

The 1960 NFL Conference Races -- THE BEST EVER?

By Tom Farley

Unlike major-league baseball, pro football rarely has pennant races. Primarily, there just aren't enough games in the season, even in the current 16-game schedule, for one team to fall substantially behind the leader and still finish first.

Usually, two teams break from the pack at some point and duke it out for the division or conference title. Four or five teams in contention late in the season -- as in the 1967 American League race or the 1973 National League East race in baseball -- just doesn't happen in football.

Except in 1960 in the NFL.

In the first year of the AFL -- when, with the obvious exception of Hall of Fame players Ron Mix (Chargers), Jim Otto (Raiders), Don Maynard (Titans/Jets) and George Blanda (Oilers), the overwhelming majority of the game's top players were still in the NFL -- first-year NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle oversaw parity unmatched in the rest of his seasons in charge: With two weeks remaining in the regular season, FIVE of the Western Conference's seven teams were within a game of first place.

Add to that an Eastern Conference race not nearly as competitive but almost as dramatic and you have one of the wildest, most competitive seasons in NFL history. It's difficult to watch too much of the "NFL's Greatest Moments" series NFL Films produces for ESPN without seeing some Hall of Fame player talking about some aspect of the 1960 season.

Seven weeks into the 13-week season -- while each team played a 12-game schedule, the first-year Dallas Cowboys brought the league to 13 teams, necessitating a bye week for each team -- the eventual Eastern Conference champion Philadelphia Eagles, led by quarterback Norm Van Brocklin and center and linebacker Chuck Bednarik, were in first place with a 5-1 record. That gave them a half-game lead over the defending Eastern champ New York Giants (4-1-1), and a one-game lead over Cleveland (4-2).

The Giants had second all to themselves after defeating the Browns 17-13 before a then-Browns record crowd of 82,872 on Nov. 6. The Giants' defense limited Jim Brown and Bobby Mitchell to a combined 43 yards in 20 carries. The Cardinals, in their first season in St. Louis, were a game and a half back at 4-3. The Pittsburgh Steelers (2-4-1) and the Washington Redskins (1-3-2), each in the middle of mostly hapless eras, were already also-rans.

The same day the Eagles took over first in the East (Nov. 6), the two-time defending league champion Baltimore Colts regained first place in the Western with a 38-24 victory over the Green Bay Packers at Baltimore, avenging a 35-21 loss to the Packers at Green Bay in Week 3.

In the game at Baltimore, Johnny Unitas threw four touchdown passes to put the Packers (4-2) a half-game behind the Colts (5-2). Three of those scoring passes put Baltimore up 21-0; the last of the four, a 16-yarder to Raymond Berry with 3 minutes, 49 seconds to play, broke a 24-24 tie. Berry caught three TDs that day as Johnny U picked on rookie defensive backs Willie Wood and Dick Pesonen, forced into the lineup when veteran right cornerback Jesse Whittenton left early in the game and returned only briefly. While Bart Starr, still battling Lamar McHan for the starting quarterback job, was 23 of 32 passing for 259 yards, he was intercepted four times, the last of those coming with 2 1/2 minutes to play and the Packers down 31-24.

After that day's games, trailing the Packers and Colts were the Chicago Bears (3-2-1) and San Francisco 49ers (3-4). While the Detroit Lions (2-4) and Los Angeles Rams (2-4) might have seemed out of it, both

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would still have much to say about the final standings. Only the Dallas Cowboys (0-7) were truly out of it at this point.

The 1960 season, however, had only begun to show its capacity for drama.

Nov. 13

The Colts' game this day, as much as any, was a showcase for Unitas' courage and determination. Down 20-17 to the Bears at Wrigley Field with less than a minute to the play, the pass rushers of the "Monsters of the Midway" had hit Unitas on consecutive plays so fiercely that he was bleeding from the lip, nose and left eyebrow. Facing fourth-and-14 from the Bears' 39 with just seconds to play, the Colts were in dire straits.

"The trainer come out and said to me 'You're outta here. You don't know what you're doing,' Unitas said later. "So I read the scoreboard to him."

"I couldn't look him in the eyes," Jim Parker said later. It was his man -- more than likely the Bears' man-mountain, Doug Atkins -- who'd gotten to his quarterback. "He said to me, 'That's all right, baby, we'll get 'em next time.'" That next time, Lenny Moore streaked down the right sideline with J.C. Caroline in tight coverage. While Unitas' pass was in flight, Moore and Caroline bumped each other; Caroline fell, and Moore caught Unitas' pass for the winning touchdown.

