

Weatherspoon a big loss on defense

By D. Orlando Ledbetter
Atlanta Journal-Constitution
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The Falcons' revamped defense suffered a setback on Monday.

Veteran linebacker Sean Weatherspoon, who had been filling in for injured rookie De'Vondre Campbell at weakside linebacker, suffered a season-ending ruptured Achilles tendon in Sunday's 48-33 win over Carolina.

Weatherspoon, who has an extensive injury history and has been able to play all 16 games in a season just once, returned to the Falcons this offseason after playing one year in Arizona.

"That's tough news for us and for him," coach Dan Quinn said. "He's a guy that we have a lot of respect for and he's done a really good job through the first part of the season."

Weatherspoon was selected by the Falcons with the 19th overall pick in the 2010 draft and played all 16 games only during his second season in the league. He has repeatedly been slowed by knee, hamstring and Achilles injuries over his career.

The Falcons replaced Weatherspoon with LaRoy Reynolds, who is normally a speedy special teams player. The team is already thin at linebacker with both Campbell, who suffered an ankle injury during practice on Sept. 15, and Paul Worrilow (groin surgery) out.

Campbell was initially told he'd be out four to six weeks, but just two weeks after the injury, he was running with trainers last week. Campbell, the fourth-round pick from Minnesota, started the season opener against Tampa Bay.

"I think so," Campbell said when asked if he was close to returning. "It's getting better."

Campbell said he's going to try to play on Sunday against Denver.

"I may have to," he said. "They said I'm healing fast. I may have to come back. We'll see."

Campbell and Worrilow were both running on Monday, but are not ready to return, according to Quinn.

"LaRoy Reynolds came in at inside linebacker and did a really good job," Quinn said. "As far as Paul and De'Vondre, both of them were running today. We won't know more until we get into the week to see if they are able to contribute yet or if they are still a week or two away."

The Falcons are expected to look for linebacker depth from the in-season free agent market. The team didn't have any players in for tryouts last week, but the previous week, the Falcons tried out five players. None were linebackers.

In addition, starting linebacker Deion Jones suffered a calf injury against Carolina.

“As we went through today, (Jones) was certainly better than he was last night,” Quinn said. “We’ll take it all the way through Wednesday. He was walking around and moving today. We are not sure until we get out and get working on Wednesday.”

In addition to shuffling the linebacker corps, the Falcons can now activate cornerback Jalen Collins, who has served a four-game suspension after testing positive for performance enhancing drugs.

“He’s back with the team,” Quinn said. “He’s done an excellent job. He looked fit when he came back in today. We knew that he’d put the work in during his time away from the team. It was difficult for him to be away from his guys.”

However, Quinn was not sure when Collins will be able to contribute.

“We’ll take it all the way through the week and see where he’s at as we are getting ready,” Quinn said.

Weatherspoon out with ruptured right achilles

By D. Orlando Ledbetter

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Falcons linebacker Sean Weatherspoon suffered a ruptured achilles and is likely out for the remainder of the season, according to his agent Ryan Williams.

"I feel terrible for him," Williams wrote in an e-mail to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution on Monday.

Weatherspoon couldn't put any pressure on his right leg as he exited the field during the Falcons' 48-33 victory over the Panthers on Sunday at the Georgia Dome.

The Falcons said they are waiting on the official results, but will likely let coach Dan Quinn inform the media at his regularly scheduled press conference at 2:30 p.m. Monday.

Weatherspoon underwent tests to determine the extent of his injury today.

The Falcons are already thin at linebacker with De'Vondre Campbell, who suffered an ankle injury in during the closed portion of practice on Sept. 15, and Paul Worilow (groin surgery) out.

Campbell was told by the team that he'd be out four to six weeks. But just two weeks after the injury, Campbell was running with trainers last week. Campbell, the fourth-round pick from Minnesota, started the season-opener against Tampa Bay at weakside linebacker.

Weatherspoon, who has an extensive injury history, was filling in for Campbell.

Weatherspoon's injury was announced as a calf/Achilles injury on his right leg. The team doctor had Weatherspoon lay down on a table as he tried to flex the achilles on his bent leg.

"I think so," Campbell said when asked if he was close to returning. "It's getting better."

