

1974 Playoff!

By Joe Zagorski

For the Los Angeles Rams and the Minnesota Vikings, the horizon on December 29th, 1974, was filled by the blinding sunlight of a possible appearance in Super Bowl IX. Both teams had identical 10-4 records at the end of the regular season, and both had worthy statistics to prove their championship status. Although L.A. had beaten Minnesota earlier in the season, 20-17, the challenge of the NFL playoffs always brings out the best in the Norsemen.

Minnesota's Metropolitan Stadium looms large in the eyes of many, its fame achieved through the numerous victories inside this architectural dinosaur. Like an ark above the water, the "Met" rises above the frozen tundra that is a home for a stone-faced coach. Bud Grant's "winter wonderland" has left on many teams an impression of defeat in the wake of the unbearable elements of Decembers past. Today would turn out to be no different, although the methods used to achieve victory were by no means etched in stone.

The Los Angeles Rams come from a climate the opposite extreme from Minnesota. However, the temperature gage stood at 31 degrees at gametime. Despite what Minnesota called "balmy weather," both teams spent the first quarter (and most of the game, for that matter) trying to give each other plenty of chances to win. By the final gun, the Rams totalled five turnovers, two more than the Vikings.

Statistics for any single game can often be misleading. Both teams' accomplishments during the regular season showed little similarity to their turnover tendencies in the title game. Both teams boasted stingy defenses, and both had versatile, if not spectacular, offenses.

Los Angeles coach Chuck Knox, only in his second year at the helm, guided the Rams into a title game for the first time since 1955. Quarterback James Harris passed and ran the team to the NFC Western Division crown, accompanied by elusive power runner Lawrence McCutcheon. Flanker Harold Jackson, experienced and graceful, led the team with five touchdown receptions.

Fran Tarkenton of the Minnesota Vikings, a "thinking man's quarterback," was known for his ability to read defenses at the line of scrimmage and to call audibles on his reads. During the season, nearly half of Minnesota's offensive plays were called at the line of scrimmage. This game would be no different.

Behind Tarkenton in the backfield stood second-year man Chuck Foreman, possibly the most fluid and versatile halfback in the NFL. John Gilliam was the Minnesota deep threat at split end, while Stu Voight held sway as one of the most underrated tight ends in the NFC.

The crowd of 47,404 watched a scoreless first quarter, but midway through the second period Minnesota began showing what made them NFC Central Division champions. Mixing runs and passes, Tarkenton moved his team to L.A.'s 29-yard line where he faced a second and 8 situation. Disdaining the conservatism that had ruled the first quarter, Fran dropped back, looked over the coverage, and threw deep.

Jim Lash, a two-year starter from Northwestern University but an unlikely deep target, ran a fly pattern down the sideline. L.A. cornerback Al Clark stayed step for step with Lash, but as they crossed the goal line the Viking receiver leaped over Clark to snare the pass. Fred Cox added the PAT.

Los Angeles came back late in the half with a 27-yard field goal by David Ray. With a halftime score of 7-3, there was a sense that this defensive battle would go down to the wire. Truly, by the end of the game, Minnesota would wind up controlling the ball for more plays (69 to L.A.'s 58) and first downs (18 to L.A.'s 15), but the Rams would outgain the Vikings in total yardage (340 to 269).

Unfortunately for L.A., their yardage advantage was gained primarily with one play. In the third quarter, the Rams were pinned down on their own one-yard line. James Harris moved them to their 25 when he escaped a fierce purple rush. Then he found Harold Jackson streaking down the middle. Jackson

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gathered in Harris' perfect pass and was off to the races. Vikings safety Jeff Wright had an angle on Jackson and pushed him out of bounds at the Minnesota two.

Just when it looked as if the Rams were about to take control of the game, the Vikings summoned up their strength and desire. Ram fullback John Cappelletti carried the ball off-tackle to the six-inch line. Six inches away from the lead in a game where every point was important!