"I never forgot that," Parker said later. "Because if I had been in his shoes looking at me, I woulda took my helmet off and beat my damn brains out."

The Colts needed the win to stay ahead of the Packers, who routed the Cowboys 41-7 in Green Bay. In the East, the Eagles (6-1) beat the Redskins 19-13 to maintain their half-game lead over the Giants (5-1-1; keep in mind the NFL did not count ties in a team's winning percentage at this point), who also won, setting up a showdown the following Sunday in Yankee Stadium.

Nov. 20

If you've seen the film from this game, you know why in 1994 NFL Films rated a defensive play in this game the greatest tackle in league history. THIS is the Chuck Bednarik vs. Frank Gifford game.

The Giants trailed 20-17 late in the game but were driving and in Eagles' territory. Gifford ran a down-and-in from the left side, received a pass from George Shaw and etched his place in history. Or rather, Bednarik etched it for him.

In the one film clip usually shown of this hit, from a camera up in the stands, the collision takes up a small part of the frame and doesn't look extraordinary. Until you see Gifford hit the ground and his arms appear to unroll like carpeting being installed.

Seeing as he was unconscious before he hit the ground, it's understandable that Gifford fumbled. The Eagles' Chuck Weber recovered, clinching the victory and dropping the Giants to 5-2-1.

As noted by Dan Daly and Bob O'Donnell in *The Pro Football Chronicle*, the hit almost didn't happen: Two plays earlier, Shaw had narrowly missed connecting with Bob Schnelker in the end zone for a touchdown. Also, Bednarik had been playing only center for most of the second half, but returned to linebacker when the Eagles took the lead with 4:24 left.

As the Eagles (7-1) were solidifying their hold on the East lead -- the Steelers upset the Browns 14-10 when time expired with the Browns (5-3) on the Steelers' 9-yard line -- things were starting to get interesting in the West.

While the first-place Colts were idle, the Packers fell a full game behind, giving the opportunity away in every sense of the word as they lost to the Rams 33-31 at Milwaukee on Danny Villanueva's 9-yard field goal with 22 seconds to play. The Packers lost three fumbles, Starr and McHan each had a pass intercepted, the Rams blocked a punt on the Packers' 17 to set up a touchdown and blocked a Paul

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Hornung field goal attempt to set up another Villanueva field goal. "We were not ready to play today," Packers coach Vince Lombardi said.

The Bears (4-3-1) got their record above .500 with a 28-7 win over the Lions (3-5) as Willard Dewveall -- who in '61 would become the first player to play out his option and jump from the NFL to the AFL, signing with the Oilers -- had touchdown receptions of 40 and 74 yards. The 49ers (4-4) kept their hopes alive with a 26-14 win over the Cowboys at the Cotton Bowl.

Nov. 24

Just four days after the heartbreaking loss to the Rams, the Packers took the field again for their annual Thanksgiving Day game with the Lions at Briggs Stadium (it became Tiger Stadium in '61). The Packers fell behind 16-0, but rallied to make it 16-10. Green Bay then forced the Lions to punt, but Willie Wood fumbled the punt and Detroit recovered on the Green Bay 13. The Lions then scored the final points in their 23-10 win to improve to 4- 5.

"The Lions overpowered our offense," Lombardi said. "It was the worst our pass protection has been all year." The loss left the Packers at 5-4, a game-and-a-half back of the Colts with just three to play.

Later that day, as Packers center and offensive captain Jim Ringo sat in the old Willow Run airport in Detroit, "The Party's Over" played over the public-address system.

"You know something? They're playing our song," he said.

Nov. 27

The Packers' mood brightened considerably after Sunday's games.

During the week, 49ers coach Red Hickey had installed an offense he called the Shotgun, truer to the old double-wing offense (although Hickey used two wingbacks) than which Tom Landry put to use in the '70s. In the T-formation-dominated NFL of 1960, this was more than the 49ers opponent this day, the Colts, could handle.

The 49ers (5-4) thrust themselves back into the race when rookie end Dee Mackey took a 16-yard pass from rookie Bobby Waters, then lateraled to R.C. Owens for a 41-yard touchdown and a 30-22 victory. The loss dropped the Colts to 6-3. The Bears, meanwhile, beat the Cowboys 17-7 to improve to 5-3-1 and sole possession of second place, a half-game ahead of the Packers (5-4), and 49ers.

