New York Giants

An important concept to remember when it comes to any sort of statistical or trend analysis is that correlation does not necessarily mean causation. Taken on the most literal level, it's painfully obvious. The fact that you spilled some mustard on your pants at lunch and then got a promotion later in the day does not mean that you should be liberally dousing yourself with Gulden's regularly. It gets trickier, though, when you notice results that would reasonably follow from an event. If that promotion came the day after you wore your suit to the office for the first time in a year, well, you might start dressing up for work every day.

With that idea in mind, we present the 2008 New York Giants. Before Plaxico Burress shot himself in the leg on an ill-fated night in November, the team was 10-1; afterwards, they went 3-3, including a playoff loss at home against the archrival Eagles. The correlation of the incident to the team's downswing in performance yielded a simple narrative: The Giants offense wasn't as good without Plaxico Burress, and it turned them into a totally different team.

That narrative is simply untrue.

The Giants' passing offense actually improved with Burress out of the lineup (Table 1). That analysis includes the Week 12 game against the Cardinals, in which Burress came out in the first quarter with a hamstring injury and didn't return, as well as the NFC

Divisional Round loss to the Eagles. Burress was also suspended for the Week 5 game against the Seahawks; if you include this 44-6 victory, the Burress-free passing game looks even more impressive. The running game declined some without the threat of Burress stretching the field to concern opposing safeties, but it wasn't enough to drag the offense down; the team's offensive DVOA was 20.6% with Burress in the lineup and 27.8% over the eight games he wasn't around.

Although the Giants scored 27.5 points per game with Burress in the lineup and 23.8 when he was sidelined (including the Cardinals and Seahawks games), they played a harder slate of defenses. The average defensive DVOA of the teams that faced them when they had Burress was -2.1%; without Burress, the average team they faced had a -5.9% defensive DVOA.

Instead, what drove the Giants' demise was the defense. Unless you want to pin the blame on Antonio Pierce's extracurricular issues related to the Burress incident, Burress had nothing to do with the decline. Instead, it was a regression in the team's sack rate that correlated well with the team's dip in performance, culminating in the playoff game versus the Eagles in which — despite playing behind an offensive line missing multiple starters — Donovan McNabb was not sacked once (although a hurry led to an intentional grounding penalty in the end zone). While Justin Tuck had 8.5

GIANTS SUMMARY

2008 Record: 12-4

Pythagorean Wins: 11.3 (4th)

DVOA: 27.0% (4th)

Offense: 23.7% (3rd)

Defense: -1.5% (8th)

Special Teams: 1.8% (11th)

Variance: 17.9% (18th)

2008: Great first half of the seasons with a fade down the stretch giving way to a disappointing opening playoff loss. Are you 2005 or 2006 in disguise?

2009: Our favorites to win the division, as long as the offensive line stays intact.

2009 Mean Projection: 10.0 wins

On the Clock (0-3): 1%

Loserville (4-6): 8%

Mediocrity (7-8): 18%

Playoff Contender (9-10): 31%

Super Bowl Contender (11+): 42%

Projected Average Opponent: -2.9% (28th)

2009 Giants Schedule

Week	Opp.	Week	Opp.	Week	Opp.
1	WAS	7	ARI	13	DAL
2	at DAL	8	at PHI	14	PHI
3	at TB	9	SD	15	at WAS (Mon.)
4	at KC	10	BYE	16	CAR
5	OAK	11	ATL	17	at MIN
6	at NO	12	at DEN (Thu.)		

sacks over the first ten games of the season and a respectable 3.5 more in the final seven games of the year (from Arizona on), everyone else disappeared. Mathias Kiwanuka had 8.5 sacks by the Cardinals game and 1.5 after. Fred Robbins, Dave Tollefson, and Barry Cofield combined for 11 sacks before the trip to Glendale and all of one sack afterwards.

It's impossible to pinpoint the exact cause of the precipitous drop. The preseason loss of Osi Umenyiora to a torn lateral meniscus undoubtedly stretched the team, forcing them to move Kiwanuka back to defensive end on what appears to be a permanent basis. Robbins was the only rotation player to miss a game of any consequence, so there wasn't a dramatic shift in the team's injury rate. There's no sign that the scheme of newly-departed defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo stagnated or was "figured out" by opposing offenses, either.

