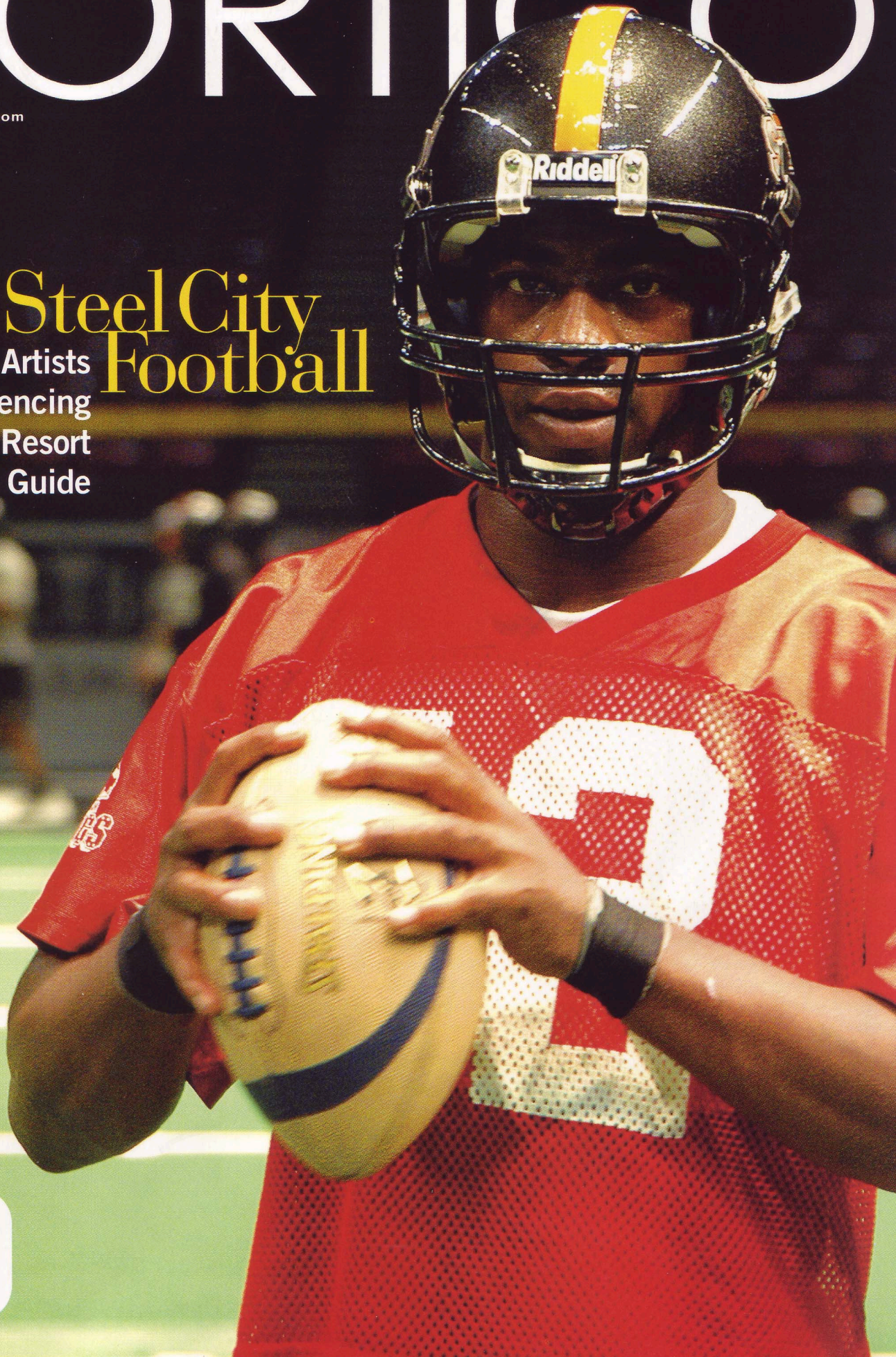


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GOING TO THE DOGS

Birmingham's semi-pro football players
struggle to keep the dream alive.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH
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Approximately one percent of all college football players are drafted by an NFL team each year, and an even smaller percentage sign on to a team as free agents after the draft. But many, many more believe they have the skill, discipline, and desire to make it in professional football but never get the shot. For those players who really don't know the meaning of the word "quit," for those who just can't stand to see the dream die, for the truly dedicated who hold on to the belief that their shot is just around the corner, there is always semi-pro football.

But semi-pro ball is no fast track to the NFL either, and is often more brutal and chaotic for a young football player trying to move up than for similar athletes hanging around in minor league baseball or hockey, for instance. Semi-pro football players receive very little pay, if any at all, often find themselves paying for their own travel and uniforms and bounce around from city to city as old teams fold and new ones emerge.

