

OFFENSIVE LINE CAPSULES

"Once again, the offensive line could be Houston's Achilles heel."

OFFENSIVE LINE GRADES

1. San Diego Chargers A
2. New Orleans Saints A
3. New York Jets A-
4. Minnesota Vikings A-
5. Cleveland Browns B+
6. Dallas Cowboys B+
7. Indianapolis Colts B
8. New England Patriots B
9. Seattle Seahawks B-
10. New York Giants B-
11. Baltimore Ravens B-
12. Cincinnati Bengals B-
13. Philadelphia Eagles B-
14. Jacksonville Jaguars C+
15. Green Bay Packers C+
16. Pittsburgh Steelers C+
17. Washington Redskins C+
18. Denver Broncos C
19. Tampa Bay Buccaneers C
20. Tennessee Titans C
21. Carolina Panthers C-
22. Arizona Cardinals C-
23. Houston Texans C-
24. St. Louis Rams C-
25. Chicago Bears C-
26. Buffalo Bills C-
27. San Francisco 49ers C-
28. Miami Dolphins C-
29. Atlanta Falcons C-
30. Oakland Raiders D+
31. Detroit Lions D+
32. Kansas City Chiefs D

1. San Diego Chargers

The best trio of offensive linemen in football resides here with behemoth LG Marcus McNeil, lithe yet mighty LG Kris Dielman and steady C Nick Hardwick, who is working his way back from foot surgery performed in March. Right now, Dielman is the shiniest gem. He is only a hair behind King Faneca in OG royalty. ... RG Mike Goff is getting older but remains a hugely critical part of the run-blocking efforts. L.J. Shelton will improve the RT position. Count backup TE Brandon Manumaleuna as their sixth O-lineman.

2. New Orleans Saints

The Saints gave up a league best 16 sacks last season. LT Jammal Brown is their big name Pro Bowler, but RG Jahri Evans is their best lineman. It is rare to find a player with Evans's combination of raw talent and developed technique. He is on the highest tier at his position. ... Losing C Jeff Faine hurts the run blocking a tad, but Jonathan Goodwin will fill in fine. Jon Stinchcomb is limited but effective, and Jamar Nesbit is overwhelmingly powerful in the run game.

3. New York Jets

The Jets have a front five good enough to spark a prolific out-break on offense (if they had better skill players, that is). LG Alan Faneca remains the class at his position. He'll help the development of rising LT D'Brickashaw Ferguson. ... Third-year stud Nick Mangold could establish himself as the preeminent center in football by the end of this year. RG Brandon Moore is adequate and RT Damien Woody, while potentially outstanding, has a lot to prove.

4. Minnesota Vikings

There's a new top LT in pro football and his name is Joe Thomas. Helping matters is the fact that athletic guard Eric Steinbach is next to him. Talk about a great duo. ... Hank Fraley slops around, but he's a pro's pro. New RG Rex Hadnot is good enough to beat out Seth McKinney, but if Ryan Tucker moves inside, it could be a different story. Tucker is expected to return from hip surgery in time for the regular-season opener. Kevin Shaffer isn't thrilled about playing RT, but that's where he best fits.

5. Cleveland Browns

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6. Dallas Cowboys

The Cowboys' prolific offense sent three linemen to the Pro Bowl last year: LT Flozell Adams, C Andre Gurode and RG Leonard Davis. All three were deserving of their Hawaiian trips, though RT Marc Colombo may have actually been the team's best blocker in 2007. ... All five starters are back this season. If everyone stays healthy, it will mark the third straight year that Dallas has started the same O-line unit for 16 games.

By Andy Benoit, www.NFLTouchdown.com

7. Indianapolis Colts

Peyton Manning's command of the offense makes this a good front five by default. Even without Manning, the Colts would be effective. Jeff Saturday is undersized but acerbically smart. They chose to re-sign LG Ryan Lilja and replace RG Jake Scott with either Dylan Gandy or UT Charlie Johnson. Good prioritizing. ... LT Tony Ugoh held up as a rookie (when healthy); he has all the potential in the world. RT Ryan Diem is an elite blocker with a huge frame.

8. New England Patriots

The Giants exposed the lack of ideal strength in the interior of this lauded Patriots line, but don't think the proper schematic corrections haven't been made. LG Logan Mankins possesses Pro Bowl skills and C Dan Koppen is consistent and smart. RG Stephen Neal is very sound in the run game. Tom Brady makes solid B LT Matt Light look like an A.

9. Seattle Seahawks

They're still not over losing Steve Hutchinson, though the hope is that new veteran LG Mike Wahle can help. Wahle's best days are behind him, but playing next to future Hall of Famer Walter Jones may revive his career. ... RT Sean Locklear would be excellent if he played with more passion. G Rob Sims will move to the right side where he can hopefully improve against blitzes and stunts. C Chris Spencer is their best interior blocker.

