



FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS



AUGUST 2, 2013 • 6:45 PM
BOBBY GRUHN FIELD AT CITY PARK STADIUM
GAINESVILLE, GA





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KIA MOTORS FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS SCHEDULE

BOBBY GRUHN FIELD
898 LONGSTREET CIRCLE, GAINESVILLE, GA 30501
FRIDAY, AUGUST 2, 2013

6:00pm | Gates Open

6:45pm | Practice Begins

7:35pm | National Anthem

8:43pm | Halftime

- Atlanta Falcons Cheerleaders
- Kia Motors Contest

9:10pm | Practice Ends

- Autograph Session Begins [15 Min Total]

9:15pm | Fireworks Begin

9:25pm | Autograph Session Ends
Event Concludes

ROOKIE ROUNDUP

Cornerbacks head talented group of draftees

By Sean Conway

Early in the preseason the Falcons rookies showed they are obviously athletes, not just football players. As they learned and competed at the Falcons mandatory minicamp in June, it was clear why fans should be so excited. The young players are blending with veterans as they trade practice reps, learning the "Falcon Way" and getting adjusted to the life of an NFL player.

DEFENSE-HEAVY ...

From first-round pick Desmond Trufant to every first-year Falcon, it's obvious these guys want to win. Trufant, a cornerback from the University of Washington, brings with him a football pedigree to the Flowery Branch complex. He has two older brothers (Marcus and Isaiah) that have been on NFL rosters.

Trufant is a player. In college, Trufant quickly assumed the role of a leader. He started 47 of 50 games for the Huskies, and his ac-

colades include being selected as a team captain in 2012 and being named second-team All-American and first-team All-Pac 12.

During minicamp, Trufant had a sort of an initiation by fire. He faced Pro Bowl wide receivers Roddy White or Julio Jones almost every snap. He came away impressed by their talent, but not bowed by their reputation.

"[White and Jones] are helping me get better everyday to be honest," said Trufant. "They're big, they're strong, they're fast. I'm thankful, though. I try to learn from as many people as possible."

While Trufant has been on NFL scouts' radar thanks to his performance at Washington, he finds himself learning and competing with another talented rookie cornerback: Robert Alford, the 60th overall pick in the draft.

Alford comes from a school unfamiliar to a lot of football fans, Southeastern Louisiana Uni-

versity, but can make an impact for the Falcons all over the field. Alford, at 5-foot-10, 186 pounds, has been auditioning for Smith as a cornerback and return man in the special teams game.

Alford plays a physical style of cornerback and isn't afraid of contact either, pressing receivers at the line of scrimmage and supporting in run defense. Guys with Alford's playing style tend to thrive in the schemes preferred by Smith and Defensive Coordinator Mike Nolan.

Alford and Trufant will be linked together because they were the top two Falcons picks in April's draft, but they welcome each other.

"I met Rob[ert] at the Senior Bowl," said Trufant. "We bonded instantly. We've been growing together and getting better together, competing."

After Alford and Trufant, Dimitroff kept working on improving the team on the defensive side of the line of scrimmage, selecting defensive end Malliciah Goodman in the fourth round. Goodman has prototypical size for an end at 6-foot-4, 276 pounds. He'll be expected to join Umenyiora and Kroy Biermann in the rotation immediately.

LATE-ROUND FINDS ...

Competing with Goodman and the veteran defensive ends will be Stansly Maponga, a

former TCU Horned Frog. The Falcons snatched Maponga (6-foot-2, 265 pounds) in the fifth round. Recovering from foot surgery in March, his speed will be an asset come fall.

Between Goodman and Maponga, the Falcons selected 6-foot-8 tight end Levine Toilolo from Stanford in the fourth round. Toilolo is looking at the opportunity of a great apprenticeship. He'll spend all of training camp learning from the habits and professionalism of the master, Gonzalez.

The theme of selecting defensive players to compete with other rookies continued for a third time in the 2013 Falcons draft when safeties Kemal Ishmael and Zeke Motta both received a draft day call from Flowery Branch in the seventh round. Fans can expect to see a little more speed out of Ishmael (6-foot-0, 206 pounds) and a little more size from Motta (6-foot-2, 216 pounds).

After selecting six defenders and Toilolo, the Falcons rounded out the draft by selecting Duke quarterback Sean Renfree. Renfree possesses the size (6-foot-5, 222 pounds) and intellect to man the quarterback position in the NFL. Renfree is recovering from shoulder surgery and will compete with free agent Seth Doege from Texas Tech for preseason playing time.

THE NEW GUYS

Jackson, Umenyiora fill important roles

By Stephen Black & Craig Sager II

During the offseason, Thomas Dimitroff inked running back Steven Jackson and defensive end Osi Umenyiora to come to Atlanta. The pair of highly-sought-after free agents chose Atlanta over multiple other suitors and will be counted on immediately to help lead the Falcons to the Super Bowl.

POWER BACK ...

Jackson demonstrated his value in the League by essentially doing the impossible during his nine-year career in St. Louis. He remained consistent in the midst of unremitting change and, at times, chaos. The former Ram rushed for more than 1,000 yards in each of his last eight seasons and did so while playing under six coaches, three sets of owners and four general managers.

Upon arrival in Atlanta, his new coaches

and teammates immediately sensed his value.

"When he is on the field, he is a business man," said Falcons Running Backs Coach Gerald Brown. "He will make us a better football team."

The 6-foot-2, 240-pound back is a nightmare to bring down and can wear down defenses. With so much talent around him this year his carries will likely go down, but his impact will remain elevated. He offers many playcalling possibilities and his versatility will be one of the main engines of this offense.

"The thing I like about Steven is that Steven is not just a running back, he's a receiving back as well, so he gives us a lot of flexibility in our personnel groupings whether or not we are putting out a run or a pass grouping, they [defenses] won't be able to tell," said Falcons Head Coach Mike Smith.

The Falcons have been led by a talented

core of guys that ranks up with the best in the League. Ryan, Gonzalez, Roddy White, Jones and Rodgers all come off career seasons and are secure for more breakout years.

Jackson could be the finishing touch on the organization's championship aspirations. His toughness and attitude on the field is sure to ignite the Dome this season and give the team an added confidence.

"I think he will make the other players better. This guy has already done it all," beamed Offensive Coordinator Dirk Koetter.

It is safe to say the Falcons are happy to have Jackson aboard.

OFF THE EDGE ...

Osi Umenyiora has lived in the Atlanta area for years. The Falcons, meanwhile, needed a pass rusher after last season. So it only made sense when the former New York Giants sacks artist signed with the Falcons in March.

"I'm excited about having Osi here," said Falcons Defensive Coordinator Mike Nolan. "One of the things I didn't know about him ... his leadership ability, which has shown up a good bit with our young players, has been outstanding."

