at all what Stram had in mind.

History will record, however, that the Texans overcame this unexpected and self-inflicted adversity and, after 17 minutes and 54 second of sudden-death play, they ended the two-year domination of the Houston Oilers in "The Other League."

The final score was Dallas 20, Houston 17. The winning points came on a 25 yard field goal by young Tommy Brooker. This epic struggle had earned its special place in history as "the longest football game ever played."

It is appropriate that Haynes' faux pas had nothing to do with the final outcome. For this was a game that produced a little of everything needed for a classic sports struggle and it certainly wasn't the kind of a duel that should ever be decided by something like a slip of the tongue – anyone's tongue, let alone one of the bright stars of that season.

To begin with, this game matched a couple of cross-state rivals, whose owners, K.S. (Bud) Adams, Jr. of Houston and Lamar Hunt of Dallas, had been most instrumental in fostering the idea of a rival league to the National Football League.

Hunt and Adams first discussed the possibility when it became apparent to each of them that they would be unsuccessful in their attempts to acquire an NFL franchise of any kind, either a new or a used one. With Hunt calling the signals and Adams backing him all the way, other potential owners were lined up and the new American Football League was launched late in 1959 with the first season of play to start in 1960.

Although they adopted slightly different approaches in building their pool of playing talent, both Adams and Hunt immediately had teams in the upper echelon of their respective divisions.

Under the guidance of personnel director John Breen, the Oilers sought playing talent from two sources: (1) the college draft and (2) the National and Canadian pro leagues. He was quite successful in both areas.

It was Houston, in fact, that scored the first big strike for the AFL in the war for player talent that would a few years later erupt into a multi-million dollar bidding contest. In 1960, the stakes were a lot lower, but the tug-of-war for the top stars was fierce, just the same as it would be a few years later.

It was in this climate that Adams signed Billy Cannon, Louisiana State's all-America halfback and Heisman Trophy winner in 1959, under the goal posts at the conclusion of the 1960 Sugar Bowl game in New Orleans. It turned out the Los Angeles Rams had also signed Cannon a mite earlier than New Year's Day, but the courts upheld the Oilers' claim. It was a significant victory for the new league.

Houston signed other top college stars of 1959, but Breen also searched for ex-NFL stars and Canadian performers who might help a new team in a new league. Here again he scored two strikes in Quarterback George Blanda, a long-time Chicago Bears

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performer, and fullback Charley Tolar, who had worn Pittsburgh Steeler colors.

Altogether, Houston's mixture of youth and experience was good enough to give the Oilers the first two AFL championships. In 1960, the Oilers whipped the Los Angeles Chargers, 24-16, and a year later, the Chargers call San Diego home, but the title result was the same, 10-3 for Houston.

Hunt, like Adams, did look to the college talent pool for major help in starting his new team but, unlike Adams, he shied away from the use of "NFL retreads," as they were called by a scoffing press. Hunt was also locked in a struggle for fan interest in north Texas with the Dallas Cowboys of the NFL. Hunt let everyone know he was in the fight to stay and he reasoned that his concentration on college talent would, in the long run, produce a superior team.

The Texans were extremely successful in the college draft, too, even when they had to battle checkbook-to-checkbook with the established NFL teams. Such stars as Fred Arbanas, E.J. Holub, Jerry Mays, Jim Tyrer, Johnny Robinson, Curtis McClinton and Bobby Hunt, to list a few, were products of the Texans' early search for playing talent and they were all destined to make a name for themselves in pro football for many years to come.

The potential was there but the pro experience was not and so the talent laden Texans had to settle for second place divisional finishes behind the Chargers the first two years.

Then, ironically, and "NFL reject" led them to a championship season in 1962. The single player was quarterback Len Dawson, who had been cut by the Cleveland Browns. He was the only Texan with NFL or Canadian experience in 1962.

The showdown battle pitted teams that were evenly matched. Each had regular season records of 11 wins and three losses. Dallas had whipped Houston, 31-7, in Houston, but the Oilers had retaliated, 14-6, just one week later in Dallas.

Houston had the league's no. 1 offense and Dallas was no. 2. On defense, it was just reversed with the Texans in the no. 1 spot. Dawson won the AFL individual passing crown and most valuable player honors as well, a twin feat Blanda had accomplished a year earlier.

Cookie Gilchrist of Buffalo won the 1962 rushing crown, but Haynes was no. 2 and Tolar no. 3 and both rushed past the magic 1000 yard mark. Either side had the guns that could produce a quick knock-out.

The championship match was to be staged in Houston's Jeppesen Stadium. Originally a high school stadium, Jeppesen, at the expense to Adams of \$200,000, had been converted into a passable temporary professional football facility seating 35,500. For this showdown, a record overflow crowd of 37,891 turned out in damp, but mild 59 degree weather.

In reality, the struggle could have been divided into three "games" – the first half, won by Dallas, 17-0; the second half, won by Houston, 17-0, thus making the third "game" – the overtime portion – necessary.

Stram, as he was to do seven years later in the 1970 Super Bowl game, threw an unexpected formation at the foe. Behind Dawson at quarterback, he inserted Jack Spikes and Curtis McClinton, a pair of fullback types, and slipped his 1000 yard rusher, Haynes, out to flanker. To stop Tolar's power thrusts up the middle and to defend against the Houston passing attack, Stram also reversed his usual defensive alignments up front.

