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FF SEIDEL

Matthew Stafford's secret was rocket fuel that revived Detroit Lions

Jeff Seidel
Detroit Free Press

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Editor's note: This is part one of a three-part series on how the Detroit Lions became the best team in the NFC.

Matthew Stafford had a secret that would change everything for the Lions.

It was the end of the 2020 season and Stafford sat in a big conference room in the back corner of the Lions' headquarters.

Rod Wood, the Lions president, was meeting with a group of team captains to talk about the season. It was a chance to clear the air, as the organization was going through yet another massive change.

The Lions were searching for both a new coach and a new general manager after they had fired Matt Patricia and Bob Quinn.

“If there’s anything on your mind, as we are doing this search, we’ll do the best we can to keep you informed,” Wood told the captains.

The players went around the room, offering opinions.

“Everybody had a few things to say,” Wood remembers.

Everyone except Stafford. He was the face of the franchise and had just finished his 12th season in Detroit.

“And Stafford goes, ‘Well, I’d just really like to talk to you in private,’ ” Wood said.

So, they went into Wood’s office.

“He got very emotional and said, ‘I just want to be traded and I don't want to go through another regime change,’ ” Wood said.

Wood wasn’t stunned. He understood it and he quickly called owner Sheila Hamp and put her on speakerphone.

The Lions were coming off a 5-11 season, their third losing season in a row. Stafford had already been through three coaches: Jim Schwartz, Jim Caldwell and Patricia. None could figure out how to make the Lions a Super Bowl contender — they couldn’t figure out how to win a playoff game, a milestone the franchise hadn’t reached since 1991.

“He said, ‘I hope I can go someplace where I can win a Super Bowl, and I hope you can get enough for me that you can win one a couple years later,’ ” Wood remembers Stafford saying.

“ ‘We’ll do the best we can do to accommodate you,” Wood said. “You know, right now we are doing a GM and the head coach search. Can we keep this out of the public domain?’ ”

Stafford agreed.

“To his credit and his camp’s credit, they never said anything, and we never said anything,” Wood said recently, sitting behind his desk in that same office. “So every coach and GM interview we did, this was not something that was brought

up.”

Wood leaned back in his chair.

“So that was a big moment,” he said, smiling.

If there is something that changed everything for this franchise, that was the key that unlocked everything.

“Now, we don't have a head coach,” Hamp said recently, recalling that moment while sitting in her office. “We don't have a general manager, we don't have a quarterback and it's COVID.”

Rattling off the challenges four years later, it sounds even more daunting to say it out loud.

“We'll work this out, no problem,” she said, with self-deprecating sarcasm — she has a warm sense of humor. “But actually, you know, as crazy as it was at the time, it was actually an opportunity to really clean house and start over. Let's really do what we say we're going to do and build it from the ground up; and that's really what happened.”

The results have been remarkable — the Lions just went 15-2 this regular season, captured the NFC North for the second straight year and earned the No. 1 seed entering the NFL playoffs for the first time. All this can be traced to that moment as the franchise enjoys the reward of this weekend's first-round bye.

All because they tore down the organization and built it back, topped off with the perfect pair of leaders: GM Brad Holmes and head coach Dan Campbell.

“The two of them are just literally peas from the same pod,” Hamp said. “Watching them work together is a joy. They really are like brothers, and it's very cool. They don't always agree on everything, and that's fine, but they listen to

each other, and then that's how they work, too."

It's an amazing story of transformation, turning a perennial loser into a championship favorite.

To chronicle how they got to this moment, the Free Press was granted unprecedented access in the first week of January to a small group of front office executives who made it happen yet who rarely talk to the news media.

Finding a 'noble cause'

When Hamp became the principal team owner in June 2020 — taking over for her mother, Martha Firestone Ford — she was straightforward about her intentions.

"I told my family from the get-go, I'm not going to do this unless I can really dig into what I think has gone wrong for the last however many years," Hamp told the Free Press, sitting in her office at Lions headquarters in Allen Park. "My very first call was to a really good friend of mine, who I went to college with. ... Sandy Cutler. He ran Eaton Corp for a long time. We were great friends. I always admired his leadership style."

Hamp and Cutler went to Yale together and she asked him the billion-dollar question: "If you were me, how would you think about this and this job?"

Hamp considered Cutler a smart, bold leader. He started as a financial analyst and retired as chairman and chief executive officer of Eaton Corp., a $20.9 billion industrial manufacturer.

