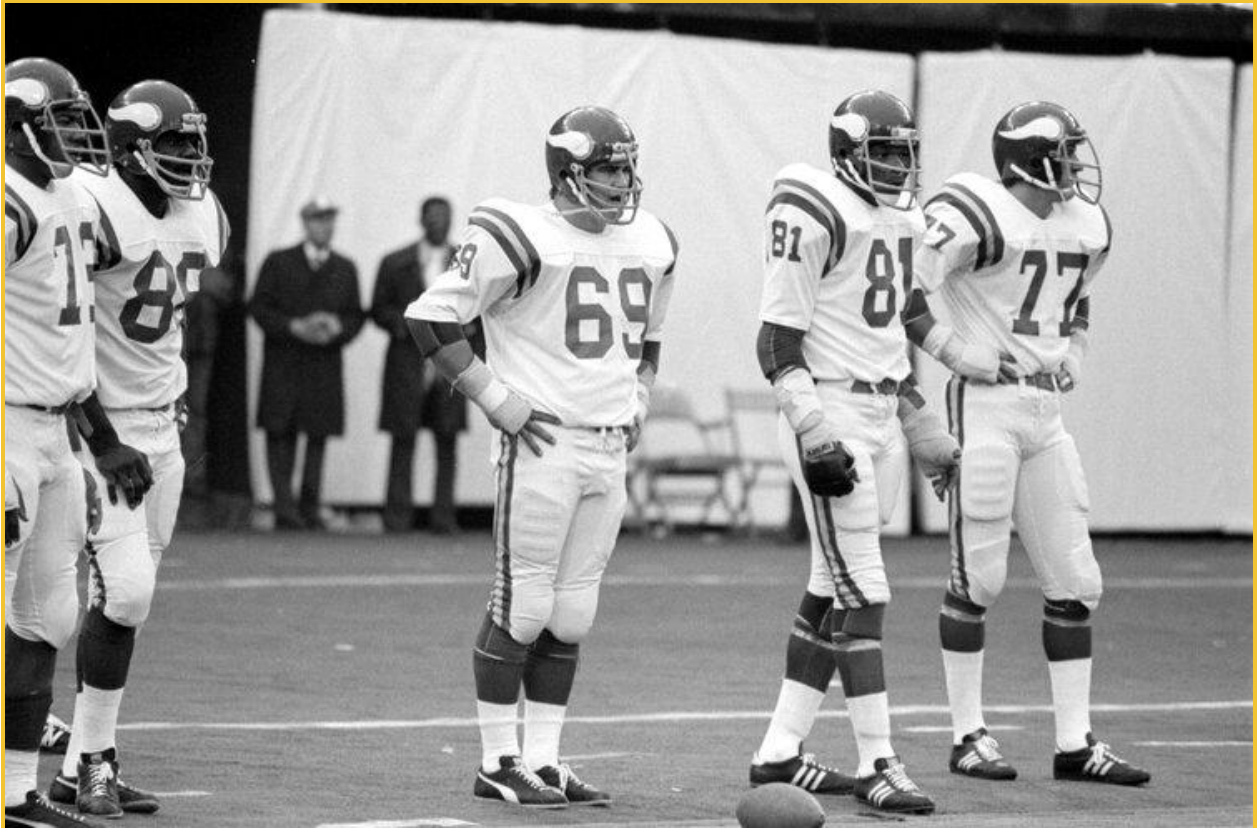


THE PURPLE GANG

The Minnesota Vikings from 1967-78



It was the glory years of Minnesota Vikings history. It was the time when Bud Grant built an expansion franchise into a team that went to four Super Bowls. It was the time of Fran Tarkenton, of Gene Washington and John Gilliam. It was the time of Bill Brown and Chuck Foreman, of Mick Tingelhoff and Ron Yary. But above all, it was the time of a defensive front called The Purple Gang.

They were Carl Eller, Alan Page, Jim Marshall and, for most of the years, Gary Larsen. They lived by a simple motto—meet at the quarterback. And they spent plenty of time doing just that.

Together, this team, anchored by the Purple Gang defense, were the best in the NFC over a ten-year period. *The Purple Gang*, a collection of twelve articles from TheSportsNotebook.com, will take you on a game-by-game ride through every season from 1967-78, looking at the

context of each game, the playoff picture and how each game was perceived at the time it was played.

The Purple Gang gives the reader the chance to walk in the shoes of Viking fans for the greatest ten years. You'll walk through the following...

*Grant's arrival and the abrupt trading of Tarkenton, the building of the team with defense and making a Super Bowl in 1969.

*The reacquiring of Tarkenton when he was a missing link and a subsequent four-year run that saw three more Super Bowl trips and an MVP season for the future Hall of Fame quarterback.

*The NFC rivalries with teams like the Dallas Cowboys, Los Angeles Rams and Washington Redskins.

*The ability of Minnesota to consistently keep division rivals, from Detroit to Green Bay to Chicago, at arm's length and win nine division titles in this ten-year span.

*The heartbreak of not ultimately winning the Super Bowl—from the frustrating four defeats, to years like 1970 and 1975, when the door seemed open, but untimely playoff defeats left the fans heartbroken once more.

*The big defensive plays that swung games, from those made by the front four, to the big playmaking ability of Bobby Bryant, Ed Sharockman and others.

Minnesota Vikings fans have endured their share of heartbreak over the years and have never seen a Super Bowl championship. But the years of *The Purple Gang* were very good indeed.

Each season from 1967-78 has its own article published individually on TheSportsNotebook.com. Those articles have been pulled together and edited for this compilation.

1967

The Minnesota Vikings came into existence in 1961, and their first six seasons were marked by tensions between quarterback Fran Tarkenton and head coach Norm Van Brocklin, over how much Tarkenton ran.

One thing they were not marked by is winning—after Van Brocklin’s first good year in 1964, the team regressed to 7-7 in 1965 and 4-9-1 in 1966. It was time for new leadership and the change that came would alter the trajectory of franchise history. Bud Grant became the new coach, and while the 1967 Minnesota Vikings did not have a good record, they got the pieces in place for a lot of winning in the years to come.

Grant and general manager Jim Finks made a big move immediately by trading Tarkenton to the New York Giants for a package of four draft picks, all in the top two rounds. To replace him, the team would rely on either Ron Vander Kelen or newly acquired Joe Kapp.

Kapp was 29-years-old and had gone to the Canadian Football League out of college. It was Finks, then working in the CFL, that spotted him and now the new GM went to work on getting Kapp into the NFL. Complicated maneuvering created a de facto “trade” between the leagues, and Grant would have two quarterbacks from whom to choose.

The offense had one Pro Bowler, fullback Bill Brown, but second-year running back Dave Osborn would be effective, rushing for 972 yards in what was then a 14-game schedule. The defense didn’t send anyone to the Pro Bowl, but they had a core of young talent that would ultimately form the The Purple Gang and be one of the best defenses of the 1970s.

Carl Eller was at defensive end, just 25-years-old. Grant drafted rookie Alan Page to play defensive tackle. Veteran Jim Marshall was on the defensive line’s other flank. And cornerback Earsell Mackbee intercepted five passes in the 1967 season.

The NFL has undergone a couple major realignment changes in the years since 1967 and a few other tweaks here and there. One constant has remained—the Vikings have always been in a division with the Green Bay Packers, Chicago Bears and Detroit Lions, and in ’67 it was called the NFL Central. The Packers were still under the leadership of Vince Lombardi, entering his final season in Green Bay. The Bears were still led by George Halas. Grant was stepping into a neighborhood occupied by legends.

To say the season didn’t start well would be an understatement. Minnesota hosted the San Francisco 49ers and trailed 27-0 after three quarters, before a late rally made the final a respectable 27-21. The Vikings were then sent west to play the Los Angeles Rams on a Friday. I’m going out on a limb and say that sending a team cross-country on five days’ rest would catch more than a little heat if someone tried it today.

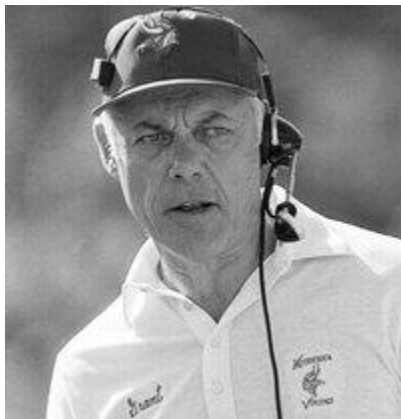
This time Minnesota fell behind 32-0 before scoring. A home date with Chicago saw improvement—the Vikings only trailed 17-0 before they got on the board for the first time. The Grant era had started 0-3 and all of the games were colossal embarrassments.

Vander Kelen had taken most of the snaps in these games, and Kapp got his first start on October 8 at home against the St. Louis Cardinals. When Kapp hit Gene Washington on an 85-yard touchdown pass to give Minnesota a 24-13 lead in the fourth quarter, the new coach's first win was at hand. Alas, the defense fell apart down the stretch and the Cards scored three touchdowns.

It was time for a trip to Green Bay. Lombardi's Packers had won the first Super Bowl ever played the previous season and were the NFL's dominant franchise. Even with quarterback Bart Starr out, there was still no reason to expect trouble from a winless team, especially when Packer backup Zeke Bratkowski had shown himself capable.

Minnesota's defense came ready. They shut down the Packer running attack of Paul Hornung and Jim Taylor, holding Green Bay to 42 yards. The Vikes picked off Bratkowski three times, two of them by Mackbee. They ran the ball, with Brown and Osborn each going over 70 yards. The fourth quarter was a breakthrough point, as the Vikings scored ten points and got a 10-7 win.

Backup quarterback or no, a rookie head coach getting his first win on the road against Vince Lombardi is heady stuff. And while it would be a mistake to say the Vikings immediately took off, you can see clear progress that continued from this game forward and set the foundation for Grant's tenure.



Minnesota hosted the Baltimore Colts next, a team on their way to an 11-1-2 season, coached by Don Shula. Kapp went toe-to-toe with Johnny Unitas, the Vikings fought the Colts to a draw in the running game and a draw in the scoreboard. A 20-20 tie against a team like this was a moral victory in any case, and certainly coming off the high of the Packer win.

