A Diehard's Diary:

Chronicles of a Frustrated Jets Fan

by Thomas Protano

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Dedicated To:

Al Atkinson-62, Bill Baird-46, Ralph Baker-51, Randy Beverly-42,
Verlon Biggs-88, Emerson Boozer-32, Earl Christy-45, Paul Crane-56,
Mike D'Amato-47, John Dockery-43, John Elliot-80,
Weeb Ewbank-Head Coach, Cornell Gordon-48, Larry Grantham-60,
Ray Hayes-73, Karl Henke-70, Dave Herman-67, Winston Hill-75,
Jim Hudson-22, Billy Joe-35, Curley Johnson-33, Pete Lammons-87,
Bill Mathis-31, Don Maynard-13, Carl McAdams-50,
Walt Michaels-Coach, Joe Namath-12, John Neidert-63,
Babe Parilli-15, Gerry Philbin-81, Bill Rademacher-23,
Randy Rasmussen-66, Jim Richards-26, Jeff Richardson-74,
Paul Rochester-72, Clive Rush-Coach, Buddy Ryan-Coach,
Johnny Sample-24, George Sauer-83, John Schmitt-52,
Mark Smolinski-30, Matt Snell-41, Joe Spencer-Coach
Mike Stromberg-68, Bob Talimini-61, Steve Thompson-85,
Bake Turner-29, Jim Turner-11, Sam Walton-71, Lee White-34.



All of them inspired me to watch, wait and hope
for another day like January 12, 1969.

And, of course, to Waithira and Wanjira, who are always 1 and 1A.

January 12, 1969

I stood in the parking lot at St. Vito's Church (yes, that's a real church) after Mass the morning of Super Bowl III, talking to Eric, my friend from school.

I had already resigned myself to what everyone had said was inevitable.

"The Colts are really gonna kill the Jets today," I said.

"Yeah," Eric answered, "but I'm rooting for the Jets anyway."

"Me too," I replied. I knew I was rooting for a losing cause, but they were a New York team. Where in the hell was Baltimore anyway?

The Jets gave us a nice thrill getting to the Super Bowl, but the fun seemed to be over now. No one thought they were going to win. They were an AFL team. My father, my uncles, everyone except Aunt Jean, said the Jets had no chance. Aunt Jean said the Jets were going to win but, I figured, she's a woman, she doesn't know anything about football.

It wasn't all doom and gloom. I was looking forward to the game. At my young age, no New York team in my memory had ever reached the big stage — Super Bowl or World Series. The Yankees and Giants were great not too many years before, but I was too young to remember that. The Mets were still nine months away from their own miracles. And the Knicks wouldn't win their championship for another year. I guess I was being a realist. I wanted to see how long the Jets could make this a good game. And, maybe, just maybe, Aunt Jean was on to something.

My grandparents lived in Rockland County at the time. We took the long drive up there most Sundays for Sunday dinner. This Sunday was no exception. It was usually pasta, then roast beef, salad, fruits and nuts, then dessert. For the adults, wine flowed throughout. My grandmother, my Nonna, enjoyed cooking for us all. She prepared the food with care and love. Nonno, my grandfather, used to entertain my older sister and me in any way he could. If that meant playing the clown in order to make us laugh, he would turn himself into the funniest clown I'd ever seen. I always liked it when he used to cut pieces of fruit into the shape

of boats for us to eat. He wasn't much on sports, though. He came from Italy, where *futbol* meant something else. We called it soccer and when he called it "football" I thought that meant he didn't know anything about soccer or football. What the fuck did I know? Years later, I would become a fan of L'Azzuri, the Italian national soccer team. But by then, Nonno was dead.

So we finished eating that Sunday afternoon and, after dinner, my mother and grandmother would tend to the dishes. My grandfather would entertain my sister and me, and my father would usually watch some sports on TV.

After a while, Nonno did what he usually did. He stretched out on a chair and snored loudly. So, on January 12, 1969, I did what I usually did when he fell asleep. I went into the den to watch TV with my father. He stretched out on the couch and I sat on the floor in front of the TV. My sister came in as well, but she had homework to do. She would be in and out of the room the entire afternoon. The game that would change the face of football was about to start.

The game didn't start well for the Jets. Baltimore drove to the Jets' 19-yard line, but Lou Michaels missed a short field goal. Then, George Sauer, the Jets' receiver, caught a short pass but fumbled. Baltimore recovered on the Jets' 12-yard line. The Colts were threatening again.

But things changed soon after that. The Jets' Randy Beverly intercepted a pass in the end zone and the threat died. It was now Jets' ball on their 20 and the score was 0-0.

I didn't understand that the Jets had been pretty much back on their heels up to that point. I was a young kid and didn't know much about football. All I knew was that the score was tied at zero. That was about to change.

After the interception, the Jets took the ball down the field and, with the ball on the Colts' 4-yard line, Matt Snell ran it in for a touchdown. I've seen that play hundreds of times over the years, but I can still remember the sight of Snell running to the left and into the end-zone on my grandparents' RCA Victor, black-and-white TV. The Jets were winning. They took a 7-0 lead into halftime.

The third quarter belonged entirely to the Jets. I didn't know anything about ball control at the time, but I could see that the Jets were scoring points and the Colts weren't. The 7-0 game became a 10-0 game, then a 13-0 game. A couple of minutes into the fourth quarter, it became a 16-0 game.

By then, John Unitas was in the game. He had replaced Earl Morrall, who had been the Colts' quarterback all year. I knew about Unitas. I knew he was a big deal. I knew he had been hurt all year long and that he was considered to be one of the greatest players ever. But I really wasn't concerned at that point. When he came in, all I knew was 13-0. Then, Randy Beverly intercepted another pass. The Jets would soon score their final three points.

In the late stages of the game, my father and I got some company. My grandparents had some visitors and a man with a thin mustache wearing a hound's tooth sport jacket sat down and watched the game with us. To this day, I don't know who the hell that guy was. But he sat with us and talked about football and the game with my father. He was nice to me; he was patient when I asked about what was going on and he helped my father explain some of the finer points about the game to me. I can't really remember anything he said, though.

