

# STEVE SABOL - President, NFL Films

JULY 16, 1998

By Thomas Danyluk

*If Father Time could put his summary of the 1970's into words, this is what he'd say:*

*"A decade has come, a decade has gone, and so very much has changed  
The meek have risen to inherit the earth, the mighty have fallen away  
I've ripened a new generation and launched them to courses of fame  
I've added some years to glorious careers, and watched men leave the game  
I've given men time to look silly, time to feel helpless and lame  
It's a chorus of laughs, a choir of fools when men play a little boys game."*

*Those are the words of John Facenda, spoken at the end of the NFL Films production "The Super Seventies." What thoughts come to your mind about pro football in that decade as you hear them again?*

**Sabol:** The 1970's could be called the Golden Age of pro football because it had some of the greatest teams ever in that decade, maybe two of the greatest. The '72 Dolphins were undefeated, but many of those players from that team will say that the '73 Dolphins were an even better team, even though they lost two games. But also in the 70's, you had the Pittsburgh Steelers, and they, to me, were the greatest team in the history of the game. Also, a decade takes its shape from its great teams and its great rivalries and the competition between those teams. What made the 70's the "Golden Age" was that, not only were the Dolphins and the Steelers great teams, but the Raiders were as well. They were truly the renegades and the cutthroats and the silver and black marauders that people talk about. They're not that way today, but they were back then when the image was created. The phrase "America's Team" for the Dallas Cowboys was coined, which we used for the team's highlight film in 1976. So you have those four teams - the Dolphins, the Steelers, the Cowboys and the Raiders - which gave that whole decade its shape.

*In that respect, there are no great teams anymore in pro football any longer, as free agency has shuffled rosters like an annual game of 52-Pickup.*

**Sabol:** Especially in the heart and soul of a great team, which is its offensive line. That's so important. Look at all those teams I mentioned - they all had a great offensive line. The Dolphins had Bob Kuechenberg and Jim Langer, who's in the Hall of Fame. The Steelers didn't have many household names except Mike Webster, who's in the Hall, but they had Ray Pinney, Gerry Mullins and Sam Davis - a really great offensive line. I think what happens today is not so much the big stars moving around but the offensive linemen that seem to be shifting around. I remember Mike McCormack, the Hall of Fame tackle for the Browns who was once head coach of the

Eagles,

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saying, "A great offensive line operates like the five fingers on your hand, and they all have to work together." The reason that the offensive line gets to that point is by spending years together maturing, growing up and practicing together. Now, that doesn't happen. Every offensive line seems to lose at least one starter. The Broncos, coming off their win in the Super Bowl, lost one or two offensive linemen. That, to me, is the reason why it's so hard to maintain a dynasty, let alone continuity, in football today. Too many of those guys are shifting around.

*That hand McCormack was talking about now looks like it belongs to Frankenstein.*

**Sabol:** You're right. The fingers are all sewn together. So much of pro football is based on the chemistry within a team, and it's hard for people to understand that. When I think of the fans' everyday appreciation and understanding of the game, one thing they can't understand or appreciate - nor can they be expected to - is that every one of these guys are in pain from November on. Football is a tough sport as it is, but when think about going out in November and playing on those frozen fields when it's cold and you're not 100% - and nobody is - that to me is why the chemistry and emotion is so important. That's the only well you have to dip into when you're playing in pain. The emotion, the teamwork, the self-sacrifice that Vince Lombardi used to talk about that are still true today. Look at the Broncos last year - I think they played a total of 22 or 23 games, including the preseason. Shit, that's like three college seasons in one. A college season is 8 or 9 games. In the NFL, to get to the Super Bowl you have to play 23 or 24 games. The wear and tear that puts on your body is just unfathomable to the average fan.

