

The Andy Reid Era

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It was only a generation, but for many Eagles fans the span between the Golden Years and the twenty-first century—the agonizing wait for another Super Bowl—seemed like a lifetime.

In many ways, it was.

When the Eagles played in Super Bowl XV in 1981, people hadn't begun to watch DVDs, drive SUVs, or listen to iPods. The laptop had just been invented, and cell phones cost \$3,500. Postage stamps were 15 cents, and the minimum wage was \$3.35. Average household income for Americans was a little over \$19,000, and the prime rate was 21.5 percent, the highest since the Civil War.

By the time the Eagles returned to Super Bowl XXXIX in 2005, coaches were carrying computers instead of clipboards. They were scouting with videotape, challenging the officials with instant replay, communicating via satellite, and devising their game plans with the help of digital photography. It cost 37 cents to mail a letter, and the minimum wage was up to \$5.15. The average household income was a little over \$43,000, and the prime rate had dropped to 5.5 percent.

For the Eagles and other National Football League teams, it was an entirely new world revolving around Free Agency, focusing on the Salary Cap, and depending on such medical breakthroughs as orthoscopic surgery and MRIs.

Professional football continued to enjoy unprecedented popularity. Capacity crowds were commonplace. Each team received \$80 million a year from the league's network TV package. Super Bowl tickets sold for \$500 apiece, if you could find one.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the NFL had become the dominant entertainment package, especially in Philadelphia, where the Eagles attracted an enormous following and generated an estimated \$16.4 million in revenue for the city just from the 2005 NFC Championship game.

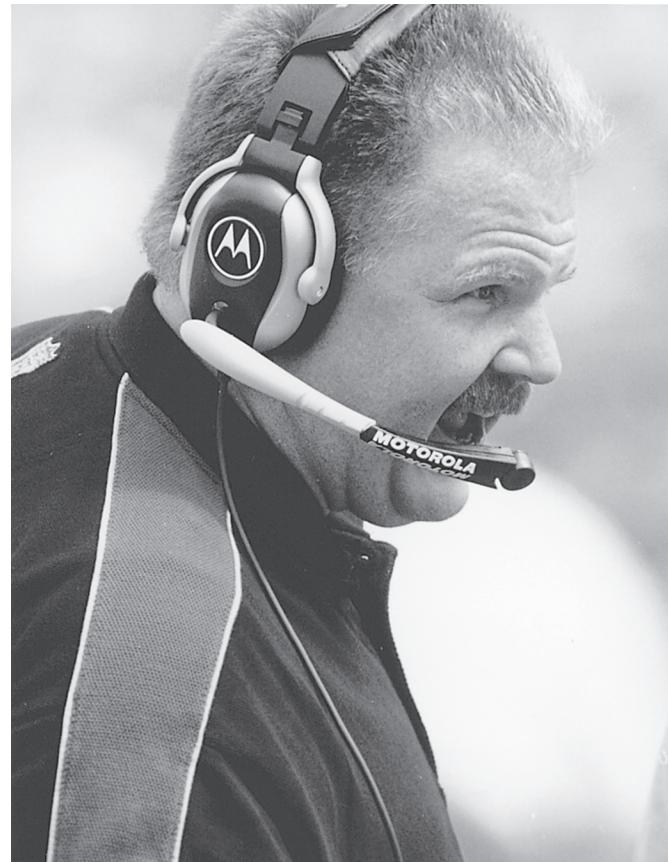
As team officials unveiled their new battle cry during the 2004 season, "ONE Team ONE City ONE Dream," the value of the Eagles franchise had skyrocketed from \$518 million to \$833 million in *only two years*, according to *Forbes* magazine. When you consider that Leonard Tose, the owner of the Eagles' 1980 Super Bowl team, bought the club for a little over \$16 million in 1969, the growth has been astounding.

The Andy Reid era began in January of 1999. That's when Eagles owner Jeff Lurie and club president Joe Banner made a bold decision. They selected Reid, a little-known assistant coach, to succeed Ray Rhodes, the first head coach

they hired back in 1995. Rhodes was fired after the Eagles went into a tailspin and dropped 19 of their last 24 games.

Reid was the quarterbacks coach at Green Bay under Mike Holmgren. He never had been an NFL coordinator or a head coach at any level. Lurie's football operations chief, Tom Modrak, favored the other finalist, Pittsburgh Steelers defensive coordinator Jim Haslett, for the job.

Most teams at the time would only consider hiring a head coach from a major college or someone with experience as an NFL offensive or defensive coordinator.



Andy Reid is the only coach to lead the Eagles to the playoffs five years in a row.

Excerpt • Temple University Press

"Not only had no one ever hired a position coach; no one, to our knowledge, had even *interviewed* one," said Banner to Paul Domowitch of the *Philadelphia Daily News*.

Banner explained that Green Bay general manager Ron Wolf—"maybe the smartest guy in football at the time"—had elected *not* to hire Reid as the Packers' head coach after Holmgren left for Seattle because *that* was the conventional wisdom.

It turned out to be a great decision for Lurie and Banner—and for Lurie's first wife, Christina, who helped with the decision.

"Jeffrey really, really studies," Christina told *Philadelphia Daily News* columnist Rich Hofmann. "He wanted, absolutely, an offensive head coach and the West Coast offense. Having spent time with different people, I think he really had a sense of what Andy was going to bring, and the unbelievable work ethic that Andy brings with him. I've never seen anybody as prepared as Andy."

Before hiring Reid, Lurie and Banner carefully analyzed the qualities of every coach that had won two or more Super Bowls in the previous 25 years. They discovered there was nothing consistent about their coaching philosophies, how they ran their offense and defense, or which facet of the game they preferred. But they did discover that every one of the successful coaches had similar qualities.

