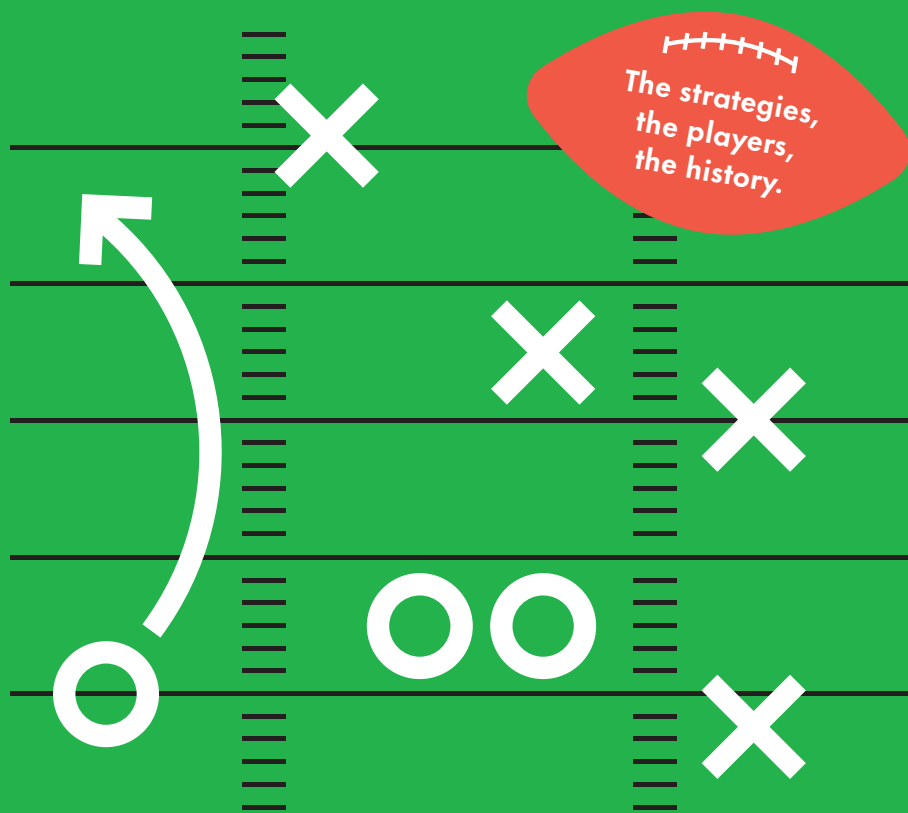


Neil Reynolds

NFL



The Ultimate Fan's Guide

'Neil is the ideal person to take fans inside the world of American football.'

Former NFL quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick

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The Ultimate Fan's Guide

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For Poppy, the biggest Jags fan I know!

Love you, darling.

xxx

Neil Reynolds

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**The Ultimate
Fan's Guide**



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CHAPTER 01

An Introduction to the NFL

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NFL

Exhausted linemen from both teams put their hands on the ground, faced off against each other and prepared to summon up one last effort at the end of the longest Super Bowl in National Football League history. The San Francisco 49ers led the Kansas City Chiefs 22-19 as they moved towards the end of overtime in Las Vegas. The winner of the epic contest would be crowned champions of the NFL's 2023 season.

More than 60,000 fans inside Allegiant Stadium were screaming loud enough to raise the roof off the domed building and hundreds of millions around the world were glued to their television screens watching sporting history unfold before their very eyes.

Legendary Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes received the ball at San Francisco's three-yard line, faked to hand it to running back Jerick McKinnon, before moving to his right and throwing the game-winning touchdown pass to Mecole Hardman.

Super Bowl 58 was over and the Kansas City Chiefs were NFL champions for the second year in a row! What followed next looked like something out of a classic sports movie. Mahomes leapt into Hardman's arms before disappearing under a pile of red-shirted bodies. Up in the stands, Taylor Swift - girlfriend of Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce - was also celebrating like crazy.

