

THE CHAOS OF FRANK BUTTON

A mathematics professor uses Chaos Theory to predict the outcome of plays in football games before they're run, making NFL quarterback Frank Button the best that's ever played.

Frank Button had never heard of Chaos Theory. The only chaos he was remotely familiar with was on the line of scrimmage in front of him, which he viewed as a homicidal mindset turned loose with a somewhat poorly defined set of parameters, those mostly being about one guy hurting the guy in front of him enough on this play that fear shows in the victim's eyes on the next. At that point, chaos becomes control, and control wins games.

So when Professor Winston Ballardian wrote "Chaos Theory" on the blackboard in the strategy room at the stadium that day, Frank sucked his teeth and glanced wearily at Coach Halpern and raised his eyebrows.

"Just listen to him," Halpern said. "He just might make you the best quarterback in the NFL."

"I'm not already?" Frank said.

Halpern sniffed, looked back to Ballardian and twirled his hand at him.

"Well," Ballardian said, his eyes dancing between Halpern and Frank, "As I look at the game of football - and...I'm...a big fan, especially of you, Mr. Button - but...as I view it, as a professor of mathematics - I teach at the local univer...well, it doesn't matter, I suppose..."

"No, it doesn't, professor" Halpern said. "Just get to what you were telling me earlier."

Ballardian nodded. "Okay. Chaos Theory. Chaos Theory basically states that systems - like wind and temperature and humidity in a weather system - or a football team's players and their game plan - rely on an underlying order of that system's parts and the actions those parts take. You expect them to do this or that, based upon what you know of them, and hope that it will work out the way you've planned. But see, the sticky wicket is, once you set them in motion, those parts and actions become vulnerable to seemingly chaotic interferences that can radically change the outcome you expect. A seemingly random windshear alters the temperature close to the ground, and the weather system changes course..."

Frank smiled. "Or a safety somehow reads the play, undercuts my receiver and intercepts my pass."

"Exactly!" Ballardian said. "Something small here creates a huge change there. Something as simple as you looking left, or stepping slightly right behind the center at a precise moment."

"I do that all the time," Frank said.

"Yes, but not at *specific* times, in *specific* ways. You follow our protocols to the letter and..."

"And what?" Frank said.

Ballardian smiled. "What if I told you that what may appear as chaotic, random actions with no specifically predictable outcome can actually be *predictable*, with *predictable* outcomes?"

"I'm a football player," Frank said. "Speak English."

"I'm saying that we now know that chaos has a mathematical basis, and as such, is empirical and understandable, and therefore, predictable. As long as you know your starting point in the utmost detail. That's basically Chaos Theory. In your case, it would be the players, their positions, what we know they're trained to key on, and several dozen other factors that I need not get into here."

Frank frowned and looked again to his coach. Halpern smiled and leaned into Frank.

"Wouldn't you just love to know what's gonna happen on the other side of that ball *before* you take the snap?," he said.

Frank tilted his head toward Ballardian. "He can do that?"

"He can do that." Halpern said, a big, broad smile growing on his face.

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Frank didn't give a shit about understanding it. Not that he ever would have, even if he'd spent the next ten years trying. Math was never his strong suit, so forget *theoretical* math. It didn't matter to him as long as it worked. All he knew was that it involved computers, algorithms, Google-type craziness. Too much for a simple jock like Frank Button to wrap his head around.

But he didn't have to. He and Coach Halpern had Ballardian and his people sitting in the booth above the field, a huge array of computers in front of them. And in the day's intra-team

scrimmage, they were going to get the chance to prove this chaos idea worked.

Play execution was simple: all the existing plays were scrapped. In their place was a specific protocol. Frank would bring his offense to the line and set them. A moment or two later, just after the defense had set their formation, Ballardian's voice would come over Frank's helmet intercom, and tell him what to do...specific moves and plays: fullback over outside tackle, or flair pass to the opposite side tight end, or a deep sideout downfield to the halfback. Frank would shout a pre-arranged signal, the offense would re-huddle, and Frank would quickly give the appropriate instructions. Then they'd run the play.

The first time they did it, it seemed like an awful lot of trouble to go to, and somewhat unprofessional. Kind of like street football, where the cool kid quarterback tells the tall skinny kid receiver to "go down to the red Volkswagon, turn and come back, I'll hit you with a bullet." Seemed kind of like that.

But when Frank lofted the pass downfield to the point Ballardian specified, there was nobody remotely near the receiver. The linebackers and safeties had all committed themselves elsewhere, leaving Frank's man open with a clear field in front of him. Touchdown.

The next play, Ballardian called for the fullback up the middle. Didn't seem likely, Frank thought, given that the team's two biggest defensive linemen were shoulder to shoulder on the very real estate the fullback was to run through. But he called the play, giving precise instructions to his linemen as outlined by Ballardian. When the ball was snapped, Frank watched the two defensive tackles go in opposite directions in attempts to penetrate the backfield, and by doing so, they left a gaping hole up the middle, through which Frank's fullback scampered for twenty yards before a safety dove at his feet and just barely tripped him up.

