



Sports

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1C ...

Vikings postpone vacations

Victory clinches a spot in playoffs

By Robert Rosenover
Staff Writer

The Vikings are NFC Central champions once again, winning the title they first did in the old days, with 11 dominant defenses and an offense that isn't just enough.

The NFL's top-ranked defense forced five turnovers and had six sacks as the Vikings defeated the Cincinnati Bengals 28-21 on Monday night to win their first division title since 1961.

"It's the biggest game I ever won in 28 years," coach Jerry Burns said. "There was a lot of pressure on the line. If you didn't win this game, all hell would break loose. Don't count your chickens until you've got them in the coop."

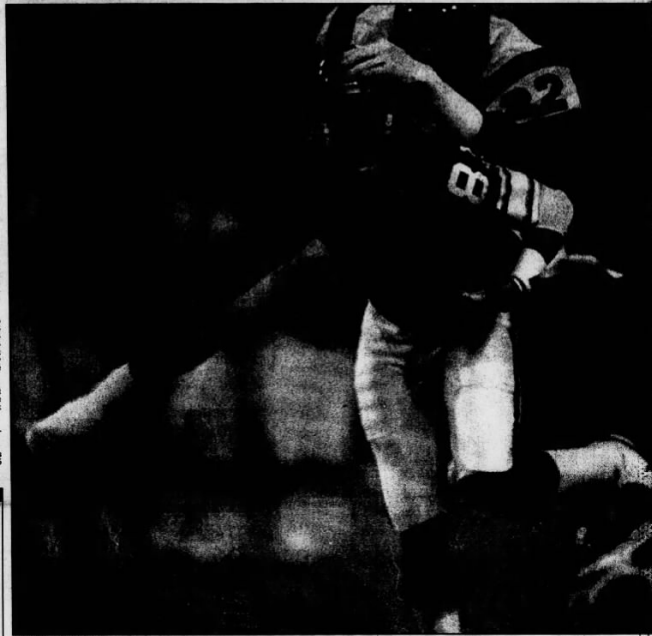
The Vikings had a 13-0 lead out to 25-21 before coming up with a determined fourth-quarter drive that ended with Wade Wilson's 10-yard touch-down pass to backup tight end Brent Kneibitz on a fourth-and-goal play that, for the most part, clinched the division title with 4:17 to play.

"If we don't make the drive, we don't win the championship. We make the drive, we win it all," owner Kirk Lowdermilk said.

Said Wilson: "That might be the biggest play of my career."

The Vikings and Green Bay Packers finished the regular season with 10-6 records.

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Staff Photo by Jeff Wheeler
Vikings wide receiver Anthony Carter (81) appeared to be giving a ride to Cincinnati cornerback Eric Thomas after making one of his five receptions in the first half.

NFL playoff schedule
Wild-card round, Dec. 31
at 1 p.m. Home at Philadelphia, 11:30
Divisional games, Jan. 6, Jan. 7
at 8 p.m. at San Francisco or N.Y. Giants, TBA.
at Philadelphia at San Francisco or NY Giants with wild-card game, TBA.
at A. Home in N.Y. Giants at home with wild-card game, TBA.
Wild-card round, Dec. 31
at Pittsburgh at Houston, 5 p.m.
Divisional games, Jan. 6, Jan. 7
at Buffalo at Cleveland, TBA.
at Wild-card winner at Denver, TBA.

Gutsy call gets Burns off the hook

On Monday, about 11:15 p.m., Jerry Burns could have been excused if he was on the phone to the nearest Pope John, seeking asylum.

In recent weeks, there had been a shuffling of the hat over the Vikings' faltering fortunes. Burns, the offensive coordinator, had been fired from his job security had gone from a source of concern on the local talk shows to a subject of serious speculation in the public prints.

"Heck yes, I was some coming into this game," Burns said. "There was a lot of pressure on the line to do something this season, to win the Central Division and make a run."

Back in September, general manager Mike Lynn had said he would take the entire blame if the Vikings didn't reach expectations. Shortly before last night's kickoff, Lynn seemed to be wavering on that position.

