



## **MARTY'S CHIEFS**

**1989-97 In Kansas City**



### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1989, the Kansas City Chiefs had been an irrelevant franchise for nearly two decades. They had just a lone playoff appearance in 1986 to show for their efforts. Even that playoff year had an “out of nowhere” feel to it and the Chiefs promptly faded right back into obscurity.

Meanwhile, Marty Schottenheimer was making his reputation in Cleveland. He coached the last consistently successful era of Browns football. Marty’s Cleveland teams made the playoffs each year from 1985-88, reached the AFC Championship Game twice and played iconic games against the Denver Broncos and John Elway.

In short, Marty was establishing himself as a coach who could win and also one that seemed to have a dark cloud over his head when the playoffs arrived. Both of those traits would follow him to Kansas City.

I’ve always focused more on the former--the consistent winning and less about the January heartbreak. As a non-Kansas City fan, those Chiefs teams Schottenheimer produced were some of favorites of all-time to watch. They had one of the game’s great outside linebackers, the late Hall of Famer Derrick Thomas. They ran the football. They overcame what was often pedestrian quarterback play with intelligent play and a good system.

All of which is the long way to say they were well-coached. With an uncanny eye for coaching talent, Marty brought names like Bill Cowher, Tony Dungy and Mike McCarthy through the

system and laid the groundwork for all three men to become head coaches and get the Super Bowl ring that always eluded their mentor.

Each season from 1989-97 has an individual game-by-game narrative published on TheSportsNotebook.com. Those nine articles have been pulled together for this download and edited to eliminate the most obvious redundancies.

One of those redundancies that was eliminated was a historical explanation that most readers probably already know, but here it is anyway--in the NFL alignment prior to 2002, each conference was only three divisions and for most of those years they were three wild-card berths. Knowing that will give proper context to the description of the race for playoff spots. And the Seattle Seahawks were in the AFC West, along with the division's four current teams.

*Marty's Chiefs* takes you back to a different time in the NFL. Let's start the ride...

## 1989

Schottenheimer's first team established a clear team identity, nearly snuck into the playoffs and set the tone for an eight-year run of success.

Defense was the calling card. The secondary was already one of the league's best. Albert Lewis was a first-team All-NFL corner while Kevin Ross was a Pro Bowler on the other side. Deron Cherry at safety was coming off a run of six straight Pro Bowl years. The defensive front included ends Neil Smith and Leonard Griffin who could get pressure off the edge in a four-man front.

Furthermore, the Chiefs used the fourth overall pick in the draft on Derrick Thomas, an outside linebacker from Alabama. Thomas won Defensive Rookie of the Year, ended up in the Hall of Fame and was the focal point of the Kansas City defense until his untimely death in an offseason car accident in February of 2000.

The Chiefs ranked eighth in the NFL in points allowed and covered for a below average offense. Steve DeBerg was the primary quarterback at age 35. But "Marty-Ball" as developed in Cleveland in the previous five years and would come to be known as here, was more about the running game. And the Chiefs had one of the best in their backfield.

Christian Okoye was brute strength personified, a physical specimen who was a freakish combination of size, speed and strength. In 1989, despite a mediocre offensive line, Okoye ran for nearly 1,500 yards, won the rushing title and made 1<sup>st</sup>-team All-Pro.

For the first half of the schedule, the 1989 edition of the Kansas City Chiefs looked a lot like their recent predecessors. The Chiefs played four noteworthy opponents—Denver (eventual AFC champ), Cincinnati (defending AFC champ), Pittsburgh (playoff team) and two games against the Los Angeles Raiders (contended to the final week of the season). Kansas City split with the Raiders and lost the other three.

Worse, the Chiefs lost decisively in Week 3 at San Diego. The Chargers were a bad team and a 21-6 loss didn't suggest Marty was going to change much, at least not quickly. Kansas City did get a road win at mediocre Seattle and took advantage of a home date with the hideous Dallas Cowboys to keep their overall record a respectable 3-5 at the halfway point of the season.

Signs of life started to show when Seattle made its return trip to Kansas City. Okoye ran for 126 yards while the defense shut down the Seattle backfield of Curt Warner and John L. Williams in a 20-10 win.

Kansas City lost again to Denver, this time at home, but the improvement from the two-touchdown defeat of Week 1 was striking. Okoye missed the game with a thigh bruise and the Chiefs allowed a defensive touchdown. They still kept John Elway under wraps and were tied 13-13 late in the game before Elway flipped a shovel pass to Steve Sewell that gained thirty yards and set up the winning field goal.

Okoye came back for Marty's return to Cleveland the following week. The Browns would extend the winning Schottenheimer had given them one year past his departure and they reached another AFC Championship Game in 1989. Kansas City fought them to a draw. In a sloppy game marked by eight combined turnovers and 22 combined penalties, it ended 10-10.

The Chiefs were still 4-6-1, but the win over Seattle combined with excellent fights given to the AFC's two best teams in Denver and Cleveland, gave the people of Kansas City a glimmer of hope.

The Houston Oilers were on their way to the playoffs when they came to Kansas City on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. If the previous three weeks had shown a flicker of life, the flame now burst into full view. The Chiefs shut down future Hall of Fame quarterback Warren Moon, holding him to 99 yards passing. Griffin finished with 2 ½ sacks. Wide receiver Stephon Paige caught seven balls for 114 yards and the result was a shocking 34-0 blowout.

Okoye pounded away against Miami, going for 148 yards in a 26-21 win. The Chiefs were now at .500. While the Broncos had pulled away from the rest of the AFC West, the remainder of the AFC playoff picture was a muddled mess. Kansas City had a shot.

Two surging upstarts met in Lambeau Field, as the Chiefs visited the surprising Packers. It was Kansas City who kept it going. The defense shut down the great wide receiver Sterling Sharpe. DeBerg played one of his best games of the season, going 15/19 for 203 yards. Okoye muscled his way to 131 more yards and KC had another surprisingly easy win, this one 21-3.

The playoffs were firmly in sight as they hosted the Chargers. But they lost 20-13, as San Diego's Marion Butts, rather than Okoye, was the big back who piled up yardage. Two losses to the worst team in the AFC West were too much to overcome.

The playoff race was still packed and the Chiefs had some hope in the final week. They knocked off the Dolphins 27-24 on a late Nick Lowery field goal amidst gusting winds in South Beach. But

the previous night, Cleveland had defeated Houston, taking away the surest path Kansas City had to get in.

Ironically, it was Schottenheimer's old team that kept him out of the playoffs this season. The playoffs expanded one year later to six teams per conference. It was a year too late for the 1989 Kansas City Chiefs, who were in the 6-spot in the AFC.

But the Chiefs had finished the season strong and could hope for better days ahead. And those days were coming, as they made the playoffs in seven of the next eight years and were as consistent a contender as any in the entire NFL.

## 1990

The 1990 team was again built on running the football and playing defense. Barry Word and Okoye combined to rush for over 1,800 yards. Defensively, the Chiefs could get after the quarterback with Thomas (20 sacks and 1<sup>st</sup>-team All-NFL) along with Lewis and Ross on the corners. On the defensive front, Kansas City got 16 ½ more sacks from the combination of Neil Smith on the edge and Dan Saleaumua inside.

Kansas City ranked fifth in the league in points allowed and all this team needed was a competent game-manager to play quarterback. DeBerg, at age 36, filled the bill. He finished the season with a 23/4 TD-INT ratio, still averaged 7.8 yards-per-attempt and helped the offense also finish in the Top 10 in scoring. Paige was the preferred target, but DeBerg also spread the ball to Emile Harry, Robb Thomas and Todd McNair out of the backfield.

The Chiefs were up and down in September and October, going 4-3 against a schedule that did not include any eventual playoff teams. A 24-23 loss at defending AFC champ Denver on the Monday Night of Week 2 was aggravating, while a 34-0 whitewash of Schottenheimer's former team, Cleveland, was heartening. But Kansas City went into its bye week at the end of October still a borderline playoff team and two games back of the Los Angeles Raiders in the AFC West.

November marked a turning of the corner. The Chiefs hosted the Raiders and the KC defense was ready. They forced three turnovers, held Bo Jackson to 40 yards on the ground, forced Jay Schroeder into a 10/31 for 139 yards passing performance and allowed kicker Nick Lowery's three field goals to be enough in a 9-7 win.

The month ended with another win over the Raiders, this one at the Los Angeles Coliseum. Kansas City had a tougher time containing Bo and were outrushed 155-97. But the Chiefs continued to be the more opportunistic team, recovering three fumbles and not turning the ball over themselves. They broke open a 17-17 tie in the third quarter with ten unanswered points and won 27-17.

Kansas City was tied for first and held the tiebreaker, but the losses to teams not as good as they were continued to add up. Seattle missed the playoffs, but on November 11, they

completed a season sweep of the Chiefs in Arrowhead Stadium. The result was Kansas City went into the final three games with no margin for error.

On December 16, it caught up to them. Warren Moon and the Houston Oilers, desperately needing a win for their own playoff hopes came into Arrowhead Stadium and the KC defense had an off-day. Moon threw for 527 yards, just shy of a single-game record and the Chiefs lost 27-10. The Raiders won at home over playoff-bound Cincinnati the same day and closed out the season with two more wins.

Thus, instead of being AFC West champs, the #2 seed and having a bye, Kansas City dropped to #5 and was forced to travel to Miami for the wild-card round of the playoffs.

