

# NFC East goes from laughingstock to juggernaut in 2 seasons

By **JOSH DUBOW**  
AP Pro Football Writer

The NFC East has gone from laughingstock to juggernaut in less than two years.

Led by Philadelphia, the league's lone undefeated team and surprising 4-1 starts by the New York Giants and Dallas Cowboys, the NFC East has three teams with at least four wins in the first five games.

This is the fourth time that has happened since the start of the eight-division era in 2002, with the AFC North doing it in 2020, the NFC East in 2008 and AFC West in 2002.

This comes two years after Washington won the division with a 7-9 record and the four teams combined for a .288 win percentage in non-division games, the fourth-worst mark of the eight-division era.

NFC East teams have already won 11 games against other divisions through five weeks, tying the total for the division from that lackluster 2020 season.

## Super Bowl hangover

The Rams (2-3) and Bengals (2-3) have losing records eight months after playing in the Super Bowl.

This marks just the third time that the previous season's Super Bowl participants both have losing records after five games.

It also happened in 1999, when Denver and Atlanta both started 1-4, and in 1988, when Washington and Denver both started 2-3.

## Taysom time

New Orleans' versatile Taysom Hill had a game for the ages on Sunday.

Hill ran for 112 yards and three TDs, threw a 22-yard touchdown pass and even recovered a fumble on special



Jaley Hurts has guided the Philadelphia Eagles to a perfect 6-0 start to lead the NFC East so far this season.

teams.

Hill became the 10th player in the Super Bowl era to run for at least three TDs and throw another in the same game. He joined LaDainian Tomlinson (2005 vs. the Giants) and Ronnie Brown (2008 vs. the Patriots) as the only ones to do it while rushing for at least 100 yards in the game.

## Big play Gabe

Josh Allen and Gabe Davis got Buffalo off to a record-setting start Sunday.

Allen's 98-yard TD pass to Davis on the third play from scrimmage against Pittsburgh was the longest touchdown from scrimmage ever scored in the first 90 seconds of a game. The last scrimmage TD of at least 90 yards

on the opening drive came when Terrelle Pryor ran for a 93-yard score on the opening play for the Raiders against the Steelers on Oct. 27, 2013.

Davis added a 62-yard TD catch in the second quarter, joining Ja'Marr Chase, Odell Beckham Jr., Lee Evans and Torry Holt as the only players since 2000 with two TD catches of at least 60 yards in the same game.

That led to Allen throwing for 348 yards in the first half, the second most in the first half since 1991 to Patrick Mahomes' 359 against Tampa Bay in 2020.

## Old man Brady

Tom Brady added another milestone to a career filled with them.

Brady threw for 351 yards

in Tampa Bay's win over Atlanta on Sunday for his 40th game in the regular season and playoffs with at least 300 yards passing since he turned 40.

Only 18 other players have at least 40 games with at least 300 yards passing in their entire careers, with Hall of Famer John Elway having as many in his career as Brady has in his 40s.

Brady also won his 23rd career game in the regular season or playoffs when attempting at least 50 passes in a game — 18 more than second-place Dan Marino and Warren Moon.

Brady is 23-12 (.657) when throwing at least 50 passes. All other QBs since 1950 have a .193 winning percentage when throwing at least

50 passes in a game.

## Comeback kids

Kirk Cousins and the Minnesota Vikings have rallied from a deficit in the final 4 1/2 minutes to win the last three weeks against Detroit, New Orleans and Chicago.

The last team to win at least three straight games when trailing in the final 4:30 was the 2011 Broncos, who did it four straight games with Tim Tebow at quarterback.

Meanwhile, Patrick Mahomes led the Chiefs back from a double-digit deficit for the 12th time in his career in the regular season and playoffs in a 30-29 win over the Raiders.

Mahomes is 12-9 after falling behind by at least 10 points, the only QB with a winning record when facing at least five double-digit deficits. All other quarterbacks in the Super Bowl era have a .155 winning percentage.

