



2024 NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS SEASON PREVIEW



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The Eagle-Tribune,
The Salem News,
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and the Gloucester Daily Times*

Friday, September 6, 2024

YES HE MAYE!

**HOPES ARE HIGH FOR ROOKIE
PATRIOTS QUARTERBACK DRAKE MAYE**

Is Drake
Maye the
Patriots' QB
savior? It's
only a matter
of time
before
new era
begins at
quarterback.

Finish, not start, key to 2024 season

Bill Burt



When your NFL franchise competes for Super Bowls, most of “those” teams have something in common beyond the fact they are probably multi-talented, with five or six NFL all-stars.

Those franchises usually start the season the right way.

They win most of their early games, getting in that “winning” mentality, and then from there those four or five teams with a real shot figure it out.

The 2024 New England Patriots are not one of those franchises. Not even close.

Three wins. Four wins. Five wins. Tops.

But that’s OK.

This is a reboot season. Every organization goes through it. This one, though, took about three decades to finalize.

And guess what? Patriots Nation is OK with that.

While the Patriots have been stuck in this “rebuild” almost since Tom Brady left, this rebuild is a different.

The Patriots are young and/or inexperienced at many key positions, including head coach, and they don’t have the star quality handful of players to rely on.

Again. That’s OK.

While they may be in for a long season, maybe winning one game over the first two months, figuring out Maye’s status is really THE story of the 2024 season.

And as we learned in 1993 with Drew Bledsoe, by the middle of



AMANDA SABGA

Former New England Patriots quarterback Drew Bledsoe addresses the crowd at Gillette Stadium during a halftime ceremony honoring the 2001 Super Bowl team. Bledsoe and the Patriots finished strong his rookie season.

December we knew there might be something special there.

After starting his career at 0-8 as a starter – he was injured for three-plus games in between – he finished that rookie season with four consecutive wins.

The last win over the Dolphins, at Foxboro Stadium, knocked “The Fish” out of the playoffs. It felt like a playoff victory with Bledsoe hitting Michael Timpson with a 36-yard bomb in overtime.

The Patriots record was 5-11 that season, but most fans realized this was the beginning of something special.

That’s where we are in 2024, with little hope of accomplishments, playoffs and championships.

The 2024 Patriots are a work in progress. While a lot of people are focused on September, I believe December and where this team is sitting around Christmas time is more important.

It’s not how you start at this point. It’s how they finish.

With a lot of cap space in 2025, there will be resources available to add a big piece or two.

You can email Bill Burt at bburt@northofboston.com.

2024 NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS SCHEDULE

WK	DATE	OPPONENT	TIME
1	Sept. 8	@ Cincinnati	1 p.m.
2	Sept. 15	vs. Seattle	1 p.m.
3	Sept. 19 (Thu)	@ NYJ	8:15 p.m.
4	Sept. 29	@ San Francisco	4:05 p.m.
5	Oct. 6	vs. Miami	1 p.m.
6	Oct. 13	vs. Houston	1 p.m.
7	Oct. 20	vs. Jacksonville*	9:30 a.m.
8	Oct. 27	vs. NYJ	1 p.m.
9	Nov. 3	@ Tennessee	1 p.m.
10	Nov. 10	@ Chicago	1 p.m.
11	Nov. 17	vs. Los Angeles	1 p.m.
12	Nov. 24	@ Miami	1 p.m.
13	Dec. 1	vs. Indianapolis	1 p.m.
14	BYE WEEK		
15	Dec. 15	@ Arizona	4:25 p.m.
16	Dec. 22	@ Buffalo	1 p.m.
17	Dec. 29	vs. Los Angeles	TBD
18	Jan 5 (Fri)	vs. Buffalo	TBD

*Game played at neutral location

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for the game
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How long will Drake take?

Top pick Maye is the future, but can he impact Patriots in present?

By Hector Longo

» Staff Writer

As late as the Monday morning after the final exhibition game at Washington, first-year Patriots head coach Jerod Mayo sent out a confusing mixed message considering his starting quarterback situation.

Just hours after calling rookie Drake Maye “our second-best quarterback on the roster right now,” in the postgame, Mayo took to the airwaves on WEEI, noting “It’s a true (quarterback) competition. and I would say at this current point, Drake has outplayed Jacoby (Brissett).”

Congrats Drake. You have done your job this training camp, forcing the issue and making the case to be the starter on September 8 in Cincinnati.

The rookie, despite a “plan” by Mayo on Alex Van Pelt that was built around readying the 18-30 journeyman Brissett as the starter, forced himself into the equation.

Mission accomplished. Now, New England clamors with a churning tide from the fanbase that refuses to relent.

Maye, the 22-year-old out of North Carolina, selected No. 3 overall, is the future of the Patriots franchise, the guy to pull New England out of its post-Tom Brady malaise (29-38, zero playoff wins).

At 6-foot-4, 225 pounds, Maye had better be all shoulders, because New England is expecting him to carry this franchise.

If you took the time to see Maye at training camp this summer, the reasons for his selection at No. 3, the third of six QBs taken in the first round, were perfectly on display.

