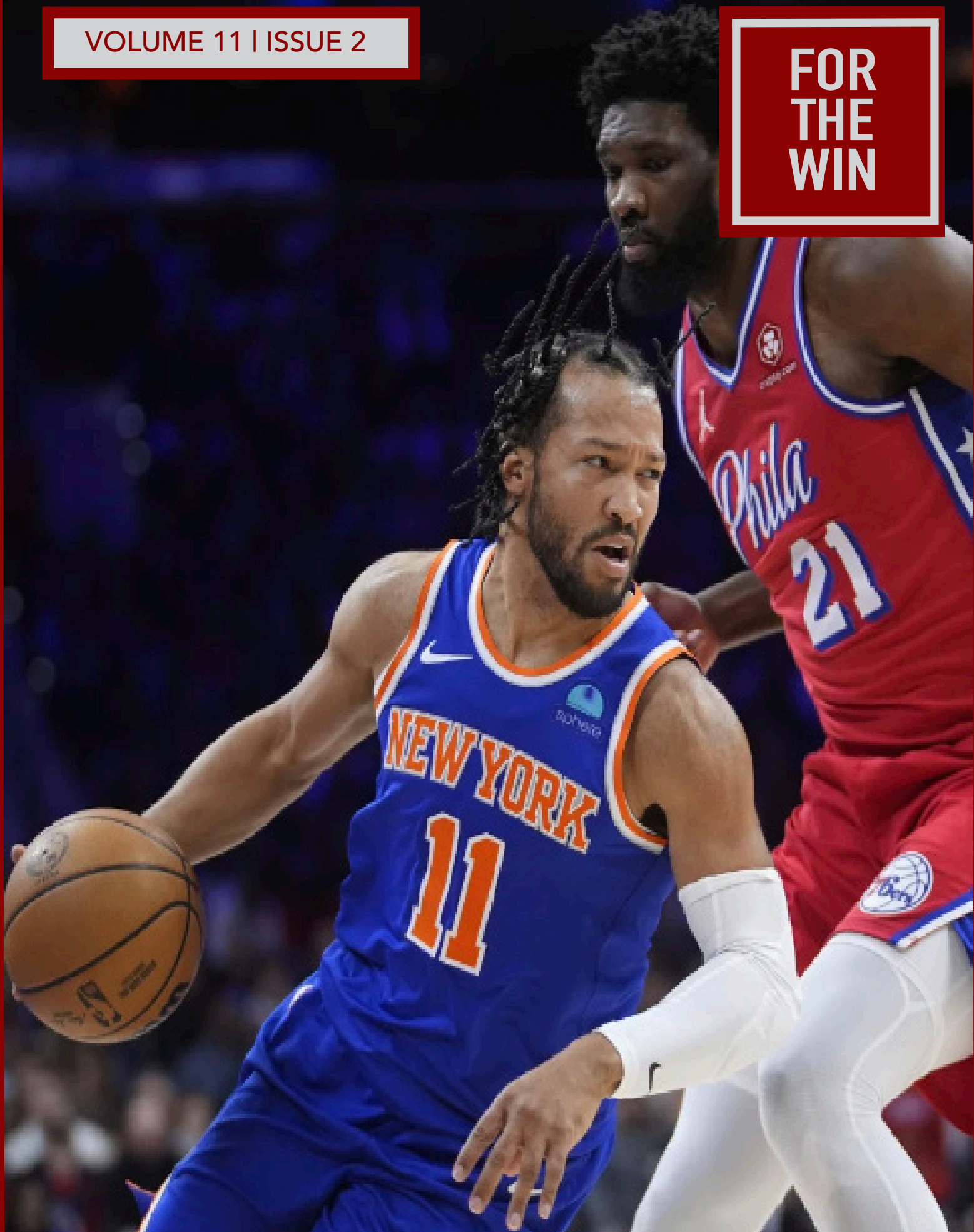


VOLUME 11 | ISSUE 2

FOR
THE
WIN





Editor's Note

Dear FTW readers,

Welcome to the second issue of Volume 11! From an MLB and NFL offseasons to NBA recaps to rising stars in the sports world, this issue is the perfect way to finish off Volume 11. Thanks to everyone involved, and enjoy reading!

Sincerely,
Your FTW Editors

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For The Win Contributors

Editor-in-Chief

Julia Werdiger
Ben Rafal

Managing Editor

Jack Mogelof

Content and Design Editors

Isabel Melián
Chase Forbes
Santi Simonian

Junior Editors

Blake Bennett
Kai Abbott

Section Editors

Kayla Choi
Will Karpf
Jaiveer Gupta
Anoushka Parakh
Rabee Singh
Ahaan Modi
Josh Anderman

Reviewing and Grading the Yankees' 2024 offseason

Following a disappointing 2023 season, the New York Yankees are looking to bounce back in 2024. In 2023, the Yankees finished fourth in the American League East, posting their worst record in 30 years of 82-80, missing the playoffs. Injuries and underperformances were the story of 2023. With the Yankees coming back to play in 2024, Yankees fans are optimistic that their offseason trades and signings are enough to get back on top and become the intimidating Bronx Bombers everyone is used to seeing.

Juan Soto was the most obvious acquirement of the 2024 offseason for the Yankees. Soto is a superstar. Besides Shohei Ohtani, Juan Soto was easily the most talented player any team has traded for/signed this offseason. In 2023, he was an All-Star and a Silver Slugger, playing all 162 games of the season. He's not a great defender, but he's not terrible. His bat, however, might be the best in the league. He walked a league-leading 132 times last season with the Padres. He has led the league in walks in three of the four full seasons he has played in the majors. His plate discipline is generational. Pairing this with a .930 OPS and clubbing 35 homers, and you've got an unreal bat. As a left-handed hitter, there's no question that Juan Soto will be incredible for the Yankees this year. The Yankees managed not to give up too much for Juan Soto, although they only have him for one year before he likely signs a multi-hundred million dollar contract before the 2025 season. The Yankees did give up Michael King, a promising relief pitcher turned starting pitcher who had some great starts for the Yankees in 2023. They also gave up Kyle Higashioka, a homegrown catcher who has been in the Yankees' organization seemingly forever. Yankees fans will miss Higashioka, but I doubt there is anybody complaining about getting Soto. Along with relievers Jhony Brito and Randy Vásquez, the Yankees also gave up top prospect Drew Thrope. Besides Juan Soto, the Yankees acquired Trent Grisham in this trade. Grisham is a below-league-average hitter. There is no doubt about that. He has a career 95 OPS+ (league average is 100) and had an 87 OPS+ last season. His glove is where he shines, however. In the outfield, he is one of the best defenders in the game and is arguably just as good of a defender as Juan Soto is a hitter. This is a great trade overall and will greatly benefit the Yankees moving into 2024.

