Gogolak 1966

THE AMERICANIZATION OF PETE GOGOLAK

No. 1 son Peter Gogolak (r.) relaxes outside the family home in Wilton, N.Y., with his mother and father and brother Johnny, 9.

DALLAS, TEX.

Peter Gogolak comes from the same place that gave us goulash and Zsa Zsa Gabor, but that's not to say he shares a kinship with other significant Hungarian imports.

There are people who find goulash and Zsa Zsa Gabor indigestible. There are people in professional football who may not be fond of Gogolak, but it's hard to find anybody who resents him.

The professionals seem to appreciate that Gogolak is more than just an exceptionally gifted specialist with a peculiar talent for kicking a football over a crossbar. Today he will be kicking extra points and field goals, if the occasions arise, for the New York Giants in their game here with the Dallas Cowboys. There are 250-pound linemen to think about, but they don't carry guns. Things were different ten years ago, when Gogolak and his family were fleeing Communist Hungary and the bullets of border guards.

The Americanization of Peter Gogolak is a remarkable story, and today's game is part of a new episode. After two years with Buffalo and the American Football League, he's entered the more prestigious National Football League with a team that bid high for his services.

More fans than ever will now see Gogolak's revolutionary sidesaddle style of kicking, adapted from soccer, at which he was a promising player in Hungary. And it is not inconceivable that he can provide the lift to reestablish the Giants as champions in their division.

Almost singlehandedly, Gogolak is thought to have precipitated the truce and merger last spring of the A.F.L. with the older, more established N.F.L. After he jumped to the Giants, the leagues rushed to their peace pipes to avoid a dollar war over each other's players.

It may be significant that an official of the team Gogolak walked out on would not knock him. "I wouldn't say he was in the running for most popular on our team," the man said, "but he was a good kid. He was likable."

It is almost the nature of the place-kicking specialist, who practices apart and never gets his uniform smudged, to be a loner. Gogolak was a loner at Buffalo, professionally and socially, but he was respected. "The ball club used to stand and watch him practice and applaud," another club official said. "He wasn't an easy guy to know, but they admired his ability to kick a football."

NO HAIRCUT FOR HIM

There were some incidents, mostly minor. It is traditional at Buffalo for the veterans to give a rookie a haircut when he makes the club, but Gogolak turned out to be one of the great hair combers in sports, ranking right up there with Joe Pepitone and Gene Mauch. "When they went to clip Peter's hair," an acquaintance said, "he darn near cried. And once at half time of a tough game, one of the players found him in the washroom combing his hair. He's very conscious of his golden appearance."

Blond, handsome, rugged (190 pounds and just under 6 feet), Peter Gogolak has shown that the "American Dream" is just as glittering—and attainable—as ever. He's achieved it in the manner of the 60's—while young enough (24) for discotheques, water skiing and girls in mini-skirts. His favorite jacket is a blue, double-breasted blazer, his car a red Mustang. It's a composite picture that makes for a mutual attraction with the opposite sex.

But it's taken more than good looks to enable Gogolak to show Americans how it should be done in *their* country. It's taken determination, willingness to work long and hard, a natural sophistication that has almost never allowed him to be taken for a bumpkin and a pride so strong that some people don't like him.

The reconstruction of Gogolak began with the 1956 uprising in Budapest, when he was 14.

"My father decided that if we were ever going to get out, this was our chance," Gogolak says. "It was a rough decision for him. We had to leave everything behind. Our house wasn't as much of a loss as it would have been before the Communists got control. The government made us share it with another family and pay rent besides."

Dr. John Gogolak, a physician, led his wife Serolta, Peter and Peter's brother Charlie, who was then 11, out. The Austrian border was 20 miles away. It was November 13th.

"We started walking through a muddy cornfield just as it was getting dark," Gogolak remembers. "There were Russian troops all over."

Rifle fire crackled around the family. They walked as fast as the slowest could manage, stumbling on the uneven terrain. As they neared the border, the guarding troops threw up big flashes of light. Seven months pregnant, Mrs. Gogolak could not drop to the ground to hide. So the Gogolaks huddled together when the flashes came to make themselves look like a haystack or a bush.

"One time we discovered Charlie wasn't with us," Peter recalls. "We were frantic. How could we find him in that strange place in the dark? We waited. Pretty soon Charlie came trudging along. He was so tired I don't think he'd even noticed that he'd fallen behind."

Soon fences and barbed wire presented new torments. Then the overwhelming realization: The flashes of light were all behind them. The exhausted family had entered Austria.

In a refugee camp, they learned that the U.S. government was flying escapees to this country, and they came here.

Within a few months Dr. Gogolak was on the staff of St. Lawrence State Hos-

pital in Ogdensburg, N.Y. Peter entered the ninth grade, sat watching and listening but knowing too little English to earn credit. He reentered ninth grade in the fall, worked hard and passed easily.

