

# Dick Nolan: Man of Many Seasons

By Don Shipley

When it comes to rich and varied pro football careers, few can match Dick Nolan's run of nearly 40 years as an NFL player and coach.

Nolan's odyssey began when the NFL was a 12-team league on the cusp of historic growth fueled by the advent of television. By the time he retired at the end of the 1990 season, there were 28 teams and the NFL was an American institution. Along the way, he competed with future Hall of Famers, learned coaching from two of the all-time greats, built playoff teams, savored great victories, and endured painful defeats.

## Learning the Ropes

Nolan's NFL career kicked off in 1954 when the New York Giants drafted him in the fourth round from the University of Maryland, where he had starred as a two-way back on the Terps' 1953 national championship team. He quickly earned a starting spot as a cornerback opposite Tom Landry, and picked off six passes in his rookie season. In Nolan's first two seasons, the Giants were a team on the rise that steadily improved but fell just short of the playoffs.

Thanks to two young assistants who would later become NFL legends, the Giants' fortunes were soon to change. Landry retired after the 1955 season to become defensive coordinator under Jim Lee Howell, and he immediately made his mark as a strategist and innovator. On the offensive side of the ball, Vince Lombardi installed the system that would later make the Green Bay Packers the dominant team of the 1960s.

"Landry was a very smart guy and so was Lombardi, but they had their own ideas about football and their own philosophies," remembered Nolan. "Vince motivated guys emotionally, and he was very good at it. Tom motivated a guy by letting him know that when he walked on the field, there was nothing that wasn't answered for when he went out there."

"Just playing under the New York Giants coaching staff of the 1950s was worth a Ph.D. in itself," Jack Zanger would later write in his book *Pro Football 1970* about Nolan, who by then had become head coach of the San Francisco 49ers.

In the two years after Nolan arrived in New York, the Giants began assembling the star-studded cast that would soon become one of the NFL's greatest defenses ever. Rosey Grier, Jim Patton, Sam Huff and Jim Katkavage came through the draft, and Harland Svare, Andy Robustelli and Dick Modzelewski arrived in trades. Joining them in the secondary was holdover Emlen Tunnell, who eventually retired as the NFL's all-time leader in interceptions.

Everything fell into place in 1956. The Giants broke the Cleveland Browns' streak of six straight Eastern Conference titles, winning the crown with an 8-3-1 mark and earning a shot at the Chicago Bears in the championship game.

"We had played them earlier in the season, and we were leading but ended up tying them after we slapped the ball around in the end zone on a Harlon Hill touchdown catch at the end of the game," Nolan remembered. "I think they thought they could handle us pretty easily, but all of a sudden we jumped down their throats."

New York scored on its first possession and never looked back, and by the time the Bears dragged themselves off the frigid Yankee Stadium turf, the score was 47-7, and the Giants were NFL champions for the first time since 1938.

"I remember it was the last few minutes of the game, but Landry wouldn't take any of the first string guys out of the game, and I broke two ribs and wound up in the hospital," said Nolan. "My wife said to me, 'you've won the championship and everyone is having a big time at the party, and here you are sitting in the hospital.'"

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"So I said, 'if you want to go, get my coat out of the closet and let's go,' and off we went to the party," he continued. "Next day they were looking for me all over New York City because they didn't know I had left."

### **Detour to Chicago**

All signs pointed to another championship run in 1957, but the Giants slipped to 7-5 and missed the playoffs. After the season, Giants management looked for ways to retool the roster, and it was Nolan who took the hit. They traded him to the Chicago Cardinals, which then as now was like being sent to Siberia.

"Pop Ivy wanted me there, so he made a two for one trade," said Nolan. "The Giants got Pat Sumerall and Lindon Crowe in return."

Nolan gamely headed to Chicago and solidified the Cards' secondary with five interceptions, but it wasn't enough, and they finished the 1958 season 3-9. Meanwhile, his former Giant teammates returned to the NFL championship, but lost to the Colts in the Greatest Game Ever Played. After the season, he began to wonder whether it was worth it to stay in Chicago.

