



With contributions from players such as Alston (48) and Johnson (bottom left), the Buccaneers' offense did enough to support their devastating defense, which harassed Gannon into a shipload of mistakes.

At 39, Gruden already has one of the most recognizable faces in sports—that grimacing, twisting, emotional, pleading, laughing, searing mass of expressions, which reflect the changing course of a game. But now it is more than that handsome surfer-boy face that sets him apart.

He is sitting atop his profession, an immensely gifted figure whose talents threaten to control this league for years to come. Perhaps no coach and no franchise will ever reinvent the dynasties of past NFL eras. But Gruden and the Bucs can at least come close. Together, they will be good enough to challenge for league supremacy on a consistent basis—a run that will be unprecedented in this new NFL, which is so erratic and challenging that the two Super Bowl teams of last season failed to make the playoffs.

The Bucs won't endure a similar stumble next season—or any time soon. Gruden simply is too ferocious, his impact too obvious and lasting. His path already has been remarkable. As offensive coordinator, he helped turn the Eagles into a playoff team with Rodney Peete and Ty Detmer at quarterback. The 1997 Raiders were 4-12 under Joe Bugel. At the end of Gruden's third year as coach, he had them playing for the AFC title.

And his footprints on Super Bowl 37 were without precedent. Those were his Raiders on one sideline, coached by his close friend and protege Bill Callahan and filled with stars such as Rich Gannon, Jerry Rice and Charlie Garner who acknowledge he was the reason they came to Oakland. He helped turn Gannon, the journeyman, into the league MVP; he helped make Garner into one of the NFL's most versatile running backs.

The Bucs, once the laughingstock of the league, became Super Bowl champs in Gruden's first season, elevating them to a plateau that former coach Tony Dungy never could reach. Quarterback Brad

Johnson led the NFC in passer rating for the first time in his 11-year career. The offense scored 186 points this postseason despite possessing few players anyone else in the league would want. Remember, the Bucs were the league's 24th-best offense this season.

With this defense, he didn't need offensive perfection. Not when the Bucs forced five Cannon interceptions, returning a record three for touchdowns. Not when the Raiders could muster only 19 rushing yards. Not when they had accumulated 78 total yards 40 minutes into the game. "We were just absolutely terrible, absolutely awful," says Cannon, who was pressured constantly by the Bucs' front four and confused by Tampa Bay's swift back seven. The defense turned what should have been a close game into a romp, making these old Raiders look slow and timid. But in seasons to come, Gruden will be less dependent.

"I don't think he has many tools on offense that he actually likes," says Randy Mueller, the former Saints general manager. "Wait until he gets his own players. Watch out."

That's the scary specter of all this. This is the worst this offense will ever be under Gruden—he has no speed receiver, his line is average, his running game was mediocre for much of the schedule—yet he was able to scheme the Bucs to the championship, complementing this overpowering defense with superb offensive game plans. Gruden complained privately much of the season about his personnel and early in the schedule, G.M. Rich McKay had to counsel him "to be patient; there is a lot of talent on this team." But he won't go into 2003 with the same offensive mix.

"I think he is brilliant," Giants G.M. Ernie Accorsi says. "You have to love the guy, the way he goes about it, how hard he works. He has the whole package: enthusiasm, passion, creativity, inspirational. And it's a great sign, the way his teams always seem

## Gannon lacked velocity, accuracy—and help

In the wake of Tampa Bay's domination of Oakland, it will be popular to say Jon Gruden out-coached Bill Callahan. We beg to differ.

Oakland's game plan was fine. It was the same game plan that had allowed the Raiders to lead the league in offense. The problem was execution. Tampa Bay played very well, particularly on defense. But the Oakland offense was out of sync all game.

Quarterback Rich Gannon had an incredible season and deserved to be the league MVP, but he played poorly in San Diego. The Bucs never let him get in a rhythm and exposed some weaknesses—Gannon's and Oakland's.

Even without blitzing much, the Bucs applied a fierce pass rush. The Raiders hadn't seen a team that fast all season. The line, which had been protecting

Gannon without much extra help from tight ends and backs all season, was overmatched.

The Bucs also clogged the middle and forced Gannon to move east and west, which no longer is his strength. Though Gannon has a reputation as a mobile quarterback, he prefers to stay in the pocket and execute the timing patterns that make the Raiders' offense go. As the Bucs proved with their five interceptions, Gannon doesn't throw that well when forced to move.

It didn't help that his receivers rarely were open. The Bucs' quarterbacks played tighter than usual, and the Raiders struggled to get separation. As a result, Gannon had to hold the ball too long. He was sacked five times and was late on many throws.

The key to beating the cover 2 is to throw the ball into tight spots

with velocity before the holes close. Gannon struggled with velocity and accuracy—not a good combination against the league's No. 1 defense.

The offense's failures also had a huge impact on the defense, which was exposed in this game. The Raiders had dominated time of possession all season (fifth in the NFL in the regular season), but the Oakland defense was on the field nearly 15 minutes longer than Tampa Bay's on Sunday. That was a huge problem for a unit missing Phillip Buchanon and with Charles Woodson still hurting. It wore down.

After a 48-21 defeat, much blame can be spread around. But the biggest problem was that the league's MVP had a bad game at the worst possible time.

—The War Room