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DRAFT EXPERTS



SCORE
STEPHEN BLACK

Dimitroff and company rarely miss on draft day; Jones adds missing piece to offense

The football team at the University of Guelph is not known by many. In fact, the school has never been to a bowl game or produced an All-American. Of course, this is because Guelph is located in Canada.

From such humble beginnings sprang Falcons general manager Thomas Dimitroff. Since being hired by Arthur Blank to re-stock the Atlanta cupboards in 2008, Dimitroff has done just that in four short years.

SLAM DUNK ...

The 2008 draft – Dimitroff's first – was a thing of beauty for Atlanta, as star quarterback Matt Ryan was selected third overall. Right behind him at pick No. 21 was Sam Baker, who has protected Ryan's blindside ever since. The current leader of the defense, middle linebacker Curtis Lofton, was then selected in the second round at pick No. 37.

Those three players have become some of the most valuable on the team. Also selected in the current staff's inaugural draft were Harry Douglas, Thomas DeCoud and Kroy

Biermann, all of whom will be counted on to make major contributions to this year's team.

NEAR PERFECTION ...

The following season, the Falcons' front office impressed yet again, but in a different way: each player selected in that draft is still active with an NFL team today. And seven of the eight 2009 draftees are still with the Falcons. Headlining the draft class was first-rounder Peria Jerry out of Ole Miss. Jerry has rebounded nicely from an unfortunate ACL tear, and will compete for a starter's job at defensive tackle this year.

Jerry was followed by four more defenders in subsequent rounds. William Moore and Christopher Owens are big parts of the secondary, while Lawrence Sidbury logs time at defensive end. Late-round choices Garrett Reynolds, Spencer Adkins and Vance Walker are all, remarkably, still with the team despite being chosen in the fifth round or later. The lone member of this class not currently with Atlanta is William Middleton, who is fighting for a starting job in Jacksonville.

UP AND COMING ...

The 2010 class has just one season under its belt, but four players made last season's roster and the other three may join them this year. First-round pick Sean Weatherspoon is the Falcons' future at outside linebacker, and despite injuries last season, he played in 11 games, starting five. Not bad for a "rook."

Corey Peters was a little-known defensive tackle out of Kentucky prior to the 2010 draft, but became a regular NFL player by fall. Peters played in all 16 regular season games and started 15 of them. While not many had heard of Peters, no one was familiar with Shann Schillinger coming out of the University of Montana (except Dimitroff, of course). He was the Falcons' last draftee in 2010 (sixth round), but played in 15 games, mostly on special teams.

This year, guard Mike Johnson will compete for a starting spot, while center Joe Hawley will try to make the team behind Todd McClure. Dominique Franks played a

bit at cornerback last year, while Kerry Meier may have seen time at wide receiver had he not gotten hurt prior to the season.

JULIO MANIA ...

That leaves the most recent draft class. In a draft-day move, Dimitroff and the Falcons decided to trade five draft picks for the No. 6 overall selection. With it, Atlanta took super-freak wide receiver Julio Jones out of Alabama. The move was widely lauded by the NFL media and many expect Jones to provide a solid No. 2 wide receiver target for Ryan. With another speedy deep threat on the outside, star receiver Roddy White is licking his chops just thinking about the possibilities.

As exciting and satisfying as last year's NFC South championship and the No. 1 NFC playoff seed was, Falcons fans have a lot more to look forward to. Dimitroff and the Falcons' front office has stocked this team with talented and young players who all have their best days in front of them.

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LOOKING DEEP



SCORE
EVAN SHAPIRO

Ryan, Falcons offense prepare to take advantage of veteran weapons, new talents

After an offseason full of NFL labor issues, the Falcons are well into training camp and excited to be back on the field. Perhaps the most excited to be back is star quarterback Matt Ryan, who led the Falcons through a 13-3 season and the NFC South division title, and has stepped up his role as team leader since the lockout.

TYING THE KNOT ...

Ryan had a busy offseason. Besides marrying college sweetheart Sarah Marshall, Ryan also helped lead team workouts and training without coaches, all the while keeping teammate Tony Gonzalez up to date on the team's activities. After Gonzalez told the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that retirement was "always a possibility," many speculated that the free agent tight end would not return for another season. Ryan, however, claims that the team knew he was coming back the whole time.

"He kind of trained that way the entire time, so I wasn't worried about that at all," Ryan said. In fact, throughout training, Gonzalez was apparently very invested in the team's activities and hounded Ryan for infor-

mation. "He was wearing me out, texting me and calling me. He always wanted to know what we were doing, what we were working on, what he could be working on...those kind of things," Ryan said, "and it was tough, because I didn't really know what the coaching staff was doing at the time."

While Ryan is glad to have Gonzalez back as a passing option, he'll have a couple more exciting offensive weapons to work with this season with draft picks Julio Jones and Jacquizz Rodgers. Jones, the ultra-fast receiver from Alabama, has been training with the team and Ryan is optimistic about what he's seen.

"I think Julio's done a good job," Ryan said after practice on Tuesday. "He was here during the offseason early working with us and getting some extra time on task, and I think that's going to pay dividends."

Rodgers, a fifth-round pick, also has shown tremendous promise on the field, though he hasn't been training with the team as long.

"I've been impressed with him," said Ryan. "I've been impressed with both those guys."

Ryan's arm looked as good as ever at Tuesday's practice, and with these two new assets, plus veterans Gonzalez and Roddy White, the Falcons' offense should really soar.

Ryan believes the team as a whole, though, has "continued to get a little bit better every day." He explained that at this point in camp (five days in), players tend to get tired and sore, but the veteran has confidence in his teammates and knows how to lead them. "If we're going to be productive in the four weeks that we're in training camp," said Ryan, "we need to push through that and continue to work hard."

ADDING A NEW DIMENSION ...

The Falcons are, indeed, working quite hard, practicing new explosive plays (20 or more yards) under the guidance of head coach Mike Smith.

"Creating the explosive play is an area we need to improve," Smith told the *AJC*. These explosive plays will affect both the running and passing game, so Ryan will obviously play a central and critical role in making them

work. He knows that preparing and executing big plays will take a lot of time and effort, and he is constantly trying to improve his game.

"I've gotta be more accurate down the field on the deeper throws, put those guys in position to make plays," Ryan said, "and I think the only way to do that is to do it in practice."

Ryan will continue to perfect his game in the next two weeks before the Falcons' first preseason game against Miami on Aug. 12. Though the whole team must perform at the top of their game, the key to success for the Falcons' offense this upcoming season will be in executing those explosive plays that Smith and Ryan have emphasized so much.

"When we have opportunities to make explosive plays, we have to make them," Ryan said. "We can't miss."

With a receiving corps that is stronger than ever, fresh blood at the running back position, and an excellent passer to lead them, the Falcons won't miss much.

Shapiro can be reached at 404-256-1572.

KIA MOTORS FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS

OFFSEASON PREPARATION



SCORE
JASON PARKER

Led by Ryan, Falcons get past lockout issues by holding independent workouts

The 2011 offseason was unlike any other in recent memory for players, coaches and even fans. On March 12, due to differing opinions in the split of total revenue between the players and owners, among other issues, the NFL owners decided to lock out its players. During the lockout, the players were prohibited from having any sort of communication with their respective coaches.

