

## THE DALLAS DYNASTY

The Cowboys From 1990-96



The Dallas Cowboys were one of the NFL's great franchises, starting in 1966-67 when they lost a pair of epic championship game battles to Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers. Those losses, painful as they may have been, were the linchpin to an exceptional run of excellence under head coach Tom Landry. It was a run that included Super Bowl victories in 1971 and 1977, trips to the Super Bowl in 1970, 1975, and 1978, winning seasons every year and the playoffs in most years.

But by 1989, the well had run dry. Landry's last playoff victory was seven years in the past, and the Cowboys hadn't even made the postseason since an NFC East title in 1985. When a well is dry in the state of Texas, it's time to bring in an oilman to do the drilling. And that's what happened when Jerry Jones bought the franchise.

Jones immediately fired Landry, the only head coach in team history. A former player at Arkansas, Jones hired his old teammate, Jimmy Johnson, who was coaching at the University of Miami. Johnson already had a national reputation—he was an excellent coach, who had won one national championship and come within a single play of winning two more. He also had the reputation as a “bad boy” coach, with the celebratory swagger of both himself and his players.

It was quite the change. Even the numerous fans across the country who loathed the Cowboys found it hard to dislike the quiet Landry and an ownership that was mostly invisible. But now with the flamboyant Jones and the cocksure Johnson, Dallas would take the concept of “you love them or hate them” to new levels.

There was still the matter of winning football games. Landry had struggled to a woeful 3-13 season in his final year. The cupboard was bare. Things got worse in the first year under Johnson. But the seeds of success were also planted.

Dallas drafted quarterback Troy Aikman with the first overall pick in the 1989 draft. They drafted running back Emmitt Smith and wide receiver Michael Irvin. Collectively, this trio would form “The Big Three”. All three made the Hall of Fame and they became the face of the franchise in the years to come.

The talent went well beyond The Big Three though. The Cowboys built a fearsome offensive line, including names like Hall of Famer Larry Allen, Nate Newton, and others. They had great players at each level of the defense. Offensively, there were weapons to complement The Big Three, from tight end Jay Novacek to fullback Daryl Johnston.

In short, Dallas had everything. By 1990, they stayed in contention until the final week of the season. By 1991, they were in the playoffs. And in 1992, they broke through and won the Super Bowl. That was the first of what would be three championships in four years.

And there was never a shortage of controversy. The biggest came when a rift between Jones and Johnson blew into public view, and Johnson left after winning his second title in 1993. Jones then hired Barry Switzer, another former college coach with a rogue reputation. Inheriting the players and staff Johnson had put together, Switzer rode the wave to a championship in 1995 and won the NFC East in 1996, before the dynasty came to an end.

The seven seasons from 1990 through 1996 make up *The Dallas Dynasty*. Each one of those seasons has its own individual article published on TheSportsNotebook.com. Those seven articles have been brought together here, and edited to create a cohesive compilation.

It's all here. All the great players and their big moments. The epic battles with the San Francisco 49ers, the Super Bowl battles with Buffalo, the playoff games with Green Bay and so much more. You'll watch Dallas rise, peak, and then start to descend, as we journey through a unique era of the NFL.

## 1990

It was the second year of the Jimmy Johnson era in Dallas. The first year had gone inauspiciously to say the least—a 1-15 finish. The 1990 Dallas Cowboys showed signs of life, staying in contention for the playoffs to the final week of the season and setting the stage for a great era in franchise history.



The Dallas personnel was still a mix of the too old and the still-developing. Troy Aikman was in his second year at quarterback and while he made progress, the mistakes were still too frequent—an 11-18 TD/INT ratio. Michael Irvin, a future Hall of Fame wide receiver, only caught 20 balls—though he averaged better than twenty yards a pop.

Aikman and Irvin were two parts of what became known as “The Big Three” in Cowboy lore. The third element was rookie running back Emmitt Smith and he made an immediate splash. Smith ran for over 900 yards, won Offensive Rookie of the Year and was the team’s only Pro Bowl selection.

Even though no other players were Pro Bowl-bound in 1990, Johnson continued to develop talent like tight end Jay Novacek, center Mark Stepnoski, right tackle Nate Newton and linebacker Jack Del Rio.

The signs of progress came early. Dallas beat San Diego 17-14 to start the season. They swept a pair of October games with Tampa Bay (the schedule formula prior to 2002 had a conference’s two fifth-place teams playing twice the following season).

Nor were the early losses that disturbing—Dallas dropped three games to NFC East playoff teams in the Giants and Redskins. Two of the three were competitive. The only real disappointment of the first seven weeks was a 20-3 loss at the mediocre Phoenix Cardinals.

The Cowboys dropped another tough game to a future playoff team, a 21-20 decision at home to the Eagles and appeared to hit a wall. Dallas lost 24-9 at a bad New York Jets team and were predictably manhandled at home by the two-time defending champion San Francisco 49ers, 24-6.

With a record of 3-7, a full-scale meltdown that would obscure the early season progress was a real possibility. Instead, the next four games were when Johnson’s Cowboys showed their mettle.

Dallas traveled west to play the Los Angeles Rams, on hard times in 1990, but coming off a strong seven-year run. Emmitt rushed for 154 yards, winning a ground battle with Ram back Cleveland Gary, who ran for 103. The game was tied 21-21 into the fourth quarter before the Cowboys got a field goal that won it.

A bigger breakout game came on Thanksgiving Day against Washington. Emmitt rolled up 132 yards on the ground, while the Redskins got away from their own traditionally strong rushing attack. The result was a 27-17 win for Dallas.

After a 10-day break, the Cowboys came back to host New Orleans in what was a critical game in an NFC wild-card picture that was filled with mediocre teams on the fringe competing for the 6-seed. The Saints were led by quarterback Steve Walsh, who had been drafted by Dallas before being traded.

It was a trade that Johnson, Walsh's college coach at Miami, would often second-guess in his darker moments before Aikman was established on the road to the Hall of Fame. On this late Sunday afternoon, Aikman played efficiently, going 15/21 for 177 yards. Walsh also threw for 177 yards, on 18/27 passing. An evenly played game was decided by a single red-zone stop—Dallas won, 17-13.

The Cowboys had a late bye week and the results left them tied for the final wild-card spot. Dallas, New Orleans, Minnesota and Green Bay were all 6-7.

But the young and coming Cowboys were the peaking team and they crushed the Cardinals on December 16. Emmitt ran for 103 yards, the defense shut down Phoenix back Johnny Johnson and the final was 41-10. The Packers, Vikings and Saints all lost. Improbably, Dallas controlled their playoff destiny with two weeks to go.

Then disaster struck at Philadelphia. Aikman was knocked out after one pass attempt and lost for the rest of the season. Dallas was stuck with Babe Laufenberg as the season hung in the balance. In the rain at old Veterans Stadium, Laufenberg threw four interceptions, one of which was brought back to the house. The Cowboys lost 17-3.

It almost didn't matter—Green Bay and Minnesota had each lost on Saturday. If New Orleans could lose at San Francisco in the late afternoon window, Dallas would be in the playoffs. Even though the 49ers had clinched the #1 playoff seed and were resting quarterback Joe Montana, the backup QB was still Steve Young—another future Hall of Famer. But the Saints defense sacked Young four times, recovered four fumbles and stayed alive with a 13-10 win.

Dallas had to either win at Atlanta the following Sunday or hope that New Orleans lost to Los Angeles on the final Monday Night of the season. The game against the Falcons was a disaster. Emmitt was held to 34 yards rushing. Atlanta's Mike Rozier rolled up 155 yards on the ground and the Cowboys lost 26-7.

There was still hope—New Orleans, at 7-8, was hardly a sure thing to win the next night. But Johnson harbored no illusions, telling reporters "the Saints can get ready to play Chicago (the 3-seed in the NFC)." That's what happened. The Saints and Rams were tied 17-17 with two seconds to play. A potential game-winning field goal by New Orleans was blocked, but L.A. was flagged for being offside. A second attempt was good and Dallas was done for the year. But they had still sent a shot across the bow of the rest of the NFL.

## 1991

The burden of expectations were now in Dallas, to at least get into the postseason. Aikman was in his third year at quarterback and he stepped up and finished in the top five in both completion percentage and yards-per-attempt. The mistakes were still there, but the 11-10 interception ratio was at least manageable by the standards of this era.