What I do remember is that at some point late in the game, my mother entered the room and told us that they had made some coffee and everyone was sitting down in the dining room. My father and the man with the mustache both laughed as my father said, "not now." I don't know if my mother understood the significance of what was going on, but she didn't press the issue.

I watched the game end. I watched the scene in the locker room afterwards. I still remember Joe Namath saying that all the reporters who picked the Colts to beat the Jets could "eat their pads and pencils." Namath would be the game's MVP. Snell set a record with 121 yards rushing in the game. Beverly was the first player to intercept two passes in a Super Bowl. I watched it all. Every second of it. And I loved it all. They were *my* Jets now.

That's how it all started. My irrational infatuation with a team began that day. I thought it would be that way forever. They would win and I'd be happy about it. It didn't quite work out that way.

The Jets would give me good times and agonizing disappointment. They would provide me with diversion and entertainment and, sometimes, total disbelief. Through it all, I've rooted hard and even prayed for one more win, one quick touchdown, a field goal, a simple first down, one more defensive stop. On January 12, 1969, I knew I was rooting for the best and I imagined that it would always be that way, but I'm still waiting for another Super Bowl. I guess I'll never stop believing. Like a guy in a country song who refuses to give up the hope that the one woman he wants in this world will love him someday, I root for the Jets every Sunday, every fall. The fact that they've fallen short every year since Super Bowl III doesn't dissuade me. I'm certain I'll see another championship from my Jets. And another after that. And then another.

I guess in the end, I just want to be that little boy who sat on the floor in front of his grandmother's black-and-white TV and watched his team become champs. As adults, we don't often get a chance to sense the feelings we had as kids. I was talking with a colleague of mine one day not too long ago, and she mentioned that her young son was playing little league baseball. I told her that something was going to happen to him soon, but unfortunately, he wouldn't understand it for many years. He'll hit a ball hard and begin to run the bases. He'll round second and head for third. Then, as he begins to round third base, it will dawn on him that if he just keeps going, he will have hit a homerun. That feeling he will have between third base and home plate is something I remember so keenly from my youth, but it's something I can never experience as an adult, because a kid in that spot feels as though that one moment, throughout the world, belongs to him. How can an adult feel that?

I know that when the Jets win again it probably won't feel the same as it did the last time, but at least I'll be thinking about that day in my grandmother's house when the Jets finally do win another Super Bowl.

Championship Lost in a Tempest



The following year was another good one for the Jets. Just not quite good enough. They won the division again, but the playoffs were a different story.

It started very strangely. Before the season, Joe Namath retired. He had an interest in a New York nightclub, Bachelor's III, that Pete Rozelle, football's Commissioner, said was a hangout for gamblers. He ordered Namath to sell his interest and Namath refused; so he "retired". Sports Illustrated even ran a cover of Namath crying. But, after negotiations took place the whole thing got settled. Namath sold his interest in the bar and went back to playing football.

I've become more cynical than I was then, obviously. Let's face it, where in fuck was Namath going to make the kind of money he was making if he didn't go back to the Jets? Of course he was going to go back to football.

These days, there would probably be grievances and/or lawsuits flying in every direction. Then, the whole fucking thing would get resolved in a negotiated settlement, just like it did in 1969.

So, Namath went back to the Jets and the Jets went about the business of defending their title.

The big thing that year was the first ever game between the Jets and the Giants. It was pre-season and it didn't count in the standings, but it was considered a serious game by the fans, the media and even the teams. You see, the Giants were the establishment — the NFL. The Jets were the upstarts. It didn't matter that the Jets were the Super Bowl Champs and had beaten the NFL champions. It didn't matter that the Giants were not even close to being a championship team. In fact, the Giants had a losing record the previous season. There actually were people who felt that the Jets' Super Bowl victory was a fluke and, because of that, the Giants would beat the Jets and prove they were the better team from the superior league. It was total bullshit.

But the Giants had been an important part of the New York sports scene for a couple of generations and the Jets were a new thing. So, there were those who thought the Jets had to beat the Giants in order to validate their Super Bowl victory. I had cousins who were Giants fans and they bought into that shit too. We had some big arguments about the game as it was approaching. I must admit, I didn't get what all the fuss was about. As far as I was concerned, the Jets were the champs and the Giants were also-rans. And the Giants were pretty far back in the pack besides.

Ultimately, the Jets won the game. Someone said at the time that the Jets had won the Championship of the World in January and now they had to win the Championship of New York. It may seem ridiculous now, but that's how it was.

But my cousins and I had our arguments and, I'll admit, I gloated a bit after the game was over. For a few years I hated the Giants. But I've gotten over that. I've come to respect the Giants and, especially, their record over the last 20-25 years — who wouldn't? As long as they're not playing the Jets, now I'll root for the Giants.

About midway through the season, I got a chance to see another championship in New York. The Mets, or, as they came to be known, the Miracle Mets, won the World Series in mid-October. It was a big shock, considering their history and they took up a great deal of the attention in the New York area. For a brief period, we had reigning champions in baseball and football. The following Spring, the Knicks would follow suit. Interestingly, those three teams seem to be remembered more than any of the other championships the city has seen since. The Mets won again in 1986 and, while they were widely celebrated, there was nothing like the interest generated in 1969. The same goes for all the Yankee championships. The teams of the 70's that became known as The Bronx Zoo are remembered fondly, but they didn't have that lasting aura of the three teams of 1969-70. The only team that came close was the 1994 Rangers. That whole run became legendary in New York because the Rangers hadn't won since 1940 and they came very close to losing in 1994. But, probably because hockey isn't as big a deal as baseball, football or basketball, it falls just a step below those '69-'70 teams.

