

FALCONS VS. TITANS

MONDAY, AUGUST 6, 2012
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LOFTY GOALS



Falcons poised to take next step

By Stephen Black

When Arthur Blank bought the Falcons in 2002, he had many goals for the franchise. However, one stood out above the rest and, this year, the Falcons will look to accomplish it by winning the Super Bowl.

It's true that Blank's boys haven't won a playoff game since the 2004 season, but that little nugget belies the fact that Atlanta has been one of the NFL's most consistent franchises since Head Coach Mike Smith was hired in 2008. In fact, the Falcons have won 43 regular-season games in that time span, more than all but four other teams in the League. Blank's team has also sported a winning record in each of the last four seasons and made the postseason three times.

It is time for this franchise to take the next step.

NEW BLOOD ...

In the wake of the playoff loss to the Super Bowl Champion New York Giants, Defensive Coordinator Brian VanGorder and Offensive Coordinator Mike Mularkey left for other jobs, giving the Falcons a chance to refill those positions for the first time since Smith was hired in 2008.

Atlanta responded by hiring Mike Nolan to coach the defense and Dirk Koetter to coach the offense. Both hires were widely praised

around the League.

Nolan has been coaching in the NFL since 1987 and has been a defensive coordinator for six teams as well as a head coach for another. The former Oregon Duck has employed the 3-4 defense in the past, but will use the 4-3 here in Atlanta based on the Falcons' personnel.

Widely regarded as one of the top defensive minds in the game, Nolan's arrival was met with enthusiasm from players and fans. Likewise, it is certain that John Abraham and Ray Edwards coming off the edge will make Nolan happy to be working in Flowery Branch. So will free-agent acquisition Asante Samuel, who is looking forward to manning a cornerback spot in Nolan's secondary.

Like his new colleague, Koetter has plenty of tools to work with. The former Arizona State head coach arrives in Atlanta from Jacksonville, where he was offensive coordinator since 2007.

Koetter will mesh his talents with some of the best skill position players in all of football. With Matt Ryan and Roddy White entering their peaks and Tony Gonzalez, Harry Douglas and Julio Jones also in the fold, the Falcons will boast a potent passing attack. In the backfield, Koetter will find another weapon in Michael "The

Burner" Turner, who has become one of the top rushers in the League since his arrival in Atlanta in 2008. Turner has rushed for more than 1,300 yards in three of four seasons with Atlanta.

The mix of new coordinators with the Falcons' talented personnel will be a boon for Atlanta.

OUR GAIN ...

It is impossible to discuss the NFC South right now without mentioning the crisis in New Orleans. The Saints will be without Head Coach Sean Payton and star linebacker Jonathan Vilma for the entire season, and defensive end Will Smith for four games. But the most damage may have been done to the psyche of the Saints, as the bounty scandal has rocked New Orleans throughout the offseason.

In Carolina, people are betting on Cam Newton to lead the Panthers to the Promised Land, but Newton had 19 turnovers last year. He will need to cut that number in half if Carolina is to have any chance of being successful in 2012.

The Panthers' defense isn't much better, ranking 26th in the League in both scoring defense and total defense.

Rounding out the NFC South is Tampa Bay, which is transitioning to an entirely new coaching staff.

One other thing that works to the Falcons' advantage is the schedule. Atlanta has the luxury of not having back-to-back road games at any point in the season, which may be the first time in recent memory an NFL team has had such an advantage. The Falcons also benefit from having a few extra days between a Thursday game against New Orleans and a road trip to Carolina.

After building the foundation of what is becoming one of the most consistent franchises in the NFL, the Falcons appear set to take the next step.

Black can be reached at sblack@scoreatl.com.

FALCONS FOOTBALL NIGHT IN DALTON SCHEDULE

FOOTBALL FIELD

3:30PM	GATES OPEN
4:30PM	FALCONS SPECIAL TEAMS TITANS SPECIAL TEAMS
4:50PM	OFF
5:00PM	FALCONS
5:15PM	FALCONS OFFENSE TITANS DEFENSE
6:15PM	FALCONS TITANS
6:25PM	FALCONS DEFENSE TITANS OFFENSE
7:00PM	PRACTICE ENDS

BASEBALL FIELD

3:30PM	GATES OPEN
4:30PM	OFF
4:50PM	FALCONS NON-SPECIAL TEAMS TITANS NON-SPECIAL TEAMS
5:00PM	TITANS
5:15PM	FALCONS DEFENSE TITANS OFFENSE
6:15PM	OFF
6:25PM	FALCONS OFFENSE TITANS DEFENSE
7:00PM	PRACTICE ENDS

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TENNESSEE TITANS



NAME	NO.	POS.	HT.	WT.	AGE	SEASONS	COLLEGE
Abraham, John	55	DE	6-4	263	35	13	South Carolina
Adkins, Spencer	59	OLB	5-11	236	26	4	Miami (FL)
Babineaux, Jonathan	95	DT	6-2	300	31	8	Iowa
Baker, Sam	72	OT	6-5	301	28	5	USC
Biermann, Kroy	71	DE	6-3	255	27	5	Montana
Bialock, Justin	63	OG	6-4	326	29	6	Texas
Bosher, Matt	5	K	6-0	208	25	2	Miami
Brown, LaMark	85	TE	6-3	220	24	1	Minnesota State-Mankato
Bryant, Matt	3	PK	5-9	203	38	11	Baylor
Calvin, Michael	15	WR	6-2	210	24	1	California
Clabo, Tyson	77	OT	6-6	329	31	9	Wake Forest
Cone, Kevin	12	WR	6-2	216	25	2	Georgia Tech
Council, Rico	43	LB	6-1	255	24	1	Tennessee State
Cox, Mike	42	FB	6-0	252	28	5	Georgia Tech
Davis, Dominique	14	QB	6-3	210	24	1	East Carolina
Davis, Drew	19	WR	6-1	205	24	2	Oregon
DeCoud, Thomas	28	S	6-2	192	28	5	California
Dent, Akeem	52	LB	6-1	239	25	2	Georgia
Douglas, Harry	83	WR	6-0	183	28	5	Louisville
Edwards, Ray	93	DE	6-5	268	28	7	Purdue
Ewing, Bradie	34	FB	5-11	239	23	1	Wisconsin
Folk, Erik	1	K	5-11	185	24	1	Washington
Franks, Dominique	24	CB	6-0	197	25	3	Oklahoma
Frey, Robbie	40	RB	6-0	203	24	1	Kutztown
Gallarda, Tommy	87	TE	6-5	259	25	2	Boise State
Gonzalez, Tony	88	TE	6-5	247	37	16	California
Grimes, Brent	20	CB	5-10	183	30	6	Shippensburg
Gruder, Max	46	LB	6-2	230	24	1	Pittsburgh
Harris, Bryce	70	OT	6-6	300	24	1	Fresno State
Harris, Jerrell	49	LB	6-3	242	24	1	Alabama
Harris, Josh	47	LS	6-1	224	24	1	Auburn
Hawley, Joe	61	OG	6-3	302	24	3	UNLV
Holmes, Lamar	76	OT	6-6	333	24	1	Southern Miss
Hope, Chris	36	S	6-0	204	32	11	Florida State
Horn, Tyler	64	C	6-4	305	24	1	Miami
Jackson, Andrew	69	OG	6-5	295	24	2	Fresno St.
Jackson, Marcus	16	WR	6-1	195	24	1	Lamar
James, Robert	50	OLB	5-11	224	29	4	Arizona State
Jerry, Peria	94	DT	6-2	295	28	4	Mississippi
Johnson, Mike	79	OG	6-6	304	26	3	Alabama
Jones, Julio	11	WR	6-3	220	24	2	Alabama
Joseph, Elisha	70	DT	6-3	275	25	2	Temple
Konz, Peter	66	G	6-5	317	24	1	Wisconsin
Manley, Phillipkeith	68	OG	6-5	309	23	1	Toledo
Markett, Marty	38	CB	5-10	162	23	1	South Carolina
Massaquoi, Jonathan	96	DE	6-2	264	24	1	Troy
Matthews, Cliff	98	DE	6-4	268	23	2	South Carolina
McClain, Robert	27	CB	5-9	195	25	3	Connecticut
McClure, Todd	62	C	6-1	296	36	14	Louisiana State
Meier, Kerry	80	WR	6-3	222	26	3	Kansas
Meisner, Lee	43	FB	6-0	245	23	1	Colorado State-Pueblo
Mitchell, Charles	26	S	5-11	205	23	1	Mississippi State
Moore, William	25	S	6-0	221	28	4	Missouri
Nance, Dimitri	30	RB	5-10	218	25	3	Arizona State
Nicholas, Stephen	54	OLB	6-3	230	30	6	South Florida
Nissley, Adam	86	TE	6-6	267	25	1	Central Florida
Nzegwu, Louis	97	DE	6-4	255	24	1	Wisconsin
Owens, Christopher	21	CB	5-9	180	26	4	San Jose State
Palmer, Michael	81	TE	6-5	252	25	3	Clemson
Peters, Corey	91	DT	6-3	305	25	3	Kentucky
Peterson, Mike	53	OLB	6-1	233	37	14	Florida
Redman, Chris	8	QB	6-3	229	36	13	Louisville
Regis, Micanor	67	DT	6-3	305	23	1	Miami
Reynolds, Garrett	75	OT	6-7	310	26	4	North Carolina
Robertson, Travian	92	DT	6-4	304	24	1	South Carolina
Robinson, Dunta	23	CB	5-10	183	31	9	South Carolina
Rodgers, Jacquizz	32	RB	5-6	188	23	2	Oregon State
Rodgers, James	18	WR	5-7	188	24	1	Oregon State
Ryan, Matt	2	QB	6-4	217	28	5	Boston College
Samuel, Asante	22	CB	5-10	185	32	10	Central Florida
Schiller, Pat	45	LB	6-2	235	24	1	Northern Illinois
Schillinger, Shann	39	S	6-0	200	27	3	Montana
Sidbury, Lawrence	90	DE	6-3	261	27	4	Richmond
Smith, Antone	35	RB	5-9	192	27	4	Florida State
Snelling, Jason	44	RB	5-11	234	29	6	Virginia
Stafford, Kenny	89	WR	6-4	204	23	1	Toledo
Switek, Will	74	OT	6-6	308	31	8	Stanford
Thompson, Peyton	37	CB	5-11	180	22	1	San Jose State
Toone, Tim	17	WR	5-10	185	28	3	Weber State
Tuimaunei, Suaesi	41	S	6-1	205	25	2	Oregon State
Turner, Michael	33	RB	5-10	247	31	9	Northern Illinois
Walker, Vance	99	DT	6-2	304	26	4	Georgia Tech
Walls, Darrin	29	CB	6-0	190	25	2	Notre Dame
Weatherspoon, Sean	56	OLB	6-2	244	25	3	Missouri
White, Aron	49	TE	6-4	239	24	1	Georgia
White, Roddy	84	WR	6-0	211	31	8	Alabama-Birmingham
Wilson, John Parker	4	QB	6-2	215	27	4	Alabama
Zelenka, Joe	82	LS	6-3	266	37	14	Wake Forest
Zimmerman, Dawson	9	P	6-2	205	23	1	Clemson

