

THE UK'S PREMIUM WEEKLY AMERICAN FOOTBALL MAGAZINE

THE GRID

— EVERYTHING YOU NEED. EVERY WEEK. ONE MAGAZINE. —

NFL PRE-SEASON WEEK 1 PREVIEW

2026 Season Kickoff

Everything before Week 1 — Sept 9-14, 2026

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- Latest camp news & injury watch
- 18 games to circle this season
- The 2026 Europe slate, in full
- Four rookie QBs to watch in August
- Predictions, fantasy prep & the full schedule

The Grid Magazine is an independent publication and is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or in any way connected to the National Football League (NFL).

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome to the pre-season preview — the format built for the calm before the kickoff. Every issue in this slot gathers the latest news out of training camp, the games worth circling on the calendar, and one longer feature to read before the season takes over your Sundays.

This one runs heavier than most: every camp storyline worth tracking, the full head-coaching landscape after the biggest single-year turnover in league history, four rookie quarterbacks worth building a remote-control schedule around, and the complete preseason and international slate laid out date by date. One read that replaces the ten tabs you'd otherwise have open on a Sunday morning, done properly rather than quickly.

Every issue of The Grid is reported, written and signed off by a human editor before it reaches you. We use AI tools and live sports data APIs to pull results, stats and match detail the moment the weekend's games finish — legwork that used to take a newsroom days, done in hours. But every article, ranking and opinion in these pages is still shaped and approved by the editor; nothing goes out that we wouldn't put our name to. All data used in this issue is correct as of 72 hours before publication.

Latest News

Falcons' QB room banged up together

Atlanta opens camp with both Tua Tagovailoa (back tightness) and Michael Penix Jr. (knee, not yet fully cleared) working with limitations, muddying what was supposed to be a clean-cut competition heading into the season. Neither injury is considered serious in isolation, but the club now has to build a Week 1 game plan without a clear picture of who's actually taking the first snap, and every padded practice between now and the opener will be read for clues. It's an awkward position for a front office that spent the offseason selling this competition as a genuine strength.

Shanahan sidelined, 49ers camp under a different voice

Head coach Kyle Shanahan is out recovering from a concussion sustained in a car accident, leaving San Francisco's staff to run camp in his absence as the team monitors his return timeline. The 49ers have not put a firm date on his return, and with Christian Kirk also banged up on day one, it's an unsettled start to camp for a roster that many had pencilled in among the NFC's genuine contenders. San Francisco's coordinators say the install hasn't slowed, but there's no substitute for the head coach's own eyes on a training camp this important.

Seahawks' top rookie opens camp on PUP

First-round safety Nick Emmanwori starts training camp on the Physically Unable to Perform list, an early wrinkle for a Seattle secondary trying to defend its title. The Seahawks haven't disclosed the exact injury, and PUP designations at this stage of camp are common enough not to panic over, but every practice Emmanwori misses is development time lost for a rookie the coaching staff was counting on to contribute early in a defense that carried the team to a championship.

Nabers still working back

Giants receiver Malik Nabers, who tore his ACL in Week 4 last season and underwent a second procedure this spring, remains without a confirmed Week 1 timetable as camp opens. New York has been cautious in its public updates, which is usually read as a bad sign rather than a good one, and the club's offense — already searching for answers at quarterback — can ill afford to open the season without its best receiving weapon on the field.

Star backs dig in on holdouts

Bijan Robinson and Jahmyr Gibbs are both sitting out of camp in search of second contracts — separate situations, same message from two of the league's best young running backs about how they value the position. Both sides in each negotiation have stayed relatively quiet publicly, which suggests talks are ongoing rather than stalled, but every day either back stays away is a day of reps and chemistry-building lost heading into a season where both are central to their team's offensive plans.

A record-breaking coaching cycle settles in

Eleven new head coaches — including first-timers Joe Brady (Buffalo), Jeff Hafley (Miami) and Todd Monken (Cleveland) — are running their first training camps, the largest single-year turnover the league has seen. Every one of those camps carries its own version of the same story: a new voice, a new install, and a roster trying to learn an entirely new way of doing things in a matter of weeks before it counts. Expect August to be uneven for several of these teams as terminology and culture bed in.

Latest News

Panthers' pass rush dealt a brutal blow

Rookie Nic Scourton tore his ACL on the very first day of camp and has already been placed on injured reserve — a season-ending injury before Carolina has even played a preseason snap, and a real dent in a defense that was building momentum after last year's playoff run. The Panthers had pencilled Scourton in as a rotational piece capable of pushing for real snaps by midseason, and the front office will now have to decide whether to address the pass rush again before Week 1 or lean on continuity from a group that already overachieved a year ago.

Bengals' Shemar Stewart carted off

Cincinnati's defensive end left practice on a cart after his left foot planted awkwardly and his knee hyperextended — the club hasn't confirmed severity, but the sight alone rattled a camp already short on certainty up front. Teammates described the moment as quiet on the practice field, always an unwelcome sign, and Cincinnati is expected to provide an update on imaging results in the coming days. A significant injury here would force the Bengals to lean harder on unproven depth earlier than planned.

Eagles lose a linebacker to PUP, lock up a lineman

Jonathan Greenard opens camp on the PUP list with a pectoral injury suffered while lifting weights, but the news out of Philadelphia wasn't all bad — the club moved to extend defensive tackle Jalen Carter before camp even got going, a statement of intent from a team still built to contend. Locking up a foundational interior piece before he could test free agency next spring is exactly the kind of quiet, unglamorous team-building that's kept the Eagles competitive year after year, even as the names around him continue to change.

Kirk banged up on 49ers' first day

San Francisco's newest wide receiver Christian Kirk is sidelined with a calf strain suffered on day one — a frustrating start for a 49ers camp already missing its head coach. Calf strains have a habit of lingering longer than initial estimates suggest, and San Francisco will be cautious given how much offensive continuity the team is counting on to open the year with a healthy Christian McCaffrey back in the fold.

Daniel Jones says he's full go

Indianapolis' quarterback, coming off a torn Achilles, tells reporters he's "feeling really good" and will be at full training camp workload from day one — a clean bill of health the Colts badly needed after last year's blowout playoff loss. Jones spent the offseason working almost exclusively on lower-body strength and mobility, and coaches say there's been no visible hesitation in his movement through the first padded practices, an encouraging early sign for an offense built around his legs as much as his arm.

Mayfield still without a new deal in Tampa

Baker Mayfield opens camp on the final year of his contract with no extension agreed — not itself unusual this early, but a storyline worth tracking all preseason as the Buccaneers weigh what a long-term commitment looks like. Mayfield has publicly said he isn't worried about the timeline and wants to let his play do the talking, but every good practice this preseason will only raise the price of getting a deal done before he can test the open market next spring.

Latest News

More from camp this week — five further storylines worth tracking before the pads really come off in August.

Nabers is back on the grass

Malik Nabers ran full-speed routes and caught passes from Jaxson Dart in his first practice since last year's ACL tear — no brace, no limitations in the drill work New York put him through. Head coach John Harbaugh called it simply: "He looked good." No Week 1 date yet, but after a second surgery and a long, quiet rehab, a receiver running unrestricted again is real progress worth noting.

Allen and Moore look instantly in sync

Buffalo traded a second-round pick for D.J. Moore this offseason, and the early returns from camp are exactly what the front office paid for — Josh Allen and his new target have shown a budding chemistry through the first week of practice that suggests the timing puzzle most trades take a season to solve might not be a problem here at all.

A record contract-extension week

Four significant deals landed in the space of 48 hours: Jalen Carter's four-year, \$152 million extension in Philadelphia makes him the highest-paid defensive tackle in NFL history; Minnesota locked up tackle Brian O'Neill for four years and \$96 million; and Cleveland re-signed both safety Grant Delpit (three years, \$48 million) and cornerback Denzel Ward, whose extension makes him the league's highest-paid corner. Four rosters got measurably more settled in a single week.

The Lewis Bond Fan Club is a real thing

Houston's sixth-round wide receiver has turned enough heads in camp — sharp route running, reliable hands, real production with the second and third-team offense — that an online fan club has sprung up around him unprompted. A Day 3 pick with a grassroots following before he's played a preseason snap is exactly the kind of story training camp exists to produce.