Campbell said he's going to try to play against Denver.

"I may have to," he said because of the injuries. "They said I'm healing fast. I may have to come back. We'll see."

Falcons plan for Coleman to play in Denver

By D. Orlando Ledbetter

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Falcons running back Tevin Coleman, who has the sickle cell trait, is set to play at the high altitude in Denver.

“We are aware of the situation back in 2007 with Ryan Clark, sickle cell anemia which is different than sickle cell trait,” Falcons coach Dan Quinn said. “There have been a number of guys who have had sickle trait and have played in Denver over the last nine years and certainly before then. We fully intend of Tev playing and playing well.”

Ryan has commanding view atop NFC South

By Steve Hummer

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

October 4, 2016

At season's start, there was a sentiment out there – one, that I must admit, more than once rolled around inside the hollow gourd residing upon my neck – that Matt Ryan was now the fourth best quarterback in a four-quarterback division.

That this once proud masthead of the franchise was yesterday's flavor, neither flashy enough nor nimble enough keep up with the Newtons and the Winstons in the neighborhood.

The one who's working on a five-year \$103 million deal, surely an anvil that would drag the Falcons back down to dark and familiar depths.

But, whoa, look at the verifiable facts from the first quarter of the season, after action has replaced supposition.

Ryan not only leads the NFC South but all of the NFL in passing yards (1,473) and the comparative measure of passer rating (126.3).

He is spreading the ball around like a late-night TV host dishes out compliments – even on a Sunday when Julio Jones set a franchise receiving yardage record, Ryan found nine other sets of hands.

After very preliminary returns, he is of MVP mettle.

Working with an offensive coordinator who reputedly was speaking ancient Etruscan to him last season, Ryan is coming off the best three-game stretch of his life, highlighted by his 503-yard extravaganza against Carolina Sunday. His QB rating is 27 points higher than that of New Orleans' Drew Brees. And 46 points higher than his Carolina counterpart, Cam Newton; 53 points higher than his Tampa Bay nemesis, Jameis Winston. The gap is rather yawning.

Here is a quarterback who already has perpetrated eight pass completions of 40 yards or more – two more than the other three NFC South quarterbacks combined.

As a result, predictably, the Falcons have a two game lead over everyone else in their division. That is why quarterbacks make stupid money.

It all can go wrong, of course, should Julio Jones develop a limp or Ryan's new keystone at center, Alex Mack, go missing. A team remains a very tentative sum of its parts. But here is Ryan showing himself still the quarterback capable of lining up all those parts, doing all the math and arriving at a rather considerable sum.

Ryan's place in the NFC South quarterbacking food chain is looking somewhat more commanding, don't you think?

This is the most important number for Falcons

By Michael Cunningham

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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The Falcons put up lots of eye-popping numbers during their demolition of the Panthers, led by record-setting days by wide receiver Julio Jones (300 yards receiving) and quarterback Matt Ryan (503 yards passing, 4 TDs). The Falcons won't face Carolina's awful each week, though, so they can't count on that kind of production for the rest of the season.

But there was one number just as important as the video-game stats put up by Jones and Ryan, and one that bodes well for the Falcons going forward: zero. That's how many passes Ryan's teammates dropped in 36 targets against the Panthers, according to a video review by Pro Football Focus.

Before the season, I noted that while Ryan had a down year by his standards in 2015 he didn't really play that badly. One overlooked reason for the offensive struggles in 2015 were dropped passes: 37 in 2015, according to Pro Football Focus, fourth-most in the league.

There's been a dramatic improvement in that area so far this season, and that helps to explain why the Falcons have the league's No. 1 offense through four games.

Falcons pass targets have just one dropped pass in 139 pass targets this season, according to Stats LLC, tied with three other teams for the fewest in the league. Dropped passes are somewhat subjective—for one example, I would give wide receiver Mohamed Sanu a second drop against the Bucs when he stumbled and couldn't corral a pass slightly behind him. But there is no question that Ryan's targets are much improved with hanging on to the ball.

One big reason for that is Leonard Hankerson is gone after he was among the worst drops offenders in the league last season. Also, free-agent addition Sanu (13 catches) seems to be putting his persistent drops issue with the Bengals behind him and wide receiver Justin Hardy (four catches) has no drops in seven targets after he dropped three of 36 in 2015.

