

The Chargers Come to San Diego

The Chargers got off the longest quick kick in Civic Center history yesterday, booting themselves right out of apathetic Los Angeles and into eager, enthusiastic San Diego.

--Jerry Magee, San Diego Union, January 25, 1961.

In the winter of 1961, the San Diego City Council unanimously endorsed professional football in the city. A whirlwind courtship that lasted only weeks brought Barron Hilton's Los Angeles Chargers south. The city's first big league sports team would begin the 1961 football season in Balboa Stadium as the San Diego Chargers.

Jack Murphy, the sports editor of the *Union*, had begun lobbying for the Chargers in a notable column on December 21, 1960. "The story will be denied and I'll probably be denounced as a third-rate fiction writer but it comes on excellent authority that the Los Angeles Charger franchise is San Diego's for the asking."

The Chargers were a new team in a new league. In their first season they played for the American Football League championship—losing narrowly to the Houston Oilers on New Year's Day, 1961. But Los Angeles—home of the well-established NFL Rams, was not interested in the Chargers. Playing in the cavernous, 100,000-seat Coliseum, the Chargers sometimes drew only 10,000 fans.



The Chargers first exhibition game in 1961 came against the Houston Oilers. Note the unfinished second deck at Balboa Stadium in the background.

Courtesy of Todd Tobias.

"There's no doubt in my mind that we've got to get out of Los Angeles," Hilton concluded. We can't compete in the same market with the Rams. A lot of cities would like to have us . . . I'd prefer to put the club in San Diego.

But the shrewd businessman, son of hotel magnate Conrad Hilton, made it clear that he had conditions: "If we move to San Diego, we're going to need a lot of help there." The best site for hosting pro football was 46-year-old Balboa Stadium. But with a seating capacity of less than 24,000, it would need expansion and a major renovation.

Hilton was willing to lose money at first—he had dropped an estimated \$900,000 in Los Angeles—but he wanted a future. In San Diego there was the promise of lucrative television rights, and an excellent chance for joining the National Football League with that league's unannounced but anticipated merger with the AFL.

San Diego's business and civic leaders saw the acquisition of the Chargers as a path to national recognition for the country's 18th largest city. Sensitive about its reputation as a mere Navy town—"an airport tied to a submarine" is what one sports executive called the city—San Diegans believed pro football would inspire civic pride.

It also made good business sense. Hilton's team was a million-dollar company with a player payroll of \$385,000. Jack Murphy predicted that every dollar spent by the Chargers would come back seven times.

Charger football was even endorsed by the baseball Padres who also had major league aspirations. "The Chargers will be good for baseball," said Padres executive Doug Giddings, "because they will awaken spectator sports in San Diego."

On January 5, 1961, Hilton came to San Diego for a visit with Mayor Charles Dail and other civic leaders. Along with Chargers coach and general manager Sid Gillman, Hilton visited Balboa Stadium to look over the field and locker room. The immediate problem they saw was the stadium's small size. That could be fixed with a reconfigured field and a second tier of seats.

But the locker room was a shock. "A real hell-hole," said Coach Gillman. "I was pretty blue after seeing the place." Cold and dark, it was so small that visiting teams had no lockers and used baskets and coat hangers to hold their clothes.

By the end of the visit Hilton said Chargers would relocate if the city would renovate the locker room and increase stadium seating to at least 30,000. Hilton also wanted a fan base that could provide season ticket sales of 20,000.

San Diego was excited. The Junior Chamber of Commerce was swamped with pledges for season tickets. The January 8 sports section of the *Union* bore the headline "Chargers' Drive Rolls!"

The following week Coach Gillman and team of engineers, architects and landscapers scoured the stadium to determine exactly what improvements the Chargers would request from the city. "If the club is going to be on television every week Balboa Stadium has got to be made a showplace," said Gillman.



Quarterback Jack Kemp (15) throwing against the Houston Oilers in the 1961 AFL championship game. *Courtesy of Todd Tobias.*

Barron Hilton personally presented the final proposal to the city council on January 24. In the contract negotiations that followed, the city agreed to pay for all the stadium improvements. The \$700,000 required would come from city operating funds. With some dissent the councilmen also approved Hilton's demand for one year of rent-free use of Balboa Stadium, \$2000 rent per game the second year, and a fixed rate of 5% of the gross thereafter. The five-year contract was signed on February 9.

One week later the Chargers announced the ticket scale for the 1961 season. Premium sideline seats would go for \$5, reserve seats outside that area would be \$3, and general admission \$2. Season tickets for seven league games were \$35.

Reconstruction of the stadium was quickly underway—aiming for completion by the start of the football season in September. But change orders slowed the work and costs escalated. When the budget passed \$1 million the city decided to defer several budgeted caption projects including fire and police stations, Mission Bay improvements, and a branch library in Ocean Beach.

Working around the clock, the expanded stadium was ready for the Chargers home opener on September 17, when they routed the Oakland Raiders, 44-0. In the next few years--with stars like Jack Kemp, Lance Alworth, Ron Mix, and Paul Lowe--the team dominated their division in the AFL. The Chargers moved to the new San Diego Stadium in Mission Valley in 1967, and joined the National Football League in 1970.

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