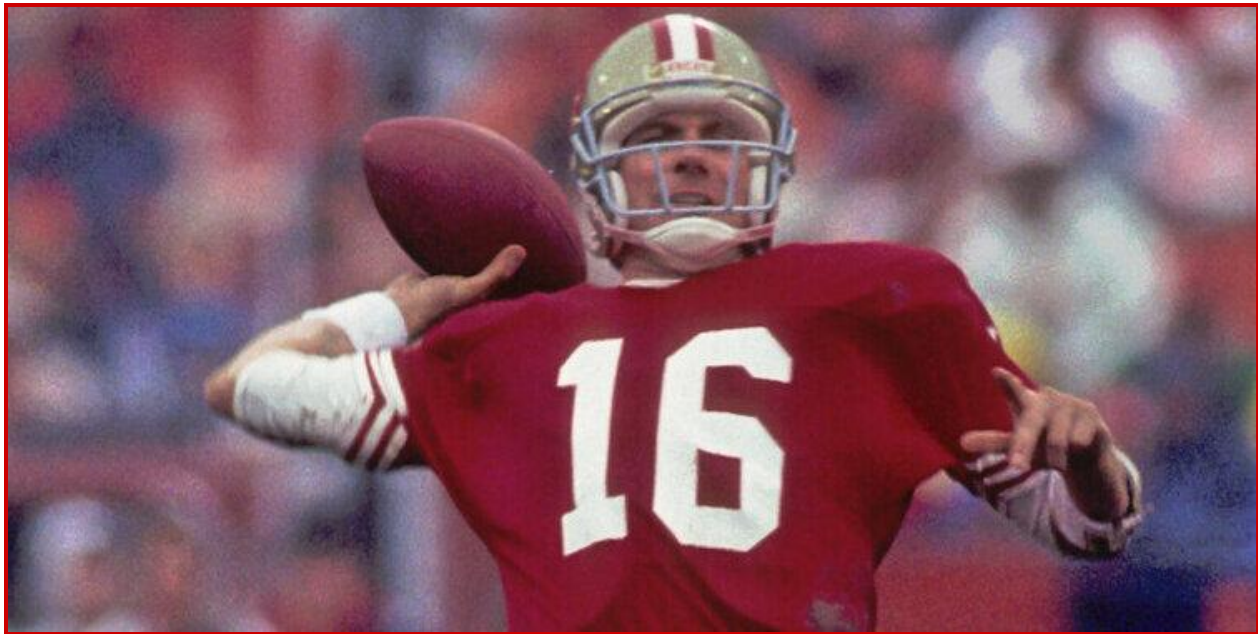


## **TEAM OF THE EIGHTIES: MONTANA'S 49ERS**

***San Francisco From 1981-89***



The San Francisco 49ers had been a moderately successful franchise in the early 1970s with John Brodie at quarterback, but those teams came up short in the playoffs and the franchise then fell on hard times. A 2-14 season in 1978 was the bottoming out point.

San Francisco went out and hired Bill Walsh, who had been a successful offensive coordinator in Cincinnati and then a winning head coach at Stanford. Walsh was committed to what was then a revolutionary strategy in offensive football.

Rather than build around the running game or the deep ball, Walsh designed his offense to run precision short passing, at times using the short pass as a substitute for the run. It was called "The West Coast offense".

Did it work? The ultimate success of the 49ers in the ensuing decade is enough to claim success on its own, but the West Coast offense made Walsh one of the most significant figures in NFL history. Pretty soon every team was running it. Walsh's staff produced successful head coaches and they in turn produced winning head coaches of their own. The "coaching tree" of Bill Walsh is nothing short of legendary.

But for that to have happened, Walsh needed to have found the perfect quarterback to run his West Coast offensive system. He found him in Joe Montana.

Montana had already built a clutch reputation at Notre Dame, helping the Irish win a national title in 1977 and then authoring a legendary comeback in the Cotton Bowl of 1978. Walsh and Montana came to San Francisco together for 1979.

Two years of taking their lumps were followed by an explosion onto the scene in 1981. The 49ers posted the best record in the league and won the Super Bowl, producing some of the NFL's most iconic playoff moments along the way.

A strike-shortened year in 1982 was a mess, but the 49ers bounced back in 1983. They reached the NFC Championship Game. By 1984, they were back on top with one of the great Super Bowl champions of all time.

1985 and 1986 were good seasons for most any other organization—double-digit wins and playoff trips. But in both cases, the 49ers left the postseason early and no one was all that surprised when they did. Montana's back was starting to cause him problems and there were questions about whether the great quarterback was finished.

The next three seasons answered the question and also answered the question about who the Team of the 1980s was. The 49ers posted the best record in the NFL in 1987. That year saw a playoff flameout, but there was no such problem in 1988 or 1989. The 49ers won back-to-back Super Bowls to conclude the decade with four titles.

Walsh had stepped down in 1988 with longtime defensive coordinator leading the way to the 1989 title. The 1990 team was driven to three-peat and came closer than anyone else in NFL history has to doing it. But an injury to Montana in the NFC Championship Game was followed by a crushing loss.

*Team Of The Eighties* takes you on a game-by-game journey through the 49ers' eight successful seasons (1981 and 1983 through 1989). Each season has its own article published individually on TheSportsNotebook.com. Those articles are pulled together and edited for this compilation.

Montana isn't the only great player you'll read about in these pages. Wide receiver Jerry Rice and safety Ronnie Lott are each generally acknowledged as the best ever at their positions. Roger Craig was an exceptionally versatile running back. Dwight Clark was a reliable wide receiver for a long time. The offensive line was anchored by names like Fred Quillan, Randy Cross and Harris Barton. The defense included Michael Carter, Eric Wright, Carlton Williamson and a whole lot more.

They came together to make the San Francisco 49ers the *Team Of The Eighties*.

**1981**

Montana had a good tandem of receivers in possession man Dwight Clark and deep threat Freddie Solomon. Defensively the Niners needed help and they were banking on three rookie defensive backs—Eric Wright, Carlton Williamson and Ronnie Lott to step in and make immediate impact. No one was thinking about the Super Bowl, but the 1981 San Francisco 49ers had reason to think the winning was around the corner.

The season didn't start off well. They lost their opener in Detroit and a Week 3 game at defending NFC West champ Atlanta gave absolutely no evidence that a changing of the guard in the NFC West in the offing. The Niners fell behind early, Montana did not play well and Atlanta's Steve Bartkowski carved up the young secondary in a 34-17 final.



Consecutive wins over New Orleans and Washington got Walsh's team to 3-2 and set up a mid-October home game with Dallas. No one was prepared for what happened in Candlestick Park.

The 49ers had a 21-0 lead by the end of the first quarter and the Cowboys never got back into the game. Montana was efficient and Clark racked up over 100 yards in receiving. The 45-14 final sent a clear message to the conference's traditional power.

There was no letdown afterward, as a win over Green Bay set up a game with Los Angeles. The 49ers again got off to fast start, leading 14-0 after a quarter. Montana and Ram quarterback Pat Haden—a future TV analyst and USC athletic director—each played well, but Montana was able to play with a lead, Clark again had 100-plus receiving yards and San Fran churned out a 20-17 win.

One week later it was the defense who took center stage in Pittsburgh. While the Steelers, the dominant team of the 1970s, had begun their decline the previous year and missed the playoffs in 1980, they were still respected and the 14-3 shutdown performance was yet another sign that Walsh had something special going by the Bay.

In the meantime, Atlanta and Los Angeles were fading fast and would fall to 7-9 and 6-10 respectively. San Francisco was able to coast home, winning both remaining games against its division rivals, finishing 13-3 and securing both the NFC West and the top seed in the playoffs. They and Dallas were light-years ahead of the rest of the NFC and the October win was the difference in making the road to the Super Bowl come through Frisco.

San Francisco took the field for their first playoff game, facing the New York Giants. The Niners again scored first. Their fast starts were no coincidence, as Walsh had instituted the practice of scripting the first 25 plays, regardless of down and distance and San Fran used its preparation to consistently get the early edge.

In this game, Giant quarterback Scott Brunner wiped out the early deficit with a 72-yard strike to Earnest Gray, but the 49ers kicked into another gear for the second quarter, scoring 17 points, including a 58-yard pass from Montana to Solomon.

The day of long scoring passes continued when Brunner completed a 59-yard play to cut the margin back to 24-14, but ultimately the Giant signal-caller was not efficient, completing only 16 of 37 passes, while Montana was a cool 20-for-31. The final was 38-24 and when Dallas destroyed Tampa Bay in the other divisional game, the NFC title showdown was set.

The 1981 NFC Championship Game was about more than who would play in the Super Bowl. It was about one proud traditional power looking to keep what it saw as their rightful place atop the conference, and another up-and-comer looking to change the landscape.

It was a game worthy of those stakes. San Francisco—have you heard this before?—struck first and took a 7-0 lead in the first quarter, but Dallas scored 10 points before the quarter was out. The teams traded TDs and the lead in the second quarter and it was 17-14 Cowboys at the half.

San Francisco was nursing a 21-20 lead into the fourth quarter when Dallas quarterback Danny White found tight end Doug Cosbie for a touchdown. With the 49ers pinned on their own 12-yard-line and only 4:54 left, it looked like the Old Guard would hold on.

