

THE UNFORGETTABLE BUZZ

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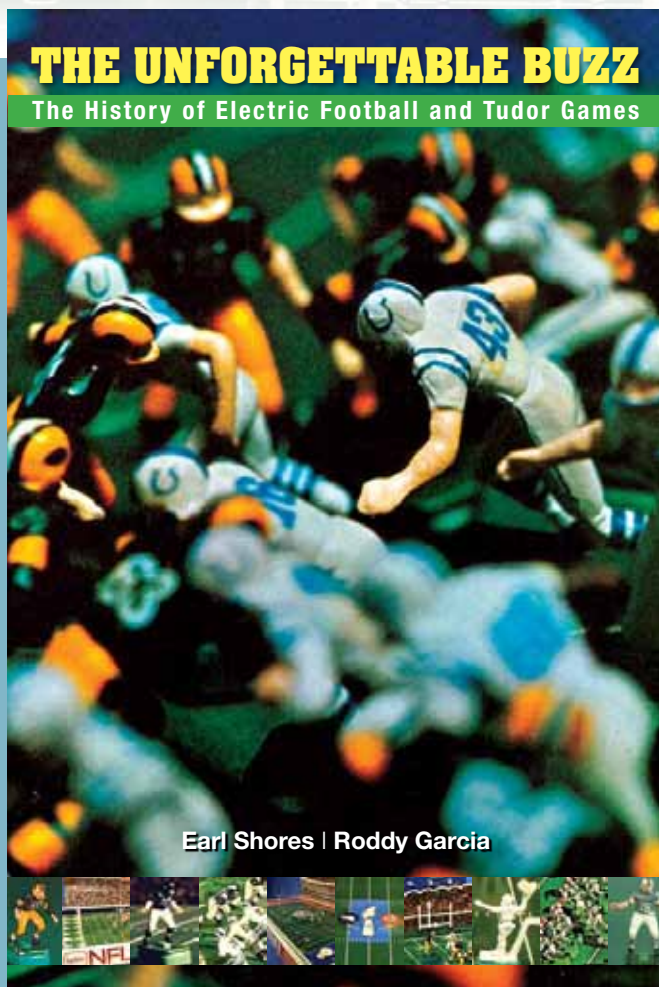
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"The Unforgettable Buzz is a thoroughly researched and cleverly written study of electric football. Every Baby Boomer who played the game – and that's all of us – will love this book."

–Ray Didinger, Pro Football Hall of Fame Sportswriter and NFL Films Emmy® Award Winning Writer and Producer

