

Ranking the Super Bowls, Part Three

by Joe Mulder

And we're back! Let's finish it up, shall we? I present to you the all-time greatest Super Bowls, numbers 17 through 1.

17. IV - Kansas City Chiefs 23, Minnesota Vikings 7 (January 11, 1970; New Orleans, LA) By now I've developed a long and cherished tradition of not talking about the many, many Super Bowls that were lost by my beloved Vikings.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: None to speak of.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: In the last game played before the NFL/AFL merger the Chiefs, 12.5-point underdogs, prove that the Jets' shocking upset of Baltimore a year earlier was no fluke, and that the AFL teams can most certainly compete with their NFL counterparts.

16. XVII - Washington Redskins 27, Miami Dolphins 17 (January 30, 1983; Pasadena, CA) Sorry, Redskins and Dolphins fans. This was a decent game, but I can't think of a single thing to say about it.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: Miami's Fulton Walker scores the first kickoff return touchdown in Super Bowl history, giving the Dolphins a 17-10 second-quarter lead.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: Washington's John Riggins sets then-records for most rushing yards (166) and most rushing attempts (38) in a Super Bowl.

15. VII - Miami Dolphins 14, Washington Redskins 7 (January 14, 1973; Los Angeles, CA) This Super Bowl is remembered as the one in which the Dolphins completed the only undefeated championship season in NFL history, a feat that – as the 2007 Patriots can tell you – isn't particularly easy to accomplish. What few people remember is that the Redskins were actually favored by a point, but their offense was held scoreless by the Dolphins' "No-Name Defense" (the fact that the Dolphins defense's nickname was predicated on the fact that they had no nickname: that's heavy. That's heavy, man) the entire game. The Redskins' only touchdown, in fact, came on one of the more memorable plays in NFL history.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: With just over two minutes left in the game and Miami leading 14-0, the Dolphins attempt a 42-yard field goal. The kick is blocked, and the ball bounces to Miami's cartoonishly short and bald European placekicker, Garo Yepremian. Yepremian, with his tiny soccer player hands, attempts to pass the ball, but instead ends up batting it into the hands of Washington's Mike Bass, who returns it for a Redskins touchdown to make the score 14-7 and put the Dolphins' perfect season in jeopardy.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: The Dolphins complete the only undefeated championship season in NFL history. We've already covered this; weren't you paying attention before?

14. XXX - Dallas Cowboys 27, Pittsburgh Steelers 17 (January 28, 1996; Tempe, AZ) When the Cowboys and Steelers get together you're gonna get a good game, as we'll see. This was the twelfth consecutive Super Bowl won by the NFC team, but the first Super Bowl in five years that was remotely competitive. The upstart Steelers came in with a hungry young coach in Bill Cowher and an offensive weapon in Kordell "Slash" Stewart, a rookie backup quarterback who also played wide receiver (remember those days, by the way? When Kordell Stewart was considered an offensive weapon?). The game is most remembered for the way quarterback Neil O'Donnell killed the Steelers by throwing two second-half interceptions to Dallas cornerback Larry Brown, both of which the Dallas offense converted into touchdowns.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: After a third-quarter field goal, the Steelers take the Cowboys completely by surprise and recover an onside kick, leading to a Pittsburgh touchdown that pulls the Steelers to within three points.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: The Cowboys become the first team to win three Super Bowls in four seasons.

13. XXII - Washington Redskins 42, Denver Broncos 10 (January 31, 1988; San Diego, CA) The Broncos led 10-0 at the end of the first quarter, but then Doug Williams, Timmy Smith and the Redskins exploded for 35 points in the second quarter. Say what you will, but I believe that 35 points in one quarter is the current Super Bowl record that is least likely ever to be broken. Much has been made of the fact that Doug Williams became the first black quarterback to win a Super Bowl, and indeed, Williams' feat paved the way for other black quarterbacks such as Tony Banks (2000 Ravens), Shaun King (2002 Buccaneers), Rohan Davey (2003 and 2004 Patriots), Charlie Batch (2005 Steelers), Anthony Wright (2007 Giants), Byron Leftwich (2008 Steelers) and Dennis Dixon (2008 Steelers) to collect Super Bowl rings of their own.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: Redskins rookie running back Timmy Smith runs for a Super Bowl record 204 yards; Doug Williams becomes the first black quarterback to win a Super Bowl.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: Doug Williams becomes the first black quarterback to win a Super Bowl. Meanwhile, Doug Williams become the first black quarterback to win a Super Bowl.