### **Return to New York**

"The next year they looked kind of disorganized, so I thought it might be time to retire," said Nolan of his first post-season as a Cardinal. "Then Wellington Mara called and told me not to retire, and before I knew it, I was traded back to the Giants in a cash deal."

The 1959 Giants showed no adverse effects from the painful loss in the 1958 championship, and once again took the Eastern Conference crown with a 10-2 mark. The stage was set for a rematch with Colts, and Nolan drew a tough assignment.

"I was covering Lenny Moore most of the afternoon," he recalled, and other than a 60-yard touchdown pass Moore caught early in the game, Nolan held his own, but it wasn't enough. For the second straight year, the Giants came up short in the championship against Colts, this time by a 31-16 margin. It was the first of six championship game losses Nolan would endure as a player or coach.

"We were a good enough team to beat them, but we just didn't get it done," he insisted.

New York missed the playoffs in 1960, but after acquiring Y.A. Tittle and Del Shofner before the 1961 season, a rejuvenated offense led Nolan and his Giant teammates back to the NFL title game. But once again the Giants took it on the chin, this time in a 37-0 pasting from the Green Bay Packers, the first championship won by their former offensive coordinator Vince Lombardi.

### **The End of the Line**

After the season, Nolan began to seriously contemplate retirement. The deciding moment came when he got a call from his former defensive coach Tom Landry, who was now the head coach of the expansion Dallas Cowboys.

"He said, 'you're just an old man now. Why don't you quit the game before you really get hurt?'" said Nolan as he remembered their conversation. "So I went ahead and retired in the spring of 1962, and went down to Dallas to start coaching for Landry."

As Nolan hung up his cleats as a player and looked ahead to his new post in Dallas, he could reflect on some particularly memorable friendships and moments from his eight years as a player. He was particularly proud of his relationships with black players of the time who were finally getting a shot at the NFL and starting to make their mark.

He shared a unique bond with defensive secondary cohort and future Hall of Famer Emlen Tunnell: "He and I roomed together, and I was almost like a detective for the Maras. We used to travel by train because Steve Owen was afraid to fly, and they assigned me to Emlen to make sure he got on the train, because he had a tendency to go off on his own if someone had a better idea. He was a great guy and a good friend."

Roosevelt Brown, another Giant teammate who later went into the Hall of Fame, gave Nolan fits in practice: "He was 265 pounds, but athletic enough to play tight end. We played across from each other in practice, and he used to just work me over."

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Then there was an epic goal-line battle with Tank Younger of the Rams: "They were playing us at the Polo Grounds with Norm Van Brocklin at quarterback, and he handed the ball to Tank on a straight plunge. In those days the goalposts were right on the goal line and they weren't padded very well, and he hit the goalpost right at the top of his head and it knocked him back to the six or seven yard line and he didn't know what hit him. He looked up at me and gave me one of those looks like what the hell just hit me, and all I said was 'watch out or next time I'll really hit you.'"

### Landry's Lieutenant

So with a wealth of good memories and a championship under his belt, Nolan felt he had made the most of his playing days, and he was fully prepared to start a new chapter as a defensive coach with Tom Landry and the Cowboys. Then when the 1962 season was about to begin, Landry approached him with a proposition.

"We were in the Cotton Bowl just before the opening game of the season and I was out on the field that Saturday for warm-ups. Landry came up me and asked me how I'd like to play again. I told him I hadn't hit or tackled anyone in months and I was overweight, and he told me I could handle it. I asked him when he wanted me to start, and he said tomorrow at 1:00. I must have lost 25 pounds in the first half alone, but I wound up playing the rest of the season. The reason he did it is that he wanted someone on the field with experience so there would be no confusion."

After the 1962 season, Nolan retired again, this time for good. With the expansion Cowboys in a serious building mode, Landry needed him more on the sidelines than on the field, and took over as defensive coordinator. Dallas didn't even get any draft picks in its first year and got little in the way of talent from the expansion draft, which forced the organization to find creative ways to stock their roster.