Alex Verdugo was a great piece for the Yankees. They paid almost nothing for him, in three relievers that were not guaranteed to be on the 40-man roster in 2024. This was an absolute steal for the Yankees. Alex Verdugo will play corner outfield in 2024 and has always been a solid hitter, posting around a 100 OPS+ for most of his career. He is a consistent hitter and will likely be the everyday left or right fielder in 2024. The Yankees also added a ton of relievers this offseason to combat the losses they faced in the Juan Soto trade. Caleb Ferguson, Victor Gonzalez, Luke Weaver, Cody Morris, and Cody Poteet will fill the spots in the bullpen for the Yankees in 2024.

The Yankees' pitching coach, Matt Blake, is a wizard at turning average relievers into great ones. While the 2023 Yankees were below average, their bullpen was among the best in Major League Baseball. Every Yankees fan is waiting for Matt Blake to work his magic on these pitchers, hopefully turning them into star relievers.

Marcus Stroman was the final notable piece of the 2024 offseason for the Yankees. Stroman has a negative history with Yankee fans, although his presence will be fantastic in 2024. He brings the youthful energy to the squad that the boring Yankee ballclub needs. He will give you at least 130 innings yearly and typically pitches to an ERA in the mid-threes. He is the definition of the solid, consistent pitcher that the Yankees need to fix their struggling rotation. Yankees fans can hope for 150 innings and an ERA in the low to mid-threes, which would be amazing but is likely wishful thinking.

The offseason is not over, and the Yankees should not be done looking for free agents. Their current rotation needs another piece. Free agent pitcher Blake Snell is coming off a Cy Young season and would be a great fit for the Yankees. They could also target Shane Bieber, reunite with Jordan Montgomery, or trade for a few other good starting pitchers. The current rotation of Gerrit Cole, Marcus Stroman, Nestor Cortes, Carlos Rodon, and Clarke Schmidt relies heavily on healthy bounce-back seasons from Cortes and Rodon. Pressure would be taken off of them with the addition of another starter. With another starting pitcher, preferably a pitcher who consistently throws a lot of innings, the offseason will be complete. Right now, I give the offseason an A-/B+. If the Yankees add another solid starting pitcher, it would be an A-. If they lock up Juan Soto on a huge contract for many years, too, it would undoubtedly be an A. Now is the Yankees window for success during the peaks of the best hitter in the game, Aaron Judge, and the best pitcher, Cole.



<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/07/sports/baseball/aaron-judge-yankees>

Ohtani's Contract and What it Means Going Forward



On December 9, 2023, professional baseball player Shohei Ohtani agreed to a record-breaking \$700 million contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers. Yet, Ohtani will only make \$2 million per year during his ten-year contract with the team due to \$680 million being deferred into payments from 2034-2043. Let's take a closer look at the specifics of the contract and exactly what this unprecedented deferral entails for the future of professional organized sports.

First off, why does a deal such as this one make sense for Ohtani or the Dodgers? Well, Ohtani, after spending the entirety of his MLB career (before joining the Dodgers) with the cross-town team Anaheim Angels, has yearned to be in a winning position after not appearing in a single playoff game. Furthermore, Ohtani's mass appeal and global popularity with his uncanny two-way player ability (he can pitch and hit), especially in the Japanese market, has allowed him to take a deal where he makes relatively little money during his tenure. Ohtani has become one of the world's highest-paying athletes just off of endorsements, with a reported \$50 million annually. For both his unparalleled income off the field and the fact that he hasn't played in any playoff games, Ohtani brought the high deferral contract idea to a few clubs, one of which was the Dodgers.

Why would the Dodgers accept this deal, though? Despite the lack of a hard salary cap for teams that leagues such as the NFL and NBA employ, Major League Baseball's (MLB) luxury tax allows front offices to shell out the "big bucks" as long as they don't care too much about the taxes they may have to pay. Clubs that exceed the predetermined payroll are subjected to a Competitive Balance Tax (CBT). For the 2024 MLB season, that predetermined number is \$237 million, and the Dodgers are aptly willing to not hit it. With NPB phenom pitcher Yoshinobu Yamamoto recently signing a mega deal with the Los Angeles Dodgers for 12 years and \$325 million (with no deferrals), it makes sense for the Dodgers to have readily accepted Ohtani's offer. Not only does it make room for more cap space, but it also leaves room for the Dodgers to continue their offseason spending spree, having already committed over \$1 billion to players just in the past two months.

If the Dodgers had not agreed to a deferred contract, it is possible that the team would be subject to a luxury tax, possibly

for consecutive years. In that case, the Dodgers would be on the hook for a tax percentage increase each subsequent year. The first year would be around 20% tax, increasing to 30% the next year and 50% by the third consecutive year. Instead, the Dodgers will pay Ohtani, just one player, \$68 million a year from 2034-2043, in the span of which he won't be playing for the organization.

The contract details can be confusing. Despite only being paid a salary of \$2 million per year throughout his ten-year contract, the value of Competitive Balance Tax purposes is actually \$460 million over ten years or \$46 million per year, which is still less than a non-deferred contract of \$70 million per year contributing to the CBT. This figure uses a net-present-value calculation that converts future dollars to their present value, with his deferred money being discounted at a rate of 4.43%, the October 2023 federal mid-term rate. The Dodgers essentially put the money in an escrow account that won't be touched until his deferrals begin in 2034, and the money will, at that time, cover his payments.

Before we delve into how this deferral is being perceived, especially by state congress, let's take a look into another interesting feature of the contract. Andrew Friedman, current General Manager of the Dodgers, was put into the contract, stating that if Andrew Friedman or even Mark Walter (controlling owner of the Dodgers) left the organization, Shohei Ohtani could opt out of his contract. This clause in the contract furthers the idea that Ohtani is there to see his new Dodgers team go out and win a championship.

Unsurprisingly, the deal has caused outrage in California. As of January 9, 2024, California Controller Malia M. Cohen made the request to Congress to change the tax code to put a cap on deferred payments, a change that could allow the state to garner more owed money from Shohei Ohtani. From a logistical standpoint, if Ohtani is not living in California when he receives the deferred money, he could potentially be exempted from current California income tax and payroll tax for State Disability Insurance of 13.3% and 1.1%, respectively. With Ohtani's deal having the potential to save \$98 million in state tax, according to the California Center for Jobs and the Economy, Cohen said in a statement on January 8, "the absence of reasonable caps on deferral for the wealthiest individuals exacerbates income inequality and hinders the fair distribution of taxes. I would urge Congress to take immediate and decisive action to rectify this imbalance." However, the estimated \$98 million figure relies on certain assumptions, with the exact terms of Ohtani's contract unknown. Steve Rosenthal, senior fellow at the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, believes Cohen is fighting the wrong issue. Rosenthal states that the true source of the problem is Ohtani's ability to leave California for anywhere else, such as his hometown Japan, and effortlessly avoid California state taxes. This issue over deferrals could become an issue for the MLB, let alone Congress.