12. XX - Chicago Bears 46, New England Patriots 10 (January 26, 1986; New Orleans, LA) The Bears were a juggernaut, having shut out both of their playoff opponents on the way to the Super Bowl. The Patriots were a

third-place team that got hot and won three road games to reach the Super Bowl. It's difficult to think of a scenario in which it would have been easier to predict the outcome of a championship game or series, and the Bears certainly didn't disappoint. The Bears defense – led by Mike Singletary and his crazy-guy eyes – had many sacks (seven) as the Patriots did rushing yards, and limited New England to -19 yards of total offense during the first half (that's right: minus 19).

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: Bears rookie defensive lineman William "The Refrigerator" Perry scores on a one-yard touchdown run late in the third quarter to give the Bears a 44-3 lead.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: The 1985 Bears, 15-1 during the regular season, outscore their three playoff opponents 91-10, leading many – including me – to consider them the best team in the history of major North American professional sports.

11. XIII - Pittsburgh Steelers 35, Dallas Cowboys 31 (January 21, 1979; Miami, FL) A classic, although one that didn't look like a classic with about seven minutes left in the fourth quarter, when the Steelers held a 35-17 lead. One long touchdown drive, one recovered onside kick and one quick Roger Staubach touchdown pass later, however, and Dallas had pulled to within four points with only 22 seconds to play. A second onside kick attempt failed, though, and the Steelers held on to win.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: Dallas tight end Jackie Smith drops a potential third quarter touchdown pass, a moment immortalized by then-Cowboys radio announcer Verne Lundquist's "Bless his heart, he's *got* to be the sickest man in America" call.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: The Steelers become the first team ever to win three Super Bowl titles. The Cowboys become the first defending champions to lose in the Super Bowl.

10. I - Green Bay Packers 35, Kansas City Chiefs 10 (January 15, 1967; Los Angeles, CA) Not a particularly great game, but it deserves a spot in the Top Ten because it was the first one. Maybe you don't think that's entirely fair to other, arguably better Super Bowls. Well, if so... maybe you should *shut up!*

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: Veteran Packers wide receiver Max McGee, badly hung over from a night of breaking curfew and partying in Hollywood, is pressed into duty after starter Bowd Dowler goes down with an injury; McGee promptly makes a spectacular one-handed grab of a Bart Starr pass and takes it 37 yards for the first touchdown in Super Bowl history.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: It was the first Super Bowl

ever; is that significant enough for you?

9. XXXII - Denver Broncos 31, Green Bay Packers 24 (January 25, 1998; San Diego, CA) The Broncos finally won their first championship in spectacular fashion, upsetting the heavily, *heavily* favored (11 1/2 points) Packers. The Broncos took a 14-7 lead in the second quarter on a particularly cagey play; star running back Terrell Davis was used as a decoy by Denver head coach Mike Shanahan, who wanted quarterback John Elway to fake a handoff and then carry the ball himself. Shanahan feared that the Packers wouldn't bite on the fake if Davis wasn't in the game, so Davis was sent in even though he was suffering from a migraine headache so intense that he could barely see. The play worked, Elway scored a touchdown and the game was afoot.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: The game tied 17-17 late in the third quarter, the 37-year-old Elway scrambles for a first down to the Packers 4-yard-line, diving for the final yards and being spun like a helicopter by two Green Bay defenders; with Green Bay in Denver territory trailing by seven in the game's final minute, Broncos linebacker John Mobley knocks away a Brett Favre fourth-down pass to seal the win.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: Considered by many – including me – to be the greatest quarterback ever, Elway finally gets a Super Bowl title. The Broncos end their Super Bowl futility by winning their first title in five tries.

