

Blood, sweat, and cheers keep them playing

Randolph Oilers teammates share a love of football

By Paul Harber
GLOBE STAFF

RANDOLPH — It is called semi-professional football, but the truth is, nobody gets paid.

They do get rewarded, though: The players are former college stars and high school standouts, and they continue to play the game because of their love for it.

For the last two weeks, the Randolph Oilers practiced at a gnat-infested park on Fencourt Street, next to a senior citizens center. Next Saturday night, the Oilers open their 25th season in the Eastern Football League against the New Hampshire Wolfpack. It's a home game, at Randolph High School's Memorial Stadium, with kickoff at 7:30.

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The Shamrock mystique doesn't deter O'Kane, first-year head coach Ed Penn, or any of the players. So what if the Shamrocks have won seven straight titles. Or that the Shamrocks traveled across America the last five years, playing for national championships.

Sure, the Oilers would like to unseat Marlborough as the EFL champion and they will try to do so. But that is not why they play with so much commitment. They play because football is so much a part of them.

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Penn replaces Bob Turner as the head coach after a long career as a player and a stint on the coaching staff. He is certainly familiar with the team. He remembers his first day as a player for the Oilers.

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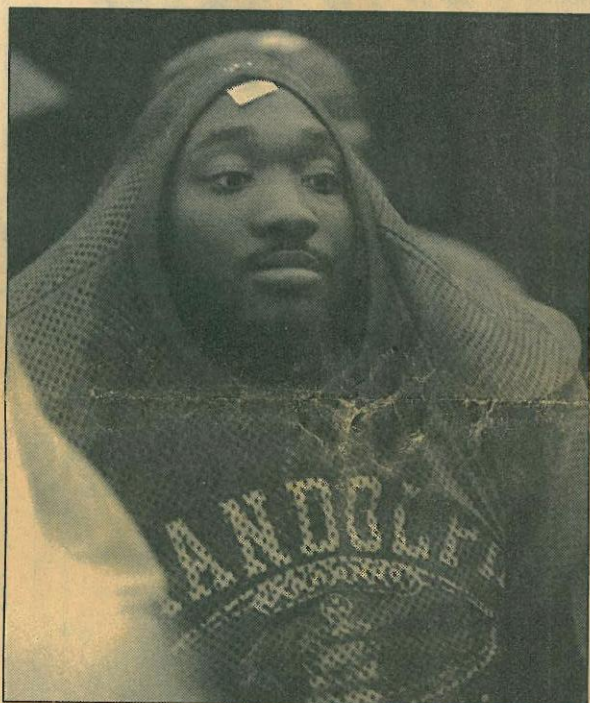
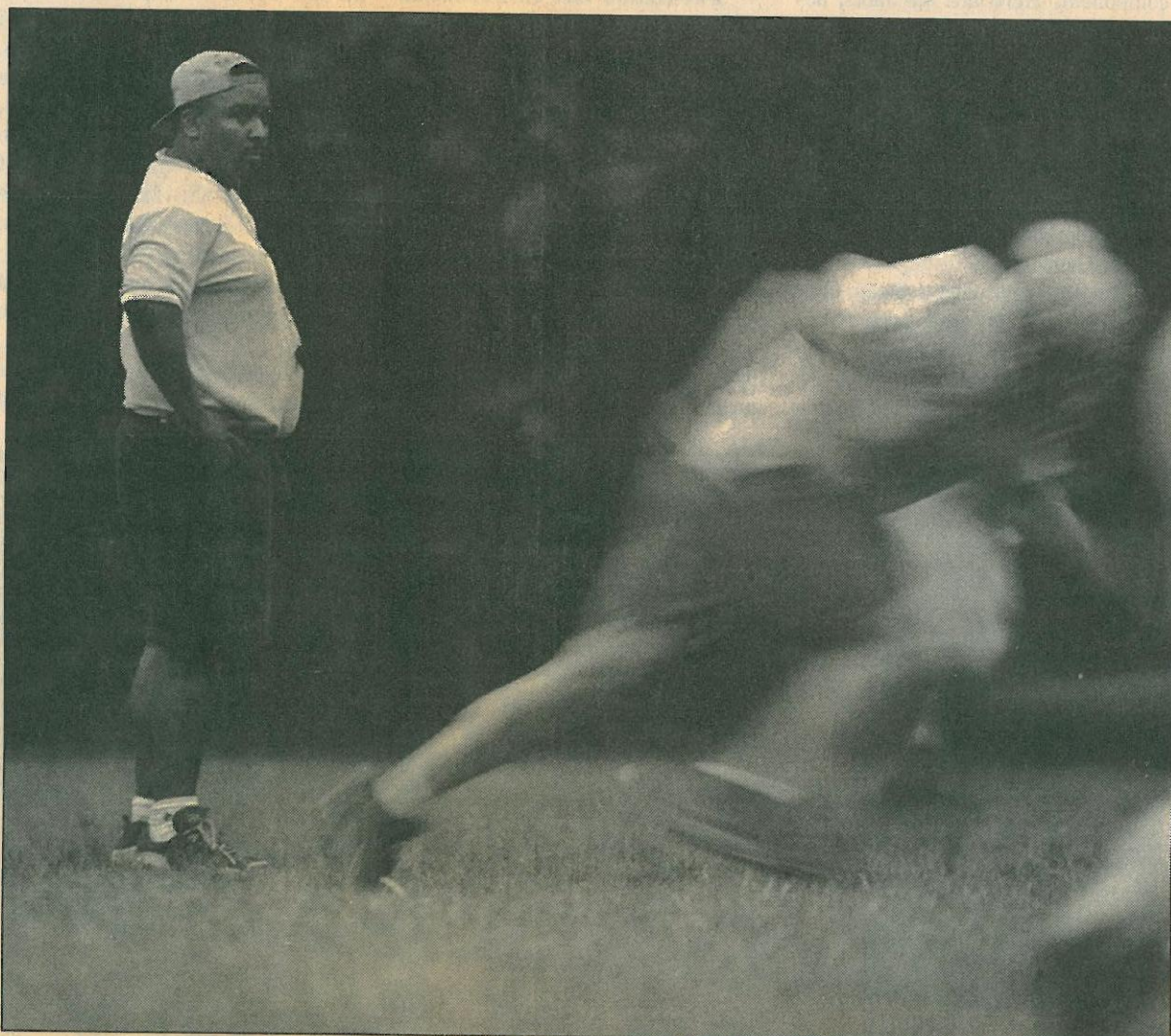
"I'll never forget going to the first practice. [Brockton High athletic director] Tom Pileski was the coach," Penn said. "I walked down the long entrance to Kennedy Field and a couple of the guys, like Norm Ellison and Sean Crowley, came up and introduced themselves to me and made me feel at home."

