

Titans are in panic mode after latest loss



Chris Siers

The Extra Point

It's officially time to hit the panic button for the Tennessee Titans.

On Christmas Eve, the Titans saw the Houston Texans snap a nine-game skid in Nashville and the Titans' grip on the AFC South lead slip away with the 19-14 Houston victory.

For years, the Titans have been reliant on a stellar defense and a top-tiered ground game.

The formula can only work for so long, though, when the Titans' roster is as banged up as it is.

With Ryan Tannehill likely out for the season, it became Malik Willis' show to run the offense.

If one thing is clear, it's the Titans' third-rounder is not ready to be an everyday NFL starter.

While the Titans' offense hasn't been a true gun-slinging, air out system, Willis couldn't even generate 100 passing yards against the Texans.

Willis went 14-of-23 for 99 yards and two interceptions.

The Titans' receivers haven't done a whole lot for Tannehill as it is, but the passing game was blatantly non-existent on Saturday.

Henry turned out his



Malik Willis went 14-of-23 for 99 yards and two interceptions as the Titans' starting quarterback on Saturday.

Photo courtesy of the Tennessee Titans

typical 126 yard day with a touchdown, but if anything has been learned over the last five games, he can't do it by himself.

Plenty of fans have been calling for Todd Downing's job all season, and for good reason.

The Titans rank 27th in the NFL with 17.9 points per game, with only Tampa Bay, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, Houston and Denver being worse.

At this point, the Titans are limping to the finish line with in-

juries across the board, including Tannehill, Dylan Cole, Amani Hooker and Kristian Fulton.

And the Titans' schedule isn't any easier in the last two weeks either, with Dallas up next on a short week for Thursday Night Football, and the season finale at now-AFC South leading Jacksonville.

With the Titans' loss on Saturday, all eyes are now turned to the finale against Jacksonville, which will decide the AFC South cham-

pion.

The Jags certainly have been playing better as of late, winning four of their last five games and averaging over 30 points per game in each of those four wins.

So what happens if the Titans lose their last two games?

Where should the front office go from here?

In a loaded AFC, featuring the likes of Josh Allen, Patrick Mahomes, Joe Burrow and Justin Herbert, it begs the question as to what

direction the Titans should be heading.

When John Robinson was fired earlier this month, it became clear the Titans' ownership wants to head another direction.

It should also be asked if it's time to blow up the Titans' roster and start rebuilding.

Tannehill isn't the quarterback to compete against the top gunslingers of the NFL and with the number of injuries across the board, it may be time for the ownership and

new general manager, whenever they are hired, to start shipping off key pieces from the Robinson era and start rebuilding from scratch, at least on the offensive side of the ball, because the status quo hasn't been producing, and with a quick glance at the schedule, it's not looking like much can change over the last two weeks of the season.

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Banged-up Titans have nothing at stake but health vs. Dallas

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

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The Tennessee Titans have absolutely nothing on the line Thursday night except pride and the chance to build some momentum by snapping a five-game skid.

Getting as healthy as possible for their regular-season finale in Jacksonville (7-8) with the AFC South title on the line matters much more.

The Titans (7-8) are fighting for their fourth straight playoff berth because of the franchise's longest skid since 2015 after a 19-14 loss to the NFL's worst team in Houston. Now they face a quick turnaround hosting Dallas (11-4) with the Cowboys needing to win out to win the NFC East.

As much as coach Mike Vrabel might want to rest every starter and treat this as an exhibition, he also has

the NFL's most banged-up team having used a league-high 82 players. That comes a year after setting the league record with 91 players in a non-strike season.

His message Monday was simple and short: "Say less and do more." Vrabel also calls this a great opportunity for players taking advantage of the chance to play.

"We'll just keep having to find guys that want to do that," Vrabel said.

What's working

The defense. Yes, as banged up as this unit is and despite giving up 10 points in the fourth quarter of their loss to Houston, the Titans held their 10th opponent to 20 points or less. Twice, they held Houston to field goals after getting inside the Titans 10.

But the banged-up secondary has allowed opponents to throw at will against Tennessee,

and the Titans gave up three of their four biggest plays in the fourth quarter on pass plays, including a 37-yarder that set up the winning touchdown.

What needs help

The offense. Malik Willis scored his first NFL touchdown on a 14-yard run with an assist from offensive lineman Jordan Roos. But the rookie quarterback had as many throws (23) as Derrick Henry had rushing attempts. Henry ran for 126 yards and averaged 5.5 yards per carry with a 48-yard touchdown run.

Willis was sacked four times by halftime behind the patchwork offensive line. He finished 14 of 23 for 99 yards passing with both interceptions in the fourth quarter, the last on the final play in the end zone with Treyton Burks manhandled with no flag.

The Titans got Burks back from a concus-

sion that cost him two games. Willis threw to him late in the first quarter for a 20-yard completion wiped out by a hold on rookie right tackle Nicholas Petit-Frere. Burks was targeted officially three times with no catches, though he did have one carry for 15 yards.

