

# Reports: 6 schools commit to staying in Mountain West

Field Level Media

The Mountain West has received binding commitments from UNLV, Air Force and four other full members of the conference following the latest dominoes of conference realignment, Yahoo Sports and NBC Sports reported Thursday.

After Utah State became the fifth Mountain West school to agree to join the Pac-12 Conference, the other six member institutions stayed put, signing agreements that will give each one a signing bonus derived from Pac-12 exit fees. A specific dollar figure was not yet known.

UNLV rejected overtures from the rebuilding Pac-12. Air Force turned down heavy interest from the American Athletic Conference.

With those schools committing to the Mountain West, the remaining members lined up behind them on Thursday: Nevada, New Mexico, San Jose State and Wyoming.

Hawaii, a football-only member, also agreed to remain affiliated with the Mountain West despite interest from the Pac-12, Yahoo reported Thursday.

The Mountain West still needs to add two more schools to get to the requisite eight to be recognized as a conference for the purposes of the College Football Playoff.

Boise State, Colorado State, Fresno State, San Diego State and Utah State have agreed to join Oregon State and Washington State in the Pac-12 in 2026.

With seven members, the Pac-12 is still one short of the minimum requirements. On Monday, Memphis, Tulane, South Florida and UTSA all passed on Pac-12 offers to remain in the AAC.



BENJAMIN B. BRAUN / TNS

Pittsburgh Steelers wide receiver George Pickens catches a ball for a first down and is pushed out of bounds by Los Angeles Chargers cornerback Kristian Fulton at Acrisure Stadium on Sunday in Pittsburgh.

## COMMENTARY

# There’s no reason the Steelers can’t contend for AFC supremacy

BY PAUL ZEISE  
*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

### PITTSBURGH

The NFL season is only three weeks old, but there are some trends that seem to be developing, and one of them is that the Steelers might be the third-best team in the AFC. And that is only as of now because the Steelers have the look of a team, especially on offense, that will only get better as they get more experience under their belt.

I know, it is a bit of an overreaction given that there is so much of the season left to be played and so many things can happen between now and the end of the season. But I have seen no evidence the Steelers can’t beat anyone in the AFC not named the Bills and Chiefs in this early part of

the season, and there are some teams that many thought were contenders that look awfully pedestrian at this point.

The first step is to win the AFC North, and the Steelers appear to be in really good position already, as the other three teams have not been nearly as good as they were billed. The Steelers have won three games, and maybe they haven’t yet beat a playoff team, but a quick look around the NFL through three weeks shows that every team is vulnerable.

Start with the Bengals, who many believed would be a force to be reckoned with in the AFC North. They have a healthy Joe Burrow and allegedly rebuilt their defense, but after watching them get sliced and diced by a rookie quarterback on “Monday Night Football,”

I am not sure their defense is any better than it was a year ago.

And they sit at 0-3 after Monday with a tough schedule on the horizon. It is entirely possible that next week against Carolina is their only “easy” game (though Andy Dalton has certainly breathed life into the Panthers) until they play the Titans in December and, by then, they could be buried.

The Browns are a mess. Deshaun Watson is the biggest mess and Myles Garrett is hobbled. They look to me like a team that is not going to get out of their own way at any point this season, and now they have three road games in a row. By the time the Steelers see them late in November, they could be on their way to another rotten season, and that’s especially true

if Watson’s legal troubles finally catch up to him.

Dallas ran out of time Sunday against Baltimore, or the Ravens might be 0-3, as well. The Ravens should be the class of the AFC North, but they have a penchant for late-game collapses and sit at 1-2 with a really tough schedule ahead of them over the next five games.

So again, I ask, why shouldn’t the Steelers be the favorite to win the division? They have by far the best defense in the division – and perhaps the entire NFL – and their offense seems to be improving each week as Justin Fields finds his way. If they can improve their passing game even a little bit, they will be a real problem for anyone they play.

The Steelers’ prospects have improved significantly, as well, if you’ve



KIRBY LEE / USA TODAY NETWORK

Eagles defensive tackle Jalen Carter (98) had a big game against the Saints with four tackles (two for losses), two batted passes and a quarterback hit.

# Pass rushes key as Eagles visit Buccaneers

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The Tampa Bay Buccaneers have surrendered 12 sacks while recording none of their own in their past two games.

Flipping that script could be critical to Sunday’s result as the Philadelphia Eagles visit Tampa, Fla., for a battle of 2-1 teams.

Baker Mayfield was sacked seven times in last weekend’s stunning 26-7 home loss to the previously winless Denver Broncos. For the second straight week, he threw for fewer than 200 yards and tossed an interception.

Tampa Bay enters Week 4 ranked 26th in the NFL in total offense and 27th in rushing, but Mayfield re-

fused to place all the blame for his dirty uniform on the offensive line.

