

THE THIRD 25 YEARS

By Jack Clary

(This is the third of three articles for THE COFFIN CORNER, by Jack Clary, current president of the Professional Football Researchers Association, that commemorates the 75th Anniversary season of the National Football League.)

The third trimester of the National Football League began with the league's third realignment in its history and it ended with the sport about to add new franchises in Charlotte, North Carolina and Jacksonville, Florida, raising to 30 the number of teams and underscoring the NFL's acclamation as America's most popular spectator sport.

It also produced the single most popular day's sports entertainment ever -- Super Bowl, a game that has increased every year in popularity until the very game on the field seems almost an afterthought because it is so deeply immersed in an almost endless series of ancillary events constructed to take advantage of this "pro football festival."

Activity was just as brisk away from the game.

Labor problems were thorny, twice leading to player strikes. In 1974, the players had boycotted the early days of training camp while negotiating a new contract but the first strike occurred in 1982 when the game was at an all-time high in public acceptance. This cost 57 days of the season, reducing it to just nine games and forcing a gerrymandered playoff schedule to maintain the integrity of the Super Bowl; and the other strike occurred in 1987 when there was a one-game hiatus after which the owners turned to "replacement teams" to play the schedule. This got the regular players back on the field after three weeks.

Finally, in 1993, an agreement featuring a "salary cap" was signed that promised peace till the millennium and guaranteed the players up to 64 per cent of all television and gate revenues.

SHIFTS, COMPETITORS AND RULES

There also were problems with franchises shifting cities, spearheaded by the Oakland Raiders move to Los Angeles in 1982 over the objections of the other teams, which had previously voted on such matters. But Al Davis, the Raiders boss, took the matter to court and it was ruled that clubs could move at their own whim, thus providing the impetus for the stunning middle-of-the-night transfer of the Baltimore Colts to Indianapolis in 1984. When St. Louis moved its franchise to Phoenix, the owners concurred. And as the fourth quarter century begins, there once again is talk of franchise shifting as teams seek to maximize their financial returns.

The NFL also found itself in competition from new leagues. The World Football League, a frothy concoction devised by a southern California promoter named Gary Davidson, who also put together the World Hockey League and the American Basketball Association, came on the scene in 1974 and lasted less than two years during which many people went belly up in their dreams of pursuing the supposed riches of pro football. The two-time NFL champion Miami Dolphins were hardest hit when three of their greatest stars -- running backs Larry Csonka and Jim Kiick, and wide receiver Paul Warfield joined the new entity. The Florida Blazers won the league's only title but their players weren't paid for the final 15 weeks of the season.

A decade later, the United States Football League was formed to play in the spring and early summer. It was bulwarked by network and cable television contracts and it landed some franchises in major cities already occupied by NFL teams. Once more, the financial impact was severe on the NFL as the USFL not only attracted many veteran NFL players but also top-flight college stars, including Heisman Trophy winners Herschel Walker, Mike Rozier and Doug Flutie.

One of the USFL's legacies remains with the number of players and coaches -- Walker, Reggie White, Anthony Carter, quarterbacks Steve Young and Jim Kelly -- who moved to the NFL and became NFL stars when the USFL died after three years. Some still wonder whether the league might not have survived in

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some form had it stayed with its spring format. But new owners, such as developer Donald Trump, decided to challenge the NFL in the fall and fans refused to follow.

The NFL also changed its rules to reflect the creative talents of its defensive coaches and to try and maintain as much offensive excitement as possible. Hashmarks were moved to the width of the goal posts, giving teams more room to either side of the field on every play; goal posts were moved from the goal line to the rear of the end zone to discourage field goals, and later the kicking tee was reduced to just one inch in height and the kickoff spot moved to the 30-yard line to encourage more returns. More freedom for the passing game was insured when wide receivers could not be chucked beyond five yards of the line of scrimmage, all but ending bump-and-run coverage; offensive linemen were allowed to fully extend their arms in pass blocking and the rules for intentionally grounding passes were altered not only to save yardage, but also to save QBs.

The NFL instituted sudden death in 1974 for all of its games, allowing one extra quarter to resolve tie games; and it expanded its schedule to 16 games in 1977 after adding new franchises in Tampa Bay and Seattle.