I didn't watch as much football with my father in 1969 as I had in previous years. He started working in the fast food industry then and his Sundays were reserved for work. In fact, he worked six days a week. He worked late into the night and got home when I was asleep and when I left for school in the morning, he was still sleeping. So it was a little different in those days than it had been before, and not just regarding football. Life as I had known it had changed. It wasn't a real seismic change, to be sure. But my father's presence was somewhat more figurative than literal now.

For practical purposes, my father's new schedule meant a couple of things. One of them was that if my mother went somewhere, I had to go, too. She couldn't just leave me home with my father, so unless she was just taking a quick trip to the supermarket, I got dragged all kinds of places. Like shopping for clothes for my sister; if she needed clothes, I had to go. I didn't like shopping for my own shit so going to Macy's or Korvette's or, worst of all, Alexander's for my sister's stuff really sucked. But, when my mother went to fabric stores because she wanted to make her own clothes, well it didn't get any worse than that.

Another thing that changed was we didn't go to my grandparent's house as often anymore. Their home was a long drive and my mother wasn't a very confident driver. So we went there less. Eventually, in the summer of 1970, my grandparents decided to go back to Italy to live. I never saw my grandmother again after that; she died in 1974. My grandfather came back to the United States only once for a visit after that, and we visited him in Italy once. Those were the only times I saw him before he died on Election Day in 1977. Ed Koch beat Mario Cuomo for Mayor of New York that day. Two sons of immigrants, one of whom would be Mayor of New York City and one of whom would be Governor of New York State. I know my grandfather, an immigrant himself, would have been proud.

So this new arrangement meant it got a little harder to watch the Jets play. My mother worked during the week and she had things to do during the weekends. If it was Sunday afternoon and the Jets were playing, my mother didn't give a shit. She wasn't going to work the Jets' games into her schedule for me. If her schedule meant that she was busy on

Sunday mornings, we went to Mass at 5:00 in the afternoon. Too bad if the Jets played a late game that week; God came before the Jets as far as my mother was concerned. I wasn't so sure, but nobody cared what I thought.

Of course, I couldn't actually tell anyone that the Jets meant more than the Church. You didn't say such things. The nuns at St. Vito's so scared the shit out everyone that you didn't even admit those kinds of things to *yourself*, never mind anyone else.

You especially didn't say anything like that to the nuns at St. Vito's. You didn't fuck around with those nuns. There was hell to pay for anyone who pissed one of those nuns off, and they pissed off easily. I remember one time when Peter Farriello committed the *worst*, most unpardonable sin: he laughed in church. *In God's house*. Sister Ann Gregory, who, believe it or not, was considered one of the *nicer* nuns, grabbed him, picked him up, and threw him against a brick wall. Then, just in case Peter didn't get the message, she started beating the hell out of him (and, yes — I understand that in this case "beating the hell out of him" can be taken two ways and I do mean it both ways). Even as a nine-year old, I realized there was something wrong with that picture: he can't laugh in church, but she can beat him up in church. For his own good, of course.

So I had to keep this idea that the Jets were bigger than God to myself. I didn't want to suffer that kind of beating in front of all my classmates. Sister Ann Gregory was very, very big and very, very strong.

Then there was the school Principal, Sister Mary Joseph. She was even bigger and stronger. In the summer, when she wore sleeveless nun's outfits, you could actually see the muscles rippling in her arms. And was she mean! Especially to us public school kids. She only had us for a couple of hours a week, so I guess she had to be especially sadistic towards us.

Sister Mary Joseph carried a dowel rod around. It was about three feet long and maybe half-an-inch in diameter. If you weren't where she thought you were supposed to be at any given moment, she'd hit you in the back of the calves with it. HARD. And don't holler in pain. Because if you do, now you're making noise, so you get another shot. She'd hit kids over the head with rulers. Then, if the ruler broke, she'd tell the kid he had to pay for the ruler "*he* broke." I'm not making this shit up. One time

she caught a girl chewing gum out in the playground and ordered her to swallow the gum. Well, the girl was apparently told not to swallow gum. So she pulled out a Kleenex to spit it out and Sister Mary Joseph went apeshit. She grabbed the poor kid by the hair and started screaming, "I told you to swallow that gum. Swallow it! Swallow it!" The girl swallowed the gum and never cried or made a sound, but you could see she was fighting the urge desperately. Like I said, these nuns could scare the shit out you.

You have to understand that things were different back then. You didn't run home and tell your parents about this shit. They sided with the authorities and these were people of God. We figured we couldn't win an argument with a nun, so we didn't try.

Anyway, in some respects I guess it's a good thing that Sister Mary Joseph became a nun. If she hadn't, with that temper and those muscles, she almost certainly would have ended up in prison. But, even still, you could make the case that being a menace to society would have been a step up for her.

So, it got kind of difficult to watch the Jets play on

Sundays. I always either had to go to church on Sunday afternoon or, if we had gone in the morning, I often had to go shopping or run some errand with my mother. I usually managed to see part of the game, but rarely the whole thing.

Anyway, in 1969, the Jets were the champs and I figured that, since they were the best they would win it again. So if I missed a little bit here or there during the season, well, I guessed I could live with that, as long as I saw the playoffs and the Super Bowl.

Well, that didn't work out either. The Jets played Kansas City in the playoffs. It turned out to be a cold and windy, miserable day at Shea Stadium.

My mother decided that she needed to go to the fabric store while the Jets were playing that game, so she dragged me along, too. On Saturday afternoon. Saturday was usually my father's day off, but for some reason this Saturday he was working.

Fabric stores were the worst places on earth for a kid. I don't know why—I think there was a statute requiring it back then—but the people

who worked in fabric stores were always really cranky and they all seemed to hate kids. Plus, and I think this was another statute, there always seemed to be some guy in every fabric store that smoked a really big, stinky cigar. They had strange rules about fabric stores back then. I wonder if those rules still exist. I don't go into fabric stores any more.

