

= National Football League playoffs =

The National Football League ( NFL ) playoffs are a single @-@ elimination tournament held after the end of the regular season to determine the NFL champion . Six teams from each of the league 's two conferences qualify for the playoffs based on regular season records , and a tie @-@ breaking procedure exists in the case of equal records . The tournament ends with the Super Bowl , the league 's championship game , which matches the two conference champions .

NFL postseason history can be traced to the first NFL Championship Game in 1933 , though in the early years , qualification for the game was based solely on regular season records . From 1933 to 1966 , the NFL postseason generally only consisted of the NFL Championship Game , pitting the league 's two division winners ( pending any one @-@ game playoff matches that needed to be held to break ties in the division standings ) . The NFL playoffs then expanded in 1967 , when four teams qualified for the tournament . When the league merged with the American Football League ( AFL ) in 1970 , the playoffs expanded to eight teams . The playoffs were expanded to 10 teams in 1978 and 12 teams since 1990 .

The NFL is the only one out of the four major professional sports leagues in the United States to use a single @-@ elimination tournament in all four rounds of its playoffs ; Major League Baseball ( MLB ) ( not including their wild @-@ card postseason round ) , the National Basketball Association ( NBA ) , and the National Hockey League ( NHL ) all use a " best @-@ of " format instead .

= = Current playoff system = =

The 32 @-@ team league is divided into two conferences : the American Football Conference ( AFC ) and the National Football Conference ( NFC ) , each of which has 16 teams . Since 2002 , each conference has been further divided into four divisions of four teams each . The tournament brackets are made up of six teams from each of the league 's two conferences , following the end of the regular season . Qualification into the playoffs works as follows :

The 4 division champions from each conference ( the team in each division with the best overall record ) , which are seeded 1 through 4 based on their overall won @-@ lost @-@ tied record .

Two wild @-@ card qualifiers from each conference ( the two teams with the best overall records of all remaining teams in the conference ) , which are seeded 5 and 6 .

The names of the first three playoff rounds date back to the postseason format that was first used in 1978 , when the league began using wild @-@ card teams . The first round of the playoffs is dubbed the wild @-@ card playoffs ( or wild @-@ card weekend ) . In this round , the third @-@ seeded division winner hosts the sixth seed wild card , and the fourth seed hosts the fifth . There are no restrictions regarding teams from the same division matching up in any round . The 1 and 2 seeds from each conference receive a bye in the first round , which entitles these teams to automatic advancement to the second round , the divisional playoffs , where they face the wild @-@ card weekend survivors . The NFL does not use a fixed bracket playoff system . The number 1 seed will host the worst surviving seed from the first round ( seed 4 , 5 or 6 ) , while the number 2 seed will play the other team ( seed 3 , 4 or 5 ) . The two surviving teams from each conference 's divisional playoff games then meet in the respective AFC and NFC Conference Championship games ( hosted by the higher seed ) , with the winners of those contests going on to face one another in the Super Bowl . Only twice since 1990 has neither a number one @-@ seeded team nor a number two @-@ seeded team hosted a conference championship game ( in the 2006 AFC Championship the # 3 seeded Indianapolis Colts hosted the # 4 seeded New England Patriots with the Colts winning 38 ? 34 and the 2008 NFC Championship the # 4 seeded Arizona Cardinals hosting the # 6 seeded Philadelphia Eagles with the Cardinals winning 32 ? 25 ) .

If teams are tied ( having the same regular season won @-@ lost @-@ tied record ) , the playoff seeding is determined by a set of tie @-@ breaking rules .

One potential disadvantage is that the two teams with the best records in a conference could play each other before the conference championship if they are in the same division . The better team would be seeded # 1 , while the lesser team would be seeded # 5 as the top wild @-@ card team ,

and as shown in the diagram , it is possible for the # 1 division winner to play the top wild @-@ card team in the divisional round . ( See also the " Modification proposals " section below . )

The New York Giants and New York Jets have shared the same home stadium since 1984 ( first Giants Stadium from 1984 to 2009 , and MetLife Stadium since 2010 ) . Thus , if both teams need to host playoff games on the same weekend , they are always required to play on separate days , even during the Conference Championship round . The only time such a scheduling conflict has occurred was during wild @-@ card weekend in 1985 , when only 10 teams qualified for the postseason and there were only two wild @-@ card games ( See the " History " section below ) : Instead of playing both wild @-@ card games on the same day , as was the case when the 10 @-@ team system was used from 1978 to 1989 , the New England Patriots defeated the Jets , 26 ? 14 , on Saturday , December 28 , before the Giants beat the San Francisco 49ers , 17 ? 3 , on the following day .

