

BIG BLUE WRECKING CREW

Parcells, LT & The New York Giants From 1984-90



The New York Giants are one of the NFL's proudest franchises. Their history goes back to 1925 and the early days of the league. The Giants were an essential part of the NFL's growing recognition among sports fans. They won championships. They won historic games like the 1934 "Sneakers Game". Their coaching staff gave the league legends like Vince Lombardi and Tom Landry. And the far-sighted vision of the Mara family, who owned the team, saw to it that smaller markets had a chance to compete and eventually set up the NFL to displace major league baseball as the national pastime.

But if you were coming of age as a sports fan in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Giants weren't on your radar. Since winning the championship in 1963--three years before the birth of the Super Bowl--New York went eighteen years with just two winning seasons and zero playoff trips.

The mid-to-late 1980s changed all of that. The Giants drafted an outside linebacker out of North Carolina named Lawrence Taylor. To say he was great is an understatement. Even to call him a Hall of Famer is an understatement. Lawrence Taylor changed the way the game of football is played.

Prior to “LT”, there was a clear delineation between defensive lineman and linebackers. Taylor was the first “hybrid”, who could line up on the line of scrimmage, drop into coverage and attack the quarterback. He played with both ferocity and grace. Offensive coordinators couldn’t plan around him. He was the kind of player who could help an unknown coach get on the national radar.

Bill Parcells was that coach and he was the perfect fit. An old-school football guy, Parcells was more than happy to build his team around defense and running the football. More Pro Bowl players joined LT in the defensive front seven. And Parcells had an assistant on his staff who made the most of the opportunity LT provided--who knows where Bill Belichick’s career might have gone had he not been defensive coordinator for these great teams.

From 1984 through 1990, the Giants made the playoffs five times. They won three NFC East titles. And they won the Super Bowl twice.

Each of those seasons, save the lost strike year of 1987 when New York struggled, has a narrative article published individually on TheSportsNotebook.com. The six articles--from 1984-86, then 1988-90 are all pulled together and edited for this compilation.

There’s also one bonus article. To properly understand the Big Blue run that started in 1984, it’s necessary to look at the prologue that was 1981. Ray Perkins was the coach, but it was LT’s rookie year. That was the year the Giants first made the playoffs. Perkins left to become the head coach at Alabama after another messy strike year in 1982 and Parcells’ tenure got off to a very rough start in 1983. But by 1984, Parcells and LT were ready to build on what had begun in 1981.

Enjoy the ride through this special time of New York Giants history. You’ll read about feisty Phil Simms at quarterback and the running of shifty little Joe Morris. The defensive backfield work of players like Terry Kinard and clutch receivers ranging from Stephen Baker to Odessa Turner to tight end Mark Bavaro. All valuable contributing parts to the scheme built around the great linebacking corps headed up by LT. It was the era of the Big Blue Wrecking Crew.

1981

The 1981 team was coming off a 4-12 year and there was nothing suggesting this season as a breakthrough year.

Phil Simms was a young quarterback, still trying to find his footing and he played with efficiency. The 54.4% completion rate was pretty good, given the standards of the era and he only threw

nine interceptions in ten starts, a reasonable pace. Scott Brunner would fill in for Simms after an injury in November and was considerably more erratic, at 41.6% and just 5.1 yards-per-pass.

The Giants relied on the running game, with Rob Carpenter running for 748 yards. Johnny Perkins was the top receiver at 858 yards. It was overall, a relatively talentless offense, with no Pro Bowlers and they finished 22nd in the league in points scored.

It was defense that made it happen and in the process starting defining an entire generation of Giants football. Harry Carson made the Pro Bowl from his inside linebacker spot. A young corner, 23-year-old Mark Haynes, would have a good career and was growing into his role.

But no one made the impact of a rookie out of North Carolina by the name of Lawrence Taylor.

Taylor took his place at outside linebacker and it's not enough to say he was Defensive Rookie of the Year or 1st-team All-Pro or even that he won NFL Defensive Player of the Year. Lawrence Taylor completely revolutionized football, that rare player big enough to play close to the line and defend the run, quick enough to drop into coverage and an absolutely devastating pass rusher. He would become known as simply "L.T" and he became the standard for outside linebackers in a 3-4 scheme.

L.T. wasn't the only member of the defense that would change football. The coordinator was Bill Parcells and the staff included Bill Belichick. The 1981 New York Giants might have come from nowhere, but the benefit of hindsight makes it easy to understand how this defense ranked third in the NFL in points allowed, or to forget Ray Perkins was actually the head coach.

The season started in Philadelphia, against the defending NFC champion Eagles. The Giants were out rushed 178-55, dropping a 24-10 decision. A trip to Washington, to face another team that would be better at the end of the year than at the beginning produced an ugly game.

Neither team ran the ball, but this time New York forced four turnovers, the last a fumble recovery by defensive tackle George Martin at the Redskins 8-yard line who returned it for a touchdown and a 17-7 win. Simms played well in a home win over lowly New Orleans, going 28/41 for 324 yards, as both Perkins and Gary Shirk had 100-yard receiving days in a 20-7 win.

Simms made some big plays in Dallas, but also threw three interceptions as the Giants lost 18-10 to the Cowboys. So far though, there was reason to be happy. No one expected New York to compete with Philadelphia or Dallas, the class of the entire conference, and the Giants had beaten the two teams that were seen as more on their level. But there was no explaining away a bad performance at home against Green Bay. The New York defense was pounded on the ground by an offense not known for its running game, they dug themselves a 20-0 hole and lost 27-14.

The sluggish play carried over into a home date with the mediocre St. Louis Cardinals and the game was scoreless into the second quarter. Finally, Simms hooked up with Perkins for a touchdown pass and the offense got rolling. Simms threw for 208 yards, three touchdowns and

no interceptions, spreading the ball to nine different receivers. Carpenter ran for 103 yards and the 34-14 win was the most balanced offensive effort of the young season.

If St. Louis was the most balanced game, the 32-0 win at lowly Seattle was the most complete all-around game. The Giants ran for 213 yards, led by Carpenter, and held the Seahawks to 29 yards rushing. New York then went to Atlanta and won an overtime thriller. Simms played another good game, going 19/32 for 256 yards and no interceptions, while Perkins caught five passes for 126 yards. It was enough to escape 27-24.

The Giants' five wins were against teams that would finish 1981 with a losing record, but beating them all indicated that New York was at least rising above that level.

It was time for the Battle of the Big Apple, as the Giants faced the Jets. At the time, the Jets still played their home games in New York City itself, at old Shea Stadium, so the trip to the Meadowlands made it a true home game for the Giants, or at least as much as possible given their locations.

It didn't help. The Jets were surging toward a playoff berth and dominated in a 26-7 win. The Giants rushed for just 55 yards and their only touchdown came on defense.

Another bad performance at Green Bay followed, as the Giants *again* dug a 20-0 hole against the Packers and turned it over seven times. This time New York made a strong rally, but still came up short 26-24.

The reason for two Giants-Packers games was that, prior to the realignment of 2002, the schedule format called for the two teams that finished last in each conference's five-team divisions (the NFC East & NFC Central in this case, with the NFC West having just four teams) to play each other twice. The Green Bay sweep would have a surprising impact on the playoff picture, as they joined New York in rising to contention.

Any thought of the playoffs seemed to be fading badly when the Giants lost their third straight game, this one a heartbreaker to the Redskins. New York had a 20-10 lead on their home field in the third quarter and with this defense, that should have been lights out. But they gave up 184 yards rushing and were not able to run it themselves to control the clock. The Redskins tied it 27-27 and then won in overtime.

To make matters worse, Simms injured his shoulder and would miss the balance of the season. The hope now rested with Brunner—which is to say, New York needed to run the football and play defense like they never had before.

That's exactly what happened in Philadelphia. The Giants and Eagles were tied 10-10 in the third quarter, but Carpenter pounded out 111 yards and after getting a go-ahead field goal, Terry Jackson picked off a Ron Jaworski pass and brought it 32 yards to the end zone. New York had the 20-10 win and no one could have guessed this represented two teams that were ships passing in the night in the 1981 season.

The San Francisco 49ers were having a big year in the first season of success under Bill Walsh and Joe Montana. New York dug a 14-0 hole and while the defense settled down, Brunner was no match for Montana. The Giants' quarterback went 13/34 for 162 yards and threw three interceptions in a 17-10 loss.

At 6-7, New York wasn't out of it. There were seven teams bunched up with six or seven wins. But with only one playoff berth left, there certainly wasn't any room for error and help was still needed.

