

Where Do the Lions Go From Here?

by Brandon Kruse

Football isn't really my game. I'm a Minnesota Vikings fan (yeah, thanks for the condolences), but watching their games is about as far as I get into the NFL, with the exception of the playoffs; even in winter, my baseball fandom carries the day, as hot stove action still occupies the majority of the turf in my sports brain.

Yet I've found myself fascinated by the predicament of the Detroit Lions, those poor winless bastards. Among the three major pro sports leagues, this kind of extreme futility is unique to the NFL, thanks to a considerably shorter schedule. The worst team in NBA history, the 1972-73 Philadelphia 76ers, went 9-73, for a .110 winning percentage that would have translated into a 2-14 record in the NFL; terrible, yes, but not that uncommon in NFL history (there were two teams with that record this year alone). The worst team in MLB history, the 1889 Cleveland Spiders, went 20-134, for a .130 winning percentage that would have also translated into a 2-14 NFL record. (And the Spiders are really an anomaly in baseball history, as the next worst record belongs to the 1916 Philadelphia Athletics, who went 36-117, for a .235 winning percentage that translates into a 4-12 NFL record.)

The Lions are the first team to go winless since the NFL moved to a 16-game season in 1978. (The 1976 expansion Tampa Bay Buccaneers went 0-14, and the 1982 Baltimore Colts went 0-8-1 in a strike-shortened season.) Others have come close – since 1978, eight teams have gone 1-15 over an NFL season. And my question today is: can those eight one-win teams shed any light on what the future might hold for the Lions? Here's what became of those 1-15 teams after they hit rock bottom:

1980 New Orleans Saints

Record the Following Season: 4-12
Years Until a .500 or Better Season: 3
Years Until a Playoff Appearance: 7

The Saints managed to go 8-8 in 1983, but that was the lone highlight in a long stretch of brutal football. Going back to when they joined the NFL in 1967, the Saints played 20 seasons where they played .500 ball only twice, for a combined record of 90-196 (.315). That awful 1980 season was the low point, and not only led many fans to refer to the team as the "Aints," it also spawned the trend of fans wearing paper bags over their heads at the game to indicate their shame (or possibly as a tribute to [The Unknown Comic](#)).

It wasn't until 1987 that the team finally turned a corner, when they suddenly went 12-3 (a strike cost the league a game that year, and three of the games that were played involved... shudder... replacement players) and made the playoffs as a Wild Card, where they lost to the Vikings (ha!) 44-10 in the first round. Some of the factors for the

turnaround were the emergence of quarterback Bobby Hebert (he was signed out of the USFL in 1985, but didn't really pan out until '87), the drafting of running backs Reuben Mayes and Dalton Hilliard in 1986, and the hiring of Jim Mora as head coach in 1986. They also stopped doing incredibly stupid things like trading their 1st round draft picks for past-their-prime players like Richard Todd and Earl Campbell, two acquisitions that cost the Saints their first-rounders in the 1984 and 1985 drafts. That just sounds insane now.

From there, the Saints went on to finish .500 or better in each of the next seven seasons, and made three more playoff appearances, though they lost in the first round every time. They fell on hard times again starting in 1994, but they've still managed winning seasons and playoff appearances since then, and have largely erased all memories of the "Aints." In fact, the idea of the Saints being a sad sack franchise and the butt of jokes is probably completely foreign to many young NFL fans; much like the Buccaneers, the Saints have done a pretty good job of revitalizing the image of their franchise over the last two decades.

Lessons for the Lions: Get a new head coach, get a better quarterback, get a better running game, and sweet Lincoln in a gunnysack, don't trade your first-round draft picks for dudes who are closing in on 30, which is like 50 in football years.

1989 Dallas Cowboys

Record the Following Season: 7-9
Years Until a .500 or Better Season: 2
Years Until a Playoff Appearance: 2

This was the low point of a brief rebuilding period that was sandwiched between a period of 20 consecutive winning seasons that included 18 playoff appearances and two Super Bowl victories and a period of six consecutive winning seasons that included six playoff appearances and three Super Bowl victories. The Cowboys' time in the gutter was brief (but oh so glorious for Cowboy haters everywhere).

What turned this ship around was, of course, Jerry Jones buying the team in 1989, firing the corpse of Tom Landry (zing!), and hiring Jimmy Johnson as head coach. The two men then rebuilt the team with smart drafting (adding quarterback Troy Aikman, running back Emmitt Smith, defensive tackle Russell Maryland, and safety Darren Woodson, among others), aided by a trade with the Vikings that sent Hershel Walker to Minnesota for like 37 billion players and draft picks (a debacle that still, to this day, makes Vikings fans vomit with rage, to borrow a line from the great Krusty the Clown).

