



## THE RISE OF THE RAMS 1973-80



### INTRODUCTION

In 1965, the NFL expanded to have four teams per conference make the playoffs. They retained that format after merging with the AFL in 1970. But in spite of the more generous playoff standards (albeit still stingy by the standards of our own day), the Rams only sniffed postseason play twice over the ensuing eight years. It's not that they were uncompetitive—there had been some notable near-misses. But they weren't getting to the Dance. The 1973 Los Angeles Rams started a new era—they hired Chuck Knox as the head coach and started a new era of success.

The Rise of The Rams covered an eight-year period where the franchise made the postseason every year. In an iconic decade of NFL lore, Los Angeles took its place as one of the league's memorable teams from this era. Their success covered Knox's five-year run through 1977 and continued on with Ray Malavasi.

The Rams endured their share of postseason frustration—four NFC Championship Game losses during this period, including two humiliating defeats at home. They didn't win a Super Bowl. But they did make it there. And they won a lot of other games along the way, doing it with some memorable talent.

All of that is chronicled here. Each season exists as a separate article on the website. They have been pulled together and edited for obvious redundancies to create a cohesive narrative.

Before we begin, a few housekeeping notes for younger readers:

\*The NFC West alignment was considerably different then. While Los Angeles had their ancient rivalry with the San Francisco 49ers, the division was filled out by the New Orleans Saints and Atlanta Falcons. The Cardinals were still in St. Louis and were in the NFC East. The Seahawks didn't exist until the latter half of the 1970s and were an AFC team until 2002.

\*Only four teams per conference made the playoffs through 1977. With a three-division format (East, Central, West) there was room for just one wild-card. In 1978, a second wild-card was added.

\*The regular season was only 14 games through 1977. The combination of fewer playoff teams and a shorter schedule gave regular season games a heightened urgency. In 1978, the schedule was expanded to 16 games.

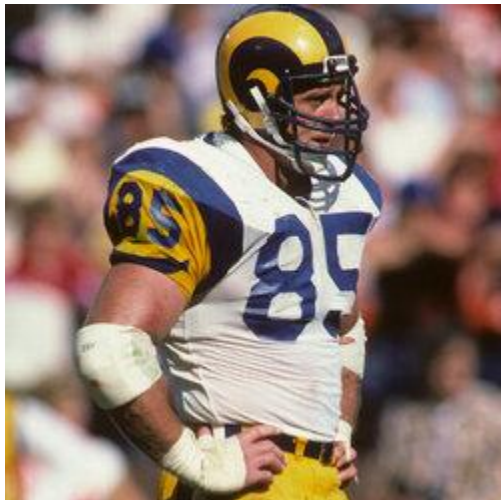
\*Homefield advantage for the playoffs was done by a predetermined rotation through 1974. Once you clinched your division there was nothing left to play for. Not until 1975 did merit-based seeding come into effect.

That said, let's go on with our eight-year, game-by-game narrative of The Rise of The Rams.

## 1973

Knox wasn't the only—or even the most notable—new addition to the Rams in '73. The front office traded for veteran quarterback John Hadl from San Diego. While Hadl's completion percentage (52.3) and interception percentage (4.3) were at or below the middle of the league, his 7.8 yards-per-attempt ranked second among starting quarterbacks. That, combined with the team's success, got the 33-year-old quarterback runner-up status in the 1973 NFL MVP voting.

Hadl's big-play target was Harold Jackson, an All-Pro who caught 40 balls for nearly 22 yards a catch. The running game was led by 1,000-yard rusher Lawrence McCutcheon, who ran behind Pro Bowl left guard Tom Mack and averaged better than five yards a pop. Fullback Jim Bertelsen was another Pro Bowler, rolling up 854 yards. The Ram offense scored more points than anyone in the NFL.



The defense had a terrific front four. While not the original “Fearsome Foursome” of NFL lore from the 1960s, these Rams still had a Pro Bowl defensive end in Jack Youngblood, who recorded 16 ½ sacks.

Merlin Olsen was one of the game's elite defensive tackles. Larry Brooks and Fred Dryer were terrific pass rushers themselves. The front seven was further augmented by Pro Bowl linebacker Isiah Robertson, and the Ram defense ranked fourth in the league for points allowed.

Los Angeles opened on the road with a late afternoon start in Kansas City. The Chiefs were a consistent contender, and they would have a winning season in 1973. The Rams were a slight underdog. But Hadl threw a pair of first-half touchdown passes. McCutcheon ran for 120 yards on 21 carries. Bertelsen got the rock 28 times and muscled for 143 yards. L.A. churned out a 23-13 win.

The home opener was against the Atlanta Falcons, a division rival in the NFC West as it existed through 2001. Hadl went 12/15 for 142 yards. A balanced rushing attack produced over 200 yards. The Rams blew out what would prove to be a good Falcon team, 31-7.

Knox would eventually earn the nickname “Ground Chuck” for his success running the football here in Los Angeles, and in later years with Buffalo and Seattle. The running game kept

pounding in San Francisco. The rush yardage edge was 223-99. Facing a 49er team that had won this division in the first three years since the merger, L.A. blew open a close game in the second half and won 40-20.

The Rams went on to visit the lowly Houston Oilers. Hadl opened things up with a 38-yard touchdown strike to Jack Snow, then found Jackson for a 15-yard TD pass. The Hadl-to-Jackson combo worked again from 69 yards out. Los Angeles built a 31-12 lead and then held on to win, 31-26.

Riding high at 4-0, L.A. was set to host the Dallas Cowboys. A playoff perennial and just two years removed from winning it all, the Cowboys would be good measuring stick for where Knox's team was at. Hadl and Jackson went off. They connected on two TD passes of over 60 yards, another from 36 yards, and a 16-yard scoring pass. Jackson caught seven balls overall for 238 yards. Hadl went 12/22 for 270 yards and no picks. The Rams again built a comfortable lead, this time at 37-21, and again let it get close. But they again won, 37-31.

Green Bay was a subpar team and Los Angeles went back to ground and pound when the Packers came to town. They ran for 244 yards, allowed just 35 on the ground, got another Hadl-to-Jackson TD pass and won 24-7.

Another big benchmark game awaited, this one a road trip to Minnesota. The Vikings were having a big year and their rivalry with the Rams would be one of the many great storylines of 1970s NFL football. On the road, L.A. couldn't get the running game going and Hadl threw a couple interceptions. The defense played well, but the Rams took their first defeat, 10-9.

They were still 6-1. San Francisco would fall hard this year, and Atlanta, at 4-3, was the nearest challenger in the division. A road trip to play the Falcons on the first weekend of November was a chance to put the NFC West race to bed early. But it didn't go well. Hadl played poorly. The running game was so-so. Atlanta made some big plays in the passing game. While the Ram defense kept the Falcons out of the end zone, they did allow five field goals. A 15-13 loss tightened up the division race.

With only one wild-card spot available, a close divisional fight meant urgency. Los Angeles played like it when they came back home to face division rivals in New Orleans and San Francisco. Hadl returned to form against the Saints, going 13/25 for 221 yards and spreading the ball around in a 29-7 win. Then the veteran QB delivered a 12/22 for 216 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions line in a 31-13 rout of the 49ers.

Los Angeles was 8-2, with Atlanta chasing at 7-3. Point differential was the tiebreaker that followed head-to-head in those days, so it was still up in the air how that would play out. The wild-card picture involved the Redskins and Cowboys in the NFC East, both 7-3.

Thanksgiving brought a gift to the Rams—Dallas lost to Miami. Since L.A. had a head-to-head win over the Cowboys, they were in position to clinch a playoff berth. The road trip to play New Orleans in Tulane Stadium proved a struggle. The Rams trailed 13-10 in the third quarter. But Hadl flipped a four-yard TD pass to Bertelsen for the lead. McCutcheon rolled up 152 yards. Los Angeles punched their long-awaited playoff ticket with a 24-13 win.

