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SNEAK PREVIEW

# THE USFL:

THE REBEL LEAGUE THE NFL DIDN'T  
RESPECT BUT FEARED



Written by Mike Damergis

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May 10, 2007



*Dear USFL fans, former players, coaches and executives:*

This project all started because I decided to return to school and get my Masters in Journalism at Iona College. I was nearing the end of my final semester and I needed to submit a topic for my thesis that had to be 10 to 20 pages in length.

I figured I could get at least 10 pages worth of material through research from the internet and my numerous contacts in the sports industry.

Once I began the project, new ideas emerged from the personal stories of former players, coaches and executives that shared their USFL experience with me—they were simply amazing and I realized these tales needed a home.

I had something way more special than a 10-page master's thesis at my fingertips.

The USFL was way more than a three-year defunct league that is lost to time. Its impact is still alive in the current NFL and the impact of its players was something that needs to be recognized.

I know I can never get to all the personal stories of the hundreds of players, coaches, executives and broadcasters. I just hope my work pays the appropriate tribute to the USFL—"The Rebel League the NFL didn't Respect but Feared!"

Cordially,

*Michael A. Damergis*



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# THE USFL:

## THE REBEL LEAGUE THE NFL DIDN'T RESPECT BUT FEARED

BY MIKE DAMERGIS

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On the cover of *Sports Illustrated's* July 21, 1986 issue is quarterback Jim Kelly in a New Jersey General uniform. The Houston Gamblers merged with the Generals as the USFL prepared to move to a fall schedule in 1986. The merger teamed Kelly with the 1982 Heisman Trophy winner and USFL all-time rushing leader—Herschel Walker.

Long before Kelly led the Buffalo Bills to four Super Bowls, he threw 83 touchdowns and passed for more than 9,800 yards during his two years as the quarterback of the Houston Gamblers.

Twenty years later, Kelly still feels like he missed a great opportunity to bring the Gamblers' Run-and-Shoot offense to New York and play alongside a back like Walker. "Without a doubt, talk about a dream team—what do you think?" said Kelly, when asked if he would have liked to play for the Generals.

But the USFL never kicked off the 1986 season. A pass was never thrown, a quarterback was never sacked, a point was never scored in another USFL game.

Yet the USFL is still alive and thriving within the modern day NFL. The controversial use of instant replay and the



*As a rookie in 1984 Kelly led USFL in TD passes with 44 and 5,219 yards*

two-point conversion were used long before the NFL adopted such drastic rule changes. The USFL was a test-market for pro football in cities like Phoenix, Ariz., Memphis, Tenn., and Jacksonville, Fla.

Players such as Steve Young, Reggie White, Kelly and Walker had a tremendous impact on the NFL landscape for years to come.

In addition to instant replay and the two-point conversion, the league was a breath of fresh air with innovations like the 18 game schedule, drafting underclassmen and "territorial" college drafts—meaning teams like the Arizona Wranglers



*Walker had more than 5,500 yards in three USFL seasons*

would have more leverage in signing players from Arizona State and the University of Arizona.

Unlike the NFL, the USFL wanted to promote and spotlight its players. The NFL wanted the team's logo to be the only identifiable source for its fans, but the USFL wanted college stars like Walker, Young, Kelly and White to be the face of the new spring league.

In the 2005 draft, more than 30 college players were underclassmen—a prime example of the lasting effects the USFL continues to have on the NFL landscape.

More than 9 million fans passed through the turnstiles to watch USFL games, but when the Baltimore Stars beat the Oakland Invaders 28-24 in the USFL Championship on July 14, 1985, it was the last game ever for the spring league.

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**DURING ITS SHORT RUN AS A LEAGUE MORE THAN 9 MILLION FANS PASSED THROUGH THE TURNSTILES TO WATCH USFL GAMES.**

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It was the end of a dream for many players like Stars QB Chuck Fusina and the start of a brave new world for players like Sam Mills, Bobby Hebert, Bart Oates, Maurice Carthon and more.

At the annual owner's meeting on Aug. 22, 1984 in Chicago, the USFL voted unanimously to switch from a spring to a fall schedule beginning in 1986. Many owners felt the pressure from Donald Trump, owner of the N.J. Generals, to move to the fall and go head-to-head with the mighty NFL.

In the spring of 1986, the USFL filed a \$1.7 billion anti-trust suit against the NFL in a Manhattan District Court. The highly publicized trial had Raiders' owner Al Davis testify against the NFL as well as legendary ABC sportscaster Howard Cosell.