The playoff game was a microcosm of the season, both good and bad. The Chiefs played well and built a 16-3 lead. But that lead could have been larger, as Kansas City kept settling for field goals. In the fourth quarter, Dan Marino got hot for the Dolphins and led a pair of touchdown drives. Trailing 17-16, DeBerg had moved the Chiefs to what appeared to be the Miami 26-yard line before a holding penalty negated a key play. Lowery was instead forced to try a 52-yard-field goal on the final play—it came up just short.

The Kansas City Chiefs were back as a contender and this marked the start of a eight-year run that saw seven playoff trips. It was also the first of several postseason heartbreaks. The tone for the Marty-Ball Era in Kansas City had been set.

## 1991

A strong running game was always the staple of “Marty-Ball” and this 1991 Chiefs team was no different. Christian Okoye ran for over 1,000 yards, finished sixth in the league in rush yardage and made the Pro Bowl. Barry Word and Harvey Williams were reliable backs, the former a power runner, the latter bringing more speed into the mix. In spite of the fact Kansas City had no Pro Bowl talent on the offensive line and a marginal passing game, they still finished 10<sup>th</sup> in the league in points scored.

Steve DeBerg was the veteran quarterback and he ranked in the lower half of the league in all of the key categories—completion percentage, yards-per-attempt and interceptions. No individual receiver even reached the 600-yard mark on the year, although J.J. Birden’s 17.2 yards-per-catch at least provided a big-play element to the passing game.

The defense had some terrific individual talent and ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in the NFL in points allowed. Derrick Thomas enjoyed a 1<sup>st</sup>-team All-Pro season with 13 ½ sacks. Neil Smith at defensive end was Pro Bowl-bound with eight sacks. Deron Cherry, the playmaking free safety, picked off four passes.

That defense showed its big-play capacity right out of the gate in a home date with the Atlanta Falcons. The Chiefs forced six turnovers, including three interceptions from corner Albert Lewis, against a team that would end the season in the playoffs. Kansas City won 14-3.

But the offense went into hiding the next two weeks against two more opponents with the postseason in their immediate future. The Chiefs were held to 67 rush yards in a 17-10 home loss to the New Orleans Saints. Kansas City then made a Monday Night visit to Houston. DeBerg could only generate 93 passing yards in a 17-7 loss to the Oilers.

DeBerg, who had enjoyed a career year in 1990, showed flashes of that form the next week against Seattle. Playing at home in the late Sunday afternoon time slot, he went 21/32 for 214 yards and two touchdowns. The Chiefs forced four turnovers, played mistake-free football themselves and won 20-13. That was followed by a 14-13 escape at mediocre San Diego, where the Chiefs were mostly outplayed, but made up for it with red-zone execution on both sides of the ball.

The Monday Night stage awaited again, this time with the defending AFC champion Buffalo Bills coming into Arrowhead. Buffalo was flying high at 5-0 with an offense that looked unstoppable. Until Kansas City got a hold of them. The potent Bills' attack never got into the end zone. Okoye and Williams each ran for over 100 yards and the result was a 33-6 rout that no one was expecting.

And that momentum rolled right into the following Sunday's late afternoon battle with the Miami Dolphins, who had ousted the Chiefs from the playoffs in 1990 and would contend to the final week in 1991. Okoye ran for 153 yards, KC was up 28-0 by halftime and won 42-7.

Kansas City was a team on a roll, but if there's one man who represented Kryptonite to Marty-Ball—be it in KC or Cleveland—it was Denver Broncos' quarterback John Elway. And a road trip to the Rockies resulted in another tough chapter of that ongoing saga. Elway turned 14 completions into 270 yards of pass offense and the Chiefs lost 19-16.

Another tough divisional foe awaited in the Los Angeles Raiders, who had won the AFC West and reached the conference championship game in 1990. In their third Monday Night game of the season, the Chiefs dug themselves a 21-10 hole at home as the fourth quarter began. DeBerg rallied. He threw a pair of fourth-quarter touchdowns, including a six-yarder to Tim Barrett that produced the 24-21 comeback win.

Kansas City went into their bye week at 6-3, in a tough three-way AFC West fight with the Broncos and Raiders. The Seattle Seahawks were also lingering on the outside. There was little room for error, and the Chiefs made no errors in a 27-20 road win over the Los Angeles Rams. KC forced four turnovers and made up for some leaky pass defense with the turnovers, winning the game on Thomas' 23-yard fumble return in the fourth quarter.

Another game with Denver, another tough loss for Marty-Ball. DeBerg threw four interceptions and the Broncos out rushed the Chiefs 172-125 in a 24-20 loss. That was disappointing, but the following week in Marty's old stomping grounds of Cleveland was simply devastating. Playing a mediocre Browns team, in their first year under new coach Bill Belichick, Kansas City turned the football over five times, was outrushed 123-78 and lost 20-15.

The Chiefs were now 7-5, a game back of both the Broncos and Raiders for the division, though still one game ahead of the Dolphins and Seahawks in the race for the playoffs. Kansas City got back to playing their style of football in a big win at Seattle. They didn't turn the ball over, committed only two penalties, stopped the run and got 96 rush yards from Word. The 19-6 win gave the Chiefs a little room to breathe.

Kansas City came home, dug themselves a 14-0 deficit against San Diego and watched DeBerg have to leave the game. Mark Vlasic, a backup signed away from the Chargers in the offseason, had a signature career moment. He came on to go 12/18 for 150 yards and helped the Chiefs avoid another embarrassing loss, as they escaped 20-17 in overtime.

At 9-5, Kansas City was tied with the LA Raiders for the top wild-card spot and had a comfortable two-game cushion for the playoffs. The Chiefs fell out of the divisional race the following Saturday in San Francisco when some poor defense negated a 115-yard game from Word in a 28-14 loss. But a playoff berth was assured.

When Kansas City went to Los Angeles for the regular season finale, it was already known that these teams would rematch in the wild-card game between the #4 and #5 seeds (the format prior to 2002 had three divisional winners and three wild-cards, not the 4/2 split of today). The last game of the season was to decide where that game would be played.

Word ran for 152 yards, Birden had a big day with eight catches for 188 yards and the 27-21 win ensured the good people of Kansas City would see playoff football for the first time since the dramatic events of Christmas Day 1971, when they lost the longest game in NFL history to the Dolphins.

The only history made in Round 3 of Chiefs-Raiders that opened up wild-card weekend on early Saturday afternoon, was that of a new candidate for ugliest playoff game in NFL history. The Chiefs missed a couple field goals in a scoreless first quarter. DeBerg only threw for 89 yards on the day. Kansas City turned it over a couple times, bogged down at the one-yard line in the fourth quarter with a chance to ice the game and gave up over 100 yards rushing to Raider running back Nick Bell.

And yet...the Chiefs won the football game. They forced six turnovers, including four interceptions of Los Angeles quarterback Todd Marinovich. They got 130 yards rushing from Word. DeBerg's 11-yard scoring pass to Fred Jones in the second quarter was the game's only touchdown and they committed only three penalties against nine for the Raiders. It might not have been pretty, but given the history of this organization in the playoffs—especially at home—no one was complaining about the 10-6 win over a hated rival.

Eight days later in Buffalo it was time for the ride to end. There would be no reprise of the Monday Night beatdown of the Bills from earlier in the year. DeBerg was knocked out in the second quarter and Vlasic threw four interceptions in his stead. The Chiefs committed ten penalties, couldn't run the ball, couldn't stop the run and the rout was on by halftime. It ended 37-14.

The 1991 season represented just one part of a long line of Kansas City teams under Schottenheimer that would more or less follow this script through much of the decade.

## 1992

With expectations on the rise, the 1992 Kansas City Chiefs season ended up being a bit of a disappointment. But they still made the playoffs—and got one very notable win to get there.



The Chiefs were built on defense and the running game, but both areas faced challenges in 1992. Christian Okoye only played five games as knee injuries brought his career to a premature end. Barry Word's 607 yards ended up leading the team.

While the offensive line had a pro Bowl left tackle in John Alt, the rest of the unit was plagued by injuries throughout the season and wasn't able to generate continuity.

Defensively, Kansas City still had some excellent individual talent. Neil Smith was a Pro Bowl defensive end, and Derrick Thomas the same at linebacker. Each player finished with 14 ½ sacks. Dale Carter, a playmaking rookie corner, picked off seven passes. But the defense as a whole wasn't consistent and finished 13<sup>th</sup> in the league in points allowed.

Amidst all this, KC was going through a transition at quarterback from one so-so veteran in Steve DeBerg to another in a 34-year-old Dave Krieg. Formerly of the Seattle Seahawks, Krieg stepped up and finished fifth in the league in yards-per-attempt, tied with future Hall of Famers Jim Kelly and Dan Marino.

Krieg's 15-12 TD-INT ratio might look bad by the standards of today, but by only throwing interceptions on 2.9% of his passes, Krieg ranked seventh in avoiding mistakes. His only weakness was a 56% completion rate that was 19<sup>th</sup> in the NFL. J.J. Birden and Willie Davis were his two primary targets and together, they produced enough that the Chiefs would finish seventh in the league in points scored.

