



## 45 YEARS AGO, HUNT AND AFL CHANGE FACE OF PRO FOOTBALL

On August 14, 1959, a 27-year-old Dallas native named **LAMAR HUNT** announced that the American Football League would begin play the following fall. Despite critics' shaking heads, the league founded by Hunt was destined for success and changed the landscape of America's favorite sport. It also steered Hunt toward his rightful place in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1972.

"I felt there were a number of markets that would be interested in having pro football," says Hunt, 72. "The NFL had 12 teams and covered only 11 markets (two teams in Chicago). College football had great nationwide interest and television was beginning to tell the excitement of pro football.

"We did no market research – it was just a gut feel."

Hunt and his fellow AFL pioneers were determined to be a success. The league was begun through the work of seven individuals at a Chicago meeting on that August day in 1959: Hunt, representing a Dallas franchise, **BOB HOWSAM** (Denver), **K.S. "BUD" ADAMS** (Houston), **BARRON HILTON** (Los Angeles), **MAX WINTER** and **BILL BOYER** (Minneapolis), and **HARRY WISMER** (New York City). In October 1959, Buffalo, owned by **RALPH C. WILSON, JR.**, became the seventh AFL franchise and Boston, owned by **WILLIAM H. SULLIVAN**, became the eighth team in November.

"The AFL was started because Lamar wanted a pro football franchise for Dallas," says Wilson, the Buffalo Bills' chairman and owner.

"I didn't go into it to make money," adds Wilson. "I went in because I wanted to own a pro football team and there weren't any for sale. We plotted out what we might lose in the first three years, but we caught on. This was not a rag-tag league."

Adams, now the Owner and CEO of the Tennessee Titans, says his desire for a pro football franchise – like Hunt – left him looking for options outside of the NFL. Adams founded the AFL's Houston Oilers, who won the new league's first two titles (1960-61).

"I was trying to buy an NFL team," says Adams. "I was close to getting a deal done with the Chicago Cardinals, but they wouldn't sell me 51 percent. They only wanted to sell me 49 percent, so I didn't accept. Lamar had talked with me about this idea of starting a new league. I was gung-ho at that point to go into it.

"I never thought whether it would be profitable or not."

Each AFL club owner paid \$25,000 in 1959 to assemble a league office. It would prove to be a remarkable investment, but critics wondered if the AFL would survive, even to the point of media referring to the teams' owners as "The Foolish Club."

"The AFL, back in those days, was a big joke," says Wilson, whose 1964 Bills team won the AFL championship. "People laughed at us. Media didn't give us a chance. It was like starting an automobile company and tackling General Motors. It got to be a battle because when you're ridiculed by the media, it rouses the fighting spirit and the owners really stuck together."

Although the AFL's teams were united in their desire to succeed, Adams had concerns. "I thought we would survive as a league, but we did have some clubs that were weaker than others and that worried me," he recalls. "I wasn't losing any money to speak of because the Oilers were drawing pretty well. We just had to worry about the other teams coming through for us."

Among the AFL's biggest breaks which helped solidify its future occurred in 1964 when NBC was in need of competitive programming to air against NFL games on CBS. Adams and Wilson remember it well.

"In 1960, ABC came to us and offered a three-year contract that would give us, as I remember, \$175,000 to each team each year based on ratings," says Adams. "At the end of the third year, NBC came to us and said, 'Don't sign an extension with ABC.'"

"When we got the (1964) TV contract, I knew we were going to be successful," says Wilson. "Billy Sullivan and I and Lamar were on a committee to work on a television contract. (Jets owner) **SONNY WERBLIN** was a close friend of (NBC CEO) **BOBBY SARNOFF** and Werblin was very helpful."

Two years later, it was announced by NFL Commissioner **PETE ROZELLE** that each AFL club would merge into the NFL in 1970 to form one league with two conferences.

"It was the right thing to do," says Hunt of the AFL-NFL merger. "It consolidated the sport and assured the continuity of every team in both leagues. We assured that every team was going to stay in business. We also assured the addition of new teams in Cincinnati (AFL, 1968) and New Orleans (NFL, 1967) and it gave the public the Super Bowl."

Fittingly, Hunt's Kansas City Chiefs earned the final AFL title in 1969 and one week later won Super Bowl IV against the Minnesota Vikings, 23-7. Hunt recalls, "That was a wonderful culmination of the 10-year history of the American Football League."

According to **Lamar Hunt**, below are key turning points that ensured success for the AFL:

- "The purchase of the New York Titans by Sonny Werblin and his ownership group (February 1963). This group created stability in a very key AFL market. The Titans were renamed 'Jets' in April of that year."
- "The five-year television deal with NBC in 1964 (with a contract starting date of 1965). This gave us financial credibility."
- "The opening of Shea Stadium for the Jets (1964). They went from the worst stadium in the AFL to the finest stadium in America and averaged 44,000 per game in their first season there."
- "Development of other new stadiums in Oakland (1966) and San Diego (1967). All of a sudden, the AFL had three new stadiums, which were the best in pro football. Miami (and the Orange Bowl) was added as the AFL's ninth team in 1966."
- "Major successful season ticket initiatives in Denver (1965) and Kansas City (1966). These ticket drives carried each team past the 20,000 season ticket level."