Atlanta was staying in pursuit, so there was no room to let up. L.A. went to Chicago, and McCutcheon racked up another 152-yard day in a 26-0 win. The Falcons lost to the Buffalo Bills and MVP running back O.J. Simpson. Los Angeles was two games up with two to play.

The penultimate game was on Monday Night against a terrible New York Giants team. By the time kickoff arrived, the Falcons had lost, and the Rams clinched. There was nothing left to play for, Los Angeles still tuned up for the playoffs by pounding the Giants on the ground and rolling up a 40-6 win for the national TV audience. And they beat a pretty good Cleveland Browns team at home 30-17, behind a 231-96 rush yard edge and a 5-0 turnover margin.

The Rams were 12-2, as were the Vikings. In a merit-based world, Los Angeles would have been the 2-seed and hosting 10-4 Dallas, who had won the NFC East. But in the world of 1973, the rotation called for the Rams to travel to Big D. So, this long-awaited playoff game would be on the road against Roger Staubach and the Cowboys.

In a late Sunday afternoon game that ended Divisional Round Weekend, Los Angeles just took too long to get started. They dug a 17-0 hole. Hadl and the offense fought back and closed to 17-16 in the fourth quarter. They had Dallas backed up. But Staubach threw an 83-yard touchdown pass that all but sealed it. The final was 27-16.

It was a disappointing way to end the season, but it doesn't change that 1973 was still a breakout year. The Rams would keep on making postseasons.

## 1974

If Knox's first year had seen success behind trading for a veteran quarterback, 1974 saw the Rams follow the opposite path. After a slow start, Knox traded Hadl in midseason, and the Rams still reached the NFC Championship Game.

Regardless of who was playing quarterback, Hadl or his successor James Harris, the key to the Rams offense was giving the football to McCutcheon. Running behind a line led by another Pro Bowler, left guard Tom Mack, McCutcheon rolled up over 1,110 yards.

Los Angeles had a pair of big-play threats at wide receiver. In an era when receivers didn't rack up big numbers for catches, Harold Jackson and Jack Snow combined for 54 receptions, and were each around 17 yards-per-catch.

In Harris' nine games as the starting quarterback, he completed 54 percent of his passes, and had an 11-6 TD/INT ratio, both of which were good in historical context. He also generated 7.8 yards-per-attempt, which is good in any context. It was all enough that, even with Hadl's slow start and the instability it caused, for the Rams to at least be league-average on offense—they ranked 13<sup>th</sup> in a 26-team league for points scored.

That's enough to win when you have the league's stingiest defense. Los Angeles had a terrific defensive line. Youngblood was one of the game's premier defensive ends, and made All-Pro. Dryer was on the other end, and he recorded 15 sacks. The interior was manned by Olsen, who made the Pro Bowl, and Brooks, who picked up 11 sacks.

With that kind of a pass rush, it's easy to see why these Rams had ball hawks in the secondary. Strong safety Dave Elmendorf and cornerback Charlie Stukes each intercepted seven passes in what was then just a 14-game schedule. The linebacking corps was led by Pro Bowler Isiah Robertson. Los Angeles was the best in the NFL in points allowed.

That defense went on display right away in Week 1, limiting a respectable Denver Broncos team to 52 yards on the ground and keying a 17-10 win. Then the D spun a shutout in the home opener against New Orleans. McCutcheon ran for 102 yards; Hadl threw TD passes to Snow and Jackson and the final was 24-zip.

Things started to go awry on a road trip to face mediocre New England. While Jackson's six catches went for 102 yards, Hadl also threw two interceptions, the team lost three fumbles and the Rams lost to the Patriots 20-14.

The running game got cranking again at home against the Detroit Lions, who were bound for a .500 season. The final rush margin was 207-65, with McCutcheon going for 124 yards in tough 16-13 win.

It was the following week's road trip to Green Bay that would prove a seminal moment for both franchises. Hadl was awful—he went 6/16 for 59 yards and threw two interceptions. The Los Angeles offense was lifeless in a 17-6 loss. Knox had seen enough. He benched Hadl and opted for Harris. And for some reason, he found the Packers to be a willing trade partner.

Eight days after this debacle, Green Bay handed over two first-round draft picks, a second-rounder and a third-rounder for the 34-year-old Hadl. It was a king's ransom that might make a future generation of Rams fans think of a similar deal the team made when they gave up the right to draft Robert Griffin III in 2012.

In the meantime, Harris was now Knox's man behind center. At 3-2, Los Angeles met San Francisco, who was 2-3. The 49ers, after being the NFC West's best team in the early part of the decade, were falling into sub-.500 territory. Elmdorf got the party started in this game with a 52-yard Pick 6. Harris was brilliant, going 12/15 for 276 yards, three touchdown passes and no interceptions. The result was a 37-14 rout.



L.A. went on the road to face the mediocre New York Jets. Harris struggled in this one, going 6/15 for 49 yards. A two-touchdown favorite, the Rams were trailing 13-6 going into the fourth quarter. But they were running the ball. McCutcheon finished with 139 yards on the day. He scored twice in the final period and Los Angeles got out of old Shea Stadium with a 20-13 win.

The road game in San Francisco was on Monday Night Football. Harris was efficient, going 12/20 for 150 yards and avoiding mistakes. They weren't running the ball well and drives often bogged down. But with the defense locked in, it was enough to squeeze out a

15-13 win.

Atlanta, after nearly making the playoffs in 1973, was going through an awful season and the Ram defense completely bottled up the Falcons, allowing just 164 total yards. Harris threw a 40-yard touchdown strike to Jackson in the first quarter, then later came back to him for a 25-yard scoring toss. L.A. rolled to a 21-0 win.

The Falcons, along with the Saints, joined the Rams and 49ers in the NFC West prior to the realignment of 2002. Los Angeles made their return trip to New Orleans on November 17. The Rams were 7-2, the Saints were 3-6. This was a chance to put the division race away.

Playing in Tulane Stadium, New Orleans' home prior to the construction of the Superdome, L.A. was exceptionally sloppy. They put the ball on the ground seven times, lost three of those, and dropped a 22-7 decision. Los Angeles was still comfortably in control of the NFC West with four weeks left, but there was still work to do.

A showdown with the Minnesota Vikings, the defending NFC champs, was next. Playing at home, the Rams were trailing 17-6 after three quarters. But their defense was playing well. So was Harris. He finished the game at 24/37 for 249 yards and avoided mistakes. Los Angeles rallied and a nine-yard touchdown pass to Snow was the game-winner in a 20-17 triumph.

When New Orleans lost on Monday Night, the NFC West race was over.

The Rams made their return trip to Atlanta. In a game they led 13-7 at the half, Elmdorf's 57-yard Pick-6 broke it open. L.A. held Atlanta to 19 yards on the ground, won turnover margin 5-0 and took home a 30-7 triumph.

A Monday Night date with the Washington Redskins was against a team seeking to clinch a playoff spot. Harris threw a 20-yard touchdown pass to Jackson in the first quarter, and the Rams built a 10-0 lead. But perhaps the difference in urgency was a factor the rest of the way. The L.A. pass defense was soft on this night and they ended up losing 23-17.

The finale was against playoff-bound Buffalo and their great running back. O.J. Simpson. Harris went 9/17 for 170 yards to key a 19-14 win. After all the quarterback turmoil of the season's first half, Los Angeles was 10-4, as were the three other playoff teams in the NFC. By the standards of today's tie breaking system, the Rams would have been the #1 seed. Under the rotation system of '74, they would get the Divisional Round at home, but faced the prospect of going to Minnesota for the NFC Championship Game.

The Redskins made a return trip west for a game that would close Divisional Round Weekend on Sunday. Harris put L.A. on the board with a 10-yard touchdown pass to tight end Bob Klein. But by halftime, Washington had nudged out to a 10-7 lead.

