

NFC Preview: NFC North

Is the North the best division in the NFC?

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Not too long ago, the NFC was akin to Craig Griffey: the less talented younger sibling that no one really respected or cared about (sorry, Craig).

From 2001 to 2009, the AFC churned out seven Super Bowl Champions, boasted the team with the NFL's best record for seven consecutive years from 2003 to 2009, and won the all-important Pro Bowl five times.

But the AFC's reign is a thing of the past. Save for the Baltimore Ravens, the NFC has made it a clean sweep in Lombardi Trophies since '09.

It seems like every other month an NFC team is making the jump from decent to elite. No team will likely run the table, but this newfound parity will have a slew of teams competing for playoff spots this winter.

With a handful of AFC teams falling from grace, the NFL's senior circuit is looking much more like Ken Jr. than Craig this season.

NFC North

Green Bay Packers: 12-4 (Division Champs)

Here's "Exhibit A" for the parity amongst NFC teams this year. I can see the North sending two teams to the playoffs once again.

You can always go with the safe bet and pick the Green Bay Packers to repeat as division champs. A quick glance at the Packers schedule may have you thinking differently.

Aside from home matchups against the lowly Cleveland Browns and Philadelphia Eagles, there are absolutely no cake walks to be found.

Games against juggernauts like the 49ers and the Flacons are sprinkled in between contests against the Bengals, Redskins and Bears. Did I forget to mention the road game against the defending champion Ravens? Well, there, I just mentioned it.

Let's not forget Greg Jennings will no longer be "puttin da team on his back, doeaaa", and the loss of Charles Woodson on defense will hurt the locker room.

And I'm not putting all of my eggs into the Eddy Lacy basket as the team's #1 running back just yet. He'll probably just eat all of the eggs... and the basket.

But the trump card is Aaron Rodgers. As long as #12 is under center, he'll find a way to get the absolute most out of the tools around him.

The trifecta of Randall Cobb, Jordy Nelson and James Jones will become an even bigger focal point while the running back situation gets sorted out. They'll be making plenty of fantasy owners proud as they all flirt with 1,000+ yards and 10+ TDs a piece once again.

The offensive line will keep Rodgers on his feet *just often enough* for him to "discount doublecheck" his way to another 35+ TD season, and the defense will be *just stingy enough* to support their high powered offense.

Chicago Bears: 11-5 (Wildcard)

In an ideal situation, my hometown Bears have done enough this offseason to close the talent gap between them and the Pack. As evident by five losses in the last eight games last season, though, "ideal" is not often a word used in relation to the Bears.

I have hope that this is finally the season where everything clicks.

The awkward divorce from Brian Urlacher and the signing of offensive-minded head coach Marc Trestman signaled a huge culture shift in the Windy City. The focal point of the team has finally become the offense, just in time for Jay Cutler to benefit from that in his contract year.

The deck is stacked so highly in Cutler's favor that he has no choice but to succeed. Seriously. If he doesn't, he'll be hunting for a new job this offseason.

It has taken him a long time to get in the groove of this new West Coast offense, and he'll actually be working through that process well into the season. Cut the guy a break, he's on his fourth offense in five seasons.

When everything does finally click, Bears fans are in for a show.

Though he claims to not know his own role in the offense, everyone else on planet earth knows Brandon Marshall will continue to put up huge numbers as Cutler's primary target. Alshon Jeffery has made enormous strides in training camp and will round into a true #2 receiver.

Matt Forte can gather over 1,500 combined receiving and rushing yards by virtue of how perfectly his skill set fits into the West Coast offense. 10 TDs isn't out of question for Martellus Bennett, who will be another safety valve for Cutler in 3rd down and goal line situations.

The incoming rookie crop will also shine this season. Kyle Long and Jordan Mills will fortify an offensive line that will keep Cutler from resembling a door mat.

On defense, Jonathan Bostic will likely open the season as the starting middle linebacker and end up being a huge reason why the defense will be every bit as good as last season's, even in Urlacher's absence. He's my early pick for Defensive Rookie of the Year. You heard it here first.

It's not all daisies and unicorns though, as my prediction for 11-5 allows for those classic Bears lapses that are bound to happen every year. But there's no reason why the Bears can't turn an elite-level season (finally) from Jay Cutler into a Wildcard berth.

Minnesota Vikings: 9-7

Adrian Peterson literally dragged his team to a 10-6 record last season on one good leg. His surgically repaired knee is clearly up to the task, and the team added a lot of backup for him this offseason.

So why do I have the Vikings winning less games and missing out on the playoffs? The Bears and Packers will both sweep their head to head matchups, including both games that'll be played at Mall of America Field.

The Vikings were dominant on their home turf last season, going 7-1. The road was a completely different story, where they struggled to a 3-5 finish. If the Pack and the Bears can take two games in Minnesota, it's not out of the question that the Vikings can drop five more road games this year.

Listen, Adrian Peterson is going to turn in another mythical season, there's no way to stop that. He nearly broke the single season rushing record last season after a recovery from an ACL tear that defied logic. Now he doesn't just want to break the record, he wants 2,500 yards. Purple Jesus gets what Purple Jesus wants.

Greg Jennings and rookie Cordarrelle Patterson will become go-to guys for third year quarterback Christian Ponder. They'll also help take some focus off of Kyle Rudolph, their break out tight end.

But I have serious doubts that Ponder can take the next step and become an above average NFL quarterback. As it stands, he's a game manager. He has the ability to get the job done, but he's not the guy putting your team over the top.

I honestly think the 18 TDs we saw from him last year was near his ceiling. He may throw a few more now that he has more competent receivers. But his struggles on the road are well documented, and he's already managed to fumble the ball 13 times in just 26 starts.

The offense has improved, and so has the defense with the addition of defensive tackle Shariff Floyd and cornerback Xavier Rhodes through the draft. Hell, Adrian Peterson might even be better this season. But this team will only go as far as Ponder takes them, and I don't think that's all that far.

Detroit Lions: 6-10

If I were a Lions fan, I wouldn't be all that excited by the team's 3-1 preseason record. The last time the Lions had a great preseason, they followed that up by losing every single game in the regular season.

That's not to say that'll happen again, the amount of talent on this roster simply won't allow that. But even though I have the Lions improving upon their record this season, I don't think they're ready to make the jump to playoff contenders.

Israel Idonije jumped ship from the Bears, and he'll join up with first round pick Ezekiel Ansah to fortify an already impressive defensive line. Ansah, Nick Fairley, Ndamukong Suh and Idonije may be the most talented starting line in the league. Their play up front will solidify both levels of the defense playing behind them.

On offense, Reggie Bush will take Jahvid Best's role as the "dash" part of the running back combo, while Mikel Leshoure will continue to provide the "smash".

Calvin Johnson is still one of the best receivers the NFL has to offer. Consistent minor injuries have about the same chance of slowing him down as any cornerback does, and those chances are slim to none.

Like the other teams in this division, the team's success will be closely tied to their quarterback, Matt Stafford. Will we see the 2011 version who lofted 41 touchdowns, or the 2012 version who tossed 17 interceptions while seeing his touchdowns cut in half?

Stafford is like a mini Jay Cutler. His decision making has always been questioned, and it may be something that never gets fully corrected.

While the team made some nice additions on both sides of the ball, a modest increase of two wins over last season is as far as I'm willing to go. As often as the Bears slip up and fall into a tailspin, the Lions have nearly perfected this art.

The team has the raw talent to win eight or even nine games, but toss in legal trouble, teammate scuffles, and any number of the other "Lions occurrences" that are likely to derail the team and another four win season isn't out of the question either.