

Olberding could make EFL history

By Glen Farley
ENTERPRISE STAFF WRITER

RANDOLPH — He has been labelled this year's Eric Swann.

That's just fine with Randolph Oilers offensive tackle Lance Olberding, who's hoping to follow Swann's route to the National Football League.

Swann, you'll remember, is the 6-4, 310-pound defensive lineman who, without a day's experience of college football, was selected in the first round of the 1991 NFL draft by the Phoenix Cardinals.

Now meet Olberding, all 6-5 and 292 pounds of him. Like Swann, Olberding's never played a game of college football. Unlike Swann, Olberding won't go in the first round, but no less an authority than NFL draft guru Mel Kiper Jr. has rated him the eighth-best offensive tackle available in this April's draft.

"Olberding is to the offensive tackle spot what Eric Swann was last year to the defensive tackle position," Kiper wrote in a recent edition of *College & Pro Football Newsweekly*. "The progress Swann has made in Phoenix could ultimately enhance the draft position of a guy like Olberding."

How much? Kiper ranks Olberding in a select group of 10 offen-

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— Peter O'Kane
owner, Randolph Oilers

sive tackles that includes Stanford's Bob Whitfield (a potential top five pick) and Michigan's Greg Skrepenak. Super Bowl participants Washington and Buffalo have already looked at him. New England Patriots personnel scout Bob Teahan contacted the Oilers requesting game films. This week will find Olberding in Indianapolis for the annual NFL Combine timing and testing at the Hoosier Dome. All of this is pretty heady stuff for an Eastern Football Leaguer who, until last summer, was a man without a team.

"It's unbelievable," said Olberding. "A year ago, six months ago, I had no idea I'd ever play a down of football again. Now I'm being picked to go as high as the second

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round of the draft."

More likely, Olberding will go somewhere in the draft's middle rounds. One NFL scout has projected him as a fifth or sixth-round pick. Abington's Jim Rourke, the former NFL offensive lineman who's been tutoring Olberding, agrees with that projection.

"He'll probably be drafted in the 4-to-9 area (between the fourth and ninth rounds)," said Rourke. "He's athletic enough for someone to take him and, in two or three years, he's going to be a player. Put him on the developmental squad, maybe hide him on injured reserve the second year. If an offensive line coach takes him and works with him everyday, he'll be a player. He has a great future."

Forget about Olberding's future for just a moment. Let's talk about history. If, and when, Olberding does hear his name called, it's believed he'll become the first player in EFL history to be chosen in the NFL draft.

"We've had a lot of guys signed as free agents," Randolph owner-general manager Peter O'Kane said, "but we've never had one drafted."

Certainly if one had been drafted, he'd have been an EFL all-star. Remarkably, Olberding didn't make the league's all-star team, leading one to wonder what our good friends in the EFL were watching last season.

Olberding is the work of agent Dick Bell, the same Dick Bell who "created" Swann. It was Bell who brought Swann to the Bay State Titans of the Minor League Football System, leading to his selection by the Cardinals with the sixth pick overall in the '91 draft.

"Dick Bell put me in this situation," said Olberding. "I attribute what's happening to me to him."

Aware of Swann's story, Olberding contacted Bell and told him his own story. A blue-chip All-America at Apple Valley (Minn.) High School, Olberding had been on scholarship at the University of Iowa but ultimately left college due to a multitude of problems at home.

Once he helped get his family life in order, Olberding found his football career was out of order. Once heavily recruited by the likes of Iowa, Michigan and Florida State, Olberding had a 292-pound body, but no one to block.

The Titans now defunct, Bell advised the 20-year-old to head east for the EFL. Olberding was one of

four Oiler "imports" Bell put up at his home in Lynn. Defensive lineman Chuck Jones and guard Jay Clark, Olberding's partner on the left side of the Oilers' offensive line, have since returned home to Ohio and North Carolina, respectively. Nick Olsen, a defensive end from the University of Maryland, is currently in Florida attending training camp with the New England Blitz of the new Professional Spring Football League.

Now only Olberding remains behind, living in Bell's home and working out at Boston University under the direction of Bruins strength and conditioning coach Mike Boyle and, until late January when he headed south as the offensive line coach of the Blitz, Rourke.

"The stuff I've learned working one-on-one with Jim is amazing," said Olberding. "He's taught me a lot of the techniques he learned in the NFL so, in that way, I'll have a jump on a lot of people. Also, where I haven't played a lot of football, my body isn't beat up. The only area I see myself behind, and I know it's major, is in experience."

Rourke agrees but is quick to add his student has all the ingredients necessary to eventually make it in the NFL.

"He's a natural 6-6, 300 pounds. He has a great attitude, and he's a great athlete. Plus," Rourke added, "the kid will work."

Parents, not pills, gave Olberding

his size. No steroids are necessary when your dad stands 6-2 and weighs 225 and your mom towers over him at 6-3, 280 and wears a Size 13 man's shoe. But then, George and Ruth aren't the only imposing figures you'll find on the Olberding family tree. Cousin Mark Olberding was one of the "Bruise Brothers" on the San Antonio Spurs of the George Gervin era. Another of Olberding's cousins, Bob Martin, is a standout on the University of Minnesota basketball team and a potential first-round NBA draft pick. The Atlanta Hawks' Jon Koncak is a distant cousin.

"I've got all the genes in the world," Olberding laughed.

His desire, Olberding says, is a tribute to younger sister Margo, who's both physically and mentally handicapped.

"I've seen both sides of the scale, from the handicapped point to 100-percent healthy," said Olberding. "A lot of those (handi-

capped) kids would give anything to be like us for half-an-hour. That's why I'll never take anything I have for granted."

O'Kane seconds that motion, saying that Olberding's was a model citizen during his season the Oilers, working two jobs and working out faithfully.

"I feel strongly about Lance," said O'Kane. "He's working to capitalize on his opportunity. His attitude's phenomenal. He's a kid who'll listen. He's team oriented. He's tremendously strong. And he's very intelligent."

Maybe, but it's Olberding's brawn, not his brains, that's putting the food on the table. Olberding's currently employed as a bouncer at Buzzy's Pub & Grub in Lynn. He also held down a construction job but, the economy being what it is, was recently laid off. That's OK. He seems to be building himself a future.

Olberding's been contacted by Classic Games, Inc., and may soon

be cashing a \$3,000 check for having his picture appear on one of the company's 1992 draft pick collectible cards. Purchase a set of 1991 Classics, and you'll find Swann on Card No. 7.

The 1991 season was a bizarre one for Swann, who ultimately divorced himself from Bell and underwent two arthroscopic knee procedures before settling in primarily as a down tackle in the Cardinals' nickel package. Olberding's been on a whirlwind tour of his own, raising the question: Will success spoil Lance Olberding?

"Not me," he answered. "I'm the type of guy who feels rich if he's got \$10 in his pocket. If I'm making \$50,000 on a developmental squad somewhere next year, I'll be one very happy camper."

"I have no illusions of any sort. I know I'm not ready to step in and start in the NFL," said Olberding. "I need to work on my technique and that comes with experience, I guess."

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