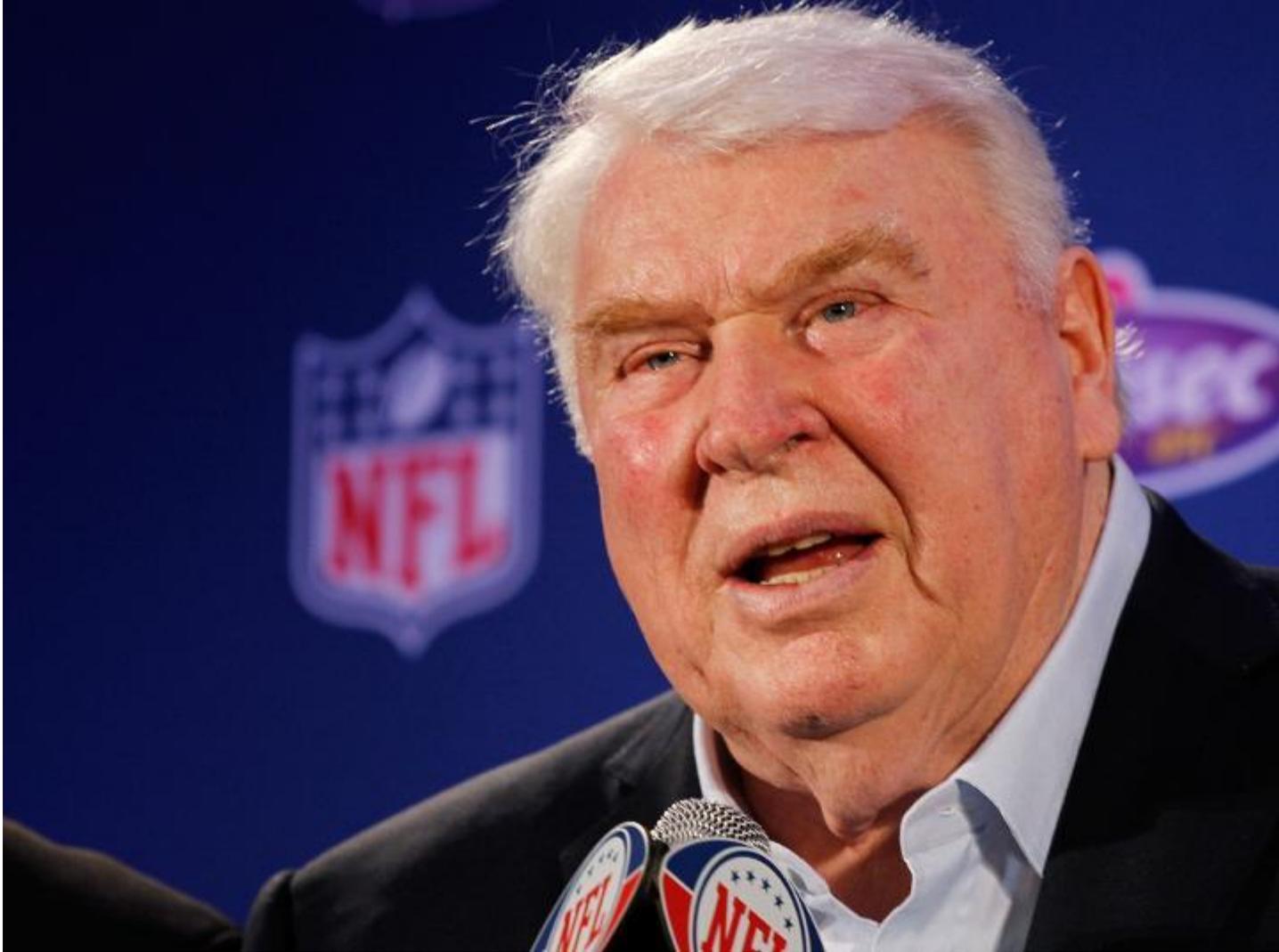


The Unbreakable Madden

By Dan Pompei June 6, 2014



John Madden currently serves as a safety advisor for the NFL, advising on rule changes to reduce concussion risk. (Getty Images)

