

Was he the best? Dan Marino retires with mixed reviews

by Don Pierson
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CHICAGO — By record and reputation, Dan Marino retired Monday as the greatest passer in National Football League history.

If passers can be separated from quarterbacks, however, he leaves a legacy open to debate.

He threw more passes for more completions for more yards and more touchdowns than anybody who ever lived. His quick release, strong arm, deep accuracy, and astonishing numbers made him the envy of his peers.

Yet Marino never won a Super Bowl in his 17 seasons with the Miami Dolphins. He got to only one, in 1984, after the most extraordinary season in passing history, 48 touchdown passes. That accomplishment in only his second pro season, an unprecedented average of three touchdown passes a game, has been approached only once, by Marino when he threw 44 in his fourth year, 1986.

Those two phenomenal years established Marino as a legend for the duration of his career in which he reached 30 touchdown passes only one more season (1994).

Marino took his team to the playoffs in 10 of his 17 seasons, the Dolphins lost AFC championship games in 1985 and 1992, and set a record with touchdown passes in 13 consecutive playoff games. But the Dolphins' postseason record with him starting was 8-10. He spent his last few years in a desperate attempt to win, and had to think twice before rejecting an offer to join the Minnesota Vikings next season for one last fling.

"Everyone would love to play forever, but that's impossible," Marino said before last season. "As long as we've got a chance to win and I feel like I can help, I want to play. But you never know about the circumstances around the team."

After the Dolphins were eliminated, 62-7, by Jacksonville, Marino again expressed his desire to return, but without coming right out and saying it, the Dolphins didn't want the 38-year-old quarterback anymore. New coach Dave Wannstedt referred to the dilemma as "The Dan Thing."

On the day Wannstedt replaced Jimmy Johnson, he had this answer to a question about Marino: "Ah, you know what, I ... yeah, I mean, Dan had a tough year because of some injuries and so forth. ... What his plans are for the future, I don't know."

Marino played golf last week with Dolphins' owner Wayne Huizenga in an attempt to smooth over what teammates felt was insensitive handling of a Miami icon, and Marino is expected

to swallow any hard feelings. His standing as a hero in the Miami community for his charity work is impeccable, unaffected by losses or interceptions. Because of his efforts, there is a Dan Marino Center at Miami Children's Hospital, a legacy more important to many than his future Hall of Fame bust.

When it comes to gauging Marino's standing among quarterbacks, there are differences of opinion. Former Bears coach Mike Ditka once said Marino would go down as the greatest player in NFL history, but Ditka's opinion might have been prejudiced by their common University of Pittsburgh background and his memory of Marino and the Dolphins ruining the Bears' perfect 1985 season.

"Elway and Marino are completely different quarterbacks," Simms wrote. "It wasn't about the system with them. It was their physical ability to throw the ball like nobody else could."

The NFL separates quarterbacks from passers in its "passer rating system," a complex formula combining percentage of completions, touchdown passes, interceptions and average yards gained per attempt that is supposed to enable statisticians to compare passers from different eras. By that measure, Marino ranks fifth all-time behind Steve Young, Montana, Brett Favre, and Otto Graham.

But the formula includes the caveat: "It is important to remember that the system is used to rate passers, not quarterbacks. Statistics do not reflect leadership, play-calling, and other in-

23 more 300-yard games than all the Bears quarterbacks in the team's 80-year history have managed together.

Barely mobile, Marino nevertheless was sacked only 291 times in 9,045 passing attempts because of quick feet and a quicker release. His 147 regular season wins put him one behind Elway on the all-time list. But only twice in 10 playoff seasons was his postseason passer rating higher than his regular season rating. Overall, it was 10 points lower.


Said former teammate Bryan Cox, who faced him twice with the New York Jets last season: "His arm is, like, 20 years old. But his body is, like, 50 now."

Marino and wife Claire have five children, including an autistic son and an adopted daughter. His desire to re-

A LEGEND RETIRES...

