



Tom Brady defied Father Time when he steered Tampa Bay to victory over the Kansas City Chiefs in Super Bowl LV. Can the Lord of the Rings win once again?

FOOTBALL'S BIGGEST SEASON

THE 2021 NFL SEASON WILL BE THE LONGEST IN HISTORY, WHICH MEANS MORE GRIDIRON ACTION THAN EVER BEFORE

BY DANNY SHERIDAN

It's a season like no other. The National Football League, America's pastime, decided that it was finally time for a 17-game season, a notion the television moguls quickly endorsed. But questions abound: Can the ageless Tom Brady lead his Tampa Bay Buccaneers to repeat as Super Bowl champions? And will stadiums be filled with fans once again?

KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES



Quarterback Josh Allen, running against the New England Patriots last November, had a huge 2020 for the Buffalo Bills.

AFC EAST

DIVISION WINNER ▶ Buffalo Bills

It was a relatively quiet offseason for the Bills, an ascending team led by quarterback Josh Allen, who had a monster 2020 (4,544 yards, 37 passing TDs). They drafted Gregory Rousseau in the first round and then doubled down on the defensive line by taking Carlos “Boogie” Basham Jr. with their next pick. General manager Brandon Beane also concentrated on boosting the ailing ground game (20th in the league) to take the pressure off Allen with the free-agent acquisition of running back Matt Breida, who may not be the answer behind Devin Singletary. Stefon Diggs (127 catches for 1,535 yards) has terrific chemistry with Allen. The Bills Mafia can’t wait to cheer their defending AFC East Champs.

2 ▶ New England Patriots

The Patriots were one of the least-talented offensive teams in the league last year, missing the playoffs for the first time since the 2008 season. Bill Belichick swiftly and urgently rebuilt, spending \$159 million over nine days in free agency and drafting a quarterback—Alabama’s Mac Jones—in the first round for the first time in 28 years. Belichick sees another Brady in Jones, who will take over at some point for Cam Newton. Free agents Jonnu Smith, Hunter Henry, Nelson Agholor and Kendrick Bourne add offense, and the defense has been upgraded with pass rusher Matthew Judon and former Belichick favorite Kyle Van Noy.

3 ▶ Miami Dolphins

Ballyhooed Tua Tagovailoa (1,814 yards passing, with 11 TDs) didn’t exactly prove he’s the Dolphins’ quarterback of the future. In 10 games, he had trouble throwing deep, mostly to DeVante Parker (63 receptions, 793 yards) and Mike Gesicki (703 yards). Wideouts Jaylen Waddle, drafted sixth overall, and burner Will Fuller will help. Myles Gaskin did most of the running (584 yards) but the Fins expect more. Brian Flores, Miami’s seventh head coach since 2007, begins his third season. He’s looking for the franchise’s first playoff win since a 2000 wild card triumph over the Colts. At least Joe’s Stone Crab remains undefeated.

4 ▶ New York Jets

Adam Gase was fired and in came Robert Saleh, a defensive guru from San Francisco. After ditching Sam Darnold to start over behind center, general manager Joe Douglas took BYU’s dynamic Zach Wilson with the second overall pick of the draft, then traded up to grab stud guard Alijah Vera-Tucker from USC. Elijah Moore, a projected first-rounder with explosive speed and tremendous route running, fell to them with the 34th pick. Wilson will have weapons with Corey Davis, Denzel Mims and veteran slot receiver Jamison Crowder, who agreed to a massive pay cut to stay. Wilson can pick up his tab at Elio’s and Mark’s Off Madison. Losing free agent pass rusher Carl Lawson (to a torn Achilles) was a devastating blow, but the return of linebacker C.J. Mosley, following his 2020 opt out, will only help.

TIMOTHY T. LUDWIG/GETTY IMAGES

AFC NORTH

DIVISION WINNER ▶ Cleveland Browns

With a strong finish, the Browns went from third in the division in 2019 to title contenders in 2020 behind a breakout season (3,563 yards, 26 passing TDs) from Baker Mayfield, a UFO believer on a franchise that had the fan base wondering for a long time whether there were any signs of intelligent life in Cleveland. Nick Chubb (1,067 yards, 12 TDs) and Kareem Hunt (841 yards) provide an elite ground game. Signing Jadeveon Clowney as a bookend for beastly Myles Garrett will make life miserable for opposing teams. A healthy Odell Beckham Jr. opposite Jarvis Landry would give impressive second-year head coach Kevin Stefanski a legitimate shot to take the franchise to its first Super Bowl.

