

**VSIN PRO**

# NFL BETTING GUIDE

2.0 PRO EDITION



## SENSATION OR SLUMP?

SOPHOMORES READY TO HELP TEAMS MAKE THE LEAP

OUR PRO GUIDE INCLUDES

- POST-PRESEASON TEAM UPDATES
- BETTING SYSTEMS AND CONTEST STRATEGIES
- HOST BEST BETS FOR WEEK 1 AND MORE

**VSIN**

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### 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

ODDS WITHIN GUIDE  
ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Greetings, everyone!

The preseason is in the books and we are all geared up for the start of the 2025 NFL regular season. It may feel like a long time ago, but we released our NFL Betting Guide back on July 1. This is the complement to that, our “Refreshed” NFL Betting Guide 2.0, a post-preseason look at the teams, the rosters, the odds movements, the players to watch, and the betting systems and trends that you need to know to be ready for kickoff.

We also have a new set of best bets from VSiN hosts and experts, whose thoughts have been molded and shaped by what we saw, read, and heard over the last several weeks. Those include Week 1 wagers, season-long prop bets and awards markets, additional season win totals, and more.

Here’s a list of what you will find in the VSiN NFL Betting Guide 2.0, along with those best bets:

- Adam Burke’s 32 Team Preview Updates and Players To Watch
- Steve Makinen’s Week 1 Betting Systems
- Fantasy Football Risers and Fallers from Tom Brolley of Fantasy Points
- Football Contest Strategies and a 2025 Survivor Blueprint

We have been very busy this summer at VSiN, as that July 1 NFL Guide and the August 5 College Football Guide were the biggest headlines, but we’ve also added new betting tools, enhanced the site experience, and reaffirmed our commitment to bring you the best football handicapping content in the business.

You can find VSiN on SiriusXM Channel 158, on the [VSiN Watch App](#), on YouTube TV as part of the Sports+ package, on our [YouTube page](#), on radio affiliates and regional sports networks across the country, wherever you get your podcast content, and through VSiN.com.



Tell your friends, tell your family, tell your colleagues and coworkers, tell anybody who will listen why now is the time to join us here at VSiN, THE Sports Betting Network.

Thank you for your support and good luck this NFL season!

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**JETS UNDER 6.5 WINS (-145)**

The bandwagon is full of bettors who believe the Giants are doomed and headed Under 5.5 wins, so let's look at the other New York team. In Week 2 of the preseason, the Giants beat the Jets 31-12 as all four of the Giants' quarterbacks — Russell Wilson, Jameis Winston, rookie Jaxson Dart and Tommy DeVito — looked much better than the Jets' starter, Justin Fields. The Jets will have success running the ball, but Fields is a wildly inconsistent passer and that's going to be a problem. While the Giants face what could be the NFL's toughest schedule, the Jets do draw a considerably easier card, yet that schedule is not soft enough to produce seven wins. In the 2024 season, 10 teams finished with five or fewer wins, including the 5-12 Jets, who seem destined for a similar fate in coach Aaron Glenn's first season.

**STEELERS OVER 8.5 WINS (-115)**

After flopping with the Jets, it's fair to wonder if 41-year-old Aaron Rodgers has much left to offer. Rodgers was not bad last season, finishing with 28 touchdown passes and 11 interceptions, and actually played pretty well in his final 10 games while passing for 18 TDs with four interceptions. Most naysayers are writing off Rodgers, citing diminished skills and a lack of mobility. The flip side to that argument is Rodgers knows this is his last stop and will be highly motivated to write a positive ending to his career. Pittsburgh coach Mike Tomlin, 10-7 in each of the past two seasons, always wins and has proven he can do it with defense and mediocre quarterback production. The defense is legit, and Rodgers has the needed weapons with receiver DK Metcalf, tight end Jonnu Smith and a solid ground attack.

**RAVENS TO WIN AFC NORTH (-160)**

According to Circa Sports odds, Baltimore is the second-strongest division favorite behind Buffalo, which is -370 to win the AFC East. Quarterbacks who run a lot are always injury risks, so the Bills have that concern with Josh Allen just as the Ravens do with Lamar Jackson. A starting quarterback going down can sink most futures wagers in the NFL, but let's ignore that possibility for the time being. In the AFC North, Jackson and John Harbaugh form the most dependable quarterback-coach combination. Derrick Henry also gives the Ravens the most reliable rushing attack. Baltimore is a little better than Pittsburgh in almost all areas, and Cincinnati is unlikely to win with the worst defense in the division.

**PATRIOTS TO WIN AFC EAST (+640)**

Draw a line through the Dolphins and Jets and handicap this as a two-horse race. The Bills are big favorites for good reason, yet the Buffalo defense might also have some big holes. It's a lot to ask of the Patriots, a four-win team last season, to make the leap to the top, but this is a new team. Mike Vrabel is the best coach in the division and will whip the New England defense into shape. Drake Maye will operate a much better offense as a second-year quarterback. Some signs in the preseason have indicated the gap between the Bills and Patriots is closer than most think. Also, Circa Sports is offering a much more appealing price on New England than the +475 at DraftKings.

**JOE BURROW MOST REGULAR-SEASON PASSING YARDS (+500)**

If the Bengals continue to be brutal defensively, they might not win enough games for Burrow to get MVP. Still, a bad defense should get Cincinnati involved in several high-scoring shootouts, and Burrow is pulling the trigger on an explosive offense. Burrow led the league in passing yards (4,918) and touchdowns (43) last season and could surpass those numbers, barring injury. The Bengals have a surplus of big-play weapons beyond the obvious three — receivers Ja'Marr Chase and Tee Higgins and running back Chase Brown — so Burrow is also worth a bet to lead the NFL in passing touchdowns (+550).

# UPDATED VSIN EXPERT

## BEST BETS

## SEAN GREEN

### VIKINGS UNDER 8.5 WINS (+140)

I'm on J.J. McCarthy as a prospect, however he's still yet to see regular season action in the NFL. Additionally, the Vikings start off with an incredibly tough schedule for a rookie trying to get in a rhythm. They're at the Bears on Monday Night Football, back at home Sunday Night for the Falcons, then they welcome Joe Burrow before going to Europe for back to back games abroad. In addition the Vikings outperformed their Pythag win total by three games, if you don't speak nerd I will translate: they won way more games than they should have. They were 9-1 in one-score games and they're going to regress a lot more than the market thinks.

### RICKY PEARSALL MOST RECEIVING YARDS IN THE NFC WEST (+1200)

This price has come down a bit for good reason, as Ricky Pearsall is primed for a breakout season. Nobody knows when Brandon Aiyuk is going to play, Jauan Jennings is sidelined with a calf / contract issue and Deebo Samuel left town, which creates a ton of opportunity for Pearsall. The Stafford back issue could really impact Puka Nacua's ceiling, the Seahawks are determined to play smash mouth football and Kyler is too tiny to carry anything let alone a No. 1 receiver. Pearsall survived a gunshot wound to the chest, got his Rolex back and still managed to have a nice rookie season. Really puts some NBA load management into perspective and he's definitely a guy I want to bet on.



## WES REYNOLDS

### WASHINGTON COMMANDERS UNDER 9.5 WINS (+105)

The Commanders surprisingly went from a 4-13 record in 2023 to a 12-5 campaign last year making it to the NFC Championship Game. Jayden Daniels had about as good of a rookie season as anyone could have anticipated, winning the Offensive Rookie of the Year Award.

Washington had the lowest number of returning players from 2023 after signing a league-high 26 free agents and everything went right for this team. The "Hail Maryland" game against the Bears was emblematic of how good this team ran in close games. The Commanders were 9-2 in games decided by seven points or less. The "Cardiac Commanders" also won five of those by a field goal or less. Washington also went 20-of-23 on fourth downs, good for an 87% conversion clip, which was 14 percentage points higher than any other team in the league.

When players have success, they want the organization to pay them. The Commanders did give Terry McLaurin a new deal, but Brian Robinson Jr, the team's starting running back for the last three seasons, was just traded to San Francisco. Rookie seventh-round pick Jacory Croskey-Merritt is likely to take the starting role with Austin Ekeler as the passing downs back.

The Commanders are also one of the oldest rosters in the league as they have had to build through free agency and look to have very few young, developmental players in the pipeline.

Plus, the schedule is one of the tougher ones in the league with road trips to Green Bay, LA Chargers, Kansas City and only eight home games.

### MIAMI DOLPHINS UNDER 7.5 WINS (+100)

The Dolphins suffered their first losing season since 2019 last year and had a three-year playoff streak snapped.

While the offense is full of speedy weapons like De'Von Achane, Jaylen Wright, Tyreek Hill, and Jaylen Waddle, it is also led by quarterback Tua Tagovailoa, who has only played all 17 games in just one season for his five-year career.

The offensive line, ranked just 25th in the PFF rankings, now has to go on without LT Terron Armstead, who retired in the offseason. The OL is not the only unit with struggles as the secondary looks like one of the league's worst. They traded Jalen Ramsey for Minkah Fitzpatrick, whose play has declined over the last couple seasons. At the other corner,





Kader Kohou tore his ACL in training camp, so now the Dolphins are looking at starting second-year, undrafted free agent Storm Duck and Kendall Sheffield, who has not been part of an active roster since 2021.

Five of the Dolphins first eight games are on the road, so there is high potential for a slow start.

## DAVE ROSS

Three adds since the original guide and all of these plays are in conjunction with the Matty Stafford bad back news.

Seahawks Over 8.5 wins +120  
Rams Under 9.5 wins +120  
Seattle to win NFC West +679 (Circa)

I am no doctor, but I think it would be a modern miracle of medicine if he plays all 17 games. To that end, I think this will be another four-horse race, "down the stretch they come", just like last year

And to make the Seahawks almost 7-1 to win the division was too good to pass up. I'm a Mike Macdonald and Harbaugh coaching tree fan. Yes, they cleaned out the WR room, but I think there won't be as big a drop off as people think. They certainly got younger.

And Sam Darnold paid big dividends for me last year in Minny and I'm going back to the well this year and banking on the Darnold for the first 15 games of the season versus the last two.

## PAULY HOWARD

### JETS UNDER 6.5 WINS

The passing game has been horrendous in camp and the preseason games. Wilson will lose his mind by October, as Fields has a tough time completing a slant. Teams will load the box to stop the run and the defense will be on the field too long. Throw in a new coach who is already getting annoyed with the media and I see a bad season for this NY team.

### BUCCANEERS NFC NO. 1 SEED (10-1)

Eagles and Washington have issues and a brutal schedule. Lions and Vikings take a step back. Niners have a ton of injuries already. Stafford isn't right with his back.

12 wins is in play here with a bad division and a team that is loaded on offense. I can see them going 5-1 in the division and Bowles would also get love for COY at 45-1.

## KELLEY BYDLON

### DAK PRESCOTT TO WIN COMEBACK PLAYER OF THE YEAR (+400)

Usually I'd say wait on a bet like this because you might get a better number in-season, but I'm not so sure in this market. I would be pretty stunned if at the end of the year we are talking about anyone other than Dak, Aidan Hutchinson, Christian McCaffrey, or Trevor Lawrence winning this award. They are the clear-cut star players coming off injury that should draw the most consideration, and the quarterbacks will just have an easier path to stand out. I do believe in this Cowboys offense finding a lot of success this season, and a lot of that will be because of Dak coming back.

### BRONCOS YES TO MAKE THE PLAYOFFS (-110)

It might have taken me a while longer than others, but I have come around on this Broncos team. Especially after reading some of the sharp takes in the first edition of our NFL Betting Guide!

I'm not ready to jump to the Broncos winning the division, but I will dive in on them to make the playoffs in a competitive AFC. The jump they made last year was pretty incredible to watch and took me a while to buy into them finding the same kind of success this season. They feasted off an easy schedule last year; that won't be the same this year, and I'm always interested to watch how a talented quarterback does in his second season, because we've seen it go both ways. However, this defense was so good last year, finishing top four against the pass and the run, and they only added pieces this offseason. I think the quality of the defense will have this team's floor so high, that we won't have to rely on Bo Nix taking a massive leap forward this season to cash this ticket.



## TEXANS +110 TO WIN AFC SOUTH

I bet this last year and while it took me a little longer to get to it this year, I'm back with the Texans to win the AFC South. Yes, there are major concerns on the offensive line, but they are rock solid everywhere else and should roll out one of the best defenses in the league. I believe in C.J. Stroud bouncing back in his third year and if he does, the ceiling could be quite high for this Houston team. This is as much of a bet against the rest of the division, though. I'm still not ready to believe in the Jaguars, the Colts have obvious quarterback issues, and then there's the Titans who are still in rebuild mode.

## STEVE MAKINEN

### WEEK 1: CAROLINA (-3) AT JACKSONVILLE

The Jaguars have a new head coach for 2025 in Liam Coen after going just 4-13 last season. However, there still seems to be an air of optimism surrounding this franchise as they bring back QB Trevor Lawrence and a host of talented young weapons at the skill positions. Could this optimism be a bit overstated? Jacksonville is far from a proven entity, being granted perhaps undeserved respect early after winning just four games a year ago. The Jaguars were just 2-7 in their final nine games. The Panthers were 1-7 before rallying to a 5-12 finish, averaging 24.1 PPG in their final nine contests, so if there is any carryover momentum, it would have to belong to Carolina. They improved greatly in 2024, particularly late in the season. To me, the Panthers were a different team towards the end of the season, when QB Bryce Young seemed to be finding his footing finally after a rough year-and-a-half to begin his career. Assumptions are dangerous in Week 1 and this is a line assuming home field means something and Carolina is still really bad. Taking teams that played well late, but their record didn't show it has been a reliable strategy.

### WEEK 1: LAS VEGAS (+3) AT NEW ENGLAND

If there is one team right now that hasn't been good in recent years but is getting all kinds of love from oddsmakers and bettors alike, it would be New England. The respect could be valid, as folks seem to be excited about what new head coach Mike Vrabel will bring to the team, both in attitude and scheme. The Patriots also have an up and coming young quarterback in Drake Maye, who showed flashes of being elite in his rookie year in '24. However, in my opinion, much of the love that is going the Pats' way could just as easily be directed at the Raiders, as they could be unrecognizable in '25. The franchise has made key changes at all the key football positions, most notably head coach and quarterback. Ironically, those adds sort of came as a package, as new QB Geno Smith played for HC Pete Carroll in Seattle. Carroll has been a proven winner, and Smith has been a prolific passer while playing for him. Oh, and by the way, Las Vegas also adds explosive running back Ashton Jeanty to the offensive mix while DE Maxx Crosby still anchors the defense. Don't overlook this team, even in a tough AFC West.

### GIANTS OVER 5.5 WINS (+125)

In even just watching the draft on TV, you could already feel that the Giants were "winning" the proceedings, landing LB Abdul Carter and QB Jaxson Dart in the first round and then DT Darius Alexander and RB Cam Skattebo a bit later. Therefore, I wasn't surprised to see the A+ grade assigned to their work by Sports Illustrated. Can it have a big impact already in '25 for head coach Brian Daboll's club? I think most of that depends upon the quarterback position, whether that answer comes from newly-acquired Russell Wilson or Dart. In my opinion, the strong draft class and the potentially major upgrade at quarterback put this team in prime position to make a big jump. Recall that veteran starting QB additions have won more than 50% of their games over the L20 seasons (230-221-1 SU, 51%). The Giants also lost a lot of close games last year, meaning they weren't that far off. Since '93, 46 teams have lost 8+ games in "close loss" format, that being one possession or less (8 pts). Of those, 39 improved the next season, with a combined average IMPROVEMENT of a hefty 3.97 wins per season. I was glad to see the franchise stick with Daboll after a couple of rough seasons, as in his first year with the team in '22, he led them to a playoff win in a season with even modest QB production. If Wilson can provide even competent play there, this rejuvenated team should easily win 6+ games.

## ZACHARY COHEN

### KANSAS CITY CHIEFS TO WIN AFC WEST (-110)

The Chiefs are looking to win the AFC West for the 10th year in a row, and I'd be pretty surprised if they don't do it. Kansas City does have one of the league's toughest schedules, but I'm not sure that matters. The Chiefs seemingly found a stud left tackle in Josh Simmons, and this team can do some special things if the rookie is up to the task of protecting Patrick Mahomes' blind side. We know that Kansas City is going to be one of the better ball-control offenses in the league, but Mahomes will have more chances to make plays over the top if he has a little more time to throw. And the Chiefs do have some burners when looking at the wide receiver corps, so I think we'll see some more explosive plays out of this offense in 2025.

Kansas City is also loaded at all three levels of the defense, and defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo should be dangerous calling plays with this group of players. He has already challenged his unit to be better against the run, and the personnel is there for an improvement against the run. They were 11th in Rush EPA per play allowed (-0.118) last year, but they should be better than that.

I know motivation is always a bit of a concern with a championship team like this one, but I just like the talent on both sides of the ball — especially with Mahomes' ability to close out tight games. All of that should allow the Chiefs to hold on over the Chargers and Broncos, who might be threatening, but also have some flaws.

### JUSTIN FIELDS OVER 14.5 PASSING TOUCHDOWNS (+100)

In 15 games played with Chicago in 2022, Fields threw for 17 touchdowns. Then, in 2023, the talented dual-threat quarterback threw for 16 touchdowns in only 13 games. With that in mind, we have seen Fields go Over a total of 14.5 passing touchdowns twice, and I'm not sure he has ever been more solidified as his team's starting quarterback than he is now. Sure, the Jets have Tyrod Taylor as a reliable veteran backup, but this coaching staff — and front office — wants Fields to be the guy. So, as long as Fields doesn't pick up a major injury, I love his chances of throwing for at least 15 scores this year. That won't even require one passing touchdown per game.

Fields also has a few spots against leaky secondaries, including the Buccaneers, Dolphins (2x), Cowboys, Panthers, Bengals and Saints. With a creative playcaller like Tanner Engstrand calling the shots, Fields should have a shot at throwing for multiple scores in a few of those contests.

