NFL GAME SCOUT -- By The Sports Xchange **Week 1 Analysis on each game** **Who will win and why**

Thursday, September 6, 2018

THURSDAY NIGHT RESULTS

Philadelphia Eagles 18, Atlanta Falcons 12

SUNDAY GAMES

MONDAY GAMES

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BUFFALO BILLS (0-0) AT BALTIMORE RAVENS (0-0)

GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: 1:00 PM ET, M&T Bank Stadium; NBC, Kevin Harlan, Rich Gannon, Steve Tasker (Field reporter).

SERIES HISTORY: 8th regular-season meeting. Ravens lead series, 4-3. This is the second time in three years the Bills are opening a season in Baltimore. In 2016, Buffalo dropped a 13-7 decision to the Ravens as the Bills' offense managed just 11 first downs and 160 yards. LeSean McCoy, one of the few offensive players still with Buffalo, had 58 yards rushing.

KEYS TO THE GAME: The Bills will be facing a Baltimore defense that ranked in the top 12 in points allowed, total yards allowed, rushing yards, passing yards and first downs, plus intercepted a league-best 22 passes. It's a difficult test for a team that is expected to struggle moving the ball this season, especially early in the year. RB LeSean McCoy will be the focal point of the Buffalo attack, and if the Bills can't establish their running game and then get into difficult down-and-distance situations, Nathan Peterman will be asked to shoulder a burden he may not be ready to carry.

   On defense, the Bills will be confronted with a Baltimore offense that could be vastly improved in 2018, especially if Joe Flacco can regain the form he showed a few years ago. He has three shiny new weapons in WRs John Brown, Michael Crabtree and Willie Snead IV, and while the Buffalo secondary is above average, this group could present some problems.
The Ravens will officially unveil their revamped passing game. Quarterback Joe Flacco took more shots downfield this preseason than any other time in his career. Baltimore added John Brown, Willie Snead IV and Michael Crabtree via free agency and the trio should help boost a passing attack that was ranked 29th in the league last season. They will test the Bills early and often.

   New defensive coordinator Don Martindale likes to attack, so the Ravens will be aggressive on defense. The linebackers will put constant pressure on Bills quarterback Nathan Peterman.

 MATCHUPS TO WATCH:

   --Bills OTs vs. Ravens LB Terrell Suggs. Suggs may be 35-years-old, but he registered 11 sacks and four forced fumbles last season, and he remains a difficult pass rusher to contain. RT Jordan Mills and LT Dion Dawkins, depending on which side Suggs lines up, will have to keep him off Nathan Peterman, and it won't be easy because the Bills' receivers have not shown an ability to get separation, and their routes typically take longer to develop.

   --Bills RB LeSean McCoy vs. Ravens MLB C.J. Mosley. McCoy is going to be an integral part of the game plan, not only as a runner but as a receiver. Given the Bills' offensive line woes, offensive coordinator Brian Daboll will have to utilize a short passing game to avoid the inevitable pressure Peterman will face, and McCoy coming out of the backfield will be a big part of that plan. Mosley, who made 132 tackles and earned his fourth Pro Bowl invitation last year, may find himself in constant contact with McCoy.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookie to watch - Buffalo defensive tackle Harrison Phillips. The third-round draft pick out of Stanford was considered a steal by many draft gurus at that point in the process, and he has fit perfectly into head coach Sean McDermott's defense. He was already going to be a fixture in the tackle rotation, but with veteran Kyle Williams sidelined by a knee injury and possibly out for the opener, Phillips will get the start next to Star Lotulelei. The 300-pounder is a ferocious, high-energy player who should help a run defense that ranked 29th in the NFL last season.

FAST FACTS: QB Nathan Peterman will make 3rd career start. Had TD pass & 100.8 rating in last start (12/10/17 vs. Ind.). ... RB LeSean McCoy ranked 4th in NFL with 1,138 rush yards & 1,586 scrimmage yards last season, his 8th consecutive season with 1,000+ scrimmage yards.... WR Kelvin Benjamin had rec. TD in only career game vs. Bal. (9/28/14 with Car.). ... TE Charles Clay had 49 receptions & led team with 558 rec. yards last season. S Jordan Poyer set career highs in tackles (95), INTs (5) & sacks (2) in 2017. Was only NFL player with 90+ tackles (95) & 5+ INTs (5) last season. Poyer & S Micah Hyde (5) were only pair of teammates with 5+ INTs each last season. Hyde had sack & FF in only career game vs. Bal. (10/13/13 with GB). CB Tre'Davious White tied for NFL rookie lead with 18 PD & tied for 2nd with 4 INTs last season. ... RAVENS led NFL with +17 turnover differential last season. ... QB Joe Flacco has 4 TDs vs. 0 INTs for 105.5 rating in 2 career home meetings.. ... RB Alex Collins set career highs in rush yards (973), scrimmage yards (1,160) & rush TDs (6) last season. Had 6 rush TDs in final 7 games of 2017. RB Javorius Allen set career highs in rush yards (591) & catches (46) in 2017. ... WR Michael Crabtree makes Bal. debut. Had 58 receptions for 618 yards & 8 TDs with Oak. last season.. ... LB Terrell Suggs led team with 11 sacks last season, his 7th season with 10+ sacks. Ranks 2nd among active players with 125.5 career sacks. Has 6 sacks in 6 career meetings. ... LB C.J. Mosley ranked 5th in AFC with 132 tackles in 2017, his 3rd career season with 100+ tackles. Is 1 of 2 NFL players (Luke Kuechly) with 450+ tackles (469), 5+ sacks (8) & 5+ INTs (8) since entering league in 2014.

PREDICTION: The Bills spent cutdown weekend trading quarterback AJ McCarron to Oakland and naming Nathan Peterman the starter. Going on the road to play the Ravens is not a great spot for an untested passer. The Baltimore defense remains formidable, while the offense looks as potentially good as it's been in years.

   OUR PICK: Ravens, 24-10.

PITTSBURGH STEELERS (0-0) AT CLEVELAND BROWNS (0-0)
GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: 1:00 PM ET, FirstEnergy Stadium; CBS, Kevin Harlan, Rich Gannon, Steve Tasker (Field reporter).

SERIES HISTORY: 131st regular-season meeting. Steelers lead series, 72-58. Steelers have won six consecutive and 10 of 11 overall since 2012. Steelers last lost to the Browns in Cleveland in 2014. The Steelers and Browns have met twice in the playoffs, with the Steelers winning both matchups in 1994 and 2002.

KEYS TO THE GAME: The Steelers want to score early and put the pressure on new Browns quarterback Tyrod Taylor, who is taking over an offense that finished dead last in the NFL in scoring last season, averaging just 14.6 points per game. Look for the Steelers to come out passing. Ben Roethlisberger had a strong training camp and has All-Pro receiver Antonio Brown and JuJu Smith-Schuster at his disposal. However, Le'Veon Bell, the All-Pro running back, hadn't reported as of Wednesday, and his teammates expressed their displeasure. If Bell isn't available, james Conner will get the start.
   Todd Haley, now the Browns offensive coordinator, had the same job with the Steelers the last six years. He'll know where to attack the Pittsburgh defense, but the Steelers will also know his tendencies, so that's a wash. Haley will use a balanced attack and could feature running back Duke Johnson Jr., who led the Browns with 74 catches last year, if the Steelers pay too much attention to wide receiver Jarvis Landry. The Cleveland defense is aggressive under the guidance of coordinator Gregg Williams, and if Bell doesn't play, the plan will be to key on the passing game.

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:
   --Browns CB Denzel Ward vs. Steelers WR Antonio Brown. The Browns used the fourth pick in the draft on Ward because they need a shutdown corner. He has been excellent in man-to-man coverage, but he will have his hands full with one of the best receivers in the league.
   --Steelers LT Alejandro Villanueva vs. Browns DE Myles Garrett, who registered seven sacks in 11 games as a rookie last season. Garrett got one sack against the Steelers in the regular-season finale, but the Steelers were resting many of their starters in that game. Villanueva is coming off his first Pro Bowl season and has been effective in pass protection since earning the starting job midway through the 2015 season.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookies to watch - Steelers safety Terrell Edmunds. The No. 28 overall pick in the draft flashed his potential during training camp and the preseason games, and the Steelers plan to use him in their sub-packages early in the season. He has been so good that he might force his way into the starting lineup sooner rather than later.
   Browns running back Nick Chubb. First overall pick Baker Mayfield would be the logical choice for this if he were starting, but the plan is to sit him behind Tyrod Taylor. Chubb was a "run the defender over" ball carrier in college, but he proved to be more than that against preseason opponents. He can bounce to the outside and turn the corner quickly. He will have to share the ball with Carlos Hyde, but should still be the Browns' most productive rookie.

FAST FACTS: STEELERS won AFC North for 2nd straight season in 2017. ... QB Ben Roethlisberger passed for 4,251 yards & 28 TDs in 2017, his franchise-record 5th 4,000-yard season. Ranks 8th in NFL history in pass yards (51,065) & 9th in pass TDs (329). Has 21-2 record in 23 career starts vs. Cle. ... WR Antonio Brown led NFL with 1,533 rec. yards & ranked 5th with 101 catches in 2017. Has 100+ receptions in 5 consecutive seasons, longest streak in NFL history. Has 582 receptions & 7,848 rec. yards since 2013, both most by player in any 5-year span in NFL history. WR JuJu Smith-Schuster led all rookies with 917 rec. yards & 7 TD catches last season. Had 9 catches for 143 yards with TD catch & 96-yard KR-TD in last meeting. ... DT Cameron Heyward led team with career-high 12 sacks last season. Has sack in 6 of his past 7 vs. Cle. LB T.J. WATT has 3 sacks & INT in past 2 meetings. Last season, became 1st player with 2+ sacks & INT in NFL debut on KO Weekend since 1982. ... S Sean Davis was 1 of 2 safeties (Jordan Poyer) with 90+ tackles (90) & 3+ INTs (3) in 2017. ... LB Vince Williams was only player in NFL with 80+ tackles (88) & 8+ sacks (8) last season. ... BROWNS QB Tyrod Taylor passed for 2,799 yards with 14 TDs vs. 4 INTs for Buf. last season. Since 2015, ranks 2nd among QBs in rush yards (1,575) & rush TDs (14). Has lowest career INT pct. (1.4 pct.) in NFL history among QBs with 1,250 career att. ... RB Carlos Hyde makes Cle. debut. Had career-high 1,288 scrimmage yards & 8 rush TDs with SF in 2017. ... RB Duke Johnson Jr. led team with 74 catches & 693 rec. yards last season. Since 2015, leads all RBs with 188 receptions & 1,741 rec. yards. Had rush TD in last meeting. ... WR Jarvis Landry led NFL with 112 receptions with Mia. in 2017. Has 400 catches since entering NFL in 2014, most by player in 1st 4 seasons in NFL history. Is only player in NFL history with 80+ catches in each of his 1st 4 seasons. ... WR Josh Gordon has 434 rec. yards (144.7 per game) & TD catch in his past 3 vs. Pit. ... DE Myles Garrett tied for 2nd among rookies with 7 sacks in 2017. Had sack & FF in only career meeting. ... LB Joe Schobert (142 tackles) & LB Christian Kirksey (138) were only pair of NFL teammates with 125+ tackles each last year.