PLEASANTON, Calif. -- It was January 1968, and the Oakland Raiders had just arrived in South Florida to prepare to play the AFL-NFL World Championship Game against the Green Bay Packers, in what would later be called Super Bowl II. A first-year linebacker coach settled into his Boca Raton hotel room and turned on the television. On the local news was a story about the participants' arrival at the airport. "Here come the Green Bay Packers," the reporter said, and John Madden watched as Vince Lombardi, Bart Starr, Ray Nitschke and the rest filed off their plane into the Florida sunshine. "And now, the Oklahoma Raiders arrive," the reporter said.

Madden couldn't believe what he'd heard. "They didn't even know where the hell we were from," he said. "The guy called us the *Ok-la-ho-ma* Raiders. Really, they didn't even know what the hell to call the game. It was called the AFL-NFL championship game or some damn thing. Now, these teams have red carpets. Everyone is in suits, there are interviews and things going on. In those days, they didn't even know what state we were from."

It shows just how far the NFL has come. Madden has had a unique perspective on the growth of the league during the league's boom era, which, thanks to Madden, also could be called the *Boom!* era. No other person has been able to observe, understand, create and influence the history of the sport over that span like Madden had. Head coach. Broadcaster. Face of the iconic video game. And now, co-chairman of the NFL player safety advisory panel.

He was part of a league that appreciated a good head slap. He watched as the baton passed from Pete Rozelle to Paul Tagliabue to Roger Goodell. He saw the Raiders go from Oakland to Los Angeles, then back to Oakland, and saw five other teams pack up moving vans, too. He has delivered eulogies for George Blanda, Al Davis, Walter Payton, Pat Summerall and Gene Upshaw. "The man is an encyclopedia of modern football," said Rich McKay, who works closely with Madden as chairman of the competition committee.

Five years after he retired from broadcasting, Madden's body moves slowly, but his wit is quick and his mind sharp. You can see thousands of great stories behind his blue eyes, and if you stay with him, he'll give you the privilege of hearing some of them. "As football evolves, there aren't many people who know what it used to be," said the 78-year old who became a head coach at 32. He knows. He knows what it is now, too. And he knows where it's headed.

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Madden was an assistant at San Diego State under Don Coryell, one of the most influential offensive minds in history. Joe Gibbs was on that staff, too, and Chuck Noll was an assistant for the Chargers at the time. While they were sharing the city, Madden and Noll became close friends.

While Madden was head coach of the Raiders, Tom Flores was on his staff, and Rams coach George Allen and Colts coach Don Shula became trusted allies. In the golden era of coaches,

Madden faced future Hall of Famers Noll, Allen, Shula, Paul Brown, Weeb Ewbank, Sid Gillman, Bud Grant, Tom Landry, Marv Levy and Hank Stram. His record against them: 36-16-2.



Madden had a 103-32-7 career coaching record, including seven division titles, over 10 seasons with the Raiders. (Getty Images)

One of Madden's fondest memories is from Super Bowl II. "I was always a Vince Lombardi fan," he said. "My biggest thrill is, I looked up, and I was standing right across the field from Vince Lombardi in that game. I'm coaching, and he's coaching. I'm thinking, 'This is great. I'm coaching against Vince Lombardi.' Now, it's how many rings you got and all this stuff. In those days, it was, 'Wow, I'm coaching against Vince Lombardi.'"

In Madden's broadcasting days, he would arrive on a Thursday and visit each team on Friday. Inevitably, the team's head coach would invite Madden to watch practice, because he felt he could trust Madden and would like to hear his thoughts. No other broadcasters were doing this. Madden spent a lot of time talking offensive football with Bill Walsh, and he got to know Landry, who amazed him with his unflappable approach. He spent hours on a chalkboard with John McKay, whom he called a "damn good coach, a brilliant mind."