The working theory of the Giants organization is simpler: The front seven got tired. Although they knew that getting Umenyiora back would help assuage some depth issues, general manager Jerry Reese went shopping in free agency and came back with linebacker Michael Boley and defensive tackles Rocky Bernard and Chris Canty. Canty is the most interesting signing of the three; a defensive end in Dallas' 3-4 scheme, Canty will move to defensive tackle for the Giants and play there on most downs. All in all, the team should be able to rotate as many as four starting-caliber defenders at both end and tackle, while Boley and second-round pick Clint Sintim project as the new starters at outside linebacker. New defensive coordinator Bill Sheridan hopes to get more of a pass rush from those spots than a year ago, when starters Gerris Wilkinson and Danny Clark combined for zero sacks.

Sheridan's ascension to the role following Spagnuolo's departure for St. Louis will come with some changes. Spagnuolo's blitz-happy scheme relied on a combination of speed and deception; a typical play, for example, might involve lining up Kiwanu-

ka and Tuck on the same side of the field, only to have them drop back while the overload blitz came from the other side. Perhaps owing to the increased depth allowed him by the free agent acquisitions, Sheridan has said that he will move away from the Jim Johnson-influenced subterfuge and employ simpler blitz schemes, relying on fresher players to get past tired blockers.

On one hand, you can see how the move would make sense. Dropping Tuck or Umenyiora into coverage prevents them from doing what they do best — rush the passer — as frequently as possible. When the Giants ran zone blitzes a year ago, they were significantly worse than the average NFL team (Table 2). They were most successful when they rushed four and dropped seven into coverage. When Spagnuolo got on the head coaching radar by holding the Patriots to 13 points in the Giants' Super Bowl XLII win, he didn't devise some brilliant blitz scheme to throw Tom Brady and company off track. He simply rushed four on most plays and dropped his linebackers into hook zones that interfered with the routes of the Patriots' underneath receivers. Expect Sheridan to employ more of that approach in 2009, with fewer big-blitzes or blitzes out of the secondary.

It's that secondary which may end up being the concern of the defense. While Corey Webster built on his 2007 playoff performance and had a huge 2008 campaign, the rest of the secondary was unimpressive. Aaron Ross looked lost for most of the year, taking too many false steps and failing to make tackles downfield. Nickel corner Terrell Thomas looked very good as a rookie, and might end up taking Ross' job if the former Texas star continues to struggle, but the Giants would be much better off if Ross could hold up in coverage and Thomas could stay in the nickel. There's also uncertainty at safety, where 2008 first-round pick Kenny Phillips takes over at strong safety from James Butler, with no depth behind either him or free starter Michael Johnson. The organization's failure to address depth issues before the sixth round of this year's draft — the team signed only mediocre Texans safety C.C. Brown in free agency — could very well come back to bite them if Webster or Phillips goes down with an injury.

Table 1: Sweat Pants ≠ Holster: Giants' DVOA With and Without Plaxico Burress

	Weeks	Off Pass	Off Run	Defense	Def Sack Rate
w/ Plaxico	1-4, 6-11	29.5%	21.1%	-6.5%	9.4%
w/o Plaxico	5, 12-19	36.1%	18.7%	0.4%	5.5%
w/o Plaxico, SEA excluded	12-19	29.9%	11.3%	2.6%	5.3%

Table 2: Giants Defense by Type of Pass Rush

	Giants		Rest Of NFL	
Rushers	YPA	Success Rate	YPA	Success Rate
3	8.4	38%	6.5	57%
4	5.4	60%	6.2	55%
5	7.2	57%	6.3	55%
6	5.6	59%	5.4	60%
7	4.9	50%	5.1	64%
Zone Blitz	7.9	50%	5.9	58%

The place where New York has impressively managed to avoid injury for two years running is on the offensive line. No starter has missed a regular-season game for two seasons. (We say "New York" and not "the Giants" because it's also true of the Jets over the past two years.) It's a remarkable accomplishment, considering that no other team has seen its starting five linemen make it through two consecutive seasons without missing a single start since 2003. In 2002 and 2003, both the Chiefs and the Vikings managed to pull off the feat; neither made it to three years, although the Chiefs' starters only missed a single game in 2004; the Vikings' linemen missed 18 games in each of 2004 and 2005.

For the Giants, the basis of their team's strength is in the combination of the offensive line with fullback Madison Hedgecock, so losing even one player for any period of time would be a huge problem. When Kareem McKenzie struggled with a back injury last year and had to come out for periodic extended breathers in the middle of games, he was replaced by utility lineman Kevin Boothe, who proceeded to nearly get Eli Manning killed. The team has only Boothe and second-round pick William Beatty for recognizable backups, so an injury to a key player like right guard Chris Snee or center Shaun O'Hara could be disastrous for the offense.

