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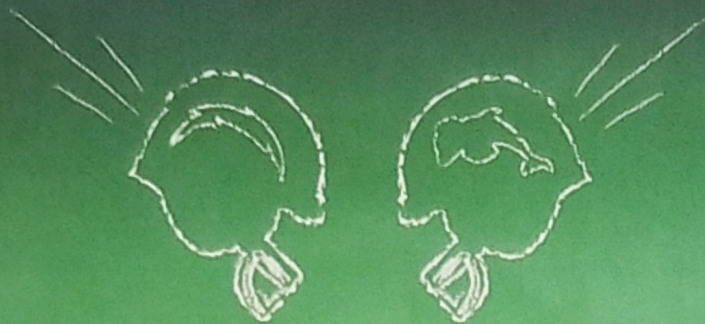
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**MAX EFFORT** This iconic photo captures the extremes that Kellen Winslow (center) went in helping his team overcome both the Dolphins and the conditions. Billy Shields (66) and fellow tight end Eric Siever supported Winslow after the game, as captured by photographer Al Messerschmidt.





# Warriors

THIRTY YEARS AGO, THE DOLPHINS AND  
THE CHARGERS LEFT IT ALL ON THE FIELD  
IN A CLASSIC NFL PLAYOFF GAME

BY JOE SOEHN

**KELLEN WINSLOW COULD BARELY MOVE.** He had played this game so hard that he had broken two shoulder pads. He was cramping up so badly he could hardly stand when the defense was on the field. He would end up being nearly carried from the field of battle. Didn't matter.

When his San Diego Chargers needed him, he answered the call. Now, with just a few seconds left in regulation in this exhausting 1981 AFC Divisional Playoff Game against Miami, the Chargers sent the big tight end to try to stop a possible game-winning field goal. As he had done time and again on this historic night, Winslow came through. He rose up all 6 feet, 5 inches of his frame, extended his arm, and with barely a pinkie disrupted the flight of the kick.

Only one problem: That left the game still tied... and into overtime went the walking dead.

The playoff game between the Chargers and Dolphins, otherwise known as "The Epic in Miami," occurred 30 years ago this month and transcended its first-round playoff status to become one of the most exciting games in NFL history. The showdown had everything: overtime, record-setting performances, a stirring comeback, seesaw momentum swings, gut-wrenching turnovers, even a once-in-a-lifetime gadget play that worked to perfection. Surpassing all this,

perhaps, was Winslow's tremendous individual effort: a 13-catch, soul-draining performance that remains legendary.

"[The game] had it all," former Dolphins coach Don Shula said in a recent interview. "It had everything going for it."

In honor of its 30th anniversary, this AFC playoff gem is worth another look.

With perhaps the most explosive offense the league had seen up to that point, the 1981 Chargers (10-6) led the NFL with 478 points (29.9 per game) and won their third consecutive AFC Western Division title. Led by visionary head coach Don Coryell, inventor of the "Air Coryell" attack, the Chargers were ahead of the times, emphasizing a diversified passing attack amid a league largely populated with more traditional run-pass offensive schemes. Basically, theirs was a precursor to the abundant pass-first systems of today.

With arguably the league's most dangerous quarterback, Dan Fouts, at the controls and a corps