The winds were swirling at 28 mph on the first Sunday of December against the Los Angeles Rams, who had fallen hard to 6-10 this season after a decade of being among the NFL's best. The Giants were outrushed and Brunner only threw for 67 yards. But Brunner took care of the ball, the rest of the offense followed suit and a three-zip margin in turnovers swung the game to New York, 10-7.

In the meantime, results elsewhere fell New York's way and all contenders for the final NFC playoff berth were tied at 7-7. The Giants continued to take care of business in St. Louis, as Carpenter ran for 117 yards and even with Brunner only throwing for 86 yards, the defense delivered a 20-10 win.

Four teams were 8-7, but two of them, Tampa Bay and Detroit, would play head-to-head for the NFC Central title. That left the Giants and Packers—and Green Bay had the edge going into Week 16, thanks for that head-to-head sweep. New York also had one other hope. Philadelphia had come back to the pack and was 9-6. The Eagles still had the first of what was two wild-card spots, but if they lost and the Giants won, New York could move ahead on the divisional record tiebreaker.

These scenarios were all well and good, but they presumed a Giants' victory—and New York had to face NFC East champ Dallas. The Cowboys still had a shot at the #1 seed if the 49ers lost their regular season finale. And the Giants-Cowboys game would take place on Saturday, in advance of all other NFC games.

The weather was again brutal in the Meadowlands, with 20 mph winds. The first half went by scoreless, the teams traded touchdowns in the third quarter, but then Dallas got a field goal to get the lead and had the ball late in the game in position to run out the clock.

New York's defense was shutting down Dallas' star running back Tony Dorsett and they forced a Dorsett fumble, recovered by Martin. It looked like the offense would miss the opportunity, but Brunner completed a 4th-and-13 pass and kicker Joe Danelo tied the game with a 40-yard field goal. We were going to overtime.

Dorsett fumbled again in overtime and the Giants took over at midfield. A 23-yard run by Brunner off a bootleg set up a Danelo field goal. But he missed, one of three missed field goals on the afternoon.

The defense delivered one more time, as rookie Byron Hunt intercepted a pass and set up another field goal try. This time, Danelo delivered. The 13-10 win kept New York alive.

Now the Giants needed help from an unusual source—the Jets were hosting the Packers and the crosstown rival also needed to win to make the playoffs. It made for a Sunday when two long-suffering fan bases in the Big Apple were united together. And the Jets made it look easy, crushing Green Bay 28-3. New York was going to the postseason.

The Eagles had arrested their late slide with a blowout win over the Cardinals, so New York traveled to Philadelphia for the wild-card game. A team built on defense and controlling tempo with the running game would like nothing more than some gift points and that's exactly what the Giants had waiting for them two days after Christmas.

New York recovered a fumble off a punt and Brunner found running back Leon Bright with a nine-yard touchdown pass. A missed PAT kept the score 6-0. Brunner then hit wide receiver John Mistler with a ten-yard touchdown pass to make it 13-0. On the ensuing kickoff, Philadelphia botched it and Haynes recovered in the end zone. The crowd—indeed the entire country was stunned as the seven-point underdog Giants took a 20-0 lead into the second quarter.

Philadelphia scored a touchdown, but Brunner answered with a touchdown pass to Tom Mullady for a 27-7 lead. When the Eagles scored on the first possession of the third quarter, it was time to get a little nervous, as that missed extra point now seemed to loom large. The Giant defense stayed in control of the game, but the offense was unable to get that one field goal that would have put the game away in the era prior to the two-point conversion in the NFL.

The Eagles finally cut the lead to 27-21 with 2:51 left and they logically kicked it deep, trusting their defense. But Carpenter, who rushed for 161 yards, was never bigger than he was right now. He moved the chains and New York never gave up the football, preserving the win.

New York's magical ride finally ended in San Francisco. Montana threw for 304 yards and Brunner wasn't going to keep up in a game like that. The Giants trailed 24-7 and ended up losing 38-24.

It's still tough to imagine a sweeter ending for Giants fans. They had their long-sought playoff appearance and they closed the year by beating Dallas to make the postseason, then knocked Philadelphia out once they got there. Not a bad legacy for the 1981 New York Giants.

1984

After a 3-12-1 start to Parcells' head coaching career in 1983, the heat was on the new coach to produce. The 1984 New York Giants made it into the playoffs and paved the way for all the good things that would follow.

Simms was still working to establish himself at quarterback and took a big step forward in 1984. He threw for over 4,000 yards, and even though the completion percentage of 53.7% was a little lower than ideal, it was manageable and the 7.6 yards-per-attempt made up for it.

There weren't great receivers to stretch the field. Simms spread the ball amongst Bobby Johnson and Earnest Gray, along with tight end Zeke Mowatt, but nobody struck fear into a secondary. The running game was similarly respectable without providing a "wow" factor. Rob Carpenter rushed for 795 yards and shifty Joe Morris began to get playing time, going for 510 yards.



New York's offense still ranked just 19th in the NFL in points scored, so the burden shifted to the Lawrence Taylor-led defense. L.T., now in his fourth year, was a 1st-team All-Pro at outside linebacker with 11 ½ sacks. Cornerback Mark Haynes picked off seven passes and was another 1st-team All-Pro.

Harry Carson was a Pro Bowler at inside linebacker, and other key contributors to the #8-ranked defense in the NFL were nose tackle Jim Burt and defensive end Leonard Marshall, who combined for 13 ½ sacks.

New York opened the season at home with Philadelphia, a subpar team. You wouldn't have known from this game that the Giants would be a defense-first team. Simms lit it up, going 23/30 for 409 yards, four touchdowns and no interceptions. Johnson caught eight passes for 137 yards and they compensated for a shaky defensive outing, 28-27.

Simms came out firing again the next week at home against Dallas, hitting Byron Williams on a 62-yard strike to get the scoring started, and then hit Lionel Manuel on a 14-yard toss. The defense forced four turnovers and the Giants got another NFC East win, 28-7.

A third straight divisional game was the big one, two-time defending NFC champion Washington. In a late afternoon kick from old RFK Stadium in D.C., the Giants led 14-13 in the third quarter, but only rushed for 47 yards. Simms threw for 347 yards, but without a running game was both erratic—22/45—and threw three interceptions. The Redskins took over the fourth quarter and won 30-14.

The turnovers got cleaned up against a weak Tampa Bay opponent and were the reason New York survived an otherwise sluggish outing, 17-14. Another sluggish game, this one at the playoff-bound Los Angeles Rams caught up to them. The Giants mustered just *eight yards* rushing, while L.A.'s, Eric Dickerson went 120. More astonishing stats worth italicizing came in that the Giants allowed *three safeties*, two of them off blocked punts. The ugly performance ended in a 33-12 loss.

New York came home to play San Francisco on Monday Night and the 49ers, en route to a great 15-1 season, were too much, grabbing a 21-0 lead in the first quarter and handing the Giants a 31-10 loss. New York was 3-3 and while the record had them in contention, they had seemed out of kilter since the fourth quarter of the Redskins game.

A road trip to a terrible Atlanta team was what the defense needed. They got three interceptions, four sacks and keyed a 19-7 win. But the Giants immediately gave it back when they dumped a game in Philadelphia. Tied 10-10 after three quarters, New York got no running game, allowed five sacks and Simms was erratic when he could get a pass off. They cracked in the fourth quarter and lost 24-10.

There was reason to be encouraged at 4-4, given what a disaster the 1983 season had begun, but no indication that this was a playoff team. That changed when Washington came to the Meadowlands on the last Sunday of October. The Giants, a (+6) home underdog, got a great game from Simms, who went 18/29 for 339 yards with no interceptions. Gray caught seven of the passes for 128 yards. The Giants were up 23-0 by the second quarter, didn't allow a touchdown until the fourth quarter and delivered a shocking 37-13 win.

Another big win came at Dallas, this one as a (+7) underdog. Simms was only 16/37 and New York trailed 7-6 at the half, but Simms was making big plays, getting 244 yards from those completions. The defense got five sacks and they won 19-7.

Just when it seemed like New York was rolling, they turned in a clunker at Tampa Bay. New York only ran for 65 yards and lost 20-17.

The St. Louis Cardinals were in the pre-2002 NFC East, along with the division's four current teams and they had a good team with a strong passing attack in 1984. The Giants needed this win in the Meadowlands and they got it, with Haynes picking off two passes, part of a six-turnover effort from the defense in a 16-10 victory.

New York was now 7-5 and squarely in the middle of a packed division race. The Redskins and Cowboys were also 7-5, while the Cardinals were 6-6. There were two wild-card spots available and the Rams, also at 7-5, were the only contender outside the NFC East. The playoffs were within Parcells' reach.

