

# NFC Predictions: NFC South

Quarterback play will dictate success for the high-powered offenses down South  
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## **Atlanta Falcons: 13-3 (Division Champs)**

In 2000, the St. Louis Rams offense was labeled “The Greatest Show on Turf.” In 2013, the Falcons offense has the chance to be known as “The Greatest Show on Anything.”

Tony Gonzalez went all Brett Favre on us and had us believing he was going to hang up his cleats at the end of last season, only to come back for one last shot at a ring with this group. Who can blame him?

Matt Ryan has evolved into the quarterback the Falcons organization thought he would be, and he was paid handsomely for it. His completions, passing attempts, yardage, yards per game, yards per throw, touchdowns, and quarterback rating have all been rising steadily since 2009.

Despite having the exact same number of playoff victories (just one) as Jay Cutler, Matt Ryan’s contract extension worth nearly \$21 million per year on average seemed like a no-brainer. That has a lot to do with his own ability to keep improving, as well as the ridiculous amount of firepower he has surrounding him.

Wide receivers Roddy White and Julio Jones make up the most lethal 1-2 combo the NFL has to offer. They led the league in yardage for a tandem last season by racking up 2,549 yards. I expect them to exceed that total this year.

The return of future Hall of Famer Tony Gonzalez gives Matt Ryan yet another reliable target in short yardage and red zone situations. What will put this offense in a new stratosphere this season will be the arrival of three time Pro Bowl running back Steven Jackson.

Jackson rushed for over 1,000 yards in eight of his nine seasons as a St. Louis Ram, and you’d be foolish to think that trend will stop any time soon.

Usually a team has an elite passing attack with a mediocre running game, or vice versa. Atlanta has it all, and teams will have to pick their poison. Matty Ice is going to have a blast making changes at the line of scrimmage when he sees hopeless defenses in the wrong coverage. Variety: the spice of life.

The defense isn’t all that impressive, but they don’t have to be. As the adage goes, the best defense is a good offense. By that logic, the Falcons have the league’s best defense. They won’t be under all that much pressure when they’re routinely spotted a three touchdown lead.

## **New Orleans Saints: 10-6**

The Saints should take a jump in the standings just by playing up to their potential. Even with head coach Sean Payton and interim head coach Joe Vitt serving suspensions, it was hard to comprehend how a team with such a great offense could fall to a 7-9 record.

One quick look at the defensive numbers tell you everything you need to know. Well, actually, just looking at one number tells you everything. 7,042. That was how many yards the Saints defense gave up over the course of the season.

The old NFL record? 6,793 yards, given up by 1981 Baltimore Colts.

A nasty combo of Bounty Gate and a high-school level defense was just too much for Drew Brees to overcome, even though he tried. He became the first quarterback to ever throw for 5,000+ yards in back to back seasons and led the NFL with 43 touchdowns.

It might seem outlandish to expect anyone to repeat an effort like that. But at this point, that's what we've come to expect from Brees. With arguably the best tight end in the league returning to full health in Jimmy Graham, Brees will have his full compliment of toys to play with this season.

That includes Marques Colston and Lance Moore, who both tallied over 1,000 yards receiving last year. The human Swiss Army knife Darren Sproles should be up to his old tricks now that he's fully recovered from a broken hand. Sean Payton loves to use Sproles early and often, so expect more of that as they both return to the team.

The defense remains the fatal flaw of this team. No big splashes were made in free agency. Through the draft, first round pick Kenny Vaccaro will step in and start at safety, but defensive tackle John Jenkins doesn't figure to see game action until 2014.

Is a mid-first round rookie safety the saving grace for the worst defense in NFL history? My money says no. The offense will rebound, but the defense will hold the Saints back from making any kind of special run this season.

### **Tampa Bay Buccaneers: 9-7**

After quarterback Josh Freeman's coming out party in 2010, the Buccaneers fell off the planet in 2011. They stumbled their way to a 4-12 finish as fantasy football owners cursed Freeman's name. I'm pretty sure one of my buddies still has a Freeman voodoo doll hanging around somewhere...

Despite being a shell of himself in 2011, Freeman took a step in the right direction in 2012. He finished with a career high 27 touchdowns. Even though he also threw 17 picks, it was five less than the previous season.

Freeman will take yet another step forward this year and the team will challenge for a Wildcard spot until the bitter end.

The offense is going to benefit from the additions to the defensive secondary.

Raise your hand if you think it's going to be easy to throw against Darrell Revis, Dashon Golson, and Mark Barron... I've made my point.

Their elite secondary will make up for their lack of talent at linebacker, and it'll also give their young defensive line an easier time as they try to find their potential. Every pick registered by the secondary (there will be many) will give Freeman and the offense another opportunity to find their form of a few years ago.

Vincent Jackson will once again serve as Freeman's top target in an otherwise thin receiving crop. The most interesting development to watch will be how Doug Martin handles his sophomore season. Will he slump as the league adapts to him, or will he be the one adapting and continuing to succeed? I'll side with the latter.

### **Carolina Panthers: 8-8**

The Panthers will also improve over their 7-9 record last season, but not as much as the Saints or Buccaneers will.

Part of the reason why Carolina took a step back last season was the up and down play they got from Cam Newton. He didn't have a Freeman-esq collapse, but the league began to key in on his tendencies in his sophomore season, and his production fell a bit as a result.

Newton still managed to score 27 total touchdowns while cutting his interceptions down by five. I'm expecting a "bounce back" season for Newton, and I'm using quotes because he didn't have all that bad of a year in 2012. He simply set the bar incredibly high in his rookie year, and we're going to see more of that in 2013.

I wouldn't be surprised to see 35 total touchdowns again out of Newton, with 10 coming on the ground. I also think he'll set another career high in rushing yards since running back Jonathan Stewart will begin the season on the PUP list and won't be available until week seven. Next to DeAngelo Williams, Newton will be the biggest running threat.

The receiver situation is interesting in Carolina; it's not an elite bunch, it's not a deep bunch, but it's not a terrible bunch either.

Steve Smith will once again be Newton's primary target, but he's not getting any younger. Greg Olsen will continue his solid play out of the tight end position, and I can see Brandon LaFell stepping up in his contract year and trying everything he can to prove his worth. Outside of those three, it's a crap shoot.

The defense is rounding into shape, thanks in large part to reigning Defensive Rookie of the Year Luke Kuechly. Here's a guy who led the NFL in tackles, didn't miss a single snap in the 12 games he started at middle linebacker, and seemed to get stronger as the season progressed.

Kuechly will have some help with fellow stud linebacker Jon Beason returning to full strength. The team went all out to bolster their defensive line through the draft, adding tackles Star Lotulelei and Kawann Short to a rotation headlined by Dwan Edwards.

The first two tiers of the defense may be good enough to overshadow the sub-par secondary, but if teams can exploit the weak pass protection the Panthers may be in for a long season.