Maye’s right arm, which delivered 62 TDs and just 16 interceptions in two full seasons as the starter at UNC, is a lightning rod. It’s a serious gift that is granted at birth.

But there is more to the package. It starts in the huddle.

“His confidence, you can feel that when you’re going out there,” said rookie receiver Ja’lynn Polk. “He holds a certain swagger for himself. So, I can feel that for sure. It’s contagious. As long as he continues to rise and do that, all the guys will as well.”

All that is left now is to decide when and where the Maye Era begins.

With Brissett’s August struggles — not to mention his mediocre-at-best track record — there is that groundswell of support for Maye’s training to be on-the-job, just like say, CJ Stroud of Houston in



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Patriots quarterback Drake Maye (10) has the arm, confidence and athletic skills to be a franchise quarterback in the NFL. Here he carries the ball in for a touchdown against Philadelphia in a preseason game.



REBA SALDANHA / AP photo

Jacoby Brissett, right, was brought on to lead the quarterback room until Maye is ready to start.

DRAKE MAYE: TO PLAY OR NOT TO PLAY

It’s a dilemma that the New England Patriots brass has been mulling over since April.

Do you play Drake Maye and let him learn under fire or do you sit him and let him absorb the pro game.

Both methods can be successful. Here’s a look at the top 10 quarterbacks in the game according to Pro Football Focus and how they got to where they are now.

» **Patrick Mahomes, Kansas City:** Sat a season behind Alex Smith to learn Andy Reid’s offense. Three Super Bowl rings later, he remains the dominant force in the game.

» **Lamar Jackson, Baltimore:** The last pick in the first round of 2018 — New England took Sony Michel and Isaiah Wynn instead of him by the way — he played all 16 games as a rookie, the final seven as the starter. He’s a two-time MVP with a 58-19 record, but he is only 2-4 in the playoffs.

» **Joe Burrow, Cincinnati:** Top overall pick in 2020, he started immediately behind a brutal offensive line. Eventually finished the year on injured reserve. Bounced back to reach the Super Bowl in 2021.

» **Josh Allen, Buffalo:** Starter from Day 1 in Buffalo. Endured a pair of rough seasons, with QB ratings of 67.9 and 85.3. Since then, he’s been nails, reaching two Pro Bowls in four years with a 48-18 record in the regular season, 5-4 in the playoffs.

» **Justin Herbert, LA Chargers:** Was slated to start his rookie year of 2020 on the bench until a doctor’s errant needle put Tyrod Taylor on the shelf. Started four seasons with one Pro Bowl and just a 30-32 regular season mark plus one play-off loss. Has thrown 114 TDs with 42 picks.

» **Dak Prescott, Dallas:** Fourth-round pick in 2016, has been the Cowboys’ starter every day since. He’s 73-41 as a starter and makes Dallas a threat year in and year out. Just 2-5 in the playoffs, though.

» **Matt Stafford, LA Rams:** Top pick overall in 2009, started from the get-go and was under siege with a bad Lions team. Dealt to Los Angeles, he has put himself into the Hall of Fame conversation, winning a Super Bowl in 2021.

» **Aaron Rodgers, NY Jets:** First-round pick in 2005, sat three years behind Brett Favre in Green Bay. He’s a first-ballot Hall of Famer with one Super Bowl ring and 59,055 career passing yards.

» **Jalen Hurts, Philadelphia:** Eagles’ second-round pick, took over the starting job in Week 12 of his rookie season. Has gone 33-14 in three full seasons as a starter, 2-3 in the playoffs.

» **CJ Stroud, Houston:** No. 2 overall pick in 2023. Started from Day 1, taking the job away from Davis Mills. The Offensive Rookie of the Year, led Texans to AFC South title and a playoff win.

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HOW GOOD IS THIS PATS DEFENSE?

It had better be great

By Hector Longo

» Staff Writer

FOXBORO — You can call up all the numbers from 2023.

Without two of its three best players for more than three-quarters of the season — Matt Judon and Christian Gonzalez — the New England Patriots defense delivered in Bill Belichick's final season.

In 2023, the Patriots finished:

- ▶ 7th in total team defense;
- ▶ 1st in yards allowed per carry;
- ▶ 7th in yards per pass attempt;
- ▶ 11th in total pass defense;
- ▶ 6th in red-zone defense;
- ▶ 6th in third-down defense.

The question persists, though: How much of this was Belichick, his masterful coaching to keep games close and manipulation of the clock and of situations, and how much of it was the players?

Clearly, the Patriots believe in the talent they have gathered.

This past offseason, the team extended defensive tackle Davon Godchaux, safety Kyle Dugger and edge rusher Josh Uche. All the pieces, save for the disgruntled Judon who was dealt to Atlanta, return.

Of course, Judon was a leader and driving force on that unit. The key veterans on the defense weren't afraid to voice their anger or at least disappointment on losing him.

Deatrich Wise Jr. was one



JAIME CAMPOS

Patriots defender Kyle Dugger (23) breaks free for a pick-six TD against the Miami Dolphins last season.

of the most articulate and honest critics of the move. Others were more subtle, like Ja'Whaun Bentley.