## Prime time dud

In a season where offenses have struggled overall, the Broncos and Colts brought it to a new level with their hapless Thursday night game.

The Colts won 12-9 in overtime in the first game in NFL history when both quarterbacks threw for at least 250 yards and neither scored a touchdown, according to the Elias Sports Bureau.

Teams in the Super Bowl era had been 1-161 when scoring no touchdowns, throwing multiple interceptions and getting sacked at least six times before the Colts won. The only other team to do it was the 1973 Browns in a 12-10 win over the Giants.

This was the seventh prime-time game without a touchdown since 2000 and the ninth overall game in the past 20 seasons when teams combined for no TDs and at least four turnovers.

# Grizzlies set sights higher after Western semis loss

By **TERESA M. WALKER**  
AP Sports Writer

MEMPHIS — Ja Morant and the Memphis Grizzlies have more experience now along with some painful postseason heartbreak.

What matters most for these still very young Grizzlies? What's next. And they want it all.

"It's no pressure for us," Morant said. "We didn't win the championship. So for us, it's pretty much going to the next level, continuing to improve and go win a championship."

Sounds simple enough for a team that got every point last season from players not yet 30 and still posted the NBA's second-best record. The Grizzlies beat Minnesota in six games for their first playoff series win since 2016.

They lost to Golden State in the Western Conference semifinals

in six games, the last three with Morant sidelined by an injured knee. The Grizzlies took that loss as an eye-opening look at just what it takes to play deep into the NBA postseason.

"We understand the habits and the foundation and things we have to develop in order to make that run and make it happen," guard Desmond Bane said.

Memphis set a high bar. The Grizzlies won a franchise-record 56 wins and their first division title while also locking up the No. 2 seed in the Western Conference.

## Morant's climb

The point guard has gone from NBA Rookie of the Year to an All Star and Most Improved Player in his third season. He wants much more, though Morant will only say stay tuned for opening night

Oct. 19 against the New York Knicks to see exactly what he spent this offseason working to improve.

Morant has talked about trying to build up his body to better survive driving to the bucket. Coach Taylor Jenkins said Morant came to the the staff at season's end with a list of areas he had targeted, including 3-point shooting.

The All-Star also has seen the player rankings and made very clear he's not satisfied.

"I got eight more spots to go," Morant said. "That's another one of my motivation coming in at nine. I'm trying to be No. 1."

## Pack of Grizzlies

General manager Zach Kleiman said last spring that controlling owner Robert Pera would pay to keep the team's core group to-

gether. Kleiman signed Morant to a five-year super max contract and John Konchar got an extension this offseason.

Center Steven Adams got a two-year extension early in training camp. Dillon Brooks and Brandon Clarke are in the final years of their contracts. Kleiman said the team feels strongly about those players.

"We view them as as potential long term pieces of this group, and we'll see how things play out," Kleiman said.

## Fill-in for JJJ

With Jaren Jackson Jr. recovering from surgery to fix a stress fracture in his right foot, the Grizzlies will need a fill-in for the power forward coming off his best season yet. Options include Santi Aldama, Brandon Clarke or possibly rookie David Roddy.

Jenkins mentioned

top draft pick Jake LaRavia as an option when Memphis goes with a smaller lineup. When Jackson returns, he has a big goal for himself: Being voted Defensive Player of the Year after being named to the NBA's All-Defensive first team.

## Bane's shooting

The 30th pick out of TCU in the 2020 draft finished fifth in the voting for Most Improved Player in his second season. Bane leads the NBA shooting 46.4% outside the arc with a minimum of 600 attempts since he entered the league.

Bane also set the franchise record making 228 3s last season, and he also ranks third in NBA playoff history making seven or more 3s in consecutive games. That puts him in the company of Warriors

stars Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson.

New Grizzlies teammate Danny Green said he's been a fan since Bane entered the league.

