

## HOPE FLOATS

The city of New Orleans may have been flooded by Hurricane Katrina, but the hearts of Saints fans across the country were gladdened - however briefly - when John Carney's 47 yard field goal floated through the uprights in Charlotte last Sunday afternoon. It is a feat that - for many reasons - I find incredible. And I don't mean *incredible* in the typically over-used sports writer sense. I mean **incredible** in the sense that I honestly didn't believe they could do it. I didn't believe that the 53 men on the New Orleans Saints roster could each shift their focus from their city that lay in ruins and onto the game at hand. But perhaps I was looking at the whole thing from the wrong angle. Perhaps the Saints were able to play the way they did *because of* the horror that has ravaged their home city. Instead of trying to block it out of their minds, they used it to fuel their efforts on the field. They fed off the agony and anguish. They channeled all the suffering and tears. They poured it all out on the field for 60 minutes. And when John Carney's field goal granted them the victory for which they'd fought so hard, they allowed themselves to the luxury of jubilation.

There are those who say that sports don't matter in the grand scheme of things, who argue - for instance - that games should not have been played on the anniversary of September 11th. If you are one of those people, then I hope you consider the above story in addition to these three: The Washington Redskins managed a win over the Bears in memory of the attack on the Pentagon four years ago. The New York Giants also won on Sunday - and they won in a big way - in a game they played in their home stadium, in a city that four years ago endured one of the worst attacks imaginable. The recovery and rebuilding of the city of New York is a tribute to the resilience of the human spirit, and it should serve as an inspiration to those affected by Hurricane Katrina.

But it doesn't take terrorist attacks or natural disasters to inspire a team to unify and play at its full potential. The San Francisco 49ers were spurred on by the recent death of their 23 year old guard Thomas Herrion. After an August 20th preseason game in Denver, Herrion was reciting the Lord's Prayer in the locker room with his teammates when he collapsed. The coroner's report which was released last Tuesday showed that Herrion died of an ischemic heart disease that had gone undetected until he suffered that fatal seizure in front of his entire team on the locker room floor. Wearing his number 72 in a black sticker on their helmets, the 49ers put forth their best team effort in honor of their fallen teammate.

The victory over the Rams didn't bring Herrion back to life, and it didn't erase the pain from the hearts of his family and friends, just the same way that Carney's field goal didn't dry up and rebuild the flooded city of New Orleans, just the same way that Washington's win didn't block out the memory of a jet slamming into the Pentagon, and just the same way that the Giants did not raise the World Trade Center with their victory over the Cardinals. But these sporting victories *did* lift the spirits of family, friends and fans across the country, and maybe - just maybe - they will inspire those affected by these tragedies. Then, a few years down the road - as in New York, the games will be played as a celebration of what we have all overcome together.

In that vein, let me encourage all of you - my dear readers - to tune in to a special Monday Night double-header this Monday at 7:30 PM Eastern Time on ABC. The New Orleans Saints were supposed to host the New York Giants this weekend, but the Superdome is in no shape for a football game. Instead, Giants Stadium will be getting a Black & Gold makeover for the game as a part of the NFL's "Recover and Rebuild" theme for this special Monday Night double-header.

At 9:00 PM Eastern Time the game will move to ESPN and yield to a classic divisional rivalry - one that dates back to a time even before football existed. Yes, it's the very politically incorrect showdown between the Cowboys and the Redskins. Aaaaand on that note... here are this week's featured games:

### Jacksonville Jaguars (1-0) @ Indianapolis Colts (1-0)

Anticipation is high for this early fight for AFC South supremacy. The Colts and their fast, high powered offense have ruled their division for years, but they have repeatedly fallen short of the Super Bowl because of their middle-of-the-pack defense. Jacksonville head coach Jack Del Rio was surely hoping to see some of the typical weaknesses when he watched game film this week, so I'm sure that his heart sank a little while watching the newly improved Indy defense nearly pitch a shut-out in Baltimore.

The Ravens' offense, however, is by no means the ultimate barometer of success. So before I cloak the Colts with an aura of invincibility, let me point out that these teams meet twice every season. And the last time they met - Week 7 in Indianapolis last season - the Jaguars, led by Byron Leftwich, scored on their final three possessions. The last one culminated with a 53 yard field goal by rookie Josh Scobee that gave them a 27-24 victory. Clearly these are not unfamiliar waters for coach Del Rio. He can use last

year's win as motivation for his young players, and he can also play up the underdog angle. You see, the Jaguars were nine point underdogs last year when they beat the Colts on their home turf, and that is (coincidentally?) the same margin by which they have been slighted this week. A point spread doesn't mean anything about the game's ultimate outcome, but it can certainly fuel the fire that will have to burn strong for a full 60 minutes in the hearts of the Jaguars if they are to duplicate last season's success.