Currently in Birmingham, there are two ways to move up the semi-pro football food chain. Play for the Central Alabama Bulldogs, Birmingham's only outdoor semi-pro football team in the Southeast Football League, or make it onto the Birmingham Steeldogs roster of the Arena 2 League. Either way, if your ultimate goal is NFL football, then you're swimming upstream.

The Birmingham Steeldogs

If you're a football player and you want to earn a paycheck playing in Birmingham, you're only choice right now is with the Birmingham Steeldogs. The Steeldogs just finished their fifth season in the Arena2 Football League—a more minor-league version of the Arena Football League—making the indoor franchise the longest running professional football team in Birmingham history.

And, while the players can continue to develop their skills and get a chance, however minute, to advance their

careers, they aren't earning much money at all. Each player earns \$250 for each win, \$200 for a loss. In a 16-game regular season, the most a player can earn is \$4,000, a fact that is not lost on Steeldogs play-by-play and director of marketing and promotions Michael Bencs.

"Yes, we are professional in that we have a very good league backing and good league structure, but at the same time, our players aren't making hundreds of thousands of dollars," Bencs says. "This isn't their only source of income, but, rather, this is something that they fit into their regular, every day lives."

"I have such respect for our players and our athletes, because they're putting in their 30-40-hour work weeks just like every other citizen, and, on top of that, they're coming off of work, getting over here and giving Bobby Humphries two to three hours every night," Bencs adds.

One of those guys giving everything and then some is quarterback Kenton Evans. Toward the end of the season, you could find him deep in the bowels of the Birmingham Jefferson Convention Complex, getting treatment on a knee injury suffered years earlier. At the time of his injury, Evans was leading the league in passing, something of a milestone for the Tennessee native, who has become a football vagabond since graduating from the University of Memphis.

Over the last three years, Evans has played for seven teams, including stops in Nashville, Memphis, Mobile, and now Birmingham. Evans says bouncing around from town to town is a

"It's frustrating at times, but when you have a passion about playing and you want to get to a certain level, you do whatever it takes."

grueling experience, but one he is willing to endure in order to fulfill his dream of playing NFL football.

"It's frustrating at times, but when you have a passion about playing and you want to get to a certain level, you do whatever it takes and travel around to different cities, and, when you have to pay for it yourself, it can be difficult. It's been a long struggle," Davis admits.

"Twelve months from now I hope to at least be in an NFL camp. That's my ultimate goal. I love football with a passion. I've just about given my left knee for it," Davis adds. "There is nothing that I would rather do. If I can't play, than I'd like to be coaching and staying around the game some way."

Still, the pragmatic Evans knows his time is running out. He has a job as a high school teacher waiting on him in Nashville when he decides to finally hang up his cleats. But, for now, he intends to suit up until he has to be carried off in pieces.



Comparisons between Steeldogs and Bulldogs

Salary

STEELDOGS - \$250 for each win; \$200 for each loss
BULLDOGS - None

Home Field

STEELDOGS - BJCC Arena
BULLDOGS - Local high school stadiums (Currently playing at Litchfield High School in Gadsden and possibly Huffman High School).

Travel

STEELDOGS - Charter buses for shorter trips. Team may fly once or twice each season.
BULLDOGS - Charter buses for longer trip with players often paying for costs themselves. Players drive their own vehicles for shorter trips.

Attendance

STEELDOGS - 6,000 - 7,000 is not uncommon. The Steeldogs played in front of more than 10,000 fans in a home game against Tennessee Valley in July 2004.
BULLDOGS - 300 fans is about average in the Southern Football League. The Bulldogs played in front of 1,500 in an away game against the South Georgia Stars in 2004.

