

A SEASON OF HOPE

Every new season ushers in an era of hope for players, coaches and fans alike. All across this nation there are “glass is half full” devotees chirping at the occupant of the closest bar stool that “the preseason means nothing.” With emphatic gestures and a glimmer in their eyes they remind each other of this universally known and often repeated truth. And it is the truth.

The NFL’s preseason is not so much a measure of the teams that oppose each other but rather a measure of the individual players on the field at any given moment. By the second half – or in many cases the second quarter – the gridiron is occupied mainly by players who will see little game time once the regular season is underway. It is important for writers and television commentators to keep this in mind when analyzing or attempting to predict the outcome of this first week’s games.

That having been said, I will fill you in on my three-fold method for picking games in the first week of the regular season. 1) I look at my year-end power rankings from the previous season. 2) I carefully consider any changes that have taken place within the team’s roster and/or coaching staff. 3) I say five Hail Mary’s and three Our Father’s. OK, I’m kidding about the third one. The truth is that I like to pick home teams when it seems like a toss-up or if there are just too many unknowns.

NOTE: This week only, the record shown will be a team’s 2004-05 regular season record.

Philadelphia Eagles (13-3) @ Atlanta Falcons (11-5)

Monday, September 12, 2005 @ 9:00 PM ET on ABC

Even though the season kicks off on Thursday night, the struggle for the top of the NFC will have to wait until these two elite squads face off in the first regular season installment of Monday Night Football. After having finished as number one and two respectively in the NFC last year, the Eagles and Falcons will treat this early clash as if it were a playoff game. All of the players, coaches and fans in the Georgia Dome will understand – well, they’ll *hope* – that the battle for home field advantage throughout the playoffs starts when the ball is kicked off on Monday night.

The Eagles stormed out to a 7-0 start last year and wrapped up home field advantage throughout the playoffs so early that they had the luxury of running their record to 13-1 and then resting their starters for their last two games. Their starters never lost to an NFC team, and they would be entering this season with a pronounced swagger if it weren’t for the fact that their star wide receiver Terrell Owens has created such a stir with his antics during training camp and the preseason. Owens has quarreled with coaches and has taken verbal shots at quarterback Donovan McNabb. He was suspended for a week, and he continues to be a thorn in the collective side of the entire Eagles organization. However – and this is a BIG “however” – that won’t matter too much if he is healthy and on the field when McNabb takes the first snap. Owens is still the biggest, strongest and most threatening receiver in the game, and McNabb is mature enough to throw him the ball even though they might not be the best of friends.

That said, the Eagles have a couple of other issues. They’ve already lost two key offensive players for the year: running back Correll Buckhalter and wide receiver Todd Pinkston. Head coach Andy Reid will fill the gaps with young talent, but the absence of these two reliable veterans could make it just a bit harder to avoid turnovers – something the Eagles did very well last year. Another issue will be the loss of defensive tackle Corey Simon who is now with the Colts. The loss of one player won’t sink a defense that was 10th in the league in total defense last year, but it could make it harder for the Eagles to contain speedy and elusive quarterbacks like... well, before I get to *him*, let me wrap this up by saying that I feel that the Eagles – while not as good as they were last year – are still one of the top teams in the league thanks to Donovan McNabb, Brian Westbrook and Javon Kears... and their perpetually great coach, Andy Reid.

The Falcons also have a great coach in 43 year old Jim Mora. But while Reid is the wily veteran coach with a proven history of winning, Mora is the young hot-shot coach who has had some success but still has a lot to prove. In that respect, Mora and his star quarterback Michael Vick (a.k.a. *him*) are two peas in a pod. Mora, in his first season as a head coach last year, took a 5-11 squad to an 11-5 record and the playoffs. Vick had similar success in his first year as a starting NFL quarterback when he led his team into the playoffs and a Lambeau date with Green Bay. Under his leadership, the Falcons became the first team to ever defeat the Packers in a home playoff game. But “first round of the playoffs” success is not the kind of legacy that these two men want. They want Super Bowl success, and they have a good shot at it now that the Falcons have some continuity for the first time in years.

After that playoff run in Vick’s first season, the city of Atlanta was buzzing with optimism and hope for the coming seasons. But then a preseason leg injury kept Vick out for the majority of the 2003 season, a

season that left the Falcons without any answers until Vick returned in week 14. After his return, the Falcons won three of their last four games. They converted that momentum into an 11-5 record and a win in the first round of the playoffs last season, and now they're looking to take the next step.