If there was any doubt the Eagles were going to win the East, they dispelled it at Franklin Field with their second win over the Giants in as many Sundays. Philadelphia improved to 8-1 and dropped New York to 5-3-1 with a 31-23 win. The Eagles took the lead for good at 24-23 when Norm Van Brocklin sent Ted Dean on a fake line plunge, drawing Giants middle linebacker Sam Huff up toward the line of scrimmage, then hit Dean as he streaked past Huff for a 49-yard touchdown pass. The Browns had a chance to move into second but dropped to 5-3-1 like the Giants with a 17- 17 tie against St. Louis.

Dec. 4

The Eagles, as expected, clinched the Eastern title with a 20-6 win over the Cardinals. Now, back to the drama.

Many of Lombardi's Packers point to this game against the Bears at Wrigley Field as the day Bart Starr came of age as a quarterback. As told by Jerry Kramer in his book Farewell to Football, Chicago's Bill George blitzed Starr early in the game and hit him in the mouth, cutting his lip. George looked at Starr and said "I'm going to take care of you, Starr, you ----." Starr responded by swearing right back, "the first, and probably the last, time I ever heard Bart swear, and he came back strong, tough, and unafraid," Kramer wrote. Starr was 17-for-23 with 227 yards, two touchdowns and no interceptions as the Packers whipped the Bears 41-13, avenging a 17-14 loss in the season opener.

Jim Taylor, on his way to the first of five straight 1,000-yard seasons (something Jim Brown did not do), carried 24 times for 140 yards, and Hornung scored 23 points (two touchdowns, two field goals, five extra points) to break Don Hutson's 1942 single-season scoring record. Hornung's 1960 total of 176 is still the

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record; even if it is broken, and no one's come within 14 points since, his per-game average of 14.67 points seems untouchable.

Meanwhile, in Baltimore, the Colts appeared to have pulled out a last-minute comeback victory when Lenny Moore dove and caught a Unitas pass while parallel to the ground -- check the film, it really happened -- and tumbled into the end zone to put the Colts up 15-13 with 14 seconds to play.

The Lions returned the subsequent kickoff to their own 35, and when Detroit's Earl Morrall threw over the middle to Jim Gibbons, Colts coach Weeb Ewbank said he was happy, because he figured Gibbons would get tackled by one of the several Colts in front of him and time would run out.

Gibbons caught the pass and made a quick cut to the outside, which caught Colts defensive backs Bobby Boyd and Andy Nelson leaning the wrong way. Gibbons, by no means a speedster, ran untouched for a 65-yard touchdown and a 20-15 Lions win. "The thing I remember is the absolute silence in the stadium," Raymond Berry said. "You could hear Jim Gibbons running."

Add to this another victory for Hickey's Shotgun -- the 49ers beat the Rams 23-7 before 77,254 at the L.A. Coliseum -- and with two weeks to play the Western Conference standings looked like this: Packers 6-4, Colts 6-4, 49ers 6-4, Bears 5-4-1, Lions 5-5. Five teams within a game of first.

Nowadays, near the end of the season, we hear and read about the lengthy list of playoff possibilities involving up to a dozen teams. With five teams still vying for a single championship-game berth, the NFL found itself with 27 possible scenarios when play concluded two weeks later.

On Tuesday, Dec. 6, sites for potential playoff games were announced, and there existed the very real possibility of a four-way tie between Baltimore, Green Bay, San Francisco and either Chicago or Detroit. Had one of those four-team scenarios come about, there would have been, in effect, conference semifinals on Dec. 26, a conference final on New Year's Day, and the championship game on Jan. 8 at Philadelphia.

Dec. 10

Prior to this game, the 49ers had never had to start a home game in the rain. This nationally-televised game began and ended in the rain and produced Robert Riger's classic photograph of Forrest Gregg, helmet and face smeared with mud, elated at what he saw on the field. The only clean jersey among the active players was Starr's as Gregg and Co. kept Starr's No. 15 visible; Taylor rushed for 161 yards, Hornung ran for 86 and scored all his team's points as the Packers won 13-0, limiting the Shotgun to 81 yards from scrimmage.

"You can credit (assistant coach) Phil Bengtson for that defense," Packers linebacker Dan Currie said. "He had that offense of theirs completely figured. On a dry field we would've murdered them."

