

The Lions knew they could beat the Chiefs, and now a season tone has been set



By Colton Pouncy Sep 8, 2023

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Inside the [NFL's](#) loudest stadium, on a night the defending Super Bowl champs raised a banner and [kicked off a new season](#) as the league's gold standard, the home crowd fell eerily silent. With less than a minute to go, the Red Sea departed, heading for the exits. This was not the night they had anticipated.

Left amid the aftermath was an upstart [Detroit Lions](#) team, lining up for victory formation and a victory lap. All offseason, they told us this was different. That they were building a core capable of not only going toe-to-toe with the best in the league — but coming out on top.

You'll have to excuse them for saying they told you so.

"I didn't learn anything," Lions head coach Dan Campbell said following [his team's 21-20 win](#) over the [Kansas City Chiefs](#). "I got verification of what I already knew."

It feels so long ago now, when Campbell *didn't* know what he had. It was a process of trial and error. Finding the right fits. Trying to establish an identity. Taking their medicine along the way, as GM Brad Holmes put it last week. But Campbell and everyone in this Lions organization feel confident in their ability to win games like this because of what they went through.



GO DEEPER

Behind the braintrust that turned the Lions into NFC North favorites

A year ago, at least early in the season, a contest of this magnitude probably ends on a more somber note for those in Honolulu Blue. Part of the 1-6 start the Lions limped to last year was the product of a young team that didn't yet know how to close. A 38-35 loss to the [Eagles](#). A 28-24 loss to the [Vikings](#). A 48-45 loss to the [Seahawks](#). A 31-27 loss to the [Dolphins](#).

But what this team has now, and what it showed Thursday night, is a composure late in games it had to discover.

The Chiefs took a 17-14 lead into the fourth quarter. Tight end [Travis Kelce](#) did not suit up, and it showed throughout the night. The Chiefs' remaining pass-catchers did little to help their quarterback. If anything, a drop by [Kadarius Toney](#) [returned for six](#) by Lions rookie Brian Branch

helped keep this one close. But Kansas City still had No. 15, one Patrick Lavon Mahomes II. [The league's best player](#). A one-man show capable of making it work with whoever's around him and willing his team to a victory.

Nobody would've been surprised to see the Chiefs pull away after extending their lead to 20-14. It would've been in typical Lions fashion to lose to a Kansas City team missing its best pass-catcher in Kelce and best defensive player in [Chris Jones](#). "Same Old Lio—" ... well, [you know the saying](#).

But then, in the fourth quarter, a sound permeated the press box. It was the repeated tapping of the backspace key on laptops, as columns and gamers centering on a missed opportunity for the Lions had to be rewritten.

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On their next drive, the Lions struck back, just when it seemed unlikely. The offense faced a third-and-12 from their own 23. Detroit was 2-of-11 on third downs before that. But [Jared Goff](#) found [Josh Reynolds](#) for a gain of 18. Chains moved.

Later in the drive, more of the same. A third-and-1 from midfield — most likely two-down territory regardless — was converted. Goff to Reynolds again, this time for 33 yards. Back-to-back conversions after a game full of stalled drives.

"That's one of the reasons I love this team," Campbell said. "They don't get fazed by those things. And they know that the next one's coming, the next play is the one that's gonna change the game for us and they played that way today."

Finally, a few plays later, Detroit broke through. An 8-yard rushing touchdown by [David Montgomery](#), the workhorse of the evening, gave the Lions a 21-20 lead with a little over seven minutes to go. A nine-play, 75-yard drive to go up on the champs in their building.



At that time, you could hear the chants. *Let's go Lions. Let's go Lions*. Players heard it on the sideline. The only thing left to do was close it out. But not before a couple of tests.

