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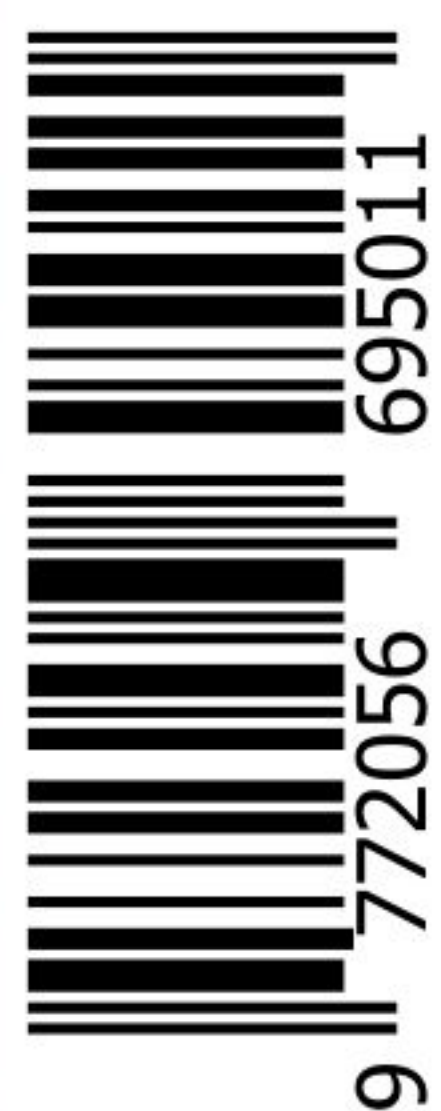
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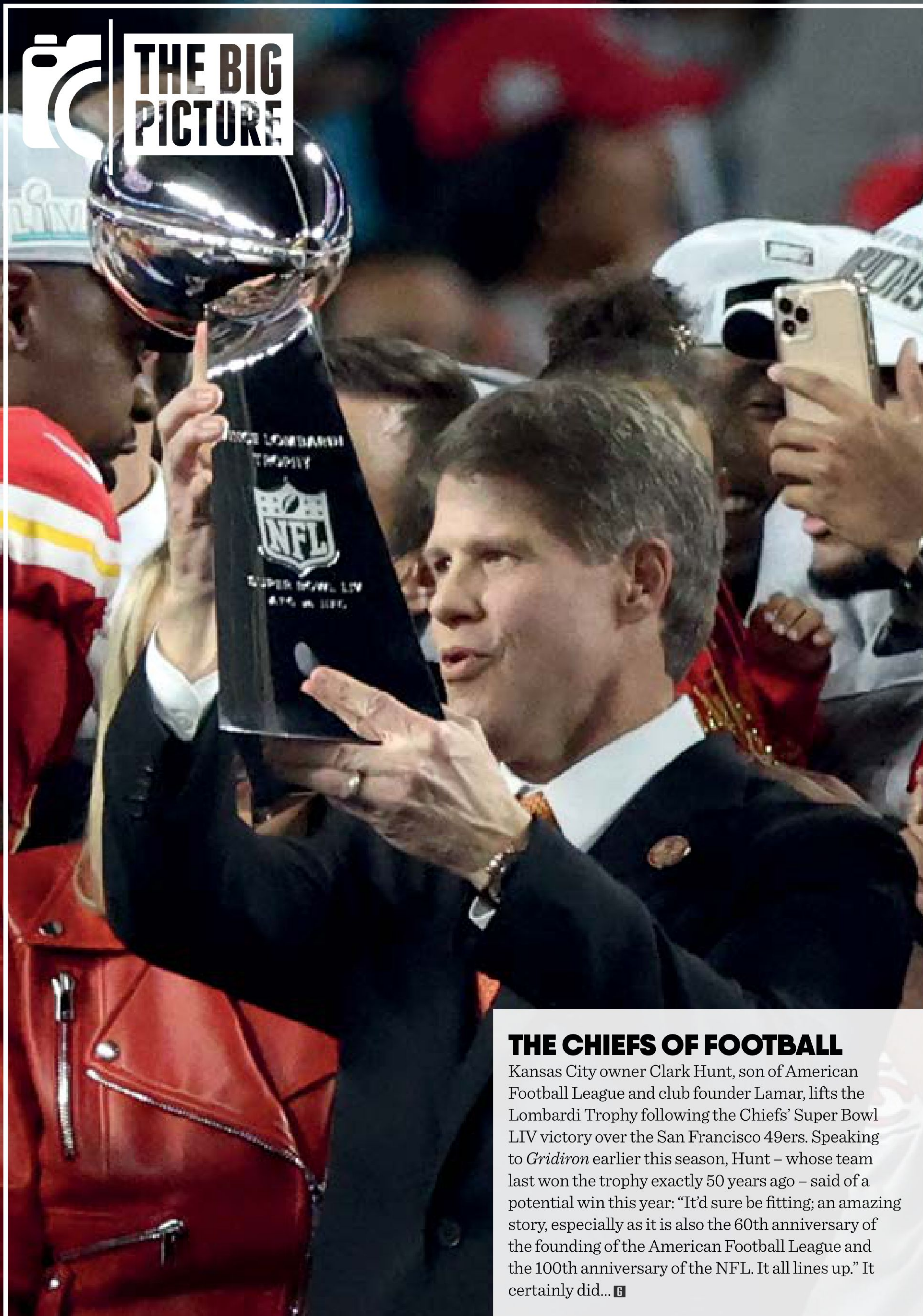
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THE BIG PICTURE



THE CHIEFS OF FOOTBALL

Kansas City owner Clark Hunt, son of American Football League and club founder Lamar, lifts the Lombardi Trophy following the Chiefs' Super Bowl LIV victory over the San Francisco 49ers. Speaking to *Gridiron* earlier this season, Hunt – whose team last won the trophy exactly 50 years ago – said of a potential win this year: “It’d sure be fitting; an amazing story, especially as it is also the 60th anniversary of the founding of the American Football League and the 100th anniversary of the NFL. It all lines up.” It certainly did... **G**



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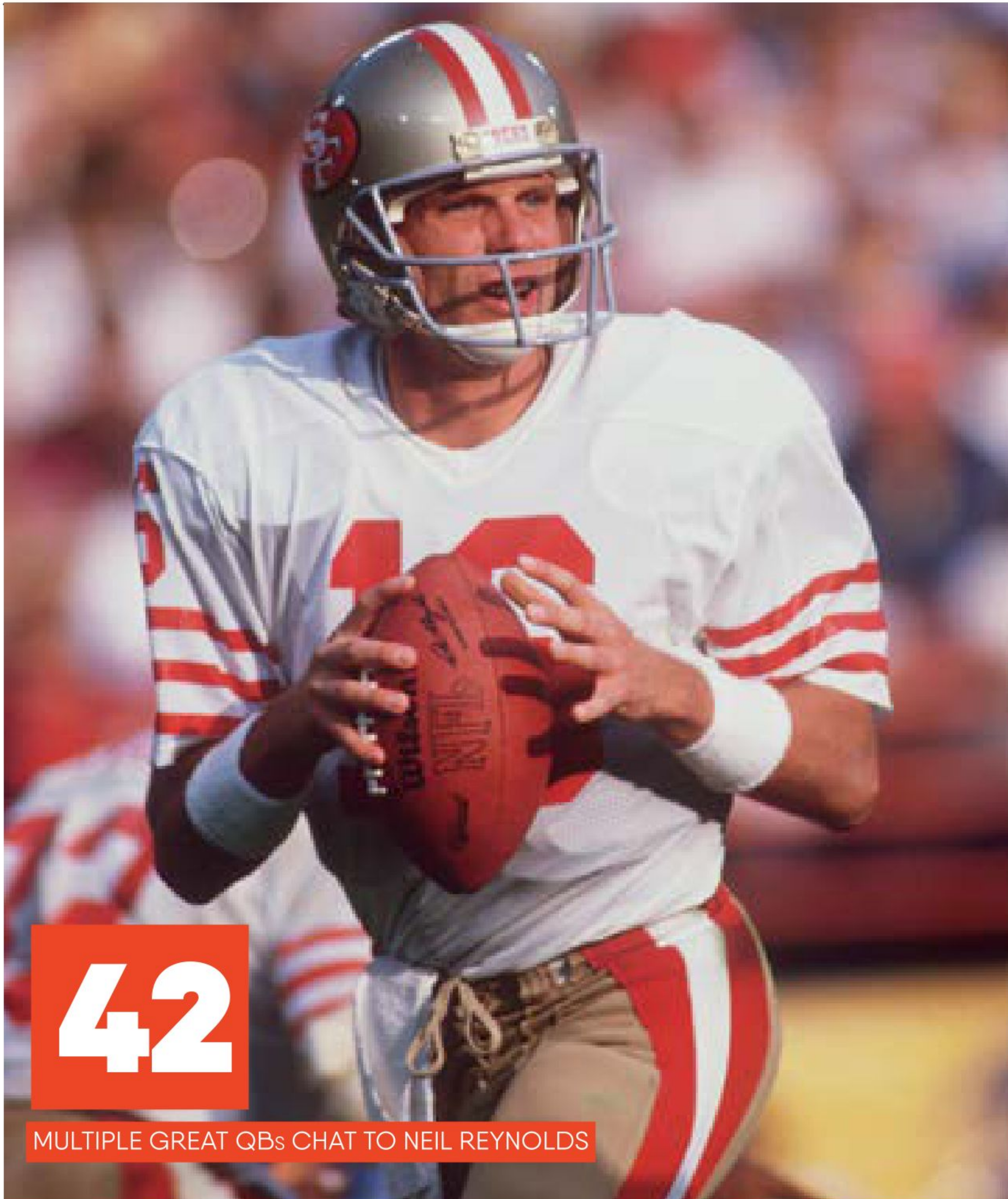
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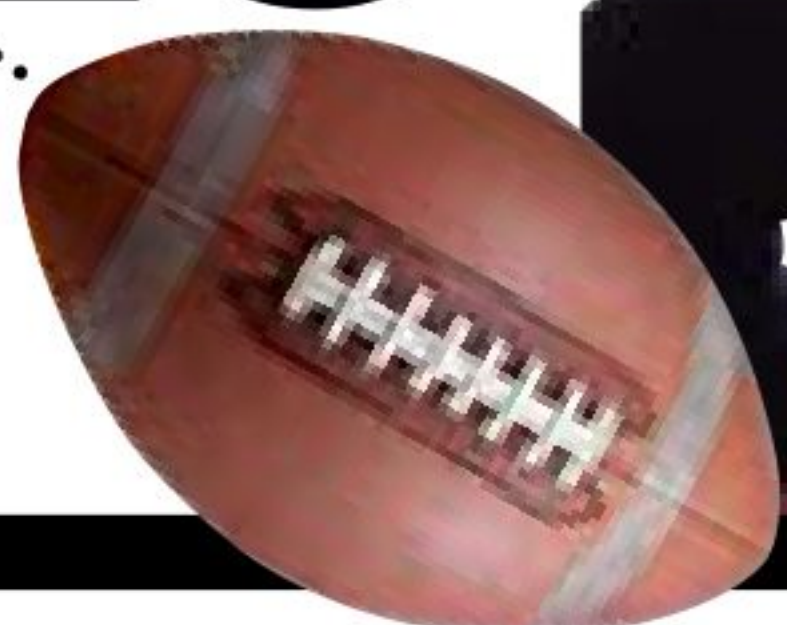
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LACES OUT



Back from covering the Pro Bowl and Super Bowl in Florida, *Gridiron* editor **Matthew Sherry** breaks down Issue LIII.

A LITTLE ON WHAT'S TO COME

→ We need to talk about quarterbacks.

There is a delicious irony, in my mind, that a Super Bowl which delivered the first title for a passer most believe represents the face of the NFL's future precedes an offseason where so many teams are seeking answers at the game's most important position. It feels, in many ways, like a changing of the guard.

While question marks surround veterans who have dominated the conversation in recent decades like Tom Brady, Philip Rivers and, to a lesser extent given he hasn't yet signed a new contract at the point of publication, Drew Brees, the 24-year-old Patrick Mahomes has his first Super Bowl ring. And is surely about to sign a long-term contract to commit his future to the Kansas City Chiefs. In the cases of Brady and Rivers, along with a bunch of other good-to-very-good veterans, the situation differs greatly.

Set against that backdrop is just how many clubs are seeking answers at quarterback. From those in desperate need (the Cincinnati Bengals, Miami Dolphins); to those with free-agent passers (Tennessee Titans, New England Patriots, Dallas Cowboys, Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Los Angeles Chargers); to those who might be unsatisfied with their incumbent (Carolina Panthers, Detroit Lions, Chicago Bears, Las Vegas Raiders, Indianapolis Colts); to those who must start thinking about it sooner rather than later (Green Bay Packers, Pittsburgh Steelers).

With all of that in mind, *Gridiron* decided this was a perfect month to

delve a little deeper. To not only begin to look ahead to the offseason, but explain how we got here. In order to do that, I set Simon Clancy a mission that really began months ago. No word count, no significant brief; just tell me why so many teams find themselves with question marks at the crucial spot. His special report is, as ever, exceptional.

Furthermore, our definitive look at the position also features my piece from Miami, where I thought Mahomes delivered a performance that truly emphasised why there is the desperation for a great signal-caller that becomes evident in Simon's piece; Neil Reynolds collects exclusive nuggets from great and good quarterbacks of now and yesteryear, ranging from Montana to Mahomes; Tom Kislingbury spends exhaustive time building a *Gridiron* QB Model that attempts to analytically break down passers' performances; and Mike Carlson, in a really fun article, looks back at the greatest quarterbacks in the history of every team in the NFL.

It is, I think, a whole section to be truly proud of – and I hope you enjoy reading it as much as we did putting it together.

MY PICK

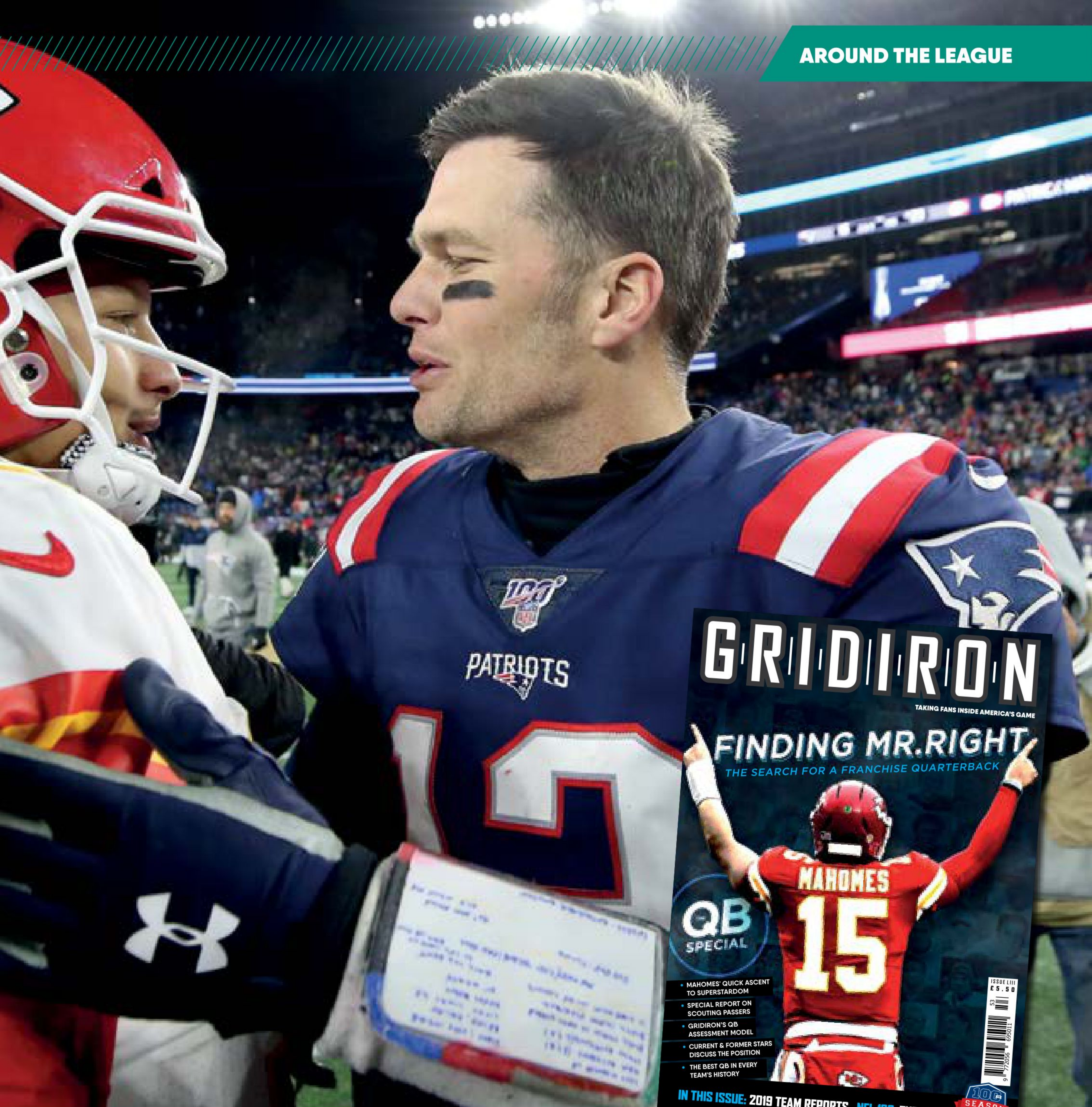
→ Outside of everything mentioned above, I'd point you to an exclusive with one of the nicest people I've met in this business. Hall-of-Fame head coach Tony Dungy was incredibly generous with his time when we spoke for *Gridiron* and my forthcoming book *Any Given Sunday*, which is out August this year. He is a gamechanger in



the truest sense and has enjoyed a stunning, multi-faceted football life.

IN THE NEWS

→ I continue to watch the Collective Bargaining Agreement negotiations with great interest. My view over recent years has been that these would be some of the tensest negotiations in years and that we might endure another lockout, so it's great to see progress being made towards a deal that might well be penned at the point you read this. If



it is, rest assured we'll break it down in-depth next month.

Overall, I'm broadly in favour of the bigger parts, admittedly from a selfish perspective. The 17th game could be enormous news for fans on this side of the pond who'd be unwilling to switch allegiances from their team to any London-based franchise and opens the possibility to a potential 'season' slate of eight games here without a relocation. Our research previously has suggested that is most people's preference and, as outlined in my report earlier this

year, I do think that's where Park Avenue are leaning now too.

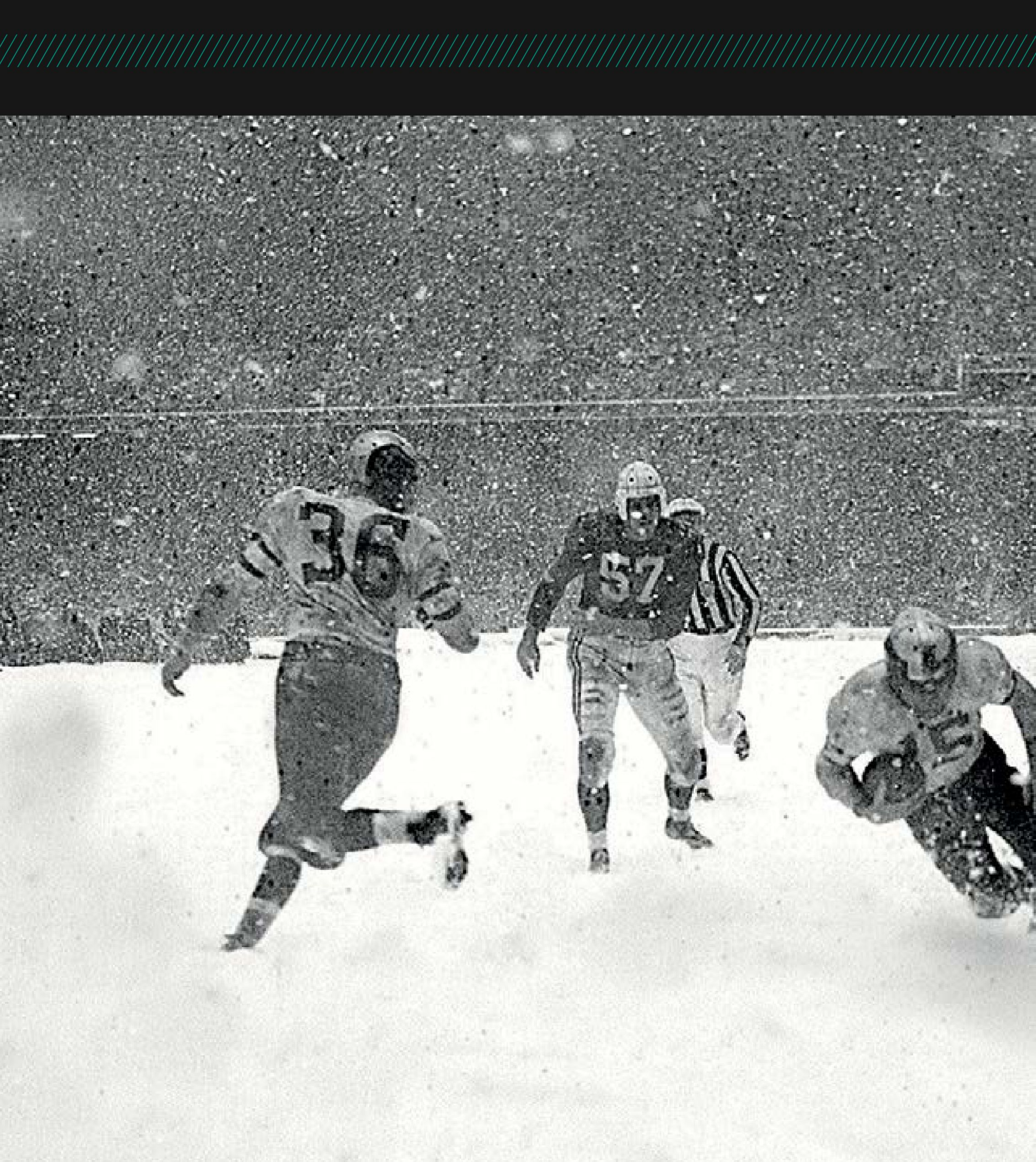
As for the expanded playoffs, I can see the dilution argument – but also that the current system has previously left out deserving teams. I can think of at least two 11-win teams who haven't made the playoffs in recent memory and, based on the last few seasons, the 'extra' clubs would all have had at least nine wins. Plus, who doesn't want a wildcard weekend with six, rather than four, contests?

Here's to peace!

FINAL THOUGHT...

Another season comes and goes. That's now seven we've covered as *Gridiron* and I can honestly say we're loving it. I cannot wait to unveil our latest plans in the coming weeks, particularly surrounding our podcast network, so please stay with us on all channels as we begin to reveal more on those.

Oh, and we'll have our draft bonanza on your doormats before you know it too. **G**



MOMENT IN TIME

Running back Steve Van Buren crosses paydirt in the snow for the only score as the Philadelphia Eagles overcome the Chicago Cardinals 7-0 in the 1948 NFL Championship Game. Van Buren, a Hall of Famer, was recently named among the NFL's 100 greatest players. [G](#)



Gridiron Times

> FIVE STORIES OF THE MONTH <

5 | ONE, TUA, THREE

With Super Bowl LIV now in the rear view, attention will turn to next season and the new crop of young talent that NFL teams hope will turn them into contenders.

Despite Ohio State DE Chase Young being widely acknowledged as the best player to have declared his draft intentions, quarterbacks will certainly garner most of the attention, with LSU's Heisman Trophy winner Joe Burrow heading a talented group that also includes Justin Herbert (Oregon), Jordan Love (Utah State), Jake Fromm (Georgia), Jacob Eason (Washington) and one Tua Tagovailoa (Alabama), whose final season was derailed by a dislocated hip.

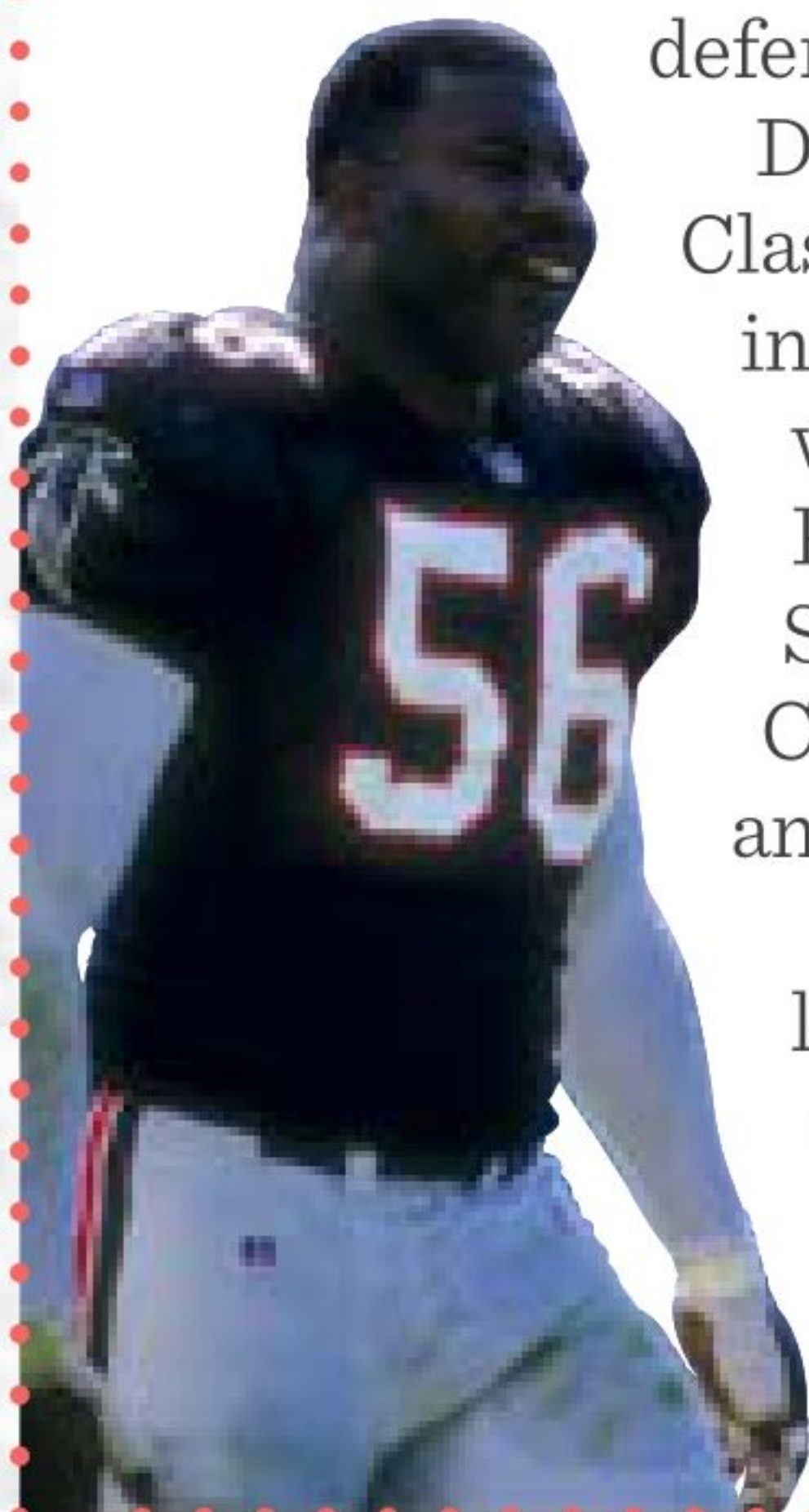
Tua has long been seen as a target for the Miami Dolphins, but the team's late-season surge may require them to spend a chunk of the draft capital they acquired during their 2019 yard sale. Picking first overall, the Cincinnati Bengals are naturally being tipped to take Burrow and, with second-placed Washington

linked to Young, the Detroit Lions could find themselves in prime position to do a deal with anyone looking to move up the order for a QB.

4 | CHRIS DOLEMAN (1961-2020) WILLIE WOOD (1936-2020)

Just four weeks after the passing of Sam Wyche darkened wildcard weekend, the 54th Super Bowl was bookended by sobriety following the deaths of former Minnesota Vikings DE Chris Doleman and Green Bay Packers safety Willie Wood.

Doleman lost a two-year battle with brain cancer on the Tuesday of Super Bowl week. He was just 58, but had previously starred in Minnesota for a decade, as part of a 15-year NFL calling that also took him to Atlanta and San Francisco. He was named to eight Pro Bowls, and amassed 150.5 sacks, eight interceptions and 24 fumble recoveries in his career, adding three defensive touchdowns for good measure.



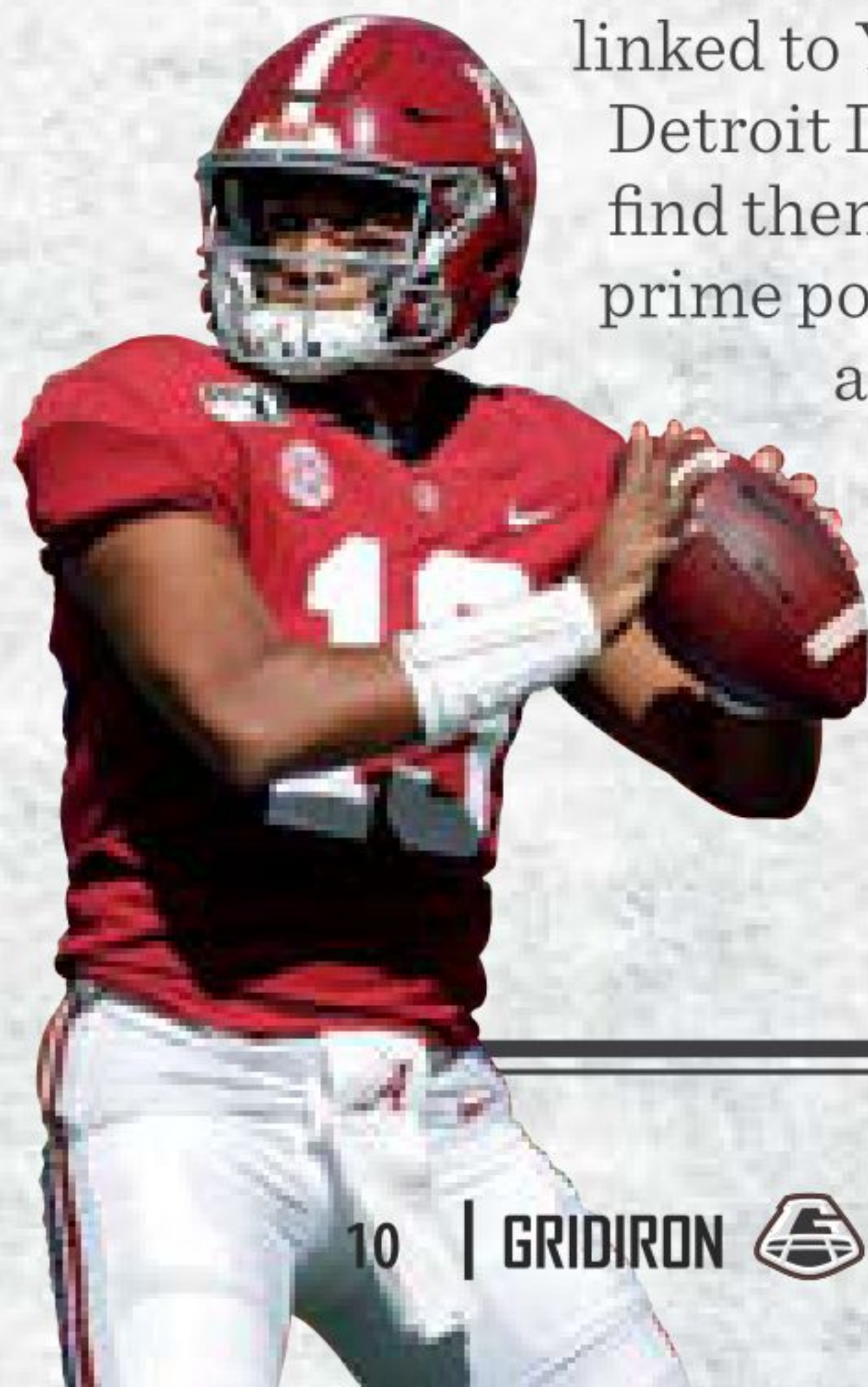
Doleman was inducted to the Hall of Fame as part of the Class of 2012, joining Wood among the best defensive players in league history. Similarly an eight-time Pro Bowler, Wood was a starter on all five of Vince Lombardi's title-winning Packers teams, and played a key role in each of the first two Super Bowls. The first African-American QB in Pacific Coast Conference history, Wood was inducted into Canton in 1989 and part of the NFL's All-Decade team of the 1960s.

The world was already mourning the loss of NBA legend Kobe Bryant, his 13-year old daughter and seven others in a helicopter crash. The Super Bowl honoured those victims and Doleman prior to kickoff, the Chiefs and 49ers lining up on their 24-yard lines, reflecting Bryant's jersey number, for a moment of silence.

3 | AWARDS AND HALL

The night before Super Bowl LIV saw the final addition of names to the specially-expanded Pro Football Hall of Fame Centennial Class, as well as the winners of the NFL's annual awards:

INDUCTEE	POSITION	TEAM(S)	CATEGORY
STEVE ATWATER	SAFETY	 (1989-98)  (1999)	MODERN ERA
ISAAC BRUCE	WIDE RECEIVER	 (1994-2007)  (2008-09)	MODERN ERA
STEVE HUTCHINSON	GUARD	 (2001-05)  (2006-11)  (2012)	MODERN ERA
EDGERRIN JAMES	RUNNING BACK	 (1999-2005)  (2006-08)  (2009)	MODERN ERA
TROY POLAMALU	SAFETY	 (2003-14)	MODERN ERA



NFL HONOURS 2019		
MOST VALUABLE PLAYER	LAMAR JACKSON	
COACH OF THE YEAR	JOHN HARBAUGH	
WALTER PAYTON MAN OF THE YEAR	CALAIS CAMPBELL	
COMEBACK PLAYER OF THE YEAR	RYAN TANNEHILL	
OFFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR	MICHAEL THOMAS	
DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR	STEPHON GILMORE	
OFFENSIVE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR	KYLER MURRAY	
DEFENSIVE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR	NICK BOSA	
UNSTOPPABLE PERFORMANCE OF THE YEAR	PATRICK MAHOMES	
ANYTHING BUT ORDINARY PLAYER OF THE YEAR	LARRY FITZGERALD	
CLUTCH PERFORMANCE PLAY OF THE YEAR	PUNTER-TO-KICKER TD	
TOUCHDOWN CELEBRATION OF THE YEAR	'BYE BYE BYE'	
FANTASY FOOTBALL PLAYER OF THE YEAR	CHRISTIAN M'CAFFREY	

2 | XFL - RATED

While we wave goodbye to NFL games for the next six months, football isn't over as the XFL 2.0 attempts to succeed where its erstwhile rival, the Alliance of American Football, failed by reintroducing the concept of the Spring League.

Vince McMahon's latest try at creating a complementary piece to the NFL kicked off on the weekend immediately following Super Bowl LIV, with its eight teams having finally revealed their nicknames, logos and colours in August 2019, and staged a multi-tiered draft process in mid-October. The league's championship match is scheduled for April 26 after 10 regular season games and two weeks of playoff games.

XFL EAST				
TEAM	HEAD COACH	COLOURS	STADIUM	NOTABLE PLAYERS
	PEP HAMILTON	RED/WHITE	AUDI FIELD	TYREE JACKSON (QB) CARDALE JONES (QB) ELI ROGERS (WR) MATT ELAM (S)
	KEVIN GILBRIDE	BLACK/GREY/RED	METLIFE STADIUM	MATT MCGLOIN (QB) NICK DELUCA (LB) TOMMY BOHANON (FB) CYRUS KOUANDIJO (OT)
	JONATHAN HAYES	ROYAL/GREY/NAVY	THE DOME AT AMERICA'S CENTER	TAYLOR HEINICKE (QB) CHRISTINE MICHAEL (RB) WILL HILL (S) MARQUETTE KING (P)
	MARC TRESTMAN	GREEN/GOLD/WHITE	RAYMOND JAMES STADIUM	AARON MURRAY (QB) CHASE LITTON (QB) ANTONIO CALLAWAY (WR) OBUM GWACHUM (DE)
XFL WEST				
	BOB STOOPS	BLACK/LIGHT BLUE/RED	GLOBE LIFE PARK	LANDRY JONES (QB) LANCE DUNBAR (RB) CAMERON ARTIS-PAYNE (RB) TRESTON DECOUD (CB)
	JUNE JONES	RED/NAVY/GREY	TDECU STADIUM	CONNOR COOK (QB) SAMMIE COATES (WR) KONY EALY (DE) MARQUESTON HUFF (S)
	WINSTON MOSS	BLACK/RED/ORANGE	DIGNITY HEALTH SPORTS PARK	JOSH JOHNSON (QB) TRE MCBRIDE (WR) SHAWN OAKMAN (DE) NICK NOVAK (K)
	JIM ZORN	NAVY/GREEN/ORANGE	CENTURYLINK FIELD	KEENAN REYNOLDS (WR) ISAIAH BATTLE (T) WILL SUTTON (DT) JACE AMARO (TE)



1 JAGUARS

DOUBLE DOWN



The NFL's annual international slate is beginning to take shape, with the five games – four in London and one in Mexico City – already known to be featuring the Atlanta Falcons and Miami Dolphins among the 'home' teams.

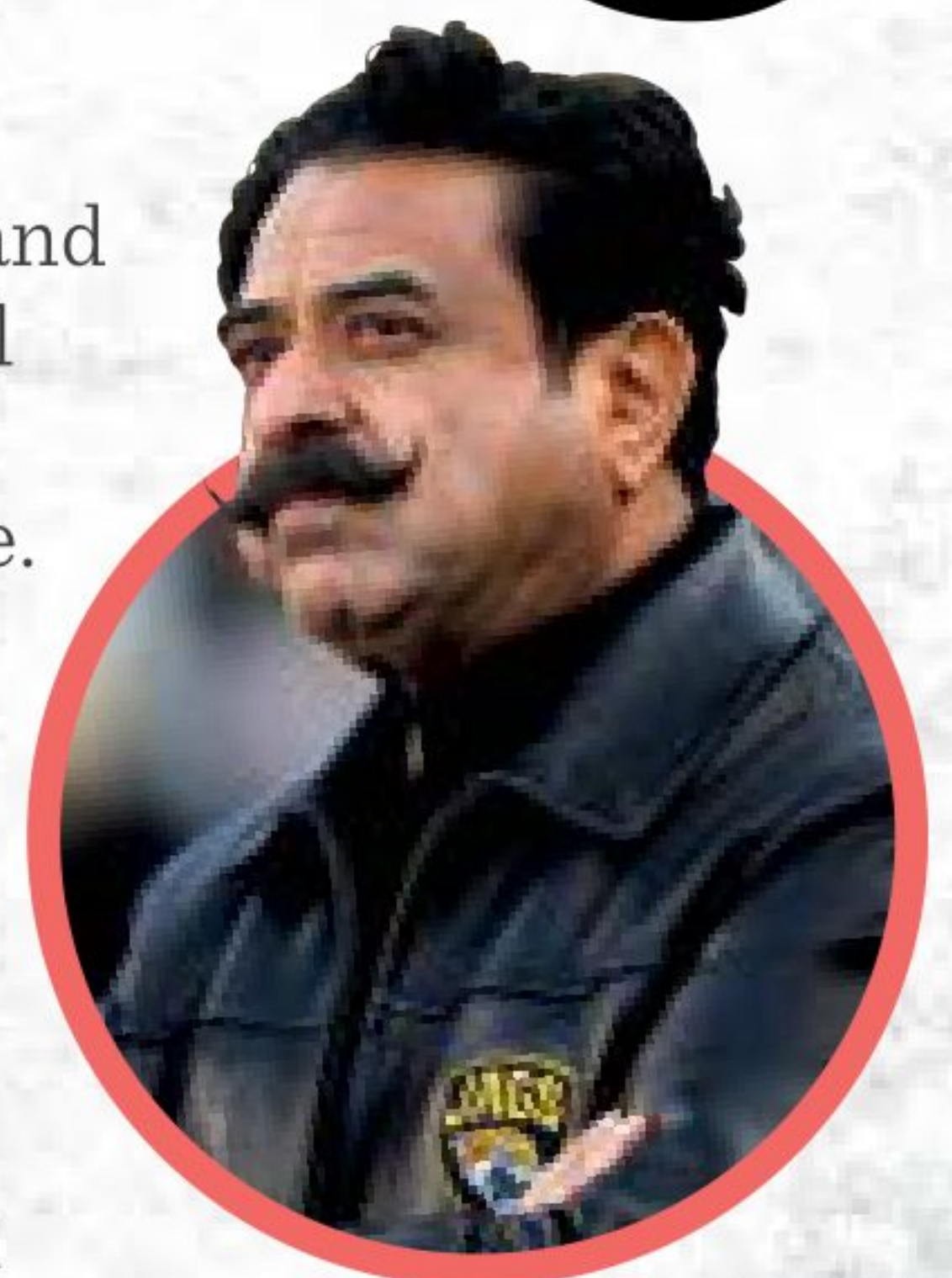
A bigger revelation emerged in the wake of Super Bowl LIV, however, when it was announced that UK fan favourite the Jacksonville Jaguars would be playing two games back-to-back, the first instance of a team staying on in London for more

than a single outing.

Jaguars owner Shahid Khan, *pictured*, says that the move to double down in 2020 is not only designed to deepen the Jaguars' relationship with the game's UK fanbase, but also to remain financially competitive in a rapidly evolving NFL, as the franchise looks to develop the area around TIAA Bank Field to boost non-football revenue streams. Team president Mark Lamping confirmed that the marquee matchups with

Pittsburgh and Chicago will be played in Jacksonville.