There was regression the following week with a 21-20 loss to Atlanta. Vander Kelen was back in the lineup and threw a costly pick-6 in the fourth quarter. But the Vikes turned around and beat the New York Giants, tied Detroit and then nearly pulled another road upset against the playoff-bound Cleveland

Browns. Minnesota led 10-0 in Cleveland, before Browns running back Leroy Kelly capped off a 123-yard day with a pair of fourth quarter touchdowns.

Kapp was back on the saddle on his own for a road date in Pittsburgh the Sunday after Thanksgiving. The Steelers were a far cry from the team that would win four Super Bowls in the ensuing decade—Terry Bradshaw was still in college and Chuck Noll was still an assistant coach in Baltimore. But the Steelers got out to a 13-3 lead. Then Kapp took over.

The quarterback threw two touchdowns and ran for one more. The defense scored twice, one a pick-6 by Mackbee. The Vikings ended up winning decisively, 41-27.

Minnesota closed the season 0-2-1, losing to the Packers 30-27 on a late field goal (although we must note that Green Bay had clinched the division and homefield was then determined on a rotation basis, removing any incentive for the Packers), tying the Bears on the road and losing 14-3 to the Lions. All of the games were competitive battles against the teams that Minnesota would have to beat.

The 1967 Minnesota Vikings finished the season 3-8-3 (there was no overtime allowed), which on the surface was about equivalent to the 4-9-1 record Grant inherited. But the surface didn't tell the story. Grant found young defensive talent, a quarterback he liked, his team played competitively with league powers and got better as the season went along. And with Lombardi about to leave Green Bay, good times were just around the corner.

1968

The 1968 Minnesota Vikings, while far from a great team, were able to give the Twin Cities playoff football for the first time.

Carl Eller was a 1st-team All-Pro. Alan Page and veteran defensive end Jim Marshall each made the Pro Bowl themselves. On the offensive side of the trenches, the Vikes got a Pro Bowl season from center Mick Tingelhoff.

If you're tough up front, you can compete, especially in the 1968 world of the NFL, and the Vikings were tough up front.

With a no-nonsense profile like this, it's appropriate that the most accomplished player at the skill positions was a fullback. Bill Brown was 1st-team All-Pro himself and even the 30-year-old Kapp, was as renowned for being rugged as he was for throwing the ball.

Kapp became the permanent quarterback in 1968, and his favorite target was Gene Washington. The 24-year-old receiver caught 46 passes for 756 yards, pretty good in a running era when defensive backs were allowed to get physical at the line of scrimmage.

Minnesota came out and buried the woeful Atlanta Falcons 47-7 in the season opener. Beating Atlanta didn't make one a playoff team, but at the very least, Grant's team had shown there was now a considerable distance between them and the league's worst.

Up next was a road game with the Green Bay Packers that would prove to be a seminal moment in the history of this division. The Packers were in a new era without Lombardi. They opened the '68 campaign with a 30-13 win over a bad Philadelphia Eagles team. Then, on September 22 at Milwaukee County Stadium, a changing of the guard moment happened.

Kapp delivered a workmanlike 9/15 for 138 yards performance and Brown established the run, pounding in a pair of first-half touchdowns. The defense was excellent. Marshall sacked

quarterback Bart Starr for a safety. Mackbee picked off one pass, and safety Paul Krause intercepted another, one of a team-leading seven interceptions for Krause this year. Minnesota delivered a 26-13 win that stood out for how ruthlessly efficient it was.

It's retrospect that allows us to know this was a changing-of-the-guard game, as the Packers declined, and the Vikings went on to mostly own this division for the 1970s, but the immediate aftermath of Week 2 made one wonder if Minnesota could keep their focus.

They went to Chicago and Gale Sayers ran over them for 108 yards on 16 carries, as the Bears built a 17-0 lead and coasted to a 27-17 win. A win over the last-place Detroit Lions righted the ship, but then Minnesota managed to lose at lowly New Orleans, 20-17. What's worse is they not only lost to a lousy team, but it came in spite of seven turnovers by the Saints. Kapp was awful, at 9/28 for 78 yards.

Another loss to a strong Dallas Cowboys team followed, and then the Bears came into town on October 27. Chicago had started slowly, with their win over Minnesota being the only one in the first five games. But they were finding their groove. Sayers again couldn't be stopped, going for 143 yards. Kapp played well, going 16/27 for 205 yards, including six catches by Washington for 133 of the yards. But Chicago still kicked a late field goal and won a back-and-forth game 26-24.

Minnesota was able to play the Washington Redskins, en route to a 5-8 season next, and the Vikes won 27-14. They were 4-4, as were the Bears, with the Packers at 3-4-1. Minnesota again beat Green Bay, with Brown again rushing for two touchdowns against the Packers and then defense again being opportunistic, collecting four turnovers. The 14-10 win kept the Vikings tied for first with the Bears.

A win at Detroit followed, and then the gap between Minnesota and the league elite showed in consecutive losses to the Baltimore Colts on the road and the Los Angeles Rams at home.

The Colts were the best team in the NFL, on their way to a 13-1 year. They would ultimately be remembered as the team that lost to Joe Namath and the New York Jets as an 18-point favorite in the Super Bowl, but even that unfortunate ending tells you how good they were. The Rams finished 10-3-1, and only the fact they were in Baltimore's division prior to the era of wild-cards kept them out of the playoffs. Minnesota lost the two games by a combined 52-12.

Minnesota stood at 6-6 and there were two games left. Chicago was also 6-6, but held the tiebreaker. Green Bay was 5-6-1, but got to play the Bears in the season finale. The Vikings had to keep winning, and with two road games ahead, it didn't look good.

The first road game was at San Francisco, a team as good as any in the Central, but with the misfortune to fall behind the Colts and Rams. Minnesota played perhaps its best game of the year. Kapp was 10/17 for 150 yards, they won the turnover battle 3-1 and built a 27-6 lead, on their way to a 30-20 win.

By rights, this should have been enough to vault the Vikings to first place, since the Bears were in Los Angeles, but Chicago pulled off a 17-16 upset to maintain control of the division. Minnesota had to win in Philadelphia in Week 14 and hope for help.

The Vikings only threw the ball ten times in Philly, but Kapp made the most of it, completing seven and getting 135 yards out of it. Brown produced a workmanlike 78 yards and Minnesota churned out a 24-17 win.

Meanwhile, the Packers were jumping all over the Bears in Wrigley Field, leading 28-10 in the fourth quarter. Chicago made a furious rally, but in the era prior to the two-point conversion, could only close to 28-27. Green Bay won and Minnesota was the champion of the NFL Central.

It might have been a playoff year that came about as much as a byproduct of the divisional alignment, but that's hardly unusual in sports history. Minnesota, at 8-6 was in the playoffs.

The trip to Baltimore for the divisional playoff round ended with a loss. The final was 24-14, although with the Colts scoring the game's first 21 points in the second quarter, one of them a defensive touchdown on a fumble recovery return, it really wasn't that close. Minnesota was never able to establish Brown and the running game. The Colts were able to make big plays in the air, as league MVP Earl Morrall went 13/22 for 280 yards.

But the most important thing about the 1968 Minnesota Vikings season is that they got to the playoffs. They would be back many more times in the years to come.

1969

The 1969 Minnesota Vikings continued the improvement, enjoying a monster season and reaching the Super Bowl.

Minnesota was a complete team in every way. They had the league's most prolific offense and its most stingy defense. The defensive front four was dominant. Eller and Marshall were at the ends, with Page and Larsen on the inside and all four were All-Pro, Eller and Page first-team.

Kapp continued to be a tough leader. The offensive line had its own Pro Bowlers, in Grady Alderman at left tackle, and Mick Tingelhoff at center.

And on both offense and defense, there were big-time playmakers. Gene Washington had 821 yards receiving, a big number in this era and he was superb at stretching the field. Defensively, Mackbee and Bobby Bryant combined for fourteen interceptions and Pro Bowl safety Paul Krause picked off five more.

The running game wasn't ideal—fullback Bill Brown, now 31-years-old, saw a little bit of a step back from his own All-Pro days and Dave Osborne, while a decent running back, wasn't outstanding. But the '69 Vikings were a team without real weaknesses.

That wasn't immediately apparent when the team opened the season in Yankee Stadium against the New York Giants. Gary Cuozzo started at quarterback and threw two long touchdown passes to give the Vikings an early lead.

But an old and future friend—Fran Tarkenton—did the Vikes in. Tarkenton threw two late touchdown passes and a mediocre New York team stole a 24-23 win.

The Colts came to Minnesota on September 28. What the Vikings did in old Metropolitan Stadium sent a loud and clear message.

The Cuozzo idea was junked and Kapp was back in the lineup. He threw an 83-yard touchdown strike to Washington in the first quarter. He hit the speedy wideout on a 42-yard scoring play in the third quarter. Kapp kept pumping touchdowns against an outstanding defense and didn't stop until he had thrown *seven* TD passes. Minnesota had a shocking 52-14 rout.

Minnesota continued its pattern of knocking off the old guard against Green Bay. They forced three turnovers and beat the Packers 19-7.

The Vikes rolled through road games against lousy teams in the Chicago Bears and St. Louis Cardinals, and set up a home date with the Detroit Lions, who came into the game at 3-2. The Vikings had the opportunity to open up some room in the Central Division and they took advantage.



Kapp-to-Washington came through again, a 41-yard touchdown pass, and an early 10-0 lead. Mackbee was all over Detroit quarterback Greg Landry, picking off three passes. The running game took over late, with Osborne and Brown each scoring and the game ended 24-3.

After another win over Chicago, the Vikings prepared to host the Cleveland Browns, who were running away with the Century Division (the Giants, who would finish 6-8 were the closest team to Cleveland). Yet another shock awaited NFL fans—not so much that the Vikings won the game, but the size and scope of the victory.

Kapp hooked up with Washington three different times for touchdowns. This game was Bryant's turn to play ballhawk, as he intercepted three passes. The final score was 51-3. Minnesota had played the two teams that had met in last year's league championship game and calmly dropped a combined 103 points on them.