He also got to know the assistant coaches, among them Bill Parcells, Bill Belichick and Jon Gruden. Even today, Madden networks with coaches. He is the chairman of the coaches subcommittee to the competition committee, and he regularly discusses ideas to improve the game with committee members Tom Coughlin, John Harbaugh, Joe Philbin, Andy Reid, Ron Rivera and Mike Smith.

His coaching style was like none of theirs. When Madden became head coach of the Raiders in 1969, he had only three rules. (1) "Be on time." (2) "Pay attention." (3) "Play like hell when I tell you to." He didn't care about facial hair, wearing a suit on an airplane or forming neat lines for pregame stretching. "None of that stuff ever has won or lost a game," he said. Madden did not expect his players to practice with the same intensity with which they played. In those days, every practice was in pads, and wearing down over the course of a season was a concern. So he never asked for a great practice or hard hitting. He only demanded a great game. "You could only ask for it so many times," he said. "I only wanted to ask for it once a week."

In the era of Lombardi, Brown, Landry and Grant, Madden's approach was counterculture. In retrospect, he was perfect for the times and the team he was leading. Players who thrived under Madden such as Ken Stabler, John Matuszak and Ted Hendricks might not have achieved what they did in a different environment. They called him "Pinky." ("You could always tell he was mad when his face got red," Hendricks explained.)

Madden coached his practices much differently from how most coaches do it today. "If they made a mistake, it was, 'Run it again,'" he said. "I would get upset. 'If we don't get this straight, we'll get the cars lined up with lights on us, and we'll stay here all goddamn night until we get it right.' Now, they have scripts and plays. In football today, I would bet they run three times as many plays as I ran in practice. If I ran 100 plays, they run 300. That whole scripting thing drives me crazy. The coaches are out there looking at a script. Everyone has their head down. I think, how can you look down and teach? I was 'Use the

right step, the right shoulder, no one jump offsides.' Those things were all important to me. So I guess I would have to up my pace in practice."

Game preparation has become more encompassing, in part because technology allows it. By the time Madden sits down at his desk in northern California on a Monday morning, he has access to every play from every game that was played on Sunday on his laptop. When he was coaching, Madden had access only to each opponent's previous two games, and that was on reel-to-reel.

Because game tape is so accessible and plays so easy to organize, Madden believes strategic trends are evolving more quickly than ever. "You used to compare things from year to year," he said. "Now, it's, *Last week this became big*. Towards the end of last season, all those bubble screens got bigger and bigger. People see what someone is doing successfully early in the season, and they are able to copy it and do it later in the season."

Today's coaches also benefit from instant replay. If replay had been in place in 1972, the most famous play in NFL history might not be so famous. Madden, who was on the sidelines for the Immaculate Reception, thinks the Franco Harris touchdown would have been overturned, and the Raiders subsequently would have beaten the Steelers. "It was a scoring play, so it would have been reviewed, and they would have seen the whole play," he said. "But they didn't see the play."

Madden says he can't figure out what 25 assistants do on modern staffs. He had six.

* * *



Madden often befriended his rival coaches, including Don Shula, whom he faced in the 1974 AFC playoffs. (Getty Images)Eleven-year old Jesse Madden plays quarterback on a flag football team. When John Madden watches his grandson's games, he sees an offense that is not unlike a lot of the offenses in the NFL -- no huddle, spread and tempo. "He's been in shotgun since he was eight," Madden said. "If he plays in high school and college, he will have been doing what they are doing now in the pros for 10 or 12 years. Whereas before, everything was new when a quarterback moved up a level. High school played one type of football. College played another type of football. And pro played yet another type. You'd have to adapt and adjust, every time you went up. Now they are all playing the same. That's how we're learning football today. That's why these quarterbacks can come in and play sooner than they ever had."

In Madden's day, [the Sid Gillman style of offense](#) ruled the NFL. Not so much anymore. "In the Sid Gillman offense, the medium routes were 17 yards," said Madden, who is a descendent from [the Gillman tree](#). "Now the mediums, those patterns, are 10 yards. They don't run as many of those patterns as they used to, because they're getting rid of the ball quickly."

