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## NFL Kickoff, Who's Who, Pretenders or Contenders?

BY MALIQUE MCCOY-WAGES

**T**HERE ARE A LOT of unanswered questions. Who is going to the Superbowl? Who is the early MVP? Will Baker Mayfield back up the talk with numbers that look like they are straight out of a video game, or will he disappoint again? These are the fundamental questions NFL fans want to know. I will take the time to give you my take, pics, and outlook of the 2022-2023 NFL season.

Let's look at teams to look out for in 2022. One of the teams to watch out for is the Cincinnati Bengals. I predict a trip to the Superbowl and a loss on the most critical stage. I see the Bengals, led by Joe Burrow and Ja-Marr Chase, putting things together this year and being a stronger contender because of their experience. They haven't gained many additions to the team, but some would consider that a good thing boosting team chemistry through the roof. On the backs of their young core, I see a 13-4 record and a push for the Superbowl, but at least, I believe they are capable of earning an AFC championship. The next team to look out for is the Carolina Panthers with the addition of Baker Mayfield and the electric emergence of Christian McCaffery, coupled with their top defense. I can see a push for the top of the NFC South and a first-round exit in the playoffs. The NFC South is up in the air, and Baker Mayfield has a chip on his shoulder and carries his impactful play coming off last season.

Now for our early season MVP picks. With us just on the cusp of the season, there are a few players I feel have the chance to do something special, and hoist that Most Valuable Player Trophy, or other known as the "Best Quarterback Award." I think the first person who has a great narrative behind him is a league favorite, Patrick Mahomes. After an underwhelming postseason and losing his key receiver Tyreek Hill to the Miami Dolphins, he has work to do, but he has set

the standard that he is an all-time great, and I believe he has the team, the coach, and the narrative to go on a great run. My next pick for MVP is Josh Allen. After coming off a stellar season and game of the ages in the Divisional round against the Chiefs, losing in OT by one score, he proves to be a great option. My last MVP pick is Russell Wilson. He has joined a hungry Denver Bronco team that has been searching for a leader offensively since Peyton Manning. They should be top of the division, and his stats should be solid enough to get him the award.

The pretenders, easy picks right off the bat, are the one and only Dallas Cowboys. Dak Prescott has been injured, and Ezekiel Elliot hasn't looked the same in years and has gone down. With a declining offensive line and a core that was once young and is now aging. The Dallas Cowboys are in a downward spiral. Another team that is a pretender is the Green Bay Packers. We've seen them get the best record in the division year after year and have nothing to show for it. Although I believe this is no fault of Aaron Rodgers, he is held accountable for being the star of the team.

The number one contender is the Los Angeles Rams, who are coming back this season as the defending champs with no sign of slowing down and their players at the peak of their talents. The NFL is not prone to repeats, but I would not be surprised if they won again and shocked the world. Number two, the Buffalo Bills are also a contender this year. They are coming off a dominant season, but they still have room to improve. I see them going far in this year's playoffs. The Kansas City Chiefs are my third ranked contenders because they are constantly setting the standard, and as long as Patrick Mahomes is healthy, I'm putting them amongst the top teams. And for my last pick, I'm taking

the Cincinnati Bengals. They were the runners-up last year, and are the youngest core amongst all the contenders, and I think they will only improve and gain confidence. With all the fantastic young talent emerging and stars of old, it's looking to be a season to remember.



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