AFC East Preview:

New England Patriots 12-4

Buffalo Bills 9-7

New York Jets 7-9

Miami Dolphins 4-12

New England Patriots:

Recap: Last season saw the Patriots dominate the AFC East by going 5-1 against the division and 13-3 overall. New England won its final 8 regular season games clinching the AFC’s top seed. They dismantled Tim Tebow and the Denver Broncos 45-10 and then won a nail-biter over the Baltimore Ravens 23-20 after Billy Cundiff missed the potential game-tying field goal. The Patriots then met the New York Giants in a rematch from Super Bowl XLII. The Patriots saw their offense struggle to get going for most of the game due to the Giants constant pressure. New England would have to watch as Eli Manning and the Giants marched down the field and score the winning touchdown with less than a minute to go. The Patriots lost 21-17.

Offense: The Patriots begin and end with one man and that’s Tom Brady. In 2011 Brady passed for 5235 yards to go along with his 39 touchdown passes. The Patriots averaged 428 yards per game as well as 32.1 points per game. The Patriots return almost everybody back this season with the exception of BenJarvus Green-Ellis (667 yds and 11 tds) who signed with the Cincinnati Bengals. The Patriots will have Wes Welker who had 122 receptions for 1569 yards as well as Rob Gronkowski who had 90 receptions for 1327 yards. New England also added Brandon Lloyd to compliment Welker as the other featured wideout. Look for the Patriots offense to not miss a beat even with the departure of Green-Ellis.

Defense: The Patriots offense had to put up big numbers because the defense was so bad last season. They gave up 411.1 yards a game which ranked 31st in the league. The defense also surrendered 21.4 points a game which ranked 15th in the NFL. New England spent the offseason looking to improve its defense through free agency and the NFL draft. The Patriots traded up in the draft twice to land Chandler Jones and Dont’a Hightower. Both could be starting by week 1. The Patriots defense should be much improved this season which will make the Patriots even stronger than they were last season.

Prediction: The Patriots are not only the best team in this division but they look to be the best team in the AFC. With more weapons around him, Brady should put up numbers just as good if not better than last season. If any of the other teams in the AFC are thinking Super Bowl then they should plan on having to go through New England.

Buffalo Bills:

Recap: Last season the Bills started off with such promise as they were 5-2 with wins over the Patriots, Eagles and Oakland. However the Bills would only win one more game, going 1-8 in their last 9 games. A big reason behind the teams collapse was Ryan Fitzpatrick’s inconsistency. He had 8 games with multiple td’s as well as 8 games with multiple int’s. The Bills also had to deal with losing starting running back Fred Jackson who had 934 rushing yards in only 10 games. After Jackson went down, the Bills only had 1 game in which they rushed for over 100 yards. Going 1-5 against your division is another area the Bills must improve on.

Offense: The Bills offense returns mostly intact from last season as they only added Vince Young and David Clowney. The return of Fred Jackson should help the Bills greatly as they hope he can replicate his performance from last season before he went down. Fitzpatrick’s play was better with Jackson in the line-up as Jackson could help take the pressure off him and help open up the passing game. If the Bills want to return to the playoffs for the first time since 1999 they will not only need Jackson to stay healthy all season but they will also need Fitzpatrick to become more consistent and cut down on his league high 23 interceptions. The Bills did resign Stevie Johnson who led the team with 76 receptions for 1004 yards to help Fitzpatrick.

Defense: Defense was a problem for the Bills last season as they gave up 371.1 yards and 27.1 points per game. To improve on those numbers the Bills signed free agents Mark Anderson and Mario Williams. The Bills only had 29 sacks as a team last season but they should see a significant improvement in those numbers with Williams and Anderson who have 88.5 career sacks between the two of them. The Bills total defense has ranked outside the top 15 for the last seven years. With the defense being able to put more pressure on the quarterback the Bills should see an increase in turnovers and an improvement of their +1 turnover margin.

Prediction: The Bills will be one of the league’s most improved teams and be in the wild card hunt. However I don’t see this being the year that they finally make the playoffs as the AFC has so many quality teams. If Fitzpatrick and Johnson can find their chemistry this team could be better than 9 wins. Look for the Bills to be one of the teams right outside the wild card.

