

## GUNSHY COWBOYS

First of all, let's call a spade a spade. I performed horribly last week. My picks went 6-10, and for the first time ever I have a losing percentage on the season. Now, before you all lose faith in me and before – God forbid – I lose faith in myself, let's remember that only two regular season weeks have been completed. Take heart! There is much left to be won!

That was what went through my mind on Monday Night as I watched the Cowboys, with a 10-0 lead and the ball at the Redskins 27 yard line, pound the ball up the middle three times in a row and then settle for a field goal. I stood and yelled at the TV (yes, I'm *that* kind of football watcher), "What are you doing?!!" Folks, you may think I'm nuts for attempting to elicit a response from a television, but I at the time I was pretty sure that I had a better chance of getting an answer from the electronics than the Cowboys had of scoring a touchdown on three consecutive Tyson Thompson runs up the middle. For the record, they went for 2, 3 and -1 yards, and Dallas settled for a Jose Cortez field goal. Turning to my buddy Mark, I said, "If the Cowboys lose this game, it will be because of *that* series of *hair-brained* calls *right there*." Fittingly, Mark Brunell connected with Santana Moss on two touchdown passes (one for 39 and another for 70 yards) in the last four minutes of the game, and the Redskins won 14-13. Bill Parcells – for the first time in his coaching career – lost a game in which his team led by 13 points in the fourth quarter, and the Dallas crowd reacted with appropriately timed boo's.

For a coaching staff that had been so good at making the right play calls in their upset road win over San Diego the week before, this was a shocking turn of events. I am still trying to figure out how any offensive coordinator in his right mind can get his team to the 17 yard line of the opposition in a closely contested divisional rivalry with a 10-0 lead mid-way through the fourth quarter and then allow this to happen:

1-10-WAS17	(8:35) J. Jones left tackle to WAS 17 for no gain. <i>Holding penalty -10 yards.</i>
1-20-WAS27	(8:08) T. Thompson up the middle to WAS 25 for 2 yards.
2-18-WAS25	(7:25) T. Thompson up the middle to WAS 22 for 3 yards.
3-15-WAS22	(6:39) T. Thompson up the middle to WAS 23 for -1 yards.
4-16-WAS23	(6:01) J. Cortez 41 yard field goal is good.

What a pathetic offensive coordinator! Then it hit me: the Cowboys don't have an offensive coordinator. They have Sean Payton whose title is officially "Assistant Head Coach/Quarterbacks Coach," and he is the one who – from what I've seen on TV these first two weeks – calls the plays. But it doesn't take an experienced offensive coordinator to see Drew Bledsoe, Keyshawn Johnson, Terry Glenn, Jason Witten and Julius Jones and pick a pass play, any pass play, to one of those guys! Take a shot at the first down, Sean! Take a shot at the end zone! Take a shot at anywhere other than the middle of the defensive line!

Jerry Jones can't be happy, so I'm thinking there just might be some "talks" in his office this week about how the play calling should be handled for the rest of the season. He's got to be wondering what on earth possessed his coaching staff to allow Tyson Thompson, a rookie from San Jose State, to take his first and only three NFL carries and run straight into the middle of the very good Redskins defensive line.

The Cowboys travel to San Francisco to play the 49ers this weekend, and I'm sure that new 49ers head coach Mike Nolan would love for the Cowboys to hand Tyson Thompson some more crucial running plays in honor of his return to the region of his alma mater. How about it, Mr. Payton?!

