

An AFL Legacy: The Odd-Front Defense

By Ed Gruver

When the National and American Football Leagues merged following the 1969 season, the old AFL gave way to the new AFC. In the decade that followed, the AFC dominated pro football, producing dynasties in Miami and Pittsburgh and changing the way the game is played by popularizing old strategies and introducing new ones.

From January, 1969 to January, 1984, the AFC captured 12 of the 16 Super Bowls played, outscoring NFC teams by a two-to-one margin and winning by an average score of 24-12. In seven of those 12 wins, AFC defenses held the NFC champions to 10 points or less; in a three-year stretch encompassing Super Bowls VII, VIII, IX, the NFC's scoring output was seven, seven, and six points, respectively.

The origin of the AFC's dominance is open to debate. Some historians suggest the starting date as January 12, 1969, when the New York Jets, champions of the AFL, shocked the sporting world by defeating the heavily-favored NFL champion Baltimore Colts, 16-7, in Super Bowl III.

AFL supporters who suffered through Green Bay's overwhelming victories in the first two Super Bowls reveled in the Jets' performance in the Miami Orange Bowl and pointed to Super Bowl III as the game where the upstart AFL came of age and achieved equality with the NFL. Fans of the Establishment weren't so sure; many NFL supporters wrote off the Jets win as a fluke occurrence. The late Tex Maule, who covered the NFL for Sports Illustrated, had trouble writing the game story for Super Bowl III because he felt the Jets had been more lucky than good in defeating the Colts.

"When I sat down to write my story after the game," Maule said in his book *The Pro Season*, "I had to lean over backward to give New York full credit for the victory.

To some, the Jets' victory merely allowed the AFL to gain a foothold on the beachhead that was NFL supremacy. Many felt it wasn't until the following year, on January 16, 1970, when the Kansas City Chiefs manhandled the favored Minnesota Vikings, 23-7, in Super Bowl IV, that the AFL established its equality with the NFL. The Chiefs' win was even more convincing than the Jets' victory had been the year before, and it closed out the AFL-NFL Super Bowl contests at 2-2, where it stands for time immemorial.

Kansas City's victory was important not only for allowing the AFL to merge as an equal with the NFL in 1970, but for establishing the quality of AFL football, which for years had been ridiculed by NFL adherents for its unconventional and wide-open style of play.

Chiefs' head coach Hank Stram confused the Vikings' vaunted defense, which had set an NFL record for fewest points allowed in a 14-game season, with a high-tech offense that included moving pockets, neatly-designed traps and draws, and flanker reverses, all originating out of a shifting array of alignments.

In the flush of victory, Stram proclaimed his schemes the "Offense of the Seventies," and while the Chiefs' multiple looks captured the imagination of the viewing public and writers who were in Tulane Stadium that day, it was the K.C. defense that set the tone for the coming decade.

Using an AFL-staple, an odd-front alignment that positioned either of the Chiefs' two immensely strong tackles, either 6-7, 287-pound giant Junius "Buck" Buchanan or 265-pound former NCAA wrestling champion Curley Gulp on the nose of Minnesota's greyhound center, 235-pound Mick Tingelhoff, the Chiefs dominated the line of scrimmage and stopped the Vikings' tough, inside runners before they could get started. K.C. held the high-scoring Vikings to just seven points, and knocked Minnesota's fiery ring-leader, quarterback Joe Kapp, out of the game with a separated shoulder in the fourth quarter.

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Said Maule, "The Chiefs were playing defense from a different philosophical stance than that used by most NFL clubs."

It was a philosophy that developed from the AFL's early days, when defensive coaches slid huge, dominating tackles like Buchanan, San Diego's Ernie Ladd, and Buffalo's Tom Sestak from their tackle position to head-up on the center.

The Chargers of the early 1960s were the first to do it. The massive Ladd was the centerpiece of a front wall that is remembered as the West Coast's original "Fearsome Foursome." When the Chargers drafted Ladd in 1961, assistant coach Al Davis urged his boss, Sid Gillman, to sign Ladd despite his large contract demands. "Just think Sid," Davis said. "We'll have the biggest damn line in the game."

The 6-9, 321-pound Ladd joined with tackle Henry Schmidt and ends Earl Faison and Ron Nery on a "Fearsome Foursome" that predated the Rams' version by five years. An off-season pro wrestler, Ladd was monstrous, with a massive upper body, 22-inch thighs, and 17 EEE shoes. When Ladd lined up over center, he blocked out the sun.

"It was dark," Boston center Jon Morris said when asked what it was like to see Ladd opposite him. "I couldn't see the linebackers. I couldn't see the goalposts. It was like being locked in a closet."

Said All-AFL center Jim Otto, "Ladd was a presence."

