

Foreword

Having played the quarterback position in the National Football League for 11 years, I can attest to the fact that Fran Tarkenton was one of the greatest players of all time. His record performance in 18 NFL seasons with the Minnesota Vikings and the New York Giants cemented his induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Nine Pro Bowls, a Pro Bowl Most Valuable Player Award, the College Football Hall of Fame, and numerous other accolades solidify Fran's accomplishments among the best who ever played the game.

Fran was as difficult to defend as any quarterback we ever played against. He drove defensive coaches absolutely crazy as they tried to put together game plans to control and contain him. He could literally do anything—throw deep down the field; make first downs with short, high-percentage passes; or destroy you with scrambling bursts that were virtually unstoppable.

We played many great games against each other and always enjoyed being together, whether in competitive action on the field, as teammates at the Pro Bowl, or off the field.

This book is a fascinating story that takes the reader through Fran's entire life, from the alleys of Washington, D.C. to the streets of Athens, Georgia. We follow his great career through high school, at the University of Georgia, and professionally with the Minnesota



Vikings and the New York Giants. The book is filled with anecdotes of past games and great players, including an entire chapter on our famous 1975 playoff game, in which the Hail Mary pass was born.

Fran's fame on the field is consistent with his success as an entrepreneur, as you will discover. Fran is my hero and it has been an honor for me to play against him for so many years and to be great friends. He is one of a kind.

His book will entertain you, make you laugh, and for the first time ever allow you into the world of Fran Tarkenton that few people know. He shares countless personal stories and anecdotes. It is a never-before-told personal journey through his life. I'm glad that I had the opportunity to join him.

—Roger Staubach



Introduction

There was never a dull moment! A November day was usually bone-chilling, with a swirling wind that made playing conditions all but intolerable. The snow was piled up at both ends of the field. The playing surface was harder than concrete. The green-painted dirt on the field bore only a slight resemblance to grass. Fans froze in their seats; being on the summit of Mount Everest in blizzard conditions might have been a welcome alternative.

It was, simply put, cold and miserable. But that's the way it was in late fall at the old Metropolitan Stadium in Bloomington, Minnesota, and even at Yankee Stadium in New York. It was where the Men of Purple roamed and Football Giants played on Sunday afternoons. It was professional football, the very best in entertainment. It was the National Football League and for 18 glorious seasons, he was the leader.

Fans in Minnesota and New York acclimated to the severe conditions as the seasons passed because once the game got under way, it rarely mattered. What transpired on those special Sundays heated up their chilled bodies and warmed their hearts. And for almost two decades they watched and cheered No. 10—and there was never a dull moment, never a boring minute, never a monotonous second.



He made fans rise from their seats and stand in absolute astonishment as he streaked across the tundra from one side to the other. He gave chase, and when it appeared that he was caught, he would break free, and the chase would start all over again.

Mick Tingelhoff, center for the Minnesota Vikings for 17 years, remembers, “I never worried if I missed my block, I would just wait a while and my man would be back.”

He ran and they followed. He was smaller than the rest and would likely crumble if his pursuers caught him at once. But they rarely ever did. Instead, he ran, he threw, and he won.

He was a Viking and a Giant. He was often victorious on the field, but he was always victorious in the hearts of the fans. He was their leader, their conquering hero, and he never surrendered.

His name is Francis Asbury Tarkenton, and he remains one of the most beloved quarterbacks in the history of football. For 13 years with the Vikings and five with the Giants, his fans watched him in amazement. Some called him “the Scrambler” because he moved so skillfully and gracefully around the field. He brought long-lasting excitement to the fans in the stands, the television viewers, and his teammates.

Whether he was playing high school or college football in Georgia or leading the Vikings or the New York Giants, he was a leader and an inspiration. He wanted to win and gave everything of himself to make it happen. He was something special to everyone who watched him.

Every Day Is Game Day is the first autobiography by one of the greatest gladiators of the gridiron, Fran Tarkenton, with never-before-told stories of his career and life. From his football beginnings in Washington, D.C.; Athens High School; and the University of Georgia; Tarkenton takes you inside the huddle of the big games and



on the field for his famous plays, including the 1975 playoff game with the Dallas Cowboys and the one play that still haunts him.

He reflects on his love for Bud Grant, Jerry Burns, Allie Sherman, and Alex Webster; Georgia Bulldogs football; his family and friends in life; the players he admires and respects; and life after the National Football League, from *Monday Night Football* to *That's Incredible!*

The practices, uniforms, and the swelling stadium crowds are decades removed from his routine, but for Fran Tarkenton the game goes on. And he plays it every day with the same grit, dedication, and love in his business and personal life.

This is not a book about football or a book about a football player. This is a book about a remarkable human being—his life, memories, accomplishments, beliefs, and disappointments. Here, in these pages, is the story of the man behind the No. 10, for whom *every day is game day*.

