

# CLOSE, BUT NO CIGAR

**The Best Teams in Pro Football History that DIDN'T make the Playoffs**

By Mark Speck

How can a team that shut out its first seven opponents and gave up only 59 points all season long not make the playoffs? How about a team that set numerous offensive records, including most rushing yards and most rushing touchdowns, AND score a record 495 points, fail to make the post-season? How can a team lose just one game all year and then have to watch the playoffs on TV at home? It's happened quite a few times down thru the years in pro football. Good and sometimes great teams have had splendid seasons that went for naught.

What follows is a list of the ten best teams that failed to make the playoffs, and may have proven wrong the old saying, **May the best man** --- or in these cases, team --- **win**.

Not surprisingly, all of these teams played in the pre-merger NFL. Eight of the ten instances occurred before the NFL expanded in 1966 and divided into four divisions. After the merger, when the playoffs started to expand, everybody and his brother seemed to make the playoffs. These ten teams played in an era before wild-cards and divisional playoffs. An era when being great sometimes wasn't good enough.

## **1934 Detroit Lions**

When the best defenses in the history of pro football are debated and discussed, one team never gets mentioned---the '34 Lions. And they may have been the best of the bunch. Detroit shut out its first seven opponents. That's right, seven. Not only that, the Lions didn't allow any of these teams inside their own 20-yard line.

Detroit simply dominated their opposition. They whitewashed the Giants 9-0 and the Cardinals 6-0. They shut out the Packers, 3-0, as Green Bay managed to cross midfield only once. The Lions held the Eagles to 8 first downs and five pass completions in a 10-0 win. Three days later, Detroit held the Redskins to 112 total yards and intercepted four passes in a 24-0 romp. The Brooklyn Dodgers were the next victims, as Detroit limited them to 56 yards rushing, 5 passing and intercepted 4 aerials in a 28-0 win. Shut out #7 came a week later, as the Lions refused to allow the Cincinnati Reds to get past midfield in a 38-0 shellacking.

By now, it was November, and still no one had scored on the Lions. Detroit was tied with the Bears for first place in the West. At home against the Steelers, Detroit didn't allow the Steelers offense to cross midfield, but the Lions finally gave up their first points----on a fake punt. Detroit rushed for a league-record 426 yards, however, and crushed the Steelers anyway, 40-7.

The Lions whipped the Cards and smashed the St. Louis Gunners, 40-7. It seemed as if no one could stop them. But a week later, Clark Hinkle's 47-yard field goal did just that, 3-0. Now 10-1, Detroit hosted the still unbeaten Bears in their first ever Thanksgiving Day game. Chicago, loaded with All-Pros, was too much, and nudged the Lions, 19-16. The last game of the season was now academic, but the Lions refused to roll over and die for the undefeated Bears. In a close game, the Bears won 10-7 to complete a perfect season.

Those final losses, plus the fact that Chicago went unbeaten, have helped the football world forget the Lions. But they shouldn't be. Detroit surrendered only 59 points all season. There were those seven shutouts in a row. No team since has been able to string together more than three. The Lions also scored 238 points, second only to the Bears, and led the NFL with 27 rushing touchdowns. Dutch Clark led the league in rushing touchdowns with 8 and also in completion percentage. Eight Lions, including Clark, Ace Gutowsky, Glen Presnell, and Ox Emerson, were named to various All-Pro teams. If Detroit had competed in the East, they would have easily won the division crown, but alas, they had the misfortune of being stuck behind the Bears. Their second place finish, however, must not obscure the fact that they were one of the best teams in pro football history NOT to make the post season.

## **1939 Washington Redskins**

Since 1936, the Redskins had been a force to reckon with in the Eastern Division. In '36, they won the division but lost in the league title game. A year later they won it all by beating the Bears. In '38 they battled the Giants down to the final game of the season for the division crown. There was no reason to think that they wouldn't be smack-dab in the middle of things again in '39.