Dallas went to its softer coverages, and Walsh took advantage by running sweeps—without blitzing or constant penetration, the pulling guards could get good blocking angles, and San Francisco ran its way out of the shadow of their end zone. They eventually worked their way down to the Dallas 6-yard line with less than a minute to go, facing third-and-goal.



Montana rolled right, under pressure. He decided to throw the ball away, but didn't quite get it out of the end zone. It was Clark who skied and snared the ball by his fingertips. An epic Sports Illustrated cover caught Clark's catch at its apex and it went into NFL lore as simply "The Catch."

The game didn't end there. A Cowboy field goal could still undo The Catch and White hit Drew Pearson over the middle and got to the 50-yard line. Pearson nearly pulled away, but Eric Wright grabbed the receiver's jersey and hung on for dear life. One play later, gut pressure forced White into both a sack and fumble and the 49ers had won.

San Francisco's win had already ensured a changing of the guard in the NFL. A new team was coming out of the AFC as well, with Cincinnati validating its #1 seed with two home playoff wins over Buffalo and San Diego, the latter played in frigid and windy temperatures. The Super Bowl would be the first one played at a non-warm weather city. Detroit, with the old Pontiac Silverdome, would host the game.

Continuing their pattern, Montana's offense got on the board with a first-quarter touchdown and with the Bengals suffering turnover problems, The 49ers added another TD in the second quarter and followed it up with two field goals to take a 20-0 lead into the locker room. The lead could've been larger, as the Bengal defense had stiffened near the goal line on the last two scoring drives. But it was nothing compared to what the Frisco defense had in store for the nation.

Cincinnati cut the lead to 20-7 and then drove to the 1-yard-line for a 1<sup>st</sup>-and-goal. Big fullback Pete Johnson was one of the best short-yardage bruisers in the league. He went into the line once and was stopped. He went into the line again and was stopped.

On third down, Cincinnati threw a swing pass to the goal line, but an outstanding tackle saved the touchdown. On fourth and less than a yard, Johnson tried again. And again was stopped. Even though the Bengals did cut the lead to 20-14, the momentum seemed clearly in San Francisco's direction.

The Niners used that momentum for a pair of time-consuming drives that both ended in field goals from veteran kicker Ray Wersching. The Bengals got another late touchdown to make it 26-21 but when the 49ers covered the onside kick, it was all over.

Not only were two new teams in the Super Bowl, but San Francisco's win ushered in a new dynasty. The 49ers would win three more championships with Montana at the helm, another with Steve Young in 1994, while Walsh's successor George Seifert would lead the way to two of those rings. Walsh's West Coast offense revolutionized the game and his "Coaching Tree" of assistants became the most successful ever spawned.

It all began with the 1981 San Francisco 49ers and The Drive, The Catch & The Goal-Line Stand.

## 1983

After a surprise run to win the Super Bowl in 1981, the San Francisco 49ers slipped back to 3-6 in the strike-shortened year of 1982. The possibility that the championship year was a fluke appeared a real possibility. The 1983 San Francisco 49ers didn't win it all, but by reaching the NFC Championship Game they established that the duo of head coach Bill Walsh and quarterback Joe Montana was here to stay.

Montana stepped up with a big year and threw for over 3,900 yards and his 64.5% completion rate was exceptional. The great quarterback finished with 26-12 TD/INT ratio, very good by the standards of the era and his 7.6 yards-per-pass was pretty good. He was the undisputed leader of the fourth-best offense in the NFL.

Production from the skill positions was balanced, with Roger Craig and Wendell Tyler combining to rush for over 1,500 yards. Both were good pass catchers, a necessity in a West Coast

offense that was still a new idea in 1983. Craig's 48 catches were second-best on the team and Tyler snagged 34 more.

The 49ers' best receiver was Clark and this year he caught 70 passes for 840 yards. Solomon was the big-play threat, averaging 21.4 yards-per-catch, and Montana worked #3 wide receiver Mike Wilson and tight end Russ Francis into the attack.

There were no Pro Bowlers on the offensive line, meaning Montana was the only player in the entire offense to make it to Honolulu. The fact San Francisco was as productive as it was, is reason for Montana to have won the MVP award over Washington Redskins' quarterback Joe Theisman (and I write that as one who was a Redskins fan).

The San Francisco defense was a similar story—the fourth-best unit in the league built primarily around Pro Bowl corner Ronnie Lott. He had some help from fellow Pro Bowler, free safety Dwight Hicks. Big plays came from corner Eric Wright and his seven interceptions, while defensive end Dwaine Board recorded 13 sacks.

San Francisco opened the season on the Saturday before Labor Day, their game against the Philadelphia Eagles coming in advance of the rest of the league. It didn't look like anything had changed from the dysfunction of 1982. Montana had to leave the game, the offense bogged down in the second half and the 49ers lost 22-17 to a bad team.

There was no time to lick wounds, because a Thursday night road trip to Minnesota was up next. Thursday night games were a rarity in 1983, and Montana took full advantage of the chance to show off for the country. He went 17/24 for 230 yards and four touchdowns. Wright picked off three passes and brought one 60 yards to the house in a 48-17 win over an average opponent.

The bleeding stopped, San Francisco caught its breath and went to St. Louis, then the home of the Cardinals. Montana hit Solomon on a 69-yard touchdown strike to get the game rolling and the quarterback didn't stop until had 341 yards and three touchdowns. The defense produced another Pick-6, this one from Tim Collins and the result was a 42-27 rout over a team that would finish with a winning record.

Atlanta had been the NFC West's best in 1982. They came to San Francisco, and held a 20-17 lead late before Montana led a touchdown drive that was capped off with a 1-yard scoring flip and a 24-20 win. The quarterback went to New England and carved up the Patriots with 288 yards spread around to eleven different receivers in a 33-13 rout.

A three-week run of NFC West opponents was up next, with both games against the Los Angeles Rams sandwiched around a visit to New Orleans. It started with a home date with the Rams and their great rookie running back Eric Dickerson. Montana threw the ball well, for 316 yards, but the Niners had no running game and didn't convert their chances. They allowed 142 yards to Dickerson and lost 10-7.

Montana's offense came blazing back with a combined 77 points in the next two road games. They blew open a tight 13-12 game in New Orleans with a 62-yard interception return by Dwight Hicks, forced five turnovers and won 32-13. Then, trailing 28-17 after three quarters in Los Angeles, Montana hit Clark on a 46-yard touchdown pass, threw two more fourth quarter touchdown passes and Board recovered a fumble in the end zone. It was a stunning finish to a 45-35 win and had the Niners firmly on track.

Just when they were on track, things started to go awry. A poor running game cost them a home game with the mediocre New York Jets, 27-13. Another AFC East opponent in the Miami Dolphins came to old Candlestick Park next. The Dolphins had a dynamic rookie quarterback in Dan Marino, and one year down the road, Montana and Marino would meet in the Super Bowl. San Francisco lost a tough 20-17 game on a late field goal.

The NFC West race was now a dogfight, with the 49ers, Rams and Saints all tied at 6-4. Only the Falcons had faded from consideration.

San Francisco dominated a big home game with New Orleans. Tyler ran for 92 yards, defensive end Fred Dean had six sacks, keying a nine-sack day overall. Clark caught six passes for 87 yards, Tyler ran for 92 more and the Niners won 27-0.

But they gave it right back in Atlanta a week later, blowing a 14-0 lead and losing 28-24. They gave up a defensive TD and Montana couldn't get the ball to Solomon down the field, and his 21/28 day was good for only 182 yards. The offensive woes continued in an 18mph wind in Chicago. Unable to pass, the 49ers only ran for 72 yards and turned it over four times in a 13-3 loss to the mediocre Bears.

Now it was Los Angeles that was in control of the NFC West at 8-5, with San Francisco and New Orleans a game back. The 49ers controlled tiebreakers against the Saints thanks to the sweep, but were a half-game behind the Rams in divisional record, meaning the odds were against San Francisco in a two-way tie with Los Angeles.

A home game with a horrible Tampa Bay team couldn't have come at a better team. The 49ers overwhelmed the Buccaneers in rush yardage, 227-38, as Tyler and Craig led the way in a 35-14 win. The Rams were upset by the Eagles, a team that didn't do much in 1983 except knock off contenders in the NFC West.

One week later, San Francisco faced a familiar situation—a road game in a cold environment amidst a stiff wind against an opponent that would finish the year 8-8. This game in Buffalo went better than the one in Chicago. Montana threw for 218 yards and no interceptions and the Niners muscled out a 127-120 edge in rushing yardage. Lott intercepted two passes and they got a 23-10 win. The Rams lost at home to the Patriots and the 49ers were in first place.

The season finale was a Monday Night game at home with the Dallas Cowboys, who sported a 12-3 record. The good news for San Francisco was that in spite of their record, the Cowboys had already lost the NFC East race to the Redskins and knew they would host the NFC wild-card game a week later. This game meant nothing.

The bad news—or at least the unsettling news—was that San Francisco wasn't even assured of a playoff berth. The postseason format of the time was three divisional winners and two wild-cards. The only spots that were locked in place were the NFC's top seed (Redskins) and the 4-seed (Cowboys). Everything else was a possibility for San Francisco, including missing altogether.

