

PRO FOOTBALL'S "WORST TO FIRST"

By Mark Speck

Much has been written the past few years about baseball teams going from worst to first in one season. Teams that eschewed the normal "rebuilding process" to rebound in one year instead of two or three or more.

The 1991 Twins and Braves and the 1997 Giants are two of the teams that have done it, rising from last place to a division or league crown in just one season.

The question remains, has this phenomenon ever happened in pro football? Have any football teams managed to capture lightning in a jar and rise from the outhouse to the penthouse in one season? The answer is yes (otherwise you wouldn't be reading this article right now).

Amazingly, this feat has actually been more prevalent in pro football than in baseball. In the last 30 years, starting with the 1967 Houston Oilers, it has occurred fourteen times. Several franchises have even managed to accomplish the feat more than once.

Rebuilding a losing franchise usually takes several years. It took Chuck Noll four years to turn around the Steelers, Weeb Ewbank five years to revive the Jets. Bill Walsh made the 49ers into winners in his third season, Jimmy Johnson his Cowboys the same length of time. But some football teams are a little more impatient, it seems, and turn it around in one season.

Some of these resurgences have been one year affairs, where a team has risen to the top and then sank just as fast. The Bucs, for example, rose from last to first in 1981, had a lackluster 1982 and then went through 12 straight seasons of 10 or more losses. Others have led to long-term success. When the Vikings went from worst to first in 1968, for example, it marked the beginning of 12 playoff appearances in the next 15 years.

Surprisingly enough, the majority of these cases have not involved wholesale roster changes. And only two teams, the 1975 Colts and the 1992 Chargers, had changed head coaches. It seems to be just a question of teams jelling at just the right time, using a blend of holdover talent with a slight influx of newcomers.

Not surprisingly, however, many of these occurrences have coincided with a resurgent year for the team's quarterback. John Brodie for the 1970 49ers led the NFC in passing after a mediocre 1969 campaign. Bert Jones finished third in the AFC for the '75 Colts, the first time he had cracked the top ten list of passers. Ken Anderson finished 12th among AFC passers in 1980, then soared along with the rest of his team to the top of the heap in 1981. Another Bengal quarterback, Boomer Esiason, finished #1 among AFC passers in 1988 after winding up 20th in 1987.

But again, this is not always the case, and has never seemed necessary for a "worst to first" move. Joe Kapp of the '68 Vikings, Doug Williams of the '79 Bucs and Erik Kramer of the '91 Lions couldn't place any higher than 13th among their conference's quarterbacks.

There is one constant among all these occurrences, however. Although each team did not see an increase in offensive production, every team's defensive numbers improved. As the old saying goes, offense sells tickets, but defense wins championships.

As stated before, several franchises have pulled off this feat more than once. The Buccaneers, Lions and Colts have all done it twice. The Bengals, meanwhile, have accomplished it three times -- in 1970, 1981 and 1988.

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Two teams are particularly interesting cases. The Buccaneers and the Lions have each gone from worst-to-first-and-back-to-worst-and-then-to-first again in the span of four years. The Bucs did it from 1978 through '81, while the Lions pulled it off from 1990 to '92. Talk about your roller coaster rides.

The two biggest turnarounds in pro football history were the 1975 Colts, who went from 2-and-12 to 10-and-4; and the 1988 Bengals, who improved from 4-and-11 to 12-and-4.

In the end, there really doesn't seem to be a magic elixir or potion needed for a team to go from worst to first in one season. Any number of factors could play a role in it and quite a few have -- new coach, new players, better seasons from the old players, winning games they should have lost instead of losing games they should have won.... All of it seems to prove another old football saying.... "On any given Sunday...."

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Houston Oilers

1966- 3 - 11 1967- 9 - 4 - 1

Keys- Addition of DB Miller Farr (AFL leading 10 interceptions), DB Ken Houston (4 interceptions, 2 returned for touchdowns), DB Zeke Moore (led AFL in kickoff returns), LB George Webster; 1,000-yards rushing by Hoyle Granger.

Minnesota Vikings

1967- 3 - 8 - 3 1968- 8 - 6

Keys- Addition of DB Paul Krause (team-high 5 interceptions), LB Wally Hilgenberg, OT Ron Yary; solid running game led by Bill Brown (805 yards) and Clint Jones (536).

San Francisco 49ers

1969- 4 - 8 - 2 1970- 10 - 3 - 1

Keys- Addition of DE Cedrick Hardman, DB Bruce Taylor (who led NFC in punt returns), K Bruce Gossett; QB John Brodie (#1 in NFC); WR Gene Washington (1,100 yards receiving).

Cincinnati Bengals

1969- 4 - 9 - 1 1970- 8 - 6

Keys- Addition of DT Mike Reid, QB Virgil Carter, OT Rufus Mayes, DB Lemar Parrish (team high 5 interceptions), P Dave Lewis (best in AFC).

Baltimore Colts

1974- 2 - 12 1975- 10 - 4

Keys- Addition of Head Coach Ted Marchibroda, OT George Kunz, OG Ken Huff, LB Jim Cheyunski; breakthrough seasons for both RB Lydell Mitchell (first 1,000-yard season) and QB Bert Jones (#3 in AFC).

1979 Tampa Bay Buccaneers

1978- 5 - 11 1979- 10 - 6

Keys- Addition of OG Greg Roberts and George Yarno; DB Danny Reece (led NFC in punt returns); RB Ricky Bell (1,263 yards rushing).

Cincinnati Bengals

1980- 6 - 10 1981- 12 - 4

Keys- Addition of WR Cris Collinsworth and DB Mike Fuller; QB Ken Anderson (#1 in AFC); RB Pete Johnson (1,077 yards rushing); P Pat McNally (best in AFC); K Jim Breech (led AFC with 115 points).

Tampa Bay Buccaneers

1980- 3 - 10 - 1 1981- 9 - 7

Keys- Addition of LB Hugh Green; *Special Note- The Bucs accomplished this despite the loss of All-World DT Lee Roy Selmon for the season due to a hamstring injury*

Indianapolis Colts

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1986- 3 - 13 1987- 9 - 6

Keys- Addition of Eric Dickerson during season, and DB Mike Prior (team high 6 interceptions); solid offensive line led by C Ray Donaldson.

Cincinnati Bengals

1987- 4 - 11 1988- 12 - 4

Keys- QB Boomer Esiason (#1 in AFC); RB Ickey Woods (AFC leading 15 touchdowns); WR Eddie Brown (led AFC in receiving yards and yards per catch); RB James Brooks (931 yards).

Denver Broncos

1990- 5 - 11 1991- 12 - 4

Keys- Addition of OT Harvey Salem, OG Crawford Ker, OG Dave Widell, RB Gaston Green (1,037 yards rushing); defense #1 in AFC in five categories; record in games decided by 7 points or less, 9-3 (2-7 in 1990).

Detroit Lions

1990- 6 - 10 1991- 12 - 4

Keys- RB Barry Sanders (1,548 yards rushing); 8-0 record at home; WR Mel Gray (led NFC in kickoff returns); team rallied around paralyzed teammate OG-OT Mike Utley.

San Diego Chargers

1991- 4 - 12 1992- 11 - 5

Keys- Addition of Head Coach Bobby Ross, QB Stan Humphries, DE Chris Mims, DE Leslie O'Neal; WR Anthony Miller (1,060 yards receiving); K John Carney (113 points).

Detroit Lions

1992- 5 - 11 1993- 10 - 6

Keys- RB Barry Sanders (1,115 yards rushing); P Jim Arnold (#1 in NFC); QB Erik Kramer (led team to 3 wins in last 4 games after taking over as starter).