**NFL basement dwellers starting to climb up the ladder**

**BY JIM MALONEY**

The first five weeks of the 2001 NFL season have been anything but predictable. From losing a week to the terror attacks of September 11, to having to move the Superbowl back to February there have been many side stories to play on the field. However, perhaps the most interesting stories have been the surprising starts for many of the perennial doormats of the NFL. Throughout five weeks there is only one undefeated team left, the St. Louis Rams. The Rams have remained atop their title as "The Greatest Show on Earth" this year after slipping to 10-6 in 2000 after winning the Superbowl the previous season. Kurt Warner is back leading the offense after fighting through injuries for a significant part of 2000. Warner is averaging 300 yards per game while completing 69.6% of his passes for 11 touchdowns. Bruce, Torry Holt, and Az-Zahir Hakim, in Warner’s arsenal of weapons are St. Louis’ deadly trio of receivers in Issac Bruce, Tony Gonzalez, and Tim Brown. Their first five games show they are for real by posting a league best 10.3 points per game. After setting a franchise record last season have been getting the job done with a balanced offense and defense. The Bears have had the starting job at quarterback for the last two years, but is off to an impressive start. With Oakland’s punishing defense, they should be a lock to be around come playoff time.

While St. Louis and Oakland are not surprised to be atop their respective divisions, there is a number of pleasant surprises throughout the league. The Green Bay Packers have struggled through the first few mediocre seasons after being the dominant force in the league in the mid 1990’s. This year the Packers have turned it around and look like the team that won the Superbowl during the 1996-97 season. Quarterback and three time MVP Brett Favre is finally healthy and his performance has returned to his level of old. While leading Green Bay (4-1) to a strong start, Favre has thrown for 1399 yards and 12 TDs. Ahman Green won the starting running back job early in training camp and shows no intention of letting go of it soon as he is averaging 4.6 yards a carry. Bill Schroeder has emerged as a solid number two receiver behind Antonio Freeman and Bobby compilers 486 yards rushing and 7 TDs in his first five games. San Francisco has been absent from the playoffs in the past couple years, but is off to an impressive 4-1 start. After setting a franchise record for passing yards in a season in 2000, Jeff Garcia has had the 2001 season in strong fashion. Although his numbers are not as impressive as they were in 2000, Garcia has still thrown for 1141 yards and 6 TDs. Running backs Garrison Hearst and Kevan Barlow have taken a lot of pressure off Garcia by averaging 4.5 and 4.6 yards a carry respectively. When Garcia does need to throw, Terrell Owens has been the league’s best receivers already totaling 483 yards and 6 TDs.

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Other pleasant surprises this year have been the San Diego Chargers and the San Francisco 49ers. Although San Diego has lost their last two contests, they still stand at very respectable 3-2. After going 1-15 in 2000, San Diego added free-agent quarterback Doug Flutie and traded that top pick in the draft for the fifth pick and Tim Dwight. The first pick ended up being Michael Vick who may be a hall-of-famer before he is done. With the fifth pick, LaDamian Tomlinson, has had the bigger impact so far. Tomlinson has compiled 486 yards rushing and 7 TDs in his first five games. San Francisco has been absent from the playoffs in the past couple years, but is off to an impressive 4-1 start. After setting a franchise record for passing yards in a season in 2000, Jeff Garcia has had the 2001 season in strong fashion. Although his numbers are not as impressive as they were in 2000, Garcia has still thrown for 1141 yards and 6 TDs. Running backs Garrison Hearst and Kevan Barlow have taken a lot of pressure off Garcia by averaging 4.5 and 4.6 yards a carry respectively. When Garcia does need to throw, Terrell Owens has been the league’s best receivers already totaling 483 yards and 6 TDs.

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