
BADASSES

THE LEGEND OF SNAKE, FOO, DR. DEATH, AND
JOHN MADDEN'S
OAKLAND RAIDERS



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The Legend of Snake, Foo, Dr. Death, and John Madden's Oakland Raiders

Peter Richmond

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To Maxfield

Contents

[Preface](#)

[Part I: Roots, Rebels, and Rites](#)

- [1](#) The Immaculate Deception
- [2](#) The Early Years
- [3](#) “I Thought We Were Better Than the World”
- [4](#) Al Davis Ascends
- [5](#) John Madden: “One of the Guys”
- [6](#) “Be on Time, Pay Attention, and Play Like Hell”
- [7](#) Summer Camp
- [8](#) Fun and Games
- [9](#) The Oakland Circuit

[Part II: Badass Football](#)

- [10](#) Guy, Foo, and Freddy: Building the Foundation
- [11](#) The Snake

[Photographic Insert](#)

- [12](#) Hubbard, Uppy, and the Saga of 1973
- [13](#) The Soul Patrol
- [14](#) The Sea of Hands
- [15](#) The Ice Bowl: Coming Up Short Again
- [16](#) The Tooz Arrives
- [17](#) Reaching the Promised Land
- [18](#) “I Felt as Confident as I’ve Ever Felt”
- [19](#) The Game

[Epilogue](#)

[Selected Sources](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

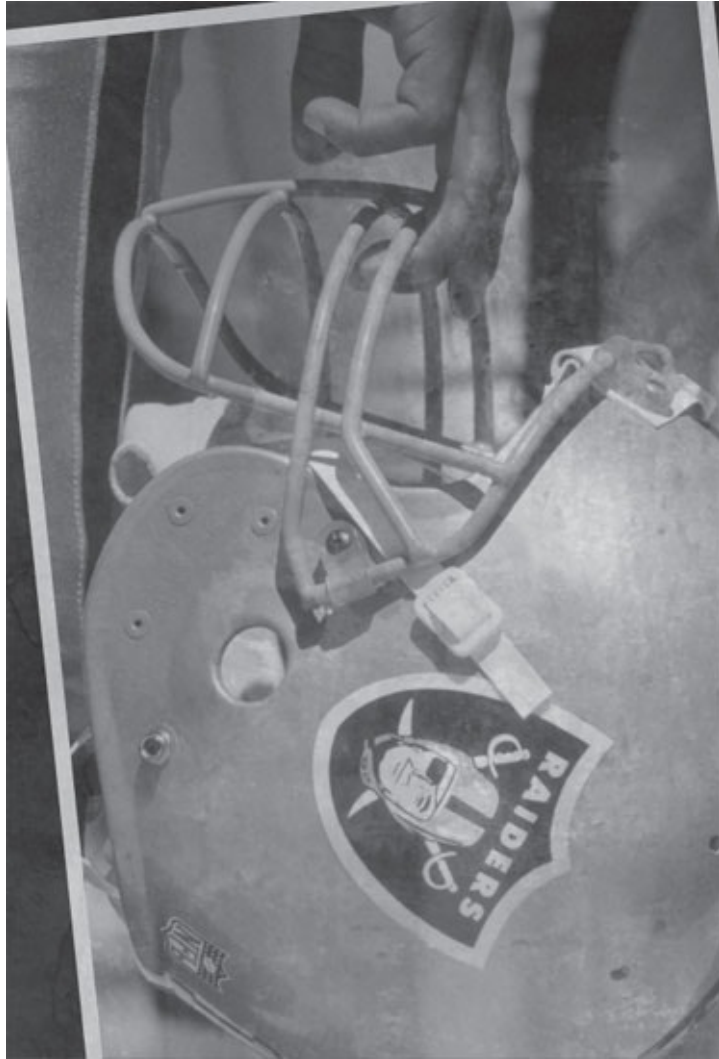
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[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)



Preface

Could a very good football team be more than just a very good football team? Could it be something more? Could it be legendary—not just Hall of Fame legendary but legendary as in the tales of ancient warriors, half-real and half-mythical, who mattered because they inspired people who needed to believe in figures mightier than their mundane selves?

Could a football team seize the modern imagination because the days of *true* legend have long passed? Because we no longer have myths in sport or in life? Because long gone are the days when, as Ken Stabler put it to me, “you played for the name on the front of the jersey, not the name on the back”?

Or how about this: Could innocent outlaws—“lovable rogues,” as Stabler calls the Oakland Raiders of the ’70s—who played in a world grown increasingly conventional and downright boring be regarded as something more than just one of the great football teams of all time? Could history judge a collection of weirdly intelligent, proudly individualistic, seamlessly bonded men as something more than just another great sports team? Could they be heroes?

