

# Modern NFL makes it harder for D to lead way to title

By JOSH DUBOW  
AP Pro Football Writer

From Pittsburgh's Steel Curtain in the 1970s to Chicago's Monsters of the Midway in the '80s to Seattle's Legion of Boom more recently, dominant defenses have often been the story of the NFL postseason.

High-powered offenses might generate the highlights, the fantasy points and victories in the regular season. But more often than not the top defenses have managed to hold those dynamic offenses in check when the weather turns colder and the games get more important in the postseason.

Yet, after one of the most prolific offensive regular seasons in NFL history, the question is can defenses still lead the way to a championship?

"I have no idea," said San Francisco cornerback Richard Sherman, a key member of Seattle's 2013 championship defense. "I don't think the league really wants that or cares to have that thing again. They care more about offensive football, so that's what they'll get. To have a special defensive group to play that well for so long would be very difficult to do because of the style of defense and the rules. ... I think it's going to be harder and harder to make the Hall of Fame from defense."

Playing defense in the NFL perhaps has never been harder, with the intimidating hits on receivers and quarterbacks now outlawed, even the most minor downfield contact resulting in penalties, and quarterbacks more accurate and efficient than ever while running the new spread offenses.

This year featured the highest passer rating (92.9), most yards per play (5.6) and second-most points per game (46.7) in NFL history. It seems like playing great defense is almost impossible.

"You can't use it as an



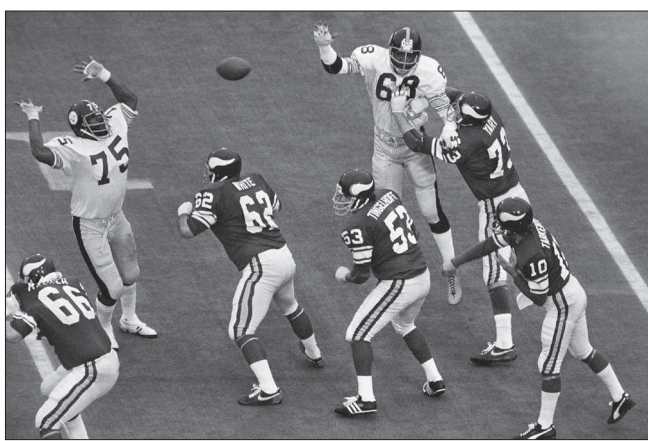
In this Dec. 23, 2018, file photo, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Nick Mullens (4) is hit by Chicago Bears defensive end Akiem Hicks, left, and outside linebacker Khalil Mack during the second half of an NFL football game in Santa Clara, Calif.

excuse because they still let us hit, OK?" said Dallas defensive coordinator Rod Marinelli, an assistant on the 2002 Tampa Bay team that won a Super Bowl behind its defense.

"I've always believed in the speed of the defense. And that's the hitting. They've got holes. We've got to hit the holes. We've got to hit them. And we've got to make it a physical game. We've got to be smart, helmet to helmet, got to be smart on the quarterback, some of those things. And you try to teach it, keep our speed and playing fast. Some of the things down the field, push-offs and all that stuff, it's tough."

The story of this NFL season has been the offenses, with the highlight being a 54-51 win for the Los Angeles Rams over the Kansas City Chiefs back in November.

That's been part of a season that had first-year starter



In this Jan. 12, 1975, file photo, Pittsburgh Steelers tackle Joe Greene (75) gets ready to block a pass as Minnesota Vikings' Andy Maurer (66), Ed White (62), Mick Tingelhoff (53) and Ron Yary (73) protect quarterback Fran Tarkenton (10) during NFL football's Super Bowl IX in New Orleans. Steelers' L.C. Greenwood is at top right.

Patrick Mahomes throwing for 50 TD passes and more than 5,000 yards for Kansas City, Drew Brees set new records at age 39 in New Orleans, Tom Brady maintains his winning ways in his 40s for New England, and Sean McVay's offense

tormenting opposing teams all year long for the Rams.

But those teams that feature four of the five most efficient offenses in the league, according to Football Outsiders, and defenses that have been far less consistent will get the opening

weekend of the postseason off.

That will provide a bit of a throwback look on wildcard weekend with many of the league's top defenses taking center stage in hopes that they can get on a run like the one the Denver Broncos had three years ago to win a Super Bowl.

"I think it's still definitely possible," said Broncos linebacker Todd Davis, a member of that title-winning team. "I don't feel like it has to be (54-51). It really doesn't. I feel like you can really stop teams if you play close defense, you play tight on receivers, play great in man coverage and you can really stop people."

Many of the teams playing this weekend have shown that ability this season, led by the NFL's top-ranked scoring defense in Chicago. An already-strong unit only got better with the acquisition of elite pass rusher Khalil Mack before

the season.

With Mack and Akiem Hicks wreaking havoc up front and Eddie Jackson and Kyle Fuller providing big plays from the secondary, the Bears appear to have the defense best equipped for a long postseason run, starting with Sunday's home game against defending champion Philadelphia Eagles.

"Dominant, that's it," Hicks said. "We are aggressive. We like to hit. All the stuff that I was (saying) before the season started, we're everything that we said we were. And hopefully we can get to another level for these playoffs."

The Bears aren't alone. Six of those 10 most efficient defenses are playing this weekend: Baltimore, Houston, the Chargers, Dallas and Indianapolis.

Ball-control offense and dominant defense have been a tried-and-true formula for teams like Baltimore and Seattle, who have combined for three Super Bowl championships and five appearances in the title game this century with that recipe.

The Seahawks still have that capability despite the absence of most of the stalwarts from the Legion of Boom such as Sherman, Earl Thomas, Kam Chancellor, Michael Bennett and Cliff Avril.