A veteran defensive end with one of the most effective speed rushing techniques in

the game was exactly what Atlanta needed to replace John Abraham. Quarterbacks are the engines that drive NFL teams, and disrupting them has to be a major part of every team's gameplan. Umenyiora brings that to the Falcons as well as the all-important leadership ability about which Nolan spoke.

Rushing the passer is an art in the NFL, and each sack artist has his own style. So what makes Umenyiora so difficult to handle?

"I think it's just that speed and the change of direction," said Falcons guard Mike Johnson. "Everybody knows he's fast off the ball. It's almost like blocking a receiver with his speed rushes."

Despite Umenyiora's pass-rushing prowess, one of his better attributes is his long tenure in the NFL and his leadership abilities.

"Osi, from the very beginning, has taken some of the young guys underneath his wing. Not just the defensive linemen, but some other positions as well," said Falcons Head Coach Mike Smith. "He's one of the first guys here in the building, in terms of his workouts, and he's taken some of those young guys with him."

With Jackson and Umenyiora in the fold, the Falcons will embark on the 2013 season with no shortage of promise.



The Friday Night Lights Guide was produced and published by Score Publishing, a division of Score Atlanta. The president is I.J. Rosenberg, managing editor is Stephen Black, assistant editor is Craig Sager II and creative art director is DJ Galbiati Blalock. The photos in the Guide were taken by Falcons team photographer Jimmy Cribb. Score is a full-service marketing company and can be reached at 404-256-1572 and SCOREATL.COM.

By Stephen Black

TRAINING CAMP LOG

A minute-by-minute look at Falcons Training Camp

The Falcons hold their annual training camp at the same Flowery Branch facility that houses the team offices and practice fields. The same dining hall they use during the season is used during training camp. Likewise, the same fields used for midseason practices are used during camp to practice and perfect the plays needed to make yet another postseason berth.

Here is a sample of an average day at Falcons training camp:

6:00 a.m. WAKE-UP CALL

For the average 9-to-5er, waking up at 6 a.m. may be a stretch. For an NFL player, this is reality, especially during training camp. Rookies, veterans, and stars making eight figures per year all have the same wake-up call. All get their doors pounded on at roughly the same time by Falcons personnel.

Getting up and getting to breakfast gives each player a chance to get ready for the day in their own unique way.

"On the way over (to breakfast), we leave the dormitory, hop on the golf cart, and I turn on my Ipod," said Falcons linebacker Sean Weath-

erspoon. "I start my day with some good music. Whatever I'm feeling, I'll listen to."

6:15 a.m. - 8:00 a.m. BREAKFAST/LIFTING

While the Falcons maintain a rigid schedule during camp, they definitely are taken care of when it comes to food. Four catered meals are served in the team's dining hall, each with multiple options and distinct variety to cater to the diverse palates on the squad.

"In the morning, there is anything from a brew line where they make the omelets to just a regular breakfast buffet is there," said Weatherspoon. "You've got to get some fuel to go out there and be productive. That's the main thing."

The Falcons staff makes sure that happens. After the first meal of the day, the Falcons hit the weight room to get the blood pumping for a full day of training camp.

8:00 a.m. MEETINGS: OFFENSE, DEFENSE

Now that everyone is loose and ready for the day, it is time for the rubber to hit the road.

All the preparation and film study during the entire offseason and previous camp practices is dissected in these meetings as coaches and players meet to go over the coming day's work on the practice field.

8:40 a.m. SPECIAL TEAMS MEETING

This is Special Teams Coordinator Keith Armstrong's time, as the team takes in their assignments for the kicking game. Kickoffs, punts, field goals, returns and coverage are discussed, and players learn their roles in each area.

10:40 a.m. WALK-THRU PRACTICE

The Falcons get to breathe the fresh morning air now after a couple hours of preparation. The walk-through also gives fans their first chance of the day to see their heroes on the practice fields. A walk-through is basically a practice for practice, with no pads.

"After the last meeting we go out for walk-through, and [that's] basically the script that we're going to have for afternoon practice for that day," explained Weatherspoon.

11:30 a.m. LUNCH

Aramark works with the Falcons Athletic Performance staff to coordinate what meals will be available to players during camp. Also available in the dining hall is a full salad bar, a protein shake station and a hot bar that includes pasta, sandwiches and baked potatoes.

After inhaling their second meal of the day, Falcons players adjourn for a brief rest before the business of football begins again. A popular place for players to relax and socialize is the amenities building near the dormitories. This facility offers a theater room, pool tables, a ping-pong table, video games, a pool and other recreational diversions.

"We usually hang out in the lounge, play some cards, maybe some spades," said Weatherspoon. "Some guys might have dominoes. Or just hang out, maybe take a nap. Get your ankles taped, get ready for your meeting."

2:00 p.m. MEETINGS

Training camp gets cranked up again with a series of meetings that precede the first full-contact practice of the day. The meetings after lunch are typically some combination of unit meetings and position group meetings.

3:30 p.m. PRACTICE

Now, it's time for the real work to begin. Training camp offers the Falcons the invaluable time it takes to get physically ready for a hard-hitting season of professional football. Veterans work out the kinks and adjust to new plays while rookies get their first true introduction to professional football.

6:00 p.m. DINNER

The third meal of the day is the biggest for the Falcons. Everything from chicken pot pies and grilled fish to sushi is available for players to consume. Each meal consists of entrees, starches and vegetables, none larger or more filling than dinner.

7:15 p.m. SPECIAL TEAMS MEETING/ TEAM MEETING

To stress the importance of this unit that is sometimes overlooked, the Falcons meet after dinner to go over the good, the bad and the ugly on special teams.

There is also a general team meeting where Head Coach Mike Smith and others address the entire team as well as other types of meetings all NFL teams conduct during camp. NFL Securities speaks to the players to help educate them on subjects such as how to protect their assets. Logistics meetings are also held to go over the plan for road trips, like this year's venture to Canada for the Bills game.

8:30 p.m. OFFENSE/DEFENSE MEETINGS

The Falcons then split in half, as coordinators Dirk Koetter and Mike Nolan speak to their troops about the day's action in the final meeting of the day.

10:00 p.m. SNACKS/FOURTH MEAL

To make sure players don't go to bed hungry, the Falcons have planned a "fourth meal" time right before bed. Some guys get a light snack like fruit or jello, others may eat yet another full meal at the dining hall.

11:00 p.m. CURFEW, LIGHTS OUT

Enough said.



