

THE NFL'S "DIRTY DOZEN"

By Mark Speck

"They were absolutely horrible, and that's the nicest thing I can say about them." -- John McKay

We are always seeing articles dedicated to the NFL's best. The NFL's best quarterback, best running back, best linebacker, best coach, best era and, of course, best team.

Experts constantly argue and bicker over which can truly be called the NFL's best team. Is it Lombardi's Packers, Shula's Dolphins, Halas' Bears, Noll's Steelers, or Johnson's Cowboys? The debate goes on and on.

But how about the other side of the coin? Which team can truly be called the NFL's worst? Like the best of all time, there's been plenty of candidates for the label of NFL's all-time worst. Here is a list of the NFL's "Dirty Dozen", twelve squads that masqueraded as NFL teams and experienced the most God-awful seasons in the history of the NFL.

1934 Cincinnati Reds-St. Louis Gunners

This was definitely no Big Red Machine! The Reds, coached by Algy Clark in his one and only NFL job, lost their first eight games by a total score of 243 to 10! They were shut out six times and lost to the Eagles by a score of 64-0. If that wasn't bad enough, the team was suspended for defaulting on payroll after the Philadelphia game. The St. Louis Gunners, an independent team, took over the Cincinnati franchise and finished their schedule. Using local rookies, castoffs from other clubs and six players from the Cincinnati team (Gene Alford, Red Corzine, Earl Elser, Russ Lay, Lee Mulleneaux and George Munday), the Gunners managed to beat the Pittsburgh Pirates, 6-0. But it would be their only taste of victory. The Gunners were clobbered by Detroit 40-7 and lost to Green Bay 21-14 to close out a horrendous 1-10 campaign. The franchise had scored only 37 points and surrendered 304. Their passers had thrown one touchdown pass and 24 interceptions. The defense gave up a league-high 3,488 total yards. It's little wonder that both cities swore off NFL football for almost 30 years.

1942 Detroit Lions

The '42 Lions were absolutely toothless, losing all 11 games on their schedule, the first winless team since the 1929 Dayton Triangles. They scored a record-low 38 points, were shut out 5 times and crossed the goal line only 5 times all year. Along the way they lost 38-7 to Green Bay, 35-7 to Pittsburgh and 42-0 to the Bears. Coach Bill Edwards quit after three games, and assistant Bull Karcis took over, but by now the Lions were a snowball rolling downhill. The Tabby passers completed only 33 percent of their throws, tossed one touchdown pass and 33 interceptions, and the team lost 23 fumbles, most in the league. The defense was just as inept, giving up a league-high 263 points. Motor City fans stayed away in droves, and the Lions drew only 14,329 a game.

1943 Chicago Cardinals

Head coach Jimmy Conzelman left to take care of his baseball duties, and the woeful Cards had replacement Phil Handler wishing he had taken up another sport. At times in '43 it seemed some of the Cards were playing something other than football. Chicago was hit hard by the war, as both their top passer and receiver marched off to the front. Rookie quarterback Ronnie Cahill tossed a league-high 21 interceptions. The defense gave up 238 points, most in the NFL, while the offense scored only 95. The closest the Cards came to victory was a 13-7 loss to Washington. Chicago had so many problems they had to merge with Pittsburgh in 1944.

1949 New York Bulldogs

Showbiz manager Ted Collins used halftime circus acts to try to draw fans to the Polo Grounds, but it was his team that resembled a circus. Collins brought in Bobby Layne, who wound up drawing plays in the dirt for his pitiful offense. The Bulldogs had the league's worst rushing game and the defense surrendered 368, most in the league. The Bulldogs beat the Giants, 31-24 and tied the Redskins, 14-14, but lost to the Cardinals 65-20, the Eagles 42-0 and the Steelers 27-0. Short of cash, Collins was releasing players left and right, and by the end of the season only 19 players were suiting up.

