



National Football League

PRO FOOTBALL 2026 Preview



COMEBACK FAVORITES



Patrick Mahomes, Chiefs QB

Any talk about 2026 NFL Comeback Player of the Year has to start with Patrick Mahomes. The three-time Super Bowl winning playcaller for the Kansas City Chiefs had surgery for a torn ACL and LCL in December. He is poised to start the 2026 opener.



Daniel Jones, Colts QB

Jones led Indianapolis to an electric 7-1 start last year, looking less like a Giants and Vikings castoff and more like a CPOTY, if not a franchise QB. Then he was hobbled by injuries before tearing his Achilles in Week 14. The Colts didn't win a game without him.



Jayden Daniels, Commanders QB

After winning 2024 Offensive Rookie of the Year and leading the Commanders to the NFC Championship Game, knee, hamstring and elbow injuries hampered Daniels' sophomore stint. Washington went 5-12, the exact opposite record from 2024.



Kyler Murray, Vikings QB

Kyler Murray went from Cardinals franchise QB to free agent when he was released in March. He had a foot injury and when he played in his five games he didn't impress. He's now a Viking with some exciting weapons at his disposal.



Micah Parsons, Packers OLB

No defensive player has won CPOTY since Eric Berry in 2015. Parsons, returning from surgery on a torn ACL and his meniscus, has the raw talent to break that streak.



AJ Brown

Myles Garrett

Kenneth Walker III

Stars find new homes

Garrett off to L.A.; AJB moves north; Walker walks to K.C.

BY ERIC PEHOWIC, THE DAILY ITEM

Big names changed teams during the 2026 NFL offseason and fans won't have to wait a game to see them in their new uniforms and roles. All-Pro defensive lineman Myles Garrett and former All-Pro receiver AJ Brown are among the most notable names in new places, and they're both featured in the league's openers, where the league made another change.

The 2026 NFL season will kick off on a Wednesday this year, when Browns' New England Patriots play at the Seattle Seahawks at 8:20 p.m. Sept. 9, in a Super Bowl rematch.

Thursday football fans will get their fix when Garrett's Los Angeles Rams host the San Francisco 49ers the next night, at 8:35 p.m. Sept. 10.

The Wednesday kickoff is the first new starting day of the week since 2002, when the league's opener moved to Thursdays.

The NFC runners-up added

more than Garrett this offseason.

Future Hall of Famer Aaron Donald unretired and inked a one-year \$20 million contract that could reach \$30 million with incentives.

Los Angeles also traded for Trent McDuffie to shore up a cornerback room that was subpar last season.

According to ESPN's Matt Bowen, McDuffie was the third best offseason acquisition across the league.

Two other big defensive moves are among his top five — three-time Pro Bowl defensive tackle Dexter Lawrence II being traded to Cincinnati and four-time Pro Bowl edge rusher Trey Hendrickson being signed by Baltimore.

Reigning Super Bowl MVP Kenneth Walker III traded blue and green for red and yellow by signing a 3-year, \$43.05 million deal with the

Kansas City Chiefs.

Walker is the fourth Super Bowl MVP to change teams immediately in the offseason since NFL free agency began in 1993.

Kyler Murray joining the Minnesota Vikings as a free agent is another move with significant implications.

If he can stay healthy and focus — both big ifs — Murray is poised to have success similar to his rookie season when he was throwing to prime DeAndre Hopkins.

Justin Jefferson, Jordan Addison and T.J. Hockenson all stand to benefit from a Murray resurgence. And the Vikings could be in line to end a five-year playoff win drought.

The Las Vegas Raiders picked Indiana's star QB Fernando Mendoza first overall in April, but that was no surprise.

More than a month earlier they made former Baltimore center

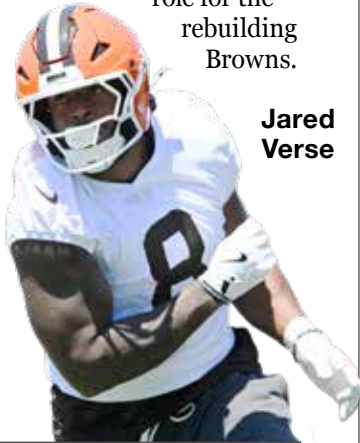
Tyler Linderbaum the highest-paid interior lineman in NFL history with a 3-year, \$81 million contract.

Linderbaum, a 3-time Pro Bowl selection, will be invaluable help for Mendoza and the offense in general. The Raiders allowed a league-high 64 sacks and finished last in the NFL in rushing yards and rushing touchdowns in 2025.

Cleveland dealt Garrett for a 2027 first round pick, a 2028 second, a 2029 third and the Rams' talented edge Jared Verse.

Verse, who won Defensive Rookie of the Year in 2024 and has been a Pro Bowl selection in both of his years as a pro, will

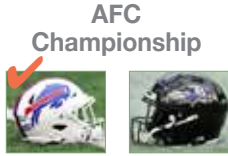
play an every down role for the rebuilding Browns.



