

Big One Always Eludes Raiders

KANSAS CITY—During the Super Bowl VI victory celebration, Tom Landry was asked what he would have thought if his Dallas Cowboys had once more failed to win the big one.

Unflappable as usual, Landry replied that the Cowboys' turn would come—they would be back in the future and win.

This comes to mind not because the Cowboys are returning to the Super Bowl, but because the Oakland Raiders aren't. The week before the AFC title loss to Pittsburgh, Al Davis of the Raiders ex-

pressed the same philosophy as Landry.

"OH, ONE OF these days we'll win the thing," the Oakland exec said casually. "But we're proud of our record. We've stayed up every year. Other teams go up and down. We're in it every year."

Davis had more biting remarks to make after the loss to Pittsburgh. He doesn't accept defeat under any circumstances, even when it's obvious to others that Oakland lost to a better team, was handicapped by injuries going in or the football took the wrong

bounces. Probably it was a combination of all three circumstances in the game at Pittsburgh.

"We're very disappointed," said John Madden. "When we started out, we thought this was going to be our year."

The Oakland coach may be able to say the same thing at the start of the 1976 season. The Raiders look to be an odds-on favorite to capture the AFC West again and make the playoffs. The talent is that good and deep to withstand the loss of three players to expansion, a low drafting position and the absence of a No. 1 pick.

DENVER, Kansas City and San Diego will get more help in the draft and may make the Raiders' life in the penthouse more uncomfortable, but the pursuers still are not strong enough to dislodge Oakland as yet.

Madden says Oakland's goal each year—outside of the one it fails to achieve—is to improve the excellence of the club. There will be changes, but not on a wholesale basis. It was obvious in the late stages of the 1975 season and the playoffs that the Raiders need a big back—a healthy Marv Hubbard type—and more pressure from their defensive line.

In the season just ended, the Raiders added to their mark of having the best record in football over the last 12 years. Some thought this was their best team ever. The regular-season mark of 11-3, however, was behind the 13-1 of 1967, the 12-1-1 of 1969, the 12-2 of 1968 and 1974. For the 13 years of the Davis regime, Oakland has an astounding 126-45-11 record, easily

the best in pro football.

THE RAIDERS play exciting games replete with late rallies, fill stadiums and boost TV ratings.

"Our game in Washington this season drew the highest rating in the history of regular-season telecasts," Davis commented. "We dominate every aspect of pro football except that one thing—winning the Super Bowl. We get that and it's total domination."

But, as usual, it's 'wait until next year' for the Raiders.

KANSAS CITY: That bountiful harvest the Chiefs were coveting in the draft has been reduced by one. The team, picking under the scouting leadership of Les Miller for the first time, now has only 12 picks in the first eight rounds instead of 13.

The loss was an eighth-round choice from Buffalo in the Doug Jones trade. Jones, a safety, was sent to the Bills last summer and immediately became a starter in their injury-ridden secondary. In his first game, Jones was injured and knocked out for the season.

Considerations of the deal stated that Jones had to make Buffalo's 43-man regular-season roster. The exhibition injury prevented him from making it.

"It doesn't seem fair," said a Chiefs' spokesman. "We lose the draft choice and Buffalo gets to keep Jones. The league ruled in favor of the Bills."

DENVER: Before the season started, John Ralston said, "Our problem defensively isn't touchdowns, it's third downs." The Broncos yielded 88 conversions from third down to first down in

1974. In the season just concluded, the opposition's conversion success dropped to 76. Down the stretch Denver was especially tough, holding its last four foes to nine of 48 conversions in third-down situations.

With the defense stabilizing, the Broncos can turn thoughts to offense. The big question may be at quarterback. Steve Ramsey, based on his showing in the Miami finale, looks to be the obvious No. 1 choice. The six-year pro never has played a full season. There was speculation that the Broncos might be in the market for Jim Plunkett if the New England quarterback were available. Plunkett played for Ralston at Stanford. The Pats' asking price was reported to be a running back and defensive lineman.

SAN DIEGO: Not wanting to dwell on reasons for the Chargers' worst record (2-12) in history, Tommy Prothro insisted, "I think most anything I would say now would sound like excuses and I don't want to do that."

