



UPDATED

2023 NFL BETTING GUIDE

HOT READS

MICHAEL LOMBARDI SHARES
UPDATES FOR EVERY TEAM

AND...

BEST BETS
FROM VSIN EXPERTS

MASTER CLASS

STEVE MAKINEN
BETTING SPLIT TUTORIAL

WEEK 1

DEEP DIVE AND
SYSTEM PLAYS



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ALL ODDS COURTESY OF DRAFTKINGS



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Special thanks to the crew of team beat writers featured throughout.

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**ODDS WITHIN GUIDE ARE
SUBJECT TO CHANGE**

COMMON ABBREVIATIONS USED THROUGHOUT THIS GUIDE

ATS - Against the Spread • Avg - Average • CL - Closing Line
DC - Defensive Coordinator • Def - Defense • Dog - Underdog
Eff Strg - Steve Makinen Effective Strength Rating • Fav - Favorite
FT - Final Total • HC - Head Coach • H2h - Head-to-Head • L - Losses
L# - Last number of games • LY - Last Year • MOV - Margin of Victory
O - Over • OC - Offensive Coordinator • Off - Offense • OL - Opening Line
OT - Opening Total • Opp - Opponent • O/U - Over/Under
PA - Points Against • Pct - Percentage • PF - Points For • PPG - Points Per Game
PYPG - Passing Yards per Game • RS - Returning Starters
RYPG - Rushing Yards per Game • SM BR - Steve Makinen Bettors' Rating
SM PR - Steve Makinen Power Rating • SU - Straight Up • TO - Turnovers
TYPG - Total Yards per Game • U - Under • W - Wins • YPP - Yards per Play
YPPT - Yards per Point • YPR - Yards per Rush

To our loyal VSIN Subscribers,

I'd like to wish you all a Happy Football Season!

With college football under way and the NFL season mere days away, our content is rolling out at a fast and furious pace and we're happy to have you along for the ride. We are excited to showcase what our analysts and writers can do, including the addition of newest VSIN writer Tyler Shoemaker and the T Shoe Index rating system.

We made a significant change to move our NFL and College Football Betting Guides up with their release dates this season and it has been a positive change by all accounts. We've had an outstanding summer for subscriptions and have welcomed a lot of new VSIN fans into the fold, while also showing our tenured subscribers how we plan to raise the bar for this and all future seasons. (And we don't just mean football!)

The "Updated" 2023 NFL Betting Guide is meant to serve as an add-on to our original publication on June 29. This one features observations from the preseason, refreshed and time-relevant feature articles, and Week 1 insights.

The highlights include:

- Michael Lombardi's "seen and heard" on all 32 teams
- Players to Watch from beat writers/team analysts, featuring Bo Smolka (Ravens), Mike Petraglia (Bengals), Zac Jackson (Browns), Kate Magdziuk (Steelers), Adam Hill (Raiders), Nick Falato (Giants), JP Finlay (Commanders), Lester A. Wilfong Jr. (Bears), Benjamin Raven (Lions), Matthew Collier (Vikings), Matthew Miguez (Saints), and Rob Staton (Seahawks); plus myself and Senior Writer Zach Cohen on the others
- Steve Makinen on how to use the DraftKings Betting Splits and Week 1 betting systems
- Matt Youmans with a refreshed look at Super Bowl futures betting
- Adam Burke on contest strategies

Oh, and a pick from EVERY on-air host, plus some of the DraftKings Network personalities you see on VSIN.

As VSIN patriarch Brent Musburger says, "Cashin' tickets is what it's all about." Our goal is to help you with that today, tomorrow, and every day. So, thank you for putting your trust in us and let's all have a successful football season.

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FRESH VSIN EXPERT

BEST BETS

MITCH MOSS

Brandin Cooks Over 725.5 receiving yards

I love this addition at wideout by the Cowboys. He'll play the role of the No. 2 receiver extremely well behind CeeDee Lamb. He's surpassed 1,000 yards six times in his career, and joins an elite offense in Dallas.

Jahmyr Gibbs OROY 10/1

Taking another shot with a player in an elite offense. Gibbs will take over as the main RB target for Jared Goff, as D'Andre Swift departed for Philadelphia in the offseason. I think Young, Stroud, and Richardson will struggle on potentially awful teams in their first season under center. (I also made a smaller bet on Gibbs to lead all rookies in receiving yards at 40/1).

Week 13 look ahead line: Cardinals at Steelers (-6.5)

This is the first of two shots I'm taking against Arizona. Kyler Murray may or may not come back and play this season. Either way, I'm not a fan, and this team appears to be tanking. Week 13 in Pittsburgh will be the 13th consecutive game without a bye for the Cards. Ouch. Their reward is to play on the road versus a team that is notorious for beating the daylights out of opponents. I expect this number to be closer to -10 than to -7 come kickoff.

Week 15 look ahead line: 49ers (-6) at Cardinals

Here is my second stab. Shop around, as I noticed SF -6.5 and -7 at different books. I'm betting on this number being higher — potentially MUCH higher — once Week 15 rolls around. The 49ers could be playing for the division or maybe even the No. 1 seed in the NFC. The Cardinals could be aiming for the No. 1 overall pick, or simply be awful this season. I expect the crowd to be 95% San Francisco fans, and the shot at a nice middle. Arizona has one thing going for it in this contest — they are coming off their bye week.

Late additions after the Cardinals released QB Colt McCoy:

Lowest scoring team (+750)

Last winless team (+460)

Most regular season losses (+305)

PAULY HOWARD

Chiefs to win the AFC West (-165)

Patrick Mahomes is 27-3 vs. the AFC West in his career. Andy Reid has won the division seven years in a row and the Chargers can't get over the hump and get to 12 or 13 wins.

Texans Under 6.5 Wins

C.J. Stroud will struggle in his first year and the lack of weapons around him does not help. Last year, the defense was dead last at stopping the run and so far the same thing has happened in preseason. Wins (by year) for Houston have been three, four, and four. Expect much of the same this year.

GILL ALEXANDER

Giants ALT regular season win total: Under 6.5 +185

The Giants were 8-4-1 in one score games last year, but their good fortune wasn't about just that. Their defense ranked towards the bottom of the league in EPA per play outside the red zone, but were the league's best unit inside the 20 by the same metric for most of the season. They allowed teams to make it to the red zone at one of the league's highest rates on a per-game basis, but were only allowing those offenses to convert a paltry fraction of the time.

On first and second down, the Giants were a bottom-third defense by EPA per play. On third and fourth down? They morphed into one of the

best defenses. Despite the fact that opposing offenses had close to the fewest yards to go to pick up third downs against the Giants, they had one of the best defenses at avoiding conversions. There is no team that can sustain such contrasts as a true skillset. Brian Daboll won Coach of the Year honors based largely on these dynamics. It all comes home to roost this year with a gauntlet of a schedule.

MICHAEL LOMBARDI

Commanders Over 6.5 Wins

Last year, the Commanders won eight games with Carson Wentz and Taylor Heinicke at quarterback. How can Sam Howell be any worse? The Commanders are one of the few teams that beat the Eagles, forced four turnovers in the game, and slowed down the Philly offense, in part because they can match up to any team physically. They might not reach the playoffs, but winning seven games should be something they can easily achieve.

STORMY BUONANTONY

Vikings Over 8.5 Wins

I fully understand the Vikings won an inconceivable number of close games last year en route to a 13-win season, so don't confuse this bet with being naive to the regression coming. Our guy Michael Lombardi always jokes with me that casinos shouldn't let Kevin O'Connell in the door because of how lucky that man was in 2022.

That said, even with Minnesota taking an inevitable step back, a five-game regression feels excessive given their offensive talent and the "meh" NFC North Division with which they play. The Vikings also won all of those games last year despite having a defense that ranked 31st in the NFL in Total D. That side of the ball should be improved under new defensive coordinator Brian Flores and the pieces they've added on that side of the ball (it would be hard to be worse). We don't need the Vikings to win in the playoffs or win the division. We don't even need a double-digit win season. We just need nine wins and I feel confident the Vikings have enough to get there.

FEMI ABEBEFE

Garrett Wilson: Offensive Player of the Year (25/1)

When I break down the Offensive Player of the Year market, I get the sense that the voters view this award as the non-QB MVP, or in other words, the "Fantasy Football Stud of the Year" award. The betting market has started to notice voter habits and no longer places quarterbacks among the favorites.

One thing I try to do with this award is pick a second or third-year running back or wide receiver who has the potential to breakout and join the elite ranks of his respective position. That brings me to Wilson. In just one season, Wilson showed why Gang Green selected him 10th overall in the 2022 NFL Draft.

In less than ideal conditions (looking at you Zach Wilson and Mike White), Wilson was able to rack up 1,100 receiving yards en route to winning Offensive Rookie of the Year. Fast forward to now, where he goes from catching passes from suboptimal signal callers to one of the best to ever line up behind center in Aaron Rodgers.

If you've listened to any Rodgers press conference or have seen any of the Hard Knocks episodes, you'll have noticed that he has gone out of his way to heap praise on his new WR1. The word he continues to use to describe Wilson is "special." In fact, earlier this offseason, Rodgers compared Wilson to his old WR1, Davante Adams.

The Rodgers-Wilson connection has been the talk of Jets training camp and preseason, with the two showing an already great chemistry (especially in the red zone). One thing about Rodgers is that he makes sure his top targets are well-fed. The combination of targets and attention from the national media makes Wilson a legitimate threat to lead the league in receiving yards and receiving touchdowns.

At the price of 25/1, I'll take a shot on Wilson to continue his ascension as one of the best young wide receivers in the NFL.

PATRICK MEAGHER

Jahan Dotson Over 750.5 rec yards

Love everything about Dotson in Year 2, as he had 35 catches for 523 yards and seven TD in just 12 games played for the Commanders last season. Sam Howell has little experience, but he's certainly more promising than a washed Carson Wentz and an average Taylor Heinicke. Add in a fresh approach with new OC Eric Bienemy and suddenly there are reasons for expectations on offense. As a rookie, Dotson had the 19th-highest contested catch rate and the 14th-highest average depth of target, so he's good on 50/50 balls and will stretch the field. Dotson is a stud and breaks out this year!

AMAL SHAH

Jaxon Smith-Njigba OROY 15/1

JSN is a complete slot receiver on a team with two very good targets already and a QB who has put up a QB Rating over 100 the past two seasons. His ability to get open, combined with his quickness, should allow him to catch 70+ balls this season. He is going to be a Pro Bowler by Year 2. Seattle should make great use of him in the red zone as well. He should end up with 70+ catches, 700+ yards and 5+ TDs, which puts him in the running.

Jaxon Smith-Njigba



DUSTIN SWEDELSON

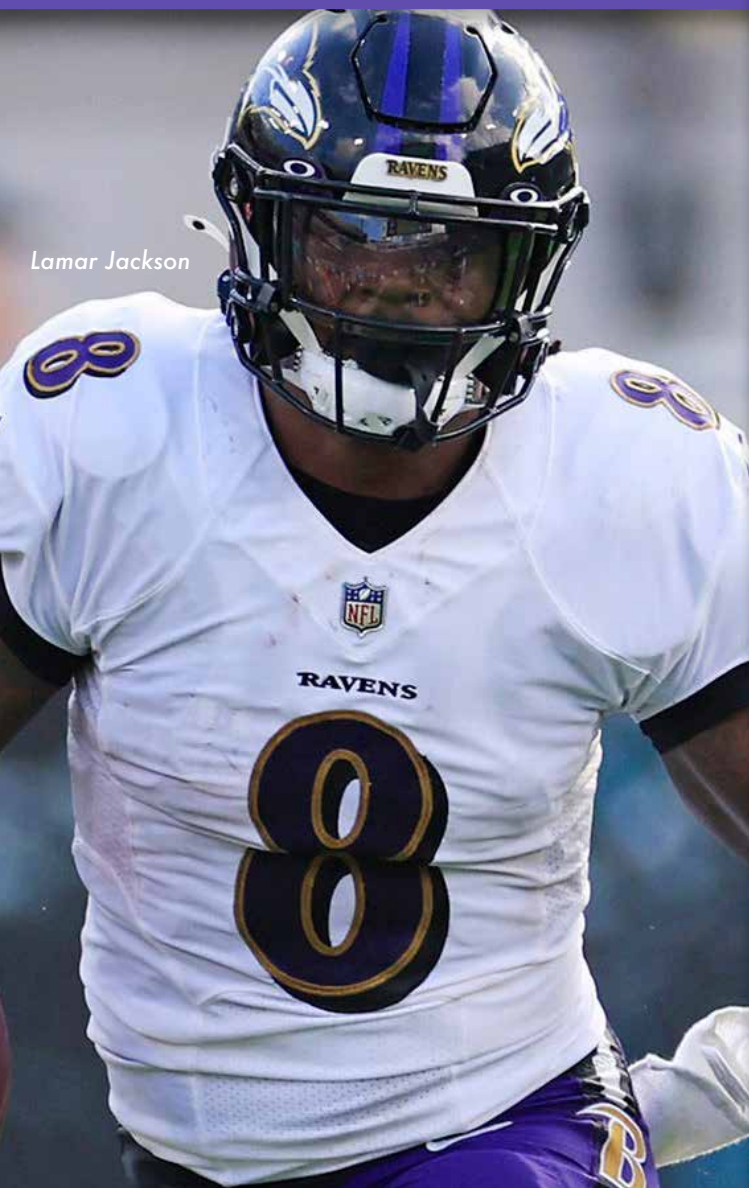
Ravens Super Bowl 18/1, Lamar Jackson MVP 15/1

Greg Roman's offensive system had run its course in Baltimore. New OC Todd Monken will bring a fresh set of eyes and creativity to what became a stale and predictable Ravens offense. Monken turned walk-on Stetson Bennett into a fourth-round draft pick and was Jameis Winston's OC during his best year in Tampa. Now, he gets to work with a former MVP who has a skill set unlike anyone we've ever seen play QB.

They will still be deadly on the ground with Jackson and a deep stable of backs, but the air attack will be massively improved. Their ability to control the clock on the ground will keep them deadly in big games and the postseason, but you can expect more screens and play action to open up the passing game. Jackson has never had weapons like Zay Flowers and Odell Beckham Jr. before. Flowers will be a YAC machine and will benefit from teams having to respect Beckham. Throw in an elite TE like Mark Andrews – and there is also a chance that Isaiah Likely and Rashod Bateman could become reliable targets – and this offense becomes scary.

The defense is extremely athletic, led by a pass rush that will help the other units thrive. They have athletic specimens coming off the edge in Odafe Oweh, David Ojabo, and Tyus Bowser. Their LB core, led by Patrick Queen and Roquan Smith, should terrify offenses. Getting anything out of Jadeveon Clowney would just be the cherry on top.

Lamar Jackson



Without Jackson's contract hanging over this franchise's head, expect him to go all out in 2023.

TIM MURRAY

Packers Over 7.5 Wins

Yes, Aaron Rodgers is in New York. Yes, the Packers only won eight games last year. While there is plenty of uncertainty surrounding Jordan Love at quarterback, the Packers have plenty of talent on the roster. Green Bay has young, but exciting wide receivers in Christian Watson and Romeo Doubs, and even rookie Jayden Reed has popped during training camp. Rookie TE Luke Musgrave is expected to be a large focus of the offense as well. For a first-time starting quarterback like Love, having running backs Aaron Jones and AJ Dillon at his disposal will be very beneficial.

Defensively, the Packers will have seven first-round picks suiting up this year. Defensive coordinator Joe Barry certainly leaves plenty to be desired, but the talent is there. The safety position is the biggest concern headed into the year.

The Packers win total entering the 2022 season was set at 11.5 wins. The Packers underachieved, finished with just eight wins, and missed out on the playoffs. However, to move the market four wins from one season to the next is aggressive. Head coach Matt LaFleur led the Packers to 39 regular season wins over his first three years and has proven to be a solid NFL coach. In a division that feels like a coin toss, the Packers should bounce back with the talent there and could certainly win the division.

SHAUN KING

Titans Over 8.5 Alt Win Total +195 and to Win the AFC South +280

As you can tell, I'm bullish on Tennessee! I'm a huge fan of coach Mike Vrabel and, while the conservative way to approach this wager is to bet the 7.5-win total, I'm all in on the Titans! The addition of DeAndre Hopkins was huge for an offense that needed a true No. 1 WR. And Ryan Tannehill and Derrick Henry are in contract years, so I'm expecting their absolute best as they try for one more big deal after this season.

Led by Jeffery Simmons, the defense will be in the top half of the league. Before you overthink this, Vrabel's records the last three seasons are 11-5, 12-5 and, of course, 7-10 last year, but don't forget they were 7-3 in 2022 before losing their last seven. I expect a huge bounce back year for the Titans and I love the value at +280 to win what I think is a two-horse race between them and the Jaguars for the division title.

MATT YOUMANS

Packers Over 7.5 Wins

The betting public is probably writing off the Packers after Aaron Rodgers' departure, but this can be a surprise team. Green Bay went 8-9 with Rodgers, who threw 12 interceptions – his highest total since 2008 – and took his diva act to the next level. The first-half schedule should help new quarterback Jordan Love, with the Packers facing only one playoff team from last season in the first eight games. A power running attack featuring Aaron Jones and AJ Dillon, plus a young defense with potential, will get Green Bay to eight or nine wins.

Raiders (+4.5) over Broncos

At the risk of putting too much emphasis on preseason appearances, the Raiders are not as bad and the Broncos are not as improved as the betting market indicates. Josh Jacobs, the NFL's leading rusher last season, is back in camp in Las Vegas. The Raiders' offensive line is stronger, quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo looks good and Davante



Davante Adams

Adams is off of a season with 100 receptions for 1,516 yards and 14 touchdowns. The new combination of coach Sean Payton and quarterback Russell Wilson has promise, yet the Denver offense has been shaky and needs time to come together, and top receiver Jerry Jeudy is expected to miss Week 1 with a hamstring injury. The Broncos got swept by the Raiders last season.

Giants (+3.5) over Cowboys

The home 'dog is live in this Sunday night opener. The line is based mostly on the Micah Parsons-led Dallas defense being dominant, as well as expectations the Giants were a lucky team last season that is likely to regress. While the Cowboys essentially wasted the preseason again this year, Giants coach Brian Daboll has his offense ready to go. There are reasons to be cynical about Cowboys coach Mike McCarthy taking over the offensive play-calling.

