

# A Reversal of FORTUNE

**THIS SEASON, THE NEW YORK JETS HAVE A REAL HEAD COACH, DEPTH AT EVERY POSITION AND A GOOD CHANCE AT ACTUALLY WINNING A FEW GAMES. HOW TIMES CHANGE.**

**I**T WAS ONLY APRIL, BUT THE BIG TUNA HAD ALREADY MADE A BIG IMPACT ON THE NEW YORK JETS' ORGANIZATION.

Three months before training camp even began, players hustled through the team's training facility and into the weight room as if their careers depended on it. Possibly because, for once, they actually did. Reporters stood outside in the freezing rain, waiting for comments from a coach too arrogant—or preoccupied—to talk and players too afraid to offer a statement that might offend their new leader.

Welcome to Camp Parcells. A place that features a boot-camp mentality and promotes the sort of winning atmosphere that has been absent at Weeb Ewbank Hall since Joe Namath led the upstart Jets to the greatest Super Bowl victory in league history back in '69.

Since then, the Jets, who won just four games during Rich Kotite's two-year reign as head coach, have managed to replace the Mets on the *Late Show With David Letterman* as the national symbol of athletic ineptitude. Last December, Letterman quipped: "Sunday's final game against the Dolphins will be played with a laugh track." And his No. 1 sign you won't be receiving a Christmas bonus? "You're the starting quarterback of the New York Jets."

But Letterman may have to change his monologues a bit this season. Kotite is gone, and a man called Tuna is the biggest fish in the Jets' organization. Bill Parcells' goal is the

Super Bowl, not to see his team reduced to a few gap-toothed one-liners. A crop of young players will be competing for roster spots under Parcells' watchful eye, trying to help the Jets reach the post-season for the first time since '91.

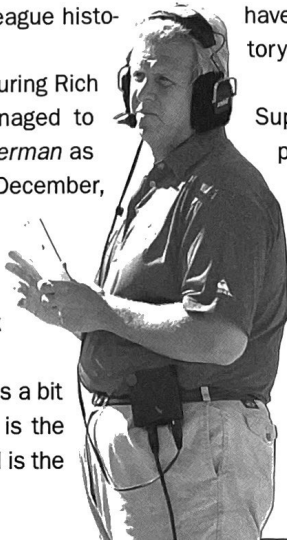
"I view this as a consummate challenge," says Parcells, who led the New England Patriots to the Super Bowl last season. "Hopefully, I can revitalize this franchise to the point where we can compete for the championship."

No one's laughing now. But even Parcells, the fourth most successful active coach (119-86-1) in the NFL, may have trouble turning things around. After all, New York has lost more games (254) than any other NFL franchise since the NFL-AFL merger in '70. The Jets have been flying so low for so long that they have produced only eight winning records in their 34-year history, failing to win a playoff game in the last 10 seasons.

"Anytime you have someone who's coming from the Super Bowl, has been in three Super Bowls, has turned two programs around—that's exciting," says second-year receiver Keyshawn Johnson, the team's marquee player. "He's told me that he's not into winning football games, he's into winning championships. That right there put a smile on my face."

After spending \$70 million on free agents in the winter of '95, the Jets enter the '97 season with salary-cap problems—but also with a core of young players who will join forces with the talented Johnson, the steady Neil O'Donnell and the speedy Adrian Murrell. They've revamped their

