

VIKINGS GAMEDAY



NFL WEEK 15

VIKINGS VS. LIONS

Kickoff: noon Sunday**Where:** U.S. Bank Stadium • **TV:** Fox**Radio:** KFAN-FM 100.3; Sirius/XM 227, 820 (Vikings), 383, 810 (Lions); ESPN Radio**Line:** Lions by 3

WILL LIONS CLINCH THE NFC NORTH?

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The Vikings and Lions will play twice in the next three weeks. It's possible they will see each other three times in four weeks, as the Lions (10-4) need one win for their first division title in 30 years and the Vikings (7-7) remain in position for a wild-card playoff berth. The Vikings still could win the division, too, if they sweep the Lions and beat the Packers in Week 17 while Detroit loses to Dallas. First, it's a matter of shaking off a blown lead at Cincinnati last week and beating the Lions at home for the sixth consecutive year. Here's a look at what to expect between the Vikings and Lions:

VIKINGS OFFENSE VS. LIONS DEFENSE

Hutchinson, Lions front present a challenge

Though Lions left defensive end Aidan Hutchinson only has 6½ sacks this season, he leads a group that's been one of the league's most effective at pressuring opposing quarterbacks. According to Pro Football Reference, the Lions' 26.6% pressure rate is the fourth best in the league; of the Vikings' opponents this season, only the Chiefs have a higher rate this year. With right tackle Brian O'Neill expected to be sidelined for another game, the task of dealing with Hutchinson will fall largely to David Quessenberry, who started for the injured O'Neill last week.

Jefferson looks for big day against Detroit

The last time the Vikings played the Lions, Justin Jefferson broke the Vikings record for receiving yards in a regular-season game. His 223 yards surpassed Sammy White's 46-year-old record of 210, and had he not been called out of bounds on a 39-yard catch in the fourth quarter, he would have broken Anthony Carter's all-time record of 227 (set in a playoff victory over the 49ers following the 1987 season). Jefferson is playing without Kirk Cousins, of course, but he could excel against the Lions corners again if Nick Mullens can get him the ball on time. Rookie Brian Branch, who will line up in the slot in nickel packages, might be the Lions' best cover corner this season.

VIKINGS DEFENSE VS. LIONS OFFENSE

Flores to keep his advantage over Goff

Lions quarterback Jared Goff has faced defenses coached by Brian Flores three times, and those three meetings have accounted for some of the worst days of Goff's eight years in the NFL. He threw for just 161 yards and was intercepted twice against the Patriots as a rookie in 2016. With Flores calling plays, the Patriots held the Rams to three points in Super Bowl LIII. Flores was the head coach in Miami for a 2020 win over the Rams that spelled the beginning of the end in Los Angeles for Goff, who committed four turnovers in the game. Goff has thrown eight of his 10 interceptions when pressured, and the Vikings will bank on Flores' pressure packages to make it a long day for the quarterback again.

Battle of strengths in run game

The Vikings run defense ranks fifth in the NFL in yards allowed and 10th in expected points added; they will face a Lions team that's posted the fifth-most expected points from the run while ranking second in the NFL in rushing yards. David Montgomery leads the team with 855 yards this season, while rookie Jahmyr Gibbs has 792, as the two backs work behind a Lions line that has three former first-round picks. The Vikings have allowed just three teams to run for more than 100 yards since they gave up 259 in Week 2 against the Eagles. The Lions run game could be one of their toughest challenges since then.

THE BIGGEST STORY LINE

Game could be the first of three

This will be the fourth time in franchise history, and the first since 1989, that the Vikings and Lions play each other twice in three weeks. Coach Kevin O'Connell said the Vikings won't game-plan for the first Lions matchup with a view toward hiding anything for the second game, adding they need to focus on their first matchup and beating the Packers before worrying about their Jan. 7 matchup in Detroit. But if the Vikings can find matchups to exploit against the Lions this week, they could benefit from those advantages in relatively rapid succession, thanks to the NFL's scheduling quirk that put two of their most important games of the season in a 14-day span.

PREDICTION

The Vikings could be in position for a big division victory, if they can recreate the success Flores' defenses have enjoyed against Goff over the years. But Murphy's absence could mean a challenge for the Vikings' young secondary against a talented Lions receiving group, while their front seven will have to battle through injuries against a physical Detroit run game. If the Vikings win this one, it could be because of another defensive masterpiece from Flores and another electrifying day from Jefferson against the Lions. Otherwise, the Vikings' defensive health might make this a struggle. **Prediction:** Lions 24, Vikings 20

Reaching for 1,000

Vikings tight end T.J. Hockenson needs 98 yards receiving vs. his old team to reach 1,000 for the season, which would be a first in his career. He has 91 catches this year for 902 yards and five TDs.

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