



As Rams imploded, Sean McVay faded away: How they found their way back to each other

Jourdan Rodrigue Feb 23, 2023

Floor-to-ceiling shelving spans two walls of Sean McVay's office inside his airy Hidden Hills home. Books line them in neatly assembled horizontal stacks, spines facing outward.

The wunderkind [Los Angeles Rams](#) head coach has been a voracious reader for years, the majority of his time spent on leadership books and biographies about historically significant coaches, teams and athletes. Outside of family and close friends, and through two Super Bowls in five years, including a Super Bowl LVI win, these books are where McVay has most frequently sought advice over the past decade.

Lately, he has realized that for years he's been checking boxes laid out by *those* people — what are their definitions of success? — not creating his own. He followed their steps. And yet that path still brought him here: a 5-12 finish in 2022, the worst record ever by a defending Super Bowl champion.

Everyone around the 2022 Rams knew repeating was almost impossible, even if everything went right. And after convincing McVay and all-world defensive tackle [Aaron Donald](#) not to retire following their title-winning season, how much went wrong still shocked them.

They lost more key assistants off their staff — an annual occurrence under McVay but this time even later in the hiring cycle — and their confidently constructed free agency plans went awry. Once the season began, the roster was decimated by injuries, and the front office priced itself out of options.

McVay, so personally validated by the success of a franchise built to function almost entirely around him, spiraled under a wave of self-destruction, fatigue, grief and frustration. He agonized over whether to leave the team and called his relationship with football “a beautiful torment.”

“This was a collision of really bad circumstances with true adversity personally,” said COO Kevin Demoff. “Either one I think we would have survived individually. I think the combination ... was fatal.”

The Athletic spoke with dozens of players, executives, coaches and support staff for the story of the Rams’ historic collapse, many on the condition of anonymity because they weren’t authorized to do so publicly. Many also spoke on the record, including McVay, who recognized that some of the team’s ruination was his own creation.

In late January, he told *The Athletic* he wanted to be held accountable for that — and for his ongoing personal journey out of the wreckage.

“I want to be able to face these things,” McVay said. “I want to be able to acknowledge it.”

Their booze-fueled celebrations stretched on for more than a week after Super Bowl LVI — informally long after — and the Rams scrambled to fill positions after the longest season in [NFL](#) history.

Offensive coordinator Kevin O’Connell accepted the head coaching job in Minnesota hours after the Super Bowl parade, and longtime tight ends coach Wes Phillips joined him. McVay retained a few coaches who had drawn interest for outside jobs but found himself in a time crunch to fill out the staff. McVay brought back former assistant Liam Coen to coordinate an NFL offense for the first time and hired 27-year-old Ra’Shaad Samples to be running backs coach after a recommendation from assistant head coach Thomas Brown [and a single 15-minute conversation](#).

As free agency began, the Rams planned to re-sign outside linebacker [Von Miller](#) to a high-dollar multi-year extension, a point of disagreement among some in the front office because of Miller’s age (33) and injury history. All agreed that they would not give the veteran pass-rusher an unprecedented third guaranteed year on the contract, which would have forced the team’s hand toward similarly structuring yet-to-be-signed deals for Donald, quarterback [Matthew Stafford](#) and receiver [Cooper Kupp](#). [Buffalo](#) swept in with a third guaranteed year in the final moments of negotiations, and Miller signed with the Bills.



GO DEEPER

'We're not replacing Von': How the Rams pivoted to Allen Robinson after Bills' big move

The Rams don’t generally fit free-agent receivers into their team-building model, but they were thin at the position, so McVay checked in with Stafford and Kupp, who emphatically endorsed veteran wideout Allen Robinson.

Robinson was on the verge of signing with the [Eagles](#) at the time, team and league sources told *The Athletic* in September, but after a late-night phone call, McVay’s, Stafford’s and Kupp’s enthusiasm — and the role they described to him as a high-volume No. 2 receiver in the Rams offense — swayed Robinson to sign a three-year, \$46.5 million contract.

Robinson impressed coaches and support staff in training camp, but the bulk of his catches came from backup [John Wolford](#). A [recurring elbow injury](#) had flared up for Stafford, and after an anti-inflammatory elbow injection in March, the Rams determined he would not be able to throw into the start of training camp.