What Los Angeles was doing was running the ball and stopping the run. As a byproduct of that, they were getting turnovers. The Rams added a couple field goals and held a 13-10 lead late in the game. Robertson then got the biggest of the six turnovers L.A. would collect—a 59-yard Pick-6 that sealed the 19-10 win.



It was on to Minnesota for the NFC Championship Game. Harris made some big plays, going 13/23 for 248 yards. But he was also intercepted twice. The biggest—and most controversial—came in the third quarter. Trailing 7-3, Los Angeles had 2<sup>nd</sup>-and-goal on the 1-yard line. Mack was called for illegal motion. Replays showed he hadn't moved. But forced to throw, Harris was intercepted in the end zone. The Rams also lost three fumbles, but this goal-line sequence was clearly the biggest moment in a 14-10 loss.

Knox was still 2-for-2 in making postseasons, and he wasn't done reaching NFC Championship Games. But this is the closest he would get to a Super Bowl.

## 1975

The good news about the 1975 Los Angeles Rams is that they continued their success and returned to the NFC title game. The bad news is that the upward trajectory did not continue, as they fell short of the Super Bowl.

The best defense in the NFL fueled the Rams, and that defense continued to be anchored by an elite front four. Jack Youngblood was a 1<sup>st</sup>-team All-Pro, recording 15 sacks at defensive end. Dryer made the Pro Bowl with 12 sacks. Olsen was 35-years-old, but the tackle still had 7 1/2 sacks and punched a Pro Bowl ticket of his own.

There were two more Pro Bowlers at linebacker, in Jack Reynolds and Isiah Robertson. Free safety Bill Simpson intercepted six passes. No one in the league allowed fewer points than this Los Angeles D.

James Harris made history in 1975. He had won the quarterback job midway through '74, but this year he became the first African-American to open the season as his team's starting QB. Harris lived up to the confidence. His 55 percent completion rate was eighth in the NFL. His 7.5 yards-per-attempt was fifth. And while a 5.3 interception rate is very high by our modern standards, in this era, it put Harris in the middle of the league. He was efficient and he made big plays.

The playmaking capacity of the passing game was helped by the presence of Harold Jackson. His 43 catches led the team, and those catches went for 18.3 yards a pop. Ron Jessie was a good second receiver, catching 41 balls for 547 yards.

McCutcheon led a balanced running game with 931 yards, and he made the Pro Bowl. McCutcheon got support from backup halfback Cullen Bryant, and fullback Jim Bertelson. Mack led the offensive line and made the Pro Bowl. The Rams offense wasn't dynamic, but at 11<sup>th</sup> in a 26-team league for points scored, it was more than enough to win.

The season opened with a visit to another perennial NFC contender, the Dallas Cowboys. In the late afternoon TV slot, the season could not have started much worse. Harris only completed one out of ten passes for five yards. He threw three interceptions. Harris was pulled for young backup, Ron Jaworski. The Rams fell behind 18-0 before scoring a meaningless touchdown late in an 18-7 loss.

A road trip to San Francisco saw the offense continue to struggle. They trailed 14-3 at the half. It took the special teams to bail the Rams out. At 14-6, they blocked a punt and recovered it for a touchdown. Placekicker Tom Dempsey, who five years earlier set an NFL record by kicking a 63-yard field goal when he was in New Orleans, came through here. Dempsey nailed a 51-yard field goal for the lead. The Rams got out of town with a 23-14 win.

The home opener was against the playoff-bound Baltimore Colts. Trailing 7-0 in the second quarter, Harris finally started to heat up. He hit Jackson with a 37-yard touchdown pass. Trailing 13-10 in the fourth quarter, Los Angeles got a 25-yard touchdown from McCutcheon, and a Harris-to-Jessie touchdown pass. They won, 24-13.

Harris had his best statistical game of the young season at lowly San Diego, going 15/26 for 226 yards. McCutcheon ran for 112 yards. But with Dempsey missing a couple field goals, the Rams could not finish drives. Fortunately, the Chargers had the same problem, and the game went to overtime at 10-10. Finally, a Dempsey field goal won it.

L.A. came back home to face the Atlanta Falcons. Harris got the scoring started with a 44-yard touchdown pass to tight end Bob Klein. Harris went 14/25 for 200 yards on the afternoon while the running game produced a 218-63 edge in rush yardage. The Rams churned out a 22-7 win.

Another dominant rushing performance came at home against the New Orleans Saints. This time the yardage margin was 223-96. Los Angeles took a 24-0 lead by halftime and coasted in to a 38-14 win.

The schedule was soft, but there was no question that the Rams were surging now. They went to Philadelphia to play a bad Eagles team on Monday Night Football. Harris and Jackson put on a show. They connected on TD passes from 54 yards and 30 yards. Harris also hit Jack Snow with a 42-yard scoring strike. With a 28-3 lead, the defense got in on the fun, with a couple of touchdowns of their own. The final was 42-3.

San Francisco made their return trip to SoCal. Even though the 49ers did not have a good team in '75, the Rams continued to struggle against their traditional rival. They built a 14-0 lead by halftime, but the running game suddenly went quiet. They couldn't salt it away. San Francisco quarterback Steve Spurrier made some big plays in the passing game. Los Angeles blew the lead and lost the game, 24-23.

L.A. made their return visit to Atlanta in mid-November. The Ram running game continued to struggle. But they defended the run impeccably. Jessie caught ten passes for 151 yards. It was enough offense to get a 16-7 win.

A home date with lowly Chicago proved to be the tonic the running attack needed. McCutcheon rolled for 114 yards to key an easy 38-10 win. Los Angeles went on to Detroit for a Thanksgiving Day game. Harris tossed an 11-yard TD pass to Jessie for a 7-0 lead. Harris then hit Jackson on scoring plays from 38 and 17 yards. The Rams won 20-0 and were soaring at 9-2.

The NFC West did not have a viable challenger. Los Angeles was closing in on the division title. When San Francisco lost on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, it was official—the Rams were NFC West champs for the third straight year.

Now, it was time to focus on getting home games for the playoffs. Minnesota, the two-time defending NFC champ, was 10-1. Over in the NFC East, Dallas and the St. Louis Cardinals were tied at 8-3. Los Angeles was situated in the 2-spot, but that could change for either good or bad in these final three weeks.

A road trip to New Orleans brought bigger problems than playoff seeding. Harris injured his shoulder and had to leave the game. The Rams won a strange game—a safety, two field goals, a defensive touchdown, and missed extra point added up to a 14-7 win. But Harris' health was now in question.

Harris tried to go the next week at home against a bad Green Bay team, but his shoulder wouldn't last. Jaworski came in. After spotting the Packers a 5-0 lead, the Los Angeles running game pounded out 195 yards, the defense did its thing, and the Rams pounded out a 22-5 win. It was enough to secure at least the 2-seed.

Minnesota lost and was also 11-2, but the Vikings still had the tiebreaker. Both teams were playing in separate nationally televised finales on Saturday. The Rams had the tougher draw—the defending Super Bowl champion Pittsburgh Steelers in prime-time.

It turned out not to matter. Minnesota wrapped up the 1-seed in the early afternoon game. Pittsburgh, having secured the top spot in the AFC, only had Terry Bradshaw play for a half. The L.A. defense intercepted three passes and won 10-3. The Rams had closed the season with a sparkling 12-2 record. Now it was time to try and reach their first Super Bowl.

They hosted NFC East champ St. Louis on the Saturday after Christmas. Harris still wasn't ready, but the Rams were a 6 ½ point favorite. The oddsmakers' confidence was justified. Jaworski ran for an early touchdown. Then the defense took over. Youngblood intercepted a pass and went 47 yards to the house. Simpson came up with a Pick-6 of his own, going 65 yards for a touchdown. Los Angeles was rolling at 21-0.

They were doing everything well. McCutcheon ran for over 200 yards. Jaworski went 12/23 for 200 yards and made no mistakes. He hit Jackson on a 66-yard touchdown pass. The lead grew to 28-9, before some late Cardinal action made the final score cosmetically respectable at 35-23.

