

By Peter King

"The day I was drafted by Buffalo, I cried." — Jim Kelly, 1985



Buffalo - So they drafted Jim Kelly.

In 1983, when the Buffalo Bills drafted University of Miami quarterback Jim Kelly, they were wrapping up negotiations to sign him in the offices of the club's

late executive vice president, Pat McGroder. The contract was within 30 minutes of being signed. Then McGroder's secretary, Phyllis Letcka, buzzed into his speakerphone: "There's a Mr. Bruce Allen from the United States Football League wanting to speak with Jim or his agents." Crestfallen, McGroder put Greg Lustig, then Kelly's agent, on the phone.

Allen, speaking for the upstart USFL, told Lus- would it? tig: "Don't sign anything. We'll match whatever they offer — and more."

The rest is Houston Gamblers' history.

The rest, really, is Buffalo Bills' history.

hard times of this comatose-but-never-dying fran- season, he was hiding in trainer Ed Abromoski's The average tenure for a Bills' coach, in 28 years, chise, it is the drafting, wooing, pursuing, losing, office because he'd heard owner Ralph Wilson was has been 2.3 years. rewooing and signing of Kelly. He got drafted by trying to reach him by phone to ordain him interim "Buffalo is a coach's graveyard," said Chuck the Bills and didn't want to play in Buffalo. He got coach. The phone there finally rang, and Abro- Knox (1978-'82). away from the Bills, and they floundered. He came moski heard Johnson say: "Mr. Wilson, can't you back to the Bills and sparked a renaissance. With get anyone else?" Wilson couldn't. Kelly and a good young defense led by Cornelius Harvey Johnson's career coaching record: 2-23-1. Bennett — who just might be the best linebacker west of East Rutherford — the Bills are on the So they lost Jim Kelly. word here. Super Bowl.

If Phyllis Letcka hadn't put that call through, the Bills might have been talking like this a couple touchdowns. They threw 31 interceptions. in 1985.

Dave Highlands remeved oredibility and his performance Majuvemed the team and the city 

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But if Phyllis Letcka hadn't put that call through, this wouldn't be the Buffalo Bills, now

Harvey Johnson, a career assistant, was the in- in the NFL." terim coach of the Bills twice, in 1968 and 1971. If one prolonged event illustrates the life and Boy, did he hate it. Drove him crazy. Before the '71 Billsfact:

question for Wilson: Quarterback Jim Was he committed to getting Kelly signed? Wilson said he was. Polian accepted the offer.

linebacker Cornelius Bennett have a message for the rest of the "When I took the job," Polian said, "the NFL: This is the year to public perception was start taking the that Murphy's Law Buffalo Bills seriously. was invented in Buffalo. There was a pall over the franchise."

Kelly, left, and

Much of this was because some horrible drafting had left the Bills without talent. From 1975-84, only two of the 10 top draft picks became consistent starters. In 1982, the Bills traded ahead of Philadelphia in the first round of the draft because they had Perry Tuttle and Mike Quick 1-2 on their draft board at wide receiver, and they thought there was a significant talent gap between them. There was. Tuttle was awful. Quick was great.

In 1984, after the Bills won two games, Kay Stephenson, then the coach, asked Polian, then the pro scout, to evaluate the Bills' talent versus the other 28 teams. "Coach," Polian told Stephenson a month later, bleary from all the film study, "we were 2-14 on merit. We've got the worst personnel

So they pursued Jim Kelly.

In 1985, the Bills finally had a good draft, getting defensive end Bruce Smith and cornerback verge of becoming — gasp! — a consistent NFL They limped along with the aging Joe Ferguson Derrick Burroughs — now immovable parts of the playoff contender. They're even mentioning the S and, in 1985, with the desperate addition of Vince defense — and the team's two future leading re-Ferragamo. Ferragamo and Bruce Mathison split ceivers, Chris Burkett and Andre Reed. In 1986, in the quarterbacking in 1985. They threw nine a thinner crop, the Bills drafted current thirddown back Ronnie Harmon and starting guard Odomes came in the '87 draft; Odomes and Burof years ago. They would have had Jim Kelly three Owner Ralph Wilson went looking for a new Will Wolford. In August, 1986, Polian flew to Man-roughs are the Bills' corners of the future. The Bills years earlier than they did. Maybe they would have general manager after the 1985 season, and he set- hattan to woo Kelly. "We just talked football," said hope running back Thurman Thomas, drafted in been better than 8-8 in 1983, 2-14 in 1984 and 2-14 tled on veteran scout Bill Polian, who was then the Polian, who was then the Polian, who was then the Bills' director of pro personnel. Polian had one Helmsley Palace. "I told him the team was being consistent rushing threat they haven't had since

