# ON WINNING NFL TEAMS

"If it doesn't matter who wins or loses, then why do they keep score?"

Vince Lombardi

I love cheese. Cheese is life. As a child, I remember going to the local grocery store with my mother, with one or two goals in mind: 1. To go to the dairy aisle to get a block of cheese; 2a. To go to the chips and snacks aisle to snag a bag of beef jerky; 2b. To go to said chips and snacks aisle to pick up a combination beef stick and cheese stick packaged in one. People really aren't kidding when they say Wisconsin is the Dairy State, and there were varieties plentiful on display. But, seven-or-eight-year-old me did not know any better, and more often than not, I would convince my mother to come home with one of those Kraft's Singles — and no, Robert, I'm not talking about the ones you find at spas… I'm sure you've had these before: the floppy, plasticky, yellow squares wrapped individually in plastic, all contained within a plastic packaging. Kraft's Singles were my go-to, my manna from Piggly Wiggly.

I come from a family from which rice is the carbohydrate of choice. During most dinners, and occasional weekend lunches as well, my protocol went as follows: take a bowl of rice, then unwrap one or two Kraft's Singles and place on top. Stick the bowl into the microwave, heat for 30 seconds or until the start of cheesy plastic bubbling, then take out the warm bowl of delicious saturated fatty gooeyness. Yum.

It was not until sixth or seventh grade when the cheesy goodness started to catch up with me. The doctor took my blood pressure, frowned, and then took the other arm's reading. He waited several minutes and then took my pressures again. Long story short – my systolic blood pressure read just under the level for Stage II hypertension – not *that* terrible, but not very good either for a twelve-year-old. So, what followed was a very uncomfortable interrogative discussion on eating habits, followed by strong recommendations to my mother to buy a sphygmomanometer for daily readings.

Okay, this anecdotal introduction was somewhat off-topic, I'll admit, but I should note that I became a Cheesehead more-or-less around the time I first began enjoying cheese. Though, of course, when I began my diet and was forced to end my cheesy–rice–bowl shenanigans, my enthusiasm for the Green Bay Packers only continued to grow and grow. In fact, that was the major reason why I decided to play football for the first time as high school freshman – but that is a story for another time!

Fast forward a dozen-plus years, and I find myself watching the NFC Championship Game. Green Bay versus Tampa Bay. Lambeau Field. Oh baby. My hand puts down the beer and brings

up a chip laden with black bean and cotija cheese tastiness towards my mouth. Heart rate tachycardic; blood pressure hypertensive. Can't blame the cheese this time: nothing like a Packers' playoff game to ramp up the blood pressure.

If you are reading this, then you already know the results of the game. Some good, a lot bad, and even more ugly. Another year, another crushing Packers playoff loss. Another disappointing end to an otherwise sparkling regular season.

In the time that I've watched the Packers, from the early 2000s and onwards, I have been quite fortunate to have seen some excellent teams in action: Favre's last hurrah of 2007, the loaded secondary of 2010 (goodness me, I miss Woodson and Collins), the offensive juggernaut of 2011, and the number one seeded team of 2020. Perhaps throw in the 2016 and 2019 Packers that clawed their way to reach the NFC Championship Game. Was there even a 2014 postseason?

After having several days to marinate this latest loss, I came to wonder – what has been the best Packers' regular season? For the Packers, if I had to guess, I would put my money on the 1996 Packers squad led by the Gunslinger and the Minister of Defense, or perhaps one of the teams from the golden Lombardi years. But how about for the league as a whole?

The excellent statistical site 538.com already provides Elo-based ratings for all NFL teams, and I encourage you to check that out if you haven't already. A big plus of 538 is that their ratings also include the postseason. However, I didn't want to just go to their website and get the answer with the click of a few buttons. So, instead, I opted to use pro-football-reference.com. Specifically, I looked at the expected win-loss for each team's season using the so-called Pythagorean Theorem, a formula that calculated a team's expected win-loss based off points for and points against. No trigonometry necessary! With only two variables, it is a very simple formula, so I am not going to overanalyze the statistical backing of it, but I think it would be a fun to carry out the following analyses (regular season only): 1. Top-ten Green Bay Packers Seasons; 2. Top Regular Season for each NFL team; 3. Top Ten Overall Regular Seasons.

Pro Football Reference presents their metric as "Expected W-L: X.X – Y.Y," where X.X is the expected number of wins and Y.Y is the expected number of losses, both to the tenth (as seen in the image below, when the 2020 Arizona Cardinals had an Expected W-L of 9.0 – 7.0).

**2020 Arizona Cardinals Advanced Stats**

« Previous Season

**Record:** 8-8-0, 3rd in NFC West Division  (Schedule and Results)
**Coach:** Kliff Kingsbury (8-8-0)
**Points For:** 410 (25.6/g) 13th of 32
**Points Against:** 367 (22.9/g) 12th of 32
**Expected W-L:** 9.0-7.0
**SRS:** 2.57 (12th of 32),  **SOS:** -0.12
**Defensive Coordinator:** Vance Joseph
**Other Notable Asst.:** Tom Clements (Quarterbacks/PGC), Bill Davis (Linebackers) and Jerry Sullivan (Offensive Assistant)
**Stadium:** State Farm Stadium
**Principal Owner:** Michael Bidwill
**General Manager:** Steve Keim
**Training Camp:** State Farm Stadium (Glendale, Arizona)