*NFL Films started out in the 1960's producing upbeat newsreels of pro games, correct?*

**Sabol:** Yes, actually that's a good point. When we started, the first film we ever did was the 1962 NFL Championship game. People think the first film that we did was this whole new style of presenting the game, with John Facenda and the music and the sound. That's wasn't the case. It took us about three or four years to develop that style, and it wasn't until 1966 that we did a film called "They Call It Pro Football." That was the first film that John Facenda ever narrated, and the first film that Sam Spence ever wrote the music for. It was the first film that a coach miked for sound appeared in. That was the "Citizen Kane" of football movies. Everything after that was influenced and affected by that film. Everything that was produced before that film was done in a certain way. The music was different, the scripts sounded something like, "Milt Plum pegs a peach of a pass to become the apple of coach George Wilson's eye." They were written in a cute, clever manner, where in "They Call It Pro Football" Facenda was reading lines like "The face of a tiger," or "The linebacker - search and destroy." It was all written in those sentence fragments that became the style of NFL Films. It was really that one film that was the springboard to the style that everyone recognizes today as NFL Films.

*Describe the evolution that occurred in transforming NFL Films from its newsreel style into an art form? Was it a creative evolution or the Big Bang?*

**Sabol:** Well, right from the start, we had two philosophies at work. My father wanted to portray pro football the way Hollywood portrayed fiction, and that was with a dramatic flair, original music and a sense of storytelling. I wanted to show the game as I had experienced it as a player. I played four years of college football at Colorado College, and I wanted to show the game as I experienced it, and that was with the eyes bulging, the snot spraying, the sweat flying, the passion and the sound. We married those two styles, those two philosophies, and that became the guiding light of all of our filmmaking, and still is today. A lot of people have given us credit for creating the image of the game and promoting the game and helping the growth of the game. That's very flattering to hear, but to be honest with you, that was never our purpose. When we were making these films, my dad was the salesman and the figurehead and the president of the company, and I was the filmmaker - sort of the little troll under the bridge that would decide how it would sound and look. But at the beginning, the company just rode on my father's personality, because until we developed a style, we weren't really doing anything that was different. The one thing that we've done that separated us from any of the sports - baseball or hockey or the NBA - was our innocence. We never had focus groups or marketing surveys. We never thought of ourselves as packagers or promoters. We were just a bunch of young guys who loved pro football and loved to make movies, and wanted to

convey our love of the game to our audience. I think that's why we've lasted as long as we have, and why we have the following we have because the fans look at our movies and know those films are being made by people like us that care about the game, that care about the same things that we do.

*I remember NBC's Bob Costas criticizing the league during a pregame show for the poor quality of its games, saying it was more entertaining to watch an NFL Films production than the real thing on Sunday afternoons.*

**Sabol:** Well, actually they should be. Alfred Hitchcock once said that, "Drama is really life with the dull parts cut out." When you look at what we were doing -and we still do - is taking a game that requires 3 hours to play but only has 12 minutes of action. We take that 12 minutes and condense it and focus it and distill it and add music to it and sound effects and edit it. What we do should be more exciting. Well, maybe not more exciting, because when you're looking at what we do you already know the outcome. What we do is embellish the game and draw out the story lines, which in certain ways can be just as emotional to some people as the outcome itself.

*The early Music of NFL Films, particularly from the late 1960s through the end of the 70s, was brilliant, inspiring, even somewhat militaristic. I can envision General George Patton plopping Volume III onto an RCA Victrola for his troops before heading off to relieve the troops at Bastogne. What is the story behind this great music?*

**Sabol:** When we started, all the music was basically the John Phillips Sousa "oom-pah" music. I was a movie buff in college, and I remember seeing "Gone With the Wind," which was three hours long. All but twenty minutes of that movie had music. I figured if there was any sport that lent itself to music, it was football. You had music before the game and music at halftime. So we decided to develop a certain style of music. When I used to go camp in the Poconos, every Friday night we'd have a campfire and sit around and sing songs, like [singing] "What do you do with a drunken sailor, da da dadum da dadum dum dum dum...." I always that would be great music with a big orchestration that would work with football. I met this composer named Sam Spence and I would hum some of these songs to him. He would take some of these melodies and orchestrate them with 60 to 70 piece orchestras. We spent a lot of money on the music in the very beginning because I felt that music was the way to really develop emotion and momentum. Music was not only part of pro football, but it was very much a part of storytelling as well.