In an effort to keep his prized quarterback, Sammy Baugh, healthy, head coach Ray Flaherty decided to alternate him with Frankie Filchock. This move may have kept Baugh healthy, but it was even more beneficial to Filchock, who led the NFL in touchdown passes and finished second in combined rushing and passing

yardage. He also completed 62 percent of his passes. Other stars included Baugh, who completed 55 percent of his aeriels, fullback Andy Farkas, who led the league in rushing attempts, yards per catch, and scoring, and tackle Jim Barber, who made All-Pro. The Redskin defense wasn't too shabby either. They pitched three shutouts and gave up only 5 rushing touchdowns and 6 passing TDs all season. Seven times they gave up 9 points or less. The defense gave up the fewest yards in the NFL—2,113—and had the league's best pass defense, surrendering just 1,116 yards. Opposing quarterbacks could only complete 37 % of their passes against the stingy Redskins.

Washington opened the season by blanking the Eagles 7-0, then played their first scoreless tie since '35 by battling their division foes the Giants to a 0-0 draw. The offense then kicked it into high gear as the 'Skins smashed Brooklyn 41-13 and the Steelers twice, 44-14 (one of the 'Skins TDs coming on a 99-yard pass from Filchock to Farkas), and 21-14.

At 4-0-1, the 'Skins travelled north to battle the East Division leading and eventual champion Packers. Green Bay was too much on this day, and handed Washington its first loss of the season, 24-14. A week later, however, the Redskins edged the Eagles 7-6, and in Detroit the Lions whipped the Giants 18-14, so Washington was back in a first place tie with New York at 5-1-1.

The Redskins proceeded to whip their next three opponents by a combined score of 101-14. They thrashed Brooklyn, 42-0, the Cardinals, 38-7, and the Lions, 31-7. The Giants, however, also won all three of their games, so for the second year in a row, the East Division championship was coming down to the final Sunday.

A large contingent of Redskins fans made the journey to New York to watch the game, and it was a battle right down to the end, and not without controversy. The two squads struggled gamely all the way through the contest. It was a bruising defensive battle that the Giants led 9-7 with time running out. But the 'Skins were threatening, and with 45 seconds left, Washington lined up for a field goal try that would win the game and the division crown. Rookie tackle Bo Russell connected and it looked good---to everyone but official Bill Halloran, who ruled that the kicked had failed. The incensed Redskins charged Halloran and an argument ensued, but the call stood. Washington, with an 8-2-1 record and with what many considered the best team in the league, was going home for the playoffs. And not to play, either.

### 1944 Philadelphia Eagles

Unlike the Redskins, the Eagles had never challenged for any division titles. They had spent most of their existence closer to the cellar than the penthouse. Since their birth in 1933, Philadelphia had finished last five times. The other five times they had finished next to last. In 1943, they had even merged with their cross-state rivals, the Steelers, to save money during the war. This merger, however, seemed to signal a change in the Eagles fortunes. They finished with their first winning record in '43, going 5-4-1. But no one was prepared for what happened to the Eagles in '44.

The NFL, as had been agreed, dissolved the Eagle-Steeler merger. The Eagles would compete again as an independent team. Head Coach Greasy Neale had a team full of young talent, and to this mix he added lineman Bruno Banducci and a fine young running back in Steve Van Buren. When All-Pro Vic Sears was lost for the season with a broken leg, Neale simply plugged second-year pro Al Wistert into the lineup, and he made All-Pro.

The Eagles opened the season by crushing the Boston Yanks, 28-7. A week later, they came from behind with 30 seconds left to tie the defending Eastern Division champion Redskins, 31-31. Philadelphia smashed Boston again, 38-0, then faced the unbeaten and first place Giants at the Polo Grounds. The two teams were evenly matched, but in this game, Van Buren was the difference. Steve scored two touchdowns and then intercepted a pass on the 45 that set up Roy Zimmerman's one-yard TD. The Eagles won 24-17.