Mahomes then took off on a full sprint behind the end zone, reaching his own team bench and collapsing to the floor in a pile of joy, relief and exhaustion as red and gold confetti rained down on him from above. Players and coaches on the 49ers bench looked sick with grief as their championship dreams were ripped away from them in a

CHAPTER 01

split second. Every human emotion was on display on that historic night in Nevada.

Just under a year later, Mahomes and the Chiefs felt that same raw emotion from the other side of the equation. The superstar quarterback played one of the worst games of his career in Super Bowl 59 as Kansas City were soundly beaten 40-22 by the Philadelphia Eagles.

In a raucous Superdome in New Orleans, Mahomes was hit time and again by Philadelphia's dominant defensive line and bullied into several key mistakes as the Chiefs fell short of becoming the first team to win three Super Bowls in a row. This time around, the falling confetti was green and white as the Eagles were confirmed as champions of the 2024 NFL season. And the tears from Mahomes fell in frustration and despair, not as a result of glorious victory.

What a difference a year makes!

Those highs and lows experienced by Mahomes and the Chiefs during the 2023 and 2024 campaigns are typical of the NFL. It is an unpredictable league in a fast-paced, action-packed sport that serves up headline after headline, week after week and year after year.

As your NFL knowledge grows - through this book and by watching games yourself - you will quickly realise that the sport of American football - and its premier league - offers something for everyone.

Tune in to any game and you are likely to witness outstanding examples of grace and skill as quarterbacks fire 50-yard passes downfield to be reeled in by sprinting receivers or running backs weaving through a sea of bodies to score a touchdown. But there are also tremendous examples of physicality as defenders regularly make big tackles on opposing ball-carriers.

Tactics are also a huge part of American football and the result is an explosive, high-stakes game of chess with coaches looking to deceive each other with a series of moves and counter-moves.

The NFL will also appeal to fans who dream of success for their favourite team, no matter their form the

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NFL

previous year. One of the most famous Hollywood depictions of American football is a 1999 film starring Al Pacino called *Any Given Sunday*. This film was named after the idea that no matter how dominant a team might appear on the surface, the competitive balance in the NFL means that all teams need to bring their A-game every single week.

The NFL has robust systems in place to ensure competitive balance and the results are clear to see. Over the past 17 seasons, the NFL has seen 12 different teams crowned champions. During that period, the only repeat title winners have been the New England Patriots, the Kansas City Chiefs and the Philadelphia Eagles – the parity among teams means there is more drama and excitement for fans.

Here's how the NFL creates a level playing field for its 32 teams.

THE SALARY CAP

There can be no domination of the transfer market or the building of super-teams in the NFL. Since 1994, the league has operated under a salary cap, which means each club has the same amount of money to spend on player wages. In 2025, each team is allowed to spend \$279.2 million on its 53-man roster. If a team over-spends, they will be hit with financial penalties and/or lose draft picks. A team cannot sit on its money either. League rules stipulate that each franchise must spend at least 89 per cent of its cap over a four-year period.

REVENUE SHARING

Every club is on a strong financial footing due to the league's revenue-sharing model. All television deals and league-wide sponsorship – along with 40 per cent of a club's ticket sales – goes into one collective pot and is split evenly among the 32 franchises. All proceeds from merchandise sales are also evenly split. So, even if the Dallas Cowboys sell 20 million t-shirts and the Green Bay Packers sell one, that money is shared. The only money teams keep

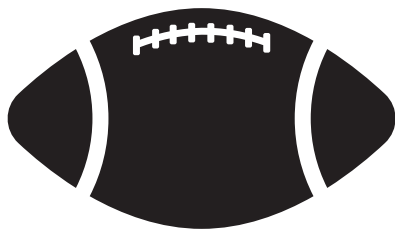
CHAPTER 01

for themselves is 60 per cent of their ticket sales, gameday concessions and local sponsorships.

