

DAN FOUTS, 1993 ENSHRINEE

By Don Smith

As a rookie in 1973, Dan Fouts started the season with the San Diego Chargers as a backup quarterback to all-time great Johnny Unitas, who had just joined the team after a spectacular 17-year career with the Baltimore Colts.

In the third game of the season, Unitas became history's first 40,000-yard passer. Two weeks later, he relinquished the starting job to Fouts, who became one of the NFL's premier quarterbacks during a 15-year career that lasted until 1987.

Late in the 1986 season, when Fouts surpassed the passing yardage record that he had seen Unitas establish 14 years earlier, he relished his new recognition with certain reservations: "He was my idol. I don't want to diminish anything he's ever done."

As it turned out, the records of either quarterback never need to be diminished. While Unitas arguably was the best quarterback of the 1950s and 1960s, Fouts earned widespread acclaim as the finest passer of the 1970s and 1980s. This January, Fouts wound up permanently as Unitas' peer when he was accorded the ultimate pro football accolade, election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. On July 31, Fouts and four other members of the class of 1993 -- Larry Little, Chuck Noll, Walter Payton and Bill Walsh -- will be formally inducted in to the Hall.

The first NFL pass the 6-3, 210-pound Fouts threw in week 4 of the 1973 season was incomplete. His last pass almost 15 years later was intercepted. In between, he completed 3,297 passes for 43,040 yards and 254 touchdowns. Besides Fouts and Unitas, only Fran Tarkenton passed for 40,000 or more yards. Confident and determined, Fouts was the heart-and-soul of the Chargers attack during a period from 1978 until 1985 when they dominated the NFL in both total offense and passing offense.

Fouts passed for more than 4,000 yards three straight seasons in 1979, 1980 and 1981. He had 51 games over 300 yards passing and six seasons over 3,000 yards. His lifetime passing point rating was 80.2. He rarely ran with the ball but he did score 13 touchdowns rushing.

The Chargers field general was named NFL Player of the Year in 1982 and the AFC Player of the Year in both 1979 and 1982. He was a three-time all-pro choice and played in six Pro Bowls.

Fouts was born in San Francisco, California, on June 10, 1951. His dad, Bob Fouts, was a veteran sportscaster who broadcast San Francisco 49ers games for many years so Dan had a chance to observe pro football at an early age. For a few years, he served as the team's ball boy and as a statistician for his father. He had aspirations of being an end when he joined the Pop Warner League as a youngster. However, his father was quite adamant that he should learn to play quarterback. Bob Fouts said it was the only football advice he ever gave his son.

At St. Ignatius high school, Fouts quarterbacked a San Francisco city championship team and, after graduation, he selected Oregon as his college. George Seifert, then an Oregon assistant but later the 49ers head coach told young Fouts: "We've got a pro-type offense and you can do the job for us."

At Oregon, Fouts passed for then-school records of 5,995 yards and 37 touchdowns in three years. He also demonstrated the mental discipline and physical toughness that would become hallmarks of his play in the NFL. "He's the toughest individual and the best college passer I've seen," Oregon coach Dick Enright said.

San Diego's coach, Harland Svare, made a careful study of several top quarterbacks eligible for the 1973 draft. He gave serious consideration to highly-touted Bert Jones of LSU, Virginia Tech's Don Strock and Mike Wells of Illinois before settling on Fouts.

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In January 1973, the Chargers acquired the 39-year-old Unitas from Baltimore. Svare envisioned his role would be to start early in the season but eventually relinquish the job to serve as a tutor for whomever the team settled on as its quarterback of the future.

When Fouts showed up at the Chargers' UC-Irvine training site in July, he was unsigned and injured. He had suffered a dislocated shoulder while playing in an all-star game in Lubbock, Texas. That very day, however, Fouts' agent, then little-known Howard Slusher, agreed to terms on behalf of his boyish client. "By mid-season, he'll be the starting quarterback," Slusher promised.