## TYLER SHOEMAKER

### STEELERS UNDER 8.5 WINS (-105)

TSI projects just 7.9 wins for the Steelers, and that aligns with what my gut tells me. Although the Pittsburgh defense can generally be counted on to be stout, there are real concerns with the offense and an aging QB with a recent Achilles tear in Aaron Rodgers. Their average win probability is just 46%, per TSI, and there are only five games on the schedule where I'd have them with a win probability of 55%, so it's going to take them winning a lot of toss-up games to get over this number. Even if Rodgers stays healthy, who knows how productive he can be, and at 40+ years old, that's a big "if".

## WILL HILL

### TENNESSEE TITANS TO WIN AFC SOUTH (+650)

The Titans not only were inept enough to pick first in last year's draft, they were also an impossibly bad 2-15 ATS. But digging deeper, they were much closer to an average team on a down-to-down basis, allowing 5.2 yards per play while gaining 5.0 yards per play. The problem was deplorable special teams play and a league-leading 34 turnovers. A perfect example of their shortcomings was the opening week against the Bears, where the Titans only yielded 11 first downs and won yardage decisively, allowing just over two yards per play. But a "pick 6" and a blocked punt for a TD allowed the Bears to erase a 17-0 deficit and win





despite an inability to move the ball. The Texans are the favorite in the division, but they are not a Chiefs, Bills, or Ravens type of favorite. The Texans scored and allowed an identical 372 points last year and still have major questions at offensive line. This division is simply not that good, and with somewhat adequate play at quarterback the Titans can flirt with going worst to first, and are worth a shot at +650.



## DUSTIN SWEDELSON

### BIJAN ROBINSON OFFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR (16-1)

RBs have won this award in back-to-back seasons. In fact, RBs have won four of the last 10. With the RB position making a comeback in 2024, I anticipate the copycat nature of the NFL means that there will be more teams focusing on their ground game this year. We have only had four multi-time winners of the award since 2000: Marshall Faulk, Peyton Manning, Tom Brady and Drew Brees. Because of that, I am going to avoid anyone who has already won OPOY in the past. Robinson was unlocked last year with Zac Robinson calling plays. He increased his rush yards by 480 and rushing TDs by 10. He finished third in rushing behind Saquon Barkley and Derrick Henry. Robinson tied for third in first downs gained, tied for fifth with 14 rushing TDs, fifth in RB receiving yards (431, 25.4 per game) and I think he is capable of more. Everything is trending upward for him. Plus, he is playing for a coach whose seat is getting warm in Raheem Morris. Getting the ball into the hands of their best player is paramount for his job security. On top of that, Michael Penix Jr. is taking over at QB and the best way to set a young QB up for success is with a great run game. Atlanta is going to lean on Bijan Robinson this year which could set up for some monster numbers.

### BROCK BOWERS OFFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR (60-1)

Let's establish that this is a longshot before we get started because a tight end has never won the AP Offensive Player of the Year award. But there has never been a TE as talented as Bowers, coming off a rookie season like he just had (eighth in NFL in Rec Yards, third overall in receptions), on a team with less mouths to feed and a potential game script like he has working for him this year. He set records for receptions (112) and receiving yards (1,194) by a rookie tight end. He also led all tight ends in receptions and was named an AP First-Team All-Pro. And he accomplished all of that without a legitimate QB throwing him the ball. Now he will have a consummate pro in Geno Smith delivering him passes. With a receiving corps still lacking top-tier talent. Brock Bowers is the No. 1 target for this team with Chip Kelly calling the plays, one of the most creative offensive minds of the last couple decades. Plus, the Raiders defense is still a little suspect, which could mean a lot of late-game situations where they are throwing from behind and he can feast. I'll take a shot on history with Bowers being a historic talent at TE.

### WILL JOHNSON DEFENSIVE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR (50-1)

Johnson is a stud who fell to the second round because of injury concerns. To me, those concerns were about longevity down the road and not right now. I also like the fact that dropping in the draft could give him a chip on his shoulder to play with in his rookie year to prove the

doubters wrong. This was a 4-star who dominated at Michigan and was a huge piece of their National Championship run. He has prototypical size and lots of experience against top-tier talent. Jonathan Gannon also knows how to set his defensive backs up for success by getting a great pass rush. Arizona added Josh Sweat, Calais Campbell, Walter Nolen III and others to their front seven in the offseason with that in mind. That could mean some opportunities to pick off underthrown balls for Johnson. It would also help if he could have some big games against the elite WRs he will face in the NFC West this year. If he answers the bell, Johnson could very well be in the mix for this award.

### TUA TAGOVAILOA COMEBACK PLAYER OF THE YEAR (35-1)

I can actually see the face you're making while reading this and I totally get it. Because this play hinges on Tagovailoa staying healthy after only playing one full season. Your skepticism is fair. But that plays a part in this bet....expectations can't get any lower. The risk at play also plays a role...what is he overcoming? Concussions. That is bigger than most of the injuries guys are returning from. 35-1 feels extremely long considering he did play 17 games in 2023. And when he plays, Miami wins games. They are 38-24 in his starts going back to 2020. He has 100 TDs to 44 INTs, and a career 68.1% completion rate. You also have a motivated Jaylen Waddle returning off a down year and Tyreek Hill healthy. Mike McDaniel is on the hot seat so he's going to dial everything he has in his back pocket up this year. The schedule sets up nicely for good passing numbers for Tua. Week 1 they face Indianapolis, who had the 24th pass defense last year. Then it's New England who was 22nd vs. the pass. Week 3 is Buffalo, who was tough at 11th. But then they get the Jets, who were 20th, Panthers 32nd, Chargers, who were No. 1 - OK not great for my case - but then Cleveland, who was 27th, and Atlanta, who was 23rd. Tua could put up big time numbers and 35-1 is just too long when you compare to the other QBs atop this market.

### RAVENS MOST WINS (+540), JOHN HARBAUGH COACH OF THE YEAR (60-1)

These two bets go together for me. The Ravens recorded 12 wins last year and 13 wins in 2023. And this year, they are somehow better. The offense has a lot of continuity with all of the big pieces returning coming off a year where they were the No. 1 offense (424.9 YPG) featuring the best ground attack at 187.6 YPG. It's Year 8 for Lamar Jackson, who is 70-24 as a starter, coming off his best passing season: 4,172 yards, 41 Pass TDs, 4 INTs. Not sure we can just expect that again, but clearly a light bulb went off. Derrick Henry shows no signs of slowing down after averaging 5.9 yards per carry on his way to 16 TDs. Plus they added DeAndre Hopkins. But the story to me is this defense. How did the rest of the league allow this to happen? After finishing as the top run defense last season and second in sacks, they added CB Jaire Alexander and a ton of depth to what was a stacked defense. The secondary has no weaknesses now with Alexander paired with Kyle Hamilton, Nate Wiggins and Marlon Humphrey. And the front seven is two to three guys deep at several spots. The only question is: How many wins does it take? I don't think 14-15 wins is out of the question for this squad. We haven't had a 15-win season since the 2015 Carolina Panthers. And Ron Rivera won Coach of the Year that season. If they run through the regular season as by far the best team, I can see them finishing with the best record and Harbaugh being rewarded for their dominance.



### **BAKER MAYFIELD PASSING YARDS LEADER (12-1)**

Looking at trends of the last 10 passing yard leaders, I found that only two were on No. 1 seeds (Patrick Mahomes in 2022 and Tom Brady in 2017) and outside of Brady in 2017 and 2021, the leader played for a team with a Total Defense ranking 16th or worse. It makes sense. Great teams usually don't have to play their starters in the final week of the season. And teams with bad defenses create more possessions and opportunities for their offenses. Tampa Bay's defense has taken steps back the last few seasons and they look suspect vs the pass heading into 2025. They also feel like a very good, not great team, so they will be fighting until the end of the season. Baker Mayfield has a ton of weapons to throw to: Mike Evans, Chris Godwin (when he returns from injury), Emeka Egbuka, Jalen McMillan, Cade Otton and more. And he will get to face bad pass defenses from a year ago: NO (28th), CAR (25th), ATL (24th) all twice.

## **MARC MALUSIS**

### **GIANTS OVER 5.5 WINS (+100)**

There is no question that New York's schedule is very difficult. But, there is an energy around the Giants this summer, almost a rejuvenation. The Giants will have a very good defense, highlighted by an elite pass rush. If Andrew Thomas can stay healthy at left tackle, the Giants offensive line will be good enough to open up running lanes and protect starter Russell Wilson. Wide receiver Malik Nabers will only build upon his standout rookie season. The Giants have stressed getting off to a good start and I think they will, by beating the Commanders outright in Week 1.

### **GREEN BAY PACKERS TO WIN THE SUPER BOWL (19-1)**

The NFC North is a fascinating division. Green Bay has flown under the radar a little bit. There is a lot to like about the Packers in 2025. They have a very good offensive line, and actually drafted a playmaking wideout in Matthew Golden. Josh Jacobs will continue to be a workhorse running the football in 2025. If you believe that Jordan Love takes a step forward at quarterback and if you believe that the defense and pass rush will improve in the second season under defensive coordinator Jeff Hafley, the Packers will be a serious threat come playoff time. It will not be easy as the Packers come into the season with the fifth-toughest strength of schedule in the NFL. I think the Packers will end up winning the NFC North and outside of the Eagles, there is nobody else in the conference that really scares me.

### **ASHTON JEANTY OVER 1075.5 RUSHING YARDS (-114)**

If you go back to his days in Seattle, when head coach Pete Carroll had a running back he trusted, they averaged 17-19 carries per game. If he stays healthy, Jeanty should get north of 300 carries this season for Vegas. If he averages 3.6 yards per carry, he passes his rushing prop. Jeanty will do better than that. Raiders OC Chip Kelly wants to run the ball. Carroll wants to run the ball. Jeanty was drafted sixth overall this past spring out of Boise State to run the football.

### **NICO COLLINS OVER 6.5 RECEIVING TOUCHDOWNS (-140)**

After a breakout 2023 season, in which he had 80 receptions for 1,297 yards and eight touchdowns, Collins took a step back in 2024. A hamstring injury limited him to just 12 games and he still had seven touchdown catches. The Over is juiced to -140 for a very good reason. Collins is a size and speed guy and has a tremendous chemistry with Texans QB CJ Stroud. When Collins is on the field, the Texans passing game is far more dangerous. Collins will have a big bounce back season in 2025 and I think he ends up with 10 or more touchdowns.

## **MIKE SOMICH**

### **BRYCE YOUNG OVER 3250.5 PASSING YARDS**

After Young's return to the line up last season, he averaged 226 yards per game. With that same pace, he hits this number in 15 games, but this isn't the same team. The Panthers went out and spent the No. 8 pick on Tet McMillan to bolster the receiving core and re-made the offensive line. This should be a team that can consistently move the ball through the air and, oh boy, will there be chances. The Panthers D still stinks out

loud, so for Carolina to win, they will need to outscore their opponents. Look for Young to build on his success late last season and go over this total.

### **WEEK 1: PANTHERS VS. JAGUARS OVER 46.5**

I've talked about this game's total being my favorite play in Week 1 for over a month and even though it has ticked up, I still like the Over. Both of these teams have more than competent passing attacks to consistently move the football, and while the offenses should be humming, I have both of these defenses in the bottom 10 in the NFL. This is an easy Week 1 total for me to look to the Over.

### **SUPER BOWL MATCHUP - PACKERS VS. BILLS (45-1)**

I know I am higher on the Packers than the market and I am just fine with that position. This is a team that is maturing together. The majority of the players have been drafted in the last four years, so a team leap is possible here. People want to question Love at quarterback, but he was top 10 in EPA last year while dealing with injuries for close to 75% of the season. This is a top O-line and a defense that has room to improve.

The Bills are, well, the Bills, but this year they get a cupcake schedule. I've bet them to be the #1 seed in the AFC, opened +250 (now +190 and still worth a bet), and with home-field advantage, this is the year they get the Chiefs monkey off their collective back.

## **SCOTT SEIDENBERG**

### **NICK BOSA DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR (15-1) AND SACKS LEADER (11-1)**

I took a look at every offensive tackle in the 2024 season and ranked them based on their PFF grade and their ESPN Pass Block Win Rate. Looking at the schedules, the 49ers play the SECOND-EASIEST schedule of opponents' offensive tackles based off these measurements. I like Bosa to take advantage of these mismatches and regain the form he once had when he was the NFL sacks leader and Defensive Player of the Year in 2022.

### **NY GIANTS OVER 5.5 WINS -125**

This team is actually...good? Okay, maybe I won't go that far, but the Giants have been the darlings of the NFL Preseason. There is a lot of optimism surrounding this team with the performance of rookie QB Jaxon Dart. I don't think we will see Dart play this season unless things get really bad for New York, but Russell Wilson also showed flashes of what this offense could look like with his deep ball ability. The schedule is rough, but the talent is there. Malik Nabers is a top-10 WR in the league and Russ gives them a competent QB leading the way. If he fails, Jameis Winston has won plenty of games in this league and if they do decide to go to Dart, well, people seem to love that idea. But the main reason I think the Giants will steal games is their defense. Abdul Carter is going to be a real problem for offensive lines. If he can have an impact, he joins a defensive front with Dexter Lawrence, Brian Burns and Kayvon Thibodeaux to make up what could be a top-five pass rush in all of football. Don't be surprised if the G-Men pull some upsets this year and find their way in the 6-7 win range.

### **BUCKY IRVING OFFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR (50-1) AND RUSHING YARDS LEADER (20-1)**

We love Bucky. I've made no secrets about how high I am on the Bucs this year with the talent they have on offense and the schedule they play. Sure, I am worried about Tristan Wirfs missing the first game or two, but even still, I am all in on Bucky. In Irving's rookie campaign last year, he was one of the most electric runners in the NFL. If you look at his explosive run rate, it ranked right up there with Saquon Barkley and Derrick Henry. The difference between the three players, both Henry and Barkley had well over 300 carries while Bucky had just over 200. If you took Bucky's numbers and gave him over 300 carries, he would have finished with over 1,800 rushing yards on the season. Bucky also was second in yards after contact per attempt (4.5) and first in missed tackle rate (37%). I think with a full workload now as the lead back in the Bucs offense, Bucky has a chance to pile up the yardage and become the most impactful running back in the NFL this year.

# MAKE YOUR MONEY WITH CIRCA MILLIONS



BY ADAM BURKE

The Circa Million is an NFL Pick 'Em contest with five picks per week over the 18 weeks of the NFL season. The lines come out on Thursday morning and do not move, so every contestant has the same set of point spreads available to them. That is a very important point because it can dictate your strategy from the start or as the season goes along.

Keep that in mind as you read along. There are only 90 points possible in this contest - one point for a win, a half-point for a push, and zero points for a loss. That means that the margin for error is very thin in the quest to cash in the world's most recognizable NFL point spread contest.

In the history of Circa Million, which dates back to 2019, the winning point totals going from 2024 to 2019:

2024: 62 (60-26-4, 69.8%)  
2023: 62.5 (62-27-1, 69.7%)  
2022: 61.5 (59-26-4-1, 69.4%)  
2021: 63 (63-27, 70%)  
2020: 57 (56-27-2, 67.5%)  
2019: 58.5 (57-25-3, 69.5%)

In 2019 and 2020, the season only had 17 weeks instead of the 18 it has now, so that's why the point totals are lower, but the win rate is still pretty similar. Making the money is going to require 65% or better. Like I said, the margin for error is very thin.

Here are some potential contest strategies for the Circa Million:

## 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 Patrick

Mahomes were to be ruled out in Week 1, the Chargers would flip to a favorite. If that announcement came down on Friday, it would be really hard not to take Los Angeles 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 contest pools, like this one, 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.

## 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. In Circa Million, 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.

## BE MINDFUL OF THE QUARTER PRIZES

One of the best characteristics of Circa Million is that you have a chance to make money in smaller segments of the contest, even if your season-long record is not very good. The season is broken into four quarters (Weeks 1-4, 5-9, 10-13, 14-18) and the prizes for cashing in a quarter are very lucrative. Stay locked in, even if the season isn't going the way that you want it. You might still be able to salvage something by getting hot for four or five weeks across 20 or 25 picks.

## CIRCA MILLIONS STRATEGIES

**PLAY THE "STALE" LINES**

**FADE THE CONSENSUS**

**PLAY ONLY HALF-POINT LINES**

**BE MINDFUL OF THE QUARTER PRIZES**



# SEVEN SUCCESSFUL WEEK 1 NFL BETTING SYSTEMS

BY STEVE MAKINEN

The anticipation for the start of the NFL regular season grows every year, especially with sports betting booming nationwide. For this season, bettors will once again be looking for the best info they can find to get their campaigns off to a profitable start. As such, it's an ideal time to examine seven different betting systems that have been successful and consistent in analyzing past Week 1 action. These are angles that take into account line positioning, how the teams performed the previous year, and the transition into the follow-up season opener, as well as whether or not revenge is in play.

These systems are fundamentally based on the perceptions of the teams by oddsmakers. Although the belief is that the house always wins, even the so-called experts can be off, too. In other cases, they accurately peg the teams. I can say firsthand that, in my years as an oddsmaker, I was never more nervous than when submitting my NFL opening week numbers, which were based primarily on assumptions. The systems I'm about to unveil reveal in which particular situations you can take advantage of potential line misses.

The most important thing to note when analyzing these betting angles is that every team, regardless of what happened last year or the player/coaching transactions made over the offseason, is starting with a fresh slate. That can do wonders for a team. It wipes out any positive or negative momentum that was generated in the prior season. All of this is very tough to measure for those behind the counter, as without any meaningful 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 to get as much even action on the various wagering options in a game, not to pick the game. Naturally, there can be weak spots, and savvy bettors who are prepared with both knowledge of the teams and a powerful tool like systems can be ready to take advantage. I have seven below to help you get ready for NFL kickoff 2025.

## SYSTEM #1

**DIVISIONAL HOME UNDERDOGS ARE 18-10-2 SU AND 24-6 ATS (80%) IN WEEK 1 SINCE 2009 (WIN: +17.4 UNITS, ROI: 58%, GRADE 75)**

**2025 Potential Plays: CLEVELAND, ATLANTA, SEATTLE, CHICAGO**

### Analysis

Unlike last year, when there were just three divisional matchups, this year, half of the games have those stakes. Four of those 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. Last year, Houston was a 3-point favorite at Indianapolis, but clawed out a 29-27 win. Note that the Chargers-Chiefs game is being played in Brazil and will not qualify.

