

DOLPHIN DYNASTY

The Glory Days of the Don Shula Era from 1970-74



INTRODUCTION

Pro football came to Miami in 1966 with the creation of the Dolphin franchise. This was an era when the NFL didn't make it easy for new teams to get up and running, so the four losing seasons that followed were predictable. Meanwhile, Don Shula was establishing himself as a winning coach in Baltimore. But Shula, in one of the most famous upsets in Super Bowl history, had lost to Joe Namath's Jets following the 1968 season. Miami was looking for a winner. Shula, perhaps looking for a fresh start, was receptive to an outreach by Dolphin owner Joe Robbie.

Robbie would later be penalized by the NFL for tampering, losing a first-round draft pick. In exchange, however, the Miami owner had landed one of the greatest head coaches in the history of the league. And Shula began winning as soon as he arrived in South Beach.

For the next quarter-century, Don Shula defined pro football in Miami, and the years from 1970 through 1974 went a long way towards shaping that legacy. The Dolphins made the playoffs all five of those years. They won the AFC title three times. Twice, they won the Super Bowl. And one of those championship years remains the only time in league history that a team capped off an undefeated season by winning the Super Bowl.

There was Hall of Fame talent, from Bob Griese at quarterback, to Larry Csonka in the backfield, to Paul Warfield at receiver, and Larry Little up front. There was an exceptional defense, with great players at all three levels.

All of those great names, and a lot more, are here in *Dolphin Dynasty*. The great games are recalled, along with those games that time may have forgotten. All five seasons from 1970-74 has its own individual game-by-game narrative published on TheSportsNotebook.com. Those articles are pulled together and edited for this compilation. So let's go, game-by-game, and year-by-year through the greatest five years in the history of the Miami Dolphins.

1970

The success of the Dolphins in the first part of this decade started with defense. Even though the unit didn't have any Pro Bowl players in 1970, coordinator Bill Arnsparger still produced the fifth-stingiest D in the NFL. He did it with four rookies in the lineup. Middle linebacker Nick Buoniconti was the only starter older than 25-years-old. Strong safety Dick Anderson, age 24, led a ball hawking secondary with eight interceptions.

Howard Schnellenberger would become a legend in this town for winning a historic national championship with the University of Miami in 1983. Here in 1970, he was Shula's offensive coordinator. The offense was built around Pro Bowl players at all the skill positions.

Bob Griese, an eventual Hall of Fame quarterback, completed 58 percent of his passes. While that can look low by our modern standards, in 1970, it was third-best in the league. Griese averaged 8.2 yards-per-attempt, second in the league. He had a fantastic big-play receiver in Paul Warfield, who caught 28 passes at better than 25 yards a pop. Larry Csonka ran for 874 yards in what was then a 14-game season to make the Pro Bowl at fullback.

Moreover, Miami had balance, especially in the running game. Jim Kiick ran for 698 yards. Kiick was also a good receiver out of the backfield. His 42 catches led the team, and an 11.8 yards-per-catch average is high for a running back. Mercury Morris ran for over 400 yards, and averaged nearly seven yards a carry. Howard Twilley was a reliable second wideout and Marv Fleming was steady at tight end.

So why then, did the Dolphins' attack only rank 11th in a 26-team league for points scored? Turnovers were the problem. Griese's TD/INT ratio was 12/17 and he was intercepted on 6.9 percent of his passes. In our own era, those numbers would have a quarterback benched by Week 3. And even in 1970, they were pretty bad. Griese ranked 21st among starting QBs in terms of making mistakes.

Miami opened the season on the road against the Boston Patriots (they wouldn't be called "New England" until 1971). Playing in Harvard Stadium, the Shula era got off to a poor start. Griese was erratic. The Dolphins were outrushed 184-95. They lost 27-14 to a bad team.



Another bad opponent was up next in the Houston Oilers (today's Tennessee Titans). Griese played a much tighter game, going 10/17 for 138 yards and a couple touchdowns. Csonka ran for 84 yards, while Kiick added 52. The defense recovered three fumbles and a 20-10 road win evened Miami's record at 1-1.

The home opener was a Saturday night affair against a good Oakland Raiders team that was a consistent contender in the AFC. And Miami got the big plays going on both sides of the ball. Warfield's three catches produced 120 yards. The defense intercepted four passes, included two by Curtis Johnson. The Dolphins won 20-13.

Another Saturday night game followed at the New York Jets. A four-point underdog against a poor team, Miami played another good all-around game. Griese went 14/24 for 224 yards and two touchdowns. Warfield stretched the field with five catches for 122 yards. And the D produced three more picks in a 20-6 win.

The Dolphins went on to lowly Buffalo and were in a tough game, taking a 20-14 lead into the third quarter. But Miami was controlling the running game, eventually winning rush yardage 147-53. Griese threw a 43-yard TD pass to Warfield to open the lead up, and the Dolphins pulled away to win 33-14.

Miami was 4-1. They were riding high. They had it going on. No one could have guessed what the next three weeks would bring.

Cleveland, generally a decent team in this era, brought a mediocre 1970 edition into the Orange Bowl. Griese threw three interceptions, including a Pick-6. The Dolphins secondary was carved up by Browns' QB Bill Nelsen in a bad 28-0 loss.