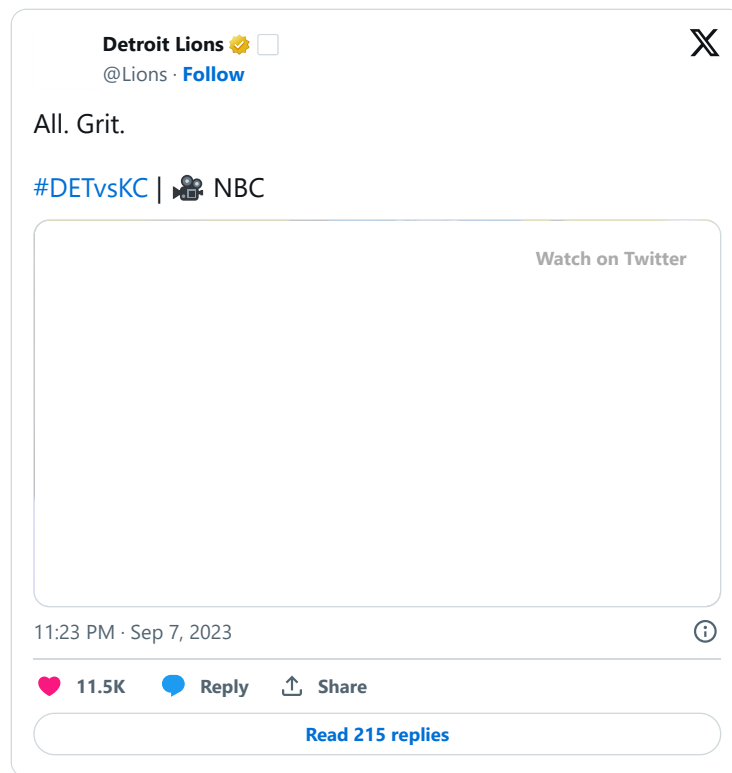
Those final minutes proved pivotal. As they should. This is the NFL, and games are often won and lost in crunch time. There's a feeling every Lions fan has in moments like this. Inevitable dread. A fear of what's around the corner.

Campbell and his crew are doing their best to erase that feeling.

The Chiefs were 0-for-7 on third downs in the second half. The Lions' defense, on back-to-back drives in the fourth quarter, held Mahomes and the Chiefs scoreless. They were aided by another untimely drop by Toney, but it's nothing the Lions will ever apologize for. Stopping Mahomes is no

small task. His final four pass attempts of the night hit the grass, falling incomplete on Kansas City's final drive. When the Lions' offense took the field again hoping to close the game, they relied on their offensive line to pave the way for Montgomery.

They fed him the ball time after time, forcing the Chiefs to use all their timeouts. By then, it just felt different. Like the Lions were in control. And when Montgomery squeaked through a pile to convert the first down, the realization set in.



The Lions were going to win the game. But, of course, it's nothing they didn't already know.

"I think it's kinda the culture that we've really built over the years, just kind of maintaining our focus on maintaining our composure throughout the whole time," right tackle [Penei Sewell](#) said in the locker room. "This game, it can be an emotional one. The flows can be up and down and the only thing that has to maintain is our heartbeat and our temperature. Coach preaches that and I think we just went out there and did that exactly."

"I go into every game thinking we better win and if we don't, there's something wrong," wide receiver [Amon-Ra St. Brown](#) said. "That's just the mentality I feel like we all have and that's what kinda helps us going into games — that confidence, that swagger that we have. Hopefully, you guys can see it too, looking from the outside in. I love this team."

How the Lions finished Thursday's game is a sign of maturity. You can see it in the ways they carry themselves, the collective mindset they share — speaking the same language in interviews conducted simultaneously across the locker room. It's a unit that moves as one.

Answering questions in the bowels of Arrowhead Stadium, Campbell, in his third season, looked the most poised and matter-of-fact he's ever been. He said he told his players they were made for this moment. He was calm, cool and collected as he talked about how he felt going into this one and how his team got it done.

"I think we expected to win this game," Campbell said. "We came in here and we knew what we needed to do, and we knew it wasn't going to be easy. We did that."

Expecting to win. That's the main difference between these Lions and Lions teams of the past. Thursday, with the world watching, they believe they set the tone for the season ahead.