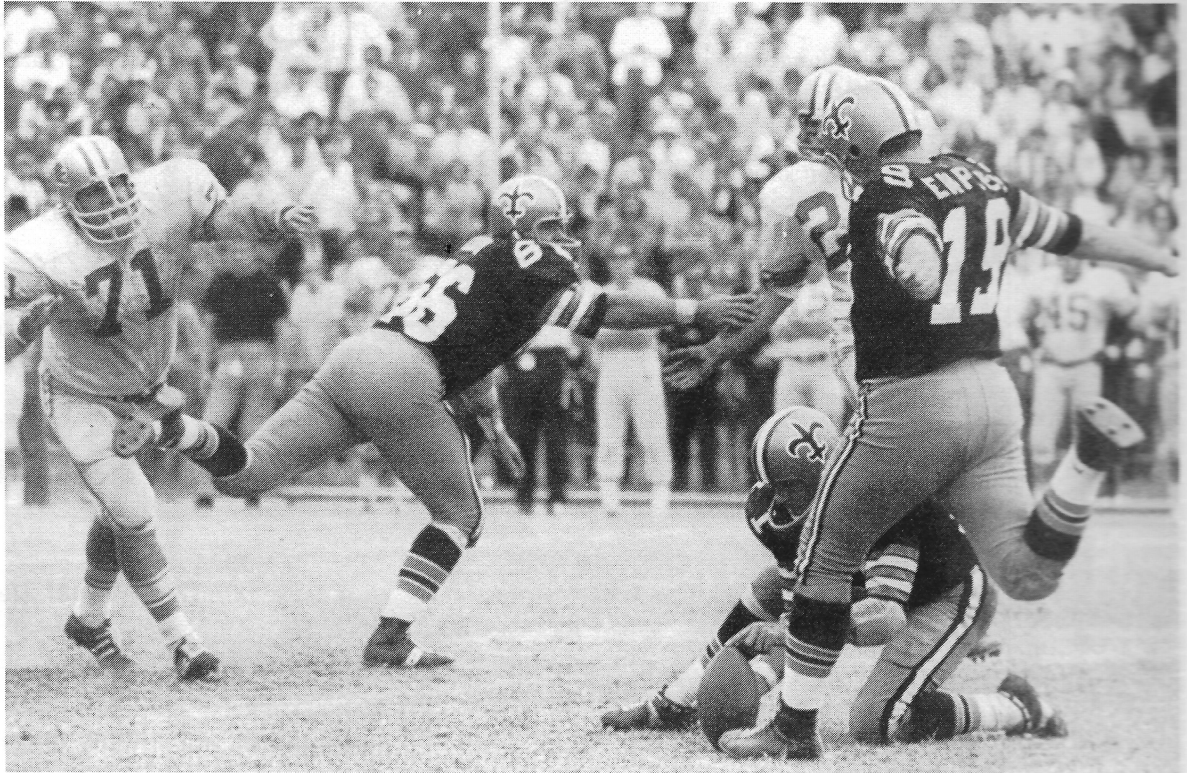


TOM DEMPSEY and the Record Kick That Almost Didn't Happen

Tom Dempsey (19) kicking the game-winning and NFL record 63-yard field goal on November 8, 1970 against the Detroit Lions at Tulane Stadium in New Orleans, Louisiana.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Any record-setting play completes a chain of events. If any event in the chain results in a different outcome, the old record remains intact. Tom Dempsey's 63-yard field goal for the New Orleans Saints at Tulane Stadium against the Detroit Lions on November 8, 1970 would not have occurred but for several different events—two officiating mistakes, poor time management by a newly-promoted Saints coach and a miscue by the Lions' backup quarterback.

The Saints fired Tom Fears, their head coach since the franchise began in 1967, just five days earlier, following a 30–17 loss to the Los Angeles Rams. Assistant coach J. D. Roberts took over for the game against the 5–2 Lions, who were nine-point road favorites. As so often happens after a coaching change, the underdogs played inspired ball. The Saints took a 16–14 lead on Tom Barrington's three-yard run and Dempsey's point after with just under seven minutes to play. It was the

home team's first touchdown of the day after three Dempsey field goals, his best game of the season to that point. He had connected on only five of 15 field goal tries in the first seven contests. Before the afternoon ended however, the game would become the highlight of his career and make him a nationwide sensation.

