NFL · AUGUST 11, 2026

2026 NFC North season preview: four playoff-caliber teams, four very different paths

The NFC North enters 2026 as the NFL's most crowded division: Detroit is the betting favorite on schedule strength, Chicago defends a title with a rebuilt secondary, Green Bay waits on Micah Parsons and a Josh Jacobs legal case, and Minnesota just named Kyler Murray its Week 1 starter. Market consensus: Lions, Packers, Bears, Vikings.

12 min read · 14 sources

2026 season · NFC North · injury report · quarterback competition · schedule preview · training camp · win totals

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Every team in the NFC North finished above .500 in 2025 — only the second division in modern history to do it — and all four believe they can make the playoffs again in 2026[2]. The champion Chicago Bears are trying to repeat with a rebuilt secondary; the Detroit Lions are the betting favorite after a stunning 15-2-to-9-8 collapse; the Green Bay Packers are contending through a star player's ACL rehab and a running back's felony charges; and the Minnesota Vikings just resolved the offseason's loudest quarterback competition by handing the job to Kyler Murray[1][4]. The season opens Wednesday, Sept. 9, and the division crown is genuinely up for grabs — the odds gap between favorite and fourth choice is the tightest of any NFL division[6][8].

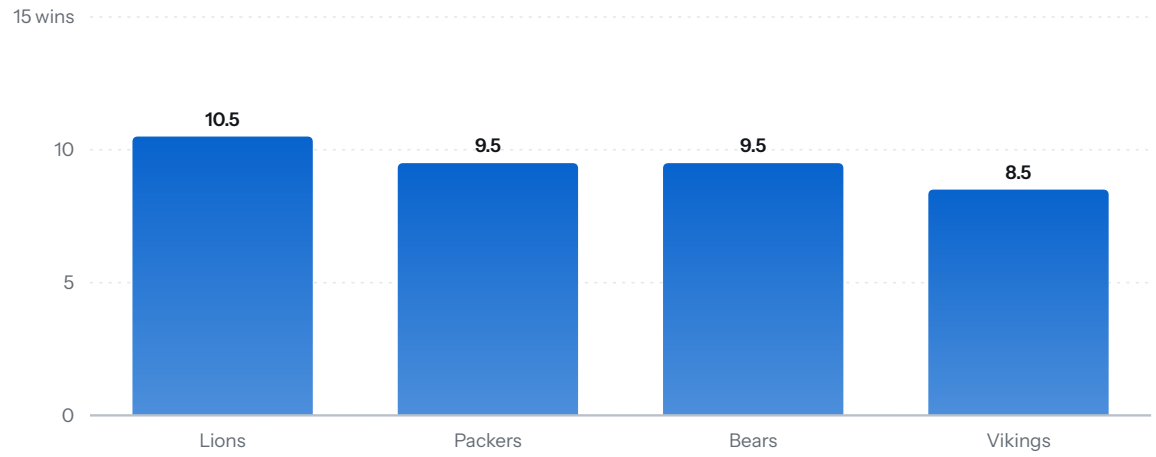
The 2025 recap and what the market says

Chicago's 2025 was a storybook flip: after an 0–2 start, Ben Johnson's Bears went 11–6 and won the division for the first time since 2018, powered by **seven fourth-quarter comebacks — an NFL-record six after trailing at the two-minute warning**[3]. They beat the Packers 31–27 in the wild-card round after trailing 21–6 in the fourth, then fell 20–17 at the Rams in the divisional round[3]. The Packers took second at 9-7-1 (their only playoff game was that loss to Chicago), and the Lions and Vikings both finished 9–8 and missed the postseason — Detroit's Week 17 loss at Minnesota handed the Vikings the tiebreaker[3][6].

The betting market's message is clear: this is Detroit's division to reclaim.

