Technical Tips Superbowl Tapes

Video

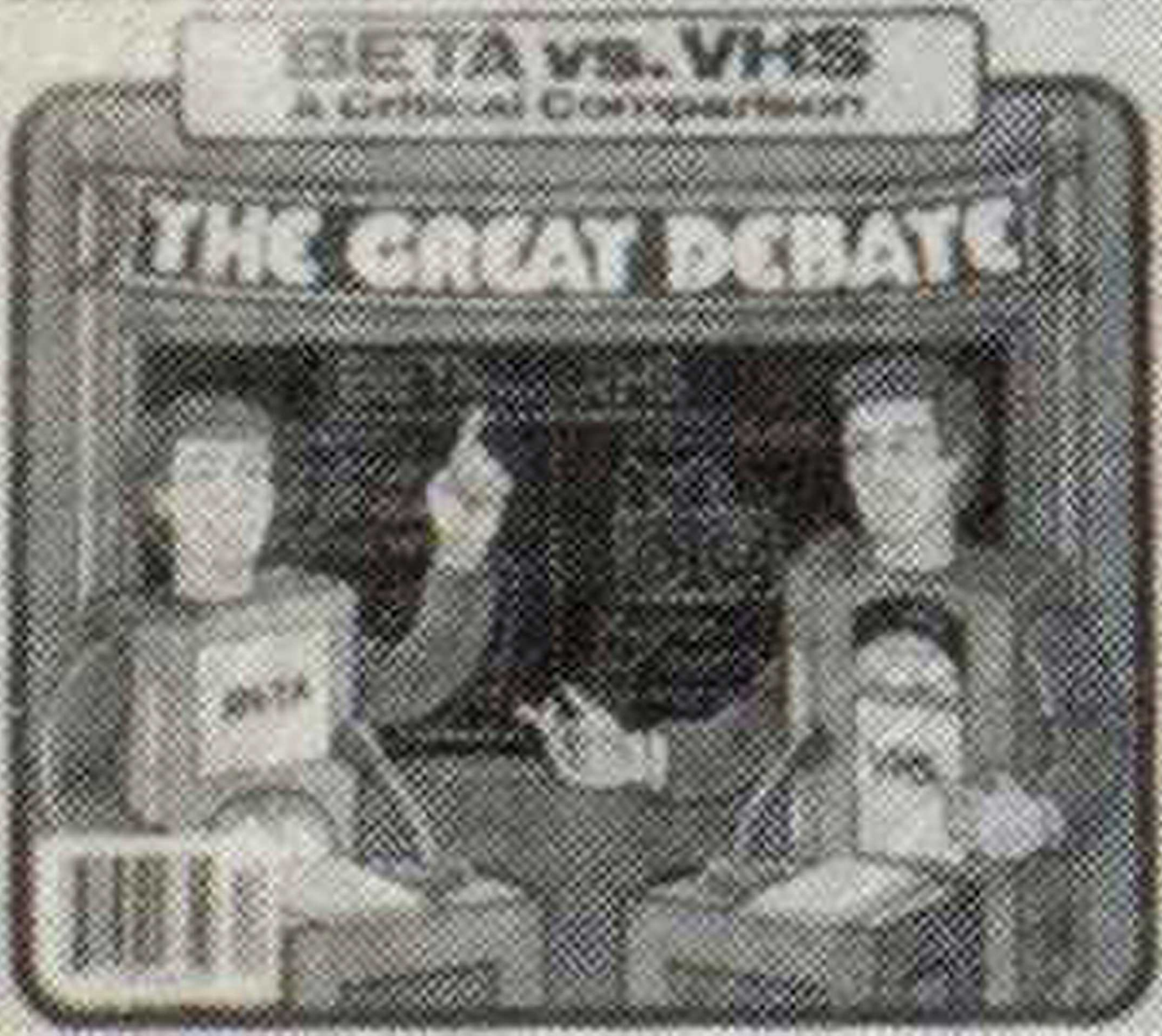
Understanding Video Accessories

Video Invaders Rock Bloggs Choosing a Club

The Early Days of Live Television

BETA vs. VHS

A Critical Comparison



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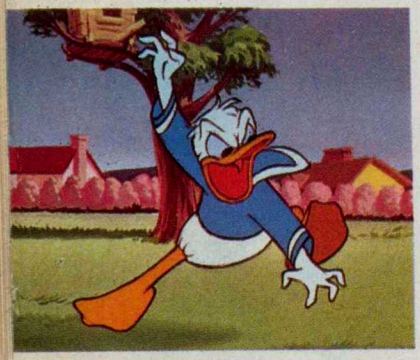

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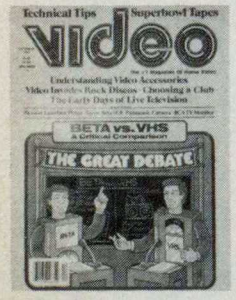

ABOUT THE COVER

First, there was Sony with its revolutionary Beta home video recording format. Then, JVC/Matsushita introduced its formidable contender for standardization, VHS (Video Home System). Five years later, both formats are still co-existing, quite peacefully. In this month's cover story, one expert offers answers to that oft-asked question, "Which is better, Beta or VHS?" Original art by David Prestone.