*How were you meet Sam Spence?*

**Sabol:** Sam Spence worked for New York composer named Malin Marek, who my father knew. Sam was his arranger. My father had been talking to Malin Marek about doing some music for us. He was a

Broadway composer and he wasn't really interested, but he said he had an arranger who he thought might be pretty good. My dad and I met Sam and we talked. Then we paid him \$50,000 the first time and he did about 15 minutes of music for us. We both liked it, and from then on, he would do an hour's worth of original music for us every year for the next 15 years.

### **Steve Sabol's Top Five Hits from the Editing Room of NFL Films:**

1) November 20, 1960 – Chuck Bednarick on Frank Gifford. Bednarick was more like a human guillotine than a linebacker on this punishing play. "That was a great hit. Gifford fumbled on the play. Philadelphia not only won that game, but went on to win the championship."

2) December 26, 1964 – Mike Stratton on Keith Lincoln. "It was a little flareout thrown by Tobin Rote. Stratton hit Lincoln so hard he broke two of his ribs, and Lincoln was the Chargers main threat at that time." With San Diego's star back knocked out of action, Buffalo went on to win the AFL Championship 20-7.

3) January 20, 1991 – Leonard Marshall on Joe Montana. This sack changed the course of the 1990 NFC title game. "The Giants were trailing, 13-9, before this [play]. After Marshall's hit (with 9:41 left in the fourth quarter), San Francisco made one first down." Montana left the game with a concussion, a broken pinkie finger, and a bruised sternum; The Giants left Candlestick Park as NFC Champions.

4) November 11, 1979 – Jack Tatum on Earl Campbell. "Campbell takes a handoff at the 2-yard line, and he and Tatum have an unbelievable collision. They both stagger, but Campbell falls into the end zone." The concussion shook the Astrodome and gave Tatum a powder-blue dose of his own medicine.

5) September 17, 1990 – Steve Atwater on Christian Okoye. "This was a big moment for us, because Atwater was miked for sound. He actually dented the [microphone] receiver. After the hit, you just heard static."

Source: The Sporting News

*It seems that NFL Films has drifted away from using those classic arrangements, turning to a more modern soundtrack behind your productions.*

**Sabol:** It depends what you're watching. We still use Sam's music in some of our things. There are certain types of music, like Sinatra's, that don't go out of style. There are some things that Sam did then that haven't gone out of style and still can be used. That music is so identifiable with the 60's and 70's. Sometimes when people see it in our newer films, it's like taking a score from "The Wizard of Oz" and putting it with "Saturday Night Fever." It just doesn't work.

Times change, the kind of music we listen to changes. In many ways, music reflects our culture. The style and the way the game is played today would not lend itself to that kind of music, although the music we use now is a derivative of that kind of music. The arrangements are different. The emphasis on the musical instruments is different, but we still try to tell a story with it.

*NFL Films' popularity seemed to hit its height of popularity in the 1970s, when "Game of the Week" and "This Week in the NFL" were television staples. Has your product gradually lost some of its appeal to recent generations?*

**Sabol:** Jeez, I hope not. I can only say that when we started, we had two shows: NFL Game of the Week and NFL Films Presents. Now, we do ten different shows on eight different networks. I just that there is so much football on television is that people get lost in the avalanche of all these pregame shows and postgame shows. "NFL Films Presents" is in its 28th year now, the longest running syndicated sports show in television history. The only thing that's been on longer than that is ABC's Wide World of Sports. Our show on HBO is the longest running sports show on cable. We're also on NFL Matchup, we do three shows for the international market. We produce features for Fox, NBC, and ABC's halftime. I could go on and on. We're doing more work now than we've ever done. We're moving into a whole new building because we've outgrown where we are now. When we started, there were two football shows on television. There was the countdown to Kickoff on CBS - NBC didn't even have a pregame show - and NFL Films Presents. Now, there are ninety-eight different football shows on television.

