

Rams, Titans stay consistent

St. Louis, Tennessee are 56-24 over the last five seasons

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The St. Louis Rams haven't won an NFL title since Mike Jones stopped Kevin Dyson a yard short of the goal line to preserve a 23-16 win over Tennessee on Jan. 30, 2000.

The Titans haven't returned to the Super Bowl since.

Yet in an era where a team (Oakland) can go to the Super Bowl one season and finish 4-12 the next, the Rams and Titans have remained the NFL's two most consistently successful teams, each 56-24 over the last five years.

Each has missed the playoffs only once in that period:

Tennessee in 2001 and St. Louis the next year. But they remain the rarest of the rare, teams able to avoid the yo-yo effect caused by free agency and the salary cap.

"There will be a point in time where you hit a wall and everyone in the league knows that," says Tennessee general manager Floyd Reese, who is as responsible as anyone for maintaining the Titans' relatively high level of play.

"You try to push it off as far as you can, and if you're lucky enough to bring in enough young players that are cheap, maybe you can survive.

Nobody else has, so we keep thinking it's out there. It's out there. It's coming."

But maybe not this year, even though the Titans ended last season \$16 million over the salary cap and had to make numerous cuts. Like the Rams, they draft wonderfully, the best way to get the cheap young players that keep them a contender.

They also know when to let go of aging or injured stars.

The Titans enter the 2004 season without running back Eddie George and defensive end Jevon Kearse, who with quarterback Steve McNair had been the core of the team during the five-year run. George, clearly on the downside of his

career, was released for cap reasons and signed with Dallas. Kearse, who missed 14 games with injuries the past two seasons, signed a \$66 million, eight-year deal with Philadelphia

The Rams no longer have Kurt Warner, the league MVP in 1999 and 2001, released because Marc Bulger is younger, cheaper and healthier and has been more effective the last two seasons. And it would not be a shock if this was the last year for Marshall Faulk, MVP in 2000.

None is likely to be missed much, primarily because of astute personnel selection.

Bulger, unheralded coming out of West Virginia in 2000, was a sixth-round draft choice of the Saints who was released in training camp that year. But Mike Martz spotted him in college and snapped him up, mentioning Bulger as a potential NFL starter even before he was released by New Orleans.

When Kearse was injured, Tennessee replaced him with a variety of players, starting with Carlos Hall, a seventh-round draft choice in 2002 who had an instant impact as a rookie. Hall has stepped right back in at defensive end this year and was in on two sacks against Cleveland in the exhibition opener.

George's replacement is Chris Brown, a third-round pick a year ago who averaged 5.3 yards a carry in last year's playoffs and had 46 yards in six carries last Saturday night. To back him up and add experience, the Titans signed veteran Antowain Smith, who led Super Bowl champion New England in rushing last season. They are paying him almost \$2 million less than George was asking.

Another key to consistency is at quarterback. The Rams have had Warner and Bulger and the Titans have Steve McNair. When injury free, which is not often, McNair is one of the NFL's best — he was co-MVP last season with the Colts' Peyton Manning.

That element also applies to the third- and fourth-best teams over the last five sea-



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Tennessee owner Bud Adams, center, talks with coach Jeff Fisher, left, and GM Floyd Reese.

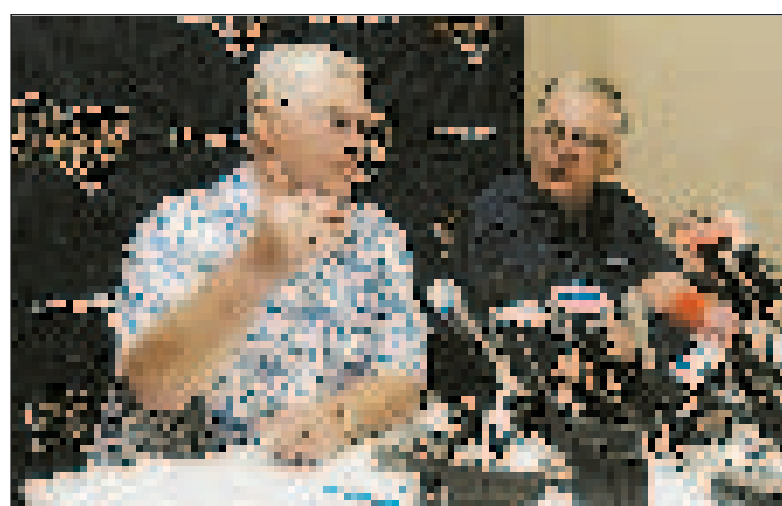
sons. Indianapolis with Manning and Philadelphia with Donovan McNabb are each 51-29, with the Eagles going 46-18 over the past four years, although they have lost three straight NFC championship games.

New England, winner of two of the past three Super Bowls and one of the favorites this year, is also strong at quarterback, proving with Tom Brady as the Rams did with Warner and Bulger that a top QB doesn't have to be a top draft pick to become a star.

"That's why I think quarterback is a must," says Ernie Accorsi, general manager of the New York Giants, who gave up a bunch of draft picks to get Eli Manning, the No. 1 pick in this year's draft. "With the constant turnover this system forces on you, it's important to have a keeper and a standout at the most important position."

Turnover is certainly the rule elsewhere for Tennessee and St. Louis.

Cornerback Samari Rolle is the only defensive player left on the Titans from the 2000 Super Bowl. McNair, left tack-



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St. Louis Rams' coach Mike Martz, left, talks about the NFL Draft as general manager Charley Arney looks on.

le Brad Hopkins and right guard Benji Olson are the only offensive starters. Overall, there are seven players remaining on the team, including punter Craig Hentrich.

The Rams also are almost totally transformed. They prepare in advance, grooming Bulger to replace Warner and drafting running back Steven Jackson with their first pick this year as the eventual replacement for Faulk.

"It gets more difficult as you win to keep your free agents because it seems like you win, everybody wants your guys," says guard Adam Timmerman, who was on a Super Bowl winner in Green Bay and joined the Rams as a free agent in 1999 just in time to play on another one. "But we've kept a core group of guys and we've kept the guys we need."

So have the Titans. The record reflects it.