SPORTS

Minnesota 'D' makes strides under Zimmer

STAFF PHOTO BY KEVIN BONESKE

At center, Bears tight end Martellus Bennett (83) is in the grasp of Vikings cornerback Captain Munnerlyn (24) with safety Harrison Smith (22) also in pursuit in Sunday's game at TCF Bank Stadium.

EDEN PRAIRIE (AP) — The Minnesota Vikings had just finished a mediocre season with a modest victory over a last-place team, hardly a setting where raw emotion was expected.

Yet there was coach Mike Zimmer, when asked specifically at his postgame news conference about the improvement made by second-year cornerback Xavier Rhodes, pausing briefly for composure.

The gruff, demanding Zimmer's voice cracked as he carefully revealed how Rhodes approached him in the locker room with gratitude for his tutelage and guidance.

"He's got a chance to be a really good football player," Zimmer said, after Rhodes stifled Chicago wide receiver Alshon Jeffery throughout the win Sunday over the Bears.

For all the dissatisfaction Zimmer expressed in his team's performance during his first season as a head coach, that competitive drive keeping him restless as the Vikings wobbled their way to a 7-9 finish, he was clearly moved by the sign of a young player finding his groove at a difficult position.

One of the early themes associated with Zimmer and his coaching style, which will ultimately have a significant influence on his success, was his self-described pride in being "a fixer."

There was a lot to fix when he took over nearly a year ago, particularly with a defense that gave up an NFL-worst average of 30 points per game, and upgrades are needed still in several areas.

This group, though, was unquestionably better in 2014. Player after player, in interviews Monday during the annual cubicle clean-out at the team facility, pointed to Zimmer for the progress.

"He's brought a completely different tone around here of just being professional, playing aggressive, tough, disciplined football," safety Harrison Smith said.

Zimmer had been an assistant coach in the league for 20 years, including 14 as a defensive coordinator, before accepting this job. The word was out. There were no secrets. The Vikings knew they were getting an intense, hard-nosed new boss.

"That's the type of coach he is, but at the same time he's one of those guys that you immediately fall in love with and you immediately want to run through a brick wall for because he seems to know when he needs to take care of guys and when he needs to push guys," defensive end Brian Robison said.

The Vikings finished 11th in the NFL with an average of 21.4 points per game allowed, better than seven of the 12 teams that made the playoffs. They were 14th with an average of 344.7 yards per game given up, better than five playoff teams. They tied for ninth with 41 sacks.

"Not that we're where we want to be, but it's trending that way," Smith said.

The Vikings struggled in several games to stop the run, so better tackling will be high on the to-do list for 2015. Takeaways will be as well, since the Vikings forced only 19 turnovers to rank tied for 25th in the league.

There were late lapses that led to losses, such as the winning touchdown drive by the Bills in Buffalo that featured a fourth-and-20 conversion and the 30-point second-half by the Dolphins at Miami.

Adjusting to the assignments of the new scheme took time, too. Cornerback Captain Munnerlyn acknowledged not listening as much as he should have to Zimmer.

"It's all about trust. When they tell me to do this, do that, even though I've been in the league for a while, I still start to question, 'Man, why do you want me to do this?"' Munnerlyn said. "Just go out there and do it."

For all the mistakes and disappointments, though, there were just as many success stories. Rookie linebacker Anthony Barr had several strong games before hurting his knee. Defensive end Everson Griffen was a force at times in his first season as a starter. Rhodes tied for fourth in the NFL with 18 passes defensed.

"He was just a big piece of clay, really, that had a ton of ability," Zimmer said.

There's more left to mold in his second year.

Bears fire GM Phil Emery, coach Marc Trestman

LAKE FOREST, Ill. (AP) — Fans were fed up and so was the team's matriarch.

The Chicago Bears made sweeping changes on Monday, firing general manager Phil Emery and coach Marc Trestman after missing the playoffs for the seventh time in eight years.

Trestman is out after going 13-19 in two seasons while Emery lasted just three years. The Bears went 5-11 in a mostly miserable season, never challenging for the NFC North lead after the first few weeks as quarterback Jay Cutler and the rest of the offense struggled mightily.

"We expect excellence," chairman George McCaskey said.

What they got was something different, and even McCaskey's mother, Virginia McCaskey, had enough.