PREDICTION: It's hard to imagine that Bell would be effective even if he does play. The Browns are hoping to being a new era after winning once the last two seasons. Even with the misery, they have played the Browns. Would an upset shock the NFL world?

OUR PICK: Browns, 21-17.

CINCINNATI BENGALS (0-0) AT INDIANAPOLIS COLTS (0-0)
GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: Sunday, 1:00 PM ET, Lucas Oil Stadium; TV CBS, Andrew Catalon, James Lofton

SERIES HISTORY: 29th regular-season meeting. Colts lead series, 17-11. Bengals won last year's meeting 24-23 in Week 8 and have won three of the last four meetings after losing the previous seven. Bengals have lost the last seven meetings in Indianapolis since 1997.

KEYS TO THE GAME: Cincinnati will face a different defensive formation this time around. When Cincinnati posted a 24-23 win in Week 8, it faced a hybrid 3-4 defense. This time around, the Colts will present a 4-3 Tampa-2 scheme, which could pose problems for developing the desired mix between the run and the pass, especially if the revamped offensive line falters. The Bengals will also be facing Andrew Luck this time around as opposed to Jacoby Brissett, whom they sacked four times.

   The Colts would like to avoid just trading scores with the Bengals, but it might come down to who has the ball last. That is, if the Colts can get some defensive stops. Ball possession is key for the home team. The Colts must win time of possession to keep its young, bend-but-don't-break defense rested and off the field as much as possible. But to secure that advantage, the Colts' offense has to do more than just rely on Andrew Luck to throw the ball. If the run game is inconsistent, look for an array of short passes to backs out of the backfield to get shifty, young players out in space. The offensive blueprint advertised with Frank Reich's arrival was predicated on quick-hit plays. The Colts will need a lot of them to have a chance on Sunday.

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:
   --Bengals LDE Carlos Dunlap, who has 64.5 sacks in eight seasons, vs. whomever the Colts start at right tackle. Seriously, the Colts might handle this by committee because nobody really emerged in preseason. This much is certain, Dunlap can wreck a game. Lest anyone forget, he decided last year's meeting in Cincinnati with a 16-yard TD interception return. And he's eager to provide dividends after being rewarded with a three-year, $45 million contract extension last week.
   --Colts WR T.Y. Hilton, one of the NFL's elite deep threats with a career 15.8-yard average per catch, vs. Bengals CB William Jackson, a former first-round pick who is looking to become a full-time starter for the first time. Hilton is a four-time Pro Bowl star with 34 career TDs in six seasons, but his numbers dropped without Luck. He'll be looking to reassert himself against a young cornerback who has been touted as one of the league's most promising shutdown cover guys.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookies to watch -   Center Billy Price. Cincinnati used its first-round pick on Price and all indications are that Price is ready to step in after some issues with snap counts early in preseason.
   Guard Quenton Nelson. Draft experts suggested the Notre Dame star was one of the best guards in years, and Nelson will prove them prophetic. He's every bit as nasty as advertised, blocking until the whistle. His testy nature drew the ire of defenders not just in camp but in preseason games, where he delivered pancake blocks. Although he's excellent at just driving a defender back with brute strength, he's also particularly effective on the move as a pulling guard. By the time this season has ended, Nelson will be regarded as the finest offensive-line addition since left tackle Tarik Glenn was drafted in the first round in 1997.

FAST FACTS: BENGALS won 3 of past 4 on Kickoff Weekend. ... QB Andy Dalton passed for 3,320 yards in 2017 & joined Peyton Manning & Cam Newton as only QBs to pass for 3,000+ yards in each of their 1st 7 seasons. Has 6 TDs vs. 0 INTs for 97.5 rating in 4 career meetings. ... RB Joe Mixon had 913 scrimmage yards (626 rush, 287 rec.) in 2017, 5th-most among rookie RBs. ... RB Giovani Bernard was 1 of 5 AFC RBs with 450+ rush yards (458) & 350+ rec. yards (389) last season. ... WR A.J. Green led team with 75 catches for 1,078 yards & 8 TDs last season, his 6th career season with 1,000+ rec. yards. Became 1st player in NFL history to record 950+ rec. yards in each of his 1st 7 seasons, surpassing HOFer randy moss (6). Aims for 4th in row vs. Ind. with TD catch. TE Tyler Kroft ranked 3rd among AFC TEs with 7 TD catches last season. ... DT Geno Atkins led team with 9 sacks last season. Since 2010, leads NFL DTs with 61 sacks. ... DE Carlos Dunlap had 7.5 sacks in 2017, his 5th consecutive season with 7+ sacks. Has 1.5 sacks, INT-TD, FR, FF & 2 PD in past 2 meetings. ... LB Carl Lawson led NFL rookies with 8.5 sacks in 2017, tied for 2nd-most by rookie in franchise history. ... COLTS Frank Reich makes NFL head coaching debut. ... QB Andrew Luck passed for 4,240 yards with 31 TDs vs. 13 INTs for 96.4 rating in 2016. Has passed for 670 yards (335 per game) with 6 TDs vs. 0 INTs for 109.6 rating in 2 career meetings. . RB Marlon Mack had 583 scrimmage yards (358 rush, 225 rec.) & 4 TDs (3 rush, 1 rec.) last season. ... Rookie RB Nyheim Hines was selected in 4th round of 2018 NFL Draft. Recorded 3rd-most career all-purpose yards (4,638) in NC State history. ... WR T.Y. Hilton had 57 receptions for team-high 966 yards & 4 TDs in 2017. Is 1 of 4 WRs (Antonio Brown, A.J. Green & Demaryius Thomas) with 900+ rec. yards in each of past 5 seasons. ... TE Jack Doyle ranked 2nd among NFL TEs with career-high 80 receptions last season & joined Dallas Clark (100 in 2009) as only TEs in franchise history with 80+ catches in single season. ... DE Jabaal Sheard had team leading 5.5 sacks in 2017. Has 5+ sacks in 6 of 7 career seasons. ... S MALIK HOOKER tied for 4th among rookies with 3 INTs in 2017 & became 1st rookie in team history to record INT in 3 consecutive games (Weeks 2-4) since 1984. ... K Adam Vinatieri ranks 2nd in NFL history with 2,487 points scored & needs 58 points to pass HOFer Morten Andersen (2,544) as NFL's all-time leading scorer.

PREDICTION: The Colts welcome quarterback Andrew Luck back after a long absence, but the question is how he will play in the crucible of the regular season. The Bengals hope to spoil the comeback.

OUR PICK: Bengals, 28-16.

TENNESSEE TITANS (0-0) AT MIAMI DOLPHINS (0-0)
GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: 1:00 PM ET, Hard Rock Stadium, TV; FOX, Sam Rosen, Cris Carter, Sarah Kustok (Field reporter)

SERIES HISTORY: 37th regular-season meeting. Dolphins lead series, 20-16. In 36 previous meetings, each team has scored exactly 692 points against the other. The Titans have lost twice to Miami in the last three previous meetings. They lost embarrassingly, 38-10, in a home game that helped spell the end of Ken Whisenhunt as head coach. They lost last year in Miami, 16-10, losing on what appeared to be a blown call on a fumble return for a TD that somehow withstood replay.

KEYS TO THE GAME: The Titans' offense is a bit of a mystery in that they revealed very little in the way of what they will do to attack opponents. The preseason was even more vanilla than teams usually show in exhibition games. The Titans want to build around quarterback Marcus Mariota's skill set and eventually the offense will revolve around him. But in the beginning, establishing the run with Derrick Henry and Dion Lewis might be what carries them offensively. Defensively, Tennessee will want to pressure Dolphins quarterback Ryan Tannehill from different angles and provide different looks to try and confuse him.

   Miami beat the Titans 16-10 last year, but Mariota was out due to a hamstring injury. With Mariota now available, Miami must contain the fourth-year NFL passer. Mariota is working with a new offensive coordinator this year in Matt LaFleur, who has promised a more aggressive attack. Look for the Titans to use more empty backfields, trying to make defenders play in space and allowing Mariota the pass-run option.

   When the Dolphins have the ball, Tannehill has to stay ahead of the sticks by employing his running game and converting on short passes. Tennessee is very good on pass defense, signing former New England Patriots Super Bowl hero Malcolm Butler to start at cornerback. Safety Kevin Byard grabbed eight interceptions last year, earning Pro Bowl honors. And the Titans also have two dangerous pass rushers in outside linebackers Brian Orakpo (7.0 sacks) and Derrick Morgan (7.5 sacks).

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:
   --Dolphins DE Cameron Wake vs. Titans RT Dennis Kelly, who is playing instead of Jack Conklin, just activated from PUP. Conklin tore his ACL at the end of last season in a playoff loss to the New England Patriots, but is not ready to play yet. Wake, despite being toward the end of his career, is a load and had 10.5 sacks last year while earning his fifth trip to the Pro Bowl. Kelly could be in for a long afternoon.
   --Titans CB Malcolm Butler vs. Dolphins WR Kenny Stills. Butler will be playing in his first game since the Super Bowl debacle when he was with the Patriots. No doubt he wants to do well for his new team, and it probably helps that he will be facing a former division opponent in the Dolphins, whose offense will feature Stills probably even more with Jarvis Landry gone to Cleveland.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookies to watch - Titans linebacker Harold Landry. Before suffering a high ankle sprain against Pittsburgh in preseason, Landry was showing the type of "bend" and pass rushing skills that had the Titans believing they had a draft-day steal when they traded up in the second round to take him. Landry should be back soon, even if he misses the first week or two of the season, and the Titans are hopeful that he can continue to build on what he did in preseason.

   Tight end Mike Gesicki, Miami's second-round pick out of Penn State, looks like a weapon in the red zone. He has good hands and also has the size (6-foot-5, 250) to block out defenders.

