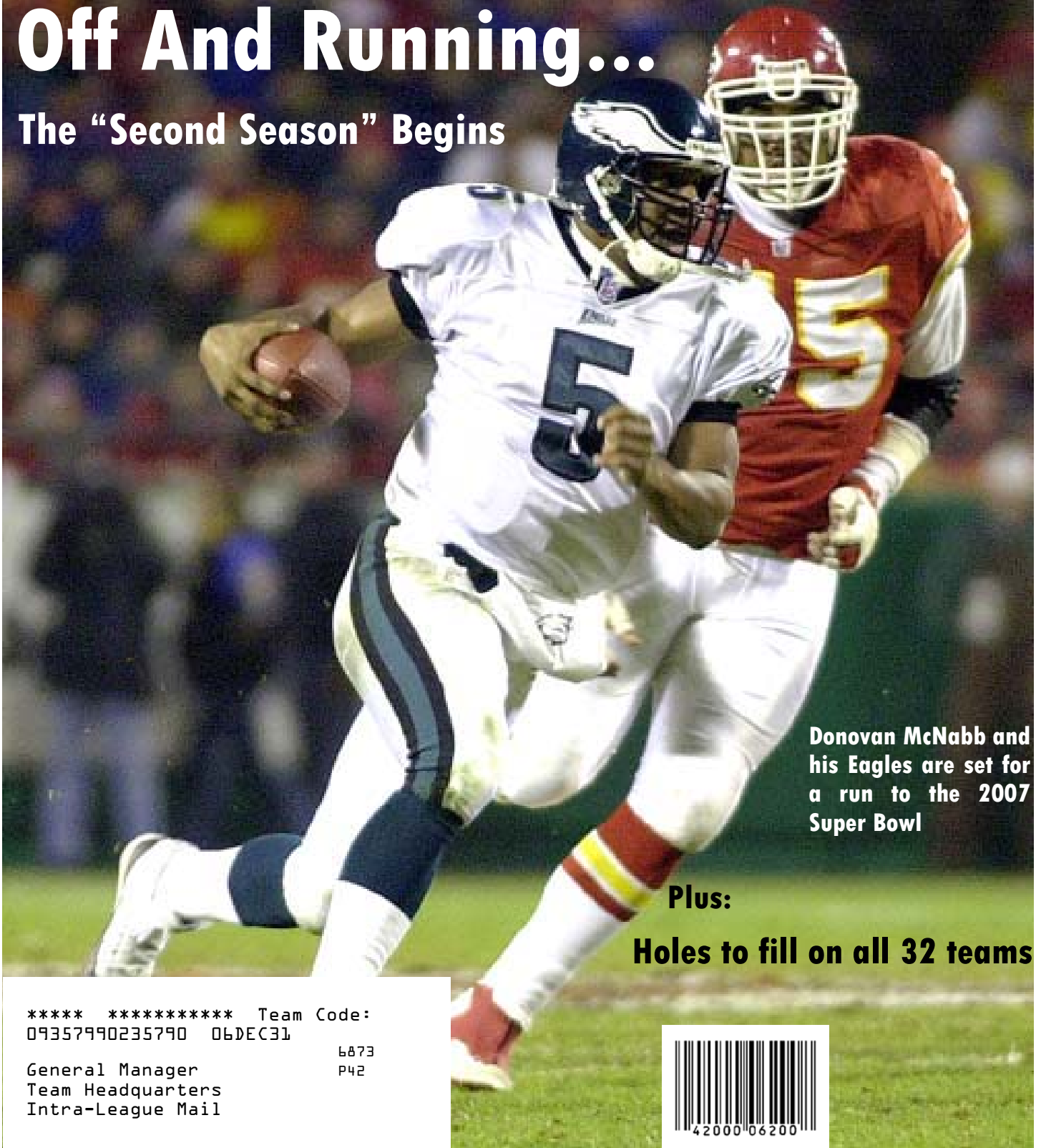


NAFIustrated

Off And Running...

The "Second Season" Begins



Donovan McNabb and his Eagles are set for a run to the 2007 Super Bowl

Plus:

Holes to fill on all 32 teams

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Contents:

Editorial.....	2
Season wrap-up.....	2
Team needs (AFC).....	3
Team needs (NFC).....	4

In the Next Issue:
Super Bowl Review
Big name free agents

Getting ready...