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video

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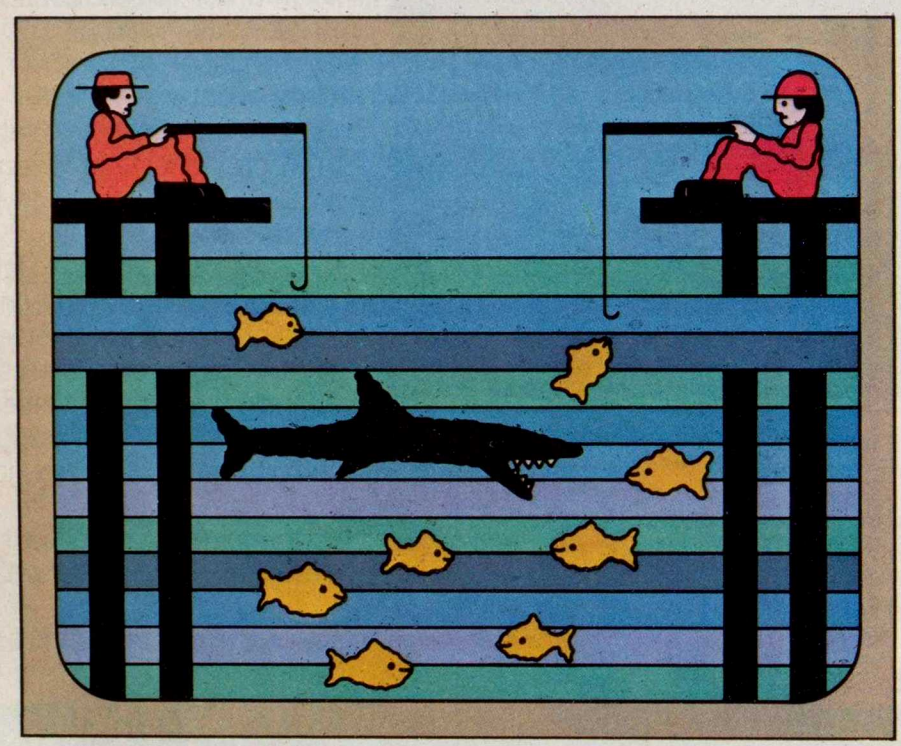
Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney

A New Era Begins

Activision Exploits Atari's Success



Fishing Derby, from Activision, is one of four new games compatible with the Atari system.

Hardware is certainly important, but there's no denying that it's software that makes the world of programmable video games go 'round. In view of the excellence—and essential parity—of all the currently available systems, it is obvious that the quantity and quality of cartridges made for each brand of home arcade are paramount in the minds of players. And, of course, nothing builds the arcader's enthusiasm faster than a clutch of exciting new electronic games.

