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## 49ers' bottom line

by [Charles Robinson](#), Yahoo! Sports

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Two men came together Sunday in the middle of the field at the Georgia Dome, smiled and shook hands. With cameras and microphones dancing around them, there would be no private moments to gloat. Not that it was necessary. Steve Mariucci and Jim Mora have success screaming what their lips won't.



The [San Francisco 49ers](#) – specifically co-owner John York and general manager Terry Donahue – blew it. Not once, but twice.

Not that most people didn't see this failure coming. Many scratched their heads when Mariucci was cut loose by the franchise in an ugly, bumbled fashion almost 22 months ago, a quizzical move that drew outright scoffing once his perch was awarded to NFL retread Dennis Erickson. But only now can we see the full scope of the damage done during the 2003 offseason, when Mariucci was sent packing and Mora was passed over in favor of Erickson. Since the fallout:

- Mariucci elevated a 3-13 [Detroit Lions](#) team to 5-11 in his first season, then turned in one of the NFL's better offseasons in free agency and the draft. He now sits tied atop the NFC North with Minnesota at 3-1 and owns a budding offensive nucleus.
- Mora spent an awkward and trying year as the 49ers' defensive coordinator, working for the coach who got the job he wanted and an organization he believed had badly mistreated Mariucci. After finally landing a head coaching job this offseason with the [Atlanta Falcons](#), he stands with a surprising 4-1 record, having revamped the team's offensive scheme and reinvigorated the same group of defensive players that formed the NFL's worst unit in 2003.
- The 49ers have gone from 10-6 in Mariucci's last season to 7-9 in 2003 and now 1-4 with Erickson. They have one of the thinnest talent collections in the NFL, and almost one-third (\$28 million) of their 2004 salary cap belongs to players no longer with the team – largely thanks to past decisions made by Donahue.

It's a flip-flop that hasn't gone unnoticed across a league abundant in coaches and front-office personnel plucked from the 49ers' tree. And while a handful this week refused to chastise

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publicly what they perceive as a negative change, they all have opinions about a franchise once considered the NFL's Camelot.

"The personality of the organization and the people running it have definitely gone south," a prominent former 49er said. "I'd say since John York [took over]."

York's wife, Denise DeBartolo York, took full ownership of the 49ers from her brother, Eddie DeBartolo, nearly four years ago. Since then, John York has earned the reputation of a man who rules with his wallet – a number cruncher rather than a football mind. Thus far, his era with the 49ers has been defined by two things: 1) a staunch support of the embattled Donahue, and 2) the firing of Mariucci. But as the franchise once again languishes in a salary cap mess, some have an even harsher belief.

"You look at a team that was a great organization and a great team like the 49ers, and look what they've done with ownership and management," former NFL coach Mike Ditka told the *Los Angeles Times* last week. "They've destroyed that organization. When Eddie had it, they were the best. You know why? The most important thing to Eddie was treating the players like family. Now, this guy (York) ... Knows nothing about football. Knows nothing about management, either. But he married Eddie's sister."

Attempts to contact York this week were turned to team spokesman Kirk Reynolds, who rebuffed Ditka last week by calling Ditka's remarks "stunning and completely uncalled for."

But Ditka's disparagement, especially in the vein of the team lacking a "family" nature, is nothing new. League sources close to both Mariucci and Mora said the two complained of the callous handling under York and the internal strife often attributed to Donahue. And they point to the 49ers' current failings as both an outgrowth of internal mismanagement and salary cap woes. Since Mariucci's departure, his San Francisco staff essentially has been divided between himself in Detroit and Mora in Atlanta.

And the loyalties remain strong. Leading up to Sunday's game against the Lions, Mora didn't hide his feelings about Mariucci's firing.

"I'm not going to badmouth the 49ers, but Steve didn't deserve what happened to him," Mora said. "And neither did the families that were involved."

Whatever the case, the 49ers don't seem to be nearing any kind of a turning point with Mariucci and Mora gone. York has sent a message that he wants to build from the bottom up once again – first by dumping big contracts (see former players [Derrick Deese](#), [Jeff Garcia](#), etc.) and building through the draft. Donahue has received a contract extension through 2009, and York has given Erickson a private vote of confidence that he won't be held immediately responsible for the current roster mess.

In short, the San Francisco haul is going to be long, long and long.

Which brings us back to Mariucci and Mora and last Sunday's pregame handshake. Maybe there was a private moment in there. Maybe it was each congratulating the other on making it out of a monumental mess.

Certainly, it beckons to a moment a little more than a year ago, when Mariucci had just taken over the Lions. Not long after York ripped Mariucci in the San Francisco media for not being on the same "team" as the rest of the organization, a reporter asked why Mariucci kept refusing to shoot back with his own criticism.

"What keeps me from lobbing a scud missile?" Mariucci asked with a smile. "Some day, there could be a scud missile fired back. That possibility always exists. But that's not going to happen today."

Now it looks like it might not ever happen. Not as long as 49ers management continues to blow up the organization itself.

*Charles Robinson is the national NFL writer for Yahoo! Sports. Send him a [question or comment](#) for potential use in a future column or webcast.*

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