Management Mike walked into the press box and perched the heavens hanging from the Metroland's second deck. Lynn sprouted a sign draped over a railing to the north entrance. The one ordered for the Christmas theme finally: "Hoop will last night, Ebenezer Lynn!"

This was the type of controversy the ABC cameras would have been watching on page 1C



Patrick Rousseau

In the playoffs, I need all that stuff you put in the paper. I need it all and all that. If we don't make the playoffs.

This time, Vikings serve up a classic

The NFL, in its infinite generosity, has done some very dumb things. It instituted instant replay. More recently, it approved that wonderful noise pollution rule. And last summer, it spent considerable time and energy trying to decide whether something as harmless as the lobby shuffle should be legal.

Dumb, dumber, dumbest. But sometimes last spring, it did something very smart. It mandated the Vikings and Bengals for the very first game of the regular season. It was a classic.

When it was over, the Vikings had a 29-21 victory and their first



Dan Barreiro

Central Division title since 1961. It was a game chock-full of highlights and marred. You had Anthony Carter dipping and dancing for extra yardage after catching a pass

over the middle. You had Hassan Jones doing his Michael Jordan imitation to bring down a Hall Mary pass at the end of the first half setting up three vital Minnesota points. You had Ronnie Stone going up high again, getting undercut by cornerback Eric Thomas, and landing on his neck, only to hold onto the ball for a flight down deep in Cincinnati territory.

You had James Brooks, showing more moves on one play than Herschel Walker has in his entire career, dipping and dancing here and there for extra yardage. You had Boomer Esiason throwing a bullet to Eddie Brown for a 34-yard

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Twins remember Martin, mentor and menace

By Jay Weber
Staff Writer

Rod Carew was 22. He felt alone. He was having second base as a rookie in the Twins spring-training camp. It was 1967. Billy Martin helped him. He became his friend.

"Billy saw something in me that he liked and he worked all spring with me," Carew said Monday night. "He took me when everyone else was saying I couldn't play second base. He knew I was a child. He taught me how to think about, pitch and ... about not making the same mistake twice. It was a crash course. Billy Martin taught me the game."

Baseball was the game, and it was at the core of Martin's life, which ended on an icy, upstate New York road Monday. The former manager of the Twins, Tigers, Rangers, A's and Yankees was killed in his pickup truck, which skidded and tumbled 500 feet. The truck's driver, William Reedy, was seriously injured and charged with driving while intoxicated.

Martin, 61, was best known for his off-the-field antics, drink-drinking, ruckus and soap-operatic fringes.

"It's one of those Italian boys that had his bones," former Twins owner Calvin Griffith said.

But Martin's independent skill, his expertise was not barroom fighting,

public displays of anger or pugilism: It was his knowledge of and devotion to the game.

He proved that in the Twin Cities. Martin played on the Twins' first team in 1961. Later, Griffith developed Martin as a minor league manager, third base coach and then as his manager for the 1993 season.

"He knew how to take chances," Griffith said last night. "He knew how to gamble on a play."

Martin knew, too, how to defend his club and fight for them. That often put him in odds with management — of the Twins and of the four other clubs he directed.

"He was a great manager, great to play for," said Carew, who was there in '67 and '68, when Martin was the Twins' third base coach, and there in '86, when Martin led the Twins to the American League West title. That was Martin's only season as the Twins' helm.

It was a season of daring and running. Carew stole home seven times, a reflection of Martin's vision of how the game should be played. Harmon Killebrew, known for cloud and not sport, stole eight bases in 11 other Twin seasons. Killebrew stole seven bases.

Griffith was also reportedly angry with Martin using his record book on a flight during the playoffs season.

"He had ballplayers playing over their heads," Griffith said then his Melbourne, Fla., home.

Carew won the first of his seven batting titles. Killebrew hit 49 homers and knocked in 140 runs. Cool Tovar stole 43 bases. The pitching came around, too.

Past loved his energy and commitment to victory. Martin established himself as the rare manager: someone who can still tickle by leader ship style.

But something else happened. Martin had a one-punch barroom fight with pitcher Dave Burrows. At the time, Griffith was also reportedly angry with Martin using his record book on a flight during the playoffs season.

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