Green Bay and Detroit still held theoretical chances of catching Minnesota in the standings, so a November 16 trip to Milwaukee to meet the Packers was still important. The Vikes did not play well, and a potential scoring drive ended up in an 85-yard interception return the other way for Green Bay. Trailing 7-3, Minnesota looked ripe to be picked, but kicker Fred Cox booted two field goals and they escaped. The Packers were finished as a threat.

After another offensive explosion—52 points over the Pittsburgh Steeler team that was bad enough to get the #1 overall pick in the ensuing year's draft and choose Terry Bradshaw—the Vikings traveled to Detroit for Thanksgiving Day. Minnesota had a two-game lead, and with only three games remaining after this, they could clinch the division.

It was a sloppy game in old Tiger Stadium, but Minnesota just gradually pulled away. Page scored a defensive touchdown in the fourth quarter, and with a 27-0 win, the Vikings had punched their return ticket to the playoffs.

Homefield advantage was determined on a rotation basis, so there was really nothing left to play for, but Minnesota did make one more statement. The Los Angeles Rams were playoff-bound, and the Vikings went west, built a 14-0 lead and beat the Rams 20-13. Minnesota completed the regular season 12-2, losing at Atlanta.

Los Angeles was coming to Minnesota on December 27, amidst 10-degree cold for the first playoff game. The Vikings looked to have an early big play—Eller tipped a pass, caught it and ran in for a touchdown. But Page was whistled offside and the Rams got a huge break.

Then LA went about the business of making the break count. Quarterback Roman Gabriel worked his tight ends, and the Rams' own strong defensive front was causing problems for Kapp. Minnesota trailed 17-7 at the half and was still down 20-14 in the fourth quarter.

Grant's offensive adjustment was for Kapp to roll out more frequently and to take off and run, to try and neutralize the pressure. It worked, and he ultimately ran for a touchdown to put his team up 21-20. With less than four minutes left, the LA offense was backed up and Eller sacked Gabriel for a safety.

Los Angeles came charging back, crossing midfield and looking to tie the game. But Page made amends for his earlier penalty, coming down with a tipped pass that sealed the win. Grant and LA head coach George Allen had more playoff meetings ahead of them, when Allen went to the Washington Redskins two years later. This game started a pattern of Grant consistently coming out on top.

Cleveland was the opponent at the Old Met for the NFL championship (this was the last year prior to the AFL-NFL merger, and what we know as the conference championship round was still considered the "NFL" rather than "NFC" Championship, as would become the case a year later).

The result wasn't as lopsided as the regular season game, but nor was it close. Kapp ran for an early touchdown and then threw a 75-yard strike to Washington. Osborn, who ran for 108 yards as the Vikings controlled the ground game, took one in from 20 yards out. Washington caught two more passes for an additional 45 yards in the air. It was 24-0 by halftime and the Vikings cruised home to a championship, 27-7.

Minnesota was a two-touchdown favorite over the Kansas City Chiefs in the Super Bowl, as oddsmakers and the public felt like the NFL losing the prior year's game was just a fluke. This game proved otherwise.

The Vikings couldn't get anything going, turned it over five times and were picked apart defensively by smart Kansas City quarterback Len Dawson. The Chiefs won 23-7. The AFL was on a par with the NFL, and the newly named AFC would win most of the Super Bowls through the coming decade.

But the Minnesota Vikings were now on par themselves—with the rest of the league's elite. They had now broken through and reached a Super Bowl, and it wouldn't be their last.

1970

It was the first year of the NFL-AFL merger and the formation of the league structure as we know it today. The 1970 Minnesota Vikings spent much of the season looking like they might not only make it all the way back, but take the final step. But a great regular season gave way to playoff heartbreak in a year when the Super Bowl trophy was theirs for the taking.

When the season started, a return Super Bowl trip wasn't the biggest thing head coach Bud Grant had to focus on—finding a quarterback was. Kapp had left after a contract dispute, and Cuozzo took over. Cuozzo was a career backup, though in fairness, part of that career involved being the backup to Johnny Unitas with the Baltimore Colts.

Cuozzo was supported by a running game that was led by Dave Osborn, who had a rather pedestrian 681 yards on the ground, but still made the Pro Bowl. Bill Brown at fullback was a former Pro Bowler, and at age 32, was still productive.

On the surface, the offensive line didn't produce a Pro Bowler. But there was more to this Viking front five than what met the eye. Tingelhoff was an All-Pro in the five seasons immediately surrounding 1970. Ron Yary at tackle was a third-year player and embarking on a Hall of Fame career.

The defensive line didn't require anyone to dig below the surface to appreciate their excellence. Carl Eller and Alan Page were first-team All-Pros. Gary Larsen had a Pro Bowl season. At 33, Jim Marshall was starting to show signs of decline and was "only" pretty good, as opposed to one of the game's best.

If you wanted to pass against Minnesota, that wasn't going to be much easier. Ed Sharockman at corner picked off seven passes in what was still a 14-game schedule. Karl Kassulke was a Pro Bowl strong safety, and Paul Krause was another future Hall of Famer at free safety.

Minnesota hosted the Kansas City Chiefs in a Super Bowl rematch. After a scoreless first quarter, the Vikings returned a fumble for a touchdown, won the rushing battle 132-63 and won the game convincingly, 27-10. The Chiefs were headed for a down year and would miss the playoffs. The Vikings had exposed their flaws quickly.

The defense continued to produce points the following week in a 26-0 win over a terrible New Orleans Saints team, but the first loss came a week later. Cuozzo and the offense were unable to generate any action when they went to Milwaukee to play the Green Bay Packers. The Vikes trailed 6-0 in the fourth quarter and after kicking a field goal, gave up a kickoff return for a touchdown. The Packers won 13-10.

A road trip to another NFC Central rival produced a better result. Minnesota won at Chicago 24-0, with Page scooping up a fumble and rumbling 65 yards for a touchdown in the second quarter. With the record 3-1, the Vikes now prepared for a tough sequence of games against the Dallas Cowboys, Los Angeles Rams and Detroit Lions.

Dallas was on its way to an NFC East title and they came to Minnesota. No one was prepared for the breadth and scope of what the Vikings would inflict. Sharockman scored off a blocked punt and an interception return in the first quarter alone. The Viking defensive front produced seven sacks. The score was 34-6 by halftime and ended at a stunning 54-13. Grant's team was off and rolling.

Monday Night Football came to the Twin Cities for the Rams-Vikings game, a rematch of a good divisional playoff game the prior year when Minnesota rallied to win in the fourth quarter. The defenses ruled this game. Cuozzo was able to connect with Brown on a 17-yard touchdown pass in the first quarter, but neither team broke the end zone the rest of the night. Minnesota recovered four of seven Los Angeles fumbles, won the rushing battle 146-66 and chiseled out a 13-3 win.

Detroit wasn't a perennial contender like the Cowboys or Rams, but the Lions were showing their teeth in 1970. They were 5-1 and tied for first when they hosted the Vikings at old Tiger Stadium on November 1. The first half involved a lot of back-and-forth. Minnesota corner Bobby Bryant intercepted a pass and took it 39 yards to the house. Cuozzo threw a pair of second-quarter touchdowns, one of them a 41-yarder to speedy Gene Washington.

The Viking defense was uncharacteristically lenient in the first half and the Lions were within 24-17 at intermission. But they kept the Detroit ground game under wraps and returned to form in the second half. Minnesota got a couple field goals from Pro Bowler kicker Fred Cox and won 30-17.

Grant's team kept their focus in a win at the mediocre Washington Redskins, while Detroit lost, creating a two-game gap in the division race. And the schedule brought the Lions right back, with the rematch in Minneapolis set for November 15.

Viking special teams were usually a strength, but the 1970 season is marked with too many instances of opposing teams returning punts and kickoffs. The game with the Lions was another example, as a second-quarter kickoff return after a field goal gave Detroit a 10-3 lead. They still led 20-10 in the fourth quarter and were poised to tighten the NFC Central race.

Cuozzo didn't have a great game, completing just 13 of 30 passes. But he made them count, getting 228 yards, and he led drives that set up two short touchdown runs from Clint Jones.

Minnesota escaped with a 24-20 win. There were five games to go, the Vikings led the division by three games and they owned the tiebreaker. They were home free.

A ho-hum win over Green Bay followed. The Vikes won 10-3 in a game marked by zero turnovers and zero ball movement either way. The Packers had faded from the race and would finish 6-8, as would the Bears.

The Sunday after Thanksgiving produced a little fly in the ointment, as Cuozzo had to leave early in a game at the New York Jets. Bob Lee stepped in, but threw four interceptions in a 20-10 loss. Lee had to start the next game six days later, a Saturday kickoff with Chicago. A win would wrap up the division, and with homefield advantage still determined by rotation rather than merit, that's all that mattered in the regular season.

Osborn played his best game of the year, rushing for 139 yards on 29 carries. Lee stayed away from mistakes and the Vikings were ahead 16-6 late. The special teams coverage problems resurfaced when Chicago returned a kickoff for a touchdown and made the game interesting, but the defense closed out a 16-13 win. Minnesota was NFC Central champs.

Lee started and won a game at the then-named Boston Patriots, while Cuozzo returned for a season finale tuneup at the equally lowly Atlanta Falcons. Minnesota easily won both games and at 12-2, they were the best team in the entire NFL.

The Vikings were a solid favorite to beat the San Francisco 49ers, and when Krause returned a fumble 22 yards for a touchdown in the first quarter, the Metropolitan Stadium faithful could surely smell another playoff victory. But it was the last good thing to happen to their team that season.

Cuozzo got nothing going, completing just 9-of-27 passes. The 49ers gradually moved ahead 17-7. Cuozzo finally got his team into the end zone, with a touchdown pass to Washington...but it came with one second left. A disheartening 17-14 loss ended the season.

Bud Grant achieved much during his tenure with the Vikings and that's highlighted by four trips to the Super Bowl. He never won it all, and this team might have been his best shot. The '69 team had been heavily favored in the Super Bowl, but that's as much on the public for underrating the Chiefs and the old AFL as it is on the Vikings. In future years, Minnesota was simply not as good as the best the AFC had—the Pittsburgh Steelers, Oakland Raiders and Miami Dolphins.

