

Memories of Jack Kemp

by

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My earliest memory of Jack Kemp was not on the gridiron, but in my living room in Santa Monica. He exuded all the confidence of a born winner, yet he had not thrown his first pass in the fledgling American Football League.

It was early in 1960, four months before we would play our first game at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. Jack, who had starred at nearby Occidental College, was selected to model our new Chargers uniform during a press party at my beachfront home. Ron Mix, our rookie All America tackle from USC, was our team's other model.

Jack graduated from Oxy in 1957, and in three years, had been cut by the Lions, Steelers, 49ers, and Giants of the NFL, and the Calgary Stampeders of the CFL. But happily, our general manager, former Notre Dame coach Frank Leahy, saw something the other teams didn't and signed Jack to our roster as a free agent quarterback.

Jack thrived in coach Sid Gilman's vertical offense, and led the league in yards per completion. His toughness was obvious, too. He was second in running touchdowns, and led the league in the number of times sacked. We went 10-4 in our inaugural season, and won the Western Divisional Championship. But we failed to draw against the L.A. Rams in their home stadium. We would have been the home team in the AFL Championship Game, but because of the lack of patrons, the league moved the game to Houston where the Oilers beat us 24-16 before a home crowd of 32,000. Less than a year after Ron and Jack debuted our uniforms, Frank Leahy retired, and I decided to move the team to San Diego.

In 1961, Jack led us to a 12-2 record, but we again fell to Houston in the AFL Championship Game, 10-3, in front of 30,000 fans in Balboa Stadium. Early in the 1962 season, Jack hit his hand on a helmet while throwing a pass, and he was out for the year. Sid, who also served as our GM, tried to hide Jack on the waiver wire. The Dallas Texans and Denver Broncos expressed interest, but our commissioner, Joe Foss, ruled that the Buffalo Bills had beaten them to it by claiming Jack for a waiver fee of \$100.

Because of his injury, Jack's career was in jeopardy. But when he went to the surgeon, he gripped a football in his hand and asked the doctor to set his finger to follow the same shape as the ball. His foresight was soon rewarded. He led the Bills to a 7-6-1 record in 1962, but lost a playoff game to the Patriots to determine the Eastern Division Champion. Ironically, that was the year that the Chargers won it all, defeating the Patriots 51-10 in San Diego.

Coming full circle, Jack and the Bills then won the AFL Championship in 1964, beating his old team – the Chargers -- 20-7 in Balboa Stadium. He led the Bills to back-to-back titles the following year by beating us again 23-0. Jack was MVP of the AFL Championship game, and shared the league MVP title with our Paul Lowe. Remarkably, Jack led the Bills to the AFL Championship game again in 1965, but they came up short against the Chiefs. In 1966, we finalized a merger agreement with the NFL, and created a new Championship Game which became known as the Super Bowl.

That same momentous year, I sold my controlling interest in the Chargers to succeed my father, Conrad Hilton, as president of Hilton Hotels Corporation. The Chargers won five divisional championships and one AFL title during my six years at the helm of the club. But that record was exceeded only by the remarkable career of Jack Kemp. From 1960-1966, Jack personally led his teams to five AFL Championship Games and he won two of them. In all, he played 13 years of professional football, and made an additional contribution as co-founder and president of the AFL Players Association.

Throughout Jack's political life, he routinely joked that I once sold him for a mere \$100. We always had a good laugh about it before settling into a deep discussion of supply side economics. The joke seemed even more ridiculous when, to my great pride, Bob Dole named Jack his Vice Presidential running mate in 1996.

By the way, during that press party at my house in 1960, the assembled media gave us great reviews on our uniforms. The lightning bolts on the white pants and helmet served as a flashy accent to the powder blue jerseys with golden bolts on the shoulders. Frank Leahy added the name of the player on the back, and convinced AFL owners to follow suit. I made sure the bolt on the side of the helmet was curved so it differed from the jagged-edged design used by the Air Force Academy Falcons.

It has been 50 years since we designed those uniforms, and they are still embraced by our fans today as the Chargers' popular throwback uniform. But I can say, without hesitation, that our uniform never looked better than the day it was first worn in Santa Monica by my great friend, Jack Kemp.