

# Five Reasons Every Titans' Fan Should Love Marcus Mariota

If you had polled Titans' fans prior to last season, I am convinced that an overwhelming majority of them would have been "all in" on Marcus Mariota. They would have believed he had proven that he was the franchise quarterback this team has been looking for since the Steve McNair era. Then the 2017-2018 season happened and the narrative about Mariota changed. Drastically. He went from being one of the most exciting young QB's in the game to one of the most head-scratching. He threw more interceptions than touchdowns last season, his accuracy seemed to get worse, and he clearly did not have the same sort of electric speed and mobility of his first two professional seasons. Now, it is not uncommon to hear Titans' fans talk about Mariota being a bust or that the team needs to draft his replacement. We live in crazy times.

I am firmly in the camp that believes that last season was an aberration. Due to a myriad (yes, I used myriad – deal with it) of factors, Mariota took a step back in his development last year. Here's a quick recap of a few of those factors:

**He had no offseason.** Mariota ended his Sophomore season with a broken leg. He spent the entire offseason rehabbing. Everything from timing with receivers, comfort in the pocket, and confidence in his legs all took a significant blow due to that injury and the loss of an offseason.

**He played in one of the most archaic offenses in the league.** I'm not going to take cheap shots at Mularkey and Robiskie, but their offensive system was a bad fit for Mariota. They consistently put him in positions where he had to be perfect to make plays work, and last season, he just didn't

have what it took to be perfect that often.

**He had really bad luck.** According to at least one analyst, Mariota threw less “interceptable” passes than most QB’s in the NFL last season but still ended up with more interceptions than most of them. Basically, when he threw bad passes, they were picked off. It’s rare that it happens like that. Every QB throws bad passes that are not intercepted. Nearly every mistake Marcus made ended up costing the team. See below and the rest of the rankings [here](#):

*“Andy Dalton threw the ball to defenders 32 times last year, he had 12 interceptions. Derek Carr threw the ball to defenders 36 times last year, he had 13 interceptions. Mariota finished the year with 16 interceptions. He threw the ball to defenders 14 times. How is that possible? He was by far the least fortunate quarterback in the league. Of Mariota’s 14 interceptable passes, 13 were caught. 92.9 percent of the time he threw the ball to a defender the defender caught it, 27 of the 36 qualifying quarterbacks had less than half of their interceptable passes caught by defenders. Compounding Mariota’s misfortune, he also had three interceptions that were direct results of one of his teammates making an egregious error. ”*

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That’s enough of the bad stuff. Last year was a disappointment from a statistical perspective for Marcus Mariota. But not everything was bad. In fact, a lot of good stuff happened last year for Mariota and I think things are about to look even better.

**Reason Number One: He is the perfect face of the franchise.**

Marcus Mariota is sort of a boy scout. He is quiet, soft-

spoken, and considerate. Read [this article](#) if you want to see the kind of guy he is behind the scenes. He is not going to embarrass the team or city with a DUI, an arrest for domestic violence, for crashing his motorcycle, for allegedly assaulting multiple women, or any number of other stupid, corrupt, and evil things. The worst thing Marcus will do is say he was “p\*\*\*\*\* off” after a game where he played poorly and then come back the next day and apologize for being angry and for saying those words – because his mother raised him to be better than that.

### **Reason Number Two: He is clutch.**

Mariota led the NFL with 4th quarter and overtime comebacks last year during the regular season. He added another comeback for the first Tennessee Titans’ playoff win in over a decade. The Titans have a chance in most games if number 8 is under center. He is that kind of player.

### **Reason Number Three: Even with a down season, he is still putting up good career numbers.**

Even factoring in a miserable statistical season last year, Mariota’s career numbers are just fine and show that he is talented and has a long career ahead of him. His numbers in key areas measure up just fine when compared to other “young” and talented QB’s in the NFL.

- **Mariota has a better career completion % than Andrew Luck, Derek Carr, and Jameis Winston.**
- **Mariota has the same or better TD % than Derek Carr, Jameis Winston, and Matthew Stafford.**
- **Mariota has a better career QB rating than Andrew Luck, Derek Carr, Jameis Winston, and Matthew Stafford.**

Mariota can improve, sure, but the rumors of his demise are greatly exaggerated.