For teams with potential rookie quarterbacks, the lockout was a devastating blow. Cam Newton has a little over one month to learn the entire Panther offense to be ready to start in Week 1, which may have to do. Fortunately for the Falcons, the majority of the offense has played together for a few years now, and most overlooked is the fact that offensive coordinator Mike Mularkey returns for his fourth season with the team. With Ryan knowing the offense like the back of his hand, he was able to get with his teammates throughout the offseason and work on his game, as well as act as a sit-in head coach for the young guys.

As stated before, the rookies this year were put into a tremendously awkward situ-

ation. Julio Jones was drafted by Atlanta in April, but could not speak a word to head coach Mike Smith or Mularkey until the conclusion of the lockout on July 25. Jones and Ryan spent all summer working together on routes, different packages and their relationship in general. It's clear whatever they did this summer was beneficial, as Jones has looked dominant so far in camp.

Tony Gonzalez, future Hall of Fame tight end, tweeted about Jones this week: "This kid Julio Jones is the real deal. He's the best incoming receiver I've ever played with. Come to think of it, it's not even close."

CHANGE OF PLANS ...

In relative terms, the skill players had it easy. The linemen missed out on team conditioning, OTAs (organized team activities) and the ability to use the team's workout facility.

For veteran center Todd McClure, the offseason was normal, yet unique. "Well I was back in Louisiana, so there was nobody really down there," said the former LSU Tiger after Tuesday's practice. "I just

kind of did my own thing like I've been doing for the past 12 years. But it was a unique situation because we had three linemen that were going to be free agents and we didn't know if they would be here or not, so it was hard for us to get together as a starting offensive line."

With the major success this line has had over the past couple seasons, it was clear the Falcons would have trouble re-signing all three free-agent linemen (Harvey Dahl, Justin Blalock and Tyson Clabo). "All three of those guys were projected to make a little bit of money, and it was going to be hard to pay them," McClure said. "Now we're just hoping that somebody steps up and fills Harvey's shoes."

McClure also stated that he holds great off-the-field relationships with his coaches. "Sometimes you just want to call and talk about life, and you couldn't this past year. The people that missed it the most, though, were the younger guys who couldn't come in and have OTAs. They are really behind the 8-ball."

The lockout clearly puts every team in a worse situation, but the Falcons are certainly

one of the few teams in the league that should not have lingering effects of the lockout in Week 1. With just two new starters on offense and one new starter on defense, the Falcons are in great shape. The veterans have spent time this summer lecturing the young guys, and the young guys have responded early in camp.

"[The young guys] just need to keep working hard in the meetings, and hopefully by then, they will feel comfortable with their roles in the offense," said quarterback Matt Ryan.

The organization admits the difficulty this summer's lockout imposed, but they do not plan on using the lockout as any type of excuse for poor play. All 32 teams experienced the same troubles, and it's an even playing field. With that said, the Falcons players stayed as prepared as possible throughout the summer. With the leadership Ryan has instilled in his young offensive players, and the team's continuity, expect on Sept. 11 in Chicago, for the Falcons to look as sharp as ever.

Parker can be reached at 404-256-1572.

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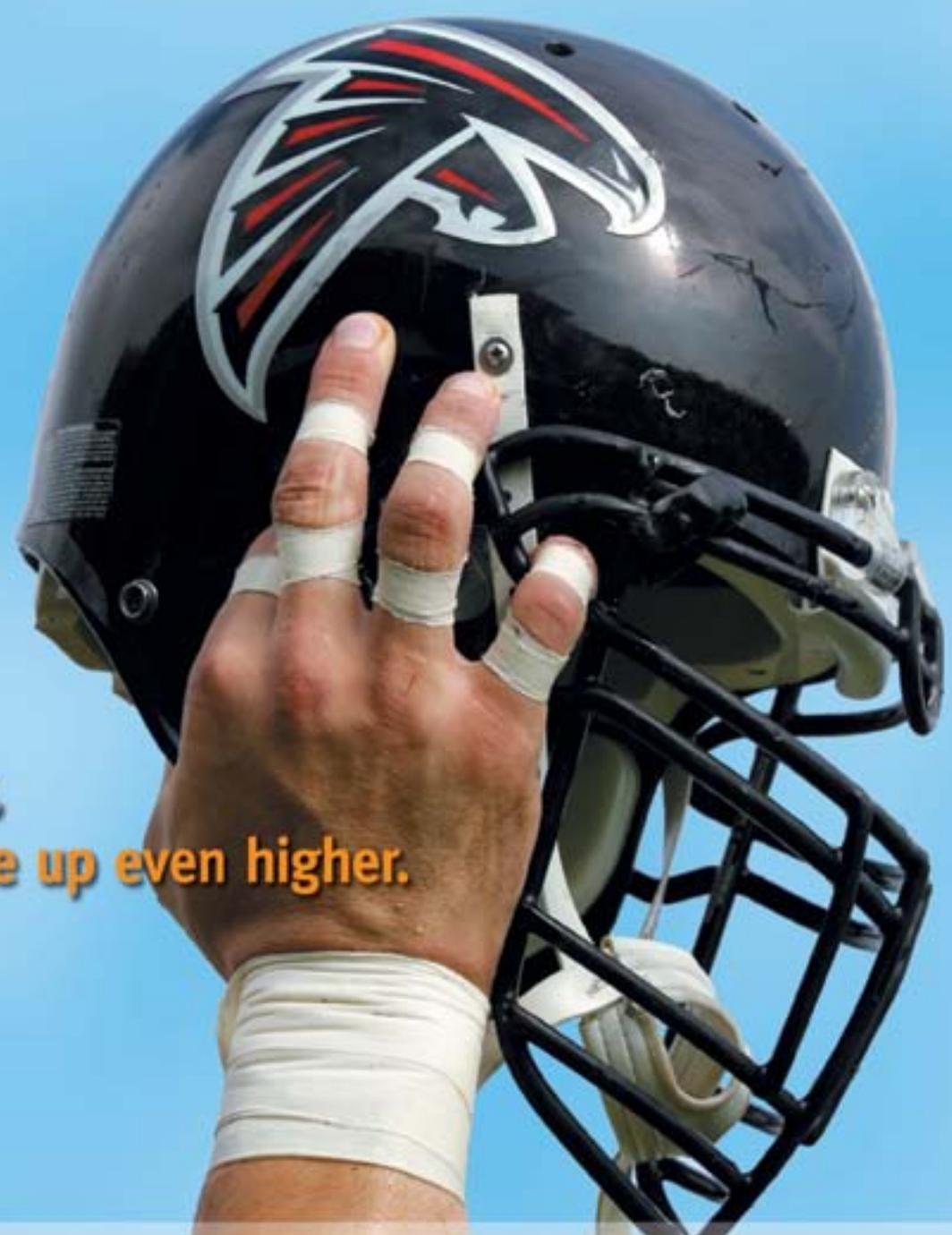
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NFC PREVIEW

By Evan Shapiro

ARIZONA CARDINALS

The Cardinals are revamping their offense in a big way, releasing starting QB Derek Anderson and trading CB Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie and a second-round draft pick to get former Eagles QB Kevin Kolb. If Arizona can re-sign star Pro Bowl WR Larry Fitzgerald (still unsigned as of press time), the passing attack will be decent. At TE, Arizona is stronger than ever with newly-signed veteran Todd Heap along with Jeff King.