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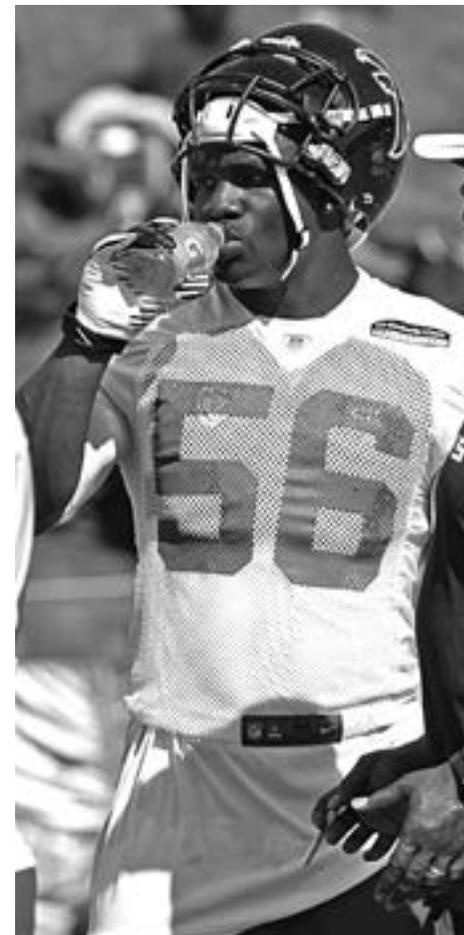
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NFC PREVIEW

By Stephen Black



ARIZONA CARDINALS

The Cardinals had an active offseason, replacing QBs Kevin Kolb and John Skelton with veteran Carson Palmer. LB Karlos Dansby was signed for his second stint in the desert while DEs Frostee Rucker and Matt Shaughnessy enter the fold. Safety Yermiah Bell was brought in to help replace last year's starting safeties, Adrian Wilson and Kerry Rhodes. Arizona also brought in CBs Antoine Cason and Javier Arenas.



ATLANTA FALCONS

The Falcons had one of the most dynamic offseasons of any NFL team in signing RB Steven Jackson and DE Osi Umenyiora to help shore up areas of need. CBs Desmond Trufant and Robert Alford were drafted to bolster the secondary. RB Michael Turner, DE John Abraham and C Todd McClure were among offseason departures. Coordinators Dirk Koetter and Mike Nolan enter their second seasons in Atlanta.



CAROLINA PANTHERS

The Panthers went heavy on the defensive line in the draft, using their first two picks on DTs Star Lotulelei and Kawann Short. Among important acquisitions were LB Chase Blackburn and returnman Ted Ginn. WR Domenick Hixon was signed to give QB Cam Newton another weapon. Former offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski is now head coach in Cleveland and was replaced by Quarterbacks Coach Mike Shula.



CHICAGO BEARS

The Lovie Smith era is over despite a 10-6 season last year. New Head Coach Marc Trestman comes to the Windy City after a five-year stint in the CFL. Legendary LB Brian Urlacher retired and, coupled with Smith's departure, makes this a transitional season for Chicago in more ways than one. D.J. Williams will attempt to replace Urlacher in the middle and the Bears drafted MLB Jon Bostic to back up Williams.



DALLAS COWBOYS

Jason Garrett enters his third full season as head coach. QB Tony Romo, who was signed to a six-year extension, must figure out how to win big games for the Cowboys to advance deep into the postseason. Monte Kiffin was brought in as defensive coordinator while former University of Tennessee coach Derek Dooley was hired to coach quarterbacks. RB Felix Jones and DB Gerald Sensabaugh were released.



DETROIT LIONS

RB Reggie Bush was signed and should help one of the League's most talented offenses. Veteran DE Cliff Avril, OL Gosder Cherilus, OT Jeff Backus, DE Kyle Vanden Bosch and kicker Jason Hanson are all now former Lions. David Akers will replace Hanson while DEs Israel Idonije and first-round pick Ezekiel Ansah should help the pass rush. QB Matt Stafford received a three-year contract extension.



GREEN BAY PACKERS

The 2010 Super Bowl champs have now won at least 10 games in four straight seasons. OLB Clay Matthews became the highest-paid linebacker in NFL history when he signed a five-year \$66 million deal. The Packers did not make many offseason moves, but second-round draft pick Eddie Lacy is expected to start at RB. Longtime Packers Charles Woodson, Donald Driver and Greg Jennings are no longer with the team.



MINNESOTA VIKINGS

The Vikings added QB Matt Cassel and WR Greg Jennings in the offseason while WR Percy Harvin, LB Jasper Brinkley, P Chris Kluwe and CB Antoine Winfield are no longer in Minneapolis. Minnesota went defense with its first two draft picks in taking DT Sharrif Floyd and CB Xavier Rhodes. Head Coach Leslie Frazier was brought back for his fourth season after a 10-6 year and a playoff berth.



NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

The Saints are coming off a disaster of a year that saw Head Coach Sean Payton suspended for the season. New Orleans still was competitive, with a 7-9 record and QB Drew Brees threw for more than 5,000 yards and 43 touchdowns. QB Luke McCown was brought in to back up Brees, and TE Ben Watson and S Jim Leonhard were also signed. The Saints took DB Kenny Vaccaro with their first draft pick.



NEW YORK GIANTS

The 2011 Super Bowl champs have now missed the playoffs in three of the last four years after going 9-7 in 2012. New York lost WR Domenik Hixon, RB Ahmad Bradshaw, DE Osi Umenyiora, LB Chase Blackburn and DT Chris Canty. The Giants signed WR Louis Murphy, DT Cullen Jenkins, DT Mike Patterson and CB Aaron Ross in the offseason. QB Ryan Nassib was taken in the draft to back up Eli Manning.



PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

A new coaching staff is in Philadelphia for the first time since 1999 as Andy Reid was let go and former Oregon coach Chip Kelly was tabbed. Kelly has three quarterbacks to choose from in Michael Vick, Nick Foles and Matt Barkley. WR Jeremy Maclin tore his ACL in camp. RB Felix Jones and QB Dennis Dixon were signed to add depth on offense while DEs Connor Barwin and Emmanuel Acho were signed on defense.



SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

The defending NFC champs added WR Anquan Boldin, DT Glenn Dorsey and CB Nnamdi Asomugha to add to an already talented team. QB Alex Smith, WR Randy Moss and DT Isaac Sopoaga all departed. Star WR Michael Crabtree is out with a torn Achilles tendon, so Boldin will be counted on early and often to make plays in the passing game. Kicker Phil Dawson was inked to replace veteran David Akers.



SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

The Seahawks surprised many last year with a playoff berth, as rookie QB Russell Wilson took control of the team and raised eyebrows around the League with his performance. DE Cliff Avril was added to an already potent defense along with DE Michael Bennett, and CBs Antoine Winfield and Marcus Trufant. Defensive Coordinator Dan Quinn replaces Gus Bradley, who is now in Jacksonville.



