

Los Angeles Rams

2017 Record: 11-5	Total DVOA: 27.7% (2nd)	2018 Mean Projection: 9.5 wins	On the Clock (0-4): 3%
Pythagorean Wins: 11.6 (5th)	Offense: 11.1% (6th)	Postseason Odds: 58.9%	Mediocrity (5-7): 18%
Snap-Weighted Age: 25.8 (31st)	Defense: -9.7% (6th)	Super Bowl Odds: 13.5%	Playoff Contender (8-10): 42%
Average Opponent: -0.4% (18th)	Special Teams: 6.8% (2nd)	Proj. Avg. Opponent: 0.2% (13th)	Super Bowl Contender (11+): 37%
2017: The greatest year-over-year improvement in modern NFL history.			
2018: Beware the Plexiglass my son: the jaws that bite, the claws that catch.			

It was the story of a young *wunderkind* and his wise old mentor, riding out west to earn their fortune. It was the story of a rag-tag group, beaten into despondency after years of obeying the whims of a cruel, mustachioed dictator. Together, they managed to silence all the doubters and haters out there, and ride into the sunset of ... uh, a wild-card playoff loss. OK, they may need to work on their feel-good endings a tad, but the best story to come out of Hollywood in 2017 was the Los Angeles Rams.

Our final projections last season had the Rams 13th in DVOA, raising some skeptical eyebrows (even among the Football Outsiders staff, if we're being honest). We predicted a significant step forward on defense with Wade Phillips working his typical first-year magic, and we knew that their special teams would remain special. On offense, however, we were more skeptical that Sean McVay could dig the Rams out of their massive offensive hole in his first year as head coach.

The Rams' chapter from *Football Outsiders Almanac 2017* was filled with hedges—phrases like “if [Jared] Goff can just be a normal level of bad” and “it would be nearly impossible for the offense to be worse in 2017 than it was in 2016.” Talk about damning with faint praise. This was a team that hadn't seen a winning season in 14 years; one that hadn't put together a competent offense since Marc Bulger was throwing to Torry Holt half a continent away. The Rams couldn't live up to our fancy-schmancy model's projections, right?

To be fair, they didn't live up to them. They blew right past them.

The Rams jumped 56.3% in DVOA and 48.9% in offensive DVOA. Those are both the second-highest increases in DVOA history, going back to 1986—and both would have been first if the Rams had not rested their starters in a meaningless Week 17 game (Table 1). They scored an additional 15.9 points per game, the biggest year-over-year increase since the 1950 New York Yanks. They were the only team to go from last to first in points scored in a single season in the Super Bowl era. There aren't enough superlatives to describe that turnaround.

Jared Goff's turnaround—his 98.8% improvement in passing DVOA nearly doubles the previous season-over-season record—was equally astounding. Part of that was Goff's natural talent showing through; the Rams traded up to get him in 2016 because of his potential, and there were reasonable expectations that he'd do better than his baseline of “literally

the worst passing DVOA we've ever recorded.” A larger part likely comes from having a functioning offensive line in front of him, as the Rams rose from 29th to ninth in adjusted sack rate.

But the largest part of his improvement came from being placed in McVay's scheme. He helped simplify Goff's reads by having the team hurry to the line, using the extra time before the mandatory helmet radio cutoff to help communicate what the defense was doing and take some of the pre-snap computational load off of Goff's shoulders. McVay's system also places great emphasis on pre-snap motion, tight spacing of receivers and effective route combinations, forcing defenders to tip their hands early and providing natural bumps, picks, and screens to make the quarterback's life that much easier.

This revitalized passing game forced opposing defenses to put more defenders in pass coverage; the Rams saw an average of just 6.12 defenders in the box (26th in the NFL) despite sitting on some heavy leads. Combined with the aforementioned improved offensive line, that helped produce a bounce-back season from running back Todd Gurley. After sputtering as a sophomore in 2016, Gurley had more than 2,000 yards from scrimmage and earned MVP consideration.

With all that success, expectations in Los Angeles are high—which brings us to this year's forecast. Their overall projection is still high, but their mean offensive projection lin-

Table 1. Biggest Year-to-Year Improvement in Total DVOA, 1986-2017

Year	Team	DVOA	Improve	W-L	DVOA Y+1	W-L Y+1
2013	KC	17.5%	57.6%	11-5	10.4%	9-7
2017	LAR	27.7%	56.3%	11-5	--	--
2010	DET	-1.1%	50.5%	6-10	10.1%	10-6
2012	DEN	36.5%	48.3%	13-3	32.7%	13-3
1999	STL	34.0%	43.8%	13-3	11.2%	10-6
2012	SEA	38.7%	40.2%	11-5	40.0%	13-3
1987	IND	9.5%*	39.9%	7-5*	1.1%	9-7
1999	OAK	21.2%	39.5%	8-8	20.8%	12-4
2000	NO	-0.9%	39.4%	10-6	-8.7%	7-9
2004	PIT	37.6%	39.1%	15-1	27.2%	11-5
2004	BUF	31.3%	38.7%	9-7	-17.8%	5-11
2008	CAR	18.0%	38.6%	12-4	7.1%	8-8

*Not including strike games.

2018 Rams Schedule					
Week	Opp.	Week	Opp.	Week	Opp.
1	at OAK (Mon.)	7	at SF	13	at DET
2	ARI	8	GB	14	at CHI
3	LAC	9	at NO	15	PHI
4	MIN (Thu.)	10	SEA	16	at ARI
5	at SEA	11	KC (Mon./Mex.)	17	SF
6	at DEN	12	BYE		

gers down near the league average, despite all that progress from last season. To explain why, we need to talk about the Plexiglass Principle.

First coined by famed baseball stats guru Bill James, the Plexiglass Principle states that teams which significantly improve (or decline) in one season have a tendency to relapse or bounce back in the next. It's counterintuitive at first glance. Isn't a team that took big strides in one year on a path to continue moving forward? The data, however, shows a clear and statistically significant trend (Table 2).

