



# The Legacy Bowl: How a bold scout, HBCU talent elevated Chiefs — and football

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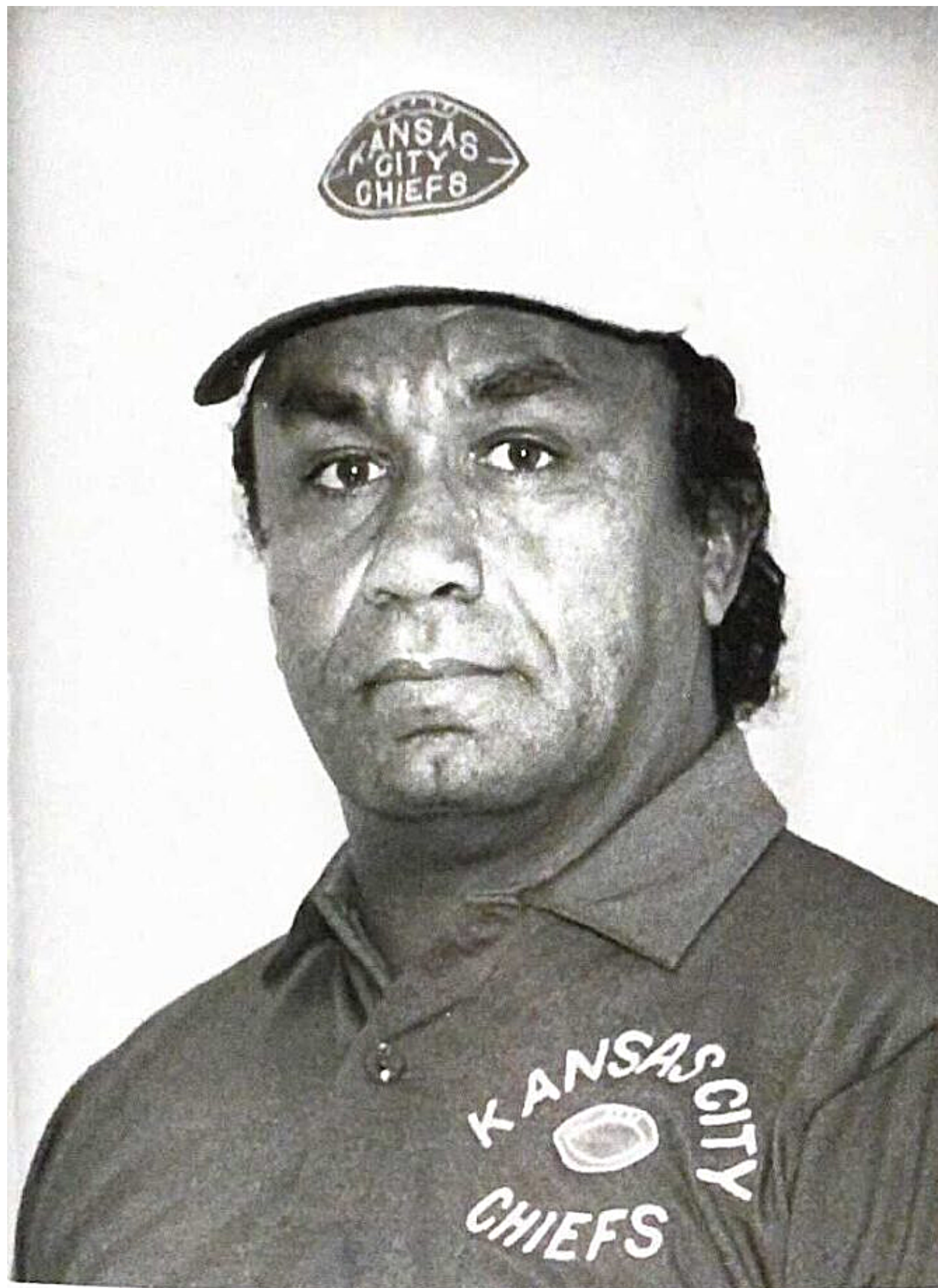
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One night in the fall of 1964, Lloyd Wells drove to a hotel in Texas to find a receiver named Otis Taylor. This is where the story gets hazy.

