# TIME STOOD STILL, DECEMBER 28, 1958

By Victor Mastro

On December 28, 1958, time stood still. Football time, that is, and remained frozen forever. Many have claimed it was the "Greatest Game Ever Played," the 1958 National Football League Championship, between the Baltimore Colts and the New York Giants at Yankee Stadium. After this memorable 23-17 Colt win, the first sudden death overtime to count, football folklore became part of the American psyche and football and television were united. Years from now, this game will still be called the turning point. So let us go back before 1958 to preview some of the events that made this game the focal point of football folklore.

The Baltimore Colts franchise had roots in The Bronx. The New York Yankees, All America Football Conference, 1946-1949, played in Yankee Stadium; they were disbanded in 1950. Another Bronx based team, the New York Yanks, became the Dallas Texans of 1952. That franchise folded and was replaced by the 1953 Baltimore Colts. Art Donovan, a Colt defensive tackle, came from The Bronx and played well in the '58 overtime game. In 1968, he was the first Colt inducted in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. (The first overtime game, an exhibition in 1955, had the identical score, 23-17, with the New York Giants on the losing end to the Los Angeles Rams.)

Indeed, 1958 had a special magic all its own. It was the first time that the football Giants were New York's only Giants. The baseball Giants had packed their bags and moved to San Francisco. The football Giants had won none and lost five, 0-5, in their preseason games.

The "DEE-FENSE" cheer grew up in The Bronx. The Giants' defensive unit was the first defense to be introduced to their fans at the pregames in Yankee Stadium. The Giants were the lowest scoring team since 1939, averaging 20.5 points per game, and had only one 100 yard rushing game to their credit. They had played three regular season games without scoring a touchdown, and yet won two of them.

Even God was on the Giant's side. Fr. Benedict Dudley, their chaplain, was the first clergyman to go on the road with a professional team.

Before facing the Colts, the Giants had to beat a much stronger Cleveland Browns team. At Yankee Stadium, in the last game of the season against the Browns, Pat Summerall, Giants kicker, booted a 50-yard field goal through a December snow. This forced a playoff with the Browns, the 13th game, the following week on Bronx soil. In that game, defense was played to perfection. The great Brown fullback, Jim Brown, was stopped for a total gain of 18 yards rushing. Even with the "aid" of a controversial call, the Giants won 10-0, and set many defensive standards.

Destiny pushed the "Cinderella" team of 1958 against the fabled "Cinderella Kid," Johnny Unitas, the quarterback of the Baltimore Colts. He had faced them in his first start, a 1956 preseason game, two years earlier. Both teams had met a few weeks earlier at Yankee Stadium with a record attendance, 71,163, but Unitas had not played, because he was injured. The final score was Giants 24, Colts 21. Sportswriters then called it the "greatest game of 1958." Little did the media know that it had been previewing the "Greatest Game Ever."

On December 28, 1958, the Baltimore Colts came to The Bronx. They had scored 381 points, but the Giants defense had yielded only 183 points in the season, a sort of mirror image of each other. Unitas defied the Giants, and came out passing. The Colts were leading overwhelmingly, 14-3, into the third quarter, and reaped the goal line repeatedly. The silent stadium watched in disbelief as the Colts were stopped four times. The game turned and momentum was with the Giants. The Giants scored twice, taking a 17-14 lead and reversing the points of the first half: Colts 14, Giants 3.

On a subsequent third down, however, Frank Gifford, Giant halfback, came inches short of a crucial first down. He was stopped by Colts: Gino Marchetti, Art Donovan and Gene Lipscomb. There had been a pile up, and the Giants believed that the ball was spotted incorrectly. This controversial call was made by referee Charlie Berry. He had made a similar "controversial" call on a Gifford reception a week previous. Had Frank Gifford made the first down, the game would have been considered the greatest comeback in championship play up to that time.

Then, starting from around their lucky 13 line, Unitas marched the Colts to the Giants 20 yard line with 13 seconds to go to the end of the game. A Colt field goal tied the Colts' 13th game, 17-17. A tie in championship play, what would follow? Time stood still. It was the first regular season or postseason sudden death overtime. The team which would score first would win.

The Giants received the kickoff but soon punted.  Unitas took his Colts on another breathtaking drive. In the shadow of the New

York goal, a television blackout suddenly hit the eastern part of the nation, increasing the fan's tension and excitement. Fortunately, the picture was restored just in time. At the end of 13 plays, the Colts' Alan Ameche, "the Horse," went over the goal line for the never to be forgotten touchdown, to win the game 23-17. The number 13 was lucky for the Colts on December 28, 1958. Coincidentally, the sum of the digits of the 12th month and 28th day is the same as the sum of the last two digits of the year 1958. In both cases the sum is 13.

This game established professional football as a game the TV audience would watch. Besides this national impact, this championship game had some other key features:

1. This was the first regular season or postseason sudden death overtime.

2. There were two Colt consecutive scoring drives of more than 70 yards. These drives consisted of many passes and runs to the middle rather than to the sidelines. Audibles, calls, no huddles, and the hurry up offense were employed within the last two minutes to tie the game.

3. Johnny Unitas completed 26 of 40 passes for 349 yards, records at the time. He completed 65% of his passes, which is one of the highest percentages in title play.

4. The Colts had 27 first downs and 17 by passing, then records.

5. Raymond Berry, the Colt end, caught 12 passes for 178 yards, both records at the time.

6. The Colts had kicked to the tie, with a few seconds left.

7. The Giants' goal line stand stopped the Colts on four tries.

8. The Giants came back with 14 points to take a fourth quarter lead.

9. There were a record number of fumble recoveries and returns.

10. The Giants' defense blocked a Colt field goal attempt.

11. The Colts had a 50.8 yard punting average, then another record.

12. A controversial third down play ended the Giants' hopes of the greatest title comeback victory.

13. The Giants assistant coaches, Vince Lombardi and Tom Landry, and the Colt coach, Weeb Ewbank, appeared in many of the other great football classics (the Ice Bowl – the 1967 NFL championship game – and Superbowl III in 1969).

14. Raymond Berry, Colt end, made three consecutive receptions on the scoring drive that tied the game at 17-17, a football rarity in all senses of the word.

Many of the players and coaches at this game have been inducted into the National Football League Hall of Fame. From the Giants they include Vince Lombardi, Tom Landry, Frank Gifford, Sam Huff, Emlen Tunnell, Roosevelt Brown, Andy Robustelli, and Giant owners Tim Mara and Wellington Mara. From the Colts they include Weeb Ewbank, Art Donovan, Johnny Unitas, Lenny Moore, Jim Parker, Gino Marchetti and Raymond Berry.

One will always look back to Yankee Stadium, The Bronx, December 28, 1958, as time stood still, football time, that is.

| Baltimore Colts | 0 | 14 | 0 | 3 | 6 | - | 23 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| New York Giants | 3 | 0 | 7 | 7 | 0 | - | 17 |

NYG - FG Summerall 36
Bal  - Ameche 2 run (Myhra kick)
Bal  - Berry 15 pass from Unitas (Myhra kick)
NYG - Triplett 1 run (Summerall kick)
NYG - Gifford 15 pass from Conerly (Summerall kick)
Bal  - FG Myhra 20
Bal  - Ameche 1 run (no kick