WES REYNOLDS

Giants Under 7.5 Wins

The G-Men were one of the 'buy low' teams last season. This season, off a winning record and a playoff victory, they are one of the 'sell high' teams. Brian Daboll earned Coach of the Year in 2022 and Daniel Jones had his best season statistically in terms of passing yards, rushing yards, rushing touchdowns, completion percentage, QB rating, and most importantly turnovers.

So why take the Under? Well, the Giants were 8-4-1 in one score games and were outgained by 11 of their 17 regular season opponents.

Patriots Last in AFC East (-120)

While the offense should be improved — at least slightly with an upgrade at offensive coordinator with Bill O'Brien over Matt Patricia — this team, particularly the offense, lacks higher-end talent.

The Patriots also start out with a brutal schedule facing Philadelphia and Miami, albeit at home, in the first two weeks and then road trips to face the Jets and Cowboys.

They also have two back-to-back stretches with consecutive divisional games (Week 7 vs. Buffalo/Week 8 at Miami; Week 17 at Buffalo/Week 18 vs. NY Jets).

PFF and Warren Sharp grade the Patriots schedule as the most difficult of the 2023 season.

GREG PETERSON

Rams Exact Division Finish 3rd (+125)

The lay of the land seems pretty set in the NFC West. The Rams have enough firepower with stars like Matthew Stafford and Aaron Donald to avoid being anywhere near the level of the Arizona Cardinals, who will be relying on career backup quarterbacks for much of, if not the entire season with the Kyler Murray injury.

The Rams also lack the depth to be able to be a contending team for 17 weeks with the Seattle Seahawks upgrading the weapons around Geno Smith in the offseason and the San Francisco 49ers having the best collection of talent sans the quarterback position in the NFC. This results in the Rams being stuck in third place in the NFC West.

SEAN GREEN

Bijan Robinson Under 1,100.5 Rush Yards

Robinson may be a dynamic running back, but his path to get 1,100 rushing yards in his rookie year is incredibly difficult. The primary reason I'm fading Bijan's rushing yards is because I think he's going to be used a ton in the passing game and not get the carries needed to hit this Over. It's very rare for a rookie RB to hit an Over this high, and especially when the rookie is competing for carries with a guy like Tyler Allgeier, who is coming off a 1,000-yard plus season himself. Arthur Smith is a huge fan of Allgeier as well, describing him "as a sledgehammer" who will certainly eat into Bijan's workload on the ground.

Titans Over 7.5 Wins

Mike Vrabel is going into his sixth season coaching in the NFL and has gone Over this total every season except last year, and even then, he was still 7-10. They signed DeAndre Hopkins, which shows the team is in win-now mode to add to some young, talented pass-catchers in Chigoziem Okonkwo and Treylon Burks. Throw in the fact that, as scheduled, they're set to play five rookie QBs, the Titans win total of 7.5 feels like an incredible value.

RYAN KRAMER

Steelers Over 8.5 Wins

Art Rooney II would have to fire Mike Tomlin for the 2023 Pittsburgh Steelers to go Under their win total. The Tomlin that I know has never, in 16 seasons in the NFL, finished under .500. NEVER. Last year, Tomlin led the Steelers to a 9-8 record in spite of a shaky start to rookie Kenny Pickett's career, plus a seven-game absence from yearly DPOY contender TJ Watt (1-6 over that stretch).

As we look ahead to 2023, Pickett, George Pickens, Diontae Johnson, Pat Freiermuth, Najee Harris and Jaylen Warren make up one of the more intriguing offensive skill groups in the league. Early returns suggest we are trending in a very exciting direction after the first-team offense scored a touchdown on 100% of their preseason drives (5-for-5) and looked very efficient in doing so. If Tomlin can overcome a shaky rookie at QB, plus the absence of Watt (Steelers 1-10 all time without him) to go over 8.5 wins, I LOVE what he can do this year.

Tyler Allgeier Most Rush Yards NFC South (65/1)

The year was 2022 – Arthur Smith hadn't yet discovered the mustache and, most importantly, Allgeier rushed for 1,035 yards on 210 carries. That yardage was good for 14th in the NFL and tops in the NFC South. Second was D'Onta Foreman at 914 yards on 203 carries and third was Alvin Kamara at 897 yards on 223 carries. Here is where it gets exciting, fourth place was actually Allgeier's teammate, Cordarrelle Patterson, with 695 yards on 111 carries. It is also worth noting that Smith LOVES to run the ball. In 2022, he showed a commitment to the run that was unmatched, leading the NFL with 559 carries and carrying the title of the only team in the NFL that ran the ball more than it passed the ball, sporting an impressive -13.7% PROE (pass rate over expected).

Let's move our sights from the rearview to the windshield, as we look forward to 2023. Beginning with draft night, Smith has repeatedly talked about lining up Bijan "all over the field" (most like Patterson), while he continually refers to Allgeier as a different player than Bijan. "A 220-pound bowling ball" who "can handle the NFL grind" and, most importantly, "a guy who takes care of the football". I LOVE playing into the variance of the RB position with this 65-1 long shot, as every other team in the division is either rolling out a RB committee or a rookie QB.

JOSH APPELBAUM

Falcons Over 8.5 Wins (-130)

No team has taken in more sharp action for their "Over" season win total than the Falcons. Atlanta opened the offseason with a win total of 7.5. Not only has the win total risen to 8.5, but the Over 8.5 is juiced up to -130. There has been zero buyback on the Under at an inflated price. This signals continued liability on the Falcons to win nine or more games. At BetMGM, the Over is receiving 60% of bets but 80% of money, a notable "low bets, higher dollars" smart money discrepancy.

Atlanta went 7-10 last year with Marcus Mariota starting 13 of the 17 games. Now Desmond Ridder, who showed promise starting four games down the stretch, takes over full time behind center. Atlanta has a plethora of exciting young talent on offense, led by Drake London, Kyle Pitts and Bijan Robinson. Head coach Arthur Smith is now an experienced veteran, entering his third season leading the team. Plus, with Tom Brady retiring, the NFC South is seemingly wide open. The Falcons also enjoy the easiest schedule in the league, with their opponents posting a combined 119-167 (.417) record last season. I'll follow the smart money and back Atlanta to go Over 8.5 wins.

JULIAN EDLOW

49ers to Win the NFC West (-150)

San Francisco's win total sits at 10.5 with heavy juice (-145) to the Over. While I lean Over there, obviously, I think at a similar price I'd have much more confidence in the Niners winning the division.

The Niners should be favored in all six division games, and while 6-0 might be wishful thinking, it's in the cards. A 5-1 division record feels more likely, and if they are able to beat Seattle both times (they did it three times last year), it'd go a very long way towards coasting to a division title.

While QB play could be an issue at times, this offense knows how to play through it. Running the ball will remain a strength, and the dominant defense returns. I feel this should be priced much closer to -200 for the 49ers to repeat as division champions, so I'll gladly lay the -150.

Tyler Allgeier



STEVE BUCHANAN

Jimmy Garoppolo Under 3300.5 passing yards

I'm not convinced that we'll see Garoppolo play all 17 games this season. If it's because of injury or just poor play, I'm banking on seeing more than one quarterback start games for the Raiders this season. With that in mind, that has me on the Under 3,300.5 passing yards. Last season, behind a better offensive line with San Francisco, Garoppolo was under pressure on 29% of his dropbacks, completing 57% of his pass attempts for just 5.4 YPA. This Raiders offensive line is projected to rank in the lower half of the league, putting their new quarterback in situations he doesn't perform well in.

Russell Wilson to throw for 4000+ passing yards (+175)

For as bad as Wilson and the Broncos were last season, he was only 476 passing yards short of this mark in 2022. After reworking their offensive line and hiring Sean Payton, I'm expecting a better outcome for their second-year quarterback. With Ben Powers at left guard and Mike McGlinchy at right tackle, this offensive line could easily be ranked inside the top 10 in the league. Injuries ravaged this line last year and helped contribute to Wilson being sacked a league-leading 55 times. When working with a clean pocket, Wilson completed 67% of his pass attempts while averaging 7.6 YPA.

JONATHAN VON TOBEL

Patriots To Make Playoffs: Yes (+245)

New England is being undervalued by the betting market this season. They return most of a defense that finished last season as one of the best in the NFL, with top-three finishes in both EPA and DVOA. That unit helped carry a mess of an offense to eight wins in 2022, but this season the offense should be improved with a real play-caller at the helm. Many believe what Mac Jones showed last season with a defensive coordinator calling plays was the real version of himself, but his play will be better with better coordination of the offense. New England has also improved the skill positions, and they have a fantastic backfield led by Rhamondre Stevenson. The market is not accounting enough for the improvements the Patriots made, and there is value in them to make the playoffs by extension.

PAM MALDONADO

Cowboys Under 9.5 Wins

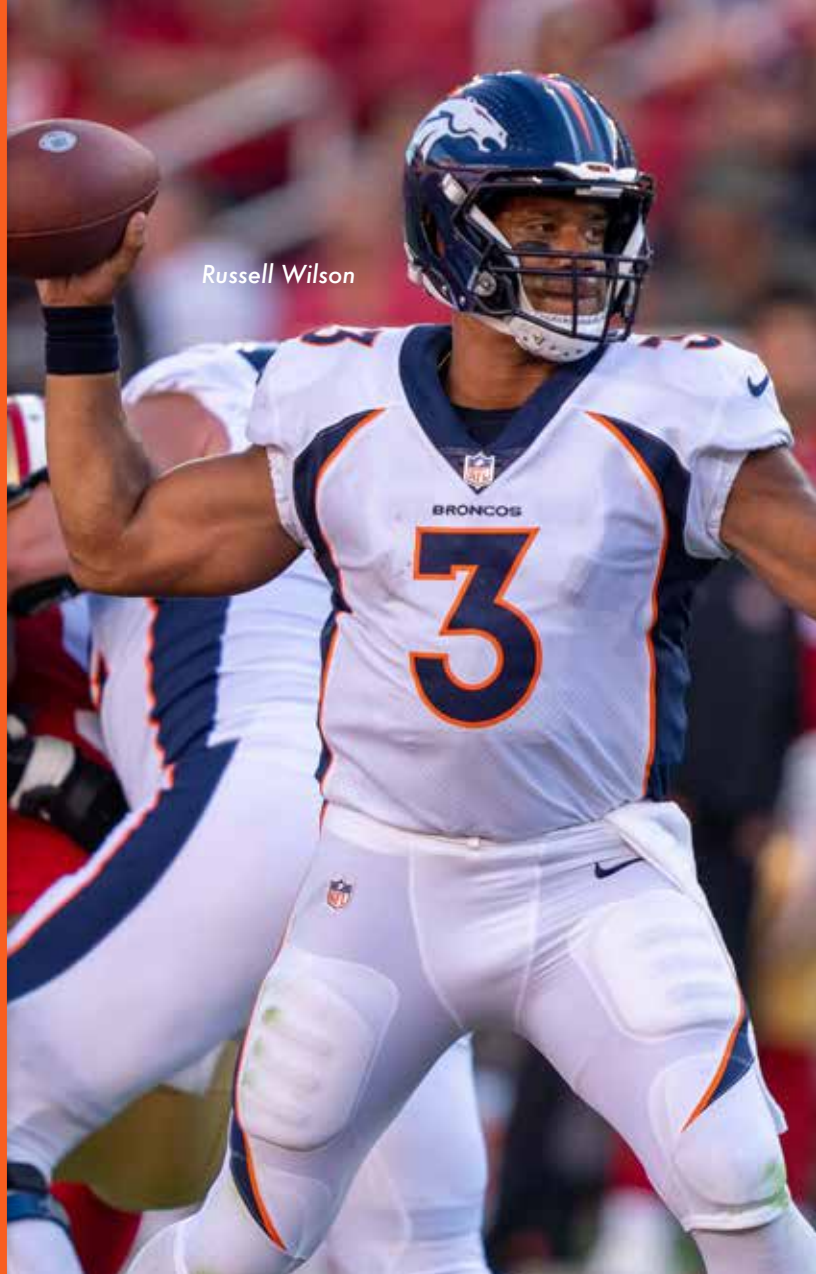
Simple regression to the mean. The Cowboys led the league in takeaways in back-to-back years, while leading in fumbles recovered last year. Forcing interceptions is a skill, recovering a fumble is more luck. Offensive coordinator Kellen Moore is out. The last two years, Cowboys were sixth and first in red-zone touchdown scoring percentage. Now, head coach Mike McCarthy will be calling plays and wants to run the ball more with no depth at running back, a turnover-prone quarterback, plus a tougher schedule of defenses. In the first six weeks, Dallas faces four opponents in the top eight for passing defenses from last year and three in the top 10 for rushing defenses.

BEN WILSON

Justin Herbert Over 4,450.5 Passing Yards

In 2022, Herbert played through torn rib cartilage, got constantly battered behind an injury-plagued and ineffective offensive line, and had to run plays in a predictable offensive scheme under OC Joe Lombardi that lacked any creativity. Despite all of that, along with posting the fewest air yards per throw of his career, Herbert still threw for 4,739 yards a season ago.

LA added OC Kellen Moore in the offseason with a clear directive to push the ball downfield and utilize Herbert's skills more effectively.



Russell Wilson

With the addition of big-target rookie WR Quentin Johnston from TCU as well as WR Jalen Guyton set to return mid-season from last September's ACL tear, the Chargers have all sorts of weapons for Herbert to target. Add in a healthy blind-side protector in LT Rashawn Slater to a solid offensive line and there's no reason to believe Herbert won't push for 5,000 yards through the air this season, let alone the 4,450.5 needed to cash a ticket.

MIKE PALM

Bears Under 7.5 Wins

For the first time in 16 years, the NFC North will not feature Aaron Rodgers. That creates uncertainty for the division. What I do know is that the Bears will still finish fourth. The Bears had the worst record in the NFL last season at 3-14. And they did it ugly. They allowed over 33 PPG during their 10-game losing streak to close the season. In six of their final seven games, they were held to seven or fewer second-half points. Combine an inaccurate QB (Fields under 60% completions), a bad offensive line (allowed fourth-most sacks in league), and a bad defensive line (recorded fewest sacks), and the recipe for success in the modern, pass-oriented NFL just isn't there. They would need a five-win improvement to go over 7.5 wins.



MATT BROWN

Coach of the Year: Pete Carroll (25/1)

I could not have been more wrong about the Seahawks last season. Not only did I think they would really struggle to win games, I took it a step further and bet their Alt Under win total. Not this year. I can't believe I'm typing this in 2023, but Geno Smith was PFF's ninth-graded quarterback last season. That's ahead of guys like Justin Herbert, Aaron Rodgers, and Tom Brady. He'll need his second-year tackles to take a step forward (something we have routinely seen) and lower those 'turnover-worthy' plays, but his weapons on the offensive side of the ball are some of the best in the NFL. The addition of Jaxon Smith-Njigba puts the upside of the passing game squarely in the conversion as a top 3-5 unit.

On the defensive side of the ball, it's no Legion of Boom, but they were ninth in Success Rate against last season. They added DL Dre'Mont Jones in free agency to help the rush defense and drafted absolute stud Devon Witherspoon at cornerback to help the pass D. Jamal Adams returns, Bobby Wagner is still balling, and Quandre Diggs has been one of the most consistent performers at safety for the last five years. That brings me to Carroll. We usually see this award go to a coach that has his team 'take that next step'. The Seahawks were 9-8 last season, and possess a better roster this season on both sides of the ball. If they do 'take the next step' and can piece together a 12-win season,

possibly winning the division over the 49ers, Pistol Pete will be firmly in the discussion for Coach of the Year. His long price also will allow you to lock in a profit should the field narrow to him and one or two others.

MIKE SOMICH

Justin Jefferson Most Receiving Yards +550

Let's not overthink this market. Jefferson led the NFL last year with over 1,800 yards receiving, the only other player to eclipse the 1,525-yard mark last year was Tyreek Hill who ended up 100 yards behind Jefferson. The other three receivers who are under 10-1 in the market — Chase, Hill and Kupp — all missed games last year and have QB1s that are questionable to play a full 17. Jefferson, on the other hand, has played every game in his NFL career and is playing with a very durable QB1 in Kirk Cousins. His target share has no reason to drop with the offseason additions and subtractions we saw in Minnesota and the division is ripe for the picking. The NFC North sports just one cornerback who grades about above replacement-level or better, which is going to lead to points in division games and yards for the best receiver in football.

DAVE ROSS

Cardinals Under 4.5 Wins

Arizona is the worst team in the league. Period. They just punted on their top-two quarterbacks. Full tank is in progress and they're not even hiding it. Trust the process — in 2024 and beyond. If they win five games, it'll be a miracle.

Packers Over 7.5 Wins

The Packers are really intriguing to me. I really like the 53-man roster. We'll find out if we love the QB. If he's just above average, this team will contend for the division title. If he's really good, they may win it. LOVE the upside of this team, pun intended.

ADAM KAUFMAN

Kirk Cousins Over 4300.5 Passing Yards

Cousins' Over/Under sits at 4300.5 passing yards — at PLUS-money! Is this a joke? Cousins is durable. He's missed a total of two games as a Viking in five seasons; one because Minnesota already had a playoff spot locked up and the other due to COVID. Last year, Cousins tossed for more than 4,500 yards, and he's cleared 4,220 each of the three years he's had Justin Jefferson at his disposal. He also has T.J. Hockenson and, now, rookie first-rounder Jordan Addison. And, with Dalvin Cook gone, expect this team to lean on the pass more so than look for Alexander Mattison to replicate Cook's production. Oh, and assuming this club is mediocre (its Over/Under is 8.5 wins), odds are Cousins will have to throw his team back into games. You like that?! I do.

Jaylen Waddle Over 1075.5 Receiving Yards

Despite only 75 catches on 117 targets in 2022, Waddle produced 1,356 receiving yards. That's with 1) Tyreek Hill putting up an absurd 1,710 yards (the 11th-highest single-season total in NFL history), and 2) a good chunk of those passes coming from Skylar Thompson and Teddy Bridgewater! And, now, Waddle's yardage prop is almost 300 lower? Explain this to me like I'm five. Tua Tagovailoa's back. While no one would confuse Tua for a top-10 QB, last year proved he's more than capable when healthy. He's only sending the ball to Hill and Waddle. Mike Gesicki isn't around to steal targets anymore. Waddle's a YAC machine. He could go for 1,500 yards and it wouldn't be shocking.



