

THE BEST LITTLE QUARTERBACK YOU NEVER HEARD OF

By Bob Gill

Don Jonas may have been the best football player who never played in the NFL. Well, make that "never did anything in the NFL" - he was with the Philadelphia Eagles in 1962, but apparently did nothing more than cover kicks. Anyway, he left no record behind for that season.

At that point, as a rookie out of Penn State, Jonas was a halfback. He was no better than third on the Eagles' depth chart, behind Tim Brown and the immortal Theron Sapp. Cut loose in the offseason, he caught on with the Harrisburg Capitols, a new team in the Atlantic Coast Football League.

The 1960s were the second (and last) great era for minor league football, and the ACFL was about as good a minor league as you could ask for. It sent dozens of players - if not hundreds - into the NFL and the AFL. For a player like Jonas, still looking for a real shot in the big leagues, this was the place to be.

Shifted to flanker with the Capitols (what we'd call a wide receiver today), Jonas got off to a fine start, catching 20 passes for five touchdowns in the first five games. His 422 receiving yards led the league at that point, but trouble was brewing. First the Caps lost their starting quarterback to an injury; then his backup went down. In desperation the team turned to Jonas.

The results were better than anyone could have hoped. After a 2-2-1 start, Harrisburg won six of its last seven with Jonas at QB, finishing with the league's second-best record and its highest-scoring offense. Don just missed leading the ACFL in completions (trailing by five) and passing yards (by 64).

On top of that, he provided virtually the only ground game the Caps had, rushing for six TDs and enough yardage to finish 10th in the league. Combined with his receiving totals, that gave him 2,526 yards of total offense. No one else was within 500 yards.

Jonas also handled the Caps' kicking, and managed to lead the league in field goals and scoring - with 135 points in 12 games. (That total was boosted considerably by his 11 touchdowns.) This terrific performance didn't go unnoticed: He was an easy choice as the ACFL's most valuable player.

For some reason, though, it apparently didn't earn him another shot at the NFL. Instead Jonas returned to Harrisburg for 1964, only to suffer a serious ankle injury in the opener and hobble through a season of disappointment, missing several games and playing hurt in most of the others. One result of the injury (apparently) was that he never again approached his 1963 rushing totals, even when he played full seasons.

In the offseason, five teams deserted the ACFL and joined with five teams from the just-disbanded United Football League (the other top minor league) to form an even better circuit: the Continental Football League. Taking advantage of the situation, Jonas signed with the Newark Bears, one of the ACFL defectors. But though he passed for 3,268 yards and 26 TDs, he also threw a league-leading 31 interceptions, and the Bears finished 5-9.

The Bears left Newark in 1966 and found a new home in Florida. Changing their name to the Orlando Panthers, they also changed their fortunes - especially Jonas. Cutting his interceptions in half, he directed the league's most potent offense as the Panthers improved to a 12-2 record before dropping a 20-17 overtime decision to the Philadelphia Bulldogs in the championship game. He also took up his kicking duties again and led the league in scoring by a whopping margin of 47 points. The result was his second MVP award in four years of minor league play.

The beat went on in 1967: Jonas led the Panthers to an 11-3 record, and this time they capped it off in style, winning playoff games against the other two division winners to bring Orlando its first championship. Jonas repeated as the league scoring leader and the MVP, throwing for five TDs in the title game against the Orange County Ramblers. Incredibly, under the CoFL's system he failed to lead in passing, despite topping the league in yardage (by more than 1,500 yards) and touchdowns (by 20) while just missing the lead in average gain per attempt.

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The passing title, incidentally, went to Dan Henning of Norfolk, better-known for his work a couple of decades later as an NFL coach.

In 1968 Jonas lost his scoring title, but he did top the league's passers while leading Orlando (10-2) to another championship - and picking up his third straight MVP award in the process. The Panthers went 10-2 again in 1969, but Jonas failed to win the MVP and the team failed in its quest for a "three-peat," falling to the Indianapolis Capitols in the eastern playoff.

After a five-year run as the most ambitious minor league of its era, if not of any era, the COFL folded before the 1970 season. Four of its teams, including Orlando, joined the ACFL, but Jonas went north, signing with the Toronto Argonauts of the Canadian Football League. The move had mixed results: Though he passed pretty well and kicked very effectively, his "go-for-broke" play-calling did not endear him to the Toronto fans or the team's management, and he lost the starting QB spot late in the season to Tom Wilkinson, another CoFL veteran.

Jonas landed on his feet, though, moving to the Winnipeg Blue Bombers in 1971. There he led the western division - in fact, the whole CFL - in passing and scoring, a performance that earned him yet another MVP award. He repeated his passing title a year later, and the Bombers improved to 10-6; but they lost to Saskatchewan 27-24 in the Western finals, falling four points short of a trip to the Grey Cup game. Though he passed for 247 yards, Jonas contributed to his team's downfall by throwing four interceptions.

