

NFL

Russell Wilson makes Seahawks leaders in NFC West

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — One look at the quarterback situations in the NFC West tells you just about everything you need to know about the hierarchy in the division.

While Arizona, Los Angeles and San Francisco all face major questions at the position, the Seattle Seahawks have Russell Wilson.

Even though they still have a suspect offensive line and questions in the running game, the combination of Wilson and a fearsome defense makes Seattle the favorites for a fourth division title in the past five years.

Wilson has had to shoulder a bigger load of the offense of late, no longer able to take a back seat to Marshawn Lynch and the running game. He threw for a career-high 4,219 yards last season — more than 1,000 yards above what he did as a rookie — despite being pressure on more than one-third of his dropbacks, according to Football Outsiders. Only Buffalo's Tyrod Taylor faced more pressure among regular starters last season.

The biggest challenger to Seattle will be the Cardinals, who hope to bounce back from a 7-8-1 season and get back into playoff contention. Arizona hopes 37-year-old Carson Palmer can turn back the clock and help the Cardinals make a last run in a closing window of opportunity.

Palmer threw 11 fewer touchdown passes last season than he did



AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File

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in a career year in 2015, and had five more interceptions. He improved late in the season after being given Wednesdays off from practice to keep his aging arm fresh, and that move could pay dividends again.

While Palmer has proven capable of leading a team to success, the situations in Los Angeles and San Francisco are more precarious.

The early returns on Jared Goff weren't good as the No. 1 overall pick last year couldn't even beat out Case Keenum for the starting job. He then showed why he began his career as a backup when Goff

finally got his chance late in the season. The Rams hired an offensive mastermind as coach and hope Sean McVay's presence will help Goff develop into a legitimate NFL passer.

The 49ers also hired a top offensive coordinator to run the show, Kyle Shanahan. He reunited with Brian Hoyer, who played in Cleveland when Shanahan was offensive coordinator, but few believe the journeyman is more than a bridge to the arrival of a franchise quarterback, possibly as soon as next offseason.

Some things to know about the NFC West:

POROUS PROTECTION: The offensive line was a major problem last season for Seattle and could be again after starting left tackle George Fant went down with a season-ending knee injury in the preseason.

Eddie Lacy was brought in to boost the running game, but must prove he can stay in shape, or a healthy Thomas Rawls could take his carries.

The defense should be back at its elite level with safety Earl Thomas healthy after missing the final six games with a broken leg, and Richard Sherman healed from a nagging knee injury. Linebacker Bobby Wagner is among the NFL's best.

FLYING HIGH: After dropping from 13-3 in 2015 to a losing record last season, the Cardinals believe they still have the talent to contend in the division.

Much of the offense will center on standout running back David Johnson, who has the lofty goal of 1,000 yards rushing and 1,000 yards receiving. But as always everything depends on Palmer's production and the ability of a redesigned offensive line to protect him.

On defense, hybrid safety Tyrann Mathieu, beset by injuries most of his career, looked like his old Honey Badger self in the preseason and forms a formidable duo in the back end of the defense with shutdown cornerback Patrick Peterson.

GOFF'S GAME: In seven starts as a rookie last season, Goff ranked last among all QBs with at least 200 passes in rating (63.3) and yards per attempt (5.3).

The offense looks more advanced this season and the addition of receiver Sammy Watkins and a bigger season from running back Todd Gurley should ease the pressure on Goff.

The Rams have another issue hanging over them. Standout defensive tackle Aaron Donald is holding out, dealing a major blow to a defense that was supposed to be a strength under new coordinator Wade Phillips.

SEARCHING FOR STABILITY: The 49ers hope to finally be off the coaching carousel after one-year tenures by Jim Tomsula and Chip Kelly followed Jim Harbaugh's firing in 2014.

Shanahan and GM John Lynch were handed six-year contracts to rebuild a once-proud franchise that won just two games last year, when the most notable aspect of the team was Colin Kaepernick's anthem protest.

The two overhauled most of the roster, including replacing Kaepernick with Hoyer, and are trying to build around a strong front seven led by recent first-round picks DeForest Buckner, Arik Armstead, Solomon Thomas and Reuben Foster, along with aging star NaVorro Bowman.

PREDICTED ORDER OF FINISH: Seahawks, Cardinals, Rams, 49ers.

Golf

Boston has a tough act to follow in FedEx Cup playoffs

By DOUG FERGUSON

Associated Press

NORTON, Mass. — Dustin Johnson and Jordan Spieth shook hands on the 18th green, and then traded text messages later in the night after providing high drama and plenty of star power in the opening FedEx Cup event.

Spieth said he texted him: "Man, congrats. That was a good battle. Let's do it again next week."

Johnson's reply: "Absolutely. I had a good time. That was my turn."

For the opening act of this lucrative FedEx Cup series that leads to a \$10 million prize, the PGA Tour couldn't have asked for much more. Johnson is the No. 1 player in the world. Judging by the slight spike in television ratings, Spieth is becoming among the most popular.