Van Buren again rushed for two touchdowns as Philadelphia clobbered Brooklyn 21-7 at Ebbetts Field. At 4-0-1, the Eagles hosted the Giants in a return match. New York was 4-1, and once again the two evenly-matched clubs engaged in a close, hard-fought struggle. Van Buren tallied on a 97-yard kickoff return, but the best the Eagles could do against the tough Giants was a 21-21 deadlock.

A week later, the Eagles were back to their winning ways, as they handed the Redskins their worst loss since the 1940 championship game. Five different Eagles scored touchdowns as Philadelphia won easily, 37-7. By now, the Eagles, with a record of 5-0-2, were the talk of the NFL. They had already tied their team record for most wins in a season. They had never been in first place this late in the season since, well, since forever.

The euphoria lasted until the next Sunday, when the Bears, the defending NFL champs, rode into Shibe Park. Chicago was in a nasty mood, as they had just lost to the Lions, 41-21, to end their chances at a repeat. They took their frustrations out on the young Eagles. Philadelphia managed only two net yards rushing, and the Bears battered the Eagles, 28-7. Although it was just their first loss of the season, Philadelphia found itself in THIRD place on Monday, behind both the Giants and Redskins !

But the Eagles rallied and finished their season in strong fashion, crushing Brooklyn, 34-0, and smashing the Rams, 26-13. Philadelphia ended their year with a splendid record of 7-1-2, but alas, it wasn't good

enough. The Giants had wrapped up their campaign by beating the Redskins twice, and while the two losses by the Skins pushed the Eagles into second place, it wasn't enough to overcome the division lead of the Giants. New York edged them out by a half a game.

Despite the frustration of a second-place finish, it had been a great season for the young, up-and-coming Eagles. Wistert, Zimmerman, and Van Buren were all named to the All-Pro team. Philadelphia led the NFL in scoring with 267 points, and had the league's best rushing attack with 1,661 yards. Van Buren was the NFL's top punt returner, and Mel Bleeker's 37.3 yards per reception topped the league. On the defensive side, Philadelphia boasted the league's #1 defense against the run, surrendering only 558 yards all season. They also gave up the fewest first downs that season, 86. But the young Eagles lost a league-high 20 fumbles, and although the '44 season showed the Eagles were not quite ready to keep up with the big boys in the league, it was a springboard for the rest of the 1940s, as the Eagles would dominate the league for the remainder of the decade.

### 1948 Chicago Bears

Chicago was nearing the end of its domination of the NFL during the 1940s. Five times during the decade they had played in the NFL title game. Four times they had won it. But in 1947, the Bears finished a distant second in the Western Division to their cross-town rivals the Cardinals. Not only that, the Bears had surrendered a team-record 241 points. But these Bears still had claws, and they had one last gasp left in them, and they made the most of it.

George Halas had opened his wallet to sign prized rookies George Connor, Bobby Layne and Johnny Lujack, but this was a veteran-laden team. Sid Luckman, Ken Kavanaugh, Bill Osmanski, George McAfee, and Bulldog Turner were all 30 years old or close to it, all battle-tested veterans from the Bears' salad days. They helped give Chicago fans one last moment in the sun.

The Bears opened the season by trashing the Packers, 45-7. Chicago then beat the rival Cards for the first time since early in the '46 season, 28-17. This win over the defending league champions must have thrilled Papa Bear Halas to no end. Chicago then continued to win, smashing the Rams, 42-21 and thrashing the Lions, 28-0. The Bears, unbeaten and comfortably in first, travelled to Philadelphia to play the Eagles, a team that had never beaten Chicago. But in the rain and mud of Shibe Park, the unthinkable happened--the Bears lost to the eventual league champs, 12-7. Chicago could do very little all day, and to add insult to injury, Sid Luckman was nailed for a safety late in the game by Piggy Barnes.

Undaunted, the Bears started another winning streak by crushing the Giants, 35-14. The Rams and Packers fell in quick succession. In Boston, the Bears clobbered the overmatched Yanks, 51-17. A week later, the Redskins were victimized, 48-13. In Detroit, the Lions were crushed, 42-14.