2 ▶ Baltimore Ravens

Lamar Jackson was a dual-threat weapon who passed for 2,757 yards, ran for 1,005, and had 33 TDs (26 passing, seven rushing). Receivers Marquise Brown, Sammy Watkins and first-round draft pick Rashod Bateman give him an impressive receiving corps. J.K. Dobbins (805 yards) and Gus Edwards (723 yards) supply the ground and pound. Good luck throwing on corners Marlon Humphrey and Marcus Peters.

3 ▶ Pittsburgh Steelers

The Steelers’ smashmouth brand of football was missing as they opened 11-0 only to slump to a 12-4 finish. Ben Roethlisberger (3,803 yards, 33 TDs) is 39. He has weapons in Diontae Johnson, JuJu Smith-Schuster, and Chase Claypool, who caught nine TDs as a rookie. Coach Mike Tomlin, who has never had a losing season in Pittsburgh, got a three-year extension, and with it, first-round pick Najee Harris to replace James Conner at running back. T.J. Watt (15 sacks) is a defensive player of the year candidate, worthy of dining on the Capone at Primanti Bros.—a sandwich of the year candidate.

4 ▶ Cincinnati Bengals

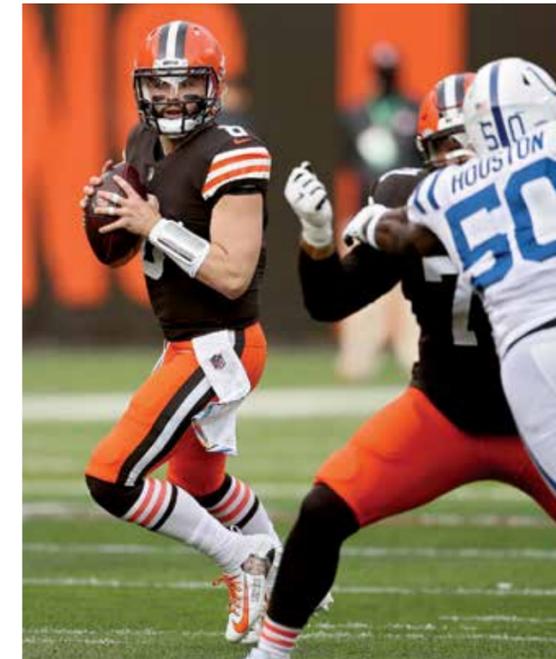
Rookie quarterback Joe Burrow (expecting a full recovery from major knee surgery) had a promising beginning for Bengal fans, throwing for 2,688 yards and 13 TDs in just 10 games. The offense was one-dimensional as running back Joe Mixon (who went down with a foot injury) appeared in only six games. Ja’Marr Chase, who played with Burrow at LSU, gives him an explosive target to join Tee Higgins (908 yards) and Tyler Boyd (841 yards). Can the O line keep Burrow upright? Defensive end Trey Hendrickson received a \$60 million free-agent deal to rush the passer.

GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES

AFC SOUTH

DIVISION WINNER ▶ Indianapolis Colts

Football is a game of inches, except in Indy, where it’s a game of feet. Following the retirement of Philip Rivers, Indy traded for Carson Wentz, who (along with guard Quenton Nelson) underwent foot surgery in training camp with a 5-12 week timetable. Jacob Eason, who didn’t throw a regular-season pass in 2020, was next on the depth chart. At least veteran receiver T.Y. Hilton returns, and Jonathan Taylor is a rising running star. Indy upgraded its pass rush on a hungry defense.



Star quarterback Baker Mayfield has brought new hope to the Cleveland Browns, seen here in 2020 taking on the Indianapolis Colts on his home turf at FirstEnergy Stadium in Ohio.

2 ▶ Tennessee Titans

The Titans lost tight end Jonnu Smith and receiver Corey Davis but landed star receiver Julio Jones in a blockbuster trade. The defense is a concern: Tennessee was the only team to allow opponents to convert more than 50 percent of their third downs. Adding Bud Dupree in free agency will help the pass rush. Ryan Tannehill (3,819 yards, 40 total TDs) will enjoy throwing to Jones and A.J. Brown (1,075 yards, 11 TDs). Running back Derrick Henry is the Terminator with his 2,027 yards and 17 TDs. Losing offensive coordinator Arthur Smith to Atlanta is big. It’s up to Todd Downing to replace him.