#### **Reason Number Four: He makes no excuses.**

This is the area where Marcus reminds me the most of Steve McNair. McNair never took the credit for the win and always took the blame for the loss. Mariota is exactly the same way. That is what you want from your leader. You want accountability no matter what. Mariota demands perfection from himself and his teammates see that and they respond to it. The fans should respond to it. At least, those of us that have not lost our minds...

**Reason Number Five: This. (Click the link in the video to watch it on YouTube. The NFL is weird about this stuff.)**

**And this.**

**And THIS!!! (It's ridiculous how giddy I get watching this one.)**

I think those plays speak for themselves. I deliberately chose plays from last season when Marcus was statistically at his worst. Even at his lowest, he did those things. He made those plays. He willed his team to win those games.

What else do you want, Titans' fans? Get on board now because the Mariota hype train is about to leave the station.

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# Random Musings (The NFL on REO)

## Goodbye Fitz!

Earlier this year, a few of us from the REO staff worked on a Power Rankings for Nashville Sports Talk Radio. We assigned points to every show in four categories, we took the averages of each of those ratings, and then we used that data to come up with our final rankings. Before we had a chance to finalize the article to present our rankings, one of the major radio stations in Nashville made some major changes to their lineup, which obviously rendered our previous rankings pointless. We decided to go back to the drawing board, allow the new iterations of shows some time to come into their own, and then re-rank everyone. Sadly, that delay is costing us again as one of the local shows – [Braden and Fitz on 102.5 The Game](#) is coming to an end. Jason Fitz is moving to a nationally syndicated show with ESPN Radio and Braden Gall will probably be part of whatever show 102.5 The Game puts together once Fitz departs.

I hate this. Not to get too deep into the inner workings of REO, when we conducted our original rankings, Braden and Fitz came out as the number 2 show in Nashville. Braden and Fitz were a new show – they have barely been on the air for a year – and they already were doing a show that was smarter, funnier, and more enjoyable than some of the long-standing local shows. Fitz is very good at keeping the conversation moving and he worked really well with Braden Gall.

So, I am happy for Fitz because this is obviously a huge career opportunity for him but I am sad for our Nashville market because we are losing a good show. I hope that whoever they get to replace Fitz will be able to keep the show as interesting. (On a personal note, I would love for them to

move Willy Daunic to mornings but I realize that is probably impossible with his Nashville Predators responsibilities.)

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## Skycam?



On Thursday Night Football, the NFL Network and NBC decided to use Skycam as the primary camera angle. It was a big deal, as no other game had been purposely covered that way before. From what I can tell, it received a mixed response from fans. There was no mixed response in my house: We all hated it. My sons watch football with me, particularly my two oldest who are fourteen and thirteen. The thirteen-year-old loves to play Madden. He is probably the perfect audience for the Skycam view and he was not particularly thrilled. My fourteen year old has never been a big gamer so his negative response was much more predictable to me.

Though I am no longer a gamer, when I was younger I did play video games a lot. In fact, I spent hours playing video games. I concentrated mostly on sports' games, with lots of Baseball Stars and Joe Montana Football. (You see, we had the Sega



Genesis and never owned any Nintendo after the original, so we were unable to play Madden unless we were at a friend's house.) Mostly though, we played Tecmo Bowl and Tecmo Super Bowl. And for my money, football video games hit their peak with those two and have been going downhill ever since. So my preferred camera angle is whatever camera angle looks the closest to how Tecmo displayed the action. And that is certainly not Skycam!

What did you, my dear readers, think about Skycam? Would you be okay with more broadcasts using it as the primary camera angle or would it work better if used as part of the rotation?

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### **Three Takes on Marcus Mariota**

Mariota has had a very uneven season. Perhaps you are having a hard time figuring out why he seems to have regressed this season. I am here to help. Here are the hater, the homer, and the halfway take. We will start with the hater.

#### **Hater**



Marcus Mariota is not a good NFL QB. He cannot play from the pocket, as his stats in 2017 bare out. He has only thrown 8 touchdowns this season and 10 interceptions. The Titans added weapons to the offense and somehow he has gotten worse. He

is uncomfortable under pressure, cannot throw to the outside, and has a less-than-average deep throw. In addition, he is not a good leader. He does not talk. He does not rally his team by getting in their faces and pushing them to be better. He is too timid, too quiet, and too mild-mannered to ever be an elite QB in the NFL.

## Homer



Marcus Mariota deserves the benefit of the doubt for this season. His critics like to forget that he missed the entire offseason, rehabbing a broken leg. He was unable to do football activities until right before training camp started.