The NFL voted to use instant replay in 1986 and that experiment lasted six seasons, allowing an "official" watching on television, to rule on all possession calls. It was abandoned because it did not fully resolve the authenticity of calls on the field.

THE TV GAME

One long-lasting addition to pro football occurred in 1970 when Monday night football became an American cultural staple. The NFL had experimented with three Monday night games in 1969 on CBS, but when it cast about for having a full-time schedule, both NBC and CBS demurred, not wishing to disturb their already solid Monday night entertainment schedule. But ABC, television's poor cousin at that time, took a chance and it paid off with a phenomenon never before envisioned.

One game was offered each Monday night--always a good matchup because the NFL wanted to showcase its product--and the manner in which Americans spent the first weekday night changed forever. For one thing, the weekly event became a game-within-a-game, first with the one transpiring on the field and the other in the broadcasting booth, pitting Howard Cosell against Don Meredith, a former quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys, each of whom were poles apart in outlook and temperament. Week after week, the overbearing Cosell fell victim to Meredith's pure "country boy" wit that delighted millions whenever he punctured Cosell's pretensions and pomposities.

Americans Monday night entertainment habits revolved around the NFL. Bowling leagues, civic and social meetings were rescheduled; movies found diminished attendances; streets were less crowded; and even crime decreased as everyone--the good and the bad--stayed home to watch pro football. A quarter century later, the series--the longest running in TV history--still attracts huge audiences.

Television's impact on NFL football didn't only happen on Monday night. In Washington, the emergence of the Washington Redskins as an exciting team, had a profound impact on the league's TV policies. Everyone in the Nation's Capitol was a Redskins fan -- particularly those working in the Halls of Congress.

That "fandom" turned to a frenzy when first Vince Lombardi came to town and produced a winning team in his only season before dying from cancer in 1970; and was further heightened when George Allen came two years later and developed his "Over the Hill Gang," and took it to Super Bowl VII.

This rabid interest clashed headlong into the NFL policy of not televising home games, and it didn't take long for those diehard Redskins fans on Capitol Hill to demand a change--or else! The NFL suddenly rearranged its "blackout" law to include only those home games not sold out 72 hours before kickoff. Since every Redskins game was sold out for the season, Washington -- and Congress -- was assuaged.

And pro football began its move abroad, beginning in 1986 when the Cowboys and Chicago Bears played at Wembley Stadium in London before 83,000, and began an American Bowl series that now includes games in Germany, Mexico, Japan, Scandinavia and Spain. It also formed the impetus to the World League of American Football, a spring league based primarily in major European cities, ostensibly to develop players but really to consolidate and promote NFL Properties interests abroad -- interests which produced some \$3 billion worth of sales each year.

GREAT TEAMS - GREAT PLAYERS

On the field, new "dynasties" sprung up in Dallas, Miami, Pittsburgh, Minnesota, San Francisco, Denver and Buffalo; and with them came another pantheon of stars who are, or will be, enshrined in the Hall of Fame . . . quarterbacks such as Roger Staubach of the Cowboys; Terry Bradshaw of Pittsburgh; John Elway of Denver; Jim Kelly of Buffalo; Dan Marino of Miami; Dan Fouts of San Diego; and Joe Montana of the 49ers and Chiefs; great running backs like Tony Dorsett of Dallas; Larry Csonka of Miami; Franco Harris of Pittsburgh; O.J. Simpson of Buffalo; Earl Campbell; Eric Dickerson; Barry Sanders of Detroit; Thurman Thomas of Buffalo; and, of course, the NFL's all-time rushing leader, Walter Payton of the Bears.

And then there were great receivers such as Jerry Rice of the 49ers, who will hold every major receiving record when he finally retires; Washington's Art Monk; Steve Largent of Seattle; Paul Warfield of Cleveland and Miami; Lynn Swann and John Stallworth of Pittsburgh; Drew Pearson of Dallas; the Marks Brothers, Clayton & Duper of Miami, and Sterling Sharpe of Green Bay.

