



INTRODUCTION

For a generation of football fans, John Madden was the face of the NFL. He was the game analyst for CBS, Fox and later on Monday Night Football. He routinely called the biggest games of the year. His name was on the legendary video game. But before all that, he was an awfully good football coach himself—the highest winning percentage of any man who coached at least 100 games. That coaching run ran from 1969-78 with the Oakland Raiders.

The Raiders were already a winning organization. Jon Rauch had taken them to the Super Bowl in 1968, and then to the AFL title game in 1969. But Rauch was constantly clashing with owner/GM Al Davis, and the result was a divorce that saw Rauch move on to Buffalo. Madden was promoted to the head job.

In a colorful decade of the NFL, filled with memorable teams, Madden's Raiders were always at the forefront. They often had the fate of being second-best to a dynasty—Don Shula's great Miami Dolphin teams in the early years of the 1970s and the legendary Steel Curtain in Pittsburgh, with whom Oakland would forge one of the league's great rivalries.

But even though the Raiders had their share of postseason frustration, they also won a lot of big games, including some of the NFL's most iconic postseason battles. From the Sea of Hands to the Ghost To The Post, and everything in between, it's all here in this narrative.

Each season exists as its own separate article on the website. They have been brought together here, and edited for obvious redundancies to create a cohesive narrative.

For younger readers, several points of order about football in the 1970s are worth reminders:

*The first year of the narrative took place prior to the AFL-NFL merger that created the structure of the league we recognize today. The Super Bowl was in its fourth year of existence, but Oakland only played AFL teams. 1970 was when the merger took place.

*Only four teams per conference qualified for the playoffs. In what was then a three-division format (East, Central, West), that meant just one wild-card berth was available. It wasn't until this narrative's last year, in 1978, that a second wild-card spot was added

*Homefield advantage for the playoffs was done by rotation, rather than merit through 1974. Each division was pre-assigned whether its champion would be at home or on the road in postseason play. It wasn't until 1975 that merit-based seeding started.

*The league only played 14 regular season games until the 1978 schedule expansion to 16 games.

*And on a minor note, the Seattle Seahawks—founded in 1976—were an AFC West rival in 1977-78 and stayed that way until shifting to the NFC in 2002.

With that said, let's get on with a game-by-game look at the ten years John Madden led the Oakland Raiders.

1969

Oakland would play its entire 14-game schedule in what was then a 10-team American Football League. The playoff format was simple—there was an East and West division. The top two in each division qualified, and there was a crossover, with #1 playing the #2 team from the opposite division.

The AFL of 1969 had three serious contenders. Joe Namath's New York Jets were the defending Super Bowl champions, having shocked the world in their historic Super Bowl III upset of the Baltimore Colts that put the AFL on the map. The Kansas City Chiefs, who had reached Super Bowl I in '66, were another. And then there were the Raiders.

Madden inherited an offense led by quarterback Daryle Lamonica. He was known as "The Mad Bomber" for the downfield passing game. While the characterization was fair, it's also fair to point out that his 52% completion rate was second in the AFL and his 7.8 yards-per-attempt was fairly normal. Lamonica threw 34 touchdown passes against 25 interceptions. While he was in the lower half of the AFL for throwing picks, that number was still much more within the norm than it is today. All in all, Daryle Lamonica ended up as the 1969 AFL MVP winner.

Lamonica's receivers were a good balance of short and deep targets. Warren Wells could stretch the field. He racked up 1,260 yards receiving at an amazing 26.8 yards-per-catch. Fred Biletnikoff worked the underneath game and led the Raiders with 54 catches. Tight end Billy Cannon, a collegiate hero at LSU ten years earlier, was steady. The running game was a balanced troika of Charlie Smith, Hewritt Dixon and Pete Banaszak.



Oakland was tough in the trenches. Across the offensive front, center Jim Otto, guard Gene Upshaw and tackle Harry Schun were all considered the AFL's best. On defense, end Ike Lassiter recorded 15 sacks and tackle Tom Keating added twelve more. The back seven was anchored by the greater corner, Willie Brown, and ballhawking free safety Dave Grayson who picked off eight passes.

All in all, the Raiders did everything well. They would lead the AFL in points scored and finished second in points allowed.

Oakland opened the season at home against the Houston Oilers. Smith ran for a pair of first-quarter touchdowns, and it looked like Madden's debut might be easy. Then Houston began chipping away and took a 17-14 lead by the fourth quarter. Lamonica answered by going up top for a 64-yard touchdown pass to Wells. Madden had a 21-17 win.

The following Saturday, the Raiders were a hefty (-16) favorite against a Miami Dolphins team that had yet to make its mark. A 76-yard Pick-6 from Grayson helped build a 17-7 lead. But Oakland was killing themselves with penalties—156 yards worth in all. Miami rallied to tie it 17-17. But once again, the Raiders came through late. Veteran kicker George Blanda hit a 46-yard field goal in the fourth quarter for a 20-17 win.

A road trip to play the Boston Patriots, as they were called prior to 1971, started poorly. Oakland dug themselves a 13-0 hole. Then Lamonica opened up. He threw four touchdown passes, including two to Wells from 28 and 55 yards. The deep passing game was augmented by rushing dominance that produced a 210-52 edge in yardage. The Raiders pulled away to win 38-23.

The schedule format required that each team play one opponent from the other division twice. It was a break for Oakland that Miami was that team. But it was a break that the Raiders did not fully take advantage of. They went to South Beach and failed to run the ball and failed to protect Lamonica. Biletnikoff still caught nine passes for 119 yards and the Raiders escaped with a 20-20 tie. But in a Western Division race that would be tough, the failure to get a win would loom large later in the season.

Lamonica answered by going to Denver and going 19/37 for 253 yards, three TDs and no interceptions. Oakland beat a bad team 24-14. They came home to host Buffalo and their old head coach in Rauch. After the discord between the two, it must have been sweet revenge for Al Davis. Lamonica not only threw six touchdown passes, *he threw them all in the first half!* Oakland led 42-0 and won 50-21.

Oakland was 5-0-1. They, along with Kansas City, were in firm control for the two playoff spots out of the West. San Diego had a respectable team, but the Raiders went to SoCal and played a good all-around game. Banaszak ran for 123 yards. Lamonica was a sharp 19/26 for 237 yards and three touchdowns. The final was 24-12 and any doubt that the Raiders and Chiefs were both playoff-bound was gone.

The Raiders had a letdown on the road against a bad Cincinnati team. Lamonica threw five interceptions, and the 31-17 loss is deceptively close—Oakland actually trailed 31-3. They came back home and played one more ho-hum quarter, being tied 7-7 with Denver. Then the Raiders returned to form. Lamonica threw three more TD passes, all to Biletnikoff. Oakland blew the game open in the second quarter and won 41-10.

A home game with San Diego was a tough battle. The Raiders trailed 16-14 in the fourth quarter, with each team having scored a defensive touchdown. It was time for the Mad Bomber—an 80-yard touchdown strike to Wells won the game 21-16.

Oakland was 8-1-1, but Kansas City was 9-1. The hiccups against the Dolphins and Bengals were costly in an era where parity was not what it is today. The fight for homefield advantage was on, and the two-head-to-head games would take place in the season's final four weeks.

A road trip to Kansas City on November 23 would start the stretch drive. The Raiders trailed 14-3 early in the game. Strong safety George Atkinson made the game-changing play, a 22-yard Pick-6 that got Oakland back in it. They nudged out to a 20-17 lead. With the Chiefs driving in the third quarter, linebacker Dan Connors picked off another pass and raced 75 yards to the house. On an afternoon when the Raiders were outgained 436-262, they forced seven turnovers, and won 27-24.

Another big road game, this one against Namath and the Jets was next. It proved to be the Lamonica-to-Wells show. The latter caught five balls and they went for 152 yards. Lamonica finished 19/28 for 333 yards. The Jets would win the East easily, but this result ensured the West champion would have the league's top record overall.

Cincinnati had been placed in the Western Division—with baseball's Reds also in the West, it makes you wonder what the state of geography was like in America's schools back then. So, the Raiders got a chance at revenge on the Bengals. Lamonica threw a 51-yard touchdown pass to Wells. Shorter TD passes of 16 yards each, one to Wells and another to Biletnikoff were coming. The final was 37-17.

Oakland was 11-1-1. Kansas City was 11-2. Their head-to-head meeting in the finale would settle the division. This was no small thing—the loser would face a cross-country trip to play Namath and the Jets. The winner would get to stay home and host the Oilers, who finished 6-6-2.

It was a rainy day in the Bay Area and both offenses bogged down. Neither team could run the ball. Kansas City's great quarterback, Len Dawson, only completed two passes. But Lamonica found a way to make some plays. He went 11/20 for 188 yards. That was the difference in a 10-6 win that ensured the road to the Super Bowl would come through Oakland.

Madden's first playoff game was a smashing success. Lamonica threw an early touchdown pass to Biletnikoff. The Mad Bomber threw four touchdowns in the first half and six on the afternoon. Atkinson had a Pick-6 and Oakland outrushed Houston 110-28. It was one long party and the Raiders won 56-7.

Kansas City had gotten it done out in New York, so there would be a Round 3 of Raiders-Chiefs for the Super Bowl ticket. Smith ran for an early touchdown and Oakland led it 7-0 after the first quarter.

But that was the last happy moment of an otherwise magnificent season. Lamonica went 17-for-45. The erraticism wasn't the problem—not in the context of how football was played in this era. But the fact those completions only generated 191 yards was a problem. He also threw four interceptions. The Oakland defense covered for that by recovering four fumbles. But KC executed on their chances to score, while the great Blanda missed three field goals. Kansas City tied the game by halftime, led 14-7 after three quarters and got a lock-up field goal in the final period to win 17-7.

It was a really good season and a really tough ending—a combination that Madden would become intimately familiar with.

1970



Madden's second year on the Raider sidelines didn't go as smoothly. But the young coach had a veteran asset up his sleeve—the great George Blanda. The 43-year-old was still the regular placekicker and was now a backup quarterback. And for a few magical weeks, his kicking and his arm saved the season for the 1970 Oakland Raiders.

Recognition for Blanda shouldn't come at the expense of Lamonica, who had a Pro Bowl season. The Oakland offense was fueled by Pro Bowl talent at the skill positions. Wells was the deep threat, who averaged 21.7 yards-per-catch. Biletnikoff's 17.1 yards-per-catch was pretty impressive in its own right, although in this offense, he was the possession receiver. Rookie tight end Raymond Chester also made

the Pro Bowl.

Dixon ran for over 800 yards and was a Pro Bowler himself. He ran behind a decorated line that included Upshaw, Otto and Schuh. All told, the Raider offense ranked ninth in the 26-team NFL for points scored.