That was the thought that hit me one day. So I ran it by a random Raider from the era—the first Raider I talked to, actually. I asked him whether we could think of the ’70s Raiders as heroic, in the you’ll-be-hearing-about-them-a-thousand-years-from-now sense. The answer wasn’t exactly what I expected.

“You have to go to the Greeks to get the appropriate conception,” said defensive lineman Pat Toomay. “The Greeks...understood ‘heroes’ as being capable of anything, from patricide to incest, because of the energy they had to embody to do the admirable things that they did. What the Greeks would see as quintessentially human behavior. Their heroes’ nature was exceptional and ambivalent, even aberrant. Their heroes prove to be at once good and bad and accumulate contradictory attributes.”

Then Toomay, graduate of Vanderbilt, son of an Air Force general who specialized in Defense Department nuclear strategies, told me that if I wanted to pursue my idea, I should check out Romanian philosopher Mircea Eliade’s *The History of Religious Ideas*.

I never did. I was too busy revisiting the golden age of my beloved Raiders, none of whom committed patricide or incest but most of whom lived somewhere outside of the conventional grid. The well-read Toomay, like his black-and-silver brethren, was obviously not your everyday professional football player. He earned a degree in Applied Mathematics. Nor was the Raider linebacker turned state senator who enlivened training camp with trivia games featuring his mastery of animal genetics, nor the linebacker who found he’d been traded during a macroeconomics exam. Nor the defensive tackle who holds a navigational-guidance patent and used to fly his own tiny airplane cross-country to camp. Nor the linebacker who would prefer to discuss the Druids rather than football—and once arrived at practice astride a horse. Nor the center who did a striptease atop the bar of his favorite tavern, nor the fullback who

rode his motorcycle through a bar, nor the linebacker who befriended a Hells Angels leader, nor the cornerback who regularly checked into the hospital room along with his motorcycle. Nor the men who arrived fresh from football's faceless, drudging minor leagues and blossomed into black-and-silver stars. Nor the players who would arrive at training camp *early*, so that they could once again plunge back into their unique haven of camaraderie.

But I think I know what Toomay was getting at: that greatness is one thing; legend is another; and myth is still a third. In a low-profile, second-sister town, all three were embodied by a hirsute, off-the-wall football team dressed in black and silver who played football for what Stabler calls "all the right reasons."

How good were John Madden's Badass Oakland Raiders of the '70s? In a modern culture that seems to live by the philosophy "Second place is for losers"—and in this case, first place judged by the number of rings on your fingers—they were not the best. Pittsburgh, Dallas, and Miami all took home more Lombardi trophies in that decade. But in the '70s, no team was so routinely dominant as the Raiders. Or so unusual. Or so damned fun and entertaining to watch playing America's true pastime.

Let's consider some other numbers. After losing the Super Bowl in January of 1968, the Oakland Raiders won seven division titles in the next eight seasons. Between 1970 and 1977, they played in six AFC Championship games. And when quarterback Stabler—the de facto leader, the Badass emblem, the "Snake"—took over for good, in 1973, he led them to five consecutive AFC Championship games, and the Super Bowl XI title to end the '76 season: the Sisyphean myth denied. Their 66 regular-season victories from 1972 to 1977 led the National Football League. By those numbers, numbers that speak of perennial dominance, it's obvious that the Badasses knew how to consistently play the game of football better than anyone out there, year in, year out. They were the ongoing emblem of in-your-face excellence.

The Steelers and Dolphins and Cowboys represented excellence of a very specific kind: simple football excellence. These were football machines, presided over by jut-jawed coaches whose stars seldom made an appearance in the celluloid reel of our imagination.

Pittsburgh and Miami and Dallas never hypnotized *me*, anyway. I was an East Coast college student laboring at the bottom of his class on an Ivy'd campus, chafing against an unseen enemy, against all things privileged and conventional and summer-home-on-Nantucket-ish—smoking my weed in the mornings, barely skimming the textbooks, affecting the archetypal rebel pose. But beneath it all I was truly addicted to nothing but professional football, the game that evokes a primal instinct, a pull to our species' need for team warfare, where a clan must work as one. The sport where strategy is sublimated by sheer physical will. And I was magnetically drawn to the guys whose hair flapped out of their helmets, whose mustaches and beards and eyeblack loomed like warrior makeup behind the face guards, whose delightfully pink-faced coach, unencumbered by coat and tie, waved his arms on the sideline at the officials like a blow-up doll gone amok. ("Holy shit," John Madden told me, of the surprise he'd feel when he'd see himself on film after games. "I know I got pissed, but I didn't think I got *that* pissed.")

