

VIKINGS GAMEDAY

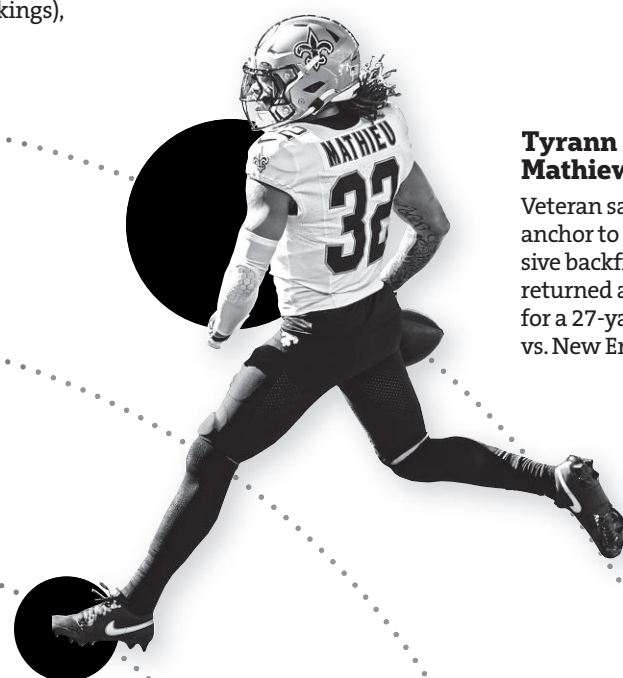
GAME 10

VIKINGS VS. NEW ORLEANS

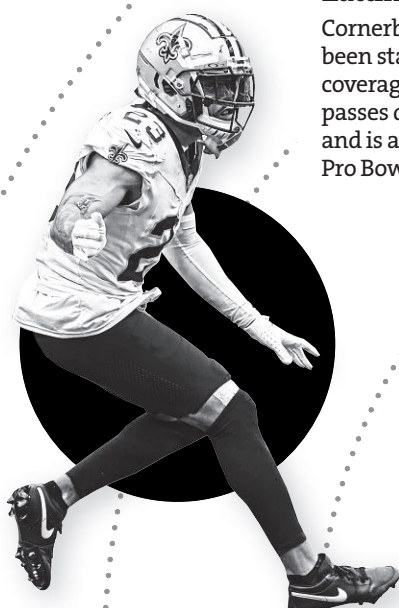
Kickoff: Noon Sunday • **Where:** U.S. Bank Stadium
TV: Fox • **Radio:** KFAN-FM 100.3; Sirius/XM 230 (Vikings),
 384 (Saints) • **Line:** Saints by 2 ½

Tyrann Mathieu

Veteran safety is anchor to defensive backfield and returned an INT for a 27-yard TD vs. New England.


Marshon Lattimore

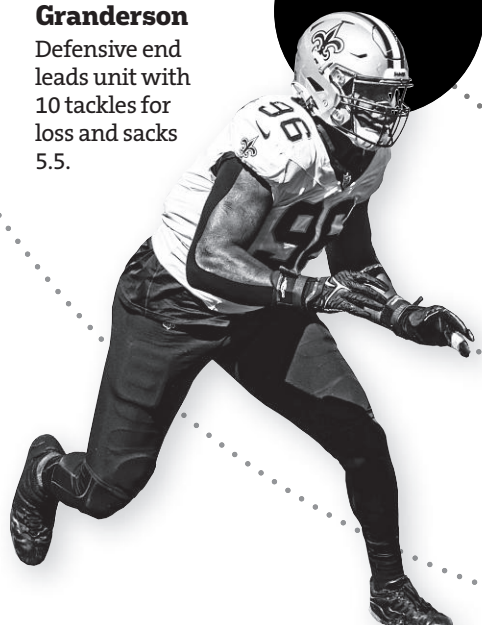
Cornerback has been stalwart in coverage with 8 passes defended and is a four-time Pro Bowler.


Joshua Dobbs

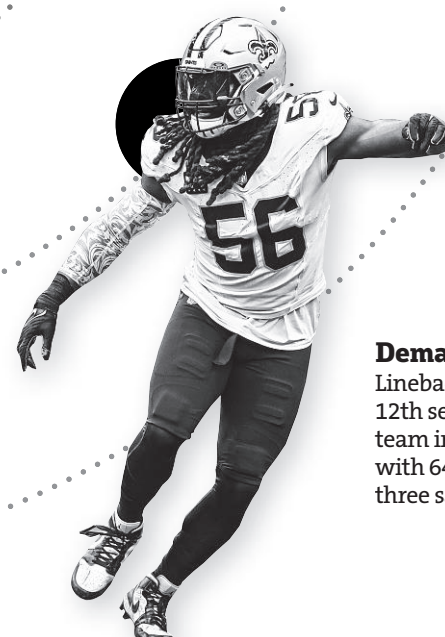
Can the Vikings' new QB handle being focal point on offense after a breakout debut?