ATLANTA FALCONS

Following an impressive 13-3 season last year, the Falcons return a strong offense led by QB Matt Ryan, bruising RB Michael Turner, ageless TE Tony Gonzalez and prolific WR Roddy White. First-round pick Julio Jones will give Ryan yet another weapon. On defense, Atlanta signed former Vikings DE Ray Edwards who, along with John Abraham, will get after the quarterback. The Falcons again look like a playoff team.

CAROLINA PANTHERS

After a disappointing 2-14 season last year, the Panthers have room for improvement. This preseason they focused on re-signing their core free agents, including key players RB DeAngelo Williams, C Ryan Kalil, DE Charles Johnson and LB James Anderson. They also signed several veteran free agents, like TE Greg Olsen from Chicago. The biggest hope, though, lies in first-round draft pick QB Cam Newton, who will try to turn around Carolina's fortunes.

CHICAGO BEARS

Lovie Smith's squad won its division last season, and is focusing on scoring more points. The Bears signed the highly skilled, but undrafted, rookie free agent WR Dane Sanzenbacher. On top of that, Chicago signed former Cowboys RB Marion Barber as well as Pro Bowl WR Roy Williams. The OL took a hit, though, as they weren't able to re-sign six-time Pro Bowl center Olin Kreutz.

DALLAS COWBOYS

The 'Boys had a disappointing 6-10 run last season, but new head coach Jason Garrett inherits a talented roster. However, with the loss of free agent DE Stephen Bowen and the release of veteran RT Marc Colombo, Dallas is struggling to solidify its lines of scrimmage. Second-round draft pick OLB Bruce Carter will help out on defense, and the offensive line should see some improvement with first-round pick OT Tyron Smith.

DETROIT LIONS

The Lions are an improving team, but are still young and inexperienced in many key positions. They focused their free-agent time on reinforcing their defense, seeking two new LBs and CBs. The free agency explosion aided them in this respect, and Detroit was able to re-sign CB Chris Houston and sign free agent LB Stephen Tulloch, who had a great five-year run with the Titans. The Lions are young, but boast a solid DL and talented offense.

GREEN BAY PACKERS

The defending Super Bowl champs have kept much of their strong offense, re-signing WR James Jones and FB John Kuhn. They played the draft well, too, selecting RB Alex Green in the third round and picking OL Derek Sherrod in the first round, who will likely be playing LG this season. The defense will be young with six defensive players released, including veteran LB Nick Barnett, but the offense will be dynamic.

MINNESOTA VIKINGS

First-round draft pick Christian Ponder may take over at QB if Joe Webb does not. After watching Sidney Rice walk out the door, the Vikings added two veterans to help shore up the WR corps, signing former Falcons WR Michael Jenkins (who worked with Minnesota offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave in Atlanta) and former Bears WR Devin Aromashodu. The Vikings' offense should also benefit from newly-signed OT Charlie Johnson.

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

The Saints finished with a solid 11-5 record last season, but suffered an unfortunate playoff exit to Seattle. After trading star RB Reggie Bush to Miami, New Orleans re-signed several key players, including Pro Bowl safety Roman Harper and WR Lance Moore (one of QB Drew Brees' favorite receivers). New acquisitions include RB Darren Sproles, who should help soften the sting of Bush's absence.

NEW YORK GIANTS

In order to stay under the salary cap, the Giants are changing up their offensive line, cutting veterans Shaun O'Hara and Rich Seubert, moving David Diehl from LT to LG and signing free agent center David Baas. On defense, the Giants have some holes to fill on the defensive line as they released DTs Barry Cofield and Rocky Bernard, but DE Mathias Kiwanuka has re-signed and should help bolster the defense.

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

Philadelphia took the lion's share of the free agency pool, scooping up multiple star players. On defense, the Eagles signed two new CBs, All-Pro Nnamdi Asomugha and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, as well as DT Cullen Jenkins and Pro Bowl DE Jason Babin. Equally impressive on offense are newly-signed QB Vince Young, RB Ronnie Brown, WR Johnnie Lee Higgins and TE Donald Lee. The Eagles are a favorite in the NFC.

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

The Niners had a frustrating 6-10 season last year and, as a result, fired Mike Singletary and hired former Stanford head coach Jim Harbaugh. New defensive coordinator Vic Fangio will install a 3-4 scheme to apply pressure on the QB. First-round pick OLB Aldon Smith may start this season, and free agent LBs Antwan Applewhite and Larry Grant were signed. In addition to the upgraded defense, the 49ers signed Pro Bowl kicker David Akers.

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

The Seahawks surprised New Orleans in the playoffs last year, but needed help on offense. To bolster the line, Seattle drafted OT James Carpenter (first round) and OG John Moffitt (third round), while also signing veteran OG Robert Gallery. The RB trio of Marshawn Lynch, Justin Forsett and Leon Washington should make for a formidable running attack. Seattle also nabbed QB Tarvaris Jackson and deep-threat WR Sidney Rice to completely reinvent their aerial attack.

ST. LOUIS RAMS

Following difficult recent seasons, the Rams hired Josh McDaniels to be the offensive coordinator. The former Broncos head coach will run more of a passing game than last year. Newly-signed WR Mike Sims-Walker and last season's leading receiver Danny Amendola should adapt to the new style, though veteran Steven Jackson and the RBs may need time for the learning curve. St. Louis signed free agent DT Justin Bannan to help plug the middle.

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

After improving from 3-13 in 2009 to 10-6 last year, the Buccaneers decided to mostly stay out of the free agent market, and instead focused on re-signing players. The Bucs had a weak defense last season, but were able to ink LB Adam Hayward, who is invaluable to the Bucs' special teams. Tampa Bay also re-signed OL Davin Joseph, who teams with Jeremy Trueblood to maintain a strong offensive line.

WASHINGTON REDSKINS

The Redskins struggled defensively last season after switching from a 4-3 scheme to a 3-4. This year, they acquired players who would fit into that 3-4 scheme, like first-round pick OLB Ryan Kerrigan and free agent DE Stephen Bowen. Washington also beefed up its RB corps, trading for Tim Hightower. They traded away Donovan McNabb and have a thin selection of QBs, though super-fast WR Santana Moss has re-signed.

KIA MOTORS FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS

FALCONS OFFENSE



QB **Matt Ryan (No. 2, 6-4, 217)** – In just his third season, Ryan led the Falcons to the best record in the NFC, passing for 3,705 yards and 28 TDs. This year, the focus will be on getting back to the playoffs and putting up more stellar numbers.