The running backs are more sure-handed, too. Tevin Coleman has 13 receptions with no drops in 15 targets this year after he dropped three of five "catchable" balls in 2015, and Devonta Freeman has no drops in 12 targets after his 8.75 percent drop rate ranked No. 43 among backs with at least 20 targets in 2015.

Fans tend to fixate on Ryan's perceived weaknesses when they aren't railing against Kyle Shanahan. Now Falcons supporters who said either one (or both) were the problem are back to praising them. That's the nature of the NFL: fickle fans want simple explanations for struggles, so the quarterback and the OC take most of the heat when things aren't going right.

But as a dispassionate observer of the Falcons I've said all along that Ryan's 2015 season was an outlier and that he and Shanahan still could help the offense soar. One reason I believe that is because I saw that Ryan and Shanahan were stymied by wide receivers, tight ends and running backs consistently killing drives with dropped passes.

Certainly Ryan had a fumbling issue early last season and then accuracy problems late, but he still ended up as the ninth-rated QB by Pro Football Focus. Shanahan relied too heavily on the All-Julio offense early last year, which he has rectified in a big way in 2016, but most of the criticisms of his play-calling (after the fact, of course) are silly and too simplistic.

Both men needed more help from Falcons pass targets and now they are getting it. That's why I think the zero drops on Sunday is the most important number for the Falcons going forward.

Falcons expect Tevin Coleman to play in Denver despite sickle cell

By Vaughn McClure

ESPN.com

October 4, 2016

Atlanta Falcons coach Dan Quinn said he expects running back Tevin Coleman to play Sunday against the Broncos despite Coleman's concerns about how having the sickle cell trait could affect him in the altitude in Denver.

Coleman told ESPN he was unsure about playing because his blood disorder, related to sickle cell disease, can cause complications in environments with low oxygen, such as the high altitude in Denver. Coleman said he would consult with Quinn about the best way to proceed.

Quinn addressed the topic Monday and did not express doubt about Coleman's playing status.

Former Pittsburgh Steelers defensive back and current ESPN personality Ryan Clark, who has the sickle cell trait, not the more serious sickle cell anemia, had an episode after playing in Denver in 2007, when he became gravely ill and ultimately lost his spleen and gallbladder. Clark was then kept from playing in two subsequent games in Denver, including a playoff game.

Last year, Bengals defensive tackle Geno Atkins was cleared to play in Denver with the sickle cell trait and played 39 of 65 defensive snaps in a 20-17 overtime loss to the Broncos.

"There's been a number of guys who have sickle cell trait who've played in Denver over the last nine years and certainly before then," Quinn said. "So we fully intend on Tev playing and playing well."

Quinn downplayed the possibility that Coleman's reps would need to be monitored. However, a medical source with previous experience with an NFL team told ESPN that teams should strongly consider cutting down reps when a player has the sickle cell trait, depending on how that player's body adjusts to the altitude. The biggest factor is staying hydrated, something Coleman planned to do all along.

"I guess coach will see how I feel when we get there," Coleman told ESPN. "And I just have to communicate with him, if I am out there [playing], if I'm dead [tired] or can't breathe. We just have to play it smart."

In August, Coleman was pulled from the end of a practice as a result of his condition and the extreme heat.

Coleman has been a major factor in the Falcons' 3-1 start while sharing carries with starter Devonta Freeman. Through four games, Coleman has 129 rushing yards and four rushing touchdowns on 40 carries. He also has 13 receptions for 181 yards.

Sean Weatherspoon says he's out for the season with Achilles rupture

By Vaughn McClure

ESPN.com

October 4, 2016

Atlanta Falcons linebacker Sean Weatherspoon told ESPN he ruptured his right Achilles tendon in Sunday's 48-33 win over the Carolina Panthers and will miss the remainder of the season.

Weatherspoon was helped off the field after playing 47 snaps. He was hopeful the injury wasn't going to be serious after feeling soreness in his Achilles and calf afterward. An MRI on Monday morning revealed the worst-case scenario.