The Dell Technologies Championship has a tough act to follow.

The second playoff event starts Friday on the TPC Boston because of the traditional Labor Day finish. Johnson, Spieth and Justin Thomas will be in the same group for the opening two rounds because of their standing in the FedEx Cup. And it just so happens they are the three leading candidates for PGA Tour player of the year.

There remains a long road ahead before the deciding of a FedEx Cup champion and player of the year.

The TPC Boston also might pay immediate dividends, though it has little to do with a big cash prize. This is the final week for 10 players to make the Presidents Cup team before U.S. captain Steve Stricker and International captain

Nick Price get two wild-card selections.

Kevin Chappell is at No. 11 in the U.S. standings and 23 points — the equivalent of 56th place — behind Charley Hoffman. Chappell would love to be on the team, though his obsession is more on his golf than wondering if he'll make the team.

If anyone is feeling pressure, it's Phil Mickelson. He has never missed a Presidents Cup or Ryder Cup dating to 1994. Lefty would need a runner-up finish to qualify for the team, and he might need to simply show some good scores to give Stricker a reason to pick him.

Bubba Watson would have to win to be on the team, but he has other goals. At No. 72 in the FedEx Cup, he has to finish among the top 70 after this week to advance to the third playoff event outside Chicago in two weeks.

Watson, Mickelson and Hoffman are the only three players who have made it through to the third playoff event every year since the FedEx Cup began in 2007.

So there's a big tournament offering \$8.75 million in prize money. There is a race to make the Presidents Cup team. And for some players, there is simply the goal of not having their season ending earlier than they want.

That's a lot on the plate, and Thomas knows the feeling.

He missed out on the Tour Championship by one putt in 2015. A year ago, Thomas was still in the hunt for a Ryder Cup captain's pick. He missed the cut.

"It's hard, it really is," Thomas said. "The Ryder Cup definitely last year, it's

so hard to get out of the back of your mind. I was playing without thinking about it that much, but before the week starts, it always creeps in the back of your head. 'Well, if I play well here, something may happen.' You always have that 'if' scenario. I think that makes it tough."

The view is much better this year.

Thomas is a four-time tour winner and PGA champion. He is No. 3 in the FedEx Cup and practically assured of being among the top five seeds at the Tour Championship, the ideal spot because those five players only have to win at East Lake to claim the \$10 million prize. He already clinched a spot in the Presidents Cup.

"At the end of the day, you just have to focus on what you're doing," he said.

Rory McIlroy is the defending champion after making up a six-shot deficit in the final round last year to win. His only pressure is winning, because he has never gone a year without winning somewhere in the world since 2008. He is No. 43 in the FedEx Cup and would like to have a few good weeks to get back to East Lake.

Johnson's playoff victory over Spieth in the Northern Trust was his first since March, and now he's looking for more.

All four? No one has ever won more than two playoff events in a year.

"You can't win them all if you don't win the first one, right?" Johnson said. "Yeah, it's definitely possible. Is it going to happen? I have no idea. I'd love to say, 'Yeah, I'm going to win all four.' But the odds are not in my favor."

MLB

Angels, Astros make late splash in trade market

Associated Press

HOUSTON — The Houston Astros have acquired Justin Verlander in a trade with the Detroit Tigers.

The right-hander joins the American League West leaders and a rotation that includes Dallas Keuchel and Lance McCullers.

Astros owner Jim Crane says: "He adds a boost to our rotation. He's been pitching well. We think he'll give us some leadership. He's been in the playoffs before and adds a dimension we didn't have."

The 34-year-old Verlander, who won the Cy Young Award in 2011, is 10-8 with a 3.82 ERA this season. The Tigers will receive three minor league prospects.

Crane hopes Verlander is a piece that can help the Astros in the postseason. He says: "We hope it positions us to get into the playoffs, get by the first round, get into the second round and get to the world series and win it. That's what we've been working at and that's what we'll continue to work at and we want to win."

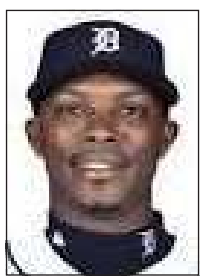
ANGELS ACQUIRE UPTON, PHILLIPS

ANAHEIM, Calif. — The Los Angeles Angels acquired slugging outfielder Justin Upton from the Detroit Tigers and infielder Brandon Phillips from the Atlanta Braves on Thursday, upgrading their lineup for the playoff race.

With a new second baseman and a new left fielder, Los Angeles has addressed its two most problematic positions heading into the final month of the season. The Angels



Verlander



Upton



Phillips

(69-65) are 1 1/2 games out of a playoff spot despite several major injuries to their pitching staff and one of the AL's least prolific lineups. Los Angeles trails Minnesota (70-63) in the race for the league's second wild card spot, and the Yankees (71-62) are just 2 1/2 games ahead.

The 30-year-old Upton is having a strong season for the struggling Tigers, batting .279 with 28 homers and 94 RBIs.