A road trip to Baltimore was expected to be difficult. The Colts were the class of the AFC East in the new alignment that followed the AFL-NFL merger prior to this 1970 season. In fact, Baltimore would win the Super Bowl this year. Miami would have to be at their best. And they were anything but.

The Dolphin special teams were awful, giving up TDs on both punt and kickoff return. Griese, along with backup John Stofa threw three interceptions. They were penalized for 117 yards. Even though Miami outrushed Baltimore 201-82, this still ended up a 35-0 debacle.

A home game with the lowly Philadelphia Eagles was the ideal antidote to this bad stretch of play. So it seemed. Instead, Griese and Stofa threw four more picks. Miami was down 24-0 after three quarters. This completed an 11-quarter stretch where the Dolphins were outscored 87-zip. At last, in the fourth quarter, Stofa tossed a couple TD passes and the final score ended up 24-17. But Miami was 4-4 and reeling.

With six games left, and a playoff format that allowed for just one wild-card, there are a lot of seasons in this era where Miami would have been done. But the AFC was top-heavy and there was a lot of mediocrity surrounding that final playoff berth. The only question was whether the Dolphins could get it going on again.

Miami hosted a bad New Orleans Saints team in mid-November. Dolphin defensive back Lloyd Mumphord opened the scoring with a 32-yard Pick-6. Griese played his best game of the year, going 15/19 for 225 yards and no mistakes. Kiick ran for 82 yards, while Csonka powered for 67. A comfortable 21-10 win got the Fish back on track.

It was time for a rematch with Baltimore. After spotting the Colts a field goal, rookie Jake Scott returned a punt 77 yards to the house. Griese ran for one touchdown, then threw a 27-yard scoring pass to Warfield. The Dolphins were up 21-3 and coasted home 34-17.

This new era of the NFL had also introduced this innovation called Monday Night Football. Miami made its first appearance on the novel show in Atlanta. Against a mediocre opponent, the Dolphin ground game muscled up. A 218-111 edge in rush yardage was keyed by Csonka's 108 yards on 19 carries. Miami won 20-7.

That was followed up by a dismantling of the Patriots. Morris opened the home game with Boston by returning the opening kickoff for a touchdown. Then Mumphord scooped up a blocked field goal and took it home. Csonka had another 100-yards-plus outing in the 37-20 win.

At 8-4, the Dolphins were rolling. The wild-card would come down to Miami and the runner-up in the Oakland/Kansas City fight in the AFC West. The Raiders and Chiefs were both 7-3-2 (ties were much more common, with overtime not existing until 1974). That boils down to the same winning percentage, since you assume a tie is a half-win and a half-loss for such purposes. The Raiders and Chiefs were about to play head-to-head, so if Miami could keep winning, they would grab the wild-card.

Miami hosted the New York Jets on a rainy late afternoon. The weather made the game sluggish, and it was tied 10-10 after three quarters. But the Dolphins pieced together a couple drives, both ending with Garo Yepremian field goals. They won 16-10.

Kansas City lost in Oakland, which worked against Miami. The Dolphins would have had the tiebreaker against the Raiders because of their Week 3 win, meaning the playoff spot would have been clinched. But the Chiefs, with a superior conference record, had the tiebreaker against Miami. That meant the Dolphins still needed to win the finale to seal the deal.

That wouldn't be a problem. They were playing well. Buffalo was doing anything but. Kiick and Csonka both ran for early touchdowns. Griese threw a 21-yard TD pass to Twilley. The score was 21-0 at the end of the first quarter and the afternoon could be one long party for the fans. The final was 45-7.

Miami fans had reason to be hopeful going into the AFC playoffs. They had the conference's second-best record behind Baltimore. They had beaten the Colts head-to-head. They had also beaten the Raiders head-to-head. But could this young team go west and win at Oakland in the postseason?

Odds makers were skeptical and slotted the Raiders a six-point favorite in the divisional round, a spread that well exceeds the advantage that might be given simply based on home field. Miami played Oakland evenly, but were on the wrong side of a couple big plays. In a 7-7 game in the third quarter, Griese threw a Pick-6. Shortly after, the young secondary gave up an 82-yard TD pass. Those plays were the difference in a 21-14 loss.

If you wanted to look at this game and feel like it was just the mistakes of youth in a pressure situation, that would be reasonable. The good news is this—now, the Dolphins had playoff experience. And they would make the most of it.

1971

Miami was looking to take the next step. They did just that, reaching the first of what would be three straight Super Bowls. And along the way, they won one of the most famous postseason games in league history.

The Dolphin offense was anchored by four future Hall of Famers. Griese was at quarterback and while his 55 percent completion rate seems low by today's standards, it was sixth-best in the league in what was a more difficult era to throw the football. Warfield caught 43 passes and averaged better than 23 yards a pop.

A balanced running game was led by Csonka. The big fullback powered his way to over 1,000 yards in what was then a 14-game schedule. Csonka ran behind a line that was keyed by right guard Larry Little.

In addition to these four great players, Kiick ran for 738 yards and caught 40 balls. Morris was a change-of-pace speedster in the backfield, rushing for 315 yards and averaging better than five a pop. Twilley averaged better than 15 yards a catch.