### New England Patriots (1-1) @ Pittsburgh Steelers (2-0)

I find it intriguing that the Patriots are the only team other than the Cowboys who lack an offensive coordinator, and they, too, lost last week. In the past I have sung the praises of Bill Belichick and his coaching genius, but I'm beginning to wonder if he will be able to handle the play calling duties in closely contested games like last week's loss to the Carolina Panthers. I called for the Patriots to use Corey Dillon to exploit the defensive run gap left by injured defensive tackle Kris Jenkins. Instead, Belichick's play-calling had a heavy (44-16) pass-run ratio, and the Carolina defense was able to rush, knock down and unsettle a usually cool and collected Tom Brady. If the Patriots hope to duplicate last season's AFC Championship victory over the Steelers, it will be up to Belichick to make heavy use of Corey Dillon and Kevin Faulk in the running game. A balanced pass-run ratio will not only keep the defense off balance, it will slow down the pass rush and keep Tom Brady fresh and confident so that he's able to avoid turnovers and make big plays. In that AFC Championship game the Patriots ran the ball 32 times for 126 yards while passing just 21 times. Brady was able to complete 14 of those passes for 201 yards, two touchdowns and no interceptions. You heard it here first, Mr. Belichick. "Run first. Pass second!"

That's the very formula that has worked so well for the Pittsburgh Steelers who have won 16 straight regular season games and threaten to break New England's record of 18 consecutive regular season wins. Second year quarterback Ben Roethlisberger (Big Ben for short) is 15-0 as a starter in the regular season and 1-1 in the playoffs. That single loss came to the Patriots in the aforementioned Championship game. Big Ben was confounded by a dynamic New England defense that intercepted him three times. I'm sure that the Steelers as a team will be looking for revenge this week, and Big Ben will be sure to prepare a little extra to avoid the same kind of mistakes that kept the Steelers out of last year's Super Bowl.

The Patriots haven't been anything special yet, but the Steelers have impressed me with their ability to run the ball with Willie Parker just as effectively as if Deuce Staley and Jerome Bettis were healthy. Such success speaks well of the offensive line, and the defense is just as good as ever. *With the revenge factor and momentum on their side, the Big Ben and the **Steelers** will extend their win streak.*

#### Kansas City Chiefs (2-0) @ Denver Broncos (1-1)

Monday, September 26, 2005 @ 9:00 PM ET on ABC

I still don't know how much stock to put in Kansas City's two wins. I anticipated that the Jets would be an above average team this year and that the Raiders would be a below average team, but so far they are both in the middle of the pack. I'm similarly baffled by the Broncos. What am I to make of their season opening loss to Miami and their three-point win over the Chargers? I fully expected the Chargers to be an above average team this year, but I didn't think the Dolphins would make the grade. This confusion is why I've decided to call the NFL the box-of-chocolates league. You just never know what you're going to get!

For years the Chiefs have had a great offense with the great passing production of Trent Green and the powerful and dynamic running of Priest Holmes, but their defense was never good enough to keep them in the tight games. Through the first two games of this season, however, the Chiefs appear to finally have that kind of a defense. Gunther Cunningham's crew confounded Chad Pennington and the Jets in Week 1 and withstood Randy Moss and the Raiders last Sunday night in Oakland. If the Chiefs can win a second straight divisional road game they will take control of the AFC West and position themselves nicely for the playoff run that was supposed to take place last year and the year before.

The Broncos are still an enigma to me. I can almost excuse their season opening loss in Miami since they couldn't have known what new coach Nick Saban would bring to the table. I'd also like to give them credit for beating the division rival Chargers last week, but I honestly feel like the Chargers were not beaten by the Broncos but rather defeated themselves in the second half of that game. Carrying a 14-3 advantage into the second half, Drew Brees dropped back and telegraphed his first pass straight into corner back Champ Bailey's arms. It was an easy romp into the end zone for Bailey, and suddenly Denver's entire first half of ineptitude was erased. The air was out of San Diego's balloon, and the home crowd that had booed the Broncos off the field at the conclusion of the first half was decidedly back in its team's corner. True, I have to give credit to the Denver defense for allowing only a field goal in the second half, but I believe that part of that success was due to what appeared to be a complete lack of fire and intensity from the visiting Chargers. I'm sure that Dick Vermeil's Chiefs will not be as forgiving. *Even if the **Chiefs** don't jump out to a big lead, they are now capable of beating their division rivals on the road – and they will.*

#### New York Giants (2-0) @ San Diego Chargers (1-1)

The Giants are bullies, man! First they took advantage of a lesser opponent and beat the Cardinals 42-19 in their home season opener, and then they deceived the Saints into playing their home opener in New York. They threw a few black and gold banners up, invited some celebrities, and acted like the party was in their honor. Then they sucker punched 'em – recovered a fumble on the opening kickoff, scored a touchdown a couple of plays later and never looked back.