"He said, 'Well, the first thing you need to do is to define your noble cause,' " she remembers.

After much thought, she decided her "noble cause" was the city of Detroit, all the

long-suffering fans. But there was something else Cutler said that was just as important. He told her, “once you've done that, find a few key people that buy into it, and then the rest should fall into place.”

She smiles, telling the story: “which is easier said than done.”

Here was another Cutler piece of wisdom: “Great leaders have the ability to translate challenges into opportunities,” Cutler told Fast Company magazine in 2012. “To connect the dots when others just see random facts; and the ability to inspire others around them to find creative, innovative solutions.”

The Lions were more than a challenge; they were a mess. A random series of dots. There were the haves — the people on the football side. And the have-nots — the business folks, most of whom had offices at Ford Field. The right hand wasn’t talking to the left. There were siloes and turf wars, no cohesion or connection.

It was a losing culture under a dark cloud of joyless mistrust.

Hamp had a lot of work to do, to say the least. “As far as the organization was concerned, I think I had the opportunity to look at it a little differently,” she said.

To find those creative solutions.

Sheila Hamp takes control

The lazy, easy narrative is Hamp learned from her parents' mistakes and did the opposite.

But that might be simplifying things too much. Mainly, because it’s all apples and oranges.

William Clay Ford, Hamp’s father, bought the Lions in November 1963. “The game changed so much, since the days when my dad bought them,” Hamp said.

“It wasn't the business it's become.”

After her father died in 2014, Hamp’s mother took over when she was 88.

“It was just a little different,” Hamp said. “She was great. She particularly did a great job with the league.”

If there is one thing Hamp did learn from her mother, it was how to hold her own as a woman in a roomful of billionaire men.

But now, this was Sheila’s time — her shot to run the organization — and she fired Quinn and Patricia on Nov. 28, 2020, two days after a Thanksgiving loss to Houston.

In early December, Hamp interviewed three internal candidates for the GM job: vice president of player personnel Kyle O'Brien, director of player personnel Lance Newmark and director of pro scouting Rob Lohman.

It turned into a revealing, important moment for Hamp because they told her the problems in the organization.

“I didn't realize how bad it was until they told the truth,” she said.

Give her credit for truly hearing what they were saying.

Give her credit for having an open mind to consider what was wrong.

“It really opened my eyes,” she said. “I realized no one was talking. There was no communication between Allen Park and Ford Field.”

Or between the football side and the business side.

She started to realize she needed to strip the organization down to the studs and build it back again.

“We wanted a horizontal organization,” she said. “Everyone working together, collaborating, talking. And I realized that was not happening at all.”

Learning what makes real culture

After firing Patricia and Quinn, there were all kinds of questions.

“Who is the interview group?” Hamp asked. “How were we going to do this?”

One thing was clear — Hamp didn’t want to hire an outside firm to help identify candidates because they had already tried that and it didn’t work.

“It goes back to the (coach Jim) Caldwell days,” Wood said.

In 2015, after Firestone fired president Tom Lewand and GM Martin Mayhew, the Lions used outside help to pick a new GM.

“The rest of that season we didn't have a GM,” Wood said. “I was brand-new in this role, and working with Jim (Caldwell), and then trying to figure out how to hire.”

They brought in Ernie Accorsi, a longtime NFL executive, hoping he would identify somebody from a winning team who would bring winning to Detroit.

“Everybody tried to import a winning culture,” Wood said.

So, the Lions back then tried to import the Patriots Way, hiring Quinn and then he eventually hired Patricia, which didn’t work.

“I didn't really know that many people (around the NFL at that time),” Wood said. “I think I learned how important it is to know more people and not rely upon somebody who's not going to be here and have to live with the results. Ernie was very good, but he moved on.”

The Lions were left with the New England Patriots culture. Without the winning. Without the great coach, Bill Belichick. Without legendary quarterback Tom Brady.

And it failed spectacularly.

The lesson? Hamp and Wood discovered it's impossible to bring in another team's culture. You can't *import* it. It has to grow from within.

"We decided we're not going to go to the league," Hamp said. "We're not going to ask for their help. That's what happened before, right? Didn't work out too well. Yes, we can handle this."

Hamp wanted Wood to be on the selection committee. That was a given.

"I've known Rod for many years," Hamp said. "He was head of our family office before he became the president. We've worked together for a long time and I love Rod. He's great. But we thought we need to — or I knew — I needed some help on the football side."

