

Cleveland to Be This Year's AFC Super Bowl Sacrifice

BY ADAM DAVIS
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It's sort of like racing to the edge of a cliff or trying to be the next guy to fight Mike Tyson, but 15 AFC teams will spend the next five months hoping to earn their way into Super Bowl XXX.

Every year, some group of suckers makes the mistake of winning the AFC Championship Game. And every year they get squished like bugs in the Super Bowl.

The last time the AFC won the Super Bowl, Men at Work was a popular band and Michael Jackson's Thriller video dominated MTV. That was in January of 1984, when the Raiders, who had just moved to Los Angeles, beat Washington 38-9.

Since that day, the NFC has won 11 straight Super Bowls, by a combined score of 429-185.

This year, there are a gaggle of teams with a chance to make the big game, and barring an upset in the NFC Playoffs, none that could actually win it.

AFC WEST: Many expect the Kansas City Chiefs to take a nosedive now that Joe Montana is gone. But such naysayers are overlooking an important point: Steve Bono is better.

Bono can't touch the Montana of old, of course, but Montana's arm was too weak to stretch defenses in his final years.

Neil Smith and a revitalized Derrick Thomas will make K.C.'s pass rush hell on offenses. The only question is whether the secondary, comprised mostly of last year's New York Jets, can guard anyone.

Last year's NFC Super Bowl fodder, San Diego, will have a hard time repeating in its own division. The Lightning Bolts lost safeties Darren Carrington and Stanley Richards to other teams and cornerback Darrien Gordon to injury, leaving gaping holes in the secondary.

But as long as Junior is still making opposing running backs Seau, the Chargers will be good.

John Elway has been reunited with coach Mike Shanahan, and Mike Pritchard is back at wide receiver for the Denver Broncos. Elway should have a big year, and the defense may improve from awful to just crummy.

Projected 1995 AFC Final Records

| East | Central | West |
|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Miami 11-5 | Cleveland 13-3 | Kansas City 11-5 |
| Indianapolis 10-6 | Pittsburgh 9-7 | San Diego 10-6 |
| New England 8-8 | Cincinnati 5-11 | Denver 9-7 |
| Buffalo 8-8 | Jacksonville 5-11 | Oakland 8-8 |
| N.Y. Jets 4-12 | Houston 2-14 | Seattle 5-11 |

The problem is the running game, which could more aptly be termed the walking game, or perhaps the falling game.

The Raiders are in Oakland now, if anybody cares. They, like the Broncos, will be an average team. But they will draw a lot more 15-yard penalties.

Then there's the Seattle Seahawks. Their best receiver, Brian Blades, has been charged in the shooting death of his cousin.

Their coach, Dennis Erickson, chipped in with a DUI. And their best player, Chris Warren, was in a major auto accident a few months back. At least the Mariners are still in the wild-card hunt.

AFC CENTRAL: Cleveland Browns and Super Bowl is kind of an oxymoron. They've been close many times, they've been not close many times, and they've never made it.

But magical things are already happening in northern Ohio (see Indians), and the Browns have the tools to become this year's Super Bowl sacrificial lamb.

Cleveland has added Tim Goad and Reginald Jones to an already vicious defense, which should have the dog biscuits flying at the Mistake by the Lake.

With Andre Rison giving Vinny Testaverde a superstar target and Lorenzo White aiding Leroy Hoard on the ground, the offense will be the average unit it needs to be.

In January, the Pittsburgh Steelers needed just three yards to reach the Super

Bowl. That they didn't get it shows where their problem lies. Cornerback Rod Woodson may lead the team in scoring, unless Bam Morris has a big year.

The last three teams in this division may not beat anyone except each other. The Cincinnati Bengals get third by default because of their excellent receivers. But one Queen City resident captured the essence of the team when he suggested that a proposed new stadium be dubbed Possum Stadium, because the Bengals play dead at home and get killed on the road.

One thing is certain about the Jacksonville Jaguars—their colors are ugly. Some have questioned Coach Tom Coughlin's dictatorial style, but he's just practicing his yelling for when the games start.

It takes an amazing lack of talent to be picked behind an expansion team, but the Houston Oilers qualify. At least they have a balanced offense — they can't run or pass.

It's appropriate that this team may move to Nashville, because you could write a lot of depressing songs about it.

