

THE UK'S PREMIUM WEEKLY AMERICAN FOOTBALL MAGAZINE

THE GRID

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SEASON RECAP

2026 PREVIEW

THE SEASON THAT WAS. THE SEASON AHEAD.

Issued March 2026 — updated with the latest moves through August 2026.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

What a season. A 14-3 team from Seattle finally got back to the mountaintop, a sack record fell, and a first-year Patriots coach nearly stole the whole thing on the road in Denver. Now the league barely pauses for breath — trades, a coaching carousel with ten new hires, a loaded draft class, and new rules are already reshaping the year ahead. This issue is our attempt to get you from the final gun of Super Bowl LX to the opening kickoff of 2026 in one sitting. Dig in, argue with our picks, and we'll see you in Week 1.

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.

Super Bowl LX Recap

SEAHAWKS SILENCE THE PATRIOTS, 29-13

Two years after Mike Macdonald took the job, Seattle has its second Lombardi Trophy. The Seahawks throttled New England from the opening whistle, riding a defense that sacked Drake Maye six times, forced three turnovers — including two interceptions and a pick-six — and never let the Patriots' offense find a rhythm. Seattle led 7-0 before New England had run a single first-down play, and the margin never dipped below nine points the rest of the way.

Kenneth Walker III was the engine on the other side of the ball, grinding out yardage behind an offensive line that controlled the game clock and kept New England's defense on the field. Walker's combination of power and burst earned him Super Bowl MVP honors, capping a physical, run-heavy gameplan that dared the Patriots to keep up. Seattle ran the ball on 13 of its first 16 offensive snaps, methodically bleeding the clock and forcing Drake Maye into obvious passing situations against a defense that had built its entire season around exactly that scenario.

For New England, it was a stunning underdog run that fell one game short. Mike Vrabel's first season in Foxborough produced a Coach of the Year trophy and a trip to the Super Bowl as a No. 2 seed that upset the top-seeded Broncos on the road — but the Patriots never solved Seattle's front seven when it mattered most. Maye, who had thrown only eight interceptions all season, was picked off twice and stripped once, and New England's offensive line — banged up after two brutal playoff wins — never found the protection it needed to establish any rhythm through the air.

The result closes the book on a Seattle turnaround that started with a coaching change and a defensive rebuild two years ago. It also opens an entirely different conversation for New England, which returns most of its roster and immediately becomes one of the favorites heading into 2026 — a storyline this issue picks back up starting on page 21.

29-13

FINAL SCORE

6

SACKS OF MAYE

3

TURNOVERS FORCED

2ND

SEAHAWKS TITLE

The Box Score

	1Q	2Q	3Q	4Q	F
Patriots	0	7	3	3	13
Seahawks	7	9	10	3	29

TEAM STATS

	NE	SEA
Total Yards	245	372
Passing Yards	210	152
Rushing Yards	35	220
First Downs	14	22
3rd Down Eff.	3-12	7-13
Turnovers	3	0
Sacks Allowed	6	1
Time of Poss.	22:10	37:50
Penalties	6-52	4-30

GAME NOTES

- Kenneth Walker III (RB, Seattle) is named Super Bowl MVP after grinding out a punishing, clock-controlling performance behind an offensive line that dominated the line of scrimmage from the opening series.
- Seattle's defense records 6 sacks and forces 3 turnovers, including a second-quarter pick-six that turned a competitive game into a rout New England never threatened to erase.
- Seattle becomes a two-time Super Bowl champion franchise, adding a second Lombardi Trophy to the one it won more than a decade earlier — and validating the defensive-first rebuild Mike Macdonald began upon taking the job.

HOW IT HAPPENED

Seattle's defensive coordinators had spent two weeks studying New England's protection schemes, and it showed from the first snap — the Seahawks disguised coverages all night, sending pressure from unexpected angles and forcing Maye to hold the ball a beat longer than he wanted. By the time the Patriots found any offensive footing in the third quarter, Seattle had already built a two-score cushion that its rushing attack was more than happy to protect. It was, fittingly, a title won in the trenches on both sides of the ball.

Next stop: Super Bowl LXI, February 14, 2027 — SoFi Stadium, Los Angeles.

Road to the Super Bowl

SEEDING

Seed	Team	Record
1	Denver Broncos	14-3
2	New England Patriots	14-3
3	Jacksonville Jaguars	13-4
4	Pittsburgh Steelers	10-7
5	Houston Texans	12-5
6	Buffalo Bills	12-5
7	LA Chargers	11-6

WILD CARD ROUND

- (2) Patriots 16, (7) Chargers 3
- (6) Bills 27, (3) Jaguars 24
- (5) Texans 30, (4) Steelers 6

DIVISIONAL ROUND

- (1) Broncos 33, (6) Bills 30 (OT)
- (2) Patriots 28, (5) Texans 16

AFC CHAMPIONSHIP

Patriots 10, Broncos 7 — New England wins on the road in Denver

Two upsets in Wild Card Weekend reshaped the AFC bracket before Denver even played a snap. Buffalo went into Jacksonville and outlasted the No. 3 seed Jaguars 27-24, riding a fourth-quarter surge that overcame a two-score deficit. Across the bracket, Houston did something similar in reverse, traveling to Pittsburgh and dismantling the Steelers 30-6 behind a defense that harassed the Pittsburgh backfield all afternoon. New England, the only home favorite to hold serve, handled the Chargers 16-3 in a game that was never really in doubt.

The divisional round belonged to Denver, barely. The Broncos needed overtime to escape a Buffalo team playing with nothing to lose, winning 33-30 on a drive that took nearly seven minutes off the clock. New England, meanwhile, methodically pulled away from Houston in the second half of a 28-16 win, setting up a rematch of the regular season's tightest division race — Denver and New England had split their two meetings by a combined four points.

Road to the Super Bowl

SEEDING

Seed	Team	Record
1	Seattle Seahawks	14-3
2	Chicago Bears	11-6
3	Philadelphia Eagles	11-6
4	Carolina Panthers	8-9
5	LA Rams	12-5
6	San Francisco 49ers	12-5
7	Green Bay Packers	9-7-1

WILD CARD ROUND

- (2) Bears 31, (7) Packers 27
- (6) 49ers 23, (3) Eagles 19
- (5) Rams 34, (4) Panthers 31

DIVISIONAL ROUND

- (1) Seahawks 41, (6) 49ers 6
- (5) Rams 20, (2) Bears 17

NFC CHAMPIONSHIP

Seahawks 31, Rams 27 — Seattle survives a Stafford-led comeback bid

The NFC bracket was chaos from the jump. San Francisco traveled to Philadelphia as the No. 6 seed and stunned the Eagles 23-19, riding a late defensive stand that stopped Philadelphia on downs inside the 49ers' 10-yard line. Carolina's feel-good playoff return — its first postseason trip since Tetairoa McMillan's rookie season began — ended in a wild 34-31 shootout loss to the Rams at Bank of America Stadium, a game that saw four lead changes in the fourth quarter alone. Chicago handled its business at home, beating Green Bay 31-27 in a Wild Card rematch of two division rivals who had split their season series.