Wells was a trailblazer — the first full-time Black scout in professional football. He was also something of a salesman. He was smart, smooth, and charming. He knew everyone. He was, according to 1965 Heisman Award winner Mike Garrett, “a forerunner of a Hollywood agent in pro football.”

Most of all, Wells specialized in two things: He knew talent, and he understood a good story. In the late 1950s and early '60s, Wells had been a newspaper editor in Houston. On the side, he mentored kids and planned high school all-star games, seeking to create chances for overlooked Black athletes. This is how he came to meet Lamar Hunt, the founder of the upstart American Football League and owner of the Kansas City Chiefs. The relationship would turn Wells into a part-time Chiefs scout, and then a full-time member of the front office. In time, he would help assemble the most forward-thinking roster in pro football.



Lloyd Wells

Kansas City Chiefs



Chiefs scout Lloyd Wells (Photo courtesy of Kansas City Chiefs)

In late November 1964, though, he was still traversing the south as an extra pair of eyes, still making connections and signing players, when he received an important mission from Hunt. The Chiefs wanted Taylor, a talented receiver from Prairie View A&M, a historically Black college in Texas. But the enemy had him. In the days before the AFL Draft — set for Nov. 28, 1964 — the Dallas Cowboys had shown up at Prairie View, picked up Taylor and teammate Seth Cartwright, and stashed them in a Dallas hotel, hoping to hide them from the rival league.

“They’ve got Otis Taylor,” Hunt told Wells, “and I want him back.”

A caveat: This particular Hunt quote came in one version of the story. There were many others. Sometimes the hotel was in Dallas. Sometimes the suburbs. Sometimes Wells engaged in elaborate detective work: phone calls to Prairie View, girlfriend informants, bellboy double agents. In one version, there were sleeping pills and a late-night escape. In another, Wells was identified by someone from the Cowboys and nearly arrested..

What is true: Wells found Taylor at a Holiday Inn, posed as a journalist from Ebony Magazine, then helped bust the receiver out the back of the hotel, shepherding him to Kansas City under the cover of darkness.

The next day, Taylor signed with the Chiefs.

For Lloyd Wells and Kansas City, it was a victory, a building block on the way to a championship.

It was only part of the story.

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## A

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Lloyd Wells was a man of many names. Chiefs coach Hank Stram liked to call him “Outta Sight,” because Wells had a habit of telling Stram, “Coach, you got to see this guy, he’s outta sight.” Some players labeled Wells a “raconteur.” Taylor called him a “fatherly figure.” Jim Kearney, a Chiefs safety from Texas, summed him up thusly: “The Man.”

To most, though, Wells had one name: Judge.

“He made good decisions,” said Garrett, the former USC star and running back for the Chiefs. “He was a learned man.”

Wells was a sergeant in the Marines, a graduate of Texas Southern, a historically Black school in Houston, and a professional photographer. Later in life, when his football days were done, he became a close confidante to Muhammad Ali, inside the inner circle at the Rumble in the Jungle. Yet to Chiefs players from the franchise’s first decade, Wells came to symbolize something simple: a roster that changed football.

“That’s what Lloyd represented to us,” Garrett said.

When Hunt and the so-called Foolish Club launched the AFL in 1960, they were taking on an established entity in the NFL, and doing so in bold fashion. Hunt, the son of an oil tycoon, was in his late 20s, mild-mannered and precocious. He also understood talent. To compete with the NFL, the AFL needed its fair share. To find it, they needed to think differently.

When the AFL began play in 1960, college football teams in the SEC, ACC and Southwest Conference remained all White. The rosters of the NFL — mostly culled from those leagues and elite conferences in the north and west — reflected the landscape. The modern NFL was desegregated in 1946, but unwritten rules and unofficial quota policies kept African American numbers down. Black players were excluded from “thinking” positions such as quarterback and middle linebacker. The NFL franchise in Washington would not integrate until 1962, when pressure from commissioner Pete Rozelle and the Kennedy administration forced the move.



