

Art Laster

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Art Laster was a mobile, quick, strong, 6-foot, 5-inch 280-pound offensive lineman, who ran a 5.1 40-yard dash. He starred at Maryland State (today known as Maryland Eastern Shore University), played a single 14-game season in the National Football League with the Buffalo Bills, had a brief stint in the Canadian Football League with the Ottawa Roughriders and spent his final professional football season playing for the Hartford Knights in the Atlantic Coast Football League.



Arthur L. Laster was born on March 2, 1948 in Gary, Indiana. He grew up in Gary. Laster attended Tolleston high school where he played football, basketball, and track. He broke the regional track record for the shot put in 1966 with a throw of 60'8 ½". The record stood for nine years until it was broken in 1975. He finished sixth in the state meet in the shot put as a junior and was runner-up as a senior. Laster was named to the Chicago Tribune Northwestern Indiana High School Conference Football All Star Team as a senior, despite his team finishing with a 2-6 record. Upon graduation from high school, Laster enrolled at Maryland State in the fall of 1966.

Laster started as a freshman at offensive guard for the Maryland State Hawks. He lettered in both his freshman and sophomore years contributing to solid Hawks teams that finished 5-3 and 5-2 respectively. Laster was named honorable mention to the All Maryland Small College All Star team as a freshman and sophomore at guard. He was moved to tackle as a junior and was a standout as he was selected to the Maryland College Division All-Star first team while helping his club to a 5-2-1 record and within



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one point of beating nemesis Morgan State, losing 19-18. Laster had another solid season in 1969 as a senior, repeating as a first team Maryland College Division All-Star, but the Hawks finished with a very disappointing 1-7 record.

Laster was named to the All-Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association team and the Pittsburgh Courier All-American football teams. Laster also lettered in track and basketball at Maryland State.

Laster, the 6'5", 280-pound tackle, was selected by the Oakland Raiders in the 1970 NFL draft on January 27, 1970. He was picked with the 24th selection in the 5th round, #128 overall.

After being drafted Laster let his weight balloon to 322 pounds, as he did not play basketball his senior year. "Laster was the sixth man as a forward on the Maryland State basketball team as a junior."ⁱ He reported to the Raiders rookie mini-camp in April and was blistered by Raiders head coach John Madden demanding him to lose weight by the time he reported to the teams' training camp in July. Laster blamed his weight gain on being newly married and eating the great home cooking of his wife. They were married between his junior and senior year in college. The good news is, Laster reported to training camp at a sleek 268 pounds, however he had lost some strength.

Following a Raiders team scrimmage on July 24, Madden praised Laster saying, "he battled back from deep in the valley to a new point of beginning."ⁱⁱ Laster felt his strength was returning however his first professional training camp was quite challenging. He said, "I realize now you just don't get the techniques at a small school... you can't get a minute of rest." "But this is so much harder, suddenly I hated to go into it. It was a shock mentality, like preparing for a final exam, then finding you can't find a single answer when they throw the test at you."ⁱⁱⁱ

In training camp Laster was reunited with former Maryland State teammates, tackle Art Shell and linebacker Gerald Irons. The camaraderie of his former Hawks mates made him more comfortable as training camp progressed as well as having his strength return.

However, on September 16 he was among the final cuts by the Raiders. The same day he was cut, the Buffalo Bills signed him. Buffalo cut tackle Mike Richey to make room for Laster.

Laster made his debut for the Bills in their regular season opener on September 20, starting at left tackle and wearing jersey #75, in the teams' 25-10 loss to the Denver Broncos. The normal starting left tackle Howard Kindig was moved to center to replace the injured Frank Marchlewski, thus opening the tackle position for Laster.



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Laster played primarily on special teams throughout the 1970 season. On October 11 in a game at the Steelers Laster returned a squib kick, by Pittsburgh placekicker Gene Mingo, for eight yards carrying the ball from the Bills 24-yard line to the 32.

Laster received his second start at left tackle on October 18, replacing Kindig, in the Bills 33-14 loss to the Miami Dolphins. He also recovered a Garo Yepremian squib kick at the Bills 25-yard line in the fourth quarter, after Miami had taken a 30-14 lead.

He started the next three weeks as the Bills defeated the New York Jets 10-6 and the New England Patriots 45-10, with the Bills rushing for 215 yards their season high, before losing to the Cincinnati Bengals 43-14. Kindig returned to the starting line-up the following week and Laster was relegated to special teams for the remainder of the season as the Bills finished a disappointing 3-10-1.