The four new cartridges we're covering this month are even more exciting than usual. In fact, they represent a significant milestone in the history of electronic games for the home screen. For the very first time, an independent supplier is marketing software designed for use with an *existing* home arcade system.

Bill Kunkel is a New York-based writer and veteran video game addict. He shares his mania with Frank Laney, Jr., another New York freelancer.

Activision, Inc., based in Sunnyvale, California, has elected to enter the video game field with a four-cartridge line compatible with the Atari machine, the most popular unit at the present time, with more than 2,000,000 sets now in use. Activision's president, James H. Levy, makes no bones about the fact that producing software for other video game systems definitely figures in his company's future plans. Levy hopes to develop Activision into an electronic publishing company which would make software for all home arcades that are in widespread use in this country.

Even if Activision's initial releases hadn't been good—and they are all solid, playable games—the sudden appearance of an independent software source would have to rank as headline news for gamers. Other, similar video publishers will spring up in the wake of Activision's success. Not only will competitive pressures tend to insure products of high quality, but the increased number of suppliers will give the home arcade owner the chance to select from literally hundreds of programs instead of just a handful.

It's something of a shame that Activision's packaging is closely modeled after Atari's, since several other suppliers are now using much better storage box configurations. Perhaps the company will eventually develop its own standardized carton once the line has grown sufficiently.

The instruction folders, on the other hand, definitely break new ground. Each rulebook credits the designer of the cartridge and gives the creator a full page to comment on the game's finer points. Players not only get a better feel for the men who make the software, but they also get an opportunity to learn about the rationale behind the various elements that comprise a game. Sometimes, knowing the designer's intentions can help guide you toward winning strategies that might not otherwise be immediately apparent.

Since four former Atari senior designers form the core of Activision's R&D staff, it's hardly surprising to find a number of similarities between the two companies' approaches to software. Both lines feature thoroughly tested games that emphasize solitaire as well as head-to-head competition. Activision cartridges are more ornate graphically, slightly elaborating upon the design simplicity that characterizes Atari products to yield a distinctively attractive look.

Boxing (AG 002) demonstrates Activision's willingness to strike out boldly in new directions. Players use the joystick controllers to direct the on-screen pugilists, colored black and white for easy identification, around the ring, which is viewed from an overhead perspective. To prevent **Boxing** from becoming needlessly complex, the computer takes charge of punch selection. The arcader decides when to throw leather by pushing the action button, but the machine then chooses the appropriate blow based on the relative positions of the fighters within the squared circle.

Rounds last only two minutes rather than the regulation three, but this proves to be a kindness to the players. Only Rocky could go a full 15 without needing a thumb transplant. The fistic action is so intense that many will require a rest period between rounds. We found that three rounds for a preliminary, five for a main event, made good matches.

The best tactic, as drawn from real boxing, is to stick and run. Keep jabbing—and try to dance away from your foe's long-range punches. One thing's for sure, flat-footed sluggers won't win many bouts in Activision Boxing.

Once an opponent is immobilized—against the ropes or in a corner—close in for the kill by keeping the action button depressed to pound out devastating combinations. Knockouts, which occur when a

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Arcade Alley

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boxer scores 100 points' worth of punches in a single round, are very rare. If your boxer tallies less than 50 points in two minutes, it indicates the need for a lot more aggressiveness in the ring.

Dragster (AG 001) is the least of the four Activision releases. Trying to screen down a measured mile track for time makes an interesting premise, but the clumsy play mechanics are annoying.

The problem is that the design is ill-suited to the Atari control system. The joystick functions as a combination clutch and shift, while the action button regulates speed. Unfortunately, it is just about impossible to achieve the necessary gradations in speed using what is essentially an on-off switch.

Dragster is undeniably clever and, with a lot of patience, is probably fun. We feel that many arcaders would do better to investigate other Activision cartridges first, however.

