

THE

# COFFIN CORNER



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## TRADING PLACES

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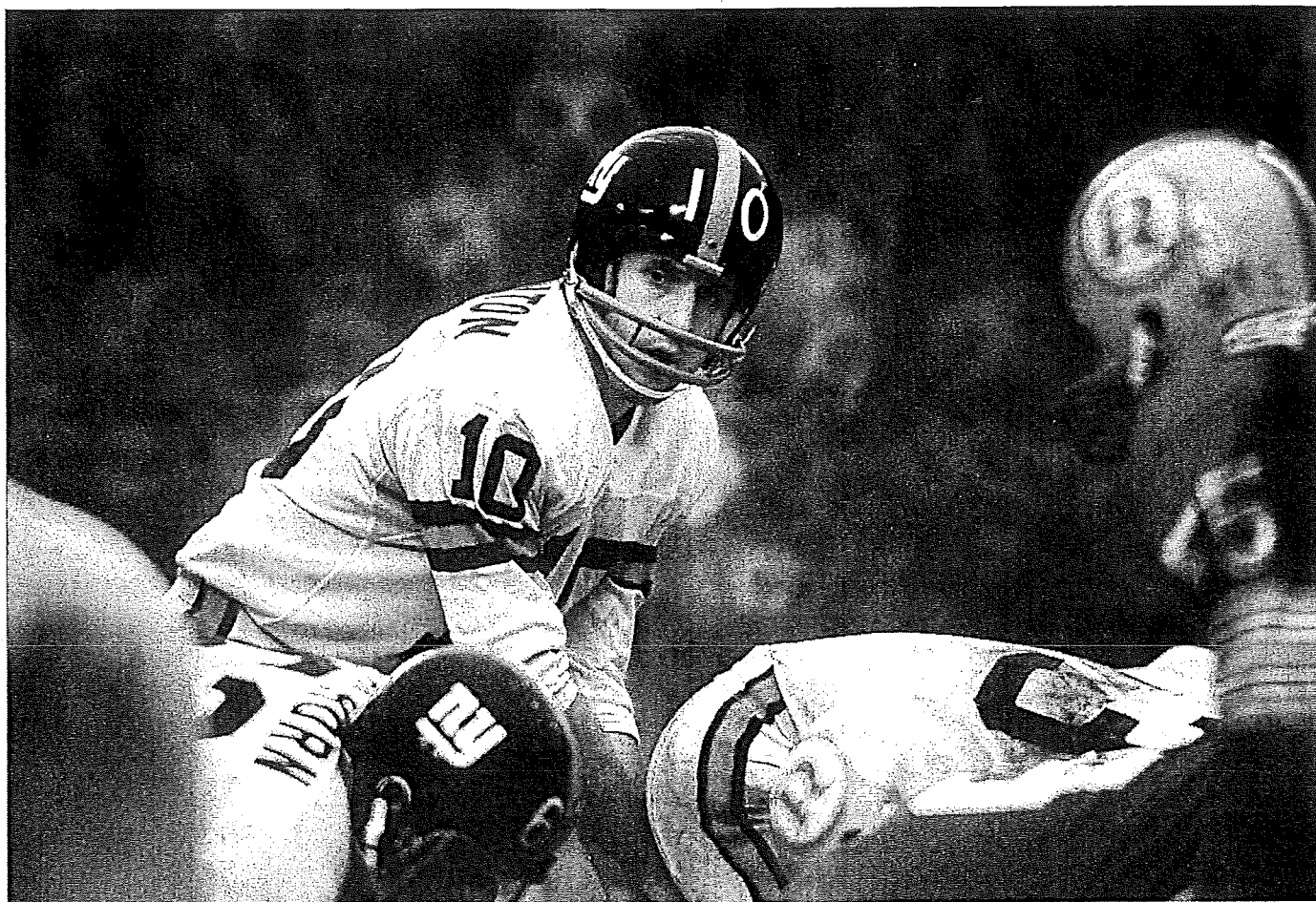
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# The Trade That Kept On Giving

## *Tarkenton to the Giants Built a Powerhouse*



NATE FINE/GETTY IMAGES

Quarterback Fran Tarkenton was drafted by the Minnesota Vikings in 1961, traded to the New York Giants in 1967—played for New York for five seasons—and was traded back to Minnesota in 1972, where he finished his Hall of Fame career in 1978.

### **Stew Thornley** \_\_\_\_\_

**A** quarterback from the University of Georgia, Fran Tarkenton was the third player chosen by the expansion Minnesota Vikings in the 1961 college draft.<sup>1</sup> He helped the Vikings in their formative years, was dealt to the New York Giants in 1967, traded back to Minnesota five years later and returned to a much stronger team than the one he left. The reason for the rise of the Vikings in between his tenures was Tarkenton himself, his trade to the Giants being one that resonated for more than a decade.

