

THE LONGEST DAY

By Paul Reeths

On Christmas Day, 1971, Garo Yepremian of the Miami Dolphins nailed a 37-yard field goal, giving his team a 27-24 playoff victory in Kansas City. Ordinarily, it would have been the ending of just another great game. The kick, however, came after 82 minutes and 40 seconds of playing time, midway through the second overtime, ending the longest game in NFL history. Most fans do not realize that it is not the longest game in pro football history. In fact, that distinction belongs to another league.

The longest game on record was a postseason marathon in the old United States Football League. You remember the USFL. It's the same league that signed a smattering of future NFL superstars like Jim Kelly and Reggie White while playing in the spring and summer from 1983 to 1985. Fortunately for them, neither White nor Kelly was on the field this day. The game instead featured the youthful Los Angeles Express and the defending champion Michigan Panthers in a 1984 playoff tilt.

Los Angeles was one of the best young teams in all of football. General Manager Don Klosterman had signed a slew of college talent, including running backs Kevin Mack and Mel Gray, tackle Gary Zimmerman and a rookie quarterback named Steve Young. All told, Klosterman inked 15 players projected to go in the first four rounds of the NFL draft. The Express, in fact, featured 30 rookies on their 43-player roster. They had struggled early, starting the year at 2-5 before taking eight of their final 11 to win the Pacific Division at 10-8. The Panthers weren't much older than their opponents but had been seasoned with a championship in the league's inaugural campaign. Defending their title had proven to be a very difficult task.

Although also winding up at 10-8, they had started out 6-0 before dropping eight of their last 12 after star receiver Anthony Carter had been knocked out for the balance of the campaign with a broken arm. Quarterback Bobby Hebert had to rally the Panthers to three wins in their final four contests to capture a wildcard spot.

By virtue of their divisional championship, Los Angeles hosted the first-round matchup on June 30, 1984, in front of a paltry crowd of 7,964 in the 90,000-seat L.A. Coliseum. Fan support had been sparse all season (to put it mildly) and had been further eroded by well-publicized ownership problems. In addition, temperatures in the 80's and the poor air quality in L.A. would put a premium on conditioning. Young and company shrugged all that off and pleased the home "crowd" when they tallied the only points of the opening quarter on a five-yard sweep by running back Kevin Nelson less than five minutes into the game. Michigan responded with a good march of their own, but a dropped first down pass by receiver Walter Broughton, filling in for Carter, ended it prematurely. It took until the middle of the second period for the scoreboard to move again, and it was the Express who extended their advantage to 10-0 on a 32-yard Tony Zendejas field goal.

It was late in the half before Michigan's experience and L.A.'s youth showed themselves. A fumble recovery led to Michigan's first successful drive, and with under two minutes remaining in the opening half, Cleo Miller finally cracked the end zone for the Panthers with a three-yard run. Seconds later, they maintained the momentum when they picked off an errant Young throw. Bobby Hebert again took full advantage of the turnover by connecting with running back Ken Lacy on a 22-yard scoring pass with 1:19 remaining before intermission. The two quick scores, both the results of turnovers, gave the defending champs a sudden 14-10 halftime advantage and took some of the steam out of the young Express.

Young persevered, and Zendejas's second field goal, this one from 34 yards out, brought Los Angeles back to within 14-13. Hebert struck back quickly, hitting tight end Mike Cobb with a two-yard throw early in the fourth quarter to make it 21-13. The Panthers had their largest lead of the day, and Los Angeles needed the rest of the period and the league's two-point conversion rule to battle back. With 8:57 remaining in regulation, the Express took over at their own 20 yard line. Young would have to drive the team 80 yards for them to have a chance, and that's exactly what he did. The march didn't start off

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promisingly. On the first play, the quarterback took a hard hit by Michigan linebacker Kyle Borland that nearly knocked him unconscious after a seven-yard scramble. "He knocked me dizzy," admitted Young.

"(Coach John) Hadl told him to come out," said left tackle Gary Zimmerman. "Steve said, 'No way,' and came back to the huddle. After that, there was no doubt. There was just...an electricity."

Young, now battling a headache caused by Borland's hit, scooted for four yards on a huge fourth-and-one play from the Michigan 47 before being crushed by free safety Ron Osborne. His right arm went numb, but still he refused to leave, sending backup Frank Seurer off the field. Facing third-and-goal from the Panther 12, Young ducked under an onrushing Panther and darted out to the left, getting blasted out of bounds a foot short of pay dirt. Finally after 16 plays and more than eight minutes, the Express drew within 21-19 on Nelson's one-yard burst into the end zone on fourth down. Needing a two-point conversion to tie, the gutsy Young kept it himself, scampering around left end to knot the game at 21-21 with 52 seconds left. The Express defense stifled Michigan, and the two teams headed for overtime.

The Panthers had the better of it in the first extra session and appeared poised to win it on a short field goal. Kicker Novo Bojovic, playing without his trademark garlic in his socks (he believed it was lucky), barely missed a 37-yard kick, and the teams battled to a standstill for the remainder of the period. With players dropping left and right from dehydration and exhaustion, it became a battle of attrition. "I felt like a dead battery out there," remarked Zimmerman. Hebert (13 of 27 for 201 yards and a pair of interceptions) was forced from the game on a blind-side sack, and backup Whit Taylor came on to lead the Michigan offense for the rest of the day. He and RB John Williams (113 yards on 23 carries) kept the offense on track, and once again the Panthers put their kicker in position to send them to the second round. This time Bojovic badly blew a 36-yard field goal attempt wide left in the second overtime session. "I felt like digging myself six feet into the ground," he said. Oddly, more than 12 years earlier in the Dolphins-Chiefs game, Kansas City's Jan Stenerud had also missed two short kicks that would have ended that one.

The Express and Panthers entered the unprecedented third overtime period (the seventh quarter), and it was then that Los Angeles was able to move the ball for the first time since their game-tying march. Young needed four plays, including two throws to favorite receiver JoJo Townsell for 47 yards, to lead his team down to the Panthers' 24-yard line. On the team's one-hundredth offensive play of the game, after more than four hours in the sun, the rookie quarterback handed the ball to Mel Gray. The shifty running back headed up the middle, cut to the right to avoid an official and then cut further to the right, scampering to the one-yard line before he barreled into the end zone for the winning score at 3:33 of the third overtime. Unfortunately, Gray landed squarely on his left arm as hit the ground, breaking his humerus. It took team trainers 10 minutes before they could get the wounded and exhausted runner off the field. While several Express players found the energy to celebrate the victory, several others instead fell to the ground in relief.

"We were just trying to set up for a field goal," explained Young. "It was a simple slant off tackle that turned into a Mel Gray special."

Gray's incredible jaunt ended the longest game in professional football history after 93 minutes and 33 seconds of official time, more than a game and a half. Young led the winners with 295 yards in the air on 23 of 44 passing with a pair of interceptions. He also added 44 yards rushing on seven attempts and the critical two-point conversion at the end of regulation. Gray paced the club with 124 yards on the ground on 31 tries, while Townsell contributed with five catches for 96 yards. They battled back from three turnovers, in part by forcing four from the hands of the Panthers.

"These guys are unbelievable," said Los Angeles coach John Hadl, whose squad would lose the following week at Arizona. "I wanted to rest JoJo for a series and he wouldn't come out. I substituted Frankie (Seurer) twice and Steve wouldn't come out. He's gonna be sore tomorrow."

Hadl, who had spent 16-years as an NFL quarterback, couldn't believe that it was finally over. "I've never been through anything like that in my life," he said. Neither has anyone before or since.