

DITKA'S BEARS

1984-91 in Chicago



The Chicago Bears have been through some lean times in the years since George “Papa Bear” Halas retired after the 1967 season and the NFL-AFL merger, creating pro football as we know it, went down three years later. But if you came of age in the 1980s, the Bears were a powerhouse. From 1984-91 this franchise defined the old NFC Central.

It was the time of Iron Mike Ditka as head coach and one of the great defenses of all-time. You had a colorful coordinator in Buddy Ryan putting the scheme together and a Hall of Fame inside linebacker in Mike Singletary who pulled off being both ferocious and studious. Defense defined the Bears in this era.

So did having fun. There were colorful players like Dan Hampton, Gary Fencik and quarterback Jim McMahon. There were future head coaches like Jeff Fisher and Leslie Frazier in the secondary.

And of course there was Walter. One of the great running backs of all-time, Walter Payton broke the record for all-time rushing yardage at the beginning of this era, retired midway through and his ultimate coronation to Super Bowl champion in 1985 was something sports fans across the country were glad to see.

They played hard, hit hard, routinely made the playoffs and in one glorious year, won it all. What follows is a compilation of eight articles that are published individually on TheSportsNotebook.com. Each season in the 1984-91 era has its own game-by-game narrative. Those narratives have been edited and pulled together for this compilation.

Watch as Ditka makes the Bears relevant again by his third season, and then quickly takes the next step to a dominating Super Bowl run. Watch three more great regular seasons that are followed by playoff frustration. A surprise collapse in 1989 is immediately followed with two more strong runs to the postseason before the final fade in 1992 marks the end of an era when it was great to be a Bears fan.

1984

The Chicago Bears had spent the better part of the Super Bowl era being irrelevant, at least when the early 1980s dawned. There had been playoff appearances in 1977 and 1979 that were followed by quick exits and immediate returns to losing. The organization shook things up prior to the 1982 season by hiring one of its legends, Hall of Fame tight end Mike Ditka, to be the head coach.

Ditka went 3-6 in the strike-shortened year of 1982, but improved to 8-8 in 1983 and finished that year off with a win over the Green Bay Packers that kept the Bears' archrivals out of the playoffs. The 1984 Chicago Bears were the team that took the next step, and put their franchise back into the postseason.

The defense had continually improved, as Ditka had retained defensive coordinator Buddy Ryan from the previous coaching staff. In 1984, they finished third in the NFL in points allowed. Mike Singletary, the middle linebacker, was the leader and a 1st-team All-Pro. Another linebacker, Otis Wilson, wasn't a Pro Bowler, but his six sacks contributed to the pressure opposing quarterbacks felt.

When it came to pressure, few could bring it like the Chicago front four. Richard Dent was a Pro Bowler with 17.5 sacks. Dan Hampton was 1st-team All-Pro and had 11.5 sacks. Steve McMichael and Mike Hartenstine didn't get to Honolulu, but combined to tack on seventeen more sacks.

Todd Bell was a Pro Bowl strong safety in the secondary, and future Minnesota Vikings head coach Leslie Frazier was on the corner. Another future NFL head coach played a key role—Jeff Fisher was the punt returner.

The offense was the sticking point. Walter Payton had been carrying the load in the Windy City in his entire career, and with over 1,600 yards in 1984 he was again a 1st-team All-Pro at age 30 and opened the season closing in on Jim Brown's NFL career rushing record of 12,312 yards. He did it without the benefit of a Pro Bowl offensive lineman or a passing game to open things up.

Jim McMahon was supposed to provide a semblance of a passing threat and when he was healthy, McMahon could do that. He completed 59% of his passes, but also only started nine games due to injuries. Chicago's top pass catchers in terms of total receptions were Payton and fullback Matt Suhey. That's not exactly stretching the field.

And the Bears had a fast receiver in track star Willie Gault, but the instability at quarterback led to Gault catching just 34 passes. Tight end Emery Moorhead caught 29 passes for just under 500 yards. The problems in the passing game were the reason the Bears only ranked 16th in the NFL in scoring.

Chicago opened the season at home against a poor Tampa Bay team and the defense set an immediate tone. They forced eight turnovers, two of them interceptions by aggressive free safety Gary Fencik, and they won 34-14. John Elway brought the Denver Broncos into town next. The Bears dominated a good team. Payton ran for a 72-yard touchdown and led the way to an astonishing 302-53 edge in rush yardage. McMahon found Gault on a 61-yard touchdown pass. It was 27-0 by halftime and that's where it ended.



Ground game dominance continued at Lambeau Field in Green Bay, with Payton going for 110 yards and the team outrushing the Packers 180-32. Red zone problems kept it close though, and it took a 28-yard field from from Bob Thomas to get a 9-7 win.

The first loss came in humiliating fashion at Seattle. The Seahawks, a playoff team from last year and would be again this year, turned the tables on the Bears. It was Seattle who forced six turnovers and scored three touchdowns on defense. Chicago lost 38-9. They lost again at home to Dallas. McMahon was knocked out, the passing game went kaput, and a 283-59 edge in rush yardage was wasted in a

23-14 loss.

Payton was closing in on the all-time rushing mark and it made Bears-Saints on October 7 a must-see game, in a way you wouldn't have said about these two teams until the 2006 NFC Championship Game. Payton carried 32 times for 154 yards and set the record early, with play being stopped. He was in the history books. Now he wanted to get to the playoffs and a 20-7 win helped.

The St. Louis Cardinals presented a potent passing attack and a team that stayed in contention for the playoffs until the season finale. Payton ran for 100 yards and McMahon returned to go 13/23 for 202 yards, as the Bears built a 21-17 lead in the third quarter. But in a rare display of defensive breakdown, they gave up three consecutive touchdowns and lost 38-21.

A return visit to Tampa Bay, then a division rival in the old NFC Central (the Bucs plus the NFC North's four current teams) was just what the doctor ordered. The rush edge was 169-45, McMahon was 12/18 for 219 yards and three touchdowns and the Bears mauled the Buccaneers 44-9.

The defense was dominant again in a home win over a terrible Vikings team. Chicago didn't allow a point until the fourth quarter and won 16-7. More surprising was thoroughly the defense dominated the defending Super Bowl champion Los Angeles Raiders. Payton outrushed Marcus Allen 111-42, the Bears got five turnovers, grabbed an early 14-0 lead and coasted home, 17-6.

Detroit had won the division in 1983, but by the time they came to Chicago on November 18, the Lions were a broken team. Star running back Billy Sims had suffered a career-ending injury and Detroit was on its way to a 4-11-1 season. The Bears enjoyed their customary dominance of the trenches, although the Lions played tough. Chicago had to get two field goals from Thomas in the fourth quarter, one from 52 yards out, to escape 16-14.

The Bears were in complete command of what was a mediocre division that had no other serious playoff contenders. When the Packers lost in Detroit on Thanksgiving, it gave Chicago their first NFC Central crown of the Super Bowl era. The Bears celebrated by crushing Minnesota 34-3.

San Francisco was in command for the #1 seed in the NFC playoffs, but Chicago was still in the hunt with a myriad of NFC East teams for the 2-seed, led by two-time defending NFC champion Washington. But with McMahon down for the count, Chicago lost two straight winnable games against mediocre teams.

A 20-7 loss in San Diego came with Rusty Lisch at quarterback, who threw a Pick-6 in the fourth quarter when the Bears had crossed midfield. A 20-14 loss at home to Green Bay followed. Payton ran for 175 yards and even threw a touchdown pass, as he tried to carry the passing game too, but it wasn't enough. By the time the season finale arrived, Chicago was locked into the #3 seed. The Bears closed the year by crushing Detroit, getting twelve sacks from a total of seven different players and the final was 30-13.

The playoff format of the time was three division champs and two wild-cards (the NFC South did not come into existence until 2002). The Bears got a week off and then traveled to Washington, where the Redskins had won a thrilling finale over the Cardinals to take the NFC East. Oddsmakers anticipated a 49ers-Redskins rematch in the conference championship Game. San Francisco had won on Saturday, and Chicago was a decisive nine-point underdog in the early Sunday afternoon time slot.

