

biggest what ifs in nfl history

biggest what ifs in nfl history have fascinated fans, analysts, and historians alike for decades, fueling endless debates about how different decisions, plays, or events might have reshaped the league's landscape. From draft choices to game-changing plays, these pivotal moments hold enormous significance in NFL lore. Exploring these hypothetical scenarios reveals not only the delicate balance of success and failure in professional football but also highlights how single events can influence careers, franchises, and even the sport itself. This article examines some of the most intriguing and impactful what if questions that have haunted the NFL throughout its history. By delving into these scenarios, we gain insight into the unpredictability and drama that make the NFL so compelling. The following sections cover some of the most debated what ifs, ranging from draft day decisions to critical game moments and franchise relocations.

- Draft Day Decisions: The Choices That Could Have Changed Everything
- Game-Changing Plays and Missed Opportunities
- Franchise Moves and Their Long-Term Impacts
- Career-Defining Injuries and Their Ripple Effects
- Rule Changes and Their Influence on the Game's Evolution

Draft Day Decisions: The Choices That Could Have Changed Everything

The NFL draft is one of the most scrutinized events in sports, with teams selecting future stars who can define franchises for years. The biggest what ifs in NFL history often stem from draft day decisions, where a single pick or trade could have altered the course of multiple teams and players' careers. These moments underscore the unpredictability and strategic complexity of the draft process.

Tom Brady and the 2000 NFL Draft

Perhaps the most famous draft what if revolves around Tom Brady being selected 199th overall by the New England Patriots. What if Brady had been picked earlier by another team, or what if the Patriots had passed on him altogether? This scenario invites speculation on how many Super Bowl dynasties might have been different without Brady's presence in New England.

Tony Mandarich: A Cautionary Tale

Selected second overall in the 1989 NFL Draft, Tony Mandarich was once hailed as a generational

talent but ultimately failed to live up to expectations. What if the Green Bay Packers had chosen another player, like Barry Sanders, who was picked third? This decision remains one of the biggest what ifs, highlighting the uncertainty in evaluating talent.

Notable Draft Day Misses

Other significant draft day what ifs include:

- Ryan Leaf being drafted second overall in 1998 over Peyton Manning
- The Cleveland Browns passing on Joe Thomas in 2007, who became a Hall of Fame left tackle
- The 2017 draft where the New York Giants picked Evan Engram instead of Patrick Mahomes

Game-Changing Plays and Missed Opportunities

The outcome of NFL games often hinges on a handful of critical moments, and the biggest what ifs in NFL history sometimes relate to spectacular plays or costly mistakes that shaped seasons and legacies. These moments are etched in memory because of their potential to rewrite history had events unfolded differently.

The Immaculate Reception

The 1972 AFC Divisional Playoff featured one of the most iconic plays in NFL history: the “Immaculate Reception” by Franco Harris. What if the ball had not bounced off the defender and into Harris’s hands? The Steelers’ playoff victory and subsequent dynasty might have been delayed or prevented entirely.

Leon Lett’s Thanksgiving Blunder

In the 1993 Thanksgiving game, Dallas Cowboys’ Leon Lett’s fumble recovery slip allowed the Miami Dolphins to score a game-winning touchdown. What if Lett maintained control? This moment is a classic example of how a single play can alter a game’s result and influence playoff positioning.

Other Critical Game Moments

Additional significant what ifs include:

- The missed field goal by Scott Norwood in Super Bowl XXV
- Malcolm Butler’s interception in Super Bowl XLIX, preventing a potential Seahawks comeback

- The “Music City Miracle” lateral play in the 2000 playoffs

Franchise Moves and Their Long-Term Impacts

Relocation decisions and franchise moves have had lasting impacts on the NFL’s competitive balance and fanbase dynamics. The biggest what ifs in NFL history often ask whether teams would have experienced greater success or stability had they remained in their original cities or chosen different relocation paths.

