

The following excerpt is from "The Super Seventies," an upcoming book by Thomas Danyluk of Chicago, IL. The book is collection of interviews with former players, coaches, and media members who were prominent in the NFL during the 1970s, and is due to be completed by 2002. For more information, please email Tom at danyluk1@yahoo.com.

O.A. ‘Bum’ Phillips

Head Coach & GM, Houston Oilers (1975-1980)

An Interview by Thomas Danyluk

(October 15, 1998)

The problem with coaches who are blessed with a quick wit is that they are usually remembered for what they said in the papers rather than what their teams did on the field. John McKay won 127 games and three undisputed national championships at Southern Cal, then took the Tampa Bay Buccaneers to the NFC Championship game after only their fourth year in existence, but his reputation today primarily stands as being a quipster. Ara Parseghian and Dan Devine are remembered for the great games and national championships at Notre Dame, while Lou Holtz, who won a title there himself, is remembered for ancient Chinese proverbs like "The man who complains about how the ball bounces is likely the one who dropped it." I can still see that hungry, almost desperate "please say something funny" look in faces of the media types that crowded around former Houston Oilers coach Jerry Glanville in the Three Rivers lockerroom after his teams' visits to Pittsburgh in the late 1980s. I never got the impression that they were swarming around Glanville to hear his take on the effectiveness of 3rd down corner blitzes on quarterback Bubby Brister. A lot of them wanted the inside scoop on why he left will-call tickets for Pope Pius VI or Sitting Bull or whichever character Glanville allegedly wasted his comps on. Of course, he rarely disappointed with his answers.

Bum Phillips was the best known "funny" coach of pro football in the 1970s, part one-liner, part two-a-day. Once after passing a physical, he announced "If I drop dead tomorrow, at least I'll know I died in good health." In reference to his wife, he said, "I take her everywhere I go because she is too ugly to kiss good-bye." But what was no joke was Phillips' ability to coach the game of football and motivate "em boys" who played for him. "My idea of discipline," he once said, "is not making guys do something; it's getting them to do it. There's a difference between bitching and coaching." His relaxed, laid-back approach to coaching, paired with a humble, caring demeanor made him deeply popular with his players. "The only discipline that lasts is self-discipline," he said in 1980. "A long time ago I gave up this philosophy of not getting close to players.....I'm around these guys seven months, seven days a week. I laugh with them. Cry with them. I know them. I want them to understand my fondness. I was us to be close. I think it helps them play better."

Phillips' pro coaching career began in 1967 with the San Diego Chargers, where he held the defensive coordinator position under Sid Gillman for four seasons. After a brief return to the college ranks, he rejoined Gillman's Houston Oilers staff in 1974 as defensive coordinator, then was named head coach the following season, guiding a roster loaded with question marks to a startling 10-4 record, the team's first winning season since 1967. Four more winning seasons followed, and by the end of 1980, he had taken the Oilers to three straight playoff appearances and became the winningest head coach in Oilers/Titans history with a 59-38 record. But it was an embarrassing 27-7 loss to the Oakland Raiders in the AFC wild card game that triggered his emotional eviction from the team. "The firing of Bum Phillips was a very touchy situation around here for a long time," says one Titans executive who was close to the situation at the time but

requested anonymity. "When Bum was fired, the word that got out publicly was that he wouldn't hire an offensive coordinator, but there was more to it than that. He was very well liked in the organization, and he took more of the blame for that loss than he should have. [Quarterback Kenny] Stabler, being Stabler, was coming back to play in Oakland, and he was supposedly out late with some of his local buddies the night before the game, and wasn't really in the best shape to play the next day. That had a lot to do with the offense not moving that day."

The "more to it," according to Phillips, also involved an internal power struggle between him and Ladd Herzeg, the team's chief administrative officer, particularly in the area of personnel decisions. "He wanted to run the doggone team," Phillips told *The Houston Chronicle* in 1990. "He wanted to make the decisions on who to draft, trade and waive. He wanted to run the team and decide who to play, really... I don't think for a second that [owner] Bud [Adams] really cared if I hired an offensive coordinator. I think somebody convinced him, meaning Ladd." Initially, it was Phillips who lost the battle, having been dismissed from a job for the first time in his career. But five months later he resurfaced on the sidelines of another dome, this one in New Orleans, as the head coach of the Saints. It was the Oilers franchise which ended up suffering the most from the decision, as the team won only 14 of its next 63 games, and didn't enjoy another winning season until 1987. During our conversation, the tone of his voice suggested his dismissal was a subject he still wasn't comfortable recalling.

It would have been easy to bait Bum Phillips into dropping more of his one-liners with questions about the Clinton White House improprieties or his solution to the Y2k problem, but I chose to stay away from the fluff. Phillips was too important of a character in the Super Seventies for one of those pleading "Please say something funny" interviews. I wanted to hear his thoughts on overusing his punishing tailback, Earl Campbell, and on playing on that concrete Astrodome floor; on trading Dante Pastorini and waiving Steve Largent. It was Phillips who helped orchestrate (maybe the wrong word here – there's nothing orchestral about guys with buzz-cuts who drive pickup trucks and cattle, and wear dress denim on the sidelines) one of the greatest playoff upsets when his battered Oilers ambushed heavily favored San Diego in the '79 playoffs. Leave the epigrams for the quote books or *ESPN Magazine*. Here's what the ringleader of the "Luv Ya Blue" hysteria has to say about the first real glory days of the Houston Oilers.

First topic - and in terms of football history, I think it's an underrated one: How were you able to take that train-wreck of an Oilers team out to San Diego and stop the Chargers in the 1979 playoffs? San Diego was a legitimate 8-point favorite in that game, but your team dragged itself out of there with a 17-14 win, despite a tremendous amount of injuries to some of your key players.

