

2006 Playoff Preview Issue

NAFLUstrated

Handed Off!

Weeks 16/17, 2006.....Vol. 1 Issue 3

The Chargers have reportedly reached a deal for Philip Rivers, the embattled QB of the 5-10 team. The team will begin rebuilding once the season ends by trading him for draft picks. His fight with LaDainian Tomlinson got settled by the front office.

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Intra-League Mail



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Season wrap-Up

Team needs for the
offseason

Coaches in **San Francisco** continue to be befuddled by the play of QB **Juan Getson**. He's regressed after a fantastic rookie year. The team will have some financial decisions to make since CB **Chris McAlister**, T **Kwame Harris** and DE **Andre Carter** all stand to pick up huge deals. They can afford all three, but not if they plunge into the market for a big free agent quarterback too. One decision already made is to move safety **Kevin Kaesviham**. He lost his job to **Tony Parrish** earlier in the year and the 49ers are sick of his bickering with McAlister. They also have three unsigned draftees. All three likely end up back in the pool in 2007... **Brian Westbrook's** broken leg has likely ended his career. At least in **Philadelphia**. They won't renew his deal until he proves he can play again which won't be for almost a year. WR's **Dane Looker** and **Terrell Owens** have benefited from playing with each other but that may be ending. Looker took a 5 year, \$15.1 million deal recently while Owens rejected one reported to be \$11 million over 3 years. The Eagles will up the offer, but can't get carried away after re-signing $\frac{3}{4}$ of the secondary and several other potential free agents. T.O. may see the franchise tag. As they run away with the NFC East, the contributors will only have a better case for big money. And **Cortez Hankton** has solidified a previously questionable return game with one punt return TD and a 27+ KR average...

Jaguar DT **Rob Meier** is disrupting the defensive unit with complaints about PT. The coaches have told him to shape up or hit the bricks when his deal expires... **Bengal** DE **Duane Clemons** better be socking away his \$4.2 million salary this year because his production is way down and he won't get near that money after his contract expires... The **Redskins'** defense has been weak all year. They are contemplating a shift to the 4-3 if **Micheal Barrow** retires, but that would still require them to add one more quality tackle. Top candidates might be **Ryan Sims** or **Randy Chevrier** who seems hell-bent on not playing for the Jets. **Mike Rucker** almost certainly won't be brought back since his play against the run has been awful (4.6 yds/carry his direction) and he's only managed two sacks. Along with Rucker, Defensive Coordinator **Melvin Brewer** will get the axe. He knows it and the team has already scheduled interviews with collegiate coaches **Mack Schwirzke** and **Andre Garrett** during their pre-bowl off weeks... **St. Louis** was the first team to clinch a playoff spot and appear to be on their way to a deep postseason run. But they have 10 starters with 10 or more years of experience and only 4 with under 4. The other three NFC West teams probably hope the vets all find it palatable to retire while on top.



Sources inside the **Panther** organization say that only the cap penalty kept under-performing WR **Calvin Rayburn** on the club. If that's true, Rayburn is likely to be cut at season end. With \$80 million spent of the '07 cap, they'll be harsh with any slackers...

When the **Steelers** gave up two firsts, a second and a third round pick for the right to pick **Jessie Dunk**, they knew they would have to be creative in the draft. This may be the biggest test of their creativity as they need to bolster the offensive line, replace **Casey Hampton** and find a running back to take over for **Duce Staley**...



Kansas City has benched guard **Will Shields** and his \$4 million plus salary. No word on whether that means Shields is through in K.C. or if they're just protecting him for next year. Some have said they may be sitting him in an effort to lower his market value and keep him off the free agency radar screen. Regardless, he's taken the demotion in stride and not complained at all...

Buffalo tight end **Mark Campbell** is sniping at QB **Clifton Huffman**, accusing him of playing 'hot potato' with him. Coaches have sided with Huffman by benching Campbell. **Tim Euhus** is the future at tight end there so the Campbell benching won't have long-term effects...

