

SHAKESPEARE IN CLEATS: THE STORY OF BILL FISHER

From Minor League Vagabond to Shakespeare aficionado

By Ace Hendricks

Many minor league players spend their time as vagabonds, moving from team to team, league to league hoping to get that chance at the stardom and paycheck that had eluded them while playing at a lower level. You've heard stories of players like Johnny Unitas and Kurt Warner, who toil in the minor league before striking it rich.

But what about those you don't hear about? The players who spend their whole careers without ever making the big time, are just in the wrong situation, missed an opportunity due to signing with this team and not that team? Spend their young adult lives just one play short of making an NFL squad?

And what about those that also enjoy Romeo and Juliet? Love reading poetry? Enjoy a good Shakespeare play instead of watching the "big game" on Sunday?

Bill Fisher was one such player. He played from 1969 to 1979 in the minors, playing in top minor league systems, such as the Continental Football League and the Atlantic Coast Football League. Later in his career, he played in leagues such as the Midwest Football League, High Desert Football League and the California Football League, where he finished his career.

He also attended three different "major league" camps, all with different teams and different results. As a rookie in 1969, he was with the Denver Broncos, 1971 with the Houston Oilers and with British Columbia of the Canadian Football League in 1972.

If Bill played today, he would certainly be in the NFL or the Canadian Football League. At 6'4", 205-pounds, he would be the prototype free safety. Good size, exceptional speed and cover skills. In 1969, there were 26 NFL teams, who had just 40 players to a roster. Today, each of the 32 teams carries 53 players.

In seasons where Bill played in the upper echelon of the minor leagues, he never led the league in interceptions, nor was he listed among the league leaders. It wasn't until playing in the California Football League, was he named to an all-league team, where he was named twice, in 1974-75.

But, although not a "star", Bill was always a professional prospect due to his good height for a defensive back, and his ability to cover a lot of ground from the free safety position.

Bill was always a starter with his respective teams, and was always able to find teams that would pay him for his services. Bill was also blessed with playing for some fine squads. In six seasons on minor league squads, his teams never had losing seasons. He was a part of two divisional champions and two league champions.

CURTAIN UP

But Fisher also has an interesting side to him besides his ability to play football. He has a love for the theatre. He has performed on stage, directed and also taught theater in a classroom setting.

He has taught at the restored Globe theatre in London, an historical open-air theatre for performing arts on the Thames River, where Shakespeare performed, and where Bill was awarded a fellowship in 1997.

Since 1990, Fisher has been the artistic director for the California Shakespeare Company, which he also founded that same year. He has directed close to 50 productions of Shakespeare and serves several roles during the productions of the plays. "I'm probably the only professional football player who has directed a Shakespeare play," laughed Fisher.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005)

Born William H. Fisher in Hawthorne, California on December 18, 1946, he discovered at a young age his fascination for the Arthurian legend and his vast imagination and love for amusement parks. Growing up on an avocado ranch in Culver City, California he created an amusement park in his back yard, charging admission. He sculpted a miniature Grand Canyon had a jungle ride and a scary fun house in the garage. He also enjoyed playing "knights and squires" as a child instead of "cops and robbers" or "cowboys and Indians".

He caught the Shakespeare bug early, passionately reciting "Hamlet" and "Romeo and Juliet". It was a passion that carried over into his adult life, through his years of playing competitive football and into a career of teaching both youths and adults.

At the age of 15 his family moved to Thousand Oaks, California where surprisingly enough Bill didn't play football until his senior season in high school. Baseball was Bill's sport, where he was team MVP, 1st team all-Frontier League as a centerfielder and led the league in hitting in 1963 & 1964.

After convincing his father to let him play football, he did quite well earning starting positions at both split end and safety. The Lancers qualified for the playoffs, but were defeated 13-12 by Brea High School of Anaheim, the eventual Southern California state champions.

COLLEGE DAYS

Attending San Fernando Valley State College (now known as Cal State-Northridge) on a baseball scholarship, he majored in Journalism where he also wrote for the school's newspaper. As a freshman he played baseball and only became involved with football following a chance meeting with the Matadors head football coach, Sam Winningham, who watched him play a game of handball in physical education class. He came out for the team as a sophomore in 1966 and made all-West Coast defensive back and from that point on baseball became secondary for him.

