

NFL

Bills plant seeds for next year's playoff crop

by MATT KRUEGER
Reporter

An 7-9 record wasn't exactly the mark the Buffalo Bills had in mind for the 2006 season and they don't want to hear about the growth they've shown.

All the players in the locker room wanted to win now, so they view the season as a failure. But from an outside perspective, this year was a success, a step toward becoming one of the elite teams in the league.

Chicago Cub fans hold the famous battle cry "wait until next year." But Buffalo fans could say the same thing. Despite the reality of losing several players to free agency during the offseason, the Bills should be a playoff team in 2007. That's right, for the first time since the Wade Phillips era — three head coaches ago — Buffalo should make its way into the postseason.

"We've been happy with the progress that we've made," first-year coach Dick Jauron said. "We're not happy with our record. You always have to believe that you can win every game and you always plan on winning every game. Whenever you lose, you're disappointed and when you're out of the playoffs, you're disappointed. We like the direction that our team has moved in, if not the results."

For a look at the signs of improvement, take a look at the stats from 2006. The offense found its legs and turned things around from two sub-par seasons in 2004 and 2005. The defense changed up personnel and began returning to the elite status it held in 2003 and 2004. The special



J.P. Losman (7) and Willis McGahee (21) helped push the Buffalo Bills to a 7-9 record, a two-game improvement from 2005.

Photo by Patrick McPartland

teams were the standout this year, as has been the case in recent history.

Quarterback J.P. Losman threw for 3,051 yards with 19 touchdowns and 14 interceptions in a year in which he proved he is capable of starting in the NFL.

"I guess I've proven it for a little while longer, maybe the beginning of next year, that's how I feel," Losman said. "There's a lot of work that still needs to be done and a lot of progress that needs to be made, and it's up to me. I was telling Steve (Fairchild) earlier, that I feel that he can only take me so far. Turk (Schonert) can only take me so far, and they can only

tell me these things so many times. It's up to me to study those things, to actually concentrate on those things. We talk about footwork, we talk about reads and defenses, the little things. It's up to me if I'm actually going to do those things. As soon as the (Tennessee) game was over, I was ready to start camp. The season was over, we weren't going to the playoffs, and it was very disappointing. You have to eat it, you have to swallow it, and you have to deal with it. There were some things during the game that I felt that I could have done better to help us succeed, so I was ready to fix those things already, and that's

what it's going to come down to. That's what my goal is from here on out."

Receiver Lee Evans turned his first season as the number-one pass catcher into his most productive with 1,292 yards and eight touchdowns.

"It was different, it was certainly different," Evans said of his transition from number two receiver to number one. "Early in the season, you're not really able to hit the deep ball very consistently. It was different for me, because that's one of the things that I like to do, and I had success with it early. I've never had a game with 10 catches for 90 yards. That was kind of different for me, but I learned that those are the little things that you have to do to be successful in this league. It's about efficiency, and the more efficient you are, the big plays will come. That was a slow process for me, and it was one of the biggest things I learned this season."

Willis McGahee missed out on breaking the 1,000-yard barrier, as he finished with 990 yards. But he missed two games to injury. With an average of 70.7 yards per game, he more than likely would

have broken 1,000 yards in a 16-game schedule.

With the combination of Losman, Evans and McGahee, the Bills could see the first triple threat it has had in years. The last time the Bills had a 3,000-yard passer, a 1,000-yard rusher and a 1,000-yard receiver was 2002. Drew Bledsoe led that 8-8 team with 4,359 passing yards. Travis Henry had his most productive season in Buffalo with 1,438 yards and receivers Eric Moulds (1,287) and Peerless Price (1,252) broke the 1,000-yard plateau. Losman, Evans and McGahee should be able to approach those numbers next season if the improvement continues into the offseason and into training camp.

On defense, linebacker London Fletcher-Baker piled up 146 tackles and four interceptions in a Pro Bowl-worthy season. Speculation is that the free agent won't return for the 2007 season, but his time in Buffalo has been spectacular. Rookie safety Donte Whitner recorded 105 tackles, while fellow rookie safety Ko Simpson had 77. Each first-year player started 15 games. Not bad for a couple of kids who were sitting in a class room a year ago.

