

THE REPEATERS: FRANCHISES THAT WON CONSECUTIVE NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE CHAMPIONSHIPS, 1920-2022

by

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How difficult is it for a National Football League (NFL) franchise to win back-to-back championships? Well, consider this: Since the inception of the NFL as the American Professional Football Association in 1920, only 13 clubs out of 80—a little over 16%—have accomplished that feat, and just three of them have turned the trick at least twice. Or to put it another way, of the 103 NFL seasons from 1920 through 2022, franchises have had 102 chances to repeat, but no more than 19 attempts were successful.

Listed below are the victorious teams and their predecessors, with a key to explain the abbreviations in the table.

OWLTR = overall won-lost-tied record (i.e., regular-season and postseason games)

OW% = overall winning percentage

BRSR = best regular-season record. For teams before 1970, this means the best regular-season record in the league, whereas for teams after 1970, the best regular-season record in the conference. Also, the NFL rule from 1920 through 1971 of not counting ties in determining win-loss percentages and, thus, league standings has been maintained in deciding if a team had the best regular-season record for a particular year.

PD/G = point differential per game (i.e., the number of points given up subtracted from the number of points scored divided by the number of games played)

OSOS = overall strength of schedule (i.e., winning percentage of all opponents' regular-season and postseason games minus the games for the team in question)

T = tie¹

Franchise	Season	OWLTR	OW%	BRSR	PD/G	OSOS
Canton Bulldogs	1922	10-0-2	.917	Yes	14.1	.615
	1923	11-0-1	.958	Yes	18.9	.505
Green Bay Packers	1929	12-0-1	.962	Yes	13.5	.491
	1930	10-3-1	.750	Yes	8.8	.535
	1931	12-2-0	.857	Yes	14.6	.467
Chicago Bears	1932	7-1-6	.714	Yes	8.3	.536
	1933	11-2-1	.821	Yes	3.8	.529
Chicago Bears	1940	9-3-0	.750	No	13.3	.561
	1941	12-1-0	.923	Yes T	22.8	.500
Philadelphia Eagles	1948	10-2-1	.808	No	17.5	.510
	1949	12-1-0	.923	Yes	18.8	.507
Detroit Lions	1952	11-3-0	.786	Yes T	12.3	.522
	1953	11-2-0	.846	No	5.2	.493
Cleveland Browns	1954	10-3-0	.769	No	16.9	.503
	1955	10-2-1	.808	Yes	11.9	.493
Baltimore Colts	1958	10-3-0	.769	Yes T	14.2	.527
	1959	10-3-0	.769	No	10.6	.500
Green Bay Packers	1961	12-3-0	.800	Yes	13.7	.530
	1962	14-1-0	.933	Yes	18.4	.474
Green Bay Packers	1965	12-3-1	.781	No	6.6	.547
	1966	14-2-0	.875	Yes	12.8	.526
	1967	12-4-1	.735	No	9.8	.558
Miami Dolphins	1972	17-0-0	1.000	Yes	13.6	.471
	1973	15-2-0	.882	Yes	14.4	.554
Pittsburgh Steelers	1974	13-3-1	.794	No	9.1	.507
	1975	15-2-0	.882	Yes	14.1	.541
Pittsburgh Steelers	1978	17-2-0	.895	Yes	11.4	.512
	1979	15-4-0	.789	Yes T	10.5	.561

Franchise	Season	OWLTR	OW%	BRSR	PD/G	OSOS
San Francisco 49ers	1988	13-6-0	.684	No	6.8	.519
	1989	17-2-0	.895	Yes	15.2	.515
Dallas Cowboys	1992	16-3-0	.842	No	12.4	.500
	1993	15-4-0	.789	Yes	10.1	.539
Denver Broncos	1997	16-4-0	.800	No	11.2	.552
	1998	17-2-0	.895	Yes	13.4	.523
New England Patriots	2003	17-2-0	.895	Yes	6.6	.551
	2004	17-2-0	.895	No	11.1	.577

Of course, the results of the table beg the question of why. Why is it so difficult for NFL franchises to win consecutive championships, and why has no club been able to make it happen since 2004?