Steve Fuller got the call at quarterback, as Ditka looked for anybody who might be able to complete a pass. But Payton would still showcase his arm. With the score tied 3-3 in the second quarter, he tossed a 19-yard touchdown pass to tight end Pat Dunsmore. It was one of two passes that Payton attempted on the day and it gave Chicago a 10-3 lead going into halftime.

Of greater import was the work Payton was doing with his legs, rushing for 104 yards, while counterpart John Riggins mustered only 50 yards. And Fuller stepped and finally made the play everyone in Chicago was desperate for. On the second play of the third quarter, Fuller hit Gault on a 75-yard touchdown strike. The Bears missed the PAT, but their defense had been handed a 16-3 lead.

The Redskins didn't go quietly—they cut the lead to 16-10, before Fuller answered with a 16-yard touchdown pass to Dennis McKinnon. Washington came right back and scored again. It was 23-17 going into the fourth quarter.

Fuller played efficiently, going 9/15 for 211 yards and no interceptions and the fourth quarter settled back into the kind of game Chicago excelled at. The defensive front turned loose and got seven sacks on the day. Three came from Dent and two came from Hampton. Chicago voluntarily took a safety with eight minutes left to avoid punting from the back of their end zone, but the defense made the 23-19 final stand up.

It was Chicago's first NFC Championship Game trip and they were on their way to play 15-1 San Francisco. This was too much to handle. The 49ers' defense, while not as hyped in NFL lore, as Chicago's, was actually better in 1984. And that's before you factor in San Francisco having Joe Montana at quarterback.

The Bears were a (+10) underdog and hung in for a half. A couple big defensive stops inside the 10-yard line kept the score 6-0 at intermission. But the offense was going nowhere. Even though Payton ran for 92 yards, Fuller was sacked nine times. San Francisco gradually pulled away, 23-0.

But Chicago had arrived. And their time was coming.

1985

No one can say the NFL wasn't warned. It was time for the breakthrough and the 1985 Chicago Bears did just that, winning the Super Bowl with a defense that's at the forefront of any conversation about the best D's of all-time.

Chicago's defense was anchored by Singletary, a future Hall of Famer, who won the first of two Defensive Player of the Year honors. The defensive front had two 1st-team All-Pros in McMichael and Dent, the latter recording 17 sacks. Hampton was another Pro Bowl player and the team broke in hefty William "The Refrigerator Perry", and he had five sacks from his defensive tackle spot.

Singletery was joined at linebacker by Pro Bowler Otis Wilson and his 10 ½ sacks. Wilber Marshall, an explosive player in his own right, had six sacks. A future two-time NFL Coach of the Year, Ron Rivera was also a part of the linebacking corps.



The front seven is what is most remembered about this defense, for the relentless pressure brought by colorful defensive coordinator Buddy Ryan. But the secondary was pretty good itself. Dave Duerson was a Pro Bowler at strong safety. Fan favorite Gary Fencik was the free safety Frazier and Fisher rounded out the secondary.

It was a defense for the ages, one that not only did the basics of stopping opponents, but intimidated them with the constant pressure. But the offense of the '85 Bears is often overlooked. The fact that this offense was the second-best in the league in points scored is one of those under-the-radar stats in NFL history.

A healthy McMahon was the key. The quarterback started eleven games, which for him was a display of endurance. McMahon's 57% completion rate and 7.6 yards-per-attempt were solid by the standards of the time and he made the Pro Bowl.

McMahon did it without great talent at wide receiver. Willie Gault had world-class sprinter's speed and could stretch defenses, but was ultimately above-average, with 33 catches and 704 yards. Dennis McKinnon and tight end Emery Moorhead were functionable targets, but not game-changers.

That didn't matter because one of the great game-changers of all-time was in the backfield. Walter Payton was 31-years-old but he was still going strong. Payton ran for over 1,500 yards behind a line led by 1st-team All-Pro tackle Jimbo Covert. Payton also led the team in receptions with 49. He was a first-team All-Pro and in spite of his individual accolades—a league MVP in 1977 and becoming the all-time rushing yards leader in 1984—Walter was desperate for a ring.

The defense didn't look historically great in the opener. The opponent was the worst team in the league, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and quarterback Steve DeBerg threw three first-half touchdowns, while James Wilder rushed for 166 yards. The Bears were in a 28-17 halftime hole.

Frazier turned the tide in the third quarter with a 29-yard interception return for a touchdown and Chicago took over the second half in a 38-28 win. Payton ran for 120 yards and McMahon was 23/34 for 274 yards.

One week later the defense made its real debut. The New England Patriots had a strong running game that they would ultimately ride to the Super Bowl themselves, led by Craig James. Chicago held the Patriots to 27 rush yards. The Bears were up 20-0 late in the game and only a relatively fluky 90-yard touchdown pass to James on a swing pattern cost them a shutout.

Thursday Night Football was not the norm in 1985, so the Bears trip to the Twin Cities to play the Vikings was a special one. McMahon was having his first injury problems and did not start due to a kidney problem. But he would certainly finish.

The Bears did not play well offensively and were down 17-9 in the third quarter. McMahon was summoned in relief. He threw a 79-yard touchdown pass to Gault, and two more TD passes to McKinnon from 25 and 43 yards. McMahon's eight completions went for 236 yards and he delivered a 33-24 win.

Chicago had eliminated the Washington Redskins in the divisional playoffs the year before. This Redskin team wouldn't make the postseason, though they did finish the season 10-6. After spotting the 'Skins a 10-zip lead, the Bears unleashed. Gault took a kickoff 99 yards to the house and the rout was on, 45-10.

A return visit to Tampa Bay was next. Chicago was again sloppy against a terrible team and this time it was the offense. They were down 12-3 at the half, but a 147-27 edge in rushing yardage eventually took over and the Bears won 27-19.

The big test was up next. They would travel to San Francisco, where they had lost the NFC Championship Game the prior year. This was not a great 49ers team—they would go 10-6 and make the playoffs, but weren't dominant. And this game underscored the changing of the guard taking place.

Payton ran for an early touchdown, starting a day where he rushed for 132 yards. The Bears added three field goals in the second quarter and took a 16-0 lead. The defense was locked in—even though the 49ers' own D got a Pick-6 and cut the lead to 16-10, Chicago calmly re-asserted control and won 26-10.

Chicago was now 6-0 and had dismantled both the 49ers and Redskins, who had combined to represent the NFC in the last three Super Bowls. Having established themselves as the team to beat in 1985, the Bears were ready to have some fun.

The mediocre Green Bay Packers came to Soldier Field for Monday Night Football. With the game tied 7-7 in the second quarter, the Bears were on the doorstep of taking the lead. Instead of giving the ball to Payton or fullback Matt Suhey, Ditka inserted Perry into the backfield. The big 340-pounder bowled into the end zone. The legend of "The Refrigerator" was born and Madison Avenue was at least as happy as Bears Nation.

The fact it was a sloppy game—nine combined turnovers—or that Payton had turned in another vintage performance, with 112 yards, or even that the Bears were still undefeated after the 23-7 win, all were dwarfed in news coverage by "The Fridge."

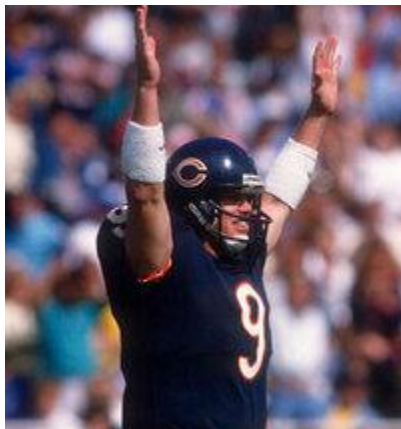
Wilson led the way in a home win over Minnesota, intercepting two passes and returning one to the house. It was part of a five-interception day for the defense and combined with Payton's 118 rush yards, produced an easy 27-0 win.