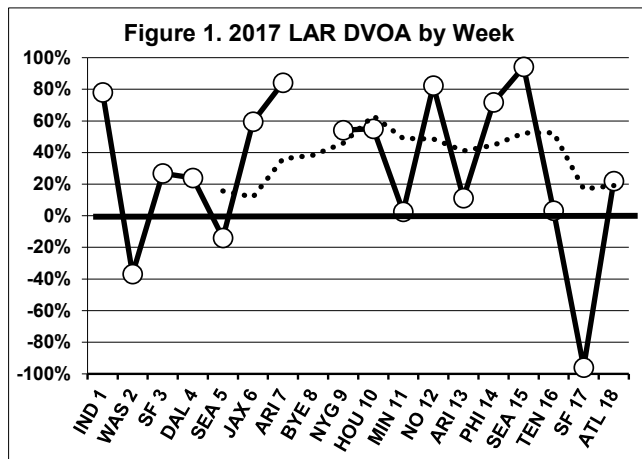
Table 2. Plexiglass Bounces, 1987-2016

DVOA Change	Teams	DVOA Change Y+1	Win Change Y+1	Pct of Teams Improving	Pct of Teams Declining
+30% or better	42	-9.1%	-1.2	26.2%	73.8%
+20% to +30%	81	-9.9%	-1.8	27.2%	72.8%
+10% to +20%	166	-5.9%	-1.0	36.1%	63.9%
0% to +10%	164	-0.5%	+0.2	46.3%	53.7%
-10% to 0%	199	+0.9%	+0.4	50.8%	49.2%
-20% to -10%	133	+4.1%	+0.2	60.9%	39.1%
-30% to -20%	81	+10.9%	+2.3	76.5%	23.5%
-30% or worse	47	+14.3%	+2.2	83.0%	17.0%

This shouldn't be conflated with simple regression to the mean, either. It's not a case of teams just being unable to reproduce a great season due to teams tending to drift towards .500. Teams in the "20/20 club"—with at least a 20.0% DVOA and a 20-point improvement from the year before—drop an average of 5.2 points more than your average over-20.0% DVOA squad. When teams smack into that Plexiglass ceiling, they suffer something of a hangover the next season.

So, what's going on here? The important thing to remember is that progress is generally slow and gradual—personnel changes and standard player development tend to not produce large season-to-season fluctuations. All things being equal, you should not expect a team's talent to suddenly change drastically in one direction or the other—and such a one-season jump likely indicates that a significant chunk of luck was involved, on top of any sustainable on-field gains. That doesn't mean that the underlying talent level *didn't* improve, just that at least some of the huge gains made can generally be chalked up to the randomness present in a 16-game sample size.

2017 saw quite a few teams make significant jumps and bump into Plexiglass territory. Five teams saw their DVOA



jump at least 20 points between 2016 and 2017, and three of them join the 20/20 club, including the Vikings and Saints. The Rams' massive jump laps the field and then some, however, making them the Plexiglass poster boys for 2018.

The 2018 Rams will be treading on rarely-traveled ground. They had a DVOA above 20.0%, a feat matched by just 137 (out of 918) teams from 1987 to 2016. They got there despite having a negative DVOA the year prior, which shrinks that pool to just 25 teams. And they're trying to improve yet *again* this season. Only four teams in our database have managed to do that: the 2003 Chiefs, 2004 Colts, 2009 Ravens and 2013 Seahawks. For every success story, there are five or six teams that ended up backsliding the next year, and about 40 percent fell right back to where they started, erasing essentially all of their gains from the year prior (most recently, the 2016 Panthers).

This is usually the point where fans go "well, *our* team is different, because of *reasons*," and we smile and nod and mark them down for an 8-8 season anyway, tsking about rose-colored glasses and confirmation bias and things of that nature. Yet the Rams actually have good, serious reasons to believe they can avoid regression, or at least limit its effects, so it's worth looking at them more seriously.

Go back to the four teams that the Rams are trying to emulate, and you'll find some commonalities. Three of the four had new head coaches—John Harbaugh was in his first year with the Ravens, while Dick Vermeil and Tony Dungy were entering their sophomore years in Kansas City and Indianapolis when they had their big turnarounds. The odd one out is Pete Carroll, who didn't see his huge turnaround until his third season in Seattle. Extend your list to look at teams that stayed within 10.0% DVOA of their big turnaround years, and you can add Jon Gruden coming to Oakland (uh, the first time) and John Fox taking over in Denver.

It makes a lot of sense on paper. A team's struggles often are caused by previous administrations doing a poor job in both talent acquisition and optimization, bringing bad players onto the team and not getting the most out of the talent available once it's there. The gap in quality between Jeff Fisher and Sean McVay cannot be overstated. We mentioned earlier that

Goff had the greatest single-season turnaround for any quarterback we've ever measured. Well, the sixth-greatest turnaround ever belongs to Goff's colleague on the 2016 Rams, Case Keenum, who blew up with Minnesota last year. Add in Nick Foles' career rejuvenation since leaving the Rams, and Sam Bradford's performance (when healthy) with the Eagles and Vikings, and it becomes pretty clear—the best career move a young quarterback can make is getting as far away from Fisher as physically possible.

It's not only issues of play calling or strategy that improve when you bid farewell to the all-time leader in losses as a head coach. Bringing in a new regime usually brings with it a spring cleaning of the roster. Failed projects, draft picks who never quite clicked, and players optimized for a scheme that wasn't working are swept aside, replaced with players who better fit the new coach's plans. The Rams were no exception. As Chase Stuart at Football Perspective first noted, 35 percent of their starts last season came from players who were not on the active roster in 2016.

So, it's not that the Rams' offensive line suddenly started playing better; it's the additions of Andrew Whitworth and John Sullivan that improved Los Angeles' blocking. It's not that Rams receivers suddenly learned how to catch; it's Cooper Kupp, Sammy Watkins, and Robert Woods replacing less successful and less talented players. It makes sense that an improvement caused by replacing bad players with better ones is more sustainable than bad players suddenly taking an uncharacteristic step forward.

It also would seem to make sense that upgrading at the most important position would produce the largest gains. Once again, three of our four examples had recent changes at quarterback. Russell Wilson and Joe Flacco were rookie starters when their teams took huge jumps, and Trent Green was in his second season replacing Elvis Grbac when the Chiefs rapidly improved. Again, it seems logical that offenses that have recently replaced their quarterbacks would achieve more “real” gains than an offense that stuck with the same personnel.