The Kansas City Chiefs, an average team, but one that would score big wins against contenders in Denver and Seattle down the stretch, came to New York and nearly did the same to the Giants. Down 27-14 in the fourth quarter, Simms found Johnson on a 22-yard touchdown pass and then hit Mowatt on a 3-yard flip to pull out a 27-2 win.

1984 was the first season the New York Jets moved to the Meadowlands to share a building with the Giants and the two teams played on December 2. The Giants got a break in that the game was considered one of their road games and they beat a mediocre team 20-10. Simms went 18/28 for 2502 yards.

New York wasn't the only team winning though—all the other contenders, in the division and in Los Angeles, had also kept winning and the fundamental landscape had not changed. It set up a big battle in St. Louis in the penultimate game on December 9.

Morris had his best game of the year, rushing for 107 yards and the game was tied 21-21 after three quarters. But Simms did not play well, going 13/31 for 175 yards and two interceptions.

His counterpart, Neil Lomax, threw for 300 yards, did not make any mistakes and put ten fourth quarter points on the board. The Giants lost 31-21.

Dallas had also lost, so New York was in a three-way tie for second with the Cowboys and Cardinals. St. Louis was going to Washington for the finale and that game would settle the NFC East. But the Giants were still in pretty good shape in the tiebreakers—they had beaten Dallas twice, so while New York did not completely control their destiny, the odds would be in their favor if they beat New Orleans.

It was a home game on a Saturday afternoon and with so much at stake, the Giants laid a complete egg as a (-10) favorite. Simms was sacked seven times and they lost 10-3. Now they needed a lot of help.

St. Louis and Dallas both needed to lose. If that happened, a three-way tie for second in the NFC East at 9-7 would be the result and New York would win that tiebreaker and gain the second wild-card berth, alongside the Rams, who had finished the season 10-6 after playing a Friday night game to end the regular season.

The good news was this—the Cardinals would be on the road in Washington, and Dallas would be on the road in Miami on Monday Night, where the Dolphins were 13-2 and playing for the top seed in the AFC behind eventual MVP quarterback Dan Marino.

All of New York watched as St. Louis lost a nail biter in Washington. On Monday Night, the Cowboys and Dolphins were tied 21-21, when Marino delivered a touchdown pass that won it. The Giants hadn't been pretty and they had messed up their share of chances, but they were going to the playoffs.

When you've lost two straight going into the playoffs, have no recent postseason history and go on the road, expectations are going to be modest. They were for New York when they went to Anaheim on the Sunday before Christmas to face Los Angeles, as a (+4.5) underdog.

What the Giants would do was capitalize on Ram mistakes. New York got an early field goal and then recovered a Dickerson fumble, setting up Carpenter's short touchdown run for a 10-0 lead. Los Angeles got a field goal in the second quarter to make it 10-3 at the half.

Another Giant field goal was answered by a Dickerson touchdown run to make it 13-10. Simms was grinding away in the passing game, going 22/31 and staying underneath, throwing for 179 yards, while avoiding the big mistake. Mowatt and Carpenter combined for 14 catches, underscoring the short-range nature of the passing game.

New York took a 16-10 lead going into the fourth quarter when Dickerson, who finished with 107 yards, got rolling and keyed a drive that got the Rams to 2nd-and-goal on the 4-yard line. Los Angeles made their share of mistakes in this game—there was the aforementioned turnover, Dickerson lost another fumble and the Rams committed ten penalties. But perhaps nothing was more costly than the strategic error of giving the football to a back not named Eric Dickerson in this situation.

Dwayne Crutchfield got the ball and was stuffed for a three-yard loss. A short pass to Henry Ellard was quickly swarmed by the Giants. There was still seven minutes to play, so there was really no choice but for LA to cut the lead to 16-13 with a field goal.

But New York closed it out without further drama. They held the ball for 34 minutes and in spite of rushing for just forty yards, the turnover-free effort and only five penalties keyed the 16-13 upset win.

The Giants went on to face the 49ers in the divisional playoffs the following Saturday. As it had been in the regular season, this was too much to handle. Simms couldn't get any protection, being sacked six times, and was marginally effective when he did. The defense played well, forced a couple turnovers to create ten points and the score was only 14-10 in the second quarter.

But San Francisco scored again before the half and the second half was quiet both ways, ending in a 21-10 game. If nothing else, the Giants covered the (+12) spread and rewarded their financial backers with a 2-0 record in Las Vegas for the playoffs.

More than that, the Giants had rewarded their fans with hope. And that hope would be fulfilled. They returned to the playoffs as a wild-card in 1985, again winning one game and again being eliminated by the future Super Bowl champion. In 1986, they took the next step and became the Super Bowl champion. The Parcells era was underway.

1985

For the second straight year, the Giants made the postseason and advanced. And for the second straight year, only running into a great Super Bowl champion derailed them.

Taylor was a 1st-team All-Pro with 13 sacks. Carson was another Pro Bowl player at inside linebacker, as was defensive end Leonard Marshall who had 15 ½ sacks. All this pressure on the quarterback gave the secondary opportunities to make plays and corner Elvis Patterson and free safety Terry Kinard took advantage—they combined for eleven interceptions.

The defense as a whole ranked fifth in the NFL in points allowed, but we shouldn't overlook an improved offense that was almost as good ranking sixth. Simms was now 30-years-old and he was finally coming into his own, with a Pro Bowl year that saw him throw for over 3,800 yards.

Simms' 56% completion rate was decent, his 7.7 yards-per-attempt solid, but the 22-20 TD/INT ratio could have been better, even allowing for an era where it was more difficult to throw the football.

The quarterback's prime target was 23-year-old Lionel Manuel, with wide receiver Bobby Johnson and rookie tight end Mark Bavaro playing supporting roles. But the real help to the quarterback was Morris. The shifty running back ran for over 1,300 yards and helped Parcells' offense control tempo.

New York opened the season at home against mediocre Philadelphia, and that ability to control the ground game was immediately apparent. They won the rushing battle 192-80 and took home a 21-0 shutout. But the running attack disappeared the next week against another mediocre opponent in Green Bay. The Giants only rushed for 76 yards and gave up a late touchdown to lose 23-20 in Lambeau.

A home game with the subpar St. Louis Cardinals was next, and it was tied 10-10 at the half. Simms opened up in the second half, throwing two touchdown passes and leading a 27-17 win. The return visit to Philadelphia was similarly sluggish.

The Giants only led 10-3 late in the game when Eagles' defensive back Herm Edwards intercepted a pass on the New York 3-yard line and basically walked into the end zone to tie the game. New York fans needed no reminders of Edwards' role in the Miracle In The Meadowlands of 1978, when he returned a fumble for the winning touchdown on a play when the Giants should have been taking a knee.

This time there would be a better ending. In overtime, Patterson picked off Philly quarterback Ron Jaworski and took it 29 yards for the 16-10 win.

Sunday Night Football was not the norm in 1985, so a Cowboys-Giants game in prime-time at the Meadowlands was most definitely an event. These two teams would join the three-time defending NFC East champ Redskins in a year-long battle for the division crown, and this prime-time game was worth the stage it was played on.

Simms threw a pair of touchdown passes to Manuel, from 51 yards and 23 yards. Backup running back George Adams bolted 70 yards for a touchdown, but the Giants missed the extra point after that TD. Even though they led 26-14, that point would haunt them. Simms threw for 432 yards, but there was no consistency in the running game, Cowboy quarterback Danny White was also having a big night and Dallas rallied for a 30-29 win.

The Giants carried a hangover into mediocre Cincinnati the following week and dug themselves a 21-0 hole. Simms had to put the ball up 62 times, something that undoubtedly left Parcells apoplectic. The quarterback completed 40 for 513 yards and closed to within 21-20. But in the process, he was sacked seven times, New York turned it over four times and Simms threw a Pick-6. They lost 35-30.

Washington came to the Meadowlands next and in a game the Giants needed to have, they returned to their power running and defense roots. A 144-69 rush edge keyed a 17-3 win.

More of the same followed in games against bad teams in the Saints and Buccaneers. The rush edge was 234-113 at New Orleans, balanced between Morris and Adams and the final score was 21-13. In Tampa, Morris racked up 132 yards the Giants won 22-20.

The Los Angeles Rams came to the Meadowlands with revenge on their minds—the Giants went west the previous year and ousted the Rams in the NFC wild-card game. Los Angeles had

one of the league's all-time greats at running back in Eric Dickerson, so Parcels wouldn't be able to win this one on muscle alone.

Simms came through and made big plays. While he only completed 16/30 passes, they went for 239 yards. And the defense came up with key stops, forcing the Rams to settle for field goals. The Giants won 24-19 and were on a good roll going into a Monday Night date at RFK Stadium in Washington.

