

Archie Manning, Quarterback

New Orleans Saints (1971-82); Houston Oilers (82-83); Minnesota Vikings (83-84)
March 25, 2002

By Thomas Danyluk

I admit it. I didn't want to do it. After Archie Manning agreed to give an interview for this project and I dug into the whole research process, it didn't take long before things got way too depressing. It had been quite a while since I sifted through any Saints stats from the 1970s, but motivation dropped way out of sight in a hurry. No mid-December contests to relive when the stakes were high. No playoff games to revisit. No championship seasons. Just a whole bayou full of losing. Too much losing. Too many thirds-and fourteen, year after year after year. Here's a sample of the mess that really belongs buried somewhere in a sealed underground vault.

- 1971 Saints, Manning's rookie year: 4-8-2. Last place in the NFC West. Seven penalties per game are the most in the league and yield almost 1000 bonus yards to New Orleans' opponents. XXX
- 1972 Saints: 2-11-1. Last place. Leading rusher in New Orleans? Running back Bob Gresham with 381 yards. You don't want to know the runner-up performance at RB. Well, maybe you do. Fullback Bill Butler dutifully kicked in 233. Only five rushing touchdowns all season as a team.
- 1975 Saints: 2-12. Last place again. Manning tosses 20 picks and 7 lonely touchdowns, while the offense averages barely 12 points per game and scores over 20 only twice. Saints passers are taken down 53 times. Head coach fired, then interim coach fired.
- 1976 Saints: 4-10. 4th but not last in the division, only because of the one-time appearance of expansion newbie Seattle. Manning mercifully sidelined for the whole season with shoulder tendonitis. The Bobby's filling in at quarterback - Scott and Douglass - are in way over their heads as enemy rushers collapse the pocket and ring the bell 51 times. New coach Hank Stram can provide no magic.
- 1977 Saints: 3-11. Last place. Humiliating 17-point home loss to Tampa Bay gives the Buccaneers their first win ever. Ground defense gives up 4.4 yards/carry and 21 rushing touchdowns. Stram canned by impatient owner at season's end.

And there's just no end to it. Researching this was much like opening the business section everyday and seeing your tech portfolio get hammered day after day until you just throw in the towel at a 70% hit. Yes, the Saints poked their heads up in '78 and '79 and sniffed at the playoffs, but who wants to read about sniffs? And as for the interview, on what angle should I focus? Do I hit Manning for what is probably the 377th time with the probing "Did you ever get tired of losing?" Or, the penetrating "Did you ever want to be traded?" How many times over the past 25 years have those fish been flopped in front of him?

"Uh, Arch, two-parter here – Tell me, do you think that using the tight end more would have helped things when Atlanta blasted you 62-7 in the '73 opener, and how did the coaches tweak things going into the 40-3 massacre at Dallas the following week?"

If I was going to do this, there had to be a somewhat softer approach. This was a very talented football player we're talking about here, not some overhyped scouting blunder, the right-handed predecessor of Steve Young. The lean had to be toward the positive, with questions that would get him talking. Opinion stuff. Gameday stuff. Did he really want to go through all that "Aints" business still another time? I'll limit the negative questions – the ones with derivatives of the words "lose" or "collapse" or "crumble" - to around ten. Nah, still too many. Manning is a quite guy, not much of a talker, so that would likely chew up half the interview. The Saints were 45-114-1 during his years with the team, and there wasn't much sunshine, but somehow I could make it work.

The number two selection of the 1971 NFL draft out of Ole Miss, Manning's case was a simple one: great quarterback, two-bit, broken-down franchise. Steve Carlton blazing away for the hopeless '72 Phillies. Stonewall Jackson leading the Luxembourg Grand Color Guard into the Shenandoah Valley.

And as things often go with these drafts, there are textbook examples of bad luck of the draw. The wrong place at the wrong time. Think the Steelers could have won four Super Bowls with Archie Manning back there winging it instead of ol' Terry Bradshaw? Why not? What about Manning running the show for Don Shula's Miami Dolphins, feeding the ball to Csonka, Morris and Kiick then whipping it out there to Paul Warfield to keep things straight? No problem. Shula would have won big with Manning, just as many Super Bowls. Hey, would Troy Aikman still be walking around with a fistful of rings had he been sentenced to the Phoenix Cardinals?

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 25, No. 1 (2003)

And there have been many others like Manning over the years. Superstar nosetackle Tommy Nobis toiled away for a nowhere team in Atlanta. Steve Young was a wreck by the time the Tampa Bay Bucs were through with him and turned him over to Bill Walsh for CPR. Walter Payton was a one-man show in Chicago for seventy-percent of his career until the Bears finally got him some help. Sometimes the hard roads end with reward, sometimes not. Young and Payton had their careers end in storybook style and Super Bowl rings; Manning, well, he got traded off to Houston. Great talents sometimes go to waste. It's sad, but it happens.