Backups: **Chris Redman (No. 8, 6-3, 225)** – This will be Redman's fifth season as a Falcon. He has been a very reliable backup for Matt Ryan's entire career. The Louisville product is in his 12th NFL season. ... **John Parker Wilson (No. 4, 6-2, 215)** – Wilson was signed as an undrafted free agent in 2009 and has been the third-string quarterback ever since. At Alabama, he proved he can win, as the Crimson Tide went undefeated during the 2009 regular season. ... **Adam Froman (No.13, 6-4, 220)** was signed as an undrafted free agent.



RB **Michael Turner (No. 33, 5-10, 247)** – Turner stepped his game back up in 2010 with an NFC-best 1,371 yards and 12 touchdowns to go along with his second Pro Bowl selection. With newly inserted third-down back Jacquizz Rodgers, Turner should be able to keep his legs even fresher this season.

Backups: **Jacquizz Rodgers (No. 22, 5-6, 196)** – A fifth-round pick out of Oregon State, Rodgers will be the heir apparent to Jerious Norwood, and will be counted on to catch passes out of the backfield. He will most likely be the Falcons' third-down back. ... **Antone Smith (No. 35, 5-9, 192)** – Smith will be ready in case of injury, as he proved during his time at FSU. ... **Gartrell Johnson (No. 27, 5-10, 219)** – Johnson is in his fourth season out of Colorado State. ... **Philip Sylvester (No. 32, 5-9, 194)** was signed as an undrafted free agent.



FB **Ovie Mughelli (No. 34, 6-1, 250)** – Mughelli has gotten the reputation around the league as possibly the best fullback in football. He represented the NFC as the starting fullback in the Pro Bowl last season and remains a big part of the Falcons' successful running game. Not only is Mughelli a fierce blocker, but he can also catch the ball out of the backfield, as well as run it. He had 13 receptions last season for 126 yards and one touchdown. Mughelli attended Wake Forest from 1999-2002 and was originally a fourth-round pick of the Baltimore Ravens and was a free-agent signing for the Falcons in 2007. With the team's high confidence in Mughelli, they decided not to carry a backup. ... **Lucas Cox (No. 42, 6-0, 245)** and **Thor Merrow (No. 40, 6-0, 252)** were signed as undrafted free agents.



TE **Tony Gonzalez (No. 88, 6-5, 247)** – Gonzalez returns for the 15th season of his illustrious and prolific career. Gonzalez was second on the team in receptions a year ago with 70 for 656 yards and six TDs. Gonzalez is arguably the greatest tight end of all time.

Backups: **Justin Peelle (No. 87, 6-4, 251)** – Peelle is more known for his blocking, but when needed, he can be productive in the passing game. In the 2008 wild card playoff game against Arizona, Peelle had a huge touchdown catch right before the half. ... **Michael Palmer (No. 81, 6-5, 252)** – Palmer is in his second season out of Clemson. He is a homegrown player from Tucker. ... **Ryan Winterswyk (No. 86, 6-4, 258)** was signed as an undrafted free agent out of Boise State. ... **Marquez Branson (No. 85, 6-3, 247)** was signed as an undrafted free agent.



WR **Roddy White (No. 84, 6-0, 211)** – White has become a top-five receiver in the NFL. White led the league last year with 115 receptions for 1,389 yards and 10 TDs, and his rapport with QB Matt Ryan will only improve as the years go on. White was named All-Pro for the first time in 2010 and has made three Pro Bowls.

Backups: **Harry Douglas (No. 83, 6-0, 183)** – Douglas came back last season from a knee injury in 2009, catching 22 balls for 294 yards. ... **Kerry Meier (No. 80, 6-3, 220)** – The former Kansas QB was lost for his rookie season due to a knee injury. ... **Andy Strickland (No. 15, 6-0, 197)** – Strickland ranks fifth all-time in receiving yards at Wofford. ... **Tim Buckley (No. 16, 6-1, 185)** – Buckley played QB in college for Alcorn State. ... **Doug Beaumont (No. 18, 5-9, 187)** and **Kevin Cone (No. 12, 6-2, 216)** were signed as undrafted free agents.



LT **Sam Baker (No. 72, 6-5, 301)** – For the most part, Baker has started at left tackle for the Falcons since his rookie season in 2008. The California native has been a huge part of the dominant rushing attack of recent years, as well as protecting the ever-important blindside of Matt Ryan. Baker played at the University of Southern California, and was named national co-offensive lineman of the year his senior year.

Backups: **Will Svitek (No. 74, 6-6, 308)** – The Falcons acquired Svitek in February of 2009. The Stanford alum started two games that year and the Falcons did not give up a sack while he was on the field. He remains a reliable backup for Baker and Clabo, and his versatility makes him a candidate to play either tackle position.



LG **Justin Blalock (No. 63, 6-4, 326)** – Blalock has started all but two games for the Falcons since he was drafted in 2007. An All-American at the University of Texas, he is a staple on Atlanta's offensive line, also helping the running game acquire its dominance. Fortunately, the Falcons were able to re-up Blalock for six more seasons. At age 27, Blalock should have a spot on this line for the foreseeable future.

Backups: **Jose Valdez (No. 65, 6-6, 324)** – Valdez was signed as an undrafted free agent in 2009 out of Arkansas. He has spent time on the Falcons' practice squad.



C **Todd McClure (No. 62, 6-1, 296)** – McClure was drafted in 1999 and is now the longest-tenured Falcon. He has started more than 150 games at center for the Falcons despite being a seventh-round draft pick. McClure has helped pave the way for three 1,000-yard rushers over his career: Warrick Dunn, Jamal Anderson and Michael Turner. He hopes to add 2011 under Turner's name as well.

Backups: **Joe Hawley (No. 61, 6-3, 302)** – Hawley was drafted in the fourth round in 2010 out of UNLV. He was named an honorable mention All-MWC player his senior season. Hawley will also be given an opportunity to start at right guard this year due to the loss in free agency of former right guard Harvey Dahl. ... **Rob Bruggeman (No. 67, 6-4, 293)** – Bruggeman attended the University of Iowa and was signed as an undrafted free agent to Tampa Bay in 2009. He was picked up as a free agent by Atlanta and has spent time on the Falcons' practice squad. **Paul Fenaroli (No. 68, 6-3, 310)**, **Ryan McMahon (No. 64, 6-1, 284)** and **Matt Murphy (No. 66, 6-4, 300)** were recently signed as undrafted free agents.



RG **Garrett Reynolds (No. 75, 6-7, 310)/Mike Johnson (No. 79, 6-6, 304)** – Johnson and Reynolds will battle for the starting job in training camp. These two talented young players were recent Falcons draft choices who have improved tremendously. Johnson was drafted in the third round by Atlanta in 2010 out of Alabama, where he was named to the All-America squad his junior and senior season. Reynolds has seen occasional action for the Falcons on the OL, but mainly plays on special teams. Reynolds was drafted in the fifth round in 2009 out of North Carolina.

Backups: **Andrew Jackson (No. 69, 6-5, 299)** – Jackson was selected in the seventh round this year by Atlanta out of Fresno State. He will be battling with Johnson and others for the starting right guard position.



