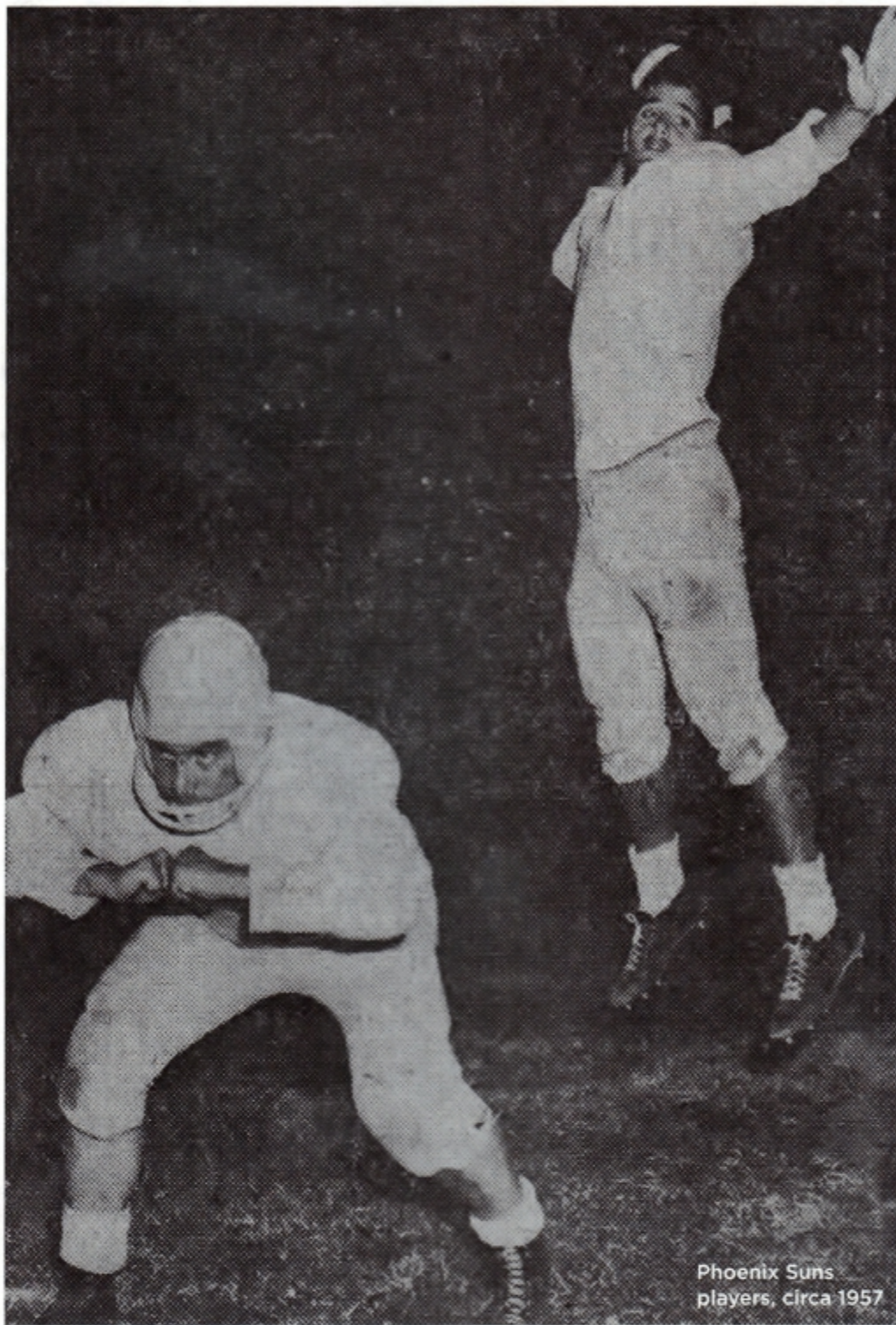


Sol Survivors

The original Phoenix Suns were barnstorming semi-pro footballers who enjoyed success on the gridiron and abject failure away from it.



Phoenix Suns players, circa 1957

of former collegiate players and aging has-beens hungry for one last taste of gridiron glory. Relative to their pampered basketball counterparts, these Suns were paupers – originally promised \$100 per game, the players settled for \$25 and were sometimes stiffed altogether. Twice evicted from Valley athletic facilities for non-payment of rent, the team was so poorly funded it once had to borrow helmets and shoulder pads. Despite all this, the Suns were a tough opponent on the field, gutting it out in the days before TV deals and multi-million-dollar contracts.

