

O'Kane Bounces back into the heart of Randolph Oilers

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RANDOLPH –

As Randolph legend Peter O'Kane underwent bypass surgery before the Eastern Football League season began last month, his heart was right where its been for the last 50 years: on the gridiron.

"I wanted it done during our bye week, so I wouldn't miss a game," said O'Kane. "But I really didn't have any say in that. I do what the doctors tell me."

Now that the surgery's done, O'Kane is back on the sidelines where he belongs, as general manager of the Randolph Oilers, continuing a relationship with the sport that started when he was a youngster in the late 1940s.

Back then, he lived across the street from Randolph High School's football field. One day he wandered over to watch the Randolph Town Team play and was immediately smitten with the game.

He volunteered as the Townies' waterboy, aiding his parched boyhood idols, but he never quenched his thirst for the game.

The Randolph Town Team faded, and other teams came into O'Kane's life.

He played four years for Randolph High School, beginning as a freshman lineman, moving to running back. "I wasn't that great. My nickname was `Thumbs,' because I couldn't hold on to the ball," said the self-effacing O'Kane, who continued to play football after graduating from high school in 1957.

There were the Randolph Tigers, which preceded the EFL. "We played in the Southeastern League," reflected O'Kane. "It was terrific football. There were great games against Middleborough and the Murphy Club of Fall River as well as teams from as far away as Fairhaven."

Today, O'Kane, 63, is the general manager of another team that represents his hometown. The Oilers aren't among the league leaders, but they are one of the more respected teams, which has been in the EFL for more than a quarter-century.

O'Kane was one of the team founders, along with the late Eddie Ripp, who ran a popular submarine sandwich shop in North Randolph.

"In 1974, a bunch of the kids from the area were playing football in the Boston Park League for the Connolly Club," said O'Kane. "They wanted to form their own team and represent Randolph."

At first, O'Kane had no desire to run the team. He wanted to play for the Oilers. The successful Randolph newsdealer was in his mid- 30s and it would have been his final fling on the playing field. "But I suffered a pulled groin the very first practice," he said.

But instead of sitting on the sidelines, he helped out. He sold advertisements for the team program, sold tickets, did a lot of different things on game day. But he never got to play again.

He still remembers the first game in the history of the franchise. "I think it was the best crowd we ever had in Randolph," said O'Kane. "We played Middleborough, and we lost, 14-8. The next two weeks there were downpours. We finished with four wins that season."

Over the last 28 years, people have come and gone through the Randolph organization, but O'Kane and his wife, Marge, who serves as the Oilers' president, have remained.

They ran the club when the Oilers won their only EFL championship, in 1990. They have seen their league thrive. O'Kane's reputation is widespread. Four years ago, he received the ultimate honor when the United States Football Association inducted him into its Hall of Fame for his contributions to semi-professional football.

"He's not just a terrific owner, he's a terrific person," said Ed Penn, a longtime associate and head football coach for the Oilers.

Penn was an all-star in the league, playing for the Taunton Raiders, when he first met O'Kane in 1978. "When the Raiders disbanded, he came to see us. Most of us players were going to join the Boston Cowboys, but he wanted us to join the Oilers," said Penn.

"He didn't talk about winning titles, he talked about how great it would be to play for Randolph, about the community," said Penn.

Penn joined the Oilers and was a member of their championship team in 1990. In 1994, Penn made the transition to assistant coach and became head coach in 1998.

"Peter doesn't have a football team. It's an extended family," said Penn. "When my father died a couple of years ago, at the church, I looked back, and Peter was in the row behind my family. And behind Peter, the pews were all of the Oilers. It's a tribute to the organization."

It's been that way from the beginning. While other teams and another communities have come and gone, it might seem that the only reason the Oilers are around is Peter O'Kane.

He disagrees. "You have to give credit to all the people that volunteer. We have folks who have worked more than 25 years with us. You don't realize how many people it takes to keep a team going. You need ticket takers, people to sell 50-50 chances, people to hold the 10-yard markers. A lot of people."

All of the original team founders, except O'Kane, are gone. "Just about everybody is dead now," said O'Kane. "I wish they were around today to see how the team has done."

Teams such as the Oilers and the Quincy Granite and Middleborough Cobras of the Eastern Football League are doing well. "There seems to be a surge in popularity of football these days," says O'Kane.

