



## COMMUNICATIONS

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# THREE WEEKS REMAIN AS THE RACE TO PLAYOFFS HEATS UP

With three weeks remaining in the regular season, the suspense continues to build as teams make their final playoff push. Entering Week 15, 26 teams remain in contention for a trip to Super Bowl LIII, tied for the fourth-most such teams with three weeks remaining in a season since the league expanded to a 16-game schedule in 1978.

Two teams have clinched division titles – the NFC West champion **LOS ANGELES RAMS** and the NFC South champion **NEW ORLEANS SAINTS** – and five additional teams can clinch their respective divisions this week: the **CHICAGO BEARS** (9-4), **DALLAS COWBOYS** (8-5), **HOUSTON TEXANS** (9-4), **KANSAS CITY CHIEFS** (11-2), and **NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS** (9-4).

As the league enters Week 15, there are 20 teams either in or within one game of a playoff spot, 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 – Chicago (NFC North) and Houston (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.

One thing is certain – the closing weeks of the 2018 NFL season will feature competitive contests across the board. Fifty-nine games have been decided by three points or fewer this season, the most in league annals through Week 14. Sixty-eight percent of all games (142 of 208) have been within one score (eight points or fewer) in the fourth quarter this year and 112 games have been decided by eight or fewer points, tied for the fourth-most through the first 14 weeks of a season in league history.

Below are highlights of the Week 15 schedule:

Week 15 kicks off on Thursday night (8:20 PM ET, FOX/NFL Network/Amazon Prime) with a showdown in the AFC West as the Los Angeles Chargers (10-3) travel to Arrowhead Stadium to take on the Kansas City Chiefs (11-2). The meeting marks the third time in NFL history that two 10-win teams meet on a Thursday night and the first since 2007 (Green Bay (10-1) at Dallas (10-1) on November 29). Los Angeles quarterback **PHILIP RIVERS** has thrown multiple touchdown passes in 12 of the Chargers' 13 games, the most in the NFL this season, while Chiefs quarterback **PATRICK MAHOMES** is one of three quarterbacks in league history with at least 4,000 passing yards (4,300) and 40 touchdown passes (43) in his team's first 13 games of a season, joining **PEYTON MANNING** (2013) and **TOM BRADY** (2007). Both Manning and Brady were named Associated Press Most Valuable Player in those seasons.

At Soldier Field on Sunday (1:00 PM ET, FOX), the Green Bay Packers and Chicago Bears meet for the 198th time in series history, including the postseason. In their Kickoff Weekend meeting, Bears linebacker **KHALIL MACK** recorded a sack, forced fumble, fumble recovery and interception-return touchdown, but Packers quarterback **AARON RODGERS** threw three fourth-quarter touchdown passes to lead Green Bay to a 24-23 victory at Lambeau Field. Packers wide receiver **DAVANTE ADAMS** ties for the league lead with 12 touchdown catches this season and aims for his fourth consecutive game with a score. Chicago's defense recorded four interceptions and three sacks in holding the Rams to 214 total net yards in the team's 15-6 victory over Los Angeles in Week 14.

The Dallas Cowboys, winners of five consecutive games, take on the Indianapolis Colts at Lucas Oil Stadium (1:00 PM ET, FOX). Dallas leads the NFC East and can clinch the division title with a win. Cowboys quarterback **DAK PRESCOTT** has 993 passing yards (331 per game) with six touchdowns and two interceptions for a 113.6 passer rating in his past three games and wide receiver **AMARI COOPER** has 642 receiving yards and six touchdown catches in six games since being acquired by Dallas this season. Colts rookie linebacker **DARIUS LEONARD** leads the NFL with 135 tackles this season and is one of only three players since 2000 with at least 130 tackles and seven sacks (seven) in a single season, joining Tampa Bay's **LAVONTE DAVID** (2013) and Arizona's **DARYL WASHINGTON** (2012).

A battle of division leaders in the AFC takes center stage on Sunday afternoon (4:25 PM ET, CBS) as the New England Patriots face the Pittsburgh Steelers at Heinz Field. Last week, New England quarterback **TOM BRADY** (582 career touchdown passes) surpassed **PEYTON MANNING** (579) for the most touchdown passes in league history, including the postseason. Pittsburgh's **JU JU SMITH-SCHUSTER** (91 catches) and **ANTONIO BROWN** (86) are the only pair of AFC teammates with at least 85 receptions each this season.

Week 15 closes with a clash of NFC South rivals as the New Orleans Saints visit the Carolina Panthers on ESPN's *Monday Night Football* (8:15 PM ET). Last week, New Orleans clinched the NFC South for the second-consecutive season, marking the first back-to-back division titles in franchise history. Saints quarterback **DREW BREES** leads the NFL with a 75.7 completion percentage and 120.8 passer rating this season and is the only quarterback with at least 30 touchdown passes (31) and fewer than five interceptions (four) in 2018. Since Week 9, Panthers running back **CHRISTIAN MC CAFFREY** leads the NFL with 10 touchdowns and is one of two players (**EZEKIEL ELLIOTT**, 161.7) averaging at least 150 scrimmage yards per game (150.7)

## **NFL WEEK 15 SCHEDULE**

### **THURSDAY, SATURDAY, SUNDAY & MONDAY, DECEMBER 13, DECEMBER 15-17**

(All times eastern)

#### **Thursday, December 13**

Los Angeles Chargers at Kansas City, 8:20 PM  
(FOX/NFLN/Amazon)

#### **Saturday, December 15**

Houston at New York Jets, 4:30 PM (NFLN)  
Cleveland at Denver, 8:20 PM (NFLN)

#### **Sunday, December 16**

Arizona at Atlanta, 1:00 PM  
Tampa Bay at Baltimore, 1:00 PM  
Detroit at Buffalo, 1:00 PM  
Green Bay at Chicago, 1:00 PM

#### **Sunday, December 16 (cont'd)**

Oakland at Cincinnati, 1:00 PM  
Dallas at Indianapolis, 1:00 PM  
Washington at Jacksonville, 1:00 PM  
Miami at Minnesota, 1:00 PM  
Tennessee at New York Giants, 1:00 PM  
Seattle at San Francisco, 4:05 PM  
New England at Pittsburgh, 4:25 PM  
Philadelphia at Los Angeles Rams, 8:20 PM (NBC)

#### **Monday, December 17**

New Orleans at Carolina, 8:15 PM (ESPN)