"Every one of them had tremendous leadership skills," Banner told Nolan Nawrocki of *Pro Football Weekly*. "Every one of them was extraordinarily detail-oriented. And we identified eight or nine characteristics that we felt were consistent with all of these multiple Super Bowl-winning head coaches."

After studying all of these key qualities and reviewing a short list of candidates, "Andy fit phenomenally well," said Banner. "We really didn't care about experience at that point, because after we did our study, we didn't feel like that was a key criterion." Still the media and the fans were skeptical. The day he was introduced in January 1999, Reid stood at the podium in front of a jam-packed news conference and repeated what he said in his interview with Eagles officials.

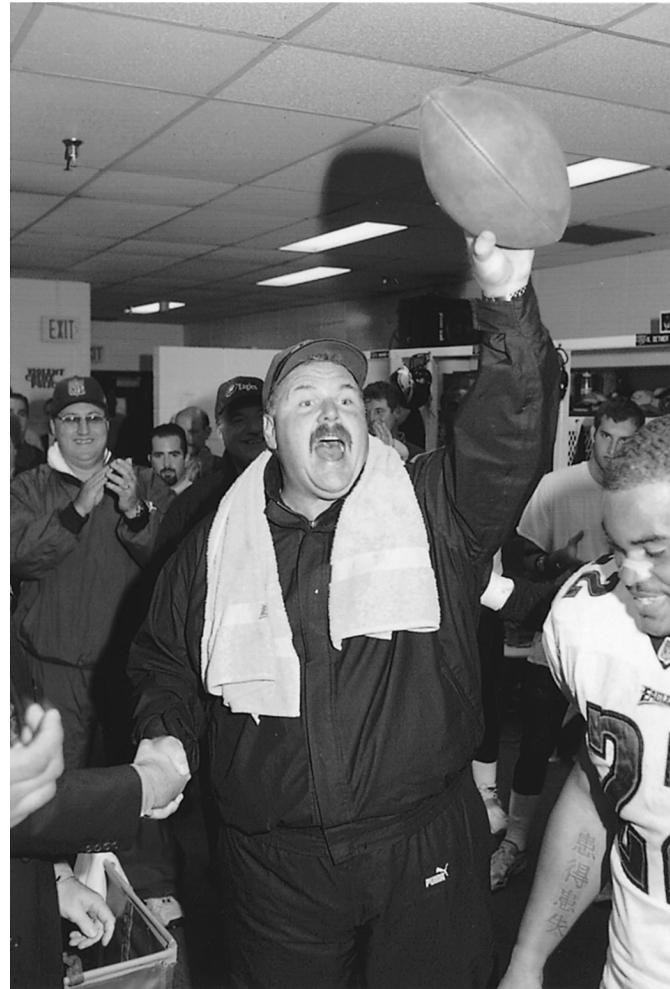
"The thing I told Jeff Lurie was, this is not a quick-fix situation," Reid explained. "I'm not here to quick-fix the Philadelphia Eagles. I'm here to supply them with a tremendous, solid organization that is going to win football games. Now, that doesn't happen overnight. We didn't do that in Green Bay. We built. And then, we eventually ended up in the Super Bowl."

Reid was correct. It didn't happen overnight.

The Eagles won only five of 16 games in Reid's first year, 1999, but the rookie head coach made it clear he was in complete charge.

Early in training camp, veteran offensive lineman George Hegamin stalked off the field after rookie Doug Brzezinski replaced him in the starting unit. Hegamin returned later in the day, only to be ordered by Reid to push a blocking sled up and down the football field in the blazing sun in front of his wide-eyed teammates and media members. Hegamin was later released, as were other veterans like defensive tackle Bill Johnson, linebacker William Thomas, and center Steve Everitt.

"He [Reid] got rid of lazy players, players he knew would give up," said veteran defensive end Hugh Douglas to *Philadelphia Daily News* sportswriter Marcus Hayes. "It was like he was a gang leader. In order to get respect, you've got to do things from the jump to gain respect."



Andy Reid celebrates his first regular-season victory as head coach, a 13–10 win over the Dallas Cowboys.

"It was a shock, but that's how you've got to run a team," added defensive tackle Hollis Thomas. "Steve and Bill were good guys and stuff, but Bill was outspoken and Steve was carefree. You've got to know there's one boss, and if you don't like it, there's no place for you here. There's no place for rebels without a cause."

"Practices got crisper, sharper," recalled John Harbaugh, who had been retained by Reid after serving as special-teams coach under Rhodes. "Meetings went smoother. More people started showing up on time."

The other part of the equation was the drafting of Donovan McNabb. Again, the Eagles went against popular opinion. Most fans, including then-Philadelphia mayor Ed Rendell, wanted the Eagles to use the second overall pick in the 1999 draft on running back Ricky Williams, the Heisman Trophy winner from Texas. But Andy Reid wanted a quarterback to run his offense, and he was sold on McNabb, the mobile, strong-armed All America from Syracuse.

Reid took his time with McNabb, allowing him to watch the first half of the regular season from the sidelines while veteran Doug Pederson played and lost seven of the first nine games. McNabb did not start until Week 10, but once he stepped on the field, the team's future came into focus. The Eagles won

their last two games over New England and eventual Super Bowl winner St. Louis, which provided the momentum for the team to reverse its record the following season, from 5–11 and last place in 1990 to 11–5 and a playoff berth in 2000.

"The last two games of 1999 were big, sending us into the off-season with a couple of wins," explained Reid. "It was easier for guys to listen to you with those positives. That's probably where we had our biggest impact as a staff. And it was nice to have a couple of veterans in there saying, 'Hey, this isn't a bad thing that's going on here. We're going in the right direction. Let's go with it and run with it.' Guys like Troy Vincent."