Aikman was surrounded by Pro Bowlers. Emmitt Smith won the rushing title with 1,563 yards. Irvin led all receivers with over 1,500 yards. Novacek caught 59 balls for 664 yards. There were no Pro Bowlers on the offensive line, but the building blocks of a line that would eventually become one of the great units in league history were in place, with center Mark Stepnoski and right tackle Nate Newton. Dallas finished seventh in the NFL in points scored.

The defense would also eventually join the league's elite, but not in 1991. Defensive end Tony Tolbert got seven sacks, but that was the only notable achievement with a young group that included two rookies, defensive tackle Russell Maryland and corner Larry Brown. Dallas ended up 17th in a 28-team league in points allowed.



Aikman, Emmitt and Irving came out of the gate firing at the season opener in Cleveland. The Browns were on a rebuilding project led by Bill Belichick, in his first game as a head coach, and Dallas had too much firepower. Emmitt ran for 112 yards, Aikman went 24/37 for 274 yards and no interceptions, and Irvin caught nine balls for 123 yards. The result was a 26-14 win.

A showcase opportunity awaited at home on Monday Night against a powerful Washington Redskins team that was nearing the end of its own glory era, but had its best team yet in store for 1991. Dallas played well. Aikman went 27/42 for 242 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions. Emmitt ran for another 112 yards. But the Cowboys narrowly lost the turnover battle, 2-1 and were beaten 33-31 on an exceptional performance from Redskins kicker Chip Lohmiller.

The offensive line collapsed six days later in the face of the Philadelphia Eagles defense. Aikman was sacked eleven times, Emmitt couldn't find running room and the 24-0 loss handed Dallas their second straight defeat at home to an NFC East rival. They bounced back on trip to Phoenix, where Emmitt ran for two early touchdowns, including a 60-yard jaunt, pounded out 182 yards on the day and led a 17-9 win.

Dallas played their fourth divisional game of September when they hosted the New York Giants (the Cardinals were in the NFC East prior to 2002 and were also known as "Phoenix" rather than "Arizona"). The Giants were the defending Super Bowl champions, but under new leadership after Bill Parcells retired and the reins were given to an unknown in Ray Handley. Aikman spread the ball out to ten different receivers. Defensive back Ray Horton kept his team in it with a touchdown and Aikman's 23-yard TD pass to Irvin eventually won the game, 21-16.

Horton did it again one week later in Green Bay, starting the scoring with a 65-yard Pick-6. It turned out to be another badly needed defensive score, because the Cowboys did not play well against what was then a poor Packers team, still a year away from getting Brett Favre. But they won the turnover battle 3-0 and survived 20-17. The following week at home with Cincinnati, the Cowboys picked off Boomer Esiason twice, got six catches for 148 yards from Irvin and after spotting the Bengals a 10-0 lead, took over and won 35-23.

Dallas was 5-2 as they headed into their bye week. On its face, the record was on track for the playoffs. But there were reasons for concern—namely, that the three toughest divisional opponents—Redskins, Eagles and Giants—had already come to Texas Stadium and the Cowboys had tough road trips ahead of them. The NFC was also shaping up as by far the more difficult conference to reach the postseason in.

The job got more difficult at playoff-bound Detroit, when Dallas turned it over four times and fell apart in the second half of a 34-10 loss. The Cowboys got back on the board with a 27-7 home win over the Cardinals, although it was another sloppy offensive performance. At 6-3, Dallas was looking at an exceptionally difficult three-game road trip that could make or break the season.

It started in Houston, where the Oilers were on their way to an 11-5 season. The Cowboys got on the board first when they recovered a blocked punt for a touchdown. But they couldn't run the ball, nor could they stop the run. They eventually lost in overtime, 26-23. A high-profile road game in New York in the late Sunday afternoon TV window went worse. Three trips to the red zone resulted in field goals and the 22-9 loss put the Cowboys on the brink.

On the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving, Dallas was in a desperate spot, facing undefeated Washington in old RFK Stadium. What happened was a franchise-defining moment. The Cowboys came at the Redskins when everything Johnson could conjure up in the defensive arsenal and they slowed an offense that had been demolishing its opponents. Emmitt ran for 132 yards. Irvin and Alvin Harper each had over 100 yards receiving and the 24-21 upset kept the Cowboys alive.

But even though Aikman played well, going 13/20 for 204 yards, he injured his thumb and was lost for the remainder of the year. With five teams competing for two wild-card spots all packed within a game of each other, the hopes of the 1991 Dallas Cowboys were put on the shoulders of Steve Beurlein.

Dallas had its annual Thanksgiving feast against the struggling Pittsburgh Steelers. The Cowboys played a mistake-free game and led 13-10 in the fourth quarter, when Beurlein went 66 yards to Irvin for the touchdown that clinched the win. A home game with playoff-bound New Orleans was next. Again, the Cowboys played mistake-free and again they won in the fourth quarter. Trailing 14-13, they scored ten straight points to close it out. Emmitt and Irvin each cleared the 100-yard threshold and at 9-5, Dallas had some momentum.

The Cowboys, Eagles and Falcons were all 9-5. The 49ers were 8-6 and two straight losses by the Giants had left them 7-7 and realistically eliminated. There were two wild-card spots available for the four contenders and the Dallas-Philadelphia game in old Veterans Stadium on December 15 was a monster regular season battle.

Winds were blowing at 22 mph and quarterback play was erratic on both sides. The Cowboys managed just two field goals and a safety through three quarters, but only trailed 10-8. Special teams made the difference—Kelvin Bryant returned a punt 85 yards for a touchdown and Dallas continued its trend of strong fourth quarter play down the stretch. They won the game 25-13. When all the different tiebreaking possibilities were calculated, the Cowboys had clinched a playoff berth.

Atlanta had secured the other wild-card spot and the season-ending Cowboys-Falcons game in Dallas lost some of its juice. It was still a good game, with Emmitt rushing for 160 yards, including a six-yard TD run in the fourth quarter that won it, 31-27. Dallas moved up to the 5-seed with the win and earned a trip to Soldier Field in Chicago.

Mike Ditka's Bears were in the playoffs for the seventh time in eight years. But they had gotten crushed in San Francisco to end the season, a loss that cost them the division title and a first-round bye. And the rise of a new power necessarily means the fall of an old one. Johnson's Cowboys would replace Ditka's Bears on this early Sunday afternoon in the Windy City.

Dallas used a turnover and a blocked punt by Darrick Brownlow to grab an early 10-0 lead. Chicago countered with two consecutive drives to the doorstep of the end zone, but the Cowboy defense stiffened. The first drive ended with a goal-line stand, the second with a 19-yard field goal. Instead of trailing 14-10 at half, Dallas led 10-3.

The game tightened in the third quarter when the Bears kicked another field goal. The Cowboy defense would be on the field a long time in this game—over 37 minutes—but the offense was at least taking care off the football and they won turnovers 3-0. Beurlein flipped a short touchdown pass to Novacek to make it a 17-6 game.

Chicago drove two more times inside the 10-yard line. They were stopped on downs a second time (the two-point conversion did not exist prior to 1996, so a fourth quarter field goal for a team down 11 points was pointless). The Bears did get a touchdown on their fourth trip inside the Cowboy 10-yard line, but it was too late. Dallas won 17-13, with Emmitt rushing for 105 yards.

Another road trip to Detroit for the late Sunday afternoon finale to Divisional Round weekend was next. Dallas was playing for the chance to go back to Washington, where they had turned their season around, and play for a Super Bowl berth. But this trip to Motown went a lot like the one in October had.

Beurlein led a couple drives in the red zone, but this time it was the Cowboys settling for field goals. He also threw a Pick-6. Trailing 17-6, Beurlein's starting career in Dallas came to an end,

as Johnson tried Aikman. It went no better, the Cowboy pass defense was shredded and the result was a 38-6 loss.

The poor showing in Detroit could not take away from the excellence of the season though, particularly the closing stretch drive, with the wins in Washington and Chicago. The Dallas Cowboys were back in business.