The games to focus on were both in the early TV window on Sunday. If Green Bay lost in Chicago, it would clinch at least a playoff spot. If the Rams lost in New Orleans it would clinch the NFC West.

San Francisco got half their wish, and the more important part. Each game went to last-second field goals. Even though the Rams won, the Packers fell and the Niners knew they were back in the playoffs. Then they went and got the #2 seed against a disinterested opponent on MNF. The 49ers were up 21-3 by the time the first quarter was done, Montana threw four touchdowns and Wright's Pick-6 in the fourth quarter sealed the 42-17 win.

It was expected that Dallas would be right back in the Bay Area two weeks later, but the Cowboys showed up flat against the Rams and lost the wild-card game. The playoff rules prior to 1990 prohibited teams from the same division playing prior to the conference championship game. San Francisco instead drew the 9-7 Detroit Lions on New Year's Eve afternoon.

The Niners spotted the Lions a 3-0 lead, but then began intercepting Detroit quarterback Gary Danielson, a current CBS college football analyst, left and right. They picked off four Danielson passes in the first half alone, one setting up a touchdown by Craig and the other a TD run by Tyler.

But Montana wasn't sharp today, and San Francisco missed the chance to blow the game open early. They led only 14-9 at half. A third-quarter field goal gave them some comfort with an eight-point lead (there was no two-point conversion in the NFL until 1996), but then they gave up two rushing touchdowns to Detroit's Billy Sims and were behind 23-17.

Montana then did what Montana does, and that's shake off the doldrums with a season at stake and lead a clutch drive. This one went 70 yards, capped off with a 14-yard touchdown pass to Solomon with 1:23 left. Detroit came back and got in field goal range, but a 42-yard try missed and the 49ers had survived.

San Francisco was a big (+10) underdog at Washington, where the Redskins had crushed people all year long. After a scoreless first quarter, the 49ers started to look like the next roadkill falling behind 21-0 going into the fourth quarter. Then Montana suddenly awoke, threw three touchdown passes, including a 76-yard strike to Solomon and the game was tied.

The lack of a running game was hurting the 49ers, as they were outrushed 172-87, negating Montana's 27/48 for 347-yard performance. The Redskins drove for the winning field goal, aided by a hotly disputed pass interference call on Eric Wright. The game ended 24-21.



San Francisco had still re-established their footing with Montana and Walsh and bigger things were just around the corner.

## 1984

The 1984 San Francisco 49ers made it all the way back. They not only won another title, they were one of the all-time great Super Bowl champions.

Montana completed 65 percent of his passes in 1984, throwing for over 3,600 yards and a 28/10 TD-INT ratio as he made the Pro Bowl. Most of the damage was done underneath. Craig led the team in catches with 71. Clark caught 52 passes for 880 yards.

When the 49ers stretched the field, they did it with Solomon, while H-back Earl Cooper provided another target for Montana underneath.

San Francisco was anything but one-dimensional. Wend Tyler had a Pro Bowl year at running back, with over 1,200 yards while Craig chipped in 649 more. And the offensive line was dominant—right tackle Keith Fahnorst was a first-team All-Pro, while center Fred Quinlan and right guard Randy Cross each made the Pro Bowl.

It added up to the second-best offense in the NFL in scoring, but for all the hype surrounding the 49ers offense, the genius of Walsh and the excellence of Montana, it was a historically underrated defense that drove the greatness of the 1984 San Francisco 49ers.

The Niner defense was the best in the NFL. They ranked higher than Buddy Ryan's Chicago Bears, who would take the league by storm one year later. The 49er defense ranked higher than the New York Giants of L.T. and Bill Parcells, higher than Seattle with Defensive Player of the Year Kenny Easley.



They did it with three Pro Bowlers— Keena Turner, Eric Wright and Ronnie Lott. Defensive end Dwaine Board didn't make the Pro Bowl, but recorded ten sacks. Defensive coordinator George Seifert, one day to win two Super Bowls himself as a head coach, orchestrated it all.

The opening game of the season was at Detroit. The Lions would finish 4-11-1 and their great running back Billy Sims, would suffer a career-ending injury. But on September 2, this was a rematch from a playoff game in 1983, where the Niners barely survived the Lions, and Sims was still healthy for the

opener.

San Francisco held Sims to 69 yards rushing, but trailed 20-17 after three quarters. Kicker Ray Wersching hit a clutch 53-yard field goal to tie the game, and with the score 27-27, Montana led a drive that set up another Wersching field goal, this one from 22 yards, to win it.

The 49ers returned home for another playoff rematch, this one with **the** Washington Redskins on the Monday Night stage. The 'Skins had reached the Super Bowl each of the last two years, winning once, and San Francisco felt some poor officiating had cost them in last year's 1983 NFC Championship Game. San Francisco was favored by two points, but the fact it was less than the customary (-3) edge given the home team, suggest oddsmakers still thought Washington was the team to beat.

And beat them San Francisco did. There was no doubt about it. Tyler ran for a pair of first-quarter touchdowns, while the 49er defense held the potent Redskin ground attack to just 62 rushing yards. Montana was 24/40 for 381 yards. The score was 27-3 by halftime before a late flurry by Washington resulted in a respectable 37-31 final score.

A home date with New Orleans was next. After bolting to a 17-0 lead, the 49ers gave up 20 straight points. But the defense was turning the Saints over, and they intercepted five passes. Montana threw a go-ahead touchdown to Cooper and the Niners eventually won 30-20.

But Montana was temporarily sidelined, and an otherwise easy road trip to lowly Philadelphia now looked in doubt. Walsh turned to Matt Cavanaugh and he got it done, 17/34 for 252 yards and no interceptions. The Niner red-zone defense was clutch and the final was 21-9, with Montana ready to come back.

The great quarterback was not sharp in a home game with Atlanta, but he avoided mistakes and the defense was locked in with another great outing. A 14-5 victory made it two straight games without allowing a touchdown. Montana got back into rhythm the next week for another Monday Night audience—he went into L.T. 's house and threw a 59-yard touchdown pass to Renaldo Nehemiah to set the tone and San Francisco was up 21-0. The final was 31-10 against a team the Niners had not seen the last of.

San Francisco was an (-8) favorite at home against Pittsburgh, who had won their division in 1983 and would do so again in 1984. But the Steelers were the definition of a mediocre division champ, en route to a 9-7 season this year. Which made the home loss that followed all the more disappointing. The 49ers fell behind 10-0 and even after rallying for the lead, allowed a mediocre offense to steal a 20-17 win.

A road trip to the Houston Oilers (today's Tennessee Titans) was shaky. Even though the Oilers were a bad team, this was Warren Moon's first year in the NFL and he traded blows with Montana. San Francisco clung to a 27-21 lead in the fourth quarter before Montana threw an 80-yard touchdown strike to Clark. Tyler added 108 rushing yards to key the 34-21 win.

Another road trip, this one to a better team in the playoff-bound Rams, went better. Montana was 21/31 for 365 yards, no interceptions and spread the ball around. The defense forced five turnovers and the final was 33-0. San Francisco was 8-1 and running away with the NFC West.

The 49ers hosted the Bengals, the first time the teams had met since the Super Bowl following the 1981 season. Cincy was now an average team under a new coach in Sam Wyche. Despite being a (-10.5) favorite, the Niners trailed 17-10 after three quarters and Montana threw four

interceptions, with no running game to support him. The defense stepped up with six sacks, kept the team in it and Joe eventually threw a short TD pass to Solomon that was the key to pulling out a 23-17 win.

The defense kept it going at lowly Cleveland a week later, not allowing a touchdown until the fourth quarter when the score was 41-0. The 49ers out rushed the Browns 213-43. San Francisco followed up with a win over Tampa Bay, as Montana went 19/23 for 247 yards, while Tyler and Craig combined for 183 on the ground. The final was 24-17.

There were four games left and San Francisco was coasting to the #1 seed. The other elite teams in the NFL were all over in the AFC, where Miami, Denver and Seattle were jousting for the top spot. The Niners rolled through road games in New Orleans and Atlanta, 35-3 and 35-17 respectively. Tyler ran for 117 in New Orleans, while the defense forced six turnovers and scored two touchdowns in Atlanta.

A Saturday game with a terrible Minnesota Vikings team started with Montana hitting Clark on a 44-yard touchdown pass. The Niners built a 21-7 lead, then Montana went to Nehemiah for 59 yards and the avalanche really began, not stopping until the final was 51-7. Cavanaugh got some playing time, and went 10/14 for 100 yards himself.

The finale was a Friday night game at home with the Rams. It meant nothing to 49ers, while having meaning to Los Angeles, who still needed to win to clinch a wild-card spot in a packed race. Montana played and was efficient, going 20/31 for 219 yards, two touchdowns and no interceptions. They led 17-10 and then held off two Rams drives, keeping LA to field goals.

On the final Los Angeles possession, a sack for a safety clinched the 19-16 win. The Rams would end up making the playoffs anyway—even hosting the wild-card game. As for the 49ers, while the win did not impact their seeding, they became the first team to go 15-1, since the 16-game schedule was introduced in 1978.