The 2020 season marks the end of Wembley's current deal to host NFL games, as well as the Jaguars' own commitment to London, but look for that to be extended...





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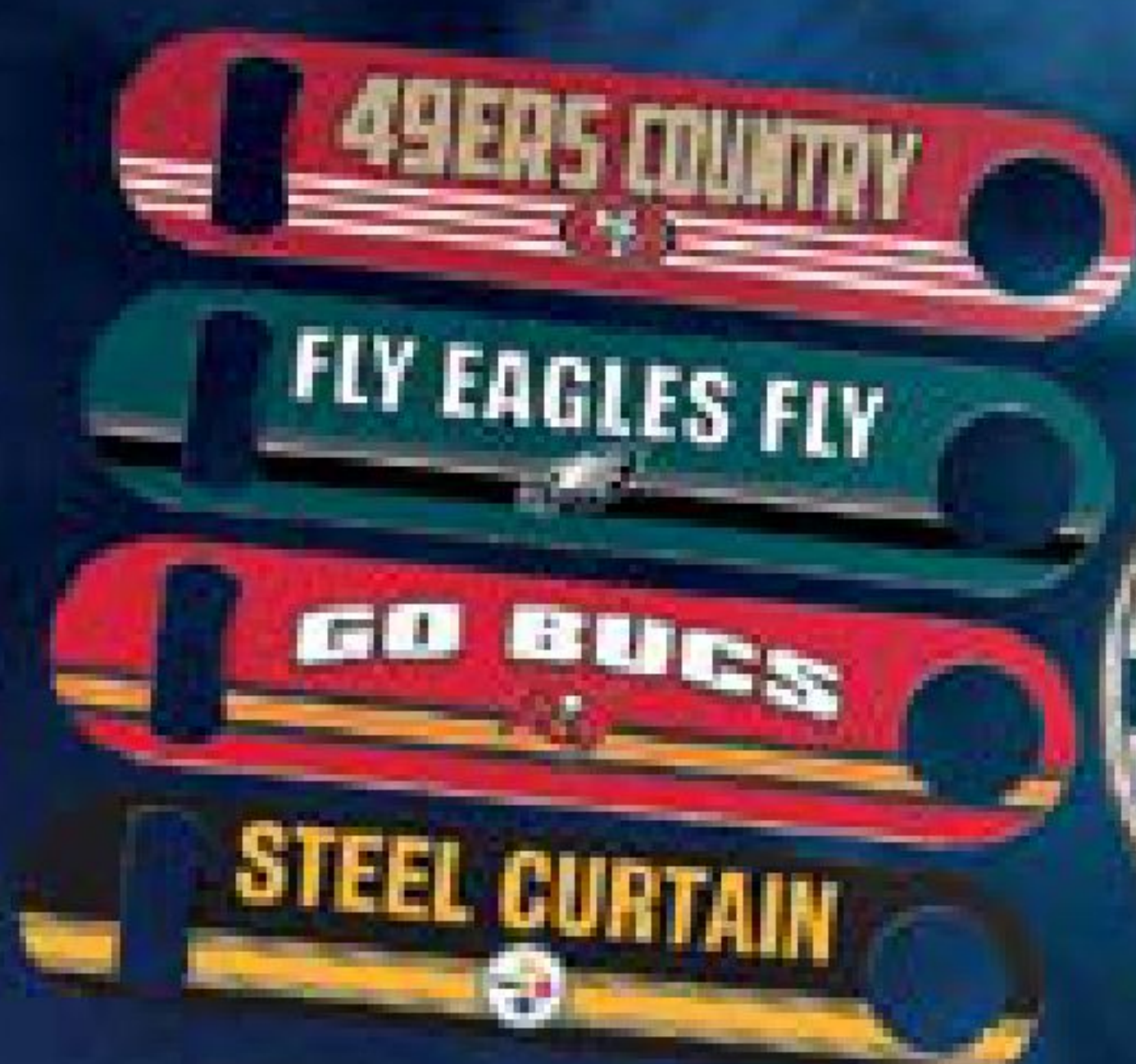


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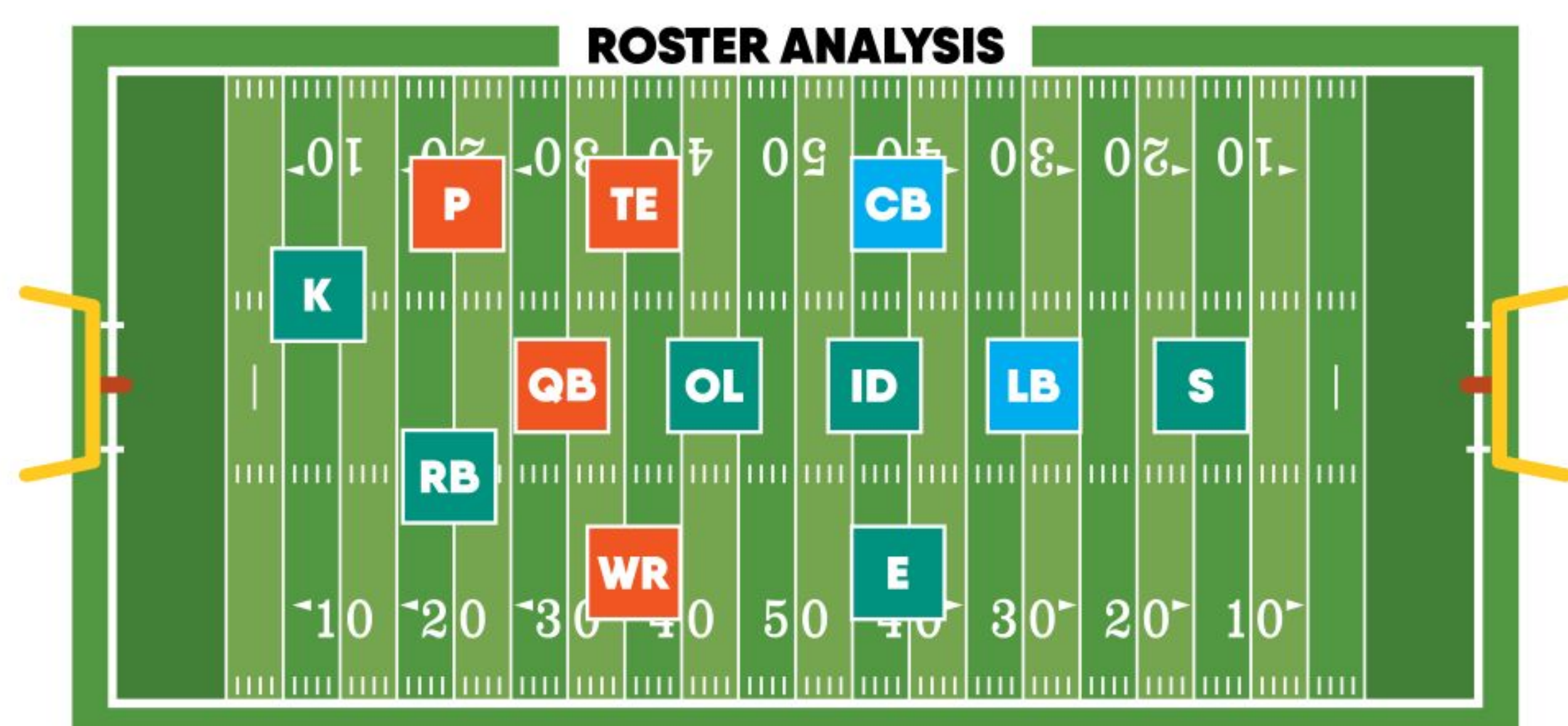
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AFC EAST

BUFFALO **BILLS**

RECORD: (10-6)

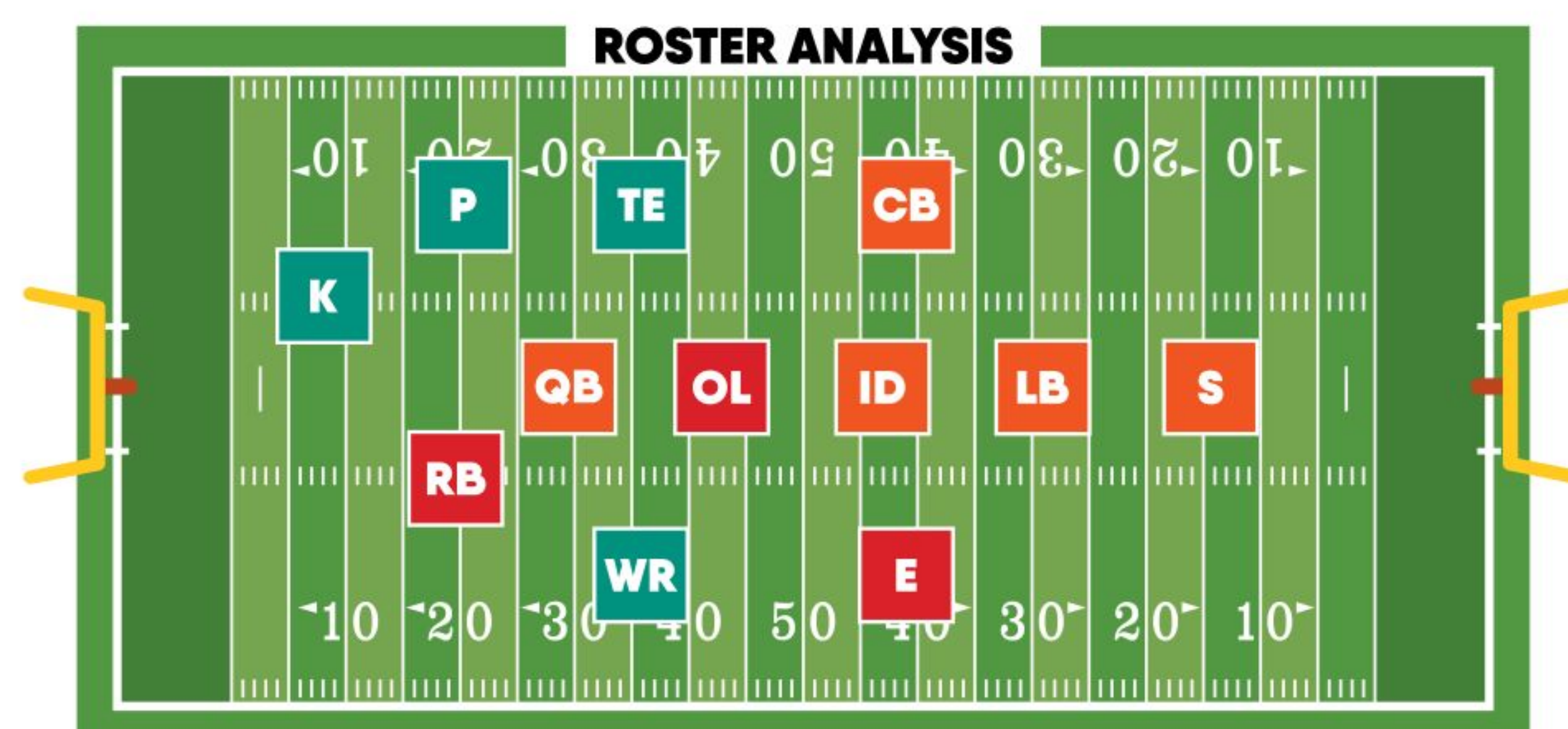
SEASON GRADE: **B+**

THE SKINNY: A stout defense and excellent coaching saw the Bills reach 10 wins for the first time this millennium. They were one-and-done in the postseason after falling victim to Deshaun Watson.

BURNING QUESTION: CAN JOSH ALLEN FIND CONSISTENCY? Allen made strides in his second year (3,089 passing yards, 20 touchdowns and just nine interceptions), but the playoff loss to the Houston Texans showed he remains a wildcard capable of maddening decisions.

MIAMI **DOLPHINS**

RECORD: (5-11)

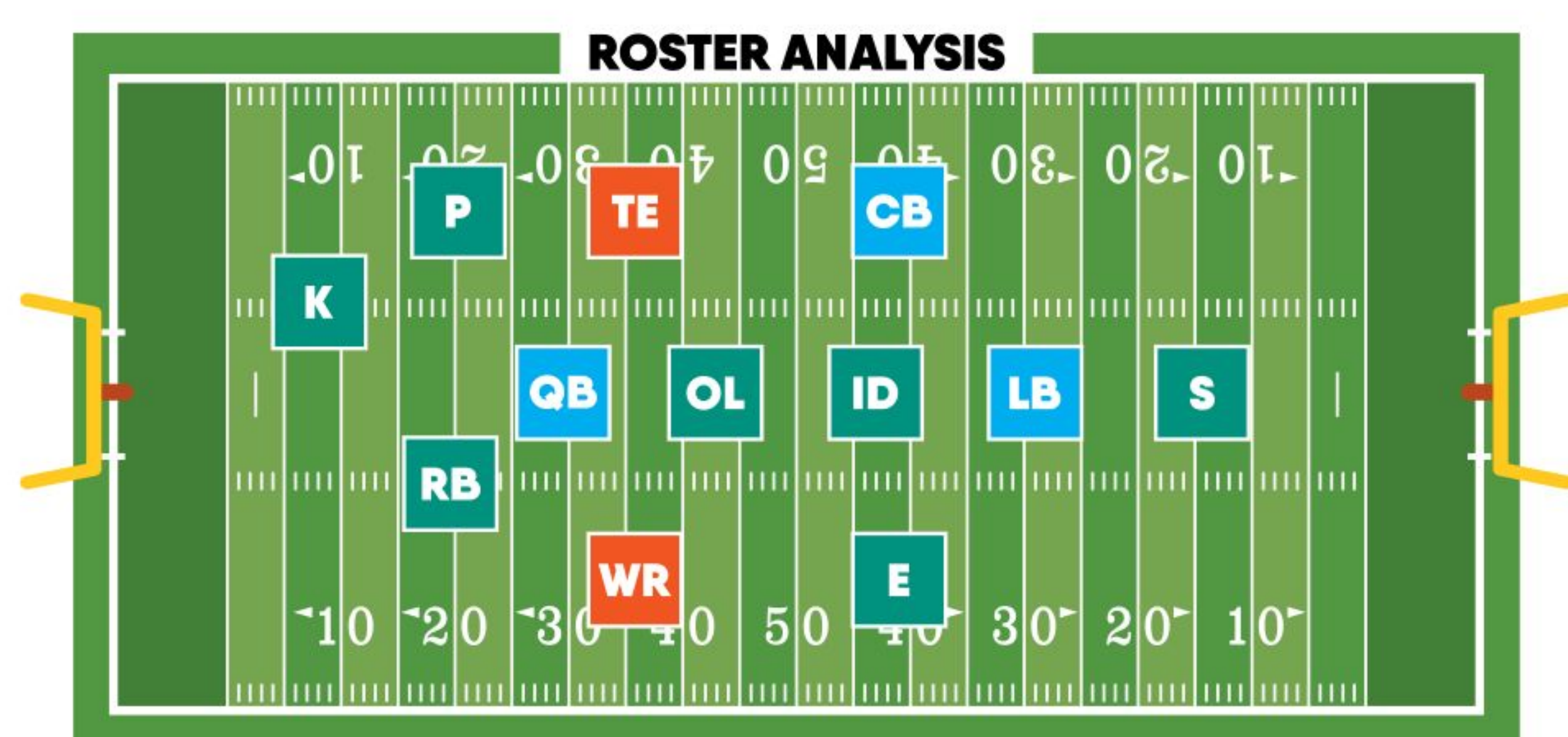
SEASON GRADE: **B**

THE SKINNY: Expected to be the worst team in football after gutting their roster, but rookie head coach Brian Flores actually won plaudits for performing admirably with a less-than-stellar cast.

BURNING QUESTION: WILL THEIR AGGRESSIVE REBUILD PAY DIVIDENDS? Miami's motives were obvious when they jettisoned Minkah Fitzpatrick, Laremy Tunsil and Kenny Stills for draft capital. If they hit on those picks, particularly at quarterback, the Dolphins could become relevant.

NEW ENGLAND **PATRIOTS**

RECORD: (12-4)

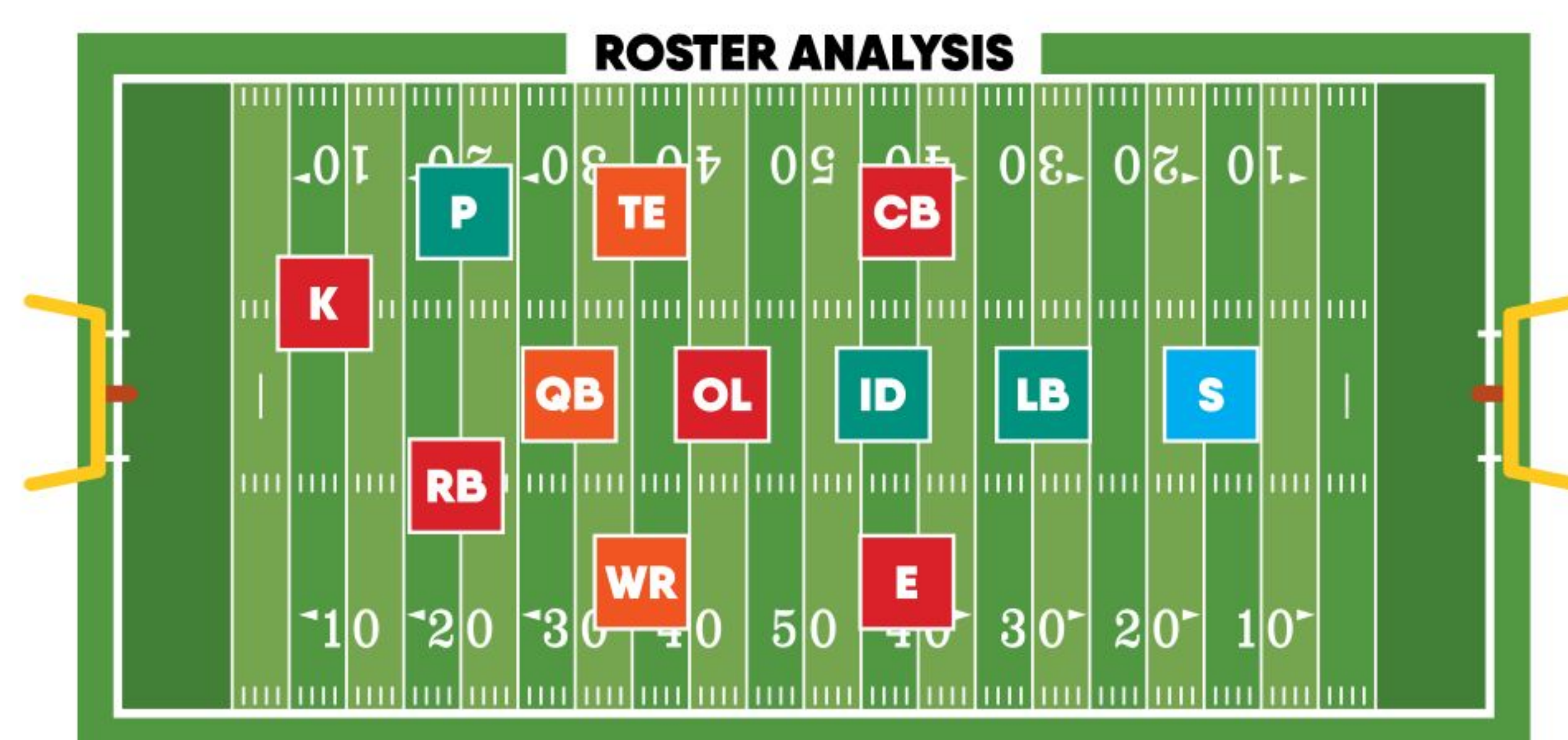
SEASON GRADE: **B**

THE SKINNY: There was another season of double-digit wins and a divisional title, but they only merit a 'B' grade having gone one-and-done in the playoffs after three straight Super Bowl appearances.

BURNING QUESTION: CAN THE OFFENSE BE FIXED? The big question, of course, is whether Tom Brady returns. Yet, with or without him, New England's running game must improve and they need a consistent, reliable target at receiver not named Julian Edelman.

NEW YORK **JETS**

RECORD: (7-9)

SEASON GRADE: **B-**

THE SKINNY: Recovered after a 1-7 start to salvage some pride in Adam Gase's first season. However, Sam Darnold's mono, C.J. Mosley's injury and Le'Veon Bell's underwhelming play meant the year was poor.

BURNING QUESTION: CAN GM JOE DOUGLAS FIX THE OFFENSIVE LINE? Paltry numbers on offense reflect badly on Gase, whose expertise is supposed to be that side of the ball. His future – and Darnold's development – likely hinge on whether an O-line revamp works.

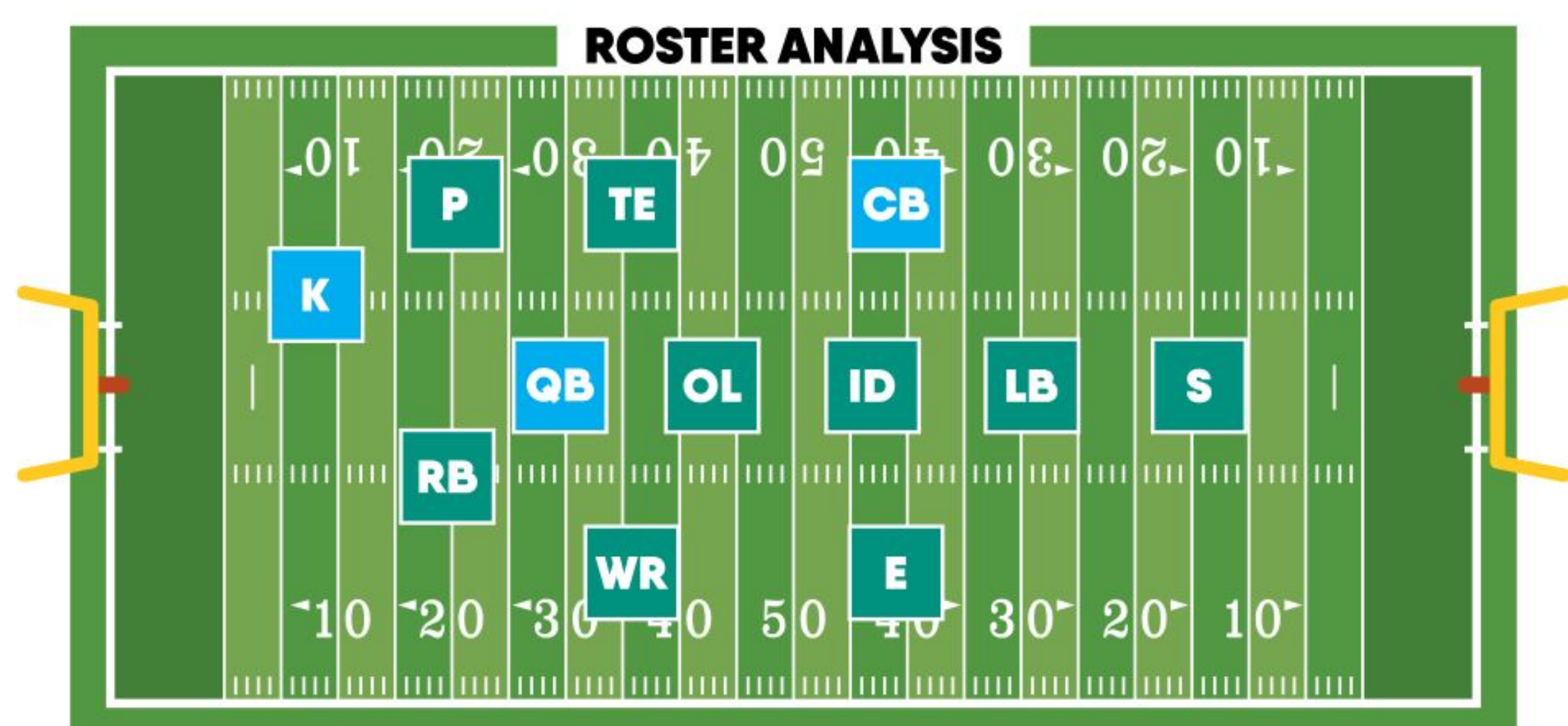
AFC NORTH

BALTIMORE **RAVENS**

RECORD: (14-2)



SEASON GRADE: **A**



THE SKINNY: Lamar Jackson's MVP campaign and an unstoppable offense propelled the Ravens to the postseason. An inspired display from the Tennessee Titans meant they fell at the divisional round.

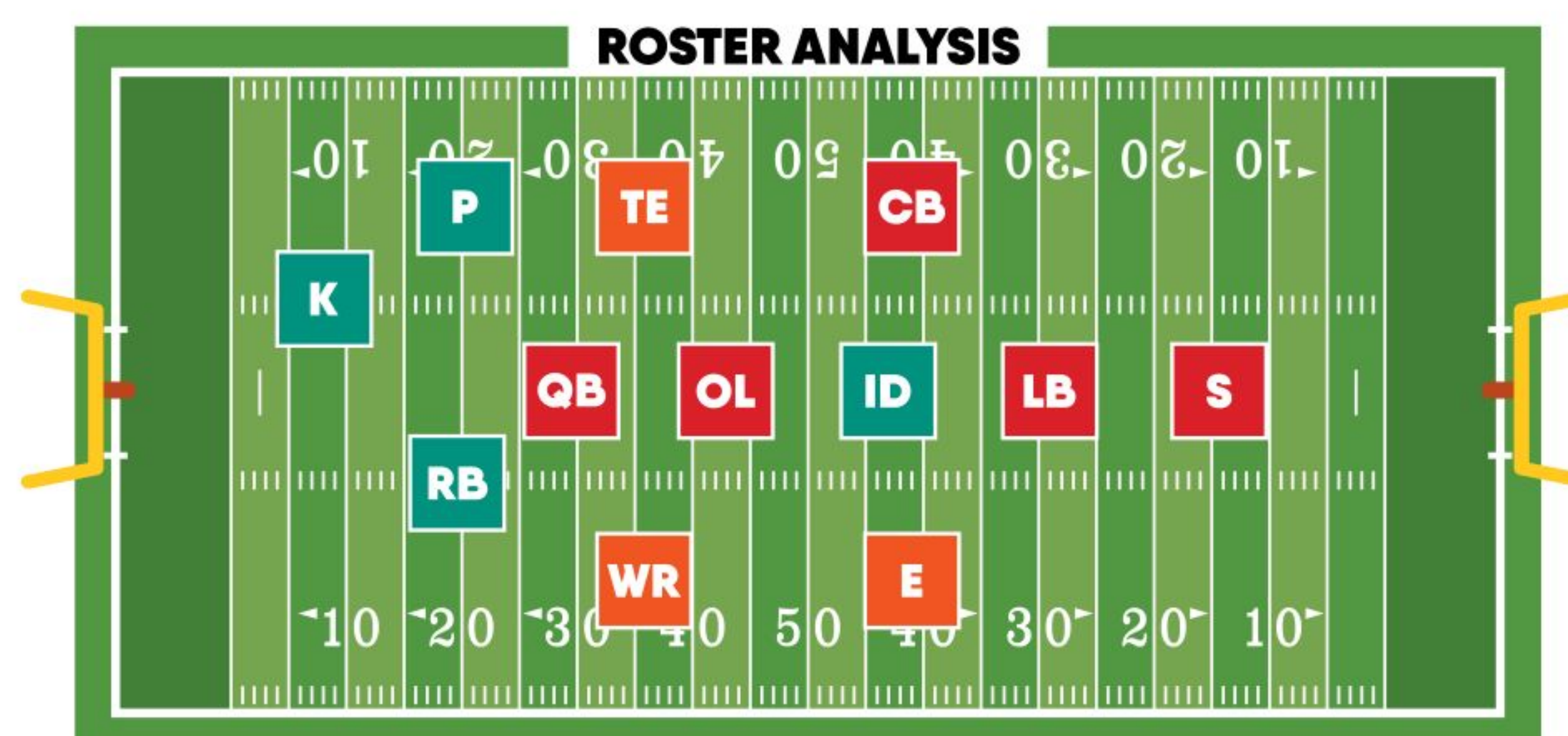
BURNING QUESTION: CAN THEY TAKE THE NEXT STEP? Most of the roster will return and coordinators Greg Roman and Wink Martindale weren't poached for head-coaching roles. Baltimore appear primed for a Super Bowl run, provided they can win in January.

CINCINNATI **BENGALS**

RECORD: (2-14)



SEASON GRADE: **D**



THE SKINNY: Need to wipe the slate clean after having the NFL's worst record. Cincy were without their best player (A.J. Green) the entire year, only got Joe Mixon going late and benched Andy Dalton.

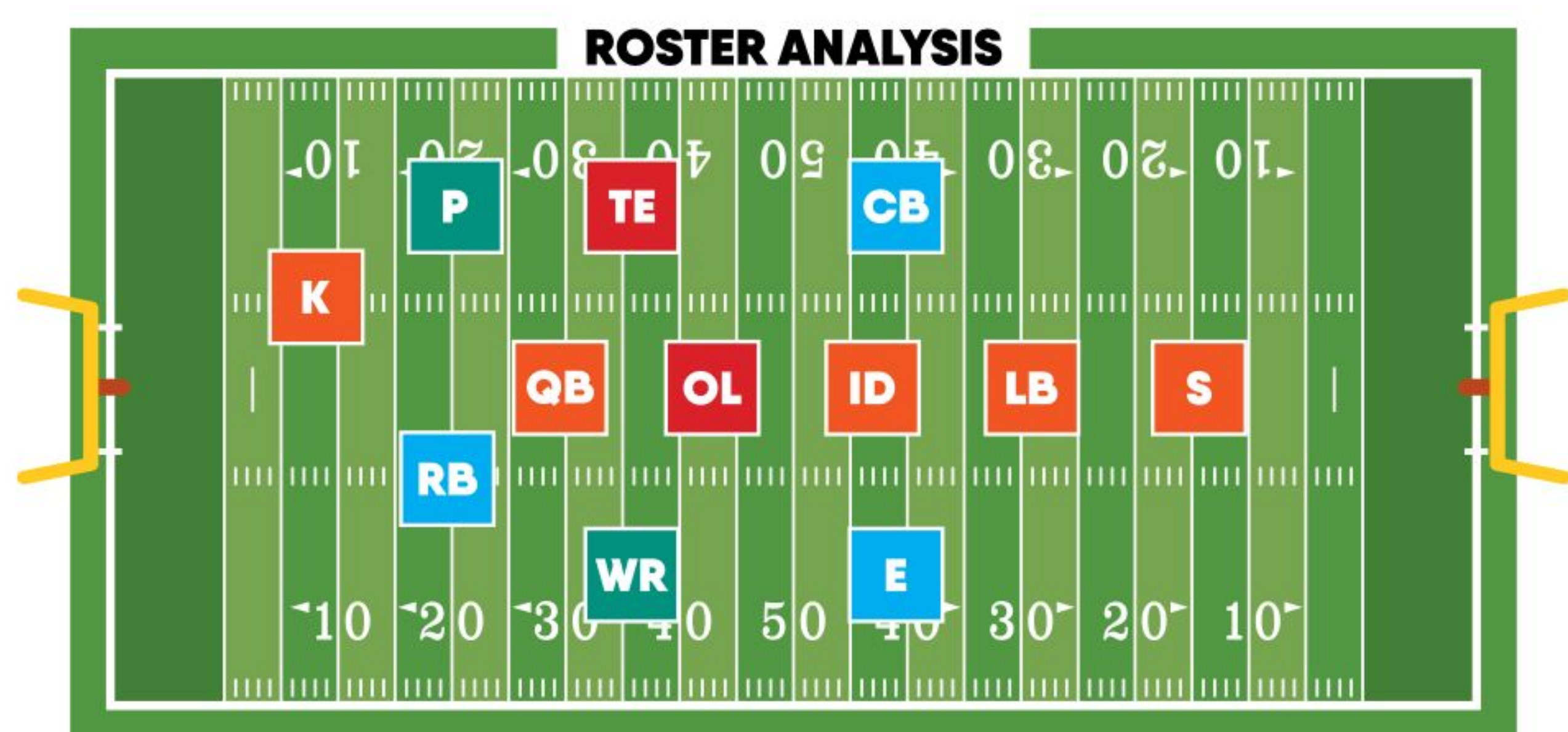
BURNING QUESTION: IS JOE BURROW THE SAVIOUR? The flip of such a dire campaign is the first overall pick, which logic would suggest the Bengals will spend on Ohioan Burrow. The next decade depends on whether Burrow is the real deal or not.

CLEVELAND **BROWNS**

RECORD: (6-10)



SEASON GRADE: **C**



THE SKINNY: Oodles of preseason optimism surrounded the Browns. We should have known better. Perplexing gameplans, a dire O-line and Myles Garrett's suspension made it a campaign to forget.

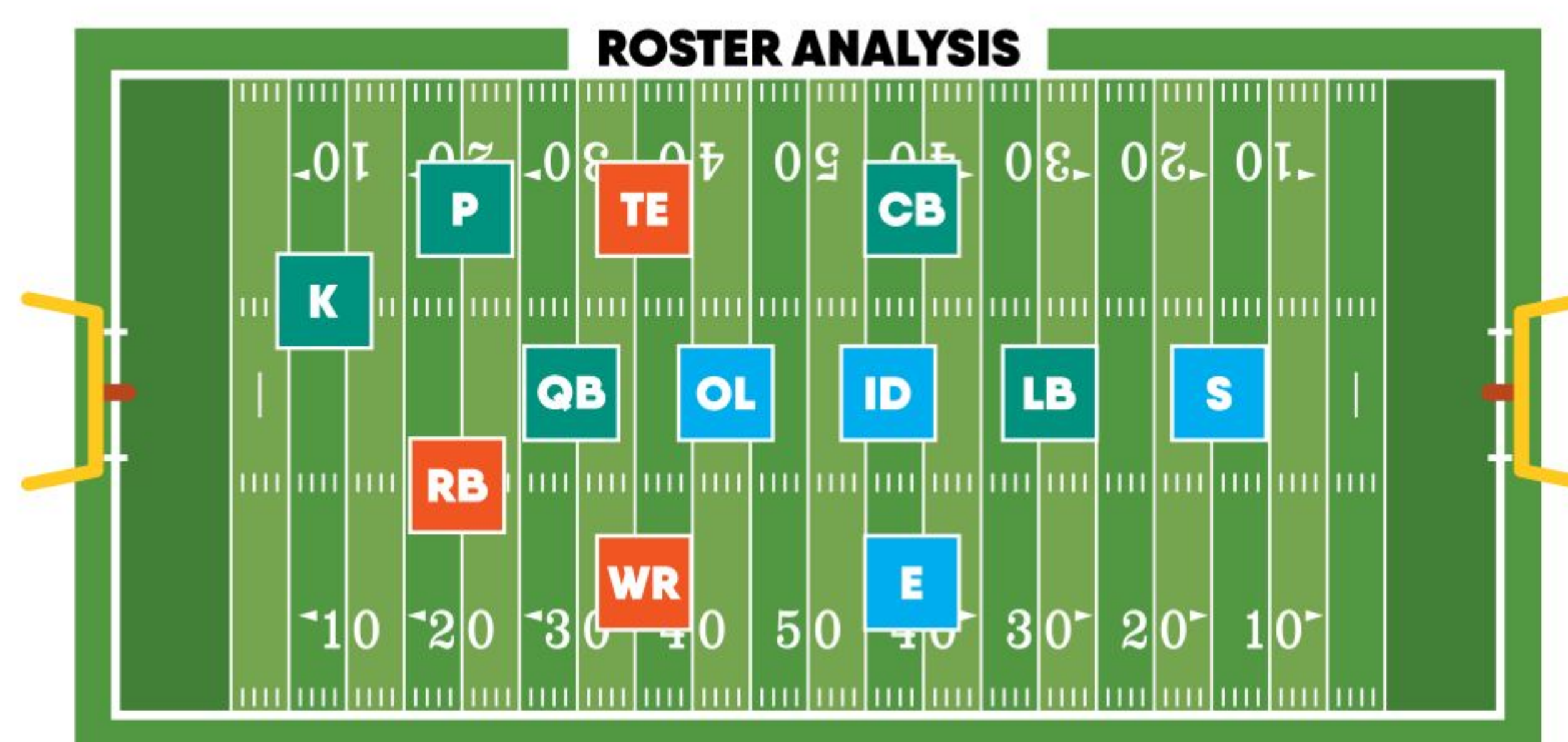
BURNING QUESTION: WILL PAUL DEPODESTA'S INFLUENCE HELP OR HINDER IN 2020? New head coach Kevin Stefanski has a roster stacked with talent, but must make it work on the gridiron. The effect of *Moneyball* disciple DePodesta's growing influence at Browns HQ will be fascinating to watch.

PITTSBURGH **STEELERS**

RECORD: (8-8)



SEASON GRADE: **B**



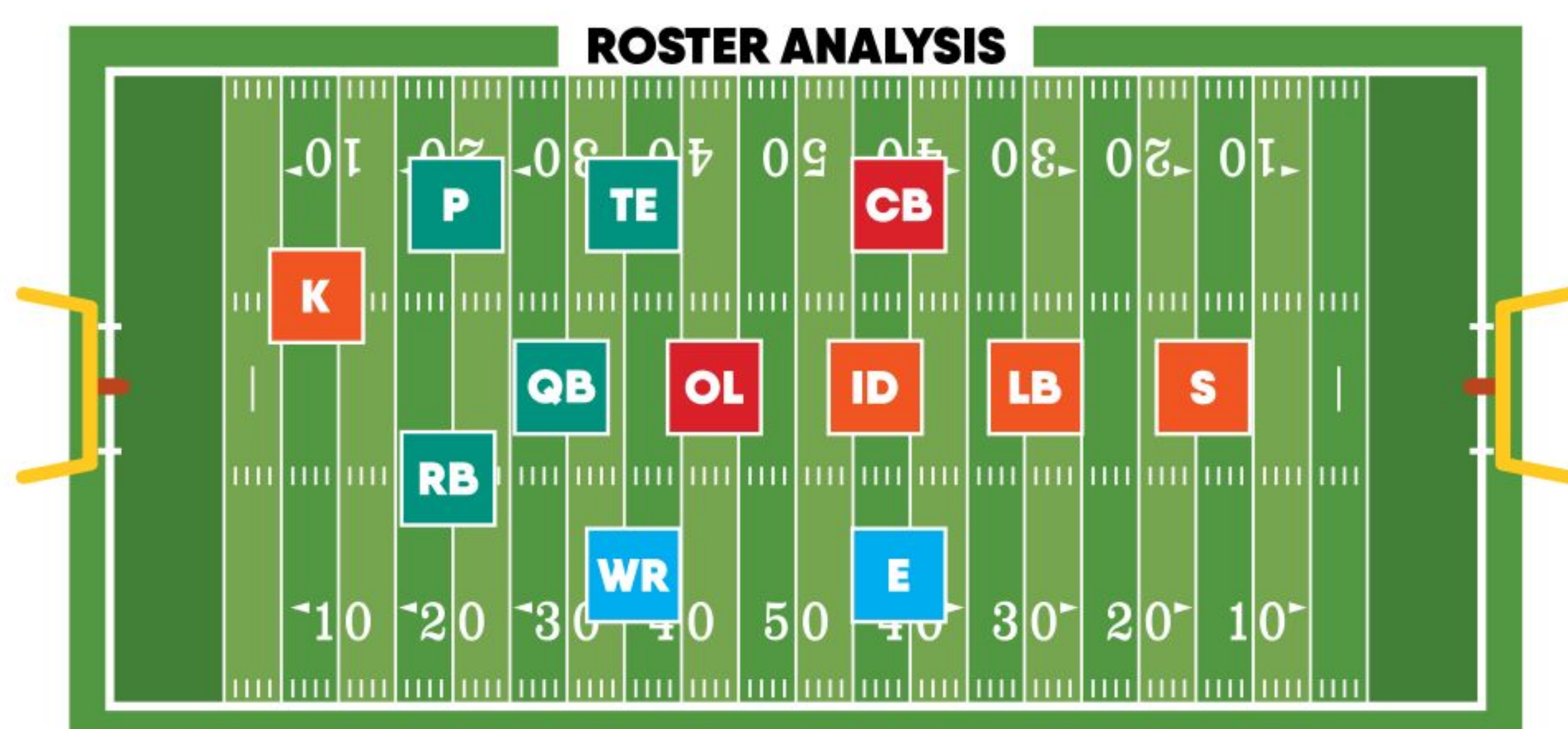
THE SKINNY: Two of the Three Killer Bs went in the offseason and the other, Ben Roethlisberger, went down in Week 2. That they went .500 and flirted with the playoffs owed much to their D.

BURNING QUESTION: WHAT SHAPE WILL ROETHLISBERGER BE IN WHEN HE RETURNS? Mason Rudolph and Devlin Hodges clearly aren't the answer and the Steelers need a contingency plan if Roethlisberger, who turns 38 this year, struggles when he returns from elbow surgery.

