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2018 NFL SEASON BEGINS ON KICKOFF WEEKEND

The NFL returns this week and it's time to get back to football. Kickoff Weekend signals the start of a 256-game journey, one that promises hope for each of the league's 32 teams as they set their eyes on Super Bowl LIII, which will be played on Sunday, February 3, 2019 at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta, GA.

One thing is certain: the 2018 season will be filled with memorable moments, as young players emerge onto the scene, familiar faces continue their climb up the record books and teams vie to make their mark in the postseason.

The 99th season of NFL play kicks off on Thursday night (NBC, 8:20 PM ET) as the Super Bowl champion **PHILADELPHIA EAGLES** host the **ATLANTA FALCONS** at Lincoln Financial Field in a battle of the NFC's past two Super Bowl representatives. The Eagles, who finished last in the NFC East with a 7-9 record in 2016, became the second team since 2003 to go from "worst-to-first" en route to a Super Bowl victory, joining the 2009 New Orleans Saints.

Every team enters the 2018 season with hope and a trip to Atlanta for Super Bowl LIII in mind. Below are a few reasons why.

- **THE FIELD IS OPEN:** Five of the eight divisions in 2017 were won by a team that finished in third or fourth place in the division the previous season – Jacksonville (AFC South), the Los Angeles Rams (NFC West), Minnesota (NFC North), New Orleans (NFC South) and Philadelphia (NFC East).

Since the 12-team playoff format was adopted in 1990, at least four teams have qualified for the playoffs in every season that were not in the postseason the year before. Eight teams that missed the postseason in 2016 – Buffalo (9-7), Carolina (11-5), Jacksonville (10-6), Los Angeles Rams (11-5), Minnesota (13-3), New Orleans (11-5), Philadelphia (13-3) and Tennessee (9-7) – accomplished the feat in 2017, tied with the 2003 season for the most such teams since 1990.

- **WILL THE EAGLES REPEAT AS SUPER BOWL CHAMPIONS?** Fresh off their first Super Bowl in franchise history, the Eagles begin their quest to repeat as champions as the race to Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium for Super Bowl LIII kicks off. Only eight teams have repeated as champions since the first Super Bowl in 1967, with the 2004 Patriots (Super Bowls XXXVIII and XXXIX) being the last team to accomplish the feat.
- **RECORDS WITHIN REACH:** New Orleans quarterback **DREW BREES** (70,445) needs 1,496 passing yards to surpass **PEYTON MANNING** (71,940) as the NFL's all-time leading passer. Brees (6,222) can also surpass Pro Football Hall of Famer **BRETT FAVRE** (6,300) for the most completions in NFL history...New England quarterback **TOM BRADY** (559) needs 21 touchdown passes to surpass Manning (579) for the most in NFL history (including the postseason). Brady (488) and Brees (488) can join Manning (539) and Favre (508) as the only players in league annals to reach 500 career regular-season touchdown passes...Miami running back **FRANK GORE** (14,026) can become the fourth player in NFL history to reach 15,000 career rushing yards, joining Pro Football Hall of Famers **EMMITT SMITH** (18,355), **WALTER PAYTON** (16,726) and **BARRY SANDERS** (15,269)...Arizona wide receiver **LARRY FITZGERALD** (1,234) needs 92 receptions to pass **TONY GONZALEZ** (1,325) for second place on the NFL's all-time receptions list. Fitzgerald (15,545) needs 390 receiving yards to pass Pro Football Hall of Famer **TERRELL OWENS** (15,934) for the second-most receiving yards in league history...Carolina defensive end **JULIUS PEPPERS** (154.5) can surpass Pro Football Hall of Famer **KEVIN GREENE** (160) for the third-most sacks in league history since the sack became an official statistic in 1982...Indianapolis kicker **ADAM VINATIERI** (2,487) needs 58 points to surpass Pro Football Hall of Famer **MORTEN ANDERSEN** (2,544) for the most in NFL history.
- **FAMILIAR FACES IN NEW PLACES:** Seven teams enter the 2018 season with a new head coach – **STEVE WILKS** in Arizona, **MATT NAGY** in Chicago, **MATT PATRICIA** in Detroit, **FRANK REICH** in Indianapolis, **PAT SHURMUR** with the New York Giants, **JON GRUDEN** in Oakland and **MIKE VRABEL** in Tennessee.