It was remarkable that Dempsey kicked in the NFL at all. He was bigger than most kickers, at 6' 1", 265 pounds and he also had to overcome birth defects, having been born with a partially formed right hand and no toes on his right foot. Dempsey played defensive end in high school and junior college—he was the first player in NFL history from Palomar Junior College in San Marcos, California. He also competed as a shot-putter and wrestler at Palomar while playing on both sides of the ball on the gridiron. Dempsey didn't start place-kicking until college, using the traditional "straight on" kicking style with the front of the foot despite the recent popularity of the soccer-style approach by the Gogolak brothers. At first, he kicked barefooted with a piece of

tape protecting his right foot. Later, he wore a special half-shoe made by an orthopedic company in California. It had a one and 3/4-inch-thick leather plate on the front end to provide a solid surface for kicking the ball.

Dempsey played in the Atlantic Coast Football League for the Lowell Giants before gaining a spot on the San Diego Chargers taxi squad in 1968. He joined the Saints in 1969 as a free agent. He not only made the team, but earned Associated Press All-NFL honors his very first season when he kicked 22 of 41 field goals, including seven of 11 from 40 yards or more and one of 11 from beyond midfield. Dempsey's 99 points in 1969 stood as a Saints record for 16 years. His 55-yarder against the Los Angeles Rams was one yard shy of the NFL record set by Bert Rechichar of the Baltimore Colts in 1953. Dempsey would get another shot at the record in that fateful game two years later.

The start of the chain of unlikely events was a third interception by Lions' veteran quarterback Bill Munson, which prompted Lions head coach Joe Schmidt to insert Greg Landry with 6:45 left in the game. The second-year backup led a scoring march which started at the Lions' 14-yard line. The officials made a mistake early in the drive which gave the Lions an extra down. As Jack Saylor explained in the *Detroit Free Press*, "A Greg Landry-to-Earl McCullouch pass from the Detroit 25 on second down was ruled incomplete because the ball hit another offensive player before McCullouch caught it. The officials left it at second down, however, and one play later, on what should have been the fourth down—the kicking down, Landry completed a pass to keep the drive alive." Shortly afterwards, a personal foul penalty against running back Altie Taylor for a midfield altercation set the Lions back. A pass interference call against New Orleans strong safety Hugo Hollas on the next play negated the setback, giving Detroit a first down at their 49. Landry then hit tight end Charlie Sanders with a 17-yard completion to move within Errol Mann's field-goal range at the 34 as the officials called the two-minute warning. With the Saints not using any of their three timeouts (Roberts's inexperience as head coach?), the Lions kept the ball on the ground. After a third down run failed to pick up a first down, the inexperienced Landry made a mistake that ultimately cost his team the game. The young quarterback called timeout immediately instead of letting the clock run down to just a few seconds. (We'll never

know if Roberts would have called time at that point.)

As a result, when Erroll Mann booted an 18-yard field goal to give the visitors a 17–16 lead, 11 seconds remained. Many in the crowd of 66,910 headed for the exits at that point. They were proud of their hometown boys for an outstanding effort that had fallen just short. One of those who left his seat early was Dan Tehan, the representative of the commissioner's office overseeing the game. Aware of the downs foul-up that looked like it gave Detroit an apparent victory, he boarded the press box elevator to meet with the officiating crew after the game.

Wide receiver Al Dodd fielded the kickoff and hustled out of bounds at the Saints 28-yard line with six seconds remaining. With time for one quick pass, Billy Kilmer connected with Dodd on the left sideline at the New Orleans 45 with just two ticks on the clock left. It is possible Dodd may not have gotten both feet in bounds. A YouTube video of the end of the CBS telecast shows Dodd jumping to make the catch with his arms extended in front of him. His right foot clearly comes down in bounds, but a split second later his drag foot kicks up chalk. Regardless of what the videotape showed, the only opinion that mattered is that of the official running down the sideline who signaled a catch.

Special teams coach Don Heinrich told J. D. Roberts, "He can kick it." In his first NFL game as head coach, Roberts made the historic decision to send out the field goal unit. Dempsey admitted later that he didn't calculate the distance of the kick as he trotted onto the field. He just knew he had to boom it as far as he could. In fact, he was kicking from the Saints 37, which made it a 63-yarder since the goal posts were on the goal line. Some of the Lions laughed in disbelief. On their sideline, Schmidt congratulated Landry for leading the winning drive. Convinced the Saints would fake the field goal, the Detroit coach sent Hall of Fame cornerback Lem Barney back deep to protect against a Hail Mary. In the stands, former Saints cornerback Dave Whitsell, who had retired at the end of the 1969 season, told his son, "Stumpy can make this! I've seen him make this in practice!" With that, Dave jumped out of his seat, ran down the aisle and hopped over the short fence onto the field, ending up just beyond the Detroit end zone.

