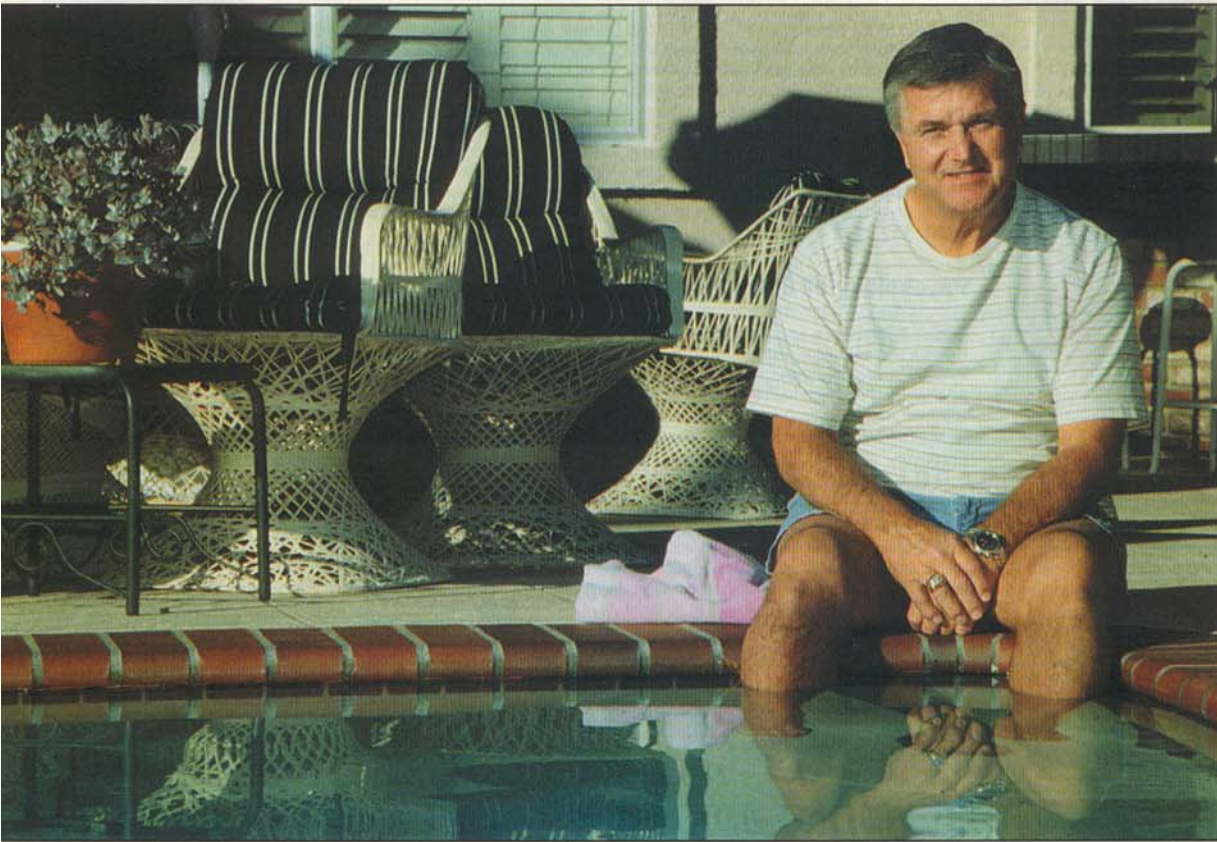


Ron Botchan 'I'm Just Coachable'

By Lee Godden



With a wave of his hand, Ron Botchan dismisses the fact that he went from officiating high school football to the NFL in five years and that he's currently regarded by many as the best umpire in the league. "I don't want to blow my own horn," he says, relaxing at his Granada Hills, Calif., home. "I'm just coachable."

Ron Botchan, considered by many to be the NFL's finest umpire, relaxes at his Granada Hills, Calif., home. "Coachability is kind of an old-school thing," he says. "I think that when people are being told something nowadays, they often resent it."

There's an old parable that says the brightest star in the sky doesn't necessarily shine the longest. Botchan has proved the parable wrong. His 20-year NFL career, including a record-tying five Super Bowls, demonstrates that rapid promotion and long-term success *can* go hand in hand.