Chicago went to Green Bay for a quick rematch and the arch-rival Packers looked ready to pull the upset. The Bears trailed 10-7 in the fourth quarter. McMichael made a big play, with a sack for a safety that cut the lead to a point. Chicago was driving again, inside the 5-yard line. Enter The Fridge.

Ditka clearly enjoyed tormenting Green Bay with his new toy because with the money on the table, he slipped the Fridge out of the backfield. He was wide open in the end zone and though Perry hardly looked comfortable on the catch he made it and the Bears won 16-10.

A dominant rushing performance at home against Detroit, with both Payton and Suhey going for 100-plus produced a 24-3 win and gave Chicago a five-game lead in the NFC Central. The division race was basically over. The Bears had a two-game lead on the Los Angeles Rams for the top seed in the NFC, while the Dallas Cowboys and New York Giants were each 7-3.

It set up another statement game opportunity in Dallas, a late afternoon kick for a national audience. And what a statement it was. Dent intercepted a pass on the goal-line for a quick touchdown. Defensive back Mike Richardson brought back another pick 36 yards for a score. It was 17-0 by the second quarter. Payton ran for 132 yards and the result was a 44-0 avalanche that put the Bears on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*.



Another shutout highlighted by defensive touchdowns came with a 36-0 rout of lowly Atlanta. Fencik had a 22-yard interception return and Frazier brought one 32 yards to the house. The Falcons' passing numbers were 3/17 for *sixteen* yards. They had fewer passing yards than pass attempts! Different era or not, this was mind-boggling and the Bears were 12-0.

The nation was abuzz for a Monday Night date in Miami. The Dolphins had won the AFC title in 1984, would win a good AFC East again this season and had one of the top quarterbacks in football in Dan Marino. His quick release gave him a chance to solve "the 46" defense, the Ryan scheme.

Chicago was focused—although the focus was on creating a video, "The Super Bowl Shuffle" that would be released soon thereafter. Even though they sacked Marino six times, the fear of the quarterback's big-play capacity was well-founded. He completed only 14 passes in 27 attempts but they went for 270 yards. Fuller threw two interceptions and the Bears dug a 31-10 halftime hole. McMahon came in, but there was no magic this time. They lost 38-24.

The legacy of the 1972 Miami Dolphins as the only unbeaten team was safe, but the 1985 Chicago Bears would create their own legacy. "The Super Bowl Shuffle" might have been audacious, but it had good intentions—proceeds for Chicago's needy—and it was tremendous fun. The combination of good intentions and good humor mean that someone in today's NFL would undoubtedly quash it immediately.

Chicago was now on the hook with the video—Super Bowl or bust. They beat a subpar Indianapolis Colts team 17-10 thanks to the non-sexy, but effective approach of running the football and playing mistake-free.

McMahon's 215 passing yards led the way for a win over the New York Jets on a Saturday afternoon in the Meadowlands. The Jets needed the win to stay in first place while the Bears had everything clinched, making the 19-6 dismantling all the more impressive. The Bears closed out their 15-1 season with a 37-17 win in Detroit, keyed by seven turnovers, a defensive touchdown from Rivera and a 94-yard kickoff return for Dennis Gentry.

It was time for the playoffs and the first opponent was a team cut in the same mold as the Bears. Bill Parcells was producing a terrific defense for the New York Giants, led by Lawrence Taylor. One year later this same Giant defense would put its own special imprint on NFL history with a Super Bowl title run. But their time was still to come. The first Sunday afternoon in January belonged to the Bears.

The winds were blowing off Lake Michigan and in the first quarter the result was an almost unthinkable play. The Giants were punting deep in their own territory. Punter Sean Landeta received the snap at his own 5-yard line...and completely whiffed. The wind moved the ball in the air and poor Landeta went down swinging. Shawn Gayle recovered for the Bears and scored the gift touchdown.

That was the only score of the first half, but McMahon stepped up in the third quarter. He threw touchdown passes to McKinnon of 23 and 20 yards. It was part of a solid 11/21 for 216 yards and no interceptions day for McMahon.

Meanwhile, Payton was able to grind out 93 yards on 27 carries against the tough New York defense. And Chicago's own D was in playoff form. The forced Phil Simms into an erratic 14/35 for 209 yards game and held shifty running back Joe Morris to 32 yards. The 21-0 score stood up and the Bears were back in the NFC Championship Game.

The best teams of the 1980s in the NFC were either the 49ers or the kings of the East, from the Cowboys to the Redskins to the Giants. 1985 was a different year and the Los Angeles Rams were the #2 seed, led by one of the great running backs of all-time in Eric Dickerson, fresh off an NFL-playoff record 248 yards in a win over Dallas. Chicago was still a 10 ½ point favorite, as the Rams lacked any passing threat to open things up for Dickerson.

Kickoff was early on Sunday afternoon, 12:30 PM ET (it was not until 2003 that the NFL began the practice of starting the earliest conference championship game at 3 PM ET). And the Bears were ready.

McMahon made a rare display of his legs, running 16 yards for a touchdown, and another drive ended with a Butler field goal. It was 10-0 and when the Rams showed poor clock management at the end of the first half and failed to get any points, the game might as well have been called.

The running games were a non-factor, ironic in that two all-time greats in Dickerson and Payton were ineffective. Chicago also held Los Angeles quarterback Dieter Brock to 10/31 for 66 yards. McMahon was the difference—16/25 for 164 yards in an efficient performance. He threw a 22-yard touchdown pass to Gault for a 17-0 lead, and Marshall sealed the game in the fourth quarter with a 52-yard fumble return. Another shutout, this one 24-0 had the Bears in the Super Bowl for the first time.

New England made a Cinderella run through the AFC from the 5-seed, becoming the first team to win three straight road games to reach the Super Bowl. It was a bit of a letdown—a lot of fans had hoped the Raiders, with Marcus Allen would be the opponent. Even more wanted a Chicago-Miami rematch. But the Patriots took out these teams, the 1-2 seeds and Chicago was installed as a healthy 10-point favorite in New Orleans.

There was little pregame discussion of whether the Bears would actually lose the football game. There was more talk centered on whether they could spin a third straight postseason shutout. That went by the boards immediately when McMahon and Payton miscommunicated on a handoff and gave the Patriots an early turnover that resulted in a field goal.

But rather than this series giving hope for New England it almost seemed to underscore how hopeless their task was. The Chicago defense simply forced a quick three-and-out before the field goal and there was absolutely nothing to suggest the Patriots could move the football. And the Bears were about to get started.

Two long drives into the red zone resulted in field goals and a 6-3 lead. Late in the first quarter, Suhey ran from 11 yards out for a 13-3 cushion. Meanwhile, Patriot quarterback Tony Eason had a deer-in-the-headlights look and he would become the only Super Bowl starting QB to not complete a pass, being yanked for Steve Grogan after six incompletions. It didn't matter.

McMahon scored on a two-yard run and Butler kicked another short field goal. It was 20-3 at the half and could have been worse if not for the turnover and the missed red-zone opportunities.



Another QB keeper from McMahon followed by defensive back Reggie Phillips scoring on a 28-yard Pick-6 removed any lingering doubt as to the outcome of this game. McMahon would finish the game 12/20 for 256 yards. Those are numbers that normally make a Super Bowl-winning quarterback the game MVP, but not on a day when the defense is making such a resounding closing statement.

Chicago's D recorded seven sacks and forced six turnovers. They scored on both the Phillips interception and a fourth-quarter safety. Dent finished with 1 ½ sacks and got the honor of game MVP. The final was 46-10.

The only downer was a decision that Ditka would later regret and it was to give the ball to the Fridge on the goal-line for a fourth quarter touchdown, rather than give the great Payton the

chance to score a Super Bowl TD. It was a bad choice, and Payton wasn't happy, but not having a one-yard TD run in a blowout Super Bowl is hardly a knock on a career. Especially not on a night when the Bears outrushed the Patriots 167-7, with a balanced Payton/Suhey tag-team.

The 1985 Chicago Bears earned their place in history. Ryan, so beloved by the defensive players that he was carried off the field along with Ditka, got the head coaching job in Philadelphia. The talk of a dynasty was freely in the air, not just in Chicago, but throughout the NFL.