Cody Bellinger's Return



A surprise of the MLB offseason for many was free agent outfielder Cody Bellinger's 3-year, \$80 million contract to return to the Cubs, given the long-term contract many expected him to receive. Bellinger, 28 years old, had seemingly revitalized his career in 2023, batting .307 with 26 home runs, 97 RBIs, and a .881 OPS. What a great season, right? According to his Baseball Reference page, Cody Bellinger was a near MVP-caliber bat who should be able to find a long-term home. However, looking into his underlying data, alarming trends can easily explain why all 30 MLB teams are reluctant to give Bellinger a contract. During Bellinger's MVP season in 2019, he was a hard-hit machine, recording a 91.2 mph average exit velocity, a hard hit rate of 46%, and a barrel rate of 12.7%, each good enough to land him in the 86th-88th percentile range of MLB competition. These scorching profiles culminated in xWOPA, xBA, and xSLG (x, meaning expected) in the 99th-100th percentile range, respectively, outperforming his true in-game results by relatively wide margins. These numbers suggest that the 2019 Cody Bellinger was no fluke; he hit the ball hard consistently, even harboring a near 30% line drive rate and a 14.4% walk rate. Those statistics may have been confusing to a non-baseball nerd. However, I can assure whoever is reading this that in 2019, Cody Bellinger was an MVP-caliber bat through and through, lacking any substantial holes to poke through the legitimacy of his play.

Following the 2019 season, Bellinger's on-field results slowly declined to an all-time low until the 2022 season, when he was hardly even worth positive value in terms of WAR, even transitioning into a bench role with the Dodgers. Everyone was wondering whether or not Bellinger could return to being even 50% of the player we saw in 2019, so when his on-field results

started to pick up in 2023 with the Cubs, the MLB community took notice. People were ready to throw a potential \$200 million price tag on Bellinger come the 2023/2024 offseason, as his MVP play had seemingly returned.

However, I, and many MLB teams, have noticed that Bellinger's 2023 season did not nearly have the same underlying data to support the legitimacy of his success. As I previously stated, Bellinger's baseline 2023 statistics were great; however, underlying comparisons to his 2019 season raise stark concerns. His once elite hard hit rate has fallen to 31.4%, landing in the 10th percentile of MLB hitters, while his average exit velocity is down to 87.9 mph, good enough for just the 21st percentile. His barrel rate is down to 6.1%, the worst of his entire career, and in the 28th percentile of big leaguers. His walk rate is down to 7.2%, in the 36th percentile. His in-game results tremendously outperform his xWOPA, xBA, and xSLG, the opposite of his 2019 profiles, and projecting his offensive value to be more similar to 2021 Dominic Smith, someone who was paid a little over \$2.5 million, more than any piece of his former self. His line drive rate has fallen to 26.4%, and when coupled with all the underlying declines, 2023 is by far Bellinger's luckiest MLB season to date, offering reason as to why so many MLB teams are avoiding him; his success in 2023 is not repeatable. Modern analytics provide teams with the information to prevent costly mistakes based solely on surface-level performance. I believe that the MLB's use of analytics in their unwillingness to give Bellinger a contract is the best use of sports statistics in the past year.



NBA Players Snubbed from the All-Star 2024

450 players are in the NBA. 24 players are chosen as All-Stars. 10 players are selected as All-Star starters. 2 are voted as All star captains. This year, LeBron James and Giannis Antetokounmpo are the captains for the 2024 All-Star game. In the Eastern Conference, Joel Embiid, Jayson Tatum, Tyrese Haliburton, and Damian Lillard are the starters. In the Western Conference, Kevin Durant, Nikola Jokic, Luka Doncic, and Shai Gilgeous-Alexander are the starters. Who was snubbed from the All-Star 2024?

Steph Curry was snubbed as an All-Star starter in the 2024 game despite averaging 28.1 points this entire season, more than most of the starters. This year will be the first time Curry has not been an All-Star starter since 2013. Steph has proven to the fans that he is a fan of the all-star games by being the first person to win the Kobe Bryant All-Star Game MVP award in 2022 after scoring 50 points. Curry has shown tremendous popularity this year by gaining 5,151,822 All-Star votes. He was leading in votes as a guard in Western Conference, but fans' votes only account for half of the total votes. Despite Curry having 300,000 more fan votes than Shai, he did not have the votes of the select media groups and current players which account for 25% each.

In the Eastern Conference, controversy sparked when Jalen Brunson was not selected as a starter in the NBA All-Star 2024. New York fans were devastated that they would not have an NBA All-Star starter this year. The part that caused talk amongst NBA sports pages was the comparative stats between Brunson and other All-Star starters. He has been averaging 27.3 points this season, 11th in the league. He has even averaged more points this season than some of the All-Star starters and still didn't make the cut. He is an All-Star reserve, though with his teammate, Julius Randle.

De'Aaron Fox was not selected as an All-Star 2024 as a starter or reserve. Despite being an All-Star last year Fox was not chosen by the fans this year. Draymond goes on his podcast to advocate for Fox and his teammate Domantas Sabonis stating that "the Kings are currently at fifth in the West and have been in the top four most of the year," and that both Fox and Sabonis absolutely deserved spots on the Western Conference team. Fox has averaged 27.5 points this season, more than the majority of the All-Star starters. Many fans believe Sacramento was robbed of an All-Star this year.



NBA Awards Prediction



The NBA has had its main awards every year since the 1960s: Most Valuable Player (MVP), Defensive Player of The Year (DPOY), Most Improved Player (MIP), Rookie of the Year (ROTY), Sixth Man of The Year (SMOTY). I am going to list who I think deserve these awards and why.

Most Valuable Player: Luka Doncic - I have never been more certain for an award than this year with Luka Doncic. Luka is averaging career best numbers with 34.2 pts, 8.8 rebounds and 9.5 assists. This number is insane when actually unpacking it. If an NBA player had 34 points, 8 rebounds, and 9 assists, you'd say it was a spectacular game that everyone should praise. However, if Luka had this statline in a game, his averages would go down. In addition, Luka had one of the offensive performances ever this season with 73 points, tied for the 3rd highest in NBA history. Not only is Luka averaging these insane numbers, he is doing it with career-best efficiency: 49% from the field, 38% from behind the arc, and 78% from free throw. Every one of these is better than his career averages, demonstrating his continual growth as a player this season. The only drawback to one of the best seasons in NBA history is his team's record. Currently, the Dallas Mavericks are the 7th seed in the western conference, and almost every MVP in the last 20 years has been a top 3 seed in their conference, so making Luka the MVP is an anomaly. However, I do believe Luka is deserving enough to be that anomaly, and his team is likely to improve. The Mavericks have racked up quality wins throughout the season, beating teams like the Thunder, Knicks, and 76ers. If Luka continues to play at the level he is at, combined with the success of his team, he should be the clear-cut MVP.

