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Fearless (Perhaps Foolish) Playoff Predictions For 2006

By Jay Nault

Now that the draft, free agency and the first set of minicamps have come and gone, teams are

close to being set in terms of personnel. The schedule is in place for every team, and this time of year presents the first somewhat realistic opportunity to look ahead. Of course, there could still be player movement, and injuries are always a monkey wrench in terms of gauging which teams are poised for a big year. With all that being said, it's time for the first set of fearless predictions for the 2006 season, including who will make the playoffs.

AFC East Top Two Finishers: New England and Miami The Patriots, for the first time in two years, are looking to recapture the title they lost last season. Any team with the combination of Bill Belichick and Tom Brady has a chance to win it all, and with the Bills and Jets at least a year away, the Pats will win the division. The Dolphins have uncertainty at QB, but also have a "star" coach in Nick Saban and talent all over the field.

AFC North Top Two Finishers: Pittsburgh and Cleveland Pittsburgh is the defending Super Bowl Champion, and they return most of their team. Their nucleus is young, and Bill Cowher will keep his team hungry. The Browns have a quality coach in Romeo Crennel and a roster that's a mix of young and veteran talent. The Bengals will take a step back assuming Carson Palmer takes some time to return to form, and the Ravens will be a victim of a tough division.

AFC South Top Two Finishers: Indianapolis and Jacksonville The Colts will have a Mt. Everest-sized chip on their shoulder this year after a disappointing finish to the 2005 season, and Peyton Manning is as consistent as any QB in history. The Jaguars have a punishing defense and a young nucleus that is a year more experienced.

AFC West Top Two Finishers: Denver and Kansas City Denver was a few plays from the Super Bowl last season and added star WR Javon Walker in a draft-day trade. The Chiefs have superstar RB Larry Johnson and a quality coach in Herm Edwards who should improve their defense. The Chargers will take a step back with a young QB and the Raiders will be squeezed out by sheer numbers.

Fearless (Perhaps Foolish) Playoff Predictions For 2006

Playoff Teams: Patriots, Steelers, Browns, Colts, Broncos, Chiefs The Dolphins and Jaguars will be left out of the wild card spots. The Dolphins will win their share of games, but until they settle on a QB, they won't go too far. The Jaguars need a better offense, and with WR Jimmy Smith retiring, those prospects don't look promising.

NFC East Top Two Finishers: Dallas and New York The Cowboys lacked one thing last year – a game breaking threat on offense, and that need was more than satisfied with Terrell Owens, who always behaves well in his first year with a new team. The Giants have a stingy defense and a maturing Eli Manning at QB. This is the most competitive division in football, and every team could be worthy of a playoff spot.

NFC North Top Two Finishers: Chicago and Green Bay The Bears have a dominant defense, and no offense in the division looks to be a threat to that unit. The Packers have Brett Favre back, and he's going back to the offense that made him a three-time MVP to go along with a beefed up defense that finished last year ranked 7th. The Vikings and Lions are a year away at least.

NFC South Top Two Finishers: Carolina and Tampa Bay The Panthers were "this" close to the big game last year, and they added a much-needed compliment to WR Steve Smith in Keyshawn Johnson that will help a tough defense. The Buccaneers return largely in tact with a team that made the playoffs last year. The Saints are improving, while the Falcons may need to take a step back before moving forward.

NFC West Top Two Finishers: Seattle and Arizona The Seahawks are the defending NFC Champions, and they benefit by being in a division that's mostly in rebuilding mode. The Cardinals have all the pieces in place, and just need to put it all together. The Rams are a year away and learning a new system, and the 49ers are a couple of years from competing for the playoffs.

Playoff Teams: Cowboys, Bears, Packers, Panthers, Seahawks, Cardinals The Buccaneers and the Giants may be better teams in 2006 than the Packers and Cardinals, but will lose out on the wild card spots because their schedules are brutal, especially when compared to the relatively easy slates that the Packers and Cardinals will enjoy.

