Jaamipedia[1] entry: Chronicle of the National Football League: Post-Merger (1970-)

1972 [click to enlarge]

1972 National Football League season
1972 NFL Playoffs
AFC Champion New York Jets
NFC Champion Washington Redskins

Super Bowl VII
Date January 14, 1973
Site Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles, California
Result New York Jets 20, Washington Redskins 17
Super Bowl MVP John Riggins (FB, New York Jets)

Bert Bell Award Joe Namath (QB, New York Jets)
Associated Press League MVP Larry Brown (RB, Washington Redskins)
AP Offensive Player of the Year Joe Namath (QB, New York Jets)
AP Defensive Player of the Year Nick Buoniconti (LB, Miami Dolphins)
AP Offensive Rookie of the Year Franco Harris (RB, Pittsburgh Steelers)
AP Defensive Rookie of the Year Larry Jacobsen (DE, New York Giants)
PFWA[2] Comeback Player of the Year Steve Spurrier (QB, San Francisco 49ers)
AP NFL Coach of the Year Chuck Noll (HC, Pittsburgh Steelers)
Single-season passer rating leader Greg Landry (QB, Detroit Lions)
Seasonal rushing leader O.J. Simpson (RB, Buffalo Bills)

The 1972 season began with two events, one customary and the other unforeseen. The customary case was the 1972 NFL Draft. The unforeseen development was a double sale of franchises in the league, first the white-knight bid for the Los Angeles Rams by Chicago businessman Robert Irsay, then the ownership-swap deal over the Rams and the Baltimore Colts between Irsay and Colts owner Carroll Rosenbloom.

Held quite early in February, the 1972 Draft yielded both shortfalls and defining successes. The two highly touted quarterbacks taken in the first round, Jerry Tagge of Nebraska and John Reaves of Florida, were disappointments to their first teams. (Reaves did however revive his career with the "Class of '76" NFL expansion franchise the San Antonio Texans, and Tagge had a workmanlike second life in the Canadian Football League.) Second-round quarterback pick and

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[1] To remind less-familiar readers: this TLverse's wiki, whose name comes from the Swahili word for "community" emphasizing that part of the Wikipedia process/experience, rather than a Polynesian word for speed (as with OTL's wikis), so a detailed online encyclopedia entry on the subject matter involved, in the manner of the much-AH.com-beloved Alternate Wikipedia Pages.
[2] Pro Football Writers' Association

1971 Heisman Trophy winner Pat Sullivan of Auburn followed a rollercoaster path through a short career in the league.

Franchises had more luck with their backfields: in the first round the Pittsburgh Steelers drafted future Pro Football Hall of Fame star Franco Harris from Penn State. In the second and third rounds the Los Angeles Rams gained two backfield anchors for their famed 1970s squads with Lawrence McCutcheon and Jim Bertelsen. With the fourth overall pick the St. Louis Cardinals selected future Hall of Fame receiver Ahmad Rashad of Oregon (still listed in the draft as Bobby Moore), while the Oakland Raiders would take a Hall of Fame wideout of their own, Cliff Branch, in the fourth round. Among quarterbacks it would be Brian Sipe from San Diego State, chosen only in the seventh round, who enjoyed the most success, with multiple awards in the course of a successful career and a starter's role in Super Bowl XIX.

The Cincinnati Bengals were able to build strength for the Seventies, to counteract the emergent power of the Pittsburgh Steelers. In the 1972 draft the Bengals selected future Pro Bowlers cornerback Tommy Casanova, linebacker Jim LeClair, and center Tom DeLeone. The St. Louis Cardinals gained a controversial anchor for their offensive line with Conrad Dobler, noted for the quality of his blocking but also infamous for dirty tactics and violent reprisals.

NFL drafts of the 1970s ran to long days and rounds into the late-teens. Perhaps the 1972 Draft's most famous and humorous pick was made at the behest of Atlanta Falcons head coach Norm Van Brocklin. This was Hollywood legend (and, in his youth, former player for the University of Southern California Trojans) John Wayne, listed by the Falcons as a product of "Fort Apache State." League commissioner Pete Rozelle disallowed the pick.

The Colts-Rams ownership swap had long-term importance for the NFL. The estate of the late Dan Reeves had put the Rams up for sale; Florida tax attorney Hugh Culverhouse bid on the team and appeared to secure a handshake deal with executors behind closed doors by violating several league procedures in the sales process. In the end Robert Irsay, a Chicago industrialist who had sold his company for millions shortly before his bid for the Rams, was able to put $2 million more in play than Culverhouse and secured a deal. For his sharp practice in the Rams sale, Culverhouse would be blocked by Commissioner Rozelle from tendering a bid for the expansion franchise that ultimately would become the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

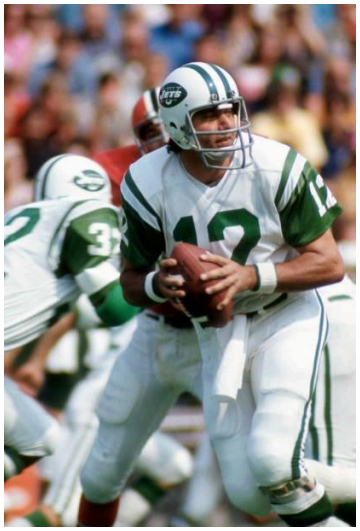
In July of 1972, Robert Irsay secured a deal with Carroll Rosenbloom, longtime owner of the Baltimore Colts, to trade franchises while their locations and player personnel would remain the same. The team swap was a historic venture for the NFL in the modern era, though it was pushed understandably from the headlines by the Democratic National Convention in Miami, with its nomination of future president George McGovern and controversial walkout of Alabama governor George Wallace to assume the American Independent Party nomination.

Thousands of variables, if not more, affect the course of any given football season. However the shape of the 1972 NFL campaign may have been altered decisively by a major upset in the second week of play. The game involved the Miami Dolphins, American Football Conference champions and Super Bowl runners-up from the 1971 season, and the Houston Oilers, who would end 1972 at the bottom of the league with a 2-12 record. The Dolphins' "No Name Defense" was one of the league's strongest, their offense powered by the league's most dominant backfield with the trio of halfbacks Eugene "Mercury" Morris and Jim Kiick, and fullback Larry Csonka. Oddsmakers made Miami nineteen-point favorites on the day.

In fact, the Oilers defense delivered a season-best performance as they held the Dolphins to under 150 yards rushing and ten points. Young Oilers quarterback Dan Pastorini threw for 184 yards, with no scores of his own but as a primary offensive mover for the Oilers' four field goals, the last kicked with forty-five seconds left to play. Dolphins quarterback Bob Griese then passed his team into Houston territory but failed to score.

Numerous counterfactuals have been offered for the now-famous upset: notably that, with this single point of difference, a 12-2 Dolphins team would have enjoyed home-field advantage throughout the AFC playoffs and a much stronger path to a second-straight Super Bowl appearance. As it was, the Dolphins still produced one of the league's strongest seasons. Miami generated 2913 yards on the ground as a team, with both Mercury Morris and Larry Csonka 1000-yard rushers, a first for the league. Backup quarterback Earl Morrall, a longtime league veteran purchased off waivers from the Colts, produced a season statistically even stronger than Bob Griese's. The Dolphins' powerful defense allowed second-lowest opposing points total (172), narrowly behind the Pittsburgh Steelers, while Miami led the league in turnovers caused. Along with his other exploits, linebacker Nick Buoniconti returned two fumbles for touchdowns and was named the Associated Press' Defensive Player of the Year. Despite losses to both of New York's NFL teams, the Jets and Giants, during the second half of the season, Miami finished 11-3 fighting for first place in the AFC East.

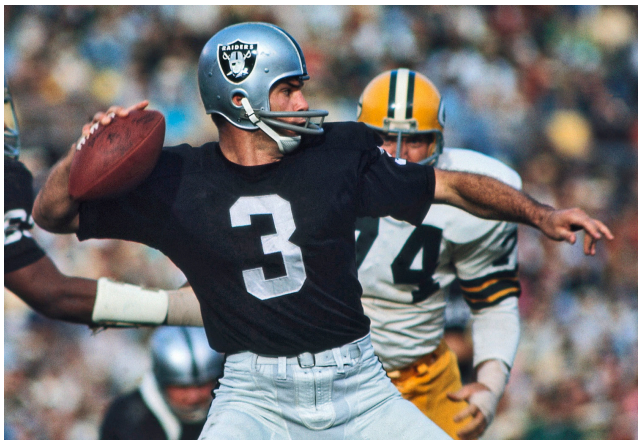




Two of the league's best battled for control of the, the AFC East: (above left) Miami's league-leading backfield of Jim Kiick (21), Larry Csonka (39), and Mercury Morris (22) won the Dolphins an 11-3 record, matched by the league's best scoring offense, the New York Jets,including (above right) famed quarterback Joe Namath's best season since 1968, with twenty-nine passing touchdowns

Due to the loss to Houston, Miami's postseason spot was threatened by a historic revival of the New York Jets. Though Miami beat New York 20-7 in their first meeting the Jets were 6-1 at the midway point of the season, finding ways to outscore their opponents, dominate the fourth quarter, and win close contests. Despite a 45-24 drubbing by the Washington Redskins in the eighth week, the Jets closed the season strongly. New York won their rematch with the Dolphins 31-23 and, even with a narrow loss to Oakland in Week 13, finished 11-3 just as Miami did. The Jets led the league in points scored (396), supported by respectable defense (the NFL's seventh-best scoring defense, fourth-best against the pass.) Famed quarterback Joe Namath not only regained but in some ways surpassed his youthful form. Namath threw for 3062 yards and twenty-nine touchdowns on the season, both of which led the league, against fifteen interceptions. Mighty second-year fullback John Riggins, nicknamed "Diesel" for his physical strength and running style, finished second in the NFL with 1339 yards rushing, plus eight touchdowns, and third in the league in yards per carry. Veteran halfback Emerson Boozer ran for eight scores himself as he added 731 rushing yards to the team's total.

Elsewhere in the AFC fortunes varied. In the AFC East Baltimore held on after early difficulties for a 7-7 season, a disappointment in the wake of two straight trips to the AFC Championship game and the Colts' victory in Super Bowl V. Despite another strong season from O.J. Simpson, who led the league in rushing with 1412 yards, the Buffalo Bills ended the year 5-9. The New England Patriots scraped ahead of Houston's won-loss record at 3-11. In the AFC Central, buoyed by a number of successful recent draft picks who included quarterback Ken Anderson, the Cincinnati Bengals registered a strong season at 9-5; to fans' delight they inflicted two of the Pittsburgh Steelers' three losses on the year. Pittsburgh, meanwhile, dropped its seasonal series with the Bengals and an early contest with the Oakland Raiders, but won their other eleven games to finish 11-3 in command of the division. Still building strength on defense, Pittsburgh registered the league's lowest number of points allowed (160). Starting quarterback Terry Bradshaw continued to improve after earlier, more erratic seasons. Rookie running back Franco Harris delivered 1277 yards on the ground, recharging Pittsburgh's offense as he earned AP Offensive Rookie of the Year honors and a Pro Bowl appearance in his first year of play.



One quiet success story of the 1972 season was the Oakland Raiders' 11-3 rise to the top of the AFC: led by veteran quarterback Daryle Lamonica's (3) final season as the team's starter, the Raiders defeated the AFC's other two division-winners in regular season play and maintained a high standard of performance all year; (left) Lamonica seen in second-week action against the Green Bay Packers, a game Oakland won 27-7 with the help of two Lamonica touchdown passes

In the AFC West, head coach John Madden's Oakland Raiders kept up their high standards quietly but firmly. The Raiders did drop three games to divisional rivals - the Chargers, Broncos, and Chiefs - but these

were Oakland's only losses on the year. In turn the Raiders defeated both the Pittsburgh Steelers and New York Jets head-to-head, and rallied to take the AFC West. Strong fourth-quarter defense and the Raiders' improved running game with backs Clarence Davis and Pete Banaszak contributed. So too did a solid year from quarterback Daryle Lamonica. "The Mad Bomber" threw for 2305 yards and twenty touchdowns, against fourteen interceptions. On defense, veteran cornerback Willie Brown led the league in interceptions as Oakland defended the pass as well as they used it on offense.

Elsewhere in the AFC West the Kansas City Chiefs began the year strong but a four-game losing streak late in the season pushed them down to a 7-7 record. With veteran quarterback John Hadl still calling plays the San Diego Chargers fought their way to 6-8 with a win against the Raiders and a 17-point comeback victory against the Detroit Lions, boosts to morale in a year when the undermanned Chargers were expected to do poorly. The Denver Broncos, on the other hand, disappointed expectations as they struggled on offense all year and finished 4-10.



Washington Redskins running back Larry Brown (43) was 1972's breakout star of the league's most successful regular-season team - at 12-2 Washington rose to the top of the NFL with first-class performances all round but notably Brown's league-leading combined yardage and touchdowns from scrimmage; Brown would end the season named the Associated Press's league MVP for 1972

In the National Football Conference the NFC East proved to be the powerhouse division of 1972 with a series of outstanding team performances that included the NFL's most successful regular-season squad, the Washington Redskins. The Redskins started strong and carried on likewise as they led off the season 8-0. The streak was capped by a 45-24 win over the New York Jets in which Washington quarterback Billy Kilmer threw for four touchdowns. Week 9 brought the Skins up short, with a 30-13 loss to the surging New York Giants, but the team recovered with strong wins against Atlanta and Green Bay. Despite a 34-31 loss to the Cowboys in the penultimate week of play, Washington finished the season 12-2 atop each of the NFC East, the conference, and the league.

Strength on both sides of the ball contributed as Washington posted the second-highest points total of the year (368) behind the Jets and just ahead of the Oakland Raiders, along with the best points defense (202 allowed) in the NFC. Head coach George Allen's "Over the Hill Gang" of veterans pulled from around the NFL excelled in forcing turnovers and defending the run. On offense Billy Kilmer threw for twenty-four touchdowns in 1972 while his partner at the position Sonny Jurgensen added four more. The dynamic engine of Washington's offense was halfback Larry Brown, who enjoyed the best season of his career with 1755 combined rushing and receiving yards from scrimmage, a league high for the year, and sixteen combined touchdowns.

With home-field advantage for the playoffs, Washington fans nurtured hopes for their first shot at a league title in a generation.

Washington was not the only surging franchise in the NFC East. The New York Giants, largely in the doldrums for a decade, began the year unremarkably at 4-4. At that point the Giants launched a six-game win streak that stole headlines around the league. New York decisively beat the Washington Redskins 30-13, the Miami Dolphins 24-7, and in the last week of play the Dallas Cowboys at Texas Stadium 21-16. The last victory was a rubber match for the NFC's wild-card postseason spot. Both New York and the Cowboys entered with 9-4 records poised for the opportunity. Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach had enjoyed another strong season, largely displacing his predecessor turned platooning partner Craig Morton (Morton made clear through the course of this process his desire to be traded from Dallas to another franchise.) Dallas concentrated much of its effort on further development of their "Doomsday Defense" as the defending Super Bowl champions worked to dominate the line of scrimmage and field a devastating pass rush. Staubach and head coach Tom Landry believed that with a return to the playoffs they could surprise and overcome the competition. In Week 16, however, the Giants scotched those hopes.

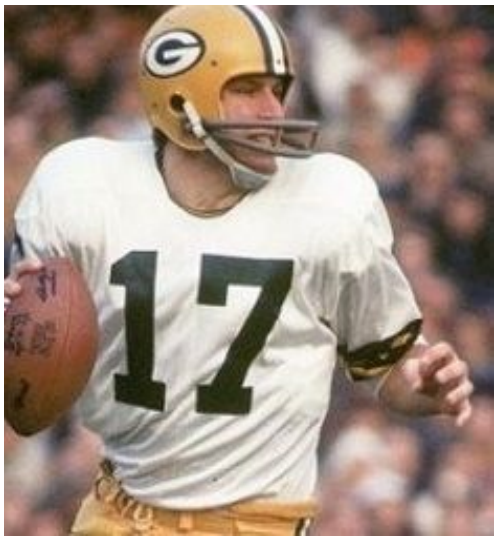
New York's offense was the key to its successful streak, led by former University of Michigan halfback Ron Johnson who scored more rushing touchdowns (13) on the year than any other NFL back. Experienced quarterback Norm Snead posted his best season in years with twenty touchdowns and just eleven interceptions. At the bottom of the division, the Philadelphia Eagles had much less to cheer. Philadelphia made rookie draft pick John Reaves, a collegiate star from the University of Florida, their primary starter for the season. Reaves, however, had a 2-10 record in that role as Philadelphia finished 3-11.



New York Giants halfback Ron Johnson (30), seen in action against divisional rivals the Philadelphia Eagles, scored an NFL-leading thirteen rushing touchdowns in 1972 as a late win streak took the Giants to the postseason for the first time in a decade

The NFC Central yielded its own share of contrasts. The Chicago Bears continued to struggle with scoring and second-half defense and finished poorly. The Minnesota Vikings, a major league power at the turn of the 1970s who now enjoyed the return of star quarterback Fran Tarkenton, underperformed losing key divisional matchups despite the continued strength of their "Purple People Eaters" defensive line and slumped to 6-8 on the year. In Green Bay Packers head coach Dan Devine sought victory on the Miami Dolphins model: a mighty running game attached to defense that was effective rather

than flamboyant. To that Devine added his key offensive draft pick of the year, University of Nebraska quarterback Jerry Tagge, who Devine fielded as the Packers' primary starter. In that role the young Tagge passed for three touchdowns and ran for three more, but also threw eighteen interceptions and posted a 3-8 record in games started as the Packers limped to a 5-9 finish, their only bright spots some effective defensive play and young All-Pro halfback John Brockington.




NFC Central quarterbacks made a study in contrasts in 1972: (left) Packers draft pick Jerry Tagge (17) faltered in the starter's role, while (right) Detroit Lions quarterback Greg Landry (11) led Detroit to a division title and finished as the league's passing champion on the season

Another NFC Central quarterback enjoyed a very different year: the Detroit Lions' Greg Landry became one of the season's stars as the Lions won the division with their best record in a decade. While the Lions fielded a reasonable defense it was, untypically, Detroit's offense that shone. Detroit posted the seventh-highest points total in the league and won several high-scoring contests over the course of the season, notably a 34-31 passing contest with the Atlanta Falcons and a 38-28 win over the Buffalo Bills in Week 13 as Landry's arm bested O.J. Simpson's rushing. Landry threw for 2655 total yards, third in the league, and the third-most touchdowns with twenty-six, against just nine interceptions as he became the NFL's passer rating champion for the year. Nor was he alone on offense: halfback Altie Taylor rushed for the only 1000-yard season of his career with nine touchdowns while veteran Mel Farr added four more as the Lions scored their way to 11-3.

The NFC West produced another breakout performance at quarterback. Much of the division struggled on the year, against outside opponents and one another, as the Saints' porous defense left them 2-12 while Atlanta finished 6-8. The Los Angeles Rams ended the year level at 7-7, in part on the strength of a Pro Bowl season from rookie halfback and kick returner Jim Bertelsen, though the effort was not enough to save head coach Tommy Prothro's job. The key play-caller's role came for the San Francisco 49ers: not long-established Niners star John Brodie but rather his sometime partner, more often backup, Steve Spurrier.

San Francisco lost Brodie for what amounted to the full season with a hip injury in the Niners' first-week win against San Diego. He was replaced by Spurrier, a Heisman-winner in college who had been inconsistent and injury-prone in the pros. At first the change did not augur well, as Spurrier had issues with interceptions and San Francisco stood at 2-2 after four weeks. Then,

in a trio of excellent personal performances by Spurrier the Niners defeated the Giants, Saints, and Falcons in order to rally their season. The team produced close, hard-fought wins in later weeks also, even a near-miss against the defending-champion Cowboys in a 14-7 loss. The crucial game came in Week 12 as Spurrier won a quarterback shootout with Los Angeles Rams veteran Roman Gabriel 31-28 in a game that gave San Francisco a decisive divisional advantage. After a lopsided win over the Falcons and a strong defensive stand to beat Minnesota in the last week of play, the Niners finished 10-4 at the top of the NFC West. Offense at the right time had made the difference, as San Francisco only scored forty-four more points (297) than it gave up (253). Spurrier meanwhile threw for an impressive 2916 yards, narrowly behind Joe Namath, along with twenty-three touchdowns against fifteen interceptions, plus one tuck-and-run score on the ground. For his decisive role in San Francisco's success, Spurrier became the Pro Football Writers' Association's inaugural Comeback Player of the Year.

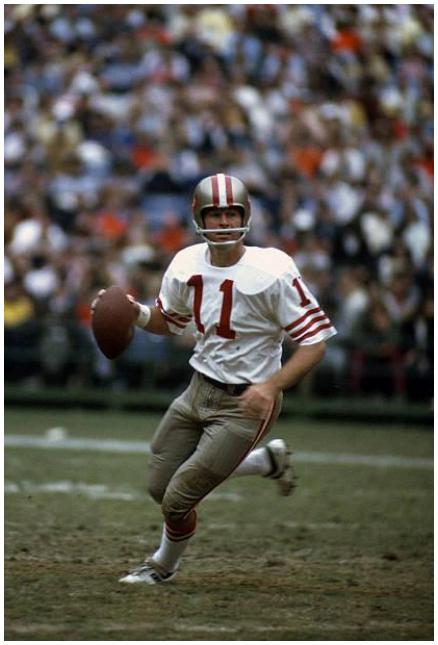


The 1972 playoffs produced a host of surprises: in the AFC Championship game, known thereafter as "The Shocker at Shea," the AFC East champion Jets defeated the powerful Miami Dolphins 41-7 (left); among other elements of their dominant offense the Jets' veteran running back Emerson Boozer (32) ran for two touchdowns in the lopsided victory

The 1972 AFC playoffs featured a clash of titans. Each of the four qualifying teams finished the season 11-3: the New York Jets won the AFC East over the Miami Dolphins on points differential (the teams were even on a series of other tiebreakers), while the Oakland Raiders enjoyed home-field advantage as they had beaten the Jets and Steelers directly. The playoffs were distinguished in part by the emergence of the Jets' defense as a major force; they produced their best play of the season at the right moment. In the divisional round, New York hosted the Steelers at Shea Stadium in a 24-10 victory. The Jets' defense dominated an indifferent Pittsburgh offense while Joe Namath threw for an early go-ahead touchdown and New York led 24-3 before a late Franco Harris scoring run lessened the margin. In Oakland, the Raiders found their hoped-for advantages ground down by Miami's "No Name Defense" that held the Raiders to one field goal in the first half and sacked Daryle Lamonica five times. In the second half a 76-yard Charlie Leigh punt return for a touchdown broke the game open as the Dolphins controlled the clock and eventually won 20-6, rekindling hopes for a repeat visit to the Super Bowl.

Dolphins players and fans believed the team had revived its fortunes and would contain the Jets' offense as they had Oakland's, then win by control of the ball and the clock. Instead the AFC Championship game would go down as "The Shocker at Shea": the New York Jets overwhelmed the Dolphins 41-7 in a stunning upset. The Jets' defense bottled up Miami's

famed running game and intercepted Miami quarterback Earl Morrall twice before late replacement by Bob Griese who threw for the Dolphins' only touchdown. Emerson Boozer ran for two Jets touchdowns, while the game's star proved to be Joe Namath who completed 22 of 28 passes for 311 yards and a trio of scores.



The San Francisco 49ers emerged from a difficult start to their 1972 as NFC West champions, led by backup quarterback and PFWA Comeback Player of the Year (left) Steve Spurrier (11); Spurrier's excellent performance in the regular season carried over, as the Niners returned to the NFC Championship game before a hard-fought loss to the Washington Redskins

The 1972 NFC playoffs included upsets as well, notably by the San Francisco 49ers. While the Niners had reached the two most recent NFC Championship games, in 1972 the Washington Redskins were prohibitive favorites to take the NFC title and, according to oddsmakers, even money to win Super Bowl VII. In the NFC's divisional round San Francisco traveled to Tiger Stadium in Detroit to face the 11-3 Lions. Detroit moved the ball: Altie Taylor ran for 141 yards on the day while Greg Landry tossed an early touchdown pass. More often than not however San Francisco stalled and stopped Lions drives as they crossed midfield. The Niners ran effectively - Vic Washington and Larry Schreiber both turned in rushing touchdowns - and Ralph McGill returned a punt fifty-nine yards for a touchdown in the 31-17 win. In the other matchup Ron Johnson made most of the running for the Giants, with 166 combined yards, while Norm Snead put up modest numbers but also a touchdown pass. Despite that Washington's Larry Brown produced 112 yards of his own to move the ball, while Billy Kilmer and Sonny Jurgensen teamed for three touchdowns, one for Kilmer and two for Jurgensen, as Washington shut down New York in the second half to win 21-13.

In freezing rain at RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C. Washington and San Francisco faced off for the NFC crown. The first quarter seemed to pesage another San Francisco upset: the Niners scored first on a methodical drive that ended with a one-yard endzone dive by Ken Willard, then two possessions later a bolt from Steve Spurrier to Terry Beasley on a crossing pattern that turned into a 51-yard touchdown and put the Niners up 14-0. Shortly before halftime, the Redskins answered with a drive of their own that ended with a short-yardage fade from Billy Kilmer to Roy Jefferson in the corner of the endzone as the teams went to their locker rooms with a 14-7 San Francisco lead.

In the third quarter the teams' defenses played a more prominent role, though Washington put the ball on the ground and wore at the Niners with a pair of field goals. San Francisco answered with its own ball-control drive for a field goal early in the fourth quarter that made it 17-13 in San Francisco's favor. After another exchange of punts Washington took hold of the ball and

moved it methodically into San Francisco's end, before springing Larry Brown on a sweep to the right for twenty yards and a go-ahead touchdown. After that Washington's defense stepped into the gap, as the Redskins thwarted two Niners drives, the second by intercepting Spurrier after which Washington held the ball and ran the clock down for the win. Larry Brown led the teams' running backs with 94 yards and a score on the day, while San Francisco managed just 113 team yards on the ground. Billy Kilmer and Sonny Jurgensen combined for 218 yards and Kilmer's touchdown pass to help put Washington back in contention, while Steve Spurrier completed fourteen of twenty-eight passes for 216 yards and a touchdown, but also two interceptions as, once again, San Francisco fell just short of the title game.

Super Bowl VII, played at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, featured the league's leading offenses. Despite the general tenor of play in the "Dead Ball" era of 1970-76, the Jets and Redskins reached the title game in large part by outscoring their opponents, with a relative balance between passing and rushing. Redskins head coach George Allen emphasized defense in his preparations for the game, while the Jets' Weeb Eubank, who had taken the team to its upset victory in Super Bowl III, preferred to keep his game plan from public scrutiny and his cards much closer to his vest.



Super Bowl VII pitted the league's top offenses against one another: (left) New York Jets fullback John Riggins (44) finds an opening on a draw play against the Washington Redskins, just after the handoff from quarterback Joe Namath (12); Riggins would become the game's MVP with two key rushing touchdowns in the second half as the Jets outmatched Washington late in the game for a 20-17 victory

On a cold, gray day in Los Angeles - even by January standards - New York won the coin toss for the game's first possession. After a Jets punt, Washington broke out to a lead at a clip: after three straight completions by Billy Kilmer, Larry Brown seized a pitchout, cut back across the entire field, and dove into the endzone corner for an 18-yard touchdown. Despite a heavy and effective Redskins pass rush - Joe Namath was sacked twice during the drive - New York responded with a push inside Washington's 10-yard line. On third down, Emerson Boozer fumbled on a draw play; though New York recovered the ball it forced the Jets to settle for a field goal. After a battle of position on punts, midway through the second quarter New York pressed ahead on the ground close enough that, when stopped on downs, Bobby Howfield hooked through a second field goal to bring the Jets within a point. For the rest of the

half, both teams' defenses drew tight when the other team crossed midfield. Each side attempted a field goal from the edge of their range near the end of the half; both missed.

The shape of the game changed dramatically on the second half's first play from scrimmage. On a trap play up the middle, Larry Brown was hit by New York's John Ebersole and fumbled on Washington's 34-yard line. After a pass by Namath, young fullback John Riggins blew through the middle of the line, knocking down two Washington defensive backs en route to a 25-yard touchdown. Washington's woes continued as, on their next possession, Billy Kilmer was intercepted by Rich Sowells and the team found itself lucky to hold the line sufficiently to force a 49-yard field goal attempt that sailed wide left. Washington added a field goal of their own after a patient drive that brought them within three. The Jets, who seemed ready to meet any challenge in the third quarter, moved the ball patiently until a 58-yard play-fake from Joe Namath to young Jerome Barkum, which set up another touchdown run by Riggins, this one of seventeen yards, to put New York in the clear 20-10. With the start of the fourth quarter George Allen brought in his more senior quarterback as Sonny Jurgensen led the Redskins patiently downfield to a short field goal attempt. Much to Washington fans' disappointment, however, Curt Knight chipped his shot to the right leaving the score unchanged. For much of the rest of the quarter New York played a ball-control game, trading time for occasional Washington possessions. With barely a minute left Jurgensen rallied Washington's offense again and, on his second pass of a last drive, hit tight end Mack Alston on a post pattern free of coverage for a dramatic 58-yard score. Rallying around Jurgensen's lightning strike, George Allen set the field for an onside kick, with hopes that another Jurgensen pass could put them in range of a tying field goal. With the low grounder well struck by Knight, the chance of a first Super Bowl overtime period seemed alive, until halfback Cliff McClain, brought in for his good hands on the coverage team, snatched the ball just ahead of two Washington players and covered. Joe Namath then fell on a snap and secured New York's second Super Bowl title.

The game was hard-fought, separated in the end by Curt Knight's fatefully muffed field goal attempt in the fourth quarter. Washington produced just over one hundred team rushing yards, led by Larry Brown who owned both the team's lead touchdown and a fateful fumble. Despite a strong start Billy Kilmer wilted as the game went on, completing just under half his passes for 170 yards and an interception. By comparison Sonny Jurgensen distinguished himself, as he completed five of eight passes for 77 yards and his dramatic late score. Joe Namath meanwhile went 14 of 23 for 235 yards, but with his limited mobility was sacked six times by the Redskins' aggressive pass rush and produced no scores, while Washington's defense bottled up Emerson Boozer as well. The game's true playmaker was John Riggins, who rushed for 94 yards and both New York's touchdowns, while he averaged nearly five yards a carry in the process. For those game-winning distinctions Riggins was named the game's Most Valuable Player.

The Jets returned to New York for a ticker-tape parade, restored to a place atop the AFC, while Washington showed that they had arrived firmly among the NFC's elite teams. As the 1970s

progressed the teams' fortunes would diverge. In this moment, however, they were linked as examples of continuity and change for the league in the wake of the NFL-AFL merger.

Rules changes tied to the 1972 season were by and large process-oriented and modest; coaching changes carried more weight and long-term effect. Regulation hash marks on the field were moved closer together, cutting down on sharp angles for field goals and short-side play for offenses, while kicks into the endzone could now be fielded and put in play, rather than registered as automatic touchbacks. Tie games would now count for one-half game in each of the win and loss columns calculating win percentages and win-loss-record tiebreakers.

The run of play in 1972 produced several significant coaching changes. One came at the season's start, as Stanford's successful head coach John Ralston arrived in Denver to take charge of the Broncos. Others occurred as the year went on or at its close. Los Angeles Rams owner Carroll Rosenbloom fired Tommy Prothro, replacing him with Chuck Knox from the successful Detroit Lions' coaching staff. In New England, head coach John Mazur was fired eleven games into the season. After interim arrangements, at the end of the season Patriots owner Billy Sullivan hired the University of Oklahoma's 1972 national title-winning head coach Chuck Fairbanks to take charge of the reeling team. After Philadelphia's 3-11 year coach Ed Khayat was released in February, replaced by Atlanta Falcons defensive coordinator and former on-field star for the Eagles' 1960 championship team, Marion Campbell. In St. Louis, Bob Holloway was fired in the thirteenth week of play and by January Cardinals owner Bill Bidwill hired San Diego State head coach Don Coryell to right St. Louis' fortunes. In Green Bay, the Packers released Dan Devine after two seasons and a 9-17-2 record. In his place the Packers hired their former star quarterback Bart Starr to take charge on the sidelines, his first head coaching position.

1973 [click to expand]

1973 National Football League season
1973 NFL Playoffs
AFC Champion Miami Dolphins
NFC Champion Los Angeles Rams

Super Bowl VIII
Date January 13, 1974
Site Rice Stadium, Houston, Texas
Result Los Angeles Rams 24, Miami Dolphins 17
Super Bowl MVP Roman Gabriel (QB, Los Angeles Rams)

Bert Bell Award O.J. Simpson (RB, Buffalo Bills)
Associated Press League MVP O.J. Simpson (RB, Buffalo Bills)
AP Offensive Player of the Year Roman Gabriel (QB, Los Angeles Rams)
AP Defensive Player of the Year Dick Anderson (SS, Miami Dolphins)
AP Offensive Rookie of the Year Sam Cunningham (RB, New England Patriots)
AP Defensive Rookie of the Year Wally Chambers (DE, Chicago Bears)
PFWA Comeback Player of the Year Dave Hampton (RB, Atlanta Falcons)
AP NFL Coach of the Year Chuck Knox (HC, Los Angeles Rams)
Single-season passer rating leader Roman Gabriel (QB, Los Angeles Rams)
Seasonal rushing leader O.J. Simpson (RB, Buffalo Bills)

The NFL's 1973 season produced a high standard of play, new league records, and a historic clash of unbeaten teams for the league title in Super Bowl VIII, all at a time of turmoil for the country at large. In the wider world the season played out against a background of the indictment of former president Richard Nixon on a series of charges, the Galbraith controls on wages and prices to staunch rising inflation, and the Oil Shock that followed from OPEC's embargo of petroleum to the United States and some European nations in response to the McGovern administration's support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War. Closer to the ebbs and flows of the NFL labor relations between players and ownership stood at a low point. Rumors floated of a strike during the season or before 1974's, besides potential competition from the planned World Football League that aimed to challenge the post-merger NFL's primacy in the sport.

In keeping with the tenor of the times, movement toward the 1973 season started with an act of government intervention. The United States Congress used a new law to change the league's home-game blackout policy, a decision that would have profound importance in 1974 as a precedent and model for government intervention in league affairs. Before early 1973 NFL policy was to black out television coverage of games in a team's home city. In 1972 this

significantly affected the Washington Redskins, whose run to the Super Bowl captured national attention. However, many devoted fans of the team who included incumbent president Richard Nixon, incoming president George McGovern, and numerous members of Congress, could not watch key games because of the blackout policy. President Nixon threatened to review the league's antitrust exemption if the practice did not change; NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle stood behind the rule and the league's autonomy. In practice, the new 93rd Congress changed the blackout standard through legislation, so that home games would not be kept off local television so long as they sold out at least 72 hours before kickoff.

As Congress got to grips with the blackout rule, the league staged its 1973 Draft. The Denver Broncos and Baltimore Colts made good use of the first round: Denver traded later-round picks in 1973 and 1974 to the Houston Oilers in return for Houston's first-place pick, with which the Broncos took All-American defensive lineman from the University of Tampa John Matuszak. At six-foot-eight and over 280 pounds, Matuszak would become an integral part of Denver's "Orange Crush" defense of the 1970s. With their original sixth spot in the draft the Broncos chose Purdue running back Otis Anderson, who would go on to a much-decorated career. With the overall second-place pick, gained from the New Orleans Saints in return for later slots and a first-round pick in 1974, the Baltimore Colts took the 1972 season's Heisman Trophy runner-up LSU quarterback Bert Jones as the designated successor to league legend Johnny Unitas. Baltimore also took multiple-Pro Bowl defensive lineman Joe Ehrmann later in the first round.

Linemen, on both sides of the ball, figured often in the early picks. The Buffalo Bills arranged a swap of draft positions with the Philadelphia Eagles, along with existing players in trade, to take the Eagles' third-place spot and gain star Michigan State guard and future Pro Football Hall of Fame inductee Joe de Lameilleure. Recently given a clean bill of health after heart-murmor issues, De Lameilleure was the expected first pick before Denver's unorthodox move for Matuszak. The New England Patriots took another future Hall of Famer, guard John Hannah, while the Eagles themselves took future All-Pro tackle Jerry Sisemore. First-year Patriots head coach Chuck Fairbanks traded with the Rams to secure USC halfback Sam Cunningham, who rose swiftly to leadership in New England's backfield. Shortly thereafter the Cleveland Browns took the Oklahoma Sooners' Heisman Trophy-winning halfback Greg Pruitt, and the Minnesota Vikings selected dual-threat running back Chuck Foreman.

The second round served the Chicago Bears well as they took both quarterback Ron Jaworski and Pro Bowl defensive end Mike Barnes. The Broncos, who continued to enjoy a strong draft, took defensive lineman Barney Chavous, followed by multiple-Pro Bowl linebacker Tom Jackson in the third round. For the New York Giants the second round yielded up future Hall of Fame linebacker Brad Van Pelt and Florida State's star quarterback Gary Huff. The St. Louis Cardinals gained running back Terry Metcalf who would play a major role in head coach Don Coyrell's offense, while the San Diego Chargers chose quarterback Dan Fouts, the Dallas Cowboys a future star of their defensive line in Harvey Martin, and the Oakland Raiders the unconventional pick of future Hall of Fame punter Ray Guy in the first round. Two standouts

among later rounds were the Green Bay Packers' choice of All-Pro center Larry McCarran and the Bengals' pick of lead back Charles "Boobie" Clark.

Several significant player trades occurred in the off-season, notably at the quarterback position. Dissatisfied with his options in that role, the Green Bay Packers' new head coach Bart Starr traded quarterback Scott Hunter, defensive tackle Dave Pureifory, and three 1974 draft picks to the San Diego Chargers in return for the San Diego's longtime starter John Hadl, who had led former coach Sid Gillman's pass-driven Chargers squads of the 1960s to the AFL postseason five times. After plans by the Atlanta Falcons to acquire Minnesota Vikings backup quarterback Bob Lee fell through in 1972, the Falcons looked again around the league and found an opportunity in Dallas. There, veteran Cowboys quarterback Craig Morton, edged to one side by the success of Roger Staubach, wanted out of the situation and found Atlanta's offer attractive. The trade of Morton for a collection of 1974 draft picks plus $250,000 - insisted on by Cowboys owner Tex Schramm as insurance against draft busts - took Morton to Atlanta. In a move that would have significant effects on league culture in coming seasons, new Los Angeles Rams head coach Chuck Knox acquired African American quarterback James Harris, at that time out of football after a stint with the Buffalo Bills. Knox had been impressed by "Shack" Harris while in an earlier coaching position and set him out as the reserve for veteran Rams quarterback Roman Gabriel. To the consternation of the Rams' owner, Carroll Rosenbloom, who saw a possible trade of Gabriel to the Eagles fall through when Philadelphia's new coach Marion Campbell scotched the plan, this meant Los Angeles was the only team in the NFL whose quarterback staff was wholly non-white. Besides James Harris, Gabriel's father was Filipino, which had made Gabriel the first Asian-American starting quarterback in the league when he arrived in 1962.

When play started for 1973, the eyes of many fans and professional observers were drawn to the AFC East, home to the defending Super Bowl champions the New York Jets and also the powerful Miami Dolphins: in 1972 Miami had been two poor games away from a Super Bowl appearance of their own. These squads were not the only attraction in the division, however. Though the Buffalo Bills continued to struggle on defense, and worked through a quarterback controversy that involved familiar starter Dennis Shaw and rookie Joe Ferguson from the University of Arkansas, the team was elevated by an outstanding personal feat.

Buffalo's star running back, O.J. Simpson, enjoyed a record-breaking year at his position that drove a record-setting rushing offense for the Bills, nicknamed "The Electric Company" for their ability to turn on "The Juice," Simpson's longtime nickname. The Bills' fullbacks, Jim Braxton and Larry Watkins, also produced outstanding seasons, rushing for nearly 500 yards each. Simpon himself delivered a record 2105 yards and fourteen touchdowns, at an average of 6.2 yards per carry - that average remains the league record for a seasonal rushing champion. The Bills as a whole produced 3214 rushing yards on the year, the NFL record for a 14-game season (the 1976 New England Patriots narrowly eclipsed it in sixteen games while other teams have approached it, notably the 1977 Los Angeles Rams, the 1980 Houston Oilers, and the 1984 Baltimore Colts.)

Despite this prolific ability to move the ball, the Bills had some difficulty scoring. Their run game did yield twenty-three touchdowns, but Bills quarterbacks threw for only seven, while the team led the AFC in a dubious statistic: the number of Bills drives inside their opponents' 20-yard line that failed to generate points. A gritty defensive loss to the Jets early in the season and a shocking upset at the hands of the New Orleans Saints in which Archie Manning threw for three Saints touchdowns left the Bills at 8-6, a real improvement on past performances for head coach Lou Saban but out of reach of the postseason.

The once-mighty Baltimore Colts found themselves in the division's cellar, as legendary quarterback Johnny Unitas was pulled from action after the fourth week. Head coach Don McCafferty resigned in protest (heated, verbally abusive arguments between Colts owner Robert Irsay and McCafferty have sometimes been blamed for McCafferty's fatal heart attack nine weeks later.) Substitute Marty Domres failed to impress as the Colts faltered before a late-season win for rookie Bert Jones to end the year at 3-11. The New England Patriots lived through a rollercoaster year with a 1-8 record and coach Chuck Fairbanks' job in jeopardy before winning four of the next five to finish 5-9. Key to the upside of New England's season was the 912 rushing yards and nine rushing touchdowns of Sam Cunningham, who managed 1205 combined yards from scrimmage and eleven total touchdowns at key times, earning the AP Offensive Rookie of the Year honor. The league-champion Jets, meanwhile, fell precipitously from grace. The capable defense they established in 1972 failed them, while injuries to halfback Emerson Boozer and inconsistency from Joe Namath hampered the offense. Namath was pulled midway through the season for Bill Demory; matters did not improve and the Jets dropped to 4-10, the most precipitous slump yet for the previous year's Super Bowl winner.

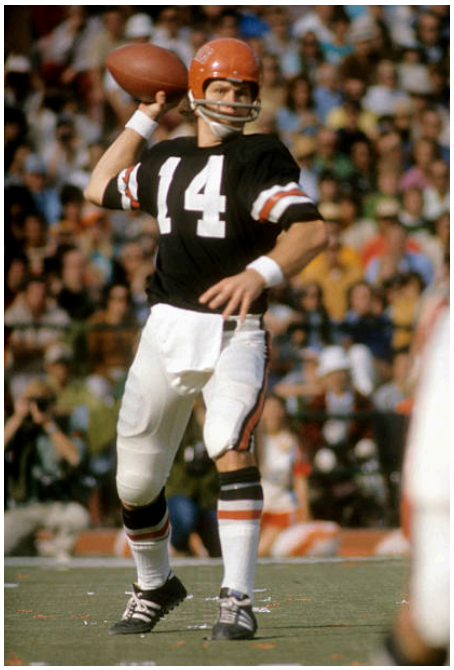


In a division otherwise dominated by the Miami Dolphins' 14-0 regular season, Buffalo Bills running back O.J. Simpson's record-breaking year stood out in its own right; (left) Simpson (32), ran for 2102 yards and propelled Buffalo to its best seasonal record since their 1965 AFL championship year

The stars of both the division and the conference, however, were the Dolphins. Miami's 1973 squad delivered a stronger performance in almost every respect than they had the year before, against a significantly stronger schedule, and finished the regular season undefeated at 14-0. The Dolphins began the year with a hard-won 13-10 victory over the defending NFC champion 49ers, then a 17-9 defeat of a powerful Oakland team (that would finish the year 12-2.) Miami performed well in their division, delivered blowout losses to the Patriots and Jets in the seventh and eighth weeks of play, and in the tenth week survived a 13-0 Buffalo Bills lead to come back for victory 26-20. Miami also beat the Dallas Cowboys and the Pittsburgh Steelers in close games before coasting

past Baltimore and Detroit to an undefeated record. Both Mercury Morris and Larry Csonka delivered 1000-yard seasons again for Miami, the only 1000-yard rushing duo to do so in consecutive seasons, with sixteen combined touchdowns. They were buttressed by Jim Kiick's 514 yards and five touchdowns, as the running game stayed central to Miami's offensive success. Quarterback Bob Griese threw twenty-two touchdowns against just twelve interceptions as he finished with the highest passer rating in the AFC (third in the NFL, behind Roman Gabriel and the Packers' John Hadl.) While Miami had the third-highest total of points scored in the league, the bedrock of the Dolphins' success was their "No Name Defense." One name at least stood out - safety Dick Anderson was voted the Associated Press' Defensive Player of the Year for no less than eight interceptions on the season while he also led league defensive backs in the then-unofficial statistic of quarterback sacks. Miami yielded the fewest points allowed in the NFL for 1973 (139), the fewest rushing yards, and created the most turnovers. After the unexpected slips of 1972 the Dolphins looked again like the team to beat.

In the AFC Central the story of the season was the unexpected success of the Cincinnati Bengals. Cincinnati split its seasonal series with both the Pittsburgh Steelers and the surging Cleveland Browns, delivered key losses to both the Denver Broncos' and Dallas Cowboys' playoff hopes, and took the division with closing wins against Cleveland and Houston. Their early 26-7 upset of the Steelers in the fifth week of play ultimately decided the division title as Cincinnati ended the year 11-3 with Pittsburgh 10-4. Growing defensive strength helped the Bengals' cause, ranked twelfth in the league against the pass and eighth against the run. On offense youth took the helm. Rookie Boobie Clark rushed for 1015 yards and seven touchdowns on the year, the key to the Bengals' ground game. Wideout Isaac Curtis, with outstanding speed as a deep threat, finished second in the league with 945 receiving yards and third among receivers in scoring with ten touchdowns. Young quarterback Ken Anderson served as the fulcrum of offensive coordinator Bill Walsh's precision-passing offense, with 2616 passing yards and twenty-one touchdowns against thirteen interceptions. Anderson's accuracy with the ball in particular earned him the second-highest passer rating in the AFC, behind Bob Griese. All this now seemed to pose a legitimate challenge to the Steelers' supremacy in the division.



One of the 1973 season's unexpected success stories was the Cincinnati Bengals, who edged out Pittsburgh to win the AFC Central with an 11-3 record: (left) quarterback Ken Anderson (14) led the way for the Bengals with twenty-one touchdowns and a key role in victories over the Steelers, Cowboys, and Browns

Despite Cincinnati's divisional victory the Pittsburgh Steelers played their way into the postseason for the second straight year with the AFC's wild-card spot. Pittsburgh's "Steel Curtain" defense remained strong, but the highlight for 1973 was improvement in offensive productivity. After

poor performance early, quarterback Terry Bradshaw was benched in favor of backup Terry Hanratty who enjoyed a 5-2 record as a starter and a career season of productivity with eleven touchdowns against six interceptions before he suffered a broken leg against the Washington Redskins in the eighth week of play. Bradshaw returned with more focus, weathering a loss to the Dolphins while beating the Broncos and Browns. Cleveland meanwhile improved markedly over their 1972 campaign, including an upset victory over the Steelers and seven rushing touchdowns from rookie Greg Pruitt in the Browns' backfield-by-committee setup. The Oilers, however, reeled from hardship to hardship with no Miami upset to console them as in 1972, ending at the bottom of the league 1-13.



Besides undefeated Miami, the other strongest AFC franchise in 1973 was the Oakland Raiders who finished 12-2 thanks to strong defensive play and seasoned offensive leadership: (left) Oakland platooned "The Mad Bomber," Daryle Lamonica (middle), and "The Snake," Ken Stabler (right), at quarterback to good effect in Lamonica's last season as a starter for the Raiders

In 1973 the fortunes of the AFC West were largely the story of two teams, the Oakland Raiders and Denver Broncos. The Raiders emerged, methodically, as one of the strongest teams in the league. Oakland worked through their schedule relentlessly, and sloughed off their only two defeats - to Miami and a one-point loss to Pittsburgh, 14-13, in the ninth week of play - while they stifled opponents' offenses and scored enough points to win. Much of Oakland's strength lay on defense. They fielded the third-best rushing defense in the league on the season and came second in fewest points allowed (145) just behind the Dolphins. Defensive ends Otis Sistrunk and Bubba Smith came second and third, respectively, in the unofficial record of sacks for defensive linemen while safety Jack Tatum was second in the league in interceptions. At quarterback head coach John Madden platooned the veteran Daryle Lamonica and the younger Ken Stabler as they combined for 2715 passing yards and twenty touchdowns, twelve for Stabler and eight for Lamonica. Oakland also ran effectively, controlling the clock at key points as they did in their sixth-week 16-13 victory over the Broncos and their 16-14 halt of a Len Dawson-powered comeback by the Kansas City Chiefs in the penultimate week.

The Broncos, meanwhile, entered the 1973 season meaning to fight their way back up from a 4-11 record the year before. They started the year in difficulty, losing to the Bengals and 49ers by wide margins, but then delivered a 41-0 blowout of the Chicago Bears and a crucial 14-13 victory over the Chiefs. Denver gritted its way ahead from there, against losses to Oakland and Pittsburgh and an overtime defeat in a 34-31 shootout with Don Coryell's Cardinals. Much of Denver's strength lay on defense: after the first two weeks Denver gave up more than 17 points in a game just three times, while the Broncos' rushing defense was one of the strongest in the AFC. On offense, Charley Johnson was reasonably effective at quarterback but injured for two

long stretches, while substitute Steve Ramsey underwhelmed. Denver's real offensive strength lay in their running game as future Hall of Famer Floyd Little scored thirteen touchdowns in his last strong season while rookie Otis Armstrong delivered 644 yards and four more scores. Denver entered the last week of play 7-6 looking for a winning record, but were denied by Oakland in a 21-14 loss. Nevertheless Denver looked much improved. Head coach John Ralston eyed the team's hard-fought losses to Oakland and opportunities to improve both the Broncos' quarterbacking situation and the defensive secondary. Elsewhere in the division Kansas City slogged to a disappointing 6-8 record with uncertainties at the quarterback slot and on the offensive line, while San Diego limped to 3-11, one of the only bright spots a late-season win over New England for rookie quarterback Dan Fouts.

In the NFC, the NFC East produced hard-fought schedules and frequent disappointments for most teams. The Dallas Cowboys entered the year physically healthy, focused, and ready to leapfrog Washington and New York for another Dallas run at the Super Bowl. Instead the season was one of hard graft and key losses. Dallas suffered an embarrassing 34-10 loss to the Bengals, along with splitting divisional series: the Philadelphia Eagles gained perhaps their most satisfying win of the year with a 23-21 defeat of the Cowboys in the teams' second seasonal matchup, while the Giants and Cardinals likewise split the difference with Dallas. In the presumptive battle for first place in the division, Dallas and the Washington Redskins tied their first encounter 10-10, while the Cowboys powered their way to a 22-10 victory in the second as Redskins quarterback Billy Kilmer gave up three interceptions. The key game of the season came in its last week, as Dallas lost 34-28 to the "Air Coryell" offense of the Cardinals: Cardinals quarterback Jim Hart threw for three touchdowns and fullback Jim Otis ran for a fourth, while for Dallas Roger Staubach threw four touchdown passes but also two interceptions that led to 10 points for St. Louis. As a result Dallas finished the year 8-5-1, again absent from the postseason.

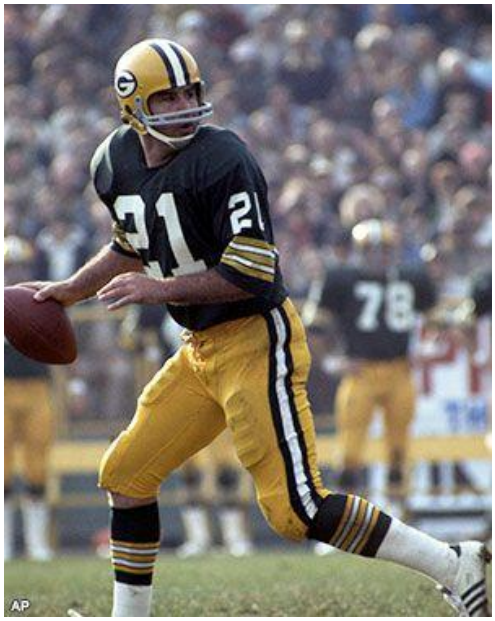
The Washington Redskins, like Dallas, hoped not only for a return to the playoffs but also a shot at the Super Bowl they had so narrowly missed in 1972. And, like Dallas, Washington found slower going as the season took shape. The Redskins split their divisional series with the Giants and Cardinals, which added to the tie and loss against the Cowboys. Washington also struggled with a weaker running game than the season before, but adjusted with a greater emphasis on their quarterbacks: Billy Kilmer threw nineteen touchdowns on the season, while his partner in the role, Sonny Jurgensen, added six. The Redskins' defense remained strong, key to perhaps the best defense-driven game of the season when Washington defeated the Pittsburgh Steelers 7-3. Driven by head coach George Allen's dogged style and attention to detail Washington ultimately finished 9-4-1 as division champions.

Elsewhere in the division the New York Giants enjoyed another strong season from halfback Ron Johnson but defensive lapses and a poor year from quarterback Norm Snead left the Giants at 4-10. The season's surprise was St. Louis, fifth in the league for passing yardage with a 7-7 record that included key upsets of Washington and Dallas. The Philadelphia Eagles benefitted

from head coach Marion Campbell's emphasis on defense, especially their fourth-quarter stand to preserve a lead in their defeat of Dallas. But this did not trump the Eagles' lack of effective offense and a poor season from quarterback Pete Liske as the Eagles finished 4-10.