The next day, Los Angeles watched as wild-card Dallas upset Minnesota on a last-second desperation touchdown pass. The Rams were hosting the NFC Championship Game.

There were still two lingering issues. One was who would play quarterback. Harris was deemed healthy enough to go, so Knox gave him the call. But the bigger problem was whether or not this game with Dallas would be different than that disastrous season opener.

It was different—only worse. Harris misfired on two passes, threw an interception, and was pulled. The great Ram defense was being carved up by Dallas quarterback Roger Staubach. Jaworski came in to a 21-0 deficit. He threw two interceptions of his own. L.A. only rushed for 22 yards. By the time they scored, they were in a 34-0 fourth-quarter hole. The ultimate 37-7 defeat was a serious humiliation at the end of an otherwise splendid season.

## 1976

The defensive line kept on thriving in '76. With 14 ½ sacks, Youngblood was named 1<sup>st</sup>-team All-Pro. Brooks was a Pro Bowler, getting 14 ½ sacks of his own coming up the middle. Another All-Pro, Isiah Robertson, was at linebacker. And the secondary had some major ballhawks. Corner Monte Jackson intercepted *ten* passes in what was then a 14-game schedule. Jackson also got All-Pro recognition. On the other corner, Rod Perry intercepted eight passes.

In other words, it was tough to get a pass off against the Rams, and you did so at your own risk. The Los Angeles defense ranked third in the NFL for points allowed.

The L.A. offense also ranked third in the league, and that was impressive considering that frequent injuries left them with major quarterback instability. Everyone from incumbent James Harris to newcomer Pat Haden to young Ron Jaworski got multiple starts. Injuries to Harris and Jaworski were one reason. A dispute between owner Carroll Rosenbloom, who favored Haden, and Knox, who supported Harris, was another.

Harris and Haden started the bulk of the games, and both had reasonably good—and similar—numbers. Each was in the high 50s for completion percentage, which was solid in this era. They each had interception percentages a hair below 4—another stat that might look bad to a modern audience but was rather good in this era of football. Harris' 9.2 yards-per-attempt was excellent, and Haden's 8.5 was awfully good in its own right. Only Jaworski, who started two games, struggled.

What this boils down is that, beyond the drama, the Rams were getting good quarterback play. Harold Jackson was one of the NFL's top big-play threats and he caught 39 balls for better than 19 yards a pop. Ron Jessie emerged as a Pro Bowl wideout, catching 34 passes and averaging a dazzling 22.9 yards-per catch.

Throughout a coaching career that would eventually take him to Buffalo and Seattle, Knox was known for producing running games. This 1976 Los Angeles Rams team was no different. McCutcheon made the Pro Bowl with over 1,100 yards. John Cappelletti ran for nearly 700 more. The offensive line was anchored by center Rich Saul.

Jaworski, who had led the team to a playoff win in 1975, with Harris injured, got the start in Week 1 at Atlanta. He didn't play well, got hurt and the Rams clung to a 13-7 lead after three quarters against a bad team. What they were doing was running the ball—a 232-62 edge in yardage with both McCutcheon and Cappelletti clearing the 100-yard threshold. Haden threw a 47-yard touchdown pass to Jessie to open the game and Los Angeles pulled away to a 30-14 win.

A high-profile showdown with the contending Minnesota Vikings was up next. The road game would be in the late afternoon TV window. It was a clash of styles. McCutcheon and Cappelletti each had 100-yard games. Viking quarterback Fran Tarkenton countered with a big game. Each team missed a couple of field goals. A game whose result would reverberate down the stretch in the fight for playoff position ended in a 10-10 tie.

The home opener was against a terrible New York Giants team. L.A. was sluggish—they spotted the Giants a 10-0 lead and were still stuck in a 10-10 tie in the fourth quarter. But that opportunistic defense came up with four interceptions on the day. Harris threw a 32-yard touchdown pass to Cappelletti to get the lead, and the Rams won 24-10.

A Monday Night home date with division rival San Francisco was up next. The 49ers had been down the past couple years, but they would trend upward again in '76. Like on this night. The Rams couldn't run the ball. Harris had decent numbers—16/27 for 201 yards and no mistakes. But there were no points. And L.A. lost 16-0, in a game where they had been a (-13) favorite.

At 3-1-1, the Rams were now a half-game back of the 49ers, and the NFC East had multiple contenders for the wild-card. It certainly wasn't panic-button time, but the time to start playing with some urgency was here.

At home against mediocre Chicago, Los Angeles jumped out to a 10-0 lead behind Harris. He got hurt, Jaworski came in, and the offense bogged down. The Rams trailed 12-10 in the fourth quarter. McCutcheon's 18-yard TD run got L.A. back on top, and they won 20-12.

A similarly unimpressive win came at lowly New Orleans. Each team turned it over five times and the score was tied 10-10 in the fourth quarter. Haden threw a 40-yard touchdown pass to Harold Jackson and Los Angeles escaped the Bayou, 16-10.

An easier game was up against Seattle, a franchise in its first year of existence. Monte Jackson delivered a Pick-6 and Harris threw a touchdown pass to Jessie. That was a part of a 24-point haymaker the Rams landed in the first quarter. The running game took over, to the tune of a 206-50 yardage advantage and the result was a 45-6 rout.

Los Angeles traveled to Cincinnati to face a contending team in a big Monday Night game. A couple of early Ram drives ended in field goals. That was costly, because the Bengals played well late, L.A. lost three fumbles and a fourth-quarter defensive collapse led to a 20-12 loss.

This was the start of a crucial three-game stretch that would continue at home against the contending St. Louis Cardinals and then go up to San Francisco for a massive NFC West showdown. Rosenbloom pinned the blame for the Cincinnati loss on Harris and ordered Haden into the lineup.

The move seemed to work—Haden threw a 65-yard touchdown pass to Harold Jackson and Los Angeles built up a 21-6 third-quarter lead against a team they had decisively beaten in last year's playoffs. But then the pass defense, normally so good, fell apart. A good Cardinal offense rallied and the Rams lost 30-28.

Los Angeles was 6-3-1 and San Francisco was 6-4. The NFC East, with Dallas, Washington, and St. Louis, now seemed to have a lock on the wild-card. The Rams-49ers showdown on the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving had gotten even bigger.

Haden got the start. He only completed three passes and the running game was non-existent. But if you think this is leading to a description of defeat, you would be wrong. The defense played its best game of the year. They forced six turnovers, two of them interceptions by Monte Jackson. The Rams pulled away in the second half to win 23-3.

Now in control of the division, Los Angeles had manageable home games coming up with New Orleans and Atlanta. The Ram running game got humming against the Saints, with 323 rush yards. They won 33-14. The following Saturday against the Falcons, L.A. rolled up a 210-59 edge in rush yardage, while Haden went 13/21 for 214 yards. The result was a 59-0 beatdown.

Going into the season finale, Los Angeles was 9-3-1. Dallas was 11-2 and leading the race for the 1-seed. Minnesota was 10-2-1, but the Rams did have the tiebreaker on the Vikings. L.A. could potentially rise to the 2-seed.

They took care of their own business on Saturday night at mediocre Detroit. After falling behind 17-3, Harris got the opportunity to turn the offense around. He and Harold Jackson hooked up on a 27-yard touchdown pass. A field goal cut the lead to 17-13. Harris finished 10/17 for 113 yards and led one more TD drive. The Rams won 20-17.

Los Angeles didn't get the break they needed—Minnesota won. When Dallas lost, the Vikings vaulted to the 1-seed. The Rams would play the Cowboys in the Divisional Playoffs.

After last year's NFC Championship Game, the Rams were ready for a little payback. A tough, physical game ensued. The Rams trailed 3-0 after the first quarter. Haden ran in from four yards out for a 7-3 lead. But in the second quarter, L.A. allowed a blocked punt that set up a TD and left them in a 10-7 halftime hole.