Defensive Player of The Year: Rudy Gobert - Rudy Gobert is having an amazing defensive season once again, averaging 2 blocks and 1 steals a game. More important than statistics is

his leadership of the Timberwolves to the top of the western conference. Last year, the Timberwolves were in the play-in tournament, struggling to make the playoffs. This year, with the improvement of Anthony Edwards, they are in contention for 1st. However, most of this can be attributed to Rudy Gobert, who was injured for much of last season and is healthy this year. His defensive impact has been recognized for the last few years and this would be his fourth win, but it is well deserved.

Most Improved Player: Tyrese Maxey - Tyrese Maxey has taken a huge step up this season with the absence of James Harden. Last year, he played great, averaging 20 points, 3 rebounds, and 3 assists. This year, though, he is averaging 26 points, 4 rebounds and 6 assists. Considering that Embiid is averaging 30+ points again, having another player finding room to score 26 points each night is remarkable. No one expected Maxey to take this step up after James Harden was traded, yet he did and should be credited. The 76ers have remained in contention for the east's top seeds even with Embiid's knee injury, clearly demonstrating Maxey's ability to stand in as a number one option.

Rookie of The Year: Victor Wembanyama - As much as I love Chet Holmgren, Victor Wembanyama is the Rookie of The Year. He is playing incredibly for a team that is filled with less-than-capable basketball players, averaging 21 points, 10 rebounds, 3 assists, and 3 blocks. This unique player is a threat on and off the ball, offensively and defensively. Wembanyama might be on the worst team in the Western Conference, but it is clear that he is not the problem. In addition, recently he had a triple double with 10 blocks. It is difficult to argue that he does not deserve at least rookie of the year, and with the hype surrounding him, he should win it.

Sixth Man of the Year: Tim Hardaway Jr. - Tim Hardaway Jr is continuing to do what he does best this season—score. He is averaging 17 points per game off the bench for a team with two superstar guards in Luka Doncic and Kyrie Irving. He definitely deserves sixth man of the year especially given the competition isn't too strong with Bogdan Bogdanovic as the 2nd best option averaging only 16 points per game. Hardaway Jr. matters immensely to the Dallas Mavericks, and needs to receive the credit for his splendid scoring and shooting abilities.

New York Knicks Go Off



Around a month and a half away from the first round of the NBA playoffs, the New York Knicks stood at 32-17, good enough for third place in the Eastern Conference. Yet, just nine games prior, they stood at 23-17. Is their nine-game win streak a sign of good things to come this year?

We can't understand their impressive win streak without looking into the players who made it happen. Jalen Brunson, the Knicks' All-Star point guard, led the Knicks to a fourth-quarter comeback against the Indiana Pacers at Madison Square Garden, shooting 15-for-30, including an and-1 that put New York in front. He finished with an incredible 40 points in their 109-105 win. Their ninth win in a row did not come easy, and as Knicks guard Donte DiVincenzo admitted after the win, "It's not easy right now with Julius going down, OG going down, Mitch not being here. Everything's been thrown against us, and he's still willing us to win games."

In late December 2023, the Knicks made a long-anticipated trade, acquiring forwards OG Anunoby and Precious Achiuwa and guard Malachi Flynn in exchange for beloved guards RJ Barrett and Immanuel Quickley and a 2024 second-round pick. Despite OG and others going down, the Knicks rallied against Indiana in their most recent game. They utilized Achiuwa, Isaiah Hartenstein, and Josh Hart at the forward spots, combining for 47 rebounds.

New York's reserves have stepped up in a "next man up" mentality, catapulting the team forward in the standings, but what can we expect moving forward? It is important to realize that the last time the Knicks had a 14-2 month before this January was nearly 20 years ago in 1994... when they went to the NBA finals. Moving forward, though, New York can't expect their reserves to step up every game. The team has to get and

stay healthy. Mitchell Robinson remains out without a timeline for return, but there is hope he can be back before the season's end. Furthermore, Julius Randle is out for an extended period with a dislocated shoulder. The Knicks will need to continue to fight for a top spot heading into the playoffs. The Eastern Conference has been extremely competitive and the Knicks will need a break in terms of a first-round matchup.

In the playoffs, the Knicks would have to square off against the top teams in their conference, like the Celtics, who they are 0-4 against. Or the Bucks, who have beaten the Knicks three times, with the Knicks only scratching out one win. Overall, New York has capitalized when playing against teams below a .500 record, with an outstanding 21-1 record versus these teams. Yet, their 11-16 record vs. .500 and above teams leaves much to be desired and indicates a lack of playoff readiness. The team has succeeded in the Eastern Conference as a whole with a 22-10 record against other Eastern Conference teams. Their success so far has fallen largely on the offensive prowess of Jalen Brunson and Tom Thibodeau's defense, which has locked teams down with or without OG Anunoby on the court.

So far, the Knicks have already made a blockbuster trade in acquiring Anunoby and more. Questions still remain as the season draws on, with injuries to multiple star players making it difficult to assess where the team stands among other Eastern Conference powerhouses. Only time will tell how far this Knicks team will go, but we can all say they have a bright future ahead.

How New York Football Teams Should Approach the Offseason



After disappointing seasons from the injury-riddled New York Jets and Giants, an important 2024 off-season is fast approaching. Both teams were expected to have playoff-quality seasons. The Jets acquired future hall-of-fame quarterback Aaron Rodgers, and the Giants were coming off an impressive 9-7-1 season in 2023 where they made the playoffs. This season, however, the Giants went 6-11, and the Jets went 7-10.

Let's start with how the Jets should approach the offseason. Their failures this past season can be credited to the devastating week one injury of Aaron Rodgers, which put Zach Wilson as the starter. The Jets' defense was still at the top of the league, but unfortunately, their offense only scored around 15 points per game. There have been rumors about the Jets firing both head coach Robert Saleh and General Manager Joe Douglas. But they both should have their jobs safe for another year, just to see how they do with a complete roster. The Jets do not have many needs for the off-season. They already have a top defense with loads of talent in the skill positions on offense. Besides bulking up the offensive line and potentially adding a new wide receiver to complement Garrett Wilson, the Jets are in good shape to make a playoff run next season.

