



## Richie Lucas

This article was written by Jeffrey J. Miller.

On November 23, 1959, the owners of the embryonic American Football League gathered in Minneapolis, Minnesota to conduct the circuit's first college draft. Like most of the other teams, Buffalo's entry (not yet officially named the Bills) did not yet have a scouting or personnel department--just owner Ralph Wilson. And like the other members of the so-called "Foolish Club," Wilson never claimed to be an astute evaluator of football materiel. Still, the teams had to have players in order to have a league and, hoping to get a jump on the established National Football League, the owners decided not to wait until they had front offices.

"We had to draft players," said Wilson. "Here's how we researched: I didn't have any football men on my payroll. We had a hat, and we put the names on little pieces of paper, and dropped them in. Each of the eight teams took one piece of paper out. If you wanted a quarterback, you reached in the quarterback hat and drew out a name. That was how we scouted."

Prior to the formal draft, each franchise was allowed one territorial pick to be used in selecting a recognizable, regional star who could help sell tickets and, hopefully, ensure financial stability. With Buffalo's pick, Wilson tapped Richie Lucas, the Penn State quarterback who had won the **Maxwell** Award (presented annually to the college football player judged to be the best all-around in the nation) and finished second to LSU's Billy Cannon for the 1959 Heisman Trophy.

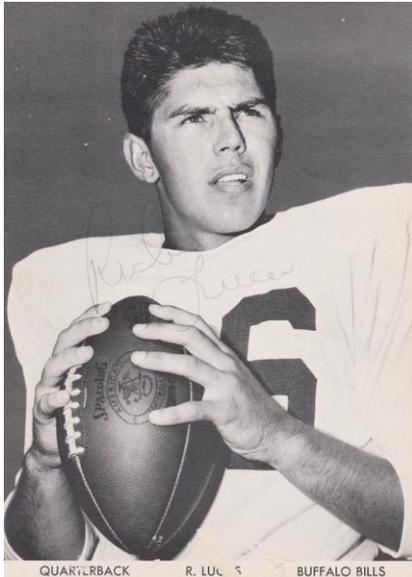
"Riverboat Richie," as he was dubbed by his school's PR department for his daring style of play, brought immediate excitement to local fans who were anticipating heroics similar to those he provided in leading the Nittany Lions to victory over Alabama in the 1959 Liberty Bowl. However, since there were now two pro leagues, the Buffalo franchise was going to have to outbid the NFL's Washington Redskins, who had drafted Lucas with their first-round selection that year.

"I met with Ralph Wilson. He came down to Penn State and we had dinner at the Nittany Lion Inn, and it wasn't a matter of money with me, it was a matter of playing something you enjoyed doing. I was awfully nice, in a manner of speaking. I didn't realize the power that you have when you're the number one draft choice. "I'm sure I signed for a hell of a lot less than they thought I would sign for, but the fact is if I played well, eventually I was going to make enough money."



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Lucas signed with Buffalo for a reported \$50,000 over three seasons. There were several factors, Lucas explained, that led him to his decision to sign on with the upstart American Football League. “I wanted the chance to play quarterback. I always had an idea about playing quarterback, which was probably a mistake on my part because the Redskins wanted me to play defensive halfback, which was really what my skills were all about. Buffalo said they’d give me a chance to play quarterback.

“I liked the idea of bringing pro football to Buffalo,” he continued. “I liked the thought of doing that—that was always part of something for me. I was from the Pittsburgh area and Buffalo was a lot like Pittsburgh as far as I was concerned. I was more comfortable with Buffalo than I would have been in Washington.”

Lucas was born and raised in Glassport, Pennsylvania, about a half hour’s drive southeast of Pittsburgh. He learned to love sports at an early age. “In Glassport,” he recalled, “if you play one sport, you generally play three or four sports. I played basketball, football, baseball, and volleyball too at some point in time, so I played four sports. I enjoyed the athletic experience. Al Bruce was the first one to call—the recruiter at Glassport from Penn State. I think Joe Paterno came down, or Rip Engle came down, but I committed myself to Penn State rather quickly. Back in those days, you were lucky to get a grant aid. My dad worked in the steel mills and drove a cab and a few other things, and he put my older brother through college with war bonds. Then myself, and Kenny—my younger brother—we both got grant aids. We were fortunate to get scholarships. I went to Penn State, and Kenny went to Pitt. We were fortunate that the three of us got to go to college.



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We were pleased to get an education out of something, something out of nothing. We weren't expecting to play pro football."

By his senior season with the Nittany Lions, Lucas was being touted as one of the best collegiate players in the nation, though he never saw himself as such. "I wasn't a hotshot quarterback," he recalled. "'Riverboat Richie?'" We played Missouri the week before the football season actually started. There was a lot of coverage in Missouri because we played in Missouri. Our sports information director got ahold of these steamboat pictures, and he sent them to several of the people that were covering us because there wasn't another football game around. He sent the postcards out to these people, and he signed them 'Riverboat Richie.' That's where that started."

Unfortunately for Lucas, who built his college legend more on his legs than his arm, the pro team that had selected him was planning to use a different offensive approach. "[Buffalo head coach] Buster was from Detroit," Lucas explained. "He was entrenched with a style of play that used the drop back quarterback. I could have been a really good running quarterback, but back in those days, there were no such things as running quarterbacks." With the Bills bringing in veteran play-caller Tommy O'Connell, the top-rated passer in the NFL in 1957 while taking the Cleveland Browns to that year's championship game, Lucas' chances at developing into Buffalo's franchise quarterback appeared dim at best.