THE NFL DRAFT

You will hear more about the NFL Draft later, but this is a hugely impactful way the NFL levels its playing field. Every April, teams pick the leading college football players from across the United States to bolster their rosters. And they go worst to first. The club with the poorest record in the league gets to choose the best player coming out of college, all the way down to the reigning Super Bowl champions, who pick last. That order is repeated over seven rounds, allowing weaker teams to close the talent gap on the leading pack.

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League Structure and Season

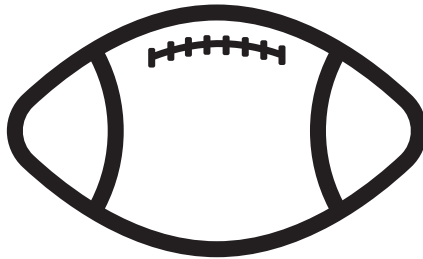
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LEAGUE STRUCTURE AND SEASON

NFL STRUCTURE

There are 32 teams in the National Football League, split into eight divisions across two conferences. Half the league plays in four divisions in the AFC (American Football Conference) - the AFC East, AFC North, AFC South and AFC West. The other 16 teams make up the NFC (National Football Conference) and feature four clubs per division in the NFC East, NFC North, NFC South and NFC West.

Divisions are geographic by their nature. For example, the AFC East features the Buffalo Bills, Miami Dolphins, New England Patriots and New York Jets. All teams on America's east coast. By contrast, the NFC West features the Arizona Cardinals, Los Angeles Rams, San Francisco 49ers and Seattle Seahawks. All are situated out west.



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National Football League

AMERICAN FOOTBALL CONFERENCE				NATIONAL FOOTBALL CONFERENCE			
AFC East	AFC North	AFC South	AFC West	NFC East	NFC North	NFC South	NFC West
Buffalo Bills	Baltimore Ravens	Houston Texans	Denver Broncos	Dallas Cowboys	Chicago Bears	Atlanta Falcons	Arizona Cardinals
Miami Dolphins	Cincinnati Bengals	Indianapolis Colts	Kansas City Chiefs	New York Giants	Detroit Lions	Carolina Panthers	Los Angeles Rams
New England Patriots	Cleveland Browns	Jacksonville Jaguars	Las Vegas Raiders	Philadelphia Eagles	Green Bay Packers	New Orleans Saints	San Francisco 49ers
New York Jets	Pittsburgh Steelers	Tennessee Titans	Los Angeles Chargers	Washington Commanders	Minnesota Vikings	Tampa Bay Buccaneers	Seattle Seahawks

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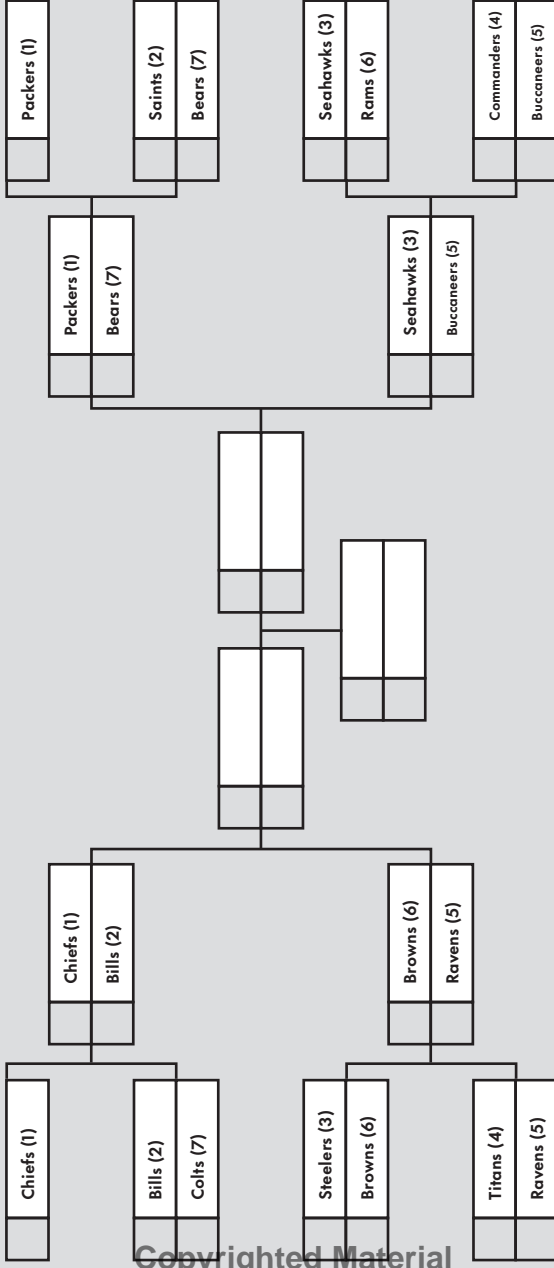
LEAGUE STRUCTURE AND SEASON

