



NFC NEWS 'N' NOTES

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QB BREES LEADS SAINTS RESURGENCE AS NFL KICKS OFF

New Orleans, here they come!

The kickoff of the NFL season is always a time of great excitement, but perhaps nowhere more so this year than in the Big Easy, where the New Orleans Saints will return after a season of unprecedented challenges.

The Saints kick off their 40th season on Sunday when they travel to Cleveland to face the Browns. They will do so with a new man under center in quarterback **DREW BREES**. One of the most sought-after free agents in the league after spending his first five seasons in San Diego, Brees elected to bring his Pro Bowl talent to New Orleans.

"This was the right fit for me in so many ways," says Brees, who is attempting to rebound from a shoulder injury suffered in the final game of 2005. "I think football was part of the reason to come with the feeling that we could be very successful here, but there was also the feeling that we're kind of building something new. I think the single best thing I could probably do at this point to help the city is win football games. I think that does wonders for people's spirits and that's what we're going to try to do."

Quarterbacks around the league find themselves in the spotlight as the NFL begins the new season, all hoping to lead their teams to a berth in Super Bowl XLI on February 4 at South Florida's Dolphin Stadium.

Following is a team-by-team look at the quarterback position in the NFC in 2006:

ARIZONA: Two-time NFL Most Valuable Player **KURT WARNER** will have a plethora of offensive options at his disposal as the Cardinals open a new stadium with high hopes for the 2006 season. Warner, who needs 786 passing yards for 20,000 in his career, has Pro Bowl targets in wide receivers **LARRY FITZGERALD** and **ANQUAN BOLDIN**, along with perennial All-Star running back **EDGERRIN JAMES** to hand the ball off to. Warner enters the season with a 94.1 career passer rating, second only to **STEVE YOUNG** (96.8) in NFL history.

ATLANTA: The Falcons are seeking to soar to the playoffs in 2006 and **MICHAEL VICK** will likely be leading the charge. Vick has proven a winner in his tenure as the club's quarterback, compiling a 31-19-1 (.618) record. He continues to pose a threat with both his arm and legs, passing for 2,412 yards and 15 touchdowns while rushing for 597 yards and six TDs last season, earning his third All-Star selection.

CAROLINA: Excitement is high once again in Carolina, as **JAKE DELHOMME** and the Panthers seek to build off last season's trip to the NFC Championship Game. Delhomme, who won a title as a member of the NFL Europe League Frankfurt Galaxy in 1999, comes off perhaps his finest season, throwing for 3,421 yards and 24 touchdowns, and posting an 88.1 passer rating to earn his first trip to the Pro Bowl. With 2,165 passing yards and 15 touchdown passes, Delhomme will surpass **STEVE BEUERLEIN** (12,690; 86) as the franchise leader in both categories.

CHICAGO: The Bears' quarterback depth chart is deep indeed. **REX GROSSMAN** enters the season as the starter for the defending NFC North champs. He bounced back from injury to lead the team to its division-clinching win over Green Bay in his only regular-season start in 2005. Former Buccaneer **BRIAN GRIESE** joined the club in the spring and led NFL passers with a 141.7 passer rating in the preseason. His 84.8 career passer rating is 14th-best in NFL history. Rookie **KYLE ORTON** started 15 games for the Bears a year ago, compiling an impressive 10-5 mark.

DALLAS: Fourteen-year pro **DREW BLEDSOE** can achieve several noteworthy milestones as he begins his second season with the Cowboys. The four-time All-Star has thrown for 43,447 yards and needs 1,553 to become only the sixth player in history with 45,000. Bledsoe also can continue his climb up the charts among all-time touchdown-pass leaders. Currently tied for 13th with **JOHN HADL** and **PEYTON MANNING** (active) with 244, Bledsoe can move into seventh all-time with 30 touchdown passes.

DETROIT: The club's quarterback position has a new look in 2006 as veteran **JON KITNA** arrived in the Motor City during the offseason. Kitna, a former World Bowl MVP who led the 1997 Barcelona Dragons to the NFL Europe championship, starts for the Lions. He will try to emulate the success he enjoyed in his last full season as a starter in

2003 when he passed for 3,591 yards and 26 touchdowns in starting 16 games for Cincinnati.

