

The Magic of the Eighth of December

Thirty special stories from the world of sports, none of which would have been possible without December the 8th

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1. 73-0

Chicago Bears vs. Washington Redskins, 1940 NFL Championship game

A score so astounding, they named an entire game for it.

Heading into the 1940 NFL Championship game between the Chicago Bears and Washington Redskins, the stage was set for a classic slugfest in the nation's capital. After stumbling in mid-November with two straight losses, the Bears held serve at Wrigley Field, winning their last two home games to finish with an 8-3 record and capture the Western Division title. The Redskins, buoyed by a 7-game win streak to begin the season, accumulated a 9-2 record, good enough to finish one game above the Brooklyn Dodgers and win the Eastern Division title. Three Sundays before, the teams clashed in a gritty battle at Griffith Stadium with Washington grinding out a 7-3 victory on their home field. Twenty-one days later, they prepared to square off on the same field to determine who would call themselves NFL champions. Despite their head-to-head loss, inferior record, and locality of the game, the consensus was that Chicago were slight favorites, with most bookmakers setting the line around three points. Regardless of your persuasion, none would argue that the game did not hang in the balance, and just over 36,000 fans filed into their seat on this Sunday afternoon prepared to see a Championship game that very well could come down to the final play. What ensued was the most lopsided beatdown in the history of American sports.

Perhaps giddy after their week 9 triumph, Redskins owner George Preston Marshall made it known to reporters that he thought the Bears were crybabies and quitters. Back in the away locker room three weeks later, Bears coach George Halas showed his players newspaper clippers containing the quotes. Apparently, this was all the motivation they needed. Chicago opened the scoring on their second snap with a 68-yard rushing touchdown from back Bill Osmanski: 7-0. A few minutes later, quarterback Sid Luckman found the end zone from a yard out to double the lead. The Bears made it three for three on their next possession thanks to a 42-yard touchdown run from fullback Joe Maniaci. By halftime it was 28-0, the teams heading to the locker room with the result all but assured.

The onslaught was only beginning. Chicago continued to pour it on after the interval, posting another four touchdowns in the third quarter with three of them scored by the defense. Eventually, Halas called off the dogs and inserted his backups, but the tide continued to flow. By the time the clock expired, the Bears had scored seven touchdowns in the second half alone, good for an additional 45 points (four failed conversions) and a 73-0 final score. Ten different Bears contributed to score eleven total touchdowns, with only running back Harry Clark finding the endzone twice with the final score of the game. Chicago accumulated 501 yards of total offense, 382 rushing yards, and intercepted Washington quarterbacks eight times, three of which were returned to the house. Such was the Bears dominance that star quarterback Sid Luckman was only required to throw the ball on four occasions: he managed 88 yards, a touchdown, and even one incompleting. The seventy-three point margin of victory remains to this day the largest in a single game in *any* professional sports league in the United States.

The championship was the Bears second under coach Halas, who was quickly approaching legendary status. The next season, the Bears defended their title with a comparatively tight 37-9 victory over the New York Giants after earning a championship game birth by defeating the Green Bay Packers in a playoff to determine the Western Division representative. In all, Halas managed five championships as a head coach, with thirty years coming between his first and his last. As for Washington, they would have to wait only two years to gain a measure of revenge for their humiliation as they defeated Chicago 14-6 in the 1942 NFL championship game to secure their second title in franchise history. They would wait forty years before winning another.

Of course, unimaginable tragedy meant that the Bears defense of their 1940 title was conducted with muted enthusiasm. Just one day shy of a year on from the beatdown at Griffith Stadium, the nation was shocked by the attacks at Pearl Harbor on Sunday morning, December 7th, 1941: a date which will live in infamy. While Japanese planes reigned bombs and gun fire on the American naval fleet, the Bears defeated their intercity rivals the Cardinals, the Redskins triumphed over the Eagles, and the Brooklyn Dodgers won the bragging rights for New York by beating the Giants in the final week of the 1941 regular season. With the nation on the verge of full-scale war, it's no surprise that only 13,341 spectators filed into Solider field on December 21st to see the Bears defeat the Giants, the smallest ever attendance for an NFL title game.

Believe it or not, even the largest victory in the history of team sports was not secured without doubt. To some, and notably Redskins star quarterback Sammy Baugh, the contest might have played out quite differently if only for a few moments. After the Bears opening touchdown, with Washington looking for an immediate response, Redskins receiver Charlie Malone dropped a sure twenty-six yard touchdown pass that would have knotted the game. An ensuing field goal try was promptly missed. After the game, a reporter asked Baugh if he thought the game might have played out differently had Malone converted the early score. A disgusted Baugh glared around the press room. "Of course the game would have been different," he sneered. "The final score would have been 73-7."

2. A Land Down Under

Australian Open Final, 1984 and 1985

In the modern era, tennis fans around the world look forward to kicking off a new year in Melbourne with the Australian Open. But once upon a time, the Grand Slam tournament in a land down under closed the calendar on the tennis circuit.

In the mid 1980s, the Australian Open was only just becoming the spectacle it is today. Top men's players Ivan Lendl and Mats Wilander prepared to make their third appearance in the tournament in 1984. John McEnroe, having played the tournament for the first time the year before, was absent. Jimmy Connors had long since given up on the event, refusing to make the long journey since 1975. To this point, Australia had proved to be more popular on the women's side of the draw. Top players Martina Navratilova and Pam Shriver had both participated every year since 1980. World number 2 Chris Evert had missed the tournament the year before but had walked off the court at Melbourne Park as champion in her last appearance in 1982.

Approaching 30, Evert may have been approaching the tail end of her career, but she was not far removed from the peak of her powers. By her lofty standards, she was having a dismal 1984 season with appearances in the finals of the French Open, Wimbledon, and the US Open but no victories. She had lost to world number 1 Martina Navratilova on each occasion. With 15 majors and a career Grand Slam title under her belt, Evert wouldn't have fretted much about the missed opportunities, had her streak of 10 consecutive calendar years with a Grand Slam title not been on the line. With one final opportunity to extend the run in Australia, it was win at all costs.

But heading into the 1984 Australian Open, Evert's consecutive years streak was the last thing being bantered around the tennis community. Instead, all the focus was on Navratilova, who was aiming to complete a calendar Grand Slam. In fact, Navratilova had won in her previous six major attempts, last tasting defeat at the 1983 French Open. The top two seeds progressed to the semifinals relatively unchallenged, and it seemed all but assured that it would once again be a Navratilova/Evert showdown to decide the biggest match of the year. But the script did not go according to plan. While Evert held serve against hometown favorite Wendy Turnbull, Navratilova was tripped up in three sets against 9th seeded Czech Helena Sukova, and the grand slam dream was over. Sukova took the first set in the final as well, but Evert rallied to win the final two sets 1 and 3 and on December 8, 1984 she had officially won a major in 11 straight years. Adding French Open wins in 1985 and 1986, Evert ended her career with 18 major championships and 13 consecutive years with a Grand Slam, a record for both women's and men's tennis.

If somebody told you that the 1985 men's Australian Open would be won by a Swede, you would have bet the house that the man would have been Mats Wilander. The two-time defending champion, Wilander was ranked third in the world and primed for a repeat run. After dropping his first set of the tournament, Wilander ripped off 15 straight, proceeding without issue to his third consecutive Australian Open Final. Wilander may have been expecting a

showdown with the top ranked Ivan Lendl, but instead it was a fellow countryman two years his junior who lay waiting. 19-year-old Stefan Edberg, an up-and-comer ranked 5th, had outlasted the big Czech 9-7 in the fifth set of an epic semi final to earn a spot in the finals of a Grand Slam tournament for the first time. With Edberg in uncharted territory, the experienced Wilander was the favorite, but the younger Swede quickly dispatched him in straight sets, winning the first of his six major trophies on December 8, 1985. Exclusively a serve-and-volley player, Edberg might seem like a strange candidate for an Australian Open title – until you recall that in 1985 the tournament was played on a grass, a surface perfectly tailored to his style of play. The Australian Open would be changed to the more recognizable hardcourt surface of today for the 1988 tournament, but not before Edberg snuck in another victory on the grass in 1987. Edberg would add a pair of Wimbledon and US Open titles to his two in Australia by career's end. As for Wilander, a severe dip in form followed his loss to Edberg before he enjoyed a stunning renaissance, winning the Australian, French, and US Open in 1988. The 1985 Australian Open is the only time two Swedish players have met in a Grand Slam final.

Edberg's victory marked the end of an era. Following the 1985 tournament, it was decided that the Australian Open should be moved to the start of the calendar year, causing the tournament to be skipped in 1986 and resumed in January of 1987. The immortals of modern tennis display stunning capabilities, but it is hard pressed to see how anyone will dethrone Edberg as the last player to win a major in December.

3. In Pursuit of Perfection

Liverpool v. Bournemouth, Chelsea v. Manchester City, 2018

To win the Premier League title, you must be the best team in England that season. In the 2018-19 season, this old adage was stretched beyond imagination.

By this point in the new century, any football season began with all associated with Liverpool collectively focused on a singular obsession: an elusive first Premier League title. The way they started the 2018-19 season, even the most pessimistic of supporters might have been dreaming this would be their year. Under the stewardship of widely beloved gaffer Jurgen Klopp, Liverpool tore in the new campaign, winning their first six league fixtures while conceding only two goals. When they traveled to the Vitality Stadium to face perennial mid-table side Bournemouth, they were still unbeaten. There would be no upset on this day. Playing incisive flair and devastating pace, the Reds eased to a four-nil victory. A Steve Cook own goal was mixed in with a hattrick from the Egyptian King Mohammed Salah, while at the other end Virgil van Dijk's meticulously marshalled defense had Bournemouth wishing they were playing golf. Liverpool's title bid seemed truly unstoppable.

Except there was one problem. While Liverpool launched an all-out assault to usurp the Premier League crown, the opposition they were hoping to dethrone had no interest in being so accommodating. And what an opposition they were. Led by world renowned manager Pep Guardiola and with an embarrassment of playing talent, Manchester City had stormed to the title the previous season, becoming the only club to amass 100 points in a season. The way they were playing in defense of their title, it seemed they might be interested in smashing their own record. With two draws the only blemishes from their first 15 fixtures, the Sky Blues were setting the pace at the top of the table and, like their title chasing rivals, entered a December 8th fixture at Stamford Bridge unbeaten. At the final whistle, the same could not be said. An N'Golo Kante strike just before half time capped off a frustrating first period of the visitors, and they would find even less joy after the interval. David Luiz's 78th minute goal secured a 2-0 victory for Chelsea and the champions were beaten for the first time. The result coupled with Liverpool's pounding of Bournemouth meant the Reds moved back into first place.

Defeat at Chelsea left Man City rattled. After a victory against Everton, they lost successive fixtures to Crystal Palace and Leicester. Meanwhile, Liverpool continued to blitz opponents without mercy, and by year's end they held a seven point lead at the top of the table. The teams prepared for a clash of epic proportions at the Etihad Stadium to open the calendar year on January 3rd. Liverpool might have been able to push their rivals beyond return with a victory, but instead a Leroy Sane winner for City meant the title race was reinvigorated. Nevertheless, Liverpool were undeterred; the Reds would not lose another match the entire season and finished with nine consecutive wins. Somehow, it was not enough. After a late January loss to Newcastle, City closed with an extraordinary 14 victories on the spin, culminating in a 98 point season and back to back league titles. When Chelsea won their first premier league title in 2004-05, their total of 95 points set the record for achievement – this time, Liverpool's 97 were only good enough to be runners up.

City's fourth premier league title was only one third of the domestic hatrick they would complete in 2018-19. With a penalty shoutout victory in the league cup final over Chelsea and a six-nil thrashing of Watford in the FA Cup Final, the Manchester side fully stamped their dominance over English football. Meanwhile, it was two other English clubs who were making headlines in Europe as Tottenham and Liverpool lined up at the Metropolitano Stadium in Madrid to contest the Champions League final. With a gritty 2-0 victory over Spurs, Liverpool salvaged a magnificent consolation from their season, winning their 6th European Cup and avenging defeat in the previous season's final to Real Madrid. Although Liverpool were heartbroken, their near miss in the 2018-19 season only made them more determined to capture the holy grail. The Reds returned with fervor the following season, dropping only two points in their first 27 fixtures, an incomprehensible stretch of flawless form. This time, City could stay nowhere close and on June 25th¹, after suffering a three-month delay as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Liverpool lifted the Premier League trophy at last.

¹ A Chelsea victory over Man City the previous season had not been enough to push the Reds over the line, but this time it was golden: Liverpool clinched the tile when City lost yet again at Stamford Bridge, this time by a score of 2-1.

4. A Tale of Two Quarterbacks

Denver Broncos vs. Green Bay Packers, 1996

If anyone could empathize with Steven Gerrard and Liverpool's anguish in their quest for a title, it was John Elway and the Denver Broncos. Despite many regular and post season heroics, the signal caller from Stanford had fallen short three times on the biggest stage, handily beaten by the Giants, Redskins, and 49ers in Super Bowls in the first seven years of his career. Now 36 and in the twilight of his career, Elway knew that the 1996 season might be his final opportunity. The Broncos entered week 15 with a 12-1 record, in total command of the AFC West and on a fast track for the number 1 seed in the conference and another Super Bowl appearance. Hosting them would be the Green Bay Packers, themselves flying high with 10 victories and only three losses. Led by sixth year gunslinger Brett Favre in the prime of his career, Packer fans were also planning for January football and a first Super Bowl appearance since the days of Vince Lombardi. On December 8th, 1996, NFL fans around the country prepared for the game of the season, a colossal showdown between two of the game's greatest quarterbacks that many expected to be a Super Bowl preview. They were correct, but not in the 1996 season.

With anticipation building 48 hours before kickoff, the game was dealt a massive blow. With home field advantage throughout the playoffs already secured, Broncos coach Mike Shanahan announced that Elway, who had been carrying a mild hamstring injury for about a month, would not start the game. The Vegas line immediately boomed to 9 points in favor of the Packers – it turns out they could have spotted the handicapped Broncos this margin many times over. Applying a conservative game plan with Bill Musgrove making his first career start at quarterback, the Broncos grinded to a 3-3 tie at the end of the first quarter. This is as good as things would get. Favre, taking a little time to warm up on a frigid afternoon at Lambeau, eventually connected with Antonio Freeman at the end of the 2nd quarter to give Green Bay a 13-3 halftime lead. A Jason Elam third quarter field goal kept Denver within one score, but Favre ripped off three more touchdown passes to put the game beyond doubt. The game's final points came when Don Beebe, himself desperate for a Super Bowl after losing four with the Buffalo Bills, recovered a teammate's fumble in the endzone to make the score 41-6. An overwhelmed Musgrave threw for only 101 yards while getting sacked three times, although he did manage to avoid throwing an interception.

Despite the shellacking, with Elway back under center the Broncos were only looking ahead. Locked in as the number 1 seed, only two home victories were required for Denver to return to the big game. With one eye already on a potential rematch with the Packers, they were tripped up at the first hurdle. Despite being two touchdown favorites, the Broncos were shocked 30-27 in the AFC divisional playoffs by a Jacksonville Jaguars franchise playing only their second season. The underdogs fell behind by a dozen early, but coach Tom Coughlin kept his team calm. Led by stunning play from quarterback Mark Brunell, the Jags scored 23 straight and withstood a late Denver push to record the monumental upset. Elway would have to wait until next year. Meanwhile, Favre and the Packers were playing like a team of destiny. After finishing the season on a five game winning streak and Favre collecting the NFL Most Valuable Player Award, the Packers stomped the 49ers 35-14 in the divisional round. They found themselves

with an expansion foe of their own in the championship round, but made no mistake, erasing the Carolina Panthers 30-13. In a competitive affair, Favre threw for two touchdown passes and 246 yards, leading the Packers to a 35-21 victory over the New England Patriots and their first championship since Super Bowl 2. Desmond Howard was named the game's MVP for his stellar kick returning that included a 99-yard score.