What has happened, in Madden's opinion, is that short, quick passes have become the solution to pass-protection problems. "It used to be, 'Block the blitz, and account for everyone,'" Madden said. "Now, it's, 'Don't account for anyone, and just throw it before they get there. Take care of the double-A gaps, don't let someone come free up the middle' -- and you can do that with shotgun."

The concept of getting rid of the ball quickly instead of trying to outnumber pass rushers gained traction in the 1980s, when Walsh had success with his West Coast offense. What we're seeing today isn't what Walsh had in mind. Madden gets a kick out of it when he hears people say the shotgun/spread attack that Peyton Manning uses in Denver is a West Coast offense. "Bill and I always joked about the shotgun," Madden said. "He once had this idea he was going to make the 49ers into a shotgun-passing team. Bill Walsh's shotgun. So he practices the whole preseason. Now he goes to Detroit, indoors, in the opener [in 1981]. And they can't hear. He had no silent count. They got beat. He didn't have any answers for it. So Bill Walsh never ran shotgun again. He ran it one time."

As the passing game has changed, so has the blocking game. Madden notes how often linemen use two point stances instead of three, and how they block with their hands instead of their shoulders. Even their shoulder pads have become much smaller, and they don't use arm pads anymore. But most linemen wear big gloves that look like they could be used in MMA training, because they help with punch.

The run game used to be about drive blocking and double teams. Now? "Most of the runs, you just direct a guy or redirect a guy," he said. "Or you try to cut a guy off, try to invite a guy off the field, knock him off and run inside of him."

The sweep was a popular run call in Madden's era that now is about as popular as bell-bottom pants. Madden said instead of having running backs trying to hit the eight or nine hole on a sweep, today's teams are calling for quick screen passes to wide receivers or tight

ends, in the eight or nine hole. It's the same concept, but the emphasis is on athleticism and speed rather than brute force.

The Raiders' running game back in the day was set up by a blocking back and blocking tight end, two antiquies today. "The fullback for all intents and purposes has been eliminated," Madden said. "Every team is basically one back. And the tight end as we knew it -- half a tackle, half a receiver and a real good blocker -- that isn't a position anymore. You take the tight end out of there and the fullback out of there, and all strong-side power running is done."

The devaluation of halfbacks has been a consequence. No halfbacks were taken in the first round of each of the last two drafts. "With the way the game is set up, I don't know that you can surround the back with enough weapons to make taking one high in the draft worthwhile anymore," Madden said.

* * *

When Madden coached, almost all players weighed less than 300 pounds, and if a player weighed more, everyone lied about it. "That's why, for years, we used to list Art Shell at 295 or 298," Madden said. "He was over 300, but you'd never put that on the program."

Shell was a team leader who did most things the right way, but the future Hall of Famer refused to step on a scale like the other players, according to Madden. "I could have fined him," Madden said. "But I figured, what am I going to do? Take his money? He's the best left tackle in the NFL. He's still going to play left tackle. So I said, 'I'll tell you what I'll do. If you walk away from me and I look between your legs and I can't see daylight, we're going to talk.'

"Then Larry Allen comes in at 330 [in 1994], and they've got pom-poms," Madden said. "So that was kind of the breaking point." Today, an offensive lineman who weighs less than 300 pounds has very little chance to make it in the NFL, or even in a major college program.

When Madden left coaching after the 1978 season, PEDs really had not yet altered the NFL landscape. "We dealt with greenies or speed or bennies," he said. "That was the accepted thing. The difference between those things and steroids is, those things didn't help you. They made you think you were playing better, but they didn't help you at all. But steroids

helped. They made you bigger, stronger; they made you faster. They made you a better player, to the point [where] it wasn't fair if you were a non-steroid guy playing against a steroid guy." Painkillers were tamer in those days, too.

