



Eight Teams That Will Surprise Fans in 2025 — for better and for worse

Overperformers

Seattle Seahawks



Seattle enters 2025 with plenty of skepticism after its offensive line ranked 30th [per](#) Pro Football Focus (PFF). Why? The offensive line [allowed](#) an NFL-high 232 pressures and 165 hurries. That overshadowed a roster with legitimate playoff potential, especially when facing divisional opponents Los Angeles Rams and San Francisco 49ers.

In that case, why do I think the Seahawks will finish higher than the 49ers and make it to the playoffs? The Seahawks addressed the offensive line with proven additions. New offensive coordinator Klint Kubiak has a [history](#) of using extra tight ends and fullbacks for additional blocking support. The signing of lineman Josh Jones provides not only flexibility at any position on the line, but [recorded](#) zero sacks or pressures in pass protection over 46 snaps. Finally, Seattle drafted a player I admire in North Dakota State guard/tackle Grey Zabel. According to NFL Draft Buzz, the [Senior Bowl](#) Overall Practice Player of the Week [had](#) a 100 per cent rating in pass block and a 97 per cent in run block.



Leonard Williams #99 via Jane Gershovich/Getty Images

Beyond the line, head coach Mike Macdonald has offensive firepower at his disposal. Quarterback Sam Darnold is fresh off winning the NFL's Most Improved Player [award](#). Kenneth Walker III and Zach Charbonnet form a balanced backfield, and the receiving corps features Jaxon Smith-Njigba, Cooper Kupp and rookie tight end Elijah Arroyo.

Defensively, Leonard Williams earned the [best PFF](#) grade of his career in 2024, ranking fourth among interior defenders. He's paired with Pro Bowl defensive back Devon Witherspoon, Pro Bowl safety Julian Love and promising rookie Nick Emmanwori.

Despite the favourable schedule, San Francisco continues to battle injuries. Which is why I believe Seattle has a real chance to outpace its NFC West rival.

Atlanta Falcons

Personally, Atlanta has the potential to be the biggest wild card in the league.

The Falcons still boast one of the league's [strongest](#) offensive lines. Anchored by Pro Bowl guard Chris



Lindstrom, the league's [highest](#)-graded guard in 2024, and veteran left tackle Jake Matthews, who was top [seven](#) in pass blocking for all tackles. Left guard Matthew Bergeron showed notable improvement in his second season, with PFF highlighting his [potential](#) to break into the top 10 at his position.



Bijan Robinson #7 via Brett Davis/USA TODAY Sports

The backfield contains an excellent combination of quarterback Michael Penix Jr. and running back Bijan Robinson. Both are dual-threat players in their own right. Penix Jr. showed from his time in [Washington](#) he can run and throw the ball. Robinson [showed](#) he can beat defenders in both the run and passing game. During the three-game stretch of Penix Jr.'s starts last year, wide receiver Drake London [ranked](#) third in expected points added per target and averaged over 117 receiving yards per game.

If Penix Jr. can establish chemistry with tight end Kyle Pitts and show the world why Pitts was the [fourth](#) overall pick in the 2021 draft, I think ten wins is feasible.

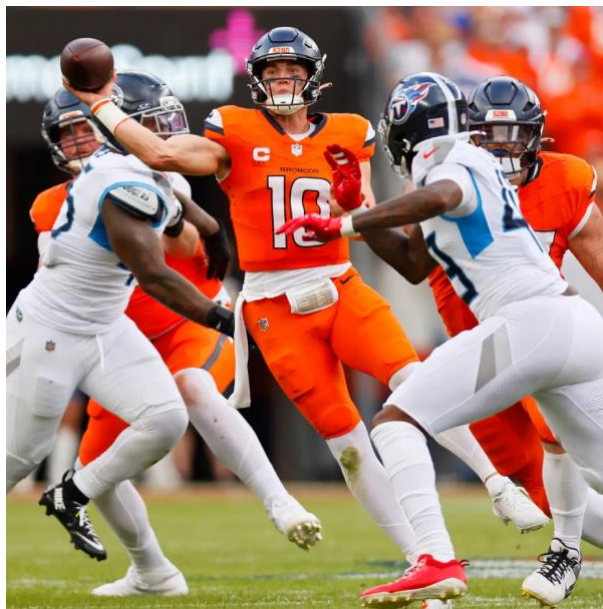
Denver Broncos



If there's a dark horse in 2025, it may be Denver.