Stock up

Veteran wide receiver Robert Woods. He caught all four passes thrown to him for a team-high 30 yards, and he leads the Titans with 44 receptions for 448 yards. His best asset? He's been available every game despite the left ACL tear that ended his 2021 season.

Stock down

Derrick Henry. Yes, he's the NFL's second-leading rusher has 1,429 yards and 13 TDs, but he also has five fumbles in the Titans' five-game skid. The three-time Pro Bowler and

two-time NFL rushing leader came into this season with a combined 11 fumbles over his previous six seasons.

"That's three games in a row I've fumbled the ball and no excuse," Henry said. "I need to be better."

Injured

The Titans may need to reach the playoffs just to have a chance for quarterback Ryan Tannehill to return from an injured right ankle. They put two starting offensive linemen on injured reserve last week after losing their three-time Pro Bowl left tackle in September.

They have 18 currently on injured reserve with one spot left to bring a player back this season. LB Zach Cunningham, activated off injured reserve Friday, couldn't finish the loss to Houston with another injury to his elbow. Titans OLB Bud Dupree also hurt his chest and was limited to 28

snaps.

Petit-Frere, who came in with an injured ankle, was replaced by Le'Raven Clark in the second half. That left the Titans with only left guard Aaron Brewer from opening week as the only starting offensive lineman still available.

Key number

6 — This franchise currently has a six-year streak of winning records at stake. The Titans also haven't lost six straight games since the skid that cost coach Ken Whisenhunt his job after a 1-6 start to his second season in 2015.

Next steps

Heal up as much as possible for Week 18 in a game whose date and kickoff has yet to be set. Having a division title on the line could push the game against Jacksonville to the NFL's final game of the regular season on Jan. 8.

TCU's Sonny Dykes at home, coaching 1st CFP team from Texas

By **STEPHEN HAWKINS**
AP Sports Writer

FORT WORTH, Texas — Sonny Dykes was nearing the end of a season as an off-field offensive analyst, and pondering his next move.

Fired from his previous head coaching job and with three young kids at home, the son of longtime college coach Spike Dykes even considered a career change after more than two decades in football. He had researched what he would need to do to get a real estate license.

Five years later, the 53-year-old is settled in at home, in Texas, still doing what he always wanted to do and is now near the peak of his profession with TCU (12-1) making it into the four-team College Football Playoff.

"It's been a lot of things, a culmination of a lot," said

Dykes, The Associated Press Coach of the Year who is in his first season as head coach at the school where he was a consultant for coach Gary Patterson in 2017.

The Horned Frogs, undefeated until an overtime loss to Kansas State in the Big 12 championship game, play Big Ten champion Michigan (13-0) in the CFP semifinal Fiesta Bowl on Saturday. They are the first Big 12 team other than Oklahoma — and first from Texas — to make the CFP.

"Being a Texas guy, the state of Texas means a lot to me, the history of college football in the state of Texas means a lot to me," Dykes said.

That season working for the Frogs, when they made their only other Big 12 title game, was an opportunity for Dykes to get home after going 19-30

in four seasons at California. The job out West was never really a good fit for the folksy, Texas-born coach.

"I was looking around, trying to get a job and trying to decide ... taking a job some place that I didn't necessarily want to go, was that the direction I wanted to go in," he said. "I've obviously always wanted to coach."

Then SMU offered its head coaching job, only about 40 miles and four years away from a return to replace Patterson at TCU. Dykes, whose first head coaching job was at Louisiana Tech, led SMU to 30 wins in its best four-season stretch since it became the only program ever shut down by the so-called NCAA death penalty three decades earlier.

The Frogs went 23-24 during that same time, and parted ways with Patterson even

before the end of his 21st season. Dykes was immediately considered the favorite to replace him, which happened after the regular season.

"I didn't want them to think about coming in and think this was supposed to be a rebuilding year," Heisman Trophy-finalist senior quarterback Max Duggan said, recalling his initial conversation with Dykes. "We can win now. We've just to fix a lot of our issues, culture-wise and discipline and accountability."

The Frogs did win, and a year after Dykes was formally introduced, they were back in the same room for the playoff announcement.

ball, not football.

Sonny Dykes was a Texas Tech assistant for seven seasons, the first seven after his father retired when on the staff of the late Mike Leach. He went west for the first time as offensive coordinator at Arizona from 2007-09, then had a 22-15 record in three seasons at Louisiana Tech before taking the Cal job.

Now, Dykes is leading a TCU program that won its only AP national title in 1938, when quarterback Davey O'Brien was the school's only Heisman Trophy winner. The Frogs, then still in the Mountain West, were 13-0 during the 2010 season that ended with a Rose Bowl victory and No. 2 national ranking.

When TCU wrapped up this regular season with a win over Iowa State, it was Sonny's 83rd career win — one more than his father.