AFC SOUTH

HOUSTON **TEXANS**

RECORD: (10-6)

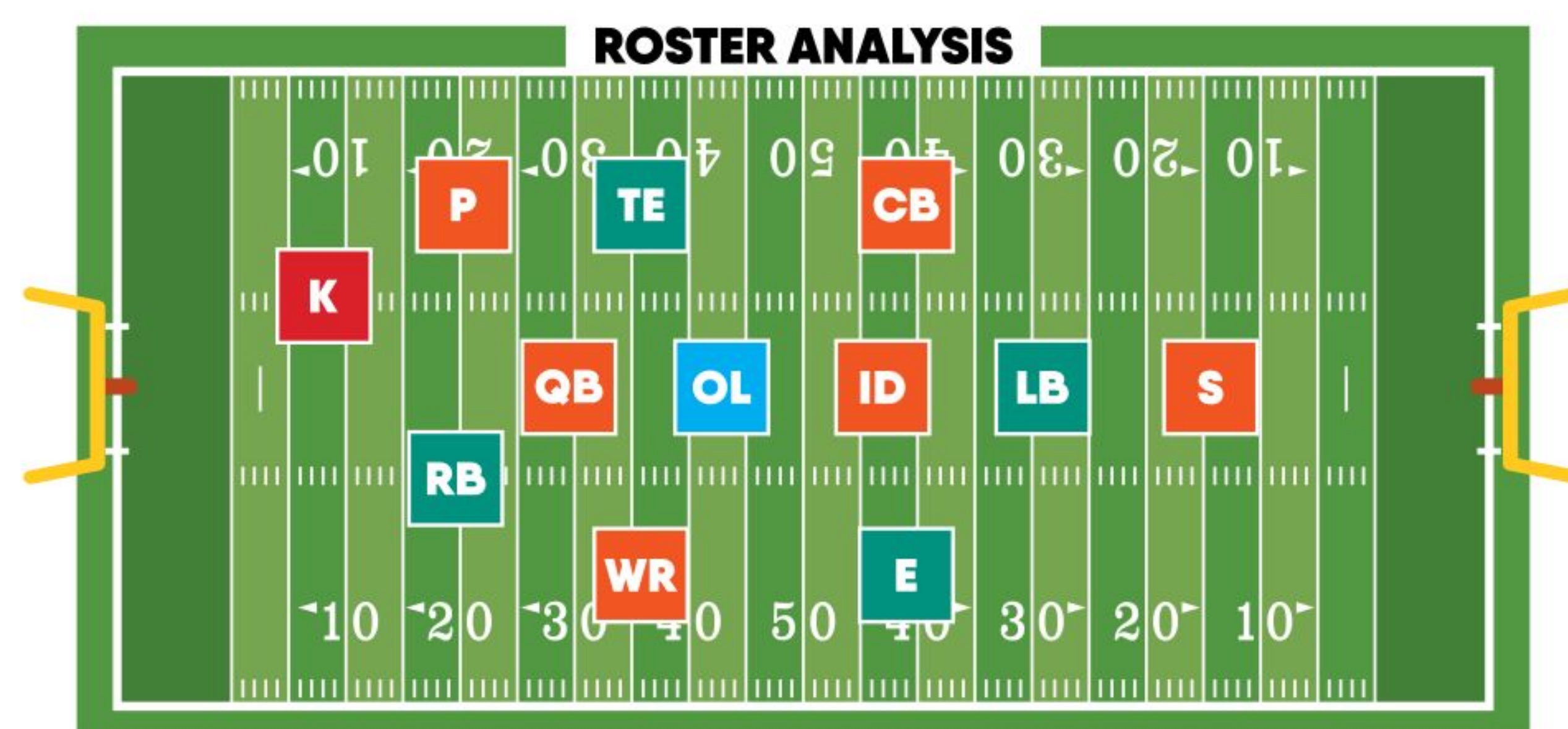
SEASON GRADE: **B+**

THE SKINNY: Won back-to-back AFC South titles – no mean feat – but once again failed to go far in the playoffs. A talented team still needing to take the next step.

BURNING QUESTION: CAN THEY RESOLVE THEIR FRONT-OFFICE ISSUES? Bill O'Brien continues to gain more power in H-Town but the Texans, without a first-round draft pick for the next two years, need someone who can work alongside the head coach and tinker with the roster.

INDIANAPOLIS **COLTS**

RECORD: (7-9)

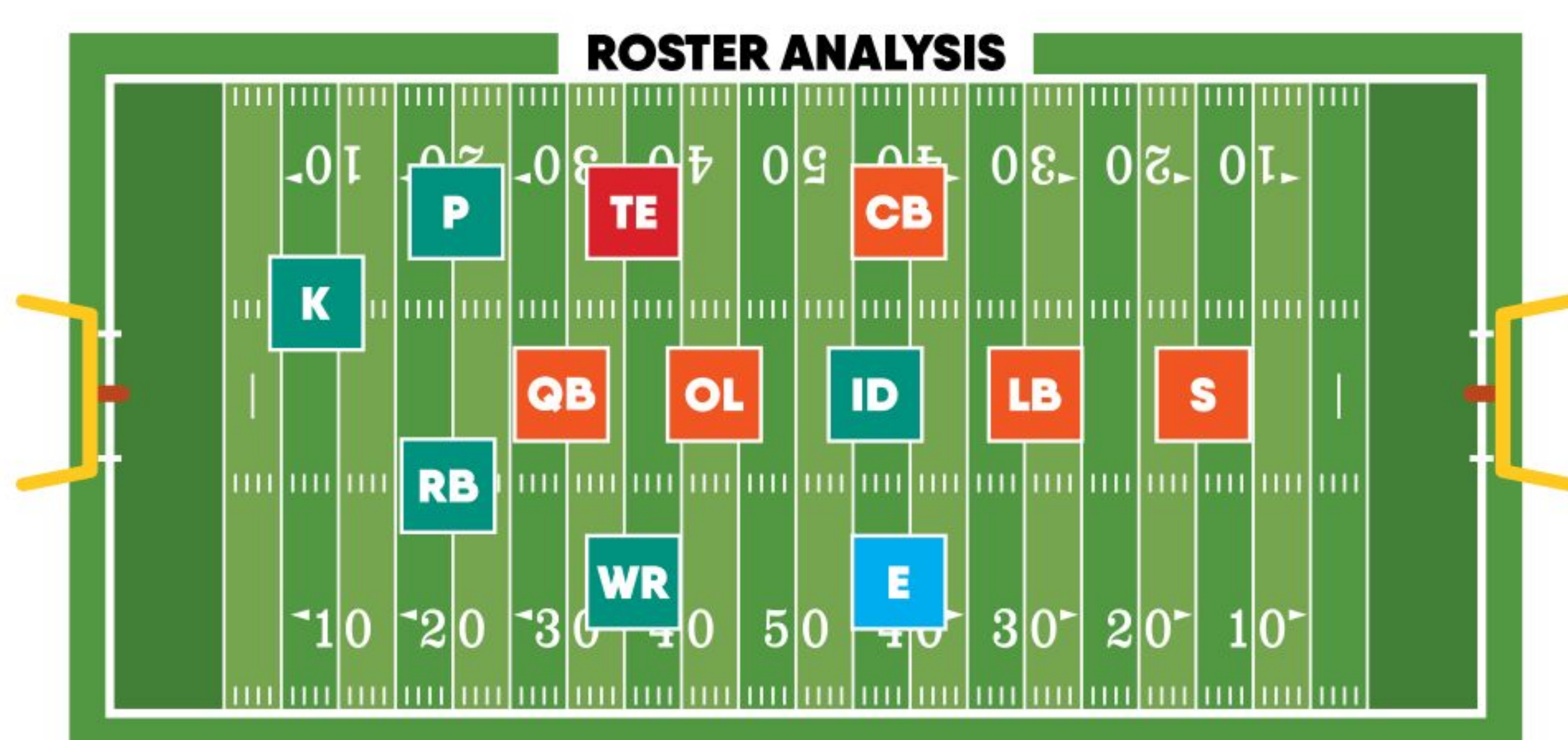
SEASON GRADE: **B-**

THE SKINNY: Left in the lurch following Andrew Luck's shock retirement, the Colts nearly made the playoffs anyway under Jacoby Brissett. That they didn't suggests they may need to evaluate the position.

BURNING QUESTION: SHOULD THE COLTS MOVE FOR ONE OF THE FREE-AGENT QBs? Tom Brady, Philip Rivers, Cam Newton and Jameis Winston are among those potentially available. The Colts want to build through the draft, but a reliable veteran QB may be the missing piece.

JACKSONVILLE **JAGUARS**

RECORD: (6-10)

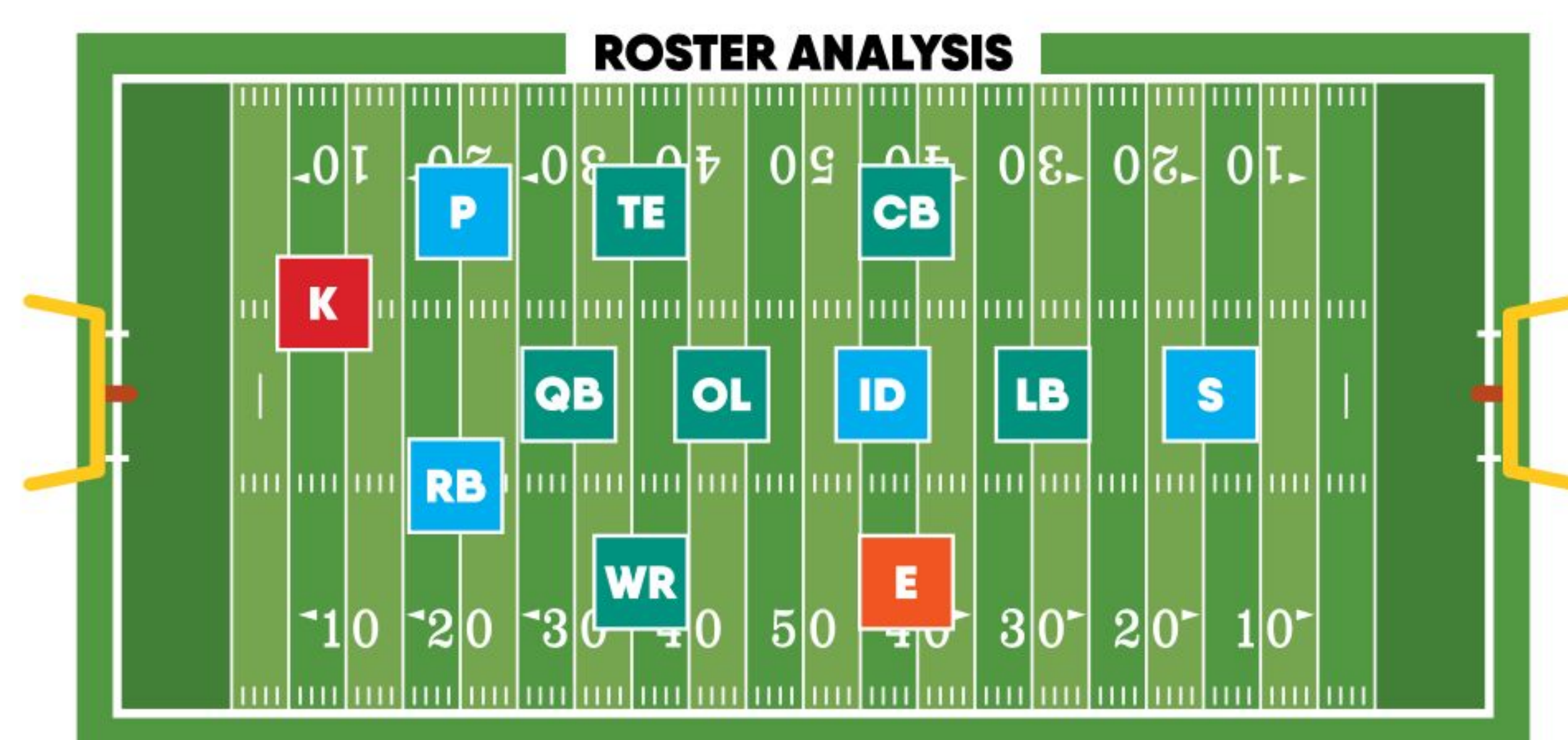
SEASON GRADE: **C-**

THE SKINNY: Lost Nick Foles in Week 1, but revelled in 'MinsheW Mania' before faltering. Jalen Ramsey's exit via trade did not help a regressing defense.

BURNING QUESTION: WHAT SHOULD THE JAGS DO ABOUT THE FOLES-MINSHEW QB CONTROVERSY? The hero of Super Bowl LII is under contract for next year, yet he was benched for rookie late-rounder MinsheW. The finances suggest Jacksonville should turn back to Foles. The game tape suggests otherwise.

TENNESSEE **TITANS**

RECORD: (9-7)

SEASON GRADE: **A**

THE SKINNY: A grade enhanced thanks to brilliant road playoff wins in New England and Baltimore. In Mike Vrabel's second year, Tennessee showed they are trending in the right direction.

BURNING QUESTION: WHAT SHOULD THEY DO ABOUT DERRICK HENRY AND RYAN TANNERHILL? The two offensive stars of 2019 – running back Henry and quarterback Tannehill – are due to be free agents. Do either warrant long-term deals? Or should the Titans use tags? Or cut bait?

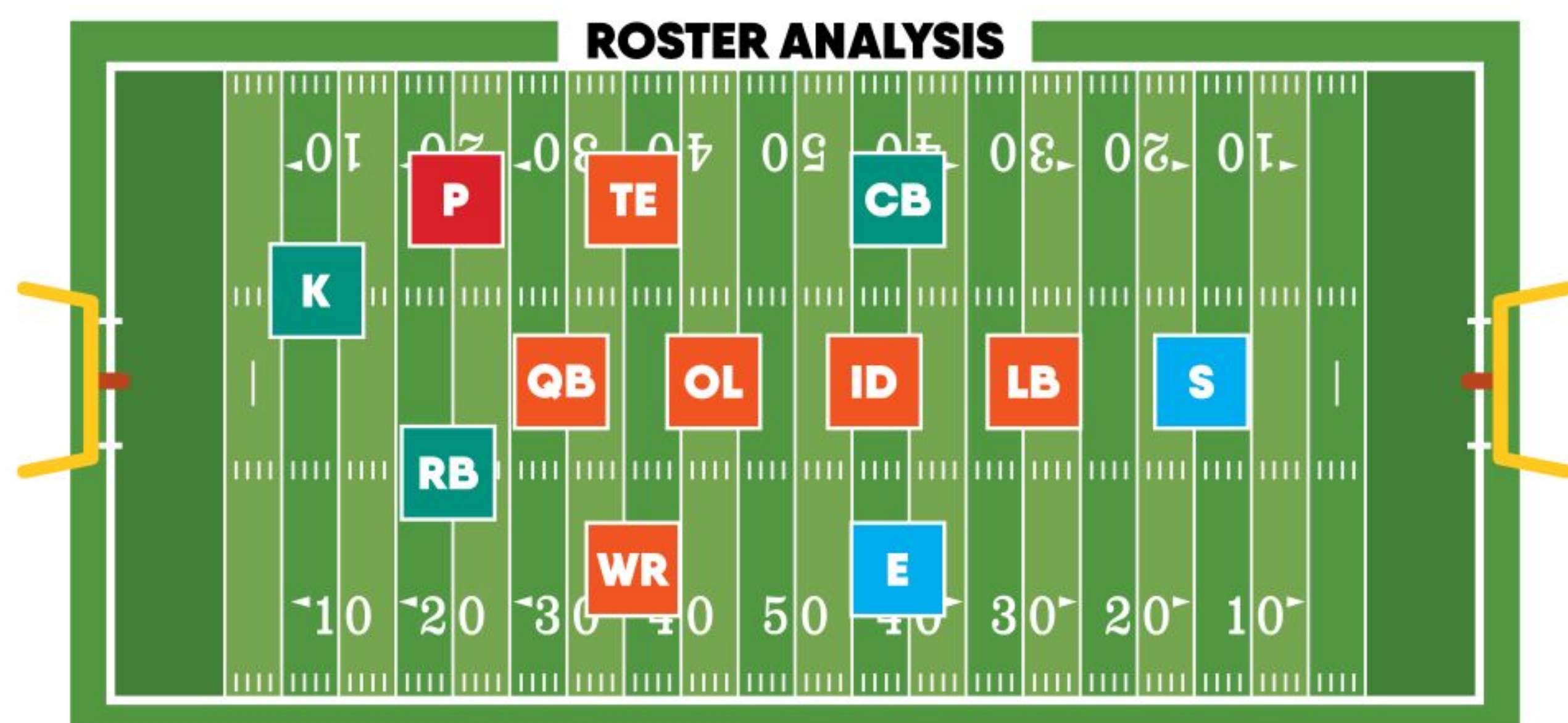
AFC WEST

DENVER BRONCOS

RECORD: (7-9)



SEASON GRADE: **B-**



THE SKINNY: Recovered after a series of narrow losses early in Vic Fangio's debut season and got more joy down the stretch when switching out veteran quarterback Joe Flacco for rookie Drew Lock.

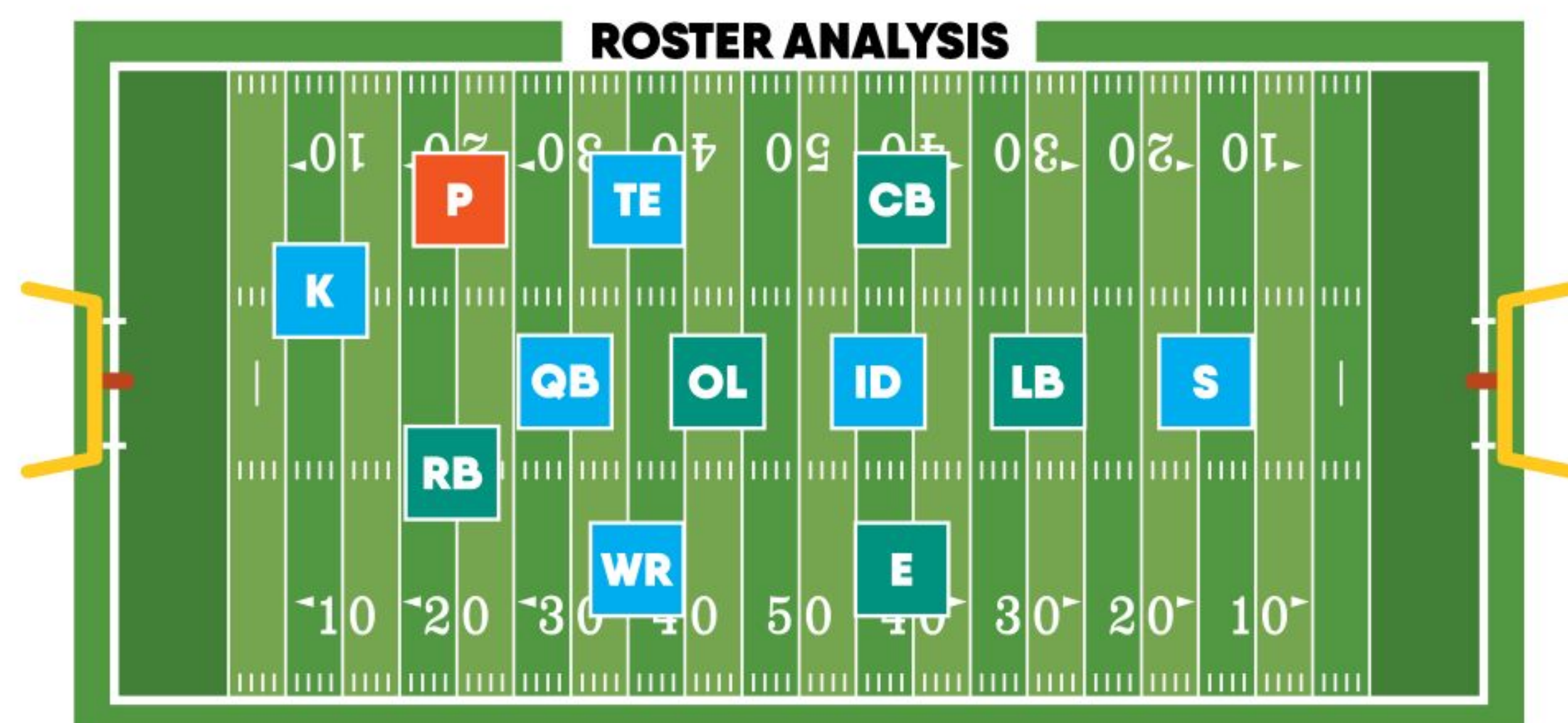
BURNING QUESTION: IS DREW LOCK-ED IN AS THE STARTER? The whole reason for switching to Lock was to see what Denver had and the initial signs were good. Can the Broncos count on their second-year passer extending that production out across a 16-game slate, though?

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

RECORD: (12-4) *WON SUPER BOWL LIV



SEASON GRADE: **A+**



THE SKINNY: Ended a 50-year wait for a Lombardi Trophy as Andy Reid got his ring and Patrick Mahomes cemented his status as the future of the NFL in the fourth quarter of Super Bowl LIV.

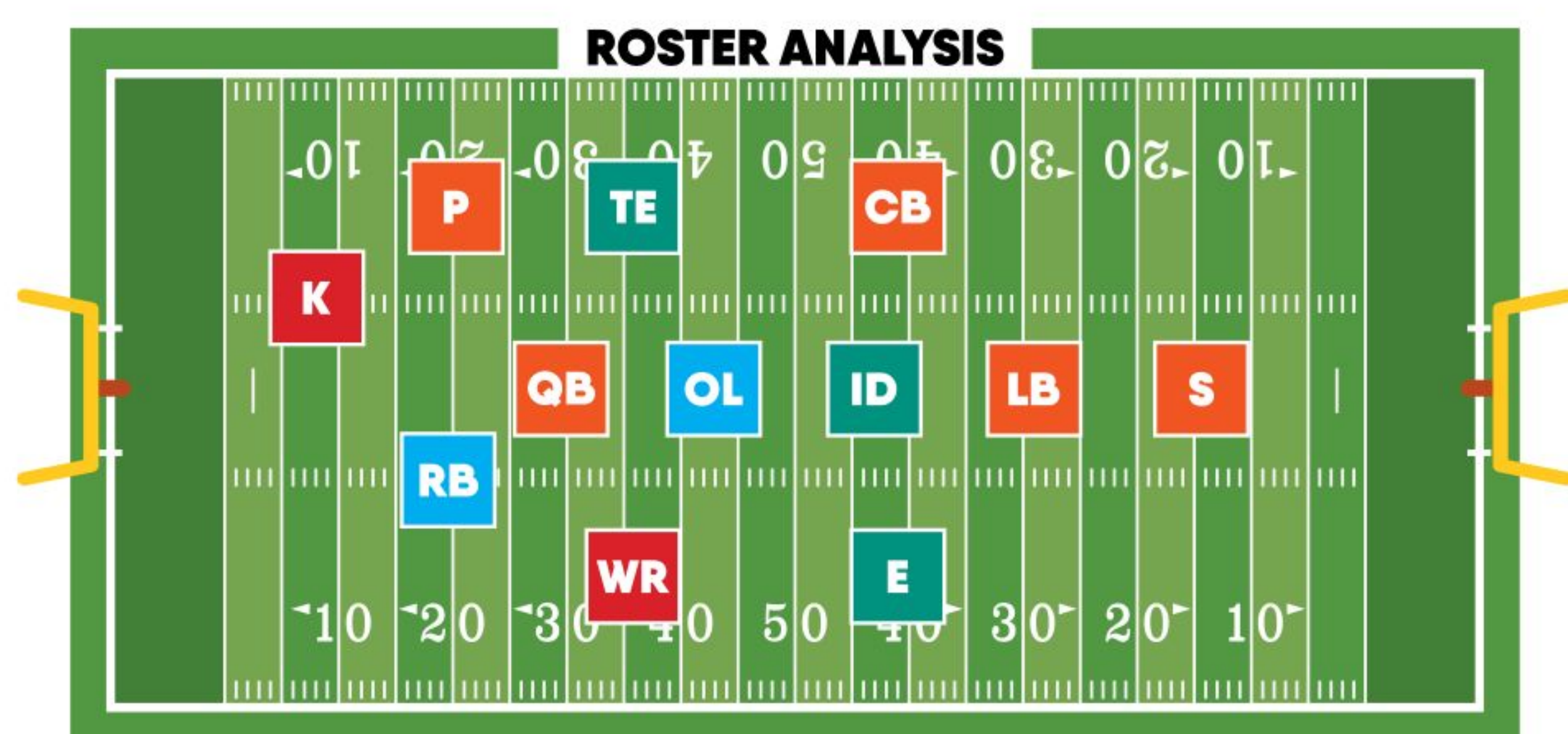
BURNING QUESTION: WILL MAHOMES' UPCOMING CONTRACT PREVENT A DYNASTY? Mahomes could command the NFL's first \$200million contract – and he will deserve it – but that leaves GM Brett Veach hamstrung elsewhere when it comes to filling out the rest of the roster.

LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

RECORD: (7-9)



SEASON GRADE: **B**



THE SKINNY: Overcame Antonio Brown drama and nearly made the playoffs. Jon Gruden is not yesterday's man and Mike Mayock's first draft was solid.

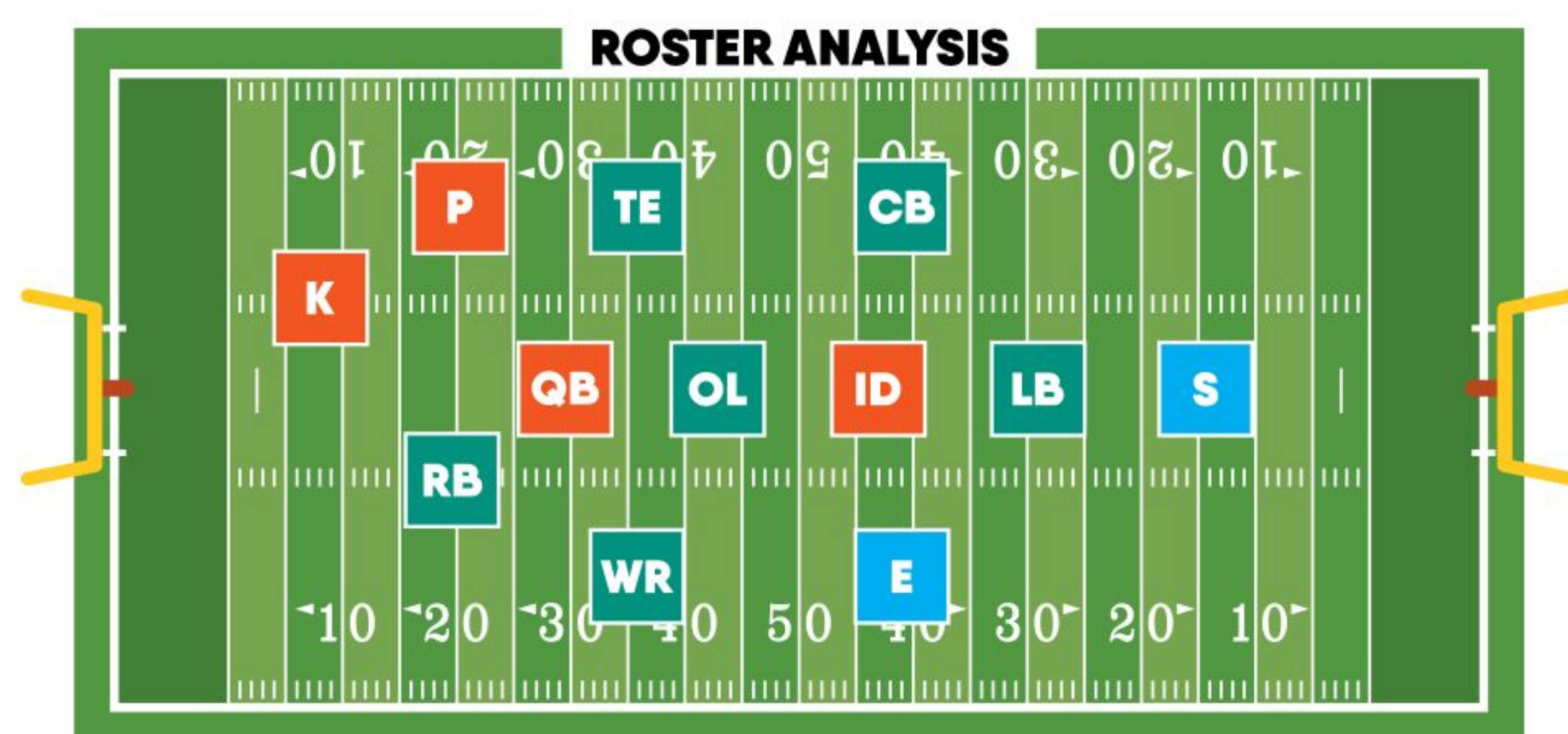
BURNING QUESTION: WILL THE MOVE TO VEGAS BE ACCOMPANIED BY SOME SPLASHY ACQUISITIONS? The Raiders may want to mark the move to Vegas with a shiny new player or two. With a tonne of cap space and plenty of draft capital, the Raiders could be one of the more interesting teams to watch this offseason.

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

RECORD: (5-11)



SEASON GRADE: **C-**



THE SKINNY: Derwin James' injury and Melvin Gordon's holdout didn't help, but the Chargers were seriously underwhelming in 2019 as Father Time appeared to catch up with quarterback Philip Rivers.

BURNING QUESTION: WHAT SHOULD THEY DO AT QUARTERBACK? Los Angeles have had some bad years in the Rivers era but, in 2019, it looked like he was the problem. Having confirmed they are moving on from the impending free agent, L.A. need a new starter for the first time in a decade-and-a-half.

NFC EAST

DALLAS COWBOYS

RECORD: (8-8)



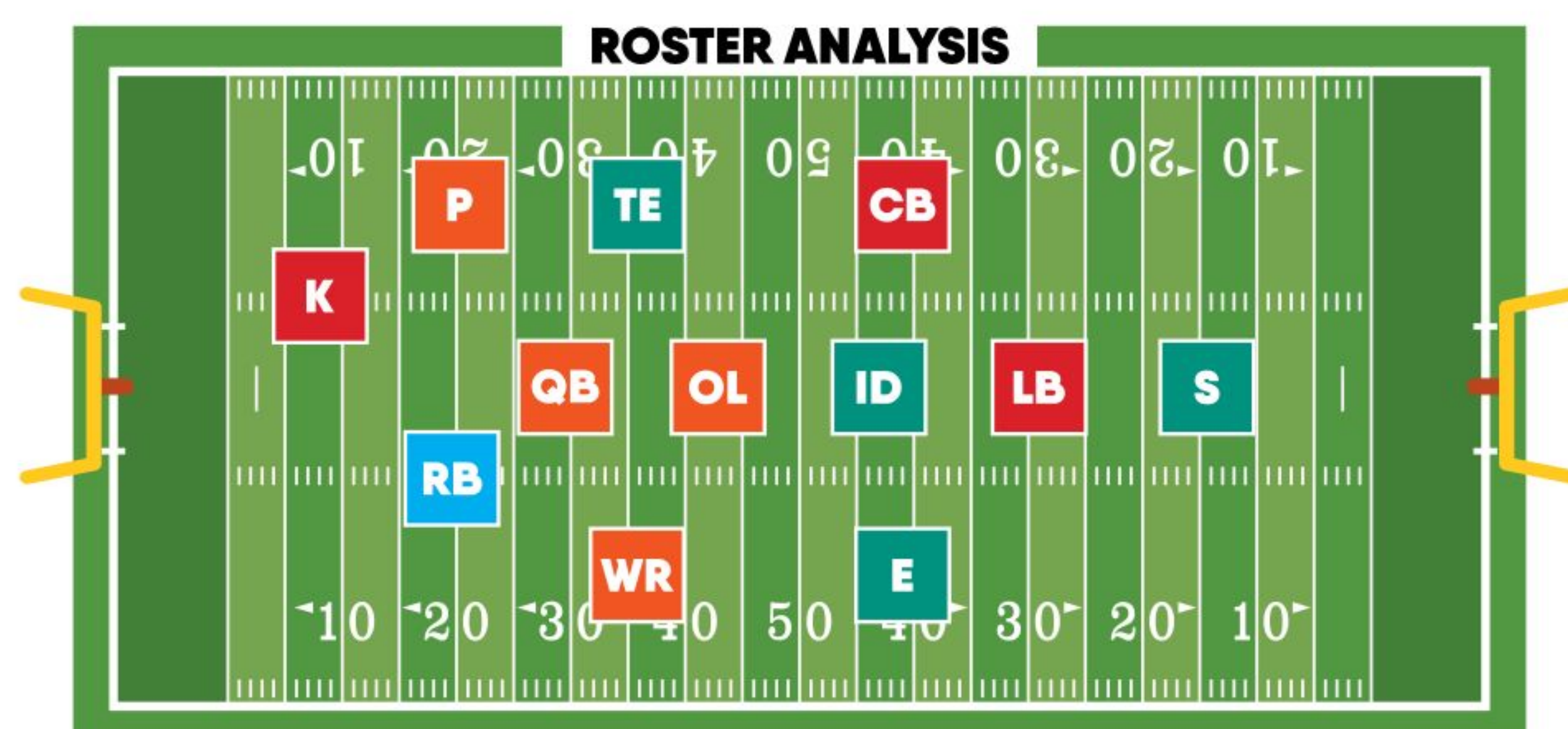
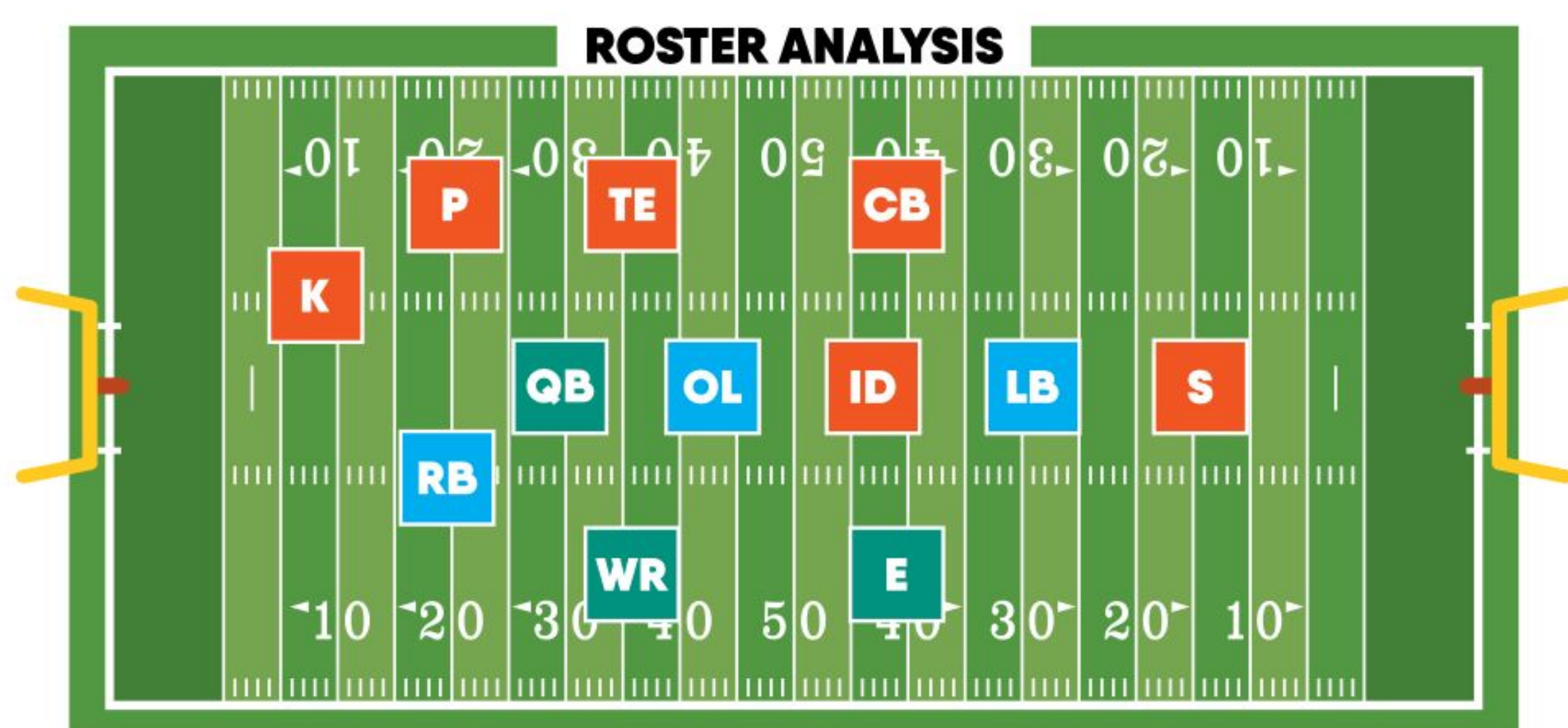
NEW YORK GIANTS

RECORD: (4-12)



SEASON GRADE: C+

SEASON GRADE: C-



THE SKINNY: The final year of the Jason Garrett era was a microcosm of his entire reign: Good, but not good enough. Supremely talented on paper, bad coaching and poor execution cost Dallas a postseason berth.

BURNING QUESTION: HAS MIKE MCCARTHY LEARNED HIS LESSONS? Garrett's replacement left Green Bay with a reputation for being too cautious, unwilling to accept analytics and favouring mundane play-calling. Has he changed? Dallas will hope so.

THE SKINNY: The Eli Manning era finally ended and rookie Daniel Jones provided fleeting glimpses of encouragement. The rest of the team did not, however, and Pat Shurmur unsurprisingly paid the price.

BURNING QUESTION: CAN JOE JUDGE SUCCEED WHERE OTHER BELICHICK DISCIPLES HAVE NOT? Few coaches have succeeded away from the bosom of Bill. The G-Men are hoping former Patriots special teams coordinator Judge can buck the trend after succeeding Shurmur.

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

RECORD: (9-7)



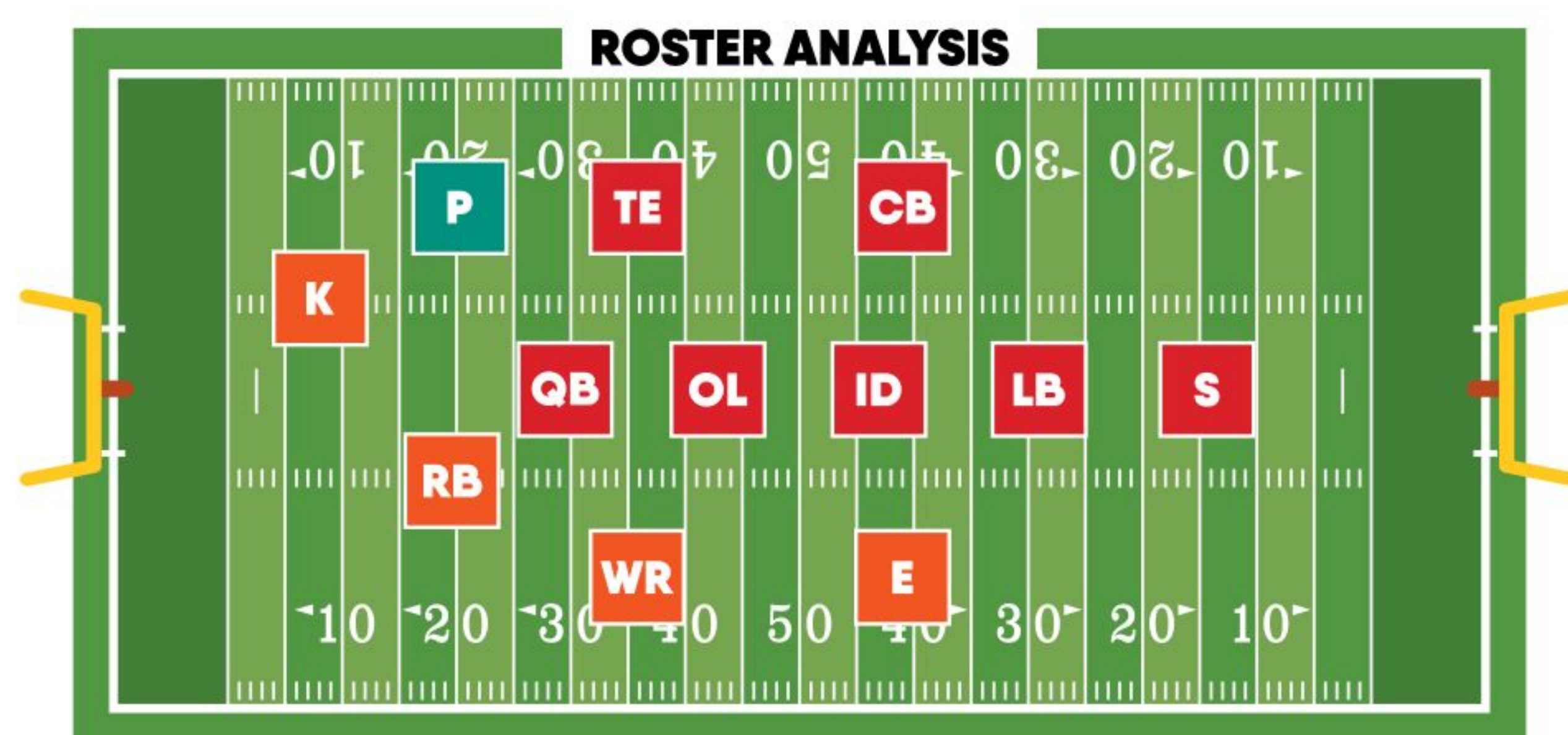
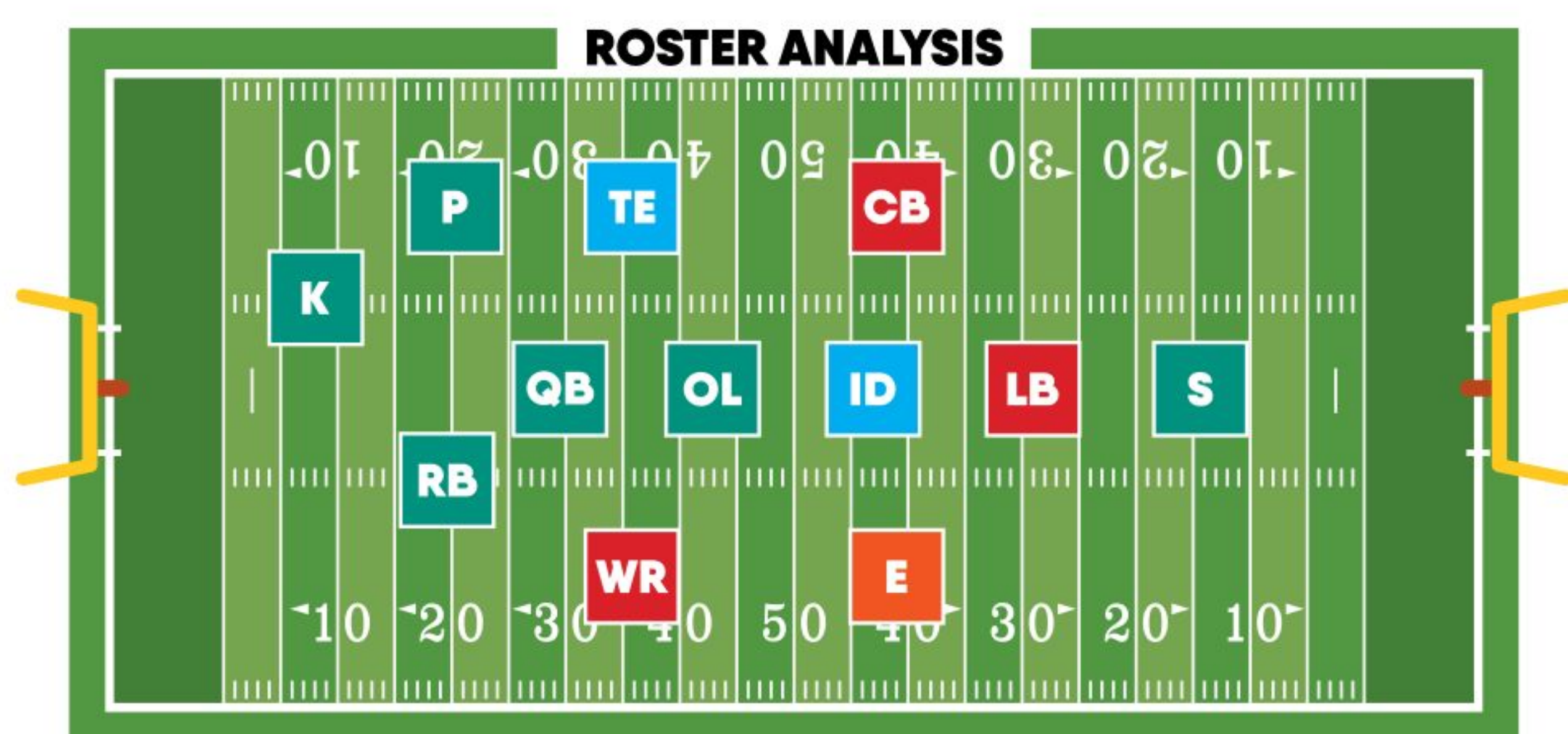
WASHINGTON REDSKINS

RECORD: (3-13)



SEASON GRADE: B+

SEASON GRADE: D



THE SKINNY: Overcame multiple injuries to win the NFC East. Carson Wentz was then knocked out of the wildcard round with concussion, but they still pushed Seattle close with 40-year-old Josh McCown at QB.

