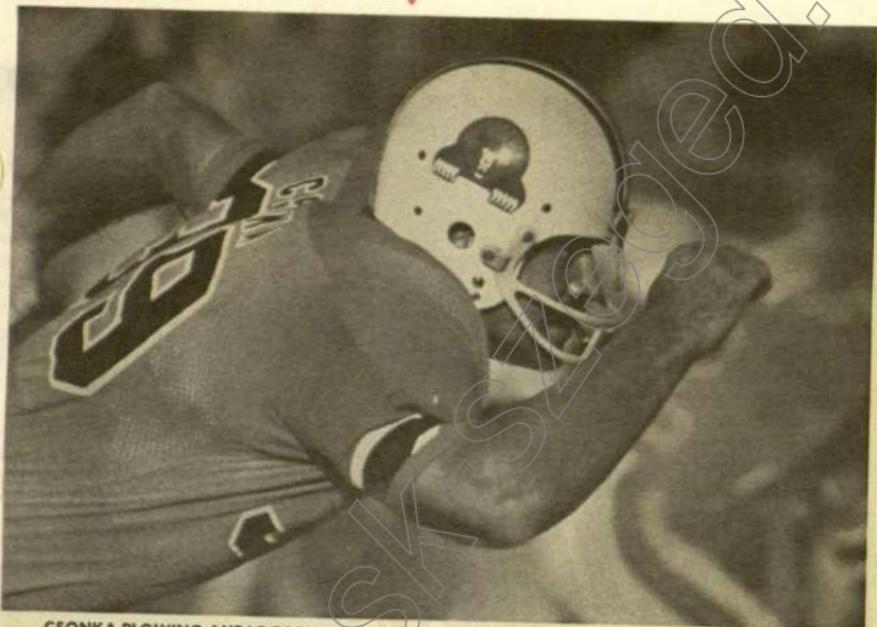
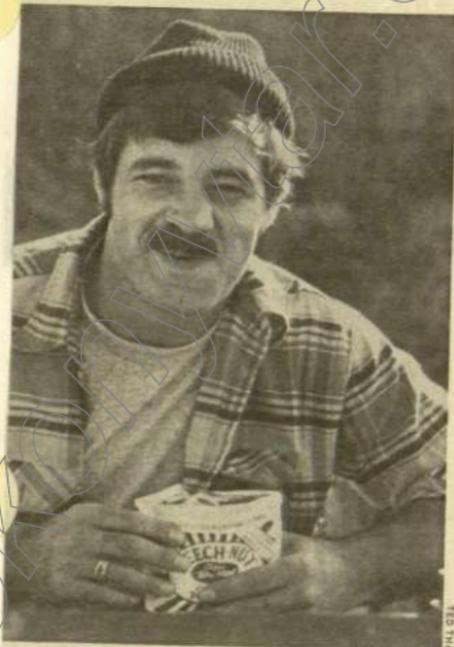


CSONKA, Larry

1975



CSONKA PLOWING AHEAD FOR MEMPHIS GRIZZLIES BEFORE COLLAPSE OF W.F.L.



CHAWING TOBACCO AT HIS OHIO FARM

## Csonked-Out

Jamming a chaw of Beech-Nut tobacco into his cheek, Larry Csonka jumped into a blue Chevrolet pickup truck and, with his older brother Joe at the wheel, bounced down a deeply rutted, brown dirt road to get a close look at 80 acres of Ohio potato and corn fields up for rent. "It's real good land," Joe said as they surveyed the rolling countryside in the fresh fall air. "It's got good drainage and you can see the good crop growing here." Larry nodded. "We can use the land," he said. "Let's take it." Before climbing back into the truck, he knelt down and poked at the loamy soil, picking up a 3-to-4-lb. potato that had been missed by the pickers.

Digging into eastern Ohio dirt was not exactly what professional football's best fullback expected to be doing this fall. He was set for his first season with the Memphis Grizzlies of the World Football League, a team he joined along with two of his ex-Miami Dolphin teammates, Running Back Jim Kiick and

Wide Receiver Paul Warfield. The bait that lured the 6-ft. 3-in., 240-lb. Csonka from the established National Football League and his \$60,000 contract: a \$500,000 cash bonus and \$325,000 a year for three years in bank-guaranteed salary. His job was just as big: to help give the new league star-studded credibility.