Ladd encased his forearms in rolls of tape, then used his arms like a scythe to cut down offensive linemen. "He comes out there," Morris said, "and you can't get your eyes off his arms. He has those long arms and all over them he has these pads and bandages. He keeps hitting you with the right forearm over and over again."

Ladd was instrumental in the Chiefs signing Buchanan, who had also been drafted by Green Bay during the AFL-NFL signing wars. Both were products of Grambling College, and Buchanan sought Ladd's advice on which league to sign with. Like Ladd, Buchanan was a physical presence. Buchanan too, used his taped-up forearm like a club, but it was his combination of size and in particular, quickness, that distinguished him from Ladd.

"A big guy will be strong, and he might be quick, but he is rarely fast," said Hank Stram, Buchanan's coach on the Chiefs. "Or sometimes he's strong and fast but not quick. Buck had it all -- big, strong, fast, and quick."

Fox announcer and former Raiders' head coach John Madden coached against Buchanan, and said the Chiefs' star, who was named all-pro six times in his career, was the first tall, quick player to play defensive tackle.

"Guys that size usually played on the outside," said Madden. "He revolutionized the game."

Buchanan's unique abilities allowed Stram to tinker with his defensive alignments. The Chiefs' coach had already earned a reputation as an original thinker in 1962, when he came up with the odd-front for the 1962 AFL championship game against the Houston Oilers. Coached by "Pop" Ivy, the Oilers owned the most prolific passing game in the AFL, and had dominated the young league by winning the first two AFL titles. Houston was gunning for a "threepeat" in '62, and he installed a double-wing formation to further exploit the talents of quarterback George Blanda, halfback Billy Cannon, and wide receiver Charley Hennigan. Game films of the '62 championship however show Stram countering Ivy's double-wing with his 3-4 odd-front defense, dropping end Bill Hull off the line to become a fourth linebacker. Tackle Jerry Mays moved to Hull's end position and Paul Rochester moved to the nose tackle position. Stram's strategy worked well enough to hold Houston in check en route to a 20-17 double-overtime win.

Tom Sestak arrived in Buffalo that same year, and established himself as the linchpin of a defensive unit that led the Bills to consecutive AFL titles in 1964-65. At 6-5, 272 pounds, "Big Ses" as he was known around the league, fit the AFL's mold of physically dominant tackles.

"(Sestak is) one of the best I've ever seen, on any field, in any league," said Lou Saban, Sestak's head coach in Buffalo and a man who has been around pro football since the 1940s. "For strength, interior pass rush, ability to read offensive keys, instinct to fight off traps, and raw courage, Tommy is the absolute best."

Despite playing with bad knees that often swelled to volleyball size between games, Sestak was an all-pro reknowned for his strength. His one-arm tackles were legendary at Buffalo's old War Memorial Stadium.

"He grabs you by the shoulders," one AFL guard said at the time, "and throws you."

Sestak's size and strength gave Buffalo defensive coordinator Joe Collier cause to be creative. In the 1965 AFL title game, Collier employed the Bills' version of the 3-4, dropping end Tom Day off the line to be a fourth linebacker and alternating Sestak and 276-pound Jim Dunaway head-up on Chargers' center Sam Gruneisen. The strategy caught Gillman off-guard, and shut out the famous San Diego offense of Alworth, Hadl, Lincoln, Lowe, etc., 23-0.

The odd-front continued to grow in popularity the next several years as more and more AFL teams deployed it. Even former NFL coaches who joined the AFL, like ex-Baltimore boss Weeb Ewbank, who became head coach of the Jets in 1963, installed his version of the defense. Stram added a new wrinkle to the odd-front in 1966, stacking his linebackers behind his linemen in under and overshifts. The Chiefs won an AFL title in '66, and Stram, who had designed the defense in part as a counter to the power back offense popularized by Vince Lombardi at Green Bay, could hardly wait to spring it on Lombardi and the NFL in Super Bowl I.

Lombardi however, was not awed by the prospect of facing a new defense.

"(Kansas City's) odd-spacing of the defense won't bother us, Lombardi said at the time. "That's nothing new. When George Wilson was coaching the Lions in the 1950s, he used it against us."

Lombardi's game-planning for the odd-front was effective. The Packers won, 35-10, rolling up 380 yards of offense.

Green Bay returned to the Super Bowl the following season, and faced another odd-front team, the Oakland Raiders. Under head coach John Rauch, the Raiders' ran the first pure 3-4 in Super Bowl history, with tackles Dan Birdwell or Tom Keating lined up opposite center Ken Bowman. As he had done the year before to Kansas City however, Green Bay quarterback Bart Starr speed-read the Raiders' shifting defense, then dissected it in a 33-14 Packer win.

While Super Bowl III is remembered largely for Jet quarterback Joe Namath's pregame "guarantee" and Matt Snell's running, at least one ex-Colt credits New York's odd-front defense for the upset.

