

Preseason NFL Division Picks

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Dragging in the lull of long summer days in an even longer NFL offseason, football season still feels like it's light years away. In the quiet stretch of time after the draft where player's vacation endeavors steal headlines for the league news, there is still lots of jostling for teams to do regarding their performance and successes next season. However, with the updated information of each team's roster after the draft in April, I believe a pretty clear picture has been painted depicting the trajectory that each organization is progressing along. Drawn from this, I will provide my predictions as to who will win and contend in each division across the NFL barring any major injuries. Unphased by flashy storylines or high dollar signings, I find that the teams who stay out of the news tend to play at a higher level historically. Unlike surface level Sunday afternoon fans, I don't buy into the misconceptions that fantasy football directly translates onto the gridiron or that spending the most money buys wins. The timeless reality of the NFL is displayed perfectly by the league's most hated team, as the Patriots dynasty has refused to give in to the appealing fads of the losing franchises. Sticking to their guns, New England has modeled consistent excellence with an amazing core of grinders, short term high value free agent signings, and constant adaptability in scheming to give their opponents a different look every week. Weighing heavily into my picks, these are a few of many ingredients of greatness that will factor into determining the division winners for the 2020 NFL season.

AFC North



My Pick- Pittsburgh Steelers

Coming off their 15th consecutive season above .500, the Steelers have flown under the radar as a miniature dynasty in an era dominated by their AFC rival New England Patriots. Even at age 36, two-time Super Bowl Champion Ben Roethlisberger defenses for a league-leading 5,129 passing yards in 2018. Despite these huge positives for the team, the fracture of the Big Three has stolen headlines surrounding the team this offseason with the departures of Antonio Brown and Le'Veon Bell. These losses would rightfully be of great concern to almost any other team in the league, however I believe the Steelers have done an incredible job drafting and grooming their replacements. Both James Conner and JuJu Smith-Schuster are Pro-Bowl caliber offensive weapons who should have no problem adjusting to the top of the depth chart, as both have already had limited experience with it in their young careers. Looking at the defensive side of the ball, an experienced unit that ranked 6th in the NFL in total defense and led the league in sacks should have no problem picking up where they left off last year and carrying weight in the formula for winning.

Looking around the rest of the AFC North, I believe the Ravens have the potential to win 8 or 9 games but will endure growing pains as Lamar Jackson is faced with new schemes in his second season. I would like to be very clear that I DO NOT BUY INTO THE BROWNS HYPE. They are one year removed from a 1-31 stretch and have a lot of talented new pieces we haven't ever seen in a Browns uniform. As for the Bengals, they are the lowest of the low bottom feeder franchise in the NFL right now and can anticipate a top five draft pick next April.

AFC East



My Pick- New England Patriots

I could compliment and commend the Patriots all day long solely based on all of the little things they do right. From the organization completely buying in to the philosophy of Bill Belichick to the value present in every single contract on their payroll, it is no surprise they have endured the fruits of success consistently over the last two decades. To put it into perspective, the Patriots have won the AFC East 15 of the last 16 seasons (the only exception coming the year Brady tore his ACL), and averaged 12.5 wins per season during that span. This adds up to more than 30 wins than their nearest competitor over the last 16 years, one of just many mind boggling statistics derived from the Belichick era. Continuing on their never-ending quest of improvement, the team addressed their biggest roster hole by drafting an electric playmaker at the receiver position in N'Keal Harry. Throughout the course of free agency, the team inked veterans Michael Bennett and Jamie Collins to team friendly deals in order to strengthen the defensive side of the ball that came up so big in the Super Bowl victory last season.

Scouting out the rest of the division, fans can expect this to be another unimpressive year for the Bills, Dolphins, and Jets. Though the Jets made some big moves in free agency, I believe the dysfunction of the front office displays this team has no true sense of direction for the future. The Bills signed several subpar talents on bad contracts this offseason, positioning themselves nicely to log another 6-10 or 7-9 season. As for the Miami Dolphins, they have quietly made some impressive moves since the end of the 2018 season, but I still believe they are in the early stages of any future building and will likely fall to the bottom of the division in 2019.

AFC South



My Pick- Indianapolis Colts

Proving all of the doubters wrong, Andrew Luck returned from a lengthy shoulder injury and put up MVP level numbers including over 4,500 yards passing and 39 passing touchdowns. Paired with this was an 11 win season that featured their first playoff berth since the 2014-2015 season. On top of this, the team finally seemed to find an answer to their struggles on the defensive side of the ball, logging their first season as a Top 10 scoring defense since 2013. With everything going their way, the Colts further proved how well their organization is run with another great offseason. Heading into free agency with the most salary cap space of any team, the team remained responsible and didn't give in to the flash and allure of day one free agent rip offs. Instead opting to pursue sensible contracts, the team scored big with the addition of Justin Houston, and found a solid WR2 in Devin Funchess to line up outside the speedy T.Y. Hilton in the slot. Looking to continue their run of success, I believe the Colts are set up nicely to win double digit games in a relatively weak AFC South division, their only true competition being the Houston Texans.