Even more disastrous, of course, would be the loss of Eli Manning. The once-embattled quarterback had his best season as a pro in 2008, improving his completion percentage and yards per attempt while cutting his interceptions in half, although it's worth noting that his six dropped interceptions were tied for third-most in the league. Manning still has accuracy issues — his rating of 80.9 percent on our accuracy index (see Appendix) was below the league average of 82.6 percent, and 26th amongst quarterbacks who threw at last 100 passes, but he has improved his accuracy on crossing routes and short out patterns. He saw a huge leap in his performance on third down, thanks to the great early-season performance of second-year receiver Steve Smith, but Smith regressed at the end of the year; he had 14 conversions on third down through Week 12, but only three afterwards. Although the offense as a whole didn't skip a beat without Burress, it's very possible that Smith's performance was affected; much like Wes Welker and Randy Moss in New England, Burress' ability to occupy the safety from the moment the ball is snapped prevents the safety from biting on the underneath route and making Smith pay when he decides to go over the middle.

We'll likely find out whether that was the case in 2009, because after the Giants released Burress and decided not to acquire either Braylon Edwards or Anquan Boldin, they spent two draft picks on receivers who are unlikely to reproduce Burress' production. First-round pick Hakeem Nicks (North Carolina) is a good route-runner who likely profiles as the replacement for Amani Toomer on the other side of the field, while third-rounder Ramses Barden (Cal Poly) has the height (6-foot-6) but not many of the same skills that Burress had; namely, running effective routes and catching the ball. Instead, the team will likely employ Domenik Hixon as the primary "X" receiver once more; Hixon had a 6.5% DVOA when he was starting in Burress' role (as opposed to Burress' 4.9% DVOA), with a superior catch rate and yardage per catch total. In other words, he played better, prominent drop against Philly aside.

The brook is also bubbling with talent at running back, where the departure of Derrick Ward in free agency should open up a spot for either Danny Ware or Ahmad Bradshaw. Bradshaw had a bit of a lost season in 2008, thanks in part to spending a chunk of his offseason in jail. Although he's a talented runner, the Giants would like to have the backup to Brandon Jacobs be someone who can pass block, and Bradshaw isn't that guy. Ware, a coaches' favorite, could very well emerge as the primary backup and become a fantasy sleeper thanks to Jacobs' annual injury.

Reese has built a powerhouse team around two often-dominant lines and a very good quarterback. In the long run, it will be keeping those cornerstones healthy and intact that will determine the success of this team, not the presence of one wide receiver. As long as the offensive line doesn't fall apart and the pass rush doesn't totally collapse under Sheridan, the Giants are the favorites in the NFC East, if not the NFC as a whole.

Bill Barnwell

2008 Giants Stats by Week

Wk	vs.	W-L	PF	PA	YDF	YDA	TO	Total	Off	Def	ST
1	WAS	W	16	7	354	209	-1	22%	12%	-12%	-2%
2	@STL	W	41	13	441	201	+1	62%	39%	-10%	12%
3	CIN	W	26	23	406	347	0	10%	35%	25%	0%
4	BYE										
5	SEA	W	44	6	523	187	+1	91%	75%	-19%	-3%
6	@CLE	L	14	35	373	454	-3	-64%	23%	89%	2%
7	SF	W	29	17	273	253	+3	25%	-5%	-32%	-2%
8	@PIT	W	21	14	282	249	+4	63%	-1%	-52%	12%
9	DAL	W	35	14	319	183	+1	97%	16%	-84%	-3%
10	@PHI	W	36	31	401	300	0	32%	29%	19%	22%
11	BAL	W	30	10	353	275	+1	56%	37%	-22%	-3%
12	@ARI	W	37	29	321	371	+2	24%	23%	12%	13%
13	@WAS	W	23	7	404	320	+1	7%	10%	2%	-2%
14	PHI	L	14	20	211	331	0	-1%	15%	8%	-8%
15	@DAL	L	8	20	218	321	-2	-37%	-29%	15%	7%
16	CAR	W	34	28	459	343	0	13%	43%	19%	-11%
17	@MIN	L	19	20	364	349	+1	48%	43%	-10%	-5%
18	BYE										
19	PHI	L	11	23	307	276	-1	22%	-2%	-28%	-3%

