

Mooch brings hope to Lions

Detroit still reeling after 5-27 mark over past two years

BY LARRY LAGE
AP Sports Writer

DETROIT — Coach Steve Mariucci is the Detroit Lions' messiah.

His blazing blue eyes, resume and homegrown roots have persuaded many fans to believe in a team that has failed for decades.

The long-suffering franchise has one playoff victory since winning the 1957 NFL title.

Under team president Matt Millen and fired coach Marty Mornhinweg, Detroit was 5-27 over the past two seasons, the worst two-year mark in team history.

Without making major changes on the field, Mariucci's charisma and track record in San Francisco — where he was 60-43, with three playoff wins — has converted many doubters.

"It's been flattering," said Mariucci, who was born and raised in Iron Mountain in the Upper Peninsula.

"There's so much excitement in Michigan because there's only one NFL team here. In California, you had the 49ers and practically across the street, you had the Oakland Raiders and that's not counting San Diego. So, there was a lot of divided loyalties, but not here. Everybody is a fan of the Lions."

Except in his hometown, which is nearly 400 miles closer to Green Bay than Detroit.

"I'm working on that and I'll admit, we still have some work to do," he said. "I can't tell you how many times people told me, 'I hope you go 14-2' when I was home."

Detroit offensive tackle Jeff Backus said Mariucci made an impact months ago, and his actions since have only validated the faith the players gave him instantly.

LIONS AT A GLANCE



COACH: Steve Mariucci, 7th season overall, 1st at Detroit (60-32 overall, 3-4 playoffs)

2002 RECORD: 3-13

LAST PLAYOFF: 1999, lost to Washington 27-13.

STADIUM: Ford Field (65,000)

KEY PLAYERS: QB Joey Harrington; WR Charles Rogers; RB James Stewart; TE Mikhael Ricks; OT Jeff Backus; DE Robert Porcher; LB Earl Holmes; LB Barrett Green; CB Dre Bly; S Corey Harris.

KEY DEPARTURES: LB Chris Claiborne; CB Todd Lyght.

WHAT THEY'RE SAYING:

"The holes bother me, but we have some strengths too. It's such a weird game. One week, I say, 'We're going to be OK.' The next week, I say, 'We stink.' That's what's tough." — team president Matt Millen.

"The first time he walked in to meet with us, he hadn't said a word and everybody was silent," Backus said. "He's Steve Mariucci and that just about says it all. Everybody knew who he was, and what he was about, without meeting him. Everybody is just buying into his plan because they know it works because it did with the 49ers."

Before a recent practice, Mariucci ran down the field and back with his players. When Mariucci noticed that his staff didn't join in the jog, he made everybody run again.

"We're all in this together," Mariucci said. "If one guy is going to run, we're all running because we've got a lot of work to do."

The Lions are excited about their future with second-year quarterback Joey Harrington and rookie receiver Charles Rogers, and Harrington is enthused about playing for Mariucci.

"He doesn't leave any detail uncovered, so when you play a game, you feel confident and comfortable with any situation," said Harrington, who



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New Lions coach Steve Mariucci has brought hope to the downtrodden franchise.

2003 SCHEDULE

Sept. 7	ARIZONA	1 p.m.
Sept. 14	at Green Bay	1 p.m.
Sept. 21	MINNESOTA	1 p.m.
Sept. 28	at Denver	4:15 p.m.
Oct. 5	at San Francisco	4:15 p.m.
Oct. 19	DALLAS	1 p.m.
Oct. 26	at Chicago	1 p.m.
Nov. 2	OAKLAND	1 p.m.
Nov. 9	CHICAGO	1 p.m.
Nov. 16	at Seattle	4:15 p.m.
Nov. 23	at Minnesota	1 p.m.
Nov. 27	GREEN BAY	12:30 p.m.
Dec. 7	SAN DIEGO	1 p.m.
Dec. 14	at Kansas City	1 p.m.
Dec. 21	at Carolina	1 p.m.
Dec. 28	ST. LOUIS	1 p.m.

threw 14 touchdowns and 16 interceptions in 14 games last year. "He knows that winning teams just react on the field, instead of thinking, because of practicing things over and over and over."

Harrington and Rogers may struggle because they're young, and they don't have a

2002 RESULTS

Miami 49, Detroit 21
Carolina 31, Detroit 7
Green Bay 37, Detroit 31
Detroit 26, New Orleans 21
Minnesota 31, Detroit 24
Detroit 23, Chicago 20
Buffalo 24, Detroit 17
Detroit 9, Dallas 7
Green Bay 40, Detroit 14
N.Y. Jets 31, Detroit 14
Chicago 20, Detroit 17
New England 20, Detroit 12
Arizona 23, Detroit 20
Tampa Bay 23, Detroit 20
Atlanta 36, Detroit 15
Minnesota 38, Detroit 36

lot of help.

Running back James Stewart is solid, but far from spectacular. Also of concern are receiver Az-Zahir Hakim's injured knee and hip and receiver Bill Schroeder's lack of consistency.

On defense, Detroit lost linebacker Chris Claiborne to

Minnesota, but made up for his departure with free agents Earl Holmes and Wali Rainer, and second-round pick Boss Bailey. Standout defensive end Robert Porcher should have helped with the addition of Dan "Big Daddy" Wilkinson.

"We could be pretty good up front," said Millen, in his third year as team president.

But the Lions could be pretty bad in the back.

They lost cornerback Chris Cash, who was coming off a promising rookie season, to a knee injury during the preseason. Cornerback Dre' Bly, their major offseason acquisition, missed the preseason with a sprained ankle.

"The holes bother me, but we have some strengths too," Millen said. "It's such a weird game. One week, I say, 'We're going to be OK.' The next week, I say, 'We stink.' That's what's tough."