FAST FACTS: TITANS advanced to postseason for 1st time since 2008 last season. ... QB Marcus Mariota had career-high 5 rush TDs last season. Passed for 3 TDs & had rush TD in his last game vs. Mia (10/9/16). ... RB Derrick Henry had 744 rush yards & 5 TDs in 2017. Ranked 2nd in NFL with 390 rush yards in 4th Q. ... RB Dion Lewis set career highs in scrimmage yards (1,110), rush yards (896) & rush TDs (6) with NE in 2017. Has 344 scrimmage yards (86 per game) in his past 4 vs. Mia. ... TE Delanie Walker tied for 3rd among NFL TEs with 74 receptions & ranked 4th with 807 rec. yards last season. Since 2014, is 1 of 3 TEs (Rob Gronkowski & Travis Kelce) with 3,000+ rec. yards (3,585) & 20+ TD catches (20). ... WR Rishard Matthews had 8 TD catches for Mia. From 2012-15. ... WR Corey Davis ranked 3rd among AFC rookie WRs with 375 rec. yards in 2017. ... S Kevin Byard tied for league lead with career-high 8 INTs & led all safeties with 16 PD last season. ... DT Jurrell Casey had 6 sacks in 2017, his 5th consecutive season with 5+ sacks. Has 3 sacks in past 2 meetings. ... LB Brian Orakpo has 3 sacks in his past 3 vs. Mia. ... CB Malcolm Butler makes Ten. debut. Since 2015, is 1 of 8 in NFL with 40+ PD (44) & 8+ INTs (8). ... LB Wesley Woodyard was 1 of 2 players (Demario Davis) with 120+ tackles (121) & 5+ sacks (5) in 2017. ... DOLPHINS QB Ryan Tannehill passed for 2,995 yards & 19 TDs for 93.5 rating in 2016. Ranks 3rd in franchise history in pass TDs (106), pass yards (18,455) & comp. (1,653). ... RB Frank Gore had 1,206 scrimmage yards & 4 TDs (3 rush, 1 rec.) with Ind. in 2017, his NFL-record 12th consecutive season with 1,200+ scrimmage yards. Ranks 5th in NFL history with 14,026 career rush yards. Has 782 scrimmage yards (97.8 per game) & 7 TDs (6 rush, 1 rec.) in 8 career games vs. Ten. ... RB Kenyan Drake had 594 scrimmage yards (118.8 per game) in final 5 games of 2017. ... WR Kenny Stills tied for 4th in NFL with 4 TD catches of 20+ yards in 2017. Ranks 3rd among active players with 16.1 yards per catch average (min. 200 receptions). ... WR Danny Amendola makes Mia. debut. Had 61 catches for 659 yards & 2 TDs with NE in 2017. ... Rookie TE Mike Gesicki was selected in 2nd round of 2018 NFL Draft. Led Penn State with 57 catches in 2017. ... DE Cameron Wake led team with 10.5 sacks last season, his 5th career season with 10+ sacks. Has 92 career sacks, 3rd-most among active players. ... DE Robert Quinn had 8.5 sacks with Rams in 2017. Since 2013, leads NFL with 19 FFs. ... S Reshad Jones led all safeties with 122 tackles in 2017. Had 2 FRs, incl. 38-yard FR-TD, in last meeting. LB KIKO ALONSO had 7 tackles & FF in last meeting. Has 100+ tackles in 3 of 4 career seasons. ... Rookie S Minkah Fitzpatrick had 9 INTs in 3 seasons with Alabama.

PREDICTION: A new head coach for the Titans adds intrigue to this matchup, coupled with the return of Dolphins quarterback Ryan Tannehill. Tennessee's defense will tip the balance.

OUR PICK: Titans, 23-217

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS (0-0) AT MINNESOTA VIKINGS (0-0)

GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: 1:00 PM ET, U.S. Bank Stadium, TV; FOX, Kevin Burkhardt, Charles Davis, Pam Oliver (Field reporter).

SERIES HISTORY: 42nd regular-season meeting. Vikings lead series, 21-19-1. San Francisco won the last meeting between these two teams with a 20-3 win in the regular-season opener in 2015. Mike Zimmer's second season was opening with promise before the surprise loss on the road to the 49ers. Minnesota might hold the advantage in the regular season, but it hasn't gone well in the postseason. The Vikings have lost four of the five playoff matchups between the two teams, including most recently after the 1997 season.

KEYS TO THE GAME: There should be few surprises in Week 1. While Vikings quarterback Kirk Cousins came out passing in the third preseason game - a stunning 28 pass attempts in one half of action - the regular-season opener will likely see the offense go back to its run-heavy approach. Minnesota has Dalvin Cook healthy and Latavius Murray probably will see more action in the early going as Cousins and Cook get more comfortable. The first-team offensive line will not have played together when it convenes against San Francisco, so quick passing and a reliance on the running game should be the order of the day against the 49ers.

Defensively, Minnesota will likely look to pressure 49ers quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo as much as possible. They can't let him get comfortable as he looks to an unheralded, largely unproven group of receivers. San Francisco has speedster Marquise Goodwin and veteran Pierre Garcon at receiver, along with rookie Dante Pettis, a second-round pick out of Washington. George Kittle and Garrett Celek are the tight ends. Losing Jerick McKinnon is a blow and the Vikings were second in the NFL in run defense last year, giving up 83.6 yards per game. Alfred Morris and Matt Breida aren't likely to find much running room.

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:

--Vikings DE Everson Griffen vs. 49ers LT Joe Staley. Staley has been one of the league's best left tackles, being named to the Pro Bowl after six of the last seven seasons. He'll have his hands full with Griffen, who had 13 sacks last season and can pressure with speed or power. Staley will try and protect Garoppolo's blind side against Griffen, who has 43.5 sacks the past four seasons. Staley is a technician and it will be a fun matchup on Sunday with two of the best at their positions.

--49ers CB Richard Sherman vs. the receiver San Francisco decides to line him up against. Sherman is looking to prove he's not past his prime after a torn Achilles ended his 2017 season and he was released by Seattle. San Francisco can let Sherman handle one side or shadow a receiver, but who would they select, Stefon Diggs or Adam Thielen? Diggs and Thielen will both be outside in the base offense, with Thielen likely moving inside to the slot in three-receiver sets with Laquon Treadwell outside. Diggs and Thielen have the speed and quickness to test Sherman.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookies to watch - Vikings cornerback Mike Hughes. If everything goes to plan for Minnesota, there are only two possible answers for the team's top rookie. Hughes, the first-round pick (No. 30 overall), has proven to be a quick learner. Other than kicker Daniel Carlson, the rest of the team's rookies are seen as development types. Hughes isn't expected to have a big role at the start of the season - maybe serving as the fourth cornerback against San Francisco in Week 1 - but he could force his way into more playing time. He's practiced inside and outside and picked up both spots in head coach Mike Zimmer's defense. Hughes will also get the first shot as the team's kickoff returner to start the season.

49ers tackle Mike McGlinchey. The 49ers have decent depth along the offensive front, which gave the coaching staff every opportunity to bring the former Notre Dame standout along slowly. But they're throwing him immediately to the wolves, starting with a tough Minnesota Vikings defense. That says something about just how ready he is.

FAST FACTS: 49ERS won last 5 games of 2017, longest active win streak in NFL. ... QB Jimmy Garoppolo is 1 of 5 QBs since 1970 to win each of his 1st 7 starts. Ranked 3rd in NFL in passing yards (1,542) over final 5 weeks of 2017 season. Passed for 1,560 yards & 7 TDs for 96.2 passer rating in 6 games with SF in 2017. Is 3-0 with 919 pass yards (306.3 per game) & 3 TDs in his past 3 road starts. ... RB Alfred Morris makes SF debut. Had 547 rush yards & rush TD in 2017 with Dal. Has 100+ scrimmage yards in 2 of his past 3 vs. Min. Since entering league in 2012, ranks 6th in NFL with 5,503 rush yards. ... WR Marquise Goodwin set career highs in receptions (56) & rec. yards (962) last season. Ranked 3rd in NFL with 17.2 yards per catch avg. in 2017. ... WR Pierre Garcon had 40 catches for 500 yards in 8 games in 2017. Has 500+ rec. yards in 9 consecutive seasons. ... Rookie WR Dante Pettis had 163 catches for 2,256 yards & 24 TDs in 4 years at Washington. ... CB Richard Sherman makes SF debut. Since 2011, leads NFL with 32 INTs & 99 PD. Is 1 of 3 active CBs with 30+ INTs (32) & 5+ FFs (5). ... DL DeForest Buckner was 1 of 3 DL (Cameron Jordan & Jason Pierre-Paul) with 60+ tackles (61) & 5+ PD (5) last season. ... DL Solomon Thomas tied for lead among rookies with 10 TFL & tied for 3rd among NFC rookies with 3 sacks in 2017. ... VIKINGS won NFC North & advanced to NFC Champ. Game in 2017. ... QB Kirk Cousins makes Min. debut. Had 4,093 pass yards & 27 TD passes with Was. last season. Is 1 of 2 QBs (Philip Rivers) with 4,000+ pass yards & 25+ TD passes in each of past 3 seasons. Passed for 330 yards & 2 TDs with 102.3 rating in only career game vs. SF (10/15/17 with Was.). ... RB Latavius Murray had 842 rush yards & 8 rush TDs last season. Since 2016, ties for 2nd in league with 20 rush TDs. ... RB Dalvin Cook had 444 scrimmage yards (111 per game) & 2 rush TDs in 4 starts in 2017. ... WR Adam Thielen ranked 2nd in NFC with 1,276 rec. yards & 4th with 91 receptions last season. Joined Rod Smith & Wes Welker as only undrafted players since 1967 to record 90+ catches & 1,200+ rec. yards in single season. ... WR Stefon Diggs had 849 rec. yards & career-high 8 TD catches in 2017. ... TE Kyle Rudolph caught career-high 8 TDs last season. Had 2 TD catches in only career home meeting (9/23/12). ... DE Everson Griffen tied for 3rd in NFC with career-high 13 sacks. Became 3rd player since 1982 to record sack in each of his team's 1st 8 games of season. ... DE Danielle Hunter had 7 sacks last season, his 3rd consecutive season with 5+ sacks. ... LB Eric Kendricks led team with career-high 113 tackles last season. ... S Harrison Smith was only NFC player in 2017 with 70+ tackles (78) & 5+ INTs (5).

PREDICTION: The 49ers and Garoppolo were the hyped team and quarterback in the offseason, but now reality hits against on the road to open the season against a stingy defense.

OUR PICK: Vikings, 19-10

HOUSTON TEXANS (0-0) AT NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS (0-0)
GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: Sunday, 1:00 PM ET, Gillette Stadium; TV, CBS, Jim Nantz, Tony Romo, Tracy Wolfson (Field reporter).

SERIES HISTORY: 9th regular-season meeting. Patriots lead series, 9-1. The Patriots open up against Houston, which offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels said feels like a division opponent given how often the teams have played. Houston's head coach Bill O'Brien was once the offensive coordinator in New England and Romeo Crennel, the Texans defensive coordinator, was the Patriots coordinator when they won three Super Bowls between 2001-2004. Since O'Brien became coach the Patriots are 4-0 against the Texans including a 34-16 playoff victory in 2017.

KEYS TO THE GAME: The Texans need to pressure quarterback Tom Brady to have a chance. Otherwise, he'll pick them apart. The return of J.J. Watt from injury should be a big plus. Offensively, the Texans have to avoid turnovers and run the football effectively.
   If the Patriots are to prevail in the opener against the Texans they must be creative offensively - given their limitations at wide receiver. Expect the Patriots to move tight end Rob Gronkowski around a lot so the Texans cannot double team him easily. Look for the Patriots to go hurry-up to counter any blitz packages the Texans might have and expect a lot of screen passes to running back James White. As noted, the Patriots must handle the pressure from the Texans who have two of the best defensive players in the league in Jadaveon Clowney and Watt. Linebacker Whitney Mercilus is also a challenging player to game-plan against given his versatility. Cornerback Johnathan Joseph has also given the Patriots trouble in the past.