On the next play, Harris went with a long snap count. The sustained cadence caused a major controversy. Minnesota defensive tackle Alan Page appeared to jump offside. Before the Rams on the other side of the line knew what had happened, Page and the rest of the Vikings were yelling that they had been drawn offside.

In films of the game, the evidence seemed to favor the Rams. The referee's call did not. Page's protest was upheld and an illegal motion penalty was assessed against L.A. guard Tom Mack. This backed the Rams up five yards and set the stage for a bit of freak misfortune.

Harris decided to throw on the next play. His target was Pat Curran, a six-year tight end out of Lakeland College. Curran was sent on a hook pattern and was defended by Jackie Wallace, who was only in his second year in the NFL. Harris thought he could rifle the ball through the middle and past Wallace to Curran in the endzone. Well, he THOUGHT he could.

Wallace's leap for Harris' throw belied his inexperience, as he tipped the ball off its intended course and into the arms of Minnesota linebacker Wally Hilgenberg, who downed the ball in the endzone for a touchback.

A 98-yard drive, including a dynamic 73-yard pass play, was wasted. After the intercepted pass, the Vikings gained all the momentum they needed. Tarkenton put together another of his patented, time-consuming drives. By the time it concluded with Dave Osborn's one-yard TD plunge, the state of Minnesota was in a state of bliss.

Los Angeles came back late in the final period when Harris hit Jackson on a post pattern. This time, Jackson reached the endzone untouched.

The Rams were down only four points, 14-10. Harris passed L.A. to the Viking 45-yard line, but that was as close as they got. Minnesota instituted a five-man line to put more pressure on Harris. The "Purple People Eaters" ganged up on the Ram quarterback and sacked him twice in a series of downs, totalling 29 yards in lost real estate.

The Vikings proved victorious this day, but one question remained: Did Tom Mack jump offside in the third quarter? "I don't know who did," Mack said after the game. "I was sure in my stance, but I believe we should've gone on a shorter snap count. Maybe on James' (Harris) first sound. I know I didn't jump offside."

The Rams took that long ride home. Although the sun had set on their season, they could be comforted by the fact that they had made it one step further than the previous year.

The Vikings, however, had made it to the mountaintop, as they basked in the glow of their second straight NFC championship. Now, they were off to Super Bowl IX.

December 29, 1974, at Minnesota. Att. 47,404

| | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| Minnesota Vikings | 0 | 7 | 0 | 7 | - | 14 |
| Los Angeles Rams | 0 | 3 | 0 | 7 | - | 10 |

Second Quarter:

- MN - Lash, 29 yard pass from Tarkenton
- PAT - Cox (kick)
- LA - Ray, 27 yard field goal

Fourth Quarter:

- MN - Osborn, 1 yard run
- PAT - Cox (kick)

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LA - Jackson, 44 yard pass from Harris
PAT - Ray (kick)

| <u>Minn</u> | TEAM STATISTICS | <u>LA</u> |
|-------------|-----------------------|------------|
| 18 | First Downs - Total | 15 |
| 9 | First Downs - Rushing | 5 |
| 7 | First Downs - Passing | 10 |
| 2 | First Downs - Penalty | 0 |
| 47 | Rushing Attempts | 33 |
| 164 | Rushing Yards | 121 |
| 3.5 | Rushing Average | 3.7 |
| 20 | Passing Attempts | 23 |
| 10 | Passing Completions | 13 |
| 50.0 | Completion Percentage | 56.5 |
| 123 | Passing Yards | 248 |
| 1 | Intercepted | 2 |
| 2/18 | Tackled/Yards Lost | 2/29 |
| 6/39.2 | Punts/Average | 5/43.8 |
| 4/23 | Punt Returns/Yards | 5/19 |
| 5/2 | Fumbles/Lost | 3/3 |
| 69/269/3.9 | Off. Plays/Yards/Avg. | 58/340/5.9 |