

Oilers: Playing for love of game

By JACK WEILAND
The Patriot Ledger

RANDOLPH - It'd take some funky circumstances for members of the Randolph Oilers football team to cross paths in their professional lives.

Their semi-professional lives, however, are another story.

Starting Friday and continuing through mid-September, the 55 athletes will work on something other than their vast array of careers - everything from prison guard to minister to nationally recognized comedian to construction worker to model to lawyer - and compete for Randolph in the Eastern Football League, a seven-team semi-professional football staple for more than 40 years on the South Shore.

And for all the effort, all the hot summer practices and mosquito-ridden workouts, they don't make a single cent. Their paycheck, so to speak, comes in another form.

"You've got all different walks of life out here," said EFL veteran kicker Dave Canavan, 38, of Weymouth. "It's a great group of guys and when we all come together, it's like nobody cares who does what for a living. There's just a good bond here at the Oiler football club. That's what keeps me coming back.

"Nobody gets paid in this league," the 13-year Oiler said. "They call it semi-pro, but nobody gets paid. People just do it for the love of the game."

"These are working men. They've got real bosses, their wives, their kids and their jobs," coach Ed Penn said. "If the Oilers can fit around third or fourth, we appreciate it. It takes a unique person to give up their summer to play in this football league."

Unique? Oilers football is a culture all its own. Outside of the team's eclectic group of professions, like comedian and defensive coordinator Jon Gates (the Bad Boy of Boston), or minister and defensive lineman James-Caesar Lopes (a Patriot Ledger All-Scholastic at Milton High School), or prison guard and linebacker John O'Brien (a Blue Hills Regional grad) or even model and nephew of NFL great Drew Pearson, Sam Pearson, the team carries numerous family ties.

Quarterback Ryan Meyers, a former water boy, is now coached in part by his father, Ron. Defensive back Mark Royster followed his father's footsteps by joining the team. Defensive lineman Kevin Callahan, perhaps the most imposing defender on the team, is the seventh of his family to don the Oilers blue and gold.

Last year, their 31st in the league, the Oilers finished 4-6. Not bad, at least for a team that started the season 1-6 and at one point went three weeks without a touchdown. Randolph won three straight to end the year, qualifying for the playoffs in the process.



Former Braintree High player Brian Berg plays on the defensive line. (MICHAEL IVINS/For The Patriot Ledger)

"The team just hung together," said Penn, who played for General Manager Peter O'Kane from 1987-1994. "They kept coming to practice, and things just turned around."

A key contributor to the turnaround has been the emergence of Meyers under center, a Patriot Ledger All-Scholastic with Holbrook High School, who played at UMass-Dartmouth and Bridgewater State. In a 28-15 victory over Charlestown last year, he went 8-for-19 with three touchdowns.

"He can sling it," Penn said. "He's elusive. He can roll out, and he's a good pocket quarterback, too. He's like our little Doug Flutie. He's not as tall as some of the other quarterbacks in the league, but he's got a good arm. Sometimes you wonder, 'Wow how did he throw that?' On the run he can flip the ball at least 40 yards, right on target."

"He's got a very strong arm, he's got good vision, and he's got great footwork," Canavan said. "When he drops back to pass, in any instance of pressure, he's not afraid to tuck it and run. He can gain 10, 15, 20 yards at a time because of his speed and athleticism. We have a lot of belief and a lot of confidence in him."

It was Randolph's defense, though, that kept the team in games. The Oilers gave up only 14 points a game last year, and return a talented linebacking corps of John Martel (a Blue Hills grad), Larry Tagger (Brockton High), John O'Brien (Blue Hills) and Tony Vanaria. Randolph recorded a defensive touchdown in the first two games last year, and forced six turnovers against Rhode Island later in the year.

Once they got into postseason play, though, Randolph lost in the first round to Boston - the Oilers' opening day opponent Friday at Randolph High School, starting at 8 p.m.

Think they forgot? Not hardly.

"With that strong finish, the guys really came in confident," Penn said. "Two days after our playoff loss to Boston, the guys were already fired up because that's the team we're gonna play for opening day. It all built up through winter: 'Coach, when are we gonna start?' Hold up, slow down ... you'll get your chance."

Indeed they will. Friday's game kicks off the eight-game regular season, during which Randolph will play host five times. For this close-knit band of ranging personalities, it'll be another crack at an EFL championship that has eluded the organization since its only title in 1990.

If the Oilers can't take home the glory in 2005, all will not be lost.

They'll still have memories of playing a game they still love.

They'll still have fun and friends.

"Let's put it this way: my wife has been asking me when I'm going to retire for probably six or seven years," said Canavan, a mortgage broker, "and I just keep saying, 'Maybe next year. Maybe next year.'"

"The whole team is like a blessing," Penn said. "I wouldn't wanna be anywhere else on Friday night but with the Randolph Oilers."

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Transmitted Wednesday, July 06, 2005