This was the first year of the AFL-NFL merger, creating the league as we know it today.. Even though the AFL had won the last two Super Bowls, and its best teams would soon dominate the 1970s, it's still probably fair to say there was a gap as far as talent depth. Thus, a Raider defense that had been one of the AFL's best, only ranked 19th in the new-look NFL. And that made this season's road to the playoffs a little rockier than the prior ones.

Oakland opened up on the road at Cincinnati. The Bengals had been a bad team in their early years, but would fight their way into the playoffs this year. The Raiders were the first to learn that this was a new and better Cincinnati football team. Oakland was outrushed 247-48, and a game that was tied 21-21 in the third quarter turned into a 31-21 defeat.

Lamonica and Wells got connected the following week in San Diego, with the latter catching seven balls for 127 yards. The Raiders built a 27-13 lead. But fourteen penalties would add up, and for the second week in a row, the defense had a fourth quarter letdown. The Chargers rallied to force a 27-27 tie.

Don Shula's Miami Dolphins were another franchise that was just coming into their own and would make the postseason for the first time in 1970. On a Saturday night in South Beach, Lamonica threw four interceptions and Oakland lost 20-13.

While the early schedule had seen three straight road games, the Raiders were still staring at an 0-2-1 record—what's more, the regular season was only 14 games long and just four teams per conference made the playoffs. All of which is to say that the moment for urgency had arrived.

The Raiders weren't playing with much urgency in the home opener against Denver, trailing 17-7 in the second quarter. Finally, the season turned for the better. Lamonica hit Wells on touchdown passes of 32 and 60 yards to get a 21-17 lead. Trailing 23-21 in the fourth quarter, the pair did it one more time—a 20-yard TD connection for the lead, and Oakland ultimately won 35-23.

The Washington Redskins came west for Monday Night Football, an innovation that came into being along with the merger. The ground game got going behind Dixon, who carried 18 times for 164 yards. A decisive edge in rush yardage helped the Raiders pull away for a 34-20 win.

Oakland was 2-2-1 and getting back into the mix. It was time for the Legend of George Blanda to get its latest chapter.

Perhaps it's fitting that it all started against Pittsburgh. While the Steelers weren't very good, in just two years' time, these two franchises would start one of the most storied rivalries in all of sports. Lamonica had to leave the game early. Blanda came off the bench to go 7/12 for 148 yards. A young Terry Bradshaw threw four interceptions and the Raiders won 31-14.

Lamonica was back in the lineup for a late Sunday afternoon kickoff in Kansas City. The Chiefs were the Raiders' key rivals in the AFC West. A pair of early TD passes to Chester gave Oakland a 14-0 lead. Kansas City chipped away and took a 17-14 lead. With three seconds left, Oakland got into field goal range. Blanda booted a 48-yarder. It was enough to get out of town with a 17-17 tie. And escaping with a tie would loom large in Oakland's favor by year's end.

A home game with mediocre Cleveland saw Oakland trailing 20-13. Blanda came off the bench. He promptly threw a 14-yard touchdown pass to Wells to tie the game. A late drive gave the old pro another chance at a long field goal, again with three seconds left. This one was from 52 yards. Blanda nailed it for a 23-20 win.

It was more of the same in Denver. Lamonica started. When the Raiders trailed 19-17 in the fourth quarter, Blanda was summoned. He threw a 20-yard touchdown pass to Biletnikoff in the game's closing minutes to pull out the 24-19 win.

Lamonica played well at home against San Diego, going 14/23 for 213 yards and no mistakes. The Chargers stayed right with the Raiders, and it was tied 17-17. It was time for Blanda to do it again with his leg. This time it was a short field goal in the final seconds. Oakland had gone 4-0-1 over the last five weeks. Without Blanda, who knows how many (if any) of those games they would have won.

Blanda couldn't save his team on their Thanksgiving Day trip to Detroit and old Tiger Stadium. Lamonica threw a pair of early touchdown passes to Biletnikoff and built a 14-0 lead. But the Raiders were beaten in the trenches, outrushed 262-100 and the Lions took the game over and won 28-14.

The calendar flipped to December and there were three games left. Oakland was 6-3-2, tied with Kansas City for the AFC West lead. In the wild-card picture. Miami was 7-4, which amounts to being tied with a 6-3-2 team, but the Dolphins had the head-to-head win over the Raiders. With a home game still left against the Chiefs, the division title was the best shot.

Oakland traveled to old Shea Stadium to face the lowly New York Jets, who had to play most of the season without the injured Joe Namath. The Raiders didn't play well, again being decisively outrushed and they trailed 13-7 in the fourth quarter. The Mad Bomber bailed his team out with a 33-yard scoring toss to Wells for the narrow escape.

Kansas City answered with a win, so the showdown was set. Oakland salvaging a tie in the prior meeting ensured that the winner of this game would have both sole possession of first place and control of the tiebreaker. Which, since there was only one game left after this, made the Week 13 battle a winner-take-all fight for the AFC West.

On a late Saturday afternoon, the defenses were in control early. But Blanda knocked through a couple of field goals and the Raiders had a 6-3 lead at halftime. And this time, the running game was finally clicking. A balanced attack would outrush Kansas City 204-62 and ultimately wore the Chiefs down. A short TD run by Marv Hubbard put the Raiders in control and a 36-yard touchdown pass from Lamonica to Biletnikoff all but sealed it. The final was 20-6 and Oakland was going back to the postseason.

Oakland had nothing in the line in the finale and looked the part against a good San Francisco 49ers team and MVP quarterback John Brodie. The Raiders lost the finale 38-7 and went into the postseason at 8-4-2.

A revenge date with Miami two days after Christmas would be the final game of Divisional Round play. The fact the Raiders had postseason experience and the Dolphins did not clearly impacted public perception—even though Miami finished 10-4 and had beaten Oakland head-to-head, the Raiders were still installed as a healthy six-point home favorite.

The first quarter went by scoreless, and the Dolphins took a 7-0 lead. Lamonica found Biletnikoff on a 22-yard pass to tie it 7-7 by halftime. In the third quarter, the great veteran corner Willie Brown made the play of the game—a 50-yard Pick-6 that gave the Raiders the lead.

Lamonica was playing mistake-free and getting the ball down the field—his 8/16 passing line still produced 187 yards and there were no mistakes. In the fourth quarter, he made his biggest throw—an 82-yard touchdown strike to Rod Sherman that built a 21-7 lead. Miami tried to rally and scored again, but the Raiders won 21-14.

They were in the AFC Championship Game and going to Baltimore to face the Colts. The early part of the game didn't go well. Johnny Unitas gave Baltimore a 10-0 lead. Lamonica was knocked out. It seemed almost too perfect—Blanda was coming off the bench. Did he have more magic left?

The proud veteran played well, throwing a 38-yard TD pass to Biletnikoff, and pulling the Raiders even at 10-10. He went 17/32 for 271 yards. The three interceptions seem a lot by our modern standards but were reasonably par for the course in this day and age. But the shaky Oakland defense couldn't consistently stop Johnny U. The Raiders fell behind 20-10. Blanda threw a TD pass to Wells. Unitas answered. In the end, Oakland lost 27-17.

Madden had come up short of the Super Bowl. But 1970 had still been a special year for the Oakland Raiders, marked by the memories of George Blanda.

1971

After two good years to start the Madden era, the 1971 Oakland Raiders spent much of the year looking cut from the same mold. But a late collapse left them out of the postseason.

The Raider offense had Pro Bowl players in the skill positions. Running back Marv Hubbard ran for 867 yards and averaged nearly five a pop. Biletnikoff caught 61 passes for 929 yards—excellent season-long numbers for this run-centric era. Chester was a reliable target who could stretch the field, averaging better than 15 yards-per-catch.

Oakland's offensive line had a pair of Pro Bowlers in Otto and tackle Bob Brown. They had a rising star in guard Art Shell, who was paired up on the left side with Upshaw at tackle.

The Raider offense was so good that they produced in spite of rather pedestrian numbers from Lamonica. His 49 percent completion rate ranked 16th among the 21 QBs who threw enough passes to qualify. The Mad Bomber only averaged 7.1 yards-per-attempt, which ranked 11th. And with a 16/16 TD-INT ratio, he ranked 16th in interception percentage.

But even considering all this, the Oakland offense still scored the second-most points in the league, trailing only the eventual Super Bowl champion Dallas Cowboys. That covered a mediocre defense that ranked 14th in a 26-team league for points allowed. Other than Brown, one of the league's top corners, the Raider defense struggled in 1971.

Oakland opened the season at New England. It was a historic game for the Patriots—their first with the name “New England” rather than “Boston”, and their first in what was then named Schaefer Stadium. In an irony of history, the Raiders also played the last game in this building—a certain playoff game following the 2001 season that ended with **the “Tuck Rule” play**.

On this day, Oakland played poorly. They led 6-0 in the third quarter, but lost three fumbles, and eventually lost the game 20-6. The offense was similarly sluggish into the second half in Week 2 at San Diego, leading 6-0. This time, Lamonica opened up. He hit Biletnikoff from 36 yards out, again from 13 and the Raiders pulled away to a 34-0 win, evening their record at 1-1.

A Monday Night Football date at Cleveland, a team that would eventually make the playoffs, was next. Oakland continued their pattern of slow starts, digging a 14-0 hole by the second quarter and still trailing 20-10 into the third quarter. But Hubbard rushed for 103 yards. Lamonica went 11/21 for 184 yards. A 13-yard TD pass to Chester and a short touchdown run by Clarence Davis gave the Raiders the lead, and they pulled away to a 34-20 win.

A fourth straight road game was in Denver. Oakland trailed a bad Bronco team 9-6 at the half, and Madden decided to give his young quarterback, Ken Stabler, a shot at giving the offense a spark.

The lefthander who eventually became known as “The Snake” ran for one score and threw for another. Defensive back Jimmy Warren brought an interception 55 yards to the house. With a 27-16 win, the Raiders completed this road swing at 3-1 and were set up for another big year.

Stabler got the start for the home opener against mediocre Philadelphia. But the Oakland offense struggled again, falling behind 10-0 in a game they were a (-18) favorite. Lamonica was summoned. He threw a 35-yard touchdown pass to Biletnikoff, who caught eight balls for 148 yards. Another second half explosion gave the Raiders a 34-10 win and gave Lamonica his job back.

After a season of slow starts and strong finishes, Oakland flipped the script at home against a bad Cincinnati Bengals team. A 17-0 lead turned into a 27-24 deficit in the fourth quarter. What the Raiders were doing was running the football—over 200 yards on the ground as a team—and Hubbard would run in for the touchdown that produced a 31-27 triumph.

At 5-1, Oakland was set up for a big home showdown with the 5-1 Kansas City Chiefs. First place in the AFC West was on the line and the oddsmakers saw this game as a pick'em. The Raiders trailed 20-10 in the fourth quarter. In a finish almost identical to what happened in 1970, Madden called on Blanda. As he had done in '70, Blanda rallied the Raiders to a 20-20 tie. The tie game ensured the division race also stayed in a dead heat.

