

JOE PISARCIK: THE PROFESSIONAL

By Joe Zagorski

On December 9, 1984 thousands of spectators gather inside Philadelphia's Veterans Stadium to witness a professional football game. To the many in attendance, it is viewed as just another game. To the players and coaches involved, it means something more.

There is nothing so feisty and uninhibited in the National Football League as a downhearted, also-ran team fighting for some self-pride in a season of failure. For the Philadelphia Eagles, all the stops have been pulled out; all caution is thrown to the wind. They have nothing to lose.

Across the field stand the New England Patriots. They are in a different situation than the Eagles. The Patriots still have a slim chance for the playoffs. Their survival rests in their ability to win. They must win.

A late-season injury to Eagles quarterback Ron Jaworski has ruptured the Eagles' playoff hopes. But a forgotten sideline survivor steps into the driver's seat. He has waited a long time for this chance. Throwing only 90 passes in the last 4½ seasons, his 32-year-old body breaks the huddle. Seeking only redemption, Joe Pisarcik has faced his past; knew he must conquer it.

The ball rests on the Patriots' 3-yard line with 5:45 left in the game. The Eagles have come back to tie the game, 17-17. Faced with a third and goal situation, Joe Pisarcik leans over center and barks out signals:

"Brown left!" Pisarcik's career has been taken for granted by many. Even his failures have been regarded as "creatures of his own self-image." Still he must think of the moment at hand, for time is fleeting, and so are the chances of fate.

"Split 29!" As he looks into the eyes of the New England defenders, he relives his past, much like a dying man who sees his life flash before his eyes. Woven around the painful memories is the knowledge that he has withstood the test of time in the NFL.

"Shift 19!" Unfortunately, most of the careers of average players are seldom recognized or remembered by the millions who observe pro football. Number 9 hasn't achieved any real glory on the 100-yard acre. But he knows the road of his past, and he can see the road to defeat. He separates the two, never forgetting the steps he took along the way. Joe Pisarcik has learned from the roads of an earlier day. "Ready, set!"...

The year is 1974. Fresh out of New Mexico State University, a young and eager Joe Pisarcik is ignored by the 26 NFL teams at the annual selection draft. The Canadian Football League shows some interest, however, as Pisarcik reluctantly signs on as a free agent with the Calgary Stampeders.

"I didn't raise too many eyebrows of the NFL scouts," said Pisarcik, "but the CFL gave me a chance to play, and that's what I really needed. I felt I had to stay active in the game, in some way or another."

The NFL was under siege in 1974. From within and without, 1974 proved that pro football had shifted from a game to a business. The cases in point were dramatic, but they were inescapable. First came the inaugural season of the World Football League. Formed by a group of California executives and lawyers, the WFL weighed heavily on the minds of football collegiates looking for a postgraduate profession.

Next came the National Football League Players Association dispute over the new collective bargaining agreement ... or the lack of it. NFL veterans carried picket signs for two weeks during this job walkout, thus giving rookies the chance to play.

"The NFL was taking its lumps back then," claimed Pisarcik, "but I had already signed with Calgary. There were a lot of choices for rookies to make (with the WFL around). A lot of the guys felt somewhat secure knowing that they had more than one option."

Still, Pisarcik had to make adjustments to play in the CFL. Differences between the American style of play and the Canadian style were obvious. Scoring, yardage and downs varied between the leagues. Before long, the NFL's fertile soil seemed to be worth another try. Joe Pisarcik knew in his heart that he couldn't

deny himself one more chance: "I wanted to take one more shot at the NFL. I felt that three years in Canada were enough."

In 1977, the New York Giants signed Joe Pisarcik to a free-agent contract. Full of heart and vigor, the NFL "rookie" viewed this chance as a new beginning; the Giants were a team that had nowhere to go but up.

"I knew that competition on the Giants would be wide open, because nobody on their depth chart seemed to step forward and take charge. I was happy to be playing football in America again," said Pisarcik.