Weatherspoon, who was a first-round draft pick of the Falcons in 2010, also missed the entire 2014 season after tearing his left Achilles. Injuries have plagued his career, but Weatherspoon experienced a resurgence this season upon re-signing with the Falcons after a one-year stint with the Arizona Cardinals.

He expressed a positive outlook and a desire to continue his career, despite his latest setback.

"My headspace is awesome man," Weatherspoon said in a text message to ESPN. "I'm blessed. I showed that I can play at a high level again. I'll do it again, with God's unchanging hand."

Weatherspoon is third on the team with 27 tackles. He signed a one-year deal with a base salary of \$1 million with just \$150,000 fully guaranteed. The deal included roster bonuses of \$31,250 per game on the 46-man roster, with a maximum value \$500,000.

The Falcons are thin at inside linebacker with Weatherspoon out and rookie De'Vondre Campbell (ankle) along with Paul Worilow (groin surgery) still recovering from injuries. Weatherspoon replaced Campbell in the starting lineup at weakside linebacker, while Worilow was beaten out by rookie Deion Jones for the starting spot at middle linebacker.

Jones suffered a calf injury against Carolina but said he's going to be fine. The other inside linebackers on the roster are Philip Wheeler and LaRoy Reynolds.

Inside the record-setting numbers of Julio Jones, Matt Ryan

By Vaughn McClure

ESPN.com

October 4, 2016

The Atlanta Falcons' 48-33 win over the Carolina Panthers was highlighted by record-setting performances by both Julio Jones and Matt Ryan.

Jones caught 12 passes for a franchise-record 300 yards -- including a 75-yard touchdown -- coming off a one-catch game against the New Orleans Saints. And Ryan threw for a franchise-record 503 yards, completing 28-of-37 passes with four touchdowns. It was the first time there has been a 500-yard passer and 300-yard receiver in the same game in NFL history.

Barring a Ryan-like performance by Eli Manning on Monday night, Ryan will enter Week 5 with a league-high 1,473 passing yards to go with an NFL-best 126.3 passer rating. He has completed 101-of-140 passes with 11 touchdowns and two interceptions.

And Jones now leads the league with 488 receiving yards, six ahead of Detroit's Marvin Jones. Minnesota's Stefon Diggs has 325 going into his team's Monday night matchup with the New York Giants.

Here's a closer look at the record-setting performances by Jones and Ryan, courtesy of ESPN Stats & Information:

Jones is the sixth player in NFL history with 300 yards receiving in a game, joining Flipper Anderson (336), Calvin Johnson (329), Stephone Paige (309), Jim Benton (303), and Cloyce Box (302).

Jones gained 120 yards after the catch Sunday, the second most in a game in his career. He gained 64 yards after the catch in his touchdown catch-and-run, including 60 yards after contact. He had never gained more than 44 yards after contact in his career.

Ryan was 12-of-14 for 300 yards with five 20-plus yard completions and a touchdown when targeting Jones. Ryan was 16-of-22 for 203 yards with two completion of 20-plus yards when targeting his other nine receivers with three touchdowns and one pick-six.

Ryan completed 14-of-16 passes for 415 yards and three touchdowns on passes longer than 10 yards downfield. That is the most yards on such passes in a game in the last 10 seasons, surpassing Cam Newton's 348 yards on those throws in 2011. Jones had seven receptions on those throws by Ryan for 258 yards and a touchdown.

Ryan also completed three passes that traveled more than 30 yards downfield, the first time in which he had three such completions.

Ryan was 10-of-13 passing with a touchdown against five or more pass-rushers, averaging 16.5 yards per attempt in those situations. That is the third-highest yards per attempt allowed by the Panthers since 2011 when Ron Rivera took over as the head coach.

Ryan targeted Jones in his first three attempts. Of Ryan's 20 first-down attempts, Jones was the target on eight of them. Jones' eight first-down targets were tied for the third most in his career and only two fewer than his total in the first three games of the season.

Falcons ahead in NFC South but not ahead of themselves

By Vaughn McClure

ESPN.com

October 4, 2016

Pro Bowl cornerback Desmond Trufant stopped short of flashing a smile as he reflected on the Atlanta Falcons' surprising 3-1 start, which included Sunday's 48-33 triumph over the mighty Carolina Panthers.