Phillips: The biggest thing I remember was we didn't have Pastorini or Campbell or Ken Burrough - that was the biggest thing. Then, of course, our free safety Vernon Perry intercepted four passes and blocked a field goal. That was the contribution of one guy! It was amazing that we could come back and beat them. They were a better football team than we were, but they weren't that day.

Denver had beaten your team up pretty badly in the previous weekend's wild card game. Heading into San Diego, Campbell and Pastorini were both sidelined with groin injuries, while Burrough, your top wideout, was limited to decoy status with his severely bruised tailbone. What kind of odds were you giving your team at the start of that game?

Phillips: I don't know. I'm stupid, you know, like coaches are. I always thought we were going to win them all.

To make things even worse, Rob Carpenter, Campbell's backup, tripped over a blocking dummy in practice and sprained his ankle. He was still on crutches heading to the stadium that day, but left them on the bus so the Charger spies wouldn't smell even more blood. I remember Carpenter being gang-tackled below the knees after catching a pass, then literally pulling his body across the ground toward the sidelines by his arms, like a man with two broken legs.

Phillips: Rob just sucked it up and played. He played well. A sprained ankle is not that bad other than pain, and he was tough enough to stand the pain. There's a difference between pain and injury.

Was Carpenter's effort - 18 carries for 67 yards, 4 catches for 23 - the most surprising to you that day? He really gave your offense a big shot of adrenaline.

Phillips: The thing that amazed me the most that day was Perry intercepting those passes and blocking that field goal. You don't see one guy do that very many times in football. I don't know of anybody ever intercepting four in one game. He was a free agent. He came from Canadian ball. He was in the right place at the right time against San Diego. I think he got a tip or two out there that helped him with the interception, whether it was their defender or our receiver who tipped it. He played for me in Houston for a couple years, then played for me for a year or two in New Orleans when I was coaching over there.

The previous time you had faced the Chargers - on the last weekend of the 1978 season - they unloaded 45 points on your defense. In fact, San Diego's offense had been held under 20 points only seven times in its last 32 games prior to your playoff meeting. Yet your team intercepted five Dan Fouts' passes - three inside the Oiler 35-yard line, and held them to two touchdowns? What kind of voodoo did you and your staff come up with to defuse Dan Fouts and that incendiary offense? What did you see in the films that the rest of the league's defenses weren't seeing that year?

Phillips: We didn't really come up with anything special. Being fair, I think they were a little bit over-confident and didn't think they were going to have to play that hard. That was one thing. You see that all the time on weekends when good football teams don't get themselves mentally ready and play a team that is mentally ready because it is a challenge for them. It's like being the Super Bowl champion. Every team on your schedule the next year - if they have a good game in them, will play it against you. I don't remember a whole lot about the gameplan, but I remember we were going to rush Fouts up the middle and try to block his passes, rather than try to rush from the outside. He was too good at sitting in the pocket and getting the ball off. We put a strong rush up the middle with the front three linemen we had, and tried to force his line back into his face. Evidently, he couldn't see very good.

Chuck Knox, the former Rams and Bills head coach, insisted that the way to beat Fouts was with gut pressure, by taking away that pocket he loved to step into, by knocking him down and forcing him to hurry his throws. It seems your team had a similar scheme that afternoon.

Phillips: We didn't know if we would get in to knock him down or not, but we wanted to look him in the eye and rush straight on him. Then, if you couldn't get to him, we insisted our players get their hands up and try to block the ball. We did block some, and we forced him to throw some with too much loft on them, which made it tougher on the receivers.

How about those terrific San Diego receivers, John Jefferson and Charlie Joiner, who both

finished with over 1,000 yards receiving that year, and the tight ends Bob Klein and Kellen Winslow? Were you slowing them off the line with your corners or doing anything special to contain that group?

Phillips: We played our regular coverage on them, a zone defense. We played some man-to-man, but very little. Not much nickel, either. We played our regular people, and stayed with the zone. We felt like we could get to the ball, we could recognize when he threw it and maybe knock it loose or get an interception. You get more interceptions with zone than you do with man-to-man. And their receivers were too good for us to try and turn two corners loose on them, to put a strong safety out on Winslow. God, we didn't have anybody that could cover them man-to-man, so we just played zone.

Was that your greatest win as a head football coach?

Phillips: It was everybody on the team's greatest win, because we had to play without a whole lot of players that were important to our football team. It had to be the best game we ever won. We were playing away from home, the visitor, and they had a great football team. They had the kind of football team that could have gone to the Super Bowl, I guess they just took us too lightly because we had all our guys hurt. But whatever it was, I'm happy we did it.

Sid Gillman must have thought very highly of your coaching abilities. He first hired you to join his Chargers coaching staff in 1967, then in '74 lured you away from Oklahoma State to the defensive coordinator on his Oiler staff. What kind of relationship did you have with Gillman?

Phillips: Sid Gillman was a great football coach, and maybe the best offensive coach of anybody who ever coached the game. He was really a genius. I had a good relationship with him. Sid would get along with everybody. Well, put it this way: If you liked football, he liked you. If you don't like football, Sid has no use for you.

He still is supposedly reviewing game films even today.

Phillips: Oh, sure! He'll do that until they put him in the ground. He just gets a kick out of doing that. The funny part about it is, he's still figuring out things to do that are probably ahead of what people are doing now. He just don't have a team to try them out with.

What was the most impressive attribute of his coaching style and philosophy?

