

Super finish gives Rams reason to celebrate

by Les Carpenter
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ATLANTA — When his moment came, time stood still for Mike Jones.

The roaring stopped, his twisted ankle ceased to hurt and, in slow motion, one of the biggest plays in Super Bowl history unfolded before him.

He saw everything: Kevin Dyson cutting across the field, slicing in front of the end zone and then leaping into the air ... very, very slowly.

Jones knew he was going to save the Super Bowl for the St. Louis Rams.

He felt Dyson catch the ball, the receiver's body thumping against his. Then everything went on instinct. He could sense Dyson trying to twist, hoping to thrust himself toward the end zone for a touchdown that could take the dream away. The clock was hitting :00. And Jones mouthed the words quietly to himself: "No way he's going to score."

One of the most exciting Super Bowls ended with its most remarkable play, with Dyson lying flat on the Georgia Dome turf, his arm outstretched, trying frantically to extend the ball over the goal line.

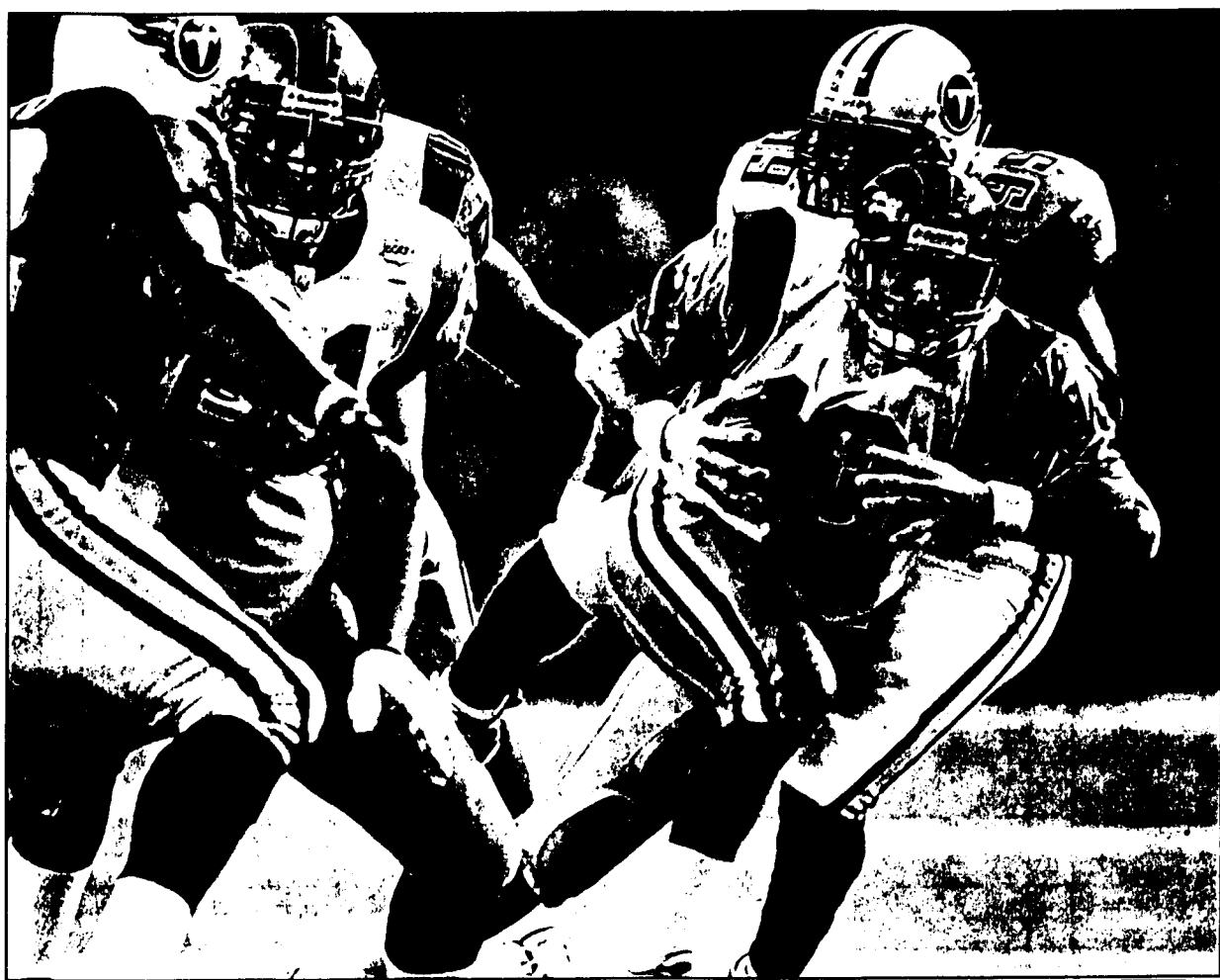
All around, the St. Louis Rams raced across the field, throwing helmets in the air, celebrating a 23-16 victory over the Tennessee Titans in a blizzard of silver confetti.

