

Previewing the National Football conference By PAUL VIGNA

NFC South

NFC West

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NEW ORLEANS SAINTS	CAROLINA PANTHERS	TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS	ATLANTA FALCONS	SEATTLE SEAHAWKS	ARIZONA CARDINALS	ST. LOUIS RAMS	SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS	COACH
Sean Payton	John Fox	Jon Gruden	Mike Smith	Mike Holmgren	Ken Whisenhunt	Scott Linehan	Mike Nolan	A YEAR AGO
7-9	7-9	9-7	4-12	10-6	8-8	3-13	5-11	LAST 5 YEARS
36-44	44-36	36-44	35-45	51-29	28-52	37-43	25-55	ADDED
LB Jonathan Vilma, CB Randall Gay, TE Jeremy Shockey, QB Mark Brunell	WR D.J. Hackett, WR Muhsin Muhammad, T Jeff Ota, QB Josh McCown	C Jeff Faine, RB Warrick Dunn, QB Brian Griese	RB Michael Turner, K Jason Elam, QB Matt Ryan	RB Julius Jones, G Mike Wahle	DE Travis LaBoy	K Josh Brown, DE Chris Long, QB Trent Green	WR Isaac Bruce, RB DeShaun Foster, WR Bryant Johnson, LB Takeo Spikes	LOST
C Jeff Faine	RB DeShaun Foster, DE Mike Rucker, WR Keary Colbert, NT Kris Jenkins	RB Michael Pittman, QB Chris Simms, T Luke Petitgout	TE Alge Crumpler, CB DeAngelo Hall, WR Chris Simms, WR Joe Horn	K Josh Brown, RB Shaun Alexander, WR D.J. Hackett	WR Bryant Johnson	WR Isaac Bruce, K Jeff Wilkins, QB Gus Frerotte	DE Bryant Young, RB Maurice Hicks, QB Trent Dilfer	BYE WEEK
9	9	10	7	4	7	5	9	MOST DIFFICULT STRETCH
Dec. 11 (at Bears), Dec. 21 (at Lions), Dec. 28 (Panthers). While the Saints will play three straight home games in October, they'll also travel to London to play at the end of that month.	Dec. 14 (Broncos), Dec. 21 (at Giants), Dec. 28 (at Saints). As tough is a start that includes road games at San Diego and Minnesota the first 3 weeks.	Oct. 19 (Seahawks), Oct. 26 (at Cowboys), Nov. 2 (at Chiefs). Bucs finish with two at home.	Dec. 7 (at Saints), Dec. 14 (Buccaneers), Dec. 21 (at Vikings). Atlanta exits from its bye with games at Philly and Oakland.	Oct. 5 (at Giants), Oct. 12 (Packers), Oct. 19 (at Buccaneers). The NFL team that travels the most opens at Buffalo.	Nov. 16 (at Seahawks), Nov. 23 (Giants), Nov. 27 (at Eagles). The finale is no picnic either, with New England away (Dec. 21) and Seattle at home (Dec. 28).	Oct. 12 (at Redskins), Oct. 19 (Cowboys), Oct. 26 (at Patriots). They play five 2007 playoffs teams in their first seven games.	Sept. 28 (at Saints), Oct. 5 (Patriots), Oct. 12 (Eagles). Surprised they even have one prime-time game, Nov. 10, at the Cardinals.	SCHEDULE STRENGTH
115-141 (T-27th)	119-137 (T-21st)	120-136 (20th)	118-138 (24th)	122-134 (19th)	119-137 (T-21st)	125-131 (17th)	124-132 (18th)	AIR MILES
23,956 (8th)	17,310 (15th)	15,754 (22nd)	16,330 (20th)	34,766 (1st)	26,073 (6th)	18,340 (13th)	31,530 (4th)	KEY 2007 NUMBER
2 TDs, 48 catches for TE Eric Johnson in what was a soft spot for the Saints.	2.5 sacks for DE Julius Peppers, an embarrassing number for a guy so talented.	4 INTs in 327 passes for QB Jeff Garcia. He gets older, but hasn't lost his touch. Yet.	355.5 yards allowed per game, ranking the Falcons 29th overall defensively.	45 sacks, fourth-best in the league, led by Patrick Kerney's 14.	9 misses in 30 field goals for K Neil Rackers.	8 losses to begin last season. This season likely won't be much better.	32nd rank in total offense, passing offense and scoring. They scored only 13.7 points per game.	WHAT'S TO CHEER, WHAT'S TO BOO
Gotta like the upside, with the Saints adding Shockey to the offense and Drew Brees — returning as one of the league's best QBs — tossing to Marques Colston. The defense has been upgraded.	Assuming WR Steve Smith stops fighting with his own guys, he's a small target who's a load for any defense to handle. The offense, ranked 29th, figures to get better. Right. Right??!!	They were second in the league in total defense and first against the pass. That unit remains intact. And the offense, with Garcia throwing to Joey Galloway and handing the ball to Earnest Graham, can play keepaway.	Atlanta fans can cheer the cutting ability of RB Michael Turner and the maturation of rookie QB Matt Ryan. The record won't be better, but the vibrations should be.	Matt Hasselback has evolved into one of the game's elite quarterbacks and, as A.J. Feeley found out last year, the Seattle defense (20 INTs last year) can cover like few others. But the schedule is a grind.	There are stars on this roster like DE Darnell Dockett (nine sacks in '07) and WR Larry Fitzgerald (100 catches and 10 TDs last year). But, among other things, they've got to get better on the road (2-6 in '07)	Will Witherspoon, who led the team last year with 110 tackles and seven sacks, returns. So that's good. So is a healthy RB Steven Jackson. But someone needs to stay healthy enough to block.	RB Frank Gore is solid but coming off a disappointing year. LB Patrick Willis led the league in tackles (174) in his rookie year. But they remain a wreck at quarterback, where Alex Smith is completely lost.	
11-5	9-7	8-8	3-13	10-6	8-8	6-10	5-11	