Like Liverpool, Denver's destiny was only one year delayed. Back in the saddle, Elway steered Denver to the 1997 AFC Championship and an appearance in Super Bowl XXXII in San Diego. Waiting for them was none other than Favre and the Packers, the prophesized showdown at last a reality. Although it was Elway under center, Las Vegas fully expected Green Bay to win their second straight and listed the defending champions as eleven point favorites. What ensued was the third biggest upset in Super Bowl history. Inspired by MVP running back Terrell playing through a migraine and the fearless Elway, who sacrificed his body for an iconic third quarter first down run, the Broncos had put themselves in position with a 31-24 lead and only 1:45 to play. When a fourth down pass attempt by Favre from Denver's 31 yard line fell incomplete, the monkey was officially off Elway's back. The Denver Broncos were Super Bowl champions: this one was for John. Riding mile high, Elway had enough juice in the tank for one more run. The Broncos successfully defended their title the following season, defeating the Atlanta Falcons 34-19 in Super Bowl XXIII. It was the final game of Elway's career, as Denver's finest ever quarterback retired a two-time Super Bowl champion.

5. Fireworks in Philadelphia

Los Angeles Lakers vs. Philadelphia Warriors, 1961

Philadelphia fans lined up for this December 8th spectacle between two of the top teams in the national basketball association eager for some early holiday excitement. What they saw was a triple overtime showdown and NBA history.

At the tip, 4th year Los Angeles Lakers superstar Elgin Baylor held the record for the most points scored by a single player in an NBA game thanks to his 71-point effort against the New York Knicks in November of 1960. When the teams left the floor after 63 heart stopping minutes of basketball, that record no longer belonged to him. With every point at a premium in this triple overtime battle, Philadelphia's 7-foot sensation Wilt Chamberlain poured in 78 points to set a new league record. Already the first rookie to win the league MVP award in 1959-60 (a feat matched by Wes Unseld of the Baltimore Bullets in 1968-69), and well on his way to a third consecutive all-star appearance, Chamberlain was very much a household name. In a dominant performance on this Friday evening, the Warriors center bested his previous career high of 67, set in March of the same year, by eleven points. Despite Chamberlain's heroics, it was Los Angeles who claimed a 151-147 victory after the third extra period; once again, the polarizing center often criticized for putting himself first left the court with the individual accolades but without team success.

After a half, it looked like it might be the home underdog's night as Chamberlain and co. took a nine-point lead at the break. Not ones to roll over, Baylor and Jerry West led the Lakers back and the visitors were up by a basket heading into what was supposed to be the final period of play. It was nip and tuck from there, with regulation eventually ending with the teams knotted at 109. Both teams dropped in a dozen in the first overtime and for good measure repeated the feat in the second extra period, sending us to a third overtime deadlocked at 133. The Warriors raised the stakes and scored 14, but the Lakers had the last laugh with two extra buckets giving them a four-point victory.

To produce his scoring outburst, Chamberlain shot exactly 50% from the field, converting 31 of his 62 field goal attempts. He was a tick more accurate from the charity stripe, converting 16/31 free throws. To accompany his 78 points, Chamberlain added a walloping 43 rebounds and, for good measure, threw in one assist. Perhaps not surprisingly, Wilt was Philadelphia's only 20-point scorer in the contest – small forward Paul Arizin, playing in the final NBA season of his hall-of-fame career, was the best of the rest with a 19-point contribution. Baylor set the pace for the Lakers with a paltry 63 point, 31 rebound effort while West added 32.

For two ascending clubs looking to breakthrough the dominance of the Boston Celtics and win an NBA title, the excitement of the 1961-62 season was only beginning. After surviving a deciding 5th game in a preliminary round against the Syracuse Nationals, the Warriors earned their shot against the three time defending champions in a seven game series that would decide who would represent the eastern conference in the NBA finals. After a 10-point game 6 victory on their home floor, Philadelphia entered the cathedral of Boston Garden brimming with confidence, believing they could dethrone the kings. But, not for the only time in his

career, Chamberlain was relatively quiet with the stakes at their highest, his 78-point outburst confined to the pages of history. Undoubtedly plagued by the defense of Bill Russell, the Warrior's talisman contributed only 22 points on 15 field goal attempts, and it was instead steady if unspectacular forward Tom Meschery who led all scorers with 32. A 4 for 22 shooting performance may have convinced Paul Arizin that this should be his final NBA game – a perfect 11 for 11 from the foul line did help him contribute 19 points to the cause. Despite the struggles, the game could have been more in the balance, tied at 107 in the final moments. With only two ticks remaining, Sam Jones converted from the right elbow, his 27th and 28th points of the game giving the Celtics the 109-107 victory and sending them to their 6th of 10 consecutive NBA finals appearances.

If the Warriors suffered at the hands of the Celtics, what lay ahead for the Lakers was pure agony. As the 1962 NBA finals between these two storied franchises unfolded, it seemed destined that this would be the year for the highly powered Lakers to break through. A dramatic Jerry West steal and game-winning buzzer beater gave LA a 2-1 series lead after game 3, and Celtics fans were sure they'd seen their beloved team play for the final time after Elgin Baylor's game 5 61 point outburst² stunned Boston Garden into silence and put the Lakers on the doorstep off winning their first west coast championship. But the Celtics rallied and stole game 6 on the road, forcing another cross-country trip for a deciding game back in Boston. Tied at 100 in the final seconds, the Celtics defense keyed on Baylor and West, leaving Frank Selvy wide open along the baseline. His championship-winning attempt rimmed out and, on the back of 40 rebounds from Bill Russell, the Celtics eked out a 110-107 victory in overtime for their 4th consecutive NBA title. Lakers legend Jerry West would have to wait a long decade before finally winning his first championship, but the fate of Elgin Baylor proved to be even worse – this was the closest he would come to securing a ring.

After the 61-62 season, it appeared Chamberlain had played his last game representing the city of Philadelphia as the franchise followed the baseball Giants formerly of New York to the city of San Francisco. However, during the 1965 All-Star break, Chamberlain was promptly traded back to the Philadelphia 76ers, the same organization that had recently existed as the Syracuse Nationals who had lost to Chamberlain's Warriors in 1962 and subsequently relocated to the city of brotherly love when the Warriors vacated. It was here that Chamberlain would win his first NBA championship, ironically defeating the San Francisco Warriors four games to two in the 1967 NBA finals. A year later, Chamberlain went west yet again, this time traded to the Los Angeles Lakers. Not as dominant as in his prime, Wilt remained a force throughout his career and captured his second NBA title and only NBA Finals MVP award with the Lakers in 1972, although the path there had not been without bumps and additional heartbreak at the hand of the Celtics.

Magnificent as it was, Chamberlain's 78-point effort at the back end of 1961 is often lost in the pages of history due to events that unfolded a few months later. On March 2, 1962, Chamberlain produced perhaps the most iconic individual performance in NBA history, scoring

² Baylor's 61 points marked an NBA playoff record that stood for 24 years until bested by Michael Jordan's 63-point effort in an opening round loss to the Celtics on that same Boston Garden floor. Baylor's sensational game 5 remains the second highest scoring playoff performance to this day.

100 points in a 169-147 victory over the New York Knicks. Thanks to these offensive outbursts, Chamberlain averaged an astonishing 50.4 points per game over the 1961-62 season – he remains the only NBA player to average 40 points per game in a season, never mind 50. If possible to be outdone, Chamberlain's scoring proficiency may fall short of his incredible stamina; in this record setting season, the big man somehow averaged 48.5 minutes of playing time per game (remember, NBA games only last for 48 minutes), sitting out only eight minutes and thirty-three seconds of the *entire* season. Chamberlain currently sits at 7th all time on the career NBA scoring list with 31,419 points. His 78 points on December 8, 1961 remains the third highest scoring performance in NBA history, bested only by his own 100 point effort and Kobe Bryant's scintillating 81 point masterpiece against the Toronto Raptors on January 22, 2006.

6. The Battle of Alberta

Chicago Blackhawks vs. Edmonton Oilers, 1985

From the mid 1970s to the early 1990s, the National Hockey League was defined by dynasties. After back-to-back Cup wins in '74 and '75, the Montreal Canadiens really got the party started with four straight under coach Scotty Bowman. When they were ready to cede control, the New York Islanders were happy to take the reins. Led by Al Arbour, the Isles won the next four Cups, wresting control of the league back from Canada. As they skated towards their first in 1980, the New Yorkers would have paid little attention to Wayne Gretzky and Mark Messier teaming up on the Edmonton Oilers, the youngsters building the foundation, laying in wait for the right time to strike. The Isles would sweep the Oilers for their final championship in 1983, but deep down they knew it was simply one last hoorah before the men from the interior took off. With The Great One and The Messiah torching the ice to melting point, coach Glen Sather led the Oilers to the next two cups, getting revenge on the Islanders in the first before dismissing the Flyers in 1985.

Heading into the 1985-86 season, the Oilers had the singular goal of continuing their path to becoming the third consecutive NHL team to win four straight Stanley Cups. On December 8, 1985, they moved one step closer. The mediocre Blackhawks started well enough, earning a power play inside the game's first two minutes. When a Gretzky assist, one of the record 1,963 in his career³, produced a Jari Kurri shorthanded goal, Chicago knew they were in for a long night. After the two-time champs made it three zip within ten minutes, the visitors were wondering what might be the quickest way to recross the border. To their credit, the Blackhawks fought back, netting two before the end of the first period to make it on contest. The teams traded goals in the second and that's how the game would end with little of note taking place in the third. In a 4-3 Oilers victory, a first period hooking penalty on defenseman Steve Smith would become a useless detail in history. The same would not be said about his contributions in the 1986 postseason.

If there was one team above all determined to halt Edmonton's title parade, it was the Oiler's neighbor to the south: the Calgary Flames. Enroute to their first Cup two years before, Edmonton ousted Calgary in the second round of the postseason, netting seven in game 7 to advance. In 1985, the Flames could not get out of the first round. Relegated to the shadows in the role of little brother and desperate for another crack at their overachieving Albertan comrades, Calgary were trying hard to get their season on track. After losing to Edmonton a week before the Oilers topped the Blackhawks, the Flames won four straight, only to drop the next six. Without ever hitting full stride, the Flames continue to chip away with a requisite standard of achievement, landing well behind the Oilers in second place of the Smythe Division but firmly in playoff position. After both Calgary and Edmonton swept in the first round, the stage was set for a rematch.

The Oilers were favorites on paper, but for this divisional rivalry it was time to throw the book out. The teams jabbed back and forth, the Flames taking the odd games, the Oilers swiping the

³ No other NHL player has 1,963 goals and assists combined in their career.

evens. As it had in '84, a deciding game would be required. Tied at two in the final period. the Oilers were looking for the goal that would push them one round closer towards a third consecutive championship. They found it, but not in the net they were looking for. Five minutes into the 3rd, Steve Smith carried the puck from behind his own net and attempted to play an outlet pass. He fired the puck directly into the back of Grant Fuhr's skate, both the goaltender and Smith watching helplessly as the puck knuckled in the wrong goal. For some reason, Perry Berezan was the Calgary player credited with the goal. Despite the chunk of time remaining, there would be no more scoring and Calgary celebrated wildly on enemy ice, the dragon slain. For the rookie Smith, it was a 23rd birthday he'd like to forget.

Riding high, Calgary won another seven game series in the next round to advance to the Stanley Cup finals. Perhaps drained emotionally and physically, they flamed out against the Canadiens, falling in five games. Although, the final round had been one too far for them on this occasion, Calgary would eventually get their hands on Lord Stanley's trophy in 1989. Meanwhile, it was right back to winning ways for the Oilers who completed their second Cup double in '87 and '88. They would add another in 1990 to make a fantastic return of five in seven years but still were left to wonder just how many in a row it might have been if not for their neighbors in Alberta.

7. Not Bad for a Baseball Player

San Antonio Spurs vs. Chicago Bulls, 1995

In 1993, the sporting world was left in shock when Michael Jordan announced his premature retirement from the NBA to try his hand at the game of baseball. When he returned to the Association in 1995, he knew it would take something special for an event with such anticipation to meet expectations. As always, Air Jordan was up to the task.

Like Jordan rising through the lane, tongue wagging, the Bulls would soar to dizzying heights in the 1995-96 season. On December 8th, 1995, the San Antonio Spurs would become one of their many victims. Jumping out early, Chicago pulled ahead by nine by the conclusion of the first quarter. The difference hovered around the double mark for a while before the Bulls turned it on in the fourth, eventually winning 106-87. Leading all scorers for the home team were Dennis Rodman and reserve center Bill Wennington. Just kidding. In typical Batman and Robin fashion, Jordan set the standard with 28 while Scottie Pippen added 19. Australian Luc Longley had a nice evening with 16 while Steve Kerr hit twice from long range to reach double figures. Rodman did add 8 points to go with a monstrous 21 rebounds and Wennington was also in on the act with a singular bucket. There was little doubt Phil Jackson had one of the best jobs in America.

Moving to 15-2 with the victory, some felt that this Chicago team might just be destined for something special. Some would be right. The Bulls continued their blistering form indefinitely, rocking the newly constructed United Center on a nightly basis. They would only lose at home twice for the duration of the season. When they beat Minnesota for their 50th win in their final February game, the Bulls had only accumulated a half dozen loses. Just under two months later, victory over Washington in the regular season finale completed a 72-10 record, the best the NBA had ever witnessed in an 82-game season. Not one to forget the ultimate goal, Jordan and co. dropped only one game to the Knicks on their path to the 1996 NBA Finals⁴. They jumped out to a quick three games to none lead over Seattle, donated two back, and then sealed their fourth championship and the best team performance in NBA history with a flourish on their home floor in Game 6. The 1996 ring marked the beginning of a second three-peat for Jordan, Pippen, and Jackson, with Finals wins of the Utah Jazz the next two seasons completing six of the best.

Although outclassed on the evening, the Spurs would consider 1995-96 a successful season. Posting a 59-23 record that was good for second in the Western conference, San Antonio advanced a round in the playoffs before losing to the dynamic duo of John Stockton, Karl Malone, and a Utah Jazz team that were well on their way to becoming a force. Such success was commonplace for an organization that prided themselves on being continually competitive, with one notable exception. Strangely for a squad that had made the playoffs in the last seven season and was coming off a 59-win campaign, the Spurs threw in complete clunker in the

⁴ After beating the Knicks in 5, the Bulls were matched against the Magic, the same team who had spoiled Jordan's hasty return to the postseason the year before, in the conference finals. Was there ever any doubt? Floors don't get swept that easily.

1996-97 season, finishing 20-62, the third worst record in the league. Perhaps there was good reason. With a plethora of ping pong balls and a bit of good luck, the Spurs won the NBA draft lottery and the right to select first in the 1997 NBA Draft – rumors that all-star center David Robinson was held out at the end of the season despite being ready to return from injury to secure said ping pong balls have neither been disproved nor substantiated. With the pick, San Antonio selected Wake Forest star power forward Tim Duncan, a player who would alter the course of the franchise and NBA history. Emerging as a superstar in his second season, Duncan led the Spurs to the NBA title in the lockout shortened 1999 NBA season. Beating the poor Knicks, who thought they might finally have a shot after Jordan's retirement, in five games, San Antonio picked up the mantle vacated by Chicago and ushered in a new era of supremacy that would see them win five rings over sixteen seasons. Always known for consistency, the Spurs missed the playoffs only one time in the thirty year period beginning in 1989: the 1996-97 season.

