

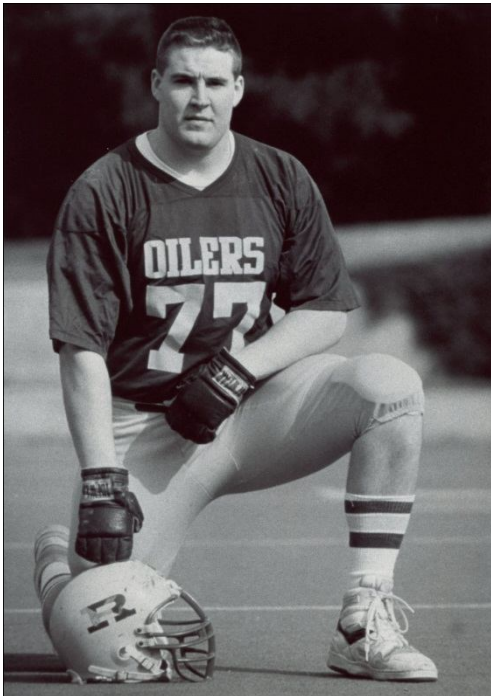
Swann clones suit up for the Randolph Oilers: They're big, they're out of school and they have NFL tools

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Frank Dell'Apa

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SALEM -- The System does not work for everyone. Sometimes the best prospects are abandoned by professional sport's minor league System, a/k/a the National Collegiate Athletic Association.



Lance Olberding of the Randolph Oilers is expected to be selected in next year's NFL Draft

Until Eric Swann was selected in the first round of the National Football League draft in April, though, the self-perpetuating properties of The System had convinced most to go along with it. Unfortunately, that left many healthy young Eric Swanns working in maintenance departments for comparative pennies.

The success of Swann, though, has started a groundswell of other healthy young athletes who have, in the vernacular, "slipped through the cracks."

And Dick Bell, who essentially conceived Swann, has caught them before they hit bottom. Bell, sort of an agent of lost causes, is not entirely altruistic, but he has created a symbiotic atmosphere in which certain individuals can thrive.

The message is: You do not have to play college football to make it in the NFL. Eric Swann seems to have proven that.

Bell found Swann, a defensive end who had struggled with the NCAA's eligibility requirements, in North Carolina and brought him to Massachusetts to play for a minor league team called the Bay State Titans. Bell loudly proclaimed Swann's abilities and citizenship, and eventually attracted national exposure. Swann was chosen by the Phoenix Cardinals in this spring's draft.

"Yes," Bell said, "I'm making a statement.

"I'm looking for big, young athletes with character. I had 200 calls from guys who heard about Eric, but I had to turn most of them down. They were either too old or they weren't what they said they were."

Since Swann's success, Bell has rejected quarterbacks and kickers and anyone over 25 years old. He traveled the country, interviewing and testing several other prospects. He ended up with four, moved them into a house in Lynn and lined them up to play for the **Randolph Oilers** in the Eastern Football League. They will receive personalized instruction from former NFL lineman Jim Rourke, who is compensated by Bell. They are scheduled to play their first game at 7:30 tonight against the Marlboro Shamrocks at **Randolph High School**.

Their average size is 6 feet 4 1/2 inches, 284 1/2 pounds. Their average age is 21 years 5 months. All four will play in the NFL, Bell said, and at least one will likely be a first-round draft choice. But their average length of stay in college has been about three semesters. Only one has played a game of football in the last year. Their hopes are realistic. Jay Clark, Chuck Jones, **Lance Olberding** and Nick Oleson hope to be the Eric Swanns of 1992. "You're in a bar," Oleson said, "and someone points to a guy and says, 'That guy could have been a great player.'"

"Well, that's something I can't live with, really. I don't want to look in the mirror every day and say I didn't make the effort. I could not live with myself. Every time I saw a football or a TV, it would make me unhappy."

Though Jay Clark's background appears similar to Swann's, their paths diverged after they were teammates at Western Harnett High School in Lillington, N.C. Swann's struggles with the Scholastic Aptitude Test effectively kept him from attending North Carolina State. Clark, though, majored in psychology at Fayetteville (N.C.) State and was ahead of schedule to graduate. He contemplated a transfer to NC State, but instead went to Methodist College, a Division 3 school in Fayetteville.