Of all your coaches in New Orleans - and that rotating door spun like mad, through JD Roberts, John North, Hank Stram, Dick Nolan & Bum Phillips - which impressed you as having the best overall football mind?

AM: I'd say Hank Stram. He had more success as a head coach than anyone else. He was very, very involved in the offense and was a great offensive mind. I regret that I didn't get more of an opportunity to play for him. He wasn't there but two years. I missed the whole '76 season with two operations, and I missed four games in the '77 season, so I didn't play but ten games for Hank Stram. I regret that he didn't get to stay a long time and I didn't get to play in his offense because he really had some good ideas and concepts. On the other hand, Dick Nolan was a proven defensive coach, and was probably just as responsible for the creation of the flex defense as Tom Landry was. He had success with it as a head coach in San Francisco, but we never quite had the players to bring it together in New Orleans. We didn't win a lot of games with anyone, but I had the most success under Dick Nolan.

Stram arguably belongs in the Hall of Fame for his success with the Kansas City Chiefs, but yet he lasted only two years in New Orleans. Was that cord cut too quickly?

AM: We didn't win, but football was different in those days. Coaches, a lot of times, were given five years to rebuild a team. In the NFL today, if you win seven games in two years you're definitely going to get fired, but it wasn't the same back then. Hank wasn't on any speed-dial type of plan. It was more like a five-year plan. He said I was his quarterback and he was going to build the team around me. His whole plan got off to a bad start because I missed so many games while he was there. He was trying to use the draft to build the team around the talent he had, and he knew that wasn't going to happen overnight. To be honest, Hank thought he had more time, but [owner] John Mecom obviously wasn't happy with the progress and had a quick hook with him. I think that caught Hank by surprise. Maybe there were some other things involved. Maybe John just thought the whole thing wasn't working and it wasn't ever going to work.

What was your opinion?

AM: I think Hank could have built the team. He had done it before in Kansas City and there's not doubt in my mind he could have done it in New Orleans. He drafted some players like Tony Galbreath and Chuck Muncie, who wound up being good players for the next guy, who was Dick Nolan. I was sad to see him go. Actually, I was sad to see all my coaches leave. I had close, personal relationships with every coach we had there, and I still call them all friends today.

Which head coach do you feel may have been in over his head, not qualified for the job?

AM: I can honestly say, we had some coaches who got really ridiculed by the New Orleans or even the national media, and that wasn't fair. For example, they said J.D. Roberts wasn't qualified to be a head coach. Well, to be honest with you, J.D. had some really good leadership abilities, and I think there are players other than myself who will admit that. But when he was the head coach of the Saints, he had no help. Aside from the man's personal head coaching ability, you've got to have somebody making those drafts and trades. I mean, all of our trades slapped us in the face, and whose fault was that? He didn't make those trades, but he certainly did pay for them. Jim Otis traded to Kansas City for a 7th round pick? Margene Adkins from Dallas for a 2nd round pick? We traded Kenny Burrough and Chuck Muncie and Wes Chandler. What you need in the National Football League to win is talent, and as a general rule, our coaches did not have enough talent, top to bottom, on the roster to really be successful. We did not have great management overall during my years there. There were always a lot of changes. Maybe sometimes the management would have been better had the coaching been better, but the opposite was also true. There never was a time were the management and the coaching were both great at the same time.

What percentage of the Saints troubles on the field do you contribute directly to team ownership?

AM: Looking back on it, it wasn't that John Mecom didn't hire some capable people. It's just that the chemistry never worked. You know, John was not a cheapo. He was not cheap. John spent money, and he wanted to win. We did everything first class. I've never asked him this, but looking back on it, I'll bet John probably regrets not finding the best football man to manage his team and turning it over to him. He had the money to do that. Things might have been a lot different had he done that.

What about drug abuse? Did you perceive that as a problem on the Saints during the '70s?

AM: [Pausing] No. Our problems in the '70s were mostly poor management and having too many changes, starting over too many times. But I think I was kind of naïve. There may have been signs that drugs were becoming a problem, but I just didn't

notice them. I didn't know what to look for. In talking to people years later and reflecting back, I can now see what the problems were. We all know what happened in 1980, with the Don Reese cocaine story in Sports Illustrated after our 1-15 season, but I didn't know that stuff was going on. I should have. After I read that article, I said, "I must have been blind!" After I was traded to Houston, I was a little bit wiser. I knew the kind of things to look for, and believe me, in Houston, the signs were there. Drugs were all over the place with that team. It was a major, major problem for the Oilers.