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:
   --Patriots QB Tom Brady vs. Texans DE J.J. Watt. Brady is a pinpoint passer who thrives on firing quick passes with excellent timing. Watt is a three-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year who has been limited to eight games over the past two seasons due to injuries.
   --Patriots CB Stephon Gilmore vs. Texans WR DeAndre Hopkins. This is one of the best matchups of the week throughout the league. In addition, it will be interesting to see how the Patriots defense, particularly the linebackers, handles the scrambling ability of QB Deshaun Watson. Finally, if Trent Brown lines up against Clowney, it will be a great test for the young left tackle.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookies to watch -   Texans safety Justin Reid. The Texans' top draft pick and third-round selection from Stanford, Reid is the younger brother of former 49ers Pro Bowl safety Eric Reid. Justin Reid is a hard hitter with range.
   Patriots linebacker Ja'Whaun Bentley. Bentley has had a strong training camp and his intelligence should allow him to have an impact in the middle of the Patriots defense making the defensive calls. Bentley should be effective against the run.

FAST FACTS: TEXANS QB Deshaun Watson set franchise rookie records with 19 TD passes & 103 rating last season. Had 19 TD passes in his 1st 7 games, most in NFL history by rookie in his 1st 7 games of season. Passed for 301 yards & 2 TDs in only career meeting (9/24/17). ... RB Lamar Miller had 1,215 scrimmage yards (888 rush, 327 rec.) last season & is 1 of 4 in NFL (Antonio Brown, Frank Gore & Julio Jones) with 1,200+ scrimmage yards in each of past 4 seasons. ... WR DeAndre Hopkins led NFL with career-high & franchise-record 13 TD catches & ranked 4th with 1,378 rec. yards in 2017. Ranks 2nd in franchise history in receptions (413), rec. yards (5,865) & TD catches (36). Since 2014, ranks 3rd in NFL in rec. yards (5,063) & tied for 3rd in TD catches (34). ... WR Will Fuller V had career-high 7 TD catches in 2017. ... DE Jadaveon Clowney had career-high 9.5 sacks & ranked 2nd in NFL with 21 TFL last season. In 3 career meetings, has 4 sacks, 6 TFL & FR. ... DE J.J. Watt has 76 career sacks, 2nd-most in NFL since entering league in 2011. ... S Tyrann Mathieu makes Hou. debut. Had 74 tackles, 2 INTs & 7 PD with Az. last season. ... LB Benardrick McKinney led team with 95 tackles in 2017. Has 21 tackles (10.5 per game) & sack in past 2 games at NE. ... LB Whitney Mercilus has 3.5 sacks in past 5 meetings. ... S Kareem Jackson & CB Johnathan Joseph are tied for franchise record with 14 INTs each. ... PATRIOTS advanced to SB for 3rd time in past 4 seasons in 2017. Led NFL in total offense (394.2 yards per game) & ranked 2nd in scoring (28.6) last season. ... QB Tom Brady earned 3rd-career MVP award in 2017. Led NFL in pass yards (4,577) & ranked 3rd in TD passes (32) & rating (102.8). Ties for 3rd in NFL history with 488 TD passes & ranks 4th in pass yards (66,159). Passed for 378 yards & 5 TDs in last meeting. Has 1,371 pass yards (317.8 per game) with 13 TDs vs. 1 INT for 124.7 rating in past 4 vs. Hou. ... RB James White has 156 receptions since 2015, 5th- most among NFL RBs. ... TE Rob Gronkowski led NFL TEs with 1,084 rec. yards in 2017, his 4th career 1,000-yard season, tied for most by TE in NFL history. Ranks 3rd in NFL history among TEs with 76 career TDs. Has 3 TD catches in 4 career games vs. Hou. ... WR Chris Hogan had 2 rec. TDs in last meeting. ... S Devin McCourty led team with career-high 94 tackles last season. ... CB Jason McCourty had 65 tackles & 3 INTs with Cle. in 2017. Aims for his 3rd in row with INT vs. Hou. ... DE Adrian Clayborn had career-high 9.5 sacks with Atl. last season.

PREDICTION: The notorious slow-starting Patriots could have issues in this encounter, but winning in Foxborough is always difficult. Brady just keeps on ticking.

OUR PICK: Patriots 24-20

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS (0-0) AT NEW ORLEANS SAINTS (0-0)
GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: 1 PM ET, Mercedes-Benz Superdome, TV; FOX, Chris Myers, Daryl Johnston, Laura Okmin (Field reporter).

SERIES HISTORY: 53rd regular-season meeting. Saints lead series 32-20. Wide receiver Chris Godwin caught the game-winning pass from Jameis Winston with nine seconds left to give the Bucs a 31-24 win over the playoff-bound Saints in Week 17 last season. The Bucs' earlier meeting in New Orleans in Week 9 last year was marred with controversy. Winston had to leave the game injured, but then got into a spat with Saints cornerback Marshon Lattimore that resulted in Bucs wide receiver Mike Evans getting a one game suspension. In the regular-season finale, head coach Dirk Koetter and Saints head coach Sean Payton had words, so there's no love lost between these teams.

KEYS TO THE GAME: The Bucs have to control the football against the Saints, especially with Ryan Fitzpatrick at quarterback. That means a heavy dose of Peyton Barber and Ronald Jones II to set up the play-action passing and keep Fitzpatrick from being behind the sticks too much. Barber looked good in the preseason, averaging 5.8 yards per carry. And while Jones struggled, he is very explosive in space and had a little success as a receiver.

   Defensively, the Bucs hope the additions on the defensive line will impact Saints quarterback Drew Brees, who does not like pressure in his face. You have to believe the Bucs will challenge the Saints receivers a little more than they have in soft zone coverage in the past and allow the defensive line to get home. If the Bucs go heavy personnel, they can isolate some one-on-one matchups with tight end O.J. Howard and Cameron Brate.

   The Saints have to resist the temptation to lean too heavily on Alvin Kamara or the passing game in Mark Ingram's absence. Give Kamara a couple more touches, throw Mike Gillislee in there and see what they can do, then let Brees figure out the rest. This offense can be just as balanced and just as explosive without Ingram so they should take the same approach they took last season when they had the highest average yards per rush and the highest average yards per pass in the NFL. As for the defense, they don't have to deal with Jameis Winston, but is a capable player. But he's not mobile, so turn loose Cameron Jordan, Alex Okafor, even rookie Marcus Davenport and the blitz and see how often you can get to Fitzpatrick.

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:
   --Saints WR Michael Thomas vs. Bucs CB Brent Grimes. Thomas is an elite receiver with 1,245 yards last season. He can get behind the defense or run physical routes underneath. Grimes is the Bucs' best cover corner but will have to be on his game Sunday.
   --Saints CBs Marshon Lattimore and Ken Crawley vs. Bucs WRs Mike Evans and DeSean Jackson: Lattimore is the Saints best cornerback and Evans is the Bucs best receiver and that matchup is spiced up by the fact that Evans drew a one-game suspension last season for an unnecessary shot to Lattimore's back in the first meeting. But aside from that sub-plot, the winner of these matchups will be a key to how well the Tampa Bay offense fares against the New Orleans defense. "I don't walk to talk about Mike and I having a rivalry," Lattimore said Monday. "We don't have a rivalry. I'm just looking forward to playing the game."

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookies to watch - Buccaneers running back Ronald Jones II. Even though he averaged 0.8 yards per carry in the preseason, the story will be different when he runs behind the starting offensive line. Jones is an explosive playmaker and can do it as a receiver, as well. Don't pay too much attention to August football. Jones will be a great change-of-pace back from Peyton Barber.

   Saints wide receiver Tre'Quan Smith. The third-round choice from UCF started opening eyes in the early days of training camp and he kept making plays throughout the preseason. He caught passes in every preseason game and led New Orleans with 15 catches for 189 yards. He initially seemed a strong candidate to be the fourth receiver behind starters Michael Thomas and Ted Ginn Jr. as well as veteran free-agent signee Cameron Meredith, but it wouldn't be surprising if he moved past Meredith and even challenged Ginn on the depth chart at some point during the season.

FAST FACTS: BUCS QB RYAN FITZPATRICK passed for 1,103 yards & 7 TDs vs. 3 INTs for 86 rating last season. ... RB Peyton Barber led team with career-high 423 rush yards last season. ... Rookie RB Ronald Jones II was selected in 2nd round (38th overall) of 2018 NFL Draft. Rushed for 3,619 yards with 39 TDs and 32 catches for 302 yards, 3 TDs in 3 seasons at USC. ... WR Mike Evans had 1,001 rec. yards last season and joined HOFer Randy Moss and A.J. Green as only players in NFL history to have 4 consecutive 1,000-yard seasons to begin career. ... WR DeSean Jackson had 668 rec. yards & 3 TDs last season. Ranks 1st among active players (min. 200 receptions) with 17.3 yards per catch avg. ... TE O.J. Howard tied for 1st among rookie TEs with 6 TD catches & ranked 3rd with 432 rec. yards in 2017. ... TE Cameron Brate has 14 TD catches since 2016, 3rd-most among NFL TEs. ... DT Gerald McCoy led team with 6 sacks last season. Since 2012, ranks 2nd among NFL DTs with 44.5 sacks. ... DE Jason Pierre-Paul makes TB debut. Had 8.5 sacks with NYG in 2017. ... LB Lavonte David tied for 2nd in NFL with 5 FFs & led team with 101 tackles in 2017. Since 2012, ranks 3rd in NFL with 764 tackles. ... CB Brent Grimes led team with 11 PD last season. Since 2013, leads NFL with 78 PD. ... SAINTS QB Drew Brees has 70,445 career pass yards & joined Peyton Manning & HOFer Brett Favre as only players in NFL history to reach 70,000 pass yards. ... RB Alvin Kamara led NFL rookies & ranked 2nd in league with 14 total TDs in 2017. Had 826 rec. yards & 728 rush yards last season & joined HOFer Charley Taylor (1964) as only rookies in NFL history to have 700+ rush yards & 700+ rec. yards. ... . WR Michael Thomas ranked 3rd in NFL with 104 receptions last season & became 1st player in franchise history with 100+ catches in single season. Has 196 career receptions since entering NFL in 2016, most in NFL history by player in his 1st 2 seasons. ... DE Cameron Jordan tied for 4th in NFL with career- high 13 sacks in 2017. ... CB Marshon Lattimore led all rookies with 5 INTs & tied for 1st among rookies with 18 PD in 2017.

PREDICTION: The Bucs begin a brutal stretch of three games to open the season without Winston at quarterback. It could get ugly.

OUR PICK: Saints, 30-13.