The Falcons have some breathing room atop the NFC South standings after knocking off the Panthers (1-3), who have won three straight division titles. But it's no time for the Falcons to fully exhale. Trufant knows that.

"It's early, and every game is championship week, but the division games are big games," he said. "That's the easiest way to get into the playoffs is owning the division. That's what Coach [Dan] Quinn, that's been his message: owning the division. We just have to continue to do that.

"I mean, we're just trying to play our style of ball. It's always a battle in the division, but we're just playing our style. And we're getting results."

Having a dominant player such as Julio Jones earns you plenty of style points. Jones' franchise-record 300 receiving yards against the Panthers, coupled with Matt Ryan's franchise-record 502 passing yards, showed the rest of the league how potent an offensive attack the Falcons have. It also showed opposing defensive coordinators why they shouldn't leave Jones alone in one-on-one coverage.

The Falcons have scored 30-plus points in three consecutive games to go with key pick-sixes by Deion Jones and Robert Alford to help seal victories in back-to-back games.

A loss by Tampa Bay and a win by New Orleans on Sunday mean that all the teams behind in the NFC South are 1-3, and the Falcons are 2-1 in division play. Still, there's no reason for the Falcons to feel too comfortable. They were 5-0 at the start of the past season, then finished 8-8 and missed the playoffs for the third straight year.

"It does feel good to be up there [atop the division], but we've got to keep grinding and keep pushing," running back Devonta Freeman said. "I mean, you have to be humble. We just have to continue to work hard and feed off this juice and energy. [Sunday's game] was a great team win, but we have to move on and keep getting better."

Not too many teams will be able to keep pace with the Falcons if they continue to average 38 points per game. Sustaining such offensive momentum will be a daunting task against the next two opponents, Denver and Seattle, on the road. The Broncos and Seahawks surrender 16.0 and 13.5 points per game, respectively.

"It ain't going to be no different than any other Sunday because I feel like every game is the same," Freeman said. "It's always one game at a time."

Of course, the Falcons might enjoy better success if their defense catches up to their offense. The Falcons have surrendered 30-plus points the past two games and have given up 16 plays of 24-plus yards through four games.

"I think we did some good things [against Carolina], but there was definitely a lull where we dipped," Trufant said of the defense. "We just have to play for four full quarters, and we're going to be a scary team."

The way the offense is rolling, that's a frightening thought.

Weatherspoon ruptures Achilles, likely out for season

By Charles Odum
Associated Press
October 4, 2016

Atlanta Falcons linebacker Sean Weatherspoon suffered a ruptured right Achilles tendon in Sunday's win over Carolina, likely ending his season.

It is the second serious Achilles injury of Weatherspoon's career.

"That's tough news for him and for us," coach Dan Quinn said Monday. "... It doesn't look good for returning at this point."

Weatherspoon, Atlanta's first-round draft pick in 2010, missed the 2014 season with a torn left Achilles tendon.

Weatherspoon played with Arizona in 2015 before returning to the Falcons. Weatherspoon had been a backup, but started against Carolina with rookie De'Vondre Campbell held out with an ankle injury. Weatherspoon had four tackles, including one for a loss, against the Panthers.

Weatherspoon's injury helps to create a possible shortage of linebackers for this week's game at Denver.

Starting linebacker Deion Jones left the 48-33 win over Carolina with a calf injury. Quinn said Jones was "certainly better" on Monday.

Former starter Paul Worilow also was held out against Carolina with a groin injury.

Quinn said it was too early to know if Campbell or Worilow can return this week. He said the team could look at acquiring help at linebacker and also could consider moves within the linebacker group.

The defense will be boosted by the return of cornerback Jalen Collins, who completed his four-game suspension for violating the NFL's policy on performance-enhancing drugs. Collins started two games in 2015.

"It was difficult for him to be away from his guys who were battling for it," Quinn said.

Monday Musings: The reason behind Matt Ryan's turnaround and why Falcons are 3-1

By Pete Prisco
CBSSports.com
October 4, 2016

Atlanta Falcons quarterback Matt Ryan is on pace to throw for 5,892 yards and 44 touchdown passes. Not bad for a guy some fools think can't play the position at a high level.

