

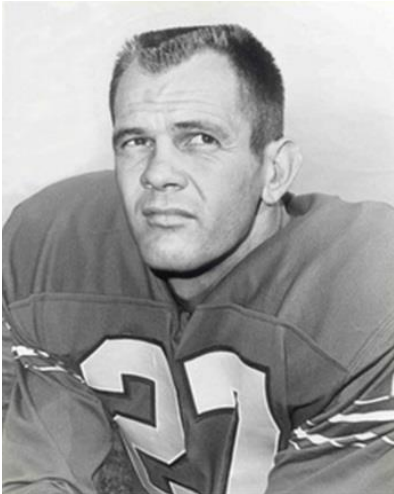


Tom Janik

This article is by Budd Bailey

Tom Janik must have participated in hundreds and hundreds of plays in his college and pro football career over the years. Yet he's mostly remembered for just one of them. It's the one that came up in the first paragraph of all the obituaries written about him. It's also that play that took place during one of the most miserable seasons imaginable for a football team.

That's not really fair, since Janik had some good years on the football field. There's probably some sort of lesson there: You just don't know when the biggest moment of your professional life will pop up.



Thomas Alvin Janik was born on September 6, 1940, in Poth, Texas. The town is about 45 minutes southeast of San Antonio, and most of the roads there are paved but not lined. Poth, which has fewer than 5,000 people, is named after a man who owned a cotton processing business in town.

Janik attended Poth High School, which is best known in the sports world of Texas for volleyball. The Pirates won nine state titles between 1995 and 2014. Poth HS popped up in the national news for a moment early in 2020. A 16-year-old male student wanted to grow his hair long, so that his ill 11-year-old sister might be able to use it for a wig if she needed it after chemo treatments. However, the school handbook stated that male students could not grow their hair "beyond the ear opening on the sides nor beyond the top of a dress shirt collar in the back." The boy opted to drop out and be home schooled



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until his hair grew to a length that could be donated to the nonprofit “Locks of Love” program.

Janik graduated from the high school in 1959 and headed to Texas A&M – where he stayed for a year. Then he transferred to the Texas College of Arts and Industries – also known as Texas A&I. It goes by Texas A&M – Kingsville today. Gene Upshaw, Darrell Green and John Randle all have gone from Texas A&I to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Some might remember quarterback Randy Johnson, who was a first-round draft choice of the Falcons after completing his eligibility in 1965.

Janik might have spent a part of his football career explaining to non-Texans what a javalina is, considering that it was the team nickname of Texas A&I. It’s an animal that also is described as a peccary, which probably doesn’t offer too much help to those in the dark. Think of something from the pig family that is associated with Central and South America; it also turns up in the American Southwest. That’s a javalina.

Janik was a standout for the school. The halfback was an All-Conference choice twice and was a second-team Little All-American choice in 1962. The team won the Lone Star conference title and Great Southwest Bowl championship in 1960. His junior year was a bit of a washout, thanks to a broken collarbone. But he bounced back in 1962 to lead the team in rushing, receptions, and scoring. Tom was inducted into the school’s athletic Hall of Fame in 1982. Brother Jerry followed Tom to Texas A&I, where he was a second-team Little All-American linebacker in 1974.

His fine career led to teams from the pros drafting him early in 1963. The Detroit Lions of the NFL took Janik in the 12th round, while the Denver Broncos grabbed him in the third. He signed with Denver, played in the College All-Star Game that year, which is remembered as the last time that the rookies beat the defending NFL champions in that series that lasted until 1976. Then Tom reported to the Broncos.

Denver was a rather sorry football team in 1963, going 2-11-1. Janik at least had the chance to earn some playing time. He dressed for all 14 games and was listed as a starter in 10 of them. Tom only played in nine games the next year, starting four of them and grabbing an interception along the way. He did see a little time as the team’s punter, averaging 37.4 yards in 10 kicks. The Broncos went 2-11-1 again in 1964, leading to the predictable midseason coaching change. Mac Speedie replaced Jack Faulkner.

The Broncos’ 1965 media guide reported that the team was thinking about moving Janik to wide receiver for that season. It also contained the news that Tom was scheduled to be Denver’s regular punter. Neither came true. After Week Two without playing a game, Janik was traded to the Buffalo Bills for a seventh-round draft choice in 1966.



The deal meant that Tom went from the outhouse to the penthouse of the American Football League instantly. Janik had joined the team that had won the AFL title in 1964, and looked ready to win again in 1965. The defensive back mostly served on special teams in his first season in Buffalo. Even so, he joined the club of pro football champions when the Bills beat San Diego for their second straight title.

“Blade” (he was known for his slight build at 6-foot-3, 190 pounds by his teammates) played a larger role in the Bills’ fortunes in 1966. Starting cornerback Booker Edgerson suffered an injury that allowed him to only start two games. Buffalo didn’t miss a beat with Janik in the lineup. He intercepted eight passes – with two of them coming back for touchdowns. The first came in November against the Houston Oilers; the other took place in the season-ending contest with Denver.

In the case of the latter, it was his second interception of the game. “I gambled on the interception and won,” he said. “He threw the same type of pass on first down in an earlier situation. John Tracey tipped the pass right into my arms. Then (Ron) McDole was right there and he yelled, ‘Run, Tom, Run.’ ... I started running for the easiest, sweetest touchdown of my life. My game is gambling. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose.”