BURNING QUESTION: CAN WHEELER-DEALER HOWIE ROSEMAN SORT OUT THE WIDE-RECEIVING CORPS? The paucity of options at wideout meant McCown came close to running routes. Wentz needs more help if they are to replicate the offensive production which won a Lombardi.

THE SKINNY: Became the first franchise to axe their coach when they fired Jay Gruden after an 0-5 start. Eventually turned to rookie QB Dwayne Haskins, for whom the jury very much remains out.

BURNING QUESTION: WAS RON RIVERA RIGHT TO WIND UP IN THE CAPITAL? Rivera should have been one of the more sought-after coaches. That he chose Washington over other seemingly more stable options was intriguing. Bruce Allen's exit will help Rivera stamp his mark.



NFC NORTH

CHICAGO BEARS

RECORD: (8-8)



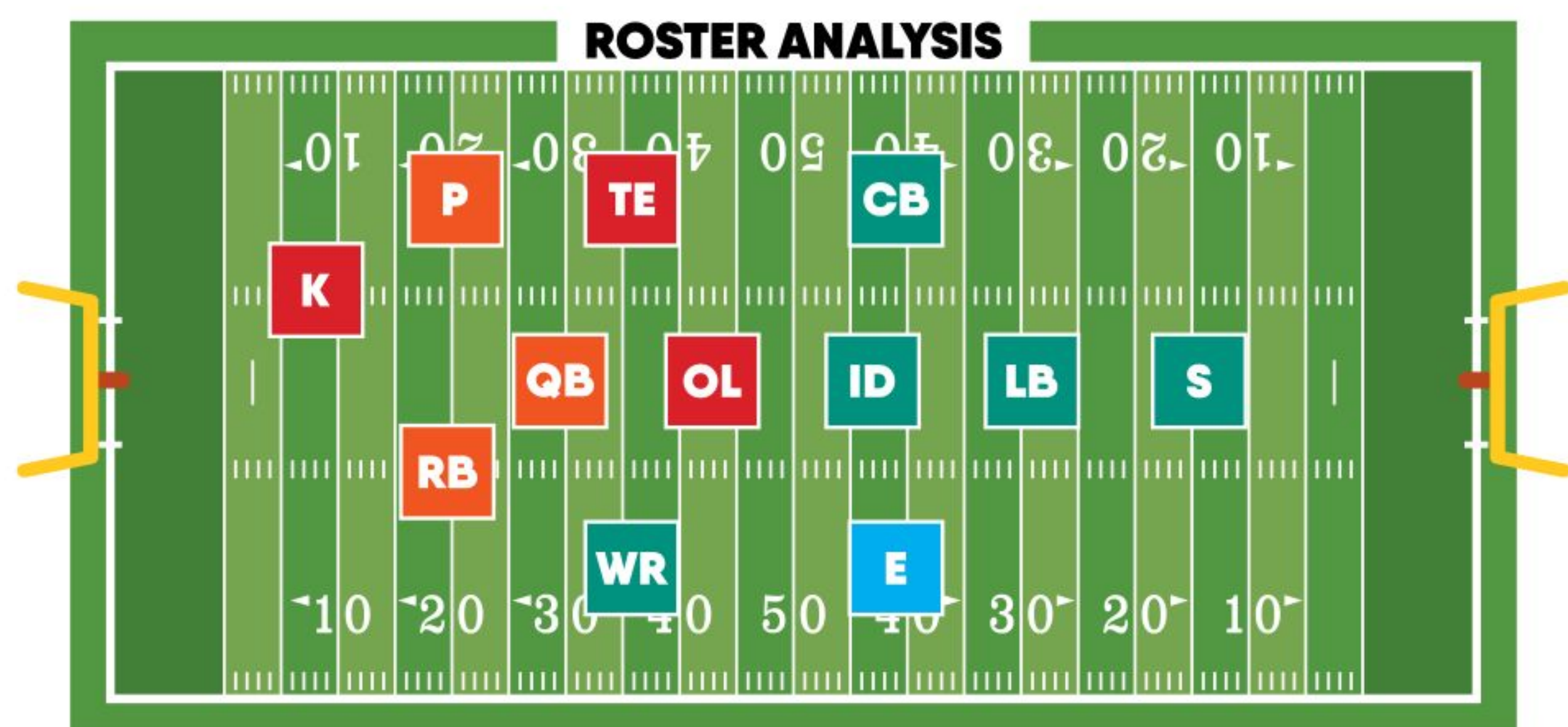
SEASON GRADE: **C-**

DETROIT LIONS

RECORD: (3-12-1)



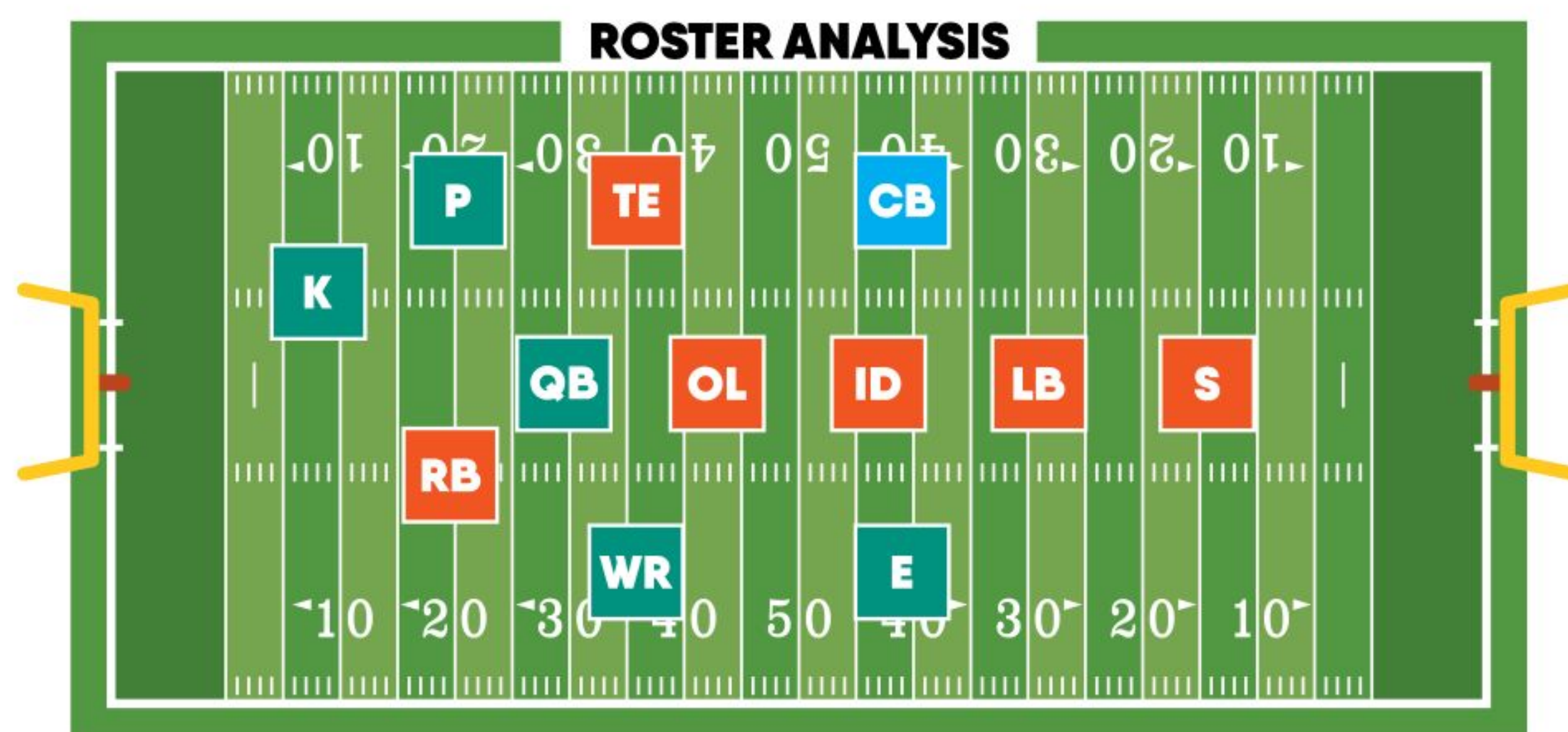
SEASON GRADE: **C**



THE SKINNY: A storied franchise that started the campaign with Super Bowl aspirations and ended it frustrated and with plenty of questions. The biggest issue appears to be their quarterback quandary...

BURNING QUESTION: WILL MITCHELL

TRUBISKY BE REPLACED? The Bears are unlikely to totally move on from Trubisky in 2020, but they need a better backup option than Chase Daniel. Look for either a veteran or a high-profile rookie to provide meaningful competition.



THE SKINNY: Hopes evaporated when iron-man QB Matthew Stafford went down in early November. There were few redeeming qualities elsewhere, so the spotlight should be shone on the coaching staff.

BURNING QUESTION: WERE THE LIONS RIGHT TO BRING BACK MATT PATRICIA?

Patricia's predecessor, Jim Caldwell, was fired after successive 9-7 campaigns. The current head coach is responsible for back-to-back losing seasons. He will be given a third chance, but the leash is surely shorter.

GREEN BAY PACKERS

RECORD: (13-3)



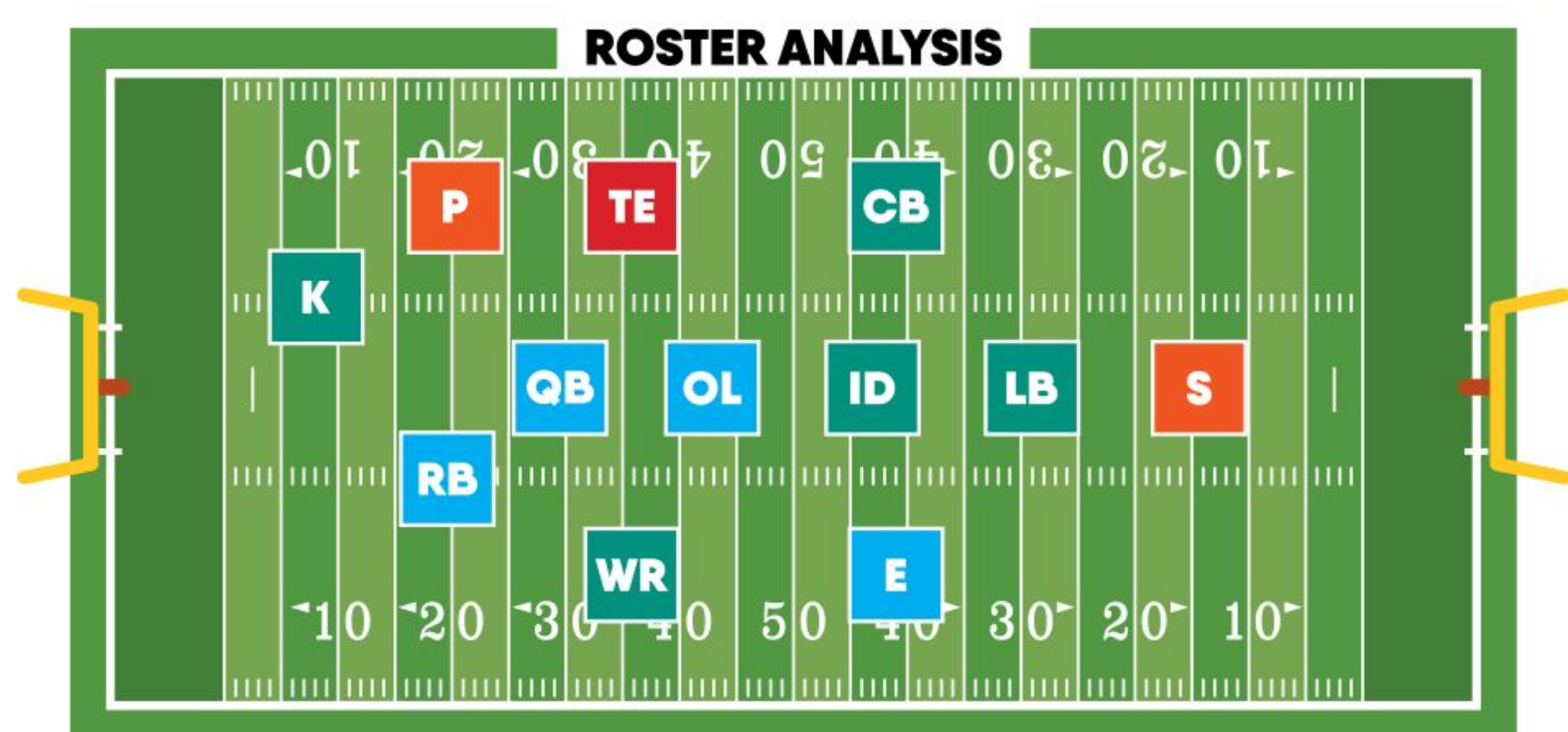
SEASON GRADE: **B+**

MINNESOTA VIKINGS

RECORD: (10-6)



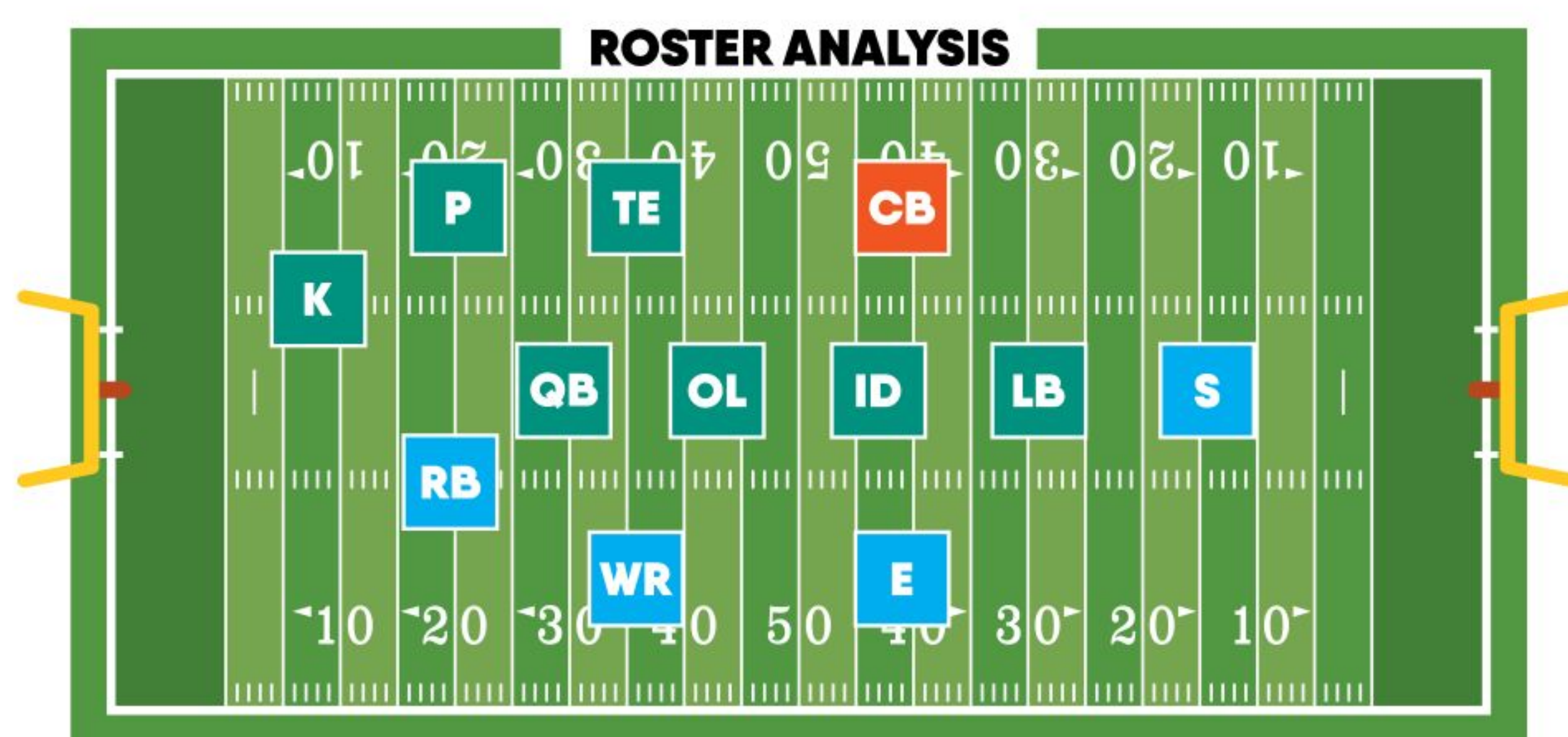
SEASON GRADE: **B**



THE SKINNY: Went all the way to the NFC Championship Game under Matt LaFleur before laying an egg against the San Francisco 49ers. After that loss, their rookie head coach questioned his team's effort.

BURNING QUESTION: CAN THEY GET SOME ASSISTANCE FOR AARON?

Outside of Aaron Jones and Davante Adams, Aaron Rodgers had little in the way of weapons. Another top wideout could really elevate this offense and help the QB replicate the magic of previous campaigns.



THE SKINNY: Reached the playoffs and upset the Saints in New Orleans on wildcard weekend, but then ran out of ideas on offense the next week in San Francisco and meekly exited.

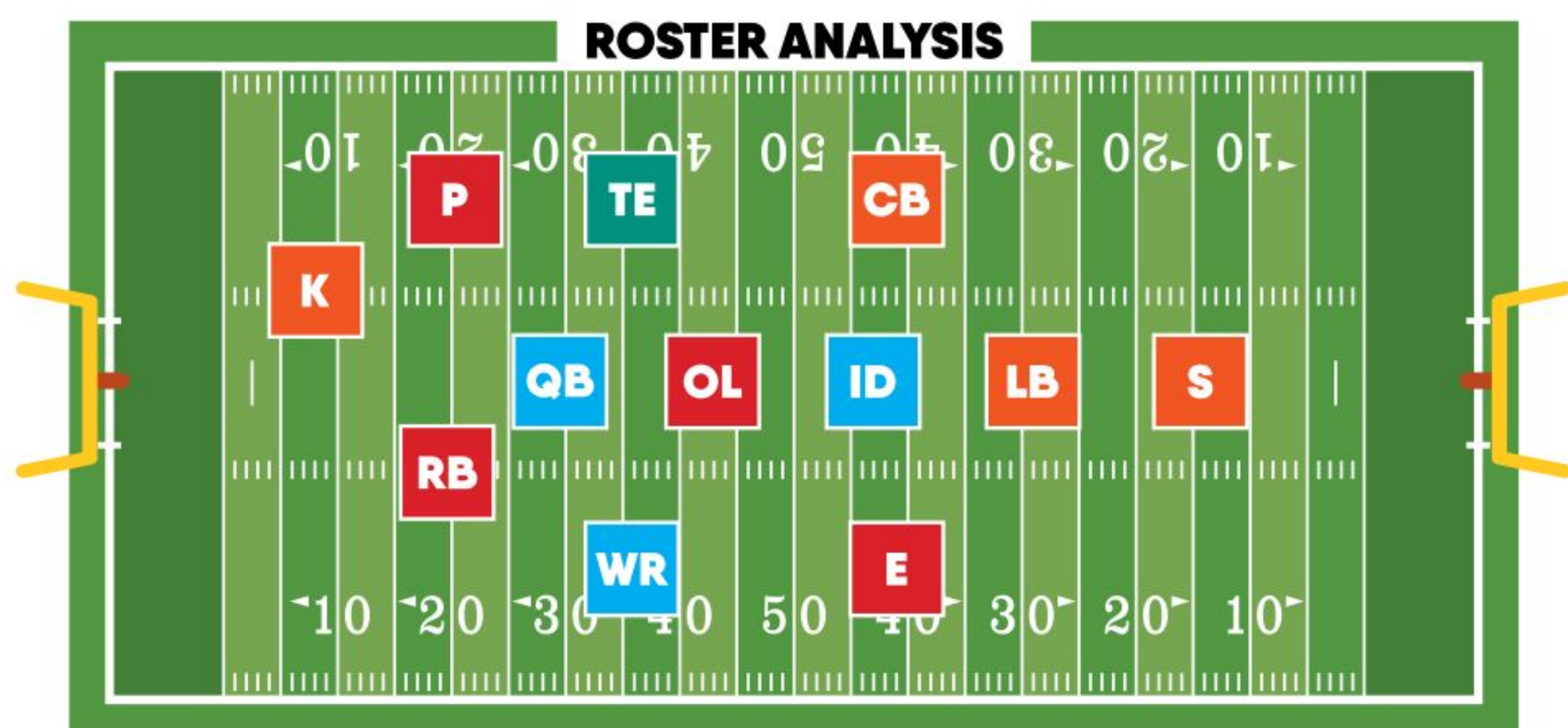
BURNING QUESTION: WILL GARY KUBIAK'S PROMOTION PAY DIVIDENDS?

Dalvin Cook's breakout campaign surely owed much to Kubiak's work with the offense. He is now at the controls. Will that help the limited-but-largely-reliable Kirk Cousins come out of his shell?

NFC SOUTH

ATLANTA **FALCONS**

RECORD: (7-9)

SEASON GRADE: **C+**

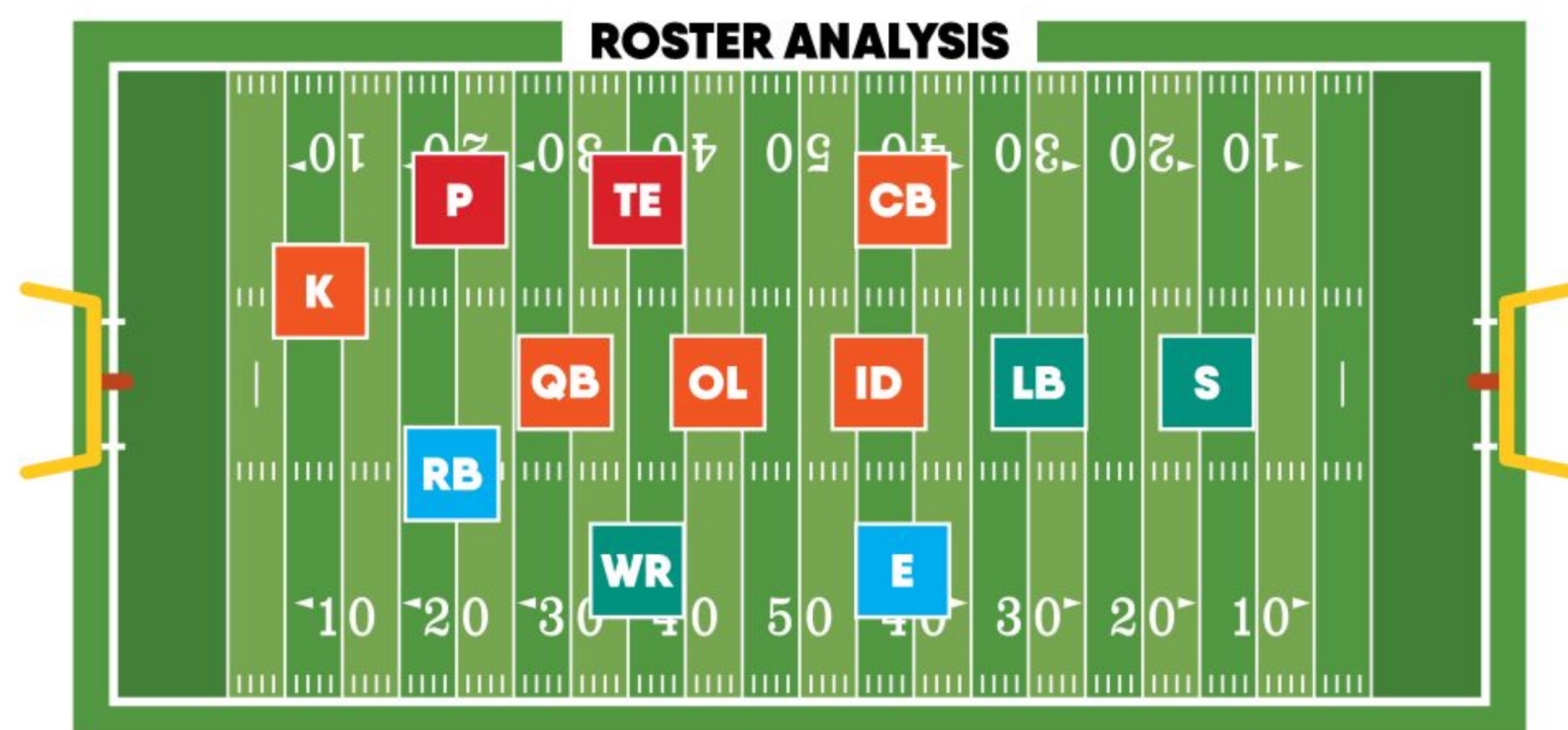
THE SKINNY: Rallied after a woeful 1-7 start, but the Super Bowl window closed further. Surprisingly, both head coach Dan Quinn and general manager Thomas Dimitroff retained their positions.

BURNING QUESTION: WAS BLANK WRONG

NOT TO FIRE? Many owners would have pulled the trigger after back-to-back losing seasons, but Arthur Blank feels Quinn and Dimitroff have unfinished business. Fresh ideas are needed, though, so it is perplexing that Dirk Koetter has been kept on too.

CAROLINA PANTHERS

RECORD: (4-12)

SEASON GRADE: **C+**

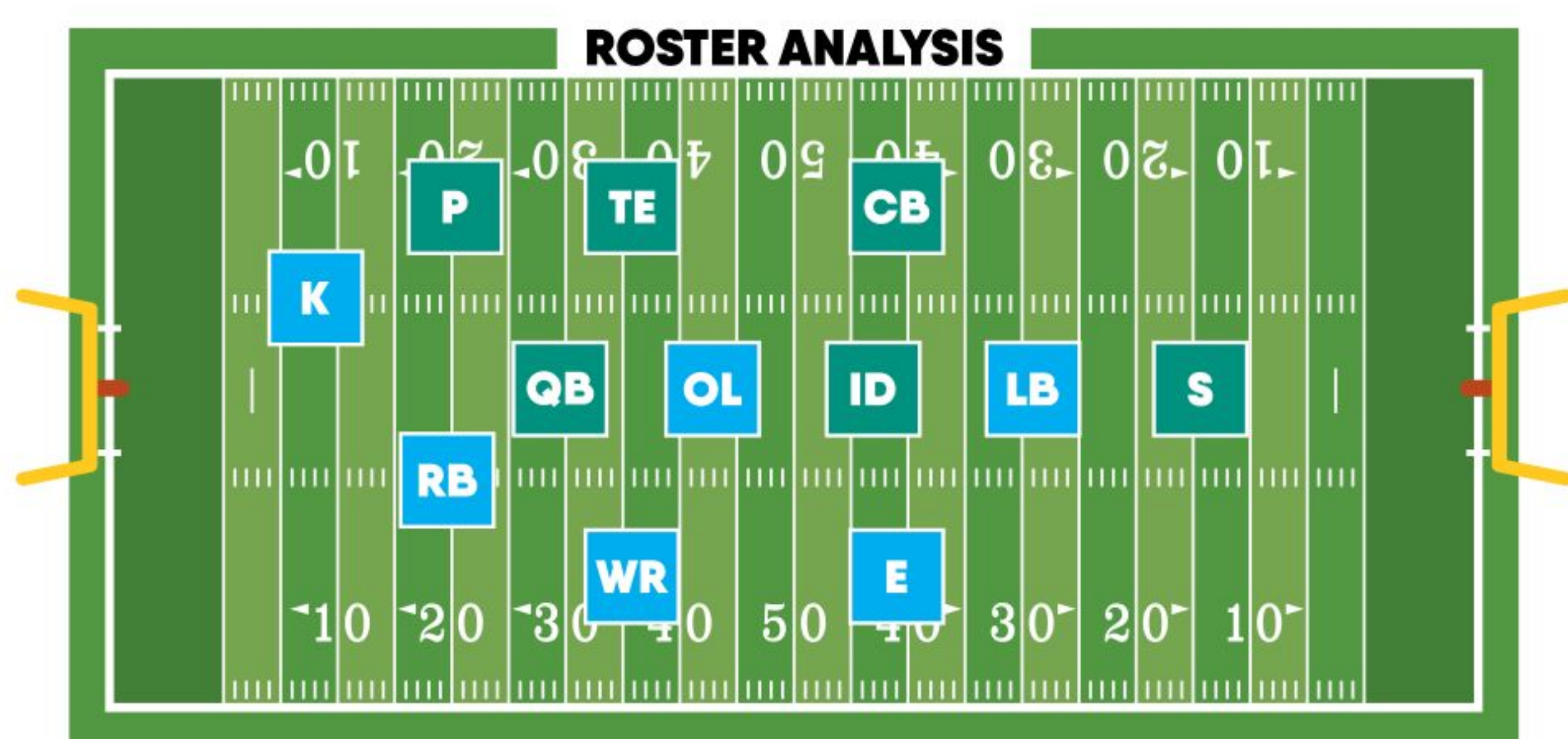
THE SKINNY: We barely saw Cam Newton due to injury, while Ron Rivera's reign ended in December. Despite Christian McCaffrey's sensational campaign, the Panthers ultimately did not have enough in an ultra-competitive division.

BURNING QUESTION: CAN MATT RHULE THE ROOST IN THE NFL TOO?

This could have been, 'What will they do with Newton?' or, 'How will they cope without Luke Kuechly?', yet Rhule's transition from college to the pros will be most intriguing.

NEW ORLEANS **SAINTS**

RECORD: (13-3)

SEASON GRADE: **B**

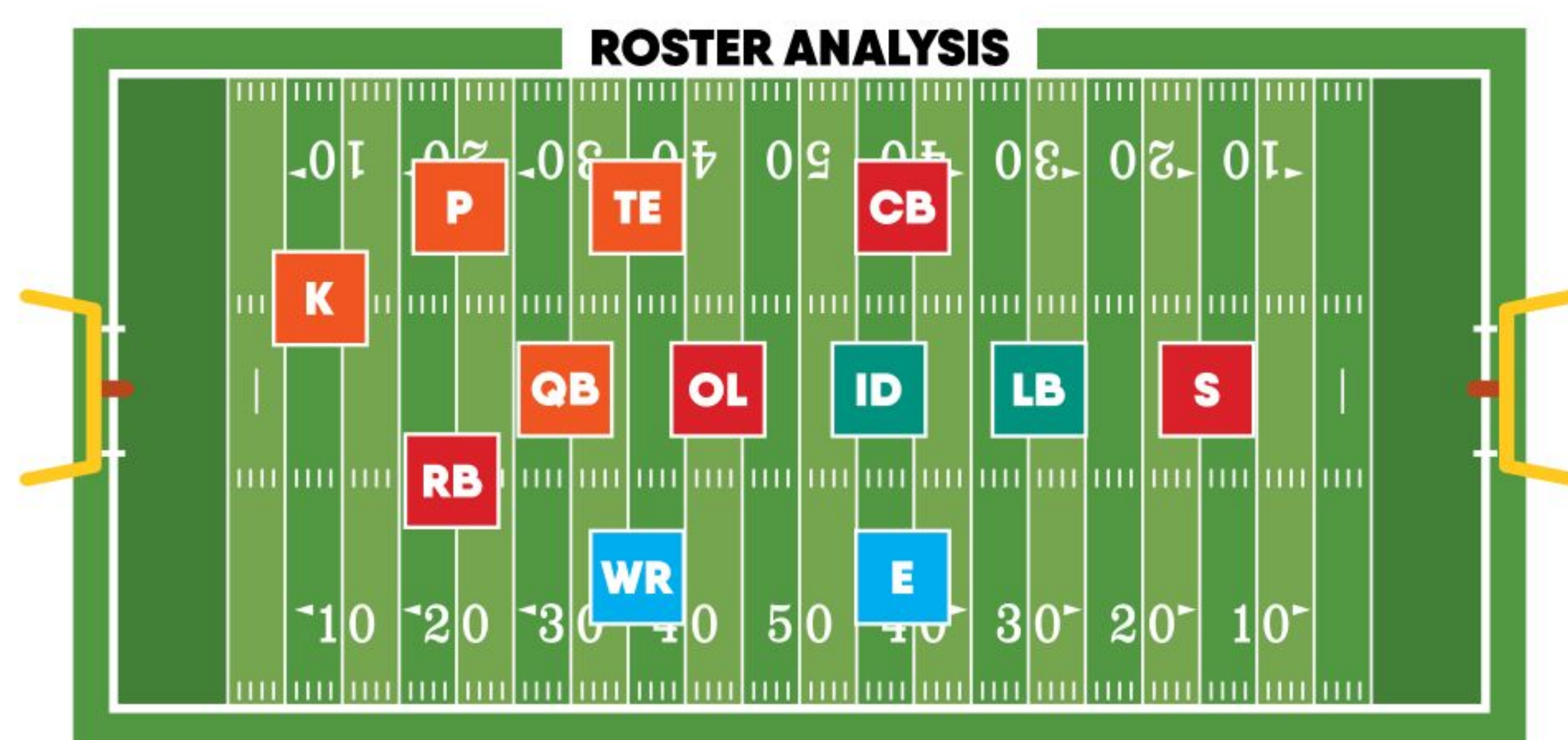
THE SKINNY: One of the better regular-season teams as Michael Thomas broke Marvin Harrison's single-season reception record. Looked set for a Super Bowl run until Minnesota stunned in the playoffs.

BURNING QUESTION: CAN THEY GET ALVIN KAMARA BACK TO HIS 2018 FORM?

There will be plenty of focus on Drew Brees at 41, but everything would be a lot rosier if Kamara could reproduce his 2018 numbers. He had 12 fewer total touchdowns last season, his first without the support of Mark Ingram.

TAMPA BAY **BUCCANEERS**

RECORD: (7-9)

SEASON GRADE: **B-**

THE SKINNY: Two 1,000-yard receivers and the quarterback with the most passing yards, yet still no playoff berth. A non-existent pass defense did not help, nor did Jameis Winston's 30 picks.

BURNING QUESTION: IS BRUCE ARIANS PREPARED TO HAVE WINSTON AS HIS STARTER?

Arians now knows there is no fixing Winston. The talent is there, but so are the boneheaded plays. The former Arizona Cardinals head coach reckons they can win with other QBs too...

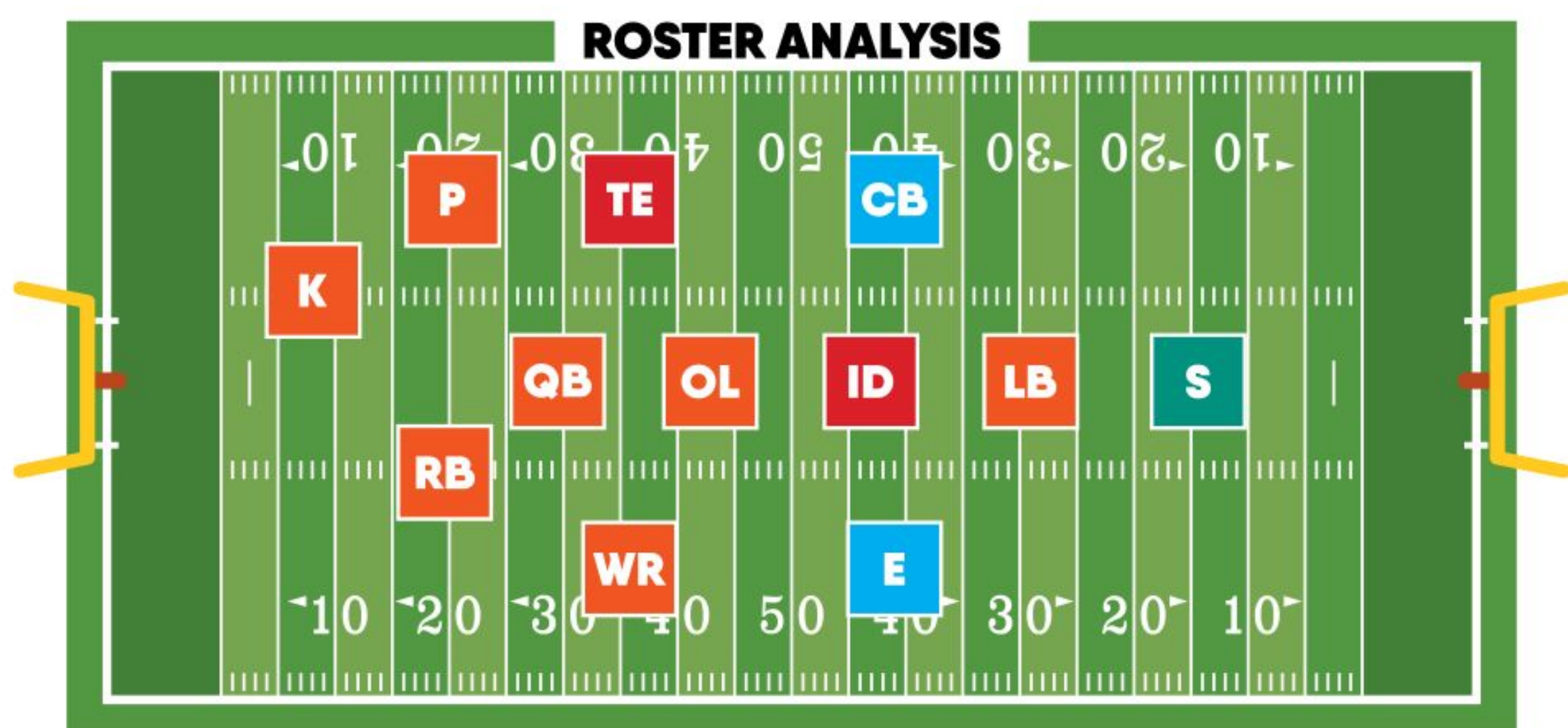
NFC WEST

ARIZONA **CARDINALS**

RECORD: (5-10-1)



SEASON GRADE: **B**



THE SKINNY: After a slow start, the rookie duo of quarterback **Kyler Murray** and head coach **Kliff Kingsbury** found their groove and showed that the Cards were right to move on from **Josh Rosen**.