The Saints' management turned in overall abysmal performance in drafting during your years there. Some memorable busts in include players like G Royce Smith (#8, 1972), WR Larry Burton (#7, 1975) and K Russell Erxleben (#11, 1979) Who, in your mind, was the team's most disappointing draft pick?

AM: Royce was a big, good-lookin' guy from Georgia who just didn't work out, just didn't turn out to be a good pro player. Larry Burton was drafted as a project, on potential. He ran fourth in the Olympics and was one of the fastest people in the world. Now anybody that fast – he ran about a 4.2 or 4.3 – you're hoping for a Bob Hayes, a track guy who was going to turn into a football player. I think he got caught up in some coaching changes and so forth and just never developed any confidence. I don't know if I can say who was the most disappointing. I can remember we had a draft back in 74. Our scouts were regional guys. I was out there working out a couple of days before the draft, and I asked our West Coast scout who he thought we were going to take. We had a pretty high pick that year, in the first ten or so. He said, "There's a receiver who I think will be there from Southern Cal, and I think he can really help us. His name is Swann." I said, "Yeah... I've seen him on TV. I think he'll be good." Then he said, "But the coach wants a linebacker." Well, sure enough, Swann was there, but we picked a linebacker from Ohio State named Rick Middleton. He wasn't very big. He wasn't very strong. Rick wasn't even the best linebacker at Ohio State. We picked him right before Denver picked Randy Gradishar, who was an All-American at Ohio State. That to me was one of the most disappointing.

Who about draft day surprises from the lower rounds?

AM: Danny Abramowicz was one of those players. He was drafted in 1967 in the 17th round. There's always stories about late-round picks. Actually, the two guys I'm thinking of were free agents. We had a guy back in 1977 from Penn State named Rich Mauti, who wound up being our best special teams player. Henry Childs was also a free agent that did a lot of good things for us. Obviously we didn't have too many who panned out.

Let's talk about some of your big games with the Saints. There weren't many, but do any bring back a smile when you think back?

AM: I think playing in big games is what I missed most in my pro career. I've always told my kids that, of course, you want to win championships, but first you want to get into big games and play well in the big games. We didn't get to play in many with the Saints. We had some big upsets. During my first year, we beat the Rams, who were a very good team, then we came back and beat the Cowboys, who went on to win the Super Bowl that year. We played Kansas City on a Monday night in 1972, and that's always a big game. Of course, it was years later before we got back on Monday night again. We didn't have any playoff games at all. So it was '78 before we made a move and started competing better. We were in the hunt there for a while, and in '79 too. But there weren't many big ones, and that's kinda what you miss. I'll tell you one game that sticks out in my mind when Bum was here, and that was in 1981 when we went over to Houston and played the Oilers. That was a big, big game. You wouldn't believe the attention that was given to that game during the week. It was like Super Bowl Sunday. Every TV station in Houston spent the week in New Orleans covering the Saints. Bum was still a real favorite in Houston. The Oilers weren't doing very well, but they still had some talent, and we went over there and beat them. I'm sure I didn't have a great statistical game, but I felt like I didn't let us lose the game. As a quarterback, I held us together and made plays when they had to be made and got us a win in a hostile environment. I always felt that Bum should have been kinda indebted to me for that, but he did trade me the next year.

Do you have a favorite?

AM: I would have to say the biggest one was on opening day of my rookie year against the LA. It was my first start, and we upset a very good Ram team that was heavily favored. They still had Roman Gabriel and the Fearsome Foursome and a whole lot of talent. I scored a touchdown on the last play of the game to beat 'em. I thought that was a great way to start my pro career.

That final play was controversial. You had fumbled the ball and the Jack Youngblood of the Rams recovered at the two-yard line, but the officials ruled that you had crossed the goal and awarded the touchdown. What really happened?

AM: Oh, I fumbled, there's no question about that. But I felt I fumbled after I crossed the goal line. I know the Rams thought it was a turnover and they should have won the game, but I think I was definitely in the endzone before the ball came out.

A few weeks later in Tulane Stadium you stunned the eventual Super Bowl champion Cowboys, 26-14. You were 6-15 for 49 yards throwing the football, while your backs averaged only 2.3 yards on 24 carries. How does one beat Dallas going 6 for 15?

