

WHY THE NFC?

By Tom Danyluk

This article, written – but not published – in 1995 takes on a new dimension with Denver's Super Bowl win.

-- The Editor

The year was 1983 - if anything, a glaring landmark of a season for the National Football League. It was twelve years ago that Dan Marino made his spectacular rookie debut with the Miami Dolphins... that Eric Dickerson of the L.A. Rams crushed the rookie single-season rushing record with his phenomenal 1,808 yards... that the Colts played their last game in Baltimore... and the last time, unbelievably, that a team from the American Football Conference won the Super Bowl.

The tally has now reached thirteen NFC wins in the last fourteen Super Bowls, including 11 in a row. Usually, at least on the professional level, that kind of winning streak shows up in contests like All-Star games and the Pro Bowl, where individual skill and one-upmanship inherently count more than teamwork.

But in the Super Bowl? In a league designed for parity, has the NFC really been that overwhelmingly superior? Well, since the 1984 season, the average score in the NFL's championship game has been NFC 39 AFC 16. No doubt, the weather vane sure has been blowing in that direction.

They were a novel thing at first, these horrendous blowouts. Chicago's 46-10 pasting of New England in Super Bowl XX to many was reminiscent of the Bears' 73-0 win in the 1940 NFL Championship game. It was the NFL's biggest championship game massacre in 24 years, and the old-time Chicago fans loved it. Payton, Ditka, The Fridge - the whole atmosphere was good for the NFL. Two seasons later, after the Redskins had racked up 35 points in the second quarter against Denver, the 42-10 final score actually had some Washington fans booing head coach Joe Gibbs for calling off the Hogs too early. In those kind of routs, it's step right up and take your shots at the record book.

But by the end of the 1989 season, after San Francisco had whipped Denver 55-10 in Super Bowl XXIV, the novelty had clearly worn off. The outrageously lopsided scores weren't topical or funny anymore. The games had become boring, uneventful. New York 39 Denver 20. Dallas 52 Buffalo 17. The defining question had become, and remains today, not which team would win the football game, but whether the NFC representative would cover the point spread. Last year's betting line posted the AFC Champion San Diego Chargers as an incredible 19 1/2-point underdog. Tradition wasn't broken, as the 49ers easily covered in a 49-26 rout.

Now what in the world is going on here, people?

"Well, if you look at any of the championship games over the years in professional football," says former New England Patriots head coach Chuck Fairbanks (1973-78), "there is always this expectation of a great matchup. How can you pick a winner? Both teams always seem so evenly matched. Well, when even a minor mistake is made on the field by one of the teams, especially in such a high pressure game, the whole thing can snowball into something that looks a lot worse than it really should be. I tend to believe that these one-sided scores really aren't that indicative of any talent or coaching differences that may exist between the teams and conferences."

San Francisco 49ers head coach George Seifert, who's team cold-cocked the Chargers with two quick, first-quarter touchdowns in last year's game, agrees readily with Fairbanks. "When a team is a big favorite, and then it goes out and scores a quick touchdown early in the game, I think the whole thing kinda snowballs."

Right into an annual football avalanche.

THE CYCLE OF PRO FOOTBALL?

Everyone has heard the wide variety of media perspectives explaining the NFC's domination in a simple terms: the long-running superiority of the NFC East... "AFC finesse versus NFC power"... the perception of smaller offensive lines in the AFC... better coaching in the NFC. All are very valid points.

Fairbanks offers another interesting perspective, one that has been generally overlooked. "The costs involved in running an NFL franchise went up dramatically during the 1980's," he says. "If you look at all of the teams that won Super Bowls over those years, they were all old NFL franchises, ones that came from old, old money. These teams have already been paid for, and most likely have very agreeable terms on their stadium leases. Financially, ownership is very stable with these clubs. The owners have been well-equipped to meet the rising costs and allocate the necessary amount of money to run their teams properly. No matter what anybody says, success in that league starts from the top down."