= = Breaking ties = =

Often , teams will finish a season with identical records . It becomes necessary , therefore , to devise means to break these ties , either to determine which teams will qualify for the playoffs , or to determine seeding in the playoff tournament . The rules below are applied in order until the tie is broken . If three teams are tied for one playoff spot and the third team is eliminated at any step , the tie breaker reverts to step one for the remaining two teams . If multiple playoff spots are at stake , the rules are applied in order until the first team qualifies , then the process is started again for the remaining teams .

The tie @-@ breaking rules have changed over the years , with the most recent changes being made in 2002 to accommodate the league 's realignment into eight four @-@ team divisions ; record vs. common opponents and most of the other criteria involving wins and losses were moved up higher in the tie @-@ breaking list , while those involving compiled stats such as points for and against were moved to the bottom .

The current tiebreakers are as follows :

= = Overtime rules = =

The NFL introduced overtime for any divisional tiebreak games beginning in 1940 , and for championship games beginning in 1946 . The first postseason game to be played under these rules was the 1958 NFL Championship Game between the Baltimore Colts and New York Giants ( the so @-@ called " Greatest Game Ever Played " ) . Overtime under the original format was sudden death , the first team to score would be declared the winner .

In March 2010 , the NFL amended its rules for postseason overtime , with the rule being extended into the regular season in March 2012 . If a team scores a touchdown ; or if the defense scores a safety on its first possession , it is declared the winner . If it scores a field goal on its first possession , however , it then kicks off to the opposing team , which has an opportunity to score ; if the score is tied again after that possession , true sudden death rules apply and whoever scores next will win .

Since postseason games cannot end in a tie unlike the preseason or regular season , additional overtime periods are played as necessary until a winner is determined . Furthermore , all clock rules apply as if a game had started over . Therefore , if the first overtime period ends with the score still tied , the teams switch ends of the field prior to double overtime . If a game was still tied with two minutes to go in double overtime , there would be a two @-@ minute warning ( but not during the first overtime period as in the regular season ) . And if it were still tied at the end of double overtime , there would be a kickoff to start triple overtime . Although a contest could theoretically last indefinitely , or last multiple overtime periods like several National Hockey League postseason games , no NFL playoff game has ever gone into triple @-@ overtime . The longest NFL game played to date is 82 minutes , 40 seconds : Miami Dolphins kicker Garo Yepremian made the winning 37 @-@ yard field goal after 7 : 40 of double @-@ overtime to defeat the Kansas City Chiefs , 27 ? 24 , in the 1971 ? 72 NFL playoffs on December 25 , 1971 .

= = Playoff and championship history = =

The NFL 's method for determining its champions has changed over the years .

= = = Early years = = =

From the league 's founding in 1920 until 1932 , there was no scheduled championship game . From 1920 ? 1923 , the championship was awarded to a team by a vote of team owners at the annual owners ' meeting . From 1924 ? 1932 , the team having the best winning percentage was awarded the championship . As each team played a different number of games , simply counting wins and losses would have been insufficient . Additionally , tie games were not counted in the standings in figuring winning percentage ( under modern rules , ties count as  $\frac{1}{2}$  win and  $\frac{1}{2}$  loss ) .

= = = 1932 playoff game = = =

In 1932 , the Chicago Bears ( 6 ? 1 ? 6 ) and the Portsmouth Spartans ( 6 ? 1 ? 4 ) were tied at the end of the season with the identical winning percentage of .857 ( the Green Bay Packers ( 10 ? 3 ? 1 ) had more wins , but a lower winning percentage ( .769 ) as calculated under the rules of the day , which omitted ties ) . An additional game was therefore needed to determine a champion . It was agreed that the game would be played in Chicago at Wrigley Field , but severe winter weather and fear of a low turnout forced the game to be moved indoors to Chicago Stadium . The game was played under modified rules on a shortened 80 @-@ yard dirt field , and the Bears won with a final score of 9 ? 0 . As a result of the game , the Bears had the better winning percentage ( .875 ) and won the league title . The loss gave the Spartans a final winning percentage of .750 , and moved them to third place behind the Packers . While there is no consensus that this game was a real " championship " game ( or even a playoff game ) , it generated considerable interest and led to the creation of the official NFL Championship Game in 1933 .