—Jim Bruton



CHAPTER I



Hail Mary

And the reality is, if we had won the game it likely would have lived in my memories as just another victory among many others. Instead, it was the worst day of my life.

People ask me if, after all these years, I still think about it. The answer is always instantaneous and emphatic: *All the time!*

It was December 28, 1975, and the Dallas Cowboys had come to the “Old Met.” The Vikings were heavily favored to win the game, coming off a spectacular NFC-best 12–2 season. But it was not to be. Our 17–14 loss knocked us out of the playoffs, ended one of our greatest seasons, and I believe changed the history of the National Football League forever.

It’s reasonable to suppose that I am haunted by the infamous Roger Staubach “Hail Mary” completion to Drew Pearson in the game’s final seconds. Or by the previous play, when Pearson caught the fourth-and-17 pass, which was ruled a first down even though the receiver should have been called out of bounds.

But the moment of the game that torments me is something else entirely.

Staubach, a friend and a wonderful person, had a marvelous collegiate and National Football League career. He is a Heisman Trophy winner from the Naval Academy and a Pro Football Hall of Famer who led the Cowboys to four Super Bowl appearances and two championships. He was a great NFL quarterback, and certainly in my top three as the best that ever played the game.

Drew Pearson was one of the premier receivers in the game. Named to the NFL’s All-Decade Team for the 1970s, he scored 50 touchdowns in his career with Dallas.

If Staubach had finished his career with one less touchdown pass and Pearson had caught one less in his outstanding seasons with the Cowboys, it wouldn’t have diminished their legacies, but it would have lifted a powerful regret for me. The play that still bothers me came when the Vikings last had the ball. It was late in the game and we were midfield, with a third down and 3 or 4. With a first down, the game is over, Dallas does not get the ball back, Staubach doesn’t



throw the Hail Mary pass, and the Vikings advance to the NFC Championship game, and beyond.

In the fall of 2008, I was watching television at my lake home and happened to turn on the NFL Network. I rarely watch old NFL game replays, but this one immediately caught my attention. It was that fateful playoff game. And for the first time since the events of the game unfolded more than 30 years ago, I watched the entire game.

I had never watched a replay of it, never looked at the game films, and had no intention of ever doing so. I don't know why, but that day I watched the whole game. The emotions of the day were rekindled immediately. I knew the outcome wouldn't be different, yet I watched. The results remained the same, as did the hurt of losing.

The 1975 Minnesota Vikings were our best team. We had great players and superior coaches. We could run the ball, throw the ball, and score points. Our defense was exceptional. We had everything going for us that year and particularly in that Dallas game.

We had finished the regular season 12–2, losing only to the Washington Redskins 31–30 in Week 11, and to the Detroit Lions 17–10 on the second-to-last week of the season. We had won the first 10 games that year including routing the Browns 42–10, winning 28–3 against the Chicago Bears, and defeating our hated rivals, the Green Bay Packers, 28–17 and 24–3. We wrapped up the regular season by beating the Buffalo Bills 35–13 and were extremely confident going into the playoffs against the Cowboys.

I knew we were going to win, and I remained convinced of it until the very end. I still have a hard time accepting the outcome. And the reality is, if we had won the game, it likely would have lived in my memories as just another victory among many others. Instead, it was the worst day of my life.

To add insult to injury, a new term, *Hail Mary*, entered football's lexicon. And in every game that followed, from Pop Warner to the



NFL, a desperation pass thrown toward the end zone at the end of the half or final seconds of the game is a Hail Mary, and a lingering reminder of that fateful December afternoon in 1975.

As the game ventured into the final quarter, we clearly had things under control. We had a 14–10 lead and showed no signs of relinquishing it. Our defense had been terrific all day. Late in the game, we had a third-down-and-short. If we can convert on this play, we run down the clock and win.

“I remember every part of the moment. He wanted the responsibility on his shoulders.”

—JERRY BURNS, FORMER OFFENSIVE
COORDINATOR AND HEAD COACH,
MINNESOTA VIKINGS

Dallas called a timeout; I think their last for the game. I went over to the sideline to talk to Jerry Burns, our offensive coordinator. We needed to come up with a play to keep the ball and control the ending of the game.

Before another word about the moment in one of the most important football games of my life, I would be greatly remiss if I didn't say something about Jerry Burns. *I love* Jerry Burns! He is the funniest man I have ever known and a brilliant, exceptional football coach and offensive coordinator. We worked closely together and made a great team. We always listened to each other and constantly brainstormed our knowledge and passion for the game. He had a keen understanding of the game and I loved planning game strategies with him.

If asked, I can just imagine Jerry saying, “Fran and I got along great. I always gave him everything he wanted.” Now, I would differ with Burnsie on that, and to say we worked well together would not do the relationship justice. It was more than that; I truly loved Jerry Burns!

When I came to the sideline during the game to discuss that third-down play, Burnsie felt that a running play was our best chance

