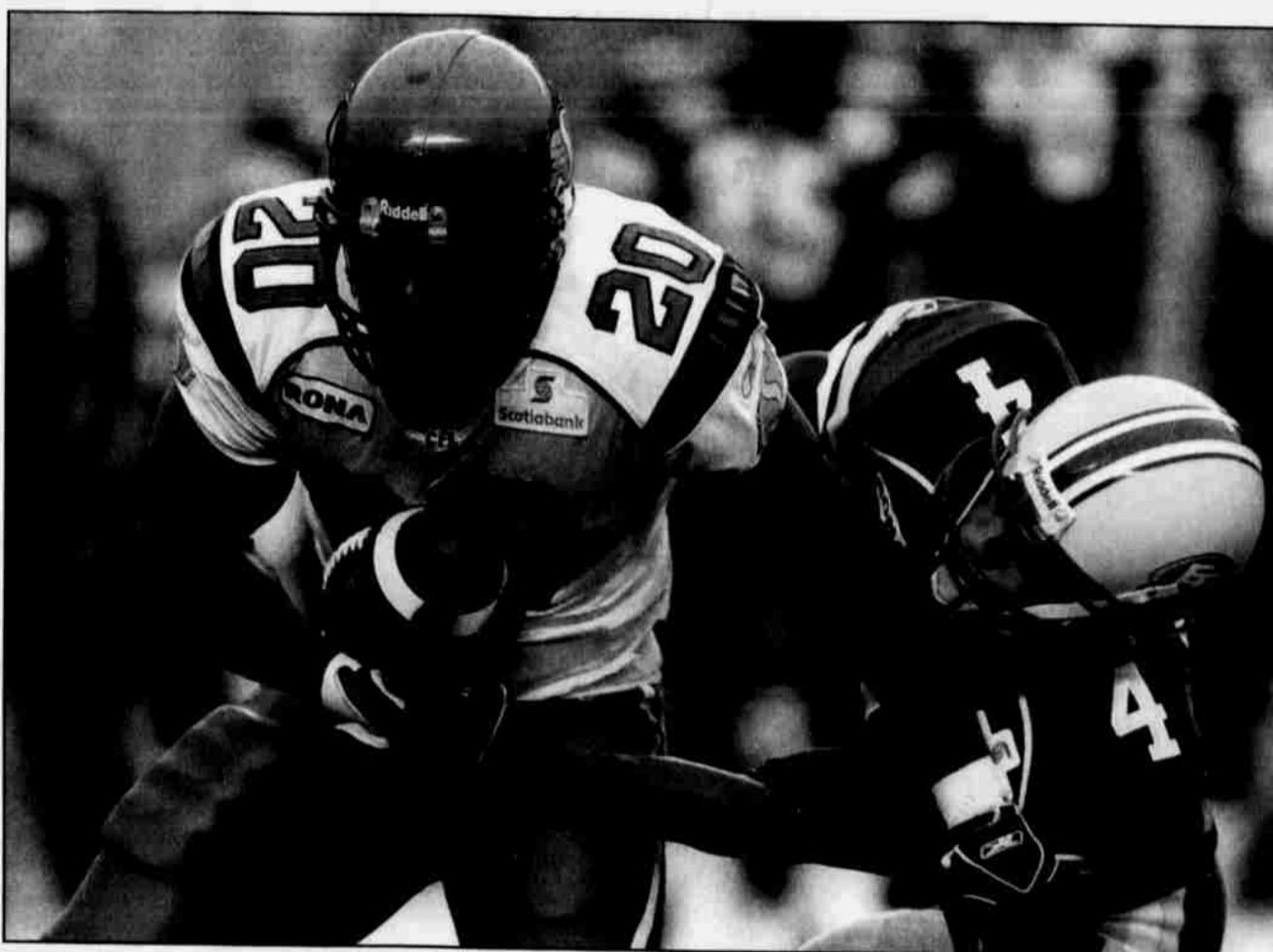


SASKATCHEWAN ROUGHRIDERS



Saskatchewan Roughriders' Wes Cates had 12 touchdowns while rushing for 1,229 yards despite missing three games with a left ankle sprain. Reuters

OPINION

The Riders weren't that bad this season

Considering the unresolved quarterbacking conundrum, the Saskatchewan Roughriders' 2008 season is aptly described as "incomplete."