Phillips: I'd say his ability to adapt his offense to whatever talent he had on the team. Sid wasn't a guy who said "We're going to run the West Coast offense, or the Midwest Offense or the East Coast offense." He was a guy that said, "Here's what we got - we've got this kind of receiver and that kind of receiver and this kind of running back," and he adapted his offense to whatever he had. That's why he was so good for a number of years - because he could adapt. The only year that he was in Houston, in '74, he had nothing! I mean, we had nothing as far as talent. We were really bad. We had just come off two 1-13 seasons, and we had nothing! And he took that team and made it into a 7-7 team. Now that is utilizing your personnel, when a guy can do that.

UPI named him their AFC Coach of the Year after that season for his efforts. Sounds like he the job he did in '74 was a minor miracle.

Phillips: It really was. You would have had to been there to realize it, but it really was.

What did you learn from Gillman that eventually made you a better head coach?

Phillips: I'd say handling people and judging people. Sid was really good at judging the type of people you'd want on your football team. He was the kind of guy that could talk to a guy and tell whether he was the kind of player he wanted on his football team. That was his biggest asset. I think he was a great, great offensive football coach, but he was also a good defensive football coach. If you know something about offense, you also know something about the defense that stops it. But probably his biggest asset was the handling of the players and recognizing who could play and who could make the team and who could help out. Obviously, when you work for a guy for six years, you pick up his ideas all the way through. He definitely taught me something.

Bum's name is actually Oail Andrew. His nickname originated from his younger sister Edrina's inability to pronounce "brother." It came out as "Bumble," and was eventually paired down to "Bum."

You were under Gillman, who also was handling the GM duties, for only one season before he gave up the coaching duties and named you the team's head coach for 1975. Did Gillman hand-pick you for that job?

Phillips: I don't have any idea. I don't know. I would hope he was thinking about that when he hired me.

Your initial contract with the Oilers gave you control over team policy-making and personnel decisions, but one of those "fine print" clauses still gave Gillman final approval to all your decisions. Considering the you would be ultimately be held responsible for the success of the team, did this clause bother you?

Phillips: The only thing that I did when Sid asked me if I wanted to be head coach, I told him that I wanted to make the decisions. And he said, "Certainly. No problem there." We didn't have an argument about that.

The story goes that you went to team owner Bud Adams and demanded that the clause be removed, and within three weeks, Gillman was forced out of the organization.

Phillips: No, no, that's not true. I still respect Sid enough that if he didn't want to do something, I wouldn't do it. He knew more about running a football team than I did.

Was Bud Adams, for the most part, a good owner?

Phillips: Yeah, yeah. He never bothered me. When I say bothered, he never told me how to run the team or who to play or who to waive or who to trade or who to claim. I had a great relationship with him. Until he fired me. But I still got along good with him. After I went to work for John Mecom in New Orleans I saw Bud much later at the league meetings. I shook his hand and had a nice visit with him. In the seven years I worked for him, I never had a cross word with him.

How did you feel having your team play at least ten of its games per season on that notoriously hard Astrodome turf?

Phillips: I thought it was great. And after watching Seattle and Kansas City last week playing in

the mud and the rain and the slop - falling on the ground and sliding for 15 yards, backs having trouble standing up - I still think artificial turf is better than natural grass. They talk about AstroTurf being hard, but let me tell you what, when that ground gets frozen, it gets awful hard too. It's like a chunk of ice.

Did you ever buy into the idea that turf tears up a football team worse than grass, in terms of injuries?

Phillips: No, definitely not. Because, at least on AstroTurf, even in the wet, stormy rainy weather, no matter how many times you run up and down the field, when you put your foot down it was gonna hit where it was supposed to hit. On a mud field or a grass field, there are always spots that are dug out, which are sometimes lower than the field when your foot hits the ground. I say it's harder to run on a wet grass field. Defensive backs have no chance at all on a wet, muddy field because they have to wait till the receiver - who knows where he is going - makes his cut. Then they have to try and catch him. They have to make a cut after he does. Defensively, you're at a real disadvantage on a rainy, muddy field.

Do you think playing in the Astrodome worked to the Oilers' advantage?

Phillips: Yeah, I liked it! In fact, in 1966 we opened the Astrodome [while coaching at the University of Houston]. And the turf at that time was not good. It didn't even have a pad under it. It was just laid on top of hard ground. It was hard, but it wasn't slippery. But around 1968 it was much better. They developed a pad to go under it, and from that time on it was good. Nowadays they use it as an excuse in negotiations, trying to tell everybody that it's bad. Dallas still plays on it, and they've won a bunch of championships. Pittsburgh plays on it and practices on it, and they've got a bunch of championships. I just can't believe that it's bad.

Looking back at Houston's final 1974 roster - the 7-7 team you had mentioned earlier - which areas did you feel required the most upgrading going into your first season as the Oilers' head coach?

Phillips: We needed some winners. We needed some guys that were leaders, because we didn't have any leadership on the team, obviously, because it was all young guys. We needed some leadership, and I traded for [center] Carl Mauck from San Diego, and got it. That was the first step. Carl is the kind of guy that everybody needs on their football team. They need somebody that just says, "Hey, we're gonna do it - I don't care what happens." He was the type of guy that every football team that wants to win has to have on their team. Obviously, you need three or four of them. But he was the first one we ever got. And there was (DE) Elvin Bethea, but he was there when I got there. And probably Dan Pastorini. Pastorini was the same kind of guy, a win-at-all-costs guy. He could play with broken ribs. He'd play, period.

What were your impressions of the quarterback situation, and the battle between Dan Pastorini and Lynn Dickey. At that time, did you believe that either of the two quarterbacks had the talent to eventually lead the Oilers to a championship?

Phillips: We couldn't afford to keep two quarterbacks that good - and either one of them were good. I just made my mind up to go with Dan, and we traded Lynn. I believe either one of them had the talent to win for us, but I felt after watching both of them play for a year that I made the right decision.