Missing all of the offseason work and preparation put him behind from the opening game. Then, to make matters worse, he injured his hamstring the fourth game of the season and has not been anywhere near 100% since that game. In addition, do not forget that many of his interceptions this season have been on his receivers running the wrong route. Yes, the team added weapons this offseason, but becoming familiar with each other takes time and with Mariota missing time due to injury, they have not been able to gel the way they need to. We just need to give it time to work. Mariota is still capable of being an elite QB in the NFL.

## Halfway



Marcus Mariota has been inconsistent this season. While he has not been anywhere near as bad as his detractors will claim he has not been blameless in the Titans offensive struggles. He has been less comfortable in the pocket, for a variety of reasons. He has been less

decisive and accurate in third down and red zone opportunities. He has made a few throws that were just plain awful. However, he has also had his share of bad luck with multiple touchdowns either dropped or taken off the board due to bad calls. Those things affect his final stat line in ways



that critics and national media people simply do not acknowledge or recognize. This will be a frustrating season for Titans fans though because as it stands, it does not appear that Mariota will have enough time to truly heal and feel comfortable with his new offensive weapons. That does not mean this will be a lost season. Even with a less than 100% effective Mariota, the Titans should still be a playoff team which is a huge step forward for a team that has missed the playoffs for nearly a decade. Right now, Mariota is a middle-of-the-pack QB with the ability to take strides to make it close to the top 10 by the time the season ends. Will he do it? I am leaning ever so slightly to yes.

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In a couple of weeks, we will be posting the  $\frac{3}{4}$  season Power Rankings. This time around, I hope to be joined by Gowdy Cannon and Mike Lytle in coming up a more definitive Top Ten. The next two weeks are going to be huge for so many teams as far as playoff implications are concerned. People might complain and criticize the quality of teams in the NFL this season, particularly in the AFC, but right now, there are 13 teams in the AFC with legitimate hopes for the playoffs. And the NFC has 13 as well. That is 26 teams out of 32 that are still holding on to hope for a postseason berth. That is insane. I realize the product is a bit watered down this season but at least this is not like some other sports where the outcome seems set in stone two weeks into the regular season. Hope springs eternal in the NFL.

See you next week.

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# Titans Tuesday: How You Like Me Now?

I'm not sure what else needs to be said about the Tennessee Titans' absolute dismantling of the Green Bay Packers. We could talk about how good the running game looked. We could talk about Delanie Walker and the stiff arm of doom. We could talk about the weapon Rishard Matthews has become in the offense. We could talk about the game plan the coaches constructed that kept the Packers' defense on its heels the entire game. But, as I have made it clear on numerous occasions, I have a massive man crush on Marcus Mariota, so we are going to spend a little time on him today.

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At this point in the season, if there are still doubters about Mariota, they need to skulk quietly into the night. They have no place at this table. Marcus Mariota is playing at a Pro Bowl level. In the past six games, he is putting up numbers that are in line with only the best quarterbacks in the NFL. He is the leader of an offense that is scoring more points than almost any other team in the league during that time frame as well. In fact, the Tennessee Titans just scored over 35 points in three consecutive games for the first time in franchise history. (That includes their time as the Houston Oilers.) Mariota is in complete command of the offense. He is accurate. He is decisive. He has the arm strength to make any throw required. He has a glorious moustache! He will still have games where he makes mistakes. He is only 22 games into his career after all. But it's clear to anyone that has eyes and a brain that he is the future of this team. He can absolutely take the Titans to the Super Bowl. It won't happen

this year, but the talent is there. Rejoice Titans' fans! Your long winter of failure is over!

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As I watched the Titans physically, emotionally and strategically dominate the Packers, I realized how much I missed seeing my favorite team play at a high level. It's been way too long. This team is still missing too many pieces to be a great team, but they have just enough to claw their way to become a good team. I can't wait to see what they will look like with one more offseason and draft under Jon Robinsons' leadership. We'll see how it all plays out, but at this point, they have to be anticipating and expecting a playoff run in 2017. I don't see how anything less could be in play.