When the season started, the Rams struggled to find any rhythm on offense with a quarterback who hadn't had much practice time with his skill position players.

That was far from their biggest problem. For the first five years of the McVay era, the Rams ranked among the least-injured teams in the league; they would get no such luck in 2022.

They started 11 different combinations of offensive linemen in each of their first 11 games. Left tackle [Joe Noteboom](#) and center [Brian Allen](#), both of whom signed extensions before the season, played six and seven games, respectively, before being lost for the year. The line went through at least three players at every position except right tackle, where captain [Rob Havenstein](#) played through a variety of injuries the entire season out of sheer desperation.

Start-of-week meetings for scouting personnel staff turned into a melancholy routine, scrolling through phone contacts and film clips while quietly asking each other, "Does anybody know a lineman?" By midseason, four-fifths of the starting line featured players who had not been on the roster in September, let alone in training camp.

Stafford was pressured 115 times in the games he played, according to TruMedia, the most ever through a nine-game stretch in the McVay era.

"What happened up front, I don't know how you have solutions to that," McVay said. "We've always been able to pivot in different directions schematically or with personnel groupings, and we didn't even have the availability to do those things."

The run game was non-existent. After being told by McVay in training camp that he needed to play with "more urgency," lead rusher [Cam Akers](#) [openly protested the lack of clarity in his role](#) and the team's vision for the ground game overall. He was benched in October before the Rams tried and failed to trade him.

Without a rushing threat, the Rams couldn't move the pocket to scheme open a more efficient aerial attack, and without speedy, injured No. 3 receiver [Van Jefferson](#) for the first half of the year, the offense couldn't stretch the field consistently.

Not that there was sufficient protection to do so. The line couldn't give Stafford enough time to consistently get past his first read, which was almost *always* Kupp, who claimed nearly 40 percent of the offense's target share when healthy.

Stafford didn't have the same relationship with Robinson, whose presence in the offense was virtually non-existent — a jarring juxtaposition to the vision described to him before he signed. The passing game lacked dimension or variation. Some players and staff privately questioned how effective "Stafford-to-Kupp or bust" could be long-term. Still, the Rams couldn't — or wouldn't — adjust, especially with so many linemen rotating in and out.

The offense plummeted to the bottom of the NFL in Expected Points Added (EPA) and stayed there. Their nearly 40 percent three-and-out rate was the worst of the McVay era and hamstrung a defense that wasn't taking the ball away or rushing the quarterback as productively as in previous years.

In a Week 9 game at Tampa Bay, the Rams' offense went three-and-out on eight of its 12 drives while the defense held Tom Brady and the Bucs to just nine points (and no touchdowns) until the end of the fourth quarter. Stafford got the ball back with the lead and 1:52 left and needed a first down to ice the game. Instead, the Rams went three-and-out and punted the ball away with 56 seconds left. The defense wasn't prepared for the sudden change. Brady knew it and went up-tempo.

The Bucs' winning touchdown drive went 60 yards in just 35 seconds.

Afterward, half of the locker room sat in stunned silence. One offensive lineman wept, covering his face with his hands. On the other side of the small space, star cornerback and team captain [Jalen Ramsey](#) vented to reporters about the offense's inability to close out the game as other defensive players quietly vented to each other.

"What the f—," Ramsey said, shaking his head. "Like, we just made a big stop. ... We've got to have some dogs that (are) like, 'F— all that, we're gonna end this game right now.'"

It was the second of six consecutive losses. Worse, Stafford entered the concussion protocol a few days later after being sacked four times and hit eight. Kupp suffered a season-ending high-ankle sprain the following week. Against the [Saints](#) in Week 11 (Stafford's first game back after clearing the protocol), he took a hit and self-reported numbness in his legs. The quarterback was diagnosed with a spinal cord contusion and didn't take another snap for the rest of the season.

[A'Shawn Robinson](#), a starting defensive tackle and the team's best run-stuffer, tore his meniscus in the same game. The next week in practice, Allen Robinson fractured his foot and underwent season-ending surgery. Donald played through a high ankle sprain suffered early in the Rams' Week 12 loss to the [Chiefs](#), then was shut down for the rest of the year.

If the Rams were a supernova, so was McVay.