It would prove to be one of the most memorable of Monday Night games, but for the wrong reasons. Taylor came on a blitz and sacked Redskin quarterback Joe Theisman. The next thing viewers saw was a panicked Taylor summoning the Washington medical staff to the field. Theisman's leg had been hideously snapped and his career was over.

The actual results of the game are forgotten, but those were pretty important too. The Giants had a 21-17 lead, but then backup quarterback Jay Schroeder beat them with a late touchdown drive. It was a key NFC East loss that dropped New York to 1-2 in their games against Washington and Dallas.

Defensive pressure revived the team in St. Louis. George Martin got three sacks, LT added two more and New York ended up with eight quarterback sacks on the afternoon in a 34-3 rout.

The final quarter of the season was at hand, and New York's 8-4 record had them tied for first with Dallas, with Washington a game back. As far as the two wild-cards, the runner-up in the Rams-49ers race in the NFC West would be in that mix. New York was in a good position to make the playoffs, but it wasn't a sure thing and this franchise was hungry for its first division title of the Super Bowl era.

Cleveland was playoff-bound, albeit at 8-8, so losing to them at home was a big disappointment. Simms played well, going 23/37 for 289 yards, and Morris ran strong, going for 131 yard. The Giants built a 33-21 lead. But inexplicably, the defense melted down against an offensively-challenged opponent and was beaten by two touchdown passes from Gary Danielson in a 35-33 loss. Dallas won to take control of the division race, though Washington lost to San Francisco and gave the Giants and 49ers control in the wild-card race.

New York still had a game to play with Dallas, but the tiebreakers meant that the Giants now needed some help. They got it the very next week. While New York cleaned up on a bad Houston Oilers team (the current Tennessee Titans), winning 35-14 and getting points from both the defense and special teams, the Cowboys were crushed in Cincinnati, losing 50-24. The regular season's penultimate game in Dallas would be for the NFC East lead.

The Giants got off to a good start, taking a 14-7 lead and in the second quarter they were driving for more. Simms then threw a pass that was intercepted by defensive end Jim Jeffcoat, who rumbled 65 yards for a game-tying touchdown. The momentum was shifted and Simms threw two more interceptions. A 28-21 loss ended the NFC East dream.

Now there was a playoff spot to secure. The Giants, 49ers and Redskins were all 9-6, with the Giants now on top of the race for tiebreakers. They would play an early afternoon game on Saturday against mediocre Pittsburgh to secure their wild-card spot. And if the chance to win the first division title in the Super Bowl era had slipped away, the opportunity to host the first postseason game in that same timeframe was still alive.



The Giants came ready to go and they were true to their identity. Morris got the football 36 times and rolled up 202 yards. The defense dominated. The score was 28-3 by half and it ended 28-10. New York was going back to the playoffs.

San Francisco came to the Meadowlands the following Sunday. The 49ers had eliminated the Giants in the divisional round in 1981 and 1984, both times in San Francisco and both times with the Niners on their way to Super Bowl titles. That pedigree led the oddsmakers to install the 49ers as three-point

favorites on the road.

New York got on the board first with a 47-yard field goal. The defense had the great Joe Montana under control and Kinard made a big play in the second quarter with an interception that set up a Simms-to-Bavaro touchdown. The 49ers drove inside the 10-yard line before the half was out, but the Giants forced a field goal attempt and the score was 10-3 at the half.

Morris was giving New York its needed edge on the ground, as he ran for 141 yards. The offensive line was also doing the job in pass protection as Simms was not sacked. On the other side of the trenches, the 49ers could not run on a cold day where passing was difficult, and Montana was sacked four times.

Simms threw a third-quarter touchdown to make it 17-3. Even though Montana threw for 296 yards, he had to put it up 47 times and San Francisco never really threatened. The game ended 17-3.

New York now had to go to Chicago, where the Bears were 15-1 and enjoying a run of historic dominance on the defensive side of the ball. The Giants couldn't win with defense against an opponent who was even better.

They made a huge special teams gaffe in the first half. Punter Sean Landeta, standing on his own 5-yard line literally whiffed a punt, as the winds off Lake Michigan played with the ball. The easy Bears touchdown was the only scoring in the first half, but Chicago got a pair of third quarter TDs to pen the game up. Morris only ran for 32 yards, Simms went 14/35 for 209 yards and New York never threatened. They lost 21-0. It was still the closest anyone played the Bears in their run to a Super Bowl victory.

There was still plenty of reason to feel good about where the franchise was headed. They had two straight playoff berths and were only getting eliminated by the league's best. The Giants were coming and it was apparent to everyone in football.

1986

The 1986 New York Giants took the final step—they won the Super Bowl with a great regular season and dominating postseason run. Of course it started with LT, who had the best year of a Hall of Fame career. He terrorized defenses with 20 ½ sacks and became the most recent defensive player to win the MVP award.

Taylor had plenty of company. Carson made another Pro Bowl at age 33. Marshall was another Pro Bowler and he recorded 12 sacks. Nose tackle Jim Burt enjoyed a Pro Bowl season and tied up blockers to enable playmakers like Taylor to do their thing. And overseeing this defense as coordinator was still the great Bill Belichick.

New York's defense ranked second in the NFL in points allowed, trailing only the legendary Chicago Bears defense, fresh off their own great Super Bowl run in 1985. In fairness to the Giants we should note that New York played a far tougher schedule than did Chicago.

The greatness of the defense obscures the fact that the Phil Simms-led offense was pretty good at moving the football. Simms threw for over 3,400 yards and averaged 7.5 yards-per-attempt. The interceptions were a problem—22 in all—but in a different era than our own, it wasn't a fatal flaw.

Simms had two 1st-team All-Pro players as part of the supporting cast. Bavaro was the favored target and the 23-year-old caught 66 passes for just over 1,000 yards. Morris rolled up over 1,500 yards on the ground even though he missed a game in the regular season. Morris ran behind a line that was keyed by Pro Bowl left tackle Brad Benson, while center Bart Oates was on the cusp of a run that saw him eventually make five Pro Bowls himself.

Running the ball and throwing to the tight end were the keys to an offense overseen by coordinator Ron Erhardt. But they could also stretch the field. Wide receivers Bobby Johnson and Stacy Robinson didn't see the ball a lot, but they averaged 17-plus yards a pop when Simms did go their way.

If all this weren't enough, the Giants won key intangible areas of play as well. Landeta was the league's best punter in 1986. And New York's aggressive, attacking defense combined with a conservative offense, created a game flow where they consistently enjoyed edges in penalty yardage throughout the season. They weren't going to give away games and they were awfully tough to beat.

But get beat they did in the opening game of the season, on the Monday Night stage in Dallas. The Cowboys were the defending NFC East champs and had beaten the Giants in a big game here down the stretch in 1985. Simms made big plays, his 22/45 night going for 300 yards. Johnson and Bavaro each caught seven balls. When Simms hit Johnson on a 44-yard touchdown pass, New York was ahead 28-24 in the fourth quarter, having come back from deficits of 14-0 and 24-21. But the Cowboys rallied for the winning touchdown.

Forget the Super Bowl for a moment—the Giants had never even won the NFC East since the division was created in the AFL-NFL merger in 1970. Losing a tough game in Dallas must have made the Big Blue faithful wonder if they would ever survive the behemoths of their own division, including the Washington Redskins who had a recent Super Bowl title under Joe Gibbs.



New York played with a bit of hangover at home against a woeful Chargers team, but intercepted Dan Fouts five times to win 20-7. They went on the road to face the Los Angeles Raiders next.

Though the Raiders would miss the playoffs this season, they were on a run of four straight postseason trips that included a Super Bowl win. They also started this season 8-4 before collapsing. So when Morris ran for 110 yards to key a 14-9

victory, it was a big deal.

The Giants played another ho-hum home game against a mediocre opponent in the New Orleans Saints. They gave up a 63-yard touchdown pass early and spotted the Saints a 17-0 lead. Then the Simms-to-Bavaro combination heated up. Bavaro caught seven passes for 110 yards, including the game-winner in a 20-17 victory.

Simms was erratic in a road game at the St. Louis Cardinals and there was no running game. The defense bailed them out with seven sacks, two apiece by LT, Carl Banks and Marshall. The Giants came home and beat up the lowly Philadelphia Eagles in a late afternoon kick. After a scoreless first quarter, a 30-yard touchdown run by Morris got the ball rolling. It ended in a 35-3 avalanche with the Eagles gaining just 117 total yards.