Matthew Stafford's Rams kept rolling in the divisional round, going into Chicago and knocking off the No. 2 seed Bears 20-17 on a fourth-quarter field goal that capped a methodical, clock-eating final drive. Seattle, fresh off its bye, made the round's other game look easy, throttling San Francisco 41-6 in a game that was effectively decided by halftime.

The NFC Championship, though, was the closest game of the entire playoffs. Stafford threw for over 300 yards and rallied the Rams from a 21-point third-quarter deficit, pulling Los Angeles within four points with under two minutes to play. Seattle's defense made one final stand, forcing an incompletion on fourth down to seal a 31-27 win and send the Seahawks to Levi's Stadium as Super Bowl LX favorites.

Conference Championship Sunday

AFC CHAMPIONSHIP

Patriots 10, Broncos 7

New England becomes the first No. 2 seed in years to win a conference title on the road, riding a Mike Vrabel defense that has been the story of the Patriots' turnaround season. Denver's offense managed just 217 total yards, its lowest output of the season.

It's a statement result for a franchise that opened the year with modest expectations. Vrabel's first Foxborough team now heads to Santa Clara as something few predicted in September: a legitimate Super Bowl contender built in his own image.

Denver's defense had shut down every offense it faced since Week 10, but New England's ground game — largely an afterthought all season — controlled the clock for over 34 minutes, the kind of game plan that only works when the roster believes in it completely.

NFC CHAMPIONSHIP

Seahawks 31, Rams 27

Seattle holds off a furious Stafford-led rally to lock up the franchise's second Super Bowl trip, setting up a rematch of the Week 1 curtain-raiser two weeks later in Santa Clara. The Seahawks led by 21 in the third quarter before the Rams' comeback bid made the final minutes genuinely tense.

For Los Angeles, the loss ends an aggressive, injury-defying season on a sour note, but the roster the Rams have since built around Stafford suggests this window is far from closed heading into 2026.

Seattle's defense forced the decisive fourth-down incompletion with 38 seconds left, a fitting bookend for a unit that had carried the franchise all season — and one final reminder of why the Seahawks entered the day as Super Bowl LX favorites.

BOTH GAMES, BY THE NUMBERS

	AFC: NE 10, DEN 7	NFC: SEA 31, LAR 27
Total yards	310 - 217	402 - 388
Turnovers	0 - 2	0 - 1
Time of possession	34:12 - 25:48	29:40 - 30:20
Sacks	4 - 0	2 - 1

2025 Final Standings

AFC EAST

Team	W	L	T	PF	PA
New England y	14	3	0	490	320
Buffalo x	12	5	0	481	365
Miami	7	10	0	347	424
NY Jets	3	14	0	300	503

AFC NORTH

Team	W	L	T	PF	PA
Pittsburgh y	10	7	0	397	387
Baltimore	8	9	0	424	398
Cincinnati	6	11	0	414	492
Cleveland	5	12	0	279	379

AFC SOUTH

Team	W	L	T	PF	PA
Jacksonville y	13	4	0	474	336
Houston x	12	5	0	404	295
Indianapolis	8	9	0	466	412
Tennessee	3	14	0	284	478

AFC WEST

Team	W	L	T	PF	PA
Denver z	14	3	0	401	311
LA Chargers x	11	6	0	368	340
Kansas City	6	11	0	362	328
Las Vegas	3	14	0	241	432

BY THE STANDINGS

Denver and New England both finished 14-3, the two best records in the conference, with Denver claiming the tiebreak for the top seed and the first-round bye. The AFC South was the conference's most balanced division top to bottom, with Jacksonville and Houston both reaching the playoffs, while the AFC East and AFC West each crowned a champion by a wide margin. Only the Jets, Titans and Raiders finished with three wins or fewer, making this one of the more top-heavy conferences in recent memory.

NFC

2025 Final Standings

NFC EAST

Team	W	L	T	PF	PA
Philadelphia y	11	6	0	379	325
Dallas	7	9	1	471	511
Washington	5	12	0	356	451
NY Giants	4	13	0	381	439

NFC NORTH

Team	W	L	T	PF	PA
Chicago y	11	6	0	441	415
Green Bay x	9	7	1	391	360
Minnesota	9	8	0	344	333
Detroit	9	8	0	481	413

NFC SOUTH

Team	W	L	T	PF	PA
Carolina y	8	9	0	311	380
Tampa Bay	8	9	0	380	411
Atlanta	8	9	0	353	401
New Orleans	6	11	0	306	383

NFC WEST

Team	W	L	T	PF	PA
Seattle z	14	3	0	483	292
LA Rams x	12	5	0	518	346
San Francisco x	12	5	0	437	371
Arizona	3	14	0	355	488

BY THE STANDINGS

The NFC South crowned a champion at 8-9 — Carolina's Tetairoa McMillan-powered surge was enough to win a division nobody separated itself in — while the NFC West produced three playoff teams in Seattle, the Rams and San Francisco, the conference's deepest division by a wide margin. Dallas's 7-9 record with 471 points scored made the Cowboys the highest-scoring team to miss the playoffs in either conference, a stat their inconsistent defense will be hearing about all offseason.

y = clinched division x = clinched playoff berth z = clinched home field PF/PA = points for/against

2025 Season Awards

MOST VALUABLE PLAYER

Matthew Stafford, QB — LA Rams

4,707 passing yards, 46 TD, league leader in both

At 37, Stafford authored the best statistical season of his career, leading the NFL in passing yards and touchdown passes while dragging a Rams roster through an injury-riddled year all the way to the NFC Championship Game. He did it without missing a start, throwing for 300-plus yards in ten different games.

The MVP vote wasn't particularly close by the end of the season — Stafford separated himself down the stretch, throwing 14 touchdowns against just two interceptions over the final six games. It's a career-crowning achievement for a quarterback many had written off as steady-but-unspectacular just seasons ago.

OFFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Jaxon Smith-Njigba, WR — Seattle

1,793 receiving yards, league leader

The engine of Seattle's title run, Smith-Njigba topped the league in receiving yards and gave the Seahawks the alpha receiver they'd been missing since their first championship era. He was remarkably consistent, topping 90 receiving yards in 14 of 17 regular-season games, and carried that form into the postseason, becoming the first Seahawks receiver to top 100 yards in a Super Bowl.

What separates his case from the field is context: he did it while Seattle ran the ball more than almost any team in football, meaning every touch came in a genuinely run-first offense rather than a system built to inflate numbers.

2025 Season Awards

DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Myles Garrett, DE — Cleveland (2025)

23 sacks — new single-season NFL record

Garrett bettered Michael Strahan's 22.5-sack mark from 2001 by just half a sack, a record that had stood for nearly a quarter-century and had come to be seen as close to untouchable given how offenses had evolved to get the ball out faster. Garrett beat it anyway, recording multiple sacks in eight different games.

The timing made the achievement even stranger in hindsight: weeks after collecting the trophy, Cleveland traded its new record-holder to the Rams in the offseason's biggest blockbuster (see page 21). Garrett becomes the rare DPOY to change teams the same offseason he wins the award.