Michael Vick is a spectacular running and scrambling quarterback, and he has learned to be a better passer. This will be the season when all of the facets his game will come together and show his true capabilities to the rest of the league. But it's not just Vick that will click – it will be the entire Falcons roster. I like the addition of former Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ed Hartwell to the defense, and I also like that the Falcons used their six draft picks on one wide receiver and five speedy defenders. But what I really like – and I've written about this in years past – are unselfish players.

That's why running back Warrick Dunn is on the top of my list of respected players. In the off-season Dunn allowed his contract to be restructured to create more salary cap room for the Falcons. I expect the football gods to reward his selfless act by protecting his 30 year old body from injuries in what could be his last season with the Falcons. Dunn has been speedy and durable despite being a small back. His legs, along with those of fullback Justin Griffith and Mike Vick, should give Atlanta one of the league's top running games again this season.

OK, I know what you're thinking... "Great. But what about this game?" Good question. I'll walk you through my mental progression. 1) On a neutral field and with a neutral crowd – who would win? *The Eagles get a slight edge because of their experience.* 2) Which team has more to prove in the first week of the season? *The Falcons get the edge because of their youth and desire.* 3) Which is the home team? *The Falcons.* 4) What/who is the x-factor? *Michael Vick is the great x-factor here. We already know he can move faster than almost any other home sapiens, and if he's now a better passer then we could be in for a real treat. In case you hadn't already guessed it... I'm picking the **Falcons**.*

New York Jets (10-6) @ Kansas City Chiefs (7-9)

The Jets have set their sights high this season. Their ultimate aim is the Lombardi Trophy, but first they're gunning for the Patriots. Cursed with cohabitation with the reigning AFC East and Super Bowl Champs, the Jets know that they must first take care of business at home if they hope to win the Big Game in the near future. Fortunately for them, preparing to beat the Patriots helps a lot when tackling the other teams on their schedule. The first challenge for Chad Pennington and crew is a big one.

The Chiefs were embarrassed last year by their record in a year when many picked them to make it all the way to the Super Bowl. Their undoing was defense – rather, a lack thereof – so they made sure to pursue new defensive talent in the off-season. Adding a good defense to the already lethal combination of quarterback Trent Green, running back Priest Holmes, tight end Tony Gonzalez and a few talented wide receivers could catapult the Chiefs right back into the realm of the elite. I get the feeling that head coach Dick Vermeil is hanging around until the Chiefs put together a season worthy of his retirement, and this could be the one. KC fans are extremely loyal and loud, and they provide one of the best home field advantages in the league. *With their new defense and playing on their home field, I like the **Chiefs**.*

Dallas Cowboys (6-10) @ San Diego Chargers (12-4)

It's a no-brainer, right? The Chargers took the league by storm last year, won their division for the first time since 1994 and made it to the playoffs. Drew Brees played like a fiend all season long to win himself the starting job, and they still have one of the best players in the league in running back LaDainian Tomlinson. The defense is great, and they have a wily veteran coach. What's not to like? Well, I hate to resort to over-used clichés, but "lightning doesn't strike twice." Before you jump out of your skin, just hear me out. I'm not saying that the Chargers will be bad this year. I'm just saying that their division got a whole lot better since last season, and this year they won't be catching any defenses off guard.

Speaking of defenses, the Cowboys have a pretty good one – and their coach ain't too shabby, either. Now that Bill Parcells has been allowed to take control of personnel, the Cowboys look like a playoff team even though they haven't played a single regular season snap yet. What are the ingredients for a post-season run? Great defense. Check. Reliable quarterback. Check. Solid offensive line. Check. Game-breaking running back. Check. Savvy coaching staff. Check. This is the year that the Cowboys could prove that Parcells is one of the greatest coaches ever. It wouldn't even take a Super Bowl victory to prove it – just a good showing in the playoffs. In order to get there, though, the Cowboys need to prove that they can win on the road – something they've been unable to do consistently over the last couple of years. They're better prepared for week one than maybe any other team in the league, and they're dying to show their coach what they're made of as a team. *That's why I'm calling this my upset of the week and picking the **Cowboys** to jump out to an early lead in the NFC North.*

Indianapolis Colts (12-4) @ Baltimore Ravens (9-7)

You've heard it before, and you're going to hear it again and again... the Ravens have a great defense, and the Colts have a great offense. This is the classic match-up of a brilliant, speedy, timing offense against a fast, physical and very intelligent defense. Which do you pick? Well, I looked back to last year and saw that the Colts won 20-10 in Indianapolis in Week 15. I have my reservations, though, about putting too much stock in that result. The Indy offense was in full flight with Peyton Manning in hot pursuit of the single season touchdown record, and the playoffs were like a carrot just inches away. It usually takes timing offenses some – well, *time* – to fire on all cylinders, so I'm tempted to pick the Ravens. But the Colts remember very vividly that they only lost to the Patriots in last year's season opener because of two Edgerrin James fumbles inside the New England 20 yard line, and that kind of failure is a mighty motivator. Losing to the Patriots – again – in the playoffs is also a motivator, so this year's Colts will boast a stronger, faster defense and will hope to avoid costly fumbles.