A third-round safety is already starting

Colts rookie A.J. Haulcy, taken with the 78th overall pick out of LSU, has worked almost exclusively with Indianapolis' starting defense since camp opened and looks like the early favourite to be a Week 1 starter — the kind of fast track that only happens when a rookie is genuinely outplaying the competition, not just being handed a job.

Injury Report

Player	Team	Issue	Status / Note
Patrick Mahomes	KC	Knee (ACL)	Full camp workload; on track for Week 1
Tua Tagovailoa	ATL	Back	Limited by tightness; Week 1 in doubt
Michael Penix Jr.	ATL	Knee	Not yet fully cleared for contact work
Malik Nabers	NYG	Knee (ACL, 2nd surgery)	Back at practice; no confirmed Week 1 date
Nick Emmanwori	SEA	Undisclosed	Rookie 5 opens camp on the PUP list
Bijan Robinson	ATL	Holdout	Absent from camp pending a new contract
Jahmyr Gibbs	DET	Holdout	Absent from camp pending a new contract
Nic Scourton	CAR	Knee (ACL)	Torn on Day 1; placed on IR, out for the year
Shemar Stewart	CIN	Knee	Carted off; severity not yet confirmed
Jonathan Greenard	PHI	Pectoral	Hurt lifting weights; on PUP list
Christian Kirk	SF	Calf	Day 1 strain; considered day-to-day
Daniel Jones	IND	Achilles (recovered)	Full camp workload; fully cleared

Head coach Kyle Shanahan is also away from San Francisco's camp recovering from a concussion sustained in a car accident; his return timeline will shape how much of the 49ers' Week 1 game plan he's personally overseen. Nic Scourton's early exit is the first confirmed season-ending injury of the 2026 preseason across either conference.

CAMP STORYLINES TO WATCH

The holdout math

Robinson and Gibbs both sit on rookie-scale deals that look increasingly team-friendly next to the running back market that's reset twice since either signed — camp attendance is the leverage point for both sides until a number gets agreed.

The two-QB-room problem

Atlanta is the only camp in the league carrying two banged-up starting-calibre passers into the same competition, which means the Week 1 answer may come down to whoever is simply healthiest on cutdown day rather than whoever has played best.

The head coach absence

Shanahan joins a short list of coaches to miss real camp time to injury; how much install authority his coordinators are given in his absence is itself a test of the staff's depth heading into a contending season.

The ACL trend

Three confirmed ACL-related situations — Nabers, Scourton and Mahomes' ongoing recovery — sit at very different points on the injury calendar, from season-ending to fully cleared, a useful reminder that not all knee news carries the same weight in July.

Preseason Watch

Preseason football rarely matters on the scoreboard, but this August carries more real signal than usual — eleven new coaching staffs are installing systems live for the first time, and several marquee names are working back from injury in full view. Here's where to point your attention.

GAMES TO CATCH

Hall of Fame Game — Panthers vs. Cardinals, Thu Aug 6

The traditional curtain-raiser, and an early look at how Carolina copes with Nic Scourton's season-ending injury before a single snap of the real season, opposite an Arizona QB room already reshaped by Carson Beck's arrival.

Packers @ Steelers, Thu Aug 13

Drew Allar's first competitive snaps in a Pittsburgh uniform, behind Aaron Rodgers on the depth chart but very much on the clock in front of a coaching staff that will be grading every throw.

Indianapolis @ New England, Thu Aug 13

The clearest live test yet of Daniel Jones' recovery from a torn Achilles, against a Patriots defense that spent its offseason getting meaningfully better.

Arizona @ Las Vegas, Thu Aug 13

A rookie-quarterback crossover — Carson Beck getting extended snaps in Arizona's wide-open competition, against a Raiders defense that will spend most of the night protecting a lead for Fernando Mendoza's offense.

Tennessee @ San Francisco, Thu Aug 13

The first real look at how much of Kyle Shanahan's game plan is actually on the field with him still away from the building recovering from his car accident.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

The rookie QB class

Mendoza, Simpson, Beck and Allar all get their first competitive snaps this preseason — full breakdown of all four over the page.

Malik Nabers

Whether the Giants ease him into any preseason reps at all will be the clearest public signal yet on his Week 1 availability.

Bijan Robinson & Jahmyr Gibbs

Neither is likely to play preseason snaps regardless of contract status, but a resolved deal for either changes how much they're used once camp reps resume in earnest.

Christian Kirk & Shemar Stewart

Both banged up in the first week of camp — how quickly each returns to practice will say a lot about whether either sees the field in August at all.

Circle These

1. Patriots @ Seahawks

Wed, Sep 9 — 8:20p (ET)

The Super Bowl LX rematch, and the season opener. Seattle dominated for most of the game in February, but New England spent the offseason retooling its pass protection specifically with this defense in mind — a genuine measuring-stick game either way it breaks.

2. 49ers vs. Rams — Melbourne, Australia

Thu, Sep 10 — 8:00p (ET)

History with a side of jet lag: the first-ever NFL game in Australia, with the Rams designated home team and both sides entering as legitimate contenders behind the league's defending champions.

3. Bears @ Packers

Sun, Sep 13 — 12:00p (CT)

A 105-year-old rivalry that found a new gear last season, with all three meetings compressed into 34 frantic days across December and January. Ben Johnson has Chicago believing it's the big brother again after stealing two improbable finishes at Soldier Field.

4. Eagles @ Cowboys

Sun, Sep 13 — 12:00p (CT)

Philadelphia's roster still built to contend on the road in Dallas colours to open the season. The NFC East never needs an excuse, but a new-look Cowboys defense gives this one an extra edge.

5. Broncos @ Colts

Sun, Sep 13 — 1:00p (ET)

Daniel Jones and a healthy Indianapolis offense at home against the AFC's best regular-season defense a year ago — a genuine measuring-stick game for a Colts team with something to prove after last January's blowout exit.

6. Rams @ Seahawks

Thu, Sep 17 — 8:15p (ET)

The NFC's best two teams last season met three times, with Seattle winning both regular-season meetings and the NFC Championship on the way to Super Bowl LX. Los Angeles spent the offseason arming up specifically to close that gap. If they're the class of the conference again, every snap here matters.

7. Broncos @ Patriots

Mon, Sep 28 — 8:15p (ET)

A rematch of a defensive AFC Championship slugfest, won by New England after Bo Nix went down injured the week before and couldn't suit up. Nix gets his first career shot at Drake Maye with a real grudge to settle.

8. Ravens @ Bills

Sun, Oct 11 — 1:00p (ET)

A rematch of last year's Week 1 shootout classic — Josh Allen's furious fourth-quarter comeback against Derrick Henry and Lamar Jackson was the best game of the 2025 season opener. Expect fireworks again.

9. Falcons @ Panthers

Sun, Oct 11 — 1:00p (ET)

Last year's surprise NFC South playoff team hosts a Falcons side betting on Kevin Stefanski to unlock a stalled roster — an early litmus test for who actually controls this division heading into the stretch run.

Circle These

10. Texans @ Jaguars — Wembley Stadium, London

Sun, Oct 18 — 9:30a (ET)

An AFC South rematch with the added strangeness of a second London trip in a week for Jacksonville — momentum or fatigue, this is where we find out which one wins, on no notice and a short turnaround.

11. Steelers @ Saints — Paris, France

Sun, Oct 25 — 9:30a (ET)

The NFL's first-ever regular season game on French soil — a genuine measuring-stick opportunity to open a new market with a performance worth remembering. Nobody wants to be the answer to "who lost the first game in France."

12. Packers @ Vikings

Sun, Nov 8 — 12:00p (CT)

Kyler Murray's first home start in Minnesota purple against a loaded divisional opponent, in a division that produced two playoff teams last year and shows no sign of slowing down.

13. Patriots @ Lions — Munich, Germany

Sun, Nov 15 — 9:30a (ET)

The third regular-season game in Munich, pitting a Super Bowl participant against a Lions side with plenty to prove of its own, at a venue that's already shown it can host a genuinely electric NFL atmosphere.

