



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Football Fantasies

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February 4, 2008

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. What a Super Bowl game! New York Giants: 17, New England Patriots: 14. Almost as exciting as the time the Packers upset the Wild Bunch. Okay, not the Green Bay Packers, but the South Four Packers, a group of over-the-hill white guys who represented the South Four Apartment in Arlington, Virginia. We played the Wild Bunch, a group of young and talented black guys from D.C.

First, let's re-hash the *second* most remarkable post-season football play in the history of football. With 1:15 left in the Super Bowl game (New England: 14, New York: 10, with 3rd and 5 from the Giants' 45 yard line), QB Eli Manning, pulled himself and his jersey out the hands of a tackler, scrambled from the pocket and threw---*no lofted*---the ball toward a trio of two first-string defensive backs and one second-string receiver. Here, the Giants' David Tyree made a sensational catch---a 32-yard gain that led to the Giants' victory.

After Sunday's game, Tyree's teammate, Amani Toomer said, "Unbelievable. In Friday's practice, he was dropping everything." Figure 1 shows the latter phase of this play, but it cannot capture the brilliance of the catch itself.²

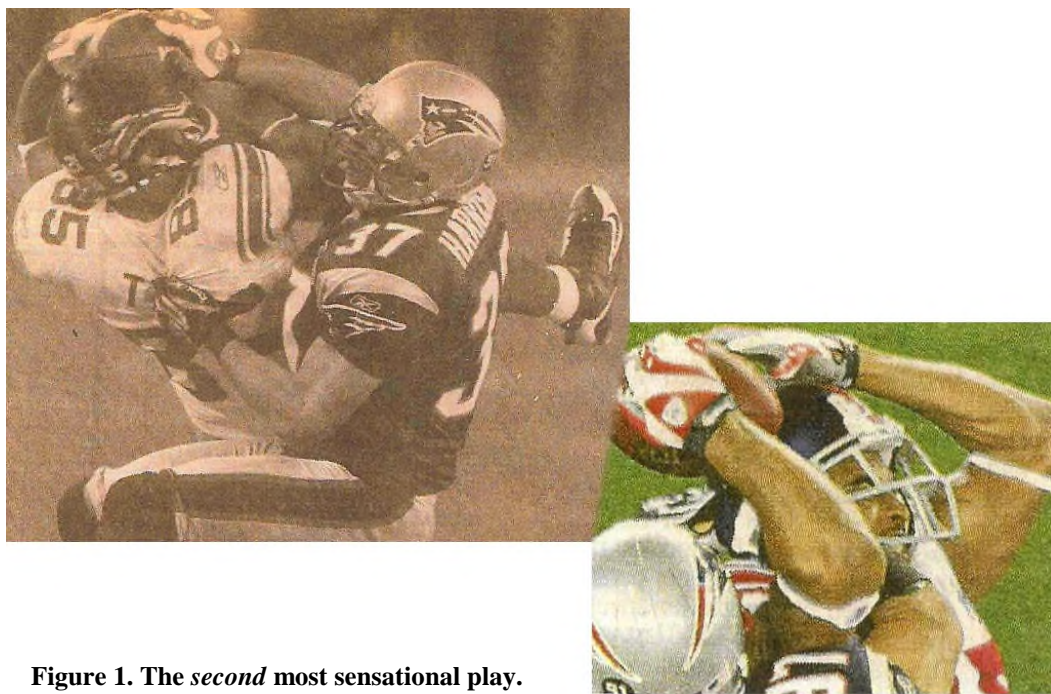


Figure 1. The *second* most sensational play.

¹ All quotations in this story are subject to my hero Mark Twain's advice, "What's often inside quotations marks are not what was said, but what was wished to be said." Okay, Mark did not spout these words of wisdom. They actually came from anon. But Mr. Twain is better known than anon and thus makes for a better authoritative reference. After all, anon is called anon for good reason.

² *The Coeur d' Alene Press*, Monday, February 4, 2008, B3, and *USA Today*, February 5, 2008, A1.

I've not been a fan of the Patriots this year. I wanted to be, as I'd migrated away from Danny and the Redskins, and was looking for another team to cheer for. The Patriots' SpyGate episode turned me off. Nonetheless, I admire the class Randy Moss, Tom Brady, and their coach showed in the post-game interviews. They are champions in that regard.

