

NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE 2019 PREVIEW

# INTERFERING WITH REPLAY

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After the egregious missed call in the NFC championship game that almost certainly sent the wrong team (the Rams) to the Super Bowl instead of the right team (the Saints), the NFL knew it had a major problem that struck to the core of pro football.

Poor officiating, right in front of millions watching on TV, might have decided a champion.

So, team owners voted to add reviews of pass interference calls and non-calls in the replay system. Coaches can challenge — they get to throw the red flag twice during a game, three times if their first two challenges are successful — outside of the final two minutes of each half or the entire overtime. During those times, officials can call for a replay review.

The change is on an experimental basis for this season.

"I'm not surprised, we always knew that might occur," says CBS officiating analyst Gene Steratore, who was a longtime NFL and college basketball referee before retiring in 2018. "There's been talk of it over the last four to five years that they would expand replay to where they would look at this. With the NFC championship game, it moved it a little forward."

"But," Steratore warns, "there is a subjective nature in all of this. How much should the level of contact be for it to be a foul?"

Steratore believes officials will continue to call penalties as they always have, noting how correct they usually are. It's not as if they simply move on robotically from any mistakes they make, either.

"I always had an empty feeling personally if I made a mistake," he says. "But I didn't not go in with a fear of that. We would continue to do the job the way we were trained to do it as best as we always can do it."

"You never want to see an outcome pretty much decided that way, by an athlete's or an official's mistake."

Precisely what Commissioner Roger Goodell, the NFL's competition committee and its owners were thinking.

"It's great when we can arrive at what we think is a good change," Saints coach Sean Payton says. "We wouldn't have any of these on the docket had it not been for one play. I don't think any of these would be on a replay discussion."

## YEAR OF THE BROWNS?

Two years removed from an infamous 0-16 season, the Cleveland Browns are expected to challenge defending AFC North champion Baltimore Ravens for the division crown.



Yes, that's not a typo. It's hard to believe considering the Browns won only one game over two seasons in 2016 and 2017.

The Browns reversed course late last season when then-rookie quarterback Baker Mayfield helped Cleveland win five of its last seven games to finish the season at 7-8-1. Mayfield, who began his pro career sitting behind Tyrod Taylor, broke Peyton Manning's NFL rookie record with 27 touchdown passes. With Odell Beckham Jr. — obtained in an off-season trade with the Giants — and Jarvis Landry as targets, Mayfield could go well beyond that TD total in 2019.

There is immediate pressure on new coach Freddie Kitchens, who began last season as running backs coach before an impressive run as interim offensive coordinator landed him the top gig. Kitchens has never been a head coach before at any level.

The hype around Cleveland helped them land their first Sunday Night Football game since 2008 — against the Rams on Sept. 22 — and two Monday Night Football games and a Thursday Night Football game. That's the most nationally televised night games that the Browns have played in 11 years.

## BRADY IS BACK; GRONK IS GONE

Tom Brady is 42 and back for his 20th season, all with the New England Patriots, as the most decorated quarterback in NFL history continues to put any retirement plans on hold.

He's coming off his sixth Super Bowl victory and still going strong as he recently signed a two-year contract extension worth \$70 million.

But one of his favorite weapons is off the Pats' roster. Rob Gronkowski retired, leaving the Patriots without a clear-cut starting tight-end — one of their biggest question marks entering the season.

New England signed Ben Watson out of retirement in the offseason, but he's suspended the first four games for violating the NFL's policy on performance

enhancers. They also picked up Eric Saubert from Atlanta, and also Matt LaCosse, Stephen Anderson and Lance Kendricks, among others.

"To replace great players, it's not like you just pick another one off the tight end tree," Brady said. "You can't just go out back. You've got to find guys that come in and want to put the work in and want to try and contribute."

## WITTEN BACK ON MNF

Jason Witten spent one year in the "Monday Night Football" broadcast booth, providing his color commentary on games even involving his former Dallas Cowboys teammates.

