

History

NYGFL - Season One

by Mike Pinelli

Many of us who were part of the NYGFL's first season in spring 2005 often look back at it as a classic era. One reason for this is because it was the first and only time the entire league played on the same field at the same time. Every Sunday from 6 to 10 pm, six teams would find their way to DeWitt-Clinton Park to play football. Two teams each week would actually play two games back-to-back. Afterwards, we all went out to the same sponsor bar, usually Posh in those early days because it was so close to the field. At these gatherings, there were electrifying dance-offs featuring David Smith, Darin Shaw, Octavio Orozco and Jeremiah Phipps; plus John Greco – the Posh owner – always provided excellent drink specials and free pizza for everybody. And...we talked about every play in every game.

The newness of it all infused the whole experience. We sensed we were part of something special, something profound and historical. But the NYGFL wasn't the only big debut that spring. Shortly after the season began, the first New York City gay sports bar opened its doors – Gym Bar – and the timing could not have been better. Members of the football league hung out at Gym all through the first season, especially on Thursday nights, beginning an enduring partnership that continues today. For many of us who never thought we'd find like-minded people who shared our athletic interests, it suddenly seemed like the most natural thing in the world to meet at a gay bar to watch a ballgame.

Yes, it was a momentous time. But it was also a wet time. It rained on opening day, it rained during the Championship Game and it rained on mostly every Sunday in between. It wasn't just rain – it was a bone-chilling get me out of here rain, made all the more problematic by the field conditions. When DeWitt-Clinton was dry, which wasn't often, it was hard and rocky. But when it was wet, it was muddy and had puddles the size of most lakes. Want a first down? It's there yonder right next to that massive body of water.

And that wet sandy dusty brown stuff you played on that got on your face during the game? It stayed with you all week. It was in your hair and in your clothes and it was all over your apartment. It was at work with you on Monday morning. It was so everywhere you could taste it. The playing conditions were just one issue. There were others. We were continually aware that gay football leagues in the city had been started before and had failed; and although the board and captains tried to avoid the pitfalls that had befallen our predecessors by putting what we believed were the right policies and processes into place, many things came up that we hadn't anticipated or hadn't thought through enough before the season began. One of these was forfeits – and on opening day, despite a 12-person roster, Eagle did not have 7 players. Knowing that all the games had to go on for the league to succeed, we asked a couple of people from other teams to play for them. As a result, Floyd Saunders is one of the only league members to

play for two teams not only in the same season, but on the same night! Also, since we hadn't put a process in place for the wait list, we allowed people who didn't sign up at one of our registration parties to simply come to the games, pay the \$60 fee and sign a waiver. We then placed them on the team that needed them most. Brandon Proctor, Rich Smith and Al Silverstein all joined the league this way.

Though the board did talk at length about vision, it did not take long for one of the central questions concerning the league to take root. What kind of organization was being created? Competitive, recreational or both? Many people in the first season had played two-hand touch, but they had not played flag football (especially with rushing and blocking) and were surprised by the amount of physical contact. Debates over whether this contact was unnecessary aggression or simply part of the game, started on opening day – and have continued to this day.

Indeed, much of what the NYGFL is about was carved out in those spring 2005 days, including the way everyone pitched in to get the league off the ground. Led by the board of officers, who constantly helped each other with their time and energy, a great spirit of volunteerism was forged. Octavio – without ever being asked – went around the field after each night of games to pick up things people had left behind. If you were missing your football or a jacket or your keys, chances are he had it and would get it back to you the following Sunday. Ralph Caruso hosted the social committee meetings in his apartment and Cyd Zeigler hosted the board meetings in his. In addition to his role as league treasurer, Mike Colgrove took over the lead referee stewardship. Bill Wiggins drove people to the games. Dave Capece and Alon Hacoheh donated flags and other equipment. Rob Landy took the train in from Long Island every weekend just to ref our games. And, when we decided to put a video of the first season together, Stephen Vellecca brought in a technical crew to film the interviews while David Brown got an editor at his job to cut the footage and add music.

With great good humor and steely resolve, the 80 members of the NYGFL's inaugural season did what was needed to launch and sustain a terrific organization. It's no wonder then that so many of them became leaders, not only in football but in many other areas of the burgeoning LGBT New York City sports community. They also helped create six unforgettable teams... Philip Marie started off slowly but got better as a team thanks in large part to the efforts of their captain, Chris Stempky, who gave encouragement to every player on every play. Though they only won one game during the regular season, they would pull off the league's first upset in the playoffs with a one point victory over third ranked Posh. The team also included one of the league's best defensive players, Al Torres and three future board members – Al Silverstein, who came up with the idea to hold a post-draft party to announce the rosters; John Morrison, a future captain who would also be part of teams in seasons 2 and 3 that would go undefeated the entire regular season; and Mat Bergman – the league's legal counsel. Along with Stephen Vellecca, Mat would lead the bachelor auction efforts that would raise a lot of money for charitable organizations (such as Ali Forney) and for the NYGFL, allowing us to afford better fields, better equipment and better parties. Much of this was done under the auspices of his hilarious alter ego, Miss Beth Israel. The first Philip Marie team also included Stephen Osada, who would run

the league website for years, captain several teams and become a member of the Super Bowl winning Warriors. Stephen also provided one of the most spectacular moments of season one when he caught a pass and sprinted across the field, splashing through a knee-high muddy crater en route to the end zone.