Neither team could get a running game going. Both Haden and counterpart Roger Staubach threw three interceptions. But Los Angeles put together a fourth-quarter drive. They kicked a tying field goal—a play where Dallas was whistled for roughing the kicker. Knox took the points off the board and continued the drive. It paid off. McCutcheon's 1-yard TD run gave the Rams a 14-10 lead.



Late in the final period, the Rams were lined up to punt. Once again, it got blocked. A potential nightmare scenario loomed, as the Cowboys were set up on the 17-yard line. But the L.A. defense met the moment, stopping Dallas on downs. The next time the Rams lined up to punt, they weren't taking any chances. They took a safety and preserved a 14-12 win.

A trip to Minnesota on the day after Christmas would settle the Super Bowl berth. The game started off well enough for Los Angeles, as they drove down inside the 10-yard line. Then the special teams woes continued. A field goal was blocked and returned 90 yards for a touchdown. The Rams dug themselves a 17-0 hole. Haden would go 9/22 for 161 yards, while McCutchen ran for 128 yards. They fought back and cut the lead to 17-13. But the hole was too deep, and another season ended in this round, 24-13.

Knox had done arguably his most impressive coaching job, navigating the quarterback instability. But he wasn't long for L.A.

## 1977

The 1977 Los Angeles Rams came into the season looking to take that next step. Instead, the step they took was backward—an early playoff exit that spelled the end of Knox’s tenure.



Los Angeles continued to deal with quarterback instability and controversy. Harris ended up in San Diego. But the job didn’t go to Haden, at least not initially. The front office made a move that could be either described as “bold” or “desperate.” They signed the legendary, but aging, Joe Namath.

Namath would only start four games, not play particularly well, get hurt, and retire. Haden took over and started the final ten games of what was then a 14-game regular season. Haden made the Pro Bowl. His 57 percent completion rate, 7.2 yards-per-attempt and 2.8 percent interception rate were all solid numbers by the standards of the era. He had a big-play threat in Jackson, who made the Pro Bowl, and a reliable tight end in Terry Nelson.

Haden’s emergence was heartening, but the real key to the offense continued to be a potent running game. McCutcheon had a Pro Bowl year, running for over 1,200 yards. Cappelletti and Wendell Tyler were both reliable change-of-pace backs. The offensive line had a trio of Pro Bowlers in center Rich Saul, veteran left guard Tom Mack and left tackle Doug Frances. They also had a 24-year-old right guard in Dennis Hannah who was on the verge of breaking out as a Pro Bowler himself.

It all added up to an offense that produced the fourth-most points in the NFL. And the defense was even better, ranking second in points allowed. Jack Youngblood recorded 9 ½ sacks. He was joined in the Pro Bowl by Larry Brooks and Isiah Robertson. The secondary trio of Pat Thomas, Monte Jackson and Bill Simpson combined to intercept 16 passes.

The season began poorly in Atlanta. The running game didn’t fire up, and they lost three fumbles. Namath couldn’t get anything going in the air and the Rams lost to a mediocre team, 17-6. Things trended back upward in the home opener against Philadelphia. The Rams pounded a bad Eagles team on the ground, to the tune of a 220-31 rush yardage edge. Namath threw a couple early touchdown passes to get the lead and Los Angeles churned out a 20-0 win.

A game with San Francisco was a penalty-ridden affair both ways, and the Rams clung to a 17-14 lead after three quarters. They had the running game going and were preventing the 49ers from doing the same. It made the difference in the final period, as L.A. pulled away to win 34-14.

A Monday Night visit to face the playoff-bound Chicago Bears would be a threshold point in the season. After taking an early 13-0 lead, the defense had an uncharacteristic letdown, giving up two long touchdown passes. They couldn't stop the great Bear running back, Walter Payton. Namath threw four interceptions and before the night was over, suffered the injury that forced a quarterback change. In the meantime, Los Angeles dropped a 24-23 decision and fell to 2-2.

L.A. hosted New Orleans, and while the Rams were sloppy, losing three turnovers, they were also controlling the line of scrimmage. McCutchen ran for 126 yards, the defense did its job and a 14-7 win put the Rams back on track.

Another Monday Night date awaited, this one with a perennial contender in the Minnesota Vikings. The Rams were ready. In the first half, Haden threw for two TDs and ran for another, building a 21-0 halftime lead. The final rush yardage advantage registered in at 283-98, with a 102-yard night from Tyler. Los Angeles collected three turnovers and committed none. That's the recipe for blowing out a contender 35-3.

But there was a letdown in New Orleans a week later. Haden played well, going 17/26 for 251 yards and no mistakes. Harold Jackson caught eight passes for 127 yards. But the Rams were pounded on the ground, giving up 253 rush yards. They lost 27-26 on a late field goal.

A home game with the woeful Tampa Bay Buccaneers, in their second year of existence, was the ideal medicine. Haden threw an early 51-yard touchdown strike to Harold Jackson, McCutcheon ran for a TD and it was 17-0 by the half. The final was 31-7.

Los Angeles traveled to Milwaukee, where the Green Bay Packers used to play three of their home games each year. The Rams took advantage of a bad team, shutting down the Packer running game, building a 17-0 lead by halftime, and winning 24-6. Los Angeles kept the winning going on their return trip to San Francisco. McCutcheon ran for 100 yards, the defense allowed just 92 passing yards and the Rams played clean football. They won 23-10.

The last three weeks had been against subpar competition, but L.A. had the feel of a team that was gaining steam. They took the show on the road to mediocre Cleveland. Neither team took care of the ball very well, with ten combined turnovers. But with McCutcheon going for 104 yards, the Rams enjoyed a decisive 216-90 yardage edge on the ground, and they won 9-0.

Los Angeles was sitting on an 8-3 record. Atlanta was still in pursuit at 6-5. The Falcons had a head-to-head win over the Rams from the season opener and the rematch was still to come, so L.A. couldn't count on a tiebreaker. In the broader NFC picture, Los Angeles was a game ahead of 7-4 Minnesota, in the race for the 2-seed. The Rams trailed the 9-2 Dallas Cowboys in the push for the 1-seed, and the tiebreaker scenario there didn't look promising.

A big battle with the defending Super Bowl champion Oakland Raiders was up. By the time kickoff arrived on the West Coast, Atlanta had lost to New England. The NFC West was now there for the taking. Playing at home, the Rams came through. They won the turnover battle 6-2. Trailing 14-13 in the fourth quarter, Haden went up top to Harold Jackson for a 43-yard touchdown pass. With the 20-14 win, the Rams were now 5-for-5 in winning division titles in the Knox Era.

That took a little of the juice out of the Falcons' visit to L.A. for the regular season's penultimate game, but the Rams were still playing for playoff position. They outrushed the Falcons 265-64, led by 152 yards from McCutcheon. The 23-7 win clinched the 2-seed and a home game in the divisional playoffs. When Dallas won on Monday Night, it took the top seed out of play and locked Los Angeles' playoff position in.

The Rams closed the season with an early Saturday afternoon game in Washington. The Redskins were trying to stay alive in what proved a futile effort to catch the Bears for the wild-card spot. Haden split time with the new backup QB, Vince Ferragamo, and McCutcheon saw limited duty. A 17-14 loss ended the regular season with a 10-4 record.

Minnesota was coming to Los Angeles on the day after Christmas for the game that would conclude Divisional Round Weekend. The Rams had lost to the Vikings in the NFC Championship Game in both 1974 and 1976. They were a playoff nemesis. But this year, Los Angeles had been the far superior team, and they came in as a (-10) favorite.

But the weather was decidedly uncooperative. Heavy rain left the field in an unplayable mud. **Photos from this game** are iconic, with jerseys almost indecipherable. Any talent edge was negated. McCutcheon was able to grind out 102 yards, but that was answered by 101 from Minnesota's Chuck Foreman. Haden threw three interceptions. The Rams trailed 14-0 in the fourth quarter and lost 14-7.

