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Gary Bugenhagen

This article was written by Budd Bailey

Gary Bugenhagen is a man who became familiar with and to upstate New York. He was born there, raised there, went to college there, and mostly stayed there in his adult life. For our purposes, he even played some pro football there.

His name is still mentioned as one of the best players to come out of his high school. But his pro football career simply didn't work out the way he, his friends and his neighbors hoped – for a few reasons.



Credit – Robert L. Smith

Gary Alan Bugenhagen was born on February 2, 1945, in Buffalo, New York. He grew up in Clarence, a small town that in the 1960s saw portions of the municipality make the transition from rural area to suburb of Buffalo. The only other NFL player to graduate from Clarence Central is Mark Murphy, who went on to play for the Washington Redskins and eventually become the team president of the Green Bay Packers.

Bugenhagen's introduction into football was delayed for a while. He had a heart condition called mitral valve prolapse. It usually isn't overly serious, but doctors weren't sure for a while if Gary could play football with it. Finally, he received clearance to do so and joined the Clarence football team as a sophomore.

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Gary was part of a couple of first-place teams during his time in high school. Bugenhagen also participated in wrestling and track for the Red Devils. He graduated in 1963 and eventually was inducted into the school's Wall of Fame for athletes.

Bugenhagen wondered if he'd wind up working in the steel mills of Lackawanna after high school, but Syracuse University changed those thoughts. It was the only Division I school to offer him a full scholarship. He soon suited up under legendary coach Ben Schwartzwalder. In the fall of 1964, Bugenhagen was part of the varsity squad as a backup offensive lineman. Schwartzwalder called him his best sophomore lineman, telling a wire service reporter, "The lad has a future."

Football for the Orangemen at that time of the team's history was rather simple. The team was in the midst of an absolutely golden era for running backs, and Schwartzwalder liked nothing better than giving them the ball. Jim Brown had started the run of great backs in the 1950s, and he was followed by Heisman Trophy winner Ernie Davis.

The leading rushers on that 1964 team were Jim Nance (1,021 yards) and Floyd Little (874 yards). Nance led the American Football League in rushing for two straight seasons with the Boston Patriots. Little had a Hall of Fame career with the Denver Broncos. The team's two quarterbacks in 1964 only threw a total of four touchdown passes for the entire season. Syracuse went on to a 7-3 regular season, and lost to LSU in the Sugar Bowl on New Year's Day. The team was ranked 12th in the country in the final wire service poll.

Bugenhagen took a step up in 1965, moving into the starting lineup. The team went 7-3 again, although it didn't receive a bowl invitation. The Orangemen had the same plan of attack as before – run the ball. That was just fine with Bugenhagen, who said he was better at run blocking at that point in his career. Starting quarterback Rick Cassata (another suburban Buffalo native who later played seven years in the Canadian Football League) only threw two touchdown passes for the entire season. Little was now the featured back, and he ran for 1,065 yards and 14 touchdowns.

Little had a new playmate in the backfield in the form of Larry Csonka, a bruising fullback who ran for 795 yards. According to Sports Illustrated magazine, Bugenhagen once told Csonka to bang into things in the offseason to build up the size of his forearms. The lineman had used that technique against locker room walls. Csonka's father

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eventually called up Schwartzwalder in the summer, and told him to get Larry out of his house because he was “knocking down the walls.”

Bugenhagen took his game to the next level a season later. The offensive lineman was an All-American and All-East selection in 1966. By that point, Little and Csonka were on their way to becoming one of the great running back duos in the history of college football. Little ran for 811 yards and 12 touchdowns, while Csonka did even better with 1,012 yards and 12 touchdowns.

Syracuse lost its first two games but won its final eight regular season games. One of those games was a 34-7 win over West Virginia in which Syracuse piled up 431 yards rushing as a team. The Orangemen were knocked off by Tennessee in the Gator Bowl. After the season, Gary won the Joseph Alexander Excellence in Football, Scholarship, and Citizenship Award from Syracuse.

When the time came to pick Syracuse’s all-century team in 2002, players like Little, Csonka, Brown and Davis were easy choices. But Bugenhagen was remembered as well, as he was picked for the mythical squad.

Once the Gator Bowl was over, Gary could start to think about his next step in football. He received letters of interest from the Houston Oilers, San Diego Chargers and Dallas Cowboys; the Oilers even flew him to Houston for a workout. In March, the NFL and AFL got together for their first joint draft since the 1966 merger. That was bad news for players like Bugenhagen, since the bidding wars for college talent had come to an end and owners weren’t throwing as many dollars at top players as before. Now it was a matter of waiting to see what team would select him.

It couldn’t have worked out too much better for Bugenhagen. The Buffalo Bills drafted the 6-foot-2, 250-pound lineman in the fourth round (102nd overall), fulfilling Bugenhagen’s childhood dream. Gary thought at the time, “I’m going to go in and become a pro football player with Buffalo. I’m going to spend five or 10 or 15 years with Buffalo, and get out and then spend the rest of my life in Buffalo, and make a career doing something else.”

