

GOOD YEAR - BAD DAY BY THE BAY

By Michael Berger

Most 49er fans' "historical memory" seems to date from the early January day in 1982 when Joe Montana and Dwight Clark teamed up for The Catch that finally beat Dallas in a big one, and sent San Francisco to its first Super Bowl.

But for those of us who grew up in San Francisco in the 1940s, the memories include not only three other 49er Hall of Famers -- quarterback Y.A. Tittle and runners Hugh McElhenny and Joe Perry -- but the very first 49er team of 1946, led by an almost-forgotten but brilliant lefthanded quarterback, Frankie Albert, a fullback named Norm Standlee who was bigger than most tackles in those days, and a roster dominated by men who were not only veterans of football, but of war.

Until The Catch in 1982, the closest the 49ers had come to playing in an NFL championship was in 1957, a season of dramatic finishes, bitter defeats, and in the midst of one game, death itself. In the early 1970s, they were within one victory of the Super Bowl twice, but lost to Dallas both times, and in neither game seriously threatened to win. But in a special Western Division playoff in 1957, they seemed headed for a championship.

Until that moment when they were on the verge of their first division title, they had been an entertaining bunch of also-rans who had the misfortune of playing in the same division with two teams that won nine championships between them between 1946-55.

In the 49ers' first four seasons in the All America Conference (1946-49), they were in the same division with the Cleveland Browns, who won the title each year. Only a change in the playoff rules made it possible for the 49ers to enter the playoffs in 1949, and even then, they still lost to the Browns on a wintry day in Cleveland, 21-7. It was the last AAFC game ever played.

Then in the early 1950s, after joining the NFL, the 49ers were in the Western Division, where first the Rams and then the Detroit Lions were dominant. The Lions won titles in 1952-53, while the Rams won in 1951. The Browns, now in the Eastern Division of the NFL, were league champs in 1950, 1954 and 1955.

The 49ers, after a losing season in their first year in the NFL, quickly recovered and were contenders from '51-'54, but a disappointing finish that year led to the firing of the team's original coach, Buck Shaw. One of his assistants, Norman (Red) Strader, was hired to toughen up a team that was criticized for being too carefree under the affable Shaw. Strader discipline didn't work. He was fired after a dreadful 4-8 season, and the 49er owner, a tough but sentimental construction businessman named Tony Morabito, asked his favorite quarterback, Albert, to coach the team in 1956.

Albert's first season began badly. The defense couldn't seem to stop anybody and after an inept performance in a 30-6 defeat at Los Angeles, the 49ers were 1-6. Helped by a weaker finishing schedule, including two victories each against the pre-Lombardi Packers and a still-developing Colts team, the 49ers went 4-0-1, providing hope for those often raucous 49er fans who would walk through Golden Gate Park to Kezar Stadium on Sundays, often bringing along liquid refreshments and depositing the empty containers on the heads of opposing players as they ran in and out of the tunnel at the eastern end zone.

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The challenges in 1957 were not only Detroit, but the defending division champion Bears, the always dangerous Rams, and a new contender, the Baltimore Colts, led by a daring young second-year QB named John Unitas.

To be a contender, the 49ers had to put a defense on the field that could support their excellent offense. In earlier seasons, the pattern had been fast start, faltering finish, often because of a shaky secondary, but in '57, several key players, including converted running back Dicky Moegle, a veteran linebacker obtained from the Steelers, Marv Matuszak, and a rookie linebacker from USC, Karl Rubke, would give veterans like tackle Leo Nomellini, end Ed Henke and linebacker Matt Hazeltine the extra lift they needed.

It all seemed to have come together on a mild, sunny December afternoon, when the 49ers hosted the Lions in the special divisional playoff after the teams had tied at 8-4-0 in the regular season. The winner would host the Eastern Division champion Browns the following week for the league title.

"Tickets for the championship game with Cleveland," said Kezar Stadium public address announcer Dave Scofield, "will be on sale to all season ticket holders from 9 a.m. tomorrow morning at the 49ers' main office in the Phelan Building."