"We have to have our guys step up. We have guys, Anfernee Jennings, Keion White, Josh Uche, guys like that who are eager and ready to step up into those

roles, obviously not trying to be Matt in no way, shape or form, but just making sure they expand their roles in that way," said Bentley of the potential edge guys. "They've been doing a solid job. They just have to keep doing what they are doing."

First-year coordinator

DeMarcus Covington's crew will likely be called on to carry the team, especially in the early going as the Jacoby Brissett/Drake Maye quarterback drama sorts itself out.

Not since the title teams of 2003 and 2004 have the Patriots looked to the

Defense: The Big Five

1 – Cornerback Christian Gonzalez: Second-year guy needs to play like an All-Pro.

2 – Defensive Tackle Davon Godchaux: Twice he's been granted major pay raises. Now, without Christian Barmore by his side, he has to earn it.

3 – Safety Kyle Dugger: Patriots rewarded him with a life-changing extension. \$14.5 million safeties don't repeatedly get lost in coverage.

4 – Safety Jabrill Peppers: Assumes the leadership role now.

5 – Cornerback Marcus Jones: His availability has been shoddy through two injury-plagued seasons. Has to play bigger on the corner opposite Gonzalez.

defense to set the tone successfully.

Head coach Jerod Mayo boldly predicted that would change when he took over.

"I think we're in a pretty good spot," said safety Jabrill Peppers, one of the summer's emerging leaders on the unit.

Losing Barmore, at least for a long chunk of the season, due to a blood clot issue, struck an early blow. He was as close to a star player that this roster has.

That, along with the Judon trade, has shifted the spotlight to second-year corner Christian Gonzalez, the 2023 first-round pick who has played less than four full

NFL games.

"I'm not going to put any expectations on Gonzo, I know the type of player I think he is, I know the type of player we think he is," said Peppers. "It's just about him going out there and executing it week in and week out. The short, little glimpse we got of him last year, I think he did a damn good job. I'm excited for him to get back out there."

Peppers is likely the only one not heaping expectations on the kid, who has been compared by media types in this region to Darrelle Revis, Ty Law and Stephon Gilmore.

Gonzalez has to be great, not just good, for this defense to be special.

New England is penciled in to finish fourth in the AFC East by just about every oddsmaker and prognosticator on the planet.

That is, everyone outside of Foxboro, anyways.

The people inside that locker-room believe that this defense can take over football games.

"Once you have the chemistry with everyone in the room, you play faster. You play more comfortable," said safety Jaylinn Hawkins. "Your guys understand each other, you play off each other ... and you keep working at it."

The pieces, they believe, are in place.

"At the end of the day, we're here to play defense," said Peppers. "They can't win if they don't score. That's our mindset."

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Bill Burt, Hector Longo picks for 2024

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Division Winners

AFC

- Buffalo, Tennessee, Baltimore, Kansas City

NFC

- Philadelphia, Atlanta, Green Bay, Los Angeles Rams

Wild Cards

AFC

- Cincinnati, Miami, New York Jets

NFC

- San Francisco, Dallas, Detroit

Conference championships

AFC

- Kansas City over Baltimore

NFC

- Los Angeles Rams over San Francisco

Super Bowl

- Kansas City over Los Angeles Rams



Will Patrick Mahomes, left, lead the Chiefs to yet another Super Bowl? Or will Joe Burrow, right, come back from a wrist injury to lead the Bengals to the title?



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOS

BILL BURT

Division Winners

AFC

- Buffalo (Bye), Houston, Baltimore, Kansas City

NFC

- Philadelphia (Bye), Tampa, Detroit, San Francisco

Wild Cards

AFC

- Miami, N.Y. Jets, Cincinnati

NFC

- L.A. Rams, Dallas, Green Bay

Conference championships

AFC

- Cincinnati over Buffalo

NFC

- Philadelphia over Green Bay

Super Bowl

- Cincinnati over Philadelphia



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5

goals for the Patriots in 2024

By Hector Longo

» Staff Writer

The New England Patriots are not going to make the playoffs in 2024. In fact, Jerod Mayo's club – a near to absolute lock to finish fourth in the AFC East – is picked by sports books nationally as the favorite for the No. 1 pick overall in the 2025 NFL Draft.

Success will not be measured by wins and losses during Mayo's initial campaign. That doesn't mean 2024 is insignificant. Bad franchises give away years like that.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Patriots quarterback Drake Maye, center left, celebrates his first preseason touchdown with teammates including guard Nick Leverett (51).

New England has basically given away the past four. Time to end that trend and get something out of this year.

So here are five modest, but thoroughly necessary, goals to meet in 2024.

1. Nurture Drake Maye

He is the franchise, rookie Drake Maye.

At times in camp, it has appeared that the offensive coaching staff has tried to change him. Talk emanated about a "complete rebuild" of the No. 3 pick in the draft. That's



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Wide receiver DeMario Douglas (3) gathers with teammates during a practice

sheer lunacy.

It feels like Maye simply said, I'm doing it my way over the last three weeks. The results have been magnificent.

It's time for Ben McAdoo, Alex Van Pelt, T.C. McCartney, Evan Rothstein and every other offensive coach in the building to cater to this kid, not Van Pelt's milquetoast 2003 West Coast offense.

