



The Associated Press

Atlanta quarterback Michael Vick (7) scrambles as New York Giants linebacker Dhani Jones (55) gives chase.

Parity reigns in '02

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Tony Dungy, let go by the Glazer family in Tampa Bay, is now in Indianapolis, and Gruden is in Tampa. Gruden was obtained in a trade with the Raiders when the Glazers found themselves adrift after firing Dungy and being spurned by Bill Parcells. Before Oakland allowed Gruden to go, it went after San Francisco's Steve Mariucci.

■ Four new stadiums. The Patriots celebrate their Super Bowl victory in new Gillette Stadium at the site of their old home. Detroit is playing downtown in Ford Field, about 40 miles from the Silverdome. Houston's new Reliant Stadium, with its retractable roof, the first of its kind in the NFL, is next to the Oilers' old home in the Astrodome. The Seahawks, after two seasons at the University of Washington, move into their 67,000-seat stadium where the Kingdome once stood.

■ A different kind of start. For the first time, the NFL will open on a Thursday night, when the 49ers visit the Giants on Sept. 5. The game will be preceded by a celebration in Times Square, and followed on opening weekend by tributes to the victims and survivors of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

This also seems to be a good year for rookies.

Quarterback David Carr of Houston, the first pick overall, will be an instant starter for the Texans. Tight end Jeremy Shockey of the Giants has shown huge potential and could open up what has been a staid offense.

Others to watch include safety Roy Williams of Dallas, huge offensive tackle Mike Williams of Buffalo, and running back Clinton Portis of Denver, who takes over for Terrell Davis. The Broncos' star will sit out this year in hopes of healing his knees, but his career likely is over.

Pittsburgh's latest "slash" is former

Indiana quarterback Antwaan Randle El, who will be a wide receiver, kick returner and running back.

One other youngster to watch is Michael Vick, the top overall pick in the 2001 draft, who will start for Atlanta. Vick is still a little unsure as a passer, but he'll be a headache for every opponent if conservative coach Dan Reeves allows him to use his unsurpassed speed and running ability out of the pocket.

If for some strange reason form holds, St. Louis is the favorite to win the Super Bowl with its perennial league-leading offense featuring Kurt Warner and Marshall Faulk. It's the third straight season the Rams go in as the favorite.

But they will be challenged in the NFC West by the 49ers, who have come back quickly after two down years caused by salary cap problems. The other NFC favorites are Philadelphia in the East, Tampa Bay in the South, Green Bay and Chicago in the North.

In the AFC, look to the Jets, Patriots and Dolphins in the East; Pittsburgh in the North; resurgent Tennessee and Indianapolis in the South; and Denver and Oakland in the West.

But also remember that last season, New England was 0-2 coming off a 5-11 season and lost quarterback Drew Bledsoe to injury.

In stepped Brady, the 199th overall pick in the 2000 draft, and the Patriots went 14-3 the rest of the way, beating St. Louis on Adam Vinatieri's 48-yard field goal on the final play of the Super Bowl. This came after Vinatieri kicked the tying and winning field goal over Oakland in New England's first playoff game — one the Patriots appeared to have lost until officials used instant replay to overturn a fumble recovery by the Raiders in the final two minutes.

Oh, yeah, replay is still around for another two seasons. It can make anybody a champion — just ask the Raiders, who still are complaining.

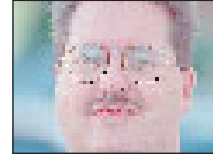
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NFC SOUTH	Tampa Bay	New Orleans	New Orleans	Tampa Bay
NFC CHAMP	St. Louis	Philadelphia	St. Louis	St. Louis
AFC NORTH	Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh
AFC EAST	Miami	Miami	Miami	N.Y. Jets
AFC WEST	Oakland	Oakland	Oakland	Oakland
AFC SOUTH	Tennessee	Indianapolis	Tennessee	Indianapolis
AFC CHAMP	Pittsburgh	Indianapolis	Oakland	Pittsburgh
NFL CHAMP	St. Louis	Philadelphia	St. Louis	St. Louis
NFL MVP	Kurt Warner	Donovan McNabb	Marshall Faulk	Marshall Faulk
TOP ROOKIE	Joey Harrington	DeShaun Foster	Jeremy Shockey	Clinton Portis
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