

NFL ANNOUNCES SCHEDULE FOR 2010 SEASON

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NEW YORK -- The Super Bowl champion New Orleans Saints will get an early test when they host the Minnesota Vikings in the NFL season opener, a rematch of their thrilling NFC championship game decided in overtime.

That nationally televised game will be Thursday night, Sept. 9. New Orleans won its first conference title by beating Minnesota 31-28 on a 40-yard field goal by Garrett Hartley 4:45 into overtime. The Saints went on to defeat the Indianapolis Colts 31-17 in the Super Bowl.

"I can't imagine it being anymore charged than the last time we were down there," Vikings coach Brad Childress said Tuesday night. "That's always a great, hostile environment to play in."

The Saints also will play at Dallas on Thanksgiving Day; the Cowboys handed New Orleans its first defeat after 13 victories last season.

In an effort to make late-season games more meaningful and avoid teams sitting out regulars once they have clinched a playoff berth, the NFL set up all intradivision matchups for the final Sunday, Jan. 2. That adjustment caused much of the delay in the release of the schedule this year; it normally is announced in early April or before.

Indianapolis begins its 2010 schedule at Houston on the first full day of the season, Sept. 12. Another highlight that Sunday will be the regular-season debut of the new Meadowlands Stadium, with Carolina at the New York Giants. The next night, Baltimore is at the New York Jets in the same venue, followed by San Diego at Kansas City in what has become a traditional Monday night doubleheader to kick off the season.

Two games will be played abroad: Denver versus San Francisco in London on Oct. 31, and Chicago versus Buffalo in Toronto the following Sunday, Nov. 7, the fifth of eight games the Bills will play in Toronto through the 2012 season.

"Our Toronto fans will have the opportunity to see us play against one of the most storied franchises in NFL history," Bills owner Ralph Wilson said, "with Brian Urlacher anchoring the Bears' defence and Jay Cutler, one of the most exciting quarterbacks in the game today, leading their offence."

The Jets also will host the Thanksgiving night game, against Cincinnati. Also on that holiday, New England visits Detroit.

Donovan McNabb's first game as Redskins quarterback will be against a familiar foe: Dallas. The Cowboys visit Washington in the Sunday night game on Sept. 12.

McNabb goes back to Philadelphia on Sunday, Oct. 4, the fourth week of the schedule and the first week with byes.

"It's a competitive schedule to measure ourselves against some of the top teams in the National Football League," Redskins coach Mike Shanahan said. "It is flattering to open the season on national television on Sunday night and to also play three prime-time games and five national broadcasts in our first nine games."

Other featured matchups include the Giants at the Colts as the prime-time Sunday game in Week 2, the second meeting between Peyton Manning and younger brother Eli; the almost-annual Colts-Patriots game, in Week 11 at New England; Dallas at Arizona on Christmas night, a Saturday; and the double dose of Brett Favre vs. the Packers, if the 40-year-old quarterback returns to Minnesota: Sunday night, Oct. 24 at Lambeau, and Nov. 21 at Minneapolis.

Julius Peppers, the highest-profile free agent this year, will return to Carolina with his new team when the Bears play the Panthers in Week 5.

In addition to Shanahan's first game coaching the Redskins, the debuts of the two other new head coaches will have Pete Carroll's Seahawks hosting San Francisco, and Chan Gailey's Bills at home against Miami.

The Rams, who hold the first pick in Thursday's draft, open at home against Arizona.