1986

The '86 Bears were awfully good in their own right, but quarterback instability proved to be their undoing in the end.



Even with Ryan gone, Chicago still played the best defense in the NFL. Singletary, who was 1st-team All-Pro. So was Wilbur Marshall and the third prong of the linebacking corps, Otis Wilson, had eight sacks.

Chicago's front four was ferocious, led by Pro Bowler defensive tackle Steve McMichael on the interior, with Hampton and Dent coming off the edge. The three combined for 29 ½ sacks. And with this kind of pressure coming on the quarterback, the secondary was liberated to be aggressive. Corner Mike Richardson intercepted seven passes and

Duerson made the Pro Bowl.

In 1985, the Bears combined the top-ranked scoring defense in the NFL with the second-best scoring offense. The health of quarterback Jim McMahon, an issue even in the best of times, was a major problem throughout 1986.

McMahon only started six games, and head coach Mike Ditka ran out everyone from Mike Tomczak to Steve Fuller to bringing in Doug Flutie at season's end. Had the year gone on any further, Ditka would have undoubtedly summoned Rick Sutcliffe from the Cubs to start a few games.

But when all else failed, Ditka could always give the ball to Walter Payton. Nearing the end of his career, the Hall of Fame running back enjoyed another stellar season in 1986. He rushed for over 1,300 yards, his 37 catches were second-most on the team and he made the Pro Bowl. Payton ran behind an offensive line anchored by 1st-team All-Pro tackle Jimbo Covert.

Willie Gault, the receiver and former track star, gave the Bears some field-stretching capability and he caught 42 passes for 818 yards. But Gault was the only receiver to really make an impact. The rest of the passing game went to Payton, fullback Matt Suhey and tight end Emory Moorhead. The offense slipped to 13th in the league in points scored.

Chicago opened the season at home with the Cleveland Browns, a team that made significant improvements and reached the AFC Championship Game this season. The Bears lost a fumble in the end zone and spotted the Browns a 7-0 lead. Chicago turned it around behind 113 yards from Payton, a 58-yard Pick-6 from Marshall and won 41-31. But the leaky pass defense and the lack of pressure on the quarterback was an early concern.

Buddy Ryan made a celebrated return to the Windy City in Week 2, and Tomczak made his first start. It would take Ryan until 1988 to get the Eagles winning, but he made the defense tough immediately. Chicago had to grind out a 13-10 overtime win behind 177 rushing yards from Payton.

A Monday Night visit to lowly Green Bay was up next. Chicago hadn't played well in Lambeau Field the year before, trailing into the fourth quarter. They struggled again this year, trailing 12-10 after three quarters. But again, they rallied. Butler hit a 52-yard field goal for the lead. McMichael recorded a sack in the end zone for a needed safety. Fuller got his chance at quarterback and tossed a 42-yard touchdown pass. The Bears won 25-12.

McMahon was healthy for a road game at Cincinnati that would prove to be one of the most impressive displays of the seasons. The Bengals were an improved team that won ten games and the Bears simply dismantled them. McMahon was 13/22 for 211 yards and three touchdowns, including a 53-yard strike to Gault that gave Chicago a 21-0 lead by the second quarter. The defense completely shut down emerging Cincinnati quarterback Boomer Esiason and the final was 44-7.

The Minnesota Vikings, the closest thing Chicago had to competition in the NFC Central, came into Soldier Field next. McMahon was a difference-maker again, going 12/19 for 204 yards. Little-used receiver Keith Ortego caught six passes for 157 yards. Payton ran for 108 yards. The defense sacked Viking quarterback Tommy Kramer seven times, two each from Duerson and McMichael. The result was a 23-0 shutout.

McMahon was erratic the following week against the Houston Oilers (today's Tennessee Titans), but he still made his 13 completions go for 208 yards. Five different defenders were able to sack Warren Moon and the Bears churned out a 20-7 win. But a quick return trip to Minnesota brought an early end to the undefeated season—the defense allowed a couple long TD passes early and with McMahon down for the count again, Chicago had no response. They lost 23-7.

An uninspiring 13-7 win over a poor Detroit Lions team at least put Chicago back in the winning column. Marshall returned a fumble 12 yards for a 1st-quarter touchdown and that was the only time the Bears saw the end zone. McMahon played and was mistake-free, but couldn't get the ball downfield. He would be out again by the following week and when the caliber of competition improved, the Bears got caught again.

A Monday Night visit from the Los Angeles Rams was a rematch of the 1985 NFC Championship Game. Both teams had backup quarterbacks in. Both teams had great running backs, but Payton was not able to get anything going for the third straight week, held to 61

yards. Meanwhile, Eric Dickerson ran for 111 yards. The defense had to do it again and almost did, holding a 17-10 lead in the third quarter. But they surrendered a long touchdown pass and a fourth-quarter field goal that resulted in a 20-17 loss.

Ditka turned to Tomczak at quarterback and the Ohio State product led Chicago to road wins at Tampa Bay and Atlanta. An early 37-yard touchdown pass to Gault got things going against the woeful Buccaneers, while Payton ran for 139 yards in the 23-3 victory. The Falcons were an average team and Tomczak gave them an early Pick-6 that resulted in a 10-0 deficit. The defense held Atlanta to 80 passing yards and Chicago eventually fought its way back for a 13-10 win.

McMahon was back in uniform for a home date with Green Bay on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. In a sloppy game, the Bears survived 12-10 the most important play came when McMahon was sacked by Green Bay's Charles Martin. The Packer defender picked McMahon up and in a blatant cheap shot threw him down hard on his shoulder. The quarterback was finished for the season. Green Bay, even as a bad team had always given Chicago fits. Now a dirty play resulted in the Bears' hopes for a repeat title basically ending.

Tomczak returned to the fold for a home date with the subpar Pittsburgh Steelers. He went 19/30 for 235 yards, but also threw two interceptions. Payton had a hard time finding running room, needing 31 carries to get 90 yards, but he tied the game 10-10 with a fourth-quarter touchdown run and Chicago won in overtime. The running game then completely overwhelmed Tampa Bay, with a balanced attack resulting in a 245-50 rush advantage and producing a 48-14 win.

There were two games left and at 12-2, Chicago had easily salted away the NFC Central. They were also locked into at least one home game for the playoffs. The New York Giants were also 12-2 and would hold the edge on a tiebreaker that came down to common opponents—the Bears loss to the Vikings was the difference in the fight for the #1 seed. Chicago would need to win out and get help.

But the help they really needed was at quarterback and Ditka made a desperation gambit. Two years earlier, Doug Flutie won the Heisman Trophy at Boston College and authored one of the most memorable moments in the history of sports, his desperation pass to Gerald Phelan that beat Miami on the Friday after Thanksgiving.

Flutie's lack of size led the NFL to pass on him and he went to play in Canada. Ditka now decided it was time to turn the keys to the car that was the defending Super Bowl champions over to him. It was an insane decision and it didn't work.

Chicago still beat Detroit on Monday Night, though they trailed 13-3 after three quarters before scoring 13 unanswered points. The season finale in Dallas was meaningless—New York had won on Saturday of the final weekend to clinch the top seed. Flutie's good numbers—8/14 for 152 yards for a 24-10 win over a collapsing team gave some false hope to the Bear faithful.

Just how over his head Flutie was became apparent when the Washington Redskins came to town two weeks later. Chicago had everything going for them—while Washington was an exceptionally good wild-card team at 12-4, they were also beat up after their playoff win over the Rams. With the game on a Saturday, the Redskins were also on a short week. The Bears were a (-7) favorite, but completely imploded.

When Chicago's Dennis Gentry returned the opening kickoff to the Washington 35-yard line, and the Flutie offense responded by going three-and-out it was a bad sign. It got worse. Flutie finished 11/31 for 134 yards and threw two interceptions. The Redskins defense, not worried about the pass, focused on Payton and shut him down. And the Chicago defense finally cracked in the second half.