After an unreal performance Sunday against the Carolina Panthers, where Ryan threw for 503 yards and four touchdown passes, with 300 of those yards and one score going to receiver Julio Jones, Ryan has emerged as an early MVP candidate. The Falcons are 3-1 after beating Carolina 48-33 at the Georgia Dome.

This Ryan start comes after a season when some were foolishly questioning whether he was a franchise passer.

Ryan has always been a quarterback fans love to pick apart for some reason, yet in 2015 he brought a lot of the heat on himself. He struggled in the first season running Kyle Shanahan's offense, throwing 16 picks and 21 touchdown passes. He was seemingly miscast in the system.

How miscast?

For the first time in his career, Ryan had to tape his ankles in practice because of all the bootlegs and rollouts. That's not who Ryan is as a player -- or should be. He functions best when in the pocket.

For that reason, I ripped Shanahan last season.

This season, he deserves praise. He has decided to cater his offense to Ryan, rather than the other way around.

The result is the highest-scoring offense in the league and a quarterback who is playing with as much confidence as any in the league. It helps that he has Jones, who is in the conversation as the league's best receiver.

Jones had catches of 32, 43, 53 and 75 yards against the Panthers, the last a catch-and-run for a touchdown to seal the game. He caught a slant inside, took off and raced to the end zone to give him 300 for the game, a Falcons record. The Panthers foolishly tried to single-cover Jones, who ate their secondary alive.

Ryan did throw a pick-six on a poorly designed inside screen, but aside from that he was flawless. The Falcons are off to a surprising start, but Ryan and Jones have been rolling up big numbers for years.

Now comes the tough part and more proving ground for Ryan, who always seems to be facing the scrutiny.

The Falcons' next two games are at Denver and at Seattle, arguably the two best defenses in the league. Facing those teams at home can be tough enough, but it can be brutal on the road.

The Falcons have to hope for a split in those games. In division where all the other teams are 1-3, they are the early favorites to win it.

The aerial show is a fun to watch, and the record-breaking duo just might get this team to the playoffs.

Atlanta's Offense Is No Fluke

By Danny Kelly

The Ringer

October 4, 2016

Three weeks into the season, the Atlanta Falcons were leading the NFL in points, total yards, and yards per play. They'd produced like the league's best offense, but there was one big asterisk tacked on to the end of that statement. They'd racked up all those yards and all those points against the Downy-soft Buccaneers, Raiders, and Saints defenses, which ranked 21st, 29th, and 30th, respectively, going into Week 4, per Football Outsiders DVOA.

Well, if we couldn't say the Falcons offense was for real after three games, we can say it now. They thrashed the Panthers 48–33 on Sunday, as Matt Ryan threw for 503 yards and four touchdowns, Julio Jones reeled in 12 catches for 300 yards, and the offense put up 571 yards of offense against the previously sixth-ranked Carolina defense. It took a season-long reboot in 2015, but Ryan is back, and the Falcons have the best offense in the NFL at the quarter point of 2016.

After going 13–3 in 2012, the Falcons haven't posted a winning season since. That year, they blew a 17-point lead in the NFC championship to the 49ers, and what followed was a quick descent into mediocrity. The Falcons won just four games in 2013, then after a 6–10 finish in 2014, general manager Thomas Dimitroff cleaned house. He fired his head coach of six years, Mike Smith, along with much of Smith's staff, and in came former Seattle Seahawks defensive coordinator Dan Quinn, who soon named Kyle Shanahan as the new offensive coordinator. Shanahan has never been far from controversy, whether it was regarding the benching of Donovan McNabb in Washington, Robert Griffin III's rise and fall, or the coach's decision to resign in Cleveland because of Johnny Manziel. But his history of top-10 offenses (2008 and 2009 in Houston; 2012 and 2013 in Washington) apparently trumped all that for Quinn, who wanted Shanahan's system in Atlanta.