*Producing the highlight film for great teams like the '77 Cowboys or the '89 Niners is probably inherently motivating for you and your staff. How difficult is it to put together a creative, enthusiastic highlight film for some of these clunkers over the years, like the 1972 Oilers (1-13) or the 1977 Saints (3-11)? Of course, you're likely to emphasize the positive in your portrayal of the each team's season, but wouldn't you, just once, have the script read, "In 1989, the Phoenix Cardinals sucked?"*

**Sabol:** Well, it's certainly not inspiring as it is to do the 49ers or the Cowboys or the Packers, but if you're creative, it's a great challenge. Teams that have records are that bad really just throw up their hands, and most of them don't even want to look at the film. The producer of that film is therefore left up to his own creative ability to make it interesting. A lot of really good ideas have come from the highlight films of the Tampa Bay Bucs, the New Orleans Saints, the Houston Oilers, those bad Giants teams of the 70's. The teams themselves really weren't that interested in it, and it was left up to our producers to make the team and their season seem interesting. So creatively, sometimes it's not that bad to have one of those teams if you are a producer. There's no pressure on you, that's for sure, because nobody is expecting much

from you. If you're doing the highlight film of the Broncos from this past year, well shit, everybody is expecting to get goosebumps for the whole 20 minutes of that.

*Let's talk about John Facenda. His voice was really the showpiece instrument in the NFL Films orchestra. What type of void were you trying to fill in your productions at the time, and how was he discovered?*

**Sabol:** John was a broadcaster, a news anchorman here in Philadelphia, and his station was phasing him out. They were bringing in the plastic blowup dolls with the freeze-dried hair to do the news, and John just didn't look like that. He was an old, craggy-faced weather-beaten guy, who had this great, oaken delivery. I had grown up with that voice as a kid, and I remembered him doing the news. Whenever he spoke, anybody that was in the room watching the news just listened. One of the things I wanted to do with our films was write less script. Not more. Less. I felt all of the films were overwritten, and there was too much script. I felt the way to build drama was to do it with sound, music and a real sparse usage of words. So who was better to speak those words than a man with the voice like John Facenda.

I remember my father approached him - I was only 22 at the time, a pipsqueak. We didn't know whether he was even a football fan, but he said he would do it. I always remember the first line of script that I wrote for him. It became kinda characteristic of the kind of writing I did for him during those first years. It was in the film "They Call It Pro Football." and it read [imitating Facenda], "It starts with a whistle, and ends with a gun - sixty minutes of close-in action from kickoff to touchdown." The problem we had was that he wanted to look at the footage. In those days he was in a sound booth looking at the film, and he really was getting distracted. So I said, "John, let's try something different. Why don't we sit here and look at the film. You watch it, and then we'll go back and do this whole recording wild," meaning he would do it without looking at the film. It was so different and so much better that way, that from then on, he never saw anything that he ever read for until it was finished. He had a certain richness of expression and a great resonance to cut through music. I always felt his voice was distinctive but not distracting.

A lot of times today you get a narrator that can be so narcissistic that they call attention to the way they're speaking, which is a distraction. John wasn't that way at all. He was an opera fan. When we'd get to portions of the script that we really wanted to sound dramatic, he would write the word "profundo." Or I would tell him, "This has to be read very briskly," and he would write "allegro." Or I would say, "This has to be read lightly," and he would write "labretto." So we would have these football scripts with the words "profundo" and "allegro" written in the margins, and you'd say to yourself, "What is this? Promuto? Vince Promuto? He's the guard for the Redskins. What does he have to do with the script?" Well, those were his ways of coaching himself

on how to read something. It was the fact that Facenda's voice was so dramatic that it enabled us to write much shorter scripts, which is what we wanted to do.

