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COLTS

Coach: Lindy Infante (24-40)
'95 record: 9-7

Playoffs: Defeated Chargers, 35-20, in wild-card game; defeated Chiefs, 10-7, in divisional game; lost to Steelers, 20-16, in championship game.

Good News: The defense, ranked seventh in the NFL, is virtually intact. The Colts have a strong front seven, with LBs Quentin Coryatt and Jeff Herrod and DEs Tony Bennett and Ellis Johnson, a rising star. DT Tony Siragusa, who looks like he stepped out of "Goodfellas," is the run plugger. QB Jim Harbaugh, who epitomized last season's Cinderella run in the playoffs, must prove that his monster season wasn't an aberration. He has an added weapon in rookie WR Marvin Harrison, who has game-breaking ability.

Bad News: The offensive line, which lost LT Will Wolford, is a major question mark. If the line struggles, RB Marshall Faulk won't be a happy camper. Faulk, coming off a sluggish sophomore season, feuded with his linemen. Don't be surprised if he becomes an attitude problem for new coach Infante.

What's Ahead: The Colts came out of nowhere last season, and came within a tipped pass of going to the Super Bowl. They were a great story, but they now find themselves in an unusual position — trying to live up to preseason expectations. A weighty burden, for sure, but they still should make the playoffs.



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CHARGERS

Coach: Bobby Ross (39-25)
'95 record: 9-7

Playoffs: Lost to Colts, 35-20, in wild-card game

Good News: Say this for GM Bobby Beathard: He's always unpredictable. Not satisfied with a first-round exit in the playoffs, Beathard dramatically altered the team's chemistry by dumping DE Leslie O'Neal. RB Natrone Means and RB **Ronnie Harmon** — all regarded as disruptive forces. "We've got to have players who want to be here, not just guys who are coming in and picking up a paycheck," QB Stan Humphries said.

Bad News: Replacing O'Neal is former Dolphin Marco Coleman, who played under Ross at Georgia Tech. Coleman is steady, but not a dynamic pass rusher. Replacing Means is Aaron Hayden, who averaged 93 yards rushing over the final five games last season. But he's never done it over a full season, which makes him a question mark. DE Chris Mims, coming off a poor season, must get his act together.

What's Ahead: Ordinarily, you'd have to question a team that cuts loose so many talented players, but the two Bobbys — Beathard and Ross — deserve the benefit of the doubt because of their track records. The team has glaring holes — wide receiver and secondary — but still has enough toughness on defense (see LB Junior Seau and DT Shawn Lee) to contend.



6

BRONCOS

Coach: Mike Shanahan (16-20)
'95 record: 8-8

Playoffs: Did not qualify

Good News: Shanahan proved his offensive genius last season, as the Broncos set team records for points and yardage. There's no reason to think they can't duplicate those numbers. QB John Elway, still going strong at 36, has two big-time receivers in WR Anthony Miller and TE Shannon Sharpe. For a change, the Broncos could be a run-oriented team. The reason: Terrell Davis, who rushed for 1,117 yards last season as an unheralded rookie.

Bad News: The defense. What else? There are a few new faces — DEs Alfred Williams and Aaron Wallace and LB Bill Romanowski — but the results may not be much different than in the past. That's what happens when you sign mediocre free agents. They still don't have an impact player in the front seven. The Broncos are weak against the run, and the secondary is positively dreadful. The biggest hope is rookie linebacker John Mobley, the No. 1 pick out of Kutztown State, who had an excellent preseason.

What's Ahead: If the defense shows some improvement, the Broncos will make the playoffs. If not, it will take another monster season by Elway and Co. to keep the team in contention. They open at home against the Jets.



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OILERS

Coach: Jeff Fisher (8-14)
'95 record: 7-9

Playoffs: Did not qualify

Good News: Two years ago, these guys were 2-14. Now they have a chance to compete for a wild-card berth. Hotshot Fisher has built one of the better defenses in the AFC. It boasts two terrific cornerbacks, Cris Dishman and Darryl Lewis, a solid linebacking corps and a young, but promising defensive line. The offense has potential impact players in rookie RB Eddie George and WR Chris Sanders.

Bad News: The Nashville situation could become a major distraction. It already has drained the enthusiasm out of Houston, which has no desire to support the team. Don't be surprised if you see crowds of 20,000 at the Astrodome. Too bad, because the Oilers are one of the up-and-coming teams in the AFC. When second-year QB Steve McNair cracks the lineup, which could be later in the season, the Oilers will be even more exciting.

What's Ahead: If the Oilers can overcome the disadvantage of having no home-field advantage, they could make some noise. The key is how well the quarterback plays. Journeyman Chris Chandler is No. 1 for now, but a controversy could erupt, because the still-green McNair is the favorite of the fans (the few that are left) and the media.



