

Wild season for Seattle ends with questions on title window

By **TIM BOOTH**
Associated Press

RENTON, Wash. — In the midst of all that happened this season between debilitating key injuries, inconsistent play on both offense and defense, and enough distractions to raise the ire of any coach, there was one particular aspect of the Seattle Seahawks season that stood out to Pete Carroll.

That after all the chaos, Seattle had a chance at the No. 2 seed in the NFC and gave away that chance at a playoff bye and a divisional round game at home.

“We missed that opportunity,” Carroll said on Monday. “Of all of the things during the season, not being able to do that might have been the most significant thing that happened. We couldn’t get the second home game here.”

A season defined by inconsistency came to an end for the Seahawks on Saturday with a 36-20 loss at Atlanta in the divisional round of the NFC playoffs.

It was likely the appropriate ending point for a team that never looked worthy of being a Super Bowl contender for an extended period, and

was more frustrating than scintillating.

Whether it was injuries to Russell Wilson, Earl Thomas, Thomas Rawls and now cornerback DeShawn Sheard, or a decision to put together an inexpensive offensive line that never was consistently good, Seattle (11-6-1) failed to reach its full potential.

And with a core group that’s still talented but aging, the Seahawks are accepting their window of winning a title is shrinking even as Carroll believes they’re in the middle of their run.

“To get to where we got to this year, it was difficult,” Seattle wide receiver Doug Baldwin said. “It was extremely hard. It was exhausting.”

The Seahawks have won at least one playoff game in five straight seasons and have three division titles to show for it during that time. It’s an unprecedented run of success in franchise history.

But they were also fortunate this season to play in a weak NFC West that helped mask some of Seattle’s flaws.

It was also a season where Seattle’s depth was tested and some of its stars — Richard



Genna Martin/seattlepi.com via AP

Seattle Seahawks running back Alex Collins, from left, linebacker K.J. Wright, linebacker Brock Coyle and cornerback DeShawn Sheard chat as players clean out their lockers on Sunday at the Virginia Mason Athletic Center in Renton, Wash.

Sherman and Michael Bennett notably — let their emotions get away from them on the sideline and in the locker room.

That was almost as disappointing for Carroll as letting the No. 2 seed slip away.

“These guys have been very emotional players, and it’s part of the thing that we like about them,” Carroll said. “But there’s a point where you can go too far.”

Here’s what else to watch about the Seahawks going into the offseason:

ON THE LINE: No unit received more scrutiny than Seattle’s offensive line for its youth, its struggles protecting Wilson and its inability to get the run game started. Seattle finished 25th in the NFL in rushing offense after being one of the top teams in the league since Carroll arrived.

There are not likely to be wholesale changes. There may be tinkering or minor additions, but Carroll indicated an interest in seeing this group develop for

another season.

“We have nothing but good things to think that will take place and the guys are going to get better,” Carroll said.

WHERE’S JIMMY?: Seattle’s biggest financial question of the offseason will focus on tight end Jimmy Graham, who is going into the final year of a contract the Seahawks inherited when he was acquired from New Orleans. The problem with that contract is that it calls for Graham to make \$10 million in 2017, and cutting him would open up an equal amount of cap space for the Seahawks.

At times, Graham has been dominant in his two seasons with the Seahawks. At other times, he’s disappeared. In two seasons with Seattle — one shortened by injury — Graham has 115 catches for 1,528 yards and eight touchdowns.

“I thought Jimmy had a terrific year. He was explosive. He was dynamic. He blocked like he’s never blocked before. He became a factor on the perimeter blocking stuff and he’s a highlight film,” Carroll said.

S E C O N D A R Y

CONCERN: Unlike previous years, the structure of Seattle’s secondary will be a worry going into next season.

Thomas and Sheard will both be coming off serious injuries, with the chance Sheard won’t be ready for the start of the season. Strong safety Kam Chancellor is entering the final year of his contract. And Sherman is coming off the most volatile season of his career that included sideline tirades and an undisclosed injury.

Carroll acknowledged that’ll be a position group that needs to be addressed in the offseason.

“We’ve got to get Earl back, get the corner thing squared away,” Carroll said. “I think that’s one of them. We will certainly be looking at that in the draft.”

FREE TO LEAVE: Seattle has 10 unrestricted free agents, most notably kicker Steven Hauschka, linebacker Mike Morgan and tight end Luke Willson. The majority of Seattle’s key contributors are all under contract through at least next season, meaning that while there will be changes don’t expect any significant roster turnover.

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