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS (0-0) AT NEW YORK GIANTS (0-0)

GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: Sunday, 1:00 PM ET, MetLife Stadium, TV; FOX, Kenny Albert, Ronde Barber, Tiki Barber (Field reporter

SERIES HISTORY: 7th regular-season meeting. Series tied, 3-3. Since 2002, when the Giants recorded a 24-17 win at New York, each team has traded off in winning their regular-season matchups. Each team is also undefeated against the other on its home turf. Their last meeting came in 2014 at Jacksonville, a 25-24 Jaguars win.

KEYS TO THE GAME: Offensively, look for the Jaguars to go with a heavy dosage of Leonard Fournette and T.J. Yeldon running the ball. The Jaguars led the league in rushing last year and improved their O-line considerably by signing free agent Andrew Norwell to fill the porous spot at left guard. Look for an abundance of runs on the left side of the line behind the trio of tackle Cam Robinson, Norwell and center Brandon Linder.

   Defensively, the Jaguars will look to apply a lot of pressure on Giants quarterback Eli Manning who has not shown the propensity to effectively handle a big pass rush like the Jaguars have. Jacksonville recorded 55 sacks a year ago, one behind Pittsburgh's league-leading total of 56. The Jaguars recorded the majority of those sacks by just sending four linemen to apply pressure on quarterbacks. That leaves the linebackers free to shut down running attacks, and in this game that will be important. The Giants are likely to spring rookie sensation Saquon Barkley into the line a number of times to take some of the burden off Manning to produce through the air.

   Last season, the Jaguars defense was fourth in the NFL on stopping opponents on third down. In 2017, offenses were successful in completing 74 out of 220 third-down attempts, an approximate 34 percent success rate. Meanwhile, the Giants were one of the worst offenses last year on third down, converting 74 out of 227 attempts (33 percent). Granted, it's a new season but the fact remains the Giants offense will need to stay out of third-and-long situations as the Jaguars success rate in stopping third-and-short drastically decreased last season.

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:

   --Giants WR Odell Beckham Jr. vs. Jaguars CB Jalen Ramsey. When Beckham signed his five-year, $95 million contract in August, no one was happier than Ramsey. It meant for sure that Beckham would be in the Giants' lineup for the season opener against the Jaguars. It also means that Ramsey will get his wish to go against the highest paid receiver in the NFL. It's the type of challenge that the Jaguars defender cherishes.

   --Giants run defense vs. Jaguars RB Leonard Fournette. In the span of a season, the Giants run defense went from being a top-five unit in 2016 to a bottom five a year later. Now equipped with a new defensive scheme that better utilizes the talent up front, the Giants run defense showed signs this preseason of getting back to its 2016 form. Still, in Fournette, they're going to face a big bruising back who last year averaged 80.0 yards per game and who can wear opposing defenses into the ground.

   --Giants RB Saquon Barkley vs. Jaguars LBs Myles Jack and Telvin Smith. It's the highly anticipated debut of the rookie running back against savvy veterans Jack and Smith. Barkley starts the season with the hope that he's the answer for a Giants offense that has struggled in recent years, especially in moving the ball on the ground. He was the elite runner in college the last couple of years and could carry that success over to the NFL. His running exploits should relieve pressure off Giants QB Eli Manning to try and do too much. It will be Jack and Smith who will key on Barkley. The Jaguars can put enough pressure on Manning with their front four that will enable the two linebackers to focus on Barkley. How successful they are in keeping him under control could determine how well the Giants offense is able to produce yards and points.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookie to watch - Giants running back Saquon Barkley. The Giants haven't had a running game that scared opposing defenses since the days of "Earth, Wind and Fire" - Brandon Jacobs, Derrick Ward and Ahmad Bradshaw, who struck fear into the hearts of opposing defenses from 2007-2008. Barkley, the dynamic rookie who can not only hurt a defense with his legs but who can also be used in certain passing routes, is going to turn out to be the best gift possible the Giants could have given to 37-year-old quarterback Eli Manning.

FAST FACTS: JAGUARS QB Blake Bortles passed for 3,687 yards & 21 TDs last season. Has 14,928 career pass yards, 4th-most by QB through his 1st 4 seasons in league annals.. ... RB Leonard Fournette led team & ranked 2nd among rookies with 1,040 rush yards in 2017. Joined Fred Taylor (1998) as only rookies to rush for 1,000+ yards in franchise history.. ... WR Keelan Cole ranked 4th among rookies with 748 rec. yards in 2017 & ranked 2nd in NFL with 17.8 yards per catch avg. ... TE Austin Seferian-Jenkins makes Jax. debut. Had 50 receptions for 357 yards & 3 TDs with NYJ last season. ... DE Calais Campbell tied for 2nd in NFL with career- high & franchise-record 14.5 sacks last season. ... DE Yannick Ngakoue was 1 of 5 players with 10+ sacks (12) & 4+ FFs (6) last season. Recorded 11 of his 12 sacks on road last season. CB A.J. Bouye tied for 3rd in NFL with 6 INTs & tied for 2nd in AFC with 18 PD in 2017. Bouye & CB Jalen Ramsey (4 INTs, 17 PD) were only pair of teammates with 4+ INTs & 15+ PD in 2017. LB Telvin Smith led team with 102 tackles. ... GIANTS QB Eli Manning passed for 3,468 yards & 19 TDs last season. Has 13 consecutive seasons with 3,000+ pass yards, tied with Peyton Manning for 3rd-longest streak in NFL history.. ... RB Saquon Barkley (rookie) was selected No. 2 overall in 2018 NFL draft. Had 3,843 rush yards & 43 rush TDs in 38 career games at Penn St. RB Jonathan Stewart makes NYG debut. Had 680 rush yards & 6 TDs in 2017 with Car. ... WR ODELL BECKHAM JR. has 38 career rec. TDs, 2nd-most since entering NFL in 2014.. ... TE Evan Engram ranked 1st among rookie TEs in receptions (64) & rec. yards (722) last season. WR Sterling Shepard had career- high 731 rec. yards in 2017. ... S Landon Collins led team with 99 tackles & became 1st safety in franchise history with 95+ tackles in 3 different seasons. ... CB Janoris Jenkins tied for team lead with 3 INTs in 2017. ... LB Alec Ogletree had 63 tackles & 2 sacks with Rams last season. ... DE Olivier Vernon had 6.5 sacks last season.

PREDICTION: Jaguars executive Tom Coughlin returns to where he coached the Giants to two Super Bowl victories. Pat Shurmur is the second Giants head coach since Coughlin was fired after the 2015 season. While that storyline won't have much to do with the outcome, it does add a layer of intrigue.

OUR PICK: Giants, 20-17.

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS (0-0) AT LOS ANGELES CHARGERS (0-0)

GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: Sunday, 4:05 PM ET, StubHub Center, TV; CBS, Ian Eagle, Dan Fouts, Evan Washburn (Field reporter).

SERIES HISTORY: 116th regular-season meeting. Chiefs lead series, 60-54-1. The Chiefs swept the Chargers last season and own an eight-game winning streak in the series. Kareem Hunt rushed for 155 yards and a touchdown in the team's last meeting, a 30-13 Chiefs victory in Kansas City in Week 15. Tyreek Hill added a 64-yard touchdown reception.

KEYS TO THE GAME: Late Thursday it was learned the Chargers could be without star defensive end Joey Bosa against the Chiefs. Bosa was limited by a foot injury again Thursday, putting his availability in question for Sunday's game. "It's possible that he might not be with us," said Chargers coach Anthony Lynn, per SoCalNewsGroup. "Foot injuries, they take on all the body weight. That can be tricky." Bosa has been dealing with the injury to his left foot since he was hurt in practice on Aug. 7. At the time, the ailment was described as "nothing serious."

The Chiefs ran all over the Chargers a season ago, piling up 363 yards in two easy victories. Establishing the run early allows new starting quarterback Patrick Mahomes to settle into the offensive game plan. On defense, the Chiefs need to force turnovers because Philip Rivers should be able to move the ball and put up points on a banged-up secondary with plenty of question marks. If the Chiefs find themselves in a shootout, expect Mahomes to work outside the pocket and use his big arm to force the ball deep.

   And expect Rivers to attack a Chiefs secondary that didn't show much in the preseason. Then when the backups got some action, there was even a bigger dropoff than usual. That has Rivers salivating, especially after how poorly he played in two losses to the Chiefs last year. Look for Rivers to go after that pass defense. Safety Eric Berry might not play for KC.

   Defensively, the Chargers would love to make the Chiefs one-dimensional and be forced to rely on the production of Mahomes in the face of the Chargers' pass-rush of Melvin Ingram and maybe Bosa, if he plays.

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:

  --Chargers CB Trevor Williams, vs. Chiefs WR Tyreek Hill, who caught 10 passes for 165 yards and two touchdowns in two games against the Chargers last season. Hill appears primed for a big season, and the Chiefs expect to give QB Patrick Mahomes an opportunity to connect with Hill down field early and often.

  --Chargers DEs Melvin Ingram and Joey Bosa, who combined for 23 sacks last season, vs. Chiefs OL, which allowed 37 sacks last season. The Chiefs' pass protection appeared sloppy at times during the preseason, but Mahomes showed he can deliver big plays when given a clean pocket. Ingram and Bosa along the Chargers' front seven may give the Chiefs' pass protection its toughest test of the season.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookies to watch - -Chiefs outside linebacker Breeland Speaks. The Chiefs expect Speaks to play meaningful snaps right from the beginning as a rookie, helping to spell Justin Houston and Dee Ford as well as kick in on the defensive line at times. He needs to show more speed than he displayed during the preseason, but the Chiefs believe Speaks can rush with power and set a strong edge. If Houston or Ford go down with injuries again, Speaks could play a significant role in the defense.

   Chargers safety Derwin James. The Chargers kept waiting for James to hit a rookie wall or to show a head that is swimming with countless assignments for a reason why his play would drop off in camp. But it never did, as James continues to play with a consistency, and nuance, of a veteran secondary member. This first-round pick, to date, has checked off every box and if he's not in Sunday's starting lineup, he'll be running with first team soon enough.