**by Grant Glickson**

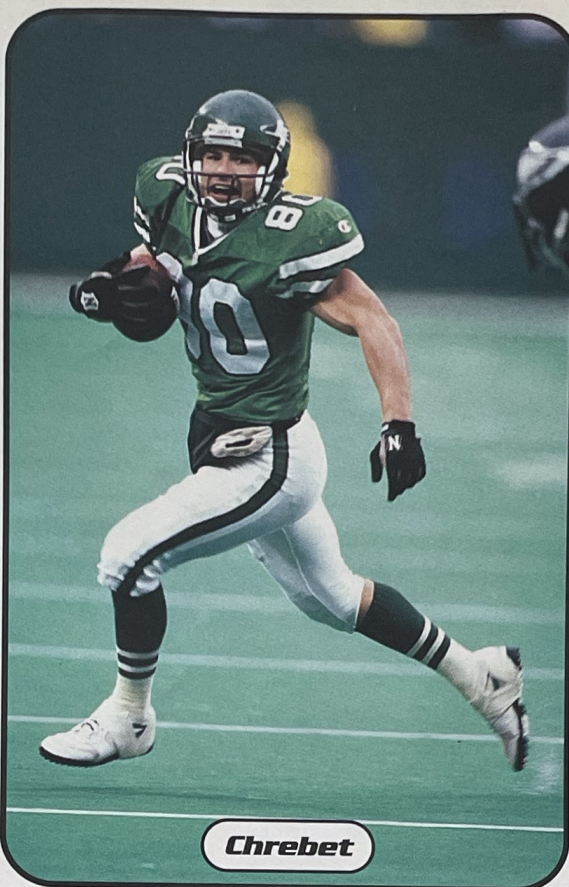


defense around Hugh Douglas, Aaron Glenn and Victor Green. With little money to spend and loads of holes to fill, the Jets, holding the draft's number-one pick, opted to trade it and turn it into seven draft choices. A bold move, but this Tuna is no chicken.

Overall, the Jets finished with 11 draft picks, having used seven of those on defense. Among the talented ball hawks taken were the No. 8 overall selection, linebacker James Farrior of Virginia, and the 32nd pick, Rick Terry, a 300-pound defensive lineman from North Carolina. The rooks will certainly complement Green, a strong safety who set a club record in tackles (207); Douglas, a defensive end who had eight sacks in 10 games, and Glenn, the '94 number-one pick out of Texas A&M.

"We went from laughingstocks the last two years to a legitimate football team," says defensive end Marvin Washington. "I'm happy for the Jets. We finally got someone who can help turn it around."

Farrior—who can rush the passer, play the run and drop into coverage with equal efficiency—is expected to unseat Marvin Jones, the team's often-injured former number-one pick ('93) for the weakside linebacker slot. Pepper Johnson, a member of Parcells' two Giants Super Bowl teams, will be calling the signals for the team's 3-4



Chrebet

844 yards and 8 touchdowns), Jeff Graham (50 receptions, 788 yards, 6 touchdowns) and Wayne Chrebet—whose 150 catches in his first two seasons set an NFL record—at his disposal, everything should be beau-

last season, is on its way in the form of 88th-overall pick Dedric Ward, a 5-9, 180-pound wide receiver and return specialist out of Northern Iowa. All Ward did in college was compile 3,876 yards—second in Division IAA history to a guy named Jerry Rice. "Once I touch the ball," says Ward, "I feel like I can get it to the end zone."

The rookies won't be the only ones getting used to their green helmets. The Jets lost 23 players to injuries last season for a total of 130 games—including \$25-million QB Neil O'Donnell, who barely had time to learn the playbook before being treated like a Slip 'N' Slide by every defensive lineman he faced. O'Donnell, who played only six games last year after signing that huge contract, still has to prove he's the marquee QB the Jets have been seeking since Namath.

O'Donnell looks forward to regaining the form that helped the Pittsburgh Steelers reach the Super Bowl two seasons ago, but if he can't get it done, he shouldn't blame his targets. With dangerous receivers Johnson (63 reception for

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defense from middle linebacker position, and Mo Lewis, the club's leader in tackles for three of the last five seasons, will man the strong side.

