

A LOOK BACK AT MY DAYS AS AN NFL BEAT WRITER

By Kerry Schmidt August 30, 2009

Went to San Diego to see my new granddaughters. Without a doubt, they are the two most beautiful little girls in the world! Why did I ever leave that beautiful cool weather?

Anyway, back to reality.

Ok, before I get into the happenings of being an NFL beat writer, I must write about THE craziest NFL player of all time. I did not have room for him a couple weeks ago, plus he was not on the toughest list.

Just completely out of his mind.

The Mad Stork! AKA, Ted Hendricks.

Raiders LB. Boy, did he fit in with that group.

During a “pre-season” game in 1968 – they were free, only a few thousand fans and the refs were more like teachers.

John Madden was the coach and the Raiders were going against my cross town 49’ers.

I was on the sideline. During one stint when the Niners were on offense, Hendricks just went off sides and sat in the Niners’ huddle.

Ref came up to him and said, “What the hell are you doing. Get back over there or I’ll have to penalize you. Hendricks just looked up and said, “Hey, it’s hot, I’m tired, so if I know what play they’re gonna run, I don’t have to work hard.

15 yards! Madden was getting pretty hot. Now, carefully listen to the exact words that Madden told Stork.

He said, “Quit your blank blank horsing around, or you can take your uniform off and get the blank out of here.”

Within 5 minutes, Stork was gone.

Now remember, way back then, the Oakland Coliseum was half built, both ends open. And, there were farms and ranches around.

Well, about 10 minutes into the 3rd quarter, all players stop and look towards the south end zone. Here comes Stork. He had gone to some farm, stolen a horse (“horsing around”), and he came riding full speed onto the field ----- totally buck naked!

There were maybe 10 to 15 thousand fans, and of course the players were going nuts. Madden actually laughed and Stork said, “Coach, you told me to quit horsing around and take off my uniform...”

They covered him up with one of the player’s coats and had someone escort him to the locker room.

But his most infamous deal was the final day of training camp.

The Raiders would always stake out this one pizza place and go there most nights. Owners loved it, since it drew fans.

Well, it was a sacred event that on the last night, Stork would have his “pizza and beer” bowling tournament.

If you’re old enough, you may remember those little “bowling alleys,” the ones with the silver “pucks,” wherein you slide them down the alley and the pins fold up.

Well, Stork had different rules. No pucks. He gathered up all those one pound discs and stored them off to the side. He then set up teams, and drew lines, in increasing distance from the alley. Each player had to chug a FULL PUTCHER of beer then run to the alley and dive head first (no outstretched arms) and slide down the alley.

Of course, the further back you got, the sooner your head would meet with the front of the alley, and, often, knock the players out!

The more they drank, the more heads were crashed.

Finally, when all but one member of a team was left, Stork declared “HIS” team the winner.

Usually that was it. But for some reason, Lyle Alzedo and Big Ben Davidson had gotten all of those one pound pucks. They proceeded to turn over a few tables and started hurling these things at Stork and his boys. As you can imagine, all tables were quickly up ended and pucks really began to fly.

When the cops finally showed up, nearly every window in the place was busted, there were maybe 15-20 pizzas they had confiscated and were throwing then about, et al.

As you can imagine, the place was nearly destroyed. Damage was over \$50,000. Stork, pizza sauce and blood all over him, simply said, 'This was great. Wait 'til next year.'

Note: There was no next year at that pizza place, the owners made it off limits to the Raiders. Wonder why?

Being an NFL beat writer had its fun and adventure.

Some games I would be on the sideline, others up in the press box.

One time, Niners at Saints, Steve Young was chased out of the pocket and ran towards my sideline. I was taking pictures as fast as I could, but Young got blasted out of bounds, and while I tried to jump out of his way, he crashed into me and I flipped a 360 and landed right on top of him.

My first thought was I had hurt him and my press days were over. He just jumped up, asked my name and if I was hurt, patted me on the backside and ran back.

After the game, I was in their locker room and he not only remembered my name, he again asked if I was OK. Even more astonishing, later that year when I went to SF and saw him in the locker room, he immediately called me by my name.

Really a nice guy. Pretty good QB, also.

There were many other "moments," not all of them so cool.

In '96, I was there when then Coach Jim Mora went into his melt down after a miserable 19-7 loss to Carolina on October 20. He just up and quit, right in the middle of the season. He started screaming about his woulda, coulda, shoulda, etc and stormed out of the press room and left, never to be heard from again.

Poor Rick Venturi took over. Super nice guy, honest and friendly with the media, but he was lost. They finished 1-7 and Venturi was gone.

Then, the "good times" began.

Mike Ditka took over in 1997. He was a disaster from the start. You remember when he announced he was going to trade the entire draft for Ricky Williams. Then the wedding gown thing. Geeze.

Ricky was out there. After the games, he would sit down on the floor in the locker room, with his helmet on and the darkened visor closed over his face. Bothering to ask him questions was as worthless as tits on a boar.

He would simply mumble some inaudible nonsense and then just shut up.

This went on virtually the entire season.

A couple other times, we caught him coming out of the shower. Now the rule is when a player gets to his locker, as long as his back is turned towards you, you did not speak to them. One time, Ricky finally turned around, and several questions were shot at him. He simply stared off into space, never saying a word. He just got half dressed and walked out, carrying the rest of his clothes.

