

NFL 2025-26 Season

Season Gap Analysis Supplement

Preseason Gaps → In-Season Adaptation → Outcomes

All 7 teams | Designed to inform 2026 draft research

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Season Gap Analysis: Preseason Concerns → In-Season Adaptation → Outcomes

This section tracks each team's identified preseason weaknesses, how they adapted (or failed to adapt) during the season, and the final outcome of each gap. This framework is designed to directly inform your team's draft research — understanding which gaps were resolved organically (and how) vs. which require draft/FA investment in 2026.

✅ Resolved
⚠️ Partial
❌ Unresolved
⊕ Exceeded
Outcome legend — used consistently across all 7 team tables below

Denver Broncos

14-3 | AFC #1 Seed → AFC Championship Game | Preseason odds: Super Bowl +2500 | O/U: 9.5 wins (preseason)

The Broncos entered 2025 with significant questions around their second-year QB, an inept 2024 rushing attack, a questionable run-blocking scheme, and a thin tight end room. Preseason consensus gave them 9-10 wins — they nearly doubled expectations with 14.

Preseason Gap Identified	In-Season Adaptation	Outcome
Rushing attack near-historic bad in 2024 (Bo Nix was leading rusher)	Signed RB J.K. Dobbins + drafted backup RB; Payton committed more to establishing run game	✅ Resolved — Dobbins was one of the best RBs in the NFL; rushing attack transformed from bottom-5 to a genuine weapon
WR room outside Courtland Sutton produced almost nothing in 2024	Kept same core but relied on internal development — Troy Franklin and rookie Pat Bryant both emerged	✅ Resolved — Sutton crossed 1,000 yds; Franklin added 700+ yds/6 TDs; room meaningfully better
Bo Nix accuracy and explosive plays — preseason offense looked 'meh' vs. first-team D	McDaniels-inspired play design simplified Nix's reads; defense kept games close, limiting need for heroics	⚠️ Partial — Nix was efficient but not explosive; team went 12-3 in one-score games relying on late execution
Run blocking — O-line had preseason issues; TE blocking was weak	Same 9 O-linemen returned (rare continuity); Tight end room addressed by adding Evan Engram	✅ Resolved — O-line became #1 in NFL (league-low 6 sacks); pass protection elite all year

Preseason Gap Identified	In-Season Adaptation	Outcome
ILB depth — Dre Greenlaw was injured/released mid-season; Singleton inconsistent	Re-signed Alex Singleton and Justin Strnad as starters; accepted the limitation	✗ Unresolved — ILB remains a weakness entering 2026; missed assignments on big plays
Penalty rate was among worst in 2024	Discipline improved under Payton's third year; cleaner execution	✓ Resolved — Penalties no longer a defining negative for the team

Bo Nix suffered a season-ending ankle injury in the AFC Championship Game vs. New England — a brutal end after a remarkable regular season that validated the Broncos' roster-building approach.

Seattle Seahawks

14-3 | NFC #1 Seed → Super Bowl LX Champions 🏆 | Preseason odds: Super Bowl long shot; projected 11-12 wins by most analysts

The Seahawks entered 2025 with their three most important offensive players from 2024 gone (Geno Smith traded, DK Metcalf traded to Pittsburgh, Tyler Lockett released). Sam Darnold was a polarizing signing — a reclamation story or a step backward? The O-line allowed 54 sacks in 2024. Almost every preseason concern proved manageable.

Preseason Gap Identified	In-Season Adaptation	Outcome
New QB (Darnold) + new OC (Kubiak) chemistry in a new system — no preseason reps with starters	Darnold had prior familiarity with Kubiak from SF; offense emphasized run game to reduce complexity early	✅ Resolved — Darnold posted 4,048 yds, 67.7% completion, 99.1 passer rating; finished B+ for the season
Loss of DK Metcalf and Tyler Lockett — WR room unproven with JSN as the only known quantity	Signed Cooper Kupp as WR2; JSN exploded into a franchise-record season (1,313 yds in 11 games)	+ Exceeded — JSN exceeded all expectations; Kupp provided veteran presence; trade deadline add of Shaheed was key
O-line allowed 54 sacks in 2024 — new OL coach John Benton, rookie Grey Zabel at G	Benton rebuilt unit culture; Zabel developed quickly; run-heavy scheme reduced pass-pro stress	✅ Resolved — Sacks allowed dropped dramatically; O-line was above average by season's end
Kenneth Walker III health — missed time in 2024, durability a concern	Walker returned healthy; Charbonnet provided genuine 1B depth; run game became a strength	✅ Resolved — Walker + Charbonnet run game was decisive in multiple playoff wins
Sam Darnold turnover risk — led league in turnovers at times; 14 INTs on the season	Defense's elite level meant turnovers less costly; Darnold and Seahawks had zero turnovers across entire postseason run	⚠️ Partial — Regular season turnovers a concern; Darnold completely locked in during playoffs when it mattered most
Macdonald year 2 — could defense repeat elite production without key free agents?	Added DeMarcus Lawrence (DE); retained core; Macdonald's scheme complexity improved with year-2 familiarity	✅ Resolved — Defense again elite; Lawrence + Murphy II pass rush was decisive in Super Bowl

