

Titans turn from losing AFC South title to hiring new GM

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



NASHVILLE — The Tennessee Titans enter the offseason at their earliest point since the 2018 season with more questions than wins, and they must hire a general manager before they can start figuring out their future.

The Titans ended a streak of six straight winning seasons by losing their final seven games to finish 7-10, their worst record since going 3-13 in 2015. Owner Amy Adams Strunk hired her first general manager, Jon Robinson, after that season.

She fired Robinson two losses into this season-ending skid. Strunk didn't speak to reporters but told the team website Monday that the Titans have been working on the search for the past month.

"We're not going to rush the process just to get someone in as quickly as possible," Strunk said. "The way we have it planned right now is we have two rounds, and we're going to see where these interviews take us."

The Titans requested permission to interview a handful of candidates Monday with San Francisco coach Kyle Shanahan confirming they had asked to talk to 49ers assistant GM Adam Peters and director of player personnel Ran Carthon. The Titans also requested an interview with Browns assistant GM Glenn Cook.

Ryan Cowden, the Titans' vice president of player personnel, assumed Robinson's duties after the firing. He is expected to be a candidate along with director of player personnel Monti Ossenfort. The Titans sent director of pro scouting Brian Gardner to two NFL sessions promoting mi-

nority candidates for front-office jobs.

Whoever is hired must bring in players who can stay healthy.

The Titans earned the AFC's No. 1 seed by going 12-5 a year ago despite using an NFL-record 91 players and followed that up leading the league yet again with 86 players used and 23 placed on injured reserve, including quarterback Ryan Tannehill.

"The short answer is that it wasn't good enough," coach Mike Vrabel said of a season that ended with a 20-16 loss at Jacksonville that cost Tennessee a third straight AFC South title.

Salary cap management

The Titans are \$17 million over the salary cap for 2023, the fourth-worst cap number in the league. The new GM's first job will be creating cap space with three-time Pro Bowl left tackle Taylor Lewan, who injured his right ACL for the second time in three seasons, a top candidate for the first cut.

Outside linebacker Bud Dupree could be a post-June 1 cut after missing 13 games since being the Titans' big offseason signing in 2021 coming off a torn ACL. Injuries limited linebacker Zach Cunningham to six games. Wide receiver Robert Woods

also could be cut despite leading the Titans with 53 catches for 527 yards.

Big decisions

The Titans will need to extend two-time Pro Bowl defensive lineman Jeffery Simmons even with his fifth-year option picked up last season after trading away Pro Bowl receiver A.J. Brown last April.

They hold the 11th overall pick in the draft and must decide what to do with Tannehill and two-time NFL rushing leader Derrick Henry entering the final year of their contracts. Are the Titans rebuilding or reloading as they look toward a future that includes plans to open a new, enclosed stadium for the 2026 season?

Tannehill had the NFL's highest salary cap number for 2022 after re-doing his deal in 2021, but that \$57.4 million dead cap number drops to \$18.8 million. Tannehill was limited to 12 starts and finished the season on injured reserve with torn ligaments in his right ankle after spraining it twice, the last on Dec. 18.

"I definitely have some good years left," said Tannehill, who turns 35 in July.

Henry is going into the final year of his contract having turned 29 last week. He finished second in the NFL in rushing with 1,538 yards and set a career high with 398 yards receiving. His 1,936 yards from scrimmage were the second most of his career.

Offensive woes

The Titans gave fans what they've wanted for months Monday, firing offensive coordinator Todd Downing along with three other assistants. Vrabel also fired offensive line coach

Keith Carter, secondary coach Anthony Midget and offensive skills assistant Erik Frazier. The team announced the moves approximately four hours after Vrabel spoke to reporters.

Downing spent two seasons running Tennessee's offense. His arrest Nov. 18 for speeding and driving under the influence hours after Tennessee's final win of the season was likely a factor in his dismissal. On the field, the Titans were outscored 196-94 after halftime — managing only 37 points in the fourth quarter.

Tennessee's injury woes hit the offense with top rookie Treyton Burks missing six games, and three original starting offensive linemen finishing on injured reserve.