Mostly, I was drawn to athletes who retained their individuality, strutted it, while playing a team sport, and to me, this furnished a magical high all its own. I hadn't a clue what I'd do with my life, that I'd end up actually writing about the world they inhabited, but I did know, like Madden did when he gave up thoughts of law school to follow his true bliss, that it would not be part of a vocation involving a coat and tie, and that whatever path I pursued would have to include professional football—played by outlaws.

In the '70s, I reveled not just in those countless Raider victories but in the certainty that if this particular band of brothers could excel, that as long as professional football could include a primetime team whose image, style, and attitude ran entirely counter to the mainstream product, then Big Football didn't have to be like Big Business or conventional society. The game could be played with obvious joy. Badass football, with its implicit message that rebellion was *good*, could indeed rule the professional landscape, no matter the number of rings it would earn. Better yet, played by iconoclasts and madmen, it could inspire.

Of course, the Raiders of the '70s themselves have their own ranking system for their historic excellence: “Number one—of all time,” the savage safety George Atkinson told me, his tones as sharp and confident as the way he played his gnarly game. “Come on, man, I'm ranking us number one. Without a doubt.”

But let's put quantifiable measures of success aside for a moment and focus on what made the Raiders so distinct: they arrived just in time to keep the dream of happy revolution alive. As Greil Marcus eloquently suggested in *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century*, as the '70s unscrolled, a grateful mainstream culture, capitalistic at heart, sighed in relief at having survived the threatening chaos of the '60s, said relief reflected in the titles of songs like the Rolling Stones' “Soul Survivor” and the Bee Gees' “Stayin' Alive.” But it was the Grateful Dead's “Touch of Grey” that spoke of a vestigial need for the endurance of the enlivening anarchy of the '60s and its belief that the kids were not only all right but had always *been* right: “I will get by, I will survive.”

Survival for mainstream American culture in the '70s, relief that the psychedelic nation hadn't swamped the two-cars-in-every-garage '50s ideals, meant going back to something like real, ordered, structured life. But what was that real life in America in the '70s? It was a tepid, unadventurous, light footprint of a decade that would transition us away from the mostly innocent mayhem of the '60s into the “greed is good” '80s.

For those of us who bemoaned the vanishing of the '60s, the new decade was a dispiriting time when the layering of the plastic tunes of Captain & Tennille and The Carpenters erased the snagged, buoyant legacies of Hendrix and Joplin and, on the football field, an era when generals replaced coaches. When Don Shula and Chuck Noll and Bud Grant and Tom Landry's steely, businesslike, humorless faces emerged to replace Brooklynite Lombardi's grinning/scowling, gap-toothed smile, Giants coach Allie Sherman's nervous, trench-coated, sideline-cigarette prowls, and Baltimore's little bulldog Weeb Ewbank's odd, oval truck driver's face, the game seemed to lose some of its muddy, giddy humanity.

As I watched these woolly Raiders play their unconventional game beneath a late-afternoon California sun that refused to set when the East had gone dark, I found my true heroes on a football team that not only played the game with a delicious violence and a tangible edge but promised that the metaphoric revolution of the previous decade was alive and weirdly thriving, on the last stage you'd ever expect to see it: a professional football field.

In the Badass Raiders, I saw a vestige of the wildly anarchic good times of the '60s grafted onto a team playing the dark sport that had entranced me since childhood. Sunday afternoons and Monday nights, my Raiders gave every rebel a cause, assured us that being out of the ordinary could be a guiding philosophy of life.

On one level, the game of football is structured and symmetrical; there is no room for tactical error. But reduced to its essence—its *eidos*, if we're still dwelling in ancient Greece, where shoulder-length-haired Spartan phalanxes marched against each other, dueling and killing at an ancient line of scrimmage—isn't this game nothing but loosely structured, balletic mayhem? Mayhem certainly flowed through the blood of the mercenary, sometimes brutal athletes who first played professional football a half century before these Raiders. Viewed as outcasts by sporting society, decried at the time as the lowliest athletic dregs, the professional pioneers were considered defilers of the decorum of the college game. "Real" football was being played in the East and Midwest for nothing but raccoon-coated campus pride. In the national headlines, across the radio waves, football's stars were clean-cut university thoroughbreds. The pro game was an aberration, impure and unruly and unholy.

Only as the game evolved for television's eye—and Madison Avenue began to recognize the marketability of these remarkably tough athletes' elemental, beautiful brutality—did the veneer of respectability begin to dawn in the professional ranks and the sport began to morph from mud-and-blood lunchpail head-butting into Pure Entertainment: the modern NFL, where now, in the words of Raider tight end Raymond Chester, "players are independent contractors. They are each mini-sports corporations."

But in Oakland, there were only two contractors and no corporations. The Raiders were an organism unto themselves, sneering at all others. They were nothing but the product of two men, Al Davis and John Madden: "Al" and "John" to the players, who considered them family in an organization where no one stood on ceremony.

