

THE GREATEST GAMES NEVER PLAYED

By Ed Gruver

It's been called "The Greatest Game Ever Played," and maybe it isn't, but there's little doubt that the 1958 Colts-Giants classic is generally the starting point for discussions on which game ranks as pro football's best ever.

The "Ice Bowl"; Super Bowl III; the 1971 Dolphins-Chiefs overtime playoff; the '81 Chargers-Dolphins playoff – each has its supporters as the greatest ever played.

But for every classic game that was played, there's a matchup that had the potential for greatness, but for an official's call or bounce of the ball, never took place. They're not dream games, like the Lombardi Packers versus Don Shula's "No-Name" Dolphins or Chuck Noll's "Steel Curtain" Steelers against Bill Walsh's 49ers, but matchups between legendary teams in the same season, matchups that might have produced classic games. Games worthy of being called "the greatest ever."

Following is a look at one opinion of the ten greatest games never played.

1949 Eagles vs. Browns – Had the All-American Football Conference and NFL been able to reach a compromise in 1949 as the AFL and NFL later would in 1966, this game would have stood as the forerunner to the Super Bowl.

As the 1940s came to a close, the Eagles and Browns stood astride the football world as two of the greatest teams ever. The Eagles were coming off their third straight appearance in the NFL title game and had beaten the L.A. Rams for their second straight league championship. The Browns had dominated the AAFC since its inception in 1946, winning four straight league titles. Both teams had lost just one game during their respective regular seasons. The Eagles had pitched a second straight championship game shutout; the Browns had allowed just a fourth quarter touchdown en route to their win in L.A.

Future Hall of Famers and all-pros dominated both rosters – Steve Van Buren, Chuck Bednarik and Pete Pihos for the Birds; Otto Graham, Marion Motley, Lou Groza and Bill Willis for the Browns. Hall of Famers Greasy Neale and Paul Brown were the coaches. These two teams did meet in the first game of the 1950 regular season, but by then circumstances had changed. Van Buren missed the game with injury, and the Browns had become a super team in the offseason by picking up all-stars from disbanded AAFC teams. Cleveland won, 35-10, but a game played in '49 when the Eagles were still at the height of their powers might have yielded a different outcome.

1963 Bears vs. Chargers – In the aftermath of San Diego's 51-10 destruction of the Boston Patriots in the 1963 AFL championship game, former Browns QB Otto Graham told a reporter that if the Chargers could play the NFL's best, he would pick the Chargers.

Graham's comments, coming as they were from a former NFL champion, shook the older league. The Chicago Bears were the NFL's best in 1963, thanks in large part to the strategies of defensive coordinator George Allen. Working under the legendary George Halas, Allen confused NFL offenses with his odd fronts and double zones, and the Bears proved that defense still carried the day in the NFL.

The Chargers, meanwhile, were the standard-bearers for the wide-open AFL. Sid Gillman's original West Coast offense emphasized speed, and with wideout Lance Alworth stretching AFL defenses deep and Keith Lincoln and Paul Lowe stretching them wide with their toss sweeps, San Diego featured an offensive armada that took the young league by storm.

Subplots abound – Halas versus Gillman, San Diego's speed versus Chicago's strength – but one thing to remember is that for one reason or another, the high-octane Chargers usually stalled in big games. From 1960-65, the Chargers played in five AFL title games. In three of those they scored seven points or less. Not a good omen against a Bears defense that ranked as one of the decade's best.

1966 Cowboys vs. Chiefs – Dallas came very close to making this the matchup in Super Bowl I. The Cowboys fell to Green Bay in the NFL championship game on New Year's Day, 1967, much to the dismay of Kansas City players like the late Jerry Mays.

Like many of his teammates on the '66 AFL champion Chiefs, Mays had been a part of the Texans team that had been run out of Dallas by the Cowboys in 1963. Lamar Hunt's club had been undercut by the NFL, which placed an expansion team in Dallas in 1960 after Hunt announced the formation of his American Football League. Despite fielding a superior team – the Texans won the AFL title in 1962 – Hunt lost the battle of Dallas to the Cowboys, who could promise fans something only the NFL could deliver, and that was the opportunity to see legends like Jim Brown and John Unitas playing in the Cotton Bowl against the Cowboys.