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I'll end this article with some quick fire bullet points to highlight a few things that stood out to me on Sunday:

- Valentino Blake pointing the wrong direction after the fumbled punt was the funniest thing that happened during the game. My kids got a huge kick out of that. Way to go Valentino. I'm glad the referees aren't influenced at all by players pointing in a direction.
- The Titans need a number one cornerback. Jason McCourty can be a really good two. Perrish Cox can be a serviceable three. Brice McCain and Valentino Blake can be fantastic practice squad players. This needs to be a draft or free agent move this offseason.
- The Titans need to keep Jurrell Casey, Brian Orakpo, and Derrick Morgan around for a long time.
- Was Jeff Triplette drunk on Sunday? Man did he struggle explaining the flags!
- Delanie Walker played angry and it was amazing! I'll leave you with a good look at the stiff arm of doom he unleashed on the Packers.



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**Titans Tuesday: “It was the**

# **best of times. It was the worst of times.”**

The Tennessee Titans' loss to the San Diego Chargers was a microcosm of the 2016 Titans' season. There was a lot of good. There was a little more bad. As I have said many times before, the Tennessee Titans are a team that is playing with very little margin for error. They cannot afford to make mistakes; especially not big mistakes as they did on Sunday. When the Titans play a clean game, they can beat almost any team in the league. Unfortunately, they do not seem to be capable of playing mistake-free football in consecutive games.

So, let's start with the bad.

First, three turnovers, two of which were returned for touchdowns, will lose you games in the NFL every single week. The fact that the Titans only lost by eight points is almost unbelievable. Marcus Mariota continues to confound the fans. I am on record, and will repeat it again here, that Mariota is a franchise quarterback. I believe that in a year or two, he will be a top 5 quarterback in the league. But games like this make me back away from that prediction a little. Crazy as it sounds, the interceptions do not bother me that much. The first one was a really good play by Casey Heyward. He left his man, free lanced, and undercut the throw to Delanie Walker. Mariota doesn't make that throw in a few years. He will recognize what Heyward is doing, and he will make him pay for leaving his assignment. It's good to remember that Mariota is just barely 23 years old and has only played in 21 NFL games. He is still an infant in NFL quarterback terms. He is still learning. The second interception was on Mariota and Kendall Wright. They both said as much. Wright has to run his route better there. And, he has to fight for the ball better to prevent the interception from happening. Mariota needs to lead Wright a bit more to the sidelines.

The fumble is another story. I hate the play call. I hate running Mariota in those zone-read options. They are rarely successful. The play was doomed to fail from the beginning and Mariota's poor ball protection made it even worse. As I analyze his game right now, 21 games into his career, this is the area that concerns me the most. Your franchise quarterback cannot fumble the ball like this. Period. If Mariota cannot improve this aspect of his game, he will never reach the highs he is capable of reaching. He has to protect the ball better.

I'll bullet point the rest of the bad:

- Run defense. Worst run defense all season. It was atrocious.
- Run offense. With DeMarco Murray banged up, Derrick Henry sidelined the entire game, and the Offensive Line struggling with getting any push, the Titans' rushing attack faltered for the first time this season.
- Pass defense. Jon Robinson has a few major needs to address this offseason. The most important one in my mind is the secondary. They need a number one cornerback. Jason McCourty is good and will be an excellent number two, but if he is your best cornerback on the roster, your roster needs help. The safety position needs an upgrade as well.

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Now, let's get to the good.

Marcus Mariota made throws that only five or six human beings on the planet can make. That is not hyperbole. The third touchdown pass he threw to Walker was one of the best throws I have seen any quarterback make. The speed, the precision, and the read were all perfect. We saw Mariota at his absolute best at times on Sunday. For the majority of the game, over 90% of the time, he played like an All-Pro. He was making great reads. He was throwing the ball with accuracy. He was moving



in the pocket better than I have seen him do for most of his career. It's scary to think how good he can become with a little more time and experience.

Rishard Matthews continues to prove that his acquisition this offseason was a smart move. He now has caught five touchdowns in the last four games. He has turned into a reliable target in the passing game.

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I completely understand the enthusiasm for this team and how a loss like this can feel so demoralizing. I feel it too. I see this team dismantle the Dolphins and the Jaguars and I start to believe they are a good team. A playoff team. I suggest we slow down just a little. This is not a good team yet. This is an average team with the potential to be good. 2016 will be a frustrating season for fans. We will see the potential and will think that the team should be able to play like that every week. We know the Titans are in a bad division and should be fighting for the playoffs. And if the Titans don't make the playoffs and only win 6, 7, or 8 games by seasons' end, there will be many that will question the coaches and the players. Not only do I believe that would be dumb, it would also be unfair. The Titans won 5 games in the 32 games prior to this season. You can't fix that level of incompetence in one offseason. Give it time. This will be a year of ups and downs. Probably more downs. But every time this team has struggled, or Mariota has struggled, they have fought back and played much better the next series or the next game. This is a team that is learning how to be good. No doubt they need more weapons and more experience. Yet, even with a limited roster they are clearly much improved from prior seasons.