14. Rams @ Chiefs

Sun, Nov 15 — 12:00p (CT)

Mahomes' return from a torn ACL meets the NFC's most-talked-about roster overhaul of the offseason — a genuine cross-conference measuring-stick game between two teams most expect to still be playing deep into January.

15. Bengals @ Ravens

Sun, Nov 15 — 8:20p (ET)

Two teams still chasing a return to the playoffs bring plenty of heat — a prized Bengals pass rusher now wears purple and returns to Cincinnati colours from the other sideline, hunting the quarterback he used to help protect.

16. Bears @ Lions

Thu, Nov 26 — 12:30p (ET)

Ben Johnson returns to Detroit for the first time since leaving as offensive coordinator to take Chicago's head job — an early referendum on the Bears' rise and the NFC North's new pecking order, in front of a crowd that watched him leave.

17. Giants @ Steelers

Sun, Dec 6 — 1:00p (ET)

John Harbaugh's first trip back into the AFC North since leaving Baltimore for New York, against the division rival that watched him build a dynasty for 18 years from the opposite sideline. A genuinely strange sight for anyone who followed that era.

18. Eagles @ Seahawks

Sun, Dec 6 — 1:00p (ET)

The defending champions host another proven contender to settle who's really the class of the NFC this season — Philadelphia's championship pedigree against Seattle's title-defending defense.

The International Series Is Expanding

A record nine games this year — four continents, seven countries, eight stadiums. Not just Europe anymore: Australia and Brazil both host for the first time, Madrid joins the rotation, and Mexico City returns after a four-year gap. Here's every game the NFL is playing outside the United States in 2026.

49ers @ Rams

Melbourne Cricket Ground, Melbourne, Australia — Thu Sept 10

The international slate kicks off with the first-ever NFL game in Australia, and the Rams designated the home team on the other side of the world.

Ravens @ Cowboys

Estádio do Maracanã, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil — Sun Sept 27

Brazil's third regular-season game, and its first in Rio rather than São Paulo — Lamar Jackson and Derrick Henry take their show to the Maracanã.

Colts @ Commanders

Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, London — Sun Oct 4

The opener of London's three-game stretch — two teams building toward playoff relevance in front of a stadium that always shows up loud.

Eagles @ Jaguars

Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, London — Sun Oct 11 (9:30am ET)

The marquee fixture of the international slate — full breakdown overleaf.

Texans @ Jaguars

Wembley Stadium, London — Sun Oct 18

Jacksonville's second London trip in a week, this time against a divisional rival — a real logistical and competitive test.

Steelers @ Saints

Stade de France, Paris — Sun Oct 25

History in the making: the first-ever NFL regular season game on French soil.

Bengals @ Falcons

Estadio Santiago Bernabéu, Madrid, Spain — Sun Nov 8

The NFL's first game at Real Madrid's home ground, opening a multi-year partnership with the Spanish capital.

Patriots vs. Lions

Allianz Arena, Munich, Germany — Sun Nov 15

The third regular-season game in Munich, pitting last season's AFC representative in the Super Bowl against a Lions side with its own ambitions.

Vikings @ 49ers

Estadio Banorte, Mexico City, Mexico — Sun Nov 22

The international slate closes with the NFL's return to Mexico City for the first time since 2022 — and a second international assignment for San Francisco this season.

The Deep Dive

Of all nine international games on the 2026 slate, Eagles-Jaguars is the one circled hardest on UK calendars — the 9:30am kickoff quoted in US coverage is Eastern Time; for anyone watching from home in Britain, or heading to Tottenham in person, that's a very civilised 2:30pm local kickoff, no alarm clock required.

Philadelphia arrives with the pedigree: a roster built to contend, led by a quarterback and supporting cast that have already tasted deep playoff runs. For Eagles fans making the trip — or tuning in from home — this is the closest thing to a home game the franchise will play all year outside Lincoln Financial Field.

Jacksonville brings a different kind of intrigue: a young core still writing its identity, playing the first of back-to-back London fixtures in the space of a week — a scheduling quirk that could cut either way. Momentum from a strong showing could carry the Jaguars into their Wembley date with Houston the following week; a rough outing could compound just as quickly.

For neutrals, the appeal is straightforward: an established contender against a team trying to prove it belongs, on a stage that always brings its own energy regardless of the standings. Get there early if you're going in person — Tottenham's pre-game atmosphere for these fixtures has become as much a part of the day

as the game itself.

There's also the small matter of the walk-up. London International Series Sundays have developed their own rhythm over the past decade — fan zones outside the ground from mid-morning, replica shirts from all 32 teams in the crowd regardless of who's actually playing, and a concourse atmosphere that owes as much to a festival as to a regular NFL Sunday. Eagles-Jaguars will be the biggest test yet of whether Tottenham's atmosphere scales with the stakes, given the quality of team making the trip.

Worth watching, too, is how Jacksonville manages the football side of a genuinely unusual week: training in a different time zone, a short turnaround into a second London game six days later, and a locker room that has never faced a stretch quite like it.

THE GRID WILL BE THERE

Our editor is travelling to Tottenham Hotspur Stadium for Eagles @ Jaguars in person — expect a full match report, colour from the ground and an on-the-day account of what London's biggest NFL Sunday of the year actually feels like, in the next issue.

Head Coaches

AFC

Team	Head Coach	'25	Career
New England	Mike Vrabel	14-3	68-48
Buffalo	Joe Brady	12-5	Rookie HC
Miami	Jeff Hafley	7-10	Rookie HC
NY Jets	Aaron Glenn	3-14	3-14
Pittsburgh	Mike McCarthy	10-7	174-112-2
Baltimore	Jesse Minter	8-9	Rookie HC
Cincinnati	Zac Taylor	6-11	56-74-1
Cleveland	Todd Monken	5-12	Rookie HC
Jacksonville	Liam Coen	13-4	13-4
Houston	DeMeco Ryans	12-5	36-28
Indianapolis	Shane Steichen	8-9	29-25
Tennessee	Robert Saleh	3-14	20-36
Denver	Sean Payton	14-3	175-107
LA Chargers	Jim Harbaugh	11-6	66-33-1
Kansas City	Andy Reid	6-11	277-156-1
Las Vegas	Klint Kubiak	3-14	Rookie HC

NFC

Team	Head Coach	'25	Career
Philadelphia	Nick Sirianni	11-6	68-39
Dallas	Brian Schottenheimer	7-9-1	7-9-1
Washington	Dan Quinn	5-12	52-67
NY Giants	John Harbaugh	4-13	174-134
Chicago	Ben Johnson	11-6	11-6
Green Bay	Matt LaFleur	9-7-1	82-49-2
Minnesota	Kevin O'Connell	9-8	39-30
Detroit	Dan Campbell	9-8	43-44-1
Carolina	Dave Canales	8-9	13-21
Tampa Bay	Todd Bowles	8-9	67-78
Atlanta	Kevin Stefanski	8-9	44-56
New Orleans	Kellen Moore	6-11	6-11
Seattle	Mike Macdonald	14-3	24-10
LA Rams	Sean McVay	12-5	90-56
San Francisco	Kyle Shanahan	12-5	87-63
Arizona	Mike LaFleur	3-14	Rookie HC

Eleven head-coaching changes breaks the all-time record for a single cycle — seven hires (Brady, Hafley, Minter, Monken, Kubiak, Schottenheimer and LaFleur) are first-time NFL head coaches, while Pittsburgh, Tennessee, Atlanta and the Giants all reached outside the building for proven, previously-fired veterans. Every one of those camps this preseason is a live install, worth watching for exactly that reason.

STORYLINES TO WATCH

Full Circle

John Harbaugh spent 18 years building the Ravens into perennial contenders — now he tries to do it again in New York, against the division rival that just hired the man who replaced him in Baltimore.

The Longest Tenures

With Tomlin's 19-year Pittsburgh run now over, Andy Reid stands alone as the league's senior head coach by a wide margin — Kyle Shanahan and Sean McVay, both entering year ten with San Francisco and the Rams respectively, are now the next-longest serving coaches with their current teams, a stability outlier in a league that just broke its all-time record for coaching turnover.

