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## NFC NEWS 'N' NOTES

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# SEVEN WEEKS TO GO! TEAMS SEEK FANTASTIC FINISH AS PLAYOFF PUSH LOOMS

Not every team can start the season like the undefeated 9-0 Indianapolis Colts or the surging 7-2 Carolina Panthers, winners of six consecutive games.

But for the others, hope is alive and well! Since the current playoff format was instituted in 1990, 13 clubs with a .500 or worse record after nine games have made the playoffs, including at least one such team in three of the past four postseasons. In the NFL, the old cliché proves true – “It’s not how you start, it’s how you finish.”

One team that is certainly moving in the right direction after a 1-4 start is the Minnesota Vikings, winners of three of their past four games, including two in a row, culminated by a historic 24-21 road win over the New York Giants last week. In the victory, the Vikes became the first team in NFL history to score on an interception return, a kickoff return and a punt return in the same game, using the unorthodox, but highly effective, formula to earn the win.

Next up for Minnesota is a trip to Lambeau Field for a Monday night meeting with arch-rival Green Bay.

“Obviously our confidence has gone up,” said Vikings head coach **MIKE TICE**. “This win puts us right back in it with a big game coming up. We have a chance to get back to .500 with six games to go, four at home and two away. That is a pretty good schedule for us, so I like how things are coming together, but we have a long way to go.”

A look at the 13 clubs to qualify for the playoffs since 1990 after having a sub-.500 record through nine games:

	Club	Record After 9 Games	Final Record	Advanced To
1990	Houston	4-5	9-7	Wild Card
1990	New Orleans	4-5	8-8	Wild Card
1992	San Diego	4-5	11-5	Divisional
1994	Detroit	4-5	9-7	Wild Card
1994	New England	3-6	10-6	Wild Card
1995	Detroit	3-6	10-6	Wild Card
1995	San Diego	4-5	9-7	Wild Card
1996	Jacksonville	3-6	9-7	AFC Champ
1997	Detroit	4-5	9-7	Wild Card
2001	Tampa Bay	4-5	9-7	Wild Card
2002	Cleveland	4-5	9-7	Wild Card
2002	NY Jets	4-5	9-7	Divisional
2003	Green Bay	4-5	10-6	Divisional

Seeking to slow the Vikings’ resurgence are the Packers, who themselves come off a stirring victory, earning a 33-25 win over the Atlanta Falcons at the Georgia Dome.

Green Bay has begun its climb from a 1-7 hole, and while the task is daunting, hope is not lost. The Packers need look no farther than the 2004 Panthers. Carolina began its season at 1-7 before catching fire, winning six of seven games before being eliminated from playoff contention with a loss in Week 17.

The Packers have a history of finishing in fine fashion, compiling a sparkling 70-35 (.667) record in the final seven games of the season since 1990, when the NFL instituted its current six-team playoff format.

“It’s just one win,” says Packers head coach **MIKE SHERMAN** of the victory that handed Atlanta its first home loss of the season. “But it’s one we certainly needed.”

A look at the clubs with the best records over the final seven games of the season since 1990:

Team	Record in Final Seven Games Since 1990
Green Bay	70-35 (.667)
San Francisco	66-39 (.629)
Pittsburgh	63-42 (.600)
Philadelphia	62-42-1 (.595)
Tennessee	62-43 (.590)

Meanwhile in Detroit, the Lions improved to 4-5 with a 29-21 home victory over Arizona. Buoyed by the return of second-year wide receiver **ROY WILLIAMS**, who made his first start since October 9, the Lions piled up 383 yards as they kept pace with the division-leading Chicago Bears at 6-3.

The Lions, who can pull to .500 with a win at Dallas on Sunday, are happy to have Williams back in the lineup. In 16 career starts, the former Texas star has totaled 64 catches; 1,033 yards; and 12 touchdowns.

Detroit's hoping to emulate the example of the 1995 Lions, who stumbled to a 3-6 start before winning their final seven contests.

Eleven clubs have won their final seven games since 1990. Of those 11, 55 percent (6 of 11) began their run to the playoffs with a record of no better than 5-4.

A look at the teams to finish the season with seven consecutive wins since 1990:

Year	Club	Record After 9 Games	Final Record	Season Result
1992	San Diego	4-5	11-5	Lost Divisional
1992	San Francisco	7-2	14-2	Lost NFC Champ
1993	Houston	5-4	12-4	Lost Divisional
1994	New England	3-6	10-6	Lost Wild Card
1995	Detroit	3-6	10-6	Lost Wild Card
1996	Carolina	5-4	12-4	Lost NFC Champ
1998	Atlanta	7-2	14-2	Lost SB XXXIII
1998	Minnesota	8-1	15-1	Lost NFC Champ
2000	Baltimore	5-4	12-4	Won SB XXXV
2003	New England	7-2	14-2	Won SB XXXVIII
2004	Pittsburgh	8-1	15-1	Lost AFC Champ

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