### Game #1: CLEVELAND (+5.5) vs. Cincinnati

The Bengals find themselves as sizable road favorites for the season opener at Cleveland despite the fact that they didn't even make the

playoffs last season. They have also shown a penchant recently for struggling in the opening week(s) of recent seasons. Perhaps 2025 will be the year that turns around, at least it seems like that is what oddsmakers are thinking. Cincinnati is loaded offensively, of course, but last year gave up too many points to be an elite team. As of this writing, the franchise was also in a contract impasse with stud DE Trey Hendrickson, and losing him would be a devastating blow to the defense. The Browns were just 3-14 last season and lost their last six games. They named veteran Joe Flacco as their opening-week quarterback, not inspiring confidence from bettors or bookies. However, the slate is wiped clean for head coach Kevin Stefanski's team and that has proven to me a key motivator historically.

### Game #2: ATLANTA (+1.5) vs. Tampa Bay

It seems hard to believe, but Tampa Bay is now the four-time defending champion of the NFC South Division, and the Bucs will look for #5 in a row in 2025. They are led by QB Baker Mayfield, who has revived his career in his time in Tampa, consistently putting up big numbers with a core of great weapons to work with. Speaking of weapons, the arsenal in Atlanta isn't so bad either, and new QB Michael Penix Jr. will have a ton of support as he takes over the full-time starting role. The Falcons were prolific in his three starts in his rookie season, and they nearly rallied for a playoff berth. In my history of betting the NFL, high-scoring home underdogs are usually a great option. We'll see if that plays out here in a key early divisional matchup.

### Game #3: SEATTLE (+2.5) vs. San Francisco

The 49ers were 6-11 last year, the Seahawks were 10-7. It is San Francisco that finds itself as a 2.5-point favorite at Seattle for the teams' season opener. This is what I meant when I indicated earlier that oddsmakers often make Week 1 lines based on assumptions. Those assumptions could prove to be true. This system, however, shows that most often they aren't in games like this. Granted, the 49ers are expected to be healthy, unlike the close of last season, and they have won their last three trips to Seattle and have averaged 27.3 PPG in their last six games at Lumen Field. The Seahawks are also starting fresh at the QB position after Geno Smith departed for Las Vegas. Their new signal caller is Sam Darnold, coming off a huge year for the Vikings in which he was one of the league's top MVP candidates. Can he help the Seahawks get off to a great start here?

### Game #4: CHICAGO (+1.5) vs. Minnesota

The Week 1 Monday night contest offers up an intriguing matchup between NFC North rivals as the Vikings visit the Bears. This is a situation where the line seems to be based entirely on where the teams left off, as compared to how they are expected to finish. Chicago has become a popular pick to be one of the most improved teams in the league this season behind new head coach Ben Johnson. He led the Lions' offense in recent years and is expected to bring much of that creativity to the Windy City for what, on paper, looks to be a talented offensive team. The Bears didn't execute like a talented offense last year, scoring just 18.2 PPG. Minnesota, on the other hand, was a dynamic offensive team, but they have to prove they can still be so behind QB J.J. McCarthy, whose entire rookie season was lost to injury last fall. The Vikings are favored. It is certainly not an easy spot against a Bears' team and fan base that should be charged up for the opportunity.

## SYSTEM #2

**HOME TEAMS PRICED IN THE RANGE OF +3 TO -3 IN WEEK 1  
NON-CONFERENCE GAMES HAVE GONE JUST 5-16 SU AND 3-17-1 ATS  
SINCE 2015 (LOSS: -15.6 UNITS, ROI: -78%, GRADE 75)**

**2025 Potential Plays: AGAINST JACKSONVILLE, AGAINST LA RAMS**

### Analysis

In general, home teams have not fared all that well in Week 1 recently. Arguments have been made often lately regarding the validity of home-field advantage overall. When you consider that there is an air of unfamiliarity that comes with playing an out-of-conference opponent in Week 1, perhaps that home-field edge is shrunk even further. Regardless of the circumstances, hosts have not performed well in this scenario over the last decade. Over the last two years, hosts have lost three straight ATS. Last year, the Browns were clobbered 33-17 by Dallas.

#### Game #1: AGAINST JACKSONVILLE (-3) vs. Carolina

The Jaguars have a new head coach for 2025 in Liam Coen, following a 4-13 season. However, there still seems to be an air of optimism surrounding this franchise as they bring back QB Trevor Lawrence and a host of talented young weapons at the skill positions. Could this optimism be overstated with this opening week line versus Carolina, a team that improved greatly in 2024, particularly late in the season? Sure, the Panthers were just a game better than the Jaguars last season at 5-12, but most of their best play came towards the end of the season, when QB Bryce Young seemed to be finding his footing finally after a rough year-and-a-half to begin his career. This is clearly a battle of hungry teams looking to take advantage of a fresh slate. Is laying any kind of points worth it?

#### Game #2: AGAINST LA RAMS (-2.5) vs. Houston

The Rams and Texans were both in the playoffs this past season. They return with even higher hopes for 2025. However, the Rams have some question marks right now, particularly at quarterback, where veteran Matthew Stafford has been battling back issues for much of the preseason. Many experts think they are the best team in the NFC West; however, if he is healthy. On the other hand, the Texans are healthy and an obvious favorite in the AFC South. They are led by now third-year QB C.J. Stroud and boast a ton of young, talented players on both sides of the ball. Having won playoff games in each of the last two years, they are looking to take another step forward this fall. A win over a quality NFC power would help that cause.

## SYSTEM #3

**NFL OPENING WEEK ROAD TEAMS THAT WON BETWEEN 4-6 GAMES  
THE PRIOR SEASON ARE 54-23-5 ATS (70.1%) SINCE 2004 (WIN: +28.7  
UNITS, ROI: 37.3%, GRADE 70)**

**2025 Plays: Play on CAROLINA, LAS VEGAS, SAN FRANCISCO**

### Analysis

Teams in the 4-6 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. Over the last two seasons, these teams have gone 5-2 ATS, including an outright upset by the Patriots in Cincinnati last year. As you can see, there are three qualifying teams for this angle in 2024. Let's look closer at those games.

#### Game #1: CAROLINA (+3) at Jacksonville

As you can see, the Panthers already qualify as a play on team in two of my first three Week 1 systems. What makes Carolina such an attractive underdog in this game? Well, for one, Jacksonville is far from a proven entity, being granted perhaps undeserved respect early after winning just four games a year ago. Two, the Panthers were 1-7 before rallying to a 5-12 finish, averaging 24.1 PPG in their final nine contests. The Jaguars were just 2-7 in their final nine games, so if there is any carryover momentum, it would have to belong to Carolina. Assumptions are dangerous in Week 1. Taking teams whose records didn't reflect how well they played late has been a reliable strategy.

#### Game #2: LAS VEGAS (+3) at New England

If there is one team right now that hasn't been good in recent years but is getting all kinds of love from oddsmakers and bettors alike, it would be New England. The respect could be valid, as folks seem to be excited about what new head coach Mike Vrabel will bring to the team, both in

attitude and scheme. The Patriots also have an up-and-coming young quarterback in Drake Maye, who showed flashes of being elite in his rookie year in 2024. However, in my opinion, much of the love that is going the Pats' way could just as easily be directed at the Raiders, as they could be unrecognizable in 2025. The franchise has made key changes at all the key football positions, most notably head coach and quarterback. Ironically, those adds sort of come as a package, as new QB Geno Smith played for head coach Pete Carroll at Seattle. Carroll has been a proven winner, and Smith has been a prolific passer while playing for him. Oh, and by the way, Las Vegas also adds explosive running back Ashton Jeanty to the offensive mix while DE Maxx Crosby still anchors the defense. Don't overlook this team, even in a tough AFC West.

#### Game #3: SAN FRANCISCO (-2.5) at Seattle

One of the unfortunate things about systems work is that sometimes sound ideas can collide. I gave you the perspective on why Seattle might make for a good home underdog in System #1 above. This is the opposite side of the coin. The 49ers were 5-12 last year for one obvious reason: injuries. All or most of their biggest stars were down for a significant time throughout the season. Most oddsmakers have no questions regarding the talent still around in San Francisco, and they expect a bounce-back season, so much so that some books actually list head coach Kyle Shanahan's team as the favorite in the NFC West. Winning a big season-opening road game at a divisional rival that went 10-7 a year ago would do a lot to validate the road chalk respect they are getting.

## SYSTEM #4

**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 11-32-1  
SU BUT THEY ARE 30-13-1 ATS (69.7%) IN WEEK 1 SINCE 2013 (WIN:  
+15.7 UNITS, ROI: 36.5%, GRADE 67)**

**2025 Potential Plays: Play DALLAS, NY GIANTS, TENNESSEE**

### 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 will show up and compete, regardless of what the records from the prior year indicated or the doom and gloom the talking heads are sharing about these franchises' prospects. Note that last year the qualifying teams went 1-2 SU but 3-0 ATS.

#### Game #1: DALLAS (+7) at Philadelphia

The defending Super Bowl champs host the NFL season opener as per tradition, and the Eagles welcome in their hated rivals, the Cowboys, for what should be an intriguing contest. The game has a sizable line attached to it considering the opponents. Sure, there was a seven-game difference between the teams last year, but so much of that could be attributed to the injury woes the Cowboys endured. It's easy to forget a healthy Dallas team won 12 games in each of the three seasons before that. This year's team does return QB Dak Prescott under center, but has moved on from former head coach Mike McCarthy in favor of Brian Schottenheimer. It would certainly give the Cowboys a lift to prove competitive in this contest, but it is never easy having to start at the home of the defending champs.

#### Game #2: NY GIANTS (+6.5) at Washington

The Giants are hoping to improve over a rough 2024 season, turning to veteran QB Russell Wilson to try to right the ship. Quarterback was a major contributor to their lack of success, so adding a veteran should provide a boost. New York also added potential stars through the first round of this past April's NFL draft. Washington unexpectedly reached the NFC Championship game a season ago in the first year under head coach Dan Quinn. There is some reason bettors could expect some natural regression after such a quick rise, but talented QB Jayden Daniels will certainly have something to say about that. The Commanders will be looking for a better start than 2024, when they were whipped by the Bucs in Week 1, 37-20.

#### Game #3: TENNESSEE (+7.5) at Denver

Last year, Denver's Bo Nix was one of a pair of rookie quarterbacks who enjoyed huge first seasons. Nix led his Broncos' team to 10 wins and a playoff berth. His team opens the season as the biggest Week 1 line favorite in the league, laying 7.5 points to the Titans. Of course, his



counterpart, QB Cam Ward of Tennessee, was the first pick in this past April's draft, and hopes to accomplish all Nix did a year ago and more, reviving the Titans' franchise in the process. The Titans were the league's worst team last year. Head coach Brian Callahan and the team did lose their final six games, but this system relies on the fact that every team has a clean slate.

## SYSTEM #5

**DIVISIONAL ROAD UNDERDOGS OF 6.5 POINTS OR LESS ARE ON A 17-14 SU AND 21-10 ATS (67.7%) RUN SINCE 2013. (WIN: +10 UNITS, ROI: 32.2%, GRADE 65)**

**2025 Potential Plays: NY GIANTS, DETROIT**

### Analysis

There are eight divisional contests on the NFL Week 1 slate, but only two of those feature road underdogs we can focus on as of Thursday, 8/21, as the others feature bigger lines or road favorites. Strangely, the two teams qualifying face what would figure to be entirely different prospects for 2025. I'll address that below; however, that typically hasn't affected the system's success. That said, note that this angle was 0-2 SU and ATS a year ago.

#### Game #1: NY GIANTS (+6.5) at Washington

I just discussed another similar system above that makes the Giants a qualifying play at +6.5. Interestingly, if the line moves off of this number, which has been key to the Week 1 systems, it will no longer qualify for both. However, if the line does stay here, the G-men would be a difficult out for Washington, despite what would seem to be a lopsided offensive edge for the Commanders.

#### Game #2: DETROIT (+1.5) at Green Bay

The Lions are in Super Bowl or bust mode, coming off a 15-2 season in which they were disappointingly beaten in the divisional round of the playoffs. Their talent is unquestioned. Losing their two coordinators could complicate matters, however. Their first test of 2025 is a tough one, having to travel to rival Green Bay. That said, Detroit has won its last three games outright and ATS at Lambeau Field. The Packers would love nothing better than to knock off the two-time defending NFC North champs in the opener, setting the table for a changing of the guard. With such a small point spread in the Lions-Packers game, it would suggest that the team that wins also covers here. Keep that in mind as you wager.

## SYSTEM #6

**OPENING WEEK HOME FAVORITES HOSTING TEAMS THAT WERE ABOVE .500 THE PRIOR SEASON ARE 50-30-5 ATS (62.5%) SINCE 2000 (WIN: +17 UNITS, ROI: 21.3%, GRADE 60)**

**2025 Plays: INDIANAPOLIS, GREEN BAY, LA RAMS, BUFFALO**

### 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. However, after a 2-5 ATS performance in seven games over the last two seasons, could this angle be losing its steam? For 2025, there are four plays on tap.

#### Game #1: INDIANAPOLIS (-1.5) vs. Miami

The Dolphins saw a streak of four straight plus-.500 seasons come to an end last year as they went 8-9 and missed out on a playoff berth. It seems that oddsmakers aren't giving them much of a shot at rebounding in 2025, as they open up as an underdog to a Colts team that has some obvious question marks heading into the season. Granted, Indianapolis posted the same record as Miami last year, so in that sense, the line seems to be fitting for a Week 1 clash. However, the Colts and head coach Shane Steichen have been answering questions about the quarterback position all offseason long and have finally settled on former Giants' starter Daniel Jones as their No. 1. Not exactly inspiring news for their fans, as he was just 24-44-1 in six seasons for New York. Perhaps they will be better served leaning on their offensive line and RB Jonathan Taylor.

#### Game #2: GREEN BAY (-1.5) vs. Detroit

Another system that conflicts with #5 above, with the Packers coming back off an 11-6 season and looking to get back atop the NFC North in 2025. Standing in their way are the Detroit Lions, back-to-back winners of the division. The Lions have won three straight in Green Bay, so the Packers not only have the motivation of knocking off a fierce rival, but

also of getting revenge for three rare recent home losses. After an injury-riddled, disappointing 2024 campaign, can Jordan Love lead this team to where it thought it would be following an inspiring 2023 campaign? This game, and the one the following Thursday at home versus Washington, will go a long way in determining that.

#### Game #3: LA RAMS (-2.5) vs. Houston

We seem to have a few more conflicts than usual in this year's Week 1 systems piece, as this is another that goes directly against what we saw in system #2 above. In that one, the Texans had the edge due to the non-conference, low line aspect of the matchup. This angle finds the Rams have the edge because of the fact that they are favored over what was a quality Houston team a year ago, and one expected to still be so this fall. So much of this game will hinge on the health of LA QB Matthew Stafford, so watch closely, as with him, this is one of the better teams in the NFC, especially in its ability to move the ball through the air.

#### Game #4: BUFFALO (-1.5) vs. Baltimore

The Bills return to the 2025 NFL season, lamenting the memories of another playoff failure. In the opener, they are hosting another team that is locked into the same scenario, Baltimore. These teams are perennially shooting for the Chiefs in the AFC, but neither has been able to overcome Kansas City. There's no reason to suspect that either won't be a contender in 2025, so that makes this Week 1 Sunday Night Football tilt an intriguing one. Buffalo is a very small favorite, and is looking to extend a run of 4-0 SU and ATS for home teams in head-to-head play. The Bills won the most recent contest, 27-25 in Orchard Park this past postseason, a margin that would be again good enough to cover this week's point spread and give this system another win.

## SYSTEM #7

**WEEK 1 FAVORITES PLAYING IN A REVENGE SPOT FROM A LOSS THE PRIOR SEASON ARE JUST 18-24 SU AND 16-26 ATS (38.1%) OVER THE LAST 13 SEASONS (LOSS: -12.6 UNITS, ROI: -30%, GRADE 60)**

**2025 Plays: Play Against TAMPA BAY, SAN FRANCISCO, GREEN BAY**

### 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 qualifying games, there are three divisional contests with enhanced stakes, two of them involving road favorites. We already know that being a divisional favorite in Week 1 is also tough.

#### Game #1: AGAINST TAMPA BAY (-1.5) at Atlanta

Most experts believe that these two teams are the frontrunners for the NFC South Division. Tampa Bay has won it four years in a row, but Atlanta would like nothing more than to put the thought in the Bucs' heads that they are a huge threat this season. The Falcons edged the Bucs last year 31-26 in a late-October matchup in Tampa, so the defending division champs probably have had this game circled on their calendars for a while for payback. However, this system shows that has not been a great motivator.

#### Game #2: AGAINST SAN FRANCISCO (-1.5) at Seattle

The 49ers are the second straight road favorite to qualify as a play against team on system #7. This game has already been brought up twice in this article, and if you're keeping track, it's two angles favoring Seattle, one on the 49ers. The game that triggered this revenge scenario occurred this past November, with the Seahawks winning 20-17 as 6-point road underdogs at San Francisco. This game will be played at Lumen Field, home of the Seahawks and the "12th Man". If new Seattle QB Sam Darnold is anything like the player he was last year, this spot with his team playing as a home dog could turn out to be a gift.

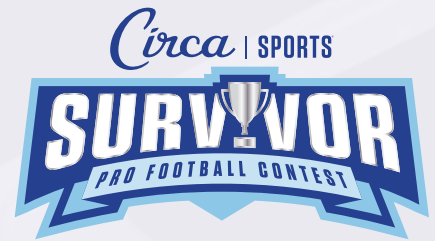
#### Game #3: AGAINST GREEN BAY (-1.5) vs. Detroit

This is another matchup now in which we see three different systems impacting the game. In this case, the count finds two favoring Detroit, one backing Green Bay. This is a tough spot, and what could prove to be a very important one for the hosts, as the Packers open the season with matchups versus the Lions and Commanders in a four-day span. Compounding the opener is the fact that the Lions are looking for a fourth-straight win at Lambeau Field, a streak that would have been considered preposterous just a few years ago.