Steve Ehrhart, a former USFL executive and general manager of the Memphis Showboats, still holds the check the NFL had to pay the USFL for violating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. According to legal documents retrieved from the case, *USFL v. NFL*, "the NFL was found guilty of unlawful monopolization of professional football that injured the USFL, and the jury found the NFL had willfully acquired or maintained a monopoly power in a market consisting of major-league pro football in the United States."

However, the victory didn't mean a landfall of money for the USFL. The jury awarded the USFL \$1, which was trebled according to antitrust law to \$3. The total, including interest, came to \$3.76.

The USFL did collect more than \$6 million in court costs a few years later, but by then "the spirit of the league had evaporated," Ehrhart said.

The \$3.76 check remains in Ehrhart's desk at the Liberty Bowl in Memphis, Tenn.

Was that all the league was worth?



# BOBBY HEBERT

## THE CAJUN CANNON

BY MIKE DAMERGIS

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BOBBY HEBERT WAS KNOWN AS THE “CAJUN CANNON” when he came to the USFL’s Michigan Panthers in 1983.

“I remember there were 13 quarterbacks when I came to training camp in Daytona Beach, Fla.,” Hebert said. “They would bring in bus loads of people to tryout for the team. They didn’t have enough helmets to accommodate all the players in training camp. Some players put on a helmet without a facemask.”

The Panthers were one of the league’s most popular teams—they even rivaled the Lions for fan support, drawing more than 60,000 in a playoff game against the Oakland Invaders in 1983.

Hebert remembers when the Panthers were the “Talk-of-the-Town” in the city of Detroit. “We were a lot more popular than the Lions were,” he said. “We won the USFL Championship after Detroit not having a champion since the Bobby Layne days in the 1950s.”

Hebert threw 81 touchdowns in his three year USFL career, and his favorite target was WR Anthony Carter. Carter caught 160 passes and 27 TD’s in his tenure



*Hebert vs. Stars in '83 championship*

with the USFL before displaying his elusive and acrobatic talents in the NFL with the Minnesota Vikings. His most productive USFL season was with Oakland in 1985 with 70 receptions for more than 1,320 yards and 14 touchdowns.

“I think we would have been in the top 14 of the NFL if we [Panthers] played them,” said Hebert, with a confident tone in his voice. “We didn’t have the depth as the NFL, but we had a good chance to win because the guys that started on the Panthers also started in the NFL later on.”

Hebert’s Panthers went on to win the first ever USFL Championship against Jim Mora’s Stars, 24-22. Hebert connected with Carter for the game-clinching score on a 48-yard pass with 3:01 remaining, sealing the win. Hebert won game MVP honors, and was also named the *Sporting News Player of the Year* award after throwing a USFL-best 27 touchdowns in 1983.

In 1985, after the Invaders and Panthers merged, Hebert and Carter brought their winning ways to Oakland as the Invaders had a league-best 13-4-1 record. The merger bolstered a passing attack that rivaled Jim Kelly’s Run-and-Shoot offense in Houston. Oakland receiver

Gordon Banks teamed with Michigan receivers Carter and Derek Holloway to put up some ridiculous numbers: The trio accounted for 36 touchdowns and 3,269 yards of offense in 1985.

In the playoffs, Oakland crushed the Tampa Bay Bandits 48-27 in the quarterfinals, before battling past the Memphis Showboats 28-19 in the semifinals.

Hebert and Carter looked to shock Mora’s Stars for a second time in three years in the USFL Championship, but a personal foul penalty on FB Tom Newton thwarted the winning drive for Oakland, and the Stars won 28-24 at a rain-soaked Meadowlands. “The guys were yelling at him [Newton] in the shower because he cost us the game,” said Hebert, who received some good news after the game that his wife was pregnant with their daughter, Cammy.

After the USFL folded, Hebert took a trip to Seattle and was prepared to sign with the Seahawks. But Hebert

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**“WE WERE A LOT MORE POPULAR THAN THE LIONS WERE...WE WON THE USFL CHAMPIONSHIP AFTER DETROIT NOT HAVING A CHAMPION SINCE THE BOBBY LAYNE DAYS IN THE 1950S.”**

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would get a call from the highest-elected official in the state of Louisiana that would change his mind.

