

NFL vets find new life in pro flag football alongside Michael Vick, Terrell Owens

Jeff Garcia, Jimmy Clausen and Justin Forsett explain their involvement in American Flag Football League

by [Cody Benjamin](#)

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Two years ago, [Jimmy Clausen](#) was preparing for his second season with the [Chicago Bears](#).

He was just a half-decade removed from a big-time [college football](#) career at [Notre Dame](#), an early-round entry to the [NFL](#) as the 48th overall selection of the 2010 draft and an opportunity to be the [Carolina Panthers'](#) franchise quarterback.

The spotlight was bright.

Did Clausen ever think that now, in 2017, he would be taking snaps against Team Vick -- that's *the* [Michael Vick](#), yes -- and alongside Terrell Owens, Chad Johnson and other big-name NFL veterans ... in a professional flag football league?

"Never."

He laughed a little.

"Never in a million years did I think this was going to happen for me," he said in the spare moments before a workout with Owens and his American Flag Football League teammates. "But this is how I got started, with flag."

Not everyone that signed up to hit the field in former hedge fund manager Jeff Lewis' upstart league, which debuts June 27 with a trial-run opener before an anticipated eight-team kickoff in 2018, had the bumpy trajectory of Clausen's NFL career.

For one, there's Vick, whose recently retired self [has been attached to AFFL promotions](#) since May. There's Owens and Johnson -- who is going by his one-time last name "Ochocinco" for the league's pilot debut in San Jose. There's [Justin Forsett](#), who retired from nearly a decade of running back roles in May. There's Jeff Garcia, who took part in AFFL practices before assuming color commentary duties for the opening game.

The list goes on. In Team Vick and Team Owens lineups tweeted by the league, ex-Green Bay [Packers](#) safety [Nick Collins](#) and former [New York Giants](#) wide receiver Derek Hagan are among the projected starters for Avaya Stadium's June 27 clash.

For all the accomplished vets, though, Clausen included, returning to the field means *something*. Even if it's for flag football.

The league itself, of course, means plenty to Lewis.

In prioritizing speed over contact, a more intimate connection with helmet-less athletes and a more relatable rendition of America's favorite fall sport, the AFFL founder is trying to offer what the NFL doesn't without sacrificing the basics of the game.

"We're trying to avoid anything that even unconsciously makes you say, 'I don't know if I'm watching football here,'" he said. "We'll have both very recognizable athletes and people that we never knew existed. But the only way we'll make it is if the quality of play will be very high. If it is, I promise you that they're going to be lined up out the door to play in 2018."

He's got technology on his side, touting the league's use of flags that are programmed to tell referees exactly where they are pulled on the field. He's got a backing, recruiting guys like former [Jacksonville Jaguars](#) safety and NFL Players Association exec Donovan Darius as advisers. He's got coverage, with Bob Pappas and Antonio Pierce set to join Garcia in the booth for a post-game online stream of the debut exhibition. And even with the emphasis on showcasing talent no one's ever heard of, he's got name recognition.

Vick. Owens. Garcia. Forsett. Clausen.

To them, some more polished relics of NFL glory than others, returning to action is as much about proving that flag football can be a platform for professional athletes as it is finding new life on the field.

Garcia, 47, has been out of the pros since 2011, when he wrapped up a near-two-decade stint across three leagues. But even outside of the AFFL, he has rekindled a fire for football with flags, following in the footsteps of his own kids, three of whom play the game.

"Post-career, I found myself back in local flag leagues," he said. "It gives me a chance to continue to compete."

Friends still "get a little excited, probably a little more competitive" when they see Garcia -- the former Pro Bowl quarterback of the [San Francisco 49ers](#) -- take the field with them. Even if he says he prefers "being on the other side of the ball," taking advantage of flag football's flexibility and manning the defense.

That's right. He's Jeff Garcia, 47-year-old starting defensive back.

Forsett, on the other hand, is more committed to the familiarity of the third-down back role he long owned in the NFL. It's what he'll play for Team Vick. (And it's a little better way of unlocking "competitive juices" than through "changing my kids' diapers with my wife," which has become a reality for Forsett in a post-NFL life.)

Plus, it's a position he said was fueled by flag football in grade-school P.E. class.

"I think that's where I developed my spin move," he said, "making sure no one touched that flag."

For Clausen, who said the AFFL's seven-on-seven format almost mirrors certain NFL practices, embracing pro flag football is not only an unofficial chance for redemption after more than a full year out of a quarterback job. It's also a return to his football roots.

"In sixth grade, I started playing flag," he said. "I didn't play tackle until high school. When I was little, my parents said, 'You can either play Pop Warner or go watch your brothers,' and I chose to go watch my brothers instead."

Now, with his 30th birthday around the corner, he's back in the flag game. As a pro.

The spotlight, in some sense, is still bright.