

# Titans' 4-game skid biggest challenge of Vrabel's tenure

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

NASHVILLE — The Tennessee Titans are facing their biggest challenge of Mike Vrabel's five seasons as head coach.

A year ago, Vrabel guided the Titans through using an NFL-record 91 players with two-time NFL rushing champ Derrick Henry missing the final nine games to the AFC's No. 1 seed and a 12-5 record. That earned Vrabel the AP NFL Coach of the Year award.

This season, they've used 80 different players, and their grip on the AFC South is slipping away.

The Titans (7-7) have lost four straight in their longest skid since the end of the 2015 season with the latest a 17-14 road loss to the Los Angeles Chargers.

Their four-game lead in search of a third straight division title is down to one with three games remaining, and the regular-season finale at Jacksonville (6-8) very well could decide whether Tennes-

see makes the playoffs for a fourth straight year.

And now the Titans get to do it on a short week in hosting Houston (1-12-1) on Saturday.

Asked Monday how they keep the faith amidst the growing injury woes and execution issues, Vrabel said they have to be professionals.

"We have to come to work," Vrabel said. "We all have a job to do. We have to excel at it. We have to do our job better. And we have to continue to find ways to not hurt ourselves in all three phases."

## What's working

The defense snapped a four-game drought without forcing a turnover with two interceptions and held Chargers quarterback Justin Herbert without a touchdown pass for only the third time in his career. The Titans looked like the defense that held eight straight opponents to 20 points or fewer despite a rotating cast of defenders.

Two-time All-Pro safety Kevin Byard, who had one interception in the third quar-

ter, wasn't thinking playoffs after the loss.

"It don't look like we're a team right now that's going to beat anybody, so we've got to find a way to get back to work and beat Houston," Byard said. "That's all we can really do at this point."

## What needs help

Offensive play-calling. Too often the Titans rotate Henry off the field on third down. The two-time NFL rushing champ is having a career season as a receiver in both catches (30) and yards (379), and he was on the sideline for one of the third-and-2s the Titans failed to convert with short passes.

Vrabel said he's responsible for every call that goes in. That would include a pass on third-and-9 in the opening minute of the fourth quarter from the Chargers 24 when Ryan Tannehill missed an open receiver to his right before being sacked for a 9-yard loss. That forced Randy Bullock to attempt a 51-yard field goal.

Henry finished with 104

yards rushing and led them with 59 yards receiving. Even a run for no gain would've left the Titans with a shorter field-goal attempt. Vrabel also said he thought of going for two after Tannehill scored with 48 seconds left before kicking the extra point.

## Stock up

Rookie CB Roger McCreary. He had one of Tennessee's defensive highlights of the season when he tipped a pass while in the air to teammate Joshua Kalu for an interception in the end zone late in the first half.

## Stock down

LT Dennis Daley. He started and finished with 47 snaps, though he rotated with Dillon Radunz before the second-year lineman hurt a knee and didn't finish the game.

## Injured

The Titans ruled seven out before flying to California and have 16 on injured re-

serve. Eight more were hurt in this loss led by Tannehill, Radunz, right guard Nate Davis, linebackers Dylan Cole and Jack Gibbens and defensive backs Terrance Mitchell, Josh Thompson and Andrew Adams.

Tannehill was carted to the locker room after rolling his right ankle in the first quarter, a move he said later was a time-saver. He returned heavily taped and wound up running for the tying TD. He also completed all six of his passes on the final drive.

## Key number

2 — Win two of the final three, and the Titans clinch a third straight division title.

## Next steps

The Titans finally get their first back-to-back home games — six days apart. They host Houston on Saturday, then play their second Thursday night game this season on Dec. 29 in hosting the Dallas Cowboys.

# Deion assembles veteran staff at Colorado

BOULDER, Colo. (AP) — Colorado coach Deion Sanders has assembled a veteran staff that includes 10 coaches who have helped develop more than 350 all-conference players and 85 All-Americans.

Sanders has been busy gathering his staff since being hired by the Buffaloes on Dec. 3. His budget is \$5 million for assistant coaches, which was a substantive bump over the allocation afforded to former coach Karl Dorrell for assistants.

"Coach Prime" is diving in at Colorado after finishing up at Jackson State last weekend after his team lost 41-34 in overtime to North Carolina Central in the Celebration Bowl. It spoiled Sanders' bid for an undefeated season.