8. A Golden Age on Merseyside

Everton v. QPR, 1984

By the 1980s, Liverpool were well established as one of the most successful football clubs in Europe. Watching the endless cascade of trophies from the other side of Stanley park, their neighbors Everton decided to get in on the act. When the 1984-85 season kicked off, Liverpool had won the last three league titles and were firm favorites to make it four in a row. Having finished 7th in the previous campaign, Everton would not have been the obvious choice to threaten Liverpool's dominance, and after successive defeats to open the season the idea of a league title for the blue half of Merseyside was nonexistent. That would soon change. After Everton stabilized in September, a six match winning streak that included a 1-0 victory over Liverpool rocketed The Toffees to the top of the table by mid-November. But as expected, nothing in English football's topflight comes easy.

Earning only 1 point from their previous two matches, Everton were looking for a big performance in their December 8th fixture against struggling QPR to restart their title push. They didn't get it. The teams played out a dour nil-nil draw, allowing an idle Liverpool to creep within nine points of their rivals. The gap was closing, the pressure was mounting, and, coupled with a lifeless performance at Loftus Road, it turned out to be exactly the wake up call Everton needed. Over their next twenty fixtures, the Blues dropped only seven points. After an eighteen match unbeaten run from Boxing Day to May 8th that saw two draws split winning streak of six and ten matches, Everton were league champions. For good measure, on May 23rd they beat the local rivals they had dethroned by the same score line as earlier in the season. It was the perfect ending to a remarkable season that had also seen them win the European Cup Winners' Cup one week before with a 3-1 victory over Rapid Vienna. Regular goal scorers Graeme Sharp, Kevin Sheedy, and Andy Gray were all on the scoresheet.

Unfortunately, despite monumental success on the field, the 1984-85 football season in Merseyside is better remembered for tragic events off the pitch. Beaten in the league, Liverpool were having better success defending their European Championship; on May 29th, they prepared to meet Juventus in the European Cup final at Heysel Stadium in Brussels. Before the game, unruly Liverpool supporters broke into the Juventus section, forcing their way across a neutral area of separation. As Juventus fans fled from the intruders, many were crushed against a concrete wall that eventually collapsed. In all, 600 individuals were injured in the confrontation with 39 losing their lives. Although it's widely accepted that Liverpool supporters were mostly at fault for the incident, outdated stadium conditions played a significant part in the scale of the casualties. Despite the violence, the match proceeded: a second half penalty from Juventus icon Michel Platini was all that separated the sides. The two clubs would meet for the only other time twenty years on in a 2005 Champions League quarterfinal. In the second leg at Anfield, in a show of respect and sorrow, Liverpool supporters unfurled a banner that read *memoria e amicitia*: In Memory and Friendship. While many away supporters applauded, others turned their back on the gesture, the wounds of two decades past still unhealed.

The disaster at Heysel Stadium resulted in an indefinite ban for English football clubs from all European competition and meant that champions Everton were not permitted to enjoy

European Cup football the following season. The ban was lifted in 1990-91 for all clubs except Liverpool, who served an additional year. Nevertheless, the domestic rivalry between the neighbors was only just kicking off. Liverpool reclaimed the title the following year with Everton runners up, but the Blues answered with their second title in the years in the next campaign, this time Liverpool serving the bridesmaid role. Liverpool were back on top the next season, capping a seven year stretch where the title never left Merseyside, only passed the half mile between Anfield and Goodison Park four times.

With all the achievements for Everton Football Club in the 1980s, a goalless December draw has long been forgotten. Not so for Queens Park Rangers. After a fine first season in the topflight, Rangers were struggling mightily in the 84-85 campaign, a classic case of second season syndrome. It went to the final day, but a total of 50 points, one better than the 49 of relegated Norwich, secured a 19th place finish and another season in the First Division. The point they earned against in December against the champions made all the difference.

9. It Hurts to Say Goodbye

Roger Maris traded from New York Yankees to St. Louis Cardinals, 1966

In seven full seasons with the New York Yankees, Roger Maris took the Big Apple by storm and ripped the history books of major league baseball. On December 8, 1966, he said goodbye to the pinstripes for good. With both his health and production declining, the Yankees traded the 32-year-old Maris to the St. Louis Cardinals for journeyman third baseman Charley Smith. Although all knew that Maris's glory years lay behind him, it turned out there was a final chapter of his story still to be written.

Almost exactly seven years prior in December of 1959, Maris began his career as a Yankee, arriving from the Kansas City Athletics as part of a seven-player deal. To that point in his career, the young right fielder had shown flashes of his talent, but upon arriving in the Bronx he catapulted into stardom. In 1960, Maris won the AL MVP award in his first season with the Yankees, clobbering 39 home runs and 112 RBI to go with a .283 batting average, the highest of his career. For good measure, Maris added the only gold glove award of his career, playing the short right porch at Yankee Stadium with expertise. Impressive as it was, the 1960 would quickly become a footnote to the one that followed.

Prior to the 1961 season, major league baseball added eight games to the length of the regular season, expanding the total number of games per team from 154 to 162. With potentially an extra forty at bats on offer, rumblings began to go around that one of the game's power hitters might threaten Babe Ruth's single season record of 60 home runs, set as a member of the 1927 Murderer's Row Yankees. Rumblings quickly became reality. Needing to hit just better than a home run every three games to break Ruth's record, Maris found himself in striking distance when he launched home runs 19 and 20 against the Los Angeles Angels in the 55th game of the season. Another multi home run effort against the Washington Senators brought him to 30 with 75 played. One to celebrate a milestone in style, Maris reached the 40 home run mark by clearing the bases four times in the same day against the Chicago White Sox, hitting two home runs in each half of a double header on July 25th. On the surface, it was the season of boyhood dreams with the stage set for a magical summer and fairy tale finish. Unfortunately for Maris, the reality of the home run chase took on a much darker tone.

After mashing White Sox pitching on that 25th day of July, Maris had 66 games remaining to hit the 21 home runs required to set a new single season record. But many, including Maris himself to a large degree, did not see it that way. Since Ruth's record was set during a 154 game season, it was widely discussed that any home runs accumulated in the extra eight games played would illegitimize a record breaking effort. To complicate matters, Maris was closely pursued in his home run chase by teammate Mickey Mantle, who was launching his own bid to take down Ruth's mark. As the season progressed, Maris, the mild-manner Midwesterner, was cast by the media and fans alike as a villain. Unlike Sammy Sosa, who was cast as a fun-loving foil to Mark McGwire in their epic home run pursuit during the 1998 season, the Golden Boy Mantle was anointed as the true heir apparent to Ruth's record, Maris nothing more than a meddling outsider. Even though little to no animosity existed between the center and right fielder, the media frequently pitted the two sluggers against one another, portraying a nasty

rivalry. When Mantle stroked two home runs on September 3rd against the Detroit Tigers to reach 50 for the season and pull within three of Maris's league leading 53, it was very much a two horse race – with just under a month left in the season, both men had the record in their sights. However, Mantle's race was soon run. A hip infection requiring hospitalization stopped the center fielder in his tracks and the popular Yankee managed to go long in only four more at bats that season, ending his campaign with 54 home runs.

Although Mantle faded, Maris's hardship did not. Suffering from great anxiety through the second part of the season that physically manifested through hair loss, Maris plodded towards Ruth's record like a man shuffling towards the gallows. Beleaguered rather than beloved in his pursuit of greatness, the worn-out Maris even received death threats from the most rabid of fans who were incensed that Maris had the indecency to threaten a statistical mark set by the revered Babe Ruth. Entering his 154th appearance of the season with 58 home runs, Maris needed a multi home run effort to achieve his true dream of leveling Ruth's mark in the same number of games. An early blast in the third inning took his total to 59 and gave him a lifeline. In the 7th, Maris flirted with the wall in right field, but his deep fly ball turned into nothing except a long out. He might have thought his chance had gone, but a pair of Yankee baserunners in the 8th inning meant Maris would see the plate one more time. Desperate to tie Ruth's mark of 60 and avoid the stigma of matching the record with the supposed unfair advantage of an elongated schedule, Maris closed his eyes and swung with all his might, praying the ball would meet the sweet spot on his bat. Instead, he barely made contact, the ball squibbing back towards the pitcher for an easy out. The record would have to wait for another day.

Six days later, Maris tied Babe Ruth's 34 year record with his 60th home run. In the final game of the season on October 1, 1961, Maris launched his 61st home run into the same Yankee Stadium, right field seats that he so often stood in front of. The blast accounted for the only run in a 1-0 victory for the Yankees over the rival Boston Red Sox and there was a new home run king. Today, Maris's 61 home run effort officially ranks as the 7th highest total of all time behind three 63+ efforts from Sammy Sosa, a 65 and a 70 home run season from Mark McGwire, and a colossal 73 home run barrage from Barry Bonds. Ironically, with all of the aforementioned efforts tainted by the steroid era, today Roger Maris is still considered by many to be the true, single season home run king.

In addition to the home run title, Maris's 141 RBIs in the 1961 season propelled to his second consecutive MVP award. For the Yankees, it was a season of both great individual and team success. Led by Maris and Mantle, the club hit a major league record 240 home runs – the record would stand until the 1996 Baltimore Orioles hit 257⁵. Most importantly, the Yankees triumphed in the 1961 World Series, defeating the Cincinnati Reds four games to one. They

⁵ Of all the home runs hit by the Orioles in 1996, the one they will most remember is one that shouldn't have been from the team whose record they broke. In the 8th inning of game 1 of the 1996 ALCS with the Yankees trailing by a run, rookie shortstop Derek Jeter hit a deep but playable fly ball to that well known right field in Yankee stadium. Orioles outfielder Tony Tarasco was in position to make a play, but 12-year-old fan Jeffrey Maier reached into the field of play and stole the ball. The interference call was missed, the series was altered for good, and the Yankees were propelled to winning their first World Series since 1978.

would defend their title the following season, winning an epic seven game World Series against the Giants.

As the sixties rolled on, Maris's production waned. By the time he suited up for St. Louis in 1967, most of the right fielder's power had dissipated, but a little Maris magic still remained. After a respectable season, Maris and the Cardinals found themselves in the 1967 World Series. Suddenly, the bat came alive: Maris racked up 10 hits with a .385 average, 7 RBIs and a home run in the series, easily the best postseason performance of his career. Thanks in no small part to his contributions, Maris won his third world series title and did his old team the Yankees a favor in the process: the Cardinals seven game triumph came at the expense of the Red Sox. Meanwhile, Charley Smith, the player the home run king had been swapped for, stumbled in pinstripes, posting career lows across the board and suffering relegation to the bench before the 1968 season.

10. Battle of the Blue

Michigan vs. Duke, 1990.

At the start of a new decade, Duke were banging on the clubhouse door, demanding to be accepted as one of college basketball's elite. With one of the nation's most rabid fan bases and final four appearances in the last three seasons, the Blue Devils resume was complete save that one all-important credential: a national championship. If Duke had one foot in the room, the Michigan Wolverines were comfortably lounging. One of the nation's most impressive universities, the Ann Arbor institution sealed their place as a college basketball blue blood by winning the program's first championship in the 1989 NCAA tournament. At the time, they would never have imagined the excitement that lay just a few years down the road.

On December 8, 1990, Duke and Michigan squared off at Cameron Indoor Stadium in a matchup that was blossoming into a frenzied rivalry. For the visiting Wolverines, the stakes were not as high. One season removed from a national championship, Michigan had beaten Duke the season before and were now in a period of transition, gearing up for a seismic recruiting push that would shake college basketball foundations the next season. But for Duke, anything less than a national championship in the 1990-91 season would be considered a failure. After taking over a mediocre program in 1980, coach Mike Krzyzewski steered the Blue Devils to the edge of the promised land, losing the 1986 championship game to Louisville by three points. A bitter disappointment, but when All-American forward Christian Laettner joined the program in 1988, Coach K felt sure he had the man to help him get over the hump. The Michigan/Duke rivalry almost exploded the year before when both teams made the final four, but Duke were felled by Seton Hall, preventing a title game matchup. Michigan, of course, won the championship two days later. Duke were back in the final four the following season and this time went one better, but the North Carolina school were run out of the gym by UNLV in a thirty point championship game blowout. It was a defeat the Blue Devils would not soon forget.

For the 61st consecutive time, Duke sent a non-conference visiting opponent on the road home empty handed. Led by 19 points from Grant Hill and six blocked shots from Antonio Lang, the number 5 ranked team overcame Michigan 75-68, improving their record to 6-2. If Laettner played, he did not make a significant impression. For Michigan, the defeat marked the beginning of a season of mediocrity that saw them fail to make the NCAA tournament and eliminated in the first round of the less prestigious. NIT. When the teams next stepped on the same floor, the Wolverines would have a very different makeup. But for now, Duke had other problems to worry about.

As the Blue Devils plotted their course to the 1990-91 NCAA championship, every conceivable path was blocked by one gargantuan hurdle. The same UNLV squad that had embarrassed Duke the season before were the talk of college basketball and the overwhelming favorite for the national title. Led by dynamic stars Greg Anthony, Anderson Hunt, Stacey Augmon, and Larry Johnson, the high flying Runnin' Rebels stormed to a 30-0 undefeated season and seemed certain to defend their title. They entered the 1991 final four matchup as 10 point favorites against Duke, who had been waiting a year for their chance at revenge. When Grant Hill poked away the opening tip before gliding to an uncontested layup and Hunt answered immediately

with a pure three-pointer, you knew it was time to fasten your seat belt. The game went to the wire, where Laettner's two free throws with 12 seconds to go led Duke to a 79-77 win after Hunt's final desperation three clanked off the backboard. After one of the most dramatic upsets in NCAA tournament history, two days later Duke won their first national title, beating Kansas 72-65.

If anyone had forgotten about Michigan in the midst of all this excitement, they were soon reminded. Sporting an overhauled starting line up consisting only of freshmen known as the "Fab 5", the Wolverines quickly became the story of the 1991-92 college basketball season. In an early season matchup of unbeatens, the nation watched as Chris Weber, Juwan Howard, Jalen Rose, Jimmy King, and Ray Jackson measured themselves against Hill, Laettner, and the defending champions. In this first installment, the wily veterans of Duke showed their experience, escaping Ann Arbor with an 88-85 overtime victory. The much more significant showdown would happen in April, when the two teams met in Minnesota to decide a national championship. Laettner started slow in the final game of his storied collegiate career, and with Michigan leading by 1 point at halftime the idea that a group of freshman could win a national championship was becoming very real. Things fell apart from there. Holding the youngsters to just twenty second half points, Duke solidified the storybook ending to Laettner's career, a twenty point victory winning their second consecutive national championship. Motivated as Duke had been by Final Four heartbreak, Michigan returned with a vengeance the following season and advanced to the 1993 NCAA championship game, where that other team from the same state, the North Carolina Tarheels, were waiting. Unlike the year before, Michigan were in the game until the very end, but Chris Webber's infamous timeout signal when his team had none remaining killed their hopes. For the Fab 5, there would be no happy ending.

11. A Heavyweight Battle

Chelsea v. Sunderland, Manchester United v. Derby, 2007

A few penalties, a clean sheet, and some free-flowing attacking football. Just another day at the office for Chelsea and Manchester United in the mid 2000s.