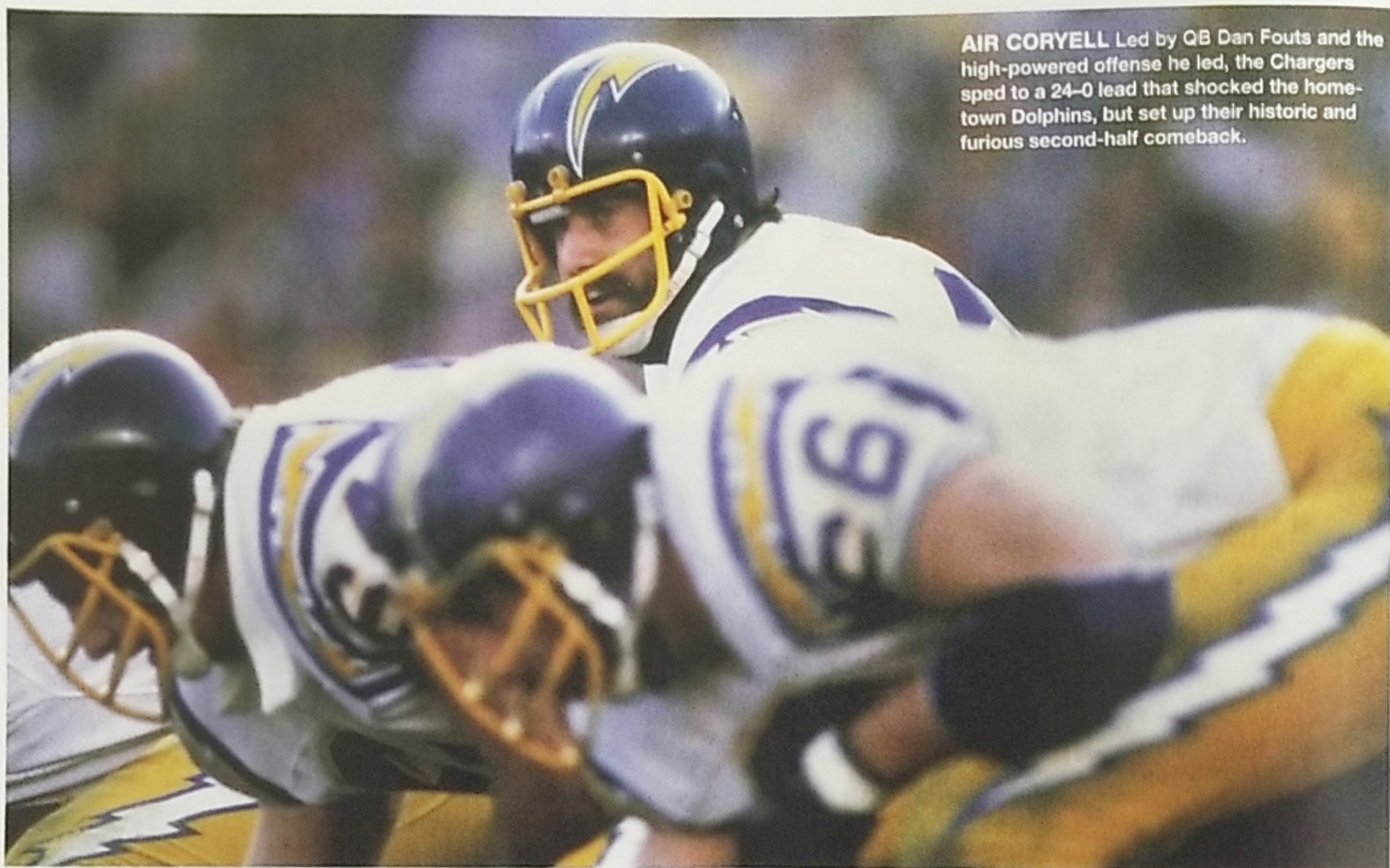
of outstanding receivers at his disposal, including Charlie Joiner, Wes Chandler, and Winslow, San Diego invariably moved down the field at a lightning-quick pace. Defensively, the Chargers were a different story. The club gave up 390 points, the third-highest total in the league that season. Yet their defense still had All-Pro talents such as Louie Kelcher and Gary Johnson, and did enough to help the team get to the playoffs.

Meanwhile, over in the AFC East, Miami bounced back from an 8-8 campaign in 1980 to go 11-4-1 and earn its sixth divisional crown under Shula. Like Shula-coached teams of the past, the Dolphins were steady, disciplined, and extremely competitive. Unlike San Diego, the Dolphins took a more conservative approach but employed an interesting offensive concept, as well. Quarterback Bob Griese, a longtime Miami favorite, had retired before the season. In his place was second-year passer David Woodley, an eighth-round draft pick out of LSU in 1980.