Colorado announced the additions to Sanders' staff Tuesday night. It includes Charles Kelly as the defensive coordinator/safeties coach and Sean Lewis as offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach.

Kelly joins the Buffaloes from Alabama, where he served as the associate defensive coordinator. Lewis relocates to Boulder after five years as head coach at Kent State, bringing with him a high-scoring offense that averaged 49.8 points in 2020.

Bill O'Boyle will be the offensive line coach and Nick Williams in charge of defensive ends.

In addition, Sanders brought several coaches with him from Jackson State, including Brett Bartolone (wide receivers), Tim Brewster (tight ends), Gary Harrell (assistant head coach/running backs), Andre' Hart (linebackers), Kevin Mathis (cornerbacks) and Dennis Thurman, who will be the director of quality control for the defense.

The group Sanders assembled has been a part of 40 10-win seasons, coached in 59 bowl games and brought home 27 conference title. They've made the postseason in either the NFL, FCS or FBS level 21 times, according to research by Colorado.

# Lawrence, Jags on rise after overseas low

By **MARK LONG**  
AP Pro Football Writer

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — Trevor Lawrence boarded the eight-hour flight home, grabbed a seat near teammates, pulled out his tablet and pushed play.

He wasted no time painfully reliving every offensive snap from the Jaguars' 21-17 loss to Denver at Wembley Stadium in London, an Oct. 30 game that essentially ended with Lawrence's second interception of the day and his ninth turnover of the season.

Lawrence was frustrated and fed up. The Jaguars' season was unraveling. They had just lost their fifth consecutive one-score game, and Lawrence had chances in several of those to rally his team — and failed.

The No. 1 pick in the 2021 draft, a generational quarterback prospect who rarely lost in high school or college, found himself facing another season of adversity. He figured it was time to do something different.

"Obviously, it wasn't a good day for me, and I really just felt like ... I let the team down," Lawrence recalled. "Should've won that game. I never forgot how I felt in that locker room because I never want to feel like this anymore."

"I'm going to start taking care of the ball. I just want to be the player that I know I can be, and I think that kind of flipped a switch in me."

He's been lights out since.

Lawrence has 15 touchdowns — 14 passing, one rushing —

and just four turnovers in the six games that followed that London loss. He completed 70% of his passes for 1,680 yards in a span that saw Jacksonville win four times and chipped in 140 yards on the ground.

In short, he's looked every bit like the guy the Jaguars (6-8) thought they were getting when the New York Jets won two of their final three games in the 2020 season and essentially handed Jacksonville the top draft spot.

Lawrence returns to New York for the second time in as many years when the Jets (7-7) host the Jaguars on Thursday night. This one features AFC play-off implications — and a much more polished and productive version of Lawrence.

"I have a little bit more of a chip on my shoulder now just because (of) the last year and a half," he said. "I don't really forget what's been said and what people have written, and now you see people change their mind after a couple weeks, but I remember everything."

"I don't use that necessarily as my only fuel, but I definitely use that."

Lawrence certainly has been edgier in recent weeks. He was caught talking trash to Las Vegas linebacker Denzel Perryman in November and then waving goodbye to Tennessee fans in the waning minutes two weeks ago.

He was in a much different state of mind at the end of October, a winless month that receiver Zay Jones called "spooky."

"You saw the dejection in him,"

offensive coordinator Press Taylor said. "I remember him coming up and sitting next to me on the plane for a long time. We just had a long conversation about where we were."

Lawrence returned to the facility the following day determined to make changes. He was focused on finding ways to stop dwelling on poor games and to bounce back from in-game errors. No more repeating mistakes. No more snowball effects. No more excuses.

"You don't put on a smile and act like everything's all right," Lawrence said. "It's not. Everybody's (ticked) and frustrated, not at each other. There's no pointing the finger, but we all understand and we've had that dialogue of what we need to do. Everybody knows what we need to do, and we've just got to go do it."

They have, and Lawrence's play has been instrumental in the team's turnaround. Beating the Cowboys 40-34 on Sunday may have provided the best evidence of Lawrence's makeover. After throwing an interception in the third quarter that Dallas turned into a 17-point lead, Lawrence responded with three consecutive touchdown drives.

And after he fumbled at the Dallas 38-yard line late in the fourth, defensive teammates found him on the sideline and vowed to give him another chance. They did, and Lawrence drove the Jaguars into position for Riley Patterson's 48-yard field goal that sent the game into overtime.