Checkers (AG 003) brings one of the world's classic strategy games to the home screen. Activision's version features solitaire play at three skill levels and will also function as an electronic board for a pair of live opponents.

The higher the skill level, the more time the computer takes to formulate its moves. At the "novice" level, the machine considers its next play for five seconds or less, but it may deliberate for up to four minutes in an "expert" contest. Thus, beginners can finish a solitaire game in just 15 minutes, but experts should allow closer to two hours for a match.

This cartridge will give just about any checkers player a good tussle. The machine's only real weakness is that it lacks the killer instinct. It sometimes hangs back from delivering the *goup de grace* during the endgame, giving the human player an occasional chance to weasel out of impending defeat.

Fishing Derby (AG 004) is one of those rare video games that should prove enchanting to the whole family—even those without lightning reflexes. Easy to learn

straight from the box, it offers youngsters better animation than Saturday morning TV and provides adults with a subtle game of skill.

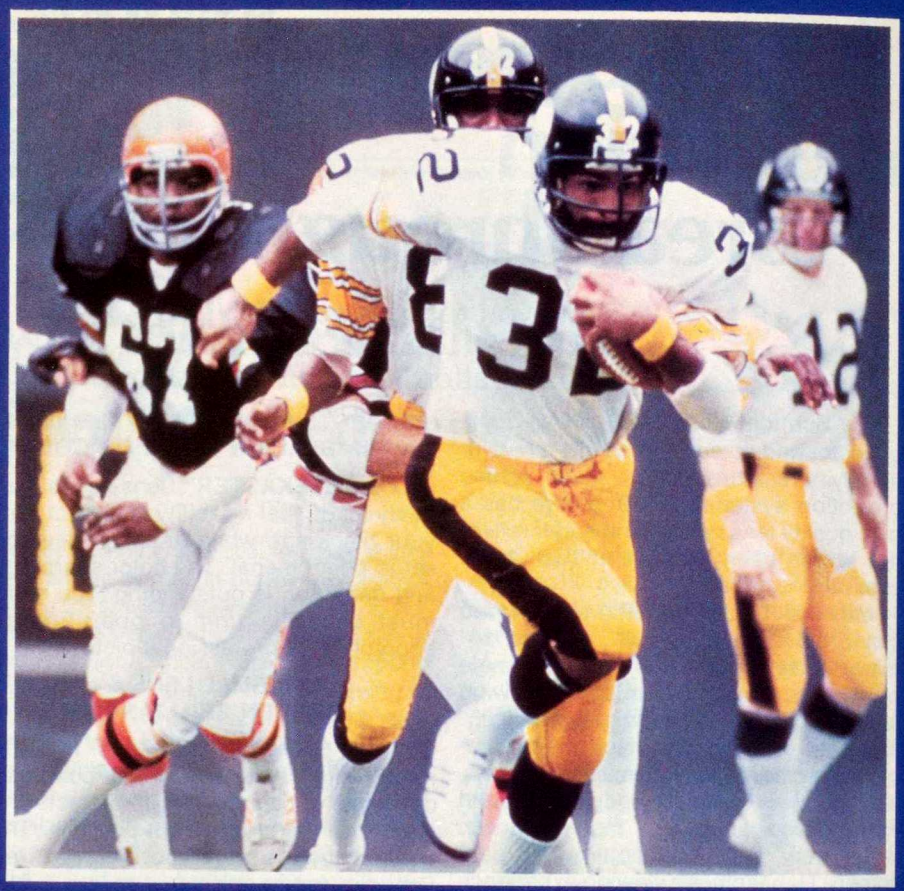
The playfield depicts fishermen sitting on docks located at the extreme left and right sides of the screen. In the rippling water below, fish swim back and forth at varying depths. (The deeper the fish, the more points are earned by landing it.) Moving the joystick from side to side extends and retracts the anglers' fishing poles, while shifting the joystick up and down raises and lowers the lines. Players reel in their catch by either pushing the action button or slowly coaxing the fish to the surface.