Fantasy Football

Let's talk about the *most* remarkable post-season play in the history of football. But first, to make the story more interesting, we take a short trip into the late 1960s and early 1970s. During that time, a group of white-collar bachelors lived in an apartment building in Northern Virginia called South Four Towers. They formed a football team to play touch football in nearby Maryland. (Touch as in: if the runner is touched by the defender, he is considered "tackled.")

Most of the players in this league played high school ball. Some played in college. I suspect few of us had illusions about going much further in football glory. But for a while---a couple hours on a playground in a Maryland suburb---former football players relived days of their past. Those days may have been ones of mediocrity, but in hindsight, to us, they were times of glory. And our exploits have become grander with each passing year.

This story of the greatest play in the history of post-season football is told four decades after the heralded event took place. Naturally, with each passing year, the greatest play assumes even more Herculean proportions.

The South Four Packers or the South Four Skins? How about Coach Lombardi?

Many of the players on our team were fans of the local Washington Redskins. Some of us wanted our team to be called the South Four Redskins. But we realized our moniker would have been shortened to the "South Four Skins" or the "Four Skins." As such, we suspected the name would curtail ticket sales and cut-down attendance. So, we became the Packers.

Also, our "coach" was named Lombardi. But unlike Vince, who actually coached his team, our Lombardi was responsible for keeping the Packers' (two) footballs dry. As myth has it, while we labored on the turf, he stayed on the sidelines, performing preventative maintenance on the local cheerleaders' pom poms. Oh yes, Mr. Lombardi was also our NFL Films Department. He took videos of many games. These movies are stored in deep archives, and are not being released until every South Four Packer player is six-feet under. Anon advises, "Embarrassment is the mother of archiving."

Fielding this football team was not an easy task because the games were played on Sunday mornings several miles away from Virginia. The staffing problem was compounded by the fact that most of the players were bachelors in their mid-to-late 20s and usually "made a night of it" the evening before the game. A number of the players did not go to bed. Okay, cutting some slack here, maybe I should say they went to bed, but they did not go to sleep.

On most mornings, we had trouble rousing ourselves out. One Sunday morning, your (future) reporter found our free safety asleep in his apartment, fully-clothed---including his trench coat and wing-tips---lying underneath his Christmas tree. I shook him, "Get up man! We're late. You need to switch uniforms."

So, there you have it. In less than 12 hours, some of the players headed from one sporting event to another. Not a very smart conditioning program for winning football games, but a fine program for boosting morale. We lost a lot of games, but we were happy---if somewhat fatigued---losers.

The Hero Begins His Football Career

Because I am writing this story, I've decided I am going to be the hero. If you've a problem with this approach, write your own self-serving tale.

Let me begin by explaining my early football days were not easy. I was very small for my



Figure 2. The fearsome twosome.

age, and as such, my teammates kicked me around a lot. To illustrate the problem, take a look at Figure 1. I am the 13-year old player on the left. The player on the right is also 13-years old...and he was considered to be of average weight and height. My helmet appears to be too big for me because it was indeed too big for me. But I had no other choice, other than to play with no helmet. In hindsight, it is no surprise I have injuries from those days that linger with me today. My one compensation? I learned to long-

snap the ball. I could rocket that sucker from between my legs as it were a pigskin...which it was.

With this background in the background, let's return to the South Four Packers, and my exploits as a gridiron hero.

The Packers

My teammates nicknamed me Jimmy Orr---from the Baltimore Colts player. As such, my jersey number was 28, and I was assigned the role of wide receiver. My strength was my good hands. I believed I could catch a ball if I could touch it. I would tell my quarterback, "Rich, just put it in the vicinity. I'll catch it." I usually did. (I told you I was the hero of this story.)

My weakness was my speed, at least in relation to the speed of our wide receivers, Pat and Al. I was not slow, and I was not fast. But I was quick. I was lightening-fast off the snap. For the first few steps, I beat most defenders, which is one of my strengths on the tennis court (a place of limited space). But they soon caught up with me, as I had not yet left them. Consequently, deep routes were not my forte.

In the first season, Rich (the team captain) discovered I was a good long snapper. I had played center in junior high and high school before a shoulder injury ended my so-called career. Therefore, I was soon transferred from a Packer wide receiver to a Packer center. Centers were eligible to catch passes, so I was also utilized as a receiver for short curl patterns and passes to the flat.