The first regular season game in Vikings history was September 17, 1961 against the Chicago Bears. Tarken-

ton began on the bench but Norm Van Brocklin, who went from quarterback of the defending champion Philadelphia Eagles to head coach of the Vikings, sent the rookie in with the Vikings ahead, 3-0, in the first quarter. Tarkenton threw four touchdown passes and ran for another as Minnesota upset the Bears, 37-13.

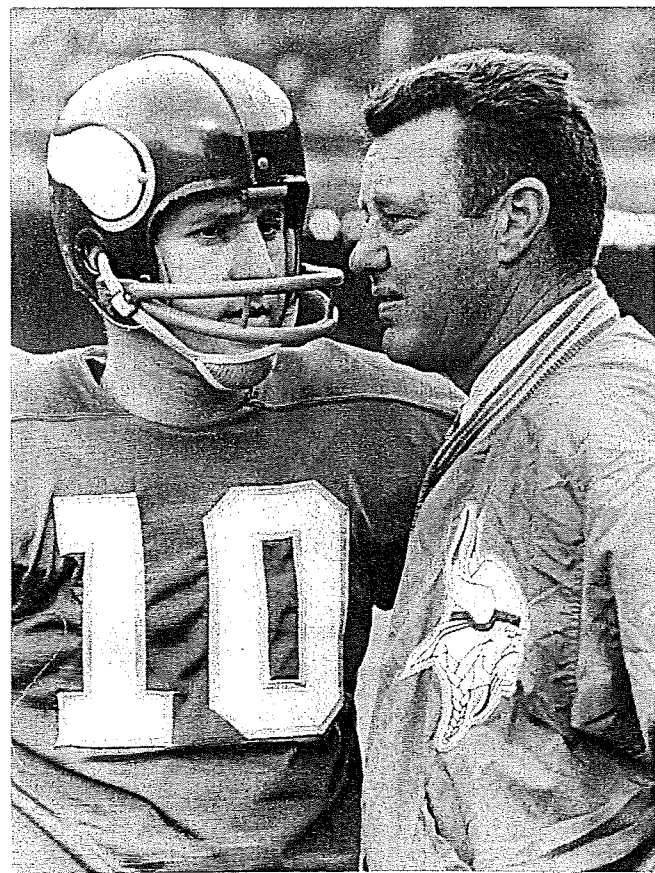
Showing flashes of the stardom that propelled him to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Tarkenton in his early years was known for another reason. Scrambling was Tarkenton's trademark and the stuff of highlight reels.<sup>2</sup> One is from a 1966 game in Dallas when Tarkenton crisscrossed the field for a remarkable 23 seconds before finding a receiver.

Two years earlier, in 1964, he had scrambled to help

the Vikings beat the Green Bay Packers for the first time in their history. The Vikings, down by two in the final minute, faced a fourth-and-22. Tarkenton ran and evaded a rush long enough to get receivers open, resulting in a 43-yard gain that set up a winning field goal by Fred Cox. Boosted by that win over Green Bay, Minnesota had an 8-5-1 record in 1964 to finish in a second-place tie in the Western Conference with the Packers.

The Vikings regressed in 1965 and Van Brocklin abruptly resigned after a November loss. He came back the next day after being talked out of it by general manager Jim Finks.

Van Brocklin clashed with everyone from reporters to his players, most notably Tarkenton, and was clearly not enamored with the scrambling. Van Brocklin even took an apparent dig at Tarkenton years later after the Vikings had acquired Gary Cuozzo: "Gary Cuozzo is a stand-up, pocket-type quarterback with a great arm. Sometimes he got dumped by the defense, but his losses were seven or eight yards, not 40."<sup>3</sup>



KEN REGAN

Vikings quarterback Fran Tarkenton and his head coach, Norm Van Brocklin, often clashed during their six seasons together. Both were gone from Minnesota in 1967.

Regarding Van Brocklin, Tarkenton said, "He destroyed me as a person."<sup>4</sup>

The relationship hit a breaking point in 1966, another disappointing season for the Vikings. The expansion Atlanta Falcons came to Minnesota for a late season game and Tarkenton was excited about his family and friends in Georgia having the chance to watch him on television. However, Van Brocklin started third-string quarterback Bob Berry and the Vikings lost the game.

The following February, Tarkenton said he would not return to the Vikings "because of the events of the past few months."<sup>5</sup> Van Brocklin resigned and this time no one tried to talk him out of it. Even with Van Brocklin gone, Tarkenton still wanted out.