The Rams’ Move from St. Louis to Los Angeles

The Los Angeles Rams’ relocation in 2016 sparked questions about what might have happened if the franchise had stayed in St. Louis. The move altered market dynamics and fan engagement, influencing both team performance and league economics.

Oakland Raiders’ Multiple Moves

The Raiders’ transitions between Oakland, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas raise what if questions about franchise identity and competitive success. Would the Raiders have maintained their historic success if they had remained in one location? These moves reflect broader NFL trends involving stadium deals and market considerations.

Impactful Franchise Relocations

Other notable franchise moves include:

- The Baltimore Colts’ controversial move to Indianapolis in 1984
- The Houston Oilers’ relocation to Tennessee and rebranding as the Titans
- The Cleveland Browns’ move to Baltimore, becoming the Ravens, and the Browns’ eventual rebirth

Career-Defining Injuries and Their Ripple Effects

Injuries can abruptly alter a player’s trajectory and, by extension, the fortunes of entire franchises. The biggest what ifs in NFL history often focus on how different careers and team successes might have been without devastating injuries.

Bo Jackson's Hip Injury

Bo Jackson was a transcendent two-sport athlete whose NFL career ended prematurely due to a hip injury. What if Jackson had remained healthy? The Raiders and the NFL might have witnessed a prolonged era of dominance by one of the most gifted athletes ever.

Robert Griffin III's Knee Injury

RGIII's injury during his rookie season significantly affected his development and the Washington Redskins' future. Speculation persists about how far he could have carried the franchise without such setbacks.

Other Notable Injuries

Some additional impactful injuries include:

- Andrew Luck's multiple injuries leading to early retirement
- Wes Welker's 2011 concussion and its effect on his career
- Alex Smith's horrific leg injury and remarkable comeback

Rule Changes and Their Influence on the Game's Evolution

The NFL's rules have evolved over time to improve player safety, fairness, and entertainment value. The biggest what ifs in NFL history sometimes involve imagined scenarios where different rule changes were adopted earlier or not at all, thereby affecting gameplay and outcomes.

The Introduction of the Two-Point Conversion

Adopted in 1994, the two-point conversion added strategic depth to scoring decisions. What if this rule had been introduced earlier or never implemented? The game's scoring dynamics and coaching strategies could look very different today.

Helmet-to-Helmet Contact Rules

Recent rule changes aimed at reducing helmet-to-helmet hits have altered defensive play styles. What if these rules had been in place decades ago? Player safety and offensive production might have been impacted in significant ways.

Other Influential Rule Changes

Additional examples include:

- The implementation of pass interference reviews
- Changes to overtime rules, including the introduction of sudden death and later modifications
- Adjustments to kickoff rules to reduce injuries

Frequently Asked Questions

What if Tom Brady had not been drafted in the 2000 NFL Draft?

If Tom Brady had not been drafted in 2000, the New England Patriots might not have become the dynasty they were, potentially altering the course of NFL history with different Super Bowl champions.

What if the Minneapolis Miracle catch had been incomplete?

If Stefon Diggs' catch in the 2018 Divisional Round had been incomplete, the Vikings would have likely lost the game, changing the playoff outcome and possibly the future of both franchises.

What if the 'Fail Mary' game call in 2012 had been ruled differently?

Had the replacement officials called the last play in favor of the Packers, Green Bay would have won, affecting playoff seedings and the NFL's decision to hasten the return of regular officials.

What if Peyton Manning had not missed the entire 2011 season due to injury?

Without missing 2011, Manning might have secured more records and possibly changed the dynamics of the Colts and Broncos, impacting multiple playoff runs and Super Bowl appearances.

What if the New Orleans Saints' bounty scandal had never been uncovered?

Had the bounty program remained undisclosed, the Saints might have avoided severe penalties, potentially maintaining their competitive edge in subsequent seasons.

What if the 1987 NFL players' strike had not occurred?