By the turn of the new millennium, Manchester United, fresh off a treble winning season in 1999, were very much established as the premier power in England's Premier league. But in 2004-05, Chelsea, under new guidance from the brash and charismatic Jose Mourinho, upset the apple cart. Deploying a stringent defense and a revolutionary 4-3-3 formation, Chelsea blitzed English football, storming to two consecutive league titles with ruthless efficiency. There would be no hattrick. Sir Alex Ferguson, certainly unamused by the appearance of a new rival, steered United to their 16th league title in the 2006-07 campaign, reminding the new kids on the block who were the true alphas. Although they'd lost their title, Chelsea gained a measure of revenge by beating United in the FA Cup final, a super link up between Frank Lampard and Didier Drogba for an extra time winner the only bright spot in a cautious affair. With the sides having traded blows, the stage was poised for another epic heavyweight round in 2007-08.

Chelsea's season started well enough, but soon hit major turmoil. In the midst of a winless September, Jose Mourinho unexpectedly left the club by mutual consent, and by month's end the team from West London stood with an uninspiring 12 points. In need of a quick rebound, interim manager Avram Grant led the Blues to victories in six of the next seven matches. The title chase was once again in the balance with both United and Chelsea playing at a high level, and both sides knew they could ill afford to drop points in home fixtures against struggling opponents on December 8th. Neither would. Chelsea dispensed of Sunderland in typical businesslike fashion, a first half strike from extravagant signing Andriy Shevchenko and a second half penalty from the ever-reliable Frank Lampard securing the points. A few hours north, United took forty minutes to break the deadlock but were soon in control against Derby County. A Ryan Giggs opener was followed by a brace from West Ham legend Carlos Tevez, putting the game beyond doubt. After Derby pulled one back, Cristiano Ronaldo, never one to miss an opportunity to be on the scoresheet, added a fourth with a stoppage time penalty. The Portuguese attacker's effort from twelve yards was not significant on this day, but Ronaldo's impact from the penalty spot would be felt greatly later in the season.

The title race went to the final day of the season. Although the teams were deadlock with 84 points, a vastly superior goal difference for United meant that the Manchester club controlled their own destiny. A Red Devils win at Wigan would guarantee a successful defense of their league title, while Chelsea needed to beat Bolton at home and hope for a United slip up. It was a cagey first half hour from the champions, but United got the opening they needed when Wayne Rooney won a 33rd minute penalty. Ronaldo, already on 30 goals for the season, approached gingerly, struck the ball without conviction, and found the back of the net. United could not gain further separation as the second half unfolded, and Chelsea's 1-0 lead at Bolton meant a Wigan equalizer would send the trophy back to the capital. At last, the tension was eased ten minutes from time when Ryan Giggs doubled United's lead, ensuring his club would be champions. To add insult to injury, Chelsea conceded an injury time equalizer, meaning they

would not become the first club to lose the title on goal difference, instead finishing two points behind the Manchester team.

A heartbreaking blow for Chelsea, but they had no time to feel sorry for themselves. As fate would have it, ten days after United's league winning performance at Wigan the two clubs found themselves in Moscow to contest the 2008 Champions League Final. Victory for Chelsea would mean an elusive first ever Champions League trophy and reduce the pain of their domestic shortcoming to a distant memory. For two teams that needed an entire season to separate them, it was no surprise that penalties would be required to find a winner on the night. Man of the moment Ronaldo opened the scoring with a towering first half header, but a fortuitous deflection allowed Lampard to equalize just before half time. After Didier Drogba was foolishly sent off in extra time, the contest gravitated towards the lottery of a shootout. Ronaldo stepped up third for United, hesitated for a second too long and hit a tame effort, allowing Petr Cech to make the first save of the shootout. Moments later, he looked on, visibly distraught with his glorious season going up in flames, as Chelsea captain John Terry stepped forward to score the penalty that would win Chelsea the Champions League. But Ronaldo was spared. Terry slipped in his run up, shanking his penalty off the post, and two shots later Nicolas Anelka also saw his penalty saved, giving United a dreamlike double. The heavyweights had gone a full twelve rounds, but when the bell rang it was the old guard who was left standing.

The season unfolded with far less excitement for Chelsea and United's December 8th victims, although Sunderland would have considered escaping the drop by three points as a monumental success. Derby County could not say the same. With only twenty goals scored, eleven points⁶ and a single victory from the entire campaign, the newly promoted club were returned to the second division before April. It is widely agreed that they were the poorest Premier League side of all time.

⁶ Derby's 20 goals set the standard for futility in a season until recently when they were joined by a 2020-21 Sheffield United side that also scored just as few. Derby still hold the record for fewest points all to themselves.

12. West Coast Warriors

Seattle Seahawks vs. San Francisco 49ers, 2013

In 2013, the NFC West had a strong case to be considered the best division in football. In addition to the 10-6 Arizona Cardinals, the grouping contained two of the most formidable and intimidating teams in the league: the Seattle Seahawks and San Francisco 49ers. Coming off consecutive NFC championship game appearances and a narrow loss to the Ravens in Super Bowl XLVII, the 49ers were ready to take the next step. However, their rivals to the north had other intentions. With second year quarterback Russell Wilson dazzling far beyond expectations, a wrecking ball at running back in Marshawn Lynch, and a defense loaded with generational talent, the Seattle Seahawks meant business.

Heading into a week 14 divisional showdown, the game was more about making a statement rather than playoff positioning. Winning eleven of their first twelve, included a week 2 29-3 bludgeoning of the 49ers, Seattle had established themselves as the premier team in the conference. At 8-4 and three games behind, San Francisco knew they were well entrenched for a wild card but likely too far removed to challenge for the division. Instead, they were focused on avenging their week 2 dismantling and reminding their rivals they fully intended to challenge for a conference title. With a sweep, the Seahawks would establish their dominance, gaining a significant mental edge of the team with greater experience and remaining on track for home field throughout the playoffs.

Early on, it was the 49ers defense rising to the occasion, stifling the Seattle attack as the home team went ahead by 6. In the second quarter, Russ started cooking. Seattle found the endzone twice before halftime but were pegged back by a Vernon Davis 8-yard touchdown pass that put the 49ers up two going into the break. In the second half, every inch would be fought for. After a collective six punts and an interception, Seattle got their noses in front with a 31-yard Steven Hauschka field goal with 6:25 remaining. In a masterful response, SF quarterback Colin Kaepernick drove down to the Seattle 4-yard line, allowing his team to kick a game-winning, chip shot field goal with 31 seconds remaining. After the battle, many anticipated what a mouth-watering rubber match might look like if these teams met again in the playoffs. They would get their wish.

The 1 seed secured, the 12th man, the moniker adorned to Seattle's rabid fan base, will their team to victory over New Orleans in the Divisional Playoffs. After the wildcard 49ers won in Carolina, the scene was set for the final installment in the NFC Championship Game. With a Super Bowl trip at stake, there would be no 29-3 runaway. Immediately, the frenzied crowd was silenced when Seattle fumbled the first play from scrimmage deep in their own territory. They soon found their voice again as the Legion of Boom held the 49ers to three. As on December 8th, the Seattle offense took a while to get started, only finding the endzone midway through the 3rd quarter on a forty-yard rumble from Lynch. This knotted the game at 10 – the 49ers would swing in front once more before Seattle responding again, taking their first lead at 20-17 after a 35-yard Jermaine Kearse touchdown reception. Up by 3 and driving, Seattle had a chance to salt the game away but had to settle for a field goal that extended their margin to six points. The defending NFC champions would have a final opportunity, a touchdown and the

point after required to send them back to the Super Bowl. Fast approaching the Seattle goal line with under a minute to play, Kaepernick took a shot at the end zone. Wrong move. With the play of the season, cornerback Richard Sherman deflected the pass intended for Michael Crabtree into the waiting arms of teammate Michael Smith, the interception sealing the game and a conference title. Moments after, Sherman made sure to inform on field reporter Erin Andrews and the world watching at home exactly what he thought about Crabtree and the 49ers. The rivalry was real.

Two weeks later, the Seahawks would win their only Super Bowl in franchise history, the defense again dominant in a 36-8 smackdown of Peyton Manning and the Broncos. Not satisfied with the conference clinching interception, Malcolm Smith added the Super Bowl MVP trophy to his resume. For the 49ers, the championship window had closed – after an 8-8 season the following year coach Jim Harbaugh left to coach at his alma mater Michigan, ending an era of excitement. And as for Sherman, he would continue to torment 49ers fans long after his playing days were in Seattle were over. Now wearing the red and gold of San Francisco, Sherman was beaten by Sammy Watkins for a key 38-yard gain in Super Bowl LV as Kansas City rallied for a fourth quarter comeback. The Stanford alumni would be wise to venture no farther north than Palo Alto on his returns to the Golden State.

13. The Streak, Part 1

Los Angeles Lakers vs. Houston Rockets, 1971

By 1971, nobody on the planet was hungrier for an NBA championship than Jerry West. Felled six times by the Boston Celtics and most recently by the Knicks in the NBA Finals, West and his Lakers teammates came up with a fool proof strategy to ensure this time they would not be short changed: never lose again. After losing their second straight game on Halloween, the Lakers used a much-needed break to turn a new leaf in November. They returned to winning ways on the 5th and would not lose again for over two months.

By the time a December 8th contest with the Houston Rockets rolled around, the Lakers had banked 17 in a row. An underwhelming Rockets team tried their best to make them work for number 18. Although LA opened a double-digit lead in the first quarter, Houston hung tough, forcing the Lakers to keep their focus as they eventually ground out a five point win. West's backcourt teammate Gail Goodrich took the opportunity to shine by pouring in a game high 42 points; the Logo did not exactly have an off night himself, contributing 33. Lakers center Wilt Chamberlain scored 3, just 75 fewer than he had exactly a decade ago. Los Angeles remained undefeated for the rest of '71, eventually winning their thirty third consecutive game against the Atlanta Hawks on January 7, 1972. This remains an NBA record. The run was snapped two days later by the defending champion Milwaukee Bucks, who would prove to make a habit of streak stopping. With the recently renamed Kareem Abdul Jabbar⁷, the reigning and soon to be recurring league MVP, badly out playing Chamberlain (39 and 15 point respectively) and Oscar Robertson matching Jerry West, the Lakers finally lost. But they would not soon forget the winning habit – four months later they overcame the Knicks in five games in the 1972 NBA Finals, winning the franchise's first title since relocating from Minneapolis.

For a Rockets team that moved to 6-22 and were going nowhere fast, there was little of note from a mundane, midweek loss. The exception might be the presence of forward Rudy Tomjanovich on the court, who would enjoy playing the Lakers much more on December 8th than December 9th. Exactly six years and one day on, Tomjanovich received a sickening punch from Lakers forward Kermit Washington after a skirmish broke out mid-game. The Rockets forward, who been approaching players in an attempt to break up the fight, was caught completely off guard and landed headfirst on the hardwood. The tremendous force of the blow fractured his skull, causing a leakage of blood and spinal fluid that rendered the situation life threatening. Thankfully, Tomjanovich was able to make a full recovery and play in the NBA for a further three seasons before becoming the coach of the Rockets, winning back-to-back championships in the 1990s. Perhaps no one embodied the motto the coach bestowed upon those teams than Rudy T himself: Don't ever underestimate the heart of a champion.

⁷ Jabar would of course continue to great success as a Los Angeles Laker, winning an additional five NBA titles with running mate Magic Johnson.

14. On the Cusp of Greatness

Mike Mussina's Birthday, 1968

Born in Williamsport, Pennsylvania on December 8, 1968, the first World Series Mike Mussina laid eyes on saw the Baltimore Orioles fall to the 1969 Miracle Mets. How it would be a sign of things to come.

Raised in the home of the little league World Series, a life on the diamond was Mike Mussina's destiny. Despite excelling at football and basketball⁸, Mussina chose to focus on baseball and spent three years at Stanford honing his craft as a pitcher. After touring the minor league circuit, Mussina debuted with the Orioles in 1991. His career got off to a flying start, the right hander named an all star in each of his first three full seasons. When baseball returned from an ugly work stoppage in 1995, the Orioles began to get good. Bashing home runs left, right, and center in 1996, Baltimore earned the AL wild card and their first postseason appearance since 1983. They would defeat the Indians in four games, with Mussina taking the only loss in game 3 of the series. After Jeffrey Maier's game 1 home run staked the deck against the Orioles in the ALCS vs. the Yankees, Mussina could not bail them out, again dropping the third game. The series and the season would end for Baltimore after five. But they would be back, this time pipping the Yankees to the division title in 1997. Wized from his first try, Mussina pitched tremendously in the 1997 postseason, allowing a total of four earned runs in four starts. Never going fewer than 7 complete innings, Mussina's performances were good for two divisional series victories over Mariners, his first a dominant outing against ace Randy Johnson in game 1. In the next round, badly lacking run support, Mussina could only watch as the Orioles wasted his scintillating starts, turning his two gems into no-decisions and a pair of team losses. For the second year in a row, the Orioles were out a round shy of the Fall Classic.

As the team trailed off, Mussina realized he might need to seek employment elsewhere to win an elusive ring. What better place to try his hand than the New York Yankees. Signed as a free agent in 2001, Mussina was a productive member of a perennial playoff team for eight seasons. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal continued to elude him. Mussina would pitch in two world series, spinning a game 5 in 2001 and also winning game 3 in 2003. On both occasions, the Yankees lost the series. Joining the organization in 2001 and retiring after 2008, Mussina was left wondering how he managed to have such rotten timing: the Yankees won the World Series in 2000 and 2009.

Mussina wasn't playing horseshoes will only his team career. On several occasions, Moose flirted with throwing a perfect game, only for something to put a fly in the ointment. On May 30, 1997, Mussina set down the first 25 Cleveland Indians he faced, only to have Sandy Alomar Jr. lace a single. 23 Tigers failed to reach first on August 4, 1998 before a double ruined the day. Now with the Yankees on September 2, 2001, it was finally time. Mussina retired the first 26 batters he saw at Fenway Park, one out away from baseball immortality. Red Sox and Yankees faithful alike held their collective breath as batter Carl Everett ran a 1-2 count. Needing one

⁸ Mussina, an accomplished placekicker, receive an offer to play collegiate football at Penn State from Joe Paterno. He declined, knowing his future lay with his arm, not his leg.

strike, Mussina fired a perfect pitch on the black of outside corner. Too close to take, Everett flipped his bat towards the ball and looped it over shortstop Derek Jeter's head, dunking the ball into left field for a base hit to break up the perfect game.

With 270 wins, a 3.68 ERA, and over 2,800 strikeouts, Mussina was a borderline case for the Hall of Fame. In his first year on the ballot in 2014, he received 20.3% of the vote. Progress was consistent if slow, the right hander climbing to 24.6, 43, 51.8, and eventually 63.5% of the vote in 2018. Finally in 2019, Mussina eclipsed the 75% threshold by receiving 76.1% of the vote and was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame. The almost man had finally gotten over the top.

15. The King is Dead, Long Live the King

Kansas City Chiefs vs. New England Patriots, 2019

When sixth round draft pick Tom Brady took the field to replace an injured Drew Bledsoe in week 2 of the 2001 NFL season, few would have imagined he'd still be playing at an all-pro level in 2019 with six Super Bowl titles to his name. After befuddling a young Rams team to win Super Bowl LIII, the Patriots sprinted to an 8-0 record, many considering their representation of the AFC in the Super Bowl a fait accompli. But although they sat with a 10-2 record heading into week 14, recent losses to the Ravens and Texans had left a feeling of uncertainty hanging heavy around Foxboro like the morning, New England fog. The defense looked vulnerable, the offense wasn't clicking, and blasphemous whispers that Father Time may have finally caught up to Brady were beginning to circulate. With third year superstar quarterback Patrick Mahomes and the high-powered Kansas City offense coming to town, the Patriots knew this game would indicate whether they were still contenders or now just pretenders in the upper echelons of the NFL. Mahomes, whose career had started in brighter fashion than even the most fanciful screenwriter could have penned, had already established his dominance in the league, winning the 2018 MVP in his first season as a starter. But Kansas City had fallen just short when it mattered most, losing in gut wrenching fashion to the Patriots during the regular season and in overtime of the AFC Championship Game. On December 8th 2019, ready to assume the mantle they felt was theirs, the 8-4 Chiefs went to New England for a changing of the guard.

