

# Brian Franco:

*USFL provided chance to show talent, perseverance*

**By Jim Lane**

Brian Franco's first experience with pro football was not a good one. He was signed by the NFL Philadelphia Eagles, then cut without being given a chance to show what he could do in an exhibition game.

Franco, who had a successful career at Penn State after kicking only one year at Altoona High, wanted a chance to prove he could kick in the pros. He felt he was denied by the Eagles.

When USFL teams went to camp, the Philadelphia Stars invited Franco. Even though he felt he did well, Franco was cut in favor of David Trout, who kicked the previous season with NFL Pittsburgh Steelers.

Denied Again.

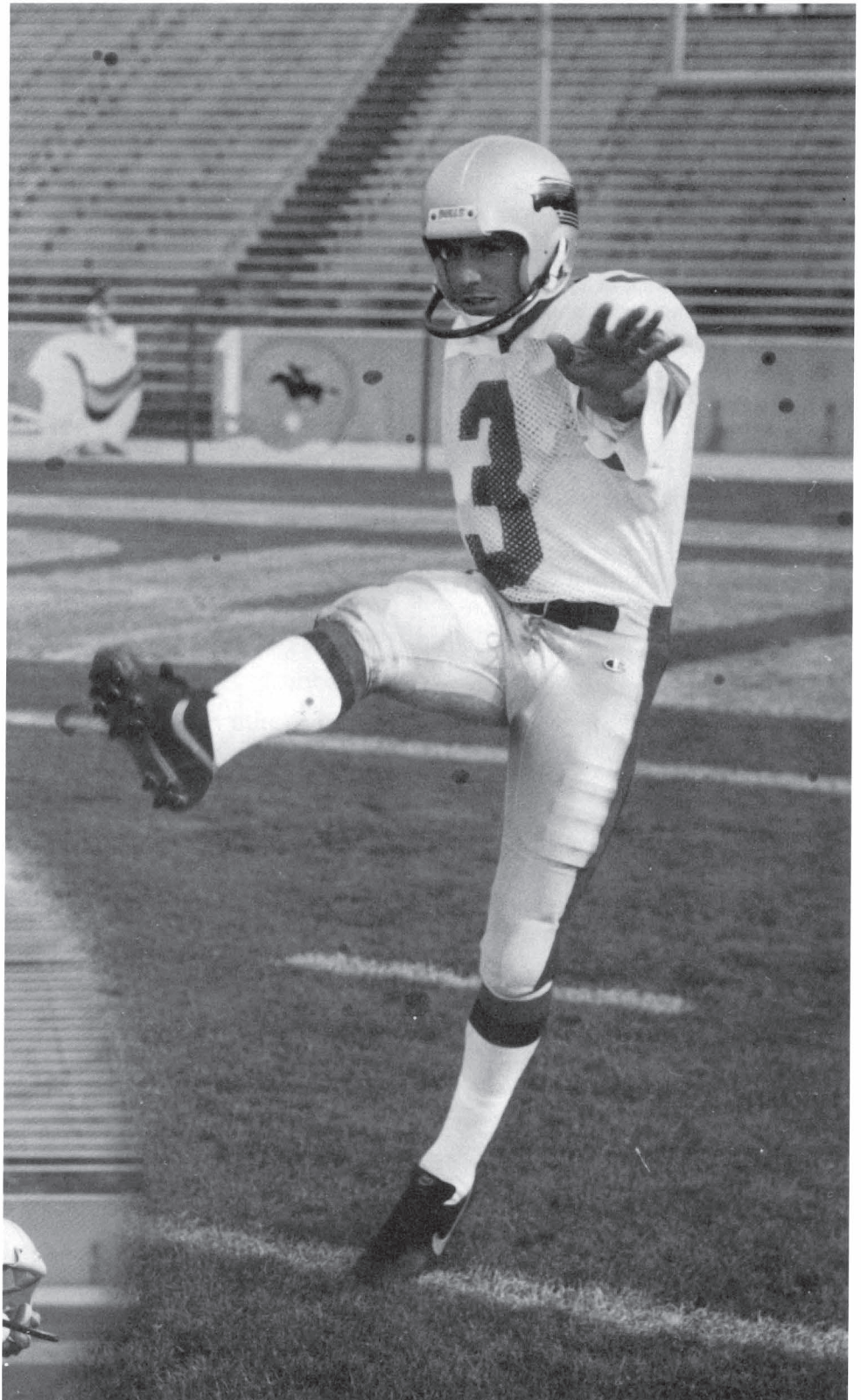
Two years ago, Buddy Geis, then a recently-signed assistant coach with the USFL Jacksonville Bulls, stopped off to visit some relatives in Altoona and gave Franco a tryout. Geis was impressed enough that he got Franco a contract with Jacksonville.

