

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 90 – Eric Davis – Human Interest

Football is Transcendent

And now a personal word,

Eric Davis loves college football: the competition, the rivalry, the pageantry. Saturday afternoon is Eric Davis time. I can imagine him rooting for the Florida Gators or the Auburn Tigers or anyone playing against Alabama. He has stories that go with each game: the color of the jerseys, the coaches on the sideline, dissertations on Steve Spurrier and Tim Tebow. I imagine him channeling the voice of Keith Jackson.

I love football too. But the pro game is my fix. I started young. The team that established itself first in my heart was the Green Bay Packers—the Packers of Paul Hornung and Bart Starr. I replayed the one-handed catch by Max McGee. I imagined running the power sweep behind Forrest Gregg. I tackled anything in my way like Ray Nitschke. The biggest debate in my young life was whether the undefeated 1972 Miami Dolphins could defeat the 1966 Packers. Shula versus Lombardi. A battle of the ages. I was certain Lombardi would win every time.

When I was a teenager at school, I doodled constantly on every sheet of paper I had. I drew pictures of the helmets of every NFL team. I got really good at drawing the Miami Dolphins logo. I drew it over and over again. On the margins of my notebooks, I wrote out the roster of teams. The 1976 Dolphins with Kim Bokamper and AJ Duhe and Larry Little and Bob Kuechenberg and Vern Den Herder and Don Nottingham and Benny Malone. I remember Freddie Solomon and Duriel Harris and Larry Seiple and Ed Newman. I would switch from one sports radio show to another between WINZ and WIOD and WKAT. Larry King talked sports.

On the streets and sandlots of our neighborhood in Miami Shores, we played football from late afternoon to dusk. Hour after hour of down-and-outs and button-hooks and post patterns. I was taller than my friends and had a strong arm and more often than not played official quarterback. I'd call plays for one team. We'd score a touchdown. Then I'd switch sides and play quarterback for the other team. And we'd score again. If it was third and long, I'd go out for the pass. I had great hands. I would dive and slide, and somehow the ball would stick. We played touch mostly, on the street between cars, but sometimes tackle on a field, without pads, just slamming each other. We would kick off and run full-steam into whoever had the ball. We'd come up scraped, bloodied, and bruised. It was great.

I played mostly with my friend Adam and his younger brother Stephen. Adam was fast and competitive. Stephen was faster and didn't care at all who won or lost. We would play two out of three and three out of five. To this day forty years later as middle-aged men, if the three of us are together, someone will bring out a football, and we're running routes. It takes us a little longer to get down the field.

The powerhouse teams of the mid-1970s were the Pittsburgh Steelers, Oakland Raiders, Dallas Cowboys, and Minnesota Vikings. The Steel Curtain was legendary in its time: Ernie Holmes, Dwight White, LC Greenwood, and Joe Greene up front; Mike Wagner, Glen Edwards, Donnie Shell, and Mel Blount in the back; and the finest linebacking core ever assembled then and now, Jack Lambert, Jack Ham, and Andy Russell. They played brutal and fast and smart—maybe the greatest defense that God ever created.

I've been watching football ever since. I love the game, the speed, the collisions, the strategy and formations. Football evolves. It has dynasties. It is beautiful and heartbreaking. It is transcendent.

On December 2, 1985, a few months after I graduated college, I was at a party in an apartment in Miami Beach overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. That night, the Miami Dolphins played the undefeated Chicago Bears. The Bears had dominated every team in their path. The Dolphins had been to the Superbowl the year before, and Dan Marino had redefined his position. The legacy of the undefeated 1972 Dolphins was on the line. It may have been the most electric night in the history of Monday Night Football. Every play mattered. Marino rolled out against the Bears blitz and found Nat Moore and Mark Clayton again and again. The crowd in the Orange Bowl was insane. The Dolphins won. The universe was in balance. Dan Marino secured his place in the NFL Hall of Fame.

I have mastered this way of watching football where I put my hand over one eye on critical plays. I move my hand close and then far away with one eye closed, so I see only part of the television screen. It happens now automatically. I'm sure it decides the outcomes of games.

Today I'm an avid Carolina Panthers fan. I follow all the roster moves. I read mock drafts. I track transactions between teams. I listen to post-game interviews. I'm concerned about the condition of the practice fields. I love the National Football League.

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