San Francisco gains wild-card victory over Green Bay

By Dennis Georgatos

SAN FRANCISCO — Terrell Owens hoped for a moment of redemption. It came at the last instant from Steve Young and left him in tears

Owens, who had four drops and a fumble earlier, leaped in a crowd to catch Young's 25-yard touch-down pass with three seconds remaining, giving the San Francisco 49ers a 30-27 NFC wild-card victory over the Green Bay Packers.

I just looked at the clock and it was ticking, ticking, ticking," Owens said. "I wanted to beat Green Bay so bad. Any time there's a chance for me to get the ball over the middle, I'm tough enough to take it.

'I was just happy that I caught the ball. I had a rough day. I let the team down in the beginning, but they all encouraged me to keep my head up."

The victory ended San Francisco's run of five straight losses to the Packers, including the last three playoffs, and to their head coach, former San Francisco offensive coordinator Mike Holmgren.

"It was the worst thing that could happen, but as athletes and coaches we have to learn to live with this," said Holmgren, who may have coached his last game for the Packers; he may leave to take a coach-GM job elsewhere.

"I don't know how they scored," Holmgren added. "I guess I'll look at the film some day. The ball goes down the middle and you don't think that ball is going to be caught, ever."

Owens, in a reception rivaling Dwight Clark's fabled catch to beat Dallas for the 1981 NFC championship, snagged the ball amid three defenders.

They immediately leveled him, but it was too late.

"It's a great thing, an emotional thing," Young said. "That play will be attached to 49ers' lore for a long time. I'll always remember it.

So will a lot of others, including Owens, who was in tears as he hugged coach Steve Mariucci on the sideline after the touchdown.

'He was frustrated because he

dropped a couple passes," said Mariucci, who beat his former team for the first time in

three games. "I told him to keep playing and have a short memory. When he caught that TD, he became a little emotional.

The score capped a nine-play, 76-yard drive after Brett Favre put the Packers up 27-23 on a 15-yard touchdown pass to Antonio Freeman with 1:56 remaining.

"I felt we had them," Favre said. "But Young, he's a great player, I didn't think they'd go down easy.

"Anybody who watched that game has to think it's the greatest game they've ever seen. The great players make big plays in big games. They made some and we made some.

The 49ers (13-4) travel to Atlanta next Saturday. The Falcons displaced the 49ers as NFC West champions.

The loss could mark the end of an era for the Packers (11-6), denied in their bid to be the first NFC team to reach three straight Super Bowls.

"I guess stunned would be a good word," Freeman said. "I'm not sure if guys are feeling anything right now. I'm still numb.' Retiring defensive end Reggie

White, the league's top career sacker, also played in his final game.

He and his teammates were upset about a non-call on an apparent fumble by Jerry Rice on the

"Absolutely," Packers safety LeRoy Butler said of whether it was a blown call. "But he's Jerry Rice and I can't comment on the referees, or I will get fined.

Then Owens came through.

"We've been waiting to be in a game with them," Young said. 'We've always been out of it early against them. We wanted to get the football with just a chance to score and win the game. That's all we asked for.

Young, beating the Packers for the first time in nine tries, completed 18 of 32 passes for 169 yards, 76 on the final drive. He also had touchdown passes of 1 and 8 yards to tight end Greg Clark, who had just one scoring catch during the

Young, harried all game and often appeared out of sync, threw two interceptions.

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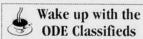
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