



Kyra Hallett
Multimedia
Sports Journalist
KyraHallett.com



Published on TampaBayStorm.com

July 1, 2014

How We Got Here

Storm coach Lawrence Samuels knew his first year as a head coach wouldn't be an easy one.

The season started out looking very promising with a 3-1 record for the rookie head coach Lawrence Samuels, but quickly turned by Week 5. Tampa Bay went winless for five weeks before turning it around in Week 11 and winning five straight, all the while, coach maintained his faith.

Samuels had a Hall of Fame career in the AFL and holds several franchise records for the Storm. He's spent 19 seasons in the AFL and 18 of them have been with the Storm including two seasons as an assistant coach and offensive coordinator before taking over the reins this season.

The team looks to the Hall of Famer to lead it back to the ArenaBowl in which it has not made an appearance in since 2010 when it lost to the Spokane Shock and hasn't won since 2003 over the Arizona Rattlers.

The Storm started the 2014 season on a two-game winning streak, pulling out a last second win in San Antonio against the Talons thanks to an Amarri Jackson touchdown with 11 seconds left. The following week, the Storm dropped a heartbreaker at home against Orlando.

"Just trying to stay positive right now with the guys," said Samuels.

The following week, quarterback Randy Hippeard threw for seven touchdowns while defensive back Chris Smith had an interception, his fourth of the season, in a victory over the Soul.

Week 5 featured the return of the 2013 touchdown leader, Joe Hills, which also was the same week the team started its five-game losing streak. The Storm dropped its sixth game in Jacksonville while Hippeard threw for four touchdowns and three interceptions.

The next week the team made its biggest move all season, signing veteran wide receiver T.T. Toliver. Toliver started his career with the Storm back in 2003 and won the ArenaBowl with

Samuels that same season. He returned in time to face his old team, the Orlando Predators, and was Hippeard's main target. Toliver caught 12 passes for 136 yards and five touchdowns.

The next two weeks the Storm dropped matches against the Spokane Shock and Portland Thunder and signed quarterback B.J. Hall. Against the Shock, receiver Michael Lindsey set the franchise career record for kickoff return yards, surpassing AFL Hall of Famer and Storm great George LaFrance total of 5,116 yards. After starting 3-1, the Storm was now 3-5.

"We need to continue on, staying focused, sticking together," said Samuels. "Don't get down on ourselves and refocus."

The team's first bye came in Week 9 along with the loss of the Smith twins. Chris signed with the Montreal Alouettes of the CFL and Donald was released. Chris led the team in interceptions and now left a hole in the secondary. The Storm signed Brendan Crawford as the backup quarterback with Hippeard headed to the injured reserve and the team assigned defensive back Darian Payne.

"Coming out of a bye week, we had the chance as a staff to reevaluate a lot of things that we needed to correct and get the guys back on the right track," said Samuels.

With Hippeard on the IR, Hall became the starting quarterback Week 10 against the Soul in Philadelphia. He threw three picks while defensive back Rod Issac collected three for the Storm. Crawford also saw some playing time in Philly but the Storm dropped its fifth straight matchup.

The succeeding week saw the return of Hippeard and the start of a new streak...a winning one. In his return, Hippeard threw for six touchdowns while defensive back James Harrell had an interception and a fumble recovery. Both were acknowledged by the AFL with Hippeard winning the Offensive Player of the Week and Harrell winning the Small Playmaker of the Week.

"The moral of the team is up. I think with that being up we have a chance now and the guys know it. They're upbeat, they're happy and that's the way we want to keep it," said Samuels.

Week 12 in New Orleans saw a new Storm team while Harrell hauled in his second pick-6 of season as the team won its second straight game.

The next two games came down to the wire but with moral back, the Storm were able to claim victory. Against the Soul in Week 13, Harrell had another pick-6 and Hippeard went down twice with apparent injuries. Hippeard battled through and came back both times, winning the game in his second return with a touchdown pass to Toliver. His gallant efforts did not go unnoticed as he won the Week 13 AFL MVP, voted by the fans.

“We lacked that in the first half of the year when we started going on the losing streak. It’s a credit to those guys that they responded and their effort and enthusiasm on defense tonight kept us in the game,” said Samules.

The Storm headed into overtime for the first time since 2012 in Week 14 against the Iowa Barnstormers. Defensive back Darian Payne had a fumble recovery while Hippeard rushed for three touchdowns and won it in sudden death, rushing for an 11-yard touchdown. His game winning play won Hippeard the AFL Highlight of the Week.

The third and final installment of the “War on I-4” took place in Week 15 as Orlando headed to Tampa with the Storm having the ability to tie for first place in the division with a victory over the Preds. Harrell had two interceptions on the night and Hippeard rushed for three touchdowns once again. The Predators had the ball with a minute left but Issac intercepted the ball, sealing Orlando’s fate.

“The guys are playing at a high level. We got each other’s back,” said Samuels. “All our goals are obtainable. Everything is laid out for us; we just got to keep pushing.”

The Storm’s five-game winning streak ended while in Cleveland last week.

The Storm now turns its focus on the last three games of the season and the push for the playoffs. Tampa Bay holds the fourth seed in the playoff picture at this moment and would have to play the first round in Cleveland.

“We’ll continue what we’ve been doing all season, paying attention to every detail,” said Samuels. “The ultimate goal is to get into the tournament.”