FAST FACTS: CHIEFS won AFC West for 2nd consecutive season in 2017. ... QB Patrick Mahomes completed 22 of 35 (62.9 pct.) for 284 yards in only career start (12/31/17 at Den.). ... RB Kareem Hunt led NFL with 1,327 rush yards & ranked 1st among rookies with 1,782 scrimmage yards last season. Became 1st rookie in NFL history with 100+ scrimmage yards in each of his team's 1st 7 games of season. Has 389 scrimmage yards (327 rush, 62 rec.) & 3 TDs (2 rush, 1 rec.) in 2 career meetings. ... TE Travis Kelce led all TEs with 83 catches & ranked 2nd with 1,038 rec. yards last season. Since 2014, is only TE with 300+ receptions (307) & is 1 of 3 TEs (Rob Gronkowski & Delanie Walker) with 3,000+ rec. yards & 20+ TDs over span. ... WR Tyreek Hill led team with 1,183 rec. yards in 2017. Has 11 career TDs of 50+ yards, tied with HOFer Gale Sayers (11) for 2nd-most 50+ yard TDs in player's 1st 2 seasons in NFL history. Aims for 3rd in row vs. LAC with rec. TD. ... WR Sammy Watkins makes KC debut. Had 593 rec. yards & 8 TDs with Rams last season. ... LB Justin Houston led team with 9.5 sacks in 2017. Has 6 sacks in his past 5 vs. Chargers. ... CB Kendall Fuller had 4 INTs & 10 PD with Was. in 2017. ... DE Chris Jones had career-high 6.5 sacks & tied for 2nd in AFC with 4 FFs in 2017. Had sack in last meeting. ... CHARGERS QB Philip Rivers ranked 2nd in NFL with 4,515 pass yards & tied for 5th with 28 TD passes in 2017. Has 9 career seasons with 4,000+ pass yards, tied for 3rd-most in NFL history. Ties for 6th in league annals in pass TDs (342) & ranks 9th in pass yards (50,348). ... RB Melvin Gordon led team with 1,105 rush yards in 2017, his 1st career 1,000-yard season. Was 1 of 6 in NFL with 1,000+ rush yards (1,105) & 50+ catches (58) last season. Had 169 scrimmage yards (91 rec., 78 rush) & rush TD in last meeting. Aims for 4th in row vs. KC with rush TD. ... WR Keenan Allen ranked 3rd in NFL in rec. yards (1,393) & 4th in receptions (102) in 2017. Became 1st player in NFL history with 10+ catches, 100+ rec. yards & rec. TD in 3 consecutive games (Weeks 11-13) last season. ... WR Travis Benjamin had 105 rec. yards in last home meeting. ... DE Joey Bosa ranked 2nd in AFC with 12.5 sacks last season. Had 19 sacks in his 1st 20 games, most by player in his 1st 20 games since 1982. Has sack in 2 of past 3 meetings. ... LB Melvin Ingram tied for 3rd in NFL with 17 TFL in 2017 & is 1 of 6 players to record 8+ sacks & 10+ TFL in each of past 3 seasons. Has 4 sacks in past 2 meetings. Bosa & Ingram were 1 of 3 pairs of teammates to record 10+ sacks each in 2017. ... CB Casey Hayward led AFC with career-high 22 PD in 2017. Is only NFL player with 20+ PD in each of past 2 seasons.

PREDICTION: The Chargers seek to pick up where they left off, winning nine of their last 12 in 2017 after opening the season 0-4. The wild card is Mahomes, and the Chargers believe they will have the answer.

OUR PICK: Chargers, 30-21

WASHINGTON REDSKINS (0-0) AT ARIZONA CARDINALS (0-0)
GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: Sunday, 4:25 PM ET, State Farm Stadium, TV; FOX, Thom Brennaman, Chris Spielman, Shannon Spake (Field reporter).

SERIES HISTORY: 124th regular-season meeting. Redskins lead series, 75-46-2. The former NFC East rivals still see each other frequently. This will be their fourth game in five years. Washington won 25-20 at FedEx Field last Dec. 17. The Cardinals won the previous two meetings at University of Phoenix Stadium in 2016 (31-23) and 2014 (30-20).

KEYS TO THE GAME: Intriguing to see how Washington running back Adrian Peterson does against the team he played for last season. Peterson looked good in his first game with the Redskins in the preseason. It was also his only game in the preseason. The Redskins are plenty familiar with new Cardinals quarterback Sam Bradford dating to his days with the Philadelphia Eagles. Given Arizona's new coaching staff under Steve Wilks -- a mentor to Redskins cornerback Josh Norman when they were with the Carolina Panthers -- it's a difficult game to prepare for in Week 1.
   The Cardinals' offensive line features three new starters so Washington's young defensive front will get a chance to feast early. Look out for outside linebacker Ryan Kerrigan, who poses a threat to that untested group.
   Stopping running back David Johnson will be paramount. He missed much of last year due to injury, but Johnson is a threat on the ground and in the air. Larry Fitzgerald has always made life difficult on the Redskins.
   Redskins quarterback Alex Smith will see a tough Arizona secondary led by cornerback Patrick Peterson. The Washington offensive line is well positioned to deal with pass rusher Chandler Jones as it has Pro Bowl left tackle Trent Williams on one side and the steady Morgan Moses on the other.

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:
   --Cardinals WR Larry Fitzgerald vs. Redskins CB Josh Norman. Fitzgerald averaged more than 100 catches and 1,000 receptions each of the last three years. Norman didn't register an interception last season, for whatever reason. Fitzgerald is sneaky good at getting open and turning short receptions into bigger gains. Norman is still an elite corner who knows how to lock down receivers and is physical.
   --Cardinals DE Chandler Jones vs. Redskins LT Trent Williams. Chandler led the NFL with 17 sacks last season. Williams has been selected to six straight Pro Bowls. Jones has an array of moves when motoring his way into opponents' backfields. Williams is a savvy, nine-year vet who has seen it all, making this one of the best individual NFC matchups to watch in Week 1.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookies to watch - Redskins defensive end Daron Payne. Another defensive lineman from Alabama drafted in the first round. Payne has the size and strength to be a factor in the run game. He isn't likely to put up huge sack totals, but just stopping the run -- finally - will be big for the Redskins.
   Cardinals wide receiver Christian Kirk. The team's second-round pick out of Texas A&M, Kirk possesses so many skills that a hefty chunk of the Cardinals' playbook has already been designed with him specifically in mind. Kirk will be moved around as a receiver, playing inside and out while also being used as a ball carrier on reverses and pitches out of the backfield.

FAST FACTS: REDSKINS QB Alex Smith makes Washington debut. Passed for career-high 4,042 yards & 26 TDs vs. 5 INTs and led NFL with 104.7 rating with KC in 2017. Has NFL-record 5 consecutive seasons with 3,000-plus yards passing and fewer than 10 INTs. ... RB Adrian Peterson makes Redskins debut after 529 yards rushing and 2 TDs in 10 games with Az. and NO last season. Has 12,276 career rush yards and needs 4 rush yards to pass HOFer Marshall Faulk (12,279) for 11th- most in NFL history. Has 425 rush yards (106.3 per game). ... WR Jamison Crowder led team with 66 receptions and 789 yards receiving in 2017. ... LB Ryan Kerrigan tied for 4th in NFL with 13 sacks. ... CB Josh Norman has 57 PD since 2014, 5th-most in NFL. ... CARDINALS QB Sam Bradford makes Az. debut. Passed for 4,259 yards with 23 TDs for 101.1 rating in past 2 seasons with Min. ... RB David Johnson set single-season franchise records in scrimmage yards (2,118), rush TDs (16) and total TDs (20) in 2016 and had NFL-record 15 consecutive games with 100-plus scrimmage yards to begin season. ... WR Larry Fitzgerald ranks 3rd all-time in receptions (1,234) and rec. yards (15,545). Has 110 career TD catches and needs 1 more to tie Tony Gonzalez. ... LB Chandler Jones led NFL in sacks (17) & TFL (28). CB Patrick Peterson has 21 career INTs, tied for 4th-most in NFL since entering league in 2011.

PREDICTION: This is probably a pick-em game as both teams have a lot to prove and both with new quarterbacks. Seems most oddsmakers give Arizona the edge, but Redskins quarterback Alex Smith, who proved he is a winner on two teams, will probably show why in this opener.

OUR PICK: Redskins, 28-21.

DALLAS COWBOYS (0-0) AT CAROLINA PANTHERS (0-0)
GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: Sunday, 4:25 PM ET, Bank of America Stadium, TV; FOX: Joe Buck, Troy Aikman, Erin Andrews (Field reporter).

SERIES HISTORY: 12th regular-season meeting. Cowboys lead series, 9-2. The Cowboys lost to the Panthers on Thanksgiving in 2015, ending Dallas's five-game winning streak in the series.

KEYS TO THE GAME: The Cowboys' biggest strengths on the offensive side of the football are guard Zack Martin and running back Ezekiel Elliott. Considering the passing game is still somewhat of an unknown quantity, Dallas needs to begin the season by running the ball with authority and leaning on those two players. If they can do that, they will give quarterback Dak Prescott a much better chance of finding a rhythm with new wide receivers Allen Hurns, Tavon Austin and Michael Gallup.
   For both teams this game is like looking in a mirror as they do similar things on offense. The Panthers will want to make sure Dallas respects all aspects of their offense, so look for them to be willing to unleash quarterback Cam Newton in a number of ways. They don't want to overexpose Newton in the rushing attack, but they know if he's a threat in that area the Cowboys could have trouble keeping tabs on the Carolina offense. It's also worth noting that Newton will have something to prove with Cowboys quarterback Dak Prescott on the other side because there have been comparisons between the two quarterbacks.

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:
   --Panthers LBs vs. Cowboys TEs. The Panthers have been strong at the linebacker position, but there's a bit of a concern with Thomas Davis serving a four-game NFL ban at the start of the season. Still, this isn't an area where the Panthers can afford to be exploited. It seems that anything the Cowboys get in terms of production from the tight ends will be viewed as a bonus. Jason Witten is no longer with the Cowboys after a stellar career, so there's retooling at that spot
   --Cowboys C Joe Looney vs. Panthers DT Kawann Short. Looney will spell center Travis Frederick until Frederick is ready to return to action. That means Looney gets a trial by fire in the opener against a solid Carolina defensive front. Short is the Panthers' best interior defensive lineman as he posted 7.5 sacks in 2017.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookies to watch - Cowboys wide receiver Michael Gallup. The Cowboys retooled their passing game and Gallup showed all training camp that he's ready to be a part of the new look. Gallup caught a 30-yard touchdown pass from Dak Prescott in Dallas's preseason opener against the 49ers.
   Panthers wide receiver DJ Moore. It's not just because he was the first-round draft pick. There is ample opportunity for Moore in a receiving group that has been retooled and needs newcomers to step up. Moore gained early approval from the coaching staff for his preparation during the offseason.

FAST FACTS: COWBOYS QB Dal Prescott passed for 3,324 yards and 22 TDs last season. Since entering NFL in 2016, leads all QBs with 12 TDs rushing and is 6-1 in past 7 starts on road. ... RB Ezekiel Elliott totaled 1,252 yards from scrimmage (983 rush, 269 rec.) and 9 TDs (7 rush, 2 rec.) last season. ... WR Allen Hurns makes Dal. Debut after 39 receptions for 484 yards and 2 TDs in 10 games with Jax. last season. ... DE DeMarcus Lawrence tied for 2nd in NFL with career-high 14.5 sacks in 2017. ... LB Sean Lee led team with 101 tackles in 2017, his 3rd straight 100-plus tackle season. ... PANTHERS QB Cam Newton passed for 3,302 yards in 2017. Led QBs with 754 rush yards in 2017, his 3rd career season with 700-plus yards rushing. ... RB Christian McCaffrey set franchise rookie records in yards from scrimmage (1,086) and receptions (80) last season. His 80 catches were 4th-most by rookie RB in NFL history. ... TE Greg Olsen has 1,000-plus yards receiving in 3 of past 4 seasons. ... LB Luke Keuchly had a team-high 134 tackles and is only player in franchise history with 100-plus tackles in each of his 1st 6 seasons. ... DE Julius Peppers had 11 sacks in 2017, his 10th season with 10-plus+ sacks. Has 154.5 career sacks, 4th-most in NFL history.

