



2013 NFL GUIDE



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About the Author - Steve Shoup:

Fanspeak.com Content Manager Steve has been a football fan since 1992 (when he was just 9 years-old). He is our resident NFL/NFL Draft Expert, and is a credentialed member of the media for multiple NFL Draft Scouting Events, to include the Senior Bowl and East-West Shrine Game.

He's been on several The FAN and ESPN Sports Talk Radio affiliates around the country analyzing the NFL & NFL Draft. And now he loves sharing his analysis with you diehard football fans!

Special Thanks to Contributing Writers:

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2013 NFL GUIDE

PRESEASON POWER RANKINGS

By Steve Shoup:

1. San Francisco 49ers (13-3):

The 49ers came up just short last season in the Super Bowl, but figure to be the premier team heading into this season. Despite already losing WR Michael Crabtree to injury, the 49ers boost one of the most talented rosters in the league. The 49ers have a tough schedule, but they have a stout defense and a talented offense to carry them through.



2. Denver Broncos (13-3):

The Broncos went all in this offseason in boosting their offensive line and adding Wes Welker to their receiving corps. They were the 1st seed in the AFC last year, and figure to make a strong run this year as well. The suspension of Von Miller looms large early in the season, but this team should be more than capable of overcoming his absence.

3. Green Bay Packers (12-4):

The Packers have added balance to their running game and much needed depth to their offensive line. The loss of left tackle Bryan Bulaga is big, but this team is capable getting by without him. If a couple of their defensive players step up in their 2nd year in the league, they should be an elite team. Regardless of their overall defense, when a team has Aaron Rodgers and Clay Matthews Jr. they are always a threat.

4. Indianapolis Colts (12-4):

The Colts look to be one of the most up-and-coming teams, with a lot of young, high-upside talent. With their players a year older and some key free agent acquisitions the Colts could challenge for the AFC South title. Andrew Luck should break out this season with an offensive scheme that makes use of his greatest attributes.

5. New England Patriots (12-4):

The Patriots are still favorites to win the AFC East, but how far they go will be determined by how their receivers and tight ends perform this year. Even if there is a drop off among Tom Brady's pass catchers, this team has in addition to Brady, a strong offensive line, rushing attack and a promising defense. If the defense can make a big jump this year they should maintain their place atop these rankings.

6. Atlanta Falcons (11-5):

The Falcons look to be one of the better teams in the league especially with the addition of Steven Jackson at running back. Their offense should be one of the better units in the league, with a dynamic passing attack and strong running game. Their defense could take a step back this season, but it won't be so bad that it cripples their postseason chances.



7. Cincinnati Bengals (11-5):

This could be the year where the Bengals jump from being a wild card contender to taking the AFC North. Defense typically wins this division, and it looks like the Bengals have a truly elite unit. Andy Dalton made big strides from year one to year two, and if he continues to develop this team could be a threat in the AFC. With an improved rushing attack and A.J. Green, the Bengals should have enough weapons to support Dalton this year.

8. Houston Texans (11-5):

The Texans should be in a neck-and-neck race for the AFC South this year, but even if they miss on the division they should be able to make it as a wild card team. Matt Schaub struggled down the stretch last season, and will need to be more consistent this year for the Texans to be a bigger threat in the AFC. Houston's defense should improve as it gets some key guys back from injury.

9. Seattle Seahawks (10-6):

The Seahawks have one of the stronger teams in the league, with a premier defense, a top running back and Russell Wilson who burst onto the scene last year. The Seahawks need to get a more consistent pass rush on defense, particularly given the talent they have in the secondary. On offense Seattle needs a receiver to step up now that Percy Harvin is out with injury.

10. New Orleans Saints (10-6):

The Saints should have a bounce back year with Sean Payton back on the sidelines and some improvements to their defense. The running game needs to improve to add balance back to this offense, but otherwise it is up to the defense with how this team improves. If they can just be slightly better, Drew Brees is capable of carrying this team far into the playoffs.

11. Washington Redskins (10-6):

More so than most teams the Redskins season will be decided by the injury report. They already have 8 starters and numerous contributors coming back from serious injuries. If the majority come back strong and stay healthy the Redskins could be a real threat in the postseason. If they have a moderate return, the Redskins should make the playoffs, but likely won't be a significant threat. If too many guys suffer a set back the Redskins could plummet in the standings. Regardless of health, the secondary and offensive line remains the two biggest question marks for this team.

12. Baltimore Ravens (10-6):

The Ravens are the defending Super Bowl Champions, but that status didn't make the Giants any better last season. The Ravens have dealt with a lot of turnover this offseason and while they did well to fill those needs, they may have some issues meshing together. They should still be a strong threat this year, but likely not the top threat. The biggest issue facing them might



be who Joe Flacco will be throwing the ball to on a consistent basis. Until that question is answered, it is hard to think they will win their division.

13. Pittsburgh Steelers (10-6):

The Steelers should expect a bounce back season as they get healthier and add the drafts premier pass rusher to a defense that has fallen off in that area. The Steelers biggest question marks remain in the trenches as they've been under-performing (or injured) the last couple of seasons.

14. New York Giants (9-7):

The Giants figure to be in a battle with the Redskins for control of the NFC East and could have their fate decided the final week of the season. New York figures to have a strong offense once again, but the question remains how strong is this defense. They made some changes this year, but it is unclear how much of a positive impact it will have.

15. Kansas City Chiefs (8-8):

The Chiefs figure to be the team that rises the most this season as new coach Andy Reid hopes to get the most out of the talent on this team. The Chiefs figure to have a strong offensive and running game and their passing attack should be improved with Alex Smith at the helm. The Chiefs defense already has a number of star players they just need to find a way to become more consistent.

16. Miami Dolphins (8-8):

The Dolphins went out and were big spenders in free agency, but they also lost a considerable amount of talent. While they definitely are improved from a weapons standpoint, Miami's offensive line and running game probably took a step back and will negate some of the pick-ups. The Dolphins



also face a very brutal schedule this year, and could have a tough time winning more than 8 games.

17. Dallas Cowboys (8-8):

The Cowboys weren't able to add much this offseason due to their cap situation. While their passing attack figures to be one of the best in the league, their running game and offensive line is still filled with question marks. Defensively they are transitioning to a 4-3 and it will be interesting to see how that move impacts their level of play. Without a dramatic improvement on defense or in the running game it will be hard for Dallas to rank higher than 3rd in the division.

18. Minnesota Vikings (8-8):

The Vikings should still be a strong team and could finish 2nd in the NFC North, but could have a tough time making it back to the playoffs in what looks to be a tougher NFC race this year. Though they made some improvements to their passing game, this team will still live and die with Adrian Peterson's legs. The Vikings defense should be good, but the secondary is still questionable.

19. St. Louis Rams (7-9):

The Rams are one of the more promising young teams in the NFL with an offense that has the potential to be elite and an improving defense. Unfortunately they play in a division with the 49ers and Seahawks, which will likely prevent them from making the postseason themselves.

20. Chicago Bears (7-9):

The Bears went 10-6 last year but missed the playoffs, this year it is possible they take a small step back. Chicago got a number of wins due to their opportunistic defense that not only led the league in turnovers but had 9 touchdowns on their own. While the defense should still be very good and should create a number of turnovers, it is unlikely they can get 9 touchdowns again this year. The offense will hopefully be improved, but questions remain about how far Jay Cutler can lead the Bears.

21. Tampa Bay Buccaneers (7-9):

The Bucs figure to be a team on the rise with a revamped secondary headlined by shutdown corner Darrelle Revis. Tampa already had a strong run defense, and now with a top notch secondary the Bucs should really cut down on their points allowed. Offensively Tampa should be solid, but it is time for Josh Freeman to take his game to the next level.

22. Philadelphia Eagles (7-9):

The Eagles are expected to have a new dynamic offense with Chip Kelly at the helm, and a revamped 3-4 defense. While they brought in a number of talented players they figure to be a year away from being a real threat in the division. How Michael Vick adapts to this system will be the key of how far this team can go.



23. Cleveland Browns (6-10):

The Browns offense should be much improved just by moving away from the West Coast offense which was a poor fit for Brandon Weeden. Defensively the Browns used much of their draft and free agent dollars to bring in talent and it could make the Browns one of the stronger defensive units in the league. Unfortunately Cleveland still figures to be 4th place in the ultra-tough AFC North.

24. San Diego Chargers (6-10):

The Chargers have high hopes for a rebound season this year, but they are relying on a revamped offensive line and secondary that for the most part is unspectacular on paper. If the Chargers can't give Philip Rivers time to throw, their chances for success this year are pretty slim. How the Chargers ground game plays out will be another key factor to what their season looks like, as this offense hasn't been the same since Tomlinson left.

25. Buffalo Bills (6-10):

The Bills quarterback situation to start the season could be a disaster, but if E.J. Manuel can return fairly quickly the Bills can have a solid season. They might not finish .500 or better, but they should be competitive and building on something for next year. The Bills running game figures to carry them this year behind star back C.J. Spiller. The Bills defense has the talent to be a strong unit, but last year had too much inconsistency.

26. Tennessee Titans (5-11):

The Titans are hoping their investments along the offensive line will pay off this season, but the real question is if Jake Locker turns the corner here. If Locker shows positive development then the Titans could have a decent season, but it is likely they will face another year of growing pains and a disappointing season.

27. Detroit Lions (5-11):

The Lions hopefully will be improved on the ground this year, but they still face a tough schedule and might not have the defense to get out of the cellar of the NFC North. This year will be a big test for Matt Stafford who has struggled mightily against teams with winning records in his career.

28. Arizona Cardinals (4-12):

The Cardinals should be improved this season on offense with a stronger line, a new quarterback and multiple running back options. Their defense still figures to be pretty strong though it might take a slight step back in the secondary and with Darryl Washington's 4 game suspension. The Cardinals still figure to be 4th in the NFC West and at least a year away before they can contend.

29. Carolina Panthers (4-12):

The Panthers ended the season strong last year, but questions still persist if this team is for real. The Panthers did make improvements on defense by taking a pair of tackles in the first two rounds which should dramatically improve their interior production.

Questions still remain in the secondary and along the offensive line. Much of the Panthers season will come down to what Cam Newton shows up. If it is the Newton from the first half of the season, Carolina will finish well below .500. If it is the Newton from the final weeks of the season, then the Panthers could make a run at the .500.

30. Jacksonville Jaguars (2-12):

The Jaguars passed on upgrading the quarterback position this year, and will likely struggled on offense this year. Their defense also figures to be a work in progress as they have a number of new starters. Jacksonville is also going to be without 2012 1st rounder WR Justin Blackmon for the first four games further hurting their offense.



31. New York Jets (2-12):

The Jets defense should continue to be strong, but their offense will continue to be a liability. They drafted Geno Smith, but he's likely a better option for 2014, meaning once again Mark Sanchez is healthy the team could turn back to him. That means that the Jets will be near the bottom of the offensive rankings, which should wreck their season.

32. Oakland Raiders (2-12):

The Raiders completely gutted their team in an effort to start fresh and clear their cap in future years. Unfortunately this is going to be a long term rebuilding project. Their defense figures to be especially problematic and will likely be among the league's worst. Whether it is Matt Flynn or Terrelle Pryor at quarterback, this will be a below average offense. The only positive is that the Raiders did the right thing to clear money for the future and finally get their team in order. Unfortunately that means they will likely end up as the worst team in the NFL this season.



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FEATURE ARTICLES

Best Chance to Go Worst to First in 2013?

By Tajh Jenkins:

With the start of the 2013 NFL season just under two weeks away, there are a few teams in the league looking to improve on their dismal 2012 seasons. While some teams have already established themselves as Super Bowl contenders, others are looking to go from their respective division cellars to playoff contenders this season. You might be thinking that it's not possible, but recent NFL history suggests otherwise. In fact, going from "worst to first" is very doable in the NFL.

Since the 2003 season, there has been at least one team that went from worst to first in the 8 NFL divisions. That makes ten consecutive years in which a team that finished last in their division the year before, turned things around and won the division the following year.

Unfortunately, there will be some teams who finished at the bottom last season who will turn in yet another disappointing season. But, there will be other teams that make a surprise rise to the top of the standings. This is the true definition of parity in the NFL, which makes every season so competitive and interesting. There's always a chance for your team to either regress or progress drastically in the standings from year to year.

As stated previously, there have been ten consecutive seasons that a team has gone worst to first. Thirteen teams have actually gone from worst to first in that span, with the Washington Redskins being the most recent to do so last season.



Here's a chart that gives a look at the last decade of teams that have gone worst to first:

| Seasons | Team (Worst to First in 2012) |
|----------------|---|
| 2012 | Washington Redskins |
| 2011 | Denver Broncos |
| 2010 | Kanas City Chiefs |
| 2009 | New Orleans Saints |
| 2008 | Miami Dolphins |
| 2007 | Tampa bay Buccaneers |
| 2006 | Philadelphia Eagles, New Orleans Saints |
| 2005 | Chicago Bears |
| 2004 | Atlanta Falcons, San Diego Chargers |
| 2003 | Kansas City Chiefs, Carolina Panthers |

Here are the candidates for this year's worst to first sweepstakes:

| Team | 2012 Record |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| Philadelphia Eagles | 4-12 |
| Arizona Cardinals | 5-11 |
| Tampa Bay Buccaneers | 7-9 |
| Detroit Lions | 4-12 |
| Buffalo Bills | 6-10 |
| Kansas City Chiefs | 2-14 |
| Jacksonville Jaguars | 2-14 |
| Cleveland Browns | 5-11 |

Now that you know the candidates for this season's worst to first turnaround, I will now breakdown the likelihood of each those team's chances of winning their division this year.

Philadelphia Eagles (NFC East):

How will Chip Kelly fair as the Eagles new head coach? Can his “fast paced” offense succeed on the NFL level? Was Michael Vick the right guy for the starting quarterback job? Can he stay consistent, healthy, and throw the ball accurately enough to last the entire season? How good or bad will the defense be after switching from a 4-3 to a 3-4 scheme? These are the questions, among others, that are surrounding the Philadelphia Eagles as the season nears.



I remain optimistic of what the NFL’s most “interesting” team of 2013 can do. They do have some great pieces in place offensively (LeSean McCoy, DeSean Jackson, Brent Celek, Jason Avant etc.) and defensively (Trent Cole, DeMeco Ryan, Cary Williams etc.), and should show major improvement in special teams under new coordinator, Dave Fipp. With that being said, I think that the Eagles are in too much of a transition to seriously make some noise in the division. They’ll most likely feature an exciting offense, but I don’t have that much trust in the defense right now. They struggle to tackle and capitalize on turnovers.

Also, playing in the NFC East is always tough even though the division isn’t as strong as it used to be. The Eagles play the NFC North, which can possibly have three teams make the playoffs, and the AFC West. The AFC West features a Super Bowl contender in the Denver Broncos and another team who you will see on this list a little later, the Kansas City Chiefs. The Chiefs expect to be much improved. The Eagles will be fun to watch, but I don’t know if this team is ready in Chip Kelly’s first season as head coach.

I think that they have a 25% chance of winning their division.

Arizona Cardinals (NFC West):

The Arizona Cardinals may have finally found a solution to a major problem that has plagued them since Kurt Warner’s retirement in 2009. Quarterback Carson Palmer was brought in via trade this offseason to be the team’s new starting quarterback. At age 33,

he's not the long term solution at the position, but All-Pro wide receiver Larry Fitzgerald should be happy with Palmer throwing him the ball. Fitzgerald will finally have a stable quarterback under center and after being held under 1,000 yards receiving for the first time since 2006, he can certainly use that stability. Palmer is a much better option over the other quarterbacks on the roster (Drew Stanton, Ryan Lindley, and Caleb TerBush) and last year's starter Kevin Kolb. Passing was a major deficiency in the offense but so was the run game.

Arizona's leading rusher for the 2012 season was LaRod-Stephens-Howling. He was only able to run for 356 yards all season. But they now have running back Rashard Mendenhall, who should be a major upgrade.

Defensively, the Cardinals look to improve upon a 28th ranked run defense. Their pass defense ranked within the top 5 of the league. They lost safety Adrian Wilson, but Patrick Peterson, Daryl Washington, Karlos Dansby, Darnell Dockett and Calais Campbell along with rookie Tyrann Mathieu should pick up the slack. Their secondary will be strong this year behind Peterson.

The good news is that the Cardinals should be better, but the bad news is that they play in arguably the toughest division in the league. Super Bowl contenders San Francisco 49ers and Seattle Seahawks will sit atop the division when it's all said and done. The St. Louis Rams will fight the Cardinals for third place. Since the Cardinals are in the same division as the 49ers and Seahawks.

I'll only give them a 10% chance of coming out on top.

Tampa Bay Buccaneers (NFC South):

The Buccaneers future looks bright. On offense, they have quarterback Josh Freeman, wide receiver Vincent Jackson, and running back Doug Martin. That's three very good players to have as the core of your offense. Despite the 17 interceptions, Freeman had great production in passing yards (4,065) and touchdowns (27). Martin rushed for almost 1,500 yards with 11 touchdowns and Jackson had 1,384 receiving yards and 8 touchdowns. Another year together and these three should be even better.

Defensively, the Bucs were one of the best rushing defenses, but they struggled in passing defense. To solve that problem, they brought in one of the top cornerbacks in the NFL, Darrelle Revis. During the offseason they also signed cornerback Dashon

Goldson, who is an All-Pro cornerback. Revis and Goldson figure to take care of any team trying to exploit their secondary.

Even though the Buccaneers play in a tough division, I believe that they have a good chance to come out on top. The Atlanta Falcons played in last year's NFC title game. The Carolina Panthers are up and coming behind the maturation of third-year quarterback Cam Newton, and head coach Sean Payton will come back to coach the New Orleans Saints this season. They also play the NFC West and AFC East. A lot of the Buccaneers success will depend on the play of Josh Freeman and the defense. Freeman needs to cut down on the turnovers and take the next step into the upper echelon of NFL quarterbacks. The defense needs a healthy Darrelle Revis on the field for 16 games. His presence can make everyone else on the defense better as he shuts down the left side of the field. I think that the Buccaneers have the second highest chance to win their division out of the 8 teams.

I'll give them a 50% chance.

Detroit Lions (NFC North):

After making the playoffs for the first time since 1999 in 2011, the Lions regressed significantly in 2012. Calvin Johnson had a record setting season after breaking Jerry Rice's single season receiving yard mark. Even with his successful individual season, it led the Lions to a 4-12 record. Despite the poor record, Detroit did have three Pro Bowl selections and two All-Pro selections, including Johnson. The other was defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh.

Though they dominated the league in passing behind quarterback Matthew Stafford and Johnson, their rushing attack was less than stellar, so they signed Reggie Bush this offseason. Bush figures to help the running game a ton, but he isn't an every down back. He'll also be a factor in the passing game. The Lions lost a few key pieces to their defense, but they did bring in replacements. Their defensive line is one of the best in the league with Suh and Nick Fairley. It only got better after drafting the athletic DE Ziggy Ansah. Louis Delmas, Chris Houston, Glover



Quinn will play key roles in the secondary.

Along with their division games, the Lions will take on teams from the NFC East and AFC North. The Lions play in a division with three other potential playoff teams. The NFC North will be very competitive. Playing the NFC East and AFC North doesn't help the matter as they are two tough divisions in their own right.

I'll give the Lions a 20% chance to win the division.

Buffalo Bills (AFC East):

The Bills have struggled the past two seasons. Their record has been stagnant at 6-10. With that being said, they do have some talent on their roster. This offseason they have changed coaching staffs with new head coach Doug Marron, and upgraded their roster. Only time will tell if their offseason moves translates into more wins. The Bills sent three players to the Pro Bowl last season. They also had an All-Pro selection, safety Jairus Byrd. Byrd is a key piece of a Bills defense that struggled to make plays last season.

The defense finished 26th in the NFL in scoring and allowed the second most rushing yards while giving up 23 rushing touchdowns. The defense should be much improved with an overhauled linebacker corps, reenergized Mario Williams and Pro Bowler Kyle Williams.

On offense, running back C.J. Spiller and wide receiver Steve Johnson are the Bills two most dangerous weapons. Rookie quarterback E.J. Manuel and Kevin Kolb are battling for the starting spot, but regardless of whom wins, Spiller and Johnson will be leaned on heavily on offense. Receivers Robert Woods and Marquise Goodwin will also be key factors.

With the Bills being in the AFC East and Tom Brady and Bill Belichick still around, it's pretty much a forgone conclusion that the New England Patriots will take the division. The Bills should finish second, ahead of the Miami Dolphins and New York Jets.

Overall I give them a 40% chance to win the division.

Kansas City Chiefs (AFC West):

Finishing with a 2-14 record is cause for major changes all around in Kansas City. But when you look at their roster, you start to realize that they should have been better than they were. With six Pro Bowl players (2 offense, 4 defense), and a second team All-Pro running back in Jamaal Charles, the Chiefs had the tools to be a good team.



Maybe it was the coaching. If so, that's fixed now with Andy Reid in town. Quarterback play was also a problem, which resulted in the trade for Alex Smith. Reid and Smith hope to be the two main pieces to help turn the franchise around. I think that they can do it. The offense will definitely improve on their 13.2 points per game average from a season ago. Smith will be protected by the No.1 overall pick in Eric Fisher and Brandon Albert. Along with Jamaal Charles, Dwyane Bowe, Donnie Avery, and tight ends Anthony Fasano and Tony Moeaki expect to put up a lot more points this year.

Defensively, safety Eric Berry, and linebackers Tamba Hali, Justin Houston and Derrick Johnson will look to build on their Pro Bowl seasons. Berry will be a part of a solid secondary that also features cornerbacks Sean Smith and Brandon Flowers. Their defense was pretty good stopping passing attacks but struggled defending the run game. This season should see better with the addition of DE Mike DeVito, who is labeled as a run stuffer.

The Chiefs talent and new additions give them a great chance to challenge the Denver Broncos as the division winner. Denver should come back better, but they have had their share of problems this offseason that could play a factor during the season (injuries and Von Miller's suspension). The San Diego Chargers and Oakland Raiders will occupy the last two spots. The Chiefs also play the NFC East and AFC South, but I think that they will be just as good as anyone they face this year. Andy Reid has a successful track record as a head coach and should be able to take this team to new heights.

To me, the Chiefs have the best chance to win their division out of the 8 teams. I'll give them a 70% chance.

Jacksonville Jaguars (AFC South):

Remember when I said that there will be some teams who turn in yet another disappointing season? I was mostly talking about the Jacksonville Jaguars. Outside of running back Maurice Jones-Drew, wide receiver Justin Blackmon, and offensive weapon Denard Robinson, there isn't really anyone I want to watch on this roster. Ok I lied. I would also like to watch linebacker Paul Posluszny, but that's mainly because he's a former Penn Stater and I'm a current Penn Stater.

Anyway, this team needs to improve in about every aspect of the team after finishing in the bottom third of every offensive and defensive category. New head Coach Gus Bradley hopes to bring his defensive genius over from his days in Seattle. He has a lot of work to do, but defensive end Jason Babin and cornerback Marcus Trufant are two players that can help improve the defense. Those two can't do it by themselves though.

Offensively, there's nothing really to look forward too. There's no quarterback on the roster good enough to lead this team, that includes starter Blaine Gabbert and backup Chad Henne. Justin Blackmon will miss four games due to suspension. Guess we'll have to watch the Jaguars run Maurice Jones-Drew into the ground again.

While the Jaguars end the 2013 season as one of the worst teams in the league, the Indianapolis Colts and Houston Texas will fight for the AFC South crown. The Tennessee Titans will most likely occupy the third spot. The other teams that they will play don't matter.

The Jaguars have a 5% chance to win the division.

Cleveland Browns (AFC North):

If the Cleveland Browns want to make any type of improvement in the standings, they have to fix their defense. The Browns ranked 25th in pass defense and 19th in run defense. It's pathetic, I know. But the defense is expected to better this year. Fresh off a Super Bowl title with the Ravens, Paul Kruger was signed this offseason to anchor the Browns pass rush. He'll have help from fellow linebacker Barkevious Mingo.

On the offensive side of the ball things are interesting. Quarterback Brandon Weeden is the future at the position



but has struggled some in the preseason. He had a solid 2012 campaign throwing for 3,300 yards and 14 touchdowns. Weeden did prove to be a little turnover prone after throwing 17 interceptions. The Browns have their every down running back in Trent Richardson, who ran for just under 1,000 yards and 11 scores. He dealt with injuries throughout his rookie season and needs to stay healthy. The Browns also have a young receiver in Josh Gordon, who became a big-play threat. He ended last season with 55 receptions for 805 yards and 5 touchdowns.

New head coach Rob Chudzinski will be under a microscope in his first season with the team. I don't think that the Browns will make major strides this season. They have a pretty tough schedule having to play the Steelers, Ravens, and Bengals twice, plus the teams in the AFC East (mainly the Patriots) and NFC North. The AFC North is up for grabs this season, but the Browns are the fourth best team in that division. Even with the Steelers and Ravens expected to have down years. The Bengals can easily snatch the division title this year.

I'll give the Browns a 35% chance to win the division.

New Faces in New Places

By PJ Moran:

The first few weeks of NFL free agency is one of the craziest times of the year. Year after year, teams will empty the bank on a player that they think is capable of turning them into a winner. Most of the time, these purchases do not work out very well. However, there is always the select bunch of free agents who fit in well with their new team and bring them to the next level. Here is a list of the top five players who swapped uniforms during this offseason:

5. Elvis Dumervil – Baltimore Ravens

If everything went according to plan, then Elvis Dumervil wouldn't even be eligible for this list. He planned on restructuring his contract with the Denver Broncos, but his agent was too late on faxing the necessary paperwork so Dumervil was released. But regardless of how it happened, Dumervil is now a member of the reigning Super Bowl champion Baltimore Ravens. The once-vaunted Ravens defense will have an entirely new look this season now that both Ray Lewis and Ed Reed have left Baltimore. Still, I think the Ravens defense will remain top-tier, and Dumervil is a big reason why. The Ravens run a 3-4 defense, and Dumervil is built to be a 3-4 outside linebacker. When Denver ran the 3-4 back in 2009, Dumervil led the league with 17 sacks. With Dumervil on one side and Terrell Suggs on the other, the Ravens defense should still be a nightmare for opposing quarterbacks.

4. Ed Reed – Houston Texans

From the guy who joined the Ravens defense to the guy who left it. After 11 years in Baltimore, this future first-ballot Hall of Famer joined the Texans this offseason and will likely end his career in Houston. While Reed is not the player that he once was, he is still as much of a playmaker on the defensive side of the ball as anyone in the entire league. To put it simply, as long as Reed is on the field, then quarterbacks should be afraid. With J.J. Watt and the rest of the defense forcing constant pressure, Reed should have a field day baiting quarterbacks into throwing interceptions. If Reed



can stay healthy (yes, this is a big if), then he should once again finish among the league-leaders in interceptions and will take the Texans defense to the next level.

3. Wes Welker – Denver Broncos

The Broncos already had two great receivers in Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker before the offseason began, but then they stole Welker from New England to form the most potent receiving corps in the NFL. Preparing for this offense will surely create headaches for defensive coordinators, as Peyton Manning will now have someone open to throw to on every play. Welker holds the NFL record of five seasons with 100+ receptions, and there is a good chance that this season will be number six. Even if he does not reach that plateau, Welker will put up some big numbers and help the Broncos in their quest for a Super Bowl title.

2. Steven Jackson – Atlanta Falcons

Steven Jackson may be a little past his prime, but if any free agent signing turned a great team in a Super Bowl contender, it was the Falcons' acquisition of Jackson. Because he has played on bad Rams teams for his entire career, Jackson has become one of the most underrated players in NFL history. He has rushed for at least 1,000 yards every year since he became a starter, and he is already 26th in all-time rushing yards. With a much-improved offensive line and less pressure to carry the offense, Jackson should once again rush for over 1,000 yards and carry the Falcons to new heights.

1. Jake Long – St. Louis Rams

While Long doesn't play as "sexy" of a position as any of the previous 4 listed players, he will make the biggest impact on his new team in the long run. Long, the former #1 overall pick, is already one of the best left tackles in the league and will remain one for years to come. Poor blocking is always the excuse for Sam Bradford's subpar performance thus far in St. Louis, but with Long now anchoring the line, it's time for Bradford to play up to his contract. The Rams' signing of Jake Long won't turn them into championship contenders immediately, but it undoubtedly turned them into a better team in both the short term and the long term.

2013 Rookies Preview

By PJ Moran:

Every year a select number of rookies burst onto the NFL scene and find immediate success, and 2013 will be no different. Last season's draft class might have produced the best joint rookie campaign in NFL history. Andrew Luck, Robert Griffin III, and Russell Wilson all led their teams to the playoffs; Alfred Morris and Doug Martin finished in the top five in the league in rushing; and Luke Kuechly led the league in tackles. So no, this year's rookie class will not match the success of their predecessors. And yes, the Class of 2013 is considered to be one of the weakest in recent memory. But many of these rookies will thrive right away, and here is the list of the ten who will find the most success:

10. E.J. Manuel – Buffalo Bills

Let me get this straight: E.J. Manuel will not have a season like Luck, RG3, or Wilson did last year. The Buffalo Bills will also probably not make the playoffs. However, neither of those two conditions should immediately deem Manuel's rookie year as a failure. Because of the level of play displayed last season, we are starting to forget what is usually expected out of a rookie quarterback. If Manuel can win 6-8 games and get a better understanding of the offense, then it would be a good year for him. If I'm picking between Manuel and fellow rookie quarterback Geno Smith over who will have the better year, give me Manuel.



9. Eric Reid – San Francisco 49ers

Any rookie who immediately earns a starting job in Jim Harbaugh's defense is probably bound for success, and that's just what Reid did this offseason. Reid will replace Dashon Goldson at free safety, which is a tough task for a rookie. But he is a great

athlete who has played very well this preseason, so he should be up to the challenge. Yes, Reid will get burnt on some plays throughout the course of the year, but he will also play well enough to hold onto his starting job.

8. Tyrann Mathieu – Arizona Cardinals

“The Honey Badger” could either make me look stupid for placing him on this list, or stupid for putting him only at number eight. The Cardinals took Mathieu in the third round, but there is no doubt that he was a first-round talent. He seems to have gotten his personal life back on track, and the Cardinals could not have given him higher praise this offseason. He will see immediate action at safety and punt returner, so he will be able to show off his game-changing ability right away. This experiment with Mathieu could easily go two ways, but I see it ending pretty well.

7. Kenny Vaccaro – New Orleans Saints

While I am high on Eric Reid and Tyrann Mathieu, I think that Vaccaro will have the best season of any rookie safety. Vaccaro’s skill set is somewhat of a match between Reid’s and Mathieu’s, and he will be a perfect fit in the Saints’ defense. The Saints’ defense is coming off of a historically bad season, so Vaccaro’s presence will significantly improve the unit. He will probably roam around the field more than he plays at a specific position, which will let him showcase his game-changing ability. If any of the rookie safeties are going to win the Defensive Rookie of the Year award, my pick is Vaccaro.

6. Tyler Eifert – Cincinnati Bengals

Tight end wasn’t a huge need for the Bengals coming into the 2013 NFL Draft, as they already have Jermaine Gresham on the roster. However, Eifert’s value was too high for them to pass up on at the 21st pick. The Bengals are certainly going to be happy with this selection because Eifert is a monster who should shine very quickly. Injuries have slowed down Gresham and the Bengals don’t have a true #2 receiver opposite A.J. Green, so look for Eifert to emerge as that option for Andy Dalton this year.

5. DeAndre Hopkins – Houston Texans

There are a select few of big and fast rookie wide receivers who have potential for breakout seasons, but the one with the best chance is Hopkins. He has been getting rave reviews this offseason, and if he can stay healthy all season, then watch out. Even if the Texans are a run-first offense with a stud wide receiver in Andre Johnson, Hopkins is way too talented to not be crucially involved in the game plan.

4. Ziggy Ansah – Detroit Lions

The highest ranked defensive player on this list, Ansah has the talent to finish the season ranked even higher. He is only the beginning stage of his development, but Ansah could very well be the next Jason Pierre-Paul. His play has been better than expected in the preseason, and he should only continue to improve throughout the regular season. With Ansah playing on the same defensive line as Ndamukong Suh and Nick Fairley, a double-digit sack total for him sounds completely reasonable.

3. Giovani Bernard – Cincinnati Bengals

It came as a shock when the Bengals made Bernard the first running back off the board, but they will look like geniuses once he takes the field. BenJarvus Green-Ellis remains the starter in Cincinnati, but that might not last long with Bernard lurking behind him. Even if Green-Ellis is in the backfield, the Bengals have made it clear that they will use Bernard at wide receiver. He's just too talented to keep off of the field. It's hard to predict exactly what Bernard will do in 2013, but expect big things.

2. Eddie Lacy – Green Bay Packers

While Lacy might not be the most dynamic running back of the 2013 class, he definitely landed in the best situation. Once thought to be a lock for the first round, Lacy fell all the way to the Packers at the end of the second round, and something is telling me he won't forget about that. Lacy is going to run angry this season, and with the current state of the Packers' backfield, he is going to run a lot. Lacy is the best pure runner Aaron Rodgers has had behind him in quite some time, and he is going to take full advantage of that luxury. Barring any injury, expect a 1,000-yard season from Lacy.

1. Tavon Austin – St. Louis Rams





If a casual fan took one look at Tavon Austin, he would never guess that he is a wide receiver. Pretty soon, even the casual fan will know Tavon Austin's name. The diminutive playmaker out of West Virginia is bringing his 4.28 40-yard dash speed to St. Louis, and NFL defensive coordinators have been put on notice. Austin is a weapon that Sam Bradford has never had, and he is going to take full advantage. Whether he's catching passes, running the ball, or returning kicks, the ball is going to be in Austin's hands a lot. And when it is, look out.



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2013 NFL GUIDE

FILM BREAKDOWN

Breaking Down the Read-Option in the NFL

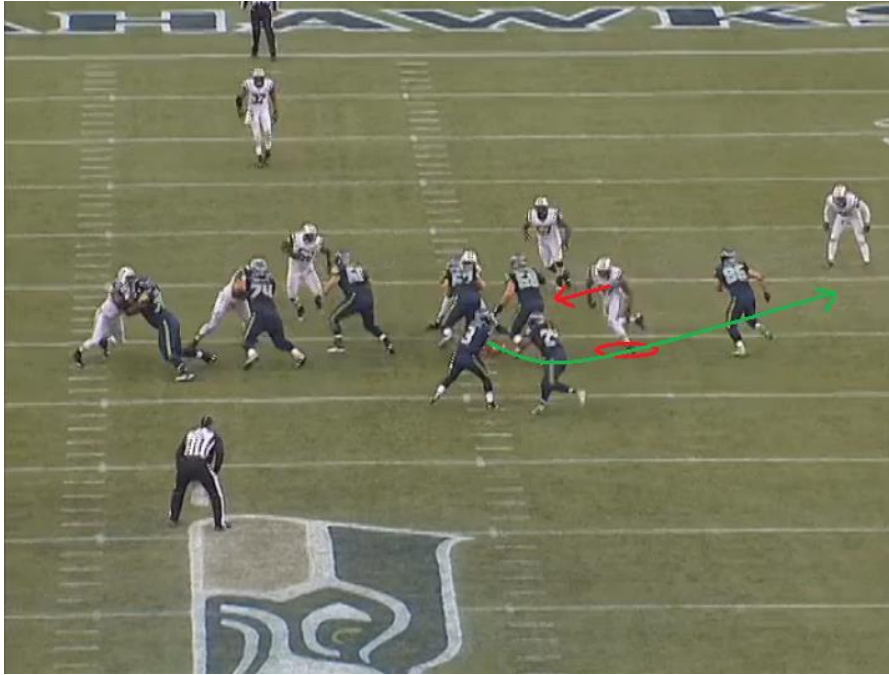
By Mark Bullock:

The read-option has been the talk of the NFL for a while now. We've seen glimpses of it for a while now, with Tim Tebow and Cam Newton in the league. But last season it really took off. The Redskins brought out multiple read-option plays with Robert Griffin III at the helm, before the Seahawks with Russell Wilson and the 49ers with Colin Kaepernick decided to jump on the train. It's no coincidence that those were three of the top four rushing attacks over the course of the 2012 regular season and that they were all playoff teams.

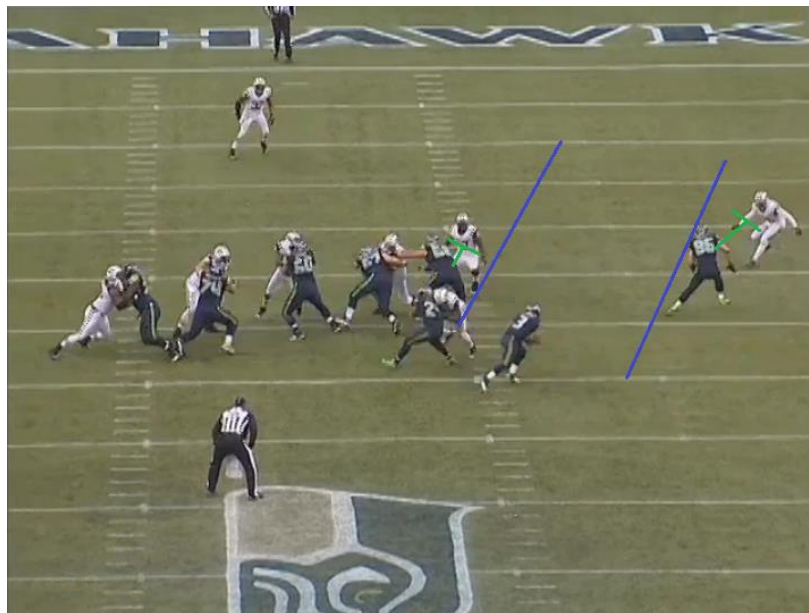
But what is the read-option? What is it exactly that has taken the NFL by storm and has every defensive coordinator in the league talking about it? In its basic form, the read-option is a play that leaves a designated defensive end unblocked. How that defensive end reacts tells the quarterback to either hand it off to the running back, or keep it himself and run. Here's an example.



The defensive end circled in red is going to be left unblocked. Quarterback Russell Wilson is reading him. Should he crash inside to prevent the run, then Wilson will keep the ball himself and run into the area vacated behind him. If the defensive end stays where he is, Wilson will hand it off to his running back, Marshawn Lynch, who will have an extra blocker as a result of leaving the defensive end unblocked.



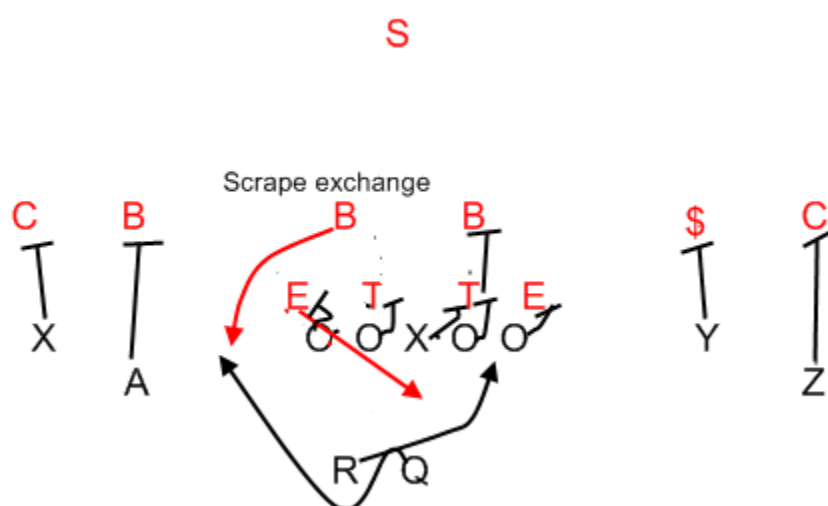
On this play, the unblocked defensive end crashes inside on the run, which tells Wilson to pull the ball and keep it himself.



There is a big running lane left wide open because of the defense end crashing inside. Wilson manages to run free and slides before he can get hit for an eight yard gain.

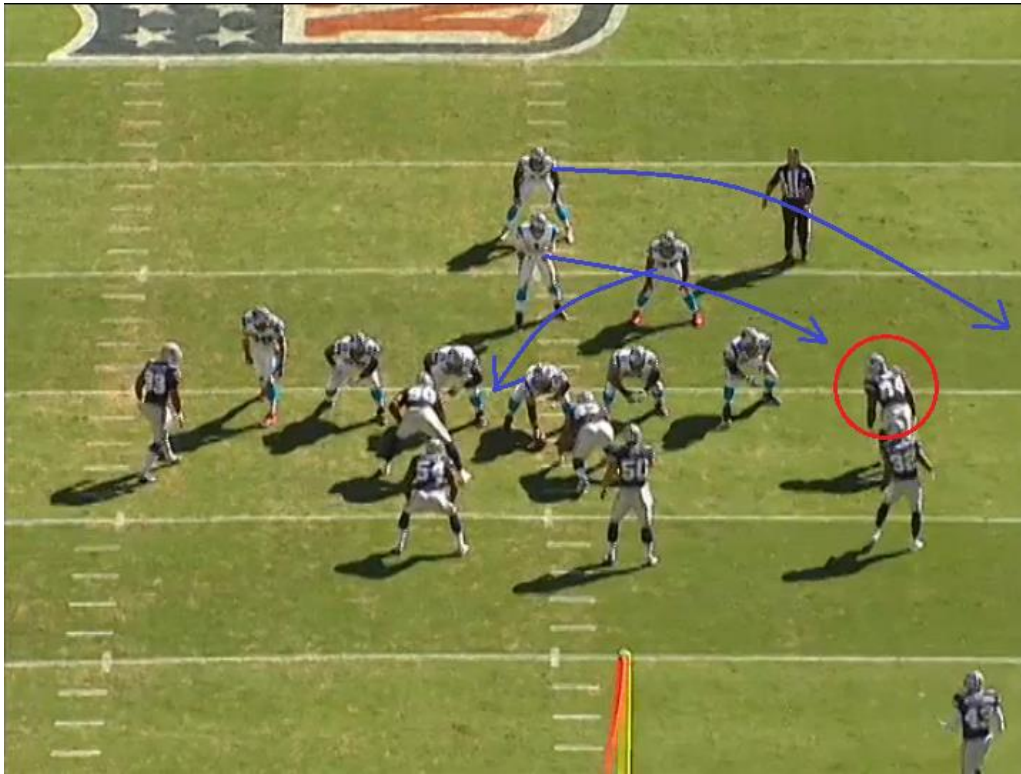
That is the most basic form of the read-option. It was initially designed to allow an extra blocker for the running back, but quite often the biggest plays come when the quarterback keeps the ball. It worked early on in the 2012 season, but defenses grew wise to it and attempted to counter it with a scheme called the scrape exchange.

Chris Brown over at SmartFootball.com drew up this diagram to demonstrate the scrape exchange.

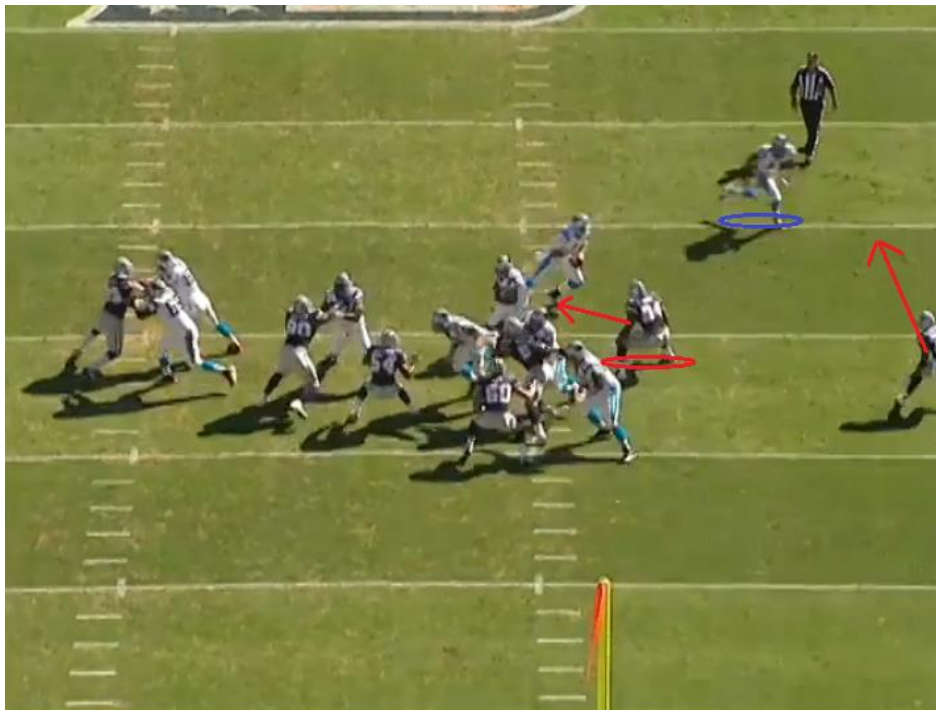


The scrape exchange tells the unblocked defensive end to crash on the run and force the quarterback to keep the ball. Then a linebacker will scrape back to tackle the quarterback instead of getting caught up on the run inside.

This has been a solution to the read-option in college for a while. College offenses had since figured out other variants of the read-option to counter the scrape exchange. One of those involved an extra offensive player in the backfield to act as a pitch-man on a triple option play.



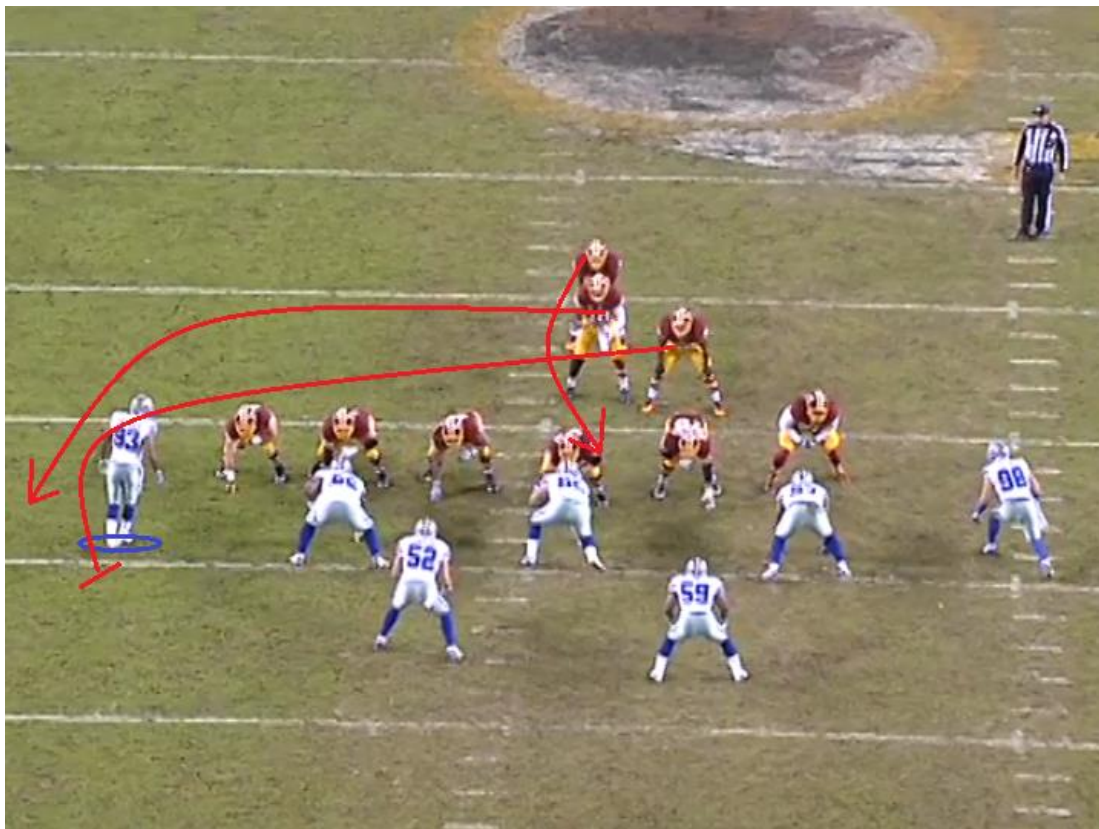
This is a favorite play of the Panthers. Just like before, they will leave a defensive end unblocked and Cam Newton will read him to decide if he will hand off or keep it himself.



The defensive end crashes, so Newton pulls the ball and keeps it himself, just like on the play we saw from Russell Wilson. But on this play, Newton also has a third option. He has another runner in the backfield with him, running to the outside in the same direction as Newton. That way, if the scraping defender comes down to tackle Newton, he can pitch it to his extra runner. On this occasion, the defender covers the pitch option which allows Newton to keep it himself for a big run.

The problem with using the triple option is that it invites defenders to hit the quarterback and leave the pitch option open. No team in the NFL wants to invite defenders to get a clean hit on their quarterback, even if he is 6'6" and 250 pounds. That brought the idea of the 'Arc Block' to the NFL.

The arc block, like the triple option, adds another player into the offensive backfield. But instead of an extra runner, a fullback or tight end is brought in to help block. But rather than being a lead blocker for the running back, he will arc around the unblocked defender and take on the scraping linebacker. The Redskins love using the arc block concept on their read-option plays.



Anthony Spencer is the edge defender that will be left unblocked on this play. However, fullback Darrel Young will charge at him appearing to be intent on blocking him.

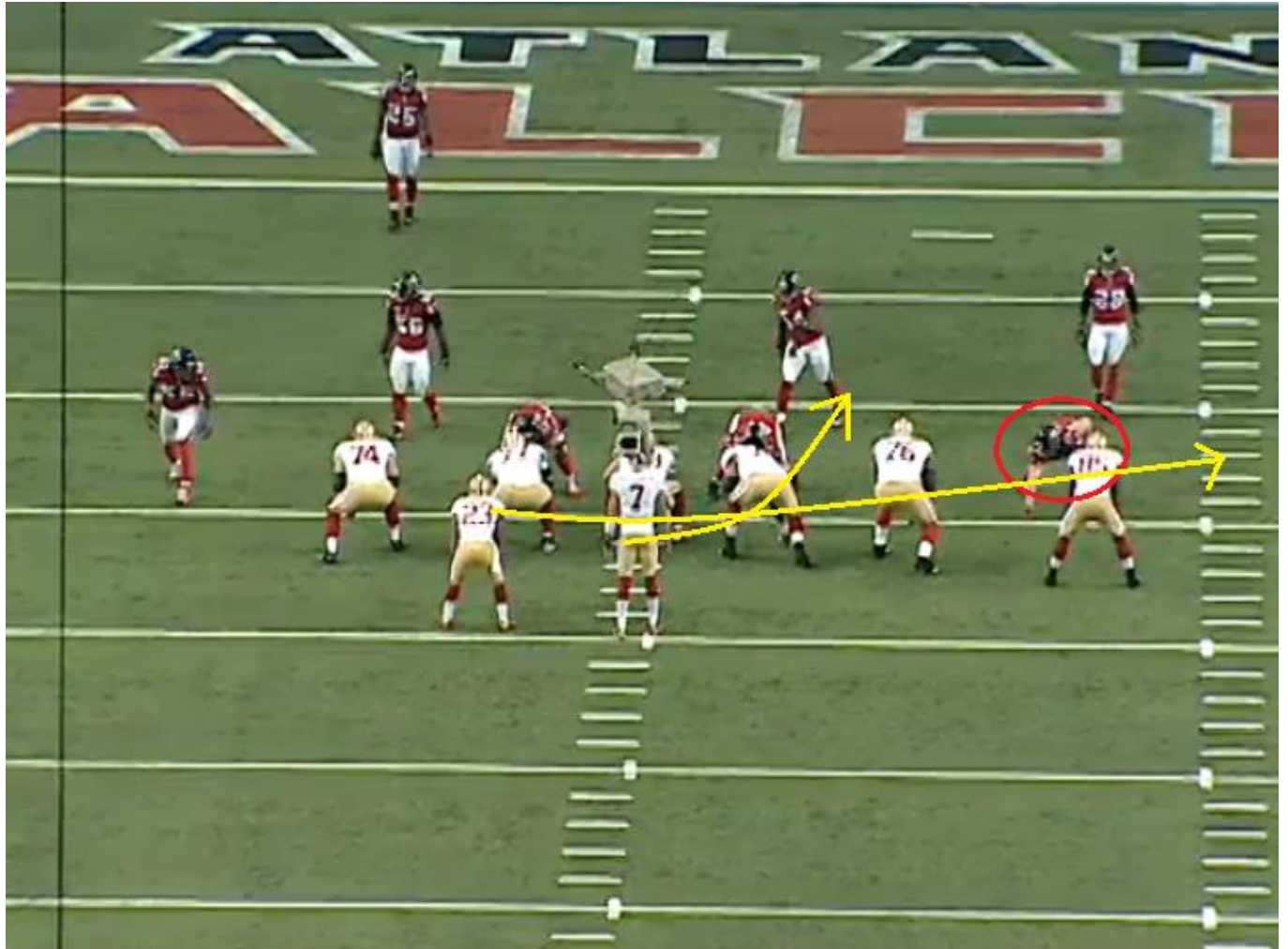


Like always, quarterback Robert Griffin III reads the unblocked defender. Spencer believes he's about to be blocked, so crashes inside to help support the run against Alfred Morris. That makes it an easy read for Griffin, who pulls the ball.

