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**Divisional Outlook For July – NI West**

**By Jay Nault**

There was quite a shakeup in the NL West over the past month, but the fact remains that the division is still completely up for grabs. Only five games separate first place from last. It appears that it's going to come down to who gets hot at the right time to make a push for the postseason.

**San Diego Padres**

Currently: The Padres stormed to the top of the standings over the past month after being stuck in the middle of the standings throughout the majority of the season. The Padres showed some consistency in going 15–11 during the past 30 days, as they rebounded from their only losing skid, which was three games in duration, with their current three–game winning streak. The Padres have been doing this mostly with their pitching, and Chris Young and Trevor Hoffman are leading the way on the mound.

Outlook: The Padres are getting it done with defense and pitching. If their hitting can come back to life, they could be back in the postseason.

**Los Angeles Dodgers**

Currently: After a scorching hot May and June, the Dodgers came back to Earth over the past 30 days, posting a 12–14 record. This stretch included a five–game losing streak and a four–game run of wins. The Dodgers are probably as happy as anyone that interleague play is over, as the team suffered through a 2–10 record against the AL over the past month.

Outlook: Few teams have ever stayed as hot as the Dodgers were, so this was to be somewhat expected. Losing Eric Gagne for the season was a blow, but the Dodgers will be in it all season.

**Colorado Rockies**

Currently: The Rockies enjoyed a turnaround of sorts this past month, but they really went from "bad" to "streaky." Their pattern of wins and losses is symmetrical if nothing else: win four, lose three, win two, lose two – this all added up to a 15–11 record. The Rockies are still in it, and they actually feasted

## Divisional Outlook For July – NL West

on the AL in interleague play, going 8–4 against the AL West. Their bats have come alive of late, giving this team some life.

Outlook: If the Rockies can completely turn the corner and go from "streaky" to "consistent," they could be a threat for the division crown.

### San Francisco Giants

Currently: The Giants remain in contention, but they had another mediocre month, going 13–15 over the past 30 days. The Giants suffered through two losing streaks lasting four and three games, respectively, and didn't put together a run of wins longer than three games. In short, their pitching needs to improve if they're going to capture that elusive consistency.

Outlook: The Giants need to focus over the All Star break, as they open the second half of the season

with ten games against playoff contenders in the Phillies, Brewers and Padres. That stretch could go a long way towards defining their season.

### Arizona Diamondbacks

Currently: This past month, and really the entire 2006 season, was and is about Jason Grimsley. Since his revelation regarding HGH, the one–time first place D'backs have plummeted to the bottom of the standings. The team posted an ugly 7–20 record over the past month. The 20 losses came in bunches, as the Diamondbacks endured losing streaks of four, five, five, three and three games in duration. Arizona was also pounded by the AL in interleague play, winning only four of 15 games.

Outlook: It would be almost impossible for any team to come back from a distraction like the one caused by Grimsley, but the Diamondbacks are not out of it – yet.

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## **Which Division Will Provide The Best Football Tickets In 2006?**

**By Jay Nault**

## Divisional Outlook For July – NI West

Even though we are entrenched in the NFL's "Age of Parity," fans around the league still want to know what they're getting when they buy their football tickets. As we look at the divisional breakdown, it becomes apparent that certain divisions are deeper than others. That's why we're going to break them down individually by way of "Divisional Power Rankings." These rankings could change throughout the season, but now is a good time to take our first look.

### 1. NFC East

The NFC East, top-to-bottom, is the toughest division in football right now. Any one of the four teams could realistically qualify for the playoffs, and the final standings could shake out in just about any way and no one would be really surprised.

### 2. NFC South

The NFC South contains a Super Bowl contender in the Panthers, two solid playoff-level teams in the Buccaneers and Falcons, and perhaps the most improved team in the league, the Saints. This division will be brutal, and the winner will definitely be battle-tested.

### 3. AFC West

The AFC West is almost as difficult, as the Broncos have Super Bowl aspirations, the Chiefs are expected to at least make the playoffs, the Chargers are talented and the Raiders could be scary if they ever put all their talent together. The rivalries in this division also make every game a battle.

### 4. AFC North

The AFC North contains the defending champions, and they didn't even win the division last year. The Bengals did, but they have question marks surrounding QB Carson Palmer and off-field distractions. Baltimore is much-improved and the Browns are getting better.

### 5. AFC East

The East has the rivalries, but only two good teams in the Patriots and Dolphins. The Jets and Bills, whether they admit it or not, are rebuilding. Regardless, fans of every team are extremely loyal, so football tickets sales will be high for any of these divisional battles.

### 6. AFC South

The South contains one potential juggernaut in the Colts, one fringe playoff team in Jacksonville, and two teams in the Texans and Titans that are in full rebuild mode. The Colts-Jaguars games will be entertaining, but the Texans and Titans are definitely a notch below as of now.

### 7. NFC North

The NFC North has one established playoff team in the Bears, one likely playoff team in the Vikings,

one team that could be a surprise in the Packers and the Lions, who seem to constantly be rebuilding. The best thing going for this division is the level of intensity present every time any of these two teams meet.

## 8. NFC West

Yes, the Seahawks got all the way to the Super Bowl last season, but after that there isn't much. The Rams could make a push this year, but they're still a year or two away. The Cardinals could surprise as well, but they've been perennial disappointments, and the 49ers need time to restock their roster with talent, so they're not going anywhere anytime soon. There are intense rivalries in the division, however, and football tickets are always hard to find for a Seahawks – Rams game.

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