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How They Stack Up – The NFC West In July

By Jay Nault

Many see the Seattle Seahawks as the "landlords" of the NFC West, and that's probably a correct assumption. The team got all the way to the Super Bowl last season, and their personnel losses appear manageable. However, there is always the prospect of a "Super Bowl loss hangover," as that has ruined other teams' seasons the following year, and two other teams in particular could be on the verge of achieving big things in the division.

Arizona Cardinals:

Offseason Additions: Although the Cardinals were relatively quiet in free agency, their one signing was a big splash in RB Edgerrin James. The Cardinals need a running game to complete their talented offense, and if James can force defenses to respect every aspect of the Cardinals' attack, their passing game will flourish. The Cardinals had a good draft with QB Matt Leinart, G Taitusi Lutui, TE Leonard Pope and DT Gabe Watson.

Outlook: If their defense continues to play well and their OL and running game come together, the Cardinals could wind up in the playoffs.

St. Louis Rams

Offseason Additions: The Rams were quite busy in every aspect of their operation this offseason, including the signing of a new coach in Scott Linehan, a respected young offensive mind. The Rams also added a slew of free agents, including DB's Fakhir Brown and Corey Chavous, DT La'Roi Glover, LB's Will Witherspoon and Raonall Smith, LB, RB Tony Fisher, QB Gus Frerotte and P Matt Turk. The Rams further added to the DB corps by drafting Tye Hill in the first round.

Outlook: The Rams added help to their leaky pass defense and will hopefully put together an offense that uses its personnel better by pounding the ball with RB Steven Jackson. If they improve in these areas, the Rams will be a tough team to deal with throughout the season.

San Francisco 49ers

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Offseason Additions: The 49ers enter their second year of their rebuilding process, and they continued to add pieces all over their roster. The team needs an infusion of talent everywhere, and that's why they were busy this offseason. Free agent acquisitions include DB's Walt Harris and Chad Williams, WR's Bryan Gilmore and Antonio Bryant, G Larry Allen and LB T.J. Slaughter. The 49ers also had a very good draft that included TE Vernon Davis and LB Manny Lawson, and each will be a significant addition to their overall talent pool.

Outlook: The 49ers are still a year or two away from being a postseason threat, but they've added pieces not only to their defense, but also to their offense as they build around young QB Alex Smith.

Seattle Seahawks

Offseason Additions: The Seahawks were unusually active for a team coming off a Super Bowl

appearance, but their losses were as significant as their additions. The team signed LB Julian Peterson, DT Russell Davis, OL Tom Ashworth, WR Nate Burleson, TE Will Heller, DE Kemp Rasmussen and DB Oliver Celestin. The Seahawks also drafted DB Kelly Jennings in the first round of the draft. However, the team also lost G Steve Hutchinson, valuable WR Joe Jurevicius and dependable DB Marquand Manuel.

Outlook: The Seahawks are facing a grim recent history in 2006. No Super Bowl–losing team since 2000 has managed even a .500 record the following year, but the Seahawks remain the class of this division, so anything less than a playoff appearance would be a surprise.

By Jay Nault sponsored by

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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

How They Stack Up – The NFC West In July

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

– 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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