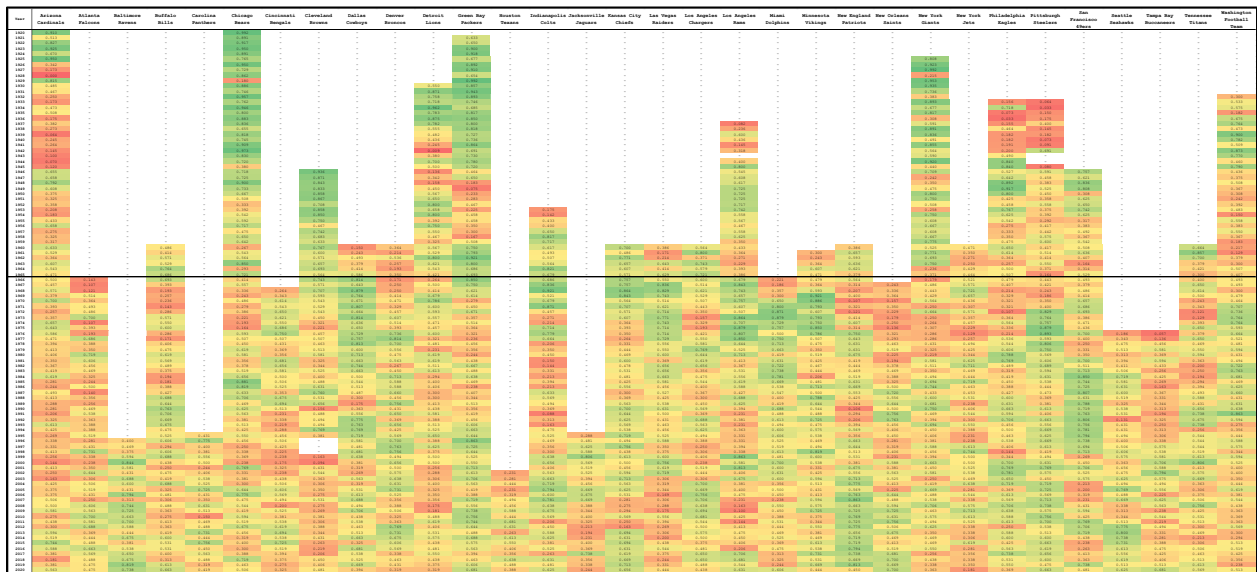*via Sports Logos.net*
*About logos*

I did not want to have to go through every team's season link by link, so I opted instead to use a web scraper to extract out the information. I had no idea how to do that, but it was actually quite simple with the aid of Google Chrome's Web Scraper Add-on and a random YouTube tutorial. At the prescribed 2000 ms per page, the entirety of the scraping took about 95 minutes. I extracted the data as comma-separated values to Excel. I did not try to learn how to extract separately the "X.X" and "Y.Y" portions of the line. Instead, I scraped the entire "Expected W-L: X.X – Y.Y" text so I spent a bit of time and elbow grease to clean up the file after – fun fact, there were a total of 2,062 seasons across 32 NFL teams. In hindsight, I suppose the more accurate method would have been to extract out "Points For" and "Points Against" to calculate the win-loss myself, but the protocol I used did the trick in the end.

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After pulling the results, it became apparent that some very early NFL seasons had extremely high Pythagorean win-loss percentages, including a ridiculous 0.992 for the 1920 *Decatur Staleys* (Chicago Bears) and 1929 Green Bay Packers, as seen in the Pythagorean Win Percentage Table for ants, below. Therefore, I decided to simply draw a line, literally, and not include pre-Super Bowl seasons from contention. I think perhaps the theorem does not work as neatly in the earlier

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seasons due to a wide point spread of games secondary to a lack of parity. Take a guess at how many points were allowed by the *Staleys* and Packers in those seasons. Answer: 21 (1.6 points per game) and 22 (1.7 points per game), respectively. Yeah, that is not happening in today's league. Nevertheless, I find it neat to see the all-time expected win percentage heatmap of the 32 current NFL franchises. For example, from a bird's eye view, one can witness the green dynasties of the 1940s AAFC Cleveland Browns, the 1970s *Oakland* Raiders, Los Angeles Rams, Miami Dolphins, Pittsburgh Steelers, and Minnesota Vikings (though no Super Bowls for this latter team), as well as the stretches of dominance by the 1980s San Francisco 49ers and 2000s-2010s New England Patriots. Also, as the "-"dash indicates years when that respective franchise did not play, we can spot the three year gap in the 1980s when Modell up-and-moved the Cleveland Browns to Baltimore, as well as two other quirks: due to lack of players because of World War II, the 1943 *Cleveland* Rams suspended their season while the 1943 Pittsburgh Steelers joined forces with the Philadelphia Eagles to form the fabled "Steagles;" the following year, the Steelers combined with the *Chicago* Cardinals to create the "Card-Pitt" team. Extra fun factoid - due to their 0-10 finish in that season, the 1944 merged team was labelled by sportswriters as the "Car-Pitts" (carpets).

Now on to the analysis. Before we begin, let me again present the three scenarios I wanted to consider. Note that this data only refers to **regular season outcomes**. Also, I'm going to make the prediction that all of the following teams will be on the top-ten overall list: 1972 Dolphins, 1984 49ers, 1985 Bears, 1991 team from D.C., and 2007 Patriots. I know the 2007 Patriots hold the record for regular season point differential at +315, but I think a relatively higher "Points Against" will hold them back. We'll see how far I am from the mark.

1. Top-ten Green Bay Packers Regular Seasons (Super Bowl Era)

2. Top Regular Season for each NFL Team (Super Bowl Era)

3. Top-Ten Overall Regular Seasons (Super Bowl Era)

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**1. Top-Ten Green Bay Packers seasons (Super Bowl Era)**

I definitely did Vince Lombardi dirty – starting this document with one of his quotes about winning, and then disregarding postseason play! Feels like a reverse Jim Mora in a way. Also, by foregoing pre-Super Bowl seasons, I did eliminate three Lombardi-coached NFL Championships of the 1961, 1962, and 1965 squads, as well as all those championship Lambeau teams.

| Rank | Year | Pythagorean Win Pct. | Pythagorean Record | Actual Record |
|------|------|------|------|------|
| 10 | 2003 | 0.706 | 11.3-4.7 | 10-6-0, 1st in NFC North |
| 9 | 2001 | 0.713 | 11.4-4.6 | 12-4-0, 2nd in NFC Central |
| 8 | 2007 | 0.719 | 11.5-4.5 | 13-3-0, 1st in NFC North |
| 7 | 1997 | 0.725 | 11.6-4.4 | 13-3-0, 1st in NFC Central |
| 6 | 2009 | 0.738 | 11.8-4.2 | 11-5-0, 2nd in NFC North |
| 5 | 2011 | 0.744 | 11.9-4.1 | 15-1-0, 1st in NFC North |
| 4 | 1967 | 0.750 | 10.5-3.5 | 9-4-1, 1st in NFL Central |
| 3 | 2010 | 0.756 | 12.1-3.9 | 10-6-0, 2nd in NFC North |
| 2 | 1966 | 0.850 | 11.9-2.1 | 12-2-0, 1st in NFL West |
| 1 | 1996 | 0.863 | 13.8-2.2 | 13-3-0, 1st in NFC Central |

Here's a summary table, before we delve into individual seasons. I'm sure you already know what what the gold color indicates. Perhaps I should have included the early 1960s Packers, though they were too dominant – six of the ten slots would have been taken up!