In March 1967, the Vikings traded Tarkenton to the New York Giants and got a bundle in return: New York's second-round picks in the upcoming draft (the first-ever joint draft of the National and American Football Leagues) and in 1969, its first-round pick in either 1967 or 1968 and its bonus pick in either 1967 or 1968. The bonus pick was for the first overall selection in the draft that was awarded to the Giants as part of the merger of the NFL and AFL the previous year. It had to be used to draft a quarterback and could be traded only for an experienced quarterback. The Giants had been moribund in the past few years and were being outshone by the AFL New York Jets and their headline-making quarterback Joe Namath.

The bonus pick was intended to help the Giants become relevant again and it did with the acquisition of Tarkenton. The deal did even more for Minnesota. The Vikings couldn't use the first-round choice and the bonus pick in the same year. The choice seemed clear since the Giants in 1966 had the worst record among all the teams in the NFL and AFL. Only the New Orleans Saints, as a new team for 1967, had a higher pick (one they traded to the Baltimore Colts). The Vikings, now holding the second overall choice of the Giants, leaned toward using it in 1967 and saving the bonus pick for 1968.

Before any of that could happen, Minnesota needed a coach. Jim Finks, who had been general manager of the Calgary Stampeders in the Canadian Football League before coming to the Vikings in 1964, had only one person in mind: Bud Grant.

Grant grew up just outside of Minnesota in Superior, Wisconsin. A multi-sport star at the University of Min-



**Bud Grant replaced Norm Van Brocklin as head coach of the Minnesota Vikings in 1967 after ten seasons of coaching the Winnipeg Blue Bombers in the CFL. He was named to both the Pro Football Hall of Fame and the Canadian Football Hall of Fame.**

nesota, he played part of the 1949–50 National Basketball Association season with the Minneapolis Lakers. The Philadelphia Eagles of the NFL drafted Grant in the first round in 1950, but Grant played another year for the Lakers. He finally signed with the Eagles in 1951 and was a defensive end. Grant wanted to play offense and when the Eagles wouldn't assure him of that, he decided to play out his option. Grant did not sign a new contract with Philadelphia but reported to the team, where he did play as an offensive end in 1952. The Eagles and NFL commissioner Bert Bell pressured Grant to sign a contract but Grant later said, "The more adamant they became, the more I decided I was in a better bargaining position by not signing."<sup>6</sup>

Grant was second in 1952 in receptions and yards in the NFL, leaving him leverage for a new contract, especially since he had become a free agent. Nevertheless, the Eagles offered little more and Grant instead signed with the CFL Winnipeg Blue Bombers. After four seasons playing for the Blue Bombers, he became the team's coach and led Winnipeg to four Grey

Cup champions. During that time, Grant and Finks became familiar with one another.

Grant was named the Vikings' head coach on March 11, 1967 and was part of the brain trust for the draft three days later. After Baltimore took defensive lineman Bubba Smith from Michigan State, the Vikings went with another Spartan, halfback Clint Jones. With the eighth pick in the draft (Minnesota's own draft choice), the Vikings took end Gene Washington, also from Michigan State. (The Houston Oilers had drafted linebacker George Webster of the Spartans with the fifth choice in the draft, making it four Michigan State players taken in the first eight picks).

Now that the Vikings had Jones, halfback Tommy Mason was expendable. The first overall NFL draft choice in 1961, Mason had a number of good years with Minnesota but his knees were giving out. He played in only seven games because of knee problems in 1966 and his best years were behind him. At the time of the draft, Mason was in a hospital in Oklahoma City recovering from his most recent knee operation. Even so, the Vikings were able to trade Mason to the Los Angeles Rams for end Marlin McKeever and the Rams' 1967 first-round draft choice, which was coming up.

With Los Angeles's draft choice—the 15th overall pick—the Vikings selected defensive lineman Alan Page from Notre Dame. Using the second-round pick they had acquired from the Giants, the Vikings took halfback-flanker Bob Grim from Oregon State.

Though the draft was successful, Minnesota hadn't addressed the quarterback vacancy. The Vikings could have drafted Steve Spurrier (the Heisman Trophy recipient from Florida) or Bob Griese (the Heisman runner-up) from Purdue instead of Jones. Instead, they placed their faith in Ron Vander Kelen, Tarkenton's backup for four years. Vander Kelen had even said he would feel insulted if the Vikings acquired another quarterback.<sup>7</sup>

Vander Kelen wasn't up to the job, though. Neither were Berry or John Hankinson, who had played for the Minnesota Gophers and spent the 1966 season with the Des Moines Warriors, a Vikings affiliate in the Professional Football League of America.