The Raiders of Madden's era were known as Hell's Angels in shoulder pads, and some of his players lived pretty hard. A team like that might be viewed quite differently today, but back then, most of the world winked and giggled at the bad boys. "I was before the drugs," Madden said. "The drug use came after I got out in football. I remember Bill Walsh, that drove him crazy, and Bill Parcells. They had no experience in it. That would have been in the '80s. That was the first big wave. To say I never had a player that took drugs, I don't know if that's true. But I don't remember cocaine. Maybe I was naïve. I don't think so. When I coached, it was alcohol. Guys would play and then go drink. They wouldn't have gotten caught up in the personal conduct policy, though, because cops didn't take them in. It was a different world."

Players got away with more on the field, too. After making a big play, no celebration was too outlandish. At one point, Madden criticized the league for outlawing certain player celebrations, but as the times have changed, so has Madden's opinion. "We're living in a different era now," he said. "The guy does it to get on SportsCenter. Then another guy sees it on SportsCenter, and he wants to do it. It becomes one-upsmanship, a contest. I like the celebrations and showing excitement, stuff that's real. But if you let it go too far, it's going to be all choreographed."

* * *



Madden has a simple office in Pleasanton, Calif., where he still breaks down game tape during the season. (Dan Pompei) In 1978, after 10 years as head coach of the Raiders, Madden had had enough. He found another passion in broadcasting, and he would become the A-team game analyst on four networks over his career. As the game he loved became more and more popular over the decades, so did Madden. The connection is not likely coincidental. Madden is in the Pro Football Hall of Fame as a coach, but he could have been inducted as an ambassador as well. A strong argument can be made that in its 94-year history, the league has never had a more powerful and effective representative. He had a rare ability to project passion on telecasts while maintaining neutrality. Madden combined a deep understanding of the game with an everyman persona, connecting with

viewers as easily as he had connected with players. It is perhaps his greatest gift. And so he sold football, even when he was selling lawn care products and screwdrivers. We all wanted to talk ball with him over a cold one, so he told us what kind of beer to drink.

An old offensive lineman, he would go on and on about the big uglies who were ignored by other broadcasters. "He helped glamorize offensive linemen," Anthony Munoz said in the 2011 book *Madden*, by Bryan Burwell. "We all love him for that."

In the 26 years since *John Madden Football* was released for Commodore and Apple II computers, the Madden games have sold more than 100 million units, making it the best-selling sports franchise in gaming history. More than 100 million fans have voted over the years for a favorite player to appear on the game's cover, too, with Richard Sherman beating out Cam Newton in this year's vote, as announced on Friday.

Madden NFL has impacted the game at a grass roots level. "Kids always played football in the street," Madden said. "'Run to the fire hydrant, and I'll throw it to you.' But they didn't know about blitzes and zone dogs, or Cover 3 and Cover 2, shotgun. They know all that stuff now." When the video game was being created, Madden lobbied for it to have the look of a televised game. Years later, he heard a Fox executive say he wanted football broadcasts to look more like the Madden game.

"Let me show you my deal back here," he said as he moves from his office to a 7,000-square-foot studio. On the wall are nine 63-inch television screens, surrounding one massive movie theater screen. Each screen is numbered. On Sundays during the football season, he has a different game playing on every screen, and if something interesting happens in one of them, he calls out for an assistant to switch that game to the big screen.



On NFL Sundays, Madden will invite around 100 people to watch the slate of games in his 7,000 square-foot studio. (Getty Images) Up to 100 people will join him -- family members, friends, hangers on. Madden sits in a big chair in the front of the room. Only the serious football fans can sit in the front row. Farther back is a second row of chairs. In this area, people talk a little and watch a little. Way in the back, there is a third row with tables filled with food and drink, where people can socialize and kids can run around.

It's a place where football and Madden bring together people of all kinds, just as they've done on a national scale for decades. Here, the NFL's popularity is easy to understand. "It's pretty good television," Madden said. "Reality television has gotten so big where you can see things as they happen, see behind the scenes. The NFL was reality television before reality television. We all know people gamble on it, and this fantasy football is big. It's

become the accepted thing to do to watch football on Sunday and Sunday night. There is nothing better. And it's free."