## 1992

The Big Three was now established, with Aikman at quarterback, future Hall of Famers Emmitt Smith and Michael Irvin at running back and receiver respectively. Then throw in Jay Novacek at tight end. The offensive line was the crown jewel of the team though—a unit that had Pro Bowlers in Nate Newton and Mark Tuinei was the NFL's best front-five since the Washington Redskins' Hogs that were in their final moments this season and no offensive line since has come close to being as good, with free agency preventing continuity.

Defensively, the Cowboys didn't produce a single Pro Bowl player while having the league's top-ranked defense under coordinator Dave Wannstedt, but they would make an early season trade to get a big playmaker in pass-rushing end Charles Haley. The Cowboys were loaded for bear and lying in wait when the defending champion Redskins came to town to open the season on Monday Night Football.

Special teams made the difference in the opener. Dallas blocked a punt for a safety that began the scoring and then holding a 16-7 lead in the second half, Kelvin Martin returned a punt 79 yards for a touchdown. The final was 23-10, but the Cowboys had controlled the line of scrimmage behind Emmitt's 140 rushing yards, and as a Redskins fan watching this game in his college dorm, all I remember about this game is that the 'Skins had no shot from the get-go.

Dallas closed September by beating the Giants and Cardinals before going into their bye week. On the other side of the bye to begin October awaited another key NFC East Monday Night showdown, on the road in Philadelphia.

The Cowboys' Monday night trip to Philadelphia didn't work out well. After being tied 7-7 after a quarter and trailing only 10-7 at the half, the game got away from the 'Boys. Philadelphia had a ferocious defense led by a Hall of Fame pass rusher in Reggie White, and a dominant defensive front that included Clyde Simmons and future ESPN radio personality Mike Golic.

Linebacker Seth Joyner was similar to Haley, a hybrid who was more naturally a pass rusher. Eric Allen manned the corner and Andre Waters was at strong safety, giving Eagles' coach Rich Kotite a tremendous package of talent. Offensively, the athletic Randall Cunningham played quarterback and the team had a new acquisition in the backfield, one Dallas was quite familiar with—Herschel Walker. He scored a pair of fourth quarter touchdowns, Aikman threw three interceptions and this time it was Dallas who was whipped on the ground. The final was 31-7.



Dallas licked their wounds, came back and won their next three, including a 17-10 win over playoff-bound Kansas City, setting up a November 1 rematch with Philadelphia in Big D. The Cowboys held first place in the NFC East by the time the Eagles came to town, as Philadelphia's inconsistency led them to drop a pair since the Monday Night battle.

This one was another tough defensive game and the Eagles were behind the eight-ball with Cunningham out. The new quarterback was Jim McMahon, a veteran of the 1985 Super Bowl champion Bears, but well past his prime now.

Philadelphia's defense was up to the challenge in the first half, and Dallas trailed 3-0 at intermission. But in the third quarter an Aikman TD pass was the highlight and the game went to the final period knotted 10-10.



From there, the big offensive line and Emmitt took the game over. Smith finished with 163 rush yards, including a fourth-quarter touchdown and the Cowboys won 20-10. At 7-1, they were in command of the division. Through November they had a brief hiccup when they lost at home to the non-contending Los Angeles Rams, and then barely squeaked by the Cardinals a week later.

But a Thanksgiving Day feast upon a Giants' team that was already light-years removed from the one that won the Super Bowl two years earlier got them back on track. Dallas went out to Denver and won an exciting 31-27 battle with John Elway. Johnson's team had an opportunity to clinch in a December 13 game at Washington.

A Dallas division title wasn't in serious doubt when they took the field in Washington's old RFK Stadium, but there would be something symbolically sweet about making it official on the site of the defending champs, while perhaps dealing a death blow to the Redskins' wild-card push. Dallas took an early 10-0 lead and led 17-7 at half.

The fourth quarter was a disaster. Three of the teams' four turnovers came in the final period. One was an interception in the end zone when a TD would have sealed it and instead a long return by Washington linebacker Andre Collins set up a field goal that made it 17-13. The final one was a fumble by Aikman after he was sacked deep in his own end that was recovered and walked in for a touchdown.

It ended up a 20-17 loss, and the temper tantrum Johnson threw on the plane home is one of this Dallas' era enduring legends. The Cowboys closed the season with workman like wins over Atlanta and Chicago to end 13-3 and get the #2 seed in the NFC playoffs, behind San Francisco.

Dallas began their drive at what they hoped would be their first Super Bowl appearance since 1978 and their first title since '77. In fact, this proud franchise hadn't even played for the NFC title since 1982. They took care of that latter omission right away.

Philadelphia had won its wild-card game with New Orleans on the road and played well for one quarter of this rubber match in the old Texas Stadium. An early field goal gave them a 3-0 lead, but Aikman tossed a 1-yard touchdown pass to his blocking tight end Derek Tennell, threw another to his Pro Bowl tight end in Novacek and it was 17-3 by the half. The Dallas defensive front was locked in and dominating, as tackles Russell Maryland and Tony Tolbert had two sacks apiece.

It's tough to do much of anything offensively when you're beaten straight up the middle and the Eagles offense indeed did nothing. Not until Emmitt had piled up 114 yards on the ground, and the lead stretched to 34-3 did Philly find the end zone. On the other side of the NFC bracket San Francisco held off Washington 20-13 and set up a battle most NFL observers considered to be the de facto Super Bowl.

San Francisco had a lot of the same core players from the teams that dominated the 1980s and won four Super Bowls, but there was one very significant change. Joe Montana was no longer the quarterback as his continual back injuries had moved Steve Young into the job. Montana still wanted to play and his negative attitude toward Young in the media only added to the pressure the new 49er quarterback felt to prove himself with a championship. Montana would be traded to Kansas City in the offseason. In 1992 the present was about Young and Aikman trying to validate themselves by getting a ring.

Dallas drove inside the five-yard line but had to settle for a Lin Elliot field goal. San Francisco drove back and finished the job with a touchdown. Before the quarter was out, the 49ers had the game's first mistake when Pro Bowl guard Guy McIntyre was called for holding, nullifying a 63-yard Young-to-Jerry Rice touchdown pass and the Niners ended up punting. In the second quarter it was the 49ers settling for a short field goal and the Cowboys getting to the end zone. It went to the locker room 10-10.

Dallas' offense came right out of the gate with a touchdown drive to start the second half and though Frisco mounted a drive of their own it ended with a field goal and the Dallas offense was locked in. A long 79-yard drive stretched early into the fourth quarter and a 16-yard pass from Aikman to Emmitt made it 24-13 and Young had only seen the ball once the entire half.

Dallas had a chance to blow it open when linebacker Ken Norton intercepted a pass deep in Frisco territory. On fourth down and short, Johnson opted to go for it—an understandable decision, for the way offenses were playing, the need to make it a three-score rather than a two-score game was logical. But the move didn't work and Emmitt was stuffed. San Francisco countered with a touchdown drive that ended with a short Young-to-Jerry Rice touchdown pass and with the score 24-20 the crowd in Candlestick was rocking.

With the ball inside their own 20, Dallas needed to make something happen. Aikman threw a slant across the middle to secondary option Alvin Harper, who took it 70 more yards. The Niner defense wasn't able to hold and the Cowboys got a touchdown that clinched the game and the NFC Championship.

The Super Bowl opponent was the Buffalo Bills, making their third straight appearance on the sports world's biggest stage. Buffalo had lost the previous two games, dropping a heartbreaker to the Giants in 1990 and losing decisively to the Redskins a year ago. Now the Cowboys were the latest NFC East team to get a crack at Marv Levy's squad.

Buffalo had a Hall of Fame quarterback in Jim Kelly who called his own plays in an aggressive no-huddle offense. Thurman Thomas could do it all out of the backfield and Andre Reed was one of the top receivers in the NFL. Across the front line, Buffalo was the only team who could come close to matching Dallas, with Pro Bowl linemen in Wil Wolford, Howard Ballard and Jim Richter.

Defensively they could get after you with Hall of Fame defensive end Bruce Smith, blitzing linebacker Cornelius Bennett, the sure and steady Shane Conlan in the middle and top defensive backs in safety Henry Jones and corner Nate Odomes.

As to why it was assumed Dallas was a vastly better team than Buffalo was a mystery to me at the time. And really, how anyone knew it in advance is still a mystery today. But there's no denying what happened on the football field in Pasadena on January 31.