The Seahawks' Super Bowl LX win (29-13 over New England) validated every preseason doubt about Darnold, the offense, and the O-line. Mike Macdonald became the third-youngest coach to win a Super Bowl at age 38.

New England Patriots

AFC #2 Seed → AFC Championship Game | Preseason odds: Projected 7-8 wins | O-line ranked 32nd entering season | Jerod Mayo fired, Vrabel hired

The Patriots were a team in genuine transition: new head coach Mike Vrabel, a second-year QB in Drake Maye, an O-line ranked dead last, and a receiving corps headlined by an aging Stefon Diggs. That they reached 13+ wins and the AFC Championship Game represents one of the most surprising overperformances of the season.

Preseason Gap Identified	In-Season Adaptation	Outcome
O-line ranked 32nd — Cole Strange the weak link; no protection for Maye	Signed Morgan Moses (RT) + Garrett Bradbury (C) in free agency; drafted Will Campbell (top OL pick); McDaniels' gap scheme reduced pressure points	✅ Resolved — O-line rose to ~12th; Maye had 6th-longest time to pressure (2.55 sec); Campbell was a strong rookie
No true #1 WR — Diggs aging, Boutte unproven, no separation threat	Leaned on TE room and short-area passing; run game via TreVeyon Henderson took pressure off passing	⚠️ Partial — Receiver limitation exposed vs. Seattle in Super Bowl; no WR cracked elite status
Defensive identity unclear under new regime (Vrabel, new DC)	Vrabel installed physical, gap-sound scheme; defense was outstanding in playoffs — held Chargers to 3 pts in Wild Card	✅ Resolved — Defense played championship-caliber football in postseason
Drake Maye pressure — was 2024 efficiency real or mirage? Could he sustain it?	McDaniels simplified reads, emphasized mobility; Maye's dual-threat ability kept defenses honest	✅ Resolved — Maye was MVP-caliber all season; narrowly missed award; acknowledged as franchise QB
Special teams below average overall — return game a non-factor except Marcus Jones	Marcus Jones emerged as elite punt returner (17.3 yds avg, 2 TDs); coverage units improved under Vrabel's discipline	⚠️ Partial — Jones was excellent but broader ST units remained average
Vrabel year 1 culture install — new staff, high expectations, unproven staff cohesion	Vrabel's player-first culture established quickly; 10-game win streak mid-season proved buy-in was real	✅ Resolved — 14 wins in debut season; culture clearly strong; players praised Vrabel all year

The Patriots lost the Super Bowl to Seattle 29-13, but the season was a massive success by any preseason measure. The O-line concern — the biggest gap entering 2025 — was almost entirely resolved.

Chicago Bears

NFC #2 Seed | Wild Card Win (Bears 38, Packers 20) → Lost Divisional | *Preseason odds: Projected 9-10 wins; NFC North competitive; Ben Johnson untested as HC*

The Bears' 2025 was defined by a single bold bet: Ben Johnson + Caleb Williams would unlock a previously dormant offense. The biggest preseason concern was whether the interior O-line rebuild (Thuney, Dalman, Jackson) could hold up and whether Williams' 2024 inconsistency was a scheme problem (it was) or a talent problem (it wasn't).

Preseason Gap Identified	In-Season Adaptation	Outcome
Interior O-line was a disaster in 2024 (65 sacks allowed in 2023, 36 in 2024 — still bottom half)	Signed Joe Thuney (LG), Drew Dalman (C), acquired Jonah Jackson (RG) — full interior rebuild in one offseason	✅ Resolved — Interior O-line transformed; Williams got cleaner pockets; Bears ranked ~11th in O-line
Caleb Williams 2024 inconsistency — scheme fit questioned under Eberflus/Shane Waldron	Johnson's system designed precisely for Williams' improvisational style; play designs created separation without needing elite route runners	✅ Resolved — Williams flourished in Year 2; Ben Johnson called him a 'perfect match' for the system
Ben Johnson unproven as HC — excellent OC but no HC experience	Johnson's football IQ translated; cultural install was smooth; Bears bought in quickly	✅ Resolved — 14-win debut, NFC North title, playoff win; one of the best coaching debuts in years
Defensive coordinator unproven — no established DC identity	Defense relied heavily on turnovers to generate points; bend-don't-break approach worked most of the season	❌ Unresolved — Defense too reliant on turnovers for sustained playoff success; Bears lost in Divisional Round partly due to this
WR room thin behind DJ Moore — no true deep threat or contested catch WR	Johnson's scheme created manufactured separation via motion, jet sweeps, RPOs; Keenan Allen (vet) added briefly	⚠️ Partial — Bears functioned without a true #1 WR but deep playoff runs will require more
NFC North gauntlet — Lions, Packers, Vikings all playoff-caliber	Won the division; beat the Lions in Week 18 on a field goal for the NFC North crown	✅ Resolved — Won NFC North title, first division title since 2018