PREDICTION: These teams will match similar offensive skills and the advantage may be home cooking. Panthers quarterback Cam Newton always seems to need to prove something and in this game it will be that he is better than quarterback Dak Prescott of the Cowboys, to whom he is often compared.

OUR PICK: Panthers, 30-20.

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS (0-0) AT DENVER BRONCOS (0-0)
GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: Sunday, 4:25 PM ET, Broncos Stadium at Mile High, TV; FOX, Dick Stockton, Mark Schlereth, Jennifer Hale (Field reporter)

SERIES HISTORY: 54th regular-season meeting. Broncos lead series, 34-19. As former AFC West rivals before the NFL realignment after the 2001 season, the Seahawks and Broncos have faced off 55 times (including playoffs) since their first matchup in 1977, with the Broncos leading the overall series 34-21. Since Seattle moved to the NFC West in 2002, they've won three of the past five contests. Most notably, the Seahawks have won both postseason matchups between the franchises, including a 43-8 romp in Super Bowl XLVIII. The Broncos dominated the series in the 1990s, winning all six divisional matchups during the 1996, 1997, and 1998 campaigns. Since 2000, however, the series has remained relatively even, with the Broncos holding a slight 5-4 edge in nine games.

KEYS TO THE GAME: Under head coach Pete Carroll's watch, the Seahawks have been notoriously slow starters, especially on the road. During his eight seasons at the helm, Seattle has only won one of its five season openers away from CenturyLink Field, including a 17-9 loss to Aaron Rodgers and the Packers last September.

Against the Broncos in a hostile road environment, the Seahawks will need to replicate these early successes from August in a meaningful regular-season game, especially with the defense breaking in so many new starters at critical positions. Offensive coordinator Brian Schottenheimer will have to lean a bit on Seattle's ground game using Chris Carson and Rashaad Penny to help protect quarterback Russell Wilson from a vaunted Denver pass rush featuring Von Miller and rookie Bradley Chubb.

The Broncos had the second-worst team-wide passer rating in the league last year. Yet their best path to success against the Seahawks might rest in that passing game, thanks to the addition of quarterback Case Keenum and a Seahawks defense with a decimated secondary. If Earl Thomas doesn't make a quick return to Seattle, Keenum, Emmanuel Sanders, Demaryius Thomas and rookie receiver Courtland Sutton will have a chance to exploit mismatches against a young secondary. Thomas reported Wednesday after a summer-long holdout and it's unknown how much he will play.

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:

--Broncos LB Von Miller, who has posted double-digit sacks in six of his seven NFL seasons, vs. beleaguered Seahawks RT Germain Ifedi. Miller has tortured some of the best tackles in football since entering the NFL, using his signature dip-and-bend move to quickly turn the corner and devour opposing quarterbacks. Ifedi, on the other hand, led the league in penalties last year and has continued to struggle avoiding yellow flags during the preseason. If there's a matchup in this game worthy of giving Seahawk fans nightmares, Miller feasting on Ifedi will certainly do the trick.

--Seahawks CBs Shaquill Griffin and Dontae Johnson, the two expected starters, vs. Broncos WRs Demaryius Thomas, Emmanuel Sanders, and Courtland Sutton. Griffin had an outstanding rookie season, starting 11 games while recording 68 tackles and an interception. As for Johnson, he started 16 games for the 49ers, but he's only been back from a broken foot for a few weeks and Broncos quarterback Case Keenum will likely test him early. Keenum will have a plethora of options at his disposal while challenging Seattle's new-look secondary, but in particular, Thomas, Sanders, and Sutton all have big-play potential on the outside. Expect Denver to dial up some vertical shots downfield early to try and take advantage of the unit's inexperience and lack of continuity.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookies to watch - Seahawks defensive end Rasheem Green. Circumstances have opened the door for the 21-year-old Green to be Seattle's most impressive player in the preseason. Displaying improved hand technique as well as a consistent motor and the versatility to line up as a 3-technique defensive tackle during passing situations, he recorded 18 tackles and 3.0 sacks in four preseason games.

Broncos running back Royce Freeman. His ability to win the No. 1 running back job thanks to a strong preseason puts him in position to have a profound impact on the team's fortunes. Freeman's vision and explosiveness helped lead to a team-leading three preseason touchdowns.

FAST FACTS: SEAHAWKS QB Russell Wilson led NFL with 34 TD passes in 2017, tied for most in single season in franchise history. ... RB Rashaad Penny (rookie) was selected No. 27 overall in 2018 NFL Draft after rushing 2,248 yards and 23 TDs at San Diego St. ... WR Doug Baldwin led team with 75 catches and 991 yards receiving last season. Has 29 TD catches since 2015, 2nd-most in NFL. ... WR Brandon Marshall ranks 2nd among active players in receptions (959) and yards receiving (12,215) as well as 3rd in TD catches (82). Had 327 catches for 4,019 yards & 25 TDs in 4 seasons with Den. (2006-09). ... LB Bobby Wagner ranked 3rd in NFC with 133 tackles, his franchise-record 6th season with 100-plus tackles. ... BRONCOS QB Case Keenum set career highs in comp. (325), yards passing (3,547), TD passes (22) and rating (98.3) with Min. last season. Rookie RB Royce Freeman, a third-round pick, was is all-time Pac-12 leader in rushing TDs (60) and 2nd in conference history in yards rushing (5,621). ... WR Demaryius Thomas led team in receptions (83), yards receiving (949) & TD catches (5) last season. WR Emmanuel Sanders had 11 catches for 149 yards in last meeting. ... LB Von Miller had 10 sacks last season. Has 83.5 sacks since 2011, most in NFL. LB Brandon Marshall had 106 tackles in 2017, his 3rd career 100-tackle season.

PREDICTION: Both teams have a lot to prove, but Seattle is a slow starter and head coach Peter Carroll is still putting pieces together in his puzzle. It will be interesting to see how Broncos quarterback Case Keenum does in this one.

OUR PICK: Broncos, 28-21.

CHICAGO BEARS (0-0) AT GREEN BAY PACKERS (0-0)
GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: Sunday, 8:20 PM ET, Lambeau Field, TV; NBC (8:20 PM ET): Al Michaels, Cris Collinsworth, Michele Tafoya (Field reporter).

SERIES HISTORY: 195th regular-season meeting. Packers lead series, 95-93-6. The Bears have lost four straight to the Packers, and eight of the last nine. The Packers have won four of the five Sunday night games the teams have played, including the last one in 2014, 55-14.

KEYS TO THE GAME: Suddenly the two biggest names in this game are Khalil Mack of the Bears and Aaron Rodgers of the Packers. How often they collide Sunday may determine the outcome. Khalil is new to the Bears defense, but natural athletic skills should do the job. Much like Brett Favre before him, Rodgers has been a Bear killer throughout his career. Rodgers is 15-4 lifetime against Chicago with 42 touchdown passes and just nine interceptions.

   The Packers have devised their game plan around the unique skills Rodgers possesses, and for the most part, he's delivered. This week will be no different as the Packers - shorthanded in the backfield - will ask Rodgers to try carving up the Bears one more time.

   Matt Nagy's Bears offense is facing a different challenge from Green Bay than Chicago has seen in recent years, with Dom Capers no longer coordinating the Packers' defense. New coordinator Mike Pettine tends to rely on single-safety high coverage and matches up man-to-man on receivers. It's likely to give the Bears opportunities with slot receivers if they give Mitchell Trubisky time.

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:
   --Packers Ts David Bakhtiari and Bryan Bulaga vs. Bears OLBs Khalil Mack and Leonard Floyd. Green Bay's tackles are the strength of its offensive line. Mack, who the Bears acquired Saturday, is a pass-rushing force while Floyd has star power if he can stay healthy.
   --Packers CBs Kevin King and Tramon Williams vs. Bears WRs Allen Robinson and Taylor Gabriel. Green Bay upgraded its cornerbacks more than any position on the team, while the Bears invested heavily in their wide receiver group. We'll find out in Week 1 who spent their money the wisest.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookies to watch - Bears LB Roquan Smith. Once Smith gets over hamstring tightness and is fully indoctrinated in Vic Fangio's defensive scheme, he's expected to be to the interior what the Bears hope Floyd and Mack will be outside.

   Packers cornerback Jaire Alexander. Green Bay's first-round draft choice is quick as a hiccup and is expected to begin the year as the Packers' nickel corner. Alexander has terrific speed, good hands and outstanding instincts.

FAST FACTS: BEARS QB Mitchell Trubisky passed for 2,193 yards and 7 TDs in 12 starts last season. He had 297 yards passing and 97 rating in last game vs. GB. ... RB Jordan Howard ranked 3rd in NFC with 1,124 yards rushing and tied for 3rd in NFL with 9 rush TDs in 2017. ... WR Allen Robinson makes Chi. debut. Had 73 receptions for 883 yards and 6 TDs in 2016 with Jax. ... LB Khalil Mack makes Chi. debut (acquired in trade from Oakland). Since 2015, ranks 2nd in NFL with 36.5 sacks. ... DE Akiem Hicks led Bears with career-high 8.5 sacks last season. ... LB Aaron Lynch makes Chi. debut. Had 2 sacks in only career game vs. GB (10/4/15 with SF). ... PACKERS QB Aaron Rodgers passed for 1,675 yards and 16 TDs in only 7 starts last season. Never mind the stats, when he is healthy he is a magician, evidenced by 111.2 rating in past 4 home starts vs. Chi. ... RB Ty Montgomery has 385 yards from scrimmage and 3 TDs rushing in his past 4 vs. Chi. ... WR Davante Adams tied for 2nd in NFL with 10 rec. TDs last season. ... TE Jimmy Graham makes GB debut. Led all NFL TEs with 10 rec. TDs last season with Sea. ... LB Clay Matthews led team with 7.5 sacks last season.

PREDICTION: Aaron Rodgers is back after sitting out nine games season with an injury. Unless newly found edge rusher Khalil Mack KO's the great QB, Packers should have their way.

OUR PICK: Packers, 24-14.

NEW YORK JETS (0-0) AT DETROIT LIONS (0-0)
GAME SNAPSHOT

KICKOFF: Monday, 7:10 PM ET, Ford Field, TV; ESPN, Beth Mowins, Brian Griese, Laura Rutledge (Field reporter).