That led to another disappointment. The Bulls opted for Florida-born kicker Danny Miller and Franco was cut again.

He didn't have to wait long for another chance. Miller failed miserably early in the season and the Bulls put out an SOS for Franco.

It proved to be a good decision. Franco finished the 1984 season strong and entered the 1985 USFL season optimistically, knowing he was the Bulls' placekicker.

Although the Bulls' 1985 season was somewhat disappointing — they just missed making the playoffs — it was far from a "downer" for Franco. He did so well, in fact, that he was named the club's most valuable player.



*Brian was the Jacksonville Bulls' most valuable player in 1985, when he was one of the top kickers in the now defunct USFL.*



"Getting the MVP was a nice surprise. I expected to get an offensive award, but the MVP is kind of special," Franco said.

Members of the press joined with Jacksonville coaches to make the selection and the award was donated by the Northeast Florida Builders Association.

No one can deny Franco the MVP credentials.

He was fourth in the Eastern Conference (the top kicker) in scoring with 117 points. He booted 24 of 29 field goals and was perfect on all 45 extra-point attempts. Franco's field goal percentage was second only to Tony Fritsch of Houston, who hit 21 of 24, and he was the only kicker in the league who didn't miss an extra-point attempt.

Franco put his name in the Jacksonville record book twice. He kicked a club-record five field goals in the season opener against Baltimore and tied the club mark with 13 consecutive field goals.

"In the next to last game against Memphis, I was going for a new record (14) and shanked a short one – literally shanked it," Franco said.

Franco's contract includes bonuses for performance. One of the bonuses was for 25 field goals. He kicked 24. The Bulls' walloped Denver 42-6 in their finale and Franco kicked six extra points but no field goals.

"Just before the half was over I missed a short one – actually it was blocked – and I said to myself

## Brian Franco



**Age:** 36.

**Sport:** Football.

**High School:** Altoona Area.

**College:** Penn State.

**Hall of Fame achievement:**

*Most valuable player for the Jacksonville Bulls of the United States Football League in 1985. As Penn State's placekicker in 1980, he made 15 of 21 attempts, including 5-of-5 in a 30-24 victory at Nebraska.*

**Current occupation:**

*Contractor.*

**Current residence:** *Atlantic Beach, Fla.*

"someone doesn't want me to get this money," he said, smiling.

Franco said that the Bulls were driving late in the game but decided to let the clock run out, instead of giving him a field goal try from the 30.

"Some of the players were upset and I was disappointed but Lindy (Coach Lindy Infante) came up and said it's not his style to run up the score. He's been on the other side of the defense and I respected his decision. However, I got a nice surprise. Fred Bullard (the Bulls' owner) gave me the bonus anyhow," Franco said.

Some of the glitter of Franco's outstanding season was taken away by the Bulls' failure to make the playoffs.

After the playoffs, the USFL will discontinue play until the fall of 1986, when it plans to go ahead with the NFL. That means more than a year layoff and that could create some problems.

"A lot of teams are firing players and coaches because of the year's layoff," said Franco, who noted that Geis and other Jacksonville assistant coaches have been dumped.

During the off-season, Franco rebuilt his father's bar, "The Whistle Stop" in Juniata. After football, he plans to take advantage of those talents.

"I'm not in any great need to play football 12 months a year. I got my knee banged up a little, so I'm going to take it easy. It would be tough to go through a pre-season camp again. Besides, I don't have to prove myself again."

*(This story was written in 1985).*

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