"In 1999, when we beat St. Louis, you had a good feeling about where we could go," said McNabb. "In 1999, people expected so much, and they didn't know what kind of quarterback I'd be. In 2000, we opened some eyes. By the end of that season, people knew what we had. Getting to the playoffs—that said a lot."

Reid's first major free agent signing came in 2000. It was 6–7, 325-pound right tackle Jon Runyan, who provided the offensive line with a solid foundation to build around as well as a winning attitude.

In 2000, Reid picked up a few Coach of the Year awards after the Eagles fashioned the greatest turnaround in the franchise's history with an 11–5 record and a second-place finish in the NFC East. The Eagles won 10 of their last 13 games and clinched the top Wild Card spot. They beat Tampa Bay, for their first playoff win in 20 years, before losing to the eventual NFC champions, the New York Giants. McNabb had a brilliant season, accounting for almost 75 percent of the team's total net yards.

In May 2001, Reid was promoted to executive vice president of football operations—giving him complete control over all of the Eagles' personnel decisions at a time when most NFL teams were splitting these responsibilities between a coach and a general manager or personnel director.

Over the years, Reid had surrounded himself with people who were considered among the best in the game: offensive coordinator Brad Childress, defensive coordinator Jim Johnson, the club's vice president of player personnel Tom Heckert, and Harbaugh.

Childress, formerly an assistant coach at Wisconsin, was one of Reid's first hires. Credited with teaching McNabb the intricacies of the West Coast offense, Childress was promoted from quarterbacks coach to offensive coordinator in 2002.

In 2002, Childress's group set a club scoring record with 415 points, despite starting three different quarterbacks. After McNabb and Koy Detmer went out with injuries, the Eagles turned to rookie A. J. Feeley, who won four out of five games down the stretch.

In 2003, Childress's offense set a team record for fewest turnovers in a season (23) with a versatile group that employed three running backs—Brian Westbrook, Correll Buckhalter, and Duce Staley—who combined for 27 rushing and receiving touchdowns.

"There are a lot of different ways to win a football game," Childress said, explaining his offensive philosophy. "You have to be open-minded. Innovate and adjust, play to the tools you have. We've done that here. We've had different personalities now than we had in the past. You need to utilize what you have."

Johnson joined the Eagles in 1999. That year, his unit forced an NFL-best 46 turnovers and set an Eagles team record with five interceptions returned for touchdowns.

Between 2000 and 2004, Johnson's defense was the stingiest in the NFL, allowing fewer than 16 points per game. During that period, Johnson's defensive unit led the league in sacks, red-zone touchdown percentage, and third-down efficiency.

In 2001, Johnson's unit became only the fourth defense in NFL history to go all 16 games without allowing more than 21 points. That streak eventually reached 34 straight games, the second longest (behind Minnesota from 1968 to 1971) ever.

"He's the mad scientist," defensive end N. D. Kalu once said in describing the team's affection for Johnson. "We could all be hurt, and he'd have the cheerleaders out there blitzing."

Between 2000 and 2003, Harbaugh's special teams twice finished first in the NFL, according to an intricate ranking system formulated by *Dallas Morning News* columnist Rick Gosselin.

"I've said time and time again that John is the best in the business at what he does, and the statistics back it up," said Reid. "He spends so much time and effort preparing his guys each and every week. Special teams are such an integral part of this game today."

In his first 14 seasons in the NFL, including 10 with the Miami Dolphins, Heckert never worked with a losing team. He displayed his player evaluation skills in his very first draft in 2002. The first four players selected that year—cornerbacks Lito Sheppard and Sheldon Brown, safety Michael Lewis, and running back Westbrook—all became valuable starters long before the Eagles went to the Super Bowl. So did offensive guard Artis Hicks, an undrafted free agent in 2002.

"This is a great organization," said Heckert after signing a three-year contract extension on the eve of the 2004 NFC playoffs. "And the relationship I have with Andy, Jeffrey, and Joe and the fact that we're a good football team and we're going to be for a while—that's a big part of my decision."

One of the major factors in the Eagles' success was Banner's management of the salary cap, which became a required NFL procedure in 1994, the same year that Joe joined the Eagles organization. Designed to ensure competitive balance in the league, effective salary cap management was recognized as the blueprint for financial success.

Banner mastered it so well that he turned it into a blueprint for success on the field. By drafting intelligently, fielding a young team, and extending contracts effectively, Joe earned the reputation as one of the NFL's most creative and innovative executives.

In an interview with *Pro Football Weekly*, Banner explained how he sat down with Reid and Heckert in the off-season, studied the team's depth charts, and planned two years ahead. "We'll kind of plot out what our priorities are," he explained. "We never want to run out of money and still have some thing that we really need unfilled. So we literally have identified position priorities."

Banner explained that Reid always emphasized "the key to building a successful team is having strong lines on both sides—that old cliché that it begins up front. So that's been an important part of our whole cap strategy."

At first, Banner's salary cap strategy was roundly criticized by other NFL executives. But by the time the Eagles started winning, his philosophy was widely acclaimed, especially when opposing teams realized the Eagles were consistently among the league leaders in salary cap space.



Eagles fans saw their team host at least one playoff game in each of five consecutive seasons from 2000 through 2004. "The Eagles are the standard right now," said Giants head coach Tom Coughlin.

"I've had people tell me that Ray Rhodes has looked at the team we have and the cap situation we have and is totally dumfounded," Banner once told Domowitch. "He said, 'I didn't think they knew what the hell they were doing.'"

Banner's first success with the salary cap involved a young free safety, Brian Dawkins, who was struggling on the field in 1998. But Banner saw the potential in the third-year player and convinced the organization to sign him to a five-year extension with a \$2.5 million bonus. A year later, when Dawkins made the Pro Bowl, he would have commanded much more money. He returned to the Pro Bowl six more times and became one of the league's top bargains.

