During this time of year, when the majority of major offseason moves are finished and teams begin to prepare for the upcoming season, it is a good idea to take a look around you to see what the competition is doing. So today I want to take a moment to examine the offseason of the AFC North.

In order for our beloved Browns to challenge for conference and league championships we must first be competitive in our division. In today's NFL you don't necessarily have to win your division to bring home league championships. Teams like the Steelers and Giants of recent years have proven that point, but you definitely need to compete with the teams in your division in order to have a chance at the playoffs.

The Browns happen to play in what many consider one of the best, if not the best, division in football and when you look at the 2012 defensive rankings for our division, I don't think anyone can argue too hard against that point. So for Cleveland, division play will give us a good gauge on how we stack up across the league.

Personally I think continuity is one of the reasons AFC North teams have fared well over the years and, although some may say success has allowed continuity, I believe that patience and belief in a group of people/system is a reason this division is so good, and I also think that patience is too rare in the NFL.

In this article we will take a look at the offseason for the three other teams in our division (Baltmore,Pittsburgh,Cincinnati) and also discuss some of what I expect to see out of these teams in 2012.

But before I get into each team's moves I wanted to take a minute to discuss the Browns

schedule and the NFL schedule in general, because I have heard a lot of rumblings from friends about how tough the Browns schedule is this year and the more I listen the more I think there may be a big section of NFL fans that don't really understand how the schedule is made.

If you already know how the schedule works you may want to skip this section and go right to the next section, but if you're not sure you might want to continue reading.

First of all I want to start off with a simple statement that sums up the way they make the schedule…….every team in a division has the same opponents exceptt for two and those two are based on order of finish in the division from the previous year.

The way they make that happen is a set rotation. The AFC North plays every team in their division plus every team in one AFC division and one NFC division. Those divisions are determined by a set rotation. That accounts for 14 out of the 16 games.

The last two games are against the other two divisions in your conference and is determined by the order of finish in those divisions.

For example, this year the AFC North plays the NFC East and AFC West which accounts for 14 games. The other two games will pit the AFC North teams playing one opponent from the AFC South and AFC East. The particular opponent is determined by how the teams finished in their division.

Cleveland finished last in the division so we will play the last place teams in those divisions (Colts,Bills). The other teams in the AFC North will play the same two divisions against opponents that finished in the same place as them.

For another example let's look at previous years.

In 2011 the AFC North played the NFC West and AFC South and played their two other games

based on order of finish against the AFC East and AFC West.

In 2010 the AFC North played the NFC South and AFC East and the 2 conference opponents based on order of finish came from the AFC South, and AFC West.

So it is pretty easy to determine the teams you will play against in the upcoming year because of the rotation, and they alternate home and away based on where you played them the last time your division faced their division.

With all that being said, the people who complain about our schedule being tough should understand that technically, if you take away the “home” and “away” part of the schedule (which you can’t completely)…….the Browns have an ‘easier’ schedule than anyone else in our division because we finished last in our division last year.

For example, we play the exact same teams as Baltimore does exceptt for two teams which are in conference games based on order of finish in the division. So Baltimore plays all the same opponents we do except for Cleveland playing the Bills and Colts……..while Baltimore plays the Patriots and Texans (much tougher opponents).

So as you can see, other than the “home” or “away” conversation, Browns fans shouldn’t be complaining about the schedule…..technically we play the easiest schedule in the division.

Sure, you can complain about the when and where, but the ‘who’ is theoretically easier than anyone else in our division as long as we stay in the basement, which I hope isn’t much longer.

O.K. now that I have thoroughly confused you I am going to get into the offseason of our division foes.

Pittsburgh Squealers

Coaching- This is the first offseason in many years that Pittsburgh is going into what I consider significant change. Out is 5 year offensive coordinator Bruce Arians and in comes ex-Kansas City Chiefs head coach Todd Haley as OC.

When it comes to judging how the change will affect the team I would factor in a couple of things. The first is that historically Haley is a coach who likes to run bigger packages when it comes to personnel. He likes running the ball and using more max protections than Arians used at the end of his Pittsburgh days…..so I think we will see a Steelers team more like the Bill Cowher days when they ran the ball much more often. I also think there will be a commitment by the coaching staff to protect Big Ben more so he isn't taking as much punishment as he gets older.

Haley is known as being a hardnosed coach that takes pride in his team'sl play so we should expect to see a more physical offense with a commitment to the running game.

Free Agency- Everyone knows Pittsburgh doesn't really play the free agent game and this year is no exception. They only signed one player (TE Leonard Pope) from another team's roster.

Pope was probably a special request from new offensive coordinator Todd Haley who was Pope's coach in Kansas City. The new TE will bring a size factor (6-8, 265lbs) that they didn't have last year but he isn't a huge threat in the passing game.