The storied career of
Dan Marino

Category	Number	Career Rank
Yards	61,361	1st
Touchdowns	420	1st
Completions	4,967	1st
Attempts	8,358	1st
300-yard games	63	1st
Wins	147	2nd



Green Bay Packers' general manager Ron Wolf did not place Marino on his list of top 10 all-time quarterbacks a year ago, when he ranked Denver's John Elway sixth. Marino and Elway were the last of the six first-round quarterbacks drafted in 1983 to retire.

"His (Marino) problem is he never won the big one," Wolf said. "That's how everybody is judged."

But Wolf didn't include five-time world champion Bart Starr on his list, either.

Minnesota Vikings' pro scout Paul Wiggins, a former player and coach, also downgraded Marino "because I don't like the number of Super Bowls he's won."

Marino's reputation among colleagues was better. When The Sporting News ranked Marino 27th among all-time football players and sixth among all-time quarterbacks last November, former New York Giants' quarterback Phil Simms argued Marino should be "much higher."

Simms said Marino's pure physical talent separated him from quarterbacks such as Joe Montana who benefited from a passer-friendly system and a better team.

tangible factors that go into making a successful professional quarterback."

Wolf rejects the separation and judges quarterbacks solely on their ability "to make the right throw at the right moment," which is why he ranks Detroit's Bobby Layne, 106th in all-time passer ratings, ahead of Marino as a quarterback. Layne won three championships.

To George Young, NFL vice president of football operations and a former Giants' general manager, ranking the great quarterbacks is as impossible and unnecessary as ranking five-star generals. To him, greatness is earned by "the guys who create great anxiety before the ball is even snapped; that's when you have a true great player."

There is no doubt Marino gave defensive coordinators and cornerbacks nightmares. Simms calls Marino's numbers "hilarious, so absurd they're funny."

To put the numbers into perspective for fans accustomed to watching the Bears, Marino threw for more touchdowns (420) and more yards (61,361) than the top five Bears quarterbacks of all-time combined. His 66 games of passing for at least 300 yards are

main close to his family was one reason for turning down the Vikings. Another was the memory of one of his old Pittsburgh Steeler heroes, Franco Harris, limping out in the uniform of the Seattle Seahawks.

By retiring a Dolphin, Marino avoided the incongruous career finishes of Johnny Unitas in a San Diego Chargers uniform or Joe Namath in a Los Angeles Rams uniform. In five years, when he is eligible for Hall of Fame selection, Marino will join Sonny Jurgensen, Y.A. Tittle, Fran Tarkenton, and Dan Fouts as prolific passers without a championship. But he will go way to the head of that class.

The sixth and final quarterback drafted in the first round in 1983, Marino quickly dispelled any doubt about his ability. Former coach Don Shula said he sat him down and told him what he had heard and what he expected.

"He said, Coach, all I want is to be the best quarterback in the NFL and I'll do whatever you want me to do to be that." He has," Shula said as early as 1984.

Tough calls for NCAA selection panel

by Andrew Bagnato
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Everything seemed to be falling into place even before the NCAA Division I men's basketball committee gathered in Indianapolis the first weekend of March to hammer out the tournament field.

Cincinnati, perched atop the polls, was a lock for the No. 1 seed in the Midwest Regional. Duke, still clicking along despite losing four players to the NBA draft, was a gimme No. 1 in the East. Stanford looked like a solid No. 1 in the West, and either Michigan State or Ohio State would come out of the Big Ten tournament as the No. 1 in the South.

But then Cincinnati center Kenyon Martin took a spill in Memphis. Stanford lost to Arizona. The NCAA lifted UCLA star JaRon Rush's suspension. And Arkansas and St. Louis, seemingly destined for NIT oblivion, charged out of nowhere to win the Southeastern Conference and Conference USA tournaments, respectively, and earn automatic berths.

Faster than you can say "Valparaiso," the brackets were in shambles.