1970 was different though. Dallas, the very team Minnesota had beaten by 41 points went to the Super Bowl. The Cowboys lost to the Baltimore Colts in a game that was exciting (decided on a last-second field goal) but generally regarded as one of the most poorly played Super Bowls in history. This 1970 team is the real what-might-have-been in the Purple Gang era.

1971

The 1971 Minnesota Vikings again produced a tremendous defense, the kind that could give the franchise its first Super Bowl victory, and did produce a division title. But offensive problems, in particular a train wreck at quarterback, ultimately did them in at playoff time.



Minnesota's defense was the best in the league, built around the powerful defensive line and a ballhawking secondary. Eller was a Pro Bowler. Larsen and Marshall still had gas in the tank.

And no one was better than Page. In the best season of his Hall of Fame career, Page won the MVP award, one of only two defensive players to have accomplished the feat in the past half-century.

If the opposing quarterback got the pass off, then Pro Bowler Krause was waiting for the pick. The same goes for corners

Charlie West and Ed Sharockman, who combined for thirteen interceptions between them.

It didn't take much offense to win, and the Vikings were willing to test that to its logical limit. They ranked 18th in a 26-team NFL in points scored. They had good pieces on the offensive line, in 25-year-old Pro Bowl right tackle Ron Yary, and Tingelhoff, even though the latter's best days were behind him. But there weren't enough playmakers.

Clint Jones was given an opportunity at running back and he wasn't bad, but at 675 yards, you couldn't build an offense around him. The production from speedy wideout Gene Washington dropped, though 26-year-old Bob Grim became a Pro Bowl receiver on the other side. The real problem though, was complete chaos at quarterback.

Cuozzo was the starter, but he was one of three quarterbacks who got the opportunity in meaningful games. Grant also tried Bob Lee, and 32-year-old Norm Snead in an ultimately futile attempt to generate a passing game.

The season opened on a Monday Night in Detroit at old Tiger Stadium. The Lions had been the Vikings' stiffest competition for the NFC Central. The offensive problems that would manifest themselves weren't apparent for the prime-time audience.

Cuozzo hit Grim for a 45-yard touchdown pass and Minnesota moved the ball mostly through the air, turning a 13-0 second quarter deficit into a 16-13 win. One week later, the Vikings lost a home game to the Chicago Bears, but it was a surprising defensive breakdown. Minnesota led 14-3, before Kent Nix threw two fourth quarter touchdowns and the Bears stole a 20-17 win.

Snead started the next two games, against a lousy Buffalo Bills team and the mediocre Philadelphia Eagles. It really didn't matter who the quarterback was, because the defense made amends for the Chicago loss, with two straight shutouts, 19-0 and 13-0. Cuozzo returned to start at Green Bay on October 17, and after a slow start, he threw two second-half touchdown passes to lead a 24-13 win, a game in which the defense forced five turnovers.

Minnesota was 4-1 and in control for a fifth straight division title. It was the ideal time to again appear on the national stage, and they hosted the defending Super Bowl champion Baltimore Colts on Monday Night Football. The defense responded to the moment and intercepted Earl Morrall three times, Sharockman doing the damage twice. The offense didn't move the ball, but played relatively clean, only one turnover and that was enough for a 10-3 victory.

The quarterback problems started to move more into the open on October 31 in Yankee Stadium. Ironically the opponent was the New York Giants and Tarkenton. The Giants were a bad team, but Cuozzo was erratic and the score was tied 10-10 in the fourth quarter. Snead came in to throw a 55-yard touchdown pass to Grim and escape with the win.

Minnesota wasn't as fortunate a week later against a good team. The San Francisco 49ers had upset the Vikings in the playoffs in 1970, and they won this game 13-9. Cuozzo misfired on his first ten passes, and was pulled for Snead, who didn't do a whole lot better.

The Vikings got back on the winning track the next week against Green Bay at home—in a game that ended 3-0, and Cuozzo threw for 42 yards. Minnesota as a team gained just 87 yards, while Green Bay gained 301, but the defense picked off three passes, two of them by West.

Lee started the next week at New Orleans. The Saints were on their way to a 4-8-2 season and not a threat to anyone. Lee played respectable and went 14/25 for 146 yards in a 23-7 win. A week later against the respectable Atlanta Falcons, the running game had one of its best days. Jones ran for 155 yards, and Bill Brown conjured up the memories of his Pro Bowl days, bulling for 85 yards and two second-half touchdowns in a 24-7 win.

Minnesota was 9-2, and able to keep some separation from Detroit, who was 7-3-1. The teams were pointing to a game with each other in the Twin Cities on December 11, the penultimate weekend of the year. The separation the Vikings had proved important—they were upset at San Diego, after Lee and Snead combined to throw four interceptions and almost singlehandedly allowed the Chargers to score 20 fourth-quarter points and win 30-14.

Fortunately, Detroit lost at home to Philadelphia that same week. So even if the Vikings couldn't clinch the division in the head-to-head battle, they could still do so at Chicago in the finale.

It was a Saturday afternoon game when Grant's team went for the NFC Central crown. The linebackers came up with big plays and it started with Roy Winston taking an interception 29 yards to the house in the first quarter, and the Vikings led 14-3 at the half.

The lead was 17-10 in the third quarter when Page blocked a punt through the end zone. The defense forced five turnovers overall and pulled away 29-10. It was an appropriate way for the 1971 Minnesota Vikings to win—Cuozzo completed only four passes for 21 yards.

Lee played the regular season finale and played well, lighting up the Bears for 271 yards and an easy 27-10 win.

Minnesota was 11-3 and tied with the Dallas Cowboys for the top spot in the NFC overall, even if rotation would continue to trump merit in the playoff pairings. It meant the Vikings and Cowboys had to meet in the first playoff game. For Minnesota it could have been worse—they at least got the game at home.

It was Christmas Day when the Cowboys came north for the NFC divisional playoffs, but Viking fans got a lump of coal in their stocking. Lee and Cuozzo each threw two interceptions. Minnesota only trailed 6-3 at the half, but an early third quarter pick led to a Cowboy touchdown, Dallas pulled out to a 20-3 lead and won 20-12. They scored 10 points directly off the turnovers. It was a disappointing end, if an unsurprising one.

That great defense needed help. Fortunately, Grant wouldn't sit on his thumbs.

1972



Bud Grant gave up two first-round draft picks to get Fran Tarkenton from the New York Giants to solve the problem. The deal would ultimately work, but not immediately. In 1972, Fran's return to Minnesota fizzled.

There were other changes coming at the skill positions. Grant acquired wide receiver John Gilliam from the St. Louis Cardinals, to help make up for the decline of Gene Washington.

Changes were made at running back, and 28-year-old Oscar Reed was promoted and given his opportunity, while rookie Ed Marinaro was drafted out of Cornell.

The juicing up of the offense worked—Minnesota improved from 18th to 12th in points scored, in spot of having an offensive line that was starting to age a bit, with the exception of 26-year-old right tackle Ron Yary, a future Hall of Famer.

But just as the offense improved, the defense declined. They went from being the best in the NFL to ranking 11th. The front four was still the reliable unit of Carl Eller and Jim Marshall on the ends, with Gary Larsen and Alan Page on the inside. But Page was now the only one on the right side of age 30, and not coincidentally, the only one to make the Pro Bowl.

In the secondary, Ed Sharockman was phased out at corner and replaced with Bobby Bryant. Sharockman was a great ballhawk, and interceptions went down. Even though Paul Krause was still a Pro Bowl safety, the defensive backfield wasn't quite the same.

Minnesota opened the season at home on Monday Night against the Washington Redskins, with each team having made the playoffs the year before, at a time when they were only four qualifiers per conference in the postseason. The Redskins were on their way to a Super Bowl and set the tone by blocking a punt for a touchdown in the first quarter and winning 24-21.

Tarkenton threw for 233 yards, two touchdowns and had no interceptions, so it's not as though the new/old quarterback was a disappointment. But special teams had always been a source of Viking pride, and on the defensive side, Minnesota allowed Larry Brown, soon to be league MVP, to rush for 105 yards.

The Vikes did bounce back with a win at Detroit. The Lions had been their stiffest competition in the NFC Central. Tarkenton hit Gilliam on an early 40-yard touchdown pass and the result was a 34-10 rout.

One week later, Minnesota lost—but it was to the Miami Dolphins, who would eventually become the first team to win the Super Bowl with a perfect record. And Minnesota still led 14-6 in the fourth quarter before a late Miami rally beat them 16-14.

At this point, any potential problems really aren't surfacing. The record of 1-2 is disappointing, but the losses are the two future Super Bowl teams—both of whom were playoff teams in 1971, so their ability was known at the time—and a win over what had been the biggest division rival (though that would change in the weeks ahead).

It was the next three games that set the alarm bells off. Minnesota played the St. Louis Cardinals, Denver Broncos and Chicago Bears in succession. None of these teams would finish better than 5-9. The Vikings lost two of the games and needed a fourth quarter Tarkenton-to-Washington touchdown pass to escape Denver with a win.

Minnesota wasn't stopping the run, and to make matters worse, the Cardinal loss came to opposing quarterback Gary Cuozzo.

The season was already on the line when the Vikings went to Lambeau Field in Green Bay. At 2-4, they trailed both the Packers and the Lions by two games. With the money on the table, the defense came through.

The game was tied 13-13 in the fourth quarter, when Krause and linebacker Wally Hilgenberg each intercepted Green Bay quarterback Scott Hunter and each took those interceptions to the house. The following night, Detroit lost in Dallas and the Vikings were within a game of first place.

A home win over lowly New Orleans followed, and then Minnesota got set to host Detroit for another must-win game. They got an early 10-0 lead, before Lion quarterback Greg Landry threw over the top for two touchdowns and the Vikes were down by four. They lost three fumbles on the day...but they came back. Reed rushed for 124 yards, his most consequential performance of the season and Tarkenton led two drives for field goals and a 16-14 win.

Tarkenton then went west and got into a passing duel with Los Angeles Rams' quarterback Roman Gabriel. In a back-and-forth battle more befitting the football of the 21st century, Tarkenton threw for 319 yards, Gabriel threw for 240 and Minnesota outlasted Los Angeles 45-41.

