



**Asmar Baraka Interview
Cornerback/Punt Returner
Shreveport Steamer 1978-1980**

This was an interview I was really looking forward to and it didn't disappoint. I got connected with Asmar Baraka last month after learning that he spent three seasons in the American Football Association (AFA), a ramshackle minor league football circuit that stretched from West Texas to the Carolinas during the 1970's and early 80's, but that has been largely forgotten in the internet era.

Known as A.T. Banks at the time, the fleet-footed corner came out of Tuskegee University in 1977 and hooked on with the AFA's Shreveport Steamer the following year. The AFA was a true love of the game league – long bus rides, odd jobs during the week, lousy pay (when it arrived at all). But it was scouted by the NFL and Banks was one of several Steamer players to leverage his time in the AFA to land a an invitation to a National Football League training camp.

After his football career ended in 1980, Asmar Baraka moved to Birmingham, Alabama. He still lives there today and remains in touch with several ex-Steamer teammates.

"I've been able to do most of the things I wanted to do in life: take care of my family and travel. If it weren't for the pandemic, I'd probably be in London right now."

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Asmar Baraka spoke to Fun While It Lasted about his adventures in the American Football Association on January 29th, 2021.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

How did you come to get hooked up with the Shreveport Steamer of the American Football Association when you came out of school?

Baraka:

When I came out of Tuskegee [University], I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do. But I continued to work out. I had an agent. Working with him, I ended up with the Shreveport Steamer. And from Shreveport, I got to [training camp] with Kansas City.

In 1976, I attended a Tampa Bay Buccaneers game. Tuskegee had played Florida A&M the day before at Tampa Stadium. A friend of mine, **Parnell Dickinson**, was a quarterback for Tampa Bay, so we went to the Bucs game the next day. Tampa Bay was playing the Kansas City Chiefs. There were some scouts there and my name got drawn into the mix some kind of way, I don't know how.

Two years later I was in Kansas City. Actually, I signed with Kansas City twice. In '78 and '79. In 1979, I was their last cut. The Buffalo Bills were interested but I didn't want to go to Buffalo because I didn't want to go through the same thing I went through in Kansas City.

So ultimately I went back to Shreveport. All I wanted to do was play ball. Money wasn't on my mind or anything. Back then, there wasn't a whole lot of money anyway. An undrafted free agent got something like \$22,500. About half the players in the [NFL], that's way they were making the first year. So I went back to Shreveport where I knew I could play and I'd had success in '78. I went back and had a pretty good season.

FWiL:

Were there guys on the Steamer that you are convinced should have been playing in the NFL, but were just overlooked? Who were they?

Baraka:

There were several. There was a guy named **Andrew Jackson**. He had played for **Eddie Robinson** down at Grambling. He was probably one of the best offensive guards I've ever seen on any level. He was an athlete. He was good people.

Our free safety was **Derrick Battle** out of Mississippi Valley State. He wasn't the biggest and he wasn't the fastest, but simply the smartest and best free safety in the business. My success at the corner was because Derrick was my safety. And I felt just that: Safe. Safe enough to take chances, and most of them paid off. I knew he had my back on every play.

Rudy Thomas was a running back from Florida State. He was a bad guy – he was tough. He was the last cut from the Pittsburgh Steelers that year. He set all kinds of rushing records in the AFA.

I think I have some records still standings in the AFA too, as far as punt returns. I played strong side corner. I played like a linebacker. I was a shutdown corner and a dangerous punt returner. I ran a 4.2 forty when I was playing ball.

But there were some guys that I played with that I never understood why they didn't make it in The League until I actually went up there and spent time in Kansas City.

One of the people I got a little close to was **Art Still**, who was the Chiefs #1 draft choice in 1978. He pulled me aside one day and gave me a quick schooling. When you get on that next level, man, everything changes. It's so fast. I mean it is so fast. That's why a lot of good college coaches can't make it on the next level.

I think one of my biggest regrets was not going to Buffalo when I had the opportunity to go. They ended up going to four Super Bowls. I probably wouldn't have been there by then even if I had panned out. But there was a Kansas City-Buffalo connection because [Chiefs Head Coach] Marv Levy and I got kind of close in Kansas City and he ended up taking Buffalo to those four Super Bowls. But hindsight is all 20/20.

FWiL:

What were the day-to-day living and working conditions like in the AFA? How did you find a place to live? Did you need to work during the week? Did the team help you find jobs in town?

Baraka:

Yeah, we worked. After being in the league for a while I realized that we had it a little better in Shreveport than a lot of the teams did.

When I stepped off the plane in Shreveport, I immediately had a place to stay. We played in State Fair Stadium and right adjacent to the stadium was a little run down hotel called the Jo-Dan Motel. The guys that didn't already live in Shreveport – that's where we stayed. Two guys to a room. That's where I stayed until I got myself an apartment.

The pay wasn't good. You know that. I think the most I ever made for one game was like \$200. We didn't get the guaranteed contracts and getting a percentage of the gate never really panned out. You couldn't put any trust in anything that was happening.

We came to the realization that we weren't going to make any money unless you were one of the ones that was blessed to get signed and get out of there. That was the whole premise for most of the guys being there – love of the game and 'I might get a shot'.

But the team did help find jobs. We worked three, maybe four days a week.

FWiL:

What'd you do?

Baraka:

I did several things. My first job, I worked for South Central Bell. My second year, I went to work for **Ed Powell**, the new owner of the team, and I went to work for his auto dealership. That was the first embarrassing situation for me. He hired about three maybe four guys off the team. I was given a janitor's job and I didn't appreciate that. And one day a fan came in and recognized me, right? And we're standing there talking and – it wasn't Ed Powell, it was one of the other supervisors that came by – and he told me to get back to work. And that started a little rift. Because that was very unprofessional and very embarrassing for me.