**10. 2003 Green Bay Packers**
Regular Season Record: 10-6 | Pythagorean Record: 11.3-4.7
Points For: 442 (27.6/g) 4th of 32 | Points Against: 307 (19.2/g) 11th of 32
Postseason Result: Won Wild Card 33-27 (Seahawks); Lost Div. 17-20 (Eagles)

I was hanging out at the house of an elementary school friend when this Packers-Eagles game was on in the background. Neither of us were particularly focused on the game, but I recall my friend's dad, ruddy-faced and yelling at the television screen. Yep, it was that infamous play. At least Al Harris let his play do the talking in the overtime win against Seattle the week prior/

**9. 2001 Green Bay Packers**
Regular Season Record: 12-4 | Pythagorean Record: 11.4-4.6
Points For: 390 (24.4/g) 5th of 31 | Points Against: 266 (16.6/g) 5th of 31
Postseason Result: Won Wild Card 25-15 (49ers); Lost Div. 17-45 (Rams)

Brett Favre and Ahman Green formed a solid regular season offense good for fifth in the NFL. Too bad they ran into the turf boys from St. Louis – eight turnovers (including three pick sixes) in the playoffs do not a win make.

**8. 2007 Green Bay Packers**
Regular Season Record: 13-3 | Pythagorean Record: 11.5-4.5
Points For: 435 (27.2/g) 4th of 32 | Points Against: 291 (18.2/g) 6th of 32
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 42-20 (Seahawks); Lost NFC Conf. Champ. 20-23 (Giants)

This team was agonizingly close to the Super Bowl! No guarantees against the Patriots, of course. Why, oh why, did you throw that ball, Brett? Third time was the charm for Tynes, as the Giants upset the Packers at Lambeau. My favorite play of the game had to have been that 15-yard reception by Donald Driver that he took the remaining 75 yards to the house. The best play that postseason, however? The shovel pass by a falling Favre amidst the flurries against Seattle in the Divisional Round.

**7. 1997 Green Bay Packers**
Regular Season Record: 13-3 | Pythagorean Record: 11.6-4.4
Points For: 422 (26.4/g) 2nd of 30 | Points Against: 282 (17.6/g) 5th of 30
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 21-7 (Buccaneers); Won NFC Conf. Champ. 23-10 (49ers); Lost Super Bowl XXXII 24-31 (Broncos)

Coming off the Super Bowl victory the year before, the 1997 Packers showed no signs of stopping as they bulldozed their way to face Broncos in Super Bowl XXXII. However, back-to-back rings for the Pack was not meant to be as Elway earned his *salary* by helicoptering his way head-first to a first down en route to the go-ahead score, thus *capping* off his first Championship victory.

### 6. 2009 Green Bay Packers
Regular Season Record: 11-5 | Pythagorean Record: 11.8-4.2
Points For: 461 (28.8/g) 3rd of 32 | Points Against: 297 (18.6/g) 7th of 32
Postseason Result: Lost Wild Card 45-51 (Cardinals)

I'm actually very surprised that the 2009 Packers squad ranks so highly, even over the 2014 and 2020 teams that failed to place in the top ten., although this team had great regular season numbers with a +163-point differential, so I guess the formula did its job. Seeing all these Packers teams with top-ten defenses by points against and fewer than 20 points against per game, I wonder – when was the last time both of these statistics occurred? Answer: 2019, when the Pack ranked 9th overall with 19.6 points against per game. The defense of 2009 allowed quite a few more points in the Wild Card game than their regular season average of 18.6, however, in the memorable desert overtime shootout against Arizona.

### 5. 2011 Green Bay Packers
Regular Season Record: 15-1 | Pythagorean Record: 11.9-4.1
Points For: 560 (35.0/g) 1st of 32 | Points Against: 359 (22.4/g) 19th of 32
Postseason Result: Lost Divisional 20-37 (Giants)

Holy spotted cow, this team had an offense. Aaron Rodgers won his first MVP award with one of the greatest quarterback seasons ever with 45 touchdowns, 6 picks, and an NFL record 122.5 passer rating. So many passing weapons were on this team: Nelson, Jennings, Cobb, Jones, Driver, and Finley. Alas, the Giants once again played the role of spoiling an excellent regular season – when I watched the 2020 Packers-Bucs game, the last scrimmage play of the first half conjured up bad memories from this divisional round game. Ugh.

### 4. 1967 Green Bay Packers
Regular Season Record: 9-4-1 | Pythagorean Record: 10.5-3.5
Points For: 332 (23.7/g) 9th of 16 | Points Against: 209 (14.9/g) 3rd of 16
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 28-7 (Rams); Won NFL Championship 21-17 (Cowboys);
Won Super Bowl II 33-14 (Raiders)

Ah, and finally we have a winner! Lombardi's last as Packers Head Coach, wherein he more than cemented his legacy and that of Titletown with his fifth championship in seven years. This season marks the only time a team has won three consecutive NFL titles in the playoff era – what a playoff it was for the Packers, especially in the NFL Championship Game against the Cowboys: the famous "Ice Bowl" with wind chills in the negative thirties. Bart Starr called his own number and ran it in behind Jerry Kramer with seconds left in the game.

