

NFL TEAMS GEAR UP FOR '99 SEASON

Out of Bounds

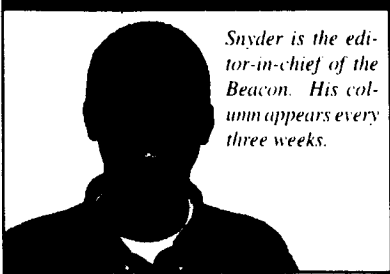
Vikings and Jets should top NFL in 2000

Just days away from the kickoff to the 1999-2000 NFL football season, there is already a sense of confusion as to who the teams to beat are. It's no longer the era of Green Bay/San Francisco/Dallas in the NFC which was evident with the Super Bowl run of the Atlanta Falcons last year. And as usual, your guess is as good as mine in regards to whom the AFC's representative for Super Bowl XXXIV will be.

But I'll narrow it down for you. My prediction for Super Bowl XXXIV sees Minnesota squeaking by the Bill Parcells' coached New York Jets.

There are the teams, but that's not the whole story. You're going to see some surprises this season. I'm not talking about a miracle season by the Barry Sanders-less Lions and I don't mean a storybook start for the Cleveland Browns. The teams in the cellar of their divisions last season will stay there for the most part, but the mediocre teams of recent seasons

Jason Snyder



Snyder is the editor-in-chief of the Beacon. His column appears every three weeks.

might start their rise to Super Bowl contendership.

The strongest division in the AFC this year is from the East. Year-in and year-out, this division almost always has at least two teams with playoff ability. The only problem: they never deliver when it counts. Postseason is also referred to as "hell" to these teams that can't seem to win the prize. Only two teams in the division have made it to the show in the 90s, but lost. Buffalo and Miami could contend for a wild-card,

but the Jets should fly atop the division.

Sure, the Browns are back and Cleveland is in a frenzy. That's good for the NFL and good for the city, but even better for the teams in the AFC: for now at least. For Jacksonville and Tennessee, that should post two guaranteed wins. For Pittsburgh, maybe a split (I don't see the Steelers sweeping their rival Browns). The Jaguars should emphatically, but quietly, win the AFC Central.

The "Best of the West" could be the worst of the AFC's playoff teams. The Broncos should ride the top of that division, but I don't see rookie quarterback Brian Griese replacing #7. You know...John Elway. Seattle could challenge, but it looks to be a one-team show.

The NFC is on a two year losing streak in the Super Bowl. Doesn't sound big, but coming off a 13-year winning streak, it is strange. Look for the NFC to bring a quick halt

to the AFC's supremacy.

There should be three exciting division races going on this season, but the best should be the NFC East. Dallas, Arizona, N.Y. Giants and the...Washington Redskins? Yes, not only am I picking Washington as a contender for the NFC East, I am picking them as the winner. There is no dominant team in the division which leads me to believe the Redskins could be the Cinderella team of the NFL this season. Washington doesn't settle for sub-.500 seasons for too long at a time. The "Skins almost always win Super Bowls unexpectedly, with an average quarterback (Brad Johnson), a quiet running back (Stephen Davis), and a good offensive line.

The NFC Central shouldn't surprise anyone except "cheeseheads." The Vikings are headed to Super Bowl XXXIV no matter what Brett Favre has to say about it. The Pack won't be back without Holmgren on the sidelines. He was no Lombardi, but Ray Rhodes is not even a Shermin

Lewis...never heard of him? That was the point.

The Falcons' miracle of last season won't repeat itself this season. San Francisco will win the division with maybe a challenge from New Orleans. I am confident in Ricky Williams even if other teams weren't.

Super Bowl XXXIV...Minnesota vs. New York. Doesn't sound very interesting, but these are two teams that have historic teams from the past and will now have more for the future. Minnesota, however, will be the team remembered.

The 1999-2000 football season shouldn't be anything out of the ordinary except for the return of the Cleveland Browns. In this area, that's a big thing, and in fact it is a positive event for the NFL. Cleveland has always been a city known for football as evident with the crazy and loud fans at the games. You'll see how more exciting football can be with just the addition of one team...one historic team.

