

Getting A Charge Out of the Postseason

By Ed Gruver

In January , 1982, the San Diego Chargers, a team seemingly destined for the Super Bowl, went from the frying pan into the...

Freezer?

After flying the friendly skies over south Florida en route to a 41-38 overtime win over the Miami Dolphins in a classic AFC playoff on Jan. 2, the Air Coryell Chargers were grounded by a wind-chill factor of minus-59 degrees in Cincinnati and lost to the Bengals, 27-7, in the conference championship on Jan. 10.

In a span of eight days, the Chargers had experienced playing conditions involving a temperature turnaround of 130 degrees. San Diego QB Dan Fouts had made NFL history in 1981 when he surpassed his own passing records for a second straight season, but San Diego as a team made history by playing in two of the more memorable games ever seen in pro football in back-to-back weeks.

From the molten crucible of Miami to the sub-zero confines of Cincinnati, the '81 Chargers experienced the ultimate in extremes.

"That's the kind of stuff," Chargers linebacker Jim Laslavic said at the time, "they make in Hollywood."

If a movie script had been written about the 1981 Chargers, it might have been titled "Those Magnificent Men In Their Flying Machines." Their quick-strike offense was symbolized by the lightning bolt emblems on the sides of their helmets, and their blue-and-gold uniforms matched the sun-drenched skies of San Diego.

Guided by Don Coryell and triggered by Fouts, the Charger offense approached liftoff in 1979 with a 35-7 pasting of eventual Super Bowl champion Pittsburgh and its still-vaunted Steel Curtain defense.

The Chargers closed the '79 campaign by reaching the postseason for the first time since 1965. Fouts' five interceptions led to a 17-14 loss to Houston in the opening round, but San Diego had served notice of what was to come as Fouts passed for an NFL-record 4,082 yards.

Wideouts Charlie Joiner and John Jefferson both surpassed the 1,000-yard mark in receiving, and Fred Dean and Wilbur Young combined to form a fierce pass rush reminiscent of the Ernie Ladd-Earl Faison duo of the mid-1960s. Six wins in the regular season's final seven weeks gave San Diego its first Western Division title since '65.

Coryell, who had built an innovative and explosive offense as head coach of the St. Louis Cardinals in the early 1970s, tinkered further with his passing game in 1980 and the result was San Diego's second straight Western Division crown. Jefferson, Joiner and tight end Kellen Winslow gave the Chargers three 1,000-yard receivers, and Coryell balanced his point-a-minute offense by obtaining breakaway back Chuck Muncie from New Orleans in a September trade.

With Muncie averaging 4.7 yards per carry, Fouts throwing for a staggering 4,715 yards, and the defensive front of Louie Kelcher, Dean, Gary "Big Hands" Johnson and Leroy Jones spearheading a pass rush that accounted for an AFC-high 60 sacks, San Diego rode another late season run to a second straight Western Division championship.

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In the first round of the AFC playoffs, the Chargers renewed postseason acquaintances with their nemesis

from the old AFL, the Buffalo Bills. For the first two quarters, the game had the look of the 1964 and '65 AFL championships when Buffalo dominated San Diego. The Bills carried a 14-3 lead into halftime, but Fouts rallied the Chargers with two second-half touchdown passes and 17 points in a 20-14 win.

Playing in the AFC championship for the first time in 15 years, the Chargers spotted Oakland leads of 21-7 in the first quarter and 28-14 at the break en route to a 34-27 loss to the eventual Super Bowl champions.

San Diego began its 1981 season minus Jefferson on offense and Dean on defense. Both stars became embroiled in bitter contract disputes with the team and were traded. Wes Chandler, who had led the New Orleans Saints in receiving the two previous seasons, arrived to replace Jefferson and joined Joiner and Winslow in a high-octane offense that for the second straight season featured a trio of 1,000-yard receivers.

Winslow led the AFC with 88 catches and Fouts threw for a record 4,802 yards and led the conference with 33 TD passes, 609 attempts and 380 completions. The 233-pound Muncie powered his way for 1,144 yards rushing and an AFC-best 19 scores and was complemented by speedy backfield mate James Brooks, who averaged a team-high 4.8 yards per carry. Tackle Russ Washington returned from a knee injury to anchor the offensive line. Air Coryell lit up both skies and scoreboards in '81, posting 44 points on opening day and scoring 40 or more points three more times during the regular season.

The Chargers reached their apex with a 55-21 rout of the Raiders in Week 12 and their 478 total points at season's end was 52 more than Atlanta had scored to lead the NFC.

Dean's absence slowed San Diego's pass rush, and the defense proved porous at times. Yet as they had the past two seasons, the Chargers closed the season strong, winning four of their last five games to beat the Broncos for the division title via the tiebreaker.

On Jan. 2 in Miami, Air Coryell quieted an Orange Bowl audience of 73,735 by taking a 24-0 lead in the first quarter.

On the Dolphin sideline, wide receiver Duriel Harris studied the scoreboard with disbelieving eyes.

"When it was 24-0," he said, "I wanted to stick my head in a hole somewhere and hide. We were just totally embarrassed and humiliated."

Miami fought back in the second quarter with 17 unanswered points, then tied the game at 24 in the third. Fouts' second TD pass of the game, a 25-yarder to Winslow, gave the Chargers a 31-24 lead, but the Dolphins tied it again on a 50-yard TD from backup QB Don Strock to tight end Bruce Hardy.