In Buffalo's last game of 1970, a 45-7 loss to Miami, Laster made his only tackle as a Bill. Following an intercepted pass by Bills quarterback James Harris, Laster chased down and tackled Miami safety Dean Brown after a 32-yard return to the Bills 40-yard line. In Laster's five starts with the club in 1970, the Bills were 2-3.

Laster returned to Buffalo for their 1971 training camp. The Bills media guide described Laster saying, "he has excellent speed and mobility for a big man."^{iv} Turmoil embroiled the Bills 1971 camp as head coach John Rauch abruptly resigned on July 20, in an argument with team owner Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. after Rauch made disparaging remarks about some of the players on the team.

Player personnel director Harvey Johnson took over as head coach. Johnson started Laster at left tackle in the Bills first two preseason games, a 14-10 win over New Orleans on August 6 and a 34-28 loss to the Philadelphia Eagles on August 16. Kindig replaced him as the starter for the Bills next two preseason games, as Laster played special teams and substituted at left tackle.

On August 31 Laster was waived by the Bills. He sat out the season as Buffalo finished with the worst record in football at 1-13. Laster signed with the Washington Redskins for 1972. He was in the Skins training camp for a few weeks, but left camp and did not return. A week later he signed a contract with his hometown Indianapolis Capitols of the Midwest Football League, a professional minor league.

The Ottawa Roughriders of the Canadian Football League signed Laster on October 20. He was put in the line-up immediately, with only one day of practice, starting at tackle



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against Montreal on October 22. Despite being out of shape and 30-pounds over his normal playing weight, he acquitted himself well in the Roughriders 17-7 win.

Following his first game with Ottawa it was reported that, “the coaches were pleased with the work of offensive lineman Art Lester. The huge, 285-pounder will get another shot at it next Saturday when the Riders play the Argos in Toronto.”^v

He again started against Toronto, playing most of the game on October 28, with the Riders winning 21-16. However, on November 1, he was waived by Ottawa. His season was finished. Laster signed with Ottawa on April 11, 1973 but was required to lose weight.

He reported to camp on June 16, overweight to the point that the 300-pound limit scale could not record his actual weight and Laster was not saying how much he weighed. Ottawa head coach Jack Gotta was furious. However, on June 26 Laster played well in the teams Blacks versus Whites intra-squad scrimmage and Gotta decided to give him another chance. Laster played in the Roughriders first two preseason games but was waived on July 20 for lack of discipline.

Laster still had a desire to play football. He was signed by the Hartford Knights of the Atlantic Coast Football League in early September. Knight head coach Nick Cutro immediately put him into the starting line-up at tackle. He started at right tackle, wearing jersey #63, in the Knights second regular season game versus the Long Island Chiefs with the Hartford winning 48-13. The Knights won their first four games with Laster at right tackle. He became a fixture there for the remainder of the season with the Knights finishing in second place, two games behind the New England Colonials with an 8-4 record. New England went on to win the league championship.

In one of the more bizarre games of the season, on November 3 against the New York Crusaders at Dillon Stadium in Hartford, Laster was ejected for fighting but the Knights won despite his ejection 30-0.

Laster had an excellent season with the Knights as he was named to the ACFL All-Star First Team at tackle, at the conclusion of the season.

The ACFL and the Hartford Knights folded after the 1973 season and with it came to an end the football career of Art Laster.

Laster was still hopeful to keep his football career alive, however. He signed with the Toronto Northmen in the new World Football League in 1974. They became the Memphis Southmen, but he did not stick with the club out of training camp.



Laster was enshrined in the Maryland Eastern Shore University Athletics Hall of Fame in 1984.

Art Laster died of a heart attack at 41 years old on January 22, 1990. Upon hearing of his death former teammate at both MESU and with the Oakland Raiders, Art Shell, said, “I am stunned. I’m so sorry to hear that. He was a good man.”

End Notes:

ⁱ Newnham, Blaine, “Weighing a Problem”, *Oakland Tribune*, July 19, 1970, p27

ⁱⁱ Ross, George, “Raiders Rookies Rest”, *Oakland Tribune*, July 25, 1970, p9E

ⁱⁱⁱ Ross, George, “Raiders Rookies Rest”, *Oakland Tribune*, July 25, 1970, p9E

^{iv} Buffalo Bills 1971 Media Guide

^v Koffman, Jack, “Kick, then run like hell”, *Ottawa Citizen*, October 24, 1972, p23