

# San Diego gives Turner another chance to lead

By **BERNIE WILSON**  
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## SAN DIEGO

Norv Turner got his third shot at an NFL head coaching job when he was hired Monday by the San Diego Chargers, a week after the surprise firing of Marty Schottenheimer.

The hiring came less than 24 hours after the Chargers wrapped up their interviews. The Chargers also hired Ted Cottrell as defensive coordinator.

Turner, the San Francisco 49ers' offensive coordinator, was the only one of the six candidates who's been an NFL head coach and the only one from the offensive side of the ball.

He inherits a team that was an NFL-best 14-2 last season but melted down in its playoff opener, a stunning 24-21 loss to the New England Patriots.

On Feb. 12, the Chargers again surprised the NFL when president Dean Spanos fired Schotten-

heimer, citing a dysfunctional situation between the coach and general manager A.J. Smith.

Turner had trouble winning in the regular season, going 58-82-1 in head coaching stints with Washington and Oakland. Schottenheimer had trouble winning in the postseason, going 5-13 overall and 0-2 with the Chargers.

Turner was San Diego's offensive coordinator in 2001, when LaDainian Tomlinson was a rookie and Smith was the assistant to the late John Butler.

The Chargers still use the same offense Turner installed.

"This isn't a team where you're rebuilding," Turner said. "We should start fast. We should be good early, and we should be good late. Not having to go through the normal things you have to go through when you make a coaching change is going to help the players more than anyone."

Turner was fired by the Raiders in 2005 after going 9-23 in two seasons.

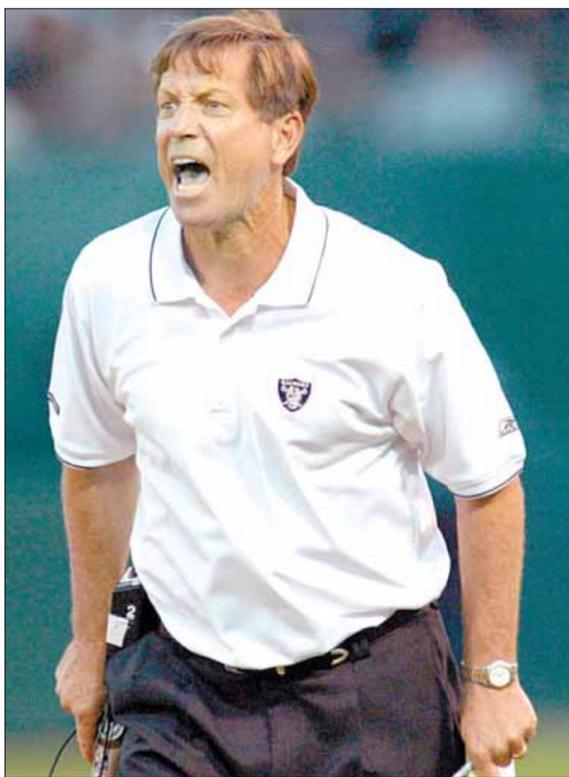
San Francisco's Mike Nolan quickly hired Turner to take over the NFL's 32nd-ranked offense.

Turner got remarkable progress from quarterback Alex Smith and an improved offensive line. He helped Frank Gore become the NFC's leading rusher in a breakout season.

Turner will be able to help with the continued development of quarterback Philip Rivers, who was voted to the Pro Bowl but saw his play tail off down the stretch.

Turner might be viewed by some as a safe pick, but Spanos said the Chargers were swayed by his experience as a head coach and the continuity he can bring.

"You can say whatever you want to say," Spanos said. "If we hadn't made a change and we lost, we made the wrong decision. If we do make the change and we lose, we made the wrong decision. So the net result of all this is there's only one thing we have to do this year, and that's get back in the playoffs."



Norv Turner was named head coach of the San Diego Chargers on Monday. Turner previously coached the Redskins and Raiders.