12

BENGALS

Coach: Dave Shula (18-46)
'95 record: 7-9

Playoffs: Did not qualify

Good News: RB Ki-Jana Carter, the No. 1 overall pick in 1995, is healthy. He should provide a major boost to the Bengals' dormant running game. When it comes to passing, not many teams are more exciting than the Bengals. With Jeff Blake throwing, and with Carl Pickens (17 TD catches) and Darnay Scott catching and running, there's some serious point-scoring potential.

Bad News: The defense stinks. There's some talent here — namely DE John Copeland and DT Dan Wilkinson — but this unit didn't stop too many people last season. The worst part was the secondary, which is why management broke into its piggy bank and signed CBs Ashley Ambrose and Jimmy Spencer. Hey, it's a start. The other major concern: The offensive line. If you can name one starter, you're on top of things.

What's Ahead: If Doogie Howser . . . er, Dave Shula doesn't get off to a decent start, he could be out of a job. Waiting in the wings: Offensive coordinator Bruce Coslet, in his second term with the Bengals. This is the last year of Shula's contract. But know this: The last time they had a fifth-year head coach, a third-year offensive coordinator and a fifth-year QB, the Bengals went to the Super Bowl with Sam Wyche, Coslet and Boomer Esiason. Don't expect a repeat.



13

PATRIOTS

Coach: Bill Parcells (98-76-1)
'95 record: 6-10

Playoffs: Did not qualify

Good news: The Patriots should be able to score points with the best of them. If QB Drew Bledsoe rebounds from a sub-par season (16 interceptions, only 13 touchdowns), the Patriots have the makings of an outstanding offense. RB Curtis Martin, dubbed a "one-game wonder" by Parcells, proved his coach wrong by rushing for 1,487 yards as a rookie. Former Giants RB Dave Meggett didn't have a good year, but should be more of a factor. Ben Coates is one of the best big-play tight ends in the business. If rookie WR Terry Glenn can escape Parcells' doghouse, he could be the deep threat Bledsoe never has had.

Bad news: Bad defense. Really bad defense. With Bill Belichick on board as the defensive coordinator, the Patriots switched from the 3-4 to the 4-3. That's fine, except they don't have four NFL-caliber defensive linemen to fill the spots. The top hope is Willie McGinest (11 sacks), who was used as an outside linebacker last year. The linebacking corps, minus Vincent Brown, is shaky. Ditto for the secondary.

What's Ahead: This could be Parcells' last season. At his request, the final year of his contract (1997) was terminated, fueling speculation that he could be ready to get out. The players can't let Parcells' status become a distraction. They have enough problems as it is.



14

RAVENS

Coach: Ted Marchibroda (71-67)
'95 record: 5-11

Playoffs: Did not qualify

Good News: Only one thing is certain about the season: Art Modell will get richer. There's not much to get excited about. Rookie LG Jonathan Ogden, the No. 1 pick from UCLA, is playing out of position but has a chance to be a great player. There's some talent on defense, namely DE Rob Burnett, CB Antonio Langham and FS Eric Turner. Anything else? Well, new coach Marchibroda is a heck of a nice guy.

Bad News: Aside from ripping the heart out of Cleveland, the Browns . . . er, Ravens, didn't do anything in the offseason to make news, except for maybe dumping WR Andre Rison, an overpriced head case. The team has no feature back (Earnest Byner? You've got to be kidding) and no stability at quarterback. Vinny Testaverde, the former Elmont star, is coming off his best pro season (2,883 yards, 17 TDs), but is not consistent enough to thrive under these conditions.

What's Ahead: The Ravens will do battle with the Jaguars for last place in the weak AFC Central. And to think, the Browns went 11-5 and made the playoffs in 1994. Marchibroda, who coached the Colts through their final glory days (1975-79) was a good hire. Too bad he didn't come with Unitas, Moore and Mackey.



15

JAGUARS

Coach: Tom Coughlin (4-12)
'95 record: 4-12

Playoffs: Did not qualify

Good News: The AFC's expansion baby turns 2. The terrible 2s? Perhaps, but at least the Jaguars are on the right track. Check out the talent they added in the offseason: RT Leon Searcy, LB Eddie Robinson, RB Natrone Means, WR Andre Rison, rookie LB Kevin Hardy and rookie DE Tony Brackens. Means, who will miss the opener with torn ligaments in his thumb, and Rison come with baggage, but it's hard to criticize the other acquisitions. They will join other important players such as LT Tony Boselli, who had a fine rookie season, and DE Jeff Lageman, the former Jet. Under ex-Jet assistant Larry Pasquale, the special teams should excel.

Bad News: The Jaguars are very shaky at wide receiver and the secondary. You also have to wonder about QB Mark Brunell. He showed some promise at the end of last season, but is still very raw. He's one of the best scramblers around, but has to refine his skills. He has to learn to stay in the pocket a little longer.

What's Ahead: Some of the players think they have a legitimate chance of reaching the playoffs. It's possible, but remote. If the Jaguars can win at least six or seven games, the season would be a success. When you're only 2 years old, the name of the game is improvement.