After a week off, San Francisco prepared for a rematch with the New York Giants, who had upset Los Angeles in the wild-card round. The 49ers came into the late Saturday afternoon affair as a solid (-12) favorite over the 9-7 Giants who had lost their final two regular season games and backed into the postseason.

San Francisco came out firing, with Montana hitting Clark on a 21-yard touchdown pass. Lott intercepted a Phil Simms pass, setting up a Montana TD pass to tight end Russ Francis and the score was 14-0. Then Montana began to slip. He threw two interceptions that led directly to ten Giants points and it was a game again.

Before the second quarter was out, Montana found Solomon for a 29-yard touchdown pass that made it 21-10 at halftime. Neither team ran the ball, and Montana ended up throwing one more interception. But he also threw for 309 yards—112 of them to Clark, who caught nine balls. And the San Fran defense owned the day, with six sacks preventing the game from ever being in doubt. The final stayed at 21-10.

San Francisco would not get a rematch with Washington, as the 2-seed Redskins had been upset by the Bears. There was still plenty of emotional fire though—Walsh detested Buddy Ryan. Buddy's defense played pretty well in the NFC Championship Game, but San Francisco's unheralded defense was even better, and more to the point, the Bears had absolutely no passing game to speak of.

The 49ers drove inside the 5-yard line twice in the first half, but had to settle for field goals both times. It's often the kind of thing that haunts you in a championship game, but the other team has to have a semblance of an offensive threat. As great a running back as Walter Payton was, the injury to starting quarterback Jim McMahon at the end of the regular season meant San Francisco could crowd the line of scrimmage without fear.

Tyler's 9-yard touchdown run in the third quarter made it 13-0, and in the fourth quarter Montana found Solomon on a 10-yard touchdown pass. The defensive front turned it loose and ended up nine sacks on the day. Chicago only threw for 87 yards and the final score ended up 23-0.

The Super Bowl was going to be in San Francisco's backyard, on the campus of Stanford in Palo Alto. Even by the standards of Super Bowl-hype, this one had a lot going for it. The opponent was the Miami Dolphins who had a 14-2 record. The combined 29-3 regular season record of the two teams remains the best ever. Dolphin quarterback Dan Marino had a record-setting year throwing for both touchdowns and yardage was the league MVP. It was a great quarterback battle with him and Montana.

The 49ers were a (-3) favorite and the game started off like it might live up to the hype. The Dolphins scored first on a field goal. Montana and Marino traded touchdown passes and it was 10-7 Miami.

Then, without warning, the game turned. Montana threw an eight-yard touchdown pass to Craig. The quarterback ran in from six yards out, Craig had a short touchdown run and the score was suddenly 28-10 and it wasn't even halftime. Miami couldn't run the ball to save their life and would finish with 25 yards rushing on the day. And now the running game wasn't an option as they hoped Marino could pull them out of an 18-point hole.

The Dolphin quarterback didn't give up and led his team to a field goal. Then a fumble on the kickoff set up another Miami field goal. At 28-16, the game was still in play, but the fact the Dolphins had been inside the red zone on their two scoring possessions and settled for field goals was one more sign of how dominant the San Francisco defense was.

And the 49ers were running the ball. They would get 211 yards on the ground, with Craig and Tyler sharing the load. Craig also caught seven passes. Seifert went to six defensive backs, took away Marino's receivers and forced him to throw underneath. In the third quarter, San Francisco tacked on ten more points and it was all over but a meaningless fourth quarter. The 49ers completed the 38-16 rout.

The San Francisco defense deserves more recognition among the great defenses of all-time. In three postseason games they didn't allow a single point after halftime and they shut down one

of the great passers of the modern era in his best season. The 1984 San Francisco 49ers were more than a Super Bowl champion—they were one of the few teams that rose to a unique level of greatness.

## 1985

A 1985 season that would be a good one by the standards of most anyone else, was a letdown in San Francisco.

It wasn't for a lack of production at quarterback. Joe Montana was his usual Pro Bowl self, churning out over 3,600 yards, completing 61 percent of his passes and getting 7.4 yards-per-attempt. His best target was out of the backfield, where Roger Craig had a Pro Bowl year of his own, thanks to 92 catches—easily the most on the team.



Montana also had his veteran targets, Dwight Clark and tight end Russ Francis. And head coach Bill Walsh began getting a young receiver into the lineup. Jerry Rice, 23-years-old, caught 49 passes for 927 yards as the process of having Rice replace Freddie Solomon as the principal deep threat began.

Craig was also a 1,000-yard rusher, going behind a line that was anchored by Pro Bowl center Fred Quillan and 31-year-old Randy Cross at right guard. The balanced attack ranked fifth in the NFL in points scored.

The defense, which had been the best in the NFL in 1984, was excellent again, ranking second in points allowed. Michael Carter was a Pro Bowl nose tackle, getting seven sacks as he anchored the middle of the 3-4 defensive scheme. Defensive ends Dwaine Board and Jeff Stover combined for 21 ½ sacks.

Cornerback Eric Wright was the one starter to not only make the Pro Bowl, but be honored as 1<sup>st</sup>-team All-NFL. Ronnie Lott, one of the greatest defensive backs of all time was at the other corner. Even though he wasn't a Pro Bowler this season, he still intercepted six passes.

All in all, the only defense better than San Francisco's was that of the Chicago Bears, who had a historically great year. But for some reason, the combination of elite offense and elite defense only translated into a borderline playoff season.

The frustration began right away at mediocre Minnesota. In a game that was tied 7-7 after three quarters, Montana threw two fourth-quarter touchdown passes to Craig and the 49ers led 21-14. But they lost five fumbles, turned it over seven times in all and in the end, dumped the game 28-21. The hangover dragged into the beginning of a home game with lowly Atlanta, as San Francisco found themselves in a 10-0 second quarter hole.

Craig got rolling and ended up with 184 all-purpose yards and the 49ers won 35-16. All appeared to be well a week later when they went on the road to a very good Los Angeles Raiders' team and won 34-10. The 49ers got nine sacks, four of them coming from Board.

Then they took another step back, losing a home game to a bad team in New Orleans. Craig was a non-factor and Montana did not play well, going 12/26 for 120 yards. The Saints scored late and stole a 20-17 win.

A return visit to Atlanta was next. Montana lit it up, going 35/57 for 429 yards, five touchdowns and no interceptions. Craig caught 12 of the passes for 167 yards and the final was 38-17. It appeared the 49ers had their mojo back as they got ready to host the Bears.

San Francisco had eliminated Chicago in the previous year's NFC Championship Game and even though the Bears were undefeated, respect for the 49ers still had them a (-4) favorite at home. It was a perfect chance for San Francisco to re-assert themselves as the team to beat.

Instead, it was Chicago who asserted just how good they were. The only San Francisco touchdown came on an interception return from Carlton Williamson. Craig couldn't find running room, and while Montana didn't play badly, he couldn't make any big plays against the Bear defense in a 26-10 loss.

Things got worse on a road trip to mediocre Detroit. The special teams gave up a 63-yard punt return and Montana struggled, going 15/26, but those completions were kept underneath for just 97 yards. Craig's running kept the team in it, the 49ers lost 23-21.

To make matters worse, the Los Angeles Rams were off to a 7-0 start. So when San Francisco traveled south to face their divisional rival, they were already staring at a four-game deficit. It was now or never if they were going to get back in the NFC West race.

Montana stepped up and was brilliant. He threw four touchdowns in the first half, two of them to Craig and finished with 303 passing yards on the day. The 49ers raced to a 28-0 lead and ended up winning 28-14. At 4-4, they were far from out of the woods, but they showed they could still look the part of a champion.

They looked it again this next week for different reasons. The opponent, the Philadelphia Eagles, were mediocre and coming to the Bay Area. But Montana would miss this game and Matt Cavanaugh had to step in. Cavanaugh stepped up with a 20/32 for 255 yards performance. While Eagle quarterback Ron Jaworski threw for 394 yards, the 49er secondary also came up with three interceptions and the result was a 24-13 win.

A big Monday Night visit to Denver was up next, with the Broncos in the midst of a race for the AFC West title. The snow was coming down hard, resulting in both Montana and John Elway having erratic nights. The 49ers trailed 17-16, but Montana got them in position for a short field goal at the end. As the ball was snapped, kicker Ray Wersching would be distracted by a snowball that came out of the stands and landed right by the holder. He shanked the kick and San Francisco suffered a controversial loss.

Their backs to the wall again, San Francisco delivered consecutive home wins over AFC opponents in Kansas City and Seattle. Montana threw for 235 yards, while backup running back Wendell Tyler rushed for 111 in a 31-3 rout of the Chiefs. The 19-6 win over the Seahawks came on a Monday Night against a team that had made the playoffs each of the last two seasons. Even though Montana threw three interceptions, the 49er run defense shut down Curt Warner to get the win.

With the record at 7-5, San Francisco was traveling to Washington. The Redskins were another franchise that had been great in the early part of the decade, but was fighting for their season now, also at 7-5. The landscape of the NFC race made it likely that there would only be room for one of them in the playoffs and this nationally televised late Sunday afternoon game had a postseason vibe to it on December 1.