The Chiefs opened the season in San Diego. They led 10-3 in the third quarter, but the Chargers were driving. Cornerback Kevin Ross intercepted a pass and went 99 yards to the house. It was one of three interceptions on the day for the KC defense and they also got five sacks. The 24-10 win would loom larger than anyone thought might be the case in Week 1.

Krieg hosted his old team in Seattle for Week 2. He went 13/19 for 231 yards, including a 72-yard touchdown pass to Birden that started the scoring and led to a 26-7 win.

A trip to Houston against another playoff perennial in the Oilers was up next. While Krieg played efficiently and the Chiefs ran the ball fairly well, they couldn't pressure Warren Moon, who threw for 279 yards. The game went to overtime, but KC took their first loss, 23-20.



Kansas City returned home for a Monday Night date with the Los Angeles Raiders and Word had his coming out party. He ran for 125 yards on 27 carries, as the Chiefs dominated the line of scrimmage in a 27-7 win. KC was set for a showdown in Denver where the Broncos were also 3-1.

The Chiefs took a 19-6 lead into the fourth quarter. But anyone who knew the history of Schottenheimer against Denver quarterback John Elway couldn't feel comfortable. Elway had rallied his teams to beat Marty's outstanding Cleveland Browns teams in the 1986 and 1987 AFC Championship Game. And Big John did it again. He threw two fourth-quarter TD passes, negated a 22/31 for 301-yards performance from Krieg and stole a 20-19 win from Kansas City.

KC had no time to lick their wounds, because another consistent playoff contender, the Philadelphia Eagles, were on their way to Arrowhead. Willie Davis broke through against the Eagle secondary, catching five passes for 167 yards. Kansas City led 24-3 in the fourth quarter and hung on to win 24-17. Another battle with an NFC East playoff contender, the eventual Super Bowl champion Dallas Cowboys, didn't end as well. The Chiefs lost a defensive battle in Dallas, 17-10.

A Sunday Night home game with the Pittsburgh Steelers, who would end up the #1 seed in the AFC, was an utter disaster. Word injured his foot early in the game, and that might have been the high point. Krieg went 9/27 for 82 yards and threw three picks. The special teams gave up a punt return for a touchdown. Kansas City lost 27-3 and went into their bye week a .500 team, at 4-4.

The Chargers were coming to Arrowhead on November 8 and after an 0-4 start, San Diego was gaining steam and getting back into the AFC West race with KC and Denver. The Chiefs needed this game and in spite of another shaky performance from Krieg, they got it. A four-zip edge in turnovers was the difference in a 16-14 win.

A fifth straight game against an eventual 1992 playoff team was up next against the Washington Redskins. The defending Super Bowl champs were having to fight for their lives this season and this game showed why. Krieg got rolling again, 19/29 for 302 yards and two touchdowns. Birden caught seven balls for 60 yards, while Tim Barnett was the big-play man, his six catches going for 148 yards. The result was an easy 35-16 win.

Kansas City had a three-game road swing ahead, but the schedule was getting easier, with non-playoff teams in the Seahawks, Jets and Raiders on the docket. KC broke open a 10-7 game in Seattle with a punt return from Carter and an improbable 22-yard Pick-6 from Neil Smith, and they won 24-7. Krieg was sharp the next week in the Meadowlands, going 17/21 for 222 yards and no mistakes in a 23-7 win But the Chiefs played poorly on special teams and on the line of scrimmage in losing 28-7 at Los Angeles.

There were three weeks left and the AFC West was up for grabs. Kansas City and San Diego were both 8-5, but the Chiefs head-to-head sweep gave them the edge. Denver was in hot pursuit at 7-6.

KC came home to play New England, a lousy team in this era and on their way to the worst record in the league. Perhaps it was an omen that the Chiefs didn't play well. The game was sloppy, four turnovers apiece. Okoye played his best game of the year and his last notable game as a pro, rushing for 86 yards and keying the 27-20 survival. The Chargers held serve, while the Broncos lost in Buffalo.

The Denver loss meant that Kansas City could clinch a playoff berth when they made another trip to the Meadowlands, this time to face the mediocre New York Giants. KC could also retain control of the division race. A lot was on the line in this early Saturday afternoon kickoff for the national audience. But the Chiefs seemed unaware. They were flat, crushed on the line of scrimmage and lost 35-21.

San Diego beat the Raiders the following day and took control of the AFC West. Denver won and stayed alive. The Chiefs were 9-6, the Broncos were 8-7...and they were set to go head-to-head for the final playoff spot at Arrowhead. Marty and Elway in another big game. No one in Kansas City could feel remotely good about this and they didn't even know about the heartbreak of 1997 that was still in their future.

But today would be different. In a 7-7 game, KC defensive back Charles Mincy picked off Elway and waltzed 32 yards to the house. Carter intercepted another pass and turned it into a 36-yard Pick-6. Thomas recovered a fumble in the end zone. Three defensive touchdowns cures a lot of ills and Kansas City never gave Elway a chance at any late heroics, sealing this one 42-20.

While this was going on, the Chargers were taking care of business against the Seahawks and clinching the division. It set up a third matchup between the Chiefs and Bolts in the first round of the playoffs.

Beating any good team three times in a year is hard and it's even harder when you're theoretically the worst of the two teams and playing on the road while your rival is red-hot. San Diego's turnaround from the 0-4 start into a playoff team was historic and the talk of the league. After a scoreless first quarter, the Chargers got their running game rolling and piled up 192 yards on the ground. The Chiefs never could run the ball and the season ended with a 17-0 whitewash.

The joy of simply making the playoffs was wearing off in Kansas City, but this 1992 team still overcame a lot of adversity to get there and has the season-ending win over Denver to hang their hat on. That's not a bad legacy and another veteran quarterback was on the way.

## 1993

The 1993 Kansas City Chiefs made some big veteran acquisitions. And when we say "big veteran acquisitions" we mean really big. Like getting Joe Montana in to play quarterback. After winning four Super Bowls in the 1980s with the San Francisco 49ers, Montana had missed the better part of 1991 and 1992 with back problems. He lost his job in San Francisco to Steve

Young. Montana wanted to prove he could still play. He needed a team that was competitive, but still needed help at quarterback. The Chiefs fit the description.

If Montana wasn't enough, Kansas City went out and bagged another Hall of Fame veteran and in this case they raided one of their key rivals. Marcus Allen, the great running back for the Los Angeles Raiders, was having a bad falling out with the front office. The 33-year-old signed on with Kansas City.

Both Montana and Allen showed they still had gas in the tank. At the age of 37, Montana's health could still be on-again, off-again and he was only able to start eleven games. But his 61 percent completion rate and 7.2 yards-per-attempt were in the top half of the league and he avoided mistakes. That, along with his reputation and the feel-good quality of his story, got Joe a ticket to the Pro Bowl.

Allen rushed for 764 yards and also caught 34 balls. He shared backfield duties with Kimble Anders and Todd McNair, both of whom were also good pass-catchers and beneficiaries of Montana's mastery of the precision short game.

The offensive line wasn't as potent as some of the units Schottenheimer would coach throughout his career, but 31-year-old left tackle John Alt was still a Pro Bowler. And the Chiefs added a rookie at guard in Will Shields, who began a Hall of Fame career in 1993.

If Montana wanted to stretch the field, he had the receivers to do it with. Willie Davis caught 52 balls and averaged better than seventeen yards a catch. J.J. Birden's 51 catches produced over 14 yards a pop.

Ultimately though, Montana was at his best when he was spreading the ball around to everyone. It was rare for one receiver to have a singularly great game in 1993, but everyone was a steady part of the offense. And that offense ended up 8<sup>th</sup> in the NFL for points scored.

The defense, often outstanding during Schottenheimer's tenure here, was only above average in '93, ranking 11<sup>th</sup> in points allowed. There were still some great individual performers who could change games though. Neil Smith was one of the league's best defensive ends and recorded 15 sacks. Derrick Thomas had another Pro Bowl season. Albert Lewis, the 33-year-old veteran at corner, intercepted six passes and Charles Mincy picked off five more.

Montana's quest to prove he could still play began in Tampa Bay on the Sunday before Labor Day. The Bucs were a lousy team and Montana picked them apart. After spotting Tampa an early field goal, Montana went 14/21 for 246 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions. The final was 27-3. But the first warning sign about Joe's health appeared— Dave Krieg had to finish the game and would start the following week in Houston.

About that Week 2 trip to Houston—the Oilers were much like the Chiefs in this era, a playoff perennial that couldn't get past the divisional round. And the road game in the Astrodome was an utter disaster. Krieg threw two interceptions and was sacked four times. KC lost three

fumbles, was penalized eleven times and only ran for 46 yards. Other than that, the game was a total delight. They lost 30-13.

The Broncos came in for Monday Night Football. Montana was back in the lineup, but the ultimate hero wasn't one of the two legendary quarterbacks on the field. It was Chiefs' kicker Nick Lowery. He nailed five field goals, including kicks from 41, 44 and 52 yards out. Kansas City won 15-7.

The Chiefs went into a bye week with some work to do. Even though they had beaten Denver, it was a penalty-ridden performance with eleven flags. Play had to be cleaned up before the Los Angeles Raiders came into town to open October.

Montana came out quickly against the Raiders and threw a pair of first-quarter touchdown passes. Kansas City played clean football and churned out a 24-9 win, although Montana again could not finish. Krieg would start the following week, a home date with lowly Cincinnati. Kansas City barely escaped, needing a late field goal from Lowery to get a 17-15 victory in a game they were favored by two touchdowns.