The Roughriders were hoping to make franchise history by winning back-to-back Grey Cups for the first time. Instead, they held the dubious distinction of leading the CFL in starting quarterbacks, with four. Although the Roughriders won 12 games while starting Marcus Crandell, Darian Durant, Steven Jyles and Michael Bishop, the season ended ingloriously on Saturday when the B.C. Lions won the West Division semifinal, 33-12.



ROB VANSTONE

Since that eyesore, Riders fans have been grumbling more often than the Republican National Committee. Head coach Ken Miller prefers to be criticized for belatedly replacing Bishop, who was released on Monday. General manager Eric Tillman has also been subjected to second-guessing for a March 6 trade that sent quarterback Kerry Joseph — the CFL's most outstanding player in 2007 — to the Toronto Argonauts.

Those decisions are all delectable fodder for the critics. However, some of the frantic fans have gone far overboard while blasting the Riders' brass.

More than a few e-mailers have questioned the acumen of Tillman. They conveniently forget that Tillman has delivered 12-win campaigns and home playoff games in his two full seasons as Saskatchewan's general manager. In 2007, he played an integral role in bringing Saskatchewan its third Grey Cup title.

It was not an accident. Tillman also celebrated Grey Cup victories as the GM of the Lions (1994) and Argonauts (1997). So maybe, just maybe, he is the proud owner of a cerebrum. After enduring years of underachieving under Roy Shivers, *et al.*, Riders fans should never allow Tillman to pay for a meal.

And then there is the bleating about Miller. Some fans have opined that Miller should be canned for being exceedingly patient with Bishop on Saturday. It was not Miller's finest hour, but how about injecting some rationality into the equation?

Miller deserves to be a finalist for coach-of-the-year, yet some people would prefer coach-for-a-year. Huh? Despite encountering a series of adverse circumstances, Miller miraculously extracted 12 victories from a team that was widely expected to finish the 2008 season in the CFL's lower echelon.

For starters, he had the unenviable — make that impossible — task of replacing the iconic Kent Austin, who resigned on Jan. 16 to become the offensive coordinator at the University of Mississippi.

Not long after inheriting the head-coaching job, Miller found himself without a Grey Cup-winning, MVP quarterback (Joseph). The offseason exodus also included luminaries such as defensive end Fred Perry (who was traded to the Edmonton Eskimos), linebacker Reggie Hunt

See Vanstone on Page C2

Rating the Riders

By MURRAY McCORMICK
Leader-Post

Saskatchewan Roughriders head coach Ken Miller prefers to accentuate the positive aspects of the 2008 season.

Miller was reacting to a question about fullback Chris Szarka breaking his left fibula in the Riders' 33-12 loss to the B.C. Lions in the West Division semifinal.

Szarka was the eighth Rider to suffer a broken leg in 2008 and the injury seemed to sum up the season.

"I think a 12-6 record sums up our season," Miller said. "That's a positive note for us. We've achieved a lot this year and a broken leg is just another sign of something that we overcame."

The Riders posted a 12-6 mark, the first time they have recorded consecutive 12-win seasons since the 1967, 1968, 1969 and 1970 seasons. They persevered despite many injuries and a quarterback controversy that may have overwhelmed most teams.

Looking back, the Riders accomplished a great deal. They just didn't beat the Lions in the semifinal and their marks in a season-ending report card reflect that.

QUARTERBACKS

The Roughriders used four different quarterbacks en route to finishing second in the West. They helped the Riders record 12 wins and post a six-game winning streak to open the season but none emerged as a bona-fide starter. Marcus Crandell was released after the Riders acquired Michael Bishop, who was waived Monday after an inconsistent season. Interceptions plagued the Riders as they were tied with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers for the most allowed in the CFL with 28 and Bishop served up three picks in the loss to the Lions. The Riders were sixth with 25 passing touchdowns. A turbulent season at quarterback ultimately led to their grade. **GRADE: D.**

RUNNING BACKS

The Roughriders and the Hamilton Tiger-Cats tied for the CFL lead in rushing touchdowns with 23. Saskatchewan's Wes Cates led the way with 12 rushing touchdowns while rushing for 1,229 yards despite missing three games with a left ankle sprain. Neal Hughes had seven touchdowns

(four rushing and three receiving) and Stu Foord had three (two rushing and one receiving). The Riders' running game had to step up because of all of the injuries and it did. **GRADE: A.**

OFFENSIVE LINE

Injuries forced the Riders to start 11 different offensive line combinations in the regular season. The return of centre Jeremy O'Day from a torn medial collateral ligament in his right knee allowed the Riders to start their best group in the loss to the Lions.