The managing general partner, a magnetic magnate with an indefinable, oft-sinister allure, the ultimate Badass, wanted more than to transform the game, to win at all costs. This was a man who sensed from the very start that he was destined for a singular place in history, and this aura enwrapped him like a coat of armor. Davis wanted to turn football convention on its head. A man who carried himself like a king, he welcomed the game's outcasts into his fold—black and white men both, at a time when this was far from routine—and loved them, as long as they committed themselves to winning for the family, for the cult. A mystical, mysterious figure, a give-a-fuck icon, he suggested to those of us who both loved the game and questioned Nixonian authority that it was not only OK to be yourself, and sketch your own blueprint, but that this was the only path to follow.

The coach? A precocious, next-door-neighbor guy, a leader the likes of whom we'd never seen and never will again: a semi-neurotic, highly sympathetic everyman who roamed the sideline looking like a fan who'd wandered onto the field. A guy unsaddled by any trace of put-on seriousness. John Madden treated his players as peers—not above or beyond them, just *of* them. The man obviously enjoyed what he was doing; he was unique in a fraternity where frowning was the *de rigueur* expression. He seemed to revel in being part of a *game*, not an industry. He was having fun.

For the most part, though, the Badasses played for their brothers. More than anything, this was their motivation: to not let down their teammates, teammates whom they truly did love. We are, after all, innately social animals. We are encoded to blend with our tribe, and no tribe blended with each other as the Raiders did, as well as with their wild, passionate fans and their entire downtrodden civic community—all the while reassuring us that going against the grain could not only survive as a way of life but also inspire respect, even delight.

And what happens when these outcasts and eccentrics start to love and respect each other? Well, if you were looking at them from the wrong side of the line of scrimmage, they could inspire not a little fear: fear that the Badasses would find a way to beat you, of course, usually in a come-from-behind fourth quarter, but also the fear that these men, my men, could just as easily separate your head from your body as they could erase a late-game deficit. When they hit, they hit with something to prove. Their *aura* hit.

“I swear, some teams didn't want to play against us; they'd just try and lose,” the delightfully crazed linebacker Phil Villapiano told me, the Raider of Raiders, the Jersey guy who lived for the rush of a brutal tackle. “We won a lot of games because people didn't want to fuck with us. They didn't want to rile us up. We won so many games when teams could have tried a little harder to beat us, but they didn't want to. It's like you don't want to fight Muhammad Ali. Ali drills you a couple of times, you fall down.”

Football historians undervalue the Badasses. The record keepers rely on numbers. Numbers refer to quantifiable successes, and speak as if pro football teams were interchangeable machines. “Though the beginning of the '70s would be ruled by the Dolphins, and the end by the Steelers, the decade as a whole belonged to the Dallas Cowboys,” wrote Michael MacCambridge in his definitive history of the league, *America's Game*. “They were the league's most visible, respected, resented and imitated team.”

But those teams were not the most *feared*, and fear lies at the heart of a game in which a single blow can cripple you in a microsecond. Nor did the Cowboys have the most character—or characters. Nor did they inspire from the gut and the heart. Yes, the Cowboys would become America's Team, but didn't the very emergence of an America's Team—a national team—signal the beginning of the disappearance of football as it was meant to be played, the waning of the old, local game, when a football team represented a city's true work ethic? When its players weren't just individuals but a reflection of the identity of its city? In the '40s and '50s and '60s, American cities still turned out products that fueled the world economy, and football

teams in cities such as Pittsburgh and Detroit and Chicago wore their football teams like proud insignia. In those years, professional football was still a worker's game. It didn't matter that some of those teams didn't win; they symbolized working-class eminence.

Besides, any team that was "America's Team" was, by definition, just as likely to sell jerseys in Des Moines as Dallas. Defined by Landry, a Christian war hero, and Roger Staubach, a Naval Academy clean-cut boy, playing quarterback in a city that epitomized New Wealth, the Cowboys' logo was nothing if not an early herald of modern America's instant-fame national ranking system for everything and everyone, wherein someone has to be the instantaneous best, the most recognizable, the champion, and can earn that perch and its attendant fame *American Idol*-style, without doing the work and climbing the ladder. Today anyone, out of nowhere, can be the Star: that supposedly hallowed emblem of the Cowboy team. And the star breeds stars, not brothers. It speaks of showmanship, not sport. Nor teamwork.

On the Raiders, a selfish drive to rise above the pack would have represented heretical behavior. "There was no superstar on the Raiders," the legendarily lovable, shaven-headed defensive end Otis Sistrunk, a veteran of football's minor leagues who reached Pro Bowl status wearing the black and silver, told me. "No retired jerseys. You had 45 players. You had a team"—a team perfectly designed for a town that occupied no place in the national pantheon of municipal privilege, or wealth, or respect, but went about doing the daily grunt work without reward, without national notoriety, in the shadow of the glittering, towered city across the bay.