When the Dallas vs. Green Bay game starts off the playoff schedule this Saturday, it will mark the start of an interesting series of contests. This year's bracket include several units that saw action last postseason including three of the four bye teams. Both Super Bowl teams from last year are in this year and last year's champs, the Jets, start in the Wild Card round again this year.



Each of the squads new this year (Dallas, Detroit, Houston and Cleveland) have at least one major contributor injured and out. Denver and Green Bay look to be

relatively healthy, but both have the extra game while others that are banged up have a week to get healthy.

The NFC looks to have the hot hand as three teams enter the playoffs with three-game win streaks (St. Louis, Dallas and Green Bay), although New England has the only four-game streak. We're not sure who will win, but we're darn sure to be watching.



The Race for the Ring

from the Editors

The playoffs get under way this weekend which means that six cities hold hope of reaching the pinnacle of modern sport - the Super Bowl. Every year there are subplots and side stories and personalities and backgrounds that color the playoffs themselves. But the action between the white lines eventually wipes away the journalistic whitewash to reveal pure athletic gamesmanship and passionate desire to win.

Professional football is not a sport like others where a hot streak can carry a team to a title. This isn't the baseball playoffs where a team can lose three in a row and still move on. This is six teams that must win every single game or they go home. Most aren't even allowed a bad quarter.

Before the four games this weekend kick off, each team will convince itself that it has the talent, coaching, plan and confidence to win. And they are right. We will read stories comparing the legendary career of Brett Favre with the unfortunate misery of Dallas' quarterback, Drew Henson. Columnists will remind us endlessly about Detroit's inevitable downfall because of their indoor home field. We'll be told with scorn about the Denver offensive line that collectively refuses to speak to the media. And the league itself will advertise its All-American good boy Peyton Manning 24 hours a day on television while nail-tough Andre Johnson gets nary a mention from the image-conscious marketers.

But all these miss what brings football fans back to the sport in ever-increasing numbers. This is not a sport about personalities or stadiums or even stars. This is a sport, played by men, where all 11 men on the field do their job or they fail. Once the helmets go on, we forget about rap sheets and pedigrees and childhood neighborhoods. All that matters is the 60 minutes of feverish action on the field. This is not a struggle between media empires or storylines or tabloid fodder.

This is the race for the ring.



The **BENGALS** will have a pretty focused strategy this offseason. GM Rob Lee has to upgrade the defensive unit and will use free agency, the draft and the ever-more-interesting option of trading Carson Palmer. It would take a lot to pry Palmer out of Cincinnati, but Lee will still listen... The **BUCCANEERS** wanted a solid finish to the season for all the obvious reasons but they also want to entice LB Donnie Edwards to reconsider retirement. His agent has hinted he may just do that. Edwards likes the linebacking corp and benefits from Derrick Brooks freelancing within the system while Wesley Eichelz holds down the middle. Less excited about returning is DE Dwayne White who's agent recently said that the team and he were "miles apart" on contract terms. Tampa will use the tag if nothing develops.... **REDSKIN** personnel have begun working the phones to feel out interest in Jon Ogden, John Jansen, Cornelius Griffin and Edge Hartwell. This in addition to previous talks regarding **Rod Gardner**. No word on specifics, but it looks like major rebuilding time in the capital... The **49ER** special team unit will get a thorough review before next year. Specifically punter Andy Lee who just finished his third year in a row with an average below 40 yards...



League analysts have surveyed the needs of most of the teams in the league and determined that free agent and coaching salaries look to be increasing sharply this year since so many teams are looking for the same thing. The analysts all say that the focus on a few positions will likely result in bargains at others...

NORTH

Chicago Bears - CB, G, TE

The Tillman injury could devastate the Bears and they need to address it now. Up front, the offense needs blockers at guard and tight end.

Detroit Lions - WR, DE, CB

A whole batch of receivers are leaving Detroit and Stan Finks can run, but the passing game didn't help him. On defense, they could add a pass rusher for sure, but one good corner would help the batch of average ones.