I had another weakness---at least a weakness in the eyes of one of my friends and teammate: I preferred to leave the ground to make a catch. As I watched the ball coming toward me, I would judge its distance to the point where I would make a leap into the air and glide through the ether

as the ball came into my body. As I just bragged, I rarely missed a ball thrown to me. My friend--my detractor---accused me of grandstanding.

Not so, while running, many Jimmy Orr wannabees pounce up and down as we drive our legs into the turf. Consequently, a short leap into the air just before the arrival of the ball provides a smooth platform and a stable reception area for the toss.

I thought my graceful catches resembled the snares of "Bambi," the great Lance Alworth who played for the San Diego Chargers. Notwithstanding, my buddy still made fun of my reception style. But what could he know? He was a middling safety, a position played by wannabe receivers who are cursed with the hands of a bricklayer.

The PLAY

The South Four Packers made the playoffs in our first year in the league. Considering we had no blacks on the team, and most of us were not exactly youngsters, it was an amazing accomplishment. Our final standings surprised the league, especially because the best team in our division, the Wild Bunch, cleaned our clocks during the regular season. As bad luck would have it, we drew this team for the first playoff game. Not unlike the Giants-Patriots rematch.

Giving us our due, we learned about the Wild Bunch during the first game and played accordingly. We played the team head-to-head during the first half and began to control play in the second half. Toward the end of the game, the PLAY was made.

I'd been in the clear in the right flat a couple times but our quarterback, Rich, had been firing-away to our two superstars, Paddy and Al, both wide receivers. For the PLAY, I informed my quarterback I was a prime target, as I had been in the clear when I ran a pattern out to the right flat.

Cut to the Huddle: Quarterback Rich pulled from his pocket a set of index cards---from which he selected a play. (Just like Bret Favre and Tom Brady, except Rich *drew up all the plays himself*. Yet, even though he made up the plays, he still used the cards. Being Italian, Rich was subject to frequent memory loss.)

Rich, "Okay, here we go." (As Rich rubbed his hands together, which he did a lot; a *very* nervous trait attributed to Sicilians, Rich's cousins). "Pat: Left Banana Out. Al: Right Banana Out. Don't slip on the peels!" Ha! Anyway, Rich like to call the Banana Out patterns for Paddy and Al, who were fleet of foot, even for old guys.

Other (minor) Heroes. As modest heroes sometimes do, I mention other *minor* heroes of the South Four Packers. As mentioned, Rich was the quarterback. He had a strong arm and was a very accurate passer. He did not look like a gifted athlete---more on the order of a motel inn keeper (which he was). But he was fine athlete. Sometimes we played pickup basketball games together, where I learned he was deadly accurate at long range and a super passer. He saw the entire basketball court, a perspective needed for a quarterback looking at the football field.

Paddy, a wide-receiver, was a fast sprinter---a Lacrosse wiz---and ran some of the best patterns I've seen executed on any field. During scrimmages, I watched his moves. He could not be handled by one man. His cuts were too quick and sharp for one guy to cover. I was amazed he did not blow out a knee when he made a leg plant into the turf. On one occasion...ahem, when we were playing the cocky Wild Bunch, Paddy's defender was tossing-out a load of trash talk. The safety nicknamed Paddy, "Apple Pie a la Mode." After which, the safety bragged he was one hungry dude. Big mistake. Rich called a fly pattern for Pat. Hut one! Hut two! Zoom! Pat left the young man in his tracks---with pie on his face. TD! The guy ran after Paddy, crossed into the end zone, and kept on running, disappearing into the woods. Legend has it that the safety never returned. (Okay, later he came out of the woods, after his embarrassment had worn off.)