**3. 2010 Green Bay Packers**
Regular Season Record: 10-6 | Pythagorean Record: 12.1-3.9
Points For: 388 (24.3/g) 10th of 32 |Points Against: 240 (15.0/g) 2nd of 32
Postseason Result: Won Wild Card 21-16 (Eagles); Won Divisional 48-21 (Falcons);
Won NFC Conf. Championship 21-4 (Bears); Won Super Bowl XLV 31-25 (Steelers)

The 2010 Green Bay Packers were never out of it, as they are the only team in the Super Bowl era to have never trailed by more than a score in any game of the season, postseason included. And what a beautiful playoff run it was, as the Packers knocked off the Eagles before facing the top-seeded Falcons in Atlanta. What followed was perhaps my favorite playoff game I have seen, as Rodgers was completely dominant, going 31-36 for 366 yards and three touchdowns. Tramon Williams with lead-extending pick-six right before half… amazing! Then another pick-six by B.J. "The Freezer" Raji to seal it at Chicago and a victory against the Pittsburgh Steelers in Super Bowl XLV! This squad remains the only six seed from the NFC to have made it to the Super Bowl.

**2. 1966 Green Bay Packers**
Regular Season Record: 12-2 | Pythagorean Record: 11.9-2.1
Points For: 335 (23.9/g) 4th of 15 |Points Against: 163 (11.6/g) 1st of 15
Postseason Result: Won NFL Championship 34-27 (Cowboys); Won Super Bowl I 35-10 (Chiefs)

What a team this was, led by Bart Starr in MVP-winning form and starring future Hall of Famers Forrest Gregg and Jerry Kramer on the offensive line, Paul Hornung and Jim Taylor at running back, Willie Davis and Henry Jordan on the defensive line, Ray Nitschke and Dave Robinson at linebacker, Herb Adderley and Willie Wood at defensive back. Whew, did I miss anyone? Little wonder that this team rolled through Kansas City in the retroactively title "Super Bowl I." Shout to Max McGee for his dominant performance in the game – a little bit of alcohol never hurt, right? That's why it is called pregaming.
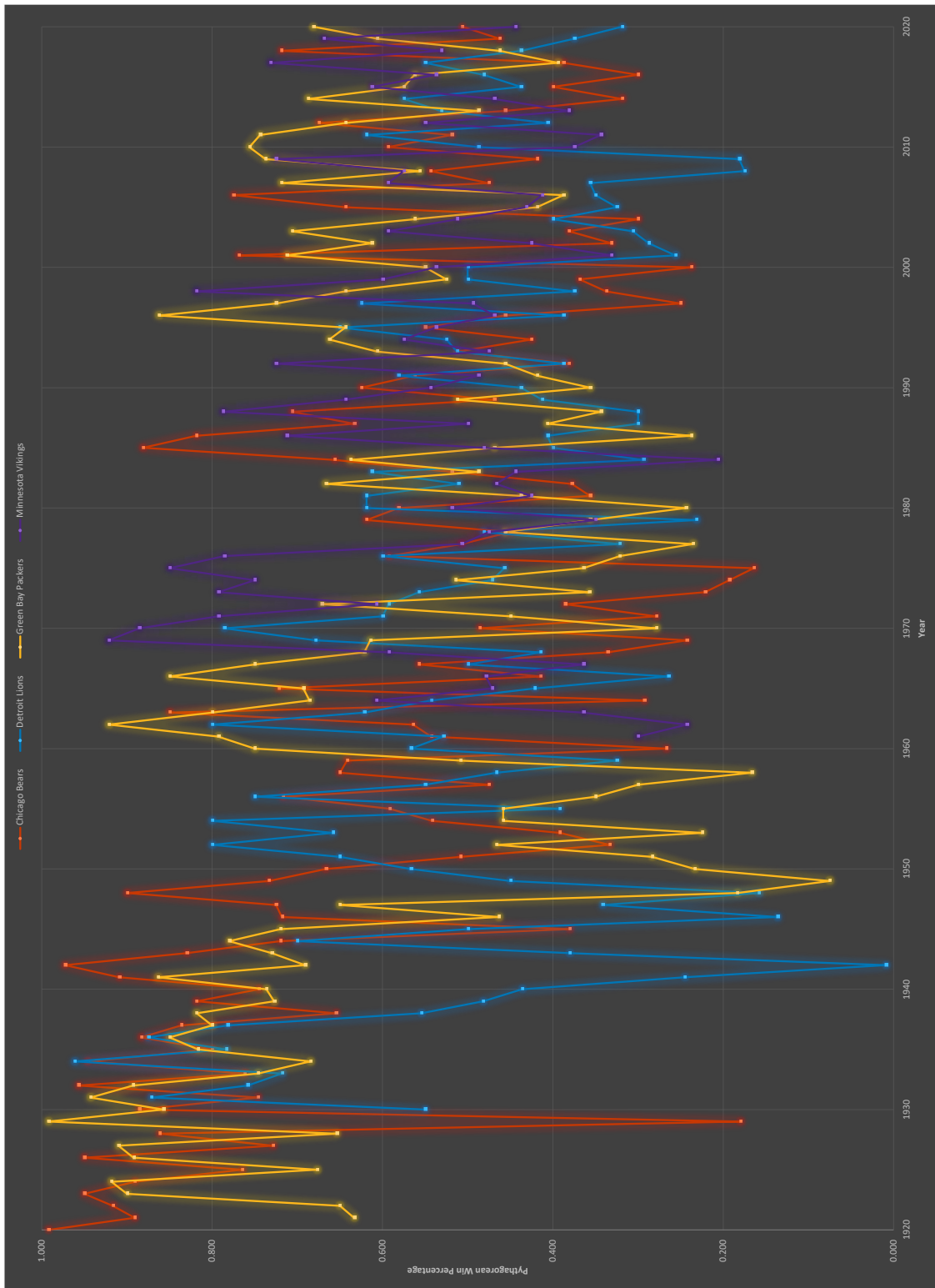
**1. 1996 Green Bay Packers**
Regular Season Record: 13-3 | Pythagorean Record: 13.8-2.2
Points For: 456 (28.5/g) 1st of 30 |Points Against: 210 (13.1/g) 1st of 30
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 35-14 (49ers); Won NFC Conf. Championship 30-13 (Panthers);
Won Super Bowl XXXI 35-21 (Patriots)

I had a hunch that this team would finish on top: it is one of only a few NFL teams in the Super Bowl era to have finished first in points for and points allowed during the regular season. Favre had perhaps his best regular season in his career with 39 touchdowns and 13 picks as he picked up the second of three consecutive MVP awards. In the playoffs, the 1996 Packers continued their dominance, putting up 100 points in three games while allowing only 48. In the Super Bowl, Desmond Howard scampered 99 yards to the house to put the Packers up for good as the Vince Lombardi Trophy headed home to Green Bay for the first time in nearly thirty years.