Hamp had no doubt that everybody they would interview would be qualified, but she worried about something else.

"How am I going to know if they're really blowing football smoke at me?" she asked.

"What do you think about Chris (Spielman)?" Wood asked about one of the greatest Lions to ever play.

"I think that'd be great," she said.

Spielman, who had strong NFL contacts, was working as a TV analyst and still had a few games left on his contract.

“I actually sent him a text while he was calling a game,” Wood said. “I said ‘give me a call and let me run something by you.’ ”

At first, the plan was to have Spielman vet some candidates and help do interviews. Not much more than that.

“Then we started talking, and then he got all excited about it,” Wood said.

“Chris is sort of the consummate Detroit Lion, loves this team,” Hamp said. “So I called Chris, and sort of just talked about how we wanted to change things, how I saw it, and he was just intrigued at the idea of coming in and changing an organization.”

Spielman didn’t really know Hamp that well but he sensed her passion.

“Like a lot of people in Detroit, it was personal for her, obviously, because it's her family, and they own the team, and it was her shot at it,” he said. “For her to be able to assemble the amount of people, the right people, and put them in place, was very important to her. And you could hear her passion for Detroit. You could hear the passion for Lions fans and for the team. And she was just, ‘I think we got to do this. We have to do it.’

“So it was her resolve, and her love of the team and the city that really came through.”

The more they talked, the bigger the idea became. Spielman wanted to help in any way possible.

“Then that kind of just morphed into, would you want to come work here full-time?” Wood said. “That was within two days, basically.”

What would his role be?

“I said, ‘Well, we'll figure it out as we go,’ ” Wood said.

Searching for what they wanted

The four-person selection team was set: Hamp, Wood, Spielman and Mike Disner, a rising star in the organization.

Disner is an important name for fans to know because some believe he is positioned to become the next Lions president, whenever Wood retires. He interviewed for the Carolina Panthers GM job in 2024.

“Disner was fabulous,” Hamp said. “Our salary cap guru at the time.”

Hamp, Wood, Disner and Spielman were being thrown into a foxhole together, trying to figure out who to hire; and the task was herculean. The Lions had been trying to find a winning culture, that could be sustained, since 1957 — the team’s last title.

“We spent a lot of time, ahead of time, thinking about what are we really looking for?” Hamp said.

In the past, the organization had tried just about everything: young coaches and old ones, retreads and new treads, defensive-minded coaches and offensive ones, not to mention, Tom Izzo’s best friend. But the losing was so pervasive that Wayne Fontes, the winningest coach in team history, actually had a losing record (66-67).

As far as GMs, they tried everything from older schoolers to a converted TV guy to someone from the New England tree.

In short, nothing had worked for long.

The futility could be measured not only in years, but in decades, if not lifetimes.

So, instead of trying to fix the organization piecemeal, which is what the Lions had done countless times, churning through different GMs and coaches, they

started to develop a much bigger plan. To change the organization at its core.

“What is your vision, Sheila?” Spielman asked. “What do you want? What type of team do you want? What type of organization do you want?”

As they brainstormed, trying to come up with the guiding principles of this new organization, Spielman wrote the cornerstones on a whiteboard:

1. Leadership.
2. Culture.
3. Staff.

Under staff, Spielman drew three arrows: “Manage, find the best and handling turnover.”

Handling turnover? It’s ironic, now, that the Lions have become so successful that everybody is trying to poach their coordinators and even Spielman, who just completed a virtual interview for the New York Jets GM role. But it’s also interesting this organization started preparing for turnover before it even started to taste success.

Out on the margin, Spielman drew an arrow pointing at culture: “Stay focused on this,” he wrote and underlined four times.

In Hamp’s mind, it went back to her “noble cause.”

“We wanted somebody that understood the city, understood kind of where the city had been, where it's going, kind of understanding our fans,” she said.

Hamp, Wood, Disner and Spielman all signed the whiteboard on 12/29/2020; then Holmes and Campbell signed it after they were hired, like it was a binding agreement.

Now, a framed copy hangs in their offices.

At this point, you could roll your eyes and say: Those are just buzzwords.

Or you could scoff: A noble cause? Get real.

But when you consider how this organization has been transformed, when you learn how those guiding principles determined whom they hired and how they built this organization and even how they select players, when you find how the rest of the NFL is trying to copy the Lions' way or just flat out poach their coaching talent, when you see how the fan base has become electrified from all the success — a noble cause indeed — the words on that whiteboard seem even bigger. They offer a road map on how they did it.