built with him in mind, that the offensive line was O.J. Simpson. But this is doubtful. The Bills' Achilintact, that'd we'd dramatically decreased our les heel is a rushing game that has been 21st and number of [offensive] sacks."

"I want to win a Super Bowl," Kelly told Polian. "I do too," Polian said. "Believe me, we don't want to be mediocre."

Polian says now: "He became a talisman, a ba- Polian said, "because you can't ask Jim Kelly to rometer by which to gauge whether Buffalo could ever be big-league. When he didn't sign in 1983, it was just another opportunity for the nation to beat up on Buffalo. Ha ha, another player won't come to Buffalo. For the town, getting Jim Kelly tran- with winning teams, and all of them with better scended football."

Polian, just before he flew to Houston for what he hoped would be the final negotiations with Kelly in August, 1986, told a TV reporter, "Tell the people of Buffalo to light a candle for us."

When Polian arrived at his Houston hotel, there Buffalo informing him that, as long he was in Houston, 2,000 votive candles would be lit at the church.

The Bills had a different defensive coordinators for six straight years, from 1982 to 1987.

So they signed Jim Kelly.

lian had the OK from Wilson to make Kelly the highest-paid player in football history — at that time — and he clinched the deal by guaranteeing it fully against injury. The numbers: five years, \$8 million, including a \$2-million signing bonus. The date: Aug. 19, 1986.

The negotiators and Kelly flew by private jet to Buffalo to announce the deal. Two stretch limos waited at the airport. The county sheriff had a motorcade waiting, and, at rush hour, the limos streamed into downtown Buffalo for a welcoming news conference. Polian will never forget the sights of that ride. On the overpasses above the expressway, people were cheering and holding signs. Some read:

"Welcome Jim Kelly!" "God bless Jim Kelly."

"We love you Jim Kelly!"

At the news conference, all three Buffalo network affiliates broke into Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings to carry the story live. One of the biggest car dealers in western New York, Charlie Mancuso, walked up to Kelly after the news conference and handed him the keys to a \$22,000 Corvette.

"What an unbelievable day," Kelly says now. "It was nuts. I'd always heard Buffalo fans were crazy, but you can't imagine what that day was like."

"I don't think he imagined in his wildest dreams what he meant to the city,' said Mancuso, now one of Kelly's friends. "In New York City, football's football; it's another diversion among so many things to do. In Buffalo, it's a grassroots thing. People live and die with it. The day Jim Kelly came to town, you'd have thought the presi-

Billsfact:

From Dec. 18, 1983, to Oct. 11, 1987, the Bills were 1-25 on the road.

So they rebuilt around Jim Kelly.

The Bills started 2-7 under Hank Bullough in 1986, and Bullough had alienated nearly everyone on the team with his long and — some said unproductive practices. "We'll never win with this guy," Kelly told friends early in the season. In came the steadying hand of Marv Levy, a disciple of George Allen who had failed (31-42-0) in his only previous NFL head-coaching stop, with Kansas City from 1977-82.

"When I walked in here," Levy said, "I knew we at least had a great quarterback in Kelly and a great defensive talent in Bruce Smith. We had neither when I got to Kansas City. What the team needed, I felt, was realism. This was a weary football team, beaten down mentally by losing. When I talked to them, I never mentioned the word 'win.' I talked about performance. That's the John Wooden approach. He never talked about winning, just about playing your best."

Linebacker Shane Conlan and cornerback Nate

17th in the NFL in the last two years, and an offensive line that's a notch below the league's good ones.