Lamonica was back in the saddle against a subpar New Orleans Saints team on the road. With TD passes of 42 and 20 yards to Biletnikoff, Lamonica had his team with a 21-7 lead in the fourth quarter. But the defensive struggles came home to roost today. Another tie game was the result, this one 21-21. If playing the Chiefs at home to a tie was a modest disappointment, a tie against a bad team was a disaster.

Oakland needed to get things turned around against the lowly Houston Oilers and they did. A wide receiver named Drew Buie caught two touchdown passes in his entire NFL career. Both of them came on this November 14 day, from 63 yards and 25 yards respectively. The Raiders led 41-0 by the third quarter and won 41-21.

San Diego was a mediocre team and not in serious contention. But the Chargers came to Oakland and took a 24-10 lead by halftime. But Lamonica was playing one of his most efficient games of the season. He went 16/26 for 190 yards, three touchdowns and zero picks. The Raiders stormed ahead to a 34-24 lead and hung on to win 34-33.

There were four games left. Oakland's record was 7-1-2, which put them narrowly ahead of Kansas City, who was 7-2-1. There was only one wild-card playoff spot in this era, and the Baltimore Colts were 7-3. The Raiders had games coming up against both teams in the stretch drive.

The Colts came west for a rematch of the previous year's AFC Championship Game. The result was a disaster. Oakland got hammered in the trenches, outrushed 210-65. Lamonica was intercepted four times. Blanda came off the bench and threw two more picks. The end result was a 37-14 loss.

Losing to Baltimore put Oakland in a difficult bind for the wild-card, but Kansas City had also lost. The AFC West race was still hot. But the Raiders continued to struggle. They went to Atlanta, where the Falcons were decent, but nothing special. It was a sloppy game, with each team losing five fumbles. Oakland returned one of those for the game's first touchdown, and Hubbard rushed for 143 yards. But Lamonica played poorly, 12/31 for 130 yards. Oakland lost 24-13.

There was still hope. The Raiders were 7-3-2. The Chiefs were 8-3-1. It was time to go to Kansas City. Win, and Oakland could move into first place, with only a home game against Denver left. Lose, and Raider playoff hopes were finished.

Odds makers weren't optimistic and they made Oakland a (+4) underdog. The Raiders fell behind 10-0. Hubbard ran in from a yard out to make it a game. They later trailed 13-7. Hubbard again ran in from a yard out. Oakland had a 14-13 lead. But even though Madden tried both Lamonica and Blanda, he couldn't get a passing game going. The Chiefs kicked a field goal, won 16-14 and Oakland would be home for the postseason.

There was still the matter of closing the year out. Lamonica threw a 67-yard touchdown pass to Chester to get the scoring going in the finale against the Broncos. While Lamonica also threw three picks, it didn't prevent Oakland from salvaging some pride with a 21-13 win. They finished the year at 8-4-2.

By the standards of today, the Raiders would have been the second wild-card. Even by the standards of 1970, their winning percentage matched that of AFC Central champ Cleveland, who had finished 9-5, and the Raiders beat the Browns head-to-head. But those standards aren't the ones that mattered. 1971 was a disappointment in Oakland.

The good news is that this was just a blip on the radar of the Madden era.

1972

After the late collapse of '71 cost them a playoff spot, the 1972 Oakland Raiders followed the opposite path—they surged down the stretch, returned to the postseason, and were only stopped by one of pro football's most famous endings.

Madden had good quarterbacks, with an emphasis on the plural. Lamonica was his established starter, but Stabler was chomping at the bit for more action and the 45-year-old Blanda was still reliable.

No one could get too comfortable behind center, but it was Lamonica who started 13 regular season games. Lamonica's 53 percent completion rate, 7.1 yards-per-attempt and 4.3 interception percentage all placed him in the upper one-fourth of starting quarterbacks.

Lamonica's prime target was Biletnikoff, who caught 58 passes for over 800 yards and was an All-Pro selection. Chester was a Pro Bowler. He caught 34 passes and at 16.9 yards-per-catch was a rare field-stretcher for his position. Mike Sinai was another deep threat, with 28 catches at 17.7 yards a pop. Charlie Smith was a safety valve out of the backfield, with 28 catches of his own.

Smith was a good runner, going for almost 700 yards. But the bread-and-butter of this offense was to give the football to Hubbard. The Pro Bowler not only rushed for 1,100 yards, he averaged a healthy five yards a carry. Hubbard was led by an offensive line that included the legendary left side of Shell and Upshaw, each starting to come into their own. Veteran center Jim Otto had a Pro Bowl year. This well-balanced Raider offense finished third in the NFL for points scored.

But Oakland didn't miss the playoffs in 1971 because of any significant offensive shortcomings. They came up short because the defense had been subpar. That changed in '72. While the Raiders didn't have dynamic defensive talent, they had an All-Pro corner in Brown, a good pass rusher in Horace Jones, and they finished 8th in the league for points allowed.

The rivalry between Oakland and the Pittsburgh Steelers would come to be a signature storyline for this entire era of pro football. That rivalry would get its first big chapter at the end of the season. Perhaps it's fitting that it was also the city of Pittsburgh where this '72 campaign began.

Stabler made his only start of the season and it didn't go particularly well, as the Raiders fell behind 17-0. Lamonica came in and went 8/10 for 172 yards and threw a couple of touchdown passes to Sinai. Oakland made it close, but they lost 34-28. While this loss doesn't look bad in retrospect, in the moment it was a defeat to a franchise that had yet to ever do anything significant.

The Raiders went on to Green Bay. Oakland again trailed a team that would eventually win its division, but this time it was only 14-10 at the half. With Hubbard rushing for 125 yards, Oakland was able to get control of the second half and win 20-14.

Lamonica got the home opener with the San Diego Chargers off to a good start, with touchdown passes to Chester and Hubbard. But the running game would be absent on this day, as would the rush defense. Lamonica wasn't able to make big plays in the passing game. A bad Charger team rallied to tie it 17-17, and that's where this game ended.

A Monday Night visit to the lowly Houston Oilers was now even more urgent, as Oakland sat on a 1-1-1 record. The Raiders lost four fumbles, but they did most everything else right. Five different players intercepted passes. Lamonica went 12/26 for 166 yards and no mistakes. The rush yardage edge was a comfortable 164-90. Oakland cruised to a 34-0 victory.

They followed that up by coming home and beating a subpar Buffalo Bills team. Buffalo had a running back named O.J. Simpson, who ran for 144 yards, and they took a 16-7 lead into the fourth quarter. But Oakland countered with 122 yards from Hubbard and 56 more from Clarence Davis. The Raiders scored three times in the final period, twice on runs from Davis, and won 28-16.

But Oakland couldn't stay consistent. The Denver Broncos were not a good team, but they came to town and jumped out to a 24-3 lead. Madden called on Stabler, who led a strong rally to close to within 27-20. But Denver pushed back and beat the Raiders 30-23.

A third straight home game was against the Los Angeles Rams. While the Rams would soon become one of the 1970s' best teams, this 1972 edition was mediocre. Lamonica was back in the saddle. He threw TD passes from 30 yards to Biletnikoff, 27 to Chester, and 31 to Sinai. Both Smith and Davis ran for touchdowns. *And this was all before halftime.* Oakland jumped out to a 35-0 lead and an easy afternoon ended with a 45-17 win.

The calendar flipped to November, and it was time for a visit to Kansas City. The Chiefs and Raiders had been sparring for several years now. Kansas City was the defending AFC West champs, and at 4-3, just a half-game back of Oakland. This late afternoon start would be for first place.

It didn't go well for Madden and his team. They were outrushed 190-73 and dug themselves a 20-yard hole by the third quarter. In the effort to come back, Biletnikoff caught ten balls for 114 yards, but it still ended 27-14. Oakland was 4-3-1. The Raiders were on the outside looking in for the playoff picture.

A road trip to play a competitive Cincinnati Bengals team now had significant urgency. And the Raiders played like it, particularly up front. They rolled up 293 yards on the ground, with Smith's 146 being his season-high. Hubbard kicked in 98 yards. The Oakland defense stopped the run. That was the difference in a 20-14 win. The ground dominance went with the Raiders to Denver, with another massive edge led by Smith and Hubbard producing a 37-20 revenge win.

While Oakland was revitalizing themselves, Kansas City was sinking. The Chiefs had lost both games since the head-to-head matchup. With four weeks to play, the Raiders were 6-3-1, while K.C. was 5-5. With the AFC Central having two teams—the Steelers and Cleveland Browns—each at 7-3—the AFC West rivals had to assume there would be no wild-card fallback when they rematched in Oakland on the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

The Raider running game and rush defense was feeling it, and that didn't stop in this game. Smith ran for an early touchdown. A balanced rushing attack produced 255 yards, while the Chiefs could only muster 93. Lamonica threw second-quarter touchdown passes to both Biletnikoff and Chester. Oakland had this one blown open by halftime, at 23-3, and they closed out a 26-3 win.

They only needed one more win to clinch the division, and they got it a week later in San Diego. It wasn't easy. The ground game formula disappeared, and the Raiders lost rush yardage by a hefty 233-96 count. They trailed 19-14 in the fourth quarter. But Smith ran in from nine yards out to get the lead, and the 21-19 score stood up. Oakland was back on top of the AFC West.

Monday Night Football on the penultimate week saw the Raiders play an old rival—Joe Namath's New York Jets—that woke up echoes of the late 1960s in the AFL. Namath threw for over 400 yards, but Oakland had better balance. Hubbard ran for 118 yards. Lamonica went 10/17 for 202 yards. And in the fourth quarter, he broke open a 17-16 game by hitting Chester with a 68-yard touchdown pass. The Raiders won 24-16. And they closed out a 10-3-1 season a week later by beating the lowly Chicago Bears 28-21, in a game where all three quarterbacks got playing time.

The playoffs were here, and Oakland was going back to where his journey had begun—in Pittsburgh—for an early Saturday afternoon kickoff that would open the Divisional Round.

Old Three Rivers Stadium, with its artificial turf, was sleet-covered on a bad weather day. Neither team could function much offensively. The problem is that the Raiders turned it over four times, compared to just once for the Steelers. Pittsburgh got a couple of field goals and led 6-0.

Madden gave the more mobile Stabler a chance to rally. The young lefty quarterback did just that. He raced down the sidelines for a 30-yard touchdown run with just over a minute to play. With a 7-6 lead, Oakland appeared ready to move to the AFC Championship Game and take a shot at the undefeated Miami Dolphins.

Pittsburgh was on their own 40-yard line with time for one more play. That play would be one for the ages. A pass was thrown to the middle of the field. Oakland safety Jack Tatum and Pittsburgh running back John Fuqua went up for the ball. It was batted on the air. Steeler running back Franco Harris grabbed the deflection right at his shoes and raced in for a touchdown.