As the Saints set up for the kick, CBS announcer Don Criqui told the TV audience that Dempsey would not only win the game if successful, but also set a new NFL

record. Jackie Burkett's snap was perfect, as was Joe Scarpatti's placement. Not wanting to be offsides and give Dempsey five extra yards, the Lions didn't make a serious effort at blocking the kick. "It sounded like some kind of explosion," said Burkett. "It was almost like the ball grunted." The thump of Dempsey's special shoe meeting the ball can be heard on the audio. As the ball rocketed through the humid New Orleans air, Criqui said, "I don't believe this." Then, "It's good! I don't believe it! The field goal attempt was good from 63 yards away! It's incredible! Tulane Stadium has gone wild!"

The ball cleared the crossbar by less than two feet and hit the turf three yards beyond the post. Dempsey broke Rechichar's 17-year-old record by an amazing seven yards. Teammates mobbed their field goal kicker and carried him and Roberts off the field as those left in the stands roared loudly enough to be heard blocks away by fans who had departed early. Some Lion defenders were stunned while others threw down their helmets in disgust.

(On a personal note, I was listening to the game on radio because the non-sellout was blacked out locally. As Dempsey prepared to kick, the radio transmission went out. My father and I agreed there was no way he could have made the kick. When the audio came back a minute later, it was clear from the excitement in Al Wester's voice and the roar of the crowd that the unbelievable had, indeed, just happened.)

Dempsey reached the locker room 15 minutes after the game. "I knew when I hit it, that I hit it good enough to carry," he told reporters. "Whether or not it'd stay straight—that was the question. What happens with field goals is, it's like hitting a golf ball, and I hit that one as sweet as you could hit it. I tried to do it like I do on a kickoff. I started my left foot six inches back of where it is on a regular kick to get more leg swing." Dempsey added, "When Coach Roberts told me to go in, I wasn't the least bit nervous. I told the team that I needed at least one second more than usual so I could hit it hard. Joe Scarpatti placed it exactly right, and I laid the leather to it. It seemed an eternity before the official signaled it was good. Then the guys swarmed all over me and it's a wonder I didn't get hurt. But I was so stunned, it wouldn't have mattered."

When reporters were let into the Detroit locker room, they discovered a jagged gash in the blackboard. It wasn't until many years later that Schmidt admitted

he had thrown his clipboard when he reached the dressing room. Who could blame him? Joe told the press, "You'll never see it again. It's like winning the Masters with a 390-yard hole-in-one on the last shot."

By coincidence, almost-hero Mann had predicted a few days earlier that someday conditions would be right for an NFL kicker to boot a field goal of more than 60 yards. Someday came sooner than he expected. "Unbelievable. He could stand there and kick it 200 times and not hit it that sweet again. There was a wind up high in the stadium that helped him out, but I still didn't think he would make it." Errol sensed what his fellow kicker experienced. "It all happened so quickly I suppose he didn't have time to realize the pressure he was under and the exact distance. I bet if he pondered the situation too long, he probably wouldn't have made one from 30 yards out."

Within a week, the excitement over Dempsey's kick had barely subsided when Tex Schramm, president and general manager of the Dallas Cowboys and chairman of the NFL competition committee, protested the use of a special shoe. "I have great admiration for Dempsey in overcoming his physical disability, but I believe he should use the same surface to meet the ball that other kickers use. A year ago the league took action that kicking shoes must be of stock manufacture for retail sale. But a member of the league office inspected various shoes and someone had the rule changed to approve Dempsey's shoe. I told them as chairman of the competition committee I didn't feel they had authority to approve Dempsey's shoe." Despite Schramm's protestations, the man who inspected the shoe, Mark Duncan, the league's director of personnel, explained his approval. "It was really an easy decision. It's lighter than the regular shoe, and there's no metal in it." Aware of the negative impact Schramm's remarks had on the league's image, NFL director of public relations Don Weiss issued a statement. "This is the only type of shoe Dempsey could wear because of his foot. The shoe is not weighted—and this is one consideration which made the NFL adopt rules calling for a standard manufactured shoe—and we don't feel that a 63-yard field goal alters the fact that the shoe was approved." Pro Football Hall of Famer "Bullet Bill" Dudley also defended Dempsey's shoe. "Any protest against special shoes should have been made before Tom kicked that field goal." Bill admitted to using a knife to fashion a square

toe on his kicking shoe during his career (1942, 1945–53). “They thought I was crazy. But later Lou Groza and Ben Agajanian wore that type of shoe.”