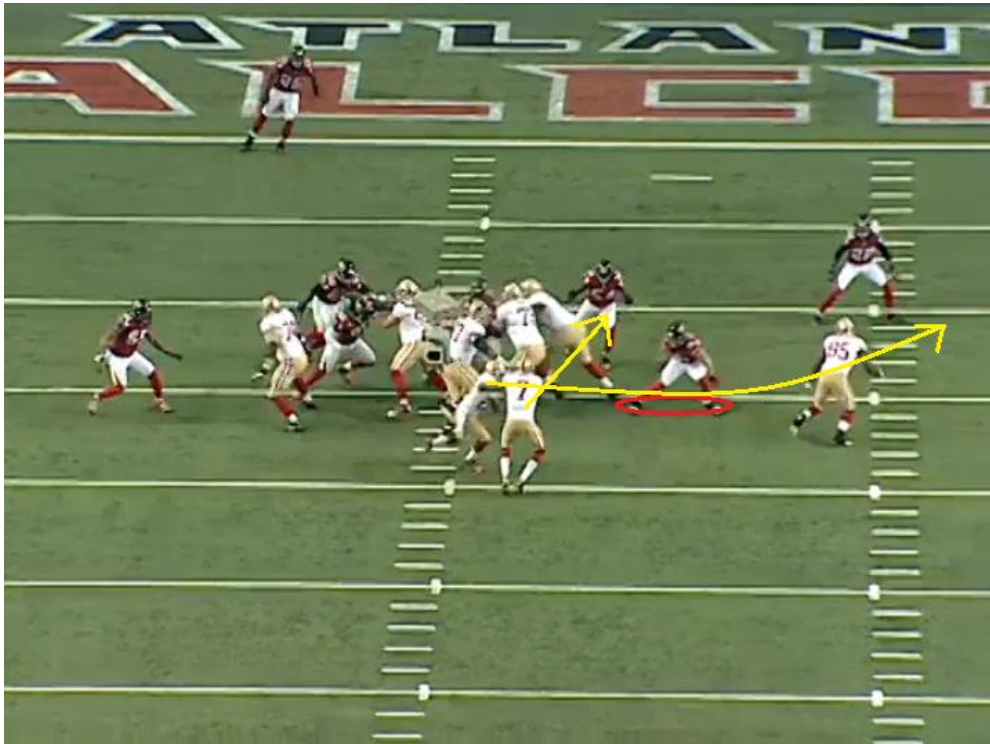


At the last second, Young skips past Spencer without blocking him. He 'arcs' around him to cut off any potential scraping linebacker. That allows Griffin a free run to the edge, and from there it's all about his speed in the open field.

The last read-option concept we've seen so far in the NFL is the 'Inverted Veer'. This concept involves the quarterback and running back almost switching roles; with the quarterback running behind the offensive line and the running back running into the vacated space behind the unblocked defender.



The base of the concept still remains the same, leave a defensive end unblocked and read him. But on the inverted veer, Kaepernick's reads are reversed. Normally if the defender crashes, he'd keep the ball and run himself. This time he'll only keep the ball if the defender stays where he is. If the read calls for Kaepernick to keep, he'll run the ball up the gut of the defense.



But the defensive end crashes, at least initially, telling Kaepernick to hand off to LeMichael James, who gets a free run to the edge of the defense.



This is a scenario no defense wants to see, a speedster like James in space. He's able to out-run the defenders chasing him and follows his blocking downfield for an easy touchdown run.

Much like the triple option, the inverted veer does open up the risk of the quarterback getting hit. If he keeps the ball, he has to run between the tackle, which is far from an ideal situation for a quarterback. But if you are able to hand it off using the inverted veer, it allows guys like James to get the ball in their hands with a lot of open field ahead of them.

Those are the four main read-option concepts we've seen in the NFL thus far. Defenses have now had an entire offseason to prepare for these types of plays, so it will be interesting to see what they come up with and, indeed, how offenses will react to those schemes.

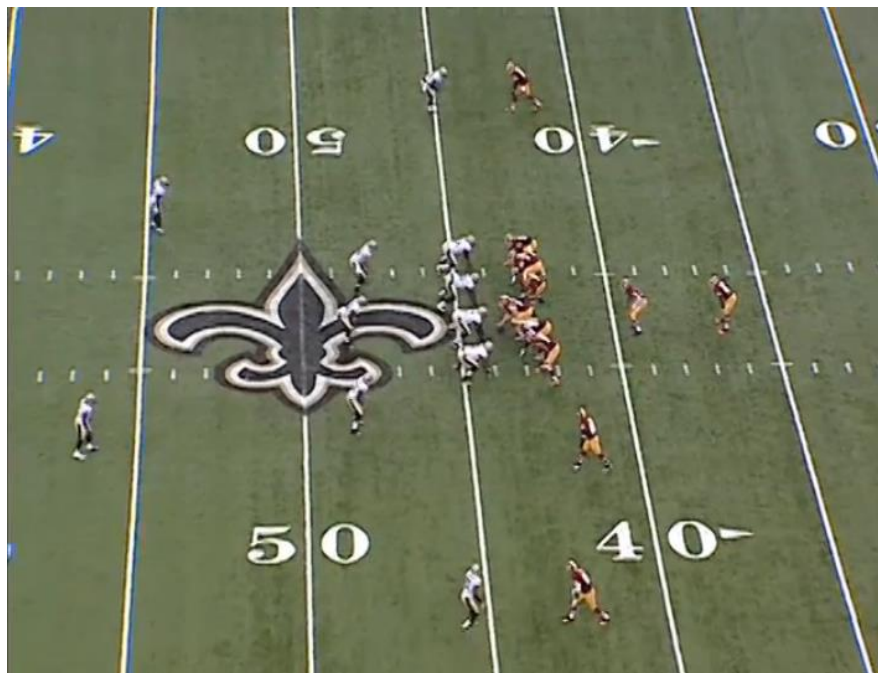
Breaking Down the Pistol Formation:

By Mark Bullock:

For years and years in the NFL, quarterbacks spent most of their time under center, taking the snap directly from the center and then either turning to hand it off to the running back, or dropping back to pass. More recently, the NFL has seen a shift towards a passing-heavy league, with quarterbacks spending more time in the shotgun. Aligned five yards back from the center, the quarterback gets a much better view of the defense from the shotgun and has an easier job recognizing coverage schemes. The shotgun also takes some of the three, five and seven step footwork out of the mind of the quarterback, making it easier for him to focus on finding an open receiver.

But the shotgun restricts the running concepts you can use from that formation. With the quarterback under center, the running back can line up directly behind him and go either way. But in the shotgun, the running back has to align either side of the quarterback, meaning he can only really run in one direction with blocks in front of him. Running from the shotgun also brings up timing issues, with the running back getting the ball much quicker than he would if the quarterback took the snap from under center.

Enter the pistol formation. In the pistol, the quarterback lines up three yards behind the center, with the running back lined up directly behind him.



This combines the best of both worlds. The quarterback gets to stand back from the line of scrimmage and get a better view of the defense, while still having the running back lined up directly behind him. That allows the offense to run their full quota of running plays in either direction. The offense can also run their standard drop back passing game, with only the quarterback having to make slight adjustments to his footwork and timing. With the full running package available to the offense, it's easier for them to sell play-action fakes. Because the running back is lined up behind the quarterback, the offense can still call for play-action bootlegs that have been so effective in the NFL for decades.

Another benefit of the pistol formation is that it hides the running back from the view of the defense.



As you can see there, with the quarterback stood up, he blocks the view of the defenders as they attempt to key in on the running back. Hiding the back can cause hesitation in the defense as they have to wait to see which direction he's going, which the offense can use to its advantage.

This is a two-way street though. The running back's view is somewhat blocked by the quarterback. But the back has the advantage of knowing what play is going to be, whereas the defense, obviously, doesn't. Inside runs are slightly more difficult to

execute effectively, but the Redskins managed to adjust by getting the quarterback to toss the ball to the back and get out of the way quickly, giving the back a clearer vision of the field.

As you can see above, the pistol also brings the fullback position back into the game. With a high percentage of the NFL favoring a shotgun, passing offense over a traditional under center offense, the fullback was becoming a thing of the past. There's no place in the backfield for a fullback in the shotgun. But in the pistol, he can line up either side of the quarterback.

The pistol formation does come with its downsides. Obviously, it takes some time to adjust the timing and footwork of everyone in the backfield, but those issues can be overcome with repetitions in practice. But short yard plays like quarterback sneaks and fullback dives aren't effective from the pistol.

Even with that in mind, I still believe the pistol formation is the way forward in the NFL. We saw a number of teams run plays out of it last year, some more than others. But I don't think it will be long until we see the NFL embrace it as the league looks to maintain its running game, while shifting towards a passing philosophy.



2013 NFL GUIDE

32 TEAM QUESTIONS

By John Manuel:

AFC East

New England Patriots - Now Wes Welker is gone, Aaron Hernandez is in jail and Gronk is rehabbing from injury. Who is going to step up and help this offense?

The question with the Pats usually revolves around the defense, but they lost to Baltimore because they couldn't do much on offense for once. Could it be injury-prone Danny Amendola or rookie Aaron Dobson? Maybe, the best way to go could be through the run, which the Pats improved last year with Ridley and others.



Miami Dolphins – What can quarterback Ryan Tannehill do in year two as the starter?

Much will be made about the money owner Stephen Ross spent since last season. I think the defense will do their job by adding Dion Jordan to bookend with Pro Bowler Cameron Wake. Ross paid big bucks for Mike Wallace to come south. The question if Tannehill can take the next step determines if this team could challenge New England.

Buffalo Bills - The real question is did the Bills reach way too high for quarterback EJ Manuel and how quickly can he develop?

New GM. New Coach. New quarterbacks. So no one really can place expectations on the 2013 Bills. Doug Marrone comes in with NFL experience as a coordinator with the Saints before being the head coach at Syracuse. The Bills haven't won in awhile, so maybe one more tough year should be ok with their fan base. Manuel should have the full season to develop under Marrone. The Bills are kind of like the 2012 Dolphins.

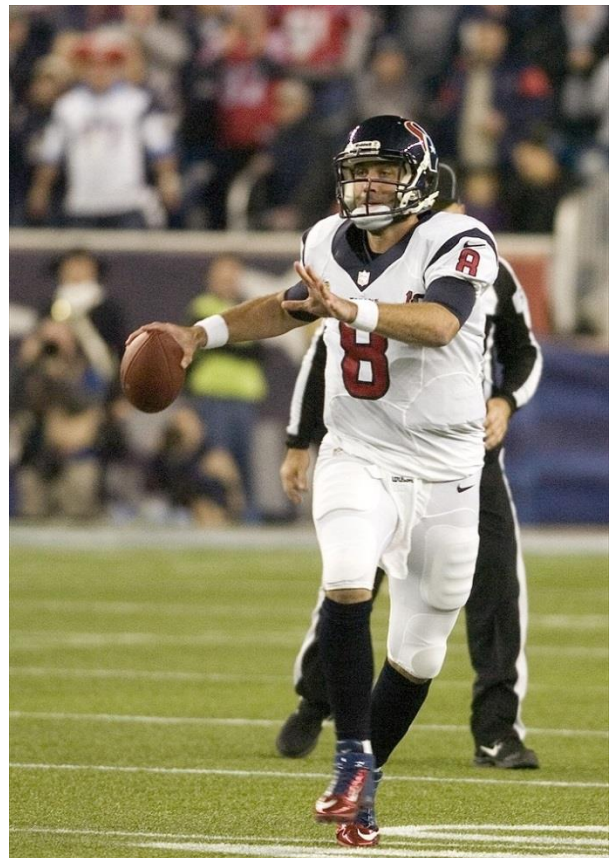
NY Jets - Bad enough that the question for Jets is can the offense do enough not to bury the defense?

The defense should be pretty good, but it might not matter. Because the offense looks to be horrid. The quarterbacks are big names now in Sanchez and Smith but after that talent is bare. Mangold is a top center but D'Brickashaw Ferguson needs to prove once again he is a top tackle. As for the skill positions most would take Alabama's over what the Jets have. The offense is going to need to do something or it is not going to matter how good Rex's defense is.

AFC South

Houston Texans - Is Matt Schaub good enough to win the playoffs?

The Texans looked like the AFC's front runners most of last season but then they slipped and were a non-factor when the playoffs came around. No doubt the team has talent but the biggest question mark is with the most important position, the quarterback. As of right now we have to lean no, but 2013 is Schaub's chance to prove many wrong, or him and Coach Gary Kubiak could be in trouble.



Indianapolis Colts – Do you consider the Colts a contender in the division or even for the AFC? Or are you wondering if last season was a fluke?

They made the playoffs but spent most of the season taking advantage of the NFL's worst teams. So is this team close to getting back to the days of Peyton or is it still building with Andrew Luck behind center? I think it closer to still building even though

they made a bunch of additions like Laron Landry, Gosder Cherilus and Greg Toler. I would be excited to be a Colts fan but not yet booking hotel rooms in NYC.

Tennessee Titans - Once again this is a quarterback driven league and the Titans need to find out, is Jake Locker the future in Nashville?

I want to say its can Chris Johnson become a monster running back with the revamped line? Or is Mike Munchak on the hot seat? But the state of franchise changes big time if Locker can be the man. If he can't, it sets back the Titans a few years at the minimum. Everyone in Nashville should be hitting church every Sunday before going to games.

Jacksonville Jaguars - Can first year coach Gus Bradley change the momentum of the Jacksonville/London Jaguars?

We can talk Blaine Gabbert but I think it is a losing cause for the Jags. So let's move onto something else. Since last season Jacksonville has more promise than seasons past, even without a solid option behind center. The Jaguars look like they had a great draft, but time will tell. It's been tough since Tom Coughlin was fired, so can Bradley step up?

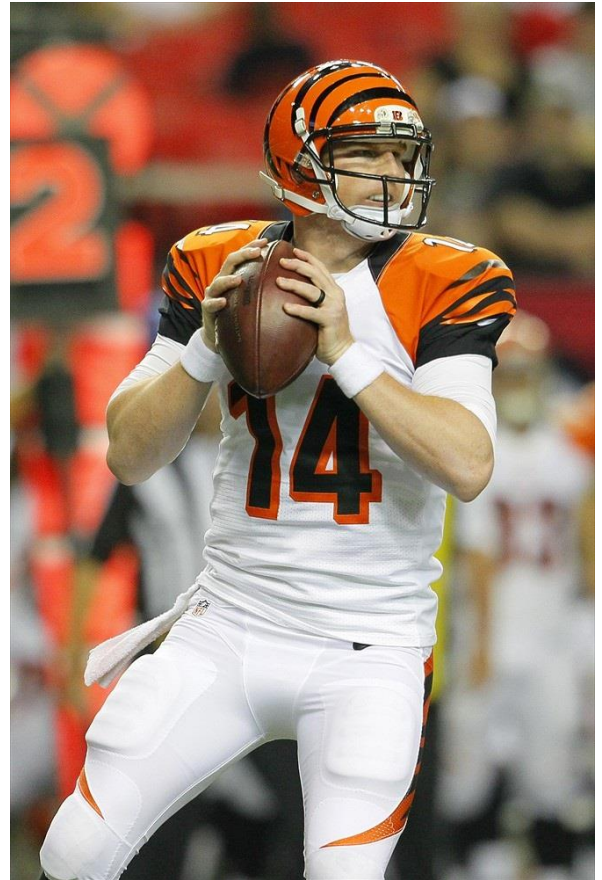
AFC North

Baltimore Ravens - Flacco got the money and the Super Bowl MVP, but will he cement himself as a top quarterback especially with what looks to be a depleted receiving core?

The Super Bowl champs had a crazy off-season. Ray Lewis went onto be the national spokesman for deer antler spray (or ESPN.) Ed Reed is also gone, so is Matt Birk, Boldin, Pollard, Kruger, Ellerbe and now add Dennis Pitta via injury. Ozzie Newsome did bring in guys like Dumervil and Huff to revamp the defense. But the question lies once again with Joe Flacco, even though he proved his critics wrong in the playoffs.

Cincinnati Bengals – Can they beat the Ravens and the Steelers and get out of the wildcard round?

Question could have been will James Harrison severely hurt a HBO Hard Knocks cameraman or producer? The defense looks to be solid led by Geno Atkins and I feel Dre Kirkpatrick will be a huge factor for the Bengals. Offensively they have weapons and a solid quarterback in Andy Dalton after three solid draft classes. I think the big question is all about Marvin Lewis. Is he the man to lead them to the next step? I don't think it matters because win or lose; he is Mike Brown's guy to the end.



Pittsburgh Steelers - Did Tim Tebow end the Steelers “run” two seasons ago and is this team still a true contender?

The Steelers need to return to the playoffs and being in the AFC North isn't going to make it easy. Good news is that the Steelers should get big lifts on both sides of the ball with rookies Jarvis Jones and Le'Veon Bell (once he returns from injury). It seems like Pittsburgh makes a Super Bowl appearance every few years so maybe they can make the magic happen with Mike Tomlin and Big Ben once again.

Cleveland Browns – Will Brandon Weeden and Norv Turner improve this offense enough?

Will the Browns be the first team to have their owner taken out in handcuffs from the owner's box? For real, just like Tennessee, is Cleveland's young (or young via experience) QB Brandon Weeden going to be a NFL starter for the next 5-10 years? They did him a huge favor bringing in Norv Turner to work with him and Trent Richardson in the backfield can't hurt. If Weeden can't do it, Coach Chud and the Browns could be scouting Teddy Bridgewater by mid-October.

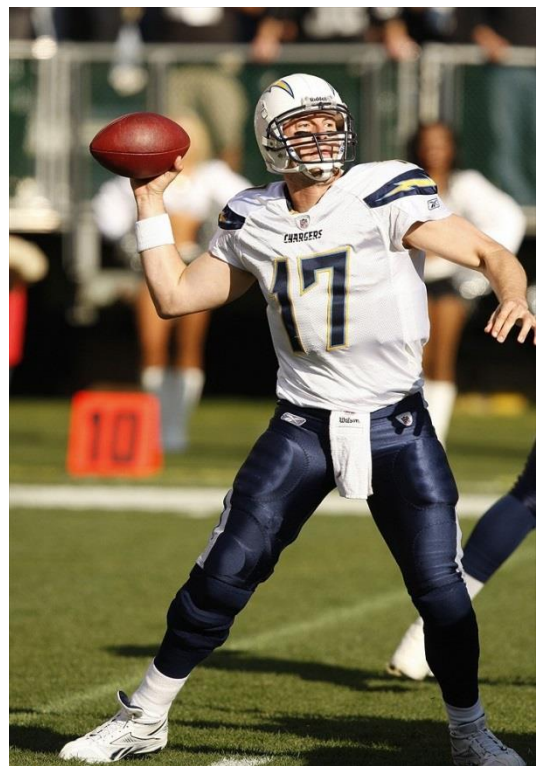
AFC West

Denver Broncos - Is it fair to say Super Bowl or bust with Denver?

Yes. No doubt. Coach has been to a Super Bowl and QB has won one, although he doesn't have the greatest playoff resume. Any they went out and added to an already top roster. The Broncos had the path to the Super Bowl looking gold last season but faltered, so how long will the window be open? It would be best to go for it this season and not worry about the future. Von Miller's suspension wasn't a good start.

San Diego Chargers - Is this team headed towards the NFL's bottom like pre-Marty?

I have no clue where to go on this football team. New coach Mike McCoy has no NFL head coaching experience. Is Philip Rivers at a crossroads in his very good career? Norv is finally gone, so how will Rivers work with McCoy? The team has already lost two main starters in Alexander and Ingram which will hurt as bad as the knees did. And will Manti Te'o's girlfriend show up for any games? Only supposed to be one question, I just gave you four. The 2013 Chargers were worth three bonus ones.



Oakland Raiders - Will the Raiders sign Jadeveon Clowney pre-draft or after they select him number one overall?

I am getting a little ahead of myself. The Raiders are still reeling from the moves of the late Al Davis and Hard Knocks jokester (or tool) Hue Jackson. The Raiders would have been better off with Hugh "Wolverine" Jackman running the team for those two seasons. Sorry, but the Raiders just bring out the jokes. At quarterback, could either Terrelle Pryor or Matt Flynn have any level of success? It could be a long season as Raiders fans should watch plenty of South Carolina games on Saturdays.

Kansas City Chiefs – What does Andy Reid do in Year 1?

Andy Reid is a good coach, no matter what Philly fans may say. But what does he do in year 1 with the Chiefs? This is a team who had a bunch of Pro Bowlers. With some added talent in the offseason, including a game managing QB in Alex Smith, can they do what the Colts did a year ago?

NFC East

Washington Redskins - Who else could it be about it? I guess I can combine it all into one question -- Can Robert Griffin III come back from the knee injury, stay healthy and work well with Mike Shanahan?

He's gotten the nod and it looks like he'll be starting week one. But the big question is can he work with Shanny? I hope they can because last season was fun to watch for all football fans when RG3 ran the Shanahan's offense. Can he stay healthy? That will depend on both Shannys and Griffin because they need him when there are still major questions on the defense.

New York Giants - Can the defense play well enough to make Super Bowl magic happen like years past?

Just like the Steelers, the Giants seem to rise up every few years and Tom Coughlin gets them into the Super Bowl. JPP and Justin Tuck are already battling injuries. Many would still consider the defensive line their strong spot, because both the linebackers and secondary have questions still. All in all, the NFC East is not sporting strong defenses anywhere. Good news is everyone considers it now an offensive league.

Dallas Cowboys - Could we see a repeat of 2010?

It has the makings and potential for it, even with the talent they possess. Semi-lame duck coach in Jason Garrett, small-game Tony Romo under center and most important Jerry Jones still is in charge. Second question may have a huge effect on the main one, can Monte Kiffin improve the Cowboys defense and not force Tony Romo to not have to

out-gun opponents? Is Kiffin past his successful days in Tampa? And can he take the talent Dallas has and mold it into a true contender?

Philadelphia Eagles - Pretty easy. It is the question the whole NFL is asking, will Chip Kelly's system work in the NFL?

Can the past style that worked magic at Oregon be successful on Sundays? A lot will depend on if he has the quarterback to help him do this. Maybe that guy is not in Philly yet but Mike Vick will have first crack. Like we said with the other NFC East rivals, can the Eagles defense even stop anyone and help out the Kelly offense? It should be an interesting and much examined season in Philadelphia.



NFC South

Atlanta Falcons – Can Mike Smith and Matt Ryan win in the playoffs?

Simple question that needs to be answered quickly. The Falcons have put together back to back great regular seasons but the playoffs have been a complete bust. Atlanta added Steven Jackson and talked Tony Gonzalez back into the league. Gonzalez still has a step but Jackson I am not so sure. The NFC is tough so each game is important to win to make sure you get home playoff games. Sad part is being home hasn't made a difference in the past for Atlanta.

New Orleans Saints - The question is can their defense finally do something?

I am pretty confident that the Saints could have Sean Payton, Drew Brees and 10 drunks off Bourbon Street and still score 30 points a game. When they won the Super

Bowl the defense wasn't really that good, they just knew how to cause turnovers. Since then the turnovers have vanished and the defense has been a disaster. In comes Rob Ryan looking to prove Dallas wrong and switch the Saints to the 3-4. It is always a challenge in year one and the Saints may not be a team that has a year to work the kinks out.

Tampa Bay Buccaneers - I think the biggest question with Tampa is the impact that Darrelle Revis makes right away?

I could go and question the situation at quarterback but I have more confidence in Josh Freeman than Greg Schiano seems to. So is Revis going to be healthy enough to be dominant corner he was pre-ACL or will he not be able to help maybe the NFL's worst pass defense in 2012? Revis is a difference maker but he needs to be 100% to warrant the huge money Tampa risked on him.



Carolina Panthers - Once again is this the year the Panthers take the next step?

The Panthers were picked by many last year to take that leap into the playoffs and be a surprise. It didn't happen because Cam Newton got off to a shaky start and looked like a clown portraying Superman down 30 at home. Carolina turned it around and played much better as Cam went off down the stretch. I am not so sure for this year, but mainly because I think the NFC is very strong and so is the NFC South. Ron Rivera is probably again on the hot seat, so is Bill Cowher still looking around?

NFC North

Green Bay Packers - The offense will be fine, but can the defense stop anyone and give Rodgers a chance?

Another team that faces the same question. Aaron Rodgers is a beast no matter what Greg Jennings says. Dom Capers probably still sees Colin Kaepernick dicing through his defense every time he sees a football field. Maybe the defense won't improve so the offense may have to help by running the ball a few times to give Capers' fellas a rest. Green Bay went out and grabbed two guys in the draft, but will they use them?

Minnesota Vikings - They made it to the wild card round so now the pressure is on Ponder to improve his play. Will he?

Last season it was, will AP come back? He did and ran for like 4000 yards I think. We overlooked Christian Ponder because not many considered the Vikes as a playoff team. Percy is gone and many in Minny are not shedding a tear that he is already hurt. The Vikings even brought Matt Cassel in for insurance, so you have to think that have some doubts on Ponder. At least Ponder has a fan 10am Saturdays on ESPN.

Chicago Bears - It is all about how will Marc Trestman do as a NFL head coach?

Life after Urlacher? Not my question. Jay Cutler performing in a contract year? Not my question. How can you fire a 10 win coach? Kinda my question.

So back to Trestman. From the CFL to the NFL. Is that like going from being Globetrotter head coach to being Lakers head coach? Can Trestman get the best out of Jay Cutler because the Bears have a huge decision to make on him in the coming months? Week 16, Eagles vs., Bears - Kelly vs. Trestman, this game should have every offensive nerd salivating.



Detroit Lions - Are the Lions the team we saw in 2011 or the one we got in 2012?

Jim Schwartz better hope for 2011 or he will be gone after 2013. Like the Saints, the Lions are still looking to find how they can improve on defense. If once again they can't find it, Matthew Stafford has to improve from last season. He still has Megatron but he can't win it all by himself and that was proven last season. The Lions are a team that is going to be hard to predict for the upcoming season unless that defense shows something.

NFC West

San Francisco 49ers - Just like the Broncos is it Super Bowl or bust?

Niners have the talent, the coach and the playoff experience, but not the big one. Well, not since the mid-nineties. Since the Niners seem to have it all the big question is, can Colin Kaepernick be a Super Bowl winning quarterback? He came close last season but couldn't make the final toss. If they don't win, Jim Harbaugh may combust into the Pacific Ocean.



Seattle Seahawks - Are they the team that got at the end of the season or the one earlier that couldn't win on the road?

Russell Wilson shouldn't have any kind of sophomore slump but they did take a hit with Harvin's injury. Watch their very talkative and active corners this season, Sherman and Browner. They have placed a lot of attention on themselves and let's see if they can back it up.

St. Louis Rams - Is Bradford a franchise quarterback?

Jeff Fisher can coach and he seems to have the Rams going in the right direction. I think the real question still comes down to Sam Bradford. He was drafted #1 and has shown good stuff at times but #1's need to be All-Pros. Good news for Bradford is he now has Tavon Austin to help jump start the offense and it should be interesting to watch what he can bring. They played the NFC West tough last season and will need to do so again in the NFL's toughest division.

Arizona Cardinals – Will their offseason moves be enough for them to compete in the NFC West?

Arizona was a disaster at two spots last season, quarterback and offensive line. And it obvious you can't win anything when that is the case. So they started by bringing in Bruce Arians to coach, followed by trading for Carson Palmer and then added offensive line help in the draft. Carson Palmer is going to have to be the Cincinnati Palmer and not the Oakland one for any chance. He should be an upgrade and a lift for Larry Fitzgerald but I expect the Cards to still finish fourth.





2013 NFL GUIDE

32 TEAM PREVIEWS & SCHEDULES

NFC EAST:

New York Giants

2012 Finish 9-7 2nd in the NFC East

Key Additions: TE Brandon Myers, TE Michael Palmer, WR Louis Murphy, DT Cullen Jenkins, DT Mike Patterson, ILB Dan Connor, K Josh Brown, CB Aaron Ross

2013 Draft: OL Justin Pugh, DT Jonathan Hankins, DE Damontre Moore, QB Ryan Nassib, S Cooper Taylor, OL Eric Herman, RB Michael Cox

Key Losses: RB Ahmad Bradshaw, TE Martellus Bennett, DE Osi Umenyiora, S Kenny Phillips, DT Chris Canty, LB Michael Boley, LB Chase Blackburn, OT Sean Locklear, K Lawrence Tynes, DT Rocky Bernard

Key Injuries: S Stevie Brown, RB Andre Brown, WR Ramses Barden, OL David Diehl

2012 Season Recap:

The Giants were the defending Super Bowl Champions, but were unable to even get into the postseason, let alone defend their title, after finishing with a 9-7 record. The Giants came out flat last year, losing their opening game at home to the Cowboys, marking the first time a defending Super Bowl Champion has lost that kick-off game since the NFL started it nine years

prior. They picked it up, winning six of their next seven games, to get to 6-2 at the mid-way point. However, they closed out the season poorly, dropping five of their remaining games and came up just short. It was a disappointing season for the defending champs as they controlled their own destiny, but were unable to win key games down the stretch.



OFFENSE:

Quarterback:

Eli Manning still remains one of the better quarterbacks in the league but he did see some of his numbers drop this past year as his receiver corps was thinned out due to injuries and free agent defections. Manning disappeared in a couple of games, which cost the Giants when it mattered most. The Giants should have a better array of weapons for Eli to work with this year and they bolstered their line in the draft to protect him. New York also drafted Ryan Nassib to serve as Eli's apprentice going forward as well.

Running back/Fullback:

The Giants lost their 1,000 yard back Ahmad Bradshaw this offseason, but still feel pretty confident with 2012 first round pick David Wilson leading the way. Wilson didn't get much work early in the season after an early fumble, but he looked like a big play running back late in the season. The Giants lost their back-up running back Andre Brown due to a preseason injury, which makes Wilson pretty much the guy in New York. It's a thinner running back situation than the Giants would have liked, but Wilson gives them a chance to be successful. Henry Hynoski is a solid fullback, and he is capable of helping the Giants as a runner, and receiver if needed to go along with his strong blocking ability.

Wide Receiver/Tight End:

The Giants struggled last season as top receiver Hakeem Nicks was in and out of the line-up and rarely seemed to be 100%. New York also didn't have a third receiver capable of replacing the very solid Mario Manningham, which further complicated their passing game. This season the Giants figure to be in a better position as Nicks should be healthier than last season and second year WR Rueben Randle looks poised to step up his role on the team. With more consistent receiving threats opposite him, Victor Cruz should be in a better position to get his numbers back to their 2011 levels.

At tight end the Giants watched the very impressive Martellus Bennett walk in free agency, but they wasted little time bringing in his replacement, Brandon Myers from Oakland. Myers had a bit of breakout year in Oakland catching 79 balls for 806 yards. His targets may drop given the Giants other weapons, but Myers will have a much more talented quarterback to work with this season.

Offensive Line:

This was not a strength for the Giants last season as they started allowing more pressure of Manning later in the year and rushing lanes weren't as consistent. This year though the Giants feel it will be a different story. First round rookie Justin Pugh is

expected to replace RT David Diehl who is currently injured. Pugh has good upside and should form an impressive tackle pairing with star LT William Beatty. Along the interior the Giants are hoping for more consistent performances from veterans; LG Kevin Boothe, C David Baas, and RG Chris Snee. Depth is a slight concern, though once Diehl is back, his versatility should help.

Offensive Player to Watch: RB David Wilson

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line:

The Giants lost Osi Umenyiora, Chris Canty and Rocky Bernard, but they replaced them with free agents Cullen Jenkins and Mike Patterson along with rookies Damontre Moore and Jonathan Hankins. The Giants still have star defensive end Jason Pierre-Paul returning, along with Justin Tuck, Linval Joseph and Mathias Kiwanuka. While there are some concerns about replacing three veteran players and with JPP dealing with injury issues, this unit should actually be better than last season. Pierre-Paul along with other Giants defensive linemen had some of their worst seasons last year, but it is reasonable to expect that they will be back to their normal level of production this year.

Linebackers:

The Giants struggled with this group last season, but could have a little boost in production this year. OLB Keith Rivers only played in about 25% of the defensive snaps last season, but was one of the team's most sure tacklers. Spencer Paysinger is expected to start at the other outside spot, and he could end up being the team's best coverage linebacker, which was a huge weakness last year. New York also made a shrewd signing by adding Dan Connor to be the man in the middle. Connor isn't elite, but he's consistent and should be a sizeable improvement over Chase Blackburn from last season.

Secondary:

The Giants cornerbacks have under-performed the past few years, but it is a group that has plenty of natural talent. Corey Webster is coming off his worst year as a pro, but should rebound this season. The 2011 first round pick, Prince Amukamara, proved himself to be a capable starter, but he still needs to take that next step to be more consistent. Behind the starters the Giants brought back Aaron Ross in free agency. Ross isn't spectacular, but he should improve the Giants depth. Second year corner Jayron Hosley is also expected to take on a more significant role this season. If youngsters like Amukamara and Hosley step up their game this could be a pretty solid unit. If they don't and the veterans don't improve much this year, it could be another long year for the Giants secondary.

The Giants are extremely weak at safety, where their top starter Stevie Brown will miss the year with an ACL injury. That leaves Antrell Rolle and Ryan Mundy as the projected starters, neither of whom are expected to make much of a positive impact. Rookie Cooper Taylor is basically the only real depth they have for the position at this point, making this a likely area for the Giants to find a free agent or perhaps work out a trade.

Defensive Player to Watch: LB Dan Connor

Special Teams:

The Giants will be going with a new kicker in Josh Brown this season and should continue to have a strong kicking game. Punter Drew Weatherford is one of the league's better punters, averaging 47.5 yards per punt. What the Giants do in the return game will be interesting to watch. David Wilson was their kick returner last season, but they can't use him now that he's the starter and Andre Brown is out. Rueben Randle will likely remain as the punt returner, but he could face some competition this season.

Overall: 9-7 Finish 2nd in the NFC East

The Giants will finish about the same as last season. They are a good team, but they just don't seem to be deep enough to win 10 or more games and retake this division. The other issue with the Giants is they face a pretty tough schedule and that could cost them an extra game or two. It is likely that the Giants will control their own destiny again, as they face the Redskins twice in December, including the final game of the year. If they can sweep those games, then the Giants could jump back atop the division.

| NEW YORK GIANTS | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|---|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | @ | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | W |
| 2 | September 15 | | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>Carolina Panthers</u> | L |
| 4 | September 29 | @ | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | W |
| 5 | October 6 | | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | W |
| 6 | October 10 | @ | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | W |
| 7 | October 21 | | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | L |
| 8 | October 27 | @ | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | L |
| 9 | | | Bye Week | |
| 10 | November 10 | | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | W |
| 11 | November 17 | | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | W |
| 12 | November 24 | | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | L |
| 13 | December 1 | @ | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | L |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | W |
| 15 | December 15 | | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | L |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | L |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | W |
| Record: 9-7 (3-3) | | | | |

Dallas Cowboys:

2012 Finish 8-8 3rd in the NFC East

Key Additions: S Will Allen, LB Justin Durant, G Brian Waters

2013 Draft: C Travis Frederick, TE Gavin Escobar, WR Terrance Williams, S JJ Wilcox, CB BW Webb, RB Joseph Randle, OLB DeVonte Holloman

Key Losses: DE Kenyon Coleman, DE Marcus Spears, OLB Victor Butler, ILB Dan Conner, S Gerald Sensabaugh, WR Kevin Olgetree, RB Felix Jones

Key Injuries: DT Jay Ratliff, G Nate Livings, DE Tyrone Crawford

2012 Season Recap:

The Cowboys entered 2012 with high expectations, but their season quickly went downhill as they entered the mid-way point of the season with a 3-5 record. To their credit they picked it up in the 2nd half of the year going 5-3, and a chance to go to the post season heading into their final game. Unfortunately 2 of the 3 games they lost in that stretch were to the Washington Redskins, including that final game of the year. Those losses sent their arch-rival to the postseason and the Cowboys back home with another disappointing season. Though it looked like Jason Garrett was on the hot seat, the Cowboys decided instead to change the pieces around him. They brought in revered defensive coordinator Monte Kiffin to turn the defense around and gave play-calling duties to offensive coordinator Bill Callahan.

OFFENSE:

Quarterback:

Though much of the focus for blame last year was on Cowboys Quarterback Tony Romo, much of it was undeserved. He did have three games with 3 or more interceptions, but he threw just a total of 7 in the remaining 13 games. Romo also threw for 4,900 yards and 28 touchdowns last year, and did so despite not having much protection or the threat of a running game. Romo signed a big extension this offseason so the pressure is on, but there is little reason to think he won't have another statistically great season. The



real issue will be, can he avoid those 2-3 games each year where he completely struggles. If he can eliminate those, the Cowboys could be post season bound.

Running backs/Fullbacks:

The Cowboys are hoping that top back DeMarco Murray can stay healthy this season, after back-to-back injury plagued years. Murray for his career has averaged 4.8 yards per carry, but in two seasons has managed just a total of 325 carries. Murray also presents a quality target out of the backfield and already has 60 career catches for 430 yards. Backing up Murray is a three man group of Lance Dunbar, Phillip Tanner and rookie Joseph Randle. Last year Dunbar and Tanner averaged 3.6 and 2.4 yards per carry respectively and Randle is a 5th round rookie who seems a ways off from contributing significant time. If Murray goes down again this will be a weak spot for the Cowboys this season.

Wide Receivers/Tight Ends:

The Cowboys have arguably the best wide receiver in this league not named Calvin Johnson and the best tight end in this league not named Jimmy Graham, in Dez Bryant and Jason Witten respectively. The pair combined for 202 receptions and over 2,400 yards last season. The scary thing is they could even be better this season. Witten was dealing with a spleen injury and had just 8 catches through the first 3 games. Bryant was much stronger in the 2nd half of the year, after having three games in the first half with less than 20 yards receiving. He never fell below 50 receiving yards in any of the final 8 games.

To go along with their two stars, the Cowboys have a solid group of additional weapons. Miles Austin is one of the better number two receivers in the NFL. He's got good speed and size and has averaged over 4 catches and 60 yards a game over the past three seasons. Dallas also drafted pass catchers in the 2nd and 3rd rounds with tight end Gavin Escobar and wide receiver Terrance Williams joining the mix. Though both are a bit raw, they could help this team down the stretch this season.

Offensive Line:

This was a major problem area for the Cowboys last season as Romo was under constant pressure and running lanes just weren't available for Dallas running backs. The Cowboys made some tweaks this year drafting center Travis Frederick in the first round, and moving RT Doug Free to RG, which should hopefully be a better position for him. This is still probably one of the weaker units in the league, but any improvement from last year will be a welcomed change for Tony Romo and the Dallas running backs.

Offensive Player to watch: WR Dez Bryant

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line:

The Cowboys are moving from a 3-4 to a 4-3, and the most interesting part of the transition will be how the defensive line takes to the new scheme. Former rush linebackers DeMarcus Ware and Anthony Spencer are going to be key to this unit's success. If they can continue to generate the same level of pressure as before, the Cowboys should be in good shape. Unfortunately Spencer underwent a minor procedure in August and may not be ready to start the season. The line will also be without defensive tackle Jay Ratliff to start the season as he was placed on the reserve PUP list.

Linebackers:

This is an area where the Cowboys are expected to excel, as both Sean Lee and Bruce Carter are expected to be 100% coming back from injuries. Lee and Carter form one of the better young linebacker duos in the league, and now that they are both healthy they could be poised for a huge season. Joining Lee and Carter in the starting line-up is Justin Durant who has been in the league since 2007. Durant is a good fit for this team as he's got good range and instincts and he is known as a very good run defender. He'll likely be subbed out on most passing downs, but he can still hold his own when he's on the field in coverage.

Defensive Backs:

The Cowboys on paper have one of the better corner duos in the league in Brandon Carr and second year corner Morris Claiborne. Claiborne flashed big play potential at times, but he struggled some as a rookie, committing 8 penalties and allowing nearly 70% of the passes thrown against him to be completed. He should though be expected to improve this season, as we've typically seen corners start playing at a high level in year two. Behind Carr and Claiborne the Cowboys are pretty thin, so they really need them to pick their game up this season.

The safety position remains a serious question mark for Dallas as their projected starters Will Allen and Barry Church would be back-ups on most teams in the league. Possibly with a the scheme change and hopefully an improved defense in front of them, Allen and Church can at least be average, but not much more can be expected of them.

Defensive Player to Watch: LB Bruce Carter

Special Teams:

Dan Bailey is one of the better kickers in the league who just simply doesn't get enough credit. He had a good year for the Cowboys last season, and should be counted upon

for another big performance. Punter Chris Jones doesn't figure to be much of a weapon as a punter and this could be a weakness for the Cowboys. Dwayne Harris was a very effective punt returner last season and he could be in line to handle both return jobs for the Cowboys this year.

Overall: 8-8, 3rd in the NFC East

The Cowboys figure to have a strong passing attack and a pretty decent defense, but too many issues remain to consider them a viable contender for the NFC East. Until the Cowboys can show an improved run game and solid offensive line, they will be limited in what they can accomplish on offense. Questions about some players returning from injury and the safety play could leave the defense under-performing yet again, leading to another year without a winning record.

| DALLAS COWBOYS | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|---|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | | <u>New York Giants</u> | L |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | W |
| 4 | September 29 | @ | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | L |
| 5 | October 6 | | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | L |
| 6 | October 13 | | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | L |
| 7 | October 20 | @ | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | L |
| 8 | October 27 | @ | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | W |
| 9 | November 3 | | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | W |
| 10 | November 10 | @ | <u>New Orleans Saints</u> | W |
| 11 | | | Bye Week | |
| 12 | November 24 | @ | <u>New York Giants</u> | W |
| 13 | November 28 | | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | W |
| 14 | December 9 | @ | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | L |
| 15 | December 15 | | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | L |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | L |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | W |
| Record: 8-8 (2-4) | | | | |

Philadelphia Eagles:

Key Additions: OLB Conner Barwin, S Patrick Chung, NT Issac Sopoaga, ILB Emmanuel Acho, CB Cary Williams, CB Bradley Fletcher, P Donnie Jones, TE James Casey

2013 NFL Draft: OT Lane Johnson, TE Zach Ertz, DT Bennie Logan, QB Matt Barkley, S Earl Wolff, DE Joe Kruger, CB Jordan Poyer, DE David King

Key Losses: OT King Dunlap, OT Demetress Bell, RB Dion Lewis, DE Darryl Tapp, DT Cullen Jenkins, DT Mike Patterson, P Matt McBriar, CB Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, CB Namdi Asomugha

Key Injuries: WR Jeremy Maclin, WR Arrelious Benn, LB Jason Phillips, LB/DE Phillip Hunt

2012 Season Recap:

2012 was a year to forget for the Eagles as they only managed 4 wins all season, despite starting out the season 3-0. Injuries ravaged the offense as the offensive line was missing four starters, many for most of the season. Michael Vick, LeSean McCoy and DeSean Jackson all missed significant time as well. Defensively the team completely imploded, dealing with plenty of infighting, and the team released former double digit sack defensive end Jason Babin before the year was out. The Eagles parted ways with longtime coach Andy Reid after the season and went with Oregon's Chip Kelly as his replacement. It's a bold move, but one that probably needed to be made after how last season went.

OFFENSE:

Quarterback:

Chip Kelly's hiring was the best thing that could happen for Michael Vick's career as it made him the front runner for the starting job in Philly. Vick's running ability will be highly valued in the offense, and his big arm should allow him to make teams pay for being fooled by the misdirection in the offense. Vick could be primed for a season nearly as good as his 2010 campaign. Behind Vick, the Eagles have a pair of young promising quarterbacks in Nick Foles and Matt Barkley. Foles isn't a great fit for this offense, but he proved last year he can play at this level. Barkley will need some time, but he gives the Eagles a young capable back-up if the Eagles look to trade Foles next season.

Running back:

LeSean McCoy struggled last season as he ran behind a line that was missing four starters for much of the year. Things were made worse for McCoy when Vick went down with injury putting all of the defensive focus on him. He made the most of it, still managing over 1,200 yards in 12 games last season. With a new offense that figures to feature the run prominently, McCoy should be in line for a career year. Behind McCoy the Eagles have a pair of promising young backs. Bryce Brown should be their number two, and he showed well in replacing McCoy last season.



He's got big play ability, but his ball security is an issue. Chris Polk, also figures to get into the mix as well. He isn't as dynamic as Brown, but is probably more reliable as a blocker and receiver.

Wide Receiver/ Tight end:

The Eagles suffered a major loss with Jeremy Maclin going down early in training camp. The Eagles still have a solid group of guys with DeSean Jackson, Jason Avant, Riley Cooper, and Damarius Johnson, but it's definitely not as good of a group as it would have been with Maclin. Jackson figures to have an expanded role in this offense, as the Eagles will probably try to utilize his open field ability with more screen passes and even some runs. Avant will remain the consistent slot option, while Cooper is the possession guy and red zone target. The interesting guy to watch is Johnson. He's got exceptional quickness and speed, and Chip Kelly will surely find ways to get the ball in his hands on a consistent basis this season.

The real interesting thing will be to see how the Eagles tight ends are used. Philadelphia decided to keep four tight ends in veteran Brent Celek, hybrid free agent James Casey, rookie Zach Ertz and top blocker Emil Igwenagu. It's a really talented and versatile bunch as guys like Celek, Casey and Ertz can split out wide, while Casey and Igwenagu can line up in a fullback role. They will likely use a lot of two and three wide receiver packages and find ways to create mismatches for this group.

Offensive Line:

The Eagles had arguably the league's best offensive line in 2011, and quite possibly the league's worst in 2012 after they were ravaged with injuries. This year the Eagles line is healthy again and with the addition of first round pick Lane Johnson, they are expected

to be one of the stronger units in the league. With multiple players coming back from serious injuries there is always a chance of a guy coming back at less than 100%. The Eagles should also be a bit concerned with their lack of veteran depth for this group. If any of their starters were to miss significant time, the Eagles would have some issues replacing them. The good news is after last year's performance things can only improve this season. Even if they aren't fully healthy they should provide far better protection for Vick and have a positive impact on the Eagles running game.

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line:

The Eagles are moving to a 3-4 and will be featuring a much different defensive line than what they had last season. Second year DL Fletcher Cox, figures to feature prominently in this new defensive alignment. Next to him the Eagles have a solid nose tackle in Issac Sopoaga, who should help limit the run this season. At the other end spot, Cedric Thornton has won the spot and has shown some nice promise. Behind the starters the Eagles have some really impressive depth with a group that features 2nd rounders from the last two years, Vinny Curry and Bennie Logan, to go along with a solid Clifton Geathers. It's not a great group overall, but they should be pretty productive for the Eagles this season.

Linebacker:

This will be an intriguing group to watch, depending on how Trent Cole takes to his new position. He should still be able to rush the quarterback effectively, but he may see a drop off in run production or if he's asked to go into coverage. Opposite him the Eagles are hoping that Connor Barwin improves upon his disappointing 2012 season with the Texans. Inside, the Eagles look to be pretty good between DeMeco Ryans and Mychal Kendricks, who both project to be at least good starters. Depth wise the Eagles are a bit thinner, relying on Brandon Graham, Jake Knott, Casey Matthews, and Najee Goode. There is a little promise in the back-up group, but for the most part there would be a pretty big drop off from the starters.

Defensive Backs:

The Eagles completely revamped their secondary depth chart, bringing in new starting corners Cary Williams and Bradley Fletcher, to go along with nickel corner Brandon Boykin. While there isn't a star in the group, that is a solid top three corner group for the Eagles. Unfortunately their depth was completely decimated with preseason injuries. Currently the only corner behind the top three the Eagles can even consider relying on is 7th round rookie Jordan Poyer. While there is some concern with this group of corners, it is still a better situation than how the safeties look.

Philadelphia already cut free agent signing Kenny Phillips, leaving them very thin at free safety. Currently incumbent Nate Allen is expected to start, but he could be pushed by 5th round rookie Earl Wolff. At strong safety the Eagles should feel pretty confident in the play of Patrick Chung, but he has had some injury concerns in the past, making depth a key. Kurt Coleman and Colt Anderson are the two remaining back-ups, but neither figures to be a good option if they are needed for more than spot duty.

Special Teams:

Second year kick Alex Henery had a good year making 87% of his kicks, though he did miss two field goals shorter than 40 yards which can be killer for a team. The Eagles brought in Donnie Jones to handle their punting duties this year, and should see at least a mild improvement to their average distance. The return game should be primarily DeSean Jackson as the punt returner and Damarius Johnson as the kick returner, with guys like Brandon Boykin and Jordan Poyer also in the mix. Jackson and Johnson both have game breaking ability and it would not be surprising to see this unit have 2-3 returns for touchdowns this season.