Griese was the league's All-Pro quarterback in 1971, and the offense ranked fourth in the NFL in points scored. The defense, while not as star-studded, was even more effective. Bill Stanfill was a Pro Bowler at defensive end. Scott, who intercepted seven passes, also got Pro Bowl honors at free safety. Miami's D was third in the league for points allowed.

The season opened in Denver. The Broncos were a subpar team, but the Dolphins did not play well. They lost four fumbles and Griese was sacked five times. They trailed 10-3 in the fourth quarter. Griese hit Warfield for a 31-yard TD pass to tie the game. The 10-10 tie held. There's no sugar-coating that this was a poor performance, but escaping with a tie would prove significant before the season was over.

Miami's running game was able to get going at Buffalo. Kiick and Csonka each cleared the 100-yard mark against a terrible team. Griese threw a 23-yard touchdown pass to Warfield that broke the game open in the fourth quarter and the Dolphins got on the board with a 29-14 win.

But another bad game followed. Playing the mediocre New York Jets at home, Miami seemed in control much of the game. They led 10-0 going into the fourth quarter. But a couple missed field goals by Garo Yepremian kept the Jets in it, and the Dolphins paid the price. New York scored twice in the fourth quarter and pulled a 14-10 upset. With a record of 1-1-1, compiled against weak opposition, 1971 was not shaping up as the breakout year Miami was hoping for.

The Dolphins went to Cincinnati, where the Bengals were on their way to a bad season. The Miami defense would struggle, allowing over 200 yards on the ground. But they got stops when they had to, and the big-play passing game got going. Warfield caught four balls for 92 yards and those big plays were the difference in a needed 23-13 win. Miami followed that up by hammering mediocre New England at home, 41-3. Griese threw three touchdown passes in the first quarter, giving Dolphin fans their first really easy afternoon.



Miami went north to old Shea Stadium for the rematch with the Jets. This time, they came ready to muscle up. Csonka racked up 137 yards on 20 carries. Kiick added 121 more yards on 17 carries. The Dolphins got a 30-14 revenge win.

The Los Angeles Rams would contend for a playoff spot to the end. A road trip to the L.A. Coliseum would be a good test. Miami passed the test. Griese was sharp, going 13/19 for 209 yards and no mistakes. Warfield caught three balls for 108 yards, including a 74-yard TD strike in the first quarter. The Dolphins led 17-0 after three quarters, then hung on for a 20-14 win.

Four straight home games were up starting on November 7. It started easy enough with Buffalo. The Bills got 90 yards rushing from O.J. Simpson, but not much else. Miami got over 300 yards on the ground as a team, led by 116 from Morris. The result was a 34-0 whitewash.

The Pittsburgh Steelers were a mediocre team in 1971, but this was the core of talent that would emerge one year later as the famed "Steel Curtain". The Steelers came to the Orange Bowl and put the Dolphins in a 21-3 hole by the second quarter. Griese answered by tossing a 12-yard touchdown pass to Warfield. Before halftime, the Griese-Warfield combo hooked up on an 86-yard scoring play. And in the fourth quarter, they did it one more time—a 60-yard TD strike. Those were Warfield's only three catches of the day, but they were more than enough. Miami won 24-21.

Now riding high at 7-1-1, the Dolphins were set for the biggest game of the season to date. The Baltimore Colts came in at 7-2.

The game was hard-fought and tied 14-14 going into the fourth quarter. The difference was that Csonka's 93 rush yards gave Miami a ground attack. Griese played mistake-free, while the defense intercepted three passes. Yepremian ultimately booted a 20-yard field goal to give Miami a 17-14 win. They had a 1 ½ game lead in the AFC East with just four weeks to go.

A division title and playoff berth seemed even more secure when the Dolphins concluded the homestand by blasting the Chicago Bears 34-3 on Monday Night Football. But there was not a lot of margin for error. And Miami gave at least some of that error back in a bad loss at New England. Even though Morris returned the opening kickoff for a touchdown, everything went downhill from there. There was no running game. There were five turnovers. And there was a 34-13 loss.

So, the Dolphins were 9-2-1, and their lead over the Colts was back down to a half-game. The rematch in Baltimore was up next. Furthermore, with the Oakland Raiders at 7-3-2, and the Kansas City Chiefs at 8-3-1, battling it out in the AFC West, the wild-card was no guarantee.

On a late Saturday afternoon in Baltimore's old Memorial Stadium, the roles from the first game between these teams was reversed. This time, the great Johnny Unitas played the mistake-free game, while Griese threw a couple picks. The Dolphins could not run the ball. They lost 14-3.

Miami did get some good news the next day when the Chiefs won a head-to-head battle against the Raiders. With Oakland slipping to 7-4-2, Miami's 9-3-1 record at least ensured them a wild-card spot. But they needed help to win the division and get home games in the AFC playoffs.

The Dolphins hosted the Green Bay Packers, who had fallen hard since the retirement of the great Vince Lombardi following the 1967 season. On a windy day, both offenses had a hard time getting going and we were in a 6-6 tie in the third quarter. The Dolphins delivered, with a couple of touchdown drives to open up the game, and then sealed it when they blocked a field goal and ran it back for a score. The final was 27-6.

And good news came from New England—the Patriots, a two-touchdown underdog, upset the Colts 21-17. Both Baltimore and Miami were going to the playoffs, but the Dolphins were going as AFC East champs.

