

THE GREATEST GAME EVER

By Rick Gonsalves

It's been nearly 40 years -- December 28, 1958 -- since The Greatest Game Ever was played between the New York Giants and Baltimore Colts.

The teams had arrived by different routes.

The New York Giants, under coach Jim Lee Howell, didn't set the league on fire at the beginning of the 1958 campaign. After five games the Giants were 3-2 and struggling to catch the Cleveland Browns for the lead in the Eastern Conference. Both teams met in game Six, with Cleveland sporting a perfect 5-0 record. The tough Giant defense, led by number 70 Sam Huff, held Jim Brown and Bobby Mitchell in check as New York ended Cleveland's streak with a 21-17 victory.

The following week, New York took on the undefeated Baltimore Colts at Yankee Stadium and sent them home with a 24-21 loss. George Shaw was the Baltimore quarterback for that game because John Unitas was still recuperating from broken ribs.

Over the next four weeks, the Giants lost just once. Going into the season's finale against Cleveland, New York was 8-3, one game out of first place. Like several of their past contests, the Giants had to win this one to make it all worthwhile. For the Browns, a victory or even a tie would do it for them.

Both teams battled to a 10-10 tie by late in the fourth quarter. The cold was bad enough but a wind-driven snow made playing conditions worse when New York moved the ball to Cleveland's 42. On fourth down with a few minutes remaining to be played, Pat Summerall lined up for the field goal attempt and powered the ball through the uprights to give the Giants a 13-10 win and a tie for the Eastern Conference title. Besides New York, only two other clubs, the Washington Redskins (1956) and Chicago Cardinals (1956) had ever beaten Paul Brown's team twice in the same season.

In the playoff game the next weekend, the Giants found the going a little easier downing the Browns 10-0. It was also the second time New York had shut out Cleveland in their meetings over the years, a feat no other team had ever accomplished.

Baltimore experienced few problems in the Western Conference, clinching the title late in November.

December 28 was a mild day for the NFL title match, weather a little unusual for New York this time of year. But it helped to draw a sell-out crowd of 64,185 people to Yankee Stadium.

When the Giants took the field, they were a tired and drained team both physically and mentally. In at least 5 of their previous victories, they had to come from behind in the final two minutes. They did it by taking advantage of every possible break in situations where one mistake would have meant disaster. The Giants also lost the benefit of a weekend of rest before the championship game when they forced the rematch with the Browns.

But by the time Bert Rechichar kicked off for the Colts to begin this quest for the NFL crown, the Giants had regrouped and were ready to do battle once more.

Don Heinrich started at quarterback for New York. Coach Jim Lee Howell liked sending him in to feel out the opposition early in the game before switching to the crafty and shrewd veteran Charlie Conerly. Heinrich, however, failed to move the Giants on their first series.

Quarterback Johnny Unitas, healthy for this meeting, drove the Colts to the Giant 25 with the help of a flat pass which Lenny Moore turned into a long gain. That was all the Giants would allow, so the Colts tried a

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field goal. Lineman Art Spinnev blocked the wrong way, and Sam Huff stormed by him untouched to block the kick.

Charlie Conerly entered the game and, seeing that the Baltimore linebackers were charging too freely, launched a pitchout to Frank Gifford. He raced to the Colts' 31 where he was tripped up by defensive halfback Milt Davis, who prevented a possible Giants' touchdown. Conerly then sent halfback Alex Webster on a pass route out of the backfield. He was clear deep in Baltimore territory when Charlie threw in his direction. But just as he was ready to make the catch, he slipped and the ball sailed by him, costing the Giants another possible score. New York had to settle for a field goal and a 3-0 lead.

Unitas and the Colts began to dominate the game in the second period. Frank Gifford fumbled on his own 20. Gene "Big Daddy" Lipscomb, the 6-6, 290 pound Baltimore defensive tackle, immediately smothered the ball. Now, John established the running game, sending Alan Ameche and Lenny Moore in and around the New York defense. Then five plays later, Alan ran in from the two putting Baltimore ahead, 7-3.