Woodley's athletic talents, particularly his mobility, earned Shula's praise, and earned him the starting nod over another veteran, Don Strock.

"[Woodley] was a good all-around athlete," Shula said. "We just tried to utilize his athletic ability on a lot of things that you wouldn't do with just a drop-back quarterback."





**AIR CORYELL** Led by QB Dan Fouts and the high-powered offense he led, the Chargers sped to a 24-0 lead that shocked the hometown Dolphins, but set up their historic and furious second-half comeback.

**S**

till, Strock figured prominently in the picture as the season wore on, and the former Virginia Tech standout saw playing time as Woodley's occasional replacement. In effect, it became a two-quarterback system known as "Woodstock." On the other side of the ball, Miami's defense, led by defensive guru Bill Arnsparger, stifled opponents and allowed the fewest points in the AFC (275).

So on January 2, 1982, the Chargers and Dolphins met for a spot in the AFC Championship Game.

The game took place at Miami's legendary Orange Bowl Stadium, and south Florida provided part of the drama—heat and humidity that made the nearly five quarters intensely draining.

The contest began with the Chargers bolting out to a 24-0 lead in the first quarter. The Chargers scored four times in a span of just over eight minutes:

- a nine-play, 64-yard opening drive that ended with a 32-yard field goal by Rolf Benirschke;
- a 56-yard punt return for a touchdown by Chandler;
- a 1-yard scoring run by running back Chuck

Muncie, which was set up by the Chargers' recovery of the ball on the kickoff after Chandler's score;

—and an 8-yard touchdown pass from Fouts to James Brooks, three plays after San Diego's Glen Edwards intercepted a Woodley pass.

"It was shocking," Dolphins receiver Nat Moore said. "I mean, it was almost like we couldn't get out of our own way, you know?"

As the game moved into the second quarter, the Dolphins needed to respond or risk losing the game by halftime. Meanwhile, San Diego players knew better than to count out their opponents.

"Well, it was still light out," Fouts said, reflecting back. "And there were three quarters to go. So it wasn't like we felt like we had it salted away."

"I knew what they could do offensively, especially (with) Don Shula, he was one of the most successful coaches who's ever coached the game," Muncie said. "And 24-nothing, if we could score 24 points that fast, I knew they could score 24 points that fast too."

Although Miami punted on its first possession of the quarter, the Dolphins' defense then forced the Chargers to punt for the first time. It was at that point, with 12:05 to go in the first half, that Shula motioned for his "relief pitcher," Strock, to enter the game in place of Woodley.

Strock immediately went to work, completing 4-of-7 pass attempts to get the team on the board via a 34-yard field goal by Uwe von Schamann. The 24-3 deficit was still daunting, but Strock clearly had energized his team.

"I think [my teammates] responded very well," Strock said. "I told them exactly what we were going to do in the huddle: We're gonna still run the offense, take shots when we can, but we want to get some points on the board, especially in the very first series. It kind of built confidence in the whole group, and even the guys on the sideline. I thought that was very important, especially when you're down 24-0."