New York traveled west to face a good Seattle team that would contend for a playoff spot until the final week of the season. The Seahawks played indoors, at the Kingdome, but they were as tough an out at home as they are in our own day. The Giants were a three-point underdog, indicating oddsmakers did not yet see this as a great team. This game gave them no reason to change their minds. Simms threw four interceptions in a 17-12 loss.

A Monday Night game against the Redskins would be significant for New York in two ways. The city was focused on the Mets, who were playing Game 7 of a dramatic World Series against the Red Sox that night. And this would be the night that, in retrospect, we know was where the 1986 New York Giants really caught fire.

The Giants dominated the ground attack against a Redskins team that was renowned for doing that same thing in the Joe Gibbs era. Morris carried 31 times for 181 yards and New York built up a 20-3 lead. Washington only mustered 32 yards on the ground, but came all the way back to tie it 20-apiece. Morris had one more answer with a three-yard touchdown run that won it.

Morris enjoyed another huge game when Dallas came to the Meadowlands, piling up 181 yards. Simms played his worst game of the year, 6/18 for 67 yards but the running of Morris combined

with five sacks for the defense and the Cowboys' getting flagged for 113 yards in penalties, all resulted in a 17-14 New York win.

The Giants had beaten their two biggest rivals in a tough NFC East race and they put together another divisional win in Philadelphia a week later. Morris ran for two touchdowns, led the way to a 17-0 lead and New York hung on 17-14.

A road trip to competitive Minnesota was a war and the Giants trailed 13-12 after three quarters. Simms stepped up and he hit Johnson with a 25-yard touchdown pass for the lead. The Vikings went back ahead 20-19, but Simms was coming through today. He finished 25/38 for 310 yards and led a drive to a game-winning field goal, 22-20.

John Elway and the Denver Broncos came into the Meadowlands on the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving in a high-profile game seen as a possible Super Bowl preview. Oddsmakers rated the teams even and gave New York only the three-point edge for homefield.

The Giants had a tough time with Elway, who threw for 336 yards. But they made big plays and none was bigger than in the second quarter, when Denver led 6-3 and was driving for more. Defensive tackle George Martin got his hands on a pass, came up with an interception and rumbled 78 yards the other way for a score. It was the biggest of the four turnovers New York collected and combined with Morris' 106 rush yards, enough to pull out a 19-16 win.

New York was 10-2 and tied for first with Washington. Dallas had started a late-season fade and was already down to 7-5. The Giants, Redskins and Bears—also 10-2—were the class of the NFC and they came down the stretch fighting for playoff position.

The San Francisco 49ers were fighting just to make the postseason, but Joe Montana commanded enough respect to make the 49ers a three-point home favorite against the Giants on Monday Night Football.

New York dug themselves a 17-0 hole, but it would be Simms, not Montana, leading the great comeback for a national TV audience. He rifled three touchdown passes in the third quarter, finishing 27/38 for 388 yards. Robinson caught five balls for 116 of those yards and the Giants won 21-17 to keep pace with the Redskins and Bears, who had each won on Sunday.

December 7 was the defining moment of the regular season, as New York went to Washington and old RFK Stadium to play for first place in the NFC East. The Giants' defense sent a loud and clear message to the rest of the league. They got six interceptions from six different players. Taylor was in beast mode, getting three sacks. New York won 24-14 in a game that didn't feel that close.

The Giants were in complete command of the division, with a one-game lead and control of the tiebreakers with two weeks to play. When the Redskins lost in Denver the following Saturday afternoon, New York clinched their first NFC East title.

There was still the matter of the #1 seed and Chicago was even with New York at 12-2, though the Giants held the tiebreaker edge thanks to a better record against common opponents—that rally against the Vikings, a team that had split its two games with the Bears, was the difference.

Morris had a huge day at home against St. Louis, going for 179 yards and a pair of touchdowns in a 27-7 win. New York finished off the season the following Saturday with a 55-24 rout of lowly Green Bay. In the first quarter, Simms threw a 24-yard touchdown pass to Bavaro, a blocked punt produced another touchdown and Morris ran for a third. It was 21-0 and the party could start at the Meadowlands. The road to the Super Bowl would come through Giants Stadium.

San Francisco was a familiar playoff foe for New York. The Giants lost out west in the divisional round in both 1981 and 1984, both leading to Super Bowl wins for the 49ers. New York took a measure of revenge in the wild-card game in 1985 at home. San Francisco had some momentum coming into this game, having rallied to steal the NFC West title from Los Angeles and the Giants were only a three-point favorite.

On the game's first possession, the Giants let Jerry Rice break into the clear and it looked like the 49ers had first blood. In a sign that this was New York's year, Rice simply dropped the football. It was a completely unforced error. It would be the Giants driving for the game's first score, a 24-yard TD pass from Simms to Bavaro.

It was 7-3 after the first quarter, but the avalanche was about to start. An interception of Montana set up a 45-yard touchdown run from Morris. Another New York drive was extended by a successful fake-field goal attempt and ended when Simms tossed a 15-yard scoring pass to Bobby Johnson.

With New York already in complete control at 21-3 and San Francisco pinned deep in their own end, the finishing blow came from Burt. He broke through and crushed Montana, knocking him cold on the hard artificial turf and ending his afternoon. It's almost an afterthought that Montana got rid of the pass, but it was intercepted by Taylor who brought it back 34 yards for the touchdown.

Morris finished the game with 159 yards, while the 49ers only mustered 29 yards on the ground. The rout continued in the second half. The final was 49-3 and an anticipated playoff battle had just turned into one long party on an early Sunday afternoon.

An anticipated battle with the Bears did not materialize—the Redskins had gone to Soldier Field on Saturday and upset Chicago. Instead of a showdown between two of the great defenses in the modern era, it would be Round 3 against a divisional foe the Giants had already beaten twice.

The winds were heavy for the 4 PM ET kick, so much so that Parcells opted to take the wind rather than the ball when New York won the opening toss. It would be a smart move. The Giants drove for a 47-yard field goal, a kick not possible to make going against the wind on this day.

On the ensuing drive, New York was driving again and reached the 26-yard line. An incomplete pass on third-and-10 seemed to mean another field goal attempt. But the Redskins chose to accept a holding penalty and try and push the Giants out of field goal range. Simms responded by hitting Lionel Manuel for 25 yards. He hit Manuel one more time, an 11-yard touchdown pass that put New York firmly in command at 10-0.

The second quarter would be critical—could Washington answer now that they had the wind? They had chances, driving into field goal range, but a botched snap cost them points. Morris fumbled it away, but the Giant defense made a stop on 4th-and-1. The score was still 10-0 and given the quality of the New York D, combined with the weather conditions, it might as well have been 35-0.

New York would outrush Washington 117-46. The Redskins were forced into throwing 50 times on a day when passing was shut down for half the game. The final was 17-0 and the Giants were going to the Super Bowl.

A rematch of that November game with Denver was the last step and by now everyone was on board the Giant bandwagon. In spite of the presence of Elway, New York was installed as a decisive nine-point favorite in Pasadena.

They did not play well defensively in the early part of the game. Elway led one drive for a field goal and another for a touchdown in the first quarter. The latter drive was aided by a pair of personal foul penalties on the Giants—one when Taylor foolishly picked up a flag he didn't like and threw it. In between, Simms hit tight end Zeke Mowatt on a short touchdown pass and the score was 10-7 going into the second quarter.



Denver drove to the one-yard line for a first-and-goal. It looked like this might be a long day for the Giants. Instead, it was the moment their defense completely turned the game around.

Elway rolled out on first down, but was stopped by Taylor.

Some unimaginative play calling on the Denver sideline took the ball away from Elway the next two snaps and put it in the hands of Sammy Winder. He failed once up the middle and another time on a sweep—why the Broncos thought they could beat the Giant defense to the edge in a constricted goal-line situation is a question only then-offensive coordinator Mike Shanahan and head coach Dan Reeves can answer.

When Denver shanked the field goal, the goal-line stand was complete. New York eventually flipped the field and had the Broncos pinned deep in their own end. It appeared Elway had gotten some breathing room on a pass to Clarence Kay. But it was erroneously ruled incomplete, with no instant replay in place to overturn a call. Martin made it hurt by sacking Elway for a safety and the game went to the locker room at 10-9.

The second half completely belonged to New York and to Simms in particular. The quarterback hit Bavaro on a 13-yard touchdown pass, led another drive for a field goal and his 44-yard pass to Phil McConkey off a flea-flicker set up a short touchdown run by Morris. Simms finished the

day 22/25 for 268 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions. It was a Super Bowl record for completion percentage and it won Simms game MVP honors.