But isn't the game still played by twenty-two men running and passing and tackling? Both conferences draft from a common talent pool each season. A considerable amount of revenue sharing exists between the franchises. And surely the recently imposed salary cap must have an equalizing effect. So aside from any financial disparities that may yet exist, can anyone provide gameday evidence as to why the once-powerful AFC has been down for so long? Is it possible to trace the roots to the origin of the AFC's long-standing collapse?

As a starting point, most pro football historians tend to view any stretch of a conference's superiority as nothing more than part of a cycle. One conference is up, the other is down, sort of like the stock market. Nothing really magical about it.

The first swing of this pro football cycle allegedly began 1960, with the birth of the American Football League, and ended some eight years later. During that span, the pass-happy AFL was generally considered a semi-pro outfit in comparison to the established, defense-and-rushing-oriented NFL, although only two games were ever played between the leagues (Super Bowls I and II, both won by the NFL's Green Bay Packers). Throwing the football? Packers' head coach Vince Lombardi summed up the NFL's attitude when he said, "The running game is really what football is all about, and also it makes you a little bit hard-nosed. The more you run, the more hard-nosed you are." So the NFL was hard-nosed and the aerial AFL wasn't. The Packers were just more hard-nosed than the rest.

The second swing of this cycle began after the AFL's New York Jets monumental 1969 upset of the Baltimore Colts in Super Bowl III, and lasted through the end of the 1980 season. Over those twelve years, the newly-formed American Conference, led by Miami, Pittsburgh and Oakland, ruled professional football, capturing ten of the twelve Super Bowls played during that period. "The thing that sticks out in my mind were all of the powerful, aggressive defenses in the AFC back then," says Pittsburgh Steelers offensive coordinator Ron Erhardt, who owns two Super Bowl rings from his days on the New York Giants staff. "Miami, the Raiders, Pittsburgh, "Denver's Orange Crush" - all great, great defensive teams." 1972 through 1980 was clearly the dark ages for the NFC, which compiled a dismal 147-218-3 (40%) record in interconference games over that period. Its lowpoint was epitomized by laughingstock Tampa Bay's appearance in the 1979 NFC title game after only the franchise's fourth season in existence.

But from San Francisco's Super Bowl win in 1981 through today, the cycle has again reversed, albeit in a much more dramatic fashion. The NFC is firmly back on top, winning every Super Bowl game by an average of 21 points, with the exception of the L.A. Raiders' victory over Washington in 1983. All indications are now that the cycle is on hold, since what supposedly goes around hasn't been coming around.

"If you study the conferences as a whole," says former Seattle and L.A. Raiders head coach Tom Flores, the last AFC coach to earn a Super Bowl ring, "I don't think there was ever that much of a difference between them. But between the playoff teams? Yeah, there's an obvious difference. I think it's safe to say that in the 70's, the top three or four teams in the AFC were better than the top three or four teams in the NFC. Then, in the 1980's, that all changed. It was the other way around, with the exception of the two years that we won it with the Raiders (1980, 1983). It's just when one side dominates, all of the comparisons come out. Do I think it's a cycle? Yes, I do."

"However," he admits, "it has been a heckuva long time."

HAS THE NFC ALWAYS BEEN THE DOMINANT CONFERENCE?

So, if a competitive cycle really exists in the NFL, should there really be a major concern about the overall conference balance in pro football? After 14 years, the return of AFC superiority certainly must be coming around soon... or is it?. One discouraging fact is that the recent Buffalo teams, led by Jim Kelly, Thurman Thomas and Bruce Smith, were clearly the best the AFC has had to offer in over a decade, yet the Bills have been pounded in their four Super Bowls appearances by a combined score of 139-73. "That I can't explain," says Flores. "Buffalo always played well against the NFC clubs during the regular season. I really expected them to do a lot better."

Another theory as to why the NFC has continued to dominate rejects the notion of any competitive cycle. It maintains that the NFC has always been the dominant group throughout the history of the two leagues/conferences... that the AFC's Super Bowl winning streak through the 1970's was a mirage... that its pass-happy offensive attacks were, and continue to be, nothing more than gimmick football... and today, with this amazing string of Super Bowl blowouts, the chasm between conferences has reached its broadest distance, even wider than the one that supposedly existed in the 1960's.