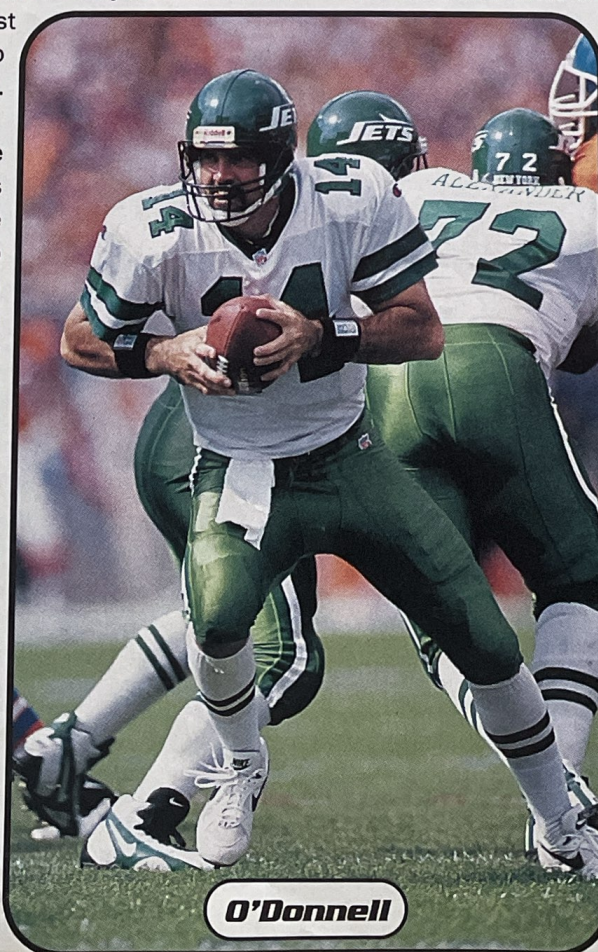
"I can spread a winning attitude," said the 32-year-old Johnson, who had 92 tackles in 11 games last season with the Detroit Lions. "I want to be the guy who can show them the way. I love the thrill of winning."

As for the extra beef on the defensive line, the Jets are hoping that ESPN's Mike Gottfried was on target when he trumpeted Terry as one of the draft's top steals, potentially better than Southern Cal's Darrell Russell, the No. 2 overall pick. The 6-4 Terry, a captain for the Tar Heels, registered 47 tackles last season, including three sacks and 15 1/2 stops for losses. During draft week, the Jets also gave the Philadelphia Eagles a seventh-round pick for Ronnie Dixon, another 300-pound lineman.

"We improved the size of our defensive front quite a bit," Parcells says. "I would have liked to get even more special-team players. When you have a poor defense, as the Jets had, then normally your special teams are lousy, too."

Help for the team's woeful kick return team, which was ranked 30th out of 30 teams in punt returns and 29th in kickoffs

tiful. That assumes they are all speaking to one another—in the off-season, Keyshawn threw a new book, *Just Give Me the Damn Ball! The Fast Times and Hard Knocks of an NFL Rookie*, at some of his teammates.



O'Donnell

He took some big shots at Hofstra alum Chrebet, calling the smallish receiver with the huge heart the "team mascot," and O'Donnell, whom he accused of faking a season-ending calf injury to save Ronnie Erhardt's job as offensive coordinator. Erhardt, now the team's special assistant, took the biggest hits of all. Lucky he's not setting the plays anymore, huh Key?

