

# NICK BUONICONTI

By Joe Horrigan

Courtesy of the Pro Football Hall of Fame

Nick Buoniconti, an All-America guard and linebacker at Notre Dame, always “played bigger than his size.” Following his senior season, a Chicago newspaper speculated that the Springfield, Massachusetts native was “sure to be one of the first three linemen picked in the forthcoming NFL draft.”

However, it was not to be. Just before he was to report to play in the East-West Game, Buoniconti was summoned to the office of Joe Kuharich, Notre Dame’s head football coach. There, to his amazement, Nick was told by Kuharich that he didn’t think he “was big enough to play pro football.” Adding insult to injury, the coach added that he wouldn’t recommend Buoniconti to the NFL. “It wouldn’t be right,” he said.

“I didn’t expect to be a first draft choice,” Buoniconti stated, “but I figured I could be good for a team that needed linebackers. All I wanted was a shot, a chance.”

Fortunately, a scout for the Boston Patriots of the upstart American Football League sent a glowing report on the Notre Dame guard/linebacker to Patriots head coach Mike Holovak. The Patriots, confused by the NFL’s apparent disinterest, drafted Nick in the thirteenth round of the 1962 AFL Draft.

Following the draft, Kuharich, in a chance meeting with Patriots owner Billy Sullivan, strongly encouraged him to waste no time and sign Buoniconti. Kuharich’s apparent about face came after the coach reviewed the films of the other All-Americans drafted by the NFL, and realized his guy was as good or better. “I don’t care who your middle linebacker is,” he reportedly told Sullivan, “Nick will take his job away.”

Buoniconti got what he wanted – a chance – and immediately set out to prove that Kuharich’s original assessment and the NFL snub was a mistake.

Determined not be overlooked again, Nick attracted the attention of his coaches and new teammates almost immediately. In the first few minutes of his first day of practice, the feisty linebacker started a fistfight with a popular veteran player. Never mind that the player, Tony Romeo, was an ordained minister. Nick felt he had taken a cheap shot, and rookie or not, he was not going to take it.

“I would have done anything to win a job,” he explained in a 1967 interview with *Sport Magazine*. “I wasn’t

going to stand there and just take it.” His confidence and hardnosed play impressed his coaches, and by the first game of the season, the 5-11, 220-pound long shot was the Patriots’ starting middle linebacker. At season’s end he was second-team All-AFL. The following year, 1963, he earned the first of his seven consecutive first-team All-AFL honors.

Nicknamed “Skippy,” Nicholas Anthony Buoniconti, Jr., was born on December 15, 1940. He attended Cathedral High School, where he was a standout football player.

Cathedral football coach Billy Wise, remembered Nick well. “I knew all about him when he came along,” Wise told the *Springfield Sunday Republican* in 1972. “There was a good bunch of football players in the South End at the time, and a lot of them came to Cathedral. I figured Skippy could make it even as a freshman. So I gave him a chance. I put him right in there and away he went.” At 13½, he was the youngest player ever to earn a regular berth on a Cathedral team.

Buoniconti, who helped the Cathedral Panthers capture the Western Massachusetts AA Conference title in 1955, was a natural. “He could see along the line and stick his nose right into the play,” said Wise.

Buoniconti’s early years, however, were marked with a seemingly incredible string of minor crises. When he was two he almost drowned off the Connecticut shore. When he was three he fell out of a moving car. A truck hit him when he was six. When he was eight he had scarlet fever, and at nine he broke his arm. In his junior year of high school he had knee surgery and doctors removed all the cartilage. Fortunately, the string of bad luck didn’t seem to follow him as he moved on to college and the pros.

The Patriots, in 1962, when Nick arrived, had a weak secondary. As a result the coaches had him blitz sometimes seven out of 10 plays. Critics began to suggest that without the blitz, the under-sized linebacker might not be as effective. But by 1965, the Patriots secondary improved and the number of called blitzes dropped significantly. Buoniconti’s play, if anything, improved, and with another selection to the

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all-league team the criticism stopped. Even his relatively small stature began to be called an asset.

"I think Nick's lack of height helps him," said teammate Bob Dee. "I have to bend down to make a tackle. So I hit with only 60 percent of my strength. Nick comes right up from the ground and can hit with all his strength."

Although considered a hard hitter, Nick argued that his speed, whether it was used to chase down an opposing quarterback or to drop back into pass coverage, was his strongest asset. "As a middle linebacker, I make it strictly by quickness, not by overpowering anybody," he offered.

When (Dick) Butkus hits you, you fall the way he wants," the good-natured Buoniconti once remarked. "When I hit you, you fall the way you want. But really, there's no difference. You still fall."

Still, others disagreed with Nick's self-assessment. "I've got nothing against hydrants," offered one opposing fullback after four quarters of play against Buoniconti and the Patriots. "It's just that I don't enjoy being hit by one all afternoon."

In one stretch in 1966, the Patriots defense, with Buoniconti plugging up the middle, stymied the potent running attacks of the AFL's four best teams in successive games. The Buoniconti-led defense held the Kansas City Chiefs to just 76 yards rushing, the New York Jets to 29, the Buffalo Bills to 52, and the San Diego Chargers to 40.

On the other hand, Nick demonstrated his speed and ability to sniff out a play by picking off three passes in a single game, against the Bills in 1968. It was just the second time in AFL history that a linebacker recorded three interceptions in one game.

Perhaps Kenny Graham, a defensive back with the Chargers, summed it up best. "He's built like a fireplug, but covers the field like a halfback."

Nick was also team leader. When Dee retired prior to the start of the 1968 campaign, Buoniconti, who captained his Notre Dame team, moved in as the Patriots' defensive captain. It was a position he would also assume with the Dolphins.