COACH OF THE YEAR

Mike Vrabel — New England

Super Bowl LX appearance in Year 1

Vrabel's first season in Foxborough ended in a Super Bowl trip and an AFC Championship win on the road in Denver, a turnaround few saw coming after New England's post-Belichick transition years. He inherited a roster with real questions at quarterback and built the team's identity around a top-five defense.

Vrabel's vote total wasn't unanimous, but it wasn't particularly close either — voters rewarded a first-year coach who took a team picked to finish outside the playoffs and turned it into the AFC's final obstacle before the Super Bowl.

2025 Season Awards

OFFENSIVE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR**Tetairoa McMillan, WR — Carolina****Panthers' first-year playmaker**

McMillan gave a rebuilding Carolina offense a true No. 1 target from Day 1, posting a 1,000-yard rookie season that ranks among the best in franchise history. The Panthers rode that spark all the way to a surprise playoff berth, their first postseason trip in years, with McMillan drawing safety help all season.

His rookie campaign wasn't just about box-score numbers — teammates and coaches pointed repeatedly to his blocking and route precision as evidence of a player who arrived more polished than his draft slot suggested.

DEFENSIVE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR**Carson Schwesinger, LB — Cleveland****Browns' first-year defensive anchor**

Schwesinger was a tackling machine from Week 1, leading all rookies in tackles and giving Cleveland's defense a long-term building block even in a rough season on the scoreboard. He started all 17 games as a rookie, an unusually heavy workload for a first-year linebacker, and became the clear defensive signal-caller by midseason.

With Myles Garrett now traded to the Rams, Schwesinger's development takes on added importance — he's positioned to be the emotional and statistical center of Cleveland's defense for years to come.

2025 Season Awards

COMEBACK PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Christian McCaffrey, RB — San Francisco

2,126 scrimmage yards, 17 total TD

McCaffrey started all 19 games including the playoffs and led the NFL with 413 touches, a full-season answer to years of injury questions that had limited him to a combined 12 games across two prior seasons. He was as effective as ever when healthy, but the story this year was availability — a workhorse workload absorbed without a single missed game.

San Francisco built its offense around his versatility all season, using him as a runner, a receiver out of the backfield and even a occasional wildcat passer. His return to full health was arguably the single biggest reason the 49ers were back in the playoff picture after a down year.

ALSO HONORED

Aden Durde, Seattle's defensive coordinator, was named Assistant Coach of the Year for engineering the league's stingiest defense down the stretch under new head coach Mike Macdonald. Eliot Wolf took home Executive of the Year for New England, the architect behind the roster overhaul that turned Mike Vrabel's first season into a Super Bowl run. Bobby Wagner earned the Walter Payton Man of the Year award for his continued work both on the field and in the community. The ceremony also honored the newest class inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame — Von Miller, Julio Jones and Earl Thomas III — at NFL Honors 2026, held the Thursday before the Super Bowl and now one of the league's marquee offseason events in its own right.

Stats & Records

PASSING YARDS

#	Player	Team	Total
1	Matthew Stafford	LAR	4,707
2	Jared Goff	DET	4,564
3	Drake Maye	NE	4,398
4	Justin Herbert	LAC	4,210
5	Patrick Mahomes	KC	4,180
6	Baker Mayfield	TB	4,025
7	Josh Allen	BUF	3,982
8	Trevor Lawrence	JAX	3,870
9	C.J. Stroud	HOU	3,801
10	Sam Darnold	SEA	3,755

PASSING TOUCHDOWNS

#	Player	Team	Total
1	Matthew Stafford	LAR	46
2	Drake Maye	NE	38
3	Jared Goff	DET	34
4	Patrick Mahomes	KC	33
5	Josh Allen	BUF	32
6	Baker Mayfield	TB	29
7	Justin Herbert	LAC	28
8	Trevor Lawrence	JAX	27
9	Bo Nix	DEN	26
10	Jayden Daniels	WAS	24

RUSHING YARDS

#	Player	Team	Total
1	James Cook	BUF	1,621
2	Derrick Henry	BAL	1,595
3	Christian McCaffrey	SF	1,488
4	Bijan Robinson	ATL	1,402
5	Jahmyr Gibbs	DET	1,366
6	Saquon Barkley	PHI	1,330
7	Kenneth Walker III	SEA	1,275
8	De'Von Achane	MIA	1,194
9	Breece Hall	NYJ	1,140
10	Josh Jacobs	GB	1,102

RECEIVING YARDS

#	Player	Team	Total
1	Jaxon Smith-Njigba	SEA	1,793
2	Puka Nacua	LAR	1,715
3	Ja'Marr Chase	CIN	1,602
4	Justin Jefferson	MIN	1,544
5	Amon-Ra St. Brown	DET	1,489
6	CeeDee Lamb	DAL	1,420
7	Nico Collins	HOU	1,355
8	Drake London	ATL	1,298
9	Tetairoa McMillan	CAR	1,206
10	Garrett Wilson	NYJ	1,150

Stafford's MVP case was built on leading the league in both passing categories, with Drake Maye's runner-up finish in each only sharpening New England's case as one of the 2026 favorites. On the ground, James Cook's rushing title came in a Buffalo offense leaning on him more with every week, while Derrick Henry, at 32, proved workhorse backs still have a place in the modern NFL. Jaxon Smith-Njigba's receiving crown, meanwhile, came in a run-first Seattle offense — a receiving champion who got there without inflated volume, which makes it more impressive, not less.

Stats & Records

RECEPTIONS

#	Player	Team	Total
1	Puka Nacua	LAR	129
2	Trey McBride	ARI	126
3	Amon-Ra St. Brown	DET	118
4	Ja'Marr Chase	CIN	114
5	Justin Jefferson	MIN	110
6	Jaxon Smith-Njigba	SEA	107
7	George Kittle	SF	101
8	Brock Bowers	LV	98
9	Sam LaPorta	DET	95
10	CeeDee Lamb	DAL	92

SACKS

#	Player	Team	Total
1	Myles Garrett	CLE	23
2	T.J. Watt	PIT	17.5
3	Nick Bosa	SF	15
4	Maxx Crosby	LV	14.5
5	Aidan Hutchinson	DET	14
6	Trey Hendrickson	CIN	13.5
7	Josh Hines-Allen	JAX	13
8	Danielle Hunter	HOU	12.5
9	Micah Parsons	GB	12.5
10	Will Anderson Jr.	HOU	12

INTERCEPTIONS

#	Player	Team	Total
1	Kevin Byard	CHI	7
2	Antoine Winfield Jr.	TB	6
3	Trent McDuffie	KC	6
4	Patrick Surtain II	DEN	5
5	Xavien Howard	MIA	5
6	Devon Witherspoon	SEA	5
7	DaRon Bland	DAL	5
8	Marlon Humphrey	BAL	4
9	Kerby Joseph	DET	4
10	Cooper DeJean	PHI	4

TOTAL TOUCHDOWNS

#	Player	Team	Total
1	Christian McCaffrey	SF	19
2	James Cook	BUF	17
3	Puka Nacua	LAR	15
4	Jaxon Smith-Njigba	SEA	14
5	Bijan Robinson	ATL	14
6	Ja'Marr Chase	CIN	13
7	Jahmyr Gibbs	DET	13
8	Justin Jefferson	MIN	12
9	Derrick Henry	BAL	12
10	Nico Collins	HOU	11

Trey McBride's second-place receptions finish makes him the tight end leader by a wide margin, while the sacks list doubles as a map of the offseason's biggest defensive storylines — Garrett's record now belongs to a Rams uniform, and Micah Parsons' 12.5 sacks in his first season in Green Bay, cut short by injury, were still enough to keep him inside the league's top 10. Trent McDuffie's interceptions total came the year before Kansas City traded him to the Rams, and Christian McCaffrey's league-leading touchdown count is the clearest possible evidence his health is finally all the way back.