Nolan remembered one player in particular who epitomized how the Cowboys found talent in unlikely places in those early years: "Cornell Green never played a down of football in college, but he was a hell of an athlete. He came in as a wide receiver and they were going to cut him, but Tom said, 'Why don't you take him on defense?' He was smart and quick, and he could do all kinds of things. He was a great basketball player, and when the Globetrotters would come to Dallas, he'd score 30 points against them."

Green was only one example of players overlooked by the rest of the league who wound up starring in Dallas. Under the shrewd leadership of Gill Brandt, the Cowboys front office revolutionized how teams scouted and built through the draft, and had particular success finding talent at small schools and historically black colleges. Players like Mel Renfro, Jethro Pugh, Don Perkins and Rayfield Wright were just a few of the players who went from college unknowns to Cowboy mainstays. Bolstered by this steady influx of talent, Nolan and Landry began to build what would later be known as the Doomsday Defense.

"For years, Tom and I were one-two and we had a great knack for it. We thought the same way and we talked the same way," Nolan recalled. "We put in the flex defense, what we called an inside outside defense. You never knew what hit you."

Dallas improved its record in each of the first four years Nolan coached the defense, going 4-10 in his first season as Landry's assistant in 1963, edging up to 5-8-1 in 1964, and finally hitting .500 with a 7-7 mark in 1965. In 1966, the trend continued, this time with a 10-3-1 mark that landed the Cowboys their first playoff berth. Nolan's defense was instrumental in team's success, emerging as one of the league's finest thanks to Pro Bowl performances by George Andrie, Cornell Green, Chuck Howley, Bob Lilly and Mel Renfro.

Dallas's opponent in the NFL championship would be the defending champion Green Bay Packers, who ended the season 12-2 with a team that boasted eight Pro Bowlers in its own right. The Cowboys showed no signs of being nervous in their in their first championship and threw a scare to the powerful Packers. With just over two minutes to go, the Cowboys took possession in Green Bay territory, drove downfield and were first and goal with enough time to score.

"We were right by the goal line with four downs to work with, and we just couldn't score," Nolan said.

Dallas continued their winning ways in 1967, capturing the Capital Division crown with a 9-5 record, and crushing the Cleveland Browns 52-14 in the Eastern Conference title game. For the second straight season, they were headed to the NFL championship game, and once again their opponent was the Green Bay Packers. Unfortunately for Nolan and the Cowboys, the outcome was the same as the 1966 match-up.'

"We had them 17-14 in the fourth quarter, but they made that drive and we couldn't hold them," Nolan remembered. "The Ice Bowl was my last game with those Cowboy teams."

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### Go West, Young Man

After two consecutive trips to the championship game, Nolan's work building the Dallas defense was beginning to attract attention around the league. During the 1968 off-season, he was in demand as the hot assistant whose name was linked to several head coaching vacancies. He accepted an offer from the San Francisco 49ers, and at age 35, became one of the youngest NFL coaches ever.

As Street and Smith's *Pro Football* wrote in its 1968 preview: "For several years, Dick Nolan has been considered one of the most promising young coaches in the league, potentially; and the San Francisco 49ers have ranked as one of the most potent teams in the league, potentially. Now that they have joined forces, it may only be a question of time until they prove it."

Nolan had his work cut out for him when he arrived in San Francisco. The 49ers had only made the playoffs once since joining the NFL in 1950, and that had been more than 10 years earlier when they blew a 27-7 halftime lead and lost 34-27 to the Detroit Lions in a 1957 divisional playoff. Since then, they were mired in mediocrity, hovering around .500 throughout the 1960s. But the team was ready to go to work for Nolan, and he inherited a strong core of veterans like John Brodie, Jim Johnson, Charlie Krueger, Roland Lakes, Len Rohde and Ken Willard.

"Dick came and had that defensive presence. It was really a new era in our life," recalled Willard in an Alumni Profile on the 49ers web site. "There was discipline. I think most of us were looking forward to that. We were looking forward to a change, to having a chance to win."