At first glance, that honor seemed a disadvantage. Prior to 1975, the NFL used a format that did not seed division winners. While wild-cards were always on the road, the 1-2-3 seeds were determined by a rotation system with the East, Central, and West champs. This year, the East was playing at the West. Which meant that not only were the Dolphins and Chiefs, the top two teams in the AFC, having to play right away, but Miami was going on the road.

The Dolphins' bad luck proved good fortune for NFL fans generally. Playing in the late afternoon on Christmas Day, Miami and Kansas City staged a classic. The Fish played from behind the entire game. KC took a 10-0 lead after the first quarter. Miami tied it 10-10 by halftime. The Chiefs went up 17-10. The Dolphins tied it. Kansas City went ahead 24-17. Miami tied it again. We went to overtime at 24-all.

Griese was playing well, going 20/35 for 263 yards. Warfield caught seven passes for 140 yards. Kansas City was answering by running the ball a little bit better. The big statistical difference was that the Dolphins won the turnover battle. And when Yepremian booted a 37-yard field goal early in the second overtime, Miami won what remains the longest NFL game ever played.

The Dolphins were also positioned to reap the rewards of their division title. The Colts had won decisively in Cleveland, so it was Round 3 for Miami and Baltimore in the AFC Championship Game. And it would be in the old Orange Bowl.

Conservative, mistake-free football had been the deciding factor in the two regular season games. So it would be here. Griese only threw eight passes. But one of them was a 75-yard touchdown strike to Warfield in the first quarter. Miami intercepted Unitas three times. And one of them was a 62-yard Pick-6 from Anderson. Csonka added a short touchdown run in the fourth quarter. The final score was 21-0 and the Dolphins were going to the Super Bowl.

The Dallas Cowboys, who had lost a heartbreaker to Baltimore in the previous year's Super Bowl were back for redemption. Playing in New Orleans' Tulane Stadium, Miami was just overmatched. They were outrushed 252-80, and lost a couple of fumbles on top of it. The 24-3 loss was never really a game.

But 1971 had the feel of it being the Cowboys' time, with the Dolphins now knocking even harder on the door. That feeling would prove to be reality in this gradually escalating era of Miami Dolphins greatness.

1972

The 1972 Miami Dolphins not only took the final step, they did it in historic fashion—the only undefeated season in league history that was capped off with a championship.

That's impressive enough, but doing it mostly with a backup quarterback is even more impressive. Griese was injured in the first half of the season. Earl Morrall started the final nine games and played well—a 55 percent completion rate was solid in this era, and Morrall's 9.1 yards-per-attempt was excellent by the standards of any era.

Big plays in the passing game were made easier by the presence of Warfield at receiver. The future Hall of Fame wideout caught 29 balls and again averaged an astonishing 20-plus yards per catch. Howard Twilley was again a reliable second target.

But a three-headed monster at running back was what made Miami's offense go, and a big reason the transition from Griese to Morrall (and back again, in the postseason) was manageable. Csonka ran over 1,100 yards. Even as a fullback running inside, Csonka averaged five yards a pop. So did Morris, who worked the outside and also delivered 1,000 yards. Kiick ran for over 500 yards, and his 21 catches were second on the team.

Miami's offense line was anchored by Little, a 1st-team All-Pro in 1972. The other side of the line had another 1st-team All-Pro in defensive end Stanfill. Buoniconti was a Pro Bowler at linebacker. Anderson was the NFL's best strong safety and Scott, who intercepted five passes, also punched his ticket to the Pro Bowl.

As befits a team that won all of its games, the Dolphins ranked first in the league for both points scored and points allowed.

The league decided a late afternoon rematch back in KC was a good way to open 1972. This year's Chiefs team wouldn't be quite as good and would miss the postseason. Miami's defense forced four Turnovers. Csonka rushed for 118 yards on 21 carries. The Dolphins built a 20-0 lead by the third quarter and won 20-10.

The home opener was against the lowly Houston Oilers. A balanced ground attack leveled the Oilers. Miami enjoyed a 274-63 edge in rush yardage, led 27-0 in the third quarter and the final score was 34-13.

Another marquee late afternoon game was up in Minnesota. The Vikings were a top team in the NFC, and would be so throughout this decade. And even though 1972 would be their odd-year out, the one time in the 1970s, they missed the playoffs, the Vikings gave the Dolphins all they could handle.

Miami trailed 14-6 in the fourth quarter. With the two-point conversion still over two decades in the future, and playing in an era where throwing the ball was much harder than it is today, being eight points down at this stage of the game was a big deficit. But the Dolphins got a 51-yard field goal from Garo Yepremian, followed by a short TD pass from Griese and escaped the Twin Cities with a 16-14 win.

A road trip to New York and old Shea Stadium to play the Jets was up next. Griese played his best game of the season, going 15/27 for 220 yards and no mistakes. Csonka rushed for 102 yards on 18 carries. Miami won comfortably, 27-17.

The subpar San Diego Chargers came to Miami. In the early part of the game, Griese was knocked out with a dislocated ankle. Morrall came off the bench, with the score tied 3-3. Anderson turned the tide of this game with a 35-yard return of a fumble for a touchdown. Morrall played well, going 8/10 for 86 yards and two touchdown passes. The Dolphins won 24-10. But the injury to Griese had altered their season's trajectory.