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Just for kicks, I decided to include the graphical Pythagorean win percentage for the four current NFC North Teams.

# 2. Top Regular Seasons for each NFL Team (Super Bowl Era)

Below is a summary table, followed by slightly more details per team.

| Team | Year | Pythagorean Win Pct. | Pythagorean Record | Actual Record | Playoff Finish |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arizona Cardinals | 2015 | 0.744 | 11.9-4.1 | 13-3-0, 1st in NFC West | Lost NFC Champ. |
| Atlanta Falcons | 1998 | 0.731 | 11.7-4.3 | 14-2-0, 1st in NFC West | Lost SB XXXIII |
| Baltimore Ravens | 2000 | 0.844 | 13.5-2.5 | 12-4-0, 2nd in AFC Central | Won SB XXXV |
| Buffalo Bills | 1990 | 0.763 | 12.2-3.8 | 13-3-0, 1st in AFC East | Lost SB XXV |
| Carolina Panthers | 1996 | 0.775 | 12.4-3.6 | 12-4-0, 1st in NFC West | Lost NFC Champ. |
| Chicago Bears | 1985 | 0.881 | 14.1-1.9 | 15-1-0, 1st in NFC Central | Won SB XX |
| Cincinnati Bengals | 1976 | 0.750 | 10.5-3.5 | 10-4-0, 2nd in AFC Central | Did not qualify |
| Cleveland Browns | 1994 | 0.769 | 12.3-3.7 | 11-5-0, 2nd in AFC Central | Lost Divisional |
| Dallas Cowboys | 1968 | 0.879 | 12.3-1.7 | 12-2-0, 1st in NFL Capital | Lost Divisional |
| Denver Broncos | 1977 | 0.814 | 11.4-2.6 | 12-2-0, 1st in AFC West | Lost SB XII |
| Detroit Lions | 1970 | 0.786 | 11.0-3.0 | 10-4-0, 2nd in NFC Central | Lost Divisional |
| Green Bay Packers | 1996 | 0.863 | 13.8-2.2 | 13-3-0, 1st in NFC Central | Won SB XXXI |
| Houston Texans | 2011 | 0.681 | 10.9-5.1 | 10-6-0, 1st in AFC South | Lost Divisional |
| Indianapolis Colts | 1968 | 0.921 | 12.9-1.1 | 13-1-0, 1st in NFL Coastal | Lost SB III |
| Jacksonville Jaguars | 1999 | 0.806 | 12.9-3.1 | 14-2-0, 1st in AFC Central | Lost AFC Champ. |
| Kansas City Chiefs | 1968 | 0.864 | 12.1-1.9 | 12-2-0, 1st in AFL West | Lost Divisional |
| Las Vegas Raiders | 1967 | 0.836 | 11.7-2.3 | 13-1-0, 1st in AFL West | Lost SB II |
| Los Angeles Chargers | 1979 | 0.769 | 12.3-3.7 | 12-4-0, 1st in AFC West | Lost Divisional |
| Los Angeles Rams | 1975 | 0.879 | 12.3-1.7 | 12-2-0, 1st in NFC West | Lost NFC Champ. |
| Miami Dolphins | 1973 | 0.879 | 12.3-1.7 | 12-2-0, 1st in AFC East | Won SB VIII |
| Minnesota Vikings | 1969 | 0.921 | 12.9-1.1 | 12-2-0, 1st in NFL Central | Lost SB IV |
| New England Patriots | 2007 | 0.863 | 13.8-2.2 | 16-0-0, 1st in AFC East | Lost SB XLII |
| New Orleans Saints | 1992 | 0.763 | 12.2-3.8 | 12-4-0, 2nd in NFC West | Lost WC |
| New York Giants | 1990 | 0.750 | 12.0-4.0 | 13-3-0, 1st in NFC East | Won SB XXV |
| New York Jets | 1998 | 0.744 | 11.9-4.1 | 12-4-0, 1st in AFC East | Lost AFC Champ. |
| Philadelphia Eagles | 1980 | 0.788 | 12.6-3.4 | 12-4-0, 1st in NFC East | Lost SB XV |
| Pittsburgh Steelers | 1976 | 0.893 | 12.5-1.5 | 10-4-0, 1st in AFC Central | Lost AFC Champ. |
| San Francisco 49ers | 1984 | 0.850 | 13.6-2.4 | 15-1-0, 1st in NFC West | Won SB XIX |
| Seattle Seahawks | 2013 | 0.800 | 12.8-3.2 | 13-3-0, 1st in NFC West | Won SB XLVIII |
| Tampa Bay Buccaneers | 2002 | 0.794 | 12.7-3.3 | 12-4-0, 1st in NFC South | Won SB XXXVII |
| Tennessee Titans | 2000 | 0.806 | 12.9-3.1 | 13-3-0, 1st in AFC Central | Lost Divisional |
| Washington Football Team | 1991 | 0.863 | 13.8-2.2 | 14-2-0, 1st in NFC East | Won SB XXVI |

The results are somewhat surprising, as I do think the Pythagorean theorem overvalues defense – for example, do we really think the 1976 Pittsburgh Steelers that went 10-4 is better than any of the 1970s Steelers teams that won a Super Bowl? Maybe they just blew it in the playoffs. Nevertheless, eight teams were Super Bowl runners-up and nine teams were Super Bowl champions. The 1976 Cincinnati Bengals were a bit unfortunate in that they failed to qualify for the playoffs that year. Teams are listed in alphabetical order; Logos displayed from Chris Creamer of SportsLogos.net. These logos are historical and are not meant to be offensive.



