

## Bob Petrich

**This article was written by Budd Bailey**

Bob Petrich probably got more out of football than he ever expected to receive. For a guy who came out of a relatively small college program in a town in Texas, he was a starter on some excellent professional teams and even has a championship ring for his efforts. Then after retirement, Bob smoothly entered the business world for a successful second career in real estate.



Robert Mark Petrich was born on March 15, 1941, in Long Beach, California, to parents who had come to the United States from Komiza, Croatia. It's a town remembered mostly for the fact that the film "Mama Mia 2" was shot there. As for Bob, he grew up in San Pedro, a part of Los Angeles that was a separate city until 1909. San Pedro is something of a hotbed for good athletes. Basketball Hall of Famer Dennis Johnson might be the best of the group to come from there.

Petrich eventually reached San Pedro High School in the mid-1950s. The most notable pro player to come from that school is Ben Agajanian, a kicker who played with eight different teams over the course of a 20-year career. Another graduate was Don Shinnick, a good linebacker for the Baltimore Colts for most of the 1960s. There are no available records of how those San Pedro teams did and how Petrich performed there.

However, he was good enough to head to Los Angeles Valley College to play at the junior college level for two years after graduating from high school in 1959. Then it was



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on to West Texas A&M University for two more years. The school is located in Canyon, Texas, a few miles south of Amarillo. If you had to describe where it was, you'd probably say it was in North Texas – since it is part of the state's panhandle. In any event, the Buffaloes have been playing football since 1910. The school was called West Texas State College until 1963, when it became West Texas State University until 1990.

Petrich arrived to join a team that was undergoing tough times. The Buffs went 1-9 in 1959 under second-year coach Clark Jarnigan, which meant he didn't get a third year. Joe E. Kerbal took over for the 1960 season, and West Texas improved to 3-7. Then Petrich arrived, and he received some playing time in 1961, when the Buffs went 6-4 with wins over Arizona and Brigham Young.

Finally as a senior, Bob was part of a powerhouse. The 1962 Buffs went 9-2, including wins over Arizona State and Texas Tech, and outscored their opponents by a margin of 312-115. It was on to the Sun Bowl in El Paso from there, as West Texas edged Ohio, 15-14. It was the third trip to a bowl game in school history. Two of the team's top offensive threats went on to the pros. Jerry Logan scored 13 touchdowns – one on a 99-yard interception return for a touchdown against Arizona State - and Jerry Richardson caught 22 passes. Petrich was a big part of that team on the line, considering that he was named into West Texas State's Hall of Champions in 1990.

Pro football scouts had made the trip to Canyon to get a look at Petrich, no doubt noticing his 6-foot-4, 252-pound frame. Since it was the time of the NFL-AFL war for players, Petrich had an interesting choice of destinations. He could go across the country and play for the New York Giants, who were in the midst of a run of three straight division titles. Otherwise, he could stay closer to home by signing with the San Diego Chargers, who had reached the AFL championship game in two of the league's three seasons.

Bob talked to the Giants first, flying into the New York airport in the middle of winter. Then he flew to San Diego to talk to the Chargers. Assistant coach Chuck Noll picked up the prospect at the airport, starting their time together with a slow drive through the city. "It was like a jungle," Petrich told author Michael MacCambridge. "And coming from New York where it was so cold, and coming from West Texas, and being there for a couple of years with no greenery or anything like that, it was like, 'Wow, I'm home.'"

Petrich opted to sign with the Chargers. He actually transferred to San Diego State University after finishing football, and went on to graduate from that school with a Bachelor of Science degree in marketing in 1966.

Petrich joined a Charger team that was not in a good mood in the fall of 1963. That was in part because of a rugged training camp, held in the desert. "It wasn't what I expected,



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but ... well ... this is what it is,” Petrich told author Dave Steidel. “I was just a rookie trying to make the team so I didn’t pay much attention to the conditions. Being from West Texas where it was just as hot, it didn’t really bother me ... I did notice that the grass was really thin and needed a lot of care, which it was not going to get. We played on wood shavings some days and our cleats barely went in.”

After playing for the AFL title in 1960 and 1961, San Diego slipped to 4-10 in 1962. Head coach Sid Gillman wanted better results from his team, and he got them. Gillman had one of the great minds for offense in pro football history, and he had plenty of toys at his disposal that year. The Chargers started veteran Tobin Rote at quarterback, and he had one of the all-time greats at Lance Alworth as a favorite receiving target. The running backs were Keith Lincoln and Paul Lowe,

On the defensive line, Petrich took a good look at some of the others on the defensive line that year – and was impressed. “At our first practice, my roommate and I came out of our cabin and the first person we see is Earl Faison,” Petrich told author Dave Steidel. “My roommate shouts, ‘Oh my God, look at how big that guy is.’ Faison was 6-foot-6 and 260 pounds with a 38-inch waist and no appearance of body fat. Then Ernie Ladd appeared and he was even bigger at 6-9 and 300 pounds and no gut. Even though I’m from West Texas and was taught to fear no one and hit harder than everyone, I was really happy to be playing on the same defensive side of the line as them.”