Of the top 32 players on the Eagles roster for the 2001 NFC Championship game, Banner's salary cap management enabled the organization to sign 25 of them through 2003. All but two of the 22 starters on that 2001 team were locked in for the following season.

That same strategy allowed the club to quickly sign Pro Bowl defensive end Jevon Kearse to an eight-year, \$66 million deal on the first day of the NFL's free-agent signing period in 2004—before other teams had time to react. With the salary cap under control, the Eagles brain trust made a number of excellent player transactions over the years. Some of them were questioned by the fans, especially when they did not re-sign popular high-priced veterans like Staley and defensive stand-

outs Troy Vincent and Bobby Taylor and replaced them with younger, less expensive players like Westbrook, Sheppard, and Brown. But the three youngsters played major roles when the Eagles finally reached the Super Bowl.

Staley was the workhorse of the Eagles' running attack for seven seasons, rushing for more than 1,000 yards three times. After holding out in the 2003 preseason, Staley divided the ball-carrying duties with Westbrook and Buckhalter when he returned to the team. At the end of the year, he signed a free-agent contract with the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Vincent, one of the most popular players in franchise history, was one of the NFL's top cornerbacks for most of his eight-year career in Philadelphia. A five-time Pro Bowl participant, Vincent signed with the Buffalo Bills before the 2004 season.

Taylor, who was often overshadowed by Dawkins and Vincent in one of the NFL's best defensive backfields, spent nine years with the Eagles before signing with the Seattle Seahawks after the 2003 season. He was named to the Pro Bowl in 2002.

As every Eagles fan knows, it was a maddening, frustrating journey to the Super Bowl. In 2001, the Eagles captured their first NFC East title in 13 years and surprised everyone by making it to the NFC Championship game for the first time since 1980, only to lose to the eventual Super Bowl champion Rams, in St. Louis, 29–24. The Birds battled back from a 12-point deficit with less



Donovan McNabb was Andy Reid's first draft pick in 1999, and he appeared in more Pro Bowls (five) than any other quarterback in Eagles history.



The Eagles' skillful handling of the salary cap allowed them to sign free-agent defensive end Jevon Kearse.

than seven minutes left in the game and came within 48 yards of tying the score when McNabb threw a last-minute interception on fourth down. Vincent, the Eagles' best cornerback, was forced to leave the game early with a groin injury.

In 2002, this time heavily favored, the Eagles were shocked by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, 27–10, in the NFC title game, the last contest ever played at Veterans Stadium. With less than four minutes left, Ronde Barber shattered the Eagles' dreams of a comeback by intercepting a McNabb pass and returning it 92 yards for a touchdown.

In 2003, it was the Carolina Panthers who upset the Eagles, 14–3, in the first NFC Championship game ever played at Lincoln Financial Field. The Eagles missed the multifaceted offensive skills of Westbrook, who was sidelined with a torn tendon in his left arm. McNabb completed only 10 of 22 passes for 100 yards and threw three interceptions before leaving the game with a rib injury.

The sting of dropping three straight NFC Championship games was extremely painful. Asked how long it would take to get over the third one, the loss to Carolina, wide receiver James Thrash said, "Probably forever."

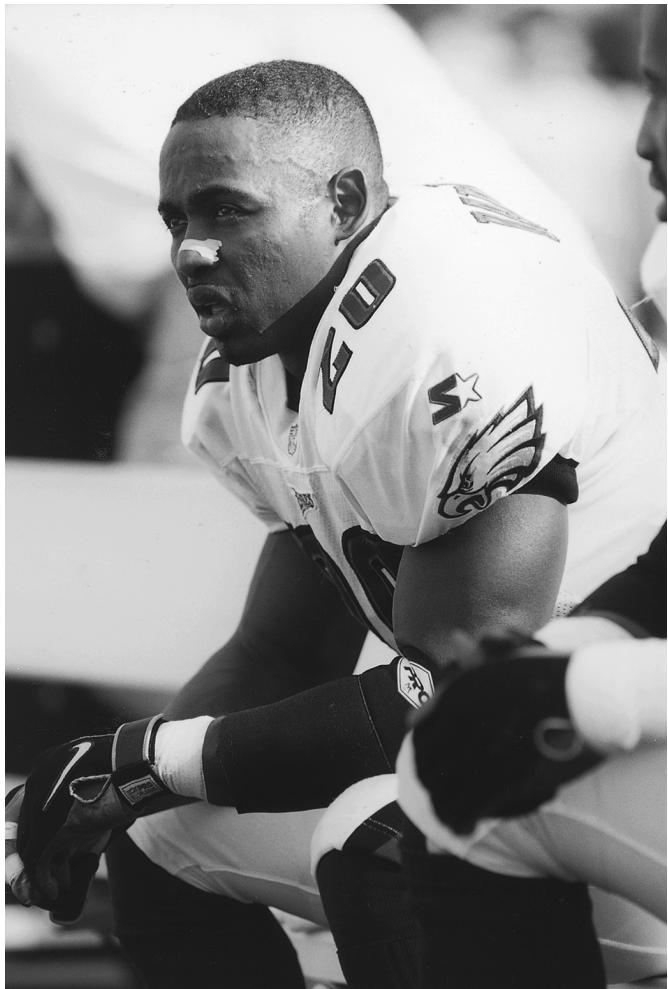
Still, after each championship game loss, Reid refused to make excuses. He didn't blame the injuries. He didn't blame

his players. He blamed himself, saying, "I didn't do a good enough job. I have to do better."