The San Diego coach tends to look on the bright side. "I don't think this team is too far away from being a good, representative team," he said. "I don't think it is too close to being a championship team."

Prothro's hopes are based on the development of a flock of good young players, the return of running star Don Woods and the college draft in which the Chargers have singleton picks in the first and second rounds, two third-round choices and four fourth-round selections.

NFC western

By BOB OATES

Picking Coach Stab in Dark

LOS ANGELES—Two of the last teams to name their new head coaches this winter were NFC Western teams, San Francisco and New Orleans, whose continuing difficulties underlined the gravity of the project. Nothing in sports is harder than finding the right coach and nothing is more important.

The problem is that there is no set procedure—there are no reliable ground rules—for the business. Most of the currently successful pro coaches were ordinary people before their accession. They provided few tips suggesting their present success.

AND WHAT FEW authentic tips they did provide were different from everybody else's. There isn't much that is the same, for instance, in the backgrounds of Don Shula, Don Coryell, Paul Brown and Bum Phillips.

The disappointments greatly outweigh the satisfactions in coach hunting. As Lou Spadia, president of the San Francisco 49ers, said when asked about it:

"I don't know much about horse breeding, but it strikes me the risks must be similar. Getting a colt out of a good horse by a great horse doesn't prove anything."

Spadia doubtless had in mind individuals such as his last coach, Dick Nolan, who was out of a good team (the old New York Giants) by way of a great team, the Dallas Cowboys, which have been successfully coached for so many years by Tom Landry.

After winning the division earlier in the decade under Nolan, the 49ers went steadily down hill.

"If there were a proven formula, we'd all have it," said Spadia.

"BUT THERE'S no rhyme nor reason, no formulas, no trends. Some highly successful college coaches haven't done well in pro ball. Some well-trained coaches from the staffs of very successful pro teams haven't done well. Some college coaches (Coryell as an example) have done very well and so have some former assistants (Shula). You just can't get a hold on it."

Spadia agrees that with the right coach, things would improve instantly in San Francisco.

"Our personnel isn't the best in the league," he said, "but I think it's better than our record. Depending on how the quarterback position is resolved, we have the personnel to contend in 1976. We've played musical chairs with our

quarterbacks for the last three years. You can't do that and be successful. There is a direct correlation between performance in that position and a team's success."

EVERY SEASON, in December and January, a percentage of NFL teams is in Spadia's predicament. More than one owner surveys the wreckage of his hopes and asks himself: where can I find a winning coach?

In most organizations, it seems to be a matter of luck. Thus it can be taken for granted that the New York Giants never would have parted with one of their assistants in 1959 if they'd realized his full potential.

The Giants haven't done much since Vince Lombardi went on to become the most famous of all pro coaches.

The Detroit Lions, 7-7 this year and a perennial runnerup in their division, once had an assistant named Shula. Later they had an assistant named Knox. Plainly, neither gave off any sparks there that could be recognized as good omens at the time. Nor did the Chicago Bears 10 years ago expect George Allen to become the head coach he has since proved himself to be.

NEW ORLEANS: The statistics tell you what the Saints need this year. Among 13 NFC teams in 1975, the Saints finished sixth on defense but a bad 13th offensively. If that No. 6 defensive rating is correct, and it seems to be, the Saints' future isn't far in front of them—if they find the right coach.

ATLANTA: The Falcons' final statistics for 1975 are misleading. They finished 13th in total defense, 11th against the run and 11th against the pass. They're much better potentially, than that. And their No. 9 rating offensively is due to Steve Bartkowski's injury for several weeks, an injury that left the Saints 10th in passing in 1975. They were a close sixth running the ball. They're a threat.

LOS ANGELES: In terms of yards yielded, the Rams were second in 1975. They were the NFC's No. 5 offensive team. Clearly, the Rams need more offense.

SAN FRANCISCO: The 49ers were the best-balanced team in the division in 1975, sixth on offense in the NFC, fifth on defense. These are figures proving that by comparison with their competition, the 49ers are ready to take off with the right coach.

AFC western

By BILL RICHARDSON



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