

Super-Chargers

A few days before the Chargers' regular season opener against the Seahawks, San Diego general manager Bobby Beathard wondered aloud whether his team would do much of anything this year.

"I hope my read is wrong," Beathard said, "but I don't feel comfortable. Everything is kind of up in the air. I don't know if it's all going to come together, and that's a big concern."

Say this much for the highly respected general manager: He certainly has a better read on draft prospects than his own team, because after two weeks, the Chargers look very much like a together team. But just how together the Chargers actually are will come into clearer focus today, when they meet the most together team in football.

The Chargers venture into Lambeau Field today, where the white-hot Packers await their next challenge on a road

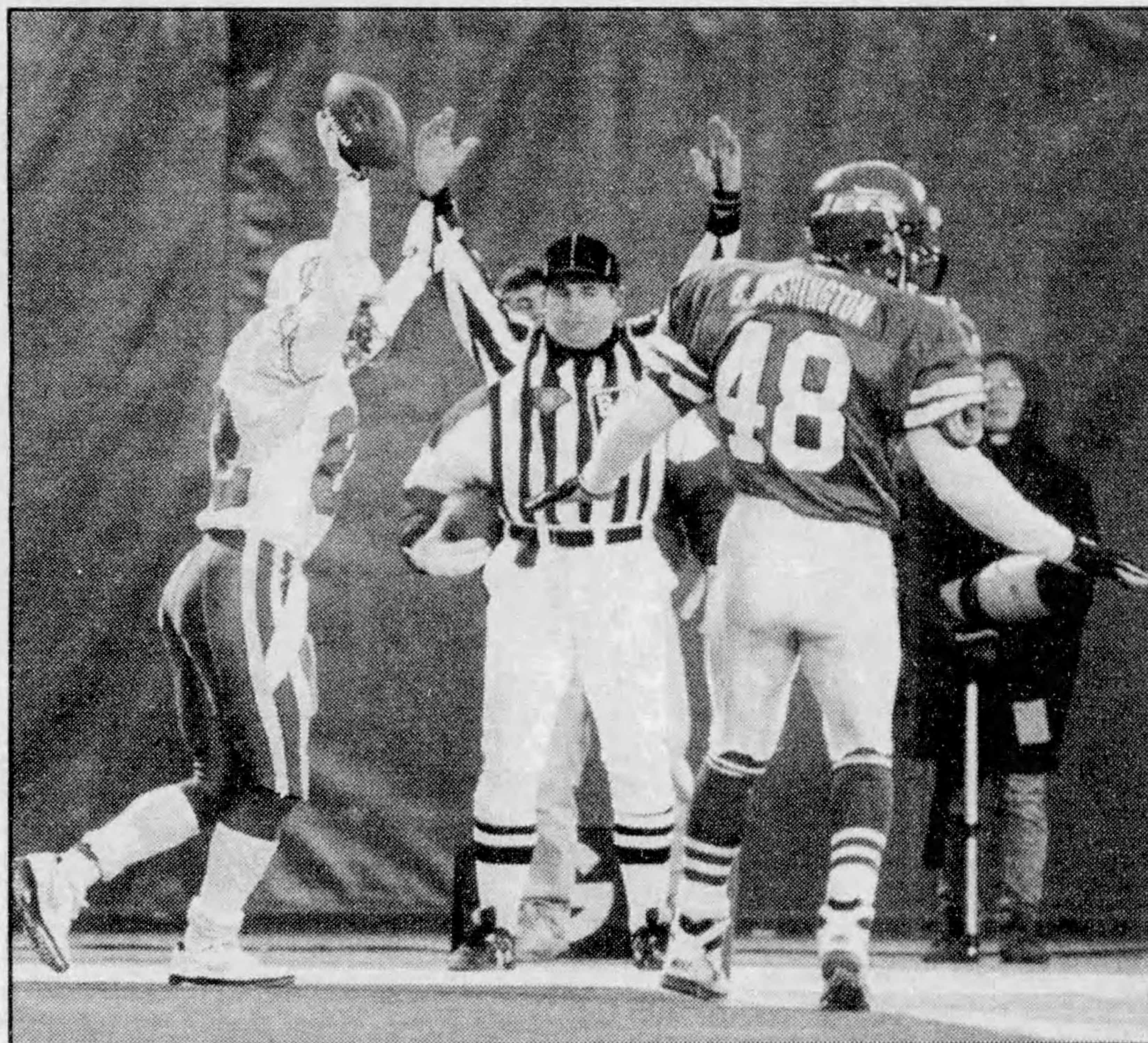
that may ultimately lead to the Super Bowl. While it's a lot to ask of the Chargers to beat Green Bay today — after all, the Pack has won 19 of its last 20 at Lambeau Field — it's not a stretch to envision a Packers-Chargers rematch in Super Bowl XXXI in January.

And if the Chargers get that far, it will be through no small contribution by the man who came into the season with so many doubts. After all, Beathard made some rather bold offseason decisions in a bid to get his team playing more like the Chargers who went to the Super Bowl two years ago than the one that gasped into the playoffs after last year's victory over the Giants in that snowball-filled regular season finale at Giants Stadium.