The 1967 Matadors squad finished 6-4, qualifying for a post-season game, but, lost to West Texas State, 35-13, in the Junior Rose Bowl game. West Texas State was led by its running backs Eugene "Mercury" Morris and Duane Thomas, who both went on to stellar NFL careers.

In 1968 Fisher really shined, intercepting five passes for 116 yards of returns - including one for a touchdown - and received 1st Team all-CCAA (California Collegiate Athletic Association) as a defensive back and his fine season and size made him a professional prospect.

For his career, Bill intercepted eight passes for the Matadors which ranked seventh all-time on the Cal State-Northridge record list before they dropped football as a school sponsored sport. He had the opportunity to hone his coverage skills by covering some very fine receivers in the CCAA. San Diego State's Haven Moses and Long Beach State's Billy Parks who both received All-American status while in college. Both went on to fine careers in the NFL.

UNDRAFTED

Undrafted, Fisher signed with the Denver Broncos after fielding free agent offers from the Oakland Raiders and Houston Oilers.

"I received a nice bonus to sign with Denver," explained Fisher, "Enough to purchase a new car."

Fisher was with the Broncos for about a month, but the time spent with the Mile High club was anything but worthwhile. In fact, the time spent with the Broncos was more of a learning experience about how hard it was for rookies.

"In '69 I was in the Broncos camp (vets & rookies) for about a month," explained Fisher.

"There were so many bodies in camp," added Fisher, " I found out (after the fact) that the Broncos had a reputation for bringing in 'boatloads' of rookies... what a wake up call when I got there."

While with the Broncos, Fisher was scouted by Larry Luongo, an assistant coach/front office executive with the Las Vegas Cowboys of the Continental Football League. Luongo was looking for "fringe" players and told

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005)

Fisher if he was waived, the Cowboys would sign him for \$200.00, plus a job in the front office writing press releases and working on the team program due to his background as a Journalist. Reporting to Las Vegas, he was the only rookie of the five-man defensive backfield prospects. The other four players had been with the Cowboys in 1968.

In Fisher's first professional game - against the Mexico Golden Aztecs - the Cowboys traveled to Monterrey and Bill made his first start from the free safety position. The Cowboys lost 13-7, but Fisher's fondest memory was the overall trip south of the Rio Grande.

"What struck me in this town (Monterrey) was the stark contrast between the poor people in town and the beautiful "futbol" stadium we played in," remembers Bill. "Plus our flight into Monterrey was something. Surrounded by mountains, our arrival seemed to be a vertical dive."

Battling for a starting position with veteran Eddie Phillips, Fisher intercepted two passes - returning one 79 yards - setting up two touchdowns in a 34-7 exhibition victory over the Portland Loggers, solidifying himself as the starter at free safety.

With his Journalism background, Bill also went as far as to write a guest editorial in a local newspaper when some bad publicity had come the organizations way due to a sticky quarterback situation involving Dewey Warren, a former Tennessee All-American and Cincinnati Bengals starter.

Another Las Vegas newspaper had declared Warren the immediate starter, although he hadn't taken a snap.

Warren had arrived in Las Vegas and according the paper was handed the starting position over rookies Bill Casey and Terry Stone, who had been in camp since the first day. Fisher came to the defense of his organization, teammates and Warren himself in explaining the situation.

The Cowboys made a tremendous reversal from the 1968 season, finishing 8-4 after a horrendous 1-9 the season before. They gained a share of the Pacific Division title, then lost a nail-biting, 21-17 game to the San Antonio Toros in the Western Conference championship and the chance to play in the final Continental Football League championship game.

Fisher intercepted one pass in 1969, returning it 24 yards. Although the team, as well as Fisher did well on the field, the organization lost money as quick as a weekend gambler.

The community as well as local businesses weren't quite sure what to make of the Cowboys.

"Reactions of fans and the community were mixed," recalls Fisher, "many asked, 'what is the league? Semi-Pro or Pro?'... it was a good league, it's a shame the NFL did not support it."

