

When Defense Ruled The Day

Before the West Coast Offense, Great Defenses Dominated the NFL

By ED GRUVER

Chris Schenkel, the broadcast voice of the New York Giants in the fifties and sixties, wrote a book once called *How To Watch Pro Football on Television*. Addressing the importance of the defensive unit, Schenkel wrote "Defensive teams have become so specialized and so colorful, they sometimes garner more respect and adulation from the fans than do the so-called glory boys on offense."

This was 1964, and Schenkel, an astute football observer, was providing a glimpse into pro football's future. Defensive teams were indeed becoming specialized and colorful, and they would dominate the sport throughout the sixties and seventies.

From the New York Giants' pulsating goal-line stands on dark, wintry Sundays in 1958 to a final curtain call for Pittsburgh's "Steel Curtaint" unit in sunny Pasadena on Super Sunday, 1980, defenses not only carried the day, they captured the imagination of the fans with colorful nicknames and a swashbuckling style.

It all began in New York in 1958, when a unit coached by defensive coordinator Tom Landry and featuring Sam Huff, Emlen Tunnell, Rosey Grier, and Andy Robustelli gained fame for their play during the Giants' pulsating playoff run with the rival Cleveland Browns.

To fans and observers, they were simply "the Giants' defense." No colorful monickers like "Big Blue Wrecking Crew" or Sam "Bam" Huff; gimmick nicknames would be reserved for future teams and future stars. But the great Giants' defense that allowed New York to win one world championship and play in six NFL title games in a nine-year span from 1956-63 left behind something more valuable than a high-gloss tagline.

Grier, Robustelli, Jim Katcavage and Dick Modzelewski popularized the notion of a dominating front four, and Landry and Huff copyrighted the role of middle linebacker, insuring that future middle men like Schmidt, Nitschke, Butkus, Nobis, Lanier and Lambert would become the linchpins of their respective defenses.

Symbolic seeds from the Giants' outfit were planted in other NFL outposts, namely Green Bay, Los Angeles, and Dallas. Vince Lombardi, Landry's coaching comrade on the Giants, took to Green Bay a working knowledge of New York's defensive system.

Lombardi's first hire in Green Bay was Phil Bengston, the defensive coordinator of the San Francisco 49ers. Together, Lombardi and Bengston built the Packers into a championship defense. Green Bay forged consecutive shutouts of a record-setting Giants' offense in the 1961-62 NFL championship games, allowing the Packers to join the 1948-49 Eagles and '85 Bears as the only defenses to record back-to-back post-season shutouts.

Concerning himself with the Green Bay offense, Lombardi gave control of the defense to Bengston. The quiet Swede built a unit featuring a record five future Hall of Famers – Nitschke, end Willie Davis, tackle Henry Jordan, corner-back Herb Adderley, and free safety Willie Wood.

"Phil coached the defense," Nitschke said once. "He was as much a student of the game as Lombardi."

The Packers' defense was responsible in part for a dynasty that produced a record five NFL championships in seven years, including an unprecedented three straight from 1965-67, and victories over the rival American Football League in the historic first two Super Bowls.

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Just as Lombardi imported Landry's defensive schemes in Green Bay, Grier took his knowledge of the Giants' system to the Los Angeles Rams in 1963. In L.A., Grier joined with tackle Merlin Olsen and ends Deacon Jones and Lamar Lundy on a defensive front renowned as "The Fearsome Foursome."

Coached by defensive mastermind George Allen, L.A.'s unit was Ram-tough. By 1967, the Fearsome Foursome was considered the best front line in football. Though they lost post-season showdowns to Lombardi's Packers in '67 and the Minnesota Vikings "Purple Gang" in 1969, the Fearsome Foursome firmly established themselves as one of the best and most colorful units in NFL history.

The Vikings' victory over the Rams in the '69 Western Conference playoff provided a symbolic passing of the torch from one great front four to another. The Purple Gang, which included Hall of Fame free safety Paul Krause, was instrumental in the fall of Roman's empire. End Carl Eller sacked Ram quarterback Roman Gabriel in the end zone for a late-game safety, and tackle Alan Page deflected and then picked off a Gabriel pass on the Rams' final drive.

Coached by Bud Grant, Minnesota's Four Norseman front featured Page and Eller, end Jim Marshall and tackles Gary Larsen and later, Doug Sutherland. They played with a collective passion summed up by Page.

"The best plan," Page said, "is for the four of us to meet at the quarterback."

Defending the weatherbeaten turf of old Metropolitan Stadium to the last inch, Minnesota outmuscled the Black-and-Blue Central Division and played in four Super Bowls from 1968-77. The sight of the Purple Gang making a defensive stand amid the snowflakes and dark skies of a Minnesota Sunday remains one of the ornaments of the NFL's modern era.

The Purple People Eater's dominance of the NFC in the late sixties and seventies was mirrored by their conference rivals to the east, the "Doomsday" defense of the Dallas Cowboys. Bob Lilly and Jethro Pugh anchored a front four ably backed by linebackers Lee Roy Jordan and Chuck Howley, and free safety Mel Renfro.

Landry's Doomsday unit not only refined the schemes he first instituted with the Giants back in the fifties, they added new wrinkles, like the innovative flex defense. In the flex, the Cowboys staggered their defensive line, alternating the offset ends and tackles according to the offensive formation.