They have all the necessary tools at their disposal: a powerful running game, a dynamic passing game and a proven defense. Unfortunately for the Jaguars, however, the Colts have also – finally – got the complete package. And for Peyton Manning, Edgerrin James, Marvin Harrison, and perhaps more than any of the rest of them, for head coach Tony Dungy this is their chance to show it off in their home stadium. *It may not be as lop-sided as their victory over the Ravens, but the **Colts** will beat the Jags.*

#### New England Patriots (1-0) @ Carolina Panthers (0-1)

Have you heard the hype? If you subscribe to the major sporting magazine in this country then you probably saw the cover a couple of weeks ago in which they dubbed the Panthers this year's team of destiny. While it was certainly too early to crown them before they'd even played a regular season game, it's equally too early to write them off after their Week 1 home loss to their division rivals. I have already documented the circumstances that inspired the Saints to play their absolute best against the Panthers last week, so the question now becomes whether the Panthers can similarly elevate their game. I'm not saying they played poorly against the Saints, but they will certainly need to play their best (i.e. avoid turnovers) if they hope to beat the reigning Super Bowl Champs. The Patriots are coming off a season opener against Oakland that was a lot closer than most people anticipated. It would be foolish, however, to interpret their 30-20 victory as a sign of weakness. Tom Brady still runs an explosive and precise offense, and the defense is as strong as ever thanks to Richard Seymour, Mike Vrabel, Rodney Harrison, Willie McGinest and the rest of the nameless crew that have captured three rings in the last four years. All these Patriots form a battle-tested roster that knows how to weather the ups and downs of a game and emerge victorious in the end. They will survive the inevitable big play from Carolina wide receiver Steve Smith. They will bounce back after a few big runs by Stephen Davis. And they will exploit the defensive weakness against the run that the Panthers suffered when they lost defensive tackle Kris Jenkins for the season in last week's season opener. *On the shoulders of Corey Dillon, the **Patriots** will remind us all why they – in the words of Freddie Mercury – are the champions.*

#### San Diego Chargers (0-1) @ Denver Broncos (0-1)

What a treat! Here is another divisional rivalry that we get to enjoy this week. Neither team started the season the way they'd hoped, so expect a hard-fought and physically punishing game this week in Denver. The Broncos and Jake Plummer heard their home fans booing them a few times last season, and they know that the fans will cut them very little slack if the game starts to get away from them the way their opener did in Miami when just about everything went wrong. Plummer was intercepted twice. Anderson rushed four times for five yards and had to leave the game with a rib injury. Bell took over for him and rushed 13 times for 47 yards, but 30 of those were on one play! Things didn't go much better for the defense. And adding insult to injury – or vice-versa – Champ Bailey separated his shoulder. Bailey and the other defenders who were injured in Miami are expected to play this Sunday, but I can't help but figure that they won't be 100%. That's not the news that Mike Shanahan wants to hear with San Diego coming to town. The Chargers amassed some huge numbers on offense last season and moved the ball quite well against a pretty darn good Dallas defense last week. Only an interception in the end zone in the final thirty seconds of the game stood between Drew Brees and another stellar start. Brees was probably wishing that his tight end Antonio Gates had been in the game for that final pass last week, so he'll be happy that Gates is back from his team-imposed suspension (for missing a contract negotiation hold-out deadline) and will be back in the starting lineup. I know that playing at home is usually a big advantage for the Broncos because of their mile high stadium, but will the altitude matter if the Broncos can't stop LaDainian Tomlinson or contain Antonio Gates and Keenan McCardell? I don't think the Chargers will have much trouble containing and pressuring Jake Plummer if Mike Anderson is still injured, so *I'm picking the **Chargers** to spoil Denver's home opener and – for the first time in years – to win at 5280 feet.*

#### Atlanta Falcons (1-0) @ Seattle Seahawks (0-1)

I saw some of you shaking your heads last week as you read my column, and I know that a few of you were sure that I'd be eating my words after the Monday Night game. But there **he** was... running one in for a touchdown from seven yards out and then threading a perfect pass 58 yards through the air, into double coverage and right into the arms of Michael Jenkins to set up T.J. Duckett's one yard touchdown run on the next play. Sure, Vick finished the game with an unimpressive stat sheet (156 yards passing, no