On a chilly but manageable afternoon in New England, the Patriots started well, opening the scoring with a Julian Edelman 37 yard touchdown haul from Brady. From there, the offense went ice cold. As New England sputtered in second gear, Mahomes moved the ball methodically, slicing through the defense and capitalizing when big play opportunities presented. By the midpoint of the third quarter, the Chiefs had scored on five of their last six possessions, a hat trick of Harrison Butker field goals combining with touchdowns and receptions from Mecole Hardman and Travis Kelce to give the visitors a 23-7 advantage. At last, the Patriots responded. A Brandon Bolden 10 yard rush (conversion no good) and a short Nick Folk field goal meant the defending champions were within striking distance, and when Brady got the ball back with 5:04 remaining Kansas City fans felt like they'd seen this horror flick before. New England traveled to the Chiefs 5-yard line, but when a fourth down pass for Edelman was knocked down in the end zone, it seemed the Patriot magic had truly run dry. Three kneels later, the 23-16 score was final and the Chiefs had finally climbed the mountaintop.

A Patriot playoff rejuvenation would have rendered their December loss to footnote status, but it was not to be the case. Astoundingly, New England lost at home to a pitiful Miami Dolphins team in the final game of the regular season, costing a first-round bye in the playoffs. There would be no waking from the nightmare: on Wild-Card weekend, former Patriot player, now coach Mike Vrable led his Titans team into Foxboro and dethroned the champions, leaving with a 20-13 victory over his former coach and teammates. The season was over, and Brady would not play another game for the franchise. Meanwhile, Mahomes continued to shine. After falling behind 24-0 to the Houston Texans in the AFC divisional playoffs, he engineered a momentous comeback, steering his team back to the title game. The Chiefs held their nerve at home against

the pesky Titans team that had dispatched New England and finally were back in the Super Bowl after 50 long years. After struggling for most of the game against a fierce 49ers defense, Mahomes found some fourth quarter magic, hooking up on a long third down pass to Tyreek Hill to spark a rally. Scoring 21 unanswered in the final period, the Chiefs ran out 31-20 winners for their second Super Bowl in franchise history. Brady had receded, Mahomes was the man, and there was a new king in the AFC.

For mere mortal monarchs the story would end here, but the banished Brady had other ideas. Sensing a warmer climate might be better suited to his elderly age, the Patriots legend took his talents south, agreeing to become the new starting quarterback of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. We were soon reminded that the greats let us know when they're finished, not the other way around. After some ups and downs in the first few months, Tom and Tampa got hot, winning their last four regular season games and stealing three consecutive road wins in the playoffs to bring Brady back to the Super Bowl. They'd lost to Kansas City in the regular season, but when it mattered most Mahomes and his men were no match. With a 31-9 dismantling of the Chiefs, Brady had his seventh ring and the message was clear: the old king was not dead just quite yet.

16.The Streak, Part 2

UConn vs. DePaul, 2017

Much like the local hoodlums attempting to mug Crocodile Dundee, one can imagine how a scene might play out if the 1971-72 Los Angeles Lakers flew east to boast about their winning prowess in front of the UConn women's basketball team. That's not a streak – *this* is a streak.

Impressive as the Laker's run of 33 in a row was, the UConn women's basketball team would better than triple that mark, winning 111 straight over three different seasons. After an early season loss to Stanford in 2014, the run began. Under the scrupulous leadership of the affable Geno Auriemma, the Huskies traversed the rest of that season and the entirety of the following one unbeaten. The 2015 Final Four in Tampa saw successes over Maryland and Notre Dame, resulting in UConn's third consecutive national championship. In 2016, number four was banked after routs of Oregon State and Syracuse, thirty points the average margin of victory. Entering the 2017 Final Four with an 111-game winning streak, the drive for five was very much alive. Unfortunately, nothing lasts forever. In a classic upset, Mississippi State⁹ knocked off the Huskies with an overtime buzzer beater in the national semifinals. During their immense winning run that spanned 859 days, UConn were only held under a ten point margin of victory three times in 111 tries.

Despite the fact that the previous season had ended in bitter disappointment, the UConn women still had one winning streak in tact when the 2017-18 campaign began. Because their loss had occurred in the NCAA tournament, their streak of consecutive wins in regular season games still stood at 86 and counting. On December 8, 2017, UConn clobbered DePaul in the Windy City to tally their 94th consecutive regular season win. Katie Lou Samuelson led all scorers with 20 in a 103-69 win, but there was plenty to go around with Napheesa Collier, Gabby Williams, Crystal Dangerfield, Kia Nurse, and Azura Stevens all in double figures for the Huskies. For the third straight year, the UConn women finished the regular season a perfect 29-0. Yet again however, they did not get the bounce of the ball when needed, losing another overtime heartbreaker in the Final Four, this time to Notre Dame. Not voided by that loss, the regular season streak survived until January 3, 2019 when finally UConn succumbed to eighth ranked Baylor. Buoyed by the win, the Lady Bears were propelled to capturing their third NCAA title in program history, defeating defending champions Notre Dame by a single point in the final game. The fate of UConn was a third consecutive semifinal loss and a second in a row to the school from South Bend.

After a stretch of dominance rarely seen, the Huskies entered the new decade ready to write some new chapters, their runs of 111 (all games) and 126 (regular season games) safely inked on the pages before. Records are made to be broken, but it will take some doing to overcome the two triple digit winning streaks set by the UConn women's basketball team in the new millennium.

⁹ Despite their heroics, Mississippi State were unable to clear the final hurdle, losing by a dozen to South Carolina in the 2017 national championship game. They would taste heartbreak again the following year when they fell to Notre Dame by three points at the same stage.

17. Running Wild

Heisman Trophy Award Winners, 1942,1948, 1953,1955, 1973, 1977, 2007, 2018

To win the Heisman trophy, you must display a rarified level of excellence at your position on the football field. Apparently, to win the trophy on December 8th, you also have to run like a man possessed. First awarded in 1935, college football's most prestigious award has been dished out eight times on the eighth day of the calendar's final month. The first six of these recipients were all stalwarts at the running back position.

In 1942, Georgia half back Frank Sinkwich became the first player from the Southeastern Conference to win the award on the back on a nation's best 209 carries on 1,103 yards. Team success followed his individual accolades: Sinkwich led the Bulldogs to an 11-1 record and a Rose Bowl victory over UCLA. Sinkwich was selected with the first overall pick by the Detroit Lions in the 1943 NFL Draft but, with the nation embroiled in World War II, chose to enroll in the US Marine Corps. Ironically for the decorated ball carrier, a diagnosis of flat feet resulted in a medical discharge and Sinkwich was back on the field to start the 1943 season. He enjoyed a short but eventful NFL career, winning the NFL MVP in 1944.

In 1948, it was Doak Walker's turn to accept the award. Walker, not to be confused with Doak Campbell, the collegiate president who oversaw the creation of Florida State University and for whom their football stadium is named, was a standout halfback as Southern Methodist University. In the second half of a collegiate career interrupted by military service, Walker was quite literally all over the field during the 1948 season. In addition to 532 yards rushing, Walker added six touchdown passes, three touchdown receptions, and three interceptions to secure the Heisman trophy. Not to leave any part of his body unused, Walker also averaged 42.1 yards per punt and handled placekicking duties for the Mustangs throughout the season. Clearly with a soft spot for Heisman trophy backs, the Lions made him the third overall pick in the 1949 NFL Draft. This time, they got a somewhat better return on their investment than they received from Sinkwich: Walker enjoyed six successful seasons with Detroit from 1950-1955 that resulted in two NFL Championships and selection to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Third was Fighting Irish halfback Johnny Lattner, Heisman trophy winner in 1953. Like Walker, Lattner dazzled as a do-it-all player, winning the award despite not leading his own team in any major offensive category. Although they were the only team in college football to go undefeated in 1953 at 9-0-1, Notre Dame were voted second in the final Associated Press poll with a 10-1 University of Maryland team that lost 7-0 in the 1954 Cotton Bowl declared the number 1 team and a consensus national champion. After a successful 1954 rookie campaign with the Pittsburgh Steelers that saw him voted to the Pro Bowl as a special teams standout, Lattner was well on his way to a fruitful NFL career. Sadly, that offseason he enlisted in the US Air Force, where during a football game he sustained a devastating knee injury; Lattner never played another down in the NFL.

Two years later, it was Buckeye's halfback Howard Cassady's turn to take center stage. 1955 may have technically been the year the Ohio State man won the award, but it may very well have been considered a recognition of lifetime achievement. Over a 36 game college career,

Cassady found the end zone 37 times, averaging better than a score per game. Also a four year player at defensive back, Cassady did not allow a single pass to be completed against him. Led by their halfback's continued excellence, Ohio State finished 10-0 as a consensus national champion in 1954 and a respectable 7-2 the following season. Cassady was selected third overall in the 1956 NFL draft by, you guessed it, the Detroit Lions, who desperately needed to fill the mandatory position of Heisman trophy winning tailback after Doak Walker's retirement following the previous season. He enjoyed a productive eight seasons in the NFL, winning a championship with the Lions in 1957.

It would be almost twenty years before the Heisman was awarded on this date again, but in 1973 Penn State running back John Cappelletti was the fifth man on the board. Cappelletti arrived at Penn State at his preferred position of running back, but stuck behind future Pro Bowl running backs Franco Harris and Lydell Mitchell, he played as a defensive back during his first year on the varsity squad. His switch back to his original position for the 1973 season would prove very fruitful. Enroute to the Heisman trophy and a perfect 12-0 season, Cappelletti gained a walloping 1,522 rushing yards and plunged into the end zone 17 times. His prowess on the field was outdone only by his compassion off it: Cappelletti is perhaps best remembered for his moving acceptance speech where he dedicated his award to his younger brother Joey who was suffering from terminal leukemia. Head coach Joe Paterno, who would preside over the Nittany Lions for 46 seasons, said that Cappelletti was the best player he ever coached.

As they say: save the best for last. In 1977, Texas running back Earl Campbell became the sixth and final player at the position to win the Heisman trophy on December 8. In a sign of what was to come at the next level, Campbell was dominant in the collegiate game, amassing 1,744 yards and 19 touchdowns in his award winning season. His play led the Longhorns to a bid for the national championship in the Cotton Bowl where, despite Campbell's 116 yards on 29 carries, they were handily beaten 38-10 by the Joe Montana led Notre Dame Fighting Irish. The first overall pick in the NFL Draft, Campbell is best known for his time with the Houston Oilers where he won the NFL MVP in his second season. His following season in 1980 was even more productive and earned him a third consecutive offensive player of the year award. Known for his physical style of running and recognized as one of the most impactful backs of all time, Campbell finished his career with over 9,400 rushing yards and 74 touchdowns.

The positional qualification may have been removed, but the running requirement certainly had not. Thirty years on from Campbell, hybrid Florida quarter back Tim Tebow became the 7th man on our list. A college icon, the Gators signal caller captured the nation with his physical running style, the jump pass, and an uncanny knack for just being able to win. Tebow burst onto the scene in his freshman season when his intermittent relief of starting senior quarterback Chris Leak propelled Florida to a national championship – a passing and running touchdown from the backup QB contributed to a 41-14 walloping of Ohio State in the 2007 BCS National Championship Game. Taking over starting duties in his sophomore season, Tebow took off. Despite having to wear a hand cast for three weeks, the dual threat quarterback dominated opponents and earned the Heisman trophy after accounted for 55 total touchdowns, 32 through the air, 23 on the ground. For good measure, Tebow and the Gators added a second national championship in his junior season, defeating an Oklahoma Sooners team led by

Heisman trophy winning quarterback Sam Bradford. With the Gators men's basketball team winning back to back the championships in 2006 and 2007, the 2009 BCS win capped one of the most dominant three years periods ever seen from a university in the collegiate sporting world. Success was limited for Tebow in the pros, but he still attained cult hero status after guiding the Broncos to the 2011 NFL playoffs and defeating the heavily favored Pittsburgh Steelers with an 80-yard, walk-off touchdown to Demaryius Thomas on the first play from scrimmage in overtime.

If Tebow was a mac truck carrying the football, 2018 Heisman award winner Kyler Murray is a Ferrari. Originally at Texas A&M, Murray transferred to Oklahoma and spent the 2017 season backing up Baker Mayfield. Heading into the 2018 season, it was unclear whether he or Austin Kendall would be the starting quarterback. The correct decision was made. Very much a dual threat, Murray filled up the stat sheet, recording over 4,000 passing yards and 1,000 rushing yards in his Heisman bid. Despite an impressive performance, Murray's Sooners would fall to Alabama 45-34 in the first round of the College Football Playoff. In addition to his quarterbacking prowess, Murray excelled on the baseball diamond and, prior to the 2018 football season, the Oakland Athletics selected him with the ninth overall pick in the MLB draft. Murray informed the team that he planned to report to spring training in 2019, but a Heisman trophy winning season changes a lot. After lighting up college football, Murray announced his intentions to enter the 2019 NFL draft, where he was taken with the first overall pick by the Arizona Cardinals. In just his third professional season, the former Oklahoma quarterback has found great success applying his dual-threat capabilities and is already established as a perennial MVP candidate.

18. Leaving it Late at The Lane

Tottenham v. Sunderland, 1990

Fresh of a third place finish in the English Football League, Tottenham Hotspur had started the 1990-91 campaign reasonably well. Star striker Gary Lineker, who along with his countrymen had thrilled and then broken the hearts of England fans a few months prior with a semi-final run at Italia '90, was in fine form and the North London men had traversed their first ten league games unbeaten. Following a 3-2 defeat to London rivals Chelsea, Tottenham may have viewed a home fixture against newly promoted Sunderland as the perfect tonic to get back on track before a busy festive fixture list. It didn't take long to discover the visitors might have other intentions.

With twenty-two minutes gone, goals from Colin Pascoe and Peter Davenport had staked the away side to a shock two goal lead. No headway would be made before halftime. The crowd were growing grumpy, but Tottenham, led by future England manager Terry Venables, knew they had goals in the side and didn't panic. Paul Walsh, perhaps tired of his teammate's lackluster effort, took it upon himself to level the match, firing in a brace in rapid succession with goals in minutes 64 and 69. But just as Tottenham had a foothold in the game, Pascoe completed a brace of his own on 75 minutes, restoring a 3-2 for the Black Cats. As the clock ticked away, it looked increasingly likely that the away side might steal the points, but Lineker popped up with an equalizer in the final minute of normal time and both teams would have to be content with a 3-3 draw.

Tottenham might have hope Lineker's late equalizer would invigorate their league campaign, but it was quite the opposite. Defeat to Manchester City followed in the next fixture and when a 2-1 home loss on New Year's Day to Manchester United marked a third consecutive league defeat in a seven day period, Spurs likely thought their season was all but over. Little did they know it was only about to begin.

