

In the NFL, it's not how you start but how you finish. That means getting hot at the right time—but how?

By **Larry Weisman** for USA TODAY

ELI MANNING
LED a rally last season just to make the playoffs. The Giants capped their run with a second Super Bowl trophy in five years.

FORGET THE FAVORITES when the playoffs begin. The concept of an advantage for the No. 1 seed has gone, well, to seed in the NFL. It's ancient wisdom that no longer applies, a seeming edge that doesn't cut through the intensified level of competition that leads to the Super Bowl.

Look for hot. The driven, desperate team on a roll, the one that's streakin' and shriekin'. The one that, despite its earlier woes and issues, has pulled itself together and rediscovered its core values. It can weather the travails of an extra playoff round, road games, and pressure.

Four of the last five NFC champions came close to missing the playoffs only to slip in at the end and reach the Super Bowl. The only team that has sailed through the season and managed a title in recent years was the 2009 New Orleans Saints. In each of those other seasons, and particularly the last two, the cliffhanger end of the season was only the beginning of a trip toward legend and legacy.

Look at the New York Giants. At 7-7 last season, leaking on defense, they faced two must-win games, the second against the Dallas Cowboys for the NFC East title.

At 7-7, they were disappointments and coach Tom Coughlin faced the annual cries for dismissal. The tabloid-fueled New York yowling was as traditional as a Thanksgiving turkey or a Christmas ham. Then the Giants turned up the heat, searing the Jets and the Cowboys. At 9-7, they were NFC East champions and in the playoffs, though few thought they would advance. A month later, they upset the New England Patriots in Super Bowl XLVI for their second NFL title in five years. It was, in many ways, a reprise of what they'd done in 2007 as a team that went on the road three times in the postseason, eventually tipping the favored Patriots in the ultimate game.

"When your back is against the wall, when people on the outside

looking in say there is no opportunity, that there is no chance, we really rallied together as a football team," says Giants offensive tackle David Diehl, who played on both Super Bowl teams.

Hot, hot, hot. How do we like it? Hot, hot, hot.

Look at the Green Bay Packers. In 2010, they finished 10-6 and won a tiebreaker for the last wild-card spot in the NFC. Three road playoff games later, they faced the Pittsburgh Steelers in the Super Bowl and won.

Neither the Packers nor the Giants showed elements of steady greatness during their championship seasons. Yet when the time came to put one victory after another while under the brightest of spotlights, they raised their level of play and defied the odds.





Three keys to late-season runs

“The thing I learned about being an underdog is that when you go on the field,” says Cardinals defensive lineman Darnell Dockett, “you have nothing to lose.” What else have underdogs learned?

BE GOOD AT LEAST ONE THING. Really good. The 2001 Baltimore Ravens struggled terribly to score points and changed quarterbacks in midstream. That’s not what won them Super Bowl XXXV. Their defense, already outstanding, simply became smothering. A 5–4 team at one point, the Ravens, over their next 11 games, held eight opponents to seven points or fewer.

HAVE HISTORY ON YOUR SIDE. The Giants of 2011 knew well what the Giants of 2007 had done. Live and learn. “I see the things that have occurred and have taken place in terms of the way we played at the end of the year, the way we played on the road, the field goal and overtime in the championship game,” Giants coach Tom Coughlin says. That helped him craft a message he continually preached to his team: finish. The Giants had missed the playoffs in consecutive seasons after the 2007 miracle, and Coughlin understood why. “I’ve researched the things that have transpired a year before or two weeks before. I didn’t think we finished very well. I took a grasp of that and wanted that to be the No. 1 thing.”

BUILD THE MENTAL FORTRESS. Outside of the locker room, peasants with pitchforks want to commit mayhem on their underachieving team before it has a chance to get hot. Players must tune that out. Says Giants safety Deon Grant: “We never broke down and pointed fingers.”

“I think the Giants did essentially what we did. They got hot late,” Packers cornerback Charles Woodson says.

There’s no single reason this happens. It would be foolish to say the Patriots weren’t a hot team coming into the last Super Bowl. They’d won 10 consecutive games (including a pair in the playoffs) before confronting the Giants (again). Perhaps it’s desperation that peppers the pot, a lack of a sense of entitlement that feeds the beast.

“We started our playoff run early,” Giants defensive end Jason Pierre-Paul says. “We had to win two games in order to be in the playoffs, which we did. It was hard, but we did it. We fought through it, and we all came together as one.”

Go back a year to Green Bay. At 8–6, the Pack was mired in the pack of contenders. Then they routed the Giants 45–17 and won a 10–3 scratch-and-claw fest against the Bears to qualify as the sixth seed. They then won in Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Chicago, battling their way back to the Super Bowl.

Road playoff games forge a mindset.

“It forms a toughness for your team,” Woodson says. “It made us a much tougher team than we had already been.”

The 2011 Giants? As a division winner, they hosted a first-round game and flattened Atlanta. Then, they went to Green Bay and drubbed the Packers. In San Fran-

cisco for the NFC championship, they booted the 49ers out of their dream season 20–17 in overtime. It brought back memories of the ‘07 season, when Lawrence Tynes kicked the Giants to an overtime victory for the NFC berth against the Packers. On the road. These two seem to be tied by destiny’s slipknot, and the elusive answer lies somewhere in this idea of getting hot at the right time.