The catalyst behind the Phoenix Suns and the Western Professional Football League was Edward B. “Chink” Coleman, who played football for the legendary Knute Rockne at Notre Dame. As a head coach, he led Phoenix’s St. Mary’s Catholic High School to state football titles in 1949 and 1951. Coleman was an energetic showman who “always seemed to be long on dreams and short on money,” noted a 1981 *Arizona Republic* article.

After leaving St. Mary’s, Coleman bur-nished his football reputation by organizing a charity scrimmage in Phoenix called the Goulash Bowl. Featuring former Arizona collegiate players, the game was a great success, raising \$8,000 to benefit freedom fighters in Hungary who were revolting against Soviet occupation. Each named after the Hungarian capital city, the Phoenix Pests defeated the Tucson Budas, 19-0, before 7,000 fans on December 29, 1956.

Coleman launched the Western Professional Football League in the spring of 1957 and became its president as well as the owner and head coach of the Suns. There were hopes for franchises in Seattle, San Pedro, Orange County, Las Vegas, Albuquerque, Lubbock, and Amarillo, but ultimately only the Tucson Cowboys and El Paso Ramblers joined Phoenix and San Francisco as official league members.

By August, the Suns were ready to tackle a hulking, 18-game schedule that included non-league contests against military squads and other semi-professional teams. The 38-man Suns roster was composed primarily of ASU alumni including local football legend Wilford “Whizzer” White, whom the team lured out of retirement to become an assistant coach and part-time player. The addition of White, who had been a star running back for the Chicago Bears until a knee inju-

RABID BASKETBALL FANS inhabiting Planet Orange are often surprised to learn the first Phoenix Suns game started with a kickoff – not a tipoff – and occurred more than a decade before the NBA team made its 1968 debut. In this

bizarre-but-true alternate Suns universe, the team kicked field goals instead of shooting them, and the only dunks they saw involved bear claws and cups of coffee.

The pigskin Suns played in the Western Professional Football League, a late 1950s semi-pro sports league consisting mostly

ry forced him to hang up his cleats in 1952, provided instant credibility to the team.

From the beginning, it was a season fraught with off-the-field mishaps. The Suns home field was the old Phoenix Municipal Stadium in south Phoenix. However, several games into the season, Coleman was unable to pay the stadium rent, and the team was evicted. They played once at Jack-rabbit Stadium in Mesa before relocating to Montgomery Stadium in Phoenix.

Despite the logistical chaos, the Suns performed well on the field thanks to White's impressive running, receiving and kicking. After losing their WPFL opener 12-7 to the San Francisco Windbreakers before 900 Bay Area fans at Kezar Stadium on September 15, 1957, the Suns went on a three-game win streak by shellacking teams from Fort Huachuca, Arizona; Venice, California; and San Francisco. Attendance was mediocre until arch-rival Tucson came to town with a team featuring many former NFL and Canadian Football League players. A crowd of 6,500 watched as the teams battled to a 7-7 tie thanks to a late game interception return for a touchdown by the Suns.

Based on their 5-2-1 record and impressive 234 to 43 overall scoring margin, the Suns were invited to the inaugural Lettuce Bowl in Salinas, California. However, the hometown

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Salinas Packers would prove to be the least of their worries. Before the players could depart for California, their football equipment was impounded in Phoenix because of a lawsuit filed by their former publicity manager for nonpayment of a \$2,100 printing bill. Coleman unceremoniously canceled the Suns' bowl appearance, prompting panicked Lettuce Bowl officials to reach out to White. Impressed that the Packers sold 4,000 tickets for the game, the former NFLer agreed to lead a contingent of Suns players to California. Only a portion of the Suns squad made the hastily arranged, late-night trip, boarding an overloaded airplane that required four refueling

stops en route. Arriving an hour before kick-off, the players suited up using equipment loaned by the Fresno State College team. Wearing ill-fitting uniforms and shoes, the sleepy Suns barely made it on to the field in time for the national anthem and suffered a humbling 32-0 loss.

Roiled by locker room dissension stemming from Coleman's management of the club, the Suns returned home to lose again (47-6) to eventual league champions Tucson. The game was moved to the Old Pueblo because of the team's stadium problems. The Suns and the league disbanded soon afterwards.

Despite their short-lived fame and drama, the team left an indelible mark on Phoenix. The team name resurfaced eleven years later when Phoenix landed its NBA franchise. Coleman, who shrewdly had copyrighted the "Suns" name, received an out-of-court settlement for its use, according to the 1981 *Arizona Republic* article. One of the NBA's most successful and prosperous franchises is thus forever linked to their football antecedents, an endearing group of unheralded players that at times resembled a traveling circus but who managed one autumn to bring excitement to Phoenix on a shoestring budget.

— Douglas Towne