

# JIM FINKS: BUILDER

By Don Smith

The 45-year career of Jim Finks found him at one time or another doing almost everything imaginable in professional football. While Finks was associated briefly with professional baseball, his working career centered around the National Football League, first as a player with the Pittsburgh Steelers and later as a highly-regarded executive for the Minnesota Vikings, Chicago Bears and New Orleans Saints.

During that long tenure, Finks developed the reputation of a shrewd operator who specialized in turning struggling National Football League franchises into either Super Bowl champions or consistent contenders. Equally impressive was that each of his three teams continued to thrive with players Finks had acquired long after he had departed. As one executive remarked six months after Finks left Minnesota: "He has us so well organized. We carry on as though he were still here."

Finks also gained widespread praise for his contributions on the NFL player management competition committees. When the NFL sought a new commissioner to replace Pete Rozelle in 1989, Finks was the leading candidate who just missed getting the necessary number of votes for election.

His ultimate recognition, election into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, came posthumously this year for Finks, who died of lung cancer on May 8, 1994.

## **A Steeler First**

Although Finks became a Hall of Famer because of his off-the-field activities in pro football, he was a fine player during his seven-year stint from 1949 to 1955 with the Pittsburgh Steelers. A T-formation quarterback at Tulsa, Finks was the 12th-round pick of Pittsburgh in the 1949 NFL draft. Pittsburgh was using the single-wing offense at the time so Finks played primarily as a defensive back for three seasons.

In 1952, the Steelers converted to the T-formation, the last team in the NFL to do so, and Finks became the starting quarterback. In his first full season as a regular, Finks tied Cleveland's Otto Graham for the league lead with 20 touchdown passes. He also earned a Pro Bowl invitation. In seven years, Finks completed 661 passes for 8,622 yards and 55 touchdowns.

Finks later joked that his main claim to playing fame was that he beat out Johnny Unitas for the starting quarterback job in 1956. The next year, Unitas launched his legendary career with the Baltimore Colts. However, the Steelers' founder and president, Art Rooney, insisted the "Jimmy was a great quarterback, not just a good one. But we were never big winners and he just didn't get the attention he deserved."

Finks retired as an active player after the 1955 season. He served as an assistant coach under Terry Brennan at Notre Dame in 1956 and then moved to the Calgary Stampeders of the Canadian Football League where he served first as a player, assistant coach, scout and later as general manager. Finks brought the Stampeders a Grey Cup title -- the CFL equivalent of a Super Bowl championship -- during his eight-year stay in Canada.

## **Viking Chief**

In 1964, Finks was named the general manager of the Minnesota Vikings, a team that had entered the NFL in 1961 and had won only 10 games its first three seasons. Through shrewd use of the draft and a series of beneficial trades, the Finks-led Vikings soon began to take on a new look.

Finks' building program began to pay dividends in 1968, when Minnesota won its first NFL Central division championship. That season marked the start of a dynasty that produced 11 divisional championship teams and four Super Bowl appearances in the next 14 years. In 1969, the Vikings won 12 of 14 games and claimed the NFL championship before losing to the Kansas City Chiefs 23-7 in Super Bowl IV.

The Vikings team that Finks put together was powered by a dynamic defensive front four popularly known as "The Purple People Eaters". The first member of the unit, defensive end Jim Marshall, came to the

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Vikings in a 1961 trade before Finks arrived. In 1964, the new general manager added two potential stars to the line, end Carl Eller as a first-round pick in the NFL draft and tackle Gary Larsen in a trade. He completed his fabled front four in 1967 by picking Alan Page No. 1 in the draft.

When inevitable controversies arose, Finks always had the answer. Late in 1966, quarterback Fran Tarkenton became embroiled in a feud with head coach Norm Van Brocklin. Finks solved the problem by trading the crowd-pleasing scrambler to the New York Giants for two first-round and two second-round draft picks, which he used to add more young, quality talent to the fold.

A few months later, Van Brocklin resigned and Finks immediately tapped Bud Grant, a comparative unknown, as his new field leader. Grant had been a successful coach of the Winnipeg Blue Bombers of the CFL for 10 seasons. "I saw Bud in good times and bad times in Winnipeg while I was in Calgary," Finks explained. "I know him as a man who knows how to win and how to retain his composure when he loses. And he isn't exactly obscure around here he was an outstanding college athlete at Minnesota."