## • Top

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

For the Big Ten, it's the second time the league best-known for its football has had the top two teams in the AP basketball poll. Michigan was No. 1 and Indiana No. 2 on Nov. 30, 1992.

The most recent time the same conference had Nos. 1 and 2 was last season, when the Big East had Connecticut at No. 1 and Villanova No. 2.

The most recent 1 vs. 2 game also was last season. No. 1 Duke defeated No. 2 Texas 97-66 on Dec. 10, 2005.

The Blue Devils returned to the rankings at No. 18 after a one-week absence. A four-game losing streak ended an 11-year run in the top 25 for Duke. The Blue Devils were ranked in 200 straight polls, the second-longest streak ever.

But last week Duke beat Boston College on the road and Georgia Tech at home, and the voters rewarded the Blue Devils.

The bottom of the rankings received a major shake-up as teams ranked 18-25 last week went 3-13. Indiana was among the teams dropping out of the top 25.

Butler dropped two spots to No. 15 after falling to Southern Illinois at home Saturday.

The Badgers and Buckeyes will not only be playing for the No. 1 ranking Sunday but also for the inside track to a Big Ten regular-season title.

Alando Tucker, who has seven consecutive 20-point games and is a leading candidate for national player of the year, and the Badgers defeated Ohio State 72-69 last month in Madison.

"If there is a player who was ever responsible for his team being ranked No. 1, it's Alando Tucker," Ryan said. "If there is an MVP, it's him."

The Badgers started the season ranked ninth, dipped to 12th and have been on the rise ever since. An experienced team that starts three seniors and two juniors, Wisconsin has already set a school record for victories in a season.

"It's not a bunch of McDonald's All-Americans and five-star recruits," Ryan said. "It's a bunch of guys who paid their dues. This year has been the culmination of a lot of hard work."

The Buckeyes have been in the top 10 all season thanks to one of the best freshmen classes in the country.

Seven-footer Greg Oden leads the team in scoring (15.5) and rebounding (9.5) and is shooting 61 percent from the field with 71 blocked shots in 20 games. Fellow freshmen Mike Conley Jr. (10.1) and Daequan Cook (11.9) combine to average 22 points per game.

In the AP women's poll, No. 1 Duke has some new company at the top.

Tennessee moved into the No. 2 spot to replace North Carolina, which was upset by North Carolina State last week. The Tar Heels, who had been second all season, slipped to fourth, while Connecticut climbed two spots to third.

Ohio State dropped from fourth to fifth after a home loss to Michigan State on Sunday ended its 17-game winning streak. In the only other change among the top 10, No. 8 Stanford traded places with No. 9 George Washington.

Purdue (23-5) climbed one spot to No. 15 in this week's poll.

## • Combine

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

"I'm not a guy where the combine makes or breaks players for me," Polian said. "It's more of a confirmation and information process. Players qualify by running under a certain time, by jumping a certain height. But that's really all it's for. However, the medical examination part is critical."

Combing through the prospects at the combine has become an art form, and the process can be tricky.

During the past 10 years, few teams have enjoyed the level of success the Colts have had with finding players who fit their specific scheme.

## GOOD CHOICES

Since 1996, the Colts have made 10 first-round selections, and all but one still is on the roster.

Here are teams that have had less success with first-round choices and how many picks have left the team:

**Green Bay:** 7 of 11 (64 percent)  
**San Francisco:** 7 of 11 (64 percent)  
**Cleveland:** 5 of 8 (63 percent)  
**Detroit:** 8 of 13 (62 percent)  
**Denver:** 6 of 10 (60 percent)

Of their 53-man roster, 25 players were drafted by the Colts. And 12 others were signed as undrafted free agents.

Of the 25 draftees still on the roster, 11 were chosen in the fourth round or later. While the Colts have been successful mining for talent in the later rounds of the draft, the earlier rounds

have been just as fruitful.

Since 1996, the Colts have made 10 first-round selections. Of those 10, only Edgerrin James (drafted in 1999) is no longer on the Colts' roster. Only Houston has a better percentage of retaining first-round draft picks, but the Texans have been drafting only since 2002.