Green Bay Packers - T, DE, WR

Bryant Flowers is fine behind Favre but he's a shorter passer than ol' #4. They'll need a group of possession receivers to complement that. A tackle upgrade will help add youth to the line too. Add a blind side rusher and they just reload.

Minnesota Vikings - RB, WR, CB

Daunte Culpepper will be more effective with a viable running threat behind him and Santana Moss could stand to use a threat opposite him. They'll start bolstering the defense by upgrading the secondary.

EAST

Dallas Cowboys - CB, WR, DE

The Cowboys can't assume that Drew Henson will ever be back but Tommy Maddox is worth a shot. They'll add something new at the corner spot while adding a playmaker at wideout and more pressure on the edges.

New York Giants - CB, OLB, QB

If you assume that Eli Manning is the answer, you only need a backup for him. But the defense needs some serious attention. Both corners could be upgraded, the linebackers need improvement and left ends combined for 3.5 sacks.

Philadelphia Eagles - RB, CB, WR

Obviously Brian Westbrook needs to be replaced and their line could be better. On defense, the nickel spot has been an issue for years. With the overall strength, adding to a position like wideout now will help later.

Washington Redskins - DE, G, CB

You hope Clinton Portis is able to return at full strength but he might not. Either way, the running game needs more talent at receiver and a upgrade to the interior of the aging line. If Mike Rucker doesn't come back that's a big hole to fill and the corners aren't great either.

SOUTH

Atlanta Falcons - CB, G, DE

The bulk of this roster is just too average. The batch of rookie WR's has to grow up quickly or there will be changes. The guard position is too weak to use TJ Duckett properly. The right corner is weak, the D-line needs an overhaul and the LB opposite Brooking should be better.

Carolina Panthers - WR, CB, DE

Patrick Ramsey may or may not be the answer, but the team has decided Jake Delhomme is not. Whomever starts, they'll need a big-play target opposite Steve Smith and protection at right tackle. The middle-of-the-road defense needs a corner or two and some line help.

New Orleans Saints - DE, T, WR

Well things are looking up with Philip Rivers on the way. A good pass rush will put this team on another level. If they can protect him and add another Joe Horn type, this is a dynasty in the making.

Tampa Bay Buccaneers - DE, T, LB

An heir to Simeon Rice has to be found pronto and a cornerstone tackle would help with the young QB. Of late Tampa has been known for its play at linebacker but the crop is a little less bountiful right now. One solid player would change the makeup of that unit incredibly.

WEST

Arizona Cardinals - G, C, CB

The Cardinals were near the bottom of the league in rushing but it's not because of Ferocious Fenner. The line needs a better push from the interior. After that, both corners need answers besides the young backups. They aren't starter material.

St. Louis Rams - CB, NT, FB

The Rams have nibbled around the cornerback position for a few years but now is the time to find a future there. They have the wins to prove they don't need starters now. A nose tackle is needed for stability. Then they should find a better blocking fullback.

San Francisco 49ers - LB, G, CB

There is young talent by the Bay and they are bringing it along. If they throw in the towel on Kolker then address the injuries at guard, this team will be well over .500 next year.

Seattle Seahawks - CB, DT, QB

The Seahawks were worst in the league in passing yards allowed and they have to improve. A corner opposite Trufant would work wonders and so would a new tackle next to Marcus Tubbs. After that, they should settle the quarterback position for the future.

NORTH

Baltimore Ravens - RB, OLB, G

This team did not run the ball well this year. Dominic Rhodes is probably a #2 back because of his inability to make the first man miss. If they are willing to pay Drew Brees \$85 million, they can pay a real #1 to help the offense. The line also needs attention but there is raw talent there. The defense might benefit from a shift back to the 4-3 since they're deep at tackle and less so at linebacker.

Cincinnati Bengals - LT, C, CB

Rich Braham will be a big loss if he can't be replaced since they were last in the league in rushing offense. A lot of that was because of the focus on the pass, but they need a left tackle to anchor the line and to add some beef to the interior.

Cleveland Browns - OLB, SS, WR

Jeff Garcia could use a wideout with big, soft hands. Andre Davis and Dennis Northcutt are good receivers, but Davis is the only sure-handed guy in the unit. The secondary has to find a replacement for Robert Griffith and one more aide to Ray Lewis.