At 26-10, and no two-point conversion available, the game was all but over. If there were any flickering hopes for Denver, they were ended when New York got an interception on the first play of the fourth quarter to set up another touchdown. Elway didn't have a bad day—22/37 for 304 yards—but he was sacked four times and the Giants dominated on the ground, 138-52. Combine that with Simms being red-hot and New York just had too much. The final was 39-20.

At long last, the Giants were Super Bowl champs. And the era of Parcels and LT was far from over.

1988

After winning the Super Bowl with a dominant year in 1986, the strike-torn 1987 season had been a difficult one for Bill Parcels and the Giants. They finished 6-9 and missed the playoffs. The 1988 New York Giants were looking for a comeback season. For the most part, they got it. But a heartbreaking ending still put them out of the money come the postseason.

Only two years removed from being the last defensive player to win MVP honors in '86, Lawrence Taylor delivered another vintage year in 1988. He rang up 15 1/2 sacks and was 1st-team All-NFL.



Taylor's presence made life easier for defensive end Leonard Marshall, who added eight sacks. The linebacking corps included Harry Carson and Carl Banks.

Terry Kinard had a Pro Bowl season at free safety. With a young defensive coordinator named Bill Belichick calling the shots, the Giants ranked ninth in the league in points allowed.

Parcels' offense was built on game management and that's reflected in the numbers of quarterback Phil Simms. With a 55 percent completion rate and 7.0 yards-per-attempt, Simms was mediocre to below average. But he was only intercepted on 2.3 percent of his throws and that was second-best among NFL quarterbacks.

Simms' key targets started with Lionel Manuel who went over 1,00 yards receiving and stretched the field at 15.8 yards a pop. Stephen Baker was another good big-play target, with his 40 catches averaging better than 16 yards each. And tight end Mark Bavaro was reliable underneath.

Joe Morris keyed the running game with a 1,000-yard season. But Morris only averaged 3.5 yards-per-attempt. This wasn't the vintage power running attack that marked so many Giants teams during their run under Parcels. The big reason was that the offensive line was having a

rough year. They didn't clear holes consistently and pass protection was awful—something that would prove decisive in the season's biggest moment.

New York opened the season at home on Labor Day night against the defending Super Bowl champion Washington Redskins. It was a great opportunity to set the tone for a comeback.

For the first half, the Giants were still futzing around and trailed 13-3. But they pulled even 13-13 by the end of the third quarter. And in the fourth quarter, the defense and special teams delivered. A punt block for a touchdown put New York up front. Nose tackle Jim Burt later sealed the 27-13 win with a fumble return for a score.

The schedule makers did New York no favors and sent Joe Montana's San Francisco 49ers into the Meadowlands for Week 2. The Giants were out rushed 181-112, the second straight game they lost the rush yardage battle. Even so, they led 17-13 in the fourth quarter. But the secondary let the great Montana-to-Jerry Rice combo get loose with a 78-yard touchdown pass and New York lost 20-17.

A late Sunday afternoon road trip to lowly Dallas produced a grinding 12-10 win. Morris ran for 107 yards, but it took him 28 carries to get there. Manuel was the big producer with 142 receiving yards on nine catches. It wasn't an inspiring win, but in an early schedule stacked with playoff perennials, it was still a win the Giants had to have.

The Los Angeles Rams were like New York—a steady playoff team in the 1980s who had been undone by the weird year that was 1987. The Rams were next in the Meadowlands. The Giants were completely outclassed. The secondary was lit up by quarterback Jim Everett and New York trailed 28-3 by the second quarter. The final was 45-31.

At 2-2, a road trip to Washington was set up to be a big game. This year's edition of the Redskins would prove to be the worst during the great run the franchise had under Joe Gibbs from 1981-92. New York went to RFK Stadium and played their best game of the young season. Odessa Turner, a big, young receiver caught eight passes for over 100 yards. The defense forced three turnovers. The Giants led 24-9 in the third quarter and in the days before the two-point conversion was allowed, it was a mammoth lead. The eventual 24-23 win wasn't as hair-raising as the score might indicate.

A Monday Night date in Philadelphia was next. The Eagles had been dormant for the past six years, but in their third year under head coach Buddy Ryan, were poised for a breakout. Simms got into a passing war with Philly quarterback Randall Cunningham. Even though Simms played well and threw for 324 yards, this wasn't Giants football. Cunningham went for 369 and New York took a 24-13 loss.

They were back to .500 at 3-3. But a particularly soft part of the schedule was ahead. Over the next four weeks, the Giants would play the lowly Lions twice—the scheduling format prior to 2002 had the last-place teams from the previous year in the NFC East and old NFC Central—the four current teams of the NFC North, plus Tampa Bay—meet each other twice.

New York would also play Atlanta, Dallas and go west to play the Phoenix Cardinals, as they were then called. It all added up to a terrific chance to get to 8-3.

The Giants didn't look ready to grab the opportunity during the first half at home against the Lions, trailing 10-7. But Simms got loose. He went 23/32 for 320 yards and no mistakes. Baker caught five balls for 98 yards. Bavaro added eight catches for 80 yards. New York pulled away to an easy 30-10 win.

Simms was uncharacteristically sloppy in Atlanta, throwing three interceptions and digging his team a 16-6 hole in the fourth quarter. Comeback football wasn't the ideal place for this Giants offense to be. But Simms rallied the team with ten straight points to tie. Then Banks intercepted a pass on the Falcon 15-yard line and took it in for the winning touchdown.

The offensive line played poorly in Detroit, allowing five sacks, and failing to create room for any kind of running game. But Simms went 22/36 for 227 yards and made no mistakes. It was enough to get out of Motown with a 13-10 overtime win.

Dallas came to the Meadowlands. This would prove to be the final year in the great career of Cowboy coach Tom Landry and his final team was a disaster. Simms threw a couple second-quarter touchdown passes to Baker and the Giants led 26-0 at half before the final score became deceptively respectable at 29-21.

The Giants were on the verge of sweeping their soft five-game stretch. But out in the desert, they let what was a potent QB-WR combo of Neil Lomax and Roy Green get rolling. Phoenix put New York in a 14-0 hole and the Giants were chasing the rest of the way in what ended as a 24-17 loss.

This wasn't a great New York team by any stretch, but in a soft NFC East they still led the way and had only Philadelphia to beat out. The Eagles-Giants game at the Meadowlands was the late afternoon feature on the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving with the legendary broadcast duo of Pat Summerall and John Madden on the call.

It was the kind of back-and-forth game you would hope for from two rivals who had first place on the line. Simms played well and went 17/28 for 253 yards. But he was also knocked out and had to be replaced by Jeff Hostetler. He threw three interceptions. The game was tied 17-17, went to overtime and Philadelphia was lined up for a potential 32-yard field goal to win it.

New York blocked the kick. They were still alive. Only the ball stayed behind the line of scrimmage, meaning it was still live. Eagle lineman Clyde Simmons scooped it up and raced for the pylon. He got there. The Giants took a devastating 23-17 defeat.

The Eagles and Giants were both 7-5, but Philadelphia now had the head-to-head tiebreaker. The playoff format and divisional alignment of the day only allowed for two wild-cards and one was all but sewed up with Chicago and Minnesota having big years in the NFC Central. The NFC West had the Saints in control at 9-3, but the Rams and 49ers both 7-5 and both with head-to-head wins over New York. The Giants needed help.

A Sunday Night visit to New Orleans was a good place to start. Simms was still out, but this time Hostetler threw an 85-yard touchdown pass to Baker in the second quarter. In a battle between two really good defenses built on great linebacker play, that was the only touchdown, and it was the difference. New York won 13-12.

Simms was back in the lineup for a home date with the Cardinals and this one went easy. Morris ran for 122 yards and the final was 44-7. Meanwhile, the Eagles were falling to the Redskins. The Giants were 9-5 and a game up in the NFC East.

Lowly Kansas City came to the Big Apple. Amidst 21mph winds, Simms could only throw for 93 yards. But Morris had his best game of the year and rolled up 140 yards on 31 carries. New York clung to a 14-12 lead after three quarters but pulled away with a couple fourth quarter touchdowns to win 21-12.

Philadelphia had kept the pressure on, so going into the final week, you had the Giants at 10-5 and the Eagles at 9-6. Over in the NFC West, the 49ers had surged into first place. The Rams and Saints were both 9-6. Unfortunately for New York, it was LA who held the tiebreaker in the divisional standings. Meaning that when it came to the second wild-card berth, Los Angeles could clinch it with a win.

Either way, the Giants had three paths into the playoffs. Win their finale with the crosstown rival Jets, hope the Eagles lost in Dallas or that the Rams would lose Sunday Night in San Francisco.