Trends and Splits

	Offense	Rank	Defense	Rank
Total DVOA	23.7%	3	-1.5%	8
Unadjusted VOA	22.9%	4	-1.2%	8
Weighted trend	20.7%	7	-0.4%	10
Variance	5.7%	9	4.8%	9
Average opponent	0.6%	31	-2.3%	3
Passing	35.7%	5	1.9%	11
Rushing	20.7%	3	-5.6%	12
First down	21.2%	1	-16.3%	4
Second down	20.5%	11	8.1%	18
Third down	34.4%	6	12.5%	22
First half	21.7%	1	-2.2%	11
Second half	26.2%	3	-0.8%	9
Red Zone	17.8%	8	-0.7%	17
Late and close	30.0%	1	7.3%	20

Five-Year Performance

Year	W-L	Pyth	Est W	PF	PA	TO	Total	Rk	Off	Rk	Def	Rk	ST	Rk	Off AGL	Rk	Def AGL	Rk
2004	6-10	6.7	6.4	303	347	+4	-15.5%	25	-10.3%	25	5.8%	22	0.7%	15	8.6	26	41.9	2
2005	11-5	10.7	10.4	422	314	+12	17.4%	10	8.9%	9	-4.1%	14	4.4%	2	5.5	28	30.2	4
2006	8-8	7.8	9.0	355	362	0	14.3%	8	12.8%	7	-1.1%	13	0.4%	16	16.4	17	31.0	5
2007	10-6	8.6	8.0	373	351	-9	1.1%	16	-0.3%	18	-2.1%	14	-0.7%	19	13.8	27	14.5	24
2008	12-4	11.3	11.4	427	294	+9	27.0%	4	23.7%	3	-1.5%	8	1.8%	11	6.2	32	29.6	13

Strategic Tendencies

Run/Pass		Rank	Offense		Rank	Defense		Rank	Other		Rank
Runs, all plays	48%	7	3+ WR	48%	18	Rush 3	1.6%	29	2+ RB, Pct Runs	68%	4
Runs, first half	45%	14	4+ WR	13%	14	Rush 4	63.5%	18	1 RB/2 TE, Pct Runs	59%	8
Runs, first down	55%	10	2+ TE	23%	21	Rush 5	18.9%	22	1RB/3+WR, Pct Runs	28%	17
Runs, second-long	50%	2	Single back	54%	18	Rush 6+	15.9%	2	Zone Blitz	6%	10
Runs, power sit.	71%	7	Play action	15%	19	Rush 7+	3.9%	3	Go for it on 4th	0.77	27
Runs, behind 2H	44%	1	Max protect	9%	13	Sacks by LB	8.3%	27	Offensive Pace	31.7	26
Pass, ahead 2H	43%	15	Outside pocket	7%	25	Sacks by DB	4.8%	22	Defensive Pace	31.2	24

Could Madison Hedgecock not be the blocker that people think he is? Big Blue had the league's second biggest difference between runs from single-back sets (40.9% DVOA, 6.7 yards per carry) and runs from two-back sets (8.8% DVOA, 4.4 yards per carry). The only team with a bigger difference was division rival Philadelphia, a team famous for spurning the fullback position in recent years. ● Opponents blitzed Eli Manning with at least five pass rushers on 41 percent of pass plays, the highest rate in the league — and they did it because it works. The Giants had a league-leading 62.9% DVOA when opponents rushed four, but 5.6% DVOA (24th) when opponents rushed five and -10.9% DVOA (22nd) when opponents rushed six or more. ● On the defensive side of the ball, the Giants' use of the big blitz (six or more pass rushers) over the past three seasons has gone from 3.1 percent of passes (30th in the NFL) to 10.6 percent of passes (10th) to 15.9 percent of passes (second). ● The Giants gave up only 2.8 yards per carry on draw plays, and ranked fourth in defensive DVOA. ● The Giants had the league's best fumble recovery rate on offense (recovering 11 of 14) but the

league's worst fumble recovery rate on defense (recovering only five of 17). ● Despite New York's excellent running game, Tom Coughlin has actually become less aggressive on fourth down over time. For his career, Coughlin ranks 36 out of 95 coaches (1994-2008) with an Aggressiveness Index of 1.075. However, Coughlin has not had AI above 1.0 (league average) since he started coaching the Giants five years ago, and last year he had the lowest AI of his career.