Overall: 7-9, 4th in the NFC East

The Eagles probably won't make it out of the cellar of the NFC East this year, but it should be a much closer race. Chip Kelly's offense with its fast pace and creativity should get the most out of playmakers like Vick, McCoy and Jackson. The real test for this team will be their defense. Can they consistently get enough pressure on the quarterback and will the secondary hold up? Those are the two things likely to keep this team from making any sort of playoff run. While it won't be the season most Eagles fans are looking for, it should be an improvement and possibly set up a promising future.

| PHILADELPHIA EAGLES | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|---|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 9 | @ | Washington Redskins | L |
| 2 | September 15 | | San Diego Chargers | W |
| 3 | September 19 | | Kansas City Chiefs | L |
| 4 | September 29 | @ | Denver Broncos | L |
| 5 | October 6 | @ | New York Giants | L |
| 6 | October 13 | @ | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | W |
| 7 | October 20 | | Dallas Cowboys | W |
| 8 | October 27 | | New York Giants | W |
| 9 | November 3 | @ | Oakland Raiders | L |
| 10 | November 10 | @ | Green Bay Packers | L |
| 11 | November 17 | | Washington Redskins | W |
| 12 | | | Bye Week | |
| 13 | December 1 | | Arizona Cardinals | W |
| 14 | December 8 | | Detroit Lions | W |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | Minnesota Vikings | L |
| 16 | December 22 | | Chicago Bears | L |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | Dallas Cowboys | L |
| Record: 7-9 (3-3) | | | | |

Washington Redskins

2012 Finish: 10-6, 1st in the NFC East, 1st round loss in the playoffs

Key Additions: CB E.J. Biggers, LB Nick Barnett, DE Phillip Merling

2013 Draft: CB David Amerson, TE Jordan Reed, S Phillip Thomas, RB Chris Thompson, LB Brandon Jenkins, S Bacarri Rambo, RB Jawan Jamison

Key Losses: S Madiou Williams, CB Cedric Griffin, LB Lorenzo Alexander, OT Jammal Brown, TE Chris Cooley, LB Chris Wilson

Key Injuries: DE Adam Carriker, DE Doug Worthington, LB Keenan Robinson, S Phillip Thomas

2012 Season Recap:

Mike Shanahan started out his Redskins career 11-21 his first two seasons, and appeared to be headed for his third straight losing season in 2012 as the Redskins stood at 3-6 heading into their bye week. With their playoff hopes all but dashed, the Redskins rallied to win their final seven games to finish 10-6 and win the NFC East for the first time since 1999.

Led by rookie sensation, quarterback Robert Griffin III and late round gem Alfred Morris, the Redskins offense finished 5th in total yards and 4th in total points. The offense played to Griffin's strengths and implemented a zone read/pistol offense that left defenders guessing all season. Though their defense was typically their downfall last season finishing 22nd in points and 28th in yards, they improved down the stretch and kept the score close enough for the Redskins to win.

Washington's storybook season came to an end in the wild card weekend of the playoffs, losing to the Seattle Seahawks 24-14. The Redskins marched out to a 14-0 first quarter lead, but the Seahawks responded with 24 unanswered points, and QB Robert Griffin suffered a knee injury that got progressively worse and severely affected his play. Griffin eventually went down with a torn ACL and LCL that required offseason surgery.

Offense:

Quarterback:

RGIII led the league in both rushing yards per attempt and passing yards per attempt for quarterbacks on his way to winning the NFL's Rookie of the Year Award last season.

Injuries though are a real concern going forward, as not only Robert Griffin is coming back from his 2nd ACL surgery since 2009, but he's now suffered concussions in each of the last two seasons. Griffin is likely to be ready for week one, but his injury concerns should be something to watch all season. Overall his passing production should at least be on par with last season, but he may not be the same as a runner this year. If Griffin were to miss any time the Redskins would turn to 2nd year player Kirk Cousins, who came in for relief last season, and worked with the first team in camp. Cousins is a very promising young QB, and would probably start on a number of teams in the NFL.

Running back/Fullback:

Alfred Morris was an unheralded 6th round pick last year, and due to multiple preseason injuries he had a chance to start the season. Morris quickly established himself as not only the Redskins starter, but one of the premier backs in the league. He rushed for 1,613 yards and 13 TD's on 335 carries (4.8 ypc) last season, good for second in the league



in both yards and TDs. Morris figures to be once again the focal point of the Redskins offense this season, and should again be among the league's best. Morris will probably see his carries drop slightly and may see a dip in ypc, but he should easily surpass 1,200 yards if he stays healthy. Backing him up this year will be 3rd year RB Roy Helu Jr., who missed most of last season due to injury. Helu will offer the Redskins more speed at the position and should be a weapon catching the ball as well. At fullback the Redskins have one of the best in the league in Darrel Young, who excels not only at blocking, but as a runner/receiver as well.

Wide Receiver/Tight End:

Pierre Garcon was the Redskins best receiver down the stretch last season, and figures to put up even better numbers this season as he doesn't (hopefully) have to deal with the foot injury that bothered him a year ago and cost him 6 games. Garcon became a big yards after the catch weapon for this offense last season and should once again be effective in the screen game and crossing routes. Starting opposite Garcon should once again be Josh Morgan, who led the team in catches and targets last season. Morgan was a reliable possession target last year, but it is hopeful now that he's fully recovered from his 2011 broken leg, he can offer more for the Redskins passing offense. Santana Moss has now become a slot only guy, but had a highly effective season last year, pacing the team with 8 TD catches and coming up with numerous clutch 1st downs. He doesn't play as much so his overall production will be limited, but when he's on the field

he's a weapon. Leonard Hankerson and Aldrick Robinson are a pair of third year receivers, who offer quality depth and should continue to carve out roles on this team.

Fred Davis is back as the starting tight end after suffering a mid-year Achilles tear, which could lead to a decrease in production. So far he looks to be back to normal, but his production bears watching. Behind him though the Redskins have blocking tight end Logan Paulsen, who filled in pretty well for Davis the final nine games of the year last season. Paulsen doesn't stretch the field like Davis does, but he still gives solid production and is a big target in the red zone. The team drafted Jordan Reed in the 3rd round this April, but he is more of a longer term project and is likely behind 3rd year Niles Paul on the depth chart. Paul, whose main value is his special teams' ability, did manage to haul in 5 receptions that went over 20 yards last season out of his eight total catches. If he can be a more reliable receiver, he could be a solid number two tight end.

Offensive Line:

Last year the Redskins offensive line started 79 of a possible combined 80 regular season games. That led them to have a better season than most expected, as they helped propel the Redskins offense to be one of the league's best. Everything wasn't rosy for the line last year though, as Alfred Morris dealt with too much contact at or behind the line of scrimmage and the team's sack rate was among the league's worst for much of the season. Washington is bringing back their entire starting line, and hopes the continuity will help mitigate any talent issues. Left tackle Trent Williams is the star of the line, though he's dealing with a sprained wrist and may be playing this season in a cast. Center Will Montgomery and right guard Chris Chester are very good starters, and keys to this team's success. Left guard Kory Lichtensteiger had a rough first year back from a 2011 ACL injury and led the team with 10 penalties. He isn't a star, but if he cuts his penalties down he could at least be solid. Right tackle is the big question mark as Tyler Polumbus struggled quite a bit there last season.

Offensive player to watch: WR Pierre Garcon

Defense:

Defensive Line:

The first four games could be a real test for this unit as projected starting DE Jarvis Jenkins is serving a suspension for testing positive for performance enhancing drugs. This comes on the heels of losing top back-up Adam Carriker for likely the entire season due to injury. The Redskins will rely on veteran back-up Kedric Golston and former back-up NT Chris Baker to hold the fort down while Jenkins is out, but there is likely to be a drop-off. Stephen Bowen and Barry Cofield are two good productive starters, but

this unit lacks an elite player. That has caused problems in the past, and could be an issue again if the depth doesn't step up.

Linebackers:

The linebacking corps is the heart and soul of this defense as outside backers Brian Orakpo and Ryan Kerrigan are probably the team's two best defensive players. Both Orakpo (who is coming off a missed season due to injury) and Kerrigan are very capable of putting pressure on the quarterback and making things happen in the backfield. Fourth year inside linebacker Perry Riley looks to take his game to the next level this season, and is considered a good all-around defender. Veteran London Fletcher saw his production and effectiveness fall last season, but he rebounded down the stretch to help this defense. What he can bring the table this season is a tough question to answer heading into this season. If he plays like he did last year the Redskins could have some problems, but if he is back to his previous level of play, the Redskins could have the best linebacking unit in the NFC. Depth is strong across the board here for the Redskins, though they will be without top back-up Rob Jackson for the first four weeks due to a suspension. The team lost 2nd year ILB Keenan Robinson to injury, but mitigated that loss with the signing of veteran Nick Barnett.

Secondary:

This unit was the Redskins biggest weakness last season, and the Redskins looked to improve this year by signing corner E.J. Biggers from Tampa and drafting defensive backs in the 2nd, 4th and 6th rounds. Biggers and 2nd round corner David Amerson will join incumbent starters DeAngelo Hall and Josh Wilson at the top of the depth chart. Hall has had issues in recent years with giving up too many catches and yards. Wilson has been the more consistent corner, but his size can limit him from effectively covering some of the bigger receivers in the league. Biggers and Amerson add size and potential, but there are some question marks surrounding both players. Overall it should be a solid group, and if someone struggles they should have the depth to replace them.

Safety is still more unsettled than cornerback at this point. Projected starting strong safety Brandon Meriweather is coming back from a late season ACL injury, and has been limited for much of practice this training camp. Though the hope is that he will be ready to start the season, the chance that he will be healthy enough for 1,000 or more plays this season seems slim. Unfortunately top back-up SS rookie Phillip Thomas, will now miss the season due to a Lisfranc injury. Though Thomas wasn't expected to start, he would have likely gotten a fair amount of work this season at both SS and FS. Starting free safety currently looks to be 6th round rookie Bacarri Rambo. Rambo has some good potential, but still figures to have his fair share of growing pains this season. Depth is now in question without Thomas in the mix, though veteran Reed Doughty has been a solid in the box safety when called upon.

Defensive Player to watch: ILB Perry Riley

Special Teams:

Street free agent Kai Forbath was a tremendous find for the Redskins last season when he made his first 17 field goals attempts after joining the team in Week 6 last year. In fact Forbath missed just a single field goal attempt all year, giving the Redskins the consistency they've lacked in their kicking game for years. Forbath's accuracy shouldn't be the issue this season, but his distance on kick-offs did put the defense in some bad situations last year.

Sav Rocca is a solid veteran punter who will boom some punts and is pretty good from a hang time stand point, but he's not consistent enough. His average distance has been in the bottom third the last two seasons, and it will likely be an issue again. The returners are up in the air at this point, but it is likely that Niles Paul is the kickoff returner. But the preseason injury to Richard Crawford puts a big question mark next to the punt returner spot on the depth chart. Whoever ends up with the return jobs should provide an improvement over the inconsistencies of Brandon Banks the last couple of years.

Overall: 10-6, finish first in the NFC East

The Redskins figure to be similar to last season where their offense carried them to the playoffs. The defense should be improved this year, particularly from a pass rush perspective, but it still figures to be the weak point of this team. The Redskins schedule is tough overall, but does start out favorably during the first four weeks before the Redskins bye. That could be key, since it is likely that players like RGIII, Brandon Meriweather and Fred Davis may not be at their peak early in the year. Also suspended players Jarvis Jenkins and Rob Jackson won't miss as many key games. The NFC East figures to be competitive this year, with the Giants and Cowboys both likely to be in the mix, but the Redskins should be able to take the division once again based on their superior offense.

| WASHINGTON REDSKINS | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 9 | | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | W |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | L |
| 3 | September 22 | | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | W |
| 4 | September 29 | @ | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | W |
| 5 | | | Bye Week | |
| 6 | October 13 | @ | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | W |
| 7 | October 20 | | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | W |
| 8 | October 27 | @ | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | L |
| 9 | November 3 | | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | W |
| 10 | November 7 | @ | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | W |
| 11 | November 17 | @ | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | L |
| 12 | November 25 | | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | L |
| 13 | December 1 | | <u>New York Giants</u> | W |
| 14 | December 8 | | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | W |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | <u>Atlanta Falcons</u> | L |
| 16 | December 22 | | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>New York Giants</u> | L |
| Record: 10-6 (4-2) | | | | |

NFC NORTH:

Detroit Lions:

2012 Recap: 4-12, 4th in the NFC North

Key Additions: RB Reggie Bush, S Glover Quin, DE Israel Idonije, DE Jason Jones, DT CJ Moseley, K David Akers, G Leroy Harris

2013 Draft: DE Ziggy Ansah, CB Darius Slay, G Larry Warford, DE Devin Taylor, P Sam Martin, WR Corey Fuller, RB Theo Riddick, TE Michael Williams, ILB Brandon Hepburn

Key Losses: OT Jeff Backus, OT Gosder Cherilus, DE Cliff Avril, DE Kyle Vanden Bosch, DT Corey Williams, OLB Justin Durant, K Jason Hansen

Key Injuries: No significant injuries

2012 Recap:

After the Lions finished 10-6 and made the playoffs in 2011, the expectations were high last season. Unfortunately Detroit got exposed this past year as they faced a tougher schedule and their lack of a running game and secondary were exploited. Matt Stafford clearly regressed last season and despite continuing to throw more than any quarterback in the league, he wasn't able to match his numbers from the year before. Coach Jim Schwartz lost control of the team and there were a number of discipline issues that plagued the Lions throughout the season.

Offense:

Quarterback:

Stafford is just 1-23 in his career versus teams with a winning record, and that is simply something that will have to change if the Lions hope to get their money's worth from the contract extension they signed him to. Stafford last year saw his touchdowns plummet and his interceptions rise. He just didn't look as comfortable in the pocket, and that could be a bigger issue this season as the Lions are breaking in two new starting offensive tackles.

Running back:

The Lions went out and got Reggie Bush in free agency and he should offer a big boost to this offense. At the very least he should be a big weapon out of the backfield for Matt

Stafford, and could catch 65-80 balls this season. How he is as a runner is another story. He probably won't have a 1,000 yard season, but if he comes close it would be a big help to this overall offense.

Wide Receiver/Tight End:

No one can blame Calvin Johnson as he caught 122 balls and had nearly 2,000 yards last season. He did only have 5 touchdowns, but that isn't really his fault. Between Matt Stafford's struggles, the lack



of a run game and no other receiver stepping up, teams blanketed Johnson inside the red zone. The Lions desperately need another receiver like Ryan Broyles, Patrick Edwards or Nate Burleson to step up this year and be a viable option opposite Johnson. Top TE pairing Brandon Pettigrew and Tony Scheffler also need to be more consistent and a bigger threat for the Lions as well. None of these guys will make opposing defenses forget about Johnson, but they will help loosen things a bit if they are seen as threats.

Offensive Line:

This is going to be an interesting group for the Lions, and how they fare could go a long way in determining how successful the Lions are. Detroit is replacing both starting tackles, with 2012 first round pick Riley Reiff taking over the left tackle spot and Jason Fox taking over the right tackle duties. How those two do against some of the premier pass rushers in the NFC North will have a big impact on Matt Stafford's success.

Offensive player to watch: OT Riley Reiff

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line:

The Lions have one of the best defensive tackle tandems in the league in former first rounders Ndamukong Suh and Nick Fairley. Both of them are back this season and should once again dominate opposing interior lines. Suh is a true stud and easily one of the top 3 DT's in the league. Fairley isn't on that level yet, but he made some big strides last season, and if he continues to develop he will be a force to be reckoned with as well. Backing them up, the Lions brought in run stopper Justin Bannan and a solid C.J.

Mosley. At end the Lions have added four new guys to their depth chart, including first round pick Ziggy Ansah. Ansah is a raw prospect, but he can be an impact pass rusher. He's probably not an every down guy though and that is where free agent signing Israel Idonije comes in. He's a solid pass rusher and stout against the run and should give the Lions a good three man rotation with their other free agent signing Jason Jones. Willie Young and 4th rounder Devin Taylor round out this unit, which projects to be pretty strong overall.

Linebacker:

For as strong as the Lions defensive line is, their linebacking corps is weak. Middle linebacker Stephen Tulloch is solid to good, but Ashlee Palmer and DeAndre Levy are both pretty weak. There isn't much depth with this group either meaning they are basically on their own.

Defensive backs:

For the first time in a while, the Lions project to have a pretty decent secondary. CB Chris Houston and S Louis Delmas are back, and if Delmas can stay healthy they should give the Lions a pair of good starters back there. Joining them this season is 2nd round rookie Darius Slay at corner back and free agent signing Glover Quin. Depending on how quickly Slay can develop this should be a unit of four average to good starters. Also slot corner Bill Bentley has a lot of promise as well.

Defensive player to watch: DT Nick Fairley

Special teams:

It's the end of an era for the Lions as Jason Hanson retired and the Lions will have their first new kicker since 1992. Detroit brought in veteran David Akers, who is coming off an injury filled and down season in San Francisco. If he's healthy though, it could be a huge signing for the Lions, as Akers was still one of the league's best kickers in 2011. Having Akers in a dome for his home games also should help make him more effective. At punter the Lions drafted Sam Martin in the 5th round and they appear high on him. Return specialist Michael Spurlock should make this a fairly strong unit.

2013 Season Outlook: 5-11, 4th in the NFC North

The Lions are hoping that their additions of Reggie Bush on offense and defensive ends and backs on defense will be enough to get them back to the postseason, but that is far from certain. Matt Stafford still needs to show that he can take his game to the next level and play against quality teams at a high level. Also, the offensive line is a question area, one that could negate the improvements made at running back. Defensively the Lions look to be better on paper, but they need Ziggy Ansah to really play at a high level as a pass rusher for it to come true.

| DETROIT LIONS | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | W |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | L |
| 4 | September 29 | | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | W |
| 5 | October 6 | @ | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | L |
| 6 | October 13 | @ | <u>Cleveland Browns</u> | L |
| 7 | October 20 | | <u>Cincinnati Bengals</u> | L |
| 8 | October 27 | | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | L |
| 9 | | | Bye Week | |
| 10 | November 10 | @ | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | L |
| 11 | November 17 | @ | <u>Pittsburgh Steelers</u> | L |
| 12 | November 24 | | <u>Tampa Bay Buccaneers</u> | W |
| 13 | November 28 | | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | L |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | L |
| 15 | December 16 | | <u>Baltimore Ravens</u> | L |
| 16 | December 22 | | <u>New York Giants</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | L |
| Record: 5-11 (2-4) | | | | |

Green Bay Packers:

2012 Record: 11-5, 1st in the NFC North, lost in the Divisional Round of the playoffs to the 49ers

Key Additions: None

2013 NFL Draft: DE Datone Jones, RB Eddie Lacy, OT David Bakhtiari, OL J.C. Tretter, RB Jonathan Franklin, CB Micah Hyde, DE Josh Boyd, LB Nate Palmer, WR Charles Johnson, WR Kevin Dorsey, LB Sam Barrington

Key Losses: RB Cedric Benson, WR Greg Jennings, C Jeff Saturday, LB Erik Walden, OLB Frank Zombo, ILB Desmond Bishop, S Charles Woodson, WR Donald Driver, TE Tom Crabtree

Key Injuries: OT Bryan Bulaga, OT J.C. Tretter, DL Jerel Worthy, OT Derek Sherrod

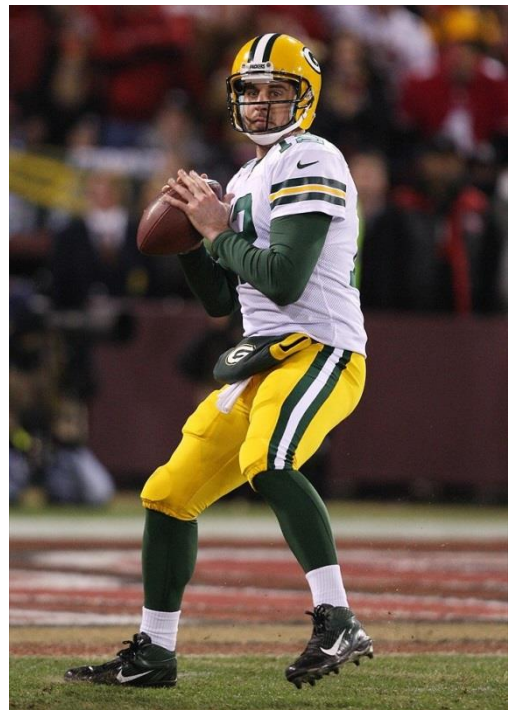
2012 Season Recap:

The Packers were coming off of a disappointing 2nd round playoff loss after finishing 2011 15-1. They were considered one of the favorites for getting to the Super Bowl last year, but week one the 49ers announced they would be a major road block for the Packers. The Packers early season struggles didn't end with the 49ers game, as Green Bay started the year 2-3, before going 9-2 the rest of the way. Green Bay's passing offense was one of the best in the league, but their rushing attack floundered due to the lack of a feature back. The Packers biggest problem was playing on the road where they were just 4-4 last season. At home the Packers dominated unless they faced the 49ers who beat them both in the regular season and in the playoffs.

Offense:

Quarterback:

While there are a number of teams with very good quarterback situations, the Packers may have the best. Unlike Peyton Manning, Tom Brady and Drew Brees, Rodgers just turned 30 and should have 5-7 prime years left in him. And while there are a



number of young gunslingers rising up the rankings, Rodgers is already at the top. There is not a single game that the Packers will play where they won't have the best quarterback on the field, and that is a big advantage for Green Bay. Rodgers has won 66% of his starts in his career and is a good bet for another double digit win total.

Running back:

The Packers made running back a priority this year, drafting Eddie Lacy in the 2nd round and Jonathan Franklin in the 4th round. These were two of the top running backs in the draft, both capable of becoming feature backs at this level, and the Packers grabbed both of them. That was exactly the right move for the Packers, given how thin their roster was at the position, and how these backs can complement each other. Fourth year running back James Starks also figures to be in the mix and could even end up starting for the Packers, but it won't be long before it's the Lacy/Franklin show.

Wide Receivers/Tight End:

The Packers lost the number 1 and number 7 career receiving leaders this offseason, (in terms of receptions) with Donald Driver's retirement and Greg Jennings leaving for Minnesota. Even with those losses the Packers figure to be pretty strong in this area. Jordy Nelson is dealing with a preseason injury, but he should be good to go for 16 games this year and he's Rodgers favorite target when he's on the field. Randall Cobb really had a breakout season last year and he should continue to grow into a big play weapon for the Packers. James Jones was needed in a bigger role last season and he didn't disappoint by leading the NFL in touchdown catches. Tight end Jermichael Finley is back and is looking for a bounce back year, after a rough season in 2012.

Offensive Line:

The Packers line wasn't great to begin with, but they suffered a devastating loss when Bryan Bulaga tore his ACL in camp, which will cost him the season. The Packers are also missing tackles J.C. Tretter and Derek Sherrod for the start of the year as they are on the PUP list. The Packers will turn to 4th round pick David Bakhtiari to protect Rodgers blindside, and will use 2012 college free agent Don Barclay as his bookend at right tackle. Depending on how these two do, could determine just how far the Packers can go this season.

Offensive Player to watch: RB Eddie Lacy

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line:

The line may be without 2012 2nd round pick Jerel Worthy to start the year (he's on the PUP list), but they have a pretty impressive collection of talent. Ryan Pickett and B.J.

Raji have been streaky the past few years, but can both play at a very high level. They will be joined by rookie 1st round pick Datone Jones, who should add an impact end to this line. Jones will help out both in the run game and rushing the passer. Behind the starters the Packers have a pretty solid group of C.J. Wilson, Mike Daniels and rookie Josh Boyd.

Linebacker:

Clay Matthews Jr. is one of the premier pass rushers in the game and an all-around impact defensive player. Matthews may find an easier path to the quarterback this year with a stronger defensive line in front of him and his opposite rush linebacker Nick Perry back from injury. Perry was the Packers 1st round pick in 2012, but he played in just 6 games as a rookie due to injury. Now that he is back, the Packers could finally have the pass rush complement they've been looking for to pair with Matthews. On the interior the Packers have a solid pairing in A.J. Hawk and Brad Jones.

Defensive Back:

The Packers should have a pretty strong defensive backfield with starting cornerbacks Sam Shields and Tramon Williams, backed up by 2nd year corner Casey Hayward, who led the team with 7 interceptions last year. That is a strong top three to have, and the Packers even have some depth behind them with Davon House and rookie Micah Hyde. At safety the Packers are going with Morgan Burnett and MD Jennings as the starters backed up with solid second year guy Jerron McMillian.

Defensive player to watch: DE Datone Jones

Special Teams:

Mason Crosby had a really poor season last year, and it cost them at least one game last season. The Packers can't afford to have a kicker they can't rely on, so Crosby has to improve this season. Punter Tim Masthay is solid, but unspectacular. If the Packers punted more, perhaps it would be a bigger issue, but with their offense it doesn't mean as much as some other teams. Randall Cobb is still expected to be the primary returner for the Packers and gives Green Bay one of the best in the league.

2013 Season Outlook: 12-4, 1st in the NFC North

The Packers should be one of the favorites in the NFC this year, as their offense and defense should both be better. On offense the Packers added a rushing threat and should see some of their top weapons healthier this year. Defensively this year the Packers will be adding Nick Perry back from injury and first round DL Datone Jones. That could be a big boost for a defense that ranked 11th in the league last year in both

yards and points. The question marks surrounding the offensive line are valid, but Aaron Rodgers has survived bad units before and he should be able to do so again.

| GREEN BAY PACKERS | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------|---|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | @ | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | L |
| 2 | September 15 | | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>Cincinnati Bengals</u> | W |
| 4 | | | Bye Week | |
| 5 | October 6 | | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | W |
| 6 | October 13 | @ | <u>Baltimore Ravens</u> | W |
| 7 | October 20 | | <u>Cleveland Browns</u> | W |
| 8 | October 27 | @ | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | L |
| 9 | November 4 | | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | W |
| 10 | November 10 | | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | W |
| 11 | November 17 | @ | <u>New York Giants</u> | L |
| 12 | November 24 | | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | W |
| 13 | November 28 | @ | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | W |
| 14 | December 8 | | <u>Atlanta Falcons</u> | W |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | W |
| 16 | December 22 | | <u>Pittsburgh Steelers</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | L |
| Record: 12-4 (4-2) | | | | |

Chicago Bears:

2012: 10-6, 3rd in the NFC North

Key Additions: OT Jermon Bushrod, G Matt Slauson, TE Martellus Bennett, G Eben Britton, OLB James Anderson, DE Kyle Moore, DT Sedrick Ellis, LB D.J. Williams

2013 NFL Draft: OL Kyle Long, LB Jon Bostic, LB Khaseem Greene, OT Jordan Mills, OLB Cornelius Washington, WR Marques Wilson

Key Losses: MLB Brian Urlacher, DE Israel Idonije, G Gabe Carimi, G Lance Louis, C Chris Spencer, OLB Nick Roach, TE Kellen Davis, QB Jason Campbell, CB D.J. Moore

Key Injuries: CB Kelvin Hayden

2012 Season Recap:

The Bears started out the season looking like not only a playoff contender but a serious option for the Super Bowl as well. They won 7 of their first 8 games, and their defense looked simply unstoppable. While there were legitimate questions about their offense, it didn't seem to matter with the way the defense was playing. The Bears however, lost 5 of their next 6 games, and lost control of their playoff destiny. Despite finishing with a 10 win season they missed the postseason and Head Coach Lovie Smith was fired.

OFFENSE:

Quarterback:

Jay Cutler finally got his big play receiver in former Bronco teammate Brandon Marshall. Marshall was easily Cutler's favorite target and came up big for the Bears, but it did little to improve Cutler's performance last year. The excuses are out the window this year as the Bears added more weapons and completely revamped their offensive line. Cutler needs to take his game to the next level if he wants to remain in Chicago beyond this season.

Running back:

Matt Forte is one of the most under-appreciated backs in the league, as he's had over 1,400 combined yards in each of his 5 seasons, and has averaged over 4.4 ypc in each of the last four years. It's not just fans who don't appreciate Forte, as the Bears have been guilty of doing that as well. Despite his effectiveness as both a runner and a receiver, the Bears seem to forget about him at times. Forte has yet to match the

number of touches he had as a rookie, despite the fact that he's shown better abilities as he's aged. Reports say the Bears realize they need to get the ball more to Forte, so hopefully this will change this season.

Wide Receivers/Tight Ends:

Brandon Marshall is one of the top receivers in the league and he proved that once again last season as he had over 100 catches and 1,500 yards. The Cutler-Marshall connection was pretty effective, but it also became pretty predictable. If the Bears were throwing it was likely going to Marshall last season. Chicago needs new TE Martellus Bennett and 2nd year receiver Alshon Jeffery to step up this year and give Jay Cutler more consistent targets.



Offensive Line:

This is going to be the one to watch as the Bears went out and added four new starters between the draft and free agency. Rookie Kyle Long has the highest upside from the group so how quickly he can get to his peak level will go a long way in determining just how good this unit can be. At the very least it should be the best offensive line the Bears have had since their Super Bowl run in 2006.

Offensive Player to watch: RB Matt Forte

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line:

The Bears said goodbye to Israel Idonije, but they should have the depth and all around talent to weather the loss. Defensive end Julius Peppers and defensive tackle Henry Melton are two of the best in the league at their positions. Teamed with them are a mix young players like DT Stephen Paea, DE Corey Wooten and DE Shea McClellin. Overall this group should be a strength of the Bears this season.

Linebacker:

It's the end of an era as MLB Brian Urlacher retired after the Bears basically said they didn't want him back this season. The Bears also lost starter Nick Roach. In their place the Bears signed MLB D.J. Williams and OLB James Anderson. They also drafted linebackers in the 2nd and 3rd round, in Jon Bostic and Khaseem Greene. While Williams

and Anderson will start the season, it wouldn't be surprising to see Bostic and Greene earn jobs later in the year.

Defensive Backs:

This group was exceptional last year leading the league in interceptions and scoring 6 of the Bears NFL high 9 defensive touchdowns last season. D.J. Moore left in free agency and CB Kelvin Hayden is out for the year, but the team does return their key starters which is important. Tim Jennings and Charles Tillman are pure ballhawks and should go a long way to strengthening this defense this season.

Defensive Player to watch: CB Charles Tillman

Special Teams:

The Bears have a pretty good kicking duo of punter Adam Podlesh and place kicker Robbie Gould. The real strength of their special teams though is the return ability of Devin Hester. Hester is probably the greatest returner of all-time and is a threat to take the ball to the house every opportunity. Teams are so scared of Hester that they will sacrifice distance on their kicks just to keep the ball away from him.

2013 Season Outlook: 7-9, 3rd in the NFC North:

The Bears will begin the Mark Trestman era with a little uncertainty, as they need to replace their defensive leader Brian Urlacher and see if QB Jay Cutler can take his game to the next level. They remain a strong, competitive team, who should be in most games, but it might be tough for them to finish above .500.

| CHICAGO BEARS | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|---|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | | <u>Cincinnati Bengals</u> | W |
| 2 | September 15 | | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>Pittsburgh Steelers</u> | L |
| 4 | September 29 | @ | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | L |
| 5 | October 6 | | <u>New Orleans Saints</u> | L |
| 6 | October 10 | | <u>New York Giants</u> | L |
| 7 | October 20 | @ | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | L |
| 8 | | | Bye Week | |
| 9 | November 4 | @ | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | L |
| 10 | November 10 | | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | W |
| 11 | November 17 | | <u>Baltimore Ravens</u> | L |
| 12 | November 24 | @ | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | W |
| 13 | December 1 | @ | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | L |
| 14 | December 9 | | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | W |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | <u>Cleveland Browns</u> | L |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | W |
| Record: 7-9 (3-3) | | | | |

Minnesota Vikings:

2012 Season: 10-6, 2nd in the NFC North, first round playoff loss to the Packers

Key Additions: WR Greg Jennings, ILB Desmond Bishop, G Seth Olsen, QB Matt Cassell

2013 NFL Draft: DT Sharrif Floyd, CB Xavier Rhodes, WR Cordarrelle Patterson, OLB Gerald Hodges, P Jeff Locke, G Jeff Baca, ILB Michael Mauti, G Travis Bond, DT Everett Dawkins

Key Losses: WR Percy Harvin, CB Antoine Winfield, P Chris Kluwe, G Geoff Schwartz, ILB Jasper Brinkley

2012 Season Recap:

The Vikings were probably as surprised as most people that they were able to have the success they had last season. After all, their star player Adrian Peterson was coming back from a late season ACL surgery and wasn't expected to do much early in the season. The Vikings started off the season 4-1, but then it looked like their Cinderella story was going to come to a crashing halt as they went 2-5



over their next 7 games. The Vikings were sitting at 6-6 with four games to go, and they basically needed to win all four for them to make the playoffs. The Vikings did just that, knocking off the Bears to start the run, and took away a wild card spot from them. The Vikings season ended poorly as starting quarterback Christian Ponder was injured and unable to play in the playoffs. This allowed the Packers defense to solely focus on Peterson, and the Vikings didn't have a chance.

OFFENSE:

Quarterback:

This could be a make or break season for Vikings 3rd year quarterback Christian Ponder. Ponder lacked weapons last season and the Vikings went to a very game manager role for their young quarterback. With Jennings and Patterson added to the

mix, perhaps the team will allow Ponder to air it out some more to hopefully open things up for Peterson on the ground.

Running back:

Adrian Peterson had arguably the best year for a running back in NFL history, and that doesn't even take into account he was coming back from a serious leg injury. Peterson may not have officially gotten the rushing record, but when you consider the fact that he was on a carry limit early in the season it is clear that he would have easily gotten the record. Peterson got stronger as the year wore on, and had over 1,300 yards in the 2nd half of the season alone. That is more than the vast majority of running backs had for the entire season last year. Top fullback Jerome Felton is suspended to start the season, which is a big loss for Adrian Peterson, as he was an excellent lead blocker last season.

Wide Receiver/Tight End:

The Vikings found their tight end as 2nd year Kyle Rudolph came on big as the season wore on. The Vikings went out and signed Greg Jennings and drafted Cordarelle Patterson to boost their receiving corps. While Jennings should prove a nice boost, he's probably not going to make the impact he would have made earlier in his career. Patterson has big potential, but he's extremely raw and unlikely to be making much of an impact this season. He could help with some screen passes and depth, but other than that he's likely to not produce much this season.

Offensive Line:

The Vikings have a pretty strong offensive line led by center John Sullivan and left tackle Matt Kalil. Both played at a Pro Bowl level last year and should continue to be major cogs of this unit. The Vikings line appears even stronger than it is due to the fact that this team runs so much. This unit functions best in blocking for the run. Right tackle Phil Loadholt in particular benefits from this. While he's a solid pass blocking RT, He is a devastating run blocker and opens up big holes for Peterson.

Offensive player to watch: RB Adrian Peterson

DEFENSE:

Defensive line:

With DT Kevin Williams and DE Jared Allen the Vikings have two stars to build this unit around. Allen is still one of the premier pass rushers in this league, and even when he's not getting to the quarterback he's making an impact. Teams change their schemes to ensure that Allen gets blocked. Williams is such a force in the middle of that line and should team up nicely with rookie Floyd to wreak havoc in the middle of this defense. Brian Robinson, Leroy Guion, and Everson Griffin round out the rest of the key rotation.

It's a pretty strong group overall and if Floyd develops quickly it could be a top 10 defensive line.

Linebacker:

The Vikings have a great linebacker in Chad Greenway a good linebacker in Erin Henderson, and a pretty big drop-off after that. With Greenway and Henderson though the Vikings should be pretty effective as a unit. Greenway continues to impress year after year with his instincts and range. He's always around the ball and seems to come up with a number of big plays.

Defensive backs:

The Vikings will have to make up for the loss of star corner Antoine Winfield. In an effort to do so, Minnesota drafted Xavier Rhodes in the first round. He's expected to compete for playing time and get some minutes, but he's not yet ready to start fulltime. The Vikings will rely on Chris Cook and Josh Robinson to take over the starting roles. At safety 2012 1st rounder Harrison Smith had a strong rookie year and should look to be even better in 2013. Jamarca Sanford isn't a star, but he's a solid complement to Smith back there in the defensive backfield. Safety depth is a bit of an issue and something to watch going forward.

Defensive player to watch: S Harrison Smith

Special Teams:

The Vikings drafted Jeff Locke in the 5th round this year to serve as their punter and kick-off specialist. Locke has a big leg and should be able to force a number of touchbacks this season. Locke will join 2012 6th rounder Blair Walsh, who will handle the place-kicking duties. Walsh had a tremendous rookie year showing both accuracy and distance. Rookie Cordarrelle Patterson will likely take on much of the return role this year, and could end up being one of the league's better returners, given his game breaking ability.

2013 Season Outlook 8-8, 2nd in the NFC North

The Vikings are a solid team that is overall pretty young with some nice potential, but they probably won't make it back to the postseason this year. Their schedule is tougher and teams will be more determined than ever to stop Adrian Peterson. If Ponder can't step up his game significantly, it is going to be very difficult to make it back to the playoffs. Peterson should have another huge year, but he can't carry this team alone.

| MINNESOTA VIKINGS | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|---|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | @ | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | L |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | L |
| 3 | September 22 | | <u>Cleveland Browns</u> | W |
| 4 | September 29 | | <u>Pittsburgh Steelers</u> | W |
| 5 | | | Bye Week | |
| 6 | October 13 | | <u>Carolina Panthers</u> | W |
| 7 | October 21 | @ | <u>New York Giants</u> | W |
| 8 | October 27 | | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | W |
| 9 | November 3 | @ | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | L |
| 10 | November 7 | | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | L |
| 11 | November 17 | @ | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | L |
| 12 | November 24 | @ | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | L |
| 13 | December 1 | | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | W |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | <u>Baltimore Ravens</u> | L |
| 15 | December 15 | | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | W |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | <u>Cincinnati Bengals</u> | L |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | W |
| Record: 8-8 (3-3) | | | | |

NFC SOUTH:

New Orleans Saints:

2012 Finish: 7-9, T-2nd in the NFC South, Missed Playoffs

Key Additions: QB Luke McCown, TE Ben Watson, OLB Parys Haralson, CB Keenan Lewis, CB Chris Carr

2013 Draft: S Kenny Vaccaro, OT Terron Armstead, DT John Jenkins, WR Kenny Stills, DE Rufus Johnson

Key Losses: QB Chase Daniel, RB Chris Ivory, WR Devery Henderson, TE David Thomas, OT Jermon Bushrod, DT Sedrick Ellis, OLB Scott Shanle, OLB Jonathan Casillas, CB Elbert Mack, CB Johnny Patrick

Key Injuries: WR Joe Morgan, DE Kenyon Coleman, OLB Victor Butler, OLB Will Smith, ILB Jonathan Vilma

2012 Season Recap

2012 is a season that all Saints fans would love to forget. Before any games were played, the Saints season was doomed by the penalties slammed down upon them for the “BountyGate” scandal. Without Head Coach Sean Payton and MLB Jonathan Vilma for the season, the Saints were simply not the same team in 2012.

Drew Brees once again threw for over 5,000 yards and led the NFL in touchdown passes, but he also led the league in interceptions. Two of the other keys behind the dynamic 2011 offense, RB Darren Sproles and TE Jimmy Graham, had good years in 2012 but



did not produce nearly as much as they did in the previous season. Without Payton on the sidelines, the Saints offense was simply unable to find any sort of consistency or rhythm.

The real disaster for the 2012 Saints, however, was the defense. If they were not the worst defense in NFL history, then they were at least top 10. They couldn't stop anybody. They became the first defense in NFL history to allow over 7,000 yards of offense in a single season. Their pass defense ranked 31st in the NFL, and their run defense finished dead last. Basically, the Steve Spagnuolo experiment was an utter disaster.

Offense:

Quarterback:

Even in a year where basically everything spiraled out of control for the New Orleans Saints, they still finished a respectable 7-9 and 2nd in the NFC South. They can thank Drew Brees for that. Brees is among the elite NFL quarterbacks and should remain in that class for the next few years. His combination of a quick release and pinpoint accuracy might be the best the NFL has ever seen. He did lead the NFL with 19 interceptions last season, but that's because the Saints were almost always trailing in games and defenses knew that Brees was going to throw the ball.

But even with his uncharacteristic amount of interceptions, Brees was still awesome last season. He led the league with 5,177 yards and 43 touchdowns. With Sean Payton back on the sidelines and Jimmy Graham fully healthy, there is no reason to believe that Brees won't get back to 5,000 yards once again.

As for the backup quarterback position, Luke McCown beat out Seneca Wallace this preseason to earn the job. McCown played well when he was in with the first team offense, but he shouldn't expect to throw many passes during the regular season.

Running back/Fullback:

The Saints don't have one running back who rushed for more than 650 yards last season, but they still have one of the best committees in the entire league. Darren Sproles is the most dynamic of the bunch and the best receiving running back in the entire league. Sproles is also a great pass blocker and will rip off some big runs. Mark Ingram is the best pure runner now that Chris Ivory is out of town, but he's going to

have to step it up this season after two disappointing years in the NFL. Pierre Thomas is a talented player who has been with the Saints for a long time, but his career might be on the decline. He doesn't have the running skills of Ingram or the receiving skills of Sproles.

Jed Collins is an above average fullback who blocks well and has a good set of hands. He won't get any carries and doesn't play on third downs, but he is a valuable player for the Saints.

Wide Receiver/Tight End:

The Saints receiving corps will look a lot different in 2013 than it did in 2012. The top two receivers, Marques Colston and Lance Moore, are still there, but after them pretty much everything has changed. Nick Toon and Kenny Stills are third and fourth on the depth chart, respectively. Both receivers are young and unproven, but they are very talented and have played extremely well this preseason. Also, the Saints cut veterans Steve Breaston and Patrick Crayton, so they must have a lot of faith in Toon and Stills. Despite some inexperience and a lack of depth, Colston and Moore alone make this receiving corps respectable.

As for tight end, the Saints have absolutely no question marks at this position. With New England's Rob Gronkowski injured, the Saints have the clear-cut best tight end in football for the 2013 season in Jimmy Graham. Even in a "down year" for Graham last season, he caught 85 balls for nearly 1,000 yards. Now that he is back to full health and Sean Payton is back on the sidelines, expect Graham to return to his record-breaking 2011 form. With former backup tight end David Thomas now out of town, the Saints brought in Ben Watson to be second on the depth chart behind Graham. Watson is a proven veteran who could still start on some NFL teams. But even as the second tight end, he should still catch a fair amount of passes with Drew Brees throwing the ball.

Offensive Line:

The Saints might have the most polarizing offensive line in the NFL, because the interior is one of the league's best while the exterior is one of the league's worst. The Saints have an exceptionally talented pair of guards in Jahri Evans and Ben Grubbs, who are both Pro Bowl players. Evans might even be the best guard in the league, as he is a four-time First Team All-Pro and has never missed a game in his career. The center, Brian De La Puente, is an extremely underrated player who has a great relationship with Drew Brees.

The tackle positions are where it gets ugly. The projected starter at left tackle is Charles Brown, the former second round pick out of USC who has failed to stay healthy for an entire season. Behind Brown is rookie Terron Armstead, who the Saints are high on but he might not be ready for NFL action. On the right side, the Saints have Zach Strief slated as the starter. Strief also struggles to stay healthy, and is inconsistent when healthy. For 31 of the 32 NFL teams, poor tackle play would be a major issue. But luckily for Brown and Strief, they have Drew Brees throwing the ball, who takes less time to make a decision than any other quarterback in the league.

Offensive player to watch: TE Jimmy Graham

Defense:

Defensive Line:

The Saints hired Rob Ryan as their defensive coordinator this offseason and he is bringing his 3-4 defense with him. This change in scheme and a new crop of players should have Saints fans excited about the prospect that their defense will improve this year.

But the defensive line play should still be underwhelming. The problems begin with starting nose tackle Brodrick Bunkley, who is more of a 4-3 defensive tackle. Another issue is left end Akiem Hicks, who will be starting even though he has never recorded a sack in his career. The lone bright spot for the Saints' defensive line is right end Cameron Jordan, who had 8 sacks and 3 forced fumbles last season.

Linebackers:

Just like their offensive line, the Saints' linebacker corps is very strong on the inside but weak on the outside. However, the change to the 3-4 should do volumes for this group. Last year David Hawthorne and Jonathan Vilma (in his limited amount of action) struggled as they were often forced to play on the outside. Now, along with Curtis Lofton, this trio should thrive in a rotation for the two inside linebacker positions.

Unfortunately, there probably won't be too much thriving occurring on the outsides. The Saints lost Scott Shanle and Jonathan Casillas to free agency, and both Victor Butler and Will Smith are done for the season with injuries. They did fill the need at this position by trading for Parys Haralson, but that still leaves one starting outside linebacker position vacant. The team is hoping either Martez Wilson or Junior Galette

will step up, but the two combined only had 8 sacks last season. It will be up to the outside linebackers to put pressure on the quarterback, and if no one comes up big then the secondary will get torched all season long.

Secondary:

Well it can't get any worse than last year, right? After a historically bad year for the Saints' secondary, changes were made this offseason to improve the unit. Keenan Lewis was signed away from Pittsburgh and will start immediately at cornerback for the Saints. While Lewis is no Pro Bowler, he is a huge improvement over Patrick Robinson. At the other cornerback position is still long-time Saint Jabari Greer, who is regressing but still solid. It gets really ugly after these two, so the team is praying that this duo can remain healthy.

At free safety is Malcolm Jenkins, who when healthy might be the best player on the Saints defense. He will get burnt in coverage at times, but he is a playmaker and is phenomenal at stopping the run. Roman Harper is the starter at strong safety for now, but that might not last very long. Harper had an absolutely abysmal 2012 season, as it seemed like he was being toasted for a touchdown every week. Harper is still good at stopping the run and has been a Saint for life, but the fact is, the guy simply cannot cover anymore.

The biggest addition was first-round draft pick Kenny Vaccaro out of Texas. The Saints are really hoping that Vaccaro can turn into a Darren Sharper-like player for them and solidify the secondary altogether.

Defensive Player to watch: S Kenny Vaccaro

Special Teams:

Garrett Hartley is one of the streakiest kickers in the NFL, but luckily for him he doesn't have to kick too many field goals with Drew Brees running the offense. The Saints have a great punter in Thomas Morstead, who finished second in the league in both total average and net average. Darren Sproles returns both kicks and punts, and he is still as big of a threat as anyone in the league to run one back.

Overall: 10-6, finish second in the NFC South

Yes, the Saints defense will still probably be pretty bad despite some offseason additions. And yes, they do play in one of the toughest divisions in the NFL. But the Saints will still win double-digit games and secure one of the wild card spots. Even in a year where practically everything went wrong for the Saints, they still won seven games. Now that Sean Payton is back and Jimmy Graham is healthy, the offense will be dynamic as ever. The defense is still flawed, but the firepower of the offense will be enough to carry the Saints back into the playoffs.

| NEW ORLEANS SAINTS | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | | <u>Atlanta Falcons</u> | W |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | <u>Tampa Bay Buccaneers</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | W |
| 4 | September 30 | | <u>Miami Dolphins</u> | W |
| 5 | October 6 | @ | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | W |
| 6 | October 13 | @ | <u>New England Patriots</u> | L |
| 7 | | | Bye Week | |
| 8 | October 27 | | <u>Buffalo Bills</u> | W |
| 9 | November 3 | @ | <u>New York Jets</u> | W |
| 10 | November 10 | | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | L |
| 11 | November 17 | | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | L |
| 12 | November 21 | @ | <u>Atlanta Falcons</u> | W |
| 13 | December 2 | @ | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | L |
| 14 | December 8 | | <u>Carolina Panthers</u> | W |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | W |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | <u>Carolina Panthers</u> | L |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>Tampa Bay Buccaneers</u> | L |
| Record: 10-6 (4-2) | | | | |

Atlanta Falcons:

2012 Finish: 13-3, 1st in the NFC South, Lost in NFC Championship Game

Key Additions: RB Steven Jackson, DE Osi Umenyiora

2013 Draft: CB Desmond Trufant, CB Robert Alford, DE Malliciah Goodman, TE Levine Toilolo, DE Stansly Maponga, S Kemal Ishmael, S Zeke Motta, QB Sean Renfree

Key Losses: RB Michael Turner, OT Tyson Clabo, C Todd McClure, DE John Abraham, CB Brent Grimes, CB Dunta Robinson, S Chris Hope

Key Injuries: RT Mike Johnson

2012 Season Recap

While Mike Smith and Matt Ryan can be happy that they finally won a playoff game together, the Atlanta Falcons were very disappointed that their 2012 campaign didn't end in the Super Bowl. The Falcons had a 17-0 halftime lead at home against the San Francisco 49ers in the NFC Championship, but they couldn't pull out a victory. Still, the 2012 Falcons had a lot to be proud of.

Matt Ryan had the best season of his already great career, throwing for over 4,700 yards and 32 touchdowns. Tony Gonzalez turned back the clock with a 93-catch season, and Roddy White and Julio Jones ended any debate over who is the best wide receiver duo in the NFL. The defense was good all season long, but not great when they needed to be. Some individual players performed at a Pro Bowl level, but as a unit the defense was not in the elite class.

Offense:

Quarterback:

Well, at least no one can call Matt Ryan the guy who "can't win a playoff game" anymore. Ryan finally got that monkey off of his back, but a poor showing in the second

half of the NFC Championship game still has his critics chirping. Still, there is no denying Ryan's regular season awesomeness. Matty Ice was a MVP candidate all season long, and he will be a contender for the award in 2013 as well. Even if Ryan does win the MVP, it's pretty clear that that's not the trophy he's aiming for. It's become Super Bowl or bust for him.

The Falcons have as little depth at quarterback as anyone in the league. The only other quarterback on the active roster is Dominique Davis, who has never even attempted a pass in the NFL. Falcons fans better start knocking on wood now that Matt Ryan never gets hurt.

Running back/Fullback:

The Falcons lost way more players than they gained this offseason, but the one position that they significantly improved at is running back. Michael Turner was absolutely awful last season, averaging only 3.6 yards per carry. The Falcons let Turner walk and brought in veteran Steven Jackson from the Rams. Turner and Jackson came into the NFL in the same year, but unlike Turner, Jackson still has plenty of juice left in his legs. Jackson has rushed for at least 1,000 yards in eight straight seasons, and as the starter in Atlanta, that streak should reach nine seasons. Behind Jackson on the depth chart is Jacquizz Rodgers, who is as dynamic as any backup running back in the league. He will be the primary third down running back and will rip off his fair share of long runs this season.

The Falcons don't have an every-down fullback, but Jason Snelling will often line up in the backfield. Snelling is an above-average runner for a fullback, but he shouldn't get many carries. Bradie Ewing is the only true fullback on the roster.

Wide Receiver/Tight End:

Last season there were only 14 players in the NFL with at least 75 receptions and 7 touchdowns. Three of them play for the Falcons. The Falcons receiving corps is absolutely loaded, with Roddy White and Julio Jones at wide receiver and Tony Gonzalez at tight end. Roddy White's career has actually been underrated to this point. He has six straight seasons of at least 80 receptions and



1,000 yards. If he keeps that production up for the next few years, he'll have a good Hall of Fame resume. Julio Jones, on the other hand, isn't very underrated because everyone is prepared for him to absolutely explode. Perhaps the most physically gifted receiver in the league, Jones had 1,200 yards and 10 touchdowns last season in only his second year in the league. With Matt Ryan airing it out, Jones is a superstar in the making. Behind the dynamic duo of White and Jones, Harry Douglas is a very good slot receiver. He is a very reliable target for Ryan and made a ton of huge plays last season.

At tight end, the Falcons have the greatest of all time for another year. Tony Gonzalez ended his brief retirement to prolong his quest for a Super Bowl title one more season. From a production standpoint, Gonzalez is still as good as any tight end in the league. Even at the age of 36, he was named a first-team All-Pro. As long as he is on the field, Tony Gonzalez will continue to put up numbers.

Offensive Line:

The offensive line of the Falcons will look much different in 2013 than it did in 2012, and not so much for the better. The left side of the line, tackle Sam Baker and guard Justin Blalock, is back and is a very solid pairing. After them, things get interesting. Second year player Peter Konz played at right guard last season to fill in for the struggling Garrett Reynolds, but now he will move back to his natural position of center. Reynolds is back as the starter at right guard, so he will have to step up his play this year if he wants to hold onto the job. The right tackle position is a major concern. The Falcons let Pro Bowler Tyson Clabo walk in free agency with the mindset that Mike Johnson would take his place. Well, Johnson fractured his ankle and tibia this preseason, so now Lamar Holmes will start for the first time in his career. There is no real option behind Holmes, so there will be plenty of pressure on him to produce and stay healthy.