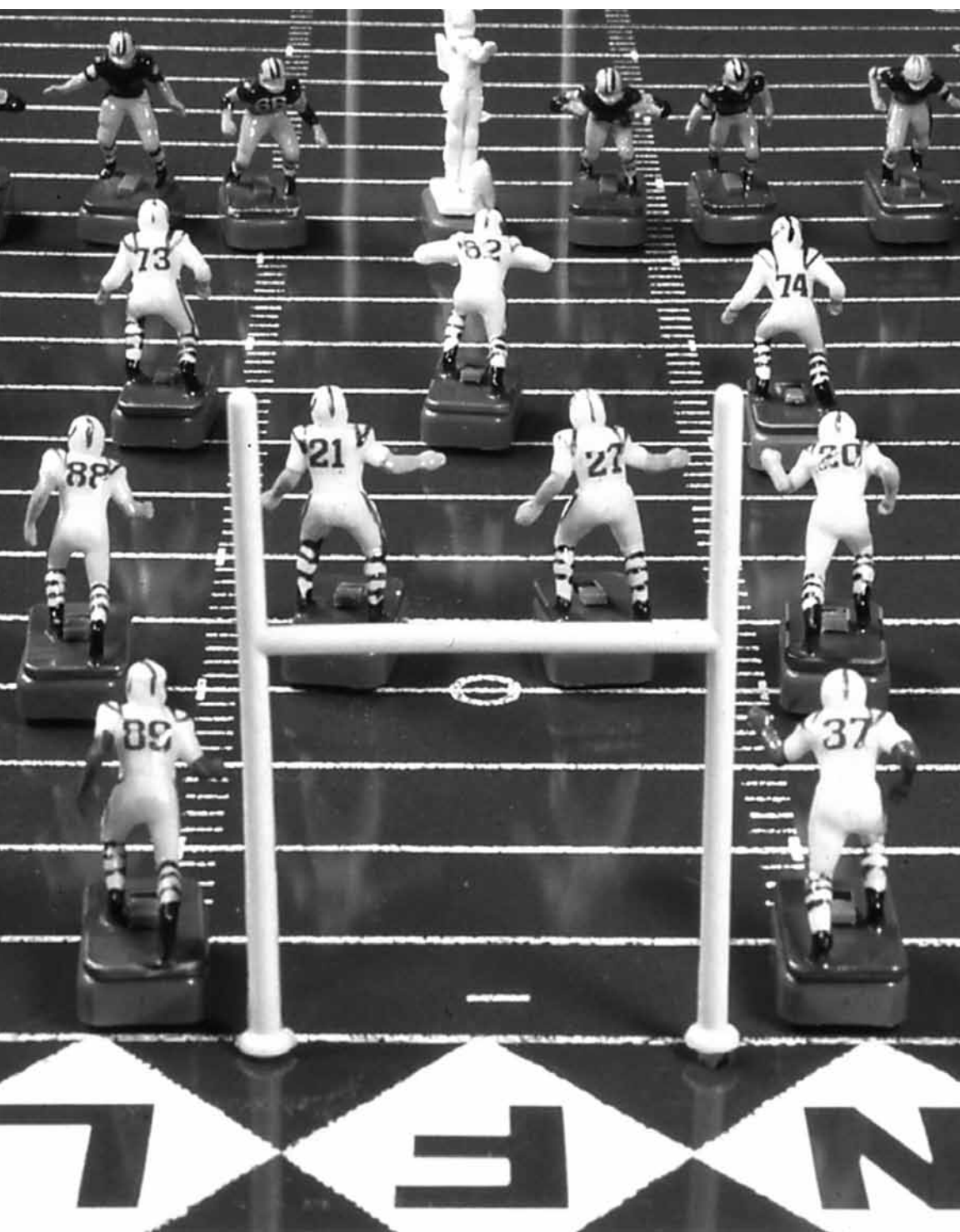
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1 TOYS FOR THE NFL

Norman Sas hadn't made many mistakes during his seventeen years as president of Tudor Metal Products, but this was shaping up as a big one. And as a meticulous decision maker, Norman now wondered what he had missed on that fateful day in 1960 when he declined to give away a 5% cut of his company's record-setting profits. The honest answer was nothing. Significant changes had come to the unique intersection of American business and culture that Tudor inhabited. Anyone claiming to have foreseen the events of the last five years was either a liar or a lunatic.

It was now the fall of 1965, and Tudor's specialized station in the world was that of toy maker, complete with a six-story factory and warehouse just off Flatbush Avenue near the entrance to the Brooklyn Bridge. The company had been founded by Norman's father Elmer Sas in 1928, but after two decades in business a dispute between Elmer and his partner pushed Tudor to the verge of a postwar liquidation. Only a last-minute deal brokered by the company accountant had saved Tudor from joining the Everest-like scrap pile of defunct toy manufacturers. Under the terms of the agreement Tudor stayed in business, but Elmer and his partner had to sell their halves of the company and "retire." Buying the partner's share of Tudor was sales manager Joe Tonole. Elmer's half of the company was sold to Norman, who was just a year removed from his college graduation. In addition to half of the company, Norman got something else – Elmer's job. He was just twenty-three years old and now the president of Tudor Metal Products.

