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Minnesota Vikings 2026: A new GM, a two-man QB duel, and a defense leaning on rookies

The Vikings enter 2026 with a new GM, a genuine Kyler Murray–J.J. McCarthy QB competition that has not produced a decisive winner through 10 practices, a rebuilt defensive front, and market expectations of a last-place NFC North finish.

8 min read · 20 sources

2026 season | injury report | quarterback competition | schedule preview | training camp

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The Minnesota Vikings reported to training camp at the TCO Performance Center in Eagan on July 29 with a new general manager, a genuine two-man quarterback competition, and a defensive front that was rebuilt through the draft — all under a coach, Kevin O'Connell, who has won 43 regular-season games in four years but has never won a playoff game. After a 9–8 season in 2025 that missed the postseason, the betting market and most analytics models project the Vikings to finish last in the NFC North, with the entire season hinging on which quarterback wins the job and how quickly he settles in[1][2][3].

The big offseason moves

A new GM after the Adofo-Mensah firing

- **Kwesi Adofo-Mensah was fired on Jan. 30, 2026**, after four seasons. Longtime salary-cap executive **Rob Brzezinski served as interim GM through the draft**, then **Nolan Teasley, a former Seattle Seahawks executive, was hired as permanent general manager on June 1** [4].
- O'Connell (fifth season), offensive coordinator Wes Phillips and defensive coordinator Brian Flores (who received a contract extension Jan. 21) all returned, but the staff was reshuffled: Keith Carter replaced Chris Kuper as offensive line coach, Frank Smith (former Dolphins OC) joined as assistant head coach, and Gerald Alexander replaced Daronte Jones as defensive backs coach after Jones left for Washington [4].

The Kyler Murray signing and the QB room

- **Murray signed a one-year, $1.3 million deal** (veteran minimum) on March 12 after being released by Arizona [5]. The deal includes a **no-tag clause**, guaranteeing Murray hits free agency in 2027 — Minnesota can keep him only by paying him [6].
- **Carson Wentz re-signed on a one-year deal** (March 19), and the room also includes 2024 first-rounder **J.J. McCarthy** and 2025 starter Max Brosmer [5] [4]. McCarthy had a disastrous 2025: **3,200 yards, 19 touchdowns and 13 interceptions (6.6 Y/A)** in 10 starts, and he finished the year with a meniscus surgery history plus a high ankle sprain, a concussion and a hairline fracture in his throwing hand across the season [7] [8].
- Veteran additions also included **WR Jauan Jennings (1 year, $8M)** and **P Johnny Hekker (1 year)**; departures included WR Jalen Nailor (Raiders), P Ryan Wright (Saints), DT Jonathan Allen, DT Javon Hargrave and S Harrison Smith, who was released with a post-June 1 designation but has not retired and remains a possible in-season return [4] [5].

Key contracts

- **Brian O'Neill signed a four-year, $96 million extension (through 2030)** on July 28, the day veterans reported — the team's biggest statement of the summer. O'Neill had stayed out of voluntary OTAs until talks resumed after Teasley was hired [9].
- The Vikings **exercised Jordan Addison's fifth-year option** earlier in the offseason; an extension is considered the next big business item, with the market reset by Zay Flowers' 4-year, $140M Ravens deal [10].

The draft: defense-first

Minnesota had nine selections (its most since 2022), including a compensatory third-rounder for losing Sam Darnold. The first three picks all went to the defensive front:

ROUND	PICK	PLAYER	POS	COLLEGE
1	18	**Caleb Banks**	DT	Florida
2	51	Jake Golday	LB	Cincinnati
3	82	Domonique Orange	DT	Iowa State
3	97	Caleb Tiernan	OT	Northwestern
3	98	Jakobe Thomas	S	Miami
5	159	Max Bredeson	FB	Michigan
5	163	Charles Demmings	CB	Stephen F. Austin
6	198	Demond Claiborne	RB	Wake Forest
7	235	Gavin Gerhardt	C	Cincinnati

The Vikings also **traded edge rusher Jonathan Greenard to Philadelphia** during the draft for third-round picks in 2026 and 2027 — a move that cleared a locker-room fit issue but left the pass rush leaning on Dallas Turner and Andrew Van Ginkel [4] [11].