Passing

Player	DYAR	DVOA	Plays	NtYds	Avg	YAC	C%	TD	Int
Eli Manning	1032	19.7%	515	3182	6.2	4.1	60.6%	21	9
David Carr	128	138.4%	14	137	9.8	2.9	75.0%	2	0

Rushing

Player	DYAR	DVOA	Plays	Yds	Avg	TD	Fum	Suc
Brandon Jacobs	300	22.4%	219	1090	5.0	15	3	51%
Derrick Ward*	265	25.8%	182	1027	5.6	2	2	51%
Ahmad Bradshaw	20	-1.4%	67	356	5.3	1	2	49%
Eli Manning	14	17.2%	7	26	3.7	1	0	--
David Carr	3	25.0%	3	15	5.0	0	0	--

Receiving

Player	DYAR	DVOA	Plays	Ctch	Yds	Y/C	YAC	TD	C%
Amani Toomer*	77	-2.3%	88	48	580	12.1	2.8	5	55%
Steve Smith	88	1.0%	82	57	577	10.1	2.5	1	60%
Domenik Hixon	142	11.5%	73	43	596	13.9	3.3	2	59%
Plaxico Burress*	94	4.9%	66	35	454	13.0	1.9	5	53%
Sinorice Moss	67	46.0%	15	12	153	12.8	2.0	2	57%
Mario Manningham	8	0.3%	6	4	26	6.5	5.5	0	67%
Derek Hagan	7	4.2%	6	3	*51*	*17.0*	*2.3*	*0*	*50%*
Kevin Boss	84	14.8%	55	33	384	11.6	4.8	6	60%
Darcy Johnson	28	48.9%	6	4	46	11.5	0.5	2	67%
Derrick Ward*	107	24.0%	55	41	384	9.4	10.0	0	75%
Madison Hedgecock	-3	-16.4%	15	8	52	6.5	5.9	1	53%
Brandon Jacobs	-21	-42.6%	12	6	36	6.0	4.5	0	50%
Ahmad Bradshaw	25	93.3%	6	5	42	8.4	10.2	1	83%

Offensive Line

Year	Yards	ALY	Rank	Power	Rank	10+ Yds	Rank	Stuff	Rank	Sacks	ASR	Rank	False	Cont.
2006	4.99	4.49	4	71%	6	19%	9	19%	25	25	5.4%	7	22	30
2007	4.79	4.48	3	70%	7	20%	8	17%	9	28	5.0%	11	14	48
2008	5.28	4.62	4	62%	23	25%	2	17%	10	28	5.0%	10	12	48

Year	LE	Rank	LT	Rank	Mid	Rank	RT	Rank	RE	Rank
2006	5.18	3	3.60	29	4.32	13	4.56	4	5.23	2
2007	4.80	7	4.21	18	4.50	6	4.35	14	4.81	4
2008	5.02	5	5.17	1	4.84	1	4.04	20	3.72	24

It's interesting to compare how our numbers match up with perception; although conventional wisdom — and most people's eyes — had the Giants as the best run-blocking line in recent memory, our numbers list Denver as the best set of run blockers in football. That's reinforced by their Power numbers. Wouldn't the best run-blocking line in football be able to get a yard when they need it? In reality, we suspect that the Giants were actually the best line when it comes to the ground game in 2008, but that the difference between them and the rest of the league was overstated.

The Giants' run game involves lots of pulling guards and patience on sweeps, traps, and counter plays, although the team does not hesitate to pull either left tackle David Diehl or center Shaun O'Hara. (Right tackle Kareem McKenzie goes for a jaunt less frequently.) Right guard Chris Snee is the star, a mauler who can effectively block anyone on the field at any level. O'Hara's superb at chipping defensive tackles and then occupying a linebacker, thereby preventing them from getting over to the edge before the back makes his cut and heads up the field. You'll note that the team was far better running to the left side than they were to the right; that's the difference in ability between Snee (pulling to the left) and left guard Rich Seubert (pulling to the right). Seubert was better in 2007, and he'd still be a starting guard on a fair amount of NFL teams, but he remains the line's weakest link.

The starters were very good in pass protection. Diehl went from tying for the league lead with 11 sacks allowed in 2007 to five last year, only slightly above-average for a left tackle. He still struggles to play with leverage against pass rushers on the outside, though; overcompensating for his lack of speed, he gets out of his base easily and can be pushed back to the quarterback.

We say "the starters" because of the performance of one Kevin Boothe. Taking over for a banged-up McKenzie over the course of the season, Boothe allowed four sacks despite seeing, perhaps, one-tenth of the snaps that McKenzie played. Boothe's struggles are a sign of what may very well happen when someone on the offensive line does suffer an injury. Perhaps with Boothe's struggles in mind, the Giants spent the 60th overall pick on UConn tackle William Beatty, who profiles as the long-term replacement for McKenzie at right tackle. At 6-foot-5, Guy Whimper returns as the other backup tackle after missing all of 2008 with a broken foot; with the departure of backup center/guard Grey Ruegamer, Whimper or Boothe could also see time at guard if either Seubert or Snee go down.