NFL SCHEDULE

Each team plays 17 league games over 18 weeks from September to early January. Under the NFL scheduling formula, fixtures are arranged as follows:

- **Home and away against the other three teams in their division (six games).**
- **Four teams from another division within their conference on a rotating three-year cycle (four games).** For example, in the 2025 season (which will stretch into the early part of 2026) the Jacksonville Jaguars will play the teams from AFC West: Denver Broncos, Kansas City Chiefs, Las Vegas Raiders and Los Angeles Chargers.
- **Four teams from a division from the other conference on a rotating four-year cycle (four games).** For example, in 2025, the Jacksonville Jaguars will play teams from NFC West: Arizona Cardinals, Los Angeles Rams, San Francisco 49ers and Seattle Seahawks.
- **Two teams from the same conference who placed in the same position in their respective divisions, providing they are not already scheduled to meet. First place finisher versus first place finisher, for example (two games).** As the Jacksonville Jaguars finished 3rd in the AFC South in 2024, they will play New York Jets (who finished 3rd in AFC East) and Cincinnati Bengals (who finished 3rd in AFC North).
- **One additional team from the other conference that finished in the same position as them (one game).** In 2025, the Jacksonville Jaguars will play the Carolina Panthers, as both teams finished 3rd in their divisions in 2024.

NFC



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AFC

LEAGUE STRUCTURE AND SEASON

THE PLAYOFFS

The leading seven AFC teams (four division winners and three franchises with the next-best records, known as Wild Card teams) will qualify for the playoffs. They will then compete in a knockout competition in January with the champion of the AFC reaching the Super Bowl. That formula is repeated in the NFC – seven playoff qualifiers, a knockout tournament and an eventual NFC champion to advance to the Super Bowl.

There is only one prize in the NFL. There are no cup competitions – the winner of the Super Bowl, played each February, is crowned the league's champion. Prior to the birth of the Super Bowl in the 1966 season, the NFL still found a way to name a league champion. From 1920 to 1932, there were no playoff games and the league champion was the team with the best winning percentage, excluding ties. As teams would often play varying numbers of games and against various levels of talent, the first four league champions were disputed and had to be determined by the NFL's executive committee. From 1933 to 1965, the NFL played a single title game to crown its champion before it morphed into the Super Bowl we know today.

Former Pro Bowl (the NFL's all-star game that sees players voted in by fellow pros, coaches and fans) cornerback Josh Norman explains: **'It's not like you have four different divisions where you can win all these trophies and claim to be king of the mountaintop. No, this is like the FIFA World Cup – there's just one. The granddaddy of them all is the Super Bowl and that's the prize we're after.'** Copyrighted Material

The Basics

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THE BASICS

Like all sports, American football has many rules and nuances. But you don't need to know all of them right away. Here are some basics to get you started on your gridiron journey.

