Mike Burnop—A Final Shot

This is it for Mike Burnop. This is the year he either realizes his life ambition of making it in professional football or he returns to another way of life. Most athletes would have given up long ago. Not Burnop.

He didn't get discouraged when he wasn't drafted following his senior year in 1972 as a top tight end at Virginia Tech. And he didn't throw in the towel when his two-year tour of duty in the old World Football League left him with little money.

And he wasn't ready to quit last season when he failed to latch on in the National Football League.

Instead, the former sports star at Roanoke Catholic became all the more determined. And now he has the opportunity to make it with the Buffalo Bills and he's primed for the challenge.

"Sure I'm 26 and a lot of people might think I'm crazy," said Burnop as he prepared to leave Friday for the Bills' training camp at Niagara University. "But I'm in the best shape of my life and I've seen enough of professional football to think I really have a good chance.

"Anyway, it's something I have to get out of my system. I know I will never be satisfied until I do."

Burnop isn't your average "jock". He maintained top grades while at Catholic and Tech. And he is within a few hours of receiving his master's degree in administration from Tech.

He starred in basketball and football at Catholic and his football ability won him a scholarship to Tech. After a year on the freshman squad, Burnop became a three-year varsity starter at tight end.

Burnop worked himself into becoming a top blocker. He always was considered an outstanding receiver and set a few records as a Gobbler. There are those who claim he never dropped a pass during his three seasons of varsity play.

Although not extremely large for a professional tight end (6-2, 228), Burnop was surprised he wasn't drafted. He also admits he was too dumb to try as a free agent. "But the coaches (Charlie Coffey and Company) never encouraged me or advised me what to do," he said.

Instead, Burnop returned to graduate school. The next year he got a trial with Jacksonville of the WFL and made the team. But he was paid for only nine of the team's 20 games.

"I'm glad I played even if I didn't make any money," he said. "It helped my confidence and made me realize I could play in the pros."

The next season (1975) Burnop was with Shreveport and was just beginning to make a name for himself when the WFL folded.

Burnop returned home to Salem and got a job with the Citadel Cement Company. He later re-entered Tech to continue work on his graduate degree.

Last winter, thanks to the help of Marshall Taylor, former receiver coach at Tech, Burnop got himself an agent. "That was the smartest thing I ever did," he said. "He had connections and knew how to handle things. He got me a tryout at a joint NFL camp last spring and a lot of scouts saw me."

Among those present were the Buffalo Bills and they liked what they saw in Burnop. They signed him as a free agent and invited him to attend a mini camp last May along with the team veterans, rookies and other free agents.

Two of the free agents were Paul Adams, former Tech fullback; and Ralph Fisher of Radford, who was a three-year starter at defensive tackle at Maryland but is being looked at by Buffalo as a linebacker.

Buffalo didn't draft a tight end and Burnop said he was the only free agent signed at the position. The Bills have three tight ends on their roster. Paul Seymour (6-4, 245) is a 12-year veteran from Michigan and considered one of the best in the NFL.

Reuben Gant (6-4, 224) is a 14-year veteran from Oklahoma State but is considered a better wide receiver. The third veteran is Fred Coleman (6-4, 240), a second-year man from South- east Louisiana who was injured most of last season.

"I know it's going to be tough to stick with the Bills," said Burnop. "But after talking with the coaches and team officials I believe I will get a fair shot. That's all I want.

"I've always dreamed of playing in the NFL. I have something to prove to myself. If I make it—well, that's great. If I don't I will always know I had the opportunity and a lot of good football players can't say as much."

BOB McLELLAND