Defensive Front Seven

| Defensive Line | Age | Pos | Plays | TmPct | Overall | | | | | | Pass Rush | | | vs. Run | | | vs. Pass | | |
					Rk	Stop	Dfts	Stop%	Rk	AvYd	Rk	Sack	Hit	Hur	Runs	St%	Yds	Pass	St%	Yds
Justin Tuck	26	DE	67	9.0%	3	59	28	88%	8	0.1	10	12.0	10	19	47	87%	1.6	20	90%	-3.5
Mathias Kiwanuka	26	DE	52	7.0%	20	43	19	83%	21	1.6	38	8.0	10	13	37	86%	1.9	15	73%	0.9
Barry Cofield	25	DT	45	6.4%	17	34	7	76%	45	2.2	48	2.5	2	1	37	73%	3.1	8	88%	-2.1
Fred Robbins	32	DT	38	5.8%	26	34	17	89%	2	-0.3	1	5.5	2	9	27	89%	0.3	11	91%	-1.7
Renaldo Wynn*	35	DE	24	3.2%	88	17	8	71%	62	1.5	36	2.0	0	5	20	75%	1.4	4	50%	1.8
Jay Alford	26	DT	15	2.0%	--	12	5	80%	--	1.1	--	2.5	2	3	9	89%	1.9	6	67%	0.0
Rocky Bernard	30	DT	56	7.0%	9	36	11	64%	69	3.2	71	4.0	6	7	43	63%	3.3	13	69%	2.5
Chris Canty	27	DE	41	5.4%	45	29	8	71%	64	2.0	55	3.5	4	4	28	64%	2.8	13	85%	0.2

| Linebackers | Age | Pos | Plays | TmPct | Overall | | | | | Pass Rush | | | | vs. Run | | | | vs. Pass | | | | |
					Rk	Stop	Dfts	Stop%	AvYd	Sack	Hit	Hur	Runs	St%	Rk	Yds	Rk	Tgts	Suc%	Rk	AdjYd	Rk
Antonio Pierce	31	ILB	96	13.7%	28	48	18	50%	6.2	1.5	0	5	50	66%	42	3.6	60	44	33%	86	8.7	87
Danny Clark	32	OLB	67	9.0%	77	44	7	66%	3.0	0.0	1	3	57	70%	22	2.6	13	9	39%	--	5.1	--
Chase Blackburn	26	ILB	43	5.8%	--	26	8	60%	4.8	1.0	1	1	29	69%	--	2.5	--	11	50%	--	9.3	--
Bryan Kehl	25	OLB	32	4.3%	--	17	4	53%	4.5	1.0	0	1	26	46%	--	5.1	--	5	99%	--	1.4	--
Michael Boley	27	OLB	81	10.3%	66	41	14	51%	5.9	0.0	1	2	36	58%	82	4.4	95	44	57%	29	5.4	22

Year	Yards	ALY	Rank	Power	Rank	10+ Yds	Rank	Stuff	Rank	Sack	ASR	Rank
2006	3.73	3.77	5	70%	26	17%	19	21%	7	25	6.3%	19
2007	4.01	3.76	3	63%	17	20%	23	22%	6	28	8.8%	1
2008	3.71	3.33	3	58%	6	22%	25	24%	3	28	7.2%	7

Year	LE	Rank	LT	Rank	Mid	Rank	RT	Rank	RE	Rank
2006	3.49	10	2.99	3	4.17	16	2.73	2	4.75	27
2007	2.90	6	4.60	22	3.63	3	3.35	2	4.40	23
2008	3.15	4	3.32	5	3.27	2	3.97	15	3.12	10

By making so many additions to what was an already fearsome front seven, the Giants give themselves all kinds of redundancies and fallback plans.

At defensive end, Osi Umenyiora returns from a lost year, thanks a torn lateral meniscus suffered in the war of attrition that is the yearly Giants-Jets exhibition game. (For those who don't remember, Jason Sehorn suffered a career-changing knee injury in the same game years earlier.) Umenyiora will start on the right side, with Justin Tuck on the left side. Having given up on converting Mathias Kiwanuka into a linebacker, the team will liberally rotate Kiwanuka in for Umenyiora and Tuck to keep all three fresh; it'll dampen the tackle and sack totals for the starters in IDP leagues, but might keep them healthy and productive for all 16 games. The same sort of rotation will exist on the interior; expect free-agent acquisitions Chris Canty and Rocky Bernard to start, but

the team will rotate Jay Alford, Barry Cofield, and Fred Robbins in and out virtually every down. Robbins tired badly down the stretch last year, with all 5.5 of his sacks coming by Week 7.

