

“THE GRITS BLITZ”

by Mark Speck

Great defenses have always been revered in the NFL. The best ones have long since become the stuff of legend, and have earned the utmost respect of fans, players and coaches alike.

We all remember their colorful nicknames -- Orange Crush, Monsters of the Midway, Steel Curtain, Doomsday, Purple People Eaters, Killer Bs, New York Sack Exchange, Fearsome Foursome. Even when the defense has no name -- The No-Name Defense -- it earns a nickname. And we all remember the larger than life players who have manned these defenses -- Greene, Alzado, Buoniconti, Singletary, Page, Gastineau, Olsen, Lilly, Lambert, Marshall.

But one great defense we may not remember. It didn't win any championships, or include many great names. But it was just as good as some of these other units, and it too earned a colorful nickname -- "The Grits Blitz", the moniker used for the defense of the 1977 Atlanta Falcons.

When the '76 season ended, it looked like the only thing the '77 Falcons would be remembered for was lousy football. Atlanta had managed only two winning seasons in 11 years, and had never made the playoffs. The team had just finished their second 4-and-10 season in a row, and prospects for 1977 looked bleak. Owner Rankin Smith showed head coach/ General Manager Pat Pepler the door after the season. To replace Pepler, Smith grabbed a little-known assistant from Chuck Knox's staff in Los Angeles. Leeman Bennett had also coached with the Cardinals and Lions before taking over as the Rams receiver coach. At 39 he was the youngest head coach in the NFL. His philosophy was much like that of Knox -- ball control, a strong running game, patience and power. But while he may have subscribed to the Rams philosophy, the scribes said, he would have to make it work without the Rams' talent.

The Falcons had given up 312 points in 1976 and had been embarrassed by the Rams 59-0 on Monday Night TV. Atlanta had finished 23rd in the NFL against the run. To make matters worse, All-World Linebacker Tommy Nobis had retired, and defensive end Claude Humphrey, fed up with losing, was demanding a trade. The schedule for 1977 called for eight games against teams strong enough to make the playoffs. No one was shocked when the Falcons were picked for last in the NFC West.

If all that wasn't enough, starting quarterback Steve Bartkowski had a knee operation during camp and was scheduled to miss the first six games. It figured to be a long season in Atlanta.

But Bennett was just what the Falcons needed. Although relatively unknown, he had a reputation as an even-tempered man with a great deal of coaching expertise. All he needed was experience. Those who knew him during his years as an assistant knew he had head coaching potential. They also knew he had his work cut out for him with the woeful Falcons.

Bennett, however, had something they had never experienced in Atlanta -- a plan. The new coach had a plan, a scheme, a system, a welcome change from the goofing around the Falcon franchise had been doing since its birth in 1966.

He knew he didn't have the league's best personnel on defense, so he and his defensive coaches -- who included a bulldog of a man named Jerry Glanville -- installed a blitzing, swarming scheme to compensate for the lack of talent. Bennett wanted his charges to blitz, blitz and then blitz some more. And not just one or two players at a time. The Falcons' scheme included a play called the "Sticky Sam" in which no less than nine players blitzed.

"We needed to establish a positive attitude", said Bennett, "and create the feeling of having a chance to win every time we lined up."

The first time the Falcons lined up in 1977 was at home against Bennett's old team, the Rams. It was student against teacher, and Bennett and the Falcons took the Rams to school. Atlanta hadn't beaten L.A. since 1973, and had absorbed that 59-0 pasting the year before. But the Falcons spoiled Joe

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Namath's L.A. debut and their swarming defense held the Rams -- the N.F.C.'s best rushing team in 1976 -- to only 59 yards on the ground. L.A. fumbled three times -- once by Lawrence McCutcheon on the Atlanta 13 in the third quarter -- and the Falcons sent 55,956 fans home with a 17-6 upset win.

