

SPORTS

NFC North has potential for plenty of points

BY DAVE CAMPBELL
AP Pro Football Writer

Green Bay's grab of the NFC North for the third straight season, giving the Packers seven of the 12 titles since the division formed, was predictable.

That unremarkable 8-7-1 record they won it with was the real surprise.

Chicago took a step back, too, and Minnesota plummeted badly. Detroit was the only team with more victories than the previous year, but still had a losing mark and fired its coach. Such mediocrity, though, should not mask the abundance of elite talent that still exists in this quartet.

From stars Aaron Rodgers, Adrian Peterson and Calvin Johnson to up-and-comers Cordarrelle Patterson, Alshon Jeffrey and Eddie Lacy, with standouts like Reggie Bush, Brandon Marshall and Randall Cobb somewhere in between, the NFC North could probably field a Pro Bowl offense all by itself.

The Packers, Lions and Bears all ranked in the top eight in the league in total yards, and even the Vikings with their persistent quarterback problems finished 13th, higher than five play-off teams.

For this division to again produce a true championship-caliber team, keeping those key players healthy all year is the first prerequisite. Then the defenses must get better. If not, and this season looks a lot like the last, well, the games are bound to be entertaining with all those big-play guys throwing, running and catching the ball.

Here are some things to know about the NFC North this year:

IN CASE OF INJURY, CALL ... When the previously infallible Rodgers went down with a broken collarbone, the dynamic of the division changed. The Packers were just barely good enough to survive his absence and beat the Bears in the final week, which served as a play-in game for the NFC playoffs. That was quite the feat considering they lost Cobb, outside linebacker Clay Matthews, left tackle Bryan Bulaga and several other starters for multiple games.

The injuries transcended all three Wisconsin borders.

Josh McCown helped the Bears withstand quarterback Jay Cutler's torn groin, but the defense lost Henry Melton, D.J. Williams, Lance Briggs and



FILE PHOTO

Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers (12) is shown getting a block from tackle Don Barclay (67) while breaking away from Vikings defensive end Everson Griffen (97) in last October's game at the Metrodome. Rodgers missed several games last season because of a broken collarbone.

Charles Tillman for a total of 38 games. Johnson wasn't the same Megatron for the Lions, missing two games and fighting knee and finger trouble that prompted offseason procedures. Peterson had a similar letdown with the Vikings, spraining his foot in December and needing surgery on his groin in

January.

PICKED THE PACK, DID PEPPERS: The Packers made a rare splash in free agency by signing eight-time Pro Bowl pick Julius Peppers, who played the last four years with the Bears. Peppers, whose 119 career sacks are the third most among active players, is making the transition from

the traditional 4-3 defensive end to the 3-4 scheme at age 34. He could, though, provide a valuable boost to a defense that sagged down the stretch last year.

"I'm looking forward to not only proving to myself that I can do it, but proving to the outsiders who don't think I can do it," Peppers said.

MORE DEFENSE SPENDING: One spot ahead of Peppers on the active player sacks list is Jared Allen, who also switched NFC North rivals by leaving the Vikings for the Bears. Like Peppers, Allen at 32 is past his prime at a speed-based position. But the five-time Pro Bowl pick, too, will be eager to prove he's not done as a dominant pass rusher. The Bears were tied for last in the league in sacks last year and gave up the second-most points, fewer than only the Vikings.

"Everybody sees the ability and what we have on paper. But that doesn't necessarily mean anything. You've got to go out and ... make it happen," Allen said.

BRIDGE TO BRIDGE-WATER: The Vikings have a new coach in Mike Zimmer and a new quarterback in Teddy Bridgewater, though the first-round draft pick from Louisville has been

behind veteran Matt Cassel on the depth chart since he arrived. Cassel played well enough last season after Christian Ponder lost the job to give the Vikings confidence in him until Bridgewater is ready to take over — whether that's this September, next September or somewhere in between.

"I think Teddy's going to be a great player," Zimmer said.

ROAR RESTORATION: Jim Schwartz was replaced by Jim Caldwell as coach of the Lions. Detroit went 10-6 and made the playoffs in 2011, then slumped to 4-12 in 2012 and squandered a 6-3 start with control of the division, only to finish 7-9 in 2013. Addressing any particular weaknesses on the roster was not as important over the winter and spring as rebuilding confidence and optimism within a group that still boasts plenty of star-caliber players.

"I believe we're on the threshold of some great things," Caldwell said. "I think the organization is ready, the city of Detroit is ready, our fan base is ready, and I think our players are ready as well."

Predicted order of finish: Packers; Bears; Vikings; Lions.

Interview with Vikings kicker Blair Walsh

Editor's note: Today's edition of The Journal includes an interview Robin Bjorkquist had earlier this month at Minnesota Vikings training camp with kicker Blair Walsh, who was drafted by the team in 2012 after playing at the University of Georgia.

RB: Who or what is going to make a difference this year?

BW: Just the amount of hard work we've done so far, you know, I feel like we've put in more work than we have last year and we're ready to go.

RB: How have you trained differently for more outdoor games?

B W : I dropped about 10 pounds this year, so I feel like I'm in better shape than I was last year and you know, working out more and (I) feel good.

RB: What is the best advice you've ever been given?

BW: Always outwork your competition. Whenever you don't want to do it, you know, so always



Blair Walsh

put your best effort forth.

RB: Who is your mentor?

BW: My dad and my kicking coach back in high school.

RB: What would you like to be known for?

BW: Being the most dependable guy in the league. I want people to hear my name and think of, hey, you know, that guy was clutch.

RB: What is the best thing about Minnesota?

BW: Besides the weather? The seasons, I like having all four seasons here, I think it's pretty cool, you know, being from a south-

ern climate you don't really get that so, it's awesome.

RB: If you are a kicker, do you have to play golf also, is that a requirement? (Previous Vikings kicker Ryan Longwell was an avid golfer.)

BW: It's like a requirement pretty much, but you don't have to be good at it.

RB: Do you have a charity you support?

BW: I support a bunch of charities. I know I support the Wounded Warrior Project and then I started a Hospice at Home Care for teen volunteers when I was in high school, so I support that as well.

SOFTBALL CHAMPIONS



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Solutions Insurance defeated Waschke/Super One/Midwest Sportswear in the final of the 2014 co-ed softball playoffs to win the championship. Team members shown include, from left, front row, Sam Hams, Julie Olson, Zandra Berglund, Lacey Richmond, Cyndi Heibel. Back row, Jace Baldwin, Jamie Skrien, Waylon Olson, John Derglund, Nathan Heibel, Tate Promersberger. Not pictured, Troy Promersberger, Darrell Ulrich, Gunnar Anderson, Mason Hanover, Alicia Budris.

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If you would like to be considered in the 2015 budget, you must submit a request in writing to:

**City Administrator
City of International Falls
600 Fourth Street
International Falls, Minnesota 56649**

Requests must be received no later than September 1, 2014 to be considered.

By order of Councilor Cynthia Jaksa
Chairman of Budget and Finance Committee

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