

25 Significant “Meaningless” NFL Games

By Mark L. Ford

Nobody writes much about NFL preseason games. No kidding, you might say. Who cares? Those August games don't count for anything. They're "meaningless," right? Actually, the better word would be "inconsequential". An exhibition win or loss will not affect a team's trip to the playoffs. But because the games can be played without consequence, the preseason has often been the place where new ideas could be tried.

In fact, nearly everything that has happened in an NFL game took place in an exhibition game first. Take "sudden death overtime". Before Alan Ameche's famous plunge to win the 1958 NFL championship, the New York Giants lost in overtime to the Rams, in a 1955 game – and by the same 23-17 score.

Before the NFL and the AFL merged in 1970, the two leagues faced off in three summers' worth of games that didn't count. Tampa and Seattle hosted their first official NFL games in 1976, after proving to be better test markets than Birmingham or Portland.

Here, now, a list of at least 25 interesting NFL games that you won't find in the official records:

1. **Ottawa, 1950: New York Giants 27, Ottawa Rough Riders 6.** The first half was played under Canadian rules before 15,000 at Lansdowne Park, with 12 men to a team, a 110 yard long field, three downs instead of four and no downfield blocking. Ottawa scored the first touchdown of the game, worth 5 points at the time. Giants' assistant coach Allie Sherman suited up as the New York quarterback, while Tom Landry scored the only "rouge" of his career to make the game 5-1. At halftime, the Giants led 13-6 and boundaries were set down to accommodate NFL rules. Forrest Griffith scored two touchdowns in the second half to win the first of several NFL games in Canada.

2. **Portland, 1955: Los Angeles Rams 23, New York Giants 17.** Before the game, the teams acquiesced to a request that sudden death be used to break any tie. Tank Younger scored the winning TD in the fifth quarter. Three years later, the Giants would lose the 1958 championship in overtime to the Colts by the same 23-17 margin.

3. **Buffalo, 1960: Boston Patriots 28, Buffalo Bills 7.** Buffalo hosted the first AFL game on July 30, 1960. The Patriots' Bob Dee recovered a Bills' fumble in the end zone for the first points scored in the new American Football League.

4. **Hamilton, Ontario 1961: Hamilton Tigercats 38, Buffalo Bills 21.** In the same week that Chicago beat Montreal, and St. Louis defeated Toronto, the AFL played its first and last game against a CFL team. Besides winning against its American neighbor, Hamilton was 104-0 in 1961 and played in the Grey Cup.

5. **Chicago, 1963: College All-Stars 20, Green Bay Packers 17.** The University of Wisconsin made the winning play to beat the Packers, as Roger Vander Kelen's 73 yard pass to his Badger teammate, Pat Richter, gave the Stars their last victory in the series, which ended in 1976. Eight of the eleven starters on offense were from the Big Ten Conference.

6. **Detroit, 1963: Detroit Lions 24, Cleveland Browns 10.** The ultimate in pro football research, as writer George Plimpton trained with Detroit on assignment from *Sports Illustrated* and suited up for his only game. Plimpton wore #0 as a backup quarterback for Milt Plum, and was prepared to enter during the last plays of the game – but his stunt was banned at halftime by the league office. He recounted his experiences in the bestseller *Paper Lion*.

7. **Denver, 1967: Denver Broncos 13, Detroit Lions 7.** The first interleague exhibition game between the NFL and the AFL, with the AFL team winning. Denver also beat the Minnesota Vikings in exhibition, before settling into a 3-11 regular season.

8. **Los Angeles, 1967: Los Angeles Rams 44, Kansas City Chiefs 24.** The final interleague game of, and the unofficial championship of, the '67 preseason. The Rams and the Chiefs were both 5-0 going into the matchup.

9. **Houston, 1968: Houston Oilers 9, Washington Redskins 3.** Before the World Football League invented the "action point," NFL and AFL owners voted to experiment with the "pressure point" in all 1968 interleague exhibitions. Extra points could not be kicked, and running or passing the conversion was worth 1 point rather than