With the familiar rules of American football in his mind, Pisarcik entered training camp that summer as the fourth-string quarterback. It didn't take long before Giants' head coach John McVay realized the potential of his newest recruit: "Joe's got a good arm and a quick release; he's also a good thinker in the pocket. He has made the adjustment to the NFL from the years he spent in Canada."

The Giants struggled through a dismal season of '77, finishing the year with a 5-9 record. The bitterest moment came in the final game against an old rival, the Chicago Bears. Playing on a Giants Stadium field covered with snow and ice, the Bears drove down the field. With 9 seconds left in overtime placekicker Bob Thomas booted a 28-yard field goal to give the Bears a 12-9 victory and a wild card berth in the playoffs.

Still Joe Pisarcik had reason to celebrate. Once rejected by every club, he suddenly became the starting quarterback of the Giants. Though he completed only 43% of his passes, much of the problem rested with a young and unproven offensive line. Pisarcik took the criticism in stride, and set his sights toward 1978.

For many teams in the NFL, a season (or the outcome of it) can boil down to a single game, or even a single play. For the New York Giants of 1978 one play was one too many. It has been remembered as the "Miracle in the Meadowlands."

The date was November 19th. The opponents for the Giants were the Philadelphia Eagles, a team in need of a victory to stay in the race for the playoffs. In fact, both the Giants and the Eagles needed a win, because the Dallas Cowboys were wreaking havoc in the competitive NFC East. The Giants were 5-6. The Eagles were 6-5. The hand of fate would apply to both of these teams in Giants Stadium on this day.

It seemed like the Giants would win the game all afternoon long. The Eagles missed two extra-point attempts early in the game and were trailing 17-12 late in the game. With time dwindling down to a final play or two, New York had the ball at their own 29-yard line, facing a third and two situation and an Eagle defense that had run out of timeouts and hope.

All Pisarcik and his teammates had to do was down the ball one more time, because the game clock would expire before a delay of game penalty would be assessed. The clock ticked down to 28 seconds when a play was sent in from the bench. Offensive coordinator Bob Gibson, coaching from the press box, called for play "Pro 65 Up." The Giants in the huddle were miffed at the absurd suggestion, and pleaded with Pisarcik to ignore the coach and "fall on the damn football!"

Reprimanded earlier in the year for not following orders, Pisarcik stuck with Gibson's call. The huddle broke with a strange nervousness filling the air. Looking over Philadelphia's defense one last time, Pisarcik called signals and gathered in the snap from center, when all of a sudden...

The morning after may rank as the worst in Giants' history. Still visibly shell-shocked, the team met for film study in a meeting room at the practice field. Absent was coach Bob Gibson, who was fired just before the meeting began. Play "Pro 65 Up" cost him his job.

Upon close scrutiny, the play looked as bad on film as it did in person. Pisarcik never got a good hold on the ball, bobbling it as he pivoted to his right. Contributing his ineptness was fullback Larry Csonka, who hit his designated hole too fast for Pisarcik to reach him.

The Eagles, knowing what a slim chance they had, blitzed every available man, hoping to create a fumble. Their plan worked to perfection. The ball lodged against Csonka's right hip and squirted free. A mad scramble for the ball ensued as Pisarcik fell to his knees and tried to grab it. The ball popped out of

Pisarcik's arms and into the hands of Eagle cornerback Herman Edwards, who was off and running at the snap, and who never broke stride as he galloped into the end zone for the winning touchdown.

Moans and groans filled the bitter meeting room as everyone looked for answers to the nightmare they had just relived. Several players went as far as to point fingers at Pisarcik and the coaching staff. "It was something you never forget," said Pisarcik. "It took me awhile to get over it."