AFC EAST: Any team except the Jets could win this division, but if talent is the deciding factor, the Miami Dolphins will dominate.

Everyone knows what Dan Marino can do, and this year running backs Terry Kirby and Keith Byars are back from injuries. Irving Fryar and Gary Clark give Marino fast targets, and tight end Eric Green gives

him a really big one.

As usual, the one thing that will keep Miami out of the Super Bowl is its defense. Louis Oliver is back after the Bengals released him, but the secondary is still suspect. And the run defense wishes it could upgrade to suspect.

But the additions of Trace Armstrong and Steve Emtman should help some.

If Miami doesn't win, it will be dethroned by the Indianapolis Colts. No, that is not a misprint. The Colts have always had a decent defense, but they were being outscored by the Colorado Rockies.

This year, they've got a legitimate quarterback, Craig Erickson, who'll be handing to a better-than-legitimate running back, Marshall Faulk. Plus, Willie "Flipper" Anderson (who really should play for the Dolphins) will compliment underrated Floyd Turner at wide receiver.

A popular pick in the East this year is the New England Patriots, who won their last seven regular season games in '94.

The Pats do have a likely future Hall of Famer in quarterback Drew Bledsoe and a terror at tight end, Ben Coates. But other than Coates, big No. 11 has few places to toss the pigskin.

Michael Timpson, Leroy Thompson and Kevin Turner are all gone. As good as Bledsoe is, he can't throw to himself.

The Buffalo Bills finally got smart last year. They went 7-9, ensuring that they wouldn't get pounded in the Super Bowl.

The Bills made a few offseason changes, but the staples — Jim Kelly, Thurman Thomas, Andre Reed — are still there. Buffalo changes its nucleus about as often

as Gene Stallings smiles.

Fans of the New York Jets may want to change the cheer J-E-T-S, Jets, Jets, Jets to L-O-S-E, lose, lose, lose.

Boomer Esiason is an above-average quarterback, but like most QBs, he doesn't throw very well from his back.

The defense might have enough talent to prevent a turtle from crossing the field. But maybe not.

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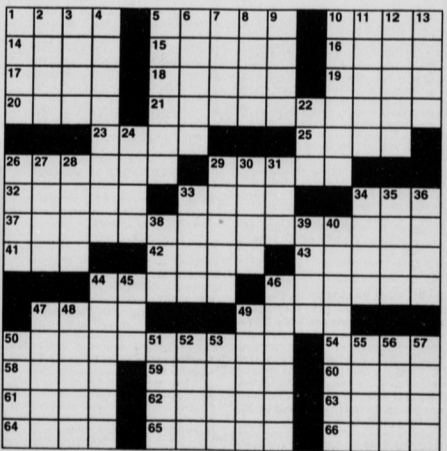
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- ACROSS
- Reasonable
 - Ford flop
 - The Charles' dog
 - Greenspan or Thicke
 - French income
 - Kind of gun
 - Faxed, perhaps
 - Ham it up
 - Voice votes
 - Scorch
 - Start of quote from "Julius Caesar"
 - Devours
 - TV sitcom, once
 - Rules of conduct
 - Farm buildings
 - Noted violin maker
 - Aria
 - Johnny —
 - More of quote
 - Safe haven
 - Pianist Peter
 - Polish money
 - Artist Grandma
 - Declaims
 - Brogan, e.g.
 - Con game
 - With final "s," end of quote
 - Outdo
 - Hearby's partner
- DOWN
- Fresh talk
 - Away from the wind
 - Zola work
 - Plea
 - Builds
 - Display models
 - job (flattery)
 - James or Kett
 - Lecher's expression
 - Vast chasms
 - Soft leather
 - Retinue
 - Vaulted church recess
 - Quayle or Rather
 - Landed
 - "I Remember —"
 - Gen. Bradley
 - and file
 - Dutch colonists in Africa
 - As well
 - A Reiner
 - Capt. Hook's mate
 - Cheer
 - Art deco artist
 - Tunisian rulers
 - Chosen ones
 - Pound, the poet
 - Lighted torch
 - Half
 - Finished, to poets
 - Earthy pigments
 - Classic Western
 - Spiral
 - throat
 - So
 - Fathers
 - Basso Pinza
 - Distinctive quality
 - Holiday periods
 - Withered
 - Walked on



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