Many of the Texans openly rooted for the Cowboys to beat the Packers in 1966, and the matchups would have been intriguing. Tom Landry against Hank Stram; Don Meredith against Lenny Dawson; "Bullet" Bob Hayes against Fred "The Hammer" Williamson. K.C. was a more veteran team than Dallas when it came to big games, and had they met the up-and-coming Cowboys in Super Bowl, notions of NFL superiority might have been put to rest right from the start.

1977 Cowboys vs. Raiders – But for an official's call that took a potential game-turning fumble recovery away from Oakland in their AFC title game against Denver, the defending Super Bowl champion Raiders would have met the Cowboys in Super Bowl XII. Instead, Dallas defeated Denver in a Super Bowl that ranks as one of the more forgettable games of the era.

A Cowboys-Raiders matchup held much more promise – America's Team vs. America's Most Wanted. The Cowboys were squeaky-clean, with a corporate image owing to Tom Landry, Roger Staubach and a computer-complex approach to the game. The Raiders were the proverbial squeaky wheel, fronted by Al Davis, Snake Stabler and physical enforcers whose nicknames – The Assassin; Dr. Death – spoke to their elementary approach to the game.

For years, the Cowboys and Raiders had lived with the derogatory tag of "Next Year's Champions." By 1977, however, these two franchises were the NFL's best. Unfortunately, they never met in a stakes game.

1981 49ers vs. Chargers – Reflecting once on how his first Super Bowl champion might have fared if they had met San Diego rather than Cincinnati in Super Bowl XVI, San Francisco coach Bill Walsh remarked that the 49ers dynasty might have been put on hold a year or two.

From 1979-81, the Air Coryell Chargers featured the most explosive offense in pro football and one of the greatest in the history of the league. Even now, the names of that famous unit – Dan Fouts, Kellen Winslow, Charlie Joiner, Chuck Muncie, James Brooks, Wes Chandler – make defensive coaches of the era shudder at the memory.

The '81 49ers were less impressive. Joe Montana fueled an offense that lacked the firepower of future 49er teams, and San Francisco's real strength may have resided in a defense that included Jack Reynolds, Keena Turner and an air-tight secondary headed by hard-hitting Ronnie Lott.

So what stopped the Super Bowl shootout between Fouts and Montana, Air Coryell and the West Coast offense? A modern-day Ice Bowl in Cincinnati the day of the AFC title game. No team in league history ever had to deal with the weather extremes the Chargers did in the '81 post-season. From the draining heat of Miami in the playoffs to the minus-59 degree cold in Cincy just seven days later, San Diego dealt with a temperature swing of close to 150 degrees. It was enough to ground Air Coryell.

1985 Bears vs. Dolphins – Okay, so this game actually did take place. Week 13 of the regular season saw the unbeaten Bears travel to the Miami Orange Bowl for a Monday night showdown with the defending AFC champion Dolphins. At stake was Miami's standing as the only undefeated team in league history.

With members from the Dolphins' 1972 17-0 team crowding the sideline, Miami won, 38-24, in one of the more memorable regular season games in NFL history. The Bears blamed their loss in part on faulty coaching. The Chicago offense started the game without Jim McMahon at QB, yet rather than hammer

away at the Dolphins' porous run defense with Walter Payton, head coach Mike Ditka had backup QB Steve Fuller come out throwing on their first eight plays of the game. Defensively, Buddy Ryan locked linebacker Wilber Marshall into man coverage on slot receiver Nat Moore. Dolphin QB Dan Marino exploited the mismatch with two TD passes to Moore, sparking Miami's upset win.

The intensity of the game was such that Ditka and Ryan got into a halftime shouting match, and the Bears used the stinging loss to fuel their fire the rest of the season. By the time the Bears blanked the Rams in the NFC title game – Chicago's second straight post-season shutout – Bear players went on local TV after the game and all but begged the Dolphins to beat New England in the AFC title game to assure the rematch.

Instead, Miami turned the ball over six times at home and lost 31-14. Two weeks later, the Bears' celebrated "46" defense capped its season with a 46-10 romp over the Patriots in Super Bowl XX.

1993 49ers vs. Chiefs – From 1987-92, Steve Young had lived in the considerable shadow cast by Joe Montana in San Francisco. Injuries sidelined Montana in 1991, and by '92, the 49ers had become Young's team.

In '93, Montana signed with the Kansas City Chiefs and promptly led them to the AFC title game against Buffalo. That same day, the NFC title game matched Young's 49ers against the defending Super Bowl champion Dallas Cowboys.