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 25, No. 1 (2003)

AM: That Cowboy team was at least three touchdowns better than we were. I don't know how we beat them because we were clearly outmanned. We were coming off a [35-14] whipping by the Bears, so maybe the Cowboys took us lightly. I know we were sky-high as a team going into that game. I remember I ran for a couple of scores and threw for another, and Dallas turned the ball over a bunch of times. Our defense did a tremendous job that day, but would bet that if we played Dallas ten times that season, we'd only beat them once. And that was the one.

Another stunner was the upset over defending NFC champ Washington in 1973. The Redskins were 5-1 and headed towards the playoffs, while the Saints were 2-4, had been outscored 185-61, and were coming off a 40-0 massacre at San Francisco. It sounds like what former NY Giants coach Bill Parcells likes to call a "trap game." You stopped them, 19-3.

AM: That was the old "Over The Hill Gang." Sometimes we had an advantage over a veteran group like that coming into New Orleans. They probably didn't take us very serious, and they probably didn't train real well the night before. It'd be hot in Tulane Stadium, and that would work against teams. We had a pretty good defense, if you want to know the truth. We weren't a bad defensive team that year. When we played Buffalo, we held OJ Simpson to his lowest yardage of the season.

What was the most impressive team you faced during your NFL career?

AM: The best team defense I ever played against was the '84 Bears. I was playing with the Vikings then, and I started against them one day and they sacked me eleven times. With their scheme, they really brought the pressure. Their whole philosophy was to destroy the pass pocket and force the quarterback to make mistakes. You'd get good number of man-to-man situations downfield, but the trouble was finding the time to complete the pass. You really had to be concerned with trying to block them all. I can honestly say I had never been under that kind of constant defensive pressure any other time. They were awesome. The '78 Steelers were also very, very good. They were a better overall team than the '84 Bears, for obvious reasons. Pittsburgh was never a team that relied heavily on the blitz, but by the late '70s, they were becoming more of a high-pressure defense. The rule changes for pass blocking kinda forced them in that direction, where before they could rely on their front four to put steady pressure the quarterback.

Let's talk about some of your teammates in New Orleans. Chuck Muncie was probably the most talented back ever to wear a Saints uniform. The first pick in the '76 draft, he was built for the position, with raw power and speed and hands that could snag anything aimed at him – a RoboBack. You had to have been thrilled finally having that kind of a weapon in your backfield.

AM: Chuck was super talented. He was one of these backs that had the ability, the size and the speed. I mean, we're talking Jimmy Brown-Walter Payton type of stuff. This guy was the real deal. He was real fast for a big man and made some tremendous runs. But Chuck wasn't able to get his personal life together. He played on one engine. But he still was able to have some good games, and even had one heckuva year in 1978. Often Chuck played a lot like Earl Campbell, who I played with when I moved over to Houston. It was great to watch the films on Monday and see the cornerbacks keep from having to tackle those two guys. On pitchouts you'd see these 185-lb. cornerbacks trying to stay out of the way without looking like they were trying to stay out of the way. When he was in college at Cal. I caught a few of his games on TV, but after we drafted him - at that first mini-camp - you could tell right away that he was something else. He had a real fast first step. I can still see him standing there in that I-formation, the kinda funny way he'd position himself, and then the explosion. Man, he was so quick. After his first step, he was at full speed. He also caught the ball well, and even threw the ball well. On option passes, he was terrific.

Muncie's career with the Saints had its moments, but at the end the label read "controversial and erratic and disappointing." Drugs were evidently a serious problem with him. When did you first get the feelings that Muncie wasn't going to last in New Orleans?

AM: Well, to be honest, I really didn't know what all was going on with him. You know, I'm from Mississippi and conservative, and I was pretty naïve, I guess. I didn't do drugs, and nobody did drugs around me, I didn't really know what signs to look for. Chuck had his problems from almost the moment he came to the Saints. He didn't practice hard. He didn't have a strong work ethic. He didn't pay attention in meetings. A lot of times I had to tell him what to do on the field when we were running the play. I saw other rookies not make a real quick transition in terms of going from college life to pro ball and having money in your pocket, those type of things. I had seen that before, and so I was always hopeful Chuck could somehow turn it around. We thought he had in '78. He had about eleven or twelve hundred yards that season, and we thought maybe he had turned the corner. About four or five of us went to the Pro Bowl that year, including Chuck. I kinda talked the coaches into letting me play when he did, and we got him into some good positions and he got MVP in the game. While we were at the Pro Bowl, we had been around good guys like Walter Payton and Tony Dorsett and Wilbert Montgomery, and we hoped that maybe a little of that would rub off on him, that maybe that would help him reach his potential. Unfortunately, that didn't work. But you know, a lot of guys involved in drugs might be distant or have a bad attitude, and that was never the case with Chuck. He was always smiling, always in a good mood. He was my kids' favorite player. He played ball with them all time. They really liked Chuck.