Offensive player to watch: WR Julio Jones

Defense:

Defensive Line:

The Falcons lost the anchor of their defensive line, John Abraham, this offseason, but there is little reason to worry. They signed former Pro Bowler Osi Umenyiora, who is past his prime but should produce at a similar level to Abraham. At the opposite end of the line is Kroy Biermann, who is small for a defensive end but often makes big plays. The real story of the Falcons defensive line though is the tackles. Jonathan Babineaux

is one of the better 4-3 tackles in the league, and beside him is the solid rotation of Corey Peters and Peria Jerry. Besides the starting unit, the Falcons might need one of their rookies, Malliciah Goodman or Stansly Maponga, to step up if they want to increase last season's sack total of 29.

Linebackers:

The linebackers are an area of concern for the Falcons heading into the 2013 season. Weakside linebacker Sean Weatherspoon is great when healthy, but the same cannot be said about the rest of his linebacker corps. Neither Arthur Dent nor Stephen Nicholas played very well last season, but they are both back in starting roles. The worst part about the Falcons linebackers unit, however, is the complete lack of depth. If any of the three starters fall to injury, then the Falcons might be in a world of trouble.

Secondary:

Much better things can be said about the Falcons secondary than their defensive line or linebacker corps. Asante Samuel remains a great cornerback, as he tallied another five interceptions last season. Opposite him is Desmond Trufant, the Falcons' first-round draft pick. Starting immediately, especially for a team with a weak pass rush, is a huge task for a rookie, but Trufant seems to be up to the challenge. There will surely be some growing pains, but by the end of the season Trufant should have found his rhythm. The Falcons also used their second draft pick on a cornerback, Robert Alford, so he should see plenty of action as well.

When it comes to the safety positions, there are no question marks for the Falcons. Both William Moore and Thomas DeCoud stepped up last season, and they were rewarded with Pro Bowl invites for their efforts. The duo combined for 10 interceptions, and they should do about the same in 2013. With shaky play bound to happen in front of them, it will be up to Moore and DeCoud to save this defense from falling apart.

Defensive Player to watch: OLB Sean Weatherspoon

Special Teams:

Matt Bryant remains one of the most clutch and best overall kickers in the NFL, as he went 33-38 last year with 4 50+ yarders. The return game is an issue for the Falcons though; they did not return one kick or punt for a touchdown last season. Jacquizz Rodgers is average at best as a kick returner, and no one has emerged as a true punt returner for the Falcons.

Overall: 11-5, finish first in the NFC South

Even though the Falcons play in one of the toughest divisions in the NFL, they will repeat as division champs in 2013. This team is experienced and hungry for a Super Bowl title, and they will come out firing this season. Matt Ryan is a legitimate MVP candidate, Roddy White and Tony Gonzalez will remain as reliable as ever, and Julio Jones is poised for a breakout season. With Steven Jackson also in Atlanta, the offense will be better rounded and some pressure will be taken off Ryan. There is good reason to be nervous about the defense, particularly the pass rush and linebacker corps. But if Sean Weatherspoon emerges and the secondary repeats its 2012 performance, the Falcons' offense will be enough to make this team a Super Bowl contender.

| ATLANTA FALCONS | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | @ | <u>New Orleans Saints</u> | L |
| 2 | September 15 | | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>Miami Dolphins</u> | W |
| 4 | September 29 | | <u>New England Patriots</u> | W |
| 5 | October 7 | | <u>New York Jets</u> | W |
| 6 | | | Bye Week | |
| 7 | October 20 | | <u>Tampa Bay Buccaneers</u> | W |
| 8 | October 27 | @ | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | W |
| 9 | November 3 | @ | <u>Carolina Panthers</u> | W |
| 10 | November 10 | | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | W |
| 11 | November 17 | @ | <u>Tampa Bay Buccaneers</u> | L |
| 12 | November 21 | | <u>New Orleans Saints</u> | L |
| 13 | December 1 | @ | <u>Buffalo Bills</u> | W |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | L |
| 15 | December 15 | | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | W |
| 16 | December 23 | @ | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | L |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>Carolina Panthers</u> | W |
| Record: 11-5 (3-3) | | | | |

Tampa Bay Buccaneers:

2012 Finish: 7-9, Tied for second in the NFC South

Key Additions: RB Jeff Demps, FB Brian Leonard, WR Kevin Ogletree, TE Tom Crabtree, G Gabe Carimi, DE George Selvie, DT Derek Landri, DT Andre Neblett, OLB Jonathan Casillas, CB Darrelle Revis, S Dashon Goldson, K Nate Kaeding, P Chas Henry.

NFL Draft: CB Johnathan Banks, QB Mike Glennon, DT Akeem Spence, DE William Gholston

Key Losses: RB LeGarrette Blount, WR Arrelious Benn, WR Sammie Stroughter, TE Dallas Clark, OT Jeremy Trueblood, DE Michael Bennett, DT Roy Miller, OLB Quincy Black, CB E.J. Biggers, CB Brandon McDonald, S Ronde Barber.

2012 Recap:

Greg Schiano was named the ninth head coach in team history on January 27, 2012. In his first season leading Tampa Bay, Schiano's impact was evident in all three phases of the game as he instilled a culture change within the organization. He transformed a team that had lost its final 10 games of 2011 into a competitive 7-9 club – tied for second place in the NFC South – with seven of those losses being decided by one score or less. Schiano's seven wins in his debut season marked the second-most by a Buccaneers first-year head coach. The Buccaneers offense blossomed under Schiano, becoming the most prolific in franchise history by setting team records for most points, yards, touchdowns, passing yards and passing touchdowns.

OFFENSE

Quarterback:

Last season, QB Josh Freeman became the first passer in team history to eclipse the 4,000-yard passing mark with a team-record 4,065 yards, while throwing for a Buccaneers record 27 touchdowns. Freeman also set franchise highs with 35 passes of 25+ yards and 185 first-down passes.

Freeman was on fire at the beginning of last season, as he tossed 18 touchdowns to just five interceptions. However, Freeman fell apart after that. He had just two scores compared to 10 turnovers (nine picks, one lost fumble) in his final three games. Ever since being separated from former offensive coordinator Greg Olson, Freeman has shown a knack for being wildly inconsistent, especially with his accuracy. The Bucs have no idea what may come next for him. While he will start the season as the No.1 QB, the team drafted NC State signal caller Mike Glennon in April's NFL Draft. It is not known how much of a leash Schiano has his starter on, but it's obvious time is running out and Freeman must progress and not regress in 2013 or Glennon will get a shot to lead.

RUNNING BACKS/ FULLBACKS:

Schiano and General Manager Mark Dominik chose running back Doug Martin with the 31st pick in the 2012 NFL Draft, a selection that paid immediate dividends. Martin earned Pro Bowl honors and recorded the second-most rushing yards (1,454), scrimmage yards (1,926) and total touchdowns (12) in a single season in franchise history. He also tied for the second most rushing touchdowns in a single season in team history (11). All were franchise rookie records. Martin's 1,926 yards from scrimmage were the third-most in the NFL and was the third-highest total for a rookie in league history.



Martin appears to be a franchise back that Tampa Bay is likely to lean on heavily in 2013. There is no reason to think Martin will not be as effective this season. Behind him at tailback are seventh-year man Brian Leonard and rookie Mike James. Peyton Hillis, a former Madden cover boy, whose career has stalled since he ran for more than 1,110 yards for Cleveland in 2010, also is in Tampa this season.

Slotted as No. 1 at fullback is 265-pounder Erik Lorig, a seventh-round pick from 2010 who has hung around to appear in 40 games since his selection, though he has yet to get an in-game carry. He did catch 12 passes last season and scored once.

WIDE RECEIVERS/ TIGHT END:

Last offseason, the Buccaneers and WR Vincent Jackson hit the jackpot when they agreed to terms. The former Chargers star is now entering his ninth NFL year, and last

year, his first in Tampa, he did not disappoint. Jackson posted a career-high 72 catches, eclipsed 1,000 yards for the fourth time en route to a career-high 1,384-yards. He led the NFL with a 19.2 YPC average, also a career high. He also scored eight TD's and if Freeman can take the next step in his career, Jackson could reach another level as well.

The continued emergence of No. 2 man Mike Williams is yet another benefit of the Jackson signing. Williams hauled in 63 passes and fell just four yards short of giving Tampa Bay a pair of 1,000-yard receivers. He also scored nine times and was good for a career-high 15.8 yards per reception.

Ex-Dallas WR receiver Kevin Ogletree joins the duo this season and should give the Bucs a nasty 1-2-3 option. Former Rutgers player Tiquan Underwood had 28 catches and a 15.2-yard average in limited time last season.

TE Dallas Clark is gone to Baltimore, as third-year man Luke Stocker takes over. A big target at 6-foot-5 and 258-pounds, Stocker caught 12 passes as a rookie in 2011 and upped that to 16 last season. He also scored once and averaged a little more than 10 yards per reception. Fourth-year man Tom Crabtree is second on the Buccaneers' depth chart after catching eight passes in 14 games with Green Bay last season.

OFFENSIVE LINE:

In addition to Jackson last year, Tampa Bay made one other big-name offensive signing last spring. Carl Nicks was inked to a five year-- \$47.5 million contract. He was supposed to be a huge difference-maker in the interior of the offensive line, but he was lost for the season in Week 8 with a toe injury. He isn't starting 2013 much healthier. Nicks is sidelined again with a MRSA infected blister on his surgically repaired foot. Schiano is optimistic the two- time Pro Bowl selection will be ready for the team's regular- season opener at the New York Jets. Former Rutgers man Jeremy Zuttah shifted left to fill Nicks' spot, but he will return to his natural center spot for his sixth NFL season. The right guard is 313-pounder Davin Joseph, who was also lost last year with a knee injury, but is set to return for his eighth season. Eighth-year man Donald Penn, a 340-pounder from Utah State, holds down the starting slot at the left tackle position ahead of youngster Mike Remmers. Demar Dotson, who checks in at a stout 315-pounds, is the No. 1 man at right tackle ahead of Gabe Carimi, a first-round pick of the Chicago Bears in 2011.

Offensive Player to watch: WR Vincent Jackson

DEFENSE:

DEFENSIVE LINE:

The Bucs defense ranked first against the run last season and dead last vs. the pass. The unit responsible for the better part of those stats returns DT Gerald McCoy for his fourth season as the starter. McCoy will be looking to help reestablish and maintain the once rich tradition of stopping the run down in Tampa. The Bucs allowed a very stingy 82.5 yards per game on the ground in 2012. McCoy's interior line mate is 315-pound veteran Gary Gibson.

Gibson will fill the void left by Roy Miller, who moved across the state and a little further north to play for the Jacksonville Jaguars. On the right and left ends, respectively, are Adrian Clayborn and Da'Quan Bowers, who were first- and second-round picks in the 2011 draft. The 280- pound Clayborn had 7.5 sacks as a rookie, but was held to just three starts last season by an ACL tear. Bowers, a 288-pounder from Clemson, started 16 games in 2011 but managed just 10 appearances and three sacks in 2012, thanks to an Achilles injury.

With an entire island behind them, this unit could be better in 13. They will still have to get over losing Miller and DE Michael Bennett. Despite his shoulder injury, Bennett is healthy and playing well in Seattle at the moment. No matter how you slice the pie, they will miss his nine sacks and run-stuffing prowess. Relying on Da'Quan Bowers and a lack of at DE depth may turn out to bite the Buccaneers in the end.

LINEBACKERS:

Second-year man Lavonte David leads the Bucs linebacking unit. A second-round pick out of Nebraska, David recorded 139 total tackles, defended five passes and recorded a pair of sacks while starting all 16 games as a rookie.

It's not an exciting unit, as David is joined in the middle by Mason Foster and Dekoda Watson. The two combined for 125 total tackles and two sacks. However, it is important to note that Foster had both sacks and 115 total tackles. Adam Hayward, who was barely on the field in 2012, and Jonathan Casillas will provide little depth. Casillas had 17 tackles with New Orleans last season; and seventh-year veteran Hayward, who has made 11 starts in six seasons with Tampa Bay, had just 24 total tackles.

SECONDARY:

In a division that possesses gunslingers Drew Brees, Matt Ryan and to some extent, Cam Newton, finishing last in pass defense will make a front office take drastic measures. This past offseason, GM Mark Dominik made the highest-profile acquisition of the offseason when they picked up perennial All-Pro cornerback Darrelle Revis from the New York Jets.

The move, while great now, may have sent mixed messages about last season and the direction the team was heading. The uneasiness began when Dominik traded Aqib Talib in the middle of last season. While Talib needed a change of scenery both on and off the field, the move was not popular with the team. The players figured their front office didn't believe that they could win now. Dominik elected to not bring back D-lineman Michael Bennett and Roy Miller this offseason, which could have been seen as validating those concerns.

Then he made the deal to acquire Revis and all seems to be forgiven. It is well documented that Revis missed all but the opener in 2012 with an ACL injury. The question is-- at age 28-- can he fully recover to once again lock down an island-sized portion of the field from opposing passers? He's expected to be fully recovered in time to be on the field when his former team, the Jets, travel to Raymond James Stadium in Week 1. While the Geno Smith/ Mark Sanchez combo won't do much to strike fear in Revis or the Bucs secondary, perhaps elite NFC South passer Drew Brees and Matt Ryan might.

However, no unit, perhaps in all of the NFL, may be as improved as the Tampa secondary—but that's what happens when you're 32nd out of 32 teams in stopping the pass. Rookie Johnathan Banks has been impressive and will play opposite Revis. Banks' play allowed the Bucs to try to trade Eric Wright to the 49ers but the deal was voided and Wright subsequently was released. Leonard Johnson, who begins his second season, provides depth and may at times push Banks after starting six times as a rookie himself in 2012 and intercepting three passes, including one for a touchdown.

At safety, the well-paid (some say overpaid) Dashon Goldson comes over from San Francisco. With that said, Goldson did intercept three passes, recover two fumbles and make 53 tackles en route to a Pro Bowl season in the Bay Area. His play will be an upgrade over Ronde Barber's (retired) declining play last season. Goldson will join Mark Barron, who is emerging as a top-notch playmaker at the safety position.

Defensive Player to watch: DT Gerald McCoy

SPECIAL TEAMS:

The plan in Tampa Bay was for Connor Barth to be the kicker but he tore an ACL in a charity basketball game and Lawrence Tynes was brought in to replace him. Tynes is now also out, as he also is suffering from a MSRA Infection. Greg Schiano brought in Rian Lindell, who was cut by Buffalo. Lindell, 36, and was kept after final cuts. Lindell spent 10 seasons in Buffalo and became the most accurate kicker in franchise history. He connected on 83.3 percent of his field goals, and left just 32 points shy of Steve Christie's franchise record of 1,011 points.

Punter Michael Koenen averaged 45.3 yards in 76 kicks last season for the Buccaneers, his second with the team after six seasons in Atlanta.

Another position that is up for grab is the kick returner. Michael Smith and Eric Page are the likely candidates. Smith had three returns for 55 yards last season. On punts, it is the equally green Eric Page. Jeff Demps, who came over in the LeGarrette Blount trade, spent the offseason working on his track and field career, but could be an impact player on returns if he returns to football.

OUTLOOK: 7-9 Third in NFC South:

The Buccaneers had a stretch last season that made you think they were closer to the 10-6 team from two years back than the one that dropped to 7-9 last season. They are by all accounts, even with their own island, somewhere in the middle. The play of Josh Freeman will be under scrutiny more than ever this season and it is tough to envision him being able to respond well. However, it would not be surprising if he did, considering the weapons he has at his disposal. Look for another big year from Doug Martin and Vincent Jackson but the Bucs future at QB, notwithstanding the presence of this year's 3rd round draft pick, Mike Glennon, may very well rest on the arm of another signal caller not yet residing in the beautiful Gulf Coast city.

| TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | @ | <u>New York Jets</u> | W |
| 2 | September 15 | | <u>New Orleans Saints</u> | L |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>New England Patriots</u> | L |
| 4 | September 29 | | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | W |
| 5 | | | Bye Week | |
| 6 | October 13 | | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | L |
| 7 | October 20 | @ | <u>Atlanta Falcons</u> | L |
| 8 | October 24 | | <u>Carolina Panthers</u> | W |
| 9 | November 3 | @ | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | L |
| 10 | November 11 | | <u>Miami Dolphins</u> | W |
| 11 | November 17 | | <u>Atlanta Falcons</u> | W |
| 12 | November 24 | @ | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | L |
| 13 | December 1 | @ | <u>Carolina Panthers</u> | L |
| 14 | December 8 | | <u>Buffalo Bills</u> | W |
| 15 | December 15 | | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | L |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | L |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>New Orleans Saints</u> | W |
| Record: 7-9 (3-3) | | | | |

Carolina Panthers:

2012 Finish: 7-9, Tied for second in NFC South, missed playoffs

Key Additions: WR Domenik Hixon, DT Colin Cole, ILB Chase Blackburn, CB D.J. Moore, CB Drayton Florence, S Michael Mitchell, KR Ted Ginn

2013 Draft: DT Star Lotulelei, DT Kawann Short, G Edmund Kumbila, ILB A.J. Klein

Key Losses: WR Louis Murphy, TE Gary Barnidge, C Mike Pollak, DE/OLB Antwan Applewhite, DT Ron Edwards, DT Andre Neblett, OLB James Anderson, OLB Jason Phillips, CB Chris Gamble, S Sherrod Martin.

2012 Recap:

Despite a 1-6 start, Carolina finished with a 7-9 record, tied for second in the NFC South. The Panthers' midseason turnaround included winning five of their final six games – and four straight to end the season – with Carolina falling short of a playoff bid for the fourth-straight season. Head Coach Ron Rivera enters his third season in Carolina, where the Panthers have gone 13-19 under his guidance. Rivera inherited a 2-14 club and has improved the Panthers to six-win (2011) and seven-win seasons (2012). Including his 16 years as an NFL coach and nine as a player, Rivera has been with teams that have reached the playoffs 16 times, made eight conference championship appearances and reached two Super Bowls. Prior to joining Carolina, Rivera most recently served as “D” coordinator for the Chargers (2008-10).

The Panthers are a team that may be closer than many people think. Statistically last season, Carolina ranked in the top 12 in the league in both total offense and yards allowed on defense. Only the Broncos and 49ers, of the teams that made the playoffs last season, can boast of such rankings.

Offense:

Quarterback:

The enigma that is QB Cam Newton's football career (and that includes college if you understand the picture) continued last season. In the headlines for long and emotionally driven press conferences to start last season, Newton finally made headlines for his

solid play to finish the year. He threw for 3,869 yards, 19 TDs and 12 INTs, producing a career-high passer rating of 86.2. More importantly, he seemed to understand that trying to do too much for an athlete as gifted as he is can be a bad thing for his team.

Newton fired 10 TD's and threw just two interceptions, as the Panthers went 5-1 to close out the season. The question entering 2013 for the former Heisman Trophy winning QB is whether he can carry that into this season.

Like in 2012, the Panthers offense may be slow to start since Rob Chudzinski, Carolina's former offensive coordinator, was a big part of turning Newton's season around. He is now the head coach of the Browns, so Newton will be in a new system in 2013. Newton is talented and will succeed under Mike Shula. Shula is Newton's former quarterbacks coach. The only issues is how long will it take.



RUNNING BACKS/ FULLBACK:

The fact that the Panthers have issues at running back is simply amazing when you consider how much money the team has spent on Jonathan Stewart, DeAngelo Williams and fullback Mike Tolbert. Despite the dollars spent, QB Cam Newton led the team in rushing yards. Williams was second and averaged 4.3 yards per carry (173 rushes for 737 yards and 5 TDs), capped by a team-record 210-yard rushing output in the finale vs. the Saints.

All three are prone to injury with Stewart the big culprit. He will start the year on the PUP list. Tolbert battled hamstringing issues during camp and Williams was the only one of the three not dealing with an injury. Williams can be a game breaker when healthy. Despite and aside from the number of different backs that line up behind or beside Newton, the Panthers drafted another RB in the sixth round when the speedy Kenyon Barner from Oregon fell to them. Barner will be a nice third down option to start but the Panthers

have some decisions to make in the very near future regarding their backfield, which needs to be more consistent in 2013.

RECEIVERS/ TIGHT ENDS:

The ageless wonder, Steve Smith had his seventh 1,000-yard season in 2012 and, at 34, is still Carolina's top pair of hands heading into 2013. Nevertheless, he cannot produce at this level forever, which is why the Panthers desperately need Brandon LaFell to realize any potential he has. He is scheduled to be their clear No. 2 receiver now. Domenik Hixon and Ted Ginn, two veteran free agents, competed hard during the preseason for the No. 3 job.

The Panthers have steady talent at the position that should all work out in the end for Newton and the Panther's offense.

In a pinch, Newton will turn to tight end Greg Olsen, who is his favorite target other than Smith. Last season, Olsen finished second to Smith in receiving yards with 842 but led the team with five touchdown catches.

OFFENSIVE LINE:

The Panthers offensive line remains a big question mark. It is hard to believe but Jordan Gross is entering his 11th season with Carolina. Gross can still move well but he may not have many years left to play. According to Pro Football Focus, he was the only Panthers offensive lineman to finish with a positive overall grade in 2012. Center Ryan Kalil is one of the league's best, but the other three spots are where doubt rains down. Right tackle Byron Bell, allowed six sacks and could not consistently open up many running lanes. And both guards, Amini Silatolu and Geoff Hangartner, struggled mightily as well.

As the team improved toward the end of the season, so did Silatolu. In fact, most of last year's line is projected to be in the opening-day lineup. However, Carolina cut Hangartner to start August, which surprised many considering his projected replacement, fourth round pick, rookie Edmund Kugbila, missed most of spring practice. He also missed all of training camp with a sore leg and hamstring strain. Finally, the Panthers placed him on IR and he will now miss the rest of the season.

Offensive Player to watch: QB Cam Newton

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line:

The Panthers' defensive front should be one of the team's strengths. In 2012, defensive ends Charles Johnson (12.5 sacks) and Greg Hardy (11) gave Carolina its first pair of double-digit sackers since 2002. At defensive tackle, Star Lotulelei and Kawann Short, whom the Panthers drafted in the first and second round respectively in April's NFL Draft, will join veteran Dwan Edwards. Both will help by keeping blockers off last year's Defensive Rookie of the Year, linebacker Luke Kuechly, who like most inside backers, does his best work when he is free to roam.

Because of a medical scare, Lotulelei, fell to Carolina and will be a big run-stuffer who will be able to get to the quarterback on occasion. Short, is a pure pass-rusher and like Lotulelei was a steal in the middle of Round 2. Short will bolster an already-decent pass rush that accumulated 39 sacks in 2012.

The Panthers did not have good late April success under former GM Marty Hernia. When DT Sione Fua was released during final cuts going into this season, only the No.1 overall pick, QB Cam Newton remains from the Panthers 2011 draft class.

Linebackers:

Speaking of Kuechly, his outstanding rookie year helped the Panthers defense jump 18 spots to finish ranked 10th in the NFL. Kuechly took over for injured middle linebacker Jon Beason early in the season and played as well as any linebacker in the entire league. He is a tackling machine and led the NFL in tackles, becoming the first rookie to do so since San Francisco's Patrick Willis in 2007. His 164 combined takedowns were 16 more than the two players that tied for second, which is almost a game and a half.

When healthy, the Panthers field a formidable group of former first-round picks at linebacker. Unfortunately, the trio of Jon Beason, Thomas Davis, and Kuechly has rarely been on the field at the same time. A small hamstring tweak notwithstanding, Thomas Davis was recently quoted as saying he feels "10 times" better than he did at this point last year. Beason is coming off knee and shoulder surgeries but has started to work his way back into the lineup.

The Panthers signed Chase Blackburn from the Giants and used a mid-round pick on Iowa State's A.J. Klein for insurance.

Secondary:

The Panthers secondary is the weak link of the unit. GM Dave Gettleman tried to improve it but the talent falls well short. This is a major issue when playing in the same division with Drew Brees and Matt Ryan. Cornerback Drayton Florence was cut but strong safety Mike Mitchell wasn't and as a low-profile veteran, will have a chance to start. Cornerback Josh Norman started for 12 games as a rookie in 2012 and then was

promptly benched, but he has been great this preseason with a couple of interceptions. Charles Godfrey is the leader in the back at free safety. Captain Munnerlyn is an undersized but tough nickel cornerback. But how they stack up vs. the Julio Joneses and Roddy Whites of the division remains to be seen. The Carolina front seven is going to have to provide a constant and disruptive pass rush to ensure the success of the Panthers secondary in 2013.

Defensive Player to watch: MLB Luke Kuechly

Special Teams:

No placekicker has been better during the preseason than Graham Gano. The former Redskins kicker was 8-8 including 3-3 from 40-49 yards and 2-2 from 50-plus. Punter Brad Nortman wasn't stellar in his rookie campaign and needs to improve. Ted Ginn will return kickoffs and punts and will give the Carolina faithful a reason to be in their seats to start games more than ever, or at least since the days when Steve Smith handled those duties.

Final Outlook: 4-12, last in NFC South

Facing a difficult schedule and question marks on the offensive line and in the secondary, the Panthers' could actually regress this season. They have never posted back-to-back winning seasons in their brief history and head coach Ron Rivera is as consistently inconsistent as his team is—which stands to reason. They were just 3-5 at home last year compared to being 4-4 on the road and are a paltry 8-16 in Charlotte during the past three seasons.

However, Carolina has enough talent where they could finish 10-6 but the likelier scenario with having the question marks they do is 4-12. This is a hot seat season for Rivera and the entire Panthers organization. The defensive front seven could be a top team vs. the run but the secondary does not provide much hope with Brees and Ryan slinging the pill around the NFC South. The Panthers were a play or two away from sweeping the Falcons last season and will likely surprise them and the Saints at least once in 2013. Beyond perhaps a few rousing division wins and a victory over the quarterback-less Jets, there aren't more than five wins for this team this season. We actually project the Panthers to finish 4-12, most likely resulting in the firing of Ron Rivera.

| CAROLINA PANTHERS | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | L |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | <u>Buffalo Bills</u> | L |
| 3 | September 22 | | <u>New York Giants</u> | W |
| 4 | | | Bye Week | |
| 5 | October 6 | @ | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | L |
| 6 | October 13 | @ | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | L |
| 7 | October 20 | | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | L |
| 8 | October 24 | @ | <u>Tampa Bay Buccaneers</u> | L |
| 9 | November 3 | | <u>Atlanta Falcons</u> | L |
| 10 | November 10 | @ | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | L |
| 11 | November 18 | | <u>New England Patriots</u> | L |
| 12 | November 24 | @ | <u>Miami Dolphins</u> | L |
| 13 | December 1 | | <u>Tampa Bay Buccaneers</u> | W |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | <u>New Orleans Saints</u> | L |
| 15 | December 15 | | <u>New York Jets</u> | W |
| 16 | December 22 | | <u>New Orleans Saints</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>Atlanta Falcons</u> | L |
| Record: 4-12 (2-4) | | | | |

NFC WEST:

St. Louis Rams:

2012 Finish: 7-8-1, 3rd in the NFC West, Missed Playoffs

Key Additions: TE Jared Cook, LT Jake Long, OLB Will Witherspoon

2013 Draft: WR Tavon Austin, OLB Alec Ogletree, S T.J. McDonald, WR Stedman Bailey, C Barrett Jones, CB Brandon McGee, RB Zac Stacy

Key Losses: RB Steven Jackson, WR Danny Amendola, WR Brandon Gibson, C Rob Turner, CB Bradley Fletcher, S Quintin Mikell, S Craig Dahl

Key Injuries: Jo-Lonn Dunbar (4-game suspension)

2012 Season Recap

The Rams finished under .500 for the sixth straight season, but they definitely improved in their first season under Head Coach Jeff Fisher. Fisher solidified the defense, turning what was a horrible defense in 2011 into a well-rounded group in 2012 that finished among the league's top half. The offense, on the other hand, struggled to find any rhythm all season. Sam Bradford yet again failed to take the next step as a quarterback, averaging only 6.7 yards per completion. Both the wide receivers and the offensive line contributed to Bradford's struggles, as both units were not very good in 2012. Steven Jackson was a bright spot for the offense, once again rushing for over 1,000 yards.



Offense:

Quarterback:

It's not a good sign that Sam Bradford has been in the league for three years and we're still waiting for him to improve upon his rookie season. Bradford, the first overall pick of the 2010 NFL Draft, won Offensive Rookie of the Year honors but has been remarkably subpar ever since. He can blame bad blocking and receiver play all he wants, but other quarterbacks have succeeded with those issues before. The Rams' front office surrounded Bradford with weapons for the 2013 season, so now it's time for him to play up to his massive contract.

Running back/Fullback:

The Steven Jackson era has ended in St. Louis, as the Rams legend has departed for Atlanta. Enter Daryl Richardson as the starter, the second-year pro out of Abilene Christian. Richardson was no lock to even make the team last year, but he ran hard all season long and finished with almost 500 yards. Isaiah Pead, the Rams' second round pick in 2012, will also be in the mix once he serves his one-game suspension. Pead is more explosive and has better hands than Richardson, but he has struggled this preseason and could not win the starting job. Expect Zac Stacy, the Rams' fifth round pick in this past draft, to get some carries as well.

Wide Receiver/Tight End:

The Rams have not had a good receiving corps for years, so they traded up in the draft to address the issue; they took Tavon Austin, the burner out of West Virginia, with the eighth overall pick. Austin is a weapon that Bradford has never had before, because he is a threat to break off a touchdown no matter where he's lined up on the field. Chris Givens, Bradford's favorite target from 2012, should improve upon his good rookie season. Givens also has game-breaking speed, so defenses will have a tough time trying to slow down both him and Austin. The Rams also used their third round draft pick on Stedman Bailey, Austin's teammate at West Virginia. Unless Brian Quick can improve upon his disappointing rookie season, then Bailey might be the favorite to emerge as the offense's third receiver.

The Rams signed Jared Cook in free agency to be the starting tight end, reuniting him with Jeff Fisher. Cook showed glimpses of greatness at tight end in Tennessee, but could never piece it together over an entire season. Motivation seemed to be an issue for Cook, but if anyone can get him going, it's Fisher. The Rams have plans to use Cook in many different ways, so we'll see if he's up to the challenge.

Offensive Line:

The Rams had one of the league's worst offensive lines in 2012, so they made the biggest move in free agency by signing left tackle Jake Long away from the Dolphins. Long, the former first overall pick, is a Pro Bowl player who instantly stabilizes the left side of the line. If he can stay healthy, then Bradford won't have to worry about his blindside for years. More good news for the offensive line is that Scott Wells, the former Pro Bowler for the Packers who missed most of the 2012 season due to injury, is back and healthy. He'll be joined by the solid pairing of guard Harvey Dahl and tackle Rodger Saffold on the right side of the line. Look for the Rams' offensive line to improve by leaps and bounds in 2013.

Offensive player to watch: WR Tavon Austin

Defense:

Defensive Line:

The Rams had one of the best young defensive lines in football in 2012, and they should only get better in 2013. Chris Long is the anchor of the line, as he has really come into his own with 24.5 sacks over the past two seasons. Robert Quinn is Long's partner in crime, and is an electrifying young talent. Last year he registered 10.5 sacks, but he has the potential to exceed that total in 2013. At defensive tackle, Michael Brockers looks to improve upon his impressive rookie season in 2012.

Linebackers:

The Rams' linebacker situation for 2013 is interesting, because they have a rock on the inside but two question marks on the outside. James Laurinaitis finishes among the league leaders in tackles almost every year and remains one of the game's best middle linebackers. Jo-Lonn Dunbar was supposed to start as the strongside linebacker, but he was suspended for the first four games of the season for violating the league's performance-enhancing substance policy. Jeff Fisher has made it clear that Dunbar's job is no longer safe, and the team signed veteran Will Witherspoon to fill the void. The other outside linebacker is rookie Alec Ogletree out of Georgia. Ogletree was one of the top prospects in the draft, but he fell to the end of the first round because of character issues. If the Rams are able to right the ship, then Ogletree could turn out to be the steal of the draft.

Secondary:

The Rams' starting cornerback tandem was good in 2012, but they have the potential to be great in 2013. Cortland Finnegan, one of the nastiest players in the league, leads the duo. Finnegan backs up all of his trash talk, as he is a lockdown corner who is also among his position's best at stopping the run. Opposite Finnegan is Janoris Jenkins, who exceeded expectations last year as a rookie. Jenkins is the playmaker of the group, as shown by his three interceptions returned for touchdowns last year.

The Rams' biggest concern heading into 2013 could very well be their safeties. They lost both of their starters from 2012, and are left with Darian Stewart at strong safety and Rodney McLeod at free safety. Both Stewart and McLeod are young and inexperienced, so there should be some struggles this year. The Rams did draft T.J. McDonald out of USC to be one of their safeties of the future, but for the time being he too has no NFL experience. Finnegan and Jenkins are very good corners, but we'll see in 2013 if they're good enough to make up for the deficiencies expected at the safety positions.

Defensive Player to watch: DE Robert Quinn

Special Teams:

Normally it says something about the state of a team when their most popular player might be their kicker, but in this case it's just because Greg Zuerlein is that awesome. "Greg the Leg" burst onto the season last year as a rookie, nailing 7 kicks of at least 50 yards, including a 60-yarder. Tavon Austin will get the chance to return kicks and punts, and it would come as a surprise to no one if he immediately became one of the league's best.

Overall: 7-9, finish third in the NFC West

Even though the projected record is a half game worse than last season's record, the Rams will be an improved team in 2013. The Rams had some lucky wins last season, but they'll earn all seven in 2013. The offseason acquisitions of Tavon Austin, Jared Cook, and Jake Long should help Sam Bradford tremendously. Also, the Rams' defense that was good in 2012 has the potential to become great in 2013. But for now, it's too early to say that the Rams will be a winning team. Bradford is unpredictable and the running game is unproven, so there's a chance that the offense will never find its

groove. Also, the Rams have two holes at safeties, so there's a good chance that the deep ball could burn them all year long. There's no doubt that the Rams had a great offseason and are a team on the rise. But for the 2013 season, it's best to temper expectations.

| ST. LOUIS RAMS | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | W |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | <u>Atlanta Falcons</u> | L |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | L |
| 4 | September 26 | | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | W |
| 5 | October 6 | | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| 6 | October 13 | @ | <u>Houston Texans</u> | L |
| 7 | October 20 | @ | <u>Carolina Panthers</u> | W |
| 8 | October 28 | | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | W |
| 9 | November 3 | | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | W |
| 10 | November 10 | @ | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | L |
| 11 | | | Bye Week | |
| 12 | November 24 | | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | L |
| 13 | December 1 | @ | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | L |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | L |
| 15 | December 15 | | <u>New Orleans Saints</u> | L |
| 16 | December 22 | | <u>Tampa Bay Buccaneers</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | L |
| Record: 7-9 (3-3) | | | | |

San Francisco 49ers:

2012 Finish: 11-4-1, 1st in the NFC West, Lost in Super Bowl

Key Additions: QB Colt McCoy, WR Anquan Boldin, WR Jon Baldwin, WR Chris Harper, DT Glenn Dorsey, CB Nnamdi Asomugha, CB Eric Wright, S Craig Dahl, K Phil Dawson

2013 Draft: S Eric Reid, DE Tank Carradine, TE Vance McDonald, OLB Corey Lemonier, WR Quinton Patton, RB Marcus Lattimore, DE Quinton Dial

Key Losses: QB Alex Smith, WR Randy Moss, WR A.J. Jenkins, WR/KR Ted Ginn, TE Delanie Walker, NT Isaac Sopoaga, OLB Parys Haralson, S Dashon Goldson, K David Akers

Key Injuries: WR Michael Crabtree, WR Mario Manningham, CB Chris Culliver, CB Eric Wright

2012 Season Recap

Unlike the 2011 team, the 2012 49ers were able to get past the NFC Championship game and reach the Super Bowl. They put up a great fight, but were unable to put the Ravens away. But if it were not for Head Coach Jim Harbaugh's decision to start Colin Kaepernick over Alex Smith midway through the season, the 49ers probably would not have advanced as far as they did. Kaepernick was sensational in the regular season and even better in the playoffs, and the defense remained one of the best in the league. They might not have taken home the Lombardi Trophy, but 2012 was a fantastic season for the 49ers.

Offense:

Quarterback:

Alex Smith is now in Kansas City, but even if he were still with the 49ers there would be no debate over who the starting quarterback would be. Colin Kaepernick earned the starting role and literally ran with it, becoming one the league's most exciting dual-threat

quarterbacks. Kaepernick has a 4,000-yard arm and 1,000-yard legs, and while he will not reach both of those plateaus this year, he will put up some monster numbers if he can stay healthy for 16 games. The 49ers signed former Brown Colt McCoy to backup Kaepernick this season.

Running back/Fullback:

Frank Gore has played back-to-back 16 game seasons, so there is good reason to believe that he has put his health concerns behind him. If he can play another 16 games in 2013, he will absolutely exceed 1,000. Gore has been one of the most consistent running backs of the last decade, rushing for over 1,000 yards in six of the past seven seasons. The 49ers have the luxury of having two good backup running backs in Kendall Hunter and LaMichael James. Hunter and James should both see more carries this year and will get most of the action on third downs.

Bruce Miller has developed into one of the best true fullbacks in the league. Last year he excelled as a lead blocker and also caught 12 passes.

Wide Receiver/Tight End:

There aren't many areas where the 49ers will struggle in 2013, but wide receiver might be one of them. Michael Crabtree was turning into a star, especially with Kaepernick behind center, but a torn Achilles will sideline him for most of 2013. Mario Manningham will also miss at least the first six games because of injury, and Randy Moss announced



his retirement. Fortunately, the 49ers did receive Anquan Boldin in a trade with the Ravens. Boldin hasn't posted the numbers expected of a #1 receiver since his days in Arizona, but he is still as tough and sure-handed as any receiver in the game. Kyle Williams is currently behind Boldin on the depth chart, but there is a good chance that Jon Baldwin will overtake that spot. Baldwin was traded to the 49ers this offseason straight up for A.J. Jenkins after he failed to assimilate in Kansas City. If Harbaugh can keep Baldwin in order, he might finally display his freakish athleticism with some consistency.

Vernon Davis is a big name at tight end for the 49ers, but he has his critics entering 2013. Once Kaepernick became the starter, Davis's reception totals dropped dramatically. However, he was featured more often in the postseason, so there is hope that Davis and Kaepernick can coexist. With a slim number of options at wide receiver this season, Kaepernick will have to find a way to get Davis the ball more often.

Offensive Line:

The 49ers have the best offensive line in the NFL, and it's by a pretty wide margin. All five starters are among the best at their particular position. Joe Staley is one of the quickest and most athletic left tackles in the league, and he is a huge reason behind the success of Kaepernick's read-option offense. Mike Iupati is the best left guard today, as he has no holes in his game whatsoever. Center Jonathan Goodwin, right guard Alex Boone, and right tackle Anthony Davis also all play at the Pro Bowl level. So much more can be said about all five of these linemen, but nothing needs to be. Their play talks for itself.

Offensive player to watch: QB Colin Kaepernick

Defense:

Defensive Line:

The impact of the 49ers three-man defensive line is huge. It all starts with Justin Smith, who is as disruptive as any lineman in the league. While he won't rack up big individual numbers, he constantly creates holes for linebackers and occupies multiple offensive linemen on just about every play. At the other end of the line is Ray McDonald, who continues to improve year after year. Isaac Sopoaga was a staple at nose tackle for the 49ers, but he joined the Philadelphia Eagles this offseason. The job is up for grabs, and Ian Williams and the newly signed Glenn Dorsey have emerged as the favorites to win it.

Linebackers:

The 49ers linebacker crew is not only the best in the NFL right now; it could go down as one of the best in NFL history. Patrick Willis has been the best linebacker in the league since he entered it as a rookie. When it's all said and done, his face could be on the Mount Rushmore of linebackers. Next to him is Navarro Bowman, the dominant run stopper who has become an All-Pro in his own right. On the left side is Ahmad Brooks,

who had the best season of his career in 2012 and was named second team All-Pro. Then there is Aldon Smith on the right side, who after only two years, might be the most feared pure pass rusher in the league. In 32 career games he has 33.5 sacks, the most to the start of a career in NFL history. As long as he stays healthy in 2013, he is a serious threat to Michael Strahan's single-season sack record.

Secondary:

The 49ers' secondary has many question marks heading into the 2013 season. The solid starting cornerback duo of Carlos Rogers and Tarrell Brown remains intact, but after them almost everything with the cornerbacks has changed. The 49ers signed embattled cornerbacks Nnamdi Asomugha and Eric Wright, and they lost Chris Culliver for the season with a torn ACL. Asomugha was once the premier cornerback in the NFL, but his stint with the Eagles seems to have ruined his confidence. He also hasn't gotten off to the best start with San Francisco, but maybe he can follow Rogers's lead and rediscover his game with the 49ers. If so, he could really put some pressure on both Rogers and Brown to play with more consistency.

Perhaps the 49ers' biggest offseason loss was All-Pro free safety Dashon Goldson, who joined the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Goldson instilled fear in opposing offenses and was a great ball hawk, so his presence will be missed. Fortunately, the 49ers used their first draft pick on LSU safety Eric Reid, who has already earned the starting job. It would be unrealistic to expect Reid to play up to Goldson's level right away, but he is a great prospect who could very well be the 49ers' free safety of the future. Donte Whitner remains the starter at strong safety despite his deficiencies in the passing game. Whitner is, however, a force against the run.

Defensive Player to watch: OLB Aldon Smith

Special Teams:

David Akers had a miserable 2012 season, so the 49ers brought in Phil Dawson from Cleveland as his replacement. Dawson is one of the league's most accurate kickers, and he will have plenty of more opportunities than he did last season. Andy Lee remains the league's best punter, once again leading in net yardage. Now that Ted Ginn is out of town, LaMichael James is the frontrunner to return both kicks and punts.

Overall: 13-3, finish first in the NFC West

When you look up and down the 49ers' roster, you quickly realize that there isn't a more complete team in the NFL. Colin Kaepernick should thrive in his first season as the full-time starter, and Frank Gore will get his usual numbers. The wide receivers are a bit of a concern, but Kaepernick should quickly develop chemistry with Anquan Boldin. The line is the real story of the offense, with all five starters playing at a Pro Bowl level. The defense will once again be one of the league's best, especially because of the linebackers.

In 2011 the 49ers lost in the NFC Championship Game. In 2012 they lost in the Super Bowl. If we're following this trend that means in 2013 the 49ers will win the Super Bowl. With no real flaws and stars at practically every position, that math sounds very realistic.

| SAN FRANCISCO 49ers | | | | |
|---------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | W |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | L |
| 3 | September 22 | | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | W |
| 4 | September 26 | @ | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | L |
| 5 | October 6 | | <u>Houston Texans</u> | W |
| 6 | October 13 | | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | W |
| 7 | October 20 | @ | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | W |
| 8 | October 27 | @ | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| 9 | | | Bye Week | |
| 10 | November 10 | | <u>Carolina Panthers</u> | |
| 11 | November 17 | @ | <u>New Orleans Saints</u> | W |
| 12 | November 25 | @ | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | W |
| 13 | December 1 | | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | W |
| 14 | December 8 | | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | W |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | <u>Tampa Bay Buccaneers</u> | W |
| 16 | December 23 | | <u>Atlanta Falcons</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | L |
| Record: 13-3 (3-3) | | | | |

Arizona Cardinals:

2012 Finish: 5-11, 4th in the NFC West, Missed Playoffs

Key Additions: QB Carson Palmer, QB Drew Stanton, RB Rashard Mendenhall, DE Frostee Rucker, ILB Karlos Dansby, ILB Jasper Brinkley, CB Antoine Cason, CB Javier Arenas, CB Jerraud Powers, S Jeremiah Bell

2013 Draft: OG Jonathan Cooper, ILB Kevin Minter, DB Tyrann Mathieu, OLB Alex Okafor, OG Earl Watford, RB Stepfan Taylor, WR Ryan Swope, RB Andre Ellington, TE D.C. Jefferson

Key Losses: QB Kevin Kolb, QB John Skelton, RB Beanie Wells, RB LaRod Stephens-Howling, WR Early Doucet, OG Adam Snyder, ILB Paris Lenon, ILB Stewart Bradley, CB Greg Toler, CB William Gay, CB Michael Adams, S Adrian Wilson, S Kerry Rhodes, S James Sanders

Key Injuries: OG Jonathan Cooper, TE Jeff King

2012 Season Recap

Remember when the Cardinals started the 2012 season 4-0, Kevin Kolb looked like the answer at quarterback, and people thought they were serious contenders? It all sounds impossible now, because you probably remember the part when the Cardinals went 1-11 in their final 12 games and got Head Coach Ken Whisenhunt fired. The offense was the league's worst, finishing 28th in passing and dead last in rushing. The defense was actually very good, but even the 1985 Bears' defense couldn't have carried this offense into the playoffs.

Offense:

Quarterback:

If the quarterback play of the 2012 Arizona Cardinals wasn't the worst of all time, then it at least deserves to be in the conversation. When the backups made original starter Kevin Kolb look like Joe Montana, then you know that there was a real problem. Kolb was actually decent before he was sidelined by a concussion, but the performances of his backups were borderline unwatchable. John Skelton, Ryan Lindley, and Brian Hoyer

combined to throw 3 touchdowns and 18 interceptions. Lindley started four games, played in seven, and still has yet to throw a touchdown pass in the NFL.

Fortunately, Carson Palmer was brought in from Oakland to relieve the situation. His arm is nowhere near where it was in his Cincinnati days, but he can still sling it down the field pretty well. The Cardinals even signed Drew Stanton to be Palmer's backup, so Lindley should never have to enter a game this season.

Running back/Fullback:

The quarterback situation was so bad in Arizona last year that most fans didn't even notice how awful the running back situation was too. As a team, the Cardinals averaged only 75 yards rushing per game. They let Beanie Wells and LaRod Stephens-Howling go, but the new committee of Rashard Mendenhall and Ryan Williams isn't much better. Mendenhall struggles to stay healthy, but even if he does he will probably continue to average under 4 yards per carry. Williams is even worse at staying healthy than Mendenhall, and his injuries have piled up to the point where he barely made the roster. One encouraging option at running back for the Cardinals could be Steffan Taylor, the rookie from Stanford, who has played well this preseason.

Wide Receiver/Tight End:

The wide receivers unit appears to be the lone bright spot of the Cardinals' offense, and the main reason why, is only two words: Larry Fitzgerald. There is no doubt that Fitzgerald is still one of the best receivers in the league, even after he posted career-low numbers in 2012. Now that he has Palmer throwing him the ball, he should get his Hall of Fame career right back on track.

Another receiver happy to have

Palmer around is Michael Floyd, the former first-round pick out of Notre Dame. Floyd showed flashes of greatness last season as a rookie, but the poor quarterback play prevented him from developing any sort of consistency. Andre Roberts rounds out the receiving corps, and he is one of the better slot receivers in the league. His numbers last season were actually almost identical to Fitzgerald's. Besides those three, look for



cornerback Patrick Peterson to get some time at receiver. The Cardinals have made it clear that he is too talented to only play one way.

Rob Housler is the starting tight end for Cardinals, and he has the potential to break out in 2013. Housler is one of the fastest tight ends in the league, but he was rarely able to display his speed last season. Now that Palmer is in town, Housler will get way more targets and he should take advantage of them.

Offensive Line:

The Cardinals' offensive line is yet another unit of theirs that is among the league's worst. It all starts with left tackle Levi Brown, the former fifth overall pick of the 2007 NFL Draft. Brown has been a massive bust, and the Cardinals would clearly like to move on, but they have no better options. The selection of Jonathan Cooper as the 7th overall pick in this past April's draft was a glimmer of hope for the offensive line, but he broke his leg this preseason and has been placed on the injured reserve. Center Lyle Sendlein and right guard Paul Fanaika are both pedestrian, and right tackle Eric Winston was signed as a free agent after a disappointing year in Kansas City. The Cardinals are hopeful he can bounce back to his old form, but even that wouldn't save this offensive line from a terrible season.

Offensive player to watch: WR Larry Fitzgerald

Defense:

Defensive Line:

Thankfully, the Cardinals' defense is significantly better than its offense, and it all starts with the defensive line. The massive Calais Campbell is one of the most underrated defensive players in the NFL; he is a force against both the pass and the run. The other end on the line is Darnell Dockett, who has lost his Pro Bowl form since the team shifted to the 3-4 but is still solid. Dan Williams rounds out the unit as the starting nose tackle.

Linebackers:

The Cardinals' linebacker corps will have a completely new look in 2013, as three of the four Week 1 starters were signed as free agents this offseason. Karlos Dansby returns to Arizona after three years in Miami, and ex-Viking Jasper Brinkley will join him on the inside. Lorenzo Alexander is the final of the free agents to start at linebacker for the

Cardinals. Alexander was a good player for the Redskins, but he has never had more than 2.5 sacks in a season. Now that he is starting on the outside of the Cardinals' 3-4 scheme, his sack numbers will need to increase. Once Week 5 rolls around, Daryl Washington will return and reclaim leadership of this unit. Washington, who was named a Pro Bowler last season after recording nine sacks, is suspended for the season's first four games for violating the league's substance abuse policy.

Secondary:

The Cardinals' secondary will also be much different in 2013, but the one centerpiece remains the same: Patrick Peterson. Peterson was named to the Pro Bowl in each of his first two seasons, but in his rookie year it was for his punt returning. Last year, his cornerback play earned him an invite. Peterson has already become the shutdown corner everyone thought he would be, and he has game-changing ability at the position that hasn't been seen since Deion Sanders. The Cardinals don't have a definite #2 corner opposite Peterson, but this offseason they signed Jerraud Powers, Antoine Cason, and Javier Arenas, and all three of them would fill the role decently.

Cardinal legend Adrian Wilson departed from the team this offseason, and Yeremiah Bell will attempt to fill his big shoes. Bell, a one-time Pro Bowler, is still a good player but is past his prime. Starting at the other safety position is Rashad Johnson, but creeping up behind him on the depth chart is the guy they like to call "The Honey Badger." Arizona took a flier on former Heisman Trophy finalist Tyrann Mathieu in the third round of the NFL Draft, and the Cardinals have thus far been blown away by his play. The Cardinals will look to get Mathieu on the field as much as possible, and it wouldn't be a surprise one slight bit if he were starting at free safety by the season's end.

Defensive Player to watch: DB Tyrann Mathieu

Special Teams:

Jay Feely is still the kicker in Arizona, and he performed well in limited action last season. Dave Zastudil is one of the league's best punters, as he led in punts inside the 20 last year with 46. The real stud of the special teams unit, though, is Peterson. If teams are foolish enough to punt to him, then no other returner in the NFL is more of a threat to run it back all the way.

Overall: 4-12, finish fourth in the NFC West

On the bright side, the Cardinals will at least be a watchable team this season. With new Head Coach Bruce Arians in charge of the offense and Carson Palmer throwing the ball, the Cardinals will actually be able to put some points on the board. Larry Fitzgerald should return to his old ways, and Michael Floyd could be poised for a breakout year. On the defensive side, all NFL fans are eager to see what both Patrick Peterson and Tyrann Mathieu are going to do.