That 2003 season started terribly as the Eagles dropped their first two games to Tampa Bay and New England. Fans were booing McNabb and calling for Feeley, the backup quarterback. The turning point of the season came in Game Six when Westbrook ran a punt back 84 yards for a touchdown with 94 seconds left against the New York Giants. Westbrook's heroics turned an apparent 10–7 loss into a miraculous 14–10 victory. Instead of staggering out of the Meadowlands with a 2–4 record, the rejuvenated Eagles went on to win nine straight games and take the Eastern Division crown for the third consecutive season.

Finally, after the 2004 season and six years after Reid was named head coach, the Eagles were in the Super Bowl following the most successful regular season in their history. No Eagles team before had won 13 games. No NFC East team had swept all six regular-season division games as the Eagles did in 2004. The team also finished with the best record in the conference for the third straight year.

"The Philadelphia Eagles are the standard right now," said New York Giants coach Tom Coughlin after the Eagles clinched



Safety Brian Dawkins was the emotional leader of the Eagles defense.

their fourth-straight Eastern Division title. "And teams are constantly trying to look at the Eagles in the off-season and trying to find ways to become more competitive and to close that gap."

By the end of the 2004 regular season, Reid had passed Hall of Famer Greasy Neale and established himself as the most successful Eagles coach in the club's history. He had more wins than any other NFL coach over that span and had become the first coach ever to lead the Eagles to four straight NFC Championship games.

"God knows what would have happened if we were wrong," Lurie told *Philadelphia Daily News* sportswriter Mark Kram. Lurie thought back to the days immediately following Reid's hiring, when the Eagles were roundly criticized for being cheap and clueless. "I remember someone saying, 'How is he going to address the whole team when he has never even addressed the whole offense?'"

"Andy's a perfect fit for the city of Philadelphia," said TV analyst Troy Aikman, the former Dallas Cowboys quarterback. "He has the right demeanor for the job and doesn't let things affect him. He has strong convictions, believes in what he's doing, and doesn't waver."

Before the 2004 season, the Eagles resolved their most glaring offensive and defensive weaknesses by obtaining two of the NFL's top players. On March 3, Kearse, the All-Pro defensive end from the Tennessee Titans, signed an eight-year contract. Then, on March 16, All-Pro wide receiver Terrell Owens was acquired in a complicated three-team trade involving the Baltimore Ravens and San Francisco 49ers.

Kearse, one of the league's most disruptive pass rushers, improved the Eagles' defensive unit considerably.

Owens scored three touchdowns in his first regular-season game with the Eagles and provided the big-play dimension that the team had missed for years. He was tied for the NFL lead with 14 touchdowns when he suffered a severe high ankle sprain and fractured fibula during a Week 15 contest against Dallas.

Owens made a miraculous recovery in time for the Super Bowl, where he put on one of the most courageous performances in NFL history. Playing against doctors' advice, with two surgical screws in his right ankle, T. O. caught nine passes for 122 yards—all in a losing cause as the Eagles came up short against the New England Patriots.

Afterward, Owens insisted he didn't feel any pain. "I just feel bad that we lost the game," T. O. explained. "Nobody in this room thought I could play this game, but nobody knew but me. I tried to tell people from day one that I would play, but nobody wanted to listen."

By the time the Eagles made their run to the Super Bowl in 2004, 14 players had been on their roster for all four NFC Championship games: Akers, the place-kicker; long-snapper Mike Bartrum; free safety Dawkins; quarterbacks Detmer and McNabb; center Hank Fraley; defensive end Kalu (who was on injured reserve in 2004); tight end Chad Lewis; wide receivers Freddie Mitchell and Todd Pinkston; defensive tackles Corey Simon and Darwin Walker; and offensive tackles Tra Thomas and Runyan.



Terrell Owens and Donovan McNabb were double trouble for opposing defenses in 2004 as they combined for 14 touchdowns.



In Super Bowl XXXIX, Terrell Owens returned to action after missing six weeks with a fractured fibula, and he caught nine passes for 122 yards.

Another six players were on the Eagles roster all four seasons but missed one or more NFC Championship games because of injuries: running back Buckhalter, defensive end Derrick Burgess, defensive tackle Paul Grasmanis, offensive guard Jermaine Mayberry, linebacker Ike Reese, and defensive tackle Hollis Thomas.

The Eagles finally reached the Super Bowl with McNabb, Westbrook, and Owens leading an offense that led the NFC in red-zone scoring, producing a touchdown 63.8 percent of the time in the regular season.

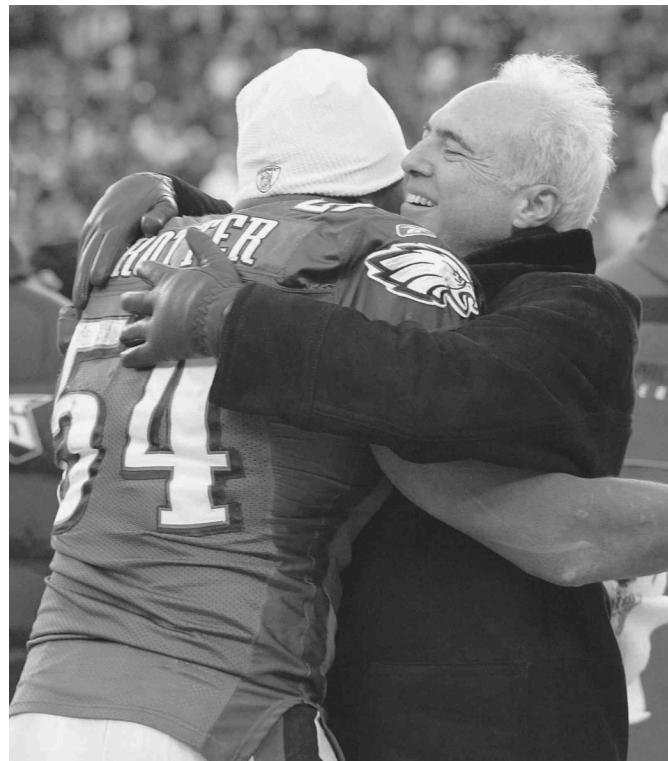
With Buckhalter out for the season with a knee injury, Westbrook, who played Division I-AA football at Villanova, did an outstanding job as featured back, leading all NFL running backs with 73 receptions and 703 yards.

