

## OPINION

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# NFL Division 'Gerrymander' May Place Less Worthy Teams in the Post-Season

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Sheldon H. Jacobson, Ph.D.

With NFL post-season play less than two weeks away, numerous teams are focused on the possibility of reaching the [Super Bowl on Feb. 11](#).

[Several teams are approaching the final week of the regular season with 9-7 or 8-8 records](#) that could make the post-season. There were 14 teams that had seven or eight wins one week ago. The current standings ensure that at least two nine-win teams (or perhaps even one with eight wins) will advance. This has been the case almost every season, although such teams typically fall aside rather quickly.

In 2022, [five teams made the playoffs with nine or fewer wins](#). [None of them made the Conference Championship](#).

In 2021, [two teams made the playoffs with nine or fewer wins](#). [Neither of them made the Conference Championship](#).

In 2020, [two teams made the playoffs with eight or fewer wins](#) (7-9 Washington and 8-8 Chicago). [Neither of them made the Conference Championship](#).

The last season when [only teams with 10 or more wins made the playoffs was 2012](#).

On the flip side, the last season a 10-win team missed the playoffs was 2020, when 10-6 [Miami lost out](#) with the [AFC packed with 11-win teams ahead of them](#), [while the NFC had a seven-win division leader](#) (Washington).

The structure of divisions within each conference and the rules that determine who makes the playoffs can be viewed as a gerrymander of the NFL divisions. By guaranteeing each division winner a spot in the post-season, stronger teams may be passed over if their division is packed with the most talented team.

It is highly likely that a 9-8 team will be one of the division winners and make the post-season this season, while several other 9-8 teams will miss out. Given that the AFC South and the AFC North are laden with seven- and eight-win teams entering the final week of the regular season, this ensures that middling teams will be playing during wildcard weekend. In other words, this system does not ensure the overall best teams make the post-season.

Independent of how the divisions are set up, the top teams, with 11 or more wins, should make the postseason (the [2008 New England Patriots stands as the only exception](#)), while teams with eight or fewer wins should get left out. The gray area is teams with nine or 10 wins.

This begs the question: should the teams with the best records, independent of their divisions, make the playoffs? Moreover, should teams that cannot win nine games be excluded? What the divisions do is obfuscate such performance by grouping teams together in a manner that both hides and exposes performance flaws.

This season, the abundance of teams that will end up with nine wins means that some will advance to the post-season, and others will be left behind. The division where a team plays will be a driver for such disparities.

What fans want to see is the team they root for make the post-season. After that, they want to see the best teams advance. The [most appropriate way to identify the best teams](#) is with their records, independent of their division. Tie breakers based on winning percentages of teams that they defeated, and those that they lost to, makes sense.

Divisions are useful to create rivalries and set up schedules, which, by design, must be unbalanced. However, to use divisions to place teams into the playoffs runs counter to the meritocracy that is at the foundation of sports competition.

Over the next week, several teams will scramble for just enough wins to scrape past the finish line and make the playoffs. Even recent powerhouse [Kansas City](#) — the loser of three of its last five games — now sports a pedestrian 10-6 record and finds itself limping into wild card weekend. The range of [post-season probabilities](#) provides a picture of what each team faces to reach post-season play.

With several teams poised to finish with 9-8 records, there are a multitude of [tie-breakers](#) used to determine who is in and who is out. The one that makes no

sense and screams in the face of meritocracy is being a division winner. Such a gerrymander is certain to degrade the quality of teams in the post-season.

To give fans what they deserve, performance is the most appropriate measure for determining who reaches the post-season. Keep the divisions for scheduling, but toss them for determining who gets to play in the post-season.

[Sheldon H. Jacobson](#), Ph.D., is a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. A data scientist, he applies his expertise in data-driven risk-based decision-making to evaluate and inform public policy and sports analytics.