Considering Norman's limited work experience – he'd spent the previous year working for General Electric – it was an enormous gamble to put him in charge of a struggling company of any kind. Yet by the time the annual American Toy Fair got underway the following year in March of 1949, Norman had invented the game that would make Tudor a household name. That game was electric football. Tudor had the electric football category all



Norman Sas from *Playthings*, December 1961.

to itself in the early 1950's, building the brand and profits as the game became a Christmas-morning staple. When a competitor finally stepped onto the vibrating gridiron in 1954, Tudor's electric football game was available in all forty-eight states. As the 1950's came to a close the Gotham Pressed Steel Corporation was struggling to pick up yardage against Tudor's popular and well-established Tru-Action No. 500 model. But Gotham's electric football games had become a regular part of both the Sears and Montgomery Ward Christmas catalogs, which at the time imparted almost biblical influence on Christmas shopping and

toy marketing. Thanks to Sears, who was the country's largest toy retailer, Gotham still maintained championship ambitions for electric football.

Norman's mistake, at least as he viewed it now, had come in early 1960 when he received a phone call from a company that up until that moment, he had never heard of. On the line, long-distance from Beverly Hills, California, was Larry Kent, who introduced himself as the vice president of National Football League Enterprises, the newly created marketing arm of the National Football League. Kent's actual employer was Roy Rogers, with NFL Enterprises being a subsidiary of the extremely profitable Roy Rogers Enterprises. As Kent explained it, he had full command of the new entity and was prepared to offer Norman one of the first official licenses

the NFL would ever hand out. In fact, Tudor had been targeted several weeks earlier during the foundational meeting of NFL Enterprises, a New York City event whose attendees included Kent, Chicago Bears owner and NFL legend George "Papa Bear" Halas, acting league commissioner Austin Gunsell, and... Roy Rogers. Also taking a prominent seat at the conference table on January 13, 1960, was the man who helped Kent pitch the NFL marketing concept, and who knew as much about the purpose of NFL Enterprises as anyone in the entire league. That man was Los Angeles Rams' general manager Pete Rozelle. Not long after the meeting adjourned, Rozelle was unexpectedly promoted to the position of NFL Commissioner.



Larry Kent from *Playthings*, December 1961.



Tudor's popular Tru-Action electric football game.

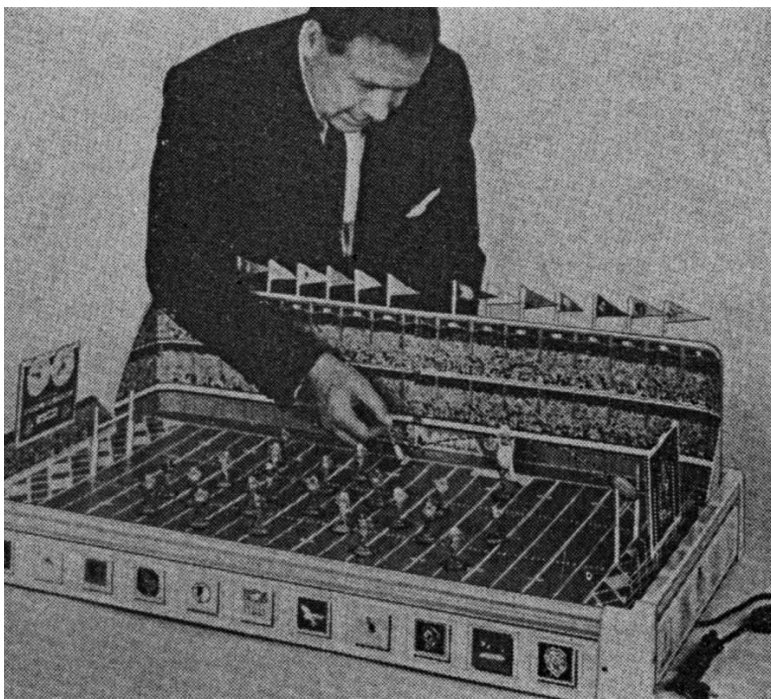
NFL Enterprises represented the league's first ever attempt to market football merchandise on a national scale. Up until this point, teams sold pennants and other souvenirs on their own, with game-day stadium sales accounting for the bulk of their mostly meager proceeds. Kent's vision was much more ambitious.