If anyone was prepared to step in though, it was Morrall. He enjoys a reputation as one of the best backup quarterbacks in NFL history. That might sound like damning with faint praise, but don't forget that the man he backed up in Baltimore was Johnny Unitas. Morrall had led the Colts to Super Bowl III after Unitas was injured, before losing in a famous upset to Joe Namath and the Jets. In 1970, Morrall came off the bench for the injured Johnny U in Super Bowl V and helped Baltimore beat Dallas. Now, Morrall was in charge of a Miami Dolphins team that had their own high expectations.

Morrall's first start, against a bad Buffalo Bills team, did not go well. He threw an early Pick-6 and the passing game in general was non-existent. But the defense and running game were both locked in, and the Fish won 24-3.

A late afternoon road visit to Baltimore followed. This year's Baltimore edition would fall under .500. Miami's ground game pounded out 286 rushing yards in an easy 23-0 win.

The Dolphins came home to host another bad AFC East rival, the New England Patriots. Before the first half was out, Morris scored three touchdowns, while Csonka added another. Morrall went 7/13 for 162 yards and no mistakes. The starters were able to be lifted early in a 52-0 rout.

Miami was now 9-0. The New York Jets were 6-3 and the only team still chasing in the division. A head-to-head win over the Jets on November 19 would clinch the AFC East.

Facing Joe Namath's team, the Dolphins fell behind 17-7 in the second quarter and still trailed 24-21 going into the final period. The running of Morris was the difference. He produced 107 yards and his 14-yard TD scamper in the fourth quarter delivered a 28-24 win.

Miami was division champs. With playoff seeding still three years away, there was nothing to play for. Except some momentum. And, of course, a run at history in these final four regular season games.

The Dolphins hosted the St. Louis Cardinals on Monday Night Football. Csonka's 114 yards keyed a 200-51 edge in rush yardage and a 31-10 win. The next week in New England, Morrall went 11/19 for 201 yards, while Morris and Csonka ran for a combined 222 yards. The final score was 37-21. The defense took over the final two weeks. Miami collected six turnovers against both the New York Giants, and against Baltimore. The Dolphins beat the Giants 23-13 and shut out the Colts 16-0 on a late Saturday afternoon to close the perfect regular season.

It would be of note that Griese got some mop-up duty against the Colts, completing two of his three passes. Morrall was still the starter, but Griese was getting ready.

On Christmas Eve, the wild-card Cleveland Browns came south to the Orange Bowl. When the Dolphins blocked a punt for an early touchdown, then added a Yepremian field goal, it looked like this might be an easy game.

But the offense was not going anywhere. Morris ran well, with 72 yards on 15 carries. But Csonka was being shut down and Kiick couldn't get loose. Morrall went 6/13 for 88 yards and was sacked four times. The Browns took a 14-13 by the fourth quarter.

Christmas was looking grim as we moved into early evening. But the Miami defense was keeping their team in the game. The Dolphins intercepted five passes, with two apiece from Anderson and linebacker Doug Swift. Finally, an eight-yard TD run from Kiick gave Miami a 20-14 lead and they held on for the win.

The previous day, the Pittsburgh Steelers had beaten the Oakland Raiders in a historic playoff game that ended on a dramatic and controversial touchdown. The homefield rotation system had put the Steelers on the top line, so Miami's reward for their undefeated season was a January trip to Pittsburgh for the AFC Championship Game.

A tough game was tied 7-7 at the half. Morrall wasn't able to get anything going, and when the Steelers nudged out to a 10-7 lead, Shula made the move. Griese came into the game.

The QB change paid off. Griese only threw five passes and completed three of them. But they went for 70 yards and opened up the running game. Miami got a couple short TD runs from Kiick and took a 21-10 lead. Pittsburgh cut the margin back to 21-17 and had two possessions where Terry Bradshaw could have won it. But the Miami defense came through. Buoniconti and linebacker Nick Kolen each intercepted a pass. The Dolphins were going back to the Super Bowl.



Miami's last hurdle to championship perfection was the Washington Redskins and MVP running back Larry Brown. The Dolphins were a narrow one-point favorite at the Los Angeles Coliseum.

Griese connected with Twilley on a 28-yard touchdown pass to get the lead. Kiick's 1-yard TD run made it 14-0 in the second quarter. And the Dolphin defense was dominating. Brown couldn't find any room. They intercepted Redskins quarterback Billy Kilmer three times, twice by Scott. The two-touchdown margin seemed like it might as well have been 50 points.

Late in the game, Yepremian was lined up for a field goal try. It would seal the game and give a 17-0 season a fitting end with a 17-0 win. Instead, it nearly turned into a historic disaster. The kick was blocked. Yepremian picked the ball up and threw an awkward looking pass to no one in particular. It ended up an interception in the hands of Washington's Mike Bass, who ended up with a touchdown.

The lead was now 14-7 and theoretically a game. But the Dolphin defense wasn't giving up anything and they sealed the deal. Yepremian's flub could be an amusing sidebar to a dominating afternoon. Scott, having intercepted Kilmer twice, was named the game's MVP.

Miam was more than Super Bowl champions. They had a unique place in history. And that historical place would be augmented in 1973.