Affiliated League

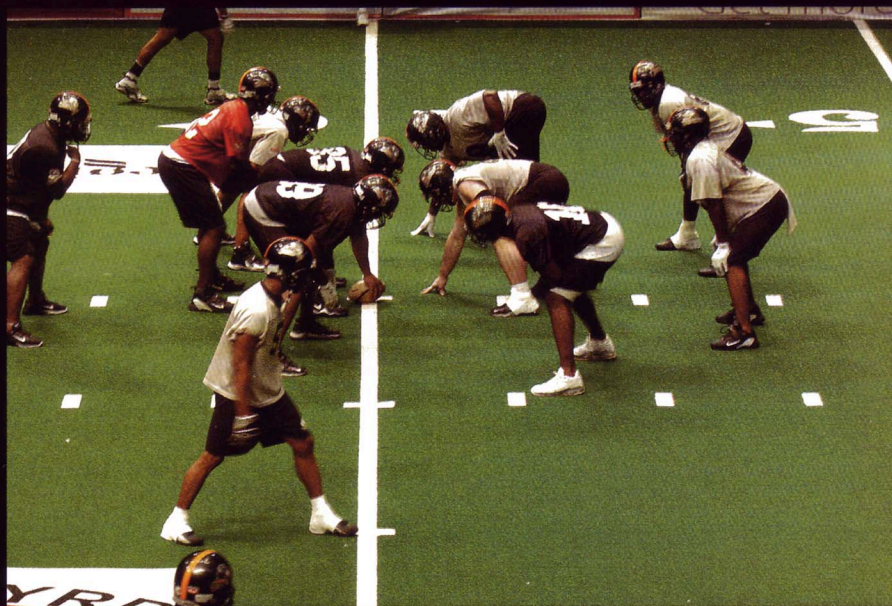
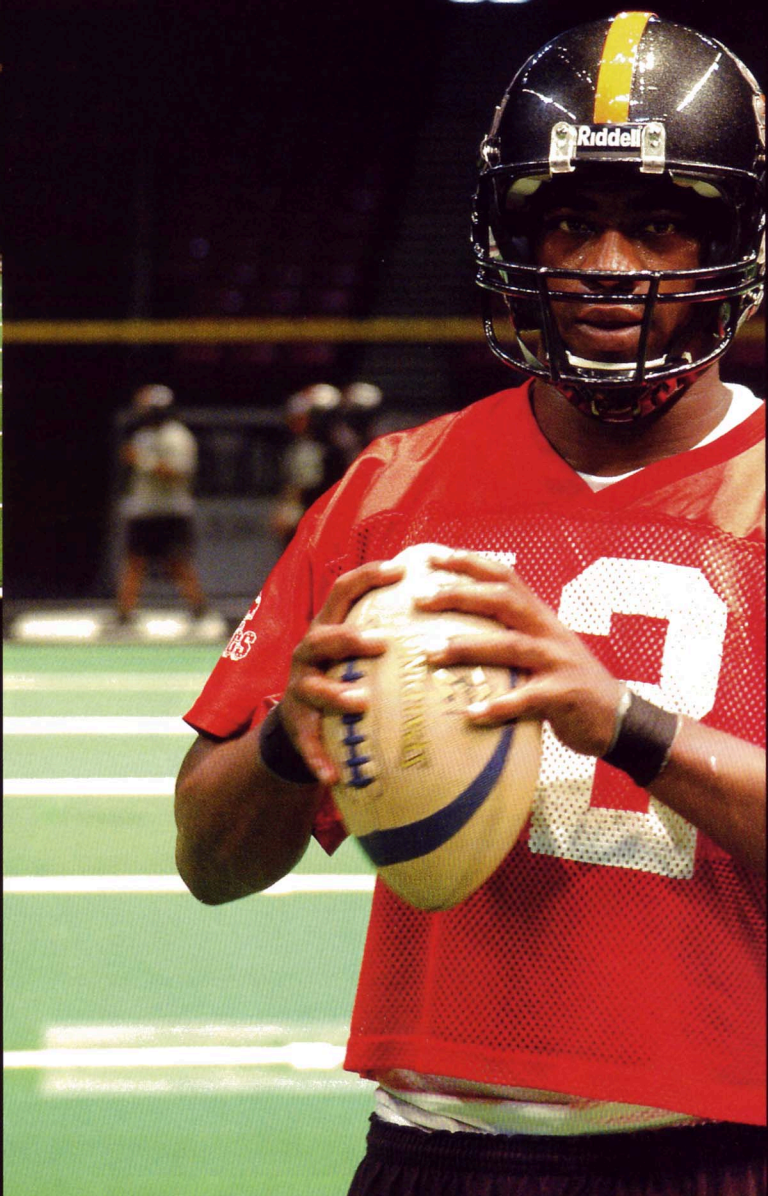
STEELDOGS - Arena2 Football League. Affiliated with Arena Football League that has a loose but positive relationship with NFL. Some NFL teams also own AFL teams.
BULLDOGS - Southern Football League. Affiliated with Eastern Football Alliance which is a loose conglomeration of leagues from New York to Florida.

Number of Teams in League

STEELDOGS - 25
BULLDOGS - 8

Local Broadcasts

STEELDOGS - Games broadcast locally on WAPI AM 1070 and WJOX AM 690.
BULLDOGS - None





The Central Alabama Bulldogs waiting for their referees to arrive.



"I'll be 27 in November and I want to try this as long as I can, but at some point I do want to have a family and settle down and come home to a wife and kids," Davis said. "I love football so much and I'm after a goal that I don't think you should put a time limit on. But, at some point I may have to come to the realization that this might not come true, that I might just have to move on and try something else."