After the ensuing kickoff, Charlie Conerly cranked up the Giants' offense but it sputtered on their own 42. Don Chandler boomed a high, spiraling punt which Jack Simpson dropped. Mel Guy recovered for New York near the Baltimore ten. Gifford, getting the call on the first play, fumbled again. Don Joyce landed on it giving the Colts possession on their own 14.

Unitas went to work, picking apart the New York defense by mixing running and passing plays excellently to keep the Giants off balance. Even Johnny U. himself kept the drive going by running 16 yards once when all his receivers were covered. From the Giant 15, Unitas hit Raymond Berry with a perfect pass between two defenders in the end zone to make it 14-3.

The Baltimore offensive line by now had no trouble handling the New York defenders. Jim Parker, in particular, the Colts' 275-pound rookie tackle, neutralized the brutal pass rush of Andy Robustelli, the Giants' great defensive end.

At the half, Baltimore had accumulated 198 yards on offense compared to New York's 86. Unitas got 115 of them through the air whereas Heinrich and Conerly could account for only 39.

Unitas came out firing to start the second half. Although Berry, Jim Mutscheller, and Moore were covered closely by the Giants' secondary, John found them time and again with perfectly thrown passes. Finally, the Colts were at the Giants' three, first and goal. To New York, it was an all too familiar situation, like many others they had faced during the regular season. A Baltimore touchdown now would all but end any chances of their making a comeback.

Tired and battered, they dug in. Four times Unitas tried to crack the defense and four times his efforts were turned back. The fans, who'd thought it was all over, went wild. No one at the time realized what effect this goal line stand would have on the future of pro football and television.

Charlie Conerly came in and called two running plays which moved New York to their 13. Next, he sent Kyle Rote, who was usually used for short passing yardage, deep downfield. Meanwhile, Charlie faked a pitchout to Gifford. The defense followed Gifford until Conerly arched a long pass in Rote's direction. He hauled it in but fumbled on the Baltimore 25. For a moment, every New York fan's heart went dead. Suddenly, Alex Webster, trailing the play as a blocker, picked up the ball and carried it to the one. Mel Triplett, on the second play, bulled his way over to cut the Colts' lead to 14-10.

The Giants broke through the Colts' fine protection of Unitas in the fourth quarter. Dick Modzelewski and Andy Robustelli each took turns dumping John for sizable losses. For once in the game, Parker wasn't on Robustelli.

On New York's first possession in the period, Conerly came up with another big play, completing a pass to Bob Schnelker for 46 yards to the Baltimore 15. From there, Charlie sent Gifford wide right, as though he would take a pitchout. This drew in the Colt defense. Frank took off downfield and Charlie put the ball in his hands for the touchdown giving New York the lead 17-14.

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Baltimore took the following kickoff and moved the ball from their 20 to the New York 59. Bert Rechichar, Baltimore's long-range kicker, tried a 46-yard field goal but it fell short.

The Giants had the lead and the ball with Conerly directing them swiftly downfield. At the Colt 42, misfortune struck the Giants once more. Phil King fumbled. The ball was inadvertently kicked around before Baltimore recovered. The Giant defense held again, forcing the Colts to punt.

New York got the ball on their 19. All they had to do was control it and the championship was theirs. Conerly drove them to their 40 where it was third and four with just two minutes remaining to be played. He sent Triplett up the middle on a fake handoff. The Colt defenders began to swarm all over him. But Charlie gave the ball to Frank Gifford who swept right. Instead of running straight ahead after making the turn, he cut back toward the middle. There, he was met by Gene Lipscomb and Gino Marchetti. Everyone went down in a pile. Once the players untangled, Gifford came up inches short of a first down and Marchetti came out with a broken ankle.

New York, faced with fourth and inches, elected to punt instead of trying for the vital first down. Don Chandler got off another beauty which Carl Taseff fielded at his own 14. The Giants knew the Colts had to pass to move the ball into scoring position quickly. They went into a prevent defense, designed to protect against long passes and sideline passes which could stop the clock.