Middle linebacker Antonio Pierce is the heart and soul of the defense, and while he's still an effective run blitzer, he struggled mightily in coverage last year. He is sometimes victimized solely because he's the one guy left in a hook zone when the blitz doesn't get there, but even that doesn't explain away how poor his performance was. Among qualifying linebackers, only James Farrior allowed more than the 5.8 yards after catch averaged on throws with Pierce in coverage. Pierce will have new bookends around him that might help this year, though; the weakside starter will be former Atlanta linebacker Michael Boley. Boley fell out of favor with the new regime in Atlanta because of his struggles against the run, and even lost his job at the end of the season, but the Giants recognize that Boley is an explosive athlete capable of rushing the passer (although he didn't show it last year) and being an effective pass defender both in zone and against tight ends in man coverage. Although we don't often use the term in football, he'll make for a nice platoon with second-year linebacker Bryan Kehl, who isn't much of a pass rusher, but does a good job of plugging up holes in the running game.

The strongside linebacker will be second-round pick Clint Sintim, assuming that he picks up the playbook and the speed of the game at the level the Giants expect him to. 2008 starter Danny Clark, thrust into the position after Kiwanuka was moved to end, was inconsistent and limited athletically; in a front seven built on quickness and the ability to rush the passer, Sintim's a better bet. The Virginia product had 11 sacks as a senior, so he can get to the quarterback, but he's not particularly experienced in coverage and might not have the skill set to play on the outside. Don't be surprised if he eventually replaces Pierce at middle linebacker, but for now, he gives the team yet another pass rusher. Sintim will be backed up by Gerris Wilkinson and special teams demon Zak DeOssie.

Defensive Secondary

Secondary	Age	Pos	Plays	TmPct	Rk	Stop	Dfts	Yds	Rk	St%	Rk	Tgts	Tgt%	Rk	Dist	Suc%	Rk	AdjYd	Rk	Yds	Rk	PD	Int
									Overall				vs. Run					vs. Pass					
Corey Webster	27	CB	74	9.9%	22	40	17	5.8	30	47%	37	69	16.5%	52	11.1	62%	9	5.4	7	5.0	25	3	
James Butler*	27	FS	71	10.1%	37	28	9	6.4	28	44%	32	25	6.4%	45	10.4	66%	7	7.5	30	7.6	4	3	
Michael Johnson	25	SS	69	9.2%	48	34	15	3.0	2	68%	3	35	8.2%	16	8.0	47%	55	7.1	20	7.1	4	2	
Kenny Phillips	23	FS	67	9.0%	51	27	16	6.4	27	48%	19	29	6.8%	39	13.5	61%	15	7.5	29	7.1	3	1	
Aaron Ross	26	CB	60	8.6%	43	23	11	4.4	11	50%	30	88	22.3%	16	10.9	48%	50	8.9	77	8.5	9	3	
Kevin Dockery	25	CB	45	7.4%	58	22	12	3.9	7	63%	15	43	12.6%	75	12.6	58%	16	6.3	24	5.6	8	1	
Terrell Thomas	25	CB	34	6.1%	--	15	8	3.7	--	70%	--	23	7.2%	--	10.7	59%	--	7.1	--	7.9	4	1	

Year	Pass D Rank	vs. #1 WR	Rk	vs. #2 WR	Rk	vs. Other WR	Rk	vs. TE	Rk	vs. RB	Rk
2006	18	-9.9%	8	-1.4%	12	6.0%	22	20.1%	31	-1.9%	16
2007	15	9.2%	21	-15.2%	6	-22.4%	7	24.8%	29	12.0%	29
2008	9	-16.1%	3	6.4%	21	-15.8%	10	8.9%	21	30.3%	31

After we devoted a whole section of the Giants chapter in last year's book to the myth that Corey Webster took a huge step forward in the playoffs, well, Corey Webster went ahead and took a huge step forward during the 2008 regular season. Only a year removed from being a healthy scratch during parts of the 2007 campaign, Webster looked like a stud cornerback on film in 2008, combining his athleticism with significantly improved awareness and footwork to stick to opposing wideouts. Webster led the league by breaking up an impressive 32.1 percent of the passes thrown at him, and he even became a better tackler and willing run defender on the edge. On this form, his five-year, $43.5 million dollar contract extension was well deserved.