So, after playing in essentially the same offense under Mike Mularkey and Dirk Koetter from 2008 to 2014, Ryan found himself in a new system that focuses less on the pocket-passing vertical game he'd been used to and more on staying balanced with the run and throwing a lot off of play-action bootlegs. The growing pains for Ryan in Shanahan's scheme were clear, as Atlanta finished last season ranked 22nd in points scored and 23rd in offensive DVOA. Ryan threw 21 touchdown passes (the lowest since his rookie season) to 16 picks (one off a career high). He struggled throwing on the move and made way too many inexplicable decisions with the football, particularly on his four red zone interceptions, which were second most in the NFL). Shanahan's year was just as dreary. In addition to the offense's struggles, his decision to move away from Roddy White in the passing game became a controversy when the fan favorite complained about being used primarily as a blocker. After Atlanta released White at the end of the year, he blamed Shanahan for the team's troubles, accusing the offensive coordinator of mismanaging late-game situations and costing the Falcons wins.

Four games into 2016, all of that drama is in the rearview. The Falcons have scored an NFL-high 152 points, Ryan just broke the franchise record for passing yards in a game, and his stat line one-fourth of the way through the year looks like this: 101-for-140 passing (72.1 percent) for 1,473 yards at 10.5 yards per attempt, along with 11 touchdowns to two interceptions and a 126.3 passer rating. He's hit his rhythm in the quick-strike short passing game, and he's more comfortable than ever on the bootleg-action rollout passes that Shanahan's offense prioritizes.

Of course, it helps to have a dominant receiver like Jones who can go off for three football fields' worth of yards in a single afternoon. Jones is basically unguardable in one-on-one situations. He's dangerous down the sideline. And he's the perfect target — with size, physicality, and breakaway speed — on the post and drag routes that Atlanta calls up on on play-action passes.

But it's not just Jones who's making this offense tick. With a more robust supporting cast, Shanahan and Ryan don't have to force-feed their star like they did last year, and that makes them much tougher to game plan for. Jones saw 33 percent of the Falcons' targets in 2015, and four games in, that number has dropped to 25 percent. Against the Panthers, nine Falcons caught passes: Taylor Gabriel (three for 49 yards), Tevin Coleman (three for 14), Aldrick Robinson (two for 48 and a TD), Mohamed Sanu (two for 22), Devonta Freeman (two for 7), Austin Hooper (one for 42 and a TD), and Patrick DiMarco (one for 18).

"You've got other guys who have made plays," Shanahan said before Atlanta's win last week over the Saints. "It makes it easier. You don't have to force it into tough looks. You can go where the coverage tells you. And when you do that, it kind of balances the field out and makes [Jones's] catches a little more valuable."

In that 45–32 win over New Orleans, Jones was targeted just seven times and caught one ball, but his teammates picked up the slack as eight different players caught passes. In Week 2's 35–28 win against the Raiders, nine players caught a pass, and in Week 1's loss to the Bucs, eight players caught a pass.

Spreading targets around so liberally makes it hard for opponents to zero in on Atlanta's tendencies, and when Jones does get the ball, there's room for him to go off like he did against Carolina.

In addition to the well-balanced passing attack, Shanahan's wide-zone run game has played a big part in Atlanta's offensive explosions. Free-agency addition Alex Mack at center is paying off. After finishing last season with 1,606 yards (20th), 3.8 yards per attempt (26th), and 13 rushing touchdowns (tied for 12th), they're currently sixth in yards (498), third in yards per carry (4.7), and fourth in touchdowns (five).

Coleman has emerged in his second season and looks much more comfortable running in Atlanta's scheme than he did as a rookie, and the former Indiana Hoosier, who was used primarily as a backup or a passing-down option in his first year, gives the Falcons another decisive, downhill physical runner to pair with Freeman. Sharing the workload should keep both fresh as the season goes on.

Atlanta ran 25 times for 90 yards and a touchdown against Carolina's stout front, and the Falcons' effectiveness on the ground not only takes some of the pressure off of Ryan's arm to carry the offense, but it helps in the play-action bootleg game. This was clear when Ryan hit Hooper deep down the left sideline for a 42-yard touchdown in the third quarter. The Panthers bit hard on a play-action run fake, and as they scrambled to adjust to the throw, they forgot to defend Hooper, who leaked out from the formation on the back side of the play.

If this play looks familiar, it's because the Falcons did almost the exact same thing in Week 2 against the Raiders.

