

NOT 'TIL THE FAT LADY SINGS

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Leland Davis

What do you mean, "Not 'til the fat lady sings?"

Well, the origin of the phrase is obscure, but it is generally attributed to the singing of God Bless America at the conclusion of sporting events by Kate Smith, a full-figured pop singer in the thirties and forties.

Because of last-minute, dramatic moments that often occur in sports, the phrase came to mean pretty much the same but not with the clarity or flare as Yogi Berra's "It ain't over 'til it's over!"

For example...

October 31, 1951, Polo Grounds, New York

The lady was all warmed up in the fall of 1951, ready to sing for the Brooklyn Dodgers, a shoo-in to win the pennant as late as September.

The Dodgers had a comfortable 13½ game lead over the Giants as far into the season as August 11. The Giants were in last place. This was the Giant team that started the year 2 and 12, with a devastating 11-game losing streak before April was even over. The last 6 weeks of the 1951 season was one long, thrilling Giants comeback. With but 2 games remaining, the Giants pulled even with Brooklyn. Both teams won their final 2 games, and a 3 game playoff was set. The Giants won the first game, then the Dodgers dug in and crushed the sleeping Giants 12 to 1.

Game 3 was a pitcher's duel for the first seven innings, with the Dodgers clinging to a 1-0 lead in the bottom of the seventh. The Giants came back and tied the game 1-1. Brooklyn responded with three runs in the top of the eighth. Suddenly it was Dodgers 4, Giants 1, with just three outs remaining. The situation seemed hopeless, the great comeback in vain.

Dodger pitcher Don Newcombe had given up only four scattered hits, but he had tired and both Alvin Dark and Don Mueller singled. Suddenly there were two on and nobody out. Irwin fouled out, and the Dodgers had a respite and kept their three-run lead. Only two outs remained, but there were two giants on base. Lockman doubled in one run, and now the Giants had men on second and third. A decent hit would tie the game. Dodger manager Chuck Dressen brought in Ralph Branca to close out the game for Newcombe. Walking Thompson might have made sense. First base was open and

Thompson was hot. He'd already had two hits. Given how hot Thompson had been. Giants manager Leo Durocher later said he would have walked him and that he "never got a bigger or better surprise in my life" than when Dressen let Branca pitch to him. Branca's first pitch was a fastball right over the plate. Thompson took the pitch for strike one. The second was high and tight — a fastball— but not as inside as Branca had intended and Thompson leaned back and slugged it 315 feet deep into the left field stands. It was a home run, winning the game, 5-4, and the pennant, for the Giants. It was a shot heard 'round the world!

February 22, 1980, Olympic Field House, Lake Placid, New York

Never yet in these Olympic Games had the U.S. hockey team faced such a daunting task. In the semifinal at Lake Placid's Olympic Field House, the Americans trailed the formidable Soviet Union, winners of the previous six Olympic gold medals. This was a Soviet squad renowned for its conditioning and its skill, a team believed to be the equal of any in the National Hockey League. In a pre-Olympic exhibition game at Madison Square Garden, the Russians had humbled Team USA by a score of 10-3. So when the Americans found themselves trailing 3-2 heading into the third and final period of the Olympic semifinal, few thought this group of college kids and recent NHL draft picks had the wherewithal to stay with the Russians, much less turn the game around. Near the halfway mark of the third period USA tied the score but they would need a super hero to pull off one of the most shocking upsets in sports history.

Up stepped team captain Mike Eruzione. With ten minutes remaining, Eruzione gained the puck in the Soviet Zone and moved it unimpeded toward Soviet goaltender Myshkin. Then he cocked and fired a 30-footer that Myshkin did not see leave the stick. The puck found a space between the goaltender's bulky pads and kissed the back of the net.

The Field House erupted into a wild cheer and rafter-rattling chants of "USA, USA!" that would only grow more intense as the period wound down. When the final buzzer sounded, pandemonium broke loose, both in the stands and on the ice. News of the tremendous upset spread like wildfire across the country. All across the nation Americans embraced in bars and living rooms as the shocking final score flashed across their television screens. As team captain Eruzione said, "I don't think you can put it into words. It was 20 guys pulling for each other, never quitting, 60 minutes of good hockey. It's a human emotion that is indescribable."

The quest for the gold was not over, of course. There was still Finland in the final. But the United States won 4-2 to earn hockey gold for the first time in 20 years. For one glorious moment the cold war was won and United States could boast of having the best hockey team in the world.

September 9, 1972, Rudi-Sedlmayer Halle, Munich

This was an Olympics mired in politics and controversy. It was the summer of 1972 and the twentieth Olympic Games were under way in Munich, Germany. The Americans had gone unbeaten in 62 straight Olympic Games, winning seven gold medals over 36 years.

