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The genius of Dan Campbell: 'He's the best leader I've ever been around'

Zak Keefer Jan 15, 2025

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ALLEN PARK, Mich. — Dan Campbell slammed his coffee down, startling everyone on the video call:

“I WANT THIS JOB.”

There were seven head-coaching vacancies in the winter of 2021, and only one team was crazy enough to call Campbell.

Only Campbell was crazy enough to think he could save the Detroit Lions.

So what if he was a bit ... *excitable*? An NFL tight end for a decade, then an assistant coach for another, Campbell was a throwback in a league where the brainy offensive whiz had become all the rage. Coaches were supposed to mumble clichés in front of the media and move on. Campbell poured his heart out. Here was this football life



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They mocked him in the beginning, convinced he was going to end up just like the rest, run out of town within a few years because nothing had changed. Nothing *ever* changed in Detroit. Then they ripped him during the climb for being too honest, for being too out there, for having the nerve to think some sort of miraculous turnaround was coming, even as the losses piled up and the critics piled on and the Lions stayed the same old Lions.

Coaches who lose 19 of their first 24 games aren't supposed to say things like, "It doesn't matter if you have one ass cheek and three toes, I'll beat your ass." But Campbell was saying that when the Lions weren't beating anyone's ass.

"People were pointing at him and laughing," left tackle Taylor Decker remembers.

That first season ate at him. One week, Campbell was in tears at the podium. The next, he called out his quarterback. "That's not a professional head coach," Hall of Famer Cris Carter said on "Good Morning Football" a day later. "That's an amateur head coach."

Now they're not sure they can trust him. Not in big moments. They're worried a mix of aggression and ambition will sabotage everything Campbell's built and cost the Lions a chance at doing what no one ever thought they would. The coach is a late-game liability, some believe. A reckless renegade.

"Just some meathead," his quarterback, Jared Goff, says sarcastically. "That's the perception, right?"

For some, yes.

"Give me Dan Campbell on the field, I'll take it. Don't put Dan Campbell on my sideline," former Patriots great and current ESPN analyst Tedy Bruschi said in December. "Detroit Lions fans, there are no more ankles and kneecaps to bite. You're on top. Start playing like it. Start coaching like it."

"I think he's a bad coach," added Detroit radio host Rob Parker, a longtime media fixture in the city. "This is reckless ... what he's doing is unnecessary and putting his team in harm's way."



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couldn't talk himself into.

This is a man who once watched one of his fake teeth fly out of his mouth during a team meeting, bent down, picked it up and kept talking. During his first interview for an assistant coaching job in the league, Campbell found himself out of breath halfway through — turns out he'd gotten up, tossed some chairs around the room and started running routes.

If nothing else, the man is authentic.



Campbell's .581 winning percentage is the highest for any Lions coach since 1956. (Grant Halverson / Getty Images)

It's taken four years, but the Lions have become an embodiment of their head coach. A bunch of ass-kickers.



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Peace” to the NFC’s top seed, and they’ll let you in on a secret: It’s the brains, too. Campbell, they say, is as sharp as any mind in the game. He just doesn’t care if anyone knows it.

“For a while, he was playing into it,” Goff says. ““So what, people think I’m a meathead? They think I’m stupid? Good. I hope they do.’

“I’ve been around a lot of really, really smart coaches in this league,” the QB continues. “He’s right there with them.”

One difference?

“He’s very secure in who he is,” Goff says. “There’s a lot of coaches who aren’t.”

“This is how smart he is,” Decker says, speaking on the same topic. “In our meetings the day before a game, he tells us exactly how we’re gonna win. And a day later that’s usually what happens. You know how easy it is to buy into that?

“He’s the best leader I’ve ever been around. So f— what everybody else thinks. I wouldn’t wanna play for any other head coach.”

Every few weeks during a team meeting, Campbell’s players will start to look around the room and shrug their shoulders at each other. Their coach is talking, and they’re not sure where he’s going.

“Sometimes we’ll never actually get an answer,” offensive lineman Dan Skipper says, laughing.

One morning in December, Campbell was rambling on and on about how he used to get in fights all the time as a kid. He’d get bruised and battered but wouldn’t give an inch. He learned if he could outlast anyone, he could beat anyone.

Pretty soon, no one in the neighborhood wanted to pick a fight with him.

“Situation didn’t matter,” Campbell told his team. “I *always* found a way to win.”