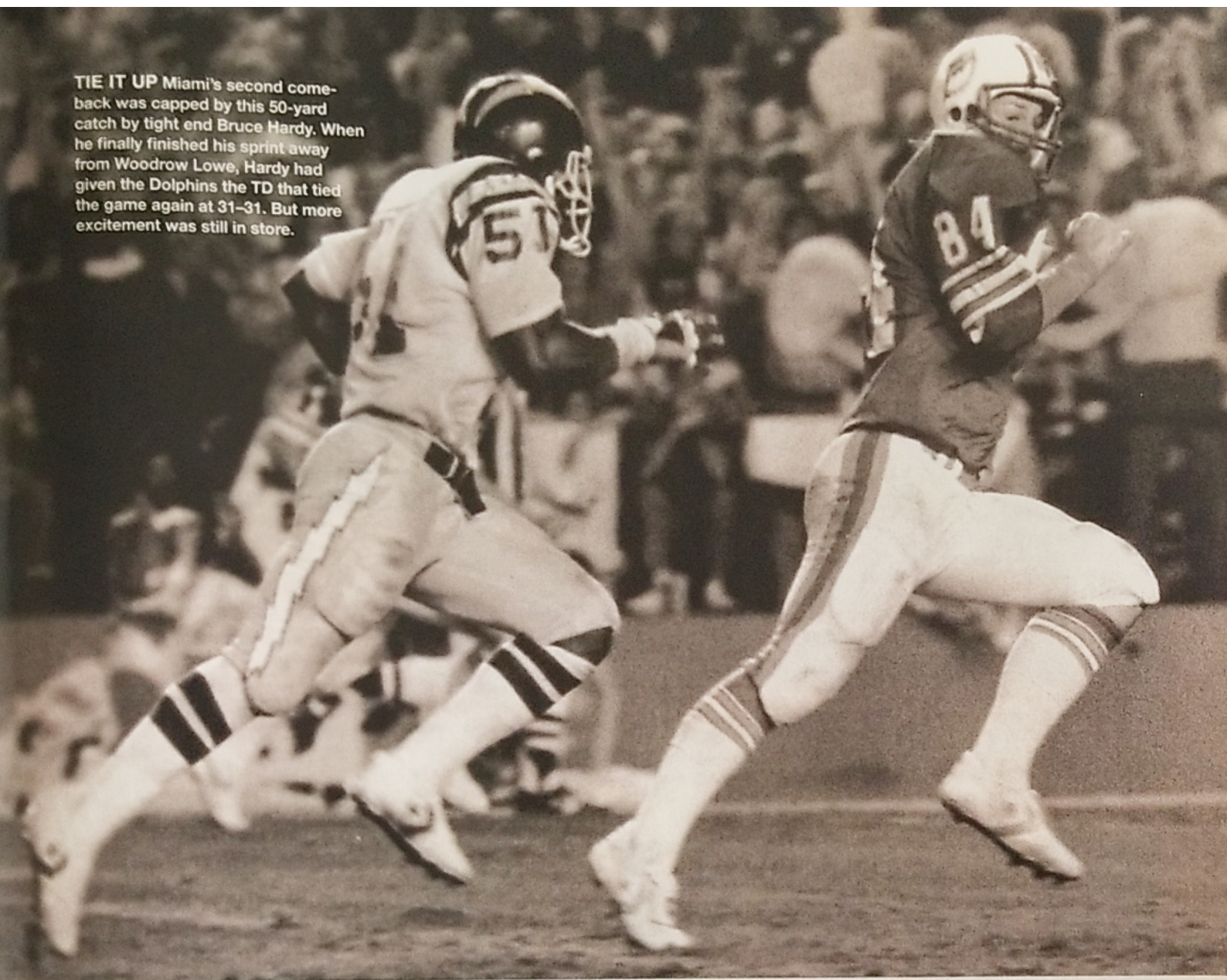
Shortly thereafter, Strock was given a short field thanks to a Chargers' fumble, and he quickly moved the Dolphins inside San Diego's 10-yard line. On third-and-goal, Strock, under pressure, found tight end Joe Rose in the end zone for a touchdown.

The Chargers had a chance to pad their lead with 36 seconds left in the first half but Benirschke's 55-yard field goal attempt was wide right.

And here's where things got really interesting. Not content with letting the time run out and waiting for the opening possession of the second half to continue mounting their comeback, the Dolphins wanted to strike while Strock was still hot.



**TIE IT UP** Miami's second comeback was capped by this 50-yard catch by tight end Bruce Hardy. When he finally finished his sprint away from Woodrow Lowe, Hardy had given the Dolphins the TD that tied the game again at 31-31. But more excitement was still in store.



Only 30 seconds remained after the missed field goal, but Strock, armed with two timeouts, was ready to operate. Through three quick pass plays, Strock marched Miami to San Diego's 40-yard line. However, the plays ate up 24 seconds and forced the Dolphins to call a time out to consider their options.

