

NFL Gameday

Compiled by Desmond Bieler, Matt Bonesteel, David Larimer and Christian Swezey



These Guys Got Game

A thoughtful yet largely snarky New Year's resolution for each NFL team — and for each member of our Gameday crew:

NUMBERS

8

Teams who have a chance to make the playoffs this year after they did not qualify last season. The Packers, Jaguars, Steelers and Buccaneers have clinched berths after not going to the postseason last year. Four other teams enter today with a shot at the playoffs: The Browns and Titans in the AFC and Redskins and Vikings in the NFC.

14-46

Combined won-loss records for the Dolphins-Bengals and Chiefs-Jets, who play today in games that are "boring" to the NFL like "flop" is to Spain's national soccer team.

EAST

BILLS: In anticipation of a move to Toronto, remember to start peppering their conversations with "Eh?"

DOLPHINS: Dupe fan base into thinking Bill Parcells is cleaning house by making Cam Cameron change his name to Coach Coachwell.

JETS: Choose a quarterback from among Chad Pennington, Kellen Clemens and whoever's behind Door No. 3, and stick with him.

PATRIOTS: Continue hypnotizing Randy Moss into thinking that getting a ring beats getting paid.

NORTH

BENGALS: Stop taking "how to play hard" lessons from the New York Knicks.

BROWNS: Investigate the best route to the postseason: Merging with Bowling Green to try and win the MAC.

RAVENS: Two roster moves: Sign Trent Dilfer and move Ray Lewis to the pregame dance team.

STEELERS: One word: FieldTurf.

SOUTH

COLTS: Have Peyton Manning lead the league in something other than commercials.

JAGUARS: Bend to the will of the fan base and change team name to "Jagwires."

TEXANS: Establish once and for all that the franchise is indeed completely different from the Tennessee Titans.

TITANS: Be happy that, while it was not a great season, at least a few casual fans realize they're not the Texans.

WEST

BRONCOS: Require quarterback Jay Cutler to lose the Southern frat boy haircut, physique and mentality.

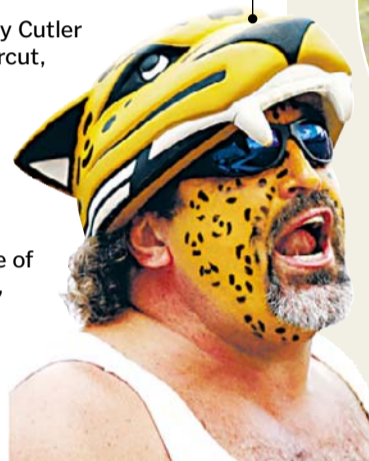
CHARGERS: Stop treating the postseason like it's the pre-season.

CHIEFS: Stop treating the regular season like it's the preseason.

RAIDERS: Revel in being the cradle of successful coaches! Norv Turner, Mike Shanahan and Jon Gruden have made the playoffs since 2005, albeit with other teams.

AFC

NFC



EAST

COWBOYS: Tell Jessica Simpson the Cowboys moved to the one place she will never find: a college.

EAGLES: Find newer and more inventive ways to make fans hate Donovan McNabb.

GIANTS: Pay Tiki Barber whatever it takes to stop making fun of Eli Manning on NBC.

REDSKINS: Don't get distracted by fans who believe Joe Gibbs will find a way to win the Super Bowl from this year until 2027.

NORTH

BEARS: Embrace the name of the team's 2008 Season Preview video: "The Young and the Rex-less."

LIONS: Scout positions other than wide receiver before the draft.

PACKERS: Convince Brett Favre that playing in cold weather will preserve his looks for one more year.

VIKINGS: Have Coach Brad Childress embrace his lookalike status to Gerald McRaney; after all watching Tarvaris Jackson impersonate an NFL quarterback is funnier than most of those "Major Dad" reruns.

SOUTH

BUCCANEERS: Stop resenting the Glazers for worrying more about Manchester United's reserve tear than Tampa Bay's home playoff game.

FALCONS: Owner Arthur Blank should start a "Glorious Loyalty Oath Crusade" a la Captain Black in "Catch-22." The first signature? New coach Rich Rodriguez.

PANTHERS: Do whatever it takes finally to become bigger in the state than NASCAR and college hoops.

SAINTS: To offset fan anger at another disappointing year, bring back the dog who fetches the kicking tee.

WEST

49ERS: Find Coach Mike Nolan a dry cleaner that specializes in getting flop-sweat stains out of men's suits.

CARDINALS: Ignore those who say that a bad team in an awesome stadium is like a horrible movie with a great soundtrack.

RAMS: RB Steven Jackson wants more noise at home games. Grant him his wish by giving season tickets to the cast of "Hogan Knows Best."

SEAHAWKS: Once and for all, stop complaining about the officiating in Super Bowl XL.