# Packers face brutal 3-game stretch run in playoff bid

By **STEVE MEGARGEE**  
AP Sports Writer

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Aaron Rodgers realizes the easy part is over for the Green Bay Packers as they try to continue their improbable path from a 4-8 hole to a playoff berth.

The climbs are much steeper going forward.

Green Bay (6-8) maintained its postseason hopes by producing back-to-back victories over the Chicago Bears (3-11) and Los Angeles Rams (4-10). The Packers' final three opponents are all .500 or better.

The Packers visit Miami (8-6) on Christmas Day before hosting the NFC North champion Minnesota Vikings (11-3) and Detroit Lions (7-7) in their final two regular-season games.

"They're all good football teams," Rodgers said after the Packers' 24-12 Monday night win over the Rams. "Miami's playing for the playoffs, Minnesota's obviously division winners and coming off a big win. Detroit's won six out of seven, they're playing really well. So it's going to be three difficult games."

"But two of them are at home against dome teams.

It'll be January for those two. We've notoriously been pretty good in those games over the years. So, yeah, this one's really important because it's on the road."

Even if the Packers win all three games, they'll need plenty of help to earn their fourth straight postseason berth. But the Packers at least have some incentive as they enter this stretch run.

Miami's high-powered offense will test the progress of Green Bay's defense, which has shown signs of bouncing back from its season-long struggles.

The Packers won 28-19 at Chicago by allowing just three second-half points and picking off passes to end the Bears' last two series.

They followed that up by getting a season-high five sacks and allowing a season-low 156 yards against the Rams.

"We came in and said, 'Let's dominate and let's get a win,'" cornerback Rasul Douglas said. "Now, we're moving on to step two and that's Miami."

## What's working

The defense held Los Angeles to its lowest single-game yardage total since Sean Mc-

Vay took over as the Rams' coach in 2017. ... The offense didn't produce a whole lot of points, but it did produce some time-consuming drives.

The Packers had four series that lasted more than six minutes and three scoring drives of at least 11 plays. They finished the game with a drive lasting nearly nine minutes and controlled possession for a season-high 37 minutes, 19 seconds.

## What needs work

Although the Packers were flagged only four times, those four penalties consumed 80 yards. A holding penalty on Jonathan Garvin wiped out a 49-yard kickoff return by Keisean Nixon. A 40-yard pass interference penalty on Adrian Amos enabled the Rams to cross midfield while trailing 24-12 in the fourth quarter, though the defense eventually forced a punt.

## Stock up

LB Quay Walker forced a fumble and had a sack and two passes defended. ... OLB Preston Smith had two sacks. Smith has four sacks over his last four games to improve his season total to 7 1/2. ...

Douglas has two interceptions and a forced fumble over his last four games. ... KR/CB Keisean Nixon had a 52-yard kickoff return, his league-leading third return of at least 40 yards. Nixon is the first Packer since Sam Shields in 2010 to have a kickoff return of at least 30 yards in four straight games.

"In all my 18 years, I've never once, until tonight, seen an opposing team's kicker kick away from one of our returners on purpose," Rodgers said after the game. "That's fun. That's pretty incredible."

## Stock down

WR Sammy Watkins was released before the game. Watkins had 13 receptions for 206 yards and no touchdowns this season. His last catch had come on Nov. 13.

Injured

After scoring two touchdowns earlier in the game, RB A.J. Dillon left midway through the second half to get evaluated for a concussion. Packers coach Matt LaFleur said Tuesday that Dillon cleared that evaluation, an encouraging sign for the running back's potential availability against Miami.

LaFleur also indicated that

running back Aaron Jones has been playing at far less than full strength. LaFleur said the Packers wanted to limit Jones' snaps on Monday, but Dillon's exit didn't make that feasible. Jones' situation could affect his practice time.

"It'll be a day-to-day thing, I would say," LaFleur said. "We've just got to make sure that he is healthy come game time. He is a guy that is going to battle through everything."

## Key number

5,100 — Jones' career rushing total after running for 90 yards on 17 carries Monday. He also had a 7-yard touchdown catch. Jones overtook John Brockington's 5,024 yards to move into third place on the Packers' career rushing list. Jones remains behind Ahman Green (8,322 from 2000-06 and 2009) and Hall of Famer Jim Taylor (8,207 from 1958-66).

## Next steps

The Packers prepare for Sunday's game at Miami, a matchup between two teams that really need a win. The Dolphins have lost three straight as they chase their first playoff berth since 2016.