

Football

# New flag football league brings out former NFL stars

By JOSH DUBOW  
AP Sports Writer

SAN JOSE, Calif. — Terrell Owens and Chad Johnson ran pass patterns with big smiles on their faces visible throughout the stadium.

Michael Vick was flinging touchdown passes the way he did in his peak as an NFL star.

Instead of an old-timers day, this was more of a throwback night with those three former stars headlining lineups with several former NFL players for the debut event of the American Flag Football League in hopes of showing that this sport played mostly by kids could have a future as a professional league.

"I've played flag football since I was a kid," Johnson said. "The only difference about playing here and playing other places, here was much faster because the level of talent. Obviously everyone has played before. It was extremely fast."

The American Flag Football League played the game Tuesday in San Jose in advance of plans by founder Jeff Lewis to launch a spring league in 2018. In front of a crowd of several hundred people, Team Vick prevailed over Team Owens 64-41 behind Vick's eight TD passes and 547 yards passing.

"It's something different," said Vick, who



Team Owens' Terrell Owens, left, carries the ball after a catch during a flag football exhibition game Tuesday, June 27, 2017, in San Jose, Calif.

was attracted to the sport by watching his daughter play flag football. "My playing days are over but I can play now and not get hit, not get tackled. I think that's pretty cool."

The game featured other notable former NFL players such as Justin Forsett, Kerry Rhodes, Steve Smith and Nick Collins; lesser-known players looking for a break such as game MVP Evan Rodriguez who is hoping NFL teams might give him another look after his nine catches for 210 yards and four TDs; and former Cornell lacrosse player

Max Seibald, who was the top collegiate player in the country in 2009.

"I think it definitely would help the league to have some guys with household names," Owens said. "But this game is purely made from speed. Just like any other game, there's a lot of skill involved."

Lewis knows marquee names will draw fans in initially. But Lewis wants most of the teams to be filled from a pool of scores of younger players who have been recently cut or never made NFL rosters rather than out-of-shape

old-timers.

"You could trot 45 and 50-year-old football players out and it would be nice to see people you remember but it's not going to be great," Lewis said. "We want it to really be compellingly high quality. The players who played who have played previously are going to be playing because they're world-class athletes."

Lewis got the idea to start this league a few years ago while watching his son play flag football and wondered what it would be like with elite athletes instead of 8 or 9-year olds. He views flag

football, which is played by more than 2 million kids each year as taking the game of football with the speed and relatability to the players that exist in sports such as soccer and basketball, where players aren't hidden by helmets.

The league plans to play up the interaction with fans by having players use social media during games and not penalizing over-the-top celebrations, which appealed to players such as Johnson.

"The atmosphere was really dope," Johnson said. "Being able to interact with the fans, being able to have your phone on the sidelines, being able to tweet while the game is going on, which I got fined for before, it's dope. I really think this is going to hit the ground, hit the ground running and be extremely big at some point."

Making it look like football and not some gimmick was paramount for Lewis. Except for a few wrinkles such as the center being an eligible receiver which led to former Pittsburgh quarterback Dennis Dixon catching a 60-yard TD from Vick on a wheel route after snapping the ball, it looked like seven-on-seven football.

The rules of the game are fairly simple. Teams get a first down by crossing either 25-yard line or midfield. No blocking or kicking is allowed, with a "throw

off" to start each half and following scores — with losers walking to the other side after touchdowns.

Teams are allowed one lateral per play, there are no "north-south" handoffs and fumbles are dead at the spot. Touchdowns are worth six points, with a one-point bonus for plays longer than 50 yards, and teams are allowed to go for one, two or three points after TDs depending on where they line up.

Teams can't rush the quarterback for two seconds after the snap and the QB must get rid of the ball within four seconds. The quarterback can't run unless he is rushed and teams get three blitzes per quarter.

Lewis believes the simplicity and safety of the game compared to tackle football could make it more marketable in foreign countries where American football hasn't taken hold and he believes the sport also has a bright future as a potential Division I college sport for women.

While concussions are a major concern for tackle football, Lewis knows selling only safety won't help draw in fans.

"This is an entertainment product," he said. "We want them to watch it because it's compelling. They're not going to watch it because it's safe. They're going to watch it because it's fun and these guys are great."

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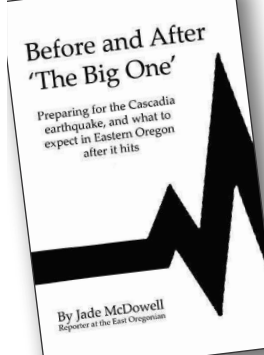
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