NFL SCHEDULE

Week 1

Sunday, September 12

Baltimore @ St. Louis	12:00
Buffalo @ Indianapolis	12:00
Carolina @ New Orleans	12:00
Cincinnati @ Tennessee	12:00
Kansas City @ Chicago	12:00
Oakland @ Green Bay	12:00
Arizona @ Philadelphia	1:00
Dallas @ Washington	1:00
New England @ N.Y. Jets	1:00
Detroit @ Seattle	1:15
Minnesota @ Atlanta	4:15
N.Y. Giants @ Tampa Bay	4:15
San Fran. @ Jacksonville	4:15
Pittsburgh @ Cleveland	8:20

Monday, September 13

Miami @ Denver 7:00

Bye: San Diego

GAME OF THE WEEK

STEELERS VS. BROWNS

Beacon Staff NFL Football Predictions

Matt Wiertel
sports editor

AFC Championship: Jacksonville Jaguars vs. New York Jets
NFC Championship: Minnesota Vikings vs. Arizona Cardinals
Super Bowl XXXIV: Minnesota Vikings vs. Jacksonville Jaguars
Super Bowl Champs: Jacksonville Jaguars

Craig Hazelwood
assistant sports editor

AFC Championship: Buffalo Bills vs. Kansas City Chiefs
NFC Championship: San Francisco 49ers vs. Washington Redskins
Super Bowl XXXIV: Buffalo Bills vs. Washington Redskins
Super Bowl Champs: Washington Redskins

Jason Snyder
editor-in-chief

AFC Championship: Jacksonville Jaguars vs. New York Jets
NFC Championship: Minnesota Vikings vs. Washington Redskins
Super Bowl XXXIV: Minnesota Vikings vs. New York Jets
Super Bowl Champs: Minnesota Vikings



NFC Top Ten

High-scoring Vikings won't be denied this time

by **Fernando Dominguez**
Los Angeles Times

1. Minnesota Vikings
Still dejected over the championship that should have been, the Vikings have their sights on Atlanta in more ways than one... getting past the Falcons in the playoffs and reaching the Super Bowl. Coach: Dennis Green (71-41) 1998 record: 15-1. Newcomer to make impact: End John Burroughs, who made 21 tackles for Atlanta last season. Little-known fact: The Vikings are the only 15-victory team not to reach the Super Bowl. Stat that must change: Minnesota lived by the pass and died by the pass, giving up 317 yards passing and three touchdowns through the air in the 30-27 NFC Championship Game loss to Atlanta. The Vikings ranked 19th in pass defense during the regular season.

2. Green Bay Packers
To overtake Minnesota in the division, the Packers have to stop resting on their laurels. Coach: Ray Rhodes (29-34-1) 1998 record: 11-5. Newcomer to make impact: Rookie cornerback Mike McKenzie, from Memphis, gives the Packers added help in containing the likes of Minnesota's Randy Moss. Little-known fact: The Packers have won 44 of their last 46 games at Lambeau Field. Stat that must change: Brett Favre had 23 passes intercepted, an NFC high.

3. San Francisco 49ers
Their high-powered offense directed by aging quarterback Steve Young can't make up for the shortcomings on defense, but nobody is writing off the 49ers. Coach: Steve Mariucci (25-7) 1998 record: 12-4. Newcomer to make impact: Running back Lawrence Phillips, the well-chronicled bust in St. Louis and Miami who can redeem himself by replacing all-pro Garrison Hearst, sidelined by a broken ankle. Little-known fact: Young and Co. manhandled opponents in the second quarter, outscoring them, 163-70. Stat that must change: The 49ers ranked 29th in pass defense, giving up 233.3 yards per game.

4. Atlanta Falcons
Even with a tougher schedule than last year, the Falcons are too talented not to give Minnesota a run for NFC supremacy. Coach: Dan Reeves (162-

117-1) 1998 record: 14-2. Newcomer to make impact: Safety Marty Carter. The eight-year veteran made 159 tackles last season with Chicago, including 18 against the Falcons. Little-known fact: The Falcons are looking to put together winning seasons for the first time. Stat that must change: Better coverage by the secondary. Of the 22 touchdowns through the air given up by the Falcons, eight covered 50 yards or more.

5. Dallas Cowboys
If free of injury and turmoil, the Cowboys should cruise in the NFL's weakest division. Coach: Chan Gailey (10-6) 1998 record: 10-6. Newcomer to make impact: Wide receiver Raghbi Ismail, the "Rocket," whose deep-threat ability should fit in Gailey's wide-open scheme. Little-known fact: Gailey and Atlanta Coach Dan Reeves were football standouts at Americus (Ga.) High. Stat that must change: The Cowboys gave up 12.99 yards per completion, fifth-highest in the league.

