

Brian Walski/The Patriot Ledger

Randolph Oilers general manager Peter O'Kane has been a constant since the inception of the Eastern Football League franchise.

Purist's delight

Randolph Oilers playing football for love of game

By Larry Rosoff
For The Patriot Ledger

RANDOLPH — In this era of professional athletes playing more for financial reward than for a love of the game, the football played in the amateur Eastern Football League is a purist's delight.

The trouble with the amateur level, though, is that a league must fight a constant battle for survival.

In the 26-year history of the EFL, there have been more than 50 franchises from eight states, but while many have come and gone, the Randolph Oilers have endured for 13 seasons.

They've had nine head coaches and hundreds of players, but one constant has been Owner/General Manager Peter O'Kane, one of the franchise's founding fathers.

A fine crop of Randolph athletes who had been playing for the Delaney Club of the old Boston Park League approached O'Kane about starting a team in their hometown.

Since then, the team has attracted players from Maine to Connecticut, anxious to extend their football-playing years beyond high school or college.

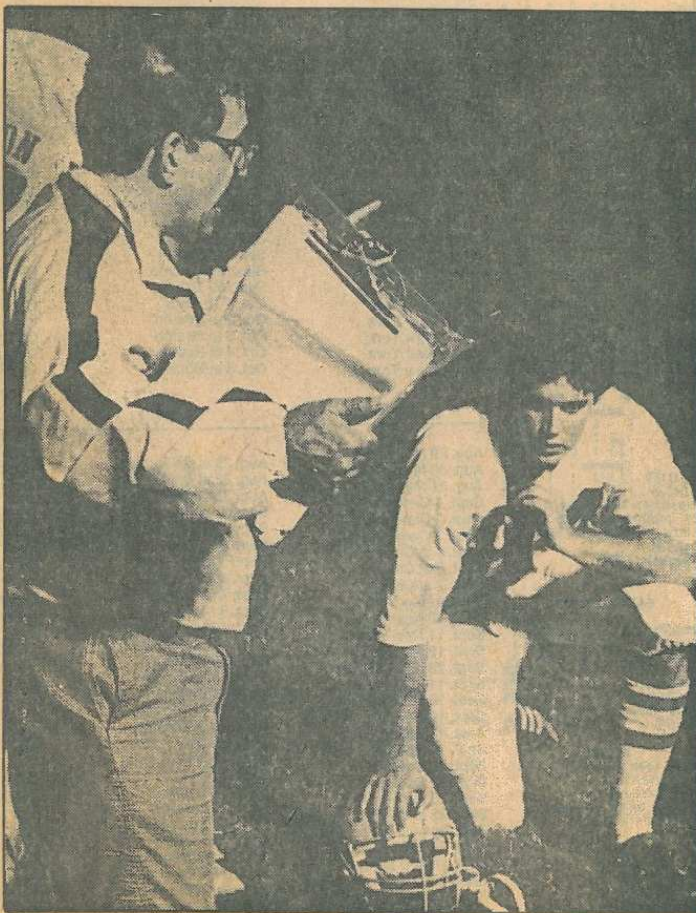
A few had the dream of attracting professional scouts and some have. Three former Oilers, Rick Horn, Jeff Spittell and Stan Hillier, played with the NFL's Giants, Jets and Patriots. The majority, though, play because they like the game.

"It's truly an amateur league," O'Kane said. "The players aren't paid. The only thing we provide is the uniform and the opportunity to play. They provide the pads. They get no travel expenses, meal money and so forth."

They also have to pay for their own medical insurance.

"I think it's impossible to insure a team as a team," O'Kane said. "You'd have to insure everyone. The deductible is so high. It would be the maximum payment."

"So for the last several years when we've looked at



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Oilers assistant coach Ed Casabian talks with the players.

Flexibility key in EFL

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insurance as a league and an individual team, it hasn't been practical."

Current Coach Tom Pileski is in his fifth year, the longest tenure in Oiler history.

At Northeastern University, Pileski was a simultaneous halfback and free safety in his junior and senior years.

He has been an assistant coach at Northeastern, Curry College and Bridgewater State and has coached defensive backs and linebackers at Div. 1 high-school powerhouse Brockton since 1983.

Unlike the players, Pileski, with his assistant coach of four years, Ed Casabian (a former Tufts star and offensive line coach at Bridgewater State for 12 years), are paid a nominal salary by the Oilers.

What is Pileski's motivation for coaching in the EFL?

"I've been branded as a defensive coordinator all my life," he said. "The Eastern League, the Randolph Oilers and Peter O'Kane have given me the opportunity to expand my horizons. I've been able to coach offense."