The Bills were still good, and won their third straight AFC East title. But they weren’t good enough to beat Kansas City in the AFL championship game, and therefore missed a chance to play in the first Super Bowl. Janik no doubt remembered an interception that he almost made early in the game; he had open space in front of him, and a touchdown at that point might have changed the game around.

Janik also gave credit to one of the Chiefs after the game when he previewed the title matchup. “The Packers have never defended against a receiver with the moves of Otis Taylor. Next season, Taylor will be recognized as a better receiver than Lance Alworth. ... I’ve never played against a receiver with such a long, deceptive stride. He’s past you before you know it.”

Buffalo’s play started to decline in 1967, as the nucleus turned old. By mid-November, the Bills had fallen to 3-6 on the year, and it was rather obvious that the team was not going to be back in the playoffs for a fourth straight year. “We’re a pretty downhearted group,” Janik said after a loss to the Jets. “We had a chance to get back in the race and we played our hearts out, but we lost. It’s the first time I’ve ever been with a club that has had so many injuries. No matter what we do, there seems to be a black cloud hanging over us. We’ve had enough things happen to us this season to last us for a couple of years, I hope.”



Still, Janik was a bright spot. Edgerson was back, but a spot opened up at strong safety when Haygood Clarke suffered an injury. Tom started in 10 games, and had a league-leading 10 interceptions. Two more picks were returned for touchdowns: one against the Dolphins on Nov. 5; the other against the Patriots on December 9. He was selected to the AFL All-Star Game. Janik's play couldn't help the Bills from falling to a 4-10 record.

Life for the Bills got worse in 1968, as they had a series of injuries at the quarterback position that was almost unprecedented in football history. Buffalo fell to 1-12-1 for the season. Janik missed some time to injury (hairline fracture in his leg) in that season, but he still had a big moment at a most unexpected time. What's more, it came against the future Super Bowl champions – the New York Jets.

Joe Namath threw for four touchdowns but had five interceptions that day. Two of the picks were by Janik, and one of them was returned 100 yards – goal line to goal line – for a touchdown.

“I was covering Curley Johnson all the way,” the defensive back said. “The ball was perfectly thrown. I hesitated for a split second, then I stepped inside my man. All I saw was daylight. Namath came up on the play downfield and I was getting tired, but I knew he was, too, and that knee of his had to be bothering him, so I just kept going.”

It broke the team record for longest interception return, and he set another Bills' record for interception return yardage in a game (137) that stood for years. Edgerson and Butch Byrd, the team's starting cornerbacks, also returned interceptions for scores in the 37-35 win.

Not too many teams have won only one game in a season. Those Bills were the last team to beat an eventual champion with their one win. The history books tell us that 15 teams (NFL or AFL) have had only one win in a season after 1968. Only two of them recorded a win against a team with a winning record – the 1969 Steelers (who beat the 9-4-1 Lions) and the 1989 Cowboys (who beat the 10-6 Redskins). Only one of them beat a team that reached the playoffs: the 1991 Colts, who defeated the 8-8 Jets. That New York team lost in the first round of the postseason. In other words, those Bills were in a class by themselves.

John Rauch arrived from Oakland to coach the Bills in 1969. Janik didn't see much of him, as he was dealt to Boston for a draft pick on August 27. Tom left Buffalo with 21 interceptions and five touchdowns in three seasons. The assumption is that the Bills wanted to make room for 1967 first-round John Pitts. Tom left with the team record for career interceptions with 21.



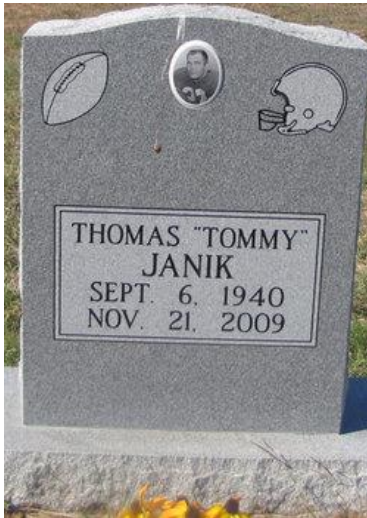
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Here's where Janik's versatility helped add years to his career. The Patriots hardly ever used him as a defensive back during his three years with Boston/New England. However, he did win the job as the team's punter. Tom averaged 41.5 yards, 39.1 yards and 37.3 yards in his three seasons in that role. That wasn't bad for a guy who hadn't punted in an AFL game since 1964. The Bills listed him as the team's backup punter, but Paul Maguire never needed relief during Janik's time there.

As for the Patriots, they never had a winning season from 1969 to 1971, capturing 12 wins in those years combined. Janik's career ended at that point, with 114 pro games to his credit. From there he returned to Texas, and stayed in that area for the rest of his life. Tom owned Shipley's Donuts in Bryan, Texas from 1970 to 1981.

Janik died on November 21, 2009 in Poth. Tom and wife Amy had one son, John. Janik has a helmet and a football on his gravestone, which is located in Saint John's Lutheran Cemetery in Poth.





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