Veteran observers of the NFC Central expected a strong, perhaps even dominant, season from the replenished Minnesota Vikings when play began. Instead fans saw a revival of fortunes for the Green Bay Packers, who won the NFC Central in the clear as its other teams suffered a range of troubles. For the Vikings the strength of their own schedule was their undoing despite a generally solid level of play, their excellent defensive line, and promising work from rookie fullback Chuck Foreman. Minnesota lost its opening game to Oakland 22-6 and, though they dominated Chicago in the second week, then dropped two more games, a stunning 30-10 loss to the Packers and a 13-10 defeat against the Lions as Greg Landry threw for one touchdown and ran for a second. After a 27-21 quarterback-shootout loss to the Rams as both Fran Tarkenton and Roman Gabriel each threw for three touchdowns, Minnesota stood at 3-4 at the halfway point. A four-game win streak followed while the Vikings sought to rescue their shot at a division title, before stinging losses to the Bengals (28-10) and Packers (28-7) sent Minnesota to an 8-6 finish. Head coach Bud Grant could console himself that other teams had it worse. The Chicago Bears again finished at the bottom of the division with a 3-11 record, though quarterback Bobby Douglass brought some measure of distinction to the year as the first (and thus far only) 1000-yard rusher at the quarterback position in the modern era, with 1077 yards and nine touchdowns on the ground. The Detroit Lions, meanwhile, foundered after their 1972 season with lapses on both sides of the ball and poor offensive productivity, heightened by a back injury to Greg Landry after which Bill Munson took over at quarterback only to go 2-5 in the role as the Lions ended up 6-8.





1973 saw a significant revival in fortunes for the Green Bay Packers, who ended the regular season 10-4 ,winners of the NFC Central, and went on to reach the NFC Championship game: (left) lead running back John Brockington (42), seen here against the Minnesota Vikings, ran for 1324 yards and seven touchdowns, while (right) quarterback John Hadl (21) threw for twenty-two touchdowns and the league's second-highest passer rating on the season

The key seasonal performance in the division came from the Packers. Under first-year head coach Bart Starr, the Packers were whipped into shape on both sides of the ball, with particular defensive strength in the

secondary, a powerful running game, and a veteran quarterback. The year started with a frustrating 21-20 loss to the defending-champion New York Jets, but improved swiftly with a comeback victory over Detroit and authoritative wins over the Giants and Vikings. Green Bay reached the halfway point with only a 4-3 record after losses to the Chiefs and Rams, but from there the Packers dominated the back half of their season. A four-game win streak in which the Packers averaged 20-point margins of victory followed, before a hard-fought loss to the Patriots, after which Green Bay secured the divisional title with wins over the Vikings and Bears to finish 10-4. Linebackers Fred Carr and Jim Carter both delivered Pro Bowl seasons, while second-year cornerback Willie Buchanon was not only voted to the Pro Bowl but also received first team All-Pro honors. On offense lead back John Brockington ran for 1324 yards and seven touchdowns as a constant offensive force. The maligned Jerry Tagge actually performed well as a reserve quarterback, as he threw three touchdowns with no interceptions. As Green Bay's starter, John Hadl produced a lion-in-winter season throwing for 2278 yards, 22 touchdowns, and only 7 interceptions, with the second-best passer rating in the NFL for the season and crucial offensive firepower for Green Bay.



1973 showcased first-year head coach Chuck Knox's (left) meteoric rise to the top of the league with the Los Angeles Rams: the son of a steelworker who took a traditionalist approach to tactics, Knox was at the same time one of the most well-liked and socially progressive coaches in the NFL; in 1973 Knox steered veteran quarterback Roman Gabriel, a gifted young backfield, and one of the league's greatest defenses to a 14-0 record in the regular season, then battled Don Shula's own 14-0 Dolphins in Super Bowl VIII to deliver the first perfect season of the Super Bowl era

In 1973 the NFC West was keyed by one of the two most extraordinary team performances of the season. The Los Angeles Rams surpassed their late-1960s excellence, ending the year for rookie head coach Chuck Knox with a perfect 14-0 record that tied them with the Miami Dolphins as the best in the league. The Rams bolted out of the gate with a difficult but effective 10-6 win over the Atlanta Falcons and storming victories over the Chiefs (40-10), 49ers (49-3), and Oilers (41-14). The Rams' powerful defense blunted multiple Dallas Cowboys drives into field goals to aid in a 17-12 victory at Texas Stadium followed by wins over the Packers and Vikings to reach 7-0 midway through. More dominant victories followed, then a fourth quarter comeback to beat the Giants 16-14 in the thirteenth week, before a strong 27-10 win against the Browns at home in the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum to cap their perfect record. The Rams showed their might on both sides of the line. The Rams' defense was joint-second in the league in fewest points allowed (145), tied with the Raiders, and led the NFC unofficially in sacks and officially in fumble recoveries. On offense, where coach Knox would later earn the moniker "Ground Chuck" for his traditionalist approach, second-year halfback Lawrence McCutcheon ran for 1467 yards and ten touchdowns, second in the league for rushing yardage behind O.J. Simpson and third in scoring. At the same

time, Knox was also happy to use a special weapon: the passing of Roman Gabriel. The veteran quarterback returned to the top of the NFL as the year's all-round passing champion. Gabriel led the league in passing yards (2995), passing touchdowns (25), and passer rating (96.6). His skill on the season was key to many of the Rams' lopsided victories, and also their few crucial comebacks to secure all fourteen wins.



In 1973 one of the league's expansion franchises of the 1960s, the Atlanta Falcons, qualified for the playoffs for the first time with a 9-5 record: (left) running back Dave Hampton (43) produced 1204 yards on the ground and nine touchdowns, a standout season after earlier troubles that made him the PFWA Comeback Player of the Year; (right) young quarterback Pat Sullivan (7), seen here in the same game, a 14-6 victory over the Baltimore Colts, produced by far the best season of his brief, rollercoaster career

Elsewhere in the NFC West one of the league's expansion teams of the 1960s, the Atlanta Falcons, broke through to their first appearance in the postseason. A notably strong season on defense helped lead the way as the Falcons ranked fifth in the league on both points defense and against the run. Four Falcons defenders - defensive linemen Claude Humphrey and John Zook, veteran linebacker Tommy Nobis (the Falcons' first-ever draft pick), and cornerback Ken Reaves - were all named to the Pro Bowl for their quality of play, while future Hall of Famer Humphrey was voted to first team All-Pro honors as well. There was offense at key moments too: lead back Dave Hampton, who had struggled for several seasons and lost much of 1972 to injuries, rushed for 1204 yards and nine touchdowns as Atlanta's leading offensive punch and was named the second annual PFWA Comeback Player of the Year for his efforts. Second-year quarterback Pat Sullivan, given the starter's role for much of the season, produced his best work in the league throwing for 1682 yards with twelve touchdowns and fourteen interceptions, and ran for two more scores in support of a 7-5 starting record. Veteran trade pickup Craig Morton won the other two games of the season, crucially a 24-7 victory over the New Orleans Saints in the last week that vaulted Atlanta over the Cowboys and Vikings into the NFC's wild-card spot. Elsewhere in the division head coach Dick Nolan swapped 49ers quarterbacks John Brodie (in his final season) and Steve Spurrier back and forth with abandon, but neither performed at anything like 1972 levels. San Francisco's defense was patchy at the wrong times, and the defending NFC champions ended the year 7-7. The Saints, still in search of several components of a wholly effective squad, finished 2-12 just above the unfortunate Oilers.

The AFC playoffs featured an engaging mix of teams and situations. The unbeaten Dolphins took home-field advantage, ready for the other teams to come to them on Miami's terms.

Oakland enjoyed home field for the divisional round, against the upstart Bengals who hoped to match the Raiders' defensive play with their own and then outscore the slower Oakland offense of the regular season. The Steelers, relegated to the wild-card spot, nevertheless still had the skills and weapons that had served them well in 1972 and hoped to catch Miami napping before a run at the franchise's notional first Super Bowl.



The Miami Dolphins methodically dismantled their opposition in the 1973 AFC playoffs; (left) in the divisional round the Dolphins ran hard against the Pittsburgh Steelers' nascent "Steel Curtain" defense in a punishing 24-3 victory as fullback Larry Csonka (39) and running back Eugene "Mercury" Morris both ran for scores while the Miami defense suffocated Pittsburgh's offensive drives

Pittsburgh's hopes were disappointed swiftly. Playing Miami at the Orange Bowl, it was the Dolphins' "No Name Defense" that dominated the game. Miami intercepted both Terry Bradshaw and Terry Hanratty on the day and stifled the Steelers' offensive drives, holding Franco Harris in particular to 46 yards. The Dolphins on the other hand ran for 239 yards of their own, as both Larry Csonka and Mercury Morris ran for touchdowns, the latter twice. Bob Griese managed a quiet but solid day in command of Miami's ball-control drives and the Dolphins foreclosed Pittsburgh's hopes by a grim 24-3 score. At Oakland-Alameda Municipal Coliseum, the Raiders and Bengals staged what was, by the standards of the "Dead Ball" era of the early 1970s, a passing shootout. Oakland and Cincinnati each passed for over 200 yards and two touchdowns each, while the potent Raiders defense kept Boobie Clark and the rest of the Bengals' running game well contained. Oakland led 21-17 at the half then tightened the screws in the second thirty minutes, as every Cincinnati drive ended in a punt or turnover and Oakland ran the ball with patient slowness, adding just a field goal to win 24-17.

The AFC Championship game that followed was truly a defensive slog, with Miami and Oakland locked up 7-7 at the half after both Csonka and Oakland's Pete Banaszak ran for touchdowns. In the second half the teams traded field goals but Miami came better out of the war of punts and positioning with a 47-yard Garo Yepremian field goal midway through the fourth quarter to take the win 13-10. Ken Stabler threw for 212 yards for Oakland but for no scores and two interceptions, while Mercury Morris' 119 yards helped set up both Miami's second-half kicks. Though delayed by a season Miami had plotted and executed their return to the title game.

The NFC playoffs yielded definitive wins in the divisional round. At home against Atlanta, the Los Angeles Rams and the upstart Falcons battled to a 10-10 tie at halftime, with a 9-yard Lawrence McCutcheon scoring run and a touchdown pass by Pat Sullivan respectively. In the second half the Rams' defense took charge. Los Angeles sacked Pat Sullivan five times on the day and his replacement Craig Morton once, while the Rams also intercepted Sullivan once and forced three Atlanta fumbles, two of which Los Angeles converted to points. Roman Gabriel

was tentative on the day, playing relatively poorly compared to his regular-season work, but McCutcheon and Jim Bertelsen teamed for 178 rushing yards and three touchdowns to build a permanent lead while the defense held Atlanta scoreless over the second half for a 27-10 result. At Lambeau Field Green Bay hosted the Washington Redskins on a frozen afternoon. Here again defense played a dominant role, as the Packers troubled Larry Brown and Charlie Harraway all day while linebacker Fred Carr and star cornerback Willie Buchanon both intercepted Billy Kilmer. Packers quarterback John Hadl threw an early touchdown pass but also two interceptions of his own, one a pick-six touchdown for the Redskins' Ken Houston, Washington's only touchdown. Reluctantly, Bart Starr benched Hadl in favor of Jerry Tagge during the third quarter; Tagge organized a respectable drive capped by a 7-yard touchdown pass. Hadl returned in the fourth quarter as Green Bay ran out the clock on a 20-10 win.



The 1973 NFC Championship game saw a rematch of the 1967 postseason, as the Los Angeles Rams and Green Bay Packers faced off in a 28-24 shootout that sent the Rams to their first Super Bowl appearance: (left) Packers quarterback John Hadl (21) throws past the onrushing arm of Rams defensive end Fred Dryer (89) - Hadl threw for three touchdowns on the day but also two interceptions, one returned for a touchdown by Rams linebacker "Hacksaw" Jack Reynolds

The NFC Championship game offered an exciting shootout rematch between the Packers and Rams, who had played a memorable game during the 1967 postseason when Roman Gabriel and Packers head coach Bart Starr still quarterbacked their respective teams. Both sides dug in well against the run, and it became clear quickly that the day would be decided in the air. The duel opened with a Roman Gabriel swing pass to Lawrence McCutcheon, who sliced a 51-yard path through the Packers' secondary for a score. Gabriel and the Packers' John Hadl traded touchdown passes through the first half as the teams went to their locker rooms knotted at 14-14. Gabriel passed Los Angeles into the lead; when John Hadl organized a drive in reply he was intercepted by linebacker "Hacksaw" Jack Reynolds who ran the ball back forty-seven yards for a score. With less than two minutes left the Packers mounted up again as Hadl threw for a touchdown to make the game only 28-24 in the Rams' favor, but Los Angeles recovered the onside kick that followed and ran out the clock. The Packers played solidly on many fronts: John Brockington carried the Packers' ground game all but single-handedly with 150 yards on the day but did not score, while John Hadl threw three touchdowns but also two interceptions, one the pick-six play to Reynolds. On the other side of the line the Rams' usually dominant running game was modest at best, but Roman Gabriel completed 18 of 35 passes for 292 yards and three touchdowns.

Super Bowl VIII, played at Rice University Stadium in Houston, Texas, offered a new level of drama for the championship game: a contest between unbeaten teams for the chance both to win the league title and notch a perfect record. The styles of each team's coaches were well

matched: Don Shula and Chuck Knox alike favored punishing defense and ball-control offense with strategic use of the pass. Both were likewise loaded with enough gifted players to parry one another as the day went on. Los Angeles put the first points on the scoreboard near the end of the first quarter, with the first truly effective drive by either team against their formidable defenses; Roman Gabriel threw a screen pass to Lawrence McCutcheon who picked up blocking to run twelve yards for the score.

In the second quarter, as the defenses took one another's measure, the teams were content to trade field goals as the Rams entered halftime ahead 10-3. Don Shula had used reserve quarterback Earl Morrall often in the first half, where Morrall had been ineffective and intercepted once. Shula shifted back to Bob Griese in the third quarter, who engineered a long drive that ended with a 2-yard fade pattern to receiver Paul Warfield in the back corner of the endzone. After the teams traded punts Los Angeles moved a drive past midfield and, after a solid run by Jim Bertelsen, Roman Gabriel threw a short pattern over the middle to McCutcheon again, who made Dick Anderson miss the tackle and rambled 18 yards for a touchdown.



Dolphins halfback Eugene "Mercury" Morris (22) runs to the outside on a sweep pattern against the Los Angeles Rams during Super Bowl VIII; the Dolphins and Rams, both 14-0 unbeatens in the regular season, squared off for the title in the first and thus far only contest of its kind in the Super Bowl era, as the passing of Roman Gabriel gave Los Angeles the fateful edge against Miami's formidable rushing attack as the Rams went on to win 24-17

Miami left no time wasted in reply. On the ensuing drive, the Dolphins patiently moved the ball to midfield, when Larry Csonka broke through the line on a trap play for a memorable 53-yard touchdown run in which he effectively trampled three Rams defenders. The score tied the game at 17-17 and electrified Dolphins fans, who expected to hold that momentum especially on defense. For a time that seemed to be true, as two Rams possessions foundered and Miami worked to run down the clock looking for a chance to score. Midway through the fourth quarter, however, the Rams mounted a drive based largely on Gabriel's passing game, with a key 32-yard play to wideout Rod Sherman that put Los Angeles within scoring distance. Two plays later Gabriel tossed a nine-yard post pattern throw to Dick Gordon for the go-ahead touchdown. After that it was Los Angeles' turn to play effective defense, which blunted Miami's efforts to return the favor. With the last possession in hand, Gabriel killed the clock with a pair of quarterback draws; the Rams had won the championship, denied Miami's second effort at a title, and capped a 17-0 season.

Miami had played well. The teams' control of the ball and clock was largely even through the day, while Griese captained the Dolphins effectively and threw for a touchdown. Csonka, Morris, and Kiick added 109, 97, and 25 yards on the ground respectively. The Rams' ground game fared less well, with no scores to credit and McCutcheon's 75 yards on the day the best

effort. The difference, besides the considerable work of both defenses, was made by the game's MVP Roman Gabriel. Gabriel completed two-thirds of his passes (18 out of 27) for 226 yards and crucially all three Rams touchdowns as the famed veteran proved he had life in his game yet. Many sportswriters and league experts argue that the perfect season secured Gabriel's election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1984.

Perhaps the most important rules change introduced in 1973, in terms of its long-term effects, was a jersey numbering system (players who had played in 1972 and earlier seasons were grandfathered) that coded players by their position on the field. In the initial version the numbers 0, 00, and 90-99 were removed from circulation in the league, but later amendments to the number system returned their use by defensive linemen and linebackers within a decade. The league also banned "ladder" blocking on kicks, whereby a defender would jump or stand on a teammate in order to gain advantage, and ruled that clock starts on changes of possession would happen with the snap of the ball, rather than when referees spotted the ball ready for play as before the change.

The 1973 season yielded very little turnover among coaches but at least two such cases, directly entwined, would significantly affect the league. The Baltimore Colts and Houston Oilers, both in a downward spiral over the course of 1973, engaged in a bidding war for the services of legendary former San Diego Chargers head coach Sid Gillman. Colts owner Robert Irsay won the bid with a stiff $1.5 million five-year contract for Gillman, but the coach still found a way to affect Houston's fortunes. Gillman recommended that Oilers owner Bud Adams hire Gillman's old defensive coordinator from Chargers days, Bum Phillips, who in 1973 was serving as defensive coordinator for Oklahoma State at the college level. Adams listened, and Phillips was signed to replace the careworn Bill Peterson just days after the last game of the season. New Orleans Saints assistant John North took charge of that team in the sixth week of play on J.D. Roberts' resignation and was confirmed in the role for the 1974 season. Changes that did not happen aggravated many fans of the New York Giants and San Diego Chargers as head coaches Alex Webster and Harland Svare, respectively, survived on sufferance tied to the next season's performance. Famed Kansas City Chiefs coach Hank Stram lived under the same contractual sword after the Chiefs' performance in 1973.

1974 [click to enlarge]

1974 National Football League season
1974 NFL Playoffs
AFC Champion Pittsburgh Steelers
NFC Champion Washington Redskins

Super Bowl IX
Date January 12, 1975
Site Tulane Stadium, New Orleans, Louisiana
Result Pittsburgh Steelers 20, Washington Redskins 14
Super Bowl MVP L.C. Greenwood (DE, Pittsburgh Steelers)

Bert Bell Award Otis Armstrong (RB, Denver Broncos)
Associated Press League MVP Sonny Jurgensen (QB, Washington Redskins)
AP Offensive Player of the Year Otis Armstrong (RB, Denver Broncos)
AP Defensive Player of the Year Joe Greene (DE, Pittsburgh Steelers)
AP Offensive Rookie of the Year Dexter Bussey (FB, Detroit Lions)
AP Defensive Rookie of the Year Jack Lambert (LB, Pittsburgh Steelers)
PFWA Comeback Player of the Year Bill Bergey (LB, Philadelphia Eagles)
AP NFL Coach of the Year John Ralston (HC, Denver Broncos)
Single-season passer rating leader Ken Anderson (QB, Cincinnati Bengals)
Seasonal rushing leader Otis Armstrong (RB, Denver Broncos)

The runup to the 1974 NFL season centered on the most consequential event in the development of the modern league other than the 1970 NFL-AFL merger. It grew out of a period of crisis for the NFL, faced with the likelihood of a player strike during spring training and the onward rush of the planned, rival World Football League to prepare for play and lure NFL players with more lucrative contracts. As part of broader government activity in the provision of public goods, Congress and the McGovern administration involved themselves in the resolution of these issues. A committee that consisted of several appointed league owners, NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle, several members of the U.S. House of Representatives led by House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce chairman Haley Staggers, and committee chairman Vice President Phillip A. Hart considered the NFL's labor, commercial, and civic situation - the latter in terms of the relationship between franchises and their home markets - in search of solutions. Vice President Hart proved to be both a thorough and an engaging intermediary, who often joked that he was "the [Detroit] Lions' inside man" at the proceedings. (In fact the vice president's wife, Jane Briggs Hart, was a daughter of the Briggs auto-parts manufacturing magnates who long owned baseball's Detroit Tigers, which made the vice president directly familiar with issues of franchise ownership.)

The end result of those talks was legislation that would have a sweeping, shaping effect on the NFL down to the present day. Officially titled the American Professional Football Regulation Act of 1974, the first version of the bill was introduced and shepherded through the House by Representative John Heinz III, a Republican who represented parts of the Pittsburgh suburbs and described himself as a devoted Steelers fan. In his honor, the legislation was and remains known by shorthand as the Heinz Act. The act created a new and lasting relationship between the NFL's commercial and financial security, and government regulation of its activities.

The Heinz Act first established what amounted to a "benign monopoly" for the post-merger NFL as the official professional league of "standard American-rules football" in the United States on much the same proprietary terms as Major League Baseball and its farm team affiliates in that sport. The act did allow for other professional leagues that adhered to different rule codes: ironically the Heinz Act made Canadian-rules football entirely separate from the NFL's new status and legal within the United States, but that possibility was foreclosed the next year by the Canadian Football Act of 1975 that passed Canada's federal Parliament in Ottawa. The Canadian Football Act prescribed that only the Canadian-rules game could be played professionally in Canada, and that the code could not be exported beyond Canada's borders. This gave the NFL a potentially permanent legal advantage over any upstart leagues, like the proposals for a spring football league mooted since the late 1960s or the nascent WFL.

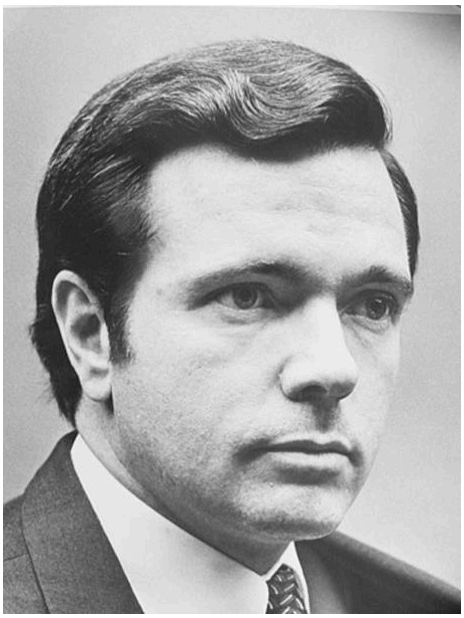
In return for this sweeping and newfound security, the Heinz Act submitted the NFL to new kinds of government regulation. There now would be congressional oversight of the actions, and the appointment of, the league's Commissioner. Labor relations in the NFL had long been a sore point, with an average NFL player the worst-paid athlete in any of the United States' top-level professional sports leagues. Now labor relations would be handled by an offshoot subcommittee of the National Labor Relations Board. The newly minted Football Labor Relations Board (instantly dubbed "the Flurb" by sportswriters and league professionals) would regulate player trades, a managed labor-market approach to free agency, plus salary and benefits benchmarks for the league.

The Heinz Act affected the league's geography. A self described "Rockefeller Republican" keenly interested in the NFL's civic effects on the cities and regions its franchise called home, John Heinz himself wrote into the legislation complex and restrictive rules that included dual hearings by Congress and the Interstate Commerce Commission designed to inhibit owners from moving their teams precipitously to other markets. This was reinforced by the league's now-proprietary status in professional football which tended to cartelize franchise revenues around home turf.

The Act also reshaped, and broadened, the planned 1976 NFL league expansion. Prior to the negotiations that produced the Heinz Act, the NFL intended to select and introduce two new franchises in 1976. After the collapse of Hugh McElhenny's abortive "Seattle Kings" franchise bid in that city, a new and more stable collective ownership bid emerged chaired by the

Nordstrom family of the department-store chain and gained Commissioner Rozelle's approval. Advantage for the other bid seemed to lie with Phoenix, as early Tampa-area proposals foundered after wealthy tax lawyer Hugh Culverhouse was banned from the bid process due to sharp practice in his earlier effort to take over the Los Angeles Rams. Tampa's bid was rescued, however, by a collective bid on the Seattle model orchestrated by several West Florida business interests; lacking a "face" figure to represent the bid to the public, the Tampa boosters induced Hollywood star and former college halfback Burt Reynolds to buy in on the bid, which was approved for the second slot.

This was not, however, the end of the process. In an effort to buy peace and prevent any legal action by boosters of the proposed WFL, the negotiating committee required the NFL to select the two most financially viable franchise bids from the rival league, now foreclosed by the Heinz Act's language, and fold them into the 1976 expansion. The first and more obvious choice was the well-funded bid of Canadian media magnate John F. Bassett, Jr. Bassett had wanted to site an American-rules team through the WFL in Canada's largest sports market, that he planned to label the Toronto Northmen. After this caused a political furore that helped lead to the Canadian Football Act of 1975, Bassett decamped with his resources to the United States and picked Memphis, Tennessee as a favorable market. The second ex-WFL franchise chosen traveled a more complex path. It began as a bid for a WFL team in central Florida that collapsed over logistical and financial issues, including tax-evasion charges against its planned general manager, former New England Patriots player Rommie Loudd. Several potential bid partners worked to relocate their bid to San Antonio but found themselves short of cash. Car-sales magnate and leading San Antonio civic booster Red McCombs bought out the bid. McCombs had long desired to own professional sports franchises and bring them to San Antonio, a process he began with the American Basketball Association team the San Antonio Spurs, who McCombs had brought to the city from Dallas a year earlier. McCombs was able to draw further funds from junior partners who wanted to secure the bid and make Texas the first state other than California and New York to have more than two NFL franchises within its borders.



Rep. John Heinz III (R-PA), then a "Rockefeller Republican" United States Representative from the Pittsburgh suburbs (and devoted Steelers fan), also principal author of the U.S. House of Representatives version of the American Professional Football Regulation Act of 1974, commonly known in his honor as the Heinz Act: the act granted the post-merger NFL an effective monopoly on professionalized American-rules football, in return for active government regulation over NFL labor relations through an agency of the National Labor Relations Board, along with direct Congressional oversight of league administrative changes and relations between NFL franchises and their home cities

While the Heinz Act took shape, and reshaped the league, the NFL moved ahead with its annual calendar led off by the 1974 NFL Draft. Held at the end of January, the 1974 Draft would become famous for its franchise-defining effects on several teams, most famously the Pittsburgh Steelers, John Heinz's own favorites. The

first overall pick in the draft, however, belonged to the Houston Oilers after their dire performance in 1973. With that pick, new Oilers head coach Bum Phillips moved the Oilers' front office to wave off potential bids-in-trade from other teams for the spot and instead select defensive end Ed "Too Tall" Jones from Tennessee State to join the Oilers' defensive line. Phillips intended to run a 3-4 defense with just three down-linemen in front with four linebackers. Jones would anchor one side, with skilled veteran Elvin Bethea on the other. In the center at defensive tackle, Phillips traded backup quarterback Lynn Dickey and veteran running back Paul Robinson, along with third- and fourth- round draft picks in 1975, to Kansas City in return for the much-decorated Curley Culp and a 1975 first-round pick. This gave Phillips a defensive front that could compete against division-rival Pittsburgh's. Houston built strength from the defensive side first, though much later, in the twelfth round, the Oilers would add star wideout and kick returner Billy "White Shoes" Johnson to their roster.

The league-champion Los Angeles Rams did well from the draft themselves. Through a complex series of later-round swaps the Rams acquired picks in hand that they then traded to the hapless Philadelphia Eagles and to the Cleveland Browns, respectively, in return for two high placements in the first round. With the first of these the Rams selected 1973 Heisman Trophy-winner John Cappelletti of Penn State, who would bring further depth and power to a backfield that already had Lawrence McCutcheon and Jim Bertelsen. With the second pick, Los Angeles veered from the typical preferences of head coach Chuck Knox and addressed an issue with the passing game. The Rams had sought a deep-threat receiver ever since a planned offseason trade with Philadelphia in 1973, that would have swapped quarterback Roman Gabriel for the Eagles' famed wideout Harold Jackson, was quashed by Eagles head coach Marion Campbell. Now, to address that shortfall, the Rams took USC wide receiver Lynn Swann with the seventeenth overall pick. There were other motives too: Rams owner Carroll Roosenbloom was famed for snatching up players sought after by other franchises. As a Rams front-office staffer later recounted, "we knew that [the Steelers] were really hot for trying to draft Swann, and we knew both [the Rams and Steelers] were good enough we might meet in a Super Bowl at some point, so Carroll [Rosenbloom] told us, 'go get him.'"

The draft was also prolific for the Denver Broncos, who took future Pro Football Hall of Fame inductee linebacker Randy Gradishar in the first round, then future All-Pro defensive tackle Lucious Selmon, the 1973 Outland Trophy winner out of Oklahoma, in the second to join fellow tackle John Matuszak and defensive ends Lyle Alzado and Barney Chavous at the heart of Denver's "Orange Crush" defense. Denver also addressed offensive issues. In the fourth round Denver selected quarterback Norris Weese from Ole Miss and, in the ninth round, UCLA quarterback Mark Harmon: Harmon had been a prolific rushing scorer out of the option offense, and Denver head coach John Ralston argued that if he did not work out as a reserve passer Harmon could convert to halfback. On a similar note, Ralston urged Denver to trade three later-round picks to the Miami Dolphins in order to acquire wideout Marlin Briscoe, who had started his career in Denver in the 1960s. Besides Briscoe's role as a noted receiver, Ralston planned to platoon "Marlin the Magician" in his original role at quarterback.

The Pittsburgh Steelers' 1974 draft has gone down in legend. While Pittsburgh used earlier favorable pick-swap trades to acquire the rights to over twenty players, the Steelers' draft is best known for the fact Pittsburgh selected four future Hall of Famers: linebacker Jack Lambert, wide receiver John Stallworth, center Mike Webster, and as late as the fifteenth round safety Donnie Shell. The picks cemented Pittsburgh's "Steel Curtain" defense of the 1970s, gave the team its leading wideout for nearly a decade and a half, and anchored the Steelers' powerful offensive line. The AFC in general did well from the draft, beyond the successes of the Steelers, Broncos, and Oilers. The Baltimore Colts gained lead receiver Roger Carr, while the Oakland Raiders took very few picks but acquired multiple-Pro Bowl defensive lineman Henry Lawrence and Hall of Fame tight end Dave Casper. The Miami Dolphins took star wideout Nat Moore, the Chiefs one of their few major offensive stars of the 1970s, running back Tommy Reamon.

NFC teams were not unproductive themselves. Together in the fourth round the Philadelphia Eagles acquired multiple-Pro Bowl linebacker Frank LeMaster and future starting quarterback Mike Boryla out of Stanford, then longtime tight end Keith Krepfle in the fifth. The New York Giants took All-Pro defensive end John Dutton in a successful first-round pick, then later quarterback Carl Summerell and much decorated punter Dave Jennings. The San Francisco 49ers quietly picked up future star running back Delvin Williams in the third round followed by multiple-Pro Bowl offensive tackle Keith Fahnhorst, behind whom Williams frequently ran in later seasons. The Detroit Lions stole away with All-Pro running back Dexter Bussey in the second round. For head coach Bart Starr's emphasis on offense the Green Bay Packers gained receivers Gerald Tinker and Steve Odom, plus quarterback Bill Troup from South Carolina as a young prospect. With star rusher Larry Brown's knees increasingly in doubt, the Washington Redskins chose longtime fullback Wilbur Jackson with the twentieth overall pick, and the Dolphins took Pro Bowl halfback Benny Malone a round later.

While a few quarterbacks from 1974's draft class would enjoy later success - notably Norris Weese and to a much lesser degree Mike Boryla, plus Denver's other choice Mark Harmon in the backup's role - it was reckoned one of the league's weaker drafts for that position. The quarterback role took on special significance in the course of the 1974 season, however. In an October issue of the magazine, *Sports Illustrated* somewhat grandly labeled the 1974 season "The Year of the Black Quarterback." The potential or conditional role of African American quarterbacks had been a matter of contention for some years. Many transitioned to other positions, as Marlin Briscoe had to receiver or as San Francisco's Gene Washington, an option quarterback at Stanford in the 1960s for then-coach John Ralston, had done as a running back. Others moved to defense, while still more took their services to the Canadian Football League.

In 1974, three franchises jointly became the first to break the post-merger NFL's color bar at the quarterback position. In Pittsburgh, Steelers head coach platooned Joe Gilliam from Tennessee State at quarterback alongside Terry Bradhsaw. With the Los Angeles Rams, Chuck Knox platooned James "Shack" Harris, often described as "the first black pocket passer" in the NFL,

with star Roman Gabriel who was himself Filipino-American, making the Rams the first NFL franchise to play a full season with only non-white quarterbacks. In Denver, John Ralston ran a bullpen at quarterback, most often starting veteran Charley Johnson but also Marlin Briscoe with occasional snaps for rookies Weese and Harmon.

The process was not always a smooth one. Noll, Knox, and Ralston were resolute in support of their players, as were the teams and many fans. In advance of the 1974 U.S. House of Representatives elections John Heinz staged photo ops with Gilliam and Bradshaw. Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley named James Harris, a stolid and responsible Baptist minister's son, to a civic board for urban renewal. Denver mayor Bill McNichols staged a "Marlin Briscoe Day" in aid of a municipal bond initiative to expand Mile High Stadium. At the same time all three quarterbacks received death threats. A Missouri-based klavern of the Ku Klux Klan held a protest outside Arrowhead Stadium before the Broncos' appearance there that season. In back-to-back games at Tulane Stadium in New Orleans Joe Gilliam and James Harris faced slurs and insults from the crowd, and objects were thrown at them onto the field that required official timeouts to clear. Shots were fired near the parking lot of Cincinnati's Riverfront Stadium prior to Joe Gilliam's game there against the Bengals. This prompted Bengals head coach and owner Paul Brown, one of the league's pioneers in starting African American players, to commandeer an official's microphone and direct an angry tirade at potential detractors in the stands. Despite these events Harris, Briscoe, and Gilliam persevered, and compiled a combined winning record as starters for the season.







1974 became known as "The Year of the Black Quarterback" as three NFL teams broke the post-merger racial barrier at the position that season: (upper left) Denver Broncos coach John Ralston purchased Marlin Briscoe's (15) contract from Miami as "The Magician" doubled up at wide receiver and a platooned position at quarterback; (upper right) the Los Angeles Rams platooned James "Shack" Harris (12) at quarterback alongside the aging Roman Gabriel; and (left) in their first championship season the Pittsburgh Steelers established their soon-famed "Dynamic Duo" of Terry Bradshaw and Joe Gilliam (17) that would enjoy great success

In the AFC East the Miami Dolphins again rose to the top. Miami's rushing game remained the engine of its offensive productivity as fullback

Larry Csonka led the way again with 1033 yards and eleven touchdowns, while no less than five other Dolphins backs gained at least 200 yards during the season and contributed to scoring. The Dolphins began the year with four solid wins, including a 42-19 defeat of the New England Patriots and a 44-30 shootout against the New York Jets, before a narrow loss to the Washington Redskins. The Dolphins continued solidly including a comeback win at Buffalo and a 44-0 shutout of the Atlanta Falcons, before a rematch loss to the Jets en route to an 11-3 finish. Miami's defense continued solidly as well, finishing second in the league against the run with only 202 points surrendered on the year.



In 1974 the New York Jets returned to the postseason, taken there largely by their offense and notably (left) by quarterback Joe Namath's (12) last Pro Bowl season at quarterback (seen here in action against the Baltimore Colts) as he passed for 2885 yards and the league's third-highest passer rating for the season with the best completion percentage of his career

After a dismal season in 1973, Weeb Eubanks' New York Jets rebounded strongly in 1974. Despite a third-week upset loss to the Patriots and later loss to the Dolphins, the Jets consistently won close games, especially with division rivals the Bills and Colts, and stood at 5-2 halfway through the season. A 27-13 win over the Dolphins in their return game gave the Jets further momentum, along with a wild 41-35 rematch win over the Patriots in which both Joe Namath and fullback John Riggins scored twice (while Patriots quarterback Jim Plunkett threw four touchdowns of his own), and a crucial last-week victory over the Dallas Cowboys, as Namath threw for three scores in a 31-9 win that helped cost Dallas their division and secured the Jets both a 10-4 record and the AFC's wild-card playoff spot. The Jets were only reasonably good both at scoring points and at preventing them. But the squad boasted a strong pass defense, as Pro Bowlers linebacker John Ebersole and safety Burgess Owens each picked off five interceptions on the year. In his last season of real quality Joe Namath threw for 2885 yards and twenty touchdowns, against twelve interceptions, along with the highest completion percentage of his career which helped vault him to the third-best passer rating in the league. John Riggins rushed for 1293 yards and seven touchdowns while veteran halfback Emerson Boozer added six more scores and tight end Rich Caster caught nine of Namath's touchdown passes to lead NFL tight ends in scoring.

Elsewhere in the East the Patriots lived through a rollercoaster season, with thrilling upset wins marred by key losses. It appeared the year had hit a tailspin when, in the twelfth week of play, the Patriots found themselves down 14-6 against the Oakland Raiders. At that point, powerful New England running back Sam Cunningham broke loose for a 59-yard touchdown ramble, followed minutes later by a 46-yard pass from Plunkett to tight end Bob Windsor as New

England came back for the win followed by another the week after as the Patriots came to rest at last level at 7-7.

The Baltimore Colts' new head coach Sid Gillman began the year with a high-profile trade with his old team the Chargers: the Colts' promising young halfback Lydell Mitchell and a third-round pick in the 1975 Draft for massive offensive tackle Russ Washington (who Gillman himself had drafted while still in San Diego), aging but legendary defensive end Deacon Jones, and second-year tight end Charle Young. Gillman started the year working to improve the play of quarterback Marty Domres (another Gillman draft pick from the Chargers) but with a 2-5 record at the middle of the season Gillman switched horses to second-year prospect Bert Jones. This began a prolific partnership that started with Jones throwing for nearly 2000 yards, with twelve touchdowns against eight interceptions, as the Colts rebounded to end the year 6-8. The Buffalo Bills continued to perform effectively on offense, especially head coach Lou Saban's vaunted running game, and were competitive in every single game of the season, but struggled defensively and finished 8-6, with questions raised about whether Saban could elevate the Bills to the postseason.

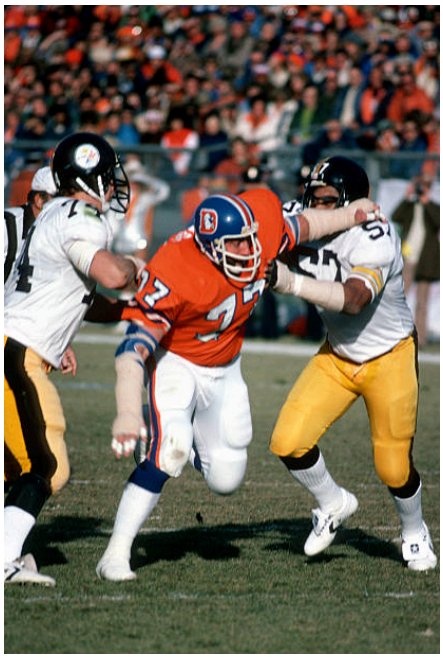
In 1974 the AFC Central belonged to the Pittsburgh Steelers. Pittsburgh gave up the fewest points (178) of any team in the AFC and lost only two games, both titanic defensive struggles with the Denver Broncos and Houston Oilers respectively. Rookie Jack Lambert led all NFL linebackers in the then-unofficial quarterback sacks standings, intercepted two passes, and returned a fumble for a touchdown en route to a place as the Associated Press Defensive Rookie of the Year. The rest of the "Steel Curtain" defense excelled as well, as Joe Greene became the AP's Defensive Player of the Year with, among other metrics, sixteen recognized sacks, two interceptions untypical for a defensive lineman, and a safety when he sacked Cleveland Browns quarterback Mike Phipps in the endzone during the teams' first meeting of the year. On offense Pittsburgh relied on its versatility, and on the emergence of the "Dynamic Duo": Chuck Noll's method of platooning Terry Bradshaw and Joe Gilliam between starts and within games. It began with a third-week win over the Raiders, as Gilliam threw for 183 yards and two touchdowns in his first victory over a major opponent. Bradshaw also posted his best year in the league thus far as he threw for 1488 yards and ten touchdowns against six interceptions, while he ran for 241 more with a pair of scores. Noll's pair of quarterbacks each finished 6-1 as starters in aid of the team's 12-2 record. Meanwhile the Pittsburgh backfield notched another 1000-yard season for Franco Harris with three other backs - fullback Rocky Bleier and halfbacks John "Frenchy" Fuqua and Steve Davis - who ran for at least 300 yards on the year.

The rest of the AFC Central was a bag of mixed fortunes. In Cincinnati, quarterback Ken Anderson had another strong year as he threw for 2577 yards and so accurately that his passer rating led the league. At the same time the Bengals' rushing game seriously underperformed, and a combination of injuries in the defensive secondary and some sheer bad luck left Cincinnati at 6-8 on the year despite a few strong individual victories. The Houston Oilers, heavily reliant on their defense and untypically so on young quarterback Dan Pastorini, fought

their way to a level 7-7 record by scoring almost as many defensive touchdowns as they did rushing ones, notably in a 21-16 defeat of the Browns where a pick-six interception and a blocked punt for a touchdown made the crucial difference. Cleveland suffered on the year with poor defensive play and a subpar year for starting quarterback Mike Phipps (who threw nineteen interceptions with only eight touchdowns) as the team finished 3-11 and seemed to mark an end to the Browns' long run of dominance in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the AFC West the Oakland Raiders opened their campaign with high-scoring wins over the Bills (49-24) and Chiefs (36-20) before a difficult loss at Pittsburgh. The Raiders rebounded briefly, on the strength of their defense specifically, then suffered a 27-17 upset loss to the Bengals as Ken Anderson threw for three of his seventeen touchdowns on the season, before rallying the week after from a 21-3 halftime deficit to beat the San Francisco 49ers 24-21. At 5-2 midway along the Raiders seemed to have secured their usual dominance of the division, but in the eighth week the most dramatic intra-divisional matchup of the year unfolded: the Denver Broncos beat the Raiders at the Oakland-Alameda Coliseum 26-24 with a field goal on the final play, in a game where Raiders quarterback Ken Stabler threw for three touchdowns and Denver's offensive star, running back Otis Armstrong, rushed for 146 yards and three scores of his own. Oakland rallied for a three-win streak against strong performances from opponents, including a rematch with Denver. In the twelfth week, however, Oakland lost 20-14 to a dramatic Patriots comeback, then delivered a solid win against the Chiefs and traveled to Texas Stadium for a game against the Dallas Cowboys. Both teams entered 9-4, Oakland in search of another divisional title and the Cowboys after the NFC wild-card position. At halftime Oakland enjoyed a reasonable 13-3 lead. In the second half, however, the Cowboys' offense exploded as Calvin Hill, Robert Newhouse, and Roger Staubach each ran for scores and Dallas scored 24 unanswered points to win 27-13, which left Oakland 9-5 for the year.





1974 became a breakout year for the Denver Broncos: from also-ran status Denver took charge of the AFC West and battled their way to the AFC Championship game, powered especially (left) by a league-best season from running back Otis Anderson (24), and the team's "Orange Crush" defense, notably its defensive line (right) manned by future Hall of Famer Lyle Alzado (77) along with John Matuszak, Barney Chavous, and Lucious Selmon

That result offered a divisional rival a golden opportunity. The Denver Broncos had worked to

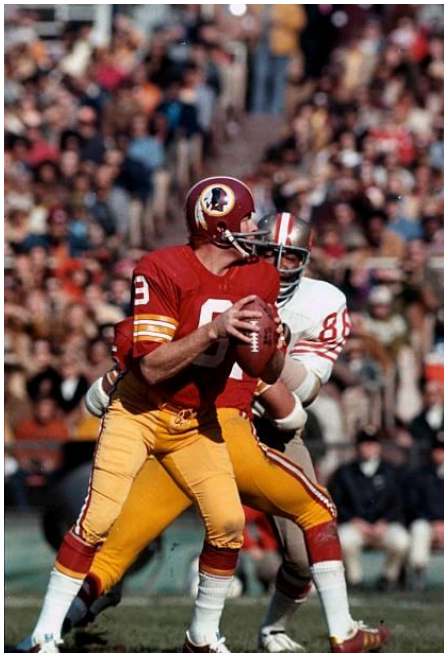
build not only one of the league's best defenses, but enough offensive strength and team resilience to challenge every week and win close games. The 1974 season became the Broncos' breakout moment in the AFC West. After a first-week loss to the league-champion Rams, in which the Broncos' "Orange Crush" nonetheless played solidly against the mighty Rams offense, Denver won a gritty, defining upset against the Steelers at Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh by a 7-3 score in a game driven by powerful defenses. The week after Denver defeated the Redskins 21-17 as Otis Armstrong ran for 210 yards and three scores. This was the beginning of a career season for Armstrong: over its course the Broncos' lead back ran for 1856 yards and twenty-one touchdowns, with 2105 total yards (including receptions) from scrimmage and twenty-three scores. That figure beat Jim Brown's 1965 number of twenty-one touchdowns from scrimmage and set a new NFL record.

Denver followed an upset loss to the Chiefs with a 30-0 shutout of the New Orleans Saints and a 38-7 defeat of the Chargers in which Armstrong again ran for three touchdowns and future Hall of Famer Floyd Little, near the end of his career, ran for two also. Despite a ninth-week 27-26 loss to the Colts because of two missed extra points, the Broncos pressed ahead. The last week produced more offensive fireworks with San Diego in a 49-21 win: Armstrong ran for 179 yards and a touchdown, while quarterback Charley Johnson added three more scores, and Marlin Briscoe not only passed for 128 yards and two touchdowns but also caught one of Johnson's as a receiver. With Oakland's loss to Dallas, Denver finished 10-4 and champions of the division. Denver's defense helped lead the way, with the fifth-best points allowed total (210) in the NFL and five defensive Pro Bowlers (linemen Lyle Alzado and Lucious Selmon, linebackers Tom Jackson and rookie Randy Gradishar, and safety Billy Thompson.) Otis Armstrong was named the AP's Offensive Player of the Year. Coach John Ralston's quarterback stable also did well, as Charley Johnson threw for eleven scores while Marlin Briscoe, in a unique distinction, not only threw for six touchdowns as a quarterback but also caught two more as a receiver. The rest of the division fared less well. Despite a promising rookie season from Tommy Reamon, a porous defense and the strength of divisional rivals left the Kansas City Chiefs 4-10. The Chargers shuffled uneasily and ineffectively between different offensive schemes and found their pass defense wanting in a disheartening 3-11 effort.

The NFC East was, once again, perhaps the conference's most contested division. Even the East's bottom end showed points of interest. Once again defense was important to the Philadelphia Eagles' fortunes under head coach Marion Campbell - veteran linebacker Bill Bergey unofficially recorded ten sacks and officially led NFL linebackers in turnovers caused, and emerged from the campaign as the PWFA Comeback Player of the Year for his work. The Eagles' win-loss record swung like a pendulum as Campbell made a successful shift at quarterback. The team started the year 1-7 under Pete Liske before Campbell brought in rookie Mike Boryla, who notched a 4-2 record in the back half of the year with ten passing touchdowns against six interceptions as the self-described "longhaired kid from Stanford" retrieved the Eagles' fortunes and helped the team to a 5-9 record on the year. Throughout, the Eagles' offense enjoyed strong support from halfback Tom Sullivan, who recorded the only 1000-yard season of

his career with 1058 rushing yards and no less than thirteen touchdowns. In New York, head coach Alex Webster responded to a season-ending injury to running back Ron Johnson by shifting towards the pass with young quarterback Gary Huff. Huff, however, threw seven touchdowns but also twenty-one interceptions on the season and recorded a 3-9 record as the Giants' starter, while other team turnovers and poor defensive performance hobbled their efforts: quarterbacks Carl Summerell and Norm Snead dropped the other two games as the Giants finished 3-11.

At the top end of the East, the Washington Redskins not only continued but redoubled their strong record in the 1970s. After a slightly shaky start to the year in the first four games, the Redskins' primary starter Billy Kilmer was lost for eight weeks to a hip injury. In his place came Kilmer's platoon partner at quarterback and one of the league's passing stars of the 1960s, Sonny Jurgensen. Jurgensen had already announced 1974 would be his last year in the league; it proved to be a celebratory one. He recorded a 7-1 record as the Skins' starter, threw for 1834 yards and sixteen touchdowns against seven interceptions, and helped secure the team's spot at the top of the division. For his decisive role putting Washington back in contention at the top of the NFC Jurgensen was named the Associated Press NFL Most Valuable Player for the year. He was not alone, either: in the twelfth week Billy Kilmer returned in the second half of a crucial home game against the Dallas Cowboys to throw the go-ahead touchdown to Charley Taylor as Washington clinched the division with a 14-13 win. Larry Brown recorded over 1000 combined yards from scrimmage, while reserve back Duane Thomas and fullback Wilbur Jackson each scored five touchdowns on the year. Cornerback Mike Bass led the NFC in individual interceptions while linebacker Harold McClinton recorded an All-Pro year of his own. Washington fielded the NFC's best points defense and the conference's second-best against the run as they finished the year 11-3 atop their division.



(Left) in 1974 Sonny Jurgensen (9) of the Washington Redskins enjoyed a valedictory season his last year in the league: Jurgensen, who had platooned at quarterback for several years with Billy Kilmer, retook the reins of Washington's offense in a long stretch of the season due to an injury to Kilmer, and returned to outstanding form; Jurgensen ended the year with an 8-1 record as a starter, as the league's passer rating champion for the season, and helped lead the Redskins to their first-ever Super Bowl appearance as NFC champions

The battle for second in the NFC East proved to be a constant source of entertainment. Both the Dallas Cowboys and St. Louis Cardinals ultimately notched 10-4 records. St. Louis had rebounded significantly under head coach Don Coryell whose open, pass-centered offense rejuvenated the Cardinals' scoring while, in 1974, St. Louis' pass defense in particular, led by future Hall of Fame cornerback Roger Wehrli, excelled as well. Veteran Cardinals quarterback Jim Hart threw for 2715 yards and 23 touchdowns in one of his best seasons, while running back Terry Metcalf put up over 1000 combined yards from scrimmage and nine

touchdowns. At the same time, the Cardinals lost both their seasonal matchups against the Cowboys, who likewise staged a storming comeback against the Oakland Raiders in the last week of play to win that game 27-13, and reach a 10-4 final record that put them in front of St. Louis on the head-to-head tiebreaker. On the season Dallas featured the fourth-best points defense in the NFC, and the NFL's second best team rushing offense, as backs Calvin Hill, Robert Newhouse, and Walt Garrison, and quarterback Roger Staubach, each rushed for over 300 yards, and 21 combined touchdowns. Such broad-based team resources and Dallas' good fortune against the Cardinals, especially their 37-31 victory in the teams' wild first meeting, propelled the Cowboys back to the postseason.

The NFC Central was marked by a struggle for supremacy between three teams: the Minnesota Vikings, Detroit Lions, and Green Bay Packers. In the end, as in 1972, the Lions were the unanticipated winners. They began the season reasonably well but again lost starting quarterback Greg Landry to a serious back injury in a third-game loss to the Packers. If anything, this brought the team's season together. Landry's backup and longtime competitor for the starting job, the veteran Bill Munson, delivered a career season in the job. Despite a difficult start in a 20-13 loss to the Los Angeles Rams, Munson led Detroit on to win six of the next seven games and, despite losses to powerful AFC sides the Broncos and Raiders, finished the year with strong victories over the Bengals (22-10) and the Eagles (38-16) to post a 10-4 record atop the division. Detroit's success showed in its depth: the team also boasted one of the best scoring and pass defenses in the league, including three defensive Pro Bowlers, defensive tackle Larry Hand, future Hall of Fame cornerback Lem Barney, and safety Dick Jauron. While Munson threw for 2168 yards and seventeen touchdowns, the Lions' running game was also strong and diverse. Rookie fullback Dexter Bussey impressed from the start: Bussey rushed for 1074 yards and thirteen touchdowns, as he earned a Pro Bowl berth of his own and also AP Offensive Rookie of the Year honors. Long-serving halfbacks Altie Taylor and Mel Farr, the latter in his final season, teamed for over 1200 yards and seven combined touchdowns.



Broad-based team effort impelled Detroit to the top of the NFC Central in 1974: (left) quarterback Bill Munson (19) hands off to veteran halfback Mel Farr (24) as a mixture of balanced offense and strong defense (fourth-best against the pass, with just 217 points allowed) contributed to success

For the Minnesota Vikings, 1974 turned into another season of solid play that, due to a pair of key losses, again brought them up just sort of their goal. Quarterback Fran Tarkenton delivered the second-highest completion percentage in the league, along with 2377 passing yards and nineteen touchdowns. Minnesota's "Purple People Eaters" defense

remained strong, as future Hall of Famers lineman Carl Eller and safety Paul Krause received All-Pro honors. Young fullback Chuck Foreman continued to emerge as one of the NFL's most formidable dual threats and the real engine of the Vikings' offense, with 1561 combined rushing and receiving yards from scrimmage and a weighty sixteen combined touchdowns. Despite this the Vikings lost twice to Detroit - first 21-17, the second time a more sobering 20-6 defeat - and that, taken with three other close losses to the Rams, Cardinals, and a shocking 16-14 loss to the Chicago Bears, put Minnesota one game outside the postseason. The Green Bay Packers, on the other hand, had a complex season moved by both heroism and shortfalls. John Hadl had a less effective year at quarterback though not entirely a bad one, though Jerry Tagge struggled notably in relief throwing nine interceptions. Yet the Packers' defense played well and held the line for victory in key games notably against the Vikings and the San Francisco 49ers, as Green Bay worked its way to an 8-5-1 record. The Chicago Bears, with the last fully productive year from halfback Carl Garrett to drive them, started well including the upset win over Minnesota and stood at 4-3 halfway through the season, before a late-year collapse in which they lost six of the next seven to end at 5-9.

The NFC West in 1974 was a division in the doldrums, other than one markedly successful team. As in 1973 that team was the Los Angeles Rams: arguably the conference's strongest regular-season squad on the year, the Rams again impressed in all facets of the game. The Rams opened the year comfortably with a four-game win streak, before a 17-14 upset loss to the Packers that featured Green Bay halfback John Brockington's best game of the season. Thereafter Los Angeles powered along including lopsided wins over division rivals the San Francisco 49ers (41-10) and the Atlanta Falcons (28-3) and a comeback victory over the Vikings in which quarterback James Harris threw two second-half touchdowns in the 21-16 win. Despite a loss to the Redskins in the penultimate week of play the Rams rallied to beat the Bills 27-7 in the last week and secure a 12-2 record, the best in the NFC. The Rams fielded the best overall defense of the season in the NFL, notably best against the run and with the fewest points allowed. Los Angeles fielded no less than five defenders who made the Pro Bowl: veteran defensive tackle Merlin Olsen, dominant defensive end Jack Youngblood, linebacker Ken Geddes, cornerback Charlie Stukes, and safety Dave Elmendorf. Youngblood and Elmendorf were voted first team All-Pro as well.