"You have to listen to and observe the veterans and the officiating supervisors," he says. "When I was coaching, that's what I demanded and expected from the players. Listen, observe and do it. That's all there is and don't make any excuses."

Botchan, a professor of health and fitness at Los Angeles City College, knows only too well that there are no excuses for anything less than an almost perfect job when you're the umpire in an NFL game. "The players are bigger and faster nowadays," he says, "and more aggressive. They used to just put the big official, the heavy-set guy, in as the umpire. But not any more. Now you have to be mobile; you have to move and read the play and react to it."

And if you don't move and run when you're the umpire? "You're going to feel like you've been in a freeway accident!"

Botchan is 65, but he doesn't look much past 50. He has a full head of silver hair combed boyishly downward. He comes across as clean-cut and levelheaded, an everyday kind of guy who'll crack a joke and make you feel like a longtime buddy. At 6 feet tall and 205 pounds, he has slimmed down 40 pounds from his playing days in the old American Football League (AFL).

His five years of coaching football at Los Angeles City College culminated in the 1971 Western States league championship. He decided to stop coaching after that. "I left at the top of my career," he says with a shrug. "Then a friend said I might want to try high school officiating."

Football, teaching, coaching and officiating have all intertwined to weave a fascinating career for Botchan. His father emigrated from Russia to New York and went on to achieve success by building a children's clothing business. Botchan's father wanted his son to follow in his footsteps and become the firm's next top salesman. But an athletic slant pushed Botchan toward football. After his family moved to Los Angeles, he played linebacker for Belmont High School. "My high school counselor said that I didn't have the aptitude for college," Botchan says, grinning. "I went to Occidental College in Los Angeles, played ball there, and I did really well."

At Occidental two teammates he roomed with went on to considerable success: Jack Kemp and Jim Mora. Kemp was Occidental's quarterback. He later played for the Chargers and the Bills, ran the AFL Players Association and then was elected to the



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Botchan shares the record for most Super Bowl assignments at five. Among active officials, only Al Jury also has five. Retired officials Tom Kelleher, Bob Beeks and Jack Fette also share the record.

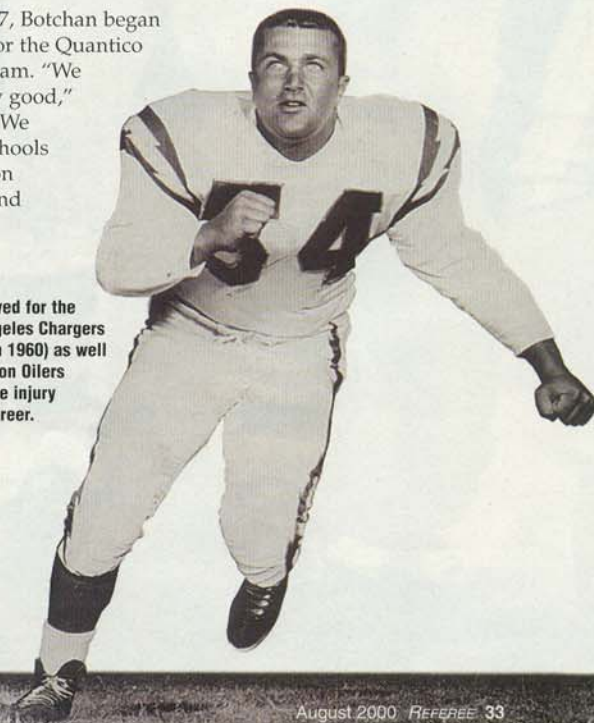
U.S. Congress before making an unsuccessful vice-presidential run in 1996. Mora played tight end and defensive end at Occidental. He later coached Occidental, the Philadelphia Stars of the now-defunct USFL and the NFL's New Orleans Saints. He's now the head coach of the Indianapolis Colts.

"I sometimes work his games," says Botchan. "But a game is a game and he knows that and everybody else knows it. He knows everything is on the up and up."