• In February, Beathard stunned the NFL world by releasing running back Natrone Means, who had fallen out of favor because of a questionable work ethic and would have counted \$2.34 million toward this year's salary cap. He replaced him with second-year tailback Aaron Hayden, and also signed journeyman Leonard Russell. The two have combined for 213 yards and three touchdowns, as the Chargers have the league's fifth-ranked rushing attack. Means, who was claimed off waivers by Jacksonville, has yet to play because of a thumb injury.

• The Chargers opted not to resign defensive end Leslie O'Neal, choosing instead to pursue Dolphins free agent Marco Coleman, who has been steady, if unspectacular, thus far.

• San Diego also dropped free-agent running back Ronnie Harmon and receivers Shawn Jefferson and



Newsday File Photo / Paul J. Bereswill

This touchdown by Mark Ingram in 1994 gave the Dolphins a comeback victory over the Jets and precipitated a steady decline in Jets' fortunes.

How Marino's 'Spike' Punctured Jets' Hearts

Rarely does a single play produce a line of demarcation as bold and indelible as the one that occurred 22 months ago in the south end-zone of Giants Stadium. This was Nov. 27, 1994, a chance for first place, a chance to repel the demons of the last quarter century, a chance for a promising rookie coach to lead his team out of the post-Namathian darkness.

Instead, Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino pulled off the infamous trick now known simply as "the clock play," the fake spike that resulted in a game-winning touchdown pass with 22 seconds left, rallying Miami to a 28-24 win after the Jets had built a 24-7 third-quarter lead. It was a game that not only helped decide first place in the AFC East, but helped decide the future direction of the Jets: straight down.

The teams meet again today at Pro Players Stadium, and painful memories of that fateful afternoon are fresh in the minds of the par-

ticipants.

"That particular game ripped the heart and soul out of our team," said former Jets offensive line coach Larry Beightol, now the Dolphins line coach. "We were playing for a share of first place, we had the lead, and they came back and nailed us. That took all the [fight] out of our team. It shouldn't have, but it did."

The Jets didn't win another game that season, and Pete Carroll was summarily fired by Leon Hess, who replaced him with Rich Kotite, accompanied by those fateful words, "I'm 80 years old. I want results now."

Here are the results: Since losing to Miami two years ago, the Jets are 3-20.

"Everybody was pointing fingers after that game," said former Jets offensive tackle James Brown, now a Dolphins' starter. "That game really broke up our team."

Two years later, it has yet to be fixed.

— Bob Glauber

Mark Seay.

• And Beathard's signing of free-agent middle linebacker Kurt Gouveia was designed to allow Junior Seau, used at that spot last year, to freelance more as a pass rusher. Seau has gotten off to a slow start, but appears ready to break out after adjusting to the change.

The results so far: The Chargers boast the league's second-ranked offense, they're second in the AFC with a plus-4 turnover ratio, and, more important, they haven't lost a

game. That could change today against the hottest hand in football, but Brett Favre surely won't have as easy a time against the Chargers as he did against the woeful Bucs and the overmatched Eagles.

Pining for Yesteryear

Former Giants cornerback Everson Walls can't believe how far the team has fallen from its Super Bowl victory after the 1990 season.

"I want to cry when I think about how the team was dismantled,"

Walls said. "We were an old team, but we weren't just your regular old guys. They have no team now. Dave Brown must be feeling like Craig Morton. You go from just a few years ago as the greatest defensive team to ever play, maybe except the '85 Bears, to what they have now? It's criminal."

Extra Points

Two things going for the Raiders in today's home opener against Jacksonville. First, quarterback Jeff Hostetler is expected back from a knee injury. Second, the Raiders have never lost a game to a team from Florida in Oakland (10-0) — of course, the last time the Raiders played a Florida-based team in Oakland was 15 years ago. Back then, they were the Raid-uhs, unlike the Al Davis-induced mess they have turned into . . . Including their last two preseason games, the Bucs have not scored a touchdown in 16 quarters . . . I don't know about you, but I'm still having trouble making up my mind about Keyshawn Johnson. On one hand, I can see him wrapping this town around his magnetic smile and quick wit. On the other hand, I can also see him spending a year or two with this bumbling franchise and attempt to flee the bad karma by orchestrating a trade . . . Only three NFC quarterbacks have yet to throw an interception this season. Then again, only one of them has thrown a touchdown. Steve Young and Gus Frerotte don't have a scoring throw, while Favre has seven . . . The Bengals have totaled only 99 rushing yards through two games; so far, 22 individual runners have more yardage. Pretty weak, considering the Bengals are spending more for their top two tailbacks, Ki-Jana Carter and Garrison Hearst, than any other team is paying for its top two rushers . . . Despite an 0-2 start, Bill Parcells isn't worried about his Patriots. "We're going to be all right," he said. "We've got some things to work out, but we are going to be fine. I just know it." Does he know something we don't? . . . The Cardinals are 0-for-Arizona on opening day. Since moving to Phoenix from St. Louis, the Cardinals have lost nine straight openers, including last Sunday's 38-10 drubbing to Miami . . . Quote of the week: Former two-way star Chuck Bednarik on today's most famous two-way player, Deion Sanders: "Sanders couldn't tackle my wife Emma." . . . And now, kicking for the Broncos, John Elway? Could happen. Broncos kicker Jason Elam is hurting with a hip injury, leaving Elway as his emergency replacement for tonight's game against the Bucs. "We'll have to break out his little black square-toed shoes," Elam said. Said Elway, who has punted six times for the Broncos during his 14-year career: "They're looking for that shoe, but it's been so long, they can't find it."