Good luck with your plays and enjoy NFL Kickoff 2025!

# CEMENT YOUR CIRCA SURVIVOR LEGACY

BY ADAM BURKE



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 and Circa Survivor is absolutely one of them. I'll get to that in a second, but first, some additional context into Survivor contests.

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. One of the benefits of the Circa Survivor is that contestants are allowed to have as many entries as they want, so you can spread out your exposure and have the opportunity to advance with multiple entries on multiple teams or not get knocked out completely because you happened to pick the big favorite that went down.

Here are some potential strategies for Circa Survivor:

## CREATE A BLUEPRINT FOR THE SEASON

I cannot stress this point enough. There is no guarantee that you get to Week 6, Week 8, Week 12, Week 15, or the end, but if you do get to a certain point, you want to make sure that you have good options available.

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 7 at home against the Raiders or Week 12 at home against the Colts.

However, this is the main wrinkle of the Circa Survivor. "Thanksgiving" and "Christmas" are their own "weeks". So you have to win those two "weeks" in the Circa Survivor in addition to the 18 scheduled NFL weeks. The Chiefs play on BOTH Thanksgiving and Christmas. It is imperative to plan for the holidays. Thanksgiving does include an extra game on Black Friday, but there are only eight teams at your disposal for that week and six teams at your disposal for Christmas.

Injuries and other things happen, so you would like to keep as many of those teams available as possible.

But even independent of the holiday weeks, you still want to plan ahead. Is there a week with limited big favorites later in the season? For example, in Week 9, the only "safe" picks look like the Packers at home against the Panthers and the Rams at home against the Saints. Well, if you use one or both of those teams prior to that point, you might end up being pushed into a short favorite as opposed to a favorite of more than a touchdown.

When my partner Marc Goldberg (Spooky Express) and I made it to the final 15 entries in 2023, we didn't take a single road team. It was a personal preference, but we also structured our available teams accordingly to not have to trust a team playing away from home.

## 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 Texans will be -13 against the Raiders in Week 16 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 Texans until Week 16 is all well and good, but what if CJ Stroud gets injured or if the Texans don't really 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. A team you were unlikely to use suddenly becomes an option due to injuries, a coaching change, a QB change. The NFL season is very fluid.

Also, you have to pick 20 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 20-0 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, as mentioned above.

## AVOID THE MOST POPULAR PICKS?

Back in 2023, the Circa Survivor contest lost 34.2% of the field after the Bengals lost in Week 1 to the Patriots. That was 4,895 entries that didn't even get a single win. Nearly 80% of the field that season was out by the end of Week 4. Nothing is a lock.

Upsets do happen. In fact, 32 double-digit favorites have lost since the start of the 2016 season. Yes, 240 of them have won, per the KillerSports database, but you don't want to be on #33 or #34 this season. There have been 124 favorites of a touchdown or more that have lost in that span.

In the last 272 games with a double-digit favorite, the underdog has won outright about 12% of the time. 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 when there are tougher decisions on the board.

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 a hybrid approach is probably the way to go, including whatever strategy you or your entry partners would like to implement.

It takes perfection to cash in Survivor. While that absolutely includes a degree of luck, you can also set yourself up for success as much as possible.

# CIRCA SURVIVOR STRATEGIES

## CREATE A BLUEPRINT FOR THE SEASON

## JUST GO 1-0

## AVOID THE MOST POPULAR PICKS?





# FANTASY POINTS FANTASY FOOTBALL RISERS AND FALLERS

BY TOM BROLLEY

Fantasy Points' Tom Brolley has closely tracked training camp news and preseason action to produce the most notable risers and fallers ahead of your fantasy draft(s). Use Fantasy Points projections, rankings, and draft articles to dominate your fantasy leagues in 2025. [Subscribe to Fantasy Points](#) today and use code SCOREMORE to save 10% off of ANY plan at checkout.

# RISERS

## **CHASE BROWN (RB, CIN)**

The Bengals released Zack Moss in late July to clear the way for Brown to handle a large workload like he did in the second half of last season. Brown had the highest carry share (83%) and the second-highest route share (62.2%) among all RBs from Week 9 on. He ranked as the RB4 (20.8 FPG) in that span, and had the most expected FPG at 22.4. Playing in Cincinnati's high-scoring attack next to Joe Burrow, Brown has legitimate potential to finish as the top fantasy RB if he sees a similar workload to what he saw in the second half of last season.

## **OMARION HAMPTON (RB, LAC)**

Najee Harris suffered an unfortunate eye injury during a fireworks incident around the Fourth of July, which has prevented him from returning to practice. The Chargers aren't just going to hand over a bell-cow role to Hampton to start the season, but his path to heavy volume is obvious if Harris is out of the mix. Hampton is an absolute freak athlete. Saquon Barkley is the only other first-round RB with a 95th-percentile SPORQ athletic score or better over the past decade. Hampton has high-end upside if he completely takes over this backfield, which could now happen earlier than expected if Harris remains out of action.

## **GEORGE KITTLE (TE, SF) AND RICKY PEARSALL (WR, SF)**

San Francisco's receiving corps is in shambles heading into the season. Brandon Aiyuk will miss at least the first month of the season as he recovers from knee surgeries. Jauan Jennings has missed most of training camp with a "calf injury" as he looks for a new contract, and his absence could extend into the season. And Demarcus Robinson is facing a three-game suspension for a DUI charge. The 49ers were so desperate for wide receiver help that they traded for Skyy Moore to bolster their depth. Kittle and Pearsall are the clear top targets for Brock Purdy to open the season, especially if Jennings remains out of action.

## **TREVEYON HENDERSON (RB, NE)**

What's a better way to start your NFL career than a 100-yard kickoff house call on your first touch? Henderson has been the fastest player any time he's been on the field this preseason, which shouldn't be surprising since he scored a 91.0 SPORQ athletic score. Henderson should handle most of the passing work in New England since he's already a proficient pass blocker, and he could split carries with Rhamondre Stevenson. The rookie has a game-changing burst and bell-cow upside if he can improve his vision as an inside runner.

## **EMEKA EGBUKA (WR, TB)**

Egbuka has been one of the fastest risers since the start of training camp, and his path to immediate fantasy production has been cleared. The Buccaneers are planning to activate Chris Godwin (ankle) from the PUP list to ramp him up for an October debut, which would be Week 5 or later. Jalen McMillan will be placed on the injured reserve for a severely sprained neck and could be out past Tampa Bay's Week 9 bye. Egbuka is a player to target in fantasy drafts, but be prepared to click his name a few rounds earlier than his listed ADP or site rank, depending on your drafting platform.

## **MATTHEW GOLDEN (WR, GB)**

Golden has been the last man standing in this Packers WR corps at times during training camp, and he's taken advantage of his extra reps. Christian Watson will start the season on the PUP list as he recovers from ACL surgery, and Jayden Reed has missed extended time for a foot injury. Romeo Doubs (back) and Dontayvion Wicks (calf) have also dealt with minor issues. Golden has received near-universal praise for his performance in his first training camp, including from Jordan Love, who called him polished and predicted that he'll be a stud. It's tough to be overly optimistic if Matt LaFleur is going to heavily rotate his receivers once again, but Golden is aiming to change that trend, especially since he's been healthy and getting the most reps.

## **TONY POLLARD (RB, TEN)**

Tyjae Spears suffered a high ankle sprain in the preseason opener, which will keep him out for a few weeks. Spears will be in a race to be ready for the start of the season, and the injury could linger into the season. Pollard out-snapped Spears 11 to 3 with the first-team offense in the preseason opener before Spears injured his ankle playing with the backups. Pollard posted an 86.6% snap share, a 68.8% carry share, a 60.5% route share, and 15.9 FPG in the four contests Spears missed in the middle of last season. Pollard is a solid RB2 value, who has an outside chance at top-12 production if Cam Ward is a stud from Game 1.

## **MARK ANDREWS (TE, BAL)**

Isaiah Likely suffered a foot fracture in late July, which required surgery. John Harbaugh said there was a chance Likely could be ready for Baltimore's Sept. 7 opener against the Bills, but his estimated six-week recovery could keep him out for the first game or two in September. Andrews averaged 13.9 FPG (TE7) in the final 12 games of last season after averaging just 4.4 FPG (TE32) through the first five games. He'll have the chance to carry his momentum into this season with Likely out, and he posted 6/68/1 receiving on an 86% route share in his lone game without Likely last season.

## **JACORY CROSKEY-MERRITT (RB, WAS)**

"Bill" Croskey-Merritt, a seventh-round pick, turned heads at Commanders practices this spring, and he's continued to take advantage of his opportunities in training camp. He's made a name for himself with powerful runs, quick cuts, and vision behind the line of scrimmage at training camp. He's been so impressive that the Commanders traded Brian Robinson ahead of the season, which cleared the way for a large role in this backfield next to Austin Ekeler and Chris Rodriguez. The Commanders are trying to create a bigger role for JCM in potentially one of the league's better offenses. Just be prepared to select him earlier than his listed ADP or site ranking on your drafting platform.

## **KEENAN ALLEN (WR, LAC)**

Allen needed a home this summer, and the Chargers lacked receiver depth after Mike Williams retired just before training camp. Allen proved to be a miserable fit with Caleb Williams, finishing with career lows in receiving YPG (49.6), YPT (6.1), receptions per game (4.7), and catch rate (57.9%). Allen was the model of consistency from 2017 to 2023, and it's fair to wonder if his rough 2024 was caused by Chicago's dysfunctional offense, his age, or a combination of both. It won't take long to get back on the same page with Justin Herbert, landing in the perfect spot to see if he still has something left in the tank.



# FALLERS

## **PUKA NACUA AND DAVANTE ADAMS (WRS, LAR)**

Matthew Stafford finally practiced for the first time in training camp on Aug. 18 after sitting out multiple weeks for an aggravated disc in his back. Stafford has enough time to get ready for the season opener against the Texans, but his slow recovery is a bit concerning if the 37-year-old's back injury were to flare up during the season. Nacua and Adams have seen their ADPs drift in August because of Stafford's condition, but that could be a mistake if he's able to stay healthy. Stafford has supported two top-24 WRs in FPG in three out of his four seasons — he failed to do it in 2022 when he played just nine games.

## **TERRY MCLAURIN (WR, WAS)**

McLaurin was looking for more money than D.K. Metcalf, who owns a \$33 million AAV, and the Commanders weren't prepared to pay him that much. The two sides finally found common ground just below that amount on Aug. 25. Even with a deal done, there's always concern for a slow start or even worse, an injury, because of his lack of activity in training camp. McLaurin scored 13 touchdowns after failing to top five TDs in each of his last four seasons, and he did it on the fewest targets (117) he's seen in that span. He's still priced near his ceiling despite his falling ADP, unless he sees a significant uptick in his usage to nullify his incoming touchdown regression.

## **BREECE HALL (RB, NYJ)**

The drumbeat has been consistent for Braelon Allen, who is having a strong training camp for the second straight summer. Allen has a better chance to remain a factor next to Hall this year with the Jets taking on a more run-heavy approach with the offense switching from Aaron Rodgers to Justin Fields at quarterback. Aaron Glenn and new play-caller Tanner Engstrand came from a Lions offense that featured a lightning-and-thunder combo in Jahmyr Gibbs and David Montgomery. Glenn has emphasized this won't be a one-back offense, and Isaiah Davis is likely to make this backfield a three-headed monster. Hall could be stuck in a committee in one of the league's worst offenses.

## **RASHEE RICE (WR, KC)**

Rice will have a disciplinary hearing with the NFL on Sept. 30, which means that he'll be available to play in the first four weeks of the season. The NFL and NFLPA could reach an agreement on a suspension before the scheduled hearing, but the two sides have yet to come to an agreement. The NFL initially proposed an 8-to-10 game ban, which received pushback from Rice's camp. His suspension could come down at any point starting in October, and he could miss significant time based on the suspension that the NFL wants to hand down. His suspension would be easier to deal with at the beginning of the season, when fantasy teams are closer to full strength without injuries and bye weeks setting in. His suspension could come down at any point after Week 4 with the chance to bleed into the fantasy playoffs, so draft him at your peril.

## **JOE MIXON (RB, HOU)**

Mixon is a candidate to land on the PUP list to start the season as he continues to deal with a lingering foot/ankle issue. It's concerning that Mixon is still having issues after sitting out spring workouts for what was deemed a minor injury at the time. Mixon has dealt with multiple ankle injuries throughout his career, including last year. He sustained an ankle injury on a hip-drop tackle early last season, and he also played through an ankle injury in the postseason. The Texans signed Nick Chubb to a one-year, \$2.5 million deal on June 10 as an insurance policy for Mixon. The Texans also drafted Woody Marks in the fourth round to significantly beef up a backfield that already included Dameon Pierce and Dare Ogunbowale. Mixon is a player to avoid in fantasy drafts, and it wouldn't be shocking if he doesn't play this season.

## **QUINSHON JUDKINS (RB, CLE)**

Judkins was charged with misdemeanor domestic battery in Florida in mid-July, which had his availability for the upcoming season up in the air. Prosecutors in the case declined to move forward with the case, which paved the way for Judkins to finally sign his contract and report to camp. If only it were that easy. Judkins and the Browns have been unable to reach a deal and may not until the end of an NFL investigation into the matter. Judkins fell behind and lost reps to Jerome Ford and Dylan Sampson in the battle to be the team's lead back, and he's going to lose out on more reps as he squabbles with the Browns over the amount of guaranteed money in his contract. He'll be eased back into action once he signs his contract, but his upside will be limited since he's not likely to catch many passes or have many touchdown opportunities in Cleveland's putrid offense.

## **BRIAN ROBINSON JR. (RB, SF)**

The Commanders were shopping Robinson as he entered the final season of his rookie contract. Both sides decided that he should sit out the second preseason game as the Commanders searched for a trade partner, and he didn't even report to the stadium to be with his teammates. Robinson's time in Washington officially came to an end on Aug. 22 when the 49ers sent a sixth-round pick to acquire Robinson from the Commanders. He's the favorite to be the #2 RB behind Christian McCaffrey, but he's lost significant fantasy juice for 2025. Robinson is strictly a late-round fantasy pick as a potential handcuff, and even that is flimsy considering Isaac Guerendo could factor in with him if CMC missed time.

## **CHRIS GODWIN (WR, TB)**

Godwin was off to a sensational start in 2024 before he suffered a gruesome left ankle dislocation that ended his season in Week 7. He needed surgery to repair the injury, and his season ended with him leading the NFL in receptions (50) and receiving yards (576) through seven weeks. Godwin underwent surgery to clean out his ankle in the spring, which landed him on the PUP to open camp. The Bucs will activate Godwin from the PUP list to ramp him up for an October debut, which would be Week 5 or later. He could get off to a slow start once he returns to the lineup, and Emeka Egbuka is angling to knock him down the passing-game pecking order.

## **BRANDON AIYUK (WR, SF)**

Aiyuk suffered a season-ending knee injury seven games into last season, which required two surgeries for a torn ACL and MCL. The injury has him in jeopardy of missing extended time to open the season. Kyle Shanahan told the media the rough estimate for Aiyuk's return is around Week 6, but he could return sooner or later. There's a good chance Aiyuk doesn't take the field until November, and it could take a few weeks to work into a full workload. It's tough to invest in him for fantasy unless your league has multiple IR spots.

## **NAJEE HARRIS (RB, LAC)**

Harris suffered what his agent called a "superficial" eye injury during a fireworks accident, but the injury is worse than that after the Chargers placed him on the NFI list. Harris has moved from walking laps to doing drills with a football on a side field in mid-August, but he's a candidate to remain on the NFI list to open the season if he plays at all this season. Omarion Hampton is the far superior talent and far more explosive than Harris, and he has the early leg up on winning the lead job by running with the first-team offense while Harris heals. We're hoping for the best for Harris, but there's no reason to use a fantasy pick on him with his playing future uncertain.

# 2025 CIRCA SURVIVOR A BLUEPRINT FOR ALL 20 WEEKS



BY ADAM BURKE

When all 272 games for the 2025 NFL season were officially announced in mid-May, my mind immediately went to the Circa Survivor contest. There is no such thing as a lock in sports betting, so there is risk attached to every single pick, including the biggest favorite or the logical choice in the context of Survivor. But, there are outcomes that are more likely to happen than others.

While the goal in Survivor is to go 1-0 every week, the ultimate goal is to go 20-0, as Circa Survivor has the two large wrinkles of Thanksgiving/Black Friday and Christmas as their own "weeks". The premise behind a Survivor contest is easy, right? Just pick a team to win their game. But, the execution is the hard part because being able to use each team only once means having a plan of attack for the entirety of the season.

The NFL is very fluid, especially when it comes to injuries, so even the best-laid plans can go awry, not only in the days leading up to the game, but during the game itself. Nevertheless, it is an interesting exercise to plot out a course. My partner Marc Goldberg and I made it to the final 13 during the 2023 installment of Circa Survivor and that's exactly what we did before the season, keeping one main thing in mind - save as many teams as you can for the holiday games.

The Thanksgiving slate has the Packers, Lions, Chiefs, Cowboys, Bengals, Ravens, Bears, and Eagles, while the Christmas slate has the Cowboys, Commanders, Lions, Vikings, Broncos, and Chiefs. The three common teams are the Cowboys, Lions, and Chiefs, so that adds an extra dimension of planning.

Before looking at a week-by-week gameplan, let's talk about the Survivor teams to pick on this season.

## SURVIVOR TEAMS TO PICK AGAINST

Like I said, plans don't always work out and 27 of the 32 teams were plus or minus 1.5 games off of their season win total odds last season and 21 of those teams were plus or minus 2.5 games or more. So, there will be surprises, but what generally isn't all that surprising is that the bad teams are typically bad.

### Cleveland Browns

At time of writing, the Browns were +400 at DraftKings for the fewest wins. Whether Joe Flacco, Kenny Pickett, Dillon Gabriel, or Shedeur Sanders start games, the Browns certainly look like one of the league's bottom-feeders and could be a very valuable team to pick against, especially if they start really poorly and Kevin Stefanski's seat gets hot as the organization looks for a scapegoat.