In terms of skills, why Pastorini over Dickey? What could he give the team that Dickey couldn't?

Phillips: You don't need two. You can't afford two. I don't know what the deciding factors were. It was just a decision you make. If you make it wrong, you're wrong. If you make it right, well then everything is okay. I don't know. I can't remember, really, except that the year before, Dan played and Lynn didn't. We knew what we were getting with Dan, and he could also punt. He was a guy that held up. Instead of getting hurt, he kept from getting hurt. And he was getting hit really bad. I guess my instincts said go with Pastorini.

Tell me more about your memories of Pastorini.

Phillips: Pastorini was a great, great quarterback. He called almost all of the plays from the line of scrimmage. We would send in a play, but he had the right to check it off, and everything was going good. Then one day he said to me, "Well, can't I just call some 'check-with-me' at the line?" and I said sure. He'd go into the huddle and say "check-with-me." They'd stand in the huddle a little bit, and then they'd go to the line of scrimmage and he'd call the play, whether it was a run or pass. If we sent something, he'd run it. But, hell, he called all the plays. He'd look the fronts over, and if they gave us something on the run, he'd audible to that. If the pass looked good, he'd audible to that. He could look and see the splits and the spacing, and whether their guy is head up on our tackle or outside shoulder or way outside. I mean he could see things that we couldn't see from the sidelines. When you called the play, he was still in the huddle. When he comes up of the huddle and gets to the line of scrimmage, it was too late to call another play. But he could see things. That's why we'd go ahead and let him audible everything. He'd call "check-with-me" about 90-percent of the time. And Nielsen did the same thing when we played San Diego

in the playoffs. Gifford was a sharp, sharp, sharp kid, too. A smart kid.

What was Pastorini's real strength as a quarterback?

Phillips: The deep ball, deep throwin'. Dan could do one thing that we really liked, and that was throw the bomb. He had a great knack of getting the ball up in the air, and putting enough air on it so that somebody could run under it. He could hit Kenny Burrough going full stride, either down-in or down-out. He was the best long-ball passer that I've ever seen. Daryl Lamonica was a good one, but I believe Dan was better. And he was a great quarterback as far as calling his own plays.

In which part of his game would you have liked to see more improvement?

Phillips: Probably, if anything, it would be thinking more sharp in short-yardage situations. Dan was always a guy who wanted to go for the bomb, and he was great at it. I would like to have maybe got him to think a little more short-yardage when we were in short-yardage, like 3rd-and-4, 3rd-and-5. But he still looked for the bomb. He looked for that first, regardless of what the situation was. He was a good thrower, but he'd look deep and work his way back up the field.

Do you remember a specific game or moment that defined Pastorini's emergence into a solid pro quarterback, as the leader of the Oilers?

Phillips: When we went down to Miami to play them in a playoff game, and he played with two broke ribs. Dan went and got a flak jacket and played, and led the football team to a victory. He played in a lot of pain, and I think really gained the respect of our players for his toughness.

The Oilers' progress under your control picked up where Gillman had left off. The Oilers

improved to a very respectable 10-4 in 1975, beating every team on your schedule except Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, both playoff teams. But the Oilers were a sudden flop in '76, winning only five games and finishing last in the AFC Central. What was the main reason, in your mind, for the collapse? Injuries, poor team chemistry, a tougher schedule?

Phillips: We got all of our wide receivers hurt that year. In football, when you start getting injuries at one position, that position really seems to disintegrate for some reason. I don't know why - maybe because people have to play longer. But we just lost our darn wide receivers. That was one reason. And I think we slipped up on a few people with that 10-4 record. We surprised a few people. Maybe we weren't as good as our record that year. We played the 3-4 defense, and nobody knew anything about it. Nobody knew how to block it. We played it down-in, down-out. It's a college defense but it also works in pro ball.

Did you have a hard time selling the scheme to your defensive players?

Phillips: Yeah, the defensive ends! Those were the only guys! Defensive ends didn't like it because they had to almost head-up on a tackle, and it affected their outside rush. But in passing downs, they moved out wider to get a better angle. It was just one of those things you do. We could find four linebackers - free agents and people like that. But you can't find many defensive linemen, and we didn't have but two. And if you don't have but two, you'd better play a 3-4 rather than a 4-3. If you can't find two more and you're still trying to play the 4-3, then you're in trouble. Plus, you have to a real hoss middle linebacker. We didn't have a middle linebacker who was that kind of guy, but we had a bunch of good linebackers. The players we had basically dictated what kind of defense we could play. Robert Brazile, who was one of our best linebackers, liked it because he got to blitz a lot. Actually, he got to rush. He didn't blitz. He got a lot of sacks. He was the guy who made the 3-4 popular for sending an outside linebacker, he and that guy [Lawrence] Taylor that played for the Giants so long that got all the credit for it. Robert was really the guy that got that thing started.

Your team rebounded in 1977 to finish 8-6....

Phillips: *[cutting in]* Yeah, we beat Cincinnati and knocked them out of the playoffs, and sent Pittsburgh to the playoffs instead. Cincinnati had the division won. All they had to do was beat us in the last game of the season, and we beat them. Pittsburgh's players sent everybody on our team a briefcase. I told them to put a ticket to the Super Bowl in those briefcases, but they didn't.

When did you first feel the right pieces were falling into place, that the Oilers were finally becoming a playoff-caliber team?

Phillips: Jeez, I don't know. I guess when they started playing like a playoff-caliber team. Rob Carpenter was a good back, and Tim Wilson was a good fullback, so we had two good running backs. Quarterback and wide receivers were in place. Our tight end Mike Barber was a great player, and capable of helping take a game over. We had a good defensive front - we had a good defensive team! Right about there it looked like we were going to be in good shape.