Defenses also turned out their share of stars, with Dallas' Doomsday gang, with Bob Lilly, coming of age in the early 70s and then producing a Doomsday II, with Randy White, Too Tall Jones and Harvey Martin later in the decade and into the 80s; Minnesota's Purple People Eaters, featuring Carl Eller, Jim Marshall, who played more consecutive games than anyone in the sports history and Alan Page; Miami's famed No-Name Defense that helped the Dolphins to the NFL's only perfect season in 1972; the Steel Curtain of Pittsburgh that paved the way to four Super Bowls, led by Mean Joe Green and Jack Lambert, and a hard-hitting secondary that featured Mel Blount; the Giants of the 80s with linebackers Lawrence Taylor and Harry Carson, and linemen George Martin and Leonard Marshall; and the Chicago Bears which featured Mike Singletary, Richard Dent and William (The Fridge) Perry. And many, many more.

But getting to that point and into such a heady existence was not always easy, beginning at the very start of the third trimester.

TWO INTO ONE

While the battle between the NFL and the American Football League had been terminated in 1966 with the agreement to merge the two leagues for the 1970 season, the feelings of great pride among each group of owners remained as strong as ever. Where once the AFL longed to become integrated within the NFL, those feelings were lost in a surge of fiery pride within its ranks to keep the new league intact following the stunning victory of its champions, the New York Jets and Kansas City Chiefs, in Super Bowls III and IV.

The feeling was reciprocated within the NFL because they had the largest television markets and would not have to share the richer television package with their new partners; the common draft gave them 14 of the 26 picks in each round of the draft; and they knew they could only get stronger with more stars and more money than could the smaller AFL.

This caused a winter-long stalemate in 1970 until one man -- Paul Brown -- demurred. He had returned to pro football by establishing the Cincinnati Bengals in the American Football League in 1968 -- the only person ever to found two NFL teams, as it turned out -- and he became one of that league's most powerful owner because of his stature and experience in pro football. He coalesced opinion within the ranks of his fellow AFL owners to recognize that while pride in their league was fine, they were dooming themselves to a second class existence. He then tossed out to the NFL, the possibility that he would test the legality of the merger agreement in court, if necessary, to get it implemented. He insisted that the original terms be honored.

The threat of court action stirred attention, though matters weren't settled until Commissioner Pete Rozelle locked the 26 owners in two meeting rooms at the NFL offices in New York City for nearly 48 hours. Each of the groups wrestled with the problems until Al Davis, the managing general partner of the Oakland Raiders, suggested that three NFL teams join the AFL and be compensated \$3 million apiece for the move. "It was like barracudas going after raw meat, as one owner described the NFL teams' reaction.

Three of the proudest, most highly respected teams -- Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Baltimore -- agreed to join the AFL teams to form the American Football Conference and the problem seemed to be solved until Davis, in his own enigmatic way, suddenly vetoed the proposal -- it required unanimous consent by all AFL owners -- unless he was given veto power over the eventual realignment of the NFL. This led to another uproarious meeting until Wayne Valley, the Raiders' majority owner, overruled Davis and voted for the new 13-13 split.

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The thorniest issue was placing teams by division. Always at odds were such elements as stadium size, TV market size, weather, historical rivalries and travel -- the same issues which plague current attempts to realign a 30-team NFL -- until Rozelle finally came up with five possible options, put them into a hat and allowed his secretary to select one on a blind draw. The slip that she chose has lasted for 25 years.

Thus, the AFL-turned-AFC stayed intact, added three NFL franchises and six years later, got another team when Tampa Bay and Seattle came into the league (Tampa Bay played its first season in the AFC, and Seattle was in the NFC, until they switched to their present setup in 1977).

ALLEN AND SHULA

A new vanguard of teams also assumed power in the league. Lombardi's death helped to signal the beginning of a new era of championship coaches, and George Allen was among the first to hit the limelight. He had been eminently successful for several seasons with the Los Angeles Rams, taking the team to the 1969 playoffs with an old-fashioned, rah-rah style that was almost a contradiction to the Age of Aquarius that had descended upon the nation.

But Allen also was irascible to his employers. He had signed with the Rams in 1964 without ever being formally released from his contract as an assistant coach of the Chicago Bears, and Bears owner George Halas took him to court "not to win the case, but to teach him a lesson." If he learned anything, it was soon lost because Rams owner Dan Reeves fired him after the 1968 season, even though he had a winning record and had won the 1967 Coastal Division title (the NFL had divided itself into four divisions, two in each conference). But Allen had always sold himself so well to his players as their friend, they demanded he be rehired. Reeves relented, got another playoff in 1969 and when the team dipped badly in 1970, he fired him again. This time there was no player protest.