Las Vegas was also a little too much for a young man away from home for the first time.

"It was my first time away from California," said Fisher, "Las Vegas was not my kind of town... I missed the beaches of California."

Bill also kept the bright lights and nightlife of Las Vegas away from his priorities and his talents.

"I never gambled and in my spare time I wrote poetry."

Following the 1969 season, the Continental Football League went belly up, and was left with four teams scrambling to the Atlantic Coast Football League, while six others (mostly from the Texas Division) re-formed into the Texas Football League.

In July of 1970, Fisher along with former college teammate, Dick Baxley traveled in Fisher's 1967 Ford van to Orlando to play with the Panthers with many of his former teammates and coaches from the 1969 Las Vegas team.

JERSEY BY WAY OF ORLANDO

Orlando had been a powerhouse while in the Continental Football League, but with the leagues demise, saw the organization completely different.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005)

Many of the "stars" from the former Panthers regime had moved on, players like Don Jonas, the most noticeable name in the league, had moved on to the Canadian Football League.

The weather was tough on the players and according to Fisher they practiced "next to a swamp".

In Orlando's first exhibition game, they had the distinction of having the first female player (Pat Palinkas) put on a uniform for actual game time.

Fisher was traded after the third exhibition game to the Jersey Tigers (an expansion team in the ACFL), so Fisher packed his bags and headed up the East Coast to New Jersey.

"Being traded to Jersey was a god-send," explained Fisher, "Ken Carpenter was a great coach, good guy and treated his players with respect."

Carpenter, who had a successful career as a minor league head coach, had played with the Cleveland Browns in the 1950's and had also spent time in the CFL.

He would also be the source of many of Fisher's "connections" in later seasons.

The Tigers were one of two teams located in New Jersey (the Jersey Jays, located in Newark was the other) and had relocated from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania where they had been known as the Capitols.

Staying afloat for years due to the stability of the Baltimore Colts financial support, Harrisburg had never attracted a fan base and without the money coming in from the NFL, they looked for a new home.

Fisher once again was a starter at free safety, and was a team favorite with his long hair and beard.

"My teammates were a lot of fun," remembers Fisher, "The players nicknamed me "J.C.", for my shoulder length hair and beard."

Fisher also worked at a classic East Coast diner cooking breakfast and lunch while playing for the Tigers.

"Most minor league pro players," explained Fisher, "supplemented our incomes with day jobs."

He also stayed at a local hotel during the season, which according to Fisher was a very enjoyable experience.

"The players who had no apartment were allowed to stay at the Cranford Motor Lodge. It was a clean and new establishment. Fresh sheets and towels everyday for \$5.00 a night. Not bad." Explained Fisher.

Record-wise the Tigers finished 6-6, one game behind division tri-champions Hartford Knights, Jersey Jays and Bridgeport Jets, who all finished at 7-5. His former team, the Orlando Panthers finished 4-8, and in fifth place in the Southern Division.

Once again, Fisher neither gained all-league honors nor was he a league leader in any defensive category. But for the second consecutive season was part of a solid defensive squad as only three others in the 11-team ACFL gave up less points than the Tigers.

"I really liked playing for and living in New Jersey," Fisher stated, "We played our games in a high school stadium, but everything was first class."

But, like most minor league teams, the Tigers failed to make a profit and following the season, folded after playing one season.

A CHANCE IN HOUSTON

In the spring of 1971, Carpenter recommended Fisher to the Houston Oilers where the AFC Central team signed him to a free agent contract.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005)

Bill went to rookie camp later that year, and made an impression on the Oilers coaching staff as a promising newcomer.

Returning in July with a small group of newcomers and the veterans, Fisher was excited and optimistic, because unlike his time in Denver, he wasn't just a number or a tackling dummy and the Oilers seemed to be genuinely interested in him.

The Oilers had finished 3-10-1 in 1970, dead last in the Central Division and had hired a new head coach in Ed Hughes, who was looking to change Houston's fortunes.

Bill did well during camp and survived cut after cut. As the pre-season went on only he and Willie Alexander (a rookie from Alcorn State) were left to challenge the veteran defensive backs.