6. Tampa Bay Buccaneers
The Buccaneers are giving quarterback Trent Dilfer one more chance to show what he can do, or show him the door. Coach: Tony Dungy (24-24) 1998 record: 8-8. Newcomer to make impact: Rookie defensive tackle Anthony McFarland from Louisiana State. The Buccaneers plan to rotate him at the position with veterans Warren Sapp and Brad Culpepper. Little-known fact: The Buccaneers have only four winning seasons since joining the NFL in 1976. Stat that must change: Tampa Bay averaged 162.9 yards passing, fourth-lowest in the league.

7. Washington Redskins
New team Owner Daniel Snyder wants big improvements or pink slips will abound. The line will form behind Coach Norv Turner. Coach: Turner (32-47-1) 1998 record: 6-10. Newcomer to make impact: Quarterback Brad Johnson, a legitimate starter relegated to back up Randall Cunningham at Minnesota. Johnson completed 64.4 percent of his passes last season, tops among quarterbacks with 100 or more attempts. Little-known fact: Snyder is erasing the last vestiges of Jack Kent Cooke's ego. The home field, for one, is now Redskins Stadium. Stat that must change: The Redskins need to win a

game before Halloween, unlike last year, when they started 0-7.

8. Arizona Cardinals
Because of a suspect defense, third-year quarterback Jake Plummer will probably have to add to his eight comeback victories in 26 games for the Cardinals to win. Coach: Vince Tobin (20-28) 1998 record: 9-7. Newcomer to make impact: Linebacker Rob Fredrickson, an excellent pass defender who made 86 tackles for Detroit last season. Little-known fact: The Cardinals have not won an opener since 1991. Stat that must change: Although they couldn't outrun a centipede, the Cardinals called for only seven fair catches in 43 punts, averaging 6.9 yards per return.

9. New Orleans Saints
Who but Coach Mike Ditka would conceive of trading all of the team's draft choices to land one player, even if it is Ricky Williams, the Heisman Trophy winner from Texas? Coach: Ditka (118-82) 1998 record: 6-10. Newcomer to make impact: Williams. He better, or, pity couch potatoes, Ditka goes back to blabbering on TV. Little-known fact: New Orleans' last 1,000-yard rusher was Dalton Hilliard in 1989. Stat that must change: The Saints ranked last in the league in rushing at 82.8 yards per game, scoring a measly six touchdowns on the ground.

10. New York Giants
Putting his faith, and perhaps his future employment, in the hands of quarterbacks Kent Graham and Kerry Collins might be Coach Jim Fassel's worst move yet. Coach: Fassel (18-13-1) 1998 record: 8-8. Newcomer to make impact: Tight end Pete Mitchell, a much-needed pass-catching threat at the position. He had 38 receptions for Jacksonville in 1998. Little-known fact: As head coach at Utah, Fassel recruited and tutored quarterback Scott Mitchell, now of the Baltimore Ravens. Now you know who to blame. Stat that must change: Graham needs to improve on his 70.8 quarterback rating or, pity the Giants, Collins gets to play.

AFC Top Ten

Jaguars Rule in 1999

by **Fernando Dominguez**
Los Angeles Times

1. Jacksonville Jaguars
A retooled defense and a solid offense makes Jacksonville a legitimate Super Bowl contender. Coach: Tom Coughlin (35-29) 1998 record: 11-5. Newcomer to make impact: Safety Carnell Lake, switching from cornerback at Pittsburgh to his strongest position, solidifies the secondary. Little-known fact: The Jaguars are the only expansion team in NFL history to have advanced to the playoffs three times in their first four seasons. Stat that must change: Equally incompetent at defending against the pass or the run, the Jaguars yielded 347.4 yards a game.

2. Miami Dolphins
Coach Jimmy Johnson has laid the groundwork but needs the ground game to kick in for the Dolphins to reach the next level. Coach: Johnson (71-57) 1998 record: 10-6. Newcomer to make impact: Rookie running back Cecil "the Diesel" Collins from McNeese State. The guy's a walking police blotter but also a gifted ballcarrier who can run inside or outside. Little-known fact: Dan Marino needs 1,087 yards passing to become the first player to reach 60,000. Stat that must change: The Dolphins averaged 3.4 yards rushing, worst in the AFC.

