

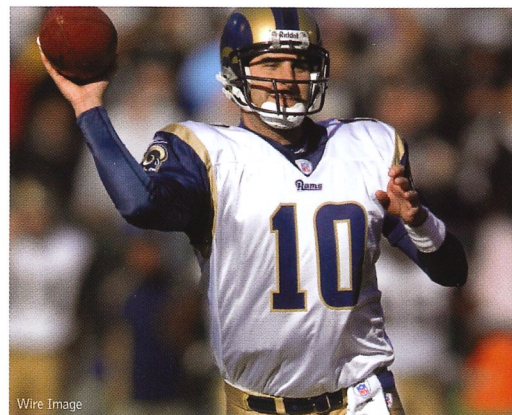
A quick-strike offense and an improving defense have the St. Louis Rams in the thick of the hunt for an NFC West title this year.

St. Louis Rams

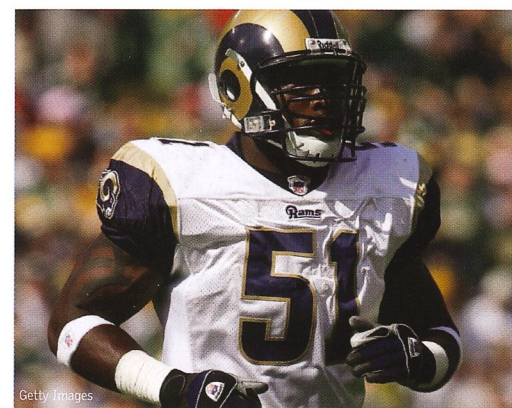
► MARC BULGER QUARTERBACK

College: West Virginia Age: 30 Height: 6-3 Weight: 212

With his pinpoint accuracy and exceptional touch on the deep ball, Bulger is the perfect fit for the Rams' high-octane offense. The two-time Pro Bowler is never reluctant to put the ball in the air, but he does so strategically, spreading the ball among the many weapons in St. Louis' arsenal. Last year, Bulger started all 16 games for the first time and had his best season to date, posting a 92.9 passer rating and throwing for a career-high 4,301 yards (third-highest in the NFL), 24 touchdowns and only eight interceptions. Along the way, he set franchise records for attempts (588), and lowest percentage of passes intercepted (1.4). For his career, Bulger has passed for more than 300 yards in 23 games, and entering this season he owned a 36-24 record in the games he started.



WireImage



Getty Images

▲ WILL WITHERSPOON LINEBACKER

College: Georgia Age: 27 Height: 6-1 Weight: 240

In Witherspoon, the Rams believe they have added a player who will help them address the deficiencies in their run defense. Originally a third-round selection by the Carolina Panthers in the 2002 draft, Witherspoon signed with St. Louis prior to last year and in his first season as a Ram led the team in tackles with 136. That high level of production was nothing out of the ordinary for Witherspoon, who prior to last season led the Panthers in tackles for two consecutive years. A sideline-to-sideline breed of linebacker, Witherspoon possesses excellent speed and the versatility to play both the middle and weakside spots. In Defensive Coordinator Jim Haslett's scheme, the six-year veteran mans the middle linebacker position.



WireImage

▲ STEVEN JACKSON RUNNING BACK

College: Oregon State Age: 24 Height: 6-2 Weight: 231

A year after recording his first 1,000-yard season, Jackson was nothing short of amazing in 2006. He accounted for a league-leading 2,334 yards from scrimmage, the fifth-best total in league history. Given his size and athletic ability, it's not terribly surprising that the former first-round selection found success on the ground, running for 1,528 yards and 13 touchdowns and leading all running backs with 14 conversions on third-and-one. What was considerably more eye-opening was Jackson's contribution to the passing game, as he recorded 90 receptions for 806 yards and three more scores. Those 90 catches were the sixth most ever in one season by an NFL running back, and they established Jackson as one the league's true dual threats.

THE FACTS

Division: NFC West
Team Colors: Millennium Blue, New Century Gold and White
Owner: Georgia Frontiere/E. Stanley Kroenke
Head Coach: Scott Linehan
Stadium: Edward Jones Dome
Playing Surface: FieldTurf
First Year: 1937



STARTERS

OFFENSE CAREER GP/GS

QB Marc Bulger 62/62
RB Steven Jackson 47/36
FB Madison Hedgecock 34/17
WR Torry Holt 128/118
WR Isaac Bruce 184/169

Bruce is playing in his 14th season, all with the Rams, and is the franchise's all-time leader in receptions (890), receiving yards (13,396), 100-yard receiving games (42), 1,000-yard receiving seasons (nine) and receiving touchdowns (80).