Sound easy? It would be, except for the shark that constantly patrols the waters between the docks. His favorite pastime is gobbling up your catch, and he's so fast that any fish that even grazes a rear fin is instantly eaten. The essence of winning strategy is to delay reeling in a prize until the shark is safely headed away from your pier.

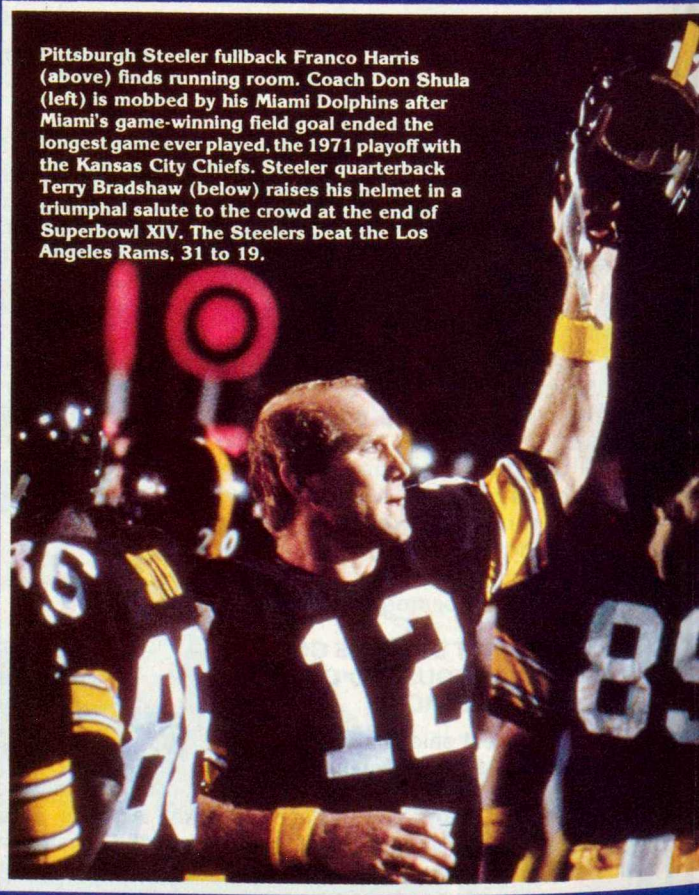
Imaginative, colorful, and fun, **Fishing Derby** is one more reason for Atari owners to applaud Activision's debut on the video game scene.