It was a bitter pill—enough that it marked the end of Knox's tenure. He stepped down after the season. Fortunately for both the coach and the franchise, there was still more success ahead. Knox would turn both Buffalo and Seattle into contenders over the next decade. And the Rams? They had good things in their immediate future.

## 1978

The 1978 Los Angeles Rams had about as chaotic a beginning to the season as one could imagine. Going through a coaching change doesn't describe it—they also fired their new head coach in the preseason. But for those who like stability, the Rams had a conclusion to the season that was quite typical—for the fourth time in five years, they lost the NFC Championship Game.

After Knox's departure, owner Carroll Rosenbloom went back to an old name—he re-hired George Allen, whose tenure with the Washington Redskins had ended after 1977.

Allen's militaristic approach didn't go over well with the players though, and there was rebellion going on within the organization. After two preseason games, Rosenbloom decided the mix wouldn't work. He fired Allen and promoted defensive coordinator Ray Malavasi, the one holdover from the Knox staff.

Malavasi had a talented roster to work with and that talent began up front. The Rams put four of their five offensive linemen in the Pro Bowl, and three of the four defensive linemen. They had a pair of good young corners in Pat Thomas and Rod Perry, each of whom intercepted eight passes en route to the Pro Bowl.

Offensively, Los Angeles relied on a balanced rushing attack that distributed the ball among Bryant, Cappelletti and McCutcheon. Haden was mistake-prone, with a 13/19 TD-INT ratio, but he threw for nearly 3,000 yards and could stretch the field with receiver Ron Jessie. To top it off, the Rams drafted a rookie kicker in Frank Corral, who promptly had a Pro Bowl year.

Los Angeles opened the season at the Philadelphia Eagles and in spite of giving up a special teams touchdown and committing ten penalties, the Rams got a field goal from Corral and won 16-14. The following week they were at home against the Atlanta Falcons and in a sloppy game—19 combined penalties and seven combined turnovers—a fourth-quarter touchdown by Bryant helped LA pull out a 10-0 win.

The defense was carrying them, but with the defending Super Bowl champion Dallas Cowboys up next, Los Angeles would have to elevate its play. That's what they did. The defense did its usual job and intercepted Roger Staubach four times. With the game tied 14-14 in the fourth quarter, Haden then delivered a 43-yard touchdown pass to Willie Miller for the lead. Perry sealed the deal with a Pick-6 to clinch the 27-14 victory.

A road trip to face the Houston Oilers and their great rookie running back, Earl Campbell, followed. The Rams held Campbell to 77 yards, while Haden played his best game of the year, completing 17/26 for 220 yards and no interceptions. It was enough for Los Angeles to escape with a 10-6 win.

The Rams were not only 4-0, but they were doing it against good teams—every one of the teams they had beaten would end up making the playoffs.

Two victories against non-playoff teams followed. Los Angeles got a blocked punt for a touchdown and another Perry Pick-6 to scoot out to a 20-0 lead in New Orleans, and then they hung on 26-20. The running game overwhelmed the lowly San Francisco 49ers, with all three backs contributing in a team effort that produced 227 yards and a 27-10 win.

Los Angeles faced another playoff perennial, the Vikings and ran their record to 7-0. Playing on the road and trailing 17-13 after three quarters, the superiority of the Rams in the trenches stood out. They held the Vikings to 42 rush yards and for 180 themselves. McCutcheon had 89 of those yards and also caught a TD pass in the fourth quarter. LA pulled away, 34-17.

After winning seven straight, with five of them against future playoff teams, it's ironic that the win streak came to an end against the sub-.500 Saints, and at home no less. Six turnovers and thirteen penalties negated basic control of the game and Los Angeles lost 10-3. Then they lost on Monday Night in Atlanta. Haden threw three interceptions in a 15-7 defeat.

Los Angeles didn't play well the following week, but they survived a bad Tampa Bay Buccaneers team, because the Bucs kept shooting themselves in the foot with turnovers. But after two losses and a 26-23 win over a poor team, the Rams hardly looked ready to face the Pittsburgh Steelers. And that's who was coming to town on Sunday Night.

The prime-time kickoff on Sunday was rare at this time, and both defenses came ready to go. It was a scoreless first half and then Pittsburgh's Terry Bradshaw threw a third-quarter touchdown pass for a 7-0 lead.

Los Angeles was struggling to find offense, but they were controlling the running game. Cappelletti was winning a battle between former Penn State running backs, as he outrushed Pittsburgh's Franco Harris 106-50. Haden was staying away from mistakes, and it all gave the Rams a chance in the fourth quarter. They took advantage, with Haden throwing a touchdown pass that secured a 10-7 win.

Haden then played a good game in San Francisco, going 17/25 for 267 yards, two touchdowns and no interceptions, saving the Rams on a day the defense didn't stop the run. The final was 31-28. The defense continued to struggle in Cleveland the following week, being carved up by

Browns' quarterback Brian Sipe and this time Haden couldn't save them. He threw three interceptions in a 30-19 loss. The Rams bounced back with a clean game at the New York Giants and a 20-17 win.

Los Angeles had put away the NFC West with their 7-0 start, and Atlanta's late-season push to a wild-card never put the Rams' hold on first place in jeopardy. It was Dallas who was coming in the rearview mirror, having found their footing after a 6-4 start. But the Rams still had a one-game lead and they had the head-to-head tiebreaker with two weeks to go.

A Monday Night home game with a terrible Cincinnati Bengals team was a perfect chance to sew up the #1 seed, especially with an early 13-0 lead. The Rams inexplicably came apart and lost the game 20-19. Now their home finale with the Green Bay Packers was a must-win.

The Packers were playing to get into the postseason themselves, so the Rams had a motivated opponent. But Los Angeles was ready and they got back to the physical, trench-controlling football that brought them here. They shut down the Green Bay run, while Bryant got the ball 30 times and produced 121 yards. The Rams led 7-0 at half, and then broke the Packers in the second half, pulling away to a 31-14 win.

Los Angeles' first playoff game would be against Minnesota, who was 8-7-1, the worst playoff team of the Super Bowl era, and who had needed the Packer loss in LA to back into the postseason. But given the history of the Rams-Vikings matchup in the playoffs, no one would take this lightly.

Minnesota came ready to play and led 3-0 after one quarter. Haden and Viking quarterback Fran Tarkenton traded touchdown passes in the second quarter, sandwiched around a Corral field goal and it was 10-10 at the half.

The Rams were able to pull away with the same formula they used in their regular season meeting—simply break the Vikings late in the game with the power of the running game. Bryant plunged over from three yards to give LA the lead and the tough runner produced 100 yards. Haden and Jessie were able to connect six times and loosen things up, and one of those was a 27-yard touchdown strike. Los Angeles pulled away for a 34-10 win.

Los Angeles would host Dallas for the NFC Championship. A physical game stayed scoreless for a half and then Dallas took a 7-0 lead in the third quarter. Would it be a rerun of the Pittsburgh game, that followed a similar script and saw Los Angeles win in the fourth quarter? Nope. It ended up close to that '75 playoff game against these Cowboys. On the day, the Rams committed seven turnovers. Haden threw three interceptions before breaking his thumb. Backup Vince Ferragamo came in and threw two more. The Cowboys pulled away and the last interception was brought back for a touchdown to seal a 28-0 Ram loss.

To have such a great season and have it end, once again, in a home playoff defeat was disheartening. But the 1978 Los Angeles Rams overcame a lot of turmoil from the start to get where they did. And bigger vindication wasn't long in coming.



## 1979

Oddly enough, the 1979 Los Angeles Rams, a team much worse than their predecessors, were the ones who found a way to win in January.

The defensive front four remained intact. There were two 1<sup>st</sup>-team All-Pros in Jack Youngblood and Larry Brooks, along with 33-year old Fred Dryer. Linebacker Jim Youngblood, Jack's brother, was a Pro Bowler himself.