A field-goal try from that distance was a bit out of von Schamann's range. A long throw into the end zone seemed to be on tap.

However, Shula and Strock sprung a surprise.

"I was standing on the sidelines [during the timeout], Shula was talking to Strock. Strock was giving his opinion about what he felt would work at that time, and Shula just said let's do the hook and lateral," running back Tony Nathan said.

Nathan remembers the reaction when Strock returned to the huddle and relayed the play call: "I looked at him and the other receivers looked up at him, and it was like, 'Alright, here we go!'"

Strock snapped the ball, dropped back, and flung a pass to wide receiver Duriel Harris at the 25-yard line. Harris, facing back toward the line of scrimmage, immediately lateraled the ball back to Nathan, who caught the pitch with a full head of steam and scampered past San Diego's stunned defense down the right sideline for a wild touchdown.

"The first thing I did was look around for flags," Strock said. "But it worked to perfection, and, obviously, the crowd just went nuts."

"It went off with no hitches at all," Nathan said.

With the hook-and-lateral play that remains one of the NFL's most-remembered, the Chargers' early dominance evaporated into the thick Miami night. 24-0 had become 24-17, and all the momentum was going Miami's way.

"At halftime, it gave us so much more energy and we couldn't wait for the second half to start," Shula said. "Our fans, I understand, never sat down at

halftime, they stood up the whole time waiting for us to come back out. And I felt that the dumbest thing I could do at halftime was to try to make an inspirational speech to them because everybody was just so sky-high after that play."

The Dolphins opened the second half on offense, and Strock picked up where he left off in the previous quarter. He moved the team 74 yards in eight plays and hit Rose on a game-tying, 15-yard touchdown toss just four minutes into the half.

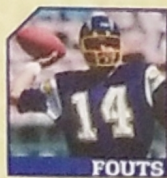
With the score tied, the game changed from a pattern of dominance-and-comeback to a series of back-and-forth punches that soon challenged players physically and mentally.

After trading possessions with the score tied, the Chargers finally got on the scoreboard for the first time since the opening period. Fouts hit Winslow over the middle for a 25-yard touchdown to put the Chargers back in front, 31-24.



## Where Are They Now?

It's been 30 years since they staged their legendary shootout in Miami, and many of the participants went on to achieve further success on the field, the sidelines, and elsewhere. Here's a look at what some of them are up to today.



FOUTS



WINSLOW



JOINER



CORYELL

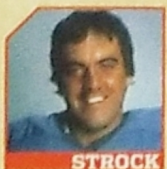
### SAN DIEGO CHARGERS

**DAN FOUTS** Fouts put together an incredible 15-year NFL career, becoming only the third quarterback in NFL history to throw for more than 40,000 yards. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1993, and is currently a color commentator for NFL game telecasts on CBS.

**KELLEN WINSLOW** The prototype for pass-catching tight ends, Winslow revolutionized the position with his combination of size, speed, and pass-catching abilities. He concluded his NFL career in 1987 and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1995. Today, Winslow serves as the Director of Athletics and Wellness for Central State University in Ohio.

**CHARLIE JOINER** Originally drafted by the Houston Oilers as a defensive back in 1969, Joiner was the NFL's all-time leading receiver with 750 catches at the time of his retirement 20 seasons later, including 11 with San Diego. A member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame class of 1996, Joiner is the wide receivers coach for the Chargers.

**DON CORYELL** The colorful coach noted for his offensive innovations passed away in 2010 at age 85. With 111 career NFL coaching wins to his credit, Coryell was named a semifinalist for the 2012 Pro Football Hall of Fame induction class. The winners will be announced on February 4 during Super Bowl week in Indianapolis.