*One of my favorites was his reading for the 1974 NFL season highlight film. It paralleled and meshed the progression of the football year - from the heat of training camp through the playoffs - with the changing of the seasons. It was the only time I ever heard the sounds of summer and fall and winter in a voice.*

**Sabol:** That film is a classic. It's really called "The Championship Chase." [Reciting] "The autumn wind is a pirate, rolling in from sea...." That whole thing has become a part of the culture of the whole NFL. They're actually using some of the lines from that script in their promotions this year. I was always a big fan of Rudyard Kipling, and that was my attempt at poetry there, with a little assistance from Shakespeare. Whenever I go back and look at the old films that I've done, I always go back and look at that one. It seems that whenever it is shown, on ESPN or wherever, everybody stops and listens. That was probably the apogee of that particular style. We've never tried to come back and do it again because I think it would be a little bit cliched now. But at that time, nobody had ever done a sports film with the music and poetry and kind of Greek chorus that I used in that film. I look back at that and I remember writing those lines of script and then hearing Facenda read them and getting chills and saying, "Boy, this is really great."

*His last piece of work for you was the Super Bowl XVIII highlight film, as he died from cancer in 1984. Others have done his job since, but have you ever really tried to "replace" John Facenda, to hire someone with a similar style and expression and intonation? I always envisioned the NFL Films recruiters scouring the country, listening to the voices sermonizing behind the Sunday lecterns or arguing in smoky neighborhood bars, looking for that next voice of distinction.*

**Sabol:** We did! We had 300 different audition tapes sent to us over a period of six months. From people like Ed McMahon and Charlton Heston and Robert Stack to guys that were just football fans doing the recording in their basement. You could hear the washing machine in the background going "ka-thump ka-thump ka-thump." People got tapes of our music and would read to it. I even saved some of those tapes. They would all take that piece that we did on Lombardi, where Facenda's opening line was, [imitating Facenda] "Lombardi - a certain magic still lingers in the very name. It speaks of duels in the snow and the cold November mud." People would all try to read that line like Facenda, but you can never replace a Lawrence Olivier or an Orson Wells, and we never thought we would replace a Facenda. To tell you the truth, if John was still alive and narrating for us, people might be saying, "Yeah, NFL Films still uses that old guy with the voice of God, but this is the rap generation." So I think Facenda has become legendary

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 23, No. 1 (2001)

because, like many great talents, he was perfect for his time and his place, and his talent was at the right place at the right time. I'm not so sure he would be the right voice for the 90's.

*November can be cold and gray, November can be surly  
With bitter rain upon the world, and winter coming early  
Do you fear the force of the wind, the slash of the rain?  
Go face them and fight them - be savage again  
The palms of your hands will thicken, the skin of your cheek will tan  
You'll grow ragged and weary and wet, but you must do the best that you can*

*The autumn wind is pirate, blustering in from sea  
With a rollicking song he sweeps along, swaggering boisterously  
His face is weather-beaten, he wears a hooded sash  
With a silver hat about his head, and a bristling black moustache  
He growls as he storms the country, a villain big and bold  
And the trees all shake and quiver and quake as he robs them of their gold*

- John Facenda, from NFL Films' "The Championship Chase" (1974)

*In the late 1980's, NFL Films put together the Dream Bowl, a mythical matchup between the '78 Steelers and the '72 Dolphins to determine which was the greatest team in history.*

**Sabol:** We ran those two teams through a computer, and it ended up with the Steelers winning 23-22. But of course, a lot of that was entertainment based, with a lot of humor and tongue-in-cheek, although it had my true feeling about which were the greatest teams. We tried to put a laugh or two into it. We had Elvis Presley singing the national anthem, and tried to do some other funny things with it. We're gonna actually do another one. We're going to do one for the year 2000, and its going to be called "The Team of the Millennium." But, in my opinion, it will probably still be the Steelers as the best football team.

*Let's look at it from the other end. Which two teams would play in the Futility Bowl, the battle for the worst team in history, loser gets the crown?*

**Sabol:** Well, you mentioned one of them, the Oilers from '72. Of course, the Saints had one stretch in which they were awful, even with Archie Manning there. They were 1-15 in 1980. Tampa had that stretch where they lost 26 in a row. Even Jimmy Johnson's first Cowboy team was a terrible team, and might be one of them. Pick from those four. But the worst team of all-time, if you want to go back, you could take the Dallas Texans of 1952. The Pittsburgh Steelers of the

1950s had some awful teams. The Green Bay Packers of '53 and '58 were really horseshit teams.

