

Semipro and semi-old, but with a football forty 'tude

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Many area semipro football players determined to hang on rather than hang it up at age 40 and keep playing

Donna Canavan can identify with Deanna Favre. Her husband retires from football every year. “For the past seven or eight years,” Randolph Oilers kicker Dave Canavan, said “I’ve been telling my wife, ‘Next year is my last.’ Seventeen years later, I’m still doing it.”

Derek Wright, whose duties with the Oilers’ Eastern Football League rival Brockton Buccaneers run the gamut from team owner to coach to a player who’s liable to line up virtually anywhere, knows of what Canavan speaks.

“When I first started,” said Wright, whose multiple positions on the playing field have earned him the nickname ‘Slash,’ “I said I wanted to play 10 years. Then it was 15. Now I’m thinking I can do 20. It’s year by year, but as long as my health is good. ...”



Over 40-year-old Brockton players from left, Derek Wright, Deondre Kennard, and Bo Garcia.

For guys like Canavan and Wright, football life didn’t begin at 40, but it didn’t end there, either. According to Oilers general manager and EFL treasurer Peter O’Kane, the number of semipro football fogies has increased over the years.

“It’s much more prevalent than it was,” said O’Kane. “We started the team in 1974. I was looking at the ’77 roster and the oldest player was 26 years old. Back then, guys would come up

to you and say, ‘I just bought a truck, my payments are \$100 a month, and if I get hurt and can’t work...’

“Things have changed. Now you’ve got guys who have played for over 20 years.”

A 1983 Brockton High School graduate, Larry Tagger’s semipro career dates back 22 years to a time when his cousin, former Boxers running back Jay Magee, brought him to play for Tom Pileski and the Oilers.

Pass the Bengay. At the age of 44, Tagger still has a burning desire to play.

“It’s tough,” said the Oilers’ linebacker. “You have your aches and pains, but I wouldn’t trade my experiences for anything. I’ve played with Jim Bowman of the Patriots (when Tagger played for the Hockomock Colts in 1992-1993) and I’ve played for guys who went on to Europe and Canada. It’s been amazing.”

Who says guys can’t line up at midfield in midlife?

According to O’Kane, the Oilers have no fewer than seven players on their roster who are 40 years of age or older: safety John Taylor-Epps (47), offensive lineman Kevin Boyle (45), Tagger (44), Canavan and linebacker John O’Brien (both 42), and All-League offensive lineman T.D. Thompson (41), and center Brian Burns(40).



Randolph Oiler T.D. Thompson adjusts his gloves during practice

“You’d think they’d get hurt and everything, but they just keep going and they’re all pretty good about coming to practice,” said O’Kane. “You wish the other guys were as good about getting there.”

“There’s always those days when you don’t want to go to practice,” said Wright, a school police officer at West Roxbury High, “but that’s when you have some of your best practices. The other day it was raining. I was thinking I didn’t want to go. Then you get out there on the practice field running around...”

Now in his 22nd season with the Middleboro Cobras, Garrett Perry grew to like the team so much over the years that he bought it and subsequently coached it to back-to-back championships in the New England Football League AAA in 2007-2008, its first two years in that league.



Players over 40-years-old from left, Michael Jackson, player/coach Garrett Perry, and Bob Burr

And after all these years, Perry’s still got the (W)right stuff, too.

On July 18, the 6-2, 305-pounder hopes to celebrate the big four-oh by clearing out members of the Connecticut Thunder as a member of the Cobras’ offensive line.

“I’m going to celebrate my 40th birthday in Montville, Conn.,” mused Perry, “by banging into some 22-year-old straight out of college.”

Who’s the kid here?

“It’s more a lifestyle than a hobby,” said Perry, a maintenance supervisor at Middleboro’s Nichols Middle School who has earned six championship rings in 21 seasons with the Cobras. “I’m not one to punch out at work, go home and lie on my recliner. It’s all about preparation.”

Even at his age, Perry wasn’t the senior member on his championship team last year.

Veteran guard-center Bill Fuller, an NEFL all-star last year at the age of 42, held that distinction. Fellow offensive lineman Bob Burr, fullback Randy Campbell and defensive lineman Michael Jackson are among the Cobras’ elder statesmen.

They are not alone.

The Buccaneers and the EFL’s expansion Bridgewater Gladiators also have players who qualify as semipro senior citizens.

The Bucs have a pair of 42-year-olds, according to Wright, in two-way lineman and linebacker Deondre Kennard and wide receiver Richard “Bo” Garcia.

The Gladiators have a pair of children of the Sixties as well, according to John Fossetti, the team's director of operations, in quarterback Tony Gaucher and safety-kicker Ricky Witt.

While others might look at their birth certificates and view them as detriments, Perry begs to differ.

"As a coach," said Perry, "I think it's to my benefit. It's hard for a 22-year-old to take it easy when he sees Bill Fuller and me completing every hill sprint next to him. If a kid sees that, he isn't going to quit."

Two years Perry's elder, Canavan, a business relationship manager at Office Max, can't quit.

"It's the love of the game and the desire to still want to compete," Canavan answered when asked what drives him. "I never want to give that up."

"I'm just a kicker, but I enjoy that feeling of being able to help my team win a game with a field goal, with an extra point, with a deep kickoff or a punt that pins the other team deep in its zone. I love that."

"It's the love of the game," agreed Tagger, a chef at TGI Friday's. "It's very competitive. Believe me, the 'E' (in EFL) does not stand for easy."

To Wright, the "E" can stand for escape.

"It's an avenue," Wright laughed. "If your frustration's built up, it's a release."

O'Kane, whose affiliation with semipro football goes back "about 60 years ago" to a time when he served as the waterboy for the old Randolph Town Team, views players like Wright, who epitomize endurance, as a link to the area's pigskin past.

"It's good to see guys that age still playing," said O'Kane. "These guys are a big part of the history of semipro football in this area. It just means a lot."

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