

Titans eager to return to postseason to snap 3-game skid

By **TERESA M. WALKER**
AP Pro Football Writer

NASHVILLE — The Tennessee Titans have strung together six straight winning seasons, three consecutive playoff berths and back-to-back AFC South titles capped by earning the AFC's No. 1 seed.

Only Kansas City has a longer consecutive winning streak at nine seasons.

Unlike the Chiefs, the Titans have nothing to show but three straight postseason losses, and there's only way to try to fix that. "Keep winning," Titans general manager Jon Robinson said. "Keep winning and try to punch a ticket into the tournament and see where we go."

The Titans became the first NFL team to take advantage of the expanded 17-game season and post eight wins against teams with winning records last season. Robinson and Mike Vrabel, the AP NFL Coach of the Year, both earned contract extensions for the franchise's best record (12-5) and highest seeding at No. 1 overall since 2008.

That all came despite using an NFL-record 91 different players — the most ever in a non-strike season. The 26 Titans placed on injured reserve included two-time NFL rushing leader Derrick Henry, who was on his way to a third straight rushing title when he broke his right foot.

Then the Titans lost on their own field for a second straight postseason, this time 19-16 to eventual AFC champion Cincinnati.

"If you don't play well in this league, you're going to lose," Vrabel said. "And if you play good, you have a chance to win. Those guys, we all know that. So we've moved on just like everybody else has."

Henry's health

Henry was leading the NFL in rushing again when he broke a bone in his right foot on Oct. 31

in an overtime win at Indianapolis. He still finished ninth in the league with 937 yards rushing and in the top 10 with 10 rushing touchdowns. He had surgery on the foot and played in the divisional loss, then spent the offseason working out like usual.

The Titans drafted Hassan Haskins out of Michigan and brought back Dontrell Hilliard for depth. Henry, 28, insists he's healthy and ready for whatever is asked of him: "Nothing is going to change in how we want to play and our style of football."

Tannehill's arm

Ryan Tannehill's favorite target A.J. Brown is gone, with the receiver traded to Philadelphia during the first round of the April draft. The Titans used the 18th pick overall acquired in the deal on All-Southeastern Conference wide receiver Treylon Burks. They also traded for veteran receiver Robert Woods and signed a former two-time Pro Bowl tight end in Austin Hooper.

Tennessee drafted tight end Chig Okonkwo and traded up for Liberty's Malik Willis in the third round, the highest drafted quarterback for the franchise since Marcus Mariota at No. 2 overall in 2015. Having Henry back could help the most, but Tannehill has to be better after being intercepted more times (14) last season than his previous two years combined (13).

Protection issues

Tannehill was the second-most sacked quarterback in 2021, and now his offensive line will feature two new starters.

Aaron Brewer, an undrafted lineman out of Texas State, seems set at left guard, replacing salary cap casualty Rodger Saffold. The issue is right tackle. Rookie Nicholas Petit-Frere, a third-round pick out of Ohio State, may beat out Dillon Radunz for the job despite Radunz being a second-round pick in

2021 out of North Dakota State.

Back are center Ben Jones, left tackle Taylor Lewan, who is his healthiest since tearing his right ACL in October 2020, and right guard Nate Davis, who is in the fourth year of his rookie deal.

Titanic front

Tennessee was the only NFL team to have three players with at least eight sacks last season, and all three are back. One of them, linebacker Harold Landry, got a big contract after a career-high 12 sacks. Plus linebacker Bud Dupree, the Titans' big free agent signing for 2021, says he played one game where he felt like himself after recovering from a torn ACL.

That game? The playoff loss when Tennessee tied an NFL record with nine sacks, a good sign for a defense that tied for ninth in the regular season with 43 sacks.

The Titans also return 10 of 11 starters from that playoff loss, with cornerback Caleb Farley, the 22nd pick overall in 2021, fighting rookie Roger McCreary for the starting job opposite Kristian Fulton. The secondary is anchored by two-time All-Pro safety Kevin Byard.

Schedule

The Titans open the season on Sept. 11 by hosting the New York Giants, then will play only two more home games through early November. They play five of their first eight on the road including a prime-time game at Buffalo in Week 2. They go to Green Bay on Nov. 17 for the first of two Thursday night games, with the second on Dec. 29 hosting Dallas.

Tennessee also plays the AFC West this season, visiting Kansas City on Nov. 6 among four prime-time games, and the Chargers on Dec. 19. If the Titans survive the road-heavy start, they will play five of their final eight at home, including three in December.