During his seven seasons in Boston, the speedy hard-hitting linebacker was the class of the Patriots defense. He led in pass interceptions with 24 and was the team's leading tackler. Injuries in 1968, however, limited his play to eight games.

Prior to the start of the 1969 season, in a surprise move, the Patriots announced that they had traded their defensive star to the Miami Dolphins for quarterback Kim Hammond, linebacker John Bramlett,

and a fifth-round draft pick in 1970. The draft pick ended up being Bob Olson, a linebacker who didn't make the team.

Stunned by the trade, Buoniconti considered retiring. After all, he had earned his law degree while playing for the Patriots. "I came very close to quitting then," he said. "I had a lot of things to consider. I knew I could make a go of it without football – with my law practice and all."

However, after talking with then-Dolphins head coach George Wilson, Buoniconti decided to make the move. Wilson called it "the greatest trade we ever made." So sure that he would make the difference on the team, one of the first things Wilson did was to name Nick captain of the defense.

Nick immediately picked up where he left off with the Patriots. Buffalo quarterback Jack Kemp, after an early season loss to the Dolphins, observed that; "He's still the best middle linebacker in pro football."

As the veteran leader of a young squad, Buoniconti was quick to share the credit for the defense's success. "The coaches here have made some fine moves with a couple of our young linemen," he explained. "They put rookie Bill Stanfill at defensive end and switched Manny Fernandez from defensive end to tackle. They're young and aggressive. All they lacked was coordination and leadership on the field. If anything, I gave them the leadership and confidence they needed." Buoniconti's contributions earned him the team's Most Valuable Player honors that season.

Following the 1969 season, however, Wilson was fired and Nick suddenly found himself in yet another untenable situation. Not only did young, inexperienced players surround him, now he would have to play for a new head coach. But that coach wasn't just any coach, it was the defensively minded Don Shula.

Shula knew he could rely on the veteran linebacker to be the stabilizing force of the young defense. But he also knew that in order to make his defense work, Nick would need to become a more disciplined player.

"I'd always been a freelancer," Buoniconti reminisced. "I could do about what I wanted – blitzing, that type of thing.... It was almost like learning to walk again." But like every other challenge he faced, Buoniconti accepted the change with enthusiasm and dedication. The results were immediate.

The Dolphins, in 1970, behind a stingy defense and conservative offense improved from 3-10-1 to 10-4 and advanced to the divisional playoff game, only to lose to the Oakland Raiders 21-14. Nick was again named the team's MVP.

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The next season, the team again pressed on to the playoffs, eliminating the Kansas City Chiefs 27-24 in overtime and advancing to the AFC championship game. In that game the Dolphin defense shut out the reigning world champions Baltimore Colts 21-0 and earned the right to represent the AFC in Super Bowl VI.

"Nondescript," is what Buoniconti called the Dolphins' 1971 defensive squad that surrendered just 174 points. "We get absolutely no recognition here," he half-jokingly told reporters. "We have no big defensive superstars like Buck Buchanan or Willie Lanier. We're too young," he explained. "Our starters are 23, 24, and 25 years old, except for me (Buoniconti was 31 at the time). Our play is team play.... We have no stars, and the offense gets the publicity. So we have pride."

Unfortunately, in Super Bowl VI, the powerful Dallas Cowboys seriously bruised the defense's pride, throttling Miami 24-3.

The following season the Dolphins defense really gelled into a cohesive unit. Capitalizing on their relative anonymity, the defense accepted and reveled under the nickname "No-Name Defense." Under Shula's no-nonsense approach, the team became the first NFL franchise to go undefeated and untied in the regular and post-season, and avenged their Super Bowl VI loss with a 14-7 win over the Washington Redskins in Super Bowl VII.

In the locker room after the game, a jubilant Buoniconti reflected. "No team has ever done what we've done, and I don't think any team ever will," he said. But clearly the pressure of going undefeated had added significantly to the pressure to win. "Right now, just eight minutes after the final whistle," he continued, "we can't even find time for joy. If anything, we feel relief. We just didn't want to lose."

Although the obvious highlight of his career, Buoniconti didn't rest on his laurels following the undefeated season. Some even suggest that he experienced his best season overall in 1973 when he set a then-team record of 162 tackles, 91 of which were unassisted and was named the Dolphins' MVP for a third time.

"It's hard to be a good middle linebacker," Nick once told a reporter. "You need to know a lot of things. But once you learn them, you can stick around awhile."

Nick Buoniconti stuck around for 14 playing seasons (1962-1974, 1976). During that time he was first- or second-team All-AFL/AFC 10 times, and was named to eight AFL All-Star Games or Pro Bowls. A driving force, he inspired his teammates with his outstanding play and fiery leadership.

"Every play is like life or death," he once said when asked why he was so relentless. "I can't think of anything except the play that is taking place at the moment."

Buoniconti, who recorded 32 career interceptions, was named to the All-Time AFL Team in 1970. And although he was sometimes overlooked or underappreciated, his hard work, determination, and self-confidence has earned him permanent recognition with his sport's highest honor, election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

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### NICK BUONICONTI

Linebacker

Buoniconti, Nicholas Anthony

5-11, 220

College: Notre Dame

High School: Cathedral [Springfield, MA]

Born: December 15, 1940, Springfield, MA

Drafted: 1962 Round 13 Bos

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#### Year Team GM

1962 Bos	14	1967 Bos	13	1972 Mia	14
1963 Bos	14	1968 Bos	8	1973 Mia	13
1964 Bos	14	1969 Mia	13	1974 Mia	13
1965 Bos	14	1970 Mia	14	1975	dnf
1966 Bos	14	1971 Mia	14	1976 Mia	11