

Maye and McCarthy find themselves in unfortunate company early this NFL season

BY JOSH DUBOW
AP PRO FOOTBALL WRITER

Drake Maye has followed up a season when he was the MVP runner-up with an opening month that has been reminiscent of some of the biggest recent draft busts. J.J. McCarthy also finds himself among not-so-lustrous company after being dealt away following a quick flameout in Minnesota.

Two of the record-tying six quarterbacks taken in the first round of the 2024 draft aren't having the best start to the 2026 season.

Let's start with Maye, who emerged as a star in his second season in 2025 when he led the NFL in passer rating (113.5), completion percentage (72.0) and yards per attempt (8.9) and finished a close second to Matthew Stafford in MVP voting while helping the Patriots reach the Super Bowl.

New England made the playoff run despite less-than-spectacular play-off performances from Maye against some of the league's top defenses, but it has only gotten worse over the first three games of this season.

Maye has turned the ball over seven times in the first three games while producing only one touchdown for the Patriots, marking the first time since 2007 that any quarterback has done that. The one positive from that is the last QB to do it was



Mike Stewart — AP

Jacksonville Jaguars defensive tackle Davon Hamilton (52) tackles New England Patriots quarterback Drake Maye (10) in the first half during an NFL football game in Jacksonville, Fla., on Sunday.

Drew Brees, who recovered to have a solid season that year and a Hall of Fame career after that.

The other company Maye is in is much less encouraging: His 58.6 passer rating marks the fifth time in the last 10 seasons that a QB was under 60 after starting the first three games. The other quarterbacks on that list include notable draft busts like Anthony Richardson (55.9 in 2024), Justin Fields (50 in 2022), Zach Wilson (51.6 in 2021) and DeShone Kizer (53.2 in 2017).

The Patriots have scored just 29 points on offense so far this season — they had a defensive touchdown in a Week 2 win over Pittsburgh — for the lowest total through three games since the Jets had 20 in 2021 in the first three starts of Wilson's career.

McCarthy went down with a season-ending knee injury in his first exhibition game for the Vikings, becoming just the third top-10 quarterback who didn't play a single snap as a rookie. He began last season as the starter and won NFC Offensive Player of the Week in his debut, but injuries limited him to just 10 starts last season.

McCarthy fell to third string this season after ranking last among all qualifiers with a 72.6 passer rating last season and now will seek a fresh start with the New York Giants.

McCarthy is just the sixth quarterback taken in the top 10 in the common draft era starting in 1967 to make 10 or fewer starts for his original team.

Rich Campbell, the sixth pick by Green Bay in 1981, threw 68 career passes and never started a

game for the Packers. San Francisco dealt away 2021 No. 3 pick Trey Lance following just four starts after Brock Purdy seized the starting role for the 49ers.

Jack Thompson made five starts for Cincinnati after being picked third in 1979, Marty Domres made six starts for the Chargers after going ninth in 1969 and Andre Ware had six starts for Detroit after being drafted seventh in 1990.

None of those QBs had any success in new places.

BACKUP QBS OFF TO RECORD-SETTING START

Case Keenum's win for the Chicago Bears in his first appearance in nearly three years was just the latest example of a team succeeding without its starting quarterback.

In all, quarterbacks who didn't start Week 1 are 6-0 this season in fill-in appearances, with Atlanta's Michael Penix, Washington's Marcus Mariota and Jameis Winston of the Giants also joining that list this week with wins.

Drew Lock won his start for Seattle in Week 2 after Sam Darnold went down in the opener and Carson Wentz did the same for Minnesota that week when Kyler Murray was hurt. Murray returned this past week and won, while Darnold and the Seahawks lost to Mariota and the Commanders.

Bengals shake up return game, cut Williams and add Tinsley

BY CHARLIE GOLDSMITH
ASSOCIATED PRESS

CINCINNATI — Coming off a loss to the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Cincinnati Bengals have a shake-up at the back of their wide receiver/tight end room that has a significant impact on offense as well as special teams.

The Bengals cut returner Ke'Shawn Williams, signed receiver Mitchell Tinsley and promoted pass catching tight end Tanner Hudson from the practice squad.

