

Playing for love of the game, EFL started back in 1961

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The Eastern Football League is a throwback to the time when players wore leather helmets.

It is football the way football was played in an age when there were no superhighways or malls, no multiyear pacts or national television contracts.

It is better than sandlot football. You could call it semiprofessional, but these players are not paid for their efforts. There are no small stipends even, just a game played for pride and love of the sport.

The south area is home to three of the Eastern Football League's 10 teams. They include:

- The defending champion Randolph Oilers, ranked fourth among semiprofessional teams in North America a year ago when they were unbeaten and untied.
- The Hockomock Colts, who play out of Mansfield. They joined the league a year ago. As the new team on the block, they got their block knocked off quite frequently last year, finishing 1-9 and scoring only 42 points to their opponents' 208. But things have changed this year, with the Colts winning three of their first four games.
- The Middleborough Cobras are among the long-timers, having been in operation since 1973. In 18 years of play the Cobras have racked up five league championships and a 114-76 record.

The league is celebrating its 31st season. It began one year after Billy Sullivan's Boston Patriots and the American Football League made its debut.

The league has undergone many changes over the years. Teams have represented five New England states -- all but Vermont -- plus New York and New Jersey.

In all, 62 cities and towns, from textile hamlets to seacoast ports, from train stops to towns tucked on the back roads of New England, have sponsored teams.

When the first football was kicked in 1961, it was known as the New England Football Conference. It has also been called the North Shore Football Conference, North Atlantic Football Conference and the Eastern Pro Football Conference before settling into its present name.

"This brand of football is making a comeback," said Tony SIRRICO, the league's information officer and a member of the board of directors. SIRRICO played this brand of football when he was released from the Army after World War II.

"I played for the Plymouth Rockets," SIRRICO said. "There were some great town teams in New England back then, but there was no league to speak of."

There was the great Harry Arlanson, who later coached Weymouth High School and Tufts University, leading the legendary Whitman Town Team. And there was the Fairhaven Football Club, the Murphy Club and the Abington Town Team.

"They were all great teams," SIRRICO said. "On a Sunday afternoon we'd draw 500 to 1,000 people to the old Plymouth High School field."

But all that died in the 1950s. SIRRICO quit the Rockets and became the athletic director at Silver Lake Regional High School.

"Major league baseball and football took over," SIRRICO said. "They started televising major league games, and people would rather stay home and watch that than go to the local ballfield."

The Eastern Football League survives because of players who love the game and a few exceptional club managers, who do what they can to make it go.

"Peter O'Kane, who runs the Randolph Oilers, has done so much to keep the league alive," SIRRICO said. "He holds raffles, runs a concession stand, sells a program and has a few Las Vegas nights."

The cost of operating a team in the league, SIRRICO estimates, is about \$15,000 a year, which is hard-to-get money in an economic recession.

O'Kane has put together many top teams for Randolph, and it paid off last year when the Oilers were unbeaten for the first time, winning the EFL title.

"This year Peter has put together an even better team than last, but they got off to a rough start," SIRRICO said. "Peter feels like Joe Morgan of the Red Sox. He has all the talent but winning hasn't come easy."

The Oilers lost their first two games but have bounced back with a pair of victories, including a 49-0 thrashing of the Charlestown Townies.

The Eastern Football League is basically a summer league. "We start the season the second week in July and wind up for the second week in September," SIRRICO said. "That way we don't interfere with high school football."

Most of the EFL teams play their games at high school fields, and it is difficult, once the high school season begins, to get the field. Also, games are costly for EFL club managers, costing about \$1,000 for everything.

"You have to pay for the use of a field, the lights, the maintenance crew, the EMTs, the concession workers, the referees. It's expensive," Serrico said. Some teams charge \$1 admission, some pass the hat.

But what makes the league so enjoyable, Serrico said, is that the players want to play.

"They do it for the love of the game," he said.

"Every night I get a call from some former high school player or college player who wants to continue the game, but there is no place to do so once their high school or college career is over."