Of course, the Ravens are not about to let the Colts exorcise their demons at their expense or in their house. The defense will be healthy, flying and trying to force fumbles on every tackle. They may not have been able to topple the Colts last year, but now their entire roster and coaching staff has been upgraded. New quarterbacks coach (former University of Washington head coach) Rick Neuheisel adds new insight and discipline, and former Titan receiver Derrick Mason (who led the league with 96 catches in 2004) adds depth and versatility to an offense that already possesses one of the biggest running threats in the league – Jamal Lewis. That's the kind of talk that has Baltimore fans talking about another run at the Super Bowl. I'm not quite that enthusiastic, but I do think they could make a run at the playoffs. That run, though, will have to start next week. *I just don't see them beating the best **Colts** team I've seen in years.*

Seattle Seahawks (9-7) @ Jacksonville Jaguars (9-7)

The Seahawks are a good team. But that's just not good enough in the NFL. They haven't won a playoff game since 1984, so it's easy to see why Mike Holmgren's reign hasn't lived up to expectations. Seattle fans will agree that Matt Hasselbeck and Shaun Alexander have done their jobs, but the receiving corps has had the proverbial "dropsies" for years. Credit the Seahawks, then, for aggressively pursuing new receiving talent in the off-season. But shame, shame, shame on the Seabags for ignoring their issues on defense. Maybe they're still being seduced by echoes of the accolades their defense received early last season, but the fact remains that they have a good secondary without much of a pass rush. That kind of defense is doomed to mediocrity, and I couldn't have picked a better opponent to illustrate that point.

The Jaguars were one of three AFC teams with 9-7 records who were left out of the playoffs last year while two 8-8 squads from the NFC advanced. They weren't happy about it then, and I can't imagine that they're any happier now to be facing a team who last year won their division with the same record that left the Jags sitting at home on the couch during the playoffs. This is one focused and talented team under the leadership of coach Jack Del Rio. Byron Leftwich returns at quarterback for what should be his break-out third season. He flanked by great talent at every offensive position, and the defense is pretty darn good, too. *Knowing that they're chasing the Colts to the playoffs, the **Jaguars** will come out firing on all cylinders and will come away with a win that should have the home fans buzzing with excitement.*

Up The Gut

- Oakland (5-11) @ New England (14-2): The honor of kicking off the season against the defending champions has been bestowed upon the Raiders, but after Thursday night I think the only upside for them will be the extra rest days before their next game. Some are saying that the addition of Randy Moss will be huge for the Raiders, but that's only going to be true if Kerry Collins can throw the ball deep enough to take advantage of his speed. I've also read that the Raiders think they can fix last year's defensive woes by simply adjusting their scheme. Well, that's the same thinking that bought the Chiefs a 7-9 record last season. That would be an improvement for the Raiders, but it's not good enough for owner Al Davis or any of the fans of the Silver & Black. The Patriots should be able to carry last year's momentum into this season with relative ease. I don't expect the loss of their coordinators (who are now head coaches elsewhere) to change much for New England, but *I do expect the **Patriots** to open their season with a convincing win on Thursday night.*
- Chicago (5-10) @ Washington (6-10): The Redskins are still largely in the same shape they were last year. Joe Gibbs is still back from retirement as their coach. Clinton Portis is still their most talented player. Patrick Ramsey is still the quarterback (after having taken over for the faltering Mark Brunell in the middle of last season). And the defense is still sub-par. The mood in our nation's capital should be uneasy, but residents of Chicago are slightly more optimistic despite the fact that their starting

quarterback is Kyle Orton – a rookie from Purdue. Orton looked good in the preseason and will have a strong supporting cast around him. Thomas Jones is a powerful running back with a good yards-per-carry average, and the Bears helped their offense by signing game-breaking wide receiver Muhsin Muhammad (formerly of the Carolina Panthers). On the defensive side, Brian Urlacher and Mike Brown are healthy again. Could this be the beginning of the return to respectability for Chicago? *A win over the Redskins is hardly a sign from above, but for fans of **Da Bears** it could be enough.*