Everyone knew that the U.S. basketball team was unbeatable. They cruised through their early matchups easily, beating Czechoslovakia, Australia, Cuba, Brazil, Egypt, Spain, Japan, and Italy. Only one team stood between them and the gold medal - the USSR.

The game was remarkable in several ways. In 1972, the U.S. squad was composed of college players. Talented, yes, but not professionals. Due to an agreement with ABC-TV the tip-off was scheduled for 11:45 P.M. in Munich, allowing millions of fans to watch the events unfold from their living rooms. If you are too young or unaware of the story of the 1972 Olympic basketball team you would probably guess that this story is too bizarre to be true.

Featuring a pair of teams who were both 8-0, the Americans and the Soviets were happy to provide the drama. The USSR took a 7-0 lead and held on with a 26-21 advantage at halftime.

Emotions ran high and the play was physical. With 12:18 left on the clock, the Soviets were ahead, 38-34, when a loose ball scuffle ensued. USSR reserve Dvornik Edeshko and the USA's Dwight Jones were ejected from the game. Jones, a 6 foot nine inch Houston center was the team's top scorer and rebounder.

During the subsequent jump ball, 6 foot nine inch Minnesota forward Jim Brewer became another team casualty. He was knocked to the floor and suffered a concussion, forcing him to leave the game.

The USSR was still leading by eight points with 6:07 remaining, but the Americans were not about to give up. They closed the gap 49-48 on a Jim Forbes jumper with 40 seconds left on the clock.

The Soviets hung onto the ball while the clock ticked down to just 10 seconds

remaining before attempting another shot, and Doug Collins, a guard out of Illinois State, drove to the basket for a layup. Instead, he was fouled and went to the line to shoot two. Collins took a deep breath and made one shot, and then the other, giving the United States a one point lead of 50-49 with just 3 seconds left on the clock. After that, confusion reigned.

The Soviets inbounded the ball to midcourt when Brazilian referee Renato Righetto blew his whistle to stop the play with one second remaining. The crowd stormed the court in celebration of the American win, but they were quickly disbursed by Righetto, who had noticed a disturbance at the scorer's table and halted play to determine the problem.

Apparently the USSR coach, Vladimir Kondrashkin, claimed he had called for a time-out after Collins first free throw. The clock was reset to three seconds and the Soviets were given a second chance to inbound the ball. This time the pass was short, the Soviets failed to score, and the Americans again began to celebrate. But it wasn't over yet.

The clock had not been reset properly, and Great Britain's R. William Jones, secretary general of the International Amateur Basketball Association, stepped in and ordered the clock to be reset to 3 seconds -again.

Ivan Edeshko took the ball out of bounds where he was guarded by 6 foot eleven Tom McMillen of Maryland. The referee motioned for McMillen to back up and he moved nearly to midcourt. The referee who spoke only Armenian at the time, later said that he only meant for the American player to move back a few inches, but this gesture meant something else to McMillen, who didn't want to risk a foul at this crucial moment. Unfortunately, his move enabled Edeshko to make a long pass the length of the court to star player Aleksander Belov. Belov pushed past two defenders to make an easy layup and score the winning points as the buzzer sounded.

The United States filed a protest before the Jury of Appeals, but it was denied on a 3-2 vote, with judges from three communist countries siding with the Soviets. The USSR was awarded the gold medal for the first time in basketball history, The U.S. team voted unanimously to refuse their silver medals. "We didn't win silver. We won gold," one player said. The tissue-wrapped medals still sit today in a wooden drawer in Olympic headquarters.

November 23, 1984, the Orange Bowl» Miami

The Miami Hurricanes had taken a 45-44 lead over Doug Flutie and the Boston College Eagles with 28 seconds to play in Miami's Orange Bowl. Boston College's possession was beginning at their own 20- yard line.

"I told my teammates I just wanted to get near midfield," Flutie said. "We've got at least four plays. Let's get the ball out near midfield and put one up in the end zone." It took three plays for the Eagle's to move to the Miami 48. There were now 6 seconds remaining on the clock, time for one more play. Flutie called for the "Flood Tip" play in which three receivers converge in the end zone, with the intention that one will try to tip the ball to another. The play had worked once earlier in a game against Temple. Flutie took the snap but had to move to his right out of the pocket because of the Miami rush. He saw receivers heading for the end zone, and from his own 37 yard line he let the ball fly as the clock ticked down to zero.