Award Watchlist

MVP

QB Marc Bulger—Rams
RB Travis Henry—Browns
RB DeShaun Foster—Car
QB Jeff Garcia—Cle
QB Donovan McNabb—Phi
QB Ben Roethlisberger—Pitt

Off. Player of the Year

QB Marc Bulger—Rams
RB Travis Henry—Browns
RB DeShaun Foster—Car
QB Donovan McNabb—Phi

Def. Player of the Year

DE Bert Berry—Ari
S Shaun Williams—Giants
LB Brian Urlacher—Bears
DE Richard Seymour—Pats
DE Reggie Hayward—Den
CB Deltha O'Neal—Colts
S John Lynch—Den

Offensive Rookie

RB Stan Finks—Detroit
QB Russell Scanga—Wash

Defensive Rookie

S Quinn Crum—Atlanta
DT Joe Dunn—Arizona

From the Cover:

Word of the Chargers offseason plan has leaked out of San Diego. The Bolts plan to trade Philip Rivers to New Orleans once the season ends. No trades can be officially announced until free agency begins, but the league is said to have been apprised of the deal and blessed it. The details are rumored to be Rivers for first round picks each of the next two years and a second round pick as well. If that's true, San Diego will have two picks in the top 10 of the upcoming draft, as the standings are now. Rivers, put on IR with a knee injury, has feuded with LaDainian Tomlinson and reportedly asked to be traded when new GM Michael Hass took over. The Saints, fed up with Aaron Brooks, will put Rivers' arm to work in the weatherless dome next year.

Guard [Matt O'Dwyer](#)'s future in [Tampa Bay](#) is uncertain to say the least. He's already at three strikes: an extended injury rehab, a contract Tampa won't like and younger players filling in nicely. Not so nicely that the [Cary Bryant](#) experiment at running back had any success however. He's still not comfortable making contact or picking up the blitz. Wideout [Michael Clayton](#), however, has impressed the team with his abilities following his ankle sprain. He was activated Week 12 and caught two nice balls against the Steelers Week 14. Everyone says he's 100% and back to form...

[Dallas](#) is going to have to address their wide receiver issues this offseason. [Drew Henson](#) has thrown 15 INT's through 13 games, but several of those were on tipped balls that should have been caught. [Charlie Weidner](#) has improved but still hasn't shown first-round talent. Odds are that the 'boys won't take the risk on another rookie when guys like [Charger Eric Parker](#) and [Redskin Rod Gardener](#) are rumored to be available. Down the stretch, the Cowboys are cycling RB [Stanley Swain](#) more to keep the impending contract negotiations on good terms. He expected to see more use in the passing game, but has been inactive much of the year. The front office is also putting pressure on [Chester McKenzie](#) to let Def. Coord. [Alvin Roberts](#) go at season end to pursue a coach better with younger players... Sources in [San Diego](#) confirmed the [Philip Rivers](#) deal but [Teddy Duncan](#) might go too, the team's recent surge notwithstanding. Another WR would be nice and the offensive line will get rebuilt around center [Donny Summers](#) since [Toniu Fonoti](#) reportedly wants more than \$5 million next year. With that price, [Tra Thomas](#) going down and [Clyde Malone](#) not developing, they may need two new tackles and two new guards. On defense, they need to replace high-dollar WLB [Armegis Spearman](#) and add a shutdown corner to the secondary while help bewildered MLB [Jerris Yoder](#) get comfortable starting. For such a poor record, the team has some cap problems too. Ouch...

Big Ben Points to Big Things



Ben Roethlisberger has made a leap in his play this year that made his coaches comfortable with the future of the organization being in his hands. Check out his stats through 13 games compared to last year. They won't admit it, but Steeler executives had begun to wonder if the quarterback was ever going to jump up and take charge of the offense.