Pro Football. It is a game played with a special frame of mind. Reasoning cannot answer all of the questions in the game. And it has been proven that talent alone can't win games. Courage, determination, and faith are all needed for one to stay alive in the game. Joe Pisarcik was an unlikely victim in a trick of fate. To be called a winner, one must overcome adversity.

In the aftermath of the fumble rose violent fan protests, where the Giant faithful could be seen burning their tickets before the remaining games. The entire New York coaching staff was fired after the season was complete. But perhaps the cruelest occurrence belonged to Joe Pisarcik.

Admonished by the fans and the coaches, Pisarcik was not allowed to call plays for the Giants ever again. In retrospect, an erasure of November 19, 1978 may have been the only remedy anyone could recommend. Indeed, one play can make or break a career. But Joe Pisarcik endured the mental anguish. Courage, determination, and faith became his blood-kin; and he used them all to survive even untimely fate.

In 1979, the Giants set sail with new Head Coach Ray Perkins, and with a first-round quarterback named Phil Simms. Pisarcik was relegated to the bench and the trainer's table after a series of nagging ailments and minor injuries. The future looked quite bleak for the 27-year-old veteran.

New York finished the year with a 6-10 record, which was identical to their finish a year before. No progress was made at all, and the new coaching staff was up to their ears in complaints from everyone. They decided to make wholesale changes in the team roster. Pisarcik was the first to go.

"All during the '79 season, I knew my days as a Giant were numbered," said Pisarcik. "With Phil Simms taking over at quarterback early in the year, the coaches sort of let me know by their actions what my future was going to be."

In the spring of 1980, the Giants traded Joe Pisarcik to the Philadelphia Eagles for an undisclosed draft choice. All during his days with the Giants, Pisarcik knew only the sights and sounds of defeat. Now he would taste victory for the first time in his career. The Eagles were flying high in 1980.

Positioned as a backup to Ron Jaworski, Pisarcik learned the system of Eagles' Head Coach Dick Vermeil, and with the mentorship of the "Lion in Winter," passing wizard Sid Gillman, he became a polished professional. Said Pisarcik, "For the first time in my career, I finally knew what was expected of me. I think that the whole team knew what they were expected to do."

Winning soon became the foremost objective in the City of Brotherly Love. The Eagles combined a stingy 3-4 defense with an explosive offense to win the NFC Eastern Division title on a 12-4 record. Ron Jaworski led the NFC in passing with 27 touchdown passes and a 90.9 rating. Halfback Wilbert Montgomery added 778 yards on the ground and utilized his rushing and receiving talents to the tune of 10 touchdowns.

The defense, by far the NFL's best, gave up only 222 points during the regular season. Middle linebacker Bill Bergey and defensive end Claude Humphrey were the emotional leaders during the Eagles' stretch drive toward the playoffs. Their first opponent would be the NFC Central Division champion Minnesota Vikings.

The game epitomized Philadelphia football in 1980. The Vikings took an early 14-0 lead, but the Eagles kept the pressure on Minnesota until they broke. A flood of turnovers made for a Merry Christmas in Philly town. The Eagles intercepted five passes and recovered three Viking fumbles en route to a 31-16 victory. Next came the NFC championship game against the Dallas Cowboys.

Dallas was a wild-card team in 1980, and had the same season record as the Eagles. Philadelphia won the NFC East by a point differential tiebreaker. They had split the season series, with both teams winning on their home fields.

The Cowboys had just won a shocker against the Atlanta Falcons, 30-27, to reach the title game with the Eagles. This game had all the makings of a classic; two heavyweight contenders battling for a chance at pro football's most coveted prize: a trip to New Orleans for Super Bowl XV.

The game was slated to be played in Philadelphia, so the Eagles had a definite home-field advantage, even though the Cowboys were picked by the oddsmakers as a four-point favorite to win the game. In a contest such as this, with so much riding on the outcome, the team that wants to win the most usually does. The Eagles did.