Unlike acquisitions, when it comes to players lost to other teams (or outright cut) the Steelers had significant movement. In addition to long time Steeler WR Hines Ward retiring, so far Pittsburgh has failed to renew contracts or flat released 10 players this offseason. The most notable on the list are former long time starters Max Starks, Aaron Smith, and James Farrior. As usual the Steelers plan to replace these players with players they have drafted in recent years.

Draft- This year in the draft Pittsburgh stuck to the AFC North 2012 anthem of trench play by drafting a guard (David DeCastro) in the first round and a tackle (Mike Adams) in the second. They also drafted their future nose tackle (Alemeda Ta'amu) during the draft so it is clear that the Steelers were intent on better protecting Big Ben and ramping up the running game and run

game defense.

Other players I think will help Pittsburgh are LB Sean Spence and RB Chris Rainey. Spence is a player I see as a future starter and the small but blazing fast and lighting quick Rainey adds an element of speed out of the backfield that the Steelers were lacking. You can also expect to see the speedster flanked out in the slot trying to get mismatches on LBs and safeties in the passing game.

Overview- Personally I think the division and entire NFL is in trouble this year because of the signing of new offensive coordinator Todd Haley and the drafting of two talented offensive linemen.

When you add the two talented rookies to one of the best young centers in the league and a really good young starting tackle that was drafted last year it adds up to a running game that should provide the defense with rest. It should also allow Big Ben to use his play action passing ability that earned him his great 4th quarter reputation early in his career.

Allowing the Steelers to use play action passing will only help their speedsters on the outside (Wallace and Brown) create more room to get deep. Simply put, if Pittsburgh gets back to running the ball effectively they will be a better team than last year and that is a pretty scary thought for the entire league and most certainly everyone in the division.

Baltimore Rat Birds

Coaching- Over the years the Ravens have lost a couple defensive coaches that have gotten opportunities to be head coaches on other teams and it happened again in 2012. DC Chuck Pagano left Baltimore to be a head coach and Dean Peas has taken over the defense. Pagano also took a couple of coaches so there is some reshuffling of coaches on the staff and a new coach for the LBs.

Peas has been a DC of a 3-4 team in the past (NE 2006-9) so he has experience doing the job and he was a LB coach for the Ravens last season so he knows the personnel and the system.

You should expect to see more of the same when it comes to the physical smothering defense of Baltimore

Free agency- The Ravens lost two starters (Jarret JohnsonBen Grubbs) during free agency but they signed 13 year mauler Bobbie Williams away from the Bengals to play guard, and they will more than likely replace Johnson with Paul Krugger who plays very much like a younger version of Jarret Johnson.

Other than that Baltimore added depth and special teams players. They have been focusing more on adding young players to compliment their group of aging veterans on defense so they were not major players in free agency.

Draft- The Ravens got at least one immediate starter when they drafted DE/OLB Courtney Upshaw from the University of Alabama. Upshaw is already listed on their preseason depth chart as a starter, filling in for injured Terrell Suggs. The Ravens will look for the rookie to have an impact rookie year and based on his skills and the players around him he is primed to have that big year.

There is only one other rookie that has a potential to contribute early and that is 2nd round pick OT Kelechi Osemele who might be needed at RT if LT Bryant McKinnie isn't ready to play and RT Michael Oher needs to play on the left side.

I will also mention 6th round pick WR Tommy Streeter as a player who could find a niche as a deep threat because he has great size and speed, but he will more than likely need some NFL seasoning before he can make a impact.

Overview- Baltimore is once again poised to be a contender for the division and conference title. They have a good mixture of young talent and veterans, and GM Ozzie Newsome once again assembled a roster that has depth. If the defense can overcome the Terrell Suggs injury and find a way to get pressure on the QB the Ravens should continue to be one of the top teams in the AFC.

With QB Joe Flacco motivated for the big payday, RB Ray Rice receiving his payday in the offseason, and having WR Torrey Smith entering his second season in the NFL……Baltimore's offense should be the most explosive they have been during their recent playoff runs.

If you factor in their really good TEs to the other explosive position players, their offense should be able to give them some leads and allow the defense to play downhill.

If the Ravens can take those leads and apply pressure to opposing teams QBs I expect Baltimore to win the division and challenge for the AFC crown.

Cincinnati Bungles

Coaching- Just like our other two division rivals, Cincinnati has a coaching staff that brings stability and continuity to the table. The Bengals have had the same head coach for 10 seasons now and they return both of their coordinators, so don't expect anything to look dramatically different this year from a schematic standpoint.

Free Agency- Cincinnati took an interesting approach to free agency in 2012. The Bengals decided to let more than one starter from their 2011 team walk and they either signed players from other teams to replace them or drafted players to replace them.

They replaced RB Cedric Benson with Benjarvis Green-Ellis and they also signed CBs Jason Allen and Terrance Newman this offseason.