After four seasons, Muncie was shipped off to San Diego for a 2nd round draft pick. Was that something you supported, considering all of his troubles?

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 25, No. 1 (2003)

AM: Personally, I didn't want it. I kinda liked having him. Now, I knew that he wasn't always prepared, that you couldn't always count on him. He'd play great one week then have some type of injury or ailment the next week. It was hard, but I still liked having him and I was hoping eventually the light would come on. We had a very good back right beside him who was a heckuva player named Tony Galbreath. Tony was a super talent and did a lot of good things for us, but he was no Chuck Muncie.

Can you compare Muncie's hot and cold performances with what Ricky Williams gave the Saints during his few years in New Orleans?

AM: I don't think the situations are the same. Chuck's problem was much more personal, not a question of talent. I don't think Ricky Williams has half the ability that Chuck Muncie had. I don't think Ricky Williams is that great of a player. I think he's a good player, but he's not a great player. He really does give you a lot of effort and runs hard, but in this league he's not going to break long runs and take a big pounding. I think the Saints felt like he was going to depreciate and be gone pretty fast. That's why they traded him, to get some value for him while they still could. They really weren't unhappy with his play. Now I understand he was late a lot. That was one of Chuck's problems too. For Chuck, it was about choices. Chuck could have been one of the greatest running backs in the history of the NFL, but his decisions off the field prevented that from happening.

Tell me about your tight end Henry Childs, who had 2 Pro Bowl caliber seasons in 1978 - he led all NFC tight ends with 53 catches - and 1979.

AM: Well, during those couple of years, we really used him. I loved using the tight end. Henry was a very good target for me. He made the tough catch about as good as anybody, so even when he was covered, you could throw balls behind him or low and he'd make the catches. He did great things for me. When he came to us as a rookie, nobody knew much about him. He really didn't have any credentials, but he worked himself into the starting spot. Henry was one of those guys who went against the theory that says you play like you practice. He didn't practically practice well or practice hard, but I'll tell you, come game time he was always there for me. He was a quarterback's delight.

Bert Jones had Roger Carr. Jim Hart had Mel Gray. Ron Jaworski had Harold Carmichael. With which receiver did you have the best on-field chemistry during your time in New Orleans?

AM: The first receiver I really connected with was Danny Abramowicz, who was a really outstanding player. He came to New Orleans a few years before I did, and led the league in 1969, catching passes from Billy Kilmer. Excellent route runner, not very fast. Super determination and toughness. Very cagey. Danny used all kind of tricks to get open and get behind faster cornerbacks. He was about as tough as they came and loved catching passes. He didn't want even one to get away. Danny and I really clicked.

By 1973, Abramowicz had moved on to San Francisco, and the New Orleans passing game was without a star at wideout for several seasons. Then in 1978 a flashy rookie from Florida came on the scene and began lighting up the Superdome with his moves and maneuvers. Your memories of #89, Wes Chandler?

AM: Wes was very athletic, the most athletic receiver that I ever played with. He wasn't as fast as some people thought, but he was so athletic, could run, jump, catch, run great routes. He was everything a quarterback could want. I really enjoyed playing with Wes. To this day, I still can't figure out why Bum traded him to San Diego. Bum said he didn't like his attitude, but Wes wasn't the first receiver that might pout a little bit when he doesn't catch a couple balls. When you don't throw to them for a quarter or a half, that's kinda the nature of receivers. With all the talent we had on offense, we just didn't have enough footballs. Muncie and Galbreath out of the backfield...hell, Galbreath was the best receiving back in the game. I think Tony caught 70 or 80 balls one season. I also had a guy opposite of Wes who was an excellent receiver named Ike Harris. Excellent receiver! Good target, smart, ran good routes. Then there was Childs...We were a productive offense in the late '70s. We didn't stop too many people either, but we could put some points on the board.

There were many years that the Saints operated with a leaky offensive line. In what year do you feel you had your best offensive line combination?

AM: Probably '79, although I thought it was going to be in '78. We had traded for Conrad Dobler, who had been with St. Louis. Conrad was pretty beat up by the time he came to us, and St. Louis kinda felt he was over the hill. But his presence made a difference right away. Unfortunately, he blew out his knee in '78, but he came back and played in '79. Conrad was a physical wreck, but he made everybody else around him play good. He had a no-sack theory. He just didn't feel like there should ever be a sack. He played on some great lines in St. Louis that didn't give up sacks. That '75 Cardinal team gave up six sacks! Hell, I got that in a half! He really did make an impact with his leadership and his presence on some of our young linemen. We went from around 40 sacks in 1978 to 17 the next year. Like I said, I had some good backs and good receivers, but in '79 the line did their part and we were a very productive offense that year. We got some respect that year. We were getting people open. We were staying on schedule, not coming up on 3rd and 12 as much.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 25, No. 1 (2003)

Dobler lasted only two seasons with the Saints, yet went on to have two very productive years with Buffalo. Why wasn't his stay in New Orleans a longer one, considering what he brought to the psyche of the offensive line?

