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How They Stack Up – The NFC North In June

By Jay Nault

As we enter the time of year when everything gets very quiet in the front offices of teams around the NFL, there's a good opportunity to take a look at how teams have improved, or not improved, as we head into the home stretch before training camp begins.

Today we'll take a look at the NFC North, and there could be some surprises in this division come fall.

Chicago Bears

Offseason Additions:

The Bears basically stood pat, as they return their entire defense from last season, and it was a dominating unit. On offense, the Bears made only one subtle move, but it could turn out to be a vital signing. QB Brian Griese gives the Bears their first legitimate backup QB in years, and that's an important piece, as fragile starting QB Rex Grossman seems to be hurt constantly.

Outlook:

If the Bears can hold steady on defense and get better on offense with the anticipated improvement of RB Cedric Benson and a more solid foundation at QB, the Bears could challenge for big things in 2006.

Detroit Lions

Offseason Additions:

The Lions were active on every front this offseason, including the hiring of new coach Rod Marinelli and offensive coordinator Mike Martz. In terms of personnel, the Lions added two QB's in Jon Kitna and Josh McCown. Neither has been an All Pro as of yet, but Martz is known for molding QB's into Pro Bowl-caliber players, as he did with Kurt Warner and Marc Bulger in St. Louis.

Outlook:

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If the Lions can rebuild their overall culture, there is a lot of talent already in place and marked improvement could take place in short order. Marinelli is a disciplinarian, and that could be exactly what the team needs to shake its underachieving label.

Green Bay Packers

Offseason Additions:

When a team goes 4–12 and suffers their first losing season in 14 years, changes will be made. The Packers brought in a new coaching staff and made some bold moves on defense. The team added DT Ryan Pickett and DB Charles Woodson in free agency and drafted stud LB A.J. Hawk. This talent will only strengthen a defense that finished 7th in the NFL last season. On offense, the Packers did not add

any big names, but several important cogs to their attack are returning from injury–plagued seasons, including TE Bubba Franks and RB Ahman Green.

Outlook:

The times are changing in Green Bay. For years, their offense carried them. This year, Coach Mike McCarthy will need to build a team that controls the ball on offense and wins ugly 17–13 games on the strength of its defense. It could happen, but everything will have to break right for this team.

Minnesota Vikings

Offseason Additions:

Like the Lions and Packers, the Vikings were active on every level this offseason, including the addition of new Coach Brad Childress and several free agent additions. The team added offensive talent in RB Chester Taylor and OG Steve Hutchinson. Although they traded QB Daunte Culpepper, the team feels secure with sometimes–fragile QB Brad Johnson. On defense, a new and more disciplined approach will be used.

Outlook:

The Vikings are one of the "teams to watch for" seemingly every season, but they have consistently underachieved despite the presence of a wealth of talent on both sides of the ball. If, like the Lions, the Vikings can show some discipline, they could make a playoff run.

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NFL 2006 Prediction

By Sebastien Veilleux

The NFL season is always full of surprises. Partway into the season there is always at least one team that surprises and one that disappoints. This off-season had some key moves. Edgerrin James left Indianapolis for the Arizona Cardinals. Adam Vinatieri left the Patriots for the Colts. Many other players moved around. The 2006 draft had some potentially great players like Reggie Bush, Mat Leinart and Vince Young. So how will this all shake out? What follows is my list of what should be the 2006 playoff teams.

NFC East

– Dallas Cowboys – NY Giants – Philadelphia Eagles

This division is pretty tough. The NFC is weak in general and all three of these teams could wind up in the playoffs.

NFC North

– Minnesota Vikings

The NFC North is a poor division. I'm not going to jump on the Bears bandwagon. Their offense is shaky and their defense will not be as potent as last season. Given the schedules, I like the Vikings to win the division.

NFC South

– Carolina Panthers

What about Tampa Bay and Atlanta? This division is going to beat up on each other and when the dust clears, the Panthers will win by a game.

NFC West

– Seattle Seahawks

They are the class of the NFC. The only possible contender in this division is the Rams and they are suspect. Until teams can prove that they can win in Seattle, the Seahawks will not lose the throne.

AFC East

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– Miami Dolphins

There's a serious Dolphins bandwagon going around. The only reason I am picking them is because the Patriots had a serious drop in talent this off-season. Additionally, the Jets and Bills are not contenders. That leaves the Dolphins.

AFC North

– Cincinnati Bengals – Pittsburgh Steelers

If Carson Palmer is not healthy and doesn't play at least 13 games this season, take the Bengals off the list. They won't make it.

AFC South

– Indianapolis Colts – Jacksonville Jaguars

One will win the division and the other will get a wildcard. I'll predict that the Colts lose their first playoff game. It's been a moneymaking bet so far.

AFC West

– Denver Broncos

What about the Chiefs and Chargers? I think both will fight hard, but only one team is going to the playoffs in this division. The Broncos are better than either of the other three teams.

There you have it. The 2006 NFL season is just around the corner and the road to the playoffs—especially in very competitive divisions—starts in week one.

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