Houston started out the 1978 season with a whimper, going 3-3 over the first six games. Then the team won seven of its next ten, secured a wild-card bid, and finished with two playoff wins at Miami and New England, despite giving up more points than it scored. What event or single game can you point to that turned the season in the right direction - toward the playoffs - that year?

Phillips: We got Earl!

I guess Earl Campbell changed the whole thing.

Phillips: Tell me about it. You don't win all of them with anybody. One guy can't make that much difference, but he made that much difference to us.

You once remarked that, prior to Campbell coming to the team, you referred to Pastorini as a sword-fighter with a pocket knife. Campbell finally gave him something with which to fight.

Phillips: I mean he had something to right with! We finally had somebody we could depend upon in the fourth quarter. Earl Campbell was the greatest fourth-quarter football player I have ever seen. Everybody griped about how much he carried the ball, but - and you check on this - he always played better in the fourth quarter than he did in the first. I don't know how he did it. He was the best fourth-quarter player that's ever been in the game. He was a guy that could carry the ball 30 times before the fourth quarter, and carry it 12 or 14 more times during the fourth quarter. We played Miami on Monday night one year, and he ran 80-some yards for a touchdown at the end of the game to win it. He had already run for 130 or so prior to that, then he makes an 80-yard run right at the end. He just had great, great stamina.

Looking at the tape of that run, he was too tired to even celebrate the touchdown.

Phillips: Oh, yeah! But this was a guy the defense couldn't catch, so he wasn't too tired!

Did Earl Campbell really get stronger as the game progressed? After crunching through the numbers, it appears Phillips wasn't imagining things from his sideline view. During Campbell's first three years in the NFL, the rampaging tailback averaged a punishing 5.1 yards per carry against tiring, second-half defenses, compared to "mere" 4.6 yards in the first half. The most glaring difference came in 1980, when he averaged a yard and a half per carry more in the second half (4.4/5.9).

Let's talk about the trade with Tampa Bay that landed you the first pick in the 1978 draft. The previous season, with Ronnie Coleman and Rob Carpenter carrying the load, the Oilers were 14th in the league in rushing - a middle of the pack performance. Did you see Earl as the missing link in Houston, or was he simply too good to pass up?

Phillips: Oh, we had a good running attack before Earl! Carpenter and Coleman and Tim Wilson were good runners. We had good players, but here was a chance to get a guy - and it certainly proved that way - that was better than everybody. We offered Tampa a tight end - they could pick from Mike Barber or Jimmy Giles - and some draft choices to trade first round picks with them.

Pretty quickly into the '78 season, the trade looked more like a Brink's job.

Phillips: Well, you know, obviously that makes out on a trade like that always say they got a steal. But Tampa got what they wanted, too They got a tight end, Jimmy Giles, who was a really great football player. They still kept a first-round draft choice, and got a few more from us. So obviously it worked out for both sides.

What were your thoughts when you first watched him play, either live or on film?

Phillips: I don't know, maybe the first time I saw him practice. We used to do these agility drills where you'd run around the cones and put your hand on the ground and turn to the right, and go around to the next one and go backwards. They're called agility drills, where you check if a guy has any balance or agility. And he couldn't do them, not at all. Then [offensive backs coach] Andy Bourgeois came in and said, "Coach, I don't know about him. He can't run backwards at all. Every time he runs backwards he falls down." I said, "Hell, we didn't get him to run backwards! Don't worry about it!" And he never did run backwards. He ran forward, and took a bunch of people with him.

Describe to me an Earl Campbell moment that just left you shaking your head on the sidelines.

Phillips: I could say that every ball game. He scored on a run against Washington. I don't believe it was about 9 yards, but I swear about seven people hit him. And we needed the touchdown to win the game. That's what I remember. [Laughing] It might have been one! No, looking at the film and everything, I think it was five or six people that hit him in that 9 yards, and he just kept going and kept going, spinning off of one, knock one down. It was the best run I think he made in the whole time he played for me.

Without question, Campbell was the top rushing force in pro football from 1978 through 1980. He averaged nearly 5.0 yards per carry in each of those seasons with that battering-ram style. But by 1981, that average had dropped to 3.8 and never again rose above 4.0.

Phillips: Well, you know, at that point he was playing for football teams that didn't win.....I don't want to say it like that. Anyhow, it had nothing to do with how many times he carried the ball or nothing else. It's just that he didn't have as good a football team with him.

Paul Brown made the famous remark, "When you have the big gun, you pull the trigger." But someone else - it may have been Chuck Noll - also said, "You don't shoot a cannon like a machine gun." Which expression makes the most sense to you now when you reflect on your usage of Earl Campbell in the Houston offense?

Phillips: I don't know. I always thought that you tried to win the game that you were playing. If it takes what he did to win the game you were playing, I think that's the only thing that counts. And I think that's what he thought. If he had to carry thirty times or forty times - he didn't ever carry forty, I don't think - to win the game, he did. I just believe that he believed that, "Hey, let's win this game and worry about next week when we get to it."

Were you ever concerned that Campbell's running style would likely shorten his career?

Phillips: It shortened a helluva lot more people's careers than it did his. I'm telling you now, when he broke through that line of scrimmage and those little 180, 190-pound defensive backs tried to hit him going twenty-five, thirty miles an hour...

The Steelers did a commendable job of slowing Campbell down, holding him to an average of 70 yards per game during the regular season, and 39 in the playoffs during your years with the team.

Phillips: Hell, they did a decent job against everybody! Who in the hell else ever played good against Pittsburgh. They had an ability to play at whatever level they wanted to play. That's why

they won the Super Bowl! That's why we could beat them once a year, and they'd beat us once a year, but they'd always beat us in the playoffs. They were a better football team than we were. They were a great football team. They had more defensive football players on their team that are gonna be Hall-of-Famers than anybody that ever had a football team.