Buffalo's top special teams player Steve Tasker struck first, blocking a punt to set up an Bills' touchdown. Dallas found the end zone twice before the quarter was out, with Aikman hitting Novacek for one, and defensive tackle Jimmie Jones scooping up a fumble on the goal line and scoring the second. It wouldn't be the last turnover the Cowboys would get on this day.

The Cowboy defense stopped Buffalo inside the 5-yard line and forced a field goal cutting the score to 14-10. At this point Aikman and Irvin hooked up on consecutive scoring passes to make it 28-10. It was already getting out of hand at halftime and the Bills were turning to backup quarterback Frank Reich. Kelly had a knee injury that had kept him out of playoff wins against Houston and Pittsburgh, though he had returned for the AFC title win at Miami.

Reich had acquitted himself more than adequately this January—against Houston he led his team back from a 35-3 deficit to win in the greatest comeback in NFL history. He was also the author of the greatest college comeback in history when his Maryland team had rallied from 31-0 down to beat Miami 42-40 back in 1984. The coach of that Miami team? Jimmy Johnson.

There would be no comebacks in this Super Bowl though. Buffalo briefly made it interesting at the end of the third quarter when Reich connected with Don Beebe on a 40-yard touchdown pass to make it 31-17. But the Cowboy defense had already intercepted Kelly twice, they would pick off Reich two more times and Buffalo put the ball on the turf an astonishing *eight times*. Five were recovered by Dallas as part of their record-setting nine turnovers forced.

This was the obvious difference in a game where passing and rushing stats were mostly even and Buffalo had made a big special teams play. Aikman was flawless, going 22-for-30 for 273 yards, four touchdowns and nary a pick to be found. Emmitt, the NFL's leading rusher during the season, produced his third straight 100-yard game of the postseason.

Dallas scored three fourth-quarter touchdowns and it would have been four if not for the game's most memorable play. Cowboy defensive tackle Leon Lett scooped up a fumble and had a clear path to the end zone. He stretched out his arms in celebration a couple yards too soon and a hustling Beebe knocked the ball out and through the end zone, which gave Buffalo the ball on the 20. It was an embarrassing moment for Lett, a tough and hardworking player who got a little carried away in the moment and paid a disproportionate price in terms of media coverage afterward. But for the Cowboys as a whole, it was a minor blot on a fabulous Sunday. They had won 52-17.

The dynasty of the early 1990s had begun.

## 1993

The bid for a repeat title got off to a rocky start when Emmitt, held out of training camp and the first two regular season games. The Smith holdout was the sign there would be some rocky times along the way to a repeat.

Even without Emmitt, Dallas still had a core of talent that was the envy of the league. Aikman led the NFL with a 69% completion rate. Aikman was also second in yards-per-attempt and with his 15-6 TD/INT ratio could avoid mistakes. He made the Pro Bowl.



Irvin made the Pro Bowl with an 88-catches/1,330 receiving yards performance. AHarper was a big-play threat on the other side, averaging over 21 yards-per-catch. And if you focused too much on the receivers? All Aikman needed to do was look for Novacek, a Pro Bowl player himself.

If this flash wasn't enough, the Cowboys could also play meat-and-potatoes football. An old-style fullback, Daryl Johnston, was another Pro Bowler. As were Newton and Stepnoski on the offensive line. Right tackle Erik Williams enjoyed a breakout year, making 1st-team All-NFL at age 25.

The defensive side of the ball didn't have quite as many stars, but they still ranked second in the league in points allowed. Russell Maryland was a Pro Bowl defensive tackle and Charles Haley could wreak havoc at defensive end. Ken Norton and free safety Thomas Everett made the Pro Bowl, while 23-year-old corner Kevin Smith intercepted six passes.

In short, this talent on hand, along with Johnson overseeing it all on the sidelines, sounds like the description of a Super Bowl team already. But it turned out that Emmitt mattered even more than anyone would have realized.

Dallas was destroyed in the opening Monday Night game of the year against the Washington Redskins—a team that would finish 3-13—and then lost a Super Bowl rematch against the Buffalo Bills. With no team having ever won the Super Bowl after starting 0-2, a mix of urgency and panic was running through Big D and consuming the national media. Jones got Smith back into the fold.

An unimpressive 17-10 win at lowly Phoenix on a Sunday night followed, but at least it was a win, Emmitt was worked back into the lineup and Dallas got a bye week to regroup. They returned two weeks later with blowout wins over playoff-bound Green Bay and a lousy Indianapolis Colts team.

Aikman was playing exceptionally efficient football and the Cowboys were positioned for a crucial three-game stretch against the San Francisco 49ers, Philadelphia Eagles and New York Giants. The 49ers were the principal measuring stick for the Cowboys, while the Eagles and Giants joined them in a packed NFC East race.

Irvin was electric before a late Sunday afternoon national TV audience against San Francisco. He caught 12 passes for 168 yards, while Emmitt ran for 92. The Cowboys won 26-17. Another bye week followed—1993 was the year the NFL tried the ill-fated experiment of giving each team two weeks off during the season. Nobody liked it and the idea has never come back.

But maybe the time off did something for Emmitt and the offensive line. Because he came back and played one of the best games of his career, rushing for 237 yards in Philadelphia and leading a 23-10 win. He rolled up 117 more in a 31-9 home rout of the Giants.

The New York win came at a cost though. Aikman was injured and would miss the next two games. The Cowboys went with Bernie Kosar. The one-time great quarterback of the Cleveland Browns had been released and with Dallas suddenly in need of some veteran insurance, they picked him up. Kosar started in a win over the Cardinals. But without Aikman, and with Emmitt having to leave the next game after just one carry, the Cowboys lost at mediocre Atlanta.

Dallas was still 7-3 and in good shape when Thanksgiving Day arrived. What followed against a playoff-bound Miami Dolphins team was one of the most bizarre finishes to any NFL game.

A blizzard hit Dallas and the game was played on a snow-covered field. The Cowboys led 14-13 and appeared to have won, when Dolphin kicker Pete Stoyanovich had a field goal partially blocked at the line of scrimmage. The ball skidded toward the end zone. Cowboy defenders surrounded the ball, letting it roll dead.

All of a sudden, out of nowhere, the well-intentioned, but rules-challenged, Leon Lett, barreled through the pile and tried to pounce on the ball. Lett thought it was live, but that only became the case after he touched it and it skidded off his body. Miami won the race to the loose ball and Stoyanovich kicked a short field goal to win it 16-14.

The record was now 7-4. Dallas trailed the New York Giants by a game in the NFC East, although there was a head-to-head matchup in the Meadowlands to end the regular season and the Cowboys had won the first meeting. They still controlled their destiny, but there was no slack.

Philadelphia came to Dallas on a Monday Night, but the Eagles were fading amidst key injuries. Emmitt ran for 172 yards in a 23-17 win.

The Cowboys paid a visit to Minnesota, where the mediocre Vikings were fighting to stumble into the playoffs. Emmitt rolled up another 100-plus in an easy 37-20 win. Another contender, the 8-5 New York Jets, were easily dispatched in a 28-7 road win before a late Saturday afternoon audience.

A revenge blowout of the Redskins, who had begun their fall from Joe Gibbs-era excellence to the mediocrity that has marked their existence ever since, set the stage for the January 2 regular season finale. The Cowboys and Giants would meet in the Meadowlands in the late Sunday afternoon TV window to settle both the division title and the #1 seed in the NFC playoffs.

Odds makers saw the Cowboys as nearly a touchdown favorite, even on the road and that looked prophetic when they took a 13-0 lead into halftime. But the Giants answered back in the second half, tying the game 13-13. This was a game that was even in most every way. Aikman and counterpart Phil Simms each avoided mistakes and each were sacked four times. Each team had a 100-yard game from their key running back, with Rodney Hampton running well for New York and Emmitt doing the same for Dallas.

But Emmitt went above and beyond. With a separated shoulder causing immense pain, Smith ran for 168 yards. He caught ten passes out of the backfield. The game went to overtime and Dallas was able to survive 16-13. The performance got Emmitt the rushing title, even with missing the first two games. And it sealed his MVP award.