OK, clearly I'm being facetious, but the truth is that the Saints didn't have much of a chance. They fumbled while attempting a trick play on the opening kickoff not because they just wanted to be cute but because they honestly felt that they were at an unfair disadvantage having to play their "home" opener 1,300 miles away from home and in front of 68,031 New York Giants fans. They dressed in the visiting locker room and played on a field named after their opponents. As it turned out, the loss of the right to play their home opener in front of their own fans was harder for the Saints to handle psychologically than all of the loss and devastation caused by hurricane Katrina. And it showed. In front of their own fans the Saints would have battled back from the early 7-0 deficit. In front of their own fans the Saints might have avoided so many mistakes in the second half when the game was still close. In front of their own fans the Saints might have heard some supportive cheering in crucial game situations. In front of their own fans –

on their home field – the Saints might have brought their hearts to the game. I can't blame them for being upset at the NFL for making them travel back to the east coast for their home opener just a week after having played a scheduled road game on that same coast, and I can't blame the Giants for taking advantage of the extra home game given to them by the league and Katrina. As my dad used to say, "That's the way the cookie crumbles." No matter how you cut it, the fact remains that the Giants now carry a 2-0 record and some serious momentum with them on their first road trip. But how will they fare on natural grass an entire continent away from home? Will Eli Manning's passes be as precise, will Tiki Barber's legs be as tireless, will the defense play as fiercely in the San Diego heat?

I've already blasted the Chargers and their coaching staff for the way they played the second half in Denver, but in front of their home crowd and on their home field that shouldn't be a problem. Moreover, the Chargers know that they can't afford to lose if they want to keep pace with the Chiefs and Broncos in their division. *They'll play tough defense, but it will be the offense – on the legs of LaDainian Tomlinson and the arm of Drew Brees – that will carry the **Chargers** to victory.*

#### Tennessee Titans (1-1) @ St. Louis Rams (1-1)

This one had me on the fence. Should I really bother with it in my featured games? The Titans looked pretty pathetic in their Week 1 loss to the Steelers, but they did rally to beat the Ravens last week. Then again, the Ravens were without their injured starting quarterback Kyle Boller. Still, they ran the ball impressively against a good defense, and they defended well against a traditionally good running team. But here again I am left with a dilemma. Do I give credit to the Titans for the fact that the Baltimore coaching staff essentially hung their quarterback out to dry? Keeping in mind that Anthony Wright was starting his first regular season game in a couple of years, I would have thought that the Ravens would have played a run-heavy game. Instead, they called 41 pass plays and only 13 running plays. As is usually the case in such lopsided play-calling situations, they managed just 14 yards rushing and had a hard time protecting their quarterback. So here I am again trying to decide just how much credit to give the winning team in a situation where the losers were really the makers of their own doom.

I am issuing a similar indictment of Kurt Warner and the Arizona Cardinals. We've all seen teams running the "two minute drill" late in the game when a touchdown or field goal could win or tie the game. And that means that we've all seen a quarterback run up to the line of scrimmage, take the hike from the center and spike the ball directly into the ground to stop the clock. The drawback is that you lose a down, so you want to run that play when you still have at least two downs left and when you have no more timeouts. Such was the case in Arizona on Sunday when the Cardinals trailed 17-12 and had the ball and a first down on the St. Louis five yard line with 27 seconds remaining. Warner dropped back to pass but was sacked for a loss of five yards. With no timeouts but three more downs remaining and the clock ticking down, the logical choice was to spike the ball to stop the clock and so that the Arizona coaching staff could come up with a play or two that Warner could run to hopefully score a touchdown. But no! I was instead treated to the sight of Warner frantically trying to call one last play on his own. The wide receivers were in a panic, the running back was in a panic, the tight end was in a panic, and the offensive line was in a panic. All this panicking was enough for fifth year offensive tackle Leonard Davis to flinch early and subsequently get penalized for a false start with seven seconds on the clock. The penalty for this infraction in this situation – to prevent a team from intentionally getting penalized to stop the clock – is a ten second run-off on the clock. Many of you math whizzes (and those of you who saw or read about the game) have already figured out that the penalty ended the game, and St. Louis won. Shall I then give the Rams credit for winning even though it was the stupidity of their opposition rather than their own brilliant play that secured the victory?

