

NFL Super Bowl

The Greatest Championships of All Time



Jim Gallagher



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CONTENTS

Introduction	4
The Biggest Day in American Sports	
Chapter One	9
A Brash Guarantee	
Super Bowl III (1969)	
New York Jets 16, Baltimore Colts 7	
Chapter Two	19
The Team of the 1970s	
Super Bowl XIII (1979)	
Pittsburgh Steelers 35, Dallas Cowboys 31	
Chapter Three	28
The Upset	
Super Bowl XLII (2008)	
New York Giants 17, New England Patriots 14	
Chapter Four	38
The Comeback	
Super Bowl LI (2017)	
New England Patriots 34, Atlanta Falcons 28	
Chapter Five	48
A New Dynasty	
Super Bowl LVIII (2024)	
Kansas City Chiefs 25, San Francisco 49ers 22	
Source Notes	57
For Further Research	59
Index	61
Picture Credits	64
About the Author	64

The Upset

Super Bowl XLII (2008)

New York Giants 17, New England Patriots 14

In the week before Super Bowl XLII, players and coaches for the New England Patriots just wanted to focus on the championship. “We are just thinking about trying to win on Sunday,” said head coach Bill Belichick. “The Giants are undefeated in the playoffs. We are undefeated in the playoffs and only one team will be left standing on Sunday night and we hope it is us.”¹⁸

One of the teams also had an opportunity to make NFL history. During the regular season, the Patriots had scored 589 points, an average of nearly 37 points per game, which easily shattered the NFL record (556). The Patriots scored more than 30 points in twelve of sixteen games and out-scored opponents by 315 points—two more NFL records. The Patriots became the second NFL team in the Super Bowl era to go undefeated in the regular season, after the 1972 Miami Dolphins. The team was also the first to win sixteen regular-season games because the Dolphins had played a fourteen-game season. If the Patriots won the 2008 Super Bowl, they would have a strong claim to be considered the greatest pro football team of all time.

Two Tough Teams

When Belichick became the Patriots head coach prior to the 2000 season, he stressed the importance of each player understanding and perfectly executing his individual assignment

within the team's larger game-day strategy. The players quickly embraced this "do-your-job" philosophy. The Patriots went from a losing record in Belichick's first year to winning three Super Bowls in the next four seasons.

Midway through the 2001 season, Patriots starting quarterback Drew Bledsoe was injured, and rookie backup Tom Brady took over. Although Brady helped the Patriots win the Super Bowl that season, he was mainly a game manager. The team relied on its defense and running game, and Belichick trusted Brady to protect the football with safe, short passes rather than asking him to win games with splashy plays. But over the next few years, as



Patriots quarterback Tom Brady sets to throw during Super Bowl XLII. Brady had developed over the previous eight years from a backup into an elite, MVP quarterback.

the Patriots continued winning, Brady developed into a star capable of making big-time downfield throws. In 2007, he became the first NFL quarterback to throw fifty touchdown passes in a season and was named the league's MVP. He was supported by talented receivers: Randy Moss was a deep threat, catching ninety-eight passes for 1,493 yards and an NFL-record twenty-three touchdowns, and Wes Welker led the league with 112 receptions.

Their opponent in the Super Bowl in 2008 would be the New York Giants, coached by Tom Coughlin. The Giants had made the playoffs as a wild card team with a 10–6 record. That sixth loss had come in the final game of the regular season, against the Patriots. The Giants had played well, leading 28–16 midway through the third quarter. But Brady led a fourth-quarter comeback for a hard-fought 38–35 win. Now, the only team left that could derail the Patriots' perfect season was the New York Giants.

A Low-Scoring Contest

The Giants received the opening kickoff, and for nearly 10 minutes quarterback Eli Manning led a methodical sixteen-play drive downfield. Most plays were runs; the biggest passing gain was a 14-yard completion to Plaxico Burress. The drive stalled near the goal line, but Lawrence Tynes kicked a 32-yard field goal for a 3–0 Giants lead. The potent Patriots offense answered with a twelve-play drive of its own, which ended with Lawrence Maroney scoring a touchdown early in the second quarter.

On their next possession, the Giants moved into scoring position again, but Patriots cornerback Ellis Hobbs picked off Manning's pass at the Patriots 10. After

this, the game settled into a defensive stalemate. Late in the second quarter, Brady's 18-yard pass to Moss brought the Patriots to the Giants 44 with 22 seconds left in the half. But on the next play, Giants defensive end Justin Tuck sacked Brady for a 7-yard loss;

SUPER BOWL STATS

Stephen Gostkowski played in six Super Bowls with the Patriots, more than any other kicker in NFL history.

A Perfect NFL Season

Only one NFL team has completed both the regular season and playoffs without losing or tying a game. In 1972, the Miami Dolphins, coached by Don Shula, won all fourteen regular-season games and three playoff games (including Super Bowl VII in January 1973) to finish 17–0. Members of that Dolphins team remain close. “There’s a unity that goes on with the ’72 team,” notes running back Larry Csonka. “To say that you’re the number one team in the history of the league, the only one that went from game one to the championship and won them all. It’s a thing you’re more proud of because it reflects *teamwork*, not just a few stars.”