It explains why they were willing to risk hiring Holmes and Campbell.

“We have got a lot of great stories on this team,” Hamp said. “Everyone's in love with Dan Campbell. How can you not be? Dan is Dan. He's really one of the most charismatic leaders I've ever seen in my life. Plus, I think he's one of the most emotionally intelligent people I've ever met.

"You know you listen to his postgame speeches in the locker room, win or lose, he has the right thing to say. I hear him at practice, and he just knows kind of when the team needs maybe a kick in the pants, or whether they need to have fun, or whether they need a little encouragement. I mean, whatever it is, he's just got such a handle on it.”

Mitch Albom: Dan Campbell's roots helped make him Detroit Lions savior

But how they put together this team is a wild story on its own.

Elephant in the room

They interviewed 12 candidates for the GM job and eight for head coach.

“Each person we interviewed, we'd say, ‘Well, what do you think of our team?’ ” Hamp remembers. “And, you know, they said, ‘Well, at least you have a quarterback, right?' ”

Trouble was. They didn’t. Stafford wanted to be traded.

After every interview, the four would grade the candidates.

“We filled out a grade sheet — kind of like a scouting report,” Spielman said.

“Everyone kind of came at it from a different angle,” Hamp said. “And, you know, we didn't always agree, and that was perfect.”

The list of candidates kept morphing. Holmes wasn’t on the original list, but Disner found a video of a mock interview.

If you wonder if the Lions' success is sustainable, the fact Disner found Holmes in a pile of video clips should be encouraging.

“The NFL has these sort of canned interviews that you can look at,” Hamp said. “They've got tons of them — GMs or presidents, or whatever. And he found Brad's interview, and he said, ‘You guys have to see this guy.’

“And we all did, and we kind of went, whoa.”

Finding a fresh start

Hamp started every interview by being blunt with the candidates, describing the organization’s past mistakes as well as her vision.

“She would talk about the history of how we got to where we are, and philosophically, what she wanted to see going forward,” Disner said. “It's representing the community, the organization, her family, to the point where we are cohesive, working together, no real siloes, and ultimately, working together

toward a common goal, as opposed to … “

Well, the way they had been doing it.

“She was very clear in terms of the direction the organization wanted to take and the pitfalls of the organization’s past,” Disner said.

They didn’t want to bring in a GM and coach from the same organization — that would be trying to copy somebody else.

The Lions were trying to create their own culture. They were looking for new leadership. Someone who would embrace it. But it was a complicated process. During every interview, they had to define Spielman’s role, because it was so unusual.

“It could be intimidating,” Wood said. “If you were coming in as a GM, well, who is this gonna be, this guy who played for the Lions, legendary player? He could be the GM. His brother is a GM.

"And same thing on the coaching side. So, we kind of described it as, he's here to help us. He's not looking to do your job. He's not looking to overlook you. And I think it would only work with somebody like Chris.”

Brad Holmes finds a home

When Holmes interviewed, he came across as smart, incredibly prepared and offered a sharp analysis of the state of the Lions.

“He blew us all away,” Hamp said. “He said things about our team specifically that no one else had said. His insights were incredible for someone who wasn't here.”

Holmes remembers how that interview was just so unusual.

“It just felt different,” he said. “It felt home, like family. It felt like it was a conversation.”

In the interview, Hamp made clear she wanted an organization built on collaboration.

“But it wasn't an in-depth conversation about culture,” Holmes said.

It was clear to him the Lions had “thoroughly did their homework, research and vetting thoroughly enough to know” what he stood for before they even interviewed him.

“I probably spoke more about my background and my upbringing and those kinds of things,” Holmes said, “more so than what kind of culture you need to have.”

Tell me about Dan Campbell

At the same time, the Lions were trying to find a coach, which was like trying to build a house, while trying to hire a general contractor at the same time the architect was drawing up the plans.

It was a whirlwind.

Spielman had noticed Campbell while calling his games on TV.

“I watched him,” he said. “Because he draws you to him. If you're a competitor or you're a player, you're drawn to that. He has an aura or that *it* quality factor.”

Spielman called then-New Orleans head coach Sean Payton, who had known Campbell for years, both as a player and from working with him as a coach.

“Tell me about Dan Campbell,” Spielman said.

Payton talked for 28 straight minutes.

“He didn't stop,” Spielman said. ”I was looking on my watch — 28 minutes.”

Campbell was put on the list of candidates.

But he was just a name on a list that kept morphing.