Rookie QBs to Watch

Preseason Week 1 arrives August 13-15 — the first live look at this year's rookie quarterback class in an NFL uniform that actually counts for something, even if the result doesn't. Four names from April's draft are worth building your remote-control schedule around, and each one represents a genuinely different bet on how to develop a young quarterback in 2026.

Fernando Mendoza, Raiders — No. 1 overall.

The clearest plot twist of the four: Klint Kubiak opened camp with a genuine competition, then handed the Week 1 starting job to veteran Kirk Cousins rather than the rookie — Mendoza begins the season as QB2, a step behind where most expected the top pick to land in August. It isn't a snub so much as a considered bet: Kubiak has been direct that Cousins gives Las Vegas its best chance to win now, with the Heisman Trophy winner developing behind him instead of being thrown straight in. Mendoza's preseason reps still matter plenty — every snap with the second and third-team offense is a chance to show the pocket poise and quick processing that made him the top pick out of Indiana — but this is a sit-and-learn story for now rather than a Week 1 dress rehearsal. How long that lasts, and how Mendoza looks whenever his number is called, is the real storyline to track through August.

Ty Simpson, Rams — No. 13 overall. Few analysts expected Los Angeles to spend a first-round pick on a quarterback with Matthew Stafford still entrenched as the starter, which makes Simpson's preseason reps the most-watched development snaps of the four. This is a pure long-term investment — nobody expects him to push for a 2026 role — but a strong August would go a long way toward justifying a genuinely surprising first-round selection. The Rams have talked openly about wanting Simpson to sit and learn behind a future Hall of Famer rather than be rushed onto the field, a luxury very few rookie quarterbacks are afforded, and one that changes how his preseason snaps should be judged — not on box scores, but on whether the game visibly starts to slow down for him possession by possession. Stafford has already talked publicly about treating this preseason as a teaching exercise as much as a competition — this is a multi-year apprenticeship, not a redshirt year with an escape hatch if Week 1 goes sideways.

WHY THIS CLASS IS DIFFERENT

Four first-through-third-round quarterbacks landing in four different rooms — three developing behind established veteran starters, and one genuine open competition still to come overleaf — makes this one of the more instructive rookie classes to track in years, regardless of who ends up being the best player. None of the four will be judged on preseason stat lines; all four will be judged on whether the game visibly slows down for them, rep by rep, whenever their number gets called.

Rookie QBs to Watch

Carson Beck, Cardinals — No. 65 overall.

The third quarterback off the board arrives in Arizona's suddenly wide-open QB room, a competition reshaped entirely by Kyler Murray's offseason trade to Minnesota. Beck won't be handed anything, but a clean QB depth chart with no obvious long-term answer already in place makes this the most genuinely competitive rookie situation of the four — every August rep will be scrutinised as a real audition, not a formality. Arizona's coaching staff has been deliberately vague about a depth-chart pecking order heading into preseason, which by itself tells you how open this competition really is; expect Beck to get a long look with the twos and threes across all three preseason games as the club builds toward a decision. His college production at Georgia and Miami has never in question — the NFL evaluation has always centred on decision-making speed against pressure looks he didn't see as often in college, and that's precisely the test three straight preseason games will provide.

Drew Allar, Steelers — No. 76 overall.

Pittsburgh's Round 3 pick lands behind Aaron Rodgers, which makes his preseason workload as much about the future as the present. A strong August won't win him a 2026 job, but it will shape how the Steelers think about the position the moment Rodgers eventually calls it a career — and gives Pittsburgh fans their first real look at the succession plan. Allar's college tape was defined by pocket poise and accuracy on intermediate throws rather than dazzling athleticism, a profile the Steelers' staff has compared internally to their own long-running offensive identity — which, if anything, only raises the stakes on every rep he gets this preseason. Sitting behind a future Hall of Famer is its own kind of education, and Pittsburgh's

staff has been open about wanting Allar to treat every walkthrough as film he can study later, not just reps to survive.

What to actually watch for. Preseason stat lines lie more than almost any other data point in football — garbage-time touchdowns against third-string defenses inflate box scores fast, and a clean completion percentage against backups tells you very little about how a quarterback will hold up in October. The more useful signals are structural: does the ball come out on time, does the quarterback climb the pocket instead of bailing outside it, and how does he respond to a free rusher he wasn't supposed to see. Those are the reps worth rewinding, regardless of the final score — and the ones coaches themselves are actually grading. Footwork under duress is another tell scouts lean on more than fans realise — a rookie who resets his base cleanly after a bad rep is showing you something a highlight reel never will.

The bigger picture. Four rookie quarterbacks, four different rooms — two long-term projects developing behind established veterans, a wide-open competition, and a succession plan in waiting. Preseason Week 1 won't answer which path works best, but it's the first data point in four very different experiments the league will be tracking all season, and The Grid will be following all four names through August and into the regular season. However August plays out, the honest read on all four will take longer than one month to arrive — but the direction of travel usually starts showing up in these preseason reps before anyone's willing to say so publicly.

2026 Predictions

Before a single meaningful snap of 2026, here's where The Grid's staff is landing on the season ahead — division winners, the major awards, and the calls we're bold enough to put our name to before kickoff proves us wrong.

PROJECTED DIVISION WINNERS

Division	Pick
AFC East	Patriots
AFC North	Steelers
AFC South	Jaguars
AFC West	Broncos

Division	Pick
NFC East	Eagles
NFC North	Bears
NFC South	Panthers
NFC West	Seahawks

AWARD RACES & BOLD CALLS

SUPER BOWL LXI PICK

Rams over Patriots

The Garrett-McDuffie-Stafford Rams finally cash in, beating New England in a rematch of styles at SoFi Stadium.

MVP PICK

Drake Maye, Patriots

A full offseason with A.J. Brown and a defense that carried New England to the brink turns Maye into the league's next star quarterback.

COACH OF THE YEAR

Kevin Stefanski, Falcons

Turning an underachieving Atlanta roster into a playoff team in year one would be the clearest Coach of the Year case in the league — and the QB room's health is the only thing standing in the way.

DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Myles Garrett, Rams

A fresh start in Los Angeles, playing alongside Trent McDuffie in a defense built to win now — Garrett's sack total should follow the scheme upgrade.

COMEBACK PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Daniel Jones, Colts

A full, healthy training camp after last year's Achilles tear and a genuine chance to build on a playoff-calibre Indianapolis roster make Jones the field's best comeback story.

BREAKOUT TEAM

Carolina Panthers

A playoff berth wasn't a fluke — with Tetairoa McMillan entering Year 2, the Panthers take the next step in the NFC South.

OFFENSIVE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

Fernando Mendoza, Raiders

Opens the year as Kirk Cousins' backup, but the bold call is an in-season promotion — once Las Vegas needs an answer at quarterback beyond 2026, the No. 1 pick gets enough run to make a real push for the award.

BIGGEST FALL

Denver Broncos

The AFC's best regular-season team a year ago gets caught by a loaded conference race and misses the top seed — not a collapse so much as the field simply getting tougher around them.

Fantasy Corner

A few storylines worth weighing before your draft locks in — some straightforward, some genuinely unresolved as camp opens. We'll work through it round by round.

ROUND-BY-ROUND STRATEGY

Rounds 1-2: take the sure thing

This is not the round to bet on a holdout resolving well or a rookie hitting the ground running — take the proven, workload-secure stars and let other drafters absorb the risk.

Rounds 3-6: this is where holdouts get interesting

Robinson and Gibbs will both fall past their talent level if camp news stays quiet — exactly the kind of value swing that wins leagues if the contract situations resolve before Week 1.

Rounds 7-10: streaming QB options

Kirk Cousins won the Raiders' starting job outright over rookie Fernando Mendoza — a serviceable streaming QB2 in a Kubiak offense, with Mendoza strictly a dynasty stash rather than a redraft option until he's actually on the field.

Rounds 11+: handcuffs and camp battles

Whoever ultimately starts opposite Carson Beck or backs up in Arizona's reshaped QB room is worth a very late-round flier purely on opportunity.

STUDS

Christian McCaffrey, RB, 49ers

Back to full health entering 2026 — when right, still one of the few backs who can win a league on his own in the passing game.