What other teams that you faced in the late 70's were able to do a comparable job in stopping Campbell?

Phillips: None. Well, we played against some people that would do a good job against him for a quarter, or two quarters. But nobody could stop him. Except Pittsburgh. They were a great football team.

The following season, in 1979, proved to be the franchise's most successful in 17 years, and concluded with another battle with Pittsburgh in the AFC title game. Despite those consecutive playoff losses to the Steelers - each only one step away from the Super Bowl - they were thrilling times for the people of Houston. Describe your memories of "Luv Ya Blue," and the team's relationship with the city during the last part of the decade.

Phillips: They were lined up from the airport to the Dome both times! The people knew the route the buses were taking - and I'm not exaggerating - there was at least 50,000 people standing in the medians, in their cars, standing on top of their cars the whole way from the airport to the Astrodome. They couldn't fit that many people in the place, so they just lined the streets of Houston. It was just one of those deals where everything fit together. The western craze was going across the country about that time, and I'm kind of a western guy. It just all fit in good. The people loved our players.

In general, would you call Houston a good football town?

Phillips: No. I would call it a great football town! Not good. Great. God, look at how they support people. They support the University of Houston, Rice. A&M can go down there and fill up Rice Stadium when both of them have competitive teams. I don't care where you are - I think you've got to have a football team that can win, and you've got to have some players that the fans like. I think that's just as important as winning. And the people actually liked our kids. They liked Earl, they liked Dan, they liked Carl and Billy "White Shoes." They liked all of our kids. Our kids were easy to like. They've had good players since then. They had good players when Jack Pardee was down there, and they were probably good kids, but the people didn't know it. They weren't as close to the fans as ours were. They were a little more distant. I guess when you get rich, you don't need anybody. But our players always put on a good show. They tried. I had never seen that bunch not try.

You developed a reputation for yourself as being a great judge of no-so-obvious talent. It's easy to spot the greatness of an Earl Campbell or a Robert Brazile, but you were also able to derive contribution from free agent throwaways like DE Andy Dorris, LB Steve Kiner and kicker Toni Fritsch. In fact, there were 21 free agents on the 1978 roster. Was it your ability to see talent where others didn't, or your ability to motivate players whom others couldn't?

Phillips: Umm, I can't answer that. I think we did a good job utilizing the guys we did have, and keeping them wanting to play. That's about 90 percent of it. You gotta want to play the game. You gotta want to win the games. You gotta make sacrifices. If you don't make sacrifices, then you ought not to be in the game of football. A lot of kids play football that don't want to make sacrifices for the team. Like sacks. Sacks are not important. Who gets the sack is not important.

Getting it is important, but who gets it is not important. A lot of your sacks come nowadays with guys who don't even get blocked. Well, that's not a great accomplishment! But he gets credit for being the sack guy. There's a lot of reasons for sacks. Busted assignments is one of them. A guy makes a good play every now-and-then is another one. But hell, most sacks are caused by something else other than just one guy, one-on-one, beating another guy. The quarterback holds the ball a little too long - you know, there's a jillion reasons why a guy gets six, seven sacks a year, and he thinks he's a really, really good football player. And he ain't necessarily a good football player just because of sacks. He's a good football player if he plays every down and plays hard every down, and if he gets a chance to make a sack, he makes it. If he don't, he still plays hard.

"I'll never forget Bum's words on the phone. He asked me if I'd like to come down and play a little ball. He sounded like an old farmer trying to get a game going out in the pasture. Bum blew my mind. I came out to the field on a bus and asked when practice was. I guess it was when everybody got there. I couldn't believe it. Here were guys sitting on helmets and shinning up goalposts. There were stray dogs running across the field. No whistles. Everybody did his own calisthenics. Guys were wearing different outfits, t-shirts, hats." Andy Dorris, Oilers DE, 1977-81.

For what specific qualities - intangibles - did you look in a player that would make your squad?

Phillips: I wanted a guy that was like the guys I already had. I didn't want anybody that I didn't feel would be happy with us. If I thought a player had the wrong attitude, or didn't have the same work habits as our guys, then I didn't want him. But guys had to have a certain amount of ability. You can't just take attitude alone or you won't beat anybody. But those kind of players can help you win. They don't necessarily have to be starters to help you win. They can be good special teamers, they can be good off the field, they can be leaders. They are interested in what's going on, pay attention the whole practice. You don't always have to have a lot of talent to play, but you have to have a certain amount to even get there. Take Guido Merkins. You probably never heard of him.

I remember Merkins. He played wide receiver and backup quarterback for you.

Phillips: And he started at tight end, he punted for us, he held for all extra points, covered every punt and kickoff that we had in the eleven years he played for me. He came over to New Orleans to play for me after he was cut by Houston. Jerrell Wilson, the punter from Kansas City, was a scout for us at Houston. He came back before the 75 or 76 season, and said, "Coach, I played softball this summer with a guy that I think would be a good football prospect." I asked him who it was, and he said Guido Merkins. I said, "What did he play?" He said, "He played quarterback at Sam Houston, but he's a heckuvan athlete, and he's a good kid." I said, "Well, tell him to come on down here." That was when you could have 115 players or as many as you wanted in camp. So we brought him on down there and he made the team and played every doggone year. He played every position, held for extra points and field goals, started a game at strong safety when one of our safeties was hurt. He was probably the best athlete out of all the kids that I've had over the years. He did everything that a guy can do for a football team. He wasn't a good enough player at any one position to start and win for you, but he was a good enough player at a lot of positions to win for you. He wasn't gonna get you beat.

