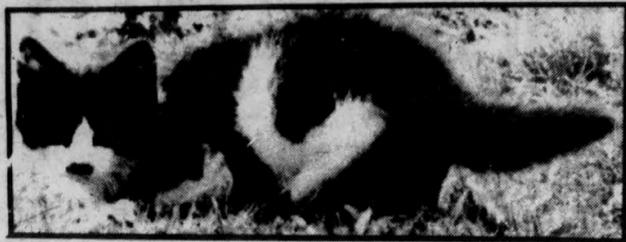


From the Litterbox



Christmas Eve may have found Santa Claus on his sleigh but it found our hero and friends slugging back cold ones laced with egg nog. The traditional Christmas day hangover convinced Stephen Marks to roam south in search of NFL play-off games. So with anticipation of rough, tough football, and lots of parties, our star reporter set out for New Orleans. The city of Mardi Gras intrigued him and a nine game winning streak was a good excuse to drop in on party-town USA.

Those former 'Aints had been playing like Saints and football fans everywhere wondered how they could improve so much. Stephen Marks was determined to find out and the game with the Minnesota Vikings should provide the answers, he thought. The Vikings had finished the regular season struggling and were thought to be easy pickings. Marks was skeptical though. He figured an alcoholic quarterback like Tommy Kramer would perform well in a city that knows how to party. Thus he figured the game would be close.

When the game started he was shocked when Kramer went early. In his place Wade Wilson played brilliantly and Minnesota ran up the score. The final was 44-10. Marks was surprised the Saints didn't run the ball more. After all, they had excelled at a ball control offense all year. They changed against the Vikes and paid horribly.

The excitement of seeing the Vikes upset the Saints gave Stephen an idea that he could emulate Jimmy the Greek in making football predictions. He figured he could relieve the disappointment of not seeing bags over Saints' fans' heads with making lousy predictions.

The first game he looked at was the San Francisco, Minnesota game. He had a keen interest after seeing the Vikings stomp over New Orleans. He figured that another Viking upset would not happen against the strong forty-niner team. Still he figured they would play a strong game and beat the point spread. His reasoning being the Vikes have talent and play tough.

The Chicago Bears play Washington Redskins again this year and Marks is ignoring last year's results. He loves Jim McMahon because the guy is nuts and has a neat haircut. The big thing in this game is McMahon is playing - that should be enough for Chicago to win.

Everybody knows Denver is good for skiing but they play football in January as well, and the Broncos love it. Marks comments that those guys like the cold. That's bad news for Houston. It looks like their play-off is coming to a demise.

In the other play-off game Eric Dickerson and the Colts travel to Cleveland to play the Browns. Marks sees it as a battle between Bernie Kosar, the Brown QB, and Mr. D. (Dickerson). The player that performs best should lead his team. But Stephen Leans toward Cleveland since they have the experience.

When asked where he will be next week, Marks was indecisive. He hoped to be out of New Orleans by then but he relayed that "a party like this could keep me here for months."

Herb's NHL Puck Ups

After the long holiday and much indulgence of liquid joy its time to comment on happenings around the NHL again. In my last column I spent much time talking about Bob Froese's goal, but a week later it was disallowed. Ron Hextall kept the goalie sharp shooting going by sharp shooting against Boston when the opposing goal was empty. Some people believe he will score again but his coach Mike Keenan hopes he will stick to goaltending.

This year has been a big year for power play goals as referees continue to call penalties like crazy. Seven teams threaten to break the power play goal record of 99 set by the Pittsburgh Penguins. An example are the New York Rangers who have 64 power-play goals in 39 games. Last year they had just 75 in the whole season. The individual power-play goal record is also threatened in this, the year of the power-play.

The holidays would be dull without comments from Harold Ballard creeping into the sports pages, and Harold opened his mouth this year as well. Harold doesn't want anybody to benefit from his multi-million dollar corporation, Maple Leaf Gardens Inc., so he plans to give all his holdings to charity. So wise investors should start investing in

their favorite charities since their value stands to go way up upon Harold's death. Let's keep that old heartbeat monitored!

Looking at the standings the Patrick Division has really tightened as the Flyers hot spot has put them tied with the Islanders. The Capitals and Rangers have also played well lately, tightening the division to an eight point spread from last to first. This has developed into the toughest division in hockey. The Adams division is also tough as the Bruins and Canadiens have the best records in hockey. The Norris continues to be the most pathetic division with three of the worst five teams in hockey. The Smythe remains to be the most uneven division with Calgary and Edmonton cleaning up on low life like Vancouver and Los Angeles. All in all, the NHL is much more competitive this year with 24 points separating first overall and last place.

Canadians can be proud of events on the International scene as we cleaned up on holiday tournaments. We won the Investia tournament, and the Spengler Cup, and are clinching the World Junior tournament as I write.

Good Luck as we puck through the New Year!



By HERB BARTON

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