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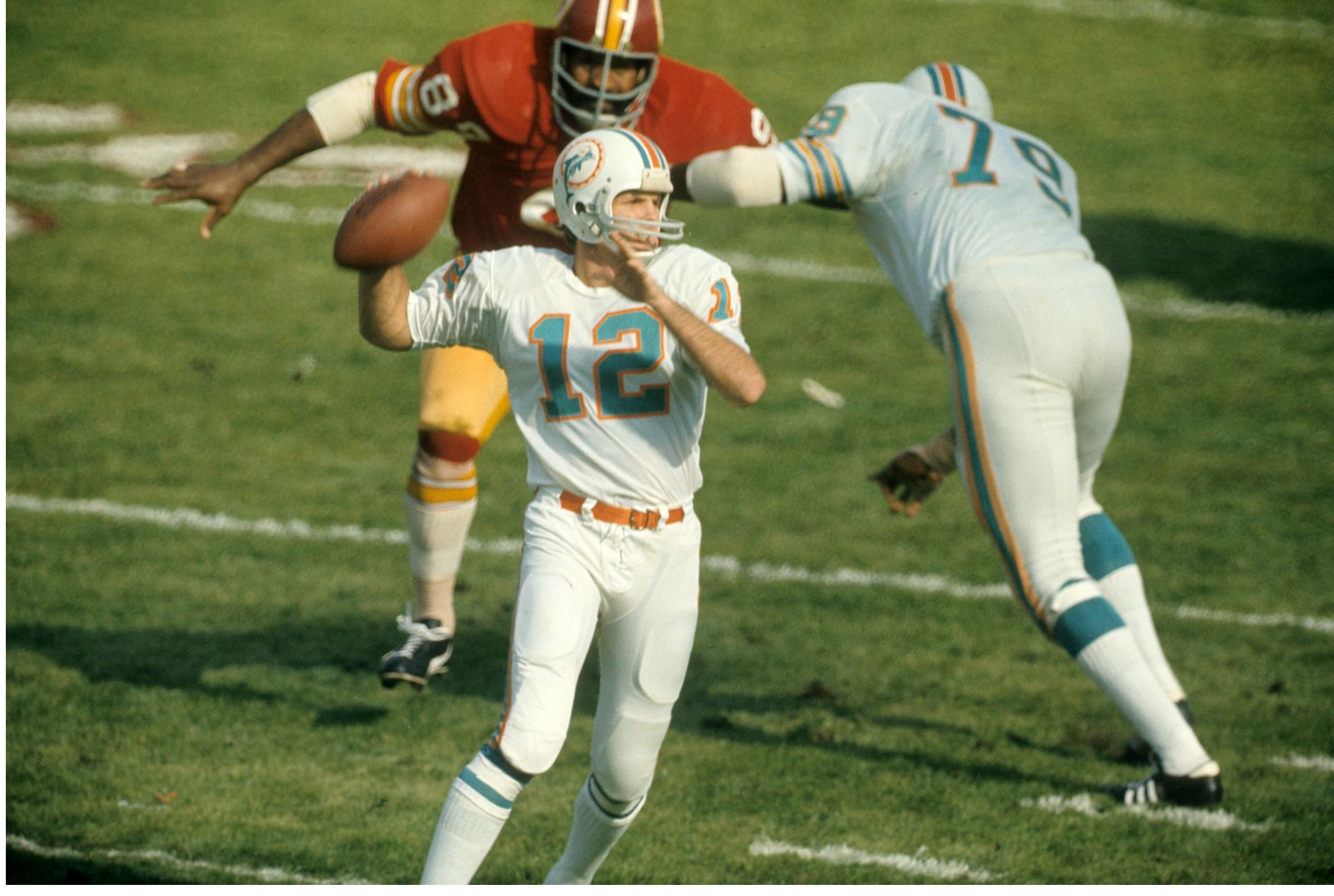
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DISCOVER

'Seventeen and Oh' Review: A Perfect Season for Dolphins

Remembering the season Don Shula's team went undefeated and won the Super Bowl—three years removed from winning 15 games in four seasons.



Miami Dolphins quarterback Bob Griese in action during Super Bowl VII. PHOTO: GEORGE LONG /SPORTS ILLUSTRATED VIA GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner
July 7, 2022 6:32 pm ET

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A half-century later, their names still resonate: imperious coach Don Shula, the hulking Larry Csonka, fleet Jim Kiick and Mercury Morris, slick quarterback Bob Griese and veteran backup Earl Morrall, balletic receiver Paul Warfield, bantam kicker Garo Yepremian, fireplug Nick Buoniconti and the No-Name Defense. Together with their teammates, they accomplished a feat unmatched before or since—an undefeated National Football League season, climaxing with victory at the Super Bowl.