John Mecam, the owner of the Saints, was going to move the team to Jacksonville, Fla., according to Hebert. But Tom Benson got involved and bought the team from Mecam. “I was ready to sign with Seattle and the Raiders were interested,” recalled Hebert. “Then Senator Chabert called my dad and asked him what my plans were. The Senator urged him to encourage me to stay in New Orleans.”

Hebert was bombarded with calls at his home and his wife was getting tired of answering the phone all day. But the most important call came from Governor Edwin Edwards of Louisiana. “My wife told me the governor is going to call me in a few minutes,” Hebert said with a laugh. “I thought, ‘What should I say, Mr. Edwards?’

Governor?’ When I took the phone, the governor said, ‘Hey coon-ass [a Cajun term meaning a raccoon’s ass], what are you doing?’ I told him I was going to sign with Seattle. He said, ‘There are no Cajun’s in Seattle, you need to sign with the Saints.’” The half-Cajun governor influenced Hebert to stay in his native territory, and Hebert became a Saint.

Hebert played 21 games with the Invaders in the spring/summer of 1985, then another 20 games in the fall/winter of that year with the Saints. “When I got to camp, I was competing against Dave Wilson and Richard Todd,” said Hebert, who started the last 6 games for the Saints.

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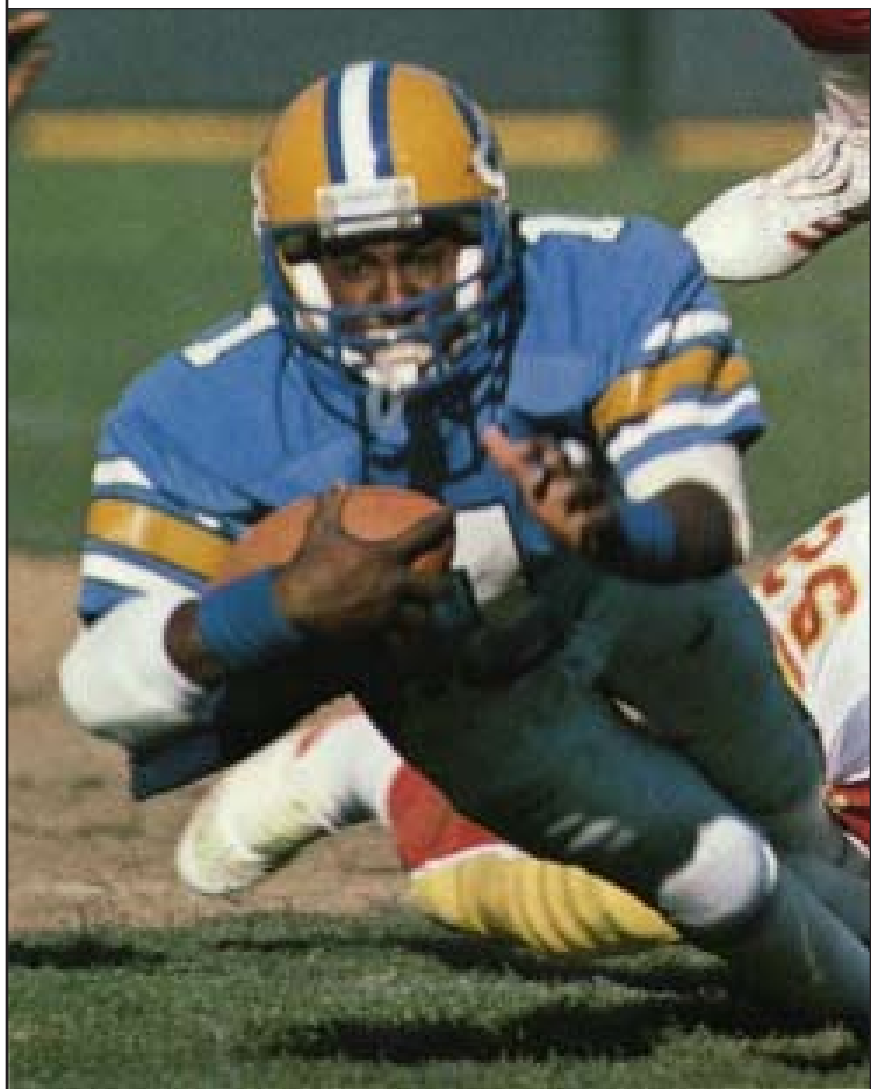
**“MORA WAS ‘OLD-SCHOOL’...GOING THROUGH HIS TRAINING CAMP MADE YOU FEEL LIKE YOU PLAYED THE SEASON ALREADY. IT WAS SO HOT, IT WAS LIKE THE BURMA JUNGLE. EVEN THE COACHES WOULD LOSE SEVEN POUNDS A DAY.”**

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Bum Phillips retired after 12 games in 1985 and had his son Wade Phillips finish up the year as head coach in New Orleans. The Saints beleaguered franchise was in search of a coach and new owner Tom Benson asked Hebert about Mora. “I told him [Benson] that I thought Jim was a great coach,” Hebert said. “He went to the championship game all three years in the USFL and won twice.”