*You might want to consider getting a playoff series together to find out which was the worst.*

**Sabol:** Yeah, but the players that were on those teams wouldn't be too happy about it. We did have an idea for that one time. We were going to call it the Repus Bowl, which is "super" spelled backwards.

*The 1970's are also known for the great moments - lots of miracle plays and fantastic finishes.*

**Sabol:** Absolutely. I think of the Miracle of the Meadowlands in '78, where the Giants fumbled the game away to the Eagles. I think of The Holy Roller, the play in the Chargers-Raiders game where Ken Stabler fumbled the ball, Pete Banaszak kicked it, and Casper falling on it for a game-winning touchdown. I think of the Hail Mary, Staubach to Drew Pearson in the playoff at Minnesota. OJ Simpson's 2003 yards in 1973. There was the Immaculate Reception, of course. I think that particular weekend was the greatest playoff weekend in NFL history. People forget that right after the Immaculate Reception game, Roger Staubach came into the playoff against the 49ers and led Dallas from two touchdowns behind to win the game.

*How about shooting-star performances by individual teams, ones that shot from the back of the pack to the tops of their divisions for a couple of seasons, the dropped back out of the sky.*

**Sabol:** The first team I think of is the Houston Oilers of the late 70s. That was a great story, a terrific wave of emotion. They had Pastorini and Bum Phillips. The problem that they had was that they had to go through Pittsburgh every year, having to play them up there in the driving sleet and rain and cold. They ended up stopping Earl Campbell. They just couldn't beat the Steelers. There was nothing wrong with that, since Pittsburgh was the greatest team ever. After they lost the AFC Championship up there in 1978, the team went back to the Astrodome that night in Houston, and the whole city showed up. They had a huge party and parade for them. I remember Bum Phillips saying, "This year we knocked on the door, and next year we're gonna kick the son-of-a-bitch in." The next year, they went up and played the Steelers and were beaten again.

*Which was the decade's greatest single-season Cinderella story?*

**Sabol:** I think the greatest Cinderella individual story was Clint Longley, the backup Dallas quarterback on that Thanksgiving Day game in 1974. Staubach was hurt in that game against Washington, and he came in and threw two touchdown passes in the fourth quarter to win the game. That was one of the great Cinderella stories. Tom Dempsey, the kicker for the Saints, who set the record for the longest field goal in NFL history, was another one. Here was a guy who had been cut from a couple different teams and had half a foot, then

goes out and kicks a 63-yarder to beat the Lions. As far as Cinderella teams, you have to say the Pittsburgh Steelers.

*A Cinderella with four Super Bowl trophies?*

**Sabol:** Think about it. This was a team that had barely a handful of winning seasons in its entire history, which dated back to the 1930s. As a franchise, they were a joke for decades. Then Chuck Noll took over the team, and he only won one game in his first season. Then they got Bradshaw and Joe Greene and Franco Harris – they started having some great drafts, some of the best in NFL history. Then they went on to become, in my opinion, not only the team of the 70s, but the team for the ages.

*The Los Angeles Rams captured seven NFC West titles during the decade, but only reached the Super Bowl once, losing to the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1979. A lot of great players wore the Rams blue and gold in those days - Jack Youngblood, Lawrence McCutcheon, Tom Mack, Nolan Cromwell. What as the missing ingredient that kept the Rams from getting past Dallas and Minnesota in the playoffs and into more Super Bowls?*

**Sabol:** I think it was the lack of a real breakaway running back. McCutcheon was more of a grinder than a breakaway guy. But when you ask what kept the Rams from getting to the Super Bowl, I think you've got to look at the teams they had to beat to get there. Dallas and Minnesota were just better teams in most years that they played the Rams. And when they finally did make it to the Super Bowl in '79, they ended up playing Tampa Bay to get there, a team they matched up well with.