* * *

On many Friday afternoons during the season, Madden is on a conference call for the player safety advisory panel. No one watches more game tape than Madden, according to a league official, and he's usually bubbling with thoughts, exchanging ideas with NFL executives all week. He was the driving force behind the initiative to make all players wear knee pads and thigh pads last year. This year, he was behind the rule clarification that will prevent linemen from hitting other linemen in the face.

One of his missions is to make tackling safer, and that means taking the helmet out of the hit as much as possible. "We have to keep chopping away at that," Madden said. "That's the only piece of equipment they have that can be a weapon. I'd like to see the forearms, shoulders, arms and hands get back into tackling, hitting and blocking. It has to be taught. It's coaching."

Madden's enlightenment about head injuries is a good barometer for how the league has changed. "I remember being in the dark ages," Madden said. "'What happened? *He just got dinged.* 'Oh, good, at least it wasn't a knee.' We had smelling salts. I thought if you broke one of those ammonia capsules and put it under a guy's nose, and if his head jerked back, he was OK. I swear I did. At some point you have to admit that stuff. It was treated more like getting the wind knocked out of you."

Madden believes quarterbacks can prevent some of the game's most dangerous collisions. He said Stabler never would have thrown a post over the middle with a safety sitting over the top. Many of today's quarterbacks do, and part of it is strategy. As Cover 2 became more popular in the '90s, big hits over the middle became more prevalent. "This is where a lot of the helmet-to-helmet stuff and defenseless-player stuff came about," Madden said. "In Cover 2, they run the Mike deep, and the way to beat that is down the seam. They throw it over the Mike, between the safeties. That gets the receiver up in the air. If these guys can't get there to knock the ball down, the safeties get there to dislodge. That helmet-to-helmet was a taught technique to dislodge in Cover 2."

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Madden coached one of the game's most feared safeties in Jack Tatum, who named his autobiography *They Call Me Assassin*. It's difficult to imagine the 1975 version of Tatum playing in today's NFL. "He would have had to make some changes," Madden said. "But Jack Tatum was real smart. He was a great guy. He knew what he could do and what he couldn't do. He would adjust very quickly. There are not a lot of guys like Jack Tatum."

Safety isn't Madden's only focus. He wants to see coaches allowed to use tablets on the sideline. He envisions 20-man practice squads and special coaches for player development. He wishes for a simplified rulebook to clear up a lot of the confusion. And there's much more.

Madden reaches into his pocket and pulls out a football card of Summerall from 1962. "A guy gave me this last week," he said. "Look at the last sentence on the back. He was perfect in extra points, 46-of-46. Now, 55 years later, we're saying we ought to move the extra point back, because they're too easy. I don't think we need that."

Much more than an ambassador for the game, Madden is a hands-on steward and guardian, and he takes it very seriously. "I just want to watch the game and make it as good as it can be, as safe as it can be," he said.

* * *

Madden attends the Pro Football Hall of Fame induction every year, and he makes a point of talking to every inductee who shows up. Of the 100-plus who attended last August, Madden said he most enjoyed talking to 92-year old Charley Trippi. The old timers are the best, and too many of them are gone. Madden's old boss and Hall of Fame presenter Al Davis passed away nearly three years ago. "Sometimes I think of calling Al at night," he said. "I used to call him at night all the time, about 9:00 at night. I still think, 'I'll call Al now.' The Al I coached for is a lot different than the Al people talk and write about. We were pretty close."

Behind Madden's desk, in a place of prominence, is a classic photograph of Lombardi and George Halas on the sidelines at a Packers-Bears game. Madden stares into the picture. "I talk to those two guys all the time," he said, still looking at it. "Every time I hear something that drives me crazy, I say, 'Sorry George. Sorry Vince.' I say that probably 20 times a day. There's s--- going on now that those two would roll over in their graves about."

And with that, Madden looks down and picks up a memo regarding an upcoming conference call with the safety advisory panel. John Madden, keeper of the flame, has studying to do.