Carl Monroe took the opening kickoff for the 49ers and took it 95 yards for a touchdown. It set the tone for the entire game. Linebacker Keena Turner returned a fumble 65 yards. San Francisco forced five turnovers in all and used the mistakes to roll to an easy 35-8 win.

While the 49ers were again starting to get their act together, the Rams were reeling. They were down to 9-4, the NFC West race was within a game and San Francisco owned control of the tiebreakers. So when Los Angeles came to Candlestick Park for Monday Night Football it was a battle for the inside track on the division title.

Everything seemed to be going San Francisco's way and they were a ten-point favorite. The 49ers led 7-3 at the half, but the formula that worked in Washington—scoring on special teams and defense—now turned around and bit them.

Los Angeles returned the second half's opening kick for a touchdown. With the game tied 20-20 in the fourth quarter, Montana threw an interception that was returned 41 yards. San Francisco lost 27-20 and their hopes an NFC West title were all but gone with two games to play.

The race for the playoffs was still very much on, and the 49ers were tied with the Redskins at 8-6 for the final playoff berth, and of course controlling the tiebreaker. San Francisco went to New Orleans and held serve with a 31-19 win, as Montana went 25/38 for 354 yards.

Washington kept pace and the New York Giants lost, dropping them to 9-6 in a race that had three teams tied for two spots. The pecking order in tiebreakers was Giants-49ers-Redskins. The two NFC East teams each had games on the final Saturday of the season and they both won. So when the 49ers played the Cowboys in a late Sunday afternoon national TV game at Candlestick, it was win-or-go-home.

Dallas had clinched the NFC East, but would have a chance to move up to the 2-seed and host a divisional playoff game if they could win and the Rams would lose on Monday Night against the Raiders (the Rams did). So it wasn't a pushover game for San Francisco and it didn't play out that way.

The 49ers were a (-9) favorite, a measurement of how much esteem they were still held in, but they fell behind 13-0 and trailed 16-7 at the half. This writer, a Redskins fan, was watching with intensity and felt real hope for the first time since about the moment Monroe brought the kickoff back in the December 1 game.

But San Francisco controlled the line of scrimmage. They won the rushing battle 109-60, and on defense they got six sacks from six different players. Montana was sharp, 24/34 for 322 yards and the 49ers dominated the second half with 24 unanswered points to win 31-16.

It was off the Meadowlands for the wild-card game. The 49ers had ousted the Giants on the road to Super Bowl titles in 1981 and 1984 and again, the oddsmakers were believers—San Francisco was a (-3) road favorite.

Maybe it was bad body clock, the phenomena of a West Coast team playing an early afternoon kick on the East Coast. Maybe it was just New York's time. Whatever it was, this wasn't the 49ers' day.

They were out rushed 174-94. When San Francisco fell behind 10-0 in the first quarter they were forced to the air. Montana threw for 296 yards, but on 26/47 passing, and he was sacked four times. San Francisco lost 17-3. A season that was good by generic standards, but a downer for these 49ers, was over.

## 1986

The 1986 San Francisco 49ers spent much of the season on that same trajectory before they rallied at the end for a division title. But a terrible playoff loss left them licking their wounds when the season was over.

Montana was now 30-years-old and his health was starting to become an issue. Montana was only able to start eight games in 1986. He was effective, a 62% completion rate, 7.3 yards-per-attempt and keeping the mistakes to a minimum. But the injury problems would lead head coach Bill Walsh to go acquire Steve Young in the offseason.

Walsh's West Coast offense had plenty of talent at the skill spots for when backups Jeff Kemp or Mike Moroski had to step in. Craig caught 81 passes out of the backfield. Craig was spelled by veteran Joe Cribbs, no longer the back he had been in Buffalo in the early part of the decade, but still able to catch 35 balls.

More important to the passing game was that Rice had a breakout year. He caught 86 balls for 1,570 yards and was 1<sup>st</sup>-team All-Pro. Clark finished with 61 catches and nearly 800 yards. Francis wasn't the Pro Bowler he'd been in his New England days, but he was another viable option underneath, with 41 catches.

It added up to a nice combination of Rice stretching the field, a series of targets able to work underneath, one of the game's all-time great offensive architects in Walsh overseeing the passing game and another outstanding coach in Mike Holmgren as the coordinator. Even



though Rice was the only Pro Bowler, the offensive line was getting old and the quarterback position was unstable, 49ers still ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in the NFL in points scored.

Lott was the anchor of the defense and 1<sup>st</sup>-team All-Pro at free safety. A good draft produced a pair of quality rookie corners in Tim McKyer and Don Griffin. Even though defensive lineman Jeff Stover and Dwaine Board combined for 19 sacks, neither made the Pro Bowl. Nose tackle Michael Carter was an emerging talent that would get Pro Bowl recognition by 1987. The defense, coordinated by George Seifert, finished third in the league in points allowed.

San Francisco opened the season in Tampa Bay. Montana put on a show, going 32/46 for 356 yards. Lott's two interceptions led a defense that picked off veteran Steve DeBerg seven times. The consequences of this game for the 49ers went beyond their 31-7 win. Montana required back surgery and would be out until November. DeBerg would soon be benched in favor of Steve Young and start the process that would eventually bring the latter to San Francisco.

The Los Angeles Rams had been a playoff team each year since 1983 and they displaced San Francisco atop the NFC West in 1985. Respect for the 49ers was such that they still went on the road as a 2 ½ point favorite with Montana out. Kemp played pretty well, going 19/24 for 252 yards and hooked up with Rice on a 66-yard touchdown pass. But Kemp threw two interceptions, the Rams were mistake-free and the 49ers lost 16-13.

Kemp came back strong at home against mediocre New Orleans. He hit Rice and Clark seven times apiece, and finished the day 29/44 for 332 yards. Even though a special teams breakdown let the Saints bring the second half kickoff back for a touchdown and get a 17-13 lead, Kemp eventually produced a 26-17 win.

Two years earlier the 49ers and Dolphins had met in the Super Bowl. One year earlier Miami had still been in the league's elite. The Dolphins would fade to .500 this year and on a visit to the Orange Bowl, Lott picked off Dan Marino twice. It was part of a four-interception day for the defense, the 49ers also rushed for 146 yards and they won the football game 31-16.

San Francisco hosted lowly Indianapolis and dinked around for a half. The game was tied 14-14. The 49ers, favored by (-17.5), got it going in the second half. Kemp hit Rice on three touchdown passes from 45, 16 and 58 yards respectively. They pulled away 35-14 and still made their bettors happy by covering that big spread.

A home game with Minnesota saw Kemp throw for 359 yards and get the Niners out to a 24-14 lead in the third quarter. The Vikings, though they weren't a playoff team in 1986 were still pretty good. They got a 326-yard passing day from Tommy Kramer, scored a defensive touchdown and eventually stole a 27-24 overtime win.

The 49ers had another bad home game against mediocre Atlanta. They gave up 217 rush yards and failed to score in the second half. The saving grace was that the Falcons turned it over five times and San Francisco still managed to end with a 10-10 tie. Nonetheless in home games against two teams who averaged out to about .500, the 49ers had gone 0-1-1.

A road game against the awful Green Bay Packers was next. The game was played in Milwaukee, where Green Bay used to play three home games a year. The 49ers were outgained 464-222, but the defense was able to get three interceptions. The biggest came when San Francisco clung to a 24-17 lead and Green Bay was driving. Tony Nixon picked off a pass and took it 88 yards to the house to secure the 31-17 win.

It was a win, but the team still wasn't playing well and they bottomed out in a 23-10 loss at New Orleans. They turned it over four times, only ran for 52 yards and couldn't dig out of an early 14-0 hole. Montana couldn't come back too soon.

The great quarterback made his return on November 9 at home against the St. Louis Cardinals. He only threw 19 passes, but he made them count. Montana finished 13/19 for 270 yards, and found Rice three times on touchdown plays of 40-plus yards. The result was a 43-17 win.

But the lack of a running game was devastating in a Monday Night visit to the playoff-bound Redskins. Montana was forced to put it up 60 times. He completed 33 passes and generated 441 passing yards. Rice had a huge night, with twelve catches for over 200 yards. But it was sound and fury that didn't go anywhere—the Niners never got in the end zone in a 14-6 loss thanks to four turnovers and just 83 rush yards.

The running attack was re-emphasized against Atlanta. Craig rushed for 101 yards, there were no turnovers and the defense was locked in a 20-zip win. The win moved San Francisco to 7-4-1. They were a half-game back of Los Angeles, but had as their hole card a home game with the Rams in the final game of the season. San Francisco also led the race for the final wild-card spot by a half-game over Dallas.

A Monday Night home date with the eventual Super Bowl champion New York Giants got off to a great start when Montana threw a pair of first-half touchdowns for a 17-0 lead. But the lead was given away rapidly when the defense allowed three third-quarter TD passes by Phil Simms. The 21-17 loss put San Francisco up against it.

They were a game and a half back of Los Angeles and needed help in the NFC West race. Dallas had also lost, but Minnesota won to pull within a half-game of the wild-card spot. With games coming up against playoff-bound AFC East teams in the Jets and Patriots, the 49ers were in serious trouble.