As previously noted, Allen found a welcome in Washington, whose thirst for a winner had only been heightened when Lombardi turned in an 8-6 record in his only season. In Allen's second season as coach of the Redskins, he had the Redskins in the Super Bowl with his emphasis on defense, an obsession for veteran players (he popularized the phrase, "the future is now," in answer to those who decried his trading draft picks for veterans) and a routine that demanded that everything be spent for the good of the team. He spent so lavishly that owner Edward Bennett Williams once moaned: "We gave George an unlimited expense account, and he exceeded it before the year was over."

In 1970, a club-footed kicker named Tom Dempsey shocked the NFL when he kicked a record-setting 63-yard field goal to help the New Orleans Saints defeat the Detroit Lions.

Dempsey's right, or kicking foot, had been deformed at birth and he wore a square-toed shoe to fit his foot.

Also in 1970, the expansion Cincinnati Bengals, in the third year of their existence, made the NFL playoffs under coach Paul Brown, deemed to have seen the game pass him by when he was fired by the Cleveland Browns after the 1962 season. It was the earliest any NFL expansion team ever reached the playoffs -- before, or since. The Bengals lost to the eventual NFL champion Baltimore Colts in the playoffs, but they reached the playoffs twice more before Brown retired after the 1975 season.

The 1970 playoff win against Cincinnati started Baltimore toward a bit of redemption -- a victory in the Super Bowl two years after it had been shocked by the New York Jets. This time, Johnny Unitas started the game for the Colts and got them a 7-0 lead against Dallas before leaving with injured ribs. Earl Morrall, the "goat" of that Super Bowl III loss, came on and steered his team to a 16-13 victory, achieved in the final five seconds on Jim O'Brien's 32-yard field goal.

One final surprise dotted that 1970 season -- the Miami Dolphins. They were coached by Don Shula, whose loss to the New York Jets in Super Bowl III had so soured his relations with Colts owner Carroll Rosenbloom, that he left for a team just four years old. But the Dolphins quickly became a title contender with such young stars as quarterback Bob Griese, abetted by runners Larry Csonka, Jim Kiick and receiver Paul Warfield; and a defense nicknamed "No Name" because it had no real stars.

They made the playoffs in 1970, then got to the Super Bowl three straight times, winning in 1972 and 1973.

But the 1972 season was their crowning achievement -- the first perfect season, a 17-0 record including the playoffs, in NFL history. Making the story even better was the fact that Griese got hurt midway through the

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season and was replaced by Morrall, who Shula reclaimed from Baltimore, and he took the team right to the edge of the season. Griese returned to lead the team to a 14-7 victory over Washington in Super Bowl VII.

That started Shula on a road that has made him the winningest coach in NFL history when he surpassed George Halas' previous record in 1993.

AMERICA'S TEAM

But for all of Shula's achievements, and later those of coach Chuck Noll and the Pittsburgh Steelers, the nation still was blinded by "America's Team," the Dallas Cowboys. Under head coach Tom Landry, the Cowboys had travelled a precipitous road from their birth in 1960 and came from the brink of oblivion to play in Super Bowl V; and did it again in 1971 before they won Super Bowl VI, erasing the tag as the team "that couldn't win the big one."

They were the most interesting and entertaining team in the NFL, both with their style of play, and their penchant for last-minute victories. In 1969, quarterback Roger Staubach, a Heisman Trophy winning quarterback at Navy in 1963, finished five years of naval service and two years later, he was the Cowboys starter. Over the next nine seasons, he engineered 23 come-from-behind victories in the fourth quarter--14 of those in the final two minutes. In the 1972 playoffs, for instance, Staubach, who had been injured for most of the season, replaced Craig Morton with his team trailing 28-13 and 16 minutes to play, and he produced an astounding 30-28 victory over the San Francisco 49ers, the winning touchdown coming with 30 seconds to play.

In another playoff game against Minnesota in 1975, he threw a fourth down, 50-yard "Hail Mary" pass to Drew Pearson in the final seconds to produce another incredible victory. He punctuated the legacy in the final regular season game of his career with the 1979 NFC-East title at stake in a game against the Redskins when he threw two touchdown passes in the final 140 seconds, the last on the game's final play to receiver Tony Hill for the victory and the title.