On the defensive line, Gillman wanted more speed from his defensive line to cut off opposing sweeps before they gained momentum. Ron Nery – the previous year’s starter – was traded to Houston during camp. Bob had quite an education in preseason, because he often practiced against one of the best ever at the position in Ron Mix.

“One of the things defensive linemen are trained to do is cheat up on the ball, so that when that ball snaps, you’re across the line, because quickness is everything,” he told author Todd Tobias. “I remember lining up, and I didn’t know who this guy was, had no clue. All I knew was he was lined up across from me, and there was a live action pass rush drill. I put my hand down, and looked down the line, saw the ball, put my head right up on it, and as soon as I saw that center’s fingers squeeze on it, I was moving. Trouble is, I didn’t even get my hand off the ground and Mix hit me with his helmet, straight on. I mean, it was like a shock. And nobody’s ever been that quick that I’ve played against. And I’ve played against guys that played professional football.

“When he hit me, it jarred me up. And then backed off, set up, and I was standing there like a moron for, I don’t know, it seemed like forever. I tried to rush in and he whacked me again. So, I said to myself, ‘Well, this is a little different than I’m used to. And I’ve got to do something and I’ve got to do it fast, or I’m gonna be gone this afternoon.’”



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Petrich eventually won the starting spot at the position, and he was ready to go for quite a ride. The Chargers rolled through that season for the most part, showing that they would be difficult for an opponent to outscore. San Diego had one game in which it didn't reach double digits in points, a 7-6 win over Boston on Nov. 10. The Chargers broke 20 points 11 times, 30 points five times, and 50 points three times. It was an overwhelming performance, good enough to finish a game ahead of the Raiders in the division with an 11-3 record. Meanwhile, Boston had won a playoff game against Buffalo to take the AFL East and advance to the championship game. San Diego had beaten the Patriots twice in the regular season, but both games were close and Boston certainly had hope of winning the biggest game of the three.

The third time was no charm for Boston. Lowe and Lincoln both ran more than 50 yards for touchdowns in the first quarter alone. It was 31-10, San Diego, at halftime, and from there it almost was a matter of running out the clock. The Chargers finished with 318 rushing yards, 206 of them from Lincoln.

"When we beat Boston in that championship game in '63, they had no clue," Petrich told Tobias. "He was running Keith Lincoln out on options, I mean, a man in motion, and they didn't even cover him, they didn't know what the hell was going on. There were a lot of things he (Gillman) did that I didn't like but I'll tell you what, it's worth it to win. ... He did what had to do to win."

Petrich was part of a defense that recorded six sacks and two interceptions that afternoon. The final score was 51-10 in favor of San Diego. In hindsight, that Chargers' team probably could have given the Chicago Bears, the NFL champions that year, as much as they could handle if not more. "The intensity of the team and the preparation that we did to get ready for games, and the comradery we had together ... couldn't beat it, It was like a group of one guy going out there," Petrich said at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 2013. In any event, Petrich was a champion in his very first season.

The Chargers dropped off a notch in 1964, falling to 8-5-1. Even so, they were good enough to win the AFL West again. John Hadl took over for Rote at quarterback, and the team's scoring fell to the middle of the pack in the AFL. The Chargers lost three of their last four, but still won the division by a game and one-half over Kansas City. Petrich was back as a starter, and Ladd returned to action after missing much of 1963 with an injury. Bob even helped out with an interception on November 8 against Denver, returning the pick 11 yards. Petrich believes Ladd was one of the most memorable teammates of his career.



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“Gosh, everything at that time kind of centered around Ernie Ladd, who is the most unique individual I’ve ever seen,” he told Tobias. “Here’s a guy that, you know, (was) big and fast, could do anything he wanted to do. Was smart, he could beat anybody at chess. Don’t play him in checkers or ping-pong. Any mind games, he was just it. Of course, he was like my bodyguard. He was the guy right next to me. He really helped me.