Patriots Over 6.5 Wins

Hi, admitted Patriots fan here. But, I'm sorry, 6.5 wins? Even if you don't believe the Pats can win 10 games, as I do (over 9.5 wins is +350, by the way!), it's downright ignorant to think Bill Belichick can't coach this roster to seven wins. Belichick coached a less talented group and the ghost of Cam Newton to seven wins during the height of COVID. That's one of only three occasions since 2001 that a Belichick-led New England team has had fewer than 10 wins. The latest was last year, with a defensive coach and a special teams coach running the offense. And that squad was probably three boneheaded plays away from 11 wins. Regardless, Belichick brought in his buddy, Bill O'Brien — an established offensive coordinator — to lift Mac Jones back to his rookie year Pro Bowl(ish) level. The swagger's back for "Alabama Mac." The run-game will be dynamic with Ezekiel Elliott complementing Rhamondre Stevenson. Is this a playoff team? Dicy. But, six or fewer wins? We're onto Philadelphia.

BRENT MUSBURGER

Week 1 Primetime Unders

Always look for an Under, especially in primetime games. Last year's three openers under the lights totaled 41, 22 and 33 points. The DraftKings O/U numbers for this year's primetime openers are 54 (Lions at Chiefs), 46.5 (Cowboys at Giants), and 46 (Bills at Jets). Choose wisely and it's Jackpot Baby!!!

JEFF PARLES

Texans Under 6.5 Wins

Even with a manageable schedule, I don't see how the Texans will be able to have a four-win improvement on their 3-13-1 season of a year ago. C.J. Stroud was officially named the starter after their final preseason game and I expect him to have some growing pains. This team is very similar to the 2021 New York Jets — rookie QB and rookie head coach with limited talent on defense. I see five wins as the ceiling for Houston.

KELLEY BYDLON

Jaguars -155 To Win AFC South

It might be chalky and boring, but this is my favorite 2023 season bet. In all likelihood, there are AT LEAST two teams in this division that are

rebuilding and refocusing toward the future — the Colts and Texans. I think it's unfair to expect them to really compete with a team like the Jags, who I expect to continue to build off a successful season a year ago.

Then, let's talk Titans. I've never been a Ryan Tannehill fan, and I'm not sure how many people in the Titans front office are anymore either. If this team is struggling by mid-season, expect to see the Will Levis era begin. At that point, the Jags could be moonwalking to the finish line.

Steelers Under 9 Wins

This isn't even really a big fade of the Steelers this season by me; it just comes down to the division they play in. I expect the Bengals to continue to be in the Super Bowl this season, plus I expect to see much better seasons from both the Ravens and Browns. Being high on all three of those teams, it makes it hard not to consider an Under bet on the Steelers.

JARED SMITH

Packers Over 7.5 Wins

I like what I've seen in the preseason from Jordan Love, whose success will be the determining factor on whether or not the Packers are a playoff team in 2023. The rest of the roster is pretty loaded, especially along the offensive line and in the secondary. Getting Rashan Gary back so soon from an ACL tear was a pleasant surprise and hopefully a healthy Kenny Clark helps improve a Green Bay rush defense that finished 31st in win rate last season. Also keep an eye on defensive lineman Devonte Wyatt, last year's first round pick out of Georgia, who is reportedly becoming a consistent force in the middle.

Even with a downtrodden Aaron Rodgers throwing double-digit interceptions for the first time in over a decade, this Packers team still managed to win eight games a season ago and I think the infusion of Love will provide a much-needed boost of serotonin to the entire team. I kept hearing all summer from bookmakers and sharps how the Jets are now overvalued in the market after adding Rodgers. If that's true, then perhaps the inverse also deserves merit about Green Bay being undervalued without him. Matt LaFleur won 13 games in each of his first three seasons before last year's disappointing 8-9 campaign. I'm willing to bet Green Bay finishes somewhere in between in 2023, but 7.5 is too low for a team with this much talent on both sides of the ball.

Steelers Over 8.5 Wins

The Steelers have gone 16 consecutive years without a losing season, which is essentially what this bet is asking for. Kenny Pickett showed flashes of brilliance last season, despite being the butt of many jokes about his size and appearance. That's fine with me, as it creates a perceived bias against him that is just not represented by the data. For example, Pickett led the NFL last season with a 75% catchable deep ball rate and a 73% catchable rate under pressure. Overall, he went 7-4 as a starter and almost guided the Steelers to a miraculous postseason berth.

He will have one of the most consistent offensive lines in football blocking for him, with all five starters starting all 17 games last season, plus the addition of first-round pick Broderick Jones out of Georgia to add some depth. The weapons are explosive, which makes Pickett's deep-ball accuracy that much more effective.

The defense is stingy, as most Pittsburgh units tend to be. I love what I've seen from rookie Nick Herbig out of Wisconsin who made a splash in preseason off the edge. The health of T.J. Watt is obviously paramount, as the defense really suffered when he was off the field last season. Mike Tomlin's impact also cannot be understated and I trust him to get the most out of this team. The schedule is the final cherry on top, projected to be the eighth easiest in the NFL and they won't face a team coming off a bye all season. I think Pittsburgh will be a 10-win team in 2023 and will compete for the division title.

WILL HILL

Robert Saleh: Coach of the Year (16/1)

I'd like to think I have a pretty good feel for these narrative awards. I was adamant last year that Brian Daboll would win this award at long odds, as he was as high as 30/1 with three weeks left in the season. I also gave out Kevin Stefanski at 20/1 odds in 2020. What does Saleh have in common with those guys? Coaching a team with a reputation for losing. Let's face it, writers vote on these awards, and writers love a good story.

The Jets now have the longest playoff drought in North American sports, since the Kings got off the schneid this past spring (hmm, I wonder how the Kings coach fared in Coach of the Year voting). The narrative is there, and so is the talent. Braxton Berrios dropped a ball in the end zone in Minnesota last year that would have won the game and given the Jets an 8-4 record. Instead, they lost that day and never won again. Still, they were a team that was in the mix to make the playoffs late into the year, and had perhaps the worst QB play in the entire sport.

Now, enter one of the great QBs of all-time, granted not in his prime, but still a winner of two of the last three MVPs. They have a tough schedule to start, but have a hidden edge — nine home games, eight on the road, with one of those "road games" against the Giants, with whom they share a building. They have a defense that was second in

the league in yards per play allowed and PPG allowed. This award will go to a coach that makes the playoffs, and very likely to a coach that missed the playoffs last year. Saleh checks all the boxes. If the Jets get in, there's a good chance it will be back-to-back seasons where the COY award gets shipped to the Big Apple.

Arizona Cardinals Exact Wins - 0 (+2200)

"We've been losing, what I want is for us to finish dead last" is what Indians general manager Rachel Phelps said in the iconic movie Major League, as she had hopes of tanking her team into a new city. Well, I introduce to you the 2023 Arizona Cardinals, who shocked everyone Monday by announcing assumed starter Colt McCoy was being cut, leaving Josh Dobbs and Clayton Tune (whoever that is) as the potential starters. Head coach Jonathan Gannon boasted about not declaring a starter, claiming it gave his team a competitive advantage. Yeah, this is gonna go well.

Caleb Williams is the goal for the Cards, who have traded everything that isn't nailed down, and are not favored in any games this season. Chances are they will luck into a win, maybe two, but maybe not. At 22/1, it's worth a shot they post a bagel and go winless this year, as this team is set up to fail. If you get them winless into December you can play back and take them plus the points in their final few games. Who knows, maybe they cover but still lose, and you add to your winnings. This team is very capable of "un-running" the table.

ADAM BURKE

Seahawks Over 9.5 Wins

The Seahawks have a good chance to win the NFC West with the quarterback situation in San Francisco, but even if the 49ers repeat as division champs, it is hard not to see Seattle in the playoffs as a wild card. The Seahawks spent ample money in free agency on the defense, which is something that they have not done in a long time.

That level of financial commitment from a savvy front office with an elite track record of player development on defense shows me that belief that the team has internally in their chances to not only make the postseason, but possibly even skip over Wild Card Weekend. The Cardinals and Rams are both in various states of disorder heading into the season and that could be four wins right there. A split with the 49ers seems very plausible.

Drawing the AFC North and the NFC East is not ideal, but the remaining three games are against Carolina, Tennessee, and Detroit. All of those are winnable games and we're at a plus-money number on this win total. Seahawks Over 3.5 Division Wins at -145 seems like a pretty good bet as well, but everything about this team screams 10+ wins.

The dynamic potential of the offense coupled with a reimagined and improved defense has this team poised for big things.



Robert Saleh

ZACH COHEN

Bryce Young To Win Rookie of the Year (+500)

I liked Young to win Offensive Rookie of the Year when we released the original guide and I didn't see anything that scared me off of that pick in the preseason. In fact, I'm more confident in it now than I was when I first made it, as Young looked excellent in his final preseason appearance. Young showed off a great connection with veteran wideout Adam Thielen, and he seems ready to show out in his rookie season — even with D.J. Chark dealing with a hamstring injury that could cause him to miss some time. I've maintained all along that if Young is the best rookie starter under center, he'll win this award. And I firmly believe he'll be just that.

Commanders Over 6.5 Wins

I didn't originally take the Over on Washington's win total, but I'm pretty high on the Commanders with the season rapidly approaching. I loved what I saw from Sam Howell throughout the preseason, as he showed the all-around poise and talent that once made him a legitimate candidate to be the No. 1 pick in the NFL Draft. And Howell doesn't need to set the world on fire for this Washington team to exceed expectations. If he's simply average under center, the Commanders should win seven games and potentially even compete for a wild card spot. This team is a lot more talented than it's given credit for.

STEVE MAKINEN

Raiders (+4.5) at Broncos

These two AFC West rivals have different looks about them heading into the 2023 season, as well they should, as both teams struggled a year ago, combining to win just 11 games. That doesn't mean that they aren't aspiring to be playoff contenders this fall because if any league offers a chance for quick redemption, it's the NFL.

The Raiders start over at the sport's most important position, quarterback, as they move on from long time starter Derek Carr. Jimmy Garoppolo figures to be the starter. Denver has a new coaching staff in place, with former Super Bowl champion head coach Sean Payton leading the way. Payton's biggest task, turning around the struggles of franchise QB Russell Wilson, who signed a team draining contract prior to 2022.

If there's one thing we know that's obvious about Week 1 in the NFL lately, it's that divisional games can provide some surprises. In fact, divisional road underdogs of 6.5-points or less are on a 14-12 SU and 18-7-1 ATS (72%) run since '13. As 4.5-point dogs, the Raiders fit this bill. Also, as of press time, the majority of bettors on DraftKings were actually siding with the underdog Raiders. In most cases that is bad, however, in 2022, it was the one situation that was a positive result for bettors — when the majority HANDLE and number of BETS was on ROAD UNDERDOGS for an ATS wager, these majority groups actually produced winning records, 26-25 ATS (51%) and 34-32 ATS (51.5%) respectively. And finally, in a piece I put together for our original NFL Betting Guide, I cited the lack of success by "retread" coaches like Payton, especially in the HOME FAVORITE role, a situation in which they have gone just 55-38 SU and 29-59-5 ATS (33%) in their first seasons over the last decade. There's some unreasonable expectation with Denver this year, and it may take a little while to get Russ cookin'. Let's take the points with Las Vegas.

TYLER SHOEMAKER

Patriots +4.5 vs. Eagles Week 1

My T Shoe Index ratings system projects Eagles -2.2 and would play this to +3.5.

PETER KEATING (THE UNDERDOGS)

Buccaneers +6.5 vs. Vikings Week 1

By now, you've probably heard the Vikings won a record 11 one-score games last season; the key reason they went 13-4 despite getting outscored. Even that doesn't fully capture how much Minnesota should have to prove before you trust them with your money this year. In 2022, the Vikes ranked 20th in defense-adjusted value over average (DVOA) on offense, 27th on defense and, for good measure, 30th on special teams. Whoa! Meanwhile, for the moment, all of these are still true: Baker Mayfield is upright, Mike Evans is with the Bucs and Chris Godwin is healthy.

JON WEINER (THE LEBATARD SHOW WITH STUGOTZ)

Dolphins Over 9.5 Wins

They have the most talented roster in the NFL and I'm not picking the Jets.

Steelers Over 8.5 Wins

Mike Tomlin.

Giants Over 7.5

Lousy conference. One of the final eight teams last year.



Daniel Jones

BILLS FLYING UNDER THE RADAR, JETS & RAIDERS WOULD HURT

by Matt Youmans

Of all the things that can prematurely wreck a Super Bowl futures wager, a quarterback injury tops the list. Still, a preseason injury to Joe Burrow has not discouraged the public from betting the Bengals.

Burrow was carted off the practice field on July 27, when Cincinnati supporters feared the worst. It's looking more like the best-case scenario is possible. According to several reports, Burrow's calf injury is healing and he hopes to start the Bengals' season opener at Cleveland.

"We've got a lot of money on the Bengals, and that's one of the most popular teams," DraftKings sportsbook director John Avello said. "Burrow's injury has not really changed anything."

At 11/1 odds to win the Super Bowl, the Bengals are the fifth choice on the DraftKings board behind the Chiefs (+600), Eagles (+650), Bills (+900), and 49ers (10/1).

"It's not going to be an easy road for the Bengals because that division is getting tougher," Avello said.

In the AFC North, arguably the NFL's toughest division top to bottom, Cincinnati is the +140 favorite, followed by Baltimore (+235), Cleveland (+400), and Pittsburgh (+500).

Burrow has led the Bengals to two straight AFC title games, including a Super Bowl loss after the 2021 season. It's no surprise at all that Cincinnati and Kansas City, the defending Super Bowl champion, are drawing heavy betting action.

Avello and several other Las Vegas bookmakers are seeing steady support for two longer shots — Dallas (14/1) and the New York Jets (16/1).

"I'm seeing some money on the Cowboys, who are the best team every July and August," said South Point book director Chris Andrews, who's offering Dallas at 10/1 odds.

Andrews said he's skeptical of the Cowboys, but he is "taking the Jets seriously."

The betting public is buying into the storyline of an old quarterback being rejuvenated by moving to a new team, so Aaron Rodgers and the Jets have been hit hard all summer. DraftKings adjusted the Jets' odds from 18/1 in June to 16/1 now.

"I understand why they would bet the Jets," Avello said. "But I didn't like Aaron Rodgers last year. Is this the new, improved Rodgers? I don't know. I'm more concerned that the AFC East is so tough. When you look at the AFC, it looks like there are 10 or 12 teams that have a chance to win it this year."

Rodgers, who turned 39 in December, failed to get Green Bay to the playoffs last season. He threw 12 interceptions, his highest total since 2008, and the Packers finished 8-9. Still, Rodgers remains one of the league's elite quarterbacks and his presence seems to be instilling confidence in a young Jets team that finished with a six-game losing streak and a 7-10 record.

It's possible Rodgers can be the final piece to the Jets' puzzle. Tom Brady was exactly what the Buccaneers needed when he moved from New England to Tampa Bay as a free agent in 2020.

At the time, many bookmakers, including John Murray at the Westgate SuperBook, laughed at the public for enthusiastically betting on the Buccaneers to win the Super Bowl before Brady's first season with a new team. Tampa Bay made the playoffs as a wild-card team and Brady won his seventh Super Bowl, going through Rodgers in Green Bay along the way.

In addition to the Jets, Murray said the betting public has been playing the Steelers (30/1), Falcons (50/1), Bears (60/1), and Raiders (60/1) as long shots.

"We would get crushed on two teams winning the Super Bowl — the Jets and Raiders," Golden Nugget sportsbook director Tony Miller said.

Andrews is also seeing a Las Vegas bias in the betting, but it's not sharp money. The South Point is offering the Raiders to win the Super Bowl at 25/1 odds, a low number considering reality and comparing it to the Circa Sports odds of 100/1.

Two other AFC West teams are tantalizing to bettors. The Chargers, who seem to draw sharp play every year, recently dipped to 18/1 from 28/1 at Circa. The Broncos are posted at 60-1 at Westgate, 46/1 at Circa, and 20/1 at South Point.

Denver was a hot commodity a year ago before quarterback Russell Wilson bombed and the Broncos turned into a last-place bust in the division. With new coach Sean Payton taking over, optimism surrounded the Broncos this summer — before their offense turned in dismal showings in the first two preseason games.

"We had early play on Denver, with people thinking Payton can turn around Wilson, but now it's starting to come back the other way," Andrews said.

Another hot AFC team a year ago is not so hot with bettors this summer.

"The Bills are kind of a forgotten team," Murray said. "Everyone is talking about the Chiefs, Bengals and Jets. I think it's interesting how under the radar the Bills are now."

BETTING SYSTEMS USING NFL BETTING SPLITS ON VSIN

by Steve Makinen

Team	Spread	Handle	Bets	Total	Handle	Bets	Moneyline
Detroit Lions	+6.5	36%	40%	53.5	57%	55%	+2
Kansas City Chiefs	-6.5	64%	60%	53.5	43%	45%	-28
Houston Texans	+9.5	19%	35%	4.4	31%	45%	+360
Baltimore Ravens	-9.5	81%	65%	4.4	69%	55%	-470
Cincinnati Bengals	-1.5	65%	76%	47.5	46%	43%	-122
Cleveland Browns	+1.5	35%	24%	47.5	54%	57%	+102
San Francisco 49ers	-2.5	50%	67%	40.5	63%	56%	-142
Pittsburgh Steelers	+2.5	50%	33%	40.5	37%	44%	+120
Jacksonville Jaguars	-4.5	85%	82%	45.5	73%	54%	-198
Indianapolis Colts	+4.5	15%	18%	45.5	27%	46%	+164
Arizona Cardinals	+7	17%	38%	39	25%	57%	+245
Wash Commanders	-7	83%	62%	39	75%	49%	-305
Tampa Bay Buccaneers	+6	39%	29%	45.5	49%	40%	+200
Minnesota Vikings	-6	61%	71%	45.5	51%	60%	-245
Carolina Panthers	+3.5	24%	46%	40	19%	48%	+145
Atlanta Falcons	-3.5	76%	54%	40	81%	52%	-175
Tennessee Titans	+3	65%	53%	41.5	47%	57%	+142
New Orleans Saints	-3	35%	47%	41.5	53%	43%	-170

NFL betting splits data on VSIN lays out a map for success. It was about mid-season last year that I set out to study the college football betting splits data provided on VSIN.com by DraftKings. I felt that a book like DraftKings, known for servicing all levels of recreational bettors, providing this type of data would offer a ton of great betting opportunities if savvy bettors knew how to interpret the numbers. As it turns out, I was right, but by somewhat different means than I thought I would find. Majority bettors weren't nearly as bad as I figured, and actually produced solid results when choosing to go against the grain. When they didn't, most often it was a good opportunity to fade them. With 13 solid principles in place for navigating the 2023 CFB season, it was absolutely necessary that I take a closer look at what the NFL DraftKings Betting Splits data offered. You will see below in analyzing the overall results and the new systems I've come up with that I'm ecstatic that I did.