Chiefs defensive tackles Buck Buchanan (left) and Ernie Ladd were both alums of Grambling State University. (Photo by Focus on Sport/Getty Images)

As the AFL came into being, college football in the south mirrored society. Black athletes headed off to HBCUs, where programs operated with smaller budgets, lesser facilities and little press. Jim Merritt, the coach at Tennessee State, once famously remarked that Black college football teams played “behind God’s back.” The conditions created a fascinating alchemy.

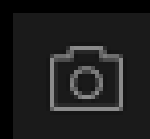
In the 2019 book “Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World,” author David Epstein writes of “The Outside Advantage,” the belief that people from outside traditional structures or systems might have ideas that could upend the status quo. In the world of professional football, Hunt was a classic outsider. So was Wells, who had spent years becoming an expert in the world of Black college football. He built relationships, championed players, and viewed sports through the lens of business — and activism. Bill Nunn, a columnist at the Pittsburgh Courier, a former Steelers scout— and a 2021 finalist for the Pro Football Hall of Fame — once called Wells one of “the best convincers in sports.”

So when Hunt hired Wells to help him find football players, the relationship came to change the fortunes of the Kansas City Chiefs — and alter the face of professional football.

“I tell people all the time,” Chiefs Hall of Fame linebacker Bobby Bell said. “The best thing that ever happened in the NFL is that Lamar Hunt started the AFL.”

As the rival leagues warred over talent, the Chiefs used their first pick in 1963 to pluck defensive tackle Buck Buchanan out of Grambling, a prominent HBCU program. In the moment, it was a groundbreaking move. (Buchanan was the first Black No. 1 pick in either league.) It also signaled the future. In 1964, Wells helped sign running back Mack Lee Hill, a free agent from Southern. A year later, Kansas City landed Taylor, a tall, lithe playmaker who became a prototype for wide receivers.

When the Chiefs won the AFL Championship following the 1966 season and faced Green Bay in what became known as Super Bowl I, the roster featured eight players from historically Black colleges, the most in football, including defensive back Emmitt Thomas and receiver Frank Pitts. That they lost 35-10 to the Packers in Los Angeles was supposed to suggest the pre-eminence of the established NFL. In time, it would be a reminder that the landscape was changing. The gap was closing.



Chiefs linebacker Bobby Bell (78) sacks Packers quarterback Bart Starr during Super Bowl I. (Photo by James Flores/Getty Images)

During the next three years, the Chiefs would add to their cache of HBCU talent, drafting linebacker Willie Lanier (Morgan State), running back Robert Holmes (Southern) and cornerback Jim Marsalis (Tennessee State). On the field, they became a force — speed on defense, offensive fireworks, a balanced and cohesive roster. With a promising team led by quarterback Len Dawson and a collection of stars from power conferences — including Garrett, Bell and defensive lineman Curley Culp — the Chiefs returned to play in Super Bowl IV. This time, they defeated the favored Minnesota Vikings.

The Chiefs' roster featured 14 players from HBCUs. They were the first Super Bowl champion to start more Black players than White.

"Eight of the 11 starting defensive players were African American," Lanier said. "That was beyond significant for us."