San Diego would fall back to 8-8 this year, but the mid-October trip west was still a big one. Montana was back and he threw a 15-yard touchdown pass to Allen in the first quarter. The offense then bogged down until the fourth quarter when, trailing 14-10, Allen ran in for another score. The Chiefs got out of town with a 17-14 win.

1993 was the one season the NFL experimented with the concept of a double bye. It was not a popular move with fans, networks or the players and was discarded. But for now, the Chiefs had to take another week off before they went to Miami.

The Dolphins were a consistent contender in the early 1990s, either in the playoffs or on the fringe. Their own great quarterback, Dan Marino, was out for this game, but backup Scott Mitchell proved more than capable. The Chiefs secondary was lit up for 344 passing yards, they fell behind early and lost 30-10.

Another Monday Night home game with another future Hall of Fame quarterback was next. Although unlike Elway, Marino and Montana, the eventual greatness of Green Bay's Brett Favre was only a possibility in 1993, not yet established. The KC defense was ready for him. Thomas sacked Favre twice, the Chiefs picked him off three times and Kansas City won 23-16.

The AFC West was shaping up into a three-team race between the Chiefs, Raiders and Broncos. The Chargers would linger, but never quite get over the hump. If Denver was the team that gave Kansas City fits, then the Chiefs were the team that constantly tormented the Raiders.

KC went to the LA Coliseum where the Raiders then played their home games. Krieg was in the lineup. After the Chiefs dug themselves an early 14-0 hole, Krieg went to work. He threw a

15-yard touchdown pass to Anders. In the third quarter, Krieg went deep to Davis for a 66-yard touchdown strike. Krieg threw one more TD in the fourth quarter. Allen, anxious to take revenge in his old stomping grounds, ran for 85 yards. Kansas City completed a season sweep of the Silver-N-Black with a 31-20 win.

Chicago had a mediocre team in 1993 and when all is said and done, the events of November 21 at Arrowhead are the “what might have been” moment for the '93 Chiefs. After Allen ran for two early touchdowns, the offense bogged down. Krieg was sacked five times and Kansas City was upset 19-17. In an AFC where the race for everything—the division, the byes, the #1 seed—were all jam-packed, everything added up and this was a game KC should have won.

It made Buffalo's visit the following Sunday afternoon even more critical. The Bills were the gold standard in the AFC, having gone to three straight Super Bowls and in contention again this year. Montana returned to face future Hall of Fame counterpart Jim Kelly in a 4 PM start that would be shown to most of the country.

After the Bills took a 7-0 lead, Montana found Allen on a 18-yard touchdown pass that tied up the game. The Kansas City defense took over. They held Buffalo's running game, led by the explosive Thurman Thomas, to 43 yards. They intercepted Kelly three times. And they cruised to a 23-7 win.

We were headed into December and Kansas City's record stood at 8-3. They were up one game on the Broncos and two on the Raiders for the AFC West. In the joust for the two first-round byes, the Chiefs also narrowly led. The Oilers led the old AFC Central with a 7-4 mark. The Bills, atop the AFC East, were also 8-3, but KC now had the tiebreaker. If the playoffs could have started today, Kansas City would have held the 1-seed.

Montana was outstanding the following week in Seattle, going 20/30 for 239 yards and no mistakes. Thomas returned a fumble 86 yards for a touchdown and the Chiefs cruised to a 31-16 win. Denver lost. So did Buffalo. Kansas City's playoff fortunes looked even brighter.

But a road trip to Elway's lair in the Rocky Mountains was next. Montana again played well, going 17/30 for 237 yards and two touchdowns. Birden caught five balls for 95 yards. KC led 14-3 early on. But no lead was safe against either of these quarterbacks. Elway chipped the lead down to 21-17 by the fourth quarter and then rallied Denver to win 27-21.

Kansas City still led both of their AFC West rivals by a game and if they could beat San Diego, it would give the Chiefs command of any tiebreaker situation. The Chargers were desperately trying to keep their wild-card hopes alive and jumped on KC for a 17-0 lead. Now it was Montana's turn to orchestrate a comeback of his own.

Montana threw touchdown passes to Davis and Birden before having to again leave with nagging injuries. Krieg came on and finished the job, extending the lead out to 28-17. KC then held off one last rally from the Bolts and won 28-24.

The Chiefs were 10-4 with both the Raiders and Broncos at 9-5. Beyond the AFC West, the Oilers and Bills were both 10-4. Kansas City, Buffalo and Houston had all played each other and all split. In a three-way tie, the Chiefs were likely to come down as the 2-seed based on conference record. That would at least earn a week off and valuable rest for Montana.

On the day after Christmas, Kansas City watched in the afternoon as both Denver and Los Angeles lost. The Chiefs took the field in prime-time up in Minnesota knowing that the AFC West was clinched. But Buffalo and Houston had held serve, so the byes and homefield were still very much on the line.

The Vikings were on the playoff fringe and had to have this game. They outrushed the Chiefs 205-37. Montana played and was off his game, throwing a couple interceptions. Kansas City was blown out of the Metrodome, 30-10.

Kansas City's finale was at home against Seattle. Montana was sharp and went 18/28 for 210 yards with no mistakes. The Chiefs jumped out to a 24-3 lead, saw it whittled to 27-24 and then added a lockup touchdown to win 34-24.

They needed help if they were going to avoid playing next week, but didn't get it. Buffalo won in the same early afternoon time slot. The Bills were the 1-seed, the Oilers were #2 and the Chiefs settled in at the 3-spot. They would play the sixth-seeded Pittsburgh Steelers, while the Broncos and Raiders played a third game in the 4-5 bracket spot.

Wild-card weekend opened on early Saturday afternoon in Arrowhead. And, as has happened far too many times to the good people of Kansas City over the years, it went downhill. The Chiefs trailed 17-7 at halftime and were still down 24-17 in the fourth quarter.

But this year they had Joe Montana. He led KC down to the Pittsburgh seven-yard line in the closing seconds. On fourth-and-goal, Montana found Tim Barnett for the tying touchdown. The Chiefs won in overtime. Montana finished the game 28/43 for 276 yards and the KC defense held a good Steeler running game to under 100 yards.

The 27-24 win got Kansas City another date in Houston. The Oilers were the hottest team in the NFL, having won eleven straight games to close the season. Between this and the disastrous results from Kansas City's Week 2 visit here, the Chiefs came in a seven-point underdog and trailed 10-0 into the third quarter.

At that point one of the most memorable stretches of play in franchise history began. Montana threw a touchdown pass to cut the lead to 10-7. After an Oiler field goal, Montana hit Birden with an 11-yard touchdown pass. Montana went 18 yards to Davis. KC led 21-13. The two-point conversion was not an option in the NFL until 1996, so this was a two-score lead.

Warren Moon, led a TD drive to cut the lead to 21-20. No problem. The KC veterans had an answer. Montana led a drive down to the Oiler 21-yard line. Allen finished it with a touchdown run. The score was 28-20 and there it stood. Kansas City was going to the AFC Championship Game.

That meant a trip to Buffalo. And this is where Kansas City runs out of steam. If we trace the season back to the Chicago loss of November—the one defeat on the schedule there was really no excuse for—we see that it cost the Chiefs the 1-seed. Even just getting to the 2-seed and getting Montana a week off would have been exceptionally valuable. But it was obvious in this AFC Championship that both KC and their great quarterback were running on empty.

Montana was knocked out. Kansas City played from behind the entire afternoon. Even though they were within 20-13 in the third quarter, it never had the feel of a game they might win. The Chiefs were out rushed 229-52 and lost 30-13.

A special season was in the books. Montana proved he could still play. Kansas City proved they could advance in the playoffs. The downside? This would be the only time during Schottenheimer's excellent tenure with the Chiefs that he made it this deep into the postseason.

## 1994

The 1994 Kansas City Chiefs were looking to take that final step to the Super Bowl. But after a nice start, they faded, barely made the playoffs and Montana went off into the sunset.

The future Hall of Fame quarterback still had a decent year in '94. He completed 61 percent of his passes and was only intercepted on 1.8 percent of his throws, both figures ranking in the top 10 of the league. The 6.7 yards-per-attempt was mediocre, but playing clean, precision football was more important in this offense.

Where the problem came in was that the running game, typically a Schottenheimer staple, was pedestrian in 1994. Allen averaged less than four yards a rush. Young Greg Hill, who split time with the Hall of Fame veteran, was barely over the 4-yards a carry threshold. Kimble Anders was solid, but his skills were in pass-catching, where his 67 receptions led the team.

The running game problems could be traced to the offensive line. Right guard Will Shields would eventually become a Hall of Famer himself, but Shields was only in his second year and there was no Pro Bowl talent up front in 1994.

The offense relied on Montana occasionally stretching the field to Willie Davis, J.J. Birden and rookie receiver Lake Dawson, but otherwise trying to move the chains with short throws to Anders and tight end Derrick Walker. The offense finished 14<sup>th</sup> in the league for points scored.

KC's defense was better. Neil Smith had 11 ½ sacks and linebacker Derrick Thomas delivered another Pro Bowl season. Dale Carter made the Pro Bowl at the cornerback spot. And after the success in bringing in great veteran help in '93, Kansas City added another vet with a Super Bowl ring—defensive back Mark Collins, part of Bill Parcells' championship run with the Giants in 1990. The Chief defense ranked seventh in the league in points allowed.