Atlanta traveled to RFK to face the Redskins, and once again the defense rose to the challenge. Blitzing and swarming all over the field, the Falcons held Washington to 105 yards on the ground and 252 yards in total offense. Atlanta forced three turnovers, including interceptions by Rick Byas and Ralph Ortega. But as great as the defense was, the offense was just as awful, and this would eventually prove to be the Falcons' undoing in 1977. The running game spun its collective wheels and Scott Hunter hit on only 16 of 33 passes. The Falcons blew several scoring chances, and could manage only a couple of field goals by Nick Mike-Mayer. A Billy Kilmer to Mike Thomas TD pass in the third quarter was the difference as the 'Skins triumphed, 10-6.

Back home a week later, the Falcon defense suffocated the Giants. Atlanta held New York to 177 yards in total offense, registered nine sacks, and the Giants line so flustered by the blitz that they committed seven holding penalties -- four by center Ralph Hill, who must have thought he was in the middle of a Manhattan rush hour. The offense was a little more efficient, as Haskel Stanback rushed for 84 yards and Hunter hit on 11 of 18 passes. When the Giants cut the Atlanta lead to 10-3, the Falcons drove 80 yards to put the game out of reach, 17-3.

People around the league were now starting to talk about the new and improved Falcon defense, and on October 9th that talk got louder. Atlanta sacked 49er quarterbacks Jim Plunkett and Scott Bull four times and allowed only 5 pass completions for 70 yards. A Scott Hunter-to-Alfred Jenkins TD pass was all the Falcons needed to blank 'Frisco, 7-0 and move into first place in the NFC West.

A week later in Buffalo, the defense again performed admirably. Although O.J. ran for 138 yards and went over 10,000 career rushing yards -- what defense in the 70's DIDN'T give up a 100-yard game or a milestone to the Juice? -- the Falcons held the Bills to a Neil O'Donoghue field goal, harassed Joe Ferguson into an 8 of 21 passing day and forced two turnovers.

Unfortunately, however, the offense once again sabotaged the efforts of the defense. Atlanta could manage only 200 yards in total offense, and Scott Hunter hit on only 9 of 29 passes for 95 yards and was intercepted twice. Their only real threat came with 5:21 left in the game and was courtesy of the defense. Linebacker Robert Pennywell blocked a Marv Bateman punt and the Falcons took over on the Bill 13. Three running plays gained only nine yards. On fourth down, Bennett eschewed a tying field goal and went for the first down. Hunter, however, was stacked up by Keith Moody. Atlanta was the first team the Bills had shut out in almost three years, 3-0.

"I made a poor decision (to go for it)," said Bennett. "I didn't follow my basic coaching philosophy which is to get points when you can. I thought we could make the first down, maybe even get a touchdown. I sent the play in. All in all, I blew it."

The Falcons faced their second Hall of Fame runner in as many weeks, but fared much better against Walter Payton, holding him to 69 yards on 24 carries, and better yet, out of the end zone. Atlanta also forced five turnovers, and whipped the Bears, 16-10. The Falcons had already equaled their win totals of 1975 and 1976, and were tied with the Rams for first place in the West. So far, their defense had given up only 32 points, by far the fewest in the NFL.

The defense had pumped up the impatient Atlanta fans, who were hungry for a winner, and they came out 59,257 strong to see the Falcons face off against the Central Division-leading Vikings.

As expected, it was a tight defensive struggle. After a scoreless first quarter, the Falcons got a break when Rolland Lawrence intercepted a Fran Tarkenton pass and returned it 30 yards to the Viking 49. Scott Hunter then stunned the Vikes on first down by whipping a 49-yard TD pass to back-up Tight End Greg McCrary to put Atlanta up, 7-0.