THE TEAMS

Each NFL squad carries 53 players on their roster, although only 11 can be on the field at any one time. There are unlimited substitutions throughout an NFL game.

THE PITCH

An NFL field is 100 yards from goal-line to goal-line and 53.3 yards wide. At each end of the pitch is a 10-yard scoring area known as the end zone.

THE CLOCK

Each game features 60 minutes of playing time, spread over four 15-minute quarters. There is a halftime break after the second quarter and the game resumes with a kick-off after a break—this is typically 13 minutes but stretches to more than 20 minutes in the Super Bowl to accommodate the famous halftime show. At the end of the first and third quarters, play continues where it left off once the teams have changed ends. Factoring in clock stoppages (there are times when the clock can stop due to a pass falling incomplete or a player running out of bounds), an average NFL game lasts just over three hours.

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CHAPTER 03

MOVING THE BALL

The attacking team – the offense – moves the ball in a series of plays called downs. The offense can choose to run the ball or the quarterback can throw to a teammate. Each down ends when the ball-carrier is tackled to the ground or a pass falls incomplete and hits the ground without being caught.

The offense aims to gain 10 yards in four plays to keep possession and earn a fresh set of downs, while the defense fights to disrupt that plan. Here is an example of how a series of plays might unfold.

- 1st and 10 at Offense 20-yard line Run for 3 yards.

This means it is first down for the offense and they have 10 yards to go before they earn a new set of downs. The ball being on the offense's 20-yard line means it is 20 yards from their own end zone and 80 yards away from their opponent's end zone.

- 2nd and 7 at Offense 23-yard line Incomplete pass
- 3rd and 7 at Offense 23-yard line Pass completion for 10 yards
- 1st and 10 at Offense 33-yard line Pass completion for 20 yards
- 1st and 10 at Opponent 47-yard line Run for 5 yards
- 2nd and 5 at Opponent 42-yard line Incomplete pass
- 3rd and 5 at Opponent 42-yard line Pass completion for 22 yards
- 1st and 10 at Opponent 20-yard line Incomplete pass
- 2nd and 10 at Opponent 20-yard line Run for 18 yards
- 1st and Goal at Opponent 2-yard line Pass completion for 2 yards – Touchdown!

If the offense fails to gain 10 yards in four plays, they give up the ball at the spot of their failure. So, in reality, teams have three downs to gain 10 yards because, on fourth down, they will typically punt the ball away to the opposition (playing for territory) or attempt a kick at goal if within range. That said, if a team is feeling aggressive or if they are in good field position, there are occasions where they will run another traditional play on fourth down in an attempt to keep the ball for themselves. If they fail, the other team takes possession of the ball at the spot where the previous play ended.

If the ball is thrown and falls to the ground without being caught, the clock stops and there is no gain on the play. So,

THE BASICS

if the quarterback throws what is known as an incomplete pass, first down and 10 becomes second down and 10.

SCORING

Touchdown = 6 points

Scored when a player crosses the opponent's goal-line with the ball or catches the ball in the end zone. Despite the name, the ball does not need to be touched down.

Extra Point = 1 point

Earned after a touchdown by kicking the ball over the crossbar and through the uprights from 33 yards, similar to a rugby conversion.

Two-point conversion = 2 points

Added after a touchdown by the offense taking the ball into the end zone again - via a run or pass - from the two-yard line. This is essentially just another normal play.

Field Goal = 3 points

Usually attempted on fourth down if the kicker is within range of the posts. His kick must go over the crossbar and between the posts.

Safety = 2 points

Awarded to the defense when they tackle an offensive player with the ball in his own end zone. This is essentially American football's version of an own goal in soccer. For example, the offense may have the ball at their own one-yard line and the running back - who lines up four or five yards behind the quarterback - could receive the ball in his own end zone. If he is tackled to the ground before escaping his own end zone, that is a safety. Or, the quarterback could retreat away from the one-yard line to throw downfield. If he is tackled in his own end zone, that is known as a sack and, again, would result in the two-point safety.