Day had turned to night when Miami took its first lead of the game at 38-31 on Tony Nathan's 12-yard TD run, and suddenly the frenzied shootout took a new turn. Strock (403 yards passing) and Fouts (433) eventually finished with a combined 836 yards passing, the first time two QBs ever passed for more than 400 yards in the same game.

In jeopardy of surrendering the game-breaking score, a Charger defense that had been maligned during the season and mauled by Miami in the Orange Bowl rose up and snatched the game away from the Dolphins. Rookie running back Andra Franklin was stripped of the ball at the San Diego 18, snuffing Miami's hopes of extending its lead and giving Air Coryell one last chance to force a tie.

Completing six of seven passes, Fouts hurried the Chargers downfield in a lightning-quick attack. He finished the game-tying drive by finding Brooks in the back of the end

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zone from nine yards out with 58 seconds left.

Back came the Dolphins in a last-ditch effort to win in regulation. Strock put Miami in position for a 43-yard field goal attempt with four seconds left. Winslow, who had been twice carried from the field due to a shoulder injury and cramps in his neck and back, stood behind Johnson and Kelcher in the middle of the Charger line.

"They call me the sissy, the San Diego chicken," Winslow said at the time. "They say I need a heart transplant."

Winslow was about to prove otherwise. Straining his 6-foot-5 frame to its maximum, he got enough of his right hand up to block Uwe von Schamann's kick.

"I was very fortunate to get my pinkie on the ball, my pinkie and the outside edge of my right hand," Winslow said. "That's all I got. It was the biggest thrill of my life. I felt like I had scored three touchdowns."

In overtime, Fouts took the Chargers from their 13 to the Miami 8, but Rolf Benirschke missed a 27-yard field goal. With 3:42 left, von Schamann attempted a 34-yard field goal, but Leroy Jones blocked it for San Diego. A Charger team that had blocked just one field goal in its last 16 games had now blocked two in one game.

"When we blocked that second field goal," Laslavic said, "I swear, I started to cry."

Given new life, Fouts buggy-whipped the exhausted Chargers into field goal position again. He hit Chandler for 20 yards and Joiner for 29 to put San Diego at the Miami 10. With 1:08 left in overtime, Benirschke drilled a 29-yard field goal to win it, 41-38.

Four hours and three minutes after the opening kickoff, the game had finally ended.

"After it was over, everyone kind of looked at the skies and said, 'Thank God,'" team captain Hank Bauer remarked.

Winslow, who had blocked on the offensive line on the Benirschke field goal, lay flat on his back on the sodden turf, too tired to look up, too tired to move.

"I didn't hear anything, no noise," he said. "The silence was beautiful. I knew we'd won."

After hauling in 13 passes and blocking a field goal in the muggy conditions, Winslow was helped from the field by teammates Billy Shields and Eric Sievers.

Eight days later, the Chargers were on a bus ride to Riverfront Stadium in Cincinnati when someone noticed clouds of steam rising from the Ohio River.

"See?" Coryell said. "It's not that cold out there."

In reality, it was colder than anyone realized. The steam rising from the river was due to the fact that the air temperature had plummeted below water temperature, causing ominous clouds of vapor.

By kickoff, the wind-chill factor of minus-59 degrees made this the coldest day in Cincinnati's history. Earlier that morning, NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle had considered postponing the game because of the intense cold. But after gathering medical opinions, he allowed it to be played.

A crowd of 46,302 shivered in the frozen sunshine but were warmed early as the Bengals took a 10-0 first quarter lead on a 31-yard field goal by Jim Breech and an 8-yard TD pass from QB Ken Anderson to M.L. Harris.

Despite having difficulty throwing in the icy wind, Fouts found Winslow for a 33-yard TD in the second quarter. Trailing 10-7, Fouts led the Chargers on two more drives into

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Bengal territory, but twice threw interceptions. Buoyed by their defense, the Bengals built their lead to 17-7 at halftime on a 1-yard scoring blast by 249-pound fullback Pete Johnson.

With San Diego's high-octane offense sputtering in the deep freeze, the Bengals controlled the second half, scoring 10 more points to win 27-7.

The Chargers' season was ended. So too were their dreams of the Super Bowl. Two weeks later, after leading his team past Cincinnati in the 1982 Super Bowl, San Francisco 49ers coach Bill Walsh would remark that he was glad his young team didn't have to face the more experienced Air Coryell in Super Bowl XVI. One year later, the 49ers and Chargers did play in a regular season game in Candlestick Park, and Fouts outdueled Niners QB Joe Montana, 41-37.

Ironically, San Diego and San Francisco eventually did meet in the Super Bowl, but that didn't come until January 1995. The QB matchup was not Fouts vs. Montana but Stan Humphries vs. Steve Young. "Air Coryell" had been replaced by "Stan Diego," Muncie by Natrone Means, and the receiving triumvirate of Winslow, Joiner and Chandler by Mark Seay, Troy Martin and Shawn Jefferson. The 49ers won, 49-26.

Yet for all the success the Chargers have had since '82, the Air Coryell years may be the most fondly remembered in franchise history for anyone not old enough to recall the AFL glory years of Sid Gillman, Lance Alworth, Keith Lincoln, Pat Lowe, Ron Mix, Ladd, Faison, etc.

From 1979-82, Air Coryell lifted Charger fans to new heights, and eventually quieted critics who questioned their fortitude.

"They say...our whole team has no heart," Winslow said.

In January 1982, the Chargers proved otherwise.