Without the strike and use of replacement players, the season's outcomes and player relations might have been markedly different, influencing collective bargaining and league policies.

What if the 'Music City Miracle' play had been stopped?

If the Titans' lateral play in the 2000 playoffs was stopped, the Bills would have advanced, changing the postseason trajectory and possibly the legacy of both teams.

What if the 2007 New England Patriots had won the Super Bowl and completed a perfect season?

Completing a perfect season with a Super Bowl win would have cemented the 2007 Patriots as arguably the greatest NFL team ever, impacting debates on NFL greatness and team legacies.

What if Johnny Manziel's off-field issues had never occurred?

Without his off-field problems, Manziel might have had a successful NFL career, influencing quarterback dynamics and the fortunes of the teams he played for.

What if the NFL had not merged with the AFL in 1970?

Without the merger, the NFL and AFL might have continued competing for talent and market share, potentially altering the league's structure, popularity, and the modern Super Bowl's existence.

Additional Resources

1. What If Brady Had Gone to the Giants?

This book explores the ripple effects on the NFL if Tom Brady had been drafted by the New York Giants instead of the New England Patriots. It delves into how team dynamics, Super Bowl outcomes, and franchise legacies might have shifted dramatically. Through detailed analysis and expert interviews, the book reimagines one of football's greatest careers in an entirely different setting.

2. The Peyton Manning Trade That Never Happened

What if Peyton Manning had been traded to a rival team early in his career? This book investigates the potential changes in AFC dominance and playoff landscapes. It examines how the Colts, Broncos, and other franchises might have fared with a different Manning timeline, providing a fascinating alternate history of the NFL's quarterback battles.

3. Jerry Rice Without Joe Montana

This title considers the impact on the San Francisco 49ers and NFL lore if Jerry Rice had never played with Joe Montana. It discusses how quarterback-wide receiver chemistry defines greatness and speculates on Rice's career achievements and the 49ers' dynasty without Montana's leadership. The book includes player perspectives and statistical recreations of this alternate reality.

4. The Impact of a Healthy Bo Jackson

Bo Jackson's career was cut short by injury, but what if he had remained healthy? This book delves into the possibilities of a dual-sport legend dominating both the NFL and MLB. It analyzes how his prolonged presence on the field could have changed team strategies, draft decisions, and the cultural crossover between football and baseball.

5. *What If the NFL Had Never Merged with the AFL?*

Explore the intriguing consequences if the NFL and AFL had remained separate leagues. This book outlines how competition, player salaries, team locations, and fan bases might have evolved differently. It provides a comprehensive look at the business and sporting impacts of one of the biggest organizational decisions in football history.

6. *The Tom Brady Draft Day Miss*

Imagine a world where every team passed on Tom Brady in the 2000 NFL Draft. This book investigates which franchises might have taken the quarterback and how their fortunes could have changed. With detailed profiles and alternate draft boards, it offers a fresh perspective on one of the biggest draft surprises ever.

7. *What If the 'Immaculate Reception' Was Called Off?*

This book reexamines the famous 1972 playoff play known as the Immaculate Reception and its impact on NFL history. It speculates how the Pittsburgh Steelers' dynasty and the league's culture might have shifted if the play had been ruled illegal. The narrative includes fan reactions and the broader significance of defining moments in sports.

8. *The Greatest Defensive Play That Never Happened*

Focus on a pivotal game-changing defensive play that was narrowly missed or negated by a penalty. This book imagines how a single defensive moment could have altered playoff outcomes and player legacies. Through game film analysis and expert commentary, it highlights defense as the unsung hero of football history.

9. *What If the 1987 NFL Strike Had Lasted?*

This book explores the consequences if the 1987 NFL players' strike had extended for an entire season. It discusses the potential impact on labor relations, team rosters, and fan loyalty. With interviews from players, coaches, and executives, it provides a detailed look at a critical moment for the league's labor history.

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