The good news was that even though the Jets were playoff-bound they were also in the middle of a dramatic late-season collapse where they lost their final five games and went from Super Bowl contender to barely hanging on. The 49ers aided that process by pounding the ball on the ground for 198 yards. They held New York to 38 rush yards and produced a 24-10 win. The Rams won ahead of them and the Vikings won behind them to keep the pressure on. The Cowboys lost again and would fade from the picture.

After three quarters in Foxboro, the 49ers trailed 17-16. The season turned in the fourth quarter. Cribbs had his best game of the season, rushing for 107 yards. Craig added 86 more yards on

the ground as the running game continued a late-season revival at the right time. San Francisco rallied to win 29-24.

Good news also came from around the league. Minnesota was upset at Houston and San Francisco clinched a playoff berth. Out west, Los Angeles lost in overtime to Miami. The head-to-head showdown for the division title was back on.

The league scheduled this game for a Friday night, with the recent history of both franchises suggesting it would be worth prime-time. The 49ers and Rams had to turn around and get ready on a short week. San Francisco did a much better job of it than did their rivals.

After an early 49er field goal, Montana hit Rice for a 44-yard touchdown pass and the lead was 10-0 after a quarter. Rushing touchdowns were swapped by LA's Eric Dickerson and Cribbs, sending the game to the locker room at 17-7.

The San Francisco defense was clamping down on the great Dickerson though, holding him to 68 yards on 18 rushes. His numbers were barely better than Cribbs, who also carried 18 times and gained 62 yards. Meanwhile, Craig rushed for 80 yards. The rookie McKyer picked off Jim Everett twice. Montana threw another TD pass, a one-yard flip to Francis. The lead went to 24-7 in the third quarter and the night turned into a long party at Candlestick, with a final score of 24-14.

San Francisco was back on top of the NFC West, but that was as far as they would go. After a week off they went to the Meadowlands to play the 14-2 Giants in the divisional playoff round. The game got off to a good start—Rice caught a pass from Montana and broke clear for what appeared to be a sure touchdown. Instead, Rice simply dropped the ball and New York recovered the unforced fumble.

To say the game went downhill from there understates the case. A complete avalanche hit the 49ers. Montana was knocked cold and had to be removed from the game. The Giants won by a stunning 49-3 margin. When asked if the Rice fumble had been the difference, Walsh replied succinctly that had Rice not fumbled the final score would have been 49-10. It was that bad.

But one thing that wasn't bad was that the fortunes of this great organization had ticked back upward. The draft from the previous spring had included not only McKyer, but also names like Tom Rathman, John Taylor, Charles Haley and Kevin Fagan. All would be huge contributors in the years to come. Over the next three seasons, the 49ers would either be the #1 seed in the NFC or win the Super Bowl or both. Montana and the dynasty had a second wind.

**1987**

The San Francisco 49ers weren't accustomed to early playoff exits. That's what happened to them in 1985 and 1986, as they were twice handled by the New York Giants. After the 1987 San Francisco 49ers had a fantastic regular season they looked ready to bring postseason glory back to the Bay Area, but in January they suffered what was now an all-to-familiar ending.

Montana had a vintage year. He led the league with 31 touchdown passes and a completion percentage of 67%. He was sixth in yards-per-attempt and though the mistakes were up a bit—13 interceptions—that was still in the middle of the league. Even though Montana finished behind Denver's John Elway in the MVP vote, it was Montana named 1<sup>st</sup>-team All-Pro at the quarterback spot.

The future Hall of Fame quarterback needed to be good, because another future Hall of Famer had been acquired in the offseason. Walsh, concerned over injury problems Montana had shown recently, brought in Steve Young. Even though Montana stayed as the starter, the mercurial talent of Young—both throwing and running—were never far in the background.

San Francisco also strengthened the offensive line in drafting Harris Barton, who immediately stepped in at left tackle and solidified the position for a decade. Craig had a Pro Bowl year running for 815 yards and leading the 49ers in receptions with 66. And on the outside, Rice, had a vintage year of his own, being named 1<sup>st</sup>-team All-Pro.

The 49er offense scored more points than anyone in the league and the defense wasn't far behind, ranking third. Orchestrated by Seifert, the Niner defense was anchored by Carter at nose tackle and Lott at free safety, each 1<sup>st</sup>-team All-Pro themselves. No one in the NFL had more players who were the absolute best at their positions than the 49ers.

You wouldn't have known that to watch the opener. San Francisco went to mediocre Pittsburgh and got it handed to them, 30-17. Montana threw three interceptions and the running game only generated 47 yards. When the 49ers went to Cincinnati in Week 2 and trailed 26-20 with six seconds left and the ball in the Bengals' hands, it looked like an 0-2 start.

Instead, a shocker happened. It was fourth down and the Bengals tried to call a sweep play that would run out the clock. It didn't work and San Francisco got the ball with one crack at the end zone. It was still from the 25-yard line so the odds were decidedly against them. But it was all the opening Montana and Rice needed, as they hooked up for a touchdown pass and an improbable 27-26 win.

After the second week of the season the players went out on strike. Unlike 1982 when the league just shut down, the owners were ready for war and they brought in replacements. Walsh had prepared well for this circumstance and summoned in players who could keep the 49ers winning. Week 3 was canceled, but when the replacements took the field on October 4, San Francisco kept rolling.

Bob Gagliano got the quarterback gig for a Monday Night game with the Giants, a marquee matchup that had a lot of steam taken out of it by the lack of regular players. The running game was dominant for the 49ers in a 41-21 rout.

The united front the players were attempting to show was cracking and nowhere as visibly by Montana's decision to cross the picket line. He split time with Gagliano in Atlanta and each threw a touchdown pass in a 25-17 win. Montana resumed full-time quarterback duties at home

against the St. Louis Cardinals and carved up the replacements to the tune of 31/39 for 334 yards. Craig also crossed the line and produced 170 all-purpose yards in a 34-28 win.

The strike ended after these three games and the regulars were all back for an October 25 game in New Orleans. The question—when the 49er regulars were last seen, they were one fluke away from being 0-2. Could they find their footing now?

New Orleans was an excellent team for the first time in their two-decade history and the 49ers had problems running the ball. Montana came through with an 18/32 for 256 yards performance, with Rice catching six balls for 89 yards. Along with a couple key defensive stops near the goal line, it was enough to escape the Bayou with a 24-22 win.

The Los Angeles Rams were disrupted by both the strike and a contract holdout by their great running back Eric Dickerson. One day before San Francisco arrived in L.A., Dickerson was traded to Indianapolis. The 49ers lacerated a team in turmoil, with Craig running for 104 yards and Montana going 21/30 for 294 yards and three TDs, shifting his attention away from Rice and to receiver Mike Wilson and tight end Russ Francis.

San Francisco came home and beat the playoff-bound Houston Oilers 27-20, holding the Oilers to 48 yards rushing and intercepting Warren Moon three times. It set up a rematch with the Saints on November 15. Montana did not play well, going 16/29 for 144 yards and was picked off twice. The Niners had a blocked field goal returned for a touchdown and lost 26-24.

Montana got back on track in Tampa Bay. He went 29/45 for 340 yards and three touchdown passes, all to Rice who ended up with seven catches for 103 yards. The result was a 24-10 win over a bad team.

No one would call the Cleveland Browns of this period a bad team. They had come within a play of the Super Bowl the year before and would do the same in this season. The 49ers played their best game of the season. Leading 21-17 at the half, they broke it open with 17 straight points after intermission. Montana was brilliant, completing 23/31 passes for 342 yards and four touchdowns.

The 38-24 win moved San Francisco to 9-2. They were one game ahead of New Orleans in the NFC West and tied with Chicago in the race for the #1 seed in the playoffs. Washington was also 8-3 and running away with their own division. The 49ers were all but assured of a return to the postseason, but where they would ultimately be seeded was still completely up in the air.

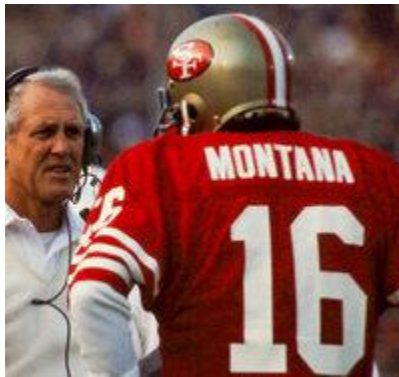
A cold snowy game in Green Bay was next, but the Packers of this era were consistently bad. Even though Frisco only led 16-12 in the fourth quarter, they got a 57-yard TD pass from Montana to Rice to seal the win. Lott picked off two passes to lead the defense.

The win set up a big Monday Night home date with Chicago. At stake was inside track to home field advantage in the playoffs. When Montana pulled a hamstring, it could have been taken as a bad sign. Instead, it was the only thing that went wrong. The defense intercepted Mike Tomczak four times. Dana McLemore brought a punt back 83 yards for a touchdown and with Young at

the controls the result was a 41-0 rout, a result shocking not for San Francisco's win, but the size and scope of that victory.