Instead of keeping four men on the line and using three linebackers, he dropped defensive end Bill Hull back to a fourth linebacker spot. If a pass was in the offing, Hull could stay back, but if Tolar got the ball, Hull was expected to rush up to meet him.

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Whether the unique strategy helped or not, the Texans nevertheless piled up a commanding lead by halftime. A 52-yard Houston drive in the first period had ended when Holub intercepted Blanda's pass at the goal line and Holub's return was almost to midfield. Dawson got the Texans in close, but the Oilers stiffened and forced Brooker to settle for a 15-yard field goal.

In the second quarter, Dallas scored two touchdowns, both by Haynes. The first came on a four-play, 80-yard drive that was culminated by Dawson's 21-yard pass to Haynes, who used his halfback skills to scamper into the end zone.

Another interception, this one by Dave Grayson, set up the second Dallas TD. It took Dawson six plays from the 50 to score with Haynes, sometimes a running back, sometimes a flanker, cracking over from the 1.

But the second half was strikingly different. Bobby Jancik returned the kickoff to the Houston 32 and the Oilers marched the remaining 68 yards for a quick touchdown. Using ace receiver Charley Hennigan as a decoy, Blanda concentrated instead on Willard Dewveall. Blanda completed three of four to Dewveall for 51 yards, the final pass being a 15-yarder for the touchdown. Blanda converted and the Dallas lead had shrunk to 17-7.

A Houston drive at the start of the fourth period bogged down but Blanda cut the margin to 17-10 with a 31 yard field goal. There was still 11:07 to play.

The Oilers continued to apply the pressure and it finally paid off on the 49-yard march that saw Tolar plunge over from the 1 with 5:38 left. Blanda's conversion made it 17-all.

The overflow home crowd sensed the happy completion of a magnificent comeback and a third straight Oilers championship when Houston reached the Dallas 35 with time running out. But Blanda's 42-yard field goal attempt was blocked by Sherrill Headrick to force the game into sudden death.

Now we are back to the slip of the tongue by Haynes, certainly one of the AFL's first super-stars. No matter how this game had turned out, Haynes would have had to be remembered as one of the major cogs in the successful Texans grid machine.

Coach Stram had decided that, if his team won the toss to start the overtime, his team would kick off. There were a variety of reasons for Stram's daring and unorthodox decision.

First, there was a brisk wind that would affect not only the punting game but the kickoff game as well. If Houston were to kickoff, by Dallas choice, the Oilers undoubtedly would kick with the wind and Blanda most likely would kick over the goal, thus giving Dallas the ball on its own 20.

The Texans had a weak kicking game in 1962, the worst in the AFL, and Stram reasoned that, if the Texans failed to gain and were forced to punt, a poor kick into the wind might give the Oilers and Blanda quick position for a game-winning field goal. Besides, Stram had confidence in his league-leading defense.

But now Haynes inadvertently had given the Oilers the ball and the favorable wind as well. Haynes, of course, should have elected to defend the goal in front of the clock, which would have been the favorable wind position. Houston then most likely would have elected to receive and Stram's desires would have been fulfilled.

"The players were excited and tugging at Abner," a sympathetic Stram said later. "He just didn't understand the option. It was a mistake you don't like to make, but there was no use crying over it."

Stram's confidence in his defense was well-founded for Robinson and Hull swiped

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passes in the "fifth" quarter to erase Houston threats. Hull's interception was particularly vital, for the Oilers were already in field goal range. The play not only stopped Houston, but it put Dallas in position for the game-winning march. Hull returned to the 50 and Dallas had third-and-eight at the Houston 48 as the fifth quarter ended.

Now with the wind at their backs, the Texans moved in for the kill. Dawson passed to Spikes for 10 and then Spikes, voted the game's most valuable player, ran for 19. Four plays later, it was all over. Brooker, a 22-year-old rookie from Alabama, calmly applied the clincher.

More than being a great football game, which it was, this longest game ever got people to talking about the new league – people who had never before even recognized the new league existed. The national television audience had gotten much more than it had bargained for – at the very least, 17 minutes and 54 seconds more of hotly-contested football action.

The competing teams themselves experienced widely different fortunes following the 1962 championship game. For the Oilers, that game proved to be the end of an era. They dropped to third place in their division a year later and to fourth in 1964 and, except for a divisional title in 1967, they never were a serious title threat again.

As it turned out, this 1962 championship game was the last that Hunt's team would ever play under the Dallas Texans banner. Before the 1963 season rolled around, Hunt would accept an attractive bid to move his team to Kansas City and break off the attendance fight with the Cowboys in Dallas.

In Kansas City, as the Chiefs, the club continued to be a powerful factor in future AFL skirmishing. The Chiefs were the first AFL team to play in the Super Bowl and also the last, when they upset the heavily-favored Minnesota Vikings.

Some of the key figures of the 1962 Texans team were still around for the 1970 Super Bowl. They form a mighty impressive list – Dawson, Robinson, Holub, McClinton, Arbanas, Mays and Tyrer!

They are living proof that the early building program of Lamar Hunt and Hank Stram did exactly what it was intended to do – keep the Texans (and then the Chiefs) in top contention for years to come!