“There were a few pressures this week that were actually on me,” Mayfield said. “There’s a mindset of trying to fix the protections when they’re bringing some of these pressures, and there’s also a mindset to snap the ball and get it out of your hands.”

“Not all of that is on the O-line.”

The last time Philadelphia visited Raymond James Stadium, Mayfield threw for 337 yards and three touchdowns in a 32-9 wild-card playoff victory on Jan. 15 of this year.

The Eagles sacked Mayfield four times in that loss – the same number their pass rush has generated

through three games this year.

Philadelphia sacked Atlanta’s Kirk Cousins only once in a last-minute 22-21 loss at home in Week 2, then took down Derek Carr only once in a last-minute 15-12 win at New Orleans in Week 3.

Second-year Eagles defensive tackle Jalen Carter is still looking for his first sack of the season, but he shined against the Saints with four tackles (two for losses), two batted passes and a quarterback hit.

“Obviously, this past game was his best game by far,” defensive coordinator Vic Fangio said. “And hopefully that will set the trend moving forward. I don’t know what actually

triggered it, other than he, and we as a D-Line unit, didn’t play good in the previous game. So I’m sure that had something to do with it.”

The headliners for this contest on offense include Eagles running back Saquon Barkley and Buccaneers wide receiver Chris Godwin.

Barkley leads the NFL in rushing (351 yards) and is tied for the lead in touchdowns from scrimmage (five) through his first three games with Philadelphia. Godwin already has 21 catches and has scored touchdowns in all three games.

Including the playoffs, Tampa Bay has won five of the past six meetings dating back to 2015.

Both teams are keeping an eye on injuries and the weather, with Tropical Storm Helene expected to reach hurricane strength before striking Florida’s Gulf Coast on Thursday night.

Eagles star receiver A.J. Brown (hamstring) still wasn’t practicing Wednesday after missing the last two games. No. 2 wideout DeVonta Smith and right tackle Lane Johnson are both in concussion protocol, while right guard Mekhi Becton (finger) and left guard Landon Dickerson (wrist) were listed as limited participants.

Defensive lineman Calijah Kancey (calf) and safety Antoine Winfield Jr. (foot) did not practice for the Buccaneers on Wednesday. Limited participants included defensive tackle Vita Vea (knee), left tackle Tristan Wirfs (knee), rookie running back Bucky Irving (hamstring) and wideouts Godwin (neck) and Mike Evans (knee).



CHARLES LECLAIRE / Imagn Images

Braves star Ronald Acuna Jr. hasn’t played since May when he suffered a torn ACL, but he’s hopeful to be back in the lineup for Opening Day next season.

# Braves’ Acuna aims to return on Opening Day 2025

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Ronald Acuna Jr. hopes to return to the field in time for Opening Day in 2025, but the Atlanta Braves’ star outfielder said he is not rushing his recovery from a torn left ACL he sustained this May.

“I’m just going to be a little more cautious and careful with (my recovery),” Acuna said Wednesday, per MLB.com. “If the team and the doctors tell me I’m ready to go and I go out there and I don’t feel good, or something’s bothering me, then I will say something.”

Acuna sustained the injury while running the bases against the Pirates in Pittsburgh on May 26.

He was batting .250 with four home runs and 15 RBIs in 49 games this season after winning his first National League MVP Award in 2023. Acuna

paid attention to the rest of the teams in the conference.

Yes, they are still behind the Bills and Chiefs because those two teams have the two most dynamic quarterbacks in the NFL. Monday night, Josh Allen and the Bills showed how scary good they can be when they are hitting on all cylinders. The Chiefs have Patrick Mahomes, and as long as he is healthy, the rest of the conference is playing for second as far as I am concerned.

Once you get beyond those two teams, who else would you not give the Steelers a really good chance to beat in a playoff game?

The Dolphins are probably cooked because their quarterback situation is up in the air. They have not looked good in any of their games, even their lone win against the Jaguars. And their vaunted defense has been shredded for 55 points in the last two games, which is not a good sign for a team that suddenly has quarterback problems.

The Jaguars are a mess, Houston is coming off an ugly loss to the Vikings, and the Steelers just beat the Chargers, who are likely the second-best team in the AFC West. The lone wild card is the Jets, but their entire season is built on the idea that 40-year old Aaron Rodgers can somehow stay healthy.

Barring a rash of injuries, the Steelers defense isn’t going anywhere, and will keep them in every game no matter who they play. That gives them an edge over just about every other team in the AFC, so it suddenly doesn’t seem so far-fetched that they could win 12 games and be the second or third seed in the AFC.

That’s not something I thought I would be writing about before the season started, but after watching the first three weeks, it is something that not only seems like a real possibility, it is creeping into the territory where it is a probability.