The schedule didn't do Minnesota any favors in 1972. At the time, teams played two games from the opposing conference. The Vikings had already played the Dolphins. Their next opponent was the Pittsburgh Steelers, who would be Miami's opponent in the AFC Championship Game. Overall, Minnesota played eight of 14 games against teams with winning records.

And they lost this one in the Steel City, with Pittsburgh taking over the fourth quarter because Minnesota couldn't stop the run in a 23-10 loss. Fortunately, Green Bay lost to Washington, so the NFC Central race was still within one game, the Vikings still had the tiebreakers and they still had the Packers coming to the Twin Cities in two weeks.

The defense showed their old form in taking care of the Bears. Chicago quarterback Bobby Douglass only completed two passes for a total of eight yards...and one of those was a seven-yard touchdown pass that came when Minnesota had a 23-3 lead in the fourth quarter. Yup, the Vikes pass defense held an opposing quarterback to *one yard* passing at points when the result was in doubt. No matter what era you're in, that's impressive.

What wasn't impressive was how Minnesota played with the division title at stake against Green Bay. On a frigid December afternoon with the wind chill at (-19), the game was scoreless through the first quarter and the Vikings were up 7-0 at halftime. But the rush defense collapsed in the second half. John Brockington and MacArthur Lane led a Packer running attack that piled up 214 yards. Tarkenton only threw for 118 yards and gave up three interceptions. The final score was 23-7 and the playoff streak in Minnesota was over.

One more loss awaited, this one in San Francisco the following Saturday afternoon. The 49ers won the NFC West, had knocked the Vikings out of the playoffs in 1970, and beaten them in the regular season in 1971. In spite of committing seven turnovers, they won this one too, with two fourth quarter touchdowns sending Minnesota to a 20-17 loss.

Minnesota was licking its wounds after the 1972 season, but the Tarkenton trade would pay dividends in the years ahead. Over the next four seasons, the Vikings reached the Super Bowl three times. The one year they didn't, 1975, was when Tarkenton won the MVP award. It was a good trade, but its first year was a definite fizzle.

1973

The 1973 Minnesota Vikings juiced up the weapons around the future Hall of Fame quarterback and started the best four-year stretch in the history of the franchise.

The lack of a go-to running back had hindered the Vikings—they got piecemeal work from backs ranging from Oscar Reed to Dave Osborn to Bill Brown for the past few years, but nothing to really sustain an attack in an era where defense-friendly passing rules made running the football an imperative. Minnesota drafted a fullback named Chuck Foreman, a good blend of power and speed and he rushed for 801 yards in 1973, winning Offensive Rookie of the Year.

Tarkenton had reliable John Gilliam, a big-play wideout on the outside. The offensive line was tolerable, though not great. Ron Yary was outstanding at right tackle, making 1st-team All-Pro, but the best of the rest was Tingelhoff, once a Pro Bowler, but now past his prime.

The defense, after regressing in 1972, returned to be one of the league's elite. The Purple Gang finished second in the league in points allowed. Carl Eller and Alan Page were first-team All-Pro up front, with Gary Larsen and 36-year-old Jim Marshall still competent players that filled out the front four.

More improvement came in the back seven. Jeff Siemon was a 23-year-old middle linebacker and he made the Pro Bowl. So did Krause, and cornerback Bobby Bryant had a breakout year, with seven interceptions.

Minnesota opened the season at home with the Oakland Raiders, a consistent playoff team throughout the 1970s. Tarkenton's 43-yard touchdown pass to Gilliam put the Vikes up 10-0 early, though a special teams lapse—allowing a punt return for a TD—put Minnesota behind 16-10. In the end, Minnesota was able to force four turnovers and win 24-16.



One week later, the Vikings fell behind a terrible Chicago Bears team on the road, 10-0, but turned it around and won 22-13, getting five field goals from Fred Cox. The biggest concern in the early going was rush defense—both the Raiders and Bears had run for 200 yards on a Minnesota defense that prided itself on being physical up front.

The rush defense showed for a trip to Green Bay, the team that had displaced Minnesota in the NFC Central. The Packers would slip below .500 this year, and the Vikings also intercepted four passes to go along with dominating the point of attack in an 11-3 win.

Ed Marinaro, an occasionally used fullback, had rushed for 83 yards against Green Bay, and he was a weapon again the next week at Detroit's Tiger Stadium. Tarkenton found the fullback on two first-quarter touchdown passes that sent the tone in a 23-9 win.

Minnesota played two subpar teams in the San Francisco 49ers and Philadelphia Eagles and won both. They didn't run the ball well in San Francisco, but forced five turnovers against an offense quarterbacked by Steve Spurrier, in for the injured John Brodie. Gilliam starred in the win over Philly, running an end-around for one touchdown and catching another.

The Vikings were riding high at 6-0, as were the Los Angeles Rams in the NFC. Homefield advantage was still determined on a rotation system, so the Vikings-Rams meeting in Minneapolis on October 28 didn't have the same meaning it would today. But there was still a lot of pride on the line. Minnesota ran for 182 yards, held Los Angeles to 89 on the ground and won 10-9. More dominance of the running game led to a 26-3 win over Cleveland a week later.

No one else in the NFC Central was seriously going to keep up with Minnesota and any doubt about that was eliminated when the Vikings beat the Lions 28-7. Brown and Osborn conjured up the best memories of their recent past, in rushing for 101 and 79 yards respectively. With a record of 9-0, an undefeated season was on the table—just one year after the Miami Dolphins had completed a perfect year by winning the Super Bowl.

A Monday Night visit to Atlanta ended those dreams. The Falcons were a good team, one that would finish 9-5 and even though they missed the playoffs, they would have made it under the more expanded format of today. Tarkenton threw a 39-yard touchdown pass to Gilliam, but there was no running game and Atlanta's Dave Hampton ran for 108 yards to key the Falcons' 20-14 win.

Tarkenton and Gilliam hooked up five times for 139 yards the next week against the Bears. Two of them went for touchdowns and Tarkenton was an efficient 11/15. Reed was the running back who had his moment in the sun, going for 97 yards in a 31-13 win.

Foreman's playing time was going up and down in this stretch of games and he was ineffective at Cincinnati. The Bengals were on their way to a 10-4 season and playoff spot and they embarrassed the Vikes 27-0. Minnesota bounced back to close out the year with easy wins over the Packers and New York Giants, both by 31-7 counts and both on the road. Bryant intercepted three passes at Green Bay, including one taken to the house early that set the tone.

Now it was playoff time and it was George Allen's Washington Redskins that were coming to old Metropolitan Stadium on December 22 for the NFC Divisional Playoff round. An early turnover set up a Redskins touchdown, and Washington's Larry Brown—the league MVP one year earlier when the 'Skins reached the Super Bowl—ran for 115 yards. Minnesota trailed 7-3 early and 13-10 after three quarters.

The risk of another home playoff loss, akin to the disappointments of 1970 and 1971, was a real possibility. But Tarkenton found Gilliam on a 28-yard touchdown pass to give the Vikings the lead. Then corner Nate Wright intercepted a pass and set up another Tarkenton-to-Gilliam touchdown. Washington scored to cut the lead back to 24-20, but Tarkenton led a final drive for a field goal and Minnesota won 27-20.

Minnesota would go to Dallas for the NFC Championship Game, although under today's rules, the Vikings would have been the #1 seed in the NFC. The defense came ready to play and so did the running game. Foreman ran for 76 yards, with Reed adding 75. Dallas running back Calvin Hill was out, and quarterback Roger Staubach couldn't carry the load.

Nonetheless, a punt return for a TD got Dallas back into the game after they fell behind 10-0. Tarkenton and Gilliam hooked up on a 54-yard touchdown pass, but it was still 17-10, when the Cowboys began driving and crossed midfield.

Then Bryant stepped up and intercepted Staubach. It was one of four picks thrown by the Dallas quarterback and on this one Bryant finished it off in the end zone. The game was effectively over. Minnesota won 27-10 and was going to the Super Bowl for the first time since 1969.

Head coach Bud Grant took his team back to the state of Texas for the Super Bowl. The game was held at Rice Stadium in Houston, and the Miami Dolphins were looking for a repeat title. The Dolphins were simply too good. Tarkenton was able to complete 18/28 passes for 182 yards, but he couldn't find Gilliam on the big play, and the Vikings couldn't run the ball. Miami could run, piling up 196 rush yards and they won easily, 24-7.

The 1973 season was still the start of some very good things in Minnesota Vikings football history. They never did win the Super Bowl, but this was the first of three NFC crowns in a four-year stretch when the Vikings were the best team in their conference.

1974

The 1974 Minnesota Vikings weren't quite as good as their immediate predecessors in the regular season. But the '74 Vikes were still plenty good, as they went 10-4. And they were just as good in the playoffs, winning a second straight NFC Championship before finally falling in the Super Bowl.

Fran Tarkenton was 34-years-old, but the scrambling quarterback still threw for nearly 2,600 yards. There was a bit of dip in production from Foreman and Gilliam. But Tarkenton, and Yary on the offensive line, still led an offense that was able to finish fifth in the NFL in points scored.

The defense was even better, ranking third. The fearsome front four were starting to show wear and tear, but they were still awfully good. Eller didn't make 1st-team All-Pro, but he was still a Pro Bowler. Marshall was now an aging 37, but could still play. The Vikes moved 26-year-old Doug Sutherland into the defensive tackle spot previously anchored by Gary Larsen. And no defensive tackle anywhere was better than Page, again an All-Pro.

Where the defense did take a modest step back from '73 was at linebacker and in the secondary. Jeff Siemon, the young middle linebacker, didn't make it back to the Pro Bowl. Bryant had injury problems, but the 32-year-old Krause made the Pro Bowl and helped keep everything together.

Minnesota opened the season at Green Bay and broke open a 10-10 game in the third quarter, with corner Nate Wright picking off Jerry Tagge twice and the Vikings won 32-17. One week later, they took a defensive battle in Detroit's old Tiger Stadium. The final was 7-6, as the Lions could only pass for 56 yards, while Tarkenton was able to throw for 142 and give his team at least a little bit of juice.

