

Sink or Swim?

The Dolphins open the 2008 season full of potential, but will they be able to reverse the curse of 2007?

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with assistance from William Williams

The next time you encounter a lull in cocktail conversation, try throwing down this pronouncement: *The Miami Dolphins will be better this year.* Feel free to say it loud enough to be overheard. Though some might question how many martinis you've had, the Dolphins will surely prove you right.

One silver lining to an excruciating 2007 season – the team's worst in history – is that the 1-15 record leaves nowhere to go but up. But could they be better than better? Could they be, ahem, good? While it would be rash to clear your calendar in expectation of playoff games, the short answer is, "yes." For one thing, turning in a solid season after a lousy season, while surprising, wouldn't be unprecedented (see chart). Recent NFL history is full of teams going from bad to good. But more important than precedent, the roster is brimming with potential, especially in the skill positions, and the previous decision makers have been replaced with blue chips.

When you go 1-15, change is your friend, and the Dolphins have plenty of that. Let's look at some of the many reasons this year will be different.

CH-CH-CH-CHANGES

"I think the franchise is headed in the right direction," says Dolphins General Manager Jeff Ireland about the 2008 squad. "We made a lot of changes in order to get both younger and stronger, and I think we accomplished that objective. We used the draft to add eight rookies to our roster, and we are excited about their potential. We signed some talented free agents and are happy with the players from last year's team that remain on our roster this season. I think we have a good blend of veterans

and young players that will certainly make us a better football team.

"I don't think anyone can truly know what our record will be this year or in the future. Obviously, like every team in the league, we want to win every game we play. But it's hard to quantify how good we may be. I look at it from a different perspective; we have a young team and one of the things I'm excited about is watching them develop during the course of the year," Ireland adds.

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THE JET FROM OUT OF THE BLUE

No Cinderella story is complete without a fairy godmother. One day before the first preseason game, it seemed a wand was waving somewhere, as the Dolphins picked up Chad Pennington after the New York Jets cut him to make room for Brett Favre. Having an accurate passer doesn't ensure a successful season. But going without one makes it much, much tougher. Take it from the Dolphins, who have gone without ever since Dan Marino. Nobody is saying Pennington is the next Marino. But he has taken a team to the playoffs and won when he got there. He's also capable of putting together a fantastic season, as he did in 2002, amassing a quarterback rating of 104.2 through 15 games.

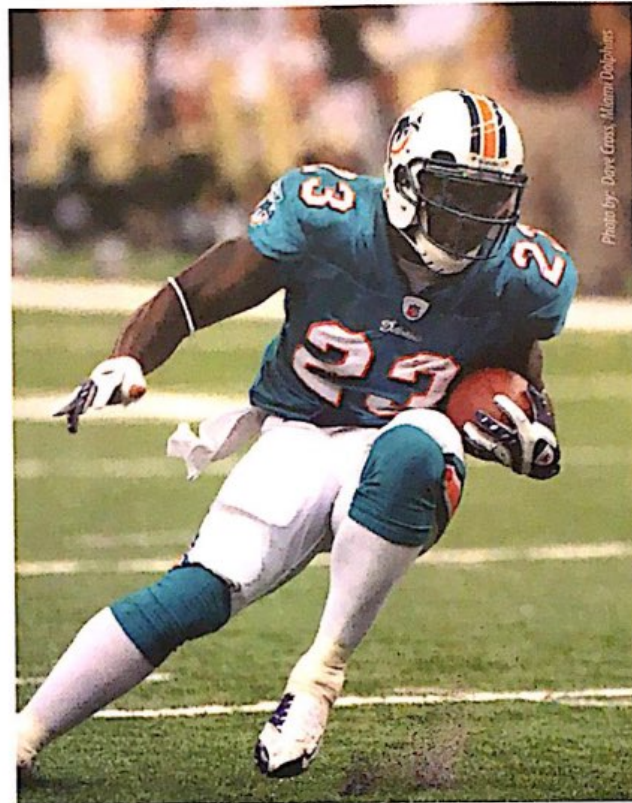


Photo by: Dave Cross, Miami Dolphins

Striking Back
Running back Ronnie Brown has already rushed for 1,000 yards, while Ricky Williams looked like his old superstar self in the preseason.

(For some perspective, the highest rating by a Dolphins QB since Marino was Jay Fiedler's 85.2 in 2002.) Pennington is seasoned, with eight years in the league. At 32, he's neither too old nor too young. And he's shown promise already in 2008. After three preseason games, he seized the leadership role on the team with both his demeanor and on-field performance, and he landed the starter role. With second-round draft pick Chad Henne waiting in the wings, to learn from Pennington and step in if necessary, a lot can go right at the quarterback position.

THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW

Amid all the punch lines about Ricky Williams' off-field choices, it's easy to forget that he walks onto the field with a body filled with NFL star material. It's also easy to forget he's a Heisman Trophy winner, a first-round draft pick and the owner of the Dolphins single-season rushing record. The doubters will likely say, "That was then. This is now." But if the preseason was any indication, "now" is looking pretty good. In the first three games, he averaged a solid 4.5 yards per carry. And that's with limited playing time. What will the numbers look like when he has a chance to wear down a defense? Another problem with the that-was-then argument is that "then" was

not so long ago. As recently as 2005, Williams averaged 4.4 yards per carry in 168 attempts, the second most efficient season of his career. The fact is, with Pennington, Henne, Williams and Ronnie Brown (another 1,000-yard rusher), Dolphins fans could see something in 2008 they haven't seen in decades: a decent passing attack paired with a decent ground game.