NAME	NO.	POS.	HT.	WT.	AGE	SEASONS	COLLEGE
Afalava, Al	38	S	5-11	212	25	3	Oregon State
Aguilar, Devin	81	WR	6-0	195	23	R	Washington
Amano, Eugene	54	C/G	6-3	300	30	9	Southeast Missouri State
Ayers, Akeem	56	LB	6-3	254	23	2	UCLA
Babineaux, Jordan	26	S	6-0	210	29	9	Southern Arkansas
Bailey, Patrick	57	LB	6-4	235	26	5	Duke
Ball, Dave	98	DE	6-5	255	31	8	UCLA
Barden, Brandon	46o	TE	6-5	246	23	R	Vanderbilt
Batson, Will	3	P/K	6-3	205	25	R	North Alabama
Bias, George	72o	G	6-3	314	22	R	Stephen F. Austin
Bironas, Rob	2	K	6-0	210	34	8	GA Southern/Aub
Brinkley, Beau	48	LS/TE	6-5	225	22	R	Missouri
Brown, Zach	55	LB	6-2	230	22	R	North Carolina
Campbell, Tommie	37	DB	6-3	205	24	2	California (PA)
Casey, Jurrell	99	DT	6-1	300	22	2	USC
Clayton, Zach	69d	DT	6-2	299	24	2	Auburn
Cook, Jared	89	TE	6-5	248	25	4	South Carolina
Dawson, Keyunta	75	DE	6-3	265	26	5	Texas Tech
Deadder, Chase	82	WR	6-5	225	23	R	Sacramento State
DeVan, Kyle	69o	G	6-2	306	27	4	Oregon State
Diles, Zac	53	LB	6-2	245	27	5	Kansas State
Divens, Lamar	72d	DT	6-3	335	26	4	Tennessee State
Donaldson, Herb	36	RB	5-11	221	26	1	Western Illinois
Douzable, Leger	78	DE	6-4	284	26	4	Central Florida
Durand, Ryan	77	OG	6-5	301	26	2	Syracuse
Egboh, Pannel	79	DE	6-6	287	26	1	Stanford
Evans, LaQuinton	16	WR	6-2	0	22	R	Southern
Francisco, Aaron	47	S	6-2	207	29	7	Brigham Young
Graham, Cameron	80	TE	6-3	244	23	1	Louisville
Griffin, Michael	33	S	6-0	203	27	6	Texas
Harper, Jamie	23	RB	5-11	233	22	2	Clemson
Harris, DaJohn	62d	DT	6-4	310	23	R	Southern California
Harris, Leroy	64	G/C	6-3	303	28	6	North Carolina State
Hasselbeck, Matt	8	QB	6-4	225	36	14	Boston College
Hawkins, Chris	35	CB	6-1	184	26	2	LSU
Hawkins, Lavelle	87	WR	5-11	194	26	5	California
Hutchinson, Steve	73	G	6-5	313	34	12	Michigan
Johnson, Chris	28	RB	5-11	191	26	5	East Carolina
Johnson, Quinn	45	FB	6-1	263	25	4	LSU
Johnson, Robert	32	DB	6-2	206	25	2	Utah
Kern, Brett	6	P	6-2	217	26	5	Toledo
Kirkendoll, James	19	WR	5-10	186	22	1	Texas
Klug, Karl	97	DT	6-3	275	24	2	Iowa
Kropog, Troy	70	T/G	6-6	308	26	3	Tulane
Locker, Jake	10	QB	6-3	234	24	2	Washington
Malast, Kevin	50	LB	6-2	235	26	1	Rutgers
Mariani, Marc	83	WR	6-1	190	25	2	Montana
Marks, Sen'Derrick	94	DT	6-2	294	25	4	Auburn
Martin, Mike	67d	DT	6-1	306	21	R	Michigan
Matthews, Kevin	60	C	6-3	302	25	1	Texas A&M
McCarthy, Colin	52	LB	6-1	238	24	2	Miami (Fla.)
McCorty, Jason	30	CB	6-0	188	24	4	Rutgers
McRath, Gerald	51	LB	6-3	228	26	4	Southern Miss
Mooney, Collin	42	RB	5-10	247	26	R	Army
Morgan, Derrick	90	DE	6-3	278	23	2	Georgia Tech
Mouton, Ryan	29	CB	5-9	184	25	4	Hawaii
Otto, Mike	66	T	6-5	310	29	5	Purdue
Preston, Michael	14	WR	6-5	206	23	1	Heidelberg
Reynaud, Darius	39	RB	5-9	201	27	4	West Virginia
Ringer, Javon	21	RB	5-9	213	25	4	Michigan State
Roos, Michael	71	T	6-7	320	29	8	Eastern Washington
Scott, Christian	41	DB	6-1	225	23	R	Texas
Sensabaugh, Coty	24	CB	5-11	189	23	R	Clemson
Shaw, Tim	59	LB	6-1	236	28	5	Penn State
Sheppard, Malcolm	96	DL	6-2	289	24	3	Arkansas
Smith, Rusty	11	QB	6-5	226	25	2	Florida Atlantic
Smith, Shaun	93	DT	6-2	325	30	9	South Carolina
Solomon, Scott	90	DE	6-3	270	23	R	Rice
Stephens, Nick	5	QB	6-3	235	25	R	Tarleton State
Stevens, Craig	88	TE	6-3	268	27	5	California
Stewart, David	76	T	6-7	315	29	8	Mississippi State
Stingily, Byron	68	T	6-5	313	23	2	Louisville
Thompson, Taylor	84	TE	6-6	259	22	R	Southern Methodist
Velasco, Fernando	61	C/G	6-4	312	27	3	Georgia
Verner, Alterraun	20	DB	5-10	187	23	2	UCLA
Vlachos, William	67o	C	6-1	294	24	R	Alabama
Washington, Nate	85	WR	6-1	177	28	8	Tiffin University
Watkins, Alex	46d	LB	6-3	234	23	R	Alabama
Wheatley, Terrence	22	CB	5-9	185	27	3	Colorado
Williams, Damian	17	WR	6-1	199	24	3	USC
Wimbley, Kamerion	95	DE	6-4	255	28	7	Florida State
Witherspoon, Will	92	LB	6-1	240	31	11	Georgia
Woods, D.J.	12	WR	6-0	180	22	R	Cincinnati
Wright, Kendall	13	WR	5-10	195	22	R	Baylor



Q&A WITH ARTHUR BLANK

Score Atlanta founder and publisher I.J. Rosenberg spoke with Falcons Owner Arthur Blank this summer about the upcoming 2012 season. Here is the transcription of that interview.

The team made its second straight trip to the playoffs last year, something that had never been done before in team history. Was this satisfying or did the disappointment of the loss take away from the accomplishment?

AB: It certainly was satisfying; the fact that we had four back-to-back-to-back-to-back winning seasons and three out of four making the playoffs after 42 years of never having back-to-back winning seasons is certainly an accomplishment. We understand that to be an "elite team," we have to not only get to the playoffs, but we have to win in the playoffs, so I think that was a disappointment – a disappointment for me, a disappointment for our coach, general manager, team president and certainly for our players, coaches and fans. So we've got to turn it up an additional level, and we are committed to doing that and we're certainly poised to do that. I definitely think we improved our team this offseason with coordinator and coaching changes, some additional players and the maturing of other players, so I think we're in a really good position heading into the 2012 season. Thirty-one other owners probably feel the same way at this time of the year, but I think we're in a good position to turn it up an additional notch.

After years of stability with the same coordinators, Head Coach Mike Smith will be working with both a new offensive coordinator and defensive coordinator. How has the new coaching staff approached the offseason?

AB: What's great is that both coordinators came in without any biases towards any scheme or players. They are taking a look at the talent we have and thinking about schemes and ways to put our players in the best position to win. That's what great coaches do. Sometimes it can be difficult for a coordinator or coach that's been in the same position for many, many years to have the ability to develop a fresh perspective. Coach (Brian) VanGorder and Coach (Mike) Mularkey did an excellent job for us and got us to where we are, but we think the addition of Mike Nolan and Dirk Koetter and Pat Hill and others will provide a little different view scheme-wise and with how we use certain players. I think that will be to our advantage this year. So far they've been very positive, and the players have responded well to their thinking and their creativity. I think we're in a good place.