Moving on to the New York Giants, general manager Joe Schoen has his work cut out for him. After winning a playoff game and paying quarterback Daniel Jones 40 million dollars a year, expectations were at the maximum. But injuries and poor play from Jones led to a disastrous season. The biggest problem with this Giants team is that they have too many holes. The offensive line continues to struggle, even after drafting Evan Neal 7th overall in 2022 and then drafting John Michael Schmitz 57th in 2023. Regarding the offensive skill positions, there is a good chance that Saquon Barkley will leave in free

agency, and no wide receiver has had a 1,000-yard season since Odell Beckham Jr. in 2018. On the other hand, the defense has been solid for the past two seasons, but star safety Xavier McKinney must get re-signed.

Looking to the NFL draft, the Giants have options. With the 6th overall pick, they have the opportunity to make waves. If they decide to go for a quarterback, they can trade up to the first or second-overall pick and take either Caleb Williams or Drake Maye. Or they can stay where they are and draft Heisman winner Jayden Daniels out of LSU. Another route is to trade back to the middle of the first round and take a cornerback or defensive lineman. I think that their best move would be to stay where they are at 6. By doing so, they can take a star wide receiver like Marvin Harrison Jr. from Ohio State or LSU's Malik Nabers, or they can snag a star offensive tackle like Joe Alt from Notre Dame or Olumuyiwa Fashanu from Penn State. No matter what they do, it can potentially define their season and maybe even their future.

The 2024-2025 season is a make or break one for both New York teams. A playoff season can revive the franchises, but another disappointing outing can send both teams into a rebuild that will resume the misery that New York fans have endured for decades.

Top 10 NFL Quarterbacks



1. Patrick Mahomes:

Mahomes is undoubtedly the best quarterback in the NFL, and it isn't even close. He has made the AFC championship in each of his first six seasons in the NFL and has made 3 Super Bowls. He makes throws that no other quarterback can make. This season, he led the Chiefs to the Super Bowl and created a high power offense with little to no help around him. He is simply the best.

2. Josh Allen:

Many have mixed opinions about Allen, but I think he is an incredible player. Most people who disagree with this ranking would point to his turnovers. While he does throw interceptions more than he should, he is able to make up for it by scoring touchdowns through the air as well as on the ground. In playoff games, Allen does not disappoint, as he always seems to make winning plays for his team.

3. Joe Burrow:

Joe Burrow was out for the majority of this season with a torn ligament in his hand. Two years before, Burrow led the Bengals to the Super Bowl where they, unfortunately, fell short to the Rams. Yet, they beat Mahomes and the Chiefs in the AFC Championship, which is quite an accomplishment. He then led the Bengals back to the AFC championship game but fell short. There are only great things ahead for Burrow.

4. Lamar Jackson

Jackson led the Ravens to their best regular season in franchise history this year but fell short to the Chiefs in the playoffs. Jackson won the MVP in 2019 and has had impressive stats over the first 5 years of his career. Many point to his lack of arm talent as a weak point, but I have seen rapid improvements since he got drafted in 2017.

5. Jalen Hurts

Hurts and the Eagles started the season 10-1 and then ended the season 11-6 and got knocked out by the Packers in the Wild Card round. The season was a massive disappointment for the Eagles and Hurts as they were three points away from winning the Super Bowl last season, but Hurts remains a top 5 quarterback due to his success through the air and on the ground.

6. Tua Tagovailoa

Tua's arm talent is top 3 in the league, but he has poor decision making and a lack of success in the postseason. In the last game of the regular season, Tagovailoa, through a crucial interception, caused the Dolphins to lose home-field advantage, which causes him to fall just outside the top 5.

7. CJ Stroud

Stroud has had the best rookie season of any quarterback we have ever seen. He is smart with the ball and has incredible arm talent. Just last season, the Texans were the second worst team in football; Stroud led them to the Divisional Round and helped them prove themselves as one of the elite teams in the NFL.

8. Brock Purdy

Purdy is on the most talented NFL team we've seen in the last decade. Many say that Purdy is just a "game manager" because he has so much talent around, but I still think he is great. While he doesn't make many plays that will leave you speechless, he does what he needs to do and has the 49ers in the Super Bowl.

9. Dak Prescott

Prescott has some of the best stats of all quarterbacks in the NFL, including the most touchdown passes. What is holding him back is his lack of success in the Playoffs. Since being drafted in 2016, Prescott has led the Cowboys to countless 10-win seasons but never to the Conference Championship. He turns the ball over too much and needs to mature as a quarterback in order to turn his elite talent into success in the Playoffs.

10. Jared Goff

Goff and the Lions had an incredible year but unfortunately fell short to the 49ers in the Conference Championship. Goff showed his maturity and composure throughout the year as he limited his turnovers, which had been a problem for him in the past. The Lions went from being undoubtedly the worst team in football two years ago to now a touchdown away from the Super Bowl. It will not surprise me if Goff breaks the top 5 in the next few seasons.

Honorable Mention:

Matthew Stafford - Stafford had an incredible year, and he's definitely an elite quarterback. However, he is getting old, which is the only reason he doesn't crack the top 10.

Buffalo Bill's Ideal Off-Season



Fire Sean McDermott: Although Sean McDermott has been a great coach for the Bills for years now, and has led them to four straight division titles and playoff appearances, it may be time for the Bills to part ways with him. For the last four years, although the Bills had amazing regular seasons, they could not get it done in the playoffs, having been eliminated in the divisional round for the past three years. Some fans may think it is Josh Allen's fault for turning the ball over too much, but it truly isn't. Throughout Allen's career in the playoffs, he has exhibited a 26-4 touchdown to interception ratio, which is great by any standard. That stat proves that in the playoffs, he doesn't commit turnovers as often as he does in the regular season. In addition to Josh Allen playing well, the Bills defense also has been great year after year. If their roster is that good and they still cannot win, they may need to make some changes in the coaching staff. Many teams in the past have made coaching changes when bringing back the same roster, and those changes strongly benefited them the following season. Sean McDermott has been great, but it's time for him to go.

Trade Stefon Diggs: Stefon Diggs is a phenomenal NFL wide receiver. He has completed six consecutive thousand-yard seasons, two with the Vikings and the last four with Allen and the Bills. However, it may be beneficial for the Bills if they trade him. The main glaring reason has to do with his lack of production in the late season. This past year, in the final seven regular season games, Diggs did not perform. He averaged four receptions and 37 yards per game, with only one touchdown. Along with that, he did not perform against the Kansas City Chiefs in the divisional round, only logging three receptions for 21 yards, and no touchdowns. In that game, he also dropped a long pass that was crucial for the Bills to win the game. Another reason the Bills should trade Diggs is his attitude. He complained on

social media numerous times throughout the duration of the year, when the Bills were going through a mid-season slump. He complained that he wasn't getting the ball enough, something he has been vocal about in past years. Considering that he has complained about his team several times, he may be a cancer in the locker room, and may want out. Therefore, if the Bills trade him, it can benefit them, and Diggs himself.

