



## COMMUNICATIONS

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11/27/18

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# THE RACE TO THE PLAYOFFS INTENSIFIES AS CALENDAR TURNS TO DECEMBER

As the season enters December, the NFL playoff picture is starting to take shape. With five weeks remaining in the regular season, there are 20 teams currently in or within one game of playoff position, including 11 teams that did not advance to the postseason in 2017. Since the 12-team playoff format began in 1990, at least four teams have qualified for the playoffs in every season that were not in the postseason the year before.

Two teams that finished in or tied for last place in their division in 2017 – the Chicago Bears (NFC North) and Houston Texans (AFC South) – are currently in first place in their respective divisions this season. In 14 of the past 15 seasons, at least one team finished in first place in its division the season after finishing in last or tied for last place. Of the 46 teams in league history to go from “worst-to-first,” 23 of them have done so in the past 15 years (2003-17), including an NFL-record three such teams in 2005 and 2006.

As the season approaches the home stretch, four teams have an active winning streak of at least five games, led by the New Orleans Saints, which have won 10 consecutive games. The Texans, which have won eight straight games after an 0-3 start to the season, are the first team in NFL history to win eight consecutive games immediately following an 0-3 start. The Chicago Bears and Indianapolis Colts have both won five consecutive games entering Week 13.

Over the past five seasons (2013-17), the Pittsburgh Steelers (20-3, .870) own the league's best record in the final month, which also includes regular-season games played in January. The Carolina Panthers (17-7, .708) have the best mark in the NFC.

TEAM	WINS	LOSSES	PCT.
Pittsburgh Steelers	20	3	.870
New England Patriots	18	6	.750
Carolina Panthers	17	7	.708
Kansas City Chiefs	17	7	.708
Green Bay Packers	16	7	.696

Quarterback play continues to excel across the league, as 13 quarterbacks have a passer rating of at least 100 (minimum 150 attempts) through the first 12 weeks this season, the most in NFL history in the first 12 weeks of a season. Three quarterbacks – New Orleans' **DREW BREES** (127.3), Kansas City's **PATRICK MAHOMES** (117.9) and Los Angeles Chargers' **PHILIP RIVERS** (115.7) – have a passer rating of at least 115 through Week 12. No season has featured more than one such quarterback through the first 12 weeks of the season.

Nine players have at least 1,000 scrimmage yards and 10 total touchdowns through Week 12, tied with the 2002 season for the most in the first 12 weeks of a season in league history. Of those nine, five players are currently in their first or second seasons – the New York Giants' rookie **SAQUON BARKLEY**, Carolina's **CHRISTIAN MC CAFFREY**, Pittsburgh's **JAMES CONNER**, New Orleans' **ALVIN KAMARA** and Kansas City's **KAREEM HUNT**. Three players – the Rams' **TODD GURLEY** (1,484 scrimmage yards), the Cowboys' **EZEKIEL ELLIOTT** (1,437) and Barkley (1,410) – are on pace to eclipse 2,000 scrimmage yards this season.

Below are highlights of the Week 13 schedule:

Week 13 kicks off on Thursday night as the New Orleans Saints travel to AT&T Stadium to take on the Dallas Cowboys (8:20 PM ET, FOX/NFL Network/Amazon Prime). New Orleans and Dallas were both victorious on Thanksgiving Day in Week 12. The Saints enter Week 13 tied with the Los Angeles Rams for the NFL's best record at 10-1 and have won 10 consecutive games. Saints quarterback **DREW BREES** leads the NFL with a 76.4 completion percentage – 4.4 percent higher than the current single-season league record of 72.0 set by Brees in 2017 – and a 127.3 passer rating. Dallas has won three consecutive games and is

currently tied with Washington atop the NFC East. Cowboys running back **EZEKIEL ELLIOTT** leads the league with 1,074 rushing yards this season and has rushed for at least 120 yards and a score in each of his past three games.