“There was a time we were playing the Raiders. I just said, ‘Ernie, I want to go inside this time.’ I’d always set my guy up, run outside. For an inside move, I’d just keep going outside, letting him beat me. When I knew it was a real important situation, I’d say I’m going on the inside. That’s the other thing a defensive end has to be careful of - if he goes inside and gets hung up, you’re in deep trouble because the quarterback rolls off. So, when I would tell Ernie I’m going to the inside, he would just take everybody. He would take one arm, grab the guard, throw him to the inside, take the center, he’d be wrapping up all the people. He was the guy that I always felt was the subject of the little saying, where ... (a player) was so good that he just tackled everybody and started throwing guys out ‘til he found the one with the ball. Boy, that was him.”

San Diego traveled to Buffalo to play the Bills for the AFL Championship on December 26. The Chargers received a rude shock in the early part of the game when Mike Stratton knocked Lincoln out of the game with a perfectly timed hit during a swing pass. Lincoln exited the game for the day on a play that is still discussed in Buffalo. The Bills went on to a 20-7 victory for the AFL title.

The Chargers were still good in 1965, going 9-2-3. Lincoln suffered from injury issues throughout the season, but Hadl, Lowe and Alworth were still dynamic players. Petrich was still a starter with Ladd and Faison. San Diego won the division title by a comfortable two games, and drew the Bills again in the AFL final. This time the game was played in San Diego, and the Chargers felt good about their chances. But they ran into one of the greatest efforts by a Bills team in its history, blanking San Diego by a score of 23-0. Petrich had recorded two sacks, but the Buffalo defense ruined any chance that the Chargers had of winning that game.

In 1966, the Chargers’ defensive line had a new look. Ladd and Faison were both gone for most of the season, and none of the starters in that group were older than 25. That left Petrich as one of the veterans of the group and he started 12 of the 14 games. Hadl had a new talented target in Gary Garrison to go along with Alworth, but the offense wasn’t as scary as it had been. San Diego finished 7-6-1, behind emerging Kansas City and Oakland – the two teams that would dominate the west for the final years of the AFL’s existence.





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There's no sign of how the Chargers and Petrich parted ways. In March of 1967, San Diego traded Lincoln to the Bills for defensive end Tom Day, who took over Petrich's job as a starter. It seems likely that Petrich was cut by San Diego and signed by the Dolphins. He had a reunion there with Faison, who had finished 1966 as a Dolphin. They had a first-hand look at a problem on that team. "The first morning, I went to sit down with Earl, to eat," Bob told Tobias. "I didn't pay attention, but I looked around the room, and all the black guys were at their own tables, white guys were at theirs. And Earl said, 'I think we better not eat here.' I go, 'Oh, yeah? If you don't want me to I won't, but, I'm eating here, I don't care what they think.'"

Petrich didn't make the final roster, and became a free agent. At some point that year, he joined the Buffalo Bills. Bob appeared in six games for Buffalo, starting five of them. It wasn't a memorable year for the Bills either. The division champs for the previous three years fell to 4-10, well out of the playoff race.

Petrich seems to have been cut by the Bills relatively early in 1968. He wasn't in Buffalo's media guide that year. He went up to Canada to play with the Toronto Argonauts, but injuries were said to be a big problem for him at this point in his career. After seven games, Petrich's time in the CFL was over.

He gave it one more try in 1969, trying out for the Cincinnati Bengals. During camp, he suffered a personal loss when Frank Buncom, a teammate of the 1963 championship team with Petrich and then a member of the Bengals, died on September 14. "Frank Buncom was the gentlest person you would ever hope to meet," he told Tobias. "I was with him in Cincinnati when he died. Frank was just like, the little kids loved him. He was just the happiest, nicest man, and he hit like a mule on the field. That was a guy that I'd lay down my life for, in a heartbeat. I really would. Frank was an angel. He's up in heaven somewhere."

Petrich was cut before playing in a game in Cincinnati, and that was it for his career. Bob finished with 62 games on this side of the border, 57 of them starts. He did play in three championship games in five years, which is a very good ratio. In 1988, he was honored with a spot on the San Pedro Sportswalk, a sports version of the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Bob went in with Don Drysdale, Bill Sharman and Jackie Joyner-Kersey, which is pretty good company.



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It was then time for Petrich to move on to the rest of his life. That included a move back to San Diego, where he apparently has been ever since. Bob and wife Dolores had lived in El Cajon, a suburb of San Diego, since 1966. They had two children – one of whom (Aaron) did some place-kicking in high school in 1984-85. Bob entered the real estate business, joining the Foster Realty Company. Then Bob had several other stops before he moved on to KW Commercial, where he specialized in retail transactions. It's easy to guess he had a good supply of stories about Ernie Ladd and the '63 Chargers whenever he talked to a client.

In his spare time, Petrich served as a president of the San Diego chapter of the NFL Retired Players Association. He also enjoyed racquetball, swimming and golf to feed his competitive instincts.



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