That same year, Finks brought in a new quarterback, Joe Kapp, from the CFL. Kapp, a rough-and-tumble but charismatic figure, quickly became the Vikings' field leader. In the 1969 NFL championship season, he passed for a record seven touchdowns against Baltimore and was a major contributor to his team's success.

But in 1970, Kapp sat out some early games because of a salary dispute. Once again, Finks had the answer. He simply sold Kapp to New England and turned over the quarterbacking chores to Gary Cuozzo, who had come to Minnesota in a 1968 trade with New Orleans. The Vikings kept right on winning with another 12-2 season and a third straight Central division championship.

In 1972, Finks made another daring trade with the New York Giants, this time to bring back Tarkenton, the quarterback he had dismissed five years earlier. In 1973, they defeated the Dallas Cowboys for the NFC championship but lost to the Miami Dolphins 24-7 in Super Bowl VIII. It turned out to be the last game with the Vikings for Finks, who that season was named the NFL Executive of the Year.

Finks, who had been named a club vice-president in 1972 as a reward for his brilliant work, resigned in May, 1974. His departure came as an outgrowth of a dispute among the team's five principal owners over the location of a new stadium in downtown Minneapolis. Finks supported the minority conviction that the stadium should belong to the entire state rather than be just a Minneapolis-oriented operation. "They knew right where I stood," Finks said. "Our fans didn't want the stadium to go downtown."

### **On to Chicago**

For a brief period, Finks' future was uncertain and there was some concern that he might cast his lot with the new World Football League. That was a needless concern, however, for Finks' loyalty to the NFL was as always, throughout his career, beyond question. He soon was named a special consultant to the NFL Management Council in its dealing with the NFL Players Association.

After the dispute was over, Finks reflected: "It was a real growth experience. one of pro football's problems is that it has 1,400 potential salesmen in our players who haven't been salesmen. That is one of the things we have to recognize and remedy."

During the spring and summer of 1974, Finks pondered whether he should get involved with potential ownership groups in Seattle or Tampa, both of which were scheduled to get new NFL franchises in 1976. But just before the start of the 1974 season, Finks abandoned those thoughts to join one of the NFL's oldest franchises, the Chicago Bears, as general manager and executive vice-president.

Finks spent the remainder of the 1974 season studying the Bears player talent as well as opposition players from all around the NFL. The next year, he began employing the same formula he used so well in Minnesota to improve the Bears' talent pool. There was no quick fix to Finks' methods, however. He preferred to build for the long haul, capitalizing on opportunities as they arose. As one Bears' staffer noted: "Jim Finks does not build teams. He builds organizations. Then the good teams follow naturally."

Perhaps no pro football executive knew the abilities of as many NFL players so completely as Finks did. He used this knowledge to bring Alan Page to the Bears in 1978. When Finks noticed Page's name on the waiver list, he promptly claimed the all-pro defensive tackle. Finks was aware of Page's problems

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with Coach Grant and his recent loss of weight. But he also knew he was an experienced winner. Page played as a regular in Chicago for the next four years.

The Bears under Finks slowly but surely improved. By 1977, they reached the playoffs for the first time since 1963. They were a playoff team again in 1979 with a 10-6 record, best-ever for the Finks-led Bears. But Finks' tenure in Chicago ended suddenly in 1982 when he resigned because George Halas Sr. did not consult him in the hiring of Mike Ditka as head coach.

Just as he had done in Minnesota, Finks left behind one of the most dominant NFL teams of the 1980s. Nineteen of the 22 players who started in Chicago's 46-10 win over New England in Super Bowl XX were drafted during the Finks regime. That 1985 team went 15-1 in regular season and shut out both the New York Giants and Los Angeles Rams in playoff games leading to the Super Bowl.

Bears President Mike McCaskey lauded Finks as he departed: "Jim moved us from a family-run business to one that is still a family business but includes a lot more elements of professional management."

After leaving the Bears, Finks joined the Chicago Cubs as president and chief executive officer in September 1983. This was not Finks' first journey into baseball for he played minor league baseball in 1949 and 1950 just as he was beginning his pro football career with Pittsburgh. He remained through the 1984 season when the Cubs captured their first title in modern times by winning the National League East Division championship. He resigned from the Cubs when that team and then baseball commissioner Peter Ueberroth undercut his promise to Chicago fans that Wrigley Field would not need lights.