Falcons fans seem really excited about the possibility of a new stadium, especially one with a retractable roof. Where are the Falcons in this process, and how much time will be spent during the season with planning and discussion?

AB: We're making progress. We've had a close, collaborative relationship with the Georgia

World Congress Center since I bought the team in 2002, and we've been working with them for several years now on a stadium solution. We're currently working on a multi-purpose retractable roof stadium, which we think, politically and for our fans, is the best way to go so we can enjoy the benefits of playing football and having other events outdoors where it makes sense to do that, while also providing the indoor environment for all the events that are so important to the Congress Center and probably more important to the city, such as the Final Four. We're moving in the right direction. Rich McKay, our team president & CEO, is at the point on this, and he's spending a great amount of his time working on this. The season itself will not slow us down in that regard. We continue to have meetings with the appropriate people from the Georgia World Congress Center Authority board and with Frank Poe, the executive director who keeps state and other political leaders in touch with what's going on so we understand their sensitivities as well. We feel good about the direction of our talks, and hopefully we'll be able to get something more definitive in place soon.

Since 1992, the Dome has offered a special home field advantage for the Falcons. Will we have the same advantage in a new stadium?

AB: Sure. I don't think that the stadium is what provides the home field advantage. At the end of the day, it's the environment, it's the team on the field, it's the game day experience, it's the tailgating experience, it's the fan amenities that we offer, it's the inclusiveness and the loyalty of the fan base we earn by consistently winning games and competing in the postseason. It's important that we do whatever we can to add value to the fan experience, to make them feel valued and an integral part of the team's success, which they are. All of these things are critical to our relationship with our fans and to giving our team a home field advantage.

While the Falcons did not have a first-round pick in April's draft, the team made several moves and brought in some serious talent. How would you grade your GM's offseason?

AB: I think it was excellent. I think we did the things we wanted to do. We primarily wanted to extend the talent we have. The best teams in the NFL consistently identify their talent early; they don't wait until they become free agents. They identify them early and they extend them early. That's the model that we try to follow here, and it's a model that this last year really came into play, as we extended a number of our players' contracts. We were able to bring in some critical free agents, starting with Asante Samuel, and we think we had an excellent draft. You have to look at these draft classes several years later. You can look back and see if it was a great draft class or not quite as good as you thought. But Thomas' record over the last four years has been outstanding, both as a result of his efforts and the result of collaborating with Coach Smith.

The Falcons were in the discussion for HBO's Hard Knocks and the team will appear on national television four times this season. It appears the Falcons' national brand is growing. What else can be done to increase the Falcons' popularity and brand?

AB: That's a very good question. At the end of the day, the most important thing is that you create a winning, sustainable franchise, and we've done that now. What happens then is you get the national games. This season we have four national games, and we could end up with more than that depending on the flex schedule and how we're doing as the season goes on. That's an indication, an unbiased indication, from the League and our media partners, CBS, ESPN, NBC, Fox, etc., that we're doing well and they want to see our product on national TV. So as long as we continue to win and support the team as the national brand it can be, we'll continue to make progress in this regard.

You are very much involved in the community with service projects, and many of your players also take time to get involved with charitable organizations. Is this something you encourage your players to do with their free time?

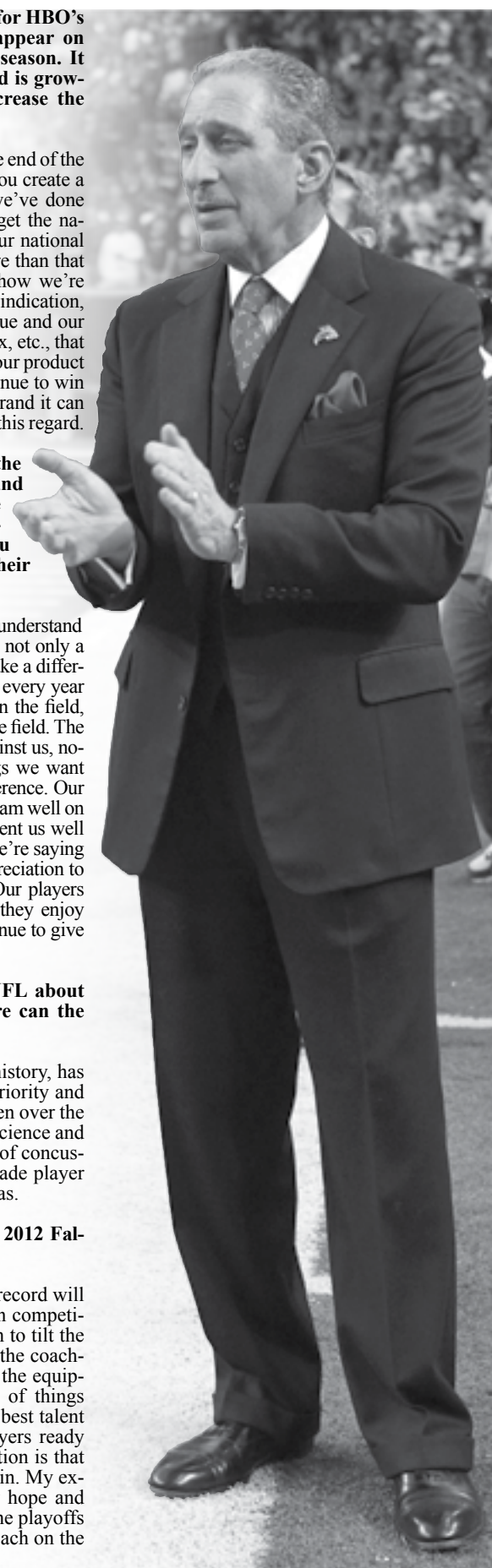
AB: We do. We make certain that they understand that when they join the NFL they have not only a responsibility, but an opportunity, to make a difference in people's lives. I tell the players every year that there are two Super Bowls: one on the field, which is the obvious one, and one off the field. The one off the field, we've got nobody against us, nobody keeping us from doing the things we want to do in the community to make a difference. Our players' job is not just to represent the team well on Sundays on the field, but also to represent us well in the community - to make sure that we're saying thank you to our fans and showing appreciation to the community in a variety of ways. Our players find that once they start giving back, they enjoy that experience so much that they continue to give back. It's a very positive thing.

There's so much concern in the NFL about players' safety recently. What more can the NFL do to combat concussions?

AB: I think the NFL, as a matter of history, has always made player safety a strong priority and there have been numerous actions taken over the years to protect players and advance science and medical understanding and treatment of concussions. Commissioner Goodell has made player safety his first priority in all these areas.

What are your expectations for the 2012 Falcons?

















AB: I wish I could tell you what our record will be. Obviously, the League is based on competitive balance. We do whatever we can to tilt the playing field in our favor in terms of the coaches, the environment, the atmosphere, the equipment, the facilities, and the variety of things we do to make sure that we have the best talent and the coaches have gotten the players ready in the best possible way. My expectation is that the team will be very competitive again. My expectation is they will play hard. My hope and aspiration is that we'll get deep into the playoffs in 2012. If you ask every player or coach on the team, they would say the same thing.





