

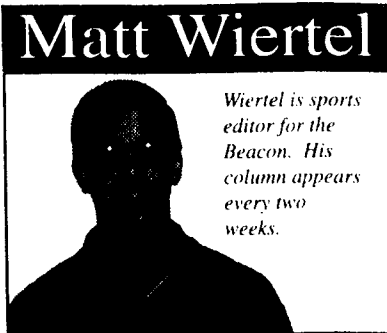
Don't Get Me Started

The real sports fan: dead or alive

In professional sports today, we see the constant acceleration of player salaries. We see billionaire owners move teams from city to city without any notice due to a lack of "profits". We see television networks outbid each other for the right to own a coveted piece of the professional sports pie.

But where are the fans? Are they in the stands or at home on the couch? Or are they at Wal-Mart gobbling up the entire supply of White House Womanizer garb?

For one, if they are at the game, they are probably missing a large



amount of money. Now I realize that if you are to mathematically calculate all of the various factors, fans on a whole are not paying much more for sporting events than they did

years ago. With that being said, it seems as if owners don't want the average fan to attend sporting events.

I for one can't afford, nor do I know any other college student who can afford, to go to any NFL, NHL, or NBA game. In order to get a decent seat at any of the facilities, you're spending \$30.00 a seat, if not more, unless you want to sit in the half way to the moon section.

And if you do scrounge up enough cash to go to see your favorite team, now all of a sudden you can't make a ruckus because it isn't accepted behavior anymore.

While attending a Bills game at Rich Stadium (now Ralph Wilson Stadium after the conceited old man named it after himself), I noticed a different attitude amongst the revelers. What used to be common behavior of screaming until your throat bled and making as much noise as humanly possible was no longer "appropriate." A friend of mine who was in attendance was told to be quiet, so he politely told that individual how he felt by means of sign language.

So where has the true sports fan gone? Some have been alienated due to their team's relocation to another

city, while others can't justify the cost. But most true fans are merely muzzled by the fair weather fans. These fans only support the team when times are good, but put away all the coats and shirts when things hit the rocks. (Sounds much like the Pittsburgh Steelers fans of this year who turned their shirts inside out after week seven or so.)

In addition, owners and players have little or no respect for the fans these days. Owners only cater to the wealthy who fill the club suites and drive up team revenues, while players constantly whine about not be-

ing paid enough.

The fan who has been a season ticket holder for years, or one who attends games on a regular basis, gets bored constantly. Not only by the bandwagoners but by the people they support by going to the games.

In my estimation, the true fan is still alive, but at this rate he or she will also soon become extinct.

McNair leads Titans to Super Bowl

by Percy Allen

Knight-Ridder Tribune
January 24, 2000

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — There are different kinds of fairy tales.

For Steve McNair, his fate has always seemed to be determined by others trying to judge his ability. He was not good enough to play big-time college football. Or smart enough to quarterback an NFL team. Or the most recent criticism: he couldn't throw the ball with enough efficiency to lead Tennessee to a third straight victory against Jacksonville at Alltel Stadium.

McNair heard it, he said, and it hurt. "Somebody is always trying to put labels on you and put you into some type of category," McNair said. "Running quarterback or black quarterback or whatever. I'm not into labels. I'm a quarterback. Period."

But to beat a Jaguar defense nicknamed "Dare McNair," he would have to prove his critics correct. McNair couldn't win by passing, but he needed to sprint past Jacksonville and carried Tennessee to a 33-14 victory that gave the franchise its first AFC championship and trip to Super Bowl.

"Call him whatever you want to call him," Titan offensive lineman Bruce Matthews said. "If he's a running quarterback, fine. But he's a winner. That's all he's done this season."

"Defenses don't rush guys because of what he can do as a quarterback and that makes your job so much easier. You can just see it in their eyes. If they blitz and miss, he's gone, so teams don't blitz."

Matthews had the best view of McNair's final run when the Titans quarterback scrambled free on a 51-yard scamper midway in the fourth quarter that broke the Jaguars' spirits and sealed the victory for Tennessee.

On third-and-one, McNair rolled to his left, stopped for a moment and took off upfield.

"Eddie [George] did a good job of selling the fake and the hole just opened wide," McNair said. "When it's that wide, I'm taking it. ... I was thinking touchdown, but I really didn't want to fumble it."

He was tackled at the 1-yard line, but scored on the next play. It was McNair's second rushing touchdown, and he ran for almost as many yards as he had passing. Afterward, the

performance nearly made him blush.

He can throw the ball, he insists. He's got the records and videotape to prove it. If you push him, he'll tell you about the time he for passed for 491 yards at tiny Alcorn State, a Division I-AA school in Mississippi.