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Fearless (Perhaps Foolish) Playoff Predictions For 2006 – Who Wins It All?

By Jay Nault

Recently, the picks for who will make the playoffs in 2006 were laid out in the open. Since we've opened ourselves up to look foolish enough trying to pick playoff teams in the spring, we figured we'd pass the dead time on the league calendar taking things a step further.

Below you'll find our picks for who will advance through the playoffs and win the Super Bowl. If you're just a casual football fan, this will save you the time of watching or attending any games. If you're a rabid follower of the league, we'll be ready to hear you blast away at the predictions that don't pan out as the year goes along.

AFC Playoff Picture

Teams: Patriots, Steelers, Browns, Colts, Broncos, Chiefs.

Wildcard Round: Steelers over the Browns, Patriots over the Chiefs

The Broncos and Colts have more favorable schedules than the Steelers and Patriots, which is why they'll earn the week off. Other than playing an extra game, there will be no other difference after the first weekend of the playoffs, between the top four seeds. The Browns will shock everyone and make the postseason, but will not be able to withstand the environment visiting the World Champions in the playoffs. The Chiefs will have a successful year as well, but it's hard to win in Massachusetts in January.

Divisional Round: Colts over the Patriots, Broncos over the Steelers

The Colts will finally get over the psychological hump of beating the Patriots in the playoffs, and wouldn't it just tickle Colt fans everywhere if K Adam Vinatieri wins the game with a last-second field goal? The Patriots will miss Vinatieri during crunch time, and it may just cost them their season. The Broncos will have revenge on their minds when they get their second consecutive chance to host the Steelers in the playoffs. The Steelers knocked them out last year, but this year's Broncos will have WR Javon Walker creating matchup problems and QB Jake Plummer will play better in the playoffs this year knowing that he'll be trying to keep Jay Cutler on the bench in 2007.

AFC Championship: Broncos over Colts

Peyton Manning will be denied again, as the Broncos will ride their patented running game with their newly-potent passing attack past the Colts and their average defense. The Broncos will do just enough to slow Manning down and will sneak away with a conference championship.

NFC Playoff Picture

Teams: Cowboys, Bears, Packers, Panthers, Seahawks, Cardinals

Fearless (Perhaps Foolish) Playoff Predictions For 2006

Wildcard Round: Bears over Cardinals, Cowboys over Packers

The Seahawks and the Panthers have schedules that should give them the top two seeds, but like in the AFC, form will hold through the first round. Both the Packers and Cardinals will be surprise playoff entries, but neither will have enough to win on the road when it matters most.

Divisional Round: Cowboys over Seahawks, Panthers over Bears

The Cowboys will spring the first "upset" of the playoffs when they knock out the Seahawks in Seattle. Dallas will enter the playoffs much more battle-tested than the Seahawks, as their schedule and division are both much more difficult. The Panthers will have the offense this year to match their defense, which should give them just enough points to advance.

NFC Championship: Panthers over Cowboys

Dallas will have a tall order on hand when they must go from Seattle to Charlotte on consecutive weeks. The Cowboys will be tough, but one of the mainstays of the John Fox regime is toughness, and Carolina will be ready with everything on the line. The Panther defense will harass Drew Bledsoe into mistakes, and the Panthers will grind out a hard-fought win.

Super Bowl XLI: Panthers over Broncos

The Lombardi Trophy will return to the NFC, as the Panthers will use the same formula that worked against Bledsoe to pressure Jake Plummer into mistakes. The Panthers have the ability in 2006 to grind out the clock with a once-again healthy stable of RBs and a great possession WR in Keyshawn Johnson to compliment Steve Smith. It'll be a great Super Bowl, but the Panthers will be the champs in 2006.

Of course, injuries, suspensions and several other unforeseen factors could make this prediction look ridiculous in the months to come, but that's what the "dead" season is for – figuring out where teams stand and assessing their potential.

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