1952 Dallas Texans

Any list of the NFL's all-time worst has to include the dreadful Texans. The transplanted New York Yanks were supposed to be a big hit in Texas, but after four games in the Cotton Bowl that didn't outdraw a backyard barbecue, the owners threw in the towel and turned the team over to the league. The pitiful Texans became vagabonds, using Hershey, Pennsylvania as their "home base". A shocking 27-23 upset of the Bears on Thanksgiving Day (before 3,000 people in Akron, Ohio) was the Texans only victory. Their quarterbacks threw a league-low 12 touchdowns, heaved 20 interceptions and were sacked for losses totalling 423 yards. The defense was like a sieve, allowing a league-high 427 points. Eight times they surrendered over 35 points. It's amazing to think that this sorry team included future stars Gino Marchetti, Artie Donovan, Tom Keane and Frank Tripucka.

1960 Dallas Cowboys

Fans in Big D endured not only the '52 Texans but the '60 Cowboys as well. The expansion Cowpokes of Tom Landry were a hodge-podge of veterans and youngsters that jelled as well as oil and water. Neither veteran Eddie LeBaron (who tossed a league-high 25 interceptions) nor rookie Dandy Don Meredith could spark a moribund offense. The Cowboys had the league's worst rushing game, turned the ball over 50 times, and scored the fewest points in the NFL. Dallas managed to tie Landry's old team, the Giants, but lost their other 11 games, including thrashings by Cleveland (48-7), Baltimore (45-7) and Green Bay (41-7). No one gave up more points than the 369 Dallas surrendered. But the good news was the fact that good times lay ahead.

1966 New York Giants

The '66 Giants may well have been the worst defensive team in the history of the NFL. As evidence, the Giants scored 34, 41 and 40 points in three of their games -- and didn't win any of them! New York gave up 52 points to Dallas, 55 to the Rams, 72 to the Redskins, 49 to Cleveland and 47 to Pittsburgh. All told, the Giants' opponents lit up the scoreboard 501 times in 1966, a record for a 14-game season and the second-most of all-time. On offense, Tucker Frederickson missed the whole season with a knee injury and Earl Morrall was lost for most of the second half. The rest of the players didn't do much. A tie and a win was all the Giants could muster.

1973 Houston Oilers

Bill Peterson had been given a "lifetime" contract in 1972 to leave Rice and coach the Oilers. That "lifetime" lasted all of 19 games and a 1-18 record. The 1973 Oilers were 0-5 when Peterson was shown the gate, and even Sid Gillman couldn't right this rudderless ship. The '73 Oilers finished 1-13 with the AFC's second-worst offense and most porous defense, which allowed 467 points. Houston turned the ball over 52 times, most in the entire NFL. Players came and went all season, but nothing worked. Houston had young studs Lynn Dickey and Dan Pastorini at quarterback, but they must have aged 10 years in one season. The two combined for 11 TD passes and 27 interceptions, and were sacked 43 times for losses totalling 451 yards. The Oilers managed to beat the equally inept Baltimore Colts 31-27, but losses to the tune of 48-20 (Denver), 42-13 (Cleveland), and 32-0 (New England) made for a long season in the Astrodome.

1976 Tampa Bay Buccaneers

When asked about his team's execution, Bucs coach John McKay said, "I'm all for it." Laughing in the face of adversity, and no team faced more adversity than the '76 Bucs. Tampa Bay had to put a league-high 17 players on injured reserve, including six defensive starters. The Bucs didn't score a point until their third game, and didn't score a touchdown until their fourth. Tampa Bay was shut out five times and scored only 125 points. Dave Green had to punt 92 times, most in the AFC. Only Seattle surrendered more points than the 412 the Bucs allowed. The Bucs didn't win a single game, and losses included nailbiters such as 42-17 to the Colts, 48-13 to the Broncos, 34-0 to the Jets, 49-16 to Oakland and 42-0 to the Steelers. Even opponents laughed. After the Pittsburgh game, Steeler Dwight White said, "I'd like to think we could beat them if we gave them the playbook." A benchmark to which all bad teams will be compared.