Do these logical inferences hold up? Are Sean McVay and Jared Goff reason enough to believe the Rams will buck Plexiglass history? To find out, we took every team that saw at least a 20.0% DVOA increase and checked if they had a coach or quarterback in their first or second year with the team (Table 3). While all sets of teams declined, the franchises who had made major personnel changes were more likely to hold on to more of their gains.

It's important to remember, of course, that a lot of coaches have been hailed as saviors in one season before their special sauce wore off. Mike Mularkey in Tennessee, Jack Del Rio in Oakland, and Chip Kelly in Philadelphia all had great debuts, only to have their luster wear off quickly. None are still employed. Quarterbacks such as Christian Ponder, Josh Freeman, and Matt Cassel have looked like players around whom a team could build, only to quickly fall off. That being said, the fact that the Rams' sudden boost coincided with a significant regime change increases their odds of keeping that momentum going into 2018.

Also on their side going forward are their offseason moves.

Table 3. 20.0%+ DVOA Increases, 1986-2016, With or Without Major Changes

Set	Teams	DVOA Change Y+1	Win Change Y+1	Pct of Teams Improving	Pct of Teams Declining
All Teams	123	-9.6%	-1.5	26.8%	73.2%
New Coach	65	-5.2%	-0.7	38.5%	61.5%
No New Coach	58	-14.5%	-2.5	13.8%	86.2%
New QB	68	-6.8%	-1.2	29.4%	70.6%
No New QB	55	-13.0%	-2.0	23.6%	76.4%
Both	46	-4.8%	-0.8	34.8%	65.2%
Neither	36	-16.6%	-2.7	11.1%	88.9%

It's easy to imagine a franchise being satisfied with their first winning season in more than a decade and looking to simply consolidate their gains and limit turnover as they try to repeat. Not the Rams, however, whose offseason is the most remarkable we've seen in nearly a generation.

Having a quality quarterback on a rookie deal is a humongous advantage under the current CBA. Just in the division alone, Jimmy Garoppolo counts \$37 million against the 49ers' cap, while Russell Wilson will cost the Seahawks nearly \$24 million. Jared Goff ranks 27th in cap hit among quarterbacks this season, at a mere \$7.6 million. That frees up gobs of extra cap space to work with, allowing the Rams to bring in more expensive veterans. We've seen other teams take advantage of this in the past, but the Rams have taken it to a whole other level.

With the extra space provided in part by rookie contracts for Goff, Todd Gurley, and Aaron Donald, the Rams were able to bring in four All-Pro-caliber players this offseason. They traded for defensive Marcus Peters and Aqib Talib, two of the top corners in the league. They signed Ndamukong Suh in free agency, pairing him with Donald to create an interior line duo that had 68.5 pass pressures in 2017. This defensive trio will help compensate for a less impressive collection of edge rushers, as you don't need top-flight talent there if nobody can get open and the interior offensive line is buckling. The Rams also traded for Brandin Cooks, who has put up three seasons with at least 1,000 receiving yards and seven receiving touchdowns all before turning 25. He fits better in McVay's offense than Sammy Watkins did, with greater speed forcing safeties to stay deep to prevent the home run ball. Put it all together, and you have one heck of a haul.

All four players have put up an Approximate Value (Pro Football Reference's metric that puts all players on a single scale) of 12 or higher in one of the last two seasons. The last team to bring in four such players was the 1994 San Francisco 49ers, who essentially rented a defense with Deion Sanders, Richard Dent, Rickey Jackson, and Ken Norton Jr. They went on to win Super Bowl XXIX, and while most of those players were gone after a season or two and the team eventually collapsed under the weight of its salary cap obligations, banners fly forever.

What won't fly forever, however, is keeping this much talent under the salary cap. Cooks and Suh are free agents in

2019, as are LaMarcus Joyner, Rodger Saffold, Rob Havenstein, and Jamon Brown. Aaron Donald will join them assuming his 2018 holdout doesn't last as long as his 2017 holdout (he must report by August 11 to be an unrestricted free agent in 2019). Todd Gurley has a major payday coming up in the not too distant future. Eventually, the lack of high draft picks and cheap players on rookie contracts will come back to hurt Los Angeles; various trades have meant they have had no first-round picks in either 2017 or 2018, and just one second-round pick between 2016 and 2019. Tough decisions will need to be made, even with significant cap room to work with in 2019 and 2020.

That, however, sounds like a problem for *future* Los Angeles to handle. The Rams have gone all-in on maximizing their available talent in this brief window of salary-cap flexibility to an extent we haven't seen before. They're essentially choosing to bypass the developmental process and plug in established veterans at their most important positions, in exchange for a more difficult roster picture in the future. This is exciting! If this works, this could be the model for future teams to follow, trading away gobs of picks to surround promising rookie quarterbacks with a veritable who's who of established veterans.

It could also backfire horrendously, which is exciting in and of itself. Not every free-agency splurge gives you championship gold like the 1994 49ers. We've seen teams go around collecting established veterans before, with less than stellar results. The 2011 Eagles "Dream Team" is the canonical example, with the additions of Jason Babin, Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, Nnamdi Asomugha, and "the other" Steve Smith helping turn a 10-6 team into an 8-8 team, and then a 4-12 team the year after. There are always questions about fits in new schemes and whether or not past success will translate into future success. The NFL isn't a game of *Madden*, where you can plug in superstars willy-nilly and have everything just sort of work out; that's what the NBA is for. When you bring in a new player, no matter how good they are, there are issues of scheme, fit, and chemistry that need to be addressed in order for these superstar acquisitions to continue to perform at a high level. For as good as Los Angeles' new foursome have been, there's every chance that they'll fail to live up to those expectations in blue and white (and random splotches of gold).

Take Suh, for example. Suh is almost assuredly going to be an upgrade over the likes of Morgan Fox, Ethan Westbrooks, and Tyrann Walker; you just have to watch film for ten minutes to realize that. On passing downs, having Suh and Donald at the 3-tech charging at quarterbacks is going to be an interior pass rush that no other team in the league can match. But the Rams' defensive weakness last year was in their *rush* defense, where they ranked 22nd in DVOA, and that gets a little more interesting.