The Falcons also owe some of their early-season success on offense to Shanahan's aggressive play calling. Jones's 75-yard touchdown run-and-catch is the perfect example. After the Panthers had erased

the Falcons' 34–10 fourth-quarter lead with a pair of touchdowns to make it an eight-point game with 3:58 remaining, the Conservative Coach's Playbook called for three straight runs that would bleed the clock and force Carolina to use up its three timeouts. Instead, on the first play of their subsequent drive — with the Panthers crowding the line of scrimmage with eight defenders, looking to stuff the run and get the offense the ball back — Shanahan and Ryan dialed up a quick slant to Jones, who took the pass and ran 75 yards past Carolina's only three deep defenders for the game-clinching score.

Ryan is back to making the types of precision throws under pressure that earned him the "Matty Ice" nickname and sent him to three Pro Bowls. We didn't see this guy last season, but with an improved run game and a more varied attack featuring all of Atlanta's offensive weapons, the Falcons have emerged as the clear favorites in the NFC South. At 3–1, they're already two full games ahead of every other team in their division, as the Panthers, Bucs, and Saints each sit at 1–3. The defense is giving up an average of 419 yards a game (29th in the NFL) and has surrendered 31 points per game (28th), and that doesn't give the offense much margin for error, but with Ryan in full control of the playbook and Jones in full flight, the Falcons still have a chance to win every week.

3 takeaways from Monday's press conference

By Andrew Hirsh
AtlantaFalcons.com
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Head coach Dan Quinn addressed the media on Monday afternoon following Atlanta's victory over Carolina. Here are three takeaways from the press conference

Injury Update

The Falcons' linebacker corps sustained a couple of ailments against Carolina. Sean Weatherspoon injured an Achilles and had an MRI on Monday. The damage looks serious, Quinn said, who added that "it doesn't look good for a return (in 2016) at this point."

Deion Jones (calf) got banged up, as well, but, according to Quinn, the rookie felt better on Monday than he did Sunday night. The team will monitor his progress throughout the week.

With those two ILBs injured, along with Paul Worrlow (groin) and De'Vondre Campbell (ankle), the team will consider making a roster move on Monday or Tuesday, per Quinn.

Coleman Good to Go in High Altitude

In 2007, Steelers safety Ryan Clark, who has sickle cell anemia, lost his spleen and gall bladder after playing in the thin air at Mile High Stadium. Tevin Coleman has a sickle cell trait — in other words, he carries the sickle cell gene — which has led to speculation about his status for next Sunday's game in Denver.

Coleman and Clark's situations are different, however: Coleman doesn't have the disease itself, and Quinn is not aware of any limitations that would hinder the second-year running back.

"There's been a number of guys who've have sickle cell trait who've played in Denver over the last nine years, and certainly before then," Quinn said. "We fully intend on Tevin playing and playing well."

Reflecting on the First Quarter

Now 25 percent of the way through 2016, Quinn believes there's a lot of value in reflecting on the first quarter of the season while maintaining focus on the work that lies ahead.

"I think it's still a good process to go through as you get through, even for a player to say (to him), 'These are the things, over four games, that in your game, you're really doing well, and here's a couple things that we think you can improve upon,'" Quinn said. "It's part of the self-scout that we do as well — scheme-wise, offensively, defensively. So it is an important part of the process."

Weatherspoon tears achilles, return unlikely

By Kelsey Conway
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Sean Weatherspoon has torn his Achilles tendon and is unlikely to return in the 2016 season, head coach Dan Quinn confirmed Monday afternoon.

Weatherspoon has been an instrumental part of Atlanta's defense since his return, both on and off the field. Prior to suffering the injury in Sunday's game, Weatherspoon was playing some of the best football of his career. The linebacker has been a sound tackler for the Falcons – his 27 tackles rank third on the team.

The Falcons have greatly benefited from Weatherspoon's production on the field, but his presence in the locker room and his role as a leader is perhaps even more valuable.

"It's the energy, the toughness, and we call it the juice, that's what he brings to the team," Quinn said of Weatherspoon.

This marks the second time Weatherspoon has experienced an Achilles injury, he missed the entire 2014 season with a torn left Achilles.

"That's tough news for us and for him," Quinn said. "He's a guy we have a lot of respect for and he's done a really good job through the first part of the season. The injury looks serious; it doesn't look good for a return at this point."