SERIES HISTORY: 14th regular-season meeting. Lions lead series, 7-6. The Jets have won their last two road games against Detroit, including a 23-20 overtime win in 2010, when Mark Sanchez led them back from a 20-10 fourth-quarter deficit in the last 2:46. But the Jets' last regular-season game at Ford Field was actually 2014, when they played the Bills there due to a massive snowstorm in Buffalo.

KEYS TO THE GAME: The Jets' only road win last season was by three points at winless Cleveland, so even without starting a 21-year-old quarterback, rookie Sam Darnold, beating the Lions, who are about a touchdown favorite, would have been a tall task.

Offensively, expect lots of Isaiah Crowell and Bilal Powell on misdirection runs, draws and screens, and expect the coaching staff and Darnold not to challenge Lions cornerback Darius Slay too much, since he led the league with eight picks last season.

Defensively, the "New Jack City" secondary will get tested right off the bat. Even with a new head coach (Matt Patricia), expect the Lions to have Matthew Stafford put the ball up in the air most downs trying to hit playmakers like Marvin Jones Jr. and Golden Tate. The Jets allowed 30 passing touchdowns last season, while Stafford threw 29. Without a great pass rush, the odds don't favor the Jets here.

Patricia knows the recipe for beating the Jets. He won 10 of 12 games against them in his six seasons as Patriots defensive coordinator and held them to 17 points or fewer the last four times they met.

With young Darnold running the Jets' offense, expect the Lions to disguise their defensive looks and pepper New York with blitzes.

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:
--Jets LT Kelvin Beachum vs. Lions DE Ziggy Ansah. Beachum is the best offensive lineman the Jets have, but the veteran missed a big chunk of time this preseason with a foot injury. He's expected to play Week 1, and the Jets desperately need him to protect the blind side of their 21-year-old quarterback Sam Darnold from Ansah, who had a resurgent 2017 season with 12 sacks.
--Jets DE Leonard Williams vs. Lions LT Taylor Decker. The Jets don't really have much in the way of a pass rush outside Williams, who himself had only two sacks last year (though he did have 25 quarterback hits, which ranked seventh in the league). Stafford was sacked 47 times last season, the second most in the league behind the Colts' Jacoby Brissett, but only 21 came in the final eight games when Decker returned after shoulder surgery.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookies to watch - OK, everybody will watch Sam Darnold because he is a rookie quarterback. So, let's suggest sleeper Jets pick defensive end Nathan Shepherd. The third-round selection out of tiny Fort Hays State is still a bit raw, but he's slated to start opposite Leonard Williams on the defensive line, so he'll get plenty of opportunities for sacks. Plus, he is a solid run defender. And game day is his 25th birthday. Piece of cake.

Lions running back Kerryon Johnson. Frank Ragnow was the Lions' first-round pick and looks like an anchor for a long time to come on the offensive line, but Johnson is the player who will have the most visible impact on the offense this fall. A second-round pick out of Auburn, Johnson probably will open the season in a time share with LeGarrette Blount and see his role expand as the season goes on.

FAST FACTS: JETS rookie QB Sam Darnold, selected No. 3 overall, passed for 4,143 yards & 26 TDs in 2017, leading USC to a title in the Pac-12 title, a step below the AFC East. ... RB Bilal Powell led team with career-high 772 rush yards and 5 TDs rushing in 2017. ... WR Robby Anderson led team with career-high 941 yards receiving and 7 TD catches last season. ... WR Terrelle Pryor Sr. is 1 of 2 active players (Mohamed Sanu) with multiple TDs passing (9), rushing (4) and receiver (5) in career. But Pryor was miscast as a QB for the first years of his career. ... CB Trumaine Johnson 1 of 8 CBs with 65-plus tackles (65) and 10-plus PD (14) with Rams last season. ... LBs Avery Williamson (92 tackles, 3 sacks, 2 FFs with Ten.) and Darron Lee (94, 3, 2) were 2 of 4 NFL players with at least 90 tackles, 3 sacks and 2 FFs in 2017. ... LIONS QB Matthew Stafford ranked 3rd in NFL in yards passing (4,446) and 4th in TD passes (29) last season. ... RB LeGarrette Blount makes Det. debut after going to last two SBs with Pats and Eagles. Rushed for 766 yards, 2 TDs with Phi. in 2017. ... WR Golden Tate had 92 receptions for 1,003 yards and 5 TD catches in 2017. ... DE Ezekiel Ansah led team and ranked 6th in NFC with 12 sacks last season. ... CB Darius Slay tied for 1st in NFL with career-high 8 INTs and led league with 26 PD, most by Det. player in single season since 1991. ... LB Jarrad Davis led all rookies with 96 tackles in 2017. ... S Glover Quin has 19 INTs since 2013, 2nd-most among NFL safeties.

PREDICTION: Rookie head coach Matt Patricia, who ruined the Jets as Patriots defensive coordinator, against rookie Jets quarterback Sam Darnold. Game is in Detroit. Not a brain teaser.

OUR PICK: Lions, 28-10.

LOS ANGELES RAMS (0-0) AT OAKLAND RAIDERS (0-0)
GAME SNAPSHOT
KICKOFF: Monday, 10:20 PM ET, Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum, TV; ESPN): Joe Tessitore, Jason Witten, Booger McFarland, Lisa Salters (Field reporter)
SERIES HISTORY: 14th regular-season meeting, Raiders lead series, 8-5. Rams won the last meeting in 2014, routing the Raiders 52-0 in St. Louis before the Rams moved back to Los Angeles. The Raiders gave up touchdowns on the Rams' first five possessions, trailed 38-0 at halftime and the loss essentially ended any chance interim coach Tony Sparano had of retaining the job fulltime. In the last game played in Oakland, the Raiders won 16-14 in 2010, with Darren McFadden gaining 145 yards on 30 carries, Bruce Gradkowski throwing a 4-yard touchdown pass to Louis Murphy and Sebastian Janikowski kicking three field goals.

KEYS TO THE GAME: The Raiders must keep quarterback Derek Carr upright and healthy after he missed some playing time last season and was not as effective as in previous years because of a broken bone in his lower back. "Hopefully, Derek stays healthy," said returning head coach Jon Gruden, who brought in AJ McCarron only last week to be the backup quarterback. The pressure is on the Oakland tackles, rookie No. 1 draft pick Kolton Miller out of UCLA on the left, and veteran Donald Penn, who has not had an easy adjustment to a new position on the right side. Expect the Rams to go hard after Carr from the outset with a dominant front consisting of Aaron Donald, Ndamukong Suh and Michael Brockers. However, if Oakland can get Marshawn Lynch and the running game going early, it should help the line give Carr time to find wide receivers Amari Cooper and Jordy Nelson downfield.
    Defensively, the Raiders under new coordinator Paul Guenther will play a lot of press man-to-man coverage and attempt to confuse Rams quarterback Jared Goff with different pressures. The Rams must provide running back Todd Gurley with lanes on first down against an Oakland defense without defensive end Khalil Mack, one of the best defenders in the game, who was traded to Chicago last weekend after a contract dispute. The Rams kept their offense pretty much under wraps throughout the preseason, but are expected to come out firing with Goff throwing early and often against the Raiders, and test a questionable secondary with wide receivers Brandin Cooks, Robert Woods, Cooper Kupp.

MATCHUPS TO WATCH:
    --Raiders WR Amari Cooper vs. Rams CBs Aqib Talib and Marcus Peters. The Raiders plan to move Cooper all over the field, so both new Rams cornerbacks should get a shot at the player Gruden has said will be the focal point of the passing offense. Both have plenty of AFC West experience against Cooper, Talib with the Broncos and Peters with the Chiefs. Cooper is a pretty cool customer and unlikely to fall for Talib's tactics the way Michael Crabtree did on two occasions when he had his chain snatched by the cornerback.
    --Rams DTs Aaron Donald and Ndamukong Suh vs. Raiders RT Donald Penn. Penn, a Pro Bowler two years ago at left tackle who missed the end of 2017 because of a broken leg, has struggled in his conversion to right tackle and goes against two of the NFL's best interior defenders in his first regular-season start at his new position. Donald missed all of the preseason before signing the most lucrative defensive contract in NFL history before Khalil Mack passed him a few days later. Suh is a five-time Pro Bowl selection who signed with the Rams after being released by Miami.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT: Rookies to watch - Rams OLB Justin Lawler. Barring injuries, the Rams will not need much from their rookies, but Lawler figures to earn a role as a pass-rush specialist and has the talent to be a factor chasing the quarterback. With no other rookies expected to contribute much as frontline players he could rise to the top as a pass rush factor.
    Raiders left tackle Kolton Miller. Miller has stepped in as a lean, 6-foot-8 left tackle and will be entrusted with protecting Carr's blind side. For that reason, he'd better be the Raiders' rookie of the year. The preseason, although Miller hasn't gotten an extensive amount of work, has been mildly encouraging.

FAST FACTS: RAMS QB Jared Goff passed for 3,804 yards with 28 touchdowns and seven interceptions in 2017, and was one of five NFL quarterbacks in 2017 with 100-plus passer rating. ... RB Todd Gurley earned AP Offensive Player of Year honors last season after leading the NFL with 2,093 scrimmage yards and 19 total touchdowns. ... WR Cooper Kupp led NFL rookie wide receivers with 62 catches and led the Rams with 869 receiving yards in 2017. ... WR Brandin Cooks will make his Rams debut after making 65 receptions for 1,082 yards and seven touchdowns last season for New England. ... DT Aaron Donald was named 2017 AP Defensive Player of Year. Since 2014, he leads NFL defensive tackles with 39 sacks. ... CB Marcus Peters, who is making his Rams debut, has 19 interceptions since 2015, most in NFL. ... DT Ndamukong Suh of the Rams ranks second among NFL defensive tackles with 51.5 sacks since 2010. ... RAIDERS QB Derek Carr is one of three quarterbacks in NFL history (Peyton Manning and Russell Wilson) with 3,000-plus passing yards and 20-plus touchdown passes in each of his first four seasons. ... RB Marshawn Lynch is second among active running backs with 81 rushing touchdowns and ranks fourth with 10,003 rushing yards. ... RB Doug Martin, making his Oakland debut, has 216 scrimmage yards (108 per game) in two career games vs. Rams. ... WR Amari Cooper had career-high seven touchdowns last season. ... WR Jordy Nelson has 69 career receiving touchdowns, tied for fifth-most among active players. ... TE Jared Cook led Raiders and ranked fifth among AFC tight ends with 688 receiving yards last season. ... DB Reggie Nelson of the Raiders has 36 career interceptions, most among active safeties.

PREDICTION: Derek Carr and several other Raiders said they were shocked to lose Khalil Mack and it might be difficult getting past that quickly, and they also will miss his presence and production. Not only that, head coach Jon Gruden has turned over much of the roster and it might take time for the new system to kick in. With quarterback Jared Goff and running back Todd Gurley leading the Rams' offense and coming off big seasons, and with Aaron Donald and Ndamukong Suh heading up the defense, this is a team with Super Bowl aspirations.

OUR PICK: Rams, 31-21.