This particular fabric store, Jack's Fabrics, was in a rotten neighborhood in Port Chester, NY. Port Chester had been a town with a lot of small factories. Arnold Bread was one of them back then. But the factories were leaving and taking the jobs with them. Arnold would soon leave too. Some years later, Lifesavers, which was also there, would also leave. So the neighborhood around Jack's was getting pretty shitty.

My mother agreed to let me listen to the radio call of the game as she drove to Jack's. I didn't want to go into the store when we got there, so she let me stay in the car and listen on the car radio. Times were different than they are now—no one would leave a kid in a car like that today. But back then, the idea that anyone would harm a kid was pretty much unthinkable, even though it was becoming a lousy neighborhood. People put up with a lot from the thugs; but even the thugs themselves wouldn't accept anyone fucking around with a child or an old person.

Back then, it was not uncommon for residents of a neighborhood to take matters into their own hands. The cops and the courts were too slow anyway. The attitude was: "You caused trouble in our neighborhood? We'll deal with you." And if the poor guy got thrown off a roof, well, the cops weren't going to get any information from anyone, because no one knew anything.

It wouldn't be long before drugs changed all those "rules". But it hadn't really happened yet.

I was spared that kind of stuff, because I lived in a place where people were fortunate enough to have jobs. At least one of my parents always had a job. Maybe not always both at the same time, but someone was working all the time and most of the time both of my parents were working. Some of my friends back then lived in some of those other neighborhoods though, so it wasn't completely foreign to me either.

So, in those days, I could stay in the car and listen to the radio, by myself, while my mother ran in the store to buy something.

As I sat there and listened, the Jets lost the game. It was over. Champions no more.

The score was 13-6 in the fourth quarter when the Jets had one last shot. I listened as they failed to put the ball into the end zone from inside the Chiefs ten-yard line. They lost the ball on downs and that was that.

Namath completed 14 passes out of 40. He threw three interceptions. Matt Snell carried only 12 times that day, for 61 yards. Boozer had only three carries. All tolled, the Jets ran the ball 21 times and passed 40 times.

I never did figure out why they threw the ball so much in those terrible, windy conditions. It was 13-7, so it's not like the Jets were behind and had to play catch up. Maybe the Chiefs stacked the line, took away the run and forced the Jets to throw. That seems unlikely considering that Snell averaged better than five yards a carry. Or maybe Namath, who called the plays, was stubborn. In any event, they threw an awful lot considering the wind conditions.

The wind at Shea swirled unbelievably, particularly in the winter. I remember one night in the mid-1980's when I was at a Mets game, early in the baseball season. By then the Jets had left for the Meadowlands. But even in April the wind got so bad and, as the temperature dropped, it just cut right through you, especially if, like me, you weren't properly dressed for the cold. By the third inning, no one wanted anymore beer. By the fifth inning, the concessions stands were sold out of coffee. We were drinking hot chocolate by the time the game was over. And it tasted like they were watering that down, too.

Shea Stadium was recently torn down and it will become a faded memory. They had a farewell ceremony for it when the Mets played their last game there. No mention was made of the Jets. No Jets players were there. Bud Fucking Harrelson was there, but not Joe Namath or Don Maynard. How can that be? I'm not trying to trash Bud Harrelson—he was a part of two pennant winners and a former manager (albeit a failed manager), but no mention of a Super Bowl team was even made. Maybe it was fitting; the Jets were always considered second-class citizens in

their own stadium. It was true when they played at Shea and it was true in Giants Stadium. Now they share a stadium with the Giants. So, maybe things will change. Or maybe not.

So the Jets' run as Champions ended in the Shea Stadium winds that day. For me it ended in my mother's light blue 1967 Pontiac Tempest.

Of all the cars my mother ever had, that Pontiac was probably her favorite. It was the first car my parents had that was air conditioned. Hell, at that point, I don't think I knew anyone who had an air-conditioned car. Up to then, I thought we were big shots because we had an air conditioner in one of our windows.

Anyway, my parents needed a car because the old grey Ford just wasn't what it used to be. This used Tempest was available and it was a good deal. It had air conditioning, which my father thought was completely unnecessary. He even laughed about the thought of cars with air-conditioning. Who needed that? But, why pass up a good deal? So, he bought it.

According to my father, after he drove the car a couple of times with the air on, he decided that he was going to look for cars with air-conditioning from then on. And, except for a couple of used cars that he picked up on the cheap, he never did buy another car without air. My father was like that. He may have seemed stubborn at first, but his mind could be changed.

He often said that he reacted the same way about automatic transmissions. He called himself "the last holdout," and he said he couldn't understand why anyone needed an automatic transmission. But after he got an automatic, he kept buying them. He reached a point, eventually, when he wouldn't even consider a manual shift.

I think he's wrong about that one, though. I prefer a shift. They don't break down, and they make the car easier to control in snow and bad weather. But, I'll admit, I drive an automatic now, too. They don't make a lot of cars with manual shifts anymore and my wife can't drive a shift anyway.

That's another reason my father didn't buy cars with manual shifts. My mother couldn't (or wouldn't — she said she learned to drive on a shift) drive one. So, when my father's car was blocking her car, she had to have

him move his car so she could go out. You should have heard my father trying to keep himself from cursing out loud whenever my mother woke him up from a nice relaxing nap to tell him to move his car.

But over the radio in that 1967 Pontiac Tempest was how and where the season ended for the Jets that day, just before Christmas in 1969. I didn't get to see it on T.V.; I had to "see" it on the radio.

But, I did see the Super Bowl from start to finish. The Chiefs won that one, too. I was rooting against them because I was mad at them for beating the Jets. But a week later when I learned that Joe Namath was rooting for Kansas City, the AFL team, I felt a little better.

Through the years, I've come to realize just how good that Chiefs team was. Len Dawson, Bobby Bell, Jan Stenerud, Emmitt Thomas, Willie Lanier and Buck Buchanan all went to the Hall of Fame, and others, like Otis Taylor and Curly Culp, were Pro-Bowlers on multiple occasions. Hank Stram, the coach, also went into the Hall of Fame. But at the time, I was sure that the Jets were better than the Chiefs; the Chiefs just got lucky and the Jets had a bad day.