Any problems with the offense in general or the running game in particular were nowhere evident in an opening day trip to mediocre New Orleans. Allen's 82 yards keyed a 152-37 edge

in rushing yardage. Montana went 24/33 for 315 yards and two touchdowns. Kansas City won the turnover battle 4-0 and the football game 30-17.

Everyone in the country was interested in the home opener, an early afternoon kick against San Francisco. It was Montana's first time playing the franchise where he'd made his legend. And this 49er team was outstanding—they would go on to win the Super Bowl. San Francisco took a 14-7 lead into the second quarter.

Thomas stepped up and made a big play, sacking 49er quarterback Steve Young for a safety. In the third quarter, Montana threw a touchdown pass and converted a two-point conversion. He went on to go 19/31 for 203 yards. More important was that Montana and the Chiefs played mistake-free, while Young and the 49ers did not. Another 4-0 turnover edge led to another victory, this one 24-17.

Kansas City went to Atlanta for Week 3 on Sunday Night. The Falcons were a mediocre team, so even though the Chiefs turned it over four times and committed fourteen penalties, it didn't come back to bite them. They forced six turnovers and the Falcons drew ten flags of their own. Montana threw for 361 yards, with Birden catching seven balls for 99 yards and two touchdowns. KC won easily 30-10.

The Chiefs were rolling and looked every bit the Super Bowl contender they were expected to be. Even when a home date with the woeful Los Angeles Rams turned into an ugly 16-0 loss, that could be seen as just one of the mysterious things that happen in the course of a long season. And Kansas City was going into their bye with a chance to get things cleaned up after two straight sloppy performances.

The heart of the schedule was still ahead. A weird schedule quirk had KC opening with all four of their NFC opponents, so the rest of 1994 still had their entire AFC schedule coming up.

A visit to San Diego was up next. The Chargers looked like their '92 selves on this October afternoon. The Chiefs could not run the ball. Even though Montana got his numbers, he had to throw 55 times, and there was a lot of empty yardage in a 20-6 loss.

John Elway and Denver were up next and the cameras of Monday Night Football were on hand. Elway and Montana was must-see television and these two great quarterbacks did not disappoint. Elway played well. Montana was brilliant, going 34/54 for 393 yards. One key statistical difference was that the KC defense got home to Elway six times, with Smith recording 2 ½ sacks.

But the game is defined by Montana's late drive and touchdown pass with eight seconds left that pulled out a 31-28 win. This Broncos-Chiefs showdown of 1994 remains one of *Monday Night Football's* iconic moments.

Montana kept it rolling, going 23/33 for 311 yards, three touchdowns and no mistakes in a 38-23 home win over Seattle. Kansas City's record was back up to 5-2 and they were going to Buffalo, the four-time defending AFC champion who had ended the Chiefs' season a year ago.



The result in this game was all too similar to what went down the previous January. KC's rush defense got pummeled, Montana was sacked four times, they turned the ball over five times and were buried 44-10.

A visit from the contending Raiders, then playing in Los Angeles, was on tap for Sunday Night Football. The Chiefs' defense redeemed themselves with a dominant performance. Some shaky red-zone football from the offense kept an otherwise lopsided game close, but a 57-yard touchdown pass from Montana to Walker provided the cushion in a 13-3 win.

San Diego was next in town and the Chargers were a game up on the Chiefs in the AFC West. Kansas City needed this game and took a 13-0 lead by halftime. But Montana was erratic, throwing two interceptions. The running game was non-existent. And the Chiefs ended up on the short end of a 14-13 decision.

Another good playoff contender arrived in the form of Bill Belichick's Cleveland Browns. In a home game the Chiefs had to have, they played some vintage Schottenheimer football. There was a balanced running game, led by Hill's 66 yards. There were no mistakes. And the result was a 20-13 win over a good team.

But again, just when Kansas City was showing life, they stumbled. Seattle was having a bad year, but they shut down Montana and beat Kansas City 10-9. What's more, Montana was knocked out and Steve Bono was forced into action for the next week's game, a big late afternoon kickoff against Denver.

Bono made big plays—even though he only completed 18/37 passes, those completions generated over 320 yards. That included a 62-yard strike to Davis that tied the game 17-17 in the fourth quarter. What the Chiefs could not do, again, was run the football. A game that went deep into OT saw KC only control the ball for 26 minutes. Denver eventually won it 20-17.

This season of such promise was teetering on the brink. San Diego was in complete control of the AFC West race. But the race for the final two wild-card spots were open. The Chiefs, Raiders and Broncos were all 7-6. So were the Patriots and Bills. The Colts were sitting at 6-7. So the postseason was still very much in play.

But Montana wasn't ready to come back and even if he were, it wasn't going to matter on a Monday Night at eventual AFC East champ Miami. Bono played well, going 33/55 for 314 yards. But the 55 pass attempts underscores the problem. The Chiefs couldn't run and even if they could have, the defense got carved up in a 45-28 loss.

The prior day had seen the Raiders beat the Broncos and the Patriots knock off the Colts. The Raiders and Pats had pole position for the final playoff spots, with the Chiefs, Broncos and Bills a game back.

Kansas City hosted the Houston Oilers, who were enduring a hard collapse after a strong seven-year run of playoff seasons. Montana returned and went 16/27 for 235 yards. He was

also mistake-free. Dawson caught five of those passes for 101 yards. The Allen/Hill rushing tandem produced 105 yards on 24 carries and the Chiefs won easily, 31-9.

Good news came from elsewhere in the league. The Broncos and Bills both lost. Kansas City wasn't home free, but they did control their destiny. They would go to Los Angeles and play the Raiders. It was a virtual playoff game. The winner was in. The loser was out.

The season finale fell in the late afternoon on Christmas Eve and Chiefs fans were looking for an early Christmas present. Montana hit Davis on a 47-yard touchdown pass in the first quarter to get the scoring rolling. In the second quarter, the lead was 7-3, but the Raiders were driving. Collins intercepted a pass and went 78 yards to the house.

With the money on the table, the veterans were coming through. Allen, playing a former team he despised, rolled up 132 yards. Hill only carried eight times, but gained 51 yards. The defense scored again when they recorded a safety. A 19-9 win sent the Chiefs back into the playoffs.

Kansas City was the 6-seed and made a second December visit to Miami in the late afternoon on New Year's Eve. This one went better than the earlier visit—Montana threw a couple touchdown passes, including a 57-yarder to Anders and KC led 14-10 in the second quarter.

A critical red-zone failure swung the tide. The Chiefs had to settle for a 21-yard field goal. They had kept Dan Marino very much in striking distance at 17-10. Even though Montana played well and threw for over 300 yards, Marino got rolling in the third quarter and the Dolphins rolled up 17 unanswered points. The Chiefs were in a 27-17 hole by the start of the fourth quarter and that's how the game ended.

It was another playoff season in Marty's terrific run here in Kansas City. It was another playoff trip in the extraordinary career of Joe Montana. But it wasn't what either man was hoping for when the season began. Montana retired. The Chiefs started anew.

## 1995

We've clearly noted that Marty Schottenheimer's teams were always noted for two things. They were tough and overachieving. And they managed to suffer terrible heartbreak in the playoffs. No team exemplified both traits better than the 1995 Kansas City Chiefs.

The Chiefs entered '95 facing significant uncertainty. The quarterback reins were being given to 33-year-old Steve Bono, a career backup.

What's more, the AFC West was tough. The Chargers were fresh off a run to the Super Bowl. The Broncos and John Elway were a contender every year. The Raiders were consistently at least on the fringe of the playoffs. The Seahawks weren't bad. In fact, every AFC West team finished at least .500 in 1995. No one knew quite what to make of KC coming into a new season.

Kansas City continued to have great players on the defensive side of the ball. Derrick Thomas produced another Pro Bowl season. Neil Smith at defensive end was one of the NFL's best pass rushers in this timeframe and he went to the Pro Bowl behind 12 sacks. Dale Carter was a Pro Bowler at corner.

Those three—Smith, Thomas and Carter—were perennial Pro Bowlers. The '95 Chiefs got a lift from defensive tackle Dan Saleaumua who recorded seven sacks coming up the inside, made the Pro Bowl himself, added another dimension to this defense and the unit was the best in the NFL.

Kansas City relied on a balanced running game, with veteran Marcus Allen and Greg Hill sharing duties. They combined to produce over 1,600 yards rushing and each averaged better than four a pop. Kimble Anders chipped in nearly 400 yards of his own at the fullback position.

Where Anders' big value was, though, was as a pass-catcher and that was what consistently sent him to the Pro Bowl during this era of success in Kansas City. His 55 catches led a passing offense that had always relied on working underneath and accelerated that trend with the transition at quarterback.

Tight end Keith Cash caught 42 passes. Lake Dawson, a young and physical receiver caught 40 balls for a little over 500 yards. The best downfield threats were Webster Slaughter and Willie Davis, who combined to catch 67 passes for over 1,000 yards.

The offensive line was led by Hall of Fame guard Will Shields, coming into his own with a Pro Bowl season at age 24.