As training camps open this month for the league's 103rd campaign, an ambitious book tells the story of the 1972 Miami Dolphins' magical season, crowned with a 14-7 trophy win over the Washington Redskins at the Coliseum in Los Angeles. "Seventeen and Oh: Miami, 1972, and the NFL's Only Perfect Season" is an intriguing hybrid work. Marshall Jon Fisher sets out not only to tell the Dolphins' tale but to put it in the context of its turbulent era. So Csonka & Co. share the narrative with the Nixon-McGovern election campaign, the Vietnam War, the Apollo astronauts, Gloria Steinem and the rise of feminism, the history of Miami and Miami Beach, drugs, porn and rock 'n' roll.

The Dolphins were "a rare combination of mental capacity and toughness, discipline and playfulness, youth and experience, that made for the perfect team," Mr. Fisher writes. They "played the perfect season with chipped teeth, a splintered forearm, a bruised liver, a slipped disc, and broken ribs—and that was just one guy, defensive end Bill Stanfill."

Miami's epic success was all the more remarkable given the team's embarrassing backstory. Joining the NFL-rival American Football League in 1966, they won only 15 games in their first four seasons. When the leagues merged in 1970, Miami brought in Coach Shula—who had taken the Baltimore Colts to the Super Bowl two years before—and the Dolphins turned the other fin. Under Shula's perfectionist eye, and with opportunistic trades and waiver deals buttressing the squad, Miami went 10-4 that year and made the Super Bowl the following season, losing to Dallas 24-3.

Mr. Fisher tells the story of Miami's undefeated season—each of its 14 regular-season wins, two playoff victories and Super Bowl VII triumph—interspersed with affectionate profiles of its stars, backups and coaches. But the passages of social and political history break the book's rhythm the way beer and car commercials break up the NFL action on TV. And his approach makes for some neck-wrenching transitions: "While B-52s continued to batter the DMZ in Vietnam even as Kissinger and Le Duc Tho held their longest negotiation yet in Paris, and the *Apollo 17* astronauts . . . finally felt the gentle tug of the Moon's gravity, the Dolphins and Giants ran out onto the Yankee Stadium grass."

Hardcore football fans may find themselves skimming this stuff to get back onto the Dolphins' line of scrimmage, but others may enjoy the intermittent newsreel. Mr. Fisher—a magazine writer and the author of "A Terrible Splendor," about the 1937 Davis Cup—unspools his football epic with verve and studs it with engaging detail.

The season starts in Kansas City, where Miami had beaten the Chiefs 27-24 in a 1971 playoff game that ran through two overtimes—the longest game in NFL history. Now, with Csonka powering through the KC defense "like a hussar on a rampage," the Dolphins take the victory, 20-10. The following week, they romp over the

Houston Oilers, 34-13. Next, a squeaker, 16-14, over the Minnesota Vikings, with Griese, who calls his own plays, hitting the tight end over the middle with seconds to go. Then come the New York Jets. Cocky Joe Namath's squad had humiliated Shula and his 1968 Colts during Super Bowl III. Now Broadway Joe is facing Shula's No-Name Defense—and this time Shula prevails, 27-17.

The Dolphins are 4-0. The next game, against the San Diego Chargers, brings the inevitable bad break—a high-low mugging of Griese that fractures his leg and dislocates an ankle. "I wanted to throw up," recalls Shula. Instead he sends in Morrall, who'd stepped in for the injured Johnny Unitas to lead Shula's Colts in Super Bowl III. Morrall has been in the league since 1956 and looks it. At 38, craggy and crew cut, he beats the Chargers that day, reels off nine more wins—then dispatches the Cleveland Browns 20-14 in the division playoff on Christmas Eve.

Will Shula start old reliable Morrall in the conference playoff against Terry Bradshaw's Pittsburgh Steelers, with its Steel Curtain defense, or go with Griese, now essentially recovered? Shula starts Morrall, but with the Dolphins trailing 10-7 in the third quarter, he pulls the trigger: Griese trots onto the field and calmly leads the Dolphins to a 21-17 win that puts the team in Super Bowl VII.