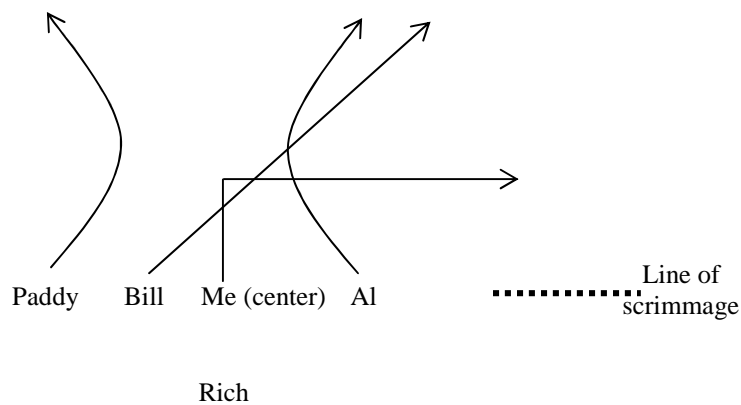
Al was our best athlete. He was the fastest runner on the team, and had great hands. He played football and basketball at the Naval Academy and was a classmate with Pat and Rich. Al's place in the South Four Packer Hall of Legend was successfully executing the most difficult play in touch football: Running back a kick-off for a touchdown. As mentioned, in touch football, a runner only has to be touched to be downed. Running the entire length of the football field, without being touched was unheard of. But Al did it. God, that man was fast! Legend also has it that no one else ever ran back a kick-off for a touchdown in this league. (Amazingly, I witnessed this feat one other time, coincidentally from another South Four Packer a couple years later.)

Take a look at the sidebar at the end of this story for more tidbits on Al.

One other minor hero. Our deep safety, Phil bears mentioning. But only a brief passage, because he was the guy who dissed my brilliant, leaping passes. Granted, he was a smart and tight coverer, probably gaining a lot of his defensive skills by playing Lacrosse at Loyola U.

So, there you have it. The South Four Packers: *Legends in our own minds*. Yes but the truth is, we may have been aging ex-jocks, but we still possessed considerable talent.

A Typical Play. A typical play from Rich's index cards is shown below. Notice the Banana Outs of Al and Paddy. Sometimes Bill (usually a blocker, and thus not mentioned in the heroes section of this story) ran a straight fly pattern toward the left or right corner of the field. Sometimes I stayed-in to block. Other times, I ran a flat pattern. Other non-glory positions are not shown in this diagram.



The scene was set: Rich, "U.D. says he's in the clear in the right flat. Paddy and Al, long Banana Outs. Bill, slant to the corner of the right end-zone. U.D., delay to the right flat. On two. Let's go!"

We broke huddle and moved to our positions. I positioned myself over the ball. "Hut One! Hut two!" A perfect snap to Rich. Out went Paddy and Al, fast as semi-greased lightning. Out went Bill, sprinting with lithe stockbroker legs toward the back of the end-zone to clear out the flat. Out went yours truly. I executed the delay perfectly, as I was not all that fast to begin with.

Present tense and back to the glorious past: No one is around me! Here comes the ball. Damn. It's high. Then jump. That's what you do anyway. Easy catch. TD! We win, a moment of glory captured by an AP photographer on the sideline (Figure 3.).



Figure 3. The *most* sensational play.

Notice how Bill has cleared out the two defensive backs from my area (white jerseys). Notice the referee running toward me, getting ready to signal a score. Notice the frenzy of the fans in the end-zone grand stands.

Notice the Wild Bunch...eh, who were not black guys. So, were the Wild Bunch wild whites, but not wild blacks? What had I done? Could it be that over the past four decades, I had muddled our vaunted victory over the Wild Bunch with another game? Could it be that Rich, Paddy, Al, Bill, and Phil were the heroes of our playoff game, and I was not? Was this photo of another game?

To the above questions: Anon says, "It's amazing what we remember. It's even more amazing that what we remember never happened." I suppose we all remember things differently: Not what they were, but what we would have liked them to have been. I find my memory gets better the further back in time I go.

Life Goes On

For a few years in the 60s and 70s, we South Four Packers hung-out together as if we were brothers. Not all team members, perhaps six or seven of us. Besides football, we reveled in dart games, drinking sprees, dances, poker---anything with a healthy absence of anything serious. As often as not, men are bound together by the most trivial of circumstances, rather than earth-shattering events. I never shared a fox-hole with these men, but I grew to love them. Okay, a minor correction to the last statement, as I never shared a fox-hole with anyone, because I was in

the Navy. Plus, I mean love in the non-conjugal sense. Our huddles were close-knit assemblages, but not that close.

Coach, Archivist, and Ball Drier Lombardi, QB Derose, fan Harvey, Safety Phil, fan Joey, wide receivers: Al and Pat



Figure 4. The South Four Packers.