However, there are just way too many problems for the Cardinals. They barely improved their league-worst running game, and the offensive line is still in shambles. Palmer is injury prone and is not mobile whatsoever, so a bad offensive line is the last thing that he needs. In the end, the Cardinals have some exciting players, but as a team they have a ways to go.

| ARIZONA CARDINALS | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | @ | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | L |
| 2 | September 15 | | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | L |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>New Orleans Saints</u> | L |
| 4 | September 29 | @ | <u>Tampa Bay Buccaneers</u> | L |
| 5 | October 6 | | <u>Carolina Panthers</u> | W |
| 6 | October 13 | @ | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | L |
| 7 | October 17 | | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | W |
| 8 | October 27 | | <u>Atlanta Falcons</u> | L |
| 9 | | | Bye Week | |
| 10 | November 10 | | <u>Houston Texans</u> | L |
| 11 | November 17 | @ | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | L |
| 12 | November 24 | | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | L |
| 13 | December 1 | @ | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | L |
| 14 | December 8 | | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | W |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | L |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | L |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | W |
| Record: 4-12 (3-3) | | | | |

Seattle Seahawks:

2012 Finish: 11-5, 2nd in the NFC West, Lost in NFC Divisional Round

Key Additions: WR Percy Harvin, DE Cliff Avril, DE Michael Bennett, DT D'Anthony Smith

2013 Draft: RB Christine Michael, DT Jordan Hill, WR Chris Harper, DT Jesse Williams, CB Tharold Simon, TE Luke Willson, RB Spencer Ware, G Ryan Seymour, LB Ty Powell, DT Jared Smith, OT Michael Bowie

Key Losses: QB Matt Flynn, FB Michael Robinson, DT Alan Branch, DT Jason Jones, OLB Leroy Hill, RB/KR Leon Washington

Key Injuries: WR Percy Harvin, DE Chris Clemons, DT Jordan Hill, DT Jesse Williams, OLB Bruce Irvin (4-game suspension)

2012 Season Recap

The Seattle Seahawks were not even supposed to make the playoffs in 2012, yet their last-minute loss in the Divisional Round against the Atlanta Falcons was devastating. Coming into the season, Matt Flynn was signed to be the starting quarterback in a rebuilding year for the Seahawks. But once third-round pick Russell Wilson won the starting job, he never looked back. The combination of Wilson's dual-threat attack and Marshawn Lynch's "Beast Mode" running turned the Seahawks' offense into one of the league's scariest by the season's end.

The real story of the 2012 Seahawks though was the defense. Chris Clemons led the team with 11.5 sacks, rookie Bruce Irvin tacked on another 8, and fellow rookie linebacker Bobby Wagner probably would have won NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year if it weren't for Luke Kuechly. As good as the Seahawks' front seven was in 2012, their secondary was even better. With all four starters playing at the Pro Bowl level, the Seahawks' secondary was easily the best in the NFL. Earl Thomas was named first-team All-Pro and Richard Sherman had the best season of any cornerback in the league. Although the Seahawks were young and inexperienced in 2012, they were as big of a Super Bowl threat as anyone.

Offense:

Quarterback:

There certainly won't be any quarterback controversy in Seattle this year. While Russell Wilson shocked everyone by winning the starting job over Matt Flynn last season in his rookie year, there is no doubt that the Seahawks are now Wilson's team. Instead of experiencing growing pains last year, Wilson threw for over 3,000 yards, 26 touchdowns, and had a higher QBR than Drew Brees and Eli Manning. Oh yeah, and he also ran for nearly 500 yards. Now that he is in his second year with the offense and still has all of the same weapons surrounding him, expect his numbers to rise.



Behind Wilson on the depth chart is Tarvaris Jackson, who could probably compete for a starting job on some other NFL teams. Jackson is a perfect backup for the Seahawks, because he is now a veteran and has the same quarterback style as Wilson.

Running back/Fullback:

And to think that the Seahawks got Marshawn Lynch for fourth and fifth-round picks. Ever since Marshawn arrived in Seattle he has been in full "Beast Mode," including a career best year in 2012. He clearly responds positively to Pete Carroll's coaching style, as he is knocking over defenders every time he touches the ball. He rushed for nearly 1,600 yards and 11 touchdowns last season, and there is no reason to believe that he won't approach those numbers yet again in 2013.

Robert Turbin and second-round draft pick Christine Michael are in an active battle for the backup running back position, which is great news for the Seahawks. If both Turbin and Michael are playing to win the job, that means both will be running hard enough to complement Marshawn nicely. As for fullback, the Seahawks cut fan favorite Michael Robinson, leaving them without a true option at the position.

Wide Receiver/Tight End:

The Seahawks acquired Percy Harvin this offseason to give Russell Wilson a true #1 receiver, but a hip injury will sideline Harvin for most of the season. While this is undoubtedly a crushing blow for the Seahawks, the impact of the injury may be getting blown a bit out of proportion. First of all, the Seahawks are a running team and will continue to be even as Wilson progresses. Secondly, the Seahawks wide receivers are still pretty good without Harvin. Golden Tate has a similar skill set to Harvin and has been waiting to break out, and 2013 could very well be the season that happens. He has developed great chemistry with Wilson, and with Harvin injured, Tate could reach 1,000 yards and 10 touchdowns. Besides Tate, Sidney Rice is a big and reliable target when healthy, and Doug Baldwin is very explosive for a #3 receiver.

Zach Miller remains the starter at tight end despite his disappointing first two years with Seattle. He did play remarkably well in both of the Seahawks' playoff games last season, so there is some reason for optimism. There is not much depth behind Miller, as fifth-round pick Luke Willson is second on the depth chart.

Offensive Line:

With the Seahawks' offensive line, there is a lot of good and a lot of bad. The good starts with center Max Unger, who was the best center in the NFL in 2012. He did not allow a single sack and plowed holes for Marshawn Lynch all year long. Left tackle Russell Okung also had a great 2012, allowing only one sack and finally looking like the player the Seahawks drafted sixth overall in 2010. After these two star linemen, it gets ugly. Journeyman left guard Paul McQuistan is average at best, and right guard J.R. Sweezy is completely inexperienced. The Seahawks' dominance in the running game is a result of Offensive Line Coach Tom Cable's zone-blocking scheme, but it won't be as successful in 2013 if the guards don't play at a high level. Right tackle Breno Giacomini had a pretty bad 2012 season, and if he doesn't step it up in 2013 then the Seahawks have a good reason to be concerned.

Offensive player to watch: QB Russell Wilson

Defense:

Defensive Line:

The Seahawks signed defensive end Cliff Avril away from the Lions in one of the biggest acquisitions of the offseason, and he should pay dividends immediately. He has averaged almost 10 sacks per year over the last three seasons, and he could exceed those numbers in 2013 playing in the Seahawks defense. Chris Clemons will play opposite Avril on the line, giving the Seahawks one of the best defense end duos in the league. Clemons will miss the first few games of the season while he is recovering from a torn ACL, but the Seahawks surprisingly did not place him on the PUP list so he could be ready to play sooner than expected. The Seahawks' defensive tackles are solid, especially Brandon Mebane. The team used two of their first four draft picks on defensive tackles, selecting Jordan Hill and Jesse Williams. However, both rookies are already injured, but the team is hoping one of them can emerge as a starter upon their return. In the meantime, both Tony McDaniel and Red Bryant are good players who can play multiple spots on the line.

Linebackers:

The Seahawks' linebacker corps was supposed to struggle in 2012 because of inexperience, but apparently nobody told them that. The unit played like a bunch of veterans, led by anchor Bobby Wagner in the middle. Even though Wagner has only played one year in the league, he is already considered one of the best middle linebackers in the game. Outside linebackers K.J. Wright and Bruce Irvin also exceeded expectations last year. Irvin looks like one of the game's next great pass rushers, but he is going to have to sit out the first four games of the season for violating the league's performance-enhancing drug policy.

Secondary:

The Seahawks' secondary refers to themselves as "The Legion of Boom," but to opposing quarterbacks they are a worst nightmare. They are far and away the best secondary in the NFL, and no other unit even approaches their game-changing ability. It all starts with outspoken cornerback Richard Sherman, who unlike many NFL players completely backs up all of his smack talk. Sherman intercepted 8 passes last season, but he won't reach that total this season, simply because quarterbacks have learned to stop throwing in his direction. Sherman's partner in crime is the terrifying Brandon Browner, who would be a #1 cornerback on most NFL teams.

As if having two Pro Bowl cornerbacks wasn't enough, the Seahawks also have a pair of Pro Bowl safeties. Earl Thomas has become the premier free safety in the league, and he earned a first-time All Pro berth for his play in 2012. He has the ability to pick off any deep ball, stop a running back at the line of scrimmage, and light up a receiver over the middle. He's simply the total package. Kam Chancellor starts at strong safety, but he might as well play linebacker. He is in on practically every tackle, and throughout the course of the year he will make some hits that will make you cringe. Let's just say that wide receivers probably don't like running in-routes against the Seahawks.

Defensive Player to watch: CB Richard Sherman

Special Teams:

Kicker Steven Hauschka and punter Jon Ryan are both extremely solid for the Seahawks. Leon Washington returned both kicks and punts for the Seahawks last season, but he is out of town so someone will need to step up to fill the void. Right now Will Blackmon is slated to return kicks and Golden Tate will field punts, but both of those positions are subject to change.

Overall: 10-6, finish second in the NFC West

The Seahawks advanced to the second round of the playoffs last year, and they should be even better in 2013. Russell Wilson is only going to improve at quarterback and Marshawn Lynch is one of the NFL's elite running backs. The Seahawks defense will be just as good in 2013 as they were in 2012, led by their star-studded secondary. While these are all reasons for hope, there are also reasons to keep expectations in check. Most starters on the offensive line are inexperienced or bound to struggle, and the defensive line is facing many injuries. Also, the NFC West will be one of the toughest divisions in 2013. But the Seahawks have too much talent to be slowed down, so they will once again reach double-digit wins and make the playoffs. And once they are in the playoffs, anything can happen.

| SEATTLE SEAHAWKS | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | @ | <u>Carolina Panthers</u> | W |
| 2 | September 15 | | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| 4 | September 29 | @ | <u>Houston Texans</u> | L |
| 5 | October 6 | @ | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | L |
| 6 | October 13 | | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | W |
| 7 | October 17 | @ | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | L |
| 8 | October 28 | @ | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | L |
| 9 | November 3 | | <u>Tampa Bay Buccaneers</u> | W |
| 10 | November 10 | @ | <u>Atlanta Falcons</u> | L |
| 11 | November 17 | | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | W |
| 12 | | | Bye Week | |
| 13 | December 2 | | <u>New Orleans Saints</u> | W |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | L |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | <u>New York Giants</u> | W |
| 16 | December 22 | | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | W |
| Record: 10-6 (3-3) | | | | |

AFC EAST:

New York Jets:

2012: 6-10, 3rd in the AFC East

Key Additions: RB Chris Ivory, TE Kellen Winslow, G Willie Colon, OLB Antwan Barnes, S Dawan Landry

2013 NFL Draft: CB Dee Milliner, DL Sheldon Richardson, QB Geno Smith, OG Brian Winter, OT Oday Aboushi, OG William Campbell, FB Tommy Bohanon

Key Losses: TE Dustin Keller, RB Shonn Greene, G Brandon Moore, CB Darrelle Revis, DE Mike Devito, S LaRon Landry

2012 Season Recap:

The Jets hoped that 2012 would get them back to the playoffs after a disappointing 2011 season that saw them staying at home for the first time in the Rex Ryan era. Unfortunately the season quickly became a bit of a disaster for the Jets. They lost key starters Darrelle Revis and Santonio Holmes to injury, and suffered a number of embarrassing losses last season. Mark Sanchez, who the team just signed to an extension, continued to struggle at quarterback and was unable to carry this team. Sanchez lost control of the team, and was benched late in the season. The Jets, dealing with major cap issues, were forced to trade Revis and take a bare bones approach in free agency.

Quarterback:

The Jets still have Mark Sanchez due to his massive contract, but they also drafted rookie Geno Smith in the 2nd round. The team would probably start Sanchez if he was fully healthy, but a preseason injury means that Smith will likely get the nod to start the season. There could be some real growing pains as Smith adjusts to the next level, but he should be considered the quarterback



of the future. The Jets need to keep things simple for Smith and not try to put too much on his plate too soon.

Running back:

The Jets traded for Chris Ivory from the Saints to hopefully take over their primary running back role. Ivory has been impressive when he's played in his career, and if he can stay healthy he could give the Jets a solid running game. He's not going to do too much out of the back field, but the Jets will just be happy if he can average 4.0 yards per carry and not put too much pressure on the rookie quarterback.

Wide Receivers/Tight ends:

The Jets are hoping that Santonio Holmes can return from injury and bolster youngsters Stephen Hill and Jeremy Kerley, but it is tough to say what can reasonably be expected from Holmes this season. Hill has big play potential and could eventually develop into a top 20 WR in this league. It won't be this year though as he's simply too raw as a player. Kerley is a nice slot receiver and can hold his own in that role, but he's not the guy you want as your de facto number one option, which is the current situation with the Jets. At tight end the Jets will hope that between Kellen Winslow and Jeff Cumberland they can cobble together some solid production. Winslow is a tough guy to bet on, so it could all fall on Cumberland who was solid in a reserve role last season.

Offensive line:

This should be the one semi-strength of the Jets' offense. D'Brickashaw Ferguson and Nick Mangold are Pro Bowl caliber guys, who should play at a high level. Vladimir Ducasse and Willie Colon could be a solid guard pairing, though there is always a concern about Colon's health. Austin Howard impressed last year at right tackle and he hopefully will either maintain his level of play or continue to develop. The Jets also drafted a quality back-up in G/T Brian Winters this past April, giving them a little depth.

Offensive player to watch: WR Jeremy Kerley

DEFENSE:

Defensive line:

This actually could be a pretty solid group. Muhammad Wilkerson is the Jets best defensive lineman (possibly their best defensive player), and he will be joined on the line by Kendrick Ellis and rookie Sheldon Richardson. Wilkerson and Richardson should both get plenty of penetration and cause a good amount of pressure.

Linebacker:

This is another area that probably will be pretty solid. Demario Davis and David Harris should be at least an average ILB pairing. Quinton Coples should do well as a stand-up linebacker, though he's currently out and the Jets are unsure when he'll exactly be back. Antwan Barnes and Calvin Pace give the Jets some other options, though neither should play 100% of the snaps.

Defensive backs:

The Jets corners should still be pretty good and that is with the loss of the best corner in the game. Antonio Cromartie is a very good corner, and was able to step into Revis' shoes last year and take away number 1 receivers. Rookie Dee Milliner should start right away and play at a high level. While his career hasn't been what the Jets were hoping for, Kyle Wilson gives them a good third corner. Safety is really the big issue for the Jets, as their projected starters are Dawan Landry who wasn't successful with the Jaguars, and 2012 7th rounder Antonio Allen. This is likely going to be a major issue for the Jets this season and one that is sure to cost them.

Defensive player to watch: CB Dee Milliner

Special Teams:

The Jets have a below average pair of kickers in punter Robert Malone, and place kicker Nick Folk. This is a big disadvantage for the Jets this season. Kerley and Kyle Wilson will likely handle most of the return duties for the Jets. They can be solid options, but they probably aren't going to make a major difference.

2013 Season Outlook: 2-12, 4th in the AFC East

It looks like it is going to get worse for the Jets before it gets better. Regardless of who ends up at quarterback it is tough seeing this team win more than 4 games this season, and even that might be a stretch. Offensively this team just doesn't have the talent to compete on a week to week basis. While the defense should be good, there are still some holes there that other teams will exploit. In addition to a lack of talent on the roster, the Jets seem like they have a real leadership crisis on this team. The Jets will likely end up with a top 5 pick in next May's draft where they can hopefully begin their rebuild for the future.

| NEW YORK JETS | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------|---|----------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | L |
| 2 | September 12 | @ | New England Patriots | L |
| 3 | September 22 | | Buffalo Bills | W |
| 4 | September 29 | @ | Tennessee Titans | L |
| 5 | October 7 | @ | Atlanta Falcons | L |
| 6 | October 13 | | Pittsburgh Steelers | L |
| 7 | October 20 | | New England Patriots | L |
| 8 | October 27 | @ | Cincinnati Bengals | L |
| 9 | November 3 | | New Orleans Saints | L |
| 10 | | | Bye Week | |
| 11 | November 17 | @ | Buffalo Bills | L |
| 12 | November 24 | @ | Baltimore Ravens | L |
| 13 | December 1 | | Miami Dolphins | L |
| 14 | December 8 | | Oakland Raiders | W |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | Carolina Panthers | L |
| 16 | December 22 | | Cleveland Browns | L |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | Miami Dolphins | L |
| Record: 2-14 (1-5) | | | | |

Buffalo Bills:

2012 FINISH: 6-10 Last in AFC East

Key Additions: QB Kevin Kolb, G Doug Legursky, DT Alan Branch, DE/OLB Jerry Hughes.

NFL Draft: QB E.J. Manuel, WR Robert Woods, ILB Kiko Alonso, WR Marquise Goodwin, S Duke Williams, S Jonathan Meeks, K Dustin Hopkins

Key Losses: QB Ryan Fitzpatrick, QB Tarvaris Jackson, WR David Nelson, WR Donald Jones, G Andy Levitre, G Chad Rinehart, DE Chris Kelsay, DE Kyle Moore, DE Shawne Merriman, DT Spencer Johnson, OLB Nick Barnett, ILB Kelvin Sheppard, CB Terrence McGee, S George Wilson

2012 RECAP:

The Bills finished 6-10 again in 2012 and with no 5-2 start like in 2011 to at least tease the fan base with, the Bills were forced to make wholesale changes. It was another frustrating season for a franchise that has dealt with plenty of that over the last decade. The 2012 campaign marked Buffalo's eighth consecutive losing season and they have not been to the playoffs since 'The Music City Miracle' beat them in Nashville back in 1999.

Buffalo cleaned house by firing head coach Chan Gailey along with offensive coordinator Curtis Modkins and defensive coordinator Dave Wannstedt. Doug Marrone, who had spent his previous four years at nearby Syracuse University, was the surprise pick to replace Gailey and Marrone began with an even bigger selection of his own.

Marrone's first decision was to find a franchise QB. He found that guy at Florida State and drafted the Seminoles EJ Manuel. Marrone and Manuel will continue a trend which has seen a rookie HC and rookie QB make their debuts for the same team in each season for what will now be the sixth straight year.

The Bills are team stuck in a rebuilding phase and working on its sixth coach since 2000. Several regulars were sent packing from Chan Gailey's roster and a full-blown overhaul is underway. The offense must identify a starting quarterback, and the defense is starting from square one. The Bills are ---and as they always seem to be in the last 13 years---many seasons away from contending.

OFFENSE:

QUARTERBACK:

The Ryan Fitzpatrick Era is over in Buffalo. But that doesn't necessarily mean happier times are ahead, as Buffalo traded down from No. 8 to No. 16 to take E.J. Manuel out of Florida State. Manuel was the best signal-caller at the Senior Bowl, and the only QB selected in the NFL Draft's first round in 2013. Manuel led Florida State to a 25-6 record as a starter – the third most wins in school history – and became the second quarterback in FBS history to win four straight bowl games (West Virginia QB Pat White). He ended his career as the school's all-time leader in completion percentage (66.9) and ranks among the top five in Seminoles history for passing yards (7,736 – 3rd), total offense (8,563 – 3rd), completions (600 – 4th) and passing attempts (897 – 5th).

While there is no denying he is talented, there is also no denying he is incredibly raw and not nearly prepared to start in the NFL. But following another concussion injury to veteran Kevin Kolb, Manuel is going to start most of the games for Buffalo once he himself returns from a minor knee procedure he had done in the middle of camp. Through the first two games of the 2013 preseason, Manuel threw for 199 yards on 26-of-33 passing with two touchdowns for a 112.0 QB rating.



Because Manuel will not be healthy for the first game, starting for the Bills on opening day this season will be Jeff Tuel—who? That's right Jeff Tuel. The former Washington St. Cougar signed with Buffalo as a free agent after a storied collegiate career. He appeared in 31 games, making 26 starts for the Cougars. He passed for 5,936 yards and 33 touchdowns and finished his career in the WSU record book first in completion percentage, fifth in completions, sixth in passing attempts, seventh in passing yards, seventh in passing touchdowns, seventh in total offense (5,878) and eighth in touchdowns responsible for (35). Tuel posted a 106.6 passer rating in the 2013 preseason, completing 31-of-43 passes for 299 yards with two touchdowns and will become the first undrafted free agent in the Super Bowl era (1966) to start a Week 1 NFL game---WELCOME TO THE NFL KID!

RUNNING BACK/FULLBACK:

The situation at running back is a bit more settled and productive for the Bills. During his first press conference as the Bills head coach, Marrone proclaimed to the delight of fantasy football owners everywhere, that RB CJ Spiller was the No.1 man in the backfield and would get most of the carries.

Spiller rushed for a career-high 1,244 yards on 207 carries and six touchdowns in 2012 - the first 1,000 yard season of his NFL career, which led to his first Pro Bowl

appearance. Spiller tied for the NFL-lead with a 6.0 yards per carry average in 2012 among running backs (207- 1,244). Combined with his 1,703 yards from scrimmage in 2012, Spiller ranks fifth in the NFL with 2,266 yards from scrimmage in the last 22 weeks of the regular season. RB Fred Jackson eclipsed 4,000 rushing yards in his career during the 2012 season - gaining 437 yards on 115 carries and three touchdowns.

Tashard Choice provides depth for the Bills as Jackson is injury prone at times. Frank Summers is listed as the team's fullback.

WIDE RECEIVERS / TIGHT END

The Bills have great talent at some critical skill set positions and receiver is one of them. Stevie Johnson extended his franchise record of consecutive seasons with 1,000 receiving yards to three in 2012. Johnson caught a team-best 79 catches for 1,046 yards and six touchdowns in 2012. He joined Andre Reed (1988-91) as the only Bills players to post 70 catches in three straight seasons. Johnson tied for seventh in the AFC with 79 catches in 2012: Since 2010, Johnson has recorded 237 catches for 3,123 yards and 23 touchdowns. His 237 receptions are the third most in the AFC and 10th in the NFL, since 2010. Johnson is also clutch pass catcher. He has 78 passes for 1,118 yards and seven touchdowns on third-down plays since 2010. His 78 catches are tied for second since 2010 on third-down plays.

WR T.J. Graham caught 31 passes for 322 yards and a touchdown in his first season in the NFL - the eighth-most receptions by a rookie wide receiver last season. Graham set a new Bills rookie record with a receiving streak of 15 games in the 2012 season, breaking the previous mark of 14 games set by Bobby Burnett (1966) and Joe Cribbs (1980). Second-round pick Robert Woods (846 yards, 11 TD at USC last season) will definitely help a unit that has lacked depth.

At TE, Scott Chandler posted career-highs in 2012 with 43 catches for 571 yards and matched a personal-best of six touchdowns, before being placed on Injured Reserve (in late December. With his six touchdown catches in 2012, Chandler matched a franchise record for most by a Bills tight end in a single-season for the second time in his career. At 6-foot-7 and 260 pounds, Chandler is almost impossible to contain in the red zone. That massive frame also helps when it comes to blocking. The question is whether Chandler, a slow runner to begin with, will be able to create separation from defenders after tearing his ACL.

OFFENSIVE LINE:

The smallest player Buffalo features up front is center Eric Wood and he's still 6-foot-4 and over 300 pounds. Led by Wood, guard Kraig Urbik and tackles Cordy Glenn and Erik Pears, Buffalo boasts a talented offensive line. The Bills were penny wise not to match the Tennessee Titans price for left guard Andy Levitre. With that said, they still have to replace their best lineman and have settled on Colin Brown, as his replacement.

Brown has taken just 155 snaps over his four NFL seasons and if he falters, five-year veteran Doug Legursky will step in.

Offensive Player to watch: RB CJ Spiller

DEFENSE:

DEFENSIVE LINE:

Defensive coordinator Mike Pettine, who was the architect of several strong defenses for the rival New York Jets, is switching the Bills defense from a 4-3 to a 3-4. The move essentially leaves Mario Williams, who is categorized as a defensive end, without a true position. No worries, with 10.5 sacks last season, he will be turned loose in 2013. The Bills allowed 362.9 total yards per game (22nd in the league) and were especially bad against the run (145.8 ypg, 31st).

Buffalo's front seven shouldn't be the pushover it was a year ago. - Pro Bowl tackle Kyle Williams, Marcell Dareus and Branch will assist in stopping the run. Dareus, who is a dominant run stopper at age 23, had a down year dealing with the death of his brother but should be more mentally focused.

LINEBACKERS:

Buffalo's offseason overhaul was not limited to just the coaching staff. The Bills' current linebacking corps looks nothing like the one that took the field in 2012. Buffalo's two biggest losses were leading tacklers Nick Barnett and Kelvin Sheppard. The Bills cut Barnett (112 tackles last season) in February after he failed his physical while Sheppard was traded to Indianapolis just days after the draft.

What's left is a young and an unproven unit featuring rookie Kiko Alonso in the middle. Alonso had 53 tackles and four interceptions for Oregon last season. Second-year man Nigel Bradham (57 tackles) and 6-foot-5 Manny Lawson, whom the Bills signed will flank the rookie. Lawson's speed has declined in recent seasons, as he can no longer run a 4.4 40. His drop in speed is beginning to affect his productivity, as his 39 tackles last season were his fewest since 2007.

Barnett and Sheppard will be difficult to replace but at least the Bills kept veteran Bryan Scott, who produced two forced fumbles and four interceptions last season. Jerry Hughes, who came over as part of the Sheppard trade is raw but he might be the team's best pass-rushing linebacker (four sacks in 2012) and will also be used as a DE in the hybrid defense of Pettine.

The Bills need more production from their linebackers, who accounted for just five of the team's 36 sacks. Pettine's aggressive defense and the addition of a few key younger players should help this take place.

SECONDARY:

Pro Bowl safety Jairus Byrd and cornerbacks Stephon Gilmore, who is coming off a strong rookie season, lead the secondary. Gilmore was given a chance to play right away last season and he ended up being one of the best rookies in the league at his position (61 tackles, three forced fumbles, one interception).

Another youngster, 23-year-old cornerback/safety hybrid Aaron Williams also showed potential last season (32 tackles in 11 games) and after the Bills cut safety George Wilson (104 tackles in 2012) to save money, Williams should get a chance to start this year. Left cornerback, Leodis McKelvin has been a solid player on special teams but it remains to be seen whether he can be a difference maker on defense. He should be eager to prove himself after signing a four-year, \$20 million extension in the offseason.

Of course, Jairus Byrd remains the focal point, and not all because of his play. The two-time Pro Bowler has been hesitant to sign a long-term deal with Buffalo and there have been reports that he is ready to skip town after the season. At press time, NFL.com's Ian Rapoport reported that it is believed Byrd will be forced to miss some time with his plantar fasciitis injury, according to sources close to the situation. If that happens, Searcy Da'Norris will step in his place. The third year pro from North Carolina is instinctive and smart in his play. He has good football intelligence and athletic ability, as well as very long arms for a safety. He is also very good in run support and loves contact.

Defensive Player to watch: OLB Mario Williams

SPECIAL TEAMS:

The Bills have turned their kicking game over to the Florida State Seminoles. Gone is 14-year vet Rian Lindell, who was cut but quickly scooped up by the Buccaneers. This leaves Florida State rookie Dustin Hopkins, as the team's primary kicker. Hopkins was an All-American in college but kicking in Florida is completely different than kicking in December in Orchard Park.

Another FSU product, P Shawn Powell set a franchise record for rookie punters with a 44.00 average in 2012. His 65 punts - fourth most by a Bills rookie - traveled 2,860 yards with 23 landing inside the team's opponent's 20-yard line.

Cornerback Leodis McKelvin was the best punt returner in football last season. He averaged 18.7 yards per return while bringing two punts all the way back for

touchdowns. He also fared well on kickoffs, averaging 28.3 yards on 18 attempts but TJ Graham will take over those duties in 2013.

OUTLOOK: 6-10, Third in AFC East

Another six-win season appears to be on the horizon in Buffalo. However, this one could be the losing season dreams are made of, as the Bills build towards the future. With a top six back in Spiller, a potential franchise QB in Manuel and Stevie Johnson to match—how can the excitement not build in western NY.

On defense, the Bills will get better; they have to against the run because they cannot get worse. The secondary will progress and the front seven could actually control a few contests if they adapt to Mike Pettine's hybrid style of play. All told, the Bills will be exactly what their record says they are, in third place in the AFC East and heading into next season as perennial rebuilders.

| BUFFALO BILLS | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | | <u>New England Patriots</u> | L |
| 2 | September 15 | | <u>Carolina Panthers</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>New York Jets</u> | L |
| 4 | September 29 | | <u>Baltimore Ravens</u> | L |
| 5 | October 3 | @ | <u>Cleveland Browns</u> | L |
| 6 | October 13 | | <u>Cincinnati Bengals</u> | W |
| 7 | October 20 | @ | <u>Miami Dolphins</u> | L |
| 8 | October 27 | @ | <u>New Orleans Saints</u> | L |
| 9 | November 3 | | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | W |
| 10 | November 10 | @ | <u>Pittsburgh Steelers</u> | L |
| 11 | November 17 | | <u>New York Jets</u> | W |
| 12 | | | Bye Week | |
| 13 | December 1 | | <u>Atlanta Falcons</u> | L |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | <u>Tampa Bay Buccaneers</u> | L |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| 16 | December 22 | | <u>Miami Dolphins</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>New England Patriots</u> | L |
| Record: 6-10 (2-4) | | | | |

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS:

2012 RECAP: 12-4 First in AFC East; lost is AFC Championship Game to Baltimore Ravens

Key Additions: RB LeGarrette Blount, WR Danny Amendola, WR Donald Jones, WR Michael Jenkins, OT Will Svitek, G Tyronne Green, DT Tommy Kelly, DT Armond Armstead, S Adrian Wilson, KR Leon Washington.

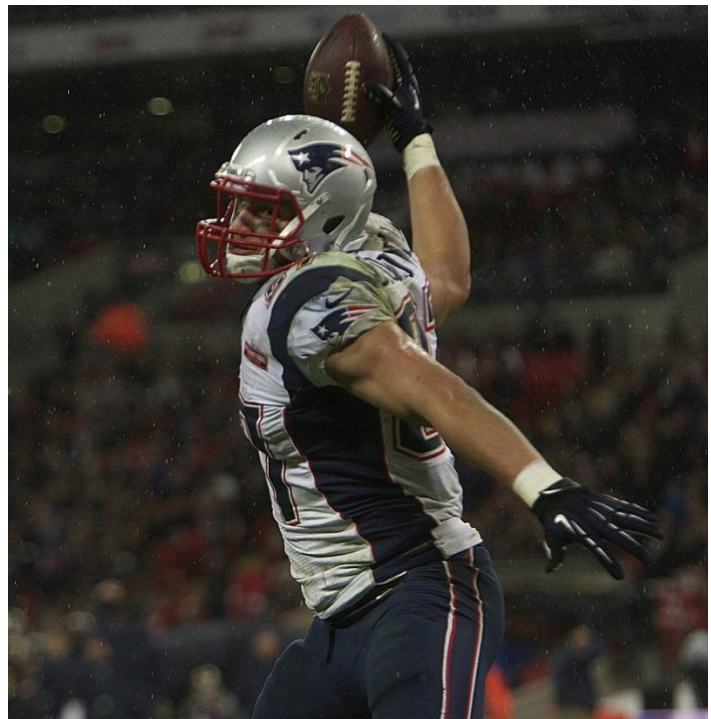
NFL Draft: DE/OLB Jamie Collins, WR Aaron Dobson, CB Logan Ryan, S Duron Harmon, WR Josh Boyce.

Key Losses: RB Danny Woodhead, RB Jeff Demps, WR Wes Welker, WR Brandon Lloyd, TE Aaron Hernandez, G Donald Thomas, G Brian Waters, DE Trevor Scott, S Patrick Chung

2012 SEASON RECAP:

Every team takes a turn making headlines during the offseason but the Patriots stole the show this past summer, as TE Aaron Hernandez was arrested for the murder of Odin Lloyd in late June. The team released him the very same day and while there is never a good time for this to occur, the loss of the Pats other Pro Bowl tight end, Rob Gronkowski, who underwent back surgery in mid-June made this an even worse situation. With Wes Welker, Brandon Lloyd and Danny Woodhead no longer with the team, Tom Brady will begin this season without his top five pass catchers from last season.

With them last season, Brady's bunch once again finished the season with one of the most prolific offenses in NFL history. The Pats led the NFL with 557 points, set an NFL record for most first downs in a season with 444 and scored 67 touchdowns in 2012, the second most in the team history and



tied for the fourth most in NFL history. While we all know about what the air attack is capable of, New England finally established a consistent ground attack, as they finished seventh in rushing in the league and contributed 25 rushing touchdowns. The Patriots finished 2012 with 6,846 total yards, second in team history to the 6,848 in 2011 and the fifth most in NFL history.

For the third straight season, the Pats defense continued to bleed yards, as they finished 25 out of 32 teams. However, they allowed just 331 points, ninth fewest in football, despite giving up the eighth-most yards.

OFFENSE:

QUARTERBACK:

Love him or hate him, Tom Brady is simply one of the best to ever play the quarterback position. Brady has quarterbacked the Patriots to victories in 136 of his 175 career regular season starts, compiling a .777 winning percentage and giving him the best record of any quarterback in the Super Bowl era. Last year, Brady finished with 34 passing touchdowns for his third straight 30-touchdown season and he now has four 30-touchdown seasons overall. With 4,827 passing yards in 2012, he became just the fifth player in NFL history to reach 4,000 yards in five or more seasons and he has now tossed at least one touchdown pass in 48 straight games, the NFL's longest active streak. His 48 straight games with at least one touchdown pass is second all-time, behind Drew Brees (54), who broke Johnny Unitas' record last season. Former Arkansas Razorback Ryan Mallett continues to back up Brady.

RUNNINGBACK/ FULLBACK

The Patriots have not had a running game this talented and deep during the Belichick/Brady era. Last year, Stevan Ridley ran for 1,200 yards and did so as a two-down back. If Ridley had played even a handful of third downs, he could have been a top-five rusher. He also finished tied for third in the NFL with 12 rushing touchdowns in 2012. Ridley is likely to remain a two-down back because the Pats have Shane Vereen, who played in 13 games last season and finished with a career-high 400 total yards and four touchdowns. He rushed for 251 yards on 62 attempts for a 4.0 average.

The Patriots added LeGarrette Blount, a 250-pound brick wall with feet, who rushed for 1,000 yards with the Buccaneers back in 2010. The former Oregon Duck led all New England backs in the preseason with 24 carries for 137 yards (5.7 YPC) and two touchdowns, including a 51-yarder.

If boy wonder offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels and Bill Belichick can figure out how to blend Brady's passing game with his three running backs—and why wouldn't they--

then it is possible the Patriots may not miss their top five pass catchers from last season. If they can run the ball more without losing yards or points, they may even be able to add another year or two to No.12's career in the process and isn't that what the rest of the AFC wants to hear.

RECEIVERS/TIGHT ENDS:

Replacing 283 receptions, 3,194 yards and 19 touchdowns will be no easy task for the next crop of New England pass catchers but if the Pats hope to win 11 or 12 games in 2012, it must somehow be done. Taking over for Wes Welker, who was last season's leader in receptions and yards is Danny Amendola. While many say this has the potential to be an even swap, Amendola's inability to stay healthy casts doubt on the probability of this happening. They are both very similar in almost every aspect of the game and even went to the same college, Texas Tech, but duplicating the Brady-to-Welker connection will not happen overnight—or can it.

In the year before Welker came to New England, he had 67receptions for 687 yards and one touchdown in Miami. Last year in St. Louis, Amendola hauled in 63 receptions for 663 yards and three touchdowns. Welker was 26 when he came to New England, Amendola is 27. And Amendola is two inches taller and is faster than Brady's former slot receiver. But he cannot stay healthy. Amendola has battled a slew of injuries during his brief career and has played in only 12 games the past two seasons. But if he can stay on the field for all 16 games and produce—say-1,175 yards and eight touchdowns in 2013, which is what Welker did in his first year coming over from Miami, then the Patriots won't miss a beat—or Welker.

The only other veteran presence at WR is another Wes Welker/Danny Amendola type in former Kent State product, Julian Edelman. His career numbers would have been a down year for Welker at any time during the past five seasons with 72 catches, 947 yards and three touchdowns. It is hard to imagine Bill Belichick relying on three rookies to make one of the NFL's most prolific offenses stay prolific in 2013—but that is likely to be the case. The Pats drafted Aaron Dobson and Josh Boyce, but undrafted rookie Kenbrell Thompson has stepped up the most during training camp and in preseason games. Thompson and Dobson combined to catch 26 passes for 253 yards and three touchdowns in four games this summer—so it is not out of the question that Brady won't make this work in a big way this season.

At TE, Rob Gronkowski is the man that has made the most recent successful version of the Pats offense so effective. Nevertheless, Gronk underwent multiple surgeries on a forearm that limited him late last season and then ended up having back surgery in early June. Brady will need his big TE in the red zone but when he will have him is likely to remain a mystery knowing Belichick. The Pats did not place Gronk on the PUP list to

start the year. However, there is bound to be constant dodging of the “when will he return” question by Belichick. According to many close to the situation, he is likely going to get back on the field faster than expected. Speaking of the red zone, Gronkowski’s 38 touchdown receptions since the start of the 2010 season are the most among all NFL players during that span. The fact that the Patriots cut TE’s Jake Ballard and Daniel Fells are further proof of Gronk’s earlier than expected return. Michael Hoomanawanui, who had just five receptions for the Pats last season and rookie Zach Sudefeld, as well as veteran Matthew Mulligan, round out the position.

OFFENSIVE LINE:

The Patriots possessed one of the league’s best offensive lines in 2012. All five starters will return to this year’s team. According to Pro Football Focus, the group allowed defenses to pressure Brady just 25 percent of the time on his dropbacks. They also finished second in their cumulative run blocking grades. Tackles Nate Solder and Sebastian Vollmer had excellent seasons and center Ryan Wendell was PFF’s highest rated run blocker at his position. Five-time Pro Bowler Logan Mankins was good but not great last year but he should bounce back now that he is finally healthy for the first time in three years. Dan Connolly was the line’s weak link in 2012 and if he continues to struggle in 2013, Marcus Cannon could replace him at right guard.

Offensive Player to watch: WR Danny Amendola

DEFENSE:

DEFENSIVE LINE:

New England’s defense has struggled to defend the pass in recent seasons but their run defense has more than held its own. Led by, rookie Chandler Jones (45 tackles, three forced fumbles) and Pro-Bowl line mate Vince Wilfork, the Pats finished ninth in the league at stopping the run in 2012.

At 29-years old, (he will turn 30 the day before the Super Bowl), defensive end Rob Ninkovich still has plenty left in the tank. He showed that he could rush the passer with a team leading eight sacks and five forced fumbles a season ago. Outside of Jones, he is probably New England's top pass rusher.

At 6-feet-6, 325-pounds, newcomer Tommy Kelly is a large and durable asset the Pats added from Oakland. He has not missed a game since 2007. He is not a great pass rusher, recording just one sack last season. New England will count on three rookies to

factor into the DL rotation. Two Maryland Terps, Joe Vellano and AJ Francis, as well as Illinois's Michael Buchannan, were all three-year starters in college.

LINEBACKERS:

The Patriots possess perhaps the best linebacking trio in all of the NFL and it starts with two-time Pro Bowler Jerod Mayo. Entering his sixth season out of Tennessee, Mayo has 428 career total tackles and covers as much ground as any weakside linebacker in the game. Last year, he finished with 147 tackles, three sacks, four forced fumbles, as well as an INT for good measure. It was the second time in three seasons Mayo has finished among the NFL's top four tacklers. Middle linebacker Brandon Spikes may not be as talented as Mayo yet but he is entering his fourth season. The former Gator from Florida registered 92 tackles last season, a career best. Spikes tied left end Rob Ninkovich for the team lead in forced fumbles (five each).

Former Alabama stud and 2012 first-round pick Dont'a Hightower had a monster rookie year with 60 tackles, four sacks and two forced fumbles. Hightower may actually end up being the best of the trio when he realizes his potential and that could start in Week 1 versus the Bills. Rookie Jamie Collins, Dane Fletcher, as well as another rookie, Steve Beauharnais round out the depth chart for defensive coordinator Matt Patricia.

SECONDARY:

The Patriots secondary has been travelling downhill at a high rate of speed it seems ever since they allowed Asante Samuels to sign with the Eagles after the 2007 season. The Patriots ranked 27th in pass defense in 2011 and 25th in 2012. Moving by two's is not going to cut it for coach Belichick, especially if the offense does happen to fall off with the loss of so many receivers.

Midway through last season the Pats traded for the troubled Aqib Talib, who was having issues on and off the field in Tampa Bay. His play was an immediate boost, as Talib performed well at times. His injury in the AFC Title game versus Baltimore seemed to be the turning point for the Ravens offense and Anquan Boldin, whom Talib essentially shut out until he left the game. Talib was a free agent this offseason, but New England was able to retain him with a relatively small deal (1 year, \$5 million) because of a diminished market for cornerbacks. Talib is a gambler but more often than not, he guesses right. He has already recorded 19 interceptions in his first five seasons.

Devin McCourty moved from CB to free safety last season and led all Patriots defensive backs with 82 tackles and five interceptions. Talib and McCourty could anchor what has the potential to be a much—much better secondary in 2013. Listed as the starting right corner on the depth chart, Alfonzo Dennard produced a top-notch rookie season and should improve upon that in 2013. It should be noted that he has been arrested twice

since 2012 and considering the Aaron Hernandez situation, can ill afford another slip up. Strong Safety Steve Gregory is the veteran of the group with 97 games of NFL experience and his three picks last year were a career-high. Kyle Arrington provides great depth, as he is only two years removed from his 66-tackle, seven- interception year in 2011. The Patriots were fifth in the league in interceptions last season with 20. Considering the lack of talent at the quarterback position in the division now, they could be even better in 2013.

Defensive Player to watch: DE Chandler Jones

SPECIAL TEAMS:

Stephen Gostkowski enters his eighth season and is as solid as ever. He has made 84 percent of his career field goals and was 11-of-15 from beyond 40 in 2012. Punter Zoltan Mesko averaged 43.1 yards, which was 28th in the league last season. As a result, he was beaten out by rookie Ryan Allen, who is a two-step left footed punter and led the country with a 48-yard average while placing 20 punts inside the 20- yard line at Louisiana Tech last year.

New England's return men are Julian Edelman on punts and Devin McCourty and Leon Washington on kick offs. Special teams captain Matt Slater might be the best gunner in football as he recorded 13 tackles last season.

2013 OUTLOOK: 12-4 First in AFC East

Despite the loss of pass catchers, the Patriots play in perhaps the weakest division in football and that alone should be good for five wins if not a division sweep. In the end, it is likely another 12-win season with a first round bye is on tap. With an improving defense, do not be surprised to see New England in the first cold weather Super Bowl, which should make Jets fans ecstatic.

| NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|----------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | @ | Buffalo Bills | W |
| 2 | September 12 | | New York Jets | W |
| 3 | September 22 | | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | W |
| 4 | September 29 | @ | Atlanta Falcons | L |
| 5 | October 6 | @ | Cincinnati Bengals | L |
| 6 | October 13 | | New Orleans Saints | W |
| 7 | October 20 | @ | New York Jets | W |
| 8 | October 27 | | Miami Dolphins | W |
| 9 | November 3 | | Pittsburgh Steelers | W |
| 10 | | | Bye Week | |
| 11 | November 18 | @ | Carolina Panthers | W |
| 12 | November 24 | | Denver Broncos | W |
| 13 | December 1 | @ | Houston Texans | L |
| 14 | December 8 | | Cleveland Browns | W |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | Miami Dolphins | L |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | Baltimore Ravens | W |
| 17 | December 29 | | Buffalo Bills | W |
| Record: 12-4 (5-1) | | | | |

MIAMI DOLPHINS:

2012 Finish: 7-9, Second in AFC East, Missed Playoffs.

Key Additions: WR Mike Wallace, WR Brandon Gibson, TE Dustin Keller, OT Tyson Clabo, G Lance Louis, DT Vaughn Martin, OLB Philip Wheeler, ILB Dannell Ellerbe.

NFL Draft: DE/OLB Dion Jordan, CB Jamar Taylor, G/OT Dallas Thomas, CB Will Davis, OLB Jelani Jenkins, TE Dion Sims, RB Mike Gillislee, K Caleb Sturgis

Key Losses: RB Reggie Bush, WR Davone Bess, WR Marlon Moore, TE Anthony Fasano, OT Jake Long, DT Tony McDaniel, OLB Kevin Burnett, ILB Karlos Dansby, CB Sean Smith, S Jonathan Amaya, K Nate Kaeding

2012 SEASON RECAP:

With a new rookie offensive minded head coach in Joe Philbin and rookie quarterback, Ryan Tannehill, the Miami Dolphins were looking to surprise a few teams in 2012. After all, making the playoffs with this exact combination was starting to become the norm in the NFL these days. Instead, the duo struggled and the team finished 7-9, second in the AFC East. They were 27th in total offense, 21st in total defensive yards allowed--and aside from a brief run where they won three straight, failed to excite anyone, including their loyal fan base that is growing very impatient.

The ghost of Dan Marino's career still looms large in Miami when the Dolphins visited the playoffs 10 times during his 17-year career. Since No.13's retirement in 1999, the Fins have made the playoffs just three times and two of those were the two years immediately following Marino's departure. From 1966 until 1999, a span of 33-years, Miami had just three head coaches but last year, Philbin became the seventh to be named to the post since Jimmy Johnson retired following the 1999 season.

Tannehill, became the 17th starting QB since Marino and after literally being protested by fans as the Dolphins GM, Jeff Ireland opened up owner Stephen Ross' checkbook this offseason to make wholesale changes in personnel. Ireland spent heavily on both sides of the ball. Since February, the Dolphins have spent an estimated \$248.06M in new contracts (Re-Signing, FA, Draft); \$116.8M of which is guaranteed.

To say that Ireland and possibly even Philbin are on the hot seat in muggy Miami, would be the understatement of the entire 2013 NFL season.

OFFENSE:

QUARTERBACK:

While Ryan Tannehill did not perform to the level of RG III, Andrew Luck or even Russell Wilson, he was not bad in 2012. After battling veteran Matt Moore and winning the job in camp last year, the former Texas A&M signal



caller's play progressed as the year did. Despite possessing below average wide receiver talent, Tannehill demonstrated more poise than someone who only started 18 games at quarterback in college.

Tannehill's overall rookie numbers were not great, as he passed for 3,294 yards, accounted for 14 touchdowns (12 passing, 2 rushing) while tossing 13 interceptions. However, he finished the season with a hot hand. He threw seven scores to just two picks in his final five games. He worked hard this offseason on his footwork and pocket presence, which should him take the next step in the QB progression. Offensive coordinator Kevin Coyle will continue to bring Tannehill along the way QB's in the NFL were meant to once upon a time. With the supporting cast that is being placed around him, he could easily take a bigger than projected next step if that cast does what they have been overpaid to do in Miami this season. Matt Moore will continue to backup Tannehill with Pat Devlin still occupying a roster spot.

RUNNING BACK/FULLBACK:

The Dolphins are young in the backfield----very young. Reggie Bush is now motoring in Detroit with the Lions leaving the starting duties to second year man Lamar Miller, who had 51 carries for 250 yards and a touchdown last season -- averaging just shy of five yards per rush. Miller had 140 of his 250 yards after contact and forced six missed tackles in his rookie campaign. Also available for carries are University of Florida draftee Mike Gillislee and holdover Daniel Thomas, whose workload (165 carries to 91) and production (581 yards to 325) dropped noticeably from 2011 to 2012. Thomas is quickly falling out of favor with Philbin, which means Gillislee, or even PR/KR Marcus Thigpen, is likely to be the main backup.

The Dolphins cut fullback Evan Rodriguez at the last minute as they brought in Tyler Clutts off waivers. Ironically, Clutts, as Rodriguez was, is a former Chicago Bears

fullback. Most recently, Clutts went through training camp with the Texans before being placed on waivers during final cut down. A defensive end in college, Clutts played in the Canadian Football League, Arena Football League and United Football League before breaking into the NFL with the Cleveland Browns. He started eight games for the Bears in 2011.

RECEIVERS/ TIGHTEND:

While Jeff Ireland may have overpaid to bring back WR Brian Hartline, it was one of the smarter overspendings of an otherwise cash drop on so-so producers. Tannehill quickly developed chemistry with Hartline last season even if it did not produce points. Hartline will be the No.2 WR now that Mike Wallace has brought his talents to South Beach. The former Steelers WR got nearly \$30 million in guaranteed money to run past safeties and score touchdowns. Wallace's contract is relatively small in the first season, but it quintuples in size in 2014. To be worth that, he will need to do something he didn't in his fourth and final season in Pittsburgh — top 1,000 yards — and at least match his career average of eight touchdowns. Ireland did not stop at Wallace. Shortly afterwards, he signed Brandon Gibson from the Rams, who underwhelmed for four seasons in St. Louis and caught 51 balls for five touchdowns and a 13.5-yard average in 2012. Hartline, who did surpass 1,000 yards last season, stands to benefit underneath tremendously if these two can stretch the field.

At tight end, Dustin Keller signed a one-year deal to replace the departed Anthony Fasano, but the former Jet sustained a serious, season-ending knee injury in the Dolphins' second preseason game. That leaves the No. 1 duties at that position to University of Tulsa alum Charles Clay, a 255-pounder who had 18 catches for 212 yards and a pair of scores last season in 14 games. Michael Egniew was supposed to be the Dolphins' future at tight end when he was drafted in the third round last year. Nevertheless, Dolphins coaches rode him relentlessly and criticized him, as seen by a national TV audience in last summer's "Hard Knocks". He did not catch a pass in 2012. This preseason Egniew caught six passes for 71-yards and is now second on the depth chart.

OFFENSIVE LINE:

While many fans liked the moves Jeff Ireland made this offseason, those same fans and probably his QB as well, are asking why he didn't use any of the money to keep Tannehill's blind side protector, LT Jake Long, who signed with the Rams 22 days into free agency.

The free-agency exit of the former No. 1 overall pick means that 2012 second-rounder Jonathan Martin, will switch sides. As a rookie, Martin played 16 games last season at right tackle. Taking over for Martin will be offseason acquisition Tyson Clabo, a 6-foot-6,

315-pounder from Atlanta. The Dolphins are a little more settled along the interior, as former Gator Mike Pouncey is at center with veteran Richie Incognito at left guard. Mississippi alum John Jerry started 16 games at right guard last season and is listed first on the depth chart as the season is set to begin but he was pushed this summer by third-round draft pick Dallas Thomas.

Offensive Player to watch: WR Mike Wallace

DEFENSE:

DEFENSIVE LINE:

Over the past two seasons, the Dolphins ranked sixth and seventh in points allowed but other than DE Cameron Wake, the unit lacked game changing playmakers.

In his second season as defensive coordinator, Kevin Coyle asked for exactly those types of players. The strength remains on the defensive front, where Wake made the transition to putting his hand in the dirt look easy. He registered 15 sacks and became Ireland's inspiration to make a big jump on draft day. The Dolphins jumped from No. 12 to No. 3 in April's first round to snatch Dion Jordan, a 6-foot-6, 260-pounder out of Oregon. And, while the ex-Duck has been hampered with shoulder concerns through the summer, he is back practicing and should be on the field for the season opener with Cleveland. If Jordan cannot go, ex Miami Hurricane Olivier Vernon, who was selected in the third round last season and impressed as a rookie recording 3.5 sacks, will get the call.

On the inside of the 4-3 scheme is big man Paul Soliai and the versatile Randy Starks. The rotation will also include Penn State alum Jared Odrick, who like Soliai, eats up a ton of space at 6-foot-5 and 302 pounds.

