

THE AFL'S FIRST SUPER TEAM

Pro football insiders debate whether the AFL champion Chargers could have beaten the Bears in a 1963 Super Bowl

By Ed Gruver

It's an impossible question, but one that continues to intrigue members of the 1963 AFL champion San Diego Chargers.

If the Super Bowl had started with the 1963 season instead of 1966, could the Chargers have beaten the NFL champion Chicago Bears?

"I've argued that for years and years," says Sid Gillman, who coached the 1963 Chargers. "We had one of the great teams in pro football history, and I think we would have matched up pretty well with the NFL. We had great speed and talent, and I think at that time, the NFL really underestimated the talent we had."

Paul Lowe, a game-breaking halfback who led the Chargers with 1,101 yards rushing in 1963, is even more confident than Gillman that the Chargers could have beaten the Bears in a 1963 Super Bowl. "Of course we would've won," says Lowe. "With our defense, our offense, our bench strength, we had no weaknesses. We knew we had a better team (than the Bears)."

"I wish we could've played the Bears in 1963," says Keith Lincoln, the Chargers' starting fullback in 1963 who led the league with a 6.5 yards-per-carry average. "We had a great team that year."

Ernie "Big Cat" Ladd, the 6-9, 321-pound anchor of San Diego's defense, pro football's original "Fearsome Foursome," believes the Chargers could have matched up well with the Bears. "I thought we could play with anybody in 1963," Ladd says. "We had the horses."

Jack Faulkner, Administrator of Football Operations for the Rams and a member of Sid Gillman's staff in 1960-61, echoes Ladd's sentiments. "The thing with San Diego is that they had good players," Faulkner notes. "In '63, I think the Chargers could've competed with the NFL. How they would've done, who knows?"

Who indeed, but Steve Sabol, the president of NFL Films, has viewed extensive film footage of every great pro football team, and it is his considered opinion that the a 1963 Super Bowl would have been an intriguing matchup to say the least. "I think Gillman's Chargers would've done very well against the NFL champion Bears," Sabol says. "I think that (Charger) team could've won. It would've been a very interesting matchup between a space-age offense and a stone-age defense."

Pro football record books show that when the Super Bowl began in January 1967, the AFL had to withstand two years of humiliating defeats to the NFL on the field and public ridicule off it. It wasn't until January 12, 1969, when Joe Namath quarterbacked the upstart New York Jets to a stunning 16-7 victory over the heavily-favored Baltimore Colts in Super Bowl III, that the AFL earned its first championship game win over the NFL. Even so, it wasn't until Len Dawson led the Kansas City Chiefs to a similar win one year later over the Minnesota Vikings in the fourth and final Super Bowl between the AFL and NFL that the AFL finally got its share of respect from both the NFL and football fans.

Those who know the AFL however, believe that the 163 Chargers, rather than the '68 Jets, might have gone down in history as the first AFL team to win a Super Bowl.

Larry Grantham, a member of the '68 Jets, played against the '63 Chargers and recalls the near-perfect blend of strategy and skill San Diego exhibited. "Sid Gillman was one of the great innovators in pro football history," Grantham says. "With players like Alworth, Lowe, Mix, he could've shown (the NFL) some things."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 3 (1995)

The late Jerry Mays was a starting defensive end on Kansas City's two AFL Super Bowl teams, and played opposite the Chargers in '63. Mays agreed with Grantham that the Chargers would have beaten the Bears. "I believe with all my heart," Mays stated, "that San Diego would have beaten the Bears in 1963. They would have beaten them in an eye-blink. San Diego was the best team in football that year. They won the AFL title over Boston and they looked awesome. It was frightening how good they were."

Lou Saban, who coached the Buffalo Bills to consecutive AFL title game victories over the Chargers in 1964-65, thinks the AFL was ready to compete with the NFL by the mid-1960s. "I believe that," Saban says. "We had four years to grow in the AFL, and we were getting some top-notch draft choices."

Hank Stram, who split two Super Bowl decisions with the NFL as head coach of the Kansas City Chiefs, agrees with Saban. "Sid's team in 1963 could have competed with anyone," Stram says. "San Diego was like the 49ers (of the 1980s). Everybody talked about their offense, but they had a great defense too."