The answer may lie in several reasons:

- The single-elimination nature of the NFL playoffs. When two teams of unequal strengths play each other, the outcome of more games played will usually favor the stronger team, unlike the unpredictability of one game.
- The increase in the number of postseason games over the years. Before 1933, winning the regular-season title was winning the championship. After that year, playoff games evolved from one to possibly four, depending on where a team is seeded.
- And the effects of free agency, especially since 1993.

Turning to those clubs that did repeat:

- Of the 36 teams represented in the table, both repeaters and their predecessors, 15 or approximately 42% have what may be termed positive scores in the last four categories: at least a .750 winning percentage, the best or co-best regular-season record, a point differential in double digits, and a minimum strength of schedule of .500.
- The highly touted 1972 Miami Dolphins have the second weakest strength of schedule, which supports the argument that the 1973 version, with its much stronger schedule and slightly larger point differential, was the better team, despite suffering two losses.

- The same could be said about the 1962 and 1966 Packers. The majority of selectors whose ratings of NFL teams were used for this article put the '62 squad ahead of the '66 one,² but with each team having the best regular-season record for its respective season, there is a much bigger difference between a .474 and a .526 strength of schedule than a 14-1-0 and a 14-2-0 won-lost-tied record. True, the '62 Pack has a 18.4 point differential, whereas '66 finished at 12.8. However, a less than six-point margin could be attributed to having played tougher competition.
- Only three teams did not have at least a .750 winning percentage, but 12 failed to have the best or co-best regular-season record, nine were unable to post a double-digit point differential, and six lacked a minimum schedule strength of .500. In addition, of the 21 teams without positive scores across the board, nine were repeaters.
- And some of the repeaters are considered to be among the preeminent teams of the NFL's first 100 years. In his article on the league's 100 greatest teams from 1920 through 2019, Nate Davis included eight back-to-backers in his top 30 selections: 1962 Green Bay, 1989 San Francisco, 1975 Pittsburgh, 1973 Miami, 1998 Denver, 1966 Green Bay, 1949 Philadelphia, and 2004 New England, in that order. And he was not alone. One or more of the earlier rankings by Bill Gutman in 1991, Tom Helberg in 1996, Phil Barber and John Fawaz in 2000, Eddie Epstein in 2002, and Michael Knisley also in 2002 list the first seven of Davis' selections³ as well as 1923 Canton, 1941 Chicago, 1955 Cleveland, and 1979 Pittsburgh.⁴ There were fewer predecessors selected, with six—1929 Green Bay, 1940 Chicago, 1958 Baltimore, 1972 Miami, 1978 Pittsburgh, and 1992 Dallas—receiving two to six votes from the selectors.⁵

¹For determining overall winning percentage, a tie equals one-half of a win and one-half of a loss.

²Cf. Bill Gutman, *Football Super Teams* (New York: Pocket Books, 1991); Tom Helberg, "Timeless Champions: The Top Ten Teams of All Time," in *Street & Smith's Guide to Pro Football, 1996* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 418-424; Phil Barber and John Fawaz, *NFL's Greatest: Pro Football's Best Players, Teams, and Games* (New York: Dorling Kindersley, 2000); Eddie Epstein, *Dominance: The Best Seasons of Pro Football's Greatest Teams* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, Inc., 2002); Michael Knisley, *The Sporting News Selects Pro Football's Greatest Teams* (St. Louis: The Sporting News, 2002); and Nate Davis, "NFL's 100 Greatest Teams of All Time: Which Squad Is Best in League History?" <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2019/08/05/nfl-best-teams-history-all-time-patriots-bears-dolphins/1886459001/> (accessed on March 29, 2023).

³Four chose 1962 Green Bay; four chose 1989 San Francisco; two chose 1975 Pittsburgh; one chose 1973 Miami; two chose 1998 Denver; three chose 1966 Green Bay; and two chose 1949 Philadelphia.

⁴Two chose 1923 Canton; two chose 1941 Chicago; two chose 1955 Cleveland; and one chose 1979 Pittsburgh.

⁵Two chose 1929 Green Bay; two chose 1940 Chicago; four chose 1958 Baltimore; all six chose 1972 Miami; five chose 1978 Pittsburgh; and four chose 1992 Dallas. Again, Davis' selections were limited to 30.