3. Denver Broncos
Without retired quarterback John Elway, Terrell Davis' running is not enough to bring the Broncos an unprecedented third consecutive Super Bowl title. Coach: Mike Shanahan (55-29) 1998 record: 14-2. Newcomer to make impact: Cornerback Dale Carter, who had 39 tackles and two interceptions with Kansas City. Little-known fact: The Broncos need to win their first four home games to set an NFL record of 28 consecutive home victories, surpassing Miami's streak of 27 from 1971-74. Stat that must change: Denver gave back every yard and more that Elway and his backups gained through the air, ranking 26th in passing defense.

4. New York Jets
If quarterback Vinny Testaverde's clock doesn't strike midnight, the Jets can go to the ball, er, Bowl. Coach:

Bill Parcells (130-92-1) 1998 record: 12-4. Newcomer to make impact: Safety Steve Atwater was a force at Denver and should be one with the Jets. Little-known fact: The Jets each took home a \$32,500 losers' share from the conference title game, \$17,500 more each than Joe Namath and company got for winning Super Bowl III in 1969. Stat that must change: New York averaged 40.6 yards a punt, worst in the AFC, hence the signing of free agent Tom Tupa away from New England. Tupa was ninth in the league with a 44.5-yard average.

5. Seattle Seahawks
New boss Mike Holmgren is hoping third-year quarterback Jon Kitna is through cutting his teeth. Coach: Holmgren (75-37) 1998 record: 8-8. Newcomer to make impact: Wide receiver Sean Dawkins, who last season caught 53 passes for 823 yards and a touchdown at New Orleans. Little-known fact: Seattle's only Monday night game this season is Nov. 1 at Green Bay, Holmgren's stomping ground the last seven years. Stat that must change: The Seahawks had the poorest third-down efficiency rating in the league at 27.7 percent.

6. Pittsburgh Steelers
The Steelers have installed an aggressive down-the-field attack, but whether quarterback Kordell Stewart can execute it is another story. Coach: Bill Cowher (71-41) 1998 record: 7-9. Newcomer to make impact: Rookie safety Scott Shields from Weber State can also punt and kick in a pinch. Little-known fact: Cowher and Minnesota's Dennis Green are starting their eighth seasons with their teams, the most by active coaches. Stat that must change: Stewart's 62.9 quarterback rating barely beat out those of immortals Don Hollas of Oakland and Craig Whelihan and Ryan Leaf of San Diego among AFC starters.

7. Tennessee Titans
Quarterback Steve McNair's stiff back had better loosen up or Nashville's latest hick show is doomed. Coach: Jeff Fisher (32-38) 1998 record: 8-8. Newcomer to make impact: Rookie end Jevon Kearse

from Florida has the speed and quickness to beat offensive tackles. Little-known fact: Al Del Greco needs one field goal to become the 12th NFL player to reach 300. Stat that must change: The Titans dropped opposing quarterbacks only 30 times.

8. Buffalo Bills
The well-rounded Bills will prove that last season was no flutie fluke, making for a tight race in the East division. Coach: Wade Phillips (27-25) 1998 record: 10-6. Newcomer to make impact: Rookie wide receiver Peerless Price last season caught 61 passes for 920 yards and 10 touchdowns at Tennessee. Little-known fact: Eric Moulds was the only NFL receiver with 50 or more catches to average 20 yards per reception at 20.4. Stat that must change: The Bills gave up 27 touchdowns passing, one fewer than AFC leader Denver.

9. Kansas City Chiefs
So the Chiefs are reduced to Elvis Grbac or Warren Moon, 43, to lead an offensive revival. What, Dieter Brock wasn't available? Coach: Gunther Cunningham (first year) 1998 record: 7-9. Newcomer to make impact: Linebacker Marvcur Patton, who is coming off a 143-tackle season with the Washington Redskins. Little-known fact: Born in Munich, Germany, Cunningham is the fourth foreign-born head coach in league history. Stat that must change: The Chiefs set an NFL season record with 158 penalties.

10. Baltimore Ravens
With Scott Mitchell or Tony Banks at quarterback, the Ravens had better call a Priest other than Holmes. Coach: Brian Billick (first year) 1998 record: 6-10. Newcomer to make impact: Tackle Harry Swayne, fresh off Denver's formidable offensive line, provides experience and stability. Little-known fact: Billick once worked in public relations for the San Francisco 49ers. Maybe he can give Art Modell a few tips. Stat that must change: The Ravens scored 25 points or more in only three games.