But we did have jobs. A lot of the guys from that area, their focus was on coaching. Assistant coaching at the high schools. A lot of them, after playing, went to work for the school systems.

FWiL:

We talked a little earlier over email about your experience as a black man playing football in the deep south and coming out of a historically black university and now going into cities like Shreveport and some of the cities where you played on the road, where even the notion of having an integrated team would have been a new concept. What was your experience of the racial dynamics of playing at that time in that place?

Baraka:

I did have several experiences that – it wasn't connected to the sport or the game itself. It was just the fact that I was a black man in this area. You know how it is. Some of the people in stands are cheering and rooting for you and buying tickets to watch you play every week, but once you walk out of the locker room and you're on the street doing your thing, it's a different story.

I remember I had just gotten married in '80, my last season in Shreveport. My wife and I were going into this restaurant that the team always ate at. It was a nice steakhouse right adjacent to the stadium. When we pulled into the parking lot, there was this car and out of the car stepped a Caucasian guy who might have been six foot six tall and he had about a 13-14 year old young man with him and an old man in his 80's, looking kind of decrepit. So you had the father, the son and the grandfather.

The father and son got to the front door before my wife and I, but the grandfather was still in the parking lot taking little bitty steps. The tall guy was holding open the door and my wife and I just walked on through the door. There were double doors and as I went to open the second door for my wife, the tall guys says:

"Mmmm! Walking ahead of white folks now. I should have brought my whip."

Just like that. I heard what he said, but it didn't register. We went inside and got in line – it was like a buffet or what they called a smorgasbord – and that's when it registered. They got in line right behind us and I turned around and confronted him. My wife said that my hair stood up on end. She had never seen me that angry before. We exchanged some words. I'm right in his face. He didn't back down and I didn't either.

It was a trying experience.

FWiL:

Did black folks from Shreveport come out and watch the Steamer games as fans at all, or as it mostly a white audience?

Baraka:

Oh no. It was mixed.

Remember, this was the late '70's. There was a five to six year period where there's a drastic change and momentum picked up for the better. An example. The first black quarterback for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Parnell Dickinson, was my quarterback in high school. We were childhood friends. We lived on the same street, as a matter of fact. We were in the same graduating class. My first touchdown reception in high school, he threw it. When we finished high school, Parnell could not go play football at the University of Alabama. He went to Mississippi Valley State. But three years later ... you could.

And now, if you look at Alabama, their whole starting eleven on defense are black athletes. The best in the business. And probably all of those eleven will get NFL contracts, either as draft picks or free agents. They'll stick with somebody. So that's how much has changed in reference to the sport. We still have a long ways to go, but that's how much it has changed and I've lived to see that much myself.

FWiL:

Another guy that was in the American Football Association with you was **Don Gaffney**, who was the first black man to start a Southeastern Conference game at quarterback when he was a student at the University of Florida in 1973. He was in the AFA all three years that you played. Do you recall him being a standout within the league?

Baraka:

I remember his name, Gaffney, but there's nothing memorable that makes him stick out to me.

One of the most interesting players that I encountered and had the opportunity to compete against was a wide receiver that the San Antonio Charros had named **Tom Whittier**.

He was a serious competitor. A dangerous guy. During the San Antonio game in the playoffs in '78, he was their main threat. My job was to eliminate the other team's threat. In the 2nd quarter of this game right here, I accomplished my mission. His quarterback threw him one upstairs and he had to go up and get it. On his way down, I clocked him. Broke his leg. They put him in the meat wagon and there he went to the hospital.

Third quarter they kicked the ball to me. I brought that punt back about 30 yards. They hit me, dislocated my elbow. Now I'm in the meat wagon. I get to the hospital and Thomas and I were set up in beds beside each other in the emergency room. When he saw me, he jumped up like that and we both busted out laughing. We both were hurtin', but I thought that was real funny and he did too.

FWiL:

That's going to be tough to top, but any other favorite memories of stories from those years?

Baraka:

I have one. We were on this plane, a Delta flight flying to Charlotte. Man, it was a thunderstorm like no other. I was sitting next to the team chaplain who was also our athletic trainer. **Ennis Sullivan**. He was an ordained minister and we used to call him 'Doctor Fat'. Now we also had a defensive end named **Ron Johnson**. His brother was **Gary "Big Hands" Johnson**, who played for the San Diego Chargers. We used to call Ron 'Dirty Sugar'. He was tough but he played dirty. If he could poke you in the eye, he gonna poke you. And everything out of his mouth was a cuss word.

They had turned the seat belt light off. Guys are walking up and down the aisle. All of a sudden this plane dropped. My head hit the bottom of the baggage compartment. When that plane dropped, the minister said "Oh shit!" and Ron Johnson, who was a hell-raiser, yelled "Oh Lord!"

We thought we were gone, man!

FWiL:

So that's interesting. There were some places you had to fly to, but this was a pretty low budget league, so I imagine there were a lot of long bus trips.

Baraka:

We flew to Charlotte and we flew to Chicago. Everything else we bussed. One of those trips to San Antonio is when things started getting rocky in the league and our team started unravelling a little bit.

For the pre-game meal in San Antonio in '78, the meal was just pancakes. Man, every ten minutes two or three of those big linemen were going to the locker room. Eating those pancakes, you got the runs, now, OK. So after that, everybody said we're gonna strike, right?

[Team owner/head coach] **Harry Lander** called a team meeting and said "I'll put a rooster and a donkey on the field and somebody will pay to come and watch." I'll never forget that.