And what about Aaron Schobel? The defensive end finished third in the league with 14 sacks and was selected to his first Pro Bowl.

On special teams, punter Brian Moorman and kicker Rian Lindell proved to be the most consistent players on the team and among the best in the league. Moorman, headed to his second consecutive Pro Bowl, was second in the league with a net average of 39.2 yards per punt and punts downed inside the opponent's 20-yard line (33). Lindell made 23 of 25 field goals and was a perfect 33-of-33 on point after attempts. And both of those guys have played their games kicking into the swirling winds of Ralph Wilson Stadium.

Yes, for the first time in several years, Bills fans have good reason to look forward to next year. The Bills are on the upswing and there's no reason to think they can't take another step up next season.

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Sweet Home makes the grade

Sweet Home's field hockey team was a champion on and off the field last fall.

Sweet Home was ranked tenth in New York State among field hockey teams in grade point average. The Lady Panthers had a 94.830.

In Section VI, Sweet Home had the second smartest boys volleyball team (94.003), third smartest field hockey (94.830), fifth smartest girls volleyball (95.725) and girls tennis (96.267) squads and tenth highest boys soccer team (93.325).

Here is a list of Town of Amherst high schools in Section VI who each earned a New York State Public High School Athletic Association award for the fall season. A team needed to have a 90 average or greater during the fall sports season to receive a New York State Public High School Athletic Association award.

Amherst Central

Boys cross country, 24th, 92.269; boys golf, 18th, 91.783; boys soccer, 26th, 91.694; field hockey, 22nd, 90.433; girls soccer, 29th, 92.518; girls swimming and diving, 37th, 90.507; girls tennis, 15th, 94.482; girls volleyball, 48th, 90.010

Sweet Home

Boys cross country, 19th, 93.204; boys golf, 13th, 92.423; boys soccer, 10th, 93.325; boys volleyball, second, 94.003; field hockey, third, 94.830; football, 28th, 91.152; girls cross country, 25th, 91.230; girls

gymnastics, eighth, 92.186; girls soccer, 26th, 92.808; girls swimming and diving, 16th, 93.926; girls tennis, fifth, 96.267; girls volleyball, fifth, 95.725

Williamsville East

Boys cross country, 14th, 93.716; boys golf, eighth, 93.620; boys soccer, 15th, 93.101; boys volleyball, 10th, 92.366; field hockey, sixth, 94.390; football, 12th, 93.063; girls cross country, 11th, 94.963; girls golf, 94.351; girls gymnastics, fifth, 95.737; girls soccer, 15th, 94.286; girls swimming and diving, 15th, 93.955; girls tennis, 16th, 94.394; girls volleyball, 27th, 92.599

Williamsville North

Boys cross country, 10th, 94.333; boys golf, 10th, 93.314; boys soccer, 30th, 91.079; boys volleyball, eighth, 92.741; field hockey, fifth, 94.517; football, 15th, 92.983; girls cross country, 17th, 93.133; girls golf, 94.351; girls gymnastics, third, 96.076; girls soccer, ninth, 95.103; girls swimming and diving, sixth, 96.090; girls tennis, eighth, 95.813; girls volleyball, 17th, 93.544

Williamsville South

Boys golf, 22nd, 90.871; boys soccer, 33rd, 90.758; boys volleyball, 17th, 90.150; field hockey, 17th, 91.504; football, 33rd, 90.259; girls golf, 94.351; girls gymnastics, 10th, 91.013; girls soccer, 46th, 90.520; girls swimming and diving, 36th, 90.521; girls tennis, 28th, 91.173; girls volleyball, 47th, 90.039

North's Miller earns field hockey honors

Despite playing all of the fall field hockey season with a torn ligament in her ankle and only playing 12 games (missing two with mononucleosis and her team not playing the last few games of the season due to the October storm), Williamsville North junior Chantae Miller received All-Western New York First Team honors for the third year in a row.

She also was named First Team All-New York State and Regional All-American for the third time

and made the National High School All-American Second Team for the second straight year.

In addition, Miller broke the national high school field hockey record for career assists. Her career total of 98 assists breaks the old record of 95. She also has scored 107 career goals, which puts her near the top ten all-time in the nation.

With one more season left, Miller could end up the only high school player in the top ten in career assists and goals.

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