But Tarkenton was too much for the Falcons. Although the ever-changing Falcon defense switched formations constantly and blitzed at will, the veteran signal-caller read every defense Atlanta threw at him. He hit on 16 of 26 passes for 235 yards and two touchdowns. Still, the stubborn Falcons defense kept it close all day long, but finally lost, 14-7 to the defending NFC champs. Even in defeat, the Falcons

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had impressed the Vikings, and afterwards Bud Grant said, "The Falcons are for real; they are here to stay."

But the Falcons couldn't stay in first place. A week later, Atlanta's defense strangled the 49ers, holding San Francisco to 97 yards in total offense, 53 of those on one drive, and eight first downs. Steve Bartkowski made his first start since October 3rd of 1976 and probably wished he was back on the bench. He completed only 12 of 26 passes, was intercepted twice and sacked seven times. The Falcons offense could only manage to get past midfield twice. The Niners won, 10-3, knocking Atlanta out of its first place tie.

The offense struggled again the next week against Detroit, a team the Falcons had not beaten in nine tries. But the team was once again saved by their reckless, relentless defense. Trailing 6-3 in the fourth quarter, the Falcons scored on a 14-yard fumble recovery by Ralph Ortega and a 20-yard interception return by Robert Pennywell. As their offense sputtered in the last quarter, the defense turned vicious, intercepting two passes, recovering a fumble and sacking Lion quarterback Greg Landry three times. The Falcons won, 17-6 to stay a game behind the Rams and in the playoff hunt.

Atlanta, a team that had surrendered 312 points the year before, was now seriously threatening the record for fewest points allowed in a 14-game season. The Purple People Eaters of Minnesota had given up only 133 points in 1969. So far, in 9 games, Atlanta had given up only 62 points.

Incredibly, the Falcons were doing this with almost the same lineup as the year before. With the exceptions of tackle Wilson Fautuina and linebacker Robert Pennywell (who was subbing for the injured Fulton Kuykendall), no newcomers were getting significant playing time. It was just holdovers Claude Humphrey, Mike Tilleman, Greg Brezina, Dewey McClain, Ray Brown and Rolland Lawrence and Bennett's game plan of blitzing people to death. Bennett had his defense playing with more abandon than any in the league, and they had earned a reputation for making the big plays that won games.

Like any good defense in NFL history, Atlanta's had finally earned a nickname -- "The Grits Blitz."

The defense had their way for most of the next game against the Saints. The Falcons built a 20-7 halftime lead as the "Grits Blitz" harassed starting quarterback Bobby Douglass unmercifully. Rick Byas' 72 yard interception return put Atlanta up by 13 at intermission.

Then Archie Manning took over. He replaced Douglass after missing four games with injuries and immediately lit a fire under the Saints. Like Tarkenton before him, Manning solved the Falcons schemes and blitzes time and again. A blitzing defense is a gambling defense, and sometimes that gamble doesn't pay off. A good veteran quarterback like Manning is capable of beating that type of defense. He whipped two TD passes to tight end Henry Childs and the Saints upset the Falcons, 21-20. It was the most points the Falcons had given up all season.

"A tough loss to take" was how Bennett summed it up.

The defense rebounded to keep the Falcons in the playoff hunt. They smothered the Tampa Bay offense in what may have been their best performance of the season. The Bucs could manage only 8 first downs and 78 yards in total offense. Atlanta forced 5 turnovers, including four interceptions, and harassed Tampa Bay quarterbacks Gary Huff and Randy Hedberg into a 5 of 23 passing day. Bennett's ball-control offense moved efficiently, Haskel Stanback rushing for 75 yards and two touchdowns, and the Falcons won 17-0. At 6-5, they were two games behind the Rams in the West and one game behind the Redskins in the wild-card race.

The Falcons faced another team with playoff aspirations, the Patriots, at home the next week. A big crowd of 57,511 was on hand, and they spent the day like they had other Sundays -- booing the offense and cheering the defense.

The Falcons defense held the Pats to just three field goals in the first three quarters and kept an opponent under 100 yards rushing for the fourth time of the season. But the offense was awful once again, managing only 9 first downs and 124 yards in total offense. Bartkowski had a terrible day, hitting on just 7 of 18 passes and being intercepted 4 times and sacked eight more.