The most consistent aspect was the play of Gene Makowsky, who saw action at left tackle, left guard and centre due to injuries. Makowsky didn't miss a game en route to winning the West Division nomination as the offensive lineman-of-the-year. **Grade: B.**

RECEIVERS

Injuries defined the Riders' receiving corps. All five starters in the season-opener against the Edmonton Eskimos spent time on various injured lists. Veteran stars like Matt Dominguez, D.J. Flick and Andy Fantuz missed a combined 36 games with their ailments. Promising rookie Adarius Bowman was sidelined nine games with a torn quadriceps muscle. Their absence created opportunities for rookies like Weston Dressler to emerge. Dressler earned the rookie-of-the-year nod in the West Division while scoring six touchdowns and 1,128 yards in receptions. Rob Bagg had some impressive receptions but couldn't score a touchdown. The youthfulness of the receivers and the inconsistency at quarterback caught up to them in semifinal as the Riders didn't score a touchdown. The Riders' receivers had 19 touchdown receptions, just three more than the total of 16 recorded by Montreal's Jamel Richardson. **GRADE: C-minus.**

DEFENSIVE LINE

The Riders were sixth in the league with 28 total sacks. B.C.'s Cam Wake had 23 on his own! But the Riders' defence was about filling gaps and not getting pressure on the quarterback. The line did score twice with end Kitwana Jones returning two fumbles for game-changing touchdowns. The Riders were also first in average gain per pass allowed at 7.3 yards, so the scheme must have had some success. **GRADE: C-plus.**

LINEBACKERS

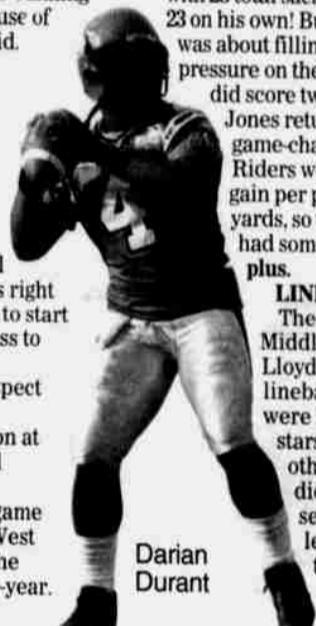
The class of the class, Middle linebacker Maurice Lloyd and outside linebacker Anton McKenzie were both selected CFL all-stars. Sean Lucas, the other outside linebacker, didn't get an all-star selection despite the leading the Riders in tackles with 95 and tying for second overall in the CFL. Renault Williams was a solid backup and would likely start on another team. Mike McCullough and Yannick Carter were also solid fill-ins. **GRADE: A-plus.**

SECONDARY

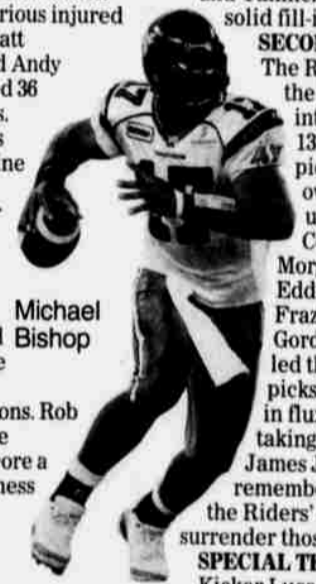
The Riders were seventh in the league with 17 total interceptions, including 13 by the secondary. The picks weren't enough to overcome the 28 served up by the offence. Cornerback Omarr Morgan, defensive backs Eddie Davis and Lance Frazier and safety Scott Gordon were solid. Frazier led the Riders with five picks. The other corner was in flux with Tad Kornegay taking over for a struggling James Johnson. Fans only remember the big plays and the Riders' secondary seemed to surrender those. **GRADE: C-plus.**

SPECIAL TEAMS

Kicker Luca Congi was 38-of-44, nailed a career-best 55-yarder and won two games with last-minute field-goals. He also filled in as punter when Jamie Boreham was sidelined for a game with an injured ankle. The Riders



Darian Durant



Michael Bishop



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