AM: When he came here, the Cardinals had given up on him just because of his health. He had real bad knees, and I think they felt he was just past his prime. Now he was limited on some of the things he could do because of his knees. Before he came, we had a pretty good sweep game, with the guards getting out in front of Muncie and Galbreath. We had to eliminate that with him because he really couldn't get out in front of them. But still, even though physically he was downhill, his presence was good for our young linemen.

How about your opponents - was there a pass rusher who particularly haunted you, your public enemy number one?

AM: Well, when you play a long time on one team, you tend to remember your division opponents because you play them so much. In my first year, Deacon Jones and Merlin Olsen were both in LA. And Deacon was everything they said he was. He might have been a little older and rested a few plays, but when he wanted to bring it, he could bring it. He was a fast man, and that headslap was the real deal. Merlin was a little older, too, but you still saw the greatness there, the consistency. Taking on blockers, stopping the run. Freddy Dryer was a load too. Of course, the guy I played against the most, who came into the league the same time I did, would be Jack Youngblood. I told Jack last year, when he got into the Hall of Fame, that I really should be his presenter. He wouldn't have gotten in without having me to sack. Jack and I started the same day and retired the same day. I'll tell you – San Francisco had a great defense in my early years. They had two ends named Tommy Hart and Cedric Hardman. Outstanding rushers, both of them. They had really good defensive players on that team. That was Dick Nolan's flex defense. One more guy is Tommy Nobis of the Falcons. I have no idea why he isn't in the Hall of Fame.

The NFC had its share of bandits in the defensive secondary, names like Atlanta's Roland Lawrence, St. Louis' Roger Wehrli, SF's Jimmy Johnson, LA's Monte Jackson - Who was the toughest corner to had to throw against?

AM: I'll tell you who comes to mind. There was a great player in Atlanta, a cornerback named Kenny Reaves. Big, strong and mean. A very good corner. But I'd have to say Jimmy Johnson of the 49ers. He was just so clever and so experienced. I was a young player and had to be really careful going up against him. He was a little older and very clever. He'd kinda bait you a little bit, play off a bit and get you looking his way. He was a real pro. Mel Renfro was kinda like that too. If you get one on those guys, you'd better think about working on somebody else. Don't come back to it again, at least not right away.

You threw for 3,416 yards and 17 touchdowns in 1978, which earned you a spot in the Pro Bowl after that season. What were your thoughts when you first went out on the field and had weapons like WRs James Lofton, Harold Carmichael and Ahmad Rashad, RBs Tony Dorsett, Walter Payton and Wilbert Montgomery, and players like Dennis Harrah, Tom Mack, and Dan Dierdorf on the offensive line? Obviously, it was the most talent you were ever surrounded with on the football field.

AM: It was fun. I was the only player from the Saints. I was the NFL Player of the Year on a losing team, as we had gone 7-9 in 1978. Usually in those Pro Bowls, the good teams take five, six, seven guys, but from the Saints that year, it was just me. Being a quarterback, I was honored to be there. Roger Staubach was the starter, and in those days they only chose two quarterbacks per conference. I think you were better off not being the starter in the Pro Bowl. The starter played the first and third quarters, and the backup played the second and fourth, which is the best time to play. So I went in during the second quarter, kinda got a little feel for things. I was throwing the ball to James Lofton, who was a rookie, and Ahmad and David Hill, the tight end from Detroit. We did some good things, moved the ball. Then I came back in the fourth quarter and did some things too. It was a lot of fun, and being there kinda gave me a lift personally as well. We had never won anything in New Orleans, so it felt good having my efforts recognized by the rest of the league.

Under Dick Nolan, team went 7-9, 8-8, then 1-15. What do you feel were the main reasons for that drastic dropoff?

AM: I think that may have been drugs. Expectations were high for us going into that season. During the first part of the season, we were losing but we weren't getting killed. We were getting beat in overtime. We blocked a punt against Miami that set us up to score on the last play of the game, and they call offensive interference on the touchdown pass. All of a sudden, we couldn't win a game, and the rats jumped ship. We had some talent, but we didn't have much character. Then that's when the Don Reese thing started, and cocaine was prevalent. You're losing, going 0-5, then 0-6, 0-7, and then the rats jumped ship. It was just a meltdown.

