

PRO FOOTBALL PLAYERS DON'T WEAR GLASS SLIPPERS

by Mark Speck

Pro football has become the #1 sport among fans because it offers everything. Action, drama, suspense, comedy, pathos, tragedy -- everything that makes for great theater. But there's one play that pro football doesn't stage very well. That's the rags-to-riches story of Cinderella. It seems that pro football players don't wear glass slippers.

Other sports embrace and even celebrate their Cinderella stories. The '57 Braves, '69 Mets, '79 Pirates, '87 and '91 Twins and '97 Marlins have all seen happy endings to their Cinderella stories in baseball. The 1970 Knicks, '75 Warriors and '77 Trail Blazers have seen their basketball fairy tale seasons end in triumph. And in hockey, there's the '61 Blackhawks, '67 Maple Leafs, '70 Bruins, '74 Flyers, '94 Rangers and '95 Devils.

There have been many rags-to-riches, Cinderella scenarios over the years during the history of pro football. But the vast majority of these have had a sad ending. Of course, there have been exceptions to the rule: the 1958 Colts, the '68 Jets and the '81 49ers. But these as one can see have been few and far between. For the most part, Cinderella stories reveal that pro football players don't wear glass slippers, they wear cleats.

1936 -- The Braves/Redskins had never finished above .500 in their short existence. In 1935, they were 2-8-1 and Owner George Preston Marshall sacked coach Eddie Casey. Ray Flaherty came in and his take-charge attitude and positive outlook sparked the 'Skins. They won 7 of 12 games and edged Pittsburgh for the East Division crown. But Marshall's interference -- despite Flaherty's insistence that he stay off the field and in the stands -- sabotaged the 'Skins fairy tale season. He raised the ire of the Boston press and fans by raising ticket prices on the day of a game without any advance notice. Miffed by what he perceived as the poor support of the Boston faithful, Marshall moved the championship game to a neutral site. On Dec. 13, at the Polo Grounds in New York, the 'Skins lost top offensive threat Cliff Battles and the game, 21-6 to the Green Bay Packers.

1947 -- The Steelers were one of the NFL's most beleaguered franchises. In their first 14 years in the league, they finished over .500 only twice. Two times the franchise had been merged with other teams to keep it financially afloat. But in 1947, the Steelers captured 8 wins to tie the Eagles for first place in the East. Alas, tailback Johnny Clement, who led Pittsburgh in both rushing and passing, was injured and ineffective in the divisional playoff game, which Philadelphia won, 21-0.

1963 -- The Raiders were the laughingstock of the AFL -- which was a laughingstock to many to begin with -- winning only 9 games while losing 33 in their first three seasons. Then Al Davis came in from San Diego as head coach, preaching "Pride and Poise." The team opened with four losses in their first six games, but then caught fire, winning their last 8 in a row. But San Diego finished a game ahead of the Raiders and won the division.

1966 -- The Cowboys were not the glamour franchise they are now during their early seasons. They didn't win a game in 1960, and didn't reach .500 until 1965. Then in 1966, they broke through, finishing 10-3-1 behind the league's best offense. They even hosted the NFL title game, but that game was against the Green Bay Packers, and the powerful defending champs ended the Cinderella dreams of Big D by nudging the 'boys, 34-27.

1966 -- The first Super Bowl pitted those same Packers against the Kansas City Chiefs of the AFL. The Packers were heavily favored, but the Chiefs were the sentimental favorites because of their upstart status. The Packers, however, whom many consider the NFL's all-time greatest team, broke the glass slippers and pounded Cinderella, 35-10.

1970 -- Cincinnati had been in existence for only two mediocre seasons, but Paul Brown drove the young Bengals to a 7-0 finish after a 1-6 start in 1970. Their 8-6 record was good enough for the AFC Central title, but not enough against a veteran Colts team on its way to the Super Bowl. Baltimore dashed the Bengals' hopes with a 17-0 win in the opening round of the playoffs.

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1972 -- The Steelers were still one of the NFL's weakest franchises and hadn't come close to the playoffs since that 1947 debacle against the Eagles. But with Chuck Noll at the helm of a young and rising team, the Steelers won the AFC Central with a record of 11-3. In only their second playoff game ever, Pittsburgh beat Oakland 13-7 with Franco Harris' Immaculate Reception. They were now the darlings of the football world, but that couldn't prevent the clock from striking midnight in a 21-17 loss to the undefeated Dolphins a week later.

1976 -- The Patriots hadn't finished above .500 in nine years, but in 1976 -- perhaps in a celebration of the Bicentennial -- the Pats won 11 of 14 games to qualify for the playoffs for the first time since 1963. New England led Oakland 21-17 late in their first round playoff game, but a questionable roughing the passer call on the Patriots' Sugar Bear Hamilton kept the winning Oakland drive alive. The Raiders won 24-21.

1977 -- If there was any franchise that was more woeful than the Patriots, it was the Broncos, who had never made the playoffs in 17 years and had finished .500 only once. But new head coach Red Miller and new quarterback Craig Morton led a "Rocky Mountain High" in '77, as Denver won 12 games to win the AFC West. The Broncos beat Pittsburgh 34-21 and Oakland 20-17 in the AFC playoffs, but were "Orange Crushed" in the Super Bowl, 27-10 by Dallas.

1979 -- The Tampa Bay Buccaneers may have topped them all as pro football's worst team, going 0-14 in '76, 2-12 in '77, and 5-11 in '78. But in '79 the Bucs captured the hearts of the nation by going 10-6 and winning the NFC Central crown. Tampa Bay whipped Philadelphia 24-17 in the first round of the playoffs, but lost 9-0 to the Rams in the NFC title game.

1987 -- The Saints were another team that had never experienced much success during their lifetime. The team had never finished above .500 and the closest they had come to the playoffs was by watching them on TV in their dens. The only exposure they received was on the NFL's annual "blooper" reels. At one point, their fans wore bags on their heads and called the team the "Aint's." But Jim Mora arrived and using a lot of old USFL players, he sparked the Saints to new heights and their first playoff spot by winning 12 of 15 games. To put this in perspective, New Orleans won 12 games in their first three seasons. But Cinderella never found the glass slipper, as Minnesota ended the Saints' storybook season, 44-10.

1991 -- The Lions had struggled in mediocrity for years, making the playoffs only once in the last 21 seasons. Despite a 45-0 loss on the opening Sunday, and a rash of injuries -- including the loss of guard Mike Utley to partial paralysis -- the Lions returned to the kind of glory they hadn't experienced since the Bobby Layne teams of the 1950's. Utley's "thumbs up" signal as he left the field on a stretcher galvanized the team and the Lions won their last 5 in a row to finish 12-4. But Detroit's fairy tale season ended in the harsh reality of a 41-10 loss to Washington in the NFC title game.

1996 -- Both second year expansion teams, the Panthers and the Jaguars, stunned the football world by capturing playoff spots in only their second seasons, the quickest that had ever been accomplished in pro football history. But both Cinderella seasons ended with losses in the playoffs, proving once again that football players wear cleats and not glass slippers.

But why? Why have a lot of the Cinderella stories in pro football over the years had unhappy endings? Is it because in the playoffs it's one game and you're out? The other sports conduct "best of" playoff formats, and a Cinderella team can get hot for a couple games and upset a favorite. Or perhaps it's because the football playoffs expose the "lucky" teams, the ones that got into the playoffs because of a few breaks instead of a lot of talent.

Pro football has staged a lot of plays over the years -- dramas, comedies, tragedies, war stories. But it has never been very good at the story of Cinderella. In pro football, it's more often than not been the big, ugly stepsisters who have won out in the end.