10. New York Giants

Everyone was concerned about Dave Diehl handling the vital LT duties at the beginning of last year. The versatile Diehl, as it turned out, proved to be just fine. So did veteran Rich Seubert, who had missed most of the '03, '04 and '05 seasons with injury. Both men are at full force in '08. ... RG Chris Snee is underrated — he gets great movement in the run game. RT Kareem McKenzie is mistake prone, but suitable. Shaun O'Hara is a key piece in the middle.

11. Baltimore Ravens

If Jonathan Ogden retires then look for the green but gifted Jared Gaither to step in instead of Adam Terry. RT Marshal Yanda is more well-trained than talented, which is fine. He can do what is asked of him. ... C Chris Chester is mobile but unproven over a 16-game schedule. LG Jason Brown is a terrific piece in a puzzle. Second-year RG Ben Grubbs is the silver dollar. Grubbs has preternatural agility and power and may already be at a Pro Bowl level.

12. Cincinnati Bengals

Levi Jones has long been underappreciated. When he's healthy, he's tremendous in both the run and pass. Same goes for the other book end; ask any left defensive end in football whom they least enjoy battling, and they'll tell you Willie Anderson. ... Andrew Whitworth can play tackle, but he's much better at guard. RG Bobbie Williams doesn't finish blocks with authority, but he's reliable as part of a unit. The Bengals gave up an AFC best 17 sacks in '07.

13. Philadelphia Eagles

Both tackles (Tra Thomas and Jon Runyan) are aging, but neither seems to be slowing down. Philly needs them for at least one more year because Winston Justice is nowhere near ready to contribute. ... Shawn Andrews may be the most voracious guard in football. He can move the line of scrimmage, and he's a rock in pass protection. C Jamaal Jackson is heavy legged but certainly serviceable. LG Todd Herremans survives with good players around him.

14. Jacksonville Jaguars

All five starters are like Baby Ruth Bars: good enough but far from great. LT Khalif Barnes offers athleticism over maturity. Tony Pashos is a quintessential RT. ... Guards Vince Manuwai and Maurice Williams (a converted OT) are not elite, but they help pave the way for two terrific runners. C Brad Meester is an intelligent leader who does a good job with the line calls. The versatile Dennis Norman is the only viable backup.

15. Green Bay Packers

Veteran tackles Chad Clifton and Mark Tauscher epitomize dependability, particularly in big games. The key for Green Bay's line is the guard position. The coaching staff was pleased with the group's pass protection in '07 but dissatisfied with the run blocking. Mobile LG Daryn Colledge is good in a zone scheme — he just needs to show it more consistently. If he doesn't, Junius Coston will take his job. Jason Spitz is decent at RG. Unheralded veteran Scott Wells is a top 10 center.

16. Pittsburgh Steelers

This line isn't bad, but it surrenders too much pressure on the quarterback. It was arrogant of Pittsburgh to think that they'll be able to simply replace Faneca. The other four starters will have to step up. New C Justin Hartwig is serviceable when healthy; RG Kendall Simmons is a cut or two above that. LT Marvel Smith has been effective for many years and RT Willie Colon is dripping with raw ability.

17. Washington Redskins

Chris Samuels plays the left side, but he's actually a better run blocker than pass protector. RT Jon Jansen has officially earned the "injury prone" label after missing his second full season in two years. Second-year OT Stephen Hoyer is raw but likely capable of taking over on the right side. ... RG Randy Thomas is great in the run game (when healthy) and LG Pete Kendall was a huge addition for them last year. C Casey Rabach does his job.

18. Denver Broncos

A lot rides on first-round rookie LT Ryan Clady. He played in a zone blocking scheme at Boise State, so he should be ready to go. Tom Nalen is getting old, but if healthy (which hasn't been recently) he's still a force. Replacing him with a fast-falling Casey Wiegmann would be unwise. ... Montrae Holland is much bigger than a typical Bronco guard, but he's been very sound since joining the team. RT Erik Pears is excellent in his role.

19. Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Offensive coordinator Bill Muir doubles as the O-line coach. That makes him arguably the most important man in Tampa Bay. Muir has two very powerful guards in Aaron Sears and Davin Joseph, but both have a lot to learn about technique and using their lower body. ... C Jeff Faine is overpaid, but he stabilizes a historically flaky position for the Bucs. RT Jeremy Trueblood is a fringe starter and LT Luke Petitgout, while much better than Donald Penn, is injury prone.

20. Tennessee Titans

This group overachieved last season, and you can expect a drop-off in 2008. The Titans are lying when they say that RG Jake Scott more than makes up for the loss of LG Jacob Bell. Not even close. ... C Kevin Mawae is nearing his end but his presence remains valuable. LT Michael Roos is still progressing and is on the cusp of greatness. He rarely gets beat in pass pro. Losing veteran Benji Olson to retirement hurts.

21. Carolina Panthers

Carolina's line has desperately lacked continuity in recent years. Yet another personnel shake-up probably doesn't help. Jordan Gross moves to LT, where he has played before. Former LT Travelle Wharton is now the LG, where his responsibilities are more achievable. Keydrick Vincent is the RG — he's a classic average starter. First-round rookie Jeff Otah takes over at RT (stay tuned) and last year's second-rounder Ryan Kalil, as planned, has been handed the C job after struggling mightily at G.