Carl Granderson

Defensive end leads unit with 10 tackles for loss and sacks 5.5.


Demario Davis

Linebacker, in his 12th season, leads team in tackles with 64 and has three sacks.



FIRST START WILL TEST IF DOBBS CAN KEEP THIS UP

Story by BEN GOESSLING • Illustration by STEVE ZIMMERMAN • Star Tribune staff • ASSOCIATED PRESS photos

The Vikings will play at home for just the second time in their past five games on Sunday, hoping to extend a four-game win streak they've built with three victories on the road, including two in the division. The run has put them in possession of the NFC's final wild-card spot after an 0-3 start; they'll conclude their four-game slate against the NFC South by facing the Saints, who lead the division with a 5-4 record that matches the Vikings. Joshua Dobbs will make his first start for the Vikings against a Saints defense that ranks near the top of the NFL. Here's a look at the key matchups and story lines for Sunday:

VIKINGS OFFENSE VS. SAINTS DEFENSE
Saints will pressure Dobbs with four (and simulate more)

The Vikings will face a Saints defense that could look similar to what they saw in Atlanta, where defensive coordinator Ryan Nielsen went to the Falcons after years as New Orleans' defensive line coach. The Saints have been committed to a 4-3 base defense for years, and though they prefer to rush with four, they'll use plenty of simulated pressures where six or seven defenders line up appearing to rush before several drop into coverage. The Vikings use plenty of these looks, too, which means their offense has practiced against plenty of them, but they'll need Dobbs and center Garrett Bradbury to be on the same page again.

Vikings have to reconstruct receiving group again

Though Justin Jefferson returned to practice this week, he won't play against the Saints. K.J. Osborn is still recovering from a concussion, and T.J. Hockenson is preparing to play through rib and oblique injuries. It creates another challenge for a group of skill position players facing a solid Saints secondary, with third-year cornerback Paulson Adebo lined up across from veteran Marshon Lattimore. Hockenson will have to deal with Saints Pro Bowl middle linebacker Demario Davis, one of the league's best in coverage.

VIKINGS DEFENSE VS. SAINTS OFFENSE
Familiar faces haven't led to explosive results

The Saints still have many of the pieces they used during the height of their run with Drew Brees. Wide receiver Michael Thomas is back after playing just three games the past two years. Alvin Kamara, who tied an NFL record with six TDs in 2020 against the Vikings, has returned from suspension. Taysom Hill is still there, as is offensive coordinator Pete Carmichael. But the Saints rank 17th in expected points added per play and 15th in total scoring, as veteran quarterback Derek Carr has averaged a modest 5.96 net yards per attempt.

Hunter, Ramczyk square off again

This will be the sixth time Danielle Hunter has faced Saints right tackle Ryan Ramczyk, the Wisconsin product who's started for New Orleans since 2017. Hunter has never sacked a Saints quarterback during the regular season; he had 1½ sacks in the Vikings' wild-card playoff win in New Orleans four years ago, when coach Mike Zimmer put Hunter and Everson Griffen in the middle of the defensive line to secure more favorable matchups against the Saints' interior linemen. If Hunter, who leads the league in sacks with 10, gets one on Sunday, he'll secure a \$1 million incentive in his contract for reaching 11 this season. He could come into the weekend with counter-moves to play off what Ramczyk might expect based on their long history against one another.

THE BIGGEST STORY LINE
Vikings try to continue run with Dobbs

After being named NFC Offensive Player of the Week for directing three touchdowns drives while quarterbacking a team he hadn't led in practice, Dobbs got first-team snaps this week in preparation for his first start in Minnesota. The Vikings will try to channel the creativity Dobbs showed last week rushing for 66 yards in their win over the Falcons, while presenting him with concepts that help him deliver the ball in rhythm and keep him away from a formidable Saints front. "We can shape a game plan around what he does best, which are a lot of really good things," coach Kevin O'Connell said. "It's going to be exciting for our coaching staff, and getting to spend a little more time with him."

PREDICTION

The Vikings' offense is in for a big challenge against a Saints defense with a formidable front four, a veteran linebacker in Davis and a pair of solid corners in Adebo and Lattimore. The fact that Christian Darrisaw should return from a groin injury will help the Vikings protect Dobbs, though, and their defense will have a chance to control a Saints offense that's struggled to score consistently in Carr's first year as quarterback. Even though the Vikings enter as underdogs, they've continued to find ways to win close games. They'll do so again at home on Sunday. **Prediction:** Vikings 20, Saints 17