

WAIVER MISBEHAVIOR: How the Chargers Lost Jack Kemp

By Bob Gill

Considering the big money teams shell out for star quarterbacks today, it's hard to believe that in the 1960s one team picked up an all-star signal-caller for a mere \$100 because a Hall of Fame coach misunderstood a new wrinkle in the AFL's waiver rule. But it happened, and the deal changed the course of AFL history.

The quarterback in question was Jack Kemp, who had led the Chargers into the AFL title game in each of the league's first two seasons, earning all-AFL recognition in 1960 and making the all-league second team in 1961.

Though they had lost both championship games, San Diego was the preseason favorite to win a third straight Western Division title in 1962. But the Chargers opened the season with a disappointing loss to Denver. They followed that with a costly 40-14 victory over the New York Titans in which Kemp and his backup, rookie John Hadl, were both injured. A couple of days later it was revealed that Kemp had a broken finger, but he put on his game face and insisted he'd be able to play on Sunday. Since the Chargers' third QB was another untested rookie named Dick Wood, Gillman delayed making a decision on his starter as long as he could.

By the weekend, though, it became clear that Kemp just wasn't able to go, and wouldn't be for quite some time. Gillman didn't want an unavailable player taking up a spot on his 33-man roster, so he moved Kemp to "injured deferred" status -- essentially what we call injured reserve today. To do so, he first had to put Kemp on waivers, at which point any team in the league could claim him for \$100. And Buffalo did.

Every book I've checked reports this as a risky move by Gillman that backfired, but that's not the case. It seems Gillman expected that if a team claimed Kemp, he could be taken off the waiver wire, and the Chargers would simply be forced to keep him on their active roster. And if he hadn't waited so long to make a decision about Kemp, that's exactly what would have happened. But the AFL had a new rule that anyone placed on waivers on Saturday or Sunday could not be recalled if claimed by another team -- a rule of which Gillman was apparently unaware.

Gillman himself contributed to the confusion, describing the loss of Kemp not as a mistake but as a calculated risk that didn't pan out. That's how the San Diego *Union* reported it on Sept. 26, 1962, a day after the deal was announced, but it seems clear that the coach was simply trying to put the best light possible on his procedural error. Before long he was talking as if he'd simply *released* his starting quarterback, saying he didn't believe the Chargers could win consistently with Kemp and that the "passing offense has been questionable for a year and a half." He also mentioned three delay-of-game penalties called during the Denver game "because of Kemp's indecision," and said even one such penalty was unacceptable. And he touched on a real sore spot when he said that "with better passing in either title game we would have won."

The latter claim certainly has merit; in the two championship games, both against the Oilers, Kemp had completed 38 of 73 passes for only 397 yards and no touchdowns, with six interceptions. The lack of offense was especially costly in the second game, in which the Chargers picked off five George Blanda passes but failed to take advantage in a 10-3 loss. But since the team had posted regular season records of 10-4 and 12-2, the idea that they couldn't "win consistently" with Kemp seems absurd.

It's also true that Kemp had played poorly in the first two games of 1962, completing only 13 of 45 passes, and with star running back Paul Lowe out for the season there would be more pressure than ever on the Chargers' passing attack.

Still, consider this: One of the major concerns in San Diego was the lack of a top-notch center, and just a few weeks earlier the Raiders, who had lost QB Tom Flores for the season, had offered to trade Jim Otto for Kemp. If Gillman really believed Kemp couldn't cut it as the Chargers' quarterback, would he have turned down a deal for the AFL's best center? Of course not.

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In any case, the Chargers stumbled through a 4-10 season in 1962 with Hadl and Wood calling the signals, and afterward Gillman was convinced he needed a veteran quarterback to handle the job until Hadl was ready to be a starter. In the offseason he acquired Tobin Rote, a former NFL star who had been playing in Canada for the past three years. The move was a complete success: Rote led the AFL in passing and the Chargers won the championship in convincing fashion, routing the Boston Patriots 51-10 in the title game.

San Diego made it back to the championship game in 1964, as Hadl gradually took over the starting QB job, and again a year later, with Rote now gone and Hadl in complete command. But the Chargers were trounced each year by the AFL's new powerhouse team -- the Buffalo Bills, led by none other than Jack Kemp. The Bills made one more trip to the championship game in 1966, losing to Kansas City, and faded after that, but not before Kemp had refuted Gillman's charge that a team couldn't win consistently with him at the helm.

The acquisition of Kemp turned the Bills into a mini-dynasty, but to be honest, even though the whole situation was embarrassing for Gillman, you can't say it was terribly costly, since the Chargers did pretty well without Kemp from 1963 to '65. And the team's subsequent fall from title contention wasn't the fault of Hadl, who was a fine quarterback well into the '70s.

In the long run even Oakland, the team that had wanted Kemp badly enough to offer Jim Otto for him, benefited indirectly from Buffalo's coup. After the 1966 season, frustrated by back-to-back second-place finishes, the Raiders traded for a quarterback named Daryle Lamonica, gave him their starting job, and compiled a regular season record of 37-4-1 over the last three years of the AFL as Lamonica was twice named the league's MVP. Why was such a quality quarterback available? Because he was considered expendable by his former team, the Buffalo Bills, who didn't need him because they had ... Jack Kemp.