"With the injuries, the suspensions, the tournament upsets, it was a phenomenal weekend," said rookie chairman Craig Thompson, in his fifth year on the panel. "It seemed like every new game brought a new result that made us reconsider something we had just talked about. It was highly unusual."

And highly controversial.

The committee handed No. 1 seeds to Duke in the East, Michigan State in the Midwest, Arizona in the West and Stanford in the South, then slotted the Bearcats No. 2 in the South.

Coach Bob Huggins took no consolation in being spared a weekend in Cleveland, where Cincinnati seemed headed as No. 1 in the Midwest.

"It's ridiculous, totally ridiculous," Huggins said. "We must be the first team in history to be No. 1 in the RPI and not get a No. 1 seed."

Said Thompson, commissioner of the Mountain West Conference: "The Ratings Percentage Index is something that is very overrated."

Bracketologists often try to sift the seeds in search of a message. This year the committee made it clear that it pays to play the big boys.

Strength of schedule was a big factor in selecting the top seeds, Thompson said, and it helped DePaul, Missouri and North Carolina sneak into the field while excluding Virginia,

Vanderbilt, Villanova and Bowling Green. Tulsa, which leads the field with 29 wins, is only a seventh seed because it loaded up on the likes of Arkansas-Pine Bluff and Centenary.

"I was afraid I may have overscheduled," North Carolina coach Bill Guthridge said.

But while the committee's emphasis on strength of schedule was clear, its decision to seed Arizona ahead of Cincinnati seemed a contradiction. Like the Bearcats, the Wildcats will be without their dominant center in the tournament. Thompson said Arizona notified the committee that back problems would keep Loren Woods out of action.

This came as a stunning injustice to Cincinnati, whose only losses before the Conference USA tournament had come in an upset by crosstown rival Xavier and by Temple, the second seed in the East.

"That's a historical thing those guys just did," Huggins said. "How do they know how good we'll be without Kenyon?"

They don't. But the committee does know how good Arizona can be without Woods. The Wildcats knocked off Stanford and destroyed UCLA with Woods in street clothes. "There was a test there," Thompson said.

The Wildcats also lost to Oregon and Oregon State, but the committee finally decided, unanimously, that Arizona was less of a question mark than Cincinnati.

"When you lose a potential and probable player of the year, that's going to affect your team," Thompson said. "We did not have an opportunity, other than one 37-minute span in one game, to judge how Cincinnati would play without Martin. And it was very difficult because that was such an emotional period."

It's possible that the snub will inspire the Bearcats. It's also possible that they will repeat their history of early wipeouts. That won't be known until Cincinnati tips off with UNC-Wilmington on Friday in Nashville.

Until then, hoop-a-holics have plenty to quarrel about. Anyone filling out a bracket in the next few days will appreciate what the selection committee went through. The uncertainty may foretell a wild ride to the Final Four.

"It brings back into the perspective of the whole college basketball landscape how college basketball is just so competitive," Thompson said. "It was a very difficult process this year."

Elliott shows 'em how he operates

by Bill Plaschke
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SAN ANTONIO — Midway through the third quarter, the crowd sliding from the edge of its seats, the star teetering on the edge of his nerves, Sean Elliott did the only appropriate thing. He performed another transplant.

A basketball, taken from his right hand, fitted into a metal rim.

A soaring slam dunk that rattled not only 26,708 screeching Alamodome fans, but medical and sports history.

Elliott became the first professional athlete to play after an organ transplant Tuesday, scoring his first and only points on that dunk, inspiring the San Antonio Spurs to a 94-79 victory over the Atlanta Hawks less than seven months after receiving a new kidney.

But this wasn't about a kidney. This was about a heart, which carried Elliott through 12 bruising minutes most basketball people never thought possible. He bounced off hard floors, ran through thick forward,

dented all common sense.