In our own day, this would be an epic play, but not a controversial one. That wasn't the case in 1972. There was a rule that once an offensive player touched a forward pass, the ball was dead. Had Fuqua caused the deflection—even in part—or was it all Tatum? Officials conferred. It was ruled that Tatum caused the deflection and the touchdown stood. Oakland's season was over in a 13-7 loss.

The Raiders were furious then, and the passage of time has not diminished the grievance. They were upset with the call itself, as well as a belief that it was done based on fear of the Steeler crowd in an age where security was lax.

Miami went on to close their undefeated season by winning the Super Bowl. But the great rivalry of the 1970s had also begun.

1973

The 1973 Oakland Raiders started to atone for the anguished ending of '72. Even though they didn't win it all, Madden's team began an impressive streak of playoff advancement and got some sweet revenge along the way.

A quarterback controversy was brewing in Oakland when the season began. Lamonica was still the veteran starter, but the 28-year-old Stabler was nipping at his heels. Lamonica kept his job to open the season, but it didn't take long for Madden to switch to the young lefthander. Stabler would start the final 11 games of the regular season.

Stabler's final numbers vindicated Madden's decision. The Snake had a completion percentage of 63%, which was the best in the NFL. His 7.7 yards-per-attempt ranked fourth. And while a 14-10 TD/INT ratio looks bad by today's standards, in the world of 1973, Stabler's interception percentage of 3.8 still ranked him eighth among starting quarterbacks.

Balance was the hallmark of Oakland's skill position talent. The receivers were balanced, with Pro Bowler Biletnikoff working underneath, Siani stretching the field and Bob Moore a consistent tight end. The running game was balanced. Hubbard led the way with over 900 yards and made the Pro Bowl. Charlie Smith and Clarence Davis each added over 600 yards apiece. The offensive line was built around the left side of Shell and Upshaw.

Oakland's offense as a whole wasn't as explosive as in recent years, but they still ranked 10th in the 26-team NFL for points scored. That was enough because a defense that had often been mediocre stepped up and became an elite unit.

The secondary was the key. Brown continued to be an All-Pro and the anchor. Tatum, at the age of 25, emerged as a Pro Bowl player. So did linebacker Phil Villapiano. Defensive tackle Otis Sistrunk recorded 13 sacks. The Raider defense ranked third in the league for points allowed.

Oakland opened the season in Minnesota. The Vikings, while coming off a down year in '72, were still a consistent winner who would also be one of this decade's iconic teams. Lamonica got the start, and while he made big plays, he was also erratic—13/30 for 183 yards. Losing the turnover battle 4-2 was another reason the Raiders saw a 16-10 lead turn into a 24-16 loss.

The schedule didn't exactly get easier in Week 2. While Oakland returned home, the opponent was the Miami Dolphins—not just the defending Super Bowl champions, but coming off an undefeated season. The Dolphins played stifling defense, but on this day, the Raiders matched them. In a grinding game, Oakland was able to run the ball. Hubbard ran for 88 yards, while Smith put up 80. The Raiders never found the end zone, but they booted four field goals and that was enough to secure a big 12-7 win.

A difficult road test was next against perennial AFC West rival Kansas City. The Raiders played poorly. They didn't run the ball and they turned it over four times. After a 16-3 loss, Madden made the decision—he was going with Stabler.

Stabler played well on the road against a bad St. Louis Cardinals team, going 19/31 for 207 yards. The Raiders won 17-10. They went on to visit the lowly San Diego Chargers and trailed 17-13 in the third quarter. But a 180-96 edge in rush yardage, combined with recovering three fumbles, keyed the surge to a 27-17 win.

A fourth straight road game awaited at Denver on Monday Night Football. The Broncos would emerge as a contender in the AFC West this season, joining the Raiders and Chiefs in the fight for the division title. The prime-time affair didn't start well—an Oakland drive was truncated and reversed when Denver ran a fumble back 80 yards for a touchdown. Stabler countered by hitting Siani on a 80-yard TD strike. The Snake had a big night for the national audience, going 16/24 for 313 yards and no interceptions. But the game was back-and-forth and ended in a 23-23 tie.

Stabler continued to sizzle in a road trip against a poor Baltimore Colts squad. He went 25/29 for 304 yards and no mistakes. A 26-yard TD pass to Sinai was the key to an early 13-0 lead, and Oakland went on to win 34-21. An early schedule that had seen six of the first seven games on the road was complete, and the Raiders were still standing at 4-2-1.

A return home to face another bad opponent, the New York Giants, went easily. Oakland ran for 211 yards, shut down the New York running attack, while Stabler went 16/21 for 212 yards. The result was a 42-7 rout.

It was time for the Pittsburgh Steelers to come to town. Stabler was knocked out in the second quarter with a sprained knee. Lamonica came on, but went through a nightmare performance. He threw four interceptions and was sacked five times. He was whistled for intentional grounding three times and his final passing numbers were 13/31. This was all tacked on to Smith turning the ball over inside his own ten-yard line. Lamonica still made big plays, and those 13 completions were good for 236 yards. But it wasn't nearly enough in a 17-9 loss.

Cleveland came in the following week, and while Stabler was healthy again, the offense continued to struggle. There was no running game. He was sacked five times. There was no downfield passing game. And there were no touchdowns. The Raiders lost 7-3. Now, at 5-4-1, their promising season was in trouble.

Kansas City was leading the pack in the AFC West at 6-3-1 while Denver was in the mix at 5-3-2. The competition for the wild-card spot included the 6-4 Cincinnati Bengals and the 5-5 Buffalo Bills. There were four games left and Oakland had little, if any, margin for error.

In a home game against San Diego, the Raiders played with appropriate urgency. Defensive back George Atkinson got the party rolling by returning a fumble 53 yards for a touchdown. It was 24-3 by halftime and ended 31-3. In the meantime, Denver beat Kansas City. Now, the Broncos were in first place at 6-3-2, with the Raiders and Chiefs at 6-4-1.

Oakland was building to a final two weeks where they would play both rivals, but first they had to go to Houston. The Oilers were the league's worst team and the Raiders were a (-19) favorite. Perhaps looking ahead, Oakland was sluggish and the game was tied 3-3 after three quarters. What Oakland was doing was running the ball, with Hubbard going for 124 yards. Stabler threw a TD pass to Biletnikoff to get the lead and the Raiders won 17-6.

The Chiefs and Broncos both lost. Oakland moved to the top of the division at 7-4-1. But it would all come down to these final two home games.

The first one was against Kansas City. The Chiefs were fading fast—in fact, this late fade would mark their drift from contention for over a decade. Oakland pounded away on the ground—a massive 259-24 edge in rush yardage, keyed by Hubbard's 115. The Raiders collected four turnovers and committed none. It was a rout from start to finish, 37-7.

Oakland still wasn't home free. Denver kept pace. With the Raiders at 8-4-1 and the Broncos at 7-4-2, this season finale was for the division. Moreover, with both the Steelers and Bengals at 9-4 in the AFC Central, there was no wild-card option. With a combination of winner-take-all and win-or-go-home, this Raider-Bronco game would surely get flexed to Sunday Night in our own day. In the television era of 1973, it was simply a really big game.

Touchdown runs from Smith and Davis in the first half gave Oakland early control at 14-0. Denver got a field goal just before the half, then closed to 14-10 in the third quarter. Stabler answered by going up top to Sinai from 31 yards. Bronco quarterback Charley Johnson was knocked out of the game early in the fourth quarter. While backup Steve Ramsey did lead one touchdown drive, the Raiders also picked him off twice. A 21-17 win, and an AFC West crown, was preserved.

Homefield advantage worked for Oakland this year. The rotation called for the AFC West champ to host a divisional round game. So, Pittsburgh came to Oakland. The Raiders had another chance at revenge.

Hubbard ran for an early touchdown, and Oakland added a field goal to lead 10-0. The Steelers cut it to 10-7 at the half. But the Raiders had the running game going and they had Stabler playing efficient football. The rush yard advantage would be a thunderous 232-65. Stabler would go 14/17 for 142 yards. Just as important, Stabler was mistake-free, while counterpart Terry Bradshaw threw three interceptions.

Oakland got a couple field goals to increase the lead. Then Brown put it away when he picked off Bradshaw and went 54 yards to the house. It was 23-7 and never got closer. The Raiders had avenged last year's divisional playoff loss with a 33-14 rout.

It was on to Miami for the AFC Championship Game. But the Dolphins were rolling to a second straight Super Bowl title and were simply too good. They put Oakland in a 14-0 hole. The Raiders fought back, and a Stabler-to-Sinai TD pass in the third quarter closed the gap to 17-10. But this time, Oakland was losing the battle up front—a 266-107 rush yardage deficit couldn't be overcome. Miami pulled back away and won 27-10.

The 1973 season was a continuation of Oakland's success, but it was also a point where that success elevated to a new level. This marked the first of five straight years that the Raiders would make the AFC Championship Game.

1974

The 1974 Oakland Raiders had a big year—even a historic one. Stabler won the MVP award and the Raiders won one of the NFL's most memorable playoff games. But the season ended with a fourth-quarter collapse and a second straight loss in the AFC Championship Game that would leave a bitter taste in their mouths.



In this '74 season, Stabler's 57 percent completion rate and 8.0 yards-per-attempt both ranked in the top five in the league. His 3.9 interception rate ranked 10th among the league's 26 starting QBs. What really set Stabler apart from his peers was a league-leading 26 touchdown passes, and the fact Oakland's offense scored more points than anyone in the NFL.

Cliff Branch became Stabler's big-play threat. The All-Pro wide receiver caught 60 passes at better than 18 yards a pop. Fred Biletnikoff caught 42 balls and averaged 14.1 per catch. Tight end Bob Moore was a reliable third target.

The running game's focal point was fullback Marv Hubbard, who ran for 865 yards. He was supported by Clarence Davis who added over 500 more. But the real leaders of the running game were up front—the great Hall of Fame tandem of left tackle Art Shell and left guard Gene Upshaw were both All-Pro in their best year together to date.

Oakland's defense wasn't spectacular, but they were solid. The Raider D had a Pro Bowler at each level—Otis Sistrunk in the trenches, Villapiano at linebacker, and hard-hitting Jack Tatum at free safety. Oakland's defense ranked ninth in the league for points allowed.

The Raiders opened the season in Buffalo on Monday Night Football. The Bills had a running back named O.J. Simpson who was coming off an MVP year, and the team would make the postseason in 1974. Oakland took a 20-14 lead in the fourth quarter when defensive tackle Art Thomas returned a fumble for a touchdown. But the Bills launched a touchdown drive and sent the Raiders to a 21-20 loss.

Oakland came home to face Kansas City. The Chiefs had been the Raiders' historic rival, going well back into the 1960s when they were in the AFL together. But Kansas City had faded at the end of 1973, and they fell hard this season. Stabler threw touchdown passes to tight end Dave Casper and Sinai to build an early 14-0 lead. The defense intercepted five passes, two by corner Skip Thomas, and the result was an easy 27-7 win.