The Bears led 13-7 at halftime, but gave up 20 points after intermission while doing nothing offensively. The repeat bid ended with a 27-13 loss that was as gloomy for Chicago fans as the weather was on the dank day in the Windy City.

When a team goes 14-2, it's unfair to call the year a disappointment. But if there were ever a time it seemed appropriate to even think such thoughts, it was with the 1986 Chicago Bears. The hopes of a dynasty never got going. This year was the first of three straight seasons that would end with home playoff losses. The Bears of the late 1980s were excellent football teams, but the inability of McMahon to stay healthy cost them a shot at being a dynasty.

1987

In 1987 the Bears won a fourth consecutive division title and were a 2-seed in the playoffs. But they were also a part of an unfortunate string of three consecutive years that ended with home playoff losses and gave a "what might have been" component to this otherwise successful timeframe.



Instability at quarterback continued to be a big problem. Jim McMahon only made six starts (of a possible 12 games due to a players' strike). Head coach Mike Ditka used a first-round draft pick on a quarterback and it's fair to say that Jim Harbaugh has made his mark on the game at all levels. But that would come later. For 1987, Ditka continued to turn to Mike Tomczak, a mediocre veteran who combined average production with poor turnover rates.

Walter Payton had defined not just the offense of the Chicago Bears, but was the face of the franchise and in many ways, the face of NFL running backs. By 1987 he was the league's all-time leader in rush yardage. But he was also at the end of the line at age 33 and struggled to 3.7 yards-per-attempt in 1987, one of the worst YPAs in the league.

Fortunately, this was another spot where Ditka had thought ahead and drafted Neal Anderson out of Florida a year earlier. Anderson split time with Payton and outperformed the legend, ranking fourth in the NFL in yards-per-carry at 4.5 and leading the team with 47 catches.

The fact Anderson led the team in catches and Payton came in second with 33, underscored the problems in the passing game. Chicago had a terrific deep threat in Willie Gault and Dennis McKinnon was a respectable wideout. But there wasn't real depth or consistency with this group and the quarterback instability only made it worse.

What Chicago did have was an offensive line—Jay Hilgenberg was an All-Pro center. Jimbo Covert had been gotten the same honor the year before at left tackle. They led a line that opened enough holes and provided enough pass protection for the Bears to still rank ninth in the NFL in points scored.

And if Chicago was going to be a Top 10 offense then they were going to win a lot of football games. Even though the defense wasn't nearly as dominant as the previous two years they still ranked fourth in the league in points allowed.

Defensive tackle Steve McMichael and linebacker Mike Singletary were each 1st-team All-Pro. Wilbur Marshall was a Pro Bowl linebacker and Dave Duerson got another Pro Bowl nod at strong safety. For some reason Richard Dent was left out of the postseason honors but the outstanding defensive lineman rang up 12 ½ sacks in the shortened schedule.

The season-opener was a high-profile home game with the New York Giants, a battle of the last two Super Bowl champs and both renowned for ferocious defenses. Neither team really played well. The Bears allowed a blocked punt for a touchdown and also gave up a Pick-6. But the Giants would struggle to a losing season this year and Tomczak rallied Chicago with two long touchdown passes, one a 56-yarder to Gault. McKinnon finished it off when he took a punt on his own 6-yard line and ended up with a touchdown return. The Bears won 34-19.

Anderson established himself in the backfield the next week at home against lowly Tampa Bay. He had 16 carries, basically split with Payton who had 15. Anderson rushed for 117 yards while Payton struggled to a 24-yard day. Anderson's running was the difference in a 20-3 win.

After Week 2 there was a players' strike. Unlike 1982, when a strike shut down play for seven weeks, the owners were ready this time. They had replacement players ready to step in. The Week 3 games would be canceled, but for the three weeks after that it was replacements who took the field in the National Football League.

Mike Hohensee, a product of the Minnesota Golden Gophers, got the call at quarterback. The Bears got blowout wins over the Eagles and Vikings in the first two weeks of replacement football. They were also running the football, overwhelming the Viking replacements for 185 rush yards behind former BYU running back Lake Hiemuli and Anthony Mosley.

Prior to the final replacement game on October 18 against New Orleans, Hohensee removed himself due to an injury. Ditka was furious and it cost the quarterback a chance to stay with the

regulars when they came back. He had a backup by the name of Sean Payton—wouldn't it have been ironic had Payton gotten an NFL start against the Saints? But Ditka brought in Steve Bradley who wasn't as successful. Chicago lost a home game 19-17, but they had at least survived this bizarre chunk of the schedule as the regulars returned.

McMahon was healthy for the trip to Tampa Bay, although the defense was rusty. The Bears allowed a couple quick TD passes and dug themselves a 20-0 hole. But a missed extra point would be huge. Chicago eventually got four turnovers and McMahon opened up with a 17/24 for 195 yards performance. His 6-yard touchdown flip to Anderson pulled out a 27-26 win.

An almost identical script played out the next week at home against another bad team, the Kansas City Chiefs. Two quick touchdown passes stuck the Bears in a 14-0 hole. Gentry turned the tide this time with an 88-yard kickoff return for a touchdown. Then McMahon got warmed up, finishing 23/34 for 287 yards and three TDs in a 31-28 win.

McMahon continued to play well in Green Bay, but Chicago continued to struggle with poor opposition. It took a 52-yard field goal from Kevin Butler to pull out a 26-24 win. The flirtations with danger caught up with them the next week in Denver. On a Monday Night against the team that had reached the Super Bowl the previous year and would do it again in January, the Bears fell 31-29. McMahon threw for 311 yards, three touchdowns and had his team up 29-21 in the fourth quarter. The proud defense couldn't contain John Elway as he rallied the Broncos.

The loss seemed to wake Chicago up and they came home to pummel Detroit on the ground, enjoying a 178-30 edge in rush yardage. Defensive back Shaun Gayle added a 20-yard interception return for a score and McMahon found McKinnon from 31 yards out in a 30-10 romp. The Bears closed November with another win over the Packers. Chicago again futzed around for a while and it was tied 10-10 at the half, but the defense locked in and they won 23-10. Ironically, the final points of this game were again a 52-yard field goal by Butler.

December was at hand and the division-rival Vikings were also playoff-bound. What they were not was a viable contender for the title of the old NFC Central. Even though Minnesota would get on a January run, they would barely scrape into the postseason. Chicago had firm command of the division race when they went to the old Metrodome on December 6.

The Bears won 30-24, but it came at a price. The defense continued to be leaky, giving up 300 passing yards. But more important is that McMahon was knocked out. Tomczak played well in relief, going 6/12 for 96 yards, hitting Dennis Gentry on a 38-yard touchdown pass and rallying the team from a 24-20 deficit. But no one in Chicago relished going into another playoff year without McMahon.

A showdown game awaited in San Francisco on Monday Night. The Bears and 49ers were both 10-2 and the winner had the inside track to the #1 seed in the NFC playoffs. Chicago proved to have bigger problems. Tomczak threw four interceptions and the result was a 41-0 humiliation in prime-time.

Turnovers were a persistent problem all year. Chicago's turnover ratio of 24-44 was the second-worst in the league. And it didn't get better at home against playoff-bound Seattle. The Bears turned it over five times, Tomczak was sacked four times and even though the game was tied 14-14 in the third quarter, it got away from Chicago in a 34-21 loss.

When Chicago took the field the next week in the Los Angeles Coliseum against a weak Raiders team there was a home game at stake. If the Bears won, they got the 2-seed. If they lost, that home game in the divisional round would go to the Washington Redskins.

It was an ugly game and no one found the end zone. But Payton dug deep and showed the heart of a legend, grinding out 82 yards on 20 carries. It was enough to help Chicago scrape out a 6-3 win.

For the third time in four years the Bears played the Redskins in the divisional playoffs. In 1984, Chicago had announced their arrival as a true elite team when they won on the road against the then two-time defending NFC champs. In 1986 the Redskins got payback when they came to Soldier Field and ended the Bears' repeat bid.