Suh is switching fronts, becoming a nose tackle in Los Angeles' 3-4. Wade Phillips' 3-4 front isn't your typical 3-4 front; it's a one-gap scheme that shares many similarities with a standard 4-3 front. Suh also does have experience as a 1- and 0-tech, as both the Lions and Dolphins frequently shifted their

lines around, so it's not like Phillips is asking Suh to something entirely unfamiliar and new. However, the fact remains that the majority of both Suh's snaps and production in terms of sacks, hurries and, yes, run defeats throughout his career have come in the B-gap as a 3- or 4-tech player. Suh is not a double-team expert, and while Phillips' scheme won't be asking him to two-gap as if he were Damon Harrison, it is a different role than he has been asked to play throughout his career.

Phillips is going to put Suh into positions where he can be as explosive as possible, shading him off to one side and using twists and stunts to give him more direct paths to the ball carrier. Because Suh won't be two-gapping all that much, the Rams are going to be relying on their linebackers to step up and make a lot of plays, filling in the other gap that the nose tackle would be responsible for in a more traditional 3-4 front. The linebacking corps didn't exactly excel at that last season, and things may be even worse now with Alec Ogletree traded out of town.

Good players and good coaches can make these transitions work. We're not trying to say that Suh will not be an overall net gain in run defense—and, if for some reason he isn't, the Rams have options to shift players around to cover for some of those issues. We're just saying that sometimes, transitions look a little cleaner on paper than they end up looking on the field.

This isn't a Suh-specific argument either. You could raise concerns about Talib's age, as he turned 32 in February. You could raise concerns about Peters' history of wearing out his welcome at both the University of Washington and in Kansas City. You could raise concerns about Cooks' history as something of a boom-or-bust receiver and acknowledge that as improved as Goff was last season, Cooks is downgrading from Tom Brady and Drew Brees. Again, none of these acquisitions are bad and all will more likely than not be improvements over what the Rams had last year. It's just that there are complexities when integrating new players—even new superstars—into new roles on a new team. This is one significant reason why the offseason champs don't always look the best when everyone gets on the field.

And that's assuming that everyone *stays* on the field. If there's one big red flashing warning light pointing to regression for the Rams, it's with their injury luck.

For the second year in a row, the Rams finished tops in adjusted games lost, with just 15.6 AGL. This included just 3.6 AGL on offense, a ridiculously small number. It's a lot easier to run a complicated offensive scheme when you don't have to worry about giving extra help to backup linemen!

There is very little year-to-year correlation in AGL, particularly when it comes to keeping AGL low. The last team to rank in the top five in AGL for three straight years was the 2007-2009 Tennessee Titans. No team has demonstrated a consistent ability to avoid injuries, and there's no reason to believe that the Rams will continue to lead the league in health just because they did so the last two seasons. After all, Kayvon Webster's Achilles could have ruptured just as easily in Week 2 as in Week 14, and neither Michael Brockers' post-

season MCL tear nor Dominique Easley's preseason ACL tear counted against Los Angeles in terms of AGL. They were fortunate that their most significant injuries either happened early enough that they were able to plan for them in preseason, or late enough that they didn't impact the majority of the 2017 season.

We're not saying the Rams are due for a wave of injuries, because that's not how statistics work. It's likely, however, that the Rams' injury luck will not continue. We don't know how McVay will react to being required to replace injured players, because he has never really had to do it. It's possible the next man up will step in and everything will keep running smoothly, but it's those kinds of shifts in luck that help push Plexiglass teams down in their next seasons. You can't count on everything going perfectly two years in a row.

You can find plenty of other areas for potential regression as well, especially on offense. The Rams had 27 drives start in opposing territory, the most in the league last season. Fifteen of those resulted in touchdowns. Their average starting field position was the 32.2, second-best in the league. While those numbers are certainly helped by a strong defense and great special teams, it's likely that both numbers will fall back to the pack some in 2018, resulting in longer fields for the offense. That field position was helped by the fact they were ninth in turnover differential, a stat that's markedly inconsistent from year to year. Goff's 1.5 percent interception rate from a year ago is almost certainly unsustainable, and the Rams were fortunate enough to recover roughly 60 percent of the fumbles they forced on defense a year ago. That turnover differential

is likely coming down. They're projected to face a tougher schedule in 2018, and everyone will have a full year of film of McVay's offense to break down. The road will be tougher in 2018, and it remains to be seen how the Rams will respond.

The Rams will likely be up to the task. The Rams will likely not be as good this season. These aren't contradictory statements.

Expecting a repeat of 2017, especially on offense, is probably too much to ask. It was a season where nearly everything that could have gone well did, in terms of injuries and turnovers and player development. Some of that is bound to come crashing down to Earth. Goff isn't the same quarterback who explored new levels of terribleness as a rookie, but it remains to be seen if he can stick in the top 10 in DVOA, especially if other teams start to figure out McVay's offense. Los Angeles is likely to face more adversity going forward, and that's going to take its toll on their offensive production.

But we still have the Rams with the top defensive projection in the league. We have them with top-three special teams. They have the Coach of the Year ready to make tweaks and adjustments and get his team to rise to the task. With all that in mind, we basically come to the same conclusion as last year—if Goff and the offense can be above average, the Rams will be a Super Bowl contender.

Given what 2017 looked like, there's every reason for optimism. But then again, Hollywood sequels are always a little bit rougher than the originals, aren't they?