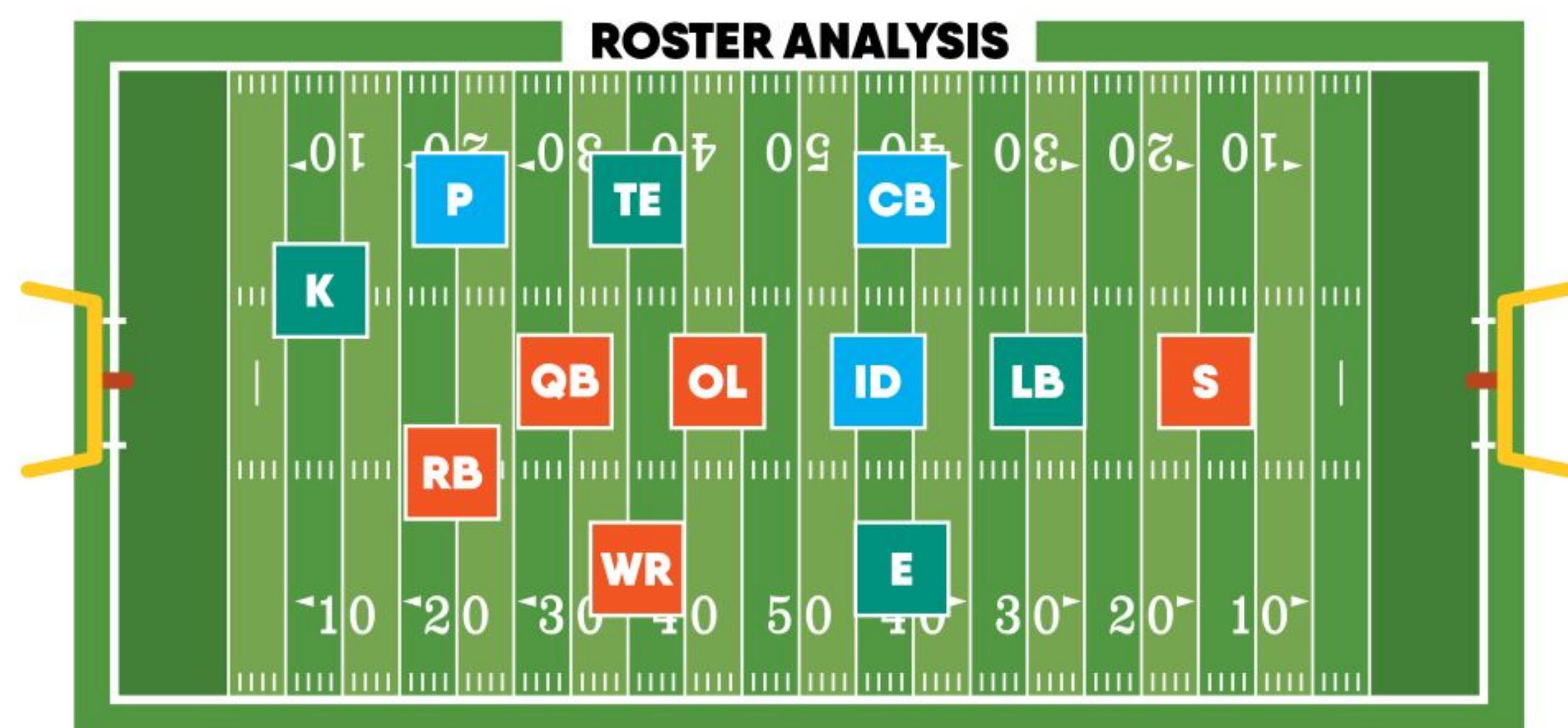
BURNING QUESTION: CAN GM STEVE KEIM BUILD A CAPABLE DEFENSE? After **Patrick Mahomes** and **Lamar Jackson**'s second-season ascents, **Murray** appears poised to break out in a big way. What he needs is a defense capable of making sure those performances come in wins.

LOS ANGELES **RAMS**

RECORD: (9-7)



SEASON GRADE: **C-**



THE SKINNY: **Jared Goff** got a big contract after reaching the Super Bowl and took a step back, along with the rest of the Rams. Not resolving the offensive line was an obvious error.

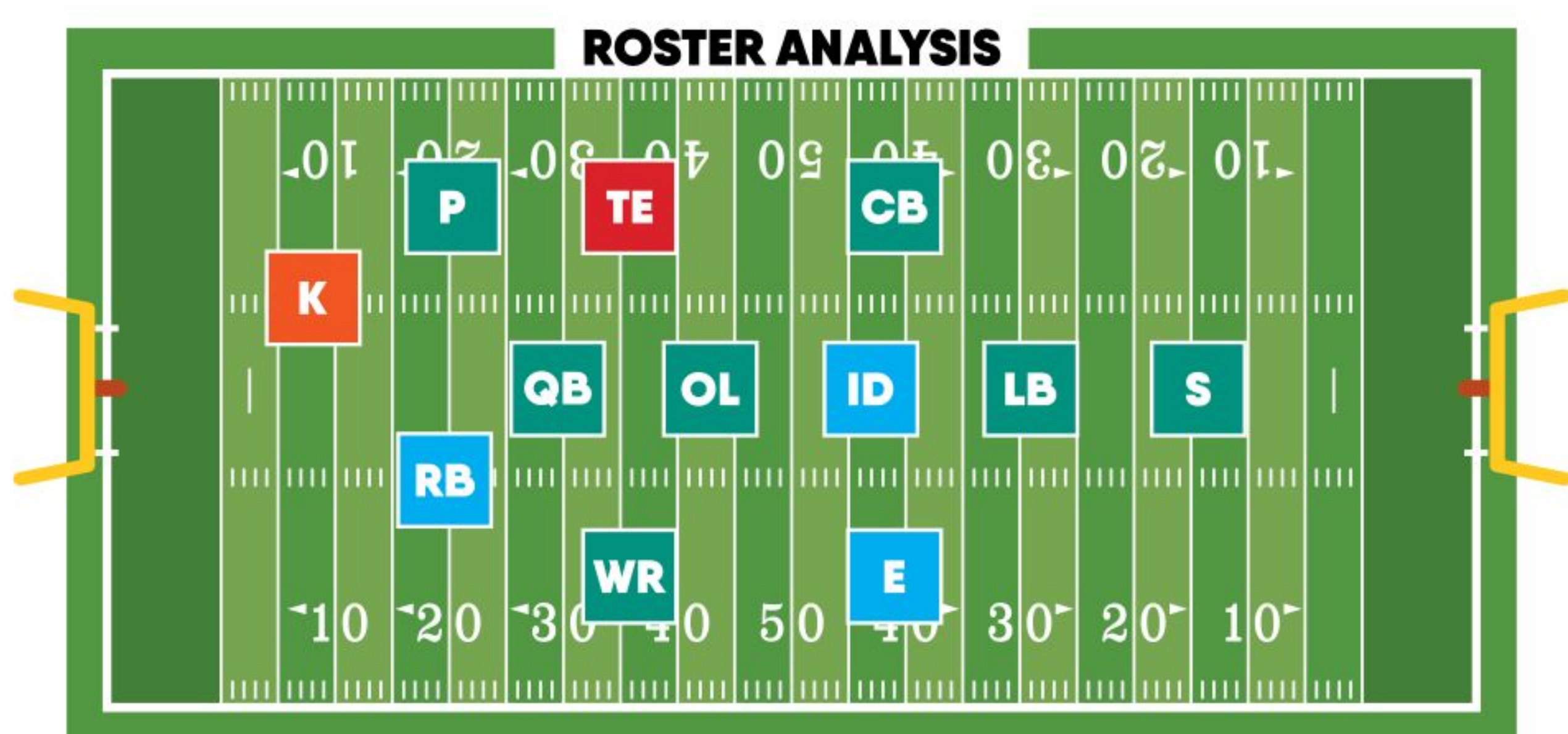
BURNING QUESTION: WHO IS THE REAL TODD GURLEY? An MVP candidate in the first half of 2018, **Gurley** has looked average since. Can the Rams get '18 **Gurley** back, or are injury concerns going to prevent that? The new defense after **Wade Phillips** was let go will also interest.

SAN FRANCISCO **49ERS**

RECORD: (13-3)



SEASON GRADE: **A**



THE SKINNY: Went from four wins to 13 and made it all the way to the Super Bowl, where they looked set to win it all until **Patrick Mahomes** happened.

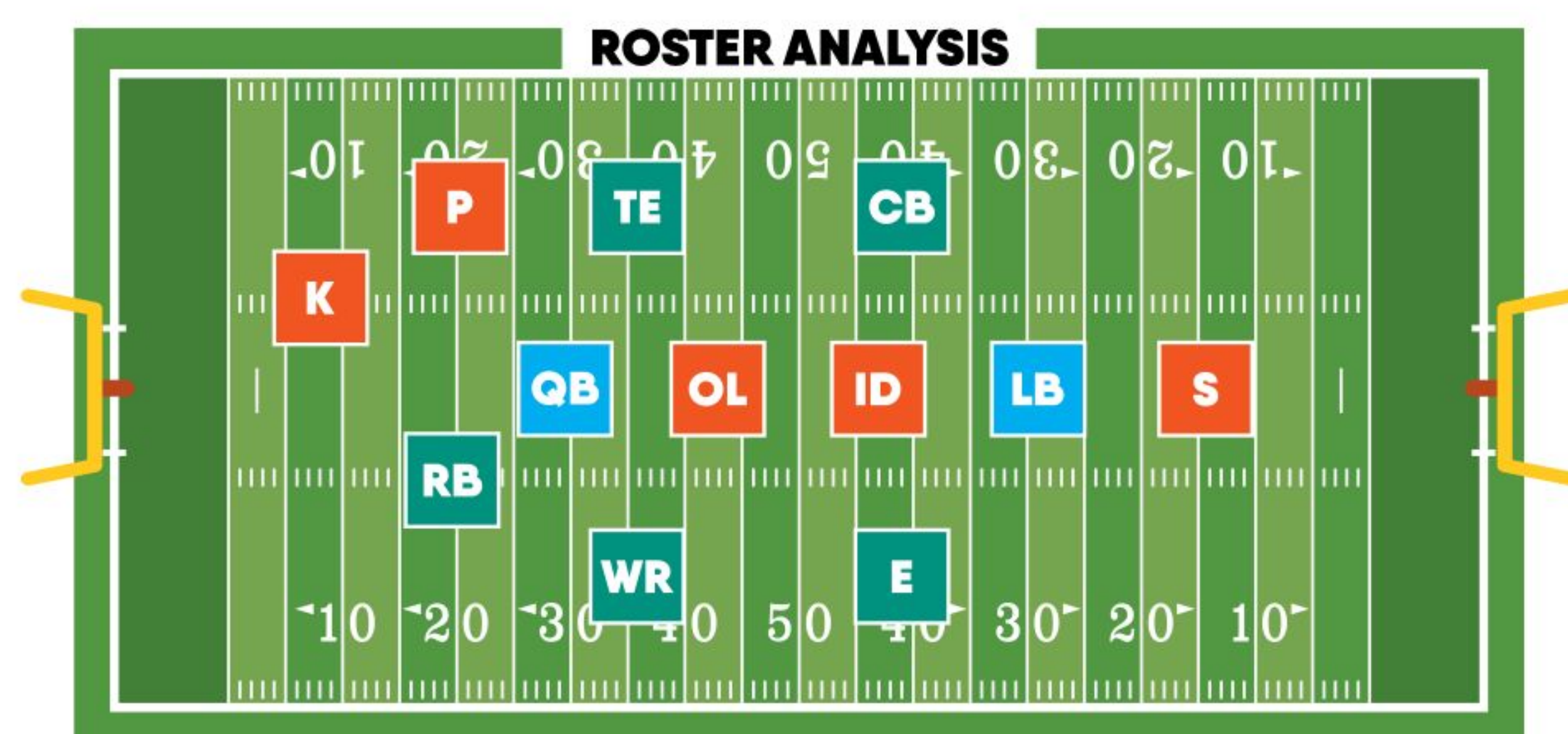
BURNING QUESTION: WILL 2019 BE AN ANOMALY OR CAN THEY BE SERIAL CONTENDERS? The future looks bright. San Francisco have a fine coaching staff, an unfairly maligned quarterback and young studs. But the Rams made the Super Bowl then failed to make the postseason the next year...

SEATTLE **SEAHAWKS**

RECORD: (11-5)



SEASON GRADE: **B+**



THE SKINNY: Made the postseason without any of the Legion of Boom thanks to a season worthy of MVP consideration from **Russell Wilson**. Won one playoff game, but weren't talented enough to go further.

BURNING QUESTION: WILL BRIAN SCHOTTENHEIMER EVER LEARN? **Wilson**'s display in the divisional-round loss to the Green Bay Packers was sensational. He is at his best when he goes off-script, which says little for the run-obsessed **Schottenheimer**, who continues to hold Seattle back.

THE QB CONUNDRUM

As more teams than ever enter the offseason with question marks surrounding their most important position, *Gridiron* investigates the NFL's scouting process at quarterback with the help of some legendary evaluators.

BY: SIMON CLANCY

"He's probably the best quarterback I've ever scouted in the flesh. I loved the kid; gave him a massive grade."

Considering the many players evaluated and drafted – and decisions made as a Green Bay Packers scout, Seattle Seahawks senior personnel executive, San Francisco 49ers and Washington Redskins general manager and Cleveland Browns senior advisor to John Dorsey –

you'd expect Scot McCloughan to be talking about Peyton Manning or Dan Marino. After all, conservative estimates would tell you he has selected at least six Hall-of-Famers in his career as one of the most important decision-makers of the past two decades. "Yeah, Ryan Leaf got me good," he adds to *Gridiron*. "And it wasn't until I sat down with some veteran scouts a few years afterwards that I really discovered why."

The Leaf question lies at the very heart of one of the biggest issues in football: what makes one





QB SPECIAL

signal-caller more likely to succeed than another, and why is the NFL's evaluation process so inconsistent? Is it scheme-related or mental; coaching or personality? Through Manning vs Leaf, Alex Smith vs Aaron Rodgers, the dismissing of Russell Wilson, Baker Mayfield, Sam Darnold, Josh Allen and Josh Rosen over 2019 MVP Lamar Jackson, along with hundreds of other hits and misses, you're left wondering if the league will ever understand how to scout the position, or if hundreds of mitigating factors make it impossible.

Famously, New England Patriots executive Scott Pioli would laugh at choosing Tom Brady with the 199th pick in 2000. "If we were any good, we wouldn't have passed over him five times," Pioli says. What's less well known is he and Bill Belichick went back and forth between Brady and Louisiana Tech's Tim Rattay during the process. "We were pretty far down the Rattay trail," Belichick admitted. "They ran a spread offense, and he had a lot of big numbers. Then we got on Brady, so it was kind of Tom versus Tim in that (sixth) round. As luck would have it, we took Brady. I guess we drafted the right one." Rattay, who passed for almost 13,000 yards and 115 touchdowns in college, managed only 31 scoring throws during a nomadic pro career. Brady recorded just over a third of Rattay's Louisiana Tech numbers at Michigan and 85 fewer touchdowns, but currently has six Super Bowl rings and 511 more touchdowns across 19 years in the NFL.

It leaves so many questions. Why do thousands of scouts spend thousands of nights in hotels for decisions nobody will want to claim three years later? Is the entire process at fault? Do teams focus on the wrong things? Are the most important traits simply unmeasurable? "It will always be the hardest area to evaluate because there's no measuring stick for the things that we deem vital," adds McCloughan. "If the mental aptitude and personality isn't right then you're in big trouble. And there's no way of telling that beyond your best guess. We can take these kids to the combine, do all the drills, all the

pushing, pulling and evaluating, but there's no test for leadership; where you can look a guy in the eye in the huddle in the fourth quarter and have 10 men look back and believe in him so much they'll do anything to win. And that's why it's so hard to truly evaluate quarterbacks."



THERE'S NO TEST FOR LEADERSHIP; WHERE YOU CAN LOOK A GUY IN THE EYE IN THE HUDDLE IN THE FOURTH QUARTER AND HAVE 10 MEN LOOK BACK AND BELIEVE IN HIM SO MUCH THEY'LL DO ANYTHING TO WIN"

McCloughan pauses for breath before starting again. "When we're in Indianapolis, the coaches get these kids on the whiteboard and that's very important. But they all meet with quarterback coaches around the country who tell them what we're going to ask. They're ready for us. And they're smart, hence they play the position in the first place. In the grand scheme of things, it doesn't really help. It's an inexact science; is it any wonder we're not very good at it?"

So why did Jeff Garcia, Warren Moon, Tony Romo, Jake Delhomme and Dave Krieg go undrafted and succeed? Why were Jamarcus Russell, Heath Shuler, Todd Marinovich, Andre Ware and David Carr high first-rounders who flamed out? Mentality? Bad scouting? Or is it simply beyond the control of the 32 teams?

Leaf sits across the table in jeans and a hoody. The poster boy for draft busts looks tanned and fit. It's 21 years

since the Indianapolis Colts had to choose between him and Manning.

Manning entered the NFL boasting a rich family name following father Archie's pro career and four strong years at Tennessee; Leaf was the cannon-armed West Coast glamour kid coming off a junior season in which he led Washington State to their first Pac-10 Championship with more than 330 yards passing per game. If Manning was polish, Leaf was dynamism. In the end, Manning finished his career as a sure first-ballot Hall-of-Famer with two Super Bowl rings, while Leaf was out of the league in four years after a combination of poor play and worse behaviour. "I had it all," he tells *Gridiron*. "And I blew it."

"When I came into the NFL," he adds, "three things were very important to me: money, power and prestige. I was powerful because I was a famous athlete. I had prestige because I was doing what everybody wanted to do. And I had a lot of money. I didn't fail until I got to the highest level, so a lot of my bad behaviour was covered up by how I performed. Once my career started to go downhill, those behaviours were given a national spotlight."

McCloughan laughs as we read that quote. Not at Leaf's downfall, but how the words underline one of his most important factors for evaluating a quarterback. "There's a joke I heard a few years ago that went around campus at Washington State, 'What's the difference between God and Ryan Leaf?'. The punchline was, 'God doesn't think he's Ryan Leaf'. It reminded me of sitting down with those veteran scouts I mentioned. They told me to never underestimate where a kid grew up, the size of town, of the high school and the college town. Because lots of guys from small towns have never been challenged. They're the big dog; the alpha. And that's what Ryan was: a small-town, all-everything kid who went to Pullman – which is a really small university town. And we're surprised he can't handle the NFL? He'd never been challenged. That's nobody's fault. It's just circumstance."

Leaf, who spent more than two



FACTFILE

FULL NAME: Scot G. McCloughan

DATE OF BIRTH: March 1, 1971

PLACE OF BIRTH: Alameda, CA

COLLEGE: Wichita State

WHO THE HECK? Former NFL executive who made his name ‘shopping for groceries’ as GM in San Francisco and Washington, and building a Super Bowl-winning Seahawks roster.

BEST OF TIMES: A college baseball star and MLB draftee of both the New York Mets and Toronto Blue Jays, McCloughan got his NFL scouting break with the Green Bay Packers, where father Kent’s former Oakland colleague Ron Wolf remembered family tales of watching college player tape on a film projector in their basement.

WORST OF TIMES: His days as GM in both San Francisco and Washington ended abruptly amid personal issues and a battle with alcoholism.

years in jail and was addicted to prescription drugs, is now a councillor, coach and college football analyst for ESPN. “I’m the only Montanan to be drafted in the first round,” he adds. “There are more first-round picks in the Manning family than from the state of Montana. There was no trailblazer for me, so this was the only way I knew. Throw in millions of dollars, scrutiny of the national media and, if your temperament’s not ready or right, it can be combustive. It all blew up in my face and rightfully so with the way I behaved. I blamed a lot of people. But I wasn’t capable of living life on life’s terms when it came to being an NFL quarterback.”

The San Diego Chargers weren’t the only ones fooled. Most of the league fell in love with Leaf and

were unaware of the issues bubbling beneath the surface. Indianapolis Colts general manager Bill Polian held the first pick in 1998. Despite his own scouts favouring Leaf, the Hall-of-Fame executive knew Manning was the guy three-quarters through the evaluation process.

“We looked at all the film,” he tells *Gridiron*, “and had started to pretty dramatically change the level of background work done in terms of investigating players, their personality and character. Once that was complete, it was clear Peyton was the guy. It wasn’t a hard decision. We knew it probably wasn’t going to be very popular. But, you know, his statue’s there today. He walks on water in Indianapolis. The stadium is the ‘House That Peyton Built.’ But in the ‘papers at that time,

it wasn’t a popular pick. Ryan Leaf was the choice of the media.”

Tony Dungy – who would coach Manning to his first title but was with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 1998 – doesn’t feel Leaf’s popularity was solely a media creation. “Don’t let people tell you differently. Manning vs Leaf was really split,” he tells *Gridiron*. “We weren’t looking for a quarterback with the Bucs, but I remember it well, and it was really split.”

Despite his conviction, Polian enlisted the help of former 49ers coach Bill Walsh. Although Walsh ultimately sided with Manning, he was adamant Leaf would be a significant NFL talent. “He is gifted, with a natural throwing motion that is so quick,” Walsh said in his evaluation. “With a flick of his wrist, he can get the ball just

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

Running the numbers on 1998 NFL Draft rivals Peyton Manning and Ryan Leaf

PEYTON MANNING
(TENN 1994-97)

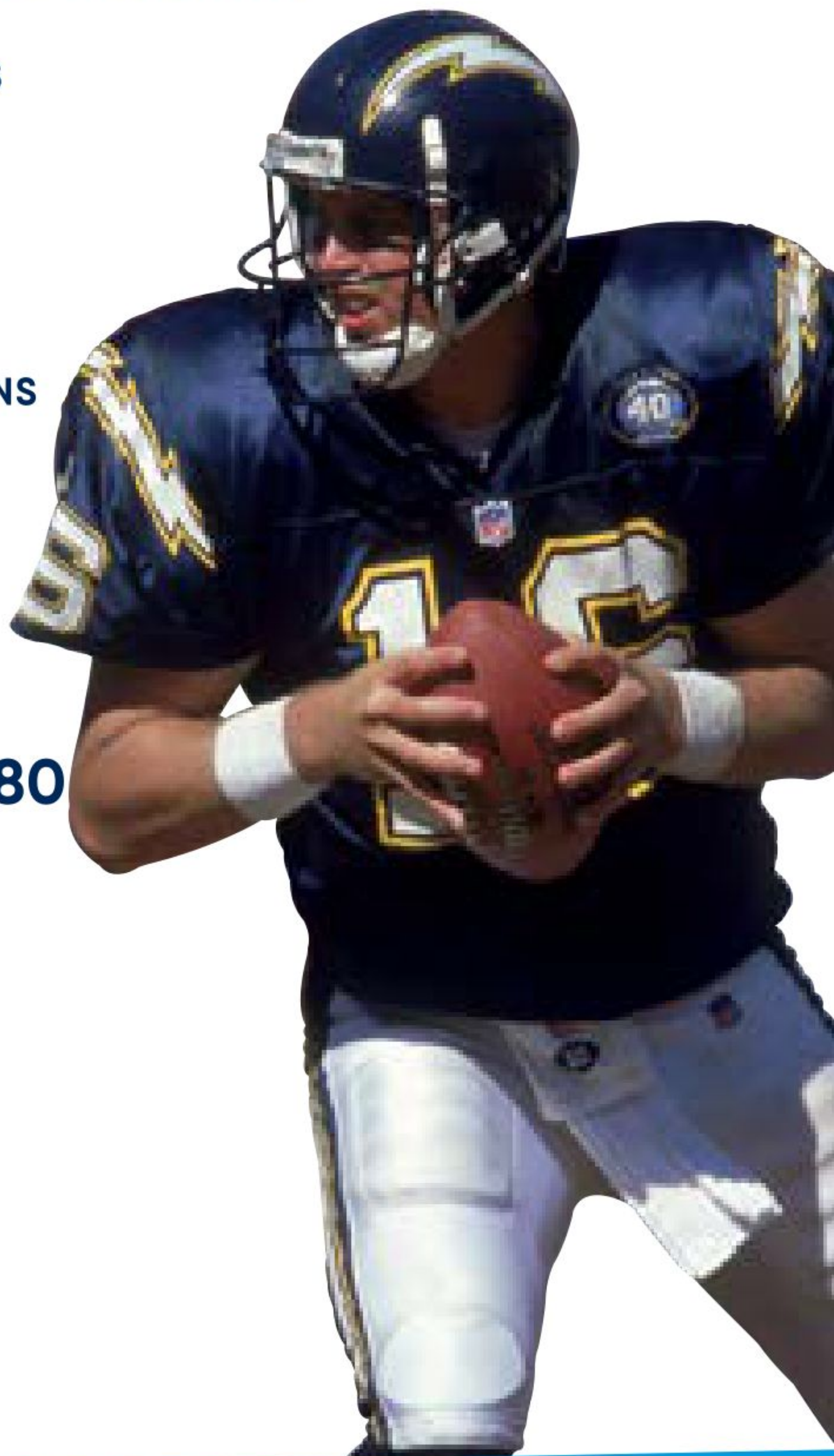
RYAN LEAF
(WSU 1995-97)

MEASURABLES

22 YEARS 1 MONTH	AGE	21 YEARS 11 MONTHS
6FT 5INS	HEIGHT	6FT 5INS
230LBS	WEIGHT	261LBS
27.71	BMI	31.37
31.5INS	ARM	33.88INS
10.13INS	HAND	10.5INS

COLLEGE STATS

863/1381	COMP/ATTs	473/880
62.5	COMP %	53.8
11,201	YDs	7,433
12.9	YARDS/ATT	8.4
89	TDs	59
33	INTs	24
147.1	QB RATING	141.4



about anywhere he wants. He is a good competitor, amazingly agile, and as smooth and graceful in his movement as a big man can be. He handled the Washington State offense beautifully. In a sense, it was an aerial circus.”

Scouts were divided on who should be No. 1. *Sports Illustrated* quoted one as saying, ‘Although he’d done an excellent job of getting the most out his abilities, Manning wasn’t as natural a player as Leaf’. Another argued whether Peyton would get better in the NFL and that, while he lacked ‘Hall-of-Fame skills’, he would have a ‘solid and productive

career’. Interestingly, while Leaf’s scouting reports eulogised over arm talent, few featured much on traits that would signal his downfall.

Was Manning vs Leaf poor scouting, a lack information or just one of those things? After all, NFL teams spend hundreds of thousands of dollars each year investigating prospects using in-house security personnel, often with law-enforcement backgrounds. At the Scouting Combine, players meet the league’s security representatives and all 300-plus participants fill out a standard background check that aims to find information other teams

may not have, creating a level playing field. Several days prior to the draft, each team’s security director compares the NFL’s findings to their own. The double-checking limits major mistakes.

Or at least it’s supposed to.

“Guys can be jerks, but I’ve never seen a player that worked harder at alienating his teammates through bad character decisions,” says the man who drafted Leaf, Hall-of-Famer Bobby Beathard. “Junior Seau, Rodney Harrison, they came to me and said, ‘Bobby, this guy is killing me.’” And Leaf agrees. “I dealt with my teammates so poorly.

I had plenty of opportunities to get guidance but, when they were critical, I pushed them away. I was making \$5million a year and miserable doing something I'd wanted to do since I was four. The third game of my career, we played Kansas City and I played as poorly as I've ever played. I completed one-of-15 with two interceptions. I yelled at a reporter, and can almost narrow it down to a feeling where that was where my career ended. Three games in, a 22-year-old kid."

If Leaf is everything a team needs to avoid off the field, what is it general managers look for on it? Most deem arm strength and accuracy critical, judging whether X can throw short, intermediate and deep to essentially answer the question you hear often: 'Can he make NFL throws?'. But there are many other enquiries crucial to the puzzle: What are his footwork and mechanics like? Can he move the pocket and throw off different platforms? Is he elusive enough to avoid the rush and athletic enough to make plays with his feet? Is he receptive to coaching? Is he poised? Tough? Thick-skinned enough to deal with the media?

Even if you tick all those boxes, are you guaranteed to get the man? McCloughan says those things are important, but that it still comes back to the unmeasurables. Which is why he chose Smith over Rodgers in 2005.

Seven years on from Manning vs Leaf, the NFL found itself in a similar predicament with two quarterbacks dominating the pre-draft analysis. Smith was a 6ft 4in, 217lb passer who ran a spread offense under Urban Meyer at Utah, won the Mountain West Player of the Year, finished fourth in Heisman voting and led the Utes to Fiesta Bowl glory. He was safe, cerebral and non-confrontational. On the flip side was Rodgers, a California kid who graduated from Jeff Tedford's passer-friendly Cal system with a strong arm and will. The 49ers, coming off a 2-14 season with a new head coach (Mike Nolan) and VP of personnel (McCloughan), needed a quarterback.

Gridiron speaks to the funny, gregarious, self-deprecating and

brutally honest McCloughan a couple of days after Green Bay knock Seattle out of the playoffs, aided by two or three Rodgers dimes on third down. He laughs when we remind him he chose a solid game manager over a first-ballot Hall-of-Famer. "Hindsight is 20/20," says McCloughan. "I was young, just 34, and probably subconsciously had echoes of Manning/Leaf in the back of my mind. I was intrigued by Alex and the physical talent he had; the upside. I knew he'd come from the spread, but I was also sure he'd pick up the pro system we were running. But it wasn't cut and dried."

Three hours up I-80, east from the 49ers offices in the small town of Chico, Rodgers felt differently. In fact, he was absolutely confident of being taken No. 1 overall. "I just thought it was the perfect situation," he said. "California kid who'd been a lifelong Niner fan. I thought I was the most NFL-ready quarterback coming out of college because I played in a pro-style system. I just thought I'd go first."



WHEN I CAME INTO THE NFL THREE THINGS WERE VERY IMPORTANT TO ME: MONEY, POWER AND PRESTIGE"

So why didn't he?

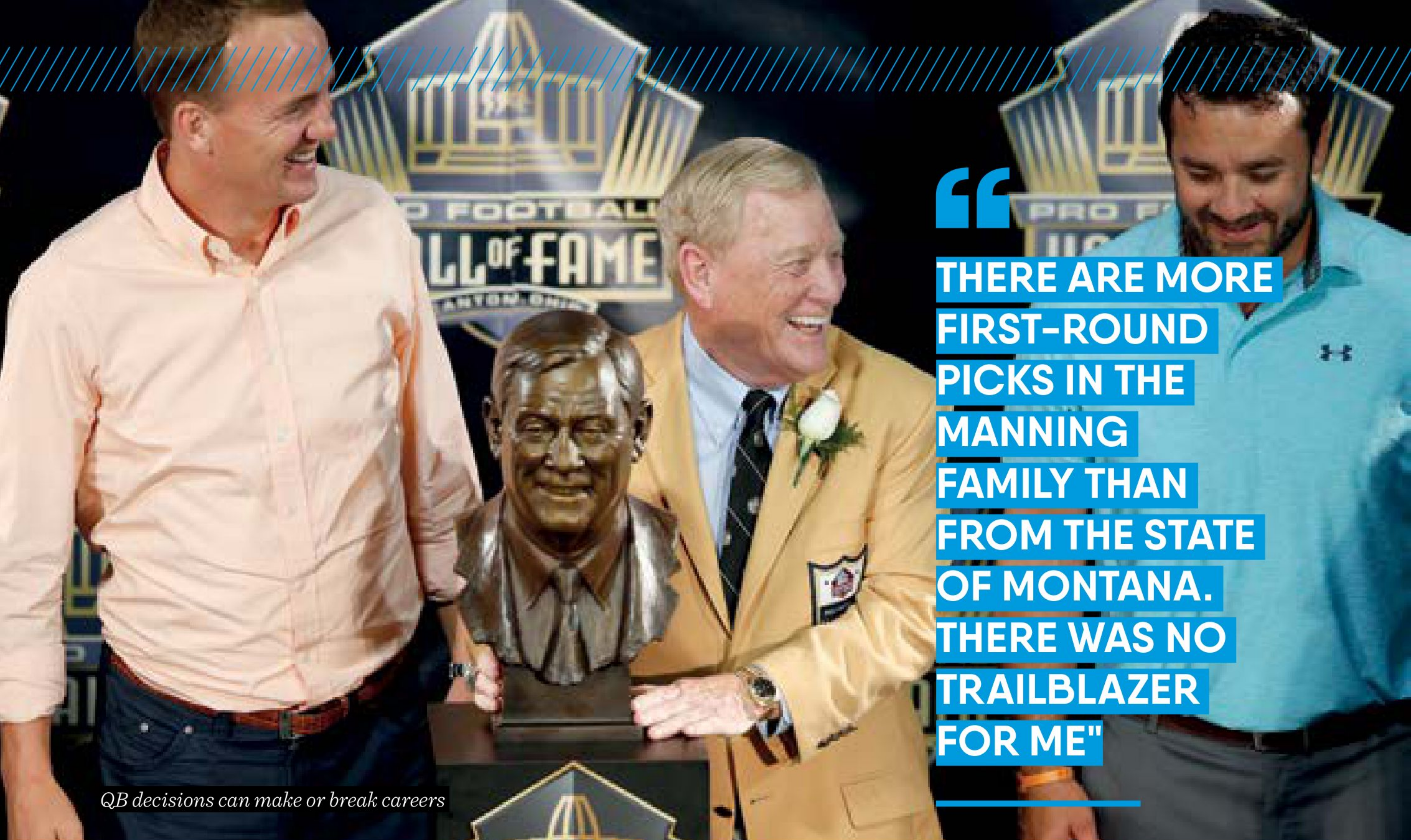
"Aaron was a damn good quarterback," says McCloughan reflectively. "He had a better workout than Alex; it blew me away. A lights-out throwing exhibition. On pure talent, Aaron was the guy. But it came down to personality because we thought Alex had the better chance of being more consistent. Aaron was moody, and rubbed some players and coaches up the wrong way – which made us nervous. Look, we were a

bad team and I was looking for the whole package. I got it wrong."

McCloughan took Smith first overall while Rodgers famously fell to Green Bay at 24. The former started straight away, while the latter sat for three years behind Hall-of-Famer Brett Favre. How big a role did where they were picked have on their careers? "I think it was huge," says McCloughan. "Alex had five offensive coordinators in his first five seasons, whereas Aaron has had two head coaches in 14 years. That matters. If I'd known it would be musical chairs for Alex in terms of who was teaching him and the changes in the offense, I wouldn't have picked him. Hell, I wouldn't have picked either! Alex wasn't learning how to be an NFL quarterback. He was just learning new terminology. In Green Bay, Aaron got to see the game and it slowed down for him. That's part of why he's so special. He got to live the system without being forced to play it."

Over the last five years, the NFL has progressed very quickly, especially systematically. As it embraces younger head coaches like Sean McVay and Kyle Shanahan and ushers out some of the older guard, there's an offensive revolution happening. In the past, where teams tried to fit square pegs into round holes, they're now embracing collegiate concepts young quarterbacks thrive in. Four-wide-receiver shotgun sets, with one read and throw, are no longer just the norm on Saturdays. Passers feel immediately comfortable, rather than being stuck under centre in two-back, two-tight-end offenses alien to the way they've always played. More than 70% of the NFL is played out of the shotgun or pistol; in 1996, it was 7% and 13 teams did not take a single snap from the 'gun!

The Super Bowl LIV quarterbacks come from offenses that, 10 years ago, would have been NFL no-no's: Patrick Mahomes thrived in an Air Raid system at Texas Tech, while Jimmy Garoppolo piloted Dino Babers' up-tempo spread attack. Now those schemes are omnipresent and the term 'pro-style quarterback' is as antiquated as the fullback position. But the scouting community is still



“**THERE ARE MORE FIRST-ROUND PICKS IN THE MANNING FAMILY THAN FROM THE STATE OF MONTANA. THERE WAS NO TRAILBLAZER FOR ME”**

QB decisions can make or break careers

a small business. Pick any team across the league and they will have scouts with more than two decades' experience. Old habits die hard.

There's a scene in the 2001 film *Moneyball*, where Oakland A's GM Billy Beane, played by Brad Pitt, walks into a scouting meeting with multiple veteran talent evaluators.

"He's got an ugly girlfriend," one says.

"What does that matter?" replies another.

"Ugly girlfriend means no confidence," says a third.

Beane quietens the room and then says: "Guys, you're talking like this is business as usual. And it's not. You're sat around saying the same old nonsense as if we're selling jeans. We've got to think differently. Adapt or die."

Finally, the NFL is adapting. "The systems issue is fascinating for scouts," said one AFC evaluator to *Gridiron* on the condition of anonymity. "Now we ask whether the player's production or lack thereof is a result of scheme. So how would Player A produce if he was on Player B's team? That's one of the fun parts of this: comparing and contrasting players talent-wise and in terms of traits, personality, work ethic, injuries and off-field issues."

Music to McCloughan's ears. "This is exactly what we should be doing," he says. "Within the past decade,

organisations have lost many old-school philosophies. That whole, 'It's my system and we're not changing' schtick. It doesn't work now. Look at the spread stuff they're running in college. Hell, I remember 15 years ago when Alex [Smith] had his first day of practice and I went outside to watch because I wanted to see how he'd handle it. Mike McCarthy was our offensive coordinator, and he came over and said Alex just told him he'd never run a huddle in high school or college. Ever. I was like, 'How is this possible?'. These days that's the rule, not exception.

"We've always expected guys to come in and be good right off the bat. Understand the play call, read it back in the huddle, do it loud enough so the other 10 guys hear you, watch the play clock, deal with the crowd, read the defense at the line, seven, six, five, adjust to the late shifts, change the protection. That's before the ball even touches their damn hands. And we wonder why kids fail when, on top of that, we're taking away the offense they've thrived in and put them in something they've never seen before!" He breathes out heavily. "Look, it goes back to what I said at the very start: there's no test for looking a guy in the eyes late in the fourth quarter and seeing control. That's what Brady has.

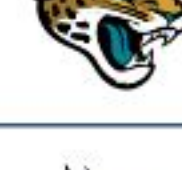
That's what Russell Wilson has. That's why they're different. Russell is right up there with the very best. And I should know; I picked him."

McCloughan isn't the only one who can select great players. Bill Parcells knew a thing or two as co-architect of many great drafts with the New York Giants, Patriots, New York Jets and Dallas Cowboys. Parcells instilled very strict criteria for selecting passers: a seven-point checklist which he believed could eliminate risk and immaturity, placing value on experience, accuracy and big-game mentality. Parcells wanted each quarterback to be a three-year starter and college senior who graduated and started a minimum of 30 games, winning at least 23. He also wanted a 2:1 touchdown-to-interception ratio and a 60% completion percentage.

Since 1999, only a handful of passers have met that test: Drew Brees, Robert Griffin III, Byron Leftwich, Matt Leinart, Andrew Luck, Eli Manning, Marcus Mariota, Chad Pennington, Philip Rivers, Tim Tebow, Baker Mayfield, Brett Rypien and Ryan Finley. Two likely Hall-of-Famers, two very good franchise passers, one very solid starter, one average starter and four busts, with three too young to yet judge. "I think the game's moved on from things like

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

The first-round QBs who either burned brightly or flamed out in the past decade

NAME	COLLEGE	CLASS/POS	NFL TEAM	NOW?
SAM BRADFORD	OKLA	2010 / 1 ST		Injury-hit current FA
TIM TEBOW	FLA	2010 / 25 TH		Pro baseball with NY Mets
CAM NEWTON	AUB	2011 / 1 ST		Still Panthers #1 – literally!
JAKE LOCKER	WAS	2011 / 8 TH		Retired citing lack of desire
BLAINE GABBERT	MIZZ	2011 / 10 TH		Backup to Jamies Winston at the Bucs
CHRISTIAN PONDER	FSU	2011 / 12 TH		5-year FA, but at least married to ESPN's Sam Ponder
ANDREW LUCK	STAN	2012 / 1 ST		Retired citing injury issues
ROBERT GRIFFIN III	BAY	2012 / 2 ND		Backup to Lamar Jackson at the Ravens
RYAN TANNEHILL	TAMU	2012 / 8 TH		Enjoying resurgence with Titans
BRANDON WEEDEN	OKST	2012 / 22 ND		FA, presumed missing under giant US flag
E.J. MANUEL	FSU	2013 / 16 TH		Retired, imminent ACC Network analyst
BLAKE BORTLES	UCF	2014 / 3 RD		Backup to Jared Goff at the Rams
JOHNNY MANZIEL	TAMU	2014 / 22 ND		On the shelf after brief CFL, AAF appearances
TEDDY BRIDGEWATER	LOU	2014 / 32 ND		Current backup to Drew Brees at Saints
JAMEIS WINSTON	FSU	2015 / 1 ST		Still starting in Tampa, founder of 30:30 Club
MARCUS MARIOTA	ORE	2015 / 2 ND		Backup to Ryan Tannehill with Titans
JARED GOFF	CAL	2016 / 1 ST		Still starter for LA Rams
CARSON WENTZ	UND	2016 / 2 ND		Injury-prone, but still starting for Eagles
PAXTON LYNCH	MEM	2016 / 26 TH		Backup to the backup to the backup at the Steelers
MITCHELL TRUBISKY	NC	2017 / 2 ND		Clinging to starting role with the Bears
PATRICK MAHOMES	TTU	2017 / 10 TH		Slings it as 2018 MVP and Super Bowl LIV MVP
DESHAUN WATSON	CLE	2017 / 12 TH		Enjoying better protection as starter for the Texans
BAKER MAYFIELD	OKLA	2018 / 1 ST		Controversial but still starting for the Browns
SAM DARNOLD	USC	2018 / 3 RD		Surviving mono to helm the Jets
JOSH ALLEN	WYO	2018 / 7 TH		Gradually winning critics over as starter for the Bills
JOSH ROSEN	UCLA	2018 / 10 TH		Backup to Ryan Fitzpatrick at Dolphins
LAMAR JACKSON	LOU	2018 / 32 ND		2019 MVP as Ravens play to his strengths
KYLER MURRAY	OKLA	2019 / 1 ST		Impressive rookie campaign after height concerns
DANIEL JONES	DUKE	2019 / 6 TH		Giants starter even before Eli Manning retirement
DWAYNE HASKINS	OSU	2019 / 15 TH		Jury is still out in DC

that,” says McCloughan. “Especially in the last few years. The evolution has been great for the game as a spectacle, but it’s made veteran evaluators reassess all they’ve ever been taught.”