When I heard those words, sitting with my father as season ticket holders in row 34, section P, looking down on the northwest corner of the end zone, there was no reason to believe that the announcement was in any way premature. It was halftime, yes, but the 49ers led the Lions, 24-7, after a thoroughly dominating performance. Two more quarters, we thought, and our team would be in its first NFL championship game, and against the team we loved to hate, the Browns.

To get this far, we had enjoyed or endured a series of games that rarely were decided until the final minutes or even seconds, but the Kezar season opener wasn't one of them. It was a shocking 20-10 defeat to the Chicago Cardinals, led by the great runner Ollie Matson, familiar to San Francisco fans first as a local high school star and later as an All-American for the University of San Francisco. On this day, his 27-yard punt return set up one TD and Joe Childress scored on a 39-yard counter play, while the 49ers' offense never got going. Tittle threw two interceptions, the final one setting up a cushion field goal by a then obscure lineman and placekicker named Pat Summerall.

The only memorable 49er play occurred when rookie punter Larry Barnes, standing one yard deep in his end zone, kicked a rocket that landed 65 yards away, and kept on going, bouncing all the way to the Chicago 10, where a stunned safety finally fell on it. Measuring from the line of scrimmage, it was an 84-yard punt, a 49er record, of course, but only by two yards. Quarterback Albert, also a skilled punter who loved to quick kick on third down deep in his own territory, booted one 82 yards against the old Buffalo Bills in the AAFC. You won't see that one in the 49er record book, because the NFL continues to deny that the AAFC ever existed.

After the opening bummer came a dreaded game against the Rams, even though it would be played at home. In those days, every time the 49ers and Rams met it was a war, and in a pre-season game three weeks earlier, L.A. had humiliated San Francisco, 58-27. But on the day that the result counted, we discovered for the first time the special talents of rookie end R.C. Owens.

The 49ers rushed for 196 yards against the Rams to keep the ball away from them long enough for Tittle to throw three touchdown passes and two of them went to Owens, a 46-yarder on the final play of the first half and the winning score with 4:20 left, a peculiar-looking 11-yarder with a high, looping arc, like a jump ball, which was exactly the idea. The 6-3 Owens, also a basketball player in college, leaped over 5-11 Jesse Castete and grabbed it, just as he had out-leaped safety Don Burroughs on the first score. Later in the year, the peculiar pass would be called the Alley-Oop, but on this day, it was just a satisfying winner in a 23-20 victory. But there was a terrible price. The team's best offensive lineman, tackle Bob St. Clair, separated a shoulder and was declared out for the season.

Then came a two-week road trip starting with the defending division champion Bears followed by the rebuilding Packers.

At Wrigley Field, that improved 49er defense held the Bears to just 77 yards passing and set up a 49er touchdown with an interception, and rookie Owens had caught another high-jump pass, this one a 30-yarder from Tittle, yet San Francisco trailed, 17-14, after George Blanda kicked a field goal with 4:41 to play. When they got the ball for the final time at their own 43, only 1:17 was left on the clock. A Tittle

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screen pass to McElhenny gained 26. Then a 12-yarder to end Clyde Conner, and another for 12 to Billy Wilson at the Chicago 7. With 31 seconds left, Tittle rolled right, spotted Owens, this time on his knees just inside the end zone, and threw a low bullet. Owens caught it. Bears safety Vic Zucco went wild, screaming that he had pushed R.C. out of bounds seconds before, making him an ineligible receiver. Films later showed that Zucco was correct, but the call stood, and the 49ers had won their second straight, 21-17.

The following week, after two interceptions led to TDs in a relatively easy 24-14 win over the Packers at Milwaukee, the 49ers, Colts and Lions were tied for the division lead at 3-1. Baltimore lost its first game when the Lions, down by 24, came back to win 31-27 with Bobby Layne hitting Hopalong Cassady for a score with 50 seconds to play. The comeback was an omen of things to come.