All five starting offensive linemen return after playing 800-plus snaps last season, a group that produced a league-[best](#) 90.8 pass-blocking efficiency rating. Right guard Quinn Meinerz ranked third among NFL guards and was the [only](#) guard to earn 80-plus grades as both a run blocker and pass protector.

Quarterback Bo Nix came alive in the second half of 2024, becoming the first rookie in league history with multiple 300-yard, four-touchdown games and a passer rating above 140. His connection with wide receiver Courtland Sutton, who finished top-20 in receptions, touchdowns and yards, was key. With wide receiver Marvin Mims emerging and the addition of tight end Evan Engram, Sean Payton has plenty of offensive weapons.



[Bo Nix #10](#) via [Justin Edmonds/Getty Images](#)

Defensively, the Broncos generated pressure on a league-leading 40.7 per cent of plays without blitzing. Linebackers Jonathon Cooper and Nik

Bonitto combined for 20 sacks, and rookie corner Jahdae Barron joins reigning Defensive Player of the Year Pat Surtain II in the secondary. This is a defence built to win big games.

Buffalo Bills



Maybe it's the local bias. Perhaps it's the latest season of *Hard Knocks*. But I think this is the year where dominoes are lined up to where certain things can happen that would open the window wide open for the Bills to compete at Super Bowl 60.

Let's get the obvious out of the way: quarterback Josh Allen is fresh off [winning](#) an MVP. This year's weapons include tight ends Dalton Kincaid and Dawson Knox, and wide receivers Khalil Shakir, Keon Coleman and now Canadian Joshua Palmer (side note: Pro Bowl running back James Cook was sixteenth in rushing yards and first in touchdowns despite being only nineteenth in attempts, per [ESPN](#).)

Per [Statmuse](#), Allen was eleventh in passing yards, fifth among quarterbacks in rushing yards and had the second-least amount of sacks. Speaking of the offensive line, Buffalo's offensive line allowed just six sacks on 673 passing attempts in 2024, the [lowest](#) total in the NFL. Hence why projections predict the Bills to score a league-[high](#) 481 points in 2025.



James Cook #4 via Adrian Kraus/AP

With a defensive line consisting of Pro Bowler Joey Bosa, Greg Rousseau, DaQuan Jones and Ed Oliver — this line is made to hold up until February. Top-[ten](#) defensive back Christian Benford and Pro Bowl defensive back Tre'Davious White will serve to motivate [standout](#) defensive back Maxwell Hairston throughout his knee recovery.

Kansas City won an NFL-[record](#) 17 games in a row by one score, and Baltimore tends to [self-sabotage](#) in the playoffs. NFL analysts can say [Baltimore](#) will win the AFC, but it might be [third](#) time's the charm for Buffalo.

Underperformers

Arizona Cardinals

In sports, nothing is worse than being mediocre. Arizona finished 8-9 in 2024: the perfect snapshot of a slightly below-average team.



The Cardinals ranked [26th](#) in pressure rate without blitzing, leading to a heavy investment in their defensive line with defensive tackle Dalvin Tomlinson, [six](#)-time Pro Bowler Calais Campbell and rookie Walter Nolen. They also signed Pro Bowl linebacker Josh Sweat and drafted 2024 College Football Playoff National Championship [MVP](#) Will Johnson (someone I considered a top-ten pick).

Unlike the Panthers, the problem is more about the offence than the defence. Arizona missed the [playoffs](#) eight out of nine years — and I don't expect this year to be any different. Last year, former first overall pick quarterback Kyler Murray [threw](#) 13 touchdowns to 11 interceptions — with seven of those touchdowns coming from two games. Since entering the league, Murray [ranks](#) twelfth in passing yards but only fifteenth in TDs, on top of being one of the most-sacked quarterbacks. Going into 2025, Murray has the fourth-highest cap hit in the NFL — more [than](#) Josh Allen or Patrick Mahomes.



Kyler Murray #1 via Matt Slocum/AP

Arizona has offensive talent — wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr., Pro Bowl tight end Trey McBride and [two](#)-time Pro Bowl running back James Conner, who has [back-to-back](#) 1,000-yard seasons. The only problem is that in the stacked NFC West, having only three offensive

weapons to rely on is not good enough to make the playoffs. It's no exaggeration to say this is a [make-or-break](#) year for Murray. He's been called out for inconsistent play, lack of pocket presence, and poor performance under pressure. The Vegas oddsmakers set the Cardinals' win total at 8.5. Falling just short could mean another missed playoff berth and there could be some shakeups in the organization.