The Tennessee Titans are just good enough to be competitive in every game. They are just bad enough to lose any time they make too many mistakes. Let's hope the good Titans show up on Sunday against the Green Bay Packers.

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# Titans Tuesday: Perspective

I live in Nashville. I am a huge sports' fan. Therefore, I listen to a lot of sports' talk radio. Too much, to be honest. And it is driving me crazy.

After the Tennessee Titans had won two games in a row, and clawed their way to a 3-3 record for the season, too many of the local shows were starting to talk playoffs.

Playoffs?!? (I won't bore you with the whole Jim Mora bit. I'm sure you've heard it many times.)

While I enjoyed hearing the local guys say nice things about my favorite team, I couldn't help but be a little annoyed at the sudden over-the-top enthusiasm and confidence. While I do believe the Titans are a much better team than they have been in years, this is still an average team fighting to become something better. Playoffs shouldn't be discussed until the final game of the season if there is still some mathematical chance. The other reason it bothered me to hear all the playoff talk is that as soon as the Titans lost another game to any team other than one of the best teams in the league, the local shows were going to be all doom and gloom.

And they were. To be fair, not all of them fell into that trap. There were some moderate and balanced views. Still, there were a good number that used the loss to the Indianapolis Colts as a sign that Mike Mularkey is the worst coach in the NFL and that Marcus Mariota is terrible.

One show in particular really took a dive down the rabbit hole

when it came to Mariota. I won't name the show mainly because I don't want to give them extra press. (Though, a nice, healthy shaming wouldn't go amiss.) Two of the three hosts used a big portion of their time discussing the game, came to the conclusion that Marcus Mariota is the same quarterback as Jake Locker, that there is no discernible difference between the two players. If I could punch another human being through the radio...

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Before dissecting all that is wrong with that comparison, let me lay down a few foundational truths and perspectives:

1. I loved Jake Locker. I wanted that kid to succeed more than any player I can remember in my life. I loved his low-key personality. I loved his mindset. I was a huge Locker fan.
2. I did not want the Titans to draft Marcus Mariota. I felt that he was basically the same QB as Locker, perhaps a little better. If Locker's game did not translate into a successful NFL career, then why would Mariota be worth the 2nd overall pick in the draft?

Now, let's take a look at how those things play into my current perspective.

1. Jake Locker was an inaccurate and often injured quarterback. You cannot build a team around a player that misses as much or more than he plays. And you cannot build a team around a QB that does not pass over 60% in his career. The team was right in letting him walk at the end of his contract.
2. Marcus Mariota is much better than I realized when he came out of college. He is a better pocket passer at this moment than I ever thought he would be in the NFL. He is smarter than I realized. The team was right in drafting him 2nd overall in 2015.

Now let's look at the claim that Jake Locker and Marcus Mariota are the same player. (To be clear, this wasn't a throw away comment by these two radio talkers. They argued it passionately with the other host. They even grew belligerent and dismissive when the other host attempted to prove to them that this was a very inaccurate statement based on the facts.)

Locker was a 57.5% passer in his 4 seasons in the NFL. He played a total of 30 games in those 4 seasons, missing many due to injury. He had a 3.8 Touchdown percentage. (That is: the percentage of his passes that resulted in a touchdown.) He had a 3.1 interception percentage. His yard per attempt was 7.0 and his Quarterback rating came in at 79.0.

Mariota, in the 19 games played in his career, is a 61.9% passer. (Steve McNair was a 60.1 percent passer for his entire career. If Mariota maintains that percentage for his entire career, he will end up in the top 25 of all-time for completion percentage. This was a major point of disagreement with the radio guys. They argued that 61.9% is not any different than 57.5%. I guess they don't understand numbers and stuff.) Mariota has a 5.2 touchdown percentage, a 2.7 interception percentage, 7.4 yards per attempt, and a 90.7 passer rating. All substantially better than Locker. He did miss four games in his rookie season, but even with that, still played more games in his rookie season than Locker ever played in a season in the NFL.