2. The Dirty Dozens

New England might go through 100

bodies this year in the regular season. It's a roster in a state of flux. That's what bad NFL teams do.

The key this fall is to establish a base of 20-25 guys that are real, proven NFL players to carry on into the future.

Assess the talent. It's what Bill Belichick did with the 5-11 2000 team he inherited from Pete Carroll. He purged the chaff from the roster, leaving the wheat. Then he replenished through free agency and a monster 2001 draft (Richard Seymour and Matt Light).

Every snap matters. It's a 17-game audition for everyone in a Patriots uniform.

3. Starts at Receiver

The team hasn't spent the big money, but it has exhausted some draft capital on receivers in the past three years, probably to the detriment of the offensive line.

New England used a second and a fourth – Ja'Lynn Polk and Javon Baker – this year; two sixths – Kayshon Boutte and Demario Douglas in 2023; and a second in 2022 – Tyquan Thornton.

With all due respect to veterans K.J. Orborn, Kendrick Bourne and, gulp, Jalen Reagor, you guys don't really matter here. New England needs to find a pair of legit NFL threats from the young quintet. Giving them every opportunity to prove they can play hangs on this coach staff's head.

See **GOALS**, Page S10

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» 2023 NFL Standings

AMERICAN FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

AFC EAST	W	L	PF	PA
Buffalo Bills	11	6	451	311
Miami Dolphins	11	6	496	391
New York Jets	7	10	268	355
New England Patriots	4	13	236	366
AFC NORTH	W	L	PF	PA
Baltimore Ravens	13	4	483	280
Cleveland Browns	11	6	396	362
Pittsburgh Steelers	10	7	304	324
Cincinnati Bengals	9	8	366	384
AFC SOUTH	W	L	PF	PA
Houston Texans	10	7	377	353
Jacksonville Jaguars	9	8	377	371
Indianapolis Colts	9	8	396	415
Tennessee Titans	6	11	305	367
AFC WEST	W	L	PF	PA
Kansas City Chiefs	11	6	371	294
Las Vegas Raiders	8	9	332	331
Denver Broncos	8	9	357	413
Los Angeles Chargers	5	12	346	398

NATIONAL FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

NFC EAST	W	L	PF	PA
Dallas Cowboys	12	5	509	315
Philadelphia Eagles	11	6	433	428
New York Giants	6	11	266	407
Wash. Commanders	4	13	329	518
NFC NORTH	W	L	PF	PA
Detroit Lions	12	5	461	395
Green Bay Packers	9	8	383	350
Minnesota Vikings	7	10	344	362
Chicago Bears	7	10	360	379
NFC SOUTH	W	L	PF	PA
T. Bay Buccaneers	9	8	348	325
New Orleans Saints	9	8	402	327
Atlanta Falcons	7	10	321	373
Carolina Panthers	2	15	236	416
NFC WEST	W	L	PF	PA
SF 49ers	12	5	491	298
Los Angeles Rams	10	7	404	377
Seattle Seahawks	9	8	364	402
Arizona Cardinals	4	13	330	455

» Goals

Continued from Page S9

4. We Need a Hero

The Belichick defensive theory of waiting for the opposition to combust on offense, keeping everything in front, and lately devolving into death by 1,000 paper cuts, no longer plays. Impact plays win in the NFL of these times. The one proven defensive impact Patriot, Matt Judon, was jettisoned to Atlanta.

Now, where will the big plays come from? Jabrill Peppers and Kyle Dugger at safety, maybe. Christian Gonzalez on the corner, sure. Perhaps, even Keion White at the edge. The defense’s lack of star power needs to be assuaged, or this team is going nowhere in the near future.

5. Declare a Hierarchy

Honestly, the noise surrounding the offseason here at Gillette Stadium has been a tad alarming. Mayo, who has his mind set on transparency, has chosen to talk way too much publicly, landing himself in the land of retraction. His talk about having free-agent money to burn was walked back. His chatter about Mayo and Jacoby Brissett



WINSLOW TOWNSON

The Patriots hope Keion White will be a disruptive force for the defense. being in a quarterback “competition” has been shot down, not just by executive director of player personnel Eliot Wolf but also from offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt. By the end of this campaign, ownership needs to clear the air and define just who is running this show. If it’s Jonathan Kraft, fine. He’s a polished, well-educated professional, ready to take the helm. So own it. If it’s Mayo, it’s time the franchise rallies around the coach. Roles need to be defined, and it needs to happen before the 2025 offseason commences.

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Chiefs, Mahomes still rule

On Pro Football

Hector Longo



Who do you love this year in the NFL? Everyone has an opinion. It says here that these days it is

Patrick Mahomes' world, and the rest of us are just passengers on it.

Yes, the Kansas City Chiefs are in position to top-ple all that greatness that Tom Brady represented. The greatest run in league history is definitely being threatened.

So with that piece of bad news, here's how I rank the teams in the NFL for 2024, from top to bottom.

1: KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

Potential Offensive MVP:

Patrick Mahomes

Potential Defensive MVP:

Chris Jones

Why They Will Win: Mahomes, winning his third title (second straight) last February, nudged ahead of Joe Montana on the greatness totem pole. He's got his sights set directly at you know who.

