

Last year's form might carry over

Only three teams have won back-to-back titles since '79

BY DAVE GOLDBERG
AP FOOTBALL WRITER

Since 1999, one sure development in the NFL has been a dramatic move from bottom to top and top to bottom. Last season, the Falcons and Browns were up, the Bears and Rams down.

In 2003, the trend might end, simply because there were few teams bad enough in 2002 to make a shocking upward move. Twenty-four of the 32 were 7-9 or better and the eight that weren't don't seem equipped to win now — not even Dallas or Detroit, where new coaches Bill Parcells and Steve Mariucci are proven winners.

Since the Pittsburgh Steelers' run of four titles in six years ended with a Super Bowl victory after the 1979 season, only three teams have won back-to-back titles: San Francisco in 1988-89; Dallas in 1992-93; and Denver in 1997-98, John Elway's last two seasons.

The primary reason? Salary-cap engendered parity that ensures that only teams with weak or meddling owners have no chance — Arizona, Cincinnati, and, more recently, Dallas and Washington.

In the past five years, nine different teams have made the Super Bowl. The Rams were the only repeaters, winning the title after the '99 season and losing in 2001 to New England. Despite a 7-9 season last year, they're one of the favorites again with two-time MVP Kurt Warner recovered from his injuries.

"I don't see any reason why we won't get right back to where we belong," coach Mike Martz says. "Kurt's healthy and I think we've readjusted the offensive line to make sure he stays that way."

Still, a lot depends on the injury gods and the bounces in a league that every year approaches the sort of parity late commissioner Pete Rozelle



Brad Johnson of Tampa Bay, left, and Rich Gannon of Oakland, will try to lead their teams back to the Super Bowl.

always dreamed of. Last season, a quarter of the 256 regular-season games were decided by three points or fewer, and there were a record 25 overtime games.

Even the teams that have little chance to win are worth watching.

Dallas, 5-11 the last three seasons, is back in the spotlight.

First the Cowboys hired the 62-year-old Parcells after owner Jerry Jones finally conceded his way wasn't working. Then they divested themselves of Emmitt Smith, who broke the NFL's career rushing record last season — he landed in Arizona and will return to Texas Stadium wearing red on Oct. 5, perhaps in a game featuring two winless teams.

Don't look for much from Dallas this season; Parcells hasn't made the playoffs in his first season with a new team. But he won two Super Bowls with the Giants, went to a Super Bowl with the Patriots and an AFC title game with the Jets.

"I'm not under any illusion about this team at all," Parcells said after a month of training camp. "We have a very difficult schedule, the hardest in the league. We've got some hard decisions to make ..."

Mariucci, fired by San Francisco despite four playoff appearances in six seasons there, takes over a Detroit team that was 5-27 in two years under Marty Mornhinweg.

The other new coaches are

Marvin Lewis (for Dick LeBeau) in Cincinnati; Jack Del Rio (for Tom Coughlin) in Jacksonville; and Dennis Erickson in San Francisco. Only Erickson, who had a 31-33 record with Seattle from 1995-98 has a real chance to win now after he took over Mariucci's playoff team.

This also marks the final season for Art Modell after 42 years as owner of the Cleveland Browns/Baltimore Ravens. Modell, who bought the Browns in 1961 and moved them to Baltimore after the 1995 season, will turn the team over to Steve Bisciotti, who will become the majority owner.

Lewis, one of the league's top defensive coordinators for the past half-decade, is in an interesting spot.

After intense offseason pressure for more minorities in coaching positions, he becomes the third current black coach — there never have been more than three at one time.

He also has more control than any Bengals coach other than Paul Brown or Forrest Gregg. He will build around a core of young players that includes quarterback Carson Palmer, the Heisman Trophy winner and first overall pick in the draft, although Jon Kitna will start the season.

For the contenders, a lot depends on the breaks of the game — literally.

Atlanta, 9-6-1 last year, suffered a major setback early when third-year quarterback Michael Vick broke his leg in



The Associated Press

an exhibition game. Vick, who was expected to carry the Falcons with his mobility and arm, will miss at least the first four regular-season games.

The injury is similar to the one last year to Philadelphia's Donovan McNabb. McNabb missed six weeks and returned for the playoffs, but his lack of mobility contributed to a home loss to Tampa Bay in the NFC title game.

"There's really nothing that anybody can do," said Vick, whose presence was responsible for selling out the Georgia Dome, previously one of the league's least-frequented arenas. "The only thing I can do is wait and let it heal on its own and hopefully things will work out for the best."

The Eagles are the only team with a new stadium. They move into Lincoln Financial Field, across the street from the Vet, unanimously conceded as the NFL's worst for more than a decade.

Green Bay is opening a totally redone in Lambeau Field, but it's still Lambeau (for now) and still at the same spot. And Chicago, which played last season in downstate Champaign, will open the renovated Soldier Field on Monday night, Sept. 29 — against the Packers.

As for new players, the biggest offseason flurry was Washington's raid on the New York Jets.

The Redskins, who have spent freely with little to show for it since Daniel Snyder bought the

team in 1999, signed wide receiver Laveranues Coles, guard Randy Thomas, return man Chad Morton and kicker John Hall from New York. The Jets could have retained Morton and Coles, their leading receiver last year, but didn't match the offers.

Other free agents of note to move were defensive end Hugh Douglas from Philadelphia to Jacksonville; quarterback Jake Plummer from Arizona to Denver; wide receivers David Boston and Frank Sanders to the Chargers and Ravens, respectively, and veteran return man Brian Mitchell from the Eagles to the Giants.

The Packers are one of those teams that prove the importance of scheduling in the second season of the new format of eight four-team divisions. They were an overinflated 12-4 in an NFC North where the other three teams, Detroit, Chicago and Minnesota, combined to win just 13 of their 48 games.

Conversely, a strong division can be trouble for anyone who wants a wild-card berth — there are just two in each conference.

Last year, for example, all four AFC East teams were .500 or better and so was the entire AFC West.

In the West, Oakland finished 11-5 and made it all the way to the Super Bowl, where it lost 48-21 to the Bucs. Denver was 9-7 and Kansas City and San Diego were 8-8 and none made the postseason.