Defense not problem

The Titans went 5-6 in one-score games. The defense did its part, holding opponents to 20 points or fewer in 11 games and finishing 14th in the NFL in points allowed (21.1 per game).

Only two-time All-Pro safety Kevin Byard and rookie cornerback Roger McCreary started every game on defense, and Simmons played the next most snaps at 840 despite spraining his left ankle on Oct. 23 and needing painkilling shots before each subsequent game.

Tennessee finished first against the run, giving up 76.9 yards per game, the second-lowest in the history of a franchise that began playing in 1960 as the Houston Oilers. However, the Titans finished last against the pass, giving up 274.8 yards a game.

Five first-year coaches in NFL playoffs

By **JOSH DUBOW**
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Coaching changes paid off in a big way for several teams this season.

From impressive turnarounds for Jacksonville and the New York Giants to big boosts for Minnesota and Miami, a record-setting five of the 10 teams that hired new coaches for the 2022 season made the playoffs.

Doug Pederson led the Jaguars on a worst-to-first flip in the AFC South, Brian Daboll helped the Giants go from last place to a wild-card berth, Kevin O'Connell took Minnesota from a losing record to 13 wins and an AFC North title, Mike McDaniel got Miami to its first playoff berth since 2016 and Todd Bowles helped Tampa Bay repeat as division champs for the first time in franchise history.

That broke the previous record of four coaches getting to the postseason in their first season with a team set in 1997 when Jim Fassel (Giants), Pete Carroll (Patriots), Bobby Ross (Lions) and Steve Mariucci (49ers) did it.

There were a record-tying 10 coaching changes last offseason and not all of the newcomers had success with Denver firing Nathaniel Hackett last month and Houston firing Lovie Smith on Sunday night.

Chicago's Matt Eberflus finished with the worst record in the NFL, Josh McDaniels turned a 10-win playoff team in Las Vegas into a 6-11 team, and the Saints had double-digit losses for the first time since 2005 in their first year under Dennis Allen.

The most impressive turnaround came in Jacksonville where Pederson helped the Jaguars become the first team since the 2008 Dolphins to win their division the season after posting the league's worst record.

Daboll's work helping the Giants go from 4-13 to 9-7-1 despite a flawed roster hurt by a staggering \$54.8 million in dead money on the salary cap to get to the postseason for the first time since 2016.

Bowles struggled a bit more as Tampa Bay won just eight games to become the fourth division winner in NFL history with a losing record. Two of the

previous three — the 2010 Seahawks (7-9) and 2014 Panthers (7-8-10) — won a playoff game, while Washington (7-9) lost to the Bucs in the 2020 playoffs.

The Texans are once again looking for a new coach after the rare, back-to-back seasons of one-year coaching tenures. Houston fired David Culley after his first season in 2021 and Smith this season.

The only other team since the merger to do that was the 49ers, who had three coaches in a row last a year or less from 1976-78 with Monte Clark, Ken Meyer, Pete McCulley, and did it again in 2015-16 with Jim Tomsula and Chip Kelly.

Rematch weekend

All six games on wild-card weekend are rematches from the regular season, including three matchups of division foes with Baltimore playing Cincinnati, Miami visiting Buffalo and San Francisco hosting Seattle.

Two of those three matchups ended in splits in the regular season with the Ravens and Bengals, and Dolphins and Bills splitting their two games.

The 49ers swept the Seahawks but know how little that matters after losing to the Rams in the NFC title game last season following two regular-season wins.

In the Super Bowl era, teams that swept an opponent in the regular season are 14-10 in a playoff rematch, including 13-6 when the game is at home like it is for the 49ers on Saturday.

In the other rematches, the Chargers are seeking to avenge a Week 3 loss to Jacksonville, the Giants are looking to do the same after losing to the Vikings in Week 16, and the Cowboys are trying to do it after losing in Week 1 to Tampa Bay.

This is the fifth time since the merger that every game in the opening round of the playoffs is a rematch from the regular season, according to the Elias Sports Bureau. It happened on four-game wild-card weekends in 2009, 2004, 1994 and 1992.

Streaking

The Niners are headed into the postseason on a quite a roll, having won the last 10 games of

the regular season with Jimmy Garoppolo starting the first five games and Brock Purdy the last five.