Your last coach in New Orleans was Bum Phillips, who came to the Saints after six successful years with the Houston Oilers. What were your initial thoughts about him taking over the team?

AM: Bum was a really hot coach in Houston for some time, but in his last year there, he really fell off. They kinda mortgaged that team to win a Super Bowl – bringing over Kenny Stabler and Jack Tatum, those kind of things. When they didn't, the team was all of a sudden real old and they didn't have any more draft choices. It had become a mess and he got fired. He probably wanted to get fired because I think he knew he could come over to New Orleans and coach for the Saints. I had heard good things about him, that his players liked him. He seemed like a good choice at the time.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 25, No. 1 (2003)

Being an experienced, veteran leader, did you feel he was the right coach at the time for your team?

AM: In those days, Bum had a pretty good approach to the game, and it really worked in Houston for a number of years. It was a little looser atmosphere, probably more fun overall on a day-to-day basis. Basically, his approach was, "Look, I don't have a lot of rules and regulations, but I expect you to practice hard and I expect you to play *real*/hard. Otherwise, just behave yourself and go one about your business." In that era, a lot of players responded to that in a real positive way. Look no further than what Houston did under Bum. You know, if the Steelers hadn't have been so good, Houston would have gone to a couple of Super Bowls. But I think what happens in a 45 or 50-man squad, with that looseness you get about five or six players that will take advantage of that. They don't even have to be your best players. Then the whole thing becomes contagious, especially among some of the younger guys. When that happens, it can tear the team down, and I think that's what happened in Houston. I got traded to Houston shortly after Bum left there, and they were in kind of a mess. Drugs were more prevalent in the league then, and there was a lot of that on the Oilers. You get a few bad apples and they can tear the whole thing down. We weren't very good, so you can't say that there was much to tear down in New Orleans.

Did Phillips promote that type of loose atmosphere in New Orleans?

AM: Ol' Bum was kinda cagey. He was a good common sense guy, clever, funny. We had a decent team his first year with the Saints. We were playing pretty doggone good about midseason, but I'm not so sure Bum didn't feel he had some pretty good job security with the team. I think he knew it was going to be his last coaching job. Like I said before, it was different back then. Not many people got fired after one or two years. I honestly believe that Bum wanted to get things started here, win some games and get things going in the right direction, then move into the general manager's job and let his son Wade be the head coach. But then things appeared to change over the second half of the season. I'm not saying we tried to lose, but after having such a good first half of the season, we just kinda shut it down for the rest of the year. There wasn't any pressure on us to lose games. But at midseason we were close to .500 and playing pretty decent football, and it seemed like there was no pressure on us to make the playoffs. The attitude was more like, "We're building something here. We can take our time." I think Bum wanted to wait until the next year before making a run. Bring in some more players, get rid of some players – namely me.

When did you first get the impression Phillips wanted to go in a different direction at QB, and that you might be traded?

AM: I knew that Bum really didn't want me to be his quarterback, that he wanted somebody else. I don't know why. I worked hard for him, but he just didn't take to me as a player. We never had a cross word or any kind of controversy. I didn't want to get traded. But some guys I knew told me, "Bum came to town, and you were the guy that did all the commercials. He didn't like that. Bum wanted to do all the commercials." I don't know for sure if that was the reason why he traded me. I never had any problems with Bum. Years later I told him, "I forgive you for trading me, but I'll never forgive you for trading me to Houston." He knew how bad things were over there. Things were bad on that team. They still had a lot of the same players from when Bum was there, but it wasn't the same. The Oilers were a mess.

How did you find out you had been dealt, and what was your initial reaction?

AM: Officially, Bum told me but I knew before that. My reaction was kinda mixed. As a player you don't want to be somewhere where you're not wanted. That's one side of it. The other side is that I had been here twelve years and I didn't want to leave. New Orleans was my home. I think I had become part of New Orleans and New Orleans part of me. I always had a vision of playing my entire career in one place. Some people in Houston who were involved in the trade kinda got word back to me that they were talking trade. We were coming off an opening day loss to St. Louis, and that Monday word started getting back to me. I had heard things all week, and then Bum told me I was gone on Friday morning.

Was a change of scenery, a fresh start, maybe good for you at that time in your career?