Sadly, for the Jets, that would be it for many years. Though I didn't know it, the Jets' long drought was about to begin.

Of Wrists and Knees



The 1970 season meant a new beginning. The Leagues had merged. There was no more AFL, just one big NFL.

The Jets were now in a new division with Miami, Baltimore, Buffalo and Boston. They would play each team twice a year and six more games against the rest of the League.

In addition, there was a new wrinkle. Monday Night Football. The first Monday night game was going to feature the Jets. It made sense. The Jets were a good team, in the country's biggest market, with perhaps the biggest star in football.

The Jets lost the first Monday night game to Cleveland. They fell behind 14-0 in the first quarter and, although they did get within three points in the 4th quarter, they eventually lost 31-21. The Jets outgained the Browns by more than two-to-one, but they also gave away four turnovers to none for the Browns.

I saw very little of it and I can't say today that I remember any of it. It was, after all, Monday *Night* Football. Monday night was a school night. There was no fucking way I was going to be allowed to stay up and watch a football game on Monday night. I could argue all I wanted, but school, like God, came before football. I have to admit, I am grateful to my parents for recognizing that school was important and instilling that understanding in me. That's not to say I always made school my first priority, but at least my parents put the idea in my head that it *should* be my first priority.

The following week, the Jets beat a terrible Boston team by the same 31-21 score. Then they lost to an equally terrible Buffalo team. When they lost game four to Miami, that left them 1-3 heading into a game against Baltimore.

The Baltimore game would be the first time the Jets and Colts played each other since Super Bowl III. It was a disastrous day for Namath. He went 34-62 with *six interceptions*. The Jets lost 29-22. After the game, it

was announced that Namath had fractured his wrist during the game and would be lost for the Season. In other words, Season over.

For whatever reason, the Jets didn't hold up too well to Namath's injuries. The same thing would happen 29 years later when Vinny Testaverde got hurt. In 1970, though, the team, which had already started badly and had lost Matt Snell to injury, just collapsed after Namath's injury. They lost to the Bills, Giants, and Steelers after that, which left them 1-7, with six games to play. No chance for the playoffs, even if they ran the table.

Then things started to happen and, briefly, it looked like they might run the table — at least to a young kid like me.

I came home from church the following Sunday and found the Jets beating the Rams. The Rams were a good team and the Jets were winning. They pulled away and won 31-20. I watched most of the second half and Al Woodall, the backup quarterback, threw three touchdown passes. All tolled he went just 10 of 17, but for 261 yards and no interceptions.

It felt good to have a win.

They followed that up with another win. They beat Boston again, which was no big deal, since Boston wasn't very good.

But then they beat Minnesota, an excellent team that had only lost one game up to then. Woodall went 8 of 12 for 106 yards, no interceptions. But the story of the day was a back named George Nock. Nock was a 16th round draft in 1969. He bounced around for about four years or so and never carried the ball much, but that day he had the day of his life: he carried 32 times for 117 yards. The Jets won 20-10 and I was thinking that things were turning. After all, that was three in a row and two of them were against good teams.

But it wasn't to be. They played another good team, the Raiders, the following week. And, although they took a lead into the fourth quarter and even increased it, they lost 14-13 on a late touchdown.

They followed that up with two more losses and that was the Season, 4-10. Woodall, a big, tall guy, seemed like a capable quarterback to me. I didn't know much, but he did win three in a row at one point. And, with a break in the Oakland game, who knows, they might have won out and

finished 7-7. But that was wishful thinking and it really didn't matter. At the end of the Season, the team finished 4-10, Namath played five games, and Snell played just three.

The worst part of all though, was losing twice to the Colts. I hated them. Ever since the Super Bowl. And if that wasn't bad enough, the Colts went on to win their own Super Bowl that year on a last minute field goal against Dallas. I wanted Dallas to win that Super Bowl so badly, just because they were playing the Colts. In fact, for a couple of years after that, I rooted for the Cowboys just because of that one Super Bowl (and the fact that Roger Staubach was one of the more exciting players I've ever seen and really fun to watch). But, no matter what, I rooted against the Colts for the next couple of years, until they got old and became a pretty ordinary team.

Eventually, I got over that stuff, but when you're a kid, these grudges matter. As adults, most of us learn that grudges only sap your energy and they are rarely worth holding. Still, some people never learn. I'm sure we've all known one of those people who just can't let anything go. No matter how many times you tell the person to forget it, it never sinks in. Those are the people who will always exhaust you.

Most of the time it doesn't matter how irrational they are being either. I've worked with people like that. I became an attorney as an adult and I've found that certain attorneys are notorious for taking everything personally. When two guys like that sometimes become adversaries on a particular case, they fight over everything and nothing is conceded. I even heard about one guy who objected when it was time to break for lunch because his adversary thought it was a good time to break. "If he thinks it's a good time to break, then I have to think it's not," is how the thinking goes, I guess. But the guy objected to fucking *lunch*! Not only that, he was a fat pig, besides. You'd think he'd be thrilled by lunch. So you know he wasn't objecting to lunch, or any other meal, on any principled grounds.

The funny thing is, most people think athletes are the super-competitive types who think that way, but it's usually the most un-athletic ones who are like that. I have a theory about that—I think the people who grew up playing sports learn to separate the game from the persons

playing the game. We don't take it personally, because it isn't personal. But those who didn't grow up playing sports can't figure out where the game ends and life begins. I'm obviously generalizing here because there are plenty of people who did play sports as kids, but never learned to separate the game from the person. Everyone, I'm sure, can remember that one kid on the playground who took *everything* personally. And, when you are like that, everything becomes worth going to war over. Even if it's not in your own best interests to go to war. Like I said—irrational.