The last team to have two QBs with consecutive five-game winning streaks were the perfect Dolphins in 1972 with Bob Griese and Earl Morrall.

San Francisco is the 13th team in the Super Bowl era to end the regular season on a winning streak of at least 10 games.

The results of the previous 12 haven't been overly impressive with only three winning the Super Bowl with the 1972 Dolphins, 1976 Raiders and 2003 Patriots extending the streaks through the postseason.

Two others got to the Super Bowl before losing with the 1967 Raiders and 2007 Patriots falling in the final game.

Five of the teams lost their first playoff game: the 2019 Ravens, 2012 Broncos, 2009 Chargers, 2006 Chargers and 1993 Oilers.

Kansas City won a wild-card game in 2015 before losing in the division round and Pittsburgh won the division round game in 2004 before losing in the AFC title game.

Happy returns

Nyheim Hines' emotional kick return TDs for Buffalo on Sunday were historic as well.

Hines became the first Bills player to return the opening kick for a TD since Terrence McGee did it against Miami and added another later in the game to become the first player with two kick return TDs in a game since Leon Washington did it for Seattle in 2010.

Hines was also the last player with two punt-return touchdowns in the same game doing it in 2019 for the Colts and became the first player to have a game with at least with at least two kickoff-return touchdowns and one with at least two punt-return touchdowns in his career.

The returns gave the NFL nine combined punt and kick return TDs — the second fewest in the Super Bowl era to the seven in the nine-game, strike-shortened 1982 season.

Jags chemistry building among offensive weapons

By **MARK LONG**
AP Pro Football Writer

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — Zay Jones has been in the NFL long enough to realize — and appreciate — the uniqueness of Jacksonville's receiving group.

The Jaguars signed three pass catchers in free agency to help second-year quarterback Trevor Lawrence, and each of them delivered a career season.

Jones, fellow receiver Christian Kirk and tight end Evan Engram quickly bonded with Lawrence and became one of the most dynamic trios in the league.

They played significant roles in helping the Jaguars (9-8) win the AFC South for the second time in franchise history and will be counted on in a wild-card matchup against the Los Angeles Chargers (10-7) on Saturday night.

"It happened faster than I had even anticipated," Jones said. "We just started speaking the same language. Where did that come from? I think maybe the freedom and availability we have in this building to say anything and be ourselves."

Jones, Kirk and Engram have combined to catch 239 passes for 2,687 yards and 17 touchdowns, roughly 68% of Lawrence's completions and two-thirds of his TD passes.

Kirk leads the way with 84 receptions for 1,108 yards and eight touchdowns. Jones is close behind with 82 catches for 823 yards and five scores. Engram has 73 catches for 766 yards, with four TDs.

Together, they finished just shy of becoming the first NFL team to have three newcomers with 800 yards receiving each. "I think it comes down to guys really just being unselfish," Lawrence

said. "When there's really no egos, that makes things a lot easier for me to do my job to the best of my ability and not worry about who's getting the ball necessarily, just trying to get it to the right place."

No egos? Really? All four insist there has been no angst about who's finding the ball, who's finding the end zone or who's getting the credit.

"Everybody has a right to have some type of ego, but we don't," Engram said. "Everybody's had their day; everybody's had their success. And we see how much fun we're having winning. I've never been a part of a winning team like this. I'm going to keep doing whatever it takes to keep this going, and that's what they're going to do, too."

"We've got a special group and we're on a special path. We found a process that works along that path, and we're all committed to it."

It surely helps that all three newcomers got paid, at least to some extent. Kirk signed a four-year, \$72 million contract that included \$37 million guaranteed. Jones got \$24 million over three years, with \$14 million guaranteed. Engram gambled on himself by signing a one-year, \$9 million but likely will be the most sought-after tight end when free agency opens in March.

Engram hopes to remain in Jacksonville, and teammates already are openly campaigning for him to land a long-term deal.

Lawrence, Jones and Kirk believe they're just getting started, too. The Jaguars expect to add suspended receiver Calvin Ridley to the mix next month, but they don't want to disrupt the chemistry in what's emerged as the team's deepest and most talented groups.