During the 1967 preseason, it was apparent someone else was needed. The Vikings eyed British Columbia Lions quarterback Joe Kapp. Kapp had played in the 1959 Rose Bowl for California when the

Golden Bears lost to Iowa and was signed by Jim Finks to play for Calgary. Despite a frosty relationship between Kapp and Finks that resulted from Finks trading Kapp to British Columbia, Finks wanted him again.

In 1967, Kapp had signed a contract with the AFL Houston Oilers and intended to join the Oilers at the end of the CFL season. When this news broke, AFL President Milton Woodard voided Kapp's contract, and the Lions suspended Kapp arguing that he was still under contract with the Lions. In a complicated arrangement, the Lions waived Kapp out of the CFL and he was signed by the Vikings in a deal that also included an indemnity reported at \$25,000 to \$50,000 from the Vikings.<sup>8</sup>

Vikings public relations director Bud McGrane described Kapp "with a gait remindful of Dagwood Bumstead running for the bus and throwing passes that frequently resembled gut-shot mallards."<sup>9</sup> Paul Flatley, one of Kapp's receivers when the team went 3-8-3 in 1967, later said he had trouble with Kapp's "end-over-end passes."<sup>10</sup> Though not a classic quarterback in any sense, Kapp's skills and swagger fit the hard-nosed Vikings as they were rising to become contenders.

In the 1968 draft, the Vikings used the bonus pick from the Giants to draft offensive lineman Ron Yary from the University of Southern California.<sup>11</sup> They also traded McKeever—whom they had acquired from the Rams for Mason—to Washington for safety Paul Krause.

Directly or indirectly, the Tarkenton trade to the Giants had produced three future Hall of Famers in Page, Yary, and Krause. The Vikings later used one of the draft choices from the Giants for offensive lineman Ed White, a member of the PFRA's Hall of Very Good.

The Vikings won the 1968 Central Division title with an 8-6 record before being pounded by Baltimore in the playoffs. In their second game in 1969, though, the Vikings turned it around, beating the Colts, 52-14, as Kapp threw seven touchdown passes. The Vikings won the Central Division with a 12-2 record and then beat the Rams in the divisional playoff and the Cleveland Browns in the last NFL Championship Game ever played.

Throughout the 1969 season, Kapp always seemed to find a way: jump-passing in a 51-3 win over Cleveland during the regular season, hurdling safety Richie Petitbon of the Rams a few weeks later and colliding

head-on with linebacker Jim Houston in the title game. Kapp was slow to get up but at least he rose. Houston was face-planted into the frozen turf of Metropolitan Stadium and remained motionless for some time.

Kapp wasn't always effective, though. The week after the 51-3 win over Cleveland, he couldn't get the offense going in Green Bay and was relieved by Gary Cuzo as the Vikings defense dominated enough for Minnesota to get away with a 9-7 win. In a 52-14 trouncing of the Pittsburgh Steelers in the next game, Kapp also sputtered and was taken out early in favor of Cuzo.

And then there was the Super Bowl, a 23-7 loss to Kansas City in a game in which the Vikings were favored by two touchdowns. That debacle was a breakdown by the entire team, not just Kapp, and it turned out to be Kapp's final game with the Vikings.<sup>12</sup>

He had played out his option in 1969, although most fans weren't worried about him not returning. Surely the man who had turned down the team's Most Valuable Player award that year wouldn't abandon Minnesota.<sup>13</sup> But Kapp was seeking more money. He demonstrated the same fierce independence that he exhibited with the British Columbia Lions three years before and that his coach had shown 15 years before that. Kapp ended up with the Boston Patriots in a forgettable 1970 season, his last in the NFL.<sup>14</sup>

Cuzo and Bob Lee led the Vikings to another 12-2 season but the Vikings lost their opening playoff game in 1970 at home.<sup>15</sup> Veteran Norm Snead was brought in as quarterback and the results were pretty much the same the next year: an 11-3 regular-season followed by an opening playoff loss at Met Stadium.

A better quarterback was needed and the Vikings pulled it off with another trade with the Giants in early 1972, getting Tarkenton back in exchange for draft picks and a few players. One was Bob Grim, who had first come to Minnesota in 1967 in the initial Tarkenton trade.

The Tarkenton deals had come full circle. The Vikings had a star quarterback along with a strong offensive line, one that Tarkenton had helped to build with his 1967 departure. No longer needing to scramble, Tarkenton stayed put in the pocket as he racked up passing yards and touchdowns, often with shorter passes to players out of the backfield such as Chuck Foreman and Ed Marinaro.



