

“Cup of Coffee” Players: John Stock

by Mel Bashore

What are the odds of a guy with only limited sandlot football experience and who never played in college making a pro football roster? Conventional wisdom wouldn't give a guy a chance in China of that happening. Nevertheless, it happened for John Stock -- a magic, albeit too brief, moment in his life. As he says, he was an NFL player for “just enough time for a cup of coffee.” He played in two regular season games for the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1956.

Stock was born on March 7, 1933, in Weirton, West Virginia, on the east bank of the Ohio River, only about twenty miles west of Pittsburgh. He played high school football in Scott Township in Pennsylvania. After graduating, he entered the University of Pittsburgh.

During spring practice of his freshman year at Pitt, Stock broke some vertebrae in his lower back. The year was 1953 and his dreams of playing college football came to a screeching halt. After his back healed, he spent a stint in the Army. He returned to Pittsburgh in 1955 and got a job in a steel mill.

"That fall," Stock recalled, "I was asked to play in a sandlot football game against the Bloomfield Rams. It seems that Bloomfield had a pretty good quarterback who recently had a tryout with the Steelers and was just cut." That “pretty good quarterback” was Johnny Unitas. A ninth-round draft pick by the Steelers in 1955, Unitas never even got into a pre-season game before being let go. Hindsight is ever so cruel to the player personnel decision makers – like Steelers coach Walt Kiesling -- who make mistakes of such major proportions.

John Stock faced Unitas again in 1956. "The next time I played against Johnny Unitas," recalled Stock, “was the following season in an exhibition game against the Baltimore Colts.” The Steelers' loss proved to be the Colts' gain -- a rather big gain.

As a twist of fate brought Unitas to the Colts, so also did an equally amazing turn of fate bring John Stock to the Pittsburgh Steelers. Out of the blue, he received an invitation to try out for the Steelers in 1956. Having played in only two rinky-dink sandlot football games in the previous three years and without any college experience, Stock was flabbergasted at the tryout offer. Apparently a Pitt coach who had viewed him in the sandlot games put in a good word for him with the Steelers. He was thrilled for the opportunity and signed for \$4,500. Stock said, “I would have signed for \$45,000!” With the fates of fortune beating on his doorstep, he even turned down an offer to be managed by Jack Mintz, manager of heavyweight boxing champion Ezzard Charles.

The Steeler training camp in the fall of 1956 was in the little river town of Olean in western New York. With his minimal experience, Stock really didn't expect to hang around very long. As Stock phrased it, “confidence was not really part of my character when I reported.”

He was 15 to 20 pounds too light to play defensive end. He was also awed to be on the same field with guys like Ernie Stautner, Jack Butler, Ted Marchibroda, and Dale Dodrill. He really felt that he was out of his league. Although they didn't voice it, he knew that his friends thought so too. From the beginning, the quickness and hard-hitting of the other players seemed to verify what he thought his friends were thinking: “John, you'll never make it.”

In training camp, he took a beating in the Texas drills against players who were 25 to 40 pounds heavier than him. However, in the tackling drills he fared much better.

Stock's most vivid memory of training camp was the belated appearance of Ernie Stautner to camp. Ernie made a habit of always reporting a little later to camp than the other players. In 1956 he stretched his

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usual late arrival until two weeks after everyone else. Player-coach Bill McPeak assured everyone that Stautner would eventually report sooner or later. Nonetheless, Coach Walt Kiesling was fuming.

In the last scrimmage before their first exhibition game, Ernie was spotted walking down the hill toward the practice field with his helmet, shoulder pads, and jersey in hand. As soon as the coaches saw him, Kiesling blew the whistle signalling the players to get ready for the "rough stuff." In his anger, he hoped that his training-camp toughened players would give him a good working over. He hoped they would take him to school and exact a little discipline. He called out the names of the offensive and defensive starters for the scrimmage. Stautner's name was among them.

As Stock recalled, Stautner had "no time to warm up, certainly no time to get in shape, and not even time to get his jersey tucked in" before the scrimmage began. In his anger, Kiesling "in the worst way wanted to beat Stautner down." For the next hour in the hot sun, Kiesling pitted Stautner against every player on the offensive line -- much to the "anguish of every man" who lined up against him. Stock felt supremely grateful that he played on the same side of the ball with Ernie. In this way, he avoided getting his bell rung by the founder of the head slap.

In an exhibition game against the Eagles that fall, Ernie knocked a man cuckoo when he whacked him on the side of his helmet. Although Stautner's hand was severely crushed in delivering the blow, he played the rest of the season with it in a cast. Ernie was one tough cookie.

Stock began the regular season on the reserve squad. It was a proud moment for Stock when the team manager asked him for his jacket size. Even though he had to buy the jacket for \$35 and purchase his own football shoes, Stock considered it one of the proudest moments in his rookie year. At that time the rules permitted two players on the reserve squad and thirty-three on the active team roster.

With the rest of the team, Stock reported for team practice at Forbes Field. They practiced from 9 AM until noon. Following the practice, Stock went home, grabbed a bite to eat, and packed his lunch bucket to the steel mill where he worked the 4 PM to midnight shift. He was finally called up to be on the regular squad in December on the next to last game against the Lions. He played the second half at end against the Lions with the game well out of reach. He played almost the entire game against the Redskins the following week.

Having made a fair impression, Stock signed for what he termed a "substantial" raise -- from \$4,500 in 1956 to \$4,900 in 1957. Chuck Cherundolo, one of the Steeler coaches, told him about the financial realities of pro football in that era. "You're playing for pride and the love of the game," Cherundolo counseled. "If you want money or security, be a truck driver."

As the 1957 season approached, Stock's hopes were high. Unfortunately, his dreams were dashed when he was injured during the first scrimmage in the fall. He never played again.