TE Randy McMichael 82/82
LT Alex Barron 30/29

Barron is responsible for protecting QB Marc Bulger's blindside now, after Orlando Pace was lost in Week 1 with a shoulder injury. The former first-round draft pick (19th overall) in the 2005 NFL Draft started all 16 games last season at right tackle, but played on the left side during his collegiate career at Florida State.

LG Mark Setterstrom 9/8
C Brett Romberg 12/5
RG Claude Terrell 15/11
RT Milford Brown 33/30

DEFENSE CAREER GP/GS

DE Leonard Little 115/75
UT La'Roi Glover 163/144
NT Adam Carriker 2/2
DE James Hall 91/69
SLB Brandon Chillar 50/28
MLB Will Witherspoon 80/73
WLB Pisa Tinoisamoa 61/60

Tinoisamoa is the heart and soul of the Rams defense and has had over 100 tackles in three of his four seasons. In 2003, he became the first rookie in franchise history to lead the team in tackles (121).

CB Tye Hill 18/12

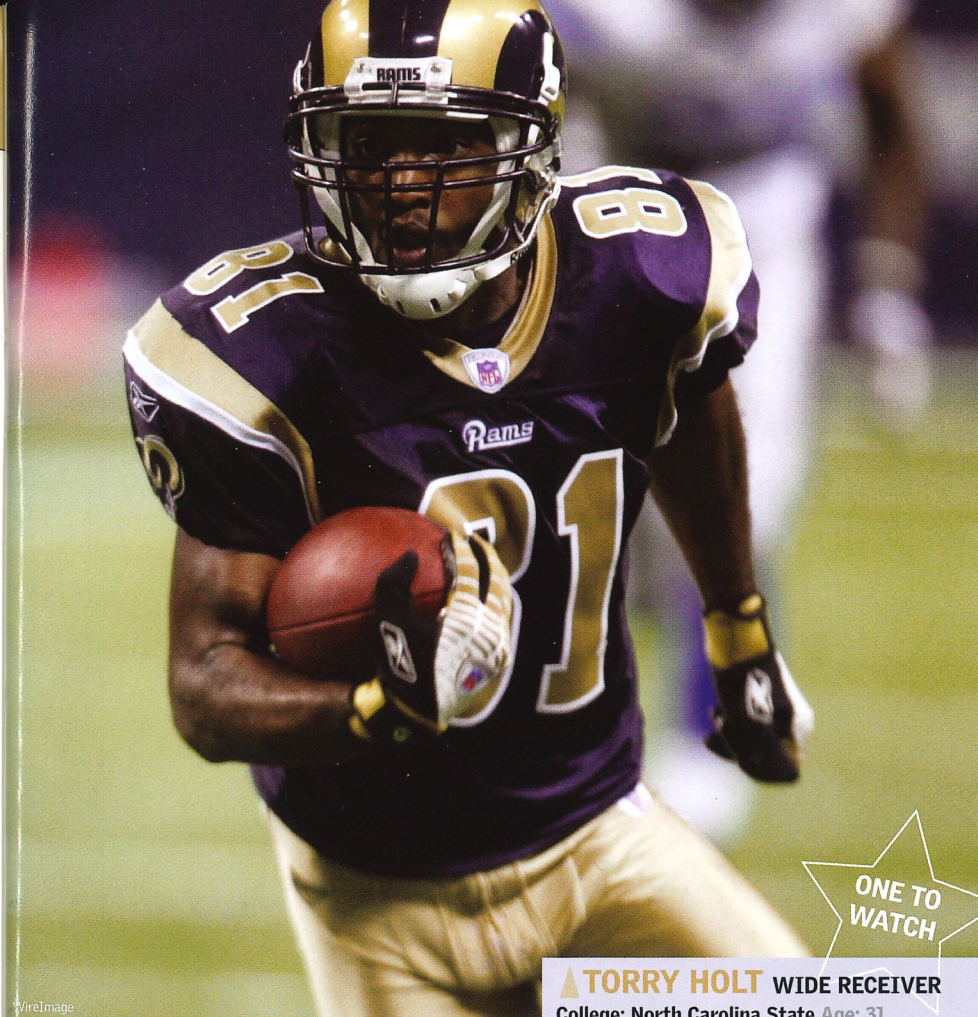
Hill, selected by the Rams in the first round (15th overall) of the 2006 NFL Draft, had a productive rookie season, playing in all 16 games with 10 starts. He collected 42 tackles, three interceptions, four passes defended and one fumble recovery.

CB Ron Bartell 28/10
SS Corey Chavous 143/106
FS Oshiomogho Atoogwe 30/18

SPECIAL TEAMS CAREER GP

P Donnie Jones 41
K Jeff Wilkins 186

Wilkins is the Rams' all-time leader in scoring (1,127 points) and field goals made (283). He has made 346 consecutive PATs, the second-best streak in NFL history. He has also led the Rams in scoring for eight consecutive seasons.