*There have been many great games in the history of the league, and NFL Films has documented them well. But what about the real stinkers, the lousy games? What was the worst game you ever saw? I remember a pathetic 3-0 game between the Redskins and the Jets in 1993, where the game-winning field goal was kicked with a minute to go in the first quarter. Another was a sloppy, bungled 20-20 tie between the Giants and the Cardinals in 1983 that was just a nightmare. Some of these can be pretty tough to take.*

**Sabol:** There was a game between Houston and Tampa in 1976 - Tampa's first season in the league – which was a complete disaster. There were turnovers and mistakes and the field was chewed up.

Another really bad game was Super Bowl V between the Colts and the Cowboys. I was just going through footage of that game and, boy, I have never seen so many dropped passes and fumbles and missed tackles. Earl Morrall turns around on a handoff and collides with Tom Nowatzke. Johnny Unitas drops back to pass, loses his balance and throws the ball into the ground. Craig Morton was sailing balls over Duane Thomas' head. That was a really poorly played game. The NFL decided to put little footballs on top of the endzone markers, and even those were wrong. We

were looking at the films and we could see they had "Chiefs" written on them for some reason. They didn't even get the teams right. I was researching the game, trying to disprove the notion that it was "The Blunder Bowl," but it was. It was the worst played championship game I can ever remember, and I've seen them all since 1962. The program from that game is considered the most valuable of all the Super Bowl programs because the truck that was carrying them to Miami got into an accident on the way. A lot of the programs got rained on and ruined, so there were fewer of them available.

Former Chicago Bears owner George Halas was infuriated after viewing a 1967 NFL Films piece which caught a gun-toting Bears' fan diving for a ball in the stands. Says Sabol, "[Halas] insisted, 'Those are not Bears fans! We don't have people like that come to our games! We have good fans!' Well, Bears fans in the '60s made the Indy 500 infield look like Parliament. They were wild, but he didn't want that. So the next year, I went to Washington and got close-ups of Redskins fans with their camel's hair coats, pretty sweaters and scarves. And every year I'd splice those shots into the Bears' films. So until the day he died, Halas said, 'See, those are Bears fans.' He never knew it was one of our running jokes at NFL Films."

*Instant replay has been a heated topic of debate in the NFL over the years. Had the league been using it since the AFL-NFL merger in 1970, some of the great plays in league history lore could have been reversed, including the Immaculate Reception and the Holy Roller play from a 1978 San Diego-Oakland game. Do feel instant replay has had a sterilizing effect on the game, one that diminishes the potential for future quirky, fantastic plays?*

**Sabol:** Well, as for the Holy Roller play, I don't know if that would have been a reviewable play or not. I guess they would have had to decide whether Stabler threw an incomplete pass or if he fumbled. It would be interesting to see how the officials would have ruled once they looked at the replay. Instant replay certainly would have affected the spontaneity of great plays like the Immaculate Reception, the Miracle at the Meadowlands, or the Holy Roller. During those days, once the referee threw up his hands and signaled touchdown, that was it. Had their been instantly replay, you would have lost that sense of finality that when the referee makes the call, the play is over – touchdown!

Of course, look at the lateral at the end of the playoff game between the Titans and the Bills – the Music City Miracle. You would think that everybody in the stadium would have relaxed while the officials looked at the replay, figuring it was going to be reversed. Instead, there was an incredible sense of suspense in that stadium because everybody knew that a chance to go to the Super Bowl was riding on this decision. That

play had a different element of suspense. It was like being in an isolation booth and the clock is ticking and everyone is waiting for you to give your answer to the big-money question. I guess instant replay lends its own type of suspense to these kind of plays.

*Over all your years at NFL Films, which owner raised the biggest stink about the content of his team's annual highlight film?*

**Sabol:** The first problem we ever had with a team's ownership was back in 1967 or '68. We had just produced a film called "The Football Follies," which was in incredible success. Everybody loved it. There were a couple of follies that were related to the Raiders, so we put them in their highlight film. They didn't think it was very funny. We felt that, in making a film, it was good to make people cheer and laugh, to cultivate all the emotions. We didn't know Al Davis at that point, and to him, there is no humor in mistakes or losing. To him, it was all about winning, but we didn't know about that at the time. He was very upset about it.