LINEBACKERS:

Everyone expected the Dolphins to keep Carlos Dansby and Kevin Burnett, especially after both had decent seasons and were the team's top two tacklers in 2012. However, desperate time's calls for desperate measures and in an effort to get younger and have game changing players, Miami aggressively pursued Baltimore's Dannell Ellerbe and Oakland's Philip Wheeler. What happened next is a good news-good news situation for Miami---They got them both. The ability of Wheeler and Ellerbe to disrupt plays with their blitzing skills is expected to result in more takeaways for a defense that found them tough to come by last year. Miami signed the two free agents to five-year deals in March

Ellerbe received a \$34.75 million contract, and Wheeler signed for \$26 million. That made them cheaper than Dansby and Burnett. They are also younger and faster.

Wheeler can play all three positions, and Ellerbe emerged as one of the most reliable performers on the Ravens' Super Bowl squad. The third linebacker is Koa Misi, who has flashed ability but needs to provide more productivity.

SECONDARY:

Prior to Joe Philbin's arrival, it appeared the Dolphins were set for years at cornerback, with Vontae Davis and Sean Smith, players they drafted in the first and second rounds in 2009. Now that Smith has signed with the Chiefs, neither is on the roster, as the rolling of the dice continued in the secondary during free agency. Despite suffering an Achilles injury and playing in just one game, the Falcons Brent Grimes signed with the Dolphins. He will play opposite Dimitri Patterson, a journeyman who is in his fifth NFL city since 2005 and arrived in Miami last season. Jamar Taylor, a second-round selection from Boise State, was slowed during camp with a sports hernia and could be slow to get started to start the season. The rotation will also include Nolan Carroll and rookie Will Davis from Utah State. The safeties appear set with free safety Chris Clemons and strong safety Rashad Jones. They combined for 194 tackles, six interceptions and four fumble recoveries last season. Kelcie McCray and Jimmy Wilson are listed as the backups.

Defensive Player to watch: DE Dion Jordan

SPECIAL TEAMS:

University of Florida product Caleb Sturgis made 84.6 percent of his kicks as a junior and upped that level to 85.7 as a senior, including a combined six of eight from 50 yards or more. He will take over for Dan Carpenter after he was selected in April's draft.

If Brandon Fields has not been the best punter over the past four seasons, then he is near the top of the list. He averaged 50.2 yards per kick and dropped 29 of 74 inside the opposition's 20- yard line.

Undrafted Marcus Thigpen will be the primary returner for Philbin this season.

2013 OUTLOOK: 8-8, Second in AFC East

If every piece falls into place for the Dolphins, they may be a Wild Card team at best. But like their QB, who is looking to take the next step, the Dolphins will progress as

most teams used to in the NFL, one year at a time, improving steadily until the team's maturity and talent find a healthy meeting point.

Finishing 8-8 would be a positive step, especially when you consider the Dolphins schedule has them facing the tough NFC South and AFC North this season. If they stay healthy and get a decent return on their large investments in free agency, Jeff Ireland may see his job saved. With Brady's bunch in New England, Miami will be second best in the AFC East. Nevertheless, Miami fans should be happy with some second-year progression from their quarterback and one more win.

| MIAMI DOLPHINS | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|---|----------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | @ | Cleveland Browns | W |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | Indianapolis Colts | L |
| 3 | September 22 | | Atlanta Falcons | L |
| 4 | September 30 | @ | New Orleans Saints | L |
| 5 | October 6 | | Baltimore Ravens | W |
| 6 | October 13 | | Bye Week | |
| 7 | October 20 | | Buffalo Bills | W |
| 8 | October 27 | @ | New England Patriots | L |
| 9 | October 31 | | Cincinnati Bengals | L |
| 10 | November 11 | @ | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | L |
| 11 | November 17 | | San Diego Chargers | W |
| 12 | November 24 | | Carolina Panthers | W |
| 13 | December 1 | @ | New York Jets | W |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | Pittsburgh Steelers | L |
| 15 | December 15 | | New England Patriots | W |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | Buffalo Bills | L |
| 17 | December 29 | | New York Jets | W |
| Record: 8-8 (4-2) | | | | |

AFC NORTH:

BALTIMORE RAVENS:

2012 Finish: 10-6 1st in AFC North, Super Bowl XLVII Champions.

Key Additions: DE Chris Canty, TE Dallas Clark, OLB Elvis Dumervil, S Michael Huff, LB Daryl Smith, DE Marcus Spears, WR Brandon Stokley

2013 NFL Draft: Matt Elam S, Arthur Brown ILB, Brandon Williams NT, John Simon LB, Kyle Juszczyk FB, Rick Wagner G/T, Kapron Lewis-Moore DE, Ryan Jensen C, Aaron Mellette WR, Marc Anthony CB

Key Losses: C Matt Birk, WR Anquan Boldin, LB Dannell Ellerbe, NT Ma'ake Kemoeatu, OLB Paul Kruger, LB Ray Lewis, S Bernard Pollard, S Ed Reed, CB Cary Williams

2012 Season Recap:

Capturing the franchise's second World Championship with a victory in Super Bowl XLVII, the 2012 Baltimore Ravens finished with a 10-6 record (14-6 overall) en route to earning their fifth-straight playoff berth and second-consecutive AFC North title. Under head coach John Harbaugh, Baltimore is the only NFL team to make the playoffs in each of the past five seasons – with the Ravens also winning at least one playoff game in each year. The Ravens, who have made the playoffs in six of the past seven seasons, seized the franchise's fourth-

ever division title with a 4-2 mark in AFC North play and an 8-4 overall conference record. QB Joe Flacco led a Ravens offense that set a single-season franchise record by scoring 398 points, averaging the NFL's 10th-most points per game (24.9). Baltimore



scored a team-record 254 points at home, producing the NFL's fourth-best home scoring average of 31.8 ppg.

The defense wasn't always its usual self during the season. For the first time in nine years, the Ravens defense finished out of the top 10 in overall defense. Depleted by injuries most of the season, Baltimore's "D" allowed 350.9 yards per game, ranking 17th in the NFL.

Offense:

Quarterback:

Super Bowl XLVII MVP Joe Flacco returns for his sixth season under center for the Ravens. This past offseason saw the Ravens reward Flacco for his winning ways in the Charm City when they gave him a six year \$120 million dollar contract, which at the time was the richest in NFL history. Last season, Flacco was his usual steady eddy with his share of average games, as well as occasional head scratchers. Every once in a while, as he always seems to do, Flacco stepped up and performed like the "elite" level signal caller he wants so badly to be in the NFL. He set a single-season career high in passing yards, with 3,817 yards, while throwing 22 TDs and 10 INTs. He also connected on 40 completions of 25-or-more yards, setting a Ravens' single-season record. In his final six games of 2012 (including playoffs and dating back to 12/23 of the regular season), Flacco was 102-of-170 for 1,483 yards, 13 TDs and 0 INTs, producing a 113.9 passer rating. For his efforts in the playoffs and SB, Flacco joined Joe Montana (1989) and Kurt Warner (2008) as the only QBs in NFL history to throw 11 TDs in a single postseason. Neither Flacco nor Montana threw an INT in their postseasons.

This season will be much different for Flacco. He will be without his two top targets in Anquan Boldin (traded to SF) and TE Dennis Pitta (out for the season with an injury) and if the preseason has been any indication, it's likely we will see the up and down Flacco that Ravens fans have come to know and love.

Health and durability have never been an issue for No.5 (knock on wood). His 93 NFL starts, including the playoffs, are the most to begin a career by a QB in NFL history. Should the need arise; the Ravens have third year backup Tyrod Taylor. The former Virginia Tech standout has gotten better each time on the field and drew a few comparisons this preseason to some of the pistol formation QB's that have become very successful in the NFL.

Running Backs/ Fullback

Earning his third Pro Bowl honor in 2012, RB Ray Rice totaled 1,621 yards from scrimmage, the NFL's ninth most. He was one of three players to post 1,000 rushing yards and 400 receiving yards and ranked second in the NFL in catches by a RB (61) and fourth in receiving yards (478). It marked his fourth-straight season with at least 1,600 yards from scrimmage and his fourth-straight 1,000-yard rushing campaign, a Ravens record. Dating back to 2009, Rice owns an NFL-high 7,506 total yards from scrimmage (5,066 rushing & 2,440 receiving), including a league-best 39 games where he has gained 100-or-more total yards. Look for more of the same from Rice in 2013. Rice's backup, Bernard Pierce, could also play a huge role in the Ravens offense this season. The former Temple standout recorded 108 rushing attempts for 532 yards and 1 TD, and grabbed 7 receptions for 47 receiving yards, as a rookie in 2012.

After releasing 3-time Pro Bowler & 3-time First-Team All-Pro Vonta Leach, the Ravens brought him back quickly after Dennis Pitta injured his hip and was lost for the year. Leach is a very welcome return and will assume his lead blocking status for Rice, as well as his reliable pass catching duties out of the backfield. He had 21 receptions for 143 yards last season. The Ravens drafted Kyle Juszczyk from Harvard in the fourth round this past April and will likely use him as a hybrid type of player both in the H-back/fullback role and as a TE at times.

Wide Receiver/ Tight End:

The biggest question mark entering the 2013 season for the Ravens is at the Wide Receiver position. The depth chart currently has third year wideout Torrey Smith and Pro-Bowl kick returner Jacoby Jones listed one and two. Smith is a speedster that has proven he can stretch defenses but whether or not he can be the go to guy remains to be seen. Smith has 99 receptions for 1,696 yards (17.1 avg.) and 15 TDs in two seasons for the Ravens and finished fourth in the NFL with a 17.4 yards-per-catch average (49-855) in 2012. Jones has had a sub-par preseason and has proved to be closer to the player the Texans released and could not depend on to take the No.2 job in Houston than the receiver the Ravens need him to become in 2013.

Baltimore brought in Brandon Stokley, who was originally drafted by the Ravens in 1999. Stokley scored the Ravens first touchdown in Super Bowl XXXV and returns 13 years later to compete and likely be the starting No.3 guy in the slot. Stokley spent last season in Denver where he hauled in 45-receptions for 544 yards and five touchdowns. That production would be a welcome relief this season in Baltimore. After final cuts, the Ravens have placed their fortunes in the hands of two rookies. Gone is Tandon Doss

and LaQuan Williams, while former Georgia Bulldog Marlon Brown and Aaron Mellette, who played his college ball at Elon University take their place. Brown led the team in receptions during the preseason with 10 catches for 169 yards. Mellette was a close second, as he hauled in nine passes for 140-yards. Both had two touchdowns.

At TE-- and in a pleasant surprise-- Dennis Pitta was placed on the injured designated to return list, which means he must be activated to play after eight weeks. The Ravens will start the season with Ed Dickson and veteran Dallas Clark with hybrid fullback/TE Kyle Juszczyk playing a role. Billy Bajema was cut and Matt Furstenburg, who had a nice showing in the preseason was signed to the practice squad and could factor in the Ravens future if he isn't signed away. We may still yet see the offense Baltimore wanted to run this season with two tight ends creating mismatches for secondaries and opening up space for Ravens receivers and backs-- much like the Patriots system did--but that won't happen until much later in the season. For now, Dickson, who is entering his fourth year out of Oregon, and if he can stay healthy, will be the guy Flacco counts on down the seam while Dallas Clark runs the underneath routes around the first down markers.

Offensive Line:

The retirement of center Matt Birk-- and not Ray Lewis-- could be a bigger impact on the field for the Ravens in 2013. While there is no denying the leader, Lewis was off the field, Birk was a key cog on a unit that hit its peak during the playoffs. This season the Ravens have a solid front five but lack depth. From left to right, Bryant McKinnie, Kelechi Osemele, Gino Gradkowski, Marshall Yanda and Michael Oher are the starting five in 2013. Gradkowski beat out veteran A.Q. Shipley in camp but not by much. Jah Reid will alternate between both guard spots but besides Reid, the Ravens do not possess much depth on the offensive line. Reid is the best of the reserves with rookies Rick Wagner and Ryan Jensen, as the next men up.

Offensive Player to watch: WR Torrey Smith

Defense:

Defensive Line:

The Ravens defense has more than enough potential to return to--or near the top of the NFL in 2013. Starting up in the trenches could be as good a trio as there is in the NFL—when they are all healthy and on top of their game. New offseason acquisition Chris

Canty will start at DE with Arthur Jones on the other side. Perennial Pro-Bowl nose tackle Haloti Ngata will hold down the middle. Canty, Ngata and Jones will be looking to improve a rush defense that ranked 20th in the NFL last season and they will be equally adept at pushing the pocket if the offense chooses to throw while they are on the field. In obvious passing situations, Jones will likely take a seat while Chris Canty and Ngata play the tackle spots with Terrell Suggs and Elvis Dumervil playing in a hybrid type of position.

Behind these five are adequate replacements that should give the Ravens a top-notch defensive line rotation. Veteran Marcus Spears is good against the run but he has been plagued by a hamstring in camp. Terrence Cody, who was thought to be a bubble player entering camp, has been one of the pleasant surprises of the preseason while rookie Brandon Williams has seen time at nose tackle and defensive tackle. Pernell McPhee has been moved to rush linebacker but can play defensive tackle in sub packages and can shift back to defensive end if the Ravens need him there because of injuries or poor play.

Linebackers:

When free agency began in March, the Ravens looked to be in a ton of trouble at linebacker but GM Ozzie Newsome has filled in the gaps nicely. The man saddled with replacing Ray Lewis in the middle is Daryl Smith from the Jaguars. He has spent his nine-year career in the polar opposite direction of the spotlight Lewis often sought out. Assuming Smith can stay healthy and judging by his preseason, he will be a perfect fit for the Ravens in the middle. Prior to his injury that cost him 14 games last season, Pro-Football Focus rated Smith as one of the best linebackers in football during the past five seasons. With Smith at the 'Mike' position, the Ravens will start Josh Byner next to him at the "Will" linebacking position. Your outside backers in the Ravens system are known as the "Rush" and "Sam". 2011 NFL "D.P.O.T.Y." Terrell Suggs takes the Rush while pass rusher extraordinaire and former Bronco, Elvis Dumervil, plays the "Sam". Second year man and 2012 BCS Title game defensive MVP, Courtney Upshaw will rotate in and out. There is plenty of depth and talent, as the Ravens groom two rookie linebackers, who could have the potential to form as nasty a Ravens linebacking duo, as the Charm City has seen in a few seasons. That is saying quite a lot.

Kanas State star Arthur Brown, whom the Ravens drafted in the second round in April, will see significant playing time and could likely unseat Byner before the year is finished. John Simon, another rookie, who played at Ohio State, is listed third on the depth chart but based off his play in the preseason, could also see the M & T Bank Stadium turf a lot in 2013. The depth is almost endless. Albert McClellan, who led the

team in tackles during the preseason with 16 and registered one sack, is also at defensive coordinator Dean Pees' disposal.

Secondary:

Considered the strength of the defense entering last season, the Ravens secondary, like the rest of the defense failed to live up to expectations in 2012. As a result, gone are starting safeties Ed Reed and Bernard Pollard, as is CB Carey Williams. Enter Safeties Michael Huff from the Raiders and Matt Elam, whom the Ravens drafted with the last pick in the first round from the University of Florida. Returning is journeyman safety James Ihedigbo, who held the hard-hitting rookie from The Swamp off during camp to earn the starting job. How long he keeps it remains to be seen. Speaking of Huff, his versatility made him one of the prized catches this past off-season. Last year, injuries forced him to play slot corner and after a rough start, Huff adapted and played well. The Ravens also have safety Christian Thompson, who is suspended for the first four games of the season. As a rookie last year he played in seven games on special teams and recorded no statistics as a rookie.

At corner, the Ravens get Lardarius Webb back after he tore his ACL during a Week 6 contest last season. His return in that the third preseason game showed why Webb was on his way to becoming a premier shutdown corner before his injury. It is possible that NFL passing attacks avoid the side of the field with Webb on it when he is 100 percent comfortable on the field. Starting opposite Webb is Corey Graham, who stepped up as big as any Ravens player in last year's playoffs. Graham's two INT's of Peyton Manning in the playoffs, one of which was returned for a TD, were huge. The other INT set up the game winning field goal in overtime. Third year pro Jimmy Smith struggled mightily at times in the preseason and isn't progressing as well as the Ravens had hoped he would when they drafted him in the first round back in 2011. Smith will still get his shots but he has to start making them count more consistently. Chykie Brown provided surprising depth last season but struggled this summer. Asa Jackson is suspended for the first eight games of the season and will at least have fresh legs when the Ravens need them most.

Defensive Player to watch: OLB Elvis Dumervil

Special Teams:

Much of Baltimore's success in 2012 was due to the play of the special teams units. The Ravens ranked second (tied, Min.) in the NFL in average starting position after a kickoff (24.6-yard line) and stood fifth in opponent average starting field position following a kickoff (20.6-yard line). Kicker Justin Tucker, the undrafted baby faced kicker from Texas, earned the 2012 kicking job as a rookie after a training camp battle with veteran Billy Cundiff. He connected on 30 of his 33 FGAs, hitting 4 50+ FGs, which rank as a Ravens' single-season record.

Producing 132 points (third most in team history and eighth in the NFL), Tucker's 90.9 percent success rate stands as the second-best mark in Ravens single-season history and also second by a rookie kicker in NFL history. Tucker was also very strong with his kickoffs last season, producing the NFL's fifth-most touchbacks (49). Additionally, his 69.5 yards per kickoff ranked No. 1 in the NFL during the 2012 campaign. Punter Sam Koch, a 2010 Pro Bowl alternate, posted a career-high and Ravens franchise record 47.1-yard gross average and a 40.8-yard net average, last season, shattering his previous career highs.

WR/RS Jacoby Jones earned his first Pro-Bowl nod with his return exploits in 2012. Jones ranked first in the NFL with a 30.7-yard KOR average, posted 2 KOR-TDs (108 yards and 105 yards) and was the only player with dual KOR-TDs in 2012 and the first Ravens player to ever have multiple KOR-TDs in a single season *and* a career. His punt return TD vs. the Steelers in Pittsburgh, KOR-TD vs. Dallas at home and KOR-TD before the lights went out versus the 49ers in the Super Bowl were all scores that resulted in Ravens wins. Without any of them, it could have been a completely different story for the Ravens in 2012.

Overall: 10-6 in the AFC North: Second

Do not be surprised if the new look Ravens are 4-4 after eight games. However, with an offense that should get better as the season progresses and a defense that is talented enough to be a top five unit, the month of December is likely to be much different this season than it was last season. Last year the Ravens became the first Super Bowl Champions to close out the season losing four of their final five games. The Ravens will return to the playoffs for an NFL best sixth straight season and they will be the first Super Bowl winning team to win a playoff game since the Patriots in the early 2000's. It is likely the final game of the season in Cincinnati will decide the fate of the AFC North. Whether they win the division or not, the Ravens are always a dangerous playoff team.

It doesn't matter how they get to the tournament. Whatever you do, do not underestimate the entire organization, they have proven to be one of the best in the NFL-- on the field and off it.

| BALTIMORE RAVENS | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 5 | @ | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | L |
| 2 | September 15 | | <u>Cleveland Browns</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | | <u>Houston Texans</u> | W |
| 4 | September 29 | @ | <u>Buffalo Bills</u> | W |
| 5 | October 6 | @ | <u>Miami Dolphins</u> | L |
| 6 | October 13 | | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | L |
| 7 | October 20 | @ | <u>Pittsburgh Steelers</u> | L |
| 8 | | | Bye Week | |
| 9 | November 3 | @ | <u>Cleveland Browns</u> | W |
| 10 | November 10 | | <u>Cincinnati Bengals</u> | W |
| 11 | November 17 | @ | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | W |
| 12 | November 24 | | <u>New York Jets</u> | W |
| 13 | November 28 | | <u>Pittsburgh Steelers</u> | W |
| 14 | December 8 | | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | W |
| 15 | December 16 | @ | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | W |
| 16 | December 22 | | <u>New England Patriots</u> | L |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>Cincinnati Bengals</u> | L |
| Record: 10-6 (4-2) | | | | |

Cleveland Browns:

2012 Finish: 5-11, last in the AFC North

Key Additions: QB Brian Hoyer, QB Jason Campbell, RB Dion Lewis, WR Davone Bess, WR David Nelson, TE Kellen Davis, TE Gary Barnidge, OT Rashad Butler, DT Desmond Bryant, DE/OLB Paul Kruger, DE/OLB Quentin Groves, CB Chris Owens, K Shayne Graham.

2013 Draft: DE/OLB Barkevious Mingo, CB Leon McFadden, S Jamoris Slaughter, DE Armonty Bryant, OL Garrett Gilkey

Key Losses: QB Colt McCoy, WR Mohamed Massaquoi, TE Ben Watson, DE Froste Rucker, DE Juqua Parker-Thomas, DE/OLB Emmanuel Acho, OLB Chris Gocong, OLB Kaluka Maiava, CB Sheldon Brown, S Usama Young, K Phil Dawson, P Reggie Hodges, KR Joshua Cribbs.

2012 Season Recap:

If not for the Oakland Raiders, the Cleveland Browns would be the NFL's most dysfunctional franchise. The Browns finished last in the AFC North once again last year and for the sixth time in 14 years, fired a head coach. The Browns have been to the playoffs just once since their return to the league in 1999 and have won just 23 games in the past five seasons. In fact, Cleveland has only won eight or more games twice in the past 15 years and just three times since 1990.

Exit Pat Shurmur and enter Rod Chudzinski. But there is reason for optimism in Chudzinski, as this is not his first rodeo on the lake. He served as the tight ends coach and interim offensive coordinator of the Cleveland Browns in 2004 and after a stint in San Diego, Chudzinski was named the offensive coordinator of the Browns in 2007. That year, Cleveland ranked eighth overall on offense, sent four offensive players to the Pro Bowl, and finished second in the AFC North with a record of 10-6, their most wins since 1994.

Offense:

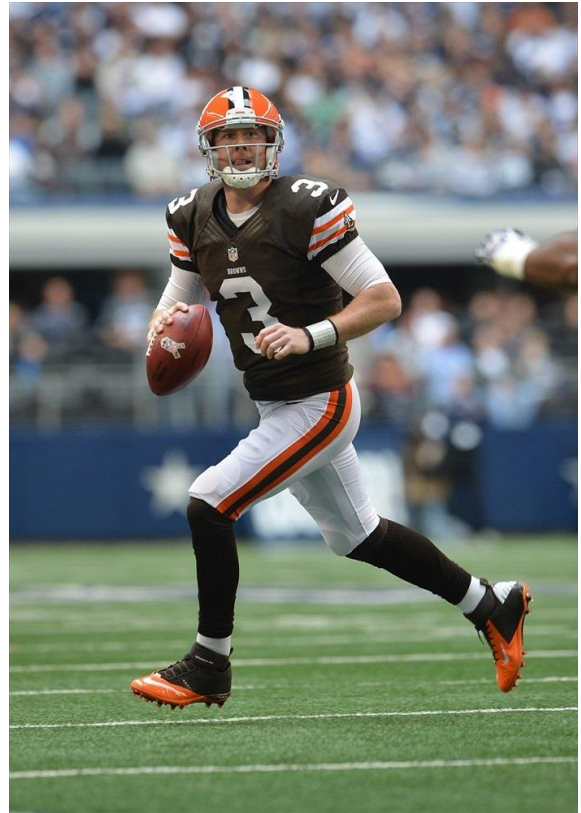
Quarterback:

Chudzinski has surrounded himself with a quality coaching talent. On offense, Chudzinski brings the offensive minded and quarterback savvy Norv Turner, as his offensive coordinator. This can only be a plus to Browns signal caller Brandon Weeden,

who struggled mightily at times in his rookie campaign. The former Oklahoma State signal caller chucked 14 TD's and 17 INT's last season. Pro Football Weekly recently asked one simple question, is the 29-year old sophomore NFL QB good enough to be a starter?

Based on the evidence of his rookie season, it is hard to say 'yes'. He finished his rookie year as the lowest-graded quarterback, even lower than Mark Sanchez. The good news for Weeden is-- the Browns did not draft a QB. However, there are many talented arms likely to be in New York for next May's NFL Draft, so this year likely will determine if Weeden remains in the Browns long term plans.

Jason Campbell was brought in to challenge Weeden for the job this season and has looked solid in the preseason. But Weeden responded well to the pressure and had 99.9 passer rating with three TD's and no INT's in the preseason. That was enough for Chudzinski to declare him to be the man under center to start the season.



Running Back/ Fullback

Running back Trent Richardson is a prototypical AFC North style running back. He's tough, as evidenced by the fact that he played much of 2012 with cracked ribs. Injury free he should be even better and more reliable in 2013. The third overall pick in 2012 took too many extra shots fighting for yards that were not there last season and it cost him playing time. With his primary backups, Montario Hardesty and Dion Lewis on IR for the season, Richardson is going to have to run smart, as well as hard this season. If he stays healthy, he should easily improve upon the 907 rushing yards he posted last season. His 11 rushing TD's may be hard to duplicate, but if Weeden moves the offense, Richardson could also eclipse that number as well.

The Brown will go with Arkansas rookie running back Dennis Johnson to back up Richardson. Another fellow SEC back, Johnson rushed for 670 yards with the Razorbacks when Knile Davis was injured in 2011 and added 757 yards for them last season when Davis was hurt again. The Browns signed Ravens RB Bobby Rainey off the Champ's practice squad, which means he has a spot on Cleveland's 53-man roster.

Receivers/ Tight Ends

The Browns field a WR corps that possesses a lot of potential. The issue's here are off the field. Josh Gordon had a solid rookie campaign catching 50 balls for 805-yards and five touchdowns. Not bad for a guy that didn't play his last two years in college because of issues with marijuana use. Gordon did not seem to learn any lessons, as he will miss the first two games of the Browns season after a failed test. Greg Little struggled early but had a strong second half finishing with 647-yards and four TD's. The Browns added veteran Davone Bess during a draft day trade with the Dolphins. David Nelson did not survive final cuts.

Tight end is a position that Chudzinski knows well and Norv Turner loves to rely on in his offense. This is where the Browns have perhaps the biggest question mark. Jordan Cameron is the likely starter after a strong preseason.

Offensive Line:

In 2012, four members of the Cleveland Browns took every snap on their respective side of the football and all were offensive linemen. Left tackle Joe Thomas, who has been named to six straight Pro-Bowls and center Alex Mack, who joined him in 2010, have played every snap of their respective careers. Coupled with right guard Shawn Lauvao and rookie right tackle Mitchell Schwartz, Thomas and Mack displayed a consistency in the Browns' offense that allowed Weeden and Richardson to break several franchise rookie records. The Browns feel Schwartz has perennial Pro-Bowl potential on the right side but was at times lacking in the running game. Former Raven, O'Neil Cousins will backup.

The Browns O-line has been riddled with injuries in training camp. Lauvao, who had his ankle scoped early in camp and his replacement Jason Pinkston, will likely miss the first three weeks of the season with injuries. Pinkston spent the 2012 season on IR with a blood clot in his lung. In their place will be rookie Garrett Gilkey, who played well versus the Lions Ndamukong Suh earlier this preseason. The Browns also have a lot of faith in guard John Greco. A player that Pro Football Focus calls a secret superstar, Greco started 10 games in 2012 filling in for Pinkston and just before camp signed a five-year contract.

Offensive Player to watch: QB Brandon Weeden

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line:

If you can't beat them—join them—or try to at least in the Browns case. The Browns spent the better part of two years drafting and building for a 4-3 defense. Toss it out the

window now that Michael Lombardi is upstairs. Chudzinski hired former Steelers defensive assistant and Defensive Coordinator of the Arizona Cardinals last season, Ray Horton, to the same job in Cleveland. With new management and coaching, Cleveland moves to a 3-4 alignment with Horton trying to implement a Pittsburgh system. The one major problem for Horton and the Browns is they do not possess Pittsburgh-type players.

Last season, Cleveland's defensive lineman combined for 25 of the club's 38 sacks, but contributors Juqua Parker (unsigned) and Frostee Rucker (Arizona) are gone. Leading sack-getter, Jabaal Sheard, will drop back in the switch and that leaves end Ahtyba Rubin (44 tackles, 2 sacks) and nose tackle Phil Taylor (14 tackles, 1 sack) to join the newly signed Desmond Bryant, who will man the other tackle position. The trio must stay healthy, make big plays and stay out of trouble. Rubin and Taylor combined to miss 11 games last season and Bryant was arrested in late February on a misdemeanor charge of criminal mischief. Bryant is huge, at 6-foot-6 and 310 pounds. He recorded 11.5 sacks while playing in 63 games with 18 starts in Oakland.

The injuries to Rubin and Taylor last season helped rookies John Hughes and Billy Winn become a viable part of the rotation. It's possible Winn could even beat out Rubin for the starting job this year. Ishmael Kitchen is yet another player to come from Baltimore that will at the least provide some depth.

Linebackers:

Another key position as the team switches to a 3-4 will be inside linebacker where, the Browns simply do not have anything close to what the Steelers and Ravens possess. They lost Kaluka Maiava in free agency and D'Qwell Jackson struggled last year, as he did in his last full season in a 3-4 back in 2008. Craig Robertson, an undrafted rookie in 2011, finished as the team's second-leading tackler behind Jackson. He also had a pair of interceptions and fumble recoveries.

The one element the old regime built well was the defensive front. Now it must transition to a two-gap system. Jabaal Sheard was a solid 4-3 end and will likely struggle at first, as he has to transition to a stand-up linebacker. The Browns backed up the Brinks truck for Ravens rotation player Paul Kruger by giving him \$41 million over five years. That is not a bad payday for a guy with only seven career starts. Nevertheless, if Kruger, who led the champions in sacks last season with nine, can build on his play from last year's Super Bowl run where he recorded four sacks in four playoff games, the Browns will feel they got their money worth.

In April the Browns drafted former LSU standout Barkevious Mingo, who promptly sustained a bruised lung in the second preseason game and according to various

reports could miss as many as the first three games. The Browns also brought in free agent Quentin Groves. Both will be designated as the rush linebackers.

SECONDARY:

The biggest challenge that faces the Browns is finding a cornerback to play opposite Joe Haden. Haden has blossomed into one of the better cover corners in the league, but he has off the field issues. The Browns drafted Leon McFadden, in the third round with the hope that he can step in and play right away. If he cannot, the Browns would have to rely on Buster Skrine, a young player who struggled and was penalized a ton in 2012. Chris Owens is also competing for the job.

The safety position is identical in that Cleveland has one player in T.J. Ward, who was stellar in 2012, and not much else on the other side of the field. With Usama Young in Oakland, Tashaun Gipson is expected to start at free safety. Signed by the Browns as an undrafted free agent in 2012 out of the University of Wyoming, Gipson started just one game last year--and like Skrine--did not play well.

Defensive Player to watch: CB Joe Haden

SPECIAL TEAMS:

A sign that the Browns have struggled more than a little bit in recent history, is that the team's two most popular players were special team standouts. Both, Pro-Bowl players last season, are now gone. After years of losing, Texas alum, and original Brown (1999), kicker Phil Dawson signed with the 49ers. The Browns also let returner Josh Cribbs leave via free agency but that was a move that proved to be supported when the Raiders cut Cribbs this preseason.

The Browns woes could have a significant this year, as they recently just signed K Billy Cundiff, who was cut by both the Redskins and Ravens last season.

Punter Spencer Lanning appears to have won the job after T.J. Conley was cut. Undrafted in 2011, Lanning has never punted in an NFL game. Cribbs, who was always a threat to score when he touched the ball, averaged 27.4 yards per kick return last year. Dion Lewis was in line to replace him but is out for the year with a broken leg. WR Travis Benjamin and safety Johnson Bademosi will likely step up and take over the roles of PR and KR respectively.

OVERALL: 6-10, Last in AFC North

The Cleveland Browns have been a laughing stock for most of the time since returning to the NFL in 1999. They have averaged 5.2 wins per season since returning 14 years ago. The only thing the Browns have done consistently in these last 14 seasons is change. Chudzinski will be the seventh head coach and Norv Turner the 10th offensive coordinator during that span.

It's difficult to buy into the Cleveland hype this year in part because it's difficult to buy into Brandon Weeden at this point. Predicting a six-win season for the Browns is very generous. They certainly will not be this year's version of worst to first. They just don't have the talent that the Ravens, Steelers and Bengals do, but they may be competitive enough to beat each of those teams once and winning games within the division is where the Browns need to start with their team goals. Brandon Weeden must have a much better season because if the Browns are drafting in the top 10 next May, it's likely Taj Boyd, Teddy Bridgewater or even Johnny Manziel will be the next and 20th quarterback to start a game for the Browns since 1999.

| CLEVELAND BROWNS | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | | <u>Miami Dolphins</u> | L |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | <u>Baltimore Ravens</u> | L |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | L |
| 4 | September 29 | | <u>Cincinnati Bengals</u> | L |
| 5 | October 3 | | <u>Buffalo Bills</u> | W |
| 6 | October 13 | | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | W |
| 7 | October 20 | @ | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | L |
| 8 | October 27 | @ | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | L |
| 9 | November 3 | | <u>Baltimore Ravens</u> | L |
| 10 | | | Bye Week | |
| 11 | November 17 | @ | <u>Cincinnati Bengals</u> | L |
| 12 | November 24 | | <u>Pittsburgh Steelers</u> | W |
| 13 | December 1 | | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | <u>New England Patriots</u> | L |
| 15 | December 15 | | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | W |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | <u>New York Jets</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>Pittsburgh Steelers</u> | L |
| Record: 6-10 (1-5) | | | | |

Pittsburgh Steelers:

2012 Finish 8-8 Third in AFC North Missed the Playoffs

Key Additions: QB Bruce Gradkowski, TE Matt Spaeth, OT Guy Whimper, CB William Gay.

2013 Draft: DE/OLB Jarvis Jones, RB Le'Veon Bell, WR Markus Wheaton, S Shamarko Thomas, QB Landry Jones, CB Terry Hawthorne, WR Justin Brown, LB Vince Williams and DE Nick Williams.

Key Losses: RB Rashard Mendenhall, WR Mike Wallace, OT Max Starks, G Willie Colon, NT Casey Hampton, DE/OLB James Harrison, CB Keenan Lewis, S Will Allen, S Ryan Mundy

2012 Season Recap:

Last season, the Steelers failed to improve on their 12–4 record from 2011 and did not reach the postseason for the first time since 2009. The Steelers finished the season with a record of 8–8, their first non-winning season since 2006. The team was inundated with injuries that began in training camp and lasted the entire season. Yet still, the Steelers lost seven of their eight games by a combined 31 points, which averages out to just four points per loss. Even the 12-point loss to the Broncos in their first game of the season is deceiving in that Pittsburgh led at the start of the fourth quarter. With six losses on the game's final play, The 2012 Steelers set a new NFL record for the most games decided on the last play.

Head coach Mike Tomlin enters his seventh season having accomplished a lot in his first six years. Tomlin's 63 wins, four playoff appearances and three division titles are the second most in franchise history. His two Super Bowl appearances also are a franchise best for a coach in his first six seasons.

Defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau has led the Steelers defense since 2004. During that time span, it has been regarded as one of the top defenses in the NFL, helping to lead the Steelers to three Super Bowls. Last year, the unit yielded an NFL-low 275.8 yards per game in 2012, becoming the first team to lead the league in net yards allowed in 10 different seasons, including five times since LeBeau returned to the Steelers in 2004 as defensive coordinator.

Offense:

Quarterback:

QB Ben Roethlisberger failed to play all 16 games for the fourth straight season and eighth time in his nine-year career. Prior to Big Ben's Week 10 injury against the Kansas City Chiefs, he was in Pro-Bowl form for the Steelers. In 13-games last season, Big Ben performed at a high level, as he averaged 251.2 passing yards per game, the fourth highest per game average of his career. He threw for 3,265 yards, marking the fifth consecutive season he recorded at least 3,200 passing yards and tied for the third most passing touchdowns in franchise history (26) and the second most of his career. He finished the season with the second-fewest interceptions in his career, which marked the third time that Roethlisberger has thrown for less than 10 interceptions in a season.



As always, the Steelers need Roethlisberger for as many games as he can stay healthy but should he not make the entire schedule, Pittsburgh-native Bruce Gradkowski returns home to provide depth at the quarterback position. They also drafted Oklahoma and Big 12 record holder Landry Jones in the fourth round.

Running back/Fullback

The Steelers employed a running back by committee approach last season with Jonathan Dwyer and Isaac Redman splitting time while Rashard Mendenhall missed six games after suffering an ACL tear in the regular-season finale of 2011. Prior to 2012, Mendenhall led the Steelers in rushing for three straight seasons but in his absence, it was Dwyer who led the team with 623 yards and two touchdowns while Redman tallied 410 yards and two touchdowns. This attack was inconsistent and error prone. They ranked 26 out of 32 teams in the NFL in rushing and for the first time since 2006, the Steelers ranked in the bottom 10 in giveaways. Considering their QB did not throw that many interceptions, fumbling was a major issue from the RB position.

Pittsburgh lost a game to the Browns in which every single running back on the team fumbled.

Mendenhall is now in Arizona and with the 48th overall pick, the Steelers drafted a big bruising back from Michigan State in Le'Veon Bell. Tomlin's hopes of watching Dwyer, Redman and Bell battle it out for the starting job was quickly dashed when Bell injured his foot and will likely miss six to eight weeks.

Now, Isaac Redman, the team's listed co-starter has missed time with back issues, as has backup running back Baron Batch. LaRod Stephens Howling missed the second preseason game with a knee injury, leaving the only two healthy options as Dwyer and sixth stringer, Alvester Alexander---but they were both released by the Steelers during final cuts. Alexander was signed to the practice squad, however.

The hope to return to a solid running game may once again take a back to seat, as Offensive Coordinator Todd Haley may be forced to throw more than he wants to in 2013. Redman will get the nod to start-- with Stephens Howling backing up. Felix Jones, whom the Steelers acquired in a trade with cross-state rival Philadelphia late in camp, could be a major contributor if he can stay healthy. Even with a healthy Bell, it would seem that this foursome isn't forcing AFC North foes to stop and take notice and Tomlin knows it.

Wide Receiver/ Tight End:

As usual in Pittsburgh, the list of key losses always outnumbered the key additions but one of those losses was the Steelers biggest offensive threat in WR Mike Wallace, who took his talents to South Beach in March. With Wallace gone, the Steelers will rely heavily on Antonio Brown in the passing game. Brown, the Steelers' MVP in 2011, took a step backward last season. The fourth-year man will not have the luxury of having a burner opposite him on the field but he will have the promising Emmanuel Sanders, who replaces Wallace. Sanders is entering his fourth-year and has shown flashes but has also been injury-prone and inconsistent. Plaxico Burress sustained a season-ending shoulder injury during training camp. The passing game will need third round selection Markus Wheaton to step up, which he has done during the preseason. But whether he can adjust to the regular season speed remains a big question mark.

Pittsburgh has five TE's listed on their depth chart after final cuts. Injuries and recovery time has forced the team to keep this many. TE Heath Miller (torn ACL in 2012) and veteran Matt Spaeth, who hurt his foot early in camp and is likely to be out an additional six weeks, will be sorely missed by Roethlisberger.

The good news is, Miller has been activated off the PUP list, which means Big Ben's top security blanket (71 catches & 8 TD's in 2012) the last few seasons can begin practicing

with the team and could be ready by Week 4 or 5. Second-year man David Paulson, and another tight end coming off a torn ACL, David Johnson, as well as fourth-year journeyman Michael Palmer will all likely get reps. Paulson's forte is in the passing game; Michael Palmer's is as an in-line blocker; and Johnson's is as the 'move' tight end. Palmer also had a couple of tackles on special teams this preseason.

If the Steelers need a roster spot to add a player at another position, they may look at tight end, where they could cut someone or possibly decide to put Spaeth on that IR-designated-to-return list..

Offensive Line:

The Steelers did not draft an offensive lineman in 2013 because they invested so heavily in that area in previous drafts. Four of the projected five starters are either first- or second-round picks. All-Pro center Maurkice Pouncey anchors the line, with the Steelers also expecting big things out of right guard David DeCastro. Tackles Marcus Gilbert and Mike Adams both have to stay healthy and become more consistent. Ramon Foster will play left guard.

Unfortunately, for Roethlisberger, there are some issues with the offensive line. The unit's lack of experience showed last season with Adams surrendering more sacks (7) than games started (6) during his rookie campaign. The backups are John Malecki , Guy Whimper and Kelvin Beachum, who figures to enter the regular season as the primary backup at every offensive line position, with the only possible exception being left tackle.

Pouncey has emerged as one of the league's best centers and is the first center in NFL history to be selected to a Pro Bowl in each of his first three seasons.

Offensive Player to watch: WR Emmanuel Sanders

DEFENSE

Defensive Line:

The defensive front is the foundation to any strong 3-4 defense, but there are some questions with the Pittsburgh Steelers' line. The Steelers enter 2013 without some long time stars, one of them being NT Casey Hampton. The fact Hampton will not be on the Steelers' roster at the end of training camp for the first time since 2000 is a frightening reminder the Steelers defense is in transition. In his place will be Steve McLendon, who should be a perfect fit in the AFC North. He battles Pro-Bowl center Maurkice Pouncey daily and is a solid replacement for Hampton.

McLendon is the centerpiece, literally and figuratively, of a Steelers defensive line that has tons of potential. As Steelers fans know all too well from last season, potential does not win games and they must get more production from ends Ziggy Hood and Cameron Heyward if the Steel Curtain is to remain on top. Hood is going into his third season as a starter but Tomlin has not been impressed. Heyward has shown very little in two seasons, and that is a concern since Brett Keisel, 34, whom he backs up, is not getting any younger. Al Woods is an active and versatile defensive lineman who will also provide depth. The final battle for a roster spot came down to the two nose tackles – Hebron Fangupo and Alameda Ta'amu---and the winner was----- Fangupo.

Linebackers:

This unit also lost a former star in James Harrison, who did not go far when he signed with the Bengals. Lawrence Timmons, who should have made the Pro Bowl last season, and veteran Larry Foote return at inside linebacker. The key to the aggressive nature of Dick LeBeau's defense is his pass rush and that remains a question mark heading into the season. Former Pro Bowler LaMarr Woodley had only four sacks last season.

Jason Worilds gets the first crack at replacing Harrison, and the former second-round pick has played well in spots. The question is whether he can stay healthy, and signs point to the fact that he may not be able to do so. It is anticipated that it won't take long for 2013 first-round pick, Jarvis Jones, to emerge as a devastating pass rusher in the NFL. Chris Carter became the obvious choice as the No. 4 outside linebacker following the trade of Adrian Robinson to the Philadelphia Eagles. He then cemented his claim to that spot with two sacks in the preseason finale.

Secondary:

Like other components of the defense, the Steelers secondary also lost a key cog following last season when starting cornerback Keenan Lewis moved on to the New Orleans Saints in free agency. The loss of Lewis thrusts Cortez Allen into the starting lineup, and Allen looked like a viable long-term starter after filling in for the injured IkeTaylor last season. Taylor is still one of the better cornerbacks in the NFL, and the Steelers signed William Gay, who spent the 2012 season in Arizona, to play nickel back.

Troy Polamalu, who is only three years removed from earning the 2010 NFL Defensive Player of the Year, could be the biggest reason why the Steelers make the playoffs in 2013 or miss them for a second straight season. Polamalu has missed 22 games since 2009 but his age (32) and style of play does not bode well for him playing in every game this season. Free safety Ryan Clark is only a year younger than his partner is but seems to be getting better and more aggressive with age.

Getting an entire season out of Polamalu, the seven-time Pro Bowler, will be key if the Steelers wish to reverse a disturbing two-year trend of not creating turnovers. While overall defense is important, statistical analysis seems to indicate that turnovers forced is more important to playoff and Super Bowl success than any other defensive category. LeBeau's unit has underperformed in that area the past two seasons, combining for 35 takeaways in 2011 and 2012, and finishing 32nd and 25th, respectively.

Defensive Player to watch: OLB Jarvis Jones

Special Teams:

Shaun Suisham was close to automatic last season, and considering Heinz Field is a place that sends many kickers into a psychological swoon, that is saying something. Drew Butler returns as the punter after a decent rookie season. WR's Antonio Brown and Emanuel Sanders will handle the return duties.

Overall: 10-6, finish third in AFC North

The Steelers have not missed the playoffs in two consecutive seasons since they did so in three straight seasons from 1998-2000. In fact, in two of the three seasons that Pittsburgh rebounded to make the playoffs, the following season they went onto play in the AFC Championship game and the Super Bowl. The assumption of health is obviously factored into this 10-6 record prediction, because getting anything less than 85 to 90 percent of the schedule from Big Ben or Troy Polamalu could lead to another 8-8 season, or even worse.

The Steelers have the front line talent to be a very good team but lack the depth across the board should the next man up be called upon to make a difference. Divisional play will be critical and if the Steelers are going to make the playoffs, finishing 4-2 in the tough AFC North will be no easy chore. The schedule sets up favorably for Pittsburgh, who could be 7-3 with six games to play. They must be better than 2-4 down the stretch, which is how they finished last season. No worries-- even at 3-3, which is how we project them to finish-- 10-6 and third in the AFC North may be enough to get them back to where Steelers nation owns a time-share, the playoffs.

| PITTSBURGH STEELERS | | | | |
|---------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | W |
| 2 | September 16 | @ | <u>Cincinnati Bengals</u> | L |
| 3 | September 22 | | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | W |
| 4 | September 29 | @ | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | L |
| 5 | | | Bye Week | |
| 6 | October 13 | @ | <u>New York Jets</u> | W |
| 7 | October 20 | | <u>Baltimore Ravens</u> | W |
| 8 | October 27 | @ | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | W |
| 9 | November 3 | @ | <u>New England Patriots</u> | L |
| 10 | November 10 | | <u>Buffalo Bills</u> | W |
| 11 | November 17 | | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | W |
| 12 | November 24 | @ | <u>Cleveland Browns</u> | L |
| 13 | November 28 | @ | <u>Baltimore Ravens</u> | L |
| 14 | December 8 | | <u>Miami Dolphins</u> | W |
| 15 | December 15 | | <u>Cincinnati Bengals</u> | W |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | L |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>Cleveland Browns</u> | W |
| Record: 10-6 (3-3) | | | | |

Cincinnati Bengals:

2012 Finish 10-6 Second in AFC North: Lost in Wild Card vs. Texans for second consecutive season.

Key Additions: QB Josh Johnson, QB John Skelton, C Mike Pollak, OLB James Harrison.

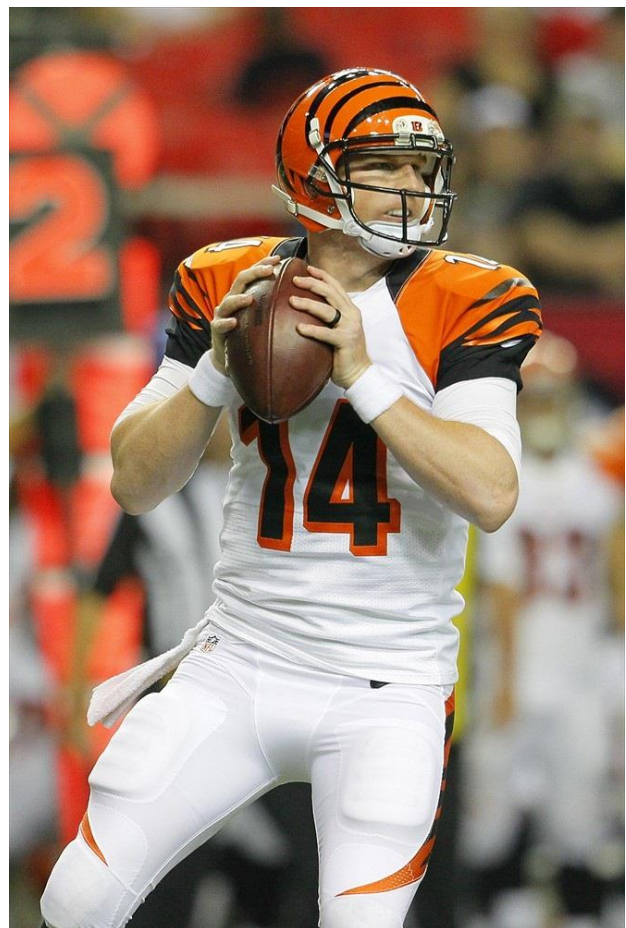
2013 Draft: TE Tyler Eifert, RB Giovani Bernard, DE Margus Hunt, S Shawn Williams, OLB Sean Porter.

Key Losses: FB Brian Leonard, DT Pat Sims, OLB Thomas Howard, OLB Manny Lawson, OLB Dan Skuta, CB Nate Clements, CB Jason Allen, S Chris Crocker, K Josh Brown

2012 Season Recap:

Led by their defense, which finished No.6 in total yards in the NFL, the Bengals went 10-6 in the regular season in 2012, tying eventual Super Bowl champion Baltimore for best record in the AFC North. 2012 was the first non-strike season in Bengals history in which they made it to the NFL playoffs for a second consecutive year. The Bengals returned once again as a wildcard team for the second straight year, rocketing into the playoffs with a 7-1 record in the season's second half. The resilient outfit stands as one of only nine teams (out of a total of 131 teams) since 1990 to rise to the playoffs after a 3-5 start.

The Bengals top 10 defense was led by their defensive line, which became recognized last season as one of the NFL's best. The Bengals set a franchise record last season with 51 sacks, and the line contributed 43 of those.



Offense:

Quarterback:

On offense, the Bengals struggled at times finishing ranked 22 out of 32 teams in the NFL in 2012. Sophomore signal caller Andy Dalton improved statistically but when looking at the final five games of the season and the playoff game in Houston, it's hard not to wonder if he is capable of leading the Bengals to the next step. The Red Headed Rifle will try this year to become only the fifth starting QB in NFL history to reach the playoffs in each of his first three seasons. The problem is, outside of the box thinking suggests Dalton may not be capable of taking the next step. According to Pro Football Focus.com, Dalton (-1.0) graded as near to 0.0 as any quarterback last year. He posted strong traditional stats for a second-year QB, with nearly 3,700 yards, 27 touchdowns, and an 87.4-passer rating. Still, he graded -5.0 as a passer and his numbers seem to be more of a product of him being an average quarterback with A.J. Green as a target. Fifth-year pro Josh Johnson currently holds the No.2 spot on the depth chart.

Running back/fullback

Back for his second Bengals season is sixth-year veteran BenJarvus Green-Ellis. The Law Firm rushed for a career-best 1,094 yards, topping the 1,008 total he posted for New England in 2010. Those numbers were average at best, as the Bengals finished 18th in the NFL in total rushing yards. Green-Ellis is a solid No.2 back in the league, which is why a second draft choice was used on North Carolina's Giovani Bernard. Bernard is a talented runner who caught 47 passes for North Carolina in 2012. The Bengals desperately needed to find a running back that could be on the field on third downs because BenJarvus Green-Ellis was never going to be that guy. He averaged 3.9 yards per carry in his first season with the Bengals and it's only a matter of time before Bernard unseats him as the starter.

One interesting note about the Bengals rushing attack and head coach Marvin Lewis is that the Bengals are 35-2 under head coach Marvin Lewis when a rusher records 25 or more carries.

Wide Receiver/ Tight End

QB Andy Dalton likely goes to sleep each night thanking the football Gods for WR A.J. Green. Green, who has quickly developed into one of the elite receivers in the NFL, hauled in 97 receptions for 1,350 yards and 11 touchdowns in 2012. In two seasons, Green has 162 catches, more than 2,400 yards and 18 touchdowns. It is a no brainer, barring any injuries, that Green has yet another phenomenal Pro-Bowl season in 2013.