Back at home in week 5 against the Bears, the 49ers, as in so many other games that year, began badly. The Bears led 14-0 after one quarter, and 17-7 in the third quarter, ten of the points the direct result of 49er turnovers. But the worst news came at halftime. Sitting in the stands, we saw a man race out of the stands and around the eastern end zone, toward the 49er bench, late in the second quarter. Later, we learned that it was GM Lou Spadia, desperately seeking team doctor William O'Grady to attend to team owner Morabito, who had just suffered a heart attack in the press box. Morabito was rushed to a nearby hospital, but too late. Early in the third quarter, the team learned that Morabito was dead.

The team reacted emotionally. First they began pressuring Chicago QB Ed Brown into mistakes. With 49er tackle Nomellini in his face, Brown tried to throw a screen to fullback Rick Casares, but when Nomellini hit his arm, the pass fell short, into the hands of another 49er tackle, Bill Herchman, who lumbered 54 yards right down the middle for a touchdown which cut the Chicago lead to 17-14.

One play after the kickoff, Brown was rushed hard again, and his pass was deflected by Matsuzak and intercepted by Moegle, who took it 40 yards to the Chicago 20. Four plays later, Tittle hit Wilson for the touchdown that put San Francisco in front for the first time. Zeke Bratkowski, in at QB after Brown was shaken up, moved the Bears deep into 49er territory twice in the final period, but both times the rookie threw an interception, the last of which was grabbed in the final seconds by Moegle. The 49ers 21-17 comeback put them in first place by themselves after the Rams upset the Lions, 35-17 and the Colts again blew a lead, losing to the Packers, 24-21.

The next Sunday at Kezar produced a different drama, one which in retrospect was yet another omen of things to come. The result was a happy miracle -- another Alley-Oop score from Tittle to Owens, this time with ten seconds left, giving the 49ers a 35-31 victory after the lead changed twice in the final two minutes.

The 49ers had a seemingly safe 28-10 lead early in the fourth quarter, when the Lions' No. 2 quarterback, Tobin Rote, got hot. He had come to the team in an off-season trade because the Detroit felt that their veteran leader, Layne, was nearing the end, and also because the Packers decided to go with a younger man, rookie Bart Starr.

Rote already had pulled out one win for the Lions that season, and he seemed to have done it again after he hit Jim Doran, rookie Steve Junker, and then Doran again on scoring passes that gave Detroit a 31-28 lead with 1:25 left. A series of short completions by Tittle brought the 49ers to the Detroit 41, and then he decided that it was time once again for "the Oop." He'd hit Owens for an apparent TD earlier in the game, but it was ruled incomplete because the end had stepped out of bounds before he made the catch. This time, Tittle rolled right as usual to elude rushers and give Owens time to go deep, and then he tossed the long distance jump ball. In the end zone, Owens arrived on time, but so did Detroit safety Jack Christiansen and corner Jim David. No matter. Owens leaped between them, clutched the ball, and fell on his back.

After their 35-31 victory, at the halfway point of the season, the 49ers were 5-1 and both Detroit and Baltimore were 3-3. The Colts lost their third straight because of two touchdown passes by the ex-49er QB, Morrall, whose Steelers won that day, 19-13.

And then, just as 49er fans allowed themselves the luxury of thinking that this finally might be the title year, everything seemed to go wrong. The first of four consecutive road games was a defensive collapse and 72 yards lost in sacks in a 37-24 loss in Los Angeles. It also was the end of veteran safety Bobby Holladay's season because of a broken leg.

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The next week in Detroit was revenge for the Lions, who passed for 370 yards, sacked Tittle for 57 and won easily, 31-10. Yet another 49er starter, end Conner, dislocated his shoulder and would be out indefinitely.

On to Baltimore, and a 21-20 49er lead with four minutes left, but then Unitas put together one of those drives that would make him a Hall of Famer. This one was 82 yards, the last eight of which were a TD pass to Alan Ameche with 53 seconds left.

Now Baltimore was back on top with a 6-3 record, while the 49ers and Lions were tied for second at 5-4 because Detroit was upset by the Bears, 27-7.