But Bobby Wagner remains at middle linebacker, Frank Clark has been an elite pass rusher, and coach Pete Carroll's scheme is still effective after all these years.

"You either believe in something or you don't," Carroll said. "I think just staying the course and knowing we're on to something. Believing in the history. We know what we're capable of doing. We've shown it over a lot of years. You're always adapting, but it's staying what you're true to. I think that's what is happening. We look like a team that we have seen before, and that's powerful."



New Orleans Saints receiver Michael Thomas makes a catch during an NFL football game against the Carolina Panthers on Sunday in New Orleans.

## Saints, Rams and Bears finish as top 3 in AP poll

By SIMMI BUTTAR  
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The chase to Atlanta is on.

The regular season is over and there are 12 teams remaining in the run to the Super Bowl.

And at the top of the AP Pro32 poll, the new year starts right where the previous one ended.

The New Orleans Saints, Los Angeles Rams and Chicago Bears, the top three seeds in the NFC, retained their top three spots in the final AP Pro32 poll of the season.

New Orleans received 11 of the 12 first-place votes for 382 points in balloting on Wednesday by media members who regularly cover the NFL. New Orleans will open the playoffs at home in the divisional round on Sunday, Jan. 13.

"The Saints lost in Week 1 and Week 17, both at home," said Ira Kaufman of Fox 13 in Tampa, Florida. "In between,

Drew Brees and company established themselves as the team to beat in the Super Bowl chase."

The Rams, who also finished 13-3 in the regular season, will start their postseason at the Coliseum on Saturday, Jan. 12.

The Bears will close wildcard weekend when they host the defending Super Bowl champion Eagles on Sunday.

The next six spots in the poll are all taken by the AFC's playoff teams.

The Chiefs, who have the AFC's top seed, are No. 4. Kansas City, which received the remaining first-place vote — from John Czarnecki of Fox Sports — has won the AFC West for three consecutive seasons.

Patrick Mahomes, who finished with 5,097 yards and 50 TD passes, will try to get Kansas City its first home playoff win since the 1993 season.

"MVP front-runner Patrick Mahomes finished a brilliant first season as a starter with 50 touchdown passes," said Newsday's

Bob Glauber. "With home-field advantage in the AFC playoffs, is a Super Bowl berth next?"

The Los Angeles Chargers and New England Patriots finished in a tie at No. 5 in the poll.

The Patriots, who won the AFC East for the 10th straight season and 15th time in the past 16 seasons, are the No. 2 seed in the AFC. They are trying to reach their ninth Super Bowl in the Bill Belichick-Tom Brady era. They are also trying to become the first team since the 1990s Buffalo Bills to return to the Super Bowl after losing it the previous season, and the first since the 1992 Bills to make a third successive trip to the big game.

The Chargers, despite finishing with the same record as the Chiefs at 12-4, lost the tiebreaker and are the No. 5 seed in the AFC. They will head to Baltimore to face the AFC North champion Ravens on Sunday. The Ravens are No. 9 in the poll.

AFC South rivals Houston

and Indianapolis are Nos. 7 and 8 in the poll. Those teams will open the postseason in Houston on Saturday when they meet for the third time after splitting their previous meetings.

"Just wish they had another WR," Czarnecki said of the Texans. Houston's DeAndre Hopkins finished second in the NFL with 1,572 yards, but the depth took a hit when Demaryius Thomas was lost for the season with an Achilles tendon injury.

Seattle and Dallas, who meet Saturday night in Texas, are 10th and 11th in the poll. The Seahawks and Cowboys both finished 10-6. They met in Seattle in Week 3, when the Seahawks won 24-13.

The team that made the biggest climb from the first poll, which was released before the season started, was the Bears, who started out at No. 28 and finished at No. 3. And the team that had the biggest drop was the Jacksonville Jaguars, who began at No. 7 and ended up at No. 28.

## Seahawks place safety Delano Hill on injured reserve

By TIM BOOTH  
Associated Press

RENTON, Wash. — The Seattle Seahawks placed safety Delano Hill on injured reserve after suffering a non-displaced fracture in his hip in the regular-season finale against Arizona.

The loss of Hill is somewhat countered by the expectation that fellow safety Tedric Thompson will be able to play after missing the past two games with a pair of injuries.

Seattle coach Pete Carroll said on Tuesday that Hill's injury didn't become apparent until the day after the Seahawks closed the regular season with a 27-24 win over the Cardinals. Hill started the final two games of the regular season at strong safety while Thompson was dealing with chest and ankle injuries that forced Bradley McDougald to switch to free safety.

Hill had a fumble recovery in the Week 16 win over Kansas City and had five tackles last week against the Cardinals. The loss of Hill will also have a trickle-down in some of Seattle's special defensive packages, as Hill has played extensively when the Seahawks have gone to six and sometimes seven defensive backs.

"He can get around and all that but he can't play. He was playing great ball. ... He played his best game. He played really well, hits, running, tackling, all kinds of good stuff. Pressuring. So a very bright future for him."

The expected return of Thompson is an important boost for Seattle, but there remain questions about cornerback Shaquill Griffin after he suffered an ankle injury in the first half against Arizona. Carroll said the hope is Griffin may be able to practice some on Thursday before the team leaves for Dallas.

On the offensive line, D.J. Fluker will return to the lineup, but J.R. Sweezy is continuing to rehab his sprained foot and will be a game-time decision. Carroll has said Sweezy's injury is typically a three-to-four week recovery, but Sweezy is trying to return after being hurt in Week 16.

"Sweezy is getting around pretty good. We'll have to see. It's going to go all the way until game time," Carroll said. "He's getting around OK. He's not in a boot or any of that kind of stuff. He's moving around, but he's very positive he can make it back."