The NFL was two wins away from a Montana-Young showdown on Super Sunday, but the matchup between two future Hall of Fame QBs never materialized. Both the Chiefs and 49ers went down in defeat in their respective conference title games, leaving the football world to wait until Week Two of the following season, when Montana led the Chiefs to a 24-17 win over Young and the 49ers before a packed house of 79,907 in Kansas City.

1994 49ers vs. Steelers – In 1994, Steve Young and the San Francisco 49ers did reach the Super Bowl, and were in quest of a league record fifth Lombardi Trophy. Had it not been for San Diego linebacker Dennis Gibson's tipped pass at the goal line with 1:04 remaining in the AFC title game, the Pittsburgh Steelers would have been at the Super Bowl as well, seeking *their* record fifth Lombardi Trophy.

While the '94 49ers were unquestionably the best team Young ever quarterbacked, the '94 Steelers were arguably the best team head coach Bill Cowher has fielded. Led by a pair of rampaging linebackers in Greg Lloyd and Kevin Greene and a solid secondary led by Rod Woodson, Pittsburgh was in its "Blitzburgh" heyday. Defensive coordinator Dom Capers confused opponents with his revolutionary zone blitz tactics, and the Steeler defense was stirring memories of its "Steel Curtain" predecessors.

The 49ers, meanwhile, featured an offense that rivaled the franchise's now-legendary '89 outfit. Young had taken over for Montana, Ricky Watters for Roger Craig, William Floyd for Tom Rathman. The '89 receiving corps of Jerry Rice, John Taylor and Brent Jones was still intact, but the 49er front office had buttressed the roster with an imposing number of past or future Super Bowl champions – Ken Norton, Deion Sanders, Bart Oates, Richard Dent, and Charles Mann.

In Super Bowl XXIX, the 49ers racked up 49 points to beat the Chargers, and left many pro football fans thinking of the Blitzburgh Steelers and wondering, "What if..."

1998 Broncos vs. Vikings – Denver was the defending Super Bowl champion, Minnesota the highest-scoring team in NFL history.

These were two champions with dubious pasts. The Vikings were 0-4 in Super Bowls from 1969-76; the Broncos 0-4 from '77-89. Denver finally broke through in '97, beating an overconfident and underprepared Packers team, 31-24.

The Broncos rolled through the '98 season, joining the '34 Bears and '72 Dolphins as the only teams in league history to win their first 13 games of the season. Denver's drive toward immortality stalled in Week 14 when they lost a last-minute thrill to the New York Giants in the wind-swept Meadowlands. But the Broncos bounced back by winning three of their last four games, including post-season wins over Miami and the Jets, to claim a second straight AFC title.

The Vikings, meanwhile, were proving just as dominant in the NFC. Sparked by veteran QB Randall Cunningham and rookie wideout Randy Moss, Minnesota went 15-1 during the regular season. Along the way, the Vikes put away memories of their Purple Gang defense of the seventies by fielding the most explosive offense in NFL history. By season's end, Minnesota had rung up 556 points, and showed no signs of slowing down in the playoffs. They opened with a 41-21 win over Arizona, and led Atlanta 20-7 in the first half of the NFC title game in the Metrodome. With a showdown looming against the Broncos, the Vikes fell apart in the second half, losing 30-27 in overtime.

2000 Rams vs. Ravens – It's almost forgotten now in the wake of the Ravens' defensive run through the playoffs, but at the mid-point of the season, the talk in the NFL was focused on whether or not the 2000 Rams featured the greatest offense ever.

Coming off their Super Bowl season, the high-energy Rams were cruising through the best NFL defenses and drawing comparisons with the league's all-time offenses. Kurt Warner, Marshall Faulk and Co. were on the fast track to immortality before being upset in the playoffs.

Had St. Louis repeated as NFC champs as most experts believed, they would have encountered a Baltimore defense that drew statistical comparisons to the "Steel Curtain" and '85 Bears. Ray Lewis, Rod Woodson and the rest of the Raven defense allowed the fewest points ever in a 16-game season, and by the time they reached Super Bowl XXXV were demolishing every offense in sight.

The Ravens and Rams did meet in a crossroads game at the start of the '99 season, Warner guiding St. Louis past Lewis and the Raven defense. How they would have fared over a year later, however, on pro football's biggest stage will always remain an unanswered question.

Just the latest in a long line of the greatest games never played.