He represents an immediate upgrade in left field for the Angels (69-65), who are still fighting for a playoff spot despite several major injuries to their pitching staff and one of the AL's least potent lineups.

"What I'm excited about is being back into playoff contention and trying to help the Angels get to where they want to go," Upton said in a phone interview. "I think I can be a piece that helps that."

The four-time All-Star signed a six-year, \$132.75 million deal to join Detroit before last season. Detroit agreed to pay the Angels \$747,951 to cover a portion of the \$3,747,951 remaining in Upton's \$22,125,000 salary this year.

His deal includes four more seasons at the same salary, but he can opt out after the World Series and

become a free agent.

The Angels sent minor-league pitcher Grayson Long to Detroit, which also gets cash considerations or a player to be named. Long was among the Angels' better prospects after posting a 2.52 ERA in 23 Double-A starts this season.

The 36-year-old Phillips was in his first season with Atlanta, which acquired him in the offseason after 11 productive years in Cincinnati. He has been solid for the Braves, batting .291 with 11 homers and 52 RBIs.

Although he has played third base in August, Phillips is likely to play largely at second base for the Angels, who are struggling at the position. The three-time All-Star is a four-time Gold Glove winner joining a solid defensive team.

"The dream is to get a (World Series) ring, and that's what I have a chance of really doing right now," Phillips said. "I hope that I can help the team out."

The Braves also sent cash considerations to the Angels, and they received minor-league catcher Tony Sanchez from Los Angeles. Cincinnati already is paying \$13 million of Phillips' \$14 million salary for this season, making the deal very low-risk for the Angels.

Tennis

Federer edges Youzhny in 5 sets at US Open; Nadal needs 4

By HOWARD FENDRICH

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A bad back prevented Roger Federer from getting ready for the U.S. Open the way he prefers to prepare for a Grand Slam tournament. And it's showed so far.

Federer blamed a lack of proper practice after making an uncharacteristic 68 unforced errors and being forced to go five sets again before coming back to edge a cramping Mikhail Youzhny 1-6, 7-6 (3), 6-4, 4-6, 6-2 on Thursday in Arthur Ashe Stadium.

It is the first time the 36-year-old Federer has played five-setters in both

the first and second rounds at a major tournament.

"I knew I was going to maybe struggle early on. Maybe I struggled more than I would have liked to. But I'm still in the draw, which gives me a chance. I still believe I'm going to pick up my game and become just more consistent because I'm not playing all that bad," Federer said. "It's just that I'm going a bit up and down in waves throughout the match."

Given that Federer entered the day with a 16-0 career record against Youzhny and a 16-0 mark in the U.S. Open's second round, one might have thought that their match

would be a mismatch.

Think again. "He's also a real man who plays tennis," Youzhny noted. "He's not a god."

Well, OK, that's true. But remember: Federer did not drop a single set en route to his record eighth Wimbledon championship in July. And that he is 37-3 with five titles, including two at majors to raise his record total to 19.

Second on that list, with 15, is No. 1-seeded Rafael Nadal, who trailed by a set and a break before figuring things out and beating 121st-ranked Taro Daniel of Japan 4-6, 6-3, 6-2, 6-2 in Ashe at night. That followed 20th-seeded American

CoCo Vandeweghe's 7-6 (6), 6-2 victory over Ons Jabeur of Tunisia under the lights.

What already was a wide-open women's bracket became more so when 2004 U.S. Open champion Svetlana Kuznetsova was upset by 116th-ranked Kurumi Nara of Japan 6-3, 3-6, 6-3. The No. 8-seeded Kuznetsova's exit means five of the top eight women are already gone.

Two other seeded women lost to Americans in the afternoon: Shelby Rogers edged No. 25 Daria Gavrilova 7-6 (6), 4-6, 7-6 (5) in a tournament-record 3 hours, 33 minutes, and Jennifer Brady eliminated No. 23

Barbora Strycova 6-1, 6-1.

A couple of seeded men departed, too: No. 7 Grigor Dimitrov and No. 15 Tomas Berdych, the 2010 Wimbledon runner-up.

The No. 3-seeded Federer won five consecutive U.S. Open championships from 2004-08 and also was the runner-up twice, including two years ago. But he missed last year's tournament while taking off the second half of the season to let his back and surgically repaired left knee fully heal.

That back, an off-and-on issue for years, flared up again while Federer was losing in the final of the Montreal Masters in August. He didn't get to

fully work on returns or serves, in particular, as the U.S. Open approached. That lack of training and the resulting lack of timing — rather than pain from his back — is what Federer said caused him problems Tuesday night in the first round against 19-year-old American Frances Tiafoe and again against Youzhny, a former top-10 player who reached the 2006 and 2010 U.S. Open semifinals but is now ranked 101st.

"I'm pretty confident that I'm only going to get better from here. That's a good thing," Federer said. "Because I've played a lot, I definitely found some rhythm now."