New York Jets:

Recap: Last season saw the Jets at 8-5 with 3 games left to play. However in the thick of a wild-card chase the Jets would lose their last 3 games including a heartbreaking 19-17 loss to the Miami Dolphins which would keep New York out of the playoffs. To make matters worse the team’s locker room was in turmoil as several players came out and said that starting QB Mark Sanchez did not have the respect of the team and that he was not the guy to lead them to the Super Bowl. The Jets offense ranked at the bottom of the league but their defense ranked near the top. The Jets clearly felt the pressure last season from Head Coach Rex Ryan’s Super Bowl predictions.

Offense: Mark Sanchez set a career high last season in passing yards as well as passing touchdowns however he also had 18 interceptions and 8 fumbles lost. At the end of the season it was clear that Sanchez had lost the locker room as the Jets fell apart. For the first time in his career Sanchez now has competition at QB with the addition of Tim Tebow. Tebow isn’t a typical NFL QB but he went 7-4 last season as a starter for the Denver Broncos. He also had 5 fourth quarter comebacks. It’s very clear with the addition of Tebow that the Jets want to improve on their 311.8 yards per game and 23.6 points per game averages. The Jets will also look to return to a prominent run game with Shonn Greene returning as the starter. Last season Greene had 1054 yards and 6 touchdowns. With the recent struggles at QB look for Greene’s numbers to improve.

Defense: The Jets defense ranked fifth in yards per game at 312.1 and 20th in points per game with 22.7. The defense has always been strong in New York and the unit played well for the most part as they ended up being on the field more than they would’ve like to. With the offense going through changes this offseason expect this unit to be tested even more so. The Jets pass defense is one of the best with Darrelle Revis anchoring them. Revis along with Antonio Cromartie only allowed 201 passing yards per game. They will have more help this season with the signing of SS Yeremiah Bell who started last season for the Miami Dolphins. Overall the Jets defense should put up similar numbers as last season but they won’t have much help from their offense.

Prediction: The Jets open their season playing 4 playoff teams in the first 5 games. Look for a slow start and after a 1-4 or 2-3 start the Jets will hand Tebow the offense. This season will be the most difficult for New York as they will not even be in contention for a wild-card berth.

Miami Dolphins:

Recap: Last season was like a roller coaster for the Dolphins as they started the season 0-7 but went 6-3 down the stretch. Miami’s play at the end of the season had many thinking that they could’ve been in the wild card hunt had they not limped out of the gate. Because of their awful start the coaching staff had no chance to survive the season as they fired Head Coach Tony Sparano after 13 games. This offseason the Dolphins hired Joe Philbin, who was the offensive coordinator for the Green Bay Packers, as their head coach. He brought in Mike Sherman to be the offensive coordinator and Kevin Coyle to run the defense. Miami not only has a new coaching staff but they will have a different looking offense with new faces and departures.

Offense: The Dolphins made it clear during the NFL Draft that they are planning for the future with their selection of QB Ryan Tannehill with the eighth pick. He battled last year’s starter Matt Moore and free agent signee David Garrard for the starting QB spot. Tannehill’s extensive knowledge of the system is why Miami has decided to go with him at QB. Last season saw Reggie Bush get his shot to be an every down back and he delivered with his first 1000 yard season. In 15 games Bush had 1086 yards, 6 touchdowns and 5.0 yards per carry average. His numbers might dip because of the Dolphins changing offenses but still look for him to be very productive. The Dolphins biggest area of concern is their Wide Receivers as they traded away Brandon Marshall who led the team with 81 receptions for 1214 yards. They will now look to Brain Hartline and Davone Bess to lead the team. Combined they had 86 receptions for 1086 yards. Miami may have the worst receiving corp in the NFL this season. Don’t expect much improvement in their 317.4 yards per game or 20.6 points per game because of their personnel changes.

Defense: Miami’s defense kept them in almost every game as they only allowed 19.6 points per game which ranked sixth in the NFL. They also ranked 15th in yards allowed per game at 345.1. With Kevin Coyle coming from Cincinnati, the team will run a 4-3 defense which should help them get more pressure on opposing QB’s which was a problem last season. This change will affect the team’s best player Cameron Wake who will move from OLB to This move may allow him to get to the QB quicker. Coyle was a defensive back coach for the Bengals and he will have to get more consistency out of Sean Smith as he has shown moments of being dominant but also has been burned by faster receivers.

Prediction: This season will be rough for the Dolphins as they undergo several key changes including a rookie coach and rookie quarterback. While they do appear to be heading in the right direction this season will be one of growing pains. For Miami the most important aspect of this season is to develop Tannehill for the future. Expect the defense to again keep the Dolphins in some games but without more playmakers on offense this team looks to be worse than last season.