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

Four teams have won the Super Bowl under a firstvear coach, with Denver the last to do it in the 2015 season under Gary Kubiak.



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 season of 73 set in 2021. 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 all have five. top playoff seeds.

FOURTH-DOWN AGGRESSIVENESS

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

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

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 fourthdown 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

BRONCOS ARE THE COMEBACK KIDS

Denver has gotten off to With more and more 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

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

Only one team before Denver won more than seven of the first 12 games after trailing in every one — The others were Jon the record for an entire the Houston Oilers opened Browns.

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 36year 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

FROM PAGE B1

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 supporting 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 studentathletes."

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 be debated will Wednesday and could be voted on the same day.

Action on a procedural vote in the House to advance the bill Tuesday underscored the stilltenuous 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 universities'

educational mission," SEC commissioner Greg Sankey said.



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

NEWREZ LLC dba SERVICING

PLAINTIFF

vs. NOTICE OF SALE IN **EQUITY**

KENNETH RAY WILLIAMS, ET AL. **DEFENDANTS**

By virtue of Judgment and Or der of Sale of the Hopkins Cir cuit 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, Ken tucky, proceed to expose to PUBLIC SALE, the real es tate located at 244 Hall Street, Madisonville, PVA Parcel No. M-33-24-6, Hop-kins County, Kentucky. See Deed Book 818, page 733 Hopkins County Court Clerk's Office, for the legal descrip tion of said property.

Terms: The real estate shal 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 bal ance of the purchase price bearing interest at the rate specified in the judgment from the date of said bond, with a li en reserved upon said prop erty until payment is made in sponsible for the current year's property taxes.

> eith Cartwrigr Master Commissione Hopkins Circuit Court

Chris Paul's return stint with the Clippers is over, and the team's rough start just got rougher

BY GREG BEACHAM AND TIM **REYNOLDS** ASSOCIATED PRESSS

Chris Paul's return stint with the Los Angeles Clippers has come to an abrupt and stunning end, the franchise parting ways with one of its greatest players in a late-night meeting that will add another layer of drama to the team's terrible start this season.

The news was delivered in a meeting in Atlanta that ended around 2 a.m. Wednesday, Clippers basketball operations president Lawrence Frank said. Frank said he made the decision to sever ties with Paul on Sunday, then told the franchise's all-time assist leader that he needed to see him on Tuesday in Atlanta.

Frank did not confirm speculation that Paul and Clippers coach Tyronn Lue have been clashing or not speaking to one another, insisting the decision had multiple layers. Frank also insisted that Lue is safe, despite the Clippers' 5-16 start to this season.

This decision had nothing to do with one incident, one meeting that did or did not happen," Frank said in a video conference with reporters. "Some of our business, respectfully, I have to keep in house. But this didn't come down to one incident or one meeting. It just wasn't the right fit.'

Paul made the announcement on social media shortly before 3 a.m. Wednesday, posting "Just Found Out I'm Being Sent Home" and adding a peace emoji. The Clippers were in Atlanta for a road game against the Hawks on Wednesday night. Los Angeles lost at Miami on Monday night to extend its wildly disappointing start to the season.

The Clippers' flight to Atlanta from Miami on Tuesday was delayed for about 4 1/2 hours, according to flight Paul, who signed a \$3.6 million deal

session between Frank and Paul. The team didn't land in Atlanta until shortly before 10 p.m.

"Because of the nature of the conversation it was a long, long, long, long, long, long meeting," Frank said.

The 40-year-old Paul is playing his 21st NBA season, and he strongly hinted last month that it will be his last. The 12-time All-Star and twotime Olympic gold medalist has earned four All-NBA first team selections, and he ranks second in NBA history with 12,552 assists. He was the first player to score at least 20,000 points while recording at least 10,000 assists; LeBron James and Russell Westbrook have both since done that as well.

Paul became arguably the most accomplished player in Clippers franchise history while leading the team to six winning seasons from 2011-17, including the Clippers' first two Pacific Division titles and three playoff series victories. Paul returned to Los Angeles as a free agent last July, rejoining a franchise where he is loved by fans while having an outside chance to contend for his first championship alongside Kawhi Leonard and James Harden.

It didn't happen.

"We did not make this move because of our underperformance," Frank said. "He had nothing to do with that. I take full responsibility for our record. We are not scapegoating Chris Paul. We have many issues, and we're going to address each issue for our underperformance. But I do want to make it clear: We have great respect for Chris, for the career that he's had and for his impact on the organization, what he did to help transform the franchise, and we're not blaming him for underperformance.'

The Clippers will likely try to trade

records, which led to the late-night to return to I.A. A trade cannot happen

until Dec. 15 by league rules. Paul hasn't spoken to reporters since he strongly hinted at retirement while the Clippers were back in his native North Carolina. But he acknowledged a video retrospective of his career played by the Clippers during a timeout at Intuit Dome last week. The video ended with "Congratulations, Point God" on the

Paul couldn't really be blamed for the Clippers' profound struggles this season because he hasn't played much.

He is averaging 2.6 points and 3.3 assists while playing just 14.3 minutes per game — all career lows — and he didn't play at all in five straight games in mid-November. Paul had eight points and three assists while playing 15 minutes against the Heat in what turned out to be his final game with the team — a game in which Harden and other starters were effectively benched, in the latest sign of discord for Lue's team.

"T Lue's a hell of a coach," Frank said. "He's going to continue to be the coach here for a long time."

The Clippers are on a five-game skid, and they're tied with Sacramento for the second-worst record in the Western Conference heading into Wednesday's games. Leonard has been limited to 10 games by injuries, and they've already lost guard Bradley Beal to season-ending hip surgery.

The Clippers' streak of 14 consecutive winning seasons is the longest active streak in the NBA, but owner Steve Ballmer's club has yet to show signs of contention this season and now they're going forward without a historically talented point guard and franchise favorite.

'Chris' legacy with us stands," Frank said. "This situation just didn't work out at this time."



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

SERVBANK, SB

PLAINTIFF vs. NOTICE OF SALE IN

DEFENDANTS

EQUITY LUCAS E. FERGUSON, ET

By virtue of Judgment and Or der of Sale of the Hopkins Cir cuit 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 Cen ter Street, Madisonville, Ken tucky, proceed to expose to PUBLIC SALE, the real estate located at 804 Park Av enue Court, Madisonville PVA Parcel No. M-43-2-37 42, Hopkins County, Ken tucky. See **Deed Book 774** page 475, Hopkins County Court Clerk's Office, for the legal description of said prop

Terms: The real estate shal be sold for cash or on credit of thirty (30) days. If on credit down payment of 10% of the purchase price at the time of he sale and post bond wit approved surety for the bal ance of the purchase price pearing interest at the rate specified in the judgment from he date of said bond, with a li en reserved upon said prop erty until payment is made in full. The buyer shall be re sponsible for the curren ear's property taxes.

> J. Keith Cartwright Master Commissione Hopkins Circuit Court