



Gang Green: An Irreverent Look Behind the Scenes

Gerald Eskenazi

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Question: *What is the only team dating back to the 1970 AFL-NFL merger that has yet to win a division title?*

Question: *What is the only team in the four major pro sports that has existed since the early 1960s and never had a coach leave with a winning career record for the team?*

Question: *What is the only team in sports that plays its home games in a stadium named for another team?*

If you bleed green and white, you know the answer to these questions as well as you know the color of Joe Willie Namath's shoes. The New York Jets have a record for futility and self-sabotage that is unmatched in the history of professional sports. And nonetheless, they have been rewarded with a loyal following that has made Jets tickets as hard to come by as Jets winning seasons.

For Jets fans, the bright beacon of promise has always turned into an onrushing train. They reveled in the joy of the Jets' epic victory in Super Bowl III, when their team beat the 18 1/2-point odds to defeat the Baltimore Colts, just as their cocky young quarterback had guaranteed; they then watched as contract squabbles broke up the core of the team, which would reach just one playoff game in the next twelve years. They cheered as their sleek, explosive team roared into the AFC Championship Game in January 1983; the team was held scoreless after overnight rains pelted the uncovered Orange Bowl field, turning the gridiron into a quagmire that favored the defense-oriented Dolphins. They dared to hope when the Jets went on an unprecedented spending spree in 1996, signing a Super Bowl quarterback and adding a host of fleet receivers and experienced linemen; they saw that team go 1-15, as Rich Kotite's Jets career coaching record sank to a jaw-dropping 4-28.

In *Gang Green*, *New York Times* sportswriter Gerald Eskenazi details the bizarre history of this remarkable team. From the poor decisions (drafting Ken O'Brien instead of Dan Marino) and bad luck (Joe Namath's knees, Dennis Byrd's near-tragic neck injury) to the horrendous leadership (see Kotite, above) and outright strangeness (team practices held in an open area alongside the Belt Parkway, leRoy Neiman's presence as team artist-in-residence, the Richard Todd/Matt Robinson quarterback duel that wasn't) that have typified the Jets' mystifying approach to football, *Gang Green* captures the history of this most unusual franchise in a funny, rollicking, nostalgic tale. If you can name the Jet who is the only man in NFL history to run more than 90 yards on a play from scrimmage *without scoring*; if you remember the glory days of the New York Sack Exchange, when practice was often disrupted by the distracting presence of Mark Gastineau's inamorata, Brigitte Nielsen; if you can still hum the fight song coach Lou Holtz made the team sing after victories -- not that there were enough for them to memorize the lyrics; or if you know which Jets coach told which Jets punter that his flatulence traveled farther than the punter's kicks -- then *Gang Green* is the book for you.

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