There are parallels everywhere, in all walks of life. Even politics. It may well play into how we ended up in a disastrous Iraq war. A bunch of guys like Cheney and Bush and Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, who had never been in a war themselves, decided to get us into a war because—well, I still don't know exactly why. The fake tough guys who think they are tough because they can send other people's kids into war sent the real tough guys into battle and then said, "Look at how tough we are." And a lot of young people came back broken and battered and dead.

When you're a kid, you can be irrational when you hold grudges. It is part of being a kid and you're supposed to get over it when you become an adult. You absolutely must get over it before you start running a country.

As a kid, I could be irrational about grudges, too. (Yes, you could argue this whole fascination with the Jets is irrational, but it's not about a grudge. There's a big difference, but I'm not sure I know what it is.) And the Colts were at the top of my list.

The Colts of 1970 were a despised group in my mind and I wanted nothing more than to see them knocked off the following year, preferably by the Jets.

The Jets didn't get it done though. They lost to the Colts twice more in 1971.

The 1971 Season ended before it started, really. Namath injured a knee in the Pre-season, making a tackle after a defensive player recovered a fumble. He missed the first ten games. Coupled with the last nine games from the year before, that made 19 straight games he missed.

Throw in the fact that a lot of guys from the Super Bowl team were slowly leaving and the team was in a serious decline. You see, Weeb

Ewbank was incredibly cheap and he didn't like paying his players. The team had plenty of money but, other than Namath, none of the players saw any of it. Although none of that money was Weeb's, he refused to part with it. Even as a kid, I knew that the Jets seemed to have a problem keeping players because of the way they paid them. Or didn't pay them. It seemed like every year someone was pissed off about the way he was being paid. If I could see what was happening, you've got to wonder why the hell the Jets' management never seemed to figure things out.

Anyway, with Namath out, the Jets sucked. They started off with four straight road games, and went 1-3. That was another problem in those days — the Jets couldn't play any home games early in the season because the Mets were the primary tenants at Shea, so they didn't allow the Jets to play any home games until the baseball season was over.

So, the Jets won just one game by beating the Dolphins on two 4th quarter touchdowns by George Nock (there's that name again). They also had a rookie fullback who looked promising—a big strong with some speed out of Kansas. He would eventually get pissed off over money and leave, too. Ended up having a nice, Hall of Fame career in Washington. Guy's name was John Riggins.

Week five, the Jets finally come home and play the Bills, a truly awful team. It's a win for the Jets but they follow that up with two losses. On top of that, at some point Al Woodall, Namath's backup, gets hurt as well and the Jets are down to their third string quarterback, Bob Davis. I actually liked Bob Davis when I was a kid, although for the life of me I can't remember why now.

In game 10, the Jets beat Buffalo again and stood at 4-6. Then came some drama.

By game 11, Namath was ready to return. He didn't start though. The Jets played San Francisco in week 11 at Shea. They fell behind 17-0. Namath came in. That's when the fun started.

Namath hit Rich Caster for 57 yards and a touchdown, making it 17-7. Closer, but still two scores away.

The 49ers, a good team, answered with a score. It was 24-7 and getting late.

Then, Namath began to remind Jets fans what they'd been missing. With time being of the essence, Namath hit Caster again for a 20-yard touchdown. The Jets got the ball back and Namath hit Eddie Bell for a 22-yard touchdown. That left the score 24-21.

Then, the Jets got the ball back again. With time running out, they moved the ball. The last play of the game was a Namath interception in the end-zone. A completion would have won the game for the Jets.

The crowd at Shea Stadium had been going crazy the whole time. For a year and a half they had waited for Joe and now he was back and he nearly pulled one out of the fire.

When the final play ended the game the crowd kept cheering. They continued to cheer after the game was over. The Jets lost, but the crowd didn't care. The Jets were 4-7 and the season was lost anyway, so what did one game matter? The important thing was Joe was back. For about 10-15 minutes, the crowd stood in the late November cold and cheered. There was finally something to cheer about.

Years later, I would see an interview with John Schmidt, the center. He actually choked up when he talked about that moment. The feelings were that special.

In truth, the good feeling was probably based on an illusion. Namath was rusty. He only hit on 11 of 27 passes, albeit for 258 yards and the Jets' defense simply could not stop the running game. The 49ers rushed for 268 yards and two backs, Vic Washington and Ken Willard each had 125 yards or more. But, no one was paying much attention to that, even though, incredibly, the Jets had not beaten a team with a winning record with Namath at quarterback since … Super Bowl III.

Namath's return and the comeback that almost was, gave New York a good feeling about the following week. There hadn't been much to root for up until then, not even for Giants fans. The next game for the Jets was against the Cowboys, which by then was the hottest team in football. It was on national television on Saturday. Now that Namath was back, this one figured to be a good game and the excitement built as the week went on.

I had some mixed feelings about this game. As I said, I viewed Dallas as an ally in my grudge against the hated Colts, so I had been rooting for

them. But now, they were playing the Jets. They couldn't both win and I, of course couldn't root against the Jets. But, I figured that whatever happened, it was going to be a terrific game.

I figured wrong. It may have been a terrific game for the Cowboys, but not for the Jets.

Dallas ran through, over and around the Jets. They beat them in the air and on the ground. Namath started but played only briefly. It became clear very early that this wasn't going to be the Jets' day, so he got pulled quickly.

Dallas ran back the opening kickoff for six. Then Roger Staubach hit Calvin Hill for two touchdown passes, 27 yards each. Then the Cowboys scored again to make it 28-0 after the first quarter. Hill scored again in the second quarter before the Jets finally got a field goal. It was 38-3 at the half.

Staubach came out of the game and the Cowboys eased up during the second half. The final score was 52-10.

I remember watching that game with my father, who was off from work because it was a Saturday. At some point in the first quarter, he gave me a puzzled look and said, "I thought this was going to be a good game." So did everybody.