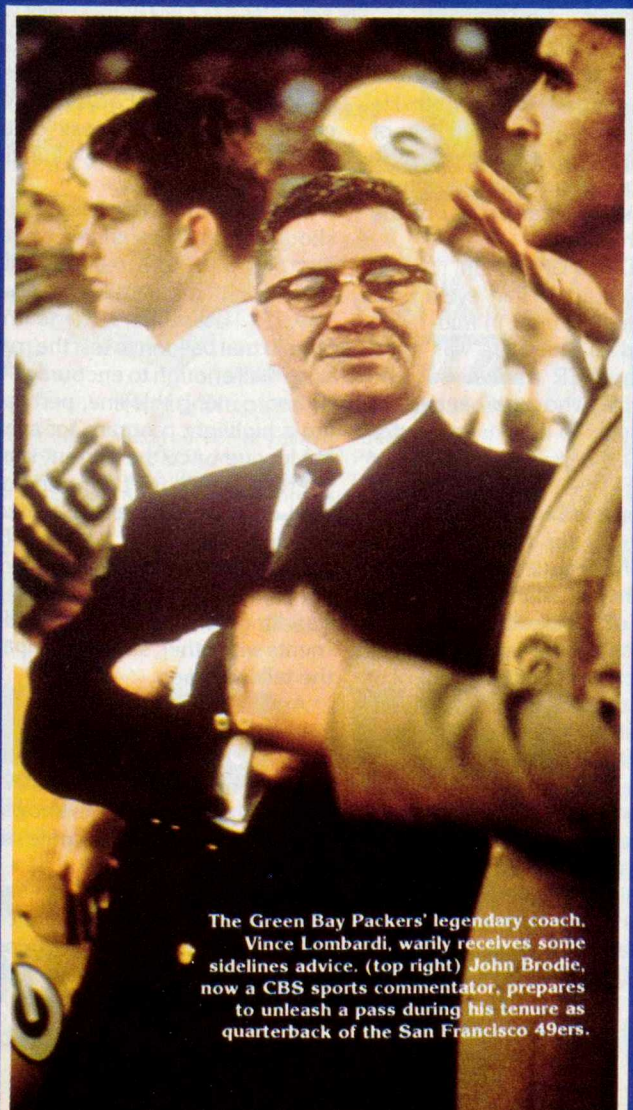
THE NFL ENTERS THE HOME VIDEO GAME

Now you can run your own instant replays of football's most memorable moments



Pittsburgh Steeler fullback Franco Harris (above) finds running room. Coach Don Shula (left) is mobbed by his Miami Dolphins after Miami's game-winning field goal ended the longest game ever played, the 1971 playoff with the Kansas City Chiefs. Steeler quarterback Terry Bradshaw (below) raises his helmet in a triumphal salute to the crowd at the end of Superbowl XIV. The Steelers beat the Los Angeles Rams, 31 to 19.





The Green Bay Packers' legendary coach, Vince Lombardi, warily receives some sidelines advice. (top right) John Brodie, now a CBS sports commentator, prepares to unleash a pass during his tenure as quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers.

by Arnie Katz

Football fans can now relive the greatest moments in Super Bowl history in their own living rooms via videocassette. The National Football League, in its boldest sprint to date, has introduced a selection of 27 football programs through its New Jersey-based film subsidiary which are aimed at the home VCR market.

The heart of NFL Films's initial group of releases is a video-cassette version of the Super Moments of the Super Bowl syndicated series, which many television stations broadcast during the last year. Each championship game is well-covered on an individual cassette, so fans can choose among numerous classic confrontations between the American and National Football Conferences. Also available are seven individual team highlight films, several "great moments" compilations, and a couple of especially charming tapes that feature the lighter side of gridiron action.

Each cassette has a running time of 24 minutes, eliminating the distracting commercials which broke the flow of these all-star-caliber productions when they were originally presented on television. The programs list at $34.95 each and are offered in both VHS and Beta tape formats. (David Grossman, director of Video Sales for NFL films, reports that VHS presently outsells Beta by approximately two to one, a slightly lower ratio than for prerecorded tapes in general.)

It's not surprising that football has gotten off the mark a lot

Top officials of other professional sports leagues have spoken of the astute media policies practiced by the NFL with a mixture of admiration and envy.

faster than baseball, basketball, hockey, and soccer in making an all-out commitment to the booming home-video audience. Top officials of other professional sports leagues have frequently spoken of the astute media policies practiced by the NFL under Pete Rozelle with a mixture of admiration and envy. Strategies like blacking out all non-sold-out home games and developing Monday Night Football as a national television institution have contributed greatly to football's rise from post-World-War-II obscurity to its present pinnacle of popularity and success.

Another important factor in the NFL's success is its extensive experience in filming and producing shows about the sport. Ed Sabol, a visionary who turned his hobby of 16 mm filmmaking into a multimillion-dollar enterprise, founded the company that eventually became NFL Films back in 1962. In that year, he successfully bid for the rights to film the NFL Championship Game—the first Super Bowl between Green Bay and Kansas City still loomed five years in the future—and made the most of his golden opportunity. His cameras even caught some of the game's most controversial moments, vindicating the officials' calls.

Sabol's earliest films broke exciting new ground, introducing a fresh approach to chronicling gridiron action that won the immediate approval with fans and team owners alike. He shot everything in slow motion and used more cameras than anyone else had ever thought of training on the field. He scrapped the too-familiar march-style music that once accompanied all football highlight footage in favor of a more evocative musical score that fit the action better. Sabol also decided to banish the all-too-predictable cadence of the typical sportscaster from his movies. The NFL Films president believes that the painstakingly prepared scripts for the programs eliminate the need for expert commentary, and he also contends that trained voice-over announcers are unexcelled at injecting excitement and drama into the narration.