3 ▶ Jacksonville Jaguars

Jacksonville is looking more like Clemson. First the team took quarterback Trevor Lawrence (a school-record 34 wins) with the first overall pick of the draft, then

they selected Travis Etienne, a dynamic running back. He joins James Robinson, a surprise standout with 1,070 rushing yards. This is the work of new coach Urban Meyer, the former scandal-plagued Florida and Ohio State coach who was fined \$100,000 for violating non-contact rules during OTAs. Giving 33-year-old dreamer Tim Tebow, his champion quarterback once upon a time in Florida, a short-lived shot was a Hail Mary attempt to boost his image or sell merchandise. Urban renewal could turn to Bourbon renewal for beleaguered Jaguars fans.

4 ▶ Houston Texans

Houston, we have more than one problem. After multiple civil allegations for sexual misconduct filed against quarterback Deshaun Watson, he demanded to be traded, which shocked the franchise. Tyrod Taylor is the uninspiring alternative. With no more Will Fuller, wideout Brandin Cooks (81 catches, 1,150 yards) will need help from rookie Nico Collins. It’s time for a massive rebuild. The new coaching staff has an uphill challenge.

AFC WEST

DIVISION WINNER ▶ **Kansas City Chiefs**

After being exposed like paper-mache against Tampa Bay in the Super Bowl, the Chiefs had one goal during the offseason: improve the offensive line. They did so in a big way, adding tackle Orlando Brown Jr. and guard Joe Thuney. Superstar quarterback Patrick Mahomes turned the NFL upside down in 2020, throwing for 4,740 yards and 38 touchdowns, and has set a personal goal of going 20-0 this season. His biggest target was tight end Travis Kelce (1,416 yards), and speed merchant wide receiver Tyreek Hill terrifies defenses. Andy Reid is a Hall of Fame coach.

2 ▶ **L.A. Chargers**

There is no telling how good Justin Herbert (who threw for 4,336 yards and 31 TDs) could be with more protection. He has a potential All-Pro wideout in Keenan Allen (992 yards), but after losing tight end Hunter Henry to free agency he will need more targets to build on his breakout rookie season. Rashawn Slater, who the Chargers took with their first pick, will help protect him, and cornerback Asante Samuel Jr. of Florida State will love playing behind Joey Bosa. New coach Brandon Staley welcomes back impact safety Derwin James.

3 ▶ **Denver Broncos**

It's amazing that John Elway's Broncos have not found a quality starting quarterback. Drew Lock (2,933 yards, 16 passing TDs and 15 picks) faces a make-or-break year—if he can hold off Teddy Bridgewater. Denver is loaded with playmakers in Melvin Gordon (986 rushing yards), Jerry Jeudy (856 yards receiving), Courtland Sutton, K.J. Hamler and Noah Fant. Patrick Surtain II, drafted ninth overall, should start at cornerback and benefit playing behind Von Miller, Bradley Chubb and Malik Reed.

4 ▶ **Las Vegas Raiders**

It's been nearly 20 years since the Raiders won a playoff game. They have the worst secondary in the league and coach Jon Gruden (the Raiders' seventh in the last 10 years) is in a state of mini-rebuild. At least they have a solid man behind center in Derek Carr (who passed for 4,103 yards and 27 TDs) and a solid backfield tandem in Josh Jacobs (1,065 yards, 12 TDs) and Kenyan Drake. Gruden needs speed receiver Henry Ruggs III to blossom. Defensive end Yannick Ngakoue will juice the pass rush. Al Davis' mantra of Just Win, Baby seems long gone.

NFC EAST

DIVISION WINNER ▶ **Dallas Cowboys**

Dak Prescott is returning after a compound ankle fracture that took him down in game five last season, and his fill-in Andy Dalton is off to Chicago. Prescott has weapons in Ezekiel Elliott (979 yards) who is determined to solve his fumbling issues, wide receiver Amari Cooper (92 catches, 1,114 yards) and 2020 17th overall pick CeeDee Lamb. Head coach Mike McCarthy needs a healthy Tyron Smith to feel good about his offensive line. Micah Parsons, who comes to Dallas via Penn State, should start at linebacker and upgrade a suspect defense.

2 ▶ **New York Giants**

General manager Dave Gettleman is on the hot seat with a “win-now” edict from co-owner John Mara. Daniel Jones (11 passing TDs, 10 INTs) needs to improve. Saquon Barkley will return from injury, and the Giants spent \$111 million for big target receiver Kenny Golladay and cornerback Adoree' Jackson to pair with James Bradberry. Drafting Kadarius Toney in the first round gives Jones a nice group of targets, but the key will be whether the young offensive line grows up. If they don't start winning, Giants fans will be pleading with Jeff Bezos to take Gettleman into space.