STROCK



NATHAN



ROSE



SHULA

### MIAMI DOLPHINS

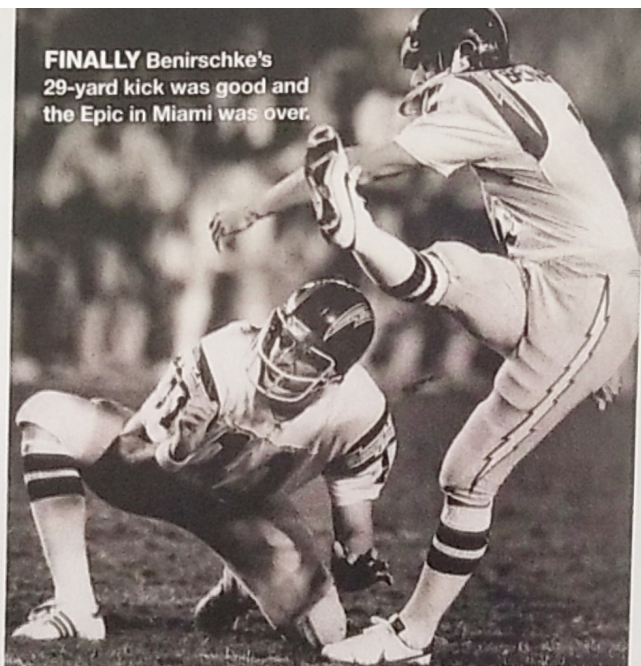
**DON STROCK** A fifth-round choice by the Dolphins in the 1973 NFL Draft, Strock was a staple in Miami for 14 years before concluding his pro career with Cleveland in 1988. Since 1983, he has hosted the Don Strock Diabetes Golf Classic, a charity golf tournament that raises funds for the Diabetes Research Institute (DRI) at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine.

**TONY NATHAN** A versatile back who scored on the famous hook-and-lateral play, Nathan was a dependable rushing (3,543 career yards) and pass-catching (3,592 yards) threat for the Dolphins from 1979 to 1987. Since his retirement, he has coached at the pro, college, and high school levels. Nathan currently serves as a bailiff for former Dolphins offensive guard Ed Newman, a Miami-Dade County court judge.

**JOE ROSE** The player who caught 2 touchdown passes to help Miami climb back from a 24-0 deficit played seven seasons in the NFL (1981-87), six of them with the Dolphins. He is currently a sports anchor for NBC 6 Miami and a radio host on WQAM 560 in Miami.

**DON SHULA** The winningest coach in NFL history with 347 overall wins, Shula retired following the 1995 season. He served 33 seasons as a head coach, the last 26 with the Dolphins. Shula, a two-time Super Bowl winner and a 1997 Pro Football Hall of Fame inductee, oversees a successful restaurant business with a collection of chains (including Shula's Steak Houses and Shula's 347 Grill) in the Southeast.

**FINALLY** Benirschke's 29-yard kick was good and the Epic in Miami was over.



Miami hit right back with a powerful combination. Bruce Hardy hauled in a beautiful throw by Strock and recorded the longest scoring play (50 yards) by a tight end in Dolphins' history. After intercepting Fouts' pass, Miami then grabbed its first lead of the game on an early fourth-quarter run by Nathan. Down 24 points early, the Dolphins had forged a remarkable comeback and led 38-31, with the momentum firmly on their side.

Miami was heading toward what could have been a clinching score, even as increasing fatigue and the heat and humidity were pushing San Diego into survival mode. But the Chargers got a big break when fullback Andra Franklin fumbled, and San Diego recovered. With 4:39 and three timeouts remaining, the Chargers, who thought they had the game in hand two hours earlier, had another shot to try and tie it up.

"You know, we were just feeling that, 'Okay, let's go down and get it,'" Fouts said. "And, again, it's just business as usual."

Sure enough, the Chargers drove 82 yards to knot the score again, thanks to a heads-up play by Brooks. On first-and-goal from Miami's 9-yard line, Fouts, forced from the pocket, overthrew Winslow in the end zone. But Brooks, a rookie from Auburn, had reacted to Fouts' scrambling by running along the baseline of the end zone. Although Winslow couldn't reach the ball, Brooks made a stunning catch.