Larry Felser, a sportswriter for the Buffalo Evening News, covered the AFL beginning with its charter year, 1960. It is Felser's opinion that had the Super Bowl begun with the 1963 season, the AFL might have increased its number of Super Bowl victories by at least two. Felser called the Chargers a "rousing offensive team that included at least two future pro football Hall of Famers, wide receiver Lance Alworth and tackle Ron Mix, plus a pair of superb running backs in Keith Lincoln and Paul Lowe, and a skilled quarterback in Tobin Rote.

"The Bears were strictly a defensive team. It was a good defense, but it didn't have Dick Butkus yet. The offense was far from top-quality, and the quarterback was journeyman Bill Wade. Gale Sayers hadn't arrived yet, either."

The Other Side

Members of the NFL old guard however, disregard the notion that the junior league had, in just four years, risen to a par with the established NFL.

Tex Maule, formerly a pro football writer for Sports Illustrated, scoffed at the idea that the Chargers could've competed with the Bears. "San Diego and Buffalo (the AFL's 1964-65 champions)," Maule wrote, "were still in the league in the years subsequent to 1964, but they were beaten by Kansas City and Oakland, who, in turn, were demolished by the Green Bay Packers."

It was Maule's opinion that the Chargers looked good only because the rest of the AFL was so weak, as Green Bay proved in winning the first two Super Bowls.

Weeb Ewbank is the only coach to win league titles in both the old NFL and AFL. Ewbank won consecutive world championships in 1958-59 as head coach of the Baltimore Colts, and won an AFL and Super Bowl title with the 1968 Jets. Ewbank was fired by the Colts after the '62 season, and joined the Jets the next year, losing twice to the Chargers in '63.

Says Ewbank, "I don't think those AFL teams (San Diego and Buffalo) could've beaten the NFL at that time. But I thought the AFL was ready to compete against the NFL by the time of the first Super Bowl."

Dave Whitsell, who started at right cornerback for the Bears in 1963, said that the Chicago defense was a physical matchup for any team. "When you came to play the Bears," Whitsell said, "and you had to go up against guys like Doug Atkins, Stan Jones, Ed O'Bradovich, Bill George, Richie Pettibon, and Larry Morris, and you had some of those gorillas looking at you, come hell or highwater, the Bears were going to put a physical beating on you. You were going to be in the damndest football game of your life."

"That championship year of 1963, two years before I got there, they came up with some characters who were tough son-of-guns," said Dick Butkus. "They played the game the way it's supposed to be played."

Said O'Bradovich, who started at left defensive end for the '63 Bears, "(We) went out on the football field and knocked the hell out of people."

Matchups

How the Chargers and Bears would have matched up is an impossible question to be sure. One thing however, is certain. A Super Bowl game played in January, 1964 between the Chargers and Bears would

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 3 (1995)

have offered some interesting matchups of great players, and these "games within a game" some interesting questions.

When San Diego had the ball, how would all-pro tackle Ron Mix have done against Bears' defensive end Ed O'Bradovich? Nicknamed "The Intellectual Assassin," Mix was an intelligent player who played in seven AFL All-Star games and was called for holding just once in 10 years. O'Bradovich, called "OB" by teammates, was a fierce pass rusher who symbolized the Bears' brutal defensive style.

Could Charger receivers Alworth, Don Norton and Dave Kocourek, who combined for 17 TDs in '63, find the holes in a Bears' double-zone defense which led the NFL in interceptions?

How would Tobin Rote, the top-ranked quarterback in the AFL, have fared trying to throw deep against Chicago safeties Richie Pettibon and Roosevelt Taylor, both of whom made all-pro in '63?

And could San Diego backs Keith Lincoln and Paul Lowe, the celebrated "L and L Boys" of the AFL's best rushing attack, find running room against a Bears' front seven that listed all-pros in end Doug Atkins and linebackers Bill George and Joe Fortunato?

When the Bears had the ball, could their conservative rushing game have mounted a consistent attack against the Chargers' great defensive front?

And how would Bears' QB Bill Wade, all-pro tight end Mike Ditka and speedy wideout Johnny Morris fare against San Diego's ball-hawking secondary, headed by Dick Harris and Charlie McNeil, who combined for 12 interceptions in 1963?

Finally, there was the matchup of coaches themselves, San Diego's Sid Gillman, "El Sid," against the "Papa Bear", George Halas.