Why They Won't: At some point, the breaks have to go the other way right? I mean, logic dictates that at some point the Chiefs falter.

Summing It Up: To be the team, you've got to beat the team. That's going to be a chore in 2024.

2: LOS ANGELES RAMS

Potential Offensive MVP:

Puka Nacua

Potential Defensive MVP:

Ernest Jones



WILFREDO LEE

San Francisco's defensive end Nick Bosa is one of the top defenders in the NFL.

Why They Will Win: Coaching matters, and Los Angeles has the best guy in the NFC on its sideline.

Why They Won't: Cooper Kupp has been beaten up in an amazing career. Health on offense has been an issue.

Summing It Up: The Rams' system plays, and Matt Stafford is headed to the Hall of Fame because of it.

3: SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

Potential Offensive MVP:

Brock Purdy

Potential Defensive MVP:

Nick Bosa

Why They Will Win: There are 8-or-9 potential all-pros on the roster.

Why They Won't: Two reasons - Brandon Aiyuk's contract issues and Kyle Shanahan's negligent game management.

Summing It Up: Truth be told, the Niners are the best franchise in the game. They've been turned away in the Super Bowl by two legends, Mahomes and Brady. They are right back in the NFC title game this year.

4: BALTIMORE RAVENS

Potential Offensive MVP:

Lamar Jackson

Potential Defensive MVP:

Roquan Smith

Why They Will Win: Mahomes gets hurt, and somehow the Ravens discover how to win in January after so many disappointments.

Why They Won't: Lamar is 2-4 as a playoff starter.

Summing It Up: The Ravens have been stung by the injury bug late in the year for sure. At some point, things have to roll John Harbaugh's way.

5: GREEN BAY PACKERS

Potential Offensive MVP:

Jordan Love

Potential Defensive MVP:

Kenny Clark

Why They Will Win: Love could be the next big thing in the NFC. He made a serious move last year as a leader and winner. The roster is better this time around on both sides of the ball.

Why They Won't: The NFC North is suddenly a gauntlet, and maybe the Lions are actually for real.

Summing It Up: If Clark, Jaire Alexander and the defense can rise up and compete with the Lions,



ERIC GAY — STAFF, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Sean McVay of the Rams is the best head coach in the NFC.

Bears and Vikings - all of whom are potentially explosive, the Packers are for real.

6: BUFFALO BILLS

Potential Offensive MVP:

Josh Allen

Potential Defensive MVP: Ed Oliver

Why They Will Win: Allen is a one-man gang, and he gets help with the addition of rookie Keon Coleman.

Why They Won't: If Coleman isn't ready for prime time, there is nobody to replace Steph Diggs in the lead receiver role.

Summing It Up: Buffalo has a bit of a strangle-hold on the AFC East. Home field in January will help, but they remain a notch down from the Chiefs and Ravens.

7: PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

Potential Offensive MVP:

Jalen Hurts

Potential Defensive MVP:

Jalen Carter

Why They Will Win: Howie Roseman has built a heck of a roster. The talent is almost as good as the Niners, but Hurts is a notch better than Purdy.

Why They Won't: The relationship between Hurts and coach Nick Siriani is at best strained.

Summing It Up: The NFC is much more wide open than the AFC, and it's undeniable that Philly is in that top tier.

8: CINCINNATI BENGALS

Potential Offensive MVP: Joe Burrow

Potential Defensive MVP:

Trey Hendrickson

Why They Will Win: Burrow gets protected, stays healthy and starts all 17 games.

Why They Won't: Twice in his four pro seasons, Burrow has made just 10 starts due to injury.

Summing It Up: Explosive on both sides of the ball, the Bengals remain quite dangerous. Still, the division goes through Baltimore.

9: DALLAS COWBOYS

Potential Offensive MVP:

CeeDee Lamb

Potential Defensive MVP:

Micah Parsons

Why They Will Win: Somebody wakes up coach Mike McCarthy on the sidelines.

Why They Won't: The once-storied franchise has grown into the NFC's consummate underachiever.

Summing It Up: Until QB Dak Prescott wins the big one, there will be constant questions. And both he and Lamb are playing for mega-deals right now. That could cause issues.

10: ATLANTA FALCONS

Potential Offensive MVP:

Bijan Robinson

Potential Defensive MVP:

Jessie Bates

Why They Will Win: Arthur Smith has finally left this system, and QB Kirk Cousins has one of the game's best arsenal of weapons.

Why They Won't: Head coach Raheem Morris is certainly a question, as all first-time head coaches are.

Summing It Up: The NFC South is a mess of a division, the worst in the game, and Cousins, if he's 100 percent healthy, gives the Falcons the edge in this sea of mediocrity.

11: MIAMI DOLPHINS

Potential Offensive MVP:

Tyreek Hill

Potential Defensive MVP:

Bradley Chubb

Why They Will Win: Miami gets off to a solid start and front-runs its way to the AFC East title and maybe even the top seed for home-field throughout.

Why They Won't: The Dolphins have to play somewhere in wintry conditions next January.