Lessons for the Lions: Get a new head coach, get a better quarterback, get a better running game, and sweet swashbuckling monkeys, put in a call to the Vikings and see if they'd like to trade a shitload of players and draft picks for

some overhyped jackass. Hey, it's worth a shot.

1990 New England Patriots

Record the Following Season: 6-10

Years Until a .500 or Better Season: 4

Years Until a Playoff Appearance: 4

I know, I know. The Patriots used to be lousy? It did happen. For the first 30 years of their existence, the Patriots were a frustratingly inconsistent team, capable of posting a 2-14 record, making a Super Bowl appearance (where they suffered the most lopsided defeat in the history of that game at the time), and going 1-15 all within a ten-year span. For a while there, the Patriots rivaled the Red Sox in their ability to torture the sports fans of New England.

That ended, of course, with their second Super Bowl appearance in 1996. They lost that game 35-21 to the Green Bay Packers, but have remained one of the league's best teams ever since. And that, of course, was a process that started with the hiring of Bill Parcells as head coach in 1993 (a season in which they also debuted a new team logo). One of Parcell's first acts was the drafting of quarterback Drew Bledsoe, also in 1993 (he also drafted tight end Ben Coates and linebacker Willie McGinest). In 1995, the Patriots drafted running back Curtis Martin (who would be named Rookie of the Year), and the following year, they picked receiver Terry Glenn, and the rest is history.

Lessons for the Lions: Get a new head coach, get a better quarterback, get a better running game, and sweet flaming catfish, get a new damn logo. Bubbles the Lion has been on the job since 1960. He's 49 years old. Even in captivity, lions don't live more than 20-25 years. You're thumbing your nose at nature! This is why you're franchise has been cursed to eight straight losing seasons. Put Bubbles to sleep, and start fresh with a new lion – maybe you can put in call to Hanna-Barbera about a 21st century version of Snagglepuss? Think of all your fans shouting "Heavens to Murgatroyd!" in unison after every touchdown. And any future coaches who are fired can be contractually obligated to say "Exit, stage left!" before running off-stage at their press conference. The possibilities are endless.

1991 Indianapolis Colts

Record the Following Season: 9-7

Years Until a .500 or Better Season: 1

Years Until a Playoff Appearance: 4

This was part of an embarrassing stretch for the Colts organization. After spending their first 25 years in the NFL building a reputation as one of the league's greatest teams, they fell on hard times in 1978, and went on to post losing records in 12 of their next 16 seasons, including this disaster in 1991.

Adding to the Colts' embarrassment during this period was the drafting and immediate trading of John Elway, the

suspension of quarterback Art Schlichter for gambling, and their exodus from Baltimore to Indianapolis. After negotiations for a new stadium in Baltimore failed and the relationship between Colts owner Robert Irsay and the city became strained, Irsay began fielding offers to relocate to other cities. Aware of this, the Maryland state legislature began working to pass a law that would give the city of Baltimore the right to seize ownership of the Colts by eminent domain. With his hand force, Irsay quickly reached a deal with Indianapolis, and on March 29, 1984, the Colts loaded up all of their equipment onto 15 moving trucks in the middle of the night, and were gone from Baltimore by 10am that morning. Needless to say, it was not one of the NFL's finest hours.

The team began to turn things around in 1995, with a 9-7 season that put them in the playoffs as a wild card team, where they made it all the way to the AFC Championship game before losing to the Steelers. That turnaround began with the 1992 hiring of head coach Ted Marchibroda, who had actually been head coach of the team back in Baltimore from 1975-1979. In 1994, the Colts drafted running back Marshall Faulk, who would be named AFC Rookie of the Year at the end of that season. That same year, they also acquired veteran quarterback Jim Harbaugh, who went on to have the best season of his career in that 1995 playoff season, leading the entire league in Passer Rating.

Lessons for the Lions: Get a new head coach, get a better quarterback, get a better running game, and sweet triangulated crossfire, think about relocating to a new city. I suspect there are a lot of people in Detroit, many of them Lions fans, who would pitch in to help you move. (Also, do not trade John Elway immediately after drafting him. I realize the Colts had little choice because Elway refused to play for head coach Frank Kush and threatened to go play baseball for the Yankees, but history has clearly shown that they should have caved in completely and not only fired Frank Kush, but had him turned into Elway's butler.)