During his seven years with the "King of the Cowboys," Kent had created the Roy Rogers Corral, an exclusive in-store display area that sold only Roy Rogers merchandise. These Corrals were now a year-round feature in hundreds of department stores across the U.S., including major chains like Sears, Montgomery Ward, J.C. Penney, the May Company, and Macy's. Kent hoped to apply his Corral model to the NFL and impressed upon Norman that the fledgling merchandising program was a ground floor opportunity. All Norman had to do was put an NFL shield somewhere on his boxes and games, then give NFL Enterprises 5% of his gross sales.

That the NFL was getting more popular really wasn't in question. Just thirteen months earlier in December of 1958 the Colts and Giants had played the NFL's "greatest game," a championship contest won by the Colts in sudden-death overtime. Not only did the game capture the imagination of the sixty-four thousand fans in Yankee Stadium, it entertained a national television audience of more than 45 million people. Yet Norman still wasn't sure that the NFL's rising profile would automatically translate into additional electric football sales. Tudor had sold more than \$1 million worth of electric football games in 1959 – if the company had been a licensee that year it would have handed over more than \$50,000 to NFL Enterprises. After quickly doing the math in his head, Norman decided that an NFL license wasn't worth \$50,000. Tudor was already selling out most of its electric football inventory. It honestly didn't need the NFL to help move games. Norman thanked Kent for the call, but politely passed on the NFL's offer.

Kent was stunned. Tudor and the NFL seemed like a perfect match – how could Norman not want to be a part of pro football? But Kent wasn't deterred. He had a backup plan, and soon found a company who thought that an NFL license for electric football was a great opportunity, 5% and all. That company was cross-town toy making rival Gotham Pressed Steel.

Recently ascending to the top of Gotham's organizational chart was toy veteran Eddie Gluck, who didn't need to think twice about signing on with the NFL. There were a number of motivations for Gluck's eagerness to be



Gotham President Eddie Gluck shows off his brand new NFL game in 1961. *Playthings*, June 1961.

associated with professional football. First, he had been the one who steered the Bronx-based company into electric football, and he had long grown tired of his company's second-string status behind Tudor. An NFL license offered Gotham a very visible way to make its electric football games different from Tudor's. Additionally, Gluck had been a professional basketball player in the 1920's and 1930's and carried a preference for the "pro" side of things. Sports licensing wasn't even a new concept for Gotham, as the company had sold baseball games endorsed by Jackie Robinson and Carl Hubbell during the late 1940's and early 1950's. Finally, there was the issue of being a former Tudor employee. Even though Gluck left the company three years before Norman was named president, he seemed to resent Norman's success with electric football. There had even been a bout of trash talk at the 1954 Toy Fair where Gluck threatened to bury Norman and Tudor. Perhaps with the NFL Gluck had finally found a shovel.

Production logistics prevented Gotham from producing an NFL game in 1960, but the Gotham-NFL licensing partnership wasn't a secret. Since Gotham's sales had never come close to equaling Tudor's, Norman wasn't overly worried about saying "no" to Larry Kent. Had he been aware of Gluck's plans for the NFL, he might have felt differently.

What Gotham unveiled in 1961 was the largest and most elaborate electric football game ever made. It was almost a foot longer than all previous games,

and sitting along the sideline was a three-foot long metal grandstand that looked exactly like Yankee Stadium, complete with paper NFL pennants “flying” high above the stadium’s distinctive façade. On the field were more innovations. Since Norman invented electric football in 1949 the players had been flat, two dimensional, and plastic, with the “team” component indicated by the color of the figures. (Tudor’s current teams were red and yellow, while Gotham’s were red and blue). Gotham had produced new plastic players that, although still flat, were tan in color. This generic color scheme served as a blank canvas for team creation, which came in the form of self-sticking paper jerseys and helmets. Seven sets of “removable” uniforms were included in every new Gotham game – each set came printed in an official NFL team color.

Whether Norman liked it or not he now had to go head-to-head with Gotham and the NFL. That meant Tudor would have to have its own oversized football game on toy store shelves for 1962, and considering Gotham’s NFL muscle, Norman knew that he would have to come up with

something that was more than simply “big.” The new game would have to have a feature that made it clearly different from Gotham’s NFL game. Norman’s answer came from a talented young industrial designer whose name wasn’t even officially on Tudor’s payroll. Thanks to Calvin “Lee” Payne, all of Tudor’s 1962 electric football games would have an electric football “first” – realistic looking three-dimensional players. And these new plastic players didn’t need paper jerseys. They could be painted to look like a kid’s favorite team.