Saban gets massive new, 8-year deal

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. (AP) — Alabama coach Nick Saban is getting a new eight-year contract worth at least \$93.6 million, eclipsing the recent megadeal of Southeastern Conference rival Kirby Smart.

The University of Alabama trustees compensation committee on Tuesday approved a one-year extension through Feb. 28, 2030 for the 70-year-old Saban, who has led the Crimson Tide to six national titles. Saban's deal averages out to \$11.7 million per year, topping Smart's \$11.25 million pay at defending national champion Georgia.

The announcement comes a month after Smart agreed to a 10-year deal worth more than \$110 million. The Bulldogs beat Alabama in the national championship game in January.

The two join Ohio State's Ryan Day, LSU's Brian Kelly, Michigan State's Mel Tucker and Texas A&M's Jimbo Fisher as college football coaches who will make at least \$9 million in 2022.

Saban's deal includes a salary and talent fee of \$9.9 million this year with \$400,000 annual raises. Saban can receive an \$800,000 completion bonus at the end of February in each of the next four years, plus other bonuses.

"(Wife) Terry and I are very appreciative of the unmatched commitment the university has shown to this football program and our family over the last 15-plus years," Saban said in a statement. "This is our home, and we look forward to finishing our career at Alabama."

His contract ensures his pay will remain at or near the top of the heap among college football coaches.

Saban would get a boost if his deal is less than the average total pay of the three highest paid Southeastern Conference coaches or the average of what the five paid coaches in college football are making. He'd receive the higher of the two averages.

Saban agreed to a three-year extension in June 2021 for \$84.8 million over eight years.

Alabama athletic director Greg Byrne is receiving a three-year extension through June 30, 2029 with a 5 percent raise. He'll make \$1.49 million this year with raises pushing his salary to \$1.91 million for 2028-29.

Byrne also secured a coach seeking his eighth national title — including one at LSU.

"We are incredibly fortunate to have the best football coach in the nation and one of the greatest coaches of all time, regardless of sport, here at Alabama in coach Saban," Byrne said. "Not only have his teams been successful on the field, but they have also achieved greatly in the classroom and community."

"Beyond that, the impact he and Ms. Terry have had on The University, Tuscaloosa and the state of Alabama cannot be overlooked."

The financial terms of the contracts become official upon the formal approval by the University of Alabama System Board of Trustees.

Air Raid evolution: Pioneering offense passes test of time

By **RALPH D. RUSSO**
AP College Football Writer

Mike Leach settles into a leather chair in his office overlooking Mississippi State's practice field after a routine spring session with his team and is asked to give a status report on the Air Raid offense, which has been carving up major-college defenses for the last 25 years.

As is often the case with Leach, his assessment of the pioneering, pass-centric scheme he helped hone into a record-breaking tour de force is a bit over the top but not without merit.

"Well, three of the last

four teams that won the Super Bowl have run it so I guess it's doing pretty good," the 61-year-old head coach said.

Birthing from the mind of Hal Mumme at a high school in East Texas in the 1980s and passed down to the latest batch of Leach-inspired, 30-something coaches, the Air Raid's evolution over four decades has made the offense both ubiquitous and inconspicuous.

It would be difficult to watch a football game at any level and not find a team running at least some of the Air Raid's foundational concepts and plays -- mesh, Y cross, four verts, the quick game.

However, finding a team at the highest levels of the sport running Air Raid in a way that resembles what Mumme unleashed on the Southeastern Conference as Kentucky's coach in 1997 is nearly impossible — outside of Leach's teams.

"It's everywhere and nowhere," said Nate Tice, a former quarterback at Wisconsin who is now a football analyst for The Athletic. "Everyone in college runs Y cross. If you watch Ohio State, they run it 100 times a game, but you don't think of Ohio State as an Air Raid team. But they're running Air Raid concepts."

The Air Raid is more

a process than a playbook these days. Keeping things simple, stressing execution over matchups and seemingly endless repetition of a relatively small number of plays in practice are what links the Air Raid's past and present.

"That really to me is the genius of Hal (Mumme) and Mike Leach and what they've done is they have a system of teaching and practicing that allows the players to improve at a high level," said Colorado State coach Jay Norvell, whose quarterbacks coach is Matt Mumme, Hal's son.

Hal Mumme's monster was created at Cop-

peras Cove (Texas) High School and inspired by LaVell Edwards' BYU passing game and Bill Walsh's West Coast offense that was turning the San Francisco 49ers into an NFL dynasty.

One-word play calls, hand signals that take just a finger or two and a slim playbook were hallmarks of Mumme's Air Raid and still are Leach staples.

