

From worst to first: How the Patriots and Bears topped the NFL standings

BY JOSH DUBOW
AP PRO FOOTBALL WRITER

The New England Patriots and Chicago Bears were just playing out the string late in lost seasons when the calendar flipped to December last year.

Now they find themselves at the top of the NFL standings after remarkable turnarounds.

It's been more than three decades since the two teams that earned the top playoff seeds in each conference had missed the postseason the previous year.

That last happened in 1992, when Pittsburgh topped the AFC and San Francisco earned the No. 1 seed in the NFC after missing the 1991 playoffs despite a 10-win season. The only other times it occurred since seeding began in 1975 came in the nine-game strike season of 1982 with Washington and the Los Angeles Raiders, and in 1981 with San Francisco and Cincinnati.

Making this even more unusual is the fact that both the Bears and Patriots have rebounded under first-year coaches.

Ben Johnson has transformed a Chicago team already assured its first winning season since 2018. This is the latest in a season the Bears have been in the top spot in the NFC since 2006, when they last reached the Super Bowl.

Mike Vrabel has led a similar turnaround in New England after the team had dropped off in recent years under Bill Belichick and Jerod Mayo. The Patriots lost 26 games the previous two seasons — one shy of Carolina for most in the league — but now have the most wins in the NFL with 11.

Four teams have won the Super Bowl under a first-year coach, with Denver the last to do it in the 2015 season under Gary Kubiak. The others were Jon



Charles Krupa

New England Patriots quarterback Drake Maye looks to pass against the New York Giants during the first half of an NFL football game Monday, Dec. 1, 2025, in Foxborough, Mass.

Gruden in 2002 with Tampa Bay, George Seifert in 1989 with San Francisco and Don McCafferty in 1970 with the Baltimore Colts.

Gruden and Kubiak had coached other teams, meaning Johnson will try to join McCafferty and Seifert as the only coaches to win a Super Bowl in their first year as an NFL head coach.

Both teams also have second-year

quarterbacks, with Caleb Williams in Chicago and Drake Maye in New England. There have never been two QBs that inexperienced starting for the top playoff seeds.

FOURTH-DOWN AGGRESSIVENESS

With more and more teams being aggressive on fourth down, the success — or failure — of those plays has a large impact on who wins these days.

That was clearly evident in two games this past week, with Green Bay scoring touchdowns on a pair of fourth downs in a win at Detroit on Thanksgiving, and Carolina doing the same on Sunday in an upset victory over the Los Angeles Rams.

In all, there have been 74 offensive touchdowns scored on fourth-down plays so far this season, breaking the record for an entire

season of 73 set in 2021.

There have already been more than twice as many fourth-down TDs this season as there were in the entire 2017 season (34). Philadelphia was one of the most aggressive teams that season and won the Super Bowl, contributing to a marked increase in fourth-down tries since then.

While the Rams were on the wrong end of those fourth downs against the Panthers, they are tied with Kansas City for the most fourth-down TDs this season with six. The Panthers, Lions and Jets all have five.

BRONCOS ARE THE COMEBACK KIDS

Denver has gotten off to a 10-2 start in a most unusual fashion.

The Broncos have trailed in all 12 games this season before rallying to win 10 of them. How unusual is that?

This is the 202nd time that a team trailed in each of the first 12 games of a season. Only eight teams besides the Broncos had a winning record after the 12th game, including the Cowboys at 6-5-1 this season.

Only one team before Denver won more than seven of the first 12 games after trailing in every one — the Houston Oilers opened

8-4 in 1978.

Of the seven teams to do it before this season, only three made the postseason, with the Oilers the only one to win even one playoff game. Houston won two playoff games that season before losing to Pittsburgh in the AFC title game.

Denver has won six games by three points or fewer — one shy of the most in any season — with the last four games being wins by three, three, three and one point. The only other team to win four straight games by three points or fewer was the 1986 New York Giants, who went on to win the Super Bowl.

COMMITMENT TO MEDIOCRITY

For decades, the Raiders were one of the most successful franchises in the NFL with three Super Bowl championships, two more trips to the title game and 16 division titles in a 36-year span ending in 2002.

Since then, it's been almost nothing but losing. The Raiders were officially eliminated from playoff contention with a 31-14 loss to the Chargers on Sunday, marking the 23rd straight season that the team will fail to win either a playoff game or a division title. Only two other franchises have had longer streaks since the 1970 merger, with Detroit doing it 29 straight seasons from 1994-2022 and Buffalo for 24 straight from 1996-2019.