Lucas was in the starting lineup at left halfback for the Bills' first-ever regular season game played September 11, 1960, versus the New York Titans' at the Polo Grounds. He was credited with two carries for 12 yards, and one reception for 15 as the Bills lost, 27-3. Lucas threw his first touchdown pass as a pro two weeks later, connecting with Elbert Dubenion for a 36-yard strike in a 24-10 loss to the Los Angeles Chargers at War Memorial Stadium. He caught his first touchdown pass in Week 9 in a 32-3 payback against the Chargers at the Los Angeles Coliseum. Richie teamed up with Tommy O'Connell on a beautiful 17-yarder that gave the Bills a first quarter lead they never relinquished.

Richie saw his first significant playing time at quarterback against Boston on December 4 (Week 11). Coming off the bench in relief of Tommy O'Connell at the beginning of the second half and the score knotted at 14 apiece, Lucas put the Bills in front with an 8-yard touchdown run midway through the third quarter, then completed the run of 24 unanswered points with a 30-yard strike to Dan Chamberlain in the final frame, making the final Bills 38, Boston 14.

Coach Ramsey rewarded Lucas' outstanding play against the Pats with a starting nod the following week against the Oilers at Houston's Jeppeson Stadium. Lucas' performance,



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however, did not carry over, and Ramsey yanked the rookie after he had completed just five of 15 passes for 82 yards, no touchdowns and one interception. But Ramsey was not quite ready to give up on his prized rookie and tapped Lucas to start the season finale against the Texans at Dallas. Yet despite an improved stat line (10 for 19 for 90 yards and one interception) and scoring the team's only touchdown on a seven-yard burst in the second quarter, the Bills dropped to 5-8-1 on the season with a 24-7 loss.

While that first year was an unqualified disappointment considering the great expectations the Bills and their followers had for the highly touted Penn Stater, it should be noted that Lucas was hampered by an injury throughout much of the campaign. "I hurt my ankle at some point in my rookie year," Lucas explained, "and that hurt me big time. You don't get hurt in your rookie year. That's one thing you don't do." Additionally, the Bills' brain trust seemed unsure of just how to use Lucas, as he spent time at halfback, flanker and quarterback at different points in the season. When used as a quarterback, Lucas admits to having trouble adapting to the pro style. "I played football at Penn State for Rip Engle, and Joe Paterno was the backfield coach. We had a pretty close relationship at Penn State, so for me to leave Penn State and be coached by Buster was a change. I had trouble with the cadence, because at Penn State we went with a quick count and I didn't have to worry about a cadence. Buster was upset at the fact that I had trouble capturing that part of it. And he should have been." Lucas finished the year with completing 23 of 49 pass attempts for 314 yards, two touchdowns and three interceptions. He gained 138 yards on 38 carries (a 3.6-yard average) and two touchdowns. He also caught five passes for 58 yards and a one score.

In addition to Lucas, the Bills had two returning veteran quarterbacks on the roster as the 1961 campaign began—O'Connell and strong-armed Johnny Green, who had been acquired mid-season in 1960 as the rotating door spun constantly with players coming and going during the team's, and the league's, inaugural campaign. Despite this, Ramsey appeared to have settled on the notion that Richie was indeed a quarterback, and Lucas experienced an increase in playing time. After a decent outing in the season opening loss to Denver in which Lucas completed 10 of 21 passes for 134 yards and no interceptions, Ramsey tapped him to start in Week 2 at home against the Titans. This proved to be Richie's brightest moment as a pro quarterback as he led the Bills back from a 17-0 first-quarter deficit to win 41-31. Lucas completed 8 of 19 passes for 129 yards and two touchdowns.

The improved showing against New York spurred Ramsey to start Lucas a week later against the Patriots. Unfortunately, Lucas performed poorly, completing just two of 10 passing attempts for 19 yards and one interception. This is where the coaching staff appears to have finally lost faith in Lucas as a signal caller. With newly acquired



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quarterbacks M.C. Reynolds and Warren Rabb now in the mix, Lucas had seen his last action behind center.

Not wanting to squander Lucas' abundant athletic talent, the team made the decision to move him to the defensive backfield, where he had also toiled successfully as a two-way player at Penn State. The move seemed to fit the second-year man well, and when the Bills hosted the Raiders in Week 9, Lucas led the defense with two interceptions. But just as the Bills seemed to have finally found a spot where their first-ever draft pick could fit in, they were dealt a blow that same week when Lucas received notification that he was being called to military service.

"I got this letter at home in Glassport," he recalled. "My mother signs for it and has it forwarded to me in Buffalo. It said I was being called back into service. If my mother didn't sign for that letter, it wouldn't have been forwarded to Buffalo."

Lucas would be lost to the team for the remainder of the season, and the time away from the game ultimately ended his pro career after just two seasons. "That was the first time I had not played sports in a long, long time," he recalled. The Bills opted to leave him unprotected in the AFL's equalization draft of 1962 and Lucas was snatched up by the Denver Broncos. His time in the Mile High City, however, was very short. "I was cut by the Broncos. That didn't bother me too much because my wife had a baby at the time, and I was able to drive home from Denver to be with my wife and my son."

Lucas returned to his alma mater and remained there for more than 30 years. "I went back to Penn State and joined the staff of the continuing education department. I was the assistant to the business manager, then became the business manager, and eventually I became the assistant athletic director. I retired in 1998."

In 1975, Lucas was inducted into the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame. He was inducted into the National Football Foundation and College Football Hall of Fame in 1986.