It was on to Pittsburgh for a late Sunday afternoon showdown. The rivalry between these two teams was gaining steam. On this September day, the Raiders got physical. Hubbard pounded out 96 yards on the ground, the defense was dominant, and Oakland won 17-0.

The Raiders stayed in the Rustbelt and went on to face lowly Cleveland. After spotting the Browns a 10-0 lead, Stabler opened up and went 19/33 for 237 yards. Davis rolled up 116 yards on the ground. Oakland had moved ahead 23-17 by halftime and pulled away to win 40-24.

On a road game against a subpar San Diego Chargers team, the Raiders struggled to put points on the board. But the running game kept pounding, to the tune of over 200 yards. Stabler tossed a short touchdown pass to Moore in the fourth quarter to pull out a 14-10 win.

A home game with Cincinnati was a matchup of 4-1 teams. But these were 4-1 teams that would go in opposite directions and that basically started around the second quarter. The Bengals jumped out to a 14-3 lead. But Stabler would make big plays—his 19/41 passing line produced 252 yards. A back-and-forth battle ended up as a 30-27 win for Oakland. Cincinnati ended the season as a .500 team.

The Raiders traveled across the Bay to play San Francisco. The 49ers had been one of the league's better teams in the early years of this decade but were starting to fade. Oakland trailed 24-14 in the third quarter. But they won turnover margin 5-1. Hubbard powered for 117 yards. Stabler attempted just 11 passes and only completed six—but they went for 140 yards. The Raiders closed with a rush and won 35-24.

In this era, the NFL didn't go out of its way to avoid lengthy road trips, so Oakland went to Denver to play their fifth road game in six weeks. The Broncos were coming into this game at 3-3-1, and were the Raiders' top competition in what was proving to be a weak AFC West. Oakland had a chance to put this division race to bed early, and they did. Stabler went 12/19 for 217 yards, four touchdown passes and no interceptions. The final was 28-17.

1974 was the final year that the NFL used a rotation system, rather than merit, to determine homefield advantage in the playoffs. In practical terms, that meant the final six weeks of what was then a 14-game schedule were mostly meaningless for the Raiders, now that the division title was close to being formally wrapped up. The good news for Oakland fans is that the rotation fell in their favor—they would get their two playoff games at home.

The Raiders hosted mediocre Detroit and ran over the Lions to the tune of a 28-6 edge in rush yardage. Stabler was lights-out, going 20/24, for 248 yards and no mistakes. The result was a 35-13 rout. The following week against San Diego, Branch had his second straight 100-yard receiving game. That overcame the lack of a ground attack, and the Raiders won another tough game with the Chargers, 17-10. When the Broncos lost on Monday Night Football, the AFC West title was officially in the bag.

On the Sunday after Thanksgiving, perhaps the combination of clinching the division and having too much turkey left the Raiders a little soft. Denver came into Oakland and rolled up nearly 300 yards rushing, handing Oakland a 20-17 loss.

The offense got back on track the next week at home against New England. Stabler threw a 67-yard TD strike to Branch to get a 7-3 lead in the second quarter. With a 20-19 lead in the third quarter, Stabler and Branch connected again, this time from 13 yards. Branch finished with 138 receiving yards. Stabler went 16/21 for 251 yards. The Raiders won 41-26.

Madden's defense still needed to tighten up in these final two weeks. A windy and wet late afternoon game in Kansas City served that purpose. Stabler sat out what was a sloppy game both ways, but Oakland pulled out a 7-6 win.

The NFL had good intentions in scheduling Oakland to host Dallas for the final Monday Night game of the season on December 14. But the Cowboys, at 8-5, had been knocked out of the playoffs for the only time in this decade, and the Raiders were just doing their final playoff tune-up. Stabler went 11/17 for 131 yards and two touchdowns, to build a 17-9 halftime lead. The Snake then took a breather, while Lamonica and Blanda played. Oakland won 27-23.

With a 12-2 record, the Raiders would have still enjoyed homefield advantage under the rules of today. But the rotation system was sending the AFC's #2 team to Oakland for the divisional playoff. And that team was none other than the two-time defending Super Bowl champion Miami Dolphins.

On a late Saturday afternoon, the Raiders and Dolphins staged an all-time classic. Oakland allowed the opening kickoff to be run back for a touchdown. In the second quarter, Stabler got the Raiders on the board with a 31-yard touchdown pass to running back Charlie Smith, but they still trailed 10-7 at the half.

Stabler threw a 13-yard TD pass to Biletnikoff in the third quarter to get the lead. Miami countered with a touchdown of their own. Even though the Dolphins missed the extra point, they later added a field goal to put the Raiders in a 19-14 hole.

Miami was controlling the running game, so it was in Stabler's hands in the fourth quarter. He hit Branch on a 72-yard touchdown pass to get a 21-19 lead. Miami answered to move ahead 26-21. With two minutes to play, the Raiders had the ball on their own 32-yard line.

Biletnikoff was having a big day and would catch eight passes for 122 yards against one of the league's premier defenses. He and Stabler connected on some big plays, as Oakland marched down the field. They reached the eight-yard line as the clock ticked under 30 seconds. The Raiders were out of timeouts.

Stabler rolled to his left. As a lefthander, it was fortunate he was rolling to his open side, because Miami defensive lineman Vern Den Herder was in pursuit and got his arms around the Snake. Falling to the ground, Stabler was able to lob a pass to the end zone. Among three Dolphin defenders, Clarence Davis went up and got the ball. It's known as **The Sea of Hands catch**. And it gave Oakland a dramatic 28-26 win.

The Raiders-Dolphins game was seen as the de facto Super Bowl. In retrospect, it sounds foolish to have so casually dismissed the Steelers, who were on their way to Oakland for the AFC Championship Game. But when you consider that Pittsburgh had yet to win a Super Bowl, that their 10-3-1 record had been compiled without beating a good team, that they had lost their last two meetings with the Raiders by a combined 50-14, and that the one win in 1972 had taken one of the NFL's all-time fluke plays—well, when you consider all that, it's easy to see why public perception was what it was.

But public perception was going to change, and that change came in the fourth quarter of this 1974 AFC Championship Game. Oakland led 10-3, but they were being hammered up front. They only ran for 29 yards, while the Steelers rolled up 210 yards on the ground. Stabler threw three interceptions. While the Steelers also turned it over three times, the advantage Oakland had enjoyed in this area in previous victories was gone. And Pittsburgh just muscled their way to a 24-13 win.

Sports can be cruel. By any reasonable measurement, this 1974 Oakland Raiders season was a resounding success. But the Raiders were at a point in their historical arc, where reasonable measurements were out, and "Super Bowl or bust" was in. Stabler would later tell a biographer that he got mad throughout the offseason thinking of the fourth quarter of the AFC Championship Game.

1975

Stabler continued to be among the league's elite in completion percentage (58%) and yards-per-attempt (7.8). The downfield passing game did leave Oakland susceptible to mistakes. Even allowing that all quarterbacks in this era threw a lot more interceptions than we see today, Stabler's 8.2 interception rate ranked 21st out of 22 qualifying QBs.



A pair of Hall of Fame receivers were on the outside. Branch was the deep threat, and with 51 catches for 893 yards, he was an All-Pro in 1975. Biletnikoff worked underneath and caught 43 balls for nearly 600 yards.

The success of the running game was keyed by the great left side of Shell and Upshaw. Both Hall of Famers had Pro Bowl seasons. A balanced running game saw one Colgate product (Mark van Eeghen) start to take carries away from another (Hubbard). Pete

Banaszak, Clarence Davis, and Jess Phillips were also a part of the backfield rotation.

It all added up to a well-balanced offense that ranked fourth in the NFL for points scored.

The defense ranked seventh in points allowed and was led by Pro Bowlers with Villapiano at linebacker and Tatum roaming at free safety. Oakland's defense had playmakers up front, with Sistrunk, Horace Jones, and Tony Cline combining for 37 ½ sacks. And they had ballhawks in the secondary, led by corner Skip Thomas who intercepted six passes.

After the historic divisional round playoff game against the Dolphins, the NFL decided to make a rematch the Monday Night opener. Playing on the road, the Raiders came out firing. Banaszak ran for a couple short TDs and Oakland led 17-0. Each team turned the ball over five times, and it never got close after that in a 31-21 win.

The Raiders were a solid 10 ½ point favorite when they went to Baltimore. But this would be a year the Colts made sharp improvement and became a contender. Oakland fell behind 10-0 early. They cut the lead to 13-10 by halftime. In the third quarter, Stabler flipped a four-yard touchdown pass to Casper. With a 143-77 advantage in rush yardage, the Raiders began to pull away, and they won 31-20.

A rainy day in San Diego made a game with the lowly Chargers more interesting than it might otherwise have been. Neither team could move the ball. The Oakland defense held a young

San Diego quarterback named Dan Fouts to just three completions, intercepted him twice, and sacked him five times. It was enough to get out of town with a 6-0 win.

The Raiders were both flat and sloppy in Kansas City. Against a bad Chiefs team, Oakland was outrushed 224-91, and turned it over six times. They got hammered 42-10 for their first defeat. And in a road trip to Cincinnati, another rainy day slowed the offense. Both Stabler, and Bengal counterpart Ken Anderson threw four interceptions. But one of Stabler's got taken to the house, and that was the difference in a 14-10 loss.

You may have noticed that we're five games into this narrative and Oakland has yet to play at home. Extended road trips to open the season weren't unusual for the Raiders, but a home opener on October 26 was still pretty extreme. In the rematch with San Diego, Stabler was sharp, going 13/20 for 171 yards. Branch caught five of those passes for 95 yards. One of them was a 45-yard touchdown strike in the third quarter that broke the game open, and Oakland won 25-0.

The Raiders were 4-2, and the Broncos came to town at 3-3 for a significant AFC West game. Oakland trailed 17-7 in the third quarter. It was at this point that the division race turned for good. Stabler threw a 21-yard TD pass to Biletnikoff and a 16-yard scoring pass to Branch to get a 21-17 lead. The avalanche hit in the fourth quarter with three more touchdowns. Instead of being tied for the division lead, the 42-17 win put Oakland two games clear of the field. And it never got close again.

The Raider offense, clearly enjoying being back at home, kept humming against a terrible New Orleans Saints team. Stabler went 16/23 for 232 yards. A balanced running game produced a 260-95 edge in rush yardage. The final was 48-10.

Lowly Cleveland came to town as the next victim. This one was tight into the third quarter, tied 17-all. Stabler then went to Biletnikoff for a 15-yard touchdown pass and tossed a 31-yard TD pass to Davis. Stabler finished 16/25 for 220 yards. Davis ran for 120 yards and sealed the 38-17 win with a 26-yard TD run in the fourth quarter.