The return of McMahon for this game buoyed Chicago hopes. But he didn't play well in the 4-degree weather. Even though the Bears outrushed the Redskins 110-72 and built a 14-0 lead in the second quarter, McMahon threw three interceptions. Combined with a special teams breakdown that allowed a punt return for a score, it added up to a 21-17 loss.

Payton played well in defeat, gaining 85 yards on 18 carries. But his tremendous career came to a surprise end. The fact the Vikings had upset the 49ers the day before—meaning the Washington-Chicago winner would host the NFC Championship Game—made it even more difficult to swallow. As the Redskins went on to reach the Super Bowl and then rout the Broncos, it was fair to think the Bears might have done exactly the same thing had they only survived this game.

The Bears were an awfully good football team in the latter part of the 1980s but there were missed opportunities. None more so than in 1987.

1988

It was still all about defense in the Windy City, and the Bears ranked first in the NFL in points allowed. They were led by Singletary, who won his second Defensive Player Of The Year award. Another Pro Bowler was Duerson, whose subsequent death has made him a focal point in the modern NFL's focus on concussions and player safety.

Singletary and Duerson were the only Pro Bowlers on defense, but that's misleading. The core talent of the '85 team was still on hand. Across the defensive front was McMichael, Hampton and Dent, who combined for 31 ½ sacks. The front seven drove the defensive greatness, but corner Vestee Jackson intercepted eight passes

Offensively, the Bears were mediocre, only ranking 18th in the league in scoring, due primarily to McMahon's continued injury problems. What the Bears could do was run the football. They had Pro Bowl talent up front, in left guard Mark Bortz and center Jay Hilgenberg, the best in the league at his position.

Neal Anderson ran behind this group for over 1,110 yards, and the steady running game worked in tandem with the defensive greatness to enable Chicago to consistently control tempo.

The defense and running game quickly put themselves in display for the home fans against the Miami Dolphins. The Bears shut down Dan Marino and the Miami offense, Anderson rushed for 123 yards and two early touchdowns, and Chicago won 34-7.



Then they won a harder-fought game against the Indianapolis Colts, who had won the AFC East the prior year. The Bears held Colts' quarterback Jack Trudeau to four completed passes and ground out a 17-13 win.

Chicago's key rival in the NFC Central was the Minnesota Vikings. The Vikes had reached the playoffs as a wild-card in 1987, then pulled two road upsets in the playoffs. Their postseason success contrasted sharply with the Bears and Minnesota was a trendy pick to make the next step in 1988.

Minnesota backed up the hype in Soldier Field. McMahon threw three interceptions, while Viking counterpart Tommy Kramer hooked up with receiver Anthony Carter to open the scoring and then to close a 31-7 rout.

The Bears bounced back by going to lowly Green Bay and dominating the trenches on both sides, beating the Packers 24-6. Then Chicago hosted the undefeated Buffalo Bills and made a big statement. McMahon played his best game of the year, going 20/27 for 260 yards. He hit Ron Morris for a 63-yard touchdown pass early in the game, and the defense held the Bills to zero rushing yards. The result was a 24-3 win.

McMahon missed the next game, a road trip to a bad Detroit Lions team. Mike Tomczak played in his stead, and led an efficient 24-7 win. McMahon returned the following week and led another quietly efficient win over a bad team, this time 17-7 against the Dallas Cowboys.

The Monday Night stage and the San Francisco 49ers were next, and the Chicago defense was ready for prime-time. They held Joe Montana to 13/29 for 168 yards. In a low-scoring game, the Bears played a clean game, committing just two penalties to the 49ers' ten. Neither team scored in the second half and Chicago won 10-9.

A letdown happened the next week against a decent New England Patriots team on the road. Doug Flutie, once the backup for McMahon here in Chicago, had his revenge. He threw an 80-yard touchdown pass in the first quarter, and with Tomczak again pressed into duty, the Bears had no offense. They also didn't defend the run and lost 30-7.

It seemed like a visit from another bad division rival, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, provided little reason for excitement. But leading up to the game, Ditka suffered a mild heart attack and was hospitalized. He was allowed to return as a “consultant” for the game, and watched Tomczak throw for 269 yards in a 28-10 win.

Ditka returned to full-time coaching duty the next week in Washington, where the defending Super Bowl champion Redskins had their backs to the wall. The Bears made life worse in the nation’s capital. They feasted on quarterback Mark Rypien for four interceptions. They held the potent Redskin ground attack to 28 yards. And they won the game easily, 34-14.

Anderson continued to churn out yardage in systematic dispatchings of Tampa Bay and Green Bay. The division title was coming into grasp, and the Bears had the opportunity to clinch prior to a season-ending Monday Night game in Minnesota.

Those efforts took a setback though, in another Monday Night game—this one a road loss to the Los Angeles Rams. Ditka tried Jim Harbaugh as a replacement for McMahon, but the Rams rolled to a 23-3 win.

Harbaugh, who would eventually become the Bears’ regular quarterback, got the call again for the injured McMahon in the penultimate game of the year at home with Detroit. A win here clinched for the Bears. It wasn’t pretty—Chicago trailed 12-10 in the fourth quarter—but the young quarterback got it done. Harbaugh completed 18/26 for 174 yards, made no mistakes and eventually, kicker Kevin Butler booted a field goal to win it. And then it turned out that Minnesota had inexplicably lost to Green Bay for the second time this season anyway.

The Bears not only had the NFC Central wrapped, but they were locked into the #1 seed for the NFC, so the season-ending 28-27 loss in Minnesota didn’t matter. The road to the Super Bowl went through Soldier Field in the NFC.

Three years after leaving Chicago, Buddy Ryan had the Eagles in the playoffs. Fittingly, they were on their way to Soldier Field for the NFC divisional round.

It was a game everyone wanted to watch, but a wave of fog settled on Chicago, and watching was almost an impossibility. The game became known as the “Fog Bowl”. Tomczak got the start at quarterback, Ditka preferring a veteran in the playoffs. Tomczak threw a 64-yard touchdown pass to Dennis McKinnon, and the Bears built a 17-6 lead at the half.

Red-zone defense was the ultimate key to the game. The Eagles moved the ball, even in the fog, and Chicago surrendered 407 passing yards to Randall Cunningham. But three different times, the Bears clamped down in close and forced field goal attempts. It was the difference in a 20-12 win.

The victory was Chicago’s first playoff win since the Super Bowl of three years ago, but they needed one more if the vindication was to be complete. And it would be Montana and the 49ers coming back into town.

If fog was the story of the first playoff game, the wind and cold defined this NFC Championship Game. The winds whipped at 29mph off Lake Michigan. It was the 49ers who handled it. Montana threw two early touchdown passes to Jerry Rice, the Bears never got anything going, and the result was an ugly 28-3 loss.

The 1988 Chicago Bears were an excellent team, and the fact the 49ers not only won this year's Super Bowl, but the following season as well, does lend perspective to the NFC Championship Game disaster that wasn't necessarily available at the time.

But there's always been a feeling that the Bears of Mike Ditka missed an opportunity in not winning—or least reaching—more than one Super Bowl. The shortcoming of 1988 was the apex of that disappointment, and Ditka never again advanced this far in the playoffs.

1989

The collapse of the 1989 Chicago Bears came as a surprise, but perhaps it shouldn't have. The '89 Bears started three rookies on the defensive side of the ball. All three proved to be at least decent players—defensive tackle Trace Armstrong, linebacker John Roper and corner Donnell Woolford. But it introduced considerable inexperience into the unit that was the focal point of the Bears' success.

Chicago still got a great year from Mike Singletary, as the middle linebacker again made 1st-team All-NFL. But Singletary was the only Pro Bowl player on a defense that ended up a poor 20th in the league in points allowed.

Offensively, the Bears were pretty good in spite of what was now familiar instability at quarterback. Mike Tomczak got eleven starts and Jim Harbaugh the other five. Both were mistake-prone and collectively, finished with a TD/INT ratio of 21-25. Even in an era not as friendly to passing as ours is today, this was pretty bad.