"I was just shocked. ... I couldn't even think about it ... it was a miracle," Hawk center Dikembe Mutombo said. "I ask myself, 'Why is he coming to the basket so hard?' Then the next time he comes even harder, and I get out of the way."

This was also about eyes, those of Sean and older brother and donor Noel. Their gaze met during the national anthem with a look that nearly swallowed them both in tears.

"It was breathtaking," said Noel, sitting in the courtside seats Sean had jokingly promised in exchange for the kidney. "It was overwhelming." This, too, was about hands, which his mother Odie laid on Sean before the game, reminding him that this comeback ended where it began.

"This," she said, "is a night for family."

Finally, this was about what is probably best described as a soul. Or whatever it is that kept Elliott chugging through open skepticism by his coach, lonely hours running stairs, and a December bout with pneumo-

nia that left him too weak to even walk to the bathroom.

"I hope this gives people encouragement, I hope it helps them not to be afraid," Elliott said with a tired smile. "That dunk was probably more memorable than the Memorial Day Miracle." He was referring to one of the last times anyone had seen him play before Tuesday, his three-point shot in the final seconds that beat the Portland Trail Blazers in Game 2 of the Western Conference finals last spring.

The Spurs used that dramatic win to launch them to an NBA championship while Elliott quietly was sinking under the weight of degenerative kidney disease.

He kept his problem quiet until after the playoffs, then underwent transplant surgery Aug. 16.

At the time, the Spurs assumed his career was over.

All except Elliott, who looked dumb when he began his comeback, and dumber as he kept trying.

"When we first started running wind sprints in November, he looked

terrible," teammate Steve Kerr recalled. "But he kept showing up. Every day he showed up. He kept tugging on Pop's (Coach Greg Popovich) sleeve until he finally gave him a chance."

On Tuesday, after purposely skipping what could have been his first game in New York, Elliott gave his hometown fans a chance.

A chance to cheer like their team won another championship. A chance to clutch their armrests in amazement. A chance to joyfully chant "We Want Sean" in the final minute of the game, as if their resting star was a beloved bench-warmer.

Not to mention, it was a chance for Popovich to take it all back, all those times he said it would take more than a doctor's orders or a veteran's pleas to return Elliott to the floor.

Take it back he did, putting Elliott in the starting lineup at the last minute in deference to last season. "It was a surreal experience," Popovich said. "It was just magic."

It began 15 minutes before the game when Elliott walked to the court to a

standing ovation.

Noel Elliott, that is.

He was followed by Sean, and the ovation grew louder, and more insistent, and repeated itself every time Sean touched the ball or appeared on the video scoreboard.

The game began, and Sean took a pass, dribbled toward the baseline, and promptly slipped and fell hard.

The guy whose kidney he was carrying fell with him.

"I was like, 'Ohhhh,'" Noel said. "It was really strange. I couldn't even talk."

But Sean stood up smiling, and that was that. Doctors who claimed the body's natural muscle and bone mechanisms would protect the kidney were one for one.

Sean bounced around for the rest of his five-minute first half, picking up a rebound and an assist.

Then, with 7:04 remaining in the third quarter, frustrated by an earlier missed layup, he dribbled around Roshown McLeod and flew.

Sitting underneath the basket just steps away, Noel flew with him, leap-

ing to his feet with the dunk and cheering.

"To break the ice like that, I couldn't believe it," Noel said. "Amazing."

Sean, as usual, agreed.

"You dream about something like that," he said. "But it's not realistic." It is now. Lots of things are realistic now.

A basketball player's message to transplant patients everywhere was clear.

The body part may belong to somebody else, but the courage is still yours.

Like Sean Elliott's sneakers, hope was everywhere.

"Watching him, we were all like, 'Damn,'" teammate Malik Rose said. "That's all we could think. 'Damn!'"

Walking off the floor to the locker room amid camera lights and blaring music and one final standing ovation Tuesday night, Sean stopped to enclose Noel in a long, sweaty embrace. The brothers said nothing. The brothers said everything.