Well, this wasn't good. I didn't like seeing the Jets get beat up like this, but I didn't blame the Cowboys. I wanted revenge against the Colts, and the Cowboys were my best hope. Plus, if you're going to get your ass kicked like that, I figured it looked better if you got your ass kicked by the best. So, that settled it for me. I was going to root for the Cowboys to win the Super Bowl.

And, the Cowboys did win the Super Bowl. In the two remaining games they beat the shit out of the Giants and the Cardinals. Then they ran through Washington and San Francisco fairly easily to get to the Super Bowl, against Miami.

Miami had beaten up on the Colts in the playoffs, and badly, 21-0. The Colts had nothing that day and it turned out to be the last gasp of an aging team. Miami was a young up-and-coming team.

But the year belonged to the Cowboys. They destroyed Miami in the Super Bowl, 24-3. To this day, I don't think any team has scored as few

as three points in a Super Bowl. Dallas had won and I had my revenge against the Colts. Don't ask me to explain the logic behind this "revenge" I keep talking about. In my youthful mind, it somehow made sense that the Dallas Cowboys could avenge a loss to the Colts for me, as a Jets fan, by beating the shit out of the Miami Dolphins and, at the same time, make the Jets look good, because now the Jets got their asses royally kicked by the Champs and not some also-ran. You got all that?

The Jets closed out their season with a couple of wins against two bad teams. The running game, with John Riggins and Emerson Boozer, proved to be pretty good. Namath had to work off some rust, but in the three games he started his record was 2-1 and he averaged 9.1 yards per pass attempt. The big problem was that the Jets absolutely could not stop the run. They gave up 168 yards a game on 4.9 yards per carry. And you control a game by running the football and stopping the run. Especially back then, because the rules hadn't yet been changed to open up the passing game. With Riggins and Boozer, the Jets had half of that in place.

With Namath coming back healthy (hopefully) the next year would look good, if the Jets could do something about stopping the run.

An Early Run; A Late Fall



The 1972 draft didn't give the Jets much. Jerome Barkum, a receiver, was the first pick and he would prove to be a pretty good player, but beyond him, there was very little. They even had two first round picks that year, but the second pick on the first round, a linebacker from Michigan named Michael Taylor, didn't amount to anything.

Of course, no one knew that going in to 1972 season. There was hope. A lot of people were picking the Jets to go to the playoffs and some even thought the Jets could beat the Dolphins for the Division title. The Colts were finally getting old and they were not considered to be a playoff team. As the season was getting ready to begin, it looked like it would be Miami and the Jets fighting it out for the Division.

The season opened with a big win over a mediocre Bills team. They were beginning to build, but did not yet have a great team. O.J. Simpson — who hadn't yet shown the ability to julienne his former wife — was there and the new coach, Lou Saban, was putting a team around him. But it was still a work in progress. Riggins and Boozer both outgained O.J. that day and the Jets just rolled over the Bills, 41-24. It really wasn't even that close, since the Bills scored 10 points late in the game to make it somewhat respectable.

The next week was in Baltimore; a chance to beat up on the hated Colts. And they did beat up on them, but Johnny Unitas, at age 39, apparently had one more big day in him. And this was it.

Namath kept hitting for big scores all day long. It was an incredible display. He went 15-28 for 496 yards, with six touchdowns. But every time the Jets took a lead, the Colts answered. It was close through most of the first half then the Jets scored and went up 27-20 at halftime.

The Jets came out and hit a field goal to make it 30-20 in the third. Then the real fun began.

Baltimore scored and closed the lead to three. But Namath, almost immediately, hit Caster for 79 yards and just like that, the lead was 10 again.

Then, Baltimore drove down the field again, and cut the lead to three again. But, just like before, Namath fires a bomb to Caster, this time for 80 yards and the lead was 10 again. You got the feeling there was nothing Baltimore could do to stop the Jets. Once the Jets took a 30-20 lead, I never thought they would lose.

The final score was 44-34. Unitas went 26-45 for 376 yards. He nearly had an answer for Namath. But he didn't have much left. He only started five games that year and the next year, 1973, he spent one final season with the Chargers.

Namath and Unitas were like two heavyweights throwing haymakers at each other.

Years later George Foreman and Ron Lyle would have a fight in which there were five knockdowns. They just took turns knocking each other down until Foreman knocked Lyle out. I saw the last two knockdowns.

I walked into the room and my father was watching the fight. He said, "These guys are killing each other."

I took one look at the two fighters, who looked like they were both out on their feet and asked if it was the last round. It was something like the fifth round. I couldn't believe it. And the Namath/Unitas duel that day kind of reminds me of that fight.

So here the Jets are, 2-0 and considered a playoff contender. The offense has scored 85 points in two weeks and looks unstoppable.

For some reason, hangover from the Colts game maybe, or maybe just because they're the Jets, the Jets lost the following week to an absolutely awful Houston Oilers team. The Oilers did not win another game all year. It is a familiar scenario to any Jets fan: just when things seem to be on the way up, bad things happen.

And the way they lost really sucked. They went up 10-0 early, then gave up the lead in the second quarter and Houston took over the game in the third quarter.

The Jets lost the next week, too, this time to Miami. O.K. That can happen. Miami was a very good team. But it makes the Oilers game hurt even more.

But the offense came back the following week when they put 41 points up against the Patriots, who were now known as the New England Patriots. Then they won three out of the next four.

They were rolling at 6-3 and headed to Miami for a showdown with the undefeated Dolphins. A win in that game would set them up for a playoff spot and ruin the Dolphins' hopes for a perfect season. The talk was already beginning to circulate that the Dolphins might be able to go 14-0. But the Jets stood in their way.

It was actually a good game. The Dolphins scored first, but the Jets tied it up quickly. Then Namath hit Caster for another touchdown. A field goal made it 17-7, Jets. Mercury Morris scored for Miami before the half to make it 17-14, then Miami took the lead on a 31-yard touchdown run by Earl Morrall—who was pushing 40 by then. But Namath threw another touchdown pass and the Jets took a lead into the 4th quarter.