He threw 29 more the following season, offsetting his 3,363 yards passing as the Bombers fell to 4-11. He lost his kicking job during the season, and in midseason of 1974 the 35-year-old veteran was traded to the Hamilton Tiger-Cats for quarter back Chuck Ealey. His nine games with Hamilton marked the end of his career in pro football.

How good was Don Jonas?

In 12 years after leaving the NFL he won five MVP awards, at least one in each league he played in. And those leagues - the ACFL, the COFL and the CFL - were the very best minor leagues of their time - if in fact you consider the CFL "minor" at all. (There's nothing comparable to the first two leagues today; the recent WLAF came the closest, but was much more "minor.") They sent several players of all-pro caliber into the NFL: Coy Bacon, Bob Tucker, Marv Hubbard and Joe Theismann, to name a few. But at the minor league level, Jonas outdid them all.

You want stats? Jonas passed for 32,000 yards and 269 touchdowns. He scored more than 900 points. Before the ankle injury he was quite a runner; and during his five-game stint as a flanker he was among the best receivers in his league, too.

Unfortunately, he got little chance to show off the latter skills with the Eagles in 1962. The problem was a guy named Tim Brown, perhaps the most versatile back of his era (though largely forgotten today). In 1962 Brown rushed for 545 yards, caught 52 passes for 849 more, and ran back kickoffs for another 831.

That didn't leave much room for a rookie like Jonas to break in.

And as it turned out, Jonas was playing out of position with Philadelphia anyway. It was only through desperation in Harrisburg that he found his true calling as a quarterback. And even if he'd been listed as a QB with the Eagles, he still wouldn't have played much, because their starter in 1962 was a fellow named Jurgensen.

Jonas's MVP season in 1963 must have attracted some attention from NFL and AFL teams, and if he'd turned in another like it in 1964 it's hard to believe somebody wouldn't have signed him. But the ankle injury washed out that season, and in 1965 with Newark he threw too many interceptions. By the time he regained his MVP form he was 27 years old, and by then it was hard to shed the "minor league" label.

However, that doesn't mean no one noticed. The Denver Broncos, always short of quarterbacks in those days, offered Jonas something like \$15,000 to come out west, apparently after the 1967 season. But by then he was well-established as a hero in Orlando, with year-round endorsements on top of what was

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probably the CoFL's top salary, and the deal would have meant taking a pay cut besides leaving what was now his home.

So Jonas turned the Broncos down. It was his last chance at a major league job. By the time the COFL folded two years later he was past 30, and no one south of the Canadian border was interested in him any more.

Would Jonas have succeeded in Denver? That depends on what you mean by success.

Would he have replaced Namath, Dawson or Daryle Lamonica as the AFL's top quarterback? Of course not. In all likelihood he wasn't as good as John Hadl or John Brodie either - let alone the giants like Uintas, Jorgensen and Tarkenton.

But plenty of QBs who can't measure up to those guys still have good NFL careers - Billy Kilmer, Craig Morton, Bill Munson from Jonas's time, and many more. Jonas may very well have been on the same level as them. Circumstances forced him to be a big fish in a small pond; and when he got a belated chance to test the NFL waters, he had grown to prefer life in the pond.

But in the world of minor league football in the 1960s, he was the biggest fish of them all.

Year	ATT	COM	YDS	Avg	TD	IN	TD	XP	FG	Pts
1963	233	112	1649	7.1	15	14	11	36	11	135
1964	204	94	1264	6.2	13	16	-	17	2	23
1965	437	206	3268	7.5	26	31	1	-	-	6
1966	257	129	2512	9.8	25	16	6	62	11	131
1967	407	203	3446	8.5	41	21	3	48	12	102
1968	275	151	2636	9.6	28	14	1	50	6	74
1969	272	137	2408	8.9	23	18	-	42	8	66
U.S.	2085	1032	17183	8.2	171	130	22	255	50	537
1970	256	124	2041	8.0	17	25	3	33	15	100
1971	485	253	4036	8.3	27	31	4	40	15	121
1972	447	252	3583	8.0	27	26	1	45	14	97
1973	452	226	3363	7.4	15	29	2	12	9	54
1974	290	142	2041	7.0	12	19	2	-	-	13
CFL	1930	977	15064	7.8	98	130	12	130	53	385
Totals	4015	2009	32247	8.0	269	260	34	385	103	922

Note: CFL scoring totals also include "singles" - 4 in 1970, 12 in 1971, 4 in 1972, 3 in 1973 and 1 in 1974.