And for the Gameday Crew ...

BIELER: No more Kyle "Pro" Boller references.

BONESTEEL: Stop TiVoing through the games to get to the Peyton Manning commercials.

LARIMER: Realize that finishing first in this group is like being an Atlanta Thrashers season-ticket holder: Anyone can do it.

SWEZEY: Next time you see hipsters, buy 'em a round of PBRs.

BRAGGING RIGHTS

The NFL Gameday crew picks their locks of the week, listed with this year's record:

49ers (+11½) over CLEVELAND
So either Larimer or Swezey (or both) will have these so-called "bragging rights." But honestly, what's to brag about, that they were the least incompetent at picking games? Whoop-de-darn-do. This whole thing is stupid. And dumb. Almost as dumb as the Browns would be in not sitting offseason trade-bait Derek Anderson and giving Brady Quinn his first snaps of the season in this meaningless game.
— Desmond Bieler (7-9)

WASHINGTON (-9) over Dallas
T.O. ain't playing, and Tony Romo may be texting mash notes to Jessica Simpson by the middle of the first quarter (sample: "ur dad iz weerd lol"). Meanwhile, the Redskins seem destined to make the playoffs (thus setting up what's sure to be a comically overheated quarterback controversy in the playoffs) and I seem destined to at least tie Bieler in the Bragging Rights version of the NIT.
— Matt Bonesteel (7-9)

San Diego (-8½) over OAKLAND
In the previous three weeks, the Raiders have allowed the Packers and Colts to clinch their divisions and the Jaguars to wrap up a playoff spot. Another loss today would give the Chargers the AFC's No. 3 seed, a pretty sweet carrot, since it would mean avoiding Jacksonville in the first round and the Patriots until the AFC title game. But most deliciously, I've got at least a share of consecutive Bragging Rights titles at stake, and JaMarcus Russell will be making his first career start.
— David Larimer (8-7-1)

INDIANAPOLIS (+5) over Tennessee
I have a hunch Peyton Manning will play quite a bit in this one. If Marvin Harrison is healthy, this is their only chance to have any on-field time before the playoffs. Funny thing is, even if Harrison doesn't play, and Manning only is in for one possession, I still finish ahead of Bonesteel and Bieler.
— Christian Swezey (8-7-1)



Titans Bank on Young To Come Up Roses

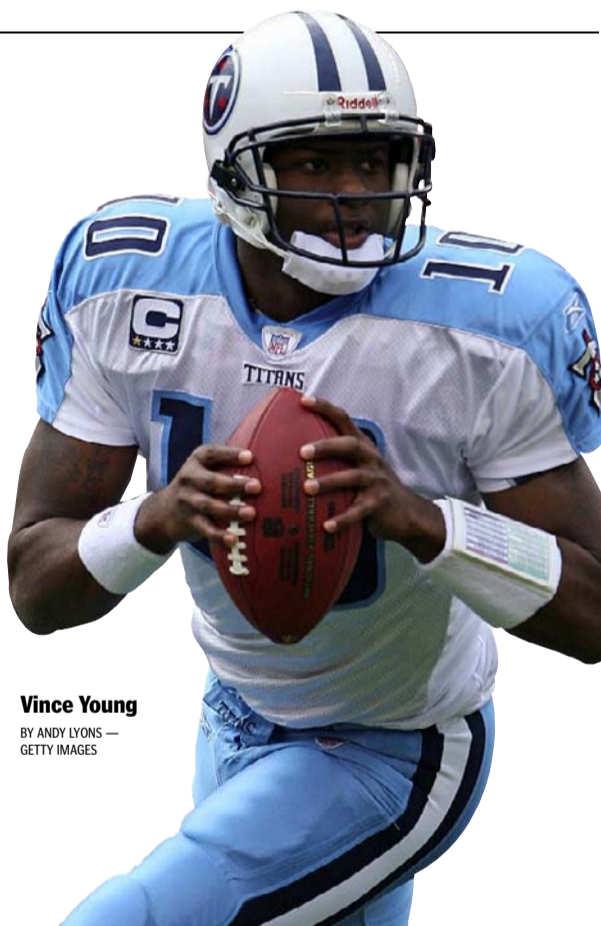
As a rookie last season, Titans quarterback Vince Young rushed for 552 yards and seven touchdowns on 83 carries. This season, Young has six more carries but 176 fewer rushing yards and four fewer rushing touchdowns. He's also thrown three fewer touchdowns and four more interceptions.

Last season, Young led the Titans to five comebacks in the fourth quarter, but Tennessee hasn't been able to repeat that feat once this season.

Tonight's game offers Young the perfect, and perhaps the last, chance to shake off his sophomore slump. Tennessee needs to win to make the playoffs for the first time since 2003.