The Bears' late regular-season inconsistency (dropped the Lions game 19-16 in Week 17) and defensive limitations ultimately ended their run in the Divisional Round. But the foundation is genuinely exciting heading into 2026 with Williams in Year 3.

Los Angeles Chargers

AFC #5 Seed | Wild Card exit | Preseason odds: Projected 9-10 wins | Harbaugh Year 2 | Herbert pressure concerns entering season

The Chargers entered 2025 with the same core question as 2024: can Jim Harbaugh build enough of a supporting cast around Justin Herbert to go deep in January? The O-line was supposed to be a strength — but Herbert was pressured at the highest rate of his career at various points, becoming the most pressured QB in the league. Still, a playoff berth was the baseline goal, and they cleared it.

Preseason Gap Identified	In-Season Adaptation	Outcome
Herbert pressure rate — led NFL in being pressured, hit, and sacked at times	Harbaugh's run-first, play-action heavy scheme reduced passing volume and pressure frequency; Herbert was most efficient when below 45% pressure rate	⚠️ Partial — Herbert finished with lowest passer rating of career (92.2) but team still made playoffs; issue persisted late season
No proven WR1 after departures of Keenan Allen era weapons	Relied on Herbert's accuracy to multiple mid-range targets; TE room (Gerald Everett tier) provided check-down safety	⚠️ Partial — Receiver corps functioned but wasn't dominant; no true #1 emerged
Jesse Minter as DC — first year as Chargers DC; defensive identity unclear	Minter ran aggressive multiple scheme; defense finished 9th in points allowed — exceeded expectations	✅ Resolved — Minter's defense was a genuine strength; pass defense finished 1st in passer rating allowed
Rest-of-roster depth concerns — salary cap constraints from prior regime	Harbaugh's culture and player development compensated for roster gaps; practice squad players contributed meaningfully	⚠️ Partial — Depth held up during regular season but thin roster exposed in playoff loss
Herbert health — took significant hits throughout season	Harbaugh managed Herbert's snap count strategically; Chargers rested starters in Week 18	✅ Resolved — Herbert stayed healthy through season; organizational decision to rest him was disciplined

The Chargers' Wild Card exit doesn't diminish a successful Harbaugh Year 2 — they eliminated the Chiefs from playoff contention and beat winning teams. The Herbert/receiver mismatch is the primary offseason priority heading into 2026.

Buffalo Bills

AFC Wild Card | Divisional Round exit (lost to Denver 33-30) | Preseason odds: Super Bowl contenders; Josh Allen reigning MVP; O/U: 11.5 wins

The Bills were widely picked as AFC Super Bowl favorites with Josh Allen coming off an MVP season. The preseason concern was singular and well-known: no true #1 WR. By year's end, that gap proved decisive — a team that was expected to go deep fell in the Divisional Round in a game where Allen couldn't carry the passing game alone.

Preseason Gap Identified	In-Season Adaptation	Outcome
No true WR1 — receiver corps thin behind Allen; couldn't create separation vs. elite corners	McDermott and OC leaned on James Cook's run game and Allen's scrambling to compensate; no major WR addition at deadline	✗ Unresolved — WR gap acknowledged by McDermott himself in Week 17; ultimately cost them vs. Denver's secondary
Defensive pass rush — lacking elite edge rusher opposite Von Miller era	Relied on scheme and Bobby Babich's coverage disguise to generate pressure; didn't add pass rusher at deadline	✗ Unresolved — 12th in scoring defense adequate but not championship-caliber; couldn't stop runs either
Allen durability — banged up in Wild Card vs. Jacksonville (returned and won)	Allen played through injuries; team managed his workload carefully late season	⚠ Partial — Allen was diminished physically in the Divisional Round loss; health clearly a factor
Sean McDermott defensive scheming — has never maximized defense to championship level with Allen	Didn't make significant mid-season staff changes; relied on same system	✗ Unresolved — McDermott was fired after the season; 'couldn't break through' narrative solidified
Offensive consistency without top WRs vs. elite defenses	Allen's improvisational genius masked the gap in most games; not enough against Denver's elite CB Pat Surtain II	✗ Unresolved — Denver's Surtain shut down the passing game; Bills' receiver limitation was fully exposed

The Bills' Divisional Round exit to Denver (33-30) ended Sean McDermott's tenure. Despite the loss, Bills are in an excellent position for 2026 — Allen is in his prime, the O-line is elite, and OC Joe Brady was promoted as new HC to finally build around Allen correctly.