The playoff run would include games with Brett Favre's Green Bay Packers, along with fellow early 1990s stalwarts, the San Francisco 49ers and Buffalo Bills. But the regular season finale was the most significant test for the 1993 edition of the Dallas Cowboys.

Dallas was favored by nearly two touchdowns in the divisional round against the Packers, making their first playoff appearance with Favre. The Cowboys started slow and trailed 3-0 after the first quarter. Then Aikman got rolling. He threw a 25-yard touchdown pass to Harper, another scoring pass to Novacek and, in the third quarter, a 19-yard strike to Irvin, who ended the game with nine catches for 126 yards. The Cowboys took a 24-3 lead and cruised home, 27-17.

San Francisco was the heavyweight opponent, although with a 10-6 record, this 49er team was weakest of their 1992-95 editions that joined Dallas at the top of the league. The Cowboys were in control in this NFC Championship Game, leading 28-7 at the half. There was a scary moment though, when San Francisco scored a touchdown and then Aikman had to leave the game.

Enter Bernie Kosar. Dallas had picked him up for a moment like this. Kosar went 5-for-9 for 83 yards and threw a 42-yard touchdown pass to Harper. The 49er rally was turned back and the Cowboys won 38-21.

A Super Bowl rematch with the Bills was next in Atlanta, and Dallas was a double-digit favorite for the second time in the postseason. It wouldn't be the '93 Cowboys though, if they didn't start a little slow before turning on the juice.

Buffalo led 13-6 at the half and it took a defensive touchdown from James Washington in the third quarter to pull Dallas back even. It was time for Emmitt to make one last display of greatness.



He got a steady diet of the football down the stretch, rushed for 132 yards and two touchdowns as the Cowboys pulled away. The final was 30-13 and the repeat championship was in the books.

It would be a tumultuous offseason for the franchise, as the bad blood between Jones and Johnson boiled over and they parted ways. But that soap opera shouldn't prevent Emmitt Smith from being the enduring memory of the 1993 Dallas Cowboys. He completed a historic trifecta of NFL MVP, rushing leader, and Super Bowl MVP. He was the heart and soul of the 1993 Dallas Cowboys.

## 1994

Super Bowl victories in 1992 and 1993 had been the culmination of Jimmy Johnson's historically rapid rebuilding program in Dallas. But the three-peat bid of the 1994 Dallas Cowboys would be quickly awash in uncertainty. Johnson's feud with owner Jerry Jones boiled to a head, and the head coach was fired. Barry Switzer, a three-time collegiate national champion at Oklahoma, but lacking in NFL experience, took over.

Meanwhile, Dallas' key rival for supremacy in the NFC, the San Francisco 49ers, were doing some plotting of their own. The 49ers acquired future Hall of Fame cornerback Deion Sanders. The Cowboys had a stiff challenge ahead of them.

Switzer's strength at Oklahoma was that he simply let great talent play and didn't overcoach. Dallas had great talent and much of Johnson's fine coaching staff remained intact. Barry just let the ship stay the course. Aikman's 65% completion rate and 7.4 yards-per-attempt were each second among starting quarterbacks in 1994, even if his 3.3% interception rate was subpar.

Irving caught 79 passes and averaged nearly 16 yards a catch, as he joined Aikman in the Pro Bowl. Harper was a big-play receiver whose 33 catches averaged a stunning 25 yards per. Novacek at tight end and Johnston at fullback were each Pro Bowlers and their combined 91 catches ensured Aikman could always work the short game.

But Emmitt made this offense go and he did so to the tune of 1,484 yards. He was 1st-team All-NFL running behind an all-time great offensive line. Mark Stepnoski at center and Mark Tuinei at left tackle were each Pro Bowlers. Nate Newton at guard was 1st-team All-NFL. And a rookie tackle named Larry Allen was getting started on what proved to be a Hall of Fame career.

It all added up to the second-most prolific offense in the NFL. And the defense wasn't far behind, coming in third in the league for points allowed. Charles Haley was 1st-team All-NFL at defensive end with his 12 ½ sacks.

Darren Woodson was another 1st-teamer at strong safety. Leon Lett punched a Pro Bowl ticket at defensive tackle. Even with Johnson gone, the defense that was his baby, continued to roll on.

Dallas opened the season at Pittsburgh. The Steelers would end up with the 1-seed in the AFC, but they were no match for the Cowboys. Emmitt ran for 171 yards, Aikman went 21/32 for 245 yards, with Irvin catching eight balls for 139 yards. It was vintage Dallas, as they cruised to a 26-9 win.

But a late afternoon home game with the Houston Oilers (today's Tennessee Titans) did not go well. The Oilers had just parted ways with Hall of Fame QB Warren Moon and were on their way to a horrible season. But Dallas had a hard time breaking free. They only led 13-10 at the half before Aikman found Harper on a 53-yard touchdown pass. The 20-17 win had the feel of a warning sign.

That warning came to fruition the following Monday Night. Facing the Detroit Lions, Emmitt and the Lions' Barry Sanders had an electric running back duel. Emmitt went for 143 yards, but Sanders ripped off 194. The Cowboys lost in overtime, 20-17.

They went into an early bye week at 2-1, clearly looking vulnerable, but just as clearly with time to get it all figured out. Dallas came out of the bye and blasted the Washington Redskins 34-7, controlling the ball for forty minutes and holding the Redskins to 28 yards rushing. A week later, the Cowboys routed the Arizona Cardinals 38-3 in a late afternoon home game. Neither the Redskins or Cardinals were any good, but at least Dallas was back to blowing out bad teams.

Another late Sunday afternoon home kickoff followed with mediocre Philadelphia. The Cowboys forced five turnovers and won 24-13. A return visit to Arizona was a little tougher. After three quarters, Dallas trailed 21-14. Worse, Aikman had been knocked out and backup Rodney Peete was in the game.

Peete played well and went 12/19 for 186 yards. He also threw two touchdown passes, including a 65-yard strike to Irvin to tie it up. Dallas survived 28-21. Another narrow escape on the road followed at Cincinnati. The Bengals were awful, but the Cowboys dug a 14-0 hole. Aikman had returned and rallied the team to a 23-20 win behind six catches for 125 yards from Harper. But this was two weeks in a row of less than inspired football.

Dallas was 7-1 and their "problems" were high-class concerns, to say the least. But when the Super Bowl is the only measure of success and you have a rival the quality of San Francisco, there's no room for error. And the head-to-head battle with the 49ers was just two weeks away.

The Cowboys hosted the New York Giants on Monday Night and clicked back into gear. Aikman was a sharp 19/24 for 241 yards and no mistakes. Irvin caught seven of those passes for 118 yards, while Emmitt rolled up 163 yards on the ground. The final was 38-10. It was time to go to San Francisco.



November 13 at old Candlestick Park was as anticipated as any regular season game could be. The 49ers were 7-2, so Dallas had a one-game lead and could all but salt away the 1-seed with a win here. But it didn't happen. While Aikman made big plays, he also made mistakes. His final line was 23/42 for 339 yards, but three interceptions. More alarming was San Francisco's 147-87 edge in rush yardage. The Cowboys lost 21-14.

A home date with Washington followed. A couple of early rushing TDs from Emmitt, along with two interceptions from corner Kevin Smith, paved the way for an easy 31-7 win. But Aikman was again knocked out. So was Peete. With the traditional Thanksgiving Day feast ahead, there was no time to recover.

So it was left to third-stringer Jason Garrett to face the Green Bay Packers and a young Brett Favre. The Cowboys had knocked the Packers out of the playoffs the year before. But without their top quarterbacks, Dallas was in a 24-13 hole. Then Garrett became a Thanksgiving Day legend. He heated up and the Cowboys ripped off 26 straight points. Garrett finished the day 15/26 for 311 yards. Dallas won 42-31.

A road trip to Philadelphia began December. The Cowboys clung to a 24-19 lead late in the fourth quarter. The Eagles were driving. Woodson saved the day. He intercepted a pass on the six-yard line and raced 94 yards to the house, sealing the win.

Dallas was up to 11-2. They had blown away the NFC East, which didn't even produce a second playoff team, much less a viable challenger to the Cowboys. San Francisco was also 11-2. Both teams had blown away the field for what were then two first-round byes. Dallas just needed a break to get to the top seed.