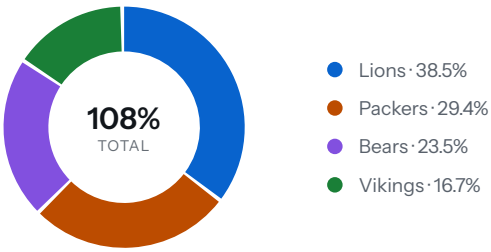
TEAM	2025 RECORD	2025 PLAYOFFS	2026 WIN TOTAL	DIVISION ODDS (BETMGM)
Detroit Lions	9–8	missed	**10.5**	**+160**
Green Bay Packers	9–7–1	lost wild card	9.5	**+240**
Chicago Bears	11–6	lost divisional	9.5	**+325**
Minnesota Vikings	9–8	missed	**8.5**	**+500**

2026 win totals, BetMGM



BetMGM season win totals, August 2026.

Division odds: implied market share



Implied probability from BetMGM futures (+160/+240/+325/+500), July 2026.

11–6
Bears 2025 record
NFC North champs

10.5
Lions win total
highest in division

+160
Lions division odds
market favorite

4
Vikings Week 1 starters
in four years

Only five of the last 54 teams that improved by six or more wins have improved again the following season — VSiN's Steve Makinen statistic that hangs over Chicago — while Detroit,

which lost 326 games to injury in 2025 (second-most in the NFL, behind only Chicago's 336), is projected for the league's easiest schedule [3] [6].

Chicago Bears: defending champs with a soft underbelly

The case for a repeat starts with Caleb Williams, coming off a leap year — **3,942 yards and 27 touchdowns against 7 interceptions** (up from 3,541/20/6 as a rookie) — and now the Madden NFL 27 cover athlete [3]. Only MVP Matthew Stafford had more big-time throws than Williams last season, and Ben Johnson's Year 2 offense adds the pieces around him: Rome Odunze at WR1, a Year 2 leap candidate in Luther Burden III, and Colston Loveland as a featured tight end [1]. The Athletic's projection is a modest **9–8**, but the offense averaged 26.0 points and 370 yards per game in 2025 [2].

The case against is the defense, which ranked **No. 29 in yards allowed (361.8 per game)** and No. 23 in points — and covered for it with a league-leading **33 takeaways and 23 interceptions** that are almost certainly unsustainable [3]. The unit lost eight key players: LBs Tremaine Edmunds and T.J. Edwards, safeties Kevin Byard (7 INTs) and Jaquan Brisker, corner Nahshon Wright (8 takeaways), and C.J. Gardner-Johnson among them [2] [3]. The Athletic notes Chicago lost *every* defender with multiple interceptions [2]. Replacements: first-round safety Dillon Thieneman (No. 25), free-agent safety Coby Bryant (out until late fall with a knee injury), and LB Devin Bush [2] [3]. Up front, no bookend edge rusher was added opposite Montez Sweat, and 33-year-old Grady Jarrett fronts a run defense that got gashed [1].

The headline trade: **DJ Moore to Buffalo for a 2026 second-round pick (No. 60) and a 2026 fifth** — Moore's career-low 682-yard season and $28.5M cap hit made him movable, saving the Bears $16.5M [12]. Center Drew Dalman's retirement at 27 hurt more than the Moore deal, pushing the Bears to trade for Garrett Bradbury and draft Iowa center Logan Jones in the second round [2]. Burden dodged a serious injury this weekend but is out for the rest of the offseason with a groin strain [2]. VSiN's Dave Tuley calls the **Over 9.5** the play, noting the seven one-score wins and schedule of comebacks against sub-.500 teams (Raiders, Giants, Commanders, Bengals) that padded the record [3].

Detroit Lions: the bounce-back favorites

No team in the division has a cleaner narrative. Detroit went 15–2 in 2024, lost both coordinators to head-coaching jobs, stumbled to 9–8 in 2025 (7–4 through 11 games, then 2–6), and now gets the NFL's easiest schedule as a reward for finishing last [3] [6]. Dan Campbell took over play-calling midseason from John Morton, who was fired; **Drew Petzing is the fourth offensive coordinator in six Campbell seasons**, with Mike Kafka as passing-game coordinator [1] [3].