Steve Sabol, son of the man who started it all, and creative director and vice president of NFL Films, is primarily responsible for charting the artistic directions taken by the programs now available on videocassette. "Our business is really unique, because we're making films about something that everybody's already seen," he explains. "Our job at NFL Films is to give a new understanding to what has already been seen.

"As filmmakers," he continues, "we try to show something that television can't even try to do. With editing, music, scripting, and optical effects, we can create a unique portrait of the event."

The company achieves this lofty goal through the deft combination of three distinct camera positions—the "free," the "mole," and the "weasel."

The "free" is the top cameraman who shoots from what is essentially the angle favored by network crews covering a game. He uses a tripod-mounted camera and gets a lot of the stock shots. The "mole" is the key man. He uses a handheld mobile ground camera and captures up to 75 percent of the footage that actually appears in the cassettes. Finally, there is the "weasel," who corresponds to the "color man" in the broadcasting booth. He is charged with capturing all the little bits of business, such as the coach prowling the sideline or a fan going crazy with joy after a touchdown—in short, everything but the play-by-play of the game.

According to David Grossman, the National Football League began eyeing the virgin home-video field back in mid-1979. "What convinced us that there was really something to the VCR market was the number of people who approached us looking for the rights to do videocassettes of the games," he says. "We got lots of offers."

And the NFL rejected every single one of them. Unfortunately for those would-be entrepreneurs, the league simply wasn't comfortable with the strictures that the various groups of outside producers all wanted to impose on the project. Essentially, league officials saw artistic control of the future tapes slipping away from them. Since pro football already had NFL Films doing a championship job covering its games, the league braintrust determined that the best course was to bring videotape activities "in house"—and do the job right.

It was a call worthy of Terry Bradshaw. NFL Films originally projected sales of 20,000 tapes during the first year. "When I joined the company," Grossman recalls, "I guessed that 30,000 would be a more realistic figure."

Actual sales have surpassed all forecasts. With *Football Follies* and *Son of Football Follies* leading the way, sales passed the 15,000-unit mark within the first 2½ months of operation. An ad for the cassettes in the Super Bowl XIV program book (circulation 100,000) generated 1000 tape orders, but the bulk of the business comes from retail outlets.

Marketing videocassettes through stores has proved to be a learning experience for Grossman and NFL Films. Now in the works is a new illustrated package to replace the rather plain boxes used for the first batch of tapes. "Our packaging is hurting retail sales," admits Grossman, "but our new cardboard box will fix that." The revamped design, which features an illustration on the front with lineups and statistics on the back, will boost the line's shelf appeal in stores.

Like any good team, NFL Films will maintain its momentum with at least a dozen new releases for the Christmas season. *Festival of Football Follies* will capitalize on the success of the Follies series, and other titles will include *Lombardi* and *Super '70s*.

The second wave of cassette programs should be an even better value than the first group. Future releases will be standardized at 50 minutes and will sell for $49.95. The seven 1979 team highlight films, a trial balloon to test the market, have done well enough to encourage the NFL to do more along this line, perhaps producing a highlight program for every team in the league once the current season ends.

Pro football isn't ignoring the major mail-order outlets either. Video Club of America is selling all 14 Super Bowl tapes for $399.95 and giving a copy of *Football Follies* free as a bonus. VidAmerica is also handling NFL cassettes, and arrangements with other, similar companies are in the talking stage.

And when the videodisc makes its splash, the National Football League will be ready, too. The programs have already been licensed to MCA and RCA. The latter intends to sell 30-minute shows, while the former will issue 90-minute servings of football action.

"We're in the video field to stay," claims a spokesman for NFL Films. "It's first-and-ten, we have good field position, and we're going to try to toss some touchdowns."