RT **Tyson Clabo (No. 77, 6-6, 329)** – Clabo has started over 60 games as a Falcon, doing a phenomenal job opening up the right side of the field for Michael Turner and company. As is the case with others on the line, the product of Wake Forest was an undrafted free agent when he was signed in 2004. At 331 pounds, Clabo can knock around most defensive linemen in this league. Clabo was re-signed this offseason for five years.

Backups: **Will Svitek (No. 74, 6-6, 308)** – Svitek also backs up Baker at left tackle. The California native was selected in the sixth round of the 2005 draft by Kansas City and was acquired by the Falcons in 2009. Svitek played in all 16 games last season and even saw time at tight end.



WR **Julio Jones (No. 11, 6-3, 220)** – The Falcons felt they needed a threat opposite White, so they traded up to draft Jones out of Alabama. Jones has the talent to become a top receiver in this league. His breakaway speed complements his impressive frame quite nicely. Jones and White will be a tough cover for any tandem of corners in this league.

Backups: **Kerry Meier (No. 80, 6-3, 220)** – Meier was lost for his rookie season due to a knee injury. In workouts, he has proven to be a sure-handed, reliable receiver with a professional attitude. ... **Eric Weems (No. 14, 5-9, 195)** – Weems proved last season he could be more than just a returner, catching six passes for 61 yards. ... **Brandyn Harvey (No. 17, 6-4, 205)** – Harvey amassed 1,835 receiving yards and 11 TDs at Villanova. ... **Drew Davis (No. 19, 6-1, 205)** and **P.J. Gore (No. 89, 6-3, 180)** were signed as undrafted free agents.



K **Matt Bryant (No. 3, 5-9, 203)** – Bryant is coming off his best season as a pro, hitting 28 of 31 field goals last year. Bryant has been very reliable since coming to the Falcons in 2009, nailing game-winners against New Orleans, Green Bay and San Francisco last season. The Baylor alum also hit a game-winning 62-yard field goal for Tampa Bay in 2006 to defeat the Eagles. Bryant has been around the game for a long time and understands what type of preparation is needed to succeed in such a pressure-filled job as an NFL kicker. ... **Matt Boshier (No. 5, 6-0, 208)** will handle kickoff duties and could see time kicking field goals as well. ... **Jacob Harfman (No. 1, 5-10, 195)** was signed as an undrafted free agent.



KR **Eric Weems (No. 14, 5-9, 195)** – Weems certainly solidified himself as the Falcons' top kick returner last season, taking a kickoff for touchdown in Tampa Bay to help clinch a win. Weems also returned a kick all the way in the playoff game against Green Bay, sending the Georgia Dome crowd into a frenzy and had a punt return for a touchdown in the regular-season finale against Carolina. Weems was named to the 2010 Pro Bowl as a returner.

Backups: **Harry Douglas (No. 83, 6-0, 183)** – Douglas returned punts his rookie year, and did an excellent job. His injury cost him the returner's job last year, but Douglas proved in 2009 that he has big-play potential. It's safe to say the Falcons would not lose a beat with Douglas returning kicks.

KIA MOTORS FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS

FALCONS DEFENSE

DE



John Abraham (No. 55, 6-4, 263) – Abraham is heading into his 12th season in the NFL, but he is showing no signs of slowing down at 33-years old. The former South Carolina standout played in 15 regular-season games last year and tallied 13 sacks, tied for second most in his career. In addition to his own numbers, Abraham frees up other Falcons defenders by consistently commanding double teams.
Backups: **Lawrence Sidbury (No. 90, 6-3, 261)** – The former Richmond Spider has provided much-needed depth up front in his first two NFL seasons. ... **Cliff Matthews (No. 93, 6-4, 268)** – A former Gamecock like Abraham, Matthews was selected by Atlanta in the seventh round of the 2011 draft. ... **Emmanuel Stephens (No. 96, 6-3, 255)** – A second-year player out of Ole Miss, Stephens will contend for a roster spot.

DT



Jonathan Babineaux (No. 95, 6-2, 300) – A product of Iowa entering his seventh year in the league, Babineaux notched four sacks in 15 games last season and continued to emerge as the team's most consistent defensive tackle. He also recovered a fumble for touchdown last year in a win at Seattle. Babineaux has a huge presence in stuffing the run.
Backups: **Vance Walker (No. 99, 6-2, 304)** – A former Georgia Tech Yellow Jacket, Walker stayed in town when the Falcons selected him in the seventh round of the 2009 draft. He started to produce as a second-year pro in 2010, playing in all 16 games and making 11 tackles. ... **Trey Lewis (No. 97, 6-3, 312)** – Lewis has appeared in 18 games.

DT



Corey Peters (No. 91, 6-3, 305) – A third-round draft pick in 2010, Peters pleasantly surprised the Falcons as a rookie. Taking up a hefty amount of space in the middle of the line, Peters excelled against the run and made 33 tackles—including 25 solo—in 16 games. He has a real chance to snag a starting job for the 2011 campaign. Peters played his college ball at the University of Kentucky.
Backups: **Peria Jerry (No. 94, 6-2, 295)** – A first-round selection out of Ole Miss in 2009, Jerry has the talent to be a long-term starter if healthy. Last year he continued to work hard to rebound from knee injury from his rookie season and is looking to compete with Peters for a starting role. Jerry saw action in 16 games last season and had two sacks.

DE



Ray Edwards (No. 93, 6-5, 268) – After the Falcons' inability to pressure Aaron Rodgers in the divisional playoffs, they needed to make a big splash in free agency on a pass rusher, and they did just that. Edwards, formerly with Minnesota, has record 16.5 sacks over the past two seasons, and at just 26 years of age, he seems to be just getting started.
Backups: **Kroy Biermann (No. 71, 6-3, 255)** – A fifth-round selection out of Montana in 2008, Biermann assumed a starting role in 2010 and he has a combined 85 tackles and eight sacks over his past two seasons. ... **Chauncey Davis (No. 92, 6-2, 271)** – The veteran from Florida State provides valuable depth on the line and has started six games over the past two seasons. He returned an interception for a touchdown in 2010.

OLB



Mike Peterson (No. 53, 6-1, 226) – A 12-year veteran, Peterson has been outstanding both on the field and in a leadership role in two seasons with the Falcons. The Florida native started 13 games last season, made two interceptions and recovered two fumbles.
Backups: **Stephen Nicholas (No. 54, 6-3, 236)** – Nicholas has progressed nicely since the Falcons nabbed him out of South Florida in the fourth round of the 2007 draft. He filled in as a starter when Sean Weatherspoon was hurt and made 158 tackles during the last two seasons. ... **Spencer Adkins (No. 59, 5-11, 236)** – Adkins has played sparingly in two NFL seasons, but he will be ready to chip in both at linebacker and on special teams. ... **LaMarcus Thompson (No. 46, 6-1, 228)** was added as an undrafted free agent.