On offense, head coach Chuck Knox platooned James Harris and the previous season's Super Bowl MVP Roman Gabriel with success; in terms of pure numbers, Harris actually delivered a better season than Gabriel, as "Shack" threw for 1632 yards and eleven touchdowns with only six interceptions, and ran for four more scores. Gabriel did not slack, however, with nine touchdowns of his own, and teamed with Harris for nearly 3000 passing yards on the season. Lead running back Lawrence McCutcheon delivered another 1000-yard year with nine touchdowns, but quarterback Harris and rushers Jim Bertelsen, Cullen Bryant, and rookie John Cappelletti each ran for at least 200 yards and combined for a dozen more touchdowns on the ground. Theirs was the most balanced success in the league and many Los Angeles fans looked expectantly toward the postseason for a possible return to the Super Bowl.

Elsewhere in the West teams foundered. With 49ers quarterback Steve Spurrier out for the season after a fourth-week hip injury, rookie Tom Owen struggled heroically on the Niners' behalf but lost eight of his starts though at least late-season defensive stands against the Browns and Saints allowed San Francisco to cling to a 4-10 record. The Falcons found matters worse, as injuries to Craig Morton left the quarterback role firmly in the hands of Pat Sullivan, who struggled all season throwing seventeen interceptions in nine games until replacement by rookie Kim McQuilken, who fared worse. With lead rusher Dave Hampton and defensive end John Zook also out much of the year, the Falcons sank to 3-11. The New Orleans Saints were at least buoyed by their best - though still mediocre - team defensive performance of the 1970s thus far and a strong year from running back Alvin Maxon who rushed for just under 1000 yards and eight touchdowns as the Saints finished 4-10 themselves, ahead of the Niners in league tables thanks to a favorable head-to-head record.

The 1974 AFC playoffs showcased the rise of new powers in the conference. At the Orange Bowl in Miami, the AFC West champion Broncos faced off with the AFC East's Dolphins in their fourth straight postseason with a depth of team experience in high-stakes play. The first half was a clash of offenses, as Mercury Morris ran, and Bob Griese passed, for a touchdown apiece while Denver's Otis Armstrong notched two short-yardage scoring runs and Miami led narrowly at the break, 17-14. In the third quarter the game seemed to take on the shape Dolphins fans and coach Don Shula sought: the Miami defense denied any long drives to Denver while the Dolphins padded their lead with a field goal. In the fourth quarter, however, the game turned on its head as Denver exploded with 17 unanswered points: first a pass from Charley Johnson (who finished the day with 255 yards through the air) to tight end Riley Odoms, then a long field goal, lastly Armstrong's third touchdown run of the day that expanded on Denver's sudden lead. Now it was the Dolphins who found themselves constrained on offense as Denver held the line for a 31-20 victory.

In the other divisional matchup, the New York Jets arrived at Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh reminiscent of their energy, and dominant performance, against the Steelers in the 1972 postseason. When the game was played, however, Pittsburgh exacted revenge. The "Steel Curtain" suffocated the Jets' offense, holding even the dogged John Riggins to 66 yards on the day, while Joe Namath passed for fewer than a hundred himself with an interception. On offense Pittsburgh's backfield ran for 272 combined yards with two touchdowns for Franco Harris and a third added by Rocky Bleier. Atop that Terry Bradshaw threw for 179 yards and touchdown passes to Frank Lewis and Ronnie Shanklin, while only a lone Emerson Boozer run put New York on the scoreboard. Pittsburgh arrived in the championship round in dramatic fashion with a 41-7 win.

The AFC Championship game included a historic first: both Pittsburgh and Denver started African American quarterbacks as Joe Gilliam and Marlin Briscoe faced off in the first half (over the course of the game they would rotate with Bradshaw, Johnson, and rookie Norris Weese.) In

snow flurries at Three Rivers it was Denver who struck first with a short pass from Briscoe to receiver Haven Moses. In the second quarter, however, it was Joe Gilliam who mounted two disciplined drives that ended with touchdowns thrown to Franco Harris and John Stallworth that put Pittsburgh up 14-7 at the half. In the second half it was the "Steel Curtain" who wrote the story, as the Pittsburgh defense held three Broncos quarterbacks to barely 150 combined yards and Otis Armstrong to just 84 on the day with no scores. In contrast for Pittsburgh both Harris and Bleier ran for over 100 yards while Frenchy Fuqua added 42 more and Pittsburgh's third touchdown that settled the final score at 21-7. At a stroke Joe Gilliam had proven his ability to quarterback with the season on the line (while Terry Bradshaw provided the mop-up in the fourth quarter) and the Steelers reached the Super Bowl.



The 1974 AFC playoffs showcased the rise of new powers in the conference: (left) in second-half action during the AFC Championship game, Broncos quarterback Charley Johnson (12) hands off to running back Otis Armstrong (24) - keyed by a strong defense that contained Denver's running game, the Pittsburgh Steelers defeated the Broncos 21 -7 to reach their first Super Bowl

In the NFC playoffs sportswriters framed the action as a potential coronation for the powerful Rams, with a few dissidents who cited Washington's season-long resilience and head-to-head victory in the thirteenth week of play. The divisional round only served to give life to that matchup. On an untypically gray day in Los Angeles, the Dallas Cowboys struck out to an enterprising early lead with a Roger Staubach post-pattern pass to famed wideout Bob Hayes. The Rams quickly turned the tables, as their defense denied the run and Dallas' ability to use the clock to advantage. James Harris, who started for the Rams, threw three touchdowns and 219 yards as Los Angeles' offense slowly picked Dallas apart and built a 21-10 lead after three quarters. A late 18-yard touchdown ramble by Walt Garrison appeared for a moment to put Dallas back in the game, but instead the Rams mounted a crushing three-minute ball control drive that killed the clock and advanced them to the next round 21-17.

In freezing rain at RFK Stadium the Washington Redskins squared off with the Detroit Lions, as Washington wrong-footed Detroit's defense with percentage passes that yielded two touchdowns for Billy Kilmer, now returned to the starting role. Detroit answered shortly before the half with a 12-yard screen pass from Bill Munson to Dexter Bussey but Washington still led 14-7 at the break. In the second half, on home turf, the Redskins defense dug in while Washington built their lead methodically over the last two quarters. Detroit managed a late touchdown run by Altie Taylor but at that point Washington's lead was too large to beat and the Redskins returned to the championship round on a 31-14 final score. Kilmer threw for 192 yards

and three scores on the day while Larry Brown added a fourth touchdown on the ground. Detroit's strong backfield was held to just 114 combined yards by the Washington defense.

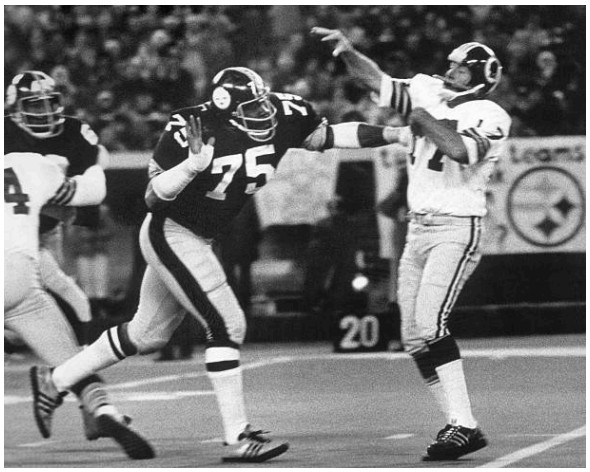


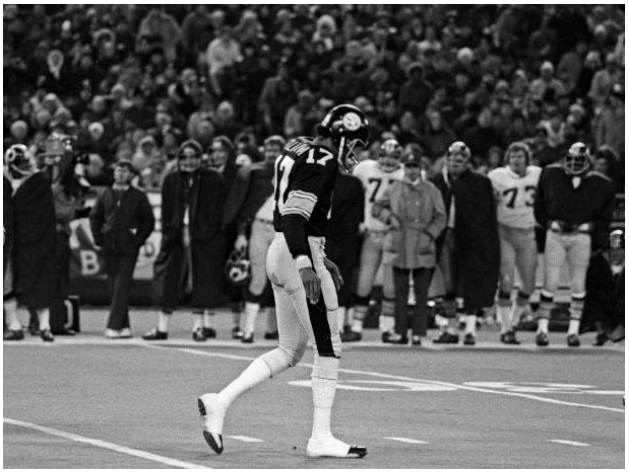
The 1974 NFC playoffs resolved themselves into a contest between the conference's most successful regular-season squads, the Los Angeles Rams and Washington Redskins: (left) during the second half of the NFC Championship game, Los Angeles quarterback James Harris (12) hands off to lead back Lawrence McCutcheon (30) who eyes a hole through the line; despite a 14-3 Rams lead at halftime the Redskins' defense rallied to shut down Los Angeles' forward progress in the second half while Washington rallied to a 20-14 victory and their second trip to a Super Bowl in three years (Washington defensive lineman Rusty Tillman (67) faces off with McCutcheon in the foreground left)

Those contests set up the 1974 NFC Championship game in the chilly sunlight of Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, where the Rams planned to use their home-field advantage and a stifling defense to put away the Redskins as both teams jockeyed for a second Super Bowl trip. The first half seemed to bear this out. Midway through the first quarter Roman Gabriel tossed a short crossing pattern to Lawrence McCutcheon, who turned it into a 65-yard play twisting through the Redskins' secondary for the first touchdown of the game. The Rams' defense slowed Washington's running game while Billy Kilmer seemed unable to find a rhythm, and Jim Bertelsen added a goal-line dive for a score shortly before the half so that Los Angeles led 14-3. At that point the game changed, as halftime adjustments by Washington reinvigorated their ground game and Sonny Jurgensen played well in relief at quarterback. Larry Brown narrowed the Rams' lead in the third quarter with a touchdown run, while it was the turn of the Redskins' defense to stifle Los Angeles' ball-control plan. In the fourth quarter Washington added ten unanswered points, first a field goal then a 5-yard fade pattern from a returned Billy Kilmer to receiver Charley Taylor. In the end Kilmer and Jurgensen teamed for 305 passing yards, just over two-thirds of that in the second half, while Washington held the Rams scoreless in the second half for the first time that season. With grit and the cool heads of veteran players the Redskins claimed another Super Bowl berth.

Super Bowl IX, played at Tulane Stadium in New Orleans, was on one hand a Louisiana homecoming for native Terry Bradshaw and for Washington's Billy Kilmer who had played multiple seasons for the Saints, on the other a return to the scene of racist anger and vandalism directed at Steelers quarterback Joe Gilliam earlier in the season. After discussions with the team, the franchise's front office, and owner Art Rooney, Chuck Noll decided to start Terry Bradshaw on the day, ostensibly in an effort to energize local fans. The decision was criticized in some quarters, both as a possible failure of moral leadership by the otherwise relatively progressive Steelers organization, also as a matter of tactics by some sportswriters and even coaches (the latter included John Ralston in Denver and Don Coryell in St. Louis) who argued

that, at his best, Gilliam was a more precise passer than Bradshaw and therefore more useful against Washington's seasoned pass defense.





Scenes from a Super Bowl: Super Bowl IX featured a gritty confrontation between teams long-absent from title contention, the Pittsburgh Steelers and Washington Redskins; (upper left) game MVP L.C. Greenwood (75) pressures Redskins quarterback Billy Kilmer (17) during a first-half pass play; (upper right) Steelers quarterback Joe Gilliam (17) paces near the Washington sideline during a second-half timeout

After kickoff, Washington began with a solid drive before a fumble in Steelers territory (recovered by lineman L.C. Greenwood, his first of two fumble recoveries on the day) that led to a grinding Pittsburgh drive and a field goal by kicker Roy Gerela. Short drives with dueling punts followed, until Pittsburgh broke through near the end of the first quarter with a 22-yard sweep left by Rocky Bleier that set up an eight-yard Franco Harris touchdown run three plays later. Meanwhile the Redskins continued to run, to little offensive effect, as the half wound down and Pittsburgh entered the locker rooms ahead 10-0 in a game dominated by defensive performance. This was, in part, Washington head coach George Allen's plan: he intended to run hard at Pittsburgh throughout the first half in an effort to wear at the Steelers' defense and keep them on the field as much as possible, then shift to penetrating passes in the second half.

Pittsburgh opened the second half with a grinding ball control drive of nearly five minutes that ended in a second field goal and the Steelers ahead 13-0 at that point. The teams parried one another for much of the rest of the quarter until late when a Terry Bradshaw pass went awry and was intercepted by Speedy Duncan. Three slashing pass plays by Sonny Jurgensen later Washington had taken the ball well into Pittsburgh territory, when the Redskins enjoyed their single piece of good luck running the ball on the day as Larry Brown broke loose on an 18-yard trap play for Washington's first score. The teams traded three-and-out drives as the game moved into the fourth quarter, before Pittsburgh resumed possession and Joe Gilliam entered the game at quarterback. Pittsburgh then staged a dominant 82-yard drive in which Franco Harris and Frenchy Fuqua wore at the clock and Gilliam completed four of five passes. The last of those was a 7-yard crossing play into the endzone to Frank Lewis, Gilliam's favorite receiver. The touchdown broadened Pittsburgh's lead to 20-7. But it carried much greater historic than tactical weight: it made "Jefferson Street Joe" Gilliam the first black quarterback to throw a touchdown pass in a Super Bowl, or any other NFL title game in the modern era.

For much of the rest of the fourth quarter Pittsburgh staged methodical drives of middling length, with Gilliam under center, while Washington seemed unable to get past their first three downs. Late in the game Billy Kilmer returned at quarterback and delivered at last what George Allen had planned for the game. Starting at the Washington 20-yard line, Kilmer threw twice to move the ball toward midfield, then drew in the "Steel Curtain" on a play-action fake and threw long to Charley Taylor, who gained a step on Donnie Shell and ran the catch in for a 52-yard touchdown. Now the score stood at 20-14 and for a moment the Redskins seemed within reach of a historic comeback. On the ensuing onside kick, however, John Stallworth covered the ball for Pittsburgh. Terry Bradshaw returned at quarterback and, starting with a four-yard sneak by Bradshaw himself, delivered a first down against Washington's remaining timeouts in the last 1:22 to kill the clock. A foursquare performance, a dominant defense, and a historic result for Joe Gilliam, all distinguished Pittsburgh's first-ever Super Bowl victory.

While the Steelers had scored twenty points thanks to solid work from a range of skills players, it was the defense that contained Washington so well for the first fifty-eight minutes and secured the win. As a consequence, the Super Bowl's panel of voters gave the game's MVP award to the most effective defensive performer on the day: defensive end L.C. Greenwood, who had six individual tackles, sacked Billy Kilmer twice, and recovered two fumbles, the first of which led to a Steelers touchdown. Greenwood became the first defensive player to win the honor. Washington's defense had played well in turn, as the Steelers managed only 112 rushing yards on the day. Terry Bradshaw threw for 165 yards, but completed only nine of his passes and threw an interception early in the second half, while Joe Gilliam was 8 of 13 for 77 yards and his landmark touchdown. Washington in turn managed only 61 yards on the ground, though Kilmer and Jurgensen combined for 275 passing yards, again chiefly in the second half much as in the NFC Championship game, though sadly short of the win. The contest reflected both the two head coaches' methodical caution, and the strength and skill of the defenses that made it a game of sheer perseverance characteristic of the "Dead Ball" era of the NFL.

The most consequential procedural and rules changes made in the 1974 season affected tie games and kicking. The NFL introduced a sudden death overtime period for all preseason and regular-season games. The overtime period would last fifteen minutes at full time, as though an extra quarter of play; if the teams failed to score in that time a tie would still result. This was introduced to reduce the number of tie games that had increased in recent years prior to the rules change. The league also reshaped the process, and the geography, of kicking field goals. The goal posts were moved to the back end line of the endzone, from their historic position on the goal line. In case of a missed field goal, the defending team would now take control of the ball either at the line of scrimmage or their own twenty-yard line, whichever was farther from the goal line. Kickoffs were also moved, from the 40-yard line to the 35-yard line, in an effort to reduce the number of touchbacks. The other most significant rules change could be described as a sentencing reduction: the penalties for holding, illegal use of hands, and tripping each were reduced from 15 yards to 10.

Several coaching changes occurred during or after the season, almost all due to poor performance. Head coach Alex Webster of the New York Giants was fired after the seventh week of play, replaced by his defensive coordinator Jim Garrett; after the season Giants owner Wellington Mara confirmed Garrett would remain head coach in 1975. Despite the San Diego Chargers' poor fortunes head coach and general manager Harland Svare saw out the season, replaced once it was over by former Rams head coach Tommy Prothro. Youth took the helm in New Orleans: Saints head coach John North was released, despite the team's relative improvement over 1973, and in his place the Saints front office hired on 39-year-old Jim Shofner, to that point quarterbacks coach under Dick Nolan with divisional rivals the 49ers. Saints owner John Mecom, Jr. hoped Shofner would be able to develop in full Archie Manning's potential and a more effective offense. In Kansas City, Hank Stram agreed to resign as head coach after fifteen seasons, three AFL championships, and victory in Super Bowl IV. Stram left the Chiefs as and when he did in order to safeguard the jobs of his coaching staff, as owner Lamar Hunt then only replaced Stram - with Miami Dolphins defensive coordinator Bill Arnsparger, hired to shore up a shaky Kansas City defense and focus on fundamentals.

Two other well-known head coaches, Norm Van Brocklin of the Falcons and Dick Nolan of the 49ers, kept their jobs only on sufferance after dismal 1974 seasons, conditional on performance in 1975. In Cleveland head coach Nick Skorich was let go at the end of the season, replaced by the Browns' longtime defensive coordinator Howard Brinker who had run the defenses of the Browns' mighty 1960s squads. In Chicago, Bears head coach Abe Gibron resigned after three largely ineffective seasons. He was replaced by Buffalo Bills offensive line coach Jim Ringo, head-hunted by the Bears' first general manager (other than George Halas' duties that had previously fulfilled parts of the GM role), Jim Fink, hired away from the rival Vikings to ease pressures on the aging Halas and restore the Bears' foundational strengths.

1975 [click to enlarge]

1975 National Football League season
1975 NFL Playoffs
AFC Champion Pittsburgh Steelers
NFC Champion Dallas Cowboys

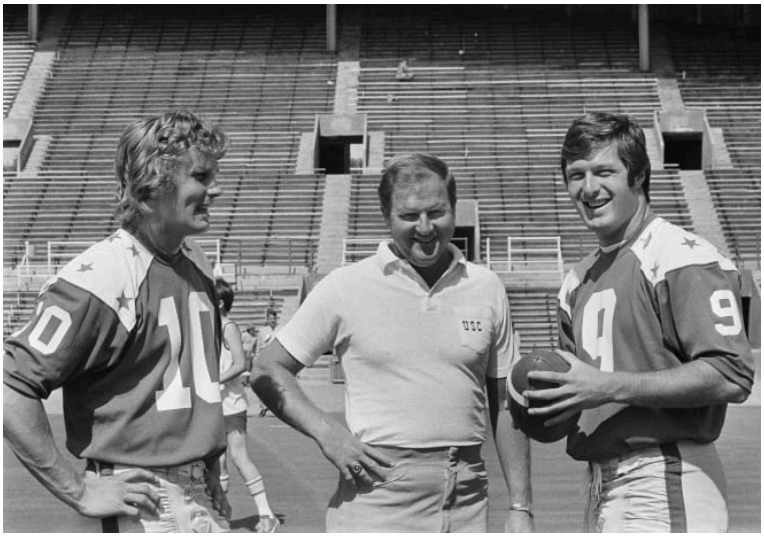
Super Bowl X
Date January 18, 1976
Site Orange Bowl, Miami, Florida
Result Pittsburgh Steelers 14, Dallas Cowboys 10
Super Bowl MVP Jack Lambert (LB, Pittsburgh Steelers)

Bert Bell Award O.J. Simpson (RB, Buffalo Bills)
Associated Press League MVP Roger Staubach (QB, Dallas Cowboys)
AP Offensive Player of the Year O.J. Simpson (RB, Buffalo Bills)
AP Defensive Player of the Year Harvey Martin (DE, Dallas Cowboys)
AP Offensive Rookie of the Year Roosevelt Leaks (FB, Baltimore Colts)
AP Defensive Rookie of the Year Gary Johnson (DT, San Diego Chargers)
PFWA Comeback Player of the Year Len Dawson (QB, Kansas City Chiefs)
AP NFL Coach of the Year Chuck Noll (HC, Pittsburgh Steelers)
Single-season passer rating leader John Hadl (QB, Green Bay Packers)
Seasonal rushing leader O.J. Simpson (RB, Buffalo Bills)

The first event of the 1975 NFL season took place far from the gridiron but made the season itself possible. This was the inauguration of the Football Labor Relations Board that began its work on January 1, 1975 per the terms embodied in, or enabled by, the Heinz Act of the previous year. The board, nicknamed "The Flurb" by sportswriters, fans, and league regulars, took charge of the NFL's often chaotic and piecemeal labor-relations issues, matters that also had been slanted heavily in favor of franchise owners, and imposed a new set of transactional and appeals processes along with baselines for salary and benefits talks, both between individual teams and players and at a collective level for the league. Several owners had chafed against the FLRBs' new role and tacitly backed campaign advertising during the 1974 midterm elections against the imposition of higher "floors" on wages and benefits. The Congressional response was to raise, quietly, the spectre of investigating franchise licenses under the terms of the Heinz Act and in response, for the moment at least, such visible resistance faded. The board's work also served as a guarantee to the young NFL Players' Association that grievances would be heard and some basic needs met; in return the players agreed to forego any potential strike actions against the league while "the Flurb" settled in to work.

Attention then turned to the 1975 NFL Draft. Held at Rockefeller Center, the 1975 draft produced a rush of talent in its early rounds, including several of the most famous names of that era. With the first overall pick after their hardships in 1974, the Atlanta Falcons had strong concerns about the health of running back Dave Hampton and were resolved, after troubles at the position with multiple players, to start veteran Craig Morton at quarterback. As a result, the Falcons selected running back Walter Payton from Jackson State; an eventual first-ballot inductee to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, for some years the all-time leader in rushing yards and yards from scrimmage (among non-quarterbacks), Payton would play a dominant role in the Falcons' offense for fourteen seasons. In the second spot, the Dallas Cowboys offered the New York Giants lucrative pick-trades in return for that draft position, with which Dallas took defensive tackle Randy White, another future Hall of Famer and an integral part of revitalizing the Cowboys' "Doomsday Defense."

The Cleveland Browns extracted useful concessions from the Baltimore Colts in return for the third overall pick, with which the Colts selected 1974 Heisman Trophy winner (also the University of Texas Longhorns' first-ever black scholarship player) Roosevelt Leaks. In fourth position, using the first-round pick the Houston Oilers had gained in trade with the San Diego Chargers a year earlier, Houston chose another Hall of Fame entrant-to-be, linebacker Robert Brazile, a Jackson State teammate of Walter Payton. With the fifth-seed, much concerned that they were now undermanned at a position that had been crucial to the franchise's fortunes, the San Francisco 49ers selected quarterback Steve Bartkowski from the University of California-Berkeley. Bartkowski would cross the San Francisco Bay from Berkeley to Candlestick Park, later a star of the Don Coryell-coached Niners teams at the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s, and the fourth future Hall of Famer chosen out of the draft's first five picks. (Roosevelt Leaks would not go undistinguished himself, with Pro Bowl and All-Pro honors in the course of his career.)



1975 Draft highlights presaged: starting quarterbacks of the 1974 NCAA Division I season's East-West Shrine Bowl, Steve Bartkowski of Cal (left) and Steve Joachim of Temple (right) seen before the game; in the NFL Draft of that year Bartkowski, picked fifth overall, would go on to a Hall of Fame career with the San Francisco 49ers, most notably under head coach Don Coryell in the late 1970s and 1980s, while Joachim became a much-decorated starter himself in nine seasons with the Philadelphia Eagles

The 1975 draft turned out a noteworthy success for the 49ers: besides Bartkowski in the first round, in the third round San Francisco paired him with multiple-Pro Bowl wide receiver Freddie Solomon, who had been a quarterback at the University of Tampa. In the second and fourth rounds, respectively, the Niners chose the defensive ends who would anchor their "Gold

Rush" defensive line for many years, a second future Hall of Famer in Fred Dean and long-serving All-Pro Cleveland Elam. Divisional rivals the Los Angeles Rams prospered as well, with more spot-trading to pick up two anchors of their offensive line into the 1980s, Pro Bowlers Dennis Harrah and Doug France. The Rams added All-Pro cornerback Monte Jackson in the second round, and in the fifth USC quarterback Pat Haden as a backstop to the aging Roman Gabriel. With the sixth overall pick in the first round the Chicago Bears selected Haden's teammate, Heisman runner-up halfback Anthony Davis, while just after that the Philadelphia Eagles traded back into the first round (after releasing their native pick to the Rams) for Pro Bowl linebacker Tom Henderson. In the second round the Eagles took Maxwell Award-winning quarterback Steve Joachim of Temple, a local Philadelphia success story who would backstop Mike Boryla and soon emerge from Boryla's shadow as a famed starter. That same round the Bears added decorated defensive end Mike Hartenstine to their roster. The Detroit Lions gained a future Hall of Famer of their own, defensive end Doug English, in the second round, and Pro Bowl wideout Leonard Thompson two rounds later. Two NFC stalwarts at tight end, the St. Louis Cardinals' Jim Obradovich and the Minnesota Vikings' Bob Bruer, were taken in later rounds.

The AFC had its own successes. With their original pick position in the first round, in addition to Robert Brazile, the Houston Oilers took reliable longtime fullback Don Hardeman. With adroit pick-trading of their own the San Diego Chargers gained two multiple-Pro Bowlers in the first round, wideout Larry Burton and defensive tackle Gary Johnson, followed by Johnson's longtime partner at defensive tackle Louis Kelcher in the second round. With the first round's final pick the Pittsburgh Steelers took cornerback Dave Brown to fill out their outstanding defensive secondary. The New England Patriots made two draft choices iconic for the franchise in 1975: future Hall of Fame tight end Russ Francis with the eleventh overall pick, and four rounds later quarterback Steve Grogan. The Cleveland Browns gained defensive tackle Dave Pear (who would go on to expansion-team fame in Tampa Bay) while the Denver Broncos chose decorated wideout and return specialist Rick Upchurch. The New York Jets selected longtime center Joe Fields. Late in the running the Miami Dolphins chose Pro Bowler safety Mike Reinfeldt.

The 1975 season saw the center of gravity shift in the AFC East. After several frustrating years that saw promising individual or statistical feats without a team trip to the postseason, Buffalo Bills head coach Lou Saban found his ambitions matched at last by the Bills' performance, on both sides of the line. The team also showed resilience: Buffalo weathered a 45-10 drubbing by the Pittsburgh Steelers in the season's second week, and a disappointing loss to Baltimore a few weeks later, but commanded their other games comfortably for a 6-2 record enhanced by a 24-21 comeback victory in the seasonal rematch with the Colts, keyed by two touchdowns from quarterback Joe Ferguson. From there Buffalo powered down the stretch including comfortable wins over solid teams like the St. Louis Cardinals (37-12) and the Cincinnati Bengals (31-16). Though they lost a shootout with the Minnesota Vikings in the last week 30-27 on a last-play field goal, the Bills ended the year 11-3 and victors in the AFC East. The Bills featured a strong

scoring defense, reasonable results against the run, and the season's third-best pass defense in the NFL, highlighted by the performances of the team's Pro Bowl-bound cornerbacks Dwight Harrison and Tony Greene. On offense Joe Ferguson threw for 2566 yards, 23 touchdowns, and 15 interceptions in his best season thus far. But the Bills' real strength was their running game which topped 3000 yards as a team (3057) for the second time in three years. Bills star O.J. Simpson led the way with 1965 yards and fourteen touchdowns, while fullback Jim Braxton added over 800 yards and ten touchdowns himself, with three more scores from second-year reserve back Carlester Crumpler. Simpson was also the team's lead scorer as a receiver with seven touchdown catches as he earned AP Offensive Player of the Year honors. It seemed Buffalo had at last cracked the code to become a dominant presence in the AFC, able to beleaguer other teams on defense and methodically outscore them.

The other team that changed - indeed reversed - its fortunes and returned to the postseason was the Baltimore Colts. Second-year head coach Sid Gillman typically emphasized offense in the development of his teams, and this was certainly true in the case of the Colts. Gillman used the team's dire competitive straits to explore and elaborate on his "ace offense" concept, a spread, one-back offensive set that used motion and the passing game to elongate the field and open spaces for the single back - typically with a fullback's size and physicality - to punch through holes in the thinned-out defense. Typically Gillman would use wide receivers Roger Carr and Glenn Doughty together with a pair of tight ends, usually Charle Young and Baltimore-area native Raymond Chester, while Gillman used the combination of size and power Roosevelt Leaks offered in the backfield. Gillman's evolving playbook offered streaks of great success punctuated by sharp reminders of the work in progress. Despite a loss to the Rams in the third week the Colts delivered an upset victory over the Oakland Raiders the week before and several commanding victories including ones against divisional rivals. With a 5-1 record going into the seventh week the Colts were brought up short by a shocking 27-0 shutout loss to the otherwise mediocre Cleveland Browns, followed by a hard-fought 24-21 defeat against the Bills, but then rallied to trounce the Dolphins (34-7) and Chiefs (34-10) and stage a comeback victory against the New York Giants. Miami won its seasonal rematch with Baltimore but the Colts ended the season with a 28-24 victory over the New England Patriots punctuated by two second-half touchdowns from Roosevelt Leaks. The win left Baltimore 10-4 on the season and in possession of the AFC's wild-card playoff spot.





Sid Gillman's Baltimore Colts delivered a breakout year in 1975, as they returned to the postseason in the AFC's wild-card spot with a 10-4 record: Gillman's free-wheeling "ace offense," which frequently featured four receivers and a single back in the Colts' backfield, produced powerful offensive numbers, notably (left) for young quarterback Bert Jones (7), who threw for 2828 yards and a top-five seasonal passer rating, and (right) rookie fullback Roosevelt Leaks (48), whose fifteen combined rushing and receiving touchdowns made him the Associated Press' Offensive Rookie of the Year

The Colts' high-powered offense generated increasing fluency with Gillman's sets and schemes, and several outstanding statistical performances. The rookie Leaks rushed for 765 yards and twelve touchdowns, with an even more impressive 1058 total yards from scrimmage and fifteen touchdowns including receptions, which gained him the nod as the AP Offensive Rookie of the Year. Young quarterback Bert Jones flourished, throwing for 2828 yards and sixteen touchdowns against just six interceptions, with the fourth-highest passer rating in the league (behind, in order, the Green Bay Packers' John Hadl, Cincinnati's Ken Anderson, and the Vikings' Fran Tarkenton.) Despite this range of movement and constant threat to opposing teams, the Colts scored a relatively modest 313 points on the year; they also relied on a strong scoring defense (236 points allowed, in the top quartile of the NFL) and a defensive line that performed very well against the run. With the chance to test those qualities again in the postseason, a renaissance in Baltimore seemed to be underway.

The rest of the division's fortunes diverged from there. The Miami Dolphins remained one of the league's stronger teams, still blessed with one of its best run defenses, while starting quarterback Bob Griese threw for 2659 yards and nineteen touchdowns for the year and halfback Mercury Morris notched another 1000-yard season. Mighty fullback Larry Csonka remained the team's most effective scorer with ten touchdowns on the ground plus two touchdown catches. But against the improved play of Buffalo and Baltimore, in particular Buffalo's sweep of the Dolphins breaking a streak of losses that had covered the 1970s thus far, Miami ended the year 9-5 and just outside contention for the playoffs. Problems for the New York Jets and New England Patriots were more obvious and occasionally more dire. The Patriots had, on occasion, things to celebrate, like a hard-fought 19-13 win over the Cincinnati Bengals in overtime in the fourth week of play, or their comeback victory over the New York Jets late in the season to split that seasonal series. New England also built greater strength on defense and enjoyed some effective work by rookie quarterback Steve Grogan in relief of Jim Plunkett. Despite all that, the Patriots ended the year 4-10, another disappointing season for the franchise. The Jets, however, had it worse, as after a 2-2 start to the season they fell into a state of collapse, with a number of injuries to defensive starters, twenty-nine interceptions thrown by quarterback Joe Namath, and despite fullback John Riggins' 1000-yard season, a noticeable and dangerous downturn in the team's running game. The Jets found themselves in free fall in the second half of the season and ultimately ended the year 2-12.

In the AFC Central, once again the essential story of that division was the Pittsburgh Steelers' season. The defending NFL champions started strong with dominant wins over the San Diego Chargers (38-10) and Buffalo Bills (45-10) before a moderately shocking upset at the hands of the Cleveland Browns powered by one of the best games of Browns quarterback Mike Phipps' career. After that interruption the Steelers carried on their dominance of the division and indeed the conference. They lost one other game over the season, to the resurgent Green Bay Packers, won their return engagement with Cleveland 20-6, and powered past most of their opposition by wide margins. In the twelfth and thirteenth week Pittsburgh overcame their most serious obstacles as the "Dynamic Duo" of Terry Bradshaw and Joe Gilliam at quarterback jointly

passed their way past the Houston Oilers' sturdy defense 24-17, while in the next week's game Pittsburgh came back from a 13-7 deficit against the Bengals with a pair of touchdown passes by Bradshaw. The last week of the season was a demonstration of the team's power: they faced off with NFC titans the Los Angeles Rams, dueled to a halftime tie at 14-14, then tightened the vice of their "Steel Curtain" defense and ran the ball methodically to score four field goals in the remaining two quarters for a 26-14 win. Steelers lead back Franco Harris ran for 1509 yards on the season with ten touchdowns, while Terry Bradshaw enjoyed his best year yet in the pros and Joe Gilliam passed for 1123 yards and eight touchdowns himself. Six Pittsburgh defenders made the Pro Bowl, while Mel Blount led the league in interceptions with nine, no one in the AFC better defended the run, and Pittsburgh gave up the second-fewest points allowed (202) in the AFC as well.

Elsewhere in the division, the Cincinnati Bengals' season looked a great deal like their 1974 campaign: several strong individual performances, most notably the best season so far in quarterback Ken Anderson's young career, but struggles for the team in the aggregate. Cincinnati stood at only 4-4 just over halfway through the season; even in the third week when Anderson threw for 334 yards and a pair of touchdowns against the Houston Oilers, the Bengals ultimately lost 17-14. Another loss in the first half of the season, 27-21 to the Atlanta Falcons, bore a mark of distinction: with veteran Falcons halfback Dave Hampton out with a pulled hamstring, rookie Walter Payton scored his first NFL touchdown. Despite a 31-16 hammering by the Bills in the ninth week of play, Cincinnati rallied to win four of their last five, losing only to the Steelers, including a satisfying 27-6 rematch with Houston and a victory over the Philadelphia Eagles in which Ken Anderson threw for four touchdowns, as Cincinnati ended up 8-6. The Oilers, meanwhile, relied firmly on their defense in a series of key victories, including the defeat of the Bengal. Houston's 3-4 defense ranked fourth in the league against the run while quarterback Dan Pastorini threw for 2271 yards and eighteen touchdowns, against fifteen interceptions, and Houston broke even for the year at 7-7. The Cleveland Browns, meanwhile, cycled between rare but heroic upset victories, most notably against the Steelers and Colts, and a series of grim defeats marked by multiple turnovers and an offense that did not keep the ball long enough to rest the Browns' put-upon defense. Cleveland finished the season 4-10.



In 1975 the AFC Central was often a clash of football fundamentals: (left) the Houston Oilers' defense, led by players like linemen Curley Culp (78) and Elvin Bethea (65), seen here in a November game against the conference-leading Pittsburgh Steelers, continued to rely on powerful defense to stay competitive in one of the NFL's two most competitive divisions; though the Oilers lost this game narrowly, 24-17, they finished the season 8-6 and tied for second in the division with the Cincinnati Bengals

In 1975 the AFC West's teams ran the gamut. The Oakland Raiders, one of the NFL's most consistent regular-season powers, turned in

another strong year as they returned to the top of the division for 1975. The Raiders weathered two upset losses to the Colts and Bengals respectively in the first seven games but controlled their other games comfortably to reach a 5-2 record at midseason. The team then keyed on dominant wins over the New Orleans Saints (44-7) and Cleveland Browns (38-13) to press into the back half of their schedule. Though Oakland dropped one 28-26 loss to the Falcons, in which Dave Hampton, Walter Payton, and even poorly-mobile quarterback Craig Morton ran for touchdowns in Atlanta's win, the Raiders then mopped up their remaining three games that included impressive victories over division rivals the Denver Broncos (27-16) and also the Houston Oilers (24-14) to finish 11-3 on the year. Quarterback Ken Stabler had an inconsistent season, throwing more interceptions than touchdowns, but the Raiders' defense and a ball control approach led by fullback Pete Banaszak's 1032 yards and fourteen touchdowns helped the Raiders manage their opposition and excel. For the Denver Broncos it was a season of almosts with another strong team performance from Denver's defense (barring the team's two head-to-head losses to the Raiders) but less consistency from the offense. The latter's strongest Sunday of the season came during a 47-17 shellacking of the Kansas City Chiefs, as star rusher Otis Armstrong ran for two scores, Armstrong's retiring backfield partner Floyd Little added a third and, in one of four quarterback starts on the year, Marlin Briscoe turned in his best day under center in the NFL with 244 yards and three touchdown passes. After eleven weeks of play Denver with an 8-3 record was in hot pursuit of the Raiders, but dropped games to Oakland head-to-head and an agonizing 16-14 loss to the Dolphins in the last week as Garo Ypremian hit a 42-yard field goal on the last play to leave the Broncos 9-5 and out of the postseason.



In his last season in the NFL, future Hall of Fame quarterback Len Dawson returned to form with the Kansas City Chiefs in 1975 as he posted an outstanding personal effort: platooned with Mike Livingston, Dawson threw for nearly 2000 yards and ten touchdowns with the league's third-highest completion percentage and PFWA Comeback Player of the Year honors; despite Dawson's (16) numbers (seen at left against the Baltimore Colts) and a handful of other strong individual efforts, the 1975 Chiefs played out a disastrous season, with a winless 0-14 record and what the Professional Football Researchers' Association has described as "perhaps the most catastrophic scoring defense of the modern era"

The Kansas City Chiefs' 1975 season showcased one of the NFL's strangest and saddest studies in contrasts of the decade. In his last year in the league, Kansas City's future Hall of Fame quarterback Len Dawson, who now platooned at the position with fellow veteran Mike Livingston, pulled off a dramatic personal return to form. Dawson threw for the greater yardage of the pair (1786), and also had the third-highest completion percentage in the league as he added ten touchdowns against seven interceptions for the year. This vaulted Dawson back to fifth in the NFL's passer rating tables for the season, and earned the much-decorated quarterback the PFWA Comeback Player of the Year award. Mike Livingston also put in a respectable year, while young running back Tommy Reamon added 710 yards and eight touchdowns on the ground leading the Chiefs' backfield. At the same time, the Chiefs'

defensive performance has been described by the Professional Football Researchers' Association as, "the second-most catastrophic scoring defense of the modern era," and failed badly against the pass as well. Though the Chiefs had moments of offensive brilliance, as in shootout losses to the New York Jets (37-34) and Oakland Raiders (26-21) in the second and fourth weeks of the season, Kansas City suffered everything from sheer bad luck (a miscued fourth-quarter fumble against the Houston Oilers that led to Houston's winning field goal in a 26-23 Chiefs loss) to brutal mismatches like their two annual games against the Broncos, lost in turn by margins of 36-14 and 47-17. The Chiefs gave up 476 points to opposing teams in 1975 and finished winless, with an 0-14 record. The San Diego Chargers, instead, performed better than anticipated for new head coach Tommy Prothro. At the forefront of an offense balanced back in the direction of the running game, lead back Lydell Mitchell put up 1412 rushing yards and ten touchdowns on the season while at quarterback, as quarterbacks Dan Fouts and Jesse Freitas platooned together, Freitas took the lead role with 1662 passing yards and eleven touchdowns against eight interceptions (five of those touchdowns came in a single victory against Kansas City, a career high for Freitas.) The Chargers finished 4-10, ahead of predictions, along with two very narrow losses, one in the final week as a goal-line stand by the Bengals denied San Diego a go-ahead touchdown in the 28-23 defeat.

In the NFC, the NFC East again featured some of the conference's strongest performances. Atop the East the Dallas Cowboys delivered a powerful return to form especially at home in Texas Stadium. The Cowboys' defense was the bedrock of their success in 1975, run by head coach Tom Landry's favored lieutenant and former tight end, Mike Ditka. On offense Dallas continued to pursue a conservative approach that balanced a stable of running backs against the versatility of dual-threat quarterback Roger Staubach, in his best physical condition for several years.



The triumvirate: at left, the Dallas Cowboys' star quarterback and offensive game manager Roger Staubach (12, far left), together with decorated head coach Tom Landry (right) in his trademark fedora, and Landry's defensive assistant (and eventual successor) Mike Ditka (middle left), confer during a timeout; the three men worked as a team to design the Cowboys' playbook and revitalize Dallas as one of the NFL's great powers - in 1975 that led the Cowboys to a 12-2 record atop the NFC and an Associated Press NFL MVP award for Staubach

Dallas started the year with its toughest assignment, at home in a grueling "Dead Ball" duel against the powerful Los Angeles Rams, won at last with a grinding final drive and last-minute field goal by kicker Toni Fritsch. Dallas dominated the next three games holding their opponents to a combined total of 16 points, before a shocking 23-6 upset loss to the surging Packers. This was the start of the toughest stretch of the year for Dallas as the Cowboys then split decisions with a win against Philadelphia and loss to the Redskins, which left Dallas 5-2 midway through the year.

From there the Cowboys found their footing and delivered the most impressive back half in the league, a seven-game win streak more often than not by wide margins. In the penultimate week Dallas held off a threat from Washington 17-10 that not only secured the division but knocked the Redskins out of playoff contention; Dallas then laid into the wounded Jets 30-14 in Week 14 to finish 12-2 atop the NFC. The Cowboys boasted no less than five defensive Pro Bowlers with one of the best scoring defenses in the conference (only 160 points given up on the year.) On offense four different Cowboys backs ran for at least 300 yards, while Roger Staubach ran for 267 and a pair of touchdowns himself, and threw for 2433 yards with twenty-two touchdowns and just nine interceptions.

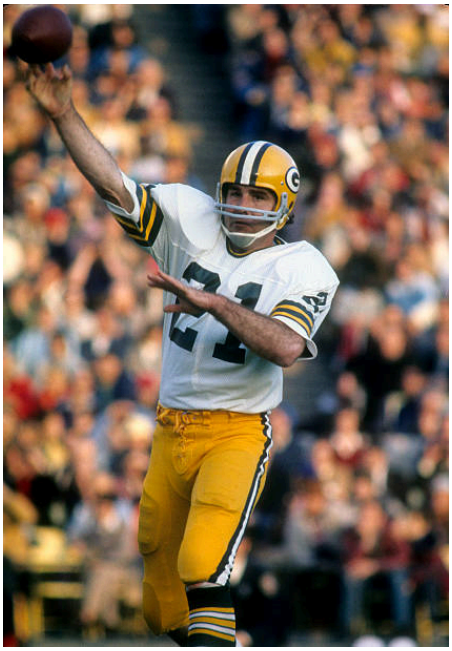
The Cowboys spent the season pursued by two other teams in the division: the St. Louis Cardinals and the Washington Redskins. Of the two, St. Louis compiled the better record led by the "Air Coryell" passing offense favored by the Cardinals' head coach Don Coryell. Quarterback Jim Hart, a league veteran, continued to deliver the best performances of his career under Coryell. In 1975 Hart passed for 2719 yards and twenty touchdowns, against fourteen interceptions, as one of the two most reliable performers on the Cards' offense. The other was longtime fullback Jim Otis, who rushed for 1138 yards and nine touchdowns on the season. The Cardinals reached the eleventh week of the season with an 8-2 record neck and neck with Dallas, but then proceeded to drop consecutive games to the Bills and Cowboys. While they recovered against Chicago and Detroit in the last two weeks that left St. Louis with a 10-4 record and more intra-division losses than the Green Bay Packers, thereby denied the NFC's wild-card spot in the postseason. The Redskins battled their way through the season, it seemed, on sheer grit and especially on the strength of their defensive performance, and occasional flashes of brilliance from quarterback Billy Kilmer. But a series of late season losses, notably to the Cardinals and Cowboys, knocked Washington down to 8-6 for the year.

The rest of the division fared poorly. The New York Giants enjoyed one bright spot in a difficult year: after a career-ending injury to young quarterback Carl Summerell, equally young backup Joe Pisarcik delivered a personal career season as he threw for 1907 yards and seventeen touchdowns, against fourteen interceptions, while he ran for three more scores. Despite his individual effort the Giants' offensive and defensive lines proved porous and the team looked outclassed against its divisional rivals en route to a 5-9 record. The Eagles, despite a dogged defense well groomed by head coach Marion Campbell, including a first team All-Pro effort from linebacker Frank LeMaster, played badly on offense as the backfield and quarterback Mike Boryla struggled all season while leading the league in interceptions, ending up 5-9 themselves.

The NFC Central in 1975 quickly resolved into a duel between two leading teams. The Minnesota Vikings delivered some of their best work in several seasons on both sides of the ball as powerful defense from the "Purple People Eaters" and the work of dual-threat fullback Chuck Foreman propelled Minnesota to leadoff wins against the Niners and Browns. After an upset loss to the Chicago Bears, keyed by outstanding work from the Bears' defense, Minnesota then enjoyed a streak of four storming wins by a combined total of 156-53 as the team reached a

6-1 record halfway through the season. In the eighth week they suffered their worst loss of the year away at Green Bay, 21-7, but rallied again to crush the Saints and Chargers in the ninth and tenth weeks before a 34-27 shootout loss to the Redskins. The rubber match of the Vikings' season followed as they met the Packers again, this time at home, where defense ground down Green Bay while Foreman and veteran quarterback Fran Tarkenton both scored two touchdowns in a 28-6 win. In the penultimate week Minnesota survived a sudden threat from the underperforming Lions in a 31-24 comeback victory, then finished the year 11-3 atop the division. Alongside four defensive All-Pros, Fran Tarkenton threw for 3080 yards and 24 touchdowns, against just 10 interceptions, with one of the league's highest passer ratings, while Chuck Foreman put up a career-high 1705 combined rushing and receiving yards and twenty touchdowns from scrimmage.

In Green Bay, the season began with a pair of painful late losses to the Lions and Broncos respectively, the latter in the last minute of play. From there, however, the Packers took off. With some of the team's best defensive work since their championship seasons in the 1960s and a valedictory year from quarterback John Hadl, Green Bay won its next nine games after those first two losses, including powerful victories over the Cowboys (23-6), Steelers (35-10), and Vikings. Going into the twelfth week of play Green Bay stood at 9-2 and seemed without question to be one of the league's most dominant teams. Then, in the twelfth and thirteenth weeks of play, the Packers suffered lopsided defeats at the hands of the Vikings (28-6) and the mighty Los Angeles Rams (34-10) that would cost Green Bay their division. Undaunted, head coach Bart Starr rallied the team, especially its offense, as Green Bay scored its way past the Atlanta Falcons 28-17 to claim the NFC's wild-card spot in the postseason. Linebackers Fred Carr and Larry Hefner, along with future Hall of Fame cornerback Willie Buchanon, were named All-Pro players for the season. Running back John Brockington delivered 1267 yards and five touchdowns to lead the backfield, though the real offensive star of the season was Hadl, who with 2667 yards in the air and twenty-four touchdowns against only six interceptions, ended the season a first-team All-Pro himself and the league's passer rating champion.





In 1975 the Minnesota Vikings and Green Bay Packers battled all season: (left) veteran Packers quarterback John Hadl (21) delivered a valedictory season, with the league's highest passer rating and 26 touchdowns tied to one of the NFC's best defenses; (right) Vikings quarterback Fran Tarkenton (10) hands off to Minnesota's leading offensive threat, fullback Chuck Foreman (44) in a late-season matchup; the Vikings finished strong and took the division with an 11-3 record, but Green Bay continued to dog their heels and at 10-4 secured the NFC's wild-card postseason spot

The rest of the division operated in the shadow of the Vikings-Packers race to the top. Despite a defense skilled at causing turnovers, a solid performance from Dexter Bussey, and efforts to platoon Bill Munson and Greg Landry at quarterback, the Detroit Lions suffered several close losses and finished the season at 6-8. The Chicago Bears, though buoyed by the most effective year from their defensive line since the 1960s and a doughty performance from young quarterback Ron Jaworski, had to settle for a 5-9 record, even then only thanks to two late, Jaworski-led comebacks.

In the NFC West the Los Angeles Rams entered the season laden with talent and ready to tilt at a return to the Super Bowl. Besides, arguably, the most powerful defense in the conference, the Rams boasted a deep bench on offense as well. At quarterback they platooned Roman Gabriel with James Harris but also had useful rookie Pat Haden as an effective reserve. In the backfield, with Lawrence McCutcheon, Jim Bertlesen, and John Cappelletti, head coach Chuck Knox would never run out of talent. To that the Rams had added gifted young deep threat Lynn Swann to an already capable receiving corps. Despite a grinding first-week loss to the Cowboys Los Angeles rallied to fend off the San Francisco 49ers' most effective defensive performance of the year as the Rams won 14-7. Los Angeles then won its next eight games, seven of them by crushing margins that included two shutouts by the Rams' defense. In the eleventh week Los Angeles lost a stunning upset to Detroit, 33-14, the highlight of the Lions' season, but rallied the week thereafter to batter the Saints 40-3. The Rams added another win, this one against the Packers, before falling to Pittsburgh 26-14 in the final week of play. This last defeat cost Los Angeles the top seed in the NFC playoffs, though the Rams finished 11-3 atop the West. The Rams delivered the widest seasonal scoring margin in the NFC (381 points for Los Angeles with only 147 against) and topped the conference in defending the run. The Rams' three quarterbacks combined for 2644 passing yards and twenty-two touchdowns, against twelve interceptions, even in Chuck Knox's relatively conservative offense. Lead back Lawrence McCutcheon ground out 1246 rushing yards with 13 touchdowns, while Lynn Swan reached the Pro Bowl with 931 receiving yards and nine touchdowns.

Over the course of the 1975 season, the rest of the division foundered. The Atlanta Falcons were beset by injuries and despite more consistent play from quarterback Craig Morton and flashes of brilliance from rookie halfback Walter Payton, including a sterling upset of the Raiders, a weakened defense cost the Falcons all season as they gritted their way to a 6-8 record. The San Francisco 49ers had a similarly difficult time as quarterback Steve Spurrier, not fully recovered from his injuries the previous year, looked stiff and inconsistent, while rookie Steve Bartkowski also underperformed leaving much of the burden on the Niners' defense, whose quality kept them competitive but rarely winners as they posted a 4-10 result. New Orleans' head coach Jim Shofner showed he could indeed up the caliber of quarterback Archie Manning's play, as Manning threw for 2866 yards and sixteen touchdowns for the year (though with seventeen interceptions as well) and ran for two more, but poor defense left New Orleans overwhelmed more often than not en route to a 4-10 finish of their own.

The 1975 AFC playoffs featured a roster of powerful teams each of whom believed they could capitalize on the right situation to their advantage. In the divisional round's first matchup, the Colts hoped to wrongfoot Pittsburgh with coach Sid Gillman's explosive offense. Instead, in flurries at Three Rivers Stadium, the "Steel Curtain" defense descended on the hopeful Colts. Baltimore quarterback Bert Jones was intercepted twice in the first half, one of which led to a Steelers touchdown several plays later. Pittsburgh's lead back Franco Harris ran for one touchdown and caught a second, while quarterback Joe Gilliam managed the full length of the game, throwing for just 157 yards but completing over sixty percent of his passes with two touchdowns to show in a ball-control offense that turned the clock against Baltimore as Pittsburgh shut out their wild-card opponents 27-0. At Oakland Municipal Coliseum the Raiders and Bills slugged it out on the ground through the first half, as Pete Banaszak and Carlester Crumpler scored for their respective teams and the score stood at 10-10 after thirty minutes. Early in the second half a short swing pass from Ken Stabler to Frank Biletnikoff put the Raiders up, before Buffalo ground the ball down the field for a touchdown dive by O.J. Simpson. The teams' defenses held one another at bay until midway through the fourth quarter; after a Ray Guy punt pinned the Bills deep in their end, Simpson broke loose on a 92-yard touchdown ramble that put the Bills up to stay as the Raiders' offense foundered and Buffalo ran out the clock. O.J. Simpson put up 163 rushing yards and a pair of scores on the day as the Bills took the game 24-17 and at last reached their longstanding goal, the AFC Championship.



The 1975 AFC playoffs came down to a contest between the conference's most powerful squads of the year, the Pittsburgh Steelers and Buffalo Bills: (left) Steelers linebacker Jack Ham (59), supported by cornerback J.T. Thomas (24), wraps up star Bills running back O.J. Simpson (32) during the conference championship battle at Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh - Pittsburgh's defense proved decisive as the Steelers won 31-17 and reached their second consecutive Super Bowl

The Steelers and Bills met the week thereafter, on a sunny Sunday with a game-time temperature of nine degrees Fahrenheit on the field. Pittsburgh opened the scoring with a ten-yard post pattern from Terry Bradshaw to John Stallworth. With smothering defense against the Bills' relatively conservative offense and some trial and error with their own sets of downs, Pittsburgh managed to add a field goal and a Franco Harris run to put themselves up 17-3 when the teams headed to the locker rooms. In the third quarter, the Bills turned to percentage passing to poke holes in Pittsburgh's defense, and a pair of long drives punctuated by short scoring runs from fullback Jim Braxton tied the game at 17-17 by the start of the fourth quarter. In response the Steelers turned to the pass themselves: Joe Gilliam hit Franco Harris coming out of the backfield for a touchdown, while just over four minutes later Terry

Bradshaw delivered a short toss to wideout Frank Lewis for another score. In a tight spot Buffalo turned to O.J. Simpson for solutions but the Steelers' defense kept a tight rein on the Bills' lead rusher. Time turned against Buffalo, as Pittsburgh controlled the field to win 31-17. Franco Harris outpaced O.J. Simpson on the day, with 115 rushing yards to Simpson's 99, along with one touchdown each rushing and receiving. Pittsburgh's "Dynamic Duo" at quarterback produced 286 total passing yards and three touchdowns for the day as the Steelers proved their quality and returned to the Super Bowl for the second straight year.