So how does a man who came into the league as a regional scout 26 years ago countenance the new era of college passers: mobile, undersized by classic NFL standards with more experience running an RPO offense than taking snaps from under centre?

“I’m very flexible,” he says firmly. “I’ll get high-school stats and work through those. I’m not worried about completion percentage, touchdowns and picks. I can give you a list of passers with sub-60 percent completion percentages, like Matt Stafford and Matt Ryan, who’ve been very successful pros. Then I have another list of hyper-accurate kids, like Brian Brohm and RGIII, who haven’t parlayed high completions in college into consistent pro performance. So I just value something greater than that.

“Wins are important, but comeback wins are vital. If you’re down in a game and you’ve shown what it takes to come back and win, I care. If you’ve done it consistently in the fourth quarter, that’s huge. After that, I’m an open book. When I get them in a room, I want eye contact, excitement for the game, assertiveness. I want to know how a kid’s wired, whether he’s a leader of men and how he’ll go from good to great. I value that more than the number of college starts you have and how tall you are. Look at Zach Thomas, Frank Gore or Russell Wilson. You can’t ever measure what they have inside, yet they’ve always been told they’re too small or too light; that they don’t fit how the NFL thinks they should be.”

“And don’t forget,” he added with a light jab at Parcells, “the Jets scouts begged Bill to draft Tom Brady and he took a cornerback instead.”

Jokes aside, McCloughan’s right. How many undersized passers have the NFL snubbed because they didn’t fit what was deemed the norm while ignoring the obvious and drafting 6ft 5in or bigger oaks like Dan McGwire,



PETE [CARROLL] WAS A LITTLE RETICENT AND KEPT SAYING, ‘HE’S SHORT, HE’S SHORT’. WE’D FIRE BACK ABOUT DREW BREES AND THEN PETE WOULD SAY THAT BREES WAS DIFFERENT BECAUSE HE ‘WAS SPECIAL’. JOHN AND I KEPT ASSURING HIM THAT RUSSELL COULD BE SPECIAL TOO”

Brock Osweiler and Blake Bortles? Would 6ft Timmy Chang, holder of numerous collegiate passing records, be more valued today? Or 6ft 1in Graham Harrell, the first player to post consecutive 5,000-yard seasons in NCAA history? Or 5ft 10in Doug Flutie? “I watch the style of the offenses and think, ‘Boy, I could thrive in these offenses,” Flutie tells *Gridiron*. “It’s the style I played in Canada: wide open, zone reads. And we actually ran RPO stuff there too. By the end of my career, it was getting more acceptable to move around. But earlier it was so frustrating; it was tight formations, seven-man protections, and having to stay in the pocket.”

All of which begs the question: how far would 5ft 10in Wilson have fallen were it not for McCloughan?

We’re all guilty of being prisoners of the moment but, for *Gridiron*, there’s rarely been much doubt over the quality of Seattle’s superstar passer. If we were launching a

franchise tomorrow, he’d be the unanimous pick at quarterback.

At NC State, Wilson was the best passer in college football and, a year later as a graduate transfer with Wisconsin, put together a season for the ages, outplaying every quarterback in the nation – including the five taken before him in the 2012 draft: Andrew Luck, Griffin, Ryan Tannehill, Brandon Weeden and Osweiler. By every possible metric bar one, he should have been a top-three pick who pushed Luck hard to be taken first overall. His college career and skillset demanded it. Because he was undersized – his official combine measurement was 5ft 10ins and 5/8ths – Wilson fell to the 75th pick.

Two months before selection weekend, former Carolina Panthers quarterback and director of the IMG Madden Football Academy, Chris Weinke, said of Wilson: “If he was 6ft 5ins, he’d probably go No. 1.” Current Oakland Raiders head coach Jon Gruden, then an analyst for ESPN’s *Monday Night Football*, concurred: “The only issue with Russell is his height. That’ll be the reason he’s not picked in the first round.”

So, what did the man who eventually chose Wilson think and why was there so much fear about undersized passers? “The year before, we had a chance to take Andy Dalton,” says McCloughan who, alongside John Schneider, was responsible for building a Seattle team that went to two Super Bowls behind draft picks like Wilson, Richard Sherman, Bobby Wagner, Earl Thomas and Kam Chancellor. “But he didn’t really fit our system even though we really didn’t have a quarterback who could win. We signed Matt Flynn as a free-agent who I knew from my Green Bay days, but really liked Russell from a long way out. I did a lot of work on him pre-draft and everything checked out. I loved him and John did too.

“But Pete [Carroll] was a little reticent and kept saying, ‘He’s short, he’s short’. We’d fire back about Drew Brees and then Pete would say that Brees was different because he ‘was special’. John and I kept assuring him that Russell could be special too. I’ve had the luxury of having the

No. 1 pick overall and he ended up being a good player – but not as good as he could have been. Then I took one in round three and he will be a first-ballot Hall-of-Famer. They're different cats, but it's the 'It' factor. Alex was 21 when he came out and had all the intangibles. But, with Russell, he transferred to Wisconsin, a place known for toughness and work ethic and, within five weeks, was named a captain. That never happens. Never!

"For him to go to a school where he wasn't known and, all of a sudden, have his peers vote him a captain? That was huge; a 'wow'. I watched his junior and senior years, especially his fourth-quarter play. And remember, this is a big school, playing against Michigan and Ohio State every season. So how was he when the score was within 14 points? Tick. What about on third-and-five and longer? Another tick. We looked at a lot of avenues. Every time it was a tick, apart from the height."

McCloughan and Schneider stuck to their guns and persuaded Carroll that Wilson would be really good. They almost drafted him in round two but took Wagner instead, then sweated through the third as, first, Andy Reid and then McCarthy called to say they were picking him in Philadelphia at 59 and Green Bay at 62.

Finally, Seattle got their man at 75 and haven't looked back. He's a two-time Super Bowl quarterback and seven-time Pro Bowler who, at age 31, is getting better. You could also make a solid argument that no passer has changed the modern game in the way Wilson has. His stature opened doors for Baker Mayfield (6ft) and Kyler Murray (5ft 10ins) to go first overall in 2018 and 2019 respectively.

Ten years ago, you'd have been laughed out of the NFL for suggesting two quarterbacks measuring 6ft or under would go No. 1 in successive years. But Wilson's accuracy, leadership and durability – he's never missed a game in eight seasons – made it possible. "At the top of the draft, there's a big focus on the physical," says Dan Orlovsky, who played quarterback in the NFL for 12 seasons with four teams and is now a highly regarded analyst



for ESPN. "For the other positions, the physical qualities matter. But they're the least important thing for quarterbacks. They can minimise a height problem by becoming obsessed with their craft, understanding how to find open throwing lanes and creating space and sightlines to throw. It's always been that way; it's just that the NFL has created these invisible barriers."

There are so many factors that go into why the league continues to miss on quarterbacks. Scouts and GMs fall in love with false idols, and miss or ignore warning signs because they're reticent to change. Teams that pick first are also some of the worst in football, often due to bad talent evaluation and development. In the end, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The nature of the sport, combined with how the human mind and body develop, means busts will always happen, just as Hall-of-Famers fall through cracks. Mistakes have to be lived with: from the personnel director who said Rodgers "is very rigid mechanically", or the Super Bowl-winning coach who called JaMarcus

Russell "a can't-miss prospect". Or the 13 scouts polled by a newspaper who claimed Cam Newton would be, at best, a 'sub-standard starter'.

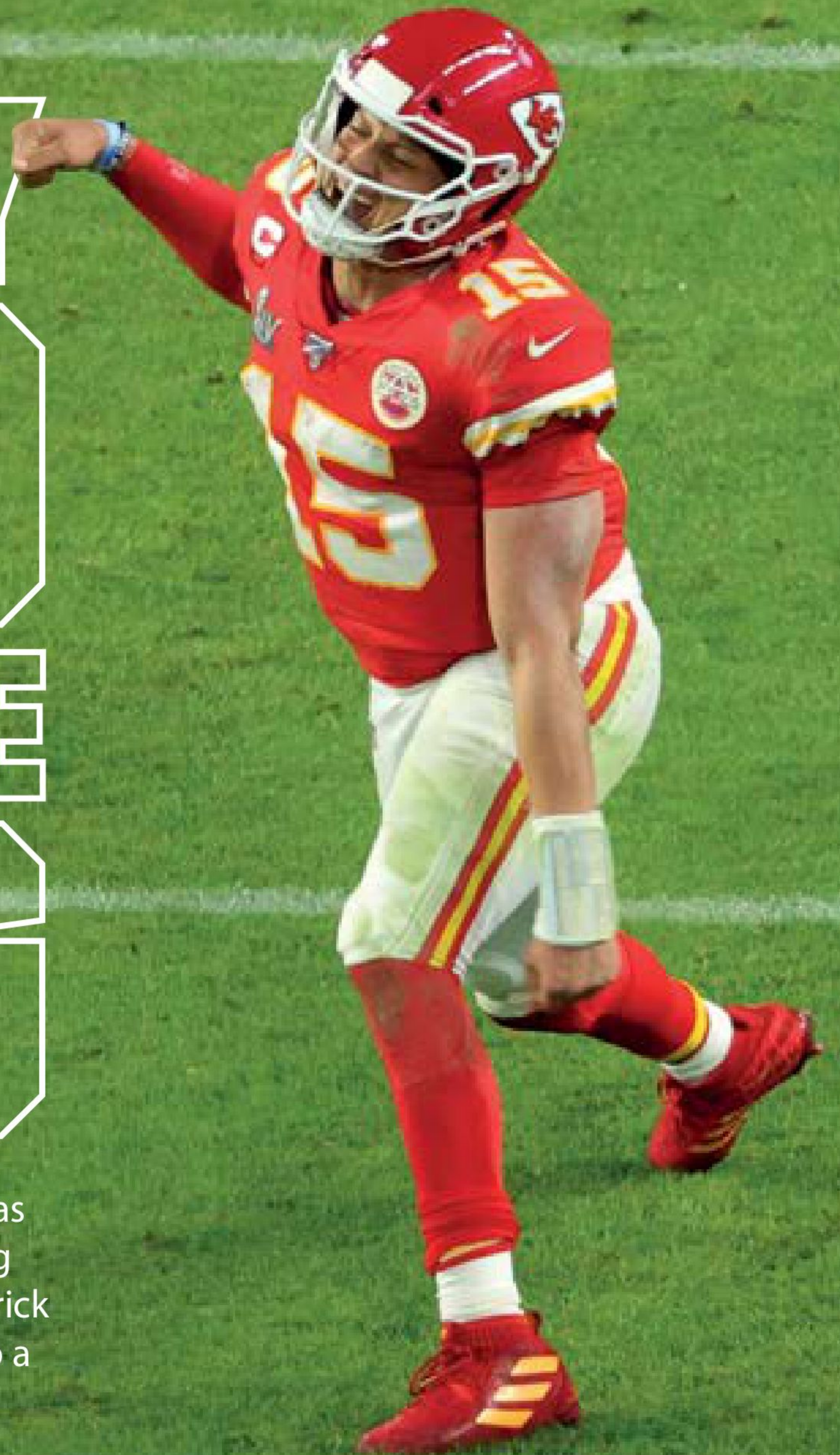
Marino fell below Todd Blackledge and Tony Eason. Ozzie Newsome traded up for Kyle Boller. Even the great Walsh stumbled upon Joe Montana accidentally. The evolution of the position in terms of parameters around size and movement may make things easier for progressive teams, but more difficult for those stuck in the past: the reason Green Bay, San Francisco and Baltimore are winners on the field is because they're winners off it. You don't go from Favre to Rodgers, Montana to Steve Young to Garcia, Joe Flacco to Lamar Jackson because of luck.

Or do you?

"Part of it is luck," says a laughing McCloughan. "When you go back and look, the ones that didn't make it lacked the 'It' factor."

"But make no mistake, we got lucky with Russell – just like the Patriots got lucky with Brady. But what do I know? I'm the guy who took Alex Smith over Aaron Rodgers..." **G**

THE BOY WHO WOULD BE KING



The value of a true franchise quarterback was never more evident than during the closing stages of Super Bowl LIV in Miami, where Patrick Mahomes continued the remarkable start to a career that has the NFL world buzzing.

As tension in the iconic Coliseum's stands mounted to create an electrifying atmosphere that contrasted sharply with the sterile soundtrack of many Rams games since their return to Los Angeles, Patrick Mahomes looked set to write the latest remarkable chapter in the story of his first year as the Kansas City Chiefs' starting quarterback.

There was an unmistakable sense that all of Mahomes' scarcely believable interventions over the preceding weeks – from no-look to left-handed passes – had been building to this point. He stood, unexpectedly after the NFL was forced to switch the venue from

Mexico City, in the City of Stars, poised to continue his ascent to becoming the league's leading man.

The scoreline – on a balmy night where supporters of both stripes felt they were bearing witness to not only a Super Bowl LVIII preview but glimpsing into the futuristic all-passing, all-points NFL – was 54-51 Rams with 1:44 remaining. Mahomes retook the field at Kansas City's 26-yard line with three timeouts in his pocket.

After two incompletions, he threaded the needle between the Rams' zone coverage to hit Tyreek Hill on an out for 26, and a feeling of inevitability descended over the stands. With animosity between Chiefs and Rams supporters palpable, those in red and white

looked contented despite trailing on the scoreboard. Mahomes had already led Kansas City near field-goal range, but he and everybody else was thinking only about seven. A walkoff touchdown.

Instead, it would prove a rare derailment for the runaway train careering towards the NFL's MVP award. The ensuing play saw Mahomes fake a handoff, take a deep drop and be forced to sidestep left quickly in the pocket. With Samson Ebukam bearing down, diving and then catching a small piece of his arm, the quarterback threw an uncharacteristic prayer that wobbled from his hand with a shadow of the usually velocity and into the grateful arms of Rams cornerback Marcus Peters.

As he stomped to the sideline,

A PATH OF PERSEVERANCE

Andy Reid’s head-coaching record from Philly to Lombardi

YEAR	TEAM	RECORD	WIN %	DIVISION RANK	POSTSEASON
1999		5-11	.313	5 TH	
2000		11-5	.688	2 ND	NFC Divisional round
2001		11-5	.688	1 ST	NFC Championship Game
2002		12-4	.750	1 ST	NFC Championship Game
2003		12-4	.750	1 ST	NFC Championship Game
2004		13-3	.813	1 ST	Lost Super Bowl XXXIX
2005		6-10	.375	4 TH	
2006		10-6	.625	1 ST	NFC Divisional round
2007		8-8	.500	4 TH	
2008		9-6-1	.594	2 ND	NFC Championship Game
2009		11-5	.688	2 ND	NFC Wild Card round
2010		10-6	.625	1 ST	NFC Wild Card round
2011		8-8	.500	2 ND	
2012		4-12	.250	4 TH	
2013		11-5	.688	2 ND	AFC Wild Card round
2014		9-7	.563	2 ND	
2015		11-5	.688	2 ND	AFC Divisional round
2016		12-4	.750	1 ST	AFC Divisional round
2017		10-6	.625	1 ST	AFC Wild Card round
2018		12-4	.750	1 ST	AFC Championship Game
2019		12-4	.750	1 ST	Won Super Bowl LIV

his purposefulness betraying frustration, Mahomes was approached by the only other player on the field possessing transcendent ability. Aaron Donald wasn’t gloating, but displaying respect. “You’re one helluva football player,” he told the quarterback. “Keep your head up.”

“Mahomes is special,” Donald tells *Gridiron* a little over a year later in downtown Miami, just days before Mahomes’ Super Bowl bow against the San Francisco 49ers, “There are not too many times I give respect like that. But I had to let him know. He’s going to be one of the greats.”

As Donald speaks, the tone is reverential. Which is unusual when discussing a player so young, with such little experience. Particularly in a league that, as Sean Payton once told *Gridiron* following an enquiry about Alvin Kamara and Marshon Lattimore during their rookie years, “doesn’t put people in the Hall of Fame for a couple of good games”.

With Mahomes, it’s just different. He is so unique – blending Aaron Rodgers’ efficiency, Brett Favre’s gun-slinging and Russell Wilson’s scrambling – that all rules go out of the window. And to think, just three years ago, debates raged over whether he warranted a first-round pick. At least in some places.

“
**THERE ARE NOT TOO
MANY TIMES I GIVE
RESPECT LIKE THAT.
BUT I HAD TO LET
HIM KNOW”**

The first steps towards Mahomes’
match-made-in-heaven union with

Kansas City head coach Andy Reid were taken prior to the 2016 season. During the spring, Brett Veatch – the Chiefs director of player personnel who would become their general manager 12 months later – called Reid into his office and explained he was watching their next quarterback.

Texas Tech’s passer, as would be the case following his senior season, was viewed as a raw prospect with some elite traits offset by not possessing the requisite experience in pro schemes to command a top-five NFL Draft selection. Veatch, however, was convinced. “I can only imagine what he’d do in this offense,” the personnel maven confided in Reid.

Over the course of the next few months, Veatch would routinely send Reid clips of Mahomes. The coach, meanwhile, noted in November 2016 that ESPN’s draft gurus Mel Kiper and Todd McShay didn’t even have Mahomes as a first-rounder in their mocks. To which Veatch replied: “This sets up perfectly for us.”

“I remember first seeing Patrick in his sophomore year,” Veach tells *Gridiron*. “They were playing LSU, who were loaded with draft picks on both sides of the ball, and Tech were outmanned. But Pat had that uncanny ability to raise the level of play in his teammates; he’s shown that at every level. Coach Reid is very methodical. I was showing him clips right away but, once coach got fully into the evaluation process with him as well, it didn’t take long for him to become convinced.”



FROM THE MOMENT HE STEPPED ONTO THE FIELD, TALENT-WISE, WE KNEW HE WAS READY. WE KNEW THE SKY WAS THE LIMIT"

The rest, as they say, is history.

Reid and Veach were so convinced Mahomes was *the guy* that they gave up two first-round picks and a third to move up from 27 to 10 to select the quarterback in the 2017 NFL Draft. Then, he was stashed away behind Alex Smith for a season, briefly flickering in a Week 17 start against the Denver Broncos when Kansas City’s playoff berth was secured, before being unleashed on the NFL for that groundbreaking 2018 MVP campaign.

“From the moment he stepped onto the field, talent-wise, we knew he was ready,” says Veach. “He just had to learn to be a pro day in and day out. We knew the sky was the limit, but we had a plan, stuck to it and it’s paying off. It’s pretty cool that he’s our quarterback.”

Since then, Mahomes has not only made his teammates and the Chiefs better, but also his coach. As arguably the most significant offensive mind of his generation and the man sitting sixth on the NFL’s

FACTFILE

FULL NAME

Andrew Walter ‘Andy’ Reid

DATE OF BIRTH

March 19, 1958

PLACE OF BIRTH

Los Angeles, CA

COLLEGE

Brigham Young (BYU)

WHO THE HECK?

Popular food-centric head coach who appears to have cemented his place in the Pro Football Hall of Fame after finally tasting Super Bowl success.

BEST OF TIMES

Following a record 206 wins as head coach without lifting a Lombardi of his own, Reid passed the baton to Ron Rivera as his Chiefs overcame San Francisco in Super Bowl LIV. In the process, Reid turned the page on multiple seasons of playoff heartache headlined by his Philadelphia Eagles losing to the New England Patriots in Super Bowl XXXIX.

WORST OF TIMES

‘Big Red’ would no doubt like to exorcise the footage of his 13-year-old self partaking in a ‘Punt, Pass, Kick’ contest that is wheeled out every time he is in the news. It was first shown on *Monday Night Football* and has become a staple for broadcasters.

all-time wins list for a leading man, Reid was likely already bound for the Hall of Fame prior to Mahomes’ arrival. But there was always a, *well*, ‘but’: the absence of a ring.

“Andy Reid is awesome,” Mahomes stresses to *Gridiron*. “He works his tail off and is in our building until 3:30am or 4am and he works the entire day long. You know that whatever he is telling you is going to be the right thing and it will

allow you to have the most success on the field. Being able to have that communication with him makes it easier on Sundays because we’re on the same page.”

As good as Reid’s schemes are, his career has lacked the transcendent quarterback talent that many other great coaches, from Paul Brown right through to Bill Belichick, have had. As such, he always took teams so far, only to fall at a hurdle where





QB SPECIAL

FACTFILE

FULL NAME

Patrick Lavon Mahomes II

DATE OF BIRTH

Sept 17, 1995

PLACE OF BIRTH

Tyler, TX

COLLEGE

Texas Tech

DRAFT POSITION

Round 1, Pick 10 (2017)

WHO THE HECK?

Charismatic Kansas City Chiefs quarterback winning fans and accolades alike with his unique brand of gunslinger football.

BEST OF TIMES

While winning league and Super Bowl MVP awards – as well as the Lombardi Trophy itself – in his first two full years of action, Mahomes seems to revel in the game, showcasing increasingly eye-catching ways to distribute the pigskin and specialising in postseason comebacks.

WORST OF TIMES

Emerging from a Week 7 goalline pile-up to discover that his right kneecap was dislocated, potentially derailing the Chiefs' 2019 season. Fortunately, the ligaments in Mahomes' knee are more 'relaxed' than usual and, without significant damage, he only sat out two games.

something beyond just schematic innovations was required. "To be in that position, to know you have a young talent like that is amazing for Coach Reid," Super Bowl-winning head coach Brian Billick tells *Gridiron*. "To know you have a run at it with him is special. Every year, you get to start with that."

As Billick spoke, that tone was again present. Reverence. It, truly, had been the theme of the ensuing 10 days.

Prior to heading south down

Florida turnpike towards Miami for Super Bowl LIV, *Gridiron* spent three days in Orlando for the Pro Bowl. It's always a surreal occasion, where the NFL's leading lights throw team allegiances to one side for a relaxed week among their contemporaries in the shadows of Disneyland.

It's also, for many, a bittersweet occasion. Most players would obviously rather spend their time

preparing for the ensuing Super Bowl, but that reality only exists for two teams. Those from the rest, then, turn their attention to the offseason and are asked various questions on their futures and, often, for opinions on the ensuing week's game.

The answers are mostly run-of-the-mill. Interesting when it comes to schematics, but usually lacking depth if individual players are brought up. Except this year, in one

TOO MUCH, TOO YOUNG

He’s only three years into his NFL career, but Patrick Mahomes is already laying milestones.

NUMBER	RECORD/HONOUR	ORGANISATION	SEASON
1	Super Bowl LIV champion		2019
1	Super Bowl LIV MVP		2019
2	Pro Bowl selections		2018 & ‘19
1	First Team All-Pro		2018
1	NFL MVP		2018
1	NFL Offensive Player of the Year		2018
1	NFL Passing TD Leader		2018
1	Bert Bell Award		2018
6	TD passes in single game		2018
50	TD passes in single season		2018
5,097	Passing yards in season		2018
108.9	Career passer rating		2017-19
4	Playoff win		2018-19
.800	Playoff win%		2018-19
10	TD passes thru first 2 games of season		2018
13	TD passes thru first 3 games of season		2018
10	TD passes thru first 3 career games		2017-18
22	TD passes thru first 8 career games		2017-18
22Y 364D	Youngest QB to throw 6 TDs in 1 game		2018
7	Consecutive road games with 3+ TD passes		2018
3,185	First player to throw 3,000+yds in first 10 games		2017-18
8	Consecutive 300+ passing yard games		2018
13	Fewest to 4,000 pass yards and 40+ TD passes		2017-18
24	Fewest to 7,500 career passing yards		2017-19

very specific case. “Man... Mahomes brings a different element,” enthuses stud Pittsburgh Steelers defensive lineman Cam Heyward. “He’s a mobile quarterback, but the best passer along with it! It’s a dangerous combination. I’ve never seen a guy at this stage of his career as advanced. For him not to play his rookie year, then come in his second year so guns

blazing, it’s unbelievable.” Heyward and Donald weren’t the exceptions, but the rule in being at a loss to describe Mahomes’ quality and advanced aptitude relative to experience. Elite players, particularly those who have played against Mahomes, were queuing to throw superlatives. “He is a great quarterback,” says New England

Patriots cornerback Stephon Gilmore, 2019 Defensive Player of the Year. “He can do it all. If he’s scrambling, you’ve got to stay with your guy because he can buy time and throw the ball anywhere on the field. Don’t think he doesn’t have enough arm strength. He can get it anywhere.” When discussing the forthcoming game against San Francisco,

Heyward proved prescient: “He’s that equaliser. He can put them over the top. You’ve seen him really rally the team and get them out of some holes.”

That equaliser was evident throughout a playoff run which, in many ways, was a microcosm of Reid’s career. In every postseason game, things went just about as badly as possible at the beginning, from the Houston Texans taking a 24-0 lead amid multiple gaffes in the divisional round to the Tennessee Titans moving 10-0 ahead and successfully bleeding the clock in the AFC Championship Game’s early stages.

On each occasion, however, the kind of *faux pas* that couldn’t be overcome earlier in Reid’s career as he has shepherded good quarterbacks deep into the postseason became irrelevant. Kansas City racked up 51 points in beating Houston, then eased aside Tennessee. Because, in Mahomes, Reid – like Brown with Otto Graham, Vince Lombardi with Bart Starr, Bill Walsh with Joe Montana and Belichick with Tom Brady – has found his *equaliser*.

The only question, as the fourth quarter wound down in Miami with Kansas City in another hole, was whether Mahomes could deliver one more time. Under the gaze of the Super Bowl’s vast audience.

As the Hard Rock Stadium

lights, now fully in effect following a late afternoon kickoff, shone down seemingly brighter than ever, glistening off Mahomes’ red helmet, he knew it was now or never. The passer had just continued an off-night in the face of San Francisco’s menacing pass-rush, missing a simple pass to Hill that was originally ruled complete before being overturned on review. Troy Aikman, in the Fox Sports commentary booth, said what everybody was thinking: “He’s not played well, Joe. That should have been his easiest completion of the night.”

From reverence to ridicule.

Yet perhaps more significant than any acclaim Mahomes has attracted from those outside of the Chiefs’ operation is the feelings that surround him inside the walls. Prior

to the game, veteran passer Chad Henne had lifted the lid on that to *Gridiron*: “This early on in a career, I’ve never seen anyone better – but it’s not just what he does on the field. Off it, the way he prepares, takes notes and engages as a leader is special. I’m just happy to have been with him these last few years; it’s fun to watch.”



**HE’S THAT
EQUALISER. HE
CAN PUT THEM
OVER THE TOP.”**

As such, while the rest of the NFL world contemplated a damaging off-night for Mahomes at the worst possible time, those in Chiefs colours remained as cool as ever. “It’s like watching Denzel Washington in a movie or LeBron James in the playoffs,” says Tyrann Mathieu in the locker room after the game. “He has that glow; that spark. For him to be that young, and keep his confidence in a Super Bowl against a tough defense who didn’t really give him anything, tells you a lot. He believes in himself and we believe in him.”

Crucially, it wasn’t just the players – but his veteran coach too. On one signature play in Miami, that confidence paid off and altered the course of the biggest game in their lives. As New York was reviewing the previous play, Mahomes asked offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy: “Do we have time to run ‘Wasp?’”

And so it came to pass that – on the play with so much riding on it, both in the context of that game and the careers of regular bridesmaid Reid and his transcendent talent – the veteran head coach with arguably the finest offensive mind in football let Mahomes make the call. Like earlier in the game, when Reid opted for a single-wing play on a crucial fourth down that led to Kansas City’s first touchdown, it

worked only due to the genius behind it. “Their relationship is amazing,” adds Henne. “Coach Reid is always asking Patrick what kinds of things he wants.”

Wasp, known as ‘Gun Trey Right, 3 Jets Chip Wasp Y Funnel’ to Kansas City’s offensive players, sees the Chiefs deploy a three-wide-receiver set to the left side of the formation. On the far left, Sammy Watkins would run a 16-yard in-cut; to his right, Hill would run a deep post corner; and Travis Kelce would run a deep slant right from tight to the formation. Mahomes’ key was to read San Francisco cornerback Emmanuel Moseley because, if he followed Watkins, Hill would be single-covered by safety Jimmie Ward.

That the play worked as designed, leaving one of the most dangerous weapons in the NFL to be covered one-on-one by Ward, illustrates the brilliance of Reid; that it led to a completion was down to Mahomes’ equal skill. For the quarterback, battered and bruised after being feasted upon by the 49ers’ Nick Bosa-led rush all game, took what – in total – might have been a 15-step drop. Then, showing the physical gifts that have left the NFL world purring, delivered a ball that travelled 56 yards in the air – his longest all season – to hit Hill.

Or perhaps, more simplistically, *The Equaliser* equalised.

From there, Mahomes continued his march down the field, then delivered another one and went from goat to landing an MVP award that might well be part of his GOAT resumé a decade from now. If the fourth quarters of Super Bowls are where careers are made, Mahomes is off to a nice start. And few around the NFL are surprised.

Indeed, when Donald told Mahomes better nights lay ahead following his game-losing pick the year before, it was moments like Miami – ending with the quarterback atop a podium clutching the Lombardi Trophy – that he had in mind. The only question now is how many more there will be. “He isn’t going to do anything but keep getting better,” concludes Donald. “That’s the scary thing.” ■



MONEYBALL

with **TOM KISLINGBURY**

The Gridiron QB Model

Gridiron's analytics expert attempts to devise a model to truly assess the NFL's quarterbacks.

Although it's often said that football is the 'ultimate team game', the reality is quite different. In modern times, it revolves around quarterbacks – a fact that only becomes truer as the league throws the ball more and more.

This naturally means that the majority of discussions, debates and arguments are about quarterbacks. The *Gridiron* staff chat is a notable example of this. Given that this is the quarterback issue, I wanted to try to bring some science to our arguments and figure out a way to score quarterbacks and remove some of the contentiousness from the debate.

Of course, some models already exist. So why do we think a new one is needed? Simply because the existing ones all have enough flaws that they're tough to accept.

The NFL has been using passer rating since 1973. It does a fine job – but describes team performance rather than individual quarterback excellence. It fails to factor any difference between pre- and post-catch, so a simple dump pass to a receiver who then beats five men for a long touchdown will give a perfect rating.

ESPN's QBR is better, but still suspect as it heavily favours certain aspects. This year, Lamar Jackson finished with the top score even though he was 22nd in passing yards.

The approach I used was based on indexing factors. Using data from 2009-2018 (some of the more esoteric 2019 data was not available yet), I placed each and every QB on a scale for all key stats, from best performer in those years to worst, and only considered regular-season games to keep it fair.

I then assigned all of those stats

a weighting (numbers that are more indicative of excellence count slightly more) and combined these scores to give a number that allows us to compare players. There are flaws with this just like any other attempt to boil performance down into a single score – but the method is mine and results stack up pretty well, as you'll see.

Weighting was a big part of this, so we resorted to a time-honoured approach to setting them: a big argument. All the *Gridiron* writers had their say before we agreed on the following hierarchy:

3 RD DOWN COVERSION %
PASSING 1 ST DOWNS
PASS YDs PER ATT
COMPLETION %
PASSING TDs
PASSING INTs
PASSING 1 ST DOWN %
PASSING YARDAGE

Of course, this is inherently subjective, so please feel free to tell us how you disagree with the list.

The first way we can use the tool is to look at cumulative production. Here are the best 10 in the study over the entire period:

PLAYER	PASS ATT	COMP PASSES	COMP %	YDs	PASSING YDs PER ATT	TDs	INTs	PASS 1 ST DOWNS	PASS 1 ST DOWN %	3 RD DOWN ATT	3 RD DOWN 1 ST DOWNS	3 RD DOWN CONV %	SCORE	INDEXED SCORE
DREW BREES	6,511	4,533	69.6%	51,161	7.9	352	134	2,570	39.5%	1,704	763	44.8%	4.9	2.13
TOM BRADY	6,336	4,076	64.3%	48,124	7.6	321	85	2,413	38.1%	1,684	685	40.7%	4.8	2.10
AARON RODGERS	5,467	3,538	64.7%	42,598	7.8	309	66	2,166	39.6%	1,542	623	40.4%	4.8	2.06
MATT RYAN	6,387	4,195	65.7%	47,742	7.5	279	122	2,469	38.7%	1,844	783	42.5%	4.6	1.97
PHILIP RIVERS	6,163	4,018	65.2%	48,574	7.9	296	142	2,433	39.5%	1,791	758	42.3%	4.5	1.96
BEN ROETHLISBERGER	5,325	3,462	65.0%	41,582	7.8	262	121	2,057	38.6%	1,495	633	42.3%	4.3	1.84
MATTHEW STAFFORD	5,696	3,559	62.5%	41,036	7.2	237	128	2,115	37.1%	1,674	639	38.2%	4.0	1.72
RUSSELL WILSON	3,777	2,436	64.5%	29,734	7.9	196	63	1,520	40.2%	1,192	442	37.1%	3.9	1.70
PEYTON MANNING	3,420	2,286	66.8%	26,336	7.7	206	86	1,352	39.5%	885	396	44.7%	3.8	1.66
ELI MANNING	5,835	3,619	62.0%	42,420	7.3	262	165	2,018	34.6%	1,734	619	35.7%	3.7	1.61



It's fairly tough to argue with the top names. Brees, Brady and Rodgers have all been at the height of their powers over the chosen years. You may think they belong in a slightly different order, but you can see they're all very close. Ryan, Rivers and Roethlisberger come next. All have been fantastic over the same period, but mostly not quite on the

same level as the top three. After that, we drop off a little bit. Stafford's score includes an abysmal rookie season and he suffers for his poor yards per attempt. Wilson has been a relatively low-volume player and only entered the league in 2012. His third-down conversion rate is also surprisingly poor. Manning retired after 2015 and missed 2011,

so many of his best years are not included here. It's surprising to see Eli Manning scraping in here, but the players after him are just not that inspiring: Alex Smith, Tony Romo, Joe Flacco and Andy Dalton. The other way to use this tool is to look at the best individual seasons, which results in the following top 10:

PLAYER	SEASON	PASS ATT	COMP PASSES	COMP %	PASS YDs	PASS YDs PER ATT	PASS TDs	PASS INTs	PASS 1 ST DOWNS	PASS 1 ST DOWN %	3 RD DOWN ATT	3 RD DOWN 1 ST DOWNS	3 RD DOWN CONV %	SCORE	INDEXED SCORE
PEYTON MANNING	2013	659	450	0.68	5477	8.31	55	10	289	0.44	164	76	0.46	4.70	1.00
DREW BREES	2011	657	468	0.71	5476	8.33	46	14	283	0.43	170	95	0.56	4.53	0.96
PATRICK MAHOMES	2018	580	383	0.66	5097	8.79	50	12	247	0.43	132	64	0.48	4.34	0.92
AARON RODGERS	2011	502	343	0.68	4643	9.25	45	6	224	0.45	139	64	0.46	4.32	0.92
MATT RYAN	2016	534	373	0.70	4944	9.26	38	7	247	0.46	142	60	0.42	4.28	0.91
AARON RODGERS	2014	520	341	0.66	4381	8.43	38	5	237	0.46	146	68	0.47	4.19	0.89
TOM BRADY	2011	611	401	0.66	5235	8.57	39	12	264	0.43	147	61	0.41	4.13	0.88
MATT RYAN	2018	609	422	0.69	4924	8.09	35	7	243	0.40	168	72	0.43	4.10	0.87
TOM BRADY	2012	637	401	0.63	4827	7.58	35	8	258	0.41	172	77	0.45	4.05	0.86
AARON RODGERS	2016	610	401	0.66	4428	7.26	40	7	240	0.39	169	74	0.44	4.03	0.86



The first thing you'll notice is that the players who were at the top of the last chart – Brees, Brady and Rodgers – make up six of 10 slots.

The surprise is that there isn't more of them, even accounting for the quality of player who forced their way in.

Peyton Manning's 2013 was ridiculous. He set NFL records for passing yards and touchdowns, while throwing just 10 interceptions and converting over 46% of his third-

down throws. Brees was similarly amazing in 2011. His third-down conversion rate of almost 56% is simply otherworldly, comfortably the best figure of this period.

Rodgers' 2011 has been forgotten a little, but to throw just six interceptions while averaging 9.2 yards per attempt is genuinely amazing. It was no coincidence the Packers went 15-1.

Patrick Mahomes' 2018 is a more recent memory and we can all recall

how seemingly unstoppable he was, while Matt Ryan delivering two incredible campaigns so close together, in 2016 and 2018, should get him more credit.

It's great to celebrate the best quarterback seasons, but the other side of the argument is equally interesting. Just who have been the worst passers? Here are the 10 poorest seasons (limited to just quarterbacks with at least 250 passing attempts in a given season):

PLAYER	SEASON	PASS ATT	COMP PASSES	COMP %	YDs	YDS PER ATT	TDs	INTs	PASS 1 ST DOWNS	PASS 1 ST DOWN %	3 RD DOWN ATT	3 RD DOWN 1 ST DOWNS	3 RD DOWN CONV %	SCORE	INDEXED SCORE
DEREK ANDERSON	2010	328	169	51.5%	2,066	6.3	7	10	100	30%	103	27	26.2%	1.9	0.41
JOHN SKELTON	2011	275	151	54.9%	1,913	7.0	11	14	91	33%	82	24	29.3%	1.9	0.41
MATTHEW STAFFORD	2009	377	201	53.3%	2,271	6.0	13	20	119	32%	122	44	36.1%	1.9	0.41
DESHONE KIZER	2017	476	255	53.6%	2,894	6.1	11	22	143	30%	142	42	29.6%	1.9	0.41
BRADY QUINN	2009	256	136	53.1%	1,335	5.2	8	7	77	30.1%	92	29	31.5%	1.9	0.40
BRANDON WEEDEN	2013	267	141	52.8%	1,731	6.5	9	9	80	30.0%	83	20	24.1%	1.8	0.40
NICK FOLES	2015	337	190	56.4%	2,052	6.1	7	10	87	26%	121	28	23.1%	1.8	0.39
JOSH FREEMAN	2009	291	159	54.6%	1,855	6.4	10	18	99	34%	84	25	29.8%	1.7	0.38
JAKE DELHOMME	2009	321	178	55.5%	2,014	6.3	8	18	103	32%	86	23	26.7%	1.7	0.37
JIMMY CLAUSEN	2010	300	158	52.7%	1,560	5.2	3	9	76	25.3%	104	27	26.0%	1.6	0.35



There are some truly abysmal players here. Skelton is a name most of us had forgotten, but there are some especially interesting ones around him. As mentioned earlier, Stafford was terrible as a rookie in 2009. His six yards per attempt was bad and, to combine that with just a 53.3 completion percentage and 20 interceptions, was impressive.

Kizer was given a good leash by the Browns, but illustrated that he truly didn't deserve it. His third-down conversion rate from so many attempts stands out in the worst way. Super Bowl MVP Foles is a surprise entrant, yet 2015 was his one and only year as a Ram after they traded for him, and his lack of accuracy was genuinely shocking.

Last and very much least, we have Clausen's rookie year of 2010. He somehow managed to convert just 25% of his passes to first downs and hit 26% on third down (which is usually a higher percentage as third-down passes generally have fewer yards to convert). Add in 5.2 yards per attempt and Clausen, *pictured*, had a legendarily bad season. **E**



NEIL REYNOLDS MAN-TO-MAN *The QBs*



**Seattle
Seahawks'
Russell Wilson
on what it takes
to succeed in the
NFL...**

Everybody throws the ball differently and some quarterbacks may be super tall or they may be shorter – I'm the shortest, probably! But, at the end of the day, it's about winning. It's about having a winning formula and doing the things that it takes to win. You've got to prepare the best in the world and make sure you lead. You've got to make sure you're passionate about the game and you've got to make sure that you leave it all on the line every play. You're talking about the best throwers in the world, so it's a special talent, that's for sure. But, at the same time, the best ones have the mentality and also the brains to be able to process and learn.

Atlanta Falcons' Matt Ryan on preparation for games...

I sometimes wish you just showed up and played, kind of how it was when you were growing up. There is a lot of preparation that goes into each week – it is a very tactical game and strategy is incredibly important. We spend a lot of time trying to put our guys in a position to succeed every time we line up and to find any mismatch we can between one of our offensive players and one of their defenders. We watch a lot of film to try to get correlations between what a defense is doing before the snap and after the snap. It's a lot of work, but I love doing it and it is certainly a fun ride. And, when something happens in a game that you have seen on film, that's why you do it.

Detroit Lions' Matthew Stafford on playing without fear...

I'm aggressive, for sure. I'm confident in my ability to put the ball into places that help us be successful. There is a fine line between taking chances and taking

Sky Sports presenter **Neil Reynolds** has interviewed the biggest quarterback names in NFL history and he shares some snippets of those conversations as we go inside the most talked-about position in American football.

F For this special quarterback-centric edition of *Gridiron*, I've decided to open the notebook and bring you unique insights from some of the very best, both in the game today and NFL history.