On January 5th, when they steadied the ship with a nervy 1-0 victory over lower league Blackpool in the third round of the FA Cup, even the most ardent Tottenham supporter wouldn't have guessed it was the start of a magical run. Aided by their penchant for the late goal they flashed against Sunderland, they set out to make history. Wins against Oxford United and Portsmouth set up a home quarter-final clash against Notts County. After an early second half own goal helped Tottenham level, it was the mercurial and splendidly talented Paul Gascoigne who would steal the headlines, his 83rd minute strike winning the match 2-1. In the semifinals at Wembley, Gazza would become a hero. Heavy underdogs against champions elect Arsenal, their bitterest of rivals, Tottenham were looking for a little bit of magic to make their first FA cup final since 1987. It took all of five minutes to arrive. From the center of the goal and way too far out to shoot, Gascoigne unleashed a thunderous free kick, the ball gathering speed as it traveled. Arsenal goalkeeper David Seaman lifted his hand towards its path but it may as well have been a piece of paper. The ball crashed into the top right corner of the goal and Tottenham had liftoff. Another five minutes later, Lineker took advantage of a stunned Arsenal to make it two. Arsenal pulled one back, but a second Lineker strike in the 78th minute sealed a 3-1 victory. Tottenham would have felt like the competition was won, but another victory was

still required to lift the cup. Back at Wembley on May 18, a Paul Stewart equalizer had canceled out a Stuart Pearce opener¹⁰ and, after 90 minutes of the 1991 FA Cup Final, there was nothing to choose between Tottenham and Nottingham Forest. In the end, an unfortunate error, the antithesis to Gascoigne's semifinal genius, would decide the match. Four minutes into extra time, Forest defender Desmond Walker headed into his own net off a deflected corner, giving Tottenham a 2-1 lead they would not relinquish.

Tottenham's 1991 FA Cup triumph was their first since UEFA Cup Winners success in 1984. They have lifted a trophy only once since, once again winning 2-1 in extra time, a Jonathan Woodgate goal securing a 2-1 victory over Chelsea in the 2008 League Cup Final. Just like 17 years prior, the defender scored in the 94th minute, this time the ball going into the correct net.

As for Sunderland: the Black Cats were bolstered by the fine December performance at White Hart Lane, but they could not escape their fate. A total of 34 points landed them in 19th place and three adrift of the 37 required to retain premier league status. Back in the second division, their minds may have wondered to late equalizers and lost opportunities as they dug in for the scrap for promotion they had become all too familiar with.

¹⁰ It was no Gazza special, but Pearce's 1991 FA Cup final free kick to give Forest the lead is well remembered to this day, a very worthy strike in its own right.

19. Monsters of the Midway

San Francisco 49ers vs. Chicago Bears, 1963

Heading into week 13, the San Francisco 49ers were responsible for the only Chicago Bears loss in the 1963 season. In the penultimate regular season game, George Halas's men made sure they put things right. With two to play, the Bears had little margin for error if they wished to dethrone the two-time reigning NFL champion Green Bay Packers as winners of the Western Conference. They had done the hard part, already handing the Packers their only two losses of the season in weeks 1 and 10. But a week 13 victory over the Los Angeles Rams the day before had left the Packers with a 10-2-1 record, threatening first place once again. At 9-1-2 at dawn on the 8th of December, the Bears knew a win over the 49ers would place them a half game ahead, a loss a half game behind.

With quarterback Billy Wade posting a pedestrian stat line of 7/20 for 136 yards and an interception on a windy day at Wrigley Field, the Bears relied on their running game to pound the 49ers into submission. With rushing touchdowns of 51 and 19 yards, the home team jumped out to a quick 14-0 lead in the first quarter. There was still work to be done however, with the west coast visitors clawing their way back into contention with a second quarter touchdown, sending the game to the interval at 14-7. Perhaps not trusting his arm, Wade took it in himself to restore Chicago's two score lead in the third period. With the San Francisco offense lacking, it appeared the two touchdown lead may be insurmountable, and a 27-7 was sealed when Rosey Taylor returned an interception 30 yards for a touchdown.

It was not only the San Francisco offense that was in turmoil on this Sunday afternoon; just sixteen days earlier, the nation was rocked when John F. Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, was assassinated at the age of 46 in Dallas. Somewhat controversially, the NFL proceeded with a full slate of game the following Sunday, with the Bears tying the Steelers and the Packers beating the 49ers just 48 hours after the president's death. In times of trouble, the NFL hoped normalcy would be the best course of action.

After beating San Francisco, the Bear secured their spot in the NFL championship game with a resounding win over the Detroit Lions to conclude the regular season. They were met by the New York Giants, who had won the Eastern Conference by a game over the Cleveland Browns. Losers of 4 of the last 5 championship games, the Giants were desperate to capture their first title since 1956. The contest was tight throughout, with a Billy Wade run cancelling out a Y.A. Tittle to Frank Gifford connection in the first quarter. The Giants managed a field goal to lead 10-7 at the half, but they would score no more – Wade plunged in from 1 yard out for a second touchdown for the only points of the second half and the Bears celebrated as 1963 NFL champions on their own Wrigley field.

With 5th year coach Vince Lombardi cultivating a dynasty in Green Bay, the Bears might have suspected that opportunities to win championships would be far and few between. Heading into 1963, the Packers were the two-time defending champions and would have been plotting a three-peat when they were shocked by the news that their star halfback and kick Paul Hornung, the Golden Boy, would be suspended indefinitely for betting on NFL games. The suspension of

Hornung, who in 1961 had set the record for most points in a championship game with 19¹¹, derailed the Green Bay season before it even began. In opportunistic fashion, the Bears took advantage of Hornung's absence to beat the Packers twice and secure George Halas's 8th and final championship, the franchise's first since 1946. Hornung would return, the Packers would secure their three-peat from 1965-67, and the Bears would have to wait until 1985 to be on top once again, but the championship of '63 was secure.

¹¹ This record was surpassed by Patriots running back James White in Super Bowl LI when he scored 20 in a 34-28 overtime victory over the Atlanta Falcons.

20. An Upset in Atlanta

LSU vs. Tennessee, 2001 SEC National Championship Game

There weren't many teams who were foolish enough to think they might challenge a loaded Miami Hurricanes squad for the 2001 BCS national championship. The Tennessee Volunteers were one of the few who might be up to the task. Heading into the SEC championship game with a two point loss to Georgia their own blemish, Tennessee knew that victory over LSU in the Georgia Dome would give them the right to contest for a national championship in the Rose Bowl on January 3rd. The Volunteers had already beaten their opponent, who with three losses to their name were looking to play spoiler, in the third game of the regular season.

LSU opened with a touchdown, but all seemed well when the 7-point favorite Volunteers scored the next 17. With quarterback Casey Clausen performing well, coach Phillip Fulmer would have felt things were progressing on schedule with a 17-10 lead at the half. Thirty minutes from college football's biggest stage, the Tennessee offense went missing. Only able to manage one second half field goal, the Volunteers looked on helplessly as the Tigers took their season away with two fourth quarter touchdowns. With a 31-20 victory, coach Nick Saban secured had his first of 10 SEC championships and Tennessee's championship bid came to a premature end.

With number 2 Tennessee and number 3 Texas both losing their conference title games, the role of sacrificial lamb at Miami's altar fell to Nebraska. Although the Cornhusker's had cost themselves an appearance in the Big 12 championship game with a comprehensive 62-36 loss to Colorado in their final regular season game, the BCS committee decided that an 11-0 start merited their inclusion in the championship contest. Shortly after the game kicked off, it became apparent that the committee was quite mistaken. With quarterback Ken Dorsey dishing the ball to future NFL starts Clinton Portis, Jeremy Shockey, and Andre Johnson for first half touchdowns, Miami rampaged to a 34-0 lead after two quarters and the white flag was waving. Facing defensive stalwarts William Joseph, Jonathan Vilma and Ed Reed amongst others¹², Nebraska quarterback Eric Crouch would have been cursing LSU for their upset between sniffs of smelling salts. The Hurricanes permitted the Cornhuskers to escape with a shred of dignity by allowing two second half touchdowns, eventually winning 37-14 in a contest that was not nearly as close as the score line indicated.

Two days after the 2001 SEC Championship game, Tennessee's proudest son Peyton Manning led the Indianapolis Colts into a Monday night battle against the Miami Dolphins. With the help of three interceptions from the former collegiate standout, the Colts were routed 41-6, falling to 4-8 overall. A few months later, the Tennessee women's basketball team, winners of three straight championships from 1996-98, were knocked off in the final four by bitter rivals UConn. Not the happiest of times all around for the Volunteers.

¹² The 2001 Miami roster would eventually produce a record 38 NFL draft picks. Their status as one of the greatest college football teams of all time is unquestioned.

21. The Present vs. The Future

UNLV vs Georgetown, 1984

When the Runnin' Rebels travelled to the nation's capital to take on the Hoyas on December 8, 1984, their team was in its infancy, a few years still to run before they would take the college basketball world by storm. The other was at the peak of its powers, enjoying a stretch of dominance they have yet to taste again.

Ranked as the preseason number 1, there was no denying that Georgetown were overwhelming favorites to cut down the nets in March. Led by generational talent Patrick Ewing, a vast presence over the entire college basketball landscape, the Hoyas were determined to reach their third final four in four seasons. To this point, the big man's collegiate career had been nothing short of majestic. As a freshman, the dominant Ewing had led his team to the brink of a national championship. Leading North Carolina by a single point late, the Hoyas were thwarted when fellow freshman Michael Jordan rose high to hit a jumper from the left wing with 18 seconds to play. Georgetown had a chance to respond, but guard Freddie Brown inexplicably threw the ball directly to Carolina forward James Worthy in the last action of the game. After an early exit from the NCAA tournament in his junior year, Ewing delivered a championship as a junior, leading his team as the Most Outstanding Player to a 1984 NCAA championship game victory over future hall-of-fame center Hakeem Olajuwon and the Houston Cougars¹³. Nothing short of back-to-back championships would suffice as a send off the program's greatest ever player.

On this night, the nation's best team reminded an up-and-coming UNLV that there was still work to be done. Everton and QPR may have had trouble finding the net a few hours before, but Georgetown had no trouble ticking over the scoreboard. Facing their first ranked opponent of the season, the Hoyas ran the Runnin' Rebels out of the building 82-46. In the rout, Georgetown forced 32 UNLV turnovers, holding their opponents to thirty percent from the floor. Ewing paced the team with a 16 point, 13 rebound double-double while starters Michael Jackson and Reggie Williams added 14. Ever the perfectionist, coach John Thompson was left wondering why an eleven point halftime lead hadn't been larger. For a Georgetown that went to 5-0, it was a small step on the path they planned would lead to a national title. For UNLV, it was a measuring stick they'd fallen well short off.

The day before preparing to pummel UNLV, Georgetown would have paid little attention to an unranked Villanova team moving to 4-0 with a win over lowly Monmouth. A few months later, they would have their attention. Georgetown motored through the regular season, their only two blemishes back-to-back January losses to St. John's and Syracuse. A Big East championship followed, the Hoyas getting revenge against the two teams that beat them at Madison Square Garden. Locked in as a number one seed, the favorites advanced to the Final Four in Kentucky with little concern, where they would face St. John's for the fourth time in the season. Led by senior guard Chris Mullin, who had shared the Big East player of the year award with Ewing for

¹³ Ewing won this round, but Olajuwon would get his revenge when his Houston Rockets, under coach Tomjavovich, beat Ewing and the New York Knicks in seven games in the 1994 NBA finals.

the second straight season, and ranked two in the country, many felt the Redmen might be the team to ruin a Georgetown repeat. Instead, the Hoyas won by 18, advancing with ease to face another Big East team, albeit this time an unexpected foe. After sneaking into the tournament as an 8 seed¹⁴, Villanova knocked off their region's number 1 Michigan in the second round enroute to an unlikely Final Four appearance, where they beat Memphis State to arrive in the title game. Only 19-10 on the regular season, Villanova came in as a heavy, nine point underdog, although they had pushed Georgetown in a two point overtime loss during the regular season. The scene was set for a coronation, but the party was spoiled. Against all odds, the Wildcats pulled off the upset by a basket, shooting a scorching 78% (22 for 28) from the field in a 66-64 victory. With one of the unlikeliest upsets of all time, Villanova became the lowest seed to ever win the NCAA tournament. The storybook ending ruined, Ewing and Georgetown were left to lament what should have been.

After the upset, Villanova coach Rollie Massimino was the toast of Philadelphia. He would stay in the city of brotherly love until 1992, when he left to try his luck in Las Vegas for two seasons as the coach of UNLV. But in 1984-85, Jerry Tarkanian, the man Massimino would replace, was only getting started with his roll of the dice. Despite the annihilation suffered at the hands of Georgetown, Tarkanian led the Runnin' Rebels to their second consecutive sweet 16, an impressive accomplishment for a program that missed the tournament from 1978 – 1982. This progress lay the foundation towards a fine run of form for a UNLV team that would become the focus of the college basketball spotlight in the not-so-distant future.

¹⁴ The 1985 NCAA tournament was the first to sport a 64-team field, up from 53 the previous season. Had the entry list not been expanded, who knows if Villanova would have received an at-large bid.

22. Taming the Tiger

Northwestern Mutual World Challenge Final Round, 2013

While gladiators brutalized each other in the city of San Francisco, six hours down the coast the world's top 20 professional golfers enjoyed a more gentlemanly pursuit on the outskirts of LA. An event hosted by Tiger Woods, the Northwestern Mutual World Challenge¹⁵ was a fine way for the most accomplished links-men to end the season. Organized by Woods beginning in the year 2000 for the benefit of his foundation, the unofficial event offered players one more opportunity at top level competition without the pressure of FedEx Cup points or official prize money. Having already won his own tournament five times, not to mention the 14 majors, Tiger was out for a bit of fun on an early December day in 2013. He might have felt differently had he known what was coming.

After 72 holes of the 2013 edition, host Woods and Zach Johnson were tied for the lead, each man shooting an impressive thirteen strokes under par. A sudden death playoff would be required. The men headed for the par 4 18th, where a Woods bogey extended the invitation for Johnson to win the tournament. He accepted, converting his par for the victory. As he walked off the final green a runner up, none would have dreamt this was the closest the world's greatest golfer would come to the winner's circle for nearly five years. Although named the PGA Tour Player of the year in 2013, Woods struggled early in 2014 as injuries set in. After being plagued for the better part of two years, back trouble would result in Woods having season ending surgery in 2015, subsequently missing every major in the 2016 calendar year. Tiger returned for his own event in December of 2016, but soon realized more treatment was needed. Still not right, Woods underwent yet another surgery in April of 2017, missing every major for the second consecutive year. Finally, in 2018, the comeback began. After continual progress, on September 23, 2018 Woods triumphed in the Tour Championship in Atlanta, Georgia, his 80th PGA tour win and first since the Bridgestone Invitational in August of 2013. His next win would come in the same states, but certainly not at same stakes. With a thirteen under par performance, the same score he managed at his World Challenge in 2013, Tiger returned to the top of the mountain at Augusta, winning his 5th green jacket and 15th major championship. An extraordinary comeback story, his 2019 Masters victory is considered one of the most remarkable feats in the history of sports.

While Zach's Johnson will not be comparing resumes with Tiger Woods any time soon, his trophy cabinet is far from bare. Considering he only has seven professional wins, Johnson's return of two major championships is impressive. His first came at the 2007 Masters, Woods for the first but not the last time playing the role off runner-up. The second came at the 2015 Open Championship, the only time Johnson has won since his World Challenge triumph in 2013. Remembering his time against Tiger, Johnson outlasted both Louis Oosthuizen and Marc Leishman in a four-hole playoff at St. Andrew's, capping a career any golfer would be proud of.