Central Alabama Bulldogs

Across town, a group of guys meets every Monday and Thursday night for football practice at the Northeast YMCA in Roebuck. Practice is supposed to start at 7 p.m. on the multi-use field that normally hosts youth sports and youth camps during the summer. However, it's not uncommon for most of the players on the Central Alabama Diamondbacks—a first-year semi-pro team in the Southern Football League—to show up 20 to 30 minutes late. Even the two-member coaching staff has a hard time being punctual to practice as they drive from all over Birmingham and beyond once the workday ends.

"This is the one thing I've had to get used to in semi-pro ball," assistant coach and former team owner Joey Hurst said. "You do have to let their family and work come first because that's what pays their rent. You'll have your set of about 15-20 guys who won't miss a practice. Then you'll have the 30 or so who may make one a week."

The Bulldogs roster is made up mainly of guys who played on a team called the Birmingham Diamondbacks over the last two seasons. That team folded earlier this year and Hurst and head coach Alexander Boone scrambled to form a new team. Hurst eventually turned over ownership duties to Boone, who now owns the team outright.

Hurst said teams coming and going is a common problem in independent minor league football, even though the league itself has managed to remain fairly stable. The league currently stands at eight teams, seven of which were not members in 2003. Financial problems, poor community support and owner mismanagement are the main reasons why teams fail. Hurst says some teams have owners who understand how to market their team to the community. The ones who don't find it hard to survive.

"You have some owners who will get out and sell the team to the community. The best I've seen is with the Middle Georgia team. When we went to their place they had cheerleaders, a band, and a dance line and, I guess, about 1,500 fans," Hurst said. "With us, last year, if we got 300 we were lucky. Some away games no one would know the game went on if the players hadn't been there to play it."

Boone, a former All-American at Alabama A&M and current head volleyball coach at Ensley High School, has bounced around minor league football as a player and a coach for 15 years. Despite all of his other responsibilities as a high school coach, father, and husband, his passion for football help keeps minor league football alive in Birmingham.

"If it hadn't become my team, it would have just been totally destroyed and gone. To this point, I'm the sole person coaching both sides of the ball, the kickoff team, the kick return, and I do all of the administrative work," Boone says.

The Central Alabama Bulldogs practice twice a week at the YMCA, but, as of late August, were still rushing to find a field to play their home games, even after the season had already started. For right now, the Bulldogs will play some games at Litchfield High School in Gadsden, but may also play at Huffman High School or at Fair Park on Birmingham's west end.

"Teams that stay have the most money. If you have a financial person backing you, you can be around for a long time. If you don't, you go in the hole and you can't afford to travel. Travel and field expenses are the most expensive things to pay for. If you can't do that, you won't be around long at all," Boone says.

Despite the setbacks involved with actually fielding a team, the Bulldogs have a deep roster with players from all walks of life. Some have played college ball and even a little professional football. Others only have high school experience. Most are from the area and either play this brand of football for the love of the game, such as Roland Sturtsis, a 40-year-old who played football at Phillips High School but didn't play full-contact football again until he was 35.

Sturtsis tried out for the Steeldogs prior to the team's inaugural season, but was cut, landing with the Diamondbacks and then the Bulldogs. With his large frame and wild, braided beard, Sturtsis commands respect on and off the field. His cool demeanor but intense attitude makes him something of an assistant coach. At this point, he's undecided about playing next year or not, but intends to stay around the game in some capacity.

"I think after this year I might play next year, then again I might just help coach," Sturtsis said. "My wife complains about my age and tells me I need to sit down, but I don't let it stop me." 🙏

Zachary Miller

On Saturday, August 7, the Central Alabama Bulldogs suffered a tragic loss when team member Zachary Miller was killed in a head-on collision. The 19 year-old was one of the team's youngest members and was a recent graduate of Clay-Chalkville High School where he also played football.

Central Alabama head coach Alexander Boone says Miller was a great kid who was improving all the time as a football player.

"His coaches didn't play him much while he was in high school but he had improved 100 percent since he came out for our team," Boone says. "He was a good kid and we're really going to miss him."

Southern Football League Commissioner Michael Frazier issued a statement on the league website offering his condolences to the family, friends, and teammates of Miller.

"The teams, players, coaches, staff and family of the Southern Football League extend our deepest and heartfelt sympathy to the family, friends, and loved ones of the Miller Family," said Frazier. "Lord, give the friends and loved ones of Zachary the will and comfort to know that God does not make mistakes. Zachary has been drafted by a team more prestigious than the NFL."