Dungy credits the team's drafting philosophy and said the combine allows his staff to get to know players on a personal level, not just know how fast they can run and how high they can jump.

"I just like to see how the guys carry themselves, how they compete," Dungy said. "I've always been one that likes to talk to the guys."

"It's really just getting a feel for them, and you do that in a number of different ways. Sometimes you get a feel for a guy by the way he goes up on the field, and some-

times it's just a five-minute conversation in the hallway while they are waiting to do something."

The combine is an opportunity for players at lower-profile schools to get noticed.

Last year, Antoine Bethea was invited to participate and was the only player from his school, Howard.

Bethea impressed the Colts' coaching staff enough to warrant a sixth-round selection with pick No. 207.

Unearthing those gems is something the Colts' staff takes pride in.

"We'll spend a lot of time together and try to find some of those lesser-known guys that have been such a fiber to our team," Dungy said.

While the lesser-known prospects can have their careers defined by a good or poor perfor-

mance at the combine, some of the top prospects come to the workout but choose not to participate in all the drills for fear of hurting their draft stock.

Dungy said he doesn't blame the players for not running or lifting at the combine. But if a player decides to run and show what he has, then he'll grab Dungy's attention.

"There's something inside of me that respects a guy that says, 'You know what, here's the day where the 50 best defensive backs are here, and I'm going to go show that I'm No. 1, and it doesn't matter that I shouldn't or I don't have to or I'm going to be a top-10 pick anyway. I'm going to show what I'm all about.'"

"And you get some of that, and it's refreshing, and it really makes you admire those kind of guys," Dungy said.

## • Faith

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wake of a couple of pretty bad seasons for RCR, if staying was the right way to go.

"Until the contract was signed, there was limbo," said Harvick's wife, Delana. "Richard and Kevin were always open and honest with each other about where they stood."

"But, for me, watching it play itself out in the media was a little disheartening because there were a lot of things said that weren't true, and I didn't want that to affect the team."

"But the ink wasn't even dry yet and there was a whole new mind-set of that team because they know it's for real, they know he's coming back and that they're all pulling in the right direction. I think you can see that from that point to the end of last year. Things just took off."

With the renewed commitment by Harvick and Childress and some critical leadership from Burton, things turned around at RCR, with Harvick winning five races and the two drivers making the Chase for the Championship, raising expectations for this year and beyond.

The only previous RCR win in the Daytona 500 was by Earnhardt in 1998. Childress, who spent more than 17 seasons with his close friend Earnhardt as his driver, said this win says more about Harvick than anything he has done since their contract was extended through 2009.

The owner shakes his head in



The car driven by Kevin Harvick, left, edges past the car of Mark Martin to give Harvick the victory in the Daytona 500 on Sunday.

wonder when he reminds people that Harvick stepped into Earnhardt's car, repainted and renumbered from 3 to 29, just five days after the death of the seven-time series champion.

"If you're not really close to it like we were, I don't think anyone could ever imagine or realize the pressure that Kevin was under (in 2001) and the pressure that followed, even 2002 and beyond," Childress said. "I don't know of many people that could have handled the kind of pressure that he was under constantly."

"If he hadn't been able to handle the pressure and do the things that he did for us in 2001, RCR might not even have been here today."

Harvick, who now has 11 Cup wins, is no longer the guy who raises the hackles of his competitors on a regular basis or gets in constant trouble with NASCAR for rough driving or saying the wrong thing.

"We've really worked hard to try to head that in the right direction," Harvick said. "Sometimes people feel like we're lay-

ing low or not saying what we should say, but we still get to voice our opinion."

"Sometimes you just have to pick and choose your battles. I'm still going to say how I feel about things but, sometimes, it's better just to let things play out."

Delana Harvick is proud of her husband and how far he has come.