The 1975 NFC playoffs began with a study in contrasts. Despite a pair of late-season losses the Green Bay Packers had enjoyed a renaissance in the regular season, indeed beating the Dallas Cowboys at Texas Stadium early in the year. This time, after their own relentless march to the NFC's heights through the back half of the season, Dallas was prepared. At Texas Stadium again, the Cowboys turned in a relentless performance, knocking Green Bay back on its heels early and never allowing the chance to recover. The Packers' backfield produced just 112 cumulative rushing yards on the day, while quarterback John Hadl threw for Green Bay's lone touchdown but also an interception. Roger Staubach, on the other hand, delivered his best postseason game since the 1971 season, throwing for four touchdowns as Dallas overwhelmed the Packers 41-7. In snow flurries at Minnesota, the surging Vikings faced off against the Los Angeles Rams. The first half amounted largely to a "dead ball" scrum dominated by the defenses, though Los Angeles produced a field goal and a short James Harris-to-Ron Jessie pass that put the Rams up 10-0 at halftime. In the third quarter Los Angeles added another field goal and a two-yard flare pattern from Harris to Lawrence McCutcheon. Backs to the wall, the Vikings' offense came to life in the fourth quarter with a Fran Tarkenton touchdown pass and a 35-yard scoring run by Chuck Foreman. Late in the fourth the Vikings had opportunities to score moving the ball into Rams territory, but were stopped each time by Los Angeles' defense. Chuck Foreman delivered 145 rushing yards and a touchdown, against just 163 rushing yards for the Rams' entire backfield stable, while Fran Tarkenton threw for 227 yards and a touchdown. But Tarkenton also gave up two interceptions, against "Shack" Harris' two key scores, as Los Angeles held on to win 20-14.

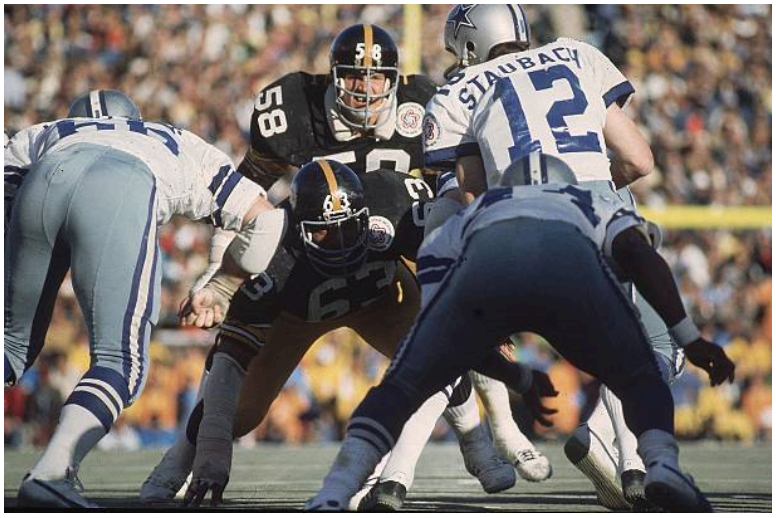


The 1975 NFC playoffs offered moments of high drama, none greater than the 1975 NFC Championship that went down in NFL lore as the "Golden Spike Game,"between the Dallas Cowboys and Los Angeles Rams. It was punctuated by a pair of long touchdown passes, one by each team, in the last two minutes that ended in a 28-24 Cowboys victory; (left) Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach (12) motions for quiet in Texas Stadium before a play on Dallas' final scoring drive - Los Angeles Rams linebacker "Hacksaw" Jack Reynolds (64) appears in the foreground left

The divisional-round results set up a Rams-Cowboys matchup, again at Texas Stadium. It yielded one of the classics of NFC Championship lore,

nicknamed the "Golden Spike Game." In the first quarter the Rams struck first on a Roman Gabriel pass to running back Cullen Bryant. In the second, halfbacks Lawrence McCutcheon and Preston Pearson traded touchdowns for their squads and the game reached halftime with Los Angeles ahead 14-7. In the third quarter Dallas stormed ahead with a 74-yard touchdown from Roger Staubach to Drew Pearson, followed after a Rams punt by a 19-yard run from Robert Newhouse. Though Los Angeles replied with a field goal early in the fourth quarter, Dallas led late 21-17. With 1:36 left on the clock, after cautious play-calling by Chuck Knox, Roman Gabriel ran a play-fake and delivered a 76-yard bomb to Lynn Swann for a go-ahead touchdown. Down 24-21, the Cowboys moved methodically, two timeouts in hand, back down the field reaching the Rams' 36-yard line with eighteen seconds left. On the next play, Roger Staubach hit receiver Golden Richards open on a crossing pattern. Richards charged across the goal line, spiking the ball as he ran through the endzone. After a squib kick, Roman Gabriel connected with Cullen Bryant at midfield, then threw two long balls into the Cowboys' endzone, both batted away by Dallas defenders as the Cowboys held on to win 28-24. It was the strongest offensive performance of the playoffs: Dallas' backfield produced 207 yards on the ground and a pair of scores, against 197 and a touchdown for the Rams. Roman Gabriel threw for 296 yards on the day, with two each touchdowns and interceptions, while Roger Staubach threw for 248 yards himself and two scores against a single pick, and added 34 rushing yards.

Played at the Orange Bowl in Miami, Super Bowl X would be remembered as perhaps the classic matchup of the NFL's "Dead Ball" years of the early Seventies. It was also the last game of that era, as rules that would transform the role of passing in the league became effective in the Bicentennial season of 1976. Most fans and observers believed that, like Super Bowl VIII, it also pitted the very best teams in each conference against one another, as proven by the Steelers' and Cowboys' conference-championship performances.



Considered perhaps the classic game of the "Dead Ball" era in the NFL during the early-mid 1970s, Super Bowl X featured a showdown between the Pittsburgh Steelers and Dallas Cowboys who slugged their way to a 14-10 victory for the Steelers on the final score line; (left) game MVP Jack Lambert (58) of the Steelers eyes Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach (12) aggressively prior to the snap on a second-half play

The game opened with a series of stifling defensive performances, as both teams tried to wear at one another with the run to no avail. Nearly halfway into the first quarter, on a roll-out pass by Roger Staubach, star Steelers linebacker Jack Lambert found himself in the right place at the right time and intercepted the ball, returning it to the Cowboys' 36-yard line. Six plays later Terry Bradshaw threw for the game's first score on an 11-yard catch-and-run play dumped off to fullback Rocky Bleier. For the

rest of the half, the Cowboys actually moved the ball more effectively than Pittsburgh, but the "Steel Curtain" drew tight whenever Dallas entered the Steelers' end of the field. Near the end of the half, a pair of successful draw plays by the Cowboys brought Dallas into scoring range though the Steelers' secondary fended off efforts to throw for a score. A Toni Fritsch field goal made it 7-3 as the teams took to their locker rooms.

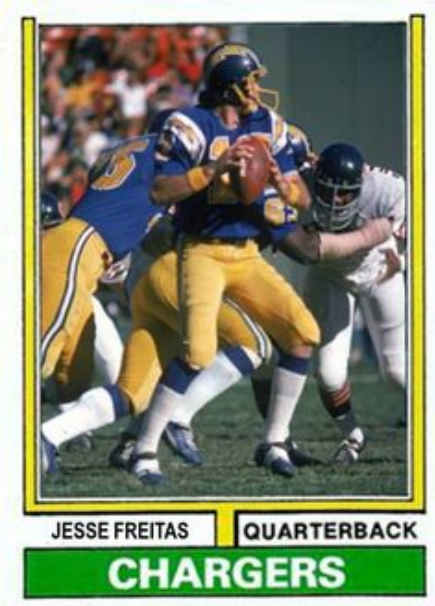
Again in the third quarter Dallas' offense looked marginally the better of the two, but the game remained the province of the defenses as both teams waged a largely fruitless war of position, each hoping to wear the other side down first. Then, at the start of the fourth quarter, Dallas appeared to mount the breakthrough drive. Roger Staubach delivered balls to Drew Pearson and Billy Joe Du Pree that put the ball in the Steelers' end of the field again; Staubach then dodged a Pittsburgh blitz to scramble for sixteen yards himself. Two plays later on a sweep right halfback Doug Dennison broke loose for a 26-yard touchdown to put Dallas in the lead. On the ensuing drive Chuck Noll put Joe Gilliam in at quarterback, who had appeared only briefly up to that point to no real effect. Now "Jefferson Street Joe" came into his own again, completing four of five passes on the drive for 66 yards, the last of these a thirteen-yard post pattern to Frank Lewis in the corner of the endzone. This put Pittsburgh back in front, though the Steelers had no luck burning the clock as Dallas' "Doomsday Defense" held them to a series of three-down possessions. Instead it was Dallas that moved the ball, but despite that they were held outside field goal range on two drives and on a third a brutal hit from Jack Ham knocked rusher Robert Newhouse out of the game and also knocked loose the ball, which Pittsburgh recovered to use up vital time. On the last possession Dallas drove again, but a long Staubach ball into the endzone was knocked away by Donnie Shell as the Steelers held on to win, 14-10.

Neither team showed great offensive production in a duel that seemed to prove the axiom, "defense wins titles." The Cowboys, however, did manage 196 yards on the ground, with Robert Newhouse the game's only hundred-yard rusher, while the Dallas defense held Pittsburgh to just 65 rushing yards on the game. Likewise Roger Stauback completed 17 of his 24 passes for 198 yards, but had only an interception to show. The "Dynamic Duo" of Bradshaw and Gilliam, by contrast, only completed half their passes but combined for 207 yards and both of Pittsburgh's touchdowns. It was the "Steel Curtain" that had made Pittsburgh two-time champions; in recognition of this the Steelers' most prolific defender on the day received the game's Most Valuable Player Award. That was Jack Lambert, who had seven individual tackles and two of the four sacks on Roger Staubach to his name, along with his first-half interception that keyed the Steelers' first score. Disappointed but undaunted, the Cowboys made plans to boost their offensive production for the coming year while, for the moment, Pittsburgh took the time to celebrate their achievement as one of the NFL's dominant teams of the decade.

Few procedural rules changes of note occurred during the 1975 season; league leadership had decided, after consideration of the changes involved, to introduce a series of new rules to do with pass coverage and potential advantages for the offense in 1976. Perhaps the most notable rule shift of the 1975 season was the decision that a fourth-down incomplete pass through the

endzone would turn the ball over to the defending team at the line of scrimmage, rather than by touchback. A more significant change was operational: for the season the NFL introduced wireless microphones for its referees to explain penalties, possession calls, and down measurements to fans and the media from the field. With this change the NFL became the first professional sports league in North America to adopt the technology.

At the end of the Kansas City Chiefs' winless season head coach Bill Arnsparger resigned, to be replaced by popular defensive backs coach Tom Bettis. The New York Jets similarly released Weeb Eubank after years of service, though Eubank was able to secure the appointment of Charley Winner as his successor in return for going quietly. New York Giants coach Jim Garrett was released after the Giants' disappointing season, as owner Wellington Mara successfully poached the rival Redskins' offensive coordinator Ted Marchibroda as Garrett's replacement. In Atlanta Norm Van Brocklin resigned also, succeeded by Marion Campbell who became available on his release by the Philadelphia Eagles, who chose the Rams' sought-after young offensive coordinator Dick Vermeil as Campbell's replacement. Dick Nolan survived at San Francisco on the condition that 1976 would be his last season as head coach. Browns coach Howard Brinker would, similarly, reach the 1976 season on sufferance. In Detroit, owner William Clay Ford, Sr. released head coach Joe Schmidt after a dip in performance over the year and three unsuccessful postseason bids in 1970, 1972, and 1974. In Schmidt's place came Monte Clark, offensive coordinator for the powerful Miami Dolphins.



The violent, untimely accidental death of San Diego Chargers quarterback Jesse Freitas (left), due to issues with mental health and substance abuse, sparked the beginning of a league-wide discussion about both issues and a drive by the Chargers in particular to make available better resources (funded through MECA) for psychological care

Perhaps the strangest, and likely the most tragic, event related to the 1975 season came in its wake. Ten days after the Super Bowl, and over a month after the end of regular-season play, a San Diego Police Department patrol car spotted a fire at a residential property in the Carmel Heights area, and a figure near the site of the fire. Dressed in dark clothing, the male suspect fled with abandon when the patrol car flashed its lights. Barely visible to oncoming traffic, and apparently not fully aware of his surroundings, the suspect ran into the road where he was struck by an oncoming vehicle, after which he died en route to a nearby hospital. On identification the suspect turned out to be young San Diego Chargers quarterback Jesse Freitas. Further investigation by the police and the shocked Chargers organization revealed that Freitas had seen a psychiatrist early in the season, who supported another doctor's earlier suspicion that Freitas suffered from bipolar disorder. Freitas apparently had been self-medicating the condition with cocaine, and developed a fascination with the concept of arson. The tragedy became a brief but highly visible *cause celebre* that shook the Chargers organization, resulted in several resignations among team medical staff,

and would in time generate response from the League about mental health issues tied to the demands and culture of professional football.

1976 National Football League season

1976 NFL Playoffs
AFC Champion Oakland Raiders
NFC Champion St. Louis Cardinals

Super Bowl XI
Date January 16, 1977
Site The Rose Bowl, Pasadena, California
Result Oakland Raiders 31, St. Louis Cardinals 24
Super Bowl MVP Ken Stabler (QB, Oakland Raiders)

Bert Bell Award Ken Stabler (QB, Oakland Raiders)
Associated Press League MVP Ken Stabler (QB, Oakland Raiders)
AP Offensive Player of the Year Delvin Williams (RB, San Francisco 49ers)
AP Defensive Player of the Year Monte Jackson (CB, Los Angeles Rams)
AP Offensive Rookie of the Year Joe Washington (RB, Dallas Cowboys)
AP Defensive Rookie of the Year Mike Haynes (CB, San Antonio Texans)
PFWA Comeback Player of the Year John Huarte (QB, Memphis Grizzlies)
AP NFL Coach of the Year Chuck Fairbanks (HC, New England Patriots)
Single-season passer rating leader Bert Jones (QB, Baltimore Colts)
Seasonal rushing leader Delvin Williams (RB, San Francisco 49ers)

The substance of the 1976 season began long before its first regular week, or even the official player draft. This owed most to two factors. The first was the growing role of the Football Labor Relations Board (FLRB, "The Flurb" to league regulars and fans alike) as it created a more mobile labor market for players and, in return for structure and negotiated equity, did away with some of the older restrictions on free agency in player contract negotiations. The second factor was the arrival of the "Class of '76," the four NFL expansion teams slated to join the league during the 1976 season, two chosen by the league's own internal selection process in 1974 and the other two legacy mergers from the abortive World Football League of 1974.

The two most notable player trades negotiated through "the Flurb" that were *not* tied directly to the 1976 expansion process involved two of the league's best known offensive players. In the first case, the FLRB managed a trade between the New England Patriots and San Francisco 49ers centered on quarterback Jim Plunkett. Rather than being largely cast off by the Patriots who planned to focus on their running game, Plunkett went to the 49ers who sought a healthy backup for their young quarterback Steve Bartkowski: Plunkett's salary actually grew in the trade based on California market prices, while the Patriots received from San Francisco two first-round draft picks in 1976 and two second-round picks in 1977.

The other marquee move spoke more to the FLRB's intended role because it was initiated by the player. Famed running back O.J. Simpson wanted out of Buffalo after the Bills' failure to reach the Super Bowl during their division-winning 1975 season. Los Angeles Rams owner Carroll Rosenbloom had courted Simpson actively since 1974, in hopes Simpson would complete what Rosenbloom advertised as "the greatest backfield in the game." In January 1976 the deal came to fruition as Simpson was released from his obligations with the Bills to join the Rams, in return for compensation in the coming 1976 player draft of one first-round pick, two second-round picks, and one pick each in the third and fourth rounds. Sportswriters heralded Simpson's move as potentially the biggest of the decade.





The NFL's Bicentennial season brought with it a series of major changes in the landscape of the league: these included a program of new rules designed to open up the passing game and improve offensive production and scoring, but most important was the arrival of the "Class of '76," four new expansion teams that entered league play in the 1976 season. These were: (upper left) the AFC West's San Antonio Texans; (upper right) the NFC Central's Tampa Bay Buccaneers; (lower left) the NFC West's Seattle Seahawks; (lower right) and the AFC Central's Memphis Grizzlies





The rest of a flurry of player and staff movement, franchise-building, and excitement prior to the season centered on the "Class of '76." The expansion teams, reckoned from east to west, were: the Tampa Bay Buccaneers slated to play in the NFC Central division; the Memphis Grizzlies, who would join the AFC Central; the San Antonio Texans, who would become part of the AFC West; and the Seattle Seahawks, soon of the NFC West. The arrival of these franchises would raise the total number of NFL teams to thirty, with fifteen each in the NFC and AFC, and each Conference then composed of three divisions each with five teams. The increase would affect not only league structure and the regular season, but postseason play as well. Each Conference would raise the number of wild-card playoff spots from one to two. This would increase the length of the season (along with overall league revenue) by one postseason week, as the two wild-card teams of each Conference would first play one another, after which the winner would advance to the divisional round. The regular season itself would grow longer as well, to sixteen games in 1976 in keeping with a roughly fifteen percent growth in league size.

From the top down, the structures of these "Class of '76" teams had distinctive qualities. The Seahawks and Buccaneers were run by collective ownership groups, though executive authority in Seattle rested with the Nordstrom family of department-store fame, while Tampa Bay's combine used investor and Hollywood star Burt Reynolds as a "face" for public relations. The other two teams, scions of the attempted World Football League, belonged to two of the more distinctive owners in a sport already known for them: the Memphis Grizzlies to John F. Bassett, Jr., a dynamic young Canadian publishing mogul; the San Antonio Texans to Red McCombs, the car-sales and property tycoon who had been a major civic booster for San Antonio, bringing the World's Fair to the city in the 1960s and soon after that the ABA then later NBA basketball franchise the San Antonio Spurs.

For head coaches, the expansion franchises each looked to the college ranks. During the run-up to the canceled WFL John Bassett developed a close working relationship with John McVay of the University of Dayton; in 1976 Bassett then honored earlier commitments and hired on McVay as the Grizzlies' head coach. The Seahawks tapped defense-minded Dick Crum, whose 12-0 1975 University of Miami (Ohio) Redhawks team had ended the season ranked eighth despite coming from a minor conference. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers, guided in large part by Burt Reynolds, chose Bobby Bowden, whose 1975 West Virginia Mountaineers team had passed the ball more than any other team east of the Mississippi, finished 10-1, and lost the Liberty Bowl only on a last-second field goal to the famed USC Trojans. In San Antonio, the Texans' newly christened front office recruited Grant Teaff, whose "Miracle on the Brazos" season reaching the Cotton Bowl with the University of Baylor Bears in 1974 followed by a winning season in 1975 marked him out as a Texan success story drawn to the next level of the game.




The "Class of '76" expansion brought new faces to NFL coaching: (left) Tampa Bay Buccaneers HC Bobby Bowden interviewed prior to a Bucs practice; (right) Memphis Grizzlies HC John McVay (front, kneeling) poses for a promotional photo with coaching staff at the team's University of Memphis practice site

The "Class of '76" were given two opportunities to draw on and assemble experienced NFL talent for their teams: direct bargaining through "the Flurb," and also the 1976 NFL Expansion Draft, where the four new franchises could select "unprotected" players from existing teams for their rosters. The expansion teams' approach to this varied in both scope and specifics, according to organizational strategy.

The Seattle Seahawks relied least on the Expansion Draft, using it to build up depth especially at defensive positions rather than hunt for distinctive talent. Seattle also made few, and selective, moves for individual player agency through the FLRB. The three most significant FLRB labor-market moves involved contracts with longtime Detroit Lions backup quarterback Bill Munson, notable cornerback Dave Brown (who would reach two Pro Bowls with the Seahawks), and defensive end Richard Harris. Otherwise coach Dick Crum and the fiscally cautious Nordstroms preferred a "clean sheet" approach with draftees who would consider Seattle their league home.

The San Antonio Texans used the Expansion Draft to secure skilled offensive talent in hopes the Texans could outscore opponents while the team built up its defense. The Texans took veteran quarterbacks: experienced NFL backup (and Baylor alumnus) Joe Reed, and the big-armed pocket passing of Philadelphia's John Reaves. Despite his record of injuries, the Texans also chose well-known Atlanta Falcons rusher Dave Hampton along with underrated reserve back J.J. Jennings of the New York Giants. San Antonio also took Dave Green of the Chiefs as both placekicker and punter for the new team, and to anchor the offensive line veteran Cincinnati Bengals guard (and San Antonio native) Tom Fest.

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers, more like the Seahawks, used the supplemental draft in large part to gain depth with linemen and took an otherwise selective approach to acquiring veterans, either for cornerstone roles or because the Buccaneers' front office believed their teams of origin

had underestimated their talents. To the first point, head coach Bobby Bowden chose experienced quarterbacks with Florida ties who were used to a pass-centered offense: Steve Spurrier of the 49ers (before that a Heisman winner for the University of Florida) and the New York Giants' Gary Huff (a Florida State alumnus.) On defense, extensive scouting of potential in-league recruits turned up defensive tackle Dave Pear and safety Mark Cotney - both would become decorated stars for Tampa Bay. In other roles, again more like Seattle, Bowden and the Buccaneers preferred to draft into future potential.

The expansion team most devoted to a "win first" approach based on veteran players was the Memphis Grizzlies. At the fore of that effort came a deal cemented by John F. Bassett himself: the so-called "Steal of the Century," whereby an FLRB ruling on the underpaid roster of the Miami Dolphins caused several marquee Dolphins players to bolt to other teams. Bassett secured the richest rewards on that process, with running back Jim Kiick, future Hall of Famers fullback Larry Csonka and receiver Paul Warfield, and defensive end Bill Stanfill all contracted with the Grizzlies starting in the 1976 season. Memphis followed other "Class of '76" teams' rule of thumb to recruit experienced quarterbacks, as Memphis took Heisman-trophy "bust" and journeyman backup John Huarte from the Bears along with the Oilers' talented young backup Danny White who would serve not only as Memphis' reserve quarterback but also its punter. In the Supplemental Expansion Draft Memphis added several other useful picks, among them from the Giants linebacker Jim Merlo who would go on to play his best professional seasons in Memphis, and from a brief retirement Jets placekicker (and English First Division soccer regular) Bobby Howfield who would kick field goals and extra points for the Grizzlies for almost a decade.

The 1976 NFL Draft proper took place at the end of March, now with thirty selections per round in line with the new number of teams in the league. For 1976 the first four draft slots were reserved for the expansion teams, who would take their specific order based on a random-number draw. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers gained the first pick: based on Bobby Bowden's offensive mindset many observers expected Tampa Bay to pick former University of Alabama quarterback Richard Todd, to fill out his stable of quarterbacks. Instead Tampa Bay looked to the other side of the ball and chose star Oklahoma Sooners defensive end Lee Roy Selmon, who would go on to be the first Buccaneers player selected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Second position went to the San Antonio Texans, who with the franchise's first pick selected another future Hall of Famer, cornerback Mike Haynes who would anchor San Antonio's secondary for a dozen seasons. With the same eye for defense, in third position the Seattle Seahawks chose defensive tackle and future three-time Pro Bowler Dave Niehaus. With the fourth pick the Memphis Grizzlies sought to amplify their powerful backfield: concerned that Heisman-winner Chuck Muncie might shy from playing for an expansion team, the Grizzlies chose solid Purdue University halfback Mike Pruitt, who would reach the Pro Bowl himself in the course of his career.

The next several slots matched some obvious pairings of teams and players. In fifth position the Kansas City Chiefs, winless in 1974, looked to their hapless defense and selected defensive tackle Mike Dawson. After that the New Orleans Saints took Chuck Muncie to transform their running game and also act as an extra receiver. With the pick just after the New York Jets continued the slow process of replacing the legendary Joe Namath at quarterback, as the Jets picked Richard Todd, now added to Marty Domres as Namath's backups. The Dallas Cowboys, who traded up into what had been the Chicago Bears' first-round choice, looked to gain a new edge in their running game and took Oklahoma Heisman finalist Joe Washington, who like Chuck Muncie was noted both as a rusher and receiver. With the ninth selection, the Cleveland Browns continued to pursue a road out of their Seventies slump as they chose another Heisman finalist, quarterback Gene Swick from the nearby University of Toledo who had won the Maxwell Award and was 1975's top-rated college passer. With the tenth spot the New York Giants chose a future Pro Bowler, linebacker Larry Gordon.

Several notable picks followed in the first round, as the Miami Dolphins chose All-Pro linebacker Kim Bokamper, the Detroit Lions halfback Lawrence Gaines, the Cincinnati Bengals Ohio State running back Archie Griffin, and with the round's final choice the Pittsburgh Steelers took long-serving tight end Bennie Cunningham. The second round saw more distinguished picks from the expansion teams. The Seattle Seahawks selected much-decorated running back Sherman Smith (who had played quarterback for Dick Crum with the University of Miami-Ohio Redhawks), while the Buccaneers chose the team's first offensive Pro Bowler, Florida Gators halfback and Heisman finalist Jimmy DuBose. The San Francisco 49ers chose decorated offensive lineman Randy Cross, the New England Patriots valuable reserve back Ike Forte, and the Minnesota Vikings wideout Sammy White. With their additional second-round picks the Buffalo Bills selected dual-threat fullback Tony Galbreath who would star for the Bills for a decade, while the Cleveland Browns picked up Pro Bowler defensive end Charles Philyaw. In the third round the Buccaneers took decorated linebacker (and brother of Lee Roy) Dewey Selmon, while the San Antonio Texans claimed wideout Duke Fergerson and the Buffalo Bills All-Pro defensive end Ben Williams.

The third round was especially fertile as the Los Angeles Rams added another of the draft's Hall of Famers with tackle Jackie Slater, the New York Giants future Hall of Fame linebacker Harry Carson, and the New Orleans Saints Hall of Fame receiver Steve Largent. Also in the third round, the Giants added a backfield fixture with Heisman finalist from Michigan Gordon Bell, while the Pittsburgh Steelers took reliable wideout Theo Bell. Further into the draft the Green Bay Packers added longtime receiver Aundra Thompson, the Memphis Grizzlies defensive end Mike St. Clair, the St. Louis Cardinals wideout Pat Tilley, and the Miami Dolphins useful running back Gary Davis. In the fifth round the San Antonio Texans picked up wideout (and Baylor alumnus) Ricky Thompson, and the Chicago Bears Pro Bowl receiver Randall Burks. The Memphis Grizzlies took a longtime receiver of their own with Isaac Hagins in the seventh round, and the Dallas Cowboys cornerback Beasley Reece. Later the Browns added a favorite target of both Brian Sipe and Gene Swick, wide receiver Ricky Feacher, while the Chicago Bears

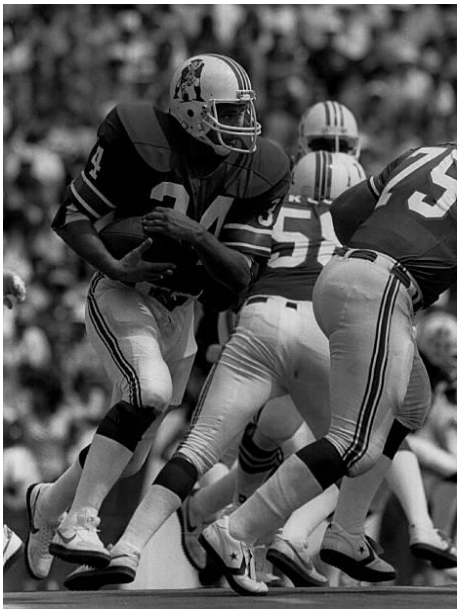
added safety Gary Fencik, and the Texans another Baylor alumnus at guard, Ronnie Lee, and one more with halfback Pat McNeil.

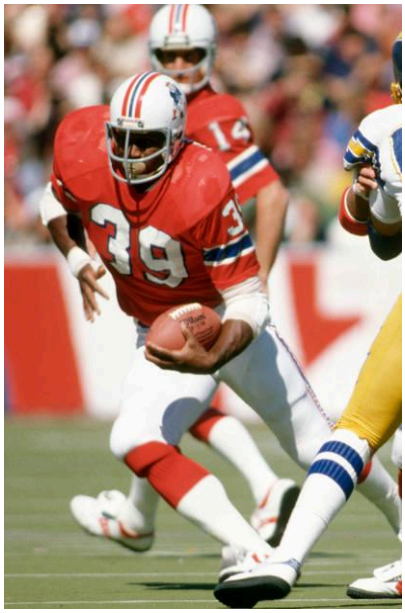




Among the 1976 NFL Draft's stars: (left) the Dallas Cowboys took Oklahoma Sooners star halfback Joe Washington (24) who would key their running game for almost a decade; (right) the Cleveland Browns selected Toledo quarterback Gene Swick (18), whose career was shortened by injury but played creditably

The AFC East in 1976 was shaped by the fortunes of two teams and, in the end, captured by the historic performance of one of the two: the New England Patriots. For much of their short history the Patriots had been an ill-starred, even maligned, team subject either to stinging defeats or brief successes that led to tragic disappointment. Head coach Chuck Fairbanks had resolved to end that and by 1976 had built a team that he believed could try. Fairbanks, a national-title winner with the University of Oklahoma, believed in a deep, effective defense and a punishing ground game as the building blocks of success. Both delivered famous performances for New England in 1976. The Patriots' ground attack saw them narrowly past the offense-minded Baltimore Colts in the first week 27-24: the Patriots would, crucially, win both their annual contests against Baltimore, which would give them the edge for the divisional title. After a close loss to the Dolphins the New England defense's greatest triumph came in the third week as they stifled the Pittsburgh Steelers for a 16-7 Patriots victory, perhaps the season's defining upset. Despite an embarrassing ambush by the Detroit Lions in the fifth week, New England then registered a nine-game win streak that included dominant wins over the Jets (44-3), Dolphins (35-9), and even a strong Denver Broncos squad (37-13). The Patriots would finish the season 12-4, victors in the AFC East thanks to a head-to-head tiebreaker advantage over the Colts. New England's defense ranked in the top tier of the league, but the team's greatest success came running the ball. As a team the Patriots rushed for 3275 total yards, still an NFL record. Agile and powerful fullback Mark van Eeghen led the way with 1266 yards, while Patriots stalwart and fan favorite Sam Cunningham added 1093 yards of his own. Third for the year was young quarterback Steve Grogan himself, lanky but fearless and skilled at managing Chuck Fairbanks' pro-set running game. Grogan contributed 612 yards and a record eleven quarterback rushing touchdowns, along with sixteen touchdowns through the air en route to a Pro Bowl appearance. The Patriots' deep roster of backfield reserves made up the rest led by rookie Ike Forte. For the team's journey from a lesser also-ran to division champions and a powerful playoff contender, Chuck Fairbanks was named AP's NFL Coach of the Year.





The 1976 New England Patriots' historic performance was defined by their running game: (left) fullback Mark Van Eeghen (34) and (right) halfback Sam "Bam" Cunningham (39) both delivered 1000-yard seasons, while quarterback Steve Grogan (14, seen in the background with Cunningham) and Ike Forte also contributed significantly to the Pats' 3275 total rushing yards on the season as New England finished 12-4, champions of the AFC East for the first time, and contestants in the AFC Championship game when the playoffs rolled around

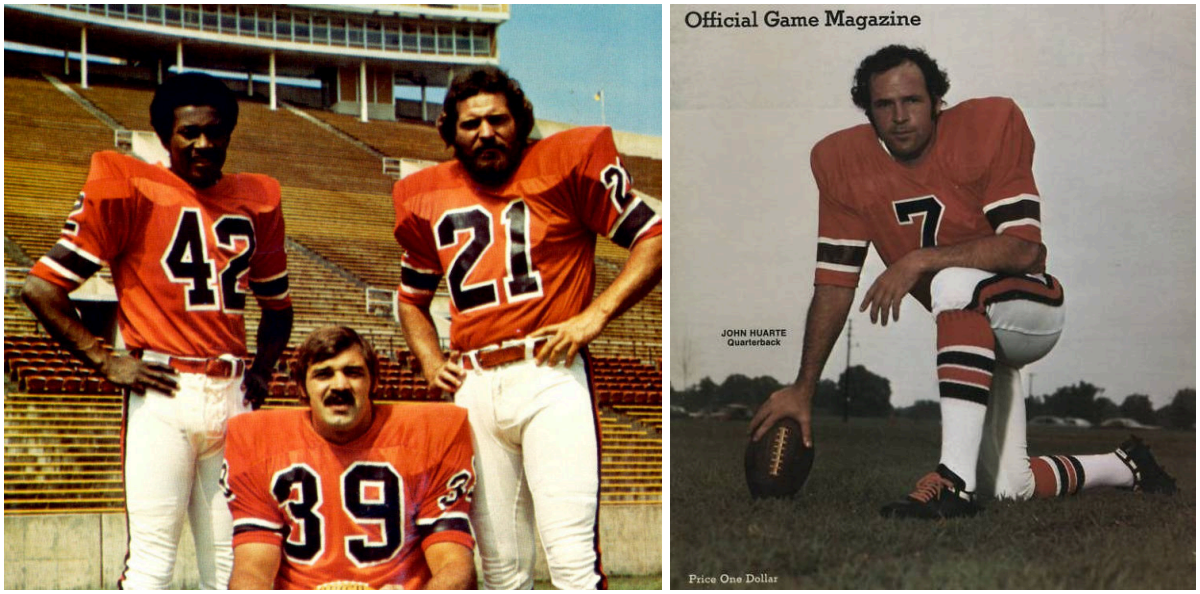
Despite two losses in the early weeks of the season, to the Patriots and the Dallas Cowboys, the Baltimore Colts dominated their schedule as well. The Colts relied on offense as much or more than New England did, running head coach Sid Gillman's "ace offense" with four wideouts and a single back who would run in the spaces created as defenses shifted to defend the pass. Quarterback Bert Jones delivered a career season: the league's passer rating champion for the year, Jones completed over sixty percent of his passes for 3414 yards, with 28 touchdowns and only 10 interceptions. Lead back Roosevelt Leaks cut a powerful dash also with 1086 yards, ten rushing touchdowns, and four touchdown catches, while short-yardage specialist Don Calhoun added eight more scores on the ground. Wideout Roger Carr produced a career year of his own as he led the NFL in receiving yards, yards per reception, and touchdown catches. Headed into the last Sunday of the season the Colts enjoyed a 12-3 record and planned for a win over the lowly Buffalo Bills that would secure the division. On the day, however, in a gritty game played in flurries at Orchard Park, NY, the Bills' rookie fullback Tony Galbreath ran for one touchdown and caught a second as the Bills defense held the line for a 20-17 victory. This meant both New England and Baltimore ended the regular season 12-4; as the Patriots defeated Baltimore twice, this shunted the Colts from the division lead to a wild-card spot.

The rest of the AFC East fared poorly on the year. The Miami Dolphins felt their personnel losses keenly, especially on defense, though quarterback Bob Griese and the backfield tandem of Mercury Morris and Benny Malone kept Miami competitive. The Dolphins finished with their first losing record of the 1970s at 7-9, though fellow AFC East teams the Jets and Bills had it worse. Though the Jets ended with a better record that was only 4-12, and on individual and statistical merits were arguably a worse squad than Buffalo, with a porous defense and no real solutions at quarterback despite starting each of Joe Namath, Richard Todd, and Marty Domres at different points in the season. The Bills were perhaps the unluckiest team in the league in 1976 - Buffalo lost four games by five points or less - and finished 2-14 for the season in the

league's cellar. Quarterback Joe Ferguson plummeted from his solid 1975 performance, the Bills' backfield committee was plagued by injuries as was the defensive line, and only rookie Tony Galbreath delivered what could be described as a positive year.

The AFC Central remained the Pittsburgh Steelers' to lose, though only just. Pittsburgh's great strengths for the season remained their "Steel Curtain" defense and the backfield duo of Franco Harris and Rocky Bleier. There were chinks in the "curtain", however, as both the Cincinnati Bengals and Houston Oilers split their annual series with Pittsburgh and the Steelers suffered key losses outside the division. The "Dynamic Duo" of quarterbacks Terry Bradshaw and Joe Gilliam looked notably off their performance in earlier seasons: Bradshaw was again prone to interceptions while Gilliam had troubles on and off the field as he struggled with the pressures of success self-medicating mental health issues with drugs. In the end the Steelers concerns took a positive turn. In a fiercely competitive division the Steelers finished 11-5 to take the Central, while new offensive coordinator Hank Stram, former head coach of the Kansas City Chiefs hired on in 1976 to soup up Pittsburgh's scoring, took Joe Gilliam's problems in hand and advocated for Gilliam's care.

The second-best squad in the Central was new on the scene: the Memphis Grizzlies. Loaded with veteran players and coached by the methodical John McVay, "The Griz" weathered respectable early losses and gathered steam midseason. Memphis swept its divisional series against the Oilers and the Cleveland Browns, defeated several other AFC teams (notably a punishing win over the New York Jets), pushed the Steelers to their limits in the teams' second meeting despite a 20-17 loss, and notched a marquee 36-30 victory over the formidable Los Angeles Rams in which Memphis ran for over 300 yards as a team. Headed into the fifteenth week of the season the Grizzlies boasted a 9-5 record, far and away the best "Class of '76" debut, but suffered first a blowout loss to the Oakland Raiders then a frustratingly close one to the Cincinnati Bengals that left Memphis 9-7, just out of playoff contention. Despite that, Memphis' first season was a great moral victory for the franchise, a success for a strong new fanbase at the Liberty Bowl where the Grizzlies played home games, even a considerable civic boost for the City of Memphis itself. Memphis' defense was relatively weak for an AFC Central team, as "The Griz" gave up ten more points (333) than they scored (323) that season. The Grizzlies compensated with a powerful rushing game that boasted two 1000-yard backs in their first season: Jim Kiick rushed for 1258 yards though only three touchdowns, while Larry Csonka added 1105 more yards with nine touchdowns as he was named one of Memphis' three inaugural Pro Bowlers. Mike Pruitt ran for much less, but averaged a powerful 4.7 yards per carry in his first season. Starting quarterback John Huarte enjoyed a redemptive year of his own. Huarte passed for 2775 yards and twenty-five touchdowns, against just eleven interceptions, a performance that earned him the PFWA Comeback Player of the Year award for 1976. It looked like Memphis would have room to grow.



A forward march of football's labor?: the creation of the labor-brokering services of the Football Labor Relations Board (FLRB, "the Flurb" to league regulars and the sporting press) put talent on the move in the NFL as the 1970s progressed; one destination was the AFC Central's expansion team the Memphis Grizzlies, who paid top dollar for veteran players, drawing several from the underpaid Miami Dolphins roster (upper left) such as Paul Warfield (42), Larry Csonka (39), and Jim Kiick (21), and (upper right) former Heisman Trophy winner John Huarte (7), long a journeyman backup, who left the Chicago Bears to post a career season as the Grizzlies' starter in 1976 and was honored as the PFWA Comeback Player of the Year

The rest of the AFC Central faced mixed fortunes. The Cincinnati Bengals split their divisional series with each of the Steelers, Browns, and Oilers while they also swept the Grizzlies, which gave the Bengals the same number of divisional wins as Pittsburgh. Rookie back Archie Griffin played respectably in a crowded backfield committee. Yet Cincinnati's defense continued to struggle, it proved to be an off year for quarterback Ken Anderson, while the Bengals fared badly outside their division and finished 7-9. The Cleveland Browns, on the other hand, rode improved defensive play and a contest for the lead at quarterback between Gene Swick and Brian Sipe to better fortunes. Swick had the better numbers overall, notably ten touchdowns against eight interceptions to seven of each for Brian Sipe, though Sipe won one more of his starts than Swick did as the Browns ended up 8-8. The Houston Oilers receded slightly from their progress in 1975 with an indifferent offense and three blown leads on the year which gave them a 6-10 record.

The AFC West featured the conference's finest team performance, from the Oakland Raiders. Oakland seemed to fire on all cylinders the whole season long: the Raiders produced more Pro Bowlers and All-Pro selectees than any other team in the league, the most effective fourth-quarter defense, and the most effective second-half offense to boot. Running backs Clarence Davis and Pete Banaszak became the season's third pair of 1000-yard rushers alongside New England and Memphis, with seventeen combined touchdowns. Ken Stabler added 3516 yards through the air and twenty-five touchdowns against fifteen interceptions, with a league-best completion percentage and the second highest passer rating behind Baltimore's Bert Jones. Veteran cornerback Willie Brown snagged the second highest number of interceptions in the NFL in 1976, while the Raiders' defensive line were likewise second in

sacks. The Raiders won their first ten games, the season's longest streak, starting with a solid 27-17 win over the defending-champion Steelers and joined later by wins over the Patriots and division rivals the Denver Broncos. Oakland would have posted the largest number of wins in the league but for an overtime loss to the San Diego Chargers in the fourteenth week: despite one bad performance in the last week of play against the Broncos, the Raiders still finished 13-3 well in front of both the AFC West and the conference at large.

The other notable story out of the AFC West was the continued strength of the Denver Broncos. Denver opened the season with a five-game win streak of their own capped by lopsided wins over the Chargers (40-10) and Oilers (24-3). Though Denver then dropped two games to the Chiefs and Raiders respectively, they rallied to a number of other major victories including a 55-10 drubbing of the San Antonio Texans in which Denver quarterback Charley Johnson matched a career high with five touchdown passes. Denver won their place in the playoffs during the last week of play with a 27-16 upset win over Oakland that caused Denver to finish 11-5, secure in the AFC's new, second wild-card spot. The "Orange Crush" defense remained strong more often than not, as Randy Gradishar led all NFL linebackers with four interceptions, while lead back Otis Armstrong rushed for 1124 yards on the season. Charley Johnson, in his final year of play, did very well himself, passing for 2886 yards and twenty-one touchdowns against eleven interceptions. (Johnson was not idle after football; with a PhD in chemistry he became a professor at his alma mater New Mexico State.)

Elsewhere in the West, despite a scoring defense perhaps more horrendous than it had been in 1975 (giving up a record 508 points in 1976), the Kansas City Chiefs arrested their winless slide with several career performances on offense. The Chiefs ended their regular-season losing streak at sixteen games with a third-week win over the New Orleans Saints, 21-13. In the sixth week, the Chiefs participated in what remains the highest-scoring regular season game in NFL history, a wild 59-49 victory over the Miami Dolphins. In the contest Chiefs halfback Tommy Reamon delivered a career-high 176 yards and three touchdowns, while for the Dolphins Mercury Morris had two rushing touchdowns of his own, starting quarterback Bob Griese threw for two scores but also four interceptions, and Dolphins backup Don Strock added a touchdown, while Chiefs quarterback Mike Livingston won the day with a pair of touchdown passes in the fourth quarter. Despite a losing streak during midseason the Chiefs ended the year with four straight wins to finish an unlikely 8-8. Mike Livingston threw for 3001 yards, 22 touchdowns, and just 13 interceptions with a career high passer rating, while Tommy Reamon rushed for 1211 yards and twelve touchdowns, reaching the Pro Bowl with this personal best. Despite outstanding work from their backfield tandem of Lydell Mitchell and Ricky Jackson, including an overtime win over the Raiders in which Mitchell ran for three scores on the day, the San Diego Chargers ended the year only 5-11. The San Antonio Texans fared worse, just 2-14 on the year at the bottom of the division. The Texans were pressed hard on the weak side of their offensive line, which constricted San Antonio's backfield, while starting quarterback Joe Reed passed for 1911 yards on the year, with fourteen touchdowns but also eighteen interceptions. The brightest spot for the new team was rookie Mike Haynes, who finished third

in the NFL in interceptions and returned three of them for touchdowns as he gained the Associated Press Defensive Rookie of the Year award. Head coach Grant Teaff sought to encourage his players at the end of the year telling them, "from here, the only way is up."

In the National Football Conference, the NFC East division dominated league performance on the year. The stars of the East in 1976 were the St. Louis Cardinals, propelled by the "Air Coryell" pass-heavy offense of head coach Don Coryell. Based on complex timing of receiver routes and different play-action looks that ran often enough to catch defenses off guard, the Cardinals scored more points (443) than any other NFL team in 1976. They enjoyed respectable, middling defense as well, and sent three offensive linemen - future Hall of Famer Dan Dierdorf, center Tom Banks, and the ruthless Conrad Dobler - to the Pro Bowl. Veteran quarterback Jim Hart had the league's second-best completion percentage as he threw for 3425 yards, 21 touchdowns, and 13 interceptions. Agile, rumbling running back Terry Metcalf posted a career season as he led the league in yards per carry with 1219 yards and thirteen touchdowns on the ground, plus 398 yards and four touchdown receptions as a receiver out of the backfield. Smashmouth fullback Jim Otis added another 882 yards and nine touchdowns of his own, four of them in a 55-14 rout of the Green Bay Packers in the season's second week. Though the Cards lost both their divisional games against the Dallas Cowboys and also a shootout with the Colts - coached by Coryell's mentor Sid Gillman - St. Louis dominated the rest of the season and finished 13-3 at the head of both the division and the NFC at large.



The NFC East showcased several strong team performances in 1976: (above left) the St. Louis Cardinals, led by head coach Don Coryell, played a breakout season to finish 13-3 atop both the division and the conference; while (above right) the Washington Redskins, led among others by running back Duane Thomas (47), seen scoring against the Philadelphia Eagles, stormed back into the playoffs as a wild-card entrant

Elsewhere in the division the Washington Redskins returned to form in 1976. Washington bulled their way forward with the division's best defensive performance, a solid year from quarterback Billy Kilmer, and a powerful rebound season from running back Duane Thomas, who put up 1235 yards and fourteen touchdowns on the ground, along with 302 receiving yards and two touchdown catches. Thomas was a prime engine of Washington's offense and the *Sporting News*' own choice for Comeback Player of the Year. Crucially Washington swept their divisional series with the Dallas Cowboys, which elevated Washington to a wild-card spot in the playoffs and kept Dallas out of the postseason. Dallas did finish a respectable 9-7, with another capable year

from quarterback Roger Staubach, while rookie Joe Washington led Dallas' backfield with 1018 yards on the ground and another 412 as a receiver, with thirteen combined touchdowns, winning the AP Offensive Rookie of the Year honor.

Perhaps the division's greatest turnaround came in Philadelphia, where new head coach Dick Vermeil at first faced a conundrum at quarterback. His planned starter Mike Boryla, back from a rocky season in 1975, suffered a season-ending concussion in preseason play (Boryla would later decide, based on a series of concussions, to retire from football altogether.) In Boryla's place Vermeil slotted in backup Steve Joachim. A tall, burly, big-armed native of the Philadelphia suburbs and college star at Temple, Joachim delivered a breakout performance in 1976. Midway through the season Philadelphia was only 3-5, though the figure was somewhat deceptive as the Eagles lost four of those games by four points or fewer. Despite a drubbing by the Cardinals in the ninth week the Eagles rallied for wins over the Browns and, crucially, a 27-17 victory over the Oakland Raiders. Philadelphia later closed the season with three straight wins (that included beating the Cowboys at Texas Stadium) to finish 7-9. Despite weaknesses on defense, Philadelphia's offense looked like a playoffs team and promised progress for the future. "The Harolds" - veteran wideouts Harold Jackson and Harold Carmichael - enjoyed solid seasons. Steve Joachim threw for 3649 yards, with twenty-four touchdowns to sixteen interceptions, a strong debut as Philadelphia's new franchise quarterback. Halfback Mike Hogan also enjoyed his best season in 1976, with 1184 yards and eight touchdowns on the ground. In New York, meanwhile, quarterback Joe Pisarcik slumped after solid work in 1975, halfback Doug Kotar suffered a career-ending knee injury, and only fits of defensive strength helped the Giants struggle to 6-10.

The NFC Central was dominated in 1976 by a resurgence of the Detroit Lions. That dominance was strongest on the defensive side of the ball: in the aggregate the Lions produced the NFL's fourth-best team defense in 1976, rising to third-best on scoring defense. Detroit sent four defensive players to the Pro Bowl - defensive ends Ken Sanders and Jim Mitchell, linebacker Ed O'Neil, and future Hall of Famer cornerback Lem Barney. The Lions' offense was more modest but effective when it needed to be: quarterback Greg Landry threw for 2636 yards, 18 touchdowns, and 12 interceptions on the year, while Dexter Bussey rushed for 1127 yards and seven touchdowns, and rookie Lawrence Gaines added 903 yards plus six touchdowns of his own. The Lions dropped only two divisional games and, despite a hard loss to the Rams in the last week of play, finished 12-4 in command of the division.

The rest of the NFC Central's performance was less inspiring. Despite another solid year from the "Purple People Eaters" defense and from dual-threat fullback Chuck Foreman, the Minnesota Vikings had to weather several hard losses inside and outside their division, gritting their way to 9-7 with wins over the Packers and Dolphins in the last two weeks. Despite improved defense and a 1000-yard season from running back Anthony Davis, the Chicago Bears relied on a pair of close wins to finish 7-9 for the year, itself their best performance of the decade thus far. The Green Bay Packers found themselves on a sharp downgrade from their playoffs

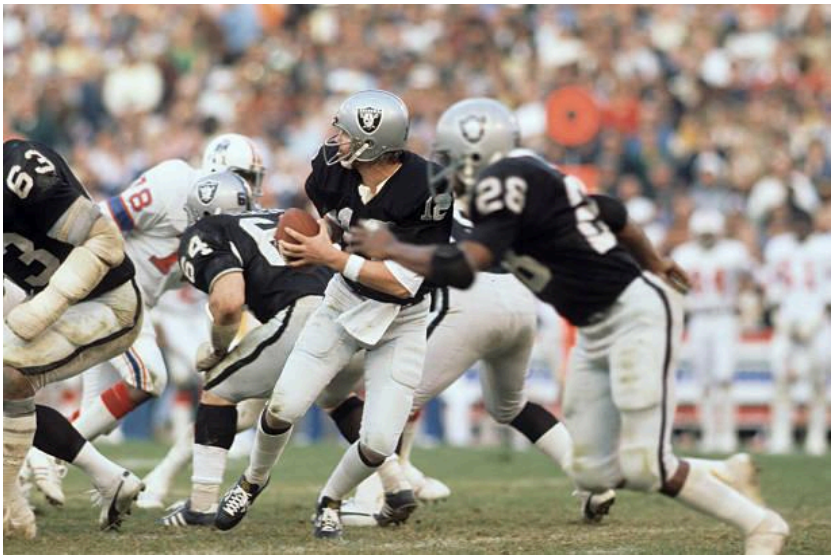
appearance in 1975. Quarterback John Hadl suffered a debilitating back injury in the preseason and played poorly. Young Lynn Dickey looked rocky in relief over the latter two-thirds of the season and, despite rusher John Brockington's last 1000-yard season, the Packers' defense was largely porous and ineffective as the team slumped to 6-10. The newly minted Tampa Bay Buccaneers were often outmatched and occasionally overwhelmed during the 1976 season but also showed moments of promise. The Buccaneers notched their first win against the Buffalo Bills 16-14, and managed two other victories to finish 3-13: a 21-13 win over fellow-rookies the Seattle Seahawks, and a surprising 21-20 upset of the Dolphins in which Steve Spurrier and Gary Huff both threw for scores and the decisive touchdown came on a pick-six of Bob Griese by defensive back Mike Washington.



1976 marked a dramatic turnaround for the San Francisco 49ers, who finished the year 12-4 with great offensive productivity: (left) quarterback Jim Plunkett (16) hands off to halfback Delvin Williams (24), who led the league in rushing, total scrimmage yards, and combined rushing and receiving touchdowns, being named the AP's Offensive Player of the Year

The NFC West's season was highlighted by the resurgence of the San Francisco 49ers. That did not begin well: the Niners' young prospect at quarterback, Steve Bartkowski, suffered a separated shoulder that would put him on injured reserve for the rest of the season. In his place came veteran Jim Plunkett, so recently acquired from the Patriots. Plunkett played reasonably in 1976, passing for 2891 yards with 18 touchdowns and 17 interceptions, but was at his best as a play-caller and game manager for the team. The keys to San Francisco's seasonal success were twofold. One was defense, especially the "Gold Rush" defensive front of defensive ends Fred Dean and Cleveland Elam, and defensive tackles Cedrick Hardman (converted from defensive end) and Jimmy Webb. Dean, Elam, and Hardman each made the NFC's Pro Bowl roster (with Webb as an alternate.) Together with a strong secondary, that front line dominated most of the Niners' opponents during the season. The other key was young running back Delvin Williams. Williams generated a strikingly dominant season: he led the NFL in rushing yards (1777), rushing and receiving yards from scrimmage (2138), and touchdowns from scrimmage (21, of which 19 were gained on the ground.) For a franchise known for its passing game this was a change of pace, and it wrongfooted many of San Francisco's opponents. Not all: the Niners suffered two embarrassing losses on the year, 27-3 in their first meeting with old rivals the Los Angeles Rams, and a 55-17 drubbing by the Cardinals. Otherwise, however, the Niners dominated their opponents (including a 31-6 rematch win over the Rams.) San Francisco closed the year with a 20-17 comeback victory over the Chargers and a 31-0 shutout of the New Orleans Saints to finish 12-4 and winners of their division.

Though the San Francisco 49ers came away with the NFC West title, the Los Angeles Rams remained a powerful team dangerous to opponents as they were throughout the 1970s. As a team the Rams rushed for 2894 yards on the season: in their first year together, the duo of O.J. Simpson and Lawrence McCutcheon produced a record-setting fourth NFL pair of 1000-yard rushers, as Simpson put up 1013 yards and eight touchdowns on the ground to McCutcheon's 1168 yards and nine touchdowns, while reserve back John Cappelletti along with quarterback James Harris added over 300 yards each. James Harris delivered a strong season as the Rams' lead quarterback, platooned with the young Pat Haden. Cornerback Monte Jackson intercepted a total of twelve passes on the season and was named the AP Defensive Player of the Year. Despite their disadvantage to the 49ers, the Rams registered several dominant wins during the season and posted an 11-5 record, narrowly behind San Francisco with home-field advantage for the NFC wild-card game. The New Orleans Saints ended the year 4-12 after Archie Manning suffered a season-ending knee injury in the fourth week and backup Bobby Scott failed to inspire in relief. The Atlanta Falcons went slightly better at 6-10, largely on the strength of a good season from running back Walter Payton who provided 1390 yards and thirteen touchdowns on the ground, but Atlanta's defense remained patchy and quarterback Craig Morton threw eighteen interceptions in the course of the season as Atlanta ended the year with a losing streak. The Seattle Seahawks struggled over the course of the year despite some strong individual performances on defense and a 1000-yard season from Sherman Smith in the backfield, finishing 1976 with a 2-14 record.