¹⁵ In it's twenty years, Wood's event has not been short on suitors for its naming rights. Different sponsors include Williams, Target, Countrywide, Chevron, and Bank of America. Since 2014, the competition has been known as the Hero World Challenge.

23. Searching for 23

Golden State Warriors vs. Indiana Pacers, 2015

By the time the Golden State Warriors traveled to Indiana for an early December matchup, they had already obliterated the record for the best start to an NBA season. Winners of their first twenty-two, the defending champions had more than one reason to have the number 23 on their mind when they faced the Pacers. With the Warriors laying waste to all in their path over the season's first two months, the talk of the basketball world was whether this might be team to break the regular season standard for excellence of 72-10 set by Michael Jordan and the 1995-96 Chicago Bulls.

Judging from this night, you wouldn't bet against them. After opening with 44 in the first quarter, Golden State already had Indiana looking ahead on the schedule. The Warriors continued to pour in a casual 111 points after three quarters, building a 28-point lead that made that final period academic. Armed with an arsenal of stars who could take over a game, tonight it was Klay Thompson's turn to carry the load. The all-star from Washington State electrified the arena, draining ten three pointers as part of a 39-point performance. His splash brother Stephen Curry had a relatively quiet evening, contributing ten assists and only 29 points. Paul George added 33 as the leading scorer from the losing team.

At 12-8, the Pacers were on the march to mediocrity. They finished a respectable 45-37, earning a playoff berth as the seven seed in the eastern conference. After stealing game one on the road, they pushed the second seeded Toronto Raptors to seven games, their season ending in a tightly contested 89-84 decider. This was the end of the line for the Pacers, but the story for their December 8th opponents would have far more twists and turns.

Four nights after beating Indiana, the Warriors dropped their first game of the season to the veteran streak-stoppers Milwaukee Bucks, ending the dream of an undefeated season. It was not something they would make a habit of. Golden State quickly got back to their winning ways, thrilling every time they stepped on the floor. On February 27th, a dramatic comeback over the Oklahoma City Thunder was completed in overtime with Curry bombing away from every inch of the front court in a virtuoso 46-point performance. The win, which brought the Warriors record to 53-5, was only an appetizer to the drama that would unfold between the two teams. The splash brothers and co. were approaching history, but some inevitable fatigue set in. After the Warriors dropped two of three to begin April, they would be forced to win their final four if they wanted to eclipse Jordan and the Bulls. That is exactly what transpired. On April 13th, the Golden State Warriors finished the season with a 125-104 win over the Memphis Grizzlies, setting a new mark for the best NBA regular season record at 73-9¹⁶.

It don't mean a thing if you ain't got that ring. With seventy-three wins under their belt, the Warriors knew they'd have to back up their regular season dominance with an NBA title if they

¹⁶ Although the Warriors were bidding for history, most NBA fans didn't see it. Instead, the majority tuned in to see Kobe Bryant's final NBA game with the Lakers hosting the Utah Jazz at the Staples Center. They wouldn't be disappointed. Rolling back the years, Kobe dropped 60 on the Jazz and led an inspiring fourth quarter comeback, leaving the game in a style worth of the Black Mamba.

wanted to be considered as the greatest team of all time. After four games of the Western Conference Finals, that status was in serious jeopardy. Down three games to one to Kevin Durant, Russell Westbrook, and the Oklahoma City Thunder, Golden State were on the brink. They held serve in game 5, but down by eight points in the fourth quarter of a road, elimination game 6 things were looking dire. The champions responded. Led by a playoff record eleven three pointers from Klay Thompson, the Warriors overcame the deficit and saved their magical season. Two nights later Golden State finished off the Thunder in game 7 and were back in the NBA finals.

Having survived the Thunder, many believed the Warriors had circumvented their greatest obstacle. As the clock wound down on a game 4 victory that would give them a 3-1 series lead in the NBA finals over LeBron James and the Cavaliers, Golden State could taste immortality. But suddenly, momentum shifted. In a fourth quarter fracas, Draymond Green, the soul of the Warriors team, lashed out at James, earning himself an ejection and subsequent suspension for game 5, altering the narrative of the series. Behind forty-point performances from James and Kyrie Irving, an NBA Finals first for a pair of teammates, the Cavs advantage of the undermanned Warriors in game 5. With a renewed sense of belief, the Cleveland crowd inspired them to victory in game 6. Suddenly, a championship that had seemed like a certainty for the Warriors would come down to a single game. And what a game it would be. A cagey affair from the opening tip, the teams stayed close with the Warriors edging to a seven point half time lead on the strength of several Green three-pointers, the forward doing his best to atone for his game 4 gaff. But Cleveland, desperate for their first professional sports championship in fifty-two years, hung tough, eventually knotting the game at 89 with 4:39 to play. Incredibly, despite the wealth of shooting ability and offensive talent on the floor, it would stay that way until Kyrie Irving gave Cleveland the lead for good with a cold-blooded three-pointer at the 53 second mark. The same Warriors team who had lit up gyms around the country would finish the final four minutes and thirty-nine seconds of their season without scoring, sparking wild celebrations from the Cavaliers players on court and their fans watching back home, the majority of them witnessing a championship for the first time. Meanwhile, the Warriors were left hollow – their record would always be remembered, but true greatness had slipped through their fingers.

24. A Morbid Monday Night

New England Patriots vs. Miami Dolphins, 1980

On a balmy Monday night in south Florida in early December, the Patriots and Dolphins prepared for a nationally televised showdown with major playoff implications. By the time the game was poised for overtime, nobody cared.

At 8-5, the Patriots entered a week 15 clash against their divisional rivals with a postseason berth firmly in sight. The Dolphins were on the outside looking in at 6-7 and knew wins in their last three were imperative to have any hope of playing beyond the regular season. The game was a grind, every yard difficult to come by. Only the visitors managed to get on the board in the first half, converting two John Smith field goals to take a six point lead at the break. Miami returned the favor in the third quarter, kicking two of their own to know the score at six a piece. Finally, things opened up in the 4th. New England were liking their chances when Russ Francis hauled in from 38 yards for the game's first touchdown, but the Dolphins responded immediately, David Woodley and Nat Moore hooking up from eight yards out to once again even things at thirteen. With time still remaining in regulation, the Patriots had a final opportunity to win the game. Managing the clock with expertise, quarterback Matt Cavanaugh drove New England to the Miami 18-yard-line, allowing time to expire to the final seconds. With a successful field goal on the final play of the game, the Patriots would escape the Orange Bowl with a key victory, their playoff aspirations intact. That's when everything changed.

As Smith jogged onto the field for the final try, ex-Giant halfback and now commentator Frank Gifford suddenly steered the conversation away from football. "Howard," he implored his booth partner, Howard Cosell, "you have got to say what we know in the booth." With hesitance, Cosell agreed and reveled devastating news: musician John Lennon, world renowned as the leader of the Beatles, had been shot and killed outside his New York City department, an event Cosell aptly described as "an unspeakable tragedy". Lennon was attacked and shot four times in the back outside his 72nd Street apartment building in Manhattan, the Dakota, after returning from a recording studio with his wife Yoko Ono at approximately 10:50pm. Incredibly, in a moment immortalized by photographer Paul Goresh, Lennon had signed an autograph for his assailant just five hours before at the same location. The murderer, who had been waiting for Lennon since morning, reported that the musician treated him with dignity and respect. While resuscitation attempts were commenced and subsequently ended without success at Roosevelt Hospital, Ono requested that the death of her husband not be reported to the media before she had the opportunity to inform their five-year-old son Sean. In another astounding coincidence, ABC news producer was waiting for treatment in the same emergency room Lennon was rushed into – he quickly relayed the information to his station, the same that happened to be concurrently broadcasting Monday Night Football. Cosell initially balked at being the one to make the announcement but eventually accepted it as his duty, informing millions for the first time in iconic fashion that the beloved Beatle had lost his life.

Without cell phones or social media, the Dolphins, Patriots, and fans in attendance were none the wiser. Their discovery would be further delayed when Smith's 35-yard attempt was blocked, sending the game to overtime. In another fascinating subplot, Smith, like Lennon of

course, hailed from England, spending his youth in Oxfordshire before first traveling to the United States at the age of 23. Like most British teenagers in the 1960s, he grew up idolizing the Beatles. In this game, he would not get another chance – Miami converted a 23-yard kick on the first possession of overtime, sending both teams back to a locker room where tragic news await.

Although the Patriots rallied to win their final two, a 10-6 record would not be sufficient for a postseason berth. They fell a game short of both the Houston Oilers and Oakland Raiders, then looked on with envy as the Silver and Black ripped through the playoff to become the first team to win a Super Bowl from a wild card position that could have belonged to New England. The Patriots would not be the only ones to look back on December 8, 1980 as a day when much was lost.

25. The Hype Man

Bob Arum's Birthday, 1931

For exactly twelve years, from June 22 1937 – 1949, Joe Louis was the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world. One of the greatest boxers of all time, the Brown Bomber from Alabama began his professional career at the age of seventeen in 1931. His foray into the ring would not be the only event that year to change the course of boxing history forever.

Bob Arum was born in Brooklyn on December 8, 1931. Spawning from an Orthodox Jewish family, it was highly likely that he would lack the height, reach, and dexterity required to stand toe to toe with heavyweights like Louis in the ring. Nevertheless, Arum would prove to pack quite a punch. For the first thirty-plus years of his life, boxing was far from Arum's mind. Instead, he focused on the law, completing his bachelor's degree at NYU before procuring his JD from Harvard Law School. Upon graduating, he took a job during the Kennedy administration in the United States Department of Justice, where he was employed when the president was assassinated in 1963. After some time with a Wall Street law firm, Arum began to worry that prosecution simply wasn't for him. Fortunately, the universe had something else in store.

While Arum had made various connections with prominent figures in the boxing world and elsewhere from his legal days, it's former NFL player Jim Brown who is credited with convincing him to become a promoter and introducing him to Muhammed Ali, who took Arum under his wing. From here Arum took off, promoting both undercard and super-fights with vigor for over fifty years. Of his many achievements in growing the sport, Arum is perhaps best known for his commitment to the city of Las Vegas, which through persistent scheduling and promotion he has transformed into the fighting capital of the world. A 40-year feud with fellow promoter Don King is also of note, although the two have successfully promoted many fights together despite their many dramatized spats over the years.

Today, at the age of 90, Brooklyn Bob is still going strong. Inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1999, Arum has more than played his role in transforming boxing from the days of Joe Louis into the sport it is today.

26. The Bomb Squad

Milwaukee Bucks vs. New York Knicks, 1988

In the late 1980s, making headway in the NBA's Eastern conference was a daunting task. The Bad Boy Detroit Pistons were established as a dominant force, Larry Bird and Kevin McHale still loomed in Boston, and a young superstar named Michael Jordan was putting Chicago basketball on the map. Having barely scraped into the final playoff position at the end of the 1987-88 season, second year coach Rick Pitino decided it was time for the New York Knicks to shake things up.

Young and energetic, Pitino implored his team to play with maximum energy, pushing the pace and applying full court pressure on defense whenever possible. In the hopes of achieving the ever-present goal of scoring more points than the opposition, Pitino came up with a strategy that is commonplace today but was unheard of at the time: take as many shots as possible worth three points instead of two. Although 4th year big man Patrick Ewing was the lynchpin of the franchise, it was the perimeter players who dazzled crowds at Madison Square Garden throughout the 1988-89 season. Given free reign by their coach to fire at will, "The Bomb Squad" of Trent Tucker, Mark Jackson, Johnny Newman, Rod Strickland, and Gerald Wilkins bombarded opponents with a barrage of three pointers on a nightly basis long before it was cool to do so. On December 8, 1988, they made NBA history. With three triples a piece from Newman, Jackson, and Tucker and another two from Strickland, the Knicks set an NBA record with eleven converted three pointers¹⁷ enroute to a 113-109 victory over the Milwaukee Bucks. Wilkins, who missed his only three point attempt, was the only member of the squad not to get in on the party. By season's end, in addition to their single game record, the Knicks had set new marks with 386 three pointers made and 1,147 three pointers attempted, shattering the previous highs of 271 and 705 respectively (both set by the Celtics the previous season). By today's standards, these numbers are laughable. On November 29, 2020, the Milwaukee Bucks set the current NBA record with 29 made three pointers in a game, almost tripling the record that was set against them in 1988. The Houston Rockets own the current NBA record with 1,323 made three pointers in the 2018-19 season, converting 176 more baskets from beyond the arc than the Bomb Squad of 88-89 attempted throughout the season. Likely the best the long range sniper of all time, Stephen Curry holds the NBA record with 402 made three pointers in a single season, besting the entire bomb squad by 16 baskets during the 2015-16 campaign.

The Knicks plan of attack was far from smoke and mirrors; led by the long ball, New York entered the 1989 playoffs with a 52-30 record and the second seed in the Eastern conference. Philadelphia was summarily dispatched in a three game sweep and the Knicks were swishing, but, not for the last time, they crossed paths with the Chicago Bulls and soon they were fishing. Heading to Chicago down three games to two, The Bomb Squad fell just short in a wild contest with more twists and turns in the final seconds than an Agatha Christie novel. Down by four with nine seconds to play the season was on life support, but Tucker curled around the top of the key, snagged a soft toss from Ewing and fired in stride, nailing the three and getting fouled

¹⁷ The same number hit by Thompson alone in the Warriors game 6 2016 WCF finals comeback against the Thunder.

in the process. After he hit the free throw, the game was tied at 111 and Chicago Stadium was silent. With six to go, the ball was inbounded to Jordan who was (maybe?) fouled as he sliced through the lane and lofted a floater. Of course, the North Carolina man made no mistake from the line. Down by two without a timeout and only four seconds to play, the Knicks somehow engineered a wide open look from three from the left wing from Johnny Newman to send the series back to the Garden for a deciding game. But the Knicks second leading three point shooter could not find the mark, and The Bomb Squad going home.

Despite the playoff upset, there was still great cause for optimism in the new direction of the franchise. With Ewing dominating the middle and the three point strategy tried and tested, the Knicks would have been gearing up for more of the same the following year, until Pitino unexpectedly resigned on May 30, 1989, eleven days after the final loss to Chicago. Rod Strickland moved on as well, and it seemed The Bomb Squad would be a one hit wonder. Indeed, the Knicks regressed to 236 made three pointers in the 1989-90 season, only the sixth highest total in the league. The Knicks would fully transition to a rough and rugged physical style of play in the 1990's (while still heavily incorporating the three pointer) but not before flashing a little Bomb Squad magic one last time. With the Knicks closing in on a famous victory in a deciding fifth game at Boston Garden in the first round of the 1990 playoffs, the ball squirted free in the New York front court. Ewing retrieved the loose ball in the left corner and, with the shot clock expiring, launched a prayer from one leg before falling out of bounds. The ball scraped the many Celtics championship banners before swishing through the net, a dagger to seal the game and in many ways close the book on the Larry Bird era in Boston. The shot completed an improbable 2-0 series comeback and set the foundation for the Knicks as a perennial Eastern conference contender in the decade that lay ahead.

27. It's The Goalie!

Boston Bruins vs. Philadelphia Flyers, 1987

With the result of a midweek clash between the Boston Bruins and Philadelphia Flyers all but decided, fans filed out of The Spectrum, eager to beat the rush hour traffic. How they wished they would have stayed until the end. Trailing 2-1 after the second intermission, the Flyers dominated the final period of play. Two Peter Zezel goals gave them the lead for good, and when Brian Propp found the net with 2:27 remaining to make the score 4-2, the fat lady reached for the microphone. In desperation mode, Boston replied as expected by pulling their goaltender, paving the way for NHL history. With the net agape, Flyers goaltender Ron Hextall lofted the puck down the ice – when it slid just inside the right post with 1:12 remaining, he became the first goaltender to score a legitimate goal¹⁸ in an NHL game. The goal sparked wild celebrations amongst Flyers players and fans alike, its unlikely nature coming as a pleasant surprise to all involved except for the man of the hour. Never known as one to be reserved, Hextall assured the post-game media that he had always planned to be the first goaltender to score, informing them “I don’t mean to sound cocky, but I knew it was just a matter of time before I flipped one in.”