The 2025 problem was protection: the offensive line ranked **31st in pass-block win rate and Jared Goff took a career-high 38 sacks** after Pro Bowl center Frank Ragnow retired [2]. The rebuild: **Penei Sewell moves to left tackle, first-round pick Blake Miller (No. 17) takes right**

tackle, and free-agent center Cade Mays ($25M) arrived — then fractured his wrist and will miss 8–10 weeks[1][2]. Young guards Tate Ratledge and Christian Mahogany need to step up.

The backfield is now Jahmyr Gibbs's alone: **David Montgomery was traded to Houston on March 2 for center Juice Scruggs, a 2026 fourth-rounder and a 2027 seventh**, after a career-low 716-yard season[13]. Gibbs carried 243 times for 1,223 yards in 2025 and is set for a Christian McCaffrey-type workload as an Offensive Player of the Year candidate[1][13]. Receiving options remain deep — Amon-Ra St. Brown, Jameson Williams (back-to-back 1,000-yard seasons), Isaac TeSlaa, and a healthy-again Sam LaPorta[1].

The defense is the swing factor, and the injury luck has been brutal: **safeties Brian Branch (Achilles) and Kerby Joseph (knee) may miss the start of the season**, and 2024 first-round corner Terrion Arnold was **released after off-field issues**[1][2]. Second-round edge Derrick Moore joins Aidan Hutchinson, with Payton Turner and DJ Wonnum added as rotation options[1]. BetMGM's Nick Hennion and the Athletic's Jacob Robinson both pick the Lions to win the division — Robinson calls them his **"dark horse Super Bowl pick"** with a **12–5** projection, citing the last-place schedule (unique opponents Tennessee, the Giants and Arizona carry a combined 18.5-game win total, by far the division's lowest) and a 3–5 record in one-score games that should regress toward wins[2][6]. The caveats: three road division games in the final four weeks, and the O-line is unproven until it's proven[1].

Green Bay Packers: talent vs. an injury-and-legal cloud

The Packers made the playoffs for the sixth time in seven seasons under Matt LaFleur in 2025 (9-7-1), but their ceiling this year hangs on two unresolved storylines[1].

Micah Parsons. The star edge rusher tore his ACL in December, revealed he also had a meniscus procedure, and is targeting a **Week 6 return against the Cowboys** (Oct. 18) — the team's official position is that he'll miss the start of the season[1][7]. Green Bay was **0–5 without Parsons in 2025**, and its defensive success rate cratered from 10th-best to 30th while allowing 28+ points per game[2]. New defensive coordinator Jonathan Gannon (who replaces Jeff Hafley) has shifted to a 3–4 base, added Javon Hargrave in the middle, and drafted South Carolina corner Brandon Cisse at No. 52[1][2].

Josh Jacobs. The three-time Pro Bowl running back was **arrested May 26 and booked into Brown County Jail on five charges — one felony (strangulation/suffocation) and four misdemeanors related to an alleged domestic violence incident**[3][4]. He practiced all offseason and is currently on the field, but a league suspension remains possible, and behind him the depth is Chris Brooks and MarShawn Lloyd, who has played one game since entering the league in 2024[1].

The offense is otherwise in good shape: Jordan Love enters Year 4 as starter having shed much of his early "YOLO" play, Christian Watson and Jayden Reed got extensions, rookie Matthew Golden improved sharply down the stretch, and Tucker Kraft returns from an ACL tear[1]. Jordan Morgan — a first-round pick in 2024 who played guard — moves to left tackle after a Week 18 spot start convinced the staff[2]. The Athletic projects **10–7**, and the schedule bends the Packers' way: **four**

of the final five games at Lambeau, including a Week 18 finale vs. Detroit, with Buffalo, Miami and Houston (Week 17 MNF) coming to Green Bay[2][14]. One lurking worry: the kicking job belongs to rookie sixth-rounder Trey Smack in December weather[1].