But then later, Al Davis became the first owner – and I think this is important – to call and congratulate me on a film. We did the 1976 Super Bowl, in which the Raiders defeated the Vikings, and after the film was shown, Al Davis got a copy of it and called me at my house to congratulate me. So I don't want to paint Al Davis as a bad guy. I could see why he was upset with those follies. To him, it's "Just win, baby." Even though they were humorous shots, watching Daryl Lamonica dropping back and falling down, or Clemon Daniels fumbling the ball was not funny to him. They were funny within the context of the "Football Follies" film, but not in a highlight film situation.

We also had a problem with George Halas in the beginning when we did montages – cutting from different games and situations throughout the season. He couldn't understand how Rudy Bukich would be throwing a pass at Wrigley Field and Mike Ditka would be catching the ball at the [LA] Coliseum. We told him it was a new film technique called montage, but he said to hell with that. He didn't like it. So for ten years, we never had any montages in any of the Bears highlight films.

The only plays that were ever shown in a Bears highlight film were from the games that they won. All the other plays, whether it would have been a terrific Gale Sayers run or a Johnny Morris touchdown catch, didn't appear in the highlight film if the Bears didn't win. Halas also didn't like close-ups. He used to call them "facials." He told me, "I don't want any facials in my film." And I said, "Well, people want to see what Dick Butkus or Gale Sayers look like." He said, "Nahhhh – if a player sees his face in those films, he's going to want more money."

*Let's play reverse word association. I'll give you the description, you give the answer:*

*"The most underrated running back of that era."*

**Sabol:** [Pause] That's a tough one. Tucker

Frederickson was a big back with the Giants who had some good years. I thought he was an underrated runner. Tom Woodeshick had some good seasons for the Eagles, but his last good year was in 1969. Dickie Post from San Diego was a very exciting player, who was also a very good receiver. Those three played mostly in the 1960s...[Thinking] I would have to say that for the 70s, Billy "White Shoes" Johnson of Houston would be my choice, even though he was a wide receiver. He was a fast, exciting player who probably didn't get as much recognition as he deserved.

*"Did the worst job of coaching with that much talent on the team."*

**Sabol:** Jim Dooley of the Bears had both Dick Butkus and Gale Sayers on his team and won only one game in 1969, so he definitely qualifies. In the 70s, I have to look at Bill "Tiger" Johnson, who had all that talent in Cincinnati but could never get into the playoffs, although having Pittsburgh in the same division didn't help much. Ken Anderson was at quarterback. Pete Johnson and Boobie Clark and Archie Griffin in the backfield. Very good wide receivers. Very good defensive talent. I think the Bengals of the mid-to-late 70s could have done more with the players that they had.

*"If he could only have that one play back."*

**Sabol:** Roger Staubach's last pass in 1979 playoffs against the Rams. He threw it to Herb Scott, one of his offensive linemen, which was a sad way to end a great career.

But the obvious one was the "Miracle at the Meadowlands," where the Giants' Joe Pisarcik fumbled trying to hand the ball off to Larry Csonka on the last play of the game, and Herman Edwards ran it back for the game-winning touchdown for Philadelphia. That game cost [assistant coach Bob Gibson, who called the play] his job, and then the Giants ended up firing [head coach] John McVay after the season. That is definitely one play that a lot of people would like to have back.

*"The game no one should have lost."*

**Sabol:** Miami-Oakland from 1974 was a great one. So was the Miami-San Diego playoff of '81. Another one was the "Ghost to the Post" game between Baltimore and Oakland, where Dave Casper caught the winning touchdown in the second overtime. That was a great one.

*"The most brutal, punishing game of that era."*

**Sabol:** I'll tell you what that was – any game from the 1978-79 season between the Steelers and the Oilers. The Oilers had Earl Campbell and were a very physical offensive team, and the Steelers were a physical defensive team. Those teams just pounded on each other. I remember the 13-3 game played at the Astrodome that was about as physical and brutal as any game in the 70s.