You've probably seen the newsletters, promos, and VSIN show hosts, touting the Betting Splits Data from DraftKings, and rightfully so, as we believe it to be a fantastic resource for bettors. These are the pages on VSIN.com that we have built utilizing the data that DraftKings so graciously provides to us detailing the breakdowns of the money and ticket splits for point spreads, money lines, and totals.

Why is this Betting Splits information so valuable? Well, most specifically, it lets us see which games are the most publicly supported each week. We all truly believe that the "betting public" does not win over the long haul, and with the amount of money DK spends on acquiring customers, you have to assume that most of the bettors that play there would be considered "public". In other words, the collective opinions of this group of recreational bettors are right out on display for all of us to analyze and take advantage of.

With more and more states becoming sports betting regulated each passing year, this information is more valuable than ever. In the "old days," offshore sportsbooks would share this type of information, but

bettors had no way of knowing the type or volume of clientele these groups were taking on. Let's just say it made the betting percentage data these places offered convoluted. With the DraftKings data, we know their customer strength is in numbers, and that is exactly what we are looking for with this type of analysis.

Before digging into some of the system data, I was able to uncover during the 2022 NFL season, identically to college football, I should start you off with two common betting generalities for recreational players that wager at places like DraftKings. That is the majority bet favorites on point spread and Overs on totals. The numbers are staggering. According to the final ticket/HANDLE numbers last NFL season, majority wagers were on favorites in 217 of 284 games, or 76.4%, and on totals to go Over in 201 of 284, or 70.8% of games. These numbers are far more dramatic than the college football dichotomy, and a huge reason to why fading the majorities in the NFL was far more successful.

As a little background on this exercise, I basically tried to analyze the records of the "majority bettors" at DraftKings and the side/total they preferred for games. I also broke it down further sometimes by the percentage of majority, and by some various team statistics. There are two fields of analysis for each wagering option that DraftKings shares the data for both sides and totals: 1) HANDLE and 2) number of BETS. These can produce varied results, but in general, I would subscribe to the theory that the total handle is a little less "public" than the total number of bets.

These were the overall records of the majority bettors for the full 2022 NFL season in games, using the key terms HANDLE, number of BETS.

Majority HANDLE on point spreads: 123-153 ATS (44.6%)
 Majority number of BETS on point spreads: 119-155 ATS (43.4%)
 Majority HANDLE on totals: 126-150 (45.7%)
 Majority number of BETS on totals: 132-148 (47.1%)

As you can see, in all four categories, the majority wound up well under-.500 and in negative unit territory. On top of that, I also found that of the 19 weeks (18 plus all playoffs combined) majority bettors “won”, or had a winning record, in only five of the 19 weeks for point spread HANDLE and number of BETS, and in only seven of the 19 weeks for the two totals’ measures.

With these significant result measures loaded up, it gave me a fantastic starting point for developing 12 systems for using these betting splits breakdowns for the 2023 season. If you haven’t been using this data in recent NFL seasons, I highly recommend adding it to your handicapping arsenal for this season, particularly the ultra-success systems I outline below.

Before I reveal the 12 systems, a quick note. All of these angles will be tracked and qualified for VSIN Pro Subscribers each week in our upcoming VSIN Analytics NFL Reports.

DK BETTING SPLITS SYSTEM #1

When more than 65% of the HANDLE was on a particular side of an ATS wager, this majority group was just 35-53 ATS (39.8%). The number for this “super-majority” in college football was closer to 80%. In other words, if you see 2/3 of the handle backing one side in an NFL game this season, it’s best to fade it.

DK BETTING SPLITS SYSTEM #2

The percentage breakdown can be expanded a bit for the number of BETS. When 63%+ of the number of BETS were on a particular side of an ATS wager, this majority group was just 66-92 ATS (41.8%). The NFL is the most public of all bettable sports. If 63%+ of the bettors at DraftKings like a particular side, fade ‘em.

It’s safe to assume that you don’t want to be part of the supermajority of DraftKings bettors on ATS wagers.

DraftKings bettors were at their absolute worst last season when analyzing divisional games:

DK BETTING SPLITS SYSTEM #3

In NFL divisional games of 2022, DK majority HANDLE bettors were absolutely awful, as this majority group was just 36-64 ATS (36%). With the obvious generality that public bettors love favorites, it’s clear that they don’t value the stakes of these rivalry games and what they mean for the competitors.

DK BETTING SPLITS SYSTEM #4

Similarly to #3 above, when the majority number of BETS staked its side in an NFL divisional game last year, this majority group was just 37-60 ATS (38.1%).

DK BETTING SPLITS SYSTEM #5

When the majority HANDLE and number of BETS were on ROAD FAVORITES for an ATS wager, these majority groups were just 36-52 ATS (40.9%) and 35-53 ATS (39.8%) respectively. Both are losing propositions, and most often, these majorities match up.

Now, for a rare winning angle for majority bettors:

DK BETTING SPLITS SYSTEM #6

When the majority HANDLE and number of BETS were on ROAD UNDERDOGS for an ATS wager, these majority groups actually produced winning records, 26-25 ATS (51%) and 34-32 ATS (51.5%) respectively. This matches up somewhat with the logic I used in explaining some college successes. When the public goes “against the grain,” they win. In this case, mildly.

This next system involves specific days of the week games were played on:

DK BETTING SPLITS SYSTEM #7

When the majority HANDLE and number of BETS backed a team in an ATS wager in the higher-profile, non-Sunday afternoon games, these majority groups were just 28-44 ATS (38.9%) and 29-44 ATS (39.7%) respectively. This set of games includes all the Thursday, Saturday, Sunday night (SNF), and Monday night contests.

This final ATS angle focuses on the won-lost records of the teams in a game.

DK BETTING SPLITS SYSTEM #8

In another rare winning record, when the majority of the HANDLE backed the team with less season wins in a 2022 NFL game for an ATS wager, this majority group was 26-22 ATS (54.2%). This is another situation where going against the grain paid off.

These next four systems involve totals.

DK BETTING SPLITS SYSTEM #9

The average NFL total last year was 44.2. In games where the totals reached 46.5 or higher and oddsmakers thus expected them to be a little more explosive, majority number of BETTORS struggled, going 28-53 ATS (34.6%). Not surprisingly, they sided with the favored team in 59 of the games.

DK BETTING SPLITS SYSTEM #10

When 56% or more of the HANDLE was on the Under in an NFL game total, this majority group was quite sharp, 26-18 ATS (59.1%). This number for a “super-majority” in NFL is quite low, evidence of how rarely the betting public bets the low side of a total. Incidentally, the same majority figure for the number of BETS produced a 23-17 record.

DK BETTING SPLITS SYSTEM #11

Quite the opposite of #11, the magic mark for the supermajority on HANDLE for betting Overs was 64% or higher, and this group performed miserably last season with a record of 38-63 (37.6%). To me, this has been a long-standing belief, but when the Over looks too obvious, it usually loses. On number of BETS, this same super majority percentage produced a slightly improved 41-52 record.

DK BETTING SPLITS SYSTEM #12

Call this one the Over trap, but when a super-majority (>=64%) of HANDLE was on the Over, and DraftKings moved the opening total lower throughout the week, this majority group lost big, going just 9-29 (23.7%). Almost as if they were trying to bait more people into taking the Over. This is a classic example of where those behind the counter are smarter than those trying to cash the tickets.

The BETTING SPLITS on VSIN.com are essentially running live and will change in the days and hours before game time. If you adopt any of these strategies this season, be sure to visit VSIN.com for the latest numbers. In the spirit of continuous improvement, we have redesigned and expanded the VSIN betting splits page, the most popular destination on VSIN.com.

The data, which we get directly from DraftKings Sportsbook, is now updated every five minutes instead of 10. We ping the DK database and see what data has changed and then indicate the change with an arrow next to the percentage.

Also, if you want to see the opening line and the line history, click on the visiting team’s logo. The updates are timestamped. A nice new touch is that if the game is over, you will get a summary that includes the final score, Total result, and season Over/Under record for each team, and you can compare the result to what Steve Makinen’s estimated score was.

Unlimited access to betting splits is available to VSIN Pro subscribers.

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO NFL CONTEST STRATEGY... STRATEGIES

by Adam Burke

Football betting contests are all the rage these days, including big ones like the DraftKings Pro Football Survivor and Pro Football Pick 'Em, as well as the Circa Million, Circa Survivor, and Westgate SuperContest. Copycat contests have also sprung up at other sportsbooks and are also run by individuals using the same or similar rules.

Contest strategies can vary because everybody has a different way of trying to achieve the same goal. For the purposes of this strategy piece, I have split the tips and tricks into two categories - Pick 'Em and Survivor. You may have a different approach that you like, but I'll try to cover the bases on the main ones and shed some light on how to give yourself the best chance at cashing.

PICK 'EM CONTESTS

Think Circa Million, Westgate SuperContest, or Pro Football Pick 'Em here. These are contests in which you have to pick X number of games against the spread based on the rules that are provided and the lines that are available. The vast majority of contests like these are going to post lines on the same day and they will not move. They are referred to as "static" lines.

Here are some contest strategies in this type of pool:

PLAY THE "STALE" LINES

This is a really popular contest strategy. The NFL betting market is the most efficient one there is, so line moves should be taken seriously. If a contest line is -2.5 and the betting market line is -3.5, that creates a really good opportunity to take a favorable position in a contest setting because 3 is such an important number. The same is true of a number like 7, if a line is +7.5 in a contest and moves to +7 or +6.5.

Sometimes you'll get an even more obvious example like when a quarterback gets hurt on Friday or is ruled out. For example, if Joe Burrow were to be ruled out in Week 1, that line (currently Bengals -1 at DraftKings) could swing to Browns -4 or -4.5, if not higher. If that announcement came down on Friday, it would be really hard not to take Cleveland with that much line value. Those opportunities will come up throughout the season for sure.

FADE THE CONSENSUS

A lot of people believe that the public is largely flipping coins when it comes to betting. They're going to win 50% of the time and lose 50% of the time. If you can isolate the sides that will be the most popular from a groupthink standpoint in a contest, it could be good to go against those teams.

It can create a two-point swing in a contest where there are a finite number of picks and a set number of chances to earn points. In something like the Circa Million, the maximum number of picks is 90, so these potential two-point swings can be extremely valuable. In larger pools, this could be a more useful strategy because there is more incentive in being creative and different because you can't just follow the masses and win all the same games they do and lose all the same games they do.

In smaller pools, this could potentially be less effective because it's more about racking up as many points as possible and not worrying so much about what others are doing.

PLAY ONLY HALF-POINT LINES

There is a lot of game theory that goes into contest participation. One element of that mindset is to only play games where a push is not possible. A push isn't a loss, but it isn't a win either. With most contest rules, a push is worth a half-point. There is often more equity in taking the chance at full points, which can be guaranteed by playing games that have a half-point line and cannot tie.

The reason for this is what I mentioned above. In larger pools with a lot of entrants, a half-point isn't going to get you very far because others are also getting a half-point for being on the other side. Also, you'll get jumped by people who are getting full points. Sure, you'll move ahead of people that got zero points on games, but the juice isn't always worth the squeeze.

It is also important to point out that the time of year matters with these contests. If you need to jump over a lot of people later in the year, taking more chances is essential. That might mean picking some bad teams or playing only half-point lines in the spirit of game theory.

SURVIVOR CONTESTS

Survivor contests have really increased in popularity over the last few seasons because the concept is really simple. Just pick a team to win every week, but once you use them, you lose them. Some Survivor pools have wrinkles like picking against the spread or picking against a team only once, but the most prominent version just requires picking a team to win straight up week in and week out.

As simple as the concept itself is, the execution is not. Big favorites can and will lose and we'll see more than a few take out large swaths of the Survivor field during the upcoming season.

Here are some options for this type of contest:

CREATE A BLUEPRINT FOR THE SEASON

Some contestants like to have the entire year planned out because you can only use each team once. That might mean staying away from division games or having to use a road team, so you study the schedule to find the best options on a weekly basis. Contestants will start with, say, Kansas City and find the game where they are going to be the largest favorite. At first glance, that looks like Week 3 at home against the Bears.

The Eagles host Arizona in Week 17. The Bills host the Buccaneers in Week 8 on a Thursday night. The Cowboys also host the Rams in Week 8. Decisions, decisions!

Mapping out which teams will be available and when is something that a lot of Survivor contestants will do so that they have a plan. This comes from the mindset of needing to go 18-0 (or better if your contest has a Thanksgiving or Christmas wrinkle) to win and will be a route that many choose to take.

JUST GO 1-0

The other primary option is to just try to go 1-0 for 18 straight weeks and take whatever the best pick is that week and not worry about saving a team for later. What difference does it make if the Eagles will be -17 against the Cardinals in Week 17 if you don't make it that far? Why save a team if you need them right now?

The other advantage to this mindset is that holding off on the Eagles until Week 17 is all well and good, but what if Jalen Hurts gets injured or if the Eagles don't need to play anybody that week because of the playoff picture?

The only game that matters is the one coming up that weekend. Somebody could always get hurt or something could happen that makes a team much more attractive than they would have looked at the start of the season.

Also, you have to pick 18 (or more) of the 32 teams to win, so being able to "sneak" a lesser opponent through could create a huge advantage. That's true of both the 18-0 mindset and the 1-0 mindset, but sometimes it's easier to make that call while living in the present. On the other hand, you could get caught on a week where there aren't many big favorites and have to take a weak team because you didn't plan accordingly.

AVOID THE NO. 1 PICK

Upsets do happen. Remember back in 2021 when the Jaguars won 9-6 over the Bills as more than a two-touchdown underdog? How about when the Jets beat the Rams as a 17-point underdog back in 2020? How about the Dolphins in Week 17 over the Patriots getting 16 points back in 2019?

It is rare, but we'll probably get at least one underdog of 14+ points that wins this season. Over the last 850 games, about 14% of underdogs getting 10.5 or more points have won outright. Some Survivor players will shy away from the most obvious pick in hopes that the team slips up and goes down and a large chunk of the field gets eliminated. Not only could that mean staying alive while others falter, but it could also mean saving that team for a future game.

There is risk involved to say the least, but the reward could be really nice, especially if you like another team nearly as much. There is risk in each and every one of these strategies and maybe taking a hybrid approach is the way to go, but it all depends on the individual, the type of contest, the stakes, and the prize amounts.

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WEEK 1 NFL BETTING SYSTEMS THAT WILL GIVE YOU AN EDGE

by Steve Makinen

With the much-anticipated 2023 NFL season opening, bettors will once again be looking for the best info they can find to get their seasons off to a profitable start. Therefore, it's the ideal time to look closer at six different betting systems that have been successful and consistent in looking exclusively at past Week 1 action. These are angles that take into account line positioning, how the teams fared the previous year and transition into the follow up season opener, and whether or not revenge is in play.

These systems are foundationally based in the perceptions of the teams by oddsmakers. Although the belief is that the house always wins, sometimes even the so-called experts are off too. In other cases, they have the teams pegged accurately. The systems I'm about to unveil uncover in which particular situations you can take advantage.

The most important thing that you should note in analyzing these betting angles is that every team, regardless of what happened last year, or what player/coaching transactions they made over the offseason, is starting with a fresh slate. That can do wonders for a team. It can also wipe out any momentum that was generated the prior season. All of this is very tough to measure, as without any on-field action to go off, how can those setting the lines be expected to 100% accurately quantify the Week 1 chemistry of the teams? This, in turn, can be to the advantage of bettors.

Remember, the bookies' theoretical job is to try and get as much even action on the various wagering options in a game, not so much to pick the game. Naturally, there can be weak spots then, and savvy bettors who are prepared with both knowledge of the teams and a powerful weapon like systems can be ready to take advantage. I have six below to help you get ready for NFL kickoff 2023.

SYSTEM 1

DIVISIONAL HOME UNDERDOGS ARE 16-7-2 SU AND 21-4 ATS (84%) IN WEEK 1 SINCE 2009 (WIN: +16.6 UNITS, R.O.I.: 66.4%, GRADE 80)

2023 POTENTIAL PLAYS: CLEVELAND, INDIANAPOLIS, NY GIANTS, NY JETS

Analysis

Unlike some recent season, there are several divisional contests on the NFL Week 1 slate, half of them to be exact. Four of the games fit the bill for this very successful system. There isn't a whole lot more motivating than an opening week contest at home against a targeted team in the division. In most past cases, the road favorite in this scenario was a returning playoff team, while the home dog was an aspiring one. In this year's case, with the exception of perhaps Indianapolis, all of the teams involved are expected playoff contenders, including the home dog Jets, who are a popular longshot pick now that they've added Aaron Rodgers. In last year's two games on this system, Houston (+7) tied Indianapolis, and Atlanta (+5.5) rallied versus the Saints before dropping a 27-26 decision.

Game #1: CLEVELAND (+1) vs. Cincinnati

The Browns will have QB Deshaun Watson for the full 17 games in 2023, barring injury of course, so it's nearly impossible to get a feel for how much better they might be than a year ago when they went 7-10. Cleveland will open the 2023 campaign as a home underdog to its biggest rival, the Bengals, who of course reached the AFC title game last year, one year removed from a Super Bowl appearance. Cincinnati has an injury concern with QB Joe Burrow, who banged up a knee in the preseason but is expected to be ready despite very limited reps. The Cleveland Dawg Pound figures to be very fired up for this one.