It was a real back and forth game up to then, and Jets looked like they would pull it out. But, when things start looking good for the Jets, doom always seems to be around the corner. Miami scored with less than two minutes left. Their undefeated season remained intact. And, just like it had been the year before, the Jets couldn't stop the run. In all, the Dolphins ran 45 times for 214 yards.

From there, Miami easily ran the table and finished 14-0. They completed the perfect season by winning the Super Bowl. The Jets were their last real challenge during the regular season that year.

As for the Jets, it was a tough loss but, at 6-4, they still had reason to believe. They played in Detroit on Thanksgiving Day the following week. It would turn out to be a bad loss for the Jets. With the score tied at 20 going into the 4th quarter, the Jets lost it completely. The Lions scored the final 17 points of the game and won 37-20.

It was all beginning to spiral out of control. Even though the Jets won the following week, they barely managed to squeak past a terrible New Orleans Saints team 18-17. They had to come from behind to do it and Bobby Howfield, their kicker, scored all of their points on six field goals. *The fucking kicker*.

They played a very good Raiders team the next week. At 7-5, the Jets needed a win. They led 13-10 at the half then fell behind 17-13 going into the 4th quarter. A Jets field goal made it 17-16. But, a long touchdown pass from Daryle Lamonica to Raymond Chester sealed the game for the Raiders.

And, that pretty much sealed the season. The best the Jets could hope for was 8-6, which wasn't going to get them into the playoffs. In the end, they lost badly to another good team, the Browns. Once again, the Jets hung in there for a while — the score was tied in the third quarter — and they lost it late by giving up the last 16 points.

The season had featured a terrible collapse. At 6-3 after nine games, there was every reason to believe the Jets would make the playoffs. But they lost four of their last five and finished at 7-7. And, when you think about it, the big collapse late in the season was built on the late collapses in close games against Miami, Detroit, Oakland and Cleveland.

The Browns made the playoffs as the wild card team that year at 10-4, so it doesn't really seem like the Jets were close. But, here's how close they were to making the playoffs: if they had held on and beaten the Dolphins (or the Raiders), then beat the Browns, they finish 9-5 and so do the Browns. But, because the Jets would have beaten the Browns head to head, the Jets would have gone to the playoffs. And, remember, the Jets lost a game to the Oilers, who were the worst team in the league that year. So it really should have been a different story.

Agonizing collapses would become another theme I would have to get used to when watching and rooting for the New York Jets. There would be more collapses and more craziness as the seasons rolled by.

2016 and Beyond

I have this dream sometimes. I'm walking along, by myself. It's a dark, dull day. As I walk down the sidewalk, I see sunlight just around the corner. It sounds like a party is going on and I'm getting nearer, so I quicken my pace. I walk faster and then start to jog. As I get closer, I start to run. By the time I get to the corner, I'm running as fast as I can. Then, running at full tilt, I turn that corner and slam face-first right into a brick wall.

So where are the Jets going? Is the Super Bowl going to happen under the current management structure?

I want to believe. And, deep down, I do believe. But belief is tempered with 48 years of disappointment. So, will this be the team that finally takes the trophy? Or will I have to wait some more? Are the Jets about to slam face first into a brick wall? Again?

Why do I root for them? Maybe I identify. I've slammed face first into a few brick walls in my time. But who hasn't? No, that may be part of the reason but it can't be the entire reason. It can't be because I love an underdog. I do, but I also root for the Yankees and the Italian national soccer team. Those are not exactly underdogs.

Maybe I really believe there's a string of championships on the way. A dynasty for all times. Bigger than the Packers, Steelers, 49ers, Patriots or Cowboys ever pulled off. Something like the Yankees from 1921-1964. Or the Montreal Canadiens from the 1950's through the 1970's. Maybe eight in a row, like the Celtics from the 1960's. Yeah, I believe that, but I have no reason for that belief.

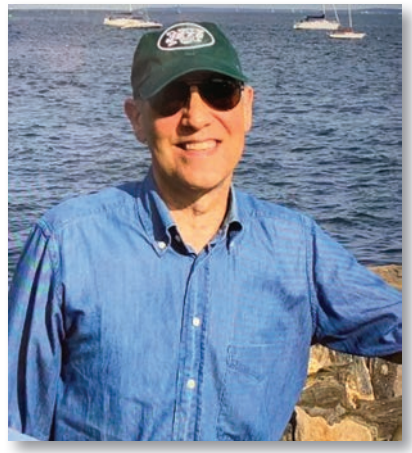
Right now though, I'll settle for one championship. I know it is coming one of these years.

What will I do when the Jets finally win? I'm usually not a yeller or screamer, but when you've been waiting this long, I guess anything is possible. Will I go wild like that or will I feel a calm sense of satisfaction? I guess we'll see.

One thing I know will cross my mind is the memory of being a little boy who sat on the floor in his grandmother's den and watched the Jets shock the world on January 12, 1969.

Oh, yeah, one more thing. The rug I sat on that day was green.

About the Author



Tom Protano has lived in the New York Metropolitan area his entire life. He attended New York University and holds a Bachelor's Degree from the College of New Rochelle and a Juris Doctor Degree from New York Law School. In addition to the Jets, Tom roots for the Yankees and the Knicks. He has worked for many years as an attorney and an administrative law judge in New York State. He has also worked as an adjunct instructor at the Purchase College, State University of New York. Although Tom has written thousands of legal memoranda and decisions during his legal career, A Diehard's Diary: Chronicles of a Frustrated Jets Fan is his first published work unrelated to law or the legal profession.

Tom lives with his wife, Waithira, in New Rochelle, New York and works in The Bronx. He has been a cyclist for many years and has ridden several centuries (100-mile rides) as well as a four-day-350-mile ride to raise money for AIDS health centers in New York and Boston. Tom enjoys an occasional round of golf, as well as good food and travel. He has been to Bahamas, Belgium, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and United Kingdom. He waits patiently for another Jets Super Bowl victory.