A.J. Brown, WR, Patriots

New team, same target share ceiling, with Drake Maye's arm behind him — a legitimate WR1 case in a retooled offense.

Josh Allen, QB, Bills

The same dual-threat floor and ceiling that's made him a top-of-draft fantasy quarterback for years — new head coach doesn't change what Allen does best.

WATCH THE HOLDOUTS

Bijan Robinson, RB, Falcons

Sitting out camp for a new deal — talent isn't the question, workload certainty is until a resolution lands.

Jahmyr Gibbs, RB, Lions

Same situation, different team — draft him for the ceiling, but track camp news closely before Week 1.

Fantasy Corner

ROOKIES TO KNOW

Fernando Mendoza, QB, Raiders

Opens the year as Kirk Cousins' backup after Kubiak named Cousins the Week 1 starter — not fantasy-relevant in redraft leagues unless there's an injury, but a clear dynasty stash given the No. 1 overall investment.

Ty Simpson, QB, Rams

Buried behind Matthew Stafford for now — not draftable in 2026 formats, but worth a note in dynasty leagues given the first-round investment.

SLEEPERS

Emeka Egbuka, WR, Buccaneers

Two touchdowns and a clear red-zone role as a rookie last season — a Year 2 target-share jump is the safest breakout bet in the receiver pool.

Jacory Croskey-Merritt, RB, Commanders

An undrafted rookie who forced his way into Washington's rotation with an 82-yard debut — worth a late-round dart throw in any format.

RJ Harvey, RB, Broncos

Efficient on limited touches as a rookie, and change-of-pace roles have a habit of expanding fast when the numbers are this good.

BUST WATCH

Tua Tagovailoa, QB, Falcons

A crowded, banged-up QB room and a body of injury history that keeps growing — the risk here is real even before Week 1 kicks off.

Malik Nabers, WR, Giants

Back on the practice field and off the PUP list, which is genuine progress after a second ACL procedure — but coaches still won't commit to a Week 1 timetable, so treat him as a risky buy-low rather than a written-off bust.

POSITION TIERS AT A GLANCE

Tier 1 QBs

Josh Allen, Drake Maye, Jayden Daniels

Tier 1 RBs

Christian McCaffrey, Derrick Henry, Bijan Robinson (contract permitting)

Tier 1 WRs

A.J. Brown, CeeDee Lamb, Justin Jefferson

Tier 1 TEs

George Kittle (health permitting), Sam LaPorta

Full Preseason Schedule

Twenty-five days of exhibition football before the games start to count. The Hall of Fame Game opens things in Canton, and all 32 teams play three preseason games apiece across the three weeks that follow. Every game across the Hall of Fame Game, Week 1, Week 2 and Week 3 is listed over the next three pages, all times Eastern.

HALL OF FAME GAME

THURSDAY, Aug 6 — Hall of Fame Game

Panthers at Cardinals 8:00p (ET)

PRESEASON WEEK 1

THURSDAY, Aug 13

Lions at Bengals 7:00p (ET)
Packers at Steelers 7:00p (ET)
Colts at Patriots 7:30p (ET)
Chargers at Texans 8:00p (ET)
Cardinals at Raiders 8:00p (ET)
Titans at 49ers 9:00p (ET)

FRIDAY, Aug 14

Broncos at Falcons 7:00p (ET)
Bucs at Jets 7:00p (ET)
Dolphins at Commanders 7:00p (ET)

SATURDAY, Aug 15

Panthers at Bills 1:00p (ET)
Browns at Bears 1:00p (ET)
Vikings at Giants 1:00p (ET)
Rams at Chiefs 4:00p (ET)
Jaguars at Saints 4:00p (ET)
Eagles at Ravens 7:00p (ET)
Cowboys at Seahawks 8:00p (ET)

Full Preseason Schedule

Sixteen games across four days, and the busiest single day of the preseason calendar — eleven of the week's sixteen fixtures fall on the Saturday alone. All times Eastern.

PRESEASON WEEK 2

THURSDAY, Aug 20

Raiders at Texans	8:00p (ET)
49ers at Chargers	10:00p (ET)

FRIDAY, Aug 21

Jets at Steelers	7:00p (ET)
Panthers at Jaguars	7:30p (ET)

SATURDAY, Aug 22

Cowboys at Cardinals	TBD
Falcons at Colts	1:00p (ET)
Ravens at Vikings	1:00p (ET)
Bills at Browns	1:00p (ET)
Packers at Broncos	TBD
Commanders at Lions	TBD
Saints at Rams	4:00p (ET)
Giants at Dolphins	4:00p (ET)
Bears at Bengals	7:00p (ET)
Eagles at Patriots	7:00p (ET)
Chiefs at Bucs	7:30p (ET)

SUNDAY, Aug 23

Seahawks at Titans	8:00p (ET)
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WHAT TO WATCH

Raiders @ Texans headlines Thursday's national window (ESPN, 8:00p ET) — Fernando Mendoza's second live outing against a Houston defense that finished last season among the league's best. Seahawks @ Titans closes the week Sunday night (FOX, 8:00p ET), the defending champions on the road against a young Titans roster still finding its identity under center.

Full Preseason Schedule

The traditional dress-rehearsal week — starters typically see their longest run of the preseason here, first-team units on both sides of the ball often playing into the second quarter. The closest look at the real product before Week 1 counts. All times Eastern.

PRESEASON WEEK 3

THURSDAY, Aug 27

Steelers at Bills	7:00p (ET)
Patriots at Browns	8:00p (ET)
49ers at Raiders	TBD
Rams at Chargers	10:00p (ET)

FRIDAY, Aug 28

Falcons at Dolphins	7:00p (ET)
Commanders at Ravens	7:00p (ET)
Texans at Panthers	7:00p (ET)
Bucs at Jaguars	7:30p (ET)
Giants at Jets	7:30p (ET)
Bengals at Eagles	8:00p (ET)
Seahawks at Chiefs	8:00p (ET)

SATURDAY, Aug 29

Cardinals at Packers	TBD
Bears at Titans	TBD
Saints at Cowboys	TBD
Vikings at Broncos	TBD
Lions at Colts	3:00p (ET)

ROSTER CUTDOWN — TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1

Every club trims from a 90-man offseason roster down to 53 within 48 hours of the final preseason snap — the single biggest transaction day of the preseason calendar, and the moment most of this issue's camp storylines actually resolve. Several clubs also hold joint practices with their Week 3 opponent in the days beforehand, a lower-intensity, higher-rep alternative to live snaps that's become a fixture of the modern preseason calendar.

Full Regular Season Schedule

WEEK 1

WEDNESDAY, Sep 9
Patriots at Seahawks 8:20p (ET)

THURSDAY, Sep 10
49ers at Rams 8:00p (ET)

SUNDAY, Sep 13
Bills at Browns 1:00p (ET)
Vikings at Dolphins 1:00p (ET)
Bears at Packers 12:00p (CT)
Giants at Chiefs 12:00p (CT)
Panthers at Lions 1:00p (ET)
Falcons at Saints 12:00p (CT)
Ravens at Jets 1:00p (ET)
Broncos at Colts 1:00p (ET)
Eagles at Cowboys 12:00p (CT)
Titans at Jaguars 4:05p (ET)
Bengals at Texans 3:05p (CT)
Commanders at Chargers 1:25p (PT)
Steelers at Bucs 8:20p (ET)

MONDAY, Sep 14
Raiders at Cardinals 8:15p (ET)

WEEK 2

THURSDAY, Sep 17
Rams at Seahawks 8:15p (ET)

SUNDAY, Sep 20
Bengals at Dolphins 1:00p (ET)
Giants at Colts 1:00p (ET)
Bucs at Vikings 12:00p (CT)
Broncos at 49ers 10:00a (PT)
Packers at Ravens 1:00p (ET)
Cardinals at Jaguars 1:00p (ET)
Titans at Steelers 1:00p (ET)
Raiders at Bills 1:00p (ET)
Lions at Chiefs 12:00p (CT)
Patriots at Texans 12:00p (CT)
Bears at Panthers 4:05p (ET)
Chargers at Cowboys 3:05p (CT)
Jets at Falcons 4:25p (ET)
Commanders at Saints 8:20p (ET)