If history reserves football of the '70s for the larger-than-life, star-emblazoned franchise, fine: for some of us the game itself will always belong to the anti-Cowboys, to the team with the dark, delightfully cackling soul.

"We used to say, 'You don't have to have a criminal record to play on this team,'" Duane Benson, an unheralded Raider linebacker of the early '70s, told me, "'but it really helps.'" The truth is, the Badass rosters included no actual criminals. Just men who delighted in living and playing somewhere outside and beyond the mainstream, and safely inside the Badass family, a team that found its bliss wearing black.

One other element distinguished my rebel squad, something obvious and infectious: the unmistakable delight with which they played their games, on the field or off. "They don't say you work football," the eccentric linebacker Ted Hendricks once said. "They say you play football." I was hardly surprised when Benson told me that he found the key to the Raider success in a place where others seldom look: in a team-wide vibe that stressed just how damned pleasurable it was to be playing a game with a bunch of teammates who exuded glee as much as they exuded menace.

"On the Raiders, there was a value placed on this notion of having fun," Benson told me. "It was such standard fare...to be a little bit crazy...to have fun. To have real *fun* and have real fun on an all-the-time basis. We always had more fun than whomever we played, during the week, and during the game. I've taken on other things in life [including four years in the Minnesota state senate] and still find it to be true: whoever has the most fun usually wins."

Or, as tight end Bob Moore, a Stanford guy, put it to me, summing up his Raider

years, “Seven days a week, it was as much fun as a human being could have and still stay alive.”

PART I

ROOTS, REBELS, AND RITES

CHAPTER ONE

The Immaculate Deception

Bob Moore wasn't looking for a fight that night. The Raiders' tight end had planned to turn in early before the memorable opening game of the 1972 AFC playoffs. Like any proud member of the tribe, Moore was no stranger to the evening pub crawl, but public imbibing was not the wisest of ideas in a hostile city lathered in anticipation of its first postseason appearance in four decades, where celebrations were sprouting all over the city like Steeltown wildflowers. For all of their legendary revelry, these Raiders had generally known where to draw the line. The game always came first. Festivity, while an integral element of the Raider repertoire, had its own time and place.

So Moore and linebacker Greg Slough had decided to make it an innocent Friday night out and catch a movie—a gangster caper called *Across 110th Street*, starring Anthony Quinn and Yaphet Kotto. (“If you steal \$300,000 from the mob,” read the film’s promo poster, “it’s not robbery. It’s suicide.”) Then Moore and Slough hoofed it back to the team hotel—where they were greeted by the sight of a well-fueled crowd gathered in front of the downtown Hilton, laying siege to the enemy’s camp.

This contingent of fans, a splinter faction from an earlier downtown celebration thousands strong, had not gathered at the hotel on a peacekeeping mission. They weren't willing to wait for the Saturday-afternoon tilt at Three Rivers Stadium to vent their partisan emotions. They had assembled to deliver an advance decree to the visiting team: You're in enemy territory now. And they were armed. Before the evening's end, one beer bottle would sail through a hotel window, and another would clock a cop. Several arrests would be made. Bob Moore had not figured to be among them.

The barbarians at the gate were polite enough to the two Raiders as they sidled forward through the mass, which was kidding and jiving with the players but making way for them. Enemies or not, they were larger than life. But when Moore met the wall of blue that the city had enlisted to hold the frothing mob at bay things grew ugly.

“We go up to the front, and there are these cops,” Moore recalls now, lounging on the deck of his spacious home in the gentle hills east of Oakland, its backyard shaded by tall redwoods, a home bathed in peace. Beloved among his teammates then, and now a Bay Area lawyer, Moore had joined the team in 1971 with a not-atypical Raider pedigree. He had smarts (the degree from Stanford), he had workmanlike skills (averaging 25 catches from 1973 to 1976), he was the consummate team player, he loved a good time, and he had an extra arrow often found in the Raider quiver: defiance, especially in the face of a challenge. If you don't want us to do it, that's reason enough to do it. This credo had always been ingrained in the Raider DNA: Us against Them. Unfortunately for Moore, on this night the opposition wore a different

kind of uniform—and it was armed with clubs. If Moore had been wearing his own uniform, what followed might have been a fair gladiatorial fight. As it is, this was no contest.

“We say we’re with the Raiders and we want to go up to our rooms,” Moore recalls. “This policeman kind of hits me and says, ‘I don’t care who the fuck you are. You’re not getting to the front of this line.’ I didn’t think a cop with a nightstick was going to beat up an Oakland Raider in town for a playoff game. So I make a comment I regretted pretty quickly.