But to see him now, running into the Super Bowl is a side of McNair that he'd rather not reveal. He prefers to stand in the pocket and fire passes the way he used to.

"It took some adjustment," he said. "I used to pass for 4,000 yards in a season and to come here and have 100 or 200 yards [passing] a game, that took some getting used to."

Again, McNair was outpassed by his counterpart.

Jacksonville's Mark Brunell finished with 226 yards on 19-of-38 passing. McNair completed 14 of 23 for 112 yards.

But Brunell's gimpy left knee made him an easy target for the Titans, who constantly harassed him and sacked him three times. McNair was also slowed by a sprained toe and needed to wear a protective boot on his left foot last week.

But he was mobile enough to run for 91 yards on nine carries and avoid the Jacksonville pass rush that led the league with 57 sacks.

"He's the guy that beat us today," Jaguar linebacker Kevin Hardy said. "We came into the game wanting to stop him and Eddie George. I think we did a nice job stopping Eddie George, but we couldn't contain McNair."

Early in the third quarter, Hardy broke free on a blitz but missed McNair who spun away and passed to George for a 15-yard gain. On the play, the defensive tackle was penalized 15 yards for roughing the passer, which pushed Tennessee to the Jacksonville 35.

McNair scored on a 1-yard run four plays later, giving the Titans their first lead, 17-14.

"That was the turning point," Hardy said.

In the first half, both teams played evenly and the Jaguars led by four points at intermission. When it seemed Jacksonville would blow out the Titans, Tennessee countered every scoring drive. Jacksonville scored quickly, needing just two minutes to cover 62 yards before Brunell connected with tight end Kyle Brady for a 7-yard touchdown pass.

Tennessee responded with a nine-play, 51-yard drive that took 5:50 minutes. McNair hadn't been sharp on many passes, but was able to throw a 9-yard touchdown pass to receiver Yancy Thigpen.

Both teams traded interceptions before Jacksonville took the lead in the second quarter on James Stewart's 33-yard touchdown run through the middle.

"We knew we weren't going to blow them out in their house," Titan defensive end Jevon Kearse said. "We wanted to keep it close and see what we could do in the second half."

It wasn't until both teams traded fumbles late in the third quarter that the game was decided.

The Jaguars began on their 1-yard line, but struggled to advance the football. Running back Fred Taylor (19 carries, 110 yards) was nearly caught in the end zone, but managed to escape a flurry of Titans and avoid a safety.

On the next play, however, defensive tackle Josh Evans broke through the middle and caught Brunell by the ankle and defensive tackle Jason Fisk drove the Jacksonville quarterback into the turf for a safety.

"When we got a team backed up like that, we're thinking score," Evans said. "Forget the punt. We want seven, but two points will do."

Momentum clearly shifted toward Tennessee and all the air seemed to be sucked out of the stadium when Derrick Mason returned the ensuing punt 80 yards for a touchdown to give the Titans a 26-14 advantage.

From there, a Tennessee defense that forced six of the game's 10 turnovers took over.

Jacksonville had two drives stopped in the fourth quarter because of turnovers and was unable to mount a serious scoring threat. The Titans played ball control and relied on the running of McNair and George, who finished with 86 yards on 25 carries.

Afterward, the two joked about the game and their performance.

"Did he have more yards than me?" George said in the locker room. "He did. He's no quarterback. He's no quarterback. He's a [running] back."

To this, McNair smiled. Again, more labels.

As expected, Rams beat Tampa Bay - but just barely

by Marcus Hayes

Knight-Ridder Tribune
January 24, 2000

ST. LOUIS — Finally.

The most deadly attack in the NFL spent most of its grandest hour impotent, wracked by penalty and error, rendered harmless by a defense that is earning itself legendary status. The Trans World Dome grew quieter by the quarter as the homestanding Rams flailed at Tampa Bay and its impenetrable force.

And then . . . and then . . .

League MVP Kurt Warner hit pedestrian receiver Ricky Proehl from 30 yards on third down and scored the game's only touchdown with 4 minutes, 44 seconds remaining. The Dome's record crowd of 66,496 exploded. Like a 747 bound for Atlanta, they took off on a glorious binge of noise that they bottled for most of the game's previous 55 minutes.

A desperate Bucs drive fizzled in the final minute. Proehl's touchdown — his only one all year — won it for the Rams and sent coach Dick Vermeil to the Super Bowl to meet AFC champion Tennessee for the first time since he took the Eagles there after the 1980 season.

The reaction? Whew. The Rams had won, 11-6.

"They had us on the ropes," Proehl admitted afterward. "That's the best defense we saw all year. Easy."

Afterward, "Georgia on My Mind" blared over the loudspeakers. Aptly named Rams owner Georgia Frontiere, whose team will play in its first Super Bowl next week in the Georgia Dome in Atlanta, Ga., took a victory lap.