touchdown passes, 1 interception, 68 yards rushing, 1 rushing touchdown), but the key is that he did his job. He set avoided the big mistakes and made some big plays within the scheme of the offense. The Eagles went to the Super Bowl last year, so he knew he couldn't beat them alone. He needed Warrick Dunn's speedy 117 yards rushing and Duckett's physical 15, along with a stellar performance by an equally quick and tough defense. This was the kind of evidence of Vick's maturity that I hoped we'd see this season, and now I can't wait to watch the rest of his games... starting this week in Seattle. Early last season the league was buzzing about the Seahawks defense, and sports writers and commentators across the nation were jumping on the "Super Bowl-bound Seahawks" bandwagon. With a 3-0 record going into their bye week, the Seahawks were flying high. By the time their Week 7 game was over, though, they were headed home from a loss at Arizona that dropped their record to 3-3. What does that have to do with this game? Everything. This is who the Seahawks have been under Mike Holmgren – great against the lower and middle echelon teams, but unable to rise to the occasion when facing a true contender. They've got weapons galore on offense and a defense that can have its moments, but *the Seahawks do not possess the intestinal fortitude – even with the support of a home crowd – to topple a team like the **Falcons** who have been on a nine month long mission since losing the NFC Championship game to Philadelphia.*

#### New York Giants (1-0) @ New Orleans Saints (1-0)

Monday, September 19, 2005 @ 7:30 PM ET on ABC

What else can I say about the way the Saints played in Charlotte last Sunday? It's truly remarkable, and I hope that they are able to keep up that kind of intensity for this game now that it has been thrust into such a bright spotlight. Giants Stadium will be the locale of their "home" opener, and it will be bathed in New Orleans Black & Gold. I'm sure it will be quite a sight, but it won't change the fact that the Giants will be playing in a stadium that bears their name in front of fans that live in their city. There is a buzz around New York since the Giants posted 42 points on the Cardinals last week. Fans of the New York Football Giants don't care that their victory came at the expense of the league's perpetual punch line. They're just happy to see Eli Manning clicking with his receivers – particularly new-comer and former Pittsburgh Steeler Plaxico Burress. And they're just as happy as ever to see Tiki Barber accounting for 122 yards of offense, including 60 receiving yards courtesy of Eli Manning. But before we hail Eli as the second coming of Peyton, let's keep in mind that his numbers (10/23 passing for 172 yards, 2 touchdowns, and 2 interceptions) are hardly the stuff of legends. He got help from Willie Ponder's kickoff returned for a touchdown and Chad Morton's punt return for a touchdown as well as the Arizona coaching staff.

What do I mean? I'll explain. The Cardinals carried a 13-7 lead into the second half in New York last week, but their top two running backs (Marcel Shipp and J.J. Arrington) carried the ball a combined 15 times for 15 yards in the entire game. Perhaps Dennis Green has never read UFR, because I'm sure that if he had he would have called more running plays when his team was holding the lead. Perhaps then his team wouldn't have allowed 35 points in the second half.

OK, so that rant was a bit more about Arizona than about this game, but I feel it's important to point out that the Giants may have been victorious over the Cardinals, but their win was hardly as worthy of laud as that hard-fought W the Saints earned in Charlotte. *That is why – not because of their inspirational story or because of any kind of bandwagon appeal that they may have – I'm picking the **Saints** to win again.*

#### Up The Gut

- Baltimore (0-1) @ Tennessee (0-1): Remember the Titans? Me too. Sad, really. The **Ravens** will take out all their frustrations from last week's loss to the Colts and will come away with a win.
- Buffalo (1-0) @ Tampa Bay (1-0): Whaddya know!? I picked these teams to both be 0-1 headed into this game, but the opposite happened. I thought that Houston's defense would be able to confuse and intimidate new Buffalo quarterback J.P. Losman, but that task now falls to the famed **Buccaneers'** D.
- Detroit (1-0) @ Chicago (0-1): I would love to give some credit to the Detroit defense for shutting Brett Favre and the Green Bay offense, but I that credit goes to their dome and their turf – two environments that have always thrown Favre off his game. I'd also love to give some credit to the Chicago defense for holding Washington to three field goals, but against the Redskins that's about par for the course. What does that mean? It means that I revert to my tie-breaker. For those who don't already know, I usually take the home team in "pick 'em" divisional games. I also like new quarterback Kyle Orton, so I'm picking **Da Bears**.
- Minnesota (0-1) @ Cincinnati (1-0): Hey, Vikes! Do you really miss Randy Moss that much? Yeah? OK. Well, you're going to miss him even more after the Palmers – oops! I mean the Johnsons – oops! I mean the **Bengals** run and pass all over you on Sunday.