They hosted the playoff-bound Cleveland Browns for a late afternoon Saturday game. Belichick's defense prevented Aikman from getting the ball down the field. The Cowboys turned the ball over four times. Even though Emmitt ran for 112 yards, the Cleveland running game was also respectable. Dallas lost 19-14.

San Francisco won the following day and again the following Sunday. By the time the Cowboys played again, on Monday Night in New Orleans, they were locked into the 2-seed. They knocked off the mediocre Saints 24-16, mailed in the finale on the road at the Giants in a 15-10 loss and went into the postseason at 12-4.

For the second straight year, the Packers beat the Lions in the wild-card round and earned a ticket to Dallas for the divisional playoffs. I was living in Wisconsin at the time. While the loyal Packer fans were realistic about their chances, they were hopeful that this season—unlike 1993—could at least be a competitive game into the fourth quarter.

For a quarter, Green Bay hung in. Dallas led 7-3 in the second quarter and were backed up on their own six-yard line. Then Aikman hit Harper on a 94-yard strike. Emmitt had to go to the sidelines with a hamstring problem, but it didn't matter. Aikman was too hot, going 23/30 for 337 yards. He spread the ball around, with Irvin and Novacek joining Harper with 100 yards receiving on the day. It was 28-9 by halftime and ended 35-9.



The previous day, San Francisco had taken care of their own business in blowing out Chicago. After Dallas' win, Irvin said what everyone in football knew—that the only point of the regular season was to determine where this particular NFC Championship Game matchup would be played. It was time for the battle.

But there were concerns about Emmitt's health. He played, but the uncertain footing of Candlestick was not ideal for a running back under even the best of circumstances. And in either case, Dallas would have to throw the very idea of running the ball out the window much earlier than anyone anticipated.

Aikman threw a Pick-6 on the first possession. Two more turnovers followed and they were immediately converted into 49er touchdowns. Dallas was staring at a stunning 21-0 deficit in the first quarter. They battled gamely—especially Irvin, who caught 12 balls for 192 yards. They stayed close enough to keep it interesting. But they also never got closer than ten points and ended up losing 38-28.

The 49ers went on to win the Super Bowl in a blowout. As everyone believed back in August, Dallas and San Francisco were both several lengths ahead of the rest of the league. But from the Cowboy perspective, all that mattered was the need to regroup and get back on top.

## 1995

The 1995 Dallas Cowboys were on a mission for redemption and their head coach had something to prove. With the help of a big free-agent signing, Dallas got back on top in '95 and solidified their status as the Dynasty of the early 1990s.

The 49ers' signing of Hall of Fame cornerback Deion Sanders had been decisive in putting them over the top in 1994. But Deion was only on a one-year deal. He hit the free agent market again and this time it was Dallas who won the bidding war. A \$35 million signing bonus brought Deion to Dallas.

Sanders joined a secondary that included Darren Woodson, the best strong safety in the NFL. Charles Haley was a Pro Bowl defensive end, with 10 ½ sacks. Larry Brown and Brock Marion picked off six passes apiece in the secondary, while Robert Jones was a steadying force at middle linebacker. The Cowboy defense was third-best in the NFL in 1995.



Deion, a two-sport athlete who also played baseball with the Cincinnati Reds, would not join the team until the Reds' season was over. As (bad) luck would have it, the Reds made the NLCS and extended their season deep into October. But not to worry—Dallas had plenty of weapons on offense to keep rolling until the help arrived.

The Cowboy Dynasty of the early 1990s was keyed by one of the greatest offensive lines of all-time. Nate Newton was 34-years-old, but the left guard was still 1st-team All-NFL. Ray Donaldson at center and Mark Tuinei at left tackle were each in their late thirties, but were Pro Bowlers. The youth on the line came on the right side—second-year guard Larry Allen made his first Pro Bowl in a Hall of Fame career. And 27-year-old Erik Williams was at right tackle.

That powerful front five created the space for “The Big Three”. Aikman had one of the best seasons in his own Hall of Fame career at quarterback. His final numbers were 65 percent completion rate, 7.6 yards-per-attempt and was intercepted on just 1.6 percent of his passes. To a modern audience, those look above average. In the world of 1995, Aikman was in the top three for each key statistical category.

Emmitt joined Detroit’s Barry Sanders as the best two backs in the league in this era and the Dallas runner captured his fourth rushing title in five years in 1995. Emmitt rolled up over 1,700 yards and averaged nearly five yards a pop. The ’95 campaign was the last really great season in the career of another Hall of Fame talent.

Then we come to Irvin. Another future Hall of Famer, Irvin caught 111 balls and averaged over 16 yards a catch in 1995. Aikman had other weapons—Pro Bowl tight end Novacek, and speedy Kevin Williams really started to come on later in the season. But Irvin was the focal point of this passing offense. And the unit as a whole also ranked third in the NFL for points scored.

The season opened on a Monday Night in the Meadowlands. The Giants weren’t very good in 1995 and this prime-time opener showed it. Emmitt ripped off a 60-yard touchdown run in the first quarter. He scored four times in total, rushed for 163 yards and Dallas cruised 35-7.

A late-afternoon home game against Denver was next. The Broncos were mediocre this year and when the Cowboys knocked out John Elway early on, the mismatch got worse. Dallas took a quick 14-0 lead, Emmitt ran for 114 yards and the offense controlled the ball for nearly 35 minutes. The game was not as competitive as the 31-21 final makes it appear.

Another prime-time date, this one on a Sunday Night, awaited in Minnesota. The Vikings had made the playoffs each of the previous three years. They slipped to .500 in 1995, but they were ready to play against Dallas. But the Cowboys had Emmitt—he rushed for 150 yards on the night and the last 31 of those yards were an overtime touchdown run that secured a 23-17 win.

Dallas came back home and played another late afternoon game. Given the prominence of the Cowboys in this era, Aikman probably got more air time in the 4 PM ET window as a player than he does today as Fox Sports’ #1 analyst. In this game, facing a bad Arizona Cardinals team Aikman went 19/30 for 251 yards. Emmitt and Irvin delivered 100-plus yards in rushing and receiving respectively. Dallas cruised 34-20.

A visit to the rebuilding Washington Redskins should have been an easy win. But Aikman had to leave early with a nagging injury. The Cowboys dug themselves a 27-10 hole, with Redskins' running back Terry Allen outrushing Emmitt. Wade Wilson was a credible backup quarterback—he had been a starter for playoff teams in Minnesota in the late 1980s—and he tried to rally Dallas. But they fell short in a 27-23 loss.

Aikman was back in the lineup for a home game with Green Bay. The Packers, with young quarterback Brett Favre, were gradually growing as a contender, but Dallas had knocked them out the previous two years in the divisional playoffs. It was more of the same today. Aikman went 24/31 for 316 yards and no mistakes. Irvin caught eight balls for 150 yards. Dallas led 31-10 in the fourth quarter and then held off a late push from Favre to win 34-24.

A road trip to San Diego was up next. The Chargers had gone to the Super Bowl in 1994 and would narrowly squeak back into the playoffs this season. But they were playing with a backup quarterback in Gale Gilbert. The Dallas defense got 2 ½ sacks from Haley and three more from Shante Carver on the other edge. They intercepted Gilbert three times and led the way to a 23-9 win.

Dallas was going into their bye week at 6-1. Deion's arrival was at hand. This entire season seemed to amount to nothing more than a preordained coronation walk to the Super Bowl. An easy 28-13 win at playoff-bound Atlanta out of the bye, behind 167 yards from Emmitt and 135 receiving yards from Irvin, added to the sense of inevitability .

The Philadelphia Eagles were the principal competition for the Cowboys in the NFC East and the first game with Philly came at home on the first Monday Night in November. Dallas held a 17-12 in the third quarter. Then, behind 158 yards from Emmitt and 115 yards receiving from Irvin, they pulled away to a 34-12 win.

It was time for the game everyone who followed the NFL waited for in this era. The one with the 49ers. Although this year, with San Francisco struggling at 5-4, and the regular season game scheduled for Dallas, it seemed like this was just an opportunity for the Cowboys to validate the idea that playing out this season was a mere formality. Dallas was a 13 ½ point favorite.