And the quarterback? Well, Bono didn't exactly light it up. He was near the bottom of the league in both completion percentage and yards-per-attempt. But Bono steered clear of mistakes. He was only intercepted 1.9% of the time, fourth-best among starting quarterbacks. That fit well with a defense-first philosophy and it was enough to get him a Pro Bowl ticket in 1995.

The season opener was indoors at the Seattle Kingdome and there were no signs Bono would have any problems getting the football down the field. He hit Davis on touchdown strikes of 60 yards and 40 yards, going 18/23 for 278 yards. Hill ran for 109 yards and the Chiefs rolled the Seahawks 34-10.

A Week 2 home opener against the New York Giants saw KC dig themselves a 17-3 hole going into the fourth quarter. Again, there were no signs that throwing the football would be a problem. With Anders catching 11 balls and Allen rushing for 86 yards, the Chiefs rallied to tie the game and then won 20-17 in overtime.

Another fourth quarter comeback followed in Week 3 at home against Oakland. Trailing 17-7, Bono threw a 19-yard TD pass to Davis. A field goal tied up the game. The Raiders were driving for the win in overtime when KC defensive back James Hasty intercepted a pass and went 64 yards to the house. 23-17 Chiefs. They were 3-0 and answering any concerns about how they would fare with Bono at quarterback.

A visit to Cleveland didn't go as well. The Browns were coached by Bill Belichick and coming off a playoff season in '94. While this season would collapse when the franchise announced its move to Baltimore during midseason, that hadn't arrived. The Cleveland team that Kansas City faced in late September was a good one and put the Chiefs in a 21-3 hole. There was no fourth quarter comeback. Even though Cash caught eight passes for 111 yards, Bono threw two Pick-6s in the final period of a 35-17 loss.

The woeful Arizona Cardinals were just what the doctor ordered. Even though Bono only went 7/17 for 78 yards, he made an unlikely difference with his legs—a 76-yard touchdown run that got the ball rolling in the second quarter. The Allen/Hill combo carried 22 times for 108 yards and the result was an easy 24-3 win in the desert.

A Monday Night visit from San Diego was up next. Both teams prided themselves on running the ball, but neither got that facet of their offense going tonight. Bono and Charger counterpart Stan Humphries each threw for over 300 yards. The Chiefs were down 23-16 in the fourth quarter when some more late-game magic went down. Bono hit tight end Derrick Walker with an 18-yard TD pass to force overtime.

Those of you keeping count have surely noted this is the third overtime game the Chiefs have played and it's only the sixth game of the season. You have also noted that each time they rallied from behind in the fourth quarter and then won in OT. How much longer could this hold out? At least one more night. Tamarick Vanover, their electric return man, fielded a punt on his own 14-yard line, took it to the house and Kansas City celebrated a 29-23 win.

Bill Parcells' New England Patriots had made the playoffs in '94 and would reach the Super Bowl in '96. This in-between season was a bad one. The Chiefs broke open a 10-10 tie in the second quarter when Bono went 18 yards to Davis and 26 yards to Vanover to stretch the lead to 24-10. Allen and Hill combined for 144 yards. KC churned out a 31-26 home win.

Denver was the team that always gave Kansas City fits head-to-head. But not on this visit to Mile High Stadium. Allen ran for 121 yards. Carter picked off Elway twice and Smith sacked him 2 ½ times. The Chiefs won 21-7 and were riding high at 7-1 going into the bye week.

A home date with a bad Washington Redskins team was on the far side of the bye and a balanced KC running game rolled up 178 yards in an easy 24-3 win. More physical football followed the next week in San Diego. Allen and Hill went back to sharing the load and they combined for 136 yards. The Chiefs controlled the ball for over 35 minutes, gradually taking control in a 22-7 win.

Kansas City did not play well in a Sunday Night home game with the mediocre Houston Oilers. Favored by 9 ½ points, the Chiefs were tied 13-13 in the fourth quarter. Bono was erratic and mistake-prone. The running game was unable to get started. Enter veteran defensive back Mark Collins. He scooped up a fumble, raced 34 yards for a touchdown and KC escaped with a 20-13 win.

It was time for the biggest test, a Thanksgiving Day date in Dallas. The Cowboys, along with the 49ers were the class of the entire NFL in the four years from 1992-95. Dallas had won Super Bowls in 1992 and 1993 and would win another one this year. Even with a 10-1 record, the Chiefs were a 10 ½ point dog in Big D.

Bono played well, going 20/36 for 276 yards. What did Kansas City in was an inability to run, particularly in the red zone. Four good drives bogged down in field goals. They lost 24-12. But for whatever it's worth, they had won respect. According to the book *Hellbent*, written by FS1 personality and then-Dallas sports writer Skip Bayless, the Cowboy coaches felt they were fortunate to win...and were concerned about what a potential Super Bowl matchup against these Chiefs might bring.

Kansas City certainly had a commanding position in the AFC. Even though no one in their division was bad, no one else was really standing out. The Chargers were the only other team that would make the playoffs and at this point with four games left, only the Raiders were even within two games of the Chiefs. The same went for the conference as a whole, with the Steelers and Bills giving chase at 8-4.

That meant December was just about taking care of business. Kansas City went to Oakland ten days later and did just that. Allen, who loved to torment his former team, rushed for 124 yards. The defense held the Raiders to eight yards rushing. KC led 29-10 in the fourth quarter and then held off a Raider rally to win 29-23. The win clinched the division crown.

Miami was fighting for its playoff life when Kansas City went to South Beach on a Monday Night. Allen ran for 88 yards, but there was nothing else to the offense. Bono struggled to a 15/37 for 180 yards performance in a 13-6 loss. The Steelers nudged to within a game in the race for the top seed.

Kansas City still had command of the tiebreaker situation and they still had their last two games at home. They came out pounding against Denver, working Anders into the running game mix along with Allen and Hill and jumping out to a 14-0 lead. Each team scored defensive touchdowns, but KC's 145-64 edge in rush yardage was the difference.

The #1 seed in the AFC was theirs. For good measure, the Chiefs put the finishing touches on a 13-3 season by beating the Seahawks 26-3. Vanover started the game with an 89-yard kickoff return for a touchdown and Hill rolled up 113 yards. The defense made their last pre-playoff statement by holding Seattle to 89 total yards. Kansas City was ready for the playoffs.

Two weeks later, the Indianapolis Colts came to Arrowhead. Jim Harbaugh, then a veteran whose career resurgence in Indy was actually charming, had gotten the team on a nice run to get into the postseason and then pull off a win in San Diego. But the Chiefs were a solid eight-point favorite. When they took the field on late Sunday afternoon to end Divisional Round Weekend, a lot of us were already mentally looking ahead to their AFC Championship game with Pittsburgh.

Maybe the Chiefs were too. Maybe the bitter cold—(-15) degrees with the windchill—had an equalizing factor that always works against the favorite. Or maybe there was the ice-cold reality that weaknesses that can be covered up during the long regular season almost always come exposed in the playoffs.

Especially when that weakness is the quarterback position. Bono threw an early 20-yard touchdown pass to Dawson for a 7-0 lead, but that was it. Three interceptions followed. Allen rushed for 94 yards, but that only led to the second big problem—one that this game is most remembered for—and that's in the kicking game. Lin Elliot struggled with the icy football and missed field goals from 35 and 39 yards.

The Colts nudged ahead 10-7 in the fourth quarter. Schottenheimer turned to Rich Gannon. The backup quarterback came in, went 5-for-8 for thirty yards and got Elliot another chance. This one was from 42 yards and there were 42 seconds left. The kick missed badly. A special season had come to an undeservedly early end.

It's hard for anyone to think of the 1995 Kansas City Chiefs without thinking of the ending. That might be reality, but it's not fair. This was an exceptional team, one that achieved well beyond what they were expected to do. Heartbreak is an unfortunate part of sports, something Schottenheimer knew all too well and this great fan base knew all too well before Patrick Mahomes. But overachievement should be the ultimate legacy of the '95 Chiefs.

## 1996

From 1990 through 1997, Marty Schottenheimer led the Chiefs into the playoffs seven times. The one exception was 1996. It didn't start out that way—right up until the end, the 1996 Kansas City Chiefs were well-positioned to continue the string of postseason appearances. But a late collapse left them out of the dance.

The late 1990s Chiefs were founded on their defense, and particularly the triumvirate of Neil Smith at defensive end, Hall of Fame outside linebacker Derrick Thomas and cornerback Dale Carter. All three were perennial Pro Bowlers. Thomas and Carter had vintage years again in 1996, with Thomas getting 13 sacks and Carter punching another Pro Bowl ticket.

But Smith only recorded six sacks in an uncharacteristically bad year that mirrored the team's. Even with veteran free safety Mark Collins intercepting six passes, the defense went from the NFL's best in 1995 to 11<sup>th</sup> in points allowed for '96.

Schottenheimer's offenses were built around the running game and the Chiefs of this era offered a consistent two-pronged attack, with Hall of Fame veteran Marcus Allen sharing the load with Greg Hill. The two backs combined for nearly 1,500 yards running behind an offensive line anchored by another future Hall of Famer, right guard Will Shields.

Allen, at age 36, was still a versatile player and his 27 pass receptions were third on the team. Kimble Anders was the best pass-catching fullback in the NFL and his 60 catches led the Chiefs and got him the second of three straight Pro Bowl invites.

But as versatile as Allen and Anders were, their receiving numbers underscored the offense's biggest problem. They couldn't stretch the field. A changeover at wide receiver gave more prominence to Chris Penn and Sean LaChapelle, but it didn't change the essential difficulty.