The man who helped orchestrate all of this was Landry, who had been the mastermind of the Giants great defenses of the late fifties before taking the job with the expansion Cowboys. He built two dynasties in Dallas -- the first that lasted until 1974, and the next one that produced three more Super Bowl teams--and one champion--in the late seventies, and three near-misses in the early eighties. He used his defensive genius to construct two great defensive units known as Doomsday I and II, and an imaginative multi-faceted offense that featured such great runners as Calvin Hill, Duane Thomas and Tony Dorsett. He even revived a form of the old double wing formation for passing downs which became known as the Shotgun Formation.

All of this became an almost weekly television staple because of their last-minute heroics and interesting style of play which were the perfect blends of entertainment that TV demands. America was enthralled with all of this and the Cowboys became the most popular team in America, hence the well-deserved nickname -- America's Team.

STEEL

But the Pittsburgh Steelers prevented either Dallas or Miami from being the Team of the 70s. Pittsburgh, one of the most woebegotten teams in the NFL, came from a 1-13 record in 1969 to become the first team to win four Super Bowls. No one seemed to mind the repetition either because their owner, Art Rooney was such a beloved figure, a man who had suffered with his teams since founding the franchise in 1932 and who had always placed the sport ahead of his self interests.

This time, his interests were well protected by the Steel Curtain Defense, and Terry Bradshaw throwing passes to Lynn Swann and John Stallworth while Franco Harris rolled up several 1,000-yard rushing seasons. The Steelers turned in the most dramatic play of the era when Harris caught a deflected Bradshaw pass, and raced to the winning touchdown in a playoff game against Oakland in 1972. It became known as the "Immaculate Reception."

Bradshaw, the butt of jokes about his mental capacities, more than answered his elitist critics as he ran Pittsburgh's offense with brilliance, particularly in the playoffs, when he threw a record 30 touchdown passes and gained 3,833 yards. In six AFC title games, he threw seven TD passes; and he had a four-touchdown day against Dallas in Super Bowl XIII.

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Pittsburgh won back-to-back Super Bowls against Minnesota and Dallas; then after a two-year hiatus, did it again against the Cowboys and Rams. Their games against Dallas in Super Bowls X and XIII were two of the best games played in that series.

During the 70s, the AFC dominated the NFL with eight Super Bowl victories in ten games -- Dallas winning the only two for the NFC. But after Oakland defeated Philadelphia in Super Bowl XV, the tide turned to the NFC where it has remained ever since as its teams have won all but one game -- Oakland defeated Washington in Super Bowl XVIII.

Part of that domination belongs to the San Francisco 49ers, who won four Super Bowls during the eighties; and part to the Washington Redskins who won three. The Giants also chipped in with two as did the Dallas Cowboys.

The 49ers really have been the NFL's dominant team since the early 80s. Part of the reason was the brilliant teaching of coach Bill Walsh, whose coaching and football philosophy were shaped during eight seasons as an assistant under Paul Brown in Cincinnati. He took a third-round quarterback named Joe Montana and fitted him with the same basic offense that Brown had used first in Cleveland, and later in Cincinnati, and watched him execute it brilliantly. The 49ers defeated the Bengals in Super Bowl XVI (ironically, Brown was that team's general manager), and three years later, rolled over Shula's Dolphins in Super Bowl XIX.

Walsh also was a meticulous builder of talent, helped no end by the deep pockets of his owner, Edward DeBartolo Jr., who always managed to "buy" the veteran players needed to solve any 49ers weaknesses. However, Walsh's selection of wide receiver Jerry Rice on the first round of the 1986 draft was the key to continuing his team's dynasty and its winning two more Super Bowls, one in the final 34 seconds in Super Bowl XXIII against the Bengals when Montana staged one of the most brilliant drives in NFL history to get the win. When Walsh retired, George Seifert took over and won another title the following year. With Steve Young as his quarterback for most of the 90s, Seifert has maintained San Francisco's dominance.

One of the victims of the 49ers dominance was the Denver Broncos, who like the Minnesota Vikings of the 70s and the Buffalo Bills of the 90s, set a "standard" for frustration by losing four times in the Super Bowl while dominating their own conferences. The Vikings, under coach Bud Grant, had built a superb defense and a good offense and then benefitted by playing the NFC championship game in the January arctic cold of Minnesota where they seemed immune to the conditions. But in Super Bowl play, when matched in milder conditions against physically superior AFC teams like Kansas City, Pittsburgh, Miami and Oakland, they simply were overrun.