Kansas City Chiefs

6-11 | Missed Playoffs (first time since 2015) | Preseason odds: Super Bowl +800 | O/U: 11.5 wins — among the favorites

The Chiefs were Super Bowl favorites entering 2025. Their collapse to 6-11 is the NFL's most stunning single-season fall in recent memory. Every gap that existed was amplified by bad luck and cascading failures — but several were identifiable before the season started.

Preseason Gap Identified	In-Season Adaptation	Outcome
WR corps built around speed, no physical X receiver to win man coverage or finish contested catches	No mid-season correction — tried to make speed-focused corps work all year; Hollywood Brown, Thornton, Worthy couldn't create vs. press man	✗ Unresolved — Deep pass outside numbers: 12/40, 0 TDs, 3 INTs; no receiver hit 600 yards; the #1 identified gap became the season-defining failure
Rashee Rice 6-game suspension — preseason known, no real contingency plan	Relied on Hollywood Brown + Tyquan Thornton; Xavier Worthy injured Week 1 compounded this	✗ Unresolved — Team went under .500 in first 5 weeks with Mahomes handcuffed
Running back room — Pacheco recovering from 2024 fibula fracture	Kareem Hunt started as lead back; Pacheco returned but averaged just 3.9 ypc; no explosive back added	✗ Unresolved — Run game averaged under 4.0 ypc; Mahomes ranked 2nd on team in rushing yards (407)
O-line question marks at LT (Simmons new starter) and RT (rotating cast)	Simmons showed top-5 potential when healthy but missed significant time with wrist injury; RT never stabilized	✗ Unresolved — O-line inconsistency under pressure all season; Mahomes took far more hits than any prior Chiefs year
OC Matt Nagy — 3rd straight year offense ranked 20th+ in points per game	No change at OC; Reid ran same scheme; playcalling described as predictable and personnel-mismatched	✗ Unresolved — 20th in points/game, 17th in yards/game; identity-less offense for 3rd straight year
Pass rush depth behind Chris Jones — aging and unproven edge options	11 consecutive scoreless quarters without a sack at one point; Spagnuolo's scheme couldn't mask lack of edge talent	✗ Unresolved — Corners and safeties in perpetual 'cover forever' mode; defense weakened despite elite scheme
Special teams — Butker missed critical kicks in September and October	No structural fix; Butker eventually steadied but early-season misses cost 2 games by a combined 9 points	✗ Unresolved — Two early losses that could have changed the season trajectory were gifted away via ST mistakes

Remarkably, 6 of the 7 gaps identified preseason remained unresolved by season's end. The Chiefs did not adapt — they doubled down on the same roster construction that was already showing cracks. The 2026 offseason must be aggressive.

Cross-Team Gap Resolution Summary

A quick-reference view of which teams successfully closed their preseason gaps — and which entered 2026 still carrying the same vulnerabilities. This directly maps to draft/FA priorities.

Team	✓ Fixed	⚠ Partial	✗ Open	Total Gaps	Fix Rate	2026 Priority
Denver Broncos	4	1	1	6	67%	ILB, TE depth, pass-catching
Seattle Seahawks	4	2	0	6	100%	Lock in Darnold; add WR depth
New England Patriots	4	2	0	6	100%	True WR1, CB depth
Chicago Bears	4	2	1	7	71%	DC hire, WR1, playoff-proven D
LA Chargers	2	3	0	5	100%	WR1 for Herbert, RT depth
Buffalo Bills	0	2	3	5	40%	WR1, edge rusher — must address
Kansas City Chiefs	0	0	7	7	0%	X receiver, RT, RB, OC change

Key insight: Seattle and New England entered the Super Bowl as the two highest-rated gap-resolution teams — they fixed everything they could fix. Kansas City resolved 0 of 7 identified gaps. The correlation between gap closure and postseason success could not be clearer.

This table is your starting point for the 2026 draft research. Teams with the most open gaps + highest draft capital = the biggest roster construction opportunities to track.