Across from him, though, was disappointment: Aaron Ross was expected to be a competent corner as soon as he stepped on to an NFL field after starring at Texas, and while he was acceptable in 2007, teams avoiding Webster enjoyed plenty of success going after Ross in 2008. He was lucky to be the beneficiary of six drops, or his numbers would have looked even worse. Ross struggled to get proper jams at the line, and then when receivers caught the ball, he had tackling issues. Ross will get another season to prove that 2008 was just an off year, but if he struggles early, his replacement may very well be the promising Terrell Thomas, who'd be high on our

Top 25 Prospects list if he had been the first third-round pick of the 2008 draft instead of the final second-round pick. In addition to being an excellent player on coverage units, Thomas was superb as the team's slot corner, taking the job away from Kevin Dockery and Sam Madison by Week 8. Madison was released in the offseason and might retire, while Dockery will be back for the final year of his rookie deal as the dime corner.

The only other change in the secondary is at strong safety, where James Butler followed Steve Spagnuolo to St. Louis. The Giants will likely move Michael Johnson, who started at free safety last year, to that spot. That opens up free safety for 2008 first-round pick Kenny Phillips, who impressed in limited duty last year. Johnson isn't great in coverage and works best as a blitzer and run defender close to the line of scrimmage, so he's likely a better fit at strong safety. Phillips will need to hold the fort deep when the blitz doesn't get there. The Giants imported C.C. Brown from Houston to back both safeties up; it is in the best interests of Giants fans everywhere that he does not make it onto the field.

Special Teams

Year	DVOA	Rank	FG/XP	Rank	Net Punt	Rank	Punt Ret	Rank	Net Kick	Rank	Kick Ret	Rank	Hidden	Rank
2006	0.4%	16	0.8	13	3.1	15	-10.5	29	11.3	3	-2.3	21	-1.3	15
2007	-0.7%	19	-2.9	24	-5.8	24	3.5	10	5.5	10	-4.3	22	5.3	10
2008	1.8%	11	3.7	11	-11.3	31	4.4	9	11.7	5	2.0	8	0.4	12

When Lawrence Tynes went down with a knee injury in camp, the team brought in John Carney as his replacement. Carney proceeded to start the year by kicking 12 consecutive field goals, giving him the job for good and limiting Tynes to kickoff duties when he was able to get on the active roster. It wasn't the right play; as good as Carney was on field goals, he had no leg strength. The 44-year-old only attempted one field goal beyond 50 yards, and he was the worst kickoff man in football; coincidentally, he was not retained by the team. Somehow, this combination added up to a Pro Bowl trip. Punter Jeff Feagles made the Pro Bowl at 42, thanks to his ability to avoid returns of any sort by accurately angling his punts or simply kicking them out of bounds. He'll be back for another year.

The coverage units are run by DeOssie, who was added to the Pro Bowl roster by the coaches in only his second season. He's joined on an above-average coverage unit by Thomas and backup middle linebacker Chase Blackburn. The team used a four-man wedge last year, so that will change. Domenik Hixon was competent when he returned punts, but he's probably off those duties if he's going to start at wide receiver, leaving a hole at the position. Ahmad Bradshaw was unimpressive and inconsistent as a kick returner, but with the Giants arguably needing to justify his roster spot, expect him to be the primary man on kickoff returns in 2009.

Coaching Staff

The departure of Spagnuolo to St. Louis resulted in the promotion of Bill Sheridan from linebackers coach to defensive coordinator. It will be Sheridan's first time as the defensive coordinator at any level. Sheridan has said that he will retain Spagnuolo's scheme, but drop his pass rushers — specifically Tuck — into pass coverage less frequently, with the idea that they're better off going after the quarterback more often. That should create more opportunities for pressure, but also eliminate some of the confusion that Spagnuolo's defense thrived upon.

Offensively, Kevin Gilbride took some heat for his play-calling against the Eagles in the Divisional round loss, but the problem was less with the scheme and more with the execution. Gilbride has had a habit of wearing out his welcome, though, so it wouldn't a surprise to see the blame fall on him if the offense gets off to a slow start. Head coach Tom Coughlin appears to have moved on from his old drill instructor style of coaching permanently, but again, it'll be interesting to see what happens if the team does struggle at the start of the year.