Slusher proved to be right. Unitas' knees, battered in 17 previous NFL campaigns, were almost shot. His fourth start on October 7, 1973, proved to be his last. The Pittsburgh Steelers were ahead 38-0 when Svare sent Fouts into the game. He responded with a 174-yard, one-touchdown passing performance and also led the team to other scores in a 38-21 loss. Except for when he was injured or involved in contract disputes, Fouts never was out of the starting lineup again.

In Fouts' first three seasons, the Chargers had a combined 9-32-1 record. Fouts endured a team that lost 11 straight games at one point in his third season. He survived the sort of punishment that comes only to a young quarterback on a bad team.

Although Fouts showed improvement every year, it wasn't until Bill Walsh became the Charger's offensive coordinator in 1976 that his career took a major turn for the better. Both the Chargers and Fouts improved that year. The team finished at 6-8, the best record since 1971 and Fouts recorded new personal highs by passing for 2,535 yards and 14 touchdowns.

Enthusiasm for the Chargers ran high in mid-summer 1977 until the team acquired James Harris, a high-salaried older quarterback from the Los Angeles Rams. Fouts balked when he heard the news and announced that he would retire unless the Chargers traded him.

Fouts joined 18 of Slusher's player-clients in filing a lawsuit to overturn the collective bargaining agreement Fouts felt tied him permanently to the Chargers. In a Minnesota court, he testified he would have no chance of reaching the Super Bowl if he remained with the Chargers.

The suit failed but some of the scars of the trial remained. His Super Bowl remarks angered some of his teammates and Fouts himself never forgave the union for what he considered to be a basic difference in philosophy. In 1981, he refused to pay \$1,122 in union dues and he was threatened with suspension if he didn't pay. Finally, some San Diego fans settled the issue by sending a dues check to the NFL Players Association. "It wasn't the money but basically because I believe in the free enterprise system and the union leadership doesn't," Fouts explained.

Fouts, who had been on a 125-day, self-imposed exile in the Oregon back country during the law suit, returned for the 11th game of the 1977 season. In his first game back, Fouts proved that he could play well without practicing by completing 19 of 24 passes for 279 yards and two touchdowns in a victory over Seattle. He continued to excel the rest of the season and again in 1978, when the Chargers at 9-7 enjoyed their first winning season since the old-AFL days in 1969.

The 1978 season marked Don Coryell's first season as the Chargers' head coach and he quickly fashioned an aerial-accented attack built around Fouts that led the league in passing seven of the next eight years.

"Bill Walsh really got me into the position to be an effective quarterback," Fouts said. "But when Coryell came, it was bombs away. It was just a dream come true for any quarterback to play for him."

By 1979, the Chargers were ready to seriously challenge for the AFC championship and a Super Bowl appearance so important to Fouts. Coryell had assembled an outstanding offensive line spearheaded by such veterans as 274-pound Ed White and 257-pound Doug Wilkerson at the guards and up-and-coming Don Macek at center. Fouts could throw to a superstar cast of receivers -- Charlie Joiner, Kellen Winslow, Wes Chandler and John Jefferson.

The Chargers won 12 of 16 games in 1979 and Fouts passed for 4,082 yards and 24 touchdowns, his best totals yet. On December 17, he threw a 32-yard touchdown pass to Joiner to defeat Denver 17-7 and clinch San Diego's first divisional title since 1965.

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Pittsburgh, on the way to its fourth Super Bowl title, seemed to be the Chargers' major obstacle but San Diego fell instead to the Houston Oilers 17-14 in a first-round playoff game. The down side was that Fouts threw five interceptions.

But the Chargers were back in the thick of things again in 1980. They won their second straight AFC West title with an 11-5 record and then advanced to the AFC championship game against the Oakland Raiders with a 20-14 first-round playoff win over Buffalo. Fouts' 50-yard pass to Ron Smith with 2:08 left clinched the victory. In the AFC title contest, Fouts completed 22 of 45 passes for 336 yards and two touchdowns but Oakland won 34-27.