3 ▶ **Philadelphia Eagles**

Nick Sirianni replaces Doug Pederson, who won the team's lone Super Bowl, and Carson Wentz is also gone, and with him the Eagles' chances of making the playoffs. It's up to Jalen Hurts (1,061 yards) to

fill the void. Miles Sanders (867 yards) is aiming for 1,000 rushing yards, which the Eagles haven't had since LeSean McCoy back in 2014. Heisman winner DeVonta Smith, drafted from Alabama with Philly's first pick, can spark the offense and try to quiet the boobirds, but Santa better remember his earplugs, just in case.

4 ▶ **Washington Football Team**

D.C. dropped the ball by not drafting a high-end quarterback like Justin Fields or Mac Jones. Alex Smith chose to retire, which left the passing offense to bust Dwayne Haskins Jr., who is now with the Steelers. Terry McLaurin was the action guy at wide receiver, with 87 catches, 1,118 yards and four touchdowns. The coaches are excited about Curtis Samuel and second-year dual-threat back Antonio Gibson. Ryan Fitzpatrick, who turns 39 in November, has produced magic wherever he has played in his itinerant career, and will start at quarterback. If Washington wins, it will be on the strength of a formidable defense.



High flying Giants phenomenon Saquon Barkley should return to the field this season, but his exploits won't be enough for New York to win without improvement from the offensive line.

NFC NORTH

DIVISION WINNER ► Green Bay Packers

MVP Aaron Rodgers (4,299 yards and 48 passing TDs) ended the biggest question of the summer and will stay a Packer, but he's likely to be an ex-Packer in 2022 if he still feels unappreciated by the organization. Jordan Love, Green Bay's No. 1 pick in 2020, is the heir obvious. There is still a roster of talent left, namely receiver Davante Adams (1,374 yards, 18 TDs), running back Aaron Jones (1,104 yards) and linebacker Za'Darius Smith (12.5 sacks). Rodgers, still melting the hearts of cheeseheads at 37, keeps his team in the Super Bowl conversation.

2 ► Minnesota Vikings

The Vikings aren't far off from being a contender, and Kirk Cousins is a big reason why. The quarterback had one of his best years ever in 2020, passing for 4,265 yards and 35 TDs. There's also a couple of 1,000-yard producers in Dalvin Cook (1,557 yards, 16 TDs), and Justin Jefferson (1,400 yards as a rookie). Mike Zimmer tightened up his defense and added two class-A draft picks on offense, Kellen Mond from Texas A&M, and Christian Darrisaw from Virginia Tech.

3 ► Chicago Bears

The toothless Bears finally got themselves a quarterback by trading up in the first round for Ohio State's Justin Fields, who has more upside than Mitch Trubisky (now with Buffalo) ever had. It's only a matter of time before Fields starts over Nick Foles, who could be traded, and Andy Dalton, last with Dallas. The top playmakers are wideout Allen Robinson (1,250 yards, 102 receptions) and running back David Montgomery (1,070 yards). Khalil Mack (nine sacks) is Papa Bear on defense.

4 ► Detroit Lions

The docile Lions need a total rebuild under new coach Dan Campbell. They traded All-Pro Matthew Stafford, who took his 4,084 yards and 26 TDs to the Rams. D'Andre Swift's talented young legs and Jamaal Williams will replace ageless Adrian Peterson (604 yards) behind an offensive line bolstered by Penei Sewell, taken with the seventh overall pick. "The Lions not drafting a QB is a nice vote of confidence for me," said new starting quarterback Jared Goff. Let's see how much confidence he has in Tyrell Williams and Breshad Perriman. T.J. Hockenson at tight end should be his go-to guy. Feel sorry for new defensive coordinator Aaron Glenn, who inherits the league's worst defense.

NFC SOUTH

DIVISION WINNER ► Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Winning the Super Bowl is hard, but repeating is far harder. The last one to do it is, of course, Tom Brady, who meant so much in his first season with the Bucs (4,633 yards, 40 passing touchdowns). His favorite receiver was Mike Evans (70 catches, 1,006 yards, 13 TDs), who has seven consecutive 1,000-yard seasons. Rob Gronkowski must be sampling TB12's Chunky Guacamole because Gronk can still come through in the clutch. Inside linebacker Devin White is a star. Bruce Arians is the first Super Bowl-winning head coach to see all 22 starters return.