If the Bills trade Diggs: After trading Stefon Diggs, the Bills should sign a solid young wide receiver to play his position. One receiver could be Marquise Brown. He is a very talented and speedy young receiver who has had good seasons with the Baltimore Ravens and Arizona Cardinals, and is definitely capable of being a good primary wide receiver. Due to his age, he would fit in with the timeline of the Bills franchise with Josh Allen as their Quarterback. If the Bills do not sign Marquise Brown, they can settle for another receiver that is capable of stepping up such as Curtis Samuel, Kendrick Bourne, Tyler Boyd, or Nelson Agholor. All of those players are somewhat young and have potential.

Cut Von Miller, Kaiir Elam: Von Miller and Kaiir Elam are two players on the Bills roster that didn't have very productive seasons. Kaiir Elam, one of the best college cornerbacks in his draft class, was selected in 2022 by the Bills. The Bills hoped that he would be a good addition to the already strong secondary. This season, Elam did not accomplish that. Other than his interception against the Chiefs in the divisional round of the playoffs, he has been no match against top wide receivers in the league. This was shown most clearly in the Bills' loss against the Jaguars this season, where Elam was put against Calvin Ridley, who beat him multiple times on crucial 3rd down conversions. Calvin Ridley, who averages 60 yards per game, ended up racking up over 100 yards by the end of the game. Cutting Elam would allow more players with higher potential, such as Dane Jackson, to get more playing time. Along with that, the Bills would save about four million dollars to invest in better players. The second player that the Bills should consider cutting is Von Miller. Coming from the Rams in 2022, Von Miller has been at his worst. This season, Miller had 0 sacks and barely brought any pressure to the opposing QB. After coming off an early season injury, he had lots of time to get back in shape. His poor performance has no excuse, and he still missed most games this season. When Miller was healthy, he would not play a lot of snaps. Even with his minimal help, Von Miller is still the third highest-paid player on the team, with a base salary of 17 million dollars. Cutting Miller would open up around 10 million dollars of cap space for the Bills to use. In total, the Bills could save around 14 million dollars in cap space to use for better players if they cut Elam and Miller.

Increase usage of Deonte Harty: Deonte Harty, the Bills punt and kick returner, had a mediocre season. Due to Nyheim Hines' season-ending injury, Deonte Harty had to step up and take his role. Other than a few decent returns and one clutch kickoff return touchdown against the Miami Dolphins in the Wild Card game, he has had no other use. Deonte Harty is a WR and should be played as that more often. Throughout the season we saw Glimpses of Harty's receiving skills and quick pace. He excelled the most on lateral passes and screen passes, since he was able to use his speed and blockers to quickly make his way through the holes created. Players such as Jahmyr Gibbs are quick and move like Harty does. One route those players are very good at are Jet Sweeps. As seen from Jamyr Gibbs against the 49ers, the Jet Sweep, if executed well, is deadly to opposing defenses. Increasing Deonte Hardy's overall usage, and introducing him into new formations would make the Bills dangerous offense more difficult to harness. This would also take some pressure off of the other WRs and RBs on the Bills, since this play makes the defense respect the threat of Harty's quickness much more.

Re-sign Micah Hyde, Leonard Floyd: This offseason, the Bills have a chance of losing two of their best defensive players to free agency, safety Micah Hyde and linebacker Leonard Floyd. Micah Hyde would be a big loss for the Bills, since he and Jordan Poyer have been a strong defensive backfield duo for years. Hyde dealt with an injury this season, which kept him out of multiple games. Even with this setback, Hyde had 2 interceptions and batted away a number of passes. Letting Hyde go would be a big mistake for the Bills since their next safety in line, Taylor Rapp, will not fill his shoes. The second big mistake the Bills would make would be not resigning Leonard Floyd. The Bills picked up Floyd in 2023, coming from the Rams. This season, Floyd made an especially big impact on the Buffalo defense by adding an extra line of pressure, recording 11 sacks and 21 solo tackles. Floyd brings more energy to the Bills' defense since he is fast, tall, and strong. By cutting Von Miller and Kaiir Elam, the Bills would have enough money to resign both players and give them stable contracts that could possibly be more than what they were paid last season.



NFL Regular Season Recap

This year's NFL season contained many unexpected twists. We witnessed the rise of new stars and the struggle of some others. Looking back, which players exceeded expectations and which fell short?

Breakout Players

Puca Nacua, WR, Los Angeles Rams: In an astonishing rookie season, Nacua, a fifth-round pick from BYU, racked up 6 touchdowns and nearly 1,500 receiving yards, becoming a sensation in the NFL. His performance not only led the Rams in receiving yards by a wide margin, even outpacing Cooper Kupp, but also played a pivotal role in the Rams securing 10 wins. His outstanding season earned him a spot on the NFL All-Rookie Team and recognition as a 2nd Team All-Pro, marking a remarkable start to his professional career.

Kyren Williams, RB, Los Angeles Rams: Williams emerged as a standout in the Rams' lineup, boasting 12 touchdowns—the seventh highest in the league—despite being sidelined for several weeks due to an ankle injury. At 23, he's quickly become one of the NFL's most electrifying running backs, leading the league with an impressive average of 95.3 rushing yards per game. His remarkable season was capped off with a well-deserved 2nd Team All-Pro selection.

Breece Hall, RB, New York Jets: Hall was a bright spot in an otherwise gloomy season for Jets fans. Initially under a snap count and competing with Dalvin Cook for playing time, Hall quickly ascended to the starting role. His season featured 5 touchdowns and nearly 1,000 rushing yards. Following a standout performance in Week 5 against the Broncos, Hall averaged 60 yards per game, establishing himself as a formidable force in the Jets' offensive lineup that will have QB Aaron Rodgers back to start next season.

Jordan Love, QB, Green Bay Packers: Love emerged as a star in an extraordinary season that saw the Packers come within a field goal of upsetting the San Francisco 49ers in the NFC Divisional Round. Stepping into the void left by Aaron Rodgers, the first-year starter impressed by amassing 4,500 passing yards and 32 touchdowns, the second-most in the NFL. Love also demonstrated his mobility by rushing for an additional 4 touchdowns. With Love playing like he has this season, the future is bright for the Green Bay Packers.

James Cook, RB, Buffalo Bills: In an impressive sophomore season, Cook not only earned his first Pro Bowl selection but also became a pivotal force in the Bills' offense, rushing for over 1,122 yards, the fourth-highest total in the NFL. Averaging an impressive 65 rushing yards per game, Cook's performance stands out even more within the Bills' pass-heavy offense.