But it turned into a complete disaster. Aikman was knocked out early and it probably wouldn't have mattered. The 49ers exploded to a 24-0 lead by the second quarter and the Cowboys lost 38-20.

No one really thought that Dallas—still with a two-game lead on San Francisco for the #1 seed in the NFC, was in danger of losing home field advantage. But did the 49ers, now 3-0 against the Cowboys in the short Switzer Era, have a head-to-head edge? It was at least worth watching. And as it turned out, even that race for the 1-seed would get awfully interesting before it was over.

In the meantime, Dallas bounced back nicely at mediocre Oakland. The Big Three put up their numbers—110 yards for Emmitt, 109 for Irving, with Aikman going 19/24 for 227 yards and no mistakes. The result was a comfortable 34-21 win.

It was time for the annual Thanksgiving Day feast and a high-profile opponent awaited. The Kansas City Chiefs were on their way to the 1-seed in the AFC and this was a possible Super Bowl preview. Dallas controlled the first quarter, getting a 15-yard TD run from Emmitt and a 33-yard touchdown pass from Aikman to Irvin. Kansas City controlled the second quarter, but their two drives ended in short field goals. The Cowboy defense came up with three interceptions and Dallas churned out an efficient 24-12 win.

At 10-2, a home game with Washington seemed another formality, especially with the Cowboys needing a little payback from the October Surprise back in D.C. But Dallas inexplicably showed up flat and, as a (-17) favorite, lost 24-17. They were still in control for the 1-seed. But San Francisco was coming on strong and the margin for error was gone.

A road trip to Philadelphia, who was 8-5, presented an opportunity to clinch the division title and a first-round bye. When Larry Brown came up with a 65-yard Pick-6 in the second quarter and put the Cowboys up 17-3 in the second quarter, it looked like all was well. But the offense bogged down and Philadelphia pulled even at 17-all. Then came a disastrous sequence late in the game.

Facing a 4th-and-1, deep in his own end, Switzer opted to go for it. Emmitt was stuffed. Unbelievably, it turned out the two-minute warning had been reached prior to the snap. With an opportunity to regain his senses, or at the very least, call another play, Switzer called Smith's number again. Stuffed again. Philadelphia kicked a field goal and won the game.

Switzer was excoriated across the country. Even the late John Madden, not known for being hard on coaches, said from the broadcast booth, "They deserve to lose." They had also lost the pole position in the NFC. Philadelphia was within one game in the NFC East and now the Eagles had the tiebreaker. A complete disaster loomed.

The good news is that the schedule would soften up, with the Giants and Cardinals in the last two weeks. But the Cowboys were not playing well and at home against New York, were outrushed 24-11. It took five field goals from kicker Chris Boniol to escape with a 21-20 win.

Dallas was scheduled to play on Christmas Night, the Monday Night finale of the season. They sat and watched on Christmas Eve Sunday to see what—if anything—they would be playing for. It amounted to an early afternoon of opening presents in Big D.

The Eagles lost in Chicago, giving the Cowboys the NFC East title. Even more stunning, the 49ers lost in Atlanta. Dallas was back in control for the 1-seed. This time they didn't give it away. On Christmas Night in the desert, Aikman went 21/32 for 350 yards. Kevin Williams had a huge night, with over 200 yards receiving. The Cowboys won 37-13. The road to the Super Bowl would come through Dallas.

After a week off, Round 3 against Philadelphia awaited in the Divisional Round. The Eagles-Cowboys game would be in the early afternoon on Sunday.

Before the game, Dallas got yet another gift—On Saturday, San Francisco lost. Green Bay went west and upset the 49ers. Even allowing the rising Favre all the credit in the world, the Cowboys matched up much better with Green Bay than with San Francisco.

Dallas was also a comfortable two-touchdown favorite against Philly. After a sluggish start both ways where the teams traded field goals and stayed 3-3 into the second quarter, the Cowboys took over. Deion, playing a little offense, got the ball in his hands, and went 21 yards for a touchdown. Emmitt rushed for another TD. In the second half, Boniol hit a short field goal from 18 and a long one from 51. Aikman went 17/24 for 253 yards, with the emerging Williams catching six balls for 124 yards. The final was 30-11.

The previous two years in the playoffs had seen the Cowboys comfortably beat the Packers. This NFC Championship Game started much the same way. Aikman threw a pair of short TD passes and Dallas led 14-3 early on.

But Favre answered with a couple of long TD strikes and Green Bay went ahead 17-14. Dallas nudged back ahead 24-17 by half, but the Packers controlled the third quarter. The Cowboys trailed 27-24 going into the final period.

Enter Emmitt. Green Bay was simply not as physical as Dallas was up front and the fourth quarter showed that in spades. Emmitt finished the day with 150 yards and he ran for two TDs in the final period. The Cowboy defensive front got to Favre four times, twice from Tony Tolbert up the middle. They forced the Gunslinger into a couple of interceptions, while Aikman was mistake-free. That was the difference in the 38-27 win.

On the AFC side, Kansas City had been upset in the divisional round and 2-seed Pittsburgh was making their first Super Bowl appearance since the Steel Curtain era. The Cowboys and Steelers had played excellent Super Bowls in 1975 and 1978, both won by Pittsburgh. The winner of this one would join San Francisco as the only franchises with five Lombardi Trophies.

Dallas dominated play early, but two drives stalled, the most damaging when an Aikman-to-Irvin touchdown pass was called back. The early dominance only produced a 13-0 lead, and the Steelers got a touchdown just prior to the half to make it a game.



Dallas got a big break when Pittsburgh quarterback Neil O'Donnell, obviously not on the same page as his receivers, threw an interception directly to Cowboy corner Larry Brown. It set up an easy score and made the game 20-7.

The Steelers then began to rally. They kicked a field goal, covered an onside kick and cut the lead to 20-17. They were taking the game over with their ground attack and defense, and when Pittsburgh forced a Dallas punt, everyone in the country could smell an upset with 4:15 to play.

Unbelievably, O'Donnell *again* miscommunicated with his receiver and *again* dropped a perfect pass into Brown's lap. Dallas got yet another gift TD and the 27-17 margin was too much to overcome.

Brown was given Super Bowl MVP honors. It was an understandable choice, although he didn't exactly have to bend over backward to get those interceptions. Aikman going 15/23 for 209 yards and making no mistakes—in a game where a 3-0 turnover edge was the ultimate difference—would have been a better pick.

For Dallas, this was a championship that came more with relief than ecstasy. It hadn't been the formality everyone anticipated. They had to overcome some real adversity along the way. Like a good movie, the plot had some twists you didn't expect. But in the end, they had sealed themselves as a dynasty.

## 1996

All of the key players were back in tow for another shot at the ring. The 1996 Dallas Cowboys were good and they had a few moments where flashes of their championship selves came shining through. But they also lacked consistency and '96 was the year when the dynasty began to wind down.

It was no fault of the defense. The Cowboy D ranked third in the NFL in points allowed. Deion Sanders was one big reason. So was Darren Woodson, who wasn't one of the big names in this era of Cowboy football, but was consistently the best strong safety in the league.

Dallas got a career year from defensive end Tony Tolbert, who made the Pro Bowl with twelve sacks. So even though the Cowboys had suffered personnel losses in free agency—cornerback Larry Brown, defensive tackle Russell Maryland and linebacker Robert Jones—the defense didn't miss a beat.

Aikman saw his numbers slip from the championship year of 1995, even though he did make another Pro Bowl at the age of 30. Aikman's 64 percent completion rate was still second-best among starting quarterbacks. But his 6.7 yards-per-attempt was mediocre. He was intercepted on 2.8 percent of his passes, which was above average, but still down from '95.

The loss of tight end Jay Novacek to retirement was a blow to the passing game. Kevin Williams, who had started to emerge late in the season in 1995 as a viable second receiver and deep threat, was limited by injuries. Aikman found himself dumping more passes to new tight end Eric Bjornson and Daryl Johnston. Deion got a little time at receiver, as head coach Barry Switzer looked for answers.

It might have been a complete disaster, but Irvin was there to at least provide some stability at receiver. Irvin caught 64 balls, averaged 15 yards a catch and made sure the passing game didn't disappear.