Young played again the following week against the Falcons. He was a bit erratic—13-for-30, though he did throw for 216 yards—and the special teams had a lapse when they allowed a kickoff return for a touchdown. But 49er return man Joe Cribbs brought a kickoff of his own back to the house and in the end Atlanta was just too bad a team to win at Candlestick. The 49ers won 35-7.

San Francisco was assured of finishing ahead of the Bears and Redskins, but the Saints weren't going away. The Niners still controlled the division, but when New Orleans beat Green Bay on the final Sunday afternoon it meant that a lot was on the line for San Francisco's prime-time home game with Los Angeles. Win, and the 49ers would be division champs and the #1 seed in the NFC. Lose, and they'd be in the wild-card game.



The superiority of the 49ers over the Rams was just too evident. San Francisco held Los Angeles to just 50 yards passing. Montana and Young both played and combined to throw five touchdown passes. The 48-0 rout sent the 49ers into the playoffs as the favorite to win their third Super Bowl title in seven years.

When the Minnesota Vikings, with an 8-7 record, upset New Orleans and came to San Francisco for the divisional playoff game on a late Saturday afternoon it looked like a big break. Better the Vikings than the Redskins, who would have otherwise come to Candlestick. Since it was the Redskins who ultimately won the Super Bowl, I guess that's true. But by game's end no one in San Francisco was seeing Minnesota's arrival as anything to be grateful for.

For the third straight year, Montana could do nothing in a playoff game. He finished 12/26 for 109 yards and his offensive line was no help, allowing four sacks. After falling behind 27-10, he was yanked for Young, who played well, going 12/17 for 158 yards and running for 72 yards.

But Young was the only bright spot on a day whose weather was as dreary as the 49er performance. The secondary was shredded by Viking receiver Anthony Carter, whose 10 catches produced a playoff record 227 yards. No one besides Young could run the ball. The final score was 36-24 and it wasn't that close.

It was a bitter end for what was an outstanding team. Over the last three playoff games, the 49ers had scored just one touchdown with Montana at quarterback, plus a couple garbage-time TDs with Young. Most other organizations would have gladly taken the wins and playoff trips, but this wasn't any other organization.

That's the bad news. The good news is that, from the perspective of history, we know that the regular season excellence of 1987 set the stage for the final push to be the Team of the 1980s.

## 1988

The San Francisco 49ers' tandem of Bill Walsh at head coach and Joe Montana playing quarterback has taken its place in the annals of NFL lore, but it was starting to look like the end might be nearing. Instead, the 1988 San Francisco 49ers won a Super Bowl, sent Walsh to retirement in glory and kickstarted one final run for the great Montana.

Montana, now 32-years-old, was being pushed by backup quarterback Steve Young. Whomever was behind center had Roger Craig to hand the ball too, and Jerry Rice to target through the air. Each were first-team All-Pro. The offensive line had good young talent surrounding 34-year-old center Randy Cross.

Defensively, the 49ers had Pro Bowlers in Michael Carter at nose tackle, Charles Haley at outside linebacker and Ronnie Lott at free safety. Haley had 11 ½ sacks, while Carter and defensive end Larry Roberts also provided a pass rusher. Cornerback Tim McKyer was a ballhawk, with seven interceptions.

San Francisco opened the season with the New Orleans Saints. The Niners were on the road and fell behind 17-10 before Montana rifled three touchdown passes in the third quarter, built a 31-17 lead and San Francisco hung on, 34-33.

Walsh was concerned over the state of Montana's back, the injury that prompted the signing of Young, and the mobile lefty got the start in New York against the Giants. Montana got the finish—the veteran threw a 78-yard touchdown pass to Rice to win the game 20-17. But a week later, against a bad Atlanta Falcons team, Montana threw three interceptions and the 49ers inexplicably lost 34-17 at home.

Montana came back against the Seattle Seahawks, who were then in the AFC and would make the playoffs this season. He threw four touchdown passes in the old Seattle Kingdome, the defense locked down the Seahawk running game and forced Kelly Stouffer into four interceptions. A 38-17 win got them back on track, and it was followed by a 20-13 win over the Detroit Lions, keyed by a strong running game and punt return for a touchdown by John Taylor.

The Denver Broncos had won the AFC each of the previous two seasons. Even though this year's Denver team finished 8-8 and missed the playoffs, they came into San Francisco ready. Montana and Young combined to throw three interceptions. John Elway rallied Denver for a tying touchdown late in the game and then won it in overtime, 16-13.

San Francisco now faced tough road games with another key divisional rival, the Los Angeles Rams, along with the Chicago Bears. The Niners won a good back-and-forth game in LA, as Craig ran for 190 yards in a 24-21 win. But the offense was completely stymied on Monday Night in Chicago, a 10-9 loss.

The 49ers came home, but the schedule didn't get easier—it was a revenge game with the Vikings, and after the poor MFN showing by Montana, it was Young who got the call. He finished

14/25 for 232 yards, but his biggest play came with his legs—a 49-yard touchdown run late in the game to pull out a 24-21 win.

San Francisco was now 6-3, but the Rams and Saints were each 7-2. There was no margin for error, but err is exactly what Frisco did. They blew a 23-0 lead to the Phoenix Cardinals and lost 24-23. Then, with Montana back in the lineup, they only scored three points in a loss to the Los Angeles Raiders. Against two teams who would finish 7-9, the Niners had lost and were clinging to dear life.

Fortunately, the Rams also lost twice and the Saints split during this timeframe. San Francisco closed the season with home games against its two rivals, so there was still a chance to get in—so long as the 49ers won a Monday Night game with the Washington Redskins, the defending Super Bowl champions and now fighting for their playoff lives themselves.

The turnaround started in front of the home fans in prime time. San Francisco forced four turnovers, pulled away early and beat Washington 37-21. Montana was then a sharp 14/22 for 271 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions in a 48-10 rout of San Diego. In the meantime, the Rams kept losing, and the 49ers moved into second place, still a game back of the Saints.

San Francisco didn't play well at Atlanta, but they took care of the ball, and got a strong rushing performance from Craig to win 13-3 in Atlanta Fulton-County Stadium. When New Orleans lost at Minnesota, the 49ers were tied for first.

The collapses of their two rivals not only gave San Francisco control of their own destiny, but if they beat New Orleans at home, the finale with Los Angeles wouldn't even matter. It was a startling turn of events after the losses to the Cardinals and Raiders.

San Francisco trailed New Orleans 10-7 in the second quarter, but Montana threw two quick touchdown passes, including a 66-yard strike to Taylor. Craig ran for 115 yards and the 49ers kept the Saints at arm's length in the second half, winning 30-17. The NFC West was theirs. They were locked into the #2 seed in the NFC, and mailed in the finale, losing to the Rams 38-16, with Los Angeles needing the game to get a wild-card spot.

The Rams lost to the Vikings in the NFC wild-card game and it set up a playoff rematch—Minnesota at San Francisco. There would be no reprise of last year's rout. Montana connected with Rice for three first-half touchdown passes, Craig ran for 135 yards and took off an 80-yard jaunt that sealed a 34-9 rout.

It was time for another revenge trip, this one to Chicago. The temperatures were 2 degrees with the windchill, as the winds blew off Lake Michigan at 29mph, making the day intolerably cold. Even more intolerable for the home fans was what happened on the field. Montana hit Rice with an early 61-yard touchdown pass. Montana hit Rice from 27 yards in the second quarter. The game ended up a 28-3 rout. San Francisco had simply obliterated the two teams with the best records in the NFC.



Two weeks later, it was time for warmer temperatures, with the Super Bowl in Miami. San Francisco faced the Cincinnati Bengals, the same team they had beaten in 1981 for Montana and Walsh's first championship together.

This year's Bengals had the league MVP in Boomer Esiason, but the 49er defense kept him contained. Neither offense did anything for three quarters. After a San Francisco field goal tied the game 6-6 late in the third quarter, Cincinnati got a kickoff return for a touchdown that looked like it might make the difference. They later got a field goal to take a 16-13 lead with 3:10 to play.



San Francisco got the ball on their own 8-yard line and the legend of Montana got another chapter. He led an 11-play drive, the last of which was a touchdown pass to Taylor with 34 seconds left. With the 20-16 win, the 49ers were champions.

Rice caught 12 passes for 115 yards and was named game MVP. Walsh retired and rode off into the sunset. Montana would be back for more. He was a long way from the travails of 1985-87.

## 1989

The 1989 San Francisco 49ers came into the NFL season as a rare breed—a defending champion in a transitional state. Even though Walsh had retired, the expectations at Candlestick Park were the same—to repeat. George Seifert had been elevated from defensive coordinator to head coach.

Seifert's brain trust included a new offensive coordinator in Mike Holmgren, who would one day be a head coach and go to three Super Bowls (two in Green Bay, one in Seattle) while winning one. More importantly, the Niners were stacked on the field. Montana had a well-balanced core of skill players at his disposal.

Craig was a 1,000 yard rusher and a good receiver out of the backfield. Rathman was a steady fullback. Rice was the top receiver in the game and is today acknowledged as the consensus "best receiver ever". Rice, along with baseball closer Mariano Rivera are perhaps the only players to receive such universal acclimation as the best at their positions. If you gave too much attention to Rice, Montana just turned to Taylor, another good deep threat, and tight end Brent Jones. Up front was a line anchored by Pro Bowler Guy McIntyre.