"He creates more mismatch problems than any other player on the field," said Fox TV analyst Cris Collinsworth. "For a quarterback, what greater luxury is there than to have a guy like Brian Westbrook, who can catch the football, make somebody miss, and add 10 yards to your stats?"

Before going down with the broken leg, Owens had already set Eagles club records with those 14 touchdown catches as well as club records for seven games of 100 or more yards and five consecutive 100-yard outings.

Other major contributors to the offense in 2004 were running back Dorsey Levens, an 11-year veteran who led the Eagles with four rushing touchdowns; wide receiver Pinkston, the club leader with 575 receiving yards and 16 yards per catch in 2003; and wideout Mitchell, who had kept the 2003 season alive for the Eagles by catching a 28-yard pass from McNabb on a fourth-and-26 play against Green Bay in the NFC playoffs.

They reached the Super Bowl with a tight end tandem of Lewis, second-year player L. J. Smith, and Bartrum, the



Linebacker Jeremiah Trotter (hugging owner Jeffrey Lurie) was welcomed back to the team in 2004 after two seasons in Washington. Trotter regained his starting position at mid-season and earned his third trip to the Pro Bowl.

Excerpt • Temple University Press

long-snapper. Lewis suffered a foot injury while catching a fourth-quarter touchdown pass against the Atlanta Falcons in the NFC Championship game and missed the Super Bowl. Smith led all NFL rookie tight ends in receiving yardage in 2003. Bartrum had the good fortune of playing on teams that made the postseason playoffs in 10 of his first 11 NFL seasons.

They finally reached the Big Game with an offensive line that protected McNabb well, allowing only 37 sacks during the regular season—Fraley, the center; guards Hicks and Mayberry; and tackles Runyan and Thomas. Mayberry was shifted from left guard to right guard after Shawn Andrews, the first-round draft choice, suffered a broken leg on opening day.

They finally did it with a defensive line, spearheaded by Kearse, which allowed the club to rotate fresh linemen into the game. Other starters included right end Burgess, who returned after two injury-plagued seasons to shine in the NFC playoffs, and veteran tackles Simon, who emerged as one of the team's all-time career sack leaders, and Walker, who was a valuable waiver pickup in 2000.

"We always said that we like to throw fastballs at the offense," said Reid of Kearse and his defensive line before the 2004 season. "Now we have Nolan Ryan."

Back in the rotation was Douglas, the defensive end who spent five years with the Eagles before signing with Jacksonville in 2003. After an unhappy season with the Jaguars, Douglas jumped at the chance to rejoin his former teammates in Philadelphia, even in a part-time role.

The Eagles reached the Super Bowl with a veteran linebacker corps headed by Trotter, who was named to the Pro Bowl even though he didn't start until Game Nine. Mark Simo-

neau, who moved to the weak side to make room for Trotter, led the Eagles in tackles with 149 in 2003. Dhani Jones, one of the team leaders in tackles and hurries, started at the strong side, with Reese, a Pro Bowl selection, playing in the nickel package.

They did it with the second-youngest secondary in the NFL; the average age of the Eagles' nine defensive backs was 24.1 years. Dawkins, the team's defensive MVP, was the oldest, at 31. Every other defensive player was 25 or younger, including Sheppard and Brown, who exhibited excellent play-making ability as full-time starters, and strong safety Michael Lewis, who led the team with 129 tackles.

Finally, they did it with outstanding special teams. Akers, who led the NFC in scoring in 2004 with 122 points including an NFL-record 17 field goals of 40 yards or more, shared club special-teams MVP honors with Reese. Punter Dirk Johnson contributed two clutch punts of 40 and 39 yards into the wind to help keep the Atlanta Falcons on their heels in the NFC Championship game.

The makeup of the roster in 2004 was another indication of the Eagles' outstanding personnel management: 28 players obtained through drafts, 28 signed as free agents, five picked up off the waiver wire, and two acquired through trades.

If there was a defining moment to the 2004 season, it occurred after the Eagles fell from the unbeaten ranks with a 27–3 loss at Pittsburgh. After the Steelers scored on their first three drives and trampled the Birds with 252 rushing yards, Jim Johnson inserted Trotter into the lineup at middle linebacker. Trotter had started only one other game, at Cleveland two weeks earlier when he replaced the injured Simoneau.



Owner Jeffrey Lurie is awash in confetti as he talks with Terry Bradshaw after the 2004 NFC Championship win over Atlanta.

Trotter had left the team after a bitter contract dispute following the 2001 season. After two unproductive years in Washington, he was cast adrift by the Redskins. Trotter picked up the phone and called Reid before the 2004 training camp. The two mended fences, and Trotter worked his way up from special teams into the first defensive unit.

Before Trotter's promotion to the starting lineup, the Birds' previous four opponents had averaged 172 yards on the ground. In the next six weeks, the Eagles went unbeaten and allowed only 83.5 yards a game and seven touchdowns. Their run defense improved from 27th to 11th. Even though he didn't start until the second half of the season, Trotter was one of ten Eagles players named to the Pro Bowl, in Hawaii. He was joined by Akers (third Pro Bowl), Dawkins (fourth), Michael Lewis (first), McNabb (fifth), Reese (first), Sheppard (first), Tra Thomas (third), Westbrook (first), and Owens (fifth), who did not play because of his injury.