Los Angeles had Rod Perry at corner. And Nolan Cromwell would eventually become acknowledged as one of the best free safeties in the game. This developing talent merged with the established players and resulted in a defense that ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in the NFL.

The Rams' offense wasn't quite as good, due to more inconsistency at the quarterback position, but they were strong up front. Rich Saul, their veteran center, and right guard Dennis Harrah each made the Pro Bowl. Jackie Slater didn't, but at 25 he was starting a career that one day win him acclaim as the league's best right tackle. Behind this line, Wendell Tyler ran for 1,100 yards and Cullen Bryant tacked on over 600 more.

Haden was the starting quarterback, but he was up and down. Eventually injuries forced Malavasi to go casting for a backup and he found the right one, Vince Ferragamo just in time.

Los Angeles opened the season with a home game against the Oakland Raiders, no longer the Super Bowl contender they had been under John Madden or would soon be again under current coach Tom Flores, but still a winning team. The Rams took a 14-0 lead, but with Haden throwing three interceptions, the lead evaporated and LA lost 24-17.

A Thursday night game was a novelty in the late 1970s, and the Rams played one in Denver for Week 2. They trailed the Broncos, the two-time defending AFC West champs and future wild-card team this year, 9-6 in the fourth quarter. Linebacker Jack Reynolds then recovered a fumble inside the Bronco 5-yard line and waltzed in for the winning touchdown.

Los Angeles was a (-13) favorite against a terrible San Francisco 49ers team, one that would win just two games as a new head coach named Bill Walsh looked to get the organization turned around. The Rams started poorly and trailed 10-0 before ripping off 24 consecutive points. Bryant rushed for 106 yards, keying ground-game dominance in a 27-24 win.

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers were a good team in 1979 and a September 23 visit for a late afternoon kickoff wasn't the last the Rams would see of the Bucs. Jim Youngblood got the game off to a good start with a 31-yard interception return for a touchdown. But the extra point

was missed and Los Angeles didn't score the rest of the day. Haden was 13/27 for only 64 yards and later replaced by Ferragamo in a 21-6 loss.

Haden was back the following week against the St. Louis Cardinals and played pretty well against a bad opponent, going 14/24 for 170 yards and no interceptions. But the defense really came through. Veteran defensive back Dave Elmendorf picked off two Jim Hart passes and a 21-0 win moved the Rams to 3-2. Then they crushed the New Orleans Saints, 35-17, with the secondary again playing the key role. LA intercepted Archie Manning five times, three from defensive back Pat Thomas.

Los Angeles wasn't playing great, but at 4-2 they were respectable and the NFC West wasn't particularly strong. The lack of division strength was what the Rams would have to fall back on as the season threatened to get away from them the next three weeks.

Sunday night games were another novelty and Los Angeles played one in Dallas that went poorly. They were outrushed 201-59, and despite trailing just 13-6 at the half, the Rams gave up three third-quarter touchdowns to the Cowboys and lost 30-6. A home game with the San Diego Chargers, en route to a 12-4 season, went even worse. They surrendered 326 yards to San Diego quarterback Dan Fouts and turned the ball over eight times in a 40-16 defeat.

As bad as these losses were, at least the Cowboys and Chargers were good teams—in fact, both would be the #1 seeds in their respective conference playoffs. You couldn't say that about the New York Giants, who came to the LA Coliseum, picked off Haden four times and maintained control of the game to a 20-14 win. The Rams were now 4-5, a game back of the Saints and only a game ahead of the Falcons.

The coming trip to Seattle had the potential to break the season. The Seahawks were a decent team, who would finish 9-7, and the Rams were a slight road underdog. But the Los Angeles defense came up with one of the truly amazing performances in the modern era of the NFL.

Los Angeles held Seattle to one first down. They allowed only two completed passes to Jim Zorn. They held the Seahawks to (-7) *total yards*. Suffice it to say, the game was a shutout. The Rams won 24-0, and even though Haden broke a finger towards the end of the game, that would be a situation that ended up working out okay for the team.

The Rams went to Chicago, where the Bears were on their way to the playoffs. LA led 16-7 at the half and had gone up 23-14 in the third quarter after Tyler bolted 63 yards. But new quarterback Jeff Rutledge only threw for 71 yards and the defense failed in the fourth quarter, losing 27-23. Malavasi made the decision to go with Ferragamo, as the 5-6 Rams were still a game back of the Saints and a game ahead of the Falcons.



Atlanta was coming into Los Angeles for a Monday Night visit. Ferragamo was erratic, completing less than half of his passes. But he made big plays—a 29-yard touchdown pass to Preston Dennard and a 40-yard strike to speedy Billy Waddy. The result was a 20-14 win and the Falcons were finished as a contender.

Another game with the 49ers was next, and once again, San Francisco was pesky, leading 17-13 in the third quarter. Ferragamo was 9/20, but he again made his completions count—they went for 149 yards, including a 71-yard scoring toss to Tyler that turned the game. The versatile Tyler also rushed for 94 yards in a 26-20 win.

Ferragamo started poorly in a home date with the Minnesota Vikings, a team that had consistently tormented the Rams in the playoffs, though the great quarterback Fran Tarkenton, had retired after 1978. After Ferragamo went 4/10 for 22 yards, Malavasi summoned veteran Bob Lee—who ironically had once backed up Tarkenton in Minnesota.

The game was a good one. LA got a blocked punt for a touchdown, but it went to overtime tied 21-21. Los Angeles drove to the five-yard line and facing third down lined up for a field goal. The Viking special teams were notoriously good, and with a down to spare, the Rams got creative. Cromwell, the holder, took off on a fake and scored the winning touchdown easily.

Even better was what happened the next night. New Orleans, in a Monday Night home date with Oakland, gave up three fourth quarter touchdowns and lost 42-35. Los Angeles now had a one-game lead in the NFC West and could clinch with a victory at Atlanta in the season's penultimate game.

Tyler rushed for 138 yards, while Ferragamo was 10/15 for 188 yards and a 25-yard touchdown pass to Waddy. The game was no contest and Los Angeles won 34-13, extending their divisional record to 5-0 and punching their ticket back to the playoffs. The anticipated season finale at home with New Orleans proved to be meaningless and the Rams basically rolled over in a 29-14 loss.

The 9-7 record wasn't exactly screaming "Super Bowl" at anyone, and Los Angeles was a decisive (+8.5) underdog at Dallas for the divisional round on December 30. It was the final game of the weekend, with Tampa Bay having already advanced to the NFC Championship Game. The Rams' road to the Super Bowl would involve beating two teams on the road where they had previously lost by a combined score of 51-12.

Ferragamo was sacked for a safety in the first quarter, but he got the passing game going in the second. The quarterback found Tyler on a 32-yard scoring play. Then, with 11 seconds left in the half, Ferragamo rifled a 43-yard touchdown strike to Ron Smith for a 14-5 lead.

The offense was shut down for much of the second half though, and the Cowboys began to come back. It appeared the Rams had thwarted one drive when they intercepted the great Roger Staubach, playing his final season, in the end zone. But pass interference was called, Dallas was scored and the lead was 14-12. Eventually, the Cowboys took a 19-14 lead and the Rams found themselves at midfield in the final two minutes.

Ferragamo dropped back, looked left and fired the ball to Waddy. It appeared to be tipped by a Cowboy linebacker but the throw had enough strength on it to get to Waddy, who took it to the end zone. Los Angeles had pulled an improbable 21-19 upset.

The NFC Championship Game in Tampa was a defensive battle. The Ram offense drove inside the 10-yard line three times, but had to settle for field goals each time. It turned out that was more than enough. The defense forced two different Tampa Bay quarterbacks, starter Doug Williams and backup Mike Rae, into 2-for-13 passing each.

The final was 9-0. I'd say it was anticlimactic after the Dallas game, but when you've lost four conference championship games the previous six years, nothing was going to take the bloom of this one. The Los Angeles Rams were finally going to the Super Bowl.