The only reason I'm skeptical of a loaded Texans team is their failure to protect Deshaun Watson with a decent offensive line. This is a major area for concern as Houston has led the NFL in sacks given up with 116 over the last two years. With a young stud at Quarterback and defense with no shortage of star power, I believe they can and will contend for the division but will fall short due to their inability to protect Deshaun Watson. The Titans almost snuck into the playoffs last year, but I feel the lack of development of Marcus Mariota as a proficient passer will restrain the offense moving forward. Moving south to Jacksonville, I feel that moving on from Blake Bortles was a step in the right direction, but Nick Foles won't have enough help to carry the current Jaguars back to the heights they reached in a wild 2016-2017 campaign.

AFC West



My Pick- Los Angeles Chargers

Aside from their uniforms and the fact that they're playing in an MLS stadium, there isn't much to criticize about the Los Angeles Chargers. They are one of the most complete rosters in the NFL, having plentiful talent in all three phases of the game. Ending their 2018 season in the AFC Divisional Round of the playoffs in a shootout with the Patriots, the Chargers have lots of reasons to hold their head high after their best season since the LaDainian Tomlinson days. Starting with the defense, the Chargers were dominant against the pass and the run, ranking inside the top 10 in yards allowed for both categories. Led by elite pass rushers Melvin Ingram and Joey Bosa, the Chargers will have one of the scariest front fours in the league for years to come. Shifting to the offense, Philip Rivers looks more like he's 27 than 37 with how well he's played the last couple of seasons. Alongside him in the backfield Melvin Gordon can do it all, averaging 1300 scrimmage yards and 10 touchdowns per season in his first four seasons.

Not picking the Chiefs to defend their division crown may surprise a lot of people, but I cannot get over the fact that they've lost so many weapons due to off the field issues. Patrick Mahomes may be the most talented player in the NFL, but his numbers drastically dropped at the end of last season without Kareem Hunt beside him in the backfield. The loss of his favorite wideout Tyreek Hill on an indefinite suspension will also not help the team in their hunt to return to the playoffs. Denver appears to be headed in a new direction after selecting Drew Lock in the 2nd round of the draft and will likely take a step back this season in order to improve their future outlook. Entering their final season in Oakland, the Raiders will fall victim to the reality that spending big doesn't translate to wins and will suffer a disappointing 5-11 season as a result.

NFC North



My Pick- Minnesota Vikings

Defying all conventional wisdom and a relatively large sample size of underwhelming performances in big moments, I am betting on Kirk Cousins to lead this team to an NFC North title next season. After facing one of the league's toughest schedules in 2018, the Vikings still managed to finish above .500 and were one game away from making the playoffs. In the first year of his contract with the team, Cousins posted a career high 70.1% completion percentage, and eclipsed 4000 yards passing and 30 touchdowns in a year that drew him nothing but criticism. Flipping to the other side of the ball, I believe the Vikings are one of the most underappreciated defensive units in the league, and their numbers back it up every year. In 2018, they ranked inside the top 3 in both sacks and passing defense, showing their domination across multiple levels of the defense. Though it will be tough to fend off the brilliant mind of Matt Nagy and the Bears, I feel that this division will come down to the Bears vs Vikings matchup in week 17 and Minnesota will benefit from playing at home.

Additionally, I don't quite buy in to Mitch Trubisky yet after his level of play faltered down the stretch in the second half of last season. The Packers will surely be better than the last two let down seasons, but I don't trust the team around Rodgers to hold their weight in a winning effort. Last and certainly least of all, the Lions are disillusioned by the belief they are emulating the New England Patriots, when in reality they are much closer to the Oakland Raiders. Once again, the team will fail to capitalize in the fading window of Matthew Stafford's prime.

NFC East



My Pick- Dallas Cowboys

Claiming their 2nd NFC East title in the 3 years of the Dak Prescott era, I see no reason the Cowboys won't be able to defend their title in 2019. With a star studded front seven including DeMarcus Lawrence, Jaylon Smith, and Leighton Vander Esch, this young core on defense has many incredible seasons in front of them. The Cowboys are a couple of secondary players away from having the most complete roster in the NFL, as they have several weapons on both sides of the ball. Although Dak has shown limitations in his game through the first few seasons of his career, most of them are masked by the BEST running back in the NFL Ezekiel Elliot. Plus, the team was finally able to land a reliable number one receiver Amari Cooper who seems to have found new life since his trade to Dallas. Besides polishing up a few mistakes from their 2018 season, the Dallas Cowboys have a favorable schedule to win 10 or 11 games and hold off the Philadelphia Eagles to earn their 3rd division crown in 4 years.