Chicago was playing its best football of the season, and with a record of 10-1, hosted their bitter rivals, the Cardinals, in the season finale. The Cards were also 10-1, and the winner would claim the division crown. The loser? Well, there were no wildcard playoffs then. The loser was going to come up short. Close, but not close enough.

The Bears discovered on December 12, 1948 that being great sometimes wasn't good enough. The Cards won their second straight division title by edging the Bears, 24-21. The Cards were going to Philadelphia to play the Eagles for the NFL crown. The Bears, despite a fine season, were going home. They had given up the fewest points and the fewest total yards in the NFL, had surrendered the fewest TD passes in the league, and had amassed the league's second-best rushing total and the third-most points in the NFL. But the Bears could only come close. The Cards, meanwhile, had puffed the proverbial cigar.

### 1948 San Francisco 49ers

It may have been the AAFC, but a great team is a great team, and no one had seen a greater offensive juggernaut than the 1948 49ers.

The 49ers were a fine team that had one major flaw: they couldn't beat the Browns. San Francisco tore thru the rest of their AAFC opponents with almost ridiculous ease, winning their first 10 games by scores like 35-14, 41-0, 36-14, 56-14 and 44-21. But Cleveland? That was another story. The 49ers may have had all the gaudy numbers, but the Browns had their number. And that was the difference.

Rookie Joe Perry scored the very first time he touched the ball, on a 58-yard run, and the Niners were literally off and running. They won their first ten games while hardly breaking a sweat, and while practically re-writing the record books. San Francisco had the greatest ground attack since Patton, setting records for most yards rushing—3,663—highest average per carry—6.1—most yards per game—262—and most touchdowns—35. When all was said and done, the 49ers had lit up scoreboards like Christmas trees, totalling a record 495 points. Halfback Johnny Strzykowski rushed for 915 yards, while Perry added 562—on only 77 attempts, an incredible 7.3 yards per carry clip—and a league-leading 10 touchdowns. Meanwhile, quarterback Frankie Albert was leading the league in completion percentage and in touchdown passes with 29, and was named the Outstanding Player of the Year in the AAFC. Alyn Beals caught a league-high 14 of those scoring passes.

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But then there was that little matter of the Browns. The first time they met them , in Week 11 in Cleveland, the two unbeaten titans drew 82,769 fans, the largest pro football crowd of the 1940s. Cleveland's defense proved to be too much, as the Browns won a nailbiter, 14-7. The Niners had been averaging 428 yards per game, but against the Browns could manage only 185. Albert was only 6 of 15 for 32 yards and had three passes intercepted. Two weeks later, after the 49ers had dispatched of Brooklyn, 63-40, the two clubs met again out on the coast before 59,785 people. The Niners built a 21-10 lead, but could not hold their advantage. Cleveland scored three straight touchdowns, and then a halfback option pass by the 49ers was intercepted to set up another score. A final TD by San Francisco meant nothing, and once again, the Browns had prevailed, 31-28, and despite a season-ending 38-21 crushing of the L.A. Dons, the 12-2 49ers, with all of their gaudy numbers, were left out in the cold. That's because the Browns, undefeated and eventual league champs, had their number. And that, in the end, made all the difference.

### 1951 New York Giants

This list almost included the 1950 Giants, but those New Yorkers finished tied with Cleveland for the East Division crown, only to lose to the Browns in a playoff. So technically one could say they made the « playoffs ». A year later, the Giants were just as good if not better, and they chased Cleveland all season long for the East Division flag.

The Giants were a strong team who, like the 49ers of three years earlier, had only one major flaw : They couldn't beat the Browns. After an opening day tie with the Steelers, the Giants reeled off three straight wins. A trip to Cleveland to face the once-beaten Browns resulted in a 14-13 loss, knocking the Giants out of first. The difference was a missed extra point by Ray Poole after the Giants second touchdown. But New York got back on the winning track, beating the Yankees, 37-31, and the Redskins, 28-14. The Browns visited a week later, and before 52,215 fans, came away with a 10-0 victory, their 7th in a row. The Browns put tremendous pressure on Giants quarterback Charlie Conerly, and one of his tosses was intercepted to set up a Cleveland field goal.

