

Always a Raider

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party, Shell reviewed the season on film. Few people thought they would go as far as they did. And except for the Buffalo blow-out, Shell was very pleased with what he saw. In his mind, the NFL's "Pride and Poise" franchise has recaptured its persona as intimidators who ask for nothing and give nothing in return.

True enough, the Raiders aren't likely to have super-duper running back Bo Jackson available for duty because of a hip injury, and Marcus Allen isn't a young colt anymore.

But Allen won't be a solo act in the backfield. Rookie Nick Bell, free agent Roger Craig and former Pro Bowler Greg Bell are very capable of compensating for the loss of Jackson. Quarterback Jay Schroeder is coming off one of his best-ever seasons. Willie Gault, Mervyn Fernandez and Tim Brown are as dangerous as any pass catching trio in the league.

Defensively, Howie Long and Greg Townsend are among the best around. The addition of Ronnie Lott to the secondary means that the Raiders will be as vicious as ever.

That's a frightening prospect for the opposition. During the regular season in '90, the Raiders defense allowed just six TDs when opponents got inside their 10-yard line. Even more revealing is that enemy offenses scored only 26 percent of the time when they got in four-down territory.

The AFC West figures to stage its usual duel 'til December for division supremacy. Kansas City looks to be the team to beat and Denver is eager to atone for its cellar finish in '90. San Diego has the talent to move up in the standings and Seattle is always competitive, even though the final record doesn't always show it.

"It doesn't matter who we play," Shell said. "Teams always seem to play over their heads when they play us. It's been like that all through the years. We found out last year that we were a good team who can play with anybody."

"What a lot of people forget is that we had a lot of young players who had never been to the playoffs before. You can talk about post-season, but once it starts, it's a different situation. You have to play at a higher level to win. Now our people understand what it takes to get to the playoffs. They also know what it takes to get over the hump once you get there."

The pre-season magazines pick the Raiders to finish second behind Kansas City in the division race this year. Schroeder's reputation of not producing in big games is the reason why. Shell dismisses the notion that Schroeder lacks the skills to put the Silver and Black in the title game for the Vince Lombardi trophy. Critics point to Schroeder's five interceptions against the Bills as ample proof of their assertions. They don't see him improving.

Shell believes that the critics are off the mark.

"Jay was among the top passers in the league last year," he said. "All we needed was to get to the big game and win it, then people would've said that he had a great year."

Even so, it's clear that LA has an eye on the future. To enhance that future, the team picked Southern California quarterback Todd Marinovich in the April draft. Mari-

novich, who would've been a junior this fall, had his share of problems at USC, including his highly publicized arrest for drug possession.

The Raiders became one of the NFL's elite by taking chances on players that other teams won't touch. The Silver and Black have reached the pinnacle of the sport by embracing so-called "problem players" who help win championships.

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Shell's ability to communicate with his players is a prime reason why the Raiders have resurfaced as a top contender in the NFL. Photo courtesy of Los Angeles Raiders