



## **2009 Preview: Kansas City Chiefs**

### **New regime offers optimism for fast turnaround**

by [Herbie Teope](#)

#### **Outlook**

Growing pains were expected last season, as the Kansas City Chiefs hoped to rebuild around a young team. Still, nobody expected a franchise-worst 2-14 record and it was clear change was needed following a two-year stretch of futility that saw the Chiefs register just six wins against 26 losses.

After 20 years, Carl Peterson stepped down at the end of the season as the team's president and general manager, leading to the hiring of Scott Pioli as general manager.

Regarded around the league as a rising executive star, Pioli teamed with New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick to build three Super Bowl championship teams and his hiring created a buzz of excitement in Kansas City. Pioli talked about the "Patriots Way," a concept of team over individual, during his February introduction news conference and some of his offseason moves reflected that philosophy.

One of Pioli's first moves was the hiring of former Arizona Cardinals offensive coordinator Todd Haley to replace coach Herm Edwards. Haley, fresh off a Super Bowl appearance, brings enthusiasm and a fiery attitude to Kansas City.

The team's biggest acquisition came in the form of QB Matt Cassel, who threw for 3,693 yards and 21 TDs with 11 INTs for New England while subbing for the injured Tom Brady. Cassel replaces Tyler Thigpen, who was a pleasant surprise with 2,608 yards passing for 18 TDs when the Chiefs went to a spread offense.

Offensively, the Chiefs ranked 26th in points and 24th in yards last season. Under Haley, it's reasonable to expect the Chiefs to open up the passing game considering Arizona threw the ball 1,220 times the last two seasons.

Having Cassel running that style of offense offers potential, but the Chiefs must replace the lost production of TE Tony Gonzalez, who was traded to the Atlanta Falcons.

With Gonzalez gone, the spotlight falls on third-year WR Dwayne Bowe, who had 86 catches for 1,022 yards and seven TDs. While Bowe's numbers are impressive, lost in the production are the dropped passes and mental mistakes that cost Kansas City potential wins last season. Bowe must continue the maturation process, as he'll shoulder the load in the passing game considering the question marks surrounding the other WRs.

Bobby Engram signed as a free agent from the Seattle Seahawks, but he's entering his 14th season and has just one 1,000-yard season to his credit while missing 18 games the last five seasons. Mark Bradley, who had 30 catches for 380 yards and three TDs last season, could eventually emerge, but he'll need to demonstrate consistency.

Meanwhile, there's intrigue surrounding the running game. Larry Johnson, who turns 30 in November, rushed for 874 yards and five TDs in 12 starts. However, his last 1,000-yard season was in 2006 and it remains to be seen how Johnson, once the focal point of Kansas City's conservative attack under Edwards, fits in Haley's passing offense.

Defensively, the Chiefs ranked at or near the bottom of every major statistical category, including an NFL-record low 10 sacks in 2008.

Haley brought along defensive coordinator Clancy Pendergast from the Cardinals and the Chiefs will eventually incorporate a 3-4 base defense. Because the team ran a 4-3 scheme the last three seasons, the Chiefs acquired LB Mike Vrabel as part of the Cassel trade and signed free agent LB Zach Thomas for veteran leadership to assist the transition.

Haley also addressed defense with his first three draft picks by selecting DE Tyson

Jackson (third overall), DT Alex Magee and CB Donald Washington. Jackson and Magee should see immediate playing time alongside last season's first-round pick DT Glenn Dorsey, who has been moved to DE.

After covering the team's 2009 draft and May's rookie minicamp, it was clear there's a changed atmosphere at 1 Arrowhead Drive under the new regime. Haley demands discipline and accountability from his players, points he made during rookie minicamp and throughout organized team activities (OTAs).

The San Diego Chargers remain the elite team of the AFC West, but Kansas City has the luxury of playing in a division where three of the four teams are also in transition with new coaching staffs. Out of the Denver Broncos and Oakland Raiders, the Chiefs appear to be in the best situation to win games now and surprise.

## **Key offseason moves**

### **a. Acquisitions**

#### **Matt Cassel, QB**

Chiefs land a potential franchise signal caller.

#### **Bobby Engram, WR**

A solid possession receiver, but entering his 14th season and durability a concern.

#### **Mike Goff, OG**

Offers experience to the offensive line.

#### **Mike Vrabel, LB**

A strong leader who will anchor the team's 3-4 defense.

#### **Zach Thomas, LB**

Former Pro Bowler offers leadership and experience.

### **b. Losses**

#### **Damon Huard, QB**

Veteran game manager now with the San Francisco 49ers.

#### **Tony Gonzalez, TE**

The Chiefs lack a TE with the skill set of Gonzalez, but the position was hardly a factor in Arizona's offense with coach Todd Haley.

### **c. Impact Draft Picks**

#### **Tyson Jackson, DE, LSU**

Considered the top defensive end of this year's draft class and will see immediate action.

#### **Alex Magee, DT/DE, Purdue**

Versatile to play both positions and expected to contribute as part of the team's defensive rotations.

### **Star Tracker**

#### **Rising:**

WR Dwayne Bowe's time to prove he's an elite option has arrived. It's reasonable to expect Bowe to face stiff coverage, but it's also reasonable to expect him to be targeted often. That factor virtually guarantees production, which is the bottom line for our purposes.

#### **Falling:**

We've said it numerous times that any RB seeing extensive action has value. However, you can't draft RB Larry Johnson as an elite No. 1 for two reasons – he's three seasons removed from his last 1,000-yard campaign and he turns 30 in November.

#### **Could Surprise**

Second-year backup RB Jamaal Charles played in a spread offense while at the University of Texas and is a good receiver out of the backfield. Charles, a must-handcuff to Larry Johnson in summer drafts, will produce in this offense if he sees playing time.

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