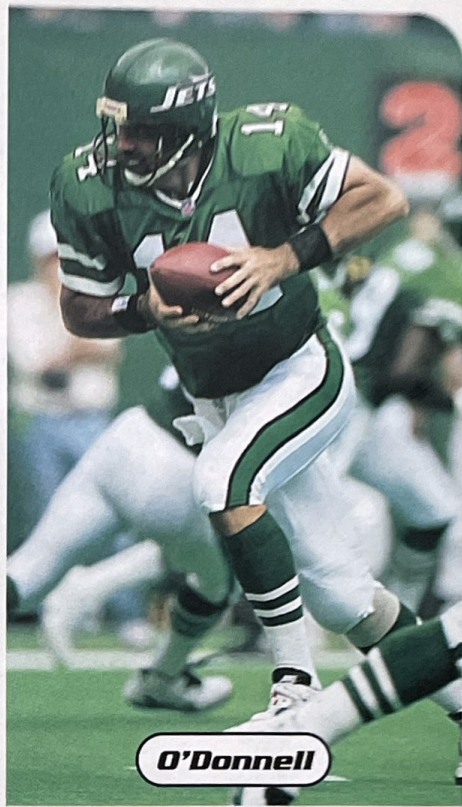
In the middle of all those receivers and controversy is the oft-maligned tight end, Kyle Brady, a former No. 1 draft pick whom most fans have considered a flop since he joined the team in '95. The 6-6, 260-pound Brady should benefit greatly from the presence of Parcells, who has a history of using tight ends as vital parts of his offense—remember Mark Bavaro?

"It's exciting for me and the rest of the tight ends, because Bill relies on his tight ends in his offense," Brady says. "I just want to come in and show what I can do and meet expectations."

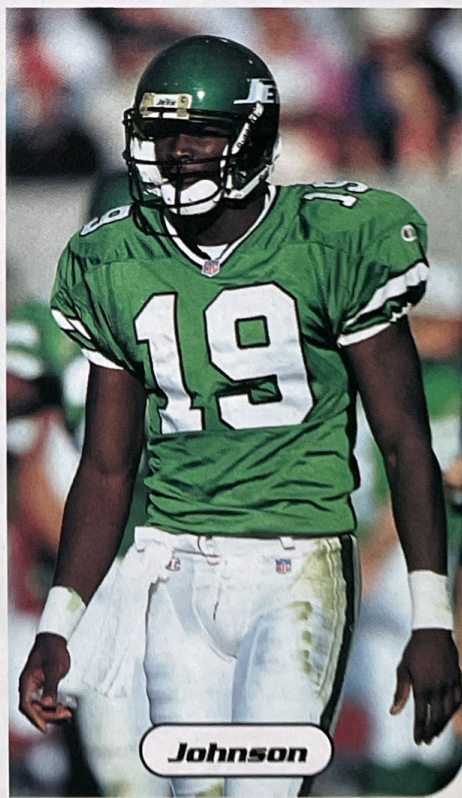
When Parcells was calling the shots in New England last season, he often praised Adrian Murrell as the most underrated back-



**Murrell**



**O'Donnell**



**Johnson**

in the AFC. Last season, Murrell became the third NFL running back in history to gain over 1,000 yards for a team that garnered only one victory. "We have high expectations for ourselves," says fellow running back Reggie Cobb. "On paper we were 1-15, but we were in just about every game. So we have to find a way to turn the corner and win those games."

The Way, everyone hopes, is Bill Parcells. Octogenarian owner Leon Hess didn't totter out and proclaim, "I want to win now," when Parcells was hired, but we all know he was thinking it. So is everyone else. Parcells has

done it before, with less talent. He should be able to do it again.

"The most important thing is that Parcells is going to build a winning organization," says Dave Jennings, the Jets' radio analyst. "I don't know how long it will take. But he will teach everybody how to win. And that's something they have not done in a long time."

Yes, it is true that not a single player on the current roster has ever played for a Jet team with a winning record. But with Parcells at the helm, the underachieving Jets should get off the ground quickly. Despite their dismal record

the last couple of seasons, the Jets' talent level is not as bad as those many losses indicated. The team, which lost seven games after leading at the half last season, was victimized by poor coaching, countless injuries, mental lapses and fourth-quarter collapses.

"We are coming from a long way back, and we have to work harder than any other team in the NFL to get where they are now," Douglas says. "But I honestly believe that the sky is the limit for us this year. With good leaders such as Bill and his coaching staff, there's nothing that we can't accomplish." **B**