What Chicago could do was run the football. Neal Anderson was in his third year as the starter since taking the baton from the legendary Walter Payton in 1987. Anderson ran for nearly 1,300 yards. Jay Hilgenberg anchored the offensive line and was 1st-team All-Pro at center. The Bear running attack was enough to spearhead an offense that ended 10th in the NFL in points scored.

The season opened with a high-profile home game against the Cincinnati Bengals, who had come within 34 seconds of winning the Super Bowl in 1988. Both teams had high hopes again this year and the game did not disappoint. Neither did the Bears—Anderson rushed for 146 yards and Tomczak's 20-yard touchdown pass to tight end James Thornton was the difference in a 17-14 win.

Another big game at Soldier Field was on deck in Week 2. The Minnesota Vikings had been in the playoffs in both 1987 and 1988 and with a talented defense, most observers were waiting for them to step and dethrone the Bears in the NFC Central. The fact the Vikes were a (-1.5) road favorite with Chicago coming off a big win shows how much respect Minnesota had.

The Bears put the challengers right back in their place. The game was tight and physical for three quarters, with Chicago holding a 10-7 lead. Then the floodgates unleashed. The Bears exploded for four touchdowns in the fourth quarter alone. Lemuel Stinson's Pick-6 made him one of four Chicago players to intercept Viking quarterback Wade Wilson. The 38-7 win sent a clear message that this division still belonged to Ditka's team.

A third straight home game awaited against a weak Detroit Lions team and the Bears kept rolling. Tomczak went 17/25 for 302 yards and even though the Lions had a rookie runner named Barry Sanders, Anderson was the most productive back on the field. He went for 116 yards in an easy 47-27 win.

Yet another marquee game was up in Week 4, this one on Monday Night in Philadelphia. The Bears forced six turnovers, including intercepting Randall Cunningham four times. Defensive tackle Richard Dent recorded three sacks. Chicago built a 20-3 lead, saw it cut to 20-13 in the fourth quarter and then sealed the game when Tomczak threw 36 yards to Thornton.

To say there was no sign of any trouble in Chicago would be an understatement—the Bears were 4-0, were up two games in the NFC Central, and had won three showcase games, any one of which would have been enough to validate the season's opening quarter. The Bears looked like the best team in football.

The city of Chicago was juiced up on the second weekend of October. Not only were the Bears rolling, but the Cubs were in the National League Championship Series and playing out in San Francisco. The Bears suffered a letdown against a lousy Tampa Bay team, losing 42-35 and the Cubbies lost three straight to the Giants and never got the series back to Wrigley.

From the football perspective, it didn't seem like a turning point—more like an understandable letdown after spending all of September playing pressure-cooker games. When the Bears hosted a playoff-bound Houston Oilers team and took a 28-19 lead into the fourth quarter, it seemed like order was about to be restored. But six turnovers did Chicago in, Warren Moon led Houston to a pair of touchdowns and the Bears lost 33-28.

A trip to Cleveland for Monday Night football did nothing to halt the slide. Harbaugh and Tomczak both played and neither performed well, negating a decisive edge in rush yardage. The Browns of the late 1980s were a good team and the '89 team made the AFC Championship Game. The Bears lost this one 27-7.

It was time for some real urgency with yet another playoff team, the Los Angeles Rams, coming into Chicago. The Bears again won the battle in the trenches—Anderson ran for 80 yards, while the Rams' normally productive runner Greg Bell was held to 32. Harbaugh came on in relief of Tomczak and played well, going 10/13 for 157 yards. The Bears took a game that was 3-3 at the half and methodically churned out a 20-10 win.

The glow of September might have been gone, but Chicago was still in good shape. They were still 5-3, had played through a brutally tough schedule and still the safest bet to win the division. Especially with a game at Green Bay coming up.

NFL fans conditioned to Packer excellence over the last thirty years—especially against the Bears—wouldn't recognize the world of 1989, where Green Bay was usually inept and Ditka owned this rivalry. The '89 Packers were 4-4, but against a significantly weaker schedule than what the Bears had seen. So it was no surprise that in this game Chicago would win the rush yardage battle, 133-69, the turnover margin 2-zip and get five sacks, two of them from Roper.

What was a surprise is that they couldn't finish Green Bay off and Chicago clung to a 13-7 lead late in the game. The Packers faced a fourth down on the Bear 14-yard line. What happened next is a play that lives in Bears' infamy.

Chicago fans insist that Green Bay quarterback Don Majikowski was over the line of scrimmage before throwing the winning touchdown pass. How insistent are Bears fans? The team media guide *to this day* has an asterisk next to the result—a 14-13 win for the Pack. I think the officials got the call right and that, at minimum, it was close enough that the Windy City could finally let this one. But then, I'm originally from Wisconsin and though not a Packer fan, I was sympathetic to their cause.

The Bears took out their anger on the Pittsburgh Steelers, another playoff-bound team in an impressive 20-0 road win. The rushing margin in this one was a thunderous 203-54 and with a revenge game against lowly Tampa Bay up next, Chicago could really reclaim some momentum.

Instead, the Buccaneers came north as an (-11) underdog and stunned Chicago 32-31. Four turnovers helped put the Bears in a 29-17 hole. Harbaugh appeared to save the day, connecting with Wendell Davis on touchdowns from 26 and 52 yards. But the defensive problems again surfaced, with the Bucs driving for a field goal and the win.

A Redskins-Bears game in the 1980s was must-see television. The teams met three times in four years in the playoffs. With Chicago at 6-5 and Washington at 5-6, both teams were at risk of missing the postseason and this late afternoon kick with Pat Summerall and John Madden—then the top broadcast team in the NFC—on the Sunday after Thanksgiving--was no exception.

Only the Bears essentially didn't show up in old RFK Stadium. They were carved up by Mark Rypien, who threw for 400 yards and the final was an embarrassing 38-14. The strength of the rest of the NFC realistically eliminated Chicago from wild-card contention, but they were still only a game back in the Central Division race.

That made Sunday Night Football in the Twin Cities a must-have game. The Bears again turned in a poor game, with Tomczak going 13/33 for 180 yards. The 27-16 final was never really competitive. And the free-fall kept going.

Chicago lost to Detroit 27-17. A visit from Green Bay was a cruel reminder of how the two teams had taken opposite paths out of the controversial finish in Lambeau Field—the Packers were coming on strong and were the team battling the Vikings for supremacy in the Central. Chicago put up a little resistance, turning the ball over five times in a 40-28 loss. The season ended the

next week in San Francisco against the eventual Super Bowl champion 49ers—again the Bears turned it over five times and lost 26-0 to a team that already had the 1-seed clinched.

Chicago's 6-10 season was a shock to the system, but the good news for Windy City sports fans is this—it was an aberration, not the onset of a pattern. The end of the 1989 season was just a bizarre sideshow in the story that is the Mike Ditka era of Chicago Bears history.

1990

The 1990 Chicago Bears came into the season looking to show they were still the same team who had dominated the old NFC Central from 1984-88. Ditka handed the reins to Harbaugh and the Bears reasserted themselves in 1990.

Harbaugh had a good offensive line in front of him, anchored by Pro Bowlers Mark Bortz and Jay Hilgenberg, to go along with a quality veteran left tackle in Jimbo Covert. Neal Anderson ran behind them for a 1,000-yard Pro Bowl season and Harbaugh was an effective enough manager for this offense to rank 10th in the league in 1990.

Defense was what defined the Chicago Bears in the Ditka Era though, and it was the defense that had unexpectedly failed the team in 1989, dipping to 20th in what was then a 28-team NFL. Muscle in the trenches brought them back. Richard Dent got twelve sacks at defensive tackle and made the Pro Bowl. Trace Armstrong added ten sacks of his own and the great middle linebacker Mike Singletary delivered another Pro Bowl campaign. The defense returned to form and ranked ninth in 1990.

The Bears won their first three games and two of them came over the Green Bay Packers and Minnesota Vikings, who had battled for the division title the year before. Chicago went to Lambeau Field in Week 2, forced five turnovers and won 31-13. The Bears hosted the Vikings a week later and relied on a balanced running attack from Anderson and fullback Brad Muster to muscle out a 19-16 win.