Unitas at 25 was cool under this pressure. With time running out, he threw short over the middle until he reached the New York 13. Raymond Berry was his key target, catching three straight passes for 62 yards. Steve Myhra, a reserve linebacker and short-range field goal kicker, came in to try to tie it from the 20.

The clock was running, showing seven seconds when he got the ball away. Every head on the field and in the stadium watched the flight of the ball. It veered to the right, but the referee signaled it good and the NFL had its first overtime game ever.

The Giants won the coin-toss and chose to receive. Starting on their 20, Gifford ran for four yards. Conerly faked a draw play to pull in the linebackers and then tossed a pass toward Bob Schnelker for the first down. The ball was off-target, and Bob made a diving try for it but just fell short. On third and six, Charlie tried to pass again. This time his receivers were covered. Taking off on his 37-year old legs, he drove over the 30 where he was stopped by Bill Pellington and Don Shinnick inches from the first down. Had Don not turned Charlie's body sideways, stopping his forward progress, the quarterback might have made it.

Don Chandler punted the ball away. Carl Taseff caught it at his 20 and returned it to his 30. After five plays, Unitas was dumped for an 8-yard loss by Dick Modzelewski, making it third and 15 for Baltimore from their own 38. If the defense could hold for just one more down, New York would get the ball back. In the face of a strong rush, Unitas hit Berry on a hook pass for a first down. Unfortunately for the Giants, defensive halfback Carl Karilivacz slipped on the play, unable to stop the pass or Berry.

Modzelewski had been blowing in fast, so Unitas called a trap play. Alan Ameche breezed by the Giant defensive tackle for a 23-yard gain to the New York 21. It took four more plays and Baltimore was on the three. The team was thinking field goal, but Unitas continued for the end zone. He sent Ameche again off right tackle. End Jim Mutscheller put a crunching block on linebacker Cliff Livingston, who reached desperately for the driving fullback. But it was too late. Ameche scored to end the greatest game ever for pro football.

The scoreboard which flashed the final score was never used again. It was replaced by a newer one prior to the 1959 season.

What this game did was make professional football a big television commodity. The previous four championship games had netted a very small TV audience because they ended in routs: 56-10 in 1954, 38-14 in 1955, 47-7 in 1956, 59-14 in 1957. Had the Giants allowed a touchdown in the third period, the score would have been 21-3 and perhaps 50 million viewers would have switched channels. Instead, with

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the outcome still in doubt, they stayed tuned for a game loaded with drama, long plays, and great defensive plays that captivated America.

BALTIMORE COLTS		NEW YORK GIANTS	
Offense		Offense	
Raymond Berry	LE	Ken MacAfee	
Jim Parker	LT	Roosevelt Brown	
Art Spinney	LG	Al Barry	
Buzz Nutter	C	Ray Wietecha	
Alex Sandusky	RG	Jack Stroud	
George Preas	BT	Buzz Guy	
Jim Mutscheller	RE	Bob Schnelker	
John Unitas	QB	Charlie Conerly	
Alan Ameche	FB	Mel Triplett	
L.Q. Dupre	HB	Frank Cifford	
Lenny Moore	HB	Alex Webster	
Defense		Defense	
Gino Marchetti	DE	Jim Katcavage	
Art Donovan	DT	Dick Modzelewski	
Gene Lipscomb	DT	Roosevelt Grier	
Ordell Braase	DE	Andy Robustelli	
Don Shinnick	LB	Sam Huff	
Dick Szymanski	LB	Harland Svare	
Bill Pellington	LB	Cliff Livingston	
Carl Taseff	DB	Jim Patton	
Andy Nelson	DB	Carl Karilivacz	
Ray Brown	DB	Em Tunnell	
Milt Davis	DB	Lindon Crow	

The winners' share was \$4,718, while the losers received \$3,111.