Hall-of-Famers, NFL Most Valuable Players, Super Bowl champions, exciting superstars... I've got it all covered off, with excerpts from interviews with 14 of the highest-profile

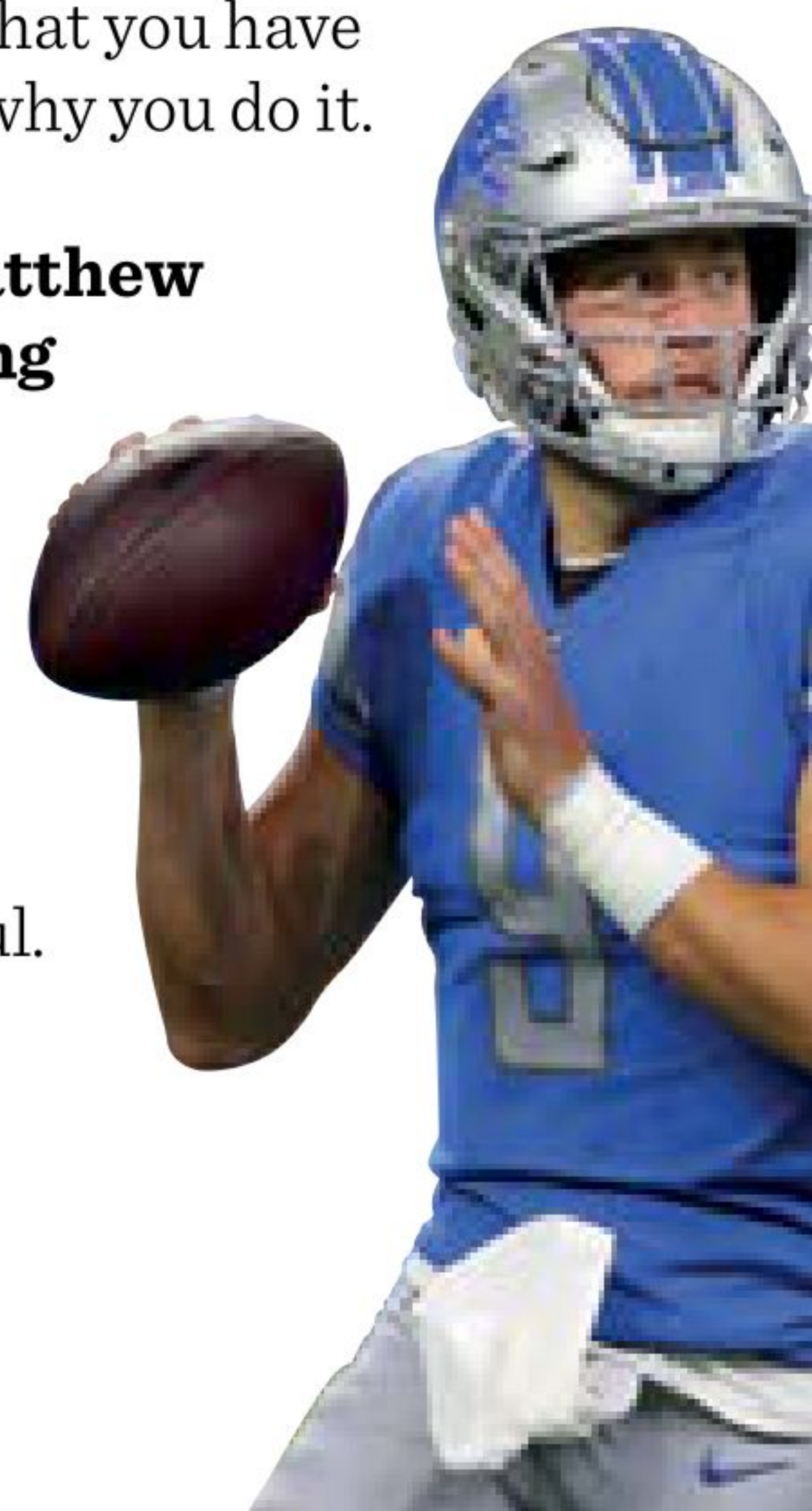
quarterbacks of all-time. This group will cover off all aspects of playing what is often called the toughest position in sports so they don't need the big introduction from yours truly.

The floor is yours, gentlemen, and who better to kick us off than reigning Super Bowl champion Patrick Mahomes? He lifts the lid on the competitive spirit that powered him and the Chiefs to overcome three chunky deficits in this year's playoffs. His quotes come from an interview I conducted in May of 2019 and hinted at the drive that would prove very useful for the Chiefs in Miami on the first weekend of February.

THE CURRENT PLAYERS

Kansas City Chiefs' Patrick Mahomes on his competitive nature and how that drives him forward...

I'm a competitor and I want to go out and win any way possible, whether that be from the pocket, scrambling or whatever it is. I just want to find a way to win. Not everything has to be perfect. I go out with the mindset that I'm going to make something positive happen every single play and, if it doesn't, I'm going to come to it on the next one. I feel pretty much the same every single game. I'm just trying to find a way to win. That's the beauty of football and being a competitor – you're never going to be out of any game and you can find a way to win at the end.



calculated risks. It is a tough line to stay on, but I just try to do that in order to help us win. I've had plenty of games where I've thrown a couple of picks and then led us on a two-minute drive to win the game. Every time you get the ball in your hand, you have to be confident in your ability and in the guys around you – and I always am in that regard.



Pittsburgh Steelers' Ben Roethlisberger on playing aggressively and making things up on the fly...

You cannot be afraid to go out there and play the game the way you know how. The gunslinger mentality makes the good ones great because they don't just go into a shell when they're having a bad game – they keep pressing on. And I think a good coach knows that he doesn't yank a player when he's throwing that many interceptions or playing a bad game. That playground football I have been known for in my career is a little bit of thinking and a little bit of pure instinct taking over. The big thing I always tell people is that I don't intentionally do those things. You try to play the game and, when things break down, you have to go and make a play. I cannot just give up and quit on a play – that's just the competitor within me.



New Orleans Saints' Drew Brees on looking after your body...

I really value my recovery. The recovery, I think, is just as – or more – important than the training itself, especially as you get up there in age. You understand you really have to hone in on recovery methods. So what I do in the weight room is what I call pre-hab. I am doing things to prevent myself from getting injured. I'm making sure that I stay flexible, I'm making sure that I eat well, I'm making sure that I get great rest, my sleep pattern. There are so many things that I look at and

I try to be regimented and disciplined about it.



Philip Rivers (current team and status for 2020 unknown) on playing with passion but also staying even-keeled...

You have to try not to ride the rollercoaster – the ups and downs of the season, the ups and downs day-to-day, the ups and downs of interviews, working with the press, lots of different things. You've got to be very steady and just keep staying the course. I really do enjoy it. I play the game as I did when I was a 10-year-old in North Alabama in the back yard. I like to play with that demeanour – it's still a game. We are grown men playing a game – it is serious and there is a lot on the line, but we should remember that this is the game that we grew up playing.

New England Patriots' Tom Brady on why he has played so long...

What I enjoy most is playing football – there's not much that gets in the way of that. There are a few things I might do during the course of an offseason that are different than being on the football field, but there's no place I'd rather be than leading my teammates and running out of the tunnel in front of 70,000 fans. You don't take it for granted – you really never know

when your last day is going to be. It's a physical game. If you take one bad hit, you may never get the opportunity again, so you'd better appreciate it while you can because it really doesn't last forever. You have to put as much as you can into it every single game. And it's all about winning – once you have experienced that, nothing else really matters.



Green Bay Packers' Aaron Rodgers on handling criticism...

Rightly or wrongly, every part of our

life is scrutinised, whether that be professional or personal. The lines between when you're a football player and when you're a normal person disappear. I don't really like to read the newspapers when they're critical but, on the flip side, you cannot get carried away when they're positive. You have to set your boundaries as far as reading your media goes. It's better to embrace any criticism rather than be offended by it because you can use criticism in a positive way. You can use that criticism to motivate you. Criticism keeps you focused and it's always good to prove those guys wrong.



Houston Texans' Deshaun Watson on advice he would give young quarterbacks...

Never let anyone tell you that you cannot fulfil any dream that you want to. I had people tell me that when I was younger and, where I came from, the statistics tell me that I shouldn't be sitting here. I stayed confident and kept working. Always stay humble and never get too comfortable. Keep going and keep encouraging. Use your success to be the best that you can be.



THE BEST OF THE BEST

Breaking down Neil's interviewees...

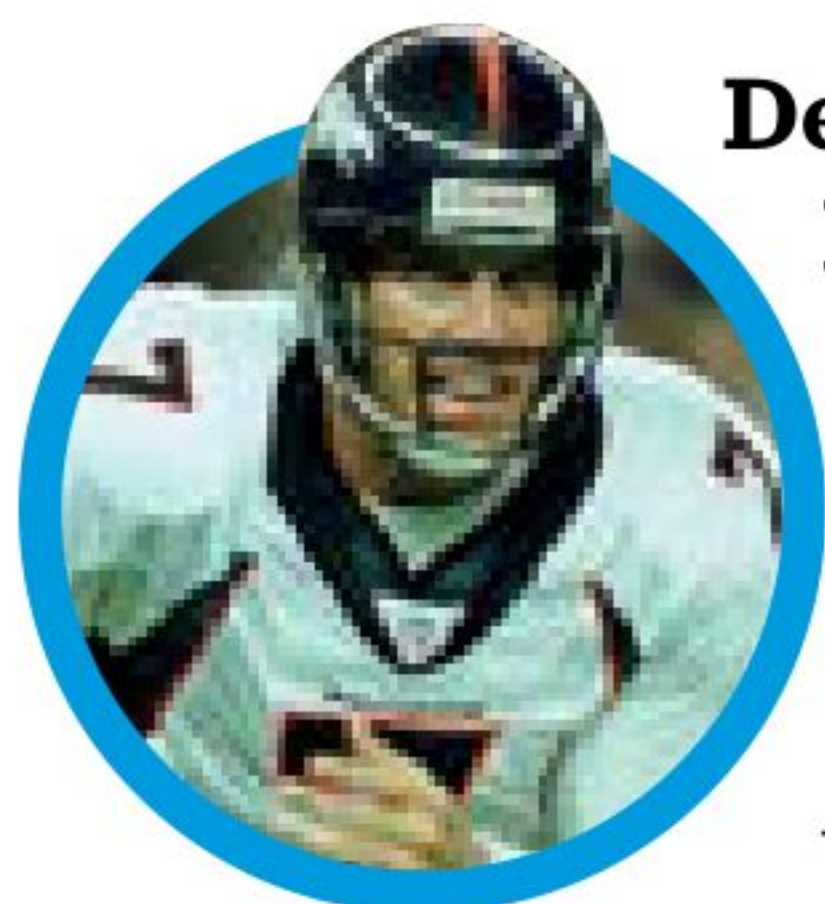
JERSEY	NAME	TEAM (S)	CAREER	TOTAL GAMES	SUPER BOWL APPS	TITLES
2	Matt Ryan		2008-	199	1	0
3	Russell Wilson		2012-	143	2	1
4	Brett Favre	   	1991-2010	326	2	1
4	Deshaun Watson		2017-	41	0	0
7	John Elway		1983-98	256	5	2
7	Ben Roethlisberger		2004-	239	3	2
9	Drew Brees	 	2001-	291	1	1
9	Matthew Stafford		2009-	152	0	0
12	Tom Brady		2000-	326	9	6
12	Aaron Rodgers		2005-	200	1	1
13	Dan Marino		1983-99	260	1	0
15	Patrick Mahomes		2017-	36	1	1
16	Joe Montana	 	1979-94	215	4	4
17	Philip Rivers		2004-	239	0	0

THE LEGENDS



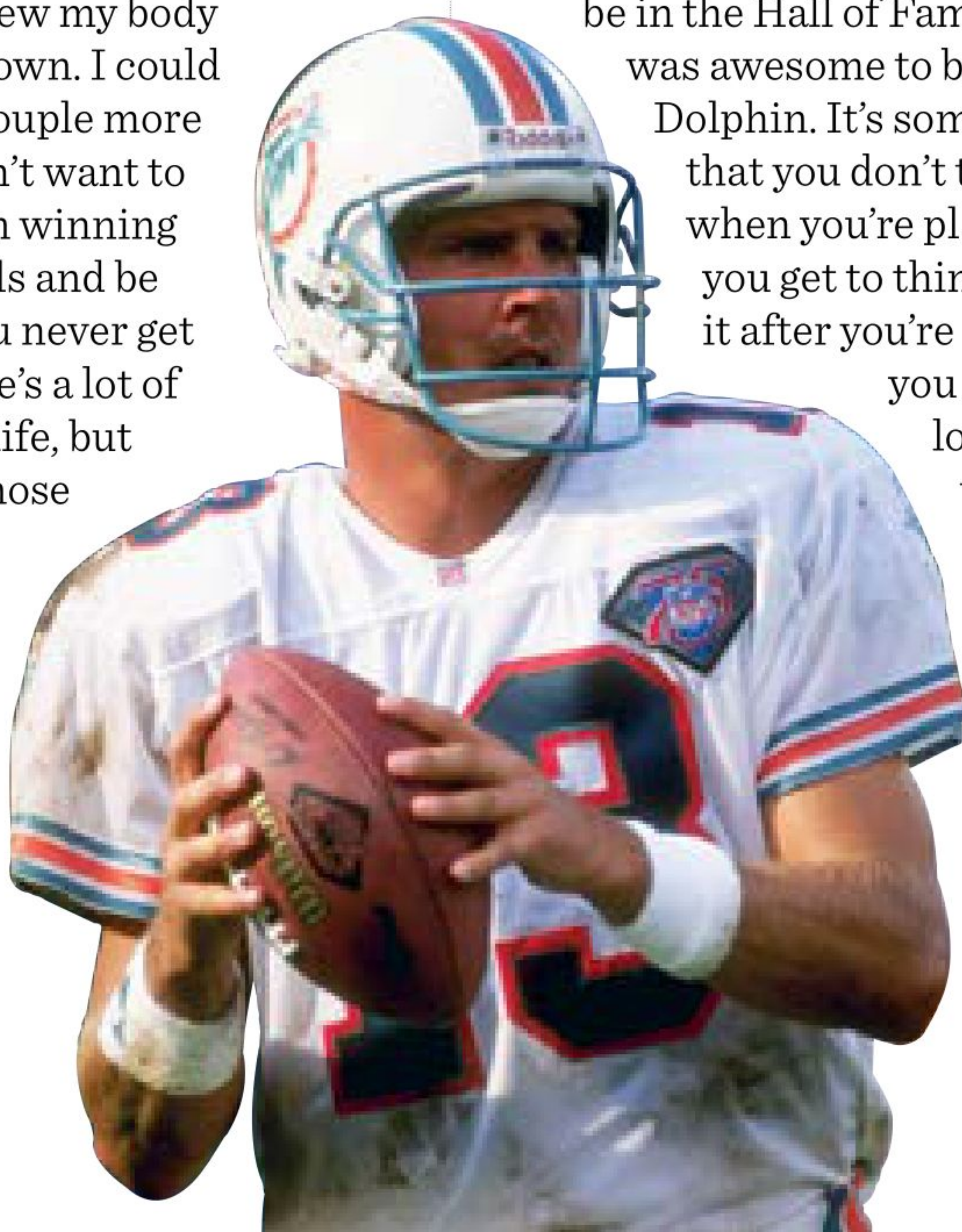
Hall-of-Famer Brett Favre on playing for the love of the game...

This is a game after all and we're lucky to be able to play and have so many people get enjoyment out of watching us play. We need to have fun. I love it and I'm not afraid to show it. I've always said that you get paid to practice and prepare for the games. You get paid for the work you do during the week. Then on gameday, you do that for free. The games are the best. We play them for free because that's the fun part.



Denver Broncos' Hall-of-Famer John Elway on missing his playing days...

It's so difficult when you do something for your whole life and you play in the NFL and taste all the excitement that goes with that. It's always very difficult to walk away from something you love because you know your second life after football is not going to be something you enjoy as much as playing in the NFL. I was very fortunate to play for a great organisation and on two great teams. I just knew my body was breaking down. I could have played a couple more years, but I didn't want to come back from winning two Super Bowls and be an also-ran. You never get that back. There's a lot of great things in life, but you never get those NFL Sundays back and that feeling of winning with 53 guys. I still miss it, sure. I still dream about playing in the NFL.



Miami Dolphins' Dan Marino on making the Pro Football Hall of Fame...

I think back to how fortunate I was to play for the Dolphins for 17 years and to play for a great coach in Don Shula and to have Mark Duper and Mark Clayton around me to make me a better player. It is awesome to be in the Hall of Fame and it was awesome to be a Miami Dolphin. It's something that you don't think about when you're playing, but you get to think about it after you're done and you start to look at all of the great players who are in the Hall of Fame. It's really a surreal feeling. When you're a little boy,

you want to be a pro and be in the NFL and then you end up as a part of the game's history when you're in the Hall of Fame and it is something really special. Sometimes, I can't actually believe I'm in the Hall of Fame, but it's great.

San Francisco 49ers' four- time Super Bowl winner Joe Montana on what made him so successful and what it meant to be such a distinguished NFL quarterback...

When you are a quarterback, you just have to be yourself. Don't change your personality or be any different from how you are in the rest of your life. I think you get more respect from the players that way. I wish everyone could experience a Sunday afternoon on the football field in the NFL. It is the most exciting thing I have ever done in my life. When you retire, you try to find that excitement but there's nothing that even comes close. If we could take a magic pill and go back and play tomorrow, we would all take it right away. **E**



CARLSON'S GOATS

Every Team's QB

Who is the best quarterback to appear for all 32 NFL clubs? Our resident historian trawls back through the league's 100-year history for answers.



AFC EAST



A Slam Dunk. Jack Kemp took the Bills to two AFL titles, and Joe Ferguson was a popular, gritty leader, but Jim Kelly came from the USFL's Houston Gamblers and, running Marv Levy's K-Gun offense, went to four straight Super Bowls. That the Bills lost them all doesn't lessen his status.



BEST: JIM KELLY



Slam Dunk II, but not quite as automatic. Bob Griese won two Super Bowls, although super-sub Earl Morrall's success deputising during the undefeated 1972 season lessens his achievement in some minds. Similarly, the only knock against Dan Marino is Miami's failure to even get to a Super Bowl after losing to the San Francisco 49ers in his second year. But he is top-10 all-time.



BEST: DAN MARINO



Slam Dunk III, or maybe you were expecting Babe Parilli, fan-favourite Steve Grogan or Drew Bledsoe?



BEST: TOM BRADY



Slam Dunk IV. Although I'm a big fan of Ken O'Brien, a strong No. 2, only one passer put the Jets on the media map, 'guaranteed' a Super Bowl win that brought the AFL legitimacy and took a beating passing the team to success. Boomer Esiason had only three seasons in green and, while Richard Todd, Chad Pennington or 'Turnpike' Vinny Testaverde, might have their fans, the obvious pick is the ultimate face of the franchise.



BEST: 'BROADWAY' JOE NAMATH



The Ravens don't carry on the Cleveland Browns' stats, nor did they acquire the Baltimore Colts', but have won two Super Bowls during their

limited existence. At quarterback in the first was Trent Dilfer, who started only the last half of that season; the second victorious passer was Joe Flacco, who has started 11 of the club's 24 seasons. Give Lamar Jackson another two years and he probably jumps to No. 1.



BEST: JOE FLACCO



Slam Dunk V. Before Art Modell (the only man to fire two of the top-four coaches in NFL history) bought the Browns, Paul Brown's team went to 10 consecutive championship games, in the AAFC and NFL, and won six. Otto Graham was the quarterback in all 10. A year after Graham retired, having missed Len Dawson, Brown drafted Jim Brown. The team won one championship with Jim Brown in 1964, and Blanton Collier was by then the coach, but haven't managed one since. In the Curse of Modell era, the list of quarterbacks is painful to read.



CLEVELAND VERSION 2.0 BEST: TIM COUCH (INJURIES PLAYED A FACTOR IN HIS NOT HAVING A BETTER CAREER)

REAL CLEVELAND BROWNS BEST: OTTO GRAHAM



It's appropriate that, as I write, the hot takez guys are discussing Joe Burrow boycotting the Bengals because Mike Brown wouldn't let Carson Palmer leave Cincinnati until he got the requisite price. Boomer Esiason had some fine years, but the Bengals'



best quarterback might have been Greg Cook, for whom Bill Walsh's original offense was designed, until a horrific shoulder injury limited him to one fine season. Thereafter, the offense went more horizontal, becoming the West Coast Offense we know. Only one QB ever ran it better than Ken Anderson, probably the best passer not in Canton, and he's Joe Montana.

BEST: KEN ANDERSON



**PITTSBURGH
STEELERS**

With apologies to Bobby Layne, this is a tough two-horse race between Terry Bradshaw



with four Super Bowl rings, and Ben Roethlisberger with two. Big Ben has a career edge statistically and, despite an injury-riddled career, could yet turn out to be the longest-lived of the QB Class of 2004, but I don't think he personifies the Steel Curtain mentality of this team quite as well as Bradshaw.

BEST: TERRY BRADSHAW

AFC SOUTH



**HOUSTON
TEXANS**

In their short life as an expansion team, the Texans' greatest QB accomplishment may be nearly killing David Carr.



Deshaun Watson suffered a serious injury in his rookie season, and may eventually take over No. 1, but Matt Schaub had a long run, much of it successful running Gary Kubiak's offense, and remains in the league.

BEST: MATT SCHAUB



**INDIANAPOLIS
COLTS**

Slam Dunks VI and VII. There are two because you must resolve the dilemma of Bob Irsay's midnight sneak from Baltimore to Indianapolis. Earl Morrall took Baltimore to a Super Bowl as league MVP and Bert Jones was very good, but John Unitas, who most



memorably won the Greatest Game Ever Played for the 1958 NFL title, is clearly the best quarterback from the quarter-century in Baltimore. Irsay didn't have the decency to leave the nickname with their home city, so the Colts have been in Indy since 1984. Jeff George and 'Captain Comeback' Jim Harbaugh played well for them, and who knows what Andrew Luck might have done had he not retired early, yet Peyton Manning was six-time All-Pro and brought a Super Bowl.



BALTIMORE'S BEST: JOHN UNITAS

INDIANAPOLIS' BEST: PEYTON MANNING



JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

Slam Dunk VIII. An expansion team who were lucky to trade with the Green Bay Packers for a quality starter early, and have not been so fortunate since – although Byron Leftwich and David Garrard look great compared to the Blake Bortles era. The choice is very clear, though the Jags could never clear the final hurdles.



BEST: MARK BRUNELL



TENNESSEE TITANS

Slam Dunk IX but, as with the Colts, we have to consider the Houston Oilers, whose records the Titans, in the NFL's Bizarro Logic, somehow inherited. Houston's 37-season history is richer, with George Blanda and Dan Pastorini having long successful tenures. But Warren Moon gave Houston excellent seasons after proving in Canada he was an NFL QB. Steve McNair took over as starter when they moved to Tennessee, playing



for two years as the Oilers (though only Jed Clampett found oil in Tennessee), before becoming the Titans. McNair had nine years as a starter and led the Titans all the way to being One Yard Short of Super Bowl glory.



HOUSTON'S BEST: WARREN MOON

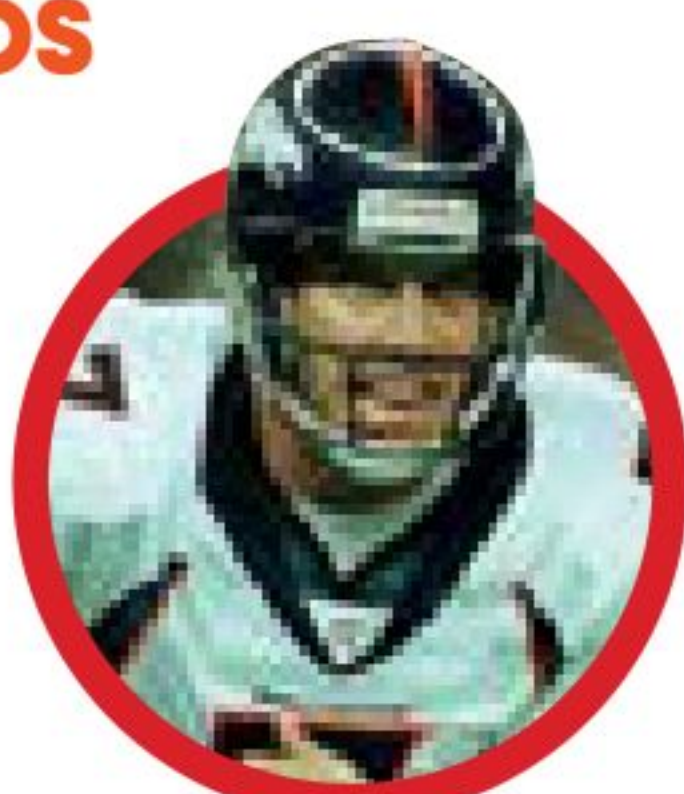
TENNESSEE'S BEST: STEVE MCNAIR

AFC WEST



DENVER BRONCOS

Slam Dunk X. It's hard to recall just how bad the AFL Broncos were, and the quarterback position was part of the problem. In fact, their best pre-John Elway was probably Charley Johnson, cast off by the then-St. Louis Cardinals or former Dallas Cowboy Craig Morton. After Elway? Probably Jake 'The Snake' Plummer or, with Elway as GM, one of Peyton Manning's two exceptional seasons (though they won a Super Bowl in the other). It took Mike Shanahan to get the best from him Elway, but he's a clear No. 1.



BEST: JOHN ELWAY



KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

Slam Dunk XI. Our friends in Hot Takez Land would put Patrick Mahomes here after his heroics in Super Bowl LIV, but he's only had two seasons as the starter, no matter how impressive they have been. Trent Green deserves a mention but, until Mahomes puts in another couple of great years (as he will), my pick is the best quarterback in the AFL who took the Chiefs to two Super Bowls, winning one.



BEST: LEN DAWSON



LAS VEGAS (VIA OAKLAND, LOS ANGELES AND OAKLAND) RAIDERS

The Raiders keep their records and character wherever they go, and this is an interesting contest. Jim Plunkett led the Silver and Black to two Super Bowl wins, but gets little love from Hall-of-Fame voters or fans. Daryle Lamonica became 'The Mad Bomber' in Oakland, but argued his way out of town. Rich Gannon won an MVP and took them to a Super Bowl. But only one man personifies the Raider image, and he got his Super Bowl ring.



BEST: KEN 'SNAKE' STABLER



LOS ANGELES (VIA L.A. AND SAN DIEGO) CHARGERS

One of the toughest calls. The Chargers have won only one AFL championship, and Tobin Rote was at quarterback. They went to one Super Bowl behind Stan Humphries. John Hadl is their third-best, but the battle for the franchise's greatest is between Dan Fouts and Philip Rivers: two guys whose styles and results have been very similar. Fouts played 15 years and set all kinds of passing records. In one season, Bill Walsh was his offensive coordinator; there's a 'what might have been' for the books. Of course, Fouts' best seasons were with Don Coryell's Air Coryell offense. He was three-time first-team All Pro, once second-team, holds a league title and is on the 1980s All-Decade Team. Rivers had 16 years with the team, but was never a first- or second-team All-Pro. His counting stats are more impressive, as you'd expect in today's passing era, and his 95 passer rating is probably a bit ahead of Fouts' 80 when era adjusted. The stats guys give Rivers a higher rating, and I think it's close.



BEST: DAN FOUTS



NFC

NFC EAST



Tom Landry didn't mind overseeing a job share at the quarterback position. Eddie LeBaron and 'Dandy' Don Meredith; Roger Staubach and Craig Morton. It took an ownership change to bring in coaches who stuck with one guy, and they have been good: Troy Aikman, Tony Romo and now Dak Prescott. But, to me, the greatest talent of all is a guy who, had he not spent five years in the military and played full-time, would have one of the greatest careers ever. As it is, he's still a top-10 all-time.



BEST: ROGER STAUBACH



I'm not counting Benny Friedman, who was basically a single-wing tailback, even if he is the NFL's first great passer. There is a lot of competition for second place: Charley Conerly, Phil Simms, Eli Manning, Fran Tarkenton. But, despite two rings, I see Eli as a Jim Plunkett who managed to keep his starting job through thick and thin, which is a huge positive, but not enough to overtake a guy who was great in San Francisco and absolutely brilliant leading the Giants to a series of championship games, all of which they lost. Throwing to the criminally overlooked Del Shofner, the legendary Y.A. Tittle set a touchdown passing mark which wasn't broken until Dan Marino came along and, for my money, is the greatest passer to don Giants blue.



BEST: Y.A. TITTLE



The Eagles won a title with Norm Van Brocklin, who played only his final three seasons there, and two with one-eyed Tommy Thompson, but the war and injuries limited him. Glenn Frey quarterbacked them in 1937, then presumably joined the rock band Eagles. They had Sonny Jurgensen for three years, traded him for seven years of Norm Snead. Then came long runs of very good play from Ron Jaworski (10 seasons), Randall Cunningham (six and parts of five others) and Donovan McNabb (10). 'Jaws' suits the personality of the city, Cunningham was the most gifted but won only one of five playoff games and McNabb went 9-7 in the postseason. But McNabb was coached by Andy Reid, not Marion Campbell, Buddy Ryan or Rich Kotite.



BEST: NORM VAN BROCKLIN



WASHINGTON REDSKINS

Joe Gibbs won three Super Bowls with different quarterbacks – Joe Theismann, Doug Williams and Mark Rypien – while Billy Kilmer quarterbacked George Allen's group to a Super Bowl loss. Theismann holds the franchise mark for passing yards; Brad Johnson for yards in a game. Sonny Jurgensen played great to no championship avail. But Washington's greatest QB still holds the team career passing touchdown record (187) along with the league's single-season punting average (51.4 yards) and the single-game interceptions (made, not thrown) marks with four.

BEST: SAMMY BAUGH

NFC NORTH



CHICAGO BEARS

Slam Dunk XII. When your best quarterback played for the team 80 years ago, it's trouble, but at least there was some debate in Washington. There's no question in Chicago, and the No. 2 might be Paddy Driscoll, another single-wing tailback from the 1920s. George Halas never knew what to do with QBs. He hated Bobby Layne and George Blanda, deploying the latter at linebacker, while playing Johnny Lujack at safety ruined his shoulder and career. Ed Brown, Bill Wade and Jim McMahon were all good journeymen; Erik Kramer or Jay Cutler may be the best of the rest. The only Bears passer of any real note was Sid Luckman, who was really the original quarterback to play the position in the manner that we are familiar with today as opposed to being a single-wing 'back.

BEST: SID LUCKMAN



DETROIT LIONS

This was almost a slam dunk, but I think really it's a two-horse race, and one of the horses is not Tobin Rote – who delivered an all-time NFL Championship Game performance to seal Detroit's third title of the 1950s. The first two were won by Bobby Layne, a Hall of Famer who doesn't get respect because his passing looks so old-fashioned, but was effective throwing and rushing, while being a real field general. The diametric opposite to Layne is Matt Stafford, whose 11 seasons (two shortened by injury) have seen him be spectacularly efficient, rather than superb, at QB. He might have been having his best season last year when he was hurt midway through. Yet Stafford has only one Pro Bowl; Layne six, plus two first-team All-Pro selections. It was a different game, yes, but the best is a man Paul Brown once declared the best third-down quarterback in football history.

BEST: BOBBY LAYNE



GREEN BAY PACKERS

Maybe the most interesting three-way dance in the league. Arnie Herber and Cecil Isbell were both single-wing tailbacks, and Rote was good, especially rushing, in the early 1950s. But the battle is between Bart Starr, leader of Lombardi's dominant Sixties teams; Brett Favre, inspirational winner of one Super Bowl in the 1990s; and Aaron Rodgers, who's won one Lombardi Trophy in this century, and was Patrick Mahomes before Mahomes. Starr was the ultimate engineer; Favre the ultimate gun-slinger; Rodgers, you could argue, the ultimate passer. I'm going to rank them Favre, Rodgers, Starr.

BEST: BART STARR



MINNESOTA VIKINGS

Slam Dunk XIII. Fran Tarkenton had the misfortune to be a great scrambler when he joined the expansion Vikings, where he needed to run for survival. After six years he was traded to the Giants and Joe Kapp, like Billy Kilmer with less arm, took Minnesota to Super Bowl IV, which they lost. Tark came back for another seven seasons, losing three times in the Big Dance. Minnesota had a couple of years with Warren Moon and one great one from Randall Cunningham, but Tommy Kramer and Daunte Culpepper are probably numbers three and two on the list.

BEST: FRAN TARKENTON



NFC SOUTH



ATLANTA FALCONS

Steve Bartkowski might be the sentimental favourite, in those horrible early years, and Michael Vick has modern fans. But the two Chris', Miller (whose career was limited by concussions) and Chandler (who took them to Super Bowl XXXIII in his five years as starter) are probably the runners up to Matt Ryan. The incumbent has already been the Falcons' quarterback for 12 seasons, missing only two starts. A few more runs in the second half of Super Bowl LI?

BEST: MATT RYAN



CAROLINA PANTHERS

Slam Dunk XIV. The expansion Panthers had a few good early years with Kerry Collins and went to a Super Bowl with Jake Delhomme, whose playoff record is 5-3 as starter.

But the team's best quarterback has been Cam Newton, whose status right now remains up in the air as a result, I believe, of absorbing a lot of punishment due to the hard style of his run game.



BEST: CAM NEWTON



Slam Dunk XV. The Saints' quarterback history is littered with a couple of years from guys past their prime: Billy Kilmer, Ken Stabler, Jim Everett. Archie Manning had a long career of futility, and Bobby Hebert delivered a few good years after the USFL. Aaron Brooks was another Green Bay-developed guy, like Mark Brunell, who was good, but there is no question that with Drew Brees, in a perfect partnership with Sean Payton, is the man.



BEST: DREW BREES



Tampa Bay is the Davy Jones' Locker of quarterbacking. Doug Williams and Trent Dilfer won Super Bowls with other teams while the Buccaneers' Lombardi Trophy came with Brad Johnson, and Jon Gruden couldn't wait to move on. Tampa have six QBs with significant playing time. The statistical leader in most categories is Jameis Winston except, surprisingly, interceptions. Vinny Testaverde had 112 in 72 starts to Jameis' 88 in 70. The team was bad in Vinny's time – but it wasn't great when Williams (33-33 as starter) or Dilfer (38-38) were around, even if the former helped reach an NFC Championship Game. Johnson went 26-23 (the only



one with a winning record), threw 64 TDs with 41 picks and, *yes*, the D was awesome but someone had to throw occasionally.

BEST: BRAD JOHNSON



Slam Dunk XVI. An historically unsuccessful franchise in three cities, there is a surprising amount of talent to choose from because – as one of two teams around from the NFL's first season – there has been much opportunity. But it's talent with limitations or a fatal flaw. You have Paddy Driscoll and Ernie Nevers, but they were really tailbacks. More recently, there is Charley Johnson, Jim Hart from the Air Coryell era, Neil Lomax, the early years of Jake Plummer and the late ones of Kurt Warner and Carson Palmer. Oddly, Johnson and Palmer are the only ones with winning records, though Hart finished 88-89. Lomax is the most intriguing; he played in Mouse Davis' original Run-and-Shoot at Portland State, but his NFL passer rating is 11% higher than average for his era, yet is always forgotten as a degenerative hip saw him out of the game at 29. In his five years as a full-time starter, Lomax had a total approximate value of 46; Palmer's was 48; and Warner's 49 but he also reached the Super Bowl.



BEST: KURT WARNER



You've got Norm Van Brocklin and Bob Waterfield, two Hall of Famers sharing time on the Greatest Show on Grass. You have Roman Gabriel and Jim Everett. You've got three years of Kurt Warner before giving

way to eight of Marc Bulger. Waterfield and Van Brocklin each started for five years on either side of the three great seasons as job-sharers, so it's hard to give the nod to either. It's not the slam dunk you might imagine, but Warner's three full-time years were so dominant that he gets the nod, even though that means he, not Van Brocklin, is the only pick as the best with two teams.



BEST: KURT WARNER



Slam Dunk XVII, but not automatic. Ignore the group of contenders for their first 30 years – Frankie Albert, Y.A. Tittle in the Million Dollar Backfield, or John Brodie – the Niners' best boils down to a two-horse race. Joe Montana for 11 seasons of significant starts, and Steve Young with eight. Young may be the best package of skills ever, but his early years were with a bad USFL team, poor Bucs squad and behind Montana. Both are perfect in Super Bowls, but Montana was 4-0, including a couple of the most iconic ever, and Young 1-0. Young will be remembered in Montana's wake.



BEST: JOE MONTANA



Seattle formed in 1976 and have four guys with long runs as good starters: Jim Zorn, Dave Krieg, Matt Hasselbeck and Russell Wilson. It's been eight seasons for Wilson, including a Super Bowl win and loss.



BEST: RUSSELL WILSON

2019

The NFL logo is shown in the bottom right corner, featuring a blue shield with a white football in the center, surrounded by stars. A white fist is raised in front of the shield.



EVERY DOG HAS ITS DAY

With free agency in full swing, the 2000s provided opportunity for some new names to emerge at the top of the NFL.

WORDS: **CRAIG LLEWELLYN**

As calendars flicked to a new millennium, the NFL's old Any Given Sunday adage became Any Given Season. The St. Louis Rams brought in the Noughties by completing an unexpected rise to the league's top table in Super Bowl XXXIV, becoming the first team in league history to lift the Lombardi Trophy after winning four or less games the previous campaign.

With the Greatest Show On Turf firing on all cylinders again to kick off the 2000 campaign, some people expected a dynasty. Instead, an all-time great defense emerged and the Baltimore Ravens further illustrated the NFL's growing unpredictability by winning Super Bowl XXXV to conclude their first winning season since departing Cleveland.

Perhaps the campaign's most

significant moment came before a pigskin was tossed. At Radio City Music Hall in New York City, 30 franchises left the annual NFL Draft not yet realising they would regret repeatedly passing on 'a bony, very thin kind of guy' who resembled 'one of them poles you hang coats on'.

Tom Brady was eventually taken by a New England Patriots team that would go 5-11 behind Drew Bledsoe in 2000 but, having been thrust onto the front line the following season, the Michigan grad responded brilliantly. He guided the Patriots to their first Lombardi as they upset a rejuvenated Rams to deliver a third successive underdog story in the showpiece.

Most poignant was the rallying cry from New England owner Robert Kraft as he clutched the Lombardi afterwards: "We are all Patriots and, tonight, the Patriots are world champions." Kraft's comments

felt like the NFL turning a page positively on a difficult season that had been interrupted by the horrors of 9/11. The decision to cancel Week 2 – with the knock-on effect of pushing the Super Bowl into February for the first time – was one of the biggest responsibilities facing Paul Tagliabue's final years as commissioner and his handling of the crisis would eventually help punch his ticket to Canton.

Over those latter days, Tagliabue also oversaw the addition of four expansion teams [1], a significant increase in the value of TV deals, the reintroduction of instant replay and a major rethink of the league's drug-testing policy, as well as the introduction of fan-friendly initiatives such as the league's online presence and launch of the NFL Network, which provided total 24/7 access to football. "Simply put,

GRIDIRON GOLD

BIGGER AND BETTER ^[1]

The resurrection of the Cleveland Browns in 1999 left the NFL with an imbalance that wasn't corrected until the Houston Texans joined the fray in 2002, bringing the league up to 32 teams. That in itself caused headaches, with the previous combination of four- and five-team divisions no longer viable.

The league structure was expanded to eight divisions, now named after the main compass points and split evenly across the AFC and NFC, with four teams in each division. Historical rivalries were maintained where possible, but geographic sensibilities and legal requirements – notably keeping Cincinnati, Cleveland and Pittsburgh together – were also observed. With Houston, Cleveland and Jacksonville all being placed in the AFC during the various expansions, Seattle were moved to the NFC as part of the reshuffle, and joined the Arizona Cardinals – now more logically located following its flit from Chicago via St. Louis – in the NFC West.

The Texans' arrival also accompanied a new eight-year scheduling rotation that sees each team play every other at least twice in that period, while only two opponents each season, instead of four, would be based on the previous season's playing record. The playoff format was also altered to reflect the need to accommodate four division winners instead of three, with the number of wildcards reduced accordingly.

AMERICAN FOOTBALL CONFERENCE			
NORTH	SOUTH	EAST	WEST
			
			
			
			
NATIONAL FOOTBALL CONFERENCE			
NORTH	SOUTH	EAST	WEST
			
			
			
			

the most honest, genuine, kindest, smartest, most visionary person that I've ever met alongside Marv Levy," former Indianapolis Colts GM Bill Polian told *Gridiron*. "Bottom line, the things he did were incredible."

Of course, the defining achievement of his tenure was the introduction of free agency. The three-year stretch from 1999-2001 had seemingly heralded a permanent period of parity, but that narrative was flipped on its head as New England went from celebrated underdog to loathed serial champion.

The Patriots failed to make the playoffs in 2002, paving the way for the first big-game meeting of the league's leading defensive and offensive units. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers triumphed over Oakland Raiders in the 'Gruden Bowl', the result of a rare head coach trade that saw Jon Gruden move east before defeating his former employer, with whom the great Jerry Rice bowed out boasting a hatful of career records.

Yet New England were back in the spotlight the following two years, collecting back-to-back Lombardis to make it three in four years and setting a new gold standard for football. "New England was put together like we were, in that they didn't beat themselves; they didn't make mistakes," former Indianapolis Colts head coach Tony Dungy tells *Gridiron*. "They knew how to finish games and, when they were super-competitive, you knew that, come December and January, there was going to be a game against them that would determine the rest of the season."

Dungy and the Colts, quarterbacked by their own all-time great in Peyton Manning, would finally avenge multiple playoff losses to Brady and the Patriots in 2006, winning the AFC Championship Game and eventually collecting Super Bowl rings courtesy of victory over the Chicago Bears. "The Super Bowl is surrounded with so much

WE ARE THE
CHAMPIONS



THE NFL'S TRIUMPHANT TEAMS FROM 2000-09...

2000
BALTIMORE
RAVENS (1)

2001
NEW ENGLAND
PATRIOTS (1)

2002
TAMPA BAY
BUCCANEERS (1)

2003
NEW ENGLAND
PATRIOTS (2)

hoopla that the more emotionally-satisfying game was that AFC Championship Game,” Polian admits. “The narrative had grown that we couldn’t beat [New England], that we didn’t have enough toughness, mentally or physically, to beat them and that they had our number.”