Led by the sophisticated defensive scheme Nolan installed, the 49ers finished 7-6-1 in his first season. The picture looked promising as the 1969 season approached, but Nolan's charges had a rash of injuries and slipped to a 4-8-2 finish. Lack of depth was still a problem, but a series of strong drafts was beginning fill out the roster. Starters Forrest Blue, Skip Vanderbundt and Tommy Hart came in the 1968 draft, Ted Kwalick and Gene Washington in 1969, and Cedrick Hardman and Bruce Taylor in 1970.

After two full seasons with Nolan at the helm, the mix of veterans and draftees he had assembled was beginning to gel, and there was cause for optimism heading into the 1970 season. Sure enough, the 49ers put it all together that year, winning the Western Conference crown with a 10-3-1 record and clinching the title with a rousing 38-7 win over their rivals across the Bay, the Oakland Raiders. John Brodie won the league passing title and was named NFL player of the year, while Bruce Taylor was honored as rookie of the year and Nolan as coach of the year.

"The players really worked at it, and Brodie came into his own," said Nolan. "We tore everybody up and had the best record in the league."

San Francisco traveled to Minnesota for the conference title game and downed the Vikings 17-14 for the first playoff win in franchise history. All that stood between the 49ers and a trip to the Super Bowl was the Dallas Cowboys, who by then had become playoff fixtures under Nolan's mentor and former teammate Tom Landry. In the first of their three playoff battles, the teacher got the best of his protege, as the Doomsday Defense completely shut down the 49er offense to take the 1970 NFC championship 17-10.

"We had it all going for us in that game, and we just didn't quite get it done," Nolan remembered. "That was a tough loss."

It was a pattern that would repeat itself. The 49ers repeated as Western Conference winners each of the next two seasons, only to come up short against the Cowboys in the playoffs, 14-3 in 1971 and 30-28 in 1972. The third loss to Dallas was particularly frustrating for Nolan and his troops.

"We were ahead by 10 points, and all we had to do was cover an onside kick and run out the clock," said Nolan. "But Mel Renfro got underneath Preston Riley from our return team and made the recovery, then Staubach brought them back."

Ironically, several weeks after each of those championship losses to Dallas, Nolan would return to the sidelines as Renfro's coach in the Pro Bowl: "Back in those days, the coach of the team that lost the championship coached the Pro Bowl team. Renfro was a hell of a player, and he won a couple of those games for me."

By 1973, key 49er veterans had started to show signs of age, and the team skidded to a 5-9 finish that year. Brodie, Krueger and Willard all retired after the season, and the rebuilding effort was underway. San Francisco's hard luck continued the next two seasons with records of 6-8 in 1974 and 5-9 in 1975. After three straight losing seasons while the team retooled the roster, Nolan experienced a career first and got

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fired, though it was a tough decision for the 49ers management to part ways with a respected coach who had led them to their only playoff wins.

"When I saw Lou Spadia at Dave Wilcox's induction into the Hall of Fame, he said, 'the worst mistake I think I ever made was firing you,'" said Nolan. "I said, 'I told you that when you were doing it.'"

### **Not So Easy in the Big Easy**

Nolan was not out of a job for long, and soon hooked on with Hank Stram and the New Orleans Saints as defensive coordinator. New Orleans had high hopes that Stram would replicate the success he enjoyed with the Kansas City Chiefs, but after finishing 4-10 in 1976 and 3-11 in 1977, he was out after two seasons. The Saints did not have to look far for a replacement, and tapped Nolan as their new head coach in 1978.

With Nolan at the controls, the Saints' fortunes began to look up, and their record improved to 7-9 in 1978. The next season, Nolan led the Saints to their first-ever non-losing season that saw them finish 8-8 and in second place in the NFC West. Archie Manning won the NFC Offensive Player of the Year award, and triggered an explosive offense that featured pro bowlers Chuck Muncie and Wes Chandler.