**2015 Arizona Cardinals**
Regular Season Record: 13-3 | Pythagorean Record: 11.9-4.1
Points For: 489 (30.6/g) 2nd of 32 | Points Against: 313 (19.6/g) 7th of 32
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 26-20 (Packers);
Lost NFC Conf. Championship 19-49 (Panthers)



**1998 Atlanta Falcons**
Regular Season Record: 14-2 | Pythagorean Record: 11.7-4.3
Points For: 442 (27.6/g) 4th of 30 | Points Against: 289 (18.1/g) 4th of 30
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 20-18 (49ers); Won NFC Conf. Championship 30-27 (Vikings); Lost Super Bowl XXXIII (Broncos)



**2000 Baltimore Ravens**
Regular Season Record: 12-4 | Pythagorean Record: 13.5-2.5
Points For: 333 (20.8/g) 14th of 31 | Points Against: 165 (10.3/g) 1st of 31
Postseason Result: Won Wild Card 21-3 (Broncos); Won Division 24-10 (Titans);
Won AFC Conf. Championship 16-3 (Raiders);
Won Super Bowl XXXV 34-7 (Giants)



**1990 Buffalo Bills**
Regular Season Record: 13-3 | Pythagorean Record: 12.2-3.8
Points For: 428 (26.8/g) 1st of 28 | Points Against: 263 (16.4/g) 6th of 28
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 44-34 (Dolphins);
Won AFC Conf. Championship 51-3 (Raiders);
Lost Super Bowl XXV 19-20 (Giants)



**1996 Carolina Panthers**
Regular Season Record: 12-4 | Pythagorean Record: 12.4-3.6
Points For: 367 (22.9/g) 7th of 30 | Points Against: 218 (13.6/g) 2nd of 30
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 26-17 (Cowboys);
Lost NFC Conf. Championship 13-30 (Packers)

### 1985 Chicago Bears
Regular Season Record: 15-1 | Pythagorean Record: 14.1-1.9
Points For: 456 (28.5/g) 2nd of 28 | Points Against: 198 (12.4/g) 1st of 28
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 21-0 (Giants);
Won NFC Conf. Championship 24-0 (Rams); Won Super Bowl XX 46-10 (Patriots)

### 1975 Cincinnati Bengals
Regular Season Record: 10-4 | Pythagorean Record: 10.5-3.5
Points For: 335 (23.9/g) 6th of 28 | Points Against: 210 (15.0/g) 7th of 28
Postseason Result: Did not qualify

### 1994 Cleveland Browns
Regular Season Record: 11-5 | Pythagorean Record: 12.3-3.7
Points For: 340 (21.3/g) 11th of 28 | Points Against: 204 (12.8/g) 1st of 28
Postseason Result: Won Wild Card 20-13 (Patriots); Lost Divisional 9-29 (Steelers)

### 1968 Dallas Cowboys
Regular Season Record: 12-2 | Pythagorean Record: 12.3-1.7
Points For: 431 (30.8/g) 1st of 16 | Points Against: 186 (13.3/g) 2nd of 16
Postseason Result: Lost Divisional 20-31 (Browns)

### 1977 Denver Broncos
Regular Season Record: 12-2 | Pythagorean Record: 11.4-2.6
Points For: 274 (19.6/g) 10th of 28 | Points Against: 148 (10.6/g) 3rd of 28
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 34-21 (Steelers);
Won AFC Conf. Championship 20-17 (Raiders);
Lost Super Bowl XII 10-27 (Cowboys)

### 1970 Detroit Lions
Regular Season Record: 10-4 | Pythagorean Record: 11.0-3.0
Points For: 347 (24.8/g) 2nd of 26 | Points Against: 202 (14.4/g) 2nd of 26
Postseason Result: Lost Divisional 0-5 (Cowboys)

### 1996 Green Bay Packers
Regular Season Record: 13-3 | Pythagorean Record: 13.8-2.2
Points For: 456 (28.5/g) 1st of 30 | Points Against: 210 (13.1/g) 1st of 30
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 35-14 (49ers);
Won NFC Conf. Championship 30-13 (Panthers);
Won Super Bowl XXXI (Patriots)

**2011 Houston Texans**
Regular Season Record: 10-6 | Pythagorean Record: 10.9-5.1
Points For: 381 (23.8/g) 10th of 32 | Points Against: 278 (17.4/g) 4th of 32
Postseason Result: Won Wild Card 31-10 (Bengals);
Lost Divisional 13-20 (Ravens)

**1968 Baltimore Colts (Indianapolis Colts)**
Regular Season Record: 13-1 | Pythagorean Record: 12.9-1.1
Points For: 402 (28.7/g) 2nd of 16 | Points Against: 144 (10.3/g) 1st of 16
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 24-14 (Vikings);
Won NFL Championship 34-0 (Browns); Lost Super Bowl III 7-16 (Jets)

**1999 Jacksonville Jaguars**
Regular Season Record: 14-2 | Pythagorean Record: 12.9-3.1
Points For: 396 (24.8/g) 6th of 31 | Points Against: 217 (13.6/g) 1st of 31
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 62-7 (Dolphins);
Lost AFC Conf. Championship 14-33 (Titans)

**1968 Kansas City Chiefs**
Regular Season Record: 12-2 | Pythagorean Record: 12.1-1.9
Points For: 371 (26.5/g) 4th of 10 | Points Against: 170 (12.1/g) 1st of 10
Postseason Result: Lost Divisional 6-41 (Raiders)

**1967 Oakland Raiders (Las Vegas Raiders)**
Regular Season Record: 13-1 | Pythagorean Record: 11.7-2.3
Points For: 468 (33.4/g) 1st of 9 | Points Against: 233 (16.6/g) 2nd of 9
Postseason Result: Won AFL Championship 40-7 (Oilers)
Lost Super Bowl II 14-33 (Packers)

**1979 San Diego Chargers (Los Angeles Chargers)**
Regular Season Record: 12-4 | Pythagorean Record: 12.3-3.7
Points For: 411 (25.7/g) 2nd of 28 | Points Against: 246 (15.4/g) 2nd of 28
Postseason Result: Lost Divisional 14-17 (Oilers)