MLB



Curtis Lofton (No. 50, 6-0, 241) – Lofton has emerged as one of the premier linebackers in the league heading into his fourth season. A full-time starter since Day 1 in Atlanta, the former Oklahoma Sooner made 160 tackles in 2009 and 142 last year. Lofton posted a career-high two sacks in 2010 in addition to his first NFL interception. In his third year, Lofton will be the centerpiece of this defense, keeping new talents such as Ray Edwards in the fold.
Backups: **Coy Wire (No. 52, 6-0, 225)** – Wire has been a leader for Atlanta's special teams the past three seasons. Playing time behind Lofton is hard to come by, but the former Stanford linebacker often sees action in passing situations. ... **Bear Woods (No. 45, 6-0, 245)** – Woods will compete to back up Lofton.

OLB



Sean Weatherspoon (No. 56, 6-2, 244) – Weatherspoon started the first three games of his rookie season, but he dealt with ankle and knee injuries the rest of the way and made only two more starts while missing five contests. Still, Atlanta's 2010 first-round pick out of Missouri was impressive when on the field and he should be back in the starting lineup with a clean bill of health.
Backups: **Akeem Dent (No. 43, 6-1, 239)** – Dent showed versatility at Georgia, playing both inside and outside linebacker. He led the Bulldogs in tackles (125) last season and could contribute right away after being selected in the third round. ... **Robert James (No. 51, 5-11, 224)** – James' work on the practice squad could pay off in the form of a roster spot. ... **Youri Yenga (No. 49, 6-1, 231)** was added as an undrafted free agent.

LCB



Brent Grimes (No. 20, 5-10, 183) – Pro Bowl cornerback Grimes had a stellar season last year, starting all 16 games and racking up a career-best 82 tackles and a team-leading five interceptions. He has improved in each of his four seasons with the Falcons so far, with 196 total tackles and 42 passes defended, and should perform well as a starter again this season.
Backup: **Christopher Owens (No. 21, 5-9, 180)** – After being selected in the third round of the 2009 draft out of San Jose State, Owens has started nine games in two years with the Falcons. He should once again earn considerable playing time, especially in nickel and dime situations. ... **Kirk Belgrave (No. 37, 6-1, 205)** and **Darrin Walls (No. 29, 6-0, 190)** were added as undrafted free agents.

RCB



Dunta Robinson (No. 23, 5-10, 183) – In his first season with Atlanta after coming over from Houston, Robinson locked down his half of the field and constantly watched quarterbacks work the other side. As such, the former South Carolina standout tallied just one interception, which came in Week 17 against Carolina. Still, he made 52 solo tackles. A big hitter and a shutdown corner, Robinson should have more opportunities in 2011 with Grimes having established himself at the other cornerback position.
Backup: **Dominique Franks (No. 24, 6-0, 197)** – A fifth-round draft pick out of Oklahoma in 2010, Franks played sparingly in his first NFL season. His unique athleticism, though, gives the Falcons depth both at cornerback and on special teams. ... **Kamaal McIlwain (No. 26, 5-10, 175)** was added as an undrafted free agent.

S



Thomas DeCoud (No. 28, 6-2, 192) – Another one of Atlanta's own draft picks who has stepped into prominence, DeCoud had a combined four interceptions over the past two seasons. The California product made a career-high 74 tackles in 2010, including 56 of the solo variety. His second-quarter pick at New Orleans set up a Falcons touchdown and paved the way to a victory that ultimately allowed the team to capture the NFC South title.
Backups: **Shann Schillinger (No. 39, 6-0, 200)** – Schillinger suffered a fractured ankle late last season, but is ready to go this season. The sixth-round pick out of Montana in 2010 is expected to play on special teams while also providing depth at free safety. ... **Rafael Priest (No. 38, 5-10, 181)** and **Suaesi Tuimaunei (No. 41, 6-1, 205)** were added as undrafted free agents.

S



William Moore (No. 25, 6-0, 221) – Moore bided his time as a rookie in 2009 and did not disappoint when he took over a starting position last season. The former Missouri Tiger tallied 72 tackles (59 solo) and came up with five interceptions, which he returned for a total of 117 yards. He helped seal a Week 11 road win at St. Louis last season with a dramatic fourth-quarter pick. Just 26-years old, Moore figures to be a long-term stalwart of Atlanta's secondary. Moore and DeCoud have developed a nice tandem in the defensive backfield.
Backup: **Rafael Bush (No. 36, 5-11, 180)** – An undrafted rookie free agent out of South Carolina State, Bush can play both cornerback and safety. ... **Matt Hansen (No. 30, 6-1, 230)** was added as an undrafted free agent.

P



Matt Boshier (No. 5, 6-0, 208) – Atlanta drafted Boshier in the sixth round of this year's draft. The University of Miami product was an All-ACC performer for three straight seasons and was named all-conference as both a punter and kicker. He averaged 44.0 yards per punt in 2010 while also handling field goals. If Matt Bryant is unavailable at any time, it is possible that the Falcons may look to Boshier for field goal duties as well. The Jupiter, Fla. native set the school record at Miami for consecutive field goals made with 14. He handled punting, field goal kicking and kickoff duties for the Hurricanes.
Backup: **Ken Parrish (No. 6, 6-2, 210)** was signed as an undrafted free agent.

PR



Eric Weems (No. 14, 5-9, 195) – In his fourth campaign with the Falcons, Weems booked a spot in his first Pro Bowl. He was the only player in the NFC to return both a punt and a kickoff for a touchdown. An undrafted rookie free agent out of Bethune-Cookman in 2007, Weems averaged 12.8 yards per punt return last year. He wrapped up the regular season in style with a 55-yard punt return for a score in the finale against Carolina before taking a kickoff to paydirt in the playoff game against Green Bay.
Backup: **Harry Douglas (No. 83, 6-0, 183)** – A special teams sensation during his rookie year of 2008, Douglas suffered a season-ending knee injury one season later. The Louisville product got back into the mix at receiver in 2010 and will contend for punt return duties.

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AFC PREVIEW

By Scott St. Lifer



BALTIMORE RAVENS

The Ravens should continue to have a defensive-minded team this season. The return of Ray Lewis and Ed Reed should keep the defense in top form. With the short offseason, the team decided to part ways with long-time offensive playmakers Derrick Mason, Willis McGahee and Todd Heap. These moves, coupled with draft picks Torrey Smith and Jah Reid, show the Ravens look to become younger on the offensive side of the ball.



BUFFALO BILLS

The Bills focused on defense in the draft, as eight out of their nine picks were defenders including DT Marcell Dareus. The Bills also re-signed DE Shawne Merriman, who they expect to regain his Pro Bowl form. The offense found a leader last season in QB Ryan Fitzpatrick and a deep threat in Steve Johnson. RB C.J. Spiller must perform at an elite level if the offense wants to get over the hump.



CINCINNATI BENGALS

The Bengals announced they have no intentions of trading Carson Palmer, forcing him to make the decision of retiring or playing in Cincinnati. The organization decided to move forward regardless of his decision by drafting QB Andy Dalton. The team also decided to go younger at WR by dealing Chad Ochocinco to New England to make room for rookie A.J. Green. Marvin Lewis' team will look to bounce back after a disappointing 2010.