"He was basically trying to dumb this thing down for guys that were just learning to play football," Matt Mumme said of his father. "But then realized that the way he was doing it can be highly successful at the collegiate level and it has."

Of the top 25 most-prolific passing seasons in major college football history by yards per game, 12 have direct connections to Mumme and Leach — from Kentucky to Houston to Texas Tech to New Mexico State to Washington State.

Those teams not only produced gaudy stats but numerous coaches, starting with Leach's first star quarterback at Texas Tech: Arizona Cardinals coach Kliff Kingsbury, who also did a stint leading his alma mater and tutoring Patrick Mahomes in Lubbock.

Other Air Raid de-
▶ See **Air Raid**, Page B5

From the Heisman to the Thorpe, the winners are?

By **RALPH D. RUSSO**
AP College Football Writer

Alabama quarterback Bryce Young is the first Heisman Trophy winner since 2017 to play another college season and he is trying to become just the second player to win the award twice.

It has been nearly half a century since Ohio State's Archie Griffin won back-to-back Heismans in 1974-75. Since then, 10 winners have returned to school and none have really come close to repeating.

This is part of the reason why Ohio State quarterback C.J. Stroud, who finished fourth in the Heisman voting last year, is the favorite to win the award this season, according to FanDuel Sportsbook.

Who will win college football's biggest individual prizes in 2022? Let's have a look:

HEISMAN TROPHY (most outstanding player).

Top contenders: Will Anderson Jr., OLB, Alabama; Devin Leary, QB, North Carolina State; Bijan Robinson, RB, Texas; C.J. Stroud, QB, Ohio State; Caleb Williams, QB, USC; Bryce Young, QB, Alabama.

Breakout player who won't win the award but could be a finalist: Anthony Richardson, QB, Florida.

And the winner is ... Williams becomes the third quarterback coached by Lincoln Riley to win the Heisman, following Kyler Murray and Baker Mayfield at Oklahoma.

SKI TROPHY (defensive player of the year)

Contenders: Will Anderson Jr., OLB, Alabama; Jalen Carter, DT, Georgia; Noah Sewell, LB Oregon; Will McDonald IV, DE, Iowa State; Clark Phillips III, CB, Utah.

Breakout player who won't win the award but could be a finalist: Jack Sawyer, DE, Ohio State.

And the winner is ... Anderson will have to live up to a mountain of hype to become the second player to repeat as Nagurski winner (Pat Fitzgerald of Northwestern, 1995-96). He's good enough to do it.

OUTLAND TROPHY (best interior lineman)

Contenders: Bryan Bresee, DT, Clemson; Jalen Carter, DT, Georgia; Siaki Ika, DT, Bay-

lor; Paris Johnson Jr., OT, Ohio State; Pete Skoronski, OT, Northwestern.

Breakout player who won't win it but could be a finalist: Blake Fisher, OT, Notre Dame.

And the winner is ... Carter is considered to have a higher ceiling than the two first-round draft picks Georgia had on its line last year (Jordan Davis and Devonte Wyatt).

DOAK WALKER AWARD (best running back)

Contenders: Braelon Allen, Wisconsin; TreVeyon Henderson, Ohio State; Bijan Robinson, Texas; Sean Tucker, Syracuse; Deuce Vaughn, Kansas State.

Breakout player who won't win it but could be a finalist: Corey Kiner, Cincinnati.

And the winner is ... Allen follows up his late-season freshman breakout of 2021 with a full-season run at 2,000 yards rushing.

BILETNIKOFF AWARD (best receiver)

Contenders: Jordan Addison, USC; Kayshon Boutte, LSU; Josh Downs, North Carolina; Jaxon Smith-Njigba, Ohio State; Cedric Tillman, Tennessee.

Breakout player who won't win it but could be a finalist: Juice Wells, South Carolina.

And the winner is ... Boutte is the focal point of an LSU offense that is otherwise looking for continuity and cohesion.

JIM THORPE AWARD (best defensive back)

Contenders: Jordan Battle, S, Alabama; Brandon Joseph, S,

Notre Dame; Clark Phillips III, CB, Utah; Joey Porter Jr, CB, Penn State; Kelee Ringo, CB, Georgia.

Breakout player who won't win it but could be a finalist: James Williams, S, Miami.

And the winner is ... Phillips is the latest Utes defensive back destined to be a high-round draft pick.

EXTRA POINTS

Butkus Award (best linebacker): Justin Flowe, Oregon.

Mackey Award (best tight end): Michael Mayer, Notre Dame.

Groza Award (best kicker): Harrison Mevis, Missouri.

Ray Guy (best punter): Adam Kosrak, Rutgers.