Several notable players were also on the move during the offseason, including quarterbacks **KIRK COUSINS** (Minnesota), **CASE KEENUM** (Denver), **ALEX SMITH** (Washington) and **TYROD TAYLOR** (Cleveland); running backs **LE GARRETTE BLOUNT** (Detroit), **CARLOS HYDE** (Cleveland) and **DION LEWIS** (Tennessee); wide receivers **BRANDIN COOKS** (Los Angeles Rams), **MICHAEL CRABTREE** (Baltimore), **JARVIS LANDRY** (Cleveland) and **JORDY NELSON** (Oakland); tight end **JIMMY GRAHAM** (Green Bay); guard **ANDREW NORWELL** (Jacksonville); tackle **NATE SOLDER** (New York Giants); defensive end **ROBERT QUINN** (Miami); defensive tackles **DONTARI POE** (Carolina), **SHELDON RICHARDSON** (Minnesota), **NDAMUKONG SUH** (Los Angeles Rams) and **MUHAMMAD WILKERSON** (Green Bay); linebacker **KHALIL MACK** (Chicago); cornerbacks **MALCOLM BUTLER** (Tennessee), **MARCUS PETERS** (Los Angeles Rams), **RICHARD SHERMAN** (San Francisco) and **AQIB TALIB** (Los Angeles Rams); and safety **TYRANN MATHIEU** (Houston).

- **YOUNG STARS TAKE THE STAGE:** Last season, four rookies – Arizona’s **BUDDA BAKER**, Kansas City’s **KAREEM HUNT** and New Orleans’ **ALVIN KAMARA** and **MARSHON LATTIMORE** – earned Pro Bowl honors in their first season. Who could accomplish the feat in 2018?

Five quarterbacks - **BAKER MAYFIELD** (No. 1 overall, Cleveland), **SAM DARNOLD** (No. 3, New York Jets), **JOSH ALLEN** (No. 7, Buffalo), **JOSH ROSEN** (No. 10, Arizona) and **LAMAR JACKSON** (No. 32, Baltimore) - were selected in the first round of the 2018 NFL Draft, marking the third time that at least five quarterbacks have been selected in the Draft’s opening round since the inception of the common draft in 1967. At least one rookie quarterback has started Week 1 in 10 consecutive seasons, the longest streak in the NFL since at least 1950.

In each of the past two seasons, a rookie running back has led the NFL in rushing yards – Dallas’ **EZEKIEL ELLIOTT** (1,631) in 2016 and Hunt (1,327) in 2017. Three running backs – **SAQUON BARKLEY** (No. 2 overall, New York Giants), **RASHAAD PENNY** (No. 27, Seattle) and **SONY MICHEL** (No. 31, New England) – were selected in the first round of the 2018 NFL Draft.

NFL KICKOFF 2018 SCHEDULE **THURSDAY, SUNDAY & MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 9-10** (All times eastern)

Thursday, September 6

Atlanta at Philadelphia, 8:20 PM (NBC)

Sunday, September 9

Buffalo at Baltimore, 1:00 PM

Pittsburgh at Cleveland, 1:00 PM

Cincinnati at Indianapolis, 1:00 PM

Tennessee at Miami, 1:00 PM

San Francisco at Minnesota, 1:00 PM

Houston at New England, 1:00 PM

Tampa Bay at New Orleans, 1:00 PM

Sunday, September 9 (cont'd)

Jacksonville at New York Giants, 1:00 PM

Kansas City at Los Angeles Chargers, 4:05 PM

Washington at Arizona, 4:25 PM

Dallas at Carolina, 4:25 PM

Seattle at Denver, 4:25 PM

Chicago at Green Bay, 8:20 PM (NBC)

Monday, September 10

New York Jets at Detroit, 7:10 PM (ESPN)

Los Angeles Rams at Oakland, 10:20 PM (ESPN)