The Immovable Bears

Clearly, these were two teams whose styles of play perfectly reflected their respective leagues.

The NFL of the 1960s was geared to ground-oriented offenses and dominating defenses, styles personified by the Packers, Bears, Browns, Colts and Vikings, who combined to win nine league titles in the decade of the 1960s.

The Bears defense in 1963 allowed just 10.3 points per game, and 144 points overall, the lowest total in 13 years. Chicago led the NFL in a rare triple, finishing number one against the run, pass and overall. Working under Halas, defensive coordinator George Allen installed a double zone pass defense that puzzled opposing offenses, beginning with the two-time defending champion Packers in the season opener on Sept. 15 in Green Bay. The Chicago defense, which led the league in interceptions with 36, the most by any NFL team in the 1960s, picked off four Bart Starr passes and held the powerful Packer offense to 73 yards passing and just 150 yards of total offense in a 10-3 Bears' win.

The key to the defense was the double zone constructed by Halas and Allen. When Halas returned to coaching in 1958 after a two-year absence, he introduced the "BUZ" defense. In his autobiography, Halas said BUZ was a code word for the Bears' new zone defense. The "B" stood for the linebackers in the 4-3; the "U" instructed them to move closer to the line to confuse enemy quarterbacks, and the "Z" told the 'backers to drop into coverage at the start of the play and help the secondary against the pass, and told the defensive ends to flare out to cover running plays.

Halas also introduced a color-coded system of linebacker blitzes. "Red dog" was the blitz signal for the right linebacker; "White dog" was the middle linebacker's blitz call; and "Blue dog" the right linebacker's call.

Allen said the BUZ defense was designed to get the Chicago linebackers into hook and flat zones as quickly as possible. The BUZ proved particularly effective against screens and draws, as the linebackers dropped into coverage, keying on the quarterback and aided by instructions from safeties Richie Pettibon and Roosevelt Taylor.

Taylor led the league in interceptions with nine, and he, Pettibon, defensive end Doug Atkins, and linebackers Bill George and Joe Fortunato made the all-pro team. The front four was bookended by the

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 3 (1995)

6-8 Atkins and Ed O'Bradovich, with Stan Jones and Fred Williams at the tackles. Larry Morris joined George and Fortunato at linebacker, and Whitsell and Bennie McRae started at the corners.

After beating the Packers in the regular season opener, the Bears reeled off seven wins in their next eight games. On Nov. 17, they met Green Bay in a rematch at Wrigley Field. Both teams were 8-1, and the winner would be in control in the Western Division standings. The Packers were hurting, having lost halfback Paul Hornung to a one-year gambling suspension and Starr to a broken hand. Still, Allen succeeded in crossing up Green Bay head coach Vince Lombardi with an unorthodox defensive twist.

While most NFL teams played a straight 4-3, with the defensive tackles lining up on the outside shoulders of the offensive guards, Allen designed an "odd" formation that presented backup QB Zeke Bratkowski with a five-man look. While "odd" and "even" defenses had been used in pro football before, Allen took the "odd" formation one step further. The Bears confused Green Bay's veteran linemen by shifting from one "odd" look to another before the snap of the ball. Chicago would move from an overshifted defense to the left to an undershift to the right, with tackles Stan Jones and Earl Leggett alternately going head-up on center Jim Ringo. With Green Bay's blocking schemes confused, the Bears won easily, 26-7.

One interesting footnote to the Bears' two victories over the Packers in 1963 was provided by Green Bay guard Jerry Kramer. When Kramer played under Halas and the Chicago coaching staff in the Pro Bowl at the end of the '63 season, he found out the Bears had picked up Green Bay's offensive play calling a year before at the Pro Bowl. The man who unwittingly provided the information was none other than Lombardi. In coaching the West All-Stars in the Pro Bowl the year before, Lombardi had installed the Green Bay offense, with its list of formations, plays, signals and blocking schemes. Chicago players who were on Lombardi's West team made complete notes of the Green Bay offense, and by the time the '63 season opened, the Bears were ready for every shift, every audible, every play the Packers called.

After beating Green Bay, the Bears went on to finish first in the Western Conference with an 11-2-1 record, and prepared to meet a New York Giants' team that led the NFL in scoring with 448 points, the second-highest total in league history to that point.