> CAUTION
>
> Three of this division's biggest storylines are unresolved as of Aug. 11: whether Josh Jacobs faces a league suspension, whether Micah Parsons returns anywhere near Week 6 at full strength, and whether Detroit's Branch and Joseph play in September. Any one of these can move a projected finish by two or three games.

Minnesota Vikings: Murray wins the job

The Vikings settled their marquee question on Tuesday, Aug. 11: **Kyler Murray is the Week 1 starter**, with J.J. McCarthy demoted to No. 2 — announced 10 days into training camp after Murray out-repped McCarthy throughout[4][5]. It makes Minnesota the fourth straight season with a different Week 1 starter (Cousins, Darnold, McCarthy, Murray)[4].

Murray, who turns 29, signed a **one-year, $1.3 million veteran-minimum deal in March** after Arizona released him, with a no-tag clause that makes him a free agent in 2027[4][5]. His career line: 20,460 passing yards, 121 TDs, 60 INTs, 3,193 rushing yards and 32 rushing TDs — one of 13 quarterbacks ever with 20,000 passing and 3,000 rushing yards[5]. Kevin O'Connell on the decision:

> *"I think he's shown enough to really project with the right prerequisite now of work for a starter leading into a camp that we can get the rhythm, the timing, we can get the mastery of our system."*[5]

McCarthy, the No. 10 pick in 2024, threw **12 interceptions against 11 touchdowns on 57.6% passing in 2025** and missed seven games with a high-ankle sprain, concussion and a hairline hand fracture; the Vikings went 6–4 in his starts[4][5]. The Star Tribune notes he remains signed through 2027 with a fifth-year option decision in May, and both QBs will play in Saturday's preseason opener at the Giants[4].

The supporting cast justifies the optimism: Justin Jefferson (career-low 1,048 yards and 2 TDs in 2025 — unlikely to repeat), Jordan Addison, free-agent addition Jauan Jennings, and a rebuilt front that invested its first three draft picks in defense — **Caleb Banks (No. 18, DT), Jake Golday (No. 51, LB) and Domonique Orange (No. 82, DT)** — after trading Jonathan Greenard to Philadelphia[1][11]. Dallas Turner (8 sacks in 2025) inherits Greenard's edge role, Brian Flores' blitz scheme returns intact, and Brian O'Neill signed a four-year, $96M extension in July[1][11]. The risks: Murray has played a full season once in five years, center is unsettled after Ryan Kelly's retirement (Blake Brandel opens there), Harrison Smith was released, and the 2025 passing game ranked **29th in yards, 30th in QB rating and 32nd in turnovers**[2][4]. The market is skeptical — **8.5 win total, +500 division odds, the longest in the division** — but the Athletic projects 9–8 and notes the QB room is better than last year's[2][6][7].

The 2026 head-to-head slate

The NFL's 18-week schedule (announced May 14) gives every NFC North team six division games, several in marquee windows: the season opens with Packers at Vikings, Thanksgiving brings Bears at Lions, and Christmas delivers Packers at Bears on Netflix[8][9].

WEEK	MATCHUP	SITE	DATE	WINDOW
1	Packers at Vikings	U.S. Bank Stadium	Sep 13	CBS 4:25
2	Vikings at Bears	Soldier Field	Sep 20	FOX 1:00
5	Bears at Packers	Lambeau Field	Oct 11	FOX 4:25
7	Packers at Lions	Ford Field	Oct 25	FOX 4:25
8	Vikings at Lions	Ford Field	Nov 1	FOX 1:00
10	Vikings at Packers	Lambeau Field	Nov 15	FOX 1:00
12	Bears at Lions	Ford Field	Nov 26	CBS — Thanksgiving
15	Lions at Vikings	U.S. Bank Stadium	Dec 20	NBC SNF
16	Packers at Bears	Soldier Field	Dec 25	Netflix — Christmas
17	Lions at Bears	Soldier Field	Jan 3	FOX 4:25
18	Bears at Vikings	U.S. Bank Stadium	Jan 10	TBD
18	Lions at Packers	Lambeau Field	Jan 10	TBD