"She's (ticked) off," George McCaskey said after about a 10-second pause when asked about his mother. "I can't think of a 91-year-old woman that that description would apply to, but in this case, I can't think of a more accurate description. She's been on this Earth for eight of the Bears' nine championships, and she wants more. She feels that it's been too long since the last one, and that dissatisfaction is shared by her children, her grandchildren and her great grandchildren. She's fed up with mediocrity. She feels that she and Bears fans everywhere deserve better."

It was clear as the season wore on, with fan unrest growing, that change was coming. The question was how far up the ladder it would go.

The Bears also fired offensive coordinator Aaron Kromer.

The Bears hired former New York Giants general manager Ernie Accorsi as a consultant to help with the search for a general manager and coach.

But ultimately, it will be McCaskey and President and CEO Ted Phillips making the call.

"This job was an opportunity of a lifetime," Emery said in a brief session with reporters. "My only regret is that we didn't win enough games for that opportunity to continue."

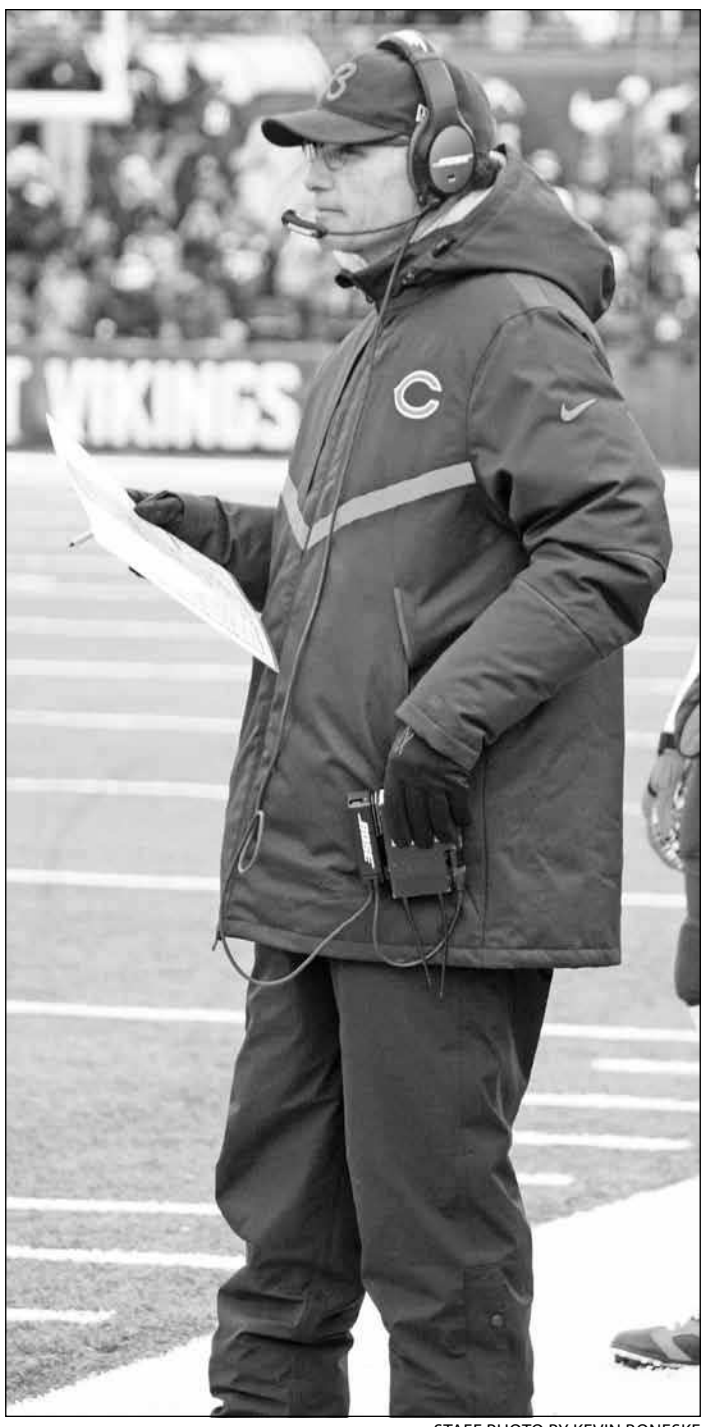
Emery did not take questions from reporters.

Trestman, in a statement issued through the team, thanked the McCaskey family for the opportunity to coach the Bears.

McCaskey said he is happy with the current chain of command, which has the coach reporting to the GM and the GM to the president. He said the McCaskey family has "complete faith" in Phillips but did not rule out the possibility of removing him from the football side of the operation.