- Cincinnati (8-8) @ Cleveland (4-12): Things don't look terrible on paper for the Browns, but the game isn't played on paper. Maybe Trent Dilfer wishes it were. Dilfer was never great, and he was only sometimes good in past starting quarterback stints with the Ravens and Seahawks. Lee Suggs is a good running back, but he isn't a game-breaker. Perhaps the most interesting player to watch on the Browns roster will be rookie wide receiver Braylon Edwards from Michigan. Equally exciting to watch could be the Bengals. Quarterback Carson Palmer is now more mature and secure with an offense that he led effectively last year. He's surrounded by talent: running back Rudi Johnson and wide receivers Chad Johnson and T.J. Houshmandzadeh. Where the Bengals failed last year was in the key area of tackling well on defense, but that is an issue that they claim to have addressed in the off-season. *I usually like home teams in divisional battles, but I'm picking the **Bengals** in this one.*
- Denver (10-6) @ Miami (4-12): The Dolphins were one of the league's lowliest teams last season partially due to the unexpected and sudden retirement of running back Ricky Williams. Well, now he's back. But how much better can the Dolphins be? Not much. Meanwhile, the Broncos made it to the playoffs again last season only to lose in the first round – again – to the Colts. Denver should be good again this year, but they'll need to avoid mistakes and turnovers if they hope to make it back to the playoffs so they can give themselves a chance to improve on their two consecutive first round losses. *The Dolphins – quite obviously – are not the Colts, so I expect the **Broncos** to win this one easily.*
- Houston (7-9) @ Buffalo (9-7): The Bills looked terrible for much of last season, but then they got it together late in the season and nearly made the playoffs. With that kind of an end to a season you might expect them to carry some momentum into this game, but you'd be forgetting that they lost Drew Bledsoe to the Cowboys and now have a new starting quarterback named J.P. Losman. Thankfully, the Bills have a good defense and a reliable running back in Willis McGahee, but it's very rarely pretty when first-time starting quarterbacks take the field with earning respect as their primary objective. The Texans know what their objective is – the playoffs. This is a team that has come a long way from the expansion squad they were a few years ago. They are now a cohesive and talented group of players capable of winning just about any game they play. David Carr has proven himself to be a durable and accurate passer, and he's backed by a corps of talented receivers and a running back – Domanick Davis – who does not shy away from carrying a heavy load for his offense. The defense is fast and reliable, too, so *I expect the **Texans** to begin their season with a road win.*
- New Orleans (8-8) @ Carolina (7-9): I feel bad writing anything negative about the Saints at a time like this, so I will simply state the obvious. I don't see how the Saints can possibly keep their minds focused on executing their game plan when their homes and their stadium have been completely devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The Panthers have carried their late momentum from the end of last season into this one. They know that their season was ruined by injuries to key players last year, so things are looking up now that Stephen Davis, Steve Smith and crew are back on the field. *I'd normally pick the **Panthers** to win at home because this is a division rivalry, so this one is easy.*
- Tampa Bay (5-11) @ Minnesota (8-8): It's been a miserable few seasons for the Bucs since they won the Super Bowl in 2002, and things aren't looking any prettier. The once-mighty defense is now only a shell of its former self, and the offense is toothless. The Vikings, on the other hand, are once again licking their lips for the beginning of a new season. Residents of Minnesota know that they're allowed to boast in the first six weeks or so of the season, but things usually fall apart after that. This year they hope to change all of that and finally fulfill their playoff potential. The departure of Randy Moss may prove to be more of a good thing than a loss, and with Detroit, Chicago and Green Bay in their division, the road to the top might as well be paved with artificial turf. *It's now or never for the **Vikings**, so I'm picking them to win this one and then to go on to win the NFC North.*
- Tennessee (5-11) @ Pittsburgh (15-1): This one looks like another no-brainer. The Steelers were the best team in the regular season last year, and their personnel looks to be just as good this year. Granted, Ben Roethlisberger has now been studied by defenses across the league, but thankfully the Steelers don't ask him to win games single-handedly. They center their game around percentage plays and a tough running game. That's why I'm worried this week. The Steelers will be missing both Deuce Staley and Jerome Bettis for their season opener. Is that enough to make me pick the Titans? Not really. Tennessee hasn't learned. They're still going with the aging Steve McNair at quarterback, but how can McNair do much of anything without a decent offensive line or even a single difference-