The Positions

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THE POSITIONS

As mentioned in the previous chapter, each NFL team carries 53 players on its roster, with 48 of those being active on each match day. With unlimited substitutions throughout an NFL game, players come on and off the field as many times as required. They do not stay on the pitch performing multiple roles, as can be the case in other sports like soccer and rugby. An American football team is made up of three specialised and separate units known as the offense, defense and special teams.

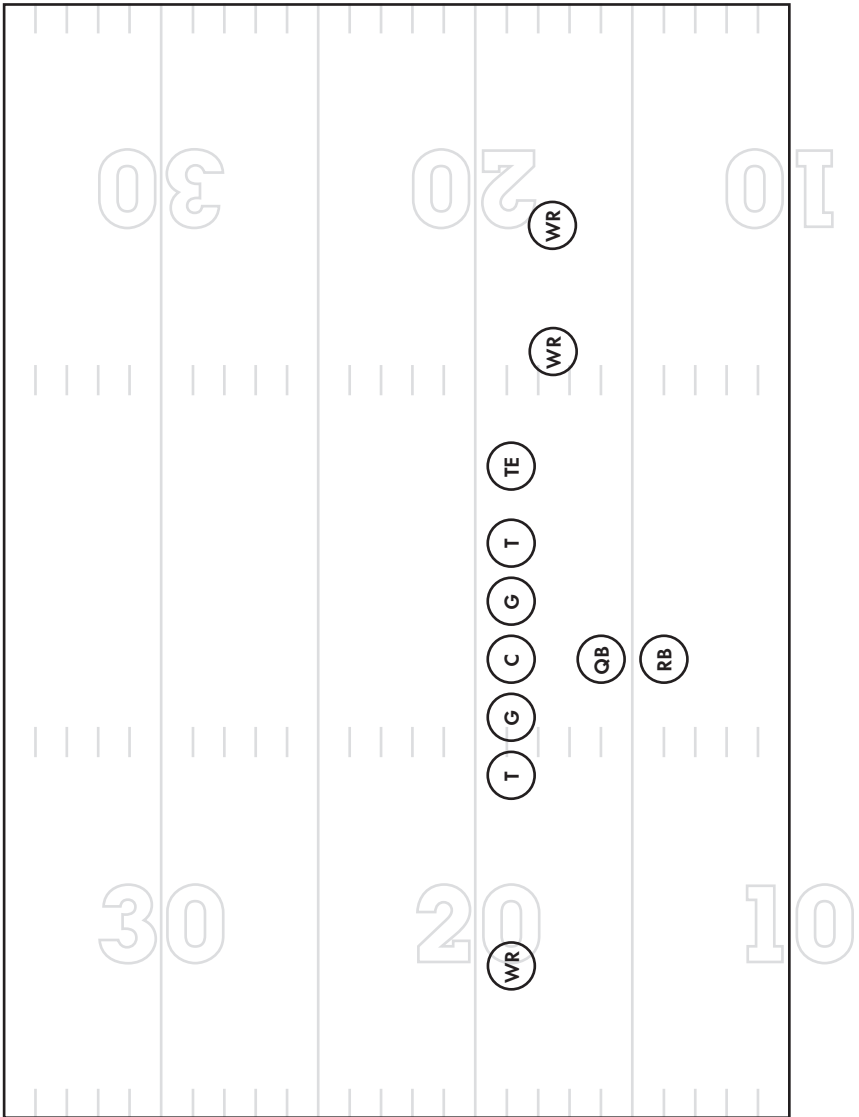
THE OFFENSE

The job of the offense is simple - to move downfield by either running or passing the football and to score points. Here are the key positions for an NFL offense.