Further, many football experts have emphasized that Pittsburgh and Baltimore, which won a combined five Super Bowls in the 70's, were really NFC agents dressed in the AFC's clothing. Both teams, along with Cleveland, had been members of the original NFL. All three agreed to move into the AFC in 1970 for financial considerations, but in doing so, never gave up their old, hard-nosed NFL identity - especially the Steelers, who, by the end of the '79 season had captured four championships. By the arrival of the 1981 season, the Steeler dynasty had all but died, and so the other NFC clubs began taking their respective shots at the heavyweight title.

The overall picture is even more persuasive: Of the 29 Super Bowls played, original AFL clubs have won only 7 of them - a 24% success rate. It's a very sound argument.

THE YEAR THEY CHANGED THE RULES – Why the NFC Now Dominates

So whether the NFC's domination is a cyclical phenomenon or the result of age-old superiority or a combination of both, one thing is for sure: it is possible to trace the origin of the AFC's fundamental collapse to a specific era in the recent history of the game. One need to look no further than to the tail end of the AFC's heyday - it was 1978, the year the league's owners changed the rules to open up the passing game.

These changes, which liberalized pass blocking while permitting defenders to engage contact on receivers only in a five-yard zone past the line of scrimmage, seem to have influenced the NFL much more than simply procuring the launch of more footballs and increase scoring. There are many indications that these new rules, paired with a coincidental but undeniable imbalance of quarterbacking talent across the two conferences at the time, is the underlying source of the disparity we're seeing in the league today.

The implication is that the NFC coaches, at a time when many of its signal-callers were either aging, undeveloped or simply awful, accepted the fact that it could not outshoot the high-level passing attacks of the AFC, and thus resorted to a massive upgrade of its defenses and running attacks. The focus of that effort was to directly counter the effects an expanded passing arena. Meanwhile, the AFC, already brimming with its top-flight QBs, openly embraced the new rules and took to the skies.

Prior to rules change, offensive strategies in the NFL were highly similar in both conferences, with little evolution from the style of the late 1960's. Except for a few clubs, ball control was still the rule. Run to set up the pass. Throw only when necessary, but remember, three things can happen and two of them are bad.

"NFC teams had always seemed to pursue a strong ground game, but people sometimes forget that the AFC was the powerful running conference during most of the 1970's," says Fairbanks. "Franco Harris, Earl Campbell, Larry Csonka, Sam Cunningham... New England was always one of the top running teams in the league during my years there. I don't think there's any question that the top three or four AFC teams' strengths and success centered around their ability to move the ball on the ground."

A prime example is the 1976 AFC playoff quartet of Pittsburgh, Oakland, Baltimore and New England, which averaged a whopping combined average of 42.3 rushes/game during the regular season.

But then came 1978, and the foundation of pro football's offensive philosophy was jolted. Pass blocking began to erode from an art form to a shoving contest. The blanket of the smothering bump-and-run pass defense, which former NY Jets' coach Weeb Ewbank once termed as "legalized mugging," had suddenly been removed. The passing lanes were cleared for a high-flying takeoff.

As the '78 season progressed, surprisingly it was the NFC coaches who were first to react to the rule changes. By the end of that year, ten teams in the NFC had over 400 passing attempts. Yet, the results of their new aerial experiment were less than spectacular. Only three NFC quarterbacks had passer ratings above 70.0. Only two teams (Dallas and Los Angeles) achieved double-digit victories. And the AFC won yet another Super Bowl.

On the other hand, the AFC offenses were initially unfazed by the new rules, as the successful rushing teams stuck with their well-developed ground attacks. Only five AFC clubs attempted more than 400 passes that year. All five missed the playoffs.

It wasn't until the following season, 1979, that the AFC arms were finally cut loose. And were they ever.