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poignant: “Before long,” Campbell said of his team, “we’re gonna be the last ones standing.”

The Lions sent 21 players to injured reserve this season, including more than half their defensive starters, and still managed to win a franchise-record 15 games and the NFC’s top seed. A team that was supposed to crumble never did.

Their coach wouldn’t let them. Campbell has built a group that’s as mentally tough as any this side of Kansas City, a team that not only knows it’s going to win but *how* it’s going to win. “There’s no one on this earth who I’ve met that’s better at knowing how a game is going to go,” All-Pro right tackle Penei Sewell says of his coach. “It’s unheard of how good he is at that.”

A day before the Lions hosted the Packers in Week 14, Campbell told his players the game would come down to a fourth-down call. “Be ready,” he warned, “because there’s a good chance we’re going for it.”

The next night, Goff stood on the sideline next to his coach with 43 seconds left and the score tied at 31. The Lions faced a fourth-and-1 from Green Bay’s 21-yard line. Even the most aggressive analytic models suggested kicking the field goal. *Damn*, Goff remembered thinking, wishing the offense had run more time off the clock.

Campbell looked at him. “Let’s go,” he ordered.

One snap later, they converted. Two plays later, they clinched the win.



GO DEEPER

Jared Goff hit rock bottom. A conversation with Dan Campbell ignited his unlikely comeback

That same ethos pushed Campbell to play his starters in a meaningless Week 17 game in San Francisco. Laying down, even for a week, would contradict everything the coach has spent four years building.

Za’Darius Smith felt it the first day he was in the building. After joining the Lions via midseason trade, the veteran defensive end learned quickly this wasn’t the same team he used to beat up on when he was with the Packers. “Stack games,” Smith and his



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“That sh– has changed,” Smith says.

“I mean, not that long ago, people were wearing paper bags over their heads to games here,” adds wideout Jameson Williams. “Now we got the loudest stadium in the league.”

Nine-year veteran Decker, the longest-tenured Lion, sensed a shift during Campbell’s first season. The holdovers from the Matt Patricia era no longer doubted the coaching staff’s messages or motives. The Lions were still losing, sure, but Campbell wasn’t flinching.

“He took it on the chin, criticism from everywhere, to protect us,” Decker says. “That sounds silly because we’re grown men, but when you have a guy in the organization saying, ‘I’ve got your back, I’ll take all the bullets, you just work on getting better,’ that’s really, really powerful. Especially when the guys here didn’t know who to trust.”

Then Detroit started winning, and Decker and his teammates learned their coach was more than just a master motivator. He not only had command of the locker room but an uncanny feel for it, too. Goff calls it Campbell’s “emotional intelligence.”

“Dan is as good as it gets with that stuff, and that’s really hard for some coaches,” center Frank Ragnow says. “He’s so emotionally aware and in tune with every single player here.”

It hit Goff during the closing stretch of his first season in Detroit. After eight straight losses, Campbell stripped then-offensive coordinator Anthony Lynn of play-calling duties and — to many observers’ surprise — took over himself. “Everyone’s like, ‘*This* guy is gonna call plays?’ Not me, but everyone outside the building,” Goff remembers. “‘The kneecaps guy? How is he gonna call plays?’”

That’s when Goff saw another side to his coach. Over the headset, Campbell never raised his voice. Never spoke too quickly. He oozed cool and calm, then relayed that into Goff’s ear. The Lions won three of their final six.

“He went from, at least in my ear, this bravado speech guy to ...” Goff pauses, then holds out his hand, “... *steady*,” he finishes, his hand perfectly still. “I didn’t know he had that in him.”



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Campbell wasn't afraid to shoulder blame when his team was learning how to win, and he isn't afraid to shoulder blame now that the Lions are contenders. (Rey Del Rio / Getty Images)

Ben Johnson calls the plays now, but Campbell tweaks the scheme in the days leading up to games. He'll flip a motion. He'll add an audible if the defense shows Cover 2. He'll remind Goff about a blitz-beater in case the safety creeps up to the line of scrimmage.

He's known for halting a walkthrough or practice, changing a play on the spot, then ordering the players to have it down for Sunday. "We're calling this one," Campbell will warn. Typically, the players say, it pays off.

"We hear all the time that (Johnson) is brilliant, and he is," Decker says. "But I'm telling you, Dan is too."

There's also the tough love. Campbell wouldn't let the players — or himself, for that matter — soak in last season's stirring run to the NFC Championship Game. Six months later, on the first day of training camp, he challenged them to be better in every way. That's what it would take, he told them, to finish the job.