1973

The 1973 Miami Dolphins didn't run the table, but they did win a repeat championship. And given the fact they did it against a tougher schedule, with more postseason dominance, and with a target clearly on their back the whole way, there's a good case that the '73 team was even better than the undefeated 1972 edition.

A defense that allowed the fewest points in the league led the way and Miami had the game's two best safeties. Anderson and Scott were each 1st-team All-Pro. Anderson intercepted eight passes from his strong safety spot, while Scott roamed at free safety and picked off four more. The front seven was led by Pro Bowlers at defensive end and linebacker, with Stanfill and Buoniconti.



Miami's offense was run-heavy and led by another 1st-team All-Pro in Csonka. Csonka rushed for just over 1,000 yards and averaged 4.6 yards a pop. Morris was explosive on the outside, generating 954 yards and averaging over six yards per carry. Kiick was a reliable pass-catcher out the backfield, his 27 catches being the third-most on the team. The line they worked behind was led by a 1st-team All-Pro guard in Little.

Griese was healthy and enjoyed a Pro Bowl campaign. Although his numbers—53 percent completion rate, 6.5 yards-per-attempt and 17-8 TD/INT ratio—were above average by the standards of the era, they weren't quite what they had been two years earlier.

What Griese did have was Warfield on the outside. Warfield averaged over 17 yards a catch and was 1st-team All-Pro. Marlin Briscoe emerged as a reliable target, and his 30 catches actually led the team. Miami's offense ranked fifth in the NFL in points scored.

The season opened home against the San Francisco 49ers, who were fresh off winning three straight NFC West titles. But this year's 49er team would slip under .500 and it started in the fourth quarter of this Week 1 game. The Dolphins trailed 13-6. Griese threw a touchdown pass to tie it. Two field goals and a safety sealed the 21-13 win.

A road trip to a good Oakland Raiders team, a playoff perennial under John Madden was next. And it was here that the winning streak, now at 18 games, came to an end. Miami's defense kept it close by getting red-zone stops, but the Raiders booted short field goals and took a 12-0 lead into the fourth quarter. A late TD from the Dolphins made it close, but it ended a 12-7 defeat.

The offense was not playing well, but that was about to change with a home date against a subpar New England Patriots team. In the second quarter, Miami erupted and Morris was the reason. He ripped off touchdown runs of 24 and 70 yards, then added a 35-yard TD jaunt in the second half. Morris finished with 197 yards on just 15 carries and the result was a 44-23 blowout.

Another home date with a weak divisional opponent, the New York Jets, gave Griese a chance to open up. He threw three touchdown passes, two of them to Warfield. Briscoe caught six balls for 98 yards and the Dolphins coasted home, 31-3.

Miami went to Cleveland for a Monday Night Football appearance. The Browns were a good team, but not a playoff squad. The Dolphin offense spent the first half back in its shell, trailing 6-3. Griese only completed three passes on the night. But the running game took over after halftime. Csonka finished with 114 yards, Morris added 94 and Miami won 17-9.

Buffalo was emerging as the top challenger in the AFC East. O.J. Simpson was having a spectacular year, one that would end with a historic crossing of the 2,000-yard threshold and an MVP award. The great Dolphin defense limited the Juice to 55 yards. Griese threw a couple touchdown passes to tight end Jim Mandich in the second quarter to open the game up. Miami was sloppy, turning it over five times, but they still won easily, 27-6.

The return visit north to New England started shaky, and the Dolphins trailed the Patriots 14-13 at the half. But when you dominate the ground game, the second half is often going to be yours. That's what happened here. A 238-94 edge in rush yardage, keyed by 100 from Morris, paved the way to a 30-14 victory. The Jets again followed the Patriots on the schedule and Miami completed another season sweep behind the running game. Csonka's 107 yards led a 24-14 win.

Miami came home to host the Baltimore Colts, who kept slipping this year. Miami's Tim Foley brought back two blocked punts for touchdowns. Morris' 144-yard day led a 44-0 romp.

The Dolphins were riding high at 8-1. The Bills were in second place at 5-4. Miami was going to Buffalo on November 18. By winning this game, Miami could clinch the AFC East.

This time, Buffalo got its running game going. Simpson ran for 120 yards and backfield mate Jim Braxton added 119. But the Bills could not throw the ball, and the Dolphins kept getting stops at the point on the field when they had to. They also jumped out to a 17-0 lead and spent the second half just salting that lead—and another division title—away. And this year, the AFC East winner was going to be the #1 seed.

In the meantime, there were four games left. The Dolphins went to play a very good Dallas Cowboys team on Thanksgiving Day. An early TD run by Csonka was followed by a 45-yard Griese-to-Warfield scoring pass. The game was turned over to the defense and Miami won 14-7.

Another tough opponent, the playoff-bound Pittsburgh Steelers, who were a year away from starting this decade's greatest dynasty, came to the Orange Bowl on Monday Night. It turned into the Dick Anderson Show. The strong safety started the scoring with a Pick-6, then did it again in the second quarter. Anderson intercepted four passes on the night. The Dolphins were ahead 30-3 by halftime, then fended off a furious Steelers rally to win 30-26.