### 1975 Los Angeles Rams
Regular Season Record: 12-2 | Pythagorean Record: 12.3-1.7
Points For: 312 (22.3/g) 11th of 26 | Points Against: 135 (9.6/g) 1st of 26
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 35-23 (Cardinals);
Lost NFC Conf. Championship 7-37 (Cowboys)

### 1973 Miami Dolphins
Regular Season Record: 12-2 | Pythagorean Record: 12.3-1.7
Points For: 343 (24.5/g) 5th of 26 | Points Against: 150 (10.7/g) 1st of 26
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 34-16 (Bengals);
Won AFC Conf. Championship 27-10 (Raiders);
Won Super Bowl VIII 24-7 (Vikings)

### 1969 Minnesota Vikings
Regular Season Record: 12-2 | Pythagorean Record: 12.9-1.1
Points For: 379 (27.1/g) 1st of 16 | Points Against: 133 (9.5/g) 1st of 16
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 23-20 (Rams);
Won NFL Championship 27-7 (Browns); Lost Super Bowl IV 7-23 (Chiefs)

### 2007 New England Patriots
Regular Season Record: 16-0 | Pythagorean Record: 13.8-2.2
Points For: 589 (36.8/g) 1st of 32 | Points Against: 274 (17.1/g) 4th of 32
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 31-20 (Jaguars);
Won AFC Conf. Championship 21-12 (Chargers);
Lost Super Bowl XLII 14-17 (Giants)

### 1992 New Orleans Saints
Regular Season Record: 12-4 | Pythagorean Record: 12.2-3.8
Points For: 330 (20.6/g) 10th of 28 | Points Against: 202 (12.6/g) 1st of 28
Postseason Result: Lost Wild Card 20-36 (Eagles)

### 1990 New York Giants
Regular Season Record: 13-3 | Pythagorean Record: 12.0-4.0
Points For: 335 (20.9/g) 15th of 28 | Points Against: 211 (13.2/g) 1st of 28
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 31-3 (Bears);
Won NFC Conf. Championship 15-13 (49ers); Win Super Bowl XXV (Bills)

**1998 New York Jets**
Regular Season Record: 12-4 | Pythagorean Record: 11.9-4.1
Points For: 416 (26.0/g) 5th of 30 |Points Against: 266 (16.6/g) 2nd of 30
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 34-24 (Jaguars)
Lost AFC Conf. Championship 10-23 (Broncos)


**1980 Philadelphia Eagles**
Regular Season Record: 12-4 | Pythagorean Record: 12.6-3.4
Points For: 384 (24.0/g) 6th of 28 |Points Against: 222 (13.9/g) 1st of 28
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 31-16 (Vikings);
Won NFC Conf. Championship 20-7 (Cowboys);
Lost Super Bowl XV 10-27 (Raiders)


**1976 Pittsburgh Steelers**
Regular Season Record: 10-4 | Pythagorean Record: 12.5-1.5
Points For: 342 (24.4/g) 5th of 28 |Points Against: 138 (9.9/g) 1st of 28
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 40-14 (Colts);
Lost AFC Conf. Championship 7-24 (Raiders)


**1984 San Francisco 49ers**
Regular Season Record: 15-1 | Pythagorean Record: 13.6-2.4
Points For: 475 (29.7/g) 2nd of 28 |Points Against: 227 (14.2/g) 1st of 28
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 21-10 (Giants);
Won NFC Conf. Championship 23-0 (Bears);
Won Super Bowl XIX 38-16 (Dolphins)


**2013 Seattle Seahawks**
Regular Season Record: 13-3 | Pythagorean Record: 12.8-3.2
Points For: 417 (26.1/g) 8th of 32 |Points Against: 231 (14.4/g) 1st of 32
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 23-15 (Saints);
Won NFC Conf. Championship 23-17 (49ers);
Won Super Bowl XLVIII 43-8 (Broncos)


**2002 Tampa Bay Buccaneers**
Regular Season Record: 12-4 | Pythagorean Record: 12.7-3.3
Points For: 346 (21.6/g) 18th of 32 |Points Against: 196 (12.3/g) 1st of 32
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 31-6 (49ers);
Won NFC Conf. Championship 27-10 (Eagles);
Won Super Bowl 48-21 XXXVII (Raiders)

**2000 Tennessee Titans**
Regular Season Record: 13-3 | Pythagorean Record: 12.9-3.1
Points For: 346 (21.6/g) 13th of 31 |Points Against: 191 (11.9/g) 2nd of 31
Postseason Result: Lost Divisional 10-24 (Ravens)

**1991 Washington Redskins (Washington Football Team)**
Regular Season Record: 14-2 | Pythagorean Record: 13.8-2.2
Points For: 485 (30.3/g) 1st of 28 |Points Against: 224 (14.0/g) 2nd of 28
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 24-7 (Falcons);
Won NFC Conf. Championship 41-10 (Lions);
Won Super Bowl XXVI 37-24 (Bills)

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### 3. Top Ten Overall Regular Seasons (Super Bowl Era)

While I could simply take the top ten teams from the previous mini-analysis, this leaves open the possibility of missing out a second or third-best regular season from a high-performing team. For example, perhaps the 49ers in their decade of dominance might find themselves on the list twice. As the Pythagorean Theorem provided wins and losses to the nearest tenth, it was possible that there were ties. Therefore, I set the following criteria for tiebreakers: 1. Head-to-head result; 2. Postseason success that season; 3. Which team I like better.