Norman’s response to Gotham in 1962 was timely in more ways than one, as Commissioner Rozelle had finally landed a league-wide national television contract. Starting in September, CBS began televising NFL games on each and every Sunday. The deal was groundbreaking because all the NFL teams were now “equal,” receiving an equal cut of the CBS fee, equal benefit from the CBS promotional department, and equal access to the latest television production technology. Previously teams had negotiated their own individual television contracts, with the financial rewards being determined mostly by the luck of geography. Pressure for a league-wide single-network contract had come not only from Rozelle, but also from the rival AFL, who already had a similar television deal in place with ABC.



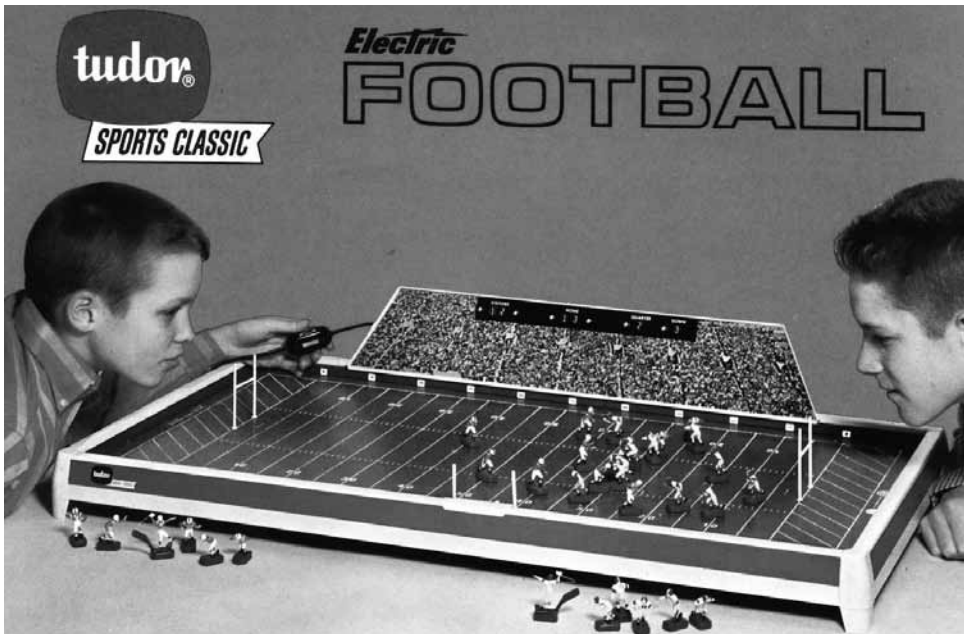
A page from Gotham's 1961 NFL Playbook. It was included in each NFL Gotham game. (Collection of Earl Shores.)

As the NFL made its debut on CBS, the league had another very special debut in the Sears Christmas Book. There at the top of page 344 was Gotham's NFL football game – in glorious full color. It was the first time Sears had elevated an electric football game to the status of a color catalog page, which at the time was very costly to print. It was a development that meant the nation's largest retailer giant viewed electric football as a toy whose star was on the rise.

Tudor's efforts to remain the dominant electric football brand in 1962 went beyond large games and 3-D players. Norman had convinced Montgomery Ward to carry Tudor's new game, as well as the smaller Tru-Action No. 500 model. Although this ended Gotham's Christmas catalog monopoly, Gluck still came away with better field position on the mail-order front. Montgomery Ward was the smaller of the two national chains, and the retailer did not use valuable color ink to show off Tudor's games. They also did not promote electric football in their Christmas advertising nearly as much as Sears did. Still, the Montgomery Ward relationship was very beneficial for Tudor. The opening of this substantial new market left Gotham's electric football gains for the year almost negligible.