1996 New York Jets

Record the Following Season: 9-7

Years Until a .500 or Better Season: 1

Years Until a Playoff Appearance: 2

This was the end of a miserable 10-year stretch that saw the Jets go 54-104 (.342), during which their best single-season record was 8-7-1 in 1988. It was a period that included the appointing of Browning Nagle, a leading contender for Worst Name in the History of the NFL, as their starting quarterback in 1992. He went on to go 3-10 as a starter, and had the distinction of throwing more interceptions (17) than touchdowns (7).

Things got much, much better in 1997, as they lured Bill Parcells away from the Patriots to become their head coach. In 1998, Parcells and the Jets traded for Patriots running back Curtis Martin, and signed quarterback Vinny Testaverde as a

free agent. The result was a 12-4 season and a playoff run to the AFC Championship, where they lost to the Denver Broncos and John Elway (damn you, Colts!) 23-10. But they went on to make the playoffs four of the next eight seasons, and have successfully put the dark days of the late 80s and early 90s behind them.

Lessons for the Lions: Get a new head coach, get a better quarterback, get a better running game, and sweet merciful crap, never employ a player named Browning Nagle. Or Nagle Browning. Don't even allow one of those names on their own. There has never been a player of note in NFL history with Browning or Nagle as one of their names. Trust me, I checked.

2000 San Diego Chargers

Record the Following Season: 5-11
Years Until a .500 or Better Season: 2
Years Until a Playoff Appearance: 4

The Chargers 15-loss season was part of a down cycle following a mid-90s peak (1992-95) that saw them make the playoffs three times in four years, including a loss to the San Francisco 49ers in Super Bowl XXIX in 1994. The rebuilding process lasted eight years, during which time the Chargers never had a record better than 8-8, and finished last in their division four different times.

This period of time also featured the Ryan Leaf debacle. Leaf, for those who don't know, was a quarterback that the Chargers drafted with the second pick of the 1998 NFL Draft. The Chargers not only drafted Leaf, they traded three draft picks and Pro Bowl running back Eric Metcalf to move up one spot to the #2 slot so they could get him. Then they handed him a four-year, \$31.25 million contract that included an \$11.25 million signing bonus. Leaf proceeded to alienate teammates, have run-ins with the media, and forced the Chargers to file a grievance against him seeking to recover money from his contract after he was caught on video playing flag football when he was supposed to be rehabilitating from shoulder and wrist injuries. But his biggest sin was that he just plain sucked on the field. In his rookie season, he threw two touchdowns and 15 interceptions, and had an awful Passer Rating of 39.0. He finished his career with a 48.4% completion rate, and 36 interceptions to just 14 touchdowns. His last season with the Chargers was that 1-15 season in 2000, and he was out of the NFL one year later. He is widely regarded as one of the biggest busts in the history of professional sports.

The Chargers began digging themselves out of the Leaf hole in 2001, with the drafting of running back LaDanian Tomlinson, who was named Offensive Rookie of the Year that season, and quarterback Drew Brees. In 2002, the hired Marty Schottenheimer as head coach. In 2004, when the Chargers went 12-4 and made it to the playoffs for the first time in nine years, Schottenheimer was named NFL Coach of the Year, and Brees was named NFL Comeback Player of

the Year. And they have not posted a losing season since then.

Lessons for the Lions: Get a new head coach, get a better quarterback, get a better running game, and sweet screaming lizards, don't draft the next Ryan Leaf. I realize that's pretty much one of the main goals of every professional sports franchise now, but you need to take special care not to do this. Maybe get one of those circle-with-a-line-through-it signs with a picture of Ryan Leaf on it for the front office, just as a constant reminder.

2001 Carolina Panthers

Record the Following Season: 7-9
Years Until a .500 or Better Season: 2
Years Until a Playoff Appearance: 2

The Panthers joined the NFL in 1995, and other than a division title and NFC Conference Championship game appearance in their second year, spent most of their first eight seasons playing losing football. In 2001, they won their season opener (against the Vikings, of course), then went on to lose 15 straight games, a record for consecutive losses in one season that was finally broken this year by the Lions.

Carolina's problems weren't limited to the field, either. In 1999, wide receiver Rae Carruth was arrested for conspiring to kill his girlfriend. Carruth, who was 25 at the time, had been an All-American player in college, was drafted in the first round by the Panthers, and was named to the All-Rookie team in his first year in the NFL. According to records from a 9-1-1 call by the victim, Cherica Adams, Carruth stopped his car in front of Adams's car, then another car pulled alongside her and its passenger shot her four times. Adams was eight months pregnant with twins; Carruth was the father. She died a week later, and only one of the children survived. Carruth was arrested, posted bail, and then became a fugitive. He was eventually captured after being found hiding in the trunk of a car outside a motel. Also in the trunk was \$3,900 in cash, bottles to hold Carruth's urine, extra clothes, candy bars, and a cell phone. He was found guilty at trial and sentenced to 18-24 years in prison, a sentence he is currently serving.