Nolan and the Saints headed into the 1980 season fully expecting continued improvement, and there was even talk of making the playoffs. It was not to be. The wheels came off early in the season, and as the losses began to mount, Saints fans took to wearing bags over their heads and calling themselves the Ain'ts. After a 27-7 loss to the Rams on Monday Night Football, their record plummeted to 0-12, and Nolan was relieved of his duties. By the end of his stint in New Orleans, it was clear to Nolan that a lot of the problems were the result of an organization with a culture of losing.

"John Mecom owned the Saints, and he was a successful businessman who was very gracious and generous to me," Nolan recalled. "But there were a lot of problems off the field that made it nearly impossible for anyone to build a winning team there."

### **Texas Two-Step**

Once again, Nolan landed on his feet, accepting an offer to become Defensive Coordinator for the Houston Oilers in 1981. After the season, Nolan's old friend Tom Landry approached him about a position as the Cowboys' secondary coach, and Nolan jumped at the opportunity to return to where his coaching career began. He served in that capacity through the end of Landry's tenure, and after Landry was fired following the 1988, incoming coach Jimmy Johnson retained Nolan on his staff.

"Jimmy wanted me to stay, so I stuck around for two more years. It was kind of like the early days of the Cowboys," said Nolan of Johnson's rebuilding effort. "Johnson was an organized guy and a real disciplinarian."

### **Still in the Game**

By the time the 1990 season ended, Nolan was ready for a break from the demands of coaching and decided it was time to retire. He settled in the Dallas area, and after the years of long hours and coaching stresses, he now finds time to enjoy playing golf, traveling with his wife and rooting for his son Mike, who followed in his footsteps as an NFL defensive coordinator, starting with the Giants and Redskins before taking his current job with the Ravens.

Nolan has traveled back east several times in recent years to catch Ravens games, and last season joined his University of Maryland teammates at a halftime ceremony honoring the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1953 national championship squad. He stays in touch with his long-time assistant coaches Paul Wiggin and Jim Shofner, along with a number of players, including Ed Beard and Cedrick Hardman, who Nolan called "like a son to me."

Winning the 1956 championship and the 1970 Coach of the Year award stand out as Nolan's best memories, but he looks back on his entire career with considerable satisfaction: "It was a great time and I enjoyed every minute of it."

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#### **Richard Charles Nolan**

6'1", 185                      College: University of Maryland  
Born: 3/26/1932, Pittsburgh, PA  
Drafted: 1954, 4<sup>th</sup> Round

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### Playing Stats

Year	Team	Gms	Int.	Yds.	TD	Fum.	Saf.	Pts
1954	NYG	12	6	48	0	0	1	2
1955	NYG	10	1	20	0	0	0	0
1956	NYG	12	2	17	0	0	0	0
1957	NYG	11	1	12	0	0	0	0
1958	ChiC	12	5	30	0	1	0	0
1959	NYG	12	5	57	0	0	0	0
1960	NYG	10	3	32	0	0	0	0
1961	NYG	9	0	0	0	0	0	0
1962	Dal	11	0	0	0	0	0	0
NFL Total		99	23	216	0	1	1	2

### Head Coaching Record

Year	Team	Reg. Season		Post Season	
		Record	Finish	Record	Finish
1968	SF	7-6-1	3 <sup>rd</sup> , NFL Coastal	-	-
1969	SF	4-8-2	4 <sup>th</sup> , NFL Coastal	-	-
1970	SF	10-3-1	1 <sup>st</sup> , NFC West	1-1	Lost NFC Chm
1971	SF	9-5	1 <sup>st</sup> , NFC West	1-1	Lost NFC Cha
1972	SF	8-5-1	1 <sup>st</sup> , NFC West	0-1	Lost Divi.Playoff
1973	SF	5-9	T-3 <sup>rd</sup> , NFC West	-	-
1974	SF	6-8	2 <sup>nd</sup> , NFC West	-	-
1975	SF	5-9	2 <sup>nd</sup> , NFC West	-	-
1978	NO	7-9	3 <sup>rd</sup> , NFC West	-	-
1979	NO	8-8	2 <sup>nd</sup> , NFC West	-	-
1980	NO	0-12	4 <sup>th</sup> , NFC West	-	-
Career		69-82-5		2-3	