

Gruden's Return Could Spark Raiders

By Dave Lukow

Will the Oakland Raiders make the playoffs?

If they do, Jon Gruden and several new players will have a lot to do with it.

Named head coach of the Raiders in January, Gruden last coached in the NFL, with Tampa Bay, in 2008. He coached Oakland from 1998-2001, compiling a 38-26 record. During his first stint with the Raiders, the team reached the postseason twice. In Tampa Bay from 2002-2008, Gruden went 57-55. The Buccaneers made the playoffs three times with Gruden on the sidelines, including 2002, when Tampa won the Super Bowl.

Oakland, which had traded Gruden to the Buccaneers, was on the losing end of that Super Bowl - and didn't reach the playoffs again until 2016, under Jack Del Rio. After guiding the Raiders to a 6-10 mark in 2017, Del Rio was fired.

Gruden, who began his NFL career as an offensive assistant with San Francisco in 1990, has gone 95-81 as a head coach. He's also been an assistant with Pittsburgh, Green Bay and Philadelphia. He was offensive coordinator for the Eagles from 1995-97.

He clearly has key offensive pieces in Oakland, none more important than quarterback Derek Carr. In 15 starts last season, Carr threw for 3,496 yards and 22 touchdowns. Drafted in the second round out of Fresno State in 2014, Carr has thrown for 103 touchdowns - and just 44 interceptions - since entering the league. He's been picked for three Pro Bowls.

Carr will be throwing to an improved group of receivers, including wideouts Amari Cooper, Jordy Nelson, Martavis Bryant and Seth Roberts. Cooper had 48 catches for 680 yards and seven touchdowns last year. Nelson, who came to Oakland from Green Bay during the offseason, caught 53 passes, six for touchdowns, with the Packers.

Bryant, another new face, caught 50 passes for 603 yards and three touchdowns for Pittsburgh.

Roberts, out of West Alabama, had 43 catches for 455 yards and one score with Oakland.

Veteran tight end Jared Cook had 54 receptions for 688 yards and two touchdowns. Lee Smith, likely Cook's backup, had eight catches for 76 yards. Derek Carrier, formerly with the Rams, provides additional depth.

With Marshawn Lynch and Doug Martin in the backfield, the Raiders should have a dangerous running game. In 2017, Lynch had 207 carries for 891 yards and seven touchdowns. Martin, who ran for 406 yards and three scores for Tampa, will be a primary reserve. In six seasons, Martin has rushed for more than 1,400 yards twice. His presence gives Lynch, whose rookie season was 2007, a breather.

Jalen Richard provides additional options. He averaged 4.9 yards on 56 attempts and had 27 catches in 2017.

Tackle Kolton Miller, drafted by the Raiders in the first round this spring, has the talent to bolster the offensive line.

Khalil Mack is the foundation of Oakland's defense. A defensive end out of Buffalo, Mack had 10.5 sacks last season. Since being selected by the Raiders in 2014, Mack has 40.5 sacks and 304 tackles.

Defensive back Reggie Nelson had 89 tackles and an interception in 2017, while linebacker Bruce Irvin totaled 58 tackles and eight sacks in 16 starts.

The Raiders added safety Marcus Gilchrist via free agency. A Clemson product, he had 56 tackles, a sack and an interception for Houston a year ago.

Tahir Whitehead, who spent 2017 with the Lions, could be an upgrade at linebacker. He had 110 tackles, a sack and one interception for Detroit.