= = = Before the Super Bowl = = =

Given the interest of the impromptu " championship game " , and the desire of the league to create a more equitable means of determining a champion , the league divided into two conferences beginning in 1933 . The winners of each conference ( the first place teams in the conferences ) will play in the NFL Championship Game after the season . There was no tie @-@ breaker system in place ; any ties in the final standings of either conference resulted in a playoff game being played in 1941 , 1943 , 1947 , two games in 1950 , and one each in 1952 , 1957 , 1958 , and 1965 . Since the venue and date of the championship game were often not known until the last game of the season had been played , these playoff games sometimes resulted in delaying the end of the season by one week .

The playoff structure used from 1933 to 1966 was considered inequitable by some because of the number of times it failed to match the teams with the two best records in the championship game , as only the conference winners would qualify for playoff contention . Four times between 1950 and 1966 ( in 1951 , 1956 , 1960 , and 1963 ) the team with the second @-@ best win @-@ loss record did not qualify for the playoffs while the team with the best record in the other conference , but only the third @-@ best in the league , would advance to the championship game .

For the 1967 NFL season , the NFL expanded to 16 teams , and split its two conferences into two divisions each , with four teams in each division . The four division champions would advance to the NFL playoffs , and to remain on schedule , a tie @-@ breaker system was introduced . The first round of playoffs determined the conference 's champion and its representative in the NFL Championship Game , played the following week . Thus , 1967 was the first season there was a scheduled playoff tournament to determine the teams to play for the NFL Championship .

During the three years ( 1967 ? 69 ) that this playoff structure was in effect , there was one use of the tie @-@ breaker system . In 1967 , the Los Angeles Rams and Baltimore Colts ended the

season tied at 11 ? 1 ? 2 for the lead in the Coastal Division . The Colts came into the last game of the season undefeated , but were beaten by the Rams . Though the Colts shared the best win / loss record in the NFL that year , they failed to advance to the playoffs while three other teams with worse records won their divisions . This event figured into the decision in 1970 to include a wild @-@ card team in the playoff tournament after the AFL @-@ NFL merger .

During the 1960s , a third @-@ place playoff game was played in Miami , called the Playoff Bowl . It was contested in early January following the 1960 ? 69 seasons . Though official playoff games at the time they were played , the NFL now officially classifies these ten games ( and statistics ) as exhibitions , not as playoff games .

= = = = AFL and AAFC playoffs = = = =

Since it would eventually merge with the NFL , the history of the AFL 's playoff system merits some explanation . For the 1960 ? 68 seasons , the AFL used the two @-@ divisional format identical to the NFL to determine its champion . There was no tie @-@ breaker system in place , so ties atop the Eastern Division final standings in 1963 and Western Division in 1968 necessitated playoff games to determine each division 's representative in the championship .

For the 1969 season , a first round was added whereby each division winner played the second @-@ place team from the other division . The winners of these games met in the AFL Championship Game . In the only year of this format , the AFL Champion Kansas City Chiefs were the second @-@ place team in the Western division . The Chiefs went on to win Super Bowl IV that season , thus becoming the first non @-@ division winner to win a Super Bowl .

During its brief history , the AAFC , who would merge into the NFL for the 1950 season , used an identical playoff format to the NFL from 1946 to 1948 . In 1949 ( its last year ) , the AAFC would merge its two conferences when one of its teams folded , and use a four @-@ team playoff system . In 1948 , the aforementioned issue of playoff inequity came into play when the San Francisco 49ers would miss the playoffs with a 12 ? 2 record ; they were in the same conference as the 14 ? 0 Cleveland Browns , who would go on to win the Western Conference and then the AAFC 's championship game against the 7 ? 7 Buffalo Bills ( AAFC ) .

= = = Super Bowl and merger = = =

The Super Bowl began as an inter @-@ league championship game between the AFL and NFL , an idea first proposed by Kansas City Chiefs owner Lamar Hunt . This compromise was the result of pressures the upstart AFL was placing on the older NFL . The success of the rival league would eventually lead to a full merger of the two leagues .

From the 1966 season to the 1969 season ( Super Bowls I ? IV ) the game featured the champions of the AFL and NFL . Since the 1970 season , the game has featured the champions of the National Football Conference ( NFC ) and the American Football Conference ( AFC ) .

When the leagues merged in 1970 , the new NFL ( with 26 teams ) reorganized into two conferences of three divisions each . From the 1970 season to the 1977 season , four teams from each conference ( for a total of eight teams ) qualified for the playoffs each year . These four teams included the three division champions , and a fourth wild @-@ card team .