"The late 70's were major, major times for all of us who were involved in the passing game," says Kansas City Chiefs offensive coordinator Paul Hackett, who was also the QB coach at Cleveland and San Francisco in the early 1980's. "especially with the emergence of the Dan Fouts-Air Coryell years in San Diego. Don Coryell introduced a passing attack to the AFC that was state of the art, involving timing patterns, short drops, different formations. Seeing how devastating an attack like that could be, the AFC became very interested in developing the big-armed passer and throwing the ball downfield. When I was at Cleveland [1981-82] under Sam Rutigliano, it seemed we were throwing on almost every down. The mindset became one of just coming out and attacking through the air, just keep coming after the opponent, not playing close to the belt at all."

Taking full advantage of the available QB firepower on their rosters, the AFC opened up its offenses, and the results were startling. Eleven of the fourteen teams in the conference threw over 400 times, and all eleven of those quarterbacks had passer ratings of 70.0 or better. Only five performed statistically as well in the NFC. By the end of that year, the disparity at the position had become obvious.

"At that time, there were about eight or nine quarterbacks in the AFC that you would legitimately want to start a franchise with," says Fairbanks. "Dan Fouts, Terry Bradshaw, Ken Stabler, Bob Griese, Bert Jones, Ken Anderson, Steve Grogan, Brian Sipe, Joe Ferguson... any one of them. All great, great players with strong arms. In the NFC, there were really only a handful you could say the same thing about."

The AFC's stars must've been aligned just right for such a strong concentration of pure passers to accumulate within the same conference. Fouts, Bradshaw and Griese? Hall-of-Famers. Stabler and Anderson could eventually get there. Jones, Grogan, Sipe and Ferguson - all three with high-caliber arms and superior talent.

Fairbanks calling nine of those fourteen AFC starters "franchisers" is no exaggeration.

But what about that NFC handful he referred to? Is that an understatement? Was the quarterbacking in the conference really that bad? Let's go through the 1978-79 rosters and pick out the true top guns.

For starters, Fran Tarkenton and Roger Staubach. Technically these two are somewhat of a reach, since both were at the very end of their careers during that time. However, both were still playing outstanding football in their final seasons. So since we've included Griese, who hung it up in '80, we'll count 'em.

Joe Theismann? Ron Jaworski? Both were beginning to blossom into solid, dependable starters after the early-career shakes. Both played on Super Bowl teams. Count 'em - that's four.

Archie Manning? A player constantly getting leveled on those pathetic New Orleans teams, but no one has ever questioned his talent. Arch makes number five.

Atlanta's Steve Bartkowski? Peachtree Bart had the complete package. That's six.

And it is here that the ranks quickly begin to thin. How about Jimmy Hart of St. Louis and Green Bay's Lynn Dickey? Despite their big numbers over long careers, to keep them you'd have to include the AFC's Craig Morton and Jim Zorn based on that same criteria. We'll decline.

Tampa Bay's Doug Williams? Nope, too erratic. Couldn't complete over 50% of his passes in a season until '81, his fourth year as a starter.

Joe Montana and Phil Simms. Disqualified. Too young to be factors in the league at that time.

Danny White? Tommy Kramer? The successors of Staubach and Tarkenton. Can't justify them as being franchise guys on that honor alone.

Gary Danielson? Pat Haden? Steve DeBerg? David Whitehurst? Bob Avellini? Joe Pisarcik? Uh, uh.

That's about it - six legitimate franchise quarterbacks in the NFC during those first years of the rule changes. Drop the aging Tarkenton and Staubach, and it really is just a handful. The big arms just weren't there for the NFC. So, in order to survive, strong defense and the powerful ground game had to be. Enter Lawrence Taylor, "the Hogs," and a new attitude towards quarterbacking in the NFC.

"Toward the end of the [1970's], the NFC began looking for the cerebral-type of quarterback," recalls Hackett. "From my days with the 49ers, I know Bill Walsh certainly was. The NFC teams were convinced that the big-armed passers and throwing downfield weren't the only keys to winning. The coaches became more interested in quarterbacks who could win football games, that had a variety of skills, including leadership.

In Washington, Theismann wasn't the prettiest passer; he didn't throw too many spirals. But that wasn't what the Redskins were looking for. They wanted someone who would do whatever it takes to win, who could handle the pressure in tough situations. For those coaches, the bottom line was winning, not what the statistics looked like at the end of the game."