The question remains as to whom the No.2 WR is going to be. The Bengals, since last season, have believed they have plenty of young talent at WR besides the nearly incomparable Green. However, as the 2013 preseason opened, no one had clearly staked a claim to being the established No. 2 wide out, starting alongside Green in the base offense. The goal is to develop a No. 2 threat similar to what T.J.

Houshmandzadeh became during the years when Chad Johnson was the team's most prominent wide out. Over seven seasons (2001-08), Houshmandzadeh rose to third all-time in Bengals career receptions (507), setting a team record with 112 in 2007, when he went to the Pro Bowl.

The overall talent looks good, but the mantle for "Houshmandzadeh II" currently rests with second-year pro Mohamed Sanu. Strong and tough at 6-2 and 210 pounds, Sanu was a catch machine at Rutgers (Big East-record 210 catches in just three seasons). Marvin Jones, a fellow 2012 draftee with Sanu, is more of a stylish and graceful receiver and has drawn consistent praise from Dalton for always being at the right place with the right route. Brandon Tate, a fifth-year pro, now in his third Bengals season, has made his mark with Cincinnati mostly as a kick returner. He has great straight-line speed and good hands.

The Bengals have a nice one-two punch at TE in veteran TE Jermaine Gresham and the Bengals first round selection, Tyler Eifert. Gresham has three straight 50-plus-reception seasons, but tends to take plays off. He had 10 drops in 99 targets last season. With that said, it is likely that offensive coordinator Jay Gruden will use more two-tight end formations, and the Bengals will even split both Gresham and Eifert out at the same time.

Offensive Line:

Heading into the 2013 season, three of the five offensive line spots are secure with left tackle Andrew Whitworth, right tackle Andre Smith and right guard Kevin Zeitler. Whitworth deservedly garnered top honors on the Bengals' offensive line last season, becoming the first Cincinnati offensive lineman in the Pro Bowl since OT Willie Anderson in 2006. This season, however the team is more sure than ever that it has another Pro-Bowler in Smith. Kyle Cook should win back the center position now that he's healthy after an ankle injury last season. Trevor Robinson gained valuable experience playing in Cook's absence. Left guard will come down to Clint Boling and veteran Travelle Wharton. Unlike the two teams the Bengals are battling for division supremacy in the Steelers and Ravens, depth here is not a concern for Cincy, at least to start the season.

Offensive Player to watch: WR AJ Green

Defense:

Defensive Line:

For the Bengals stout “D” everything starts up front. The Bengals have developed one of the more dominant defensive lines in the league. Starting on the outside and working our way in we have ends Michael Johnson and Carlos Dunlap, who are long, play hard every down and combined for 17.5 sacks last season. The team accumulated 51 sacks in 2012 with 43 of them coming from the front four, led by Geno Atkins' 12.5. Atkins is arguably the best 4-3 defensive tackle in all of football right now. In addition to generating a very high sack total for a player at his position, Atkins also happens to be equally adept at stopping the run. Domata Peko, who is also very talented, has been the line's leading tackler four times in five seasons.

There is also plenty of talent in reserve, and all players are likely to see action in the line rotation, as the rotation goes seven deep. The pressure from the down linemen means defensive coordinator Mike Zimmer doesn't have to blitz to get to the quarterback. At defensive end, 10th-year Bengal Robert Geathers serves as a mentor and still has plenty of gas in his own tank. He started every game last year on the left side, though he shared time with Carlos Dunlap. Also at defensive end, Wallace Gilberry was a big plus last year after being signed as a free agent in September. He logged 6.5 sacks and tied for second on the team in fumbles forced and/or recovered (four). A prime new talent is 6-8, 280-pound rookie beast Margus Hunt, who blocked 17 kicks in four seasons at SMU, including an NCAA record 10 field goals.

At DT, a pair of high 2012 draft picks stands ready to up their contributions. Devon Still of Penn State and Brandon Thompson of Clemson have all the strength and tools to build on their rookie seasons. Once again, depth at this position could be the determining factor in the Bengals finishing on top of the AFC North in 2013.

Linebackers:

Signing outside linebacker James Harrison from Pittsburgh should help push the defense over the top in terms of having a mean championship attitude. The Bengals are gambling that a declining Harrison still has plenty left as he enters his 10th season. How well he adjusts from the Steelers' 3-4 zone blitz concepts to Zimmer's 4-3 base will be key. Harrison looked like a shell of his former self last year, recording just six sacks. He has also struggled to stay healthy, as he has missed eight games the past two seasons because of various injuries.

How well Harrison is able to help middle linebacker Rey Mauluga work in coverage and improve his game will also be key to the units' success. The Bengals decided to bring Mauluga back to be the man in the middle and Vontaze Burfict will play outside.

Burfict showed good ability to shed blocks last season, something that has hampered Mauualuga in his career and almost caused him to be playing elsewhere in 2013.

Burfict was a Bengals college free agent signee last year and went on to lead the team in tackles (174). Original college free agents currently running in No. 2 spots are second-year pro Emmanuel Lamur (SLB) and third-year player Vincent Rey (MLB).

Quality depth at linebacker is a concern.

Secondary:

All of the pressure that Cincinnati's front seven is capable of generating really helps minimize some of the weaknesses in the secondary. Defensive Coordinator Mike Zimmer likes his cornerbacks to play man coverage. Cornerbacks Leon Hall, Terence Newman and Adam Jones have proven to be versatile enough to do just that and the trio is adept at playing inside or outside. The addition of Dre Kirkpatrick, last year's No. 1 pick who had an injury-plagued rookie season, provides more depth. Kirkpatrick is taller (6'2") than the other corners but does not yet have the experience and respect to be as successful.

Finding a second safety to play alongside Reggie Nelson is going to be a big key. Second-year pro George Iloka of Boise State has won the job next to Nelson even after Iloka suffered a hand injury in practice early in the preseason. He hurt himself and his chances when he became angry at rookie LB Jordan Campbell and struck Campbell on the helmet. He missed two preseason games which allowed rookie third-round draft pick Shawn Williams and fourth-year pro Taylor Mays to get most of the snaps at the position and pick up some valuable playing time. Jeromy Miles, a fourth year guy on the roster, will back up Nelson.

Defensive Player to watch: DT Geno Atkins

Special Teams:

Kicker Mike Nugent missed the final month of the season with a calf strain but was re-signed in the offseason. He's made 83.8 percent (67-of-80) of his field goal attempts in three seasons with the Bengals, including a club record-tying 55-yarder last season. Nugent has been consistent with his kickoffs, both in their depth into the end zone and placement away from the middle of the field, enabling the Bengals to become one of the top coverage units in the NFL.

Bengals fifth-year punter, Kevin Huber, opted not to test the unrestricted free agent market this past offseason, re-signing with Cincinnati just before the new league year

began. It was great news for Cincinnati's special teams. Huber set Bengals season records last year for gross punting average (46.6 yards) and net average (42.0), and in so doing, he qualified for the franchise's career leads of 44.0 gross and 38.9 net.

Adam Jones is a threat to score every time he touches the ball in the return game, especially on punts when the field is generally shorter and the action a tad quicker. He reads blocks well and still has that second gear, which helped make him a first-round pick of Tennessee back in 2005. Brandon Tate is listed on top of the depth chart to return kickoffs.

Overall: 11-5 First in AFC North

The Bengals have finally drafted well during the past few years, and it looks like that will pay off this year. Before they can think about winning a playoff game, this team must consistently beat the perennial contenders in the division in the Pittsburgh Steelers and Baltimore Ravens. Adding a player like James Harrison should help in that regards in terms of developing the nastiness it takes to win in this division.

The schedule does not matter but Andy Dalton's play could. With the defense the Bengals have, the Red Headed Rifle must not misfire this season; he may only need to play average, as did Joe Flacco during his 16 game schedule last season to win the division. But winning the division may seem like a disappointment if they don't win a playoff game.

Where the Bengals will need Dalton is where Flacco shined, in the playoffs. This offense has done enough to reach the playoffs in each of the past two seasons. Nevertheless, just enough will not be enough this year. Dalton and the offense need to do more. Cincy is a favorite but they must still take baby steps to be in New York the first Sunday in February, steps the Bengals seem ready and capable of taking.

| CINCINNATI BENGALS | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | @ | <u>Chicago Bears</u> | L |
| 2 | September 16 | | <u>Pittsburgh Steelers</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | | <u>Green Bay Packers</u> | L |
| 4 | September 29 | @ | <u>Cleveland Browns</u> | W |
| 5 | October 6 | | <u>New England Patriots</u> | W |
| 6 | October 13 | @ | <u>Buffalo Bills</u> | L |
| 7 | October 20 | @ | <u>Detroit Lions</u> | W |
| 8 | October 27 | | <u>New York Jets</u> | W |
| 9 | October 31 | @ | <u>Miami Dolphins</u> | W |
| 10 | November 10 | @ | <u>Baltimore Ravens</u> | L |
| 11 | November 17 | | <u>Cleveland Browns</u> | W |
| 12 | | | Bye Week | |
| 13 | December 1 | @ | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | W |
| 14 | December 8 | | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | W |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | <u>Pittsburgh Steelers</u> | L |
| 16 | December 22 | | <u>Minnesota Vikings</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>Baltimore Ravens</u> | W |
| Record: 11-5 (4-2) | | | | |

AFC SOUTH:

Indianapolis Colts:

2012 Finish: 11-5, 2nd in AFC South

Key Additions: QB Matt Hasselbeck, FB Stanley Havili, WR Darrius Heyward-Bey, OT Gosder Cherilus, G Donald Thomas, DE/DT Ricky Jean-Francois, NT Aubrayo Franklin, DE/OLB Erik Walden, ILB Kelvin Sheppard, CB Greg Toler, S LaRon Landry

2013 Draft: DE/OLB Bjoern Werner, G Hugh Thornton, C Khaled Holmes, NT Montori Hughes

Key Losses: QB Drew Stanton, WR Donnie Avery, WR Austin Collie, OT Winston Justice, G Seth Olsen, C A.Q. Shipley, DE Clifton Geathers, DT Antonio Johnson, DE/OLB Dwight Freeney, DE/OLB Jerry Hughes, ILB Moise Fokou, CB Jerraud Powers, S Tom Zbikowski

2012 Season Recap:

The Colts and their fans were set for a rebuild under first year coach Chuck Pagano in 2012, but everything that happened to the Colts a year ago was unexpected. Pagano was diagnosed with Leukemia and Bruce Arians took over the team for much of the season. On the field, rookie quarterback Andrew Luck made Colts' fans instantly forget (well, at least to some degree) about Peyton Manning. In the end the Colts punched a ticket to the Wild Card round of the playoffs where their season ended against the Ravens. Now Indianapolis is once again the team to watch out for in the AFC South.



Offense:

Quarterback: Andrew Luck lived up to the hype of his first overall draft selection in 2012. The Pro Bowler passed for 4,374 and 23 touchdowns, but it's the veteran presence and intangibles that are so impressive when it comes to Luck. Matt Hasselbeck is now the team's primary back up and will serve as a tutor to the young Luck. Can the Colts phenom avoid a sophomore slump and put Indy back on top of the AFC South?

Running back/Fullback: Vick Ballard was the leading rusher for the Colts last year rushing for 814 yards. Donald Brown also added 417 yards in the backfield. The running back corps may have a little bit more of a bite now as they've added former New York Giant Ahmad Bradshaw. Bradshaw ran for 1,015 yards a year ago and his 6 rushing touchdowns were double that of Ballard and Brown combined. The speedster is definitely another productive weapon for Luck. Former Eagle Stanley Havili is expected to take over at fullback, as he continues to develop as a starter in this league.

Wide Receivers/Tight Ends: Reggie Wayne proved that age is just a number last year as the soon-to-be 35 year old caught 5 touchdowns and went for 1,355 receiving yards. Wayne doesn't show any signs of slowing down in 2013. Raiders cast off Darius Heyward-Bey will be across from Wayne, as the speedster looks to resurrect his career. T.Y. Hilton also proved to be a reliable target a year ago as he caught 50 balls for 861 yards and 7 touchdowns. Hilton establishes serious depth for the Colts receiving corps.

At tight end, it's still about the maturation process for the two second year players Dwayne Allen and Coby Fleener. Allen had over 500 yards and 3 touchdowns a year ago, while Fleener, a college teammate of Andrew Luck, caught 2 of his own while going for 281 yards on the year. The two could continue to grow into one of the best duos in the league.

Offensive Line: The biggest weak spot for the Colts on offense is the offensive line. Left tackle Anthony Castonzo and center Samson Satele are the strong points of the line, but the other positions are a bit shaky. Gosder Cherilus comes in from the Lions to take over for Winston Justice at right tackle, but Cherilus is known for being fairly inconsistent. The guard position is the real focal point. Donald Thomas does not have much experience and Mike McGlynn is considered to be among the league's worst starting linemen. It's surprising that the Colts have not invested more in Andrew Luck's future by making sure he has a solid offensive line.

Offensive Player to Watch: QB Andrew Luck

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line: The Colts added some serious experience and size to their defensive line with Aubrayo Franklin and Ricky Jean-Francois. Both have experience on successful teams and will look to improve a unit lead by former Raven Cory Redding. Look for second year nose tackle Josh Chapman to get a fair shake on the D-line as well. The Alabama product has what it takes to become a starting space eater in this league and could be starting in front of Franklin sooner rather than later.

Linebackers: Colts legend Dwight Freeney is gone after one season at outside linebacker but his running mate Robert Mathis remains. Overpaid Erik Walden will likely start opposite Mathis, while the Colts groom top draft pick Bjoern Werner. Werner will need the time to learn, as many think he was better suited for a 4-3 defense. Pat Angerer and Jerrell Freeman finish off the starting linebacking corps and are becoming a solid tandem in the middle.

Secondary: The secondary may be the most overhauled unit for the Colts. Greg Toler comes over from Arizona to start alongside former Dolphin Vontae Davis. Antoine Bethea also has a new name next to him as former Jet and Redskin Laron Landry will look to resurrect his derailing career in Indianapolis.

Defensive Player to Watch: DE Ricky Jean-Francois

Special Teams:

The kicking duo of Pat McAfee and Adam Vinatieri lead what has become one of the most reliable special teams units in the league and that's not set to change. T.Y. Hilton and Kerwynn Williams will be the stars in the return game and can become a dangerous combination for the Colts.

Overall: 12-4, Finish first in the AFC South

As good as Andrew Luck was in his rookie year, he'll need to be even better in 2013. The Colts are now a marked target and not an upstart team with a good a story. Many of the young stars the Colts have are now on tape and the team as a whole will need to continue to adapt. On offense, it's all about protecting Andrew Luck. While on defense the focus has to be on creating pressure using an unorthodox rotation of outside linebackers and defensive ends.

| INDIANAPOLIS COLTS | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | W |
| 2 | September 15 | | <u>Miami Dolphins</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | L |
| 4 | September 29 | @ | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| 5 | October 6 | | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | W |
| 6 | October 14 | @ | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | W |
| 7 | October 20 | | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | L |
| 8 | | | Bye Week | |
| 9 | November 3 | @ | <u>Houston Texans</u> | L |
| 10 | November 10 | | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | W |
| 11 | November 14 | @ | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | W |
| 12 | November 24 | @ | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | W |
| 13 | December 1 | | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | W |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | <u>Cincinnati Bengals</u> | L |
| 15 | December 15 | | <u>Houston Texans</u> | W |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| Record: 12-4 (5-1) | | | | |

Jacksonville Jaguars:

2013 Finish: 2-14, 4th in AFC East

Key Additions: RB Justin Forsett, DT Roy Miller, DT Sen'Derrick Marks, OLB Geno Hayes, CB Alan Ball

2013 Draft: OT Luke Joeckel, S Johnathan Cyprien, CB Dwayne Gratz, WR Ace Sanders, WR Denard Robinson, S Josh Evans

Key Losses: RB Rashad Jennings, RB Jalen Parmele, FB Greg Jones, WR Laurent Robinson, OT Guy Whimper, G Eben Britton, DT Terrance Knighton, DT C.J. Mosley, OLB Daryl Smith, CB Derek Cox, CB William Middleton, CB Aaron Ross, S Dawan Landry

2012 Season Recap:

An injury to star running back Maurice Jones-Drew hobbled the Jaguars a year ago, so much so that the team finished 2-14 with their only wins coming against divisional opponents the Titans and the Colts. The season was so abysmal in Jacksonville that it cost first year head coach Mike Mularkey his job. Owner Shahid Khan has now revamped the franchise, the roster, the front office, and even the teams look to move the Jaguars into the future, wherever that may be.

Offense:

Quarterback: New general manager David Caldwell has been outspoken in supporting third year quarterback Blaine Gabbert. The 23 year old Gabbert is now 5-19 for his career, has a quarterback rating of 70.2, and has thrown 21 touchdowns to 17 interceptions. While first year head coach Gus Bradley has also been supportive of Gabbert, veterans Chad Henne and Mike Kafka will certainly be breathing down his back. It'll be sink or swim for Gabbert this year and whether or not he succeeds will solidify him as "the guy" in Jacksonville or send Caldwell and Bradley looking for a new guy next offseason.

Running back/Fullback: It was clear last year that the Jaguars live and die with Maurice Jones-Drew. After leading the league in attempts and yards in 2011, MoJo only suited up for 6 games for the Jags last year. The Jaguars will need to have Jones-

Drew back into 1,200+ yard form to be successful in 2013. Back-up running back Rashad Jennings is gone, but former Seahawk and Texan, Justin Forsett will step in. The Jags are wildly inexperienced at fullback as Greg Jones is gone and rookie Lonnie Pryor and third year man Will Ta'ufo'ou will look to take over the roll.

Wide Receivers/Tight Ends: When you check out the Jaguars roster and explore their receiving corps you instantly become unimpressed. When you notice last year's first round pick Justin Blackmon will miss the first four games this season for violating the league's substance abuse policy, the Jags receiving corps looks even worse. Division III product Cecil Shorts just missed 1,000 yards ago and will be the Jags top target, with hopes of trumping his 7 touchdown season last year. Mercedes Lewis will still be a reliable target and will look to continue to be a safety blanket for Blaine Gabbert.



The Jags may be more exciting to watch though, as they look to use a pair of unorthodox weapons in their offense. Jacksonville drafted two guys that they have solely labeled as “playmakers”. The first is former Michigan quarterback Denard Robinson, who will now try his hand at catching the ball rather than throwing it. The other is special teams gem, Ace Sanders from South Carolina, who will also look to make some noise.

Offensive Line: Jaguars quarterbacks got pounded last year and the team simply can't survive this year by taking 50 sacks once again. To address the issue, Caldwell drafted offensive tackle Luke Joeckel from Texas A&M. While Joeckel is a great prospect, many draft analysts thought the pick was a bad one for the Jags because he's a right tackle and Eugene Monroe will still protect the left side. Taking a right tackle at second overall is a bit unorthodox. Right guard Uche Nwaneri can hold down the fort, but center and left guard Brad Meester and Will Rackley will need to improve drastically to protect the Jags offensive assets.

Offensive Player to Watch: Blaine Gabbert, QB

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line: The Jags defense was an abomination a year ago and Gus Bradley is in Jacksonville to fix that. Former first round bust Tyson Alualu will move to defensive end. Veteran Jason Babin and second year man Andre Branch will also look to generate some pass rush, while additions Sen'Derrick Marks and Roy Miller will look to take care of business on the inside.

Linebackers: The linebacking corps of the Jags is a list of rejects from elsewhere. Paul Posluszny and Russell Allen were unimpressive last year and former Bear and Buc, Geno Hayes, will look to revitalize a career. The Jags also lack depth or some youthful talent that can move up and surprise anyone.

Secondary: Rookie second rounder Johnathan Cyprien will get a baptism by fire his first season and start at safety. Next to him will be Dwight Lowery, who is solid at best and has been a bit of an injury candidate the past couple of years. Former Seahawk Marcus Trufant also looks to help Gus Bradley in his transition. Another rookie, Dwayne Grantz, will also be thrust into the limelight at cornerback for the Jags.

Defensive Player to Watch: DT Roy Miller

Special Teams:

Kicker Josh Scobee is about as solid as it gets and may even be considered Jacksonville's best player at this point. Punter Bryan Anger lived up to his third round draft pick hype by averaging 48 yards per punt last year. Rookie Ace Sanders is the guy to watch though, as the 5'7 former Gamecock will be looking to take it to the house early and often.

Overall: 2-14, Finish fourth in the AFC South

The fact that the Jaguars are showing NFL RedZone on their jumbotrons during the game may tip the hand for how Jaguars brass may view how their season will go. The Jags should once again challenge for the worst record in the league and it may be sending Gus Bradley looking for his quarterback in 2014. The Jaguars trip to London may be the most exciting thing going down in Jacksonville this year.

| JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------|---|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | L |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | L |
| 4 | September 29 | | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | L |
| 5 | October 6 | @ | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | L |
| 6 | October 13 | @ | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | L |
| 7 | October 20 | | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | L |
| 8 | October 27 | | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | L |
| 9 | | | Bye Week | |
| 10 | November 10 | @ | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | L |
| 11 | November 17 | | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | W |
| 12 | November 24 | @ | <u>Houston Texans</u> | L |
| 13 | December 1 | @ | <u>Cleveland Browns</u> | L |
| 14 | December 5 | | <u>Houston Texans</u> | L |
| 15 | December 15 | | <u>Buffalo Bills</u> | L |
| 16 | December 22 | | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | L |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | L |
| Record: 2-14 (0-6) | | | | |

Houston Texans:

2013 Finish: 12-4, 1st in AFC South

Key Additions: FB Greg Jones, CB Alan Ball, S Ed Reed, P Shane Lechler

2013 Draft: WR DeAndre Hopkins, S D.J. Swearinger, OT Brennan Williams, DE Sam Montgomery, DE/OLB Trevardo Williams, OT/G/C David Quessenberry

Key Losses: RB Justin Forsett, WR Kevin Walter, TE James Casey, OT Rashad Butler, DE/OLB Connor Barwin, S Glover Quin, K Shayne Graham, P Donnie Jones

2012 Season Recap:

The Texans had a stellar regular season and once again took down the Bengals in the Wild Card round of the playoffs, and also once again lost in the Divisional round. Gary Kubiak's squad has all the pieces to go deep into the playoffs, but something just hasn't clicked yet in Houston. Minor offseason adjustments were made to a solid core of veterans and youthful talent. The Texans have a tenacious defense and an offense with some of the most impressive weapons in the league. The question is, when will that translate to playoff success?

Offense:

Quarterback: The biggest question for Matt Schaub is whether or not the window is closed or closing. The 32 year old veteran has struggled to stay healthy at times but is coming off a Pro Bowl season. Sooner or later Schaub's time is going to be up in Houston so the quarterback who threw for over 4,000 yards and 22 touchdowns a year ago will need to figure out how to replicate his regular season numbers when it counts in the playoffs.

Running back/Fullback: Arian Foster and Ben Tate may be the best one-two punch in the NFL, but can they both be healthy at the same time? Foster has had his fair share of injuries and will enter the season with a nagging back injury. Tate played in 11 games last year and his production went down 700 yards. Arian Foster was a monster once again though, rushing for over 1,400 yards and 15 touchdowns. The Texans backfield will become even stronger this year as they stole bruiser fullback Greg Jones from division rival Jacksonville to fill the void left from James Casey's departure.



Wide Receivers/Tight Ends: If Calvin Johnson is considered the league's best receiver then Andre Johnson is still his "1A". Johnson was once again phenomenal in 2012 with nearly 1,600 yards, but only 4 touchdowns. Johnson will no longer be the sole wide receiving threat as the Texans invested a high draft pick on Clemson Tiger DeAndre Hopkins. Both receivers will open up the field together with Lestar Jean and Keshawn Martin filling in as backups. At tight end, Pro Bowler Owen Daniels is still among the league's best after a season where he caught 6 touchdowns and had over 700 receiving yards. Simply put, Matt Schaub has some options.

Offensive Line: All five starters return from a year ago to form a group where continuity is paramount. Duane Brown anchors the line at left tackle, while book end Derek Newton holds down the other side. On the interior Wade Smith, Chris Myers, and Brandon Brooks will complete the unit. Rookie David Quessenberry adds some depth to the line and could eventually challenge for a starting spot.

Offensive Player to Watch: WR DeAndre Hopkins

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line: Any defensive line with JJ Watt is going to be considered to be one of the best in the league. Watt is coming off a season in which he had 20.5 sacks and left

a wake of destruction. Running mate Antonio Smith added 7 sacks of his own and Earl Mitchell will anchor the middle at nose tackle.

Linebackers: The Texans have a tenacious linebacking crew with Joe Mays and Brian Cushing holding down the middle and with Brooks Reed and Whitney Mercilus rushing from the outside. Connor Barwin is gone, but that likely means increased production from Reed and Mercilus who combined for 8.5 sacks a year ago.

Secondary: Ravens legend Ed Reed was the big offseason signing for the Texans, but he has yet to prove that he can be healthy. Jonathan Joseph and Kareem Jackson are talented corners who lock down opposing threats which allows the Texans front seven to apply maximum pressure. Danieal Manning will try to hold down the fort at strong safety, while Shiloh Keo or rookie DJ Swearinger will play at free safety if or when Reed comes back.

Defensive Player to Watch: DE JJ Watt

Special Teams:

Kicking has been a bit of an odyssey for the Texans and that could continue with second year man Randy Bullock who was on the injured reserve last year. Although Bullock could be a bit of a question mark, the Texans added one of the league's best punters in boomer Shane Lechler. The return game is a little iffy too with Keshawn Martin and Shiloh Keo taking over duties. Both players are expected to be busy elsewhere and lack of depth may rear its head when it comes to their spots as returners.

Overall: 11-5, Finish second in the AFC South

It comes down to the Colts and the Texans in the AFC South and on paper the Texans look like the more talented team. Expect Houston to once again breeze through the regular season, but Gary Kubiak and his team have to be focused on postseason success to deem this season successful.

| HOUSTON TEXANS | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 9 | @ | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | W |
| 2 | September 15 | | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | W |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>Baltimore Ravens</u> | L |
| 4 | September 29 | | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | W |
| 5 | October 6 | @ | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | L |
| 6 | October 13 | | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | W |
| 7 | October 20 | @ | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | L |
| 8 | | | Bye Week | |
| 9 | November 3 | | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | W |
| 10 | November 10 | @ | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | W |
| 11 | November 17 | | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | W |
| 12 | November 24 | | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| 13 | December 1 | | <u>New England Patriots</u> | W |
| 14 | December 5 | @ | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | L |
| 16 | December 22 | | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | L |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | W |
| Record: 11-5 (5-1) | | | | |

Tennessee Titans:

2013 Finish: 6-10, 3rd in AFC South

Key Additions: QB Ryan Fitzpatrick, RB Shonn Greene, RB Jalen Parmele, WR Kevin Walter, TE Delanie Walker, Andy Levitre, G Chris Spencer, C Rob Turner, DT Sammie Lee Hill, ILB Moise Fokou, S Bernard Pollard, S George Wilson

2013 Draft: G Chance Warmack, WR Justin Hunter, CB Blidi Wreh-Wilson, OLB Zaviar Gooden, C/G Brian Schwenke, DE Lavar Edwards

Key Losses: QB Matt Hasselbeck, RB Javon Ringer, RB Jamie Harper, TE Jared Cook, G Steve Hutchinson, G Deuce Lutui, G Leroy Harris, C Eugene Amano, DE/DT Jarius Wynn, DT Sen'Derrick Marks, DT Leger Douzable, OLB Gerald McRath, OLB Will Witherspoon, ILB Zac Diles, CB Ryan Mouton

2012 Season Recap:

Last year the keys were turned over to second year quarterback Jake Locker. Opposing defenses effectively contained running back Chris Johnson for the most part, Locker threw more interceptions than touchdowns, and generally, the Titans offense was woefully inept. While the offense struggled, the Titans defense didn't fare much better, giving up more points per game than anyone else a year ago. The Titans are looking for their first playoff appearance since 2008 and coach Mike Munchak's seat might be getting a little hotter in the Music City.

Offense:

Quarterback:

Jake Locker was touted as a raw, mobile quarterback with a rocket arm. Thus far Locker has been a project and he'll need to succeed in his third year for the Titans to be successful. A lack of weapons cannot be an excuse in Nashville and the Titans are starting to realize that. The pressure presented by veteran Matt Hasselbeck is gone, but former Bills starter Ryan Fitzpatrick will now be pushing Locker.

Running back/Fullback:

Chris Johnson has not been able to recreate his 2,000 yard pace from 2009 but 1,243 yards a year ago is not bad. Johnson is still a premier home run threat in this league and now he'll get some help from two running backs who have both started in the NFL in former Chief, Jackie Battle and former Jet, Shonn Greene. Having a deeper rotation will help to keep the soon to be 28 year old Johnson fresh throughout the season. Quinn Johnson is the lone fullback on the roster, but the Titans have other power backs who could pave the way for CJ2K.

**Wide Receivers/Tight Ends:**

The Titans may have the league's most underrated receiving corps. Kenny Britt has not lived up to his potential in the NFL and Kendall Wright is a developing talent who could eventually grow into one of the league's best targets. Nate Washington is still solid and hanging around, while second round pick Justin Hunter will make the Titans even more dangerous this season. Jared Cook is gone, but bruiser Delanie Walker will step in and become a valuable target for Locker.

Offensive Line:

The Titans offensive line is certainly their strength. The Titans pried away Andy Levitre from Buffalo and then further solidified their interior with Chance Warmack a guard from Alabama, who some considered to be the top interior offensive line prospect in the NFL Draft. Rob Turner fills out the inside at center in a move that many thought would be filled by Fernando Velasco. Michael Roos and David Steward round out the offensive line and the tackles could become bookends in Tennessee if everything goes well.

Offensive Player to Watch: QB, Jake Locker**DEFENSE:****Defensive Line:**

Tennessee added serious beef up front with Sammie Lee Hill to play alongside former USC Trojan Jurrell Casey. On the outside Kamerion Wimbley and Derrick Morgan will look to pressure the quarterback. Even though all of the guys in the entire unit are fairly decent, depth may still be an issue.

Linebackers:

The linebacking corps is a young one for Tennessee. Akeem Ayers and Zach Brown will look to bring pressure from the outside, while Colin McCarthy will man the middle. The group is growing together and will need to continue to improve, but depth is also an issue here with a hodge-podge of veterans backing up the youngsters.

Secondary:

The Titans added some solid upgrades in the secondary with safety George Wilson and the controversial Bernard Pollard to play along Michael Griffin. While the Titans have depth at safety and a strong starting presence, the cornerback position isn't as deep and hasn't improved that much. Jason McCourty and Alterraun Verner are slated to start the year at corner.

Defensive Player to Watch: OLB Zach Brown**Special Teams:**

Rob Bironas has become a standard for kicking in this league and is expected to continue to be steady in 2013. Brett Kern is an average punter at best for the Titans. The Titans do have a pair of interesting and exciting kick returners in Marc Mariani and Darius Reynaud. Both have found success on various levels before and could carry that over into their performances in Nashville.

Overall: 5-11, Finish third in the AFC South

Titans' fans should expect another long year in the Music City. The biggest lingering question is, will this be Munchak's last and does that mean it will be Jake Locker's last as well? The Titans can find success in their offensive line and one of the league's best running backs. But despite that, the Titans defensive will have to improve at a faster pace than the offense will need to, if they are to enjoy any real success.

| TENNESSEE TITANS | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | @ | <u>Pittsburgh Steelers</u> | L |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | <u>Houston Texans</u> | L |
| 3 | September 22 | | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | L |
| 4 | September 29 | | <u>New York Jets</u> | W |
| 5 | October 6 | | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | L |
| 6 | October 13 | @ | <u>Seattle Seahawks</u> | L |
| 7 | October 20 | | <u>San Francisco 49ers</u> | L |
| 8 | | | Bye Week | |
| 9 | November 3 | @ | <u>St. Louis Rams</u> | L |
| 10 | November 10 | | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| 11 | November 14 | | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | L |
| 12 | November 24 | @ | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | W |
| 13 | December 1 | @ | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | L |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | L |
| 15 | December 15 | | <u>Arizona Cardinals</u> | W |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>Houston Texans</u> | L |
| Record: 5-11 (2-4) | | | | |

AFC WEST:

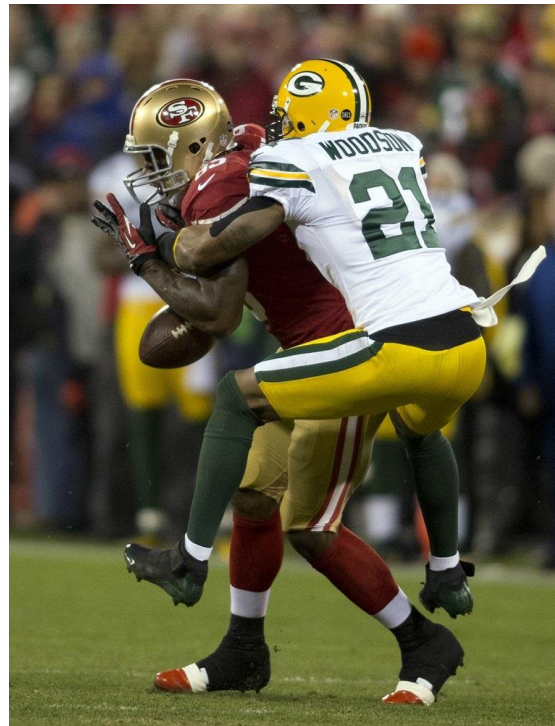
Oakland Raiders:

2012 Finish: 4-12, 3rd in the AFC West

Key Additions: QB Matt Flynn, DT Jason Hunter, OLB Kevin Burnett, CB Mike Jenkins, CB Tracy Porter, S Charles Woodson, P Chris Kluwe

2013 NFL Draft: CB D.J. Hayden, OT Menelik Watson, LB Sio Moore, QB Tyler Wilson, TE Nick Kasa, RB Latavius Murray, TE Mychal Rivera, DT Stacy McGee, WR Brice Butler, DE David Bass

Key Losses: QB Carson Palmer, TE Brandon Myers, WR Darrius Heyward-Bey, DT Desmond Bryant, DT Richard Seymour, DT Tommy Kelly, LB Phillip Wheeler, S Michael Huff, P Shane Lechler



2012 Season Recap:

The Raiders had one of the league's most expensive rosters yet were considered one of the weakest teams in the NFL. Years of mismanagement, traded draft picks and bad contracts had come due, and the Raiders were only saved from finishing 4th in the division due to the ineptness of the Chiefs. Even though Carson Palmer threw for over 4,000 yards, the Raiders offense was very predictable and not much of a threat all season. The Raiders made the extremely tough, but probably correct call to clear the books this offseason, parting with a number of high priced veterans and allowing their free agents to walk. It cost the Raiders a lot in dead money this year, and dramatically reduced their talent, but in the long run it is probably for the best as it sets them up with plenty of money to spend in 2014 (to potentially go along with the first overall pick).

Offense:

Quarterback:

This is going to be one of the worst units in the league as the team is making the decision between Matt Flynn and Terrelle Pryor. Flynn has some limitations, but he's probably the better option in terms of giving the Raiders a chance to win. He can be a game manager type of quarterback for Oakland. Pryor has higher upside and the potential to hurt teams on the ground, but he's not a good option to start.

Running back:

Darren McFadden should be happy to see the Raiders abandoning their zone read attack, in favor of a more traditional power run game. The return to a power attack should improve McFadden's numbers, but it is still too early to get excited on him having some sort of great season. The chances he lasts 16 games is next to zero, and with a weak passing attack and an offensive line that is banged up, he will have a tough time finding running lanes.

Wide Receiver/Tight End:

The Raiders have a pair of decent starting receivers in Danarius Moore and Rod Streater, but with their questionable quarterback play they are unlikely to be too effective this season. Their presence does bode well for the future when the Raiders hopefully can get a quality option behind center, but right now their talents are pretty much wasted on this roster. The Raiders tight end situation took a huge step back this year as they lost Brandon Myers and didn't make any real effort to replace him.

Offensive Line:

This was expected to at least be a solid unit for the Raiders with budding stars LT Jared Veldheer and C Steve Wisniewski leading the way. In addition, the Raiders had a solid veteran in Mike Brisiel at RG and 2nd round rookie Menelik Watson competing at RT. That has all changed with the loss of Veldheer, who is expected to go on injured reserve with the ability to return late in the year. Now the Raiders are forced to start Watson at LT, and the whole line looks a lot more shaky.

Offensive player to watch: RB Darren McFadden

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line:

The Raiders still have 2010 2nd rounder Lamarr Houston who has had a strong career so far. Unfortunately beyond him the Raiders don't have a whole lot of talent along their line. The next best player might be Jason Hunter who missed all of last season due to injury. This is a very weak position group in terms of depth and the Raiders only hope is that a young guy like Jack Crawford or Stacy McGee step up this season.

Linebacker:

The Raiders gutted this position as well and this figures to be another serious problem area for Oakland. Rookie Sio Moore has a bright future and a lot of promise, but his impact for this year should be fairly minimal. Beyond him the Raiders are relying on stop gap veteran options like Kevin Burnett and Nic Roach.

Defensive Backs:

This is the one defensive position area that shouldn't be too bad for the Raiders. Mike Jenkins, Tracy Porter and Charles Woodson were all good pick-ups for this team. None of them might be stars, but all should offer solid production. They will team up with incumbent safety Tyvon Branch, who was one of the few quality players left on this team. Depth isn't great overall, but compared to some other positions it is pretty strong with rookie CB D.J. Hayden and free agent safety Usama Young giving the Raiders their top options.

Defensive Player to Watch: OLB Sio Moore**Special Teams:**

The Raiders still have star kicker Sebastian Janikowski, who in some ways is their best offensive weapon given his immense range. Long time Raider punter Shane Lechler left, leaving the Raiders turning to former Viking Chris Kluwe to handle the punting duties. Jacoby Ford should handle the return duties and will give the Raiders one of the better return men in the league if he can stay healthy.

2013 Outlook: 2-14, 4th place in the AFC West

There is really no sugar coating it, the Raiders are in for a long season as they simply don't have the offensive talent or quality defense to win more than 2-3 games. They will likely finish with the league's worst record this year. While some may accuse them of "tanking" the Raiders did absolutely the right thing by clearing the books for the future, even if that meant them taking on a large amount of dead money this season. Some fans might not like it, but this is the most responsible the Raiders have been run in decades.

| OAKLAND RAIDERS | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | @ | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | L |
| 2 | September 15 | | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | L |
| 3 | September 23 | @ | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | L |
| 4 | September 29 | | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | L |
| 5 | October 6 | | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | W |
| 6 | October 13 | @ | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | L |
| 7 | | | Bye Week | |
| 8 | October 27 | | <u>Pittsburgh Steelers</u> | L |
| 9 | November 3 | | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | W |
| 10 | November 10 | @ | <u>New York Giants</u> | L |
| 11 | November 17 | @ | <u>Houston Texans</u> | L |
| 12 | November 24 | | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | L |
| 13 | November 28 | @ | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | L |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | <u>New York Jets</u> | L |
| 15 | December 15 | | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | L |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | L |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | L |
| Record: 2-14 (1-5) | | | | |

Kansas City Chiefs:

2012 Finish: 2-14, 4th place in the AFC West

Key Additions: CB Sean Smith, WR Donnie Avery, QB Alex Smith, DB Dunta Robinson, G Geoff Schwartz, FB Anthony Sherman, TE Anthony Fasano, DE Mike Devito

2013 NFL Draft: OT Eric Fisher, TE Travis Kelce, RB Knile Davis, LB Nico Johnson, DB Sanders Commings, C Eric Kush, FB Branden Wilson, DE Mike Catapano



Key Losses: OT Eric Winston, TE Kevin Boss, QB Matt Cassel, DT Glenn Dorsey, CB Javier Arenas, S Abram Elam

Key Injuries: DB Sanders Commings

2012 Season Recap:

Despite having 7 Pro Bowlers and a couple other talented guys, the Chiefs were able to sneak out just 2 wins last season. While there were definitely institutional issues that affected the whole team, the biggest problem was clearly the quarterback spot last season. Matt Cassel was just simply woeful and it meant that star receiver Dwayne Bowe was essentially wasted. Top runner Jamaal Charles had a great season, but rarely found the end zone, since once the Chiefs got close to the end zone, teams just stacked the box against him. The Chiefs decided to start anew and brought in former Eagles coach, Andy Reid to rebuild this roster.

Quarterback:

It would have been hard to get much worse at the quarterback position than the Chiefs were last season, which is why Kansas City made such an effort to improve the position. They traded a pair of draft picks to the 49ers for Alex Smith, while at the same time they signed Chase Daniel to be the back-up. Daniel is one of if not the highest paid back-up quarterbacks in the league now. While it is a good amount to spend on a back-up, it is easy to see why the Chiefs wanted to ensure they had options. Smith is a good

game manager QB, but if they ask him to do too much he could struggle. This is a solid quarterback group, but it's not likely to become anything more than that.

Running back:

The Chiefs have one of the league's top backs in Jamaal Charles. Charles is a dual threat back capable of beating you both on the ground and through the air. Though there is some concern that Charles will see his carries cut due to Andy Reid, that should be pretty minor. If Reid were to cut Charles' carries it would be because he had drastically increased his number of catches.

Wide Receiver/Tight End:

Dwayne Bowe was completely neutralized as a weapon last season with the Chiefs quarterback situation. Teams knew that he wasn't a real threat down the field, and if it was an underneath route he was simply double covered. Too often when Bowe was targeted and even semi-open the pass would be so poorly thrown that he simply didn't have a chance at the ball.

Offensive Line:

The Chiefs had a pretty strong offensive line last year, but they made the big move this offseason to get rid of veteran RT Eric Winston, and to draft Eric Fisher first overall. Though Fisher will eventually move to left tackle, he will start out as the Chiefs right tackle. The Chiefs starting offensive line is made up of two 1st round picks, two 2nd round picks and a 3rd rounder, all drafted since 2008. That is a lot of natural talent for Andy Reid to work with.

Offensive Player to watch: RB Jamaal Charles

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line:

Despite a number of high draft picks in this area, the Chiefs defensive line has underperformed these past few years. Kansas City let former 1st round pick Glenn Dorsey walk this offseason and replaced him with veteran Mike Devito. Devito has been a good consistent lineman for the Jets the last couple of seasons, and if he can bring similar production to the Chiefs, it will be a good boost to their defense.

Linebacker:

The Chiefs have one of the strongest 3-4 linebacking corps in the league, led by rush linebacker Tamba Hali. Hali is one of the premier pass rushers in the league, but doesn't

get near the credit he deserves, given that he plays for the Chiefs. Opposite him is third year pro Justin Houston, who had a bit of a breakout campaign last year. In the interior Derrick Johnson has gone to back-to-back Pro Bowls and is a stout piece in the middle. Next to Johnson is former Philadelphia Eagle Akeem Jordan, who could be a solid fit in the 3-4.

Defensive Back:

Kansas City has a really strong secondary led by Pro Bowl safety Eric Berry. Berry came back last year after missing nearly all of 2011 due to injury and didn't miss a beat. He didn't have as many interceptions as his rookie year (when he also went to the Pro Bowl), but he was probably better in coverage. Joining him in the defensive backfield is quality starting corner Brandon Flowers, up-and-coming safety Kendrick Lewis and free agent signings CB Sean Smith and CB Dunta Robinson. That is a pretty strong base group for the Chiefs.

Defensive Player to Watch: OLB Justin Houston

Special Teams:

The Chiefs have a good punter in Dustin Colquitt, who was named to the Pro Bowl last year. Colquitt has been a consistent punter for the Chiefs a number of years now, with the only downside that he's gotten far too much work over the years. He's not punted fewer than 83 times in the last four years, and Kansas City is hoping this is the year they don't need to rely on him as much. Place kicker Ryan Succup is a solid kicker, but he was a bit inconsistent last season, missing four field goals shorter than 40 yards. Dexter McCluster figures to be the primary return man this year. He had a punt return for a TD as a rookie, but hasn't done much these last two years.

2013 Overall: 8-8, 2nd in the AFC West

The Chiefs should be a much better team with Andy Reid at the helm and Alex Smith at quarterback. There is some concern if Smith can throw the ball the 35-40 times Reid typically likes to put the ball in the air, but it should all work out. Smith might not be a great gunslinger, but he's learned efficiency and has limited turnovers. If he can do that with weapons like Charles and Bowe, with a strong offensive line in front of him, this offense should be just fine. The defense should improve since they aren't likely to be put in so many bad scenarios. Also, the free agent additions should be enough to push this group to be a top 10 unit. This is a team who will be in the playoff hunt most of the season, but will probably fall just short.

| KANSAS CITY CHIEFS | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 8 | @ | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| 2 | September 15 | | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | L |
| 3 | September 19 | @ | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | W |
| 4 | September 29 | | <u>New York Giants</u> | L |
| 5 | October 6 | @ | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | W |
| 6 | October 13 | | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | W |
| 7 | October 20 | | <u>Houston Texans</u> | W |
| 8 | October 27 | | <u>Cleveland Browns</u> | W |
| 9 | November 3 | @ | <u>Buffalo Bills</u> | L |
| 10 | | | Bye Week | |
| 11 | November 17 | @ | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | L |
| 12 | November 24 | | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | W |
| 13 | December 1 | | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | L |
| 14 | December 8 | @ | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | L |
| 15 | December 15 | @ | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | W |
| 16 | December 22 | | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | L |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | L |
| Record: 8-8 (3-3) | | | | |

San Diego Chargers:

2012 Record: 7-9, second in the AFC West

Key Additions: DE/OLB Dwight Freeney, CB Derek Cox, OT King Dunlap, G Chad Reinhardt, RB Danny Woodhead

2013 NFL Draft: OT D.J. Fluker, LB Manti Te'o, WR Keenan Allen, CB Steve Williams, DE Tourek Williams, QB Brad Sorensen

Key Losses: G Louis Vasquez, OT Jared Gaither, OLB Shaun Phillips, OLB Antwan Barnes, CB Quentin Jammer, ILB Takeo Spikes, CB Antoine Cason, S Atari Bigby

Key Injuries: OLB Melvin Ingram, CB Steve Williams, WR Danario Alexander

2012 Season Recap:

The Chargers last year spent big money to bring in weapons for Philip Rivers, but they ignored putting a quality line in front of him and it cost them. Rivers was under constant pressure throughout the season, and had his worst year as a starter. With RB Ryan Mathews dealing with injuries, the running game fell apart as well, leaving this once mighty offense weak and not a real threat to anyone. The defense was still pretty solid, and was a top 10 unit against the run, but it wasn't enough given the state of their offense. Norv Turner was fired after the season and Mike McCoy was brought in from division rival Denver to fix this offense.

OFFENSE:

Quarterback:

Philip Rivers is still a very good quarterback, he was just put in a poor situation. The Chargers offense was a run focused system that wanted to bring an extra guy in the box, so the quarterback could attack down field. Unfortunately with no rushing attack or protection, Rivers was a sitting duck last season. Rivers has to hope the line and the running game are improved this year, for him to get back to his career norms.

Running back:

The Chargers drafted Ryan Mathews in the first round in 2010, but since then they haven't gotten the production of a first rounder. He did have 1,000 yards in 14 games in 2011, but Mathews needs to be more consistent and actually stay healthy. He's already missed 10 games in his three year career and has probably played another 4-6 at under 100%. The Chargers brought in 3rd down back Danny Woodhead to give them a

weapon out of the backfield, but he's not really going to be able to take over Mathews work load if he goes down with injury again.

Wide Receiver/Tight End:

It's not off to a good start for the Chargers as last year's free agent bust Robert Meachem has been cut, and last year's free agent surprise Danario Alexander will miss the season due to an ACL injury. Though Meachem was a bust last year, the hope was he would put it together in year two of his big contract. The loss of Alexander is a killer though, as he was such a weapon after signing late with the Chargers last year. Top wide receiver Malcolm Floyd has been nicked up, but he should be fine for most of the season. Youngster Vincent Brown is expected to take on a bigger role, with rookie Keenan Allen and veteran Eddie Royal getting into the mix as well. Antonio Gates still remains one of the league's best tight ends, though he's always dealt with some injury issues.

Offensive Line:

The Chargers offensive line is going to be a major work in progress this season. They lost their top offensive lineman from last year in Louis Vasquez who went to the Broncos. They did bring in some guys like King Dunlap, Chad Reinhardt and 1st round pick D.J. Fluker, but they are going to miss the veteran presence of Vasquez. If this line doesn't improve the Chargers offense will likely crumble again, so the pressure is on for this group to succeed.

Offensive Player to watch: WR Vincent Brown

DEFENSE:

Defensive line:

The Chargers have a really good starting group here of Kendall Reyes, Cam Thomas and Corey Liuget. None of the three are elite players, but all three can play at a high level for extended periods. Together they form a strong group that should once again help the Chargers contain the run. There is solid depth behind this group as well.

Linebacker:

This could be a problem area for the Chargers, particularly on the outside. Shaun Phillips is now in Denver, and 2012 1st round pick Melvin Ingram is on IR. The team brought in Jarrett Johnson last year, and he's a solid ball player, but he's not much of a pass rusher. Opposite him the Chargers will go with veteran Dwight Freeney. Freeney struggled in a 3-4 role last season in Indianapolis, and while San Diego could find ways to use him more effectively, he's hardly anything more than a situational answer. Inside the Chargers should be pretty good as rookie Manti Te'o will team up with Donald Butler

for a pretty strong pairing.

Defensive Backs:

The Chargers revamped their secondary somewhat and have new corners Derek Cox and Richard Marshall competing with Shareece Wright for the top three corner back jobs. While Cox and Marshall have some experience, it is



hard to imagine that this ends up being anything better than an average unit. The idea of these three as the primary cover guys is even more of an issue considering the lack of the pass rush this year. At safety the Chargers do make up for their cornerback issues with a starting tandem of Eric Weddle and Marcus Gilchrist. Gilchrist is a solid safety with some promise, while Weddle is one of the top five safeties in the league.

Defensive player to watch: LB Manti Te'o

Special Teams:

The Chargers have a solid but unspectacular pair of kickers with punter Mike Scifres and kicker Nick Novak. Neither is considered great, but both get the job done for the Chargers. Eddie Royal will likely be the primary return man, and he's always capable of breaking off some big returns.

2013 Season Outlook: 6-10, 3rd in the AFC West

The Chargers simply lack the talent to contend this season. Philip Rivers is still a quality quarterback, but unless a cohesive offensive line is formed and a running game established he's not going to be able to get this team to playoff contention by himself. Defensively the Chargers should be solid, particularly versus the run. The question is do they have enough pass rush and pass defense talent to be a balanced defense. A weaker schedule could get them in the 6-7 win mark, but it seems very unlikely that they can hit .500.

| SAN DIEGO CHARGERS | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 9 | | <u>Houston Texans</u> | L |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | L |
| 3 | September 22 | @ | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | W |
| 4 | September 29 | | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | W |
| 5 | October 6 | @ | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | L |
| 6 | October 14 | | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | L |
| 7 | October 20 | @ | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| 8 | | | Bye Week | |
| 9 | November 3 | @ | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | L |
| 10 | November 10 | | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | W |
| 11 | November 17 | @ | <u>Miami Dolphins</u> | L |
| 12 | November 24 | @ | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | L |
| 13 | December 1 | | <u>Cincinnati Bengals</u> | L |
| 14 | December 8 | | <u>New York Giants</u> | L |
| 15 | December 12 | @ | <u>Denver Broncos</u> | L |
| 16 | December 22 | | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | W |
| Record: 6-10 (3-3) | | | | |

Denver Broncos:

2012 Finish: 13-3, 1st place in the AFC West, lost in Divisional Round of Playoffs

Key Additions: WR Wes Welker, G Louis Vasquez, CB Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, DB Quentin Jammer, DE/OLB Shaun Phillips

2013 NFL Draft: DT Sylvester Williams, RB Montee Ball, CB Kayvon Webster, DE Quanterus Smith, WR Tavarres King, OT Winston Painter, QB Zac Dysert

Key Losses: DE Elvis Dumervil, RB Willis McGahee, WR Brandon Stokley, DT Justin Bannan, DE Justin Hunter

Key Injuries: C Dan Koppen, C J.D. Walton, LB Stewart Bradley, S Quinton Carter, OLB Von Miller (Suspension 6 games)

2012 Season Recap:

Despite winning their division in 2011 and Tebowmania, the Broncos made the wise call to sign Peyton Manning as a free agent and completely change their offense. The move paid off as Manning had arguably the 2nd best season of his storied career and the Broncos ended up with the first seed in the AFC, despite losing 3 of their first 5 games.