How do Mariota's numbers stack up against some of his peers? On the other side of the field this Sunday stood Andrew Luck, the NFL's golden boy. For his career – basically four seasons (he missed 9 games last season and has played in 7 this season) – Luck has a 58.9% completion percentage, a 4.8 touchdown percentage, 2.5 interception percentage, 7.1 yards per attempt, and an 86.5 passer rating. That means, that Mariota has better numbers through the first 19 starts of his career in 4 of those 5 important QB stats than the once and future king, Andrew Luck. Luck was clearly the better

quarterback on Sunday, but it's fair to point out that it was one of his best games ever and an average day for Mariota. Luck carried his team, something Mariota has done before and will need to do in the future, but was unable to do this Sunday.

I've included a simple chart showing these stats side-by-side. The red indicates the statistic where Mariota is number one in this comparison.

JAKE LOCKER - 30 GAMES

57.5% completion percentage.  
3.8 Touchdown percentage.  
3.1 interception percentage.  
7.0 yards per attempt  
79.0 quarterback rating.

MARCUS MARIOTA - 19 GAMES

61.9% completion percentage.  
5.2 touchdown percentage.  
2.7 interception percentage.  
7.4 yards per attempt.  
90.7 passer rating.

ANDREW LUCK - 62 games

58.9% completion percentage.  
4.8 touchdown percentage.  
2.5 interception percentage.  
7.1 yards per attempt.  
86.5 passer rating

I think the stats and the facts speak for themselves: There are too many people in the media that are paid to know this stuff and they know less than a guy that writes about it in his free time. But the sad fact of the matter is, they are the ones with the voice and their completely asinine position is being heard by thousands, and probably influencing a large percentage of them. The doom and gloom about Marcus Mariota is not justifiable at this point, and it borders on outright stupidity.

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Here is what I know about the loss against the Colts:

1. Mariota has to play better. Quarterbacks get too much credit and too much blame in the NFL, but that is the nature of the business. Mariota was not great in this game and his mistakes cost the team. He was not bad though. And he did lead the team to a game tying score and then led them on a game winning drive. He did enough

to win this game. Sadly, the team needed him to do more, and if he is going to be the franchise QB, he will have to do more from time to time.

2. The defense was not good. The Titans do not have the secondary to win games. They need their pass rush to generate pressure to be successful. The pass rush did not do its job. Going up against a poor Colts' offensive line, they should have been able to generate more than two sacks. That will not win you many games in this league.
3. Once again, special teams cost the team. Missing an extra point due to a bad hold and then not recovering the onside/squib kick which resulted in 3 points for the Colts is completely unacceptable. I have said it before, but it needs to be repeated: The Tennessee Titans have a very slim margin for error. If their special teams is costing them points, they will have a hard time winning many games.
4. The coaches need a share of the blame. They asked Mariota to throw the ball 37 times even though the game was close and they were averaging 4.4 yards per carry in the run game. They did not roll out Mariota or call enough run plays for him. They decided that they needed to throw the ball a lot to beat the Colts, instead of doing what they do best. They need to game plan better and call better plays as the game develops.

The Tennessee Titans are 3-4. They play in two days against Division foes, the Jacksonville Jaguars. It's another must-win game for the Titans. They have a chance to get to .500 again. They have a chance to top their win total from the entire 2015 season. They have a chance to prove to their fans that they are improving. That is the perspective they need to have.

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# Titans Tuesday: Fill in the Blank

I'm going to let you in on a little secret: I have no idea what this article is going to be about today. I nearly decided not to write an article today, but I would hate to let down my 37 faithful readers. I will press on, writing one word after another until an idea hits me.

I promised last week that we would look at the Titans' regular season schedule, so, I guess that is as good of a place to start as any. "Officially", the Titans should have one of the easiest regular season schedules in the league, since they finished with the worst record in the league last year. Some years, that works out well, and this year seems to fall in that category. Frankly, I haven't been thrilled with the schedule for the Titans the past few seasons. Too many tough matchups early on, or a bye week that falls at the wrong time, or too many road games early in the schedule seemed to lend to the death spiral that has been the Tennessee Titans in recent history. Fortuitously, in 2016, their schedule is a good mix of home and away early in the season, strong and weak opponents. The only downside to the schedule is the bye week, which comes with only four games left in the season. I am considering doing a special edition of Titans Tuesday where I predict the outcome of each game before the season starts, but that has so much potential to backfire in my face that I might wimp out.