One more picture before closing the story about the Greatest Football Play-off Play in History. Figure 4 above is a snapshot I made of some of the team members and two ardent fans. I searched my picture files for a team shot of the Packers, but to no avail. So, I've used this one. We were in downtown D.C. celebrating nothing specific and everything in general. We called this get-together the Family Luncheon. It was doing these soirees that Rich solicited ideas for variations of his Banana Out, and we feasted at the Prime Rib, still one of the best restaurants in Washington.

Time Flies by Me. So do the Footballs. (The Hero Ends His Football Career)

A few years later, after the South Four Packers went away, I joined-up with a night league in Virginia. There, I experienced my first remembrance of aging, of losing my (as it were) physical prowess---something I had never thought about. Oh, I suppose it was a minor incident and I was still in my early 30s, but it was an experience I shall never forget.

A big play was coming up. The opponent was ahead by six points. We were late into the 4th quarter and moving downfield. I was playing center, and after snapping the ball, I ran a delayed banana-out pattern into the left corner of the end zone. The delay left me completely free. Out came the ball, a perfect spiral toward my hands. Easy catch. ...I dropped it. We lost possession of the ball, which cost us the game.

I dropped a routine pass. I could not believe what had just happened. Since my early youth, my hands had compensated for my lack of speed and my small stature. In my late teens, I had grown in size, and had become stronger and faster; but...

As I walked to the sidelines, my teammates were silent. None looked at me except one of my friends, a man who had been a teammate with the Packers. He said, "I've never seen you drop a pass. What happened?"

I did not know. After all, everyone miffs a pass now and then. The great Washington Redskins Art Monk once dropped an uncontested TD pass from Sonny Jurgensen. Art went back to the huddle, and said, "I was open." Sonny threw to Art again on the next play and Art scored. Same thing with the Patriots' Tom Brady and Randy Moss.

But it was different for me this time. *The ball, for the first time in my life, did not seem to slow down as it came to me. It seemed to speed up.* I could not adjust my body and hands fast enough. I could not make my Bambi leap to snare the catch.

I was never the same receiver after that. Could be that I psyched myself out. Who knows? But I have an opinion about the incident. It was Mother Nature's gentle nudge, a reminder that receivers slow down; that we all tend to decelerate as we grow older; that there comes a time when we must look to other diversions to keep our egos intact.

Congratulations, New York Giants. What a game. What a play. Almost as grand as the one I made in a nearly deserted stadium many years ago in Washington, D.C.

Sidebar: Get Those G--Damn Hands Out Of Your Pockets!

At the Packer's first game, I knew only one or two of the players. Captain Rich had recruited me at a TGIF party at the South Four Apartment party room. He thought I was a football player because I talked slow-like. Later he discovered my drawl had nothing to do with brain damage, but was Southwestern-America based.

I was to play two days hence. Having had no workouts with the team, I was unfamiliar with Rich's "complex" playbook for his offence. So, he made me a first string defensive safety, a position for which I was eminently qualified because I had never played safety in my life.

During our first defensive stand, we were waiting for our opponent to break his huddle. It was cold---temperature around 40-45 degrees. Sensibly enough, I had my hands in my pockets so my nimble, pass-catching fingers could remain nimble. Suddenly, a Packer teammate (jersey number 12) looked back at me and shouted, "Get those g--damn hands out your pockets!"

?? A total stranger, not knowing the strategy behind my hand warming routine, was implying I was a slacker. I said nothing. I kept my hands in my pocket. But I was not a happy camper about this asshole. Who did he think he was, insulting my competitive manhood? What gave with this guy? Was he the missing link? Later, I discovered he was one of the most talented athletes I have ever known. He's still competitive, but in a lower-key sort of way.

By a weird coincidence, I knew number 12's wife. I had met her (before she married) in the Philippines in the early 1960s. She was sitting on the sideline, and few plays after the Cro-Magnon incident, I heard Pam from the sidelines, "U.D.!, U.D.! I can't believe it. It's Pam from the Philippines."

I walked over to the sidelines, "Pam! What are you doing here?"

"Watching my husband play football. His name is Al. He's number 12."

I said, "Sweet Mary! Congratulations." I thought, *Sweet Jesus! My condolences.*

By the way, in Figure 4, Al is the man second from the right. I'll wager he has his hands in his pockets. By the way again, number 12 went on to become one of my best friends, as did many players of the legendary South Four Packers.