The penultimate regular season game in Baltimore was basically mailed in. Griese didn't play and Miami lost 16-3. The starting quarterback was back in the lineup for the finale at home against mediocre Detroit. Griese finished the season by going 11/15 for 141 yards, no mistakes and four touchdown passes—all to Warfield. With the 34-7 triumph, the Dolphins were 12-2 and primed to repeat.

On December 23, Miami hosted the Cincinnati Bengals in the divisional round. The offenses of both teams were humming in the first half. Griese threw a 14-yard TD pass to Warfield. Csonka and Morris both ran for touchdowns. While the Dolphin defense was having problems, they were forcing field goals. Miami led 21-16 at intermission.

The defense tightened up in the second half. The ground game kept pounding, concluding with a 241-97 edge in rush yardage. Morris carried 20 times for 106 yards. Griese tossed a TD pass to Mandich, kicker Garo Yepremian nailed a couple long field goal attempts and the Dolphins won 34-16.

A chance to avenge the Week 2 loss to Oakland awaited in the AFC Championship Game. The Raiders came to the Orange Bowl for a 4 PM kickoff on December 30. Miami came humming out of the gate, scoring two quick touchdowns, both short TD runs from Csonka. Griese was able to manage the game and threw just six passes on the day. The Raiders closed to within 17-10 by the third quarter. But Csonka was pounding away, going for 117 yards. He added another touchdown. Yepremian kicked a field goal. Miami finished with a decisive 27-10 win.

The last step would take place in Houston, where Rice Stadium was the host for the Super Bowl. The Minnesota Vikings were the opponent. The Vikes had their own great defense, the famed "Purple People Eaters", and they had their own Hall of Fame quarterback in Fran Tarkenton. But they were nowhere near as good as the Dolphins.

Super Bowl VIII started much like the AFC Championship Game. The Dolphins put two quick touchdowns on the board, with Csonka and Kiick going for short TD runs. Then the defense took over. Minnesota could get nothing going until a meaningless fourth quarter touchdown. Csonka muscled his way to 145 yards, then a Super Bowl record. He added another touchdown in the third quarter to put the Dolphins up 24-0. The final was 24-7. Csonka was an easy choice for game MVP, the first running back to win the honor.

Miami was a dynasty. They had three straight AFC titles and two straight Super Bowl championships, one of which was a perfect season, and the other which concluded with complete dominance of the playoff field. The 1973 season remains the last time that the Vince Lombardi Trophy made its way to South Beach.

1974

The Dolphins were riding high. But there was a lot of rockiness in the waters of South Beach, from player dissatisfaction off the field and some injuries in it. The 1974 Miami Dolphins were still very good, and it took one of the great playoff games of all-time to end their bid for another Lombardi Trophy. But the signs of slippage were there.



It began in March of 1974, shortly after the team capped off their 1973 campaign with a dominant Super Bowl win over the Minnesota Vikings. The fledgling World Football League announced it had scooped up two big Dolphin stars—Csonka and Kiick. They wouldn't join the WFL until 1975, but the disruption of a great team was underway. Injury problems with Morris, and wide receiver Marlin Briscoe, would move them in and out of the lineup and add to the discontinuity.

But problems are all relative and most teams in the NFL would have gladly signed up for the chance to deal with Shula's issues. The Dolphins still had a future Hall of Fame quarterback in Griese. Griese's 60 percent completion rate and 7.8 yards-per-attempt were both in the top five among starting QBs and earned him a Pro Bowl spot. Warfield also made the Pro Bowl. Although, he too, would eventually land in the World Football League.

In the meantime, Griese integrated young Nat Moore into the passing game and Moore's 37 catches led the team. Mandich was a reliable tight end and Twilley continued to be a steadying force at wide receiver. And with the running game up in the air, Benny Malone and Don Nottingham each stepped into be solid contributors when the injury situation required it. Even with the disruptions, the Dolphin offense ranked third in the NFL for points scored.

Miami's defense was led by its great safety combo of Anderson and Scott. Anderson made the Pro Bowl, and Scott, with eight interceptions was a 1st-team All-Pro. Up front, the Dolphins had a Pro Bowl pass rusher at defensive end with Stanfill. The D as a whole was sixth-best in the league for points allowed. Like the team overall, the defense was still very good, but they slipped from elite status.

Issues with defense and the running game showed up immediately when the season began at mediocre New England. In spite of good work from the passing game—both Warfield and Briscoe had 100-plus yards receiving—Miami only ran for 89 yards and lost 34-24.

There was no time to lose in getting the defense shored up, because a road trip to Buffalo was next. The Bills were the prime challenger to the Dolphins in the AFC East, with O.J. Simpson coming off an MVP year in 1973. Miami was able to hold Simpson to 63 yards on the ground, while Morris ran for 88 yards and Csonka chipped in 68 more. The Dolphins won 24-16.

A road-heavy early schedule continued with a Week 3 trip to San Diego. Facing a subpar Chargers team Miami dug themselves a 21-7 hole after three quarters, as the rush defense again sprung holes. Griese responded with a touchdown pass to Moore to make it a game. Csonka and Kiick added short TD runs to escape with a 28-21 win.

The home opener would be on Monday Night against the New York Jets. Miami's old physicality up front returned. They won the rush yardage battle, 159-41, shutting down John Riggins. The Dolphins took an early 14-0 lead and ultimately won 21-17.

