

★ StarTribune
SPORTS

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Can adding **Justin Jefferson** to a **Joshua Dobbs**-led offense lift playoff hopes and delay offseason decisions?

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When Vikings players returned from their bye week on Monday to begin a five-game push for a playoff spot that appeared much more contested than it had a week earlier, Brian Flores gathered the members of one of the league's most surprising defenses and told them what was at stake.

"My message was: 'You've got 35 guaranteed days. That's all we got that's guaranteed.' I can't give that message and not heed that message," the Vikings defensive coordinator said in response to a question about his own prospects for a second head coaching opportunity.

"Let's put everything into those five weeks,

and not come out of it with any regrets."

The Vikings are weeks from an offseason that could shape the direction of General Manager Kwesi Adofo-Mensah and coach Kevin O'Connell's tenure in Minnesota.

They will learn if a head coach job proves attractive enough to spirit away Flores, the architect of their defensive turnaround.

They will monitor the rehab and the financial aspirations of quarterback Kirk Cousins, the free-agent-to-be who had flourished enough in a second season under O'Connell to elicit comments from both the head coach and GM about a possible return in 2024.

See **VIKINGS** on C7 ►

Las Vegas Strip awash in purple

LA VELLE E. NEAL III



LAS VEGAS - Eric Buring was born in California, grew up in New York and has lived the past 38 years of his life in Alaska. He didn't set foot in Minnesota until the 2000s.

Yet he was standing in a Buffalo Wild Wings just off Las Vegas Boulevard early Friday morning wearing a Vikings sweatshirt at a Twin Cities radio station broadcast live. And live, Minnesota time, meant 4 a.m. Vegas time.

"I was a Fran Tarkenton-Chuck Foreman fan," he said in explaining his long-distance fan-

dom. "And it's the coolest logo in the NFL."

Buring is the president of the Arctic Vikings Club, based in Anchorage, Alaska. The club has operated for nearly 30 years, and about 80 dedicated members meet weekly at the 907 Ale House and Grill in Anchorage to watch games.

When the NFL schedule was released, with the Vikings traveling this weekend to play the Raiders for their first regular-season game here, Buring had two words for the membership: "Who's going?" Several members jumped on board, and by early Friday morning, some of them had already arrived with others en route. Several thousand — tens of thousands, actually — other Vikings fans had the same idea.

See **NEAL** on C7 ►

From Cuba to the Armory and beyond

PATRICK REUSSE



The young boxer was known as Osvary Morrell while becoming a star amateur in his home country of Cuba. He

turned 20 on Jan. 18, 2018, only a few days before winning a gold medal in the first-ever India Open International Tournament in New Delhi.

There had been several other gold medals in international events and he had an advertised amateur record of 130-2.

This excellence created the lure of a professional career, and that drew three men from the Morrell family to the sea on June 4, 2018: the father, Rafael Sr.; the older son, Rafael Jr.; and Osvary.

There was a boat there that would attempt to take them away from Cuba and start the journey across the big water to Mexico. To get to that boat, the Morrell men would need to swim a considerable distance and avoid the security patrols on the lookout for these forbidden seacraft with human cargo.

See **REUSSE** on C2 ►

WILD

8 p.m. Sunday at Seattle (BSN)

Zuccarello happy out of the spotlight

By SARAH MCLELLAN
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Mats Zuccarello was one of the last players to leave the ice at a recent Wild practice. After ditching his helmet and sitting at his stall in the almost empty locker room, Zuccarello began to discuss the Wild.

He explained the effect shedding a recent seven-game losing streak had on the team, how the mood had improved and how everyone was smiling.

"That helps a lot for team spirit," he said.

But the question that got Zuccarello talking wasn't about the Wild; he was asked about himself.

Zuccarello, after all, is the Wild's leading scorer. He had a 10-game point streak that ended Thursday, and his eight-game assist streak was one shy of matching the franchise record. The winger has factored into multiple goals in as many games (six) as he's gone pointless.

This season is on track to be the most productive of Zuccarello's NHL career.

See **WILD** on C8 ►