8. XLIII - Pittsburgh Steelers 27, Arizona Cardinals 23 (February 1, 2009; Tampa, FL) Here we are, back where it all started; loyal reader(s?) will remember that the impetus for this series of columns was the declaration by some – not including me – that the most recent Super Bowl was also the greatest. Turns out it wasn't even the greatest Super Bowl involving the Steelers, but more on that in a minute. Yes, the game came down to the final minutes, and the fourth quarter itself was marvelous. But this isn't a list of the greatest fourth quarters in Super Bowl history (look for that 11-part series beginning sometime in April*), it's the list of the greatest Super Bowls in history. As such, I cannot in good conscience rank any higher than 8th a game during the third quarter of which I turned to those I was with and remarked, "This is kind of a dog of a game, huh?" Plus, the officiating was subpar. It would be a stretch to say that it decided the outcome, but it was subpar. From a memorable moments/plays standpoint, though, I will admit that it was a tough Super Bowl to beat.

*kidding

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger throws the winning touchdown pass to Santonio Holmes, who barely touches his toes in the end zone to give the Steelers the lead with 42 seconds to play; Steelers linebacker James Harrison intercepts a Kurt Warner

pass and returns it 100 yards for a touchdown as the first half ends; Cardinals wide receiver torches the top-ranked Steelers defense for 115 yards and two touchdowns...in the fourth quarter alone.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: The Steelers become the first and only team to win six Super Bowls. The Cardinals play in the Super Bowl for the first time, thus defying the predictions of everybody, ever.

7. XXIII - San Francisco 49ers 20, Cincinnati Bengals 16 (January 22, 1989; Miami, FL) Football fans hadn't seen a particularly competitive Super Bowl game in over ten years, but Super Bowl XXIII packed a decade's worth of thrills into just sixty minutes (pretty good, huh? That could be in like a Super Bowl book or something, no?). The teams were knotted at 3-3 at halftime and in fact no touchdowns were scored until the final minute of the third quarter, when Cincinnati's Stanford Jennings scored on a 93-yard kickoff return to give the Bengals a 13-6 lead. One San Francisco touchdown and one Cincinnati field goal later, the stage was set for the scoring drive that would make Joe Montana a legend (dude! I could totally write a Super Bowl book! That's gold right there, is what that is).

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: In the huddle late in the fourth quarter, Montana reportedly points into the stands and says, "Isn't that John Candy?", then proceeds to lead the 49ers on a 92-yard, 11-play Super Bowl-winning drive capped off by a touchdown pass to John Taylor with 34 seconds on the clock.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: Is hailed by many at the time as the best Super Bowl ever; is hailed by me now as one of the best seven. Also, Bengals running back Stanley Wilson is suspended from the team for getting high on cocaine the night before the game, making him the first prominent player to get in major trouble right before a Super Bowl.

6. XXXIV - St. Louis Rams 23, Tennessee Titans 16 (January 30, 2000; Atlanta, GA) The Rams, the losingest team of the 1990s, completed a spectacular turnaround to finish 13-3. The story of the season was St. Louis quarterback Kurt Warner, who was pressed into starting duty when Trent Green was lost for the year during the preseason; Warner won the NFL MVP award while helping the Rams offense score what was then the third-most points in league history. The Titans, for their part, had advanced to the Super Bowl with the help of the "Music City Miracle," a last-second kickoff return to beat the Buffalo Bills in the opening round of the playoffs. The Titans managed to slow down the explosive Rams offense for most of the game, limiting St. Louis to three first-half field goals but failing to score themselves until late in the third quarter. In the end, the Titans fell juuuuust short.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: Mike Jones of the

Rams tackles Kevin Dyson of the Titans one yard shy of the end zone as time expires, preserving the St. Louis victory on one of the most dramatic plays in the history of the NFL; Warner connects with Isaac Bruce on a 73-yard go-ahead touchdown pass late in the fourth quarter.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: Not much, actually, other than the fact that we got to check the Rams off the list of teams that hadn't won a Super Bowl, and you got to check the Titans off the list of teams that hadn't played in one.