MONDAY, Sep 21
Eagles at Browns 8:15p (ET)

WEEK 3

THURSDAY, Sep 24
Packers at Giants 8:15p (ET)

SUNDAY, Sep 27
Raiders at Bucs 1:00p (ET)
Bears at Falcons 1:00p (ET)
Titans at Colts 1:00p (ET)
Jaguars at Bills 1:00p (ET)
Cowboys at Cardinals 11:00a (MT)
Lions at Ravens 1:00p (ET)
Chiefs at Dolphins 1:00p (ET)
Texans at Saints 12:00p (CT)
Browns at Rams 10:00a (PT)
Eagles at Steelers 1:00p (ET)
49ers at Vikings 3:05p (CT)
Jets at Chargers 1:05p (PT)
Panthers at Bengals 4:25p (ET)
Seahawks at Commanders 8:20p (ET)

MONDAY, Sep 28
Broncos at Patriots 8:15p (ET)

WEEK 4

THURSDAY, Oct 1
Packers at Steelers 8:15p (ET)

SUNDAY, Oct 4
Colts at Commanders 9:30a (ET)
Seahawks at Jaguars 1:00p (ET)
Saints at Raiders 10:00a (PT)
Browns at Bucs 1:00p (ET)
Vikings at Ravens 1:00p (ET)
Falcons at Broncos 11:00a (MT)
49ers at Cowboys 12:00p (CT)
Cardinals at Dolphins 1:00p (ET)
Panthers at Texans 12:00p (CT)
Jets at Bengals 1:00p (ET)
Lions at Chargers 1:05p (PT)
Titans at Chiefs 3:05p (CT)
Patriots at Rams 1:25p (PT)
Bills at Giants 8:20p (ET)

MONDAY, Oct 5
Bears at Eagles 8:15p (ET)

WEEK 5

THURSDAY, Oct 8
49ers at Colts 8:15p (ET)

SUNDAY, Oct 11
Eagles at Jaguars 9:30a (ET)
Bears at Cardinals 11:00a (MT)
Texans at Chiefs 12:00p (CT)
Cowboys at Raiders 10:00a (PT)
Ravens at Bills 1:00p (ET)
Falcons at Panthers 1:00p (ET)
Bucs at Bengals 1:00p (ET)
Titans at Dolphins 1:00p (ET)
Chargers at Packers 12:00p (CT)
Steelers at Patriots 1:00p (ET)
Seahawks at Lions 4:05p (ET)
Saints at Vikings 3:05p (CT)
Commanders at Browns 4:25p (ET)
Broncos at Giants 8:20p (ET)

MONDAY, Oct 12
Jets at Rams 8:15p (ET)

WEEK 6

THURSDAY, Oct 15
Chiefs at Bengals 8:15p (ET)

SUNDAY, Oct 18
Jaguars at Texans 9:30a (ET)
Cowboys at Packers 12:00p (CT)
Bucs at Panthers 1:00p (ET)
Commanders at Vikings 12:00p (CT)
Bears at Raiders 10:00a (PT)
Ravens at Eagles 1:00p (ET)
Steelers at Rams 10:00a (PT)
Chargers at Cardinals 11:00a (MT)
Dolphins at Bills 1:00p (ET)
Falcons at Colts 4:05p (ET)
Giants at Browns 4:05p (ET)
Seahawks at 49ers 1:25p (PT)
Saints at Jets 8:20p (ET)

MONDAY, Oct 19
Titans at Patriots 8:15p (ET)

BYE: Broncos, Lions

Full Regular Season Schedule

WEEK 7

THURSDAY, Oct 22	
Bills at Colts	8:15p (ET)
SUNDAY, Oct 25	
Steelers at Saints	9:30a (ET)
Broncos at Bucs	1:00p (ET)
Chargers at Titans	12:00p (CT)
Ravens at Dolphins	1:00p (ET)
Seahawks at Giants	1:00p (ET)
Rams at Panthers	1:00p (ET)
Packers at 49ers	10:00a (PT)
Falcons at Texans	12:00p (CT)
Browns at Raiders	10:00a (PT)
Patriots at Vikings	3:05p (CT)
Commanders at Jets	4:05p (ET)
Eagles at Bengals	4:25p (ET)
Cardinals at Chiefs	8:20p (ET)
MONDAY, Oct 26	
Lions at Jaguars	8:15p (ET)

BYE: Bears, Cowboys

WEEK 8

THURSDAY, Oct 29	
Cardinals at Jets	8:15p (ET)
SUNDAY, Nov 1	
Seahawks at Vikings	12:00p (CT)
Rams at Dolphins	1:00p (ET)
Titans at Giants	1:00p (ET)
Panthers at 49ers	10:00a (PT)
Commanders at Patriots	1:00p (ET)
Colts at Texans	12:00p (CT)
Saints at Eagles	1:00p (ET)
Bears at Steelers	1:00p (ET)
Browns at Lions	4:05p (ET)
Jaguars at Broncos	2:05p (MT)
Bengals at Cowboys	3:25p (CT)
Chargers at Ravens	8:20p (ET)
MONDAY, Nov 2	
Bucs at Bills	8:15p (ET)

BYE: Chiefs, Falcons, Packers, Raiders

WEEK 9

THURSDAY, Nov 5	
49ers at Steelers	8:15p (ET)
SUNDAY, Nov 8	
Chargers at Falcons	1:00p (ET)
Titans at Cardinals	11:00a (MT)
Broncos at Bears	12:00p (CT)
Bills at Seahawks	10:00a (PT)
Packers at Vikings	12:00p (CT)
Jaguars at Bengals	1:00p (ET)
Lions at Giants	1:00p (ET)
Rams at Eagles	1:00p (ET)
Cowboys at Saints	3:05p (CT)
Raiders at Panthers	4:05p (ET)
Browns at Jets	4:25p (ET)
Texans at Bucs	8:20p (ET)
MONDAY, Nov 9	
Chiefs at Commanders	8:15p (ET)

BYE: Colts, Dolphins, Patriots, Ravens

WEEK 10

THURSDAY, Nov 12	
Cowboys at Steelers	8:15p (ET)
SUNDAY, Nov 15	
Patriots at Lions	9:30a (ET)
Falcons at Commanders	1:00p (ET)
Saints at Seahawks	10:00a (PT)
Rams at Chiefs	12:00p (CT)
Eagles at Jets	1:00p (ET)
Colts at Raiders	10:00a (PT)
Bucs at Giants	1:00p (ET)
Bears at Bills	1:00p (ET)
Dolphins at Jaguars	1:00p (ET)
Vikings at Texans	3:05p (CT)
Broncos at Chargers	1:05p (PT)
Titans at Browns	4:25p (ET)
Bengals at Ravens	8:20p (ET)
MONDAY, Nov 16	
Panthers at Packers	8:15p (ET)

BYE: 49ers, Cardinals

WEEK 11

THURSDAY, Nov 19	
Jaguars at Commanders	8:15p (ET)
SUNDAY, Nov 22	
Bears at Browns	1:00p (ET)
Seahawks at Titans	12:00p (CT)
Texans at Raiders	10:00a (PT)
Chargers at Patriots	1:00p (ET)
Bills at Steelers	1:00p (ET)
Cowboys at Panthers	1:00p (ET)
Jets at Colts	1:00p (ET)
49ers at Chiefs	12:00p (CT)
Saints at Packers	12:00p (CT)
Eagles at Falcons	4:05p (ET)
Ravens at Bucs	4:05p (ET)
Giants at Dolphins	4:25p (ET)
Cardinals at Broncos	8:20p (ET)
MONDAY, Nov 23	
Lions at Bengals	8:15p (ET)