The EFL season runs from July to September. The team practices two nights a week — Tuesday and Thursday — with games Friday or Saturday nights.

One of the coaching staff's problems is having a full squad at practice sessions. Players occasionally have conflicting job or family obligations.

"We try to be as flexible and understanding as we can," Pileski said. "We don't penalize players if they have to miss a practice, but each one knows other players are after their jobs."

O'Kane, whose primary business interest is the Randolph-based O'Kane News Agency, has worn many Oilers hats over the years as he tries to keep operating costs down.

He has, among many other duties, carried water out to the players, cleaned the field, picked up ice, kept stats and raised funds.

The cost of operating an EFL franchise can vary greatly.

There are league obligations, including the payment of dues and franchise fees. There are expenses for coaches, field rental, medical supplies, electricians, police, concession supplies, etc.

"There have been years we've spent \$40,000 and years we've spent a lot less," said O'Kane. "Last year's expenses went around \$23,000."

Gate receipts are minimal. How do teams defray costs?

"We try to raise money," O'Kane said. "You hope the gate will cover your expenses, but realistically, it only pays 10-15 percent of expenses."

"We've had a great group of volunteers who have helped raise funds. There are so many people in the background who go unnoticed. Whether they're collecting tickets or selling them, announcing the game or holding the stakes on the sidelines, these people are the real unsung heroes."

Like the players, the franchise owners are in the EFL for the love of the game. They have all paid the price, some much more than others.

O'Kane said that in his 13 years in the league, he hasn't seen one team break even financially.

"It's amazing what individuals have gone through to keep a team. People have lost their houses and their cars. You don't know if they'll be back the next year, but most of the guys find a way."

In the nine-member EFL, the teams from Albany, Marlboro and Hyde Park have been the strongest for several years and the stronger teams that make the playoffs benefit from the extra gate receipts.

In the past, the league raised money and divided it among the clubs. The Oilers have held Las Vegas Nights. Once the league sold its playoff rights to a promoter, with each team in the championship game receiving one-third and the rest going to the remaining teams.

O'Kane believes the league now is in its best financial condition in his 13 years.

"We have a good president and commissioner. Paul Bartlett has been president for at least 15 years and George Murphy has been commissioner that long. They, plus our outstanding by-laws, make it a strong league on the field and financially."

O'Kane has some good memories which help make it all worthwhile.

The Oilers have never won a league championship title outright, although in 1977 they came as close as a team could.



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Tom Pileski is in his fifth season coaching the Oilers.

They had a 10-1 record and a three-game lead with three games left. They needed one more win for the title.

They lost their next two games, so it came down to the season finale at home, against Marlboro.

The Randolph players had more on their minds than football that day.

"We had a boy in town named Bobby Boothby who was born without arms or legs. The players were going to have a raffle to get money for team jackets, but instead they gave the money to Bobby. They played the game for Bobby; it was the best crowd we ever had. We sold over 3,000 tickets and turned over several thousand dollars to the fund."

"In the game, we had two cracks from the one-yard line to win the championship. We couldn't get in. We wound up in a five-way tie at 10-4."

O'Kane said he's grateful that in all his years in the league, he has never seen a permanently disabling injury.

However, he and his Oiler family have faced tragedy.

There was the death of Jimmy Allen, an original Oiler, in a car accident.

"Jimmy Allen was a great offensive lineman for us, especially as a downfield blocker."

"He came from Stoughton and played for us for a few years. He later got a job working for the state and moved to the Cape, making it impossible for him to make our practices."

"I remember when he told us he was going to leave. He cried and told us he had a chance to play for the now-defunct Plymouth Rocks. He was a member of the Rocks when he died."

"I was proud of our team then. Every team reacted in a different way. Plymouth postponed its next game. Our guys voted to play. As a team they were down, but playing was what they thought Jimmy would want them to do."

"We won, 30-0. We weren't noted for scoring a lot, but rose to the occasion that day."

The other incident was a lesson in courage.

The Oilers had a young quarterback from Whitman-Hanson Regional High School named Fran Duggan.

Late in the season, he sustained a knee injury that required a hospital exam.

"One Monday night I was in his room at the New England Deaconess Hospital with some of the players. We were talking about next year and how Franny had improved, especially as a leader."

"The doctor came in and asked us to leave. When we went back in, Franny told us they would have to operate and take his leg. He had cancer."

"Franny took that better than anyone in the room. We couldn't cope with it. He did. It was a big lesson in courage for all of us."

The EFL may have saved Duggan's life. If he hadn't been injured, the doctors might not have been able to stop the cancer's progress.

Duggan has been an occasional spectator at Oiler games because his enthusiasm and love for the game haven't waned.

His attitude parallels that of the owners of EFL teams.