The Cleveland Browns, who defeated Cincinnati 35-20 in Week 12, visit the Houston Texans at NRG Stadium (1:00 PM ET, CBS). Cleveland quarterback **BAKER MAYFIELD** is the first rookie in league history to record a passer rating of 140 or higher (minimum 20 attempts) in consecutive games and has completed 73.9 percent of his passes (65 of 88) with nine touchdowns and one interception for a 129.5 passer rating in his past three games. Houston quarterback **DE SHAUN WATSON** has 24 touchdown passes and seven interceptions for a 110.4 passer rating and 256 rushing yards with two scores in nine career home games. Texans defensive end **J.J. WATT** leads the AFC with 11.5 sacks and is the only player in the NFL with at least 10 sacks and five forced fumbles (five) in 2018. In his last game against Cleveland (November 16, 2014), Watt recorded a sack, forced fumble, fumble recovery and caught a two-yard touchdown pass in a Houston victory.

Sunday afternoon features an interconference showdown between the Minnesota Vikings and New England Patriots at Gillette Stadium (4:25 PM ET, FOX). Minnesota quarterback **KIRK COUSINS** completed 29 of 38 passes (76.3 percent) for 342 yards with three touchdowns and zero interceptions for a 129.5 passer rating in the Vikings' Week 12 win over Green Bay. Cousins is one of three NFL quarterbacks (Atlanta's **MATT RYAN** and New Orleans' **DREW BREES**) with a 70+ completion percentage (71.1), at least 3,000 passing yards (3,289) and a 100+ passer rating (101.9) this season. New England quarterback **TOM BRADY**, who surpassed **PEYTON MANNING** (79,279) for the most passing yards in league history (including the postseason) last week, has 578 career touchdown passes (including the playoffs) and needs two touchdown passes to surpass Manning (579) for the most in league annals.

Sunday's slate closes with a battle of AFC contenders as the Los Angeles Chargers take on the Pittsburgh Steelers on *Sunday Night Football* (8:20 PM ET, NBC). Last week, Chargers quarterback **PHILIP RIVERS** completed his first 25 pass attempts, the most consecutive completions in a single game in NFL history, and finished the game completing 28 of 29 passes (96.6 percent), surpassing Pro Football Hall of Famer **KURT WARNER** (92.3 percent on 24 of 26 passing on September 20, 2009) for the highest single-game completion percentage in league annals (minimum 20 attempts). Tennessee's **MARCUS MARIOTA** completed 95.7 percent of his passes (22 of 23) in Week 12, also surpassing Warner's previous record.

Rivers and Steelers quarterback **BEN ROETHLISBERGER** were selected with fourth and 11th picks, respectively, in the 2004 NFL Draft and meet as starting quarterbacks for the fifth time in their careers with the head-to-head series tied at two wins apiece. Pittsburgh wide receiver **JU JU SMITH-SCHUSTER** had 13 catches for 189 yards, including a 97-yard touchdown catch, last week. Smith-Schuster, who had a 97-yard touchdown reception as a rookie last season, joins **GUS TINSLEY** (two) and **LAMAR MILLER** (two) as the only players in NFL history with two scrimmage touchdowns of at least 97 yards in their careers.

## **NFL WEEK 13 SCHEDULE** **THURSDAY, SUNDAY & MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29, DECEMBER 2-3** (All times eastern)

### **Thursday, November 29**

New Orleans at Dallas, 8:20 PM (FOX/NFLN/Amazon)

### **Sunday, December 2**

Baltimore at Atlanta, 1:00 PM  
Denver at Cincinnati, 1:00 PM  
Los Angeles Rams at Detroit, 1:00 PM  
Arizona at Green Bay, 1:00 PM  
Cleveland at Houston, 1:00 PM  
Indianapolis at Jacksonville, 1:00 PM  
Buffalo at Miami, 1:00 PM

### **Sunday, December 2 (cont'd)**

Chicago at New York Giants, 1:00 PM  
Carolina at Tampa Bay, 1:00 PM  
Kansas City at Oakland, 4:05 PM  
New York Jets at Tennessee, 4:05 PM  
Minnesota at New England, 4:25 PM  
San Francisco at Seattle, 4:25 PM  
Los Angeles Chargers at Pittsburgh, 8:20 PM (NBC)

### **Monday, December 3**

Washington at Philadelphia, 8:15 PM (ESPN)