“I said, ‘Look, motherfucker, I’m going to my room.’”

You called a riot-squad cop a motherfucker? Why? Moore thinks for a second, then answers: “It’s sort of what people say at times when they’re pissed off.” Well, it’s definitely sort of what a Badass would say, Stanford sheepskin or not.

“So then, *boom*. This guy comes down on the top of my head with a nightstick, which is like a baseball bat. Solid wood. The next thing, I’m on the ground. And I got a guy on my chest trying to beat the shit out of me, and another guy holding my legs. I’m trying to cover up, and I get my hands pulled away, and *bang*, I get it again. You get hit by one of these things while you’re conscious, you think you’re going to die.”

“Motherfucker” was Moore’s first Badass pronouncement. But he was just getting started. He lusted for Raider retaliation. Rationality had been replaced by Badass instinct. “They drag me away to a paddy wagon. I get in the back. The first guy comes in. I went after him. Just attacked him. Hit him with everything I had. He goes out and they slam the door. A couple minutes later the driver comes back and says, ‘We’re going to take you down and book you.’ I said, ‘Book me for what?’

“Then he sees I’m drenched in blood. He says, ‘No, we’re going to rush you to the hospital.’ Turns out it wasn’t bad. Seven stitches, cuts on both sides of my head. I was swollen like a son of a gun. I’m on the operating table and the young surgeon says, ‘You’re real lucky.’ I said, ‘You have to explain this to me. I don’t feel very lucky.’”

Turned out the state of Pennsylvania had something called the doctrine of sovereign immunity. Which means you can’t sue the city, only individual people. “So he said, ‘Generally, guys who get this kind of treatment don’t come here. We pick them up at the morgue after they dump them in the river.’ I said, ‘Thanks, that’s comforting.’”

After they’d sewn him up, Moore was taken back to the police station to be booked. Madden was there. The mayor was there. The chief of police was there. But a deal was offered to Moore: If you don’t sue the cop, you won’t be arrested. His response would have done his teammates proud: “I said, ‘Tell them to fuck themselves.’” Finally, Moore agreed to an alternative proposal: he wouldn’t talk to the press while he was in town, and they’d let him go.

“The next morning in the locker room I can’t get a helmet on. So [defensive lineman] Kelvin Korver had a big head, with, like, a size-eight helmet. They took his helmet, took all the insides out of it and made these Styrofoam donuts strapped to the inside. Everyone’s crowded around me in the locker room before the game, right? So John walks up and says, ‘Hey, Bob, with all due respect, we got a football game today. Tell them to go away.’” Moore’s red badge of courage no longer counted on game day. Still, there was something reassuring about a Raider striking the first blows a full day in advance of the actual game.

“I don’t remember a thing about the game,” Moore says now. “I wandered like a mummy off the field, knowing we lost. But I had to figure out what the hell happened.”

This, of course, makes Bob Moore unique among football fanatics. To the rest of the football world, what happened on December 23, 1972, remains indelible: what NFL Films would come to call “the greatest play in NFL history”—in a game that, arguably, despite its outcome, launched the Raiders’ long, strange journey to the top. The catalyst for all to come.

For the Steelers, the game lives on forever, and the play remains a singular moment of glory. How else to interpret the statue of favorite son Franco Harris planted in a concourse of Pittsburgh International Airport? Does it show Harris slipping a tackler’s grip? Sprinting or rumbling toward one of his 91 career touchdowns? Does it commemorate any of the hundreds of other great moments in the immortal Franco Harris’s Hall of Fame career?

Of course not. It shows him reaching down to his shoelaces, gathering an errant football with his fingertips. For thousands of travelers, every day, there it stands: a very lifelike monument to a singular moment of (questionable) triumph.

“The Immaculate Reception? I call it the Immaculate *Deception*,” Atkinson, the “Hit Man,” says now, with only half a laugh. “We got fucked by a soft dick.”

It made for a catchy sound bite, “the Immaculate Reception.” But think, for just a second, about what this now-immortal phrase implies. Consider the phrase’s original usage. To have an immaculate event, there had to be a miracle involved, right? And a god behind it? So isn’t this the subtext of what the term “Immaculate Reception” suggests: that on the artificial turf of Three Rivers Stadium, with seconds left in a football game that the Oakland Raiders had more or less won, as Terry Bradshaw called the signals for a fourth-down desperation play, a beneficent god reached down and bestowed victory on a team that was otherwise unable to attain it on its own?

One narrator on a retro film clip subsequently called it “the greatest miracle in sports history.” And miracles don’t happen without divine intervention, do they? Any way you look at it, then, legend insists that it took Outside Help to defeat Oakland’s Army of the Night on that December afternoon.