"The way he's built it doesn't look like he should be a basketball player," Green said. "But he's very effective. It's crazy to see that he shoots the ball very well with, you know, how strong he is and how compact he is."

## Stat leaders

Memphis led the NBA in rebounds, steals and blocks, the league's first team to do that in each category since steals and blocks became official stats in 1973-74. The Grizzlies also led the NBA in points scored in the paint, second-chance points, fast-break points and offensive rebounds.

# NASCAR fines Stewart-Haas Racing \$200K for race manipulation

By **JENNA FRYER**  
AP Auto Racing Writer

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — NASCAR said a review of data and team communications showed that Stewart-Haas Racing manipulated the results of the playoff elimination race at Charlotte, an infraction that drew an additional \$200,000 in fines on Tuesday.

"Nothing contradicted that that was done deliberately," NASCAR senior vice president of competition Scott Miller said of Cole Custer slowing on the backstretch of the final lap to help teammate Chase Briscoe gain the positions needed to advance into the next round of the playoffs.

The new penalties brings SHR's monetary fines to \$300,000 over the last week; Kevin Harvick, one of the most outspoken drivers about safety concerns with NAS-

CAR's new Next Gen car, was penalized along with his crew chief when his Ford failed a post-Talladega inspection.

On Sunday, Custer appeared to deliberately hold up a line of traffic on Charlotte's road course as teammate Briscoe stormed past in a desperate effort to move into the third round of the playoffs. Briscoe finished ninth, good enough to bump reigning NASCAR champion Kyle Larson from the playoffs as the field was trimmed from 12 drivers to eight.

Briscoe earned the eighth and final spot in the next round of the playoffs by two points over Larson.

NASCAR said after Sunday's race it was reviewing Custer's contact on the final lap. The penalties levied were a \$100,000 fine for Custer and loss of 50 driver points, as well as 50 owner points for SHR. Crew chief Mike Shiplett was also fined

\$100,000 and suspended indefinitely.

Miller said NASCAR heard Shiplett tell Custer over the radio "I think you've got a flat. Checkup, checkup" when he couldn't see the car to tell if it had a flat.

"Blatantly pulling over and changing the finishing order on the last lap is what makes it over the top," Miller continued, "especially with the instructions from the pit box."

SHR was already appealing Harvick's penalties and said Tuesday it would appeal the latest penalties against Custer's team.

Miller said the penalty against Custer's team would have been even stiffer if NASCAR didn't believe Briscoe had earned his spot in the round of eight. NASCAR considered suspending Custer, who is the son of SHR's co-president Joe Custer, but Miller said it didn't because "super flagrant things that

eliminated other competitors" are what warrants suspension.

NASCAR also did not consider removing Briscoe from the playoff field, which is down to eight drivers as NASCAR heads to Las Vegas Motor Speedway. NASCAR found no data or communication that indicated Briscoe or the No. 14 team was aware Custer was assisting Briscoe's advancement.

NASCAR cut Miller's availability on the topic at just under 11 minutes, and Miller was not asked if NASCAR considered adding Larson back into the playoff field as a ninth driver.

The precedent for all this dates to a 2013 race manipulation scandal by Michael Waltrip Racing in the final regular-season race. Clint Bowyer was instructed over his radio to itch his arm, and Bowyer's car spun to set in motion a sequence of events

in which Ryan Newman did not win the race to earn an automatic playoff berth, and Bowyer teammate Martin Truex Jr. got the final playoff position.

NASCAR ultimately removed Truex from the playoff field in favor of Newman, who was closing in on the victory before the bogus spin by Bowyer. But further NASCAR investigations found manipulation by other teams, as well, and Jeff Gordon was ultimately added to what was then a 12-driver playoff field as an unprecedented 13th driver.

NASCAR also at the time declared a "100%" rule in which all teams were mandated to fully compete or risk serious fines. Tuesday marked the first time the rule has been enforced.

Briscoe heads to Las Vegas ranked eighth in the standings with three races to set the championship four.