

Jack Kemp, a sports business force RIP

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Jack Kemp and I had a 30-year relationship. I first met Congressman Kemp in 1979 as a 22-year-old reporter in some ballroom in Tappan, or maybe it was Orangetown, New York, when he was either campaigning for something or fundraising for someone or himself. It must have been a fundraiser because it was late winter/early spring and he was 400 miles from his district. Nonetheless, it was our first meeting and it wasn't our last.

Over the years, I ran into Congressman, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Kemp, the failed Vice Presidential candidate Kemp, the former professional football player Kemp and private citizen Kemp and I was struck by how he wasn't a mean, vindictive politician filled with vitriol and distain. We never agreed on his economic policy but that never stopped me from enjoying spending time with him or talking politics or football. ("Lookie, lookie here comes Cookie," he said of one time teammate Cookie Gilchrist, or how Elbert "Golden Wheels" Dubenion was now "rusted wheels.")

Nearly two decades after we first met, I found a picture of our first meeting; I showed it to him and the first thing he said was. "You had more hair in those days." I said, "Yours is grayer but the same cut." We both laughed. A few years later, we were at an NFL owners meeting at the Arizona Biltmore in Phoenix at an owners party. Jack gave my then 18 year old son a drink; it might have been a scotch and told him to join in with us. Then Jack saluted my son, and me "Shalom!"

It turned out that Kemp grew up in a heavily Jewish area, Fairfax, in Los Angeles and as a kid turned on and off the lights at a local synagogue on the Sabbath.

He joked after he bonded with my son, "I wanted to run for Vice President in the worst way and I did." Kemp was on the Republican ticket in 1996 running as the number two with Presidential candidate Robert Dole. Incumbent President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore beat the Dole team.

Jack Kemp's view of the world was shaped by football where the huddle is colorblind. He was just another guy looking to be a quarterback somewhere and in the late 1950s with just 12 National Football League franchises around, it was very difficult for guys like Kemp, like Len Dawson and others to get starting jobs. But Kemp caught a break when a pair of Texans, Lamar Hunt and K. S. "Bud" Adams, could not get expansion franchises in the NFL nor could Hunt or Adams entice the owners of the Chicago Cardinals to sell their franchise. Hunt wanted to buy the Bidwill family Cardinals franchise and move the team to Dallas in 1959, Adams wanted the team and to put the franchise in Houston.

Hunt and Adams, after failing to land an NFL team, started a new league, the American Football League. It was actually the fourth attempt for the name American Football League as three AFL's were formed in the 1920s and 30s and all failed although

some AFL teams were absorbed into the NFL, the most notable being the Cleveland Rams.

Kemp signed a contract with Barron Hilton's Los Angeles Chargers in 1960 and played for the Hilton's Chargers in both Los Angeles and San Diego. According to Paul Maguire, who played with Kemp with the Chargers and the Buffalo Bills, Chargers players took an off-season job in 1961 to help bring Balboa Stadium to AFL standards by expanding the seating capacity from 15,000 to 34,000. Maguire claims Kemp showed his political skills by leaning on teammates and encouraging them to shovel and cement so the building would get done. Maguire said Kemp made a good boss as he watched his teammates help construct the Balboa expansion. Kemp ended up with Buffalo in 1962.

The American Football League was looking for players and started signing players from traditional black football playing colleges like Grambling. This marked a sharp contrast to NFL signings of players. George Preston Marshall's Washington Redskins did not hire an African-American player until 1962 when Washington traded for Cleveland's Bobby Mitchell. The AFL experience would lead to one of the biggest civil rights showdowns in sports history in 1965 and Kemp was one of the leaders.

New Orleans missed out on hosting the 1965 American Football League All-Star Game and getting an AFL franchise because a group of players and AFL owners had a social conscience.

Kemp and his white teammates saw their teammates, black players, have cabs pass them by at the airport when they needed a ride to New Orleans, could not eat with their black teammates in New Orleans restaurants, nor could they stay in the same hotels in December 1964. There were 21 African American players who were selected to play in the game.

The American Football League was looking to expand and decided that New Orleans would be a perfect fit for the five-year-old league. The AFL owners' plans included a January 1965 All-Star game at Tulane Stadium and an announcement at the game that the league was going to put a team in the city. But the idea came to a sudden halt because a group of players were appalled that African American players could not get hotel rooms in New Orleans or eat at city restaurants because of their skin color. This occurred after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had been passed by Congress and signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Kemp, who was a co-founder of the American Football League Players Association in 1964, and the white All-Stars said they would support whatever decision the 21 African Americans made after their meeting about boycotting the 1965 AFL All Star Game.

Their decision was to boycott the game.

The outraged group of AFL players called Houston Oilers owner Bud Adams and said they were going to boycott the game. The eight AFL owners league moved the contest to

Houston. It was the first time that players and owners together showed social concern and boycotted a city. It was a remarkable showing of solidarity and backbone but it was the 1960s and some athletes, like the AFL players, took stands in those days. The boycott ended the chance that New Orleans would get an AFL team. Two years later, New Orleans had an NFL team because of Congressional maneuvering. The American Football League and the National Football League announced that the two leagues wanted a merger on June 8, 1966. Congress had to approve the marriage of the rival leagues and neither Louisiana Senator Russell Long, who was the Democratic Party whip, nor Representative Hale Boggs, the Democrat who was the House Majority Whip, were sure whether it made sense that the two leagues merged. New Orleans didn't have a team and Louisiana was involved in pro football so two of the most powerful politicians in Washington weren't inclined to vote on the football alliance.

Within a few days of signaling their displeasure, NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle told Senator Long and Congressman Boggs that the NFL thought things over and would give New Orleans a franchise if they delivered the Congressional approval. The Louisiana politicians got the votes and New Orleans had a team in exchange for the merger.

Kemp ran for Congress in 1970 in western New York and won his first race. Kemp got involved with politics during the 1964 Presidential campaign supporting Republican nominee Barry Goldwater. Of course it could be argued Kemp was immersed in politics with the founding of the American Football League Players Association and winning an election to serve as president five times. Kemp was an enigma in the Republican Party as he often sided with Democrats on labor issue because of his past.

Kemp would spend the rest of his life fighting social injustices as a nine term Congressman and the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development under President George H. W. Bush. He kept advocating supply side economics, claiming that cutting taxes would grow the economy.

Kemp was always a gentleman. His political view wasn't for everyone but he was always respectful. A lot of people arguing politics, whether they are career politicians or the noise machines on radio talk shows and cable TV news, would do well to emulate Jack Kemp. He was a good guy and a great acquaintance whether we saw eye to eye on issues or not. Rest in Peace, my friend.