I do feel that at the top end, the Pythagorean Theorem overemphasizes defense, as (spoiler alert), all teams are from the 1960s to 1980s. Nevertheless, here are the Top Ten teams based off of the Pythagorean Theorem metric:

### 10. 1972 Miami Dolphins
Pythagorean Win Percentage: 0.871 | Tiebreak: Criterion 2
Regular Season Record: 14-0 | Pythagorean Record: 12.2-1.8
Points For: 385 (27.5/g) 1st of 26 | Points Against: 171 (12.2/g) 1st of 26
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 20-14 (Browns)
Won AFC Conf. Championship 21-17 (Steelers)
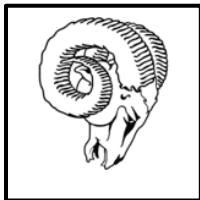Won Super Bowl VII 14-7 (Redskins)

### 9. 1968 Dallas Cowboys
Pythagorean Win Percentage: 0.871
Regular Season Record: 12-2 | Pythagorean Record: 12.3-1.7
Points For: 431 (30.8/g) 1st of 16 | Points Against: 186 (13.3/g) 2nd of 16
Postseason Result: Lost Divisional 20-31 (Browns)

### 8. 1975 Pittsburgh Steelers
Pythagorean Win Percentage: 0.871 | Tiebreak: Criterion 2
Regular Season Record: 13-2 | Pythagorean Record: 12.9-1.1
Points For: 373 (26.6/g) 5th of 26 | Points Against: 162 (11.6/g) 2nd of 26
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 28-10 (Colts);
Won AFC Conf. Championship 16-10 (Raiders);
Won Super Bowl X 21-17 (Cowboys)

### 7. 1975 Los Angeles Rams
Pythagorean Win Percentage: 0.879 | Tiebreak: Criterion 1
Regular Season Record: 12-2 | Pythagorean Record: 12.3-1.7
Points For: 312 (22.3/g) 11th of 26 | Points Against: 135 (9.6/g) 1st of 26
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 35-23 (Cardinals);
Lost NFC Conf. Championship 7-37 (Cowboys)

### 6. 1973 Miami Dolphins
Pythagorean Win Percentage: 0.879 | Tiebreak: Criterion 2
Regular Season Record: 12-2 | Pythagorean Record: 12.3-1.7
Points For: 343 (24.5/g) 5th of 26 | Points Against: 150 (10.7/g) 1st of 26
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 34-16 (Bengals);
Won AFC Conf. Championship 27-10 (Raiders);
Won Super Bowl VIII 24-7 (Vikings)

### 5. 1985 Chicago Bears
Pythagorean Win Percentage: 0.881
Regular Season Record: 15-1 | Pythagorean Record: 14.1-1.9
Points For: 456 (28.5/g) 2nd of 28 | Points Against: 198 (12.4/g) 1st of 28
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 21-0 (Giants);
Won NFC Conf. Championship 24-0 (Rams);
Won Super Bowl XX 46-10 (Patriots)

### 4. 1970 Minnesota Vikings
Pythagorean Win Percentage: 0.886
Regular Season Record: 12-2 | Pythagorean Record: 12.4-1.6
Points For: 335 (23.9/g) 3rd of 26 | Points Against: 143 (10.2/g) 1st of 26
Postseason Result: Lost Divisional 14-17 (49ers)

### 3. 1976 Pittsburgh Steelers
Pythagorean Win Percentage: 0.893
Regular Season Record: 10-4 | Pythagorean Record: 12.5-1.5
Points For: 342 (24.4/g) 5th of 28 | Points Against: 138 (9.9/g) 1st of 28
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 40-14 (Colts);
Lost AFC Conf. Championship 7-24 (Raiders)

### 2. 1969 Minnesota Vikings
Pythagorean Win Percentage: 0.921
Regular Season Record: 12-2 | Pythagorean Record: 12.9-1.1
Points For: 379 (27.1/g) 1st of 16 | Points Against: 133 (9.5/g) 1st of 16
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 23-20 (Rams);
Won NFL Championship 27-7 (Browns); Lost Super Bowl IV 7-23 (Chiefs)

### 1. 1968 Baltimore Colts (Indianapolis Colts)
Pythagorean Win Percentage: 0.921 | Tiebreak: Criterion 3
Regular Season Record: 13-1 | Pythagorean Record: 12.9-1.1
Points For: 402 (28.7/g) 2nd of 16 | Points Against: 144 (10.3/g) 1st of 16
Postseason Result: Won Divisional 24-14 (Vikings);
Won NFL Championship 34-0 (Browns); Lost Super Bowl III 7-16 (Jets)

A few takeaways from this top ten list. First, the majoirty of these teams did not win a championship (exceptions are 1972 and 1973 Miami Dolphins, 1975 Pittsburgh Steelers, and 1985 Chicago Bears). However, the teams that did not win were really, really good – and it is not surprising that two more of these franchises did win a Lombardi a few years later or earlier from the listed season (e.g., 1970 Baltimore Colts, 1971 Dallas Cowboys). Sorry, Purple Eaters and LA Rams… Second, all of these teams either ranked first or second in points allowed, which I think drove the expected win-loss a bit too high for many of these teams. Third, while the majority of these teams are not counted among the top to play by NFL fans, the aforementioned ones that won a Lombardi, especially the 1972 Dolphins and 1985 Bears, do find themselves frequently discussed as among the greatest teams to ever play. Fourth, I find it fitting that the 1968 Baltimore

Colts have the best regular season based off this metric, as it only lends further weight to their upset in the 1969 Super Bowl matchup against Broadway Joe and the Jets.

Finally, how did my predictions pan out? I managed to only pick the tenth-ranked 1972 Miami Dolphins and the fifth-ranked 1985 Chicago Bears. Though as I mentioned before, there were 2,062 seasons of play, so it's not that easy!

As for the other guesses:

1984 49ers (15-1) | #18 regular season overall, Pythagorean win percentage 0.850
1991 Redskins (14-2) | #T-15 regular season overall, Pythagorean win percentage 0.863
2007 Patriots (16-0) | #T-15 regular season overall, Pythagorean win percentage 0.863


And for good measure:
1996 Packers (13-3) | #T-15 regular season overall, Pythagorean win percentage 0.863


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Now, at the end of the day, you can look at this analysis as ludicrous, and you would be totally right. For example, even my brief summaries of the Packers seasons focus not on their respective regular season performances but by their postseason outcomes! Paraphrasing Lombardi – what is the point of calculating expected regular season wins, if actual wins (and postseason performance) are what matter? However, it was a fun thing to write, and that is good enough for me.

Cheers, and Go Pack Go!