Stats & Records

TOP SCORING OFFENSES

Team	Points For
LA Rams	518
New England	490
Seattle	483
Detroit	481
Buffalo	481

Seattle's defense (292 points allowed) and New England's offense (490 points scored) were the two best full-season units in football — and both teams met exactly where you'd expect, in Super Bowl LX. It's a rare double: the league's stingiest defense and most prolific offense reaching the same championship game.

STINGIEST DEFENSES

Team	Points Against
Seattle	292
Houston	295
Denver	311
Jacksonville	336
LA Chargers	340

The Rams' 518 points scored led the entire NFL, a total padded by an offense that rarely punted inside its own territory. Houston's defense quietly finished second in the league in points allowed despite playing in the AFC South, a division that produced two playoff teams.

Stats & Records

23

Sacks by Myles Garrett, a new single-season NFL record, breaking Michael Strahan's 22.5 from 2001 — a mark that had stood for nearly twenty-five years and had survived the league's shift toward quicker passing games designed specifically to neutralize pass rushers.

14-3

The record shared by both Super Bowl LX participants' conference No. 1 seeds (Denver and Seattle) — the NFL's two best regular-season marks, and a reminder that the top seed doesn't always make the Super Bowl: Denver was upset in the AFC Championship.

2ND

Lombardi Trophy in Seattle Seahawks franchise history, won more than a decade after the first, and the first championship of the Mike Macdonald coaching era in Seattle.

6

Sacks of Drake Maye by Seattle's defense in Super Bowl LX, part of a three-turnover night that included a pick-six and effectively ended New England's upset bid before halftime.

10

Head-coaching changes across the league this offseason, tying the all-time record for a single hiring cycle — a wave that reshaped nearly a third of the league's sidelines before training camp even opened.

413

Touches for Christian McCaffrey, the most in the NFL, as San Francisco's Comeback Player of the Year answered years of injury questions with a full, uninterrupted workload.

518

Points scored by the LA Rams, the most in the NFL, on an offense that rarely punted inside its own territory and finished the year as the league's most explosive unit start to finish.

129

Receptions by Puka Nacua, the league's catches leader, as the Rams' passing attack leaned on him as its most reliable target in a season that ended one win short of the Super Bowl.

Opinion & Editorial

Cleveland Traded Its Sack King. Did the Browns Just Blink?

By The Grid Staff

Myles Garrett spent 2025 rewriting the record book, piling up 23 sacks to break Michael Strahan's 24-year-old mark and taking home Defensive Player of the Year. Weeks later, Cleveland shipped him to the Rams in the offseason's biggest blockbuster.

“Both things can be true — a smart rebuild and a gut punch.”

The football logic is straightforward: the Browns weren't close to contending, and Garrett, already the best pass rusher in football, was only going to get more expensive. Los Angeles, fresh off an NFC Championship run, needed exactly what he provides and paid handsomely in draft capital to get it.

But trading away a homegrown, record-setting star the same offseason he sets the record is still a jarring image for a fan base that has watched this movie before. The Browns will argue they turned a 5-12 season into future assets. Rams fans will simply say: our front seven just got scary. Both things can be true —

and we'll only really know who won the trade once Garrett is teeing off on quarterbacks in a Rams uniform this fall.

Either way, it's the rare trade that reshapes two rosters, and two fan bases' expectations, in one move.

There's also a personnel-management lesson buried in here for the rest of the league: Cleveland's front office has now shown, twice in recent memory, a willingness to move on from homegrown stars at the peak of their value rather than pay market rate to keep them. Whether that philosophy ages well depends entirely on what the Browns do with the draft capital they received — and on how many more sacks Garrett racks up in a Rams uniform while Cleveland watches from home.

Opinion & Editorial

New England Isn't Rebuilding Anymore — It's Arrived

By The Grid Staff

A year ago, the question in Foxborough was how long the post-Belichick reset would take. Mike Vrabel's answer: one season. A Coach of the Year trophy, a road upset of the AFC's No. 1 seed, and a Super Bowl appearance later, the Patriots are no longer a rebuilding story — they're a contender.

“The Patriots didn't just show up in 2025 — they arrived.”

Drake Maye's growth was the headline all year, but it was the defense — and Vrabel's fingerprints on it — that carried New England through January. Holding Denver to seven points on the road in the AFC Championship wasn't a fluke; it was a preview of what this team wants to be.

The offseason moves back that up. Trading for A.J. Brown gives Maye a true No. 1 receiver, and the front office is clearly operating with a win-now mentality most people didn't expect

from this roster this soon. Super Bowl LX stings, but if the Patriots' defense travels with them into 2026, this looks less like a one-year surprise and more like the start of something.

The bar is now the only place left to go: no more moral victories. New England has to win the big one.

Skeptics will point out that this roster still hasn't proven it can win the game that matters most, and that's fair — a Super Bowl loss is a Super Bowl loss no matter how the defense played. But teams that lose the big game and run it back with the same core the following year have a mixed track record, and this front office's aggressive offseason suggests it isn't interested in finding out the hard way twice.

Opinion & Editorial

Where Does a 37-Year-Old MVP Season Rank?

By The Grid Staff

Matthew Stafford has been one of the league's best pure passers for the better part of fifteen years, but 2025 was different: a league-leading 4,707 yards and 46 touchdowns, an MVP trophy, and a Rams team that rode his arm all the way to the NFC Championship Game.

“Age is just a number when the arm still looks like this.”

What makes it remarkable isn't just the age — 37, deep into a career that already includes a Super Bowl ring — it's the context. The Rams built an aggressive, win-now roster around him this offseason, from the Myles Garrett blockbuster to the Trent McDuffie extension, betting that Stafford's window is still very much open.

Historically, MVP seasons this late in a quarterback's career are rare. Stafford's now belongs in that conversation alongside the handful of passers who got dramatically better,

not worse, in their late thirties. The only thing missing from the resume is a second ring — and after an offseason like the Rams just had, he may get another crack at it sooner than people think.

It also reframes how we should think about quarterback aging curves in general. For years, the conventional wisdom held that elite quarterback play cratered somewhere around 35. Stafford — along with a handful of his contemporaries around the league — is quietly rewriting that assumption, and front offices that build around veteran quarterbacks may look a lot smarter in hindsight than they did when the ink dried on those contracts.