"I was like a secondary receiver, and basically when he rolled, all I did was run what we call a slip pattern," Brooks said. "When I ran down there and turned, [Fouts] was looking at Kellen, [and] all I did was go toward the ball. I just stayed behind [Winslow] and made sure I didn't step on the line. As a matter of fact, [the Dolphins defenders] didn't even see me back there, they had so much focus on Kellen. And all I'm thinking is, as long as he doesn't hit me, I can catch the ball. And I just took off and caught it."

Ready for OT? Not so fast. The fourth-quarter roller coaster had yet to come to a complete stop.

Taking advantage of a squib kick, the Dolphins returned the ensuing kickoff to their own 40-yard line. Miami had 58 seconds to get in range for a game-winning field goal try. Just to add to the drama, Strock then threw a pick on the second play of the drive... which the Chargers promptly fumbled back during the runback. Miami eventually drove to San Diego's 25-yard line and called on von Schamann to attempt the game-winner.

On the other side of the field, the Chargers' hopes were pretty much left to blocking the kick. So here came Winslow.



**A SHOCKER** The Dolphins entered NFL legend with this hook-and-lateral play just before half-time. Harris did about a 15-yard hook pattern, while Nathan trailed the play out of the backfield. A perfect pass by Strock led to a quick pitch to Nathan, now moving at full speed, and he ran untouched the final 25 yards for the score.

Winslow not only would catch 13 passes in the game, but he also was a key part of the rushing attack as a blocker. Drained as he was, though, he joined the kick-block team for this attempt to save the game.

"My pinkie and the outside edge of my right hand," Winslow said in the November 1982 issue of *Pro* magazine. "That's all I got. It was the biggest thrill of my life. It felt like I had scored three touchdowns."

Thanks to Winslow's historic block, everyone got to stick around and play more football. It was 38-38. Bring on overtime.

As if trying to add to the drama, each side had a chance to wrap things up in the extra session with field goals—but each side blew it. Benirschke missed a 27-yarder while von Schamann's 35-yard attempt was blocked, this time by Chargers defensive lineman Leroy Jones. Did anyone want to win this game?

"Three of the guys that were in field-goal protection were defensive players that were getting a rest," Benirschke recalled about his missed kick in OT. "And so they didn't anticipate the call [for a field-goal attempt, since it was third down]. And so we're out there and we're missing three guys, we're yelling and shutting them in. I'm telling [holder] Ed Luther, 'Let's call time out, call time out,' and he goes 'No, no, it's short, it's short, just kick it, we'll just kick it.' I should have called time out and gotten set. It was a close kick but we were rushed."

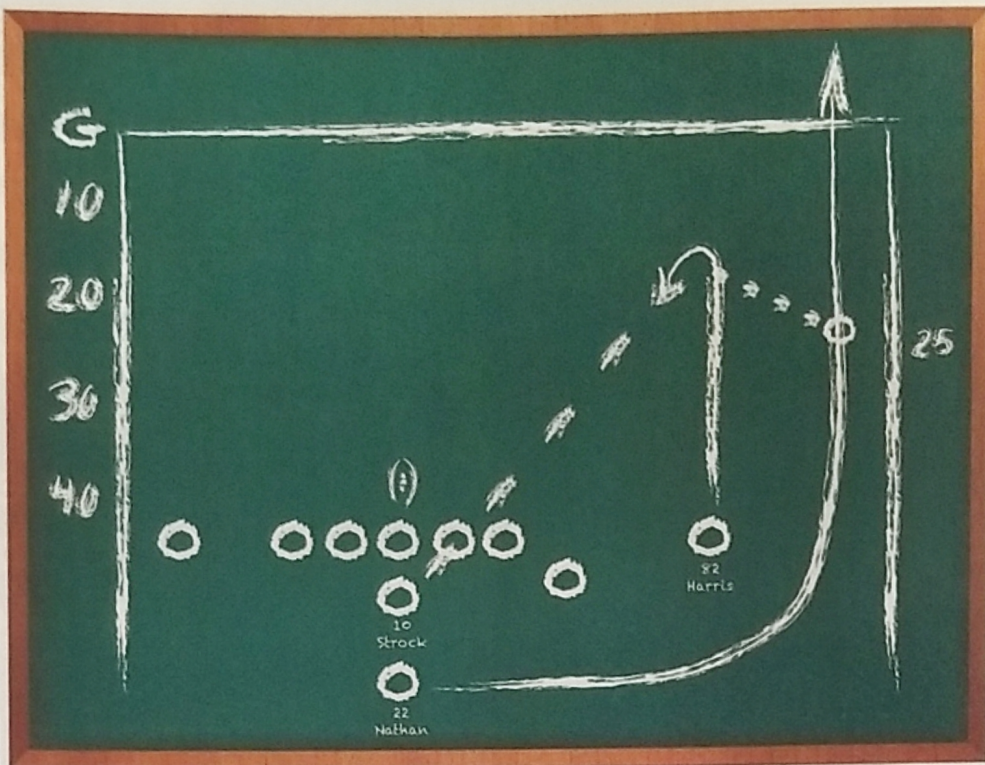
**"I started wondering how much longer I could go at this pace, physically."** —Kellen Winslow