5. X - Pittsburgh Steelers 21, Dallas Cowboys 17 (January 18, 1976; Miami, FL) Super Bowl X was one of the first great Super Bowls, and was the first to feature two teams that already had at least one Super Bowl to their credit. The game was competitive throughout, with Pittsburgh pulling out to a 21-10 lead late in the fourth quarter on a Lynn Swann touchdown. Dallas scored on Roger Staubach's touchdown pass to Percy Howard (on what would be Howard's only NFL catch) to pull to within four points of the Steelers with two minutes left to play. The Cowboys then recovered an onside kick and drove down as far as the Steelers 38-yard-line. On the game's final play, Roger Staubach's pass was tipped by Steelers defensive back Mike Wagner (not to be confused with PoopReading.com contributor Mike Wagner) and intercepted in the end zone by Glen Edwards.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: Pittsburgh's Lynn Swann makes an astounding, balletic 53-yard catch, tipping the ball to himself as he falls to the turf; after Steelers kicker Roy Gerela misses his second field goal of the game, Cowboys safety Cliff Harris taunts him with a sarcastic congratulatory pat on the helmet. Steelers linebacker Jack Lambert takes exception and throws Harris to the ground. Because the incident takes place back before before every kid got a participation trophy, before we were all scared shitless of secondhand smoke and before simply looking at peanut dust would kill you instantly, Lambert is allowed to remain in the game. In fact, officials briefly consider awarding Pittsburgh a re-kick due to the extreme amount of sack shown by Lambert, but ultimately decide against it.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: The Steelers repeat as champs, which is notable.

4. III - New York Jets 16, Baltimore Colts 7 (January 12, 1969; Miami, FL) Super Bowl III deserves a spot this high on the list due almost entirely to its historical significance; the AFL champions – the Chiefs and Raiders, respectively – had been badly beaten by the NFL champion Packers in the first two Super Bowls; if the AFL could not be competitive, interest in the Super Bowl would surely wane and perhaps the merger of the two leagues, agreed upon two years earlier, might even be called into question. The game itself was no barn-burner; the Colts made a lot of mistakes and committed several turnovers that allowed the Jets to grind the clock with their conservative play calling and win the time-of-possession battle. Not the sexiest game plan

(particularly given the fact that the Jets had football's sexiest quarterback), but when you're a 17-point underdog, as the Jets were, you've pretty much just got to play the cards you're dealt and rely on a buttload of dumb luck. That's what the Jets did, and that's how they won.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: As time expires in the second quarter the Colts completely fool the Jets with a flea flicker play, but quarterback Earl Morrall fails to spot wide receiver Jimmy Orr wide open near the end zone and instead throws a pass that is intercepted by the Jets to bring the first half to a close; Jets QB Joe Namath, having literally guaranteed a victory early in the week, memorably jogs off the field at the end of the game with his index finger pointed in upward, "We're Number 1!"-style.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: The Jets prove that, on any given Sunday at least, the best of the AFL can beat the best of the NFL. As such, the Super Bowl as we know it today undoubtedly owes a large part of its cultural significance to Super Bowl III.

3. XXXVI - New England Patriots 20, St. Louis Rams 17 (February 3, 2002; New Orleans, LA) One hesitates to overstate the importance of sports in our actual lives (as opposed to the portions of our lives spent in the pursuit of leisure activities), but Super Bowl XXXVI, played just a few months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, certainly helped us start to feel our lives as we knew them were not in imminent peril. We gathered together and watched the Super Bowl, just like we always did. Unlike always, though, the game itself was a dramatic, memorable one. The upstart Patriots, led by second-year quarterback Tom Brady, came in as 14-point underdogs to the St. Louis Rams of Kurt Warner, Marshall Faulk, Isaac Bruce, Torry Holt, *et. al.*, known collectively as "The Greatest Show on Turf" and regarded by many as even better than the Super Bowl champion Rams of two seasons earlier. But the Patriots dominated early, somehow holding the Rams to only a field goal for a 14-3 halftime lead as football fans across the country asked themselves "how in the world are the Patriots doing this?" The Rams' high-powered offense finally got into gear in the fourth quarter as Warner led the team on two touchdown drives to tie the score at 17-17. The Patriots then took over with 90 seconds left to play, and the rest is history.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: New England's Ty Law picks off a pass and returns it for a touchdown to give the Patriots a 7-3 second quarter lead; Tom Brady marches the Patriots down the field with 1:30 to play and no time outs, and Adam Vinatieri nails the Super Bowl-winning field goal as time expires (Rams fans will point out, of course, that with seven seconds left on the clock when the ball was snapped, time *shouldn't* have expired. And they're right).