Summing It Up: Tua Tagovailoa, in superb weather, leads one of the most dynamic attacks in the game. Finesse teams just don't win without home field in the playoffs.

12: DETROIT LIONS

Potential Offensive MVP:

Amon-Ra St. Brown

Potential Defensive MVP:

Aidan Hutchinson

Why They Will Win: Coordinator Ben Johnson is the top young offensive mind in the game that has not been given a head-coaching job yet.

Why They Won't: Do the Lions have enough on the defensive side of the ball? They gave up 395 points on the year, playing in four games against Justin Fields and the Vikings without Kirk Cousins.

Summing It Up: Head coach Dan Campbell is either a modern-day Bill Cowher or he's a caricature of himself. If that's the case, his team will lose confidence in the boss quickly, sending the Lions careening back to the pack.

13: NEW YORK JETS

Potential Offensive MVP:

Aaron Rodgers

Potential Defensive MVP:

Sauce Gardner

Why They Will Win: The pieces are in place for the Jets to rise to the top of the AFC. Garrett Wilson and Breece Hall are offensive game-breakers. The offensive line is now solidified. Also, New York clearly has the best defense in the division.

Why They Won't: Aaron Rodgers' calf/Achilles will be subjected to the spotlight every time the 40-year-old receives a snap. "Calf Cam" is coming. Trust me.

Summing It Up: In all honesty, do you trust coach Robert Saleh to not mess this thing up? The New Yorkers have already butchered the Reddick deal, as he is AWOL through the pre-season. It's only a matter of time for this thing to self-destruct. The other side of the coin? This roster won seven games last year with Saleh and without Rodgers.

14: TENNESSEE TITANS

Potential Offensive MVP:

Calvin Ridley

Potential Defensive MVP:

Jeffery Simmons

Why They Will Win: The Titans have a gifted, albeit somewhat aging, offensive crew. They've also quietly rebuilt the offensive line to give QB Will Levis the chance to succeed.

Why They Won't: Derrick Henry was Tennessee's lone Pro Bowler last year, and he's now a Raven.

Summing It Up: Quarterbacks and coaches win in the NFL. Tennessee has put its trust in Levis, a second-year QB, and the son of former Raider coach Bill Callahan, Brian Callahan.

15: ARIZONA CARDINALS

Potential Offensive MVP:

Kyler Murray

Potential Defensive MVP:

Budda Baker

Why They Will Win: Murray is back healthy and has had the entire offseason to train and prepare for this season.

Why They Won't: The heat is already on coach

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» Rankings

Continued from Page S13

Jonathan Gannon after a 4-13 campaign.
Summing It Up: You can't blame Gannon for 2023. Murray missed the first nine games, recovering from his ACL injury, and the Cards were 1-8 by the time he hit the field. With Murray having the full offseason to prepare, Arizona could be a playoff threat in the NFC.

16: PITTSBURGH STEELERS

Potential Offensive MVP: Justin Fields
Potential Defensive MVP: TJ Watt
Why They Will Win: Either Fields finds his NFL swag-ger or Russell Wilson locates the fountain of youth and wins the Comeback Player of the Year.
Why They Won't: As the old saying goes, if you've got two quarterbacks, you've got no quarterbacks.
Summing It Up: There is talent on the roster around the QBs that again should help the game's most underrated coach, Mike Tomlin, lead this club to a nine-win season.

17: HOUSTON TEXANS

Potential Offensive MVP: CJ Stroud
Potential Defensive MVP: Derek Stingley Jr.
Why They Will Win: The NFL's best story of the 2023 season gets even bet with Stroud, making that magic step forward in year two.
Why They Won't: Despite the year that Stroud, Nico Collins and Tank Dell put together, it felt a little bit like the Texans found the perfect storm – a cushy schedule with a mediocre AFC South to go with a rookie QB finding the hot hand.
Summing It Up: Houston appears to be the top team in a weak division. A return to the playoffs could be likely, but they might just bounce off a great 2023 season, too.

18: SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

Potential Offensive MVP: Jaxon Smith-Njigba
Potential Defensive MVP: Uchenna Nwosu
Why They Will Win: A dozen seasons in, Geno Smith capitalizes on an absolutely dynamic offensive unit.
Why They Won't: The heart-and-soul of the defense, Bobby Wagner, is no longer in Washington State. He's in Washington, D.C.
Summing It Up: The post-Pete Carroll Seahawks are likely to fall back, mainly because the defense is a shell of what it once was. The division is a monster.

19: CHICAGO BEARS

Potential Offensive MVP: Caleb Williams
Potential Defensive MVP: Montez Sweat
Why They Will Win: Williams, the top pick in the draft, lives up to the hype.
Why They Won't: Rookie QBs, even those throwing to guys like DJ Moore, Keenan Allen and Rome Odunze, often take time to adjust to the pro game.
Summing It Up: The Bears are the story the NFL is dying for, with a charismatic rookie like Williams lighting things up. Sorry, even with the new haircut and beard, I'm not buying what head coach Matt Eberflus (10-24 in two seasons) is selling.