A high-profile late afternoon game awaited in Washington. While the Redskins would miss the playoffs in 1975, they were a perennial contender in this era that stayed in the hunt to the very end. Stabler went 20/32 for 243 yards, with Biletnikoff catching nine balls for 113 yards. In front of the national audience, Oakland built a 20-9 lead. But they also lost three fumbles. The Redskins rallied to tie it 23-23 and force overtime. But the Raiders got a field goal and escaped D.C. with a thrilling 26-23 win.

With four weeks to go, Oakland was 8-2. In the newly discovered race for playoff seeding, the defending Super Bowl champion Pittsburgh Steelers were 9-1, and being chased by 8-2 Cincinnati. The AFC East had 7-3 Miami and 6-4 Baltimore fighting it out. The Raiders, with their head-to-head wins over the Dolphins and Colts, were in good position to at least get the 2-seed and host one playoff game. But they could go anywhere from 1 to 3 as we hit the stretch drive.

On a road trip to play the subpar Atlanta Falcons, the Stabler-to-Branch connection came out on fire—touchdown passes from 40 yards, 27 yards, and 11 yards in the first quarter alone. But the defense was having an off-day and it was only 21-13 at the quarter. Then Stabler threw a Pick-6 and we had a ballgame. Oakland was still running the ball well—Banaszak went for 116 yards, van Eeghen added 82, while Davis chipped in 79. For the second straight week, the Raiders went to overtime, and for the second straight week they won. The final was 37-34.

The defense redeemed themselves on Monday Night home against Denver. Safety Charlie Phillips intercepted three passes to key a 17-10 win. Oakland was 10-2, while all of their rivals for playoff position had also held serve the last two weeks.

Pittsburgh had the tiebreaker for the 1-seed, and they won a Saturday game over Cincinnati in the regular season's penultimate week to sew it up. On Sunday, in a game that kicked off two hours prior to the Raiders' home date with the Houston Oilers, Baltimore won a big AFC East showdown with Miami. The consequence of that was that Oakland clinched the 2-seed. Whether that resulted in the Raiders first building up a 26-17 lead over a good Oiler team, but then losing 27-26 is subject for speculation. But it didn't matter. Oakland would host a divisional round game in the AFC playoffs.

A home date with Kansas City was now for tune-up purposes. Stabler went 11/12 for 134 yards. The running game spread the wealth in producing 246 yards on the ground. Banaszak's short TD run was the clincher in a 28-20 win. The Raiders closed the season at 11-3.

Cincinnati edged Miami for the wild-card spot, and there was a rule in place that said teams from the same division could not meet prior to the conference championship game. The Raiders would host the Bengals in the final game of Divisional Round Weekend for the right to go to Pittsburgh.

Oakland got a field goal and took a 3-0 first quarter lead. In the second quarter, Stabler threw TD passes to veteran wide receiver Mike Siani and tight end Bob Moore, sandwiched around a Cincinnati touchdown. The Raiders were in control at the half, up 17-7.

A six-yard touchdown run from Banaszak extended the lead to 24-7. Oakland would win the rush yardage battle 173-97. Stabler went 17/23 for 199 yards. When he flipped a two-yard scoring pass to Casper in the fourth quarter, the lead was 31-14. It looked over.

But the Cincinnati offense, coordinated by a future legend named Bill Walsh, stormed back. The Bengals scored two touchdowns. And with just over four minutes to play, Banaszak fumbled and lost the ball on his own 37-yard line. Disaster loomed.

The Oakland defense stood tall in the unforgiving minute, getting a sack and pushing Cincinnati out of field goal range.. They got the ball back. With 0:50 left, the Raiders had to get a punt away. The Bengals came after it...and were called for roughing the kicker. The 31-28 win was finally sealed.

It was on to Pittsburgh for an AFC Championship Game rematch. After some rainy weather, Oakland arrived to find that the artificial turf at old Three Rivers Stadium was a sheet of ice. The Raiders were furious and believed the tarp had been left off intentionally to slow Oakland's more wide-open offense. Whatever the reason, it worked. In a sloppy game, both teams combined to turn it over 12 times. The Raiders trailed 16-10. Branch caught a pass on the 15-yard line late in the game. But he couldn't get out of bounds, there were no timeouts left and it ended right there.

Getting this far but not finishing the job was getting to be old, and Oakland carried the bitterness into the offseason. The good news? Their redemption was almost here.

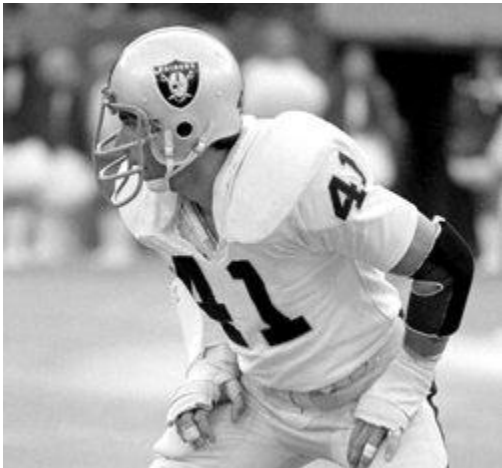
1976

Even in the relatively calmer media climate of the 1970s, the “can’t win the big one” tag was being hung on Madden and Stabler. We can only imagine how intense the media shouting would be today.

One way to have a breakthrough year is for a collection of Hall of Fame players to all have great seasons simultaneously. That’s what happened with the Raider passing game. Stabler’s 67 percent completion rate and 9.4 yards-per-attempt were each the best in the league. His 27/17 TD-INT ratio and 5.8 percent interception rate are poor by today’s standards. But in the world of 1976, the interceptions were merely subpar, with his rate ranking 19th among starting quarterbacks. Stabler got another Pro Bowl ticket.

Cliff Branch caught 46 passes, and with 1,111 total yards, his yards-per-catch was an amazing 24.2. Dave Casper caught 53 balls from his tight end spot. Branch and Casper were both named All-Pro. Fred Biletnikoff caught 43 passes, as a possession receiver working underneath.

The running game was led by Mark van Eghen, who rolled up over 1,000 yards. Clarence Davis chipped in over 500. The offensive line was anchored by the great left tackle-guard combo of Gene Upshaw and Art Shell. When you added it all up, the Raider offense ranked 4th in the league for points scored.



Oakland’s defense only had one Pro Bowler, outside linebacker Phil Villapiano. But they had several playmakers.

Defensive end Otis Sistrunk produced 11 sacks. John Matuszak added 9 ½ more. Ted Hendricks was a disruptive force at outside linebacker. Jack Tatum was a ferocious hitter from his free safety spot. Willie Brown, the proud 36-year-old veteran, was still getting it done at corner. The Raider defense wasn’t great, but they still ranked 12th in what was then a 28-team league.

Oakland just needed to prove it could beat Pittsburgh, and the opening game pitted the two rivals against each other. In our own day, this would be a Thursday night affair in the Steel City, but back then it was a normal Sunday afternoon game and scheduled in Oakland. The Raiders trailed 21-7 at the start of the fourth quarter and 28-14 with five minutes to go, but Stabler rallied the troops.

The final quarter saw him throw for two touchdowns, run for one more and the Raiders got a late field goal to win 31-28. Stabler finished with 342 yards passing, enough to offset his four interceptions. Oakland not only had a win over its conference rival, but they were at least 1-0 as they started a five-game stretch that would be all on the road.

Stabler was sharp on Monday Night against a bad Kansas City Chiefs team. He went 22/28 for 224 yards. The Raiders outrushed the Chiefs 211-115, and built a 24-7 lead. Then, Stabler got hurt. Oakland's offense bogged down. Kansas City scored twice, but the Raiders hung on to win 24-21.

Even so, Stabler had to miss the Week 3 trip to Houston. A game with the subpar Oilers would become tougher than it otherwise might have been. But backup Mike Rae filled in admirably, going 13/22 for 170 yards. The defense held Houston to 39 yards rushing, and Oakland got out of town with a 14-13 win.

Stabler returned the following week in New England. But the Raiders were awful. They were crushed on the ground, getting outrushed 296-114. They turned it over four times. And they took it on the chin in a 48-17 rout. At the time, it looked like Oakland had been crushed by a mediocre team. But, as it turned out, they hadn't see the last of the Patriots.

A trip to San Diego continued the road trip, and the Raiders struggled with a mediocre opponent. They were tied 7-7 in the second quarter. Stabler went up top to Branch from 74 yards. Then, they trailed 17-14 in the fourth quarter. Stabler again found Branch, this time from 41 yards out. Stabler finished 20/26 for 339 yards and the Raiders were able to win, 27-17.

Denver was the last stop on these marathon road trips that were strangely commonplace for Oakland in this era. The Broncos proved to be the top challenger in the AFC West, and this was a battle. The Raiders trailed 10-3 at the half. The Stabler-to-Branch combo came through again, a 46-yard scoring strike to tie it up in the third quarter. Oakland ultimately won 17-10.

The Raiders weren't looking dominant, but they were 5-1, and in an era where the schedule was only 14 games, there were just two more road dates remaining. Opportunity was right in front of them.

On a home date with lowly Green Bay, Stabler threw a 27-yard touchdown pass to Casper, an 88-yard strike to Branch and a 10-yard toss to Biletnikoff. It was enough to win, but the kicking game was an adventure. Fred Seinfort missed two extra points, got hurt and was placed on injured reserve. Punter Ray Guy missed the third PAT. The result was a weird 18-14 final.

Errol Mann was brought in as the new kicker for the rematch with Denver. He hit a couple field goals and the game was tied 6-6 in the fourth quarter. The Raider pass rush was unleashed and would finish with ten sacks. Stabler broke the tie with a 31-yard touchdown pass to Biletnikoff. A Davis touchdown run was the clincher—although another missed PAT left the final at 19-6.

On a road trip to face mediocre Chicago, Stabler went 11/17 for 234 yards and no mistakes. Branch caught five balls for 163 yards. The biggest was a 49-yard touchdown pass in the fourth quarter that turned a 27-21 deficit into a 28-27 win. Ironically, it was a victory made possible because Mann hit all four extra points, while Chicago missed one.

Kansas City made their return trip to Oakland. In a strange coincidence, the Raiders again won the rush yardage battle by exactly 211-115. They won the football game 21-10. The running game continued to roll in the season's final road game at Philadelphia. The Raiders pounded out 250 yards on the ground, 133 from van Eghen. They beat a bad Eagles team 26-7.

At 10-1, Oakland had clinched the AFC West, but there was still a lot to play for. The Baltimore Colts and Cincinnati Bengals were both 9-2, and the Colts had a leg up in the tiebreaker.

The Raiders hosted the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, who were winless in their first year of existence. Oakland kept them that way by sacking quarterback Steve Spurrier five times and getting a 15/23 for 245 yards performance from Stabler. After the first quarter ended with the game tied 7-7, the Raiders coasted to a 49-16 win.