	Yds/Att.	TD's	Int	Rating
2004	6.50	23	17	79.6
2005 (13 games)	7.13	27	8	94.2

When [Bears'](#) wideout [Bernard Berrian](#) went down in the preseason with a torn MCL, the team knew [Matthew James](#) would have to stand up and play at least as well as he did in 2005. Well, he played worse, though not much worse, and now he's gone down with the same injury. So in steps [Jermaine Lewis](#) who they signed a few weeks after the magnitude of Berrian's injury became clear. Now Lewis has sprained an ankle and journeyman [Charles Lee](#) has the starting job. At this point, no word is forthcoming on acquisitions to come, but both rookies and vets will get a hard look following this triage unit's season...

Amid all the [Drew Brees](#) attention, the fall-off in [Dominic Rhodes'](#) production has gotten lost. His touchdown numbers are fine, but the bruiser has dropped more than 0.25 yards per carry. Defenses may be catching on. And speaking of Brees (and who isn't these days?), his agent rejected a six-year, \$52 million contract extension. He's still got a year left in [Ballimore](#), but the team wants to lock him up before the draft so they can use the picks elsewhere. And speaking of draft picks (it's segue season in the NFL), Raven GM [William "Hawk" Reynolds](#) has quietly put the word out that he'd be willing to part with one of his two first-round choices. Sources say the one to stay will be the one acquired in the [Jonathan Ogden](#) trade. They won't need a new tight end, but [Todd Heap](#) recently got a \$10.6 million deal. With needs on the offensive line and secondary that will need attention the budget is already beginning to shrink. The first-rounder may help bring in a veteran to fill one hole, but there are more...

The mess in [New Orleans](#) regarding defensive linemen is still not resolved despite the extension of [Darwin Walker's](#) contract. Because of injuries at other positions, the team had to release longtime Saint [Darren Howard](#) and rookie [Matt Malone](#) who'd never made the field. With [Will Smith](#) pushing for Walker's spot, the group might only return one starter next season. Def. Coord. [Jeffrey Reynolds](#) is one of many in his position that might be looking for work next year. The defense has improved but not enough to assure him another season. Head Scout [Bo Caldwell](#) might go with him since his supposed strengths haven't met expectations. You can bet that the team will also do whatever they can to support Philip Rivers next year... Sources in the Commissioner's office say that the league will not intervene in the ongoing feud between [Ray Lewis](#) and [Drew Brees](#). The two may get to settle it at the Pro Bowl...



Dolphin Safe?

With the season effectively over, the Miami staff has benched six starters to keep them healthy. But three of the six could play elsewhere next year as they are free agents.

Benched	Starting
LB Zach Thomas (FA)	Marc Fletcher
RB Lee Suggs	Cornelius Sobin
WR David Boston	Marty Booker
K Olindo Mare (FA)	Leonard Torrice
DE Jason Taylor	Corey Smith
S Antuan Edwards (FA)	Doug Evans

With [Jeff Garcia](#) and [Ross Verba](#) both getting contract extension within the last month, the looming free agency of guard [Kelvin Garmon](#) has [Brown](#) watchers wondering if the franchise tag might not be reserved from him. The team won't confirm it, but he's by far the biggest player left to re-sign, but Garmon won't take it easily. Now that doctors have ruled receiver [Andre Davis](#) has a degenerative hip condition that may end his career, word has leaked out of Cleveland that the team had pushing to extend Davis' contract just days before the injury was discovered. He's been so vital that the team won't say for sure that he can't come back despite knowing he'll be out up to two years. Watch for Defensive Coordinator [Juan Delgado](#) to tinker with the defense throughout the playoffs. He loosened the coverage for the [Carolina](#) game and red zone defense improved, but [Baltimore](#) got 2 TD's inside the 20... The [49ers](#) are the most penalized team in the league by almost 100 yards. That's entirely out of character for a [Brad Morris](#) team... [Arizona](#) defensive end [Bert Berry](#) is a leading candidate for Defensive Player of the Year. He's having a great year, but coaches say he actually had a better year in 2004 when he was knocking down more passes and focusing less on the run... Sources inside the [Bengals'](#) front office bristled at our prediction of Head Coach [Sam Siddiqui's](#) pending demise. They've been publicly supporting him all week. GM [Rob Lee](#) will, however, seek offers on [Carson Palmer](#) again this year. It's happened before, but they might have a market price for the talented QB now that [Philip Rivers](#) has been dealt. They need help on defense and they'd get plenty for Palmer... [Carolina](#) has given [Jake Delhomme](#) his last shot. His poor performance last week cemented [Patrick Ramsey](#) as their starter for the Week 17 showdown for the division and any playoffs that might follow. If they lose, look for them to dump a ton of their \$80 million cap for next year and look to the future. It's too much to spend on an underperforming club.