Otherwise, the Giants went thru their opposition like a thresher through wheat. After their second loss to the Browns, the Giants shut out both the Cards and the Steelers, and clobbered the Eagles, 23-7 and the Yanks, 27-17. New York's defense was #1 against the run, and led the league with 41 interceptions. All-Pro Otto Schnellbacher had a league-best 11 picks, while Em Tunnell added 9 and Tom Landry 8. Tunnell also returned four kicks—three punts and a kickoff—for touchdowns, and led the league in punt returns. He was Dante Hall before there was a Dante Hall. Defensive tackles Arnie Weinmeister and Al DeRogatis and linebacker Jon Baker won All-Pro honors. On offense, Conerly had an off-year, but fullback Eddie Price led the NFL with 971 yards rushing on a record 271 carries. Tackle Tex Coulter, coaxed out of retirement, made All-Pro.

Their final record of 9-2-1 would have won the National Conference title, but in the American it was only good enough for a close second to the Browns. Close, but not close enough. Great, but not good enough.

### 1962 Detroit Lions

The Lions had finished a close second to the Packers in both 1960 and '61. Only one game had separated the two teams in 1960, and in '61 Detroit breathed down the necks of the Packers all year long. Detroit was one of the few teams in the NFL that didn't seem fazed by the Packer mystique. They split their games with Green Bay in both 1960 and '61 and always played them tough.

Although they were a success on the field, Detroit had not fared well in the war against the AFL. Top draft choices Johnny Robinson, Jim Norton, Earl Faison, John Hadl and Eddie Wilson had all signed with the AFL, and the Lion veterans were not pleased. To placate them, the Detroit front office pulled off a big trade with the Browns, getting quarterback Milt Plum, fullback Tom Watkins and linebacker Dave Lloyd from Cleveland. Although it made headlines at the time, and did quell the ire of the team's veterans, the trade ultimately did little to bolster the Lions offense. Plum had a sub-par season, and Watkins gained 485 yards in spot duty. But it mattered very little. This team was built on its defense.

Detroit's defense included future Hall-of-Famers Joe Schmidt, Night Train Lane and Yale Lary, along with All-Pros Roger Brown and Alex Karras. The Lions sacked the quarterback for losses totalling 455 yards, most in the league. Detroit was #1 against the run and #1 in total defense. Only Green Bay gave up less points than the Lions total of 177. Seven times the defense surrendered 10 points or less.

Detroit opened the season with wins over the Steelers (45-7), the 49ers (45-24), and the Colts (29-20). In Week Four the Lions journeyed to Green Bay to face the unbeaten Packers. Detroit led 7-6 late in the game, and seemed to have the game virtually wrapped up. But an ill-advised third down pass by Milt Plum was picked off to set up a 27-yard field goal that won the game, 9-7. The frustrated Lions were not happy, and the story goes that Karras threw a shoe at Plum in the locker room.

The offense continued to sputter, and more often than not, the defense bailed them out. Detroit nipped the Rams, 13-10, then lost 17-14 to the Eastern Division-leading Giants. The defense shined in two close wins,

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11-3 over the Bears and 12-3 over the Rams. Detroit clobbered the 49ers, 38-24, then whipped Minnesota, 17-6, to move their record to 8-2.

That set up a Thanksgiving Day showdown with the hated Packers, still unbeaten at 10-0. The Lions, still steaming over their earlier heartbreaking loss to the Pack, put on a defensive clinic. They sacked Bart Starr 11 times, and Schmidt and Brown spent practically the whole game in the Green Bay backfield. The Lions had gotten sweet revenge in beating their division rivals, 26-14, and denying them an unbeaten season.

Detroit won its next two games, 21-14 over the Colts and 37-23 over the Vikings. But the Packers also won both their games, and clinched the division with a Week 13 win over the 49ers.