Meyers is expected to take over as the primary returner when the Bengals host the Jacksonville Jaguars on Sunday. Tinsley, who played for the Bengals in 2025, steps into a role on the offense. And Hudson steps into a bigger role with rookie receiver Colbie Young now expected to miss time with an injury.

Williams made the team as a returner, but he fumbled a punt on Sunday against the Steelers. In limited action, Meyers has shown impressive flashes as a returner. Meyers has also seen his role on the offense increase every week.

"I thought Dohnte did an excellent job," coach Zac Taylor said. "He was a part of the game plan (in Week 3 against the Steelers), but that really expanded when Colbie went out. He had a

really good feel for what we asked him to do. He blocked some big guys. It's hard because certain guys you put in there and the personnel groupings will change on defense.

"Sometimes, Dohnte draws a difficult task with his responsibility. I thought he gave everything he possibly could to make those blocks we needed from him. He did a good job of understanding the game plan and the tweaks we needed from him in there. Really proud of what he did."

Tinsley had eight catches, including six for first downs and two touchdowns last season. He also proved to be a reliable blocker in the running game.

When Meyers made the Bengals' 53-man roster, he took a roster spot from Tinsley. While Tinsley went to the Texans' practice squad for the first three weeks of the season, the Bengals jumped at the chance to bring him back once Young got injured. Bengals No. 3 receiver Andrei Iosivas is also on injured reserve with a thumb injury.

"The good news is we're not playing with guys who we don't think we can find a role for," Taylor said. "Everyone in that receiver and tight end room, we feel like has earned the opportunity."

Steelers head to Cleveland for matchup of 2-1 teams in Rodgers' final Thursday night game

BY JOE REEDY
ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEREA, Ohio — Aaron Rodgers' NFL farewell tour continues with his final scheduled Thursday night game when the Pittsburgh Steelers face the Cleveland Browns.

Even though Rodgers is one win shy of tying Tom Brady (14) for the most QB wins on Thursdays, the Steelers have not had the same success. Pittsburgh is 0-9 on the road when facing an AFC North team on Thursday.

"Because there's not enough damn time to embrace the tape," defensive tackle Cam Heyward said. "But the great thing about it is they got to deal with the same problems we are. So it's an even playing field."

Four of those nine losses have been against Cleveland. The Browns won 24-19 two years ago when the second half was played in a snowstorm. There was also the 2019 game when former Browns defensive end Myles Garrett got in a late-game scuffle with Steelers QB Mason Rudolph. Garrett ripped off Rudolph's helmet, swung it and hit him in the head.

"We had that snowball a couple years ago, which was crazy," Heyward said. "Yeah, it can become a little bit more gimmicky because it's not as sharp as a Sunday. But we're just gonna embrace it and be ready for it."

Thursday night also marks the 150th meeting

all-time between the rivals, which are separated by only 135 miles.

Rodgers is 13-7 on Thursdays with 46 touchdowns and seven interceptions. One of those losses, though, came last season at Cincinnati when the Bengals rallied for a 33-31 victory.

"I just suck it up for those three hours and then know you get a reward on the back end. I think it's part of the game now because of the money that's in it. I think I'm just excited about the weekend," said Rodgers, who has thrown 11 touchdowns and no interceptions in five games against the Browns.

Steelers coach Mike McCarthy is 11-5 on Thursday nights, with wins in four of the past five games.

Cleveland has won seven straight games on Thursday night, the longest active streak and tied for fourth longest in NFL history.

Deshaun Watson has four touchdowns and no interceptions in the past two games as the Browns are 2-1 for the first time since 2023. The 10-year veteran has lost to Pittsburgh in his three starts, though, including taking 18 sacks.

"It's a great opportunity to showcase what we're about on a big national stage. And yeah, we're super excited," Watson said. "We're playing a very tough opponent, experienced opponent, and we

got to make sure that we have all our things locked in going into that game."

NEED TO KNOW

Pittsburgh (2-1) at Cleveland (2-1)

When/where to watch: Thursday, 8:15 p.m. EDT, Amazon Prime.

Latest odds: Steelers by 2 1/2.

Against the spread: Steelers 2-1; Browns 2-1.