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It's little things, like pulling Goff aside after a lousy practice. "If I have a crap day but no one else thought it was a crap day, he's telling me it's crap," the QB says. "He'll just say, 'Jared, that wasn't good enough.'"

No player is sacred. Last season, amid a career year for Amon-Ra St. Brown, Campbell summoned the star wideout into his office for a sit-down. The coach played a clip from the previous week's win over the Bucs. St. Brown had whiffed on a nickel blitz. "Would rookie Saint do this?" Campbell asked.

"No."

"That's not you, man," the coach continued.

St. Brown shook his head. He knew. Back in his first season, when he was getting fewer targets in the passing game, he'd made blocking a benchmark of his game. Now that he'd grown into one of the best pass-catchers in the league, Campbell wasn't about to let him slip.

A year later, St. Brown grins at the memory. "He sees *everything*," the receiver says.

Coaches have felt it, too. The brute honesty. The unflinching accountability. Kelvin Sheppard played eight years in the league and now coaches the Lions' linebackers. What stands out most about his boss? He's never seen Campbell use notes when he addresses the team.

"It's all raw, it's all authentic, it's all genuine," Sheppard says. "It's honesty that most coaches wouldn't (use) in front of the players. Now, they'll go upstairs and do it (with the general manager or owner), then come down and smile in the player's face ..."

Not in Detroit, where the head man takes it on the chin when necessary. After a Week 2 loss to the Bucs, the coach began the following morning's staff meeting with four words: "That one's on me." The moment has stayed with Scottie Montgomery, Campbell's assistant head coach, for months.

Because after that the Lions won 11 straight.

"I've never wanted to go harder for a head coach," Montgomery says. "That is a leader you want to be in the building with — and not only that, wanna fight with. Because you



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In that team meeting the day before the Packers game, Campbell singled out three players.

“We’re gonna need a big one from you, 16,” he said, pointing at Goff.

“We’re gonna need a big one from you, 14,” he said, pointing at St. Brown.

“We’re gonna need a big one from you, 58,” he said, pointing at Sewell.

Some stars would bristle at that type of burden; these Lions have come to relish it. It’s how Campbell has them wired. He wants a target on his team’s back. He knows his men can handle it.

“He has not shied away from the high expectations, and for a guy who hasn’t really been in this position before, I cringe a little bit,” Johnson admits. “(But) now as I watch it unfold, man, it’s a beautiful thing. He knows what our guys are made of.

“He’s probably the best leader I’ve ever been around.”

The turnaround started with Goff, whom Campbell called out after a lopsided loss their first year together. “I feel like he needs to step up more than he has,” the coach said after the Lions fell to 0-6. The comments drew heaps of criticism around the league. In reality, the QB was never bothered by it.

“He was right, and I respect that,” Goff says now. “He shoots you straight. Damn right I needed to play better.

“What people didn’t know then was how much Dan believed in me. I still remember him and (GM) Brad (Holmes) calling me after the trade (from the Rams in 2021). I’m in a pretty fragile mental state at that point. The world had just turned upside down, right? And Dan’s like, screaming on the phone: ‘I can’t believe we were able to pull off this trade and get you as our quarterback!’