The Panthers closed the book on their awful 2001 season by firing head coach George Seifert and replacing him with New York Giants defensive coordinator John Fox. Fox focused first on improving the Panthers defense, then in 2003, they signed quarterback Jake Delhomme and running back Stephen Davis in the offseason. Delhomme, given his first shot as a starter, rose to the occasion with the best work of his young pro career, and Davis, by then a veteran and two-time Pro Bowler, set personal bests in total rushing yards and rushing yards per game. The Panthers went 11-5, won their division, swept through the NFC playoffs, and lost to the Patriots in Super Bowl XXXVIII 32-29 on a last-second field goal. They returned to the playoffs in 2005, and are there once again this season.

Lessons for the Lions: Get a new head coach, get a better quarterback, get a better running game, and sweet Dan Rather in a housecoat, during those preseason orientation sessions, make sure to really emphasize to your players that killing is a bad solution to their problems, hiring someone to do their killing for them is still very much a crime, and that still choosing to show up to assist in said killing despite paying someone else to do it is incredibly stupid.

2007 Miami Dolphins

Record the Following Season: 11-5

Years Until a .500 or Better Season: 1

Years Until a Playoff Appearance: 1

The Dolphins came very close to beating the Lions to the punch in 2007, getting their only win in Week 15, in overtime. They also offer the Lions the most hope for the future (or the most false hope, depending on how you want to look at it), as they bounced back to go 11-5 this year, completing the greatest single-season turnaround in NFL history, and becoming the first team in NFL history to win their division after having only one win the previous season.

The Dolphins cleaned house in the offseason, starting with owner Wayne Huizenga hiring Bill Parcells as Executive Vice President of Football Operations. A few days later the Dolphins turned over their front office, bringing in a new GM, and shortly after that, they fired coach Cam Cameron after one season and hired Dallas Cowboys assistant Tony Sparano (not to be confused with Tony Soprano, though if you're like me, that's what you read every time you see that name). Then in August, during the preseason, after the Jets signed Brett Favre and released quarterback Chad Pennington, the Dolphins signed him to a two-year contract. Pennington, who had suffered through a tumultuous career with the Jets, turned in a terrific year for Miami, leading the NFL in completion percentage, and finishing second to Peyton Manning in NFL MVP voting. The Dolphins also benefitted from their use of the Wildcat offense, which opened up their running game. The Wildcat offense is a formation that involves a direct snap to a running back rather than the quarterback, and gives that running back the option to run the ball himself, hand off to another running back, or throw a pass.

They made it back into the playoffs after a seven-year absence, but unfortunately lost to the Baltimore Ravens this weekend, ending their magical worst-to-first season.

Lessons for the Lions: Get a new head coach, get a better quarterback, get a better running game (who better to run an offensive scheme called "Wildcat" than the Lions... except possibly the Bengals, Jaguars and Panthers), and sweet fancy Moses, see if you can steal Parcells away from the Dolphins. He's helped turn around three of the eight teams on this list, and what better way for him to solidify his reputation as the greatest genius in the history of the NFL than by rebuilding the worst team in league history back into a winner?

So the three most common elements these teams' surge back to respectability were a new head coach, a better quarterback, and an improved running game (and whether that's just a coincidence or an actual cause and effect is better left to a column more analytically rigorous than this one, and a columnist more steeped in the minutiae of the NFL). Where do the Lions stand in these three areas? Well, they fired head coach Rod Marinelli just one day after the completion of their 0-16 season, so they are ready to complete step one sometime this offseason. At quarterback, Dan Orlovsky and Daunte Culpepper would seem to be in competition for the starting job in 2009 right now, but neither is any kind of long-term solution. There's a lot of speculation that the Lions will take University of Georgia QB Matthew Stafford with the #1 pick in the 2009 NFL Draft; that would seem to make sense for them. Running back Kevin Smith showed promise in 2008, coming just 24 yards shy of a 1,000-yard season in his rookie year, and could be a viable long-term answer for the franchise.

And judging by how the eight teams we just covered fared after their 1-15 seasons, what can the Lions expect in the near future? Here's the rundown:

The average record in the following season was 7-9.

The average number of years until a .500 or better season was two.

The average number of years until a playoff appearance was three.

So Lions fans, put in your order for 2011 season tickets, and get ready to root for a playoff-bound winner!