One receiver was his roommate, Gerald Phelan, who already had caught 10 passes in the game. As Phelan saw the ball coming toward him, he also realized he was behind the Miami defensive backs. Instead of tipping the ball he caught it and fell into the end zone, answering the Hail Mary prayer that gave Boston College a 47-45 victory. The extra point was not attempted.

"He just threw a rocket," Phelan said. "I held that thing against my shoulder pads like it was my firstborn." For a few seconds, Flutie had no idea what had happened once he released the ball.

"I didn't see anything much until the referee raised his arms," Flutie said. "Then, I admit, I couldn't believe it, except when everybody started yelling and pulling me up."

Flutie's pass traveled a remarkable 64 yards in the air and capped a remarkable day that saw him complete 34 of 46 passes for 472 yards and three touchdowns as he outdueled sophomore Bernie Kosar. Playing before a national television audience the day after Thanksgiving, Flutie's performance likely earned him the extra votes he needed to earn him the 1984 Heisman Trophy.

"I guess the defenders didn't think Doug could throw it that far, but I knew he could," Phelan said. "As he threw it the ball was coming down and as everybody jumped up in front of me, the ball disappeared for a moment and there was a lot of contact. All of a sudden the ball reappeared, probably in the last three yards. It was one of those things where you react as quickly as you can. Just like as a fork falls off the table you react to catch it. I happened to get it."

September 25, 1927, Soldier Field, Chicago

Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney could not possibly have been more different. Tunney was a well-read gentleman and as pure a boxer as they come. He was a classic counter puncher; he always seemed to be thinking two punches ahead of his opponent. Dempsey was nothing of the sort. He had spent years living as a hobo in the American West, getting his knuckles bloody in saloon brawls that were so common in the early part of the 20th century. He was a brawler through and through and had spent his seven years as champion proving that he could bring destruction to his opponents with either his right or his left, both of which were constantly flying during a match.

These two men had first met in the ring a year before during a driving rainstorm in Philadelphia, and Tunney had left not doubts that he was the superior boxer. He had allowed the overaggressive Dempsey to tire himself throwing combinations that did not connect, and had scored enough of his own points to cruise to a 10 round decision.

The rematch was a national event and the proceeds from the gate set a new world record at \$2.65 million. More than 104,000 spectators packed into the stadium to witness Tunney's defense of his heavyweight championship against the man who had held it, and the nation's attention, for so long.

The bout started with the ever-charging Dempsey taking the offensive against the wily champion. Tunney let Dempsey charge but never let him get too close for too long. Throughout the early rounds Tunney chose his spots wisely and allowed the challenger to expend huge amounts of energy without doing much damage.

And then, with 50 seconds having gone by in the somewhat lopsided match, the old Dempsey showed through for just a moment. Dempsey tired, but still attacking, threw a solid right that landed square on the face of the champ. He followed with a devastating left hook on Tunney's chin. Yet another right had the champion stumbling back into the ropes. As Tunney bounced back toward his suddenly dangerous challenger he took another lethal hook square on his exposed jaw.

Tunney began to fall. Dempsey was on fire. The carnage was not over yet. As the champion fell, Dempsey let loose with a four-punch barrage that sent Tunney crumbling to the canvas. With a roar the fans were on their feet thinking they had seen the final annihilation by the slugging ex-champ.

They were wrong. Dempsey, as was his tradition, remained standing over Tunney when the champ hit the mat. However, according to the Illinois State Athletic

Commission, in the event of a knockdown the opponent must retreat to the farthest neutral corner before the referee begins to count the man down. Apparently not realizing this rule, when referee Dave Barry motioned him to go to a neutral corner, Dempsey stood his ground.

Meanwhile, Tunney remained down. Barry attempted to move Dempsey in the proper direction and finally began his count at one. By now the timekeeper had already reached a count of five. At Barry's count of three, Tunney lifted his head for the first time, a full eight seconds after he had met the canvas. It was not until Barry had reached a count of nine, 14 seconds after he was first knocked down, that the defending champion rose. But rise he did, and the "Long Count" had found its place in the annals of great sports controversies.

Tunney unscrambled his brains quickly enough to outbox Dempsey for the next three rounds, and took the decision in similar fashion to his first victory over Dempsey in Philadelphia. Later Tunney claimed that he would have gotten up in time to beat the ten-second count, even if Barry had picked up the timekeeper's count. However, he admitted to not remembering the argument between Barry and Dempsey that ensued after the knockdown. Furthermore the champ defended his title only once more joining Rocky Marciano as the only heavyweight champions at the time to ever retire as champs and remain retired.

For Dempsey, the brawler, Chicago was the last time he ever stepped into the ring. Both fighters had given everything in their two meetings, and there could not have been a more fitting way for two of boxing's greatest careers to end than with one of the most controversial fights in the history of the sport.