The same can't be said of another great player from this era of Cowboy football. Emmitt Smith is one of the great running backs of all time. He had won four rushing titles in the previous five years, including an MVP award in 1993. And he ran for over 1,200 yards in this 1996 season. But if you look below the surface, he averaged less than four yards a pop. This is in spite of four offensive linemen—Nate Newton, Ray Donaldson, Larry Allen and Erik Williams having Pro Bowl years.

It's Smith's down season that was the biggest difference between this Cowboy team and those that won Super Bowls in 1992, 1993 and 1995, and was the clear second-best team in 1994. The inability to muscle past opponents is the key reason the Dallas offense ranked a woeful 25th in the league in points scored.

The problems showed up right away on an opening Monday Night in Chicago. Dallas couldn't run the ball against a mediocre opponent, lost three fumbles and took a 22-6 Labor Day loss to start the season.

The Cowboys came home and dispatched a bad New York Giants team 27-0, behind early touchdown passes from Aikman to Deion, Kevin Williams and Emmitt. A week later, at home against playoff-bound Indianapolis, the Cowboys built a 21-6 lead in the third quarter. They were getting big days from Tolbert and defensive tackle Leon Lett, who combined for five sacks. But in the fourth quarter, Colts quarterback Jim Harbaugh heated up. Dallas melted down in front of the late Sunday afternoon national audience and lost 25-24.

Buffalo had been Dallas' Super Bowl foil in the 1992-93 seasons and were still a playoff team here in 1996. The Cowboys went on the road for another late afternoon national game. Facing a backup quarterback in Todd Collins, the defense played exceptionally well. The offense did not. Aikman threw three interceptions. Dallas only rushed for 32 yards. They lost 10-7.

At 1-3, the Cowboys were reeling and the rest of the league could see blood in the water. The Philadelphia Eagles had been the top challenger in the NFC East and Dallas had a Monday Night date in Philly to close September. When they dug a 10-0 hole in the first quarter, disaster loomed. But the defense stepped up with six sacks, two by Tolbert, and getting five turnovers. A 23-13 win stopped the bleeding going into the bye week.

The week off seemed to be what the running game needed. Emmitt went for 112 yards in a 17-3 home win over mediocre Arizona. Then a bad Atlanta Falcons team came in the following week, and put the Cowboys in a 25-17 hole in the third quarter. Facing a complete embarrassment, Aikman threw a short touchdown pass to Emmitt and converted the two-point play to tie the game. Then, trailing 28-25, Aikman hit Kelvin Martin on a 60-yard TD strike that salvaged a 32-28 win.

Dallas was back on the right side of .500 at 4-3, but still looked nothing like a Super Bowl contender. And they were entering a crucial four-week stretch of high-profile games.



After two years out of the game, Jimmy Johnson was back on the sidelines in Miami this year. And as luck would have it, the Cowboys and Dolphins were due to play each other on the AFC-NFC rotation. They were in the late Sunday afternoon national window on the final weekend of October.

Dallas moved the ball consistently in the first half, but three deep drives ended in field goals. They trailed 10-9 at the half. But Aikman and Irvin took over. The quarterback finished 33/41 for 363 yards and no interceptions. Irvin, one of his former coaches' favorites, showed why, with 12 catches for 186 yards. The Cowboys took over the second half and won 29-10.

It was a great time to build on the momentum with the Eagles coming to Big D. Instead, Aikman was outplayed by Philadelphia counterpart Ty Detmer and the Cowboys lost 31-21. They were 5-4.

A road trip to San Francisco was next. The previous four years in the NFL had been defined by the Cowboys and 49ers, clearly head and shoulders above the rest of the league. Dallas trailed this game 17-10 in the fourth quarter. With 49er quarterback Steve Young out, Aikman ended up making the difference. He finished 24/39 for 230 yards, including a late TD pass to Bjornson that tied the game. Dallas won 20-17 in overtime.

The next big contender on the docket was the Green Bay Packers. The Cowboys had ousted the Packers from the playoffs each of the previous three seasons. But this year's Green Bay team was different. The Brett Favre era in Lambeau Field was fully emerging and the Packers were playing the best football of anyone. But they knew they had to be able to beat Dallas.

This writer is originally from southeastern Wisconsin and was gathered with a group of Packer fans who watched this Monday Night game in horror. The Dallas defense was vintage, sacking Favre four times and preventing him from getting the ball down the field. The offense comfortably marched up and down the field. In a rather strange circumstance, they kept kicking field goals—seven of them in all—but it was enough to win 21-6.

Now 7-4, with consecutive wins over the 49ers and Packers, Dallas was back in the Super Bowl conversation. It was another great time to build some momentum. But this Cowboy year was different and the following Sunday in the Meadowlands showed it. There was no running game against the Giants. Dallas turned it over five times. A 20-6 loss broke up all the good feelings they had come over the last month.

As we approached Thanksgiving and the final quarter of the season, Dallas was in a jam-packed race in the NFC East. At 7-5, the Cowboys and Eagles each trailed the 8-4 Washington Redskins. The Arizona Cardinals were 6-6, but had a potentially favorable tiebreaker situation shaping up.

The very top of the NFC had Green Bay at 9-3, with San Francisco and Carolina (NFC West rivals prior to the '02 realignment that created the NFC South) at 8-4. Of course Dallas had their own potentially favorable tiebreakers working here. But first, they had to somehow push through the logjam in their own division.

That would start on Thanksgiving, with the Redskins coming into town. It looked like the Cowboys of old, mainly because Emmitt looked like his old self. He muscled his way for 155 yards. The 'Skins could only muster 46 yards rushing. Dallas won 21-10. That Sunday, the Cardinals lost. The NFC East was down to Dallas, Washington and Philly, all 8-5. It was a mad race to the finish.

Down in Arizona, the Cowboys were sluggish for a half, trailing 6-0 into the third quarter. Aikman found Irvin on a 50-yard touchdown pass. It was the showcase point of a game when Aikman went 15/24 for 255 yards and Irvin's eight catches produced 198 yards. The Cowboys won 10-6. Meanwhile, the Eagles and Redskins both lost.

Dallas not only had a one-game lead, but the tiebreakers were falling their way. They hosted the Super Bowl-bound New England Patriots in the season's penultimate game. With 22 mph winds swirling, neither offense could do much of anything. But the Cowboys won the turnover battle 4-2, which led to them winning a battle of field goals 4-2. The 12-6 win clinched a fifth straight NFC East crown.

The Cowboys were locked into the 3-seed and the Redskins had collapsed, so a potentially high-profile season finale in the final game of Washington's old RFK Stadium ended up not meaning anything. Switzer mailed this one in and got players some rest. It ended in a 37-10 loss.

No one knew quite what to make of this Dallas team going into the playoffs. Their pedigree was unquestioned. So was the fact they had clearly demonstrated an ability to dominate the league's best teams in this season. But could they string together the four consistent games it would take to win a fourth Super Bowl title in five years?

Minnesota came in for a late afternoon Saturday visit to start the playoffs on the final weekend of December. The championship Cowboys showed up for this one. Emmitt ran for 116 yards. Irvin caught eight balls for over 100 yards. Dallas was ahead 30-0 by halftime and cruised to a 40-15 win.

Carolina had outlasted San Francisco in the NFC West, so the Panthers had the 2-seed. Divisional Round Weekend started when the 49ers were eliminated up in Green Bay. The Cowboys and Panthers took the field on late Sunday afternoon.

All the negative patterns of the regular season came through for Dallas. They didn't run the ball and dug themselves an early 14-3 hole. The game stayed tight, with the Cowboys pulling to within 14-11, 17-14 and 23-17 at various points. But Aikman threw three interceptions and the season ended with a 26-17 loss.

The dynasty was officially over. It seemed like an inappropriate end. The folks up in Green Bay badly wanted Dallas to have come to Lambeau Field. Losing to San Francisco would have been a worthy final chapter. A defeat to a franchise in its second season of existence wasn't what any scriptwriter would have produced.

But it's what happened. And the cracks that showed in 1996 opened wide in 1997. The Cowboys slipped to 6-10 and Switzer was fired. Even though the franchise would get back into the playoffs in 1998, they were never an elite team and it was never the same. Aikman retired after the 2000 season. The dynasty came to an end in 1996.