What kind of player would not have fit into your Houston teams?

Phillips: The guys that wouldn't put the team first. We had a few, but they just passed through town.

You opened and closed a few training camps during your days in Houston and New Orleans. Who was the toughest cut you had to make, and why?

Phillips: Hmmm [pause]. John Hadl, probably. We had picked him up in a trade with the Packers. We picked him up for a reason - to be a backup for Dan. Dan was gonna play as the starter, and if something happened to him, we had a veteran who could go in and replace him. We had him for two years. That was probably my most difficult cut. He had played in San Diego when I was there. It was like cutting an old friend. We had a chance to draft a kid, Gifford Neilsen, that we felt was smart enough to play and good enough to play behind Dan, and we couldn't afford three quarterbacks. We just gambled and kept Gifford, thinking Gifford would eventually be the replacement for Dan. We had another guy who was tough to cut, Mike Simpson. He was a safety who played with Wade [Phillips] in high school and with the 49ers. There were a lot of tough cuts, but John was the toughest.

Another question on cuts: In 1976, you drafted a wide receiver out of Tulsa named Steve Largent, who was good enough to make the Hall of Fame but couldn't beat out Jim Beirne, Earl Thomas or Mel Baker for a roster spot. What did you see when you saw Largent running patterns in camp that prompted you to release him?

Phillips: I thought he was a pretty good player. I thought he was an excellent player. He just didn't fit what we wanted, rather, what our receivers coach [Fran Poltfoot] wanted. He didn't have the breakaway speed. Of course, it turned out to be a terrible mistake, but it's not the only one I've ever made. Then we drafted Mike Renfro the next year, who was exactly like Steve Largent. I didn't want to cut Steve Largent. I don't want to sound like it was somebody else's fault, but it was. I wanted a possession receiver, and they the receivers coach wanted the guys who could outrun them all. He said if [the defense] got up and played bump-and-run on him, he'd never get off the line of scrimmage. Plus, you gotta remember, a guy doesn't always perform like he can perform. Then, when his back is up against the wall and he goes somewhere else, he does really, really good because he's got more.....incentive, I guess you might say, because he got cut somewhere and he wants to make sure he proves them wrong. But anyhow, he was a great one, and I sure messed up when I let him get away.

Everybody remembers your brazen Super Bowl precognition after the loss to Pittsburgh in the 1979 AFC Title game – “Last year we knocked on the door; this year we beat on it; next year we're gonna kick the sonofabitch in.” That door, however, never did open for the Houston Oilers. Which one position could you have significantly upgraded that would have enabled your team to finally power its way into the NFL championship game?

Phillips: It would have been another year on my contract.

Do you really believe you had enough talent on that roster to win the Super Bowl?

Phillips: Yeah! We had another draft coming up, and we already had a good team. We just needed to play better in that playoff game against Oakland.

From 1978-80, you led the Oilers to a 32-16 record and three straight playoff appearances - the team's most successful run since joining the NFL - but shortly after the playoff loss to the Raiders in 1980, you were dismissed by Adams as head coach. Was that a shocker for you, or

had you seen signs that your time in Houston was nearing its end?

Phillips: It surprised me. But at the same time, it's his team, and he's the owner. The way I look at it, if he thinks he can do better without you, he can let you go. And if he's wrong, you can go somewhere else and prove he was wrong. If you can't get another job, then he was probably right to fire you. I never had a cross word with him, even on the day he fired me. When he hired me, I thanked him and told him, 'Someday you'll probably fire me, and i'm going to shake your hand again and say thank you.' But it surprised me, and it disappointed me to leave Houston because I had everything there. Everything was going good. If we had stayed another year, we might have gotten to the Super Bowl. We just didn't play good at Oakland. I don't know how to explain it, we just didn't play good.

What, in your mind, were the circumstances leading up to Adam's decision?

Phillips: You'd have to ask him. I have no idea.

He never sat down with you and gave his reasons?

Phillips: No, no. He called me down there [pause].....and told me he was going to let me go. He said he wanted me to hire an offensive coordinator, and I told him I wasn't going to do it. Somebody had convinced him that if we'd have had an offensive coordinator we would have done better. I said, "Look, Mr. Adams, we only have but seven coaches on our staff, and we've got three guys that run the offense. And I don't believe that I'm going to go hire somebody from outside, bring him in, and say, 'Look, these three guys have been to the playoffs for three straight years, but they're gonna work for you, and they're gonna do what you tell them to.'" I said I'm not gonna do that. Like if you go to a ballgame and you don't make many yards running that game, people can say, "You only have one guy back there - Earl Campbell - and everybody watches him. Everybody knows he is going to get the ball. Well, everybody knew Walter Payton was gonna to get it and he gained a lot of yards. Everybody knew Eric Dickerson was going to get the ball. With [the Rams'] offense, he was the only guy in the backfield! He made twenty-one hundred yards in one season. If you get beat, they're gonna find things to gripe about. And you just take it with a grain of salt and go on.

Do you think Adams could have done more to help the Oilers win a championship?

Phillips: No. I thought he was a good guy to work for in the respect that he did not try to run the football team. He ran his business and let me run the football team.

How about in terms of spending money for players and facilities? Would he spend the cash to help the football team?

Phillips: He wasn't necessarily free with it, but I can't blame him there. He wanted to make a profit, which is understandable. We never lost anybody because of money. I'm sure the players all felt like they should make more, like everybody does. But we didn't lose anybody because of it, so I'd have to say he was alright with the money.

Looking back - and it's been nearly 20 years since your last game in Houston - did you take the Oilers as far as the talent on that team would allow? Could that group of Oilers realistically have gone deeper into the playoffs?

