

Lions no laughingstock, but far from good

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Detroit building capable team, yet it remains young and thin at spots



Gregory Shamus / Getty Images

Matthew Stafford has more offensive support in his second season as the Lions' starting quarterback.



By Tom Kowalski

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In the 18 months since taking over arguably the worst team in NFL history, Lions general manager Martin Mayhew and coach Jim Schwartz have only won half the battle. In terms of perception and reputation, the Lions no longer are the laughingstock of the league, as Mayhew has made several deft personnel moves and Schwartz did all he could with a roster in progress.

Now, though, the battles must be won on the field and the victories must start stacking up. At this point, there's little to

suggest there will be any great leaps or bounds this season. It took 10 years for the former regime to destroy the franchise, and it's going to take more than two seasons to resurrect it.

What's new

Offense: Even before running back Kevin Smith went down with a serious knee injury in December, the Lions already were planning to upgrade this position and did so by drafting Cal's Jahvid Best in the first round. The Lions needed someone with great speed and home run ability to force opposing defenses to play it honest against their passing attack.

Schwartz will wait until the end of training camp to determine just how much the 200-pound Best will handle the ball each game, but remember that Schwartz worked with Chris Johnson in Tennessee and knows a player doesn't have to be big to handle the workload. It's unlikely Smith will be anywhere near 100 percent at the start of the season. He's a tough runner but lacks the outside speed or inside explosion to break big plays.

Defense: The worst-ranked defense in the league for three consecutive years continues to undergo a scheme overhaul. The line underwent the biggest change this offseason with free agent Kyle Vanden Bosch at right end and Jared DeVries returning from a torn Achilles tendon to man the left end spot. Tackle Corey Williams arrives from a trade with Cleveland and will team with Ndamukong Suh, the second-overall pick in the draft.

Suh — an impact player against the run and pass — will draw a lot of attention and create opportunities for others. He might need some time to adjust to the pro game but should be a force

soon. The interesting thing about Vanden Bosch and Williams is they've both proven to be effective players, but neither has played at that level for the last two years.

Breakout player

DeAndre Levy, MLB. Filling in for injured players last season, Levy played relatively well—he started eight games on the outside—but now he's being asked to run the defense from the middle. In just his second year, the coaches have no doubts that Levy is ready to handle the heavy mental and physical load. While Levy is solid against the run (but needs to cut down on his missed tackles), he already has won a job in the nickel defense.

"I've never seen a young linebacker like him."

— defensive coordinator Gunther Cunningham

"They told me to be ready and to know the defense. I wanted to know the defense as a whole so I could fill in wherever needed. Fortunately, last year I got playing time at both (outside) spots. It's been a smooth transition (to the middle). We got those kinks out of the way last year. Now, I know what to expect and I can focus on the game and the things I need to get better at, as opposed to learning as you go."

— Levy

Opponent's view

"The problem with Detroit is the same problem they've had for years — they keep changing everything every year or two. Look at the roster. They've still got guys from three schemes ago. They draft players for one specific philosophy, like big linemen for

power running, and then shift to a complete zone-blocking system the next year. Now, it's back to power [football](#) and they just spin their wheels. They've dumped guys they should've kept, and the guys they kept haven't been playing the system. You see it at all the positions. ...

"Continuity has to be maintained, and even if it's not the same coach it has to be the same scheme. They're going to be better because their talent is improving, but they've really got a long way to go. It's amazing how far behind they are, compared to the good teams. You can't make up that kind of ground in a year or two. At least they seem to be headed in the right direction—you couldn't say that two years ago."

Bottom line

In a division full of strong-armed quarterbacks, the Lions' weak defense is going to struggle. They'll be improved from last year and their offense will give them a puncher's chance in some high-scoring shootouts, but the fourth quarter is going to reveal their weaknesses.

Opponents are clever at finding mismatches and exploiting them, and Detroit has many. It's too soon for a playoff run to be the barometer of this team's success. The Lions must strive toward .500 and be a threat to be in every game. From where the Lions were two years ago, it's a worthy and lofty goal.

Depth chart

Offense

QB: Matthew Stafford, Shaun Hill

FB: Jerome Felton

RB: Jahvid Best, Maurice Morris
WR: Calvin Johnson, Derrick Williams
WR: Nate Burleson, Bryant Johnson
TE: Tony Scheffler, Brandon Pettigrew
LT: Jeff Backus, Jason Fox
LG: Rob Sims, Manny Ramirez
C: Dominic Raiola, Dylan Gandy
RG: Stephen Peterman, Manny Ramirez
RT: Gosder Cherilus, Jon Jansen

Defense

LE: Cliff Avril, Jared DeVries
DT: Corey Williams, Landon Cohen
DT: Ndamukong Suh, Sammie Hill
RE: Kyle Vanden Bosch, Turk McBride
SLB: Julian Peterson, Zack Follett
MLB: DeAndre Levy, Jordon Dizon
WLB: Zack Follett, Landon Johnson
CB: Chris Houston, Jonathan Wade
CB: Amari Spivey, Eric King
SS: Ko Simpson, Daniel Bullocks
FS: Louis Delmas, C.C. Brown

Specialists

K: Jason Hanson
P: Nick Harris
KR: Aaron Brown
PR: Nate Burleson
LS: Don Muhlbach