In the Eastern Conference, the surprising Browns, playing their second season without Otto Graham, but led by rookie fullback Jim Brown and a consistent defense, were 7-1-1 while the defending league champs, the Giants, were 7-2, and doubtless looking forward to playing the slumping 49ers at Yankee Stadium the next week.

But in yet another unexpected turn to this surprising season, the 49ers turned six Giants turnovers into 24 points in a 27-17 victory also highlighted by some surprise quarterback draws by the slow-footed Tittle, plays drawn up that week by the QB-turned coach, Albert.

Again, victory came at a price. On his last run, Tittle pulled a thigh muscle, and rookie John Brodie had to finish up. YAT claimed he was OK and would be ready for the Colts at Kezar the next week, but he was hurting.

In week 11, the 49ers (now 6-4) had to beat the Colts (7-3) to move back into a first place tie, but under a strong rush, and limping on his bad leg, Tittle was ineffective. Baltimore corner Milt Davis ran back an interception 80 yards to score and Unitas hit Lenny Moore on an 82-yarder for a 13-10 lead that looked safe late in the game. Needing just an eight yard possession pass to make a first down and possibly run out the clock, Unitas threw a bit low to Jim Mutscheller, who later said he should have caught it. After Baltimore punted, the 49ers had the ball with 2 minutes left, 64 yards away from the Colts' goal-line.

These were the days before sophisticated two minute drills, and against the fierce blitzing of the Baltimore defense, the 49ers were not a good bet to score. In fact, after a first down but then another sack, Tittle faced a third-and-21 when, with Marchetti bearing down on him again, YAT threw over the middle, and this time hit McElhenny in stride. The man they called The King raced for the sideline, made a quick left turn and headed west, right toward the corner of the end zone in front of our Section P. By the time the Colts caught him, he was practically in our laps, out of bounds at the Baltimore 15 after a 44-yard play.

A quick middle screen to Perry got just a yard and then, rushed again, Tittle threw it away, but took another blow, this time from linebacker Dick Syzmanski which buckled YAT's bad leg. It was third down again. The veteran quarterback was on his knees, struggling to rise. Coach Albert looked at the eastern end zone, and saw the old Tidewater Oil clock with the big red second hand showing 1:25 to play. Not wanting to waste a timeout, Albert yelled to Brodie to replace Tittle, who by this time was being helped off the field by teammates.

The rookie from Stanford put on his helmet as he dashed into the huddle, called a play, rolled to his right and fired a bullet down the middle, and on the money, but Wilson couldn't handle it at the goal line when hit by safety Art DeCarlo. Back in the huddle, the rookie asked for suggestions. "Throw it to me down and out," said The King.

So on fourth-and-nine with 55 seconds left, Brodie faded, saw Marchetti coming at him again, but stood his ground and lofted a perfect fadeaway pass to McElhenny, who had run directly at cornerman Davis (who later claimed that The King pushed off), cut left and was in the clear as he caught the soft pass for a 16-13 lead. Then more drama. The extra point was partially blocked, hit the crossbar, and went over anyway for 17-13.

On the first play after the kickoff, Unitas threw again for Mutscheller and this time, it was too high and Moegle grabbed his seventh interception of the season. Bedlam. And a three-way tie for the Western Conference lead, with one regular season game left.

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The 49ers had to prepare for the Packers without Tittle, whose bad leg wouldn't allow him to start. The Lions, meanwhile, had beaten the Browns, 20-7, but had lost Layne because of a broken ankle. Now, Tobin Rote was Detroit's only hope.

That week, coin tosses to determine playoffs in case of a likely first place tie came up all Baltimore. A 3-way tie would mean a bye for the Colts while the 49ers and Lions would play at Detroit, with the winner moving on to Baltimore. A two-way Detroit-Baltimore or 49er-Baltimore tie also would result in the Colts getting the home field. The only way the 49ers could get a home playoff would be if the Colts lost at Los Angeles while the 49ers and Lions both won on the final Sunday. Which is exactly what happened.