The Lions had won a team-record 11 games. The only games they lost were to the Eastern Division champion Giants, the eventual league champion Packers, and to the Bears, who would win the 1963 title. A fine season. Great, but not good enough.

### 1963 Green Bay Packers

The Packers had captured three straight division crowns and two straight NFL titles, and had another great season in '63, winning 11, losing just 2 and tying 1, a record anyone would be proud of. The Packers were great once again, but this time they were just not good enough.

The last three years, the Lions had provided the competition, battling the Pack for the division crown. This time a new challenger stepped up. The Bears, coached by venerable old George Halas, hadn't won a championship since 1946. But defensive assistant George Allen installed a zone defense, and the Bears were once again « Monsters of the Midway ».

Still, a 10-3 loss to the Bears in Week One was written off as a fluke. These guys were still the Packers, winners of three straight division titles and two straight league crowns. Yes, they missed Paul Hornung, who was suspended for gambling. But Tom Moore and Elijah Pitts filled in capably, combining for 870 yards and 11 touchdowns. But the loss of Bart Starr for four games due to a broken hand cost the team tremendously.

After the opening loss to the Bears, the Pack won 8 straight, rolling over their opponents like they had in previous seasons. Detroit (31-10), Los Angeles (42-10), St. Louis (30-7), Pittsburgh (33-14) and Minnesota (20-7) fell like leaves from the trees, and the Packers looked like they were ready to successfully defend their championship. But when Starr got hurt, Green Bay had to regroup. With only journeyman John Roach on the roster, the Packers grabbed veteran Zeke Bratkowski from the Rams. Bratkowski, however capable, was no Starr, and when the Pack travelled to Chicago for a battle for first place, the Bears throttled the Packers for the second time that season, 26-7. The ball-hawking Bears forced seven turnovers, and intercepted five passes. Jim Taylor rushed for only 23 yards, and Green Bay didn't score until the final quarter. The Packers had discovered that the Bears were no fluke. Green Bay whipped the 49ers twice, clubbed the Rams and tied the Lions in their last four games, but it wasn't enough. Green Bay, 11-2-1 and with no less than seven All-Pros on their roster, had been great once again. Willie Davis said the '63 Packers were just as good as their championship teams. But the Pack had discovered that, in 1963 at least, being great sometimes wasn't good enough.

### 1967 Baltimore Colts

The Rams and Colts battled tooth and nail in both 1967 and '68 for supremacy in the brand-new Coastal Division. If this had been baseball, they'd be comparing these two seasons to the great pennant races of all time.

It was closest in 1967, as an eyelash separated these two evenly-matched squads. Both teams finished with identical records of 11-1-2. The Rams scored 398 points, the Colts 394. L.A. gave up 196 points, the Colts 198. George Allen of the Rams and Don Shula of the Colts were named co-Coaches of the Year in the NFL. Both teams placed 4 players on the All-Pro squad. The first time the two clubs met that season, in Week 5, they battled to a 24-24 tie. It doesn't get any closer than that.

The Colts battled thru a rash of injuries to keep pace with the Rams. Offensive tackle Jim Parker had to retire due to injury. Both wide receivers, Jimmy Orr and Raymond Berry, went out with injuries. Shula and the Colts kept plugging holes and winning, mainly due to the efforts of NFL Player of the year Johnny Unitas, and their rock-ribbed defense. Johnny U. threw for 3,428 yards and 20 touchdowns and led the NFL in completion percentage. The defense was solid with a top-notch veteran at every position plus two fine rookies in Bubba Smith and Rick Volk. Eight times the Colts surrendered 10 points or less. Baltimore led the NFL with 32 interceptions, and gave up only 5 rushing and 13 passing TDs all season.