ST. LOUIS RAMS

St. Louis will try to make the postseason for the first time since 2004. QB Sam Bradford should be helped by the addition of OT Jake Long and draft picks Tavon Austin (WR) and Stedman Bailey (WR). RB Steven Jackson is a huge loss on offense and Daryl Richardson will try to replace him. Starting safeties Craig Dahl and Quintin Mikell are gone and a hodgepodge of players fight for the starting jobs there.



TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

The Bucs were one of the most active teams in the offseason. Head Coach Greg Schiano enters his second year replacing a multitude of former starters. Tampa Bay added RB Jeff Demps, WR Kevin Ogletree, and CB Darrelle Revis to attempt to fill holes. The rushing defense last season was No. 1 in the League, but the pass defense was among the worst. QB Mike Glennon was drafted in the third round.



WASHINGTON REDSKINS

QB Robert Griffin III enters his second NFL season coming off knee surgery, but remains the key to the future of the Redskins. Washington added OT Jeremy Trueblood and WRs Devery Henderson and Donte Stallworth to support Griffin. Mike McDaniels was named WRs Coach and Keith Burns was tabbed to be the Special Teams Coordinator. Washington looks to win a playoff game for the first time since 2005.



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By Stephen Black

TOP 10 MOST MEMORABLE GAMES

Last-minute kicks, miracle passes highlight Falcons history

1 1998: Andersen's kick sends Atlanta to Super Bowl

The Falcons had never played for a Super Bowl berth before Dan Reeves took over as head coach in 1997. But after guiding Atlanta to a four-game improvement in 1997, Reeves then led the Falcons to the NFC Championship Game in 1998 after a spectacular 14-2 regular season. Reeves' squad flourished behind the passing of Chris Chandler, running of Jamal Anderson and an opportunistic defense.

Despite sporting the best record in franchise history, the Falcons were decided underdogs heading into Minneapolis to take on the No. 1 seed Vikings, who held a 15-1 regular season record. After falling behind 20-7, then 27-17, Atlanta needed a huge fourth quarter to advance. The Falcons did just that, as Morten Andersen kicked a field goal and Terance Mathis gathered in a scoring pass from Chandler to tie the game. Minnesota kicker Gary Anderson missed a field goal that would've all but clinched the game for the Vikings with 2:07 left, setting the stage for Chandler and Co. In overtime, Andersen drilled a 38-yard kick to send the Falcons to their first-ever Super Bowl appearance.

2 1978: Falcons win in playoff debut

The 1978 season was an exciting one for Falcons fans. Atlanta beat arch-rival New Orleans twice on last-second miracles, saw kicker Tim Mazzetti make a team-record 11 straight field goals and clinched the first playoff appearance in franchise history.

Despite a 9-7 record, the Falcons had the No. 4 seed in the NFC and earned homefield advantage for the Wild Card game against Philadelphia. The clash took place on Christmas Eve, and Falcons fans hoped they would receive a playoff win as a holiday gift. The game, however, got off to an inauspicious start, as the hosts fell behind 13-0 heading into the fourth quarter. Falcons Quarterback Steve Bartkowski was part of the reason for the slow start, as he threw two interceptions. However, the former first-round draft choice rallied Atlanta to two fourth-quarter touchdowns. Philadelphia tried to play the Grinch and steal the game as Quarterback Ron Jaworski drove the Eagles to the Falcons 17 with seconds remaining. A field goal attempt went wide and Atlanta celebrated its first NFL playoff victory.

3 2012: Last-second drive beats Seahawks

Thomas Dimitroff, Mike Smith and Matt Ryan each came to Atlanta in 2008 with dreams of success with their new team. Dimitroff was a GM for the first time, Smith an NFL head coach for the first time and Ryan an NFL rookie quarterback. The trio got off to a great start and was successful in every way but one heading into the 2012 season: a playoff win.

So despite a 13-3 regular season record, playoff top seed and division championship, Falcons Nation was not satisfied. Atlanta wanted a playoff win. The Falcons hosted Seattle in a game that could not have been more important to the franchise. Ryan and company leapt to a commanding 20-0 halftime lead, but watched it wilt away in the fourth quarter as Seattle scored three fourth-quarter touchdowns to take a shocking 28-27 lead with just 31 seconds remaining. Ryan, however, was not to be outdone and drove the Falcons into Seattle territory in a matter of seconds, which led to a game-winning 49-yard field goal by Kicker Matt Bryant.

4 1966: Franchise's first victory

You have to start somewhere. After a rocky 0-9 start to the franchise's inaugural season, Head Coach Norm Heckler's team rebounded for a 27-16 win against the New York Giants, one of the NFL's most storied franchises.

The Falcons went into Yankee Stadium (the Giants' home from 1956-1973) and took a 20-3 third-quarter lead, then used a 3-yard touchdown run by Quarterback Randy Johnson in the fourth quarter to ice the game. Atlanta's defense caused four turnovers while the offense racked up 289 yards in frigid conditions.

Johnson finished the day with three scoring passes, two to running back Ernie Wheelright.

The success against the G-Men has continued, as Atlanta holds an 11-10 series lead, including last year's 34-0 massacre. The Falcons hold a commanding 7-3 lead in games hosted by the Giants.

5 2002: Thawing the Frozen Tundra

Arthur Blank bought the Falcons before the 2002 season and helped revitalize interest in the team. Season tickets sold out thanks in part to Blank's marketing and business prowess and the first-round selection of Michael Vick in 2001.

The Falcons began the 2002 season with a narrow 34-31 loss at Green Bay in overtime.

Not many knew then that the Falcons would be visiting Lambeau Field again that season. A 1-3 start to the season gave way to a 7-0-1 stretch midway through the year to put Atlanta in the playoff mix. The Falcons soon found out they would be heading back to the Frozen Tundra for the Wild Card playoff game.

On Jan. 4, Atlanta took the field in the usual bitter cold of a Wisconsin winter evening. But the 20-degree temperatures didn't bother the Falcons, who exploded to a 24-0 halftime lead. Brett Favre and the Packers offense mustered just seven points as Atlanta rolled to a 27-7 upset. With the win, Atlanta became the first team to beat the Packers in a Lambeau Field playoff game.

6 1978: Big Ben bests New Orleans

The Falcons could not have made the playoffs for the first time without a gift from the football gods. Atlanta went to the Superdome looking to beat the lowly Saints and cement its chances at an initial postseason berth.

The day did not start out well for the Falcons as the Saints, playing the spoilers' role, took a 17-3 halftime lead. But Quarterback Steve Bartkowski rallied Atlanta in the second half. A Tim Mazzetti field goal and Haskel Stanback touchdown run drew Atlanta to 17-13 in the final period. However, the game looked out of reach with 19 seconds left when Bartkowski dropped back from his own 43 and heaved a desperation pass deep down the right side. The ball was tipped up in the air and Falcons receiver Alfred Jackson caught it at the 12 and scored the unlikely game-winning touchdown.