Players Who Underperformed

Rhamondre Stevenson, RB, New England Patriots:

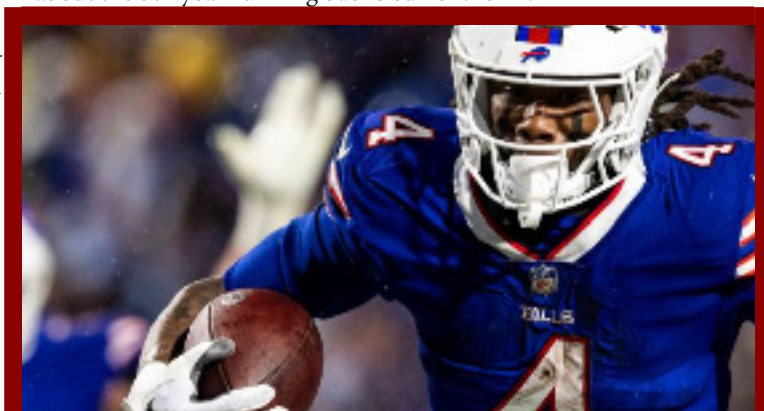
After a standout 2022 campaign with 1,000 rushing yards, the bar was set high for Stevenson's third year. However, 2023 proved challenging as he amassed only 620 rushing yards, falling short of expectations. Remarkably, quarterbacks like Jalen Hurts and Josh Allen nearly matched or surpassed him in rushing yards, with 605 and 524 yards, respectively, highlighting the dip in Stevenson's productivity.

Stefon Diggs, WR, Buffalo Bills: Following a stellar season where he nearly reached 1,500 receiving yards and scored 11 touchdowns, Diggs experienced a decline in 2023, amassing only 1,100 receiving yards and 8 touchdowns. This drop moved him from ranking 5th in receiving yards across the league to the 13th. The downturn in Diggs' performance was underscored by the Bills' continued postseason challenges, notably their defeat to the Chiefs in what was their most crucial game of the year, further spotlighting the team's and Diggs' struggles in key moments.

Austin Ekeler, RB, Los Angeles Chargers: The 2023 season proved challenging for Austin Ekeler, who concluded with just 600 yards and 5 touchdowns, a stark contrast to his nearly 1,000-yard, 13-touchdown performance the previous year. Hindered by a combination of subpar play and nagging injuries, Ekeler saw reduced playing time in favor of Joshua Kelley. With the arrival of new head coach Jim Harbaugh, questions about Ekeler's ability to rebound next year are at the forefront of Chargers' discussions.

Cooper Kupp, WR, Los Angeles Rams: The 30-year-old wide receiver encountered his most challenging season in the last five years, amassing only 700 yards and 5 touchdowns. In a competitive wide receivers' room, Kupp's ability to return to the peak of his career—particularly his 2021 season—remains uncertain. This dip in performance not only fell short of the lofty expectations based on his prior seasons but also sparked debates regarding his role within the Rams' lineup.

Miles Sanders, RB, Carolina Panthers: Sanders experienced one of the most significant declines in the NFL, plummeting from 1,300 rushing yards and 11 touchdowns to a mere 400 yards and a single touchdown despite playing in every game. His transition from the Philadelphia Eagles—a top-tier team—to the lowly Carolina Panthers undeniably contributed somewhat to his lackluster year. However, this sharp downturn also raises questions about the 5th year running back's current form.



https://www.espn.com/nfl/player/_id/4379399/james-cook

Review of the New England Patriots



The New England Patriots Dynasty, also known as the Brady-Belichick Era, dominated the National Football League from 2001-2019, earning five Super Bowl titles in that span. However, it is no secret that after Tom Brady left, the Patriots fell, going 7-9, 10-7, 8-9, and 4-13 in 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023, respectively. From 2020-2022 the Patriots still maintained decent records, making the playoffs in 2021 with the help of then rookie, Mac Jones. However, Jones, their 15th overall draft pick, did not produce to the same extent as he has in recent years, leading to the Patriots benching him in week 13 for Bailey Zappe, who, although was not a star, did manage to pick up a few wins (as in two wins out of their four). The 4-13 season was Bill Belichick's worst season as a head coach in his 29 years. So, what happened this season? How can the Patriots bounce back?

The first notable aspect of this is Mac Jones' struggles at quarterback. Jones had a stellar rookie year, but struggled immensely this year. One could try to point a finger to the lack of talent in the wide receiver core for the Patriots. However, to me, this was not the problem as the only notable loss in that position was Jakobi Meyers. Meyers put up decently good numbers, accumulating around 800 yards a season before he was signed by the Raiders. Although Meyers led the Patriots in receiving yards, the Patriots recovered for his loss through signing JuJu Smith-Schuster. However, Schuster severely underperformed this season by only gaining 260 yards. To put this into perspective, Ja'Marr Chase earned more yards in a single game in 2022. Luckily, the gold pot at the end of the rainbow was the rookie Demario Douglass who got 561 yards this season, leading the team. So, although the wide receiver core may seem like the core of this problem, I personally believe that it was ultimately Jones' struggles that caused the overall lack of

offensive production for this team.

The other key aspect was the injuries to the team early in the season. The best player on the defense, and arguably on the team, is Matthew Judon who suffered from a torn bicep. Judon had 12.5 sacks in his debut year with the Patriots back in 2021 and succeeded that number in 2022 with 15.5 sacks. Judon had 4.0 sacks through 3 games this past season, but his injury in week 4 sidelined him for the remainder of the 2023 NFL season. Judon was even ranked 33rd on the NFL Top 100 Players of 2023 list prior to the start of this past season. Losing a player like Judon to an injury was a big loss and certainly left a hole in the team.

Yet, the defensive curse did not stop there as the Patriots' first round pick (17th overall) in the 2023 NFL draft, Christian Gonzalez, suffered a torn labrum also in week 4 against the Dallas Cowboys (clearly the Cowboys did not bring the Patriots good luck). Throughout the limited time Gonzalez played, he looked amazing and showed what it meant to be a first round pick, being voted 2023 NFL Defensive Rookie of the Month. Who knows, he may have been a top runner for NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year, but now we will never know... It is no surprise that the Patriots have not had a good offense basically since Tom Brady left, but the defense was always the star of the team and the way the defense looked these first few games gave some hope to lost Patriots fans, like myself. So, imagine this, your two top defensive players get injured in the same game, same week, just shortly after each other. Crazy, right?!

Well, the Patriots season has been nothing short of crazy, with offensive troubles and injuries plaguing the team. Not to mention everything happening in the back rooms between former head coach, Bill Belichick and Patriots owner, Robert Kraft. Now, the Patriots enter the 2024 NFL Season with a 3rd overall pick in their pockets, the youngest head coach in the league, Jered Mayo, a healthy team, and a new string of hope. Who knows what the 2024 NFL Season will bring... will the Patriots be contenders, or will they still slump at the bottom of the rankings? These questions are all on the minds of Patriots fans alike and football fans in general. All we can do is trust that the Patriots will do the right thing, which frankly is a hard thing to do, all things considered. As the Patriots enter their rebuilding season, we shall see what the 2024 NFL Season brings for the New England Patriots... a fresh start perhaps, and hopefully more than 4 wins.