Wilbert Montgomery's 42-yard touchdown run on the Eagles' second play from scrimmage presaged things to come. Once again, turnovers told the tale as the Eagles claimed three Dallas fumbles in the second half. Philadelphia used ball control to its ultimate extension, running 71 plays to Dallas' 55. Montgomery ended the game with 194 yards on 26 carries, as the Eagles pulled away from the Cowboys in the fourth quarter, winning the game 20-7.

In the span of one year, Joe Pisarcik had traveled the NFL roller coaster from a scapegoat trying to recover a fumble to a Super Bowl backup. The Eagles gave him the chance he needed, and when surrounded by the right atmosphere, he joined in with the rest. As he exited the locker room after the game, one might've sensed that Joe Pisarcik knew he could survive. Being a part of a winning team, Pisarcik had taken another step along the road to conquering his past. Super Bowl XV was upon him.

For the Oakland Raiders, Super Bowl XV marked their third trip to the pinnacle of their profession. They had lost Super Bowl II to Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers, and had defeated Bud Grant's Minnesota Vikings in Super Bowl XI. They were the Raiders, a team dedicated to physical intimidation and downright meanness. That was, and has always been, their style.

The Eagles' victory over the Cowboys impressed many football experts, who unradically depicted the Raiders as underdogs. The Raiders had lost to Philadelphia earlier in the year, 10-7. The main reason why the Raiders were picked to lose was because they were "due" to lose. Oakland was a wild-card team that had pulled a rabbit or two out of the hat on the road to the Super Bowl.

With an incredible 14-12 victory over the Cleveland Browns in the playoffs, and a stunning 34-27 conquest over the San Diego Chargers in the AFC title game, the Raiders had few believers who would bet on them to win one more time. No wild card team had ever won the Super Bowl before.

"We were able to shut down their passing game for the most part in the first meeting of the season," said Eagles strong safety Randy Logan. "The pass rush was the biggest reason why." Indeed, the Philadelphia pass rush boxed in Raiders' quarterback Jim Plunkett for most of the game. Plunkett was sacked eight times, but managed to connect with wide receiver Cliff Branch on an 86-yard touchdown that appeared to break the game open.

The Eagles then mounted a 71-yard touchdown drive that culminated when halfback Wilbert Montgomery swept left and dove into the end zone from three yards out. It was a well played game, the outcome of which the Eagles desperately wanted to repeat in Super Bowl XV.

Super Sunday in the NFL. All the events of the day are insignificant compared to the annual football classic that decides the new king in pro football. January 25, 1981. The Louisiana Superdome. The time for talking is over; let the game begin.

On the third play from scrimmage, Ron Jaworski's bullet pass into the seam of the Raiders' zone defense was picked off by linebacker Rod Martin. A few plays later, Plunkett hit Branch on a comeback pattern for a touchdown. Once Oakland gained momentum, they clung tightly to it; and soon everything went right for the silver and black.

"We had the perfect game plan to use," said Pisarcik, "but everything we tried was unsuccessful. They [the Raiders] out-hit us, they out-hustled us, and they were as prepared as they could be. They just flat-out kicked our ass."

Philadelphia's offense never took wing, while Oakland's never touched the ground. Jim Plunkett was named the game's most valuable player, as he passed for three touchdowns (one more to Branch and a Super Bowl record 90-yard catch 'n carry to Kenny King) in the Raiders' 27-10 victory.

Many people claimed that "Super Bowl jitters" caused Philadelphia to fold in the big game. Others claimed that after 14 victories, they were "due" for a letdown. But whatever the cause, the effect was painful enough to last the entire off-season.

"We were determined to get back to the Super Bowl the next year," said Pisarcik, "but that wasn't going to be easy. Every team was now gunning for us, and I think we got a little down on ourselves during the losing streak we had at the end of the year." In the midst of another playoff season, the 1981 Eagles lost 4 of their last 5 games, and buckled under in a wild card encounter with the "new" New York Giants, 27-21.