Bryan Knowles

2017 Rams Stats by Week

Wk	vs.	W-L	PF	PA	YDF	YDA	TO	Total	Off	Def	ST
1	IND	W	46	9	373	225	+2	78%	9%	-58%	11%
2	WAS	L	20	27	332	385	-2	-37%	-15%	19%	-3%
3	at SF	W	41	39	418	421	0	27%	31%	-3%	-7%
4	at DAL	W	35	30	412	440	+2	24%	18%	13%	18%
5	SEA	L	10	16	375	241	-3	-14%	-35%	-36%	-16%
6	at JAX	W	27	17	249	389	0	60%	11%	-23%	26%
7	ARI	W	33	0	425	193	+1	84%	23%	-50%	11%
8	BYE										
9	at NYG	W	51	17	473	319	+3	54%	41%	1%	14%
10	HOU	W	33	7	443	283	+4	55%	8%	-40%	8%
11	at MIN	L	7	24	254	451	-1	2%	16%	17%	3%
12	NO	W	26	20	415	346	-1	82%	54%	-10%	19%
13	at ARI	W	32	16	303	312	+1	11%	-4%	1%	16%
14	PHI	L	35	43	307	455	-1	72%	65%	-3%	4%
15	at SEA	W	42	7	352	149	+1	94%	3%	-64%	27%
16	at TEN	W	27	23	402	366	0	3%	20%	-8%	-25%
17	SF	L	13	34	251	461	+1	-96%	-65%	35%	4%
18	ATL	L	13	26	361	322	-2	22%	16%	-4%	2%

Trends and Splits

	Offense	Rank	Defense	Rank
Total DVOA	11.1%	6	-9.8%	6
Unadjusted VOA	9.7%	8	-8.7%	6
Weighted Trend	12.7%	5	-9.0%	8
Variance	10.1%	27	8.5%	30
Average Opponent	-2.6%	5	-1.9%	24
Passing	31.4%	7	-14.3%	3
Rushing	0.3%	10	-4.1%	21
First Down	6.4%	9	-15.4%	3
Second Down	7.9%	10	-11.5%	4
Third Down	25.6%	2	3.2%	17
First Half	15.8%	5	-10.8%	5
Second Half	6.1%	14	-8.5%	8
Red Zone	28.5%	2	-3.1%	13
Late and Close	1.3%	15	-13.2%	9

Five-Year Performance

Year	W-L	Pyth W	Est W	PF	PA	TO	Total	Rk	Off	Rk	Def	Rk	ST	Rk	Off AGL	Rk	Def AGL	Rk	Off Age	Rk	Def Age	Rk	ST Age	Rk
2013	7-9	7.6	7.8	348	364	+8	2.4%	14	-9.5%	22	-5.7%	11	6.3%	4	26.1	10	21.4	10	26.1	28	25.0	31	25.0	30
2014	6-10	7.1	6.1	324	354	-2	-3.8%	18	-11.1%	25	-3.8%	9	3.5%	7	37.6	21	26.5	7	26.5	23	25.0	32	25.2	32
2015	7-9	6.5	7.9	280	330	+5	-2.2%	16	-15.0%	29	-10.5%	7	2.4%	7	32.3	16	48.0	29	25.2	32	26.1	25	24.9	32
2016	4-12	3.3	4.6	224	394	-11	-28.6%	30	-37.8%	32	-2.0%	15	7.1%	3	7.7	1	21.3	8	25.5	32	26.0	26	25.4	29
2017	11-5	11.6	11.3	478	329	+7	27.7%	2	11.1%	6	-9.8%	6	6.8%	2	3.6	1	12.0	6	26.0	31	26.0	19	25.0	31

2017 Performance Based on Most Common Personnel Groups

LAR Offense					LAR Offense vs. Opponents					LAR Defense				LAR Defense vs. Opponents			
Pers	Freq	Yds	DVOA	Run%	Pers	Freq	Yds	DVOA	Run%	Pers	Freq	Yds	DVOA	Pers	Freq	Yds	DVOA
11	81%	6.3	25.5%	38%	Base	15%	6.0	14.5%	61%	Base	58%	5.4	-9.3%	11	45%	5.5	-8.6%
12	12%	6.1	-1.2%	65%	Nickel	77%	5.9	15.1%	43%	Nickel	37%	5.5	-12.5%	12	28%	5.5	-15.1%
01	5%	3.3	-48.0%	75%	Dime+	8%	7.3	48.5%	10%	Dime+	2%	4.8	-10.2%	21	10%	6.0	-10.7%
13	1%	1.8	-78.0%	75%	Big	1%	4.0	-22.4%	80%	Big	2%	5.5	0.1%	10	6%	6.3	-2.7%
10	1%	0.9	-87.1%	0%										13	5%	3.5	-13.5%

Strategic Tendencies

Run/Pass	Rk	Formation	Rk	Pass Rush	Rk	Secondary	Rk	Strategy	Rk
Runs, first half	36% 28	Form: Single Back	92% 2	Rush 3	4.9% 22	4 DB	58% 2	Play action	29% 2
Runs, first down	53% 11	Form: Empty Back	4% 30	Rush 4	61.1% 19	5 DB	37% 25	Avg Box (Off)	6.12 26
Runs, second-long	40% 6	Pers: 3+ WR	87% 1	Rush 5	27.4% 4	6+ DB	2% 23	Avg Box (Def)	6.41 3
Runs, power sit.	69% 5	Pers: 2+ TE/6+ OL	13% 32	Rush 6+	6.6% 13	CB by Sides	63% 27	Offensive Pace	27.90 1
Runs, behind 2H	38% 1	Pers: 6+ OL	2% 24	Int DL Sacks	46.9% 2	S/CB Cover Ratio	28% 15	Defensive Pace	30.22 10
Pass, ahead 2H	42% 25	Shotgun/Pistol	43% 31	Second Level Sacks	6.3% 32	DB Blitz	5% 28	Go for it on 4th	1.14 9

Although the Vikings used play-action slightly more often overall, the Rams were the only team to use play-action fakes on more than half of first-down passes: 57 percent, to be exact. ☹️ The Rams ran 40 percent of the time when they had three or more wide receivers on the field, the highest figure in the league. ☹️ Los Angeles led the NFL with 11.4 average yards after the catch on passes behind the line of scrimmage and 6.6 average YAC overall. They were one of only two teams to have a higher DVOA on passes behind the line of scrimmage (70.0%) than beyond it (64.1%). Indianapolis was the other. (FYI, these DVOA ratings are ridiculously high in part because sacks and a number of incompletes such as throwaways are not included.) ☹️ A big part of that first number comes from a red-hot screen game. On wide receiver screens, the Rams led the NFL with 133.0% DVOA and were fifth with 7.3 yards per pass. On running back screens, the Rams led the NFL with 11.8 yards per pass and were tied for seventh with 64.9% DVOA. ☹️ The Rams picked up Wade Phillips' love of good old-fashioned base defense, using just four defensive backs roughly three times as often as they did in 2016. The Rams were one of only three teams to use base defense more often than they used nickel or dime. (The others were Cleveland and, just barely, Carolina.) The Rams also followed Phillips' philosophy of rarely blitzing defensive backs after the Rams had ranked first or second in DB blitzes from 2014 to 2016. ☹️ Despite having one of the top defenses in the league, Los Angeles was near the bottom (30th) by forcing a three-and-out on just 18.9 percent of drives. ☹️ Demonstrating the effect of running out a lead, the Rams had the fastest pace in the league in the first half of games (one play each 25.4 seconds) and the next-to-slowest pace in the second half (one play each 30.0 seconds). ☹️ The Rams led the NFL with 34 penalties on special teams, with 25 of those coming on punts.