He became emotionally distant from players and staff, consumed by his frustration. Sky-high expectations had been replaced by problems that the meticulous coach couldn't control, and it was infuriating to him. He faded away, polite but mechanical in press conferences, drained and angry behind closed doors. Players gravitated toward defensive coordinator Raheem Morris' office as their head coach drew inward.

The low point came when the Rams traveled to Kansas City in Week 12. McVay gave up play-calling, handing off duties to Coen. McVay wanted to see if ceding control could ease some stress, and at 3-8, the Rams had nothing to lose by trying it out.

McVay is a "heart-on-his-sleeve" play caller. Careful observers can *see* the ebbs and flows of his brain call by call — and they can also see when creativity and collaboration morph into frustration and angst. When he calls a game, he feels connected to his players and they to him; the unspoken energy is transferred back and forth, good or bad. Or really bad.

"I have an ability to bring people with me in this positive energy and this aura," McVay said. "But I also believe that can be equally destructive, even if I'm not saying anything. The frustration, the body language guys feel — that leads to them being tighter and not going and playing the way they are capable of."

As McVay stood on the sidelines in Kansas City, his shoulders knotted and his jaw set, he could hear the game unfolding in his headset and see it on the field. But not calling the game made him feel more distant than ever from his players — and from himself.

"I think it made him *more* miserable," Demoff said. "But I also think it was really empowering for him to know, 'OK, that is not a solution to this.'"

McVay watched as the Rams' defense made stand after stand against [Patrick Mahomes](#) and the Chiefs despite being backed into their end zone multiple times. They refused to surrender to a team that would inevitably beat them, even in a dead season.

They were fighting — without him, maybe even in spite of him.

Something has to give, McVay told himself. You've got to make a choice.



McVay gave up play-calling duties against the Chiefs in an attempt to ease some stress, but it made him feel more distant than ever from his players. (Jason Hanna / Getty Images)

After the loss to Kansas City, McVay called a meeting with his coaches. He was intense and direct. He said they had to return to their core standards of coaching, teaching and developing. Their season was lost, but his expectations would rise.

But if McVay was going to ask for extra effort from his staff, he couldn't withdraw from them anymore.

The next week, the Rams claimed embattled quarterback [Baker Mayfield](#) off of waivers from Carolina. McVay had spoken highly of Mayfield after meeting him before his rookie season, and some assistants jokingly referred to the move as a “curiosity” project for McVay — a fun hobby to keep things light.

There was no way that Mayfield could be expected to run an offense in prime time on Thursday Night Football just two days after joining the team. And yet, that was the possibility the staff was preparing him for as soon as he landed in Los Angeles late that Tuesday night with Stafford on injured reserve and Wolford dealing with a neck injury.

It was exhilarating. “We had to be a little more ‘f— it’,” one coach said of that time.

Against Las Vegas, Mayfield managed to lead a 98-yard touchdown drive in the final minute to secure the Rams' first win in almost two months. When Mayfield hit Jefferson for the go-ahead score, McVay exploded on the sideline. Veins popped in his forehead as he screamed, fists clenched, in a celebration that looked more like an exorcism than joy.

“Just like we drew it up,” he said with a dry chuckle postgame.

Mayfield was more dependent on the play-action passing game than Stafford, so McVay and the offensive coaches built game plans that generally featured an even run/pass balance. After the trade deadline, McVay had a sit-down conversation with Akers for the first time since camp. The running back returned to the fold and the starting lineup, and Brown returned to coach the running backs after Samples took a job at Arizona State.

The Rams averaged 120 rushing yards per game through their final six games. Akers finished the year with consecutive 100-plus-yard games, the first for a Rams running back in two years.

They still weren't a good football team, winning two of their last five while missing 11 full-time starters to injury. But coaches and players believed they had simplified things, and many felt they had returned to just coaching and playing — instead of trying to stop losing.

“Sean had to shift his focus,” Morris said. “You go from this area where you're dominating ... and then things don't go right, so you have to try to find a happy place to make things right. I think he's been shifting his focus over the last couple of weeks, making the team better and getting back to what the process (feels) like to be *in* the moment.”

[Bobby Wagner](#)'s presence helped. The future Hall of Fame linebacker was voted a captain by teammates in his first season with the Rams after signing a five-year deal in March, and his steadiness was a source of balance for many — including McVay — when the season got rocky.