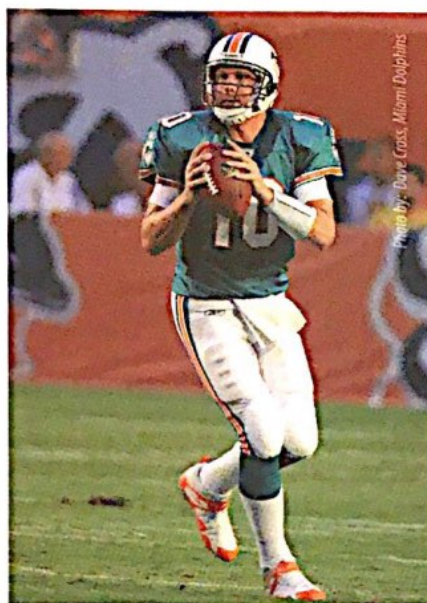
CATCH HIM IF YOU CAN

He's a receiver, but it's not his hands that are so intriguing. Ted Ginn Jr. is fast. And the Dolphin faithful – assuming they didn't blink – saw his speed in the preseason when he returned a punt 59 yards for a touchdown against the Chiefs. He showed similar explosiveness in 2007, his rookie year. Now that he's acclimated to the NFL and has a better quarterback, could the first-round draft pick (No. 9 overall) turn some of that potential into touchdowns? He's not the only top-10 pick who could pay big dividends. Left tackle Jake Long, the number-one pick in the 2008 draft, is embarking on his rookie season. While every rookie is an unknown quantity, it feels good to add one of the draft's most coveted players to the offensive line, one of last season's biggest trouble spots.

According to Ireland, "Fans should expect a total effort from our players every snap of every game. We are going to work hard, and that means all week, not just on Sunday. We have a great coaching staff in place, led by Tony Sparano, and they are going to do a great job preparing the team to play every week. And I know that when game day does come around, we are going to give 100 percent up to the whistle on each and every play."

THE ARCHITECT

If hope can truly be found in any non-player, Bill Parcells is the guy. He's football's Warren Buffet: Everything he touches turns to gold. Before joining the Dolphins last December as their Executive Vice President of Football Operations, he had coached the Giants, Patriots, Jets and Cowboys. All four of those teams reached the playoffs, two reached the Super Bowl and the Giants won the Super Bowl twice. And sometimes the results came quickly. The 2002 Cowboys were 5-11. In 2003, Parcells' first season with the team, the Cowboys reached the playoffs with a 10-6 record. In 1996, the Jets were 1-15 (sound familiar?). The following season Parcells became the coach and brought them to a 9-7 record, narrowly missing the playoffs. Granted, as



Miami's new quarterback Chad Pennington has proven he can run the offense and complete passes -- at least for other teams.

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Buffet would say, history is no guarantee of future results. But the more history you have, the better a predictor it is, and Parcells is four for four.

HAPPY TOGETHER

Of course, Parcells isn't the coach. Tony Sparano, who was an assistant to Parcells in Dallas, became the Dolphins head coach a month after Parcells arrived. Sparano has said he's learned more from Parcells than from any other person in football. He's also not afraid to put in a 20-hour workday. But for something concrete regarding the Dolphins' new coaching staff, there's no more important statistic than this one: 13-3. That was the Cowboys' 2007 regular season record, tied for the best in the NFC. Why does that matter? Five members of the coaching staff were at Dallas before coming to Miami, including Paul Pasqualoni, the defensive coordinator. Bottom line: The coaches and Parcells have worked together before and have found success.

"I think we have improved in a lot of different areas," Ireland states. "We've gotten younger and stronger, and I believe that will allow us

EXTREME MAKEOVERS

Can the 2008 Dolphins go from lousy to good in just one year? Rising from the depths of the league to the playoffs isn't all that rare in the NFL's current era. In just the past five regular seasons, here are the teams that went from gory to glory in just one year.

BEFORE		AFTER		
YEAR	RECORD	TEAM	YEAR	RECORD
2003	6-10	STEELERS	2004	15-1
2003	4-12	CHARGERS	2004	12-4
2005	6-10	RAVENS	2006	13-3
2005	3-13	SAINTS	2006	10-6
2005	4-12	JETS	2006	10-6
2003	5-11	FALCONS	2004	11-5
2004	5-11	BEARS	2005	11-5

Source: Cravings staff

to improve as the season goes along. We've upgraded our personnel on both offense and defense in terms of depth. One hidden key is the improvement we have made in special teams. I believe special teams play is one way a team can improve quickly, and I think we have worked hard to upgrade that facet of our team," he says.

"But we're never truly finished in our efforts to improve our team. We're always looking under rocks for talent, and we'll continue to add players to our roster if we feel it makes us a better football team," says Ireland. "I'd like to think that by the end of the season we will have put a foundation in place to restore the Dolphins to their long-time place among the elite teams in the NFL."

And if you need one more reason to feel good about the Dolphins, consider that last year six of their losses were by just three points. Parcells, however, wouldn't put any stock in that. After all, he's credited with the football axiom: "You are what your record says you are." Okay, fine. The Dolphins were a 1-15 team in 2007. But that was then and this is now. ♥