Baltimore opened by winning four games by a combined score of 141 to 47. Then came the tie with the Rams followed by another deadlock with the Vikings. The Colts then started another winning streak, beating the Redskins and then the eventual NFL champs, the Packers, 13-10. They crushed the Falcons, 49-7, and the Lions, 41-7. By now it was obvious that the Division title, and a playoff spot, would be decided on the season's final Sunday in L.A. The two teams came into the game in a virtual dead-heat, the Colts in first by an eyelash at 11-0-2, the Rams a close second at 10-1-2. Los Angeles was coming off an emotional 27-24 victory over the Packers, but there was no sign of a letdown. Roman Gabriel and Jack Snow combined to

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tear the Colt defense to shreds, and the Rams won easily, 34-10 to win the division and a spot in the post season. The Colts? They had lost just one game all season, and it still wasn't good enough for a playoff berth. Great, but not good enough.

### 1968 Los Angeles Rams

In 1967, the Rams edged out the Colts for a spot in the playoffs. A year later, the Colts returned the favor and nudged a strong Rams team out for the division title and a spot in the postseason.

For the second year in a row, the Rams and Colts battled for leadership in the Coastal Division. This time, the Rams finished second to what many consider one of the best teams in NFL history. L.A. finished with 10 wins, 3 losses and a tie, which would have been good enough to win either the Central or Century Divisions. But Baltimore won 13 of 14 and nosed out the Rams for the division crown and a playoff berth.

Like the Colts the year before, the Rams had a solid season despite a rash of injuries. Les Josephson, the team's leading rusher in '67, missed the season due to a foot injury, but rookie Willie Ellison stepped in to gain 616 yards. Despite being hampered by a broken wrist for seven weeks, tight end Billy Truax led the team with 35 receptions. Roman Gabriel had a sub-par season, but the Ram offense clicked well enough to score 312 points.

But this team, like any George Allen-coached team, was built on its defense, and the Rams had one of the best. L.A. gave up only 3,118 yards in offense, a record for a 14-game season. Although Lamar Lundy missed nine games, the Rams still tied for the league lead with 51 sacks, 22 of them by Defensive Player of the Year Deacon Jones. The Rams surrendered the fewest first downs in the league, giving up only 198. Opponents were forced to punt a league-high 88 times against the Rams. Jones, Merlin Olsen and Eddie Meador were All-Pro, and Clancy Williams had seven interceptions.

L.A. won its first six in a row, then journeyed to Baltimore to face the Colts. Baltimore was coming off a 30-20 loss to Cleveland, and was anxious to make amends, and they did, spanking the Rams 27-10. L.A. then went on another unbeaten string, winning 4 and tying one to raise its record to 10-1-1. They trailed Baltimore, which stood 11-1, by the slimmest of margins. It looked for all the world that this season, like 1967, was going to come down to the final game of the year in Los Angeles. Rams and Colts for the division crown and a spot in the playoffs. But the Rams may have overlooked their next opponent. The Bears, at 6-6, flew to Los Angeles for what looked like a Ram tuneup for the Colt game. But the Bears had other ideas, and stunned the Rams 17-16. The loss eliminated Los Angeles from the playoffs, and made the game against the Colts academic. Not surprisingly, the disheartened Rams fell to the eventual NFL champs, 28-24. A record of 10-3-1 was something for anyone to be proud of, but Ram owner Dan Reeves proved the adage that great sometimes isn't good enough. After the season, he tried to fire George Allen, much to the chagrin of his players. A public outcry eventually forced Reeves to reinstate Allen, but it showed the coach, who had guided his club to a 21-4-3 record over the last two years, that close only counted in horseshoes and hand grenades, not pro football.

### THE TEN BEST SECOND-BEST TEAMS

1934

Bears	13-0-0
LIONS	10-3-0

1939

Giants	9-1-1
REDSKINS	8-2-1

1944

Giants	8-1-1
EAGLES	7-1-2

1948 (NFL)

Cardinals	11-1-0
BEARS	10-2-0

1948(AAFC)

Browns	14-0-0
49ERS	12-2-0

1951

Browns	11-1-0
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GIANTS	9-2-1
1962	
Packers	13-1-0
LIONS	11-3-0
1963	
Bears	11-1-2
PACKERS	11-2-1
1967	
Rams	11-1-2
COLTS	11-1-2
1968	
Colts	13-1-0
RAMS	10-3-1