

Dwight Clark, 61, Dies; Made a Touchdown Catch for the Ages

Dwight Clark making what came to be called simply “The Catch” to tie the score with less than a minute to go in the 1982 N.F.C. championship game in San Francisco. The 49ers beat the Dallas Cowboys, 28-27. Credit Phil Huber/The Dallas Morning News, via Associated Press

Dwight Clark, the wide receiver whose spectacular last-minute leaping touchdown reception, known as “The Catch,” propelled the San Francisco 49ers toward the first N.F.L. championship in their history and ushered in their dominance of the league through the 1980s, died on Monday in Whitefish, Mont. He was 61.

His death was announced by his wife, Kelly, on his Twitter account. He revealed in March 2017 that he had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, the degenerative nerve-cell disorder known as Lou Gehrig’s disease.

Clark was only a 10th-round pick by the 49ers in the 1979 N.F.L. draft, having caught just three touchdown passes playing for Clemson. But, teaming up with the future Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Montana, he became a leading pro receiver.

With 58 seconds remaining in the January 1982 National Football Conference championship game between the underdog 49ers and the Dallas Cowboys on a soggy Candlestick Park field, San Francisco had the football on the Dallas 6-yard line, trailing by 6 points. It was third down with 3 yards to go.

Montana, who had engineered a long closing drive, rolled to his right while pursued by several Cowboy defenders and threw an off-balance toss into the rear right corner of the end zone. Clark, who was 6 feet 4 inches tall and had already caught a touchdown pass in the game, went high for the ball and snared it with his fingertips to tie the game. The extra point gave the 49ers a 28-27 lead.

“It’s a madhouse at Candlestick, with 51 seconds left,” the play-by-play announcer Vin Scully said.

The Cowboys were in 49er territory in the final seconds. But their quarterback, Danny White, fumbled while trying to pass, the 49ers recovered, and the 49ers, a franchise that had gone 2-12 two seasons earlier, had conquered the N.F.L.’s glamour team of the time.

“Everson Walls was right beside me; he had me covered,” Clark told the NFL Network long afterward, referring to the Cowboy defensive back. “I remember seeing the ball coming and thinking, ‘Wow, that’s pretty high.’ ”

The 49ers went on to defeat the Cincinnati Bengals, 26-21, in Super Bowl XVI, for the first of four championships they would win in the 1980s.

Dwight Edward Clark was born on Jan. 8, 1957, in Kinston, N.C. He was recruited by

Clemson; the team already had some outstanding ends, so the coaches tried to convert him to a defensive back. He was unhappy enough to consider transferring, but he was finally allowed to play offense.

Image



Clark, far left, with the 49ers' head coach, Bill Walsh, and quarterback Joe Montana at Candlestick Park in San Francisco in 1985. Credit Associated Press

He caught just 33 passes for the Clemson Tigers from 1976 to 1978. But the 49ers' coach, Bill Walsh, on a visit to scout Steve Fuller, the Tigers' quarterback — who would also go on to play professionally — noticed Clark playing catch with Fuller and was impressed with his moves. The 49ers took him as the 249th pick of the 1979 draft.

Clark played with the 49ers for nine seasons, amassed 6,750 yards in receptions for 48 touchdowns, played in two Pro Bowl games and was named a first-team All-Pro in 1982.

He also played on the 49ers' 1984 team, which defeated the Miami Dolphins in the Super Bowl. He retired after the 1987 season and missed the team's 1988 and 1989 Super Bowl championship seasons.

Clark was later director of football operations for the 49ers and the second Cleveland Browns franchise.

In addition to his wife, his survivors included a daughter, Casey, and two sons, Riley and Mac, from a previous marriage.

By the early 1990s, Clark's catch had become the most requested clip in the archives of NFL Films, which was charging up to \$5,000 for its use.

“It’s the most romantic moment we’ve captured in football in the past 25 years,” Steve Sabol, the president of NFL Films, told The New York Times in 1993. “It symbolized the decline of America’s Team and the rise of the team of the ’80s.”

The 49ers’ former owner, Eddie DeBartolo Jr., honored Clark last October during a game against the Cowboys, inviting many of his former teammates for a reunion. Clark addressed the fans from a suite at Levi’s Stadium, and the team gave away T-shirts with an image of “The Catch.”

Mr. DeBartolo, who owned a ranch in Whitefish, wanted to have Clark and his family close to him as his disease progressed, and at his behest the Clarks moved to Whitefish in March from their home in Santa Cruz, Calif.

Late in April, Mr. DeBartolo brought more than two dozen former 49ers to his ranch to join Clark in what became a final reunion.

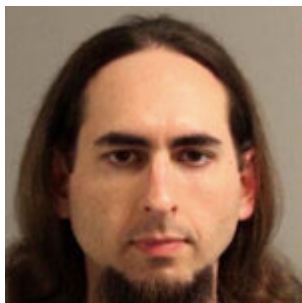
“It would be hard to say I’ve had a bad life, even though I’ve had a bad break now,” Clark said in a video commissioned from NFL Films for the occasion, Sports Illustrated reported. “I just don’t think I would change anything.”

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