GO DEEPER

Bobby Wagner is back in Los Angeles, but he never really left it behind

Inspired in part by Wagner's leadership style, McVay met one-on-one with players and asked for their feedback. In team meetings, he started asking the younger players if they remembered what they said as kids they wanted to be when they grew up.

“Every guy in this locker room wanted to be a professional football player,” said Jefferson, smiling. “Coach McVay said, ‘Why don't you guys just go out there and *play*, then? Have fun.’ It just brought me back.”

Through December and January, backup players laughed and chatted in the locker room as they spilled into the vacated areas where the star players and injured starters usually sat. The sideline energy changed, too. Slumped shoulders and fixed expressions turned into back-slaps. The players made their way back to each other, and McVay found his way back to them.

“That's what I'm most proud of,” he said.

He still didn't know if he would return to the Rams in 2023, but he had been reminded about what he loved most about coaching.

After the Rams' season ended in the pouring Seattle rain with another loss, McVay spent the first week of the offseason confiding in and consulting with close friends. He sought counsel from coaches and faith leaders. In all of his conversations, he kept returning to the re-connections with his players.

“We didn't stop the storm,” McVay said. “I didn't for me, at least. But I at least grabbed an umbrella and I said, ‘I won't let this totally tear me down personally.’”

The Rams built their championship roster with elite players at premium positions, usually acquired via picks-for-players trades, then drafted and developed middle-round picks to complement them. They knew from the beginning that their aggressive team-building was fragile, [but it also won them a Super Bowl](#).

“We were not smarter than anybody, by any means,” said Demoff. “But we had a ton of first-mover advantages.”

If the life cycle of the current Rams model ended after the 2021 season, it did not for the rest of the league. The spring after their championship, an unprecedented number of players were traded for high-round picks. Ten additional trades were made at the Nov. 1 deadline, the most ever.

The Rams attempted to make a couple of big trades for pass rushers ahead of the deadline but were turned down or outbid. They tried trading for [Carolina](#) running back [Christian McCaffrey](#) in late October, but the [49ers](#) had more picks to spare and edged them out. The front office found itself [priced out of a market it helped inflate](#).

The Rams aren't publicly using the word “rebuild”, preferring to call what's coming in 2023 a “remodel.” The new league year is less than a month away.

“We've got to go find those first-mover advantages again,” said Demoff. Even the most prominent players on the roster aren't certain what the future holds.

McVay is already moving. He let go of six coaches in January and re-hired at their positions. Coen departed for the offensive coordinator position at Kentucky, while Brown was hired as Carolina's offensive coordinator. The new staff recently convened at the team's facilities to dig into the roster.

McVay is referred to by those who know him as a “thermostat,” with energy capable of changing a room. When he is high, he lifts people with him. When he is low, he drags them down. He knows this about himself, but he can't always control it, and that leads to guilt.

At times last season, McVay would realize how unhealthy it was to be so emotionally hollowed out by his team's failure, but he couldn't stop his feelings. It scared him, how detached he felt from everybody around him. He resented the circumstances he couldn't control, and he resented needing control in the first place.

For five years, since the Rams' loss to [New England](#) in Super Bowl LIII, McVay believed the only thing he needed to achieve happiness was to win a championship by any means necessary. When he did, he realized how much of himself he either left behind or lost entirely to get there.

It’s a dry joke among some Rams executives that they “robbed” McVay of normal life experiences and their ensuing lessons as a young adult. He won so much, so quickly after being hired in 2017 at age 30, and so the Rams built much of their ecosystem to his detailed specifications because it functions at its best when *he* is at his best.

But that level of operation, at McVay’s preferred pace and combined with his unforgiving competitiveness, is unsustainable. Especially last season, it became deeply unhealthy, too. McVay said he could manage it all, and the Rams kept letting him. It was all OK because they kept winning — until they didn’t. And the same tools that built the Rams’ enormous success helped dismantle them.

“The guy has been basically running an 800-meter sprint every week since he got our job,” said general manager Les Snead. “At some point a hamstring is gonna get tight, a hamstring is gonna get pulled.”

In November, McVay’s grandfather John died. The winner of five Super Bowls over two decades in San Francisco’s front office, John McVay’s professional excellence was often spoken in the same breath as the qualities his grandson also most admired: kindness, humanity and empathy, even under intense pressure.

As he worked through his grief, and the wreckage of his team’s season, McVay had to ask himself whether he truly shared those qualities.

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