20: CLEVELAND BROWNS

Potential Offensive MVP: Deshaun Watson
Potential Defensive MVP: Myles Garrett
Why They Will Win: Watson stays healthy and reverts to his three-time Pro Bowl form.
Why They Won't: The last time he made the Pro Bowl was 2020.
Summing It Up: Cleveland's roster on both sides of the ball is as good as any team in the AFC. It's just tough to put faith into Watson, who hasn't been decent since Trump left office.

21: TAMPA BAY BUCS

Potential Offensive MVP: Rachaad White
Potential Defensive MVP: Vita Vea
Why They Will Win: Quarter-back Baker Mayfield continues to trend upward in his second season with Tampa.
Why They Won't: Mike Evans hits the wall and Chris Godwin breaks again, this time for good.
Summing It Up: Todd Bowles has done a sleeper good job holding this thing together with the Bucs. They were supposed to disappear after Tom Brady, and they haven't.

22: DENVER BRONCOS

Potential Offensive MVP: Bo Nix
Potential Defensive MVP: Patrick Surtain
Why They Will Win: Nix leads the revival of Sean Payton's coaching career with a CJ Stroud-like rookie season.
Why They Won't: I get one call in my life right and know that Nix is destined to be an over-drafted bust. Watch the film on this kid when he played at Auburn. I dare you.
Summing It Up: Denver showed plenty of character, surviving a gamble gone way wrong in the Russell Wilson deal. Nix alone can't overcome that kind of mismanagement. It's time that franchise pays for such a mistake.

23: LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

Potential Offensive MVP: Justin Herbert
Potential Defensive MVP: Khalil Mack
Why They Will Win: Mack is a Hall-of-Famer looking for one final hurrah. He joins forces with Jim Harbaugh, hungry to show the world that he can coach at the highest level after allegedly bending the rules to return Michigan to elite NCAA levels.
Why They Won't: Maybe Herbert isn't as good as the hype would lead you to believe. He doesn't have

Keenan Allen, Austin Ekeler or Mike Williams.
Summing It Up: Harbaugh replacing Brandon Staley has to be a major upgrade, right? Still, the gap between the Chiefs and Chargers in the AFC West is gigantic.

24: JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

Potential Offensive MVP: Trevor Lawrence
Potential Defensive MVP: Josh Hines-Allen
Why They Will Win: The AFC South has been all about who gets hot at the right time. Maybe, it's Jacksonville's turn.
Why They Won't: Trevor Lawrence just hasn't gotten it done. He's 20-30 as a starter in the pros. Yes, he had to overcome a year of Urban Meyer. I get it. But the inconsistency is a major issue.
Summing It Up: Lawrence's career 85.2 QB rating simply is not enough to take the Jags seriously.

25: LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

Potential Offensive MVP: Davante Adams
Potential Defensive MVP: Maxx Crosby
Why They Will Win: The house always wins in Vegas.
Why They Won't: Antonio Pierce held things together, but the damage Josh McDaniels inflicted with the Raiders was pretty deep.
Summing It Up: The Raiders are attempting a half-hearted rebuild with Gardner Minshew and Aidan O'Connell battling for the QB job. Las Vegas is headed for the top of the draft and will likely be in the market for the next "franchise QB."

26: INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

Potential Offensive MVP: Jonathan Taylor
Potential Defensive MVP: DeForest Buckner
Why They Will Win: Anthony Richardson, who missed the bulk of his rookie year with injury, put the work in, paid attention and is ready to go.
Why They Won't: They

allowed Pro Bowl QB Gardner Minshew to walk away after somehow carving out a 9-8 season.
Summing It Up: Would it surprise you if the Colts, Texans, Jags and Titans all finished 8-9 in the AFC South?

27: MINNESOTA VIKINGS

Potential Offensive MVP: Justin Jefferson
Potential Defensive MVP: Dallas Turner
Why They Will Win: Going to be tough without a quarterback, but maybe after years of floundering, Sam Darnold gets it done. Finally.
Why They Won't: This is a place-holder year as rookie QB JJ McCarthy heals from his knee surgery.
Summing It Up: There is character in Minnesota's home locker room. But character alone won't lift the Vikings out of the NFC North cellar.

28: NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

Potential Offensive MVP: Chris Olave
Potential Defensive MVP: Marshon Lattimore
Why They Will Win: Derek Carr's second year in the offense has to be better.
Why They Won't: Tampa Bay is more consistent – a lingering post-Tom Brady effect – and Atlanta has made substantial gains, leaving the Saints in their wake.
Summing It Up: When New Orleans came to Foxboro last winter, the vibe from coach Dennis Allen (24-46 in his career) was one of incompetence. and that was after a 34-0 win.

29: WASHINGTON COMMANDERS

Potential Offensive MVP: Jayden Daniels
Potential Defensive MVP: Bobby Wagner
Why They Will Win: Kliff Kingsbury is a pretty solid offensive coach, who can lift Daniels up in his rookie campaign.
Why They Won't: Dan Quinn, with his hat turned backwards, again shows the

NFL that he's not a qualified head coach.
Summing It Up: Someone do Terry McLaurin a favor and deal him to a real NFL franchise. A player of his level deserves better than this.