Last week: Steelers beat the Bengals 30-27; Browns beat the Panthers 21-18.

Last meeting: Browns beat Steelers 13-6 on Dec. 28, 2025, in Cleveland.

Series record: Steelers lead 86-62-1.

MATCHUP TO WATCH

Browns offensive tackles Spencer Fano and Tytus Howard vs. Steelers linebackers TJ Watt and Alex Highsmith. Browns tackles have allowed a 13.5% quarterback pressure rate, second highest in the league. Howard is tied for most pressures allowed by a right tackle with 17. Pittsburgh has the highest

pressure rate when using four or fewer pass rushers. Watt has 17 1/2 sacks in 15 meetings against the Browns while Highsmith has 11 1/2 in 11 games.



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UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE® (All Periodicals Publications Except Requester Publications)		
1. Publication Title	2. Publication Number	3. Filing Date
MESSENGER-INQUIRER	3 4 1 1 6 6 0	09/22/2026
4. Issue Frequency	5. Number of Issues Published Annually	6. Annual Subscription Price
TUESDAY - SATURDAY	260	\$410.80
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication (Not printer) (Street, city, county, state, and ZIP+4®)		Contact Person
PO BOX 1480 OWENSBORO, DAVIESS COUNTY, KY 42302-1480		Barry Garden
8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher (Not printer)		Telephone (include area code)
P.O. Box 1480, OWENSBORO, KY 42302-1480		(270) 691-7252
9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor (Do not leave blank)		
Publisher (Name and complete mailing address)		
MIKE WEAVER		
P.O. Box 1480, OWENSBORO, KY 42302-1480		
Editor (Name and complete mailing address)		

10. Owner (Do not leave blank. If the publication is owned by a corporation, give the name and address of the corporation immediately followed by the names and addresses of all stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of the total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, give the names and addresses of the individual owners. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, give its name and address as well as those of each individual owner. If the publication is published by a nonprofit organization, give its name and address.)				
Full Name	Complete Mailing Address			
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Paxton Media Group LLC	201 South 4th Street	Paduach	KY	42003
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12. Tax Status (For completion by nonprofit organizations authorized to mail at nonprofit rates) (Check one)
The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes:
☒ Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months
☐ Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months (Publisher must submit explanation of change with this statement)

PS Form 3526, July 2014 Edition, Page 1 of 4 (see instructions page 4) PSN: 7530-01-000-9931 PRIVACY NOTICE: See our privacy policy on www.usps.com.

13. Publication Title	14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below
MESSENGER-INQUIRER	08/06/2026
15. Extent and Nature of Circulation	
a. Total Number of Copies (Net press run)	7469
b. Paid Circulation (By Mail and Outside the Mail)	
(1) Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies)	1060
(2) Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies)	458
(3) Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS®	4080
(4) Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Through the USPS® (e.g., First-Class Mail®)	0
c. Total Paid Distribution (Sum of 15b (1), (2), (3), and (4))	5598
d. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (By Mail and Outside the Mail)	
(1) Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541	0
(2) Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541	0
(3) Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through the USPS® (e.g., First-Class Mail®)	0
(4) Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or other means)	1687
e. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (Sum of 15d (1), (2), (3), and (4))	1687
f. Total Distribution (Sum of 15c and 15e)	7285
g. Copies not Distributed (See Instructions to Publishers #4 (page #3))	92
h. Total (Sum of 15f and g)	7377
i. Percent Paid (15c divided by 15f times 100)	76.84%
* If you are claiming electronic copies, go to line 16 on page 3. If you are not claiming electronic copies, skip to line 17 on page 3.	
16. Electronic Copy Circulation	
a. Paid Electronic Copies	935
b. Total Paid Print Copies (Line 15c) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a)	6533
c. Total Print Distribution (Line 15f) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a)	8220
d. Percent Paid (Both Print & Electronic Copies) (16b divided by 16c x 100)	79.00%
I certify that 50% of all my distributed copies (electronic and print) are paid above a nominal price.	
17. Publication of Statement of Ownership	
☒ If the publication is a general publication, publication of this statement is required. Will be printed in the 10/01/2026 issue of this publication.	☐ Publication not required.
18. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner	Date
Mike Weaver, Publisher	09/22/2026
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