The Jets were a mediocre team and stood at 7-7-1 for this finale, out of the picture. Simms delivered an efficient game, 18/30 for 230 yards for three touchdowns and no interceptions. Morris carried twenty times for 97 yards.

But the offensive line—and there is no nice way to say this—was atrocious. They allowed eight sacks. The Giants trailed 20-7 in the third quarter. Simms stepped up and delivered a nine-yard touchdown pass to Baker. Simms added another nine-yard scoring pass to Manuel in the fourth quarter. With a 21-20 lead, the Giants were ready to escape. But the Jets drove down the field and reached the five-yard line. With everyone assuming they would position for a game-ending field goal, NYJ quarterback Ken O'Brien threw a five-yard touchdown pass.

The 27-21 loss was coupled with Philadelphia's win in the same early afternoon time slot. The NFC East went to the Eagles. All that was left was to hope the Rams lost.

But there wasn't a lot of hope. San Francisco was locked into the 2-seed and played like a team that had nothing on the line. Los Angeles rolled to an easy 38-16 win, taking the final playoff berth, and sending New York into the offseason.

It was an extremely difficult way to see the season end. But the Giants had gotten themselves back on the board as a contender. They strengthened the offensive line going forward, setting up the Parcells era for a second wind.

1989

The Giants needed to get back into the postseason and they did just that, returning to the top of the NFC East.

While the '89 team wasn't stacked with Pro Bowl players, they had two essential cogs—Taylor was still 1st-team All-NFL at outside linebacker and Bill Belichick was still the defensive coordinator. A wrecking ball on the field and brilliance in the press box combined to make the Giants defense the second-best in the league in points allowed.

The offense was competent, ranking 12th in a 28-team league, but not great. Simms was 34-years-old and played pretty well in an offense built around the run. Ottis Anderson ran for over 1,000 yards but his 3.1 yards-per-attempt was low. The receiving corps didn't knock your socks off, although between Turner and Manuel on the outside, along with Bavaro and Mowatt at tight end, it had the virtue of balance.

New York did get a nice lift from an unexpected source. Dave Meggett, a rookie from Towson known to perhaps no one except Parcels provided a change of pace in the running game, a reliable target out of the backfield and most importantly, he became a Pro Bowl punt returner. On a team that relied on grinding out field position, Meggett's contributions were no small thing.

The season opened on a Monday Night in Washington, where the Redskins were also looking to rebound after a recent Super Bowl championship was followed by a non-playoff year. On a humid September night in old RFK Stadium, it was kicker Raul Allegre that came up big.

Trailing in the fourth quarter after a Simms Pick-6 put the Giants in a 24-21 hole, Allegre first hit a field goal to tie it. Then he drilled a 52-yarder on the final play of the game to win. This writer, a lifelong Redskins fan, still remembers how crushed and sweaty I was in the heat of my college dorm late that Monday night.



This was part of a three-year stretch (1988-90) where the Giants owned the Redskins. They won all six games and they were all gut wrenchers for those of us who bled burgundy-and-gold. The rematch at the Meadowlands came in mid-October. Anderson rushed for 101 yards and Simms rallied New York after they trailed 10-6 going into the fourth quarter. He found Bavaro and Turner for touchdown passes and the Giants won 20-17.

The sweep of Washington gave New York a big boost in an NFC East race that was built around these two teams and the Philadelphia Eagles. And those two wins were the highlight of a very consistent stretch of football through nine weeks. The rest of the schedule wasn't great, save for a Monday Night home win over the playoff-bound Minnesota Vikings and a tough loss in Philly, but the Giants methodically churned out wins. They sat on an 8-1 record as a difficult portion of the schedule approached.

New York went west to face the Los Angeles Rams, the eventual 5-seed in the NFC playoffs. The Giants were pummeled on the ground, losing rush yardage 150-6 and losing the football

game 31-10. After a ho-hum win over mediocre Seattle, New York again got on the plane west. They faced San Francisco on a Monday Night. The 49ers were the defending Super Bowl champs and would win it again in 1989.

The Giants again dug themselves a hole, falling behind 24-7 in the second quarter, with Joe Montana carving them up for a couple touchdown passes. This time, Simms rallied his team. He put the ball up 48 times for the game and threw for 326 yards. Touchdown passes of 53 yards to Meggett and 7 to Turner eventually tied the game 24-24.

Montana was too much to overcome. He finished a surreal 27/33 for 292 yards and three touchdowns. More important, he made no mistakes while Simms was intercepted three times. San Francisco got a second wind and won 34-24.

Most damaging was a home loss one week later to Philadelphia. The New York offensive line was manhandled, allowing five sacks, only getting 58 yards on the ground and Eagles defensive lineman Clyde Simmons produced a touchdown. That was the difference in a 24-17 loss amidst heavy winds at the Meadowlands.

New York still had a clear path to the playoffs, but Philadelphia now controlled the division. The teams were tied at 9-4, with the Eagles owning the head-to-head sweep.

The Giants-Broncos game a week later in Mile High Stadium was shown to most of the country and it was realistically make-or-break for New York's NFC East title hopes. Denver would make its third Super Bowl in four years this season, but they always had problems matching up with the best in the NFC. This game was no exception. Simms played efficiently, Meggett produced a 57-yard touchdown catch and the Giants won a physical battle, 14-7.

The remainder of the schedule was more than manageable—home games with a horrible Dallas Cowboys team and the mediocre Los Angeles Raiders. New York won both games without breaking a sweat. And on the penultimate Monday Night of the season, the Giants got the break they needed—the Eagles lost in New Orleans. New York's win over the Raiders sealed the division crown and #2 seed in the playoffs.

The Rams came to the Meadowlands for the divisional playoff game in the early Sunday afternoon time slot. In a tough, physical battle, the Giants just didn't make enough big plays. Simms went 14/29 for 180 yards while counterpart Jim Everett turned his 25/44 day into 315 yards. Everett hit two big touchdown passes to Flipper Anderson, the latter a 30-yard post pattern in overtime that ended the New York season, 19-13.

It was a tough way to end the season, but the Giants were back on the board as a playoff team. One year later they were back on the board in a bigger way.

1990

The expectations were high. Simms might have been getting long in the tooth at 36-years-old and perhaps making preliminary plans for his future career as a CBS analyst, but he was still a

tough competitor and a mistake-free passer, which made him perfect for a team built on defense and the running game. Anderson was the go-to back and Pro Bowler William Roberts was the best on the offensive line.

Defense was the real calling card though, and Belichick orchestrated a unit built around one of the best linebacking groups ever to play the game. Taylor was still the league's most feared blitzing linebacker after ten years in the league and his counterpart on the outside, Banks, was one of the most underrated. On the inside was veteran Pro Bowler Pepper Johnson.

Nose tackle Erik Howard excelled at tying up blockers and enabling the group behind him to make plays. Corners Mark Collins and Everson Walls were as good any cover due in the NFL. What it all added up to was that this team had Super Bowl talent and a brilliant coaching staff to guide them.

The Giants had their work cut out for them in the rugged NFC East. The Philadelphia Eagles had made the playoffs each of the previous two years. They had a ferocious defensive front, led by Reggie White and Jerome Brown, along with an athletic playmaking quarterback in Randall Cunningham. They were coached by Buddy Ryan, father of future NFL coaches Rex and Rob. Neither of the boys are known for being shy around a camera and we can safely say they got it from the old man.

The Washington Redskins had "The Hogs" on the offensive line, a very talented wide receiver trio of Hall of Famer Art Monk, Gary Clark and Ricky Sanders. They were coached by Joe Gibbs, as circumspect as Ryan was loud, and though the 'Skins had missed the playoffs the previous two years, they won 10 games in 1989 and Gibbs already had two of what would be three Super Bowl rings for his career.

It added up to an NFC East and that was absolutely brutal at the top and in fact would get tougher as the year went on. Though Dallas had gone 1-15 the prior year, the rebuilding project of Jimmy Johnson would go much faster than anticipated and the Cowboys got to 7-9 before a season-ending injury to second-year quarterback Troy Aikman probably cost them a playoff berth.

In a season that had little margin of error, the Giants were up to the challenge. And they did it by avoiding errors. It started right away with a home game against Philadelphia. After trailing 10-6 at the half, New York rallied on a Simms touchdown pass and then a 68-yard punt return for a TD by the fabulous return man Dave Meggett. They eventually got out to a 27-10 lead and hung on 27-20.

The difference in the game is that while Simms made no mistakes, Cunningham was picked off three times and sacked six more. Three of the sacks came from Taylor who put behind the frustration of a training camp contract dispute and was ready to play football.