He has been an Oiler ever since. Penn developed into one of the top linemen in the EFL and stayed at that level for years.

"I never ever thought of getting hurt," he said. "When you love the game, you just go out and play it and you don't worry about things like that."

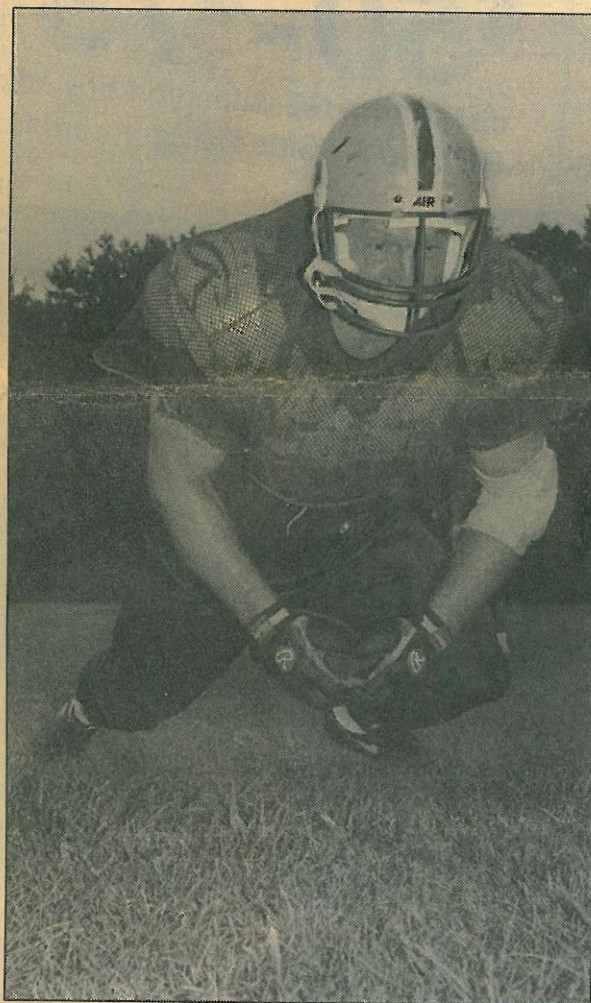
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Randolph Oilers defensive coach John Gates (top photo) looks on as players run sprints. Meanwhile, all-purpose back Anthony Comer (above), 24, listens to a coach's talk, and defensive lineman Steve Venckus, 38, prepares to hit the ground during a practice session.



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In his other life, he is a professional comic. He has appeared on HBO and at most of the region's comedy clubs, and this summer he has a CD being released, called "I Have Too Much Time On My Hands."

In addition to his comedy gigs and coaching the Oiler defense, Gates is committed to youth football in Boston. He helped Harry Wilson put together a superior youth football program in Mattapan that in 1990 went all the way to the national championships in New Jersey, which they won in a cakewalk.

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Strong safety Sam Pearson has football in his genes. His uncle, Drew Pearson, was an outstanding receiver for the Super Bowl-winning Dallas Cowboys in the 1970s. His father, Seth Pearson Sr., was a college star at cornerback for Western Kentucky. His father made it to the National Football League and played briefly for the Cincinnati Bengals and the Los Angeles Rams.