"Everyone was nice to me," he says. "But it was pretty hard getting adjusted, . . . finding out what the kids liked to eat, where they went after school and what their jokes were about. You just had to be alert and ask as many questions as you could without bugging people."

Bill Plimpton, who taught world history at Ogdensburg Free Academy (the public high school), remembers Pete as a boy who studied intensely and dipped constantly into the dictionary he always carried with him. "He was friendly with everyone but seemed more mature than most of them," Plimpton says.

Ogdensburg didn't have a soccer team, so Gogolak tried American football. "At first he was puzzled by the organized plays, with everybody having an assignment," says William Powers, then an assistant coach and now Ogdensburg's principal. "He didn't know when someone was likely to slam into him. But he came on to play regular right end for us."

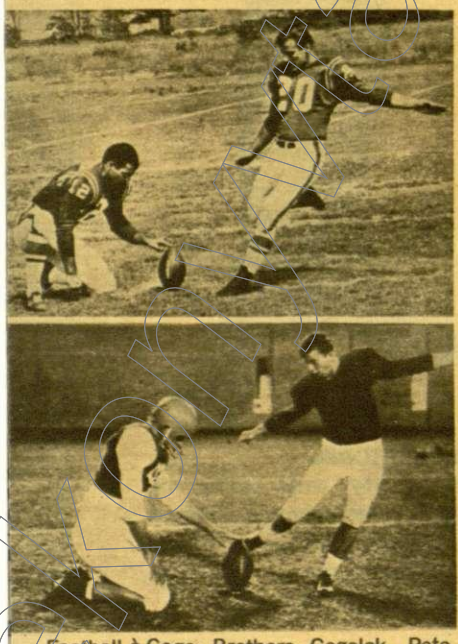
Bill Plimpton also was football coach. When he called for placekickers after regular practice, Gogolak tried *that*—but in a style no one had ever seen before. He approached the ball from the side, clipping it with his right instep and swinging his right leg across his left.

His kicks were low and inaccurate, not even end over end. The coach forgot about Pete as a potential point maker. But Pete couldn't forget placekicking.

"I had a feeling," he says, "this was something I'd be able to do well."

Using a kicking tee, he practiced for hours in a cow pasture. Later on, brother Charlie began to practice with him, employing the same style. (Charlie became a standout kicker at Princeton, this year will kick for the Washington Redskins.) Before the first season ended, Peter was kicking Ogdensburg's extra points.

Two seasons were all Pete had. He was able to make up the year he'd lost in ninth grade by finishing high school in two years. In fact, Gogolak did so well he was awarded a scholarship to Cornell. His parents were delighted.



Football à Gogo: Brothers Gogolak, Pete (top), Charlie (bottom) do some European style kicking of an American football.

At Cornell, Gogolak booted 54 out of 55 extra points in three years and, although college teams are not field goal minded, also sent a number of three-pointers over the crossbar.

Gogolak feels it was at Cornell that he really broke through into the mainstream of American life.

"I was invited to join one of the top fraternities," he notes, "and it really opened me up as a person. I learned how to move easily in social situations. I got so I could kid around and express my thoughts without groping for words."

Fraternity brother Buck Penrose, who was a senior when Gogolak was pledged by Delta Upsilon as a freshman, recalls, "Peter was pretty sharp the day he walked in there. We invited about 20 girls from another school in for a party with our pledges, and I remember Pete sorting his way through those girls until he found one he wanted to pair off with."

In pro football, an accurate placekicker is coveted, especially if he's successful from 40 or more yards out, as Gogolak is. Yet no N.F.L. team saw much promise in Cornell's unorthodox kicker. But Buffalo of the A.F.L. did.

HEEDS FATHER'S ADVICE

Gogolak signed with Buffalo, forewarned by his father that an athlete may sock away some money as a pro but had better remember that a faded star is soon forgotten. Gogolak is continuing his studies at Cornell in the off season (his draft deferment is based on this) to prepare for a career in hotel administration.

He beat out several other aspiring kickers at Buffalo. In 1964, he kicked 35 of 36 extra points and 19 of 28 field goals; in 1965 it was 35 of 35 points-after and 28 three-pointers.

All last season, Gogolak was doing something else classically American: lining up a better deal. He was "playing out his option" to leave him free to sign with any team he wished. The Giants promised fame and fortune. They needed a kicker like Gogolak badly. Gogolak went a step further and hired top agent Fred Corcoran, who got him a three-year contract at a reported $32,000 a year.

"He's going to change our strategy a lot," comments coach Allie Sherman. "Knowing we have his three points on the bench, we won't have to try desperately for long touchdown plays."

Right now, Peter and Charlie Gogolak are the only kickers using the soccer style. Generations of American boys have been taught only the straight, blunt-toe method. But as the fame of the Gogolaks spreads, the soccer kick is going to be seen more and more.

Gogolak has it all now. With Hungary an ever-dimmer memory, he says:

"This country has done some unbelievable things for me. I've worked hard, but I feel very fortunate. I don't feel like a Hungarian who came over here anymore. I really feel like an American."