Fran Tarkenton led the Vikings to a NFC-best 12–2 record in 1975 and also won the NFL Most Valuable Player Award and the NFL Offensive Player of the Year Award that season.

His return created excitement and hopes among the fans, although 1972 was a disappointing year as the Vikings went 7–7 and missed the playoffs. They got back on track and went to three Super Bowls in four years, all ending in disappointment again. Minnesota won the Central Division again in 1977 and beat the Rams in the playoff. With Tarkenton out with an injury, though, the Vikings were no match against Dallas in the National Football Conference title game. Tarkenton returned in 1978, the Vikings won their tenth Central Division title in 11 years, but they lost to the Rams in the opening playoff game.

It was the end of the road for Tarkenton and the conclusion of what likely would have been called a Minnesota dynasty had the team been able to win even one Super Bowl. An 0–4 record in the big game haunted some Minnesotans, but even Super Bowl losses represent heights the Vikings have not reached since then.

From 1961 to 1978, Fran Tarkenton was the Minnesota Vikings, his influence there even when he wasn't.

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## NOTES

1. Tarkenton was chosen by the Vikings after linebacker Rip Hawkins from North Carolina and halfback Tommy Mason—the first overall pick in the National Football League draft—from Tulane. The trio became known as the Three Rebels and, in a sign of the times, even posed around a Confederate flag.

2. Over time, Tarkenton offered different reasons for his scrambling. One version was that his high school coach had told him to never give up on a play. In another, Tarkenton cited the beating he had taken from the Bears in a 1961 preseason game two weeks before the regular-season opener. He decided to use his feet to make up for the lack of a strong offensive line in those early years.

3. Merrill Swanson, "Vikings Trade for Quarterback," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Tuesday, January 30, 1968, p. 21.

4. From a *History of the Vikings* DVD.

5. Bob Fowler, "Fran Tarkenton Quits Vikings," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Saturday, February 11, 1967, p. 1.

6. Author interview with Bud Grant, March 8, 1989.

7. "Vander Kelen: I've Earned a Chance," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Saturday, March 4, 1967, p. 14.

8. Jim Kearney, *Vancouver Sun*, September 5, 1967, p. 18; Merrill Swanson, "Vikings' Kapp Is Off to Boston," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Saturday, October 3, 1970, p. 17. Swanson, in an article about Kapp's departure from the Vikings to the Boston Patriots, reported on the indemnity the Vikings paid British Columbia three years earlier when acquiring Kapp from the Lions. The deal that brought Kapp to Minnesota has often been described as a trade for Jim Young as part of the future considerations promised the Vikings by B. C. when Willie Fleming retired rather than report to Minnesota. The transactions involved complicated maneuvers with complexities that included Kapp being waived out of the CFL. Kearney reported that the Lions carefully timed the September 1, 1967 waiving of Kapp in a way that any other team claiming him would have had to put him on its roster and cut another imported player (CFL teams had a limit on the number of non-Canadian players teams could have on their rosters) less than 24 hours before one of its games. "To have done that just to keep Kapp from taking employment in the United States would have been a triumph of emotion over common sense," Kearney wrote.

9. Bill McGrane, *Bud: The Other Side of the Glacier*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986, p. 86.

10. Associated Press, "Flatley Says Rose Thwarted Pay Hike," *Minneapolis Star*, Friday, June 13, 1975: 8B; Flatley made the "end-over-end" comment while testifying in a trial over the option-clause compensation (known as the Rozelle Rule) in Minneapolis in 1975.

11. Although the Giants had been limited to using the bonus pick for a quarterback, the Vikings—in trading for it—had no such restriction.

12. The manner in which Kansas City bamboozled the Vikings is described well by Pat Duncan in his 2014 book, *Last Kings of the Old NFL: The 1969 Minnesota Vikings*.

13. When Kapp received the team MVP award toward the end of the 1969 season, he cited the motto of "40 players for 60 minutes" as he said, "There is no most valuable Viking. There are only 40 most valuable Vikings. 40 for 60, put it that way, and I cannot accept this," putting down the award.

14. James D. Dworkin, *Owners Versus Players*, Boston: Auburn House Publishing Company, pp. 250–251. Dworkin notes that Kapp tried to play again for the Patriots without signing a contract but was ordered by the league to do so. Kapp sued the National Football League for restraint of trade in violation of federal anti-trust laws. Kapp prevailed in his claim although was not awarded any damages.

15. Lee was used more as a punter than a quarterback with the Vikings. However, he and Bob Berry—another Minnesota backup—became regular quarterbacks for the Atlanta Falcons, playing for Norm Van Brocklin, whom the Falcons hired as coach in 1968.