

SIMPATICO! A TALE OF TWO RAIDER QBs

By Joe Horrigan

The Oakland Raiders upset victory over the Philadelphia Eagles in Super Bowl XV, focused attention on the resurgence of Jim Plunkett's career. Just what magic formula is responsible for the comeback heroics of Plunkett is unclear. Some will argue that it is the "genius" of Al Davis, while others say it is simple the healing of his physical and psychological wounds suffered elsewhere. Perhaps one ingredient in Plunkett's rebirth that is being overlooked is that of Raiders' head coach, Tom Flores.

Agreed, head coaches generally receive too much credit for individual and team superlatives (and too much blame for failure), but the similarities in Plunkett and Flores are too great to be overlooked.

First, there is the obvious, both soft-spoken men are Mexican-Americans, California natives, and have played quarterback for the Oakland Raiders. But rather than the end of the similarities, this is just the beginning.

Jim Plunkett began his pro football career in 1971 with the New England Patriots. After numerous shoulder problems and eventual surgery, he was traded at the end of the 1975 season to the San Francisco 49ers for a handful of draft choices. The draft choices approved a gold mine for the Pats, while Plunkett suffered through two non-productive seasons with the 49ers before being released.

Fearing that his pro football career might be over, Plunkett reported to the Oakland Raiders as a free agent in 1978. Jim Plunkett now proudly wears the "mark of excellence," a Super Bowl ring.

Tom Flores, on the other hand, began his pro career in 1960 with the Oakland Raiders of the then new American Football League. Although he'd had tryouts in both the CFL and NFL in 1958 and 1959, chronic shoulder problems and eventual surgery kept Flores from catching on in either league.

Flores began the 1960 season sharing time with veteran quarterback Vito "Babe" Parilli, but by mid-season was the number one signal caller. By season's end, Flores led the league in pass completion percentage (54.0) and fewest interceptions (12). The next season, Flores finished second in the league being Pro Football Hall of Famer George Blanda of the AFL champion Houston Oilers. Flores sat out the entire 1962 season with illness, but returned in 1963 to win back his starting berth.

After the completion of the 1966 season, in a surprise move, the Oakland Raiders traded Flores to the Buffalo Bills. As was the case in the Plunkett trade, the Flores deal proved more beneficial to his former team than to his future one. Flores and veteran receiver Art Powell were sent to Buffalo in return for a man whose name still graces the pages of the Oakland Raider record book, Daryle Lamonica.

Although Flores was surprised and disappointed to be traded to Buffalo, at least it appeared that he was being traded to a winning team. However, even that went sour. After winning the AFL East title in 1966, the Bills nose-dived to the basement in 1968. And, after two injury riddled seasons, Flores was released.

As fate would have it, both Plunkett and Flores prospered from being cut. Flores was picked up as a free agent by the Kansas City Chiefs and earned his first Super Bowl ring as a back-up to Len Dawson in Super Bowl IV. Oakland, as mentioned, has just presented its free agent quarterback with his first Super Bowl ring. Just as Tom Flores began his pro football career eleven years before Jim Plunkett, he also earned his Super Bowl ring eleven years before him.

Coincidence? Maybe.

Perhaps the best example of the amazing similarities between these two men can be shown by examining their respective "comeback seasons."

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Jim Plunkett's "comeback season" began in the fifth game of 1980. In that game, Raider starting quarterback Dan Pastorini was forced to the sidelines with an injury. Pastorini, who had just joined the Raiders during the off-season, was not living up to the great expectations the team and the fans, perhaps unfairly, had placed upon him. In his first four starts, he was only able to produce two wins. Early predictions of a last place finish for the Raiders began to look like a distinct possibility. Although Plunkett directed three scoring drives, he was unable to bring his team to victory in that fifth game, losing to the Kansas City Chiefs, 31-17. But, with Pastorini sidelined, Plunkett was now the starting quarterback, and, as a starter, he directed only two losing efforts in the 1980 regular season. Behind Jim Plunkett's big play offense, the Raiders rallied to a second place finish in the AFC West, just behind the division champion San Diego Chargers.

The Tom Flores story reads much the same. Flores' "comeback season" was 1963. In his case, he was attempting a comeback after a year's absence due to a lung infection, later diagnosed as a form of tuberculosis. Everyone, including Tom's doctor, assumed that his pro football days were over. Everyone, that is, except Tom Flores. Against his doctor's advice, Flores asked the new Raiders' head coach and general manager, Al Davis, for a tryout. In the meantime, Oakland had secured the services of veteran Cotton Davidson as their starting quarterback. But, in the Al Davis tradition, Flores was given another chance.

The rest you can almost guess. In the fifth game of the 1963 season, Tom Flores became the starting quarterback, taking over a team that had won only two of its first four games. As a starter, Flores would direct his team to only two defeats in the regular season. And, of course, the Raiders finished second, just behind AFL West champion San Diego.

True, Tom Flores and the second place 1963 Oakland Raiders did not defy the experts and go on to win the Super Bowl as did Jim Plunkett and the 1980 Raiders. There was no Super Bowl in 1963. Flores had to wait until 1969 when his Kansas City back-up role put him on a Super Bowl winner. Ironically, the Chiefs had finished second to Oakland.

Now, eleven years later, Tom Flores the Coach has his second Super Bowl ring, thanks in large part to his "comeback alter ego," Jim Plunkett.

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