“It’s worked out for us and the Giants the last two years,” Packers general manager Ted Thompson says. “I think both of those teams, if you went back and asked them, would rather do it another way. I still think we’d rather be 15–1 than 10–6. But if you want to count the

“I THINK THE GIANTS DID ESSENTIALLY WHAT WE DID. THEY GOT HOT LATE.” – CHARLES WOODSON (#21, RIGHT)

rest of them and say yes or no, I’d go with whoever’s going to win the whole thing.”

This spate of lower seeds streaking to the title seems rooted in what the Steelers achieved in 2005. Strong after a 7–2 start, 7–5 after injuries to quarterback Ben Roethlisberger and backup Charlie Batch, the Steelers ran the table. They won their last four games to clinch the playoffs, then won three times on the road. They became the first playoff team since the 1985 Patriots to win three road playoff games and the first to win the Super Bowl.

They defeated the Seattle

Peaking at the right time

Four of the past five NFC champions, including the Giants last season, nearly missed the playoffs only to go on to the Super Bowl:

SEASON	TEAM	START	FINISH	POSTSEASON
2011	Giants	W7–L7	W9–L7	Won Super Bowl
2010	Packers	W8–L6	W10–L6	Won Super Bowl
2008	Cardinals	W8–L6	W9–L7	Lost Super Bowl
2007	Giants	W6–L2	W10–L6	Won Super Bowl



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Seahawks in Super Bowl XL. That Seahawks team had also established a first; it got to the Super Bowl without defeating a division champion in the playoffs, beating the wild-card Washington Redskins and Carolina Panthers, sixth- and fifth-seeded respectively. There’s the hard road, and then there’s the path lined with cream puffs and marshmallows. The Steelers took the path that once was less traveled by. Now it’s the way of the world.

The Giants were a nine-win team, the first to win the Super Bowl. The Arizona Cardinals were a nine-win team in 2008 when they came within a minute of defeating the Steelers in Super Bowl XLIII. They had knocked off a nine-win team (the Philadelphia Eagles) in the NFC championship game and previously dispatched an 11-win Atlanta team at home and the 12–4 Carolina Panthers on the road as they headed toward


their first and only Super Bowl appearance and their first shot at a title in 61 years.


The Cardinals were a fourth seed in those playoffs and the lowest seed, other than the Giants (fifth in 2007, fourth in 2011) and Steelers (sixth in 2005) to get to the big dance since the NFL expanded the playoffs to 12 teams in 1990.


“When you’re playing hot, like we did in ‘05, like the Packers did, like the Giants did, practice goes a little smoother because everyone is more relaxed and you can stay in a rhythm,” says Hines Ward, the recently-retired Steelers receiver. “When you get the No. 1 seed, some of those teams stop playing guys because they don’t want to get anybody hurt and you kind of lose that edge a little bit at practice, you get out of sync and it’s not good. The No. 1 and No. 2 seed, sometimes that bye is not a good thing.” 


Five teams most likely to get hot


How do we predict which team might be the one to bolt from the gate just a bit late and fight its way to New Orleans for Super Bowl XLVII? Here are five preseason candidates:

 **ATLANTA FALCONS:** They must learn to win against better competition in the late going. They played three games against eventual playoff teams in the second half of the season (New Orleans twice, Houston) and lost all three. The only team they defeated that reached the postseason was the Lions. Other than a safety, the Falcons didn’t score in their playoff loss on the road to the Giants. They’ve got to play better away from the dome.

 **BALTIMORE RAVENS:** Closed last season winning six of seven and went 6–0 in AFC North play. An errant 32–yard field goal attempt ruined them in the AFC championship game against the Patriots, which they lost 23–20. This team knows how to compete, knows what’s important in divisional play, and was undone by an unseemly breakdown by the usually accurate Billy Cundiff. Not that the Steelers aren’t a big enemy, but age is creeping up on the Ravens and that can crimp a late-season run.

 **DETROIT LIONS:** They won three of their last four, losing a preposterous 45–41 shootout in the finale to the Packers with Aaron Rodgers sitting out and Matt Flynn throwing a club record six touchdown passes. The Lions gave up the same number of points in their wild-card outing against the New Orleans Saints, losing 45–28. Defense doesn’t always win championships, but a lack of it will lose them.

 **HOUSTON TEXANS:** They had all the makings of a solid contender until injuries felled quarterback Matt Schaub and his backup, Matt Leinart. Rookie T.J. Yates was a little overmatched, and though the Texans made the playoffs for the first time and won their first-round game, they were eliminated on the road in Baltimore. They’d gone into the playoffs on a three-game losing streak. They now know the value of a hot streak and, of course, good health.

 **PHILADELPHIA EAGLES:** They have a little history of getting hot late. They won their last four last season, but that only got them to 8–8. In 2008, they were given up for dead at 5–5–1, finished 9–6–1, and then fell to the Cardinals in the NFC title game.