

Blood, sweat, and cheers keep them playing

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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.

The Oilers are not favored to unseat the seven-time reigning EFL champion Marlborough Shamrocks. Still, the Oilers are the only other team to win the EFL championship in the 1990s.

"It's like anything else," said Oiler owner/general manager/water boy Peter O'Kane. "All the best players want to play for a winner. It's the same in all sports. Marlborough has guys coming from as far away as Virginia and Pennsylvania wanting to play for them."

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.

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.

"It was 1985. The year before I played for the Taunton Raiders," said Penn. "The Raiders folded and everybody on the team except for me joined the Hyde Park Cowboys. I met Peter O'Kane, and he sold me on being a part of the team.

"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."

As a coach, his main concern is winning. "We've got some great players at the skill positions. But what we really need is some big linemen if we are going to take on Marlborough. If you know of any big linemen, tell them to see me," he said.

In the Real World, Penn is a chauffeur for Polaroid executives. "Our CEO, Gary DiCamillo, is thrilled that I got the job as coach of the Oilers," he said.

Penn's sidekick and defensive coordinator is John Gates, who could be called an Urban Renaissance Man. Like Penn, he grew up in Boston, played football for the Park League champion Shelburne Cobras, moved to the Taunton Raiders, and joined Penn again on the Randolph Oilers, with whom he had a distinguished career.

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.

Jay McGee is a first-year assistant coach with the Oilers.

"It's a very strange feeling being on the sidelines," said McGee, who is the EFL's all-time leading rusher, having gained more than 6,000 yards in 13 seasons for the Oilers.

"I don't think I'll be tempted to put on a uniform again," he said. "We've got a pretty good group of running backs."

His best memory of his years with the Oilers was winning their only league championship in 1990.

"The following year I was the MVP of the league, and personally it stands out, but the championship was an emotional thing I shared with all the guys," said the former Brockton High great, who in the Real World is a shipper and receiver.

Steve Venckus is the oldest player on the team at 38. The 6-foot- 7-inch, 270-pound defensive lineman first played for the Oilers nearly two decades ago. But 13 years ago he called it quits, and his only athletic activity became playing soccer.

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.

"I missed the the game. And besides, I got divorced and had a lot of free time," said Venckus, who is a machinist.

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.

Chris Pryor, 30, is a first-year quarterback for the Oilers. The former East Stroudsburg (Pa.) State College signal caller, originally from 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.

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."

Anthony Comer, 24, was one of the greatest football players in the great gridiron history of Brockton High School. He went on to become a junior college All-American at Nassau Community College and later had a brief but starry career at Boston College.

If the Oilers need a cornerback, Comer will play cornerback. If they need a quarterback, he will play quarterback. If there is a need for a flanker or a running back, he will fill in there, too. He just wants to play football. "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.

At least one player has made the jump from the EFL to the NFL -- Eric Swann played for the Oilers and also for a semi-pro outfit in Lynn that is not part of the EFL. He became a first-round draft choice of the Arizona Cardinals and is still playing for them.

Brian Pagel plays defensive back for the Oilers. Off the field, the former Braintree High standout works for First Data Corp. in Westborough.

"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."

Penn's previous coaching experience is as an assistant coach at Stoughton High School. "My coaching philosophy is for the team to be a family," Penn said. "Everybody can talk to me. I'm no Bill Parcells yelling at players. I let my assistants do the dirty work."

If the Oilers find a way to unseat Marlborough for the Eastern Football League championship this year, it would be the icing on the cake for these teammates.

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