

# 'Albion Antelope' was hometown legend

OVERLOOKED ORLEANS: Former resident joined Bills as original member in 1949

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ALBION — After another seemingly abysmal start to the 2018-19 NFL season, the Buffalo Bills appear to be relegated to the pits of the AFC East division.

Yet nearly 70 years ago, an Albion native found himself on the roster of the old Buffalo Bills of the All-American Football Conference.

"The Albion Antelope" is perhaps one of the greatest sports stories to come out of Orleans County during the early half of the 20th century. His career was marked by significant success at multiple positions during his high school, collegiate, and professional career.

Thomas "Tommy" Colella was born July 3, 1918 at Albion to Giacomo and Louise Colella and spent his earliest years growing up on Washington Street. During his time at Albion High School, Colella played multiple sports including football, baseball, basketball, and track, but football was clearly the defining sport in his career.

He was part of the 1936 football team that went 8-0-1, scoring 293 total points for the season and only allowing 20 points against. The year following his graduation, the team went .500 scoring 81 points and allowing 84 points against.

In the final game of the '36 season, Colella's interception and 40 yard pass to Joe Rosato for a touchdown led Albion to a 27-0 victory over Medina.

In his senior year, Tommy Colella played semi-pro ball with the Albion West Ends, earning \$5 per game — the arrangement was cut short when he realized the stipend might jeopardize his ability to play



SUBMITTED PHOTO

**Tommy Colella joined the Cleveland Rams in 1944. His tenure with the original Buffalo Bills started five years later.**

college ball.

Following graduation, he enrolled at Canisius College where he played football for four years. During a time when football squads were small and players filled multiple positions, Colella played running back, quarterback, kicker, punter, defensive back, and kickoff/punt return specialist.

His successful tenure at Canisius earned him Little All-American Honors three years in a row and the Canisius College Sodality Football Sportsmanship Trophy, which was given "to promote and reward

really progressive achievements by the students, and to honor real sportsmen, both on and off the field."

In 1942, Colella was selected in the seventh round of the NFL draft by the Detroit Lions, as the No. 55 pick, as a halfback. Wearing number 46, he played two seasons for the team behind Frankie Sinkwich.

His lack of involvement in the team's running game resulted in his request to move to another team, which was made a reality in 1944 through a trade with the Cleveland

Rams. His role as the team's halfback and punter would lead the Rams to the 1945 NFL Championship, but once again he felt undervalued by his team.

Colella signed on with the newly established Cleveland Browns prior to the relocation of the Rams to Los Angeles in 1946. During his three years with the Browns, he helped lead the team to three AAFC Championships before his trade to the Buffalo Bills in 1949.

During his professional career, Colella played 87 games, scoring 15 touchdowns and 1 field goal accounting for 93 total points. On 199 rushing attempts he ran a total of 753 yards, accumulating the majority of those yards with the Cleveland Rams.

Playing multiple positions, he completed 56 passes out of 149 total attempts for 617 yards; a meager 37.6 percent completion rate. He punted 196 times for 7,317 yards, averaging 37.3 yards per punt, and totaled 32 punt returns for 487 total yards.

His longest punt return of 82 yards came with a touchdown while playing with the Browns in 1947.

With his trade to the Buffalo Bills, he became one of the few athletes to play for his hometown team in high school, college, and on the professional level. In 1967, his accomplishments earned him a spot in the inaugural class of the Golden Griffin Sports Hall of Fame at Canisius College. He entered the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame in 2002, 10 years after his death on May 15, 1992.

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