

The 1961 San Diego Chargers – The AFL's First Dominating Defense

by Paul Lovett

Usually when one thinks of the American Football League of the 1960's it revolves around the wide open passing game and stars like Joe Namath and Lance Alworth. If defense is mentioned it usually revolves around the Buffalo Bills squad that won successive titles in 1964 and 1965. Yet before the Bills' defensive heroics came a defensive team in the AFL that would influence other NFL defenses a few years later (the Rams and the Vikings) with a huge defensive line that simply terrified opposing offenses. That defense belonged to the San Diego Chargers of 1961 – a defense with a record breaking secondary that simply overmatched other early AFL offensive lines and quarterbacks.

The 1961 Chargers were looking forward to starting the season in their new city. The end of their first season in Los Angeles had seen an offensive explosion rarely seen in professional football. In their last four regular season games the Chargers had scored more than 40 points. Despite the death of the Chargers' leading receiver, Ralph Anderson, due to a diabetes attack in November of that year, rookie Jack Kemp had a great year, passing for more than 3000 yards. Paul Lowe came out of nowhere after the first month of the season to rush for 855 yards, averaging over six yards per carry.

Although the loss in the championship game due to George Blanda's clutch passing left the Chargers short of their goal in 1960, the team entered 1961 brimming with confidence.

Increased expectation came with the upgrading of the defensive line. Holdover Ron Nery (6'6 230 lbs.) was joined by newcomers Bill Hudson (6'4 270 lbs.), Earl Faison (6'5 255 lbs.), and the towering Ernie Ladd (6'9 315 lbs.) leaving assistant coach Al Davis to gleefully acknowledge that the Chargers had the biggest defensive line in pro football. The Chargers were loaded with talent, ready to attempt to avenge their loss to Houston in the AFL's first year.

With the enlarging of San Diego's Balboa Stadium the Chargers were victorious in their first two games against Western Division rivals the Texans and the Raiders. The keys to the wins were the Charger rushing attack that totaled over 400 yards and an opportunistic secondary that recorded nine interceptions for one TD. San Diego fans were excited by their new team, but they knew that the home match against the Raiders did not showcase superior AFL opposition. The real test would come in San Diego the next week.

Game three of the 1961 season against the Houston Oilers was a rematch of the previous AFL championship and close to 30,000 fans came to see how the Chargers would respond. They had plenty of reason to cheer as the Chargers harassed the veteran Blanda and his back-up, Jacky Lee, throughout the 34-24 win. In a game that was really not that close, the Chargers had six interceptions that totaled 194 yards. DB Charlie McNeil had 177 of those yards (on three interceptions) with a 76-yard TD return. It seemed that the 1961 Chargers were the class of the young league at this point.

Yet the Houston game revealed a trend that would eventually stalk the team. After three games the Charger defense had 15 interceptions for over 300 yards and two touchdowns. The offense, despite being given excellent field position time and time again, proved erratic and not consistent enough for head coach Sid Gillman.

Both Kemp and Lowe would suffer through an up-and-down season, with little help from their replacements. Like the previous year, Gillman gambled on Kemp in 1961 to stay healthy, as untested back-up QB Hunter Enis warmed the bench during the year. RB Bo Roberson teamed with Lowe well in the first two games, but the rest of the year saw a drastic drop in production. Finally, it must be noted that both John Hadl and Lance Alworth would first appear in 1962 and rookie Keith Lincoln was used mostly on defense and kick returns during the year.

But despite the offensive problems the Chargers kept winning on their way to a record interception total. The Bills, Patriots, and the Titans fell as the Charger defense added seven more interceptions. DB Dick Harris had four of these, one a 56-yard TD that helped the Chargers edge a tough Buffalo squad 19-11 in week four. With a 6-0 mark the Chargers were clearly outdistancing the Dallas Texans, their closest rival in their division.

Five more victories followed that brought the Chargers record to 11-0, completely obliterating the AFL's Western division race. The defense kept the pressure on, with the interceptions piling up at a dizzying pace. Four each against the Raiders and the Broncos followed by five each against the Titans and the Broncos again added eighteen to their total, bring the season's amount after eleven games to 43. In week eight's shutout of the Broncos three different Charger defenders had interceptions of over 50 yards with two going for TD's. After week nine's 48 to 13 rout of the Titans statistics revealed that over one-third of the Charger interceptions set up TDs (12 of 35) and of the team's 40 TD's 18 came during or after the interceptions!

