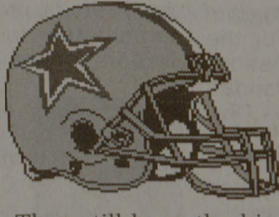


Cowboys, Redskins and Giants look to contend for NFC East title

(AP)—The Dallas Cowboys like to think of themselves as America's Team. They are more like America's Soap Opera.

Can Chan bring harmony to a team that lost its way? Can Troy find his groove? Will Emmitt find the end zone? Will Michael put away his scissors?

The Cowboys, two years removed from their fifth Super Bowl title, stumbled to 6-10 last season. They still have the big-name offensive talent that won three championships in the '90s. But they played old in 1997, and the only consistency was mediocrity as the Cowboys finished 20th in the NFL in rushing, 20th in passing and,



naturally, 20th overall.

Troy Aikman became increasingly frustrated with his lack of receiving options besides Michael Irvin, and Emmitt Smith finished with four touchdowns. In the 1994 and 1995 seasons combined, he scored 46.

New coach Chan Gailey hopes to free Irvin from double-teaming by sometimes putting him in the backfield. But Irvin, who got more unwanted attention for the training-camp "horseplay" with lineman Everitt McIver, undoubtedly would find even more freedom if either Billy Davis or free agent Ernie Mills come through.

The Cowboys' rushing defense wore down late in the season, while their seldom-tested pass defense ranked No. 1.

The full-time return of defensive tackle Leon Lett will help the imbalance, but defensive ends Kavika Pittman and No. 1

pick Greg Ellis are suspect.

The New York Giants, meanwhile, were the surprise winners of the NFC East last year, and one stat separated them from everyone else in the division. Dallas, Philadelphia, Arizona and Washington ranked 24th, 25th, 27th and 28th, respectively, in the NFL in rushing defense. The Giants were third.

And New York has just the right offense to take advantage of the disparity. Halfbacks Tiki Barber and Tyrone Wheatley rotated behind fullback Charles Way, and the three rolled to nearly 1,800 yards. Gary Brown will be added to the mix this year, and Way will see the ball even more.

Coach of the Year Jim Fassel replaced Dave Brown at quarterback with Danny Kanell, who distinguished himself more for winning than putting up impressive numbers.

The Giants were the first division winner to average less than 5 yards per pass play in 25 years, and they were 28th in the NFL in passing. They upgraded the receiving corps in the draft, taking Joe Jurevicius and Brian Alford, and they are counting on Ike Hilliard, who sat out 1997 with a neck injury, to be a big-play receiver.

It was defense where the Giants excelled last year, with budding stars in end Michael Strahan, linebacker Jessie Armstead and cornerback Jason Sehorn helping stuff the run and force turnovers.

But they lost Sehorn for the season to a knee injury in a preseason game when he was returning a kickoff for the first time in his career.

Washington, 25th or worse against the run the last five years, spent lavishly to plug the weakness with two 300-pound defensive tackles.

In a three-day period in February, the Redskins signed Dana Stubblebine to a 1997 Defensive Player of the Year \$80 million, six-year contract, and a \$21.4 million, five-year contract with Dan Wilkinson.

But coach Norv Turner has a lot of work besides the defensive line. Gus Frerotte ranked next-to-last in completion percentage in the NFL in completion percentage. The release of Henry Ellard, who had to rely on Michael Westbrook, Leslie Shepard at wide receiver, and Brook, the fourth pick of the draft, who has just 34 receptions in each of the last three years.

Terry Allen has been a wear-and-tear running back, but he missed six games last year with a broken thumb, a sprained right ankle, and a sprained right ankle last year. In 24 games, the Redskins were 24-

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