Football Was Business, Fun

By ABE GOLDBLATT
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Ken Barefoot found playing college football to be a hard, hard business.

"High school football was a lot of fun," says the former Virginia Tech tight end.

"And pro football was like a paid vacation. That was fun." At Virginia Tech, Barefoot was a three-year starter (1962-65), and presently stands fifth among the Hokies' career pass receiving leaders with 68 receptions for 752 yards and eight touchdowns.

In the years that Barefoot played, Tech enjoyed three of its best seasons, 7-3 in 1965, 8-2-1 and the Liberty Bowl in 1966, and 7-3 in 1967.

Despite his excellent credentials that won him invitations to two all-star games (East-West and Senior Bowl), Barefoot looks back and insists college football was a grind for him.

"It was a hard business," says the onetime Great Bridge All-Tidewater end (1962-65). "I was at a school where football was defensively oriented, and here I was an offensive receiver."

Jerry Claiborne was the Virginia Tech coach when Barefoot played.

"Claiborne was so conservative when he coached at Tech, I believe firing him made him a better coach. He realized he had to concentrate more on offense, and he's shown it in his success as coach in Maryland."

"A big knock against Claiborne was he couldn't recruit the bluechipper. I think he recruited some pretty fine talent."

When Claiborne and Tech parted company after 10 years, he had compiled a 61-37-2 record.

Which isn't a bad production for what Barefoot claimed was a "defensively oriented" football team.

In any event, Barefoot's performance at Tech didn't go unnoticed. He was the first of two fifth-round draft picks by the Washington Redskins. The other was punter Mike Bragg.

"I had been through four tough years at Virginia Tech and, in contrast, pro football was like a paid vacation. I found it to be really fun."

"I received a bonus for signing, and I thought it was a good, solid bonus for a fifth-round pick."

"Otto Graham was the coach when I joined the Redskins. He was a good guy. Jerry Smith was moved to the outside and Pat Richter was at tight end, where he set a record. I played behind Richter."

"Although the Redskins led the NFL in almost every offensive category, Graham couldn't win."

"Sonny Jurgensen threw a soft pass, a catchable pass. He was the best I've ever seen. I've seen him throw the football from behind his back. That's why it was so much fun."

"When Graham was fired, they brought the late Vince Lombardi in. I went through six weeks of training under Lombardi. He moved Jerry Smith back to tight end and had Richter backing him up."

"The Detroit Lions were looking for a back-up to Charlie Sanders, who was an All-Pro tight end in his rookie year."

Barefoot was dispatched to the Lions.

"I was with Detroit a year and had two knee operations. The doctors advised me to get out of pro football. I had two good years in the NFL but if you can't run, you can't play."

"The longer I'm away from football the more I appreciate Lombardi as a man and for the way he did things. He knew when to scold a player and when to pat him on his head. He was a great motivator."

Barefoot looks back to his high school days with great satisfaction.

He played at 6-4, 210 pounds.

"In junior high school, I was bigger than most players in high school. At Great Bridge, I was the biggest in the offensive line—and I was an end. I always feared they'd move me to a tackle. But I always managed to catch the football when they threw it."

"High school football in Tidewater was big when I played. I remember crowds of 10,000 and 12,000."

"In my sophomore year we lost only one game—to Norview, 9-7. The game I remember best is the one we played against Princess Anne in my senior year."

"Princess Anne had 22 lettermen, with Buster O'Brien at quarterback. We had about four or five starters back, including Fella Rhodes at quarterback and Joe Bussey at halfback."

"Fella ran a punt back for a touchdown and we won the game. We had an unexpected good year, and the reason was the superior coaching of Billy O'Brien."

"I really feel credit should go to O'Brien. He gave me the basics to build on what I take to develop. He took what talent he had on hand and molded it into a winner."

"High school football was fun. We didn't know anything about winning. We had a winning tradition at Great Bridge."

"I played under some fine coaches—O'Brien, Claiborne, Hank Stram (Senior Bowl), Ara Parseghian (East-West), Lombardi, Graham, and Joe Schmidt (Detroit Lions)."

Barefoot received nearly 50 inquiries from colleges when he completed his high school career, and he had two good years in the NFL.

"I almost decided on the University of Miami because I found the 85-degree weather much to my liking when I visited Florida."

"But my dad convinced me I was going to stay in Virginia, so they could see me play. He pointed out that I'd be going into business in this state when I finished college. He was right."

Ken is now president of the Barefoot Realty Inc. in Virginia Beach.

"I remember my freshman year at Tech when 50 players came out for football. Only 17 of them were still on the squad in our senior year."

"In those days a coach could recruit all he wanted and run off the ones he didn't want. It's different now. The recruiting is limited."

"As I said, college football wasn't fun for me, when you consider practice in August, the winter workouts and spring practices."

"But I was amazed at Tech, the setting and warmth. That's why I'm glad I went there."

In his sophomore year, Ken married Kathleen Smith, who was a cheerleader and homecoming queen at Norview High School. They have four children.

Barefoot made his first money as an athlete when he received $1,000 for playing on the winning team in the Senior Bowl. In the East-West game he played with Larry Csonka. As a pro, his salary ranged from $16,000 to $18,000.

"I found the real estate business just like athletics," he said. "You're as good as you want to be."

"REMEMBER

WHEN?..."

He was the first player from the state of Virginia to be selected to play in the College All-Star football game. He coached many years at a Virginia university. Who is he? In next Sunday's Inside Sports, he'll tell you about how it was when he was coaching.