The play now known as "Big Ben" still stands as one of the signature plays in Falcons history.

7 1991: Hail Mary beats Niners

The Falcons had not been to the playoffs in almost 10 years when the 1991 season began. But Falcons fans were full of excitement as Deion Sanders electrified and the Georgia Dome was slated to open up for the 1992 season.

But there would be one last memorable moment for the Falcons in Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium. Stuck with a so-so 4-4 record at the midpoint of the season, Atlanta badly needed a win against the visiting Niners, whom the Falcons had beaten just twice in 15 meetings. Atlanta trailed 14-10 late in the fourth quarter and things looked bleak. Backup quarterback Billy Joe Tolliver had thrown for less than 100 yards and the Falcons offense was listless. But Tolliver heaved a pass high in the air towards the end zone from the Niners' 44. Somehow, Michael Haynes leaped above seven other players and caught the game-winning pass with a second left.

The Falcons went on to win six of their next seven games and make the postseason.

8 2009: Falcons clinch back-to-back winning seasons

After a tough 26-23 loss at New Orleans, Atlanta was on the outside of the playoffs looking in with a 6-7 record. But

there was still one goal left: clinching back-to-back winning seasons for the first time in franchise history.

Atlanta won an intense 10-7 road game at the Jets before shellacking Buffalo 31-3 at home. Next up was a trip to division-rival Tampa Bay, where Atlanta had lost four of five games. In 43 seasons, the Falcons had never held winning records in back-to-back seasons. That mark was within reach when they took the field in Raymond James Stadium with an 8-7 record.

The Bucs tied the game at 10 in the fourth, but a Matt Ryan 12-yard touchdown pass to Roddy White and a Matt Bryant field goal iced the game and another first for the Falcons franchise.

9 2008: New regime nets first win

Arthur Blank knew he had to go in a different direction prior to the 2008 season. The team needed new leadership. Blank went out and hired General Manager Thomas Dimitroff from New England, Head Coach Mike Smith from Jacksonville and drafted Quarterback Matt Ryan in the first round.

With the future in place, it was time for the Falcons to start winning. They did just that in the 2008 season opener as Atlanta waxed visiting Detroit on Sept. 7, 34-21. The rookie quarterback heaved a touchdown pass on his first career attempt, a 62-yard toss to Michael Jenkins. Michael Turner then ran in for scores twice in the first quarter and the rout was on.

A new era of Falcons football was underway.

10 1995: Hebert-to-Mathis

The Falcons had lost three of four games overall and three straight games to San Francisco by an average of 35 points, and entered this Christmas Eve affair having to beat their NFC West nemesis to earn a playoff berth. To make matters worse, starting Quarterback Jeff George left the game injured in the first half with Atlanta trailing 21-13. Backup Bobby Hebert entered the game in relief and rallied the Falcons to a rousing 28-27 win with two second-half touchdown passes, including a dramatic 37-yard scoring toss to Terance Mathis, who dove into the end zone with 1:45 left in the game. The loss prevented San Francisco from gaining homefield advantage throughout the playoffs and gave the Falcons a 9-7 record and their first playoff appearance since 1991.

Honorable Mentions:

- **1978 vs. L.A. Rams:** Mazzetti's five FGs beat Rams on MNF
- **1989 vs. L.A. Rams:** Deion returns first NFL punt for a touchdown
- **1978 vs. New Orleans:** Another miracle tops Saints
- **1971 at New Orleans:** First winning season clinched in final minute

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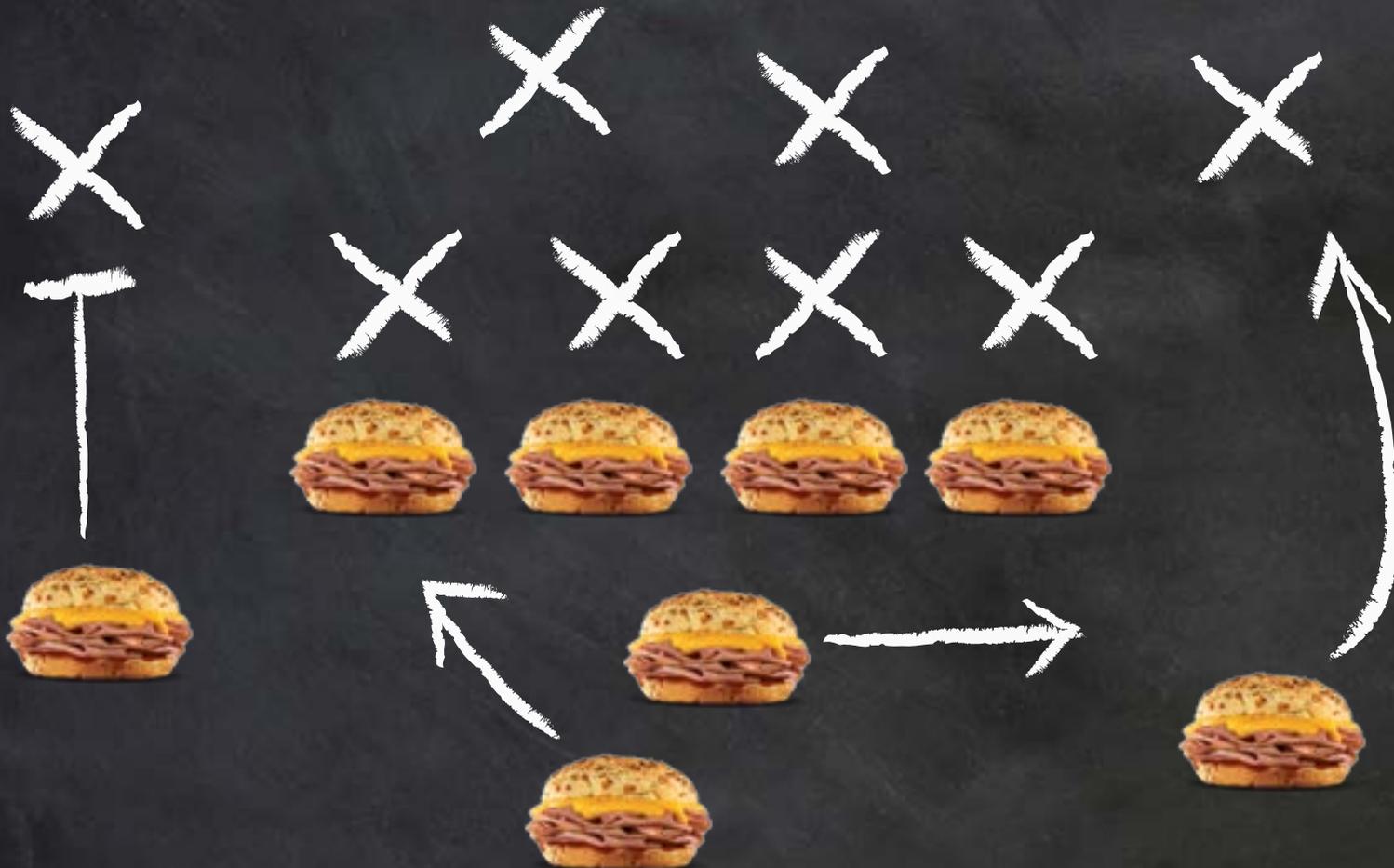
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▼ AFC PREVIEW