They ran thirty plays that afternoon. Twenty-eight resulted in touchdowns.

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By the mid-point of the season, Frank Button and company were undefeated. Nine wins, and none of them was even close. They broke the record for points scored by a team in a single season

by halftime of their fourth game. Frank's completion to attempts ratio was the highest in history, and each of his receivers had caught more passes individually than most teams' receivers had combined. The ground attack was just as brutal, with each runner magically finding open space with every carry, racking up record yardage.

With the offense unstoppable, Halpern had Professor Ballardian shift his Chaos Theory protocols onto the defense, with devastating effect. Linebackers and safeties intercepted at will. Defensive linemen seemed to know where every run was going. For opponents, it was the Perfect Storm.

Such success did not go unnoticed. Spurred on by the press, whose conspiracy theory mentality began questioning how one team could, in one season, become so completely dominant, with journeyman players in nearly every position suddenly becoming Hall of Fame caliber, the League commissioners did what little they could. Drug tests for all players turned up nothing. An investigation into the possibility of gambling ties with organized crime proved fruitless...nobody was throwing games or making inordinate amounts of money on the sure thing Frank's team had become. They came to the only conclusion they could: the perfect team with perfect execution on both sides of the ball under the perfect coach had finally arrived. Nobody looked at the little man in the tweed coat slumped in front of a bunch of computers high above the field.

And Frank's team kept winning. Game after game after game. The perfect season. They plowed through their division and into the playoffs without challenge. The Divisional Playoffs were a cakewalk. They took the Conference Championship without breaking a sweat. The upcoming Super Bowl was a given. They were the most celebrated football team of all time. It was a hell of a lot of fun.

Until it wasn't.

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Frank leaned into Halpern's office and knocked on the door jamb. "Got a minute, coach?" he said.

Halpern waved him in, his head buried in charts and graphs on his desk. "You and Ballardian watch the films on Chicago? You clear on what he needs you to do?"

Frank slipped into the chair in front of Halpern's desk. "Well, uh...that's what I want to talk to you about."

"What?"

Frank hesitated, then sat up straight, his mind made up. "I want to play this last game straight."

Halpern stopped flipping the charts and looked up at his quarterback. "You want to what?" he said.

"This last game. I want to just play it. You know...us against them. No Chaos...whatever it is."

Halpern stood, came around the desk and leaned on it. "This is the Super Bowl, son. You're about to take the prize in the biggest game on the planet."

"That's just it, coach," Frank said. "I don't feel like I'm playing a real game, you know? None of us does. We all feel like checkers on a board with one guy playing both sides. There's no surprises. It's boring, if you really want to know."

"Look, Frank," Halpern said. "We all walked into this knowing the deal. We wanted to win. Period. Just like every other team and every other player out there. We just found a way to do it better than anybody else is all."

"It doesn't feel better. And it doesn't feel right," Frank said. "To tell you the truth, it feels like cheating."

Halpern rose. "Can that talk, Button. This is the mountaintop. And we're going to stand on the peak. You're about to become the God of the Gridiron, for God's sake! The best to ever play the game. And I'm going to be the best coach, and this team will forever be the best team that ever stepped onto a field. There's no turning back now. Now get in that room with Ballardian and do what he tells you to do."

Frank stood and moved toward the door. "This ain't right," he said. "It'll never be right."

Halpern pointed his finger at Frank. "There's only one right here. My right. If you can't handle it, I'm sure Jackson won't mind stepping behind center."

"Wouldn't make that much difference if he did, would it?" Frank said. He and Halpern eyed each other several seconds, then Frank turned and was gone.

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The thing about perfection is that if everything is perfect, nothing really is. Where do you go from perfect? Frank Button came to that conclusion and decided he'd rather be imperfect if that was his fate. But at least it would be decided by his own talent and what he did with it on the field, not by some mathematical hocus-pocus.

Frank prepared for the big game as he had prepared for every other game: he watched the film of Chicago with Ballardian, as ordered, learned the protocols Ballardian set out, readied himself as he had all season. After their final session Saturday night, he asked Ballardian if he'd like to join him and a couple of the boys for a beer before turning in for the night. Ballardian accepted.

Why Ballardian did not show up for the Big Game the next day has never been determined. As game time approached, a highly-anxious Coach Halpern had team security go to the hotel to find him, but they were told he had checked out the night before. Police sent to his home found nothing there. The university who employed him, when interviewed days later, said he'd abruptly quit his position, saying he was going to move to the West Coast somewhere and do research. He was never heard from again.

As for Frank Button and his team, they played one of the greatest Super Bowls on record, a classic engagement of exquisite offense and defense on both sides. Frank was intercepted three times, twice resulting in points for his opponents. Each time Frank and his boys battled back, with the running backs grinding out hard yardage on the ground, and the receivers making spectacular catches under extremely close coverage. The lead changed hands five times.

In the end, Frank and his team lost by two points, in what the pundits have since called one of the biggest collapses in sports history. But you wouldn't have thought that if you saw Frank and his boys jogging off the field after the game.

They all wore smiles that lit up their entire faces.