Pittsburgh Steelers - DT, RT, DE

Duce Staley is starting to fade a little and a more receiver-oriented tight end would be a nice complement. Right tackle and guard also need attention. The biggest hole will be the loss of Casey Hampton and the rest of the defensive line. Kelly Malcolm looks like the only pass rusher there.

EAST

Buffalo Bills - DE, CB, T

The Bills couldn't do much against the run this past year. They've put two tackles in place that might grow into anchors there for a while, but the ends need help. In the secondary, there's no depth at corner and that hurt the defense as a whole.

Miami Dolphins - G, T, RB

Louie Fariori? Maybe. Lee Suggs? Nope. The existing line? No way. They can rebuild around the solid linebackers and secondary on defense but the offense is the anchor on their ship coming in.

New England Patriots - CB, T, FB

There's a need for another corner and some stronger tackles. If they can settle the fullback position the offense is full at the skill positions. The cap might be a challenge for the already powerful Pats.

New York Jets - OLB, WR, G

It was the pass defense, not the run defense that kept them from winning more games. Brant Winters better get good quickly or they'll need a replacement. They'll need another guard going forward and one serious deep threat at wideout.

SOUTH

Houston Texans - TE, WR, OLB

Give David Carr two more weapons and they'll set records. Tight end and receiver need the most. The defense lacks a dominant run stopper at linebacker.

Indianapolis Colts - NT, ILB, CB

The offense has plenty of talent and they'll give the D some attention this year. Up the middle, the nose guard needs a legitimate starter and the Rob Morris needs a mate at linebacker. Add a corner and they're set.

Jacksonville Jaguars - DE, WR, G

One wonders about Reggie Williams' injury and the receiver position's impact on Leftwich. The defensive tackles are one of the best duos in the league but the ends could be better. They also need a replacement for Vince Manuwai.

Tennessee Titans - CB, T, DE

If Andre Dyson isn't going to be re-sign, the Titans would be wise to try to replace him. There is a new tackle corp afoot in Tennessee since the group of 2006 was so old. After that, one good DE could replace two or three of the group there now.

WEST

Denver Broncos - TE, CB, T

They'd certainly love to have a real threat at tight end in Denver, but depth is really the only concern.

Kansas City Chiefs - QB, G, WR

Neal Regalado isn't the future in KC and whomever is under center needs another threat at wideout to complement Dante Hall. Guard is a problem considering Will Shields' status and the lack of depth following him into the system.

Oakland Raiders - QB, RB, ILB

Oakland's problem this year was turnovers. They had more than any other team in the league. Fargas fumbled more than anyone else and Matt Talley looks to be color-blind. They fix that, they fix their future.

San Diego Chargers - QB, CB, LT

The Charger pass defense was plain bad and they botched the cornerback position last year. Twice. If Eric Parker really leaves town, that will need attention too. Most important, though, will be a replacement for Philip Rivers.

Little Billy Cundiff made a big splash in **DALLAS** this year by saving an inept red zone offense. He'll want the cash for it soon. So will Kennedy Hendon who has seen his reps decrease since Deion Houston came to town. Don't think they're shaking in their Cowboy boots. Houston is one of several members of a heralded draft class that hasn't performed. Cris Ladner got all kinds of hype but is really an average back. The middle rounds provided role players and not much else... **EAGLE** DT Donald Chelius followed up a Rookie of the Year season last year with more sacks, more tackles, more hurries and more assists. He fits in well with a group of solid pass rushers... **BALTIMORE** coaches have taken up the 'no name' mantra regarding their defense. They faded late, but were decent against the run collect 33 sacks as a unit. There's plenty of youth to build around and they will... **COLT** wide receiver **Brandon Stokley** quietly racked up 1,133 yards this year. That's a great year, but not even a career high for the vet out of Louisiana-Lafayette. The 17.9 yards per catch was though...



If the playoffs end up with the **PATRIOTS** and **RAMS** like people think, it will be a matchup of two very even QB's. Marc Bulger and Tom Brady are separated by less than 50 pass attempts in their entire career. Their yards per attempt are essentially the same, Brady has only 10 more TD's and the sack count is 84-82 Bulger. The only real difference is Bulger's completion percentage, 64.2 vs. 58.8 by Brady.