2 ► New Orleans Saints

There may not be much celebrating on Bourbon Street since Drew Brees retired. The Saints are still dangerous but can Taysom Hill (928 yards) or Jameis Winston fill the void? Alvin Kamara will need to be Superman again among running backs, with his 932 yards rushing, 756 yards receiving, and 21 combined TDs. Latavius Murray is a quality backup. Coach Sean Payton does wonders with quarterbacks. Notre Dame's Ian Book may surprise. Michael Thomas (zero TDs in 2020) needs to rebound following an injury-ravaged season and multiple surgeries, especially now that Emmanuel Sanders (726 yards) is in Buffalo. The offensive line is stout, and defensive end Cameron Jordan and linebacker Demario Davis are as dependable as the Shrimp Clemenceau at Galatoire's.

3 ► Carolina Panthers

Sam Darnold, once a No. 1 Jets pick, replaces Teddy Bridgewater at QB, who passed for 3,733 yards and ran for 279 more. He was trying to make up for the 13-game loss of running back Christian McCaffrey, who is healthy again following injuries. Darnold inherits two 1,000-yard receivers, D.J. Moore and Robby Anderson. Drafting cornerback Jaycee Horn (eighth overall) and receiver Terrace Marshall Jr. to replace Curtis Samuel should help Matt Rhule's rebuilding program.

4 ► Atlanta Falcons

The Falcons haven't been the same since they blew a 28-3 lead in Super Bowl LI. Matt Ryan is still capable at 36, but he won't have Julio Jones to throw to anymore, and he was sacked 41 times. Calvin Ridley helped all he could (90 receptions, 1,374 yards) and Mike Davis replaces Todd Gurley at running back. Atlanta's No. 1 pick, tight end Kyle Pitts, will be a hot commodity in fantasy drafts. Incoming coach Arthur Smith has his hands full.



Star Packers running back Aaron Jones at the center of an L.A. Rams sandwich, thanks to Jalen Ramsey, Jordan Fuller and Troy Reeder, during the 2020 NFC Divisional Playoff at Green Bay.

NFC WEST

DIVISION WINNER ▶ Los Angeles Rams

The Rams paid up to get star quarterback Matthew Stafford, trading Jared Goff and giving up draft picks in 2021, 2022 and 2023. Stafford immediately improves the offense. He will connect with wideouts Cooper Kupp (974 yards, 92 receptions) and Robert Woods. L.A. is looking like a complete team: Coach Sean McVay is one of the NFL's most innovative coaches, and Aaron Donald and Jalen Ramsey are elite difference-makers on defense.

2 ▶ San Francisco 49ers

Ok, who will be the 49ers' starting quarterback? Jimmy Garoppolo is being pushed by third overall draft pick Trey Lance, who threw only one interception in his career at North Dakota State. He has tremendous upside as a dual threat, but is raw. He has the right coach to develop him in Kyle Shanahan. Raheem Mostert is explosive at running back (when healthy) and tight end George Kittle and wide receivers Deebo Samuel and Brandon Aiyuk are a quality trio. Nick Bosa is a double-digit sacker at defensive end and Fred Warner is a tackling machine.

3 ▶ Seattle Seahawks

Russell Wilson is still among the best quarterbacks around. He sloughed off 47 sacks and threw for 4,212 yards and 40 touchdowns. DK Metcalf (1,303 yards) and Tyler Lockett (1,054 yards) are double trouble receivers for opposing defenses. Bobby Wagner at middle linebacker and strong safety Jamal Adams keep offensive coordinators up at night.

4 ▶ Arizona Cardinals

Kyler Murray (3,971 yards, 26 TDs) could have been the first quarterback drafted by Arizona to take the Cardinals to the post-season since Jake "The Snake" Plummer in 1998, but he just missed. His favorite wideout was DeAndre Hopkins (115 receptions, 1,407 yards), who will be joined by former Bengals veteran A.J. Green. Coach Kliff Kingsbury is hoping that Chase Edmonds and James Conner can replace Kenyan Drake at running back (955 rushing yards) as quickly as J. Lo replaced A-Rod with Ben Affleck. Adding veteran defender J.J. Watt has to make defensive coordinator Vance Joseph happy.

SHERIDAN'S PLAYOFF PREDICTION



SUPER BOWL LVI CHIEFS DEFEAT BUCS 35-21

Andy Reid and Patrick Mahomes have waited a year for another shot at Tom Brady. The 44-year-old finally begins to show some slippage in the lead-up to the big game, while Mahomes, protected much better by his rebuilt offensive line, goes into Super Bowl Sunday with extra motivation when his Chiefs fail to complete the perfect year he had publicly targeted in the offseason. The sea

of red-clad Chiefs fans at SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles go crazy as Mahomes throws multiple TD passes, and runs one in for good measure. The defense makes Brady look his age with red-zone interceptions. There's no eighth ring for Brady, but a second ring for Mahomes and Reid. ❖

Danny Sheridan appears frequently in newspapers and on TV.