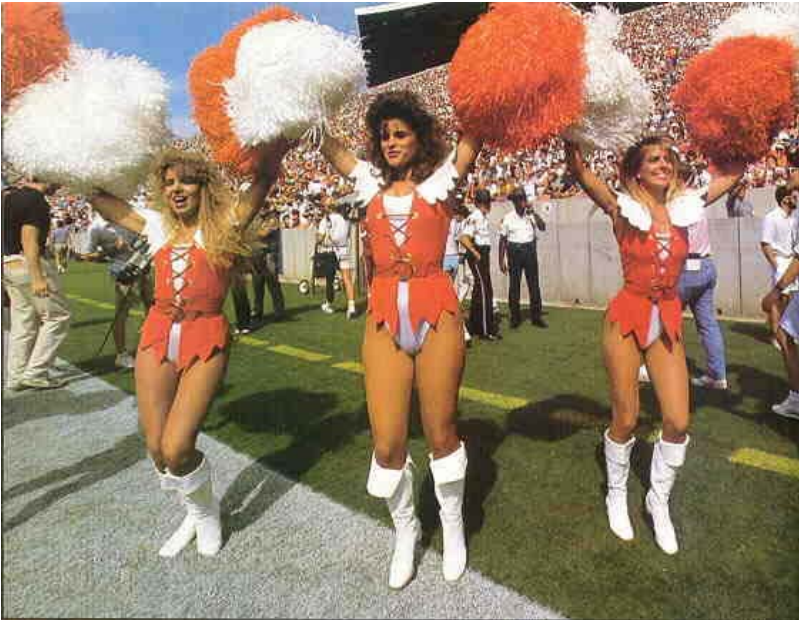


Honey Bears in Tampa

I worked at the old Tampa Stadium as a game day soft-drink vendor between 1978-83, the first couple of those years while I was the statistician on my football team in high school, where some of my best friends were either cheerleaders or, to paraphrase the late George Halas' description, dancing girls in the marching band. [I graduated high school in June 1980]



During that time, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, back when they wore Creamsicle Orange jerseys and Bucco Bruce helmets [which they plan to reintroduce for a "throwback" home game this season] were, of course, in the old NFC Central Division, which meant that they had to play the Bears home-and-home.

I never did like the Bucs back then, and despite their championship season 7 years ago, still don't like them much. But one delight that I experienced during my 6 year soft-drink vending stretch at the old Stadium was that on 4 of those occasions--1978, '79, '80 and '83--when the Bears played at the Bucs, the Honey Bears tagged along and rocked the sidelines, probably much better than the Bucs' own cheerleaders. I also read some printed accounts of them also appearing when the Bears played at the Bucs in 1977, the year before I started vending the sodas and when the Bucs were in the middle of a franchise-opening 26-game losing streak.

I don't know if it was George Halas' idea or Cathy Core's to send the Honey Bears to Tampa those 5 times, but it wasn't every week that an NFL team's dancing girls actually went out on the road during the regular season. Perhaps the Honey Bears' visits to Tampa had their own magic, because 4 of those 5 times, the Bears beat the Bucs. While 1978 was the only one of those 5 times the Bucs beat the Bears in Tampa, that 1980 game I saw in person [when I was 18], on the last week of the season [Dec 20], was one that went down to the wire, particularly since it was also televised live nationally on CBS during an early Saturday evening.

The Bucs trailed 14-13, and needed a long field goal to win with seconds to go. During a timeout before the field goal attempt, I said to myself, rather spontaneously, "Let's do this for the Honey Bears." Sure enough, that field goal try was blocked, and the Bears won. Keeping in mind that everything at the old Tampa Stadium was more open then than today's NFL parks are now, when I met up with some of the Honey Bears after the game, as they made their way toward their chartered bus, I said to one of them, "You all are the greatest and you're all welcome back here anytime." I vaguely recall that person actually giving me a flower in response to that compliment.