By Stephen Black



BALTIMORE RAVENS

The defending Super Bowl champions lost some key pieces as Rolando McClain, Ed Reed and the legendary Ray Lewis retired, while Danell Ellerbe, Bernard Pollard and Brendon Ayanbadejo left town. However, the Ravens added Chris Canty and Elvis Dumervil on the defensive line and re-signed steady QB Joe Flacco. Baltimore went defense-heavy in the draft, taking defenders with their first four picks.



BUFFALO BILLS

The Bills will have almost an entirely new look this year, as coach Doug Marrone takes over for Chan Gailey and rookie QB E.J. Manuel will compete for the starting job with journeyman Kevin Kolb, who was acquired from Arizona. Former Jets defensive coordinator Mike Pettine now holds the same role for the Bills while Nathaniel Hackett comes over from Syracuse to coordinate the offense.



CINCINNATI BENGALS

The Bengals made the playoffs last year for the third time in four years, but have not won a postseason game since 1990. Cincinnati made a big move to acquire former Steeler James Harrison. The Bengals have beaten Baltimore just once in the last five meetings and Pittsburgh once in the last six. Cincinnati bolstered the offense by drafting TE Tyler Eifert and RB Giovani Bernard with their first two picks.



CLEVELAND BROWNS

The Browns have been to the playoffs twice since 1990 and not since 2002. Rob Chudzinski is the head coach after Pat Shurmur lasted just two seasons. Cleveland again reached into the SEC for its first-round draft choice by taking LSU's Barkevious Mingo, a defensive end. The Browns traded QB Colt McCoy and inked veteran Jason Campbell to back up Brandon Weeden. Norv Turner is the new offensive coordinator.



DENVER BRONCOS

The Broncos had one of the most successful regular seasons last year, but fell in the playoffs on a near-miracle pass play by Baltimore. Denver, however, made a big splash by signing WR Wes Welker. The Broncos also promoted Adam Gase to offensive coordinator and signed Greg Knapp to be QB coach. Last year's OC, Mike McCoy, is now head coach of the Chargers. DE Von Miller is suspended for the first four games.



HOUSTON TEXANS

Houston had its best season ever in 2012, but failed for the second straight year to advance to the AFC Championship Game. Star RB Arian Foster and recent acquisition Ed Reed begin training camp on the PUP list. Houston took WR DeAndre Hopkins in the first round to give QB Matt Schaub another target along with dynamic WR Andre Johnson. The Texans then selected safety D.J. Swearinger in the second round.



INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

The Colts had a brief downslide in 2011, but rebounded nicely last season behind rookie Andrew Luck's solid play. In the offseason, Indy added several free agents who look to fill important roles this season, including FB Stanley Havili, WR Darrius Heyward-Bey, OL Gosder Cherilus and RB Ahmad Bradshaw. Head Coach Chuck Pagano returns after a 2012 season that was interrupted by his battle with cancer.



JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

The Jaguars have not made the playoffs since 2007 and have seen their win total decrease the past three seasons. Head Coach Mike Mularkey lasted one season, last year's 2-14 campaign. Now, Gus Bradley is head coach after four years as Seattle's defensive coordinator. Jacksonville took OT Luke Joeckel with the second overall pick and also selected Michigan's Denard Robinson, who is expected to play WR.



KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

A once-proud franchise, the Chiefs have made the playoffs once since 2006 and just three times since 1997. Kansas City fired Head Coach Romeo Crennel and parted ways with GM Scott Pioli. John Dorsey, former Green Bay Director of Football Operations, was dubbed the new GM and longtime Eagles coach Andy Reid will now guide the Chiefs. With the No. 1 overall selection, they took OT Eric Fisher.



MIAMI DOLPHINS

The Dolphins were somewhat of a hard-luck team in 2012 as they lost two overtime games and three others by a touchdown or less. Rookie QB Ryan Tannehill impressed despite having a paltry running attack to support him. RBs Lamar Miller and Daniel Thomas will try to spark the Dolphins ground game. OT Tyson Clabo was inked as was CB Brent Grimes, while leading tackler Karlos Dansby was released.



NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

Bill Belichick's team has been one of the most consistent in the League since its first Super Bowl championship in 2001. However, to maintain that success, the Patriots must overcome the loss of TE Aaron Hernandez, WR Wes Welker and wait on injury-plagued Rob Gronkowski. WRs Danny Amendola and Michael Jenkins will look to fill in for Welker and lessen the dependence on tight ends in the passing game.



NEW YORK JETS

Since making the conference championship game in Head Coach Rex Ryan's first two seasons in New York, the Jets haven't made the playoffs. The Mark Sanchez era may have reached its end as the Jets took QB Geno Smith in the 2013 draft. Shutdown CB Darrelle Revis was traded to Tampa Bay, and LB Bart Scott and QB Tim Tebow were released. Marty Mornhinweg takes over as OC and John Idzik is the new GM.



OAKLAND RAIDERS

Oakland hasn't made the playoffs or had a winning record since 2002. QB Carson Palmer was traded to Arizona for draft picks and last year's 4-12 record in Head Coach Dennis Allen's first season was a step back from 8-8 records in the two previous years. Veteran CB Charles Woodson was signed and given his old No. 24. Longtime CEO Amy Trask resigned in the offseason due to differences with Owner Mark Davis.



PITTSBURGH STEELERS

Two Steeler traditions are pass rushers and power running backs, and Pittsburgh held true to that standard by selecting NCAA sacks leader Jarvis Jones and bruising RB Le'Veon Bell in the draft. QB Bruce Gradkowski was signed to back up starter Ben Roethlisberger and Plaxico Burress was inked for his second tenure in Steel Town. Pittsburgh will look to rebound from its first non-winning season since 2006.



SAN DIEGO CHARGERS

The Chargers made wholesale changes in leadership after firing Head Coach Norv Turner. The new head man is Mike McCoy, who was formerly the offensive coordinator in Denver. Tom Telesco is now GM and former Arizona head coach Ken Whisenhunt is offensive coordinator. QB Philip Rivers is entering his 10th season and will again try to get the Chargers to the Super Bowl for the first time.