So were the Broncos, despite the brilliance of quarterback John Elway. Elway was -- and still is -- one of the most unflappable quarterbacks in NFL history, a man undaunted by time and who more than rivals Staubach and Montana with his ability to bring his team to victory, as was demonstrated with "The Drive" in the 1986 AFC title game against the Browns -- a 90-yard march in the final two minutes to achieve a tie, and Denver then won in overtime. But when he got to the Super Bowl, his supporting cast was neither big enough, nor good enough to handle the physical superiority of teams like the Giants, Redskins and 49ers.

Buffalo, like Minnesota, benefitted from playing its conference championship game in sub-arctic conditions. Even with Jim Kelly at quarterback, and Thurman Thomas as their big runner, the Bills always were a step lower than their NFC competition. They came closest to winning a title when a potentially game-winning field goal in the final five seconds of Super Bowl XV against the Giants sailed a foot wide and they lost 20-19. Then followed three more consecutive losses -- they were the first team ever to appear in four consecutive Super Bowls, and also the first to lose them all.

The third trimester of the NFL ended with America's Team II -- the Dallas Cowboys, back on top after back-to-back championships. The key to their success was a fine job of rebuilding by coach Jimmy Johnson after new owner Jerry Jones, called by many a shameless self-promoter, had bought the team in 1989 and then summarily fired Tom Landry -- the only coach the Cowboys had ever had -- after he had begun to assemble the pieces for revitalizing the team.

Landry had already drafted quarterback Troy Aikman, and Johnson, who had won a national collegiate championship at Miami, then acquired running back Emmett Smith in the draft. Smith became the key to the team's offensive success, abetted by a fine supporting cast that Johnson very competently knitted together, including a new defense. The team went from 1-15 in 1989 to the first of its back-to-back titles in 1992.

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The NFL also was under new leadership for the final five years of its third quarter century when Paul Tagliabue replaced Rozelle in 1989. The game had grown so complex and its problems so consuming that Rozelle simply had exhausted himself during the tumultuous 70s and 80s and stepped away as the sport's most brilliant executive -- one who had brought the NFL from the brink of greatness to the pinnacle of success.

Tagliabue now runs an NFL light years different from the sparse operation inherited by Rozelle back in 1960, and which begins the run toward the completion of its first century as an entity every bit as complex as any major American business.

It should be a very interesting next quarter century.

NFL Champions (1970-93)

1970 Baltimore (AFC) 16, Dallas (NFC) 13
1971 Dallas (NFC) 24, Miami (AFC) 3
1972 Miami (AFC) 14, Washington (NFC) 7
1973 Miami (AFC) 24, Minnesota (NFC) 7
1974 Pittsburgh (AFC) 16, Minnesota (NFC) 6
1975 Pittsburgh (IAFC) 21, Dallas (NFC) 17
1976 Oakland (AFC) 32, Minnesota (NFC) 14
1977 Dallas (NFC) 27, Denver (AFC) 10
1978 Pittsburgh (AFC) 35, Dallas (NFC) 31
1979 Pittsburgh (AFC) 31, Los Angeles (NFC) 19
1980 Oakland (AFC) 27, Philadelphia (NFC) 10
1981 San Francisco (NFC) 26, Cincinnati (AFC) 21
1982 Washington (NFC) 27, Miami (AFC) 17
1983 Los Angeles (AFC) 38, Washington (NFC) 9
1984 San Francisco (NFC) 38, Miami (AFC) 16
1985 Chicago (NFC) 46, New England (AFC) 10
1986 New York (NFC) 39, Denver (AFC) 20
1987 Washington (NFC) 42, Denver (AFC) 10
1988 San Francisco (NFC) 20, Cincinnati (AFC,) 16
1989 San Francisco (NFC) 55, Denver (AFC) 10
1990 New York (NFC) 20, Buffalo (AFC) 19
1991 Washington (NFC) 37, Buffalo (AFC) 24
1992 Dallas (NFC) 52, Buffalo (AFC) 17
1993 Dallas (NFC) 30, Buffalo (AFC) 13