Unfortunately, the offense was not keeping up the pace. After a fine game in week six against the Titans with 302 yards passing, Jack Kemp suffered through a difficult month. Week seven had Kemp 5 of 17 passing for 65 yards against the Raiders. In the next contest against the Broncos, Kemp threw four interceptions while going 11 for 28.

The peak of offensive troubles revealed themselves in Denver in week 10 as Kemp went 11 of 31 for 201 yards (90 of them coming on a TD pass to Keith Lincoln) as the Chargers squeezed out a fortunate 19-16 win. Paul Lowe had a tough game as the Denver defense limited him to 15 yards in 18 rushes. Finally, week eleven brought an equally dismal Charger rushing performance in a 24-14 decision over the Texans. Twenty rushing attempts totaled three yards as Kemp broke out of his slump with 357 yards passing to keep the Chargers unbeaten. The stage was set for another rematch with the Oilers at Houston.

The Oilers were not the same club that the Chargers faced in San Diego in September. New coach Wally Lemm, who believed football should be "fun", replaced Lou Rymkus after four games and put George Blanda back as the starting QB.

With the '61 Oilers setting offensive records across the board, the Chargers fell 33-13 as Blanda went 20 of 33 for 351 yards with only one interception (along with a 55-yard FG). Although Kemp had a fine passing day (22-39-242 2TDs), the team's lack of a rushing attack (17 rushes for 35 yards) gave a team that had a defensive off-day a tremendous let-down. Although 11-1, the Chargers finished 1961 with a listless win against Buffalo and an embarrassing 41-0 loss to the Patriots in San Diego heading into the championship game against the Oilers.

Played in San Diego, the 1961 AFL championship proved to be one of the sloppiest and most vicious football games ever played. Thirteen turnovers set the tone of this brutal contest that saw many players carried off the field. Again the play of the Chargers mirrored most of their season as the defense continually harassed Blanda into five interceptions (for a total of six in the game) but the offense could not take advantage, continually sputtering and making too many mistakes. Like in 1960, one Blanda to Billy Cannon TD pass proved the difference in a 10-3 win marked by questionable officiating and a game-ending row between the Charger coaches and AFL back judge Johnny Morrow.

Despite the championship loss the 1961 Charger defense should be remembered as one of professional football's best. The 49 interceptions (in 14 games – this does not include the six in the playoff) is still a NFL record. Astoundingly, those interceptions totaled 929 yards and nine TD's! Charlie McNeil had nine interceptions for 349 yards and 2 TD's. LB Bob Laraba (who would be killed in a February 1962 car accident) had five interceptions for 151 yards and 2 TD's.

Along with the before-mentioned NFL Rams and Vikings (the "Fearsome Foursome" and the "Purple People Eaters") the sheer size of the defensive line influenced rival AFL coach Hank Stram to develop the "moving pocket" and draft large, tall defensive linemen of his own (Buck Buchanan comes to mind). As a final note, the legacy of the 1961 Charger defense is reflected in the "Steel Curtain" defense that helped the Pittsburgh Steelers of the 1970's toward four Super Bowls due to the Chargers 1961 defensive line coach -- one Chuck Noll.

1961 San Diego Interceptions

Game	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	Total
Gibson	1-12	1-18					2-0		1-13						5-43
McNeil	1-20		3-177-1			1-21	1-58	1-41-1	1-32	1-0					9-349-2
Faison	1-6		1-8												2-14
Allen	1-4		1-9					1-59-1	2-39						5-111-1
Harris		1-41-1		1-56-1	1-0	2-5				1-30-1				1-8	7-140-3
Karas		1-11	1-0					1-10							3-21
Blair		1-4						1-0							2-4
Maguire		1-2													1-2
Zeman					1-19	1-5	1-21		1-4	1-31	1-2		1-7	1-0	8-89
Laraba						1-22		1-57-1		1-7	1-60-1	1-5			5-151-2
Whitehead													1-0		1-0
Hudson													1-5-1		1-5-1

Totals:	Game One	4-42
	Game Two	5-76-1
	Game Three	6-194-1
	Game Four	1-56-1
	Game Five	2-19
	Game Six	4-32
	Game Seven	4-42
	Game Eight	4-174-2
	Game Nine	5-97-1
	Game Ten	5-110-1
	Game Eleven	3-62-1
	Game Twelve	1-5
	Game Thirteen	3-12-1
	Game Fourteen	2-8
	Total	49-929-9

Note: Special thanks to fellow PFRA member T.J. Troup for his help with three interception yardage totals that helped finish the 1961 interception research.