With young stars like Randy White, Harvey Martin, Cliff Harris and Charlie Waters replacing aging veterans, Doomsday helped Dallas dominate the Eastern Division in the late sixties and into the seventies, the Cowboys claiming Super Bowl titles in 1971 and '77 and five NFC titles from 1970-78.

The AFC's answer to the Cowboys and Vikings was found in two former NFL bosses, Don Shula and Chuck Noll. Shula, Noll, and defensive coordinator Bill Arnsparger had built the great Colt defenses of the late sixties, and Shula and Arnsparger molded Miami into a unit whose sum was greater than its parts.

The Dolphins were labeled the "No-Name" defense after Landry admitted before Super Bowl VI he couldn't remember the names of the Miami eleven. In time, nose tackle Manny Fernandez, middle backer Nick Buoniconti, and safeties Jake Scott and Dick Anderson became household names as Miami won consecutive Super Bowls in 1972-73 and made five straight playoff appearances from 1970-74.

At the heart of Shula and Arnsparger's defense was an intricate zone scheme, which combined with a four-linebacker alignment dubbed the "53" defense for the uniform number of hybrid end/backer Bob Matheson, allowed the Dolphins to spin a systematic web of control.

Miami's mindful approach to defense was contrasted by the physical, pounding style of Pittsburgh's "Steel Curtain" unit. Noll's Steelers rose to prominence in 1974, winning the first of four Super Bowls in six years as the Steel Curtain seized physical control of virtually every game they played in.

Noll and defensive lieutenants George Perles and Bud Carson built a front four around the all-pro talents of tackle Joe Greene and end L.C. Greenwood. Behind them was a trio of all-pros linebackers, Jack Ham, Jack Lambert, and Andy Russell. Cornerback Mel Blount and safety Mike Wagner headed a hard-hitting Steeler secondary.

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After winning back-to-back Super Bowls in 1974-75, the Steel Curtain hit its peak in 1976. Bulwarked by an innovative "Stunt 4-3" alignment that saw "Mean Joe" and "Arrowhead" Ernie Holmes crowding the center's nose at a 45-degree angle, the Steel Curtain clanked shut on opposing offenses.

With their own offense crippled by the loss of quarterbacks Terry Bradshaw and Terry Hanratty to injuries, the Steel Curtain stepped to the fore. Over their last nine games, the Steelers yielded just 20 points -- an average of 1.3 per game -- did not allow a touchdown over 22 straight quarters, and shut out five of their final eight opponents.

"Our objective," Greene said, "was to shut 'em out. Just shut 'em out."

By season's end, the Steel Curtain led the AFC in six defensive categories, and seven members -- Greene, Greenwood, Ham, Lambert, Russell, Blount, and Wagner -- were chosen for the Pro Bowl.

Noll's familiarity with great defensive fronts dated back to his years as an assistant coach in the early sixties with the San Diego Chargers. Though known around the AFL for their offensive firepower, the Chargers set a record for interceptions in 1961, thanks largely to a fearsome pass rush led by massive 6-9, 321-pound Ernie "Big Cat" Ladd and 6-5, 270-pound Earl "The Tree" Faison.

In 1965, the Chargers became one of just three teams in pro football history to achieve the difficult trifecta of leading the league against the run, pass, and in overall defense. San Diego gradually gave way as the AFL's best defensive unit to the Buffalo Bills, whose defense was as rock-hard and resilient as the turf they played on at the "Rockpile", War Memorial Stadium.

Great AFL defenses followed in Oakland, where the Raiders fielded "The Angry Eleven," in New York with the '68 Jets, and in Kansas City, where the Chiefs set records in 1968-69 with a defense that was arguably the AFL's best ever. K.C.'s Super Bowl IV unit that manhandled Minnesota featured all-time All-AFL players in Buck Buchanan and Jerry Mays up front, linebackers Willie Lanier and Bobby Bell, and safety Johnny Robinson.

Noll incorporated innovative AFL ideas, like the odd-man front and complex double zones, into his Steeler strategems, and though Pittsburgh's run of defensive brilliance was briefly interrupted when they were KO'd by Denver's "Orange Crush" unit in 1977, the Steel Curtain rebounded to win Super Bowl titles in 1978 and '79.

Pittsburgh's fourth Super Bowl championship marked a curtain call not only for the now famous Steel Curtain, but for the era of defensive dominance as well. Liberalized rules aimed at promoting point production paved the way for high-tech aerial assaults. The eighties and nineties saw the emergence of "Air Coryell" in San Diego, San Francisco's "West Coast" offense, Washington's "Ace Back" formation, Houston's "Run-and-Shoot" and Buffalo's "No-Huddle" offense.

Colorful, dominating defenses were found in the '85 Bears, '86 Giants, and '91 Eagles, but they represented less of a modern trend than a throwback to an earlier era. An era when fans exhorted the fifties Giants and sixties Packers, the Fearsome Foursome and Purple Gang, Doomsday and the Steel Curtain, with chants of "Dee-fense! Dee-fense!"

It was an era when the defense never rested, and stated its case convincingly. An era when colorful defenses ruled the day in the NFL.