Another great memory from that time was watching Posh get ready before each game. In their green tee-shirts, they sat together at DeWitt-Clinton in the fading twilight, went over their game plan and stretched. Led by league founder Cyd Zeigler, the team featured several people who would go on to become captains in their own right – Seamus Mallon, Keith McKeon, Jacques Couvillon, Kevin Williamson and Brian Bey (whose Philip Marie team would win the season 4 championship). Also on Posh – the first League MVP winner, Octavio Orozco; perennial sportsmanship nominee and one of the NYGFL's great unifiers, Kurt Miller; all around good guy Steve Aaronson and the only woman to play the entire first season, the wondrous Joanne Rizzi.

With their laid back, meditative approach to the game, XES nicknamed themselves Team Zen and produced a veritable who's who of stars and leaders, including Ryan Quinn, Ed Staudenmeyer, Joe Haines, Stephen Vellecca, Michael Sipin, Nick D'Andria, Eddie Gorecki, Drew Patterson and their dynamic captain Corey Johnson, who rallied the team with his famous exhortation, "It's a big third down, guys. It's a big third down!" With their efforts on behalf of the league off the field and their continual great sportsmanship and competitive calm energy on it, Zen offered inspiration to me and the other board members as we worked to keep things moving forward. Zen wound up in first place in the regular season standings (percentage points ahead of Posh and HK, all of whom had 6-2 records) and earned a spot in the finals.

They faced Jagermeister, a scrappy fun-loving bunch that included the team's MVP nominee, Hector Torres; the winsome Jason Zimmerman; future captains and star players Mikki Cotter and Rich Smith; the soon to be Commissioner of the Big Apple Softball League, Reggie Brown; the first person in league history to score a touchdown, Darin Shaw and still the only trio to captain a team – Jeremiah Phipps, Laurence M. and league founder Tim Hughes. In a close exciting game, Jagermeister won the NYGFL's first Championship, in part because of the superb running game of their quarterback, Joe Justin.

Throughout the season, Team Eagle used several quarterbacks including their captain (and league founder) David Smith, Matt Bernardo and Brandon Proctor (who broke his finger in his first game and demonstrated great mettle by coming back and playing just two weeks later). Surprisingly, however, Eagle's rotating quarterbacks did not include one of the people who would go on to become one of the best QBs in NYGFL history, Paul Sokolson (who nonetheless received the first of his several MVP nods that season). One of the league's best all-time receivers was on that first Eagle team as well, Matt Truesdale as was star player JR Badian and a nucleus of excellent guys and dedicated players - co-captain Dave Capece, rusher Ron Zacchi, a great athlete and great guy, Chris Cormier, the always warm and smiling David Price and the league's first Ed Gallagher Sportsmanship Award winner, Kevin Cox.

A great spirit of dedication and competition defined the first HK squad. Though he was new to football, Ralph Caruso quickly became one of the league's best players and leaders: He encouraged and supported everyone on our team no matter what the score. So did Eddie Buggie, who made some of the most phenomenal catches of the season. HK also included one of the great team players of all time, Jeff James; winner of the League MVP award in season 5, Floyd Saunders; and a guy who suffered a knee injury that prevented him from playing in future seasons but didn't stop him from becoming one of the most dedicated referees in NYGFL history, Joey Rivera. My co-captain on HK was Alon Hacoen who in that first season – and in the seven since – has demonstrated incredible passion for the game and taught scores of people much about football and even more about inclusion and courage. Other straight people played in season one, but none were as visible as Alon – and certainly none invested as much time and energy to make the league a success. Alon withstood a lot of criticism and questioning, but he never took offense. He was just glad to be part of it – paving the way for other straight people to feel more comfortable and helping us all realize the dream of being part of a football league that is home to everyone.

When in mid-season Alon threw a touchdown pass to someone who had never caught a football before the NYGFL, the entire league cheered. That's because the receiver was an individual whose limitless energy and amazingly joyful spirit lit up the dreary nights at DeWitt-Clinton like no one else – the inimitable Jackie Dupree. People who saw it still talk about it. A few weeks later, singing her heart out, Jackie brought the house down at the NYGFL's first ever end of season party (at the LGBT Center). She was just one of the many volunteers who made that party special. We had little money but – as always – everyone contributed to make the event a phenomenal success – Eddie Gorecki and Seamus Mallon collected tickets at the door; Ralph Caruso ran the raffle; Derek Hartley hosted the show; Rob Landy and Brandon Proctor bought paper goods and ice; Ryan and Laurence bartended...on and on and on – a group of people celebrating a once-in-a-lifetime experience...achieved through a spirit of togetherness that has defined the league to this day.