- Pittsburgh (1-0) @ Houston (0-1): First I read that Big Ben would be out for this game, and now I read that he will be ready to start. I don't think it really matters, though, since Tommy Maddox is a proven backup quarterback. I'm a bit tempted to pick the Texans, but after the way they let me down last week (and considering that Pittsburgh was 15-1 last season) I have to pick the **Steelers** to find a way to win – even if they have to score exclusively with their running game and their defense.
- San Francisco (1-0) @ Philadelphia (0-1): A couple of weeks ago I was studying the schedule, and I can tell you that the thoughts I had about this game then are nothing like the ones I'm having on Thursday. But that was before I read that Donovan McNabb's status has been upgraded from "questionable" to "probable" after having suffered a chest injury last Monday Night against Atlanta. That was also before I heard that the 49ers have started talking "smack" to ex-49er – and current star receiver for the Eagles – Terrell Owens. Talking smack before visiting the defending NFC Champions is not a good idea. Such activity pretty much negates any kind of motivational momentum the 49ers could have taken from their Week 1 win over the Rams, so I have no choice but to pick the **Eagles**.
- St. Louis (0-1) @ Arizona (0-1): It's a game of two coaches who frequently show more signs of a possible concussion than their players. I've already told you how Dennis Green sacrificed his team to the Giants last week, and you've heard all about the Rams falling to the 49ers. The Rams were my preseason pick to win the NFC West, so they seem like the logical pick. But I'm haunted by the memory of their 31-7 loss in Arizona last year when they were making a late run at the division title. Maybe there was something in the water in New York. There probably was, right? Yeah, I'm sure that was it. I'm picking the **Cardinals**. (Huh. That's interesting. This water tastes funny. I wonder...)
- Cleveland (0-1) @ Green Bay (0-1): Both of these teams looked pretty inept last week, but I have faith in the **Packers** to rebound now that they're back at home.
- Miami (1-0) @ NY Jets (0-1): Wow... what is this game doing way down there near the bottom of the column? That can't be right. Oh, maybe it's because of the fact that Chad Pennington fumbled nearly every time he touched the ball last week in Kansas City, and almost all of the passes he managed to throw came up short of his intended target. Has the surgery ruined a potentially great quarterback? We'll see. Miami has long had one of the best pass-defending defenses in the league, so Pennington had better make a miraculous recovery if the Jets hope to win this one. I don't think it will happen, so I'm picking the **Dolphins** (can you believe it?) to keep pace with the Patriots atop the AFC East.
- Kansas City (1-0) @ Oakland (0-1): The Raiders looked good in Foxboro, and they've had a few extra days to rest up for this good old-fashioned divisional smack-down. But do they have the goods to contain the powerful Priest Holmes and the Trent Green-led passing attack of the Chiefs? Anywhere else – no – but in the Black Hole Coliseum – maybe. It's not the popular pick, but I'll gamble this week and pick the **Raiders**. But I'm warning them! If they fail me I won't soon pick them again. I mean it!
- Washington (1-0) @ Dallas (1-0): It's politically incorrect, but I have to say it. It was true in my back yard, and it'll be true in Dallas. History teaches us that in this battle the **Cowboys** emerge victorious.

### Statistics

- I was an undefeated 5-0 last week in my featured games. Unfortunately, the rest of the games brought me down to an overall record of 9-7, so my season percentage starts at 56.25%. My all-time record has now passed a milestone – 300 wins! But 300-176 is still only a 63.03% win percentage, and I'm hoping that will improve this season.
- Last week's locks were New England (-7.5), Houston (+5.5) and Jacksonville (-3).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 2-1 last week (53-49-3 all-time). Houston was the only Lock that let me down. I honestly thought their defense would do better against new Buffalo quarterback J.P. Losman. It's not an easy week to pick locks, but here goes...

### Week 2 Locks

Green Bay (-6.5)  
Baltimore (-3.5)  
Cincinnati (-3)

### Keys

Brett Favre and Ahman Green are dying to sink his teeth into the season.  
It'll be the Jamal Lewis and Ray Lewis show in Tennessee.  
They were good last year. Now they're mature and focused. They could be great.

**Standings**

**AFC East**

Buffalo (1-0)  
Miami (1-0)  
New England (1-0)  
N.Y. Jets (0-1)

**AFC North**

Cincinnati (1-0)  
Pittsburgh (1-0)  
Baltimore (0-1)  
Cleveland (0-1)

**AFC South**

Indianapolis (1-0)  
Jacksonville (1-0)  
Houston (0-1)  
Tennessee (0-1)

**AFC West**

Kansas City (1-0)  
Denver (0-1)  
Oakland (0-1)  
San Diego (0-1)

**NFC East**

Dallas (1-0)  
N.Y. Giants (1-0)  
Washington (1-0)  
Philadelphia (0-1)

**NFC North**

Detroit (1-0)  
Chicago (0-1)  
Green Bay (0-1)  
Minnesota (0-1)

**NFC South**

Atlanta (1-0)  
New Orleans (1-0)  
Tampa Bay (1-0)  
Carolina (0-1)

**NFC West**

San Francisco (1-0)  
Arizona (0-1)  
Seattle (0-1)  
St. Louis (0-1)