Bell said Methodist College administrators encouraged Clark to pursue his athletic ambitions.

"They knew he wasn't going to the NFL from Methodist College," Bell said. "He thought now was the right time to try for the NFL. He only has a semester to go, and he can finish his studies in the offseason."

Clark and Olberding are offensive linemen. They work on blocking techniques against Jones and Oleson, defensive linemen. All four regularly lift weights and spend most of their time concentrating on their task.

"A man lives 70 some years," Clark said. "I'm willing to risk one year for this."

Lance Olberding had been waking at 5 a.m. daily for his landscaping job in Minneapolis. After he realized that his situation was similar to Swann's, he telephoned Bell at his Salem office.

"I got on a plane an hour after we talked," Olberding said.

"He is the most like Swann physically," Bell said. "There is no question Lance will play in the NFL if he gets a chance. He has a natural stance for a left tackle and he is light on his feet.

"He could play 10-15 years in the NFL. You just don't find guys his size with feet like his."

Olberding, 20, a cousin of former NBA forward Mark Olberding, attended the University of Iowa as a freshman. He was a member of the Hawkeyes' traveling team but did not play a game.

Olberding's grade point average was "ridiculously low" because of family difficulties, according to Bell.

So Olberding transferred to Kirkwood Community College in Iowa. From there, he could have played at Minot State, a small National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics school in North Dakota, or North Dakota State.

"He would have had to take something like 17 credits in summer school and get an A-minus average to be eligible at Iowa," Bell said. "It just wouldn't have worked out."

Chuck Jones' picture stares out from a 1988 edition of a national sports publication. He was named a first-team high school All-American along with such players as Brockton's Rudy Harris. He was probably the best prospect from Chillicothe (Ohio) High School since Patriots defensive end Garin Veris. Jones committed to Ohio State. Had his career proceeded as planned, he would likely be a starting junior defensive lineman this year. However, Jones did not graduate from high school until the summer of 1989, his senior year; that caused him to lose his scholarship. Jones completed his high school requirements before the fall semester in 1989 but would have had to pay his tuition.

He was working a construction job last winter, his football hopes on hold, when he saw Swann's image on television.

"I was lying on the floor watching TV," Jones said, "and Swann caught my eye on TV. I said, 'Mom, this might be an opportunity for me.' "

Oleson, 23, is the only one of the four ineligible for the NFL draft because his collegiate class graduated last year.

"He will be signed as a free agent outside defensive end," Bell said. "He is exceptionally mature and intuitive. I tell him he looks like an extra in a Hercules movie. He just needs a year to play."

Oleson is also something of an amateur dietician for the group.

"I was in Phoenix working at an auto body shop," Oleson said. "I read a headline in the paper: 'Swann's agent on lookout for unknowns.'"

"We're getting a second chance. I wasn't giving up hope, but it was getting tough to fulfill a lifelong goal. There are a lot of kids who have had problems in school but no one else had put the time in to help them."

Bell, 37, played defensive line at Milton High School, Dean Junior College and the University of Rhode Island. His potential NFL career was stymied by injury and he worked at auto dealers and as an insurance salesman before becoming a sports agent six years ago.

He established himself by discovering reliable players from obscure backgrounds, and in 1990 he had his first first-rounder: defensive back Ben Smith from the University of Georgia. Bell appeared to be on his way toward becoming an establishment figure, working with established schools and established players. Then he discovered Swann.

The concept of a college dropout playing for a minor league team was received skeptically.

"Maybe Swann was a once-in-a-lifetime deal as the No. 6 pick," Bell said. "But you won't see guys like these at Boston College. If scouts go to Penn State, they won't find four line prospects like these guys. People don't like change, but we're breaking the mold. I've talked to a lot of NFL personnel directors and they are all planning on coming here to watch the Randolph Oilers."

Frank Dell'Apa, Globe Staff. "Swann clones They're big, they're out of school and they have NFL tools." The Boston Globe (Boston, MA). New York Times Company NY, NJ, DC, MA, TX & Intl Addresses. 1991. *HighBeam Research*. 24 Feb. 2011 <<http://www.highbeam.com>>.