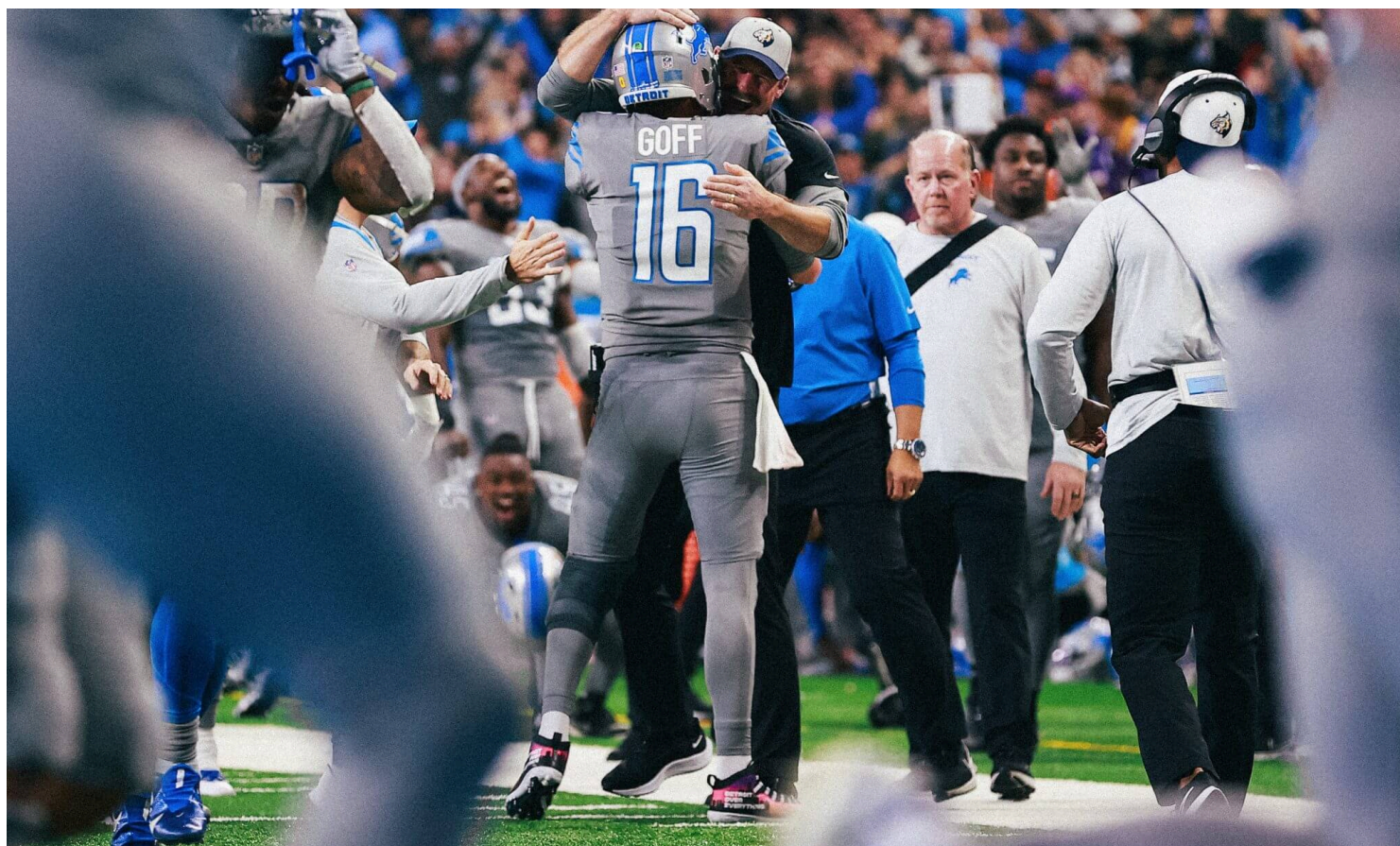
“I was like, ‘Holy smokes, haven’t heard that in quite some time.’”



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"I've been around a lot of really, really smart coaches in this league," Jared Goff said. "(Campbell) is right there with them."
(Rey Del Rio / Getty Images)

Goff's staggering career revival — from middling starter on an 0-8-1 team to MVP candidate for one that's 41-21 since, including the playoffs — mirrors the organization's rise from league laughingstock to Super Bowl contender. So when injuries threatened to derail Detroit's dream season, Campbell leaned into it. He hadn't built his team to fold.

"Nobody's gonna write our story for us," he said after a December loss to the Bills.

There was no doubt the Lions were hurting. The Eagles and Vikings were hot, threatening to steal the No. 1 seed. Skipper, the veteran offensive lineman, remembers watching a few defensive players run onto the field late in the year and muttering to himself, "I don't even know who those guys are."

Campbell asked his team who they wanted to be.



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what you're doing, you're not very smart, you can't process, you're throwing the ball out of bounds on fourth down, your coach is a meathead ...

"You go through this whole deal, but yet you look at each other and you trust each other."

He trusted them. They trusted him. Three wins later, including a winner-take-all finale against the Vikings, Campbell slipped on a baby blue T-shirt that read "READY TO ROLL" in the victorious locker room at Ford Field. The Lions had repeated as division champs and clinched the NFC's top seed for the first time in franchise history. Their story was still in their hands.

"You look like you remember who the f— you are!" the coach screamed at his players.

That's because he never let them forget.

(Illustration: Demetrius Robinson / The Athletic; photos: Perry Knotts, Nic Antaya / Getty Images)

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AWESOME

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