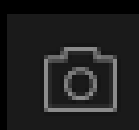
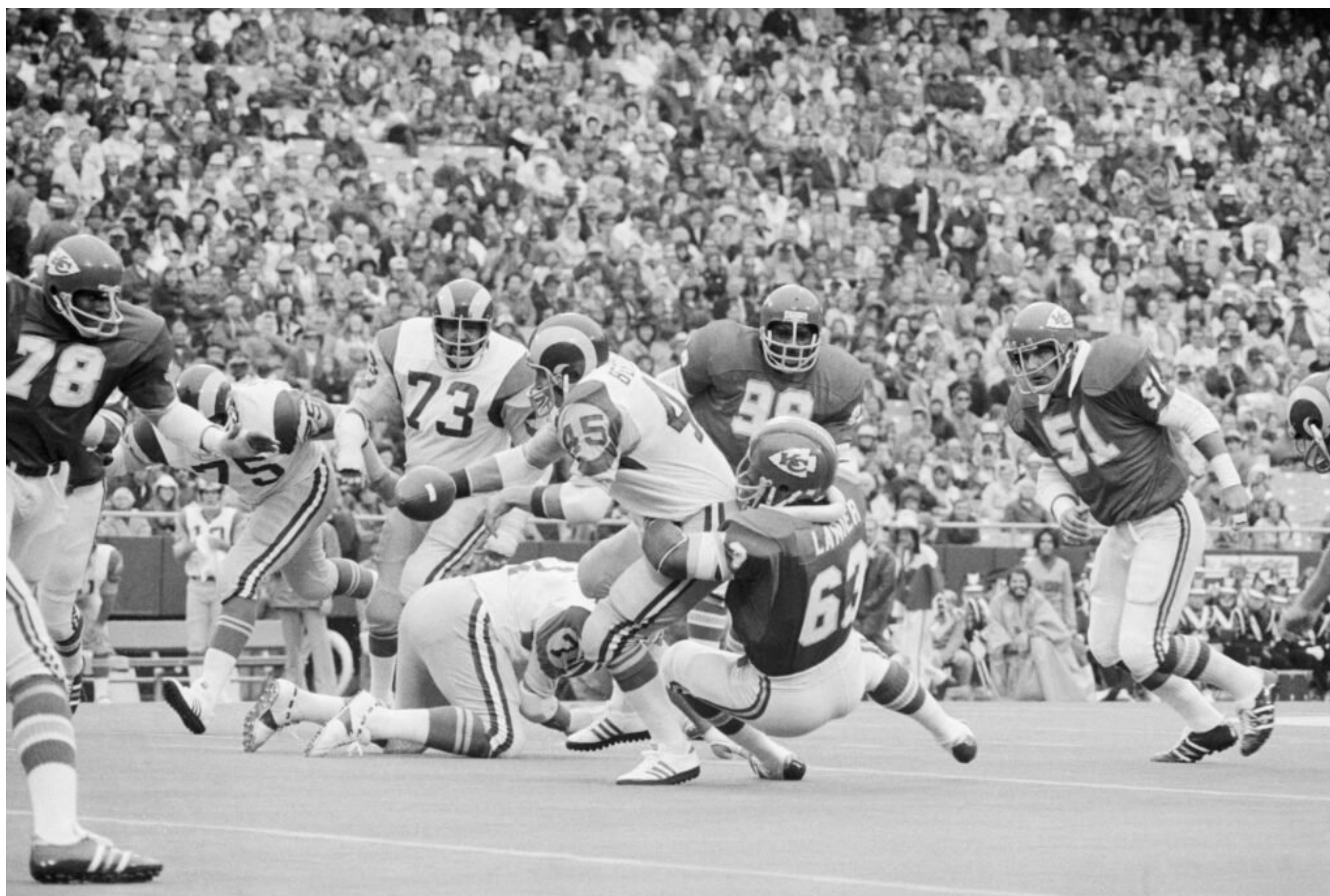
## A

When Lanier arrived in Kansas City in the late '60s, teammates called him "Contact." He hit hard, led with his head and patrolled the middle of the field with a ferocious intensity. When he switched up his tackling style as a measure of self-preservation, he earned a second nickname: "Honey Bear." As a Black middle linebacker, he was breaking new ground. As a child of Richmond, Va., he understood racism and segregation. (He had attended Baltimore's Morgan State, in part because he sought job opportunities outside Virginia.) Lanier found the egalitarian nature of the Chiefs refreshing. In the midst of a turbulent '60s, the locker room was home to little animosity or tension. Lanier credits Hunt for establishing a culture that extended beyond football.

"The reality of their understanding of race and where it fit into the mindset of America was one that was as pure as it could be," Lanier said.

As Bell, a fellow Chiefs linebacker, puts it: "Lamar treated the players like his family."

In his biography of Hunt ("Lamar Hunt: A Life in Sports"), author Michael MacCambridge describes the Chiefs founder not as a progressive, but rather a businessman who understood the value of a diverse talent pool. Hunt made his home in Dallas. According to MacCambridge, he was a lifelong Republican who loyally voted GOP. Some players simply viewed him as capitalist, and in the early days of the AFL, there was an economic incentive to mine HBCUs, where players were often cheaper than those from power schools. "But then that changed very quickly, too," Garrett said.