Dec. 11

There always seem to be at least one or two examples annually of why NFL games are not played on paper. Despite their struggles in recent weeks, the Colts didn't figure to lose to the 3-6-1 Rams. But ... Unitas' streak of consecutive games with a touchdown pass ended at 47 and the Colts were kept out of the end zone for the first time in four years in the Rams' 10-3 shocker win. Billy Wade rushed 66 yards for a third-quarter touchdown, Villanueva added a field goal, and the Colts' Alex Hawkins fumbled on the Rams' 19 with time running out.

Meanwhile, the Browns whipped the Bears 42-0 at Cleveland -- Bernie Parrish intercepted Ed Brown and Bobby Franklin picked off Brown and Zeke Bratkowski; all three of those interceptions went for touchdowns -- and Detroit beat Dallas 23-14 in the Motor City.

With one game each to play, the records stood as follows: Packers 7-4, Colts 6-5, 49ers 6-5, Lions 6-5, Bears 5-5-1. Only the Bears were eliminated, and a Packers win over the Rams at the Coliseum would give Green Bay its first conference title since 1944.

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Dec. 17

Another nationally-televised Saturday afternoon game, another Packers victory, their biggest since the end of World War II. Rather than grinding the Rams down, as Lombardi's Packers did so well in the early '60s, the Packers won on this day with one long-distance touchdown after another.

The Packers rallied from 7-0 down to lead 28-7 at the half thanks to, in order, a 57-yard pass from Starr to Max McGee, a 91-yard pass from Starr to Boyd Dowler, a punt block and recovery in the end zone by reserve running back Paul Winslow, and a 42-yard halfback option pass from Hornung to McGee. Four touchdowns in 10 minutes, 9 seconds, one of the most explosive runs in the Lombardi Era.

After a scoreless third period, Wade threw a 2-yard pass to Jon Arnett to make it 28-14, but the Packers responded with a 74-yard touchdown drive culminating in a 4-yard run by Taylor. The Rams added a consolation touchdown to make the final score 35-21; the Packers carried Lombardi off the field for the first of many championship rides.

Dec. 18

You may think there was nothing left to play for, but this was the first year of the Playoff Bowl, the NFL's equivalent of the national third-place game at the NCAA men's basketball tournament. As second place was yet to be determined in either division, two of the final Sunday's games did mean something.

In a shootout at Yankee Stadium, the Browns beat the Giants 48-34 to clinch second place in the East, 8-3-1 to the Giants 6-4-2. The Lions, never short of incentive against the Bears in those days, routed the Bears 36-0 at Briggs Stadium; while both the Lions and 49ers tied for second at 7-5, the Playoff Bowl berth went to the men from Detroit.

In the Jan. 8 Playoff Bowl at the Orange Bowl, Bobby Mitchell took a short pass from Milt Plum and ran 89 yards for a late touchdown, but the center snap on the extra-point attempt was momentarily bobbled, enabling Dick (Night Train) Lane to block the kick and preserve a 17-16 Lions victory.

Dec. 26

A dramatic season got the dramatic ending it deserved as the Eagles beat the Packers 17-13 at Franklin Field, Bednarik saving the victory by tackling Jim Taylor at the Eagles' 9 on the game's final play.

While the Eagles faded into oblivion in subsequent seasons, the Packers won five NFL championships and the first two Super Bowls in the next seven seasons, no doubt having learned something about winning big games in 1960.

FINAL STANDINGS NFL 1960

<u>Eastern Conference</u>	W	L	T	PCT.	Pts	Opp
Philadelphia Eagles	10	2	0	.833	321	246
Cleveland Browns	8	3	1	.727	362	217
New York Giants	6	4	2	.600	271	261
St. Louis Cardinals	6	5	1	.545	288	230
Pittsburgh Steelers	5	6	1	.455	240	275
Washington Redskins	1	9	2	.100	178	309
 <u>Western Conference</u>						
Green Bay Packers	8	4	0	.667	332	209
Detroit Lions	7	5	0	.583	239	212
San Francisco 49ers	7	5	0	.583	208	205
Baltimore Colts	6	6	0	.500	288	234
Chicago Bears	5	6	1	.455	194	299
Los Angeles Rams	4	7	1	.364	265	297
Dallas Cowboys	0	11	1	.000	177	369

Championship

Philadelphia Eagles 17 - Green Bay Packers 13

Playoff Bowl

Detroit Lions 17 - Cleveland Browns 16