Another ugly game followed, an 11-7 home win over Chicago. But ugly or no, the Vikings were 3-0 and had beaten their three divisional rivals. Up next was a road trip to Dallas. The Cowboys were off to a 1-2 start, but had become a perennial playoff team under Tom Landry and this was a rematch of the previous year's NFC Championship Game.

In a late afternoon kickoff, Minnesota gave up an early 58-yard touchdown pass to Roger Staubach, but Foreman responded by taking a pass from Tarkenton and going 66 yards. It set

up a back-and-forth battle, and one that the Vikings would win 23-21 on a fourth-quarter field goal from Fred Cox. It set the tone for a rare year where Landry's Cowboys would miss the playoffs.

The following week against the Houston Oilers, an average team, Tarkenton threw an 80-yard touchdown strike to Gilliam, setting the tone for a 51-10 blowout. Then, at 5-0, the Vikings let a couple games slip.

Home games with Detroit and New England—both .500 teams—saw Minnesota hold fourth-quarter leads and give them up on late touchdowns, losing 20-16 and 17-14 respectively. They righted the ship at lowly Chicago a week later, when the defense took over and led a 17-0 win.

The Monday Night stage was next and it was against the St. Louis Cardinals, who were on their way to an NFC East title. The Vikings trailed 17-14 at half and St. Louis quarterback Jim Hart would throw for 353 yards. But the Vikes ran the ball well, with vet Dave Osborn coming up with 98 yards. Tarkenton and Foreman each ran for touchdowns in the second half and Minnesota escaped St. Louis with a 28-24 win.

Bud Grant's team held a three-game lead in the division. With the rotation system in its final year, the Vikings' regular season work was done.

They played like it the next two weeks. The Packers came to the Twin Cities and the Vikings were overrun by John Brockington, who keyed a rush attack that produced 202 yards and a 19-7 upset. Minnesota then lost in Los Angeles to a good Rams team, on their way to the playoffs. The Vikes led 17-6 after three quarters, but again had a game where they didn't close. James Harris threw for 249 yards and led the Rams to a pair of fourth quarter touchdowns and a 20-17 win.

It's this inability to close games that made the 1974 Minnesota Vikings "only" very good, as opposed to outstanding. They didn't play well the following week at home against a poor New Orleans team. It was 15-9 in the fourth quarter before Tarkenton and Gilliam hooked up twice to finally break it open.

Tarkenton sat out the next week and played part-time in the finale, both games against bad teams in the Atlanta Falcons and Kansas City Chiefs. The Vikings still won both comfortably and whatever problems they'd had, they were 10-4 and poised for another Super Bowl run.

Another game with St. Louis, this one at the old Met in Minneapolis, started the postseason. It was a scoreless first quarter, then Hart and Tarkenton swapped TD passes in the second. The Viking defense played much better against Hart than was the case in the earlier Monday Night game though. Hart only completed 18/40 passes for 200 yards.

Tarkenton was much more efficient, at 13/23 for 169 yards, he was backed by a running game, as Foreman went for 114 yards and Osborn for 64 more. A field goal, a fumble return for a score

by corner Nate Wright and a 38-yard strike from Tarkenton to Gilliam broke the game open in the third quarter and it ended 30-14.



The Los Angeles Rams came north for another rematch. Minnesota led 7-3 in the third quarter, when Harris hit Harold Jackson on a 73-yard strike that got the Rams to the two-yard line. But a false start was called on Ram guard Tom Mack, and forced to throw, Harris threw one to Viking linebacker Wally Hilgenberg.

Minnesota took a 14-3 lead in the fourth quarter and hung on 14-10. It was a sloppy game, with eight turnovers in all. But the Vikings collected five of those turnovers and it was the biggest reason they were going back to the Super Bowl.

The Super Bowl was against the Pittsburgh Steelers down in New Orleans, at Tulane Stadium. The Steel Curtain was starting a dynasty and their defense was too much for Minnesota. The Vikes could only run for 17 yards. Tarkenton threw three interceptions and the only Vikings points came on a blocked punt recovered for a touchdown. They lost 16-6 in a game that wasn't that close.

Minnesota wasn't on a par with the Steel Curtain, just as they hadn't been on a par with Don Shula's Miami Dolphins the prior year, or with John Madden's Oakland Raiders two years later. What the Vikings were was better than anyone in the NFC, a group of teams that still included Landry's Cowboys, George Allen's Washington Redskins and Chuck Knox's Rams. And that's pretty good.

1975



Fran Tarkenton had the best year of his career at age 35 for the 1975 Minnesota Vikings. The team might have been the best in the seven-year stretch that Tarkenton played for Bud Grant.

Tarkenton won the MVP award, the Vikings went 12-2 and were poised to reach the Super Bowl for the third straight year and perhaps this time, finally bring home a championship. Heartbreak caught up with them at the end.

Tarkenton threw for nearly 3,000 yards and had a 25/13 TD-INT ratio, sparkling numbers in this era when defensive backs could essentially assault wide receivers. Chuck Foreman ran for 1,070 yards. The offensive line got a spark when right guard Ed White developed into a Pro Bowler at age 28, joining right tackle Ron Yary, who was a perennial first-team All-Pro.

The Viking offense ranked third in the NFL in points scored, and the defense also ranked third. Alan Page, a 1st-team All-Pro at defensive tackle was the anchor on a front four that was no longer dominant, as they had been in the early part of this decade, but still had a lot of veteran savvy with Carl Eller and Jim Marshall at the ends.

Siemon was a Pro Bowl linebacker, and two defensive backs had great years. Krause, the veteran free safety, made his usual Pro Bowl trip, and his ten interceptions were an unusual display of ballhawking. Bryant was another Pro Bowler at corner, picking off six passes.

Minnesota's early schedule was soft—none of their first four opponents finished better than 5-9 at the end of the season. The Vikings were sluggish at home against the San Francisco 49ers, leading 13-10 and then pulling away in the fourth quarter to a 27-17 win. Minnesota went to Cleveland and picked off four passes to key a 42-10 rout.

Tarkenton then began a home game with the Chicago Bears by hitting veteran receiver John Gilliam on an early touchdown pass, and he completed 19/30 passes for 250 yards in an easy 28-3 win. There was a lot of hype surrounding the visit of Joe Namath and the New York Jets one week later.

Namath's Jets weren't very good anymore, but they did lead 21-20 in the fourth quarter, before a blocked punt for a safety gave Minnesota the lead and they eventually won 29-21. Tarkenton threw for 244 yards, while Foreman ran for 96, including the clinching touchdown.

The Detroit Lions were 3-1 and hoping to give Minnesota a run in the NFC Central, but the Vikings jumped out to a 25-3 lead behind Foreman's 107 rushing yards. Detroit rallied to make it 25-19, but Minnesota extended its division lead to two games.

Minnesota's trip to Chicago was on Monday Night Football, and it was a defensive battle. Tarkenton was the difference—he completed 16/30 for 234 yards, while counterpart Gary Huff was only 10/22 for 97 yards. The Vikings won 13-9. Tarkenton then went to Green Bay and completed 24/30 for 285 yards, including two fourth-quarter touchdown passes that turned a 17-14 deficit into a 28-17 win.

It was the defense's turn to shine at home against Atlanta. The Viking D held the Falcons to 43 rush yards and intercepted quarterback Kim McQuilken five times in a 38-0 rout. A win over another bad team, the New Orleans Saints, followed, when Tarkenton threw for 310 yards and helped overcome five turnovers in a 20-7 win.

The Vikings won their tenth straight over the terrible San Diego Chargers, although it wasn't an inspiring blowout. The Chargers hung around until Foreman, who ran for 127 yards, went for two fourth-quarter touchdowns to break open a 28-13 win.

Even though Minnesota was 10-0, they hadn't played a team that would finish the season with a winning record. The first chance came at RFK Stadium and the Washington Redskins on November 30. A consistent playoff team under George Allen, the Redskins were fighting for their lives and they put Minnesota in a 21-0 hole.

Tarkenton got hot, and rolled up 357 passing yards against a proud, veteran defense. He brought the Vikings all the way back, to a 30-24 lead. It should have been the stuff of legends, but the Minnesota defense allowed Billy Kilmer and the Redskin offense to drive back and win the game 31-30. Washington would not ultimately make the playoffs, but they had derailed the Viking bid for perfection.

Minnesota came back with an easy 24-3 home win over Green Bay, but a road trip to Detroit resulted in a 17-10 loss. The offense played one of its worst games, with the only points coming on a Krause fumble return when the score was 17-3. The Vikings' first visit to the new Detroit stadium, the Pontiac Silverdome, hadn't gone well.

1975 was the first year that record would be the criteria for seeding division champions, and Minnesota's second loss meant they needed to win the season finale at Buffalo to hold off the Los Angeles Rams for the #1 seed. The Bills had O.J. Simpson, and they were 8-5 coming in—a reminder that the Vikings still had not beaten a team that would finish on the plus side of .500.

Minnesota's defense met the moment. They held O.J. to 57 yards and intercepted Joe Ferguson three times, two of the picks by Bryant. Tarkenton led an easy 35-13 win and the road to the NFC title would come through the Twin Cities, the frigid outdoor environment and old Metropolitan Stadium.

The Dallas Cowboys were the opponent, the one wild-card team in the four-team NFC bracket. Tarkenton didn't have a bad day, but it wasn't his best, at 12/26 for 135 yards. Cowboy counterpart Roger Staubach completed 17/29 for 246 yards. Even so, the Vikings led 14-10 and had Dallas backed up on their own 15-yard line with 1:51 left.

Dallas faced a 4th-and-16, when Staubach found Pearson for a first down near midfield with 24 seconds left. Pearson then ran down the right sideline. Staubach launched a desperation pass.

Minnesota corner Nate Wright appeared to overrun the play, though Viking fans and players argued ferociously that Pearson gave him a nudge to aid that. The Cowboy receiver caught the ball and walked into the end zone.

It was a stunning end to a great season for the Vikings. Say what you will about the schedule, any team that goes 12-2, produces the MVP and has the eventual NFC champs (Dallas) on the ropes to that extent is awfully good.