Those games set the tone for the NFC Central race, as Green Bay and Minnesota both fell by the wayside quickly. Chicago rolled on to a 9-1 start that included a couple more wins against teams whose ship the Bears were basically passing in the night.

The Rams had been a playoff perennial in the 1980s and the Bears were only a two-point favorite on Sunday Night in Soldier Field for Week 6. Harbaugh went 18/25 for 248 yards and led a 38-9 rout. Denver had gone to three Super Bowls in the previous four years behind John Elway. Chicago went to old Mile High Stadium and won 16-13 in overtime, behind six sacks of Elway and 110 yards rushing by Anderson. Los Angeles and Denver faded this season and Chicago was one of the teams taking their place at the table.

In spite of being 9-1, the Bears had a playoff problem. The San Francisco 49ers and New York Giants were both undefeated. Furthermore, 1990 was the first year the postseason expanded

from five teams per conference to six—meaning that the 3-seed Chicago was in would have to play a first-round game for the first time.

After a blowout loss in Minnesota, Chicago clinched the division on December 2 when Anderson caught a 50-yard touchdown pass in overtime to beat the Lions at home, and then the Packers fell later that night. But any hopes for a bye took a big hit, when the Bears lost 10-9 to the Redskins in spite of intercepting Mark Rypien five times.

The regular season ended on a skid, with four losses in the final six games, but the biggest loss was that Harbaugh separated his shoulder in Detroit on December 16 and was lost for the year.

Mike Tomczak was in at quarterback and Chicago had an easy playoff draw in the first round, getting New Orleans who had stumbled in at 8-8. The game was ugly, but the Bears controlled the line of scrimmage. Anderson for 110 yards, the Saints couldn't get their own running game going and with over 37 minutes of possession time, Chicago won 16-6.

They went to the Meadowlands as a seven-point underdog against the Giants, who had also lost their quarterback when Phil Simms went down. Jeff Hostetler was a more able backup though and New York was better than Chicago at the power running and ball-control game. The Bears rushed for 27 yards and lost 31-3.

1990 was still a comeback year and the message was sent that the NFC Central was still Mike Ditka's backyard. The Bears had one more playoff trip in them in 1991 before this era in franchise history ran out of steam.

1991

The 1991 Chicago Bears were Ditka's final playoff team in the Windy City. Mike Singletary was now 33-years-old, but still good enough to be 1st-team All-Pro in 1991. He was joined by a young pass-rushing linebacker in John Roper, who got eight sacks .

Up front, Chicago was still led by holdovers from the '85 championship team, including Steve McMichael and Richard Dent, who combined for almost twenty sacks. The Bears ranked ninth in the NFL in points allowed.

Whatever you think of the love-him-or-hate-him persona that Jim Harbaugh has since developed as a head coach, there's no disputing he was a mediocre quarterback—at best. Jimmy H ranked in the lower half of the league in completion percentage, yards-per-attempt and interception percentage. That was in spite of having two pretty decent receivers, in deep threat Wendell Davis and Tom Waddle, who worked secondaries underneath.

Chicago also got a Pro Bowl year from Neal Anderson, even though he missed three games. Brad Muster missed five games, but was a capable backup when available. Both players could catch passes out of the backfield and the offensive line was anchored by seven-time Pro Bowl center Jay Hilgenberg, who was still going strong. But the subpar play at quarterback left the Bears ranking 14th in a 28-team league for points scored.

The season opened with a late afternoon kick against the Minnesota Vikings. Bears defensive back Markus Paul picked off two passes to key a 10–6 win for the home crowd. Chicago then went to lowly Tampa Bay. They turned the ball over four times, but the defense made up for it with eight sacks, the majority coming from Roper, Dent and McMichael in a 21-20 escape.

Chicago's offense again bogged down at home against the New York Giants, who had won the Super Bowl in 1990, but would struggle and miss the playoffs this year with Bill Parcells in retirement. After taking a 13-0 lead, the Bears gave up 17 straight points. Anderson had only rushed for 15 yards. But the running back broke through in the fourth quarter, with a 42-yard touchdown jaunt to win it.

Another visit from a New York team came when the Jets arrived for Monday Night Football. This time it was Harbaugh's turn to deliver. He threw for 303 yards, with Davis and Waddell combining to catch seventeen passes in a 19-13 overtime win. Chicago was 4-0 and riding high, but two red-hot teams were ahead on the schedule, in the Buffalo Bills and Washington Redskins.

The Bills & Redskins would end up meeting in this year's Super Bowl and while the Bears hung in better than most teams would, they lacked the firepower to win games like these. They only trailed 7-6 at the half in Buffalo, but the failure to run the ball meant that the dam eventually broke against the Bills' potent offense in a 35-20 loss. Chicago would outplay Washington at home, but three Harbaugh interceptions were their doom in a 20-7 defeat.

A Thursday Night game at lowly Green Bay came following a bye week, and with the winds gusting at 20mph in Lambeau Field, the Bears won 10-zip. Ten days later came the best win of the year, an important road game at New Orleans, who was another division leader in the NFC. Even though Harbaugh was putrid—5/22 for 61 yards, Chicago won the rushing battle 142-51 and pulled out a 20-17 win.

Detroit had emerged as the principal challenger for this year's NFC Central race. The Lions came into Soldier Field and led 10-6 in the third quarter, before Harbaugh opened up. He threw a 22-yard touchdown pass to Davis for the lead and an eight-yard strike to Davis to seal the 20-10 win. Chicago kept rolling through divisional opponents with a 34-17 win at Minnesota, keyed by 178 rush yards and a strong fourth quarter that blew open a close game.

Anderson was missing the following week in Indianapolis, but the Colts were horrible and Muster picked up the slack with 101 rush yards. Harbaugh went 18/32 for 287 yards and tossed a pair of touchdowns in the third quarter of a 31-17 win.

Chicago was riding high at 9-2, well on pace to win another division title and secure a first-round bye in the playoffs. Until the final two games of November. The Bears blew a 13-3 lead in the third quarter against Dan Marino's Miami Dolphins and lost in overtime, 16-13. More damaging was a Thanksgiving Day visit to Detroit. Harbaugh threw four interceptions in a 16-6 loss.

The Bears & Lions were now each 9-4. Chicago held the tiebreaker thanks to a better divisional record—and they also had the tiebreaker on the 9-4 Saints in the race for the 2-seed, but any room for error was now gone.

Visits from two bad divisional rivals were just what the doctor ordered. Harbaugh went 16/25 for 209 yards and two touchdowns in an easy 27-13 win over Green Bay. The running game rolled the following Saturday afternoon over Tampa, piling up 182 rush yards in a 27-0 win. Chicago just needed one more win to lock up a week off in the playoffs and then a home game in the divisional round.

The finale would be on Monday Night in San Francisco, where the 49ers were going to miss the playoffs, but were also a hot team coming down the stretch after an injury-riddled year. The Bears hoped to get some help on Sunday with Detroit visiting Buffalo. But the Bills were resting a number of starters, having already clinched homefield advantage and the Lions won in overtime.

It turned out the beginning of the end of the Ditka era began right here. Chicago wasn't respected, even in a must-win spot, and were a five-point underdog to the 49ers. It turned out that was generous. The Bears trailed 24-0 by halftime and lost 52-14.

In the following Sunday's wild-card round, they hosted a rising force in Jimmy Johnson's Dallas Cowboys. Chicago was able to hold on to the ball for long drives, ending up with over 37 minutes of possession time. But they made every big mistake. Two drives to the doorstep of the goal-line resulted in only three points. They had a punt blocked. Harbaugh threw a couple interceptions, while the young Cowboys made no mistakes. The Bear season ended with a 17-13 loss.



It wasn't apparent at the time that the era was over. Chicago still started the 1992 season with four wins in the first seven games and were in the playoff conversation. But they collapsed and lost eight of their last nine. Ditka and the organization parted ways after the '92 campaign.

The Bears have had some good teams since then, notably making a Super Bowl trip in 2006 under Lovie Smith. But the franchise has never approached the sustained success of the Ditka Era that came to an effective end in 1991.