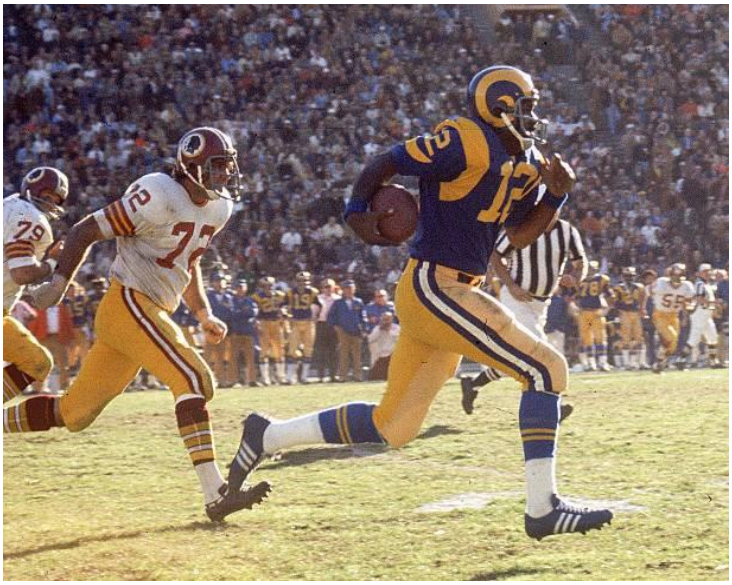


Raiders quarterback Ken Stabler (12) drops back to pass (as Clarence Davis (26) rolls out from the backfield in the foreground) during the second half of the 1976 season's AFC Championship game; the Raiders won a hard-fought contest 27-17 and advanced to Super Bowl XI

The 1976 AFC playoffs brought together a range of team cultures and styles: the defense of Pittsburgh and Denver, the offense of Baltimore and New England (and in that case either Baltimore's passing game or New England's rushing), and the well-rounded dominance of the Oakland Raiders. The inaugural wild-card game, played in flurries at Memorial Stadium in Baltimore, set the home-team Colts against the Denver Broncos. Baltimore dominated the first half with its passing game, as two Bert Jones touchdown passes also opened the way for a bruising 22-yard touchdown run by Roosevelt Leaks and Baltimore led 21-3 at the half. The Colts padded their lead with a field goal in the third quarter and, though Otis

Armstrong and young backup quarterback Norris Weese ran for scores during a fourth-quarter comeback, Baltimore held the line to advance with a 24-17 win. The divisional round was marked by a pair of dramatic results. The Pittsburgh Steelers played their first away game in the conference playoffs since 1973, in Foxboro, Massachusetts against the Patriots. In mud and freezing rain the teams slugged it out grimly in the old fashion, playing the game on the ground. While Franco Harris ran for two Pittsburgh touchdowns, one in each half, each of Sam Cunningham, Ike Forte, and Steve Grogan scored for New England, and the Patriots' defense held off a late Pittsburgh drive for a 24-17 upset victory that ended the chance of a third straight Steelers Super Bowl appearance. At the Alameda County Coliseum in Oakland, many observers expected a passing shootout between the Raiders and Colts. Instead the game was a one-sided landslide: Clarence Davis ran for three Oakland touchdowns and Pete Banaszak for two, while Ken Stabler added 369 passing yards and two touchdown passes of his own, as Oakland's defense held Baltimore to one Bert Jones touchdown pass. The only blemish on Oakland's day was a missed extra point by Fred Steinfort as the Raiders stormed to a 51-10 victory.

The Raiders and Patriots faced off in the AFC Championship game on a cold, clear day in Oakland. The Raiders led off scoring with a Pete Banaszak goal-line dive; New England answered with two Mark van Eeghen touchdown runs in the first half while the Patriots defended well against the run as the game went on, and led 14-10 at the half. The Raiders changed pace in the third quarter as Ken Stabler delivered long balls to Cliff Branch and tight end Dave Casper in the third quarter to break out for a lead. The fourth quarter became a battle of position as each team kicked one field goal and the Patriots missed a second that would have brought them within a touchdown of the lead. Late in the game Oakland's defense stifled New England's running and picked off Steve Grogan, after which the Raiders ran down the clock for a 27-17 victory.



The 1976 NFC playoffs featured matchups between several teams who were regular staples of the 1970s' postseasons: (left) Los Angeles Rams quarterback James Harris (12) outruns Washington Redskins defenders on a first-half play during the NFC's inaugural wild-card game; the Rams won the game 21-13

The 1976 NFC playoffs featured a number of familiar teams from the postseasons of the 1970s, starting with a rematch between the Los Angeles Rams and Washington Redskins in the conference's inaugural wild-card game. The two teams' defenses dominated the first half, as the Rams held Washington to field goals on its only deep drives and played a game of field position on punts until Los Angeles could shorten the field and score on an endzone

fade from James Harris to wideout Ron Jessie for a 7-6 lead at halftime. In the second half Los Angeles held the line as OJ Simpson and John Cappelletti added touchdowns to pad the Rams' lead. In the fourth quarter Washington exploited cracks in the Rams' defensive sets for a sixteen-yard Duane Thomas touchdown run that narrowed the lead. The Rams, however, played ball control successfully in the waning minutes and came away with a 21-13 win. In the divisional round, San Francisco's "Gold Rush" successfully shut down the Detroit Lions' offense as the teams traded field goals in the first half. In the second, showing that his performance improved with a postseason to play in, Jim Plunkett threw for two touchdowns as the Niners built a lead and kept it with a relentless defensive press for the 20-9 victory. On a rainy day at Busch Stadium the Cardinals and Rams squared off for the remaining spot in the conference championship game. The teams traded long-bomb touchdowns in the first half, James Harris to star wideout Lynn Swann and St. Louis' Jim Hart to Mel Gray. Early in the third quarter they traded blows again with touchdown runs by Jim Otis and Lawrence McCutcheon. From there defense took the fore as each side blocked the others' path trading field goals, but future Hall of Fame placekicker Jim Bakken knocked in a 47-yard shot for a final 20-17 St. Louis lead, and soon thereafter the win.

The NFC Championship game was one of hard slog: the Cardinals and 49ers knew one another's playbooks well and checked one another's maneuvers through most of the first half. Against the trends of the year, as the teams traded touchdowns in the second and third quarters respectively it was running back Terry Metcalf who scored twice for the Cardinals, while Jim Plunkett threw another pair of San Francisco touchdowns. San Francisco drove deep late in the game, but a stiff hit from St. Louis' future Hall of Fame safety Roger Wehrli knocked a catch loose and the Cardinals covered the loose ball. In just over a minute Jim Hart passed St. Louis into field goal range and Jim Bakken once again sealed the win with a long shot at 31 seconds left. With that field goal the Cardinals became the newest NFC team to reach the Super Bowl.

Super Bowl XI, played at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, CA, was the culmination of the NFL's Bicentennial season and showcased the more wide-open offenses, oriented towards passing, that the league hoped to encourage with its expansion and renovation. In the wake of the sometimes tumultuous events of 1976 and the controversial 1976 United States presidential election during the regular season, Super Bowl XI was seen and often treated as valuable national recreation, a sign that everyday life went on much as usual while a new contestant in the Super Bowl, the St. Louis Cardinals, sought to make a mark. Among the sellout crowd were recently inaugurated Vice President [REDACTED] and House [REDACTED] Gerald Ford. (Ford was especially appreciative that one of his favorite performers, singer Vicki Carr, would perform the National Anthem. At a pre-game buffet where the two were introduced, Carr gestured to a spread of enchiladas and asked Ford what his favorite Mexican dish was - reportedly Ford grinned and replied, "you are.")

Determined to stifle one another's powerful offenses, and to avoid unforced errors, both teams ran the ball in the first quarter without much success, until a breakthrough Raiders drive that

ended with a two-yard endzone dash by Clarence Davis. After adding a field goal early in the second quarter Oakland opened up in an effort to deliver a killing blow: Cliff Branch shed his coverage on a deep post pattern and Ken Stabler delivered the ball for Branch, with his breakneck speed, to cut across the field for a 69-yard touchdown. This, however, left St. Louis not defeated but roused. Three plays after the ensuing kickoff, the Cardinals ran a deception pattern that freed Mel Gray and Ahmad Rashad to run crossing patterns midway into Raiders territory; Jim Hart hit Rashad in the open for a 78-yard score of his own. After an Oakland fumble late in the half, St. Louis closed the distance with more cautious out patterns before a two-yard sweep by running back Terry Metcalf that made the score 17-14 in Oakland's favor as the teams hit their locker rooms.



Super Bowl XI produced an entertaining quarterback duel between the St. Louis Cardinals and Oakland Raiders as (above left) Jim Hart (17) and (above right) Ken Stabler (12) combined for 609 passing yards and four touchdowns; the Raiders opened repeated leads only to see the Cardinals close them, until a last scoring drive for Oakland that secured the game, the NFL title, and Ken Stabler's Super Bowl MVP award

The third quarter returned to a pattern of probe and counter-probe as Oakland in particular worked to sit on their lead. Their greatest success came with a drive of nearly six minutes capped when a well-placed trap block sprang Pete Banaszak for four yards and a touchdown. Again St. Louis answered with their own methodical move downfield that produced a Jim Bakken field goal and brought St. Louis back within a touchdown. There the game seemed suspended through much of the quarter as Oakland's ball control approach seemed uninspired while its defense managed to cover St. Louis' timing patterns effectively. Then, with less than four minutes to play, Roger Wehrli picked off a Ken Stabler pass at Oakland's forty-eight-yard line and St. Louis pressed the ball methodically downfield, until Jim Hart dished a two-yard screen pass to Jim Otis who ran over an Oakland linebacker on his way across the goal line. This left the game tied with 1:31 to play when the Raiders regained the ball. With the outcome on his shoulders, Ken Stabler ran a faultless two-minute drill down to a first-and-goal, on which Clarence Davis swept left for six yards to the Cardinals' two-yard line. There were less than twenty seconds to play; nevertheless Don Coryell had shepherded two Cardinals timeouts in

case of need. Concerned about a last hail mary play from "Air Coryell," followed by another Bakken field goal, Ken Stabler talked Raiders coach John Madden into an untypical risk to put the game out of reach. Oakland lined up for a run to set the ball for a field goal, but Stabler rolled out to his left and tossed a short flare to veteran wideout Fred Biletnikoff who gathered it in for a touchdown. St. Louis did pass the ball just past midfield before time ran out, but a last-play ball into Oakland's endzone was batted away. The Raiders restored their lead and, in their second appearance, won their first Super Bowl together with the NFL title it carried, 31-24.

Ken Stabler's last pass drew together a career year for the southpaw quarterback. Stabler was named the Associated Press' NFL League MVP for the 1976 season, and added to that as MVP of Super Bowl XI. Despite the late-game interception, Stabler completed an impressive twenty of twenty-six passes for 279 yards and two touchdowns, including the game-winner, at the Rose Bowl. By contrast Oakland was held to just under 100 team yards rushing by an uncommonly strong St. Louis defensive front, though they generated two touchdowns. The leading back on the day was St. Louis' Terry Metcalf, who had fifteen carries for 72 yards and a first-half touchdown. Jim Hart, stalwart throughout, completed nineteen of his own twenty-nine pass attempts for 330 yards, with two touchdowns and an interception himself. Together Stabler and Hart generated 609 passing yards, indicative of the new style of play the NFL hoped to encourage. Raiders defensive tackle Otis Sistrunk and the Cardinals' Roger Wehrli were reckoned the game's strongest defensive players.

With the 1976 season the league introduced a series of rules changes intended to open up the passing game and produce more effective offensive play. One of them, referred to by shorthand as "the Mel Blount Rule" after the Pittsburgh Steelers' punishing cornerback, held that defensive players could only make physical contact with receivers out to a point five yards from the line of scrimmage, after which contact would, depending on its nature, be pass interference or defensive holding. This was refined by another regulation that defenders could only make contact with receivers inside the five-yard window "on one occasion," which left some latitude with field judges on the nature and severity of the contact. Another "named" rule, known as "the Mel Renfro Rule," made double touches of a forward pass by the offense legal, but also ruled that batting a pass towards the opponent's endzone would be illegal. Pass blocking regulations would now allow extended arms and open hands, while the penalty for intentional grounding was substantially reduced to ten yards and a loss of down. The penalty for hurdling was removed, while committing a penalty deliberately to stop the clock would cause a ten-second runoff of that clock. The league also added a seventh official, a side judge, to monitor penalties downfield and act as another set of eyes on field goals and extra points.

There were few league coaching changes of note largely because New Orleans' Jim Shofner and the New York Jets' Charley Winner survived on sufferance to see the 1977 season. By far the largest change was an unusual demotion: the Atlanta Falcons retained Marion Campbell's contract but downgraded Campbell to defensive coordinator after the Falcons' unsuccessful 1976 campaign. In his place, Atlanta was able to recruit new head coach Johnny Majors fresh

from his role coaching NCAA Division I co-champions the 1976 University of Pittsburgh Panthers team. In San Francisco, on the retirement of Niners coach Dick Nolan, his offensive coordinator and designated heir Jim Stanfel became head coach in his stead. Buffalo Bills coach Lou Saban was let go at the end of their 2-14 season, replaced by Saban's offensive coordinator Bob Shaw. In Kansas City the Chiefs' turnaround earned head coach Tom Bettis a firm two-year contract for 1977-78, to continue the team's rebuilding effort.

1977 [click to enlarge]

1977 National Football League season
1977 NFL Playoffs
AFC Champion Oakland Raiders
NFC Champion Los Angeles Rams

Super Bowl XII
Date January 22, 1978
Site Tampa Stadium, Tampa, Florida
Result Oakland Raiders 27, Los Angeles Rams 18
Super Bowl MVP Ted Hendricks (LB, Oakland Raiders)

Bert Bell Award Jack Youngblood (DE, Los Angeles Rams)
Associated Press League MVP Ken Anderson (QB, Cincinnati Bengals)
AP Offensive Player of the Year Walter Payton (RB, Atlanta Falcons)
AP Defensive Player of the Year Jack Youngblood (DE, Los Angeles Rams)
AP Offensive Rookie of the Year Joe Roth (QB, New York Giants)
AP Defensive Rookie of the Year Bob Baumhower (DT, Miami Dolphins)
PFWA Comeback Player of the Year Craig Morton (QB, Atlanta Falcons)
AP NFL Coach of the Year Dick Vermeil (HC, Philadelphia Eagles)
Single-season passer rating leader James Harris (QB, Los Angeles Rams)
Seasonal rushing leader Walter Payton (RB, Atlanta Falcons)

1977 marked the second season of a new era in the NFL. In many ways the 1976 season had marked the completion of the NFL-AFL merger process as a true new league took full shape. With thirty teams, a more wide-open style of play, a longer regular season and cycle of playoffs, along with ever-more lucrative television contracts, American-rules football emerged as the nation's preeminent team sport especially among sports fans under the age of forty.

From there some of the more interesting stories that presaged the 1977 season had to do with that process of consolidation. In San Antonio, San Antonio Texans owner Red McCombs was able to gain zoning permission and break ground on his proposed Alamodome, the latest domed stadium project in the vein of Houston's Astrodome, Detroit's Pontiac Silverdome, and New Orleans' Superdome. As a temporary measure the Texans had played their first season in a refitted Alamo Stadium, the league's smallest: though it had been expanded to seat 22,000 Alamo Stadium was more typically used for high-school playoff games. McCombs had worked with a range of regional partners, Texas state authorities, and filed for funds under the Urban Renovation and Sustainment Act (URSA) of 1975 in order to build an enclosed facility that could seat three times Alamo Stadium's capacity and could shift between a layout for Texans home games and those of the ABA, transitioning then to the NBA, franchise the San Antonio Spurs that McCombs also owned.

The league also began talks with Paramount Studios: linked to the "fourth network" Paramount Channel planned for introduction in 1978, and designed to capitalize on the expansion of cable television services tied in part to federal infrastructure spending, Paramount intended to start up the Paramount Sports Entertainment Network (PSEN) as a dedicated sports broadcasting cable channel, and wanted direct links with the NFL for summary coverage, interview programs, and a potential showcase for NFL Films products. PSEN would of course outstrip its parent Paramount Channel as a preeminent American sportscasting entity.

The 1977 NFL Draft was one of the more eventful drafts of the decade and produced (thus far) five future entrants to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Two aspects of the 1977 Draft stood out especially in their significance. The first was the fate of the draft's likeliest first pick, University of Pittsburgh Heisman Trophy winner Tony Dorsett. Both the San Antonio Texans and Buffalo Bills produced 2-14 records in 1976, with the Texans placed lower by fewer divisional wins. This gave the expansion team the draft's first-seed choice, but Dorsett had been clear in interviews that he would exercise his rights with the Football Labor Relations Board if the draft sent him to an expansion team. As a result the Texans shopped around the league seeking the maximum benefit in trade for their first-pick rights and in the process Dorsett became the subject of a bidding war between the New York Jets and Denver Broncos. Both teams believed that pairing Dorsett with their existing backfield - the Jets with former Super Bowl MVP fullback John Riggins, the Broncos with All-Pro back Otis Armstrong - could vault them to the fore of their divisions. In the end the Broncos, who saw a combination of a Dorsett-Armstrong backfield and their "Orange Crush" defense as a potential Super Bowl ticket, offered more incentives to San Antonio including Broncos first-round picks in 1978 and 1979. As a result the Broncos took Dorsett with the draft's first choice; Dorsett would indeed reach the Super Bowl in time, in the course of a twelve-season Hall of Fame career in Denver.

The 1977 Draft was also noted for its quarterback class, one of several yearly NFL drafts over the decades recognized for a "quarterback class" of considerable numbers and also quality. No fewer than twelve quarterbacks who saw some substantial playing time entered the league in the 1977 Draft, half of them in the first round and a total of seven within the first two rounds.

The class commenced with the draft's second pick: concerned about Joe Ferguson's poor performance in 1976 and potential shoulder issues, the Buffalo Bills took star University of Nebraska quarterback Vince Ferragamo. With the seventh pick the New York Giants chose Heisman finalist Joe Roth from California. Two other Heisman-finalist quarterbacks followed: with the fourteenth pick the Atlanta Falcons took Oregon's June Jones as a potential long-term successor to Craig Morton, while with the twenty-first slot the Washington Redskins took Rice University star Tommy Kramer as the designated heir to Billy Kilmer. With the twenty-ninth pick of the round the St. Louis Cardinals chose Missouri quarterback Steve Pisarkiewicz at owner Bill Bidwill's insistence. In the second round the Tampa Bay Buccaneers took Steve DeBerg, one of the most efficient Division I collegiate passers from San Jose State, while the Dallas Cowboys chose Glenn Carano. In later rounds the Detroit Lions chose Cliff Stoudt, the Chicago Bears Vince Evans of USC, the Green Bay Packers chose David Whitehurst, the New England Patriots Matt Robinson, and the New York Giants chose Northwestern's Randy Dean to backstop Joe Roth. Each of these twelve quarterbacks would see, at the least, multiple starts in the NFL. Among them Vince Ferragamo, Joe Roth, Tommy Kramer, and Steve DeBerg would all reach the Pro Bowl, while Ferragamo would once be named the Associated Press' NFL league MVP. After his untimely death from recurrent melanoma Joe Roth's name was in time attached to the league's annual Payton-Roth Humanitarian Award in recognition of his distinguished though tragically shortened career. Others like Carano and Evans proved to be capable backups; out of twelve only Steve Pisarkiewicz's career could be called a true "bust."

Several teams took special benefit from the 1977 Draft. Under new head coach Ted Marchibroda the New York Giants greatly improved their offense: the Giants angled for spot-swap trades on several fronts in order to trade up for two picks each in the first and second rounds. In the first they took not only Joe Roth, one of the draft's most outstanding quarterbacks, but Roth's University of California teammate wide receiver Wesley Walker. In the second round, by trading up the Giants were able to take swift and massive fullback Rob Carpenter out from under the Seattle Seahawks (Carpenter had played his first college seasons at Miami (Ohio) under Seahawks head coach Dick Crum), then also longtime wideout Johnny Perkins. In the fifth round, as the Giants resumed, they also gained multiple-Pro Bowl guard Brad Benson to protect Roth's blind side on the offensive line. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers also fared remarkably well in the early going. With the fourth overall pick they took USC running back Ricky Bell, a future Pro Bowler who would rotate with Jimmy DuBose in head coach Bobby Bowden's single-back offense. In the second round the Bucs took quarterback Steve DeBerg, a successful longtime fixture in Tampa Bay, while in the third round Tampa Bay gained Pro Bowl linebacker Dave Lewis and also future Hall of Fame tight end Jimmie Giles, a regular entrant in conversations about the NFL's greatest player at that position. In the fourth round the Bucs added longtime guard Charley Hannah.

Other teams prospered as well. With the third overall pick the Seattle Seahawks took future Pro Bowler defensive end A.J. Duhe, while in the sixth spot the Memphis Grizzlies traded up through the New Orleans Saints to secure the draft's third Hall of Famer, offensive tackle

Marvin Powell (Powell, who gained a law degree during his playing days, would in his post-football career go on to be a two-time Mayor of Memphis.) The Miami Dolphins gained decorated defensive tackle Bob Baumhower, while in the Broncos' original slot the San Antonio Texans selected a new lead rusher, Heisman finalist from Michigan Rob Lytle. The New England Patriots chose their lead wideout of many seasons, Stanley Morgan, along with cornerback Raymond Clayborn, and in the second round tight end Don Hasselbeck. The Memphis Grizzlies added massive fullback Pete Johnson in the second round, a potential successor to Larry Csonka, while the Rams gained much-decorated cornerback Nolan Cromwell and also successful running back Wendell Tyler. To that second-round hall the Seattle Seahawks added guard R.C. Thielemann, and the Houston Oilers took the powerful North Carolina halfback Mike Voight. In later rounds the San Antonio Texans picked up Baylor halfback Cleveland Franklin and future Pro Bowler cornerback Mike Nelms, yet another Baylor product and counterpart to future Hall of Famer Mike Haynes as the "Iron Mikes" of San Antonio's secondary. In the fifth round the Oakland Raiders took future Hall of Fame cornerback Lester Hayes, known as "Lester the Molester" for his aggressive style of play. The Philadelphia Eagles made an especially fortunate choice with Abilene Christian's Wilbert Montgomery, in time a Hall of Fame running back, still one of the Eagles' top all-time rushers, and one of the league's top producers of scrimmage yards in the late Seventies and early Eighties. The New York Jets also struck paydirt with soon-legendary defensive tackle Joe Klecko, much honored and a multiple entrant on Hall of Fame ballots though not yet admitted. The Dallas Cowboys gained wideout Tony Hill. The New Orleans Saints selected mighty fullback Tim Wilson as lead blocker for Chuck Muncie, and also decorated defensive end Charles Johnson. The Chicago Bears gained longtime receiver Emery Moorehead. Near the very end of the draft, which had twelve rounds in the format of the 1970s, the Cincinnati Bengals gained almost as an afterthought their placekicker for the next fifteen seasons, Rolf Benirschke.





In a season that harked back to the start of the 1970s, the Baltimore Colts and Miami Dolphins mastered the fiercely competitive AFC East: (left) quarterback Bert Jones (7) of the 12-4 Colts delivered another banner performance at the forefront of coach Sid Gillman's pass-centered offense as Baltimore won the division, while the Dolphins (right) relied on stalwarts like quarterback Bob Griese (12) and a career season from running back Benny Malone (32) for their return to the playoffs with an 11-5 record

The AFC East remained a cockpit of struggle and one of the league's most entertaining divisions. In 1977 its

upshot echoed the early years of the decade, with a struggle between the surging Baltimore Colts and the rejuvenated Miami Dolphins. Baltimore led off their season with several powerful wins and a 21-17 comeback victory over a much-improved Buffalo Bills defense. The Colts then lost their first meeting with Miami in a 38-24 offensive shootout, then another game 24-14 to the Kansas City Chiefs' best defensive performance of the season. The Colts bounced back with wins that included a surprising 34-14 walk against the mighty Pittsburgh Steelers before the Colts themselves were ambushed 37-13 by backyard neighbors the Washington Redskins. From there Baltimore raised themselves up to dominate the back end of the season, winning six of their last seven that included a 28-13 rematch victory against the Dolphins in which quarterback Bert Jones passed for 358 yards. On the season Jones threw for 3512 yards with a league-leading thirty-two touchdowns to just eleven interceptions, with the highest passer rating in the AFC (third-highest in the NFL in 1977, behind James Harris of the Los Angeles Rams and Steve Joachim of the Philadelphia Eagles, respectively.) Though head coach Sid Gillman's "ace offense" relied on just one running back at a time Baltimore did not lack for rushing: big Roosevelt Leaks continued to lead the way with 957 yards and eleven rushing touchdowns, while young Ron Lee added 720 more yards and four more scores in relief of Leaks. Defense remained Baltimore's principal question mark, but again in 1977 the Colts boasted quite enough offense to meet their needs.

Miami, meanwhile, hewed to head coach Don Shula's first principles: a mighty backfield, a suffocating defense, and quarterbacks who could lead men and throw accurately and efficiently when needed. In 1977 those attributes took the Dolphins back into the league's front ranks. Starting quarterback Bob Griese returned to good form, reaching the Pro Bowl with one of the league's highest completion percentages and few interceptions (along with the AFC's third-highest passer rating) and especially effective play in the second half of games. Griese's towering backup Don Strock (Griese stood six-foot-one, Strock six-foot-five) played capably and won his two starts in relief when Griese struggled with a shoulder injury. Despite navigating generational turnover of defensive players Miami's future on that side of the ball looked bright: rookie Bob Baumhower led all NFL defensive tackles in (still unofficial) sacks, recovered three fumbles, and was consensus Defensive Rookie of the Year for the Associated Press and several other wire services. Wideouts Nat Moore and Duriel Harris each caught nine touchdown passes on the year, while lead back Benny Malone enjoyed a career performance with 1412 yards rushing, third-most in the league, and ten touchdowns. In his penultimate season as a starter fellow running back Mercury Morris added 875 more yards and five touchdowns of his own. The Dolphins entered the last week of play 11-4 knotted with the Colts' record, but while Baltimore defeated the New England Patriots 20-17 in the snow at Foxboro, MA, the Dolphins lost a bitter 17-16 contest with the Buffalo Bills thanks to two late Buffalo scores. The game cost Miami a shot at the division but, with an 11-5 record, they still enjoyed home field advantage for the AFC's wild-card game.

Despite some letdown from their historic 1976 season the New England Patriots continued to play well in 1977. They boasted a stingy "no-name defense" of their own that constrained

opponents enough to keep the Patriots close in all but two games that season. On offense the backfield tandem of Mark van Eeghen and Sam Cunningham continued to deliver with a combined 2068 rushing yards and fourteen touchdowns between them. With twenty-one interceptions on the year quarterback Steve Grogan struggled a bit more, but also threw for seventeen touchdowns and ran for four others as the Patriots fought their way to a winning record at 9-7. The New York Jets foundered all season on both sides of the ball, highlighted by continued difficulties at quarterback as neither Joe Namath in his final season nor young Richard Todd performed with much quality while the team's backfield was equally ineffective in their 5-11 campaign . The Buffalo Bills showed some progress on defense and scored a handful of notable wins that included the final-week comeback against the Dolphins. But the Bills' offense remained deeply inconsistent while quarterback Joe Ferguson still struggled with a lingering shoulder injury and threw twenty-four interceptions on the year while the Bills finished 4-12.

1977 was a season of transformation in the AFC Central, though no one was sure whether that might last. The Bengals' defense improved significantly over recent seasons, still not a league-leading lineup but quite strong enough to give the Bengals a shot at victory in many more games. And win they could, because of Cincinnati's league-leading 1977 offense. Quarterback Ken Anderson's considerable skills returned in full - so much so that he was named the Associated Press' NFL Most Valuable Player - as Anderson threw for a league-best 3961 yards, along with 26 touchdowns and 14 interceptions. Cincinnati's attack was more balanced in 1977 thanks to the explosive success of the Bengals' backfield "committee": veteran lead rusher Boobie Clark, the small but agile Archie Griffin, and the doughty Stan Fritts. Taken together the three running backs generated 1922 rushing yards and twenty touchdowns, out of a team total of 2205 yards and twenty-three scores on the ground. Cincinnati did lose two divisional games, to the Houston Oilers and Memphis Grizzlies respectively, but recorded only one other loss on the season: the Bengals swept Pittsburgh in their yearly series, and dominated the field against other AFC and also NFC teams en route to a 13-3 record, second in the AFC only to the 13-3 Oakland Raiders on a divisional-losses tiebreaker. Bengals founder, owner, and longtime head coach Paul Brown had announced before the season that 1977 would be his last on the sidelines, and it proved to be a remarkable sendoff.



(left) Cincinnati Bengals quarterback Ken Anderson (14) delivered a landmark season in 1977 as he passed for the most yards in Bengals history to that point and the most in the NFL for 1977 (3961) and helped lead the Bengals to a 13-3 tear through their schedule that displaced the mighty Pittsburgh Steelers and made the Bengals one of the top two AFC teams on the year - offense was key for the Bengals' success as Anderson's passing (which earned him the Associated Press' NFL Most Valuable Player award) and the Bengals' "backfield committee" of Boobie Clark, Archie Griffin, and Stan Fritts powered Cincinnati past opponents into the playoffs

The 1977 season threw a sharp hitch in the Pittsburgh Steelers' league-dominating record for the 1970s, caused in

large part by trouble at home. Pittsburgh ended the season with a 4-4 record in the AFC Central: the Steelers lost both annual games against Cincinnati, along with single-loss upsets against the Memphis Grizzlies and Cleveland Browns, all of which followed the early-season 34-14 drubbing at the hands of Baltimore. Pittsburgh would end the season 10-6, in potential contention for the playoffs but ultimately denied by the Denver Broncos on a divisional-losses tiebreaker. On offense the Steelers navigated injury issues with fullback Rocky Bleier and running back Frenchy Fuqua, though Franco Harris delivered yet another solid, Pro Bowl-caliber season. Now the solo starter at quarterback with Joe Gilliam absent, and more central to offensive production because of offensive coordinator Hank Stram's shift to a more pass-oriented game, Terry Bradshaw's season was emblematic of the Steelers' issues in 1977. The "Blonde Bomber" threw for 3785 yards and twenty-six touchdowns, but also a league-leading twenty-six interceptions. The Steelers' defensive front remained one of the very strongest in the league, but injury and inconsistency issues in the secondary hurt especially against Cincinnati and Baltimore, between them three of Pittsburgh's six losses. Despite those problems Pittsburgh improved over the course of the season to finish strong in its final games, but came up short of the postseason nonetheless.

The class of the rest of the AFC Central remained the expansion Memphis Grizzlies. The front end of Memphis' season was mixed: "The Griz" sustained blowout losses against the Bengals and the San Diego Chargers, but also several important wins that included a 41-3 romp over the Green Bay Packers and a historic first franchise victory over the Steelers, 27-24. After a four-game midseason losing streak they rebounded to win four of the next five and entered the final week 8-7 in search of a second winning record. In that pursuit they were frustrated by the second-half dominance of the Steelers in a 24-10 loss, but still finished 8-8 with not yet a losing season in the franchise's fragile first two years. Quarterbacks John Huarte and Danny White platooned to very good effect as they generated numbers in the top half of league performance, most importantly twenty-four combined touchdowns against only fourteen interceptions. Running back Mike Pruitt emerged as a backfield leader with 903 rushing yards and ten touchdowns. In his last season as a starter Jim Kiick was hampered by injury issues but also contributed, and fullback Larry Csonka continued solid work as the Grizzlies totaled up 2218 team yards and twenty touchdowns on the ground. Lead wideout Paul Warfield was also joint-second in the NFL with ten touchdown catches. Defense remained Memphis' weak suit but the team continued ably despite that.



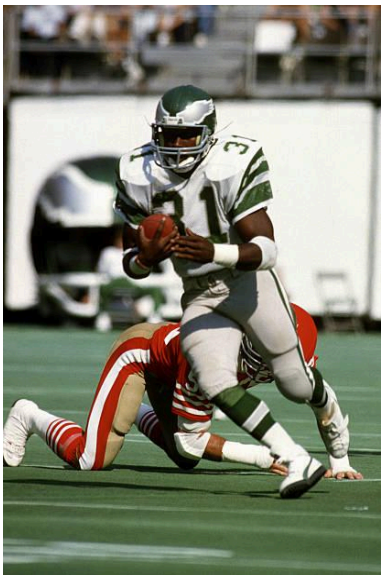
At the outset, the strongest "Class of '76" expansion franchise was the Memphis Grizzlies, seen here in a home game at the Liberty Bowl in Memphis against the Houston Oilers; with a roster anchored by noted veterans like running back Jim Kiick (21, foreground) and his longtime backfield partner Larry Csonka (39, middle right), alongside younger talent like quarterback Danny White (11, right), the Grizzlies posted an 8-8 season in 1977 in the intensely competitive AFC Central, which cemented a 17-15 record for their first two seasons

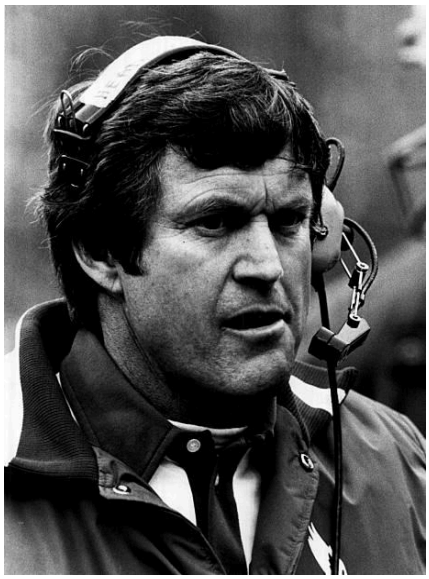
The remaining teams in the Central struggled more visibly. The Houston Oilers continued to build on one of the NFL's more powerful defenses, key to the team's victories in 1977. On the other side of the ball, however, the Oilers brought to bear an anemic offense: quarterback Dan Pastorini threw for just 2063 yards on the season with thirteen touchdowns and nineteen interceptions, while lead running backs Ronnie Coleman and Mike Voight had just over six hundred rushing yards each, though blocking fullback Don Hardeman registered a surprisingly strong year with 505 yards on the ground, while the three backs combined for sixteen touchdowns. The Oilers' record of 6-10 put head coach Bum Phillips' job in jeopardy. The Cleveland Browns, meanwhile, lurched between several solid victories and more stiff losses. Cleveland's linebacking corps suffered a series of injuries over the season while the defensive line's pass rush was relatively weak. Second-year quarterback Gene Swick suffered a debilitating neck injury (Swick would later decide on early retirement for health reasons) and performed less well than he had the year before while his platoon partner Brian Sipe was mixed at best: the team's best game at quarterback came when reserve Dave Mays, Cleveland's first African American quarterback (and a practicing dentist in the offseason), led a 24-21 comeback victory against the Steelers. Otherwise, despite a 1000-yard season from lead back Greg Pruitt, the Browns finished 6-10 as Houston had, two steps back from 1976's forward progress.

The story of the AFC West in 1977 still centered on the Oakland Raiders and the Denver Broncos. The Raiders reprised a more methodical version of the style of play that took them to Super Bowl XI in the 1976 season. Oakland's defense led the league in forced turnovers, in part because the mighty defensive secondary, now joined by rookie Lester Hayes at the start of his Hall of Fame career, led the NFL in interceptions. At quarterback, Ken Stabler enjoyed another distinguished season as he threw for 3176 yards, 25 touchdowns, and 15 interceptions. The Raiders also ran well in support of ball and clock control, and for scoring. A hard-fought 17-14 victory over the Steelers in the second week, decided by a 46-yard field goal on the Raiders' final drive, spurred a win streak into midseason. Oakland and Denver split their seasonal series as each side won at home, the Raiders' sole divisional loss of the year. Indeed Oakland suffered only one lopsided loss all season, a 33-13 defeat in Los Angeles against the Rams, en route to a 13-3 record. Their lower number of divisional losses gave the Raiders home field advantage for the playoffs, ahead of Cincinnati. The Denver Broncos, meanwhile, boasted defense of their own, the NFL's best team defense against the run plus five defensive Pro Bowlers: linemen Lyle Alzado and Lucious Selmon, linebacker Tom Jackson, cornerback Louis Wright, and safety Billy Thompson. In his first season as Denver's starting quarterback, young Norris Weese played solidly and also ran effectively as a "third back" for the Broncos' dominant running game. Rookie Tony Dorsett scored twelve touchdowns on the year as a downpayment on his potential, while Dorsett and veteran Otis Armstrong both notched 1000-yard seasons in the backfield. A loss to Oakland cost Denver its best shot at the division title, along with an upset defeat by the San Antonio Texans, but Denver finished the season with a pair of victories that sewed up an 11-5 record and the AFC's second wild-card spot in the playoffs.

The San Antonio Texans, now in their second season, dealt with a mixture of improvements and complications. San Antonio's pass defense continued to solidify, though injury issues and inconsistent play from the defensive front hampered the team and contributed to a poor scoring defense. On offense, rookie running back Rob Lytle did rush for 749 yards and seven touchdowns, but he was far and away the most effective man in the Texans' backfield as head coach Grant Teaff found his preference for running the ball stifled. In response, Teaff made a change at quarterback and shifted his offensive center of gravity. Quarterback John Reaves, regarded as a "draft bust" with his first team the Philadelphia Eagles, took over under center for the Texans. He then delivered his best season yet in the league: Reaves threw for 3452 yards with eighteen touchdowns and twenty interceptions. In line with Grant Teaff's change of plans, Reaves made more pass attempts (488) than any other quarterback in 1977, and two late Reaves touchdown passes helped engineer a 27-21 comeback win over the New York Jets. The Texans also swept their yearly divisional series with the Kansas City Chiefs en route to a 4-12 record as they doubled their win total from 1976. The AFC West's other teams struggled as well. The San Diego Chargers coped with patchy defense and low offensive scoring: running back Lydell Mitchell enjoyed a Pro Bowl season as he rushed for 1176 yards, but the rest of San Diego's backfield and starting quarterback Dan Fouts were largely unproductive for the 5-11 Chargers. For similar reasons the Kansas City Chiefs slumped from their 1976 performance also - notably young backup quarterback David Jaynes, seen as a potential heir for longtime starter Mike Livingston, went 0-4 in his starts for 1977 - and while the Chiefs' poor mid-Seventies defense improved notably the offense failed to keep pace so Kansas City ended with a 4-12 record of their own, level with the Texans.

The NFC East emerged as perhaps the league's most competitive during 1977: three of its five teams were consistently in playoffs contention all season while a fourth dogged their heels. Only the St. Louis Cardinals, 1976's NFC champions, slid backward to a 7-9 record caused in part by declining performance from both the Cardinals' defense and quarterback Jim Hart. Despite those setbacks in St. Louis the division as a whole enjoyed a banner season.





Fresh faces made the NFC East perhaps the NFL's most competitive division in 1977: (above left) rookie running back Wilbert Montgomery (31) of the Philadelphia Eagles played a key role as the once-hapless Eagles vaulted to the top of the division and on to the NFC Championship game; (above center) New York Giants rookie quarterback Joe Roth (12) turned in a performance that made him the AP Offensive Rookie of the Year and seemed to right the Giants' fortunes; (above right) Eagles head coach Dick Vermeil, in his second season, was named the NFL Coach of the Year by multiple wire services, including the Associated Press, as his team went from 7-9 in 1976 to 12-4 and contenders for the NFC title

The way was led by the Philadelphia Eagles, long one of the division's more disappointing teams. Philadelphia had finished the 1976 season 7-9, with a much improved offense. The front half of their 1977 season began in difficulty: Philadelphia suffered stiff losses to the Rams and the Washington Redskins in the second and seventh weeks, while they were also swept in their yearly series with the New York Giants, the second a heartbreaking 37-31 defeat in overtime. At the same time the Eagles notched several useful wins, especially a hard-fought 17-14 victory over the Dallas Cowboys at Texas Stadium. From there, however, Philadelphia's season came together, as the Eagles swept the back half of their season with an eight-game win streak, including a tough win over Washington and a second victory over the Cowboys to win the yearly series for the first time in the 1970s. As a result, Philadelphia transformed its prospects with a 12-4 finish that captured the division title. Steve Joachim remained outstanding in his second year as Philadelphia's starting quarterback: the big-armed young prospect threw for 3706 yards with twenty-six touchdowns to just nine interceptions and the second-highest passer rating in the NFL. Rookie running back Wilbert Montgomery was a powerful catalyst for the Eagles' success with 1219 rushing yards and ten touchdowns while in his last season veteran Mike Hogan added four more touchdowns out of the backfield. Another key to Philadelphia's newfound success was significant improvement in their defense, especially the defensive line and linebacking corps, as the team finished statistically in the top half of the league on defense and gained steam as the season went along, shutting down most of the Eagles' opponents in the back half of the year.

Close behind Philadelphia came the Washington Redskins. Strong defense was also important for Washington especially in close games all season, like a 19-17 victory over the Cowboys and a

16-9 win at Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia. Defensive tackle Dave Butz and future Hall of Fame safety Ken Houston received not only Pro Bowl invites but also first-team All-Pro honors. (Linebacker Harold McLinton was also named to the Pro Bowl for his outstanding special teams work.) This was Billy Kilmer's last season as the Redskins' starting quarterback and he played solidly throughout, with 3029 passing yards, 18 touchdowns, and 11 interceptions, and a lead role in wins over the Buffalo Bills (as Kilmer threw for four touchdowns) and the Miami Dolphins. Head coach George Allen's backfield remained a potent part of Washington's game as well. Running back Duane Thomas continued his renaissance with 1376 yards and ten touchdowns on the ground, while big fullback Wilbur Jackson added another 814 yards and seven scores. Washington led the NFC East midway through the season with a 6-2 record though they performed marginally worse in the second half of 1977, especially as they fell prey to the Green Bay Packers' best game of the season in a 35-17 loss. Despite that Washington finished strong with a three-game win streak to end at 11-5 with a solid wild-card berth for the postseason.

The New York Giants may have been the division's most improved team in 1977. In the first half of their season they swept their divisional series against both Philadelphia and Washington, looked strong and competitive even in a 14-10 loss to the Los Angeles Rams, and came agonizingly close in a 14-13 loss to the Cowboys due to a missed extra point. The Giants then won their rematch with Dallas 10-9 along with a 38-26 shootout victory over the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. After thirteen weeks the Giants were 7-6, but then suffered a three-game slump at the end of the season to finish 7-9. Despite that, much like Philadelphia the year before the Giants showed many signs of progress and promise especially on offense. Rookie quarterback Joe Roth completed roughly sixty percent of his passes for 3163 yards, with sixteen touchdowns and only six interceptions, a performance that garnered him the AP's Offensive Rookie of the Year award. Another rookie, powerfully built fullback Rob Carpenter, rushed for 1163 yards and eight touchdowns as the leading backfield performer, while Gordon Bell added 799 yards and seven touchdowns of his own. Rookie wideout Wesley Walker, Roth's favorite target in college, notched 1178 receiving yards and nine touchdown catches. While the Giants had work yet to do on defense head coach Ted Marchibroda could look forward with some confidence.

The Dallas Cowboys, meanwhile, mirrored in many ways the fortunes of their one-time Super Bowl opponents the Pittsburgh Steelers. Dallas still fielded one of the three best defensive lines in the NFC. Famed quarterback Roger Staubach continued to do Pro Bowl-quality work under center with great efficiency: Staubach threw for eighteen touchdowns and ran for three more in 1977, against just eight interceptions. Staubach's favorite target, wide receiver Drew Pearson, led the league with twelve touchdown receptions. In the backfield Joe Washington and Robert Newhouse continued to lead the way with eleven combined touchdowns (six for Washington and five for Newhouse) and over 1700 combined rushing yards. The Cowboys put up an impressive 7-1 record against teams outside their division. The problem, conversely, was that in 1977 Dallas had a 3-5 record inside the NFC East, swept by the Eagles with one loss each to the Giants, Redskins, and Cardinals, the last of those a late-season spoiler. As a result the 10-6

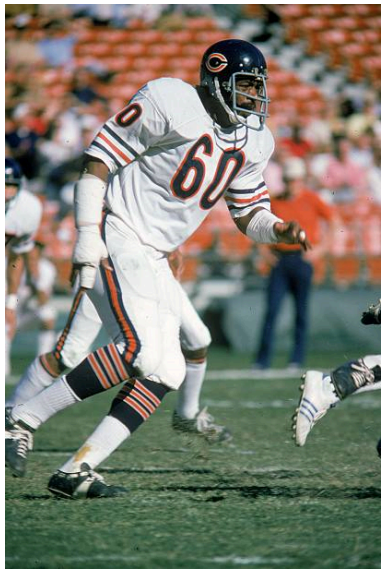
Cowboys were edged out of the playoffs for the second straight year, on a divisional-victories tiebreaker for the second NFC wild-card spot. Dallas looked especially to how they might improve defensive performance in order to foreclose more trouble with their most familiar opponents.

In 1977 most teams of the NFC Central clustered together at the lower end of mediocrity. The exception was the Chicago Bears, who seized the opportunities they found and gritted their way to their first division title in fifteen seasons. The Bears' defense played a key role, especially their defensive line highlighted by defensive tackle Wally Chambers, defensive end Ken Hartenstine, and at the other tackle spot future Hall of Famer and newly-arrived former Minnesota Vikings legend Alan Page. The 1977 season also saw the emergence of safety Gary Fencik as a major defensive force. The Bears rode their way through a streaky season: the first ten games followed a pattern of three straight wins, followed by three losses, followed by four more wins. Chicago lost both divisional games against the Minnesota Vikings but otherwise dominated the NFC Central as they swept each of the Packers, Detroit Lions, and Tampa Bay Buccaneers. By itself this might have secured the division in a collective off year, but the Bears also recorded key wins against the St. Louis Cardinals, Seattle Seahawks, and Kansas City Chiefs en route to an 11-5 record. Offense was not Chicago's long suit but they generated it when necessary. Quarterback Ron Jaworski stayed healthy through a punishing schedule and threw for 2836 yards, 15 touchdowns, and 14 interceptions on the season. Running back Anthony Davis rushed for 1115 yards and nine touchdowns, while fullback Roland Harper crucially added 766 yards and five touchdowns of his own, three of those scores in the 41-14 romp over the Chiefs. Bears head coach Jim Ringo was the *Sporting News* ' Coach of the Year choice and received a key to the City of Chicago in honor of the Bears' dramatic turnaround.

The rest of the NFC Central fared less well. The Minnesota Vikings spent much of the season reeling after an opening-week loss to the Cowboys. There followed four-game streaks of wins and losses, then another losing spiral of five games that included two shutouts, a 15-0 loss to the Packers that included Green Bay linebacker Fred Carr sacking Fran Tarkenton for a safety and a 20-0 loss to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. While fullback Chuck Foreman continued his solid work with another 1000-yard season on the ground and good service as a receiver out of the backfield, it was a rocky year for Fran Tarkenton and the Vikings' offensive line was plagued with injuries. The Green Bay Packers' season was a roller-coaster of occasional, pronounced wins against strong opponents and losing spells in between, with inconsistent or simply poor performance on both sides of the ball that included young quarterback Lynn Dickey and also the Packers' once formidable defensive line. The Detroit Lions could point to a reasonably solid season from their defense and from lead back Dexter Bussey, but the rest of Detroit's offense was anemic and the Lions suffered some sheer bad luck in close games to finish 7-9. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers' season could be described through their triptych of quarterbacks. The Bucs started the season a reasonable 3-4 after seven games in which head coach Bobby Bowden primarily played veteran quarterback Steve Spurrier before Spurrier suffered a season-ending shoulder injury (Spurrier would then decide to retire from play so he could pursue coaching.) Bowden subbed in

quarterback Gary Huff who went 0-6, before giving way to rookie Steve DeBerg who won two of three starts at the end of the season. More notable, perhaps, than Bowden's "Bucco Ball" emphasis on offense, was the steady improvement of Tampa Bay's defense, especially the Buccaneers' defensive line and the defensive secondary.





1977 saw the Chicago Bears fight their way back to the top of the NFC Central for the first time in over a decade, led by a number of key performances on both sides of the ball: (left) fullback Roland Harper (35) breaks through for a gain against the Washington Redskins; (right) defensive tackle Wally Chambers (60) in pursuit during an away game against the Kansas City Chiefs - Harper rushed for 766 yards on the season, the second-best of his career, while Chambers was voted into the Pro Bowl and to second team All-Pro honors

In the NFC West, the Los Angeles Rams returned to the dominance that they had enjoyed for much of the decade. The 1977 Rams were one of the most well-rounded teams in the league. They boasted a top-five defense in all major statistical categories and a number of outstanding individual performances on the field, led by future Hall of Famer Jack Youngblood, the towering defensive end who led the league in sacks and blocked passes, returned a fumble for a touchdown, and did so while playing the last four weeks of the season with a broken right hand. Youngblood was named the AP Defensive Player of the Year and enjoyed the same honor from two other wire services as well. On offense, owner Carroll Rosenbloom saw his ambitions for the Rams' backfield realized in full. Lawrence McCutcheon, O.J. Simpson, and John Cappelletti each saw significant playing time during the season. McCutcheon rushed for 1771 yards, second in the league, and thirteen touchdowns, while Simpson ran for 1009 yards with nine touchdowns, as each man averaged over five yards per carry. As a team the Rams rushed for 3188 total yards and twenty-four scores, dominating the field against nearly all their opponents and well in contention even in their three losses. At quarterback, head coach Chuck Knox platooned James Harris and Pat Haden. While Haden did play capably during the season, the older, bigger, and more experienced Harris very much took the lead. This proved to be both successful and historic: "Shack" Harris, one of the league's first African American starting quarterbacks, threw for 1999 yards, twelve touchdowns, and just three interceptions while he completed over sixty-two percent of his passes. As a result Harris was the NFL's first African American seasonal passer rating champion; he also went on to both the first Pro Bowl invitation and the first first-team All-Pro selection for any black quarterback. Perhaps the most telling statistic from the Rams' triumphant run was that they scored nearly twice as many points as they gave up, while they notched the NFC's best record at 13-3.



Los Angeles Rams quarterback James "Shack" Harris (12), who platooned at quarterback for Chuck Knox's juggernaut squad with Pat Haden, became the league's first African American seasonal passing champion in 1977 as he threw for 1999 yards, a dozen touchdowns, and only three interceptions; Harris also quarterbacked the team to victory in the NFC Championship game against the formidable Dallas Cowboys, and the decision to start Haden instead in Super Bowl XII (the preference of Rams owner Carroll Rosenbloom) remains controversial to this day

Among the Rams' only three losses, two came at the hands of the same team, a divisional rival: the Atlanta Falcons. During their first season under new head coach Johnny Majors, the Falcons seemed to be a team transformed. Three factors deserved special notice. One was the Falcons' defensive secondary, now under the tutelage of a bright young assistant recruited by Majors named Jerry Glanville. Safety Ray Easterling and cornerback Rolland Lawrence reached the Pro Bowl, while Glanville developed new defensive looks that could mass the secondary for pass rushes as part of Atlanta's aggressive "Grits Blitz" effort to disrupt their opponents' passing game. Another key factor was quarterback Craig Morton. In recent seasons some fans and observers had begun to consider the veteran signal-caller as much a liability as an asset for the Falcons. In 1977, however, Morton enjoyed the start of a renaissance. He threw for 2894 yards, 21 touchdowns, and just 12 interceptions, and delivered some of his best work in close games, like both wins over the Rams in which Morton had two touchdown passes apiece, crucial to a 24-23 comeback win in the rematch. As a result of his renewed success Morton was named the PFWA Comeback Player of the Year. The central figure in the Falcons' reemergence was running back Walter Payton. Payton was simply dominant all season. Statistically, Payton led all significant categories - attempts, yards, touchdowns, yards per carry - with 1852 rushing yards and fourteen touchdowns on the season. Like Craig Morton, more often than not Payton converted his effort into Atlanta wins, especially inside the NFC West. The Falcons actually matched the Rams' 6-2 record within the division, as Atlanta swept both the Rams and the New Orleans Saints while they also split their two-game series with the Seattle Seahawks and San Francisco 49ers. The Falcons actually fared worse outside the division, significantly because of a second-half collapse against the Washington Redskins. Despite that, the Falcons finished the season 10-6 with a divisional-wins advantage that secured the NFC's second wild-card spot and took Atlanta back to the postseason.

The remainder of the NFC West did not enjoy that level of success. Despite a creditable year from the San Francisco 49ers' "Gold Rush" defensive line and from running back Delvin Williams, the Niners lapsed considerably from their division-winning performance in 1976. Platooning at quarterback Jim Plunkett and young Steve Bartkowski provided seventeen combined touchdowns but also threw twenty-seven combined interceptions, while San

Francisco's offensive line was rife with injuries and the team finished 6-10. The New Orleans Saints foundered all year, their offense constricted by opponents and their defense sometimes paper-thin. Despite one excellent 28-21 win over the Rams, in which quarterback Archie Manning threw for three touchdowns and lead back Chuck Muncie added a fourth, the Saints toppled to 3-13 on the year. Additionally Muncie, unhappy with the Saints' front office and a target of racist incidents while playing for the team, made clear he no longer wanted to stay in New Orleans. The Seattle Seahawks continued to trade on head coach Dick Crum's emphasis on defense and the ground game: in 1977 that began to produce at least a few results. Seattle's defensive line produced an effective pass rush, while big lead back Sherman Smith rushed for 963 yards and eight touchdowns. Veteran quarterback Bill Munson was not central to the run-oriented offense but was quite effective, passing for 2500 yards, 13 touchdowns, and 9 interceptions on the year. Seattle doubled their 1976 win total with a 4-12 record, still poor overall but with several clear signs of improvement for the future.