Passing

Player	DYAR	DVOA	Plays	NtYds	Avg	YAC	C%	TD	Int
J.Goff	1125	24.0%	500	3619	7.2	6.8	62.6%	28	7
S.Mannion	-141	-66.6%	40	162	4.1	3.3	59.5%	0	0

Receiving

Player	DYAR	DVOA	Plays	Ctch	Yds	Y/C	YAC	TD	C%
C.Kupp	272	24.8%	92	60	869	14.5	6.0	5	65%
R.Woods	172	13.4%	85	56	781	13.9	5.2	5	66%
S.Watkins*	216	24.1%	70	39	593	15.2	4.7	8	56%
T.Austin*	-99	-68.2%	24	15	56	3.7	6.4	0	63%
J.Reynolds	-35	-31.0%	24	11	104	9.5	3.1	1	46%
P.Cooper	-53	-49.2%	19	11	84	7.6	4.9	0	58%
M.Thomas	10	4.5%	7	5	93	18.6	4.4	0	71%
B.Cooks	258	14.9%	114	65	1082	16.6	3.5	7	57%
T.Higbee	-9	-10.4%	45	25	295	11.8	3.4	1	56%
G.Everett	-20	-17.0%	32	16	244	15.3	6.8	2	50%
D.Carrier*	5	-0.8%	11	8	71	8.9	6.3	0	73%
T.Gurley	236	35.9%	87	64	788	12.3	12.3	6	74%
M.Brown	-7	-24.6%	11	9	53	5.9	6.6	0	82%

Rushing

Player	DYAR	DVOA	Plays	Yds	Avg	TD	Fum	Suc
T.Gurley	268	13.9%	279	1305	4.7	13	5	53%
M.Brown	4	-6.9%	63	246	3.9	1	1	33%
T.Austin*	97	-6.0%	59	270	4.6	1	0	-
J.Goff	-6	-20.6%	14	68	4.9	1	1	-
L.Dunbar*	24	43.6%	11	51	4.6	1	0	55%
B.Cooks	6	-28.1%	9	40	4.4	0	0	-

Offensive Line

Player	Pos	Age	GS	Snaps	Pen	Sk	Pass	Run	Player	Pos	Age	GS	Snaps	Pen	Sk	Pass	Run
Jamon Brown	RG	25	16/16	1037	6	1.0	10	8	Andrew Whitworth	LT	37	15/15	922	5	5.0	16	9
Rob Havenstein	RT	26	15/15	972	8	5.0	18	7	John Sullivan	C	33	15/15	866	2	1.0	6	5
Rodger Saffold	LG	30	15/15	950	2	2.0	10	9	Austin Blythe	C	26	16/1	197	1	0.5	4	9

Year	Yards	ALY	Rank	Power	Rank	Stuff	Rank	2nd Lev	Rank	Open Field	Rank	Sacks	ASR	Rank	Press	Rank	F-Start	Cont.
2015	4.24	3.88	24	64%	20	23%	28	1.03	24	1.17	3	18	3.5%	1	27.0%	20	16	25
2016	3.23	3.66	29	61%	16	22%	28	0.89	31	0.30	30	49	8.1%	29	28.0%	21	20	29
2017	4.53	4.70	3	50%	29	22%	23	1.42	1	0.82	11	28	5.6%	9	29.8%	12	20	42
2017 ALY by direction:				Left End: 3.58 (23)			Left Tackle: 6.18 (1)			Mid/Guard: 4.80 (3)			Right Tackle: 4.11 (13)			Right End: 4.61 (6)		

The Rams had a perfect offensive line continuity score through Week 16—the same five starters week in and week out. That goes a long way to explaining the consistency and chemistry the line was able to develop. We already know it won't happen again in 2018, with right guard Jamon Brown earning a substance-abuse suspension for the first two games of the year. It's difficult to overstate how important adding Andrew Whitworth was to the Rams' line. The Rams jumped from 4.42 to 6.18 adjusted line yards running off left tackle, tops in the league. Whitworth only allowed 1.5 fewer sacks than Greg Robinson had the year before and ranked roughly the same in blown blocks, but it was the quality of his successes that really stood out. Whitworth didn't just stop people; he took them out of the play. Whitworth also only drew five penalty flags last season. Robinson had twice as many holding calls alone in 2016. Whitworth got all the press but adding veteran John Sullivan in the center of the line was nearly as important. Sullivan had just 11 blown blocks all year, and helped the Rams rank third in Adjusted Line Yards up the middle (4.80). Rodger Saffold looked like an entirely different player compared to the year before. He had the most blown blocks of any left guard two years ago but was middle-of-the-pack in 2017. There was talk of swapping Brown and right tackle Rob Havenstein during training camp last season, but Brown proved just too slow to handle speedy edge rushers. Havenstein actually had a slightly better snaps-per-blown-block rate than Whitworth (35.6 to 34.0), so leaving him at tackle worked out all right. Whitworth and Sullivan are both on the wrong side of 30, while the other three starters are all free agents after 2018. That's why the Rams' first two draft picks were tackle Joseph Noteboom (TCU) and center Brian Allen (Michigan State). Noteboom's an athletic project; Allen's a high-effort grinder. Both will hopefully spend most of 2018 on the bench.