Which brings us to the importance of Kelly. "Teams in the northeast need a running game," pass into the teeth of a 40 mile-an-hour wind in December." You can ask Kelly to pass on every other occasion. Over the last two NFL seasons, in yardage, only four quarterbacks — and all of them receivers — have thrown for more yards than Kelly's 6,391. He has exceptional arm strength, can take a hit without flinching, and improvises well.

Last Halloween Eve, the Bills traded a chunk of the future for a great presence, Bennett, who is clearly a rare talent. He'll be the guts of the dewas a telegram from a Catholic parish just north of fense, and he'll make offenses think twice about double-blocking Smith (27 sacks in his last 28 games). Bennett and Smith will play on opposite sides. In front of Bennett, at left end, will be 32year-old Art Still, who thinks he has two more good pass-rushing seasons left.

"We don't have the greatest defense in the NFL now," Conlan said. "But I think we can be."

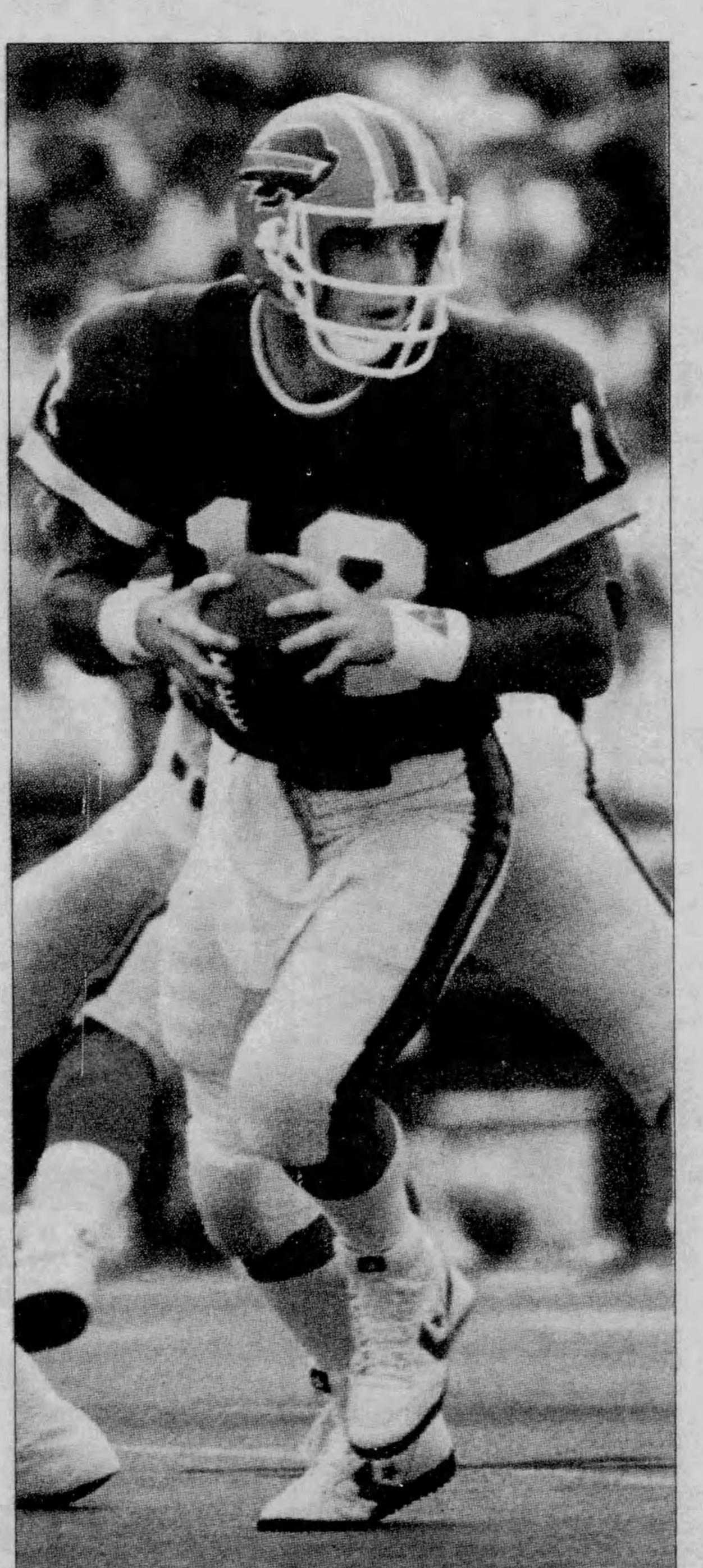
Levy is trying to temper much of the optimism It was almost a foregone conclusion, really. Po- here. This was, after all, a 7-8 team last year, a team that lost its final two games against beatable teams (New England, Philadelphia) with the playoffs on the line.