For von Schamann, the poor field conditions really hindered his attempts.

"At that time of the year, the Orange Bowl, the field was just always in really bad shape and it was basically kicking off dirt. And what they did was they painted the dirt to make it look nice on TV. A lot of it was just dirt, I mean sand. And so I basically just hit it fat. Twice. Instead of kicking it off the sand, I just hit it a little bit fat," von Schamann recounted later.

As time dragged on in the extra session, fatigue was becoming more and more of a factor.

"[After Benirschke's miss in OT] I started wondering how much longer I could go at this pace, physically," Winslow said. "I was getting cramps on just about every other play. I missed a good part of the



overtime getting repaired. I went through three pairs of shoulder pads that night. They kept breaking."

But the teams kept at it until the Chargers, through their bread-and-butter passing game and a 29-yard field goal by Benirschke, claimed the win, 41-38. It was almost anticlimactic after all the drama. The crowd was silent, of course, having watched their Dolphins rally and fall short. The players could barely walk, let alone celebrate. The famous photo by Al Messerschmidt of Winslow being helped off the field

400 yards (Fouts with 433, Strock with 403). Though some of those marks have since been topped, perhaps no game continues to be remembered as fondly by those who admire grit and heart.

"It's very, very rare when you look across the field at the end of an epic battle and know that not just most of the guys, or half of the guys or some of the guys, but every guy was physically, mentally, emotionally spent," San Diego RB Hank Bauer said. "And they invested everything they had—coaches, players, staff, fans—that's what I remember. I'll never forget Ed just walked right into the showers full uniform and turned the water on. Nobody saw that, everybody saw Kellen getting carried off."

The Chargers went on to play at Cincinnati the following week for the AFC championship in extraordinarily cold temperatures—minus-9 degrees, with a wind chill factor that took it to an unearthly minus-59 degrees. The conditions wreaked havoc on the team's aerial operations, and the Bengals took advantage to advance to Super Bowl XVI.

The extreme weather of the "Freezer Bowl," plus its higher stakes, threatened to overshadow the Chargers-Dolphins' playoff matchup. However, all of the thrills, drama, and excitement that played out on January 2, 1982, were already frozen in time, instantly preserved as one of the NFL's all-time classics.

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summed up the game for those who took part.

"We were, of course, happy," Fouts said. "When you're on the road and you win a game like that, there's just noise of your own team cheering and laughing and having fun. But everybody was so tired, it was pretty quiet."

The Dolphins' disappointment was numbing.

"Two great teams and one of those kind of games you remember," Shula said. "You'd like to think that you'd win them all, but sometimes you don't."

The 41-38 shootout did set some notable postseason records, including most total points (79), most total yards (1,036), and most receptions (Winslow, 13, later tied by two players). It also produced the first game with two quarterbacks each throwing for more than