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My thirteen-year-old son was confused about my salted cured meat comment last week. I don't blame him. It was random and added nothing to the discussion. In other news, I ate a pastrami, black pepper turkey, white sharp cheddar cheese on a potato bun sandwich yesterday. It was delicious and I highly

recommend the combination.

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The third preseason game has come and gone and I think we know a little more about the Titans than we did the week before. Here are the things that stood out the most to me:

1. The first team offense is going to be above average this season. The receiving group is solid and has the potential to be the best wide receiver group the Titans have fielded in over a decade. Marcus Mariota has full control of the offense and is making plays with his arm and his legs. And the running game is everything the team has been preaching. DeMarco Murray and Derrick Henry are going to hurt some people this season and it's going to be a lot of fun to watch them bring the pain. They do need a better nickname than Thunder and Thunder though. Feel free to post your suggestions in the comment section below.
2. The secondary is a mess. Bad coverage, bad angles, bad tackling, bad positioning. You name it; they probably did it against the Raiders. I don't think Perrish Cox back in the lineup is going to fix it all, but it's bound to help. Let's hope with that and a more aggressive Lebeau-styled-blitz-heavy scheme will be enough to keep them competitive.
3. Playing football on a baseball field is the worst. I love baseball but football should not be played in dirt. What an ugly stadium and field.

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That is all I have for today. To be honest, I didn't think I could get even that many words down for this edition. I'm glad I stuck it out. I hope you are as well.[1. Don't tell me if you are not. It would hurt too much.] Next week, we will have our **2016 BOLD PREDICTIONS**. You won't want to miss that because

I will probably end up making a fool of myself in ways you cannot even imagine. Spoiler: I may or may not be predicting a playoff appearance for the Titans. I am also going to be posting REO staff predictions for the Titans' 2016 record.

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## **Titans Tuesday: Winning Back the Fan Base**

Apathy.

It is one of the worst things that can happen to a professional sports' franchise. Anger, frustration, and even pure hatred are almost more desirable than apathy. You want the fans of your team to feel something, anything. But sometimes, things get so bad that apathy is the only reaction that feels natural.

That is where the Tennessee Titans have been for the past few seasons. Due to a mind-numbing combination of poor on-the-field performance and astounding incompetence from the ownership, the franchise has found itself as the laughing stock of the NFL. The Titans don't merely lack respect from the rest of the league and the media; they aren't even taken seriously.

If you have followed this team with any level of attention, you are familiar with the problems. It has been a slow decline that began during the final years of the Jeff Fisher era, accelerated during the Mike Munchak era, and then took a dive off a cliff during the Ken Wisenhunt era. The coaches were only part of the problem. General managers have failed this franchise. Ownership has been awful. From the top down, the Tennessee Titans have been an embarrassing and pathetic

football organization for nearly a decade.

Do we have any reason to believe the team is going to be any better in 2016 than they have been in the recent past? I say yes. Tentatively. Let's look at three major areas that seem to indicate that the franchise has finally turned the corner.

### **Ownership.**

When Amy Adams Strunk took over as controlling owner, replacing Tommy Smith, the move was met with skepticism. That is not to say anyone was happy with the job Tommy Smith had been doing. On the contrary. The Smith reign gave us Ken Wisenhunt. Do I need to say more? Amy Adams Strunk didn't immediately win fans over. She did not do interviews. She did not appear at press conferences when big announcements were made. She stayed in the background, allowing others to speak on her behalf. That angered some fans, thinking that it showed a lack of concern on her part. Frankly, anyone that made a big deal of her lack of public speaking looks foolish now. She may not have given any award winning speeches, but her actions behind the scenes proved that she was not content with letting things remain the way they were. She fired the head coach, Ken Wisenhunt, after only seven games of the 2015 season. It was more than deserved. After the season was over, she fired General Manager, Ruston Webster. Also deserved. All this to say: Outside of some questions regarding her choice as Head Coach, every move she has made since taking over as the controlling owner has been positive.

### **A new General Manager.**

After Amy Adams Strunk fired Webster, she replaced him with new GM Jon Robinson. At this point in time, we have no way to fully evaluate that hiring, or the decisions Robinson has made as GM, but the signs all seem to be positive. He made a virtually unheard of trade of the first pick in the 2016 draft, picking up a bevy of picks. Prior to that, he traded

for Demarco Murray, solidifying the running back position without having to give up much of anything. Robinson has made a point of signing and drafting character guys. Guys that have been leaders on other teams, in the NFL or in college. Players that have produced and are not just potential. Robinson has had a plan that is apparent from the outside. That is more than can be said about the previous two general managers. We don't know at this point if his plan is a good one, but right now I'll take any plan over what seemed like blindly throwing darts at the draft board.