Bombarded by hate mail, Schramm ate crow. He phoned Dempsey on November 22 to apologize. Dempsey explained, “Mr. Schramm was calling to say he was sorry about the remarks he made and that he hadn’t meant to take away anything from my kick by what he said.” Tex told the press, “It was a mistake and bad timing on my part. That 63-yarder was a heck of an accomplishment and a tremendous tribute to him. I don’t give a damn what you’ve got on your foot, I say that if you can kick that darn thing 63 yards through the goal posts, it is one heck of an accomplishment.”

The kick turned Dempsey’s season around. He made 10 of his final 15 field goal tries, including two from more than 50 yards against the Rams. Dempsey’s turnaround was not shared by the Saints however. The Detroit victory was the Saints’ last in a 2–11–1 season.

Dempsey became a national celebrity. He received the Pro Football Writers Most Courageous Player award for overcoming his birth defects. He appeared to have a bright future ahead of him with the Saints, but that was not to be the case.

Dempsey reported to training camp for the 1971 season weighing 265 pounds, 20 pounds over the weight his coach wanted. In the exhibition season, Dempsey made only one of eight field goal attempts. “What have you done for me lately?” Saints fans booed him, and Roberts cut him the week before the season opener. Dempsey explained, “I guess I put too much pressure on myself to stay on top, and that screwed me up.” He had married a New Orleans girl that June and recalled, “I thought my wife married a hero. Now I was thinking she married a washout. But she stood behind me.”

Dempsey continued to kick in a park near his home, retrieving the ball himself. He called various teams offering his services. Finally, after six weeks, the Eagles signed him to their taxi squad. He was activated for five games in 1971, making 12 of 17 field goals, including 3-of-5 beyond midfield. As a result, he became the Eagles’ regular kicker the next three seasons.

Philadelphia traded Dempsey to the Rams in April, 1975, for an undisclosed draft choice. Coach Mike McCormack insisted the trade had nothing to do with Dempsey calling Eagles’ owner Leonard Tose “an out-right liar” during the NFL Players Association strike the

previous summer when Dempsey was the team’s representative. Since Philadelphia had no other kicker on its roster after trading one of the premier kickers in the league, no one believed McCormack’s disclaimer.

Dempsey played in all 14 games for Los Angeles each of the next two seasons. After appearing in five games for Houston in 1977, he finished his career with two seasons in Buffalo.

Because of controversy over whether the special shoe gave him an unfair advantage, the NFL passed the so-called “Tom Dempsey Rule” in 1977. “Any shoe that is worn by a player with an artificial limb on his kicking leg must have a kicking surface that conforms to that of a normal kicking shoe.”

After his NFL retirement, Dempsey and his family returned to New Orleans, where he was an automobile salesman for many years and an ardent Saints fan. After watching kicker Garrett Hartley miss a game-winner, Dempsey sent word to kicking coach John Carney to teach Hartley not to overpower the ball. “The kid has a strong leg. He doesn’t need to overkick it.” When the Saints reached the Super Bowl after the 2009 season, local and national media outlets interviewed the 63-year-old record-holder. He told them he had watched the NFC Championship Game against the Vikings in his den with his wife Carlene. As Hartley lined up to kick the game winner in overtime to send the Saints to the Super Bowl, Dempsey yelled at the set, “Don’t overkick it!” As soon as the ball left Hartley’s foot, the old kicker exclaimed, “It’s good!”

Dempsey’s record was finally tied by Jason Elam of the Broncos in a 1998 game at Mile High Stadium. Oakland’s Sebastian Janikowski in 2011 and San Francisco’s David Akers in 2012 also booted 63-yarders, * Janikowski’s coming at Denver and Akers’s at Green Bay. Finally, another Bronco, Matt Prater, broke the 63-yard barrier by one yard in a game at Denver on December 8, 2013. The shoes used by all five kickers reside in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, with Dempsey’s sticking out like a sore thumb.

Tom Dempsey, however, can still sit at home in New Orleans and proclaim that no one’s ever bettered his unlikely record—at sea level.

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