Phillips said there is no timeline for the hires but did say the Bears would move with a "sense of urgency." Accorsi has already provided a list of GM candidates. The Bears did not rule out hiring a coach first.

The new GM and coach have a big decision to make with quarterback Jay Cutler. He tied Philip Rivers for the league lead with 18 interceptions after signing a $126 million, seven-year contract at the end of last season.



STAFF PHOTO BY KEVIN BONESKE

Bears head coach Marc Trestman stands along the sideline in Sunday's game at TCF Bank Stadium. Trestman lost his job the day after the season-ending 13-9 loss to the Vikings.

The deal, which guaranteed $54 million, would make him difficult if not impossible to trade. Cutting him is also a possibility.

Phillips said that will be up to the new GM and coach. But McCaskey insisted he does not regret giving Cutler that huge deal.

"That was a decision that Phil made with our approval," he said.

Phillips said he does not expect any players to meet with potential coaching candidates as Cutler did during the last search.

The house cleaning was certainly not what the Bears envisioned with a prolific offense returning intact and a rebuilt defense in tow. But little went right for Chicago this season.

There were distractions throughout the year, whether it was linebacker Lance Briggs being allowed to miss practice to open a restaurant in California the week of the opener, Kromer admitting he was the NFL Network's source behind a critical report of Cutler late in the season or Cutler getting benched in favor Jimmy Clausen late in the season.

Trestman surprised some by allowing star receiver Brandon Marshall to fly to New York on a weekly basis to record Showtime's "Inside the NFL." Marshall, who is open about his struggles with borderline personality disorder, had an off year and at one point gave a rambling news conference over past allegations of domestic abuse.

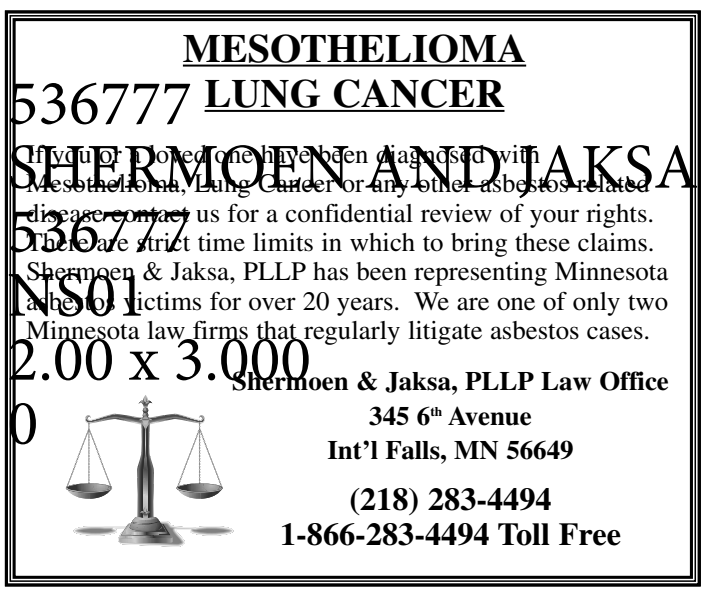
Marshall also challenged a Detroit fan on Twitter to a boxing match for charity, and reporters standing in the hallway overheard him screaming in the locker room after a loss to Miami at Soldier Field in October that raised all sorts of questions about where the team was headed.

"We didn't have a successful year as players. So the coaches didn't have a successful year," tight end Martellus Bennett said. "I think everybody has their hand in the pot. And the gumbo doesn't taste that great when everybody's hand is in the pot."

As for Emery, the decision to replace Lovie Smith with Trestman — who at times seemed overmatched in his first NFL head coaching job after winning two titles with the CFL's Montreal Alouettes — backfired. The fact that the man he passed over for the job, Bruce Arians, led Arizona to the playoffs made it even worse.

Giving Cutler a big contract after last season when the franchise player tag was an option is looking like another mistake. Emery did have success rebuilding the offensive line before the 2013 season.

But the makeover he gave the defense, bringing in Jared Allen among others, last offseason did not pay off. The Bears allowed 442 points, the second most in franchise history behind a team-record 478 last season. They joined the 1923 Rochester Jeffersons as the only teams to give up 50 or more in back-to-back games.

Emery also had a spotty draft record.

"Something has to change," veteran cornerback Tim Jennings said. "I'm not surprised by it. I mean, hopefully it will be a good one this time."