ATLANTA FALCONS 2012 REGULAR SEASON SCHEDULE

Compiled By Fletcher Proctor

Sept. 9 1:00 p.m. FOX		@ Kansas City Arrowhead Stadium Kansas City, MO	The Falcons will open up the 2012 season at one of the toughest venues in the NFL: Arrowhead Stadium. While the Chiefs offense has fallen on some tough times since the salad days of Priest Holmes, the defensive secondary is full of playmakers including Brandon Carr, Brandon Flowers and Eric Berry.
Sept. 17 8:30 p.m. ESPN		vs. Denver Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	The Falcons make their first appearance on national television as Matt Ryan matches wits with new Denver Quarterback Peyton Manning. After passing for 4,700 yards and 33 touchdowns in 2010, Manning missed all of last year and was released by Indianapolis. Denver's defense got to the opposing teams' quarterback 41 times last year.
Sept. 23 4:05 p.m. FOX		@ San Diego Qualcomm Stadium San Diego, CA	Few teams can light up a scoreboard quite like the San Diego Chargers. Last season, San Diego posted 406 points, second-most in the AFC, as Chargers Quarterback Philip Rivers passed for 4,426 yards. The defense is paced by the dominating linebacker Antwan Barnes, who racked up 11 sacks in 2011.
Sept. 30 1:00 p.m. FOX		vs. Carolina Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	Last season the Carolina Panthers ebbed and flowed with rookie quarterback Cam Newton, who guided the division rival Panthers to the fifth-most total yards in the NFC. Newton passed for 4,051 yards and ran for an additional 706. He finished with 35 touchdowns and a Rookie of the Year trophy.
Oct. 7 1:00 p.m. FOX		@ Washington FedEx Field Landover, MD	Robert Griffin III, the 2011 Heisman Trophy winner, should be firmly entrenched as the Redskins' quarterback when the Falcons travel to just outside of the nation's capital. The real threat will be the opportunistic defense, which is led by Ryan Kerrigan, who came away with four forced fumbles last year.
Oct. 14 1:00 p.m. CBS		vs. Oakland Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	The Raiders will bring a potent rushing attack that ranked No. 7 last year with Darren McFadden looking to run his way over, around and through would-be tacklers. He averaged 5.4 yards per carry before missing time with injuries. Carson Palmer is also back to work with some talented receivers.
Oct. 28 1:00 p.m. FOX		@ Philadelphia Lincoln Financial Field Philadelphia, PA	The Falcons finally took down the Eagles last year, but Michael Vick is back under center, leading an offense that averaged nearly 400 yards one year ago while lighting up scoreboards to the tune of 24.8 points per game. LeSean McCoy rushed for 1,309 yards last year with 17 scores.
Nov. 4 8:20 p.m. NBC		vs. Dallas Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	Tony Romo is still trying to make his way into the "elite quarterback" conversation, and he piled up 4,184 yards last year with 31 touchdowns despite not having much of an offensive line. The Cowboys have Dez Bryant on the outside, who hauled in 63 receptions for 928 yards last year.
Nov. 11 1:00 p.m. FOX		@ New Orleans Mercedes-Benz Superdome New Orleans, LA	The Saints have Drew Brees but will be without head coach Sean Payton when the Falcons take on the defending division champions. The Saints could also be without several members of its defense due to suspensions, but the offense led the league in total yards last year. Atlanta leads the all-time series 46-40.
Nov. 18 1:00 p.m. FOX		vs. Arizona Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	Pro Bowler Larry Fitzgerald will make his way to the Dome, ready to match up with the new-look Falcons secondary. The question of who will get Fitzgerald the ball will be one to watch as no Arizona quarterback cracked 2,000 yards last season. The defense managed 42 sacks in 2011.
Nov. 25 1:00 p.m. FOX		@ Tampa Bay Raymond James Stadium Tampa, FL	The new-look Bucs welcome in a host of playmakers that should immediately improve Tampa's offensive attack. Vincent Jackson hauled in 60 catches and nine scores last year for San Diego and gives Josh Freeman another receiver to work with. First-round pick Mark Barron could shore up the defensive secondary.
Nov. 29 8:20 p.m. NFL Network		vs. New Orleans Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	The Falcons have perhaps the greatest tight end in NFL history in Tony Gonzalez, but Jimmy Graham set a tight end record with 1,310 yards on 99 catches in the regular season. Keep an eye on RB Darren Sproles, who ran for 603 yards and hauled in 710 more receiving yards.
Dec. 9 1:00 p.m. FOX		@ Carolina Bank of America Stadium Charlotte, NC	Steve Smith had a resurgence last year, catching 79 passes for nearly 1,400 yards and seven scores. Smith was brought back to work with Newton, the outstanding second-year quarterback. Meanwhile, the defense should be improved with first-round pick Luke Kuechly, an inside linebacker out of Boston College.
Dec. 16 1:00 p.m. FOX		vs. New York Giants Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	The defending Super Bowl champions dispatched the Falcons en route to the title, becoming the third NFC team in four years to make the Super Bowl after beating the Falcons in the postseason. Eli Manning passed for 295.9 yards per game last year, and the team drafted running back David Wilson.
Dec. 22 8:30 p.m. ESPN		@ Detroit Ford Field Detroit, MI	The Lions are coming off of a rare playoff appearance after Matthew Stafford (300.9 yards per game) and Calvin Johnson (96 receptions, 1,681 yards) blossomed on the offense. Stafford threw for 41 scores last year, including 16 to Johnson, but the running game racked up just 95 yards per game.
Dec. 30 1:00 p.m. FOX		vs. Tampa Bay Georgia Dome Atlanta, GA	The Bucs visit Atlanta in the regular-season finale, a game the Falcons hope will be a playoff tune up. Freeman took a step back last year, throwing 22 interceptions and just 16 touchdowns, and taking 29 sacks. Freeman must improve his 74.6 QB rating or the Bucs will be sunk.

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Markina Brown 
Meteorologist

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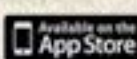
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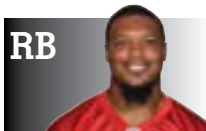
QB



Matt Ryan, No. 2 (6-4, 220) – The Falcons signal caller established career highs last season by throwing for 4,177 yards and 29 touchdowns. His 92.2 QB rating was also a personal best. Ryan has led Atlanta to three playoff appearances in four seasons.

Backups: Chris Redman, No. 8 (6-3, 229) – The 10-year NFL veteran played in five games last season, completing 18 of 28 passes for 188 yards. ... John Parker Wilson, No. 4 (6-2, 218) – Wilson started two preseason games in 2011, completing 28 of 52 passes for 257 yards. ... Dominique Davis, No. 14 (6-3, 210) – The rookie free agent threw for 3,225 yards and 25 touchdowns during his senior year at East Carolina.

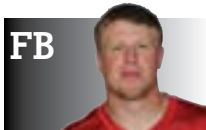
RB



Michael Turner, No. 33 (5-10, 244) – The Falcons battering ram was third in the NFL last season with 1,340 yards rushing and sixth with 11 rushing touchdowns.

Backups: Jason Snelling, No. 44 (5-11, 223) – A reliable veteran, Snelling has been with the team since 2007. He has scored seven times and rushed for 1,193 yards in his career. ... Jacquizz Rodgers, No. 32 (5-6, 196) – Rodgers saw action in every game last season, and scored rushing and receiving touchdowns while compiling 205 rushing yards and 188 receiving yards. ... Antoine Smith, No. 35 (5-9, 190) – The FSU product has been with the Falcons since 2009 ... Dimitri Nance, No. 30 (5-10, 219) – a second-year product out of Arizona State. ... Robbie Frey, No. 40 (6-0, 203) – Frey is a rookie free agent from Kutztown University.

FB



Mike Cox, No. 42 (6-0, 252) – In his fifth year out of Georgia Tech, Cox could markedly increase playing time in 2012. Cox has played on special teams as well as offense in stints in Atlanta and Kansas City. A threat in the passing game, Cox has caught 24 passes in his brief career.

Backups: Bradie Ewing, No. 34 (5-11, 239) – Ewing was named special teams player of the year during his senior season at Wisconsin. The former Badger was Academic All-Big 10 three times. Ewing will challenge for the starting fullback spot and can contribute on special teams. ... Lee Meisner, No. 43 (6-0, 245) – Meisner is a rookie free agent out of Colorado State-Pueblo where he was an All-American.

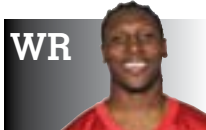
TE



Tony Gonzalez, No. 88 (6-5, 243) – Gonzalez is simply the best when discussing the tight end position. The former Cal All-American holds NFL tight end records for most receptions (1,149), touchdowns (95) and receiving yards (13,338). Gonzalez is a 12-time Pro Bowler and nine-time All-Pro.

Backups: Michael Palmer, No. 81 (6-5, 260) – Palmer caught 10 balls last season for 72 yards and a score. ... Tommy Gallarda, No. 86 (6-5, 262) – Gallarda is a rookie free agent out of Boise State. ... Adam Nissley, No. 86 (6-6, 267) – Nissley is a rookie free agent out of Central Florida. ... Aron White, No. 49 (6-4, 239) – White is a rookie free agent out of Georgia. ... Lamark Brown, No. 85 (6-3, 220) – Brown is a rookie free agent out of Minnesota State-Mankato.

WR



Roddy White, No. 84 (6-0, 212) – The UAB product was eighth in the League in 2011 with 1,296 yards while catching eight touchdowns. He was also second in the League with 100 receptions. White was rewarded by being named to his fourth consecutive Pro Bowl.

Backups: Harry Douglas, No. 83 (6-0, 183) – The Jonesboro native set career highs last year in receptions (39) and receiving yards (498). Douglas also contributes on special teams. ... Kerry Meier, No. 80 (6-2, 224) – Meier was starting QB at the University of Kansas. ... Drew Davis, No. 19 (6-1, 205) – Davis was signed in 2011 as a rookie free agent ... James Rodgers, No. 18 (5-7, 188) – Kenny Stafford, No. 89 (6-4, 204) – Rodgers and Stafford are both rookie free agents. ... Tim Toone, No. 17 (5-10, 185) – Toone was drafted out of Weber State in 2010 by Detroit in the seventh round.

LT



Sam Baker, No. 72 (6-5, 301) – The USC product has started 41 games in his four years with the Falcons. A dependable blindside protector, the former Trojans All-American was the No. 21 overall draft choice in the 2008 draft. The 27-year-old was a three-time All-American at Southern Cal, and was named to the Outland Trophy and Lombardi Award watch lists.

Backups: Will Svitek, No. 77 (6-6, 309) – A native of the Czech Republic, Svitek played his college ball at Stanford, where he played defensive end and tight end. In six NFL seasons, Svitek has played in 61 games and started 16 of them. Svitek was drafted in the sixth round at pick No. 187 of the 2005 draft. Svitek attended high school in Newbury Park, Calif., where he was a three-sport athlete.

LG



Justin Blalock, No. 63 (6-4, 326) – The reliable guard has started in all 71 games in which he has participated. A second-round pick in the 2007 draft, the former Texas Longhorn never missed a game in college, becoming the first UT player ever to start 50 games.

Backups: Mike Johnson, No. 79 (6-5, 312) – The native of Pensacola, Fla., was drafted 98th overall by the Falcons in the 2010 NFL Draft. In college, Johnson was a consensus All-American in 2009 while helping lead Alabama to the national championship. Johnson has played in two games during his Falcons career. ... Phillip Keith Manley, No. 68 (6-5, 309) – Manley is a rookie free agent from Toledo.

C



Todd McClure, No. 62 (6-1, 296) – The longest-tenured Falcon, McClure has been a rock at center since being drafted in the seventh round of the 1999 draft. The former LSU Tiger started 13 games last season after entering 2011 with 148 consecutive starts. In his NFL career McClure has played in 182 games, starting 179 of them. McClure proved his durability in his second year when he rebounded from knee surgery to start in every game.

Backups: Joe Hawley, No. 61 (6-3, 297) – A native of Anaheim, Calif., Hawley will move over to center in McClure's stead should the need arise. ... Tyler Horn, No. 64 (6-4, 305) – Horn is a rookie free agent from Miami (Fla.).

RG



Joe Hawley, No. 61 (6-3, 297) – A fourth-round selection in the 2010 draft, Hawley has played in 31 games for Atlanta. Hawley started at right guard last season in 10 games. The former UNLV Rebel played both center and guard in college, and his versatility remains a major strength.

