

NFC Predictions: NFC East

The return of RGIII makes the Redskins early favorites in the East

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Washington Redskins: 10-6 (Division Champs)

I don't think anyone in the Milky Way Galaxy is more excited to get the season started than Robert Griffin III.

It's interesting to survey the sports landscape and see how athletes react to ACL injuries these days. On one end of the spectrum there's Derrick Rose, who is taking zero precautions and will utilize every second possible to make sure he's at peak physical and mental health before he steps foot on a court again. Then there's RGIII, who vocally disagrees with his coach's decision to hold him out of a pre season game and has resorted to wearing an "Operation Patience" shirt to show just how anxious he is to return.

But I digress.

Based on the amount of effort and determination RGIII put into his return, I really don't see any way he doesn't return to his same dominant, explosive self this year. The amount of designed quarterback runs will be greatly reduced, but that doesn't mean he won't still scramble for over 500 yards this season.

The remainder of Washington's rushing attack will come from Alfred Morris, who exploded onto the scene last year with 1,613 yards and 13 touchdowns. Having a consistent back like Morris will help ease Griffin's transition back; there's no immediate pressure to carry the team on his back and be the Superman we all know he can be if Morris can shoulder a good chunk of the load.

There's also no clear number one receiver on the Redskins, which is more of a pro than a con. Santana Moss, Pierre Garcon and Josh Morgan all had very similar seasons statistically, and defenses will need to game plan for all three instead of being able to throw triple teams at just one guy.

Their defense, which was decimated by injury last season, will become a strong point once again. If linebacker Brian Orakpo can stay healthy, there's no chance this defense gives up 377 yards per game again.

Orakpo will lead an improved pass rush, which will make the transition to the NFL easier for rookies David Amerson and Phillip Thomas in the secondary. Both figure to step into the starting lineup in week one.

RGIII will go back to leading a balanced, efficient offense like nothing ever happened, and Brian Orakpo will make a serious run at Comeback Player of the Year as the 'Skins head back to the playoffs.

New York Giants: 8-8

We know the formula for the Giants by now: start slow and then make a furious move late in the season that carries over into the playoffs. That tactic left the Giants on the outside looking in last season, and will likely leave them in the same spot this year.

If the Giants get off to a slow start once again, the schedule doesn't seem to provide all that much relief in the second half of the season. Both games against my division favorite Redskins bookend a visit from the Seahawks, and the Giants can easily take three losses.

Hakeem Nicks and Victor Cruz are the homerun hitters for an offense that really has no running game. Second year back David Wilson will slide in with the first team after early favorite Andre Brown fractured his leg in the preseason finale.

I know Doug Martin and Alfred Morris made the jump from obscurity to elite NFL backs, but I don't see Wilson as the same caliber back as those other two even though he's shown some flashes this preseason.

Some people may still laugh at the notion of Eli Manning being an elite quarterback, but you won't find me in that group. The problem is he has no consistent running game to play off of. Outside of Nicks and Cruz, there's little else to go to in the pass game.

The G-Men are also pretty one dimensional on defense as well. Outside of an incredible pass rush off the edge provided by Justin Tuck and Jason Pierre-Paul, there are talent and health question marks aplenty at the other nine positions.

Dallas Cowboys: 8-8

Real quick, can we just stop calling the Cowboys "America's Team"? All that implies is that Americans closely identify with an overpaid, generally underperforming group of guys who choke in the clutch. That's not a good look, America.

Besides, outside of actual Cowboys fans, most people actually despise them for that sense of entitlement that they carry with them.

The Cowboys will once again be one of the league's most closely followed teams by the national media, mostly because their annual circus of a season makes for pretty entertaining television.

The roster is stocked to the brim with talent once again. If DeMarco Murray can stay healthy, he'd make a great compliment to a dynamic passing attack that features homerun hitters (Miles Austin and Dez Bryant) as well as chain movers (Jason Witten).

And then we have Tony Romo... I still have no clue what to make of this guy. He gets more scrutiny than any other quarterback in the league, but he's been able to put up borderline top tier stats with shoddy offensive lines in front of him.

Despite all of that, he's routinely choked in the stretch run of seasons, and he's been an incredibly mediocre quarterback come playoff time. All the blame can't rest on him, but teams generally go by way of their quarterback.

The defense was also a middle of the road unit last season, and they really didn't do much to improve over last season.

Besides a week five matchup against the Denver Broncos, the first half of their slate is pretty mundane. They can very easily start out 6-2.

I'm going to have a lot of fun watching how they limp to a 2-6 finish.

Philadelphia Eagles: 7-9

Maybe this is my Oregon bias leaking through, but I have a lot of faith in Chip Kelly as an NFL coach. He's going to turn this franchise around, and he's got a lot of athletic players on offense to get creative with. The only problem is that this turnaround will likely take time instead of happening all at once for the Eagles.

The Eagles are a prime example of paper champions. If you were to look at their roster before the beginning of the past few seasons, you could see how they could matchup against just about any team.

A smattering of injuries to Michael Vick and LeSean McCoy changed that outlook in a heartbeat. Players who you'd expect to see routinely making highlight reels, like DeSean Jackson and Nnamdi Asomugha, seemed to flip the switch to autopilot. There was just a nasty vibe coming from the Eagles, which eventually led to the departure of long time head coach Andy Reid.

In came Chip Kelly, and a breath of fresh air into the organization as they tried to flip the page on the Reid era... until Riley Cooper opened his mouth at that Kenny Chesney concert. Now another distraction hangs over the team as they try to shake their overrated moniker.

Jeremy Maclin, the team's most consistent receiver, is already done for the season with an ACL injury. The arrival of tight end Zach Ertz via the draft can shore up some of that lost production, but it'll be on guys like Brent Celek and Jason Avant to fill the rest of that void.

The team's success is contingent upon the return of Vick, McCoy and Jackson to their normal production. All three of these guys are incredibly athletic and have speed to burn, which plays right into the high-tempo scheme Chip Kelly is importing from his college days.

Kelly is the perfect candidate to resurrect an offense that has been doomed since Vince Young proclaimed the Eagles to be a "Dream Team" in 2011.

Maclin's absence will make things tougher, and the defense will likely be a middle of the road bunch once again. But I expect the Eagles to take a big step forward this year and hang around the .500 mark all season long. Next season will be when they get back to legitimate contenders.