Defensive Front Seven

Defensive Line	Age	Pos	Overall								vs. Run					Pass Rush			
			G	Snaps	Plays	TmPct	Rk	Stop	Dfts	BTKl	Runs	St%	Rk	RuYd	Rk	Sack	Hit	Hur	Dsrpt
Aaron Donald	27	DT	14	789	41	5.7%	31	37	19	4	29	86%	11	1.2	8	11.0	21	48.5	2
Michael Brockers	28	DT	16	729	58	7.1%	8	48	13	5	46	80%	31	2.0	39	4.0	4	14.0	5
Morgan Fox	24	DE	16	334	18	2.2%	--	14	3	3	14	71%	--	2.9	--	2.5	0	6.0	1
Ethan Westbrooks	28	DE	16	333	24	2.9%	--	21	8	2	18	83%	--	1.7	--	4.0	2	2.5	1
Tyrunn Walker*	28	DT	16	308	26	3.2%	--	21	5	3	18	83%	--	2.4	--	1.0	0	4.5	4
Tanzel Smart	24	DT	16	308	14	1.7%	--	12	0	2	11	91%	--	1.7	--	0.0	2	3.5	1
Ndamukong Suh	31	DT	16	883	50	6.5%	17	40	18	2	40	78%	44	1.6	22	4.5	10	20.5	3

Edge Rushers	Age	Pos	Overall								vs. Run					Pass Rush			
			G	Snaps	Plays	TmPct	Rk	Stop	Dfts	BTKl	Runs	St%	Rk	RuYd	Rk	Sack	Hit	Hur	Dsrpt
Connor Barwin*	32	OLB	14	658	33	4.6%	54	24	8	4	23	70%	67	3.4	83	5.0	8	18.5	0
Robert Quinn*	28	OLB	15	634	33	4.3%	61	24	17	5	16	56%	93	5.4	95	9.0	5	19.0	0
Matt Longacre	27	OLB	14	377	21	2.9%	87	18	8	1	14	86%	14	3.0	73	5.5	9	15.5	1
Samson Ebukam	23	OLB	16	351	22	2.7%	--	13	2	4	16	63%	--	4.2	--	2.0	2	7.0	0
Cory Littleton	25	OLB	16	279	35	4.3%	--	24	6	5	20	75%	--	4.0	--	1.0	2	2.5	1

Linebackers	Age	Pos	Overall								vs. Run					Pass Rush			vs. Pass						
			G	Snaps	Plays	TmPct	Rk	Stop	Dfts	BTKl	Runs	St%	Rk	RuYd	Rk	Sack	Hit	Hur	Tgts	Suc%	Rk	AdjYd	Rk	PD	Int
Alec Ogletree*	27	ILB	15	923	105	13.6%	30	63	15	19	58	59%	61	4.6	80	2.0	5	17.5	42	59%	13	7.0	45	5	1
Mark Barron	29	ILB	14	823	89	12.4%	41	49	18	12	51	67%	22	3.1	25	1.0	1	3.0	55	54%	25	7.3	49	5	3

Year	Yards	ALY	Rank	Power	Rank	Stuff	Rank	2nd Level	Rank	Open Field	Rank	Sacks	ASR	Rank	Press	Rank
2015	3.97	3.70	6	63%	14	24%	7	1.13	17	0.90	24	41	6.3%	17	28.3%	4
2016	3.99	3.43	1	64%	19	29%	1	1.10	11	1.04	30	31	5.0%	29	28.4%	11
2017	4.65	4.36	27	63%	16	18%	28	1.14	19	1.19	31	48	7.9%	5	31.5%	11

2017 ALY by direction: Left End: 4.29 (20) Left Tackle: 5.10 (29) Mid/Guard: 4.36 (22) Right Tackle: 4.22 (25) Right End: 3.25 (9)

In *FOA 2017*, we mentioned that Aaron Donald and Ndamukong Suh tied for the most defeats among interior linemen. They nearly pulled off the feat again in 2017—Suh was one defeat short. It remains to be seen how opposing guards and centers handle these two together; our best guess is “not well.” They won’t even get a break with the two rotating out; they were first and second in percentage of team snaps among defensive tackles last season. ☹ Donald also led all interior linemen in sacks, knockdowns, QB hits, and yards per play. If there’s anything he does “poorly,” it’s stop the run, where his 86 percent stop rate was only 10th in the league. So, you know, don’t bother giving him a massive extension or anything. ☹ Suh has more snaps in the past eight years than any other defensive lineman, but only three percent of them have come at nose tackle. Wade Phillips’ scheme is more similar to 4-3 fronts than most 3-4 defenses, and Suh should have plenty of one-gap opportunities. ☹ The shift to a 3-4 helped Michael Brockers, who recorded a career high in tackles. He tore his MCL in the wild-card loss to Atlanta but is expected back for the regular season. ☹ The projected starters at edge rusher, Matt Longacre and Samson Ebukam, have just 7.5 career sacks, all recorded last season. They each played about 350 snaps a year ago; they’ll be asked to handle double the workload in 2018. ☹ The lack of experience at the edge is a great opportunity for fifth-round pick Ogbornia Okoronkwo (Oklahoma). An offseason broken foot will slow his early development, but he’s an explosive, athletic pass-rusher who should see heavy sub-package work fairly early on in his career. ☹ Mark Barron was the third-most targeted linebacker in pass coverage in 2017. His speed makes him a useful coverage player, which is why the Rams ask him to do it so often. However, you’d expect a former safety to have a higher success rate than Barron did; he was firmly middle-of-the-pack. ☹ With Alec Ogletree gone, the second inside linebacker slot is an open battle. So far, Cory Littleton has taken the most advantage of the vacancy, immediately stepping in during OTAs and impressing the coaching staff. He was the first man up last year when Barron or Ogletree went down, and Sean McVay singled him out for praise on his communication abilities. He stopped short of saying Littleton has the job, however. Keep an eye on fifth-round pick Micah Kiser, a tackling machine with great run defense instincts. In three years as a starter at Virginia, Kiser had 397 combined tackles (including assists) and 33.5 tackles for loss. Bryce Hager or Ramik Wilson will also get consideration during training camp., This may be the most wide-open battle on the team. ☹ The Rams went heavy on the front seven with their limited draft picks. In addition to Okoronkwo and Kiser, they also took defensive end John Franklin-Myers from the FCS-level Stephen F. Austin Lumberjacks. The Rams will try him out at the 5-tech, where his 82-inch wingspan should be great for getting into passing lanes.