- making wide receiver? I know what you're thinking, and the answer is, "No, Drew Bennett doesn't count." *Even without their top two running backs, I still think the **Steelers** will roll over the Titans.*
- Arizona (6-10) @ NY Giants (6-10): Finally! A story line game! Kurt Warner was sidelined by the New York Giants last season when their year was far from being over. The Giants moved to the rookie Eli Manning far too early in the season, and Warner wasn't happy about the way it was handled. For that matter, neither was I. Now Warner is in Arizona, and he's got a team around him that could surprise a lot of people around the league. The Cardinals have two big play receivers in Larry Fitzgerald and Anquan Boldin, and they're also blessed with a stable of stellar running backs led by J.J. Arrington from Cal. You might expect a high scoring game, but consider this: Arizona has a better defense than the Giants and a better offense than the Giants. That's why *I'm picking the **Cardinals** to win easily.*
 - Green Bay (10-6) @ Detroit (6-9): The Packers won their division last year but then lost to their division rival Vikings in the Wild Card round of the playoffs. The era of Brett Favre is coming to a close, and we're all sad about it. Right? Well, we are sad about it, but the Favre era might not be completely over yet. The Packers still have great wide receivers Javon Walker, Donald Driver and tight end Bubba Franks along with workhorse running back Ahman Green. Can they put together one last run at the playoffs and give Brett a chance to write a story-book ending to his storied career? I hope so because it sure would be fun to watch, and it would probably go a long way toward lifting the spirits of a guy (Favre) who has been through so much already in the last year and who has now lost his family's home in Louisiana to the hurricane. Favre normally performs at his best following a tragedy, but he also tends to under-perform in domes and on artificial turf. That's why I'd love to pick the Lions to win this one at home. They always play their division rivals tough anyway, so why not pick them to start off their season on a positive note? *Well, youth and inexperience and a lack of talent are a few reasons, but I'm going to ignore them and pick the **Lions** anyway.*
 - St. Louis (8-8) @ San Francisco (2-14): Many of you will know that I'm extremely tempted to pick the 49ers in this one for personal reasons. How great would it be for last year's "butt of every joke" team to start off their season with a home win over a division rival? Pretty great... but is it even possible? When they played the Rams last season they were riddled with injuries both times and lost by 10 points both times. So if they're healthy then it should be a close one. Unfortunately, things are starting to look bad again. Jeremy Newberry and Eric Heitmann are two of the anchors of the offensive line, and they are both questionable for the game. Tight end Eric Johnson – Tim Rattay's most reliable target – won't be in the lineup due to a foot injury. The Rams, meanwhile, are healthy and firmly believe that the NFC West is theirs to win this year. After watching Steven Jackson last season and this preseason I firmly believe it, too. As if the Marc Bulger to Isaac Bruce and Torry Holt combination wasn't lethal enough, the Rams now boast a beefed up defense that should help launch them to the top. *Division dominance starts for the **Rams** this weekend with a win in San Francisco.*

Statistics

- I went 7-4 in last season's playoffs, bringing my 2004-05 season record to 167-100 (62.55%) and my all-time record to 291-169 (63.26%). My all-time "Lock of the Week" record is 51-48-3. For the uninitiated, my "Locks" are three weekly picks using the Thursday lines from USA Today.

Week 1 Locks

New England (-7.5)
Houston (+5.5)
Jacksonville (-3)

Keys

Same old Brady, same old defense. Same home field advantage.
Confuse Losman. Don't get away from the running game.
It's time for everything to come together for Leftwich and the Jags.

Final 2004-05 Standings

AFC East

New England (17-2)
N.Y. Jets (11-7)
Buffalo (9-7)
Miami (4-12)

AFC North

Pittsburgh (16-2)
Baltimore (9-7)
Cincinnati (8-8)
Cleveland (4-12)

AFC South

Indianapolis (13-5)
Jacksonville (9-7)
Houston (7-9)
Tennessee (5-11)

AFC West

San Diego (12-5)
Denver (10-7)
Kansas City (7-9)
Oakland (5-11)

NFC East

Philadelphia (15-4)
N.Y. Giants (6-10)
Dallas (6-10)
Washington (6-10)

NFC North

Green Bay (10-7)
Minnesota (9-9)
Detroit (6-9)
Chicago (5-10)

NFC South

Atlanta (12-6)
New Orleans (8-8)
Carolina (7-9)
Tampa Bay (5-11)

NFC West

Seattle (9-8)
St. Louis (9-9)
Arizona (6-10)
San Francisco (2-14)