Super Bowl XLI was notable for multiple reasons, from Adam Vinatieri winning a fourth Lombardi, to Devin Hester taking the opening kickoff back for the quickest score in game history. Perhaps most significant was that both teams were overseen by black head coaches in Dungy and Lovie Smith following the 2003 introduction of the Rooney Rule [2], and the validation it gave Manning’s remarkable career.

Along with Drew Brees, who would join the New Orleans Saints in 2006, Brady and Manning rewrote the record books. All three boasted at least one ring by the end of the decade, with the Colts on the opposite sideline when Brees took his Super Bowl bow at the end of the decade. As the two top-seeded teams disputed a Lombardi for the first time in 16 seasons, the game’s signature moment saw the Saints, trailing 10–6 at the half, restart with a successful onside kick. The moment set up a 31-17 victory that provided a fitting cap for New Orleans’ recovery from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The Saints were forced to play away from the Superdome during the 2005 campaign, but returned the next year and gradually progressed to the ultimate game. “Four years ago, whoever thought this would be happening when 85 percent of the city was under water?” MVP Brees mused postgame. “Most people left not knowing if New Orleans would ever come back, or if the organisation would ever come back.”

Dotted between the Colts and Saints successes, the Pittsburgh

Steelers and New York Giants struck blows for the ‘old boys’, with their combined three wins being helmed by quarterbacks from the notable Class of 2004. Ben Roethlisberger guided Pittsburgh to victory in the 2005 and 2008 campaigns, the latter seeing Mike Tomlin follow Dungy and become the second black head coach to lift a Lombardi, while the Giants saw off the Patriots courtesy of a remarkable play by Eli Manning – who had notoriously engineered a draft-day team swap after refusing to play for San Diego – and David Tyree that denied New England the chance to post a perfect 19-0 record in 2007.

“I call it providence, not luck,” Tyree says of the famed ‘Helmet Catch’ on third down.

“I remember running that post route and, as I turned around, Eli’s already under duress, but there was never any idea of quitting on the play. I was prepared for contact and, when it came, I’m just clenching, not letting go.

“I will never forget getting my second hand back on the on the ball, but I had absolutely no idea that it was on my head!”

Had the Patriots come out on top in a game that ended 17-14, their unbeaten season would have represented a remarkable response to the Spygate scandal that rocked the franchise.

In that instance, commissioner Roger Goodell used the club as an example in his crusade to improve the league’s all-round image, cracking down on off-field indiscretions as heavily as he ramped up revenues, turned offseason events like the combine and draft into must-sees and encouraged the push into overseas markets with the International Series’ introduction.

New England remained in Goodell’s sights during the following decade, but it didn’t stop their growing penchant for winning. **E**

GRIDIRON GOLD

NOT SIMPLY BLACK OR WHITE [2]

Noticing the dearth of black head coaches in the NFL, an anomaly highlighted by the 2002 firings of the successful Tony Dungy and Dennis Green, the Rooney Rule was instigated to force teams to at least interview ethnic-minority candidates.

The rule was named after former Pittsburgh Steelers owner and NFL diversity committee chair Dan Rooney, but multiple others – including commissioner Paul Tagliabue – played a key role.

Studies proved that black head coaches were less likely to be hired and more vulnerable to being fired than white counterparts, regardless of their team’s record. Prior to Tom Flores’ hiring by the Oakland Raiders in 1979, the league had only had one minority head coach – 1920s star Fritz Pollard – in nearly 60 years.

While sound in theory, the rule stipulated minority candidates need only be considered for interview and, although several other black coaches have attained top office since its inception, the total number still remains around a quarter of teams.

The Rooney Rule was widened to include all senior football operations roles from 2009, and it is likely to again be broadened further as the conversation continues to come up.

2004

 NEW ENGLAND
PATRIOTS (3)

2005

 PITTSBURGH
STEELERS (5)

2006

 INDIANAPOLIS
COLTS (2) (4)

2007

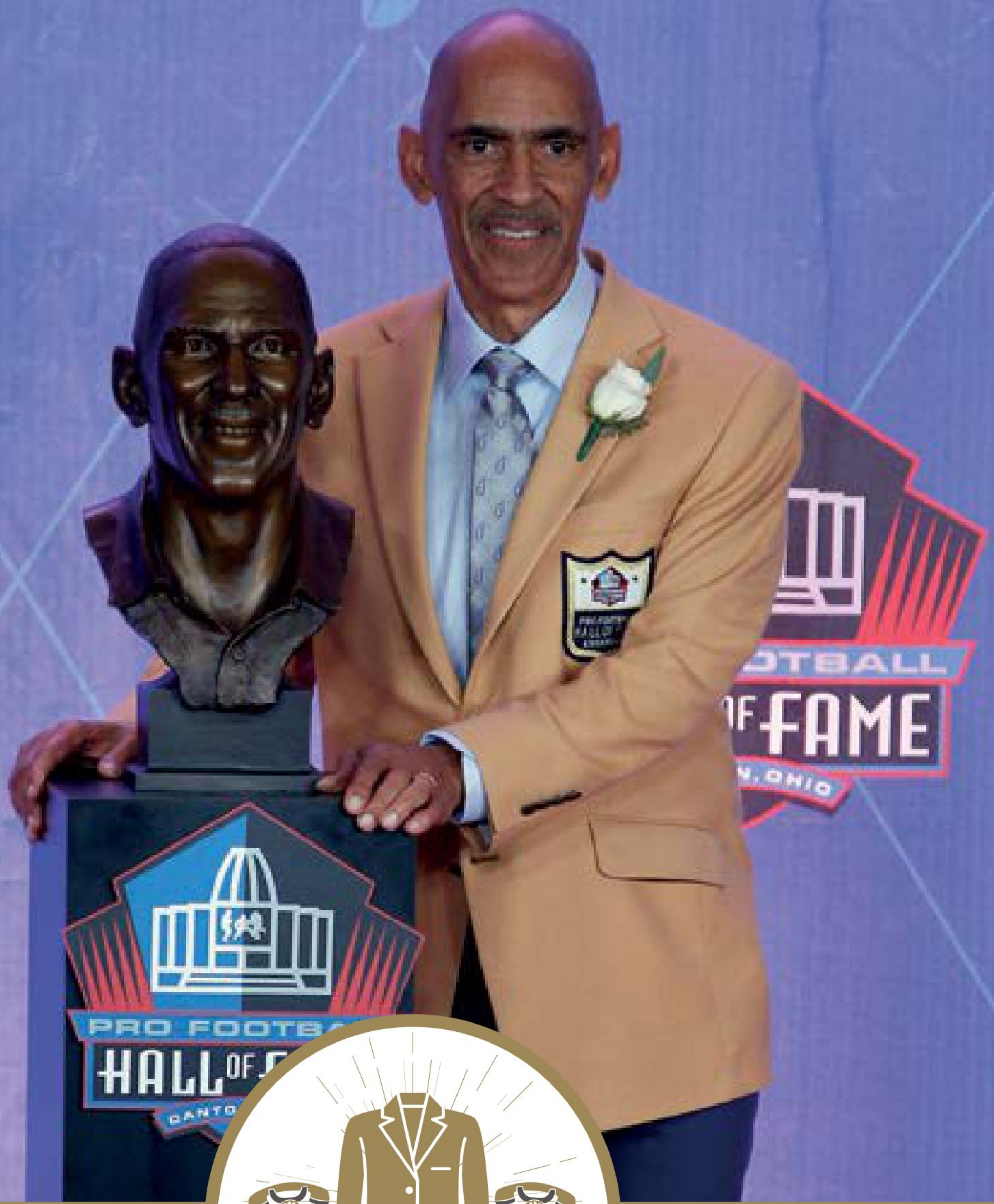
 NEW YORK
GIANTS (3) (7)

2008

 PITTSBURGH
STEELERS (6)

2009

 NEW ORLEANS
SAINTS (1)



TONY DUNGY

A Super Bowl winner as a player and head coach, Tony Dungy lifts the lid on his remarkable football life.

INTERVIEW: **MATTHEW SHERRY**

Let's start with your playing days, particularly with the Pittsburgh Steelers. What kind of impact did Chuck Noll have on you? Terry Bradshaw spoke of his respect for Noll, but also said he 'never felt comfortable' around him.

TD: Everything I learned about professional football and my philosophy of how to do things

really came from him. But I think if you were the type of player that really needed confirmation, encouragement, building up, somebody patting you on the back every day, he wasn't the person for you. However, if you had drive and self-confidence, and were highly motivated, like a lot of our guys were, he was perfect because he just laid out the roadmap of what you needed to do to succeed – and then showed

you how to do that. I came back and coached on his staff for eight years, and began to learn the 'whys'. He would explain what we were going to do, and why it was important. That was so beneficial for me as I became a coach. I wanted to let my players know that I wasn't necessarily going to be there to build them up, to give them pep talks and things, but that I was there for them and that I cared about them as individuals. I think

Coach Noll cared – he just didn't say it a lot!

What do you recall of your first HC role in Tampa Bay, building up to being perennial playoff contenders with a defense that ultimately would go down as one of the best in history?

TD: We missed out on John Lynch, Warren Sapp and Derrick Brooks when I was the defensive coordinator in Minnesota and it hurt me. They all ended up in Tampa and then, in 1996, I get the head job there. I knew the defense I wanted to put in and three of the key elements were already sitting there. All I had to do was sell them on the mindset. It took about a year and a half for the guys to really buy into but, once they started realising that they could shut people down, they became a hard group to deal with.

“

WE FELT LIKE WE WERE GOING TO HAVE TO BEAT THOSE GUYS TO GET TO THE SUPER BOWL, SO IT WAS A SWEET MOMENT ”

How frustrating was it to spend those years building the team and then watch somebody else finish the job and win the Super Bowl?

TD: It was bittersweet. I felt like we were making progress and strides, and we had a couple of shots. Obviously, I was very happy for those guys who started out and stayed the course, but I was sad that I wasn't there with them.

Bill Polian, the Colts' GM at the time, told *Gridiron* he was surprised you might be on the market, and apparently told Jim Irsay that he'd fly down

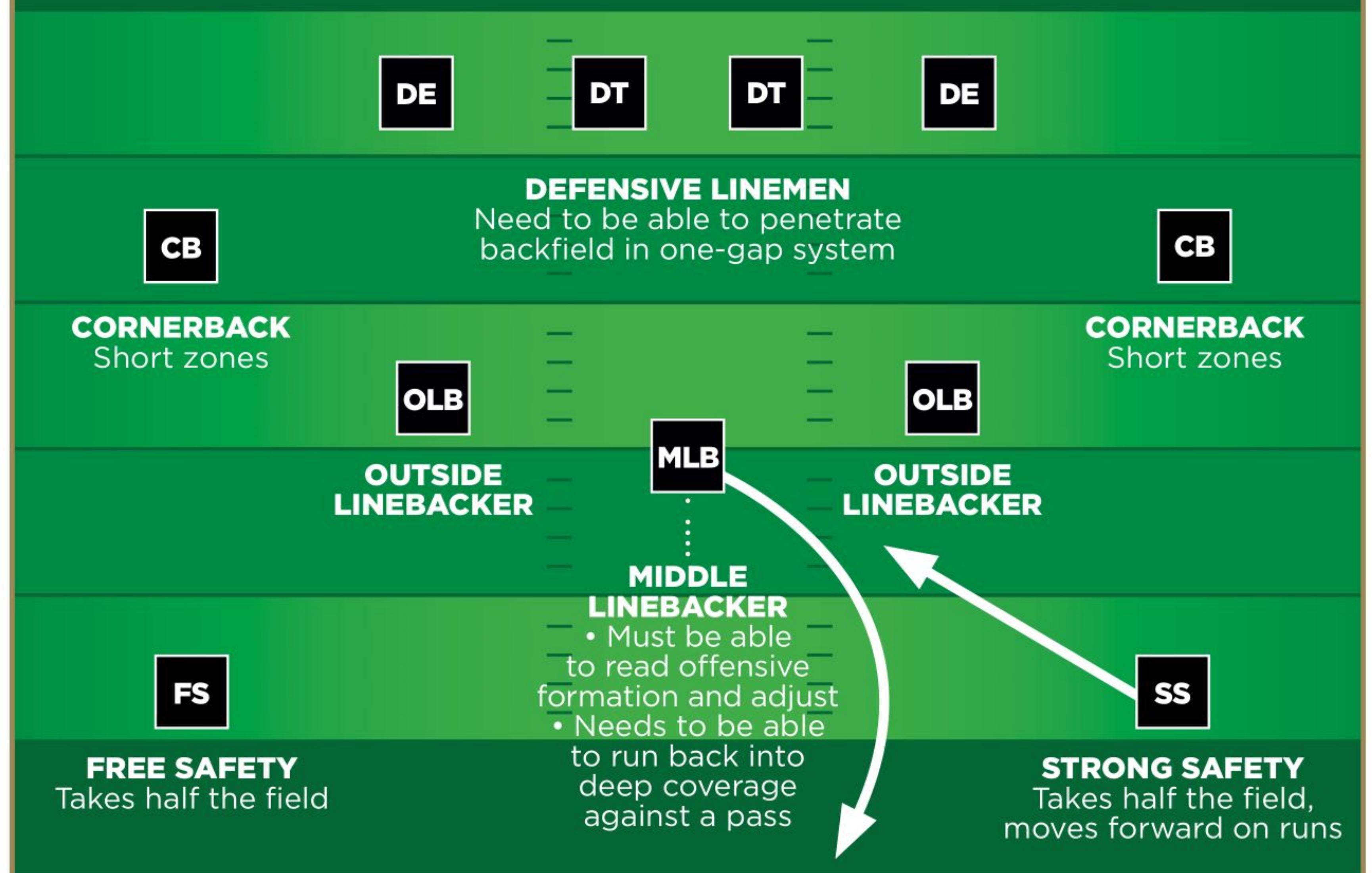
TAMPA-ING WITH GREATNESS

Tony Dungy is widely credited with creating the 'Tampa 2' defense, but is the first to admit its inspiration came from another formidable unit. "Tampa 2 is a misnomer!" he tells *Gridiron*, "It was the 'Pittsburgh 2' all the way: everything from the 1973 playbook, exactly the way we did it in Pittsburgh. No differences, no nuances, nothing new. I guess people, by the time I did it again in 1996, had lost the history.

"The philosophy is, 'We're gonna play a lot of zone defense, we're going to get athletic, fast guys who fly to the football and are physical, and we're going to do the same things over and over. We're not going to give up big plays and not beat ourselves.

"Of course, your front four has to be able to generate pressure without blitzing. That way you can use seven guys to cover and you can play a lot of zone defense because the quarterback is not going to have a lot of time to stretch you and pick you apart. And then, when you get those exceptional players – whether it's Joe Greene, Jack Lambert, Jack Ham and Mel Blount in one era, or Warren Sapp, Simeon Rice, Derrick Brooks and John Lynch in another – they make the defense exceptional, but the concepts are very, very basic."

TAMPA 2 DEFENSE



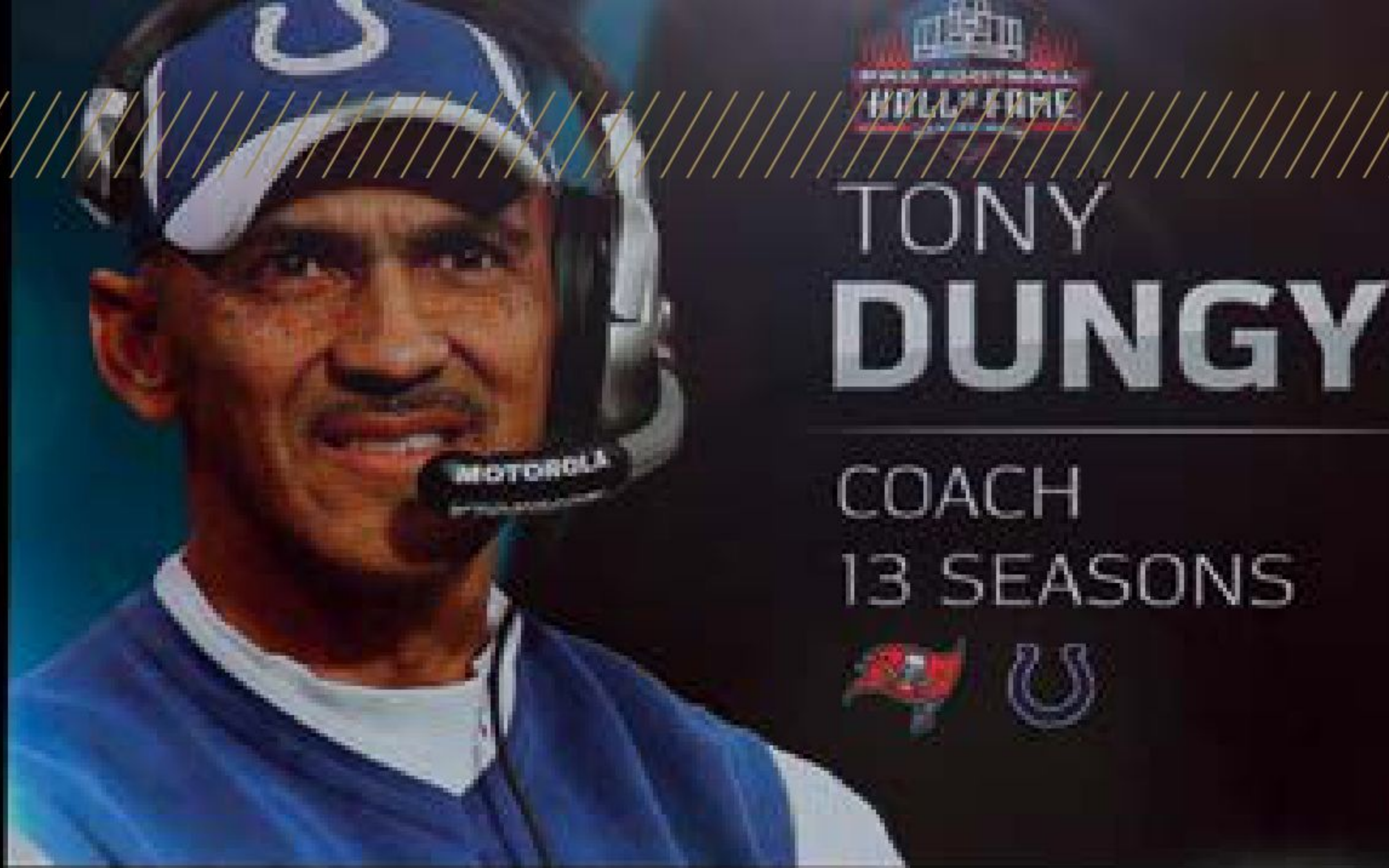
and bring you to Indianapolis himself if necessary...

TD: There was a lot of talk and speculation that, if we didn't win the Super Bowl in Tampa, the owners were going to make a change, and that is what happened. Bill came down to meet me and he just started saying, 'We're going to have a high-priced offense, so we're going to need to play a lot of young players on

defense, and we think your system fits in'. It was a short conversation...

How refreshing was it when you got into that building to be looking at the game through the same eyes as the GM?

TD: It was great. I had it in Tampa with Rich McKay and I had it in Indianapolis with Bill. We talked for three or four days straight when I



came to Indianapolis, about what we needed to be successful, the kind of guys that I wanted. He listened very well and, pretty soon, we're drafting Dwight Freeney, Joseph Addai, Robert Mathis, Cato June and all these guys who are just exactly what the system is looking for. People were saying, 'This guy's too short, he's too small, he's too this or too that', but those guys ended up being so productive for us.

And it was a very different coaching challenge to Tampa, as you're trying to create a defense that's more of a complementary piece to an offense and this all-time great quarterback in Peyton Manning...

TD: It was really the same thing: selling the team on how we're going to win, being fundamentally sound, playing hard and not beating ourselves. What changed in Indy was that we had a lot of money committed to the offense, so we had to build a defense complementary to that. We looked for guys who could rush the passer, or could make plays in the defensive backfield, because we knew we were going to be ahead a lot and taking the football away would be important in protecting leads in the fourth quarter.

Your rivalry with the New Patriots was pretty intense, so what was it like when you finally beat them in the 2006 AFC title

game. It wasn't just the fact that you beat them; you came back from 21-3 down at halftime?

TD: It was almost poetic justice. We felt like we were going to have to beat those guys to get to the Super Bowl, so it was a sweet moment and I'm glad it happened that way. After you play them a lot, you kind of realise what's going to happen. Bill Belichick's going to try to take away what you do best offensively, and he's going to try to attack your weakness defensively. You have to understand what you are, and look at it through his eyes: what's he going to try to attack?

The drive we had to win that game, Peyton knew that Bill's not gonna let Marvin Harrison beat him. So the coverage is going to be set, even though they may not have done it the whole game in that situation. He's going to take Marvin away, so we put Marvin on the right, and threw every ball in that drive to the left side of the field. That wasn't our plan, necessarily, but we understood that's what they were going to do, and we had to adjust.

And then, obviously, you go on and finish the job in one of the more bizarre Super Bowls given the awful rainy conditions in Miami.

TD: It was gratifying to win but, as a purist, I hated to win a game like that, where you got so many turnovers and sloppy play. It was the result of two

hard-hitting teams and the weather conditions so, to hang in there, battle through all the adversity and come away with the win, it was a great feeling. It was a first championship for Indianapolis, the fans, the city and our whole organisation. While we were waiting to do the postgame TV interviews and the trophy presentation, I remember looking at the stands and seeing all our fans there and our families down on the field and you realised it was a victory for the whole state of Indiana. It was very gratifying.

Was there added significance in becoming the first black head coach to win a Super Bowl?

TD: I certainly felt that. As I mentioned in my Hall-of-Fame speech, in my first year playing, 1977, there were only 10 African-American assistant coaches in the entire league. Coming from that and watching guys evolve and not get an opportunity to be a head coach, to know that I was representing all of those men, it felt very special. **B**

Tony Dungy largely constructed a Super Bowl-winning Tampa Bay Buccaneers roster in his first head-coaching role, and then secured his own Lombardi Trophy, and the first for a black head coach ever, with the 2006 Indianapolis Colts. Dungy was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2016.

PFF EDGE

DOMINATE WITH DATA

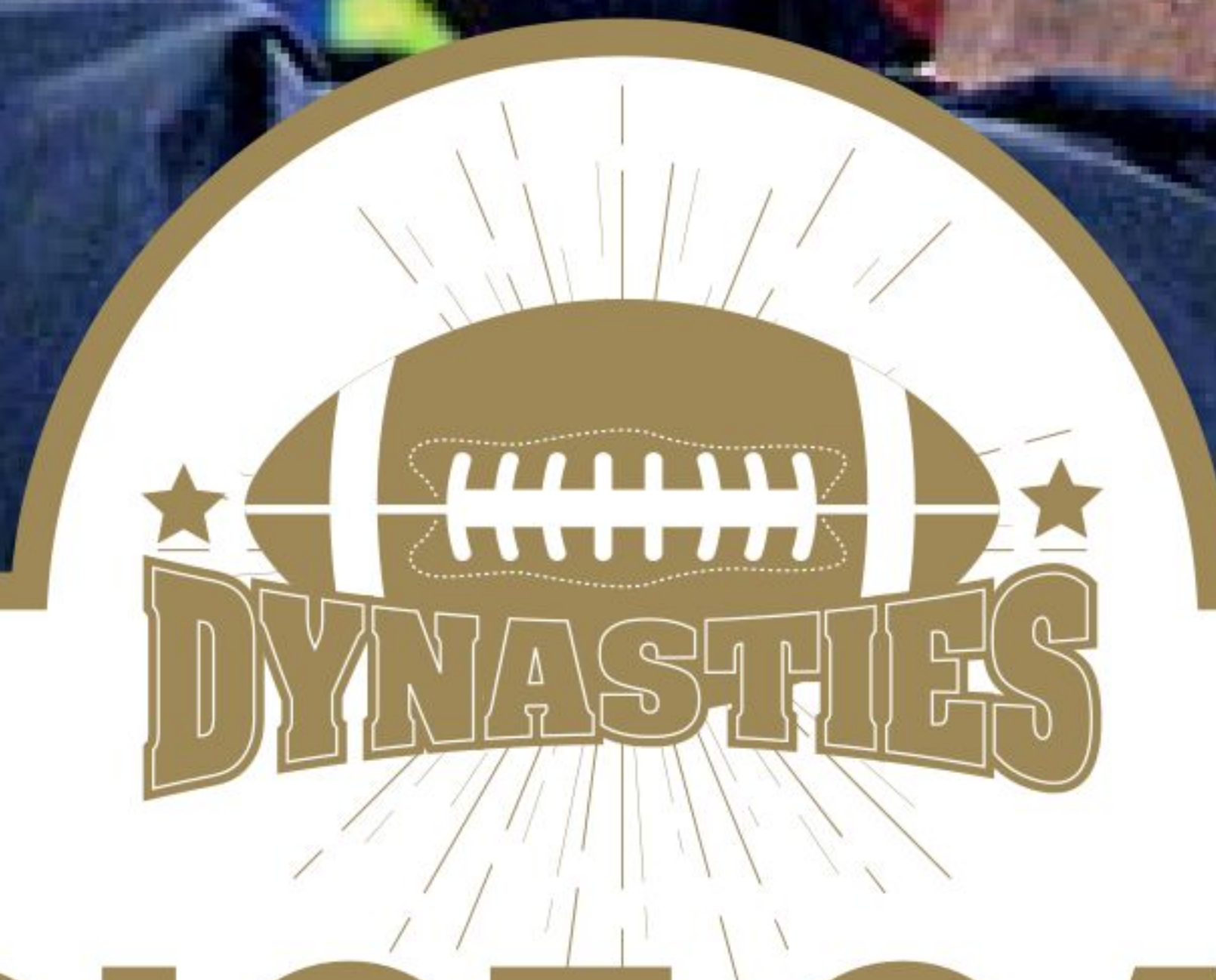
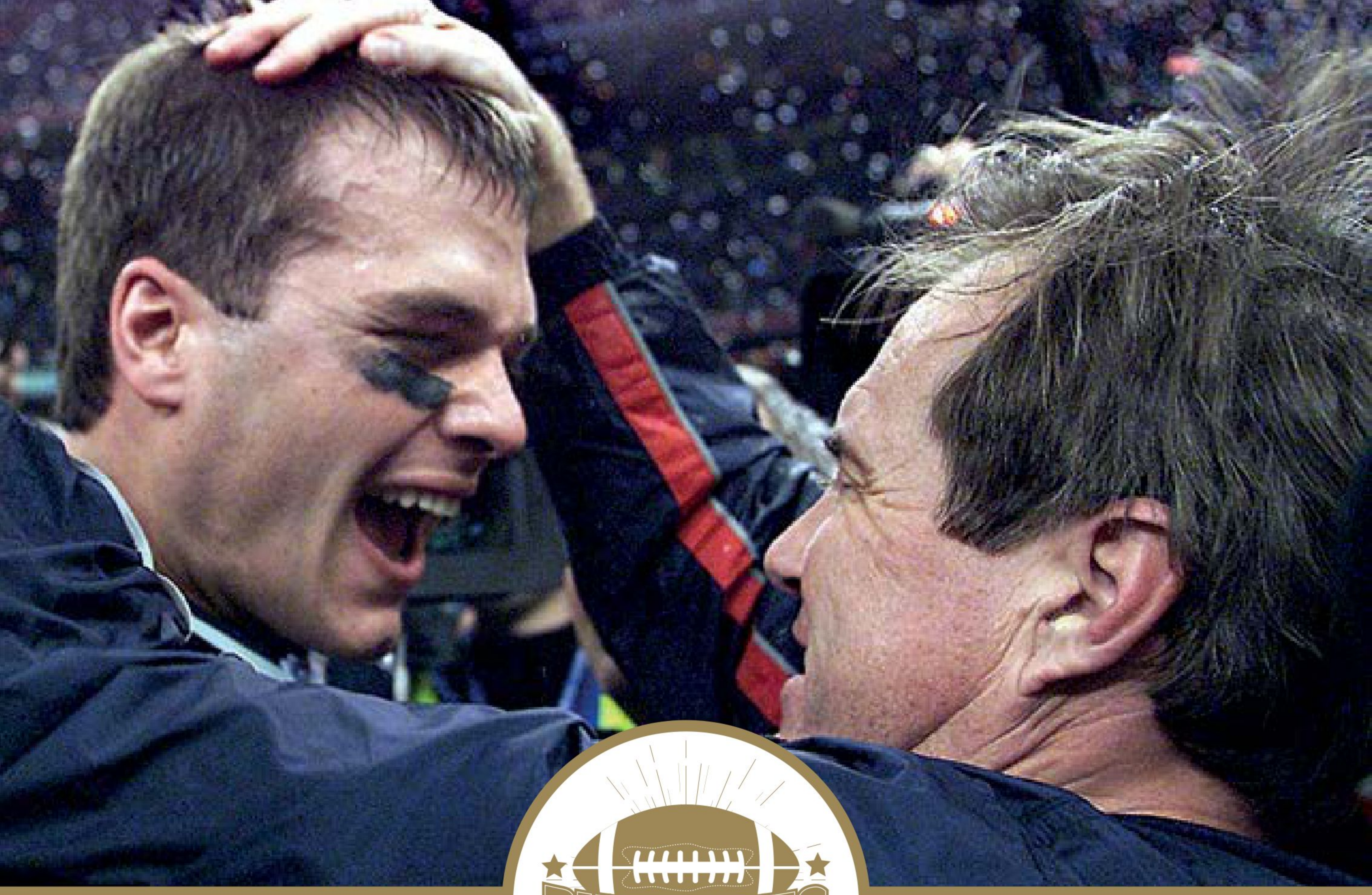
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PATRIOT GAMES

How a diminished head coach, overlooked quarterback and roster full of rivals' rejects combined to turn rags into riches.

WORDS: **CRAIG LLEWELLYN**

Super Bowl XX hurt because they were never in the game. XXXI stung because they should have been. Now, the New England Patriots were hoping to make the third time the charm – against the Greatest Show on Turf.

After defeats, a decade apart, to the Chicago Bears and Green Bay Packers, New England were back and, during a time when the United States was still reeling from the atrocities of 9/11, their underdog story – and appropriately jingoistic nickname – had anyone not enamoured by the St. Louis Rams firmly in their camp.

The Patriots campaign could so easily have ended in Week 3, however. Trailing the New York Jets that head coach Bill Belichick had ditched with seven words just a year earlier, the Patriots' \$100million quarterback Drew Bledsoe was drilled by Gang Green linebacker Mo Lewis, leaving him literally fighting for his life.

His replacement hardly appeared inspiring [1], but Tom Brady had overcome the stigma of being the seventh-string QB when he arrived on campus at Michigan to earn the nickname 'Comeback Kid'. A swirling contradiction of confidences that saw him assure Patriots owner Robert Kraft that

he was 'one of the best decisions this franchise has ever made' while constantly fearing for his job, Brady nevertheless backed up Belichick's decision to keep starting him over a fit-again Bledsoe by guiding New England to the postseason.

Once there, it required a controversial win over the Oakland Raiders to reach the AFC Championship Game, before the tyro, having seen New England's defense stifle the potent Rams attack in Super Bowl XXXVI, led his team downfield to position Adam Vinatieri for the winning kick.

"It's something I'll admit, as a coach and analyst, I don't think they should have done, but they have the

guts,” CBS colour commentator John Madden conceded from his perch in the booth that night, “What Tom Brady just did gives me goosebumps.”

Despite having been 14-point underdogs, the 2001 Patriots were moulded in their coach’s image, with Belichick putting the awkwardness of his escape from New York in the rear view as he and director of player personnel Scott Pioli reshaped the squad bequeathed by the fired Pete Carroll from 2000 onwards.

“He was the right man at the right time,” linebacker Willie McGinest tells *Gridiron*. “He had a clear blueprint. He wanted tough, physical, smart and versatile guys. He took a nucleus from the [Patriots] team he was an assistant on and added to that.”

Going 5-11 in his first year hardly hinted at Super Bowl potential but, having targeted team-first players – even if they had been discarded by rivals – he instilled his patented ‘do your job’ mentality. Belichick’s brand of complementary football – and willingness to go in a different tactical direction to the rest of the league – paved the road for many a repeat visit.

Despite missing out on the playoffs entirely the next year, the Patriots were back in the Super Bowl at the end of the 2003 campaign. Belichick had shown another of the hallmarks of his leadership by releasing captain and fan favourite Lawyer Milloy when the Pro Bowl safety became a fading financial millstone to the franchise, but the Patriots went a club-record 14-2 nevertheless, before needing another last-gasp Vinatieri field goal to wrap up a see-saw final encounter with the Carolina Panthers.

Twelve months on, they returned victorious to Foxboro once more, the last team to repeat as Super Bowl champions as another 14-2 season and typically complementary big-game performance saw them hold off a spirited Philadelphia Eagles rally in Jacksonville. Along the way, one of the cast-offs accommodated by Belichick, running back Corey Dillon, turned up trumps as the Patriots extended their 15-game unbeaten run through the end of the previous

season to a modern league-record 21.

There would be no ‘three-peat’, nor another shot at another Lombardi until 2007 – a season after New England’s biggest challenger of the period, Indianapolis, had finally broken the Patriot stranglehold on their rivalry en route to the top step. When they did return to the finale, however, New England did it in style.

After being punished to the tune of fines and a first-round draft pick for Spygate, a scandal surrounding their recording of opposing signals, Belichick and Co. responded by delivering the first unbeaten 16-game regular season. Armed with new weapons in Wes Welker and Randy Moss, Brady was never short of options as the Patriots rewrote the record books. Their feat was sealed in a 73-point Week 17 thriller versus the New York Giants that also saw Brady and Moss break the NFL’s touchdown pass and reception records respectively. But the teams would meet again.

The wildcard Giants used late-season momentum to make the Super Bowl, but arrived as 12-point underdogs against a team many already considered the finest in the history of the NFL.

In contrast to their Week 17 encounter, the game proved a defensive affair, with just a combined 10 points on the board after three quarters, and the outcome turned on New York’s final possession, where a remarkable ‘one hand, one helmet’ reception by David Tyree kept the drive alive and helped set up Plaxico Burress for the winning score.

“The all-consuming storyline was 19-0,” Tyree tells *Gridiron*. “People turned up expecting sports history to be made and it was – just not the way everybody anticipated.”

When Brady suffered a torn ACL on the opening weekend of the following season, many expected the end of an era, but the Patriots still went 11-5 behind backup Matt Cassel, only to lose a sixth straight AFC East title – and a postseason berth – to a fourth-level tiebreaker.

Behind the scenes, however, Belichick continued tinkering, churning his roster, readying the empire to strike back. **6**

GRIDIRON GOLD

TAKING TOM [1]

Long after Penn State teammates Courtney Brown and LaVar Arrington had been taken first and second overall at New York’s Radio City Music Hall, when the memory of the hometown Jets’ record four first-round selections had already begun to fade, and with six quarterbacks already off the board, the New England Patriots opted to add depth to their roster with the 199th pick of the 2000 NFL Draft.

The Michigan graduate named on the card handed to an anonymous NFL runner had hardly produced an eye-popping performance at the annual Scouting Combine and, worse still, possessed a personal image encapsulated in a photograph that would have shamed many a seven-stone weakling.

Thomas Edward Patrick Brady Jr. also ‘couldn’t run worth a lick’, but ‘had enough where he can step out of the way of people’. He was also considered ‘a very good deep passer’ and ‘highly competitive’ with a ‘priest-like personality’, but most scouts and GMs couldn’t get past that photo.

“I couldn’t forget about Brady if I tried,” a rueful Steve Mariucci, then head coach of the QB’s hometown 49ers, tells *Gridiron*.

“He ran a 5.2-second 40-yard dash – which I think may be the slowest of all-time for a quarterback – but I think his story has made a lot of people look at how they evaluate quarterbacks. It’s not just about the measurables; a big part is what’s inside.”

THE END ZONE

WITH ANDY REID

Introducing the grizzled head coach who finally got his Lombardi and a likely home in Canton...

1978-80

SEASONS WHERE REID, AS AN OFFENSIVE LINEMAN, WAS TEAM-MATE TO FUTURE CHICAGO BEARS QB – AND SUPER BOWL WINNER – JIM MCMAHON AT BYU

13

AGE OF THE OUTSIZED ANDREW WALTER REID WHEN HE APPEARED ON *MONDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL* WEARING 207LB RAMS RB LES JOSEPHSON'S JERSEY TO TAKE PART IN A 'PUNT, PASS, KICK' COMPETITION

XXXI

SUPER BOWL WHERE THE PACKERS BEAT NEW ENGLAND AND REID WON HIS FIRST RING, AS ASSISTANT OFFENSIVE LINE AND TIGHT ENDS COACH

5

THICKNESS, IN INCHES, OF THE DOCUMENT DETAILING HOW HE'D RUN THE PHILADELPHIA EAGLES THAT REID TOOK TO HIS JOB INTERVIEW

24-21

MARGIN OF EAGLES DEFEAT BY NEW ENGLAND IN REID'S FIRST SUPER BOWL APPEARANCE AS HC

2

NUMBER OF FORMER REID COACHING TREE MEMBERS TO WIN THE SUPER BOWL BEFORE HIM (JOHN HARBAUGH & DOUG PEDERSON)

4

DAYS BETWEEN EAGLES RELEASE & SIGNING ON AS HC OF THE KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

4

CONSECUTIVE NFC CHAMPIONSHIP GAME APPEARANCES FOR THE EAGLES UNDER REID, ALTHOUGH ONLY ONE YIELDED A TRIP TO THE SUPER BOWL

206

RECORD NUMBER OF WINS WITHOUT A LOMBARDI AS HEAD COACH, PUT RIGHT BY WIN #207 IN SUPER BOWL LIV

1

SEASON WITHOUT PLAYOFFS FOOTBALL FOR KC UNDER REID

DID YOU
KNOW?

REID'S PRO COACHING CAREER BEGAN WITH A MIDDLE-OF-THE-NIGHT ENCOUNTER WITH FELLOW HIREE STEVE MARIUCCI DURING A FIRE ALARM AT THE MIDWAY MOTOR LODGE THEY WERE BOTH STAYING AT BEFORE HEADING TO THE GREEN BAY PACKERS FACILITY!

"I WANTED TO SEE IF THERE WERE PEOPLE RUNNING FOR THEIR LIVES, SO WE MET IN THE HALLWAY, IN OUR UNDERWEAR, WITH THE FIRE ALARM GOING OFF, AND IT'S BEEN REALLY TIGHT EVER SINCE." - MARIUCCI



NFLPA

PATRICK MAHOMES II QB
TYRANN MATHIEU S



TRAVIS KELCE TE
SPENCER WARE RB

THE KANSAS CITY CHIEFS ARE SUPER BOWL LIV

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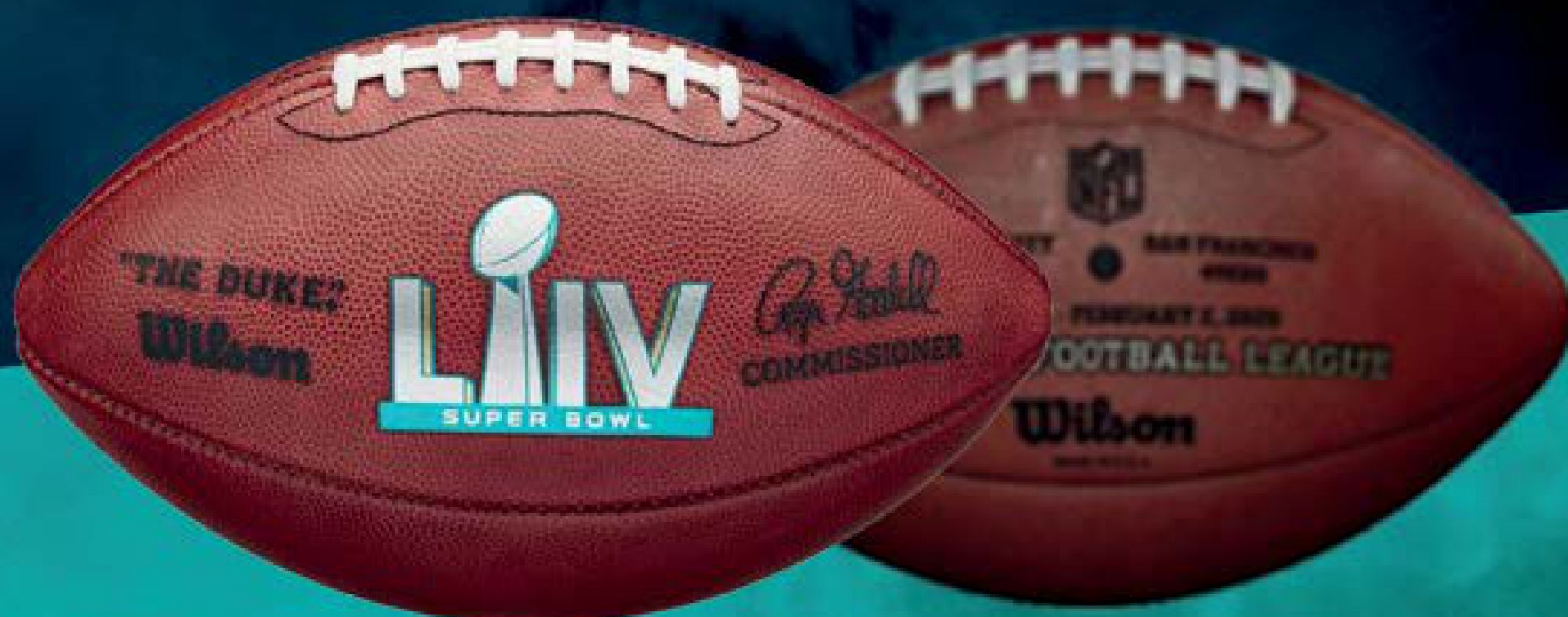
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