

# The powerful lure of amateur football Amateur league thrives in region

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The Eastern Football League is a throwback to the time when players wore leather helmets.

It is football the way football was played in an age when there were no superhighways or malls, no multiyear pacts or national television contracts.

It is better than sandlot football. You could call it semiprofessional, but these players are not paid for their efforts. There are no small stipends, just a game played for pride and love of the sport. The league entry from the western suburbs is the Marlborough Shamrocks, one of the top teams of the Eastern Football League. Marlborough was unbeaten in the first five games this season, but its superior record dates back to the mid-1960s when the team joined the EFL.

The team has a national reputation as well, having qualified for the national championship tournament of semipro teams several times. The Shamrocks dominate their league much like another team with an Irish name, the Celtics, did in the National Basketball Association in the 1960s.

Since 1983, Marlborough has won the Eastern Football League championship five times and its lineup is dotted with players who have been stars for many years.

"Marlborough and neighboring Hudson have been football hotbeds for many, many years," said coach Bob Brennan.

"My brother, Walter, played for Marlborough {High School} in 1944 when they won the state Class C championship," Brennan said.

In the mid-1950s, Marlborough High won 25 consecutive games and two state championships, and, in the 1960s, it added another title.

Lou Ghiloni, the town's recreation director, founded the Shamrocks in the 1960s.

"He was the blood and guts of the organization," Brennan said. "He is the one who made Marlborough football what it is. He started the tradition. Everyone else just carried the ball for him over the years."

This year, Marlborough's success has come at the expense of quarterbacks.

Former Worcester State passer Billy Polymeros, an all-conference selection many times, opened the season as quarterback.

He played well in the season-opening jamboree, but hurt his left hand. But it did not stop Polymeros from playing the next week in the season opener. He threw three touchdowns as Marlborough snapped the two-year winning streak of the defending EFL champion Randolph Oilers with a 21-9 victory.

Despite the sore hand, Polymeros completed eight of 13 passes for 163 yards and was named the EFL Player of the Week.

"After the game, he finally had it attended to and we found out it was broken," said Brennan, who immediately searched for a new quarterback.

The following week against Middleborough, Brennan sent in wide receiver Greg Moore to quarterback in the scoreless first half.

"The player we wanted to start at quarterback, Mike Kelly, was late for the game and didn't show up until the second half," Brennan said.

In the second half, Kelly scored on a quarterback sneak late in the game to beat the Cobras, 7-3.

For his performance, Kelly was named EFL Player of the Week.

In the next three games, Polymeros' replacement was Dave Palazzi, who broke in with a bang, firing a 70-yard touchdown pass to Moore. Palazzi is a former No. 1 quarterback at the University of Massachusetts. "Dave is a talented player," Brennan said.

Meanwhile, Palazzi's new league is celebrating its 31st season. It began one year after Billy Sullivan's Boston Patriots and the American Football League made its debut.

Since then, the league has undergone many changes. Teams have represented five New England states -- all but Vermont -- plus New York and New Jersey. In all, 62 cities and towns, from textile hamlets to seacoast ports, have sponsored teams.

When the first football was kicked in 1961, it was known as the New England Football Conference. It has also been called the North Shore Football Conference, North Atlantic Football Conference and the Eastern Pro Football Conference before settling into its current name.

"This brand of football is making a comeback," said Tony Sirrico, the league's information officer and a member of the board of directors. Sirrico played that brand of football following his discharge from the Army after World War II.

"I played for the Plymouth Rockets," Sirrico said. "There were some great town teams in New England back then, but there was no league to speak of."

An early notable figure was Harry Arlanson, who later coached Weymouth High School and Tufts University. Arlanson led the legendary Whitman Town Team. Among other local teams were the Fairhaven Football Club, the Murphy Club and the Abington Town Team.

"They were all great teams," Sirrico said. "On a Sunday afternoon, we'd draw 500 to 1,000 people to the old Plymouth High School field."

But all that died in the 1950s. Sirrico quit the Rockets and became the athletic director at Silver Lake Regional High School.

"Major league baseball and football took over," Sirrico said. "They started televising major league games, and people would rather stay home and watch that than go to the local ball field."

The Eastern Football League survives because of players who love the game and a few exceptional club managers, who do what they can to make it go.

"Peter O'Kane, who runs the Randolph Oilers, has done so much to keep the league alive," Sirrico said. "He holds raffles, runs a concession stand, sells a program and has a few Las Vegas nights."

The cost of operating a team in the league, Sirrico said, is about \$15,000 a year, which is hard-to-get money during a recession.

O'Kane has put together many top teams for Randolph, and it paid off last year when the Oilers were unbeaten for the first time, winning the EFL title.

"This year, Peter has put together an even better team than last, but they got off to a rough start," Sirrico said. "Peter feels like Joe Morgan of the Red Sox. He has all the talent but winning hasn't come easy."

The Oilers lost their first two games but have bounced back with a pair of victories, including a 49-0 thrashing of the Charlestown Townies.

The Eastern Football League is basically a summer league. "We start the season the second week in July and wind up for the second week in September," Sirrico said. "That way we don't interfere with high school football." Most EFL teams play games at school fields.

"You have to pay for the use of a field, the lights, the maintenance crew, the EMTs, the concession workers, the referees. It's expensive," Sirrico said. Some teams charge a \$1 admission, some pass the hat.

But what makes the league so enjoyable, Sirrico said, is that the players want to play.

"They do it for the love of the game," he said. "Every night, I get a call from some former high school player or college player who wants to continue the game, but there is no place to do so once their high school or college career is over."

Paul Harber, Globe Staff. "[The powerful lure of amateur football Amateur league thrives in region.](#)" The Boston Globe (Boston, MA). New York Times Company NY, NJ, DC, MA, TX & Intl Addresses. 1991. *HighBeam Research*. 17 Feb. 2011 <<http://www.highbeam.com>>.