With Brodie at QB on the final regular Sunday, the 49ers led Green Bay, 10-0, then fell behind as the Packers turned two interceptions and a fumble recovery into a 20-10 halftime lead. As the second half began, in limped Tittle to direct a drive that yielded a field goal. The defense intercepted a pass by Starr that led to a nine-yard scoring run by Perry which tied the score, and finally, Tittle called a 13-play, 69 yard drive for 27-20 with Perry plunging in again from two yards out. The 49er defense shut out the Pack in the second half.

All of which brings us back to halftime on the following sunny playoff Sunday. Tittle, no longer limping, had completed 12 of 19 passes in the first two quarters, three for touchdowns to Owens, McElhenny and Wilson. The 49ers had produced 207 yards of total offense to 102 for Detroit, which was playing not only without QB Layne, but its best offensive tackle (Charlie Ane) and its best runner, former 49er John Henry Johnson, who had hurt an ankle in the second quarter and wouldn't be back.

The 49ers scored the first two times they had the ball, first on another "Oop" from Tittle to Owens over David, then a 47-yarder to McElhenny, who took it between David and Carl Karilivacz at the 15, pulled away from David's arm tackle, then shook off Karilivacz, and scored.

After Detroit's one TD drive of the first half early in the second quarter, it had the ball only six more plays before intermission, largely because the 49ers drove 88 yards in 21 plays that took more than nine minutes off the clock.

Euphoria rose even higher in our Section P on the first play after the second half kickoff, when McElhenny took a pitchout from Tittle, turned the right corner, faked out two Lions defenders, reversed field and raced down the north sidelines before Terry Barr finally pushed him out of bounds at the Detroit nine.

"I should have gotten in the end zone," McElhenny later recalled. "If I get in, it's a different game. We would have won."

The Lions knew that another touchdown, even early in the second half, would virtually end the game. So did the 49ers, but after playing wide-open football to that point, Tittle suddenly became cautious. Three running plays picked up just six yards and Gordy Soltau kicked a field goal to make it 27-7.

Their defensive stand fired up the Lions, who later told reporters of hearing the 49ers celebrating at halftime in the dressing room next door, and decided to do something about it. Within the next four minutes, they did, repeating their October performance by scoring three touchdowns to take a 28-27 lead.

It all began when Tittle fumbled a center snap and Bob Long recovered at the San Francisco 27. The 49ers held for three downs but on fourth-and 13, Rote found Cassidy open for 14 yards and a first down. Two plays later, Tom Tracy - who had carried just 15 times in 12 regular-season games and was in this one only because Johnson was hurt - scored from a yard out to make it 27-14.

When the 49ers, still trying to run the ball, failed to make a first down, the Lions had it near midfield. On the first play, Tracy burst through the line and ran 58 yards to score. Now it was 27-21, and after another quick three and out series by the 49ers, the Lions had the ball back at their own 46. This time, Rote found Junker open down the middle for 36 yards on the final play of the third quarter.

Another burst by Tracy, this time for 10, was followed two plays later by Gene Gedman's smash from the two. Jim Martin kicked the extra point for 28-27.

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In the final 12 minutes of the game, all four 49er possessions ended in turnovers, three of them Tittle interceptions. Linebacker Joe Schmidt made the second one, returning it 16 yards to the 2-yard-line, where San Francisco held, but Martin's 14-yard field goal made it 31-27 with 2:05 left.

On the 49ers' final series, Tittle, by now under a strong rush, never got the team close enough for another "Oop." Near midfield, he was hit as he threw and the wobbling pass was intercepted by linebacker Roger Zatkoff.

In the locker room, Lions coach George Wilson, who had taken over the team when Buddy Parker resigned in disgust over the Lions' lacklustre training camp, called it: "the greatest comeback team I've ever seen. The 49ers might have scored all those points too quickly. They became clock watchers and abandoned everything that had worked for them."

Tittle agreed. "We played it too close to the vest. We tried to coast in and that was wrong."

One week later, in Detroit, Rote led the Lions to a smashing 59-14 victory over the Browns. It was their third NFL title in six years.

"It should have been us," said Albert.