"It's hard to expect somebody to just come in and maintain that leadership role that really needed to carry that 29 team," she said. "I mean, this was a kid that had just raced a couple of years in the Busch Series. He knew what it took to be a hard racecar driver but really didn't have a good understanding of what it took to be a leader."

"Over the years, he's made a lot of mistakes, but he's human, and I think he's learned from those. And, on the flip side, Richard really has mentored Kevin a lot."

Now he's a Daytona 500 champ. "And I'll tell you one thing, the next time Richard Childress tells me he has a gut feeling, I'm going to believe him," Harvick said with a laugh.

But NASCAR deemed Benson's move legal.

It's why in a week that saw six people thrown out of the garage for cheating, Jeff Gordon received only a slap on the wrist when his car failed an inspection.

It's why Elliott Sadler and Scott Riggs were penalized for infractions that car owner Ray Evernham insisted are not even addressed in the rule book.

And it's why Michael Waltrip wasn't kicked out of the Daytona 500 after NASCAR found a fuel additive in his new Toyota Camry. The transgression was so blatant, Pemberton said he was personally insulted. NASCAR cracked down on Waltrip, but his presence in the race infuriated rival drivers.

The one constant of Speedweeks? Every incident proved it's past time for NASCAR to have a very clear rule book.

Otherwise, everything will always be arbitrary, even fantastic finishes like Sunday's.

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## • Dungy

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days after the Super Bowl.

Colts All-Pro defensive end Dwight Freeney also will return for another season after the team placed the exclusive franchise tag on him Monday.

As an exclusive franchise player, Freeney cannot sign with another team. He will receive a one-year contract at the average of the top five players at his position at the end of the upcoming free-agent period (\$8.64 million).

"He wasn't going to go anywhere, and I've had a good talk with his agent (Monday), and we'll continue to talk," Polian said. "We'll continue to talk with the idea of putting together a long-term deal with him, and he's an integral part of this team, and we'd like to see that done if at all possible."

Both Dungy and Polian admitted it won't be easy to keep all of

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Bill Polian

Colts president and general manager on defensive end Dwight Freeney, who has been named the team's franchise player

the Colts' free agents, particularly linebacker Cato June.

June is an unrestricted free agent and is expected to attract interest from a number of teams. Polian said the team would like to bring June back, but at the right price. For now, they have to wait and see where the market sets that price.

"As a coach, you want everybody back, and we know that's not going to happen," Dungy said. "That's the way (the salary cap) is set up."

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## • Book

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a few hundred yards from the finish, NASCAR let the racing go on.

It wasn't until Clint Bowyer flipped, crossing the finish line on his roof as flames ripped through his car, that NASCAR finally waved the yellow flag.

By then, it was too late for Martin. Harvick already had nosed ahead, beating him across the finish line by the length of his car hood. The .020 margin of victory was the closest in the history of electronic scoring at Daytona.

Martin initially was irate over his radio, criticizing NASCAR for not throwing the caution.

"I can't believe they waited!" he wailed.

Still, he refused to blast NASCAR for its decision, which might have cost Martin his final shot at a Daytona 500 victory. He's easing into retirement and is racing a partial schedule this season, with no firm plans for his future.

"No one wants to hear a grown man cry," the 48-year-old Martin said. "I'm not going to cry about it. This is the end. They made the decision. That's what we're going to live with."

That's just how it goes in NASCAR, where the rules can be a moving target and enforcement is almost always arbitrary.

On any other lap at any other race, it's likely the caution would have come out the moment Busch and Kenseth made contact.

Arguing that it was OK because it was the final lap isn't right, either. In 2005, NASCAR froze the field on the final lap at Talladega (Ala.) Superspeedway because of a spinning car way behind the leaders. Tony Stewart crossed the finish line first, but Dale Jarrett got the win because he was ahead when the field was frozen.

Different circumstances lead to different interpretations.

It's why Johnny Benson wasn't flagged for driving below the yellow line in Friday night's Craftsman Truck Series race, even though NASCAR has made that part of the track a strict no-no.