Jared Verse

PICK THE CHAMP

The Bills' Josh Allen and the Ravens' Lamar Jackson will face off in the AFC Championship, so one of them will finally make a Super Bowl. There they'll fall to the Rams.



AFC Championship



NFC Championship



Super Bowl

ERIC PEHOWIC

NFL'S GLOBAL APPEAL



Melbourne Cricket Ground, in Melbourne, Australia

The NFL will play a record nine games outside of the United States in 2026.

The travel kicks off early this year, with the Los Angeles Rams and San Francisco 49ers playing at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in Melbourne, Australia, on Sept. 10 — Thursday of opening week. Kickoff is 8:35 p.m. Eastern Time, which is 10:35 a.m. local time.

Then on Sept. 27, the Cowboys and Ravens travel to Rio de Janeiro.

In October, London will host three games — Colts-Commanders and Eagles-Jaguars at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium. The third game also features the Jaguars. They'll be facing the Texans at Wembley Stadium. It's the third time the Jaguars have played back-to-back games in London.

The league will also play in Madrid, Munich, Paris and Mexico City in 2026.

RECORDS IN JEOPARDY IN 2026

Team sacks in a season

Current record: Chicago Bears, 72 in 1984

Contender: The 2025 Denver Broncos sacked QBs 68 times in 2025.

Yards from scrimmage in a season

Current record: Chris Johnson, 2,509 in 2009

Contender: Bijan Robinson had 2,298 scrimmage yards in 2025.

Receptions in a season

Current record: Michael Thomas, 149 in 2019

Contenders: Puka Nakua had 129 last season. Ja'Marr Chase had 125.



Travis Kelce

Career playoff receiving yards

Current record: Jerry Rice, 2,245

Contender: Travis Kelce needs 168 yards to break the record.

2026 SITUATIONS TO WATCH

Aaron Rodgers' farewell tour

Rodgers is a future first-ballot Hall-of-Famer. He's a four-time MVP and the likely starter for the Steelers in 2026. He has said this is his last hurrah and will have a better receiving corps than last year at his disposal.

Baker Mayfield's FA audition

The Buccaneers and Mayfield couldn't reach a long-term deal after a dip in the QBs numbers in 2025 as his WRs dealt with injuries. In three years with Tampa, he's averaged 4,079 yards, 31 TDs and 12 INTs a season.



Young quarterbacks seek return of rookie-year magic

Texans QB C.J. Stroud and Commanders QB Jayden Daniels had rookie seasons that portended superstar careers. Both have faltered since and a return to form could make both teams playoff contenders. In 2023, Stroud won rookie of the year and led Houston to the AFC South title and a playoff win. Daniels was named the top rookie in 2024 and led Washington to the NFC Championship Game.



Jayden Daniels

C.J. Stroud



Cowboys bolster defense

Dak Prescott, CeeDee Lamb, George Pickens and Javonte Williams are top-tier fantasy picks. But the Cowboys have missed the playoffs in back-to-back years because their defense has been porous — ranking last in points allowed and third-worst in yards allowed last season. Dallas added a bunch of veterans on that side of the ball and spent five of seven draft picks on defense, including first-rounders Caleb Downs, of Ohio State, and Malachi Lawrence, of University of Central Florida.



Caleb Downs

BURNING QUESTIONS

1

Is McCarthy the answer to Steelers' drought?

Only three men have coached the Pittsburgh Steelers since 1969 — Chuck Noll, Bill Cowher and Mike Tomlin. Tomlin has the best winning percentage. In 19 years, he never had a losing season. He also hadn't led his team to a playoff win since 2016. New Steelers coach Mike McCarthy has a lot to live up to in Pittsburgh, but he'll be expected to get a playoff win sooner rather than later.

2

Can Caleb Williams, Bears live up to the hype?

No Chicago Bears quarterback has thrown for 4,000 yards, but current starter Caleb Williams got closest with 3,942 last year in his second season in the league. He improved his quarterback rating in 2025 and the team went from 5-14 to 11-6 with a win in the Wild Card round. Many expect the Bears and Williams to take the next step in 2026.

3

How will Eagles O cope with no AJB?

The Philadelphia Eagles roster a lot of the same players who won the Super Bowl two years ago, minus, of course, AJ Brown, who is now a Patriot. Brown was the first Eagles receiver to post 5,000 yards over four seasons. He made Pro Bowl three times in four seasons. Devonta Smith will step in as the new No. 1 with either rookie Makai Lemon or Packers castoff Dontayvion Wicks as the new No. 2. How they settle into those roles will determine if the Eagles can challenge the Rams, Seahawks and Lions in the NFC.

4

How will Harbaugh impact the Giants?

The New York Giants have won 14 games in the last three seasons leading to the arrival of John Harbaugh, the top coaching free agent in the 2026 offseason. The Giants core of young stars — Jaxon Dart, Cam Skattebo and Malik Nabers — has seen its share of offseason hype. How the new coach and the youngsters connect will go a long way to determining if the Giants will have a winning season.