22. Arizona Cardinals

Levi Brown has All-World potential, though he may remain somewhat inconsistent until 2009. He is the only Cardinal lineman who doesn't lack ideal power. ... LT Mike Gandy needs solid guys around him. One of those guys is LG Reggie Wells. Both players have commendable mobility (Arizona loves to pull Wells). RG Deuce Lutui is satisfactory, while C Al Johnson can't sustain blocks.

23. Houston Texans

Once again, the offensive line could be Houston's Achilles heel. LT Ephraim Salaam no longer has the lower body strength to hold up on an island. He has a solid guard next to him in Chester Pitts, but not solid enough to compensate.

At least Eric Winston is developing into a good starter. And on another positive note, this is a well-coached unit that sees its deficiencies masked by a shrewd zone scheme.

24. St. Louis Rams

It can't possibly be worse than last year. ... Let's hope. LT Orlando Pace is one major injury away from writing off his career. His presence moves the athletic but inconsistent Alex Barron back to RT. Barron must play with more fire. ... LG Jacob Bell will prove to be an invaluable FA signing. Brett Romberg and Richie Incognito have both battled injury and position changes throughout their careers.

25. Chicago Bears

If first-round rookie Chris Williams doesn't immediately flourish, this front five will self-destruct. No pressure. John Tait is currently the LT, where, few realize, he's actually at his best. Still, he'll move back to RT when Williams is ready. ... C Olin Kreutz remains All-Pro caliber, but he is flanked by arguably the worst starting guard tandem in football. The Bears will struggle getting consistent movement in the ground game.

26. Buffalo Bills

LT Jason Peters is coming off his first Pro Bowl. The converted TE flashes freakish open field blocking skills. LG Derrick Dockery is effective on the move, but he is bogged down by the incompetence of C Marvin Fowler and RG Brad Butler. Starting them is a death wish to your rushing attack. RT Langston Walker is a little overpaid, but he does his job.

27. San Francisco 49ers

San Fran's O-line is borderline average as long as nobody gets hurt. One injury could crash the house of cards. Joe Staley moves to his more natural LT position where he'll look to build on his strong rookie season. LG Adam Snyder is a monstrous downgrade from Larry Allen. RG David Baas is as far from proven as a veteran starter can get. C Eric Heitmann is sloppy, yet he survives.

28. Miami Dolphins

Every position save for C (Samson Satele) has a new face. The most notable is obviously Jake Long. It will be interesting to see if a supposed lack of quickness hinders him at LT. Last year's LT, Vernon Carey, has the same stigma, which is why he's back on the right side. Carey isn't bad. LG Justin Smiley was swiped early in free agency. Fourth-round rookie Shawn Murphy is being trusted at RG, thanks mainly to attrition.

29. Atlanta Falcons

"Work in progress" is a polite description for this line. LT Sam Baker was drafted too high (first round) but Atlanta could not afford to rely on Quinn Ojinnaka or Renardo Foster to protect Matt Ryan's blindside. Both players are backups, though Foster could push mediocre RT Todd Weiner. ... C Todd McClure is only adequate. Second-year LG Justin Blalock has some tools, but he also has a lot to build. RG Kynan Forney wouldn't start for most teams.

30. Oakland Raiders

Robert Gallery was a bust at OT, but he has blossomed in his new home at LG. He's their best lineman. Of course, that's not hard to do when Kwame Harris, Cornell Green, Cooper Carlisle and John Wade round out the starting unit. None of these players could start for most teams. Carlisle sorely lacks power, but he's at least adept in Tom Cable's zone scheme. Jake Grove and Paul McQuistan could both sneak back into the first string at some point.

31. Detroit Lions

Gone is Mike Martz and his lopsided emphasis on the aerial game. In his place is Jim Colletto and a newfound focus on simplicity and power. This will help a front line that surrendered 54 sacks in 2007 (30th in the NFL). But a schematic change won't be enough. Detroit is dangerously weak with Jeff Backus and Scott Young on the edges, and veteran G Edwin Mulitalo is only effective plowing north and south. C Dominic Raiola is a gritty leader.

32. Kansas City Chiefs

The rotting Kansas City offensive line is poised to stink for at least another year. Despite having three-time Pro Bowl LG Brian Waters (who is coming off his worst season), the Chiefs surrendered a league-worst 55 sacks in '07. ... After Waters, the only guy who clearly deserves a starting job is LT Damion McIntosh. And even he should be a RT, no less. They have high hopes for rookie RG Branden Albert, but he has to prove himself first. **PF**

Andy Benoit is the author of the NFL preview book series NFL Touchdown. His work has received praise from John Madden, Chris Berman, Rick Reilly, Steve Sabol and Tony Kornheiser, among others. To view all of Benoit's content or to contact him, visit www.NFLTouchdown.com.