Offseason Shake-Up

Myles Garrett → LA Rams

Browns trade reigning DPOY / sack-record holder

The offseason's headline move. Cleveland deals its record-breaking pass rusher — fresh off a 23-sack, Defensive Player of the Year season — to a Rams team that just made the NFC Championship, instantly upgrading Los Angeles' front seven from good to potentially historic. The Rams gave up a package built around future first-round picks, a price several rival executives called steep even for a player of Garrett's caliber — and for Cleveland, the front office frames it as a rebuild accelerant rather than a white flag.

Trent McDuffie → LA Rams

From Kansas City, for four draft picks incl. a 2026 first

The Rams' second major swing arrived just days after the Garrett deal. McDuffie, one of the league's premier shutdown corners, signed a four-year, \$124 million extension immediately upon arrival. Kansas City's return — four picks including a 2026 first-rounder — signals a Chiefs front office pivoting toward a longer rebuild window than fans are used to seeing, while the Rams enter 2026 with arguably the NFC's most talented front-seven-plus-secondary combination.

Micah Parsons → Green Bay

Cowboys deal disgruntled star for two firsts and a corner

Dallas moves on from its best defensive player rather than meet his contract demands, sending Parsons to Green Bay for two first-round picks and a starting cornerback. It's a stunning return to the rebuild-via-star-trade playbook for a Cowboys front office that just watched the deal reshape the NFC's pecking order overnight — Green Bay's defense, paired with Jordan Love and a playoff-tested offense, instantly becomes a Super Bowl threat.

Terry McLaurin Stays in Washington

Commanders re-sign their longest-tenured star

Despite months of trade speculation tied to Washington's cap crunch, McLaurin never left — the team instead restructured his deal to ease the 2026 number while keeping its most reliable target in place. For a Commanders receiver room still searching for a true No. 2, keeping McLaurin's steadiness in the fold matters more than whatever a third-round pick might have returned.

Offseason Shake-Up

A.J. Brown → New England

Patriots send a first- and fifth-round pick to Philadelphia

Fresh off a Super Bowl run, New England gives Drake Maye a true No. 1 wideout to build around for 2026, sending Philadelphia a first-round pick and a fifth-rounder in a deal that surprised much of the league given how deep the Eagles' receiver room had looked. For the Patriots, it's a clear signal the front office views its championship window as open now, not several years away.

Michael Pittman Jr. → Pittsburgh

Steelers extend him three years, \$59 million on arrival

Pittsburgh adds a proven possession receiver as it tries to build on a 10-7 division title season, extending Pittman three years and \$59 million the moment the trade was finalized — a strong show of confidence in a player who has quietly posted four consecutive 1,000-yard-adjacent seasons, and a direct fix for a receiving corps that struggled against man coverage in the Steelers' playoff loss to Houston.

Amari Cooper Retires

Veteran receiver steps away in September, before Week 1

Cooper announced his retirement just before the season began, closing out a career that included four 1,000-yard seasons and a Pro Bowl trip. The timing caught several teams still shaping their receiver rooms off guard, but for Cooper it capped a decorated run on his own terms rather than fading out on someone else's roster.

Josh Sweat Stays in Arizona

Cardinals keep their edge rusher off the trade market

Arizona holds onto Sweat rather than let him hit free agency, giving Klint Kubiak's front seven a proven veteran presence up front after a 3-14 finish that left plenty else to address on the roster. It's a lower-profile move than some of the offseason's bigger swings, but a clear signal the Cardinals see their pass rush as a building block rather than a teardown candidate.

Offseason Shake-Up

Kyler Murray → Minnesota

One-year deal after release by Arizona

The Cardinals moved on from their former franchise quarterback after a 3-14 finish, and the Vikings scooped him up on a prove-it deal — one of the more surprising landing spots of the offseason given Minnesota's recent quarterback carousel. The structure gives both sides an easy out if it doesn't work, but real upside if Murray recaptures his old form.

The Trade That Wasn't: Maxx Crosby

Raiders ↔ Ravens deal voided

A blockbuster sending Maxx Crosby to Baltimore for two first-round picks was reportedly agreed in principle — then fell apart after Baltimore's medical staff raised concerns over his surgically repaired knee during the physical. Crosby stayed in Las Vegas, and the near-miss has become one of the offseason's most discussed what-ifs.

Chase Young Stays in New Orleans

Saints keep their edge rusher off the open market

New Orleans re-signs Young rather than let him test free agency, banking on a healthier, more aggressive front seven to anchor a defense still finding its identity in a rebuilding season. Young's snap counts dipped over the past two seasons, but his pass-rush win rate when healthy remains among the better marks at the position.

A League on the Move

Ten head-coaching changes, tied for the most ever

Between the trades above and a coaching carousel spinning as fast as any in league history (see next page), the 2026 offseason will be remembered as one of the most aggressive in recent memory — a sign that the margin between contending and rebuilding has never felt thinner across the league.

Offseason Shake-Up

10 HEAD-COACHING CHANGES — TIED FOR THE MOST EVER

Team	Out	In
Arizona	Jonathan Gannon (fired)	Mike LaFleur (hired, ex-LAR OC)
Atlanta	Raheem Morris (fired)	Kevin Stefanski (hired, ex-CLE HC)
Baltimore	John Harbaugh (parted ways, 18 yrs)	Jesse Minter (promoted, Ravens DC)
Buffalo	Sean McDermott (fired, 9 yrs)	Joe Brady (promoted from OC)
Cleveland	Kevin Stefanski (departed, → Atlanta)	Todd Monken (hired, ex-BAL OC)
Las Vegas	Antonio Pierce (fired, 3-14)	Klint Kubiak (hired, ex-SEA OC)
Miami	Mike McDaniel (fired)	Jeff Hafley (hired, ex-GB DC)
NY Giants	Brian Daboll (fired)	John Harbaugh (hired, ex-BAL HC)
Pittsburgh	Mike Tomlin (fired)	Mike McCarthy (hired, ex-DAL HC)
Tennessee	Brian Callahan (fired)	Robert Saleh (hired, ex-SF DC)

The carousel's biggest twist: John Harbaugh, who spent 18 seasons in Baltimore and won a Super Bowl there, resurfaces in New York with the Giants — while the Ravens stay in-house, promoting defensive coordinator Jesse Minter to keep the defense's identity intact. Cleveland's rebuild continues in earnest too: after losing Myles Garrett to the Rams (see page 21), the Browns also see head coach Kevin Stefanski leave for Atlanta, turning instead to Ravens offensive coordinator Todd Monken to modernize the offense.

Pittsburgh's decision to move on from Mike Tomlin — the franchise's answer at head coach for parts of

three decades — was the offseason's most stunning call, with the Steelers turning to Super Bowl-winning veteran Mike McCarthy to keep the standard intact. In Las Vegas, Antonio Pierce's tenure ends after one difficult season, replaced by Seahawks offensive coordinator Klint Kubiak. Dallas remains the outlier, still searching for a permanent hire as camp approaches.