WireImage

ONE TO WATCH

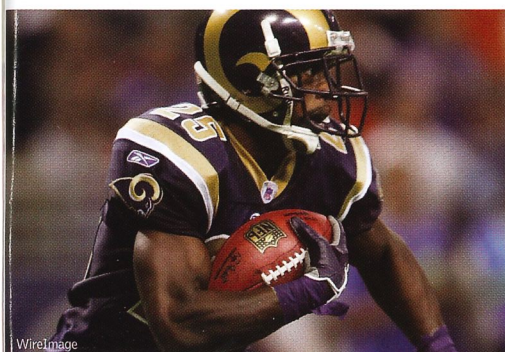
▲ TORRY HOLT WIDE RECEIVER

College: North Carolina State Age: 31

Height: 6-0 Weight: 190

How good is Torry Holt? Last season he led St. Louis with 93 catches (fourth-best in the league) for 1,188 yards and 10 touchdowns (the second most he's scored in a season)...and it was considered a down year. That's what happens when a receiver sets a league record by posting at least

The man known as "Big Game" has been near unstoppable. 1,300 receiving yards for six straight seasons and then "only" gains close to 1,200 the next year. Of course, no one's really complaining about Holt's production. Through his first eight seasons, the man known as "Big Game" has been near unstoppable. Holt is the fastest player in NFL history to 10,000 receiving yards, achieving that feat in only 116 games, and he's the second-fastest player in NFL history to reach 700 receptions. He also has the most receiving yards per game in NFL history, averaging 84.7, and his 43 100-yard receiving games rank as second most in a player's first eight seasons. Capable of working any part of the field, Holt is especially effective in the intermediate area, where he last season totaled 40 catches for 694 yards on passes thrown between 11 and 20 yards.



WireImage

▲ COREY CHAVOUS STRONG SAFETY

College: Vanderbilt Age: 31 Height: 6-1 Weight: 208

In his first year with St. Louis, Chavous solidified the safety position with his active play and, perhaps more importantly, the leadership and savvy decision-making that comes from playing nine years in the league. A former Pro Bowl selection, Chavous is a veteran defensive back who's not afraid to mix it up, as evidenced by the career-high 118 tackles he posted last year. That number was good for second on the team, behind Witherspoon. Selected by Arizona in the second round of the 1998 NFL Draft, Chavous has recorded 20 career interceptions.

RAMS FIRSTS

First Head Coach: Hugo Bezdek
First Draft Pick: B Johnny Drake, Purdue (1937)
First Stadium: Cleveland Municipal Stadium (Cleveland Rams)
First All-League Selection: Johnny Drake, 1940
First Regular Season Win: September 17, 1937; 21-3 over the Philadelphia Eagles
First Playoff Win: December 16, 1945; 15-14 over the Washington Redskins (1945 NFL Championship)

THE WAY IT WAS

Last Four

Bucs 38-35 (12/18/00)
Bucs 24-17 (11/26/01)
Bucs 26-14 (9/23/02)
Rams 28-21 (10/18/04)

CONNECTIONS

Bucs DE Kevin Carter played for the St. Louis Rams from 1995-2000 and was a member of the Rams' Super Bowl XXXIV Championship team.

Rams LT Todd Steussie was a member of the Buccaneers from 2004-2005.

Bucs G Matt Lehr was briefly a Ram at the end of the 2004 season but saw no action during his time in St. Louis.

Bucs General Manager Bruce Allen's father, George Allen, was head coach of the Los Angeles Rams from 1966-1970.

Rams Assistant Strength & Conditioning Coach Brad Roll was the Bucs' strength and conditioning coach from 1993-1995.

Tampa has been a breeding ground for the Rams scouting department. Scout Dick Daniels was the Bucs' head scout in 1975; Scout Dave Boller broke into the NFL with the Bucs in 1995; and Scout Brad Holmes is a Tampa native and a former prep star at Chamberlain High School.

Rams second-year running back Kay-Jay Harris is a native of Tampa and attended Tampa Bay Technical High School.

Rams safety Todd Johnson was raised in Sarasota and attended Riverview High School.

A SERIES OF SHOOTOUTS

The Bucs-Rams series has been characterized by high-scoring games, a trend that even predates St. Louis' offensive surge since 1999. The Bucs' 38-35 Monday Night Football victory in 2000 (see page 51 for more details) is the highest scoring contest in the two teams' shared history, but others have come close, such as the Rams' 34-33 squeaker in 1984 and a 31-27 contest that went the Rams' way in 1992. In fact, the averaged combined point total in the 15 previous regular-season Bucs-Rams games is 45.5, far higher than most of Tampa Bay's head-to-head series. Only the Bucs-Colts (48.3 points per game) and Bucs-Raiders (46.3 matchups) have produced higher-scoring games on average.