Houston Texans

The defence is great. ESPN ranks the Texans as the [second](#)-best defensive unit in the league with Pro Bowl cornerback Derek Stingley Jr., Pro Bowl defensive end Danielle Hunter, safety Calen Bullock (top ten in interceptions last year), and Pro Bowl defensive end Will Anderson Jr.



Do not be fooled: this offensive line will squander the success of the Texans this year. Analysts predict the Texans to [win](#) the division this year, but I'm not so sure. [Per](#) Pro Football Reference, the Texans were first in hurries, second in pressures, third in sacks and 24th in hits.



CJ Stroud #7 via ESPN

Houston's offensive line ranked [last](#) in PFF's 2024 grades, allowing the lowest clean-pocket rate and the worst rushing success rate. Quarterback C.J. Stroud was [sacked](#) 52 times, and in the offseason, the Texans [traded](#) away their [five](#)-time Pro Bowl left tackle, leaving the unit even thinner.

A lack of depth adds to the concern. Running back Joe Mixon will miss time with an [ankle](#) injury, wide receiver Tank Dell suffered [multiple](#) torn ligaments, and Stefon Diggs departed to New England. Vegas set Houston's [win](#) total at 8.5, but without protection for Stroud and a diminished skill group, this number feels generous.

Carolina Panthers



"Nobody thinks the Panthers are going to be a good team, why put them on this list?" Oh [really](#)?

Here's why I think the Panthers will go from pick eight in the 2025 draft to —at best — pick twelve. Carolina's defence allowed 534 points —the worst in NFL [history](#). The Panthers surrendered nearly 6,900 yards and more than 3,000 rushing yards, ranking bottom-three in [both](#) categories. They were last in rushing yards allowed per game and near the bottom in missed tackles, sacks and penalties, [per](#) Pro Football Reference.

While the Panthers drafted talented rookie edge rushers Nick Scourton and Princely Umanmielen, asking two rookies to change an all-time bad defence is not realistic. Now the pushback comes from claims that Pro Bowl defensive tackle Derrick Brown is returning from [injury](#), quarterback Bryce Young is clicking with head coach Dave Canales, and rookie wide receiver Tetairoa McMillian will be the [difference](#)-maker. I understand that the running backs were [thirteenth](#) in running back yards before contact.



Derrick Brown #99, Jeremy Chinn #21, Shaq Thompson #7, Frankie Luvu #49 and Matt Ioannidis #99 via Bob Donnan/USA TODAY Sports

But I buy into none of those narratives. Even with the seventh-[easiest](#) schedule, maybe winning more than [five](#) games is possible. The analysts can try to [persuade](#) you that this team is ready to take the next step, but the stats show the Panthers aren't quite there yet.

Miami Dolphins

Two major concerns with the Miami Dolphins: Tua's health and the locker room culture.



Quarterback Tua Tagovailoa has posted strong numbers overall, with a 101.3 passer rating and an 87-to-32 TD-to-INT ratio. But his [struggles](#) in cold weather (0-7 with eight TDs and 10 INTs in games under 45 degrees) and a history of three [reported](#) concussions (a fourth going possibly undocumented) are major red flags.

"If he's medically cleared to play but chooses to retire, Tagovailoa will give up the remaining \$124 million of guaranteed money, provided there's no settlement," says Jason Clinkscales and Jacob Feldman, sports reporter, Sportico. "Yet if he's medically forced to retire, he'd still get all the guaranteed money".



Tyreek Hill #10 via Randy Litzinger/Getty Images

The retirement of offensive tackle Terron Armstead leaves the Dolphins without their [most](#) reliable lineman. In 2024, Miami [ranked](#) last in pocket time and seventh in fumbles lost, despite facing the fewest blitzes. The front office passed on help like offensive lineman Grey Zabel, opting to add defensive end Kenneth Grant, leaving glaring holes up front.

Defensively, all five secondary starters from 2024 are gone, while edge rushers Bradley Chubb and Jaelan Phillips continue to deal with major [injuries](#). Off the field, coach Mike McDaniels has admitted [tardiness](#) and fines were an issue in the locker room. Tyreek Hill's public [criticism](#) after games hasn't helped, suggesting McDaniels may have lost control of the locker room. "Just from a culture perspective, Miami has been the NFL equivalent of an accident -- a controversy, a feud, a drama -- waiting to happen," [says](#) Cody Benjamin, NFL Staff Writer, CBC Sports.

Last year I predicted the Titans would be bad, and this year, I predict the same for the Dolphins — except with more controversy.



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