### New Orleans Saints

Tyler Shough? Spencer Rattler? Jake Haener? Are any of these quarterbacks going to worry you? Will any of them have the ability to win a game in the second half or fourth quarter? They'll probably be an underdog in at least 15 of their 17 games and were +425 for fewest wins.

### New York Giants

Russell Wilson and the Giants may be catching points in all 17 games and absolutely need a QB of the future in the 2026 NFL Draft. Given the brutal start to the schedule, this is a team likely to be demoralized early and often.

### Tennessee Titans

No. 1 overall pick Cam Ward could inject some immediate life into the Titans, but it could also be Will Levis at the start. While there are some talented individual players, this was a 3-14 team last season that still needs a lot of work.

Whether or not you plot a course in similar fashion to this or just focus on the present instead of the future, the most important piece of information to remember from this exercise is to be extremely aware of the holiday games because you'll want multiple options for arguably the two biggest potential landmines that the unique Circa Survivor rules have to offer.

All picks as of August 25 and the spreads subject to change.





## WEEK 1

### BRONCOS (-7.5) VS. TITANS

Cam Ward is drawing what could very well be the league's top defense in Week 1 and that's a tough task. Furthermore, this is a Week 1 game in elevation, so there will be a lot of players attempting to get into game shape. There are other spots to take the Broncos, but I think going against a rookie QB in the first week is the best of them.

One quick note: Theoretically, if you don't max out your entries, you can take the Eagles on Thursday and rebuy if they don't win, but the Eagles are also a holiday team.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Eagles (-7) vs. Cowboys (TNF)  
Patriots (-2.5) vs. Raiders  
Commanders (-6) vs. Giants

#### USED

Broncos

## WEEK 3

### SEAHAWKS (-6.5) OVER SAINTS

This might not be a rookie QB in his first road start, depending on how everything shakes out with the New Orleans position battle, but it is still the first road game for the Saints and it is a long way from home against a Seahawks squad that is stacked at the skill positions. This is a big test for Kellen Moore and the staff and a great spot to use the Seahawks on a week with fairly limited options.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Bills (-8.5) over Dolphins (TNF)  
Buccaneers (-7.5) over Jets  
Commanders (-7.5) over Raiders

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks

### CARDINALS (-4.5) OVER PANTHERS

The Cardinals are not the biggest favorite in Week 2. Far from it, in fact. However, this is Carolina's second consecutive road game and a long trip out to the desert. Arizona is a team that I am very high on heading into Jonathan Gannon's third season and I also feel like the Panthers are a good team to catch early in the year in case they struggle to find a rhythm coming out of the preseason.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Bengals (-5.5) over Jaguars  
Cowboys (-4.5) over Giants  
Ravens (-12.5) over Browns  
49ers (-7) over Saints

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals

### TEXANS (-6) OVER TITANS

Something worth keeping in mind as you go through the Circa Survivor selection process is that you'll need to use 20 of the 32 teams to make it to the end. So, that sometimes means bypassing the biggest favorite and looking to sneak a team through. I don't think the Texans fully apply in that context here, but it is important here in my mind to save the Bills and Lions, even though they are probably double-digit favorites.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Bills (-12.5) over Saints  
Lions (-10.5) over Browns  
Rams (-6.5) over Colts  
Dolphins (-5.5) over Jets

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans

## WEEK 2

## WEEK 4



## WEEK 5

### VIKINGS (-7) OVER BROWNS

We have a unique situation here, as the Vikings are playing a second straight week in Europe and the Browns are not. Minnesota is a decidedly better team than Cleveland to begin with, but the Europe factor adds in another layer. The Browns play in Detroit the week prior and will travel to London later in the week. The Europe games can have a higher level of variance just because of the nature of the travel and the game, but this one seems more projectable.

This is also the first week with byes, which cuts down the number of available teams.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Colts (-1.5) over Raiders  
Cardinals (-5.5) over Titans  
Ravens (-7.5) over Texans  
Bills (-8.5) over Patriots

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings



## WEEK 7

### CHARGERS (-6) OVER COLTS

While the Chargers are unlikely to be the biggest favorite of the week, this is a pretty good spot to back them given the difficulty of their schedule. They play the Chiefs, Raiders, Broncos, Giants, Commanders, and Dolphins prior to this, with the opener in Brazil and games in Vegas, New Jersey, and South Florida, so their "easiest" games are on the road. The schedule lightens up here in what amounts to a must-win type of spot against a Colts team making its second long trip to Los Angeles (Rams in Week 4).

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Bears (-7.5) over Saints  
Chiefs (-9.5) over Raiders  
Jets (-1.5) over Panthers  
Broncos (-7.5) over Giants  
49ers (-6.5) over Falcons

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers

### STEELERS (-6.5) OVER BROWNS

The Steelers get a chance to kick their hated rivals while they are down here. This is a third straight game away from home for Cleveland and Pittsburgh is off of the bye. Judging by Pittsburgh's schedule, this should be their highest game from a win probability standpoint. The spread indicates that and so does the spot, with the Browns coming back from London and the Steelers well-rested. Remember - we have to take at least 20 different teams, so even if a team is projected to be mediocre, you still want to find spots to use them.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Eagles (-7) over Giants (TNF)  
Broncos (-6.5) over Jets (London)  
Raiders (-3) over Titans

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers

### PATRIOTS (-5.5) OVER BROWNS

Welp, let's pick on the Browns again. The bye week - and a badly needed one at that - is the following week for Cleveland. This will be their fourth road game in five weeks and sixth in the first eight weeks of the season. It is the first game back in Foxboro for the Patriots in nearly a month, as they play road games in Weeks 5-7, so this is a "get right" type of game at home against a bad opponent and arguably the Patriots' best spot for a Survivor pick. They do play the Jets in Week 11, but it is a Thursday Night Football game.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Bengals (-7.5) over Jets  
Eagles (-10.5) over Giants  
Colts (-3.5) over Titans

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers, Patriots

## WEEK 6



## WEEK 8







## WEEK 9

### RAMS (-9.5) OVER SAINTS

This is a pretty ugly and limited week for Survivor contestants. Four teams are on a bye and, as mentioned, the Browns are one of them. The Jets are also idle, along with the Eagles and Buccaneers, so two teams you'd like to go against and two teams you'd probably think of using. But, the Saints should be a great team to go against as well. The Rams are off of the bye after playing in London in Week 7 and the Saints will be eight weeks into whatever their season holds. And it probably won't be good.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Packers (-7.5) over Panthers  
Raiders (-1.5) over Jaguars

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers, Patriots, Rams



## WEEK 11

### PACKERS (-4.5) OVER GIANTS

Hold your breath. Hold your nose. Hold a loved one. Hold something. Week 11 is messy. Early lines had the Packers -4.5 on the road against the Giants, which was tied for the fourth-highest line of the week. The Patriots (Jets), Bills (Bucs), and Ravens (Browns) were the only bigger favorites when putting this together. As I outlined above, losing is in the Giants' best interest this season and this one fits the bill to me. The Packers are on a short week and play all three NFC North rivals over the next three weeks, so the spot is scary, but I think the risk is worth it.

I'd prefer to save the Bills, need the Ravens for Thanksgiving, and already used the Patriots.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Patriots (-5.5) over Jets (TNF)  
Falcons (-3) over Panthers  
Ravens (-8.5) over Browns

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers, Patriots, Rams, Bears, Packers

### BEARS (-5.5) OVER GIANTS

The holiday games have been a consideration for me every week up until this point and I've stayed away from them. But, this is a spot where I am interested in one. Even if Jalen Hurts (and others) were to be hurt for the Black Friday game, I still wouldn't have too much interest in backing the Bears on the road against the Eagles. I wouldn't call this a layup against the Giants, but maybe a somewhat contested 8-footer. It is a good spot for the Bears to rally before the schedule toughens up again and it is a third road game in four weeks and a fourth in six weeks for the Giants.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Broncos (-6.5) over Raiders (TNF)  
Jets (-2.5) over Browns  
Panthers (-4.5) over Saints  
Texans (-3.5) over Jaguars

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers, Patriots, Rams, Bears

### 49ERS (-7) OVER PANTHERS

This is the week before Thanksgiving, which is very important to point out. As you will see, the best considerations are the Lions, Chiefs, and Ravens, who all play on Turkey Day. Like I said from the jump, you want as many holiday options as possible. This is Monday Night Football, so a stressful wait could be in the cards, but it is a back-to-back road spot for a Carolina team that doesn't have its bye until Week 14. It will be just the second game not played at 1 p.m. ET (Week 2) for them. While the 49ers have a late bye as well, so they'll be playing a 12th straight game, they won't have gone further than Glendale since Week 9.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Lions (-8.5) over Giants  
Chiefs (-9.5) over Colts  
Ravens (-11.5) over Jets  
Raiders (-3.5) over Browns

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers, Patriots, Rams, Bears, Packers, 49ers

## WEEK 10



## WEEK 12





## THANKSGIVING

### RAVENS (-5.5) OVER BENGALS

Pretty simple here. There are four games up for discussion - Packers at Lions, Chiefs at Cowboys, Bengals at Ravens, and Bears at Eagles. The Eagles were the biggest of the favorites at the time of this exercise, but I'm saving them for later. Maybe that's a mistake, to "save a team for later" this deep in the competition, but Baltimore feels the safest with a division game at home on a short week.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Chiefs (-5.5) over Cowboys  
Eagles (-7) over Bears

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers, Patriots, Rams, Bears, Packers, 49ers, Ravens



## WEEK 14

### BUCCANEERS (-9.5) OVER SAINTS

There is quite a pattern here, eh? This is the fourth time picking against the Saints. The Browns have been a victim three times thus far. Those teams will luck into some wins at some point. You just hope they're not when you're against them. This is a great spot for the Bucs. They're in the midst of three straight home games and will have already played the Saints on the road, so they'll have all the film they need with the far superior roster. It will be their biggest favorite role (barring injury) and a great pick to have at this stage of the game, especially because the pickings are pretty slim this week.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Ravens (-8.5) over Steelers  
Browns (-1.5) over Titans  
Chiefs (-6.5) over Texans

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers, Patriots, Rams, Bears, Packers, 49ers, Ravens, Dolphins, Buccaneers

### DOLPHINS (-6) OVER SAINTS

Admittedly, I have no idea what kind of state the Dolphins will be in by this point. Does Mike McDaniel still have a job? Are the playoffs a possibility? Is Tua Tagovailoa still upright? There are going to be decisions that you wrestle with and second-guessing is inevitable, win or lose. All of the other best Week 13 options were selected to get to this point, but this is absolutely a game that Miami should win and unquestionably the best time to take them. Remember - you're going to need 20 teams to win for you in order to cash and not all of them will be enjoyable sweats.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

49ers (-6) over Browns  
Chargers (-6.5) over Raiders  
Patriots (-3) over Giants

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers, Patriots, Rams, Bears, Packers, 49ers, Ravens, Dolphins

## WEEK 13



### EAGLES (-10.5) OVER RAIDERS

A long trip east for a December 14 game for the dome-dwelling Raiders seems potentially problematic. By this point, the Raiders could also be positioning themselves for the NFL Draft, as they'll have just played the Chargers and Broncos. This game should matter a lot to the Eagles. They are on a short week after coming back from Los Angeles for Monday Night Football, but that's a minor concern to me. We've also gotten the holiday concern out of the way for the Eagles since they are not part of the Christmas slate.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Bears (-7) over Browns  
Jaguars (-4.5) over Jets  
49ers (-7.5) over Titans  
Seahawks (-3.5) over Colts

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers, Patriots, Rams, Bears, Packers, 49ers, Ravens, Dolphins, Buccaneers, Eagles

## WEEK 15





## WEEK 16

### BILLS (-8.5) OVER BROWNS

Just the second road team on the list so far. There are home teams that could apply here, too, but the Bills should have something to play for and the Browns shouldn't, other than pride. Who knows how dysfunctional the organization will be by this point, but I have to think one of Dillon Gabriel or Shedeur Sanders is starting this game. They'll have to evaluate one or both of them. I think I'm okay with Josh Allen over one of those dudes, away game or not.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Chiefs (-7) over Titans  
Ravens (-8.5) over Patriots  
Broncos (-5.5) over Jaguars  
Lions (-6) over Steelers

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers, Patriots, Rams, Bears, Packers, 49ers, Ravens, Dolphins, Buccaneers, Eagles, Bills



## WEEK 17

### BENGALS (-3.5) OVER CARDINALS

Let me tell you...Week 17 is AWFUL. Like extremely awful. At the time I wrote this up (May 20), the biggest Saturday/Sunday/Monday favorite in Week 17 was -3.5. Injuries will obviously alter the market, but at least I still have Joe Burrow against a Cardinals crew forced to play outside on December 28. There is also a chance that this game is flexed to Saturday, so it could be a short week for the desert dwellers to fly all the way to the Rust Belt.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Raiders (-2.5) over Giants  
Titans (-3.5) over Saints

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers, Patriots, Rams, Bears, Packers, 49ers, Ravens, Dolphins, Buccaneers, Eagles, Bills, Commanders, Bengals

### COMMANDERS (-5.5) OVER COWBOYS

There are only three games here, so there are just six teams to pick from. Because Christmas falls on a Thursday, we just get a tripleheader. You notice, though, that both the Lions and the Chiefs - the two other favorites - are still available here. Having options for the holiday games is critical. Even though it's Week 17 and you'd love to use them earlier, if you get to this point, you can't get shut out. As far as the Commanders, I've been holding them for this spot and have to go with it.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Chiefs (-4.5) over Broncos

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers, Patriots, Rams, Bears, Packers, 49ers, Ravens, Dolphins, Buccaneers, Eagles, Bills, Commanders

## CHRISTMAS



### CHIEFS (-6) OVER RAIDERS

Initially, I was saving the Bills for here (Jets) over the Chiefs, but this is a rare year in which Kansas City may have to play everybody in Week 18 because of the strength of the AFC West. Projecting Week 18 this far in advance is probably a meaningless exercise, as we'll have a ton of moving parts. There are likely to be a lot of strong options. Bengals over the Browns comes to mind. But, I'd rather trust the Bengals in Week 17 than the Raiders or Titans, at least as of now and take a third and final road team to finish it off.

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Bengals (-8.5) over Browns  
Bills (-9.5) over Jets

#### USED

Broncos, Cardinals, Seahawks, Texans, Vikings, Steelers, Chargers, Patriots, Rams, Bears, Packers, 49ers, Ravens, Dolphins, Buccaneers, Eagles, Bills, Commanders, Bengals, Chiefs

## WEEK 18





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TEAM	POWER RATING
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BALTIMORE	29.5
BUFFALO	29.0
KANSAS CITY	29.0
DETROIT	28.0
GREEN BAY	27.0
WASHINGTON	27.0
LA RAMS	26.5
TAMPA BAY	26.0
LA CHARGERS	25.5
SAN FRANCISCO	25.5
CINCINNATI	25.0
HOUSTON	24.5
ARIZONA	24.0
DENVER	24.0
MIAMI	24.0
MINNESOTA	24.0
PITTSBURGH	24.0
CHICAGO	23.5
DALLAS	23.0
ATLANTA	22.5
SEATTLE	22.5
NEW ENGLAND	22.0
INDIANAPOLIS	21.5
JACKSONVILLE	21.5
CAROLINA	21.0
LAS VEGAS	21.0
NY GIANTS	20.5
NY JETS	20.0
CLEVELAND	19.0
TENNESSEE	19.0
NEW ORLEANS	18.5



# BUFFALO

## BILLS

As a co-Super Bowl favorite, heavy division favorite, and favorite for the No. 1 seed in the AFC, due in large part to co-MVP favorite Josh Allen, the goal for the Bills in the preseason was simple - get out healthy. Allen didn't play in the preseason for the first time in his career, so we'll see if he gets off to a slow start in Week 1 against the Ravens in a primetime showdown sure to draw overreaction one way or the other.

The high expectations are nothing new in Orchard Park, but the team's depth has to be a concern going into the season. Injuries in training camp impacted the playing time and reps for guys like WR Curtis Samuel, first-round pick CB Maxwell Hairston, and a handful of offensive linemen.

The deepest position on the roster is the defensive line, which will also get Larry Ogunjobi and Michael Hoecht when their PED suspensions end during the Week 7 bye. Buffalo's backups in the secondary were shredded throughout the preseason, so that may be a place they hope to add as the season rolls along.

### PLAYER TO WATCH: WR JOSH PALMER

Allen really spread around his targets last season in the scoring areas, as Khalil Shakir had 100 targets and 76 catches, but only had 10 of the 68 red zone targets. Signed as a free agent from the Chargers, Palmer averaged over six targets per game during the 2023 season with Kellen Moore as the OC and had over 100 looks in 2022. While he lost targets to Ladd McConkey last season, he looks to have the chance to pick up targets here.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL**  
**+600**

**AFC**  
**+330**

**AFC EAST**  
**-330**



# MIAMI

## DOLPHINS

There don't seem to be a lot of happy campers down in South Beach. Head coach Mike McDaniel has lamented the team's lack of execution and toughness in preseason games and joint practices. Most of the players of consequence on both sides of the ball have had no or limited reps in games, with a million reasons to protect Tua Tagovailoa and injuries to De'Von Achane, Tyreek Hill, and Jaylen Waddle. Protecting players became even more evident when Alexander Mattison suffered a season-ending neck injury.

The overarching perception on where Miami stands is low as well. Their division odds have gotten longer, now out double digits, and some have even invested in the 'Fewest Wins' market. The sportsbooks that do offer 'First Coach Fired' odds will have McDaniel at or near the top.

The Mattison and Achane injuries gave Ollie Gordon II the chance to shine a bit, as the sixth-round pick led the nation in rushing yards in 2023 at Oklahoma State, but had an underwhelming junior season in 2024. With a lot of new faces on a rebuilt defense, the offense is under the microscope, and likely tasked with saving some jobs.