Phillips: [Pause] ...I can't even answer that question, because no matter how I answer it, it ain't

going to come out right. When we beat out Pittsburgh in 1980, we thought we were going to win it all. But when we went out to Oakland, we just didn't play good against the Raiders. They beat us, and they went on to win the Super Bowl. Three years in a row, the team that beat us in the playoffs went on to win the Super Bowl.

"When I got to Houston, I asked Bum what he expected from me. He said, "I don't want you to fumble. And every yard you move the ball to the goal line, that's one less yard that Earl won't have to get by himself." Richard Ellender, Oilers WR/KR, 1979.

Did you feel that Ken Stabler, a 10-year veteran who came over to the team from Oakland in 1980, still had enough in his tank to take the Oilers to the Super Bowl? A lot of people, including Al Davis, were of the opinion that he was on the decline by the end of the 70's.

Phillips: Yeah! He wasn't the same player that he was maybe four or five years before that, but I've seen him walk out on the practice field, and in a 7-on-7 practice drill throw eighteen straight passes and complete every one of them. That was the first time he worked out with the team - never knew a receiver, had never thrown a pattern to a receiver or nothing. Just walked out there, and in a 15 minute period completed 18 of 'em in a row. That was against a defense, too - linebackers and secondary. He was a phenomenal thrower.

Since we're talking about Stabler, let's talk about the circumstances behind the blockbuster deal that brought him to the team. Two months after the second consecutive loss to Pittsburgh in the '79 AFC title game, Pastorini was shipped out to Oakland for Stabler in a rare one-for-one QB trade. How difficult of a decision was it to let him go, considering the progress the team had made under his direction?

Phillips: It was his decision.

Pastorini's decision?

Phillips: Yep.

The story that the public was fed was that it was the team's decision to make the move. You're saying that you would have kept him as the team's quarterback had the decision been yours?

Phillips: Sure! He came in to talk to me after the season was over and said, "They never have liked me here. I want to leave. I told him, "Dan, that's not right!" He said, "Well, that's what I want. You told me the first year you came here, standing up in front of the team, that anytime somebody didn't want to be here, all they had to do was ask, that you didn't want anybody to be on the team that didn't want to be here." I said, "Well, yeah, I said that." He said, "I'm telling your right now - I want to be traded." I told him to go home and think about it, that it was a bad decision for him that he would regret for the rest of his life. He came back the next week and said he still wanted to be traded. I said ok, and we made the deal.

Did you feel that Pastorini had peaked in terms of his development as quarterback?

Phillips: No, I think he was still improving, except he got his leg broke [playing for Oakland]. He would have done really well out there.

Did you have any idea that Pastorini was unhappy playing in Houston?

Phillips: I can't answer that. [The fans] got a little upset with him, but Christ, they got upset with me. They get upset with anybody when you don't win. You just take that with a grain of salt and move on. You gotta learn to do it that way.

So you began shopping him around?

Phillips: No, I didn't start shopping him around. I just called one guy - Al Davis. Dan was from California, anyhow. That's where he was raised and grew up. That's where he played [Santa Clara in college]. He liked that area.

The story goes that Davis was looking for a stronger arm to jump-start his deep passing game. Stabler's arm apparently wasn't getting the ball downfield far enough for the Raiders.

Phillips: Yeah, they were after the deep ball. No doubt about it that Davis wanted Dan because Dan could throw it deep. Unfortunately, Dan broke his knee very early on when he was out there, and he never got over that.

Did you know that Stabler was available at the time?

Phillips: No, I had no idea.

After the trade, you commented, "We weren't looking for a better passer than Dan. We were looking for a different type of passer, a more consistent, intermediate guy that would fit into a ball-control offense." Was that a damage control PR statement, or was Stabler really that appealing to your offense?

Phillips: I had to say something. When Kenny came to play for us, we didn't really know him that well, what he was still able to do. We had him running an offense that had been built for Dan. Had I been there another year, I think we could have utilized him better.

Quickly, let's talk about those memorable battles with the Steelers near the end of the decade. You said after the second regular season meeting in 1978, a 13-3 loss at the Astrodome, "In my 31 years of coaching, I've never seen a game that was as hammer and tong like this one." Looking back at your games with Pittsburgh.....

Phillips: [Laughing] All of them were. They needed an ambulance on the sideline for most of them.

Was the rivalry as bitter and mean-spirited as, say, the Steelers-Raiders or Chiefs-Raiders rivalries? It was definitely as physical.

Phillips: No, we got along good. Our players got along good with them. Our fans, everyone respected the Steelers, and the Steelers liked and respected our guys. It was just good, hard football, that's all. Part of the reason it became a great rivalry was that we knew we had to beat them to win the division and get to the Super Bowl. To get to the Super Bowl, you had to get through Pittsburgh. When we beat them, they were gracious losers and gave us the credit for winning. They would say we won fair and square and move on with no excuses. And whenever they beat us, they still would give us credit for playing hard. You have to respect a team that does that.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 22, No. 5 (2000)

Terry Bradshaw once said that had the '78 and '79 AFC Championships been played in the Astrodome instead of in the winters of Pittsburgh, the Oilers would have won both of those games. If anything, his remark reflects a great deal of respect for your football teams. Do you agree with Bradshaw's opinion?

Phillips: I would like to agree with him! What's unfortunate is that we'll never be able to say whether that's true or not. If not, I still think we were the second-best team in the league those years.

During his first three seasons with the Houston Oilers, Campbell represented 33% of team's total offensive yardage. By comparison, Cleveland's Jim Brown accounted for 34%, Chicago's Walter Payton 36% and Denver's Terrell Davis 30%. However, Campbell averaged nearly 2 more carries per game (22.7) than each of them in doing so.