After all that, the big game is almost an afterthought. The Dolphins dominate the first half, leading 14-0 on a Griese pass to Howard Twilley and a Kiick goal-line plunge. But in the final minutes, with victory within reach, Yepremian muffs a field goal and tries to pass the loose ball—only to have a Redskin defender snatch it and score. Washington, still trailing by a touchdown, gets the ball back with 1:24 to go but can't thwart destiny.

After two Super Bowl losses, Shula finally has his "white whale," Mr. Fisher writes, and would go on to coach the team for 23 more years. Some of the players, such as Griese and Csonka, would prosper after football. But, as the author concludes, the lives of Morrall, Kiick, Morris, Buoniconti, Stanfill and other battered Dolphins would end in the nightmare of dementia, Parkinson's, cocaine addiction, even prison for drug trafficking. Perfection has its price.

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Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, is a stoic lifetime New York Giants fan.

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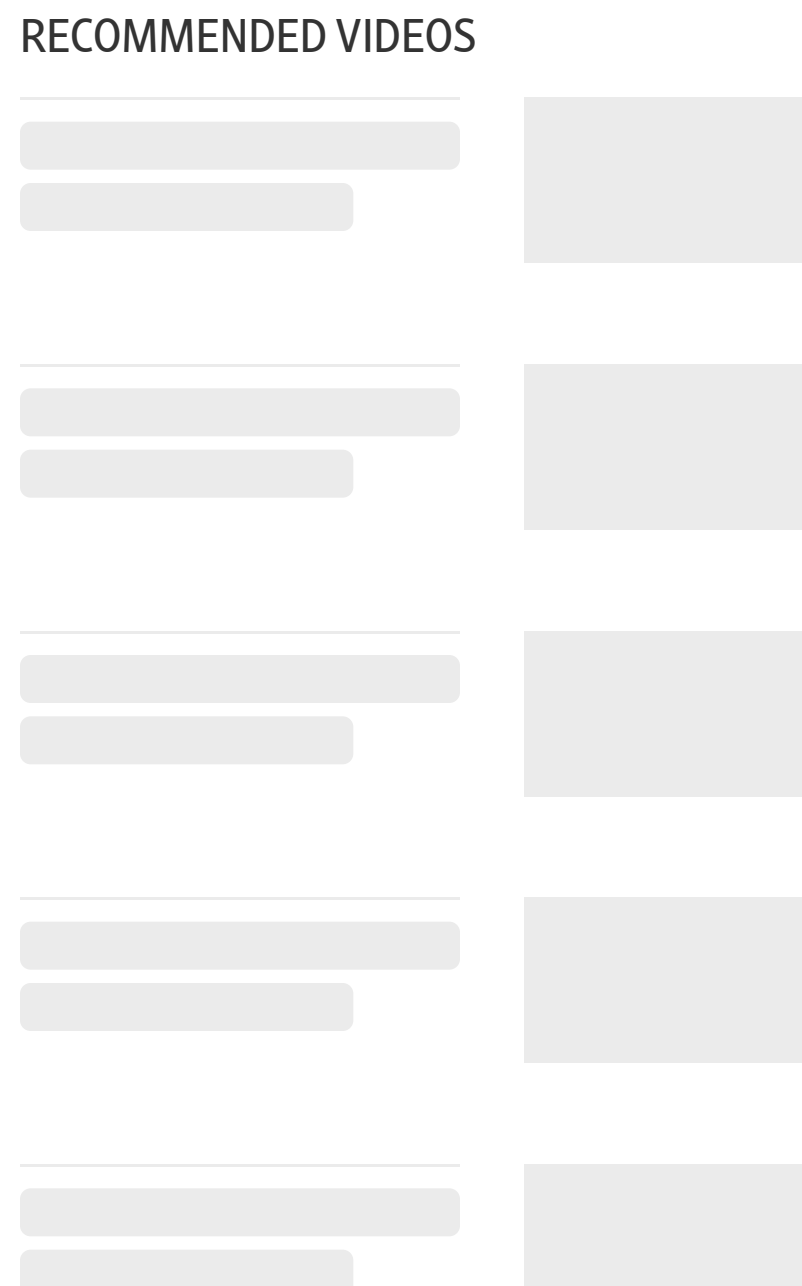
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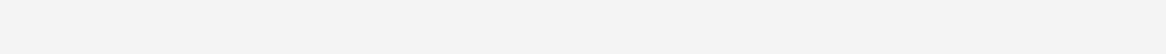
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