### PLAYER TO WATCH: TE DARREN WALLER

Another interesting story is the return of Waller, who spent time on the PUP list for conditioning reasons after "retiring" prior to last season. With three games in 11 days to start the season, it's fair to wonder how much of an option he will be. Despite 350 career catches and over 4,000 yards, Waller only has 20 receiving touchdowns and nine came in one season. Given that Jonnu Smith led the Dolphins with six red zone TDs and was second with 14 red zone targets last season, Waller may end up a big part of the offense.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL**  
**120-1**

**AFC**  
**50-1**

**AFC EAST**  
**+950**





# NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

Drake Maye hasn't been the conductor of the hype train, but he's certainly been a passenger as it flies down the tracks. Instead, undrafted rookie WR Eton Chism III and 38th overall pick TreVeyon Henderson gave the Patriots offense and special teams the explosiveness that it lacked last season. The 2024 Patriots had just 4.8 yards per play and 1.58 points per drive.

Tenacity and toughness won't be in short supply under Mike Vrabel and DC Terrell Williams, but there's a lot more to the present-day game than smashmouth football. That's where Josh McDaniels comes in, as Maye learns a new scheme. Maye had the 11th-lowest completed air yards per pass last season per NFL Next Gen Stats. With some OL improvements and Stefon Diggs, that number should improve.

One notable stat of the preseason is that the Patriots were 8-for-12 in the red zone and kept their first two opponents to a 2-for-7 success rate before the Giants went 3-for-4. They were 30th in RZTD% last season and 25th on defense. Many see them as the only contender to the Bills in the division - and one with long odds at that.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: RB TREVEYON HENDERSON

I mean, obviously, right? What I don't think people really realize about the McDaniels offense is that he still achieves balance with his run-pass distribution. Maye is clearly not Tom Brady, but in his 13 years as OC with Brady leading the Patriots, the McDaniels offense was in the top 10 in rushing attempts 10 times and 11th once. Everybody knows that Rhamondre Stevenson is looking over his shoulder and Henderson should see more and more snaps and touches as the season goes along. Stevenson has also had under 40 catches each of the last two seasons and Henderson has terrific hands.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL 60-1**

**AFC 28-1**

**AFC EAST +475**



# NEW YORK JETS

My concerns about Aaron Glenn as a head coach grew exponentially when he challenged a reporter by saying, "Who said it was a passing league? The team that won the Super Bowl, what were they in passing? 29th. What were they in running? First." And, well, the Eagles may have the unstoppable Tush Push and the best running back in the league, but they were also eighth in Dropback EPA and 10th in adjusted net yards per pass attempt. So, they were not 29th.

Nevertheless, while Glenn's fundamental understanding of stats and efficiency may be misguided, this is going to be a risk-averse offense with a lot of short throws for Justin Fields and a whole lot of running plays. Fields' mobility could be an asset in this Tanner Engstrand offense, as he goes from the relatively immobile Jared Goff to a dual-threat type of guy.

The defense should keep shining and a bounce back season from Sauce Gardner would help the cause. The Jets came through the preseason very healthy across the two-deep and even down to the last guys to make the roster, so everybody got meaningful reps for a team that the market still believes will have double-digit losses.

## JETS PLAYER TO WATCH: LT OLU FASHANU

For the second straight year, the Jets used their first-round pick on an offensive tackle. Growing pains for Armand Membou on the right side are probably inevitable, but Fashanu is the guy who really needs to take a step forward. Fashanu took over for Tyron Smith when he suffered a season-ending injury and had a PFF Overall Grade of 61.2 (73rd out of 140 tackles) and a Pass Blocking Grade of 59.4 (84th out of 140 tackles), playing snaps at both left and right tackle. Fashanu was the third offensive lineman off the board in that 2024 NFL Draft and he'll need to step up if the Jets are to have a successful, run-first offense.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL 250-1**

**AFC 100-1**

**AFC EAST 22-1**



# BALTIMORE RAVENS

It was business as usual for the Ravens in the preseason. John Harbaugh continued fattening bankrolls and Lamar Jackson had nothing to do with it. A major injury scare during Week 3 of the preseason turned out to be nothing when Jackson's foot got stepped on in practice, but he was only sore and not hurt.

With Jackson chilling on the sidelines, the Ravens made an extreme commitment to running the football and virtually all three running backs - Keaton Mitchell, D'Ernest Johnson, and Rasheen Ali - had success in their game reps. That left quite a roster battle behind Derrick Henry and Justice Hill, who were not put at any unnecessary risk. Neither were any of the top wide receivers, as guys like LaJohntay Wester and Devontez Walker tried to make their impressions.

More news may have come out of camp had the Ravens and Commanders had joint practices as scheduled prior to their Week 3 game, but with Washington on a short week, those were cancelled. For now, it's status quo for Baltimore heading into the season as the very clear AFC North favorite following a disappointing preseason for the Bengals.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: WR DEANDRE HOPKINS

It's unfair to do this, but I'm going to do it anyway. If we extrapolated out Hopkins' 2024 regular season time with the Chiefs, he'd have had 66 catches for just shy of 700 yards. The six mostly wasted games with the Titans held down his full season numbers, but he was a 1,000-yard receiver with 75 catches in 2023. My question is - how does he fit in the Ravens offense? Zay Flowers is the clear WR1 and I'd basically consider Mark Andrews the WR2. With 127 total targets to Andrews and Isaiah Likely, 116 to Flowers, and 72 more to Rashod Bateman, how much of a factor can Hopkins really be?

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL**  
**+600**

**AFC**  
**+330**

**AFC NORTH**  
**-170**



# CINCINNATI BENGALS

Oh boy. Joe Burrow is healthy going into Week 1, which has been half the battle or more for the Bengals over the last few preseasons. Ja'Marr Chase looks great. But, the offensive line is a problem. Cordell Volson's 48.8 PFF Pass Blocking Grade score may actually lead to addition by subtraction, as Georgia rookie Dylan Fairchild looks to be in line for the first opportunity to replace him.

Head coach Zac Taylor tried to downplay the defensive shortcomings by noting that new DC Al Golden wasn't going to pull the curtain back on everything. The same Taylor who said that the Bengals were going to take the preseason more seriously in hopes of avoiding a slow start in the regular season. I don't think watching Golden's defense get torched by Riley Leonard and Jason Bean was part of the plan, though.

The Bengals agreed to a one-year bridge deal to bring Trey Hendrickson back into the fold, but he'll hit free agency next season. With one of the worst red zone defenses in the NFL, and more struggles in the preseason, backups or not...Well, you know what? At least Burrow is healthy! And at least Hendrickson is back!

## PLAYER TO WATCH: DE MYLES MURPHY

The Hendrickson situation probably gets resolved. But, it is worth noting that he had 17.5 of the team's 36 sacks. Murphy, the team's first-round pick out of Clemson in 2023, had zero. His season started late due to a sprained MCL, but he had 20 tackles and just four QB hits in 13 games. Three sacks over two seasons for a first-round pick who gets to play opposite Hendrickson is a really, really poor return on investment. Healthy entering this season, it's a big year for Murphy with a defense desperate for more negative plays.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL**  
**25-1**

**AFC**  
**12-1**

**AFC NORTH**  
**+290**



# CLEVELAND BROWNS

When the Browns came back in 1999, they became the 31st team in the NFL. In those first two seasons, they finished 31st in points scored. Last season, they finished last in the league in points scored for the fifth time since returning. They've had four winning seasons. This does not appear to be their fifth, but Dillon Gabriel and Shedeur Sanders both had bright spots in the preseason and the team probably needs to give them extended looks.

We didn't get to see Quinshon Judkins in the preseason and the Browns kept the good press going by signing Isaiah Bond after a grand jury declined to indict him on sexual assault charges. Myles Garrett seemed to speed his way through the preseason. The team's plans to build a stadium near Cleveland Hopkins Airport hit an Ohio Department of Transportation snag. Usually the worst thing about the Browns is watching them on Sundays, but it's been quite a ride already.

The betting markets expect nothing from this team and probably with good reason, even if there are a lot of good players at non-QB positions. The defense is dealing with depth issues in the back seven, but the first units at all three levels are pretty solid. Of course, they're still co-favorites in the 'Fewest Wins' betting market.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: OT DAWAND JONES, OT JACK CONKLIN

There are a lot of players to keep an eye on, including Bond, Harold Fannin Jr., and even Jamari Thrash, but nothing matters if you can't protect the QB. Conklin has only played 49 games in five seasons for the Browns, appearing in 12 games last season after only playing in one the year prior. Conklin was above average with a PFF Grade of 66.2, putting him in the top 50 among tackles. But, Jones was one of the worst run-blocking tackles and a below average pass-blocking tackle. With mediocre depth behind those two, the Browns badly need health and improvement.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL**  
**300-1**

**AFC**  
**120-1**

**AFC NORTH**  
**40-1**



# PITTSBURGH STEELERS

After years of rooting against The Great 8 on the ice, the city of Pittsburgh is hoping for their own Great 8 on the gridiron. Aaron Rodgers did not make a preseason appearance, so his Steelers debut comes in Week 1 against his previous employer.

The 41-year-old will have to move the chains on some key third downs and execute in the red zone when called upon. The Jets were 0-7 last year in games decided by six or fewer points. Does the supporting cast for the Steelers, coupled with never-had-a-losing-season Mike Tomlin, help an old dog relearn some tricks? Per Pro-Football-Reference, Rodgers has a 45/6 TD/INT ratio on play-action passes. Russell Wilson and Justin Fields had a 2/1 TD/INT ratio on 123 play-action attempts last season. I'd expect some of that in this Arthur Smith offense.

Speaking of great things, T.J. Watt does a lot of them. So does Jalen Ramsey, well, maybe "did" is the right vernacular, but he'll play nickel with Darius Slay and Joey Porter Jr. as the wide corners. While I would say that the betting markets are split on this team, the closer we get to the season, the more Kool-Aid being passed around.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: TE PAT FREIERMUTH

Obviously most of the focus at the TE position will be on Jonnu Smith, who has a ton of familiarity with Smith as a play caller, but how about we look at Freiermuth? While 65 catches represented only two more than his previous career high, he did it in only 78 targets. He had an 83.3% Catch% and seven TD to tie his rookie season. His 2024 snap share was the highest of his career at 68.7%. Smith may take away some snaps and maybe some targets, but Freiermuth could be a huge weapon.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL**  
**35-1**

**AFC**  
**16-1**

**AFC NORTH**  
**+475**





# HOUSTON TEXANS

The only QB sacked more times than C.J. Stroud last season was rookie Caleb Williams. Stroud was dropped 52 times for more than 400 yards worth of loss. The Texans still won the lackluster AFC South and also won a playoff game for the second straight season. So it is fun to imagine what Stroud and the Texans could do if he hadn't been sacked 90 times in two seasons with 739 yards of loss.

It does make the Texans a hard team to handicap in some respects because they are 20-14 in the regular season with a +24 point differential, which typically points towards a downturn of fortune. On the other hand, Houston drafted Aireontae Ersery in the second round and signed Jake Andrews, Laken Tomlinson, and Cam Robinson in hopes of keeping Stroud upright.

With limited playing time in preseason games, it was up to Stroud and the new OL members to gel in practice reps. The line also hasn't blocked for Joe Mixon, who has missed pretty much all of camp. So, plenty of questions remain, but the defense should be solid again and the offense has room to grow with new OC Nick Caley.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: WR CHRISTIAN KIRK

Kirk switched AFC South teams this offseason, going from the Jaguars to Texans. He only played eight games last season, but had 47 targets and 27 catches. As a guy with over 100 targets in three of his seven seasons, Houston makes sense as a landing spot with Tank Dell out and the need for a WR2 behind Nico Collins, who has had his own injury issues. Jayden Higgins and Jaylin Noel could very well have been mentioned here, but the speedster Kirk in an offense likely to use a fullback for more pass protection has high upside potential.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL 40-1**

**AFC 18-1**

**AFC SOUTH +105**



# INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

Arguably the biggest story of the preseason came when Shane Steichen named Daniel Jones the Week 1 starter for the Colts. Then he sat Anthony Richardson for the final preseason game, noting that it wasn't worth the injury risk. While that is a reasonable stance to take with a dicey starter in Jones, there are so many potential layers to this decision.

How do the players feel? How do the fans feel? How does the front office feel? Does the newcomer have a better grasp of the playbook than the third-year holdover? If so, why? Richardson has spent a lot of time injured, but he can still watch tape, scout, and learn. Jones is also a free agent at season's end, so unless the Colts are prepared to come with a multi-year deal with Richardson on the hook for a cap hit of nearly \$11 million next season, what is the plan here?

The Jones announcement didn't seem to materially alter futures odds or the Week 1 game against the Dolphins, who are not highly-viewed by the betting market. If Jones is indeed the right call, there's a lot of talent, young and old, on both sides of the ball, plus an offensive line that played together a ton last season.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: TE TYLER WARREN

Warren has shined throughout camp, which has to be exactly what the Colts' brass wanted to see. He was taken 14th overall after amassing 104 catches for 1,233 yards for Penn State, which amounted to 35.6% of their receptions and 33.8% of their receiving yards. He might even be a short-yardage ball carrier, which is probably a good idea behind Jonathan Taylor given the lack of size at the position. Expect him to be a huge part of this offense.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL 150-1**

**AFC 60-1**

**AFC SOUTH +400**



# JACKSONVILLE

## JAGUARS

The big story in Jaguars camp is Travis Hunter. That will happen with a two-way player and elite athlete who has the ability to make special plays on both sides of the ball. But, personally, I think the story should be Trevor Lawrence, who has looked very comfortable in practice reps and game action under first-year head coach Liam Coen and OC Grant Udinski.

Lawrence has not played well the last two seasons. Injuries to himself and several wide receivers played a big role last season, but he had just a 21/14 TD/INT ratio in 2023 and 11/7 in 2024. The 26-year-old is hardly washed and it sure seems like Coen's arrival, as a strong branch of the Sean McVay coaching tree, has the potential to lead Lawrence back to top-10 QB territory. Remember, he was seventh in MVP voting back in 2022.

Hunter could be an impact player on a defense that badly needs one. After allowing nearly six yards per play last season and the second-most points per drive, little seems to have stood out on that side of the ball in camp. Recent draft picks Yasir Abdullah and Jarrian Jones need to take a leap.

### PLAYER TO WATCH: RB TRAVIS ETIENNE JR., TE BRENTON STRANGE

Maybe an obvious choice with the starting running back and tight end, but the Bucs got 98 receptions on 109 targets from Rachaad White and Bucky Irving with Coen as the OC last season. He didn't have that luxury with the Rams in 2022, but did use TE Tyler Higbee a ton, as he led the team with 108 targets. For fantasy or player prop purposes, keep a close eye on these two.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL**  
**100-1**

**AFC**  
**45-1**

**AFC SOUTH**  
**+280**



# TENNESSEE

## TITANS

Cam Ward has certainly taken on the leadership role of a starting QB in the NFL based on training camp reports of how he brought energy and a little trash talk to boost his boys on offense. As for his performance throwing the football, reading defenses, and picking up on blitzes, it sounded like a real mixed bag.

His game reps - and he played all three games - were exactly what you'd expect from a rookie QB taken first overall. The arm strength looked good and he developed an immediate rapport with top target Calvin Ridley. He'll need to foster that relationship more with newcomer Tyler Lockett, but the Titans also have good receiving backs as safety valves. C Lloyd Cushenberry III being activated from the PUP list also helps.

As bad as things were for the Tennessee offense last season, the defense only allowed 5.2 yards per play and the second-fewest yards in the NFL. Of course, they were 30th in scoring defense because the team was -16 in TO margin. With a lot of vets on D, most of those guys got their significant reps in joint practices.

### PLAYER TO WATCH: WR ELIC AYOMANOR

It would have been too easy to highlight Ward here, so let's look at a wide receiver who could move up the depth chart as the season goes along. As mentioned, Ridley and Ward seem to have gelled, but he's still searching for that relationship with Lockett. Ayomanor has gotten first-team reps in game action and probably has more upside than somebody like veteran Van Jefferson. Ayomanor might be a good red zone option as the tallest of the receivers.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL**  
**200-1**

**AFC**  
**80-1**

**AFC SOUTH**  
**+650**



# DENVER BRONCOS

The betting market still believes that the AFC West goes through the Chiefs, but the Broncos have clearly gotten more attention than the Chargers in terms of the teams looking to knock Kansas City off its perch. The offensive starters looked iffy in game conditions, but finished on a high note with a scoring drive in the final preseason game.

This is one of the healthiest teams coming into the regular season. The football gods have been shining down on Denver, as Nate Adkins is likely to miss a game or two in the regular season, but the roster mostly avoided the soft tissue injuries and other ailments that a lot of teams dealt with throughout the month of August. Linebackers Dre Greenlaw and Nick Bonitto did miss some reps, but those are not guys you need to worry about because they will be ready.

Denver's futures odds keep slowly creeping down and we're likely to see more bettors tired of the Chiefs' division dominance wishfully think that the Broncos will be the ones to do the deed. With that defense, new heights are certainly possible.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: TE EVAN ENGRAM

We haven't seen a ton of Engram in the preseason, but Sean Payton talked with reporters about his well-known "Joker" role, which is a running back or tight end heavily involved in the offense by working the middle of the field. Last season, the Broncos didn't have the personnel to effectively fill that role. This season, they have quicker backs with better hands and a stronger tight end in Engram. Tight ends had 51 receptions for the Broncos last season. Engram has gone over that total in four of his eight seasons and would have gone over it in the other four seasons had he not missed games due to injury.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL 22-1**

**AFC 11-1**

**AFC WEST +250**



# KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

The second-biggest news to come out of Chiefs camp this preseason is that Andy Reid was almost hit by a bullet in his office at the team's practice facility in May 2024. Three bullets reportedly hit the building, including one that lodged in the wall about 15 feet from his desk per The Kansas City Star. The biggest news was that Travis and Jason Kelce finally got Taylor Swift on the "New Heights" podcast.

Not to make light of that scary and dangerous situation by any means, but status quo was maintained otherwise. Rashee Rice's hearing with the NFL is set for September 30, so Patrick Mahomes should have him for the first four weeks, which, coincidentally, are among the toughest for the Chiefs with the Chargers, Eagles, and Ravens in that span.