This season has been particularly bad for Las Vegas with a 2-10 record that includes five losses by at least 17 points.

The offense has been the biggest issue, with the team's current streak of four straight games allowing at least four sacks and rushing for fewer than 75 yards tied for the longest in the Super Bowl era with the 2016 Browns.

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stood out to her was a clause that gives the newly created College Sports Commission full authority to resolve disputes about payments from third-party companies to players, and prohibits players from seeking remedies outside the new system.

"It's safe to say there's a lot buried in here that people don't know or didn't see or never went through the committee process," Cantwell said.

The USOPC had withheld its support, seeking changes that would bolster Olympic sports.

Though the types of changes the committee's leadership advocated were not placed into the House version of the bill, the USOPC signaled its support, saying it was ready to work with Senate leaders and others to "build a model that supports Olympic and Paralympic sport and reinforces the critical role college programs play in developing student-athletes."

The NCAA and Division I conferences portray the bill as placing into law the rules created by the multibillion-dollar lawsuit settlement that allows college players to be paid.

The NCAA lobbied for three key elements in the bill: antitrust protections, pre-emption of state laws that regulate the payments to players, and a section that prevents athletes from becoming employees of their schools.

Those elements remain in the slightly revised version of the bill that will be debated Wednesday and could be voted on the same day.

Action on a procedural vote in the House to advance the bill Tuesday underscored the still-tenuous prospects for the legislation. After Republicans openly debated the bill on the floor, it was narrowly advanced to a final vote by just a single vote margin.

"There's some people that have issues with the NCAA. That have issues that they don't want the federal government to have to get involved in this," said House Majority Leader Steve Scalise.

One notable addition to the latest version of the act was a clause prohibiting state attorney generals or other state officials from bringing civil action against the CSC before exhausting all arbitration and other remedies offered by the CSC.

Last month, the CSC sent out a contract that included similar language. The commission needs all 68 teams from Power Four conferences to sign the contract for it to go into effect.

But last week, Texas attorney general Ken Paxton sent out guidance to schools in his state urging them not to sign the CSC document, calling it "an egregious attempt to insulate CSC from legal challenges."


"No entity should be allowed to arbitrarily give itself the type of legal immunity CSC is pursuing, especially by putting colleges and universities in the crosshairs," Paxton said. The bill appeared

headed for passage over the summer, but hit roadblocks among Republican members who represented states with smaller Division I schools.

The NCAA negotiated to help those schools retain some of their decision-making power when it came to membership standards for Division I schools. That was part of an overhaul of its governance structure that helped open the door to the conferences supporting the legislation.

"The SCORE Act will establish stability and return national standards to college sports while supporting universities' educational mission," SEC commissioner Greg Sankey said.

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COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY
HOPKINS CIRCUIT COURT
MADISONVILLE,
KENTUCKY 42431
CIVIL ACTION NO.
24-CI-00953

NEWREZ LLC dba
SHELLPOINT MORTGAGE
SERVICING

PLAINTIFF


vs. NOTICE OF SALE IN
EQUITY

KENNETH RAY WILLIAMS,
ET AL.

DEFENDANTS

By virtue of Judgment and Order of Sale of the Hopkins Circuit Court the undersigned will, on **Monday, December 15, 2025 at 1:00 p.m.** on the steps of the Hopkins County Judicial Center, 120 East Center Street, Madisonville, Kentucky, proceed to expose to PUBLIC SALE, the real estate located at **244 Hall Street, Madisonville, PVA Parcel No. M-33-24-6**, Hopkins County, Kentucky. See **Deed Book 818, page 733**, Hopkins County Court Clerk's Office, for the legal description of said property. Terms: The real estate shall be sold for cash or on credit of thirty (30) days. If on credit, the purchaser must pay a down payment of 10% of the purchase price at the time of the sale and post bond with approved surety for the balance of the purchase price, bearing interest at the rate specified in the judgment from the date of said bond, with a lien reserved upon said property until payment is made in full. The buyer shall be responsible for the current year's property taxes.
J. Keith Cartwright
Master Commissioner
Hopkins Circuit Court

LEGAL NOTICE



COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY
HOPKINS CIRCUIT COURT
MADISONVILLE,
KENTUCKY 42431
CIVIL ACTION NO.
24-CI-00973

SERV BANK, SB

PLAINTIFF

vs. NOTICE OF SALE IN
EQUITY

LUCAS E. FERGUSON, ET AL.

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