CLEVELAND BROWNS

After another lousy season, the Browns must rely on their young talent. Colt McCoy will take over the quarterbacking duties full time this season after the team cut ties with Jake Delhomme. Peyton Hillis returns at running back after becoming one of the league's premier backs last season. New head coach Pat Shurmur takes over a franchise that may be on the way up, but for now, they will struggle to contend for the playoffs.



DENVER BRONCOS

The Josh McDaniels experiment ended in Denver with the hiring of defensive guru John Fox as the next head coach. Fox brings with him the experience of coaching in two Super Bowls. A QB battle looms for the Broncos among Kyle Orton, Tim Tebow and Brady Quinn heading into camp. Orton was benched for the final two games of the 2010 season in favor of Tebow. Rookie DE Von Miller should help out what was an abysmal defense last season.



HOUSTON TEXANS

The Texans were a disappointment in 2010 by slumping to a 6-10 record. They had one of the most prolific offenses in the league behind Arian Foster, the NFL's leading rusher. The passing game also did not disappoint with WR Andre Johnson and QB Matt Schaub leading the assault. The pass defense must improve if the Texans want a shot at postseason play, as they finished last in the league in that category.



INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

With a diminished rushing game last season, the Colts relied on Peyton Manning even more than usual. He produced the most prolific passing offense in the league even with key targets Dallas Clark, Austin Collie and Anthony Gonzalez injured for most of the season. The Colts did not make many offseason moves, but expect them to make the postseason yet again barring any major injuries or a setback on Manning's recovery from neck surgery.



JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

The Jaguars ushered in a new era by drafting QB Blaine Gabbert. He will compete for the starting job with returning starter David Garrard. TE Mercedes Lewis and WR Mike Thomas broke out last season to give the Jaguars two passing threats. RB Maurice Jones-Drew must have another 1,000-yard rushing season if Jacksonville wants to contend for the AFC South crown. HC Jack Del Rio's squad has not made the postseason since 2007.



KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

HC Todd Haley's Chiefs came out of nowhere to claim the division title last season. The two-headed monster of Jamaal Charles and Thomas Jones helped Kansas City run away with the league's best rushing offense. The connection between QB Matt Cassel and WR Dwayne Bowe became a familiar misery to defenses last season as Bowe regained his 2008 form. Look for the Chiefs to contend again in the AFC West.



MIAMI DOLPHINS

The Dolphins looked to improve their offense for the upcoming season by acquiring a few new players. They recently traded for Reggie Bush and drafted Daniel Thomas to help at RB. The team also signed QB Matt Moore, who is expected to compete for the job against Chad Henne and rookie Pat Devlin. Despite the upgrades on offense, Miami will struggle to make headway in the rough-and-tumble AFC East.



NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

The Patriots made big moves this offseason by trading for WR Chad Ochocinco and DT Albert Haynesworth. The enigmatic Ochocinco gives QB Tom Brady a deep threat to complement WR Wes Welker. The Patriots must improve on pass defense, which was their Achilles heel last year. New England will compete against the Jets for more than just AFC East supremacy.



NEW YORK JETS

After two consecutive trips to the AFC title game, head coach Rex Ryan guarantees this is the year the Jets will win it all. To accomplish this feat, CB Darrelle Revis must remain healthy, as he currently is one of the most feared players in any secondary. The re-signing of wideout Santonio Holmes gives QB Mark Sanchez a deep threat. The Jets still have a potent defense, but the addition of WR Plaxico Burress could put them over the top.



OAKLAND RAIDERS

Last season, the Raiders became the first team in league history to go undefeated in their division but miss the playoffs. At 8-8, it also marked Oakland's first non-losing season since the franchise made the Super Bowl in 2002. RB Darren McFadden must build off of his breakout season to carry the offense. The Raiders must improve their atrocious rush defense if they wish to make it back to the postseason.



PITTSBURGH STEELERS

Even after last season's fiasco with Ben Roethlisberger, the Steelers still won the AFC championship. This offseason has been a quieter one for Roethlisberger, but not for teammates Hines Ward and James Harrison. Ward was arrested for suspicion of DUI while Harrison publicly criticized some of his teammates and commissioner Roger Goodell. Aside from the distractions, the Steel Curtain looks to remain at the top of the league in rush defense.



SAN DIEGO CHARGERS

After leading the league in passing yards last season, QB Philip Rivers looks to generate even more impressive numbers this season with WR Vincent Jackson remaining with the organization; Jackson missed the first 10 games of last season due to a contract dispute. Rivers' No. 1 goal is to get his team back to the postseason after their first absence since 2005. The signing of DB Bob Sanders will help bolster last year's No. 1-ranked pass defense.



TENNESSEE TITANS

Vince Young was released and a QB battle has developed between veteran Matt Hasselbeck and rookie Jake Locker. Draft picks Akeem Ayers (LB) and Jurrell Casey (DB) should improve what was a lackluster defense in 2010. Most notably, HC Jeff Fisher resigned after 17 years with the franchise and former longtime Oilers OL Mike Munchak takes over in Nashville. Three-time Pro Bowler RB Chris Johnson will look to regain his sensational 2009 form.

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KIA MOTORS FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS

ATLANTA FALCONS 2011 REGULAR SEASON SCHEDULE

Compiled By Jason Parker

Sept. 11 1:00 p.m. FOX		@ Chicago Soldier Field Chicago, IL	The Falcons open the 2011 season in the not-so-friendly confines of Soldier Field. Atlanta has beaten the Bears in both meetings since Mike Smith became head coach, each time at the Dome. Bears QB Jay Cutler will attempt to rebound from his disappointing performance in last year's NFC Championship game.
Sept. 18 8:20 p.m. NBC		vs. Philadelphia Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	Michael Vick returns to the Georgia Dome once again for an epic Sunday Night showdown between two of the NFC's best teams. The Falcons will look to break a five-game losing streak to Philly. A key matchup in this game will be WR DeSean Jackson against CB Dunta Robinson.
Sept. 25 4:15 p.m. FOX		@ Tampa Bay Raymond James Stadium Tampa, FL	The Falcons head to Tampa to play the up-and-coming Bucs. Third-year QB Josh Freeman has developed nicely, while head coach Raheem Morris has his young team motivated. Raymond James has always been a tough place to play for the Falcons, and this could prove to be a pivotal game in the division race.
Oct. 2 4:00 p.m. FOX		@ Seattle CenturyLink Field Seattle, WA	The Falcons play their third playoff team in four weeks against the Seahawks. Seattle is one of the toughest places to play in all of football. The Falcons won't take the Seahawks for granted, as everyone saw what Pete Carroll's team did to the Saints last year in the playoffs.
Oct. 9 8:20 p.m. NBC		vs. Green Bay Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	The Falcons' daunting schedule continues, as the defending Super Bowl champions head to town. Atlanta will be looking to avoid a repeat performance of last year's divisional playoff game. The defense must step up to try and stop Super Bowl MVP Aaron Rodgers.
Oct. 16 1:00 p.m. FOX		vs. Carolina Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	The Falcons finally find a team on their schedule that finished towards the bottom of the league last season. However, Atlanta could have its hands full with rookie sensation Cam Newton. The Falcons took both of last season's games from the Panthers, who are breaking in new head coach Ron Rivera.
Oct. 23 1:00 p.m. FOX		@ Detroit Ford Field Detroit, MI	The Falcons finish out their pre-bye week schedule against the up-and-coming Lions. Detroit presents a ferocious defensive line, including second-year Pro Bowler Ndamukong Suh and rookie Nick Fairley. Two of the league's top receivers in Roddy White and Detroit's Calvin Johnson will face off.
Nov. 6 1:00 p.m. FOX		@ Indianapolis Lucas Oil Stadium Indianapolis, IN	The Falcons take on Peyton Manning for the first time in the Mike Smith/Matt Ryan era. Both teams have Super Bowl aspirations, so this game should be a good midseason measuring stick. The Falcons' offensive line must prepare to stop all-pros Dwight Freeney and Robert Mathis.
Nov. 13 1:00 p.m. FOX		vs. New Orleans Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	The Falcons and Saints renew their rivalry, as last season both teams won on the road. New Orleans handed the Falcons their only regular season home loss a year ago when Drew Brees' late TD pass gave the Saints a 17-14 win. The winner of this game could be in the driver's seat for a division title.
Nov. 20 1:00 p.m. CBS		vs. Tennessee Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	The Falcons welcome Chris Johnson and the Titans to the Dome for the first time since 2003. This game should be won in the trenches, as both teams love to run the football. Rookie QB Jake Locker, the No. 8 overall pick, could very well be starting for the Titans.
Nov. 27 1:00 p.m. FOX		vs. Minnesota Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	Adrian Peterson and the Vikings head to Atlanta for this rematch of the 1998 NFC Championship Game. Minnesota will have a new quarterback after the retirement of Brett Favre, but John Abraham and company will have to stymie a potentially high-powered Vikings offense.
Dec. 4 1:00 p.m. FOX		@ Houston Reliant Stadium Houston, TX	The Falcons will take on the Texans for just the third time ever. The overall series is tied 1-1. This game comes during a critical stretch, as both teams have playoff aspirations. The Falcons have a chance to make it two wins against former Atlanta QB Matt Schaub.
Dec. 11 1:00 p.m. FOX		@ Carolina Bank of America Stadium Charlotte, NC	The Falcons make their annual trip to Charlotte. Last year in Carolina, RB Michael Turner rushed for 112 yards and three touchdowns in a 31-10 blowout victory. The Panthers sported one of the worst offenses in the league last year on their way to a 2-14 record.
Dec. 15 8:20 p.m. NFL Network		vs. Jacksonville Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	The Falcons finish off the NFL Network's Thursday Night Football schedule at home against Jacksonville. The Falcons could see yet another rookie QB in Blaine Gabbert, depending on the type of season Jacksonville is having. This is another matchup between run-oriented teams.
Dec. 26 8:30 p.m. ESPN		@ New Orleans Superdome New Orleans, LA	It has become an annual tradition for these two teams to meet on Monday Night Football, and this year's game could decide the division. The Falcons hope to repeat last year's Superdome performance, in which they won in dramatic fashion on a 46-yard Matt Bryant field goal in OT.
Jan. 1 1:00 p.m. FOX		vs. Tampa Bay Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	The Falcons finish the regular season against division-rival Tampa Bay. The Bucs finished last season 10-6, a seven-win improvement over their 2009 total, but narrowly missed the playoffs in the NFC. Like the previous week, this final matchup could decide the division.

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KIA MOTORS FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS

NEW ADDITION



SCORE BRIAN JONES

Ray Edwards acquisition adds partner for Abraham, gives Falcons pass rushing threat

When the Falcons made the blockbuster trade on draft day and selected Julio Jones, many fans and experts lauded the move. But the Falcons' front office was not done yet.

Fast forward to late July when the NFL lockout was lifted, and the 2011 season had officially begun. This also meant that the free-agency period began shortly after the lockout lifted and the Falcons knew who they wanted to pursue.

Defensive end Ray Edwards had been a star with the Minnesota Vikings since 2006, but was looking for a new home and wanted to play for a winner. There were a number of teams interested in the 26-year-old defensive end, but at the end of the day, the Falcons were able to grab him.

"He's going to help our pass rush,

and he's also a very good run defender," said Falcons head coach Mike Smith. "He's an all-around defensive end that is going to line up and play our left defensive end. We just can't wait to get him out here and see what he can do."

Edwards was excited about signing with the Falcons not only because he was coming to a Super Bowl contender, but because he will play alongside John Abraham on the defensive line. The two could become the top defensive end tandem in the NFL if both players remain healthy.

"I believe that myself and Abraham are going to be a great tandem," he said. "We'll work on playing off each other and causing a lot of havoc."

PAYING DUES ...

Edwards was selected in the fourth round of the 2006 NFL Draft. He appeared in 15

games his rookie year and recorded three sacks and 10 tackles. In 2007, he played in just 12 games but had five sacks and caused four fumbles.

In 2008, Edwards started in 15 games and recorded 55 tackles and five sacks. But it was the following year when the NFL started to take notice of Edwards, as he recorded 8.5 sacks in the regular season and four sacks in two playoff games, including a three-sack game against the Dallas Cowboys. As an unrestricted free agent after the 2010 season, Edwards signed a one-year tender and had another strong season with eight sacks and 37 tackles.

This past offseason, Minnesota wanted to revamp the defensive line and decided not to give Edwards a long-term deal. The Falcons took advantage of the situation and got their man to complement Abraham.

"It was a sigh of relief, knowing that your career is going to continue," Edwards said. "I definitely came to a great team who went 13-3 last year and hasn't lost any key components. I feel like I was just the missing piece."

THE ROAD AHEAD ...

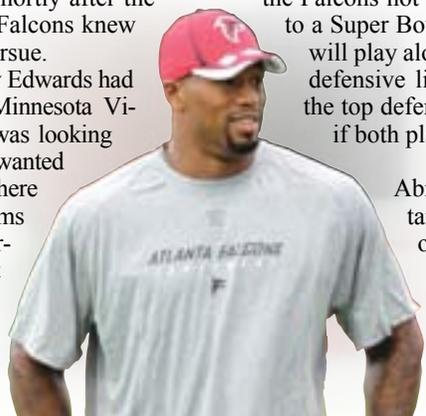
Edwards was not able to practice with the team until Aug. 4 because of new Collective Bargaining Agreement rules pertaining to free agents. But the former Purdue Boilermaker has attended every practice to make sure he knows what is expected of him when he does take the field.

"I just go out there and play ball," Edwards said describing his game. "I'm a go-getter. I'm a hard worker and I'm a high-motor guy."

With the addition of Edwards, the Falcons improved what was already a talented roster.

Through the draft, the Birds added Jones to add more explosive plays and Jacquizz Rodgers to add a different element to the running backs. With a core of established stars like Matt Ryan, Roddy White, Michael Turner and Tony Gonzalez coming back for another playoff run, the Edwards acquisition looks even better.

Photo of Ray Edwards courtesy of Jimmy Cribb/Atlanta Falcons. Jones can be reached at bjones@scoreatl.com.



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