Only Jones still lay on the ground. Holding Dyson to the turf.

And saying to himself, "Thank God it's over. Let's go home."

The first Super Bowl won by the Rams will not be remembered for the arching 73-yard touchdown pass thrown by Kurt Warner to Isaac Bruce with 1:54 left.

Its legacy is forever going to be wrapped in the last play that saved the night — a tackle by a linebacker who was once a running back. A player who was never drafted. A player who has toiled in such anonymity that his teams have always felt the urge to drop in his middle initial "A" to distinguish him from all the other Mike Joneses who play profes-



St. Louis quarterback Kurt Warner (13) scrambles for a gain in the first half of Super Bowl XXXIV Sunday against Tennessee.

sional football.

And on the team of Kurt Warner and London Fletcher and all the other unheard-of, unwanted players who came together to make the Super Bowl, this was exactly the way it was supposed to be.

Another unknown would save the day.

"I thought (Dyson) was going to score," Tennessee quarterback Steve McNair said.

Everyone did. But Jones had come too far to let Super Bowl XXXIV slip through his grasp.

There was that day in 1991 the NFL held its draft and Jones, a running back from the University of Missouri, held a party for his family and friends. They gathered in front of the television, making sure to bring the phone in close right where they could hear it.

Only nobody called. He and a friend went to the park near his Kansas City home that day and started running a hill. Up and

down. Up and down. They ran and ran and ran. And all the while he was determined to make them never forget his name again.

When the Raiders gave him a chance a few weeks later, transforming him from running back to linebacker, he made the most of the opportunity.

That's how he made it to yesterday, the day he ran into Dyson and wrapped his hands around the biggest tackle of his life and held on tight.

"I don't think any of this has hit me yet," Jones said as he sat in front of his locker. "I thought it would hit me when I came back to the locker room, but I can see that it hasn't. I guess that's not going to happen until I get to the hotel."

Down the hall, Dyson undressed slowly, shook his head, and muttered to himself. He kept replaying the final moments to fellow receiver Derrick Mason.

As Dyson talked, Mason looked sadly at the floor. "He's more disgusted than any-

body," Mason said. "I mean he caught the ball and didn't get in. Wouldn't you be disgusted?"

What the Rams could not have known is that the Titans were prepared for this situation.

They ran the same play three times in practice last week. This is the maniacal way that Tennessee Coach Jeff Fisher works. He plants the ball on the ground and throws out the most absurd situations possible.

He called this one last week. "OK, last play of the game, ball's on the 10-yard line."

They threw the

Each time he scored. Perhaps destiny was saying they would score again this time.

After all, McNair and running back Eddie George had led the Titans back when it seemed they were through. They had crawled from a 16-0 deficit, tying the score late in the fourth quarter, only to see that tie undone by the Warner bomb to Isaac Bruce.

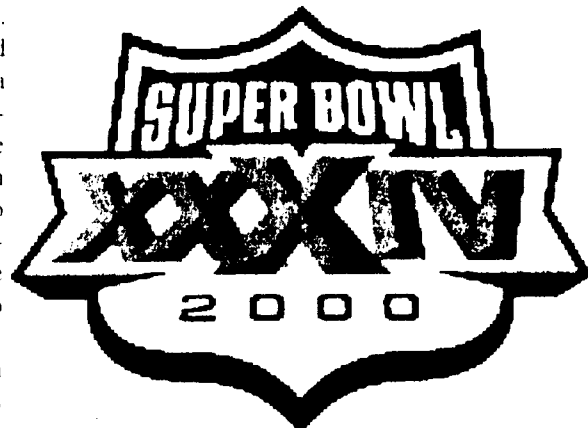
And even then, with 88 yards to go in only 1:54, McNair drove them to the 10.