TENNESSEE TITANS

The Titans showed a renewed commitment to star RB Chris Johnson by selecting OG Chance Warmack in the first round. The Titans added QB Ryan Fitzpatrick to back-up Jake Locker and also added RB Shonn Greene and Safeties Bernard Pollard and George Wilson. The offensive line will get a facelift with Warmack now in the fold as well as OT Barry Richardson, OGs Andy Levitre and Chris Spencer and C Rob Turner.



REGULAR SEASON *SCHEDULE*

SEP 8 1:00 PM EDT FOX AT SAINTS Mercedes-Benz Superdome

Former Falcon Curtis Lofton made an impact in his first year with the Saints, leading the team with 123 total tackles. Lofton was the lone linebacker to start all 16 games last year and the team will likely count on him to lead under new defensive coordinator Rob Ryan.

SEP 15 1:00 PM EDT FOX RAMS Georgia Dome

Playing in perhaps the toughest division in all of the NFL last year, Sam Bradford managed to pass for a career-high 21 touchdowns to help the Rams finish 7-8-1, including a 1-0-1 record against the NFC Champion San Francisco 49ers. Bradford surpassed 300 yards through the air three times.

SEP 22 4:05 PM EDT FOX AT DOLPHINS Sun Life Stadium

Quarterback Ryan Tannehill didn't lead his team to the playoffs like two other rookies last year, but he started 16 games and passed for 3,294 yards, more than Russell Wilson or Robert Griffin III. Miami must also protect him better after allowing 35 sacks.

SEP 29 8:30 PM EDT NBC PATRIOTS Georgia Dome

The New England Patriots have turned over the roster plenty since last hoisting the Lombardi Trophy in 2004, but Tom Brady and Bill Belichick remain the two constants in the Patriots' dynasty. Belichick has won 151 games with the Patriots, 136 with Tom Brady under center.

OCT 7 8:40 PM EDT ESPN JETS Georgia Dome

While his team has missed the postseason the last two years, Jets Head Coach Rex Ryan has four playoff wins under his belt in just four seasons. The loss of cornerback Darrelle Revis will hurt the Jets secondary.

OCT 20 1:00 PM EDT FOX BUCCANEERS Georgia Dome

Josh Freeman passed for 4,065 yards in 2012 in a bounce-back year after throwing for 3,592 with 22 interceptions in 2011. The four-year vet passed for a career-high 27 touchdowns as the Bucs finished 7-9. Freeman threw for a combined 478 yards against the Falcons last year.

OCT 27 4:25 PM EDT FOX AT CARDINALS Univ. of Phoenix Stadium

With new Quarterback Carson Palmer in the fold, look for Arizona to be a little more comfortable passing the ball in 2013. Four different quarterbacks combined to pass for 3,383 yards last season for the Cardinals, while Palmer finished with 4,018 in just 15 games for Oakland.

NOV 3 1:00 PM EST FOX AT PANTHERS Bank of America Stadium

The Carolina defense improved from 27th in the NFL in points allowed and 28th in yards allowed in 2011 to 18th and 10th, respectively, in 2012. Luke Kuechley sparked the team with 103 tackles and five turnovers while Charles Johnson and Greg Hardy combined for 23.5 sacks.

NOV 10 1:00 PM EST FOX SEAHAWKS Georgia Dome

In a year featuring high peaks and deep valleys, Quarterback Russell Wilson enters his second year with great expectations after leading the Seahawks into the playoffs last season. Wilson won his playoff debut despite passing for just 187 yards.

NOV 17 1:00 PM EST FOX AT BUCCANEERS Raymond James Stadium

Teams passed at will against Tampa Bay in 2012 as the Bucs finished 32nd in the League in yards surrendered. Nine teams put up at least 290 yards, taking advantage of rookie Mark Barron. The team added Darrelle Revis to shore up the secondary. The Falcons managed 558 passing yards in two games.

NOV 21 8:25 PM EST SAINTS Georgia Dome

New Orleans quarterback Drew Brees made his fifth straight Pro Bowl last year after completing 422 passes and a league-leading 5,177 yards. His 43 touchdowns also led the League, but opponents picked off 19 passes in 2012 including six in two games by the Falcons.

DEC 1 4:05 PM EST FOX AT BILLS Rogers Centre - Toronto

New head coach Doug Marrone will have a new signal-caller under center this year after the Bills pulled the plug on Ryan Fitzpatrick. While Kevin Kolb should begin the year as the starter, Marrone could look elsewhere if Kolb struggles as he did in Arizona.

DEC 8 8:30 PM EST NBC AT PACKERS Lambeau Field

Green Bay's explosive offense begins with Quarterback Aaron Rodgers. Last year, the 2011 MVP passed for 4,295 yards and 39 scores and made his third Pro Bowl. Randall Cobb is the leading returning receiver after hauling in 80 receptions while James Jones snagged 14 touchdowns in 2012.

DEC 15 1:00 PM EST FOX REDSKINS Georgia Dome

Robert Griffin III made the Pro Bowl last year, though his season ended with a knee injury in the playoffs. Washington hopes to have the 2012 AP Offensive Rookie of the Year back early in 2013 as he served as a catalyst for the resurgent franchise.

DEC 23 8:40 PM EST ESPN AT 49ERS Candlestick Park

Jim Harbaugh's team has been one of the best in football the past two seasons, totaling 24 wins and making the NFC Championship Game both seasons. QB Colin Kaepernick was fantastic after becoming the starter, rattling off a 7-3 record and making the Super Bowl in 2012.

DEC 29 1:00 PM EST FOX PANTHERS Georgia Dome

Last season, Carolina Quarterback Cam Newton quickly put to rest any notion of a sophomore slump by passing for 3,869 yards and 19 touchdowns. He rushed for 741 yards with eight additional scores. In just two seasons, Newton has accounted for 62 touchdowns.

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By Sean Conway

RYAN'S GAME-WINNERS

Falcons QB was born to engineer comebacks

It may have started with a simple game of tidily-winks, checkers or chess when he was a little kid. He might have been behind in a game of one-on-one basketball in the driveway with a neighbor. At some point when he was growing up in Exton, a suburb of Philadelphia, this much is obvious: he never learned to give up, he kept fighting, willing himself – and his teams – to victory. Over the last several years, Atlanta Falcons fans have learned this simple truth: Matt Ryan is a winner.

When the game is on the line or the chips are all in, Matt Ryan is never beaten. Opponents know better than to count him out. Ryan's history of leading his football team to comeback victories is well documented from his years at Boston College through his first five years as a pro guiding the Falcons to their most successful era in the history of the franchise.