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- 2, making the pressure point a hybrid of both leagues' rules. Houston's Willie Campbell failed in the first attempt to score a pressure point, in what was also the first game in a domed stadium, the Astrodome.
10. **Huntsville, Alabama, 1969: Atlanta Falcons 55, Alabama Hawks 0.** The only game between an NFL team and a Continental Football League team, and the last matchup between the big leagues and the minors. The Falcons' rookies played against Atlanta's unofficial CFL farm team.
11. **Cleveland, 1969: Chicago Bears 23, Buffalo Bills 16.** An AFL team was invited to the annual Cleveland doubleheader, and the Bears became the first and only NFL team to score an AFL 2 point conversion. Jack Concannon threw a pass to Dick Gordon to make the score 14-7.
12. **Buffalo, 1969: Buffalo Bills 21, Washington Redskins 17.** Buffalo's John Rauch and Washington's Vince Lombardi faced each other for the first time since Super Bowl II. Eighteen months earlier, Lombardi's Green Bay Packers defeated Rauch's Oakland Raiders 33-14.
13. **Eugene, Oregon, 1970: San Francisco 49ers 23, Denver Broncos 7.** In 1970, the NFL still placed its goal posts on the goal line, while colleges and high schools had the posts at the end of the end zone. In most exhibitions, the posts could be moved, but not at the University of Oregon, where the structure had been set in concrete. The teams kicked their extra points from inside the end zone and neither side attempted a field goal. In 1974, the NFL joined the rest of America in moving the goal posts ten yards from the touchdown line.
14. **Canton, Ohio, 1970: New Orleans Saints 14, Minnesota Vikings 13.** Tom Fears did it all at the 1970 Hall of Fame game, coaching the winning team and being inducted into the Hall at halftime (for his achievements as a player for the Rams). Fears' newly acquired status did not keep him from being fired later that year. The Saints went from 4-2 in the preseason to a 2-11-1 record for 1970.
15. **Denver, 1974: New York Jets 41, Denver Broncos 19.** With most of the NFL veterans on strike, Denver fielded a team composed entirely of rookies. Running back Al Barrett fumbled three times, setting up three Jets' touchdowns.
16. **San Diego, 1974: San Diego Chargers 20, New York Jets 14.** Jesse Freitas threw a 19 yard pass to Glen Bonner for the first win under the NFL's new overtime rule.
17. **Pittsburgh, 1976: New York Giants 17, Pittsburgh Steelers 0.** The closest approximation to a meeting between the champions of the WFL and the NFL took place on national television. Memphis Southmen coach John McVay became a Giants assistant, and brought nine players to the New York squad. The WFL vets contributed to an upset of the Super Bowl champs.
18. **Canton, Ohio, 1980: San Diego Chargers 0, Green Bay Packers 0.** The last 0-0 tie in a regular NFL game was in 1943. The Hall of Fame game participants were scoreless when a violent thunderstorm began in the fourth quarter. With 5:29 left in the game, the organizers called off the exhibition.
19. **Miami, 1982: Miami Dolphins 24, Washington Redskins 7.** The Redskins lost their first game and went 0-4 in the preseason. Washington lost only once in the regular season and met Miami again in their last game, Super Bowl XVI. This time, the Redskins won 27-17, proving that the preseason is not a predictor of anything.
20. **London, England 1986: Chicago Bears 17, Dallas Cowboys 6.** The NFL had played once before in Britain, but never with the enthusiasm that came with the first American Bowl, in Wembley Stadium before 82,699 spectators. The Bears hired British soccer player Russell Wilsmer to boot the opening kickoff against "America's Team".
21. **Washington, 1992: Minnesota Vikings 30, Washington Redskins 0.** The Vikings wrapped up an incredible preseason, outscoring their opponents 140 to 6 with scores of 24-3, 30-0, 56-3 and 30-0.
22. **East Rutherford, NJ, 1994: Miami Dolphins 20, New York Giants 19.** Miami's Rob Coons threw a pass to Doug Pedersen to score the first 2 point conversion under NFL rules.
23. **Canton, Ohio, 1995: Carolina Panthers 20, Jacksonville Jaguars 14.** The Hall of Fame hosted the first game each for the NFL's 29th and 30th teams.

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24. **Chicago, 1996: Kansas City Chiefs 14, Chicago Bears 10.** The shortest NFL game lasted 40 minutes, 40 seconds. With 4:20 left in the third quarter, the game was called because of thunder and lightning.

25. **Canton, Ohio, 1999: Cleveland Browns 20, Dallas Cowboys 17.** The new Cleveland Browns played their first game, winning the first Hall of Fame contest to go into overtime.

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The preceding list was confined to twenty-five games, but many more could have been listed. What makes the preseason interesting is that it allows a plausible answer to "what if?," the universal question of historians. Many would say that contests that don't count in the standings are, by definition, dull. But as the preceding list indicates, it is that quality of "not counting" that has made the games worth looking into.