Game #2: INDIANAPOLIS (+3.5) vs. Jacksonville

Jacksonville is the defending AFC South champion, coming off a 9-8 season that also included a playoff win in the wild card round. The Jaguars are the "next big thing" right now, with a young offensive nucleus that would figure to take another step forward this year. Their opponent for Week 1 is an Indianapolis team that struggled badly in 2022, but they start fresh with a new coaching staff and a rookie at quarterback. There is a reason the Colts are a home dog here. However, that doesn't make the task of winning or covering any easier for Jacksonville.

Game #3: NY GIANTS (+3.5) vs. Dallas

Stop me if you've heard this before...the Giants and Cowboys will open up the season against one another on Sunday Night Football. Yes, it is quite the popular matchup for the folks at NBC. For this season's Week 1 showdown, the Cowboys are installed as 3.5-point favorites in New York, despite the Giants having excelled as one of the surprise teams last year. This is a big rivalry game and both teams boast playoff aspirations once again. That makes it unusual to see a 3.5-point road favorite.

Game #4: NY JETS (+1.5) vs. Buffalo

There is no team that is more amped to get the 2023 season underway than the Jets. After adding QB Aaron Rodgers and several other key veterans, the excitement meter is off the charts in New York. There also couldn't be a bigger first-week matchup for Rodgers & Co. than a showdown on Monday Night Football versus AFC East power Buffalo. Not to mention the fact that this game will be played on the anniversary of the 9-11 attacks in New York. In what figures to be a highly emotional contest, if the hosts can settle in and overcome all the theater, this should be a very compelling game, one that will have a huge impact on building a Jets bandwagon should they win.

SYSTEM 2

**DIVISIONAL ROAD UNDERDOGS OF 6.5 POINTS OR LESS ARE ON A 14-12 SU AND 18-7-1 ATS (72%) RUN SINCE 2013.
(WIN: +10.3 UNITS, R.O.I.: 39.6%, GRADE 70)**

2023 POTENTIAL PLAYS: CAROLINA, GREEN BAY, LAS VEGAS, LA RAMS

Analysis

Again, there are several divisional contests on the NFL Week 1 slate, and thus more underdogs to focus on. Four of the games fit the bill for this very successful system. A divisional contest in Week 1 pegs the urgency meter like nothing else, especially when a team is on a road and not expected to win. Keep in mind though that all three games on this system lost last year, so these divisional road dogs were 18-4-1 ATS prior to 2022. Perhaps this year's four dogs will get it going in the right direction again.

Game #1: CAROLINA (+3) at Atlanta

If there is any division in football that is legitimately up for grabs in 2023, it has to be the NFC South. No team of the four finished above-.500 last season and all were within one game of one another. That means that much of what happened in the offseason figures to play a huge role in what transpires, especially early. For Carolina, it is truly a fresh start, with head coach Frank Reich beginning his tenure there. One of his first key orders of business was to name rookie Bryce Young as his starting quarterback. In another study, I found that rookie QBs typically perform well early and late in their first seasons. This would be a very good coming out party for Young to play well as a road dog to Atlanta, who looks to be the more stable team in this matchup if not much else.

Game #2: GREEN BAY (+2.5) at Chicago

One of the most interesting games on the Week 1 slate features a rivalry contest in Chicago, and there may not have been a time in the last 30 years in which the Bears were happier to be hosting the Packers. After suffering through the Brett Favre and Aaron Rodgers era's while they quarterbacked the Packers, the Bears can finally emerge from that shadow as they take on a Jordan Love-led Packers team for the first time. Is the quarterback change enough to swing what has been an absolutely one-sided rivalry lately? We'll see, but Green Bay is sure to be motivated by this underdog line.

Game #3: LAS VEGAS (+3.5) at Denver

These two AFC West rivals have different looks about them heading into the 2023 season, as well they should, as both teams struggled a year ago, combining to win just 11 games. That doesn't mean that they aren't aspiring to be playoff contenders this fall because if any league offers a chance for quick redemption, it's the NFL. The Raiders start over at the sport's most important position, quarterback, as they move on from long time starter Derek Carr. Jimmy Garoppolo figures to be the starter if he's able to hold off hard-charging rookie Aidan O'Connell, who looked the part of emerging star in the preseason. Denver has a new coaching staff in place, with former Super Bowl Champion head coach Sean Payton leading the way. Payton's biggest task is turning around the struggles of franchise QB Russell Wilson, who signed a team-draining contract prior to 2022.

Game #4: LA RAMS (+5.5) at Seattle

The Rams went from Super Bowl Champs to chumps in just one season, going 5-12 in 2022. Now granted, much of it had to do with injuries, particularly to QB Matt Stafford, who figures to be back for 2023, albeit in rusty form. His team takes on a returning playoff team in Seattle in Week 1 on the road, and according to the oddsmakers, the deck is stacked against LA. However, nothing wipes out the ugly memories of a prior season more quickly than a divisional upset win to kick start the follow-up campaign. It happens often in the most unexpected places. Don't write off the Rams too quickly here.

SYSTEM 3

LAYING BIG POINTS IS RARELY A GOOD IDEA IN A WEEK 1 NFL CONTEST, AS UNDERDOGS OF 6.5-POINTS OR MORE MIGHT BE JUST 10-28-1 SU, BUT THEY ARE 26-12-1 ATS (68.4%) IN WEEK 1 SINCE 2013 (WIN: +12.8 UNITS, R.O.I.: 32.8%, GRADE 70)

2023 POTENTIAL PLAYS: PLAY DETROIT, HOUSTON, TAMPA BAY

Analysis

There is a lot to be said about a team's ability to start over in the NFL, and with every Week 1 game comes a fresh slate. All that happened last year is forgotten as both teams go into these games with 0-0 records. In many cases, it is strange or fluky happenings from the past season that caused these Week 1 lines to be so inflated. Trust that the underdogs are going to show up and compete.

Game #1: DETROIT (+6.5) at Kansas City

The Lions became everyone's darlings last year with a late-season surge that nearly landed them in the playoffs. Now, they come into 2023 as the favorites in the NFC North. However, schedule makers did them no favors in having them open up with a primetime season-opening showdown at Kansas City, the league's top team and defending champion. That said, what happened last year is just that, last year, and big point spreads are essentially assumptions being made by those "in the know". I'm quite sure that Lions' head coach Dan Campbell will use his team's underdog status as supreme motivation in getting ready for this Thursday night clash.

Game #2: HOUSTON (+9) at Baltimore

Week 1 games that show point spreads of 9 points in the NFL truly are assumptions, dangerous ones as it turns out, as rarely do favorites of this magnitude hammer their opening day foes. Baltimore isn't the returning champion either. The Ravens were a 10-7 team that floundered without QB Lamar Jackson in the lineup. Sure, Jackson will be back for 2023, but he figures to be untested, having not taken an in-game snap for quite a while. Houston meanwhile, will be quite the changed team, with the new head coach/new quarterback combination being tested. There seems to be a lot of good young talent on the Texans, will it be enough to make a game of this Week 1 clash?

Game #3: TAMPA BAY (+6.5) at Minnesota

There is no other matchup in Week 1 where bettors and experts alike have totally soured on the prospects for both teams than the clash in Minnesota between the Buccaneers and Vikings. The Bucs are supposed to be down, and for good reason, as they move on from QB Tom Brady after a division-winning 8-9 record last season. It doesn't seem like anyone is too high on his replacement, Baker Mayfield. At the same time, Minnesota is getting little to no respect after a 13-4 season a year ago. Perhaps that's because the Vikings were actually outscored by opponents on the year and were ousted from the playoffs in their first game, at home nonetheless. If everyone is right about head coach Kevin O'Connell's team, they figure to underperform in this game as reasonably big Week 1 favorites.

SYSTEM 4

NFL OPENING WEEK ROAD TEAMS THAT WON BETWEEN 4-TO-6 GAMES THE PRIOR SEASON ARE 49-21-5 ATS (70%) SINCE 2004 (WIN: +25.9 UNITS, R.O.I.: 34.5%, GRADE 72)

2023 PLAYS: PLAY ON ARIZONA, LAS VEGAS, LA RAMS

Analysis

Teams in the 4-to-6 win range usually qualify as potential bounce-back teams the next season, with the start of the new season offering fresh motivation and momentum. In many cases, it was bad luck, injuries, or even tanking that soured their records the prior season. Last year there was only one qualifying play, the Giants, and they rallied for a big 21-20 upset win at Tennessee in a game that jumpstarted an unexpectedly strong season for them. As you can see, there are qualifying teams for this angle in 2023. Let's look closer at those games.

Game #1: ARIZONA (+6) at Washington

Undoubtedly, the team that most fans have pegged as the worst one in the NFL this season is Arizona. With QB Kyler Murray recovering from injury and expected to miss the early part of the season, new head coach Jonathan Gannon has yet to name a replacement, and it's not because all the options are fantastic. That said, Washington isn't much better off right now, despite the vibes you may have gotten from the Commanders' monumental preseason win over the Ravens, which snapped the latter's 24-game win streak. Trust me when I say that head coach Ron Rivera's team probably doesn't deserve 6-point favorite status over anyone at this point. Arizona still is a professional football team and with a clean slate, will be motivated by this line.

Game #2: LAS VEGAS (+3.5) at Denver

I already mentioned the changes for each of these teams heading into 2023, and that will be the major storyline for this opening week contest. Both teams are in the position of being returning 4-to-6-win teams. It just so happens that Las Vegas gets put on the road for the game. Typically, aspiring road teams like the Raiders fare well in Week 1.

Game #3: LA RAMS (+5.5) at Seattle

The logic behind this system is that teams are quickly able to flush the painful memories of the prior season because they get a clean slate and return to the field fully healthy. Just those two points alone can be enough to rejuvenate an NFL team. For the Rams, so much went wrong besides the Stafford injury that starting anew will be like a breath of fresh air. Don't forget, they are just one year removed from a world championship. On the other sideline, so much went right for Seattle to get to 9-8 and a playoff berth. All that gets flushed away as well as they open up a whole new season in a difficult point spread covering spot.

SYSTEM 5

OPENING WEEK HOME FAVORITES HOSTING TEAMS THAT WERE ABOVE .500 THE PRIOR SEASON ARE 48-25-5 ATS (65.8%) SINCE '00 (WIN: +20.5 UNITS, R.O.I.: 26.3%, GRADE 60)

2023 POTENTIAL PLAYS: KANSAS CITY, LA CHARGERS

Analysis

Home favorites hosting a quality opponent are likely a very strong team themselves, or at least expected to be much better, and opening the season provides extra motivation. After a 3-2 SU and ATS performance in five games last season, for 2023, only two plays are on tap.

Game #1: KANSAS CITY (-6.5) vs. Detroit

This particular system will obviously clash with that in system #3 for the Chiefs-Lions opening night contest. The logic here is that despite the fact that the Lions are a returning plus-.500 team, the host Chiefs are still favored for a reason. Actually, in the case of the defending champs, it's a lot of reasons, starting with QB Patrick Mahomes, the returning MVP of the league. Interestingly, this is an opening night game unlike any other in recent memory. Usually, two big time teams are set up against one another, and both have gotten accustomed to the primetime stage. There is no team in the league that has played fewer big-time games recently than Detroit. Might this stage be too big for the Lions?

Game #2: LA CHARGERS (-2.5) vs. Miami

The Chargers got over the hurdle of reaching the postseason last year only to see a 27-point lead disintegrate in their playoff game at Jacksonville. Will there be a hangover from that contest still eight months later? Or, was it just another building block for what is to become one of the league's premier teams in 2023? Quite realistically, it is somewhere in between those two opposites, but there's no denying that head coach Brandon Staley has one of the more talented teams in the league on both sides of the ball. On the opposite sideline is a Miami team that is stuck in a reoccurring pattern of playing well but just not well enough in recent years. The Dolphins are loaded on offense but also have their own hurdles to overcome. This is a tough opening week travel spot for them.

SYSTEM 6

WEEK 1 FAVORITES PLAYING IN A REVENGE SPOT FROM A LOSS THE PRIOR SEASON ARE JUST 15-22 SU AND 13-24 ATS (35.1%) OVER THE LAST 11 SEASONS (LOSS: -13.4 UNITS, R.O.I.: -36.2%, GRADE 68)

2023 POTENTIAL PLAYS: PLAY AGAINST ATLANTA, JACKSONVILLE, CHICAGO, DENVER

Analysis

This is a tough spot for a favorite to be in. While it can be argued that revenge is a good motivator, there is enhanced pressure of being placed as a favorite over a team that you lost to last time out. In the case of this year's four qualifying games, they are all divisional contests with enhanced stakes. We know that being a divisional favorite in Week 1 is also tough.

Game #1: ATLANTA (-3) vs. Carolina

We have another clash system here, as Carolina qualified for its own successful angle in system #2 earlier. This one is about revenge though, and the Panthers' 25-15 win in November last season can easily be pointed to as the reason the Falcons were not able to win the NFC South Division. It's naturally more complicated than that, but there will be at least a hint of vengeful motivation being played out by head coach Arthur Smith. The Falcons have beaten the Panthers in six of the last eight meetings in Atlanta.

Game #2: JACKSONVILLE (-3.5) at Indianapolis

Believe it or not, 4-12-1 Indianapolis did beat 9-8 Jacksonville last year in late October, and the result probably made things a lot harder on the Jaguars than they needed to be in terms of eventually winning the AFC South Division. While this is also a system #1 play favoring Indianapolis as the road dog, surely head coach Doug Pederson will try to rally his troops around the concept of "these guys beat us last time out". Will it be enough to overcome what has proven to be a difficult point spread covering scenario? We'll see.

Game #3: CHICAGO (-2.5) vs. Green Bay

I already gave an expanded look at the Packers-Bears contest for Week 1, I'll focus here more on the revenge aspect, as it figures to be paramount in the contest. Of course, this angle goes directly against that in system #2, so it will be up to you to weigh their significance in your own handicapping. All you have to do is look back some 30+ years to understand the frustration of having had to face the Packers all that time with their two elite quarterbacks under center. Of course, Aaron Rodgers bellowed the famous "I still own you" in the game in Chicago a couple of years ago, and surely that makes Bears' players and fans' blood boil. Is this the game that Chicago officially turns the page and the tide in this rivalry?

Game #4: DENVER (-3.5) vs. Las Vegas

If you're counting system qualifying plays among the six angles, the final tally is Las Vegas 2, Denver 1 for their opening week showdown. The angle that suggests that the Broncos will be the team standing at the end is one of revenge. Although the game didn't mean a whole lot in the standings eventually, the Raiders did win in Denver back in November, their sixth straight victory over the hated Broncos. Now, if you don't value the motivation a team may get from losing to its utmost rival the last time out, perhaps you will when that revenge aspect is six-fold. If head coach Sean Payton's Denver team is to turn a corner this season, it must turn back Oakland at home in Week 1, and flush the recent history of what has been a one-sided series.

Good luck with your plays and enjoy NFL Kickoff 2023!

STEVE MAKINEN'S POWER RATINGS

TEAM	POWER RATING
KANSAS CITY	30.5
PHILADELPHIA	30.0
BUFFALO	29.0
CINCINNATI	29.0
SAN FRANCISCO	28.5
DALLAS	28.0
JACKSONVILLE	27.0
BALTIMORE	26.5
NY JETS	26.5
MIAMI	25.5
DETROIT	25.0
LA CHARGERS	25.0
CLEVELAND	23.5
DENVER	23.5
MINNESOTA	23.5
NY GIANTS	23.5
PITTSBURGH	23.5
SEATTLE	23.5
NEW ENGLAND	23.0
NEW ORLEANS	23.0
GREEN BAY	22.5
ATLANTA	22.0
CHICAGO	22.0
LAS VEGAS	22.0
CAROLINA	21.5
LA RAMS	21.5
TENNESSEE	21.5
INDIANAPOLIS	20.5
WASHINGTON	20.5
TAMPA BAY	20.0
HOUSTON	19.0
ARIZONA	17.5



BUFFALO BILLS

AFC EAST
ODDS TO WIN: +120

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: +900

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

Last preseason, the Bills were 31st in the NFL in giving the ball away, which didn't bother anyone until opening night, when they gave the Rams the ball four times but still won the game by 21 points. Nothing has changed this summer.

The Bills still cannot hold onto the ball and rank 30th in turnover/takeaway. Is this a concern? Yes, and last summer, Josh Allen only attempted three passes and completed all of them. This year, after two games, he was on the field for 10 attempts. When the Bills tried to use their first-team offense to score on the Steelers, they struggled to block TJ Watt and went three and out. On the second drive, penalties forced them to punt the ball back to the Steelers when they faced 4th and 25. They sent Allen back onto the field to correct the mistakes and had another three and out. It wasn't a good day for the Bills and perhaps a sign of things to come in the AFC East.

With four of their key starters on defense all over 30 and coming off injury, the Bills are not perfect as a team as they start the 2023 season. Can they get it back? Yes, but they need to stay healthy on defense, which is a concern.

PLAYER TO WATCH: RB JAMES COOK

Cook has officially taken over in Buffalo. The 2022 second-rounder out of Georgia is the primary back and took nearly all of the first-team reps in practice and the preseason games. Cook played sparingly last season to start the year, picking up no more than 18 offensive snaps through Week 12, but he was on the field for at least 36% of the snaps in each of the final five regular season games he played and at least 40% in four of them. His usage did decline in the postseason, but he is the clear, unblocked every-down back now and may see a snap share of 60% or higher in this offense. - Adam Burke



MIAMI DOLPHINS

AFC EAST
ODDS TO WIN: +300

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 25-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

Whenever the subject of the Dolphins' 2023 outlook comes up, a prerequisite is always attached to the prediction. "If Tua is healthy all season, then I love the Fins to win the East. If not, I am out." That's the declaration by all fans — even Miami diehards. Why? The Dolphins have a great reputation for being an explosive offense. They finished second in the NFL in yards per passing attempt and fourth in touchdowns scored, but they were only 11th in points scored and 24th in converting third downs. With their skill and talent, they can place the fear of God into any defensive coordinator. However, being consistent on offense and staying healthy was another thing. It was either a quick-strike drive for the Fins or they were punting. And their offense bogged down when they lost Tua at quarterback or some of their offensive linemen.