An easy way to measure the impact of Tudor's new 3-D players was to look at a 1963 Gotham sales catalog. Gotham's newest feature was...3-D players. These players, while promoted as newly designed, carried a suspicious whiff of Tudor about them. But they certainly added another dimension of realism to Gotham's already lifelike NFL concept. Beyond the world of electric football, the NFL licensing program was continuing to grow. In fact it had grown so quickly that the NFL itself took over the management of the program in March of 1963. Larry Kent was now president of a new company called National Football League Properties. Finding himself on the NFL cut list in this new marketing arrangement was Roy Rogers. It was a betrayal that the King of the Cowboys would never forgive.

During the fall Norman could observe the new era of NFL marketing on CBS, or anytime he ventured over to Manhattan to check out the toy department at Saks Fifth Avenue. NFL Enterprises had made Saks the "official distributors" of New York Giants clothing, so displayed on special racks in The Boys' Shop were officially licensed Giants hats, warm-up jackets, pajamas, sweaters, and uniforms. Norman could also look at page 100 of the Sears Christmas catalog where Eddie Gluck had landed three NFL electric football models, all in a blitz of full color. At least the Sears page didn't blindside Tudor this year, as Montgomery Ward had elevated Tudor's electric football games to color status. Yet Norman was well aware that the NFL logos and shields gave Gotham's games a more authoritative presence. Also giving Gotham an authoritative sales presence was the dedicated advertising support that Sears provided during the 1963 Christmas shopping season.



Tudor's 1962 answer to Gotham's NFL – an oversized electric football game with 3-D players (Collection of Norman Sas.)

But Gotham still wasn't eating all that much into Tudor's electric football earnings. For the moment, anyway, the electric football market had actually expanded thanks to the high-end "deluxe" models that both companies were now selling. As 1964 opened it was clear to Norman that selling games was becoming increasingly about marketing and perception. More and more NFL items were being licensed, with American boys being the main target of this NFL promotional power sweep. Previously mundane items like parkas, raincoats, bathrobes, towels, blankets, and even lunch boxes, were now available with NFL team logos and the distinctive NFL shield. There were also other NFL items like seat cushions, juice glasses, transistor radios, plaques, decals, bobble-heads, uniforms – and, of course, Gotham's electric football games. The average ten-year-old boy probably didn't know or care that NFL television ratings were up, or that the league had just tripled its television money intake by signing a two-year \$28 million deal with CBS. But young football fans did see and feel that there was "more" NFL all around them. Not only was it was on television every Sunday, it was on their heads and their backs as they walked to school in the morning; on the lunch table holding their chocolate milk and bologna sandwiches; and in the backyard – again on heads and backs – during after school pick-up football games.

Tudor was now fully engaged in a marketing battle with Gotham, coming up with a second-generation of 3-D electric players that were far and away the most realistic ever created. Payne's continued refinement



A new Tudor 3-D player in 1962 (Photo by Earl Shores)

had given Tudor unbreakable players that looked great and played great. The only thing they lacked was involvement with the NFL. That was still Gotham's domain, and Eddie Gluck had again placed three NFL electric football games on a lively color page in the 1964 Sears Christmas Book. Montgomery Ward did all it could for Tudor, giving electric football top billing on a full-color, all-sports Christmas catalog page. This left Sears and Ward battling to a stalemate on the holiday advertising electric football scrimmage line, but Gotham's market share began to edge upward.

The opening days of 1965 were filled with pro football headlines even though both the NFL and AFL seasons were long over. That's because the AFL New York Jets spent a pro sports record \$400,000 to sign a

University of Alabama quarterback named Joe Namath. The Jets were already on the rise, having tripled their attendance after moving to the newly opened Shea Stadium for the 1964 season. This was on top of a fully guaranteed five-year \$36 million television deal the AFL had signed with NBC. (Much of the money used to sign Namath came from an NBC "advance" to the Jets.) The new league still wasn't viewed as an equal of the NFL, but the Namath signing gave an indication of just how hard they were going to fight – and how much they were willing to spend – to try and achieve parity with the older league.