Cincinnati lost, so that assured Oakland of at least the 2-seed. They would get to play at least the Divisional Round at home. The Raiders were now hosting the Bengals for Monday Night Football in the penultimate week.

Pittsburgh, after an injury to quarterback Terry Bradshaw, and an awful start to the season, was coming on strong. They were a game back of Cincinnati and held the tiebreaker. But there was only one wild-card available and New England had a hold on that.

All of which is to say that there was more than a little speculation that the Raiders might just hold their fire in this one—effectively knock the Steelers out of the playoffs, by taking their foot off the gas against the Bengals. The fact the Colts had lost the prior Saturday meant Oakland had a loss to give in the push for the 1-seed.

But the Raiders believed in both themselves and the integrity of the game. They played to win on Monday Night and that's what they did. Stabler threw two TD passes to Stabler in the first quarter to get the early lead. Oakland rushed for 228 yards. They kept Cincy at arm's length the rest of the night and won 35-20.

With everything now sewn up, Rae got the start for the finale with the Chargers. The Raider defense held a young Dan Fouts to 82 yards passing in a 24-0 shutout win. They had wrapped up the season at 13-1. But none of those were the wins that Oakland really wanted.

The playoff road would start with a change to avenge their lone loss. The Patriots came west for a late Saturday afternoon divisional round game. And the feisty wild-card would continue to show they were a tough matchup for the Raiders.

New England scored first and led 7-3 after a quarter. Stabler found Biletnikoff for a 31-yard touchdown pass and Oakland took a 10-7 lead into the locker room. But the Raiders couldn't run the ball and they were having a tough time stopping the run. The Patriots drove for a pair of third-quarter touchdowns. A nightmare was unfolding for Oakland fans. They trailed 21-10 and their dream season was in serious jeopardy.

Stabler was playing well though, finishing 19/32 for 233 yards. Biletnikoff finished with nine catches for 137 of those yards. Oakland rallied and cut the lead to 21-17. Then they got help on two controversial calls.

A big incompleteness stopped a Patriot drive to run out the clock, when New England tight end Russ Francis was interfered with. Stabler would get a chance to win the game. And he drove the Raiders down the field.

A big sack forced Oakland into a 3rd-and-18 from the Patriot 28-yard line. Stabler dropped back. He threw an incomplete pass. But there was a flag on the field—roughing the passer on defensive tackle Sugar Bear Hamilton. New England was furious with the call. Given a reprieve, Stabler finished the drive by running in from a yard out. The Raiders survived, 24-21.

The stage was set for the third straight Oakland-Pittsburgh AFC Championship Game. The Steelers had taken their regular season surge into the playoffs and crushed the Colts, 40-14. Pittsburgh's defense was dominating people. Regard for the two-time defending champs was so high that this one-loss Raider team was a four-point underdog on their home field.

But Pittsburgh was also missing their running backs, Franco Harris and Rocky Bleier. And Oakland, having survived their scare, was ready to elevate their own game. A first-quarter field goal from Mann gave them the lead, and then Davis ran in for a touchdown to make it 10-0.

The Steelers cut it to 10-7, but a short TD pass from Stabler pushed the lead back out to 17-7. Oakland was able to run the ball against the Steel Curtain, producing 157 yards on the ground. Bradshaw, forced into bad situations, was held to 14/35 for 176 yards. Stabler tossed another short touchdown pass in the third quarter. And Oakland finally overcame their nemesis, 24-7.

This year's Super Bowl would be the first time a professional football game of any kind was played in Pasadena's Rose Bowl. The last hurdle for Oakland was the Minnesota Vikings. The Vikes had their own issues with "winning the big one," having lost the Super Bowl in 1969, 1973 and 1974. A monkey was coming off somebody's back in this game.

Oakland had special teams problems in the first quarter. Mann missed a short field goal. A blocked punt near their own goal line could have been disastrous, but the defense stepped up and forced a fumble. It allowed the Raiders to get out of the opening period with the game still scoreless. And in the second quarter, they took over.

Mann got another chance at a chippie field goal and hit it. Stabler threw a short TD pass to Casper, and Banaszak scored. Another missed extra point kept it 16-0, but Oakland was in firm control. They were dominating the line of scrimmage, to the tune of a 266-97 edge in rush yardage.

A third-quarter field goal was followed by a Viking touchdown. At 19-7, the Raiders responded by driving down for another score. Oakland forced three turnovers and committed none. One of those turnovers came when Brown intercepted a pass and brought it 75 yards to the house. It was 32-7, and even another missed PAT wasn't going to dampen the celebration. This one was all but over, and it ended 32-14.

The ability of the Raiders to run the ball against a defense with a well-earned reputation was again the story, just as it had been in the AFC Championship Game. Davis ran 16 times for 137 yards. I'm still not sure how he was passed over for game MVP in favor of Biletnikoff, who caught four passes for 79 yards. Even allowing that those numbers are more impressive in the mid-1970s than they would be in today's environment, they weren't overwhelming. Davis deserved the award.

But what was most deserved, was that the "can't win the big one tag"—rarely fair in any circumstances—could finally be lifted. John Madden and the 1976 Oakland Raiders had won it all.

1977

The 1977 Oakland Raiders continued to contend and extended their streak of consecutive AFC Championship Game appearances to five. But they came up short of a repeat championship.

The league's most prolific offense was the key to success. Stabler had a Pro Bowl year at age 32. While he was prone to interceptions, that was also more common—and acceptable—in this era, so long as you made big plays. And Stabler did. His 7.4 yards-per-attempt was third-best among starting quarterbacks. He was also efficient, with a 58 percent completion rate that ranked fourth in the league.

Stabler had the NFL's best tight end in Casper, who caught 48 balls for 584 yards—and that number doesn't include his biggest catches, which came in the postseason. Branch was now 33-years-old, but the wide receiver still made the Pro Bowl. Branch, along with Biletnikoff, each caught 33 passes.



But the real key to the offensive explosion was a powerhouse running game. Mark van Eeghen ran for almost 1,300 yards in what was then still a 14-game regular season schedule. Clarence Davis added nearly 800 yards. They both ran behind a terrific line, anchored Shell and Upshaw. Both made 1st-team All-Pro in 1977. Dave Dalby was a Pro Bowl center.

A prime reason that Oakland often ran just a step behind other great AFC teams in this era, from Pittsburgh to Miami earlier in the decade, was that the Raider defense usually wasn't elite. That was the case in 1977, when the Raider defense ranked 14th in a

28-team league for points allowed.

There were no Pro Bowlers on the defensive side of the ball in '77, but there were some playmakers. Defensive ends Pat Toomay and Matuszak combined for 23 ½ sacks. Tatum was one of the hardest hitters in the league. But the D could never really overcome the injury to one of their more consistent performers—linebacker Phil Villapiano.

Defensive problems certainly weren't evident in the early going. Oakland opened the season at home against mediocre San Diego. The Raiders outrushed the Chargers 178-59, won the turnover battle 3-1 and took home a penalty-ridden game 24-0.

That set the stage for a high-profile visit to Pittsburgh—the teams who had played for the AFC Championship each of the last three years. In our own day, this would either be prime-time, or at least late Sunday afternoon viewing. In 1977, it just kicked off at 1 PM EST.

While Pittsburgh wanted to reassert themselves atop the AFC, Oakland had their own motivation. Their victory in last year's playoffs had been diminished by many in the public because the Steeler running backs, Franco Harris and Rocky Bleier were injured. Franco and Rocky were healthy today. And the Raider defense shut them down. They forced five turnovers and sacked Terry Bradshaw five times. The 16-7 win marked the third time in a calendar year that Oakland had beaten Pittsburgh.

A Monday Night visit at lowly Kansas City saw the Raiders get out to a slow start, and they trailed 21-13 at the half. But the offense was moving the ball. Both van Eeghen and Davis cleared the 100-yard mark rushing, and Casper did the same receiving. Oakland won 37-28.

The Raiders went on to visit Cleveland. They forced five turnovers from the mediocre Browns, van Eeghen rushed for 114 yards, and Oakland stayed undefeated with a 26-10 win.

Denver had gone back and forth between contention and irrelevance in the 1970s to date. This '77 edition of the Broncos were decidedly contenders, and the first head-to-head battle in Oakland was between 4-0 teams. Stabler threw a nine-yard touchdown pass to Casper to get a 7-0 lead. That was about the last thing that went right for the Raiders. Stabler threw *seven* interceptions, including a Pick-6. Unsurprisingly, it led to a 30-7 loss.

Oakland went on to play a bad New York Jets team in old Shea Stadium and dug themselves a 27-14 hole after three quarters. What the Raiders were doing was running the ball, to the tune of a 210-67 rush yardage edge. By the fourth quarter, that paid off. Stabler threw touchdown passes to Casper and Mike Sinai, making the Jets pay for an earlier missed extra point in a 28-27 win.

That set up a fast turnaround for the road rematch with Denver. Stabler again opened this matchup with an early touchdown pass, this one to Branch, for a 7-0 lead. This time, he played well the rest of the way. There were no turnovers. There were 200 rush yards, 105 of them from Davis. By playing clean football, the Raiders built a 24-0 lead by the third quarter and closed a 24-14 win. The AFC West rivals were both 6-1 as the season moved to the second half.

A home date with the subpar Seattle Seahawks got off to a slow start, and Oakland only led 3-0 after a quarter. But with Davis going for 100 yards, and Stabler playing clean football, the Raiders rolled to a 44-7 win.

The Houston Oilers were starting to put together a contender, one that would emerge as a playoff team the following year. They came into Oakland and had the Raiders down 29-24 in the third quarter of what was a turnover-laden game both ways. What Stabler was doing was making big plays. He went 23/31 for 264 yards, with Branch catching eight of those passes for 115 yards. Oakland rallied to win 34-29.

But the following week, Stabler played his worst game of the year in San Diego. He went 4/10 for 40 yards and was yanked for backup Mike Rae. The Raiders were getting outrushed decisively, 263-112. They made enough red-zone stops to keep it close, but still lost 12-7.

In the meantime, Denver beat Kansas City. The Broncos not only took a one-game lead, but they also took the lead in terms of division record, which would be the key tiebreaker, given the head-to-head split.

Oakland came back home and took out their frustrations on a poor Buffalo Bills team on Monday Night Football. The Raiders pummeled the Bills up front, to the tune of a 307-65 edge in rush yardage. 143 of those yards came from van Eeghen. The final was 34-13.

At 9-2, Oakland had a one-game lead on Miami for the wild-card spot. The Raiders were also in reasonable position for the tiebreakers, depending on how the final three weeks played out.

But Oakland gave away their cushion in a big road game against the contending Los Angeles Rams. Stabler threw four interceptions, and the Raiders lost a close 20-14 game. Denver knocked off Houston and clinched the AFC West. Oakland and Miami were both 9-3, with the Raiders still controlling their own destiny.