After graduation, Kemp signed with the Pittsburgh Steelers, while Botchan and Mora joined the Marine Corps. A few years later, Kemp and Botchan reunited as teammates with the Chargers. Kemp, Mora and Botchan have all remained close friends and were all in each other's weddings. A good thing, since Botchan introduced Mora to his wife.

In 1957, Botchan began playing for the Quantico Marine team. "We were very good," he says. "We played schools like Boston College and

Botchan played for the then-Los Angeles Chargers (seen here in 1960) as well as the Houston Oilers before a knee injury ended his career.





Holy Cross." In 1960, the Baltimore Colts scouted him and offered him a contract. Then another scout told him he'd do better in a new league called the AFL, with a team called the Los Angeles Chargers.

Chargers Coach Sid Gillman took a look at Botchan and liked what he saw. "After I'd already signed the contract for \$6,000 a year, Gillman took me into his office and gave me a \$1,000 a year raise, right on the spot. That was no small change," Botchan says. It was a late start in the pros, at age 26, but Botchan earned a starting linebacker spot. Two years later, he signed with the Houston Oilers, but after only one year, Botchan's playing career was ended by a knee injury that required several operations.

Teaching high school at North Hollywood High came next for Botchan. He supplemented his income with scouting assignments for the Chargers and the Colts. He also coached baseball and football at the high school. His teaching and football experience helped him win the head football coaching job at Los Angeles City College in 1966. He stayed there for five years, taking the college to several league championships.

In 1972, after leaving coaching, Botchan tried his hand at high school football officiating. A few years later, he began working junior college games and before long, he was officiating at his alma mater, Occidental College.

Next came Pac-10 assignments in 1976 (the conference was known as the Pac-8 until 1978). "For the first two years, I didn't work any games. It was crazy!" he says. "I just held the stakes (on the chain crew) and observed the games. I couldn't understand why, if you're already qualified to do it, you don't get games." But in his third year in the Pac-10, 1979, Botchan was finally assigned as umpire for two games.

He then applied to the NFL. A bold move, but considering his rapid rise within officiating so far, he figured, "Why stop here?" Without notifying Botchan in advance, NFL scout Norm Schachter observed Botchan at a game he was working at Golden West College. Several months later, Botchan interviewed with Nick Skorich, an NFL supervisor. Because there were no openings in 1980 for umpires, he accepted a position as a line judge. In his second year, an umpire spot opened up and Botchan moved right in.

Having an experienced mentor helped Botchan early in his career. Jerry Seeman, now the NFL's senior director of officiating, was the

Botchan rose through the officiating ranks at a meteoric pace. He began officiating high school football in 1972, was hired to work in the Pac-10 in 1976, became an NFL official in 1980 and worked his first Super Bowl in 1986.

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referee on Botchan's crew in his rookie year in the league. Coachability came into play in that first year when Seeman had to teach Botchan how to be a line judge. "I was really coachable," Botchan recalls. "I was always coachable in college, high school or professional ball. The coach tells me what to do, and I do it." That attitude paid off for Botchan early on. In his rookie year as an NFL official, Botchan was rewarded with a playoff game. With a satisfied smile he adds, "And rookies never get playoff games."

Botchan's style on the field is one of calm concentration. "If your nerves get to you, that's when you foul up," Botchan says. "The coaches and the players are more pumped up than anything I've ever seen. But that doesn't affect me. I just go through the things that got me to this level."

Concentration is key because, without it, an NFL umpire is in extreme physical danger. "When we're through with a game," Botchan says, "sometimes I'm bleeding and bruised just from fighting off the linemen. As an umpire, you can never relax."

A small minority of NFL officials wear flak jackets to protect against injury, but not Botchan. He has another idea: "I wouldn't mind seeing a small helmet for umpires, maybe like a batting helmet without the ears. We could paint it like a regular



Botchan (lower left) played football at Occidental College in Los Angeles, where his teammates were current Indianapolis Colts head coach Jim Mora (lower right) and former vice-presidential candidate Jack Kemp (upper center).

"The players are bigger and faster nowadays," says Botchan, who once finished officiating a game with a head injury that later required eight stitches. "Now, (umpires) have to be mobile; you have to move and read the play and react to it."



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