Fairbanks agrees. "A big-time passing quarterback has never been absolutely necessary to win in the NFL, provided you can develop a good enough ground game to challenge the opposition. His arm needs to be just strong enough to keep the linebackers honest, from cheating up on the line of scrimmage. And with running, ball-control offenses, you usually always see a very good defense behind it. The two go hand-in-hand. The NFC seemed to go in that direction, and the results are pretty obvious."

As the 1980's progressed, the NFC's strategy became more and more apparent, particularly within the collegiate draft. Consider the defensive talent that was brought into the conference in 1981 alone: Lawrence Taylor, Ronnie Lott, Eric Wright, Carlton Williamson, Bobby Butler, Hugh Green, Dexter Manley, Daryl Grant.

Two years later, in 1983, the list was even more imposing: Darrell Green, Joey Browner, Leonard Smith, Mike Richardson, Dave Duerson, Carl Lee, Wes Hopkins, Tim Lewis, along with linemen Leonard Marshall, Charles Mann and Richard Dent. All-pro defensive backs and herd of bullish pass rushers - the perfect combination to conquer the big-armed passer. In fact, 11 of the first 15 defensive backs chosen in the '83 draft went to NFC teams. Definitely not a coincidence.

In contrast, the AFC's lofty class of 1983 had "bombs away" written all over it, featuring Qbs Dan Marino, Jim Kelly, John Elway, Ken O'Brien, Tony Eason, Todd Blackledge, and receivers Ron Brown, Jojo Townsell, Stephan Starring, Trumaine Johnson, Mark Clayton, Mervyn Fernandez and Anthony Carter - the famous Quarterback Class of '83 and a slew of track stars. In all, the AFC selected the first six quarterbacks that year, and 13 of the first 19 wide receivers - strong symptoms that it had indeed become deeply addicted to the passing game.

And still is. Yet for all of the high-flying aerial displays the AFC has been putting on over the last fourteen seasons, the results have repeatedly been ugly when it's come down to one final game - the Super Bowl.

"The difference is a matter of coaching philosophy, what you're trying to accomplish on the field," Erhardt stresses. "Coaches go after the types of players that will best allow them to execute their philosophies. A lot of the AFC teams have turned to the base 3- and 4-receiver offensive sets, with one running back, to help their passing games. Buffalo, Miami, Houston, Denver, even the Raiders at times – all have been very successful within the AFC using it. Why? They've had the great quarterbacks and wide receivers to help them achieve this.

"If you look at the philosophies of many of the NFC coaches, the power game - running the football - is really the big priority. They're looking for road grader type of offensive linemen, power runners, swift tailbacks and strong defenses."

"The NFC teams," maintains former San Francisco head coach Bill Walsh, "for a period, have dominated just by explosion, movement, strength and power. The AFC, conceivably, isn't geared to that until the Super Bowl, and then all of a sudden they are hit with it, especially at the highest levels, right at the top. The AFC hasn't been able to generate the kind of power football that the NFC has, and so these Super Bowl games have been a series of very, very tough defeats for them."

Hackett, who coached under Walsh in San Francisco, sees a deadly flaw in the AFC's heavy use of multiple-receiver, 1-back sets, which have almost become a conference trademark. "It's an impressive passing attack when it's working. But what kind of pressure does it put on the team's own defense? It's likely going to be on the field if the offense isn't picking up first downs.

"Yes, the 49ers - an NFC team - have been very successful with a pass-based offense over the years, but in Walsh's system, the short, controlled passing attack was the intent - moving the chains. The biggest difference was that in San Francisco, the running game, anchored by a strong, two-back set, was never de-emphasized as it has been in the AFC over the years."

Red Sanders, the old UCLA coach, once said, "He who lives by the pass, dies by the pass." Until this forlorn conference recommits to the fundamentals of power rushing and strong defense, which it abandoned after that fateful 1978 season, the AFC funeral processions to the losing locker room will continue after the Super Bowl game clock runs out.