Perhaps it's a small consolation to consider that the Pittsburgh Steelers, who beat Dallas in the Super Bowl, were probably too good to be stopped anyway. But the 1975 Minnesota Vikings deserved a better ending than they got.

1976

The 1976 Minnesota Vikings had a lot of proud veterans who were past their prime. But rather than fading quietly into the night after a devastating playoff loss in 1975, this group of vets put it together for another big run and reached a third Super Bowl in four years.

Throughout the roster, players that had been All-Pros and would be future Hall of Famers were long in the tooth. Fran Tarkenton was 36-years-old at quarterback, as was his center, Mick Tingelhoff. On the defensive ends, Carl Eller was 34 and Jim Marshall was 39. Free safety Paul Krause was 34. Alan Page, still the best player on the defensive front, was a Pro Bowler, but no longer first-team All-Pro as he'd been six of the previous seven years.

There was every reason to expect decline from the Vikings, but this defense still found a way to be second in the NFL in points allowed. They were under a first-year coordinator that was on his way to big things, one by the name of Buddy Ryan.

It also helped that Bud Grant made a couple moves to get Tarkenton some help offensively. The production of wideout John Gilliam had been fading for a couple years, and Grant acquired Ahmad Rashad from the Buffalo Bills, and drafted Sammy White. Tarkenton now had weapons, and he still had 26-year-old Chuck Foreman running the ball. Foreman ran for 1,155 yards and the offense ranked ninth in the NFL in points scored.

Minnesota went to New Orleans to start the year and Foreman showed off his pass-catching skill, with seven catches for 106 yards in a 40-9 rout. The next week the Vikings hosted the Los Angeles Rams, one of their consistent rivals for NFC supremacy.

A 56-yard TD pass from Tarkenton to White helped give Minnesota a 10-0 lead, but Los Angeles rallied to tie it. The Vikes couldn't stop the running of Lawrence McCutcheon and John Cappelletti, who each went over 100 yards. Neither team could score in overtime and the game ended 10-10.

The Vikings were sluggish next week in Detroit, escaping with a 10-9 win because the Lions didn't convert an extra point in the fourth quarter. Perhaps the sluggishness was understandable—Detroit was a subpar team and they were sandwiched right between the Ram game and the coming Monday Night visit from the two-time defending Super Bowl champion Pittsburgh Steelers.

On the Monday Night stage, the Minnesota defense delivered. They intercepted Terry Bradshaw four times and the offensive line created room for Foreman, who ran for 148 yards against the vaunted "Steel Curtain" defense. Even though Tarkenton couldn't get anything going through the air—41 passing yards, Minnesota won 17-6.

Another botched extra point by a mediocre division rival saved Minnesota on October 10, as the Chicago Bears missed a chance to tie the game in the fourth quarter and the Vikings won 20-10. Tarkenton opened up the next week and lit up the New England Patriots for 288 passing yards and a 24-7 win.

Minnesota kept their undefeated season going by taking over the second half in Philadelphia. A 9-7 halftime deficit was turned into a 31-12 rout on the strength of Foreman's 200 rush yards. But the first loss came the next week in Chicago.

The Bears had been a terrible team for the entire decade, and were now elevating to respectability. They would finish this year 7-7 with second-year running back Walter Payton. A 39-yard touchdown run by Payton in the first quarter was followed by both defenses taking over and the Vikings coming up short 14-13.

Tarkenton had a big day against Detroit. The Vikings had a tough time shaking the lions, but Tarkenton threw for 347 yards and they kept the lead throughout in a 31-23 win. It was also a huge day for White, who amassed 210 receiving yards and a pair of touchdowns.

The next week was an extremely alarming win. The Seattle Seahawks were an expansion team, and in spite of turning it over four times, Seattle led this game 21-20 in the fourth quarter. Tarkenton's five-yard touchdown pass to tight end Stu Voigt averted embarrassment. Another pedestrian win followed, 17-10 win in Green Bay, with a fourth-quarter TD pass to Rashad making the difference.

A good team winning while playing poorly is usually the recipe for an upset and it proved to be the case when Minnesota went to San Francisco the next Monday Night. The 49ers weren't bad, on their way to an 8-6 season, and they ran all over Minnesota. The Niner piled up 317 yards on the ground, with Delvin Williams and Wilbur Jackson each having huge nights and the result was a 20-16 defeat for Grant's team.

The loss was also consequential. Minnesota had the NFC Central all but iced, but at 9-2-1, they now trailed the Dallas Cowboys by a half-game in the race for the #1 seed. The Rams were in pursuit at 8-3-1 for the right to host a game as the #2 seed.

Minnesota's rushing game dominated a game with Green Bay. The Vikings got 218 yards on the ground, 95 of them from Robert Miller, a second-year back who had his career highlight in a 20-9 win. The following Saturday, Minnesota was in Miami.

Don Shula's Dolphins had slipped and were in a brief rebuilding mode, with a 6-7 record coming into the game. Tarkenton and White connected three times for touchdowns, as White caught nine passes for 120 yards in all. Minnesota won 29-7. Then they watched in delight the next day when the Washington Redskins went to Dallas and upset the Cowboys 27-14. Minnesota had the top spot in the NFC playoffs.

Minnesota hosted Washington the next week, and it appeared the Redskins had blown their emotion just to make the playoffs in Dallas. Foreman ran for 105 yards and fullback Brent McClanahan went for 101. The Vikes were up 21-3 at half and 35-6 after three quarters, before garbage time Washington points made the final score appear respectable at 35-20.

Los Angeles upset Dallas in the other NFC divisional game. It was the second time in three years the Vikings and Rams would meet in the conference championship game.

Bryant, also a big special teams player, made the play of the game early. Los Angeles had driven deep into Minnesota territory and was attempting a short field goal. Bryant blocked the kick and brought it 90 yards to the house. Just like that, it was 7-0 Minnesota and it would become 17-0.

The Vikings couldn't stop McCutcheon any better in December than they could in September though, and the Ram running back ran for 128 yards. Los Angeles scored two touchdowns, but a missed extra point left the margin at four points, 17-13 into the fourth quarter.

Minnesota was still the team avoiding mistakes though, while Los Angeles coughed it up four times. The turnover edge was the difference, and the Vikings got another touchdown and closed out a 24-13 win.

For the third time in four years, and the fourth time since 1969, the Vikings were going to the Super Bowl. There was still one thing they hadn't done though, and that was win it. That wasn't going to change this year. The Oakland Raiders of John Madden were a better team, having gone 13-1.

Minnesota had a chance early when they blocked a punt and recovered on the two-yard line. But they promptly fumbled it back and after a scoreless first quarter, Oakland opened up and won 32-14.

The Vikings were never able to win a Super Bowl, under Grant or since. The 1976 team was the last one to make it that far. The next two seasons would see the gradual fade of one of the 1970s outstanding teams.

1977

The 1977 Minnesota Vikings were a good team that won a division title, their ninth in ten years. They reached the NFC Championship Game. But there were also unmistakable signs of decline setting in for the franchise that had been the NFC's best from 1969-76.

Throughout most of the decade, it was customary to see the Vikings in the top ten—if not the top five—in the NFL in points scored. They were traditionally a top five defense. But in 1977, they ranked 16th in offense and 13th on defense.

The lineup was long on the tooth. Tarkenton was now 37-years-old and his TD/INT ratio slipped to 9/14. The defensive line still had the names of three men who were part of The Purple Gang. But Eller, Page and the 40-year-old Marshall were no longer Pro Bowlers. Nor was Krause, now 35-years-old. Other players for whom the clock was ticking included Tingelhoff at 37 and Bryant, age 33.

But lest we turn this into a funeral atmosphere, they could still play savvy and the Vikings had a top running back in Foreman, who rolled for 1,112 yards. They had good receivers in Rashad and Sammy White. The right side of the line had Pro Bowl talent in Ed White and Yary, although

Yary did lose the 1st-team All-Pro status that he had enjoyed since 1971, and 1977 would be his last year in the Pro Bowl.

Minnesota opened the season hosting the Dallas Cowboys, and it began with an erratic performance from Tarkenton, who went 13/32 for 182 yards and three interceptions. The game still went to overtime, but the Cowboys left town with a 16-10 win.

A rare early season Saturday night kickoff followed in Tampa Bay, where the expansion Buccaneers were a new team in Minnesota's NFC Central Division. It was an ugly game. Eller sacked Tampa quarterback Randy Hedberg for a safety and the defense forced Hedberg into a 4/14 for 51 yards and three interception night. But the Vikings only won 9-3.

The Green Bay Packers were a bad team at this time, and even after getting a 95-yard touchdown pass from Lynn Dickey to begin their game in Minnesota, the Vikings took over. They held Dickey to 48 yards passing the rest of the way and won 19-7. Another defensive game followed at home with Detroit. There was no running game, but Tarkenton's two first-quarter touchdown passes to White were enough for a 14-7 win.

A fourth straight game with a division foe was next, and so was another hard-fought win. The Vikings led the Chicago Bears 13-0, then fell behind 16-13, then tied it with a field goal. Minnesota won in overtime, on a trick play, as Krause came in and threw a touchdown pass to tight end Stu Voigt.

Minnesota was 4-1 and had swept their NFC Central rivals. But the fact the games with the Packers, Lions and Bears were all at home and all close, was enough to cause concern. And that concern shot up with a humiliating Monday Night trip to Los Angeles. The Vikings gave up three first-half touchdown passes to the Rams' Pat Haden and were crushed 35-3 by a traditional playoff team.

Another grinding win over an average team followed in Atlanta. After falling behind 7-0, Tarkenton connected with White on a 54-yard touchdown pass to key a 14-7 win. The next week though, the St. Louis Cardinals came to the Twin Cities and the rush defense collapsed. The Cardinals ran for 316 yards, and the offense didn't score until St. Louis was ahead 27-0 in the fourth quarter.

Grant got his team back on track against a decent Cincinnati Bengals team. The Vikings played their best game. Foreman ran for 133 yards. Tarkenton was razor-sharp, completing 17/18 passes for 195 yards in a 42-10 rout. But as though something was telling Minnesota that their time was running out, Tarkenton broke his leg. He was lost for the season.