2026 NFL Draft

NO. 1 OVERALL Fernando Mendoza, QB, Indiana

Selected by the Las Vegas Raiders

Mendoza is the first Hoosier taken in the first round since 1994, headlining a draft class that filled needs at every level — and one that lands in Las Vegas just months after the Raiders moved on from Antonio Pierce and hired Klint Kubiak, joining a quarterback room led by veteran Kirk Cousins. Scouts were unanimous that he was the cleanest quarterback prospect in a class otherwise considered thin at the

position.

The pairing with Kubiak, an offensive-minded coach with a track record of developing quarterbacks, was viewed around the league as close to ideal. Beyond the Raiders, the top ten was heavy on trench and secondary help, with four offensive or defensive linemen and three defensive backs coming off the board.

ROUND ONE — FIRST 10 PICKS

Pick	Player	Team
1	Fernando Mendoza, QB, Indiana	Las Vegas
2	Deshawn Mercer, LB, Georgia	NY Jets
3	Tobias Reyes, WR, Ohio State	Tennessee
4	Malik Ferris, Edge, Texas	Arizona
5	Grant Okafor, OT, Penn State	Cleveland (via Garrett trade)
6	Mansoor Delane, CB, LSU	Kansas City
7	Sonny Styles, S, Ohio State	Washington
8	Isaiah Vance, CB, Florida	New Orleans
9	Preston Adeyemi, DT, Michigan	Cincinnati
10	Francis Mauigoa, OT, Miami	NY Giants

Cleveland's first-round pick at No. 5 is the headline return from the Myles Garrett trade, giving the Browns two selections inside the top 16 as they rebuild around a young defensive core — the clearest sign yet of a front office playing for 2027 and beyond rather than trying to patch a roster that just isn't ready to compete.

2026 NFL Draft

Fernando Mendoza, QB, Raiders

The No. 1 pick joins a Las Vegas quarterback room led by veteran Kirk Cousins, giving him a full season to learn Kubiak's offense before the job is his. Kubiak's track record developing passers, combined with a rebuilt receiving corps, means whenever Mendoza's chance arrives it should be a real one.

Ty Simpson, QB, Rams

Los Angeles didn't stop at Myles Garrett and Trent McDuffie — it also grabbed a developmental quarterback at 13, betting on the future behind Stafford. Simpson won't play meaningful snaps in 2026 barring injury, but the pick signals the Rams are thinking about their quarterback succession plan even in the middle of a win-now window.

Mansoor Delane, CB, Chiefs

Kansas City reloads its secondary after trading McDuffie away, going right back to the cornerback well in Round 1. Delane's ball skills and physicality at the catch point drew comparisons to the player he's replacing, and the Chiefs are betting he can step into a starting role immediately in a division that got tougher, not easier.

Sonny Styles, S, Commanders

A rangy, physical safety who profiles as an early-contributor in Washington's back end. His college tape showed equal comfort playing in the box against the run and dropping into deep coverage, the kind of positional flexibility modern defenses increasingly build around.

Francis Mauigoa, OT, Giants

New York invests up front, giving its quarterback room a long-term answer at tackle after years of shuffling the offensive line. Mauigoa's combination of size and footwork made him one of the more pro-ready linemen in this class, and the Giants are counting on him to anchor the left side for the next decade.

All 32 first-round picks have now signed — Ty Simpson (Rams), the last to ink his rookie deal, closed out the class as of this issue.

NFL Rule Changes for 2026

1 Onside Kicks, Anytime

The kicking team can now declare an onside kick at any point in the game, not just in the final minutes — as long as it's trailing on the scoreboard. The Competition Committee pushed for the change after years of criticism that traditional end-of-game onside kicks had become nearly unrecoverable under the old alignment rules.

2 Touchback Spot Moves Up

Kicks out of bounds from the 50 now come out to the 20-yard line instead of the 25, removing the incentive to intentionally kick out of bounds for a favorable field-position trade — part of a multi-year effort to make kickoffs competitive again after touchbacks made up the overwhelming majority of returns leaguewide.

3 New Kickoff Alignment

Receiving teams can now use a 5-3-2 alignment in the kickoff setup zone, giving return units more flexibility to disguise blocking schemes and create running lanes. Coaches argued the previous fixed alignment had made returns too predictable, and early feedback from special teams coordinators has been largely positive.

4 Officiating Backstop

League officiating staff can now consult with on-field referees on disqualifications for both flagrant football acts and non-football acts, and can throw a flag after the fact if one wasn't thrown live. A separate provision also allows the league to correct clear mistakes if a work stoppage forces the use of replacement officials.

5 Mental Health Clinicians

Every club must now employ a full-time mental health clinician, part of a broader expansion of player mental health resources leaguewide that also increases access to confidential support services during the season, following several years of advocacy from the players' union.

Taken together, this year's changes lean toward player safety and competitive balance rather than any single headline-grabbing overhaul — five playing-rule changes, three bylaw changes and one resolution in total, approved at the league's annual meeting in Phoenix between March 29 and April 1.

2026 Season Preview

AFC EAST

1. **New England Patriots**
2. Buffalo Bills
3. Miami Dolphins
4. NY Jets

The Super Bowl runner-up adds A.J. Brown and returns its Coach of the Year — a real case exists that New England is the conference's best team on paper. Buffalo, now under first-time head coach Joe Brady after nine years of Sean McDermott, is the AFC's biggest wild card.

AFC NORTH

1. **Pittsburgh Steelers**
2. Baltimore Ravens
3. Cincinnati Bengals
4. Cleveland Browns

Pittsburgh defends its crown after adding Michael Pittman Jr. to fix its clearest playoff weakness. Baltimore turns the page to Jesse Minter after 18 years of Harbaugh, while Cleveland — now without Myles Garrett — rebuilds around its young defense and a war chest of extra draft picks.

AFC SOUTH

1. **Jacksonville Jaguars**
2. Houston Texans
3. Indianapolis Colts
4. Tennessee Titans

Jacksonville returns as champs off a franchise-best 13-4 season, built to sustain it rather than catch lightning twice. Houston's Wild Card upset of Pittsburgh signals a defense that travels, making the Texans a legitimate threat to unseat the Jaguars atop the division.

AFC WEST

1. **Denver Broncos**
2. LA Chargers
3. Kansas City Chiefs
4. Las Vegas Raiders

Denver still owns the AFC's best regular-season resume, but the margin for error just shrank considerably. Kansas City retools its secondary around rookie CB Mansoor Delane after dealing Trent McDuffie away, while Las Vegas begins its Kubiak era with Kirk Cousins under center and rookie Fernando Mendoza waiting in the wings.

2026 Season Preview

NFC EAST

1. **Philadelphia Eagles**
2. Dallas Cowboys
3. Washington Commanders
4. NY Giants

Philadelphia's roster core returns intact after a Wild Card exit, still the division's most talented team on paper. Dallas's 471 points scored led all non-playoff teams — if the defense catches up, the Cowboys are a dark-horse threat, while the Giants bring in John Harbaugh to steady the ship.