"I told them to expect a Rose Bowl-type performance where he takes it upon himself to will the team to victory," Colts Coach Tony Dungy said this week, referring to when Young led Texas to the 2005 national title with a win over Southern Cal.

Meanwhile, the Colts have wrapped up the No. 2 seed in the AFC, meaning many of their stars won't play much. The last two times Indianapolis had nothing to play for in Week 17, in 2004 and 2005, quarterback Peyton Manning played only one series. Such wanton indifference could cause some anxious moments in Cleveland, because the Browns will advance to the playoffs only if the Titans lose.



Vince Young
BY ANDY LYONS — GETTY IMAGES



No Joy of Sacks for Vikes

A befuddling crew, this Vikings defense. Minnesota features two Pro Bowl defensive tackles in Kevin Williams and Pat Williams, who often draw double-teams. One would figure this would leave the defensive ends with an easier path to the quarterback. But if that's the case, ends Brian Robison, Kenechi Udeze and Erasmus James still have found stumbling blocks.

Udeze leads Minnesota's active defensive ends with five sacks (Ray Edwards, who was suspended for the final four games of the season, also has five). To put that number in perspective, Seattle's Patrick Kerney, whom the Vikings could have signed as a free agent in the offseason, has 14½.

The Vikings have 37 sacks, which ranks ninth in the NFL, yet Minnesota ranks last in the NFL against the pass.

The Vikings hurried Redskins quarterback Todd Collins six times in last week's loss, yet only one of those hurries came from a defensive end.

"I tell them all the time, 'One of you should have 13 or 14 sacks, with me and Kevin getting all the attention,'" Pat Williams said this week as the Vikings prepared for their must-win game against the Broncos.



The Sins of the Saints

The Saints, despite clinging to a faint hope of making the playoffs, might well take the field today not looking forward, but back.

Back to Week 13, and the baffling decision to run a reverse while holding a three-point lead late in the fourth against Tampa Bay. That botched play resulted in a fumble and led to the Buccaneers' winning touchdown. Or to Week 5, when the Saints missed two field goal attempts in the fourth quarter, then watched as a tipped-ball interception led to the Panthers' game-winning field goal as time expired. A win in either of those games would have put New Orleans in command of its fate, instead of hoping for a win and losses by both the Redskins and Vikings.

But why stop there? Consider the team's 0-4 start, during which Drew Brees threw one touchdown and nine interceptions. He's returned to his 2006 form since then with 24 TDs and seven interceptions in 11 games.

Even today's venue, Soldier Field, is haunted, being the site of last season's NFC title game between these teams, when the Saints struggled in the cold and were routed, 39-14. But with the Bears weeks removed from playoff contention, at least the Saints won't be alone in wondering: How did we get here?

Minnesota at Denver 4:15 p.m.

BREAKDOWN

1989

The last time a rookie — the Lions' Barry Sanders — led the NFC in rushing. Vikings RB Adrian Peterson has 14 more yards than the Eagles' Brian Westbrook entering the final weekend.

New Orleans at Chicago, 1 p.m.

BREAKDOWN

"What happened to us? Whatever happened to them, they were able to get more wins than us."

Bears LB Lance Briggs, responding to a question of what happened to the Saints this season

AMERICAN FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

EAST	W	L	T	Pct.	SOUTH	W	L	T	Pct.	NORTH	W	L	T	Pct.	WEST	W	L	T	Pct.
New England	15	0	0	1.000	Indianapolis	13	2	0	.867	Pittsburgh	10	5	0	.667	San Diego	10	5	0	.667
Buffalo	7	8	0	.467	Jacksonville	11	4	0	.733	Cleveland	9	6	0	.600	Denver	6	9	0	.467
N.Y. Jets	3	12	0	.200	Tennessee	9	6	0	.600	Cincinnati	6	9	0	.400	Oakland	4	11	0	.267
Miami	1	14	0	.067	Houston	7	8	0	.467	Baltimore	4	11	0	.267	Kansas City	4	11	0	.267

NATIONAL FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

EAST	W	L	T	Pct.	SOUTH	W	L	T	Pct.	NORTH	W	L	T	Pct.	WEST	W	L	T	Pct.
Dallas	13	2	0	.867	Tampa Bay	9	6	0	.600	Green Bay	12	3	0	.800	Seattle	10	5	0	.667
N.Y. Giants	10	5	0	.667	New Orleans	7	8	0	.467	Minnesota	8	7	0	.533	Arizona	7	8	0	.467
Washington	8	7	0	.533	Carolina	6	9	0	.400	Detroit	7	8	0	.467	San Francisco	5	10	0	.333
Philadelphia	7	8	0	.467	Atlanta	3	12	0	.200	Chicago	6	9	0	.400	St. Louis	3	12	0	.200