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So it was up to the defense to make the big plays, and once again it did. Byas intercepted a Steve Grogan pass and returned it 17 yards to the Patriot 14 to set up Bartkowski's scoring pass to Wallace Francis that cut New England's lead to 9-7.

Early in the last quarter, the "Grits Blitz" did it again as rookie defensive tackle Edgar Fields blocked his third punt of the season, and defensive back Frank Reed recovered on the Patriot 12. That set up Fred Steinfort's 25-yard field goal that put Atlanta up 10-9 with 13 minutes left.

But all season, the Falcons had lived and died with the blitz, and on this day they died with it, along with their playoff chances. The Pats moved 89 yards as Grogan exploited the stunting, blitzing Falcons, and hit Stanley Morgan with the winning TD pass. The Falcons had lost, 16-10.

Although the playoffs were no longer in sight, Atlanta had something else in its crosshairs -- the record for fewest points allowed in a season. So far, the Falcons had given up just 99 points in 12 games. If they could just hold their last two opponents to under 34 points, the record was theirs.

In Los Angeles, Atlanta faced the Rams, whom they had beaten 17-6 in Week One. But this was not the same Rams team the Falcons had played before. They were on their way to their fifth straight NFC West title and were riding a five-game winning streak. They would pose the most serious challenge to the record, as Atlanta played perhaps their only bad defensive game of the year. The Falcons lost, 23-7, the most points they had allowed in a game all season.

If the Falcons were to set the record, they would have to hold the Saints to 10 points or less in their last game. New Orleans had beaten Atlanta earlier, 21-20, but this time the Falcons put it all together. The offense put on its best display of the season, scoring a season-high 35 points. The Falcons shredded the Saint defense for 236 yards rushing, including 129 yards and two touchdowns by Haskel Stanback. Steve Bartkowski added two touchdown passes.

But once again it was the defense that shone through. The "Grits Blitz" gave up only 279 yards in total offense and forced five turnovers. They drove Archie Manning from the game and put the clamps on the Saint running game. A second-quarter touchdown was all Atlanta would allow. The Falcons won, 35-7 and the record was theirs.

"We are the best defensive team in the whole world," crowed Claude Humphrey, "the whole, wide world!"

"We are very proud of our defensive record, and everybody contributed," said Bennett. "The defense did a whale of a job in stopping the opposition, the offense did not turn the ball over often, and the special teams did an excellent job of leaving the defense with good field position."

When it was all said and done, the Falcons had given up only 129 points, a new record for a 14-game season. The Falcons also allowed the fewest first downs (192) and fewest passing yards (1,384). They forced the most fumbles in the NFC (22) and compiled 42 sacks and 26 interceptions, both team records. They had allowed only five rushing touchdowns all season. To put that in perspective, in their 59-0 loss to the Rams in 1976, the Falcons had given up seven -- in one game!

The defense had improved tremendously, and Bennett, who had been Rankin Smith's second choice to coach the Falcons -- the owner had originally wanted a man named Dan Reeves -- was named NFC Coach of the Year.

No, the names may not be familiar, and no, the Falcons didn't win any championships. But the "Grits Blitz" defense proved to be just as good as some others in NFL history -- even if they aren't the most remembered.

What a Difference a Year Makes:

Atlanta's Defensive Rankings

	1976	1977
First Downs Allowed	257 (9th)	192 (1st)
Rushing Yards Allowed	2517 (13th)	1858 (4th)
Passing Yards Allowed	2001 (8th)	1384 (1st)
Points Allowed	312 (12th)	129 (1st)

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Turnovers Forced	38 (7th)	48 (1st)
Turnover Ratio	-3 (9th)	+23 (1st)
Rushing TDs Allowed	22 (14th)	5 (1st)