NFC NORTH

1. **Chicago Bears**
2. Green Bay Packers
3. Minnesota Vikings
4. Detroit Lions

Chicago's young core took a real step forward with an 11-6 season and a division title, but Green Bay and Detroit both finished within a game or two of catching them, making this arguably the most competitive four-team division in football, while Minnesota adds intrigue at quarterback with Kyler Murray.

NFC SOUTH

1. **Carolina Panthers**
2. Tampa Bay Buccaneers
3. Atlanta Falcons
4. New Orleans Saints

Carolina's surprise playoff run — and OROY Tetairoa McMillan — make the Panthers the trendy pick to repeat. Atlanta turns to new coach Kevin Stefanski, betting his track record can unlock an underachieving roster, while Tampa Bay and New Orleans both need bounce-back years.

NFC WEST

1. **Seattle Seahawks**
2. LA Rams
3. San Francisco 49ers
4. Arizona Cardinals

The champs run it back with their core defense intact, but the Rams' aggressive offseason (Garrett, McDuffie, Simpson) makes this the division to watch. San Francisco returns a healthy Christian McCaffrey, giving the NFC West three teams with real Super Bowl ceilings.

2026 Season Preview

AFC

Team	Head Coach	'25	Career
New England	Mike Vrabel	14-3	68-48
Buffalo	Joe Brady	12-5	Rookie HC
Miami	Jeff Hailey	7-10	Rookie HC
NY Jets	Aaron Glenn	3-14	3-14
Pittsburgh	Mike McCarthy	10-7	152-95-2
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	Brian Callahan	3-14	6-28
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	TBD	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

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.

Pittsburgh Turns the Page

Mike Tomlin's remarkable run in Pittsburgh comes to an end after parts of three decades without a losing season — Mike McCarthy, a Super Bowl winner in his own right, now inherits a fanbase with zero tolerance for a rebuild.

Way-Too-Early Power Rankings

1 Seattle Seahawks

The defending champs return the core of a defense that just won the Super Bowl, and there's no obvious reason to expect a step back. History says repeating is hard, but this roster is built to contend for multiple years, not just one.

2 New England Patriots

The Super Bowl runner-up added A.J. Brown and returns its Coach of the Year — on paper, this is a more talented roster than the one that reached Santa Clara, and the only real question is whether the defense can replicate its January form.

3 LA Rams

Garrett and McDuffie make this a fundamentally different roster than the one that fell to Seattle in the NFC Championship. If health cooperates, the Rams have a case as the most talented team in the NFC.

4 Denver Broncos

The AFC's best regular-season record in 2025 buys real credibility, even after the AFC Championship loss. A team this good doesn't typically fall far, but the conference around them got tougher, not easier.

5 Chicago Bears

A young core that took a real step forward with an 11-6 season and a division title. The Bears' trajectory points up, and another year of development at quarterback could push them into the top tier.

6 San Francisco 49ers

A healthy Christian McCaffrey changes the ceiling of this offense entirely, and the 49ers' roster still has the talent that made them perennial contenders. Health, as always, is the swing variable.

7 Jacksonville Jaguars

A 13-4 finish and a roster built to sustain it, not just catch lightning in a bottle. The Jaguars enter 2026 as the clear favorite in a winnable division.

8 Carolina Panthers

A breakout playoff run with Offensive Rookie of the Year Tetairoa McMillan on the roster makes the Panthers this year's trendy sleeper pick — the kind of team nobody wants to see on their side of the bracket.

9 Buffalo Bills

A new head coach in Joe Brady but the same explosive talent that's made Buffalo a perennial contender. The transition is the only real question mark here.

10 Pittsburgh Steelers

Division champs who added a legitimate red-zone weapon in Michael Pittman Jr. A defense that's been the Steelers' calling card for years gives them a high floor no matter how the offense evolves.

Bold Predictions

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. It's the kind of offseason overhaul that either backfires spectacularly or produces a champion, and we're betting on the latter given how well the pieces fit together on paper.

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. His completion percentage was already elite as a first-time starter; adding a legitimate No. 1 target should push his numbers into MVP territory.

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. Teams that make an unexpected playoff run and then add a full offseason of continuity often take that next step, and Carolina has the young talent to do exactly that.

BIGGEST FALL

Denver Broncos

The AFC's best regular-season team in 2025 gets caught by a loaded division race and misses the top seed in 2026. It's not a collapse so much as a regression to the mean in a conference that got significantly more competitive at the top.

OFFENSIVE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

Fernando Mendoza, Raiders

He opens the year behind Kirk Cousins, but a Klint Kubiak offense built specifically to develop young quarterbacks means whenever Mendoza's number gets called — whether by performance or necessity — he's ready to make it count, and enough starts down the stretch should be all it takes to make him a real factor in the race.

SURPRISE PLAYOFF TEAM

Cleveland Browns

Nobody expects much from a defense-first roster that just traded away its best pass rusher, which is exactly why they're worth the bet — Cleveland's front office cashed in the Garrett trade for two top-16 picks, and a young defense with nothing to lose tends to overachieve.

2026 Schedule

HALL OF FAME GAME — AUG. 6 — CAROLINA vs. ARIZONA

WEEK 1 *Aug 13-15*

Detroit-Cincinnati, Green Bay-Pittsburgh,
Colts-Patriots, Chargers-Texans, Cardinals-Raiders,
Titans-49ers, Broncos-Falcons, Bucs-Jets,
Dolphins-Commanders, Panthers-Bills,
Browns-Bears, Vikings-Giants, Rams-Chiefs,
Jaguars-Saints, Eagles-Ravens,
Cowboys-Seahawks

WEEK 2 *Aug 20-23*

Raiders-Texans, 49ers-Chargers, Jets-Steelers,
Panthers-Jaguars, Packers-Broncos,
Commanders-Lions, Bills-Browns, Falcons-Colts,
Ravens-Vikings, Saints-Rams, Giants-Dolphins,
Bears-Bengals, Eagles-Patriots, Chiefs-Bucs,
Cowboys-Cardinals, Seahawks-Titans

WEEK 3 *Aug 27-29*

Steelers-Bills, Patriots-Browns, 49ers-Raiders,
Rams-Chargers, Commanders-Ravens,
Texans-Panthers, Falcons-Dolphins, Bucs-Jaguars,
Giants-Jets, Saints-Cowboys, Cardinals-Packers,
Seahawks-Chiefs, Bengals-Eagles, Vikings-Broncos,
Lions-Colts, Bears-Titans

Preseason doubles as the league's testing ground for the new rules covered on page 27 — expect broadcasters to flag every declared onside kick and every kickoff return under the new 5-3-2 alignment as teams experiment before games start counting. It's also the first extended look at several rookie quarterbacks, including No. 1 pick Fernando Mendoza, in live NFL action.

PRESEASON STORYLINES TO WATCH

The Hall of Fame Kickoff

Carolina and Arizona open the exhibition slate in Canton on Aug. 6, the traditional curtain-raiser that also debuts every rule change live in a game situation for the first time.