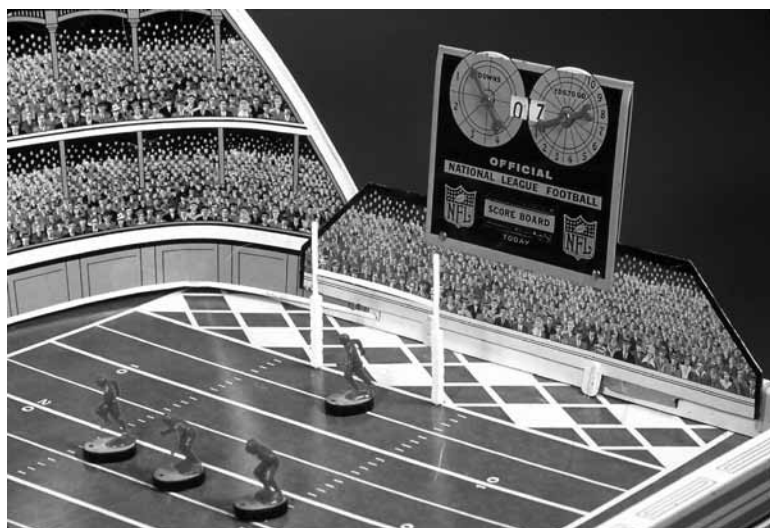
Norman could only watch and scratch his head as the buzz from the Namath signing finally dissipated from the sports pages. The AFL was involved in licensing too, although not to the extent of the NFL. There were AFL shirts and slacks, and Norman had even owned the AFL electric football rights since 1961. But the AFL had nothing like what Hormel was going to sell in 1965 – Official NFL Training Table meats including bacon, hot dogs, and lunchmeat. And in the snack aisle of the grocery store you could find bite-size solid milk chocolate NFL footballs and NFL Touchdown Cookies. Saks had even more official New York Giants items for sale this year. Most of these items were in The Boys' Shop, but adults were finally being given the chance to be part of the NFL. Team logos were now appearing on Arrow shirts and Mighty-Mac stadium jackets.

But there was one NFL item in particular in 1965 that crystallized Norman's growing doubts about his decision to turn down the NFL. It

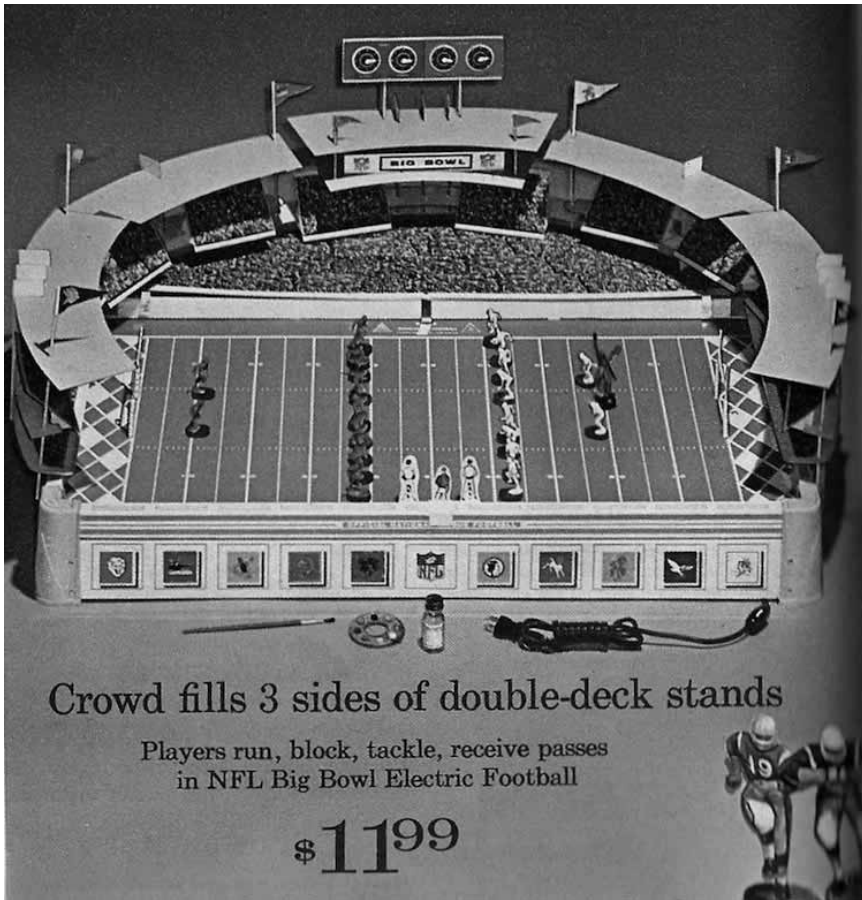
appeared on page 442 of the Sears Christmas catalog, and was called the NFL Big Bowl Electric Football game. The game's maker was Gotham. With the Big Bowl, Gluck had taken the stadium concept to another level. Now sitting on top of Gotham's standard oversized NFL field was a thoroughly modern 3-D, double-decked, bowl-shaped stadium. It was stunning – even Norman conceded that the game looked “fantastic.”