BYE: Rams, Vikings

WEEK 12

WEDNESDAY, Nov 25	
Packers at Rams	8:00p (ET)
THURSDAY, Nov 26	
Bears at Lions	12:30p (ET)
Giants at Cowboys	4:30p (ET)
Chiefs at Browns	8:20p (ET)
SUNDAY, Nov 29	
Jets at Broncos	11:00a (MT)
Saints at Cardinals	11:00a (MT)
Patriots at 49ers	10:00a (PT)
Dolphins at Chargers	10:00a (PT)
Bengals at Colts	1:00p (ET)
Seahawks at Raiders	10:00a (PT)
Vikings at Bills	1:00p (ET)
Panthers at Jaguars	1:00p (ET)
Eagles at Bucs	4:05p (ET)
Falcons at Titans	3:05p (CT)
Commanders at Ravens	4:25p (ET)

BYE: Steelers, Texans

Full Regular Season Schedule

WEEK 13

THURSDAY, Dec 3
Dolphins at Jets 8:15p (ET)

SUNDAY, Dec 6
Seahawks at Eagles 1:00p (ET)
Cowboys at Jaguars 1:00p (ET)
Vikings at Raiders 10:00a (PT)
Bears at Rams 10:00a (PT)
Steelers at Giants 1:00p (ET)
Chiefs at Falcons 1:00p (ET)
Texans at Lions 1:00p (ET)
Colts at Patriots 1:00p (ET)
Bills at Broncos 2:05p (MT)
Commanders at Packers 3:05p (CT)
Panthers at Titans 3:25p (CT)
49ers at Ravens 8:20p (ET)

MONDAY, Dec 7
Cardinals at Browns 8:15p (ET)

BYE: Bengals, Bucs, Chargers, Saints

WEEK 14

THURSDAY, Dec 10
Colts at Browns 8:15p (ET)

SUNDAY, Dec 13
Dolphins at 49ers 10:00a (PT)
Saints at Rams 10:00a (PT)
Bucs at Jaguars 1:00p (ET)
Packers at Patriots 1:00p (ET)
Raiders at Steelers 1:00p (ET)
Falcons at Bengals 1:00p (ET)
Chargers at Bills 1:00p (ET)
Broncos at Vikings 12:00p (CT)
Cowboys at Seahawks 1:05p (PT)
Eagles at Texans 3:05p (CT)
Cardinals at Ravens 4:25p (ET)
Jets at Lions 8:20p (ET)

MONDAY, Dec 14
Chiefs at Bears 8:15p (ET)

BYE: Commanders, Giants, Panthers, Titans

WEEK 15

THURSDAY, Dec 17
Bucs at Patriots 8:15p (ET)

SUNDAY, Dec 20
Falcons at Vikings 12:00p (CT)
Chiefs at Jaguars 1:00p (ET)
Cowboys at Broncos 11:00a (MT)
Ravens at Titans 12:00p (CT)
Raiders at Chargers 10:00a (PT)
Jets at Packers 12:00p (CT)
Bengals at Saints 12:00p (CT)
Texans at Browns 1:00p (ET)
Panthers at Commanders 1:00p (ET)
Lions at 49ers 1:05p (PT)
Dolphins at Steelers 4:05p (ET)
Colts at Cardinals 2:25p (MT)
Giants at Rams 8:20p (ET)

MONDAY, Dec 21
Seahawks at Bears 8:15p (ET)

BYE: Bills, Eagles

WEEK 16

SUNDAY, Dec 27
Colts at Panthers 1:00p (ET)
Eagles at 49ers 10:00a (PT)
Dolphins at Cowboys 12:00p (CT)
Bills at Lions 1:00p (ET)
Vikings at Titans 12:00p (CT)
Steelers at Chiefs 12:00p (CT)
Bucs at Bears 12:00p (CT)
Giants at Jets 1:00p (ET)
Raiders at Packers 12:00p (CT)
Bengals at Seahawks 10:00a (PT)
Commanders at Cardinals 2:05p (MT)
Patriots at Ravens 4:05p (ET)
Saints at Chargers 1:25p (PT)
Broncos at Texans 8:20p (ET)

MONDAY, Dec 28
Rams at Falcons 8:15p (ET)

BYE: Browns, Jaguars

WEEK 17

THURSDAY, Dec 31
Cowboys at Falcons 8:15p (ET)

SUNDAY, Jan 3
Raiders at Ravens 1:00p (ET)
Colts at Steelers 1:00p (ET)
Browns at Broncos 11:00a (MT)
Cardinals at Lions 1:00p (ET)
Bengals at Commanders 1:00p (ET)
Packers at Bills 1:00p (ET)
Texans at Bears 12:00p (CT)
Dolphins at Eagles 1:00p (ET)
Panthers at Vikings 12:00p (CT)
Rams at Chargers 1:05p (PT)
Jaguars at Saints 3:05p (CT)
Titans at 49ers 1:25p (PT)
Bucs at Chiefs 8:20p (ET)

MONDAY, Jan 4
Patriots at Giants 8:15p (ET)

BYE: Jets, Seahawks

WEEK 18

SUNDAY, Jan 10
Texans at Giants 4:25p (ET)
Cardinals at Rams 1:25p (PT)
Colts at Packers 3:25p (CT)
Browns at Seahawks 1:25p (PT)
Dolphins at Lions 4:25p (ET)
Bears at Jaguars 4:25p (ET)
Bucs at 49ers 1:25p (PT)
Commanders at Cowboys 3:25p (CT)
Bills at Jets 4:25p (ET)
Titans at Raiders 1:25p (PT)
Patriots at Panthers 4:25p (ET)
Ravens at Saints 3:25p (CT)
Steelers at Falcons 4:25p (ET)
Eagles at Broncos 2:25p (MT)
Bengals at Vikings 3:25p (CT)
Chiefs at Chargers 8:20p (ET)

Thirty Years of Attack

By The Grid Editors

How NFL Offensive Philosophy Evolved from the Run-and-Shoot to Today's Wide-Zone Era

Football's defenses get the credit for being reactive, but offense is where the sport's real intellectual history lives. Every era of the NFL has been defined by a handful of coaches who solved the game differently — and then by the defensive coordinators who spent years catching up. Tracing offensive strategy from the mid-1990s to today isn't just a nostalgia tour. It's a map of how the sport's core argument — protect the quarterback and control tempo, or spread the field and multiply answers — keeps resolving itself in new ways.

THE WEST COAST OFFENSE: PRECISION BEFORE POWER

No system shaped the modern passing game more than Bill Walsh's West Coast offense, which was already dominant by the mid-1990s and remained the sport's default operating language well into the 2000s. Its premise was almost radical for its time: instead of forcing the ball downfield, use short, high-percentage throws — timing routes to backs, tight ends, and slot receivers — as a substitute for the running game. Yards after the catch did the work that a deep ball used to do, and a quarterback's rhythm and footwork mattered as much as his arm strength. Walsh's coaching tree — Mike Holmgren, Andy Reid, Jon Gruden, Mike Shanahan among them — carried the system's DNA into nearly every franchise in the league by the early 2000s, which is part of why so many modern offenses still borrow its vocabulary of route concepts even when they

no longer resemble it structurally.

THE RUN-AND-SHOOT: FOOTBALL'S MOST DIVISIVE EXPERIMENT

At the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum sat the run-and-shoot, a four-receiver, no-tight-end, no-huddle system built around receivers reading coverage and adjusting their routes live, rather than running a route tree decided in the huddle. Mouse Davis had developed it at the college level, and it reached the NFL through Jerry Glanville's Houston Oilers in the late 1980s, with June Jones as quarterbacks coach installing it alongside Warren Moon. The Oilers rode it to seven consecutive playoff appearances, and Jones brought the offense — rebranded the “Run 'N Shoot” — with him to Atlanta, where it briefly turned Chris Miller into a Pro Bowl passer. It was explosive, and it was also the most argued-about system of its decade. Critics, including veteran defensive coach Buddy Ryan, dismissed it as “chuck-and-duck” football, unserious because it sacrificed a tight end and a fullback for pure spacing. The run-and-shoot never became the league standard, but its core idea — receivers making coverage-based decisions rather than running fixed routes — didn't disappear. It resurfaced two decades later as the intellectual ancestor of option routes inside modern spread passing games.

