

NFL 2002: Parity reigns once again

By The Associated Press

The NFL enters the 2002 season with perfect parity.

When New England upset St. Louis in the Super Bowl, it became the third consecutive team to win the NFL title one year after finishing .500 or worse.

With the league's new alignment of eight divisions of four teams each, there's no reason to think that won't continue.

Almost every team thinks it has a shot at the playoffs, and several look as if they can continue the theme of mediocre to magnificent, as New England did last season in going from 5-11 to the title. Baltimore did it the previous year after going 8-8, and the Rams went all the

way from 4-12 to champions in the 1999 season.

Tennessee, for example, should improve by five or six games on its 7-9 record, returning to the form that produced a 26-6 record the previous two seasons and a Super Bowl trip three seasons ago. They're also talking Super Bowl in Dallas, which has been 5-11 in the past two seasons, and even fans in Houston think the expansion Texans are a playoff team.

Houston has had one major effect on the 2002 season: It forced realignment when it became the NFL's 32nd team, a franchise for the city to replace the Oilers, who defected to Tennessee after the 1996 season.

Houston's hope — and the hope of the downtrodden — stems from the salary cap, which took full effect three or four years ago and gives everyone a chance. This year, only a few truly sorry franchises (Detroit and Carolina, to name two) have no chance for at least a playoff run.

That's due to the cycle that forces teams that make a run at the top to shed veterans afterward to stay under the cap. Baltimore has only 16 players left from the team that won the Super Bowl two seasons ago, and the team the Ravens conquered, the New York Giants, have fewer than half.

The cap also leaves almost every team thin, so an injury to a key player can ruin a season. Last year, Denver was one of the AFC favorites, lost wide receiver Ed McCaffrey with a broken leg in the opener, and finished 8-8. No Denver receiver could make up the 80-plus catches McCaffrey would have made.

"I never could have played with this system," says John Elway, who retired in 1999 after leading Denver to two Super Bowl victories. "You have to get rid of useful players, you lose team chemistry. No one considers himself a member of a team anymore. People just go from city to city like mercenaries."

Under the realignment, it's advisable for a team to win its division, because of the strong possibility of missing the playoffs with a better record than a division win-



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Tennessee running back Eddie George (27) scores on a 1-yard dive against the Oakland Raiders in a preseason game. Titans guard Zach Piller (69) blocks Raiders LB Greg Biekert (54). At left is Raiders DT Chris Cooper (75).

ner. For instance, if the new AFC South had existed last season, Houston, an expansion team getting ready to play, would have won with an 0-0 record. The other three teams, Tennessee, Indianapolis and Jacksonville all were under .500.

This year, it could happen in another division.

The AFC West, for example, is relatively balanced and could be won by an 8-8 or 9-7 team. The move of coach Jon Gruden to Tampa Bay seems to have taken a lot of life out of defending champion Oakland. Denver is OK but nothing special, and San Diego and Kansas City don't seem like contenders.

In the East, on the other hand, three of the four teams are legitimate contenders: defending champion New England, which won it all under QB surprise Tom Brady; the improved New York

says, "Sure it could happen. But we'll wait to deal with it until it does."

One positive about the eight divisions is they're far more geographically correct. The few anomalies are for reasons of tradition — Dallas remains in the NFC East with archrivals Washington, Philadelphia and the New York Giants. The renamed NFC North is the old "Frostbite Division" of Chicago, Detroit, Green Bay and Minnesota.

But Indianapolis is in the AFC South because there was nowhere else to put it.

Seattle is the only team to change conferences, going from a grouping where they would be a contender (the AFC West) to the NFC West, where they are a distant third best.

Among the things to watch: ■ Barring injury, Emmitt Smith will break Walter Payton's career rushing record. Dallas' brilliant and durable running back is 540 yards away from Payton's 16,726 yards.

■ Steve Spurrier, a superstar college coach at Florida, is now in Washington, the fourth coach in Snyder's three seasons as owner. He is trying to implement the offensive system that was so successful with the Gators by using three mediocre quarterbacks, two of whom (Shane Matthews and Danny Wuerffel) played for him in college.

■ More high-profile coaches in new places.

Marty Schottenheimer, fired by Snyder in Washington, is now in San Diego, where he's already benched Doug Flutie for Drew Brees.

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2001 STANDINGS

NFC

EAST

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Philadelphia	11	5	0	.688	343	208
Washington	8	8	0	.500	256	303
N.Y. Giants	7	9	0	.438	294	321
Dallas	5	11	0	.312	246	338

SOUTH

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Tampa Bay	9	7	0	.562	324	280
New Orleans	7	9	0	.438	333	409
Atlanta	7	9	0	.438	291	377
Carolina	1	15	0	.062	253	410

NORTH

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Chicago	13	3	0	.812	338	203
Green Bay	12	4	0	.750	390	266
Minnesota	5	11	0	.312	290	390
DETROIT	2	14	0	.125	270	424

WEST

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
St. Louis	14	2	0	.875	503	273
San Fran.	12	4	0	.750	409	282
Seattle	9	7	0	.562	301	324
Arizona	7	9	0	.438	295	343

AFC

EAST

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
New England	11	5	0	.688	371	272
Miami	11	5	0	.688	344	290
N.Y. Jets	10	6	0	.625	308	295
Buffalo	3	13	0	.188	265	420

SOUTH

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Tennessee	7	9	0	.438	336	388
Indianapolis	6	10	0	.375	413	486
Jacksonville	6	10	0	.375	294	286
Houston	0	0	0	.000	0	0

NORTH

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Pittsburgh	13	3	0	.812	352	212
Baltimore	10	6	0	.625	303	265
Cleveland	7	9	0	.438	285	319
Cincinnati	6	10	0	.375	226	309

WEST

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Oakland	10	6	0	.625	399	327
Denver	8	8	0	.500	340	339
Kansas City	6	10	0	.375	320	344
San Diego	5	11	0	.312	332	321

NOTE: Standings reflect realignment for 2002

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