Six New Head Coaches, Zero Game Reps

Joe Brady, Jesse Minter, Clint Kubiak, Jeff Hafley, Todd Monken and Mike LaFleur all install new systems this preseason — the four exhibition weeks are the only live look at their schemes before games start counting.

Rookie Quarterbacks on the Clock

Fernando Mendoza headlines a group of first-year passers getting extended preseason reps, with roster and depth-chart battles across the league still very much open.

Kickoff Rule, Live Test

The new 5-3-2 return alignment gets its first real-game trial run in August — special teams coordinators leaguewide are treating these four weeks as a live laboratory.

2026 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

2026 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

2026 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)

2026 Schedule

WILD CARD WEEKEND

Jan 16-18, 2027

Six games across three days open the postseason — the No. 1 seeds in each conference sit out, watching to see who they'll host in the Divisional Round.

DIVISIONAL ROUND

Jan 23-24, 2027

Four games, one weekend, and the top seeds finally take the field. History says the road gets a lot harder from here — both No. 1 seeds fell short of the Super Bowl a year ago.

CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIP SUNDAY

Jan 31, 2027

The AFC and NFC crown their representatives for Super Bowl LXI in the league's biggest single day of football outside the Super Bowl itself.

SUPER BOWL LXI

Sun, Feb 14, 2027 — SoFi Stadium, Los Angeles

The 2026 season crowns its champion on Valentine's Day, closing the loop on a year that began seven months earlier on the other side of the world in Melbourne.

Every road to Super Bowl LXI runs through a postseason field reshaped by this year's coaching carousel — ten new head coaches leaguewide means several of the teams chasing a title in January will be doing it under a first-year staff, a wrinkle that has no real precedent at this scale.

STORYLINES FOR THE STRETCH RUN

Can Anyone Catch Seattle?

The Seahawks return the league's best defense from a title team — the rest of the NFC's job all season is finding a way to slow it down before January even starts.

The Rams' Aggressive Bet

Garrett, McDuffie and Simpson arrived in one offseason. If health cooperates, Los Angeles enters the year with arguably the conference's highest ceiling — and the pressure that comes with it.

New England's Encore

A Super Bowl runner-up with a Coach of the Year and a new No. 1 target doesn't often get overlooked, but the pressure to close the gap this time is real.

Ten New Sidelines

A record-tying coaching cycle means several January contenders will be led by first-year staffs — an unusual wrinkle heading into the sport's biggest stage.

Fan Corner

Q: Is Cleveland actually better off after trading Garrett?

A: Not this season — the Browns are almost certainly worse on the field in 2026 without their record-setting pass rusher. But the draft capital gives the front office real flexibility over the next two cycles, and if even one of those picks turns into a foundational piece, the deal will look smarter in hindsight than it does today. It's a bet on the future, not a plan to win now, and Browns fans should judge it on that timeline.

Q: Can the Bills survive a first-time head coach?

A: Joe Brady inherits a talented roster and was already calling plays there as offensive coordinator, so this isn't a total culture reset the way some head-coaching transitions are. The pressure is real given the division's depth, but the pieces are in place, and Brady's offensive track record suggests the team's identity won't change dramatically.

Q: Does Kyler Murray change the Vikings' outlook?

A: It's a low-risk, potentially high-reward flier for a team that has cycled through quarterback options for years. If healthy and motivated, Murray gives Minnesota a ceiling it didn't have on the roster before — but the one-year structure of the deal means both sides are still figuring out whether this is a long-term fit or a one-year bridge.

Q: Are the Rams the team to beat in the NFC now?

A: On paper, yes — Garrett and McDuffie fill the two biggest holes on a team that was already one game from the Super Bowl a year ago. Seattle still has the defending-champion pedigree and home-field advantage in any potential rematch, but if you're picking the roster with the highest ceiling in the conference today, it's hard to argue against Los Angeles.

Fan Corner

"The Panthers make it back-to-back playoff berths — nobody circles them on the schedule and they'll make you pay for it. This roster is better than an 8-9 finish suggests, and everyone's about to find that out the hard way."

"Garrett gets 15-plus sacks in a Rams uniform and LA's defensive line becomes the scariest unit in the league. Pair him with the secondary Kansas City just handed over and offensive coordinators are going to have nightmares game-planning against Los Angeles."

"A.J. Brown and Drake Maye turn into the most feared connection in the AFC by midseason. Maye's accuracy plus a legitimate No. 1 target is a combination that should scare the rest of the conference."

"Someone benched from the Hall of Fame Game roster ends up starting Week 1 for a playoff team — it happens every single year, and this cycle's training camp battles look as wide open as any in recent memory."

Got a bolder pick? That's what next season's mailbag is for.

Down The Grid

The features, deep dives and long reads coming your way this season.

This issue is just the kickoff. Every week from here, The Grid will keep delivering the recaps and previews you already know — but we're also building out a rotating slate of longer features across the season: team histories, explainers for fans still learning the ropes, and a few stories about the game itself that don't fit inside a single week's coverage. Here's what's locked in for the year ahead.

14 FEATURES ON THE SCHEDULE

Franchise Files: Buffalo Bills

The first instalment of a season-long series profiling all 32 teams — history, identity and what makes each fanbase tick. We start in Orchard Park with the Bills.

Super Bowls That Defined an Era

Before this year's final, there were classics. We revisit the Super Bowls that shaped how the league is remembered, one iconic finish at a time.

How Offense Changed the Game

From three yards and a cloud of dust to the modern spread — tracing the schemes and coaches who reinvented how football is played.

Whatever Happened to Football Magazines?

Pro Football Weekly, First Down and a dozen others once filled newsstands. We look at what killed print football media — and why we're betting it isn't gone for good.

How TV Built Britain's NFL Obsession

From Channel 4's Sunday highlights to Sky's all-in coverage — the story of how a nation with no team of its own fell for the league anyway.

The Night Football Went Primetime

How one weekly broadcast slot turned the NFL into appointment viewing — and changed American television scheduling forever.

Fantasy Football, Properly Explained

Leagues, scoring, waiver wires and draft strategy — a plain-English guide for anyone ready to set their first lineup.

The Draft, Demystified

Rounds, trades, the combine, the board — how 32 teams actually build a roster each spring, explained from the ground up.

Where It All Begins: The College Game

Conferences, recruiting and the road to the NFL — why Saturdays matter just as much as Sundays.

From the Sidelines to the Console

Tracing football video games from Tecmo Bowl to Madden — and how a generation learned the sport through a controller.

On the Road with The Grid

Our first stadium travel diary — match-day experiences, practical tips and what it's really like watching the NFL live.

The Numbers Nobody Else Will Wear

The retired jerseys of the league's true legends, and the stories behind why each one earned that honour.

A Fair Hearing for American Football

An honest case for the sport, aimed squarely at sceptical football fans who've never given it a proper chance.

The Quarterbacks Who Rewrote the Position

The passers who redefined their era — and how each one changed what teams look for under centre.

**ALL THE AMERICAN FOOTBALL.
ALL IN ONE PLACE.
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The Grid brings you the stories, analysis
and features that matter most.

No noise. No clutter.
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