GREEN BAY: **BRETT FAVRE** kicks off his 16th season and is to many the epitome of an NFL quarterback. The Packers' legend is within reach of a bevy of significant milestones in 2006, including one achievement that may occur this week. Favre has 396 career touchdown passes and needs four to join **DAN MARINO** (420) as the only players in NFL history with 400. With 139 career wins, Favre needs 10 to pass **JOHN ELWAY** (148) and Marino (147) for the most wins ever by a quarterback.

MINNESOTA: Veteran **BRAD JOHNSON** led the Vikings to wins in seven of his nine starts last season and enters 2006 as the club's No. 1 quarterback. Johnson, who saw his first significant professional action as a member of the London Monarchs in 1995, has been a consistent winner throughout his career, posting an impressive 65-43 record (.602) – third among active quarterbacks with 100 starts.

NEW ORLEANS: **DREW BREES** has thrown for 20+ touchdowns and 3,000+ yards in each of the past two seasons with the Chargers and has a 21-11 (.656) record in his last 32 starts. Brees, San Diego's career record holder with an 84.9 passer rating, set the club single-season record with a 104.8 rating in 2004, earning a trip to the Pro Bowl after leading the Chargers to a 12-4 record and the AFC West title. Brees needs 20 touchdown passes for 100 in his career.

NEW YORK: **ELI MANNING** enjoyed a standout season in 2005 and hopes to build upon that success this year. Manning, who led the Giants to an 11-5 record and the NFC East Division championship last season, aims to become the first Giants quarterback since **PHIL SIMMS** (1989-90) to lead the team to consecutive division titles. Manning, the younger brother of Colts quarterback **PEYTON**, is not the only Giants' passer with a famous quarterbacking brother. New York's **TIM HASSELBECK** is the younger brother of Seahawks starter **MATT**.

PHILADELPHIA: **DONOVAN MC NABB** missed seven games due to injury in 2005 and he's looking for a bounce-back season in 2006. McNabb, who led the Eagles to the playoffs from 2000-04, has been adept at protecting the ball throughout his career. His 2.24 interception percentage (66 INTs-2,943 attempts) ranks second in NFL history, trailing only **NEIL O'DONNELL** (2.11, 68-3,229) all-time. With 16 touchdown passes, McNabb will join **RON JAWORSKI** (175) and **RANDALL CUNNINGHAM** (150) as the only players in franchise history to reach 150.

ST. LOUIS: **MARC BULGER** has proven to be a consistent passer – and winner. His .636 winning percentage as a starter (28-16) is fourth best among active quarterbacks with a minimum of 20 starts, trailing only **BEN ROETHLISBERGER** (22-3, .880), **TOM BRADY** (58-20, .744) and **DONOVAN MC NABB** (60-28, .682). Bulger is a graduate of Pittsburgh Central Catholic High School, the same school that produced legendary NFL passer **DAN MARINO**.

SAN FRANCISCO: **ALEX SMITH** enters his second season firmly entrenched as the team's starter. The No. 1 overall selection in the 2005 NFL Draft, Smith saw action in nine games with seven starts a year ago. The offseason brought additional help in the form of first-round draft pick **VERNON DAVIS**, who many considered to be the best pass-catching tight end in college football at Maryland, and **LARRY ALLEN**, a 10-time All-Star offensive lineman who joined the club as an unrestricted free agent after spending his first 12 seasons with the Dallas Cowboys.

SEATTLE: Aiming to help win the NFC West for the third consecutive year and reach the playoffs for the fourth season in a row, quarterback **MATT HASSELBECK** enters his sixth year with the club. The two-time All-Star is the highest rated passer in Seahawks history with an 86.6 rating. Playing in the NFL is a family profession for the Hasselbecks, as brother **TIM** is a quarterback with the Giants and father **DON** spent nine years as an NFL tight end.

TAMPA BAY: **CHRIS SIMMS** started the club's final 10 regular-season games in 2005 and looks to build on a performance that helped the Buccaneers to the NFC South Division title, the team's first since its Super Bowl XXXVII-winning campaign in 2002. Simms posted an 81.4 passer rating, throwing for 10 touchdowns and 2,035 yards. He and his wife, **DANIELLE**, had their first child in the offseason, **SIENNA ROSE**.

WASHINGTON: Entering his 14th season, quarterback **MARK BRUNELL** enjoyed one of his best years in 2005, passing for a career-high 23 touchdowns in leading the Redskins to their first playoff appearance since 1999. Brunell, who hopes to take the club to consecutive playoff berths for the first time since 1990-92, ranks fourth among active quarterbacks with 174 touchdown passes and needs 26 to become the 27th player in NFL history to reach 200.

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