"I felt disgusted with the whole scenario," said Pisarcik. "The team was in a state of confusion, and answers were hard to come by. We were never able to get the job done." One reason for Philadelphia's poor play at the end of the '81 season was an ineffective offense that could muster only 43 points during a snake-bitten losing streak. Said Pisarcik, "We started to feel the oncoming mistakes ourselves. Everything seemed to go wrong, and the whole team was to blame."

The defense, once so stingy in the trenches, was now soluble, as a wide variety of holes opened up for opposing runners. Before long, injuries, complacency, turnovers, and lack of talent in key positions turned the once-proud Eagles into pretenders or worse.

In 1982, the NFLPA called a player strike after the second week of the regular season. The strike lasted all of eight weeks, and left behind it bitterness, resentment, and a hollow season that almost ruined the sport. It was the worst of times for NFL fans, whose support of the game has made it the biggest spectator attraction in America.

"We all wanted the strike to get over with, but it was handled quite ridiculously," said Pisarcik, "The owners knew how to handle it, and they eventually got what they wanted. We [the players] got just a little bit more than what they [the owners] had proposed at the second week of the strike."

When action returned to the field, few, if any teams were in shape. The Eagles finished the '82 season as they did in '81, losing to the Giants. Philadelphia's 3-6 record for the strike-shortened '82 season was their worst under head coach Dick Vermeil. During the spring of '83, Vermeil retired from coaching, submitting job burn-out as the reason. Losing can bring out the mortality in a man, and can turn the first into last.

The decline of the Eagles began sharply, and spread out through the '83 and '84 seasons. Under new Head Coach Marion Campbell, the Eagles experienced injury problems as never before. The final standings for 1983 placed Philadelphia in fourth place in the NFC East with a 5-11 record.

Joe Pisarcik still held onto his role as a veteran backup, even though his competitive desire to start still burned bright. "I know I can contribute to this team," said Pisarcik, "but Ron's the starter right now. Ron has proven himself to me and to the rest of this team. It's a shame we can't have two starting quarterbacks."

The 1984 version of the Philadelphia Eagles previewed a sign of the future. With young and talented wide receivers like Mike Quick and Kenny Jackson, the air game in Philadelphia began to soar. Although they finished in last place, their 6-9-1 record wasn't the only improvement. New attitudes about the game instilled a fighting spirit in a forlorn situation.

"When Ron went down with the broken leg in St. Louis, it was as if we all knew that our pride was on the line," said Pisarcik. "We looked at each other and found a closeness we never had before. When your back is to the wall, you must fight to survive. We all decided that we must survive. Believe me, it's what makes winning so special. Sometimes, making the choice to do what's right is the hardest part. But it can be the most important part ... when the chips are down. That's what you remember most."

"Hut one, hut two!"

“Pisarcik rolls right on a quarterback bootleg...He jumps over one man and dives over Patriots linebacker Andre Tippett into the end zone for a touchdown!”

“The coaches did a great job of calling those plays,” said Pisarcik after the Eagles’ 27-17 victory. “I didn’t know I was a running quarterback. But I put out of my mind all the background of my career and played today without giving it a second thought. You do what you have to do. We’re professionals.”

Joe Pisarcik has suffered in pro football. But he has refused to let losing and bad luck ruin him. For a brief moment, victory is as sweet as it ever was before. And in that one moment, Joe Pisarcik has conquered his past, and has played his part. This is enough to withstand the pains of failure.

Walking out to the Veterans Stadium parking lot, Joe Pisarcik has a smile on his face, and a sparkle in his eye. It is the look of a professional.

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Author’s Note: Joe Pisarcik was waived at the beginning of training camp in 1985. Nobody can argue that teams must pick the best men for the job. Whether Pisarcik retires or not is yet to be seen, but I feel that we’ve not heard or seen the last of him. Though it is a road he hasn’t seen in the past, he has the ability to face it. His past proves he is capable of that.