But why would a benevolent god intervene to help one football team beat another? Well, if one team was deemed good, worthy, anointed, and the other...demonic. If one team represented the staid old-world NFL’s Rooney franchise, and the other represented the rebels of Al Davis, a man who bowed to no higher power.

In the end, what, really, does the phrase “Immaculate Reception” imply other than that the infidel band of marauders was poised to win the game and wreak havoc on the free world—until Someone decided to defy a defender known as “the Assassin” and drop the ball into the hands of one of the most loveable figures in the game? A man with his own legion of fans? “Franco’s Italian Army” is what the T-shirts celebrating the Rookie of the Year read (which was cute enough at first glance, until you think

about what Spain's Generalissimo Francisco Franco's regime stood for). But there was nothing not to love about Franco Harris. The Steelers' first-round pick, the biracial all-American boy, was as popular a player as the game would ever see.

No, on this day, the gods clearly had it in for the Badasses—"the Antichrist," says Atkinson, nodding, smiling, clearly proud of having been part of the dark side.

Of course, there was little question about whom the football establishment favored: that week, the guys in Pittsburgh had gotten a good-luck call from George Halas, officially giving the Old Humorless NFL certification to the Pittsburgh team. Halas had owned the Chicago Bears since its earlier incarnations, and was only five years removed from having coached the Bears for nearly half a century. Art Modell had wished the Steelers luck, too: the steward of the hallowed Cleveland Browns franchise. The Steelers had even gotten a best-of-luck message from Nixon: Mike Nixon, a former Steeler head coach. But a telephone call from the football fanatic president wouldn't have been too surprising.

No high-profile public endorsements of Al Davis's band of brutes were forthcoming. Nor was Moore's rumble the only pre-game omen that did not favor the West Coast challengers. The Raiders' plane had developed engine trouble at the start of their trip, and a replacement couldn't come in because of the fog. They'd had to bus to San Francisco for another flight east. Romantic fog might be a good omen for a team from the city across the bay, with its gentle, artistic aura of all things effete, but not for the guys from working-class Oakland, hometown of the Black Panthers as well as the black and silver. The week of this game, *The Black Panther*, the weekly "intercommunal news service" of the party, splashed "Season's Greetings from the Black Panther Party" on its cover—with a sprig of black holly adorning it: the hollowest of salutations, laden with dark irony. This was not the kind of town where Tony Bennett would leave his heart.

For the Raiders and their fans, this game would be the first step back to the long-awaited Super Bowl they'd been denied in January of 1968, a 33–14 drubbing in the second inter-league championship game against the Packers. This playoff game figured to launch them toward finally getting the rings they'd watched the hated Jets and Chiefs collect in the interim years. They'd be playing a team that hadn't made it to the playoffs in modern times, a team that had finished 6–8 the year before.

Steeler quarterback Terry Bradshaw had thrown as many interceptions as he'd thrown touchdowns in 1972. For 10–3–1 Oakland, 1972 offered a chance to return to supremacy after the aberrant 1971 season when, with much of the personnel from the team's previous incarnation slowed by age and injury, the team had missed out on the playoffs, and the Chiefs had won the division. (In 1970, the Raiders' eight victories had been good enough to take the division but, behind veteran quarterback George Blanda, they'd lost the championship game in Baltimore, to the Colt team that would win the Super Bowl.) In 1972, riding a powerful and unrelenting ground game led by the tanklike fullback Marv Hubbard (the man who once supposedly bet he could dive

into a shot glass, and actually tried), the Raiders had pretty much put it away in week 11, when, with the division title on the line, they'd honed their game by routing the Chiefs, 26–3.

And Pittsburgh? No surprise that the town was in a bottle-throwing lather, with tickets being scalped for an unheard-of \$50: playoff-wise, the Steelers were 0 for 39 years. In the first three years under Chuck Noll's stewardship, the Steelers hadn't had a winning season. But in 1972, in Bradshaw's second year, they'd won 9 of their last 10 and finished at 11–3. Individually, the “under the hill” gang averaged fewer than four years in the league, but with a defense anchored by Joe Greene, Dwight White, L. C. Greenwood, and Jack Ham, they'd given up a remarkable total of 15 points in their last four games and hadn't allowed a touchdown in their last three.

Now, the Raiders had returned to Pittsburgh to avenge the season-opening loss at Three Rivers, a 34–28 Steeler victory in which the Raiders had characteristically rallied from a 20-point deficit, but this time only to come up six points shy. The Raider-Steeler rivalry would, of course, soon become the game's most intense. “In a way, the teams mirrored each other,” says Stabler. “You look at their tough blue-collar steel city, and our blue-collar city, both wearing black.” But they were distinctly different shades of black. One signified industrial supremacy. The other stood for the dark side.