THE K-GUN: BUFFALO'S NO-HUDDLE JUGGERNAUT

No team weaponised tempo more effectively than Marv Levy's Buffalo Bills, whose so-called “K-Gun” offense — named for tight end Keith McKeller, whose deployment as a fourth

Thirty Years of Attack

receiver defined the personnel grouping — used the no-huddle not as a two-minute-drill trick but as a base-offense identity. With Jim Kelly at quarterback calling plays at the line rather than waiting on signals from the sideline, Buffalo denied defensive coordinators the substitutions and the breathing room they relied on, wearing down fronts possession after possession behind Thurman Thomas and Andre Reed. It was, in effect, the run-and-shoot's tempo philosophy married to a more conventional route tree — and it worked well enough to carry the Bills to four consecutive Super Bowl appearances from 1990 through 1993, a run no other franchise has matched before or since, even though Buffalo lost all four. The no-huddle's legacy outlasted that heartbreak: it proved an up-tempo attack could be a team's primary offense rather than a late-game gimmick, a lesson every modern hurry-up system still borrows from.

ERHARDT-PERKINS AND THE PATRIOTS' QUIET REVOLUTION

While the West Coast offense spread through imitation, a quieter system was reshaping how coaches thought about play-calling itself: Erhardt-Perkins, developed originally with the Patriots in the 1970s and refined into its modern form under Bill Belichick and Charlie Weis in the 2000s. Its innovation wasn't a route tree but a vocabulary — plays organized around a small number of core concepts with many formational variations, rather than hundreds of individually named plays. That structure let Tom Brady's Patriots shift personnel and formation constantly while keeping the underlying concept, and therefore the answer to any given defensive look, identical. It rewarded a quarterback's command of the system over raw physical tools, and it became the template for

how several of the league's most cerebral offenses — including later Josh McDaniels and Sean McVay branches of the coaching tree — organize their playbooks today.

AIR CORYELL'S LONG SHADOW

Even as short-passing systems dominated headlines, Don Coryell's vertical, numbered route-tree passing game — built around stretching a defense deep before working underneath — never left the league. Its clearest modern descendant is the Kansas City Chiefs' offense under Andy Reid and, more specifically, the Coryell-rooted principles Reid absorbed early in his career and folded into a West Coast base. The result is a hybrid that borrowed timing and rhythm from Walsh and shot-play verticality from Coryell — proof that the sport's offensive lineages rarely stay pure for more than a decade before merging with a rival system.

ZONE BLOCKING AND THE SHANAHAN FAMILY BUSINESS

Running-game philosophy underwent its own quiet revolution through the 1990s and 2000s with the wide (or “outside”) zone blocking scheme, popularized by Mike Shanahan and Alex Gibbs in Denver. Instead of assigning each lineman a specific defender to block, zone schemes had the whole line move laterally together, with the back reading the leverage of the defense and picking his own cutback lane rather than following a predetermined hole. It let Denver plug in a series of different running backs — Terrell Davis most famously — behind the same system and get similar production, because the scheme, not any individual back's talent, was doing much of the work. Shanahan's son Kyle carried the system forward decades later in Atlanta and San Francisco, pairing it with pre-snap motion to manufacture the same

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run-pass conflict for defenses that the run-and-shoot had once tried to create through personnel alone.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL'S GIFT: SPREAD, AIR RAID, AND THE SHOTGUN STANDARD

Somewhere in the 2000s, the flow of ideas reversed. Instead of the NFL exporting concepts down to college football, college systems began climbing up. The Air Raid, developed by Hal Mumme and refined by Mike Leach at Texas Tech, treated the pass as the primary means of moving the ball on nearly every down, using simplified route combinations repeated relentlessly until a defense broke. Chip Kelly's up-tempo spread at Oregon did something similar for pace, snapping the ball as fast as legally possible to prevent defensive substitution and decision-making. Both systems arrived in the NFL diluted but influential — Kelly himself brought his tempo-based spread to the Philadelphia Eagles in 2013, and Air Raid concepts now appear as sub-packages inside almost every modern playbook, especially on third down.

THE PISTOL, AND THE RISE OF THE RUN-PASS OPTION

Nevada coach Chris Ault's pistol formation — a quarterback stationed a few yards behind center rather than in a full shotgun, with the running back directly behind him instead of offset — solved a problem college and pro coaches had wrestled with for years: how to keep a running game's downhill physicality while still giving a quarterback the vision of a shotgun passer. Colin Kaepernick's 49ers popularized it at the NFL level early in the 2010s. Around the same period, the run-pass option (RPO) — a single play that lets a

quarterback choose, based on a single defender's reaction after the snap, whether to hand the ball off or throw a quick pass — became the era's signature innovation, turning the quarterback's pre-snap and post-snap reads into the actual play design rather than a contingency for busted coverage. Together, the pistol and the RPO era did for the 2010s what the run-and-shoot had tried to do in the 1990s: force a defense to be right about run or pass before the ball was even snapped.

WHERE THE LEAGUE SITS NOW: MOTION, MULTIPLICITY, AND THE MCVAY-SHANAHAN STANDARD

The current NFL offensive standard, built most visibly by Sean McVay in Los Angeles and Kyle Shanahan in San Francisco, is best understood as a synthesis rather than a single new idea. It borrows Erhardt-Perkins-style formation flexibility around a small core of concepts, Shanahan zone-run principles, and constant pre-snap motion — receivers and backs shifting before the snap specifically to force a defense to reveal whether it's playing man or zone coverage before the ball is even in play. The goal is the same one that's animated every era covered here: make the defense wrong before the play starts, whether the tool is a receiver reading coverage in the 1990s or a running back going in motion in the 2020s. What's changed isn't the ambition. It's the sophistication of the disguise.

THE THROUGHLINE

Strip away the label on any of these systems and the same argument reappears in every decade: control tempo and shorten the game, or spread the field and multiply the number of correct answers a defense has to find. The West Coast offense and Erhardt-Perkins argued for rhythm and repetition. The

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run-and-shoot and Air Raid argued for volume and reads. Zone blocking and the pistol argued that the running game itself could be redesigned to ask the same questions the passing game already did. None of these systems replaced the others outright — they layered, married, and occasionally reversed course entirely, which is exactly why the modern offense on any given Sunday is likely to contain fragments of all of them at once.

The Grid Ahead

Once the season's underway, we'll be digging into where the game came from as much as where it's going — the stories behind the sport, not just the box scores. Nine features on the way, from long-read history to first-person reporting from the road.

The End of Printed American Football Media

What was lost — and what wasn't — when the programmes, annuals and glossy previews that used to define how fans followed the sport went digital, or disappeared entirely. A look at what a modern issue like this one owes to the publications it replaced.

How Television Built Britain's NFL Fanbase

Long before streaming and International Series games, a handful of UK broadcasters built an audience for American football from almost nothing. This is that story, told through the people who made the calls no one back in the States ever heard.

The Birth of Monday Night Football

How a single scheduling decision turned into the longest-running episodic programme in American primetime history, and reshaped how the whole league is watched, marketed and scheduled to this day.

On the Road with The Grid

Our editor is in London for Eagles @ Jaguars at Tottenham on October 11, then back in the States in November for a three-city swing — Broncos @ Panthers (Sun Nov 8), Bills @ Vikings (Mon Nov 9) and Commanders @ Giants (Thu Nov 12). Full reports and behind-the-scenes colour from all four trips as the season goes on.

The NFL Draft, Explained

A UK fan's guide to the strangest, longest player-acquisition process in sport — how the order is set, why teams trade picks, and what actually happens in that room once the clock starts.

Understanding the College System

There's no NFL without it — a beginner's guide to how college football actually feeds the league, from recruiting to the transfer portal to how scouts build a draft board a year out from draft night.

Why American Football Deserves a Fair Hearing From Soccer Fans

The case for taking the sport seriously, written for readers who've spent a lifetime being told it's all stoppages and no skill — and why that reputation says more about broadcast habits than the game itself.

A Beginner's Guide to Fantasy Football

For readers who keep hearing colleagues talk about their league and have no idea what a flex spot is — the rules, the jargon and the etiquette, explained without assuming you've ever drafted a team before.

Where to Actually Watch: A UK Viewer's Guide

Streaming rights, red-eye kickoffs and which package actually covers your team — an honest, regularly updated breakdown of how to follow the season from this side of the Atlantic without missing the games that matter.

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