On Dec. 29, in the frozen, eight-degree sunlight at Wrigley Field, the Bears won the NFL title by intercepting Giants' quarterback Y.A. Tittle five times in a 14-10 win. The game turned on a second-quarter tackle by Morris, who blitzed Tittle and crashed into the quarterback's left leg, twisting his knee. The injury prevented Tittle from planting his feet on his throws, and the unpredictable Chicago winds and unyielding Bears defense troubled Tittle and the Giants' league-leading offense the rest of the game.

The Bears' victory was a capsule of their 1963 season. Both of Chicago's touchdowns were set up by the defense. In the first quarter, with the Giants leading 7-0, Morris stepped in front of a Tittle screen pass intended for Phil King and returned it 61 yards to the New York five. Wade then scored on a two-yard plunge to tie the game. Chicago's winning TD came courtesy of another interception, with O'Bradovich picking off a screen pass and carrying it 10 yards to the New York 14. Five plays later, Wade dove in from the one.

"The Chicago defense was supposed to be damn near invulnerable," Tittle said later. "I must say it was very good ... The Bears had size and experience and they played an alert ballgame."

The Chicago offense scored just 301 points in 1963, the lowest for any NFL title team in the 1960s, but they led the league in turnover ratio. The Bears were paced by Wade and All-Pro tight end Mike Ditka, who led the team with 59 catches. The Bears' ground game was by committee, with fullback Joe Marconi leading the team with 446 yards. Speedster Willie "The Wisp" Galimore had five rushing touchdowns, and fullback Rick Casares was one of the league's best blocking backs.

"We gave people a lot of fits with our offense," Wade said. "We felt we did our part, but the defense was more colorful."

Though Halas and Allen made the Bears' defense famous with their strategic planning, the offense came up with a few innovations of its own. In preparation for their two meetings with the Lombardi Packers, the Chicago coaching staff spent much of the 1963 preseason studying films of the Green Bay defense. What they noticed was that Packer linebackers Ray Nitschke, Bill Forester and Dan Currie dropped deeper into coverage than most NFL 'backers at the time. Armed with this information, the Bears went to a greater number of underneath passes when they played the Packers in 1963.

The Irresistible Chargers

While the veteran Bears dominated the NFL with their "Monsters of the Midway" defense, the youthful Chargers zapped the AFL with an offensive armada that led the league in seven different offensive categories, including scoring with 399 points. The jagged lightning bolt that adorned San Diego's helmets and jerseys symbolized the Chargers' quick-strike capabilities.

Running behind Mix on Gillman's patented toss sweeps and inside traps, Lincoln led the AFL with an astounding 6.5 yards-per-carry average, and Lowe high-stepped for 1,010 yards and averaged 5.7 yards per attempt. Running the famous Charger Curl and Fly, Alworth used speed and grace to haul in a team-high 61 catches for 1,205 yards and a league-leading 20 yards per-catch average. Rote led the league in passing, completing an AFL-high 59 percent of his passes and gunning the ball for 2,510 yards and 20 touchdowns. The triggerman on San Diego's streaking deep patterns, Rote led the AFL in yards-per-attempted pass, averaging 8.7. Lincoln, Lowe, Mix, Rote and Alworth were each named to the ALL-AFL team.

Defensively, the Chargers were led by the AFL's first greatfront four. While NFL defenses in the 1960s were geared to dominating middle linebackers -- like Bill George and later Dick Butkus in Chicago; Nitschke in Green Bay; Joe Schmidt in Detroit; Sam Huff in New York; and later Tommy Nobis in Atlanta - - AFL clubs relied on the charge up-front of outstanding defensive linemen. Every AFL club seemed to have them. In Boston, the Patriots had Larry "Wild Man" Eisenhauer and Houston Antwine; Buffalo listed Ron McDole, Tom Sestak and Jim Dunaway; Oakland looked to Dan Birdwell and later, Ben Davidson and Tom Keating; Kansas City had all-pros in Buck Buchanan and Jerry Mays, and later added Curley Culp.

In 1963, the Chargers had one of the best, and certainly the most colorful, of the early AFL defenses. The San Diego unit was spearheaded by all-pro end Earl Faison and massive, 6-9, 321-pound Ernie Ladd, the "Big Cat" of the Charger defense. End Bob Petrich and tackles George Gross and Henry Schmidt filled out the front wall.