Originally , the home teams in the playoffs were decided based on a yearly rotation . From 1970 to 1974 , the divisional playoff round rotated which of the three division champions would not have home field advantage , with the wild @-@ card teams and the teams they would face in the divisional playoff game would never have home field advantage throughout the playoffs . Starting in 1970 , the divisional playoff games consisted of the AFC Central champions and the NFC West champions playing their games on the road . Then in 1971 it rotated to the AFC East champions and the NFC East champions playing their games on the road . In the 1972 divisional playoff games , the AFC West champions and the NFC Central champions were the visiting teams . And 1973 it would start all over with the AFC Central and NFC West again , and so on . If the " road " division winners advanced to the conference championship games they would be visiting teams again , unless they

played a wild @-@ card winner .

The rotation system led to several playoff inequities , such as :

In 1971 , the top two seeds in each conference met in the divisional round . The teams with the best records in their respective conferences , the Kansas City Chiefs ( AFC ) and Minnesota Vikings ( NFC ) , were ousted by the eventual Super Bowl participants , the Miami Dolphins and Dallas Cowboys .

In 1972 , the Dolphins had to take their perfect record to Three Rivers Stadium to face the Pittsburgh Steelers , who went 10 @-@ 3 @-@ 1 , in the AFC championship game .

In 1973 , the Cowboys finished 10 @-@ 4 but hosted two 12 @-@ 2 teams , the Los Angeles Rams and Minnesota .

The league did not institute a seeding system for the playoffs until 1975 , where the surviving clubs with the higher seeds were made the home teams for each playoff round . Thus , the top seeded division winner played the wild @-@ card team , and the remaining two division winners played at the home stadium of the better seed ( which meant that the lowest @-@ seeded division winner had to open the postseason on the road ) . However , two teams from the same division could not meet prior to the conference championship game . Thus , there would be times when the pairing in the divisional playoff round would be the 1 seed vs. the 3 seed and 2 vs. 4 .

= = = Expansion = = =

Following an expansion of the regular season from 14 to 16 games in the 1978 season , the league added one more wild @-@ card team for each conference . The two wild @-@ card teams played the week before the division winners . The winner of this game played the top seeded division winner as was done from 1970 ? 1977 . The league continued to prohibit intra @-@ divisional games in the divisional playoffs , but allowed such contests in the wild @-@ card round . This ten @-@ team playoff format was used through the 1989 season . Under this system , the Oakland Raiders became the first wild @-@ card team to win a Super Bowl following the 1980 season .

During the strike @-@ shortened 1982 season , only nine regular season games were played , and a modified playoff format was instituted . Divisional play was ignored ( there were some cases where division rivals had both games wiped out by the strike , although each division ultimately sent at least one team to the playoffs ) , and the top eight teams from each conference ( based on W @-@ L @-@ T record ) were advanced to the playoffs . As a result , this became the first time that teams with losing records qualified for the playoffs : the 4 ? 5 Cleveland Browns and the 4 ? 5 Detroit Lions .

Several times between 1978 ? 89 , the two wild @-@ card games had to be played on different days . Normally they both would be held on Sunday . In 1983 and 1988 , the games were split between Saturday and Monday because Sunday was Christmas , and the NFL had avoided playing on that day at the time . In 1984 , both games were played in the Pacific Time Zone , so they had to be played on Saturday and Sunday to accommodate for time differences . In 1985 , both the New York Giants and Jets hosted wild @-@ card games . As they have shared a home stadium since 1984 , the games had to be played on different days .

Since the 1990 season , a third wild @-@ card team for each conference was added , expanding the playoffs to the current twelve teams . The lowest @-@ seeded division winner was then " demoted " to the wild @-@ card weekend . Also , the restrictions on intra @-@ divisional games during the divisional playoffs were removed .

The 1990 format continued until the 2002 expansion and reorganization into eight divisions . In this current format , as explained above , the 4 division winners and 2 wild cards are seeded 1 ? 6 , with the top 2 seeds receiving byes , and the highest seed in each round guaranteed to play the lowest seed . Also , seeds determine the home @-@ field advantage .

= = Modification proposals = =

There are some limitations that exist in the current 12 @-@ team playoff system . Since being a

division winner is a guaranteed playoff berth , there have been many cases in which a team that wins a " weak " division either barely has a winning record ( as with the 2013 Green Bay Packers ) , or has a .500 or losing record altogether ( such as the 2010 Seattle Seahawks ) . At the same time , since a division winner is seeded higher than the wild cards , non @-@ division winners may end up playing a road game during Wild Card Weekend against a team with an inferior record , or may end up outright missing the playoffs . And going on the road during the first postseason round does not guarantee success : the first time that all four road teams won during Wild Card Weekend occurred during the 2015 ? 16 season .