Backups: Garrett Reynolds, No. 75 (6-7, 317) – The former North Carolina star started seven times in 2011. He has played in 20 games in three years with Atlanta. ... Peter Konz, No. 66 (6-5, 315) – The Wisconsin graduate was named Academic All-Big Ten three times in his college career. Konz also earned All-American honors after the 2011 season and was a Rimington Trophy finalist.

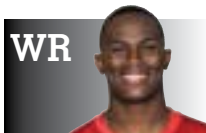
RT



Tyson Clabo, No. 77 (6-6, 329) – The former Wake Forest Demon Deacon was originally signed as a rookie free agent by Denver in 2004. After a year in NFL Europe, Clabo was signed by Atlanta in 2005. Clabo has played in 85 games and started all of them in six years with Atlanta. The Knoxville, Tenn., native was named to the Pro Bowl in 2010. In college, Clabo started the final 36 games of his career.

Backups: Lamar Holmes, No. 76 (6-6, 333) – The Southern Miss product was drafted in the third round of this year's draft. Holmes is returning to practice after an injury. ... Andrew Jackson, No. 69 (6-6, 299) – Jackson was the Falcons seventh-round pick in 2011. ... Bryce Harris, No. 70 (6-6, 300) – Harris is a rookie free agent from Fresno State.

WR



Julio Jones, No. 11 (6-3, 220) – The sixth overall in the 2011 NFL Draft, Jones caught eight touchdown passes and accumulated 959 receiving yards. He was named Rookie of the Month for December. Jones finished third among rookies in receptions and receiving yards, and caught more touchdowns than any other rookie. While in high school, Jones was named the top player in America by Sports Illustrated.

Backups: Kevin Cone, No. 12 (6-2, 216) – In 2011, Cone was signed as a rookie free agent and was a practice squad player. ... Michael Calvin, No. 15 (6-2, 215) – Calvin is a rookie free agent from Cal. At his college pro day, Calvin ran a 4.32 in the 40-yard dash. ... Marcus Jackson, No. 16 (6-1, 195) – Jackson is a rookie free agent from Lamar.

K



Matt Bryant, No. 3 (5-9, 203) – In his 12th year out of Baylor, Bryant has kicked for five teams in his NFL career. In three seasons with Atlanta, Bryant has not missed an extra point, making 99 consecutive. The Texas native has made 62 of 70 field goal attempts for the Falcons. Bryant began his professional career with the Iowa Barnstormers of the AFL before being signed by the Frankfurt Galaxy of NFL Europe in 2002.

Backups: Erik Folk, No. 1 (5-11, 185) – The University of Washington product was a semifinalist for the Lou Groza Award in 2011 and set a school record by making 124 of 124 PATs. With the Huskies, Folk kicked field goals to beat USC in 2009 and 2010.

KR



Jacquizz Rodgers, No. 32 (5-7, 188) – Rodgers rushed 57 times for 205 yards with one touchdown and caught 21 passes for 188 yards and added another score during a productive rookie season. He will get an opportunity to return kicks in 2012. At Oregon State, "Quizz" was named offensive player of the year for the Pac-10 in 2008 and was all-conference in three consecutive years (2008-2010). After the 2010 campaign, Rodgers received first-team All-American honors after being third team the two previous years.

Backups: Harry Douglas, No. 83 (6-0, 183) – The Louisville product will be the main backup early in camp. Douglas is also a back-up wide receiver and the first-team punt returner. In his career Douglas has returned four kicks for 46 yards, all of which came in 2008.



FALCONS DEFENSE

DE



John Abraham, No. 55 (6-4, 263) – The Predator enters his 13th season in the NFL after appearing in 15 games last year with the Falcons. Abraham racked up 9.5 sacks in 2011 while forcing four fumbles. In 2008, Abraham set the franchise's single-season record for sacks with 16.5.

Backups: Lawrence Sidbury, No. 90 (6-3, 265) – The four-year vet enters the season fresh off his best year as a pro when he got to opposing quarterbacks four times. Sidbury is a former Richmond Spider, and was drafted by the Falcons in the fourth round. ... Cliff Matthews, No. 98 (6-4, 257) – The former South Carolina Gamecock was drafted in the seventh-round of the 2011 NFL Draft.

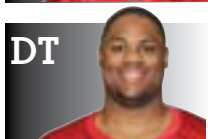
DT



Jonathan Babineaux, No. 95 (6-2, 300) – The eight-year Falcons veteran has 19 career sacks in 106 games. The Port Arthur, Texas native made 21 tackles in 2011 and managed to deflect two passes at the line of scrimmage. Babineaux was a second-round selection in 2005. The former Iowa Hawkeye will turn 31 in October.

Backups: Peria Jerry, No. 94 (6-2, 294) – The 2009 first-round pick started four games one year ago and registered double-digit tackles for the first time in his career. Jerry also recorded a forced fumble in 2011. The Ole Miss product has played in 34 total games for Atlanta. ... Travian Robertson, No. 92 (6-4, 302) – The 2012 seventh-round pick will step into the mix at tackle after starring at South Carolina.

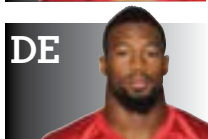
DT



Corey Peters, No. 91 (6-3, 295) – The 2010 third-round pick has taken the NFL by storm, grabbing a starting spot as a rookie and not letting go. In 2011, Peters appeared in 15 games, registering 26 tackles, three sacks, one interception, one fumble recovery and a touchdown. In college at the University of Kentucky, Peters was named All-SEC. The Louisville, Ky., native is currently on the PUP (physically unable to perform) list for three weeks.

Backups: Elisha Joseph, No. 70 (6-3, 275) – The Temple product was recently signed by the Falcons. He was drafted by Green Bay as an undrafted free agent in 2011, and also played with Pittsburgh's practice squad last season. ... Vance Walker, No. 99 (6-2, 307) – Walker is a four-year pro out of Georgia Tech. ... Micanor Regis, No. 67 (6-3, 305) – Regis is a rookie free agent.

DE



Ray Edwards, No. 93 (6-5, 268) – The 27-year-old Edwards enters his second year with the Falcons looking to improve on his 3.5 sacks from 2011. Edwards has the ability to get to the quarterback consistently, as shown by his 33 career sacks. He heated up towards the end of the season, recording 11 of his 35 tackles after Dec. 1.

Backups: Kroy Biermann, No. 71 (6-3, 255) – The fifth-year pro recorded his second career touchdown last year on an interception return. Biermann also recorded 2.5 sacks and 37 tackles. In his career, Biermann has 12.5 sacks. ... Jonathan Massaquoi, No. 96 (6-2, 264) – The fifth-round draft pick got to the quarterback 19.5 times the over the last two seasons at Troy.

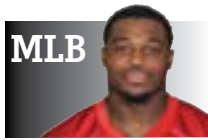
OLB



Stephen Nicholas, No. 54 (6-3, 230) – In five seasons with the Falcons, Nicholas has started 32 games and registered 246 tackles. Last season, the South Florida product appeared in 10 games and forced two fumbles.

Backups: Spencer Adkins, No. 59 (5-11, 236) – Adkins enters his fourth season with Atlanta having seen action as an outside linebacker as well as on special teams. The former Miami Hurricane has 15 career tackles in 24 games with the Falcons. ... Jerrell Harris, No. 49 (6-3, 242) – Harris is a rookie from Alabama who helped the Tide win a BCS title last year. ... Pat Schiller, No. 53 (6-2, 235) – The rookie played linebacker at Northern Illinois.

MLB



Akeem Dent, No. 52 (6-1, 242) – The former Georgia Bulldog appeared in 16 games as a rookie last year, recording 20 tackles and two forced fumbles. A native of Atlanta and graduate of Douglass High School, Dent made 126 tackles for Georgia in 2010 and was named to the All-SEC team.

Backups: Mike Peterson, No. 53 (6-1, 233) – The 14-year veteran enters his fourth season with Atlanta and has totaled 140 tackles for the Falcons. During his NFL career Peterson has made 700 tackles, snatched 19 interceptions and accounted for 21.5 sacks. ... Rico Council, No. 43 (6-1, 255) – The Tennessee State standout signed as a free agent with the team after recording 87 tackles in college.

OLB



Sean Weatherspoon, No. 56 (6-1, 239) – Selected with the No. 19 pick in 2010, Weatherspoon racked up 115 tackles and four sacks in 2011. The former Missouri Tiger also deflected eight passes and recovered a fumble.

Backups: Robert James, No. 50 (5-11, 235) – The 2008 fifth-round pick has risen from the practice squad to see action in two different seasons. Last year, the 28-year old appeared in the season finale against Tampa Bay and also on special teams. ... Max Gruder, No. 46 (6-2, 230) – The rookie recorded 116 tackles his senior season at Pitt. ... Matt Hansen, No. 30 (6-1, 230) – The Falcons signed Hansen out of the University of Rhode Island in 2011.

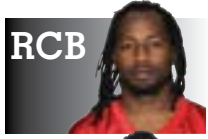
LCB



Brent Grimes, No. 20 (5-10, 181) – The former rookie free agent made the Pro Bowl in 2010 and has 13 interceptions in five seasons with the Falcons. Grimes signed with the Falcons out of Shippensburg and recorded his best year in 2010, when he notched 82 tackles while starting all 16 games.

Backups: Dominique Franks, No. 24 (5-11, 194) – The former Oklahoma Sooner had a career year last year, recording 15 tackles and two interceptions. ... Darrin Walls, No. 29 (6-0, 190) – The second-year standout out of Notre Dame intercepted one pass last year. ... Robert McClain, No. 27 (5-9, 195) – McClain appeared in 16 games for the Carolina Panthers in 2010 and made 16 total tackles.

