



Staff Photo by Steven LaBadessa

HOT FUN IN THE SUMMERTIME: Coach Bob Turner has some words of advice for his EFL team during a recent workout.

Gritty gridders find home in EFL

By LISA OLSON

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According to Turner, an amazed Berry looked at him for a moment, realized he was serious, and blew up.

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For many like Turner, the Eastern Football League's pull is strong. Formed 28 years ago for people who can't seem to shake the game, the EFL is the last remnant of semi-pro football in New England.

It is also the only place where one can sweat away 10 pounds in the blazing heat, fight off blood-thirsty mosquitoes, bang a few heads, and happily declare it a perfect summer night.

"Nothin' else I'd rather be doing," said Teddy Clinksale, taking a break from a recent Randolph Oilers practice. It was the hottest day so far this year, yet Clinksale and his 60 teammates were in their element.

"When you love football, you'll play it in any conditions," said Clinksale, a 28-year-old free safety who played collegiately at Adrian College in Michigan. "You don't play 'cause it's glamorous or easy. You play because the game's gotten under your skin and won't let go."

The only criteria are that players be out of high school and not part of a college team. Players range from teen-agers to men in their 40s, all of whom just want to play a little summer football.

"Some come to practice in cars that cost \$50," said Peter O'Kane, in his 16th year as the Oilers general manager. "And others drive up in Mercedes and BMWs. We should get the rich players to sponsor us."

O'Kane was a fullback for the Randolph Rams for 12 years, during the days when the EFL would draw 20,000 fans. Nearly ever large town in New England seemed to have a team, and the championship was played at Fenway Park.

"That was before the pros and TV took over," said O'Kane who, besides being the GM, is the league treasurer and historian. He is also the Oilers' 50-year-old waterboy. Some have likened him to a latter-day Tom Yawkey.

Marge O'Kane, team president and Peter's wife, plays the role of Jean Yawkey, except the Red

and former Ohio State player from Mattapan with a penchant for barking on the field.

"Where I work (as a federal officer), I've got a lot of anger inside me. I take it out playing football. It's the only place I can growl and get away with it."

Others, like defensive end Larry Tagger, see the league as a way to hang onto the sport that brought them fame in their salad days.

"I'm realistic. I know playing semi-pro doesn't mean some day a scout's going to offer me a million bucks to play pro," said Tagger, 24, a former Brockton High and UMass-Amherst star. "This is just a way to hang on to something I love."

Billy Turner still struggles to hold on to the same thing. After his stint with the Pats, he returned to the EFL in 1988 and blew out his knee in the last game of the season. Now he runs the Oilers offense, while his father, Bob, is the head coach.

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General Manager Pat Sullivan's exasperation was tinged with a touch of amusement.

"He went on the news that night," Turner remembered, "and told all of New England I'd rather play in some rinky dink league than the real thing. He thought it was hilarious.

"Then he cut me the next day."

Turner and the Marlboro Shamrocks played for the EFL title that weekend and won. Berry and his replacement players beat Houston 21-7.

The following week, the Patriots asked Turner back. He returned for another 10 days, then was let go for good when the strike ended. In all, Turner's pro career lasted little over a month; his love affair with football on

the rudimentary level is still in the romance stage.

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In the EFL, one certainly doesn't play for the money. Unlike semi-pro leagues in Europe, where players receive stipends for housing and food, the Oilers and those on the league's five other teams aren't paid a drop.

They provide their own pads, pay their own traveling expenses and often fork over money for necessities like mustard at the concession stand.

Most have "real" jobs in the day, with careers ranging from accountants and lawyers to cops and construction workers. Clinkscale, for instance, is a disc jockey at WUMB. He rushes to the station straight from practice three nights a week, where he spins soul ballads and urges listeners to "catch one of our games."

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"Marge does the grunt things like washing the towels and shopping for tonic and relish on sale," said O'Kane. "And more than once she's had to use her cookie-jar money for finances."

The O'Kane's, however, are no different from owners of the Marlboro, Charlestown, Middleboro, Worcester and Rhode Island franchises. They are executives in name only, and when fund-raising efforts fall short of the \$8,000-\$10,000 needed to run a team, they gladly shell it out of their own pockets.

All so players like Johnathon "Dog" Gates can have their day in the sun.

"It's like a family here," said Gates, 26, an Oilers linebacker

and former Ohio State player from Mattapan with a penchant for barking on the field.

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"I haven't missed a game in years," said the younger Turner, 29. "So the last couple (the Oilers' first two season games) were the hardest days of my life. It was horrible just watching. I can imagine what it would be like without football altogether."

For Jim Turner, the EFL one more rung up the ladder brother Billy once scaled.

NFL scouts have been known to frequent an EFL game or two and having just returned from playing semi-pro ball in England, the youngest Turner, has an added purpose.

"I'm hoping to catch someone's eye," said Jim, a fullback who captained the 1987 Boston College team. "I'm looking at Oilers as a step toward professional football. Most play to win the league championship, playing to win a job with pros."