And that was the key point in 1965 – how the game looked. It didn't matter that the bowl design would make the game almost impossible to play with, or almost impossible for anyone younger than age twelve to reassemble once Christmas was over. It also didn't matter that Tudor had more realistic players and better playing games, not to mention grandstands that could be set-up and taken down in a matter of minutes. What mattered was this: Gotham had an NFL game with a thoroughly realistic and modern-looking stadium on full color display in the Christmas catalog of the largest toy retailer in the entire country.

For Norman, there was no doubt about it anymore. Saying no to Larry Kent and the NFL had been a mistake. The mistake wasn't really about sales figures, as 1965 would mark the sixteenth straight year that Tudor had the top-selling electric football model. Yes, the NFL would help Tudor sell more games, but Norman had simply grown tired of playing defense against the electric football whims of Eddie Gluck. It felt like Tudor had spent the last four years running from sideline to sideline on a muddy field trying to tackle Gotham and the NFL ball that the company held so tightly. Norman was sure that if he had signed on with Kent in 1960 he wouldn't



Gotham's large NFL game in 1963 with new 3-D players. (Photo Earl Shores.)



The game that made Norman pursue the NFL – the 1965 Gotham NFL Big Bowl.

now be wasting time and effort figuring out how to top the Big Bowl. Instead, Gluck would be the one calling an audible whenever Tudor had a new feature on their NFL games. Five years out, \$50,000 seemed like a small price to pay to have Gluck and Gotham permanently anchored to the bench of electric football.

A simple solution was to make Gotham fumble the NFL license. Gotham had never come close to selling as many games as Tudor did annually, so there was no question that NFL Properties would make more money if the electric football license belonged to Tudor. And while the Big Bowl was undeniably inspired – and big – Lee Payne was now Tudor's Director of Product Development. In combining Lee's creativity with the NFL, Norman was certain Tudor could set an electric football standard that Gotham would never equal. Worrying about Gotham would be a thing of the past. Gluck would be left sprawled on the turf watching Tudor race towards the end zone with the NFL cradled under its arm. At least that's

how it worked out in Norman's frequent daydreams. Reality, however, was going to be just a bit different.

Taking the NFL away from Gotham wasn't going to be easy. The fact that Tudor was the stronger company, and other than the Big Bowl structure, had a more realistic electric football platform, really didn't matter. What did matter was how Larry Kent felt about Norman and Gotham. Was Kent still feeling slighted over Norman's original decision? Was there a special relationship between the NFL and Gotham that transcended the basic elements of business? Had being in the right place at the right time in 1960 earned Gluck a permanent NFL license?

There was only one way to find out – call Larry Kent and ask. One problem Norman didn't have was admitting to a mistake, and he would acknowledge right up front that he had been wrong in 1960. Then he would pitch Kent on why Tudor could do more for the NFL than Gotham. Regardless of the outcome, Norman knew it would be a challenging conversation.

As Norman picked up the phone and dialed Kent's number he had no idea that he was about to change the world of toys and sports licensing.

Forever.