The game had featured a tense, wonderful battle of defenses, heavyweights gutting it out. Two-thirds of the way through the fourth quarter, the score was 6–0, Pittsburgh, on two Roy Gerela field goals. The Raider defense held Harris and the Steeler runners to 108 yards; Bradshaw completed all of 11 passes. “The best defense I faced all year,” he would say afterward.

But veteran Raider quarterback Daryle Lamonica, ailing with the flu, had been ineffective, too: he'd completed just 6 of 18 passes for 45 yards. The “Mad Bomber” had been with the team since 1967, when he'd taken the Raiders to that second championship game between the NFL and AFL, not yet called the Super Bowl. But there was already some feeling on the team that Stabler should have been starting. Lamonica was not universally beloved, and the cool, high-living, high-profiled Snake was. But Lamonica had considerable physical gifts: he could throw the long pass as well as anyone, and certainly better than Stabler.

But now six minutes remained, and Madden figured that on this day the Bomber's time was up. In 1972, four years out of Alabama, the second-string Stabler had appeared in every game of the regular season, mostly in a backup-savior role, and he'd played effectively. He had completed 60 percent of his 74 passes during the year, including 10 of 11 in the second half of the season's final victory over Chicago, relieving Lamonica in a tied game to defeat the Bears.

So now Madden sent in the lefty, and a team that had lain dormant all day immediately responded to the laconic, eerily even-tempered Alabaman whose life philosophy, according to Stabler's own book, had been passed on from a hard-drinking dad: “Go for the good times when you can.”

True Badass fans now had a glimmer of hope, if a slim one—and a glimpse of the future. Stabler engineered a drive that began at his own 20 and brought the Raiders to

the Steeler 30. He called a pass, but in the face of an all-out blitz, he and his achy left knee took off and, with the defenders glued to their receivers, saw nothing but open field beckoning. He rambled an unlikely 30 yards down the left side for the go-ahead touchdown—holding the ball out like the proverbial loaf of bread, hair flopping from the back of his helmet, tucking the ball in and diving/falling across the goal line.

It was 7–6, Raiders, with 1:13 left. Three Rivers and the Steeler nation had fallen silent in disbelief. Score one for the Antichrist. Without the “Deception,” this game would have gone down in history as Ken Stabler’s Last-Minute Miracle Touchdown Drive—especially if the Raiders had then gone on to beat the Dolphins, which the Steelers didn’t. (Then again, that year, no one beat the mighty white-clad Dolphins.)

“I guess it was kind of my coming out,” Stabler told me, recalling the play as if it had happened yesterday but refusing to buy into the notion that he’d pulled off anything spectacular: “But that was kind of the personality of the whole team. It was, ‘Find a way to win. No matter who does it, just get it done.’”

Now, with 22 seconds left on the clock, and stalled at their own 40, the Steelers lined up on fourth and ten. Or, as one commentator put it, “fourth and hopeless.”

The play was called 66 Circle Option, with Bradshaw looking deep for the seldom-used receiver Barry Pearson, who hadn’t caught a single pass all season. The ball was snapped, and Bradshaw faded back. But finding Pearson covered, Bradshaw was flushed out of the pocket, barely eluding the grasp of Raider lineman Horace Jones.

“Bradshaw avoided a lot of guys on that play,” remembers Raider receiver Fred Biletnikoff. “We had the opportunity to sack him, and when he ran out, we still had the opportunity. He made a hell of a play just to get rid of the ball.”

Bradshaw scrambled out to his right and, greeted by two lunging linemen in his face, threw desperately across the field, 37 yards diagonally downfield to his left, to “Frenchy” Fuqua, the running back who, to that point, had had a forgettable game, averaging just over one yard per run on 25 rushing attempts. On this play, Fuqua had run 25 yards down the left side, out of the backfield, and hooked in for the ball at the left hashmark. Safety Jack Tatum, that Assassin, patrolling the deep middle of the field, abandoned the tight end he was covering and took aim on Fuqua from behind.

Now, like the statue in the airport, time froze while the gods debated up on Olympus. “What are our options?” said Zeus. “Well,” said Athena, “Tatum, the Badass of Badasses, is about to hit the Fuqua guy like a truck aiming for a squirrel. We can let him knock the ball out and give the game to Al Davis’s guys. I kind of like that blond lefty quarterback, anyway. He has heroic qualities.”

“No,” says the Big Man. “Let’s make that Italian guy the hero. Give the people what they want: good over evil. This one play will spur a Steeler dynasty. I love dynasties. Mine is eternal.”

Well, it’s as logical as what actually happened, isn’t it? Harris wasn’t even supposed to be near the ball. He was supposed to be blocking. He wasn’t supposed to be anywhere near a miracle.