

THE WAY I SEE IT – GRIDIRON FAIL



By P. Araya

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The Author (Right) and Doug Baffone (Center) in the Summer of 1972 (Photo courtesy Araya Family).

In 2016 Colin Kaepernick took “workplace protest” to a new low. A few weeks later, NFL Commissioner Goodell acquiesced to a handful of pampered players rather than stand up to their repugnant behavior. I haven’t watched an NFL game since. It wasn’t always like that. As a kid growing up in Naperville, the Monsters of the Midway (or Bad News Bears, depending on the year) ruled my every Sunday. I had posters of Gale Sayers on my wall, and when I was 13 years old, I attended the Doug Baffone Football Camp at North Central College.

However, I still enjoy a good game on the gridiron. This past December, two great match ups with exciting plays up to the final seconds kept me at the edge of my barstool. Even though my beloved Navy Midshipmen lost to the Army’s Black Knights, it was a nail biter to the bitter end. The following week, my alma mater, North Central College and its Fighting Cards, lost an equally tough match against the scrappy Cortland Red Dragons at the 50th Amos Alonzo Stagg Bowl in Salem, Virginia. In one week I aged a couple of years and got some more grey hair! But it was worth it.

But both games showcased the best aspects of sports in general, and football specifically. With very few exceptions, the players from the service academies have little chance of getting drafted by an NFL team after serving a minimum of their two year military contract. And while Division III football players may not be exactly unicorns in the NFL, they are less competitive in the NFL Draft, than their Division I and II counterparts. That’s what makes their games so exciting and fun to watch. These young men are playing for the glory of the game; for the challenge of the competition; for their schools. They do not have their eyes on lucrative contracts and endorsements. In both the service academies and Division III schools, academics come first.

So while the sleek hype and marketing for Super Bowl LVIII begins in earnest in a few weeks, keep in mind football wasn’t always as silly as it is now. There was a time when a player who danced in the end zone like an 8th Grade Cheerleader would have been carted off the field the next play after a bone crushing collision with the likes of a Dick Butkus or Ray Nitschke. Same goes for the bling wearing Wide Receiver, who catches a 30-yard pass and celebrates by jumping and gesticulating as if he just discovered the cure for cancer, rather than simply catching a ball, for which he is handsomely paid to do.

I know there are those that will argue that the NFL is more popular now than ever, eclipsing the combined revenue of the NHL, NBA and MLB. I’d posit that a lot of that is due to the easy access to any game, anywhere from home to restaurants to bars. Also, the proliferation of legal gambling and the infinite permutations of Fantasy Football Leagues have not hurt the viewership. And that’s fine. To each his own.

As for me, I've come to appreciate my three or so extra hours on Sunday where I can work on a house project, fiddle with my '66 GTO or watch re-runs from the '60's and '70's of NFL Films. After all, what better way to truly appreciate Gale Sayers running untouched for a TD or John Riggins barreling through a defender than in slow motion with John Facenda narrating?