That difficulty was quarterback Steve Bono. A career backup who had gotten his first real chance to start in '95 at the age of 33, Bono simply showed that...well, why he was a career backup. He was near the bottom of the league in both completions and yards-per-attempt.

In '95, Bono had been excellent at avoiding mistakes and with the defense at the top of its game, that was enough. This year, the defense wasn't as good and Bono threw 13 interceptions—his 3% interception rate was 11<sup>th</sup> in the league. Not bad, but when that's the best you have to offer, it's a big problem.

Kansas City opened on the road against a mediocre Houston Oilers team. The Chiefs did not run the ball well and only had 25 minutes of possession time. By rights, they should have lost, but the Oilers racked up over 100 yards in penalties and KC escaped with a 20-19 win.

They were better when the Oakland Raiders came to Arrowhead a week later. A defensive battle saw the Chiefs leading 7-0 in the third quarter. Defensive back James Hasty recovered a Raider fumble and raced 80 yards to the house. The play all but sealed what ended up as a 19-3 win.

The victory was a good start to what was a stretch of four consecutive games against AFC West rivals. Kansas City went to Seattle (an AFC West team prior to the realignment of 2002) and Bono played well. He tossed a 9-yard TD pass to Penn. Then Carter got in the act on offense and caught a 46-yard touchdown pass. Allen and Hill combined for 109 yards on 23 carries and the Chiefs coasted, 35-17.

A week later at home, Bono outplayed Denver's great John Elway. Bono went 20/35 for 242 yards and capped the afternoon off by leading a fourth quarter touchdown drive that pulled out a 17-14 win.

The winning streak came to halt the next week in San Diego when the lack of a running game or any pressure from the defensive line led to a 22-19 loss. But the Chiefs were 4-1 and there was reason to expect anything less than another playoff trip for Marty's boys.

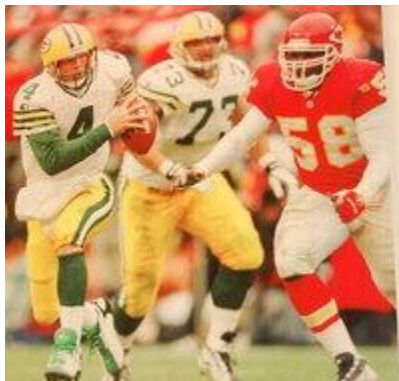
Pittsburgh had gone to the Super Bowl in 1995 and would return to the playoffs in '96. They came into Arrowhead on a Monday Night and simply pounded the Chiefs. The KC defense got carved up by mediocre veteran quarterback Mike Tomczak and was muscled up front in the running game. A 17-7 loss could have been much worse and sent Kansas City into their bye week on a dour note.

Another prime-time home game awaited on the far side of the bye, this one a Thursday Night visit from Seattle. The Chiefs showed they had made the most of the time off. They were up 20-3 by halftime, played efficient football in every way and dispatched the mediocre Seahawks 34-16.

It was time for a visit to Denver. In a division that tended to be very balanced, the Broncos were the ones emerging for a big year. That Week 4 visit to Kansas City was their only loss thus far. The Chiefs needed to win to keep pace and lock up the tiebreaker situation. Instead, their worst performance of the season ensued.

Kansas City was outrushed by Denver 213-24. The Chiefs committed twelve penalties. Their only points came on a kickoff return by Tamarick Vanover. They lost 34-7. Denver was in command of the AFC West.

A stretch of four games in five weeks against NFC teams was ahead. Kansas City got well in a visit to playoff-bound Minnesota. The defense got rolling and took a 7-0 lead into the fourth quarter. The KC running game, on its way to a 202-48 edge in rush yardage took over down the stretch. Hill ran in for touchdowns from 17 and 10 yards respectively and the Chiefs won 21-6.



Brett Favre's Green Bay Packers were having a big year that would end up with a Super Bowl victory. They came to Kansas City and the Chiefs were dominant.

Bono only went 9-for-22, but those nine completions produced over 200 yards. Hill rushed for 94 yards. There were no turnovers. KC led 27-6 in the third quarter and only some empty points late in the game made the final score cosmetically close at 27-20.

Chicago was the next visitor to Arrowhead. The Bears were mediocre, and the Chiefs, seemingly on a roll, were a (-8.5) favorite. They didn't play as well as the previous two weeks, but KC stopped Chicago on the ground, while getting a combined 116 yards from the Allen/Hill combo. The Chiefs escaped 14-10.

San Diego, in the midst of a mediocre year after two straight playoff seasons, made their return visit to Kansas City. The afternoon was a disaster for the Chiefs. They were down 28-0 after three quarters. Backup quarterback Rich Gannon came in and threw a couple fourth quarter touchdowns, but the 28-14 final was never a game.

A short week followed with a Thanksgiving Day trip to Detroit. The Lions of this era were generally good, with Barry Sanders. But '96 was a hard year and they only won five games. For the national audience, the Kansas City defense kept Barry under control, limiting him to 77 yards. Allen and Hill combined to carry 32 times for 176 yards. Gannon didn't make big plays, but he was efficient—15/18 for 120 yards. And he rallied the Chiefs in the fourth quarter, turning a 21-14 deficit into a 28-24 win.



There were three games to go. Kansas City was in firm control of their playoff destiny. Even though Denver, now 12-1, had everything in the AFC all but put away, there were three wild-card berths available. The Chiefs were one of two teams at 9-4—the Bills and Patriots had that same record and were tied atop the AFC East.

Every other contender—San Diego, Indianapolis and Houston was 7-6. Jacksonville was 6-7. Kansas City had pole position and extra rest for the stretch drive following Thanksgiving.

That extra rest didn't do much the following Monday Night in Oakland. Gannon was awful, going 12/33 for 88 yards. The Chiefs were flagged eleven times. They trailed 26-0 after three quarters and lost 26-7. The Bills had also lost on Sunday, so KC and Buffalo were still tied at 9-5, with New England getting control of an AFC East race they would win. Indianapolis had pulled up to 8-6. But San Diego had lost, while Jacksonville beat Houston, putting those three teams at 7-7. KC was still in good shape.

But the schedule had both the Colts and Bills on it, the latter on the road to end the season. That further heightened the importance of the late Sunday afternoon kick with Indy—the team that had broken Kansas City's heart in the playoffs a year earlier.

Gannon got the start and pulled a hamstring early on. Bono came back and was facing an early 14-0 hole. Even though Allen and Hill combined for 97 yards, the quick deficit meant they could only carry a combined twenty times. The Chiefs rallied, but lost 24-19.

Buffalo's loss meant that the Chiefs, Bills and Colts were all 9-6. Tiebreakers meant that Indy had clinched one of the three spots. San Diego had lost, so they were out. But Jacksonville had won and nudged to 8-7. What's more, the Jaguars controlled tiebreakers on both the Bills and Chiefs.

Thus, it was simple—if Jacksonville beat Atlanta, the Jags grabbed the second playoff spot. Which meant that Buffalo-Kansas City was winner-take-all for the final berth. Both games were early on Sunday afternoon and the Jaguars took care of business.

The Chiefs and Bills were on similar trajectories—perennial contenders of the 1990s seemingly determined to kick away their playoff berth down the stretch. They both played like it in this game. Bono was back, but only went 14/28 for 138 yards and two interceptions. Allen, as he always did in the biggest games, played well and carried 20 times for 87 yards. The Chiefs took a 9-6 lead into the fourth quarter. But Kansas City turned the ball over three times down the stretch and lost 20-9.

In the blink of an eye—three straight losses—it was over. To make matters worse, Jacksonville went on to upset Buffalo, then stun Denver in the divisional round and create a wide-open AFC bracket. One that a veteran team like Kansas City might have found a way to come through. The December collapse denied them the chance.

**1997**

The 1997 Kansas City Chiefs bounced back with a vengeance. They had a big year, won a division title and earned a #1 seed for the playoffs. But the all-too-familiar specter of heartbreak in January caught up with them in the end and augured the end of an era.

Derrick Thomas recorded 9 ½ sacks and racked up another Pro Bowl season in '97. The same went for perennial Pro Bowler Dale Carter at corner. James Hasty also made the Pro Bowl in the secondary.

Even though the Chiefs parted ways with defensive end Neil Smith, a staple of their success, and let him walk to divisional rival Denver, the KC D still ranked first in the league in points allowed.

The running game had been a two-pronged attack for several years, with Hall of Fame veteran Marcus Allen combining with Greg Hill. A third prong was added with Donnell Bennett. These three backs, along with Kimble Anders, all were in the neighborhood of 400-550 yards for the season.

Anders' real strength was catching the football, and had his third straight Pro Bowl season at fullback on the strength of 59 catches. What makes that number significant in context is that it no longer led the team. At long last, Kansas City found a receiver who could stretch the field and be the primary target.

That receiver was Andre Rison, fresh off winning a Super Bowl in 1996 with Brett Favre and the Green Bay Packers. Rison came in and caught 72 balls, averaged better than fifteen yards a catch and made the Pro Bowl. Between Rison going deep and Anders, tight end Tony Popson and a 21-year-old rookie tight end by the name of Tony Gonzalez, KC had a passing game for the first time in three years.