"Our offensive front did not know which linebacker was coming, and the Jets were pouring through," Preston Pearson said in his book, *Hearing The Noise*. "Our line became confused in its assignments, not knowing whom to block, nor even whom to look for."

The Colts, who scored an NFL-high 402 points in 1968, were held to just seven points in Super Bowl III. Baltimore's embarrassing point total was matched in Super Bowl IV by the Vikings, a club that had scored 51 or more points three trimes in 1969 and averaged 25 points in its two postseason wins.

"All season long, they hadn't played anybody with an odd alignment," Chiefs' defensive Jerry Mays said after the game. "Mick Tingelhoff was a great, great center. He could go out and get a middle linebacker. But he couldn't handle a 280-pound tackle on his nose."

By the time the game was over, Buchanan and Culp had overwhelmed Minnesota's offensive line and combined for nine tackles. Longtime AFL writer Bill Felser of the Buffalo Evening News said later that Tingelhoff looked "like his head had been caught in a snowblower."

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In the years that followed, the odd-front defense became the centerpiece for AFC teams that dominated pro football. In 1972, the AFC began a run of five straight Super Bowl wins in which they held NFC teams to an average of 10 points per game, and the odd-front defense was a key component in each victory.

Over the course of the next decade, AFC teams Miami, Pittsburgh, and Oakland combined to win eight Super Bowls, with each team running a variation of the odd-front. Coached by Don Shula and defensive coordinator Bill Arnsparger, the Dolphins won Super Bowls VII and VIII, holding NFC champions Washington and Minnesota to a combined 7 points (the Redskins' only score came on a blocked field goal.)

Arnsparger's odd-front defense featured mustachioed, 250- pound tackle Manny Fernandez lined up on the center's nose. Fernandez used his agility and quickness to make seven tackles against the Redskins in Super Bowl VII, a game in which NFC rushing leader Larry Brown was held to 72 yards.

Brown's output equalled the team total the Dolphins allowed the Vikings in Super Bowl VIII. Alternating between a 4-3 and 3-4 look, depending on the responsibilities of hybrid end/linebacker Bob Matheson, whose number 53 gave the defense its nickname, Miami held the Vikings to one score in a 24-7 win.

The Dolphins won with precise, coordinated teamwork. The team that followed them as the NFL's most dominant, the Pittsburgh Steelers, won with punishing brute force. Defensive coaches George Perles and Bud Carson positioned 275-pound "Mean" Joe Greene and 265-pound "Arrowhead" Ernie Holmes in an odd-front alignment that saw the two tackles lined up in 45-degree angles on the center's nose. Greene and Holmes took turns stunting, looping, and smashing their way through offensive lines, and Pittsburgh's "Stunt 4-3" terrorized NFL centers for the rest of the Seventies.

"Greene and Holmes designed their own special defense," said Pearson, who as a member of the Dallas Cowboys played Pittsburgh in Super Bowl X. "Only the one seemed to know what the other was doing, and with their size, strength agility, and meanness, playing against them was brutal."

The "Stunt 4-3" peaked in the 1975 Super Bowl against the Minnesota Vikings. Running stunts and loops, Holmes and Greene helped hold the Vikings to a record-low 17 net yards rushing, and an average of 0.8 yards per attempt.

Said Viking offensive tackle Ron Yary, "They dominated us."

Pittsburgh's magnificent "Steel Curtain" defense produced four Super Bowl wins in the 1970s, and the Oakland/Los Angeles Raiders won three world championships from 1976-83. Again, the odd-front played a role, as the Raiders ran a pure 3-4 scheme and intimidated NFC teams with physical, bump-and-run coverage carried over from their AFL days.

Nose tackle Manny Sistrunk played a key role in the Raiders' 32-14 win over the Vikings in Super Bowl XI, and his heir apparent, Reggie Kinlaw, did the same in Super Bowls XV and XVIII, making a combined nine tackles as the Raiders held feature backs Wilbert Montgomery of the Eagles and John Riggins of the Redskins to 2.8 and 2.5 yard per carry averages, respectively.

The Raiders' victory in the 1984 Super Bowl signalled the end of the era of AFC dominance, but the odd-front continued as a means of Super Bowl success.

In 1985, Buddy Ryan, a defensive coach with the Jets in 1968, gave the odd-front a new look with his "46" alignment. Ryan retained odd-front principles, stacking a man opposite the center, but he added to it by covering the guards with an undershifted line and placing two linebackers on the strong side. Ryan's defense held the Patriots to a Super Bowl- record low of seven net yards rushing and an average of just 0.6 per attempt as the Bears battered New England 46-10 in Super Bowl XX. New York Giants coach Bill Parcells followed by winning two world championships from 1986-90 with odd-front defenses.

With the return of the 4-3 in the 1990s, the popularity of the odd-front defense has fallen from the zenith it reached in the 1970s. Its legacy however, remains secure in Super Bowl annals.