Well, the 37-year-old Witten will be back on TV on a Monday night this season but this time on the field.

The longtime Cowboys tight end changed his mind about retirement during the off-season and returned to Dallas for his 16th season. His team is set to play a Monday night game against divisional rival New York Giants on Nov. 4 and the 11-time Pro Bowler is expected to be playing in it.

Despite his year away, Witten is sliding right back into a leadership role with the Cowboys as he prepares to set the franchise record for seasons.

## NO LUCK FOR COLTS

In the shocker of the off-season, Colts quarterback Andrew Luck announced his retirement from the NFL at the end of his team's third preseason game. He retires at the age of 29, after seven seasons in the league, all with Indianapolis. Luck cited his recurring injuries as the main reason to end his career, but the timing upset fans and caught everyone off guard.

Jacoby Brissett, who has some starting experience and served as understudy to both Luck and Brady, has been named the team's new quarterback. Out of NC State, Brissett was drafted by New England in the third round in 2016.

## MARQUEE MATCHUPS

Some games worth tuning into during the 2019 season (all times PDT)

### WEEK 1

#### PACKERS AT BEARS

Thursday, Sept. 5 5:20 p.m. Opening game of NFL's 100th season features longest rivals

### WEEK 2

#### SAINTS AT RAMS

Sunday, Sept. 15, 1:25 p.m. Will pass interference flags fly when they should?

### WEEK 2

#### BROWNS AT JETS

Monday, Sept. 16, 5:15 p.m. Two teams with high expectations for second-year QBs

### WEEK 7

#### RAVENS AT SEAHAWKS

Sunday, Oct. 20, 1:25 p.m. Both teams rebuilding once-proud defenses

### WEEK 8

#### BROWNS AT PATRIOTS

Sunday, Oct. 27, 1:25 pm. If Browns are for real, they can show it versus champs

### WEEK 9

#### BEARS AT EAGLES

Sunday, Nov. 3, 10 a.m. Eagles knocked Bears from playoffs at Chicago last January

### WEEK 11

#### PATRIOTS AT EAGLES

Sunday, Nov. 17, 1:25 p.m. Wonder if Eagles will have another Philly Special for Patriots

### WEEK 11

#### CHIEFS VS. CHARGERS at Mexico City

Monday, Nov. 18, 5:15 p.m. Last year's game was moved from Azteca because of poor field conditions

### WEEK 13

#### SAINTS AT FALCONS

Thursday, Nov. 28, 5:20 p.m. Tasty Thanksgiving night battle between archrivals

### WEEK 14

#### CHIEFS AT PATRIOTS

Sunday, Dec. 8, 1:25 p.m. Rematch of AFC title game that went to OT

### WEEK 15

#### RAMS AT COWBOYS

Sunday, Dec. 15, 1:25 p.m. Todd Gurley and Ezekiel Elliott to key strong running games

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## SIX FACES IN NEW PLACES

### ODELL BECKHAM JR. Cleveland

Traded to the Browns in a blockbuster deal in the offseason after five years with the Giants. Always the center of attention, the three-time Pro Bowler is being counted on to help the Browns, who are dealing with high expectations for this season and will look to end the league's longest current playoff drought.

### EARL THOMAS Baltimore

Former member of the "Legion of Boom" is a three-time All-Pro safety and won a Super Bowl in nine seasons in Seattle. He will provide leadership to a usually stout, though revamped Ravens defense, which was No. 1 in the league last season but lost several key players in free agency.

### ANTONIO BROWN Oakland

One of the league's top receivers who forced a trade to Oakland for draft picks after nine productive years with the Steelers. Brown is a four-time All-Pro who had six straight 100-catch seasons for the Steelers. Despite his talent, he has a reputation for being a prima donna and publicly criticized coach Mike Tomlin and QB Ben Roethlisberger in Pittsburgh and recently filed and lost a grievance with the NFL over his use of an old helmet that is no longer certified as safe to use. And now he's going from a team that was a perennial playoff contender to a rebuilding one in Oakland before it heads to Las Vegas.