On defense, they couldn't create turnovers. They also couldn't cover man-to-man and were exposed whenever they played against a good quarterback, or even an average passer. Hiring Vic Fangio as the defensive coordinator will help the defense and allow them to become more multi-dimensional in terms of coverages. Will this be the cure for what ails Miami? Well, it goes back to one thing. Can they keep Tua healthy? He got hit this summer — which means he will get hit in the fall. So, my answer is probably no.

PLAYER TO WATCH: RB RAHEEM MOSTERT

This offense runs through Tua, Tyreek Hill, and Jaylen Waddle, but Miami would like to achieve some balance. If for nothing else, it could help Tua stay upright, given his history of concussions. Unfortunately, none of the running backs really stood out in the preseason, leaving a timeshare with Mostert, Jeff Wilson, De'Von Achane, and Salvon Ahmed. Mostert was the healthiest of the backs in camp, so he was mostly put in bubble wrap while the others battled it out for reps between injuries. Plan on Tua throwing early and often unless this position somehow shakes itself out. - Adam Burke





NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

AFC EAST
ODDS TO WIN: +800

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 65-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

The Patriots finished 8-9 last season, and two plays kept them from being 10-7. The crazy lateral in the Raiders game and the Rhamondre Stephenson fumble going in to score at the end of the game against the Bengals which would have been a game-winner. If those plays go the other way, we are having a different conversation. Bill Parcells once said, "You are what your record says." But altering the course of a few plays indicates a team might be closer than expected. However, no one thinks the Patriots are close. They think the world is coming to an end, and it's all doom and gloom, which I am sure is how head coach Bill Belichick wants it.

The Patriots have a solid defense that can rush the passer and create turnovers. They can run the ball, and if they can keep Mac Jones from making mistakes, they can play with anyone. This summer, it's clear they have improved their speed on defense, which was a huge need as they were 0-4 against running quarterbacks. Their offensive line has been a work in progress all summer as many of their returning players are coming off an injury. The biggest positive so far has been Trent Brown. The starting left tackle is in good shape and looks like he is ready to play. When Michael Onwenu is back at right guard, this line will have a chance to improve. Yes, the Patriots' schedule is tough, but we know they will be well-coached in all three phases and will not back down.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR JUJU SMITH-SCHUSTER

Offensive coordinator Bill O'Brien has been focused on getting the ball out quickly, which means a lot of RPO and screen concepts for Mac Jones and Bailey Zappe. However, that type of scheme also really boosts Smith-Schuster, who is the Jakobi Meyers replacement in the offense. Meyers was targeted 222 times in 2021-22 and Smith-Schuster can run all those routes and has a higher Catch% in his career. Expect a lot of volume for the former Steeler regardless of who plays QB throughout the season. - Adam Burke



NEW YORK JETS

AFC EAST
ODDS TO WIN: +270

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 16-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

Remember in the board game Monopoly, when you landed on Chance and pulled the card that said, "Go directly to jail. Do not pass Go. Do not collect 200 dollars?" The 2023 version of "Jets Monopoly" doesn't include a jail card. It includes a Super Bowl card: "Do not worry about the regular season, do not worry about the playoffs, go directly to the Super Bowl."

Everyone, the Jets included, believes they have what it takes to win it all as a team. Getting Aaron Rodgers this off-season changed the conversation for the Jets. They went from wondering about whether Zach Wilson is a starter to believing their team is not good but great. And with Rodgers playing more like 2021 than 2022, the Jets could be correct with their assessment. However, not to be a "Debbie Downer," the Jets under head coach Robert Saleh have only won two AFC East games in two years and lost seven of their last eight games. Their defense is good. But how good? Well in those last eight games of the season, they only forced two turnovers, which signals good-not-great play. However, with Rodgers, they can expect to play from in front, something that rarely happened last season, which will highlight their pass rush and create turnovers.

As with most teams competing for a Super Bowl run, their success is tied to the play of their quarterback, and in the brief view of Rodgers this summer, it appears as if he is more like the 2021 version than 2022. This is great news for those playing in the Jets Monopoly board game.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR RANDALL COBB

There is no question that Garrett Wilson is the WR1 for the Jets, but Cobb might already be the WR2 over Allen Lazard and Mecole Hardman Jr. Cobb was getting a lot of reps as the preseason went along and the Jets reportedly value his run-blocking skills quite a bit. The obvious connection between Rodgers and Cobb factors in here as well, especially since Rodgers basically handpicked he and Lazard in free agency after joining the Jets. The 12-year vet had 89 targets in 25 games with the Packers over the last two seasons and he may emerge as a trusted red-zone option when teams focus more on Wilson. - Adam Burke





BALTIMORE RAVENS

AFC NORTH
ODDS TO WIN: +235

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 18-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

The Ravens finally lost a preseason game, ending their 24-game win streak, but what is more alarming than the Ravens losing a preseason game is that in two weeks of games, their defense hasn't been able to get off the field. They have played 35:36 minutes of defense in the two preseason games and allowed their opponents to convert 47.1% of their third downs.

Last summer, they were balanced with time of possession, playing 30:41 of defense and 29:19 of offense. When you factor in that their best corner Marlon Humphrey is going to miss regular season game time, and their pass rush was so weak they needed to call in defensive end Jadeveon Clowney, this indicates a problem. The North is loaded with good teams and good quarterbacks. So the question that lingers at the end of summer for the Ravens is, are they good enough on defense, even when healthy? Call me highly skeptical.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR ZAY FLOWERS

The Ravens' first-round rookie might have been the best player in Ravens training camp. Flowers runs precise, decisive routes that create space against defenders, he makes the contested catch, and his burst and shiftness after the catch is exactly what the Ravens were looking for. The Ravens rebuilt their receiver room this offseason, adding Flowers, Odell Beckham Jr. and Nelson Agholor. Other than Mark Andrews, Flowers might end up becoming Lamar Jackson's favorite target because he gets open in the short and intermediate spaces. That's where Jackson throws best. - Bo Smolka, Pressbox (@bsmolka)



CINCINNATI BENGALS

AFC NORTH
ODDS TO WIN: +140

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 11-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

The Bengals have always presented a problem for any evaluator in the preseason as they don't play their starters, and their backups don't look sharp. Head coach Zac Taylor relies on building his team throughout the season. In each of the last two years, the Bengals have been 5-4, then peaked in late November and playoff time. They are not a great opening-day team in terms of execution. With star quarterback Joe Burrow missing all of training camp and most of the offseason work, it will take some time for him to find his groove.

What concerns me more than the eventuality of Burrow getting in rhythm is the Bengals' defense, particularly in the secondary. So far this summer, as the Bengals incorporate two new safeties into their defense, they have struggled to stop the run, allowing over 5.0 yards per carry. Nick Scott and Dax Hill have big shoes to fill replacing Jessie Bates and Vonn Bell, and it might take time before this unit is playing at a high level like last year. I trust defensive coordinator Lou Anarumo to eventually fix the issues. It just might not be in September.

PLAYER TO WATCH: TE IRV SMITH JR.

Ja'Marr Chase hinted in the spring that he would be moving around more in the formations and this is the biggest wrinkle the Bengals have shown in camp. Tee Higgins, Tyler Boyd, and Smith Jr. could be beneficiaries of this with more open space over the middle, which has been on display throughout camp. Smith has flashed consistency over the middle and figures to carry on in the tradition of receiving tight ends who flourish with Burrow at quarterback. Smith has gotten open several times in the end zone against a very good Bengals red zone defense and this bodes well for Burrow and the Bengals offense to put up good numbers once they're inside the 20. The biggest question is how this new wrinkle is impacted by the lack of snaps in camp for Burrow. - Mike Petraglia, CLNS Media (@Trags)





CLEVELAND BROWNS

AFC NORTH
ODDS TO WIN: +400

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 35-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

On December 23rd, 1989, Cleveland Browns running back Kevin Mack crossed the goal line with less than a minute to go ahead in the game against the Houston Oilers. The Browns became winners of the then-called AFC Central. Little did anyone know (me included as I was in the Astrodome witnessing the win) that would be the last time the Browns finished in first place in their division, ahead of the Steelers. Thirty-four years have passed, many of them with the Browns having no chance to finish ahead of Pittsburgh. This year might be their year. And why not? The Browns are talented. They have no glaring weakness on either side of the ball; this summer, they appear focused and have solid depth.

The Browns are good where it matters most — both lines. With the addition of defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz and special teams coach Bubba Ventrone, the Browns have shored up two areas of malfunctions last season. Now, they need to get quarterback Deshaun Watson to regain his past form, his confidence, and his playmaking skills. If he can, and head coach Kevin Stefanski doesn't go for every fourth down he meets, then they might have a good chance to win the North. Thirty-four years is a long time, and the clock is ticking for the Browns to turn a talented roster into a winning team.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR ELIJAH MOORE

This is Watson's offense and the Browns will mostly be an 11 personnel team that tries to force defenses to defend every inch of grass. Watson is best when he's on the move, and the Browns want to both roll him out by design and let him improvise. Moore is the slot receiver, but he'll also line up in the backfield and across the formation. After a disjointed and disappointing 2022 season, Stefanski has spent the offseason refining this more open offense and taking Watson's feedback on what works. The Browns targeted Moore because they think he's explosive enough to get yards on quick screens and get big yards when Watson leaves the pocket. It wouldn't be a surprise to see Moore lead the team in targets, and the Browns think that they're far enough along to start using his versatility to also create favorable matchups for David Njoku and Amari Cooper. - Zac Jackson, The Athletic (@AkronJackson)



PITTSBURGH STEELERS

AFC NORTH
ODDS TO WIN: +500

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 50-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

When we fail to recognize facts, it can be due to various reasons. One common reason is that people can become too emotionally invested in their own beliefs, which can cloud their judgment. They may want to be "right" and cling to their opinions even when faced with contradicting evidence. Additionally, some individuals may mistakenly believe that their opinions are facts and fail to understand the difference between the two. The fact is simple: Mike Tomlin isn't going to have a losing season. Not last year, not next year, not ever. He wins, and winning nine games with his 2022 was Coach of the Year worthy.

By the end of last season, the Steelers were playing their best football, dominating on defense, effectively playing well on offense, and protecting the ball. When Kenny Pickett protected the football, took the profits in the offense, and didn't force the ball into tight windows, the Steelers found ways to win seven of their last nine games. This summer, they have looked like a Super Bowl contender. I am not sold on the Steelers being an elite Super Bowl team, but I am sold on them being a good team — as good as anyone in the AFC North. And being good in the North has led to a team being in the AFC Conference Championship game two years in a row. The fact is Tomlin and the Steelers are very good. Don't deny it.

PLAYER TO WATCH: QB KENNY PICKETT

In 2022, Pickett threw just 30.4% of his pass attempts 10+ yards beyond the line of scrimmage. Throughout training camp and the preseason, Pickett's willingness to go deep has been well-documented, with several of those deep attempts for George Pickens going viral on social media. The limited action we've seen in the preseason has generally matched that narrative, with 46.6% of attempts going for 10+ air yards. The deep ball might just be the thing that gives this offense some explosion, with a slew of weapons at the ready, including WRs Diontae Johnson and Pickens, as well as TE Pat Freiermuth, leading the pack. Even if it is "just the preseason," Pickett has led all quarterbacks with five or more pass attempts with 13.3 yards per attempt, throwing for 158.3 passer rating with a 10.6 aDOT. - Kate Magdziuk, Behind the Steel Curtain (@katemagdziuk)





HOUSTON TEXANS

AFC SOUTH
ODDS TO WIN: +800

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 200-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

The only thing we know about the Texans from the summer is they won't be firing their head coach at the end of the year. New head coach DeMeco Ryans is playing the long game. He is going to start a rookie at the position and hopes to grow the team around CJ Stroud's skill set. At times this summer, Stroud has looked confused, hesitant, energetic, athletic, and accurate. It's been a mixed bag, but what would you expect from a quarterback who never called a play in a huddle, and never took a snap from under center? His development is going to be a process — a year-long one.

With an improved offensive line and lack of elite skill players, the Texans will take their lumps as Stroud grows into the role. One thing is for sure, they will play hard with relentless effort because the players know Ryans is in control. Their defense is undersized, explosively fast, and will close on the ball. They will try to duplicate the 49ers' model of winning up front, but with less talent. They will give each opponent a tough start, will run out of steam late, and have a hard time closing out wins. In the end, they won't win many games because of their youth, but they will be a formidable opponent for the first 50 minutes of the game.

PLAYER TO WATCH: TE DALTON SCHULTZ

New offensive coordinator Bobby Slowik is a Kyle Shanahan disciple, having spent the last four years as an offensive coach for the 49ers. While Schultz isn't exactly George Kittle, Slowik knows the value of a reliable tight end and any reliable set of hands should be beneficial for Stroud in his rookie season. In the final preseason tune-up, Schultz was open regularly, using some of the same route concepts as Kittle. Schultz also praised Stroud's accuracy throughout the month of August and the two should be a good pairing for a Texans team likely to trail a lot and be forced to throw the ball in the second halves of games. - Adam Burke



INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

AFC SOUTH
ODDS TO WIN: +600

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 150-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

We are about to witness the full Anthony Richardson experience at quarterback for the Colts. Owner Jim Irsay said the Colts would have drafted Richardson at the first pick overall had they been in that position. I doubt that's true, and how could anyone believe Richardson is ready to be a star in the NFL when he wasn't First-Team All-SEC? Every great passer has growing pains, from Peyton Manning to Patrick Mahomes. The Richardson hype train is in full force this summer — every move he makes, athletically or showcasing his arm sends Twitter (now referred to as "X") through the roof. Yet, none of these highlights are from playing the quarterback position. Why are they there? No one doubts or denies Richardson's skill set. For him to help the Colts win games, it will take time. It will take him being more consistent with his accuracy and processing the information as the game speeds up.

The Colts will have to rely on their defense to keep them in the game, and in their last preseason tune-up, the Eagles backups moved the ball effectively against them with Tanner McKee at quarterback. That's not a good sign. The Colts' defense is good but not great. They are small, and having to play more than 28 minutes per game will affect their overall production. This means Richardson must be great on third down, and what rookie quarterback is great in that area? Or great with their accuracy? Josh Allen in his rookie season posted a 25% rate of bad throws, which improved to 16.6% last season. It's a dramatic improvement that Richardson will need to make as his career develops, but it just won't happen this year no matter how many X highlights we watch.

PLAYER TO WATCH: DE KWITY PAYE

The player to watch for the Colts is clearly Richardson, who will do a lot of good things and make a lot of mistakes on offense. However, the Colts will probably be on defense a lot unless they can move the chains on third down and Richardson can avoid turnovers and the inaccuracy that plagued him at Florida. Therefore, another player to watch closely is Paye. The 2021 first-round pick missed five games last season and most of a sixth in Week 10 when he only played 18 snaps. After securing two sacks in Week 1 against the Texans, he only had four sacks the rest of the way, but went from three tackles for loss in 15 games in 2021 to 10 in 12 games in 2022. Paye may be ready to make that leap and rack up some more sacks, so long as he stays healthy. Remember, new head coach Shane Steichen's Eagles defense had 70 sacks in 17 games last regular season. - Adam Burke





JACKSONVILLE

JAGUARS

AFC SOUTH
ODDS TO WIN: -155

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 30-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

When general manager Trent Baalke traded for wide receiver Calvin Ridley last season, I loved the deal. As one NFL defensive coordinator told me after facing the Jags, they are a receiver away from having a great offense. And if Ridley plays like he did from 2018 to 2020, scoring 26 touchdowns, he would be the perfect receiver for the offense. Watching the Jags this summer, I agree they can be dangerous and challenging to defend especially when quarterback Trevor Lawrence doesn't take unnecessary chances with the ball. The Jags will score points. They were 8-1 last year when they scored 24 or more points in a game. The only teams they beat scoring less were the Jets with Zach Wilson under center and the Titans with Joshua Dobbs.

The concern with the Jags moving into this season centers on their defense, specifically their ability to pressure the passer. They will get the lead on teams; can they increase the lead with their ability to pressure their opponents into mistakes? Last year, they finished seventh overall in the turnover takeaway battle and 24th in yards allowed. So, even with the turnover advantage, they struggled to add to the lead. This summer, we know the offense is great, and the defense is still middle of the road, with hopes of trending upward.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR CALVIN RIDLEY

Ridley served his time and now he enters the season as a man on a mission. The 28-year-old has basically missed two years in a row now, but he's been a standout in Jaguars camp and defenses won't be able to cover all of the weapons in this offense. The expectation is that Lawrence and the passing game will improve in Year 2 under Doug Pederson, and Ridley could be a huge benefactor as a big-play threat. There is a good bit of rust to shake off when Sundays come and the lights get bright, but Lawrence is likely to find the hot hand and you don't want to be behind if it is Ridley from the jump. - Adam Burke



TENNESSEE

TITANS

AFC SOUTH
ODDS TO WIN: +350

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 80-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

The Titans spent the offseason determined to improve their offensive line. In their last preseason game against the Patriots, their starters had a hard time blocking the Patriots' second and third teams, which isn't a good sign. For the Titans to win the South, they will need the line to perform at a higher level. And for all the wasted talk after the draft that Will Levis will beat out Ryan Tannehill, Levis didn't beat out Malik Willis for the backup job. Tannehill will be the quarterback, and even though they changed offensive coordinators, the offense will still rely on Derrick Henry and the run game, with a heavy dose of play-action.

Under Mike Vrabel, the Titans have always been solid on defense, and they will be again this year with a better secondary, particularly at the corner position from adding Sean Murphy-Bunting. With Jeffery Simmons inside pressuring the passer, the Titans are a stout defensive team, and Vrabel always gets more out of his players than their talent.

If the offensive line comes together and there is doubt based on the summer preview — the Titans will be in the mix to win the South.