For a while, Finks worked with the Chicago public relations firm of Hill and Knowlton as a part-time consultant. But he grew restless being away from the professional sports scene and the NFL in particular and that uneasiness led him to Owner Tom Benson and his Saints.

### **Saints: Preserve Us!**

A native of St. Louis, Missouri, where he was born on August 31, 1927, Finks on January 14, 1986, took charge of a New Orleans team that never had experienced a winning season in its 19-year history. His first move was to hire a new coach, Jim Mora who, like the coaches Finks hired in Minnesota and Chicago, had led teams in a different league and had not developed high public profiles. Some questioned whether Finks sought coaches who would not overshadow him but the bottom line was that his coaches almost always won.

Off the field, Finks distanced his new organization as far as possible from the vestiges of the losing past. The Saints of 1986 wore new uniforms with patches of the state of Louisiana on their hips and sleeves. Always acutely aware of the needs and interests of fans, he moved the team training camp closer to New Orleans and invited fans to come out for practice any time. He conducted a good-will tour of players, coaches and front-office personnel around a three-state area to spread the story of the new Saints.

Happily, success came more quickly for Finks in New Orleans than it had in either Minnesota and Chicago. In just his second season, the Saints won 12 of 15 games for their first winning season ever. Finks was named NFL Executive of the Year for a second time.

In the next five seasons from 1988 to 1992, the Saints went over .500 four times and settled for an 8-8 year in 1990. In their last six seasons under Finks, the Saints won 62 and lost 33, a .653 winning pace. Six players drafted by Finks -- linebackers Sam Mills, Vaughan Johnson and Pat Swilling, running backs Rueben Mayes and Dalton Hilliard and special teams player Bennie Thompson -- made 16 Pro Bowl appearances during that period.

When long-time Commissioner Pete Rozelle retired in 1989, Finks was the odds-on choice to replace him. He was unanimously endorsed by the first committee of owners but eventually another ownership group prevailed with their choice of Paul Tagliabue. Finks graciously accepted the defeat: "I am proud that I was voted on by 19 of the 28 NFL teams. That makes me feel good." Tagliabue, in turn, named Finks to the key position of chairman of the league's competition committee.

So for the next three seasons, Finks split his time between building the Saints and serving the league that already owed him so much. As the leader of the competition committee, he had a special interest in playing rules. He urged a sensible curbing of prolonged celebrations and made it clear he didn't like the "in the grasp" rules that protected passers when defenders first made contact. "When I see a play blown

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dead, when some of those great quarterbacks have a chance to break away and make an even more exciting play, I don't like it," he announced.

But before Finks' work both with the Saints and the competition committee could come to fruition, the dark, ominous and unrelenting cloud of cancer began to permeate the Jim Finks existence. On July 15, 1993, he stepped down as president and general manager of the Saints. Within a year, he was dead.

Meaningful eulogies poured in from the entire sports world but Ed McCaskey, chairman of the board of the Chicago Bears, may have summed it up best: "I know most of the NFL owners rather well. Some are fine mean, capable men, rich men and some are lucky men. But for one reason or another, they have all achieved membership in what has proven to be a very exclusive club. Jim Finks stood head and shoulders above them all -- in all areas."

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JIM FINKS QB-TB-DB  
 James Edward Finks  
 6-00 175 Tulsa Salem HS [IL]  
 b: 08/31/27, St. Louis, MO  
 d: 05/08/94, New Orleans, LA (66)  
 Selected on 12th round 1949 NFL draft  
 Pro Bowl after 1952 season

		PASSING -----							
YEAR	TEAM	LG	ATT	COM	PCT.	YARD	AvgG	TD	IN
1949	Pit	.. N	71	24	33.8	322	4.54	2	8
1950	Pit	.. N	9	5	55.5	35	3.89	0	1
1951	Pit	.. N	24	14	58.3	201	8.38	1	1
1952	Pit	.. N	336	158	47.0	2307	6.87	*20	19
1953	Pit	.. N	292	131	44.9	1484	5.08	8	14
1954	Pit	.. N	306	164	53.6	2003	6.55	14	19
1955	Pit	.. N	*344	*165	48.0	*2270	6.60	10	26
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8 years			1382	661	47.8	8622	6.24	55	88