Another marquee NFC opponent awaited in the Minnesota Vikings. It was a home game, and by the time the Raiders took the field, the Dolphins had lost in New England. Whether Madden knew this and informed his team, I don't know. But Oakland played hungry. In short order, van Eeghen ran for a TD, Stabler threw one to Branch, and the defense scored a touchdown. It was 21-0 quickly. The Raiders collected seven turnovers, van Eeghen rushed for 112 yards and a 35-13 rout secured a playoff spot.

Madden took the opportunity to let Rae start the home finale against Kansas City. The backup QB threw a 100-yard Pick-6 and the Raiders trailed 20-12 in the fourth quarter. But Rae, aided by a ground game that rolled up over 240 yards, rallied Oakland to a 21-20 win.

The Raiders finished the season 11-3. It was the second-best record in the AFC, but as the wild-card, they would have to go on the road for the postseason. That road would start on a Christmas Eve Saturday afternoon against the Baltimore Colts.

In the course of the great 1970s NFL decade, Oakland had already played in some all-time classic playoff games. From the crushing and controversial loss in Pittsburgh in 1972, to the epic win over Miami in 1974, the Raiders had their place in the history books. Today in Baltimore, they played another one.

Davis took off on a 30-yard touchdown jaunt in the first quarter for a 7-0 lead. But Stabler threw a Pick-6 in the second quarter and the Raiders trailed 10-7 at the half. In the second half, both offenses started trading blows. Stabler threw a ten-yard TD pass to Casper. The Colts returned the ensuing kickoff for a touchdown. Stabler threw an eight-yard touchdown pass to Casper. Oakland led 21-17 going into the final period.

The Raiders were getting the better of the flow of play and would outgain the Colts 491-301. But losing the turnover battle 4-0, along with giving up a special teams score, prevented Oakland from getting control. Baltimore scored to take the lead, 24-21. Stabler kept throwing. He finished 21/40 for 345 yards, with Biletnikoff and Branch each going over the 100-yard mark. Oakland went back up front, 28-24.

Baltimore had their own response and took a 31-28 lead. The Raiders had the ball on their own 44-yard line with 2:17 to play.

The next play would become known as “Ghost to the Post” in NFL lore. It drew its name from Casper (“**The Friendly Ghost**”), running a post pattern. Stabler hit with him a deep ball that set up the tying field goal.

At 31-31, the game went to overtime. Then it went to a second overtime. Finally, it was Stabler and Casper again early in the sixth quarter. A ten-yard touchdown pass won the classic battle, 37-31.

That set up Round 3 with Denver, after the Broncos took out the Steelers later that day. The AFC Championship Game would take its own place in NFL lore, although not for the reasons any Oakland fan wanted. In a game where neither team ran the ball well, the Raiders trailed 7-3 in the third quarter. Denver was on the doorstep of adding to the lead.

They gave the ball to Rob Lytle. Tatum leveled a big hit and forced a fumble. Raider defensive back Mike McCoy scooped it up and might have been running for a long time. But the play was blown dead. It was a premature whistle in the age before instant replay. Denver scored on the next play. It was the difference in a game that ended as a 21-17 loss.

The loss was a bitter play to swallow. It also—though not apparent at the time—represented at least a pause in the era of Oakland’s excellence.

1978

The previous nine years had been a great run of success for the Raider franchise. We've seen Madden's teams earn eight playoff berths, six appearances in the AFC Championship Game and a Super Bowl title—all while competing in a conference that had some of the league's all-time great times, from the Shula-era Dolphins to the Steel Curtain. The 1978 Oakland Raiders season was looking much the same, with a playoff berth in grasp. But a late fade and an early retirement from the young head coach ended an era.

Stabler continued to be renowned for his accuracy—a 58 percent completion rate was good for fifth in the league in an era where passing was more difficult. Stabler could also get it downfield, with his 7.3 yards-per-attempt. But he also threw a lot of interceptions. Even allowing that more INTs were thrown in this era, Stabler's 30 picks—on 7.4 percent of his passes—was one of the worst in the league. I guess the nicest way to say it is that very few of Ken Stabler's passes hit the ground in 1978.

Casper was the key to the short passing game. The NFL's best tight end caught 62 passes. Branch and Morris Bradshaw were at wideout, each with an ability to get down the field.

Oakland's great offensive line was starting to show its age. Upshaw missed the Pro Bowl at age 33 and began to decline. Shell still had a Pro Bowl year at left tackle, but even though van Eeghen was a 1,000-yard rusher, he had a mediocre four yards per attempt. Arthur Wittington's 661 yards at halfback came at the cost of just 3.8 yards a pop.

Even so, the Raider offense still ranked a solid 10th in a 28-team league for points scored. The defense ranked the same. There were no Pro Bowl seasons on D, but there were still playmakers, from outside linebacker Ted Hendricks to corner Lester Hayes to Tatum and Charlie Phillips at safety.

Tatum was surrounded by controversy and tragedy in the preseason. His hit on New England Patriots' receiver Darryl Stingley resulted in Stingley being paralyzed. It bears noting that Tatum was not penalized on the play nor disciplined by the league afterward, but there's no question the tragedy impacted him, and Madden would later cite it as a factor in his decision to retire.

The regular season opened at Denver. The Raider pass defense limited Bronco quarterback Craig Morton to 34 passing yards. But Oakland had to settle for field goals on two trips to the red zone. They lost the turnover battle 3-1. Denver got touchdowns on their red zone trips and handed the Raiders a 14-6 loss.

Another divisional road game was in danger of getting away at San Diego. With Stabler throwing three interceptions, the Raiders trailed the Chargers 20-7 in the fourth quarter. Stabler

hit Bradshaw on a 44-yard touchdown pass, then drove Oakland down to the San Diego 14-yard line. There was time for one more play.

It would prove to be one of the most famous (or infamous) plays in NFL history. Stabler was about to get sacked to end the game. He deliberately fumbled it forward. Two Raider players, including Casper, kept pushing the ball forward, where the tight end finally fell on it in the end zone. This was a legal play at the time. It became known as “**The Holy Roller**” and it handed the Raiders a 21-20 win.

A road trip to play a decent Green Bay Packers team finally produced an easy win. Even though Stabler threw four interceptions, van Eghen rushed for 151 yards and the team overall rolled up 348 yards on the ground. Oakland coasted, 28-3.

The following week would make history. The Raiders’ home opener with the Patriots would be in prime-time on Sunday Night. This would be the first-ever edition of what is now the highest-rated TV show of any kind in the United States—Sunday Night Football. Madden likely had a hard time appreciating the history of it all after his team was outrushed 207-83, blew a 14-0 lead and lost 21-14.

A late-afternoon road trip to Chicago saw Stabler play his cleanest game of the season to date. The Snake went 25/43, 278 yards, no interceptions and spread the ball around. The game went to overtime and the Raiders pulled out a 25-19 win. They were 3-2, and half of their road schedule was already behind them.

The Houston Oilers were becoming a contender with a rookie running back named Earl Campbell. They came to Oakland, put the Raiders in a 17-7 hole, and were knocking on the door for more in the third quarter. Then Phillips made a massive play, returning a fumble 96 yards for a touchdown. Stabler tossed a three-yard TD pass to Casper. The Raiders overcame five turnovers to win 21-17.

Kansas City was the worst team in the AFC West, and Oakland made quick work of the Chiefs. Phillips scored again, this time on a 42-yard Pick-6. Stabler was brilliant, going 15/20 for 222 yards and no mistakes. The final was 28-6.

Seattle was a franchise getting competitive for the first time since their founding in 1976. A trip to the old Kingdome was a disaster for the Raiders. They couldn’t run the ball, dug themselves a 21-0 hole and lost 27-7.

Oakland hosted San Diego and led 23-14 in the fourth quarter. But a generally well-played game on both sides turned against the Silver-n-Black. Dan Fouts and the Chargers pulled out a 27-23 win. The Raider record was suddenly 5-4 and they faced some urgency.

A light spot in the schedule arrived at just the right time. Whittington rushed for 134 yards in Kansas City, while Casper caught seven balls for 112 yards. The Raiders beat the Chiefs 20-10. A Monday Night visit to lowly Cincinnati saw defensive back Neal Colzie start the party with a 32-yard fumble return for a score. Stabler played clean football, Oakland built a 27-7 lead and won 34-21. Another mistake-free game from the Snake, combined with 98 yards on the ground by van Eghen, produced a 29-17 win at Detroit.

Oakland was 8-4 and in a good position to make the playoffs. They were tied for first with Denver in the AFC West. While the Broncos had the tiebreakers, thanks to divisional record, the Raiders would still host their rival in December.

With two wild-card berths now available, Oakland's position there was even better. The primary contestants were Houston and Miami, both 8-4 themselves. The Raiders had the head-to-head win over the Oilers and would play the Dolphins in the season's penultimate game.

In short, it was all right there for Oakland. But it was all right here when it all fell apart.

The Seahawks were 6-6 and hoping to make a push themselves when they came to town. Even though Stabler played well, the Raider offense bogged down in the red zone once, and had what proved to be a fatal missed PAT. They lost 17-16. But the good news was that the Broncos and Dolphins both lost too. No reason to panic.

Denver came in for another Sunday Night game. The game was almost a carbon-copy of the season-opener. Morton only threw for 54 yards. Oakland put together two nice drives but had to settle for field goals. They turned it over five times. They trailed 7-6 in the second half, and again Denver put it away late. This time the final was 21-6. The loss realistically ended any hopes the Raiders had of winning the AFC West.

It would all come down to a late afternoon national TV game in Miami. If Oakland won, they would still control their destiny for a wild-card spot in the season finale at home against Minnesota. If Oakland lost, they were finished.

Another missed extra point loomed large as the Raider-Dolphin battle was tied 6-6 after three quarters. Stabler went 23/36 for 251 yards. But he also threw five interceptions. The game got away in the fourth quarter and turned into a 23-6 loss.

Oakland salvaged some wounded pride against Minnesota, outrushing the Vikings 168-90, getting another defensive touchdown from Phillips, taking a 21-0 lead, and winning 27-20. Minnesota came into the game still fighting for the NFC Central title, and while they would win it, the Raiders made the Vikes back into the playoffs. Madden's final season might have been disappointing, but his team had held their head high in the finale.

EPILOGUE

Madden would later recount that he knew he was going to retire. His ulcers were creating a health problem that, even at age 42, he didn't want to keep pushing. He departed with a career record of 112-39-7—the best winning percentage (75.9%) of anyone who has coached at least 100 games.

Tom Flores took over as Oakland coach. The 1979 season was more of the same—a 9-7 finish that wasn't enough to get in the playoffs. But better times were coming for both the franchise and for Madden. Flores won Super Bowls in both 1980 and 1983. And Madden merely went on to CBS, later Fox, and effectively turned into the public face of the NFL. All's well that ends well.