(left) Baltimore Colts quarterback Bert Jones (7) scrambles under a strong pass rush during the Colts' divisional-round game with the Cincinnati Bengals; Baltimore won the game 35-20 in an upset that took the Colts back to the AFC Championship game for the first time since 1971, but the Oakland Raiders proved to be more than a match for the Colts' efforts

The 1977 AFC playoffs reflected both the year's unexpected upsets - especially the Cincinnati Bengals' success - and also the jockeying among the AFC's deep bench of strong teams. In the conference's wild-card game the Denver Broncos traveled to Miami to face the Dolphins' home field advantage. Broncos coach John Ralston took advantage of the Dolphins' concentration on stopping rookie phenom Tony Dorsett. Denver rebalanced their rushing towards Dorsett's older partner Otis Armstrong, and towards short pass patterns. Denver's defense was already well-aligned to tackle Miami's offensive approach. The teams traded field goals early as Denver waged an ultimately successful battle for position and hit Miami with misdirection runs by Armstrong. On the day Armstrong ran for 144 yards and a pair of touchdowns, while quarterback Norris Weese bootlegged a third touchdown run late in the third quarter. After forty-five minutes of ground-centered drives blunted by the "Orange Crush" the Dolphins turned to the air as Bob Griese led a methodical push that ended with a touchdown pass to Duriel Harris, but this only improved the margin of loss. Denver ran down the clock for a 24-13 win.

In the divisional round, the Colts and Bengals faced off in frigid weather at Riverfront Stadium in Cincinnati. Baltimore struck early and twice in the first quarter, with a Roosevelt Leaks goal line dive and later a Bert Jones touchdown pass. In the second quarter Ken Anderson tossed a short nine-yard catch-and-run to Archie Griffin which made the score 14-7 at halftime. The teams traded scores again in the second half as Jones and Anderson threw for additional touchdowns, then a more grinding Baltimore drive ultimately sprang Leaks on a trap play for

an 18-yard touchdown. On the next drive, Ken Anderson executed a play-fake and hit deep-threat receiver Isaac Curtis for a 73-yard score, though the Bengals missed the point-after that left the game 28-20 in Baltimore's favor. The Colts' defense stepped up in the last six minutes of play as Baltimore's offense also burned the clock with another touchdown pass at the end; Baltimore came away with a 35-20 upset victory. Both Ken Anderson and Bert Jones threw for three touchdowns on the day, Jones with 336 passing yards to boot, while the key backfield performance was Roosevelt Leaks' 88 yards and two scores as the Colts bottled up Cincinnati's passel of halfbacks. In freezing rain in Oakland the Raiders and Broncos ground out a slow, dogged, defensive struggle. Oakland's short-yardage specialist Pete Banaszak scored twice, in the second and third quarters, while the Raiders stifled Denver's attempts to pass and held them at bay on the ground. In the fourth quarter Denver backup Mark Harmon subbed in to relieve Norris Weese: on his first drive Harmon completed all five passes and ran for twelve additional yards, ending with a quick flare to Haven Moses that halved Oakland's lead at 14-7. The Raiders, however, got and kept control of the ball in the closing minutes and wound down the clock to preserve both their lead and the win.

In better weather, Baltimore traveled to Oakland for the AFC Championship game. Oakland lit out to score first when a classic trap-block run sprang Clarence Davis for a weaving 44-yard touchdown. Over the rest of the first half Baltimore answered with effective passing and two short Roosevelt Leaks touchdowns, though Oakland also added a 44-yard field goal and a 41-yard touchdown pass from Ken Stabler to Cliff Branch. In the third quarter Oakland methodically added two more field goals and a quick Clarence Davis endzone dive. In the closing minute of the quarter Leaks ran for his third touchdown of the day for the Colts, though this only made the score 30-21 in Oakland's favor. In the fourth quarter Oakland livened up a slow, clock-killing drive with a 22-yard post pattern from Stabler to Fred Biletnikoff, after which the Raiders' defense fended off Baltimore capably as time ran down for a 37-21 Raiders win. Roosevelt Leaks rushed for 123 yards and three scores as Baltimore's most effective offensive effort; Bert Jones did pass for 232 yards but no scores, while a relentless Oakland pass rush sacked Jones five times, three delivered by Otis Sistrunk alone. Ken Stabler, on the other hand, was a capable 18-of-28 for 269 yards and a pair of scores, backed by a backfield committee that tallied 193 yards on the ground and valuable time deprived from Baltimore. Oakland had simply been better on the day than any of their playoff opponents, and took their shot at a second consecutive Super Bowl in stride.



(left) Philadelphia wide receiver Harold Carmichael (17) outpaces Chicago Bears defenders on a 43-yard touchdown catch from Eagles quarterback Steve Joachim at Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia; the Eagles would go on to drub the Bears 41-7 as Philadelphia advanced to their first NFC Championship game since the start of the 1960s

The 1977 NFC playoffs kicked off in more bad weather at RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C. as the Redskins hosted the Atlanta Falcons. Defense dominated the first quarter as the teams probed at one another, traded field goals, but gained no other offensive traction. In the second quarter Washington blitzed repeatedly, in part to put the slow-moving Craig Morton off his game but also to spread the defensive front against Walter Payton. This kept Atlanta contained while Washington cut gaps in the Falcons' defense with Billy Kilmer's passes. Kilmer connected on a nine-yard pass to Duane Thomas coming out of the backfield for the game's first touchdown; Thomas would add a one-yard dive just before halftime to give Washington a 17-6 lead. In the second half the Redskins played ball control and padded their lead with long field goals from young placekicker Mark Moseley. In the fourth quarter Atlanta managed a successful passing drive off a pair of key long balls from Craig Morton, then scored on a six-yard Walter Payton run that made the score 23-13 in Washington's favor. Washington, however, succeeded in pressing their advantage slowly down for a final field goal that put the game out of reach and, content then to play defense, held on for a 26-13 win that would take them to Los Angeles for yet another postseason tilt with the Los Angeles Rams.

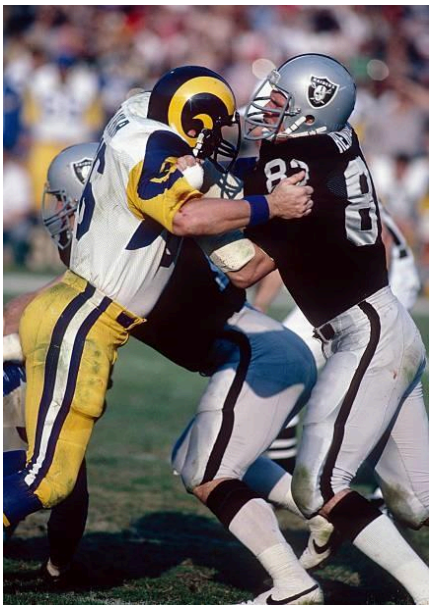
In Philadelphia, the Eagles hosted the Chicago Bears in the divisional round. Chicago started the game competently, with a patient drive on their first possession capped by a one-yard Anthony Davis touchdown dive. From there, however, everything went downhill for the Bears. On the next drive Eagles quarterback Steve Joachim answered with a short endzone fade to Harold Jackson. Philadelphia would add a field goal and a twelve-yard Wilbert Montgomery touchdown run before the half, for a 17-7 lead while the Eagles' defense remained solid against Chicago's underpowered offense. In the second half Philadelphia scored again on their first possession with a 15-yard catch-and-run swing pass to Montgomery, then a 43-yard strike from Joachim to Harold Carmichael that blew the game fully open. As Chicago tried to broaden the field in response, the Bears suffered a 77-yard pick-six of Ron Jaworski by Eagles rookie Herman Edwards (as irony would have it, Edwards would go on to become one of the Chicago Bears' most successful head coaches in the 2000s.) Philadelphia played comfortable ball control in the remainder of the fourth quarter and registered a powerful 41-7 victory. While Anthony Davis did provide an impressive 133 yards and Chicago's only touchdown on the ground, the rest of Chicago's offense was notably ineffective. Philadelphia, on the other hand, rushed for 223 team yards mostly from Wilbert Montgomery and Mike Hogan, while Steve Joachim threw for 251 yards and three touchdowns.

At the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, the Rams and Redskins staged another of their 1970s postseason matchups. On an early possession Washington fullback Wilbur Jackson punched in the game's first touchdown. O.J. Simpson answered for the Rams on their next possession, as he swept right thirty-two yards for the score. Los Angeles' defense blunted Washington's attempts to concentrate on passing the ball and held the Redskins to two field goals for the rest of the half, while John Cappelletti added a Rams touchdown and the teams went to their locker rooms with Los Angeles up 14-13 at the half. The second half was a story of defense and patience, as

the Rams' pass rush flummoxed Washington and the Rams worked to control the ball and kill the clock while they added a pair of field goals to the score line. On their last drive Washington gave reserve quarterback Mike Kruczek a chance, only for Kruczek to throw an interception to Nolan Cromwell just past midfield. The Rams ran down the clock for a 20-13 victory, part of 241 team rushing yards for Los Angeles on the day, and now concentrated their attention on the Eagles' explosive offense.

The keys to the NFC Championship were twofold. First there was defense: the Los Angeles Rams' defense played at the top end of their considerable capacity, as they held the Eagles to just 71 team rushing yards and eight first downs on the day, while defensive ends Jack Youngblood and Fred Dryer each sacked Steve Joachim - tall, powerfully built, and usually quite hard to bring down - twice. As the teams jabbed for weak points they traded field goals in the first quarter, after which the Rams started an onslaught led by their other intangible: the experience and leadership of quarterback James Harris. The Rams scored sixteen points in the second quarter, one screen pass from Harris to Lawrence McCutcheon and three field goals, one of them kicked after the Rams intercepted Joachim. Late in the third quarter on a second-and-goal play the Rams padded their lead with an eight-yard fade from Harris to Lynn Swann for a typically balletic catch in the endzone's corner. Fired by the exhortations of Dick Vermeil the Eagles refused to quit, first marshalling a solid drive for a field goal and then, after an effective defensive stop, a 65-yard play-fake bomb from Steve Joachim to Harold Jackson. This made the score 26-13 in Los Angeles' favor, but an Eagles onside kick after the touchdown pass was covered by Monte Jackson and the Rams then controlled both the ball and the clock to the game's end. Los Angeles' third NFC Championship appearance in four seasons delivered them return billing in the Super Bowl.

Super Bowl XII was played in the bright winter sun at Tampa, FL in recognition of the "Class of '76" expansion teams, in this case at the home field of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. The game featured an intra-state contest between California's two most powerful NFL teams, the Rams and Raiders, both of whom sought their second Super Bowl ring. The most notable event during the maneuvers and media frenzy prior to the game was the internal debate inside the Rams' front office about the quarterback position. The Rams' famous, larger-than-life owner Carroll Rosenbloom wanted to start Pat Haden in the Super Bowl, as a significant move towards making Haden the team's primary starter. Head coach Chuck Knox was opposed, firmly behind his preferred quarterback James Harris. Rosenbloom made his veiled direction a command; Knox threatened to resign. In the course of events Harris himself talked Knox out of resigning, saying it would be detrimental to the team, and Haden was slated to start the game.



Super Bowl XII was a frequently gritty battle between two consistent NFL powers of the 1970s, the Oakland Raiders and Los Angeles Rams, won in large part by the strength of the Raiders' defense on the day against the usually overwhelming Rams offense: (left) here future Hall of Fame Raiders linebacker Ted Hendricks (82), later the game's MVP, battles with Rams blockers on a pass rush in the first half of the game that Oakland won 27-18

Pitted against one another, both John Madden and Chuck Knox favored a cautious, traditional approach to the game, which became a cagey slugging match between two of the most well-equipped teams of the era. On their third possession the Raiders moved carefully downfield as they worked to punch openings in the Rams' mighty defensive front. In the end they got close enough for Ken Stabler to hit Cliff Branch on a quick five-yard crossing pattern on a second-and-goal play. Just before the end of the first quarter Oakland added a field goal, while Los Angeles saw drives go awry on failed third-down conversions. Early in the second quarter Oakland staged a five-minute drive that burned the clock effectively and ended when Pete Banaszak punched the ball in for a touchdown from one yard out. Just before the end of the half Los Angeles was able to stretch a drive well into Oakland's end and put a field goal on the board, but this left them down a surprising 17-3 at the half.

In the third quarter the teams traded field goals as both defenses took hold of the game's pace, but near the end of the quarter Pat Haden was finally able to piece together a pass-centered drive - Haden completed only seven of his twenty passes on the day - that put Los Angeles within scoring distance, before Haden was intercepted by towering Raiders linebacker Ted Hendricks - nicknamed "The Angry Stork" for his great height - at Oakland's three-yard line. Two plays later, however, on a blitz against an Oakland play-fake, Jack Youngblood cornered Ken Stabler and sacked him in the endzone for a safety, the first in a Super Bowl. Pat Haden continued to be ineffective but the Rams stuck to the ground on their ensuing drive and added another field goal to make the game 20-11 in the Raiders' favor. At this point, done with Haden's relatively poor performance, Chuck Knox put James Harris in the game.

The Rams were forced to punt on their next possession, however, after which the Raiders staged another long, clock-killing drive that culminated in a quick five-yard buttonhook pass to reserve wideout Mike Siani for a score. Now the Rams drove more confidently down the field, mixing their powerful running game with Harris' passes, until a John Cappelletti run took the ball inside Oakland's twenty-yard line. At that point Harris hit O.J. Simpson on a slant pattern coming out of the backfield and "The Juice" rumbled seventeen yards into the endzone. With good use of their remaining timeouts and a second wind on the field, the Rams forced Oakland to punt then staged a two-minute drill with accurate passing from James Harris to get just within field goal range. Chuck Knox planned to take the relatively quick field goal, then stage an onside kick in hopes of a last possession with Los Angeles by then only six points down. In

the event, Tom Dempsey's kick was partially blocked and sailed left of the uprights. Oakland took over on downs and killed the clock efficiently. With that, the Raiders joined the company of the Green Bay Packers and Pittsburgh Steelers as the third team to win back-to-back Super Bowls.

Super Bowl XII was a hard-hitting game, traditional in its style of play. The key role played by both team's defenses was recognized through the game's MVP: Oakland's Ted Hendricks, who had ten individual tackles, a sack of Pat Haden, an interception, and a fumble recovery to his credit. Some members of the MVP voting pool suggested the game should have two MVPs, with the other Jack Youngblood, who had seven tackles, a sack, and the safety against Ken Stabler to argue for his spot. In the end the voters chose only Hendricks, but the debate spoke to the nature of the game. Despite trailing throughout the Rams produced 231 team rushing yards led by 106 from O.J. Simpson and 95 from Lawrence McCutcheon. The Raiders ran for 169 yards themselves, and more efficiently as Oakland's drives more often led to scoring. In his fourth quarter appearance James Harris completed six of eight passes for 86 yards and a touchdown, notably better than Pat Haden's record for the day. Ken Stabler, meanwhile, completed seventeen of twenty-seven pass attempts for 187 yards and a pair of touchdowns. In the end Oakland's early lead told, as capable defense and a bit of special-teams good luck on the Rams' last field goal attempt held the line against a potential Los Angeles comeback. Oakland would enjoy the fruits of their labor, while Los Angeles retooled to reach and capitalize on the postseason again the next year.

Most of the significant rule changes implemented in 1977 had to do with physical contact. The league outlawed the head slap, with a change referred to as the "Deacon Jones rule" for the Hall of Fame defensive end with the Rams and Colts well-known for that technique. Defenders were banned from making contact with an opponent above the shoulders with the palms of their hands except to ward them off the line. Likewise offensive linemen now could not thrust hands to a defender's face, neck, or head. The NFL also closed a loophole in the language on clipping so that wide receivers could no longer clip opponents downfield. In addition, the NFL began to record time of possession as an official statistic; pressure mounted to count sacks officially as a key defensive statistic but the rules-change process did not move forward during the 1977 season.

There were more coaching changes than the league had seen in 1976. Buffalo Bills owner Ralph Wilson fired head coach Bob Shaw at the close of another disappointing season, then hired Toronto Argonauts head coach and Hall of Fame offensive lineman with the Green Bay Packers Forrest Gregg to right Buffalo's ship. Saints head coach Jim Shofner was let go the last week of the season, replaced in the offseason by Washington Redskins offensive coordinator Charlie Waller. With respect to Washington, head coach George Allen signed a special limited two-year contract with the team that indicated 1979 would be his last season with the team. Browns head coach Howard Brinker was let go at the end of the year also, replaced in his case by New York Jets receivers coach Sam Rutigliano. Jets head coach Charlie Winner resigned after a second

subpar season; the Jets' front office brought back from Cleveland longtime Jets defensive coordinator Walt Michaels to take charge of the team. San Francisco 49ers coach Jim Stanfel did not outlast the team's poor 1977 performance. In his place, thanks to continued friction with temperamental St. Louis Cardinals owner Bill Bidwill, Don Coryell left the Cardinals just one season out from their Super Bowl appearance and agreed to come to San Francisco where he would take charge of the 49ers. Tommy Prothro in San Diego was another casualty of the season, replaced in his case when Oakland Raiders quarterbacks coach Tom Flores agreed to become the Chargers' head coach. Tom Bettis continued in Kansas City thanks to the letter of his contract, given a chance to see whether his second year at the helm could bring improvement for the Chiefs.

1978 [click to expand]

1978 National Football League Season
1978 NFL Playoffs
AFC Champions Pittsburgh Steelers
NFC Champions Atlanta Falcons

Super Bowl XIII
Date January 21, 1979
Site Orange Bowl, Miami, Florida
Result Pittsburgh Steelers 30, Atlanta Falcons 24
Super Bowl MVP Joe Gilliam, Terry Bradshaw* (QBs, Pittsburgh Steelers)
*joint award

Bert Bell Award Walter Payton (RB, Atlanta Falcons)
Associated Press League MVP Walter Payton (RB, Atlanta Falcons)
AP Offensive Player of the Year Steve Grogan (QB, New England Patriots)
AP Defensive Player of the Year Randy Gradishar (LB, Denver Broncos)
AP Offensive Rookie of the Year Earl Campbell (RB, Houston Oilers)
AP Defensive Rookie of the Year Al "Bubba" Baker (DE, Detroit Lions)
PFWA Comeback Player of the Year Fran Tarkenton (QB, Minnesota Vikings)
AP NFL Coach of the Year Johnny Majors (HC, Atlanta Falcons)
Single-season passer rating leader Steve Joachim (QB, Philadelphia Eagles)
Seasonal rushing leader Walter Payton (RB, Atlanta Falcons)

The prelude to the NFL's 1978 season was quiet, by comparison to the most recent seasons beforehand. The league appeared to have settled into the patterns laid out since 1970 and established in major stages both in 1974 and 1976. While the Football Labor Relations Board continued its work there were no major offseason trades in the early months of 1978. Several franchises looked forward to the debut of new head coaches: among them Buffalo who awaited Forrest Gregg, San Diego with Tom Flores, and San Francisco with Don Coryell.

One of the biggest stories of the early 1978 offseason involved New York Jets principal owner Leon Hess. In 1978 Hess consolidated his control over the Jets franchise with lucrative buyouts of former partners or their estates. No sooner had Hess gained the reins of the team than he brought suit against the New York Mets of Major League Baseball. Hess aimed to break the Mets' stringent control over Jets home games at Shea Stadium. The legal wrangles would last nearly three years, with a resolution that produced a public-private partnership for the renovation of Shea Stadium with multi-use features for a full Jets home season. This expressed the government of New York City's increased reliance on the Jets, together with other sports

franchises, not only for civic revenue but also a sense of cultural distinction and separation from the wide swaths of suburbia that spread beyond the city.

The journey toward the 1978 season hastened with the 1978 NFL Draft, held later than usual in early April, at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York. As usual, much discussion and debate surrounded the likely first pick, in this case Heisman Trophy winner and star of the 1977 Texas Longhorns national championship team, running back Earl Campbell. On the basis of their record in 1977 the New Orleans Saints held the first-seed pick in the draft. The Saints faced a controversy over their backfield: Saints starter Chuck Muncie had complained publicly about his situation in New Orleans and intimated that he might use "the Flurb" to bargain for a spot with another team. This triggered much debate among Saints fans and in the team's front office, over whether to bargain with Muncie in hopes he could be induced to stay, or take a chance on the rookie Campbell.

In the end New Orleans chose to haggle with Muncie and trade their first-pick rights for multiple later picks, in an effort to improve the team as a whole. The decision remains controversial among Saints fans: New Orleans did indeed gain additional draft slots and the chance to build both depth and strength for the whole team. But Muncie left for New Orleans' divisional rivals the San Francisco 49ers at the end of the season. New Orleans' trade of the first pick to the Houston Oilers meant that Houston took Campbell, who would become one of the league's greatest running backs and a Pro Football Hall of Fame inductee. For his future successes with the 49ers Chuck Muncie would eventually join Campbell in Canton, but neither back benefited the Saints.

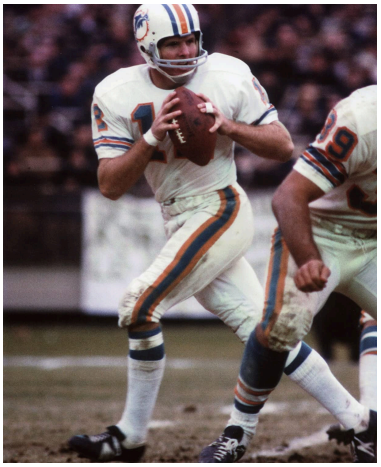
With the second pick of the draft, the Buffalo Bills followed hot on Earl Campbell's heels. The Bills chose Heisman runner-up and star halfback for Oklahoma State Terry Miller, who would go on to win both Pro Bowl and All-Pro honors himself as he helped anchor Buffalo's offense into the 1980s. With the third spot, the Kansas City Chiefs made a substantial play to improve their shaky defense with defensive end Art Still, whose much-decorated career would make him a candidate on multiple Hall of Fame ballots after his career, though not yet an entrant. Kansas City's divisional rivals the San Antonio Texans used the fourth pick to secure the Texans' second Hall of Famer, gifted wide receiver John Jefferson, who would reach multiple receiving benchmarks faster than any wideout before him.

The 1978 Draft became known for its receivers: directly after San Antonio, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers chose multiple-Pro Bowler Wes Chandler as their latest receiver. The Green Bay Packers traded up for San Diego's position just after, and with it took Hall of Fame wideout James Lofton, widely regarded as one of the league's most successful receivers of all time. The New York Jets followed at left tackle with Pro Bowler Chris Ward. Another left tackle followed, as the Atlanta Falcons traded additional picks to New Orleans for what had originally been Houston's position. With it the Falcons took Hall of Fame tackle Mike Kenn, an indispensable blocker for the mighty Falcons backfields of the late Seventies and the Eighties. Soon after the

San Francisco 49ers selected Notre Dame star Ken MacAfee at tight end: the physically massive MacAfee would reach two Pro Bowls as a key role player for head coach Don Coryell. Directly after MacAfee, the Cleveland Browns took another tight end who would reach the Hall of Fame, Ozzie Newsome. The Browns also traded picks for a second go in the first round, taking decorated linebacker Clay Matthews, while the San Antonio Texans used a "double dip" of their own for defensive end Larry Bethea.

In the draft's second round the Detroit Lions took multiple All-Pro defensive end Al "Bubba" Baker who would help anchor the Lions' "Silver Rush" into the 1980s, but the second round would be noted in the long term for its quarterbacks. While none had been taken in the draft's first round, that changed in the second with a series of noteworthy picks. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers took Heisman finalist and Grambling State star Doug Williams: known for his big arm, Williams expanded the depth and range of Buccaneers coach Bobby Bowden's bullpen of quarterbacks. Next went another of the 1978 Draft's Hall of Famers to be selected as the Houston Oilers took their second Hall of Famer of the draft, quarterback Warren Moon from the University of Washington. Agile and with "vertical" reach like Doug Williams, the Oilers took Moon as a backup and counterpart to often-injured starter Dan Pastorini, who Moon soon would eclipse en route to the Hall of Fame and success with both the Oilers and the Seattle Seahawks. The San Francisco 49ers picked up a third capable quarterback, Stanford's Guy Benjamin, to supplement Steve Bartkowski and Jim Plunkett. The Pittsburgh Steelers did similar as they took on hometown collegiate star Matt Cavanaugh of the University of Pittsburgh Panthers in the backup role.

The Kansas City Chiefs continued a strong draft taking Pro Bowl linebacker Gary Spani in the second round and, in the third, Arizona State quarterback Bill Kenney who would go on to a distinguished career with the Chiefs especially in the 1980s. The New York Jets took Pro Bowl tight end Mickey Shuler in the third round also, while the Buffalo Bills picked up capable wideout Jimmy Cefalo. In the fifth round the 49ers selected the last Hall of Famer of the draft, safety Dwight Hicks. Three rounds later the Buccaneers took another in their stable of receivers, Derrick Gaffney. The Atlanta Falcons added distinguished safety Tom Pridemore, while in the tenth round the San Diego Chargers took running back Ricky Patton. In that same round the Green Bay Packers took the last of the draft's noteworthy receivers, multiple Pro Bowler tight end Paul Coffman.





Quarterbacks played a key role in the contentious AFC East during the 1978 season: (left) Miami's Bob Griese remained the reliable fulcrum for the Dolphins' offense while New England's Steve Grogan (right) produced a career season that helped win the Patriots the division and saw him named the AP's Offensive Player of the Year

The AFC East proved to be one of the league's most contentious divisions in 1978. The Miami Dolphins, playoff contenders throughout the decade, rode the division's roller coaster all season. The Dolphins started the year looking like Super Bowl contenders with runaway wins over the Jets (37-3, in quarterback Bob Griese's best game of the season) and the Colts (44-17), before two heavy losses (42-13 to the Eagles and 28-10 to the Cardinals.) Miami then returned to the more methodical ways of head coach Don Shula to establish another win streak including the Miami defense's best game of the season, a 27-12 win away at division rivals the New England Patriots. The rest of the season was patchier, with a rematch loss to the Colts followed by one to the surging Dallas Cowboys, then a mixture of wins and losses until two crucial victories in the last two weeks, 16-14 over the Oakland Raiders and 24-21 on a late field goal over the Patriots. Despite sweeping New England in the seasonal series, Miami finished 10-6 in second place in the division. Despite occasional injury issues Bob Griese produced a solid season with 2936 passing yards, twenty touchdowns, and just eight interceptions. Halfback Mercury Morris posted the last 1000-yard season of his career while Morris' backfield partner Benny Malone put up ten touchdowns on the season. Miami's troubles lay more often on the defensive side of the ball as age and injury began to tell on Shula's "No Name Defense," especially in Miami's secondary.

After their run of success in recent seasons, the Baltimore Colts were brought up brutally short in the first two weeks of play, with blowout losses to the Cowboys and Dolphins in that order. Halfway through the season, even aided by several narrow victories notably over New England and a 38-35 shootout win against the Jets, Baltimore's record was only 4-4. In the second half of the year, however, the Colts rallied in an effort to make the playoffs, starting with their rematch victory over Miami then a gritty 27-24 comeback win against their NFL neighbors the Washington Redskins. Indeed the Colts won five of six games to put themselves back in contention with a 9-5 record. Those hopes were dashed in the last two weeks as Baltimore lost first to the mighty Pittsburgh Steelers and then, despite four passing touchdowns from star quarterback Bert Jones, in a game where victory slipped away as the Buffalo Bills rallied to win 34-31. Jones had another season of quality, as he threw for 3238 yards with twenty-three touchdowns, just eight interceptions, and the highest passer rating in the AFC. But much like the situation in Miami, an inconsistent and often porous defense hampered and sometimes betrayed the Colts' hopes all year.

The team to beat in the AFC East was the Patriots. Indeed with solid offense and for a time the division's stingiest, most reliable defense, the Patriots won five of their first six matchups and looked like serious league contenders. That was hampered by a rematch loss to the Dolphins and a narrow 31-27 defeat against the Cincinnati Bengals' best game of the season, but the Patriots remained undaunted with big wins over the Jets and Bills. New England headed into the twelfth week of play with a 7-4 record and proceeded to win four straight games with the same potent, balanced play they had shown early on, including a gritty defensive victory over

the Dallas Cowboys 17-10. New England then lost their last game of the season to a Dolphins comeback, but finished the year 11-5 atop the division. The Patriots were known as a rushing team, and indeed their backfield stars Mark van Eeghen and Sam Cunningham combined for 1956 yards and eighteen touchdowns on the season. But in 1978 the Patriots' leader on offense was quarterback Steve Grogan. Grogan generated a career season: though he completed just under half his passes, he still threw for 3286 yard and a league-leading 29 touchdowns with 17 interceptions. The rambling, dual-threat quarterback also ran for 539 yards and five touchdowns more on the ground. Grogan's prolific output earned him the Associated Press' Offensive Player of the Year award.



Fighting their way up: both the Buffalo Bills and New York Jets sought to raise their faded fortunes in the AFC East during the 1978 season - the Bills had the better of it, in part because they swept their divisional series against the Jets behind a greatly improved offense with young talent like rookie running back Terry Miller (40, left) who, along with backfield partner Tony Galbreath, receivers like Jerry Butler and Jimmy Cefalo, and handsome young quarterback Vince Ferragamo, would power a Bills renaissance under head coach Forrest Gregg

The rest of the AFC East was marked by efforts from the Bills and Jets to return to respectability. In that, Buffalo was more successful during the 1978 season: with much improved offense and occasional bursts of focused defensive effort the Bills were competitive in nearly every game of the season, starting with a gritty 16-14 loss to a mighty Steelers squad. The Bills' backfield largely regained its footing with another good outing from dual-threat fullback Tony Galbreath, who caught more touchdowns than he ran for, and a 1000-yard season with seven touchdowns from rookie running back Terry Miller, a portent of things to come. Young quarterback Vince Ferragamo, who boasted height, movie-star good looks, and a strong arm, took the reins of the Bills' offense in 1978 and showed promise, though also a tendency to force some passes that made him pick-prone. On the year Ferragamo threw for 3276 yards and a solid 22 touchdowns, but also 23 interceptions. He capped the season well, however, with two fourth-quarter scores against a strong effort from the Colts for a 34-31 comeback win that gave the Bills a 7-9 record. The Jets struggled more often, especially in all the major aspects of defense. Quarterback Richard Todd remained inconsistent but had his moments, notably a late-season upset of the Dolphins where Todd threw for 277 yards and four touchdowns. Todd nevertheless threw more interceptions than touchdowns on the year and, despite a 1000-yard season from veteran fullback John Riggins in support, the Jets blew several opportunities with poor scoring defense and finished 5-11.

The central story of the AFC Central in 1978 was the renaissance of the Pittsburgh Steelers. Pittsburgh enjoyed a storming return to form with the best defense in the league, a more

forward-looking passing game under offensive coordinator Hank Stram, and a near-perfect record. The dominant 1978 Steelers boasted six defensive Pro Bowlers, the best scoring defense and rushing defense in the league, and the most effective pass rush. After a hard-fought win over the Bills in the first week Pittsburgh simply overwhelmed their opponents through the first half of the season, outscoring them by a cumulative 242-56. The Steelers went from strength to strength with a solid defensive effort in the tenth week, winning 21-10 over a strong Los Angeles Rams squad. They were denied a perfect season in the twelfth week by a remarkable effort from the surging Atlanta Falcons, but rallied in the weeks after to put away the Oilers (37-10) and Colts (38-17) followed by another gritty defensive effort over the Broncos 13-7. Pittsburgh ended the season 15-1 atop the AFC Central, their conference, and the league as a whole. Running back Franco Harris kept Pittsburgh solid on the ground with 1082 yards and eleven rushing touchdowns. Starting quarterback Terry Bradshaw also played well with 2053 passing yards and 23 touchdowns to 15 interceptions. The season also marked the return of Steelers quarterback Joe Gilliam from a year of physical and psychological rehabilitation to kick a drug habit. Gilliam played at his statistical best in 1978 in the backup role, with 862 yards averaging over fifteen yards per completion, five touchdowns, just two interceptions, and a higher passer rating for his efficiency than Bradshaw. Though not quite the "Dynamic Duo" in full again, Pittsburgh's ability to play both quarterbacks kept their passing attack fresh and opponents back on their heels.



The 1978 season marked the return of Pittsburgh quarterback Joe Gilliam (17, left), after a season off for drug rehab and physical conditioning; Gilliam marked his return with the best statistical performance of his career, one among several moving parts of the Steelers' dominant 15-1 season and return to the top flight of the NFL

No team in the AFC Central had the wherewithal to catch the Steelers; the battle for second place fell largely to the Cleveland Browns and Houston Oilers. Cleveland rode a resurgent offense under new head coach Sam Rutigliano and a consistently inconsistent defense through a roller coaster of a season, with occasional blowout wins or losses and a series of high-stakes offensive shootouts. On the season, Cleveland's patchy defense gave up marginally more points than the offense provided (358 points surrendered against 356 points scored for the year.) The Browns, however, enjoyed Brian Sipe's best season yet in the league as he threw for twenty touchdowns against fourteen interceptions while Rutigliano reoriented the team towards its passing game. At the same time, veteran running back Greg Pruitt delivered a career season that earned him Pro Bowl and second team All-Pro honors, as he put up 1370 yards, averaging just over five yards per carry, with fourteen touchdowns. Fullback Cleo Miller added four more, while tight end Ozzie Newsome led AFC tight ends with 816 receiving yards and eight touchdown catches, along with an end-around rushing score. The end result, despite a loss in the final week, was a 10-6 record that secured Cleveland a wild-card spot in the playoffs. The Houston Oilers, on the other hand, concentrated again on their powerful defense and their

rushing game now anchored by rookie sensation Earl Campbell. Campbell delivered, with 1450 rushing yards and thirteen rushing touchdowns, along with three touchdown catches, all of which earned him Pro Bowl and AP Offensive Rookie of the Year honors. Quarterback Dan Pastorini and reserve back Mike Voight also posted relatively solid seasons. But Houston was denied a winning record in large part by two blowout losses to the Steelers, plus two shootout defeats against the Browns (45-30 and 27-24 respectively, the latter on a last-play field goal from Cleveland's Don Cockcroft) that left the Oilers 7-9 for the season.



A tale of two halfbacks: Browns veteran Greg Pruitt (34, left) and Oilers rookie star Earl Campbell (34, right) both produced outstanding seasons in 1978, though the Browns' team effort proved superior with their return to the playoffs, while Houston came up just short of a winning season at 7-9

While the Browns and Oilers contended for the division's second spot, the Memphis Grizzlies and Cincinnati Bengals foundered. For Memphis, this came despite continued solid play on offense. Young quarterback Danny White was a Pro Bowl runner-up with a solid season in which he put up 3089 passing yards and 22 touchdowns against just 13 interceptions, a consistent resource for "The Griz" in tough games and increasingly a Memphis fan favorite. Memphis' "Big Man Backfield" - with the famed Larry Csonka, mighty 262-lb. fullback Pete Johnson, and fullback-sized Mike Pruitt in the halfback role - generated just over 2000 team rushing yards and seventeen touchdowns on the ground. Future Hall of Famer Paul Warfield performed well in his last season as a starting receiver with 1016 receiving yards and nine touchdown catches. Despite that Memphis' defense was porous all season and at inopportune times, as in a tight 21-20 loss to Houston (where kicker Bobby Howfield also shanked a crucial extra point) and a 26-24 defeat against the Browns in the season's penultimate week. The Grizzlies finished 6-10. In Cincinnati, the unexpected good showing of backup quarterback Mike Pruitt was the only good news of the year for the Bengals. Starter Ken Anderson plummeted from his MVP heights in 1977 as he suffered both shoulder and hip injuries and threw only ten touchdowns on the year with twenty-two interceptions. The Bengals' backfield was likewise dogged with injuries and defensive skill proved hard to find all year as Cincinnati struggled to a brutal 3-13 record.

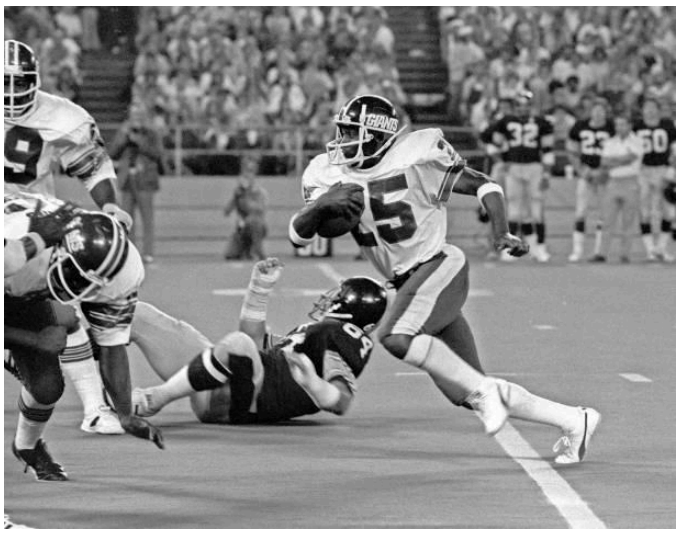
In 1978 the AFC West was marked by internecine battles among its teams, and often by poor luck outside their home division. A partial exception, at least to the latter, was the division's top squad, the Denver Broncos. Their season started poorly, as Denver lost a hard-fought defensive battle to the Oakland Raiders 14-7, in which they also lost starting quarterback Norris Weese to a season-ending knee injury. Weese's backup Mark Harmon took over under center and, despite occasional setbacks, helped lead the Broncos to a division title. The Broncos beat a strong Minnesota Vikings squad in the second week and, despite a narrow 27-24 loss to the Chargers the week after, then won six straight before Harmon's worst game of the season in an upset loss to the Jets. Denver rallied with strong wins over the Browns, Packers (41-0 in that instance, as star back Tony Dorsett ran for four touchdowns), and Lions. By the last week Denver held an 11-4 record atop the division and hoped for more, though they were denied in a tough 13-7 loss to the Steelers. Denver's defense once again proved to be one of the league's best: the outstanding individual performance came from linebacker Randy Gradishar who led all NFL linebackers in both interceptions and sacks, and would take home the AP Defensive Player of the Year award. At quarterback, Mark Harmon passed for 2775 yards with fourteen each touchdowns and interceptions. Denver's real offensive strength, again, came from their running game. Tony Dorsett's season was one of the league's best with 1266 yards and no less than fifteen rushing touchdowns, while his partner Otis Armstrong added nine more scores. The lithe Harmon proved to be the NFL's second-best rushing quarterback on the season, behind Steve Grogan, as Harmon ran for 452 yards and four touchdowns himself. As a team Denver led the league in rushing, with 2712 yards and twenty-nine team rushing touchdowns.

The middle ranks of the AFC West were marked by two teams headed in opposite directions. In their first year under head coach Tom Flores, the San Diego Chargers gelled around Flores' implementation of a version of Sid Gillman's "ace offense" with four receivers who ran timed routes and a lone rusher in the backfield. Chargers quarterback Dan Fouts and his backup Scott Hunter combined for 3632 passing yards and twenty-nine touchdowns on the season - though also two dozen interceptions. As San Diego's primary "ace back" Lydell Mitchell added nine touchdowns on the ground and caught five of Fouts' and Hunter's scoring passes as an effective fifth receiver. The offensive jump-start bolstered San Diego's chances considerably, but they remained hampered by turnovers and inconsistent defense that prevented their 9-7 season record from being even better. The Oakland Raiders, however, slumped well down after back-to-back league titles. Oakland's defense remained strong and kept the team competitive in most games, but the Raiders' offense devolved with injuries, patchy execution, and repeated turnovers. Quarterback Ken Stabler had a disastrous year with a league-leading thirty interceptions while running back Clarence Davis missed half the season with a knee injury. It took two late-season wins over the Broncos and Chiefs, powered by defense and reserve quarterback Mike Rae, for Oakland to salvage a 7-9 record.

Close at Oakland's sagging heels came the San Antonio Texans. San Antonio still struggled with a porous offensive line on one side of the ball and an ineffective pass rush on the other. Despite

that, quarterback John Reaves continued to develop as a more consistent passer and effective team leader, while the Texans' running game improved as well. Running back Rob Lytle enjoyed a career season with 1120 yards and nine touchdowns on the ground. Reaves improved all year, hitting his peak in a 34-10 upset of the Dolphins driven by the defense's best performance of the season and Reaves' 334 passing yards with four touchdowns. Reaves finished the season with 3273 yards through the air, along with 20 touchdowns and 21 interceptions. Rookie John Jefferson was Reaves' favorite target, as the young wideout accumulated 1143 receiving yards and a league leading thirteen touchdowns. Sweeping the division series with the Chiefs, and a late-season romp over the struggling Cardinals, helped San Antonio improve on its 1977 performance with a 6-10 record in 1978. Kansas City, meanwhile, continued a long slog through the Seventies. Head coach Tom Bettis played to the offense's backfield strength with his "T And T" approach centered on halfbacks Tommy Reamon and Tony Reed, both of whom had solid seasons in which they averaged roughly five yards per carry and the Chiefs' ground game produced 2117 total yards with seventeen touchdowns. Quarterback Mike Livingston was almost completely ineffective however, while turnovers and poor special teams play often negated improvements in the Chiefs' defense. As a result Kansas City suffered its way to the bottom of the league with a 2-14 season.





In 1978 the NFC East was one of the league's most competitive divisions; (left) Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach turned in another outstanding season as Dallas topped the conference with a 13-3 record; New York Giants running back Gordon Bell (25, right) was part of an offensive renaissance for the Giants who turned in a winning season

The NFC East turned out to be one of the league's most competitive divisions in 1978, with a long series of exciting intra-divisional matchups between its teams. Top of the heap came the Dallas Cowboys, restored to a dominant position in both the division and the league. The Cowboys opened the year with a 44-9 shellacking of the Colts followed by a doughty defensive victory, 10-6, over the Giants, contests that started an eight-game win streak. Despite a 28-24 loss in a quarterback duel against Fran Tarkenton's best game of the season for the Vikings, twelve weeks into the season Dallas boasted an 11-1 record. There followed some difficulties: Dallas lost their annual Thanksgiving game to the Washington Redskins on a last-minute field goal, followed by a loss to the Patriots at Foxboro, Massachusetts. In their return home the week after, Dallas won a wild 33-27 game against the Philadelphia Eagles led by quarterback Roger Staubach, who tied the

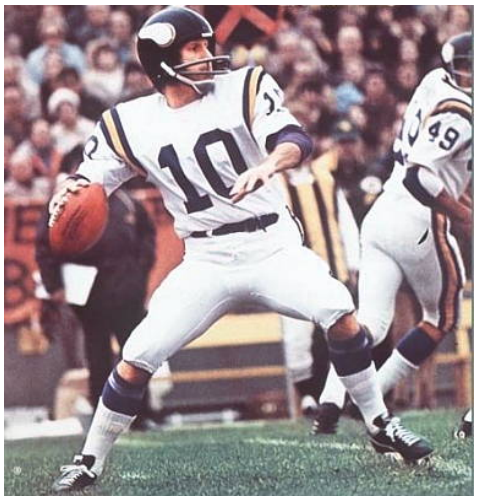
game with a last-minute touchdown scramble then won the day with a touchdown pass in overtime. A comfortable win against the Jets in the last week made Dallas 13-3 on the year, atop the NFC with a conference-wins edge against the Atlanta Falcons. Staubach had a banner year in which he threw for 3190 yards with 25 touchdowns and 16 interceptions and ran for two more scores. Versatile halfback Joe Washington ran for eleven touchdowns, caught two more, and also returned a kickoff for a score. The combined efforts of Washington, Staubach, and backs Robert Newhouse and Calvin Hill added up to 2187 rushing yards and twenty-four combined touchdowns on the ground. Not content to dominate on one side of the ball, Dallas' "Doomsday Defense" was ranked third overall in the league, behind only the Pittsburgh Steelers and Atlanta Falcons, and just ahead of the Denver Broncos. Dallas fans and head coach Tom Landry looked to the postseason with anticipation, planning to use Dallas' home-field advantage for another Super Bowl run.

Other teams in the NFC East battled for what advantages they could find. Over the course of a streaky season, the Philadelphia Eagles faced hard-fought games nearly every week. After solid work in 1977, Philadelphia's defense in 1978 struggled with a series of injuries and was prone to lapses on big plays. What elevated the Eagles was their offense. Quarterback Steve Joachim continued to mature running Philadelphia's variation on the "Air Coryell" offense with deep, specially timed routes to receivers. He was aided by the Eagles' outstanding receiving corps, led by "the Harolds" - wide receivers Harold Carmichael and Harold Jackson - along with big, sure-handed tight end Keith Krepfle. Running back Wilbert Montgomery was often Joachim's go-to receiver on shorter routes; meanwhile the second-year back, who had been a later-round draft pick turned rookie sensation in 1977, emerged as the NFC East's top rusher in 1978. Montgomery delivered 1405 rushing yards and no less than fifteen touchdowns on the ground, third-best in the league on yardage and tied with Tony Dorsett for the second-most scores. Aided by a doughty offensive line, itself cued by an All-Pro season from tackle Jerry Sisemore, Philadelphia's offense fought its way to an 11-5 record and a wild-card place in the playoffs.

Head coach Ted Marchibroda's New York Giants also made their way forward on grit in 1978. There were some signs of improvement in the Giants' defense, thanks largely to tremendous individual efforts by future Hall of Fame linebackers Harry Carson and Brad Van Pelt. But as in Philadelphia, the key to the Giants' improvement lay with their offense. Second-year quarterback Joe Roth remained a bright prospect: his completion percentage dropped from his rookie season, as Roth preferred to throw the ball away under pressure rather than lose yardage on sacks, but the young Californian delivered 3068 passing yards with twenty-two touchdowns and only eleven interceptions, along with one tuck-and-run score on the ground. His primary targets, wideouts Wesley Walker and Johnny Perkins, each posted 1000-yard receiving seasons and together caught eighteen of Roth's scoring passes. The Giants' ground game was a study in contrasts between big, powerful Rob Carpenter and small, agile Gordon Bell, but the two combined for 1868 yards and thirteen touchdowns on the season. With a 6-6 record twelve weeks into the season the Giants went on a three-game win streak highlighted by a 20-10 upset of the Los Angeles Rams with scoring led by a Roth touchdown pass and a pick-six of Rams

quarterback Pat Haden by Harry Carson. Only a hard-fought 23-20 loss to the Eagles in the last week of play kept the Giants out of the playoffs picture.

For both the Washington Redskins and St. Louis Cardinals, 1978 was a season of woes. For Washington, close losses in the closing minutes to the Eagles (24-21), Colts (27-24), and Giants (27-26, that on the final play) denied them a winning season. The Redskins' defense was plagued by injuries and blown plays. Young quarterback Tommy Kramer threw more touchdowns than interceptions but was dogged by growing pains with accuracy and the range of his arm, while backups Mike Kruczek and Billy Kilmer, the latter in his last season, were ineffective. Washington's one reliable asset was their backfield of Duane Thomas and Wilbur Jackson, both of whom delivered solid seasons trying to keep Washington competitive. Only a divisional sweep of the Cardinals kept Washington at 4-9 after thirteen weeks, before the team enjoyed a bit of redemption. Washington upset the Cowboys at Texas Stadium in Dallas' annual Thanksgiving game, then staged a stunning 23-6 upset of the mighty Atlanta Falcons on the strength of a defensive renaissance and two Duane Thomas touchdown runs. This helped the season end on an up note despite a grim 6-10 record. St. Louis did record a strong season from veteran fullback Jim Otis and three dominant wins in the fourth, tenth, and thirteenth weeks respectively, but these were some of the only things to go right for the Cardinals in 1978. Poor execution on both offense and defense hampered the team nearly every other week. Young quarterback Steve Pisarkiewicz played all year in place of an injured Jim Hart but did not improve his scattershot arm over time as he completed less than half his passes with twelve touchdowns but also twenty-three interceptions. St. Louis did manage something of a heroic loss in the final week, 17-14 to the mighty Falcons, as the defense played much better and the Cardinals nearly came back to win. But the "almost" did not erase a 4-12 season record.





On the offensive: Minnesota Vikings quarterback Fran Tarkenton (10, left) returned to form in 1978 as the PFWA Comeback Player of the Year, passing for 3668 yards as the offensive engine of the Vikings' 12-4 record; while Tampa Bay staged its own offensive push with Bobby Bowden's vaunted passing game and rushers like Jimmy DuBose (35, right) whose productivity pushed Tampa Bay to a 9-7 record, the young franchise's first winning season and a foretaste of things to come

The NFC Central was, even more than the NFC East, a division of contrasts. At the top of the pack, the Minnesota Vikings enjoyed a powerful return to form in 1978. After issues in 1977 with injuries and inconsistency, quarterback Fran Tarkenton turned his final season into a statement of his skill. Tarkenton made both more pass attempts and more completions than any other NFL quarterback, for a league-leading 3668 yards along with 25 touchdowns and 16

interceptions. Tarkenton's furious passing and its game-winning success made him the PFWA Comeback Player of the Year for the season. Rushers Chuck Foreman and trade acquisition Rickey Young performed well in the backfield with thirteen combined touchdowns while Minnesota's defense, though affected by the retirement of several star players, rallied to its old standards dominating their home division. Despite a late-season waver, the Vikings ended the year 12-4 well on top of the NFC Central, aided by one of the conference's best scoring defenses.

The other major story for the NFC Central in 1978 was the second winning season for a "Class of '76" expansion team, this time the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. In typical fashion Buccaneers head coach Bobby Bowden played all four of his quarterbacks over the course of the season. After veteran Steve Spurrier was injured in the second game (and thereafter announced his retirement) Bowden rotated Doug Williams, Steve DeBerg, and Gary Huff under center. The big-armed Williams passed for the most individual yardage, both Williams and DeBerg threw eight touchdowns apiece on the year, and Bowden's four-man bullpen aggregated 3615 passing yards with twenty-one touchdowns and eighteen interceptions on the season. The need to pull back and defend Tampa Bay's passing game opened seams for the Bucs' single-back rotation of Ricky Bell and Jimmy DuBose, who themselves teamed for 1583 combined rushing yards and fifteen combined touchdowns. Tampa Bay's defense likewise continued to improve, especially the Buccaneers' pass rush and their defensive secondary: defensive linemen Lee Roy Selmon and Dave Pear, along with cornerback Mike Washington, each reached the Pro Bowl for their contributions to Tampa Bay's 9-7 record.

The Detroit Lions could point to several of their own net positives in 1978. Rushers Dexter Bussey and Lawrence Gaines had respectable seasons. The Lions' pass rush was strong, keyed by rookie defensive end Al "Bubba" Baker who ranked second in the league in sacks, returned a fumble for a touchdown, and for these and other reasons was named the AP Defensive Rookie of the Year. Veteran quarterback Greg Landry had one of the NFC's highest passer ratings for his efficiency with eighteen touchdowns and just eight interceptions on the year, most notably in Detroit's greatest victory of the season, a 24-20 upset of the Atlanta Falcons during which Landry threw for three scores. But beyond the defensive line Detroit's defense was patchy all season, the offense subject to inopportune turnovers, and the Lions did not always generate yardage or scoring to keep pace with their opponents. As a result, despite the bright spots Detroit posted only a 7-9 record. This was, however, better than the performance of the NFC Central's remaining teams. After an opening four-game win streak propelled by strong defense and second-year running back Terdell Middleton, the Green Bay Packers collapsed over the rest of the season, swinging from misfortune to misfortune with a 5-11 record. A year after they had won the division, the Chicago Bears were plagued with defensive injuries and despite yeoman work from quarterback Ron Jaworski could not keep pace with most foes, finishing 5-11 themselves.

The dominant story in the NFC West was the meteoric rise of the Atlanta Falcons. Every element of the Falcons' game came together in 1978 under second-year head coach Johnny

Majors. The Falcons started the season with a six-game win streak that included a 45-3 romp over the Los Angeles Rams and a 20-10 win over the Pittsburgh Steelers driven by defense and a pair of Walter Payton touchdowns. After an upset loss to the Lions Atlanta rallied to more divisional wins and, despite a late-season upset loss to Washington, won five of its last six games to finish the year 13-3, well in front in the NFC West and behind only Dallas on a conference-losses tiebreaker. The jewel in Atlanta's crown was Walter Payton's season. Payton led the league in number of carries, both rushing yards (1804) and yards from scrimmage (2192), and both rushing touchdowns (20) and touchdowns from scrimmage (26, a new league record), all while he averaged five yards per carry. As a result "Sweetness" was both the AP National Football League MVP and the Bert Bell Award winner as Player of the Year. Veteran quarterback Craig Morton also posted one of his best seasons as he threw for 3243 yards, twenty-two touchdowns, and just ten interceptions with the league's second-highest passer rating. Atlanta's "Grits Blitz" dominated defensive play also, as the league's second-best overall defense, its second-best scoring defense, and the NFL's leading pass defense coached by Majors' young assistant Jerry Glanville. Indeed the Atlanta defense produced four Pro Bowlers in 1978: defensive tackle Wilson Faumuina, future Hall of Famer defensive end Claude Humphrey who led the league in sacks, linebacker Dewey McClain, and safety Ray Easterling, while Humphrey and Easterling also made first team All-Pro. For his decisive role in the Falcons' triumphs Johnny Majors was named the AP NFL Coach of the Year and for several other wire services likewise.



Atlanta's "Grits Blitz" defenders wrap up Los Angeles Rams running back John Cappelletti (22, left) for no gain in a 45-3 early-season shellacking of the Rams; in 1978 the Atlanta Falcons forged ahead of the usually dominant Rams in the NFC West, powered by a historic season from running back Walter Payton, sterling work from veteran quarterback Craig Morton, and the league's second-best defense, seen in action here

While Atlanta muscled ahead of Los Angeles in their shared division, this did not mean the Rams fared poorly on the season. Despite a pair of grim losses to the Falcons and a couple of upsets to the Saints and Giants respectively, for most of the rest of the season Los Angeles performed at or close to familiar standards in all aspects of the game. Rams lead backs Lawrence McCutcheon and O.J. Simpson both posted 1000-yard seasons, though Simpson was at times hampered by knee issues. The Rams' full backfield committee - McCutcheon, Simpson, John Cappelletti, return specialist Cullen Bryant, and young Wendell Tyler - combined to lead the Rams to 2693 rushing yards and nineteen touchdowns on the ground. Quarterbacks James Harris and Pat Haden continued to share the job as Rams owner Carroll Rosenbloom (who backed Haden) and head coach Chuck Knox (who backed Harris) warred backstage over which of them would be Los Angeles' long-term solution at the position.