RCB



Asante Samuel, No. 22 (5-10, 185) – The 10-year vet will make his Falcons debut this season after spending the last four years with Philadelphia. Samuel has 45 interceptions over his career, including 23 with the Eagles. The former Central Florida standout has five career pick-sixes.

Backups: Dunta Robinson, No. 23 (5-10, 182) – The ninth-year pro is in his third season with the Falcons. The Athens native will start at nickelback this season. ... Christopher Owens, No. 21 (5-9, 179) – Though just 25-years old, Owens has 104 career tackles. He appeared in 14 games in 2011. ... Peyton Thompson, No. 37 (5-11, 180) – Thompson is a rookie free agent from San Jose State.

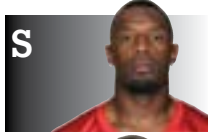
S



Thomas DeCoud, No. 28 (6-2, 192) – The 27-year-old California Golden Bear enters his fifth season with the Falcons. Last year, DeCoud appeared in 16 games, recording 86 tackles and nabbing four interceptions. In his career, DeCoud has eight picks.

Backups: Chris Hope, No. 36 (6-0, 204) – Hope was signed in the offseason after spending six years with Tennessee and four years with Pittsburgh. During his NFL career, the Florida State product has nabbed 20 interceptions and made 534 tackles. ... Shann Schillinger, No. 39 (6-0, 202) – In his third season with Atlanta, the former Montana Grizzlies standout racked up 11 tackles one year ago and has 19 in his two years with the team.

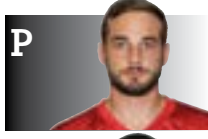
S



William Moore, No. 25 (6-0, 218) – Since being drafted out of Missouri in 2009, Moore has been a star in the Falcons defensive secondary. Moore broke out in 2010 with five interceptions and played in 12 games in 2011, racking up 54 tackles and two picks. He has also registered 17 pass defenses in the last two years.

Backups: Charles Mitchell, No. 26 (5-11, 202) – The 2012 sixth-round pick out of Mississippi State played in 50 games during his time in Starkville. Mitchell was named Gatorade Player of the Year in Mississippi during his senior year of high school. ... Suaesi Tuimaunei, No. 41 (6-1, 205) – The former Oregon State Beaver attended training camp with the Falcons in 2011 and was signed to the practice squad. Tuimaunei is a native of Hawaii.

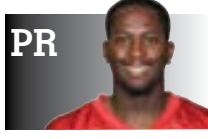
P



Matt Boshier, No. 5 (6-0, 208) – The second-year pro out of Miami (Fla.) handled punting and kickoff duties last season for Atlanta. The 24-year old had 70 punts for an average of 42.7 yards per kick last season. His longest was 59 yards, and he pinned opponents inside the 20-yard line 27 times. Boshier will kick off again for Atlanta this year and back up field goal kicker Matt Bryant.

Backups: Dawson Zimmerman, No. 9 (6-2, 205) – The rookie from Clemson was named Academic All-ACC twice, and was team specialist of the year the same season. The former Brookwood Bronco had 24 punts of 50-plus yards. Zimmerman was the holder on field goals in 2011.

PR



Harry Douglas, No. 83 (6-0, 183) – Douglas was selected in the third round of the 2008 NFL Draft and contributed immediately to the Falcons by rushing 12 times for 69 yards and a touchdown while also catching 23 passes for 320 yards and a score. In 2011, Douglas caught a career-high 39 balls for 498 yards. Douglas returned a punt 61 yards for a touchdown and was named NFC Special Teams Player of the Week for his efforts as a rookie.

Backups: Dominique Franks, No. 24 (5-11, 194) – Franks returned 29 punts for 346 yards in college, good enough for an 11.9 yards-per-return average. The team has allowed him to return punts in practice the last few seasons.

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Q&A WITH THOMAS

Score Atlanta founder and publisher I.J. Rosenberg recently discussed the upcoming 2012 season with Falcons General Manager Thomas Dimitroff.

How was this offseason compared to past offseasons in terms of the new collective bargaining agreement put into place last year?

TD: Last year was incredibly tumultuous and precarious at every turn as far as what to expect. This year it's a major relief to go into this season with most everything in place, and not only from the standpoint of the coaches and players, but also from the standpoint of admin-

istration. We are relieved to be heading into the season again with everything in a solid place.

Unlike last year when the NFL had a work stoppage that went into the summer, everything is back to normal for getting ready for the season. How much does this help the two new coordinators you brought in?

TD: Last year was unprecedented. This year everything was in place to bring in a new offensive coordinator, defensive coordinator and offensive line coach, who are major cogs within a coaching system. They're all adept and we're looking forward to working with these gentlemen going into this season.

Each offseason has featured a big signing or trade and you were able to keep the Asante Samuel trade under wraps for quite some time. Did bringing in a player like that relate to having no first-round pick?

TD: Well, we lightheartedly stated that that was one of our first-round picks and we were excited about and encouraged about having a player of Asante's caliber join our football team. He's going to help our secondary and our defense and he's going to bring an ele-

ment of swagger and confidence to our defense and help contribute to what we already have in place. We think we have a nice foundation here and we think Asante can just help us take our defense to another level.

Talk about Asante's swagger.

TD: In my mind, Asante's got some of the best confidence, self-confidence, in our League. He's got some of the best anticipatory skills in the League and his ability to get his hands on the football with 45 interceptions throughout his career is indicative of his ability to make plays. When you have someone like that who knows how to get to the ball and get around the ball, he just adds that element of confidence within a defense and secondary that his teammates will believe in. He can help make plays on the ball and help turn the ball over.

Before your arrival, the team had never finished with back-to-back winning seasons and had never been to the playoffs in consecutive years. Four seasons later, both of those items have been accomplished. How have the expectations changed as you enter season No. 5?

TD: Our bar continues to be set higher and higher, and our expectations too, obviously. Our owner, Arthur Blank, our head coach, Mike Smith, and myself as a general manager all believe we have the football team that will continue to take us to new levels. It will take a lot of focus, dedication and passion from our entire organization to help bring us to another level, and we are confident that we can do that.

The team spent its first two picks in the draft on offensive linemen when flashy playmakers were still available on the board. Is the mindset of building the offensive line something you brought with you from New England?

TD: We believe that we need to continue to fortify our offensive line and provide a very strong pocket for Matt Ryan to step up and deliver the ball to our playmakers. The only way we are going to be able to do that is if we continue to focus and continue to get more and more gritty and more stout along the offensive line. The ability to move the ball in the run game and get those tough yards was something that we focused on in the offseason. Another focus in the offseason was definitely directed towards making sure we're sound in all of the areas along the offensive line that I've mentioned.

The team brought back several free agents that you selected from your first few drafts. How do you decide on which players to bring back (for example Harry Douglas) vs. which players you decide to let walk (for example Curtis Lofton)?

TD: We felt that we were very, very active in free agency contrary to what was discussed. We had over 15 moves that we deemed were free agency moves by signing back the majority of our core of football players. Our desire was to make sure we got back every player that we felt that was going to be important for us moving forward and to continue to break through the proverbial door.



Q&A WITH MIKE

Head Coach Mike Smith enters the 2012 season with a sparkling 43-21 record with three playoff appearances and a division title. Entering his fifth season in Atlanta, Smith will attempt to take Atlanta back to the postseason for the fourth time. Score Atlanta founder I.J. Rosenberg sat down with Coach Smith earlier this summer.

For the first time since you were hired, you will have an offensive coordinator not named Mike Mularkey and a defensive coordinator not named Brian VanGorder. How have the two new hires taken to the job thus far?

MS: Both Dirk and Mike have come in and given us a new set of eyes on our football team, and I think they've done a very nice job through the OTAs and our minicamp in terms of installing the new offense and defense. Both of those guys have great resumes, and I am looking forward to seeing the schemes fill out in terms of what our players are capable of doing. In terms of coaching, I think you have philosophies that you believe in but you have to sometimes put those philosophies on the back shelf and make your decisions based on what your players are capable of doing and what their strengths and weaknesses are.

Mike Nolan is a respected defensive mind in the NFL, but you paid your dues on the defensive side of the ball, too. How involved will you be with the defensive game plan week-to-week or even play-to-play?

MS: As a head coach, you hire a defensive coordinator to call the plays on game day. I think that I am more of a macro-manager than a micro-manager. Mike and his staff, just like the last four years, will spend much more time evaluating the opposing team's offense

and will put together the game plan. I will be involved during the week, but on game day, I will let both the coordinators call the game, and I think that's very important.

Julio Jones has all of the makings of the next great superstar wide receiver in this league. What is Jones' ceiling in your eyes?

MS: It's a very high ceiling. He's going to be much more comfortable and is going to have a full offseason with us. Last year, it was a very unique situation in terms of our offseason and not having an opportunity to work with the rookies until the start of training camp. So I think that you are going to see Julio continue to go through a maturation process to be a very good wide receiver in the NFL. His run-after-catch ability is outstanding, and he also has a very unique skillset.

The schedule is interesting this year with the team never having back-to-back road games or home games. How difficult will this be on the coaching staff and on the players in terms of finding a rhythm?

MS: I think that it's unique because to the best of my recollection I don't believe I've ever had a schedule that was home-away-home-away all the way through. You usually would get a couple of road games then a couple of home games. The difficult part of that is going to be that we do have some Monday night, Sunday night, Thursday night games, so we're going to have to have four or five

different schedules that we are going to have to go through this season in our weekly sequence. We are used to that. We have played national games in the last couple years.

The sign of a great franchise is the chain of command from the owner to the GM to the coach to the quarterback. This will be your fifth year together. How does that synergy work?