### **Marcus Mariota.**

It is true that Mariota has only played one season in the NFL. An injury plagued season at that. Yet, anyone that watched him play saw something special. We saw something we haven't seen since Steve McNair played quarterback for the Titans. Mariota is everything a franchise QB needs to be. He is supremely gifted. He is smart. He is a hard worker. He leads by example. From all appearances, he has unimpeachable character, on and off the field. As much as I wanted to see Jake Locker become the franchise QB this team needed, he never could stay healthy long enough to develop into a quality starter. Mariota is already farther along in his development, after one season, than Locker ever was in his short NFL career. Every franchise needs stability at the quarterback position. For the first time since number 9 took the field, it truly looks like the Titans have just that.

I realize this is a limited sampling and that the situation is vastly more complex. Still, I feel that any franchise that has these three areas in sync is a franchise that can't help but be successful. Let's hope Amy Adams Strunk, Jon Robinson, and Marcus Mariota are able to bring back respectability, success, and passion to the franchise. From my perspective, they have taken the first small steps to winning back the fan base.

What do you think? Do you feel the organization is on the

right track? What else do they need to do to give you confidence things are going to get better?

*(Logo Artwork by Aidan Lytle.)*

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## **Titans Tuesday: Thank You Ken Whisenhunt and Ruston Webster**

*Welcome to the inaugural Titans Tuesday article. This will be a weekly look at the Tennessee Titans, starting in earnest during the preseason. We will have occasional updates during the offseason but it won't be weekly until closer to the start of the season.*

Today, my topic is simple. Consider this a big "Thank You" to Ken Whisenhunt and Ruston Webster.

Now, I know what you are thinking. Why are we thanking those two? What did they ever do to deserve our thanks? Your questions do not come as a surprise.

During Ken Whisenhunt's brief tenure as head coach in Tennessee, he managed to take a team that averaged over seven wins a season in three years under Mike Munchak and somehow only produced three wins in the span of 23 games before he was fired midseason. He was a failure as a head coach in every way imaginable. His offense (his supposed specialty) was horrendous, ranking in the bottom five both years he was in Tennessee. His defenses weren't much better. He got his quarterbacks hit all the time due to his stubborn insistence on running his offense even when it was clear the players were



not suited to it. He talked a big game but his coaching decisions, win-loss record, and an overall inability to adapt made all his words hollow.

General Manager Ruston Webster did not fare much better. He consistently drafted potential over known quantities. His drafts and free agent signings are littered with non-contributors: Michael Oher, Justin Hunter, Moise Fokou, Darius Raynaud, Zavier Gooden, Lavar Edwards, Ryan Fitzpatrick, Andy Levitre, and Shonn Greene to name a few. He missed on too many good players in the draft too often. There is a reason he is now a scout for the Falcons and not running the show for any NFL franchise.

So, why am I thanking these two men who from all appearances did more to run this team into the ground than anyone in franchise history? Simple: Marcus Mariota.

Think about it. According to multiple reports, the Eagles and Chip Kelly were desperate to draft Mariota. They were willing to give just about anything to the Titans so they could move up to the number two spot in the 2015 draft. The Titans did not bite. They stuck to their draft assessments and picked Mariota. From all appearances, they chose wisely. Mariota has done nothing but impress in his time in Tennessee. He looks like a franchise quarterback on and off the field. He is better in the pocket than anyone could have hoped and his athleticism and speed make him a dangerous player outside of it. He is a dream for any coaching staff.

Due to this, the Titans do not need to worry about the quarterback position, hopefully for a very long time. They have their guy. This is one of the primary reasons the blockbuster trade with the Los Angeles Rams was even possible. If the Titans were in the market for a franchise quarterback, there is very little chance they trade out of the number one spot in the 2016 draft. But due to Webster and Whisenhunt sticking to their guns and taking Marcus Mariota

last year, that allowed new Titans' general manager Jon Robinson to work some magic and make a deal that will likely improve the team in the coming years.

So for that and only that, thank you, Ken Whisenhunt and Ruston Webster.