Lanier (63) causing a fumble in a 1973 game against the Rams.  
(Bettmann / Contributor/Getty)

When Lanier was a senior at Morgan State, the NFL and AFL instituted a common draft. In response, he researched and wrote a senior paper on, in his words, “the monopolistic aspects of pro football.” When he was drafted by the Chiefs in the second round in 1967, he famously sparred with Wells over his first contract.

“He was just doing his job,” Lanier said “But I understood the market.”

When Lanier arrived in Kansas City, he wondered whether he’d get a fair chance to play middle linebacker, a position that required players to call plays and which had long been the dominion of White players. What he found was an honest competition and a level playing field.

“I started recognizing that they were already well along the way in terms of doing things that other teams had not necessarily done,” Lanier said.

Hunt treated players like kin. Stram empowered them. On the road, Lanier roomed with Jim Lynch, a White linebacker from Notre Dame. They became close friends, two intellectually curious men who pondered the world outside of football. The Kansas City of the 1960s was not the Deep South. It was, however, a place of de facto segregation and structural inequities. On the field, though, there was a singular focus on winning, Lanier said, an honest approach toward equality that shaped the organization, even as players endured discrimination and bigotry elsewhere.

“The word equal meant that to them in spades,” Lanier said of the Hunt family. “It could be the president of the United States. It could be the commissioner of the National Football League. It could be your bus driver. They treated everybody, in my estimation, more equal than I’d ever seen in my life.”

Before he died in 2006, Hunt put it this way: “We never pretended we made a conscious effort to open things up. We made the conscious effort to go out and find the best players anywhere.”

On the evening of Jan. 11, 1970, in the moments after Super Bowl IV, Garrett found himself standing in a victorious locker room, pulled into a CBS interview with retired Giants legend Frank Gifford. Buchanan stood to his left, nearly blocking the camera. Garrett was still in pads. To his right, standing behind Gifford, was a man in a white shirt and dark tie.

The Chiefs had rolled over the Vikings 23-7. Taylor had clinched the win with a 46-yard catch and score. If there were doubts about the AFL after the Jets’ victory in Super Bowl III, they had been laid to rest. “We were on a quest,” Lanier said.

Fifty-one years later, the legacy of Super Bowl IV is not hard to find. The HBCU pipeline kept producing stars, from Walter Payton to Jerry Rice to Michael Strahan. The sport pushed forward. The Chiefs, a team built by Willie, Bobby and Buck, are back in the Super Bowl, hoping to claim a second straight championship on Sunday. The franchise that upended the status quo is seeking to become it.

Last week, as the NFL focused on Patrick Mahomes, Tom Brady, and a matchup of generational stars, Lanier was touring around the south, visiting historically Black college campuses at Jackson State, Alcorn State, Tuskegee, and Alabama State. Lanier is 75 now, and on a mission to honor the history of Black college football with the Honey Bear Project, an initiative to install new fields at HBCUs across the country, where resources are often still scarce.

“All of these discussions are being made across the United States,” Lanier said. “The United States is re-visiting itself through this pandemic, and reflecting a little bit more about what is right, decent, honorable and just — and maybe it found itself not quite as comfortable as it could be with itself. I think the broader reality is not necessarily based on the sport. It’s based on a reach toward equal.”

Lanier found success in the business world, working in the financial services industry after football. Once, when a colleague asked how they might diversify their pool of stockbrokers, Lanier answered with two words: “Hire them.” He never wanted to forget about the places that offered opportunity. The classrooms at Morgan State. The HBCU culture. The locker room in the NFL, where on a night 51 years ago, Garrett looked to his right, saw a man in a dark tie, and pulled him in front of the CBS cameras after Super Bowl IV.

It was Lloyd Wells.

“I must do one thing,” Garrett told Gifford. “This guy is a scout for us, and he does a great job.”

For Garrett, it was a simple act – and a symbolic one. The AFL opened up professional football and it offered opportunity. It didn’t matter where you came from. It just mattered that you could play.

“It opened up the competition,” Garrett said. “Like we’re trying to open up this country more and more, Lloyd opened it up in the ‘60s.”

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