The Broncos offense and defense were both outstanding last season, and gave Denver a balanced attack that few teams could match. While the Broncos were considered the AFC favorite by many heading into the postseason, they lost a heartbreaker to the Ravens in overtime during the Divisional round of the playoffs. The Broncos had the Ravens on the ropes, with a 7 point lead and just over a minute to go on the clock. A Hail Mary with 40 seconds remaining tied the game for Baltimore and sent it to overtime where the Ravens completed the upset.

Offense:

Quarterback:

The Broncos went from having perhaps the league's worst throwing quarterback, to one of the league's top three with the addition of Peyton Manning last season. Though many wanted to write off Manning as done last year, he responded with being tied for the

league's best completion percentage and finished in the top 5 in most major categories. Manning should be even better this year as the Broncos bolstered the offensive line, and added a big weapon in slot receiver Wes Welker.

Running back/Fullback:

The Broncos finished top 10 in the league in rushing attempts last season, but saw their rushing game regress as the season wore on. Things really fell apart after starter Willis McGahee went down with injury. The Broncos released McGahee this offseason, but did draft his replacement in 2nd rounder Montee Ball from Wisconsin. Ball has a lot of potential, and could possibly be even better than McGahee. If Ball struggles though, the Broncos will rely on 2nd year back Ronnie Hillman and former first round pick Knowshon Moreno to carry the load. It's not the best running back group, but there is enough potential here that they should be effective.

Wide Receivers/Tight Ends:

The Broncos had one of the best receiver duos in the league last year with Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker, and have now turned that into a trio with the addition of Wes Welker from New England. The three receivers will be an absolute nightmare for opposing defenses to cover this year, and give Manning arguably the best group of weapons he's ever had to work with.

The tight ends are going to be interesting as well this season. Last year's starter Jacob Tamme, who had 550 receiving yards will now be more of the third tight end, as youngster Julius Thomas is expected to take over the number one duties. Thomas has great size and athleticism, and if there were enough targets to go around would have the potential to put up big numbers. Tamme will still get some use, especially given his familiarity with Manning, but his targets will be limited this year. Joel Dressen will once again be the number two tight end, given his superior blocking ability. Dressen is a solid short yardage and red zone tight end, though it may be tough for him to get many catches this year.

Offensive Line:

The Broncos offensive line only gave up 21 sacks last year and for the most part did well in run blocking. Denver wasn't satisfied with the status-quo though and added guard Louis Vasquez from the Chargers. The Broncos did lose their top two centers from last season meaning there are still some concerns with this unit. Overall though the Broncos should once again see another great year from their line and Peyton Manning should have plenty of protection this season.

Offensive Player to watch: RB Montee Ball

DEFENSE:

Defensive Line:

The Broncos lost star defensive end Elvis Dumervil due to a contract glitch this offseason and replaced him with veteran Shaun Phillips. Phillips can still get after the quarterback and should ensure that the drop-off isn't too drastic, but he's no longer able to be counted on as an every down player. Run stoppers Derek Wolfe and Robert Ayers will man the defensive end spots on early downs before giving way to Phillips and Von Miller on passing downs. Along the interior the Broncos should be improved as they drafted Sylvester Williams in the first round and signed Terrence Knighton to rotate with Kevin Vickerson inside. On passing downs Wolfe and Ayers could get some work at the tackle spots as well. Overall this is a strong defensive line unit, but they are relying a lot on new faces like Phillips and Williams to help generate a pass rush.

Linebacker:

The ability for the Broncos to rush the passer was further compromised when Von Miller was handed down a 6 game suspension. Miller is one of the elite defensive players in the league, so losing him for any amount of time is hard to swallow for the Broncos. Phillips will get some of Miller's snaps, but regardless of who takes them, they are basically impossible to replace. Now Miller will be back for the stretch run and the postseason so all isn't lost, but his suspension could potentially cost them a chance for the top seed in the AFC.

Miller isn't the only loss the linebacking corps has suffered, as free agent signing Stewart Bradley is out for the year. Bradley was expected to take over the middle linebacker duties this season and be a steady improvement over last year. Now without Bradley, WLB Wesley Woodyard will move inside. He's a good choice as he had 117 tackles last year to go along with 5.5 sacks and 3 INT's, but he leaves a hole at weak side linebacker. Danny Trevathan is expected to get the job to start the season. The team is high on him, but it could be a tough job early on, especially without Miller taking the focus of the offense for the first six games.

Defensive Backs:

The Broncos look pretty solid at cornerback where Champ Bailey and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie are expected to start. Behind them the Broncos have Chris Harris, Tony Carter, Quentin Jammer and 3rd rounder Kayvon Webster. There is always a little concern if Bailey is going to lose a step, but he was still playing at a high level last season. The Ravens did get the best of him deep in the playoff game, but that shouldn't sour people on his overall season.

The Broncos safeties are a bit more problematic. Rahim Moore is set to start at free safety, after a really good sophomore season last year. He still had some developing to do, and he could take his game to the next level this season if he can build upon last

season's success. Starting opposite him will be Duke Ihenacho who was a rookie free agent in 2012. Ihenacho is a good in the box safety, but it is unclear if he can be consistent enough in coverage. Mike Adams is the primary back-up for the Broncos, giving them at least some nice veteran help.

Defensive Player to watch: LB Wesley Woodward

Special Teams:

Matt Prater continues to show a big leg in Denver's thin air, hitting 15 career 50+ yard field goals, but he's seen his accuracy go down overall. Each of the last two years Prater has been below 85% accuracy, which is a bit of a problem for a team with Super Bowl aspirations. Prater missed a 52 yard field goal late in the first half against the Ravens in the playoffs. Not only would the field goal have put the Broncos up by 10, with just over a minute before half-time, but if he made the kick the Ravens wouldn't have had excellent field position to tie the game before half. If Prater makes that kick, it is very likely the Broncos win that football game. At punter the Broncos have Britton Colquitt who did a good job for them last season and should be effective this year as well. In the return game the Broncos found speedy Trindon Holliday last season off the Texans waivers. Holliday rewarded them with a big season, and capped it off by returning both a punt and kick for a TD in the playoff game.

Overall: 13-3, 1st in the AFC West

Though the Broncos have some question marks to start the season, they are blessed with a weak division as well as a quarterback who knows a thing or two about carrying a team on his back. With the weapons that Peyton Manning has and protection along the offensive line, the Broncos should have no problem winning this division. While maintaining the top spot in the AFC won't be easy, it's hard to pick against the Broncos. If they can get through their first six games at no worse than 2 losses, then they likely should lose no more than 1 or 2 more games the rest of the way with Von Miller back on defense.

| DENVER BRONCOS | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Week | Date | | Opponent | Steve's Prediction |
| 1 | September 5 | | <u>Baltimore Ravens</u> | W |
| 2 | September 15 | @ | <u>New York Giants</u> | L |
| 3 | September 23 | | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | W |
| 4 | September 29 | | <u>Philadelphia Eagles</u> | W |
| 5 | October 6 | @ | <u>Dallas Cowboys</u> | W |
| 6 | October 13 | | <u>Jacksonville Jaguars</u> | W |
| 7 | October 20 | @ | <u>Indianapolis Colts</u> | W |
| 8 | October 27 | | <u>Washington Redskins</u> | W |
| 9 | | | Bye Week | |
| 10 | November 10 | @ | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | L |
| 11 | November 17 | | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | W |
| 12 | November 24 | @ | <u>New England Patriots</u> | L |
| 13 | December 1 | @ | <u>Kansas City Chiefs</u> | W |
| 14 | December 8 | | <u>Tennessee Titans</u> | W |
| 15 | December 12 | | <u>San Diego Chargers</u> | W |
| 16 | December 22 | @ | <u>Houston Texans</u> | W |
| 17 | December 29 | @ | <u>Oakland Raiders</u> | W |
| Record: 13-3 (5-1) | | | | |

| Day | Date | WEEK 1 | | | Time (ET) |
|-----|--------------|----------------------|---|----------------------|-----------|
| Thu | September 5 | Baltimore Ravens | @ | Denver Broncos | 8:30 PM |
| Sun | September 8 | New England Patriots | @ | Buffalo Bills | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 8 | Seattle Seahawks | @ | Carolina Panthers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 8 | Cincinnati Bengals | @ | Chicago Bears | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 8 | Miami Dolphins | @ | Cleveland Browns | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 8 | Oakland Raiders | @ | Indianapolis Colts | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 8 | Minnesota Vikings | @ | Detroit Lions | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 8 | Kansas City Chiefs | @ | Jacksonville Jaguars | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 8 | Atlanta Falcons | @ | New Orleans Saints | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 8 | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | @ | New York Jets | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 8 | Tennessee Titans | @ | Pittsburgh Steelers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 8 | Arizona Cardinals | @ | St. Louis Rams | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | September 8 | Green Bay Packers | @ | San Francisco 49ers | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | September 8 | New York Giants | @ | Dallas Cowboys | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | September 9 | Houston Texans | @ | San Diego Chargers | 10:20 PM |
| Mon | September 9 | Philadelphia Eagles | @ | Washington Redskins | 7:10 PM |
| Day | Date | WEEK 2 | | | Time (ET) |
| Thu | September 12 | New York Jets | @ | New England Patriots | 8:25 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | St. Louis Rams | @ | Atlanta Falcons | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | Carolina Panthers | @ | Buffalo Bills | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | Minnesota Vikings | @ | Chicago Bears | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | Miami Dolphins | @ | Indianapolis Colts | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | Washington Redskins | @ | Green Bay Packers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | Tennessee Titans | @ | Houston Texans | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | Dallas Cowboys | @ | Kansas City Chiefs | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | San Diego Chargers | @ | Philadelphia Eagles | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | Cleveland Browns | @ | Baltimore Ravens | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | Detroit Lions | @ | Arizona Cardinals | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | New Orleans Saints | @ | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | Denver Broncos | @ | New York Giants | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | Jacksonville Jaguars | @ | Oakland Raiders | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | September 15 | San Francisco 49ers | @ | Seattle Seahawks | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | September 16 | Pittsburgh Steelers | @ | Cincinnati Bengals | 8:40 PM |
| Day | Date | WEEK 3 | | | Time (ET) |
| Thu | September 19 | Kansas City Chiefs | @ | Philadelphia Eagles | 8:25 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | New York Giants | @ | Carolina Panthers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | Green Bay Packers | @ | Cincinnati Bengals | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | St. Louis Rams | @ | Dallas Cowboys | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | Cleveland Browns | @ | Minnesota Vikings | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | Arizona Cardinals | @ | New Orleans Saints | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | @ | New England Patriots | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | San Diego Chargers | @ | Tennessee Titans | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | Houston Texans | @ | Baltimore Ravens | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | Detroit Lions | @ | Washington Redskins | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | Atlanta Falcons | @ | Miami Dolphins | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | Buffalo Bills | @ | New York Jets | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | Jacksonville Jaguars | @ | Seattle Seahawks | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | Indianapolis Colts | @ | San Francisco 49ers | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | September 22 | Chicago Bears | @ | Pittsburgh Steelers | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | September 23 | Oakland Raiders | @ | Denver Broncos | 8:40 PM |

| Day | Date | WEEK 4 | | | Time (ET) |
|--|--------------|----------------------|---|----------------------|-----------|
| Thu | September 26 | San Francisco 49ers | @ | St. Louis Rams | 8:25 PM |
| Sun | September 29 | Baltimore Ravens | @ | Buffalo Bills | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 29 | Cincinnati Bengals | @ | Cleveland Browns | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 29 | Chicago Bears | @ | Detroit Lions | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 29 | Seattle Seahawks | @ | Houston Texans | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 29 | Indianapolis Colts | @ | Jacksonville Jaguars | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 29 | New York Giants | @ | Kansas City Chiefs | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 29 | Pittsburgh Steelers | @ | Minnesota Vikings | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 29 | Arizona Cardinals | @ | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | September 29 | New York Jets | @ | Tennessee Titans | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | September 29 | Philadelphia Eagles | @ | Denver Broncos | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | September 29 | Washington Redskins | @ | Oakland Raiders | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | September 29 | Dallas Cowboys | @ | San Diego Chargers | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | September 29 | New England Patriots | @ | Atlanta Falcons | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | September 30 | Miami Dolphins | @ | New Orleans Saints | 8:40 PM |
| BYES: Green Bay, Carolina | | | | | |
| Day | Date | WEEK 5 | | | Time (ET) |
| Thu | October 3 | Buffalo Bills | @ | Cleveland Browns | 8:25 PM |
| Sun | October 6 | New Orleans Saints | @ | Chicago Bears | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 6 | New England Patriots | @ | Cincinnati Bengals | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 6 | Seattle Seahawks | @ | Indianapolis Colts | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 6 | Detroit Lions | @ | Green Bay Packers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 6 | Baltimore Ravens | @ | Miami Dolphins | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 6 | Philadelphia Eagles | @ | New York Giants | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 6 | Kansas City Chiefs | @ | Tennessee Titans | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 6 | Jacksonville Jaguars | @ | St. Louis Rams | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 6 | Carolina Panthers | @ | Arizona Cardinals | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | October 6 | Denver Broncos | @ | Dallas Cowboys | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | October 6 | San Diego Chargers | @ | Oakland Raiders | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | October 6 | Houston Texans | @ | San Francisco 49ers | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | October 7 | New York Jets | @ | Atlanta Falcons | 8:40 PM |
| BYES: Minnesota, Tampa Bay, Pittsburgh, Washington | | | | | |
| Day | Date | WEEK 6 | | | Time (ET) |
| Thu | October 10 | New York Giants | @ | Chicago Bears | 8:25 PM |
| Sun | October 13 | Cincinnati Bengals | @ | Buffalo Bills | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 13 | Detroit Lions | @ | Cleveland Browns | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 13 | St. Louis Rams | @ | Houston Texans | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 13 | Oakland Raiders | @ | Kansas City Chiefs | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 13 | Carolina Panthers | @ | Minnesota Vikings | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 13 | Pittsburgh Steelers | @ | New York Jets | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 13 | Green Bay Packers | @ | Baltimore Ravens | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 13 | Philadelphia Eagles | @ | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 13 | Jacksonville Jaguars | @ | Denver Broncos | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | October 13 | Tennessee Titans | @ | Seattle Seahawks | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | October 13 | New Orleans Saints | @ | New England Patriots | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | October 13 | Arizona Cardinals | @ | San Francisco 49ers | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | October 13 | Washington Redskins | @ | Dallas Cowboys | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | October 14 | Indianapolis Colts | @ | San Diego Chargers | 8:40 PM |
| BYES: Atlanta, Miami | | | | | |

| Day | Date | WEEK 7 | | | Time (ET) |
|--|------------|----------------------|---|----------------------|-----------|
| Thu | October 17 | Seattle Seahawks | @ | Arizona Cardinals | 8:25 PM |
| Sun | October 20 | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | @ | Atlanta Falcons | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 20 | St. Louis Rams | @ | Carolina Panthers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 20 | Cincinnati Bengals | @ | Detroit Lions | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 20 | San Diego Chargers | @ | Jacksonville Jaguars | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 20 | Houston Texans | @ | Kansas City Chiefs | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 20 | Buffalo Bills | @ | Miami Dolphins | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 20 | New England Patriots | @ | New York Jets | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 20 | Dallas Cowboys | @ | Philadelphia Eagles | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 20 | Chicago Bears | @ | Washington Redskins | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 20 | San Francisco 49ers | @ | Tennessee Titans | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | October 20 | Cleveland Browns | @ | Green Bay Packers | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | October 20 | Baltimore Ravens | @ | Pittsburgh Steelers | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | October 20 | Denver Broncos | @ | Indianapolis Colts | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | October 21 | Minnesota Vikings | @ | New York Giants | 8:40 PM |
| BYES: Oakland, New Orleans | | | | | |
| Day | Date | WEEK 8 | | | Time (ET) |
| Thu | October 24 | Carolina Panthers | @ | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | 8:25 PM |
| Sun | October 27 | Dallas Cowboys | @ | Detroit Lions | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 27 | San Francisco 49ers | @ | Jacksonville Jaguars | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 27 | Cleveland Browns | @ | Kansas City Chiefs | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 27 | Buffalo Bills | @ | New Orleans Saints | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 27 | Miami Dolphins | @ | New England Patriots | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 27 | New York Giants | @ | Philadelphia Eagles | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | October 27 | New York Jets | @ | Cincinnati Bengals | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | October 27 | Pittsburgh Steelers | @ | Oakland Raiders | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | October 27 | Atlanta Falcons | @ | Arizona Cardinals | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | October 27 | Washington Redskins | @ | Denver Broncos | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | October 27 | Green Bay Packers | @ | Minnesota Vikings | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | October 28 | Seattle Seahawks | @ | St. Louis Rams | 8:40 PM |
| Byes: Chicago, Tennessee, Indianapolis, San Diego, Baltimore, Houston | | | | | |
| Day | Date | WEEK 9 | | | Time (ET) |
| Thu | October 31 | Cincinnati Bengals | @ | Miami Dolphins | 8:25 PM |
| Sun | November 3 | Kansas City Chiefs | @ | Buffalo Bills | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 3 | Atlanta Falcons | @ | Carolina Panthers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 3 | Minnesota Vikings | @ | Dallas Cowboys | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 3 | New Orleans Saints | @ | New York Jets | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 3 | Tennessee Titans | @ | St. Louis Rams | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 3 | San Diego Chargers | @ | Washington Redskins | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 3 | Philadelphia Eagles | @ | Oakland Raiders | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | November 3 | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | @ | Seattle Seahawks | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | November 3 | Baltimore Ravens | @ | Cleveland Browns | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | November 3 | Pittsburgh Steelers | @ | New England Patriots | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | November 3 | Indianapolis Colts | @ | Houston Texans | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | November 4 | Chicago Bears | @ | Green Bay Packers | 8:40 PM |
| BYES: Detroit, NY Giants, Denver, Arizona, San Francisco, Jacksonville | | | | | |

| Day | Date | WEEK 10 | | | Time (ET) |
|--|-------------|----------------------|---|----------------------|-----------|
| Thu | November 7 | Washington Redskins | @ | Minnesota Vikings | 8:25 PM |
| Sun | November 10 | Seattle Seahawks | @ | Atlanta Falcons | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 10 | Detroit Lions | @ | Chicago Bears | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 10 | St. Louis Rams | @ | Indianapolis Colts | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 10 | Philadelphia Eagles | @ | Green Bay Packers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 10 | Oakland Raiders | @ | New York Giants | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 10 | Jacksonville Jaguars | @ | Tennessee Titans | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 10 | Buffalo Bills | @ | Pittsburgh Steelers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 10 | Cincinnati Bengals | @ | Baltimore Ravens | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 10 | Carolina Panthers | @ | San Francisco 49ers | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | November 10 | Houston Texans | @ | Arizona Cardinals | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | November 10 | Denver Broncos | @ | San Diego Chargers | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | November 10 | Dallas Cowboys | @ | New Orleans Saints | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | November 11 | Miami Dolphins | @ | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | 8:40 PM |
| BYES: Cleveland, Kansas City, New England, NY Jets | | | | | |
| Day | Date | WEEK 11 | | | Time (ET) |
| Thu | November 14 | Indianapolis Colts | @ | Tennessee Titans | 8:25 PM |
| Sun | November 17 | New York Jets | @ | Buffalo Bills | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 17 | Baltimore Ravens | @ | Chicago Bears | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 17 | Cleveland Browns | @ | Cincinnati Bengals | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 17 | Oakland Raiders | @ | Houston Texans | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 17 | Arizona Cardinals | @ | Jacksonville Jaguars | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 17 | San Diego Chargers | @ | Miami Dolphins | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 17 | Washington Redskins | @ | Philadelphia Eagles | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 17 | Detroit Lions | @ | Pittsburgh Steelers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 17 | Atlanta Falcons | @ | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 17 | Kansas City Chiefs | @ | Denver Broncos | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | November 17 | San Francisco 49ers | @ | New Orleans Saints | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | November 17 | Minnesota Vikings | @ | Seattle Seahawks | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | November 17 | Green Bay Packers | @ | New York Giants | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | November 18 | New England Patriots | @ | Carolina Panthers | 8:40 PM |
| BYES: Dallas, St. Louis | | | | | |
| Day | Date | WEEK 12 | | | Time (ET) |
| Thu | November 21 | New Orleans Saints | @ | Atlanta Falcons | 8:25 PM |
| Sun | November 24 | Pittsburgh Steelers | @ | Cleveland Browns | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 24 | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | @ | Detroit Lions | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 24 | Minnesota Vikings | @ | Green Bay Packers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 24 | Jacksonville Jaguars | @ | Houston Texans | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 24 | San Diego Chargers | @ | Kansas City Chiefs | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 24 | Carolina Panthers | @ | Miami Dolphins | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 24 | Chicago Bears | @ | St. Louis Rams | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 24 | New York Jets | @ | Baltimore Ravens | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | November 24 | Indianapolis Colts | @ | Arizona Cardinals | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | November 24 | Tennessee Titans | @ | Oakland Raiders | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | November 24 | Dallas Cowboys | @ | New York Giants | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | November 24 | Denver Broncos | @ | New England Patriots | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | November 25 | San Francisco 49ers | @ | Washington Redskins | 8:40 PM |
| BYES: Buffalo, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Seattle | | | | | |

| Day | Date | WEEK 13 | | | Time (ET) |
|-----|-------------|----------------------|---|----------------------|-----------|
| Thu | November 28 | Green Bay Packers | @ | Detroit Lions | 12:30 PM |
| Thu | November 28 | Oakland Raiders | @ | Dallas Cowboys | 4:30 PM |
| Thu | November 28 | Pittsburgh Steelers | @ | Baltimore Ravens | 8:30 PM |
| Sun | December 1 | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | @ | Carolina Panthers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 1 | Jacksonville Jaguars | @ | Cleveland Browns | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 1 | Tennessee Titans | @ | Indianapolis Colts | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 1 | Denver Broncos | @ | Kansas City Chiefs | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 1 | Chicago Bears | @ | Minnesota Vikings | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 1 | Miami Dolphins | @ | New York Jets | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 1 | Arizona Cardinals | @ | Philadelphia Eagles | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 1 | Atlanta Falcons | @ | Buffalo Bills | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | December 1 | St. Louis Rams | @ | San Francisco 49ers | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | December 1 | New England Patriots | @ | Houston Texans | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | December 1 | Cincinnati Bengals | @ | San Diego Chargers | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | December 1 | New York Giants | @ | Washington Redskins | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | December 2 | New Orleans Saints | @ | Seattle Seahawks | 8:40 PM |
| Day | Date | WEEK 14 | | | Time (ET) |
| Thu | December 5 | Houston Texans | @ | Jacksonville Jaguars | 8:25 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | Indianapolis Colts | @ | Cincinnati Bengals | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | Carolina Panthers | @ | New Orleans Saints | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | Cleveland Browns | @ | New England Patriots | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | Oakland Raiders | @ | New York Jets | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | Detroit Lions | @ | Philadelphia Eagles | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | Miami Dolphins | @ | Pittsburgh Steelers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | Minnesota Vikings | @ | Baltimore Ravens | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | Buffalo Bills | @ | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | Kansas City Chiefs | @ | Washington Redskins | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | Tennessee Titans | @ | Denver Broncos | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | St. Louis Rams | @ | Arizona Cardinals | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | New York Giants | @ | San Diego Chargers | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | Seattle Seahawks | @ | San Francisco 49ers | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | December 8 | Atlanta Falcons | @ | Green Bay Packers | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | December 9 | Dallas Cowboys | @ | Chicago Bears | 8:40 PM |
| Day | Date | WEEK 15 | | | Time (ET) |
| Thu | December 12 | San Diego Chargers | @ | Denver Broncos | 8:25 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | Washington Redskins | @ | Atlanta Falcons | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | Chicago Bears | @ | Cleveland Browns | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | Houston Texans | @ | Indianapolis Colts | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | Buffalo Bills | @ | Jacksonville Jaguars | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | New England Patriots | @ | Miami Dolphins | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | Philadelphia Eagles | @ | Minnesota Vikings | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | Seattle Seahawks | @ | New York Giants | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | Arizona Cardinals | @ | Tennessee Titans | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | New Orleans Saints | @ | St. Louis Rams | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | San Francisco 49ers | @ | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | New York Jets | @ | Carolina Panthers | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | Kansas City Chiefs | @ | Oakland Raiders | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | Green Bay Packers | @ | Dallas Cowboys | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | December 15 | Cincinnati Bengals | @ | Pittsburgh Steelers | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | December 16 | Baltimore Ravens | @ | Detroit Lions | 8:40 PM |

| Day | Date | WEEK 16 | | | Time (ET) |
|-----|-------------|----------------------|---|----------------------|-----------|
| Sun | December 22 | Miami Dolphins | @ | Buffalo Bills | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | New Orleans Saints | @ | Carolina Panthers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | Minnesota Vikings | @ | Cincinnati Bengals | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | Denver Broncos | @ | Houston Texans | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | Tennessee Titans | @ | Jacksonville Jaguars | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | Indianapolis Colts | @ | Kansas City Chiefs | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | Cleveland Browns | @ | New York Jets | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | Chicago Bears | @ | Philadelphia Eagles | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | @ | St. Louis Rams | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | Dallas Cowboys | @ | Washington Redskins | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | New York Giants | @ | Detroit Lions | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | Arizona Cardinals | @ | Seattle Seahawks | 4:05 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | Pittsburgh Steelers | @ | Green Bay Packers | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | Oakland Raiders | @ | San Diego Chargers | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | December 22 | New England Patriots | @ | Baltimore Ravens | 8:30 PM |
| Mon | December 23 | Atlanta Falcons | @ | San Francisco 49ers | 8:40 PM |
| Day | Date | WEEK 17 | | | Time (ET) |
| Sun | December 29 | Carolina Panthers | @ | Atlanta Falcons | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | Green Bay Packers | @ | Chicago Bears | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | Baltimore Ravens | @ | Cincinnati Bengals | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | Jacksonville Jaguars | @ | Indianapolis Colts | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | Philadelphia Eagles | @ | Dallas Cowboys | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | New York Jets | @ | Miami Dolphins | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | Detroit Lions | @ | Minnesota Vikings | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | @ | New Orleans Saints | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | Buffalo Bills | @ | New England Patriots | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | Washington Redskins | @ | New York Giants | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | Houston Texans | @ | Tennessee Titans | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | Cleveland Browns | @ | Pittsburgh Steelers | 1:00 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | San Francisco 49ers | @ | Arizona Cardinals | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | Denver Broncos | @ | Oakland Raiders | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | Kansas City Chiefs | @ | San Diego Chargers | 4:25 PM |
| Sun | December 29 | St. Louis Rams | @ | Seattle Seahawks | 4:25 PM |

Writers for Team Previews:

AFC South – Parks Smith

AFC North, Buccaneers, Panthers, Bills, Patriots & Dolphins – Alan Zlotorzynski

NFC West , Falcons & Saints – PJ Moran

NFC East, AFC West, NFC North, Jets – Steve Shoup



2013 NFL GUIDE

VEGAS ODDS & OVER/UNDER PREDICTIONS

By John Manuel:

AFC East:

New England Patriots – 11.5 Wins

My Call: UNDER

It's tough to think that the Patriots are not going to get to 12 wins. Very suspect division and having Tom Brady should make it a lock. But I think that the loss of Aaron Hernandez and Wes Welker and the Gronk's uncertainty has me thinking this team wins 10 or 11.

Miami Dolphins – 7.5 wins

My Call: OVER

No team made more noise since last season than Miami. They have added multiple weapons for Ryan Tannehill, but will it pay off? I think enough to at least go 8-8. Dion Jordan should also join Cameron Wake as an imposing pair on defense.



New York Jets – 6.5 wins

My Call: UNDER

I have a knack for killing the Jets and I am going to add on here. I look at their offense and just laugh. They still have some solid players on defense but this league is about offense and they don't have it. Especially starting at the QB unless Geno Smith shocks the NFL in year one.

Buffalo Bills – 6.5 wins

My Call: OVER

Surprised I am going this route but just have a feeling Doug Marrone will make an impact in year one just like Sean Payton did in NOLA. 7 wins are very possible even with Manuel at QB. I just see the Bills are more of a surprise than most do.

AFC South:

Houston Texans – 10 wins

My Call: OVER

I think everyone other than Ron Jaworski has concerns over Matt Schaub but I am pretty confident he can play well enough to equal last season's results. The Texans will repeat as division champs because they are in solid shape almost everywhere. If not, coach and QB could be in trouble.

Indianapolis Colts – 8.5 wins

My Call: OVER

I thought this number may be 1 win higher but my call is they do win 9. Even though they beat up on the Jags, Titans and Lions last season. Andrew Luck should be more solid in year two and is a star to be.

Tennessee Titans – 6.5 wins

My Call: UNDER

This could all depend on Jake Locker and if he shows anything in year three. You have a coach on the hot seat and a shaky QB, which could be a recipe for disaster. But I can see Chris Johnson having a huge bounce back and that would help Locker.



Jacksonville Jaguars – 5 wins

My Call: EVEN

Jaguars are going to go 5-11. Not much to say about these guys other than I hope the Londoners love their team. It wouldn't be a crazy call for them to get to 6 wins but I am just far from sold on anything they put behind center.

AFC North:

Baltimore Ravens – 8.5 wins

My Call: OVER

It takes at least 9 wins to make the playoffs and John Harbaugh always makes the playoffs. Simple math or logic, or whatever you call it. I don't see a repeat champ but the playoffs should be a lock.

Pittsburgh Steelers – 9 wins

My Call: OVER

I see a comeback year for the Steelers and that means 10 wins and a battle with Baltimore for the AFC North. Big Ben needs to stay healthy and rookie Jarvis Jones needs to make an impact without James Harrison there.



Cincinnati Bengals – 8.5 wins

My Call: UNDER

I like Andy Dalton and everyone loves AJ Green but I just see them ending up 8-8. One reason is I think Marvin Lewis is heading into that Andy Reid territory of being with the same team for a long time, but never going anywhere far.

Cleveland Browns – 6 wins

My Call: OVER

7-9. Norv Turner will help Brandon Weeden and new coach Chud makes an impact like Marrone. Defense is better and last place schedule helps. Just have a hunch.

AFC West:

Denver Broncos – 11.5 wins

My Call: OVER

Denver should get 12 or even 13 victories. Manning back in year two and giving him Wes Welker to go with an already dangerous pair of receivers. Loss of Dumervil and short term loss of Von Miller hurt, but they can overcome because of Manning.



San Diego Chargers – 7.5 wins

My Call: UNDER

I just don't like this team and we don't know enough about Mike McCoy to see if he can change this franchise back to 4 years ago. They had a huge draft but we will have to see if that pans out quickly.

Kansas City Chiefs – 7 wins

My Call: OVER

Can they do what Indy did a year ago? I think partially. No playoffs but 8 wins. New coach and QB should help accomplish this. And they do have some solid returning talent in KC.

Oakland Raiders – 5.5 wins

My Call: UNDER

Someone has to win like 3 games and I think Oakland is it. They are on a better track but they have a huge hole to dig out from. Hugh Jackson's trade for Carson Palmer was a disaster and hurt the Raiders as bad as any move Al Davis did in the past 2 decades of his life.

NFC East:

Washington Redskins – 8 wins

My Call: OVER

They won 10 last season, so I think 9 is certainly a good chance. I know Robert Griffin is coming off an injury as everyone else does, but I believe he will be fine and if not Kirk Cousins should fill in fine. The defense has to be better, although the secondary is inexperienced. I just think Griffin is a star and has this franchise headed in the right direction for once.

New York Giants – 9 wins

My Call: EVEN

I think the Giants end up 9-7. They could be 10-6 but I would go under for sure. They always have a good foundation but I am not sold on them defensively and at the offensive line. And Eli Manning has had a remarkable history of being out there every week. Is he due to go down? Peyton looked invincible at one point and we know what happened two years ago.

Dallas Cowboys – 8.5 wins

My Call: UNDER

I don't like this current situation at all. You can tell me all day about all the talent they have. I still think there are major concerns at the top between Jerrah and Coach Jason Garrett. Let's see what Monte Kiffin can do coming off the disaster at USC. I could easily see a season much like the final one for Wade Phillips. Jerry Jones really needs

to take a look what he has done to this organization much like Dan Snyder did 3 years ago.

Philadelphia Eagles – 7 wins

My Call: Who knows? Actually going to say UNDER

No one knows what to expect from Philly with rookie coach Chip Kelly. Will the NFL not be ready for his offense or will Vick not be able to run it effectively? No one really knows yet. I think it may be a one year learning curve for Kelly to see where he wants to go at QB. A whole new secondary replacing a very disappointing one is something else to watch with the Eagles.



NFC South:

Atlanta Falcons – 10 wins

My Call: OVER

I am not a big Falcons guy but 11 wins should be there for the taking. The division is going to be tough but the Falcons have the talent to repeat what they did last regular season. Question is can Mike Smith and Matt Ryan do it in the playoffs finally? I think I said the same exact things a year ago.

New Orleans Saints - 9 wins

My Call: OVER

The Saints will bounce back with the return of Sean Payton in 2013. The defense is still a concern as they shuffle coordinators once again. But the defense is always a concern. Payton plus Brees is good enough to get at least 10 wins for the Saints.

Carolina Panthers – 7.5 wins

My Call: UNDER

I want to go over but just can't do it. The Panthers seem to show promise under Cam Newton but I just am not a huge fan of teams with coaches not cemented in stone for the future. Add losing Newton's offensive coordinator to Cleveland and I am worried he could slip back into his childish ways.



Tampa Bay Buccaneers – 7.5 wins

My Call: OVER

I am not a huge fan of Tampa and far from a fan of Greg Schiano. But adding Revis was huge for the Bucs. Yes his return from the ACL is not a certain he is ready to be the best corner in the NFL yet, but it was a huge grab. Pressure is on Josh Freeman to produce and I feel he will do enough to get them 8 to 9 wins.

NFC North:

Green Bay Packers – 10 wins

My Call: EVEN

10 wins sounds perfect for the Packers. Aaron Rodgers is the best but he also takes a beating week to week. And now has lost his left tackle for the season. The defense will have to improve to get more than 11 wins in another tough NFC division combined with the first place schedule.

Minnesota Vikings – 7.5 wins

My Call: OVER

The Vikings made the playoffs and added some key components in free agency and the draft yet Vegas is dumping on them with their win total. It looks to be all about Christian

Ponder and if he can step up his game. I am nervous saying over because even the Vikings seem concerned with Ponder by bringing in Matt Cassel.

Chicago Bears - 8.5 wins

My Call: OVER

Much like the Eagles it will be interesting to see what Marc Trestman brings to Chicago. The Bears did win 10 last season, but can the defense make plays like it did in 2012? That will be hard to do and what will life after Urlacher be? Most importantly which Jay Cutler shows up in 2013? I think he can work well with Trestman and get them 9 wins.

Detroit Lions - 7.5 wins

My Call: UNDER

And maybe just because someone can't win 8 games in this division. When I look at making the call on Detroit I see how tough the NFC looks to be this year. Who is going to lose games? Taking my chances that Megatron, Stafford and Schwartz cannot get back to what they did just two seasons ago.



NFC West:

San Francisco 49ers – 11.5 wins

My Call: UNDER

Two months ago I would have said easy OVER. But now I just think the NFC is way too tough and I see a log jam at the top. The NFC West is the toughest division on paper after years of being a joke. It will be interesting to see if Colin Kaepernick is a MVP candidate or not this season also. Losing Crabtree hurts him a lot as he finally seemed to be coming into his own. I might get burned here because the Niners are loaded with talent but still just think the NFC is a monster.

Seattle Seahawks – 10.5 wins

My Call: UNDER

Please refer to the 49ers statement here also. I do think the Hawks have the talent to win 11 or more but once again the NFC is killer. Russell Wilson is great. But I do think the talkative Seattle corners have put way too much focus on themselves and they will get exposed this season. Plus, losing Percy is a major loss to start the season.



St. Louis Rams – 7.5 wins

My Call: OVER

I am not completely sold on Jeff Fisher's crew but 8 wins is very possible. Fisher is good and the team showed promise last season especially against the Niners head to head. It is all going to come down to where Sam Bradford is at in his career. Is his a franchise guy or just a legit caliber starter? St. Louis has a lot riding on that.

Arizona Cardinals – 5.5 wins

My Call: OVER

Bruce Arians proved that he can be a winning NFL coach last season and I think he can take the Cards to at least 6 victories. I am not a fan of Carson Palmer but he has to be better than the mess they have had the past two seasons. Patrick Peterson is a star and Arians feels he can also help on offense. Can Arizona protect Palmer much better than they did Kolb or Skelton? Big question but it has to be better.



2013 NFL GUIDE

TOP 10 GAMES TO WATCH THIS SEASON

Top 10 Games to Watch This Season:

By Willypops:

Every year, there are a total of 256 regular season games played in the NFL. When you take a look at the comprehensive 17-week NFL schedule prior to the start of the season, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of the games don't have much hype or intrigue associated with them. Those are games that are of interest mainly to just the fans of the two teams that are facing off. Well that, and all fantasy team owners!

But, every year as the season approaches, fans everywhere will look at the schedule and pinpoint certain games that are just must see. So we thought we'd get into the act and take a shot at identifying the Top 10 games you just have to watch this season.

Of course, there are a number of reasons why particular games will have widespread appeal. Sometimes, the game has the potential to be critically important to a playoff race or it may be a game involving two perennially successful franchises. Often, these are games that have an interesting storyline such as an intriguing quarterback faceoff or a rematch aspect. Even the location of a particular game can be the ingredient that adds flavor to a matchup. Whatever the reason, the real football fan doesn't need a network promo to tell them that it's a game they can't miss.

After beginning the effort to develop this Top 10 list, we quickly realized that there were a lot of great games to consider. Indeed, our initial cut yielded 35 candidates. Whittling it down to just 10 games was not easy. In doing so, we had to leave some great possibilities off the list. Notable games that didn't make the cut included: Steelers @ Patriots; Seahawks @ Falcons; Packers @ Bears; Patriots @ Falcons; and Texans @ Colts.

As might be expected, several teams appear multiple times on our list and overall, only twelve different teams are involved. Interestingly, the Broncos appear in half of the games that we selected. While you might think that Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning is the reason for that, you will see that other factors came into play.

But enough discussion – let's get on to the list! Let us know where you think we missed the boat.

10 – Ravens @ Broncos – “Mile High Kickoff”

There are three things going for this game. First, unlike previous seasons, the defending Super Bowl Champions have to play the Thursday night, season “Kickoff” game on the road – the result of a scheduling conflict with the Orioles. Second, this is a rematch of last January’s Divisional Playoff game where a long TD pass by Joe Flacco with under a minute to play tied the game, and the Ravens went on to win it in overtime. If not for the pitiful failure of Denver defensive back Rahim Moore to come up



with a sure interception on that Flacco pass, it’s quite possible that the home team in this matchup actually would be the defending Super Bowl champ!

Finally, it’s the season “Kickoff” game – and aren’t we all ready for some football?

Week 1 – Thursday, September 5 @ 8:30 ET

9 – Redskins @ Broncos – “Shanny Goes Home”

What makes this one intriguing, is Redskins’ coach Mike Shanahan making his return to Denver, where he made his mark as a head coach. During Shanahan’s 14 seasons in Denver, he led the Broncos to a 138-86 record, resulting in 7 playoff appearances, 3 Division crowns and 2 Super Bowl titles. Shanahan, who still maintains a home in the Denver suburbs (well, it’s actually a 35,000 square foot mansion), was fired by Denver after the 2008 season, when the Broncos blew a 3-game division lead in the last 3 weeks of the season. This could be a matchup of potential playoff contenders in their respective conferences, but that will not be the primary hype surrounding this midseason contest.

Week 8 – Sunday, October 27 @ 4:25 ET

8 – Chiefs @ Eagles – “Brotherly Love Welcome for Reid?”

This one is another return of sorts. New Chiefs head coach, Andy Reid, leads a team that tied for the worst record in the NFL last year (2-14) into Philadelphia for a Week 3 faceoff with the Eagles, the team he coached for the previous 14 seasons. Reid led the Eagles to a 130-93-1 regular season record and 9 playoff appearances. During his time in Philadelphia, the Eagles won 7 Division titles and one Conference Championship.



However, because they never won the big one during his tenure there, Philadelphia fans never fully appreciated Reid. So it will be interesting to see how the Eagles fans react to Reid's return. Well ... not really. We pretty much have a feel for what type of reception Philly fans will give him! But, the drama over Reid coming to town aside, this early season game will give us a good opportunity to see if Reid can work some magic with the Chiefs and if Chip Kelly's much-talked about, up-tempo offense is legit.

Week 3 – Thursday, September 19 @ 8:25 ET

7 – Broncos @ Giants – “The Manning Bowl”

There's no question that a game pitting the Manning brothers against each other would be one that makes this list. The added intrigue here is that it could be the last time they faceoff, unless Eli somehow ends up in the AFC West in the next couple of years! With the NFL's rotating scheduling format where teams in opposite conferences only play each other once every four years, there's a distinct possibility that Peyton may no longer be playing by the time the 2017 season rolls around. The brothers have met twice in the past, with Peyton's Colts besting Eli's Giants both times. But then again, Eli holds the edge in Super Bowl rings 2-1, so you got to figure that Eli is okay with losing to big

brother when going head-to-head. Since this game comes very early in the season, there probably won't be any other really critical factors associated with this game.

Leading up to the game, you know there will be the endless blathering about the matchup and countless interviews with each guy where they really won't say anything. Then during the game there will be more blathering and numerous shots of the Manning parents sitting in the owner's suite, with the requisite speculation about which son each parent is rooting for. You know the drill – and you'll watch anyway!

Week 2 – Sunday, September 15 @ 4:25 ET

6 – Steelers @ Ravens – “Thanksgiving Hate in Charm City”

This one should be the best of the three Thanksgiving Day games. It involves a heated rivalry where there is an intense hatred of the other team. And that's just the fans! In fact, you would be hard pressed to find fans of either team who would even have anything nice to say about the other team's city – just on principle. Truth is, neither team actually really likes each other. As a result of this passionate, fan frenzy and on-field intensity, these prime time Steelers/Ravens matchups have provided us with some real entertainment in recent years.

There are some question marks with each team going into the season. Can each of them fill some major holes in their respective lineups resulting from off-season moves and significant injuries?

Can the Steelers rebound from their disappointing 2012 season where they lost 5 of their last 7 games? Can the Ravens find the inspiration to be that team that captures back-to-back Lombardi Trophies? The answer to these questions should start to come into focus by Thanksgiving Night. If both teams are getting it together, this one could be a real barnburner.



Week 13 – Thursday, November 28 @ 8:30 ET

5 – Seahawks @ 49ers – “NFC West Showdown”

This Week 14 game could have enormous playoff implications and could go a long way in determining who will win the NFC West Division crown. The teams split their two matchups last season, each getting a win on their home field. If it wasn't for a frantic drive by the Falcons in the waning moments of a Divisional playoff game, culminated by a Matt Bryant 49 yard field goal, these two teams would have met for a third time in the NFC Conference Championship game. A budding rivalry between these two teams seems to be springing up, and it has all the signs of one that will be around for a while.

In addition to the effect that this game could have on the playoff picture, it also offers the chance to be entertained by two of the brightest young quarterback stars in the NFL. The 49ers Colin Kaepernick, entering his third season in the league, and second-year guy, Russell Wilson of the Seahawks, are both dual-threat quarterbacks that bring their own unique style of play to the game. Kaepernick works more out of the Pistol and Read-Option schemes and, although the Seahawks implemented the Read-Option more and more as the season progressed last year, Wilson is more of a pocket passer who has an uncanny ability to scramble out of trouble and keep the chains moving. No matter how you slice it though, both guys are just flat out exciting to watch. It will be interesting to see how they fare playing against two of the league's toughest defenses in this game.

Week 14 – Sunday, December 8 @ 4:25 ET

4 – Broncos @ Patriots – “Manning vs. Brady Part 14”

No matter how many times it occurs, it's hard to get tired of seeing a Manning/Brady faceoff. The fact that Peyton has moved on to another team matters little. Here you get the chance to see two of the greatest quarterbacks to EVER play the game.

The outcome of these showdowns has been decidedly in Tom's favor. He is 9-4 going head-to-head with Peyton, including 2-1 in the postseason – with each getting a win in an AFC



Conference Championship game.

This late season game has the potential to be a classic. A Sunday night game in Foxboro in late November with the weather likely to be a factor – could there be a better backdrop for this one? Well, perhaps a Sunday night game at Mile High in late November with weather likely to be a factor?? Of course, this game has playoff implications written all over it and could conceivably convey home field advantage to the winner if they should face off again in the playoffs as champions of their respective divisions.

Regardless of the circumstances, there probably won't be too many more chances to see a Manning vs. Brady shootout. So let's savor this one!

Week 12 – Sunday, November 24 @ 8:30 ET

3 – Patriots @ Ravens – “AFC Championship Rematch”

This Week 16 game is actually a rematch of the last two AFC Conference Championship games. The Patriots won it in 2011 before going on to lose again to the Giants in the Super Bowl. In last season's game at Foxboro, the Patriots had a halftime lead but gave up 21 unanswered points in the 2nd half and lost 28-13. To make matters worse, the Patriots also lost to the Ravens in an early season game at Baltimore last year when they squandered a 30-21 4th quarter lead.

As alluded to above, there are questions about whether the Ravens will be able to fill the significant holes that exist in their receiving corps and on the defensive side of the ball. Likewise, New England's receiving corps took a major hit with the departures of Wes Welker and Brandon Lloyd and the arrest of Aaron Hernandez, not to mention Rob Gronkowski's injury. While Gronk is expected to be back and healthy by this point in the season, there has to be some nervousness in New England about how effective he will be considering the injury issue and the changes that have taken place.

Potentially, the importance of this game could be minimized if one or both teams fail to adequately adjust to their changed circumstances. But if they both step up to the challenges, as most people expect them to, then the significance of this game with respect to the AFC playoff picture cannot be overstated. The game is in Baltimore on Sunday night, so the advantage goes to the Ravens. But we don't recommend betting the farm against Brady.

Week 16 – Sunday, December 22 @ 8:30 ET

#2 – Falcons @ 49ers – “NFC Championship Rematch”

This one is the second of our Week 16 Conference Championship rematches. It's the Monday Night game and most everyone will be surprised if it doesn't have significant playoff implications.

The Falcons still have to be kicking themselves over their loss to the 49ers in the Championship game last year. They quickly jumped out to a 17-0 lead and held a 24-14 lead at the half. Many Falcons fans were starting to consider whether they would drive or fly to New Orleans for the Super Bowl. But the Falcons gave up 14 unanswered points in the 2nd half and eliminated their fans' quandary.

This game will feature two very different offensive approaches. With Colin Kaepernick, the 49ers will run a lot of pistol and read-option schemes. The Falcons on the other hand will rely on Matt Ryan in a more traditional pocket passing scheme. He likely will be throwing often to his elite corps of receivers: Roddy White, Julio Jones and Tony Gonzalez. But a wild-card in this game, and for the Falcons season for that matter, may be running back Steven Jackson. He came over to the Falcons after a number of very successful seasons with the Rams. If he can stay healthy and be similarly productive, he will bring an added dimension to the Falcons offense that for the most part has been lacking. Just think what a positive impact an effective running game will have on that Falcons passing attack.

There's a good chance that this game will be a shootout. Given the different offensive styles, the number of playmakers involved, the anticipated effect on the NFC playoff picture and the rematch factor, this could be one of the most entertaining games of the season. What a way to prime us for the final week of the season.

Week 16 – Monday, December 23 @ 8:40 ET

And the # 1 game to watch this season ...

1 – Broncos @ Colts – “Peyton Returns to the House He Built”

Yeah, Peyton again. But it just had to be this one. As a mid-season matchup, this game may be taking place a bit too early to know if it will have a big impact on the AFC playoff hunt. But how can you discount this storyline?

When you think of the Baltimore Colts, you think of Johnny Unitas. When you think of the Indianapolis Colts, there is no question, you think of Peyton Manning. In the 13 seasons he actually played for the Colts, he led them to 11 playoff appearances, 3 Conference Championship games, 2 Conference championships and one Super Bowl title. If ever a player can be considered an “institution” within a franchise, it’s Manning with the Colts. That’s why it was so hard for most fans, Colts or otherwise, to witness his departure from the Colts and his signing with the Broncos.



Lucas Oil Stadium, home to the Colts, opened in 2008. It is often referred to as “The House That Manning Built”, owing to the consistent success he helped bring to the Colts, and in doing so, the reputation he built for himself. So, given all this, is it any wonder why Peyton’s return to “his” stadium on the visiting team’s sideline is a big deal?

But if you need something more, consider the fact that Manning will be facing off against his successor, Andrew Luck, who last year actually had a much better rookie season with the Colts than Manning had with them. Luck helped lead the Colts to the playoffs and appears to be on the verge of attaining his own unique stardom.

So, will the cagy, old vet pull off one more stunning performance at Lucas Oil Stadium, one like those that Colts fans became accustomed to seeing? Or will the young phenom be able to stand up to the pressure under the intense spotlight that this game will generate? Will there be more fans in the stands wearing blue & white #12 jerseys or blue & white #18 jerseys? Can’t wait to see – enjoy!

Week 7 – Sunday, October 20 @ 8:30 ET



2013T NFL GUIDE

POSTSEASON PREDICTIONS

By Steve Shoup:

Here are my predictions for the 2013 NFL Postseason:

AFC Seeding:

- #1 – Denver Broncos
- #2 – Indianapolis Colts
- #3 – New England Patriots
- #4 – Cincinnati Bengals
- #5 – Houston Texans
- #6 – Baltimore Ravens

NFC Seeding:

- #1 – San Francisco 49ers
- #2 – Green Bay Packers
- #3 - Atlanta Falcons
- #4 – Washington Redskins
- #5 – Seattle Seahawks
- #6 – New Orleans Saints

In the AFC Wildcard round I predict that the Bengals will defeat the Texans and the Ravens will defeat the Patriots. In the NFC Wildcard round I predict that the Falcons will defeat the Saints and the Seahawks will defeat the Redskins.

That leaves us with this road to the Super Bowl and my predictions for the rest of the 2013 Postseason:



CREDITS:

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THANK YOU TO ALL OF OUR WRITERS AND EDITORS – Alan Zlotorzynski, John Manuel, PJ Moran, Parks Smith, Tajh Jenkins, Bill Shoup, and of course Steve Shoup!

Be sure to check out our Fantasy Football coverage all season long at fanspeak.com/nfl.

Happy 2013 NFL Season!