

Prepared Buffone is lone hero

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Tribune Photo by Bob Fila

Despite two interceptions, Bears' Doug Buffone (above) wears dejected look following 27-7 loss. At right, Buffone picks off pass intended for Patriots' Stanley Morgan.

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By Bill Jauss

PUBLIC ADDRESS announcer Chet Coppock announced the two minute warning. The Soldier Field crowd cheered.

What was left of the crowd, that is. Half of the 54,128 fans had fled. Those who remained booed the Bears. Even the Honey Bears couldn't hold the crowd. They kicked and danced behind the south end zone—to the backs of departing fans.

On the Bears sideline, 35-year-old Doug Buffone conferred with defensive coach Buddy Ryan. Then Buffone, playing an unfamiliar position and playing it brilliantly, went in for the last few plays in a hopelessly lost cause.

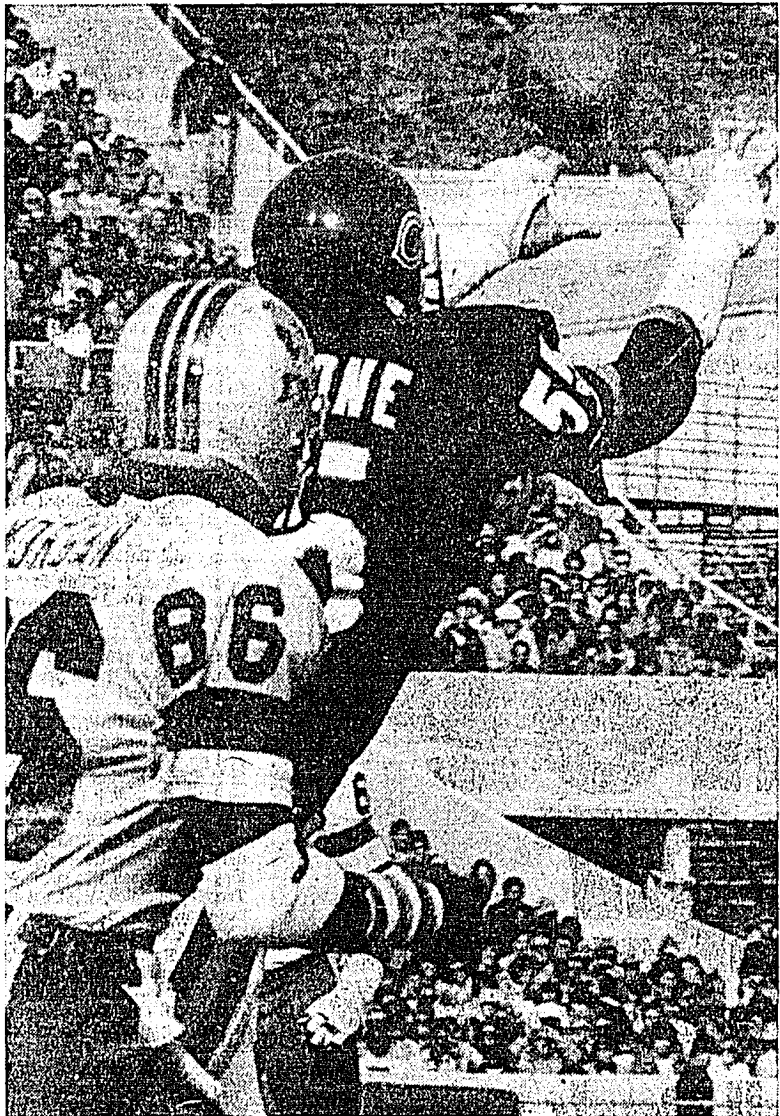
For Buffone, a 13-year pro veteran, it was an all too familiar situation. He was a lone hero amid a bunch of losers.

Buffone intercepted two passes, breaking Dick Butkus' career record for Bear linebackers. Buffone made seven tackles, including a touchdown save on Steve Grogan's rollout that fooled the other 10 Bear defenders. New England whipped the Bears 27-7. These events left Doug with mixed feelings, mostly bad.

"Obviously, it's a good feeling to know there's still a fire in the furnace," Buffone said after his first start of the season. "But you like the good things to come in victories. Otherwise, it's like hitting a home run when you're trailing 12-0. Not worth it."

Buffone said he didn't know until Sunday morning that he would start. "I knew Tommy [Hicks] was ill," said Buffone. "But I didn't know until this morning that I'd play."

"I was a little apprehensive," Buffone said, "because of the position. Oh, I could play outside [linebacker] in my sleep. But the middle, well, I'd only played there one quarter in an exhibition game against St. Louis."



Tribune Photo by Edward Wagner Jr.

Buffone spent last week behaving as though he was going to start, though he never dreamed he would. He studied films of Grogan, the Patriots' 26-year-old running quarterback.

"I always study," said Buffone. "I studied all week like I was going to start. You never know. And you never want to get caught short."

Buffone was properly impressed with Grogan after the ex-Kansas State passer completed 21 of 34 passes for 244 yards and three touchdowns.

"Grogan can beat you so many ways," said Buffone. "He rolls out. He buys time. He's got that great tight end, Russ Francis. He played better today than the last three weeks' games I studied him on film."

The Pats led 14-7 and reached the Bears 10 in the second quarter when Grogan passed for Stanley Morgan near the goal line. Buffone made a deep drop, reached high, broke Butkus' record with his 23d interception and returned it 11 yards to the 16. He waved the ball jubilantly before he ran off the field.

"I felt we needed a big play then," said Buffone. "I felt if they made another touchdown there it would really put us out. I had an idea he'd pass. I picked up the receiver."

Buffone credited experience—film study last week plus a dozen NFL seasons—with the Gro-

gan-for-Jackson pass he picked off on the Bears 22-yard line in the third period.

"That was more or less experience," he said. "I read him [Grogan] while he was running. It's not that I'm an excellent pass defender. I'm not. I just had a sense where the ball was going to be."

Buffone's finest tackle of the day did little more than save bettors who picked the game in the under 36 [total points] pool. Doug tackled Grogan on the 5-yard line after Grogan had deked out the other defenders on a rollout to his left. New England then settled for a field goal.

"I picked that up when I was studying," said Buffone. "I had an idea he [Grogan] was going to come up then with a run like that."

Buffone said he felt "a little tired." He was replaced in the Bear defense on some down-and-distance situations because that unit was on the field twice as long as the offense.

Buffone did not know until after the game that he'd broken a club record set by his ex-teammate Butkus. "I think I'll send him a telegram," said Doug, "and tell him I did it at his [middle linebacker] position."

Buffone wasn't "surprised" that he played well.

"I wouldn't have come back this year," he said, "if I didn't think I could still do it."