Rookie OT Josh Simmons drew rave reviews in the preseason, so the offensive line could be improved, leading to better protection for Patrick Mahomes and bigger holes for the running game. That would help tremendously, as Kareem Hunt and Isiah Pacheco averaged just 3.6 and 3.7 yards per carry, respectively.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: RB BRASHARD SMITH

The rookie seventh-round back moved from wide receiver at Miami to running back at SMU and racked up 1,332 yards and 39 catches for 327 yards. Hunt is a between-the-tackles back and Pacheco, who has been bogged down by injuries, only has 4.8 yards per touch, including just 5.7 yards per receiving target. Smith could take on a bigger role when Rice is inevitably suspended, but I think he may end up taking on a bigger role in the running game rather quickly.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL +850**

**AFC +400**

**AFC WEST -115**





# LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

What if I told you that the Raiders could be the team to give the Chiefs a run for their money? It may come off hyperbolic, and maybe it is, but the talent level is improved on this roster and Pete Carroll is obviously a few steps above the last few coaches for the Silver & Black. Of course, they're still the longest shot outside of the hapless Browns to be a division winner, but Brock Bowers and Ashton Jeanty are special skill-position players to build around.

Geno Smith had limited preseason game action, but he's a veteran and he'll be ready to go for a team that was -16 in TO margin last season. Nobody really emerged at wide receiver, so Bowers will be the primary target again, but Smith throws a good, accurate ball and that is an upgrade over what the Raiders have had.

Defensively, the return of Malcolm Koonce, who missed all of last season with a torn ACL is an underrated development. He hasn't had any setbacks and had eight sacks back in 2023 playing opposite Maxx Crosby. That in and of itself is a microcosm of why the Raiders have some promise - they suffered no major injuries during the preseason.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: WR TRE TUCKER

Tucker only hauled in 47 of his 81 targets last season, but he was the de facto WR2 to Jakobi Meyers. The 5-foot-8 Tucker has the chance to be a middle class man's Tyler Lockett, as Lockett stood just 5-foot-10, but had a Catch% of 71.8%, 64.8%, and 66.2% with Smith in Seattle. With Meyers and Bowers likely to attract a ton of attention, Tucker may very well be sitting on a breakout season with Chip Kelly's scheme.

odds

SUPER  
BOWL  
150-1

AFC  
60-1

AFC  
WEST  
22-1



# LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

Rashawn Slater's season-ending knee injury cast a dark shadow over the preseason for the Chargers. The under-reported injury to Mekhi Becton also loomed from late July throughout the month of August. So, the Chargers have some questions on the offensive line entering the season, one in which they open with three straight division games.

Fortunately for LA, Joe Alt simply flipped to the other side of the line and seventh-year vet Trey Pipkins has ample experience at the right tackle position. But, two starter injuries hurt the depth and the depth of a team might be the most important in the trenches with the physical nature of those spots. That was rather evident when Justin Herbert played in the preseason for the first time and went 2-for-5 with a sack against the Rams.

Little has been said about Najee Harris' eye injury, so it looks like first-round pick Omarion Hampton will start right out of the gate at running back. With Quentin Johnston concussed and Tre Harris dealing with a nagging injury, it's fair to wonder if the Chargers will be firing on offense to start the year, which will put pressure on last season's top-ranked scoring defense.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: RB OMARION HAMPTON

Pretty obvious choice here, but the Harris eye injury and the fact that he has only averaged 3.9 yards per carry in his career, Hampton is the clear upside back. Harris has played all 17 games in all four of his seasons and has been a 1,000-yard rusher in all of them. And the Chargers, even with the injuries, still have a strong offensive line. But, Hampton led the ACC in carries in both 2023 and 2024, so he proved he's durable while also ripping off 5.9 yards per carry. Ironically, a similar stat line to Harris in college. The timeshare will be interesting, especially if one outshines the other.

odds

SUPER  
BOWL  
25-1

AFC  
12-1

AFC  
WEST  
+350



# DALLAS COWBOYS

Everything's bigger in Texas, including the contract negotiations. Or lack thereof, in this case. Micah Parsons and owner/GM Jerry Jones seem to no longer be talking. Maybe this situation does resolve itself prior to Week 1 and Parsons will be out there. First-year head coach Brian Schottenheimer seemed to think so. I don't think many people have that same level of confidence.

Jones also alienated star defensive back Trevon Diggs, whose base salary for this season was dropped by \$500,000 for not participating in 84% of the team's offseason program. He was rehabbing an injury that ended his 2024 season in December on the heels of missing 15 games to a torn ACL in 2023. It's always a soap opera in Big D.

Injuries weren't limited to the defense, though the carryover injuries to DeMarvion Overshown and Shavon Revel Jr. deserve mentions, too. The offense line has had its share of bumps, bruises, and broken bones in camp. Dak Prescott is healthy and a lot of the skill guys are returnees, but it really feels like this team is set up more for failure than success at present.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: QB DAK PRESCOTT

Obviously Dak is the most important player on this roster if the Cowboys are to have success. Javonte Williams was an underwhelming addition to the running back room after Rico Dowdle left for Carolina. He has back-to-back seasons well below four yards per carry, an issue exacerbated by preseason injuries suffered by Miles Sanders and Jaydon Blue. Dallas had 209 more pass attempts than rush attempts, not to mention the 38 sacks on dropbacks, so they were pass-happy last season and may be even more pass-dependent this season. Or, he'll have to follow his head coach's advice, who said, "Dak's gotta be able to run."

**odds**  
SUPER BOWL  
**55-1**  
NFC  
**25-1**  
NFC EAST  
**+650**



# NEW YORK GIANTS

Is it fair to say that no team had a better preseason than the Giants? They went 3-0, not that wins and losses are a determining factor, but Jaxon Dart looked the part and there were no major injuries. The team took it easy with prized WR Malik Nabers and his barking back, but beyond that, everybody got their work in. Cam Skattebo missed a couple of days, but judging by how quickly Brian Daboll was to protect veteran starting jobs, he wasn't going to beat out Tyrone Tracy Jr. or even Devin Singletary.

The only potential downside to come out of August for the Giants is that the fan base and media will be clamoring for Dart at the first hint of trouble for Russell Wilson, who played in one preseason game and went 10-of-14 for 136 yards with a pick on a miscommunication. Daboll shut down any Dart discussion very early in camp, but you know it has a chance to pop up down the line.

The Giants looked impressive enough to chop their NFC East Division winner price down a bit and Dart saw some attention in the Rookie of the Year market. The schedule is still very brutal, especially early, but the glass got closer to half-full for this team as a result of the preseason.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: CB PAULSON ADEBO

Not what you expected to see here, but the Giants only had five interceptions last year. If not for 10 fumble recoveries, which seems like a number ripe for regression this season, they would have finished worse than their 28th ranking in takeaways. They were -8 in TO margin and had the second-fewest interceptions in the league. Despite the lack of takeaways, they were still 16th in percentage of opponents' drives ending in points. One way to get better is to improve the TO margin. That should happen on offense. Adebo, who got a fat contract this winter, should help a lot, given that Deonte Banks, who led the team in pass breakups, had just a 50.3 coverage grade and a 50.9 overall grade from PFF.

**odds**  
SUPER BOWL  
**150-1**  
NFC  
**60-1**  
NFC EAST  
**18-1**



# PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

The Eagles are hoping to run it back as Super Bowl champs with virtually the same team as last season. There are a few losses here and there, but several years of great drafting and savvy signings have Philly in a good position. Landon Dickerson's meniscus injury was easily the most eventful thing of the preseason, but he's targeting a Week 1 return. Even if he misses a game or two, the Eagles should be fine.

But, that is the one position group that feels a little light on depth. Dickerson has to stay healthy and so do the others around him, at least until the backups and practice squad guys can be coached up a bit more. Even the loss of Saquon Barkley doesn't seem too daunting with the preseasons that Will Shipley and AJ Dillon had. If it was a short-term deal, of course. Even the health of Jalen Hurts, while important, seems navigable with the way Tanner McKee looked last season and in the preseason.

Nakobe Dean and Zack Baun missed some training camp reps, giving Jeremiah Trotter Jr. and Smael Mondon Jr. the chance to stand out. This ferocious defense is full of playmakers on the two-deep and it wouldn't be a surprise to see lighter workloads early when possible thanks to the 23-week season last year.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: TE DALLAS GOEDERT

Goedert played 10 games during the regular season last year and the Eagles went 8-2, not to mention the 4-0 in the postseason. The Eagles are a better team with him on the field, as it is a scary proposition to have to use single coverage on DeVonta Smith and AJ Brown, let alone trying to find a way to keep eyes on Saquon Barkley. Across the regular season and playoffs, Goedert caught 59 of his 72 targets. New OC Kevin Patullo, elevated from Pass Game Coordinator, is likely to keep viewing Goedert as a focal point.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL**  
**+700**

**NFC**  
**+360**

**NFC EAST**  
**-140**



# WASHINGTON COMMANDERS

The cover of our Refreshed NFL "2.0" Betting Guide kind of says it all, right? We had some impressive rookie performances and some that showed promise. Who will take their teams to the next level? Well, in the case of Jayden Daniels, who already took his team all the way to the NFC Championship Game, a sophomore slump would be a major surprise.

The end of Terry McLaurin's holdout came at the right time, as he easily paced the team with 117 targets and 82 catches in the regular season. The presence of Deebo Samuel does give Kliff Kingsbury and Daniels a really fun weapon to work with. More reps for Austin Ekeler would help also, as he was fourth in receptions and fifth in targets. Given that Jacory "Bill" Croskey-Merritt had all of seven catches at the FBS level, we'll see more Ekeler.

Dan Quinn's apathy towards the preseason continued, as the Commanders went 0-3 and got outscored 109-38. This is a defense that was 23rd in points per drive against and only had 17 takeaways plus a bottom-five run-stopping unit. But, they added a lot over the offseason. We just didn't see much of them or from them in August.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: DE DEATRICH WISE JR.

Washington focused heavily on the defense in free agency and the draft, including Wise. Wise, along with opposite end Dorance Armstrong, had a much higher PFF Pass Rush Grade than Run Defense Grade. Second-year DC Joe Whitt is likely to run a pretty deep rotation on the edge based on down and distance, a luxury he didn't really have last season. For a team that gave up 200+ rushing yards in five games and 150+ in four more games, the improved depth is a godsend, even with the loss of sack leader Dante Fowler.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL**  
**19-1**

**NFC**  
**+900**

**NFC EAST**  
**+220**





# CHICAGO BEARS

There were a lot of things to like about Chicago's preseason. Caleb Williams was 17-of-25 for 220 yards with a couple touchdowns and just one sack. Tyson Bagent was spectacular, going 46-of-69 for 511 yards and a 5/1 TD/INT ratio. The running game still needs a bit of work, though D'Andre Swift played very little and primary backup Roschon Johnson didn't play at all.

But, we saw plenty of glimpses of the Ben Johnson offense in action. The Bears were last in total offensive yards last season, outgained by over 1,200 yards, and were -1.4 in yards per play differential. With virtually no help from the offense, the defense did about as well as it could and we know that's a very deep and talented group. It was all about the offense this offseason with the Johnson hire and it looks like a good one thus far.

That being said, Chicago's odds to win the NFC North have gotten longer and you can still find a plus-money price tag on Over 8.5 Wins, much like you could when our original NFL Betting Guide came out on July 1. In other words, plenty of skeptics still exist.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: RB D'ANDRE SWIFT

It feels like Swift, who only mustered 3.8 yards per carry last season, should have a new lease on life with Johnson. Interestingly, even though he averaged 0.8 fewer yards per carry from 2023 to 2024, he still had almost the same number of yards per touch. He was a really effective pass catcher with 9.2 yards per reception to set a career-best mark. Given that he'll be expected to be the Jahmyr Gibbs of this offense, it's worth noting that with Johnson as his OC in 2023, he averaged a career-high 6.3 yards per touch, 1.7 YPT better than last season.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL 45-1**

**NFC 20-1**

**NFC NORTH +550**



# DETROIT LIONS

Statistically, it was an underwhelming preseason for the Lions, who squandered their extra game in Canton with a hideous 34-7 loss. Their other games didn't go much better, but Hendon Hooker played a lot and looked awful in the process. Jared Goff didn't see any preseason snaps and neither did most of the starters on both sides of the ball, as Dan Campbell opted to use joint practices for those reps.

There didn't seem to be a lot of positive buzz for the Lions over the summer, as the losses of Ben Johnson and Aaron Glenn dominated the fact that this is still a very good football team. Yet, they are still the favorites to win the NFC North, though that price has gone up a little bit with some love for their division rivals.

Multiple players did note some growing pains with new OC John Morton's offense, but the joint practice reps were reportedly stronger and stronger as they went along. The defense under former linebackers coach turned DC Kelvin Sheppard might be ahead of the offense at the start of the season. Frankly, that's not a bad thing.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: WR ISAAC TESLAA

This was an obvious choice, as TeSlaa was one of the most buzzworthy players of the exhibition period. He caught 10 of 13 targets for 146 yards and three touchdowns as a 6-foot-4 third-round pick out of Arkansas. Amon-Ra St. Brown and Jameson Williams combined for 232 targets, 173 catches, and 2,264 yards last season. But, WR3 Tim Patrick only had 33 grabs on 44 targets for 394 yards. TeSlaa is a big body in the red zone and could be a very valuable weapon.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL 11-1**

**NFC +550**

**NFC NORTH +160**



# GREEN BAY PACKERS

Personally, I'm extremely interested in the Packers this season. Not because I have a lot of bets on or against them, but because they've barely been discussed in the lead-up to the 2025 campaign. The Lions have the new coordinators and are the division favorites. The Bears have Ben Johnson, second-year QB Caleb Williams, and reside in a major media market. The Vikings have J.J. McCarthy as an unproven first-time starter.

And the Packers don't really seem to be talked about one way or the other. Jordan Love was just 1-of-5 for seven yards before having surgery on his left thumb, so he missed out on some valuable reps with newcomer Matthew Golden and others. At least he'll have a full week and then some to get ready.

The Packers just weren't an exciting preseason team because there weren't any huge additions or big position battles, outside of one that emerged at left tackle. This was a team that went 11-6 in the regular season with the six losses by 24 points. It's about recent draftees elevating the ceiling of the squad more than anything else. And that's just not headline-worthy, even if this should be a solid team again.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: WR MATTHEW GOLDEN

With several NFL-caliber wide receivers, the Packers still took one in the first round of the April Draft. Christian Watson is likely to miss most of the season coming back from a torn ACL and the health of the unit overall feels touch-and-go on a regular basis. Dontayvion Wicks led the team in targets with 76 and only caught 51.3% of those. Jayden Reed is really the WR1 here, but if you look at each individual guy, you can see why the Packers isolated Golden and the upside he possesses.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL 19-1**

**NFC +900**

**NFC NORTH +225**



# MINNESOTA VIKINGS

Jonathan James McCarthy. Quarterback whisperer Kevin O'Connell probably would have liked to get McCarthy some game action last year, but it was a learning year for the Michigan product after suffering a torn meniscus. McCarthy got on the field in the preseason opener and led a field goal drive by going 4-of-7 for 30 yards. Otherwise, he got his reps in joint practices and team activities.

Obviously he's set up for success with a dynamic cast of skill players, though Jordan Addison, who had an 18-yard catch from McCarthy in that game against the Texans, is out for the first three games of the season serving a suspension. Justin Jefferson missed a lot of camp with a hamstring injury. So, there could be some serious growing pains in the MNF opener against the Bears and in other early-season tilts.

Fortunately, the Vikings are strong most everywhere else with a deep and talented, albeit rebuilt, offensive line and a terrific defense led by DC Brian Flores. The betting market seems to have some belief in the Vikes, or maybe just less belief in the Lions, as their price to win the NFC North, much like Green Bay's, has shrunk a bit.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: RB JORDAN MASON

Mason averaged 5.2 yards per carry for the 49ers last season and has averaged 5.3 YPC in his 236 career attempts. Teams with smart play-callers like O'Connell don't just do things like this out of nowhere. Aaron Jones had 255 of the team's 457 carries last season and more than 300 touches overall. You have to think Mason will cut into the rushing attempts and probably some goal-line attempts. Jones only averaged 2.0 YPC in 42 red zone rush attempts with four rushing touchdowns. Mason might be a good deep-league fantasy option or an Anytime TD guy at plus money each week.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL 25-1**

**NFC 11-1**

**NFC NORTH +320**



# ATLANTA FALCONS

In July, I wrote about how the Falcons used their limited free agent dollars and their draft picks on the defensive side of the ball. Now we'll get to see how those perceived improvements play out, as they look better in terms of rushing the passer and forcing turnovers. If those two things come to fruition, then it will be all about how Michael Penix Jr. and the offense does converting those opportunities into points.

Unfortunately, the news turned bad late in the preseason with Kaleb McGary's multi-week injury. The starting right tackle will miss time and his backup, Storm Norton, also had surgery that will take up a good chunk of the first part of the season. We are fortunate as football fans and bettors that there weren't a ton of long-term, significant injuries in the preseason, but McGary's is definitely one of them. That's especially true because he protects the left-handed QB's blind side.

The glass is half-full on defense, though. Offseason additions have created more depth on the line and Atlanta is likely to employ more of a rotation this season. Given that they allowed 2.34 points per drive (28th), the second-most passing TDs in the league, and mustered just 31 sacks, fresher bodies could be impactful.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: QB MICHAEL PENIX JR.

Obviously, right? Penix was 1-2 in three starts and posted a 3/3 TD/INT ratio taking over for Kirk Cousins. We saw the good. We saw the bad. We saw the accuracy and the inaccuracy. We saw nothing in the preseason because he didn't play in any of the exhibition games. Many of the second-team WRs reportedly had strong camps to make roster decisions tougher. Well, it was Cousins throwing to them. Penix simply has to be treated as an unknown heading into the season.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL 80-1**

**NFC 35-1**

**NFC SOUTH +210**



# CAROLINA PANTHERS

The Panthers scored 23 points and went 0-3 in the preseason. But, Bryce Young led the only touchdown drive in Week 1 against the Browns and played just two possessions the following week, getting pulled from the game after taking a third-down sack. Chuba Hubbard only had five carries for 14 yards. First-round pick Tetairoa McMillan got more reps than others, including five targets in the first preseason game.