The two quarterbacks combined for 3044 passing yards with 22 touchdowns and 18 interceptions though Haden, who saw less playing time, was the more efficient with eight scores and just four interceptions. Rams special-teams play was also solid; all things considered it was Los Angeles' famed defense that provided the weakest link in the 1978 team, especially their inability to handle the Falcons. Despite that Los Angeles played solidly more often than not and took the NFC's second wild-card spot in the playoffs with an 11-5 record.

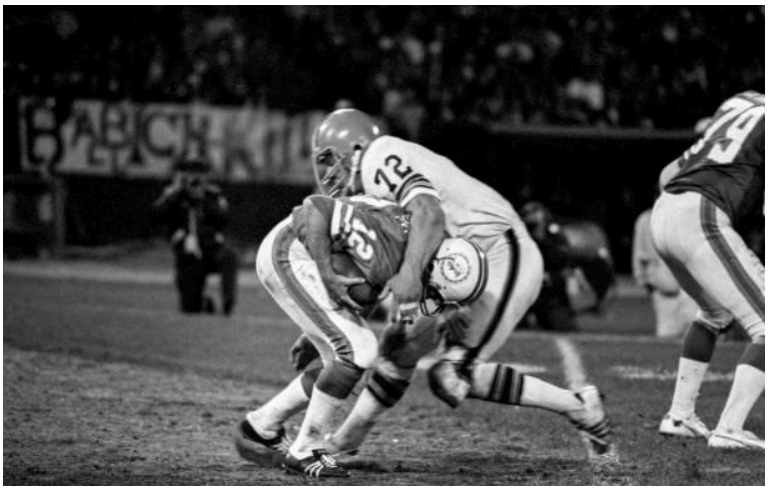


Passing to run: while new San Francisco 49ers head coach Don Coryell brought his "Air Coryell" offense to the Bay Area, this also opened seams for 49ers lead back Delvin Williams (24, right) who rushed for 1248 yards and ten touchdowns in 1978, helping the Niners back to a winning record

Elsewhere in the NFC West fortunes were mixed. The San Francisco 49ers often struggled on defense over the course of the season - though not in the team's biggest win of the year, a 12-9 slugging match over the Falcons. New head coach Don Coryell brought with him his "Air Coryell" passing attack and employed all three of his quarterbacks - primary starter Steve Bartkowski, veteran Jim Plunkett, and rookie Guy Benjamin - as they learned the ropes of Coryell's sophisticated timing and deep attack. Wideout Ahmad Rashad brought experience with the system as he, like Coryell, left the Cardinals for the Bay Area and now teamed with Freddie Solomon at receiver for the Niners. Taken together Coryell's three quarterbacks threw for 3712 yards, twenty touchdowns, and fifteen interceptions on the season. But often San Francisco "passed so they could run," especially by opening seams for lead back Delvin Williams who turned in a Pro Bowl season rushing for 1248 yards and ten touchdowns. Doughty blocking back Paul Hofer added seven more touchdowns as a strong short-yardage scorer. On the strength of that offense, in a highly competitive division, San Francisco managed a 9-7 record just outside the postseason picture.

Offense also mattered in New Orleans, where despite continued struggles on defense the ability to move the ball and score brightened prospects. Quarterback Archie Manning enjoyed his best season to date, completing just over sixty percent of his passes for 3416 yards with 20 touchdowns and 16 interceptions on the year, while he also ran for two more scores. Lead receiver Steve Largent continued to give Manning one of the league's best pass-and-catch combinations with 1101 receiving yards and eleven touchdown catches. Controversial lead back Chuck Muncie turned in a solid season as did blocking back Tim Wilson, but the real backfield surprise for New Orleans was reserve back Ted McKnight who put up 701 rushing yards and six scores of his own and led the league in yards per carry. These strengths kept the Saints competitive in most of their games and helped them to a much improved 6-10 record. In Seattle,

meanwhile, the young Seahawks continued in the doldrums despite a respectable season from veteran quarterback Bill Munson as trouble with turnovers and with pass defense left Seattle 4-12 on the year.



Brown-out: Cleveland Browns defensive tackle Jerry Sherk (72, left) overwhelms Miami Dolphins quarterback Bob Griese (12, left) during the second half of the 1978 AFC Wild Card Game, in which Cleveland rallied to dominate Miami in the second half en route to a 27-14 win

The 1978 AFC Playoffs were largely a contest for the right to face, and then try to overcome, the Pittsburgh Steelers. From the outset the surprising Cleveland Browns had their eyes on this goal. Away at the Orange Bowl to face the Miami Dolphins in the AFC's wild-card game, the Browns faced obstacles in the first half but overcame them in the second. Cleveland led off the scoring with a 20-yard out pattern from Brian Sipe to receiver Ricky Feacher. After that, however, the Dolphins played to their home-field advantage using ball control and opportunistic defense. In the second quarter Miami answered with a Bob Griese touchdown pass to Nat Moore; two Cleveland possessions later Miami defensive end Vern Den Herder pick-sixed a Brian Sipe screen pass for a 29-yard touchdown rumble. Cleveland managed to add a field goal shortly before halftime but found themselves down 14-10 as the teams headed to their lockers. Midway through the third quarter, however, the Browns broke the game open on a swift, weaving 50-yard Greg Pruitt touchdown run. It was Cleveland's turn to dominate defensive play, as the Browns sacked Bob Griese four times in the second half and recovered two Miami fumbles. Cleveland added another field goal and a late touchdown pass to Reggie Rucker as they surged forward to a 27-14 win.

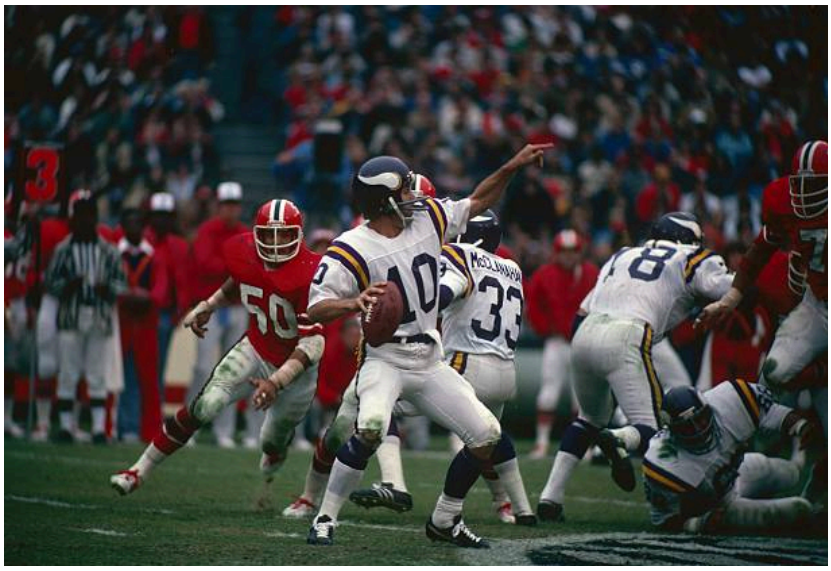
The divisional round was marked by more bursts of offense. The Broncos and Patriots met in Foxboro where New England played well to the home crowd in the early going. The Patriots scored first on a short swing pass from Steve Grogan to Sam Cunningham, which Denver answered with a long drive running the ball that was capped by a seven-yard sweep right from Tony Dorsett to make the game 7-7. In the last minute of the first quarter, flushed from the pocket under pressure, Steve Grogan mounted a rambling, weaving 68-yard scramble all the way into Denver's endzone. For a time this seemed to break the game open as Grogan soon added a touchdown pass to wideout Stanley Morgan, but a Dorsett goalline dive just before the half made it 21-14. Through the third quarter New England's defense seemed to contain the Broncos while the Patriots padded their lead with a field goal. Then, in the fourth quarter, the Broncos rallied as quarterback Mark Harmon capped his defining season with a defining comeback. After a quick out pattern to Rick Upchurch at the end of a long drive put Denver in

range, on New England's next possession linebacker Tom Jackson intercepted a Steve Grogan pass. Three plays later the cool-headed Harmon hit Haven Moses on a 28-yard post pattern that gave Denver a lead they kept through the nervy final minutes. Tony Dorsett was a powerhouse through the game with 157 yards and two touchdowns, out-rushing the Patriots as a team aside from Grogan's touchdown ramble. Grogan managed 228 yards passing and 81 more on the ground with three combined touchdowns but also the fateful interception, while Mark Harmon went 13-for-18 with 179 yards and two scores, most of that in the second half.

The other divisional game, played at Three Rivers Stadium in snow flurries, was an intra-divisional affair. Cleveland had lost badly to the Steelers twice during the regular season but would not go quietly in the playoffs, and indeed scored first on a Brian Sipe crossing pattern to the safe hands of Ozzie Newsome. Pittsburgh answered with a ball-control approach, grinding away until Franco Harris found a seam for a 28-yard touchdown run. The teams traded several punts before Pittsburgh again made slow going down the field, only to run a play-fake capped as Terry Bradshaw threw a 37-yard touchdown to wideout Frank Lewis. This put the Steelers up 14-7 at the half. In the second half Cleveland coach Sam Rutigliano continued to "pass to run," which succeeded when Greg Pruitt found an opening for a 56-yard scoring dash. Pittsburgh answered with a field goal but Cleveland drove again, capped with a quick screen pass from Sipe to fullback Cleo Miller for the score. The Browns entered the fourth quarter up 21-17, but now the "Steel Curtain" descended. Pittsburgh's pass rush at last began to penetrate and on offense they returned to ball control, rewarded with another Franco Harris touchdown. A late fumble forced on a sack of Brian Sipe gave Pittsburgh the chance to run out the clock, which they did for the 24-21 victory.

The 1978 AFC Championship game was, with the sixteen-game season and wild-card playoff week, played in the early days of 1979 and with snow on the sidelines at Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh, where the Steelers dominated the early going. On Pittsburgh's second possession Terry Bradshaw punctuated a confident drive with a 45-yard touchdown pass to tight end Randy Grossman. Denver managed a field goal in reply but soon Pittsburgh drove again and fullback Rocky Bleier escaped a scrum of Broncos linebackers to ramble 39 yards for a score. Late in the half, with Denver's offense stifled, the Steelers mounted another ball control drive ended with a quick three-yard flare from Bradshaw to Frank Lewis, which made the score 21-3 at the half. In the second half Denver head coach John Ralston switched his approach to a succession of shorter-range plays designed to find and exploit seams in the "Steel Curtain"'s coverage. One succeeded far beyond expectations when Tony Dorsett turned a screen pass from Mark Harmon into a 66-yard touchdown threaded through the open spaces in Pittsburgh's defense. Pittsburgh continued to dominate the clock and the game, however: the Steelers sacked Mark Harmon six times on the day, three of them safety blitzes by Donnie Shell, while Pittsburgh wore down the clock with their running game. Denver added a second field goal, however, and midway through the fourth quarter Lyle Alzado leveled Bradshaw leaving the Pittsburgh quarterback unconscious, then concussed. The teams traded punts thereafter as Denver looked for any advantage, but found instead that the Steelers simply reloaded under

center. Joe Gilliam entered the game and lofted a precisely-thrown 70-yard bomb to John Stallworth that put the game away, 28-13. Denver had their moments: Tony Dorsett rushed for 108 yards, plus another 88 yards and a touchdown as a receiver, while Mark Harmon used Ralston's short patterns to rack up 200 yards passing with both a touchdown and an interception. But Pittsburgh dominated the clock, the statistics, and the score as Bradshaw and Gilliam combined like old times for three touchdowns to punch Pittsburgh's ticket for the Super Bowl.



Grit, blitzed: Minnesota quarterback Fran Tarkenton (10, left) signals to his receivers, changing a play under pressure from Atlanta's relentless pass rush in the 1978 NFC playoffs divisional round; the Falcons manhandled the Vikings in that game, 45-13, on the way to Atlanta's first Super Bowl appearance

With several high-powered teams involved the 1978 NFC playoffs seemed to offer a more open, opportunistic field than the AFC's postseason. In the 1978 NFC wild-card game the Los Angeles Rams made the most of such opportunities. As they had in the 1977 NFC Championship game, the Rams' defense frustrated the Philadelphia Eagles' timed passing routes and generally bottled up Philadelphia's ground game. On the other side of the ball Los Angeles moved the ball methodically with their deep backfield, and enjoyed the fruits of James Harris' best game of the season at quarterback. Harris threw for an early touchdown to star receiver Lynn Swann, then ran for a score himself in the second quarter on a four-yard quarterback bootleg. Near the end of the half Philadelphia finally capitalized on openings after a Rams turnover and Wilbert Montgomery dove in for a touchdown to make the score 14-7 at halftime. The Rams added a field goal early in the third quarter, then both teams' defenses settled in to dominate play. In the fourth quarter, efforts to recalibrate the Eagles' receiver patterns paid off as Steve Joachim hit Harold Carmichael for a touchdown that briefly brought Philadelphia within a field goal. The kickoff pinned Los Angeles deep in their own end but, two plays later, James Harris used his long-ball arm to connect with Lynn Swann on an 88-yard touchdown that broke the game open. Los Angeles capitalized on long possessions thereafter to burn the clock and reach a 24-14 victory.

During the divisional round, the Atlanta Falcons and Minnesota Vikings squared off in surprisingly mild weather at Fulton County Stadium in Atlanta. On their first possession the Vikings ground out a long drive capped by a field goal; after that Atlanta's deluge began. Two Atlanta possessions later Walter Payton left Minnesota's famed defense in the January mud on a

51-yard touchdown run. Craig Morton added two second-quarter touchdown passes to wideout Alfred Jenkins and fullback Haskel Stanback as Atlanta led 21-3 at the half, their defense smothering Fran Tarkenton's passing game. After a ball-control drive in the third quarter Morton made the score 28-6 with a quick three-yard endzone flare to Billy Ryckman. Tarkenton at last passed his way into the endzone for Minnesota, but this was answered by two more Walter Payton scoring runs as Atlanta dominated the game front to back for a 45-13 win. Payton put up 205 total rushing yards on the day with touchdowns of 51, 54, and 19 yards, while the Vikings as a team managed only 115 yards on the ground. Fran Tarkenton delivered Minnesota's lone touchdown but was also picked off three times by the Falcons, while Atlanta quarterback Craig Morton threw for 216 yards with three touchdowns and no interceptions.

At Texas Stadium the Dallas Cowboys and Los Angeles Rams staged another classic installment in their series of 1970s postseason games, known afterwards as the "Hail Swann" game. Defense dominated the early going as the teams traded field goals in the first quarter. In the second quarter Los Angeles varied their play-calling more widely and staged a successful drive capped by a short pass from Pat Haden to receiver Ron Jessie. This roused Dallas to lean on their passing game, which led to two Roger Staubach touchdown throws, a 29-yard pass to tight end Billy Joe DuPree and a quick two-yard swing pattern to Joe Washington. Down 17-10 early in the second half Los Angeles enjoyed some brief success running the ball, as they sprang Lawrence McCutcheon on a 19-yard trap play for a game-tying touchdown. Both teams' defenses clamped down again leaving fans in suspense until what seemed to be the game-breaking play as defensive back Benny Barnes intercepted Pat Haden near midfield and ran the ball back for a touchdown. Undaunted, Los Angeles kept trying and, after forcing a late Dallas punt, held the ball near midfield in time for a last play. With his deceptively strong arm, Pat Haden dropped back and threw a 54-yard hail-mary as star receiver Lynn Swann sidestepped Dallas' coverage to make a balletic catch and force the game into overtime. Fortune favored the Rams' boldness: Los Angeles won the coin toss and ground out a patient drive that ended with a game-winning field goal by Tom Dempsey. With this upset the Rams gained a third chance on the season to face their divisional foes, the Falcons.

The 1978 NFC Championship game therefore took place not in Dallas, as most professional observers had expected, but rather in rain-soaked Atlanta. Los Angeles kept the ball on the ground in the early going and gained a field goal for their trouble. At first Atlanta seemed to do likewise, but at midfield on the ensuing drive Craig Morton ran a play-fake and hit receiver Alfred Jackson for a 48-yard touchdown. As their mighty defense frustrated Los Angeles and sacked Pat Haden four times in the first half, Atlanta added a field goal of their own for a 10-3 lead at the break. The second half was largely the same, with any moves by the Rams gummed up by well-designed defensive schemes from the Falcons, while Craig Morton added two more touchdown passes to perhaps the best postseason game of his career. Los Angeles finally wore their way through the Falcons' defense for a five-yard sweep right from Lawrence McCutcheon, but the Falcons responded with a field goal of their own to keep the game well out of reach and later ran out the clock for a 27-10 victory. The Rams' vaunted backfield had less than a hundred

combined yards rushing on the day, against 103 yards for Walter Payton by himself. The Falcons' real offensive star of the afternoon was their veteran quarterback: Craig Morton completed twenty of his twenty-four passes for 249 yards and three touchdowns that cleared "Hotlanta"'s path to the franchise's first Super Bowl.

Super Bowl XIII was staged at The Astrodome in Houston, the game's inaugural trip to an indoor, domed stadium, a decision in which interventions with League Commissioner Pete Rozelle by Texas governor and Houston booster John Connally were rumored to have played a role. It pitted two of the league's three statistically-best teams against one another, both of them taken there by a dominant offense and a balanced offense that scored often (though it might be said that, under offensive coordinator Hank Stram, Pittsburgh now leaned a little more heavily on its passing game than Atlanta.) Both teams were loaded with talent, as Pittsburgh suited up ten future Hall of Famers on its Super Bowl roster, and Atlanta five of its own. Fans and professional students of the game looked forward to a competitive matchup. Regardless of the game's quality it would have at least one historic feature: because of Terry Bradshaw's head injury in the AFC Championship game, Pittsburgh would start Joe Gilliam at quarterback, the first African American to be named a starting quarterback in the Super Bowl.

The game did not disappoint. Both defenses started in good form, though Pittsburgh held just enough advantage for Franco Harris to run a five-yard sweep left for a touchdown immediately after a dramatic 36-yard catch and run from Joe Gilliam to John Stallworth. Pittsburgh then added a long field goal from kicker Roy Gerela just before the end of the first quarter to take a 10-0 lead. It was not, however, sustained: behind future Hall of Fame linemen Mike Kenn and R.C. Thieleman Atlanta began opening holes in the "Steel Curtain" through which Walter Payton and reserve back Bubba Bean ran. A solid Falcons running game took Atlanta to second and goal at the Steelers' six-yard line at which point Craig Morton tossed an easy post pattern to Billy Ryckman for Atlanta's first touchdown. After both defenses forced the teams to trade punts for much of the quarter Atlanta pushed into Pittsburgh's end of the field again and Walter Payton spotted daylight for an agile 35-yard dash through the Steelers' secondary to make it 14-10 Falcons. Atlanta's ensuing kickoff, bobbled by Pittsburgh, pinned the Steelers at their own seven-yard line as the game's momentum seemed to turn. Despite that, four plays later Joe Gilliam ran a play-fake with Franco Harris then stepped back to fire a graceful, accurate long ball to reserve wideout Jim Smith, Jr. - in the game because of an injury to starter Frank Lewis - that connected for an 81-yard touchdown just before the two-minute warning. Undaunted by the sudden blow, Atlanta both ran and passed the ball downfield in an efficient two-minute drill for a 46-yard field goal attempt from young kicker Tim Mazzetti. Mazzetti hit it squarely and the teams went to their locker rooms tied 17-17, with fans well-pleased by the contest.

The third quarter belonged to both teams' defenses, as even a fumble lost by Franco Harris and an interception of Craig Morton by Mel Blount failed to yield any advantages. Late in the quarter Pittsburgh rode a solid punt return to a drive just good enough to produce a field goal and a slim 20-17 lead. Atlanta returned the blow with a clock-burning drive dominated by

Walter Payton's skill, before Craig Morton pulled up and threw a 14-yard crossing pattern to Alfred Jenkins that gave Atlanta back the lead. The teams traded punts again before Joe Gilliam turned to efficient percentage passing on shorter patterns to get Pittsburgh within field goal range, where Roy Gerela narrowed Atlanta's lead to 24-23. After an Atlanta punt, on the next play Joe Gilliam was flattened, and concussed, by the Falcons' star defensive end Claude Humphrey. Rather than use rookie reserve Matt Cavanaugh, Terry Bradshaw entered the contest. Bradshaw managed a careful trip past midfield, then stepped well back into the pocket and uncorked the ball deep to tight end Randy Grossman, for a 44-yard touchdown that put Pittsburgh ahead with four minutes left. Atlanta moved the ball past midfield themselves, before Craig Morton was intercepted on a crossing pattern by linebacker Jack Ham. Terry Bradshaw then threw for one first down and lowered his head on a quarterback draw for a second that allowed Pittsbugh to control the ball and run out the clock. The Steelers survived a stern challenge to their perfect Super Bowl record and emerged with the win, 30-24.



At their best with the game on the line: future Hall of Fame center Mike Webster (52) makes ready to hike the ball to future Hall of Fame quarterback Terry Bradshaw (12) in the closing minutes of Super Bowl XIII: with a combined effort from quarterbacks Joe Gilliam and Terry Bradshaw, who shared MVP honors, the Steelers - barely- saw off a powerful challenge from the Atlanta Falcons, 30-24, to secure Pittsburgh's third Super Bowl title

Despite the Steelers' two long-ball touchdowns, Atlanta's defense played a solid game as they held Pittsburgh to just 98 rushing yards on the day. Future Hall of Fame safety Ray Easterling had no less than ten tackles and a safety-blitz sack on the day, while fellow future Hall of Famer Claude Humphrey had eight tackles and knocked Joe Gilliam out of action. On offense, Walter Payton averaged a blistering six yards per carry with 150 on the day and a touchdown, as part of 197 team yards on the ground. Quarterback Craig Morton added 192 yards through the air and a pair of touchdowns, though also two interceptions. The game's decisive figures were Pittsburgh's "Dynamic Duo" at quarterback, reunited by circumstance to produce game-changing scores. Joe Gilliam completed twelve of his twenty-two pass attempts for 226 yards and a touchdown, and added twelve yards on the ground. Terry Bradshaw completed three of five late-game passes for 62 yards with the game-winning touchdown and crucial late first downs. Gilliam and Bradshaw became the first players to share the Super Bowl Most

Valuable Player award in a game very definitely won by Pittsburgh's quarterbacks as the Steelers became the first team to claim three Super Bowl titles.

This triumph, however, was soon followed by tragedy. In the early hours of March 2, 1979, a car driven by Steelers quarterback Joe Gilliam failed to make the sharp turn known as the "Mae West Bend" on Pennsylvania Route 8 in the metropolitan Pittsburgh area. The car flew clear of the guardrail and crashed; Gilliam was killed on impact. An autopsy after the crash showed the presence of alcohol and cocaine in Gilliam's bloodstream. Gilliam's funeral, held in his family's home city of Nashville, Tennessee, was attended by a cross-section of major NFL figures and other celebrities: among the famous African Americans in attendance were NFL Hall of Famer Jim Brown, Rev. Jesse Jackson, musician Stevie Wonder, and actor/comedian Richard Pryor. During the viewing prior to the funeral service, a visibly shaken Terry Bradshaw placed his own, three Super Bowl rings on Gilliam's chest, to be buried with his teammate. The impulsive gesture inspired Richard Pryor's monologue "Terry Bradshaw Is A Redneck" from Pryor's album *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert*. In it Pryor explores Bradshaw's personal and cultural foibles; examines the pressures and pains of celebrity for black Americans in ways that, for Pryor, veer into autobiography; explores the nature of friendship; and considers the ways the black community deals with public grief.

Still in the wake of 1976's substantial rule changes (geared toward freeing up the passing game), rules changes made in 1978 were relatively minor. The league imposed a five-yard penalty and ten-second runoff of the clock for any team that committed a foul in order to stop the clock. Hurdling was declared no longer a foul. A seventh official, the side judge, was introduced for each officiating crew to aid in rulings on penalties downfield and act as a second umpire on field goals and extra points. Other than these minor alterations, the largest of which was the addition of side judges which added a total of fifteen new officials to NFL officiating crews, the league's rules and procedures were left untouched.

Coaching changes likewise were few, but notable. In Seattle, the Seahawks' collective ownership chose to buy out the fourth year of head coach Dick Crum's contract and release him after the 1978 season. In his place they hired Jack Christiansen, who had played as a star defensive back and return specialist in the 1950s, then served as head coach of the San Francisco 49ers during the 1960s. Despite Washington's poor showing, famed head coach George Allen would be allowed to see out the last season of his contract in 1979; likewise Jets head coach Walt Michaels survived on sufferance dependent on results in the next season. Cincinnati Bengals head coach Bill Johnson was released, and Bengals owner Paul Brown scored what he hoped was the coup of bringing famed University of Oklahoma head coach Bud Wilkinson back to football in order to revive the Bengals' fortunes. St. Louis Cardinals coach Jim Hanifan was also fired at the end of a disappointing season, replaced by his former defensive backs coach and recent Hall of Fame entrant for his days as a Cardinals defensive back, Larry Brown.

In Kansas City, without significant progress in the Chiefs' performance head coach Tom Bettis was let go at the end of his contract. In his place owner Lamar Hunt recruited noteworthy CFL head coach Marv Levy, who had coached the Toronto Argonauts to a Grey Cup during his tenure there. Hunt hoped Levy's inventive intelligence would return the Chiefs to the kind of success they had enjoyed in the 1960s. Meanwhile, in Green Bay, a historic and controversial meeting of the team's collective management chose not to renew Bart Starr's contract for 1979, a decision still debated today. Instead the Packers' front office reached out to former Oakland Raiders head coach, and then-current Tampa Bay Buccaneers offensive coordinator, John Rauch to become Green Bay's next head coach, with hopes he could revive the historic franchise's fortunes.

1979 [click to expand]

1979 National Football League season
1979 NFL Playoffs
AFC Champion Pittsburgh Steelers
NFC Champion Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Super Bowl XIV
Date January 20, 1980
Site Jack Murphy Stadium, San Diego, California
Result Pittsburgh Steelers 44, Tampa Bay Buccaneers 24
Super Bowl MVP Terry Bradshaw (QB, Pittsburgh Steelers)

Bert Bell Award Dan Fouts (QB, San Diego Chargers)
Associated Press League MVP Roger Staubach (QB, Dallas Cowboys)
AP Offensive Player of the Year Earl Campbell (RB, Houston Oilers)
AP Defensive Player of the Year Lee Roy Selmon (DE, Tampa Bay Buccaneers)
AP Offensive Rookie of the Year Chuck Fusina (QB, Philadelphia Eagles)
AP Defensive Rookie of the Year Fred Smerlas (DT, Buffalo Bills)
PFWA Comeback Player of the Year Larry Csonka (FB, Memphis Grizzlies)
AP NFL Coach of the Year Bobby Bowden (HC, Tampa Bay Buccaneers)
Single-season passer rating leader Roger Staubach (QB, Dallas Cowboys)
Seasonal rushing leader Earl Campbell (RB, Houston Oilers)

The early prelude to the NFL's 1979 season passed in relative quiet, though two events transpired that would have repercussions - on different scales - in the league as their consequences played out. First, Oakland Raiders owner Al Davis clashed with the City of Oakland over Davis' desire for a new stadium to replace the Alameda County Coliseum in which the Raiders played. After a presentation of plans and a series of public meetings, the city argued that Davis placed too great a burden on public funds in the proposed construction plan and the planning authority turned down Davis' bid to have a full planning and environmental impact statement prepared for a city council vote. Davis then turned to the league and, indirectly through the provisions of the Heinz Act, to Congress with a double-edged appeal: either approve the planning statement and debate a means to go forward with the new stadium, or Davis would begin action to move the Raiders from Oakland. The plan was tied up in committee assessments for the duration of the 1979 season, but the longer-term effects of the controversy would test the boundaries and the powers of the Heinz Act and the structure of the league in years to come.

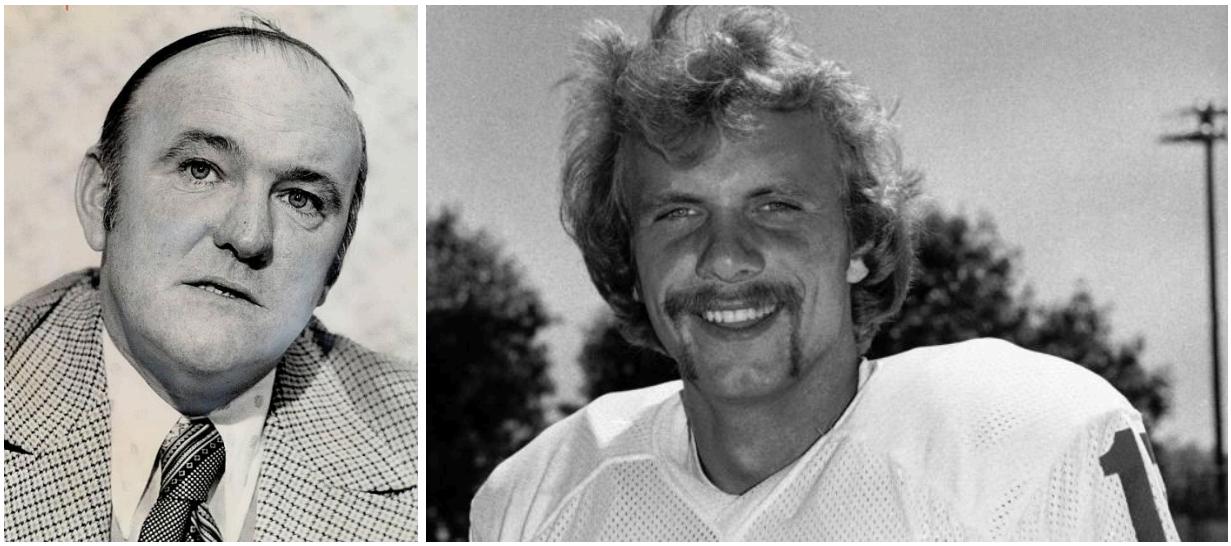
On a much smaller scale, the most significant offseason player movement through the Football Labor Relations Board (known to league regulars as "the Flurb") came when Chuck Muncie

announced his desire for a transfer from the New Orleans Saints to the San Francisco 49ers. On his return to New Orleans for an off-season front office meeting early in 1979 Muncie left the meeting to find his car vandalized - tires slashed, the letters "KKK" scratched into the paint. This was the last straw in a contentious relationship between Muncie and the often racist environment in New Orleans; despite entreaties from Saints head coach Dick Nolan, Muncie appealed to the FLRB for a move. The board agreed that Muncie could void his contract without penalty and transfer, in return for the 49ers second, third, and fourth round 1979 draft picks given over to the Saints. For Muncie and the 49ers, this took him to the team environment where Muncie would eventually become a Pro Football Hall of Fame entrant. For New Orleans, it remained tied to the 1978 decision to hold on to Muncie rather than draft another future Hall of Famer, Earl Campbell, who instead went to the Houston Oilers.

The 1979 NFL Draft began with its own first-pick controversy. The one-seed in the draft belonged to the Kansas City Chiefs after their woeful 1978 campaign. New Chiefs head coach Marv Levy had set his sights on rebuilding the team's once-formidable defense. As a result, and with good cause as events proved, speculation centered around the Chiefs' desire to draft the top defensive prospect of the year, Ohio State linebacker Tom Cousineau who had been a rare defensive finalist for the Heisman Trophy in 1978. At the same time, Chiefs starting quarterback Mike Livingston had played poorly in recent seasons and was clearly at the end of his career, while Livingston's young backup Bill Kenney was untested. Levy chose not to take any of the four quarterbacks picked in the draft's first two rounds, three of whom would reach the Pro Bowl at least once and two of whom would win Super Bowls. Levy's proponents counter with Bill Kenney's own successes, most famously in the 1985 season. Against this in turn, critics raise the point that Levy turned down an opportunity for Notre Dame quarterback Joe Montana - already known for a trio of bowl-game comeback victories - to practice with the Chiefs. Some measure of ink has been spilled over the years about the statistical and strategic prospects if Levy had watched Montana practice up close - not only a future Hall of Famer but a perennial favorite in debates about the NFL's greatest quarterback - then taken "The Joesen One" to play for the Chiefs.

Kansas City did draft Tom Cousineau with the year's first pick: this was not in itself a poor choice, as Cousineau would reach the Pro Bowl four times and make second-team All-Pro once in a decade of play, eight seasons with the Chiefs then two more with the Seattle Seahawks. At the same time Cousineau was not in the end one of the four Hall of Famers taken among the five draft picks that followed. First came tight end Kellen Winslow to the Cincinnati Bengals, still regarded as one of the greatest ever to play the position and second in his era only to Tampa Bay's legendary Jimmie Giles. With the third pick the St. Louis Cardinals selected the University of Miami's Ottis Anderson, to this day the Cardinals' leading rusher and a distinguished Hall of Famer. Seattle, under new head coach Jack Christiansen, turned to defense with defensive end Manu Tuiasosopo. This choice, rooted in Seattle's own West Coast region, allowed the Chicago Bears an opportunity to take a Hall of Famer at the same position, Dan Hampton, anchor of the Bears' mighty defensive line of the 1980s, with the next draft spot.

Each of the franchises, to that point, who had followed on the Chiefs' first pick either relied on veteran quarterbacks or, in the case of the Seahawks, chose to make defense their top draft priority. This meant that, for a franchise that chose to do so, the path to draft a quarterback was clear. In that position, the Green Bay Packers' new head coach John Rauch did not hesitate. Unlike Levy, Rauch had followed his veteran Midwestern scout's counsel and brought Notre Dame star Montana up to Wisconsin to work out with Packers assistant (and former backup quarterback to Bart Starr) Zeke Bratkowski. After Bratkowski's enthusiastic endorsement, Rauch used the draft's sixth pick to select Montana, which would take "Joe Cool" to Green Bay for the glory years of his career.



The big play: newly installed as the head coach of the Green Bay Packers, John Rauch (above left) bet on a quarterback with the Packers' early selection in the first round of the 1979 NFL Draft - the result was future Hall of Famer Joe Montana (above right), who arrived from nearby Notre Dame at the leading edge of a revival in Green Bay's fortunes during the 1980s

Even with Green Bay's momentous pick the draft had just begun to pick up steam. With the next choice the New Orleans Saints bucked convention and took their dual-role kicker of some years Russell Erxleben now unfortunately more famous for post-career financial malfeasance than his yeoman work for the Saints. Two picks later the San Antonio Texans played to their offense by selecting running back Greg Hawthorne: both a successful rusher and backfield receiver at Texans coach Grant Teaff's former collegiate program Baylor, San Antonio hoped Hawthorne's dual-threat skills would add flexibility to the Texans' style of play. With the next pick the Memphis Grizzlies made an unexpected but ultimately quite useful choice: Heisman finalist and dual-threat Clemson quarterback Steve Fuller. While Memphis head coach John McVay was an enthusiastic supporter of Grizzlies starting quarterback Danny White, McVay had no real confidence in White's backups if he were to be injured. Fuller provided a more effective backstop and, if White stayed healthy, an enticing trade prospect for other teams. (This was Fuller's ultimate fate: he went on to a number of productive seasons as the Chicago Bears' starter after Chicago lost Ron Jaworski to chronic injuries.)

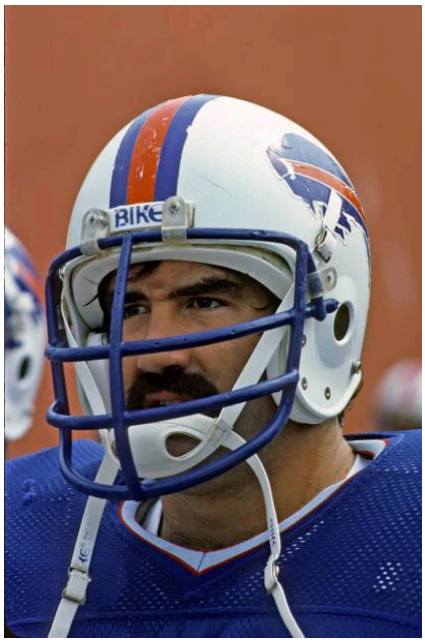
Thereafter, the Washington Redskins selected one of their most reliable receivers of the coming 1980s, Jerry Butler, while the Buffalo Bills took the next Hall of Famer to appear in the draft, defensive tackle Fred Smerlas who emerged swiftly as a rookie sensation and one of Bills head coach Forrest Gregg's favorite players. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers took pass-oriented Washington State quarterback Jack Thompson - best known now for the redemption arc in the last years of his career - as the latest member of "Bobby Bowden's Buccaneer Bullpen" of quarterbacks. Both Cincinnati and Green Bay traded bundles of later round picks to the New York Giants and Cleveland Browns respectively in order to select a pair of running backs. Cincinnati took LSU's larger, powerful Charles Alexander to revitalize a backfield decimated by injuries. Green Bay took Eddie Lee Ivery, who would join Terdell Middleton as the core of John Rauch's backfield with the Packers. San Antonio enjoyed a second first-round pick thanks to their 1977 trade with the Denver Broncos for Tony Dorsett, and with it took Pro Bowl offensive tackle Kelvin Clark who would bolster the Texans' offensive line considerably. Philadelphia took their own, defensive Pro Bowler, linebacker Jerry Robinson. The Minnesota Vikings, scrambling after Fran Tarkenton's unexpected off-season retirement, picked Stanford quarterback Steve Dils to be their future under center. With the penultimate pick of the first round, the Atlanta Falcons helped define their offense for the next decade with bright Auburn prospect William Andrews, who would reach the Hall of Fame in the dual-threat fullback role alongside Walter Payton in what former Cowboys quarterback and *Monday Night Football* commentator Don Meredith would go on to dub "God's Backfield."

Defense dominated notable picks in the draft's second round. The New York Jets took much-decorated defensive end Mark Gastineau who would anchor the Jets' "Sack Exchange" defense under defensive coordinator Bill Parcells in the 1980s, while the Detroit Lions added Bob Golic to their "Silver Rush" defensive line. The Buffalo Bills took linebacker Jim Haslett and the Atlanta Falcons linebacker Zack Valentine. There were some significant offensive picks in the round also. The San Antonio Texans took longtime tight end and two-time Pro Bowler Doug Cosbie while the Oakland Raiders picked up halfback Kenny King. With similar logic to Memphis' first-round pick of Steve Fuller the Philadelphia Eagles, concerned by the need to backstop star quarterback Steve Joachim, took Heisman Trophy-winning Penn State quarterback Chuck Fusina in the second round. Fusina of course would go on to his own much-decorated career as the Eagles' starter after Joachim.

In the third round, the Bills added another coming defensive star, multiple-Pro Bowl safety Jeff Nixon. St. Louis and Pittsburgh each added longtime wide receivers, as the Cardinals took Pro Bowler Roy Green and the Steelers Calvin Sweeney respectively. In the fourth round the Washington Redskins recapitulated the logic of Memphis and Philadelphia when they took University of Alabama quarterback Jeff Rutledge to hold the second spot behind starter Tommy Kramer. In the fifth round the Detroit Lions added one of the first two-sport stars of the post-merger league with Michigan State receiver Kirk Gibson: Gibson would reach the Pro Bowl as a wideout for the Lions, and was also a multiple All-Star with his hometown's major league

franchise the Detroit Tigers. In that same round the Dallas Cowboys also reloaded their backfield with short-yardage power fullback Ron Springs.

In rounds that followed the Minnesota Vikings added tight end Joe Senser and the Memphis Grizzlies longtime receiver Jeff Groth, while the Bengals and Tampa Bay added multiple-Pro Bowl offensive tackles, Max Montoya for the Bengals and Cody Risien for the Buccaneers. In the ninth round the Miami Dolphins and Cincinnati - the latter of which enjoyed a highly productive draft - added longtime stalwarts, as Miami took fullback Woody Bennett while the Bengals added late-round pick turned much-decorated star Dwight Clark at wide receiver. Among other late picks the Cleveland Browns added linebacker Bill Cowher to their roster, while Memphis took longtime reserve back Wayne Wilson and the Los Angeles Rams a rising star of their receiving corps, Drew Hill.





Renaissance by the lake: 1979 saw the reemergence, under head coach Forrest Gregg, of a powerful Buffalo Bills team who took the AFC East title with a 12-4 record; on offense young quarterback Vince Ferragamo starred with thirty touchdowns while second-year running back Terry Miller (40, right) put up his second 1000-yard season in the backfield; on the other side of the ball AP Defensive Rookie of the Year Fred Smerlas (left) keyed a vastly improved Bills defense led by young talent in a highly competitive division

In the highly competitive AFC East, the Buffalo Bills started their year on a mixed note, 1-2 after the first three contests with a hard-fought two-point loss to the Dolphins, a confident 28-10 win over the struggling Bengals, and their worst loss of the season, 41-17 to the pass-driven offense of the San Diego Chargers. From there, however, the Bills came together. Buffalo started a six-game win streak with a 34-6 shellacking of the New York Jets, and over the streak outscored their opponents 176-58. After an upset loss to the Patriots the Bills closed by winning five of their last six games capped with a 27-24 victory over the mighty Pittsburgh Steelers thanks to a late touchdown pass from Vince Ferragamo and a swift two-minute drill after a Pittsburgh fumble for the winning field goal. Buffalo excelled on both sides of the ball. The Bills sported the league's third-best defense against the run, along with a much improved pass rush. New addition Fred Smerlas at defensive tackle led all NFL rookies in sacks, forced three fumbles and recovered two of them, and intercepted a pass en route to his distinction as the Associated Press' Defensive Rookie of the Year. Fellow rookie Jeff Nixon returned an interception for a touchdown. On offense Vince Ferragamo came into his own: the dashing

young quarterback threw for 3199 yards with thirty touchdowns and nineteen interceptions, and the highest passer rating in the AFC. Running back Terry Miller posted his second 1000-yard season in two years of play, with nine rushing touchdowns. Fullback Tony Galbreath ran for even more touchdowns (nine) than he caught (five). Top Bills receivers Bob Chandler and Jimmy Cefalo each caught ten touchdowns on the year as Chandler made the Pro Bowl and Cefalo was tapped as an alternate. Most notably after recent seasons, the Bills scored 167 more points (413) than they gave up (246). All this led to a 12-4 record and the AFC East title.

For the runners-up of the division, grit was the order of the day. The Miami Dolphins continued to battle against the slow erosion of their former defensive strength and seasonal issues with turnovers in 1979. The Dolphins started the season 4-1 on the strength of their offense in close games before hard losses to the Raiders and the Bills. Miami again used cool heads and fourth-quarter grit to win two games in return before their worst loss of the season, 41-10 to the Houston Oilers. The Dolphins then won three of their last five, notably a defensive struggle against the Detroit Lions and a solid victory over the Jets, but also suffered key losses to the Colts and Patriots. As a result Miami finished the season 10-6 but with a 5-3 divisional record, one game behind the Denver Broncos and therefore out of the wild-card picture for the playoffs. Despite a solid year from halfback Benny Malone in his last season as a regular starter - Malone rushed for 1176 yards and seven touchdowns - the rest of the Dolphins usually powerful running game was curtailed. Quarterbacks Bob Griese and Don Strock teamed together for much of the team's more limited productivity, with a combined 3532 passing yards - a team record at the time - and twenty-four touchdowns, though also two dozen interceptions. In New England, the Patriots suffered a drop-off from their successes in 1978, though late-season determination and heroics saw them through to a 9-7 record. Already playing worse than he had the previous year, quarterback Steve Grogan was lost to serious neck and shoulder injuries in the third week of play. Backup Matt Robinson took over and at first earned praise for his comeback success in a 30-27 win over the powerful San Diego Chargers. After that however Robinson's performance was mixed: the young quarterback showed real talent with the long ball but completed less than half his passes on the season for 2193 yards with thirteen touchdowns and eighteen interceptions. Other teams enjoyed more success stifling New England's powerful rushing game, while the Patriots' defense was middling at best until the final weeks of the season. New England finished the thirteenth week, fresh off a 31-9 drubbing by the Bills, with a 6-7 record but then proceeded to win their last three matchups including hard-fought victories over the Dolphins and Vikings to finish 9-7.

The most mercurial team of the division in 1979 was the New York Jets. Much of that wide variance owed to young quarterback Richard Todd, now in his third season as the Jets' principal starter. The Jets started the season 3-0, as Todd passed for an average of over 241 yards in each game, with seven touchdowns and also seven interceptions. In the fourth week New York was crushed by the Bills 34-6, as Forrest Gregg's revitalized defense intercepted Todd three times. Despite a hard-fought loss to the Raiders the Jets stood at 5-3 midway through the season, thanks in later games to stalwart work from veteran fullback John Riggins. The Oilers' mighty

defense victimized Todd again in a 14-9 loss, but New York rallied the week after to put away Green Bay 28-9. The Jets dropped two more games but again turned up winners in a shootout victory over the Seahawks 34-24. This put the team at 7-6 after thirteen weeks, not altogether out of the playoff picture. That apparent good fortune dissolved, however, as the Jets lost their last three games, the worst of them to the Patriots in a contest where Richard Todd was picked off four times on the day. Todd finished the season completing just under half his passes for 2966 yards, with 21 touchdowns but also a league-leading 28 interceptions. The brightest spot for the Jets was John Riggins' return to form, as he rushed for 1153 yards and nine touchdowns. The Baltimore Colts continued their slide especially in the first half of the season, as Baltimore stood at a woeful 2-6 halfway through the season. The year turned around in some measure in the ninth week as the Colts won a 28-23 shootout with the Patriots in which quarterback Bert Jones passed for 311 yards with three touchdowns and ran for the Colts' fourth on a bootleg play. Despite a strong win over Miami Baltimore experienced more troubles with a 4-9 record thirteen weeks in until they, like New England, swept their final three matchups thanks especially to the Colts' best defensive play of the season to finish 7-9.

Once again, the story of the AFC Central in 1979 was dominated by the might of the Pittsburgh Steelers. Pittsburgh's "Steel Curtain" on defense remained one of the league's strongest. But in 1979 the story of Pittsburgh's conference-dominating success centered on its prolific offense. The Steelers started their season with a 37-10 romp over the Patriots and continued to dominate their opponents in the following weeks including a 44-3 drubbing of the then-hapless Colts. Pittsburgh posted a series of key divisional victories that included the Memphis Grizzlies' most lopsided defeat of the season as they lost to the Steelers 59-13. Pittsburgh then won a hard slog between top-rank defenses over the Denver Broncos 19-14 and an unexpectedly tough win against the Redskins. In the eleventh week the Steelers enjoyed an especially satisfying victory, over the powerful Dallas Cowboys 24-14 in what was advertised as a potential Super Bowl matchup. Just after a much more evenly matched but able victory over the Grizzlies, 31-24, Pittsburgh held a record of 14-0 and talk grew of a possible perfect season. The Steelers, however, then dropped their final two games by a total of four points, a 21-20 loss to the Oilers at the Astrodome and a 27-24 loss to a comeback by the Buffalo Bills, themselves division winners. Despite that Pittsburgh stood atop the AFC at 14-2, with the league's best defense against the run and its third-best scoring defense. On offense, star quarterback Terry Bradshaw threw for a personal-best 3724 yards with 27 touchdowns and 17 interceptions, while he also ran for two scores. An emotional Bradshaw dedicated the season's successes to his "Dynamic Duo" partner the late Joe Gilliam. The Steelers' running game was also dominant, as running back Franco Harris and the Steelers' two fullbacks, young Sidney Thornton and veteran Rocky Bleier, combined for 2205 rushing yards and twenty-two touchdowns. The Steelers' offense scored a league-leading 478 points, a testament to the work of offensive coordinator Hank Stram who had introduced a more wide-open style of play for Pittsburgh's offense in recent seasons.



The rushing game played a key role throughout the AFC Central in 1979 but nowhere more than with the Memphis Grizzlies and Houston Oilers: Memphis fullback Larry Csonka (39, above left) earned PFWA Comeback Player of the Year honors as part of a Grizzlies backfield that posted a league-leading 3082 yards along with twenty-six touchdowns, while Houston's Earl Campbell (34, above right) keyed Houston's trip to the playoffs with a league-leading 1797 individual rushing yards, nineteen touchdowns, and AP Offensive Player of the Year honors of his own.

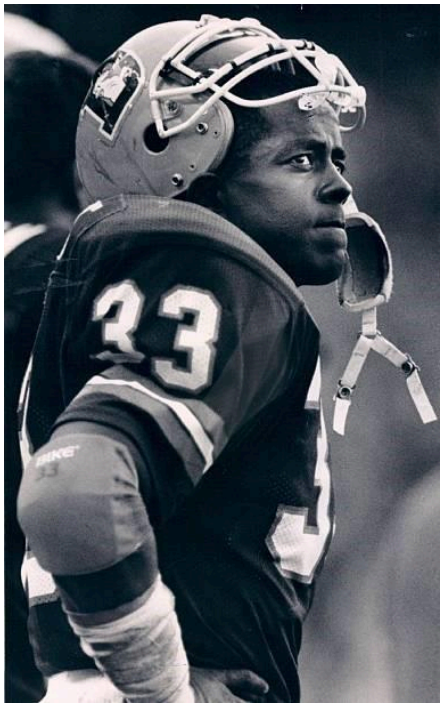
Second place in the division belonged to a renaissance of the Houston Oilers, who relied on Texan football fundamentals - suffocating defense and running the football - to reach a wild-card spot in the playoffs. Houston's second-year backfield sensation Earl Campbell was the dominant engine of Houston's offense. Campbell rushed for a league-leading 1797 yards and nineteen touchdowns, which earned him Pro Bowl, first team All-Pro, and AP Offensive Player of the Year honors. Doughty reserve back Mike Voight added 368 more yards and four more scores, along with contributions from blocking back Don Hardeman and young quarterback Warren Moon towards Houston's 2515 team rushing yards and twenty-six rushing touchdowns. At quarterback Moon and veteran Dan Pastorini platooned all season for a combined 2542 passing yards, twelve touchdowns, and seventeen interceptions, while Moon also ran for two scores. Houston swept their divisional series with the Cleveland Browns and Cincinnati Bengals, and split their series with the Grizzlies and Steelers, the latter in a 21-20 triumph at home in the Astrodome on two fourth-quarter Earl Campbell touchdown runs. Houston also played well outside their home division en route to an 11-5 record. The other key to Houston's success was their defense, ranked fourth-best overall in the league. The Oilers' entire three-man defensive line - defensive ends Elvin Bethea and Ed "Too Tall" Jones and nose tackle Curley Culp - made the Pro Bowl, as did safety Tim Fox, while star linebacker Robert Brazile, nicknamed "Doctor Doom," enjoyed both Pro Bowl and first team All-Pro honors as he led league linebackers in forced fumbles and sacks. Houston's "Luv Ya Blue" fan campaign, with brass bands, color-coded cheering sections, and a theme song, took off in popularity with the Oilers' trip to the postseason.

The successes that the Memphis Grizzlies did enjoy in 1979 depended heavily, almost exclusively, on their offense. The Grizzlies started the season 4-2, a record that included a solid upset of the troubled Denver Broncos and the Houston Oilers' worst loss of the year - that also marked the Grizzlies' best defensive performance of 1979 - in a 44-7 Memphis rout. Memphis weathered stiff losses to both the Cowboys (38-14) and Steelers (59-13, Memphis' worst loss of the year) but swept their divisional series with the Bengals and Browns to remain competitive. Memphis lost a late-season shootout in their rematch with the Oilers 37-28 but rallied with a win over the Cardinals to post an 8-5 record with three weeks left to play. There followed two hard, close losses to the Steelers (31-24) and Redskins (24-21) in games that were battles all the way, but Memphis put away the Browns solidly, 34-13, in the final week to post a winning record at 9-7. Memphis' "Big Man Backfield" was the prime mover of that record. Mike Pruitt came into his own with a career season as he rushed for 1294 yards and nine touchdowns. Veteran Larry Csonka earned a second Pro Bowl berth on the year for the Memphis backfield and also the PFWA Comeback Player of the Year award as he added 1093 yards and ten scores. Mighty 262-lb. fullback Pete Johnson put up 622 yards and six touchdowns of his own, all part of Memphis' team total of 3085 rushing yards and twenty-six touchdowns on the ground. To this quarterback Danny White added a respectable 3157 yards through the air with 21 touchdowns and 17 interceptions. Memphis put up one of the higher points-scored totals in the league (417), but also had a scoring defense - and defense overall - in the league's bottom quartile, as the Grizzlies also gave up 382 points on the year.

The Cleveland Browns' season was plagued by inconsistency. Like Memphis the Browns suffered the effects of generally poor defensive play. On offense, head coach Sam Rutigliano continued the shift to an aggressive pass-based offense. Quarterback Brian Sipe made the most pass attempts (535) of any starter in the league, for 3793 yards and twenty-eight touchdowns - but also twenty-six interceptions including three that were returned for touchdowns. Sipe was aided by 960 rushing yards and eight touchdowns from lead back Greg Pruitt plus another three scores from fullback Cleo Miller, but the Browns also had starkly different fortunes inside the AFC Central and out. Playing outside the division the Browns posted a respectable 5-3 record, but inside the Central the Browns could beat only the Bengals, albeit twice, and finished 2-6. Together this dropped Cleveland from playoff heights in 1978 to a 7-9 record in 1979. In Cincinnati, the Bengals again suffered a poor season. Though quarterback Ken Anderson improved from his cellar in 1978, throwing more touchdowns than interceptions, he was less consistent than usual and also threw for fewer yards (2821) than his norm. This was in part because head coach Bud Wilkinson sought to reestablish the Bengals' rushing game while Anderson worked to recover his form. In practice that enterprise failed as the Bengals' rush was bottled up for much of the year despite a respectable rookie season from Charles Alexander. The Bengals' defense was also porous and at times, despite Wilkinson's efforts, seemed poorly motivated. Cincinnati did win half its games outside the division, but ended up a woeful 0-8 in the AFC Central as they finished not much better than they had in 1978, at 4-12.