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: The Patriots win their first ever Super Bowl, and the first of what would be three in four years. For the first time ever, the winning score of the Super

Bowl comes on the game's final play.

2. XLII - New York Giants 17, New England Patriots 14 (February 3, 2008; Glendale, AZ) What else needs to be said about Super Bowl XLII? The Patriots were going for an unblemished record, a never-before-accomplished 19-0 season (the perfect 1972 Dolphins only played 17 games, including playoffs), and the Giants were regarded by many as lucky to have reached the Super Bowl at all. How wrong we were. Do you notice a pattern here, by the way? Most of these greatest-ever Super Bowls involve an underdog hanging around and ultimately toppling (or almost toppling) the heavy favorite, and that should come as no surprise; if you're a sports fan, that's the story you always want to see (unless you're a lifelong fan of the team that's favored, of course).

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: On 3rd-and-5 from the Giants 44-yard-line with 1:15 left in the fourth quarter and the Giants down 14-10, New York quarterback Eli Manning somehow struggles free from the grasp of three Patriots pass rushers and heaves a 32-yard pass to David Tyree, who holds onto the ball by pinning it against his helmet as New England's Rodney Harrison swats away at it. Tyree's catch, widely acknowledged as the greatest play in Super Bowl history, is commonly called "The Helmet Catch" but, as Cracked.com pointed out, should absolutely be referred to as "The Giant Snatch."

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: The stunning Giants upset ruins the Patriots' chance to complete a 19-0 campaign that, let's face it, would have been the most historically significant NFL season by any football team, ever.

1. XXV - New York Giants 20, Buffalo Bills 19 (January 27, 1991; Tampa, FL) So, here we are. The greatest Super Bowl ever played.

What makes it so great? Well, you've got two great teams, for one thing. The 13-3 Bills had run roughshod over opponents all year, securing their Super Bowl berth by virtue of a 51-3 shellacking of the Los Angeles Raiders in the AFC title game. The 13-3 Giants (one of those losses having been to the Bills at Giants Stadium) came in having toppled the two-time defending Super Bowl champion 49ers on the road to win the NFC championship. The Bills, however, were 14 point favorites. The game began on a historically high note as Whitney Houston famously belted out the national anthem, bringing a tear to many a patriotic eye in the midst of the Gulf War. Once the game got going the Giants took a page out of the Jets' Super Bowl III playbook and played grind-the-clock, eating up time with a power running game and keeping the Bills' potent, up-temp no-huddle offense off the field. The Giants, in fact, would set a Super Bowl record for time of possession with 40:22, and they held the ball for 22 minutes out of a possible 30 in the second half.

Buffalo's offense couldn't be stopped completely, though,

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and the Bills took a 19-17 fourth quarter lead on Thurman Thomas's 31-yard touchdown run. The Giants kicked field goal midway through the fourth quarter and, after the teams traded punts, the Bills got the ball back down by one with 2:16 to play. Bills Hall of Fame quarterback drove the team down the field to the Giants 29-yard-line with three seconds to play, leading to a 47-yard Scott Norwood field goal try that would become one of the most memorable plays in Super Bowl history and, depending on which team you rooted for, one of the most glorious or one of the most devastating.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS/PLAYS: Norwood misses, the Bills lose, and they lose the next three Super Bowls after that. To this day, you can walk up to anyone Buffalonian and say the words "wide right" and, if he does not immediately begin to convulse with deep, heaving sobs, he will murder you.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: What; being the greatest Super Bowl ever isn't significant enough for you?