When the Oilers cut veteran Johnny Peacock, Bill was shocked. The only safeties remaining in camp were now Kenny Houston, John Charles and Bill. The 24-year old rookie was brimming with confidence.

But the following week, Houston signed former Kansas City Chiefs veteran Goldie Sellers (he was later released) and moved a cornerback, Bob Atkins to a safety position.

The opening exhibition game was against the Los Angeles Rams in the "Hall of Fame" game on national television and things started out well for Fisher when he tackled Travis Williams (former Green Bay Packers record setter) on the opening kickoff.

But later in the game, Fisher was involved in a play that may have changed the course of his professional career on a Los Angeles scoring play.

"The play that has haunted me forever was in the second quarter," explained Bill, "I was playing strong safety and was covering tight end Bob Klein.

"The Rams were driving and had a first and goal inside the ten. Klein ran a flat pattern, our corner let the wide receiver inside, which picked me, but I was able to get around him and almost pick off the pass... Can you imagine? A 95-yard interception on national television?"

"I know those extra steps I had to take cost me the interception... Needless to say I have run that play in my head over and over in my mind. What could have been? What the T.D. might have led to? My big break... gone. Oh well, life goes on."

After that some factors cost Bill a chance at a NFL roster spot. The first was the fact that he had always played the free safety position and this season was placed behind All-Pro Kenny Houston at strong safety.

Another was John Charles, who, although not as big or fast as Fisher, had been in the NFL for four seasons and had more experience and had been coached by Houston's defensive back coach Burnie Miller while at Purdue.

And finally, after a fast start in camp, Bill contracted the measles and missed several days of valuable practice time, losing the opportunity to challenge Charles in camp.

With the small rosters of the NFL at that time, the Oilers kept just six defensive backs, Fisher was on the outside looking in. Being placed behind Houston in the secondary, Bill found himself expendable.

"My heart was broken in '71 in Houston," stated Fisher, "I was the last cut in the secondary. To go through training camp and exhibition season was painful."

BACK IN THE ACFL

After being released by Houston, he once again found his way to the ACFL, this time with the Hartford Knights, who was just one of the four teams remaining in the league after having 11 a year earlier.

The Knights, along with the Norfolk Neptunes were the class of the league. The Knights had been to the ACFL championship every season since 1968, but had won just once (30-17 in 1968). They had been 28-8 in that time, and won the Northern Division three consecutive seasons.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005)

Bill was paid well while in Hartford, between \$200-300 a game, plus had a "cake" day job. Many of the players, including Fisher worked for team owner Pete Savin, who was owner of a construction company.

"Basically, it was clock in, go to breakfast, nap, go to lunch, nap, paint construction equipment for an hour or so and then clock out," recalls Fisher, " The regular workers hated us, but they knew we were Pete Savin's football players and couldn't say much."

The Knights played its home games at Dillon Stadium in downtown Hartford, and once again were divisional champions when they finished the season 9-3 and defeated Norfolk three of the four times they faced each other, in fact with only four teams in the league, and a 12-gamed schedule, there were few opponents.

"We played each team four times... two home/two away... got to know your opponent," added Fisher.

After dominating Norfolk during the regular season, the two teams faced off for the league championship. But this time, the Neptunes shut down the Knights successful offensive attack and won the league crown, 23-14.

Once again, Bill enjoyed his time on the East Coast, but had some interesting and worrisome times when he first arrived -also when he went back to California.

The new team arrivals were temporarily housed in an old three-story house in the Hartford suburbs.

Apparently, an escaped convict from a prison in Massachusetts was on the run. Unbeknownst to Bill, he fit his physical description. After settling in the apartment, he decided to find a place to eat, opened the door, walked down the hallway only to be looking down the barrels of about 10 guns! FBI, plainclothesmen.

"Scared the hell out of me," explained Fisher, "Apparently, a concerned neighbor saw me arrive and go into the building and called "the man." Added Fisher, " after many nervous minutes and not great treatment, I convinced the feds that I was not their guy!"

The price of being a minor leaguer is tough, especially when your neighbors don't know who this "stranger" is or where he came from. It could also be rough when although paid well by minor league standards, you are low on funds and want to drive across country to get home.