New York then beat Dallas twice in a three-week span and sandwiched those around a win over a pretty good Miami team, quarterbacked by Hall of Famer Dan Marino and who would make it to the second round of the AFC playoffs in January.

After a bye week was a trip to Washington. Again, the turnover issue was paramount and the combo of Simms and the Giant defense was too much. With Redskin starter Mark Rypien out, Big Blue intercepted Stan Humphries three times. Simms not only made no mistakes, he and receiver Stephen Baker hooked up on a 80-yard touchdown pass and the Giants won 24-20.

Two weeks later Washington made its return trip to the Big Apple and New York got two early touchdowns to build a 14-0 lead. The Redskins rallied and closed it to within 14-10 in the third quarter, but again the New York defense was getting turnovers, picking off Humphries three more times, the last one by Walls who took it 28 yards to paydirt for a 21-10 win. The Giants were 3-0 against the best two teams in their division, and had a 9-0 advantage in the interception category.



The undefeated run continued with wins at Indianapolis and at the LA Rams, who were having a disappointing year after reaching the NFC Championship Game in '89. A 20-0 whitewashing of Detroit moved New York to 10-0 and the sports world was looking ahead to a Monday Night showdown on December 3 in San Francisco. The 49ers were not only the two-time defending Super Bowl champs, they were also 10-0.

But neither team made it to the showdown unscathed. A road trip to Philadelphia the Sunday after Thanksgiving didn't go well. This time, the defense couldn't intercept Cunningham and the offense lost two fumbles. New York trailed 14-13 at half, obviously manageable, but frustrating because they missed an extra point. It ended up not mattering, as Philadelphia scored two TDs in a 22-second timeframe and pulled away to a 31-13 win. The 49ers lost to the Rams the same day, but even though New York-San Francisco wasn't a battle of unbeaten, it was still about the #1 seed in the upcoming NFC playoffs.

Defenses ruled the night. The Giants got a Matt Bahr field goal in the second quarter for a 3-0 lead, but a Montana touchdown pass gave San Fran a 7-3 lead that, believe it or not, stood up to the end. Simms was sacked four times and late in the game had a chance to win it when the team got to the San Francisco 9-yard line at first-and-goal. But they couldn't punch it in on four tries and Frisco had the inside track to homefield advantage.

After a bounceback win over Minnesota, the Giants lost a hard-fought game at home against Buffalo, the top team in the AFC. The 17-13 defeat wasn't the worst part of it, even if it did kill any lingering thoughts of homefield advantage and it had to be frustrating coming down in the fourth quarter to the Buffalo 23 and 18-yard lines on two drives, but not being able to finish. What was most damaging about this game is that Simms was knocked out and lost for the year. Backup quarterback Jeff Hostetler would now run the offense for the playoffs.

Though the division crown wasn't in jeopardy and the last two games of the season were cupcakes against bad teams in the Cardinals and Patriots, it seemed a promising Super Bowl chance was slipping away.

No one in New York was happy just to be in the playoffs, least of all Bill Parcells, and Hostetler was a veteran who'd had 2 ½ games to get acclimated to being the starter. The opponent in the divisional round was the Chicago Bears. They had a great coach on the sideline in Mike Ditka and a future coach playing quarterback in Jim Harbaugh.

Like the Giants, Chicago was still defined by its defense. A lot of the players from the dominant 1985 defense that won the Super Bowl were still there—players like Richard Dent, Mike Singletary, Dan Hampton and Steve McMichael. There were new additions like corner Donnel Woolford and rookie free safety Mark Carrier who'd made the Pro Bowl in his first year.

But in a way this worked to New York's advantage—the Bears would try to beat them at their own game, and Parcells' team was simply better at it. They dominated the ground game, to the tune of 194-27. Leading 7-3 after one quarter, they added ten points in the second and a touchdown in each of the last two quarters. A 31-3 rout earned New York a ticket to the NFC Championship Game in San Francisco.

This was not only the matchup everyone had waited for all year, it was really the game everyone had waited on for two years. The Giants and Niners were the top two seeds in 1989, but New York lost a home game in overtime to Los Angeles and missed the chance for the NFC Championship date they now had.

The Niners were at the peak of their dynasty and were favored to win an unprecedented third straight Super Bowl. Joe Montana was running the offense and had a well-balanced package of skill players. Roger Craig was a 1,000 yard rusher and could catch the ball out of the backfield. Jerry Rice was the best to ever play his position at wideout. Montana could also turn to John Taylor on the outside and tight end Brent Jones.

Defensively, San Francisco had future Hall of Famer Ronnie Lott at free safety and pass-rushing dominance in Charles Haley and Kevin Fagan. In the regular season meeting Simms had been sacked four times, twice by Fagan. In the field position game that Giants excelled at, those line of scrimmage battles had to be won.

The game wasn't a back-and-forth offensive classic by any means, but it was still one of the best games in the history of the NFL playoffs. The teams traded field goals in both the first and second quarters and went to the locker room at 6-6.

In the third quarter a 61-yard strike from Montana to Taylor looked like it might stand up. The Giants chipped away with two more Bahr field goals, but with a one-point lead San Francisco had the ball late and was trying to run out the clock. Montana handed off to Craig. Howard poked the ball free and Lawrence Taylor caught it in the air. New York had life at the San Francisco 43-yard line.

Hostetler completed two passes to get them to the 25. On the game's final play Bahr kicked a 42-yard field goal to win the NFC crown. On a field not known for its smooth kicking surface, the veteran kicker had not only hit five field goals, but three of them had been from 40-plus and one

from 38. And the Giants, in spite of not scoring a touchdown in two trips to Frisco, were going to the Super Bowl.

Buffalo rolled through the AFC playoffs, beating Miami and then hammering the then-Los Angeles Raiders 51-10 for the AFC title. Based on their play, the Simms injury and their December win in the Meadowlands, the Bills were the favorite to grab the first Super Bowl win in franchise history.

They ran an aggressive hurry-up offense with Hall of Fame quarterback Jim Kelly calling his own plays and versatile running back Thurman Thomas in the backfield. Other weapons included a tall receiver in Andre Reed, one of the best of the early 1990s and the defense had an elite linebacker in Cornelius Bennett. He was cut in the L.T. mold and at this stage of their careers, Bennett was the better player. On the inside was Shane Conlan, a Pro Bowler and hero of Penn State's 1986 national championship team. Another Hall of Famer was at defensive end in Bruce Smith. It was easy to see why Buffalo came in as the favorite.

There was only a one-week turnaround this year for the Super Bowl, a rare case of it being scheduled in (other instances of a one-week wait had been strike years and the aftermath of 9/11). The Giants would have likely benefited from the extra prep time. Because while Marv Levy was a fine coach for Buffalo, as his record four straight AFC crowns attests, the Belichick/Parcells duo could have used the time for extra schemes to slow down Kelly's no-huddle.

But the Giants played their game and ended up with a Super Bowl record 40 minutes of possession time. The teams traded field goals in the first quarter, and then Buffalo opened up a 12-3 lead aided by Smith sacking Hostetler for a safety. The quarterback bounced back with a touchdown pass to Baker that made it 12-10 at the half.



Anderson, on his way to a 100-yard night and game MVP honors, scored the go-ahead touchdown in the third quarter, but Thomas took it back for Buffalo with a brilliant 31-yard scoring run.

The Bills' back rushed 15 times for 135 yards and even in a losing cause had a good case for game MVP himself. A short Bahr field goal made it 20-19 and late in the game Kelly rallied the Bills from deep in their own end to set up a last-play chance for kicker Scott Norwood.

The field goal would be from 47 yards. With Buffalo's Rich Stadium being artificial turf, as it is today, Norwood hadn't made a field goal that long on grass all year—in fact not even close. This one wouldn't be the first. It sailed wide right and for the second time in New York Giants history, they were Super Bowl champs.

Parcells chose to retire, the first of several retirements. His future included stops with the Patriots, Jets and Cowboys. He enjoyed success at each stop, put New England into a Super Bowl and New York into an AFC Championship Game.

The Giants franchise had more success ahead of them. After a brief step backwards following Parcells' retirement, they returned to the playoffs by 1993. They've since won two more Super Bowls, twice beating Belichick's New England Patriots. The 2007 title run, derailing an undefeated Patriots team in the Super Bowl, is one of the most significant championships in the history of the NFL.

So neither Parcells nor the Giants were going anywhere after they parted ways following the 1990 Super Bowl run. But both the coach and the franchise had the very best years together. They had a clearly defined personality, compelling rivalries at both the division and conference level, a single player who redefined the entire sport and brought home two championships. That's a pretty good legacy for the Big Blue Wrecking Crew.

