NFL Picks: Tampa Bay visits New Orleans to battle the Saints

Contributed by Neil Jordan
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Despite winning just nine games, Tampa Bay won the NFC South last season to sneak into the NFL playoffs. The Bucs odds of that happening again are slim, as New Orleans and Carolina both look much-improved. BetOnline.com has the Tampa Bay Buccaneers (+3) at New Orleans Saints (-3) for NFL Picks action on Sunday, September 7 at 1:00 PM EST.

The Buccaneers made very few changes in the off-season, instead building through the draft. The defense certainly needed an injection of youth. First-round cornerback Aqib Talib is very talented and a trio of Talib, Ronde Barber and Phillip Buchanon is an intimidating one for quarterbacks.

The offense remains almost exactly the same as a year ago. Jeff Garcia will again start at quarterback, though he was admittedly upset by the team’s flirtation with Green Bay in the off-season, as the Bucs apparently tried to acquire Brett Favre.

Garcia has been underappreciated his entire career. He played very efficient football in 2007 and will have one new receiver to throw to this year in Antonio Bryant. Bryant’s young legs are a welcome addition, as primary target Joey Galloway is 37 years old.

The Saints, on the other hand, made a few changes. The defense was shored up via the draft, trades and free agency. Linebacker Jon Vilma was acquired from the Jets. It’s debatable whether he’ll be the same after being injured, but there’s no question when he’s healthy he’s very active. He’ll be joined for first-round defensive tackle Sedrick Ellis.

New Orleans added even more pop to its already explosive offense. Tight end Jeremy Shockey should add another dimension to the passing game, while last year’s top pick, Robert Meachem, looks poised for a breakout after a monster preseason.

The offense could be lacking pop in the running game, however. Deuce McAllister will try to come back from a third knee surgery, but he’s got a lot of mileage on his body.

Reggie Bush remains in the fold, but it’s tough not to label him a bust—the NFL odds of him actually running North-South for once aren’t good. He needs to have a big season if New Orleans wants to contend for the NFC title.

Normally, I might like the Saints odds in this match-up, but the team has faced too many distractions in the wake of Hurricane Gustav. It hasn’t had the same impact as Katrina, but it could be a hindrance nonetheless.

NFL Picks: Tampa Bay will cover.

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