"We've gone from being a very, very bad team to a mediocre one," he said. "That's it. We have no sense of security."

"Potential means nothing. We haven't done anything," guard Tim Vogler said. Except get Kelly, and Bennett, and hope.

"I love it here."

— Jim Kelly, 1988



Jim Kelly has thrown for more than 6,000 yards over the past two seasons



## Bennett: Taylor-Made For Buffalo's Defense

FTER the Atlanta Falcons signed rookie linebacker Aundray Bruce last spring, head coach Marion Campbell pulled Bruce into a film room and popped in a video tape.

Bruce sat back and watched highlights of an eminently forgettable game, Buffalo's 17-7 it was widely felt that, in this loss at Philadelphia to close deal, the Colts had prospered last season. What he watched by getting Eric Dickerson and NFL in 1987.

235-pound Bennett had 17 the ball in practice, we knew tackles, four sacks and three we had a great one." forced fumbles.

In his ninth professional game. At the age of 22.

the year. Bennett's impact, the next time." coupled with the skills of passrushing defensive end Bruce ger for the game that he's seen Smith, inside linebacker Shane in few players. Bennett says Conlan and corners Derrick this is because, in his youth, he Burroughs and Nate Odomes, was annually over the weight gives the Bills one of the limit for youth football leagues

"I'm not trying to sound like ham, Ala. (His weight at birth: somebody with a big head," 11 pounds, four ounces.) "All Bennett said, "but there aren't the guys in my neighborhood, many people who could come in my friends, were coming home and do what I did last year. I'm with trophies, but all I could do just one of those special people, was play sandlot ball with older I guess. I'm blessed."

ans Stadium. On the sidelines hungry now. I want to make up that day, Bills director of ad- for everything I missed." game like this."

greatest I've ever seen."

Not that the Bills needed to watch this slightly smaller clone of Lawrence Taylor play like this to know what a great prospect he is. Bennett was acquired from Indianapolis in the Halloween Eve trade for the biggest package — two No. 1 draft picks, a No. 2 and running back Greg Bell - ever commanded for a defensive player in the NFL. At the time, was not eminently forgettable. the Rams by getting six high He watched rookie Buffalo draft picks. The Bills, some linebacker Cornelius Bennett felt, overpaid. "No guts, no glohave the best statistical game ry," said Bills director of pro of a defensive player in the personnel Bob Ferguson, who pushed for the deal. "But as When it was done, the 6-2, soon as we saw him come off

In Bennett's first week of practice last year, he covered a wide receiver on a medium This is the type of awe that route, catching up to him with the debut of Bennett has in- his 4.45-second-in-the-40 speed spired around the league, and and batting away a pass. The it is the type of play that lifted receiver seemed amazed, and the Bills from being rated 24th receivers coach Ted Tollner rein the league in team defense assured him: "Don't worry. when Bennett arrived last No- That won't happen in a game. vember to 12th by the end of Run that play the same way

Levy says Bennett has a hunleague's best young defenses. in his hometown of Birmingkids," Bennett said. "That's Back to December at Veter- one of the reasons I'm so

ministration Ed Stillwell In doing so, he's conjuring turned to veteran trainer Ed up memories of a young Law-Abromoski and said: "Am I rence Taylor, the player college dreaming? Am I going nuts? coach Ray Perkins compared I've never seen a guy play a him to at Alabama. Which is fine with Bennett.

"He played that well," coach "Lawrence is the best at Mary Levy said. "It was a truly what he does," Bennett said. rare performance, one the "I'm just following in his foot-- Peter King