

NFL Storylines

What to keep an eye on around the NFL this season

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It's that magical time of year again, football fans. That's right, it's the NFL Preseason.

With two abysmal baseball teams struggling through the summer here in Chicago, Bears fans couldn't be happier to see the return of America's Game on the horizon.

There are no shortages of storylines to follow as the Bears approach their regular season opener against the Cincinnati Bengals on September 8th. But even the most diehard Bears fan would be remiss not to keep their eyes on the other 31 teams in what is shaping up to be one of the most exciting NFL seasons in recent memory.

Here are some major stories to keep tabs on throughout the NFL season:

1) Will the Atlanta Falcons have the best offense in NFL history?

The 2000 St. Louis Rams offense is known as "The Greatest Show on Turf", but this year's Falcons offense may end up being labeled "The Greatest Show on Anything".

The Falcons boast the league's most lethal receiving duo, Roddy White and Julio Jones. They combined for 2,549 yards to lead all tandems. Expect more of the same from these two.

After doing his best Brett Favre impression, Tony Gonzalez has decided to forgo retirement and return to the team. And quarterback Matt Ryan is fresh off inking a deal worth an average of \$20.75 million per year, making him the second highest paid player in the NFL. Think he has something to prove?

The key to this offense will be the addition of three-time Pro Bowl running back Steven Jackson. He was essentially St. Louis' entire offense for the past nine years, rushing for 1000+ yards in each of the past eight seasons.

Defenses will be forced to respect Jackson's running game, which will open up the skies for Matty Ice and his gang of insanely talented receivers. With the addition of Osi Umenyiora and Desmond Trufant, the defense will be forcing plenty of turnovers to give the offense more chances to shine.

The New Orleans Saints set the record with 7,474 total yards in 2011; don't be surprised to see the Falcons top that this year.

2) Will Adrian Peterson break the single season rushing record?

Sorry Bears fans, but when Purple Jesus starts making guarantees, you'd better pay attention. After tearing an ACL and MCL in the 2011 playoffs, Adrian Peterson guaranteed he'd return for the 2012 season opener. Doctors laughed off his bold statement, assuming he was a mere mortal like the rest of us. Silly doctors.

After a nine month rehab that is now the subject of legend, Peterson put together an MVP campaign while coming eight yards short of the NFL single season rushing record of 2,105 yards.

Now AP is setting his sights on 2,500 yards. Am I going to doubt the man? Absolutely not. Even if he comes nearly 400 yards short, he'll still set a new record.

3) How will Colin Kaepernick fare in his first full season for the San Francisco 49ers?

In a parallel universe somewhere, Colin Kaepernick is lighting up radar guns for the Chicago Cubs (he was drafted by the Cubs in the 43rd round of the 2009 Draft). In reality, we're going to see if he can avoid the dreaded sophomore slump and continue his meteoric rise.

In his 10 starts between the regular season and the playoffs, Kaepernick posted 2,406 yards and 14 touchdowns through the air and tacked on 502 yards and five touchdowns on the ground. He seemed to get stronger as the season progressed and led the 9ers to their first Super Bowl appearance since 1994.

Kaepernick now has a full offseason of preparation under his belt, but NFL defenses spent a good chunk of their own offseasons game planning against him. He has the raw skills to become one of the NFL's best, and the arrival of Anquan Boldin will surely help. But Kaepernick now has a target painted squarely on his back, and it's up to him to adapt.

In the end, I can see Kaepernick making defenses look clueless while running the option offense, and "Kaepernicking" next to the Lombardi Trophy come February.

4) Will the Baltimore Ravens fall from grace?

People need to realize that Ray Lewis's retirement will not cause this defense to completely deteriorate. The same can be said for the Bears defense and the retirement of Brian Urlacher. Defense runs deep in the Ravens culture, and the loss of Lewis as well as safety Ed Reed to Houston won't suddenly stricken this unit with amnesia.

Former Bronco Elvis Dumervil will provide a lethal pass rushing combo with Terrell Suggs, and a healthy Lardarius Webb will bolster the secondary.

While Anquan Boldin's departure to San Fran hurts, the offense won't experience much of a step back either if Joe Flacco can show some consistency. That's a big "if", but I have faith.

They likely won't repeat as Super Bowl champs, but don't be surprised to see them in the playoffs this winter.

5) Will the Aaron Hernandez saga affect the New England Patriots?

What transpired this offseason regarding Aaron Hernandez and his eventual indictment on murder charges is unprecedented. If there is any silver lining to be gleaned from this situation, it's that the New England Patriots are likely the best equipped team in the league to deal with this situation.

Despise him if you must, but Bill Belichick is a great coach to have in a damage control situation. He's infamous for playing things close to the chest, and he and the rest of the team's internal personnel have said and done all the right things.

What perplexes me, though, is how such a sustainable and successful franchise let in a character like Hernandez. We've all heard the idea of doing things "The Patriot Way", which implies that each player on the roster has at least a tiny shred of integrity and humility in their DNA. Even though he's an outlier, you have to wonder how the team personnel let a background like Hernandez's slip through the cracks in their evaluation process.

At least the Patriots can fall back on their other stud tight end, Rob Gronkowski... oh wait, Gronk will likely be put on the PUP list following back and forearm surgeries, meaning he'll be out at least six weeks.

In one offseason, Tom Brady has gone from throwing to Gronk, Hernandez, and Wes Welker, to Jake Ballard, Zach Sudfeld, and Danny Amendola. My, how the mighty have fallen. Your move, Brady.

6) How will defenders react to being fined for hits?

After the NFL fined Bears rookie linebacker Jonathan Bostic \$21,000 for his hit on Mike Willie of the Chargers in a preseason game, it's clear the league puts a much higher premium on guarding against concussions than any other injury.

Bostic labeled Willie with a textbook hit in the third quarter, which sent reverberations through Willie's family tree and lit the Twitter-verse on fire. The NFL even cut the highlight and promoted it on their site as a "spectacular hit".

Now Bostic is being punished for a hit any coach would be happy to show as an example for how to tackle because the league deemed he was leading with the crown of his helmet.

Because the league would much rather have seen Bostic take Willie's knees out and risk completely blowing out his ACL a-la Dustin Keller, right?

A strange thing happens to athletes when you tell them to rework their playing habits, and that's exactly what the NFL is doing. Now, instead of instinctually being able to level a defender with a completely clean hit, defenders have to go through a process of deduction as they try to make tackles:

“Is he defenseless?” “Am I leading with the crown of my helmet?” “Should I go low instead?” “Will I be fined?”

To quote Sweet Brown, “ain't nobody got time for that!”

I understand the league's argument, and it really is a Catch 22. Football is so violent in nature that any kind of hit can lead to injury. But it will be interesting to see who takes heed to the fines and how it affects their game.

These questions and more will be answered by the time the eventual Super Bowl winners are being showered in confetti on February 2nd at MetLife Stadium. All we have left to do is kick back, relax, and enjoy as the answers unfold in front of us over the course of 151 days.