Defensive Secondary

Secondary	Age	Pos	Overall								vs. Run					vs. Pass									
			G	Snaps	Plays	TmPct	Rk	Stop	Dfts	BTKl	Runs	St%	Rk	RuYd	Rk	Tgts	Tgt%	Rk	Dist	Suc%	Rk	AdjYd	Rk	PD	Int
Trumaine Johnson*	28	CB	16	935	79	9.6%	23	32	18	7	14	36%	58	6.7	53	84	23.9%	66	13.6	45%	73	9.3	72	13	2
John Johnson	23	SS	16	718	82	10.0%	39	36	9	6	42	52%	17	5.9	34	41	15.3%	69	12.9	51%	41	6.0	15	11	1
Lamarcus Joyner	28	FS	12	688	57	9.3%	51	18	9	6	22	27%	63	10.6	74	25	9.5%	37	17.8	63%	6	5.8	10	9	3
Nickell Robey-Coleman	26	CB	15	655	54	7.0%	64	35	15	8	10	60%	15	5.5	29	55	22.3%	56	6.7	56%	14	6.7	20	10	2
Kayvon Webster*	27	CB	11	550	45	8.0%	48	19	7	3	7	57%	18	12.9	76	46	22.2%	54	12.1	53%	25	6.7	22	7	1
Cody Davis*	29	FS/SS	7	281	23	6.4%	--	9	3	3	12	25%	--	7.7	--	5	4.8%	--	12.3	93%	--	1.1	--	3	1
Troy Hill	27	CB	12	267	21	3.4%	--	12	4	7	4	50%	--	5.0	--	37	37.1%	--	12.1	61%	--	7.2	--	4	0
Marcus Peters	25	CB	14	967	55	7.7%	52	24	16	11	11	55%	25	5.9	41	73	20.2%	40	14.9	48%	59	7.9	44	9	5
Aqib Talib	32	CB	15	752	37	5.4%	75	14	6	2	8	38%	53	7.5	61	45	12.5%	3	8.8	55%	21	5.4	3	8	1

Year	Pass D Rank	vs. #1 WR	Rk	vs. #2 WR	Rk	vs. Other WR	Rk	WR Wide	Rk	WR Slot	Rk	vs. TE	Rk	vs. RB	Rk
2015	8	-26.4%	2	-19.1%	6	4.1%	16	--	--	--	--	-4.0%	16	-3.0%	13
2016	20	3.7%	21	-3.8%	11	17.8%	30	20.5%	31	-3.3%	11	-6.0%	10	-20.1%	6
2017	3	-5.4%	12	-24.8%	4	-16.8%	7	-10.4%	10	-16.0%	6	1.2%	19	-9.8%	9

Marcus Peters posted a 57 percent adjusted success rate as a rookie in 2015, followed by 54 percent in 2016. In 2017, Peters' adjusted success rate dipped to 48 percent and he recorded the fewest passes defended in his career. Peters is still a dominant player, but Kansas City's defensive devolution did not allow him to show it as often. When he is enabled to shine, few cornerbacks in recent history can rival Peters' knack for finding the ball. Since 2000, only three defensive backs have recorded at least 19 interceptions through their first three seasons: Ed Reed (21), Richard Sherman (20), and Peters (19). Just this past season, quality passers such as Phillip Rivers and Marcus Mariota fell victim to Peters' savvy for jumping routes on the far side of the field that most cornerbacks would not even dare attempt. Additionally, Peters has a combined 10 forced fumbles and fumble recoveries since 2015, a feat matched only by Josh Norman. 🍷 Aqib Talib's average depth of target dropped from the mid 11s to 8.8 last season, possibly a result of him playing off the ball more. Reuniting with Wade Phillips, expect Talib to go back to pressing at the line like he did in Denver in 2015 and 2016. 🍷 Amidst all the love for Talib and Peters, Nickell Robey-Coleman gets lost somewhat in the shuffle, but his 60 percent success rate was the third-highest among slot defenders in 2017. He benefitted enormously in the move from Buffalo's zone scheme to Los Angeles' man-to-man coverage. 🍷 It's safe to call Lamar Marcus Joyner's move from slot corner to moveable safety an unqualified success. He posted the best charting numbers of his career in a great example of how the proper scheme fit can allow players to blossom. 🍷 As a rookie, John Johnson took over the starting strong safety job in October and never looked back. He had the fifth-most passes defended among safeties despite playing about 300 fewer snaps than the rest of the top of the leaderboard. The Rams moved him all around the field, showing a surprising amount of versatility for a first-year player. When he's the weak link in your secondary, you have a special group.

Special Teams

Year	DVOA	Rank	FG/XP	Rank	Net Kick	Rank	Kick Ret	Rank	Net Punt	Rank	Punt Ret	Rank	Hidden	Rank
2015	2.4%	7	-6.7	30	2.5	9	4.0	7	10.4	5	1.6	13	1.0	14
2016	7.1%	3	3.8	9	4.0	8	1.3	11	29.2	1	-2.6	22	0.7	16
2017	6.8%	2	11.3	5	-0.3	19	9.2	2	10.3	3	3.7	7	40.6	1

The Rams lapped the rest of the league in our "hidden" special teams rating—40 points of value, when no one else was above 15. Some of this value wasn't actually all that hidden: three blocked punts, a blocked field goal, and a blocked extra point. Even without considering the blocked punts, however, the Rams finished in the bottom five in both gross punt value and gross kickoff value by opponents. And opponents were just 23-for-34 on field goals, with four misses on field goals of less than 40 yards and another two missed extra points on top of the block. 🍷 It's better to be lucky than good, but it's best to be both lucky *and* good. All four of Los Angeles' specialists—kicker Greg Zuerlein, punter Johnny Hekker, returner Pharoh Cooper, and long snapper Jake McQuaide—made the Pro Bowl. That's the first time in NFL history that has ever occurred. 🍷 Cooper averaged 12.5 yards per punt return after taking the role over in October. Tavon Austin's best year had him at just 11.4, plummeting all the way down to 4.4 last season. And the Rams got a pick for him! By Football Outsiders metrics, Cooper ranked second in punt return value (behind Detroit's Jamal Agnew) and third in kick return value (trailing Tyler Lockett and Alvin Kamara).