On the opposite side, was Deuce McAllister. After each game, most players were ready to party, whatever. Deuce was always reading the Wall Street Journal and business magazines. I hooked him up with a private banker, and he and Eli Manning and others began buying up entire dilapidated blocks in Jackson, and turning them into trendy shops, etc. He has made millions. Ditka himself was a work of art. He was amenable early on, but as the team sucked, his glare alone was enough to scare a bulldog off a meat wagon.

Several times he was about to blow, so his wife began to come into each press conference, and as you could see his face begin to get red, he'd look at his wife and she'd just nod and he calmed down.

His disaster with Williams got him canned after the '99 season, along with the dumbest GM any NFL team ever had, Bill Kurarich.

Then came THE most turbulent ride. Jim Haslett.

In his first year, 2000, he went 11-5 and led the team to their first ever playoff win. He was Coach of the Year.

But it all went down hill from there. Fast!

In 2002, they were 9-4, lost the last 3 and never finished better than .500.

But it was Haslett's complete loss of control of the team that was the real story.

He had a mix of all types of players, and mostly they did not get along. They would have "parties" every Tuesday night, and often Haslett would attend.

He even managed to get a Saints cheer leader pregnant!

His adamant stance of sticking with loser Aaron Brooks cost them two bad seasons, 8-8. He refused to even consider Jake Delhome.

I personally got into it one time with him.

It was a Monday night game against, I think, the Jets. We were supposed to win easily, but gave up 11 points in the last 5 minutes. This was the infamous game when the ever so volatile (see insane) Kyle Turley ripped the helmet off a Jets player and threw it in the air, costing the Saints 15 yards and the loss.

After the game, I asked Jim, "Was this game a setback?" My God, you'da thunk I had ripped his wife and kids. He immediately started screaming, "What kind of question is that? Who the F is that. What's that F doing here, Get him the F outa here," and so on, and he stormed out.

Later Kenny Trahan found me in the locker room and said Haslett was looking for me to apologize. He never did.

I had an early flight to California the next morning, and when I got to my hotel in Malibu, there were 11 messages waiting for me.

Seems ESPN had caught his tirade and it was THE story of the week.

He had apologized on TV and everyone wanted to know if I had seen it. I did not, but he and I were not on the best of terms thereafter.

From then on, my fellow press folks called me, "setback."

Turley was something else. No one dared to even ask him a question. I had written a column a week or so before, calling him "surly Turley."

When he saw me, he actually started chasing me across the locker room, saying he was going to kill me. Haslett came racing in and they managed to calm him down, but he left the locker room, slamming doors and cursing, nearly knocking several people over.

He also nearly killed a new WR they had just signed mid season. Can't remember his name, but he was about to kill this guy. It was clearly a racial thing, which showed how out of control Haslett's team was.

The only bright spot was WR Joe Horn. If you ever needed a quote, Horn was your man. From the minute he put on his yellow or purple suit, he started talking, and did not stop until he was the last one there.

Jerry Fontenot, center, was a really nice guy. Always ready to answer questions.

Next to him was Jim Dombrowski, another good guy. I got to know him pretty well, and worked out with him at then Gold's gym

No dumb Pollock, he. Graduated from UVA in 3 ½ years with a 3.95 GPA in bio-chemistry. Was admitted to several med schools, but took the big bucks of football.

Grady Jackson was a DT, weighed in around 370. Sitting between a couple of chiseled players, he looked like Jabba the Hut. I didn't even know he had a belly button until his second season.

Ah, the aroma of those locker rooms. About 10,000 pounds of sweaty monsters. Sweet! NOT!

Many many more stories, but not enough space.

Road games pretty much sucked. Philadelphia was something. Trying to walk off the field into the Eagles locker room after the game was a sure way to get spit on, bombarded with whatever, and called every name possible.

Back in 1969, fans fired snow/ice balls at Santa Clause as he was driven in a sleigh at half time. They had to cancel his trip.

S.F had the best locker room. Huge. Each locker was double sized, came with its own TV, lounge chairs and there were huge whirl pools, pool tables, everything.

There were pictures of Joe Montana everywhere.

Super Bowls were pretty cool, except after 2001. It took 2 weeks just to get your press pass, and it was like a CIA thing, no longer just the little chit tag around your neck. Plus, you had to be in the stadium by 10 am. Damn game did not start 'til 5:30.

Overall, it was pretty fun. But after awhile, you got worn out. Even on home games, you left the house about 8 AM and did not get back until after 6.

Away games took the entire weekend.

I did this from 1996 through 2004, though by then I was tired, and actually "cheated" a couple of '04 games. I watched them on TV and wrote my story, getting a couple of quotes when another writer who was there called me.

And with Katrina, it all came to a very quick end.

But it certainly was fun to be on the inside like that for awhile. I'll say this, if you ever got to stand on the sideline during an NFL game, it would take your breath away. These 300 pound plus guys were faster than you. And the noise when tackles were made. Not tackles, really, more like train wrecks.

I took several friends to games and had them on the sidelines, and they just could not believe it all. It was a lot of fun! From bad games to SB's, it was worth it.

Speaking of worth it, single malt time!