Off the field, Pearson splits his time between Boston and New York for his work as a model. Is he afraid that an injury could damage his modeling career? "Not at all. I can't give up football. It's in the blood. The game is a part of me," he said.

Philadelphia, came to New England because of his computer-industry career, but he is happy the move also let him continue his football career.

He has seen action with the Middleborough Cobras, the Marlborough Shamrocks, the Boston Braves, and the defunct Leominster franchise in the EFL.

"Everyone who is playing in this league plays because we love the game, and what can be better than that?" Pryor said.

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Running back Jim Callahan knew he was going to join the Oilers from the time he was a teenager playing youth football in Randolph. His father, Michael, played for the Oilers. So did three of his uncles. "I remember as a kid going to games and watching Uncle Tim play," said Callahan.

After youth football, Callahan went on to a successful high school career at Archbishop Williams. He then enrolled at Salve Regina, which was beginning a football program, and when Callahan graduated last spring, he was the school's all-time leading rusher and his records could well stand for a long time. "I'm not ready to give up playing football," said Callahan. "It's just too great a game."

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"I think I can play in the NFL," says Comer. "I'm bigger and stronger than I was in college and I think I could make it if they would just give me a shot."

He has calls in to several NFL teams, including the New England Patriots. He is hoping a couple of good games will titillate NFL scouts.

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"Maybe I should play for the Shamrocks because I work so close to Marlborough," said Pagel with a laugh. "Just joking. This is a great team. I wouldn't want to play for anyone else."

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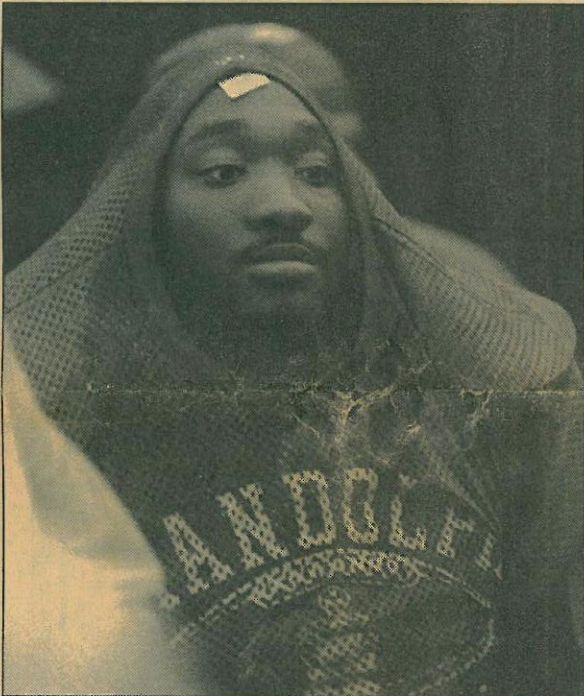
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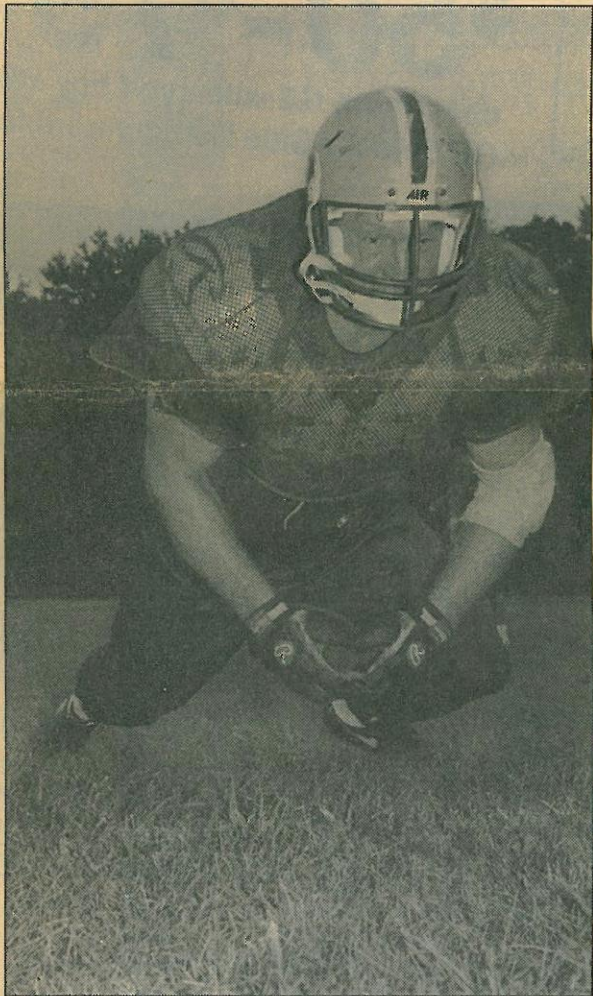
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Then a year ago, O'Kane invited Venckus to the team's annual banquet. Venckus had such a good time at the reunion that he rejoined the team for last season's games. He hasn't lost much on the playing field,

either. He earned the EFL Comeback Player of the Year Award.

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But whatever happens, just playing the game is sweet enough.