In the AFC West the way was led by another explosive offense: that of the San Diego Chargers. With a remarkable 470 points scored on the season, the Chargers came in just behind the league-best Pittsburgh Steelers on offensive productivity. The way was led by their passing game, directed by All-Pro quarterback Dan Fouts. Fouts threw for a league-record 4082 yards and a league-leading 32 touchdowns, with 20 interceptions, joined by one tuck-and-run score. Fouts' epic season earned him the Bert Bell Award as player of the year from the Maxwell Club, the private body of league movers and shakers. The consistent, indeed relentless, passing attack disoriented many opponents as the Chargers threw for thirty-four total touchdowns (Fouts' backup Scott Hunter added two from the bench.) Receiver Charlie Joiner led the league with 1433 receiving yards and fourteen touchdown catches. The passing game also opened up opportunities to run underneath the aerial barrage. The Chargers' rotating single-back rushers Lydell Mitchell and Mike Thomas combined for fourteen of the team's seventeen short-range rushing touchdowns. San Diego opened the year with a trio of wins including notable defeats of the Raiders (35-9) and Bills (41-17), then after a shootout loss at New England added solid wins over the much-improved 49ers and the Broncos. The Chargers also weathered late-season losses to the Steelers and the Atlanta Falcons to rally with wins over the New Orleans Saints and a 37-21 clean seasonal sweep of the Broncos to finish 12-4 atop the division. If the Chargers had an Achilles heel it was their defense. They surrendered 374 points on the season and performed most poorly against the run. San Diego lost games against the Patriots (though the final blow there was a Matt Robinson bomb to wideout Stanley Morgan), Steelers, and Falcons because of those teams' ability to run against the Chargers' defense. But there were glimmers of defensive potential both early and late in the season and, more often than not, the Chargers could simply score their way to victory.





Peak performance: teams at the top of the AFC West in 1979 depended greatly on dominant offensive performances to get them there; San Diego quarterback Dan Fouts (14, left) posted a league-best season at the helm of the Chargers' blistering offense that propelled them to a 12-4 record and a division title; running back Tony Dorsett (33, right) was the keystone of Denver's comeback in the second half of the season, as his 1343 yards and thirteen touchdowns powered a 7-1 win streak in the back half of the season that redeemed Denver's poor performance earlier in the year and netted a playoff berth

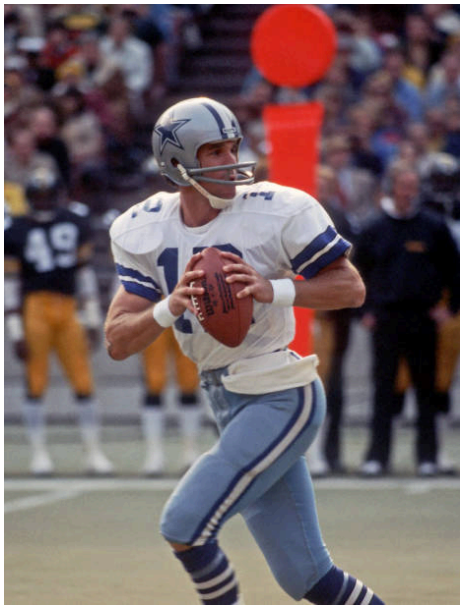
The 1979 season of the Denver Broncos told a phoenix-like tale over the season's two halves. In the first half of the season Denver

started with their worst opening in years as the Broncos dropped their first three games to the Grizzlies, Los Angeles Rams, and Falcons respectively. Denver performed much better in divisional play though they also dropped two hard-fought losses, 20-17 to the Chargers and 19-14 to the Steelers. Despite a 3-1 record in the AFC West this put Denver at a troubling 3-5 halfway through the season, their postseason streak seemingly done for. At that point the Broncos rallied. In his lone start of the season backup quarterback Mark Harmon and star running back Tony Dorsett combined in a close 24-21 victory over the surging New Orleans Saints. Denver added two more wins followed by a 45-23 triumph over the 49ers in which starting quarterback Norris Weese threw for two touchdowns and ran for a third, while veteran rusher Otis Armstrong added two more touchdowns and Dorsett one. Denver fended off able efforts from the Raiders and Texans, and rallied the "Orange Crush" defense - which had been having an off year earlier - to put away the Buffalo Bills 21-14. Now 10-5, Denver suddenly had the playoffs in reach and, despite a 37-21 loss to the Chargers in the last week of play, Denver's strong 6-2 divisional record placed them ahead of the Dolphins for a wild-card spot. Norris Weese threw for 2613 yards in 1979, with fourteen touchdowns and sixteen interceptions, but the real drivers of Denver's success were the usual: a resurgent defense in the season's second half and Denver's powerful running attack. Tony Dorsett led the way with 1343 yards and thirteen touchdowns, though Otis Armstrong added eight more while Weese led league quarterbacks in rushing with 448 yards and six touchdowns of his own. As a team the Broncos rushed for 2619 yards and a league-leading twenty-nine rushing touchdowns from a team that looked more and more like a contender as the season went on.

For a team that finished third in a hard-fought division, the Oakland Raiders did not view their 1979 season as any improvement. Their final record was not: they finished 7-9 as they had in 1978, suddenly far from their powerful performances and two league titles earlier in the decade. On one hand Oakland's offense improved. Quarterback Ken Stabler completed over sixty percent of his passes for 3615 yards and twenty-six touchdowns, yet also twenty-two interceptions. Likewise Oakland gained some traction rushing with their backfield committee of Clarence Davis, Ted Brown, and Kenny King but were troubled by turnovers there also. Famed tight end Dave Casper was Oakland's most consistent performer on either side of the ball and gained All-Pro honors for his work. The Raiders' defense also looked weaker than it had in past seasons, especially in the second half of the year as several close-fought games turned into defeats when opponents powered ahead in the final quarters.

While they still struggled defensively, the San Antonio Texans could look on their 1979 campaign with more pride and optimism than the fallen Raiders. The Texans continued their run of good play against the Kansas City Chiefs, though perhaps the team's most prominent victories came against the Raiders, the Cleveland Browns, and most notably a 28-24 upset of the vaunted Los Angeles Rams, as quarterback John Reaves threw for three touchdowns aided by a pick-six score from San Antonio's defensive standout, All-Pro cornerback Mike Haynes. Reaves produced his best season yet in the league with 3095 yards and twenty-six touchdowns against fifteen interceptions. For his athletic performance and leadership on the field as the Texans

finished 6-10 on the season, Reaves was named the *Sporting News*' inaugural Comeback Player of the Year. The Texans' running game was more mixed, as Rob Lytle underperformed and missed games with hip and ankle injuries, but rookie Greg Hawthorne played well with 522 rushing yards and seven touchdowns on the ground, plus 712 receiving yards and four touchdown catches, just the sort of work San Antonio hoped to gain from him. The Kansas City Chiefs showed signs of improvement as well. Defensive end Art Still was a Pro Bowl alternate as the Chiefs' most effective pass rusher. Mike Livingston turned in a creditable season under center with 2490 passing yards and sixteen touchdowns with twelve interceptions. Though running back Tommy Reamon had some injury issues, he and Tony Reed combined for sixteen of Kansas City's eighteen team rushing touchdowns, while Reed posted a 1000-yard season. Though the Chiefs finished 5-11 on the year, close losses to the Texans (21-20) and the vaunted Chargers (28-24) might have made them 7-9, and both fans and league observers regarded the Chiefs as a better team than their won-loss record showed, certainly improved from 1978.





The NFC East boasted its share of distinguished performances in 1979: (left) Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach enjoyed what amounted to a career season as he captained the Cowboys to a 13-3 record and another postseason run; (right) rookie Ottis Anderson of the St. Louis Cardinals took the troubled franchise bodily along with him as he posted AP Rookie of the Year statistics and helped inspire a much improved 7-9 record

As they had the season before, in 1979 the Dallas Cowboys led the way in the NFC East. Though the Cowboys faced some generational turnover on defense, their strength on both sides of the ball saw them undefeated through the first half of the season including highly competitive games with the 49ers (21-20) and Rams (30-28). Dallas suffered their first reverse against the Steelers in Pittsburgh, but then drubbed the New York Giants and pulled off one of quarterback Roger Staubach's patented comebacks against the Philadelphia Eagles: down 28-14 in the fourth quarter Staubach threw for one touchdown and ran for a second, after which Dallas won the overtime coin toss and kicked a field goal to win 31-28. After a solid win against the Redskins the Cowboys suffered perhaps their most disappointing loss of the season in their annual Thanksgiving game, 27-23 against in-state rivals the Houston Oilers. Dallas then beat the Giants a second time, lost their rematch with the Eagles in Philadelphia, and staged another comeback at home, this one against Washington, to win their final game 30-24 and end the season with a 13-3 record atop the division. Dallas' pass rush played with distinction all season; defensive linemen Harvey Martin and Randy White, and linebacker Bob Breunig, all made the Pro Bowl.

At quarterback, Roger Staubach enjoyed what amounted to a career year. Staubach passed for 3856 yards, 27 touchdowns, and only 8 interceptions, was the league's passer rating champion, ran for another score, and engineered three come-from-behind victories over the course of the season. All this contributed to his selection as the AP NFL League MVP for 1979. Wideout Tony Hill led the way among Staubach's receiving corps with eleven touchdown catches. Dallas' backfield committee of Joe Washington, Robert Newhouse, Ron Springs, and Calvin Hill combined for eighteen rushing touchdowns in support of the effort. In a hard-fought division Dallas again looked like a potential Super Bowl contender.

In Philadelphia, the Eagles' decision to draft quarterback Chuck Fusina was put to a swift and unexpected test. In the third game of the preseason, a cheap spearing hit against Philadelphia's star quarterback Steve Joachim put him out for the season with a back injury. Fusina would, then, suit up from the first week of the season under center for the team. The Eagles won their first game, against the Giants, and Fusina played notably well in a tough second-week victory over the Atlanta Falcons. The Eagles then weathered an upset loss to the surprising New Orleans Saints, and rallied to win four straight games against three divisional opponents including Fusina's best game of the season, with three touchdown passes in Philadelphia's rematch with the Redskins. The Eagles then suffered a crushing 26-3 intra-state loss to the Steelers yet carried on as before, beating the Memphis Grizzlies 27-21. There followed Philadelphia's worst stretch of the season, a three-game losing streak marked by poor second-half defense, though rookie Fusina played creditably in all three games. The Eagles rallied to win their last four games, including solid victories over the Cowboys and Oilers, to end the season 11-5 and claim home-field advantage for the NFC's wild-card game. Philadelphia's defense was at best average but offensive performance saw them through, including their replacement under center. Fusina was a different sort of quarterback from Joachim: leaner, smaller, and a percentage passer, against the bigger Joachim who was hard to bring down and favored the long ball. But Fusina was also remarkably successful in his unexpected debut, as he threw for 3285 yards on the season with twenty-four touchdowns and only ten interceptions, the second-highest passer rating in the league for his efficiency, and the AP Offensive Rookie of the Year award. Running back Wilbert Montgomery continued his sterling work with 1194 rushing yards and twelve rushing touchdowns on the season, and a total from scrimmage of 1885 yards and fifteen touchdowns when one included his work as a receiver out of the backfield.

Despite what was consistently the second-best defense in the division behind the Cowboys', the Washington Redskins coped with a streaky season of ups and downs. Washington started the year 4-0 beginning with a rout of the Oilers, then went on to lose three of their next four games, two of those to the Eagles. The Redskins then retrieved a one-point victory, 24-23, over the New Orleans Saints before they dropped their next three contests, one a gritty 16-10 loss to the Steelers where a chance of victory slipped away late. Washington revived its season by winning the next three contests against the Giants, Packers, and Grizzlies respectively, and found themselves 9-6 with an outside shot at the playoffs in head coach George Allen's last season at

the helm. In the last week Washington fell prey to a fourth-quarter Roger Staubach comeback in a 30-24 loss at Texas Stadium to finish 9-7. The Redskins had sometimes a stronger pass rush than the Cowboys: defensive tackle Diron Talbert made the Pro Bowl while his partner Dave Butz was tapped as an alternate. Young quarterback Tommy Kramer showed real improvement in his second season as he passed for 2800 yards with 23 touchdowns and just 13 interceptions. Lead running back Duane Thomas reached his fourth Pro Bowl in a row as he rushed for 1389 yards and nine touchdowns while big fullback Wilbur Jackson added 717 more yards and three more scores. Despite the frustrating end to George Allen's historic stint as the Redskins' coach, Washington could console themselves that they were only one or two close losses away from the playoffs, a major improvement over 1978.

The rest of the NFC East offered a study in contrasts. The St. Louis Cardinals, under first-year head coach Larry Brown, saw heartening improvements over recent years. The Cardinals' pass defense improved considerably, as did special teams play. But the real key came on offense, with rookie sensation Ottis Anderson. A big, explosive runner in the mold of Earl Campbell, Anderson officially took the fullback spot in a pro set offense alongside veteran rusher Terry Metcalf. But, while Metcalf had a solid season himself, Anderson emerged swiftly as St. Louis' offensive powerhouse. St. Louis played their way to a 4-4 record within the division, ambushing the Redskins and Eagles along the way, and managed a 7-9 record for the year. Quarterback Jim Hart regained some of his form as he passed for 2218 yards with 15 touchdowns and 20 interceptions (Steve Pisarkiewicz added three touchdowns and four interceptions off the bench in relief.) But the Cardinals' rushing game was their forte. Ottis Anderson rushed for 1645 yards and thirteen touchdowns, second-best in the league, averaging five yards per carry, as he pulled the offense along with him bodily. Terry Metcalf added 718 yards and six more scores in support, despite dealing with knee issues. Prospects looked much less bright in New York, however. Despite solid work from star quarterback Joe Roth the Giants stood at 2-2 when the team lost Roth for the season to a hip injury early in the fifth week of play. From there the year degenerated. The Giants' defense remained patchy. While backs Rob Carpenter and Gordon Bell combined for nine touchdowns on the season the Giants' running game was stifled. Backup quarterback Randy Dean was woeful in relief and late in the season replaced by the more experienced Joe Pisarcik who did manage a late-season victory for the team. But by the end, New York had plummeted from their winning season in 1978 to a grim 4-12 record in 1979.

The NFC Central was dominated by the team tied for the best record in the league: the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. In 1979 the many elements of head coach Bobby Bowden's squad came together with historic success for the young franchise. In their first week of play the Buccaneers fended off one of the Detroit Lions' best efforts in a bad year, 24-16, after which the Bucs plowed a methodical path through their opponents, including a 23-16 victory over the powerful Rams in which Tampa Bay's top-ranked defense blunted multiple Los Angeles drives into field goals, and a gritty 10-7 defensive struggle against the Chicago Bears. Just after solid wins over the Packers and Vikings Tampa Bay stood at 9-0 before their first loss, when the Atlanta Falcons came from behind on a Craig Morton-to-Walter Payton pass to beat the Bucs 17-14. Tampa Bay

rallied with a solid win over the Lions and a 36-0 drubbing of the Giants, then beat the Vikings and won another tough contest with the Bears to sweep the NFC Central 8-0. Tampa Bay then suffered their second loss as the San Francisco 49ers mounted a 17-point fourth quarter comeback to beat the Bucs 27-20. The Bucs rallied for a 35-13 victory over the Chiefs that included a pick-six touchdown by Tampa Bay's Pro Bowl cornerback Mike Washington to finish the year 14-2 atop both their division and the NFC at large.





The 1979 Tampa Bay Buccaneers reached their 14-2 record with strength on both sides of the ball: (above left) Tampa Bay's "No Quarter" defense led the league in forced turnovers and sacks, captained by AP Defensive Player of the Year Lee Roy Selmon (63, above left); meanwhile the Bucs' offense was led by "Bobby Bowden's Buccaneer Bullpen," a quartet of quarterbacks that included Steve DeBerg (17, above right) who personally threw for fifteen touchdowns and just five interceptions as Tampa Bay methodically outscored nearly all their opponents

The unexpected catalyst for Tampa Bay's success, on a team known for its offense, was the might of the Buccaneers' "No Quarter Defense." The Bucs' defense led the league in forced turnovers and sacks, returned two interceptions for touchdowns, recovered more fumbles than any other team, and had possibly the best pass rush in the league as defensive end Lee Roy Selmon and defensive tackle Dave Pear made the Pro Bowl with Pear's partner rookie Dave Logan an alternate. Selmon led the league in sacks and fumbles caused, recovered four of those, and captained the defense on the field, all ingredients that led him to receive the AP Defensive Player of the Year award. By the usual standards of his "Bucco Ball" offense Bobby Bowden was nearly conservative in 1979. But his quartet of quarterbacks - Doug Williams, Steve DeBerg, Gary Huff, and rookie Jack Thompson - combined to throw for 3161 yards with 31 touchdowns and 14 interceptions. Among them Williams and DeBerg led the way. With 1304 personal passing yards, twelve touchdowns, and just three interceptions, Doug Williams was named a Pro Bowl alternate: some sportswriters and professional observers believed Williams should have played in the Pro Bowl, that he was hard done by for the merely statistical reason that he did not make enough pass attempts to qualify for the annual passer rating competition that his 1979 rating otherwise would have won. Tampa Bay "passed to run" more often in 1979 also, quietly netting a pair of 1000-yard rushers for the team. Ricky Bell put up a career-best 1289 yards and nine touchdowns, while his single-back rotation partner Jimmy DuBose added 1013 yards and five scores. Among Tampa Bay's receiving corps tight end Jimmie Giles stood out as a first-team All-Pro with 732 receiving yards as he led league tight ends with ten touchdown

catches and was rated the league's most effective blocking tight end also, for his combination of size and speed.

The rest of the NFC Central in 1979 was a collection of also-rans, but it was the Chicago Bears whose record most belied their actual talents. Though 6-10 for the season, the Bears lost no less than four games by seven points or fewer including two hard-fought contests with the Buccaneers lost by a combined six points. The Bears managed this despite several key injuries on defense, especially among the defensive line. Lead rusher Anthony Davis produced a solid season with 988 rushing yards and seven touchdowns, though his backfield partner Roland Harper lost time to ankle injuries and performed less well. In turn the Bears leaned more on their passing game and, despite missing three games and parts of others due to a pair of shoulder injuries, quarterback Ron Jaworski led the way. Jaworski threw for 2669 yards and eighteen touchdowns, with only twelve interceptions, his best statistical year in the league thus far. In relief, backup quarterback Vince Evans threw for 508 yards, four touchdowns, and five interceptions and also ran for a score. The Bears prided themselves on toughness in the face of adversity and showed it often during the season.

In Green Bay the situation was more frustrating. There were bright spots: All-Pro cornerback Willie Buchanon intercepted a league-leading eleven passes, one returned for a touchdown. The Packers' backfield pair of Terdell Middleton and rookie Eddie Lee Ivery allied effectively for 1734 combined yards and fourteen touchdowns, the highlights of the Packers' offense. But the rest of Green Bay's defense played poorly, and at quarterback head coach John Rauch played the long game. Rookie Joe Montana made just twenty-three pass attempts on the season completing most of them, and threw for one touchdown that clinched a comeback victory over the Falcons 24-21, the most satisfying win of Green Bay's season. Otherwise Rauch preferred to train and protect his bright prospect on the sidelines, and also wait for veteran quarterback Lynn Dickey to return from nearly two years' rehabilitation for what had been nearly a career-ending back injury. Instead Rauch played David Whitehurst and reserve Bill Troup, who did produce sixteen touchdowns between them in Rauch's more wide-open offense but also two dozen interceptions and several fumbles when sacked. John Rauch weathered "BRING BACK BART" signs on the sidelines late in the year - a reference to Rauch's predecessor Bart Starr - and a 5-11 record with his eye on the future.

In Minnesota, the Vikings grappled with a steep drop-off in performance from their 1978 season. A wave of retirements on defense, linked with the end of Fran Tarkenton's career, weakened the Vikings' famous capacity on that side of the ball. Mighty dual-threat fullback Chuck Foreman struggled with what were ultimately career-ending injuries, though his backfield partner Rickey Young had a respectable season. Familiar backup Bob Lee struggled early in the year which brought rookie Steve Dils in to take his place. Dils had his own teething troubles over the course of the season, as he threw for 2952 yards and twelve touchdowns but also seventeen interceptions. As a team the Vikings limped along with a 5-11 record and the hope of useful draft picks. In Detroit things were worse. After a middling performance in the season's early

weeks, near the end of the season's third game the Lions lost veteran quarterback Greg Landry for the season to a back injury. There were several key injuries on defense also, and in the fifth week a career-ending knee injury for running back Lawrence Gaines. Opposing defenses ganged up on rusher Dexter Bussey all season, while backup quarterback Cliff Stoudt underwhelmed and the defense became progressively more porous over the season. The Lions spiraled down. Head coach Monty Clark was fired after the fourteenth week, replaced by his vigorous young linebackers' coach Marty Schottenheimer. Schottenheimer at least managed a .500 record in the last two weeks, as the Lions won their final game against the Packers with Dexter Bussey, a talented halfback-passer, at quarterback. Though defensive end Al "Bubba" Baker did make the Pro Bowl for the second time in his second season, there were no other bright spots to speak of for the Lions who finished at the bottom of the league, 2-14.

The NFC West was a division full of vigorous competition. As they so often did in the 1970s, the Los Angeles Rams fought their way through that competition to come top of the divisional heap. This was not without effort: after two solid opening wins the Rams suffered their worst defeat of the season, a stinging upset at the hands of the San Francisco 49ers, then a second defeat by the Buccaneers. The Rams secured two more wins before another, hard-fought loss to the Cowboys at Texas Stadium. Los Angeles rallied with a shootout victory over the San Diego Chargers 35-31, and then embarked on a seven-game winning streak that carried them towards the top of the division. The Rams concluded the season 12-4, returned to what they saw as their rightful place atop the NFC West. While the Rams' typically ironclad defense was at times shaky, head coach Chuck Knox got the job done with offense. As befit Knox's nickname "Ground Chuck," much of that owed to the Rams' formidable rushing game. In his final season, despite growing issues with chronic knee injuries, O.J. Simpson produced a last return to his classic form. A second-team All-Pro for the year, Simpson rushed for 1503 yards and nine touchdowns at just over five yards a carry, at the head of the Rams' five-man backfield stable. The other largest contributor, also near the end of his career thanks to chronic knee and hip pain, was Lawrence McCutcheon, who added another 1097 yards and eight touchdowns of his own. Taken together the Rams rushed for 2967 team yards, second-best in the league, with twenty-three rushing touchdowns. At the same time, aware of changing trends in the league, Knox also put the ball in the air more often. Again Pat Hayden and James Harris platooned at quarterback and, while Harris produced the greater efficiency of the two, together they paired for 3094 passing yards, 22 touchdowns, and 19 interceptions on the year. Star wideout Lynn Swann led the way for the Rams' receiving corps with 980 receiving yards and eleven touchdown catches, half the team's total of the latter. With productivity like that, their worst week against the Niners excepted, generally the Rams could do as the other Southern California team, the Chargers, did and outscore the opposition.

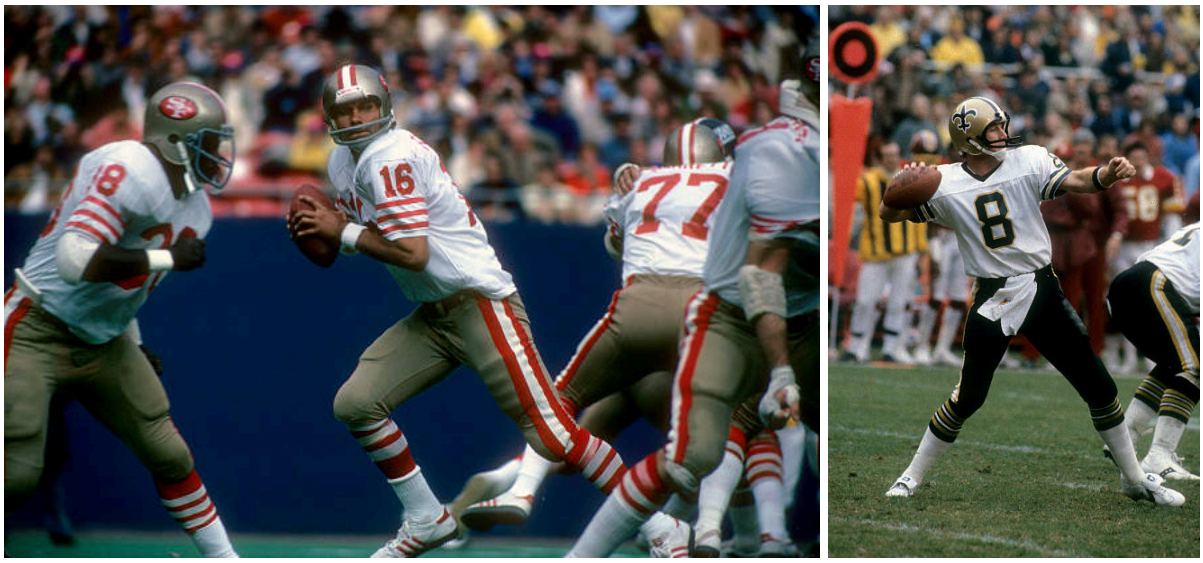
Another NFC West team driven by offense lived up the California coast in San Francisco. Under head coach Don Coryell, the 49ers rode offensive strength back to the postseason. While the coach known for his "Air Coryell" offense did throw the ball often, what distinguished his early seasons in San Francisco is that Coryell recalibrated his offensive system to spread the field and

also create opportunities for the powerful backfield the 49ers had assembled, notably the pairing of big, powerful, but also maneuverable Chuck Muncie and the fleet-footed Delvin Williams. The Niners came firing out of the gate for the season with an opening-week shootout win over the Vikings 37-28, then a narrow one-point loss to the mighty Cowboys, followed by a shocking 41-16 upset of the Rams in which quarterbacks Steve Bartkowski and Jim Plunkett combined for four touchdown passes in true "Air Coryell" style. Despite a loss to the Chargers San Francisco stood at 5-2 before an eighth week loss to the Falcons in which Atlanta's defense contained San Francisco's running game effectively. The Niners then beat the Bears, and their Bay Area neighbors the Raiders, 38-16, followed by a win over the Saints. There followed depressing losses, a large one to the Broncos and a narrower but still stinging defeat in their rematch with the Rams. San Francisco then ran past the Cardinals and came from behind to beat the Buccaneers 27-20, before a last-week loss to Atlanta by a fourth-quarter field goal. At 10-6 San Francisco was able to claim the NFC's second wild-card spot and return to the playoffs for the first time in three seasons. This was not thanks to their defense: a tattered pass defense and injuries on the defensive line, especially losing Cleveland Elam for most of the season, took a toll and the Niners had one of the league's worst scoring defenses. That was however overmatched by their offense. Both Steve Bartkowski and Jim Plunkett posted what were statistically their best seasons in the league thus far (reserve Guy Benjamin also came off the bench just enough to add a touchdown pass to the Niners' total.) Together Coryell's platooned quarterbacks passed for 3361 yards on the season with 31 touchdowns and only 11 interceptions. But the Niners' secret weapon in 1979 was their backfield. New arrival Chuck Muncie, a second-team All-Pro for his efforts, rushed for 1394 yards and thirteen touchdowns, with a league best six yards per carry, tearing through defenses. Both Delvin Williams and blocking back Paul Hofer averaged over five yards a carry themselves, as the Niners combined for 2797 team rushing yards - then a franchise record - and twenty-two rushing touchdowns. Lead receivers Ahmad Rashad and Freddie Solomon each grabbed nine touchdown catches. Big Pro Bowler tight end Ken MacAfee had a career year in his second season, with 703 receiving yards and seven scores, outstanding work as a lead blocker for Muncie and Delvin Williams, and an end-around touchdown run on the ground.

For the Atlanta Falcons 1979 was a season of promise and frustration. It began well: five weeks in, the Falcons were 4-1 with solid wins against the Saints and Broncos and only one three-point loss to a strong Eagles squad. Then Atlanta blew a lead to a late Green Bay Packers comeback (the first of Joe Montana's career) and lost the next week to the Raiders as well. There came some notable redemption in the week after, with a solid 34-17 victory over the 49ers on *Monday Night Football*. There, color commentator (and former Dallas Cowboys quarterback) Don Meredith remarked on the Falcons' backfield set of Walter Payton and powerful rookie prospect William Andrews at fullback:

> I mean, you just look at Walter Payton there, maybe the best, probably the best, and this kid Andrews - big, fast like Payton, great reads, great hands - those fellahs right there… If the good Lord had a pickup game those fellahs would be His backfield for sure…

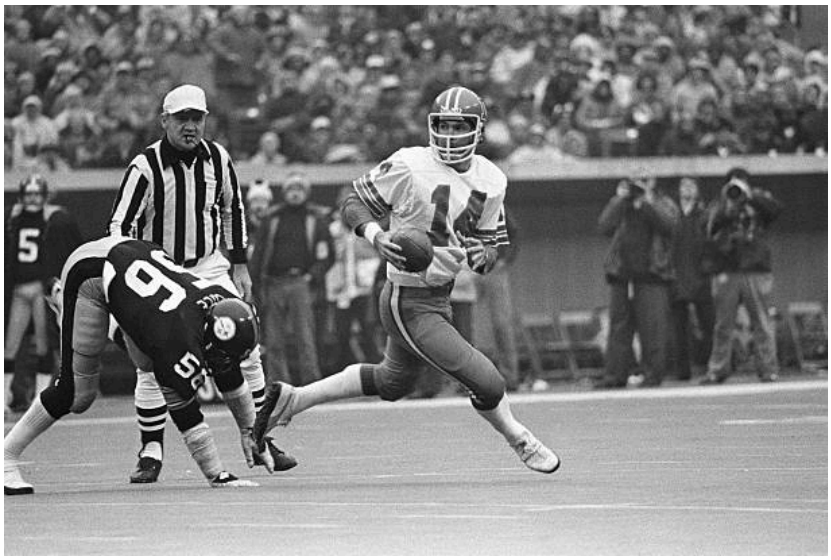
When other sportswriters ran the story, the nickname "God's Backfield" stuck for Payton and Andrews for the rest of their mutual Hall of Fame careers. Atlanta followed the win by beating the Seahawks and then a comeback victory over Tampa Bay - before a three-game losing streak, notably another blown-lead defeat in Atlanta's rematch with the Seahawks and their worst loss of the season 35-16 to the much-improved Saints. The Falcons then ran past San Diego and defeated the 49ers for the second time, but also lost to the Rams for the second time to finish 9-7. A single win over the Rams, or either of Atlanta's blown-lead losses, would have put them back in the playoffs thanks to their head-to-head advantage over San Francisco, while holding on against both comebacks would have given the Falcons an 11-5 record. In general the Falcons' defensive secondary remained excellent as both safeties, Ray Easterling and second-year starter Tom Pridemore, made the Pro Bowl. But the rest of the defense's performance was less consistent, especially late in games. The backfield Don Meredith praised was indeed one of the league's best: Walter Payton rushed for 1395 yards and eleven touchdowns reaching his fourth Pro Bowl in as many seasons, while William Andrews rushed for 1023 yards and eight rushing touchdowns along with three touchdown receptions as a backfield receiver. Quarterback Craig Morton was less impressive than he had been in recent seasons, hampered by chronic back pain, but managed a reasonable showing as he threw for 2626 yards with eighteen touchdowns and nineteen interceptions. The Falcons' distance to greater things in 1979 was frustratingly close.



1979 was a redemptive season for veteran quarterbacks in the NFC West: The San Francisco 49ers' Jim Plunkett (16, above left) platooned at quarterback with Steve Bartkowski and produced the higher passer rating of the two as he threw for twelve touchdowns and just four interceptions while the Niners found their way back to the playoffs thanks to coach Don Coryell's offense and a 10-6 record; the New Orleans Saints' Archie Manning (8, above right) sloughed off a history of injuries and disappointments to reach the Pro Bowl with his seasonal performance and lead the Saints to a 7-9 record, the franchise's best up to that date

The lower rungs of the division showed definite signs of improvement. This was most true in New Orleans where the Saints leapt forward to a franchise-best 7-9 record and were one missed field goal in the third quarter against Washington - in a 24-23 loss - away from a non-losing season for the first time in the team's history. Under head coach Dick Nolan some real defensive improvements, especially in sets and play-calling - making best use of the players on hand - made a genuine difference. But as it was elsewhere in the NFC West offense was the key. Saints

quarterback Archie Manning, whose career had been marked by injuries and disappointments, generated his best season to date in 1979, making the Pro Bowl for the first time. Manning threw for 3716 yards as the dominant offensive engine, with 23 touchdowns and 18 interceptions, while he also scrambled for two additional scores. Star receiver Steve Largent gathered in a dozen of Manning's scoring throws. Reserve turned starter in the backfield Ted McKnight continued to impress with 795 rushing yards and especially his nine touchdowns - Saints fans held up "CHUCK WHO?" signs in the Louisiana Superdome, a reference to the departed Chuck Muncie - while blocking back Tim Wilson emerged as a short-yardage specialist with 576 yards and three touchdowns on the year. There was much for Saints fans to like in 1979, indeed only the Washington game and a hard-fought 26-21 loss to Los Angeles in the final week of play separated the Saints from a winning season. In Seattle, the Seahawks also took a turn for the better with a franchise-best 6-10 record, that included upset wins over the Dolphins and Falcons and a 35-31 shootout win over the Browns. Young quarterback Jim Zorn played doggedly passing for 2706 yards and eighteen each touchdowns and interceptions, and also scrambled for three touchdowns on the ground. Seattle's backfield pair of Sherman Smith and Dan Doornink combined for 1475 yards and a productive sixteen touchdowns on the ground, while the Seahawks' defense greatly improved the team's turnover ratio.



Denver Broncos quarterback Norris Weese (14, left) scrambles for daylight under pressure from the Pittsburgh Steelers' "Steel Curtain" in the divisional round of the 1979 AFC playoffs; despite solid work by Weese and the Broncos especially in the second half, Pittsburgh outlasted Denver 16-14 in a matchup that helped clear the Steelers' path to their fourth Super Bowl

As in 1978 the 1979 AFC playoffs resolved quickly into a fight to face the Pittsburgh Steelers and, through them, perhaps find a path towards the Super Bowl. That fight started in dramatic fashion when the Denver Broncos visited the Houston Oilers at the Astrodome in the wild-card round. Fueled by their late season renaissance, the Broncos delivered an upset that may not have been shocking in its result, but was in its scope. The "Orange Crush" held Earl Campbell to 93 yards on the day and the Oilers' lone touchdown, and shut down the rest of Houston's offense. Quarterback Dan Pastorini was sacked seven times by the Broncos on the day and suffered a pick-six touchdown snagged by Denver's Billy Thompson. Broncos quarterback Norris Weese had perhaps the best game of his career, in its combination of success and importance, as he threw for 305 yards and two touchdowns against the normally-effective Oilers secondary, and ran for 34 more yards and a third score. On grinding ball-control drives Tony Dorsett and Otis Anderson scored also, part of

218 team yards rushing for Denver as the Broncos buried Houston 42-7 and looked directly towards Pittsburgh for the next stop on their campaign.

That conflict came to a head in the divisional round and the chilly atmosphere of Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Stadium. In a game often dictated by the defenses of both teams, Pittsburgh had more of the momentum in the first half, mounting three strong drives to Denver's one. From that the Steelers came away with a bullish three-yard Sidney Thornton touchdown run and two field goals, and the Broncos with a quick six-yard sweep right by Tony Dorsett, to make the score 13-7 at halftime. In the third quarter the "Orange Crush" tightened its vice as Denver sacked Terry Bradshaw twice and intercepted him once in those fifteen minutes. The Broncos, meanwhile, mounted a useful drive in the middle of the quarter, pushing forward on the ground in short increments until a lightning 44-yard play-fake from Norris Weese to tight end Riley Odoms that gave Denver their first lead, 14-13. Dominance of the defenses returned, however, until a similar play-fake from Bradshaw to Frank Lewis that put Pittsburgh deep in Broncos territory. Denver bottled up the Steelers but they claimed a field goal and regained the lead 16-14. Then, late in the quarter, Donnie Shell intercepted a deep ball from Norris Weese and Pittsburgh ran out the clock on an achingly narrow 16-14 win.

In sunnier San Diego the Buffalo Bills faced the Chargers for the next tilt at Pittsburgh. With methodical rushing in the early going the Bills struck first with a field goal. On the next drive San Diego passed breezily downfield until Dan Fouts ultimately connected with Mike Thomas on a quick crossing pattern out of the backfield to make it 7-3 San Diego. The second quarter saw a flurry of action. This started with another Bills drive on which Vince Ferragamo dropped back from a midfield play-action and fired the ball 47 yards to Bob Chandler to retake the lead. After each team punted, San Diego made ground again with their passing game, which cleared the way for a deceptive 11-yard trap play up the middle run in by Lydell Mitchell. The Bills responded more briskly this time, passing more often, until Ferragamo hit tight end Mark Brammer for the score. The Chargers replied with a field goal of their own, and then grabbed a second in the last minute of the half after Ferragamo was intercepted early in a Buffalo drive. Both defenses mounted more impediments in the second half, though the Chargers drove hard three times in the third quarter, which netted them two more field goals and a lost fumble. Buffalo found it harder going until midway through the fourth quarter when they again pushed deep into Chargers territory, only for Vince Ferragamo to be picked off a second time, after which San Diego controlled the clock. With that advantage, the Chargers held their lead to come out winners, 26-17, ready for their first conference championship game of the Super Bowl era.

Even the weather took sides with Pittsburgh when they met the Chargers for the 1979 AFC Championship game. In the frigid conditions San Diego actually started fast and managed one brisk drive down for a Dan Fouts play-action 22 yards to Larry Burton for the game's first score. It was the last the Chargers would see of a competitive contest. The Steelers sacked Fouts five times and intercepted him once in the first half, and recovered a key fumble in the second quarter, while Pittsburgh's offense managed a Franco Harris touchdown and a pair of field

goals, supplemented just before halftime when Pittsburgh moved away from their cold-weather ball control model for Terry Bradshaw to drop back and find tight end Bennie Cunningham from 38 yards out for the score, which made it 20-7 at halftime. In the second half, to their credit, the Chargers' defense played more doggedly, blunting a pair of Steelers drives into field goals, but time and the Steelers wore them down as Franco Harris scored again early in the fourth quarter. The Chargers mounted a last substantive drive that ended on a quick sweep left by Mike Thomas for a touchdown, but even then the Steelers did San Diego the indignity of blocking the extra point. After that Pittsburgh simply ran hard and wound down the clock to confirm their victory, 33-13. For the fourth time in the decade, the Steelers would see the Super Bowl, a chance to break their own league record of three wins in the game.



A familiar scene, but without the same magic: Los Angeles Rams quarterback Pat Haden (11, left) drops back to pass at Texas Stadium during the divisional round of the 1979 NFC playoffs; Haden and the Rams played gamely but failed to recapture their good luck from the same time and place in the 1978 season, as the Cowboys won 30-14 and took a step closer to a return to the Super Bowl

Again as the season before the 1979 NFC playoffs promised a more wide-open field than their rival conference. This was demonstrated in the NFC's wild-card game, a contest that was nearly the opposite of the AFC's installment. There, in a cold drizzle at Veterans' Stadium in Philadelphia, the San Francisco 49ers faced the Philadelphia Eagles on the latter's home turf. On their second possession, Philadelphia ground the ball downfield and claimed a field goal. Four pass plays into the ensuing San Francisco drive Steve Bartkowski dropped back and found Freddie Solomon crossing into the endzone on a 47-yard touchdown play. After that San Francisco was more conservative with the ball and the Eagles defense penalized them for it, while Philadelphia used Chuck Fusina's percentage passing to travel downfield twice, once ending with a short-yardage endzone flare to the height of Harold Carmichael, the second time on a longer post pattern to doughty tight end Keith Krepfle. San Francisco, who turned back to their passing attack late in the half, kicked a field goal on its last play to make the score 17-10 Eagles as the teams reached their locker rooms. In the second half San Francisco came out throwing and claimed another Bartkowski-to-Solomon touchdown to tie the game. After that Philadelphia played for possession, burning the clock, until opportunities opened up and the Eagles drove downfield in the fourth quarter for a Wilbert Montgomery endzone dive that returned them to the lead. With less than two minutes left Don Coryell subbed in Jim Plunkett at quarterback who coolly directed the Niners downfield until, deep in the Eagles' end of the field, Plunkett dropped back

and handed the ball to Chuck Muncie on a draw play, as Muncie trampled two Eagles linebackers along the eleven yards into the endzone. Philadelphia failed to pass midfield and the game entered overtime with the teams knotted 24-24. San Francisco won the toss and moved cautiously downfield. Just inside field goal range, with Steve Bartkowski back at quarterback, the tall Californian faked a handoff to Delvin Williams and turned to hit Ken MacAfee on a screen pass; the mighty tight end rumbled thirty yards to Philadelphia's two-yard line. On the next play, a misdirection handoff to Paul Hofer put the Niners in the end zone as they advanced to the divisional round with a 30-24 win.

At Texas Stadium, the Rams and Cowboys met just as they had the season prior, but in this contest the last-minute magic of the 1978 playoffs eluded Los Angeles. Dallas, with their offensive line playing perhaps their best football of the season, moved a balanced attack downfield on the Rams more than once. In the first quarter that included an eight-yard draw play dash by Joe Washington for the Cowboys' first touchdown, followed roughly six minutes later by a Roger Staubach pass to Tony Hill that made it 14-0. The Rams' defense stepped up their game in the second quarter, and Los Angeles finally wore their way through the "Doomsday Defense" for a five-yard sweep by young Wendell Tyler that made the score 14-7 at halftime. Dallas returned rejuvenated and passed their way down the field only to change their approach in Los Angeles' end of the field with a pitch-out to Joe Washington who weaved 28 yards for the score, though kicker Rafael Septien miffed the point-after. Just at the end of the third quarter Roger Staubach threw his second touchdown pass of the day that appeared to put the game away. Rams coach Chuck Knox wanted to replace the largely ineffective Pat Hayden at quarterback with James Harris, but was refused directly by Rams owner Carroll Rosenbloom. Los Angeles continued to hammer away and struck some luck in the fourth quarter after a pass to wideout Ron Jessie, when on a trap play O.J. Simpson broke loose thirty-three yards for the score, with shades of his loping, youthful seasons. Dallas mustered a ball-control drive for a field goal, then stifled the Rams' efforts to pass downfield and ran out the clock on a 30-14 win. Each team rushed for just over 200 yards though the difference told especially at quarterback, where Pat Haden threw for 142 yards with no results, while Roger Staubach went 13-of-20 for 192 yards and a pair of touchdowns, along with one interception. Dallas now had their chance at a return to the big game.

At Tampa Stadium the ambitious San Francisco 49ers found themselves in over their heads against a Buccaneers squad determined to exact revenge for their regular-season loss to the Niners. Tampa Bay did not waste time, scoring 17 points in the first quarter started by an explosive 30-yard run from Jimmy DuBose. The Bucs piled on early in the second quarter with an 87-yard punt return for a touchdown by Danny Reece before San Francisco finally brought the "Air Coryell" approach in sync and passed their way downfield capped with a quick one-yard endzone flare from Steve Bartkowski to Ken MacAfee. Tampa Bay answered with a twelve-yard scoring pass from Doug Williams to Wes Chandler and, though San Francisco eked out a field goal just before the half, Tampa Bay responded again running a misdirection play where Doug Williams rolled right and found wideout Derrick Gaffney open for a 70-yard bomb

that made the score 41-10 at halftime. Tampa Bay were content to lay back, push their smothering pass rush against San Francisco, and run the clock down as the second half progressed. One drive pushed through the Niners' weary defense far enough for the Bucs to kick an additional field goal, but beyond that they concentrated effort on covering San Francisco's pass routes as the game wore on to a 44-10 victory for the Buccaneers. Though Chuck Muncie rushed for 108 yards he was the only offensive bright spot for San Francisco. For Tampa Bay, Doug Williams and Steve DeBerg combined to pass for 357 yards, with 305 yards and three touchdowns of that credited to Williams. Tampa Bay would host the conference championship game, with a chance to show their quality.

Even casual fans relished the fact that the 1979 NFC Championship game pitted the conference's two best teams against one another. Here, then, was the chance to see which team would prevail and then perhaps frustrate Pittsburgh's ambitions for a fourth title. For three quarters the game was dominated by defense. There were glimmers of activity, however. On their fourth possession of the first quarter the Cowboys tried their hand at percentage passing and worked downfield methodically on a drive capped by a six-yard Roger Staubach pass to Tony Hill for the score. In the second quarter Bobby Bowden brought in Jack Thompson at quarterback: Thompson's season had underperformed but he played less often than Williams or DeBerg, which gave the Cowboys less game tape to plan from. Bowden ran a series of misdirection and timing-driven plays to move downfield and Thompson managed the drive smartly down to a fifteen-yard post pattern touchdown pass to Wes Chandler that left the teams tied 7-7 at the break. In the third quarter, as the defenses continued to smother activity, the teams traded long field goals to find themselves still knotted 10-10 at the start of the fourth quarter. Tampa Bay finally gained traction on their second possession of the quarter: after grinding ahead in their own end of the field Doug Williams ran a play fake and found Jimmie Giles who had ducked under coverage and threw to him. Giles lowered his shoulder to level Cowboys cornerback Benny Barnes and dashed to the Cowboys' fifteen-yard line. Two plays later Williams found Wes Chandler in the corner of the endzone for a score. After a Dallas punt returned to Tampa Bay's forty-yard line, three plays later quarterback Steve DeBerg - brought in as Bowden rotated his quarterbacks more rapidly in the final period - flicked a screen pass to Ricky Bell, who loped through a gap in Dallas' defensive secondary fifty-seven yards for the score. This broke the game open. Roger Staubach captained a solid drive in response but, in the Buccaneers' end of the field, a stiff hit from linebacker Dewey Selmon knocked the ball loose from Joe Washington on a sweep run and Tampa Bay recovered. They then ground their way downfield burning the clock until Jimmy DuBose rumbled into the endzone from seven yards out. Undaunted, Dallas passed their way downfield but Roger Staubach's last throw was intercepted in the Bucs' endzone to secure the win, 31-10. The big men of Tampa Bay's offensive line hoisted Bobby Bowden on their shoulders as the orange-hued crowd celebrated the first "Class of '76" team to reach the Super Bowl.



A Super Bowl triptych: (above left) A scrum of Buccaneers defenders wrap up Steelers back Rocky Bleier (20) on a short-yardage play; (above center) Buccaneers lead running back Ricky Bell (42) takes off on a draw play past Pittsburgh defensive lineman (and former Super Bowl MVP) L.C. Greenwood (68); (above right) Terry Bradshaw (12) hands off to fullback Sidney Thornton (38) on a sweep right with Lee Roy Selmon of the Buccaneers (63) in pursuit; the game was fiercely competitive through three quarters before a burst of Steelers scoring in the final quarter put their fourth Super Bowl victory away 44-24

With the two strongest teams in the league pitted against one another, Super Bowl XIV promised a game full of incident. It delivered: bright weather at Jack Murphy Stadium in San Diego (where the Chargers had finished one game away from playing for a title on home turf) the Steelers and Buccaneers faced no hindrance from the climate. A first drive full of misdirection plays brought Tampa Bay downfield until the "Steel Curtain" drew taut and forced them to settle for a field goal. With both teams' defenses eager to prove their quality the two sides traded punts until the middle of the quarter, when Pittsburgh pieced together an effective drive that the Buccaneers seemed to stop at the edge of field goal range. Then, on third-and-eleven, Terry Bradshaw ran a play-fake and connected with Frank Lewis downfield for a 36-yard touchdown pass. Again both teams were frustrated several times as Tampa Bay's run defense and Pittsburgh's pass coverage stunted their opponents' offenses. Bobby Bowden continued to draw up new plays on the sideline and, in the opening seconds of the second quarter, put one to the test. With a new route pattern for his three wideouts, tight end Jimmie Giles broke past coverage by linebacker Jack Ham into the open. Giles sprinted ahead and Doug Williams hit him with a pass in the open field, after which Giles put his shoulder down to get past Donnie Shell and sprinted for a 59-yard score. Two possessions later the Steelers finally began to gain traction on the ground and pushed deep into Bucs territory before they too were forced to kick a field goal. On the ensuing drive the Buccaneers shifted to percentage passing with success, a smartly-executed dive that ended with a ten-yard down-and-out pass to Ricky Bell coming out of the backfield into the front corner of the endzone. In response the Steelers opened up and passed their way downfield themselves. Two plays after the two-minute warning Terry Bradshaw hit John Stallworth on a crossing pattern, and Stallworth proved his skill as one of the best receivers at opening up the field after a catch. Stallworth wove through

the Bucs' secondary thirty-one yards for a game-tying touchdown. Thanks to this spurt of second-quarter offense the teams headed for their lockers with the score 17-17.

After a Steelers three-and-out at the start of the second half, Tampa Bay mounted a more methodical drive, though one aided by a twenty-six yard dash from Ricky Bell, his longest of the day. A quick down-and-out pattern to Jimmie Giles put the ball at the Steelers' ten-yard line and, two plays later, Steve Deberg tossed a quick swing pass to Bell who found an opening and stepped into the endzone for a score. Both teams' defense played at the top of their form for most of the third quarter, though one persistent Pittsburgh drive got close enough for a field goal. A battle for field position from one another's punts did little else to benefit either team and the third quarter ended with the Bucs up 24-20. On their first drive of the final quarter the Steelers finally began to wear away at Tampa Bay's massive and potent defensive line, and opened the field up for play-action passes - Terry Bradshaw made a pair, both to Frank Lewis, that moved Pittsburgh much of the distance downfield. An eight-yard burst from fullback Sidney Thornton made it first-and-goal and on the next play Bradshaw found reserve wideout Theo Bell on a buttonhook at the front of the endzone for a nine-yard touchdown pass. Tampa Bay began to move the ball themselves but, just past midfield, receiver Derrick Gaffney took a stiff hit from Mel Blount and fumbled a catch that was recovered by the Steelers. The Buccaneers' defense drew tight as Pittsburgh tried to capitalize downfield, but Steelers kicker Roy Gerela narrowly booted a 48-yard field goal that made the score 30-24 in Pittsburgh's favor.

Now the tide appeared to turn. The "Steel Curtain" forced the Bucs to punt, and Terry Bradshaw then directed a long, grinding ball-control drive that consumed time and took the ball deep into Tampa Bay's end of the field, before a second-and-goal trap play freed Franco Harris for a seven-yard rumble into the endzone. On Tampa Bay's sideline Bobby Bowden devised a counter-strategy. With roughly three minutes left the Buccaneers would move the ball downfield at a clock-killing pace to score, then stage an onside kick and look for a final lightning stroke to pull off a comeback. First Bowden subbed in Jack Thompson at quarterback for the same reason Bowden had used the rookie in the NFC Championship game - Pittsburgh had less knowledge of Thompson's game to prepare them - and planned to return his long-ball specialist Doug Williams under center for the final comeback throws. The run of play went according to plan into the final minute as a pair of misdirection runs and percentage passing took the ball down to Pittsburgh's thirty-nine yard line with just over fifty seconds to play. Then, positioned as part of a safety blitz, Pittsburgh's Donnie Shell spotted a change of play, changed his own position to step in front of a short crossing pattern intended for Bucs reserve tight end Dana Nafziger, and saw daylight ahead of him along the sideline. Only the swift Jimmie Giles, who crossed the field to pursue Shell, even came close as Shell raced sixty-six yards for the pick-six score. In the time remaining Doug Williams passed the Buccaneers up past midfield again but his long balls into the Steelers' endzone were batted aside as the clock ran down. With a flurry of scoring blows in the final quarter Pittsburgh claimed their fourth Super Bowl title of the decade with a 44-24 win.

Despite Pittsburgh's final breakaway, Tampa Bay could take pride in several aspects of their performance. Running back Ricky Bell was the Buccaneers' standout on offense with 101 rushing yards at just over five yards per carry and 25 more yards with a pair of touchdowns as a receiver. The Bucs' quarterbacks combined for 226 passing yards and three touchdowns, though they completed a little under half their passes against the "Steel Curtain." Tampa Bay's defense recovered a fumble and sacked Terry Bradshaw five times, four of them by the Selmon brothers, defensive end Lee Roy and linebacker Dewey. The Buccaneers could reasonably say they ended their remarkable 1979 run fifteen minutes short of a league title, with prospects for the future. As a team, Pittsburgh rushed for 158 yards with Franco Harris' touchdown to show, while pass defense especially in the second half was key to the "Steel Curtain"'s performance in this latest Super Bowl victory. Terry Bradshaw was the engine of Pittsburgh's offense throughout the game, both as passer and game manager. Bradshaw completed twenty of thirty-five passes for 292 yards and three touchdowns, and was named the Super Bowl Most Valuable Player for his performance. As he had done with the season as a whole, Bradshaw dedicated his second MVP award in the big game to the late Joe Gilliam. With four league titles in just six seasons, Chuck Noll and his team completed a remarkable feat, one that ranked them as the dominant NFL franchise of the decade.

Significant rules changes for the 1979 season were largely administrative, with a handful of interesting exceptions. Referees would now be distinguished by black hats rather than the white worn by the rest of their officiating teams. Numbering for linemen was modified. Officials' numbering also changed, and officials gained lettering to indicate their role. A five-second clock stoppage would now take place after quarterback sacks. Notably, receiving teams on kicks, punts, and field goals could no longer block below the waist, while head butting, spearing, and other deliberate hits made with the helmet would now be penalized as unnecessary roughness. Tearaway jerseys were also banned.

The coaching changes that resulted from the 1979 season were few but significant. In Detroit, owner William Clay Ford II confirmed that the Lions' interim coach late in the season, Marty Schottenheimer, would take over full time as head coach for 1980. Youth came to the helm with another franchise as well: after the sideline argument over quarterback substitution in the NFC divisional round, head coach Chuck Knox of the Rams publicly resigned. (Two weeks later, Rams quarterback James Harris also announced his retirement.) In response, owner Carroll Rosenbloom promoted the Rams' quarterback coach Kay Stephenson - tied to Rosenbloom's favored starter Pat Haden - to replace Knox. Only in his mid-thirties, Stephenson was an unexpected choice, one many observers suggested as an indication that Rosenbloom wanted to take more direct control over team affairs. In Cincinnati, after a poor season and several clashes with often temperamental Bengals owner Paul Brown, head coach Bud Wilkinson resigned. What followed generated surprise and interest around the league. Brown announced a reconciliation with his longtime assistant Bill Walsh, who had left the Bengals for a successful tenure as head coach at Stanford, and that Walsh would return to Cincinnati as the Bengals' head coach for 1980.