30: NEW YORK GIANTS

Potential Offensive MVP: Malik Nabers
Potential Defensive MVP: Dexter Lawrence
Why They Will Win: Tommy Cutlets replaces Daniel Jones and ignites another magical run to third place in the AFC East.
Why They Won't: The Giants' roster has tumbled to the bottom of the game. It tends to happen when you sign a QB like Jones for a \$160 million deal.
Summing It Up: Brian Daboll is about to become the latest severed branch from the Bill Belichick coaching tree, joining the likes of Eric Mangini, Josh McDaniels, Joe Judge and Matt Patricia.

31: NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

Potential Offensive MVP: Drake Maye
Potential Defensive MVP: Christian Gonzalez
Why They Will Win: Maye is Josh Allen 2.0.
Why They Won't: It's the worst overall roster in football from 1-53.
Summing It Up: Jerod Mayo is in a tough spot for his first head-coaching attempt at any level.

32: CAROLINA PANTHERS

Potential Offensive MVP: Bryce Young
Potential Defensive MVP: Derrick Brown
Why They Will Win: They won't.
Why They Won't: Zero Pro Bowlers in 2023 and a roster that simply is not at NFL levels.
Summing It Up: The two most productive players on the Panthers roster, Brian Burns and Frankie Luvu are no longer in Carolina. This team is starting over ... again.

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A summer to savor

Authentic Greek fare flavors menu at Ya Mas

As the warm weather arrives, Ya Mas Greek Taverna & Bar welcomes guests with enticing summer fare and refreshing cold beverages.

The popular farm-to-table restaurant, now in its second year at The Mall at Rockingham Park in Salem, is known for its authentic Greek cuisine. It's a family-friendly spot where meticulously prepared Grecian delicacies are best savored over good conversation with friends and loved ones.

Embark on a culinary journey at Ya Mas, where owner Athanasios Sioras, a first-generation Greek American, has unveiled exciting updates to his upscale scratch kitchen eatery.

The dining room now offers two distinct sections, each with its own unique offerings.

The fine dining section beckons with classic Greek entrées, such as lamb shank,

gyros and souvlaki, and other timeless recipes passed down for generations, tried and tested to ensure the integrity of the cuisine is preserved.

The atmosphere at Ya Mas is flush with heirlooms and antiques hanging on the walls, a replica statue of Venus De Milo gracing the entranceway, and Grecian music softly filling the air.

The restaurant's summer menu features plenty of seafood, including a Mediterranean branzino, fresh sardines and fried anchovies, as well as a traditional fish soup from Kalamata, the second most populous city on the Peloponnese peninsula.

Over in the lounge area, a new roster of Greek-inspired bar bites and other lighter fare is on tap for patrons to sample as they sip their favorite refreshers. Among the new nibbles are a black truffle and caramelized fig buffalo bite with lemon and dill-infused Greek yogurt; spinach, feta and artichoke dip; lamb tacos; Greek-style sliders made with Japanese wagyu beef; and Moroccan chicken wings with a pomegranate chimichurri, enhanced with the hot, sweet and citrusy notes of berbere-spiced yogurt.

Step into the world of mixologist Asterios Natsios, a Greek native with extensive knowledge of spirits and craft cocktails. He has concocted a tantalizing slate of drinks to serve throughout the week.



On Martini Mondays, you will pay half-price for classic, dirty, espresso and citrus drop martinis, along with cosmopolitans. Tiki Tuesdays offer \$8 mai tais, pina colodas, Blue Hawaiians and scorpion bowls. Wine Down Wednesdays feature \$7-per-glass sangria, with flavors including sour cherry and mango red, pineapple and peach white, and strawberry and grapefruit rosé. Thirsty Thursdays offer half-off whiskey-laced old fashioned, while sparkling spritzers made with sour cherry and mango, pineapple and mastic, Aperol, or grapefruit and peach are \$7 on Spritz Sundays from 2 to 10 p.m.

For \$14, get a two-course express lunch served within 10 minutes of ordering between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. on Mondays through Fridays. Pick a Greek American salad, Greek Village salad or egg-lemon soup for the first course. Second-course choices include spanakopita (spinach pie), dolmades (stuffed grape leaves), braised lamb shank, or the Greek eggplant and meat lasagna known as moussaka.

There's a simplicity to Greek food that demands close attention to the caliber of the product. It's a naturally healthy, relatively unambiguous cuisine.

"You are meant to taste the food," Sioras says.

However, experiencing genuinely authentic Greek dining requires going the extra mile. That's why only 100% imported Greek extra-virgin olive oil fills the fryers at Ya Mas, and the cheeses — made from sheep and goat milk (more velvety options than cow's milk) — are also flown in from Greece.

Sioras uses only 100% American prime lamb from Colorado, acorn-fed Heritage Farm Duroc pork, and Bell & Evans poultry. In keeping with Greek tradition, Ya Mas sources most of its fresh products from local farms, such as fruits and vegetables from Brookside Farms in Pelham.

For Sioras, no culinary detail is too small. "We just have very, very high quality," he says. "We're dedicated to delivering an unforgettable experience that leaves our customers coming back time and time again."



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