1980 New Orleans Saints

You know you're bad when you're known by an insulting nickname. The 1980 Saints will forever be remembered as the "Aint's," and the team was so awful that New Orleans fans took to wearing paper bags on their heads to games at the Superdome. Dick Nolan had led the 49ers to the playoffs a decade before, but he couldn't win with this bunch. A 27-7 loss to the Rams cost Nolan his job, and Dick Stanfel took over. In his second game, Stanfel's troops took a 35-7 halftime lead over the 49ers. They wound up

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losing, 38-35, an NFL-record 28-point blown lead. At 0-14, the "Aint's" went to New York and edged the Jets, 21-20, their only win. The Saints gave up an NFL-high 487 points, including 40 to St. Louis, 41 to Atlanta and 45 to the Rams. Incredibly, through it all and with little or no support from his rushing game, Archie Manning had one of his best seasons, completing 309 passes for 3,716 yards, both NFC bests. Just more evidence to Archie's courage and greatness.

1981 Baltimore Colts

Another club known by a cute but malicious nickname – the "Dolts". The '81 Colts had quite simply the worst defense in NFL history. Period, end of statement. The Colts gave up a record 533 points, including 41 to Cincinnati, 43 to San Diego and 42 to Cleveland in consecutive weeks! How they won two games is amazing, but not when you consider they came against the equally as dreadful Patriots. Quarterback Bert Jones and running back Curtis Dickey feuded publicly, and the overall mood of the team was ugly. Jones kept passing to try to keep the Dolts competitive, but the defense couldn't stop a high school team. Baltimore got to enemy passers only 13 times, and gave up 6,793 yards in total offense, another league record. The team's performance (or lack thereof) cost head coach Mike McCormack his job after the season.

1990 New England Patriots

The '90 campaign started well for the Patriots, as new head coach Rod Rust saw his club drop a close 27-24 game to Miami and then beat the Colts, 16-14. Then Rust's dreams of the playoffs turned into a nightmare, as the Pats lost all 14 games left on their schedule, including a 41-7 loss to Cincinnati, a 48-20 pasting by Philadelphia and a 42-7 crushing by the Jets. Steve Grogan was lost for most of the season with a neck injury, and the offense went with him. New England scored only 18 touchdowns all year and tallied just 181 points, a record-low for a 16-game season. The porous offensive line gave up 58 quarterback sacks, most in the NFL. The defense was just as putrid, allowing 446 points and giving up the most rushing yards in the NFL! Off the field problems plagued the Pats franchise as well. An ugly sexual harassment incident involving Boston Herald reporter Lisa Olson gave the Patriots, and owner Victor Kiam, who at first criticized OLson, a black eye. Several days after that, two players were injured in a barroom brawl. All in all, perhaps the worst season ever suffered by an NFL team.

There were others -- the 1936 Eagles, the '39 Cardinals, the 1950 Colts and the '67 Falcons to name a few. All in one way or another made their mark on football ineptitude.

Like lists of the all-time best teams, there will be controversy and debate, of course. How could one forget the '69 Steelers or the '91 Colts? Others will say, why not define the all-time worst team based on several seasons of putrid play. This listing could include some real stinkeroos. The 1943-45 Cardinals won 1 game and lost 29. From 1939 to 1942 the Eagles went 6-36-2. From 1967 to '71, the Bills won 13 games, lost 55 and tied twice. In the mid-'70s, the Jets won 9, lost 33 and went through five head coaches! The 1982-84 Oilers were 6-35.

But these twelve teams, this NFL's version of the "Dirty Dozen", are the ones that will be the benchmark for the low standards for other future teams to live down to.

These were the teams that put together the worst seasons in NFL history, teams that only a mother could love. Unless, of course, she was an "Aint's" fan and wore a bag over her head.

The NFL's "Dirty Dozen"

The twelve worst teams of all-time, listed from 1 to 12, with Number Twelve being the worst.

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| 1. 1973 Houston Oilers | 1-13 |
| 2. 1990 New England Patriots | 1-15 |
| 3. 1960 Dallas Cowboys | 0-11-1 |
| 4. 1949 New York Bulldogs | 1-10-1 |
| 5. 1980 New Orleans Saints | 1-15 |
| 6. 1981 Baltimore Colts | 2-14 |
| 7. 1934 Cinc. Reds/St. Louis Gunners | 1-10 |
| 8. 1966 New York Giants | 1-12-1 |
| 9. 1952 Dallas Texans | 1-11 |
| 10. 1943 Chicago Cardinals | 0-10 |
| 11. 1942 Detroit Lions | 0-11 |
| 12. 1976 Tampa Bay Buccaneers | 0-14 |