The road trip to Chicago was next, and the Bears' Walter Payton carried the ball 40 times and ran for 275 yards. It was a performance that probably won Payton the MVP award. Minnesota could only score on a blocked punt by Pro Bowl linebacker Matt Blair and they lost 10-7.

Minnesota was now 6-4, with Chicago and Detroit each in close pursuit at 5-5. This was essentially new territory. The Vikings had only sporadically faced challenges for the division title deep into November. Now they had competition.

Bob Lee was the quarterback at Green Bay the next week at Green Bay, but it was the defense and Foreman's 101 rush yards that keyed a 13-6 win. Perhaps that's why Grant was ready to pull Lee when the Vikings dug a 24-0 hole for themselves at home the next week against the San Francisco 49ers. Enter Tommy Kramer.

Kramer would eventually become the starting quarterback and the 23-year-old delivered an electric performance. He completed 9/13 passes for 188 yards. Kramer threw three fourth-quarter touchdown passes to three different receivers and led a stunning 28-27 comeback win.

He lost the job the next week after digging a big hole in a 35-13 loss to the defending Super Bowl champion Oakland Raiders, but that was a game the Vikings would probably have lost on the road no matter what, even had Tarkenton been healthy. Kramer's heroics against San Francisco meant that Minnesota controlled their own destiny going into the final week of the season.

The Vikings were 8-5, as were the Bears. Detroit had faded, and Minnesota held the tiebreaker. There was no guarantee of a wild-card fallback, as only one such berth existed at this time, and the Washington Redskins were also 8-5.

Minnesota played their season finale on Saturday in Detroit. Lee was the starter and he played well, completing 11/16 for 206 yards, and not making any mistakes. The Vikings took a 24-7 lead and even though they allowed a pair of special teams touchdowns, on two long returns by Eddie Payton, Minnesota was never in danger of losing. They won 30-21 and secured another NFC Central—and the win was needed, because Chicago and Washington both won on Sunday.

The Vikings were the #3 seed in the four-team NFC bracket and they traveled to Los Angeles to rematch with the Rams. A torrential downpour engulfed the LA area and the Coliseum was tracked with mud. Foreman ran for over 100 yards, as did Ram running back Lawrence McCutcheon. Lee played extremely conservative, going 5/10 for 57 yards, but not throwing any interceptions.

It was the Rams who made the mistakes. Minnesota got out to a 7-0 lead, and were up 14-0 in the fourth quarter because Haden threw two interceptions, and Los Angeles missed a field goal. The Rams finally did score with a minute left and then recovered the onside kick. Haden threw one more pass into the end zone...and one more interception, as Jeff Wright picked it off to secure the win for the Vikings.

The run ended on New Year's Day in Dallas. The Cowboys were just too dominant this season. The Vikings had to play a perfect game under any circumstances, and they lost three fumbles.

The balanced Dallas running attack of Robert Newhouse and Tony Dorsett keyed an easy 23-6 win.

Even with the loss, they still showed they could survive a tough division race and still win playoff games. But the end was clearly coming.

1978

The 1978 Minnesota Vikings were Fran Tarkenton's last ride, and while it certainly wasn't his best year, the 38-year-old vet packed it full of enough key moments to steal one more division title.

Tarkenton threw for 3,468 yards in the first year that the NFL made the rules easier for pass offenses, but he also threw 32 interceptions. The dramatic rise in turnovers was accompanied by a lack of production in the running game. The Vikings had become used to 1,000-yard seasons from Chuck Foreman, but even with two extra games added to the schedule in 1978, Foreman mustered only 749 in 16 games.

The offensive line was aging, with center Mick Tingelhoff—another stalwart in his last year, and future Hall of Fame right tackle Ron Yary past his prime at age 32. The receiving corps was good—Ahmad Rashad was the one Pro Bowl player on this side of the ball, and Sammy White was a good deep threat.

Bud Grant had long prided himself on defense, but this unit was aging. Carl Eller and Jim Marshall on the defensive ends were shadows of their former selves and Eller's playing time was drastically reduced. The same went for defensive tackle Alan Page—so much so that Page was released after six games. The Purple Gang that had dominated the entire NFC for much of the 1970s, were no longer.

Matt Blair at linebacker was the defense's only Pro Bowler and the secondary had two more proud, aging vets with Paul Krausse at safety and Bobby Bryant on the corner. Collectively though, it all added up to the 20th-ranked defense in the NFL in points allowed.

The problems showed up immediately in a season-opening visit to New Orleans, when Tarkenton threw four interceptions and the Vikings lost 31-24. They got their first win on Monday Night at home against the Denver Broncos, but it was ugly.

Both teams threw three interceptions, but the Vikings recovered three fumbles and the Broncos failed to convert an extra point. Minnesota won in overtime 12-9. Five more turnovers followed in a bad home loss to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, 16-10.

Minnesota was reeling when they went to Chicago on Monday Night to face a Bears team that had made the playoffs a year earlier and were hopeful of breaking the Viking stranglehold on the NFC Central.

Tarkenton met the moment on the Monday Night stage in Soldier Field. He threw an early 33-yard touchdown pass to White. Blair produced a defensive touchdown and the defense held Walter Payton to just 58 yards. A 24-20 win got the Vikings to 2-2. The same formula produced a win in Tampa—stop the run, take care of the football and get a non-offensive touchdown, as the Vikes beat the Bucs 24-7.

The momentum didn't continue when they went west to play an improving Seattle Seahawks team. After falling behind 13-0, Tarkenton played well—he completed 27/37 for 274 yards and no interceptions and rallied Minnesota to a 28-19 lead. The defense couldn't close though, and they lost 29-28. Another loss followed at home to a good Los Angeles Rams team. The Vikings led 17-13 after three quarters, but when you lose the rushing battle 180-42, you're asking for an avalanche to eventually hit you and that's what happened with three fourth-quarter Ram touchdowns.

Minnesota was now 3-4, and the Green Bay Packers were riding high at 6-1. Since the realignment of 1970 that created the NFC Central, the Vikings had won this division every year but one. If they failed to defend their home turf at the old Metropolitan Stadium against the Packers on October 22, you could all but kiss that streak goodbye.

Tarkenton again rose to the occasion. He found Foreman on a 16-yard touchdown pass in the second quarter for the game's first points. Two more touchdown passes to Rashad followed. The old quarterback went 26/43 for 262 yards and there were no interceptions in a 21-7 win.

The Vikings still trailed the Packers by two games as the season hit its midway point and a Thursday Night visit to the defending Super Bowl champion Dallas Cowboys was next. Thursday games outside of Thanksgiving were rare at this time in the NFL and the short week on the road was one more challenge added to trying to beat an elite team.

But the proud veterans of Minnesota were up for the challenge. They shut down Dallas running back Tony Dorsett. The offensive line paved the way for Foreman to rush for 101 yards. Tarkenton took care of the football and the Vikings won surprisingly easily, 21-10.

The defense paved the way for consecutive home wins over Detroit and Chicago, 17-7 and 17-14. In the meantime, Green Bay lost both weeks and the NFC Central race was tied at the top, with both the Vikings and Packers at 7-4.

Both teams lost the following week. The Vikings dropped one at home to the improving San Diego Chargers—a team that would finish 9-7 and by the following year be a playoff team with Dan Fouts at quarterback and Joe Gibbs at offensive coordinator. But the Packers lost at Denver, so the race was still a dead heat when Minnesota went to Lambeau Field on the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

For 58 minutes, it was a disastrous performance for Tarkenton. He threw four interceptions. The defense allowed Green Bay to control the point of attack, as Terdell Middleton rushed for 110 yards. But the Vikings were still in it, trailing 10-3 when Tarkenton got the ball one last time. And

he made it count, driving the distance and hitting Rashad on a five-yard touchdown pass to force overtime. Both teams missed field goal chances in overtime and the game ended 10-10.

The tie was almost as good as a win for Minnesota though, because they held the tiebreakers. The next game was at home against a playoff-bound Philadelphia Eagles team and even in December outdoors in the Twin Cities, Tarkenton was putting the ball in the air. He threw 56 passes, completing 30 and getting 289 yards as he rallied his team from a 27-14 deficit to a 28-27 win. Green Bay answered with a win and both teams were 8-5-1.

No one had any illusions that either the Vikings or Packers were real Super Bowl contenders. The Cowboys and Rams were the top two teams in the NFC and the Central winner would be a significant road underdog in the first postseason game. But even allowing that, the ending of this race was two teams backpedaling to the finish line as fast as they could.

Minnesota played terribly at Detroit, as Gary Danielson picked the Viking defense apart for 352 yards passing and five touchdowns in a 45-14 win. Green Bay “answered” by being shutout at Chicago, 14-0. The Bears and Lions would each finish respectably, at 7-9, though neither were ever in the division race.

In the finale, the Vikings and Packers each went west. Minnesota turned it over seven times in Oakland, fell behind 21-0 and lost 27-20. Green Bay was no less hapless in Los Angeles, losing to the Rams. The Vikings were 8-7-1 and had backed into another NFC Central title.

The playoffs had a predictable ending. Minnesota went to Los Angeles as an 8 ½ point underdog and hung in for a half, staying tied with the Rams 10-10. Given the Vikings long history of tormenting the Rams in postseason play—including an upset the previous year—no one in Los Angeles could have been comfortable. But just as in the regular season meeting, the Rams owned the ground game and it took over after halftime. The Vikings lost 34-10.

It was an ugly ending, and as division championships go, it wasn't one for the ages. But that doesn't mean we should overlook what Tarkenton did. He was 38-years-old and coming off a year in which he had broken his leg. Yet he still came up with a big win in Dallas and a clutch drive at Green Bay.

There's something to be said for veteran savvy that helps you squeeze out one more year even when Father Time seems to be saying no. That's what Tarkenton did, and he rode off into retirement following the season.

The era of The Purple Gang was officially over. They fell hard and missed the playoffs in 1979. When they made the playoffs in two of the first three years in the 1980s, they were an offense-first team. The franchise is still seeking its first Super Bowl trip since that glorious era spearheaded by legends.