By the time the Eagles reached the 2004 NFC playoffs, they were prepared and confident. They outscored their two opponents, the Minnesota Vikings and Atlanta Falcons, by a combined 54–24 score, and Reid finally had something to celebrate.

"It was a great feeling," Reid said after his players were showered with green, silver, and white confetti as they paraded the George S. Halas Trophy around Lincoln Financial Field following the 27–10 triumph over the Falcons in the NFC Championship game.

"Really, with about two minutes left, the place erupted. The players felt it. I think it even makes it more worthwhile that we had to do it four times to get over the hump."

If anyone had the right to gloat or to feel highly vindicated, it was Lurie, who endured so much criticism in the early years. But Lurie told *Philadelphia Inquirer* sportswriter Shannon Ryan he didn't really get any extra gratification from finally making it to the Super Bowl.

"Honestly, I'm very confident in our strategies and the people around us," Lurie explained. "Our strategies never related to what was meant to be popular. I always felt that our decisions had to be best for the franchise and they often were very unpopular. If you want to succeed in the NFL with this salary cap, you have to make unpopular decisions."

When he took over the club in 1994, Lurie was appalled by the decaying conditions of Veterans Stadium, the lack of first-class training and practice facilities, and just about everything about the franchise he had inherited.

Early on, Lurie and Banner were ridiculed for almost every decision they made. The two boyhood friends from New England were accused of running the franchise like a fantasy football team. Some of their own staff accused them of meddling and interfering with football decisions.

When they gave Rhodes complete control over player personnel, the club was torn by dissension and finger-pointing and the team won only nine games the following two seasons. The media scoffed when Lurie proclaimed the Eagles franchise would become the "Gold Standard" of the NFL.

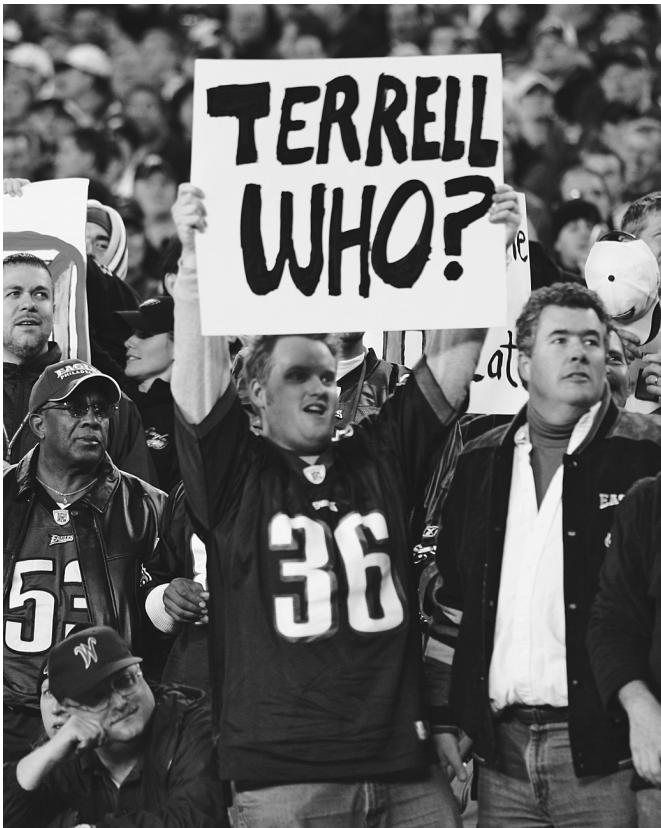
One of their first priorities was to erase the perception that the Eagles organization was unwilling to spend the money required to win. They chartered bigger and better planes. They put the team up in better hotels, and they upgraded the quality of food at pregame meals.

"We believed that we had to do things in a first-class manner," Banner told Rosabeth Moss-Kanter, author of *Confidence: How Winning Streaks and Losing Streaks Begin and End*. "We went overboard in size and quality in the beginning."

Shortly after assuming control, Lurie and Banner flew to San Francisco to consult with 49ers coach Bill Walsh and other officials of the league's top franchise at the time—a team headed to its third Super Bowl championship in the previous seven



Vindication: Donovan McNabb
McNabb basks in the glow of his first NFC Championship.
"It's just a great feeling for the city of Philadelphia," he said. "We know what happened in the last three years."



The love affair between Eagles fans and Terrell Owens ended in 2005.

years. Lurie told sportswriter Paul Domowitch that the 49ers had impressed him more than any other NFL franchise. "They made outside-the-box decisions," Lurie explained. "They consistently went into every season with the intention of winning the championship. They did things first-class in every way. I just liked the way they operated. It was an upbeat, dynamic, high-energy organization with expectations to be the best every year."

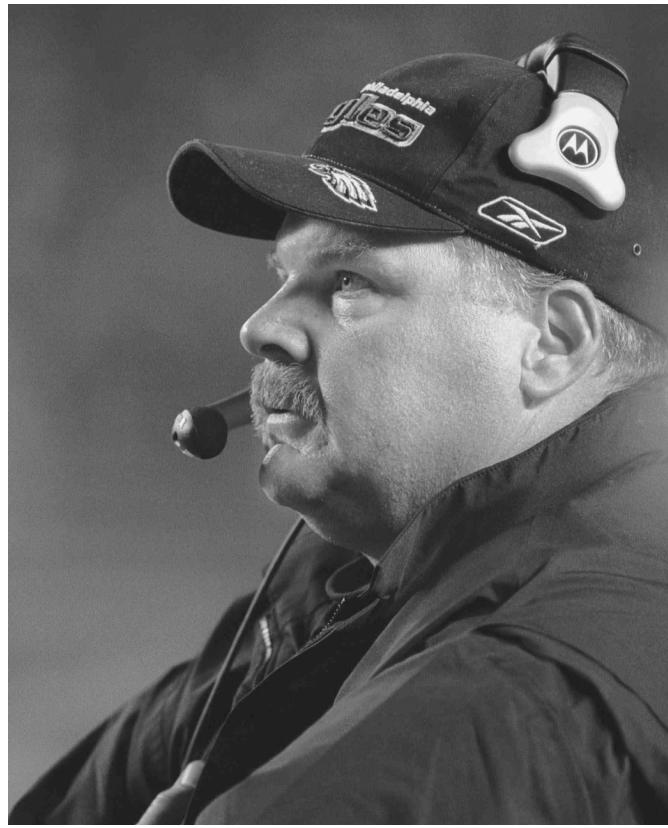
Then came the two key components vital to transforming the Eagles into an elite NFL franchise: the \$37 million NovaCare Complex opened in March 2001 and the \$512 million Lincoln Financial Field was completed two years later.