At the time of his first goal, Hextall, only in his second NHL season, was at the peak of his powers. Coming from the AHL as an unheralded rookie, Hextall took the league by storm in the 1986-97 season, winning the Vezina Trophy as the most outstanding goaltender in the regular season. His stellar play continued throughout the postseason: thanks in no small part to Hextall’s heroics, the Flyers advanced to the Stanley Cup Finals, defeating the New York Rangers, New York Islanders, and Montreal Canadiens enroute. Despite falling to the powerhouse Edmonton 3-1 in a deciding seventh game, Hextall was still awarded the Conn Smythe trophy as the most valuable player for his team throughout the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Hextall continued his fine play between the posts in his second season. In addition to his scoring prowess and shot stopping ability, Hextall earned 104 penalty minutes in both of his first two seasons, marking the only times a goaltender had broken the Chamberlain line. He promptly broke his own record the following season, sending his teammates to the box for 113 minutes. While Hextall thrived, the Flyers stumbled, partly due to the absence of their star goaltender to begin the season. Prince of Wales Conference regular season champions the year before, the Flyers entered this postseason tied with two other clubs for the fourth most points and were ousted by the Washington Capitals in the first round. With the embarrassment of conceding to a goaltender long behind them, it was the Boston Bruins who would usurp Philadelphia as conference champions – they proved no match for the same Edmonton Oilers in the Finals, the Canadian team securing their second consecutive cup with a four- game sweep.

¹⁸ On November 28, 1979, Islanders goaltender Billy Smith became the first at his position to be credited with scoring a goal. With the opposition goalie pulled, Smith deflected a blue line drive from an attacker off an outstretched pad. The puck rebounded off the back boards to a deep lying opponent who recycled the puck back towards the blue line, only to see it glide the length of the ice and into his team’s abandoned net for an own goal. As the last Islanders player to make contact, Smith was credited with the score.

Hextall was not able to sustain the dizzying heights of his early seasons for long, but he enjoyed a fruitful career spanning 13 NHL seasons, all but two spent in Philadelphia. His aggressive style of play and willingness to come off his goal line to play the puck revolutionized the goaltender position and paved the way for future greats such as Martin Brodeur to model their game around puck handling and mobility. To this day, Hextall remains a fan favorite and is revered around Philadelphia as a great goal stopper and, of course, a great goal scorer.

28. Shuffling to the Super Bowl

Indianapolis Colts vs. Chicago Bears, 1985.

With the Super Bowl favorite Chicago Bears having lost their undefeated season in week 13, nobody would have envied the Indianapolis Colts role as week 14 visitors to Soldier Field. Six days before, all eyes were on Monday Night Football when Chicago flew south to the Orange Bowl, carrying a 12-0 record with them. To the surprise of many, the Bears airtight defense, which had only allowed a total of three points in their previous three games, were lit up by third year quarterback Dan Marino and the Miami Dolphins as they ran away with a 38-24 victory. The Miami victory not only ensured that their 1972 compatriots would remain as the only undefeated team in NFL history but perhaps more significantly moved the Dolphins to 10-3, serving notice to Chicago to what might await them in a potential Super Bowl matchup. The proud Bears defense flew home with their tails between their legs¹⁹, already salivating for their next opportunity to hit someone.

Coming in a 3-10, the Colts could very well have been in line for a hiding when they faced the Bears on December 8th, but to the visitors credit they kept the contest competitive. With the Bears defense back to themselves and the Colts unit matching them stride for stride, neither team found the endzone in the first half. Chicago eventually broke a 3-3 tie with a 16 yard touchdown run from Walter Payton and would have felt very comfortable when Calvin Thomas found the end zone to make it 17-3 in the fourth quarter. A consolation touchdown meant a final score of 17-10 that many Indianapolis fans wouldn't have minded – the Colts had easily covered the 19.5 point spread.

With the Monday night blip in the rearview mirror, the Bears defense readied themselves for a dominant playoff run. With homefield advantage throughout the playoffs, Chicago delivered consecutive shutouts against the Giants (21-0) and the Rams (24-0) to earn their place as the NFC representative in Super Bowl XX. As they celebrated in the locker room, many Bears defenders eagerly watched the AFC Championship game in Miami unfold, keen to pick up any edge on the Dolphins team that had bamboozled them a month prior. They needn't have worried. In a surprise result, the wild card New England Patriots pull off an upset, earning their first appearance in Super Bowl history. There would not be a second round of the Monday Night mayhem.

Perhaps breathing a small sigh of relief, the Bears historic defense began preparations not for Dan Marino and the Dolphins but instead Tony Eason and the Patriots. Immediately, the Chicago offense put their defense to the test by allowing the Patriots to recover a Walter Payton fumble deep in Chicago territory. The Bears held forcing three straight incompletions, but New England led 3-0 and might have been seeing a path to victory. If only the game had ended there. Playing with ferocity on both sides of the ball, the Bears rolled off the next 44

¹⁹ It seems the Bears got over the loss rather quickly. Embarrassment on national television did not stop the Chicago players from recording their Super Bowl Shuffle hit the following day, an anthem that would become synonymous with their success in the 1985 season. A risky move, but it paid off.

points with the Patriots struggling to gain a yard²⁰. Early in the fourth quarter, Irving Fryar went in for a meaningless New England touchdown, the only score the Bears conceded the entire postseason. Determined to have the final word deserved, Chicago lineman Henry Waechter sacked replacement quarterback Steve Grogan in his own endzone for the final two points of the game, the perfect stamp on a 46-10 rout. Fittingly, Bears defensive end Richard Dent was named the game's MVP after recording 1.5 sacks and two forced fumbles. Behind their dominant defense, the Bears had shuffled to Super Bowl glory, but one can't help but wonder what might have happened if they faced Marino one more time.

²⁰ Quite literally in fact. Patriots quarterback Tony Eason was replaced in the second quarter after going 0 for 6, of course gaining 0 yards. Eason did manage to move the ball 28 yards in the wrong direction, getting sacked three times and losing a fumble.

29. Crazy Eights

Real Madrid v. Malmo FF, 2015

The Golden State Warriors were not the only ones rippling the net on December 8, 2015. Heading into the final matchday in Group A of the 2015-16 Champions league group stage, Real Madrid had long secured passage to the knockout rounds. But that's never stopped the Galácticos from putting on a show. On the eight day of the month, the Spanish side hit eight against their weary Swedish opponents, delighting the home fans at the Santiago Bernabéu. Perhaps even more rare than an eight goal outburst, Madrid's performance produced a seldom seen double hatrick, with Karim Benzema (3) and Cristiano Ronaldo (4) accounting for seven of the goals. Midfielder Mateo Kovacic accounted for the last, the only goal he would score in any competition that season. Although qualification was clear, the game was not without meaning. Madrid began the evening three points clear of Paris St-Germain, meaning they would need at least a point to secure top spot in the group and a more favorable draw in the knockout rounds. They just about managed. As for Malmo, a point for them would have meant breaking their deadlock with Shakhtar Donetsk, vaulting them to a third-place finish and the knockout stages of Europa League competition. Clearly, their efforts would be better applied on the domestic front.

For Los Blancos, the party was just beginning. After toiling in Europe's premier club competition for a decade, Madrid finally secured their 10th European Cup by beating local rivals Atletico in dramatic fashion in the 2014 final. With seconds remaining in injury time, Sergio Ramos saved la decima, rising highest to nod in an out swinging corner and send the game to extra time. With Atletico spirits and resistance broken, the floodgates opened as Real scored three in extra time for an emphatic victory. Two years later and 5 months on from Real's thrashing of Malmo, the intercity rivals prepared to contest the final once again. This time, it was Atletico's turn to find a late equalizer when Yannick Carrasco's strike eleven minutes from time cancelled out a Ramos opener, the defender's name once again on the score sheet on the big occasion. With the identical 1-1 score line of 2014, the match headed to extra time. Atletico managed to hold out for penalties, but just like before luck deserted them in the key moments. With typical theatrical flair, Cristiano Ronaldo scored the clinching spot kick and Real won the European Cup at the expense of their rivals for the second time in three seasons. They would kick on to win the next two competitions, first beating Juventus and then Liverpool in the final for a hatrick of consecutive Champions League triumphs.

Real Madrid's remarkable run of four European triumphs in five seasons underscored a transition of footballing power between England and the continent from the first decade of the millennium to the second. From 2005 to 2012, all but one of the eight Champions League finals contained at least one English representative; in the five that came after, no Premier League team made an appearance. While the presence of four English clubs in the knockout stages of Europe's elite club competition was a given in the mid-2000s, success was not as regular in the years that followed. With Atletico and Real barreling towards the final in 2016, Manchester City would be the only Premier League club to make the quarter final round. Although this iteration of the Champions League was destined for an all-Spanish affair, there would be English

representation at the secondary level. Eliminating bitter rivals Manchester United along the way²¹, Liverpool made a dramatic run to the Europe League final, eventually falling to Sevilla, another Spanish side, three goals to one. For one of the great European football clubs, it was a step back toward the stage they knew they belonged on. While Real Madrid scored eight on the 8th of December, the Reds watched with a mixture of nostalgia and envy, wondering when such magical scenes might return to Anfield. There would be more Champions League glory to come, but for now they would have to wait, comforted by the memories of their own history on this date that had long since been etched in eternity.

²¹ On the same evening Madrid thrashed Malmo, United found themselves on the wrong end of a five-goal thriller against Wolfsburg. A late winner from Naldo meant the German side topped Group B; for the Manchester club, it would be football on Thursday nights.

30. The Miracle at Anfield

Liverpool vs. Olympiakos, 2004

Oh. Ya. Beauty. With one swing of his gifted right foot, Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard said here we come not just to the knockout stages of Champions League competition but also sporting immortality. Five months on in May of 2005, the world watched aghast as Liverpool overcame a three-nil deficit to European giants AC Milan to complete the Miracle of Istanbul. But that day would never have come if not for the Miracle at Anfield.

Liverpool FC have always been a big club, but by the 2004-05 season their days as a dominant force on the European football scene were memories of the past, figments of the present. They had not won the European Cup in over twenty years. Their last league title had been lifted in 1990. There was a treble in the 2000-2001 season, but consisting of the League, FA, and UEFA cups it was viewed as something of a junior variety. Success on the two main fronts – the Premier and Champions League – the Merseyside club wished to fight on still proved elusive. The Reds were left frustrated by final day defeat in the 2002-03 season to Chelsea at Stamford Bridge, the result meaning the latter and not the former would enjoy Champions League football the following season. With fourth place slipping away, Gerrard flew into a trademark challenge, earning a card the color of his kit on the way to his summer holidays. Without Champions League football to focus on, Liverpool managed to find their way to fourth the following season, albeit thirty points off the pace set by Invincibles Arsenal at the top of the table.

With new manager Rafael Benitez at the wheel and back amongst Europe's elite, Liverpool began the 2004-05 season full of optimism. But as summer turned to fall, there was not much to suggest this would become a special season at Anfield. The Reds alternated wins and losses in the league through the middle of October, quickly accepting their top target as fourth rather than first. Their bid for a top two spot in Group A was unfolding with similar inconsistency. They opened with a 2-0 win vs. last year's beaten finalists Monaco, but a loss to Olympiakos and goalless draw with Deportivo meant only a return of one point from their next two. A win in the return fixture at Deportivo boosted their chances, but a loss to Monaco in their penultimate match put the scousers firmly behind the 8-ball. To qualify for the knockout stages of the Champions League, Liverpool would have to beat Olympiakos 1-0 or by two clear goals in the final group A fixture. The match would take place at Anfield on December 8, 2004.

For the opening kick-off, Liverpool had their tails up. After former captain Sammy Hyypia went close with a header, a deft flick from Gerrard seemed destined for the side netting, only to strike the post. Still, the Reds felt confident the goal they needed would come. Then things took a turn for the worse. After a mazy run, striker Rivaldo brought down just outside the Liverpool penalty area, the ball perfectly positioned for a strike at goal. The Brazilian stepped up to take the responsibility himself and stroked the ball past a bewildered Chris Kirkland, the strike passing through a gaping hole in the wall created by Antonio Nunez inexplicably vacating his position. It was a first ever goal on English soil for the Greek side and meant Liverpool would need three. Searching for a spark, Benitez turned to Florent Sinama Pongolle at half time, hauling off Djimi Traore. The Frenchman took two minutes to deliver, equalizing the match on

47 minutes. Liverpool had life, but a resolute Olympiakos defense continued to frustrate. With 78 minutes gone and still two needed, the Spanish magician waved his wand one more time. On came Neil Mellor for Milan Baros – this time the magic took three minutes to kick in. The substitutes linked up, Pongolle twisting in a cross that Mellor eventually hooked in close range in the 81st minute. Liverpool led on the night, but as things stood it wouldn't be enough. They searched with immense desire for a goal. Carragher tried to stay cool. Mellor with a lovely, cushioned header. For Gerrard! With a stunning half volley from twenty-five yards in the 86th minute in front of the Kop End, Steven Gerrard ripped the side netting and sent Liverpool to the knockout stages of the Champions League. Anfield exploded. Gerrard, overcome with emotion, dove head first into the fans, arms pumping like a steamboat engine. Benitez clung to a pitch-side steward. The quality of the strike was matched only by the eloquent and exquisite commentary of Martin Tyler and Andy Gray, their verbiage and passion illuminating the thoughts and emotions of football fans everywhere. Liverpool were going through.

The rest, as they say, is history. Bayern Leverkusen provided little resistance in the next round. A first-leg home win proved decisive in an emotional quarterfinal with Juventus. A controversial Luis Garcia goal²² was the only tally in 180 minutes of semifinal football against Premier League champions Chelsea. Leading up to the final vs. Milan in Istanbul, it seemed that Liverpool may be a team of destiny. After forty-five minutes, destiny had no place on the football pitch. But if the Italian side were comfortable with their opponent needing three second half goals, they'd forgotten that Liverpool had been here before. This time, the Reds would not need nearly as long. In the span of six second half minutes, the deficit evaporated. Gerrard started the comeback with a majestic header, Vladimir Smicer won the lottery from long-range, and when Xabi Alonso struck from the penalty spot the match was level after 60 minutes. When divine intervention stopped Andriy Shevchenko from scoring at point blank range deep into extra time, it was becoming clear the penalty shootout was only a formality. Dudek wobbled his legs, Shevchenko was denied again, and Liverpool were European Champions for the 5th time.

With a history long and rich, Liverpool Football Club have created many a famous night at their hollowed stadium of Anfield, stories shared between loved ones and passed down generations. Few will be remembered with greater feeling than the night Steven Gerrard shook the Kop on December 8, 2004.

²² After a mad scramble in front of goal four minutes into the second leg, Garcia prodded the ball towards the Chelsea goal line. It was cleared by Chelsea defender William Gallas, but not before the linesman flagged for the goal to be given. Most television cameras indicate the ball did not fully cross the line. Others insist the energy emitting from the Kop End sucked the ball into the goal. We'll never know for sure, but what is certain is that, in the next 86 minutes, Chelsea failed to find the away goal they needed, Liverpool's resolute defending enough to see them defeat the side they would finish 37 points behind in the league.