**Cinderella Industry.** Instead of leading the wobbly W.F.L. to prosperity, though, Larry Csonka had watched the starveling league die midway through its second season. Along with more than 350 other players, he had become a victim of the '70s retrenchment in sport. After a roaring decade of unprecedented growth, professional sport in some ways looks like a Cinderella industry heading toward midnight. Of the 23 teams in the American Basketball Association and World Hockey Association, only one is in the black. "There's no question about it," says Attorney Bob Woolf, who has negotiated hundreds of contracts, "the pendulum is swinging back. We're in a period of contraction."

So last week Larry Csonka, 28, was back at his 400-acre farm retreat in Lisbon, Ohio, preparing to settle in with his wife and two sons for his first fall in 17 years without football. "When my kids register for school here," he told TIME's Jay Rosenstein, "their father's occupation will be listed either as 'unemployed' or 'who knows?'"

Unlike most of the other W.F.L. players sidelined by the league's sudden death, Csonka at first had hopes that he might actually profit from it. Encouraged by his agent Ed Keating, Csonka thought for two days that he would be available for open bidding by N.F.L. teams. "I believe lightning has struck twice," said Keating as he arrived in Memphis the day the W.F.L. folded. "Larry is free to negotiate a deal with the Dolphins or another N.F.L. club and still draw his guaranteed salary from

Memphis." No way, announced Grizzlie Owner John Bassett. "Csonka is with me as long as I pay him."

Before starting talks with N.F.L. clubs, Csonka decided to lug his stuff home. He hooked a U-Haul trailer to his silver Cadillac Seville and crammed in his quadraphonic stereo system, clothes, and 700 lbs. of weights. With Keating aboard for talk, he drove the 746 miles from Memphis to Lisbon (pop. 4,000) in 15 grueling hours, stopping only for gas and a quick breakfast of orange juice, doughnuts and weak coffee. They arrived exhausted, but Keating immediately began telephoning N.F.L. teams from the farm. Within hours, the two headed for New York City to talk business with Andy Robustelli of the New York Giants and Joe Thomas of the Baltimore Colts, and to appear on television shows at ABC and CBS. "Larry's hot right now," Keating crowed.

By the time they reached Cleveland-Hopkins International Airport on their way east, Csonka was a good deal cooler. He and Keating learned that N.F.L. Commissioner Pete Rozelle had ruled against any W.F.L. player's joining the N.F.L. this season. His reason: Bassett had threatened an antitrust suit against the N.F.L. if the league tried to sign his men. Csonka the realist shrugged his massive shoulders. "Let's face it," he said. "We had a power play going. Now I have to start thinking about next year."



**Restraining Order.** That thinking began early the next morning in Manhattan, when Keating dialed Dolphin Coach Don Shula at his home in Miami and asked: "Do we talk about next year?" Cautious, Shula told him to wait for the legal issues to be settled. "It's pretty sad," sighed Keating. "They've taken the wind out of our sails." Said a weary Csonka bluntly: "It must be nice to be in a position to make the laws. Let's go ahead and take a double tax write-off on our tractors." With all meetings canceled, Csonka and Keating appeared on TV and returned to Ohio.

Csonka must now wait for the situation to clear. Last week, a federal judge issued a temporary restraining order allowing nine W.F.L. players to negotiate with N.F.L. clubs about playing this year. The judge will hear arguments this week about extending the order to other W.F.L. players. However he rules, Csonka's future hinges on Bassett's efforts to gain an N.F.L. franchise for his Memphis club, which has 30 players under contract. If he succeeds, Csonka can look ahead to playing with the Grizzlies next year. If Bassett fails, Csonka will have to buy his release before he can play football elsewhere. Meanwhile, the tractor calls. Corn has to be harvested and a score of purebred Black Angus cattle need attention. As for those 80 good acres of rentable farm land, Csonka's football experience came in handy. He instructed his lawyer to draw up a five-year contract with a yearly option to renew.

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