He was only the second Buffalo native to be drafted by the Bills in their relatively brief history. Linebacker Ray May of Southern California went 13 picks before Bugenhagen as he was selected by Pittsburgh. May played 118 games in the NFL, leading the others taken in that round. Little, by the way, went sixth overall.

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Before reporting to training camp, Bugenhagen and Little took part in the Coaches All-American game in Atlanta, a showcase for college graduates who were on their way to the pros. Then, they split up for good. It took a little extra time for Gary to work out a contract, as he missed the first couple of days of training camp before signing with Buffalo.

Bugenhagen joined a Bills' team that wasn't at the top of the football world, but thought it was fairly close to it. Buffalo had won the Eastern Division title of the AFL in 1966 for the third straight year. But the Bills' hopes of reaching the first Super Bowl were emphatically ended by the Chiefs in the AFL title game. The hope was that the Bills would win the division for the fourth straight year in 1967.

That team had most of its core group back, but it had completed a substantial trade with the Raiders. Buffalo sent Daryle Lamonica and Glenn Bass and a draft choice to the Raiders for Art Powell, Tom Flores and two draft choices. It still considered one of the most one-sided bad trades in Buffalo's history, as Lamonica led the Raiders to the Super Bowl in his first season there. Meanwhile, the Bills had injuries to players like Bobby Burnett and Bobby Crockett didn't help, and the roster had started to show some signs of age as well. The team slumped to 4-10.

It wasn't a great year for Bugenhagen either. The Bills' entire starting line was back for the 1967 season. That meant Bugenhagen was forced to sit and wait for his chance. He played in all 14 games but only started one of them. Little did Gary know at the end of that season that his professional association with the Buffalo area was about to come to an end.

The Cincinnati Bengals were about ready to enter the NFL for the 1968 season, and they needed some players. Interestingly enough for Bugenhagen, their very first player had a Buffalo connection. John Stofa, a quarterback from the University of Buffalo, was acquired in December 1967 from the Miami Dolphins for two draft choices.

A month or so later, the NFL conducted its college draft and its expansion draft. The Bengals had the second overall pick and used it on Tennessee center Bob Johnson – a good pick, but they bypassed future Hall of Famers Claude Humphrey and Csonka in the process. When the expansion draft began a short time later, Cincinnati took five players from each of the established AFL teams. Bugenhagen was one of the selections from the Bills' roster. For the record, he was joined on the trip to Ohio by Burnett, Charlie King,

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Bob Schmidt, and Rich Zecher in Cincinnati ... at least on paper. King was the only player of the five who actually played a game for the Bengals.

Bugenhagen never even made it to training camp, as world events took precedence. The Vietnam War was raging at that point in history. Three days after the season ended, Bugenhagen joined a National Guard unit in Niagara Falls. His group was called to active duty shortly after that, and before he knew it, he was on his way to Vietnam as part of 18 months of service with the Air Force.

“I came back from Vietnam with pleurisy (an inflammation of lung tissue) and some other injuries,” Bugenhagen told Jeff Miller in the book, “Rockin’ the Rockpile.” “I tried it at Cincinnati (in 1969), but I was only there for one week and they let me go.” He rested up a bit, and joined the Indianapolis Capitols of the Continental Football League. Bugenhagen made the All-Star team and was part of a championship squad there, and decided to give pro football one more chance.

The Boston Patriots gave him that chance in 1970, signing him as a free agent. He was placed in a difficult situation right away, as the NFL and AFL Players Association had merged, and the new organization was working with the league on a collective bargaining agreement. Bugenhagen, who obviously had no bargaining position in his situation, opted to be one of the few veterans in the league who reported to training camp. The others went on strike for two days, and then a new CBA was reached.

With that settled, Bugenhagen had the chance to play with his former teammate at Syracuse, linebacker Jim Cheyunski. Bugenhagen made the team as a reserve offensive lineman, and even started seven games that season. Bugenhagen was playing against the Bengals in the year’s final game when his career abruptly ended.

“Jim Nance ran a dive play up through my hole,” he said. “(Bengals linebacker) Bill Bergey filled in – he played with reckless abandon. My knee and his shoulder came into direct contact and that was it. (He had surgery in the offseason, and) then I had complications from the injury, and I never got back to football. At least I went out as a starter, and satisfied my potential that I could play against the Cincinnati Bengals even though they told me to go on and do something else.”

Bugenhagen soon headed back to Syracuse after that. He tried his luck as a stockbroker after retirement, but soon moved into the sporting goods business. He stayed with that for about 30 years, and then became a real estate broker. Gary was still at it 50 years after

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leaving football. He also created the “Believe to Achieve Award,” dedicated to saluting those with significant contributions to the Central New York sports community.

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