The Cost of Winning in Detroit

By Sam Canfield
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On Sunday, November 1, Detroit Lions linebacker Jack Campbell nearly became a paraplegic.

Desperately trying to protect his team's 12-7 lead over the rival Vikings, Campbell attempted a routine third down tackle at Detroit's 25-yard line. When the dust settled, Minnesota had been stopped short, though Campbell remained motionless on the Ford Field turf, facedown, his body limp.

The shocking and horrific nature of the incident was apparent on his teammate's faces as he was stretchered out of Ford Field, exiting the tunnel for maybe the final time of his playing career. Campbell, only 26 years old, was a team captain, the defense's play-caller, an All-Pro first-teamer, and had never missed a game in his professional career. For any NFL player, that level of consistency and good health is quite impressive. If you're a Detroit Lion, it's damn near impossible.

The Lions' defensive unit has statistically been the most battered in the league for the last half-decade. In both 2024 and 2025, the Lions' defense ranked last in Adjusted Games Lost, a metric that measures total volume and quality of a team's missed playing time. In 2023, Detroit's defense was 9th-to-last, and in 2022 Detroit was the 6th-most injured team overall.

November 1st epitomized the inevitable and universal brutality the Lions defense can't seem to avoid. In the second quarter, DJ Wonnum was carted off with a nasty concussion after a friendly fire incident with Brian Branch (who also incurred a concussion). Rookie Jimmy Rolder tore his hamstring on the same play Campbell went down. The very next play, DJ Reed limped off the field with a hip injury after heroically deflecting a 4th-down pass.

So what the hell is going on?

Pondering the current state of the Lions, I think back to Head Coach Dan Campbell's (no relation to Jack) legendary first press conference back in 2021.

"So this team's gonna be built on — we're gonna kick you in the teeth, and when you punch us back we're gonna smile at you.

And when you knock us down, we're gonna get up. On the way up, we're gonna bite a kneecap off, and then it's gonna take two more shots to knock us down…

On the way up, we're gonna take your other kneecap, and it's gonna take three shots to get us down. Before long, we're gonna be the last ones standing. That's gonna be the mentality."

After a 3-13-1 debut season, Campbell had to endure skepticism from the media and from his players. In Hard Knocks Season 18, Campbell beseeched the Lions for their trust, defending his utilization of full-contact practices at the start of training camp.

“I had a couple of you look at me like, ‘What the f—k, why are we doing live?’ I don’t want to put anybody in jeopardy, but we have to do it, man!

If I absolutely knew we could get to where we need to get without ever putting pads on, I’d do it, I swear to you.”

And ever since that speech, the Lions have gotten much closer to where Dan wants them.

Four consecutive winning seasons. Back-to-back NFC North championships. A 15-win regular season. The first two playoff wins in more than 30 years. Jahmyr Gibbs. Amon-Ra St. Brown. Aidan Hutchinson. Penei Sewell. Jared Goff.

Jack Campbell.

With Dan’s namesake stitched onto his back and a previously impeccable participation record, Jack was *the* standard bearer for Detroit on defense. He represented everything Dan espoused on both sides of the ball: toughness, voracity and grit, no matter what.

Just five snaps before his ill-fated tackle, replay reveals Jack may have incurred incipient spinal damage leading with the crown of his head into Minnesota wide receiver Jauan Jennings. Both players take an extra second to pull themselves up after the helmet-to-helmet hit, and Campbell certainly doesn’t appear to be feeling pleasant. But he made the gritty, hard-nosed decision to stay in the game when he probably shouldn’t have.

Now, his teammates need to make some tough decisions about how *they* approach the game, after witnessing how horribly things can go wrong for the most dependable, durable and well-liked players.

At surface level, it feels like a lose-lose.

The Dan Campbell Way is producing results for a “cursed” franchise that squanders generational talent and always lets its city down. If a player were to play any less than their absolute bravest and best, that would mean betraying Dan, Jack, the team’s philosophy and an entire fanbase. On the other side of the coin, he could wind up betraying his own body, family and future.

How does a human being navigate such a narrow and risky middle ground?

Twenty years from now, Jack Campbell’s unintentional sacrifice might be remembered as a spark that propelled the Lions to their first ever Super Bowl, or it might be remembered as the beginning of the end of the Dan Campbell experiment. It could also be forgotten among all the other career-ending injuries football players have suffered.

As a diehard fan of Detroit, all three outcomes scare the living hell out of me.