AM: Well, a change of scenery is not bad, but I had put in so many years here during tough times that I kinda wanted to be there when things got better. I really didn't want to leave, but I could see what was happening. Bum had brought Kenny Stabler over from Houston, where I think he had been released before training camp, so the Oilers were a little thin at that position. They were working over there with Gifford Nielsen and a rookie named Oliver Luck from West Virginia. I knew their coach Eddie Biles. I had played against him a lot, so I could see how sending me to Houston made sense to some people. To be honest, in Bum's offense, the quarterback really wasn't the key guy. He needed somebody who was willing to hand off the ball on first and second down and try to complete a pass if it got to third down.

If fate had been a little kinder and given you a choice of teams, where would you have played?

AM: I was always a Cowboys fan. I guess I never admitted it in those days, but I can admit it now. I love the Cowboys. I really do. It would have been fun playing for Landry and having all those weapons on offense, like Tony Hill and Drew Pearson and Tony Dorsett. They always had a good offensive line, too, which meant I would have spent a heckuva lot less time picking myself up off the ground.

What was the best piece of advice an opponent ever gave to you?

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 25, No. 1 (2003)

AM: I can't think of a single piece of advice that really stands out for me, but there were several players who kinda looked out for me when I was a younger player, tried to steer me the right way. Roman Gabriel was really nice to me. He was with the Rams, and he was always nice enough to come over and chat with me before each game when we played them. Roman was such a competitor. He just talked to me about preparation and hard work and competing. It wasn't anything I didn't know, but still, I appreciated it and kinda admired a guy that walked his talk. In a way, John Brodie was the same way. John Brodie to me was like an artist out there. He'd been around a long time, and he's kinda just pick you to pieces, doing things his way.

The German philosopher Neitzche once said, "That which doesn't kill me can only make me stronger." After finishing your "sentence" with the woeful New Orleans Saints of the 1970s, you're still obviously here among the living. What did you gain from your experience in New Orleans, if anything?

AM: I think that most people who have life in sports learn to deal with adversity and low times, and in New Orleans, we definitely had a lot of experience with that. But I think that, more than anything, the whole experience taught me a lot about people. I dealt with so many of them, and by just watching them – how they react to tough times or adversity or losing games – I was able to learn things about human character. Some people are quitters or complainers or become discouraged and lose their focus. Others keep plugging away, trying to find ways to overcome obstacles, encouraging and motivating people around them.

I saw all types during my days with the Saints. There were three or four of us that kinda felt we went through it together. A safety, who joined the team a year after I did, named Tommy Myers was one. Joe Federspiel, who was our middle linebackers, was another. And then there was my backup quarterback and roommate, Bobby Scott, who I spent more time with than any one during my professional career. There was some sort of bond between the four of us because we were on the team for a long time and shared a lot of the same experiences. There is a different kind of bond that's created during losing times, which I believe is just as strong as one that's forged while you're winning.

I was on a successful team in college, so I can make that comparison. In New Orleans, we didn't experience a lot of the happy times or good times. Maybe a lot of the things we wanted to forget. A lot of your postgames aren't celebrations. They're more like mournings, if you will. But you go through it together, and you depend on one another, and there is still a bond there.

Year	G	PASSING								RUSHING			
		ATT	COM	Pct.	YDS	AVG	TD	INT	RATE	Att	Yds	Avg	TD
1971 NO	12	177	86	48.6	1164	6.58	6	9	60.1	33	172	5.2	4
1972 NO	14	448	230	51.3	2781	6.21	18	21	64.6	63	351	5.6	2
1973 NO	13	267	140	52.4	1642	6.15	10	12	65.2	63	293	4.7	2
1974 NO	11	261	134	51.3	1429	5.48	6	16	49.8	28	204	7.3	1
1975 NO	13	338	159	47.0	1683	4.98	7	20	44.3	33	186	5.6	1
1977 NO	10	205	113	55.1	1284	6.26	8	9	68.8	39	270	6.9	5
1978 NO	16	471	291	61.8	3416	7.25	17	16	81.7	38	202	5.3	1
1979 NO	16	420	252	60.0	3169	7.55	15	20	75.6	35	186	5.3	2
1980 NO	16	509	309	60.7	3716	7.30	23	20	81.8	23	166	7.2	0
1981 NO	12	232	134	57.8	1447	6.24	5	11	63.6	2	28	14.0	0
1982 NO-Hou	7	132	67	50.8	880	6.67	6	8	62.1	13	85	6.5	0
1983 Hou-Min	5	88	44	50.0	755	8.58	2	8	49.2	3	12	4.0	0
1984 Min	6	94	52	55.3	545	5.80	2	3	66.1	11	42	3.8	0
13 Years	151	3642	2011	55.2	23911	6.57	125	173	67.1	384	2197	5.7	18

Additional Statistics: Rec 1-(-7) 7.0