MS: Well, I think it's a very positive synergy. And I think that it starts, as you mentioned, at the top with Mr. Blank and philosophically what he believes in terms of running an organization. And I think that we've been successful in our first four years and I don't think that there are going to be any changes. I am very confident that we will continue to grow as a team and as an organization, even though many parts have changed since the first day Thomas and I were hired to run the football operations. We've just got to continue to stay the course with how we're building our football team. We believe in filling through the draft and supplementing with free agents.

How do you see the 2012 season playing out and what would be considered a successful year? Should Falcons fans pack for the Super Bowl?

MS: To put it in one sentence, we want to be a better football team in 2012 than we were in 2011.



Q&A WITH RICH



Score Atlanta founder and publisher I.J. Rosenberg sat down with Falcons President & CEO Rich McKay earlier this summer to discuss the current state of the franchise.

After making the playoffs two years in a row, something that's never been done in franchise history, is the next logical step for the franchise to reach the NFC Championship game?

RM: I don't know if there is such a thing as the next logical step. I think that all of us in the organization feel the pressure to keep get-

ting better. And "keep getting better" means to take the next steps, but every year is a new year. You have to build a football team and you have to reconstitute your players because the modern game has such a high turnover. We're incorporating two new coordinators this year, so we feel the pressure to keep moving.

When it comes to the fans, they've seen the success you've had the past couple years. How does a team President & CEO look at it from the perspective of what the fan demands and how you listen to what's written and said about that?

RM: I've been in the League long enough to know that fans raise their expectation bar every year, but the number one thing they want to see is consistency. They want to see you consistently be competitive in December and January and that is what Mike (Smith) and Thomas (Dimitroff) have helped us achieve. They're always going to want to see you do better than whatever last year was and however last year ended. I think their first requirement and expectation is that we want to be a competitive team that's relevant in Decem-

ber, that's playing for division championships and competing in the playoffs. That's the first expectation for every fan across this League and, as an organization, we have taken that challenge on and Mike and Thomas have helped us meet that challenge. Now we just want to be raising the bar.

As a chairman of the NFL's competition committee you hear a lot of proposals that involve the safety of players, but it seems the average fans are just starting to hear about all that these days. Have teams been concerned with the safety of the players for a while?

RM: I've been on the competition committee since 1994. I don't remember any meeting that I've been to where safety wasn't the first point discussed. It always has been about safety. I think we put defenseless receiver rules in place in 1995. People tend to think the safety discussion and the safety rules are recent, in the past couple years, but that's not the case. That has been the point of emphasis and the point of discussion in the League for an awfully long time. But the game evolves and so do the athletes and, as it does and as they do, you have to continue to evolve the rules and that's what we've been trying to do.

With all of the talk of a new stadium, how do you go about putting that talk away once training camp starts, or do you continue to pursue additional plans during the season?

RM: I think you let football take precedence. That's what should take precedence, and that's what will take precedence. My charge is to work behind the scenes with the Georgia World Congress Center on finding a long-term stadium solution that can be a win-win for all of our stakeholders. As an organization though, we're always focused on putting football first. It's what our fans want, it's what our team wants and it's what we should do.

What are realistic hopes/goals for the 2012 season? What is a success?

RM: I have never been one that got too worried about what the ultimate goal was. I'm more worried about preseason Week 1 and, certainly, regular season Week 1 rather than what the end of the season looks like. I think the most important thing we can do is build a really good football team during training camp, which the fans will be a part of and get an opportunity to watch, and then focus on taking it one game at a time. There are 32 teams in this League and every single one of them wants to win every single week. We have an incredibly competitive League. So I think when you start setting goals by number of wins or what will happen, you end up, sometimes, being bitterly disappointed. I think in our case, what we've done in the last four years is do it the right way, which is we set some internal goals but the main thing we've done is shown up and play consistently and won a lot of home games. It's a good formula for success.



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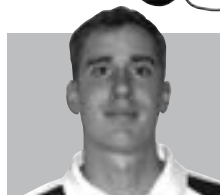


FROM YOUR HOME OF THE ATLANTA FALCONS






TENNESSEE SPOTLIGHT



“Dangerous” Titans hunt playoffs

By Fletcher Proctor

For years the Tennessee Titans have been thought of as one of the most dangerous organizations in the NFL. Whether it was Steve McNair, Eddie George or Chris Johnson, the Titans seemingly always had someone that was a threat to take over any game at any time. Last season, the Titans finished with a winning record for the first time since 2008, but Mike Munchak's squad missed out on a tiebreaker with the Cincinnati Bengals and watched the playoffs from Nashville.

NOISE MAKERS ...

This year, Munchak's squad could be a serious threat to make some noise in an AFC South that is in a bit of transition. The division will be without Peyton Manning, and the Titans could find themselves in a serious competition with Houston for the division crown.

Chris Johnson will be back in Tennessee's backfield healthy and eager to put a disappointing 2011 behind him. While 1,047 yards rushing isn't necessarily a disappointment, the 3.99 yards per carry is a bit of a low number when you consider Johnson's career average is 4.8. Johnson is a three-time Pro Bowler, but the 2009 All-Pro has seen his numbers slip in each of the past two seasons. Johnson did pose more of a threat as a receiver out of the backfield in 2011, but Munchak will want Johnson to find and apply his 2009 game again if possible.

Johnson will be playing behind what should once again be a quarterback controversy. Matt Hasselbeck led the team to a 9-7 record one year ago, but Titans fans were no doubt encouraged when first-round selection Jake Locker received some playing time in

the middle of the season. Locker finished with four touchdowns and no interceptions while throwing for 542 yards on 34-for-66 passing.

Hasselbeck, meanwhile, was 319-for-518 for more than 3,500 yards and 18 touchdowns. The 13-year veteran has a career 78-69 mark with three Pro Bowl appearances. The 36-year-old is listed as the starter, but Locker could potentially steal that title and is clearly the future in Tennessee. Munchak told the Titans' team website he hopes to have a decision made by the team's third preseason game on Aug. 23.

Whichever quarterback wins the training camp derby will have a serious threat on the outside in first-round pick Kendall Wright. The former Baylor Bear led the NCAA one year ago with 19 catches of at least 25 yards. The speedster will join Nate Washington, Damian Williams and Lavelle Hawkins on the Titans' perimeter.

GETTING DEFENSIVE ...

Defensively, Titans defensive coordinator Jerry Gray will benefit from the team's Round 2 pick of UNC's Zach Brown. The speedy linebacker will likely see time at weak-side linebacker as well as in the team's nickel formation. Brown and Akeem Ayers, a 2011 second-round pick, should form quite an impressive attack from the linebacker position with Colin McCarthy in the middle.

Up front, Derrick Morgan and Kamerion

Wimbley can make noise off the edge. Wimbley spent the past two seasons in Oakland, totaling 16 sacks and piling up 96 tackles. He will be moving from linebacker to defensive end in the Tennessee system, a position he played in college before being moved to outside linebacker in the NFL. Morgan recorded just 2.5 sacks in 2011, but the former Georgia Tech Yellow Jacket did make 10 starts while appearing in 15 games one season ago and should benefit from Wimbley on the opposite side.

New secondary coach Brett Maxie will have a fine pair of safeties under his supervision. Michael Griffin will begin his sixth year in the League as one of the Titans' most-tenured players after being taken No. 19 overall in the 2007 NFL Draft. The former Texas Longhorn has 17 career interceptions from his free safety spot, including seven in 2008. At the other safety spot, Jordan Babineaux will return for his second year with the Titans after spending his first seven years in the League with the Seattle Seahawks. Babineaux is the younger brother of Falcons' defensive tackle Jonathan Babineaux.

On the schedule, Tennessee draws the Bears, a 3-5 road team in 2011, at home and the Vikings, a 1-7 home team, on the road, in two games that could be the difference between making the playoffs and not.

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THE NEW FALCONS

By Stephen Black

C/G Peter Konz

Drafted: Second Round, Pick No. 55

College: Wisconsin

The Skinny: The Falcons' first pick in the 2012 Draft, Konz will be looked at to play guard or center. He was considered by some experts to be a late first-round selection, as well as the best center prospect in the draft. Konz graduated early, leaving the Badgers after his junior year. Scouts say he has a wide base off the snap, plays with consistent pad level, has excellent balance for pass protection and is a physical run-blocker. The 6-foot-5, 314-pounder picks up stunts well and works well with the rest of the interior offensive line. In college, Konz played 30 games for Wisconsin and helped lead his team to three straight bowls, including two Rose Bowls.

OT Lamar Holmes

Drafted: Third Round, Pick No. 91

College: Southern Miss

The Skinny: The 6-foot-6, 334-pound road-grader began his college career at Itawamba Community College in Mississippi prior to transferring to Southern Miss. Holmes carries prototypical size for an NFL tackle and carries it well. He impressed scouts with his athleticism, strength and foot movement. Holmes has col-

lege experience playing both tackle positions and will be looked upon by the Falcons to add depth and potentially develop into an NFL starter. As a tribute to his leadership ability and character, Holmes was voted team captain in 2011 by his Golden Eagles teammates. The Gastonia, N.C., native was named all-Conference his senior year while protecting quarterback Austin Davis' blindside. The Southern Miss offense was quite potent last season, as Davis threw for 3,496 yards and 30 touchdowns while the Eagles ran for 205.1 yards per game.

FB Bradie Ewing

Drafted: Fifth Round, Pick No. 157

College: Wisconsin

The Skinny: In four years at Wisconsin, Ewing made the Academic All-Big Ten team three times. Ewing was a part of the Badgers' offensive backfield, as well as the punting and kicking units. During his college career, Ewing returned eight kickoffs for a 17.38-yard average and made 17 tackles. While blocking for Heisman candidate Montee Ball, the Richland Center, Wisc., native had 30 touchdown-resulting blocks his senior season after having 18 his junior year. Ewing also caught 28 passes during his career at Wisconsin including two scores. In addition to his skills as a blocker and

receiver, Ewing is proficient on special teams, as the former walk-on was named Wisconsin's Special Teams Player of the Year in 2011.