This issue has become more prevalent since the aforementioned 2002 realignment . There are three notable examples in which a division winner with a .500 or sub-.500 record ended up winning a playoff game against a team with a superior record :

In the 2008 ? 09 season , the San Diego Chargers clinched the AFC West with only an 8 ? 8 record , and hosted the 12 ? 4 Indianapolis Colts in the wild @-@ card round , while the New England Patriots failed to even secure a wild @-@ card spot at 11 ? 5 . The Chargers then went on to defeat the Colts in that playoff game .

In the 2010 ? 11 season , the aforementioned 2010 Seahawks won the NFC West with a 7 ? 9 record , hosting and defeating the 11 ? 5 New Orleans Saints . Failing to make the playoffs were the New York Giants and Tampa Bay Buccaneers , both with 10 ? 6 records . The 2010 Seahawks were the first team in NFL history to win both a division championship and a playoff game with a losing regular season record . They currently have the lowest win percentage of any team to ever make the playoffs .

In the 2014 ? 15 season , the Carolina Panthers won the NFC South with a 7 ? 8 ? 1 record . By week 16 , no team in that division could finish with more than seven wins . The Panthers then defeated the Atlanta Falcons , who were 6 ? 9 and undefeated within the division entering the game , for the division title . They hosted and defeated the 11 ? 5 Arizona Cardinals in the wild card round . The best team to miss the playoffs that year was the Philadelphia Eagles , who finished 10 ? 6 . To date , the 2014 Panthers and 2010 Seahawks are the only two teams to win a division , and a playoff game , with a losing record .

As a result of this seeding issue , frequent calls have been made to modify the playoff format even further . One proposal has been to expand the playoffs to 14 teams . Proponents of expansion note the increased revenue that could be gained from an additional two playoff games . They also note that the 12 @-@ team playoff system was implemented when the league only had 28 teams and six divisions ( of 4 to 5 teams each ) . The opposition to such a move notes that an expansion of the playoffs would " water down " the field by giving access to lower @-@ caliber teams . Opponents to expansion further point to the NBA playoffs and the NHL playoffs where 16 of 30 teams qualify for the postseason , and there is often a decreased emphasis on regular season performance as a result .

After the 2007 playoffs saw two wild @-@ card teams with better records ( Jacksonville Jaguars and eventual Super Bowl XLII champions New York Giants ) go on the road to defeat division winners ( Pittsburgh Steelers and Tampa Bay Buccaneers , respectively ) during wild @-@ card weekend , the NFL explored another proposal to change the playoffs so that the team with the better record would host the game , even if that meant a division winner went on the road . The NFL 's Competition Committee withdrew the request later that offseason , with Atlanta Falcons president Rich McKay mentioning that they wanted the idea to simply get a discussion going . New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft was a strong opponent of the rule change , believing that " if you win a division , it 's good for your fans to know you will have a home game . "

Just before the 2010 ? 11 Seahawks @-@ Saints playoff game , McKay wanted to revisit the previous proposal to reseed teams during wild @-@ card weekend . However , sportswriter Peter King wrote that he believed league owners were still hesitant on implementing any such changes at this time due to the then @-@ pending 2011 work stoppage , the proposals to extend the regular season from 16 to 18 games and how it will impact the postseason , and the simple fact that not enough teams have been seriously disadvantaged by the current format .

In October 2013 , NFL commissioner Roger Goodell announced plans to revisit the idea to expand

the playoffs to 14 teams , with the increased revenue gained from the two additional postseason games being used to offset plans to shorten the preseason . The two extra Wild Card games could also be scheduled on the weekend , creating triple @-@ headers on both Saturday and Sunday . Goodell then suggested that they might instead be played on Friday and / or Monday , which may eventually cause scheduling conflicts with games of the new College Football Playoff .

The 14 @-@ team playoff proposal remained tabled until December 2014 , when no team in the NFC South could finish better than .500 ; Goodell stated that the league would vote on it at the March 2015 Owners ' Meetings . One proposed 14 @-@ club system includes giving first @-@ round byes for the teams with the best record in each conference , two division champions in each conference receiving home games , and the remaining eight teams would be seeded by win @-@ loss record . However , by the following February 2015 , the Washington Post reported that support among team owners has eroded , and league leaders expressed reluctance to make a change until the one @-@ year extension with CBS to televise Thursday Night Football expires at the end of the 2015 season .

= = NFL playoff appearances = =

Correct as of 2015 ? 16 NFL playoffs

\* Tiebreaker playoff appearances based on the team with the more recent playoff appearance .

= = = Appearances by active teams = = =