All in all, Dave Canales and the coaching staff just wanted to keep everybody healthy and work on some different things in joint practices and team activities. You can't blame him, given that one of the problems bad teams face is usually a lack of depth. For the Panthers, the drop-off from the starters to the backups is rather significant at nearly every position.

The most shocking thing that happened in the preseason is that the Panthers released second-leading tackler Josey Jewell while he was in concussion protocol. For the worst scoring defense in the NFL to make that move so quickly was eye-opening, mostly because it speaks to how hard his attempt to return has been, as the incident happened in Week 15 last year.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: CB MIKE JACKSON

Jaycee Horn was a Pro Bowler last season, but you could easily argue that Jackson was the better player. Not the be-all, end-all, but Horn, who was an above average player, had just a 57.7 PFF Coverage Grade that ranked below average out of 222 CBs. Jackson had a 67.1 PFF Coverage Grade. His 17 pass breakups led the team and he was one of two players with multiple interceptions. He barely played over his first three seasons before a breakout year in 2022 with the Seahawks with 12 pass breakups and 75 tackles. Then he had a down year. If he's for real, and with the upgrades to the front seven, the Panthers can improve on D.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL 150-1**

**NFC 60-1**

**NFC SOUTH +475**





# NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

It probably isn't a good sign when an NFL quarterback competition isn't decided by the end of the preseason. It's a regular occurrence in college football going into Week 1, but you never really see it at the NFL level anymore. The Saints obviously drafted Tyler Shough expecting that he could turn into a competent NFL starter. Presumably they did the same with Spencer Rattler, who was drafted three rounds later than Shough, but in the 2024 draft.

Armed with a lot of easy throws in first-year head coach Kellen Moore's offense, both guys had high completion rates, but few downfield shots or explosive plays. It is also probably a bad sign that both Rattler (W1) and Shough (W3) were the leading rushers in two of the three preseason games. In total, the Saints allowed 11 sacks across the three games.

Frankly, I'm surprised that as of August 24, the Saints and Browns were still co-favorites for the Fewest Wins. New Orleans looks to pretty clearly be the worst team in the NFL on paper as of now, regardless of who "won" the starting QB gig.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: RB ALVIN KAMARA

Following a season in which he had a career-high 296 touches, Kamara has a chance to crack 300 this year with Moore and OC Doug Nussmeier. Saquon Barkley only had 33 catches last season, but had a league-high 345 rushing attempts. Of course the Eagles led a lot of games and the Saints won't, so Kamara's going to get targets. Austin Ekeler had 74 and was second on the 2023 Chargers. Tony Pollard and Ezekiel Elliott combined for 78 in Dallas in 2022 and 111 in 2021. Kamara didn't play in the preseason, as Moore was evaluating the backups.

odds

SUPER  
BOWL  
400-1

NFC  
160-1

NFC  
SOUTH  
18-1



# TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

Nobody ever wants to see an injury in the preseason, but some injuries are less impactful than others. The presence of Emeka Egbuka has had that effect on Jalen McMillan's scary and unfortunate injury. McMillan has a severely sprained neck, so something that the Bucs are going to take very seriously. With Chris Godwin out until October, drafting Egbuka, who regularly shined as a route runner and run blocker in college, wound up being an excellent decision by the front office.

One injured player far more difficult to replace is Tristan Wirfs, who will also start the season on the sidelines. The protector of Baker Mayfield's blind side has a very important job with Baker's long load-up and throwing motion to get as much on the ball as his frame allows. As productive as Bucky Irving and Rachaad White were last season, this was still a pass-first offense with over 600 dropbacks compared to 483 rushes.

The play distribution is actually something I am watching closely. First-year OC Josh Grizzard, who steps into the role previously held by Liam Coen and previously held before that by Dave Canales, who are now both head coaches, was Tampa Bay's Pass Game Coordinator last season.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: WR TEZ JOHNSON

Egbuka would have been the obvious choice, but he's not sneaking up on anybody now. Johnson can, as he caught 12 of 15 targets in the preseason for 82 yards. Egbuka can move around the formation and Johnson should be able to as well, even though he played the slot a ton at Oregon. That was also scheme-related, as Oregon threw a ton of quick passes to get the playmakers the ball in space. With future Hall of Famer Mike Evans, two talented backs, Egbuka, and a solid TE in Cade Otton, there are only so many eyes to watch everybody. Johnson could be a sneaky good player here.

odds

SUPER  
BOWL  
25-1

NFC  
11-1

NFC  
SOUTH  
-115



# ARIZONA CARDINALS

A four-win improvement from Year 1 to Year 2 for Jonathan Gannon didn't seem to generate a whole lot of praise or buzz this summer. As host Stormy Buonantony correctly pointed out on our VSIN Pro Football Futures Draft on August 13, Call of Duty: Black Ops 7 comes out on November 14, so Kyler Murray may be a bit distracted as the season rolls along.

Half-truths, half-jokes aside, it does seem like Murray is the reason people don't believe much in the Cardinals. Gannon's team went from 28th to 14th in point differential year over year, along with a bump from 31st to 15th in points allowed on defense. The pass defense went from 30th in TDs allowed to fifth. We have seen the NFC West odds tighten up a bit throughout the preseason, as Murray got some game reps in Week 1 and none after that.

Without question, that improved secondary is the area of worry for Gannon and his staff. Sean Murphy-Bunting was already out for the season when Starling Thomas V tore his ACL in late July. Second-round pick Will Johnson will be thrown right into the fire, quite possibly opposite second-year corner Max Melton. The Cardinals improved by eight sacks year over year under Gannon. They may need to do even better in 2025.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: WR MARVIN HARRISON JR.

The fact that the Cardinals don't have a very good group of wide receivers didn't help Harrison in his rookie year, but the highly-touted fourth overall pick in 2024 only had two games with 97+ yards and had four of his eight touchdowns within the first four weeks of the season. He only caught 53.4% of his targets on the season. Of course, he also was thrown a lot of deep, low-percentage passes. Hopefully OC Drew Petzing figured out better ways to get him the ball this offseason.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL**  
**55-1**

**NFC**  
**25-1**

**NFC WEST**  
**+425**



# LOS ANGELES RAMS

Most training camp injuries didn't really move the needle all that much, but the ongoing back woes of Matthew Stafford definitely got a lot of attention. Sean McVay never plays his starters in the preseason, and the backups really battled in an absolute throwaway game in Cleveland in Week 3, so we wouldn't have seen Stafford anyway. But, he would have been out there in joint practices and other team activities to get in gear for his age-37 season.

Because he wasn't, he didn't get many reps with newcomer Davante Adams, who will be expected to pick up some of the volume of Cooper Kupp. The Rams also dealt with injuries to Alaric Jackson and Willie Lampkin IV on the offensive line. For a reigning division champ with minimal roster turnover, it has not been an enjoyable preseason.

The one silver lining was that Stetson Bennett looked awesome, so good, in fact, that the Rams kept him out of their final preseason game and gave the entire thing to Dresser Winn. Stafford was said to be a full participant in practice during the final week of preseason games, but it's likely to be touch-and-go for a while, especially when we see him actually get hit for the first time.

## PLAYER TO WATCH: RB BLAKE CORUM

Will Stafford's injury force McVay into a little more reliance on the run? Kyren Williams, who is only three months and 19 days older than Corum, enters his fourth NFL season. He's had 610 touches over the last two regular seasons, plus 53 more in three playoff games. Corum was second in rushing attempts with 58 last season as a rookie. Williams also has 125 red zone carries in the last two years, so he's done a lot of physical running. Corum should get more time and the Rams need to find out if he'll be a serviceable RB2 going forward.

**odds**

**SUPER BOWL**  
**22-1**

**NFC**  
**10-1**

**NFC WEST**  
**+200**



# SAN FRANCISCO

## 49ERS

The NFC West team of choice for many has been the 49ers. According to Aaron Schatz at FTN, the 49ers had 141.2 adjusted man games lost, which was more than 20 higher than the next closest team. All of the injury attrition and other factors gave the 49ers their first losing season since 2020. They went 35-16 in the regular season in between.

While the team is healthier, “healthy” is hardly how to best describe the Niners going into Week 1. Brandon Aiyuk remains out. Jauan Jennings hurt his calf. Guards Ben Bartch and Dominick Puni are also dealing with injuries, along with several guys on the defensive side. With some of the high-priced contracts the 49ers have doled out in recent years, they’ve had some issues filling out their depth chart. And they are dangerously thin on the OL and in the secondary.

Picking up Brian Robinson Jr. as a Christian McCaffrey insurance policy was a sharp move. The 49ers, despite all of last season’s injuries, were still +1.0 in yards per play differential. They were -10 in TO margin and gave up 219 more yards to penalties than their opponents. Half-full. Half-empty. All in the eyes of the beholder with their prospects for 2025.

### 49ERS PLAYER TO WATCH: WR RICKY PEARSALL

If healthy, Jennings will be the WR1, as he led the team with 113 targets, though he did only have 975 yards on 77 catches. With Aiyuk out and Deebo Samuel gone, there are plenty of targets available. Pearsall, who only played 11 games last season, caught 31 of his 46 targets for 400 yards. Pearsall wound up with a 67.5% snap share, but that number will absolutely go up this season.

odds

SUPER  
BOWL  
**19-1**

NFC  
**+900**

NFC  
WEST  
**+155**



# SEATTLE

## SEAHAWKS

Perceived as a regression candidate by overachieving last season, the Seahawks are the long shot to win the NFC West, despite the fact that they had 10 wins last season. They were only +7 in point differential and outgained by nine yards overall, but Mike Macdonald’s crew won six of their last eight games after the bye week. Not a bad season-long arc for a first-year head coach.

Former OC Ryan Grubb went back to college and the Seahawks made a very sharp hire bringing in Klint Kubiak. There are a lot of Sam Darnold detractors out there, but it does seem like he’ll be playing in a competent offense for the second straight year. He’s got tons of weapons and looked comfortable leading a touchdown drive in his only preseason action.

Most of the top defenders sat out the preseason games, but it is worth noting that Macdonald and DC Aden Durde whipped the unit into shape last year. They gave up 19.6 PPG after the bye compared to 24.6 PPG before it. Like the offense, the defense is very healthy entering the season.

### SEAHAWKS PLAYER TO WATCH: RB ZACH CHARBONNET

Charbonnet has gotten a lot of important time in front of the coaches, especially Kubiak. While he’s installing his new scheme, it has been Charbonnet running with the 1s, since Kenneth Walker III has missed time with foot and ankle issues. He was limited to 12 games last season and has seen his yards per carry go from 4.6 to 4.1 to 3.7. A timeshare could be in the works, but Kubiak has seen more of Charbonnet’s skill set to this point and he’s definitely ahead of the curve.

odds

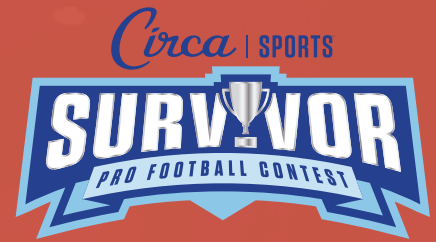
SUPER  
BOWL  
**60-1**

NFC  
**28-1**

NFC  
WEST  
**+500**



# THE HISTORY OF CIRCA SURVIVOR



BY DAVE TULEY

Do you remember the scene in *Back to the Future* when Doc Brown said, "Here's a red-letter day in the history of science – November 5, 1955" and showed Marty McFly the flux capacitor that makes time travel possible? Well, let me take you back to April 22, 2019, because I think of that date when it comes to the Circa football contests.

Derek Stevens had invited me and a handful of other local reporters to a suite at his Golden Gate Hotel in downtown Las Vegas to announce he was starting his own independent sportsbook called Circa Sports. The Circa Resort & Casino was just a vacant lot across Fremont Street on the former site of the Las Vegas Club Hotel & Casino, the Glitter Gulch strip club and a tiny slot casino called Mermaids that I remember most for the deep-fried Twinkies. He said Circa Sports would launch in a small, but state-of-the-art, sportsbook at the Golden Gate on June 1, with another book to open later in June at the D, his other downtown hotel at the time.

Stevens told us how he was a lifelong gambler (just like he does in current TV ads) and was building a sportsbook like one he would want to play at, one that dealt fair odds and gave bettors bang for their buck in a fun atmosphere. But he really perked up when telling us about his plan for a new handicapping contest, the Circa Sports Million, with a guaranteed first-place prize of \$1 million (hence the name) and a blue blazer to the champion. "I know what it's like to have a future bet to win a million dollars," Stevens said, "and I want to give our customers that thrill to make life-changing money."

The overall guarantee for Circa Sports Million I in 2019 was \$1.5 million (there was no Circa Survivor that first year). The Westgate SuperContest was the longest-established high-end football contest in town since 1989 and had fought off many competitors, coming off a record 3,123 entries in 2018. The SuperContest had a \$1,500 entry fee back then, and Stevens decided to go with a \$1,000 entry fee and no rake (while the Westgate had an 8% rake at the time). That proved to be just as important a selling point to contest players as the guarantee.

Entries started slow, as expected, for a new contest, and many people here were expecting there to be an overlay as Stevens needed 1,500 entries to make his nut. However, he advertised heavily and word of mouth certainly helped and they passed the guarantee on the Wednesday before the start of the NFL season. By the time registration closed on Saturday, Sept. 7, they hit a grand total of 1,875 with the additional \$375,000 going to the "quarter prizes," another added feature of Circa Sports Million.

It was an exciting time for football contests here in Vegas as the 2019 SuperContest still

set another record with 3,328 entries despite the new competition. You know the saying: a rising tide raises all ships.

Circa Sports certainly had the momentum heading into 2020, but most people at the time felt it would still take a few years for them to bypass the SuperContest as the biggest contest in town, and certainly not until 2021, the first full NFL season at the new Circa Resort, which still wasn't planned to open until late 2020.

So, Stevens forged ahead and announced on February 26, 2020 (very early for Vegas football contests), that the guarantee for Circa Sports Million II would double to \$3 million with the same guaranteed \$1 million first-place prize. Furthermore, he was adding Circa Survivor, which would have the same \$1,000 entry fee and a guaranteed prize pool of \$1 million. He also took the bold step of opening registrations on March 6 in advance of the annual huge crowds who would always come to Vegas for March Madness.

It seemed like a no-brainer – and then the COVID-19 pandemic shut down all Vegas hotels on March 17, and they didn't reopen until June 3. Circa Sports did some sign-ups at the valet drive-through outside the Golden Gate (with social distancing), but otherwise, everything was shut down for two and a half months, and many people wondered if Stevens would rescind the guarantees.

But he didn't. He said he wanted Circa Sports and the contests to help bring customers back to Vegas and kept Million and Survivor at \$3 million and \$1 million, respectively. Stevens was rewarded as an unbelievable 3,148 entries were bought for Circa Sports Million II, making it the second-biggest football contest field in Vegas history (behind the previous year's SuperContest). The Westgate only drew 1,172 entries as more customers were drawn by the guarantee and no-rake. In addition, Circa Survivor I drew 1,390 entries to also blow away its guarantee for a first-year prize of \$1,390,000 that ended up having 35 winners (there was only a 17-week NFL schedule that first season of Circa Survivor and only one added "Thanksgiving Week" for 18 total picks).

So, it only took Stevens two seasons to bypass the Westgate in the number of entries before the new Circa Resort opened in December 2020, and then it was full speed ahead with entries now being taken at the new sportsbook.

The guarantee for Circa Sports Million III in 2021 was \$4 million and they made it with a new record of 4,087 entries with the champion being Tony Gordon of Atascadero, Calif., using the alias Durbify (and my proxy client), who still holds the mark for best record at 63-27 ATS (70%) in the NFL's first

18-week schedule. Stevens had seen how even more popular his Survivor contest was becoming and increased the guarantee to \$6 million for Circa Survivor II. This time it cost him as there were only 4,080 entries and Stevens had to pony up the \$1.92 million overlay, but it was clear that Survivor was turning into a monster that would easily bypass the Million the next year, especially after only five Survivors went 20-0 with the addition of a "Christmas Week."

In 2022, Stevens guaranteed \$6 for Circa Sports Million IV, and it drew another record 4,691 entries, but again fell short as he had to pay out a \$1.309 million overlay. But the big news was that he again guaranteed \$6 million for Circa Survivor III, and this time he hit it with 6,133 entries and a \$6.133 million prize pool, both records for any Vegas football contest. There was also a record set for winning payout as only two entrants – using the aliases BROWNA and JED – completed the season a perfect 20-0 to collect \$3.065 million apiece (though there was a chop involved with the other contestant that made it to the final Sunday, THE ENEMY WITHIN, but that's the official winning amount for the sake of the contest). That certainly opened a lot of people's eyes to how lucrative the Circa Survivor contest could be.

In 2023, Stevens guaranteed another \$6 million for Million and \$8 million for Survivor. Circa Sports Million V attracted another new record with 5,274 entries (but just a \$726,000 overlay for Stevens to pay this time), and Circa Survivor IV also set a record with 9,267 entries. This time, there were four winners (LAJONESER, Indiana Jet, CIRCUS MASTER and JAX JAGS), collecting \$2,316,750 apiece. Last year, the guarantees were \$6 million for Million but boosted to an aggressive \$10 million for Survivor.

Circa Million VI drew 5,817 entries to again fall short of its guarantee with an overlay of \$183,000, which ties back to what Stevens said back then one time if he would advertise more to try to get more entries, and he said, "I could spend more on ads, but I'd probably be losing the same amount of money, so I'd rather have that go to our customers."

Circa Survivor V drew a whopping 14,266 entries, blowing away all projections, for a \$14.266 million prize pool, obviously both records. As has been the case in most years, there was a ton of early-season carnage and only eight made it to the finish line, collecting \$1.78 million apiece (though the \$2.3 million in 2023 stands as that record).

How high will the prize pools be this year and in the future? Only time will tell, but Stevens has already promised to push the envelope with new record guarantees this season.

Bring on 2025.