Offensive Line

The wall of muscle known as the offensive line features five players who perform a vital role. An NFL team could have the brightest stars at other positions, but it will all come crashing down without good blocking up front. The middle of the line features a center, who passes the ball between his legs to the quarterback in order to start each play. This is known as a snap. The two men either side of the center are powerfully built guards and the two blockers on the edge of the line are more athletic tackles, designed to deal with speedy defenders trying to get to the quarterback. On running plays, the line will power forward and block defenders in a bid to open space for the running back. When this group drops back to form a protective shield

THE OFFENSE



KEY

- T = Tackle (part of the Offensive Line)
- G = Guard (part of the Offensive Line)
- C = Center (part of the Offensive Line)
- QB = Quarterback
- RB = Running Back
- WR = Wide Receiver
- TE = Tight End

THE POSITIONS

around the quarterback (known as a pocket), it's most likely to be a pass downfield.

Quarterback

The quarterback is the golden boy of the NFL and plays American football's most vital position. If you have one of the league's better quarterbacks, you have a shot at Super Bowl glory. If you don't have an established player at this position, your team is going to be in trouble! The Kansas City Chiefs are the perfect example of that logic. Since Patrick Mahomes became their full-time starter in 2018, they have reached at least the semi-final stage of the Super Bowl race in every season. They have played in five Super Bowls and have won three since 2019.

The quarterback touches the ball on every play. After receiving the snap from the center, the quarterback has two options. . .

Option one: Passing play

- **On a passing play, the quarterback throws the ball to a receiver. Today's NFL teams tend to pass the ball more than they run it, placing that emphasis on the quarterback to be an effective player.**

Option two: Running play

- **On a running play, the quarterback hands the ball to his teammate, who runs upfield or runs the ball themselves towards the end zone.**

For more information on the options that the quarterback has, see Chapter 5.

Quarterbacks are the highest-paid players in the NFL, with the best earning up to \$60 million per year, but they earn their money by playing what is often described as the toughest position in all of sports. When setting to throw, a quarterback must assess how the opposition is defending the play, scan the entire field to find an open receiver, and deliver an inch-perfect throw - often to an area his

CHAPTER 04

teammate will run into moments later – while an angry 300-pound monster barrels ever closer, determined to deliver a big hit. And all of that must ideally be accomplished within two and a half to four seconds.

‘You have to be on it on every single play,’ says Miami Dolphins quarterback Tua Tagovailoa. **‘You have to know what everyone on the field is doing – all 11 guys on your side, all 11 guys on the other side, and there are a lot of things that go into the quarterback position.’**

The greatest quarterback of all time – seven-time Super Bowl champion Tom Brady – believes keeping a clear head is vital for the position, as he explains: **‘There are a lot of distractions you have to block out. You have to make sure everybody is calm and no one is freaking out or getting too excited. You kind of have to play a little counsellor, a little coach and a little quarterback. That’s the fun part and that’s what we sign up for.’**

Quarterbacks come with varying skills. Some excel at throwing strong passes (Buffalo’s Josh Allen), others shine through their accuracy and decision-making (Cincinnati’s Joe Burrow); and then there are those who rely heavily on their athleticism to evade defenders and run downfield like a running back (Baltimore’s Lamar Jackson). Those who can combine all of those skills and deliver in the biggest of moments are among the best in the game today, with Mahomes leading the way.

HIGHEST-PAID NFL QUARTERBACKS – AS OF 1 APRIL 2025

— DAK PRESCOTT	DALLAS COWBOYS	\$60M PER YEAR
— JOSH ALLEN	BUFFALO BILLS	\$55M PER YEAR
— JOE BURROW	CINCINNATI BENGALS	\$55M PER YEAR
— TREVOR LAWRENCE	JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS	\$55M PER YEAR
— JORDAN LOVE	GREEN BAY PACKERS	\$55M PER YEAR

Running Back

The running back is one of the NFL’s most versatile players. Lined up in the backfield behind or to the side of the quarterback, he must be able to run, catch and block. There are