Defensively, the leader was Ronnie Lott. With him in the secondary was corner Don Griffin. The defensive front was tough, with Carter on the nose, Kevin Fagan at defensive end and a hybrid end/linebacker in Charles Haley was a complete havoc-wrecker.

San Francisco drew three straight road games to start the year and the first two were against bad teams in Indianapolis and Tampa Bay. The third one in Philadelphia was a good test against

an Eagles club that had won the NFC East the prior year and would make the postseason again this year.

Montana burned Ryan's defense with a 68-yard touchdown pass to Rice early on, but then for about 2 ½ quarters Philadelphia controlled the flow of play and was in position to seal the game. But they kept settling for field goals, and a 21-10 lead came about through the odd combo of one touchdown, one safety and four field goals.

A 70-yard touchdown strike from Montana to Taylor put Frisco right back in it, and even though Philly got that TD back, the 49er signal-caller eventually took the game over. Montana rifled fourth-quarter scoring passes to Rathman, Jones and Rice in succession, ended up with 428 yards and five touchdowns on the afternoon and the 38-28 win moved the 49ers to 3-0.

The Los Angeles Rams came to town and were the one team that could threaten the Niners in the NFC West. Under the leadership of John Robinson, they'd made the playoffs as a wild-card in 1983, 1984, 1986 and 1988, while winning the division in 1985. The only bad year was the strike season of 1987 that was chaotic for a lot of teams. LA was led by a prolific quarterback in Jim Everett and two good receivers in Henry Ellard and Flipper Anderson. They got solid work up front from veteran lineman Tom Newberry and Jackie Slater, both Pro Bowlers and the latter one of the great offensive tackles of all time.

Defensively, they had their own havoc-wreaking linebacker in Kevin Greene, who would one day go on to star on a Super Bowl team in Pittsburgh and eventually become the linebacker coach for the 2010 Super Bowl-winning Green Bay Packers and their own dominator, Clay Matthews.

The Rams would be a tough out in the West and they showed why on October 1. They neutralized San Francisco's offensive weapons and only trailed 6-3 at halftime. Everett found Anderson for a 65-yard touchdown pass to make it 10-6 and later, with the score 10-9, a Niner drive died on the 1-yard line. A Mike Cofer field goal gave San Fran the lead, but Los Angeles eventually took it back and won 13-12.

San Francisco went on the road and got back on track by beating New Orleans. They also went to Dallas (on its way to a 1-15 year in the start of Jimmy Johnson's rebuilding project). The 49ers had a curious record of 5-0 on the road and 0-1 at home.

Los Angeles lost their focus and after a 5-0 start, lost four straight. San Francisco kept winning, and churned its way to 9-1 before a home loss to Green Bay, due to three turnovers, set them up at 9-2. Over three weeks in late November and early December, two big Monday Night games were ahead One was with the 9-2 New York Giants, the other a visit to Los Angeles.

The Niners began their stretch run on November 27, the Monday after Thanksgiving against the Giants in a fight for the inside track to the #1 seed in the NFC. Montana threw a pair of short touchdown passes in the first quarter to build a 14-7 lead and a later scoring pass to Jones helped stretch the lead to 24-10.

At this point, New York quarterback and current CBS analyst Phil Simms, fired a pair of scoring passes of his own to tie the game. San Francisco was able to recover and get the final ten points of the game, the big difference being that Simms threw three interceptions to Montana's zero.

Los Angeles was out of the division race, but still pushing for a playoff berth when San Francisco brought their 11-2 record to town. The Rams were ready out of the gate, striking for a 17-0 lead in the first quarter. Montana then hit Taylor on a 92-yard touchdown pass and a field goal cut the lead to 17-10. Los Angeles had a counterpunch ready, moving ahead 24-10 by the end of three quarters and kicking a field goal early in the fourth that seemed to put the game under wraps.

Montana found Jones for a 7-yard TD pass and then pinned inside his own 5-yard line, threw another touchdown pass to Taylor, this one from 96 yards. Even though a crucial PAT was missed, The Master wasn't going to be stopped now. Montana would throw for an MNF record of 458 yards before the night was over and eventually set up a 1-yard run by Roger Craig that delivered a stunning 30-27 win. It all but secured home field advantage, and Frisco closed the season with a couple more wins that gave them a 14-2 record going into the playoffs.

Minnesota had become a familiar opponent for San Francisco in the divisional round. The Vikings had come to Candlestick in 1987 as a solid underdog and pulled an upset. They came to 1988 as a respected underdog and lost in a blowout. Now they were here for a third straight time.

Minnesota's defensive line was the strength of its team, with outstanding pass rushers at defensive end in Chris Doleman and Al Noga. Defensive tackle Keith Millard was another elite talent and both running the ball and protecting the passer were serious problems against this D. They had a pair of Pro Bowlers in the secondary in corner Carl Lee and strong safety Joey Browner.

The Viking offense was not great, with Wade Wilson being a little shaky at quarterback, a situation that failed to make the most of the talents of receiver Anthony Carter. Minnesota tried to strengthen their offense with one of the most infamous trades in sports history, trading several players and several draft picks to Dallas to get running back Herschel Walker. While Walker was a decent runner and pass-catcher for the Vikes, Johnson's Cowboys used the picks to build a dynasty.

What it all boiled down to is that Minnesota was a team a lot of observers respected for their talent, especially defensively, and just wondered if they could make it count in the postseason.

No one had any doubts about Montana's ability to make it count in the postseason. After spotting Minnesota an early field goal, Montana hit Rice for a 72-yard TD strike to make it 7-3 at the quarter. In the second quarter, the QB broke it open. He threw three touchdown passes, spreading it around to Jones, Taylor and Rice. It was 27-3 going into the half and with a second straight playoff blowout, San Francisco was sending a clear message to Minnesota about who

the top dog in the NFC was. Lott completed the message in the second half taking an interception 58 yards to the house and the final score was 41-13.

Los Angeles had surprised observers with a tough run through the NFC East. They'd gone to Philadelphia for the wild-card game and gotten a win, and then beat New York in overtime to make it to the NFC Championship Game.

Just as the Niners had in the first playoff game, they spotted an early field goal. It might have been 10-0, but the play this game is remembered for is Ronnie Lott running towards a wide-open Flipper Anderson near the goal line and batting away a pass at the final moment. It was the last positive moment for the Rams all afternoon.

By the second quarter San Francisco had gotten into rhythm, with Montana hitting Jones from 20 yards out and Taylor from 18, sandwiched around a short TD run from Craig. The defense took over, intercepting Everett three times and holding Greg Bell to 26 yards rushing. San Francisco meanwhile, ran for 179 yards, while Montana went 27-for-31 for 268 yards and zero picks. Another Super Bowl trip awaited, as the Niners were booked for New Orleans.

The Denver Broncos were making their third Super Bowl appearance in four years, under the coaching of Dan Reeves and led by quarterback John Elway, a Hall of Famer and the current Bronco team president. As good as Elway was, there was not Super Bowl-caliber talent around him and it was all he could do in order to reach this point, Denver had a nice rookie running back in Bobby Humphrey, a good receiver in Vance Johnson, and three Pro Bowlers on defense, but there was no real talent in the offensive line, nor in the secondary and it showed on Super Bowl Sunday.



Elway was sacked six times, the running game was non-existent and San Francisco dominated this one from the outset.

Montana threw three first half touchdown passes to make it 27-3 at intermission. He threw two more in the second half and the final was 55-10. The quarterback completed the postseason going 66-for-84 (79 percent) for 806 yards, 11 touchdowns and no interceptions. The team won their three games by an average score of 42-9.

It was more than just a Super Bowl title for the 1989 San Francisco 49ers. It was more than just sealing their claim to be the Team of the 1980s with a fourth championship. It was nothing more than the complete obliteration of the rest of the NFL.

## **EPILOGUE**

The chant reverberated through the locker room following the Super Bowl victory over Denver. "Three-Peat! Three-Peat! Three-Peat!". The 49ers were driven to make history. They almost did it.

Montana won another MVP award at the age of 34 in 1990. San Francisco went 14-2. They won a showcase *Monday Night Football* game against the New York Giants that effectively got them home field advantage. The 49ers beat the Redskins in the playoffs and welcomed the Giants into Candlestick Park for the NFC Championship Game.

The defenses were in control in what was a battle of field goals, 6-6 in the third quarter. Montana appeared to strike the big blow in the third quarter when he hit Taylor on a 61-yard touchdown pass for a 13-6 lead. New York got two more field goals to cut the lead to a point when disaster struck.

Montana was knocked out of the game. With less than three minutes to play, Craig fumbled and the Giants recovered. New York got one last field goal for the 15-13 upset. The three-peat bid had come closer than any other two-time defending Super Bowl champion had gotten. But it came up short.

The injuries to Montana were piling up and he didn't get on the field for another two years. By the time he recovered he was a Kansas City Chief. Montana showed he could still play and led the Chiefs to consecutive playoff trips and an AFC Championship Game berth in 1993. The 49ers were also in good hands. Steve Young established his own Hall of Fame credentials and won a Super Bowl in 1994.

But either way, a historic era ended in 1990.