Mora led the Saints to the playoffs four times in seven years; he had at least eight wins in seven of his 11 years as head coach of the Saints—who hadn’t had a winning season in the 20 years before he came to New Orleans. “Mora was ‘Old-School,’” Hebert remembered. “Going through his training camp made you feel like you played the season already. It was so hot, it was like the Burma Jungle. Even the coaches would lose seven pounds a day.”

Unfortunately, the Saints never won a playoff game during their four post-season appearances under Mora.



*AC diving for extra yards*

But it was a great accomplishment for an organization that knew nothing but losing for more than two decades before Mora and Hebert arrived. “I wanted the Saints job because they never won there, and football was important to the people in New Orleans,” Mora said in November 2005.

In addition to Mora, linebackers Sam Mills and Vaughan Johnson joined the Saints via the USFL. The

duo went to nine Pro Bowls between them, and along with teammate Pat Swilling, the Saints became one of the NFL's fiercest defenses.

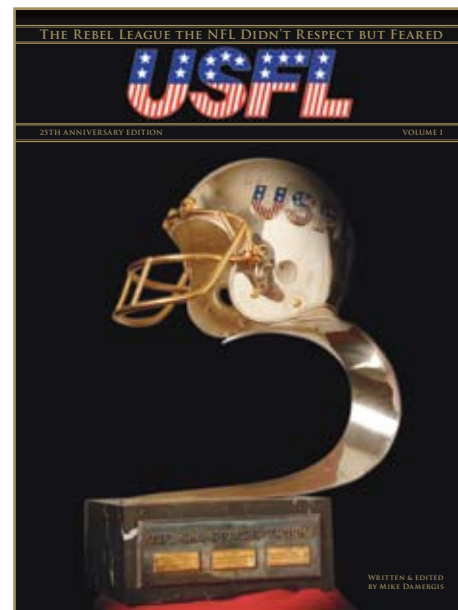
In 1987, Mora led the Saints to a 12-3 record. The Saints started sluggish with a 3-3 record after six games. After a 24-22 loss to the 49ers, their emotional coach laced into the team. "Jim went into his 'Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda' speech, saying, 'We Suck,'" recalled Hebert.

After Mora's tirade, the Saints won nine games in a row, scoring 30 points in five games and at least 20 points in all nine. The Saints winning streak ended with a stunning playoff loss against the Vikings 44-10 at the Superdome. Hebert was pulled in favor of Wilson after completing only 9 of 19 passes for 84 yards, 1 TD and 1 INT. The Vikings ran up 417 yards of total offense as Hebert's former teammate in Michigan, Anthony Carter, stole the show with six receptions for 79 yards, including a 10-yard TD reception. Carter also set a post-season record by returning a punt 84 yards for yet another score.

Hebert sat out the 1990 season because of a contract dispute, but returned to lead the Saints to the playoffs in 1991 with 11 wins and 1992 with 12 victories. But the Saints lost in the first round of the playoffs both years: 27-20 to the Falcons in '91, and 36-20 to the Eagles in '92, blowing a 20-7 third-quarter lead as Philadelphia went on to score 29 unanswered points.

In 1993, Hebert joined the Atlanta Falcons and had an impressive year with 24 TD's and more than 2,900 yards passing. But Hebert's efforts couldn't lead the Falcons to a winning record as Atlanta won only six games. It was only the second time in his pro career Hebert was on a losing team when he was the starting quarterback (1986 the other).

Hebert retired after the 1996 season, despite throwing 22 TD passes and more than 3,100 yards. Hebert finished his career with an impressive 135 touchdown passes and 21,683 yards. Named in the Top 10 of quarterbacking categories 19 times in his 11-year NFL career.



Order your copy of **THE USFL: THE REBEL LEAGUE THE NFL DIDN'T RESPECT BUT FEARED** for \$34.95 (includes shipping/handling). Please make all checks payable to Mike Damergis and mail with completed order form to:

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