

Morrall Victory for a Backup QB

By Bob Gill

Remembered today as an outstanding backup quarterback, Earl Morrall could be better described as a classic “might-have-been” who never got a break when it counted. He had his moments in the sun, but in general his career was a series of near misses. (See his passing stats on page 2.)

As a rookie with the 49ers in 1956, Morrall was given the starting job over veteran star Y.A. Tittle. He didn't do badly, averaging eight yards per pass, but he threw only one TD pass against six interceptions, the defense gave up points by the bushel, and before long Tittle had reclaimed his job. Still, it was a good showing for a first-year quarterback, and Tittle wasn't getting any younger ...

In the spring of 1957, though, the 49ers drafted John Brodie, another strong-armed prospect, and when the Pittsburgh Steelers needed a quarterback, Morrall was available. In Pittsburgh, playing full-time ahead of rookies Len Dawson and Jack Kemp, he ranked sixth among the league's passers.

At this point Morrall seemed on the verge of establishing himself as an NFL quarterback. But he started slowly in 1958, and when new coach Buddy Parker had a chance to get Bobby Layne from the Lions, he sent Morrall to Detroit two games into the season. The youngster played little behind Tobin Rote, another established veteran, and in the end 1958 was a wasted year. Rote faded badly in 1959 and the Lions' slide continued, so by 1960 the team was looking for a new quarterback.

Here was the chance for Morrall to step into the spotlight. He had taken over from Rote toward the end of the season and done well, but for some reason the Lions decided to pin their hopes on Jim Ninowski, who had spent the last two years glued to the Browns' bench as Milt Plum's understudy.

Until then, Morrall couldn't really complain about his playing time in the NFL. He had played full-time in Pittsburgh, where there was no established quarterback, and backed up two stars, Tittle and Rote. Ninowski, however, was no star. In 1960 he was easily the worst passer in the league, averaging 5.7 yards per attempt and throwing 18 interceptions with only two touchdowns. But the Lions' defense was turning into a top-flight unit, the team improved to a second-place finish, and Ninowski somehow held onto his job.

As for Morrall, he averaged better than eight yards per pass and doubled Ninowski's total of TD passes while throwing only 49 passes all year.

Ninowski wasn't as bad the next year, but he still wasn't much, and Morrall played enough to throw 150 passes. Unfortunately, the result was one of his two worst seasons (along with 1958), and he was unable to nail down the first-string job.

The Lions weren't satisfied with their quarterback situation, so they turned to the Browns again – this time acquiring Milt Plum, who was at least a starter. In fact, Plum had led the NFL in passing in 1960 and '61, so it's hard to argue with the Lions' choice of him over Morrall, who hadn't been a regular since 1957; but he didn't make much of a splash in Detroit, ranking 11th among the league's passers. Still, with their defense allowing the fewest points in the NFL, the Lions improved to 11-3, second-best in the Western Division.

The Detroit offense hit the skids in 1963 as Plum averaged 4.4 yards per pass and threw 12 interceptions in 77 attempts. (Shades of Jim Ninowski!) Finally – about three years late – the Lions turned to Morrall, and he responded by throwing 24 TD passes to rank third in the NFL in passing. No one blamed him for the team's slide to a 5-8-1 record.

The next year, though, he started slowly and lost the job back to Plum, who had his last good season. That made Morrall expendable, and in 1965 the Lions gave him a break by sending him to New York. The Giants had hit rock bottom in '64 when Y.A. Tittle and company got old all together, and they were looking for someone to lead them back to respectability. Morrall did just that, ranking fifth in passing as the Giants improved from two wins to a 7-7 mark.

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Morrall got another break in 1966 – unfortunately, this time it was a broken wrist that caused him to miss more than half the season. The Giants fell back to last place, and in the offseason they managed to acquire Fran Tarkenton from the Vikings. Tarkenton was not only brilliant but durable as well, and Morrall threw only 24 passes in 1967 as his backup.

His prospects for 1968 weren't any better, but a trade sent him to Baltimore just before the season started. John Unitas had a bad elbow and Morrall was expected to hold the fort until he was ready. It turned out to be a long wait, as Morrall led the NFL in passing and the Colts to a 13-1 record. He also stood out in the first game of the playoffs, throwing for 280 yards and two TDs in a 24-14 win over the Vikings.

Morrall didn't do much the next week in a 34-0 win over the Browns, and he was replaced by Unitas midway through the famous Super Bowl loss to the Jets. Still, it was a hell of a season for someone who'd already been labeled a career backup.

Morrall continued as Unitas's understudy for the next three years, compiling distinctly better stats than the Colts' legend. However, you have to make allowances for legends, and this is not to say the Colts should have benched Unitas and put Morrall in there.

That's just what they did, though, in Super Bowl V against Dallas. Actually, an injury put Unitas on the bench, but Morrall did come in and lead the Colts to two scores in the fourth quarter to pull out a 16-13 victory.

After four years in Baltimore, Morrall was picked up by Miami in 1972. He was penciled in as the backup to Bob Griese, another fine quarterback who was in his prime. But Griese broke his leg in the season's fifth game, and suddenly the 38-year-old Morrall was starting for another Super Bowl contender. He didn't disappoint, either, leading the AFC in passing as the Dolphins rolled to an unprecedented 14-0 record. He also led Miami to a 20-14 win over Cleveland in the first playoff game, but Griese returned a week later to lead the Dolphins to the AFC title and then a Super Bowl win over the Redskins.

Morrall hung on for four more seasons after that, but he had no more moments in the spotlight. And after all, by then he was a 40-year-old quarterback, probably not capable of handling any extended playing time. But he picked up another Super Bowl ring with the Dolphins and ended his career as a respected veteran.

Still ... Just notice the similarity of his 1963, '65 and '68 seasons – playing for three different teams, with years of relative inactivity in between. It's hard to see why he wouldn't have had a lot more years like that, if he'd only had the chance.

	Att	Com	Yds	Avg	TD	Int
1956 San Francisco	78	38	621	8.0	1	6
1957 Pittsburgh	289	139	1900	6.6	11	12
1958 Pittsburgh-Detroit	78	25	463	5.9	5	9
1959 Detroit	137	65	1102	8.0	5	6
1960	49	32	423	8.6	4	3
1961	150	69	909	6.1	7	9
1962	52	32	449	8.6	4	4
1963	328	174	2621	8.0	24	14
1964	91	50	588	6.5	4	3
1965 New York	302	155	2446	8.1	22	12
1966	151	71	1105	7.3	7	12
1967	24	13	181	7.5	3	1
1968 Baltimore	317	182	2909	9.2	26	17
1969	99	46	755	7.6	5	7
1970	93	51	792	8.5	9	4
1971	167	84	1210	7.3	7	12
1972 Miami	150	83	1360	9.1	11	7
1973	38	17	253	6.7	0	4
1974	27	17	301	11.1	2	3
1975	43	26	273	6.4	3	2
1976	26	10	148	5.7	1	1
Totals	2689	1379	20809	7.7	161	148