Rumors out of [Jacksonville](#) say that GM [General Mike](#) may contact the league office to file a complaint about dirty play - literally. He contends that the bout of illness that the [Titans](#) suffered through found its way on to the playing field. Mike accuses some Titans of actually vomiting on the field resulting in the season-ending injury to WR [Reggie Williams](#). He also managed to extend the contracts of DT [John Henderson](#) and WR [Ernest Wilford](#) which were huge obstacles in their 2007 plans. Additionally, TE [Todd Yoder](#) and MLB [Tommie Hendricks](#) will be back next year...



Five single-game records have been set this year: Pass Attempts - 61 ([Juan Getson](#), [San Francisco](#)), Rushing attempts - ([Chris Brown](#), [Tennessee](#)), Receptions - 15 ([Terrell Owens](#), [Philadelphia](#)), Interceptions - 4 ([John Lynch](#), [Denver](#)), and Sacks - 4.5 ([Kevin Williams](#), [Minnesota](#))... [Viking](#) RB [James Stewart](#) will be no cap penalty for being released next year. He's lost so much power, they'll take advantage of that.



First of all: St. Louis only lost one game at home this year and they get to play there as much as they want. Their run defense is wholly underrated and have exactly 100 more points than the next closest NFC team. They won't get beaten on a fluke.

The obvious favorite: St. Louis - A great offense and a good run defense plus home field advantage and experience.

The field: (2) - Philadelphia - not having Westbrook really hurts but they can still pass and rack up the points. (3) Green Bay - don't bet against Brett. (4) Carolina - It's Patrick Ramsey here on out. DeShaun Foster is a game changer. (5) Detroit - the Lions run and stop the run well. That's ideal for the playoffs. (6) Dallas - Without Henson it's bleak, but they too can run and play D.

The long shot worth watching: This could finally be Brett Favre's farewell tour. He's had 17 fantastic years in the league and has a solid heir in Green Bay. With one of the best pass defenses and least penalized teams in the league, they could make a run if Favre gets hot and they play for revenge against the Eagles in Round 2.

And that means?: They've been there before and the Rams will make the title game again this year. Several other teams could take a shot at the Rams, but Philadelphia looks most likely. The two are tops in the NFC in turnover margin and near the bottom in passing yards allowed. Could be a barn-burner. We've got no guts. St. Louis 40-30 over the Eagles.



First of all: Despite New England's standout record, this conference is extremely tight. The Browns are the most balanced team in the entire league and everyone in the AFC beat up on each other so much that the records obscure the depth. Denver looked unstoppable early and is top notch. One through six, they all can play.

The obvious favorite: New England - a passing team with a good enough defense to win it all and the best regular season record in the AFC.

The field: (2) Cleveland - solid on both sides of the ball and a great coach. (3) Indianapolis - could have Marvin Harrison back but a decent run D overshadowed by a porous pass defense. (4) Denver - game-changing rushers, good pass rush and Jake Plummer in a contract year. (5) New York - legitimate offensive threats with playoff experience. (6) Houston - a decent defense and big-play offense for a shoot-out.

The long shot worth watching: Defense wins championships but you've got to get there first. New York was there last year and the Pennington/Lewis combination is terrifying for the one-at-out. The Jets won 8 of their last 9 and momentum matters in the playoffs. They'd have to do it on the road, but they could.

And that means?: The Browns ground the Jets in ugly Ohio weather. 16-10 Cleveland.