PLAYER TO WATCH: RB TYJAE SPEARS

With a changing of the guard coming soon at quarterback, could we soon have one at running back as well? Spears has been getting a lot of press and a lot of run throughout the preseason, so he could be coming to challenge Henry's throne in the Music City sooner rather than later. Henry led the NFL in carries for the third time in four seasons last year and the passing game looks questionable, so the Titans may rely heavily on the ground and pound with some thunder and lightning from the 250-pound veteran bruiser and the rookie out of Tulane. Henry's 33 receptions and 41 targets were career-highs last season, but getting touches for Spears may be a priority that cuts into those numbers. - Adam Burke





DENVER BRONCOS

AFC WEST
ODDS TO WIN: +600

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 45-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

There are no magic wands when it comes to rescuing football teams or players. New Broncos head coach Sean Payton is viewed as the man who can save Russell Wilson and get him back into cooking gourmet meals. So far this summer, Wilson looks the same as he has the last two years — more line cook than top chef. He is uncomfortable in the pocket, unwilling to climb the ladder and look down the field, and most of all, not as quick or explosive to escape the rushers.

Payton will do everything in his offensive play-calling power to help Wilson with easy throws, but there will be a point when Wilson must excel on his own. If the Broncos offense struggles, which it could, then Wilson won't be the 17-game starter. What might save Wilson and the Broncos offense is their running game, where they have looked good this summer, averaging over six yards a carry. We know Payton will call runs which will keep his defense off the field.

Are they good enough on defense? They held 10 teams to under 20 points last year, finishing 4-6 in those games. Payton's play-calling and managing of the game will help, but don't count on a miracle.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR COURTLAND SUTTON

My VSiN colleague Zach Cohen wrote about Sutton's potential upside long before Jerry Jeudy suffered a hamstring injury on August 24. Now it seems as though Sutton will have to fight with rookie Marvin Mims Jr. for receptions, but Sutton did lead the team in targets last season, even if Jeudy had more yards and more touchdowns. Options are good and Sutton may fit more into a possession receiver role than a big-play threat this year as a big body to get open across the middle in Payton's offense. Michael Thomas got open a lot for Drew Brees at 6-foot-3 and 212 pounds. Why can't Sutton at 6-foot-4 and 216 pounds? - Adam Burke



KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

AFC WEST
ODDS TO WIN: -165

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: +600

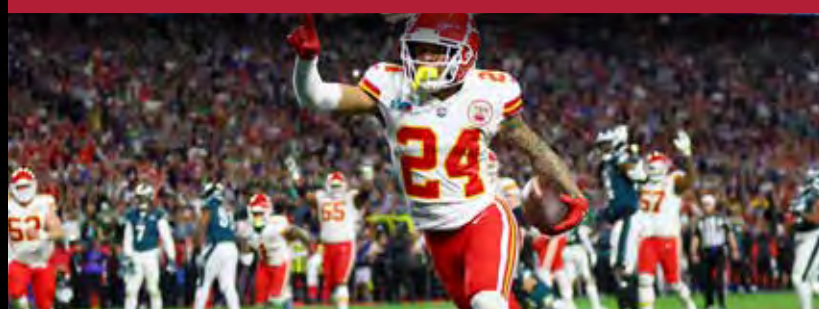
LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

Chris Jones was the best defensive player in the NFL last year. He dominated games and made it impossible for the opposing quarterback to step up and throw. He led the league in quarterback knockdowns and deserves a raise or a new deal. Without him on the field, the Chiefs are vulnerable defensively, and defense is their concern. With Patrick Mahomes' skill set and Andy Reid's design of the offense, the Chiefs will score. But without Jones, they will allow points.

Can they overcome this? Nine of the Chiefs' 14 wins, including the Conference Championship game and the Super Bowl were within six points. Because of their offense and Jones's ability to pressure, the Chiefs have found ways to win close games. Without him, it might be a challenge, and this summer, their offense hasn't looked dominant, even though Mahomes has played. Last year, he attempted 26 passes and completed 18, for 8.5 yards per attempt and three touchdowns. So far this year, before the final preseason game, he has attempted 17 passes and completed 12 for 7.1 yards per attempt and one touchdown. You can say it's preseason, but so was last year.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR SKYY MOORE

Targets are available in this offense, as JuJu Smith-Schuster was second to Travis Kelce (152) with 101 tosses in his direction, but he's now with the Patriots. Marquise Gooden was third with 81 targets and running back Jerick McKinnon was fourth with 71. With Mecole Hardman gone as well, Mahomes will be looking for options. Could Moore be that guy? With Kadarius Toney hampered by a torn meniscus early in the preseason, he missed out on valuable reps with Mahomes. Moore, who had 42 targets over 19 games played last season, had four games with a snap share of at least 42% between the regular season and playoffs and had 19 of his targets in those games. It wouldn't be a surprise to see him benefit the most from the departures. - Adam Burke





LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

AFC WEST
ODDS TO WIN: 16-1

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 80-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

After beating the Broncos in overtime in Week 11, the Raiders improved to 3-7. Over the next seven games, they turned the ball over 14 times, still won three games, and had a chance to win two more. They kept shooting themselves in the foot with poor decisions and lousy execution. The Raiders were determined this off-season to become a smarter situational football team, protect the ball, and not make the easy throw challenging. And so far this summer, they have done a nice job of displaying their improvements.

They are faster on defense, have better linebacking play, and with a stronger front, they should be improved. Last season, the Raiders finished 29th in yards allowed passing, 31st in interceptions and overall just struggled to stop the run. They ranked 26th in third down defense and 29th in the red zone, which is why the Raiders, once again, spent the offseason trying to get smarter as a team.

When Josh Jacobs returns and signs his tender, the Raiders will be a solid offense that must finish drives and not be ranked 26th in red zone offense. If the Raiders make improvements in those two areas, they will be an improved team. Will they be a playoff team? I'm not sure, but they will show progress, something they didn't do last year.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR HUNTER RENFROW

There's really no way to sugarcoat the fact that 2022 was a lost season for Renfrow. After all the hype about how much slot receivers had thrived under Josh McDaniels with the Patriots, the outlook was extremely promising for one of the most precise route-runners in the league entering his first year in the system. Then, a combination of injuries and general unhappiness depressed Renfrow's numbers. He has openly discussed being in a much better place mentally entering this season and it has been evident in training camp. Renfrow has been unguardable at times and served as a favorite target for new quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo, who has excelled in the short and intermediate game while struggling to regain his timing in the downfield passing game. While there is still a non-zero chance Renfrow ends up elsewhere, look for him to surpass expectations in the prop market, particularly early in the season with such diminished expectations. - Adam Hill, Las Vegas Review-Journal (@AdamHillLVRJ)



LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

AFC WEST
ODDS TO WIN: +290

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 25-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

If you ask any Navy Seal Bud instructor if they can tell who will not make it through the grueling eight-week training program, they all say the candidate who looks great the first day and shows great athletic skills initially. Once the training begins, the bumps and bruises occur, they fall short and disappear, and their helmet ends up in the quad. That sounds like the Los Angeles Chargers to me. They are great on paper; awesome to start the season when they are completely healthy; they have a Super Bowl feel. Once the grind begins, they lose players, don't look as good on paper, and fall apart.

Last year, they refused to run the ball, ranking 28th in rushing attempts. And their defense could not stop the run. This summer, they have tried to run the ball, attempting 94 carries for a 6.4 yard per carry. In 2022, they attempted 64 carries and averaged 3.5 yards per attempt. Big difference. Now last summer, they were behind in all the games, which might explain the fewer carries, yet it's hard to ignore the production and the emphasis. They added one player in the off-season to their defense — linebacker Eric Kendricks, which could help. But when you cannot stop the run and struggle to defend the pass — 20th overall in yards allowed per attempt — it might take more than one player and health to keep the Chargers helmet from being in the quad.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR KEENAN ALLEN

Health is a skill and one that the Chargers have had problems with for several seasons in a row. If Allen can stay healthy, a return to being over 1,000 yards is not only within reach, but quite possibly the expectation for 2023. Allen and Herbert were reportedly in sync and then some over the final week of preseason action and Kellen Moore's offensive scheme has been predicated on getting the ball out quick and into open space, with the occasional deep toss mixed in. Allen caught over 100 passes in 2017, and then for three straight years from 2019-21. He caught 66 balls in just 10 games last season and a return to prominence looks likely for the five-time Pro Bowler in this offense. - Adam Burke





DALLAS COWBOYS

NFC EAST
ODDS TO WIN: +195

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 14-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

The Cowboys enter the 2023 season riding a two-year playoff run. That doesn't sound like a big deal, but they haven't had a three-year run since 1996. The Cowboys have never been the model of consistency. During his nine-plus seasons as the head coach of the Cowboys, Jason Garrett never had back-to-back playoff appearances and only went to the playoffs three times, each time losing in the divisional round. The last NFC Conference game the Cowboys played in was 1995, their last Super Bowl season. We often mistake the Cowboys as a consistent winner which they aren't.

Based on the preseason, the Cowboys have tried to correct their problems from a year ago. They are better in the secondary, have more depth in their defensive front, and can handle any team on the schedule if their offensive line stays healthy. Their backfield looks solid, as Rico Dowdle and Deuce Vaughn both have displayed excellent running skills to offset the loss of Zeke Elliott. Is this the year the Boys put it all together? On paper, they look great, but based on prior history, I'm not so sure.

PLAYER TO WATCH: RB TONY POLLARD

Mike McCarthy will be calling plays for Dallas this year and he has openly stated that he'll be leaning heavily on the running game in order to keep his defense fresh. So, with Elliott now on the Patriots, this is Tony Pollard's show. Pollard is an explosive player and had already been out-producing Elliott on a per-touch basis. Pollard also looked electric during training camp, showcasing his otherworldly quickness and home-run hitting ability. He genuinely seems ready to turn in a career year. However, it should be noted that Pollard fractured his fibula last season and underwent tight rope surgery on his ankle at the start of the year. That said, Dallas could be a little cautious with him early on. - Zachary Cohen



NEW YORK GIANTS

NFC EAST
ODDS TO WIN: +900

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 65-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

The Giants decided to pay quarterback Daniel Jones big money — \$40 million per year — and he only threw for over 300 yards in two games. Both were losses. Jones will never be mistaken for John Elway or Dan Marino zipping the ball all over the field. He is a well-managed passer within the offense. The Giant coaches have complete faith that once the offense gets more skilled talent, they can expand their conservative approach and showcase his skills.

Is that realistic? One thing is for sure: Brian Daboll and the Giants proved last year that they have a certain style they need to play if they want to win. They kept the game close and tried to win a one-possession game in the fourth quarter. This philosophy worked well in the first part of the season, but the Giants struggled once teams understood their style and methodology. In two games against the Eagles, Jones scored 29 total points. In the one meaningless game, when Davis Webb played quarterback, they scored 22. Overall, the Giants were outclassed and outscored by the Eagles in three games, 88-45, and were never in the games. For them to defeat the Eagles, they need to alter their approach on offense, but will this show Jones as a \$40-million-man or an overpaid player? Only time will tell.

As for their defense, they were the fifth-best team on third down and in the red zone, which offset their inability to stop the run. They have improved this summer in the secondary, and even if they are better on defense, the tougher schedule might offset the talent increase. The formula that worked last year will need to work again this year — great red zone offense and defense always help win games — and regardless of the schedule, if the Giants excel in that game situation, they can be a team to make the playoffs in the NFC.

PLAYER TO WATCH: TE DARREN WALLER

One of the primary reasons why Joe Schoen felt comfortable trading for Darren Waller is the Giants' training staff. New York's soft-tissue injuries were down by 200% last season. The addition of Waller is now the catalyst for the Giants' offense. Not only will plenty of plays be schemed for Waller, but his presence will lead to open receivers in the short to intermediate parts of the field. Waller, along with rookie Jalin Hyatt and free agent acquisition Parris Campbell, should be instrumental in helping Jones throw for more than just 6.8 yards per attempt this season. For the most part, Waller looked unguardable throughout training camp. - Nick Falato, Big Blue View (@nickfalato)





PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

NFC EAST
ODDS TO WIN: -135

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: +650

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

In 2022, Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts threw six passes in the preseason and completed every one for 80 yards and a touchdown. This preseason, Hurts never saw the field, and why would he? He demonstrated last year he was exceptional at running the six-back offense and making plays with his arm and feet. His accuracy has improved from 26.7% in his rookie season of missing open targets to 14.2% last year. This improvement in his ability to make tight-window throws makes the Eagles' offense so hard to slow down.

They have talent on all levels, from their line to skill players, and it's highly unlikely they will fall prey to the Super Bowl loss hangover. The Eagles will have two new coordinators to start the season but seemingly have no issues getting their team ready to play their best football in September. Last season, they played a soft schedule. On paper this year, the schedule will be more challenging, and the Eagles are good enough to meet that challenge.

PLAYER TO WATCH: DT JALEN CARTER

Many viewed Jalen Carter as the top defensive prospect in the 2023 NFL Draft, but an off-field incident caused him to slide a bit on draft night. But Carter didn't end up falling too far, as the Eagles took him with the ninth pick in the draft. And the former Georgia defensive lineman looks like he'll be a star early in his career. Carter absolutely blew up the Philadelphia offensive line in training camp, and that dominance carried over to the preseason. Carter didn't play much in two preseason games, but he did enough to earn the second-highest PFF grade amongst rookies. And the eye test backed that up, with Carter looking quick off the line and living in the opponent's backfields. He should be a gamewrecker for a Philadelphia defense that is already pretty loaded. - Zachary Cohen



WASHINGTON COMMANDERS

NFC EAST
ODDS TO WIN: 13-1

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 65-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

Performing an exorcism is a religious or spiritual practice that involves evicting demons or malevolent spiritual entities from a person or an area. When Josh Harris became the new owner of the Washington Commanders, the demons of former owner Daniel Snyder were removed. The exorcism had to occur. Now Washington might get their fan base back, might have an engaged home field, and with second-year quarterback Sam Howell under center, they might have a long-term answer at the quarterback position. Let's face it, Howell cannot be any worse than Carson Wentz or Taylor Heinicke, especially in the red zone.

Washington had chances to win 10 games last year, but they continuously shot themselves in the foot with turnovers inside the opponent's 10-yard line. Their defense was outstanding without Chase Young rushing off the edge, and since his fifth-year option wasn't exercised, he will be playing for a big contract this year. Don't forget Washington beat Philadelphia last season in Philly and turned the ball over two times. They can physically match up to any offense in the league with their defensive front. If they can ever play from in front (they were outscored 156-147 in the first half last year), they will be able to pressure the opposing offense.

Head coach Ron Rivera has to produce. With only four playoff appearances and three winning seasons over his 12-year career, he, like Young, will be playing for a new contract next season.

PLAYER TO WATCH: QB SAM HOWELL

There's a lot to like about Sam Howell. He's got a big arm, can move, studies the playbook and has that quiet confidence front offices like to see in a passer. If the O-Line can protect and Howell can deliver on training camp and preseason promise, expect the Commanders to flirt with a playoff spot. 2023 first-round pick Emmanuel Forbes has also been too good not to mention. He has repeatedly shown an ability to find the football, and after a decorated career at Mississippi State that saw him break an NCAA record for interceptions returned for touchdowns, the corner could be a sneaky candidate for Defensive Rookie of the Year. - JP Finlay, NBC4 (@JPFinlayNBCS)





CHICAGO BEARS

NFC NORTH
ODDS TO WIN: +380

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 50-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

This summer, a quick receiver screen and check down to the running back in the Bears first preseason game has created a sensation not seen in Chicago since 1936, when 120,000 fans turned out to watch Billy DeCorrevont play his final high school football game. (You can learn more about Billy and others in my new book, *Football Done Right*, coming to your favorite bookseller on September 5th.) Starting quarterback Justin Fields is the new hero in town (sorry Billy), and all the Bears fans' hopes are attached to him being great.

What has been ignored this summer has been whether the Bears' defense can improve. In the first preseason game, when everyone including our Femi Abebefe was starstruck with Fields, the Titans with Malik Willis at quarterback moved the ball down the field against most of the Bears' defensive starters. It was concerning for someone like me who is highly skeptical of the Bears' defense which must rely on turnovers more than forcing stops. Remember in head coach Matt Eberflus' last year as defensive coordinator in Indianapolis, the Colts ranked 16th in yards allowed but second in forcing turnovers. Yards can be accumulated in his defensive scheme as prodding the ball out is the main point of emphasis.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR CHASE CLAYPOOL

General manager Ryan Poles had plenty of salary cap space to play with, and he spent wisely, with his biggest splash coming on the trade that netted him wideout D.J. Moore. The connection between Fields and Moore has been fantastic throughout training camp, but don't sleep on Chase Claypool. Before suffering a minor injury, Claypool was looking unguardable in training camp at times. Moore's placement as the team's top receiver should create opportunities for Claypool and Darnell Mooney, and tight ends Cole Kmet and Robert Tonyan have flashed during camp too. Overall, Fields is primed for a nice improvement over last year's pedestrian passing numbers now that he's in Year 2 of the offensive scheme, and this team can still lean on the rushing attack. - Lester A. Wiltfong Jr., Windy City Gridiron (@wiltfongjr)



DETROIT LIONS

NFC NORTH
ODDS TO WIN: +140

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 22-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

If you are "all in" on the Lions hype train, there has been zero evidence this summer that the train is heading to the correct station. That isn't to imply the train is lost. Rather, the Lions have held back playing their veterans and taking the games seriously this summer. The Lions expect to pick up where they left off last year, which is being a great offense and a defense that can get a few stops.