Bye weeks split the division oddly: **Lions and Vikings rest in Week 6, Bears in Week 10, Packers in Week 11**[10]. Both the Lions (vs. New England, Week 10 in Munich) and the Vikings (vs. San Francisco, Week 11 in Mexico City) play international games, and the Lions open their season at Buffalo in the first game at the new Highmark Stadium on Thursday Night Football[8][9]. Notably, Detroit closes with three road division games in its final four weeks — at Minnesota, at Chicago, at Green Bay — while the Packers host four of their last five[1][9].

30 Jan 2026
Vikings fire GM Kwesi Adofo-Mensah
Nolan Teasley hired June 1 as replacement.

2 Mar 2026
Lions trade David Montgomery
To Texans for Juice Scruggs, 4th + 2027 7th.

5 Mar 2026
Bears trade DJ Moore
To Bills for 2026 2nd-round pick (No. 60).

12 Mar 2026
Kyler Murray signs with Vikings
One-year, $1.3M deal with no-tag clause.

23-25 Apr 2026
2026 NFL Draft
Miller 17 (DET), Banks 18 (MIN), Thieneman 25 (CHI), Cisse 52 (GB).

14 May 2026 **2026 schedule released**
18 weeks, Sept. 9 - Jan. 10.

26 May 2026 **Josh Jacobs arrested**
Five charges including felony strangulation.

28 Jul 2026 **O'Neill signs $96M extension**
Vikings tackle locked through 2030.

11 Aug 2026 **Murray named Vikings starter**
McCarthy to No. 2 after 10 camp days.

Where the forecasters land

The consensus is a four-team traffic jam with Detroit on top. BetMGM's division-winner pick is the Lions (+160), the Athletic projects **Lions 12–5, Packers 10–7, Bears 9–8, Vikings 9–8** and calls Detroit its dark-horse Super Bowl pick, and VSiN's strongest play is the Bears Over 9.5[2][3][6].

	Lions	vs	Bears
2025 record	9–8 (4th)	·	11–6 (1st)
2026 win total	10.5	·	9.5
Division odds	+160	·	+325
2025 one-score games	3–5	·	7 wins, incl. 6 after the 2-min warning
2025 games lost to injury	326	·	336

The market's core trade: regression in opposite directions.

KEY FINDING

No division in football can make a credible case for all four teams, and the NFC North is that division. The betting market has it Lions > Packers > Bears > Vikings, but the gap between favorite and longshot (+160 to +500) is the smallest of any NFL division.

The two swing factors that decide everything: **Chicago's 7 one-score wins and 33 takeaways** (regression risk) versus **Detroit's 3–5 one-score record and league-worst injury luck** (regression reward)[2][3][6]. If the Packers get Parsons back at full strength around Week 6 and Jacobs avoids suspension, their closing stretch — four of five at home — is a championship-caliber run[1][2]. The 4-for-4 question — can a division put all four teams in the 14-team playoff field — is live: every team projects to at least 8.5 wins[2][6].

Bottom line

Detroit is the right favorite — easiest schedule, best roster balance, and the most obvious regression candidate in the positive direction — but this is the rare division where the favorite is only +160. Green Bay has the highest ceiling if Parsons returns to form and the Jacobs matter resolves without a suspension; Chicago is the regression risk, with a defense that lost every takeaway-maker it had; Minnesota is the wild card, with a proven (if injury-prone) playmaker at quarterback and the longest odds in the division. Before the season, watch four things: the Jacobs legal case, Parsons' Week 6 target, the health of Branch and Joseph in Detroit, and how Chicago's rebuilt secondary holds up without its turnover machine. Preseason Week 1 kicks off Aug. 13–15, and the regular season begins Sept. 9 with the Bears-Lions matchup on the league's opening slate — a division game on opening Sunday for the fourth straight year for Green Bay, which opens at Minnesota [8] [14].

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