The celebration did not stop there. Members of the NYGFL marched in the Pride Parade that June, tossing footballs around and passing fliers out to the crowds as we turned onto Fifth Avenue. Also, we participated in an episode of Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. On a blistering hot July morning, many first season people (and several who would join the league in the second season including the star of the episode, Jeff Berman) frolicked with the Fab Five in Central Park's dust bowl. (let's just say the conditions of the field made league members feel right at home as dust clogged the air with every step, just like in DeWitt-Clinton). People in the more established LGBT leagues in the city could not believe that the fledgling football league was chosen to appear on the white hot Bravo show. But we weren't surprised. We knew then – as we know now – that the NYGFL is where it all happens.

Special NYGFL History Piece – League 5 Year Anniversary

by Mike Pinelli

The NYGFL is so well established that it's difficult to believe how young it still is. It's only been five years since eight strangers met at Cyd Zeigler's apartment on November 4th, 2004 to talk about starting a football league for the LGBT community.

Yet because football leagues that cater to gay people had already failed many times, those of us at that meeting didn't expect much. The most successful LGBT leagues in New York City at the time (softball and bowling) were not contact sports, so how *could* it succeed? Conventional wisdom held that gay people didn't play contact sports, certainly not in any competitive organized way and definitely not in Manhattan, where concrete – not grass – is the stuff that's mostly underfoot.

Thus, when the league was met with unbelievable enthusiasm by so many people, we were surprised...but not unprepared. The people who started the league – and who participated in its early seasons – was a group seemingly brought together by destiny, so well did they fit in with the LGBT zeitgeist of the time and with each other . . . and they worked incredibly hard to get things right.

It all came together beautifully – gay men and women eager to be included in one of America's most popular sports came out on the field, bringing everything they had as they de-flagged opponents, blocked and rushed, threw flags, raced to the end zone, went to social committee meetings and cheered on their teammates from the frantic and fun sidelines at DeWitt Clinton, East River Park and Pier 40. It was a sudden and exhilarating move into the mainstream, especially because from the beginning the league attracted so many different types of people, including straight guys like Seth Greenleaf and the Hacoheas whose electrifying presence generated even more involvement from our heterosexual brothers and sisters.

We anticipated having four teams in season 1 (spring 2005) but the demand was so great we went to six. In season 2, we jumped to ten teams and in season 3 went to fourteen, accompanied by a robust wait list. In the seasons since, we could have had many more teams but the limited field space in the city prevented further expansion. Our registration parties at Cubbyhole, Phoenix, Eagle and Gym Bar were great fun but have long since become obsolete. Register early online or be shut out.

Much of the league's success is in its people. The NYGFL attracts a feisty strong-minded extremely fun can-do type of participant. It has to. We are continually tested – by people on the field who question our right to be there, by the demands of a game that take a physical and mental toll and by the elements: playing on rocky muddy DeWitt Clinton in freezing cold rain the first year or in shin-high water at Pier 40 just last month or having to kick straight soccer players off the field when our permit time begins is not for the fainthearted.

Members of the NYGFL are at once intensely loyal and utterly adaptable, which is why the structure of the league works so well. Every season for a period of a few months, twelve athletes bond with their teammates, have incredible fun on and off the field and in many cases, form lifetime friendships. The teams disband after the season and within a couple of months, new teams form and the cycle begins all over again. People who played against each other in last season's playoffs are now teammates. It takes a little getting used to at first, playing with former rivals and seeing your beloved former teammates wearing a different jersey than the one you're now wearing. Soon though you realize that the very transient nature of the league – with its ever-changing seasons – connects everyone in the NYGFL on a very special level – and for always . . .

And the memories? Uncountable, unforgettable, life-changing. Some are etched in our league-wide consciousness like Matt Truesdale's spectacular performance in Henrietta Hudson's championship-winning game in season 3; or Jackie Dupree, Molly Lenore, Stephen Osada and Rich Smith singing "Close to You" at that season's end party; or the NYGFL setting the standard for doing the Super Bowl right when we hosted the tournament in fall 07; or the league taking part in a "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" episode in the summer of 05; or Jason Klatsky's humble and moving acceptance speech when his Big Red Henrietta team won the season 8 championship; or the thousands and thousands of dollars raised for charity by our bachelor auctions; or Leilani bringing her new baby to the field . . .

Others are personal memories – rich and colorful, hilarious and poignant and intimate: teammates congratulating each other when they make a good play or supporting each other when mistakes are made; moving the soccer goals off the field; contacting an injured player to see if he's okay; telling the referees they did a good job or made a good call; volunteering on a committee; appreciating the unique sensibilities each person brings to the sport; throwing away Gatorade bottles even if they weren't yours; taking a moment to look at the way the sun sets off the bridge at East River Park or at the snow surrounding the woods at Riverbank; standing in the pouring rain cheering your team on even when you're not in the game at the time; giving the cones to the refs; all the little and big things every person does to make the NYGFL what it is – a home to everyone who loves camaraderie and competition and courage. It takes a special kind of individual to get onto a football field in New York City on a Saturday night. It takes passion, dedication, bravery and the kind of togetherness that week after week for five years has been achieved in a league no one thought would last.

It did last and it will continue to last as long as people like you – on the gridiron and off – keep discovering the best in themselves . . . and in each other