Tua Tagovaila and the Future of the Dolphins



On March 23, 2022, the Kansas City Chiefs traded away 6 time NFL Pro Bowl Wide Receiver Tyreek Hill to the Miami Dolphins in exchange for five draft picks. He has been the game-changer for the Dolphins, who had a relatively mediocre offense with a 9-8 record in the 2021 NFL season. During the 2022 season, Hill had a career-high of 1710 receiving yards, and Tagovailoa threw for a career-high of 3548 yards. This past season, Tua had a league-leading 4624 yards and Hill a league-leading 1799 yards and 13 touchdowns. Their offense has turned into one of the most explosive ones in the league as Tagovailoa and Hill became a top 5 QB - WR duo. However, they have consistently struggled in the playoffs, having lost in the wild card to the Bills in 2023 and the Chiefs in 2024. They have also struggled immensely against winning teams. This past season, they only beat one team with a winning record (the Dallas Cowboys) and lost every other game against teams with positive records.

Though their offense has looked unstoppable against lowly ranked defenses, their offense has collapsed against highly ranked defenses. The Dolphins' defense is around average overall, so their inability to win important games stems from their offense's struggle to keep drives alive and stay focused under pressure. Their lack of wins over other good teams has led people to consider them a "fraudulent" team without a real chance of making a deep playoff push with a potential Super Bowl run. Many believe that Tua has only been making spectacular plays, and their offense has been on fire at certain moments because of Hill. They think that if Hill wasn't on the team, no one would consider Tua an elite quarterback, and he might even be in danger of being benched or traded. Next season, the Dolphins and Tua will have to adapt to situations where Tyreek Hill is being double-covered or simply

not open. Tua often panics in these situations and throws it to Hill when he shouldn't. These poor decisions often result in interceptions and incompletions and result in an inefficient offense.

So the ultimate question is: Will Tua Tagovailoa be able to lead the Dolphins to the playoffs?

This question is tough to answer as Tagovailoa is only 25 years old, and the Dolphins have been inconsistent over the past couple years. But personally, I don't think the Dolphins will go anywhere with Tagovailoa as their quarterback. His throwing form and technique is not great, and he lacks power on deep throws. As long as teams cover Tyreek Hill, the Dolphins are seldom able to drive down the field and score points. Although their offense can put up 70 points against poor defenses, I don't think they will be able to have a shot at the superbowl. I think Tua is not the answer for them, and they should either trade Tua for another QB or draft a QB. They have the 25th pick for the first round in the 2024 NFL draft, so there is a high chance no fantastic QBs will be left in the draft. So, I think they most likely should try to trade Tagovailoa, as well as one of their offensive weapons, such as WR Jaylen Waddle and RB Devon Achane, for a slightly more consistent QB.

For example, I think Jared Godd, Trevor Lawrence, or CJ Stroud would fit nicely into Miami's aggressive offensive scheme. Each of them have better throwing technique than Tua, as they seem to be able to step into the ball, and their game IQ is levels above Tagovailoa. Each of those QBs has not had a Tyreek Hill caliber WR on their team and still had great stats on their teams. Perhaps that could even turn the Dolphins into a more conservative team that takes longer drives, can use all of its skill position players, and doesn't have to rely on massive chunk plays down the field in order to put points on the board.

Overall, the Miami Dolphins have potential to perform at a high level against great teams, though I think they must get rid of Tua Tagovailoa and get a more talented, solid, and consistent quarterback who will be able to move the Dolphins down the field without relying solely on Tyreek Hill. This way, they will be able to have longer possessions with greater chances of scoring points and lower chances of turnovers, removing pressure on their defense and greatly enhancing their chances of winning important games to make a push into the playoffs.

Rafael Nadal's Recent Successes



128 of the world's best tennis players are competing in the men's draw of this year's Australian Open. Notably absent from their ranks is two-time champion Rafael Nadal, who withdrew due to injury following his loss in the quarterfinals of the Brisbane International tournament just two weeks ago. He later shared on X that an MRI revealed a micro tear on a muscle and that he would take time to rest and recover.

His withdrawal from the tournament is just the latest in a trend of injuries that has plagued him effectively since the start of his career in 2001.

Nadal won the title most recently in 2022. While favored to defend it as the top seed last year, he lost in the second round to unseeded American Mackenzie McDonald. While McDonald should by no means be discredited from the win, the loss was just the latest disappointing loss for many fans who expected a better result from Nadal. Just a month ago, he returned to the tour for his long-awaited comeback, playing in Brisbane. He delivered straight-set victories against former US Open champion Dominic Thiem in the first round and Jason Kubler in the second before sustaining another injury in a loss against Jordan Thompson.

While recent statistics may say otherwise, Nadal is by no means a fragile player. Despite his injuries, he has won 22 of his 30 Grand Slam finals (a 73% win rate), including an unmatched 14 Roland Garros titles, and has enjoyed an impressive 973–174 overall career record. He owes much of this to his unique forehand. With a stroke that lassoes over his head, he has managed to produce an average of 3,300 RPMs off his racket—nearly triple the average for professional tour players—all without sacrificing speed or

precision on his shots.

While Nadal's vigorous playstyle has brought him tremendous success throughout his career, skeptics have long been wondering if it would lead him to retire earlier than his similar-aged peers. By the time he won his first Grand Slam, the French Open, in 2005, he had already been diagnosed with Mueller-Weiss syndrome, a rare degenerative disease that causes gradual deformation of the back of the foot. In Nadal's case, this translates to pain. Despite this, he has kept competing—and winning—for over 20 years.

Now 37, Nadal has missed a combined 16 majors—four years worth—due to injuries and illnesses. Given his win percentage, fans can only speculate how many of those he could have gone on to win. A decade ago, he might have been able to take a few weeks to rest and recover, then resume playing immediately. Today, he faces injuries with more frequency and takes longer to recover from each. They've left him sitting in the lower ranks of the world's top 1000 players today, snapping his astonishing streak of 17 years and 6 months in the top 10.

With this year's French Open—which Nadal has said will be his last—quickly approaching, a question looms ever more prominently in tennis fans' minds: will Nadal recover in time, if at all?

For the past few years, Nadal has found himself competing against players who were born after he started playing professionally. They have been pushing his stamina to its limit. And while he may not be able to play with as much aggressive physicality as he once did, his desire to play and resolve has not once wavered. He will modify his playstyle and persevere through injuries as he has since the beginning of his career. After all, it was his adaptability that let him begin playing left-handed when he was a teenager for no other reason than because he thought it would make him a better player.