The ultramodern, 108,000-square-foot NovaCare Complex houses the Eagles' indoor and outdoor practice areas, state-of-the-art medical and training facilities, and the club's executive offices. It is considered one of the finest facilities of its kind in professional sports.

The construction of Lincoln Financial Field began in 2001. On September 8, 2003, about 28 months later, the magnificent stadium with a seating capacity of 68,532 opened. Just 17 months later, it hosted the NFC Championship party.

The Eagles lost to New England, 24–21, in Super Bowl XXXIX, but they went into the 2005 season confident they could pick up where they left off the previous year. It wasn't to be.

Before the season ever started, a contract dispute led to the trade of defensive tackle Corey Simon. Westbrook complained of feeling "disrespected" when the front office failed to offer him a new deal. Buckhalter and wide receiver Todd Pinkston were



Andy Reid's 14-year run as head coach in Philadelphia ended painfully as the team went 4–12 in 2012.

lost for the year with injuries. Defensive end Jerome McDougle was also lost after he was shot in an attempted carjacking.

"A lot of strange things," said cornerback Sheldon Brown.

But the strangest was the very public battle that drove Owens and the Eagles organization apart. Owens was in the second year of a seven-year, \$48.9 million contract, but after burning up the league in 2004 and playing through his injury in the Super Bowl, Owens felt he deserved a new deal. Banner, who handled those matters, said no.

Owens, with agent Drew Rosenhaus alongside, took on the Eagles, criticizing everyone from the front office to the coaching staff to his own teammates. He reported to training camp but refused to speak to most of the coaches, including Childress. He was so disruptive that Reid sent him home for a week. Owens made a joke of it, playing hoops in the driveway of his South Jersey home and doing sit-ups while answering questions from TV news crews.

Owens came back and played the first seven regular-season games, catching 47 passes and scoring six touchdowns, but he still wasn't happy. The front office was not bending on his contract demands, and McNabb made it clear he wasn't getting involved, saying it was none of his business. Owens felt the quarterback let him down, and it drove a wedge between the two men who had teamed so brilliantly the year before.

In an interview with ESPN, Owens called McNabb a hypocrite and said the team would be undefeated (instead of 4–3) if it had Brett Favre playing quarterback. Reid felt the situation was unsalvageable at that point, and he suspended Owens.

Initially, it was a four-game suspension, but the Eagles had no intention of bringing Owens back. He was gone, but the damage was done. The team won just two of its last ten games, falling from first place to last in the NFC East.

"This is a unique situation, the most bizarre I've ever seen in my 32 years around pro football," said Ron Jaworski, the former Eagles quarterback. "I've always believed the teams that handle distractions the best usually end up being championship teams. To me, it is crystal clear this team has been adversely affected by what has happened around it. Despite organizational denials, player denials, it's clear to me they lacked focus this season."

"I've always said with [Owens] on the field we can do remarkable things," McNabb told ESPN. "We could have set records, and that was something I looked forward to doing, winning Super Bowls together. But it just continued to go in the wrong direction. It was, like, this ain't going to work at all."

The Eagles, Reid, and McNabb never recaptured the mojo of 2004. Over the next eight seasons, the team made the playoffs four times but only advanced to the conference championship game once. That was in 2008, when the team rebounded from a 5–5–1 start (which led to Reid benching McNabb in one loss) to catch fire, qualify for the playoffs on the final day of the regular season, and then defeat Minnesota and the Giants before losing the conference final in Arizona, 32–25.

Jim Johnson died of cancer just as the 2009 summer camp was beginning. It was a terrible blow, one the team could not

overcome. Without his master defensive strategist, Reid saw his defense unravel. Losing Dawkins, the unit's emotional leader, to Denver in free agency hurt on the field and in the locker room.

Other assistant coaches left for other opportunities. Harbaugh became head coach in Baltimore and won a Super Bowl. Ron Rivera became head coach in Carolina and led the Panthers to the playoffs in 2013. Pat Shurmur became head coach in Cleveland. Steve Spagnuolo won a Super Bowl ring as defensive coordinator of the Giants. Childress and Leslie Frazier went to Minnesota. Reid filled the slots but could not replace what was lost in quality, and the team suffered.

In 2010, the Eagles traded McNabb to Washington and Michael Vick, whom they signed after a two-year imprisonment, stepped in at quarterback, and led the team to the post-season. The following year, they went on a spending spree, signing a number of marquee free agents including defensive back Nnamdi Asomugha, defensive linemen Cullen Jenkins and Jason Babin, running back Ronnie Brown, and receiver Steve Smith.

Quarterback Vince Young, another splashy signing, called it a "Dream Team." It proved to be an expensive failure. The Eagles were 8–8 in 2011 and fell apart completely the following year, finishing 4–12. Reid was fired the day after the last game a humiliating 42–7 loss to the New York Giants. He ended his 14 seasons in Philadelphia with a record of 140 wins, 102 losses, and one tie.