DE Jonathan Massaquoi

Drafted: Fifth Round, Pick No. 164

College: Troy

The Skinny: Massaquoi is from nearby Central Gwinnett High School, where he began playing organized football for the first time during his junior season – and he made a big impression. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution named him to its list of top 60 juniors in the state. After his senior year with the Black Knights, Massaquoi enrolled at Butler Community College in Kansas. From there, he transferred to Troy where he continued to impress. After his first season at the Alabama school, Massaquoi was named to the All-Sun Belt Conference team. During that season, the native of Liberia, West Africa, had 13.5 sacks and 20.5 tackles-for-loss. Massaquoi followed up that season with a senior year in which he again led the team with six sacks and 10.5 tackles for loss.

S Charles Mitchell

Drafted: Sixth Round, Pick No. 192

College: Mississippi State

The Skinny: Mitchell will join three returning safeties in the Falcons defensive backfield. A former cornerback, Mitchell displayed solid coverage skills in college while also being stout in the running game. The native of Clarksdale, Miss., started all 50 games in his career with the Bulldogs while making 188 tackles and snatching four interceptions. Like Ewing, Mitchell was a standout special teams player in college. Scouts have said he diagnoses plays well and is always

in position to make plays. Known as a sure tackler, Mitchell is also good in zone coverage. As a senior at Clarksdale High School, Mitchell was named the state's Gatorade Player of the Year.

DT Travian Robertson

Drafted: Seventh Round, Pick No. 249

College: South Carolina

The Skinny: The 6-foot-4, 310-pound big man is known for his ability to mobilize offensive linemen, which frees up linebackers to make plays. Robertson brings a lot of leverage to his game and has shown the ability to play low. His hands and his physical strength are above average for players at his position. While competing in the SEC, Robertson played all four seasons for a total of 56 games, one behind the school leader. Like Mitchell and Holmes, Robertson was voted team captain by his peers. The native of Laurinburg, N.C., led the Gamecocks defensive line with 49 stops in 2011.

ROOKIE FREE AGENTS: LaMark Brown, WR, Minnesota-Mankato; Michael Calvin, WR, California; Rico Council, LB, Tennessee State; Dominique Davis, QB, East Carolina; Robbie Frey, RB, Kutztown; Max Gruder, LB, Pittsburgh; Bryce Harris, T, Fresno State; Jerrell Harris, LB, Alabama; Josh Harris, LS, Auburn; Tyler Horn, C, Miami; Marcus Jackson, WR, Lamar; Phillipkeith Manley, G, Toledo; Marty Markett, CB, South Carolina; Adam Nissley, TE, Central Florida; Louis Nzegwu, DE, Wisconsin; Micanor Regis, DT, Miami; James Rodgers, WR, Oregon State; Pat Schiller, LB, Northern Illinois; Peyton Thompson, CB, San Jose State; Dawson Zimmerman, P, Clemson



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NEW DIGS



Falcons deserve new outdoor nest

By Fletcher Proctor



Few things in life are as nice as sitting outside with grills discharging mouth-watering aromas and friends engaging in revelry matched by just a handful of other cities across the country. The weather is seasonably warm with a hint of a crisp breeze blowing every so often to help move those grill smells across the vast space of Falcons fans gathered around cars and RVs, anticipating an Atlanta victory. Soon the fans will pack up the grill and head to

their seats to watch the Falcons put a hurting on the day's opponent. Wouldn't it be nice if fans didn't have to leave the sunshine in the process to watch the home team win?

WARM WEATHER ...

The Falcons are in the exploratory process of a new stadium, perhaps one with a retractable roof that could open up and let in the elements. As quickly as they can, Falcons

fans should wrap their arms around the idea of a new, outdoor stadium in the heart of Atlanta. Imagine attending a football game while the sun shines overhead. Think of the home-field advantage the Falcons would have early in the season. Take a second to ponder the possibility of sitting in a brand new, state-of-the-art facility that can open up to let fans take advantage of Atlanta's beautiful fall weather. There is a reason people move to Atlanta, and that is the weather in the fall. Do you think it's fun sitting on metal bleachers in Buffalo a few days after Thanksgiving? No. Fans might still be wearing shorts while attending a game that same day in an outdoor stadium in Atlanta.

Georgia has incredible fall weather, so it is about time the team takes advantage of it, opposed to simply sitting inside of a Dome that could be in Atlanta or Detroit or Billings, for all we know. Why run from something that millions of people have taken advantage of by moving to the city? The weather is a drawing point, so it only makes sense to capitalize on it with a stadium that opens up to let in the weather.

In the unfortunate case of poor weather such as a rain storm, this is where the retractable roof comes into play. Stadiums such as University of Phoenix Stadium, Reliant Stadium and Lucas Oil Stadium with retractable roofs can have the top close in a matter of minutes. The latter dome, in Indianapolis, can have the roof closed in a mere nine minutes. If rain is in the forecast, one Falcons employee would just need to flip a switch and suddenly you are inside again.

BRIGHT LIGHTS ...

If those Thursday night Georgia Tech games have taught us anything, it is that the city's sky-

line is an incredible view at night. Imagine Sunday Night Football taking place in the Falcons' new stadium with an incredible view of downtown Atlanta just beyond the upper reaches of the upper deck. During MNF's aerial shots from the blimp, imagine seeing the inside of the new stadium, packed full of screaming Falcons fans inspiring the defense instead of just the shot of a dome's roof with who-knows-what going on inside of it.

And in case anyone needed another reason to push for a new stadium, especially one that is outdoors or with a retractable roof, look no farther than to Indianapolis, Detroit, New York and Glendale. The Colts, Lions, Giants/Jets and Cardinals all built new stadiums within the last few years, and all have been rewarded with the honor of hosting a Super Bowl. Glendale's University of Phoenix Stadium will actually be hosting a second one in 2015 since its grand opening back in 2006. If Atlanta wants to host another Super Bowl, it appears that a new stadium will be the only way to bring football's grandest event back to the ATL.

At the end of the day, those in the know will decide whether the Falcons need a new stadium in downtown Atlanta. Hopefully if a new one is to be built, the team will seriously consider at least a retractable roof, if not a completely open-air stadium. The weather and all that comes with it helps to make football the sport we all love. Let the fans take their tailgating experience into the stadium, under the same amazing sun with the same perfect weather throughout. Make this brand of football feel like football the way it was meant to be experienced.

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POLE KAT



Falcons Kat chases Olympic dream

By Stephen Black

On every NFL game day, there are dozens of remarkable athletes who take the field. At the Georgia Dome this fall, one of the most accomplished athletes will be on the sidelines sporting Atlanta Falcons cheerleading attire.

Cheerleader Kat is not only a talented promoter of the pom-poms, she also nearly made the U.S. Olympic team in pole vaulting. After growing up a gymnast, diver and cheerleader, Kat took up pole vaulting during college and has become rather good at it in a short time.

THE NATURAL ...

The Alpharetta native took up the sport at Clemson while she was on the football cheerleading squad. Assistant track coach Josh Langley noticed her obvious athleticism at a Tigers football game.

"It was completely random," she explained. "Whenever the football team would score, we'd have to go running down to the end zone and do back flips. And (Langley) saw me and thought I was pretty athletic. He found me (later) in one of the athletic facilities and asked me if I had any pole vaulting

experience and I didn't."

It was a fortuitous event for both Kat and the Clemson track team. The multi-talented young lady won the Tiger Invitational in her first season in the sport. Then, after jumping 11 feet, 5 3/4 inches in 2009, Kat increased her personal best by almost two feet in clearing 13-6 1/2 the following year while at the University of Georgia. At the Olympic Trials this summer, Kat cleared a career-best 14-5 1/4 to finish fifth overall. The top three advanced to the Olympics.

After coming so close to London 2012, Kat will continue to pursue her goal of making the Olympics. And she will do it while also holding down a full-time job in the public health industry and cheering for your Atlanta Falcons.

"I'm going to have to be really, really structured with my days," she said of her busy schedule. "After I finished fifth at the Olympic Trials after only doing it for three years, I came to the conclusion that I have to try for 2016 (the next Olympics) or I'd be kicking myself for the rest of my life. I think my days are going to be 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. every day, but it'll be fun."

Her next shot at representing the U.S. in-

ternationally as a pole vaulter will come next year at the indoor and outdoor World Championship meets.

"Ideally, I'd keep training until then and make that team to be the best in the U.S. at that point, but I'm just going to have to see how training goes in the fall and trying to coordinate it with cheerleading," she said.

DIVERSE BACKGROUND ...

While Kat is nearing the top of the pole vaulting world and holding a spot with the prestigious Falcons cheerleaders, she also has a background in other sports. Growing up, she was a competitive diver and also a Level 10 gymnast until switching to cheerleading while at Chattahoochee High School. At Level 10 as a gymnast, she was the next step below an Elite gymnast, which compete internationally.

"At four years of being at level 10, I had to decide...do I try to go elite and take it to an international level, but that would've met changing gyms, homeschooling, making a life change," she said. "I made a huge change at that point. I changed from private school to public school at that point and started cheerleading. It was a complete 180."

From there, Kat earned a partial academic scholarship to Clemson and made the Tigers' cheerleading team. After graduating from Clemson, she went to UGA for graduate school and continued her track career with the Bulldogs.

With Kat now on the sidelines, Falcons fans might be able to say one day that they saw an Olympian perform during a Falcons game.

Photo courtesy of Vaulter Magazine. Black can be reached at sblack@scoreatl.com.



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