There were moments of trepidation and controversy before and after Proehl's heroics. The Rams' offense had managed just a 24-yard Jeff Wilkins field goal with 4:17 left in the first quarter before Proehl's touchdown catch, victims of the league's third-ranked defense.

After the catch, Bucs rookie quarterback Shaun King — like some mirror image of *Any Given Sunday* hero Willie Beamen, played by Jamie Foxx — guided his Florida-based club toward the promised land.

King and Co. trudged 41 yards in deafening noise and under incredible pressure. King — who played coolly all day despite absorbing five sacks,

throwing two interceptions and fumbling twice — was sacked on first down with 1:25 left to play.

On second-and-23 from the Rams' 35, King appeared to hit Bert Emanuel with a 13-yard pass. But referee Bill Carollo said that replay official Jerry Markbreit buzzed him and initiated a review, and Carollo agreed that the ground helped Emanuel catch the pass, and it was ruled incomplete.

Instead of third-and-10 from the 22 with 47 seconds to play, it was third-and-23. King was pressured into an incompletion on third down, and the fourth-down try was batted out of bounds and never had a real chance.

"I like to think we would have held them even if [Emanuel] had made the catch," said defensive end Grant Wistrom, who sacked King on first down.

And they probably would have, because the Bucs' offense couldn't score. The Bucs took possession four times in Rams territory and managed one field goal. They managed just two field goals total — one when defensive end Steve White intercepted a Warner pass on the opening play from scrimmage at the Rams' 20, and another when a long drive stalled at the Rams' 5 in the third quarter. That gave them a 6-5 lead: the Rams had gotten two points on a safety when Tony Mayberry snapped the ball over King's head in the second quarter.

"They shut us down in the red zone," Bucs coach Tony Dungy said.

That was to be expected. Offense did not send the Bucs to St. Louis: it was the fifth-worst in the league in yardage per game and sixth-worst in scoring this season. Rather, the defense that ranked third in yardage and scoring led Tampa Bay to 11 regular-season wins and past the Redskins in the playoffs last week.

The Redskins' offense ranked behind only the Rams, and it managed just two field goals against the Bucs.

Until Proehl's play, it looked as though the Rams would be lucky to get the same — not a pleasant prospect, since right-footed Wilkins has patellar tendonitis in his left knee, giving him trouble in planting his left leg. Wilkins already had missed from 44 Sunday, and he missed from 42 in last week's win over the Vikings. A 47-yard kick was anything but a gimme.

So, when Warner let fly, Vermeil was hoping against hope.

"I just thought, 'We'd better complete it, we'd better complete it,' because our field goal situation isn't as healthy as you would like it to be," Vermeil said.

Dumping it in his offense's lap might not be such a grand prospect, either. The Rams crowded after they put 45 points on the backs of Minnesota in their playoff opener last week. They preened as, they claimed, they proved themselves for real.

Oh, yeah? Well, before Sunday, that offense had faced only one of the league's top 10 defenses: Baltimore, in the season-opener. The Rams had 31 turnovers this season, the third-lowest total in the NFC, and Tampa Bay took it away three times. Warner was responsible all three — three interceptions, all bad, all his fault. He finished 26-for-43 for 258 yards, but most of those yards came because the Bucs gave him the short stuff.

"It seemed like everything we did," he said, "they knew what to expect."

That will be doubly true against the Titans in a week. Tennessee beat the Rams, 24-21, in Game 7, the Rams' first loss.

Proehl, a 10-year veteran, hopes Sunday's near-miss will deflate some of the Rams' gaudy egos, not the least of which belong to receivers Isaac Bruce, Torrey Holt and Az-zahir Hakim, who have dubbed themselves "The Warner Bros."

"Hopefully, this will bring us back to earth," Proehl said.

The Bucs never left it — especially charismatic defensive tackle Warren Sapp, the league's defensive MVP who was held without a tackle or sack.

"The replay [on Emanuel's incompletion] didn't lose this game for us," Sapp said. "We had plenty of opportunities to put this ballclub away in the fourth quarter. We just didn't make the plays."

"You know defense is going to give us a chance to win it and offense has to pull it out in the end, but we couldn't get it done tonight. We always felt we had the capability to shut this offense down. It wasn't a matter of this run-and-gun fun and Time-Warner Brothers and all this bullbleep they talk about."

No. It was about great defense and Dick Vermeil keeping his guys faithful and one guy hitting another guy with a bomb at the end to win it and go to Atlanta.

Due to technical difficulties beyond our control, the Beacon could not publish the Scoreboard this week. We are working to solve this problem and will print both weeks' statistics next week.



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