At Boston College, they called him "Mat-ty Ice." In the NFL, he has been tabbed the "Comeback Kid" for his dramatics. Ryan is no longer a kid, though. Entering his sixth year in the NFL, he is in the dawn of his prime.

Ryan's first big comeback in college came back in 2005. On a rainy, windy Saturday in October of 2005, Boston College inserted red-shirt sophomore Matt Ryan into the game late in the fourth quarter trailing Wake Forest by nine points. In the final 3:30 of the game, Ryan was brilliant. He connected on seven completions in nine attempts for 134 yards and two touchdowns. Ryan calmly said later, "You can't be surprised as a backup. You've got to be ready to go at all times."

By October of 2007, Ryan was established as BC's starting quarterback and his legend was blossoming. In another performance, the Eagles were trailing Virginia Tech with just over four minutes left in the fourth quarter. Ryan led BC on a 92-yard drive, and minutes later led his team on the game-winning drive, hitting receiver Andre Callender on a 26-yard pass with only 11 seconds remaining. In November, he led BC to a comeback victory against Clemson by completing a touchdown pass to Rich Gunnell, also after the two-minute warning.

Ryan's exploits were good enough to attract the attention of the Falcons newly-hired leadership in 2008, General Manager Thomas Dimitroff and Head Coach Mike Smith. The Falcons selected Ryan with the third pick of the 2008 NFL draft. Ryan made Dimitroff and Smith look like geniuses on his first play from scrimmage as a pro that September by connecting with wide receiver Michael Jenkins on a 62-yard touchdown pass. Ryan's first game-winning drive came against one of football

proudest dynasties the next month, the Green Bay Packers. Ryan was 16-of-24 for 194 yards passing that afternoon. He leaned on running back Michael Turner to seal the victory with a late touchdown in the fourth quarter.

Ryan added the final comeback drive of his rookie season in a win against the St. Louis Rams in Week 17. As was the trend as a rookie, Ryan was managing the game and growing into his role as a leader. Ryan was named NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year for his heroics in 2008.

In 2009, Ryan led the Falcons to victories late in the game against the Bears, Jets and Buccaneers. At New York, Ryan connected with tight end Tony Gonzalez on a six-yard strike with 1:42 on the clock. On the drive Ryan completed six passes to five different receivers for 37 yards, strokes of brilliance.

After leading the team to a late win against the Saints in September, Ryan had one of his most most improbable rallies against the 49ers. Taking the ball on his own eight-yard line, Ryan was promptly sacked. Restarting the drive from the three-yard line, Ryan led the Falcons on an 18-play drive connecting with five different receivers. Ryan was later intercepted on the drive, but restarted the march after White stripped 49er defensive back Nate Clements creating a fumble. With the Falcons now back to their own seven yard-line, Ryan continued the drive unfazed. A Matt Bryant field goal would seal the game with six seconds left, 16-14.

Ryan "only" had three game winners in 2011, one against the Philadelphia Eagles and

two against the Carolina Panthers. The second Carolina victory is one comeback Atlanta fans will never forget. The Falcons trailed Carolina by 16 points at halftime before Ryan responded with the help of his newest accomplice, rookie receiver Julio Jones. Ryan connected with Jones twice in the fourth quarter, a 17-yarder and a short pass that Jones took 75 yards "to the house" to seal the victory, 31-23. Afterwards, Jones said of his quarterback (who threw four touchdowns that day), "He just kept his poise. He kept it positive on the sideline, encouraged us to 'keep it going, keep it going.' Eventually, we did."

The "Comeback Kid" became the full-fledged "Comeback Man" for the Falcons in 2012. Ryan guided Atlanta to six game-winning drives, including a playoff win against the Seattle Seahawks. The fun started in September against the Panthers. The offense took over the ball on their own one-yard line with less than a minute. Ryan immediately split two defenders and connected with White on a 59-yard bomb. Ryan absorbed a heavy pass rush from Carolina when he threaded the needle into White's palms from the Falcons' end zone. Falcons win 30-28.

In November, Ryan led the Falcons back in another see-saw affair. Momentum seemed to be changed for good when Ryan hit Jones for an 80-yard touchdown on the team's first possession of the third quarter, but the Falcons eventually needed Ryan to connect with four different receivers on consecutive plays as part of an eight-play drive to edge out a road win, 24-23.

With his 21 comebacks and/or game winning drives, no other NFL quarterback is as clutch as Ryan. His comebacks are the most of any passer since the beginning of the 2008 season, but he somehow found a way to notch his 22nd comeback in a playoff game against Seattle in January.

As the Falcons faithful took their deepest breaths, Ryan led the team to the field with only 31 seconds remaining in the season and the home team trailing by a single point. Ryan fired a 22-yard strike to Harry Douglas down the left side. First down. Ryan then responded by con-

necting with Gonzalez on a 19-yarder to the right side. Two plays, two completions. That's all Bryant needed to kick the game-winning field goal with just 13 ticks left on the referee's stopwatch.

Once again Ryan, proved he's the Falcons main man. After the game, Ryan summed up how he approaches every late-game situation when the water is at full boil.

"It's kind of the same message that I say in those situations every time I go out there. It's not a big fire and brimstone speech. It's more of just, 'Let's go out there and do our job. We've got time, we've got the timeouts, we need to execute.'"

Ryan has accomplished a lot as a quarterback. Two Pro Bowls and more wins than any other quarterback in the history of the League (56) over their respective first five years.

As he prepares for his sixth NFL season, Ryan is sure to add even more signature moments when the game is on the line. It's becoming impossible to figure out whether the gifted quarterback should have been born with a football at the end of his gifted right arm ... or a pen.

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MATT RYAN'S GAME-WINNING DRIVES

2008

Oct. 5: at Green Bay, 27-24
Oct. 12: vs. Chicago, 22-20
Dec. 14: vs. Tampa Bay, 13-10
Dec. 28: vs. St. Louis, 31-27

2009

Oct. 18: vs. Chicago, 21-14
Dec. 20: at NY Jets, 10-7
Jan. 3: at Tampa Bay, 20-10

2010

Sept. 26: at New Orleans, 27-24
Oct. 3: vs. San Francisco, 16-14
Oct. 24: vs. Cincinnati, 39-32
Nov. 11: vs. Baltimore, 26-21
Nov. 28: vs. Green Bay, 20-17
Dec. 5: at Tampa Bay, 28-24

2011

Sept. 18: vs. Philadelphia, 35-31
Oct. 16: vs. Carolina, 31-17
Dec. 11: at Carolina, 31-23

2012

Sept. 30: vs. Carolina, 30-28
Oct. 7: at Washington, 24-17
Oct. 14: vs. Oakland, 23-20
Nov. 18: vs. Arizona, 23-19
Nov. 25: at Tampa Bay, 24-23
Jan. 13: vs. Seattle,* 30-28

*indicates playoff game



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