Before the Super Bowl era, two teams had finished the regular season undefeated but lost in the NFL championship game. In 1934, the Chicago Bears finished with a 13–0 regular-season record but lost the championship to the New York Giants on an icy field, 30–13. The 1942 Bears earned an 11–0 regular-season record. But they were beaten, 14–6, by the Washington Redskins in the title game.

Quoted in Joseph Palmer, “50 Years On, the 1972 Miami Dolphins’ Undefeated Season Remains Undefeated,” *The Guardian*, November 24, 2022. www.theguardian.com.

Brady fumbled on the play, and the Giants’ Osi Umenyiora recovered the ball. At halftime, the Patriots still held a 7–3 lead.

New England received the ball to start the third quarter. Although Brady led the offense on a drive that took about 9 minutes off the clock and reached the New York 28, it ended with no points. A third-down sack by Michael Strahan knocked New England out of field goal range, and Brady’s fourth-down pass fell incomplete.

On the Giants’ first play of the fourth quarter, Manning hit tight end Kevin Boss with a deep pass, gaining 45 yards. That moved the ball to the Patriots 35. Several plays later, David Tyree caught a short touchdown pass to give the Giants a 10–7 lead.

With 7:34 left, Brady took over again. He led a twelve-play drive that burned more than 5 minutes off the clock, completing eight of eleven passes for 73 yards to Welker, running back Kevin Faulk, and Moss. The drive ended with a 6-yard touchdown catch by Moss. Stephen Gostkowski’s extra point gave New England a 14–10 lead with just 2:45 remaining.

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19. Quoted in Dan Salomone, "One Giant Victory: An Oral History of the Winning Drive in Super Bowl XLII," New York Giants, February 8, 2024. www.giants.com.
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www.espn.com/nfl

The NFL on ESPN page provides links and recaps of NFL games as well as live score updates, video highlights, and pro football news.

NFL.com

www.nfl.com

The NFL's official website provides news about the league, conference and division standings, team schedules, player statistics, and video highlights.

INDEX

Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.

- Adderly, Herb, 8
Aikman, Troy, 38, 43
Alford, Robert, 40, 45
Allen, Josh, 52
Amendola, Danny, 40, 43
American Football League (AFL), 6
Armistead, Arik, 51
Atlanta Falcons, in Super Bowl LI, 38–39, 42, 43–44, 45–46
- Baltimore Colts, 43
 in Super Bowl III, 9–11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Banaszak, John, 22–23
Barber, Phil, 5–6
Barnes, Benny, 24
Belichick, Bill, 28–29, 39, 42, 44, **44**, 45, 48
Benoit, Andy, 44
Bledsoe, Drew, 29
Blount, LeGarrett, 40
Boozer, Emerson, 14, 17
Bosa, Nick, 50
Boss, Kevin, 31
Bradshaw, Terry, 21, 23, 24, 25
 in Super Bowl XIII, **26**
Brady, Tom, 21, 29–30, 40, **46**
 Patrick Mahomes as successor to, 48
 in Super Bowl XLVII, **29**, 30–31
 in Super Bowl LI, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47
 on 2007 Patriots team, 36
Brown, Ji’Ayir, 51
Buffalo Bills
 in 1993 playoff game, 43
 in Super Bowl XXVII, 38
 in 2022 playoff game, 52
Burruss, Plaxico, 30, 35
Butker, Harrison, 51, 53, 54
Butler, Malcolm, 39
- Cheffers, Carl, 45
Chenal, Leo, 53
Chicago Bears, 5
Coleman, Tevin, 39
Collins, Marcus, 55
Coughlin, Tom, 30, 37
- Dallas Cowboys, 19, 20–21
 in Super Bowl XIII, 22, 25–27
 in Super Bowl XXVII, 38
Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, 21
Dawson, Len, 8
defensive player, first to score, 8
Dent, Richard, 41
Detroit Lions, 5
Dorsett, Tony, 21, 22
DuPree, Billie Joe, 26
- Edelman, Julian, 45
Elway, John, 21
Ewbank, Weeb, 11, 14
- 5-yard rule, 21–22
football, pro, growth in popularity of, 4–5
Freeman, Devonta, 39, 40
- Gerela, Roy, 25
Gostkowski, Stephen, 30, 31, 41
Gowdy, Curt, 17–18
Greene, Joe, 21, 25
Green Bay Packers, 34, 35, 49, 56
 in first two Super Bowls, 7
Greenwood, L.C., 21
- Halas, George, 48
Ham, Jack, 21
Harris, Franco, 21, 24, 25
Harrison, Elliott, 27
Harrison, Rodney, 33, **33**, 34
Henderson, Thomas “Hollywood,” 23, 25
Hightower, Dont’a, 39