We are going to assume they improved on defense, particularly at corner, where the Lions are counting on Emmanuel Moseley and Cam Sutton to cover man to man. We are also going to assume that their pass rush will improve and that Jared Goff's 1.2 interception percentage will continue to hold true, even though his career numbers with the Rams were 2.3. But Goff was solid last season. He made all the right throws off of play-action, and after the debacle in Dallas when he threw two interceptions, Goff only had one more the rest of the season. When protected in this offense, Goff can make all the throws. And if Jahmyr Gibbs is a better version of D'Andre Swift, the Lions' offense can become even better, and that's not an assumption.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR AMON-RA ST. BROWN

Wunderkind offensive coordinator Ben Johnson is back after flirting with the head-coaching ranks on his quest to take his multifaceted attack to new heights. His return should mean great things for this franchise, but it's specifically huge for Amon-Ra St. Brown. The third-year wideout has looked like a superstar every step of the way in training camp. This offense wants to run the ball more than most. But St. Brown is the focal point of this attack, and he brings an underrated ability to the table. And it's easy to envision the Sun God hitting another level after posting 106 receptions last season. He's likely going to work on the outside more through the first six weeks with Jameson Williams suspended. But you can trust in the Sun God to figure it out. - Benjamin Raven, MLive (@BenjaminSRaven)





GREEN BAY PACKERS

NFC NORTH
ODDS TO WIN: +400

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 65-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

When quarterback Jordan Love takes his first snap on September 7th against the Bears, Packers fans would have spent the last 11,583 days watching either Brett Favre or Aaron Rodgers dominate the quarterback position as the Week 1 starter. It's been a hell of a run of over 31 years, eight months, and 11 days. Packers fans have long forgotten about Don Majkowski as their starter and have never had to experience uncertain play from their starter for over three decades. Life is about to get real now. Let's face it, Packer fans have been spoiled. They might claim they've underachieved, having just two Super Bowl wins during that incredible span, and they would be correct. It should have been more. However, having a blue chip player at the most important position for so long is unheard of in pro football, and it may never be duplicated again. Now comes a new era with a head coach who has also been spoiled by a great quarterback.

So far this summer, the Packers look excellent on defense, can rush the passer, and have a rising star in Kingsley Enagbare to go along with Rashan Gary, Preston Smith and Kenny Clark in their front seven. The Packers won't be easy to block for any team. What we have also learned this summer is Love is not going to be Rodgers. He just needs to be timely with his throws and not be the reason for losing. Is this going to be good enough? We shall see, but playing in the weakened North, it just might be.

PLAYER TO WATCH: QB JORDAN LOVE

It's no secret that Green Bay's player to watch heading into the regular season is Love. With Rodgers now on the Jets, Love is finally getting the keys to the franchise. The former Utah State star was good during the preseason, going 21 for 33 for 193 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions over three games. Love looked very poised in the pocket and made good decisions with the football. Given his impressive talent, he should turn in a great year if he can continue to avoid making mistakes. And if Love looks like the player he was during the preseason, Green Bay has the potential to exceed expectations this season. The NFC North is wide open and the Packers still have a decent amount of talent in place — especially on the defensive side of the ball. - Zachary Cohen



MINNESOTA VIKINGS

NFC NORTH
ODDS TO WIN: +290

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 35-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

The joke on the Lombardi Line is that if Vikings head coach Kevin O'Connell tried to walk into any Vegas casino, he would be turned away. Every security officer in every casino has his picture memorized. Why? Because he is lucky. Damn lucky. The Vikings were the best team in the NFL in winning close games and pulling rabbits out of their hat. They were awful on defense all season, yet somehow, some way, they made a play here and there and ended the season with 13 wins. Do you realize how hard winning 13 games is in the NFL? With the 31st-ranked defensive in terms of yards? It takes luck, and O'Connell had a ton. This year, by the law of averages, the luck will run out. It has to. No one, not even Teddy KGB, can have this kind of luck.

The good news for the Vikings is their defense has to be better — fundamentally, scheme-wise and in execution. It cannot get worse. And their offense, despite the loss of running back Dalvin Cook, will still be explosive because of their system and their dynamic wide receiver, Justin Jefferson. Minnesota will move the ball. They might not win 13 games again, but they have a chance to be a better team. Last year, when they played the best teams in the NFC — Dallas and Philadelphia — they were outscored 64-10 and were never in either game. Against great teams, the Vikings looked average and luckless.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR JORDAN ADDISON

Skeptics will look at the Vikings' one-score games and schedule and call for regression — and they are right — but regression can be mitigated by being more dynamic around Jefferson on offense and better than the 31st-ranked team in yards against on defense. And overall, their offensive progress rests on the shoulders of rookie Jordan Addison, who shined on a daily basis and appears ready to be a difference maker right away. Addison suffered a concussion that kept him out of action for most of the preseason, but he's a pro-ready player that turned heads all throughout camp. He should immediately fill the void left by two-time Pro Bowler Adam Thielen. - Matthew Coller, Purple Insider (@MatthewColler)





ATLANTA FALCONS

NFC SOUTH
ODDS TO WIN: +200

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 60-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

In the 11th episode of my favorite show, *The Sopranos*, the title is fitting for the Falcons based on their work this pre-season. "Nobody Knows Anything." Arthur Smith has been guarded with his intentions of how he will incorporate his skill talent within the offense. One thing we know for sure is Smith's teams are ready to go at the opener. Last year in the opener, they rushed for 201 yards and threw for 215 against a good Saints defense with less talent than he has this season on offense.

We know the Falcons will move the ball, but are they good enough to stop anyone? That's the concern, and this summer, when they played their starters against the backups of the Bengals, they didn't look impressive. They allowed Trevor Siemian to drive the ball into field goal range, only to not convert a 4th and 2. If they struggled to stop Siemian, can they stop a good quarterback? At this point with the Falcons, nobody knows anything.

PLAYER TO WATCH: DE ZACH HARRISON

Bijan Robinson is the only rookie anybody wants to talk about with this Atlanta team, but keep an eye on former Ohio State defensive end Zach Harrison. The 22-year-old is a massive 6-foot-6 and 272 pounds, and he has great instincts when it comes to disrupting opposing quarterbacks. He might never be a guy that racks up sacks, but he is good at making opponents uncomfortable and using his arms to block passes. Harrison gave the Falcons second-team offensive line hell during training camp, which helped him quickly earn the respect of head coach Arthur Smith. He isn't going to be a starter right away, but he should make an impact as a rotational piece along the defensive line. That'll be big for the depth of a team that is hoping to make a playoff push this season. - Zachary Cohen



CAROLINA PANTHERS

NFC SOUTH
ODDS TO WIN: +500

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 80-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

If there is one man every survivor contestant despises, it's Panthers head coach Frank Reich. Reich has single-handedly cut the field in half with his horrible performances in opening games. Reich's Colts got beat in 2020 as a 7-point road favorite. In 2021, Reich lost to Seattle as a 3-point home favorite, which probably didn't take many contestants down. However, in 2022, once again a 7-point road favorite, Reich delivered a crushing blow, tying the Texans 20-20. During Reich's five years as a head coach, his teams are 0-4-1 in openers, and it's no wonder he is a stay-away bet on the first weekend of the season.

Based on the preseason, Reich's inability to prepare his team for the month of September appears to be holding steady. The Panthers have regressed from last season, and even though Bryce Young appears as a "can't-miss" prospect, the Panthers around him are all missing.

PLAYER TO WATCH: QB BRYCE YOUNG

After a lackluster start to the preseason, Young showed everybody why he was the first pick in the 2023 NFL Draft in Carolina's final preseason game against Detroit. Young was 7 for 12 for 73 yards and a touchdown through the air, while also adding another 21 yards on the ground in that game. Young also showed off a great connection with veteran wideout Adam Thielen, and the former Heisman Trophy winner simply didn't look like a rookie in that game. That's about as good of a compliment you can make to a rookie quarterback. Young now heads into the season with quite a bit of momentum. As long as the Panthers can keep him upright, Young should be a threat to win Offensive Rookie of the Year. And Carolina just might challenge for the top spot in the NFC South. But that's easier said than done. The offensive line has looked shaky throughout the summer. - Zachary Cohen





NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

NFC SOUTH
ODDS TO WIN: +105

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 30-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

Last year, the Saints allowed 42 points to the Arizona Cardinals with Kyle Murray playing quarterback and lost by eight points. This year, we think the Saints are the class of the NFC South, and the Cards, even if they had Murray, will be at the bottom of the West. Normally the Saints defense plays well, but in the Arizona game, their quarterback Andy Dalton was in giveaway mode, throwing two picks for touchdowns. The Saints' offense loved to give the ball away last year, and their defense didn't create turnovers, which is why they finished 31st in the NFL at -11 in the turnover/takeaway column. Things are supposed to be different with newly acquired Derek Carr manning the quarterback position.

Carr is coming off his worst season as a pro in Las Vegas with a career-high 2.8 interception percentage and 20% bad throw percentage. Before last year, Carr carried a 1.9 interception percentage and never was above 16% in the bad throw category. Was it the new offense? Was it the lack of pass protection? One might assume going into the 2022 season with Davante Adams as his number-one, Carr might have had a career year. He did but it was a career worst. The Saints must hope that the return to the West Coast offense will help Carr become more accurate with his throws and cut down on his mistakes. Carr has won 63 games during his nine-year NFL career — seven wins per year — which is another number the Saints hope will change. Based on the preseason, Carr looks better, more accurate and in rhythm. But once the competition rises, once the defense takes their hits, will this make him rise to a new level or sink to last year?

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR CHRIS OLAVE

One of the things that really stuck out throughout training camp was the individual play of Chris Olave. What he has done this summer has been nothing short of exceptional. Olave had a breakout rookie season where he had over 1,000 yards, but he looked even better in camp. During joint practice with the Los Angeles Chargers, Olave only dropped one pass that was thrown his way and it was because of a pass interference penalty. He torched their defensive backs down the field and made life really hard. He's going to be a force in New Orleans with more of a vertical passing threat now. - Matthew Miguez, Canal St. Chronicles (@MiguezMatt)



TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

NFC SOUTH
ODDS TO WIN: 10-1

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 100-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

The Bucs will go from Tom Brady to Baker Mayfield, which is like staying at the Four Seasons one night to joining Tom Bodett at the Motel 6 the next. Mayfield has been better this summer than he was last year, only throwing one incomplete pass all preseason and getting the ball down the field for a 7.1 yards per attempt average. Mayfield was bad for the Panthers last year, even in the summer, averaging 6.1 per attempt. He struggles to get the ball down the field, seeing the open receivers and being accurate with the throw.

Since his rookie season, when he averaged 7.7 yards per attempt, he has steadily declined. In his last season in Cleveland, he was at 7.2; last year in Carolina and Los Angeles, he was at 6.5. Defensive coordinators push the pocket inside on Mayfield, limiting his visibility and forcing the ball to sail. Mayfield needs to be in a play-action passing game to have any kind of success, and the problem in Tampa is they finished 32nd in every rushing category last year with Brady under center. Based on the summer results, the Bucs don't seem as though they have improved their run game, averaging 3.3 per carry on 91 attempts. They are trying to run the ball, but they just don't seem good enough up front, and teams are expecting them to run especially with Mayfield at quarterback.

PLAYER TO WATCH: QB KYLE TRASK

Mayfield ended up winning the starting job for the Buccaneers, but Kyle Trask will very likely see the field in the near future. The 2021 second-round draft pick completed 45 of 69 passes for 509 yards, two touchdowns and only one pick in the preseason. And the reports out of training camp were that he did a much better job of protecting the football than Mayfield did. Bucs offensive coordinator Dave Canales also glowed about how much the game has slowed down for Trask, who is doing a much better job of going through his reads in his second year in Tampa Bay. With Mayfield being nothing more than a stop-gap option under center, Trask will soon get a chance to prove to this Buccaneers front office that he can be their future at the quarterback position. - Zachary Cohen





ARIZONA CARDINALS

NFC WEST
ODDS TO WIN: 35-1

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 400-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

My mother always told me, if you can't say anything nice, don't say it. She clearly didn't understand scouting or breaking down teams and her son's propensity for speaking what he feels. It's hard to find much to like after watching the Cardinals this summer. Yes, they play hard with fight and intensity, which works on the game's first series. As the game continues, their lack of skill shows. They have struggled to stop the run, struggled to run the ball, and with limited quarterbacking play, the Cards are going to need to rely on their opponents to make mistakes. I'm not sure the Cards are a good 45-minute team — they might be a first-half-only team, and as the game continues, their scheme and strategy will begin to unravel. Count on them playing hard, but don't count on them playing well.

PLAYER TO WATCH: QB CLAYTON TUNE

It's hard to find a lot of positives for a Cardinals team that is projected to be the worst in football, but Tune put some nice things on film throughout training camp and the preseason. Tune possessed a bit more upside than veteran journeyman Colt McCoy, as he has a bit of a bigger arm and has an underrated set of wheels. That definitely factored into Arizona's decision to release McCoy on August 28th. Tune was 34 for 59 with 353 yards, a touchdown and a pick in the preseason, and he was a bad Greg Dortch drop away from having two touchdown passes. Those numbers were pretty promising considering the Cardinals didn't have a good offensive line in front of him, and the running game did him no favors in setting up manageable third down situations. Even if Josh Dobbs ends up with this starting job, Tune should unseat him eventually. - Zachary Cohen



LOS ANGELES RAMS

NFC WEST
ODDS TO WIN: 10-1

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 80-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

Listening to the Rams preseason broadcast team of Andrew Siciliano and Andrew Whitworth during the Raider preseason game, they kept mentioning that this was the Raiders' first team driving down the field against the Rams' second team. Yes, Aaron Donald was not on the field, but other than Donald, the Rams' first and second teams look alike. There is no distinction in terms of their talent from group one to group two.

The Rams have one great player in Donald, and then some good players in Cooper Kupp, Matthew Stafford and maybe Tyler Higbee. Other than that, even the most sophisticated NFL fan would have a hard time naming their starting corners or linebackers. They will have one first-round player on defense, Donald, and no one else drafted before the third round. They might lead the league in college free agents that make their team, and if anything happens to Stafford or Donald, it could go from bad to worse quickly. Even their kicking game will feature 2023 college free agent Tanner Brown as the kicker and seventh-rounder Ethan Evans as the punter.

Sean McVay is a great offensive mind, and with Stafford and Kupp, he will scheme them to make plays. Once teams uncover the methods of McVay, he won't have many different options. Call me skeptical about the Rams even when healthy.

PLAYER TO WATCH: CB AKHELLO WITHERSPOON

Pittsburgh released Akhello Witherspoon after the corner spent two years in the Steel City. Witherspoon has now caught on in Los Angeles, where it looks like he'll start opposite Cobie Durant. Witherspoon has drawn rave reviews from Rams defensive coordinator Raheem Morris, and he's a player that should benefit from Los Angeles' lack of depth. Witherspoon has had some good years in his career — he had three picks and nine passes defended in just nine games for the Steelers in 2021 — so it isn't outrageous to think that this low-risk, high-reward signing will work out for the Rams. Witherspoon did, however, hurt his groin towards the end of the preseason, so that might prevent him from hitting the ground running during the regular season. - Zachary Cohen





SAN FRANCISCO

49ERS

NFC WEST
ODDS TO WIN: -190

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 10-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

All preseason, the Trey Lance news dominated the 49ers conversation. No one discussed the team. They wanted to know who was going to be the second- or third-string quarterback. With Lance riding off to Dallas, we can turn our attention to the 49ers and how good they can be in 2023.

Now that Lance and his guarantees are off the roster, the 49ers will focus on making Nick Bosa one of the highest-paid players on defense. The Niners know they need Bosa at full strength for them to keep Seattle at bay and catch Philadelphia. When the 49ers suffered their injuries last season, we witnessed them losing to a bad Atlanta team and watching Kansas City move the ball up and down the field on their great defense. By the end of October, the 49ers were healthy and didn't lose another game until Brock Purdy's elbow gave out.

Their offense will be even better, as wide receiver Deebo Samuel is committed to having his best season, and because their offense centers around multi-positional players who create nightmares for the opposing defensive coordinators. In 2022, the Arizona Cardinals beat the 49ers twice holding them to 27 points in two games. Once Christian McCaffrey arrived, the Cards had no answer for the 49ers' offense, allowing 76 points in two games. The 49ers moved players around and never demonstrated a tendency because of their ability to move the players into different positions. If healthy, expect the 49ers to be good, but they need Bosa to be great.

PLAYER TO WATCH: QB BROCK PURDY

It's hard to talk about the 49ers without focusing on Purdy. After undergoing elbow surgery for an injury that arguably cost San Francisco the NFC Championship Game, Purdy was able to come back and reach full strength with a few weeks to spare in the preseason. That allowed him to get some reps under his belt and prove to the 49ers that he can play without any limitations, which led to the 49ers trading Lance to the Cowboys and elevating Sam Darnold to No. 2 on the depth chart. But Purdy's training camp performance was far from perfect. At one point, Purdy had an alarmingly high interception rate. So, his turnover count will be an interesting thing to keep an eye on early in the year. Darnold rarely made mistakes in camp, so Kyle Shanahan might not hesitate to turn to a guy that was once considered a future star at the position. - Zachary Cohen



SEATTLE

SEAHAWKS

NFC WEST
ODDS TO WIN: +230

SUPER BOWL
ODDS TO WIN: 30-1

LOMBARDI'S HOT READ

We all believe playing the Seahawks in Seattle is a tough venue. Since 2015, the Seahawks are just 17 games above .500 at home — 41-24 and 15-10 since 2020. So can we please stop all the "Seattle is a tough place to play" nonsense? They have been beatable in Seattle in large part because they haven't been a great defensive team that can rush the passer and take advantage of the home crowd noise. That might be different this year, and Seattle might revert back to their dominating ways at home. From 2012-2014, their best defensive teams under Pete Carroll, the Seahawks had a 22-2 home record.

With new additions on defense and corners that can cover man-to-man, Seattle will be a better defense and still can be an effective offense. Quarterback Geno Smith was great last year, playing behind two rookie offensive tackles. He isn't going to fall back as the talent around him is excellent, and his accuracy has always been his strength. Of his 572 attempts last year, Smith only threw bad balls 11% of the time, which is outstanding. Seattle had a great offseason and draft, and now if they get those great crowds back into Lumen Field, they will have a great season.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WR JAKE BOBO

Injuries have been a concern for the Seahawks heading into the regular season. Top pick Devon Witherspoon has missed considerable time with a hamstring injury and Jaxon Smith-Njigba is now likely to miss the start of the season with a broken bone in his wrist. On the plus side, undrafted free agent receiver Jake Bobo has had an excellent camp and has made such an impression with coaches and teammates that there'll be confidence he can fill the void left by Smith-Njigba to start the season. Bobo had seven catches for 125 yards and two touchdowns in three preseason games, showing that he can still make an impact at the pro level despite having a slow 40 time. - Rob Staton, Seahawks Draft Blog (@robstaton)

