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How They Stack Up – The Afc North In June

By Jay Nault

All is about to be very quiet on the NFL front, as most staff and players take advantage of the final opportunity to relax and recharge before the grind of training camp begins. This is also an opportunity to take a look at the AFC North to see how the teams in the division are looking as their rosters near completion.

Baltimore Ravens

Offseason Additions: The Ravens were relatively quiet in terms of the number of free agent acquisitions this off-season, but they did make a big splash late and add a potentially crucial cog to the RB position. The Ravens let Chester Taylor go, but brought in Mike Anderson, a powerful, bruising runner who will be a perfect compliment to Jamal Lewis. Baltimore also traded for QB Steve McNair, which could solve their seemingly-endless QB problem.

Outlook: The Ravens also get S Ed Reed and LB Ray Lewis back from injury, so this is a team that could be extremely tough to deal with all year long.

Cincinnati Bengals

Offseason Additions: The Bengals, like the Ravens, were not as active as other teams in the off-season, but did bring in a player who could be a significant addition to their defense. It seems that for years, the Bengals have had a good offense and a defense that got gashed regularly. The team is hoping that DT Sam Adams, a premier run-stopper, can provide the resistance the defense needs to get off the field and give the ball back to their powerful offense.

Outlook: As important as the addition of Adams was, the Bengals season depends on the health of QB Carson Palmer. If he makes it back in time for the season, look out – the Bengals could threaten for the division and even bigger things. If not, their improved defense won't matter.

Cleveland Browns

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Offseason Additions: The Browns spent money like crazy this off–season, as they obviously are looking for an immediate boost in their overall talent level. Additions include DT Ted Washington, DE Willie McGinest and C LeCharles Bentley, among others. They added to their haul by drafting defensive studs Kamerion Wimbley and D'Qwell Jackson, so this team could make a big leap this year, as they also get WR Braylon Edwards and TE Kellen Winslow II back from injury.

Outlook: If young QB Charlie Frye can play well, which is a big "if," this team could go a lot farther than most pundits predict. If Frye struggles, the team will as well, as this is a very tough division.

Pittsburgh Steelers

Offseason Additions: It wasn't so much about what the World Champions added this off–season as opposed to what they lost. RB Jerome Bettis retired, WR/KR Antwan Randle El and DE Kimo von Oelhoffen signed elsewhere and QB Ben Roethlisberger scared everyone recently with a

potentially–deadly motorcycle accident that luckily left him relatively healthy. However, his return in time for the season is far from guaranteed. The Steelers did draft WR/KR Santonio Holmes in the first round, but he's had his share of problems already.

Outlook: The Steelers' renowned depth will be tested this season, as they suffered the same fate as most Super Bowl champions in that their roster was raided and somewhat depleted. That said, they're still the champs, and they'll remain that way until someone takes it away from them.

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Which Division Will Provide The Best Football Tickets In 2006?

By Jay Nault

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.

How They Stack Up – The Afc North In June

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

How They Stack Up – The Afc North In June

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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