

Kapp-ing A Memorable Campaign

``Injun' Joe Kapp spirited the '69 Vikings to an NFL championship`

By Ed Gruver

He was called "Injun" Joe, despite the fact his heritage was a mix of Mexican and German blood, and he quarterbacked an NFL championship team, despite owning a passing arm that produced more wounded ducks than his hunter-head coach, Bud Grant, who spent pre-dawn hours squatting with a rifle in a Minneapolis duck blind.

But in 1969, a season that remains memorable in the minds of Minnesota football fans, "Injun" Joe Kapp blazed a trail through the National Football League and bonded the Vikings into a formidable league champion, a family of men whose slogan, "Forty for Sixty," was testament to their togetherness.

"I liked Joe," Grant said once. "Everybody liked Joe, he's a likeable guy. In this business, you play the people who get the job done, and Joe did that."

John Beasley, who played tight end on the Vikings' '69 team, called Kapp "a piece of work...big and loud and fearless."

Even the Viking defense rallied behind Kapp, an occurrence not so common on NFL teams, where offensive and defensive players are sometimes at odds with another. Witness the New York Giants teams of the late 1950s and early 1960s, where middle linebacker Sam Huff would tell halfback Frank Gifford, "Hold 'em Frank, and we'll score for you."

No such situation occurred on the '69 Vikings, a fact made clear by Minnesota safety Dale Hackbart. "Playing with Kapp was like playing in the sandlot," Hackbart said. "It was 'Hail, hail, the gang's all here' kind of football, bloody-nose stuff...It was hard for anybody to think about his own stats when he played or knocked around with Joe."

Unlike his contemporaries, Bart Starr and John Unitas, Kapp was not a classic quarterback. While Starr and Unitas would take their patented five-step drops, survey the field, then whistle a pass through the defense, Kapp would stagger back seven steps, do a slogging, half-roll left or right, then float a pass that had more wobble than whistle.

Sometimes, "Injun" Joe simply reared back and threw, with the arm motion of a javelin thrower, particularly when the Vikings ran their number one passing play, a fly pattern to split end Gene Washington.

"Ruptured ducks" was how Detroit Lion defensive tackle Alex Karras once described Kapp's passes, which in their fluttering state seemed to challenge the theory that a football is aerodynamically sound. Kapp's deliveries had more quirky movements than a Phil Niekro knuckleball, and when the Vikings played the Kansas City Chiefs in Super Bowl IV, the champions of the American Football League were slack-jawed when they got their first look at "Injun" Joe's javelin-like heaves that wobbled in the wind. Chiefs' coach Hank Stram, wired for sound, can be seen in game tapes watching Kapp's arcing passes sail high and out of bounds and remarking, "That ball looked like it had helium in it."

"Injun" Joe couldn't have cared less. The tough-talking, tequilla-swilling Kapp relished his rough image. At 6-3, 216 pounds, Kapp was bigger than three-fourths of his backfield. His dark, Chicano features sported a jawline scar courtesy of a Canadian beer bottle, and his swashbuckling style led teammates to call him

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol 19, No. 1 (1997)

"Zorro." Kapp speaks in deep, gravel-filled tones, and Vikings' beat writer Jim Klobuchar once wrote that Kapp's voice sounds "as though it had been dragged through four layers of sand."

As a quarterback, "Injun" Joe was a rebel, cut from the same roguish cloth that produced Bobby Layne and Jim McMahon. When a reporter told Kapp his quarterbacking style was "crude," Kapp shot back, "They pay a quarterback to win, not on how pretty he looks." When someone said Kapp lacked the "classic" passing style of Unitas and Starr, Kapp growled, "So I'm not a classic passer. Classics are for Greeks. I'm a winner."

Winning is something Kapp knew plenty about when he arrived in Minnesota in 1967 as a 29-year-old NFL rookie. Born on 19, 1938 in Sante Fe, New Mexico, Kapp grew up the son of a laborer. A multi-sport athlete at William S. Hart High School, Kapp played basketball as well as football, earning the reputation as the team's "hatchet man." Earning a scholarship from the University of California at Berkely, Kapp was both quarterback and kickoff returner as he led the Golden Bears to the 1957 PAC-Eight title and a berth in the Rose Bowl, where Cal lost to Iowa, 38-12.

Disappointed by his 12th round selection by the Washington Redskins in the 1959 NFL draft, Kapp instead was lured to the Canadian Football League by Jim Finks, who headed Calgary. Arriving in Canada, Kapp earned the starting quarterback position ahead of Jack Kemp, who later went on to star in the AFL, directing the Chargers and Bills to a combined five division championships and two league titles.

Plagued by knee problems his first two years with Calgary, Kapp was traded to Vancouver. Success followed quickly. Kapp earned the CFL MVP award in 1963, and led Vancouver to the league championship in '64. In eight CFL seasons, Kapp threw for 22,725 yards and 137 touchdowns.

Finks was named general manager of the Vikings prior to the 1964 season, and three years later brought Kapp to Minnesota to play under another former CFL member, head coach Harold "Bud" Grant.

Kapp impressed teammates right away. Viking cornerback Ed Sharockman watched the new quarterback take charge of the team, and told a reporter "Joe Kapp has charisma."

Kapp had charisma all right, but he also brought a sense of *machismo* to Minnesota. Swaggering and battle-scarred from his CFL years, Kapp rose to the challenge of playing in the NFL. When he faced the Los Angeles Rams' "Fearsome Foursome" unit for the first time, "Injun" Joe looked at Deacon Jones and Merlin Olsen and growled, "All right, let's see how tough you sons of bitches are."