Training camp storylines to date (through Aug. 10)

Camp opened July 29; through 10 practices, the storylines are the QB battle, an impressive rookie class, and a couple of nagging injuries.

1. The quarterback competition: still open, and getting noisier

O'Connell has said there is "absolutely a date in mind" for naming a starter but has declined to reveal it, and he said again on Aug. 10 that "nothing has really changed" [2] [12]. He has praised Murray's mental grasp — "I think mentally he's definitely probably ahead of where I thought" [12].

The day-to-day scorecard:

- **Murray is getting the majority of first-team reps** — about 37–39 more first-team snaps than McCarthy by Aug. 7, and roughly double by some counts, per SKOR North's tracked counts [13]. McCarthy's best day (Aug. 7: three touchdowns in a four-play red-zone sequence) still mostly came with the second team [13].
- **Neither quarterback has stacked consecutive strong days.** Murray's best day was Aug. 1 (14-of-17, "accurate, decisive" per ESPN), but he threw two interceptions on Aug. 9 and fumbled during 11-on-11 work on Aug. 8; McCarthy has been steadier on short throws but forced a double-coverage throw into the end zone on Aug. 8 [13] [14].
- Early combined completion numbers (first two days, via Purple Insider): Murray 19-of-32 (59%), McCarthy 21-of-27 (78%) — with the caveat that McCarthy worked mostly underneath [13].

- A Mike Sando survey of 50 NFL coaches/executives ranked **Murray 23rd (Tier 3) and McCarthy 34th (Tier 4)** — with every NFC North rival QB ranked ahead of both [14].

> *"The second worst outcome is what we have right now — both guys are so-so. Nobody's really running away with it." — Two Old Bloggers on Vikings 1st & SKOL* [14]

The stakes are unusually high: Murray's no-tag clause makes 2027 a free-agency year, McCarthy's fifth-year option decision looms, and O'Connell enters Year 5 still without a playoff win [1] [3].

2. The rookie class is the camp's bright spot

- **Charles Demmings (5th-round CB)** has been the breakout star, breaking up passes daily against Justin Jefferson, Jordan Addison and Jauan Jennings, plus a sack on Aug. 9. He's drawn comparisons to a pre-Xavier Rhodes homegrown corner [13] [14] [15].
- **Caleb Banks (1st-round DT)** — coming off foot surgery (he played only three games at Florida in 2025 and fractured the same foot before the Combine) — is fully cleared and has worked in with the starters, blowing up a run play past Will Fries in one rep [13] [16].
- **Jake Golday (2nd-round LB)** has earned first-team snaps in Flores' scheme, tipping a pass and shifting to edge [16] [14]. **Gavin Bartholomew (2025 6th-round TE)** has caught everything thrown his way [16]. **Demond Claiborne (6th-round RB)** ripped a 60-yard touchdown run on Aug. 8, but has also dropped passes in red-zone drills [13] [15]. **Jakobe Thomas (3rd-round S)** has rotated with the first-team defense [16].

3. Injuries and lineup notes

- **Jordan Addison** jammed his thumb Aug. 4–5 and sat out most of team drills through Aug. 9; he returned to first-team reps Aug. 8 but was still limited [13].
- **Jay Ward** missed consecutive practices (unknown issue) and Levi Drake Rodriguez/Tyrion Ingram-Dawkins were "banged up" per O'Connell on Aug. 9 [13].
- **Jamal Adams** — signed at the veteran minimum — switched from No. 54 to No. 32 and has been getting first-team safety reps since Aug. 7, potentially squeezing Ivan Pace Jr. (a one-year, $3.52M RFA tender) for a roster spot [13] [16].
- **Christian Darrisaw** (knee issues in 2025) says he "feel[s] the best I've felt in two years" and expects to play every game; he gets regular rest days as a precaution [13] [1].
- **Center is a live concern**: multiple botched snaps by Blake Brandel and Michael Jurgens in the first two padded practices, including a fumbled exchange with Murray [13].
- **Blake Brandel** is the presumptive starter at center following Ryan Kelly's March retirement; veteran swing tackle Ryan Van Demark (1 year, $4.2M guaranteed) was signed for tackle insurance [5] [13].