THE LONG WAY HOME

In December, following the season, Bill ventured home in his 1966 Karmen Ghia that he had paid \$ 250.00 dollars for and according to Bill " was a real piece of junk".

The weather was brutal, and snowed most of the way. To make matters worse the car's heater didn't work. By Texas the vehicle had about had it, and Bill was stocking up on cheap oil, to make it home.

His engine essentially died 50 miles from Thousand Oaks, and he basically coasted the rest of the way.

"It's amazing what you can endure when you are strong, stupid and 24!" laughed Fisher.

Ken Carpenter once again helped Bill out, in 1972 when he got Bill a tryout with the British Columbia Lions of the Canadian Football League.

There wasn't much to enjoy while in Canada. First, Bill was positioned as a running back, a position he had never played.

"I never felt connected (other than Rocky Long, now the University of New Mexico's head football coach) to my teammates in Canada." Said Fisher.

About a month into camp, Bill received a call from home. He had to make a decision, either sign a teaching contract for the fall or give up the position. Not knowing if he would make the squad, he voluntarily left camp for the security of his teaching job.

THOSE WHO CAN'T, TEACH?

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005)

For the first time since the fall of 1965, Bill didn't play organized football.

But in 1973, he returned to the gridiron. This time with the Indianapolis Capitols of the Midwest Football League, coached by Carpenter.

The Capitols had been a strong team in the 1960's while in the Continental Football League and had won the final league championship in 1969 (coached by Carpenter), but by 1973, the huge fan base and salaries had dried up.

Bill's salary was \$ 150.00 dollars a game and had a day job. The Capitols were a veteran team and had been the league champions the year before.

Once again, the Capitols were league champions when they tied with Youngstown Hardhats who had an identical 8-2 record.

Unfortunately for Fisher he wasn't around to see his team take first place at the end of the season.

"The season started in June, and because I was under contract in California as a school teacher, I had an agreement with the team to leave early." Explained Fisher.

After playing at one time or another in three different countries, and playing in cities from coast to coast, in 1974 Bill felt it was time to form his own organization.

"That way, no one could put me on waivers if I owned the damn team!" added Fisher.

He decided to organize the Conejo Oaks, which was based in the Thousand Oaks area. He was the owner, public relations director, general manager and starting free safety.

He found out about the newly formed California Football League by contacting Bob Flowers, who owned the Southern California Rhinos, was also league commissioner and looking for a franchise to even out the number of teams in the league.

They applied and were admitted into the new league. The league consisted of the Oaks, the Rhinos, East Los Angeles Ramblers, Sacramento Statesmen, Lancaster Sidewinders and the San Fernando Lancers.

In the Oaks' first season they finished 9-3, second place in the league behind the Rhinos. Bill was named to the all-league team.

The following season, the league dropped to five teams, losing Lancaster and San Fernando, but gaining the South Bay Crew.

The Oaks really stepped it up that season, by being a dominating force and won the league championship. Again, Fisher gained all-league honors.

With Bill working part-time for a local newspaper, the Oaks received excellent coverage (plus pictures) on a weekly basis.

The crowds were fairly good sized for "semi-pro", usually playing in front of 5,000 paying customers on Saturday night.

In those two seasons, Fisher intercepted nearly 30 passes, and was the elite defensive back in the California Football League.

"Those two seasons that I intercepted so many passes," explained Fisher, "I was 27 and 28 years old and in the prime of my life.

"I also was much more wiser and experienced as far as my abilities and knowledge of playing the defensive back position."

In 1976 Bill was engaged to be married and was feeling pressure of trying to run an organization and keeping things on an even keel in his daily life.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005)

He sold the team to a local businessman, but things weren't quite the same. Bill did play part of the season, but injured his Achilles tendon (by playing softball of all things) and had to sit out the remainder of the season.

Later in the season, a visiting team vandalized the Thousand Oaks High School locker room and the Oaks finished the season as a road team.

"I'm quite proud of the two years I ran the Conejo Oaks. We all worked hard and accomplished great things," recalls Fisher, "I've always been good at organizing things and the formation of the Conejo Oaks was truly a "labor of love"."