An interview for the ages

Campbell’s interview has become something of lore in Allen Park.

“Dan's interview was probably the most unique,” Disner said. “He was at a random hotel in New Orleans, I believe, and he was jumping off the screen. He was up in his seat. He was crushing the biggest Starbucks I've ever seen. You know, at one point he kind of did one of these — “

Disner mimicked slamming a gulp of coffee.

Like somebody guzzling a mug of beer.

“Just threw it down,” Disner said. “You could feel the energy through Zoom, which is really hard to do. And Brad, too, you know, there were two people that you could feel the energy. You could feel the desire and how they wanted to come here and make a difference.”

Whatever makes a leader, Wood could see it in Campbell: “Some people just have it, and whatever the it factor is, Dan has it, you know, in spades. And it came through in the interview, same with Brad.”

While searching for a coach can seem like speed dating, this was different at its core. It was clear both Holmes and Campbell wanted the job desperately. During their interviews, it was clear both had done extensive research on the Lions, the city, the team’s history, the ownership and had ideas on how the organization

could succeed.

“Dan desperately, passionately wanted the job,” Spielman said. “Wanted to come here. He wanted to be a part of what Detroit was doing. He believed in Sheila’s vision.”

Spielman picked up on something else he deemed vital.

“The other thing that really sold me on him, and I'll never forget this, he said, ‘I will get good coaches to come with me,’ ” Spielman said. “He said that without any arrogance or without any cockiness. And the reason why that's so important in this world, sometimes coaches are afraid to hire guys that are maybe smarter than them or better than them, because they may view them as a threat. He's not.

"He's so confident in his ability and what he does. He wants to hire guys that may have strengths that he does not have, because we all don't have every strength. And so that's what really sold me.”

Now remember, this was done during COVID-19. At a time when the world was adjusting to Zoom calls. But that didn’t stop either Holmes or Campbell.

“When a leader stands out, through a one-dimensional screen — and both Dan and Brad stood out, exuding leadership in that kind of tough environment — you say, ‘Oh, this is interesting,’ ” Wood said. “Let's learn more about this person.”

Revealing the Stafford news

Then came the tricky part. The elephant in the room — *oh, by the way, you don’t have a quarterback.*

“So how did they react?” I asked.

“I'll start with Brad,” Wood said. “And I said, ‘well, before you take the job, oh,

here's something you should know.‘ ”

But Holmes didn’t blink.

“He said, ‘Oh, OK, let's go,' ” Wood said, slamming his fist on the table. “ 'Let's figure this out. I can really build my team, as opposed to one I inherited, and one I have to build around him.' ”

While going through different interviews, Wood preferred GM candidates with a strong draft background because he figured they would get a haul in trading Stafford.

What did Campbell say, when told that they were going to trade Stafford?

“Dan said the same thing — ‘Let's go. Let's go!’ ” Wood remembers.

There was one last but vital question: How would they work together?

The Lions were about to hire Holmes and Campbell, even though they had never met.

“I introduced them via cellphone,” Wood said.

“You guys talk,” Wood said. “Because you're likely going to be working together, and I want to make sure that they see the world the same way.”

That’s where there was a bit of luck, too.

It was like they were meant to be together.

“Brad said, ‘Did he read my book?’ ” Hamp said. “They were so on the same page about everything — what kind of team they wanted to build, what kind of players, so we were pretty sure, you know.”

The next day, the Lions hired Campbell.

It would be disingenuous to say the Lions knew this would work out so spectacularly.

“That was a little bit of luck,” Hamp admitted.

At its core, this was an arranged marriage. “We thought we were doing the right thing, but, you know, it could have blown up,” she said.

It took tremendous courage for a brand-new owner to hire a first-time GM and a first-time coach. There were all kinds of examples in the NFL where that had failed in the past.

“Big reward comes with big risks sometimes,” Wood said.

But they trusted their process, guided by the principles on that whiteboard.

“We were pretty sure these were the right people,” Hamp said. “Dan, of course, played on the 0-and-16 team. He was in Detroit for a couple years and he and his wife, Holly, loved the city. And he has seen the team at probably its worst and still loved everything about it and really wanted to be here.”

But hiring Campbell and Holmes was just the first step.

Coming Monday: Part Two, Brad Holmes defines the on-field product.

Contact Jeff Seidel: jseidel@freepress.com. Follow him on X @seideljeff. To read his recent columns, go to freep.com/sports/jeff-seidel.