### LE'VEON BELL N.Y. Jets

Signed a four-year, \$52.5 million deal with the Jets on March after sitting out last season in a contract dispute with Pittsburgh. The two-time All-Pro is perhaps the most dynamic running back in the league and is expected to be a key part of new coach Adam Gase's offense.

### NDAMUKONG SUH Tampa Bay

The No. 2 overall pick in the 2010 draft has joined Tampa Bay, his fourth team after stops in Detroit, Miami and the L.A. Rams. The three-time All-Pro defensive tackle signed a one-year deal with the Bucs as a replacement for Gerald McCoy in new defensive coordinator Todd Bowles' 3-4 scheme.

### NICK FOLES Jacksonville

One of only two quarterbacks to beat Tom Brady in the Super Bowl. He received a four-year, \$88 million contract that included \$50.125 million guaranteed to try and get the Jaguars to the big game for the first time. He also took the Eagles to the playoffs last season while substiting for an injured Carson Wentz.



## NFL 2019: Carr, Winston, Mariota among QBs in prove-it years

By JOSH DUBOW  
AP Pro Football Writer

ALAMEDA, Calif. — While outsiders keep speculating when the Oakland Raiders will cut ties with Derek Carr and search for a new franchise quarterback, Carr tunes out all the outside noise.

He ignored all the pre-draft talk whether the Raiders would select his replacement and has paid so little attention to the talk about his long-term security that he has already bought a house in Las Vegas — where his new neighbor when the Raiders arrive in Sin City next year will be coach Jon Gruden.

"We are next-door neighbors," Carr said. "We will be, yes, but that's for the future. That'll be fun. Hopefully a lot



In this Aug. 8, 2019, file photo, Tennessee Titans quarterback Marcus Mariota (8) looks to pass during NFL football game against the Philadelphia Eagles in Philadelphia.

of knocks on the door. Maybe we can car pool. That would be good for us."

Carr might be the only person so confident in his job sta-

tus with the Raiders. After a promising start to his career that featured a 12-win season and MVP talk in 2016 when Oakland ended 13-year

playoff drought, Carr's performance has lagged the past two years, thanks in part to switching play callers and diminished talent around him.

If he can't succeed this season after the Raiders added the NFL's most prolific receiver in Antonio Brown, a dangerous deep threat in Tyrell Williams, first-round running back Josh Jacobs and elite pass-blocking tackle Trent Brown, Carr might need to look for a real-estate agent. And for a new job as the Raiders can get out of his five-year, \$125 million contract three years early with almost no penalty.

"Let's just get through this year first and then we'll play that game again," he said. "I'll probably have some more fun with it, but I'm not going anywhere. This is my team and it

will be for the next however long I want to play."

Carr is one of several QBs in a prove-it season, along with 2015 top two picks Jameis Winston and Marcus Mariota, who are playing out their fifth-year options in Tampa Bay and Tennessee without long-term deals; Cincinnati's Andy Dalton; and Jimmy Garoppolo in San Francisco.

Most of those teams can get out of commitments to players they once had hoped would be franchise quarterbacks without major salary cap implications. Winston and Mariota are set to be unrestricted free agents if they don't get new deals or franchise tags. Dalton will enter the final year of a \$96 million, six-year contract in 2020 with no dead money on his deal. The 49ers can get

out of Garoppolo's with a cap charge of just \$4.5 million.

The questions about Winston, Mariota and Dalton have taken longer to form. Winston and Mariota came into the league as the top two picks in 2015 but haven't lived up to that billing.

Mariota has had a difficult time, missing at least one game a season and going through three head coaches and five play callers in his brief career. He is coming off a season when he threw for a career-worst 11 touchdowns with eight interceptions.

But with Derrick Henry at running back and an emerging star in Corey Davis at receiver, Mariota has the best offensive talent around him that he's had in his career. It's an opportunity to show he's worthy of a mega-contract.