The Oaks folded after the 1976 season, and Bill once again was playing for another team, this time in 1977 with the West Valley Falcons of the High Desert League. Fisher played both ways, as a wide receiver and defensive back.

After a year's hiatus, there was a new promise for another team from the Thousand Oaks area to form in the California Football League, which by this time was on solid ground, with eight teams spanning up and down the coast.

After the Public Relations disaster of the Oaks, a name change and a new venue were essential. In 1978, they were able to secure Mt.Clef Stadium at Cal Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks for the home games and received financial backing from a long-time local doctor.

Irving Schaffner, was that person. Although quite eccentric, he was a good guy, enthusiastic and explained by Fisher, "had a big heart".

The organization was named the Ventura County Americans and Bill served as a player/coach and public relations director. He soon phased into coaching only.

"In '79 I discovered that I no longer had the desire to hit people," explained Fisher, "I knew it was time to hang the cleats up.

"I also discovered that coaching (only) was something I didn't enjoy that much."

So, following the 1979 season, Bill called it a career - in football - and ventured into another arena, one that was very dear to his heart.

LIFE AFTER FOOTBALL

"After my "illustrious" football career, I taught high school English and theatre, while coaching football and baseball."

Bill acquired his teaching credentials during the off-season in a South Central Los Angeles School where his students gained respect for him due to his athletic abilities.

He later taught elementary, junior high school and even community college in Ventura County and in Irvine. He has also taught classes at Learning Tree University.

In 1990, with the help of a former student and now friend, Monika Copeland, they together formed the California Shakespeare Company, which is Southern California's only year round Shakespearean company.

"Putting together the California Shakespeare Company," explained Bill, "was comparable to organizing the Oaks."

In this arena, Fisher has directed close to 50 productions, and never seems to be at a loss for time during the presentations, with experience in light design, set design, costume design and production.

"If you ever want to write a book on how to put a theatre company together...ask me." Said Fisher.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005)

Bill has built three complete "black box" theatres. One in a school classroom and two in storefront locations. From the ground up. "I've always liked to create something from absolutely nothing," added Fisher.

Bill's three favorite productions are John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" and Shakespeare's "The Tempest" and "Hamlet". He also enjoys "Macbeth", but it is there that Bill's luck seems to run out, due to its "supernatural" background.

Called Shakespeare's "cursed" play, Bill has directed it four times, and every time, something disastrous has occurred.

Once while putting up the Scottish flag before the play, his latter fell away, and he broke his wrist in three places. The next time he contracted pneumonia.

He is very proud of the theatre accomplishments and that it has given the area in which he resides a chance to see and hear good Shakespeare. When asked about his most memorable seasons or games, Bill replied with an emotional response that would leave most football lovers speechless.

"I really don't have a memorable football season, but rather a memorable career," offered Fisher, "For ten years I was allowed to do what I loved and (however modest at times) get paid for it. How good is that?"

"I always felt that football fulfilled all my needs at the time. (Physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually). What a great game.

"I had so much fun, learned so much about myself, others, discipline and teamwork. Nothing can ever top that."

Except maybe a good Shakespeare play.

BIG BAD BEARS

The Chicago Bears from 1940-1943 were an absolute powerhouse. Everyone knows about the 73-0 shellacking that they gave the Washington Redskins in the 1940 championship game, but the "Monsters of the Midway" did not stop there.

In 1941, they beat the New York Giants 37-9 and in 1943 the Redskins, again, by a count of 41-21. The Bears scored a total of 151 points in those three games compared to 30 by their opponents. The average score of the three contests was 50-10. Fourteen different Bears scored touchdowns in the three games.

The only thing that stopped the Bears from winning four consecutive NFL titles was a loss to the Redskins in 1942 by an amazing score of 14-6. A game in which the Bears entered with an undefeated record. Even more amazing is that their offense did not score a single point in the championship game. Maybe Redskin coach Ray Flaherty was right about the T-formation not being the major reason for the Bears big victory in 1940. Maybe it was just one of those days.

--- Timothy Holland