Kapp's challenge was not restricted to enemy defenders alone. Drowning his despair in a barroom following a 1967 loss to the NFL champion Green Bay Packers, Kapp got into an argument with 250-pound Viking linebacker Lonnie Warwick over who had lost the game. Kapp blamed himself; Warwick blamed the defense. The two men took their argument outside, standing on opposite sides of a fence as they engaged in a free-swinging brawl.

Kapp did manage to lead the Vikings to a 10-7 upset of the Packers that same year, then quarterbacked Minnesota to their first NFL Central Division championship in 1968. He solidified a Viking team torn apart by cliques, and infused them with a family-like togetherness embodied by his rallying cry of "Forty for Sixty," which stood for forty men playing together for sixty minutes.

"He played manly football," Klobuchar wrote in his book, *Purple Hearts and Golden Memories*. "He was the proud Chicano and everybody's crony in the locker room."

In 1969, the brawling, charismatic Kapp led a free-wheeling Viking offense that posted an NFL-high 379 points and three times scored more than 50 points in a game. While the Minnesota defense of Jim Marshall, Alan Page, Carl Eller, and Gary Larsen gained recognition as the "Purple People Eaters," it was "Injun" Joe who remained the fiery ring-leader of the Purple Gang.

"When you play a kid's game," Kapp said, "you turn into a kid sometimes. You play an animal's game, you turn into an animal. Football is a game for kids and animals."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol 19, No. 1 (1997)

Under Kapp's command, the Vikings played like kids in 1969, exhibiting a reckless, care-free attitude that helped carry them to an NFL-record 12 straight regular season victories and a second straight Century Division crown. They played with hearts as visible on their sleeves as the NFL emblems that were stitched on their uniforms to symbolize the league's 50th anniversary in '69.

Kapp set the tone for the season when he bombed the Vikings' 1968 playoff nemesis, the Baltimore Colts, for seven touchdowns in a 52-14 win. He also furthered his reputation as a tough quarterback when he took on Colt 240-pound linebacker Mike Curtis, nicknamed "The Animal" because of his ferocious style of play, and ran over him for a short gain. "Joe put his head down and ran right over Curtis," Kapp's old sparring partner, Lonnie Warwick said, adding that "Injun" Joe was "even crazier than I am."

"Most quarterbacks look to run out of bounds," said Grant. "Mine looks to run over people."

Kapp shrugged off the Curtis play, saying, "I just hand the ball off and kick backsides."

Two days after Christmas, the Vikings hosted the Rams in their playoff opener in snow-ringed Metropolitan Stadium. Played under gray skies and before a raucous crowd of 47,900, the game offered a classic matchup of the NFL's two heavyweight teams. *Sports Illustrated* senior football writer Tex Maule, who had covered the NFL's biggest games for over a decade, called it one of the best games he had seen.

Minnesota trailed 17-7 at halftime, but Kapp rallied his team with a drive that saw halfback Dave Osborn score from the one in the third quarter to cut the deficit to 17-14. Kapp, who called the football, "the seed", stood on the sideline after Osborn's score exhorting his defense to "Get me the damn seed!"

The Purple Gang responded, shutting down the Ram offense. Kapp put the Vikings ahead in the fourth quarter when he bootlegged and hurdled L.A. cornerback Jim Nettles at the two yard line for the TD. Eller and Page applied the clincher; Eller with a sack of Ram QB Roman Gabriel in the end zone for a safety, and Page with an interception that sealed the Vikings' 23-21 win.

When a reporter asked Kapp if the Vikings won because they "wanted" it more than the Rams, Kapp responded, "Everybody wants to win. Hell, wanting to win is nothing! Show me the people who are willing to do what it takes to win...You gotta be willing, not wanting!"

Kapp and the Vikings were both willing and wanting the following weekend, when they hosted the Cleveland Browns in eight-degree cold at old Met Stadium for the NFL championship. Kapp scored the Vikings' first touchdown when he collided with fullback Bill Brown on a botched handoff, then spun around and battered his way through the middle of the Cleveland defense for an early score. Kapp further intimidated the Browns when he took on 250-pound linebacker Jim Houston in the open field, and knocked the Cleveland star cold with a knee to the helmet.

Minnesota won its first and only league championship, 27-7, and Kapp celebrated in the Vikings' lathery locker room when he took a long gulp from a champagne bottle, then turned and smashed the bottle on his locker door. "I'll drink the rest," he told champagne-soaked reporters, "when we win the Super Bowl."

Kapp never did get to down the rest of his victory drink. The Vikings were manhandled by the Chiefs, 23-7, in Super Bowl IV, with Kapp getting knocked out of the game by Kansas City defensive end Aaron Brown late in the fourth quarter. Kapp finished the game on the bench, gritting his teeth from the pain of a separated shoulder.

Few knew it at the time, but Super Bowl IV marked Kapp's final appearance with the Purple Gang. A contract dispute forced him out of Minnesota before the 1970 season began, bringing to a close the chapter of one of pro football's most colorful teams.

But for Kapp and the Purple Gang, their real victory may have come following their win in the WFL title game. Kapp, who had worked hard for three years to bring the Vikings together as a team, was approached by Carl Eller, Minnesota's black defensive end.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol 19, No. 1 (1997)

As Eller draped an arm around Kapp's shoulders, he looked the muddied quarterback in the eyes.

"Joe," Eller said quietly, "you're my brother."

Kapp wiped his eyes. As Klobuchar noted later, for a black man to call him "brother" meant a lot to "Injun" Joe. It was a moment so special even a Super Bowl victory could not have matched it.