November 20, 1982, Memorial Stadium, Berkeley, California

John Elway enjoys remembering many games from his football career at Stanford University. There is one time, however, that he would love to forget.

It was a game that has forever been linked to college football history because of "The Play," when California scored the winning touchdown on a five- lateral kickoff return that ended with the Stanford band already on the field.

The 85th game in the history of California versus Stanford rivalry, played at Memorial Stadium in Berkeley marked the final game in Elway's college career, and even before he knew how historic the game was going to be, he was upset by the outcome. "What a farce," Elway said. "This was an insult to college football. There is no way it

should have happened. The officials ruined my last college football game. It's unbelievable."

Elway's anger came out after Stanford had seemingly won the game on a 35-yard field goal by Mark Harmon. The kick gave Stanford a 20-19 lead and only four seconds remained on the clock.

All Stanford had to do was prevent a miracle kickoff return to complete the victory. Harmon kicked a squib kick, and Cal's Kevin Moen picked up the ball at his own 43. As he started to run, he was about to be tackled when he lateraled the ball to Richard Rogers. The play still seemed innocent enough until Rogers lateraled the ball to Dwight Garner.

As Garner was about to be tackled, he lateraled again to Rogers. Rogers in turn lateraled to Mariet Ford, who took off toward the end zone.

At about the same time, the 144 member Sanford band — thinking the ball carrier had been tackled — started to march onto the field to play the post-game victory song. But the play was still alive, and Ford ran all-out toward the band. When he was about to go down at the 25-yard line, he lateraled the ball to Moen, who started all this when he recovered the kick. Moen caught the ball and dodged a tuba player before he ran over a trombone player as he reached the end zone.

The officials huddled for five minutes before declaring the run stood and the touchdown counted, and California had won the game. Their judgment was that none of the California players had done anything illegal and that none of the players were down before they lateraled the ball. The band and fans who were on the field were from Stanford, so any penalty for that would have been against Stanford.

Afterward, Moen said "As far as I was concerned they were all Stanford players, and I just busted through. The trombone player was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

January 22, 1983, Joe Robbie Stadium, Miami

For most of the San Francisco 49er fans at Super Bowl XXII at Miami, a field goal at the end of regulation was all they wanted. After all, three points would tie the game at 16 and send it into overtime. For a while that was what quarterback Joe Montana was thinking as well. "We just got going, thinking field goal," Montana said. "We never gave up. Things might go wrong, but you've got to fight back. That's one thing we never gave up on — confidence. And it showed."

With the Bengals leading 16-13 and just over 3 minutes to play, the 49ers took possession of the ball at their own 8-yard line. Montana didn't panic and calling two plays at a time moved the team methodically down the field. He didn't go for the dramatic big play, but was content to pick away with short and medium passes.

Before the Bengals knew what was happening, Montana had the 49ers on the Cincinnati 35. Now he's thinking touchdown, but overthrew his star receiver Jerry Rice for the only incomplete pass of the drive.

Unfortunately for the Bengals, Montana recovered quickly. Even a 10-yard penalty against Bengal Randy Cross on the next play proved only a temporary reprieve for Cincinnati. It brought up a second-and-20 on the Cincinnati 45, and once more the thought of just going for the field goal flashed through Montana's mind. He found Rice open on a 13-yard pass, but then Rice picked up another 14 on the run, making it a 27 yard gain. Now, at the 18-yard line, Montana went to another of his favorite targets, Roger Craig, to pick up another eight yards. The 49ers were now at the Bengals 10, an almost gimme field goal, but Montana decided to get greedy. Why settle for the tie when you had a chance to go for the win and avoid the uncertainty of the sudden-death period?

He called for a pass play designed to go to Craig, but he was covered. Montana searched the field, and found secondary receiver John Taylor, for the touchdown with 34 seconds left to play, giving the 49ers a 20-16 victory.

Counting the 10 yards for the penalty, Montana had moved the 49ers 102 yards, completing eight of nine passes for 97 yards. For the game, Montana completed 23 of 36 passes for a Super Bowl record of 357 yards.

In Montana's third Super Bowl, he extended his total to 93 passes without an interception, as the 49ers won their third Super Bowl championship. "We had them on their 8 with three minutes to go," said Cincinnati receiver Chris Collinsworth. "Somebody came up to me and said 'We've got them now.' I said 'Don't you know who's their quarterback? Joe Montana is not human.'"

That was 23 years ago this month. To this day, according to those who know him, Sam Wyche, then the Bengals coach, cannot bear to watch the films of that crushing last-minute loss.

Yes, once again, the fat lady finally sang, but only after what had seemed a certain victory by the losing team.