Fouts and the Chargers won their third straight AFC West title in 1981. The San Diego passer had his best season statistically with a career-high 4,802 yards and 33 touchdowns passing. In a 55-21 defeat of the Raiders in November, Fouts threw a team record six touchdown passes.

In a memorable first-round playoff game, Fouts completed 33 of 53 passes for 433 yards in a 41-38 overtime victory over Miami. But misfortune befell the Chargers once again in the AFC championship game in Cincinnati. In a game played in 59-degree-below zero wind chill conditions, the Chargers lost to the Bengals 27-7. Fouts' 33-yard pass to Winslow in the second quarter accounted for his team's only touchdown.

The Chargers during their peak years were loaded with a plethora of quality players and imaginative coaches and the famous "Air Coryell" offense that terrorized opposition defenses. But none of it, everyone knew, would work without Fouts. Unlike some quarterbacks who have a great year once or twice in a career, Fouts was the most consistent quarterback of his time with quality passing production game-after-game, year after-year.

"You are not going to stop Fouts," said Ray Perkins, then coach of the New York Giants. "He has such great vision and timing. He doesn't have the great arm but he is so smart he could coach their whole offense."

Technically, Fouts was a perfect passer. His quick drops, rapid reads and passes thrown "on rhythm" without an instant's hesitation made him the ideal instrument for the Coryell offense.

Fouts also was a fine field leader from the very start of his career. It was something he insisted upon. Not all of his teammates liked him, but none viewed him with anything but respect.

For instance, he set his own rules for the Chargers receivers: (1) never fool the quarterback and (2) always be where you are supposed to be when you are supposed to be there.

The Chargers did reach the playoff in the strike-shortened 1982 season but were never serious contenders again during Fouts' tenure. Slowly, the Chargers' quality player pool was diminished by retirement. Coryell himself was replaced halfway through the 1986 season.

Fouts was enduring injury after injury -- three shoulder injuries, two concussions and various damage to the knee, groin and calf. He missed 18 games in his last five seasons. In those games, the Chargers were 4-14.

A major dispute with Charger Owner Alex Spanos centering around money and whether or not Fouts successfully passed a physical erupted before the 1987 season. After the season, Fouts retired.

"My decision to retire is a mutual decision between me and the Chargers. We essentially agreed that 15 years is long enough and this body has had all the hits it can take," Fouts said.

"I've had everything I wanted except a Super Bowl ring," he concluded.

Now, Fouts will have his special piece of jewelry ... only this will be something even rarer ... a Pro Football Hall of Fame ring.

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FOUT'S PASSING RECORD

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>TEAM</u>	<u>LG</u>	<u>GM</u>	<u>ATT</u>	<u>COM</u>	<u>YARD</u>	<u>AvgG</u>	<u>TD</u>	<u>IN</u>
1973	San Diego	N	10	194	87	1126	5.80	6	13
1974	San Diego	N	11	237	115	1732	7.31	8	13
1975	San Diego	N	10	195	106	1396	7.16	2	10
1976	San Diego	N	14	359	208	2535	7.06	14	15
1977	San Diego	N	4	109	69	869	7.97	4	6
1978	San Diego	N	15	381	224	2999	7.87	24	20
1979	San Diego	N	16	530	*332	*4082	7.70	24	24
1980	San Diego	N	16	*589	*348	*4715	8.01	*30	24
1981	San Diego	N	16	*609	*360	*4802	7.89	*33	17
1982	San Diego	N	9	330	204	*2883	*8.74	*17	11
1983	San Diego	N	10	340	215	2975	8.75	20	15
1984	San Diego	N	13	507	317	3740	7.38	19	17
1985	San Diego	N	14	430	254	3638	*8.46	27	20
1986	San Diego	N	12	430	252	3031	7.05	16	22
1987	San Diego	N	11	364	206	2517	6.91	10	15
15 years			181	5604	3297	43040	7.68	254	242

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