A difficult road trip to Washington was up next, where the Redskins were bound for their fourth straight playoff appearance. Miami led 10-0 going into the fourth quarter. But they couldn't run the ball and salt the game away. And the pass defense was getting carved up by Sonny Jurgensen. Play opened up in the fourth quarter and the Dolphins fell 20-17.

With a 3-2 record, it would be a stretch to say that Miami was in trouble. Especially with four of the first five games on the road. But in this era when only four teams per conference made the playoffs, they had to play with more urgency than would be the case in our own day. The good news was that the Fish had four soft opponents ahead, three of them at home.

Miami's play was far from inspiring against Kansas City. The Dolphins trailed 3-2 in the fourth quarter, as Griese was intercepted three times. But Csonka was able to pound out 80 yards on 17 carries and his fourth quarter touchdown produced a 9-3 win. Another uninspiring win over the Baltimore Colts followed. Down 7-3 in the third quarter, the Dolphins were at least running the ball well. Behind a 252-89 edge in rush yardage, Miami took over and won 17-7 behind 100-plus yard games from Malone and Nottingham.

The Malone-Nottingham combo got rolling again the next week in Atlanta, and this time Miami put it together and gave the home fans an easy afternoon. Malone ran for 108 yards, Nottingham added 87, and the final was 42-7.

That concluded the three-game homestand. The four-game run against weak teams concluded with a trip to New Orleans. The Dolphins were sharp—no turnovers—and Griese threw three touchdown passes, two of them to Mandich, in a 21-0 win.

Miami was now 7-2 and they were tied for first with Buffalo. A head-to-head showdown with the Bills in the Orange Bowl was up on November 17. A Dolphin win would not only give them sole possession of first place, it would also give them the tiebreaker.

A touchdown run from Csonka and 49-yard TD pass from Griese to Warfield gave the Dolphins early control, with a 14-0 lead at halftime. Griese would go 11/18 for 237 yards on the afternoon. But the Miami defense had trouble closing and a lost fumble gave Buffalo a gift touchdown. The game was tied 21-21 in the fourth quarter. The Dolphins, though, were battle-tested and they responded. Nottingham ran for touchdowns from 11 yards and 23 yards. It was the difference in a 35-28 win.

Now in firm control with four weeks to go, the Dolphins gave at least some of that control back a week later in New York against the Jets. There was no running game and Joe Namath beat Miami 17-14 with a 45-yard touchdown pass in the fourth quarter. The Bills won, pulling back into a tie with the Dolphins at 8-3.

Miami hosted Cincinnati on Monday Night Football on December 2. Buffalo had won the day before, so there was no slack for the Dolphins. They captured the form of the previous two years. Csonka ground out 123 yards on 24 carries. Griese was ruthlessly efficient, completing 11/13 passes for 118 yards and no mistakes. Miami held serve atop the AFC East with an easy 24-3 win.

Malone was the focal point of the ground game in Baltimore a week later, going for 104 yards and helping the Dolphins build a 17-3 lead. With the margin at 17-6 in the fourth quarter, the Colts were on the march. The Miami defense forced a short field goal attempt. With no two-point conversion in effect, keeping the lead at 17-9 was enormous. The Dolphins preserved a 17-16 win.

Meanwhile, the Jets were doing some more damage to the AFC East contenders. New York beat Buffalo. Miami was 10-3. Buffalo was 9-4. While the Bills would get the wild-card, the Dolphins had clinched another division title. Under the rotation system, Miami was going to be the #3 seed this year.

Morrall got the start in the finale at home against New England. The game started poorly, with the Patriots returning both an interception and fumble for a touchdown. Miami trailed 24-0 by the second quarter. Then, in a rally that would prefigure what happened at this same venue in a historic 1981 playoff game against San Diego, the Dolphins came storming back. They cut the lead to 24-17 by halftime. Morrall finished 15/23 for 288 yards and he completed the comeback, all the way to a 34-27 win.

Whatever flaws the Dolphins had shown, they were still 11-3. They had the second-best record in the AFC, but the playoff format meant they were going to play the 12-2 Oakland Raiders, and their MVP quarterback, Ken Stabler, in the divisional playoffs.

That late Saturday afternoon in Oakland's Alameda-Coliseum would be a game for the ages. Miami got their running game going, rolling up 213 yards on the ground, compared to 114 for the Raiders. Stabler countered by giving Oakland an edge in passing yardage, even though Griese did play well. In a back-and-forth game, Oakland had the ball last.

Miami was holding a 26-21 lead, but in the closing seconds, Stabler flipped an eight-yard touchdown pass to running back Clarence Davis, who snagged the ball while surrounded by Dolphin defenders. It became known as "The Sea of Hands" game in NFL lore and it ended Miami's bid for a three-peat.

The Dolphins run at the very top of the NFL was over. And so, at least for a short time, was their status as a regular playoff team. Warfield joined Csonka and Kiick in playing with the WFL in 1975. Anderson suffered an injury that kept him on the sidelines during that '75 campaign. While Miami went 10-4 in 1975, and again in 1977, the higher standards for postseason play left them at home. In between, there was a disappointing 6-8 season. While the World Football League didn't last, it existed long enough to inflict damage on this early 1970s dynasty.