Just as Halas was ably assisted by Allen, Gillman had capable lieutenants in defensive backfield coach Chuck Noll and offensive line coach Joe Madro. Under Noll, the defense led the league in fewest points allowed, surrendering 256. Two years earlier, San Diego's ball-hawking secondary set an all-time pro record with 49 interceptions. Under Madro, the Charger offensive line gave Rote and Hadl enough time to throw deep, and opened gaping holes for Lincoln and Lowe.

The Chargers cruised through the regular season with an 11-3 record; they scored more than 30 points five times during the season, and more than 50 twice.

While the Chicago defense had to prove itself in the NFL title game against the league's best offense, so too did the San Diego offense face a strong test when they faced a Boston Patriots team built on all-out defense. Under head coach Mike Holovak, the Patriots smothered enemy offenses with a variety of blitzes, including the eight-man maximum blitz.

For the championship game, Gillman devised a precise three-page game plan aimed at countering the Patriots' blitz package with traps and draws off motion plays. The fleet Lowe was assigned as the motion man, and Gillman expected that Lowe's unexpected motion would cause the Boston blitzers problems at the line of scrimmage. Gillman also tinkered with his passing game, lining up Alworth in an "East Formation" that had the speedy flanker on the same side of the field with split end Don Norton and turned tight end Dave Kocourek into a weak side receiver. The "East Formation" forced Patriot strong safety Ron Hall, who was normally accustomed to covering slower tight ends, to stay with Alworth or Norton, neither of whom was slow.

The Charger defense made adjustments too, moving middle linebacker Chuck Allen to the weak side, where he would stunt and blitz into the Boston backfield.

On Jan. 5, the 30,127 fans who crowded into San Diego's sunsoaked Balboa Stadium saw the Chargers turn in the most dominating championship game performance in AFL history. On the game's second play from scrimmage, Lowe went in motion. The move caused instant confusion on the Boston defense, which was in a blitzing formation. End Bob Dee nearly jumped offside, and the Patriot linebackers were off-balance when Lincoln took Rote's handoff and broke through the line on a trap play that carried for 56

yards. Two plays later, Rote carried in from the two, scoring the first of San Deigo's seven touchdowns in a 51-10 romp. Lincoln, who added a 67-yard TD run in the first quarter and had a 25-yard scoring pass from backup QB John Hadl in the fourth, rushed for a title-game record 206 yards on just 13 carries. Lincoln also had 123 yards receiving to account for 329 of the Chargers' 610 yards of offense. Lowe rushed for 94 yards, including a 58-yard TD run, and Alworth scored on a 48-yard TD pass from Rote.

"Our passing game was really the ultimate," Gillman said. "We were probably as scientific as it was possible to be at that time. The emphasis was on speed and quickness."

Gillman's offensive system called for his wide-running attack to stretch the defense horizontally, and his deep passing game to stretch it vertically."

Said Mix, "A football field is 100 yards long by 160 feet wide, and we used every inch of it."

Challenges

In the Charger dressing room after the game, Faison fired a verbal shot at the NFL-champion Bears when he said, "The Bears can call themselves the world champions, but we're the champions of the universe."

Gillman added fuel to the fire, saying "We're champions of the world. If anyone wants to debate it, let them play us."

In the aftermath of their win over the Patriots, Otto Graham, the former Cleveland Browns' star QB, thought the Chargers were the best team in football that year. "If the Chargers could play the best in the NFL," Graham said after the AFL title game, "I'd have to pick the Chargers."

Patriots' team owner Billy Sullivan acknowledged that despite the final score of the title game, the Chargers'impressive win benefited the young AFL, even if it had to come at the expense of Sullivan's team. "It almost killed me to have to watch it." Sullivan said,"But when you think about it from the stand point of our league, then you'd have to say that San Diego did us all a favor."

Indeed. Whether or not the Chargers could have defeated the Bears in a Super Bowl following the 1963 season will never be known. What is certain however, is that the Chargers established themselves as the first of the AFL's super teams. In so doing, they became the first AFL champion to invite serious comparisons with the best of the NFL. Which in 1963, was victory in itself for a league still struggling to create its own identity.