4. Offensive tweaks and depth battles

- The run game ranked 12th in YPC and sixth in rushing success rate in 2025, and the team is building on that with Keith Carter's physical training standard, Frank Smith's Miami-influenced motion concepts, and rookie fullback Max Bredeson replacing retired C.J. Ham [16].
- **Tai Felton (2025 3rd-round WR)** has emerged as a legitimate No. 4 option behind Jefferson, Addison and Jennings after a one-handed red-zone catch [1] [16]; **Jeshaun Jones** has led camp in buzz but faces a brutal roster bubble [14].
- Justin Jefferson is coming off the weakest season of his career — **84 catches, 1,048 yards, 2 touchdowns** — and the entire offensive identity depends on getting him back to elite production [17] [2].

Preseason outlook

Preseason schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	SITE
Sat, Aug. 15, 12 p.m. CT	at New York Giants	MetLife Stadium
Sat, Aug. 22, 12 p.m. CT	Baltimore Ravens	U.S. Bank Stadium
Fri, Aug. 28, 8 p.m. CT	at Denver Broncos	Empower Field

The Ravens week includes **joint practices in Minnesota on Aug. 19–20** ahead of the Aug. 22 game — a significant proving ground for both the QBs and the roster bubble [18].

Regular-season shape

- The season opens **Sept. 13 vs. Green Bay at U.S. Bank Stadium** and closes with four divisional games among the final six; the Vikings also play the 49ers in Mexico City (Estadio Azteca) on Nov. 22, a Monday night vs. Buffalo on Nov. 9, and a Week 6 bye [4].
- The schedule is a third-place slate (NFC South + AFC East plus third-place finishers from three other divisions), with non-division tests against the Bills, Patriots and 49ers [19].

Market expectations

- **Win total: 8.5** (Over/Under both -110 at BetRivers); **+160 to make the playoffs, -200 to miss**; **+5000 to win the Super Bowl**; **+500 to win the NFC North — the longest odds in the division** [1].
- Projections cluster at 8–9 (WalterFootball, 3rd in NFC North) [19]; PFF frames it as "a roster talented enough to compete in the NFC North if they can find stability at the position" [11].
- Skepticism centers on the QB situation, the departed edge rush (Greenard led the team with 47 pressures), and a defensive front that now relies on a rookie (Banks) and a 3rd-round nose tackle

(Orange)[11][19]. Positives: the league's best tackle pairing when healthy (O'Neill + Darrisaw), one of the NFL's most aggressive defenses under Flores, and a special-teams unit that ranked eighth in DVOA with Reichard going 33-of-35 in 2025[19].

> **CAUTION**
> Some figures above — day-by-day QB completion rates, first-team rep counts and practice observations — come from beat reporters' unofficial tracking and vary by source. Treat exact snap counts as approximate.

Bottom line

The 2026 Vikings are a classic "quarterback-or-bust" team: elite skill talent (Jefferson, Addison, Hockenson), a strong tackle pairing and an aggressive, blitz-heavy defense, but a genuine question mark at the most important position. As of Aug. 10, Kyler Murray holds a clear lead in first-team reps and is the betting favorite, but neither he nor J.J. McCarthy has seized the job, and O'Connell has given no public timeline for a decision. The preseason opener at the Giants on Aug. 15 and the joint practices with Baltimore the following week are the next real checkpoints. The market says last place in the NFC North; the talent says a bounce-back is possible if a winner emerges quickly — and the stakes extend to O'Connell's job security, McCarthy's future and Jefferson's patience beyond 2026[1][2][3].

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