The biggest competition Dallas will face in the NFC East is the Eagles, yet I feel like they have too many roster holes and uncertainties going in to next season to keep up with the Cowboys. I really like Carson Wentz as one of the best young stars in the league, but he has been injury prone throughout his entire career dating back to college and can't be relied upon to start 16 games for this team. Looking around the rest of the division, it seems like the Redskins are plagued with a devastating injury to one of their key players about once a week. Relying on Case Keenum or a rookie (who I really like) Dwayne Haskins will probably result in a 6 or 7 win season with their roster. Their neighbors up north the New York Giants are the NFL equivalent of the Los Angeles Lakers right now, with their franchise in shambles right now with no sense of direction. As long as the team rides out the formula of an old Eli Manning with no surrounding weapons, the team can enjoy a top 8 draft pick to screw up every April.

NFC South



My Pick- New Orleans Saints

Entering Drew Brees' age 40 season, the window of opportunity is definitely shrinking for the New Orleans Saints. With a roster built for winning now, I believe the Saints will cruise to their third NFC South title in a row and log somewhere close to 11 wins along the way. The losses of Mark Ingram and Alex Okafor throughout the offseason will unquestionably hurt the team moving forward, but I feel the team quietly had a great draft to patch their roster needs. With the evolving nature of the offense to a more balanced attack than the past, the team has to rely less and less on an aging Brees, and actually opens up more plays for him downfield due to their unpredictability. The time is now for this team as Drew Brees stated in an interview this week that he would be playing the upcoming season like it was his last, and the team even deferred some of his salary in order to sign more players for next season. Putting all their chips in on 2019, the Saints will have an unparalleled sense of urgency and vengeance after the bitter taste left in their mouth to end last season.

Atlanta will be their toughest inter-division competition next season coming off of a disappointing 7-9 finish in 2018, but I don't see their ceiling as anything higher than a wild card team. The Carolina Panthers have been put in a tight spot with Cam Newton's injury situation being unknown going forward. It is still possible that poor previous treatment of injuries have caught up to him to the point where he might be held out of the entire 2019-2020 season pending further testing. Moving south, the Buccaneers looked to start fresh by bringing in Bruce Arians as the new head coach for the team, however the team's failure to tame the wild Jameis Winston will continue to hold them back from becoming anything more than the Buffalo Bills. Because of this, the team should consider tanking in order to roll the dice on a new quarterback like Tua Tagovailoa in the 2020 NFL Draft.

NFC West



My Pick- Los Angeles Rams

Changing the course of the franchise in only two years at the helm, Sean McVay has taken the league by storm and become the model coach every team is looking to copy. His young offensive mind has elevated Jared Goff from a rookie draft bust to a top 10 level quarterback in the NFL. Benefitting from two years left on his rookie deal, the Rams have surrounded him with a complete roster including the best defensive player in the NFL Aaron Donald. Blowing the league away with 20.5 sacks and 4 forced fumbles in 2018, Donald is earning every bit of the massive contract extension he signed last summer. An offseason of rest will rejuvenate Todd Gurley and Cooper Kupp back to 100% health which will hopefully spark an offense that died in Super Bowl 53 against the Patriots. Compiling 13 wins and earning the 2nd seed in the NFC, the Rams have lots of momentum to carry with them next season and beyond.

Surprising everyone and refusing to enter rebuild mode, the Seahawks grinded in 2018 to sneak into the playoffs as a wild card team last season despite the lack of experience on defense. Following the disbandment of the Legion of Boom, even more weight was put on the shoulders of Russell Wilson to bear for this team. As a result, the team signed him to an extension that made him the highest paid player in NFL history, crutching the team's ability to sign high caliber free agents in the future. Flying under the radar, the 49ers will get Jimmy G back from injury next season and will start to take advantage of the talented roster John Lynch has cleverly built the last few seasons. Though they are still in the early phases of blossoming into a playoff caliber team, they will be a force that will challenge the Rams for years to come. Stealing most of the pre-draft headlines, the Cardinals have generated lots of hype with the hire of Kliff Kingsbury as head coach and Kyler Murray at quarterback. In an attempt to introduce some air raid flare from the college game, expect them stay at the bottom of the division as they endure growing pains.