That's when the night seemed to stop, when Dyson sliced in front of the goal line and Jones came up to meet him.

The ball, Dyson and Jones col-

lided at once. There was an explosion of flash bulbs from the stands. Confetti burst into the air.

"If you're going to bring in one guy to make that play, you're going to



bring in Mike Jones," St. Louis Coach Dick Vermeil said. "He's been that way for three years."

On the biggest night, he was again.



Tennessee Titans quarterback Steve McNair (9) gets a pass off by the charging Billy Jenkins (22) in the first half of Super Bowl XXXIV Sunday.

Bill Belichick finally named Patriots coach NCAA announces referees can use instant replay for buzzer-beaters

by Ed Duckworth
Knight-Ridder Tribune
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FOXBORO, Mass. — The longer Robert Kraft considered the problem, the clearer the solution became to him.

So when the Boston millionaire finally picked up the telephone late Wednesday night to close the deal his heart told him to make, the one that would bring Bill Belichick to Foxboro Stadium as the 14th coach in the 40-year history of the Patriots, he knew he had made the right choice.

"The thing that really got me (to move) was Robert Edwards's situation," said Kraft on Thursday. "We thought we had our running back problem solved, and what happened through an act of God that changed all that, and we're still dealing with it."

Edwards, the Pats' first-round draft choice in '98, had appeared to be heading toward a long and productive career before he suffered what likely will prove a career-ending knee injury during a flag football game in Honolulu early last February.

Players, no matter how talented, can have the same shelf lives as strawberries. Coaches, by contrast, can be planning and motivating and winning games for decades.

Kraft indicated he had tried mightily to avoid surrendering a No. 1 pick to the Jets as part of a compensation package for Belichick, but his gut told him the team needed a strong leader to get them back on track in the AFC East.

So the price the Jets placed on their assistant head coach, a first-round pick this spring, as well as fourth- and seventh-round selections in 2001, wasn't too much to swallow, especially when the Jets sweetened the arrangement by ceding a fifth-round pick to the Pats in '01 and a seventh-rounder the fol-

lowing season.

Now, less than 24 hours later, the 58-year-old owner was introducing Belichick to the media, saying he was pleased to have succeeded in landing the man he expects to successfully lead the Pats into the 21st century.

Belichick, 47, said he had shaken hands only a few hours earlier on a five-year contract that will pay him at least \$2 million a season if he merely coaches the team.

Should the general manager's title and duties be added to his job description, Belichick will make even more. For now, at least, the Nashville, Tenn., native isn't sweating such minor details.

"I'm head coach," he said in response to the question of whether he also has agreed to be the team's general manager. "I've spoken with Robert briefly about the structure of the organization, but no decisions have been made about any those things."

Although Kraft has portrayed the former defensive coordinator of the Jets as a workaholic, Belichick implied he doesn't care about who has the ultimate say on matters of personnel so long as correct decisions are reached.

"This is no one-man band here," he said, referring to himself. "I can't play all the instruments. There are a lot of resources in this organization and I'm looking forward to working with as many of them as I can. I'll take as much help as I can get."

That Belichick wasn't appointed as general manager or director of operations was seen as a sign that Kraft intends to continue talking with Tom Donahoe, the former director of football operations for the Pittsburgh Steelers, about a personnel job.

Where that would leave Bobby Griener, the Pats' vice president of player personnel, isn't clear, though his future has been the subject of specula-

tion recently and was again last night when he didn't attend the news conference at which Belichick was introduced.

Belichick, who completed his 25th season as an NFL coach this season, has had one previous trial as a head coach. The Cleveland Browns teams he coached from 1991-95 compiled a 37-45 record and won one playoff game, against the Pats in '94.

Although he had been rumored to be at the top of Kraft's list of candidates to replace the fired Pete Carroll, as late as Tuesday it hadn't looked as if the Pats could wrest him from New York.

But his soap-opera journey certainly was marked by headlines.

A day after Bill Parcells quit as head coach of the Jets on Jan. 3, Belichick declined to succeed him, something his contract required he do through 2002.

