

HEIDI-HO!

By Bob Carroll

There are exciting games, dull games, sloppy games, and memorable games. Occasionally, there are even great games. Very few games can be described as notorious. Or even infamous. Or worse.

Such a game took place on Sunday evening, November 17, 1968, and those who saw it -- or, to be precise, those who saw most of it -- will never forget. Or forgive.

The Raiders, in their first Oakland incarnation, needed to win. Al Davis's Black and Silver were locked into a tight race with the Kansas City Chiefs for the American Football League's Western Division title. Their opponents for the day were the New York Jets who were in the midst of an easy trek to the AFL East crown. Quarterbacking the New Yorkers would be Mr. Charisma himself, Joe Namath, at that time the most famous football player in the world as much for his high-living lifestyle as for his footballing. It was said that the passes Broadway Joe threw on the field were nothing compared to those he threw at the New York nightclubs.

All told, it looked to be a bang-up game, and wasn't NBC the lucky network to be able to air it coast-to-coast? Millions of football fanatics tuned in at 4:00 EST expecting a game for the ages. Or, at least, a diverting late afternoon's entertainment.

What they got was a humdinger.

The first quarter got off to a Jets start on a Jim Turner field goal. Oakland came back with a Darryl Lamonica-to-Warren Wells pass to take the lead. Turner kicked a second field goal to make it 7-6 Raiders at quarter's end.

A bomb landed in the second quarter. Thrown by Lamonica, it nestled in the hands of Billy Cannon, the Raiders' tight end, and ended up as a 49-yard touchdown to widen the Oakland lead to 14-6. The Jets came back. Namath, who normally risked his oft-injured knees only under duress, sneaked one yard for the TD. When the conversion wasn't converted, the score stood 14-12 at halftime.

The first half had been good; the second half was better. New York moved in front on Bill Mathis' four-yard TD run. The Raiders retook the lead on Charley Smith's touchdown jaunt, then added a two-point conversion on a pass to Hewritt Dixon. 22-19 Raiders.

It looked like the Raiders were just about to put the game on a drive in the fourth quarter, but Smith fumbled at the three. Namath immediately picked on Raiders' rookie defensive back Butch Atkinson, lofting a pass to Don Maynard that the future Hall of Fame receiver took to the 50-yard-line. On the next play, the Namath-to-Maynard combination clicked for the full 50 to return the Jets to the lead 26-22. Midway through the fourth quarter Turner cashed his third field goal: 29-22 Jets.

Oakland's turn. Lamonica's 22-yard touchdown completion to Fred Biletnikoff followed by George Blanda's kick knotted the score at 29.

As exciting as the game had been, it was far from a thing of beauty. It was rough, rugged, no holds-barred football, and penalties on the field were even more common than blood spatters. The passing, the scoring, and the penalties were making the game run a little longer than most, but who could complain when it was such a terrific contest? No one -- except a few people at NBC who were watching the clock.

Namath carefully guided his team down the field preserving the clock with precision use of the sidelines. The trick was to score but not leave the Raiders enough time to retaliate. Turner kicked a 26-yard field goal, his fourth of the day, with only slightly more than a minute left to play. 32-29 Jets.

The odds were stacked against them, but the Raiders had produced miracles before. Maybe They took the kickoff and ran one play. The clock read 1:05 left.

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WHAT THE HELL? or words to that effect were screamed in front of every NBC-tuned TV set east of Denver. Blip! The game blinked off and on came this saccharine, blond muppet from the Swiss Alps. Heidi who?

NBC in its infinite wisdom had scheduled a special presentation of the Johanna Spyrl children's classic for 7 P.M. (EST). That's seven on the dot. When the big hand nudged twelve, it was out with the old football game and in with the new sweet girl. Well, gosh-and-golly! If they stayed with that old football game, the bedtimes for millions of children would be set back a whole minute and five seconds!

Lord only knows how much child abuse took place in the U.S. east when daddies discovered their game was being bumped by a show for the kids.

NBC's switchboard lit up like a congregation of smokers coming out of church. It was too late of course. Only a few protest calls had gotten through before the game was over -- an apparent Jets victory. Still the calls kept coming. NBC ran the final score across the bottom of Heidi's screen -- Raiders 43-Jets 32! The switchboard nearly exploded with calls.

What a large part of America had missed was Lamonica's 42-yard strike to Smith for a go-ahead touchdown, followed by a Jets' fumble on the ensuing kickoff that was recovered for another Oakland TD. Nothing much in the Great Scheme of Things perhaps, but life's blood to a football fan.

The next day, in calling the whole screw up "a forgivable error committed by humans who were concerned about the children," NBC president Julian Goodman placed the number of protest calls at tens of thousands. "I missed the end of the game as much as anyone else," Goodman whined.

Since the Heidi debacle, the chastened networks know better than to interrupt a football game for anything short of the Second Coming. Even then, they might go to split screen.