L.A.'s magical January nearly carried them to what would have been a big Super Bowl upset of the Pittsburgh Steelers, the "Steel Curtain", who had three of the previous five Super Bowls, including 1978. Los Angeles led 19-17 in the fourth quarter, and even when trailing 24-19, were driving for the go-ahead touchdown. But Ferragamo threw an interception, Pittsburgh mounted a long drive and the game ended 31-19.

Of all the playoff teams the franchise produced in Los Angeles during this era, it's fair to say the 1979 Los Angeles Rams were the worst in the regular season. But they were the best when it mattered most.

## 1980

For better and for worse, the 1980 Los Angeles Rams were a team that returned to form. Los Angeles was improved in 1980, going 11-5, but that was small consolation when they again lost in the playoffs.

An improved offense was the biggest reason the Rams won two more regular season games in 1980. Vince Ferragamo now had the job, and hethrew for nearly 3,200 yards with a 30/19 TD-INT ratio—pretty good, by the standards of the times.

The offensive line was anchored by Pro Bowlers Kent Hill and Rich Saul, and there was a future Hall of Famer at right tackle in Jackie Slater. Protected by this line, Ferragamo spread the ball around to Preston Dennard and Billy Waddy in the passing game, while Elvis Peacock and Cullen Bryant carried the rushing load.

None were spectacular, but all were steady. The result was Los Angeles ranking third in the NFL in points scored.

Five Pro Bowlers dotted the lineup on defense, led by first-team All-Pro free safety Nolan Cromwell. The corners were in good hands with Pat Thomas and Rod Perry, while Larry Brooks made it at defensive tackle and 33-year-old middle linebacker Jack Reynolds again got Pro Bowl recognition. The L.A. defense was further supported by The Old Guard veterans up front in Jack Youngblood and Fred Dryer. The Ram defense was seventh in the league in points allowed.

The season started with a bang—Drew Hill took the opening kickoff against the Detroit Lions and took it 98 yards to the house. The Rams still led 20-17 at half, but they were being lacerated on the ground. Detroit, the worst team in the NFL a year earlier, had drafted a Heisman Trophy running back in Billy Sims. Los Angeles allowed 330 rushing yards overall and they fell apart in the second half of a 41-20 home loss.

For the second straight year, the Rams played a Week 2 Thursday Night game. This one was in Tampa Bay, a rematch of the NFC Championship Game, where Los Angeles had won a 9-0 defensive affair. This one was more of the same—the Rams led 9-3 after three quarters, meaning these two teams managed to go seven straight quarters without a touchdown.

But this time it caught up with L.A. Ferragamo threw four interceptions and they ended up losing 10-0. Los Angeles quickly bounced back at home against the Green Bay Packers. Johnnie Johnson returned an interception 99 yards for a touchdown and Perry brought one back 83 yards in a 51-21 rout.

The Rams traveled to New York to play a bad Giants team, and got three rushing touchdowns from Peacock in an easy 28-7 win. A home game with the San Francisco 49ers resulted in another day where the Ram defense returned two interceptions for touchdowns in a 48-26 rout.

Los Angeles went to the city they would one day call home to play the St. Louis Cardinals. Bryant ran for 115 yards as the Rams controlled the trenches, and Ferragamo played mistake-free in a 21-13 win. Another victory over the 49ers followed, this one on the road. Ferragamo was brilliant, going 18/28 for 291 yards and four touchdown passes, the second time he'd outplayed the still-developing Joe Montana.

The Rams were 5-2 and riding a five-game winning streak, but none of the wins had come against teams that would finish any better than 6-10. The Atlanta Falcons were emerging as the main challenger in the NFC West. Los Angeles was set for a visit to Atlanta on October 26.

It was a defensive struggle, and the Rams trailed 6-3 in the third quarter. Ferragamo stepped up with a 74-yard touchdown strike to Hill to get the lead, but Atlanta's Steve Bartkowski, enjoying a Pro Bowl year, threw a 54-yard TD pass of his own and Los Angeles lost 13-10.

A visit from the Saints, the worst team in the NFL in 1980, was just what LA needed to bounce back and Ferragamo threw three first-quarter touchdown passes to put the Rams out to a 31-0 lead. Peacock and Bryant combined for 180 rush yards to salt away a 45-31 win that was never that close. But the Rams gave it back the next week at home against the Miami Dolphins.

Ferragamo threw four interceptions, the defense allowed 280 rush yards and the Rams lost to an average team 35-14 in a game they were an (-11) home favorite. The veteran Los Angeles defense stepped it up the next week on the road against a potent New England Patriots offense. The Rams won a hard-fought 17-14 game to get back on track.

Los Angeles was on the Monday Night stage at New Orleans just prior to Thanksgiving. They got off to a sluggish start offensively and the game was scoreless into the second quarter. Then some trickery loosened things up, when running back Mike Guman threw a touchdown pass and LA coasted in to a 27-7 win.

The record was 8-4 and the playoff race was hot in both directions. The Falcons led the NFC West at 9-3. Los Angeles was in position to make the playoffs as the second wild-card, but Detroit was right behind them at 7-5 and holding the head-to-head tiebreaker. The Rams had little margin for error.

Ferragamo did not play well at home against the New York Jets, throwing four interceptions. But the opponent was bad, and the running game was strong, with Peacock going for 152 yards in a 38-13 blowout. Another AFC East opponent was next, the Buffalo Bills, who would eventually win that division. Ferragamo only threw one interception this time, but it was returned for a touchdown. It was the only TD the Rams allowed, but that was all it took in a 10-7 overtime loss.

The loss pushed the Rams two games back of Atlanta with two to play. The rivals would meet in L.A. for the final game of the season and since Los Angeles pulling even presumed they would defeat Atlanta, the Rams would also take the tiebreakers. On the other side, Detroit had come up short in the clutch and was at 7-7, meaning one more win would lock up at least a wild-card for the Rams.

But getting that win was not going to be easy, even with both games at home. Before the finale with Atlanta, Los Angeles had to play the Dallas Cowboys on Monday Night Football. The Cowboys were in a tough fight with the Philadelphia Eagles for the NFC East title, with the runner-up set for a wild-card.

The Rams responded with their best game of the season. They led 7-0 after one quarter and then unleashed. Jewerl Thomas, the third running back, took off on a 34-yard touchdown jaunt. Ferragamo hit Waddy from 40 yards out, and then found Dennard on a 34-yard TD pass. The score was 38-0 by the time the fourth quarter started and only then did L.A. let up, and Dallas picked up a couple meaningless touchdowns.

Atlanta had also won, so the season finale had only marginal importance. The Rams were set to go on the road for the wild-card game, though they could get homefield if Dallas lost at home to Philadelphia. Atlanta had the #1 seed in hand, though they could lose it if Philadelphia beat Dallas. The Rams-Falcons and Cowboys-Eagles kicked off at the same time and it became quickly apparent that Dallas would win, rendering the game out west meaningless. It was still a good game and went into overtime before LA won 20-17.

The Rams visited Dallas for the NFC wild-card game. Los Angeles had pulled an upset in this venue the previous January, and their Monday Night humiliation of the Cowboys was fresh in everyone's mind. The Rams started well, scoring two touchdowns and holding Dallas in the red zone on a couple occasions. But LA missed an extra point and the game was tied 13-13 at half.

Then the season ended the way it began, with a collapse of the rush defense. Dallas ended up with 338 rushing yards and the Cowboys took over, en route to a 34-13 win.

As it turned out, this was a temporary end of the good times in Los Angeles. Malavasi slipped under .500 the next year and after another losing season in 1982, was fired. It wasn't until 1983, with a new head coach in John Robinson and a dynamic rookie running back Eric Dickerson, that the Rams would return to the postseason.

By the time the franchise reached another Super Bowl, they were in St. Louis. Kurt Warner led those St. Louis Rams to the Lombardi Trophy in 1999. It wasn't until 2021, after the Rams had returned home, that they would win a championship for the city of Los Angeles.