His resignation came during a curious press conference during which he raised questions about his position in the Jets' organization that at the time was in the process of changing hands.

After the Jets declined to allow him to become a free agent and NFL commissioner Pete Tagliabue ruled his contract binding, Belichick filed an antitrust suit against the league and asked a federal court to issue an order that would have enabled him to coach elsewhere.

But when the court denied him a restraining order, Belichick dropped his suit and began facing the prospect of spending the 2000 season out of football.

Parcells began changing all that Tuesday night when he telephoned Kraft, suggesting they bury the hatchet and cut a deal for Belichick's services.

"We just talked about it," Parcells reported during a conference call. "I think they got the idea that unless (a No. 1 pick) was included, we weren't

going to have a deal."

Kraft wasn't ready to pay that much, however, and after interviewing Dom Capers, the Jacksonville Jaguars' defensive coordinator, for four hours on Wednesday, he was close to forgetting about Belichick.

But at about 10 o'clock Wednesday night, after again reviewing his options, Kraft telephoned his son, Jonathon, and said, "I think we're going to make a run at this."

Kraft then called Parcells and agreed to pay the Jets' price.

Parcells waited until about 7 a.m. yesterday to deliver the news to Belichick, who, after getting a call from Kraft a little later, hopped in his car at his Long Island home and drove to what the owner said was a "little secret location," apparently somewhere near the Rhode Island-Connecticut border, for a talk.

By early afternoon, Belichick had happily accepted Kraft's offer to coach the Pats.

"I'm tremendously excited," he said. "I had an outstanding experience here in '96 (when he coached the Pats' secondary under Parcells). This is a first-class organization and I can't wait to start working. I'm thankful things worked out the way they have. It was an ordeal."

Belichick said his first goal is to put together a staff. He will meet the team's holdover assistant coaches this morning to discuss their futures.

Although Parcells said Charlie Weis, the Jets' offensive coordinator, had been released from his contract, Belichick stopped short of announcing his hiring.

"I'm going to be trying to act on a staff as quickly as I can," he said. "There are a lot of people to consider. There (also) are a lot of coaches on this staff I have respect for."

Belichick also has an owner who thinks the world of him.

NCAA announces referees can use instant replay for buzzer-beaters

by Dick Jerardi
Knight-Ridder Tribune
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PHILADELPHIA — It came eight days too late for Villanova, but Tuesday, the NCAA announced that it has changed a rule to allow men's and women's basketball officials to look at a replay to determine if a game-determining shot was before or after the buzzer.

You will remember that on Jan. 17 Miami's Johnny Hemsley hit a late three-pointer to beat the Wildcats, 67-66, at the Ski Lodge. Replays indicated the shot was released too late.

A similar controversy had erupted two days earlier when Texas A & M played at Texas Tech. Apparently, two major problems in 48 hours convinced the powers that be to act now rather than later.

"That's unbelievable," Villanova coach Steve Lappas said Tuesday night. "It's a day late and a dollar short."

And it's a bit strange.

"It's a good change," Lappas said. "Don't get me wrong. How can you have two different sets of rules? Somebody else is going to benefit from something that we should have benefited from. I don't understand it."

But he's not opposed to it. And if that game determines whether Villanova is in or out of the NCAA Tournament, Lappas hopes the committee will give the Wildcats the benefit of the doubt.

"I've got to hope so," Lappas said. Before the change, replay equipment could be used only in certain situations. For some reason, game-deciding shots were not among them.

The new rule, which will go into effect Friday, states: "At the end of the second half or at the end of any overtime, the officials shall use replay equipment, if available ... to ascertain whether a try for field goal that will determine the outcome of a game (win, lose, tie) ... was released before the sounding of the period-ending horn."

The officials will make a call on the floor. Then, they will look at the monitor. First, they will try to see if it's possible to hear the horn. Failing that, they will try to check out the red light on the backboard support. If that doesn't help, they will use the game clock.

If none of that is conclusive, the original call will stand.

"Obviously, there is not a call that is more important and it's the one call that's remembered longer than any other," said Reggie Minton, chair of the men's rules committee and coach at Air Force. "If we have the technology available to help us, we want to make sure we use it to get the call right."

Big East commissioner Mike Tranchese has told anybody who has asked that he thinks Villanova should have won the game. The records, however, won't change. The rule will.