They let the new RDE for the Cleveland Browns, Frostee Rucker, leave town as well as DT Jonathon Fanene. They failed to sign starting WR Jerome Simpson, who later signed with the Vikings, and they let offensive lineman Bobbie Williams move to the division rival Ravens. Mike McGlynn and Nate Livings were also allowed to leave during free agency.

Livings and Williams were the starting guards last year but guard Travelle Wharton was signed

to start for Livings and the Bengals will go with youth to replace the other guard Williams. As you can see, Cincinnati was active on both sides of free agency this year.

Draft- This is where the Bengals hit a home run in 2012. Sure, no one has a crystal ball into what type of careers drafted players will have, but as far as talent goes……Cincinnati did a tremendous job of adding extremely talented players through the 2012 NFL Draft.

The Bengals had two first round picks (CB Dre Kirkpatrick/OG Kevin Zeitler) and two third round picks (WR Mohamed Sanu/DT Brandon Thompson) to go along with second round DT Devon Still. All five of these players will contribute big time this year and guard Zeitler will start for sure.

They could also get contributions from fourth round TE Orson Charles as well as fifth round WR Marvin Jones. The Bengals had 10 draft picks this year and all of them have really good talent and will more than likely make the roster.

If you add last year's draft class that included QB Andy Dalton and WR A.J. Green, Cincinnati has done an outstanding job over the last two years adding young talent to their roster.

Overview- Whenever you have a young team there is always a higher risk to experience ups and downs, but with the veterans they have on defense, coupled with a second year QB who proved he could play at a high level throwing to a freakish talent like A.J. Green, Cincinnati has a great chance of repeating their solid 2011 season again this year.

Going 9-7 like the 2011 Bengals did while having a rookie QB is pretty impressive and should put the division and conference on notice. For Cincinnati to take the next step in their growth the young team will have to figure out the way to win the close division games against the bullies on the block.

Cincinnati won two division games last year both against the Browns. They were in the other 4 games against the division front runners (Ravens,Steelers) but they couldn't find a way to pull those games out in the end. If they want to continue gaining respect they must find a way to win those games and that will lead them to finding a way to the playoffs and further. Cincinnati took

big steps last year their challenge this year is avoiding taking small steps back.

Analysis

When it comes to the AFC North, this division will be won in the trenches. The 4 teams in the division combined to pick 6 trench players in the first 2 rounds of the draft and if you count the 3-4 OLB that Baltimore picked with one of their second round picks that makes 7.

I didn't preview the Browns because as Browns fans we already know what we have done in the offseason, but when factoring in the Browns to division talk you will see that 3 of the 4 division teams have focused on trench players over the last few years.

The Browns, Steelers and Bengals, and have rebuilt their OLs over the last 3 years and the Ravens drafted future OL starters this year.

To go along with the offensive trench players, all four teams boast new defensive line starters so although the play of Big Ben, Joe Flacco, Andy Dalton, and Brandon Weeden will be big factors in the outcome of games, I get the sense all four teams are convinced winning the war up front and being able to get tough rushing yards in December (and stopping those yards) is the key to winning this division.

When you ask yourself how the division will play out this year you could probably go the high conversation route and find some reasons why the division will be turned upside down but I'm not going to take that path.

In my mind, based on the way the offseason has gone, I have no reason to think the top of the division will turn out much different than it did last year.

The Steelers and Ravens know how to win big and close games and they both have gone deep into the playoffs the last few years, so I expect nothing but more of the same this year. Sure the

Steelers and Ravens are getting older but they also have both done a good job of starting the turnover.

All things being equal, I like the Ravens to win the division. It could very well be the Steelers but it has to be one and I think the Ravens have a chance to be more explosive than in years past on offense so I am giving them the edge.

As far as predictions go, the 3rd and 4th place teams will be Cincinnati and Cleveland with the order being debatable. Based on what I already know Andy Dalton and A.J. Green are I am giving the nod to the Bengals, but with a solid running game Cleveland could easily be better than Cincinnati.

I do like Cleveland's defense better than the Bengals, but the offensive differences are enough in my book that I am picking the Bengals to be slightly better.

As a Browns fan I am not discouraged by my own words in this article. I love the defense and I do believe the offense has added a ton of much needed talent this year, but as far as true predictions go I have to be honest to the game the way I see it.

Until their play on the field tells me otherwise, the Steelers and Ravens are playoff caliber teams and the Bengals beat us twice last year with a rookie QB so they have the edge in my book.

I bleed orange and brown and am excited for the direction and future of this group but I will let their play tell me that they are ready to truly take steps forward and permanently climb out of the basement. When that happens I will probably start picking them to win it every year but until then I will go by what I know.

Enjoy the season Browns fans. I expect to see a much better product on the field this year and check in with me throughout the season with game previews and reviews…….Go Browns!