Elvis Grbac had the keys to the offense, replacing Bono. Grbac's numbers weren't great—his 57% completion rate was middle of the pack and 6.2 yards-per-attempt were below the league average. But they were an upgrade from what Bono had been giving and Grbac only threw six interceptions all season. It was enough to win in the Schottenheimer system.

An early August 31 start saw Kansas City make a high-profile trip to Denver. The Broncos had been the 1-seed in the AFC playoffs in 1996 before a crushing loss sent them home early. They wanted redemption as much as the Chiefs and this game did not go well. KC fell behind early and even though Hill popped for 92 yards on just seven carries, that was the only bright spot in a 19-3 loss.

It was now four straight losses dating back to the end of 1996. That losing streak started with a Monday Night visit to Oakland. Perhaps it was appropriate that the streak would end the same way. KC made an MNF visit to their archrivals.

For the better part of three quarters, it was more of the same, the Chiefs in a 27-13 hole. Then, after a field goal, defensive back Darren Anderson picked off a pass and went 55 yards to the house. Grbac hit Rison a 33-yard touchdown strike. The quarterback ended the night 21/35 for

312 yards. Rison caught eight balls for 162 yards. As it turned out, Anderson's Pick-6 had not just turned the tide of this game, but the entire trajectory of the season.

Trailing 13-9 against Buffalo, another perennial 1990s contender that would fall hard this season, the Chiefs got a 94-yard kickoff return from their great return man, Tamarick Vanover. Playing mistake-free football, KC pulled out a 22-16 win.

A road trip to Carolina was next. The Panthers were fresh off a run to the NFC Championship Game in their second year of existence. This year would see them fall back to mediocrity. Grbac threw a 55-yard touchdown pass to Anders, then found Rison from eight yards out. Staked to a 14-0 lead, the Chiefs defense got down to work. They delivered five sacks, four interceptions and an easy 35-14 win.

Kansas City came home for a late afternoon kick against mediocre Seattle. Grbac didn't play well and threw three interceptions. But the running game pounded out over 200 yards and kept the ball from Warren Moon, now in Seattle. It took overtime, but the Chiefs won 20-17.

A road trip to Miami was a battle of playoff contenders. Kansas City fell behind 7-0. Grbac then tossed a 16-yard touchdown pass to Rison and a 21-yarder to Gonzalez. But KC's running game did not get started. Neither did the Dolphins' and the game stayed tight. Dan Marino made a few more plays than Grbac and the Chiefs lost 17-14. They went into their bye week at 4-2.

The Chargers came to Arrowhead on a Thursday Night. San Diego, after producing good-to-decent teams for the past several years, collapsed in 1997. Grbac tossed a couple short TD passes to Rison in the second quarter, the score was 24-0 by halftime and ended 31-3. Kansas City then crossed the state to play the St. Louis Rams, won the turnover battle 4-zip and the football game 28-20.

Now up to 6-2, a Monday Night visit from Pittsburgh, another AFC contender, loomed large. It was the first of three straight games against good playoff teams. The Chiefs fell behind 10-0 in the first quarter, but led 13-10 by halftime. Then a tough defensive battle loomed for the second half. Kansas City's running game controlled the clock for 36 minutes and rolled up 183 yards. That was the difference as the 13-10 lead stood up to the end.

Something else happened in the course of the win. Grbac had been knocked out. Rich Gannon was coming in. It would be the start of a debate that would go on within the locker room and the fanbase for the rest of the season.

The Chiefs went to Jacksonville and turned the ball over five times, losing 24-3 to Tom Coughlin's Jaguars. It set up the biggest game of the season to date, a visit from Denver on November 16. KC was two games back of the Broncos in the AFC West and a second loss to their archrival would basically finish any hopes of winning the division.

By most standards, Kansas City was outplayed. Gannon only went 11/21 for 98 yards. John Elway played pretty well for Denver, and Terrell Davis ran the ball for the Broncos. Between the 20-yard lines, Denver more or less did as they wished.

But inside the red zone, the Chiefs defense was on. They forced five field goals. In the meantime, KC was making their drives count. In spite of being outplayed, they only trailed 22-21 late in the game. Gannon drove the Chiefs down to the Bronco 37-yard line.



There was time for one more play. Pete Stoyanovich came on to try a 54-yard field goal into a slight wind. He nailed it. Bedlam ensued. Kansas City was 8-3, a game back in the AFC West and now holding the tiebreaker on Denver thanks to divisional record.

A road trip to Seattle followed. There was a bit of a letdown. But the defense got to Moon five times, two of the sacks coming from defensive end Vaughn Booker. Gannon found Rison six times for 90 yards and the Chiefs were able to grind out a 19-14 win.

The San Francisco 49ers were on their way to the 1-seed in the AFC. Both Kansas City and Denver still had to play the 49ers, so this had the potential to be the X-factor in the AFC West. The Chiefs hosted San Fran on the final day of November.

Kansas City delivered a thoroughly dominating performance. Rison caught five balls for 117 yards. The defense pressured San Francisco's great quarterback Steve Young, with outside linebacker Pellom McDaniels and defensive end Dan Williams each getting home twice. When Young could throw, he was kept to underneath routes. If there were any doubts that the Chiefs were Super Bowl contenders, this 44-9 demolition ended them.

A soft schedule was now ahead—the final three opponents were Oakland, San Diego and New Orleans and none would finish better than 6-10. Denver, by contrast, had road trips to Pittsburgh and San Francisco. The Chiefs needed to win out and hope the Broncos lost once.

Gannon was sharp at home against the Raiders, going 15/21 for 225 yards. The balanced running attack produced over 200 yards and over 40 minutes of possession time. The final was 30-0. And out in Pittsburgh, the Steelers knocked off the Broncos. Kansas City controlled their destiny for everything in the AFC.

Thomas got unleashed in the road trip to San Diego, ringing up three sacks. Williams added two more. Defensive back Mark McMillian added an 87-yard Pick-6. The final was 30-0. The following night, Denver lost in San Francisco. The Chiefs were AFC West champs and had the 1-seed locked up.

They also had a quarterback controversy on their hands. Grbac was back and old-school thinking said a player should never lose his starting job due to injury. Grbac got the start in the meaningless finale, a 25-13 win at home over the Saints. But the debate was on—Grbac or Gannon for the playoffs?

From the perspective of history, we know that Gannon would eventually leave Kansas City, win an MVP award in Oakland and take the Raiders to the Super Bowl in 2002. From the

perspective of 1997, it was less clear. Players were reported to prefer Gannon as the better leader. But the head coach, old-school to his core, went with Grbac.

Kansas City and Denver were clearly the best two teams in the AFC, finishing 13-3 and 12-4 respectively. So when chalk held in the wild-card round, it meant they would meet up for a third time in the divisional playoffs.

On a late afternoon start on Sunday that brought an end to Divisional Round weekend, the Chiefs and Broncos played a fantastic, slug-it-out football game. Kansas City trailed 7-0 at the half and had to settle for a 20-yard field goal in the third quarter. They nudged ahead 10-7 in the fourth quarter.

What the Chiefs were not doing was running the ball. Rison caught eight balls for 110 yards, but that was all the offense that could be mustered. Neil Smith, anxious to prove a point to his former employers, sacked Grbac twice. Denver could run the ball, with Davis going for 101 yards. The Broncos took a 14-10 lead.

Grbac led the Chiefs down the field on one last drive late in the game, getting to the 23-yard line. But his fourth down throw into the end zone was batted away. Another Kansas City season ended in heartbreak.

## **CONCLUSION**

Officially, the Schottenheimer era lasted one more year, but its effective end was 1997. The Chiefs slipped to 7-9 in 1998 and there was a mutual parting of the ways between the coach and the organization.

Kansas City slipped into a long period of decline. There were occasional playoff trips--2006 under Herm Edwards and 2010 with Todd Haley at the helm. But those felt like that 1986 playoff berth that immediately pre-dated Marty's time here--they were out of nowhere, never felt like anything solid to build on and quickly dissipated.

The next real era of success came when Andy Reid arrived in 2013. The first five years of Reid's tenure were a lot like Marty's--the Chiefs were good, they made the playoffs...and they managed to lose some crushing playoff games. A record collapse in Indianapolis. A heartbreaker at home to Pittsburgh. An inexplicable home loss to Tennessee. Same old, same old, for better and for worse.

Then Patrick Mahomes arrived. Kansas City won a playoff game in his rookie year of 2018. There was still heartbreak--an overtime AFC Championship Game loss to Tom Brady and the Patriots, but this seemed to feel different. It was. Kansas City got their long-awaited breakthrough a year later with a Super Bowl victory. They went back to the Super Bowl the following year, even if Brady (now in Tampa) got in the way again. But this generation of Chiefs fans knows what it feels like to win that last game of the year.

I live in New England and have likened the Chiefs of 2019 to the Red Sox of 2004--a historic breakthrough for a long-suffering organization with great fans. When the '04 Red Sox won their title, Curt Schilling made a clubhouse toast asking that all the players from the franchise's past now be remembered as the great players they were.

I hope the Mahomes Era can do the same for the great players and coaches in the Kansas City Chiefs' past. Marty Schottenheimer was a *great* football coach. Now that the fan base knows what winning it all feels like--and sees just how great of a quarterback it can take to get there--let's allow Marty and everyone associated with the Chiefs' teams of 1989-97 take their rightful place in history.