I have decided to treat this the same way that the NFL treats concurrent personal fouls on members of opposing squads – the infractions offset. Therefore, *I must pick the **Rams** to win their home opener.*

#### Atlanta Falcons (1-1) @ Buffalo Bills (1-1)

As I write this Michael Vick is still listed as "questionable" for this game in Buffalo. For any team the loss of its starting quarterback is traumatic and brings about uncertainty. Will the backup be able to handle the pressure? Will he throw interceptions? Those concerns certainly exist for the Falcons, but they also have to worry about losing a portion of their running game. When a team is built so heavily around one player, they run the risk of being lost without him if he were to get injured. That was the case for the Falcons two years ago when Vick missed the majority of the regular season after suffering a broken leg in preseason, so Falcons fans and players are hoping that Vick will be able to recover from his hamstring injury soon. The other concern for Atlanta is their defense. After playing so brilliantly against the Eagles in Week 1,

they gave up 21 points in the first half in Seattle. Granted, the offense wasn't holding its own in that half, but a truly great defense (see Indianapolis this season) keeps the team in the game even when the offense isn't clicking. The up side is that the Falcons almost managed to come back and tie the game despite spotting the Seahawks a 21-0 half time lead, but a 21-18 loss is still a tick in the wrong box. And it could prove even more costly if Matt Schaub is left to run the team because of Vick's injury.

Bills quarterback J.P. Losman found out early what it feels like to win games in the NFL, but that was when Houston visited. His trip to Tampa was not as rewarding. At one point he was even pulled from the game, but former Browns quarterback Kelly Holcomb didn't fare any better so it was back into the ring for Losman. The Buccaneers put relentless pressure on him, and that pressure wasn't abated by any kind of a running game. The Bills ran the ball just 17 times, and four of those runs were scrambles by Losman! The Bills will have home field advantage this Sunday, but if they can't run against the Atlanta defense then it will once again be a long and painful day for Losman and Holcomb. *This could be a very close one if Mike Vick can't start for the **Falcons**, but I think that even without him they'll win with their defense.*

### Up The Gut

- Carolina (1-1) @ Miami (1-1): The Gus Frerotte era of elation won't resurface until Ricky Williams is done serving his four game suspension for testing positive for marijuana use before retiring at the beginning of last season. Having righted their ship after the season opening loss to the emotionally charged Saints, the **Panthers** got back on track with an impressive win over the Patriots. They'll win.
- Cincinnati (2-0) @ Chicago (1-1): I've been impressed with Chicago's defense, so it will be interesting to see how it holds up against an offense that is clearly firing on all cylinders. The **Bengals** have looked impressive in wins over the Browns and Vikings, and I think they'll beat the Bears in Chicago.
- Cleveland (1-1) @ Indianapolis (2-0): **Colts** 42-10 – and that touchdown will come in garbage time.
- Jacksonville (1-1) @ NY Jets (1-1): Chad Pennington's arm looked much better last week in his home win over the Dolphins than it did in his embarrassment Week 1 in Kansas City. I was concerned that Curtis Martin might not be able to play this week because of a knee injury, but the good news for the Jets is that his status has been upgraded to "expected to play." Martin is more important to the Jets now than ever before since LaMont Jordan is now with the Raiders. Derrick Blaylock came over from the Chiefs to fill his shoes, so we might get to see him in action if Martin's knee can't carry the full load of the running game. Either way, it will be important for the Jets to run well in order to protect Pennington from the very good Jacksonville defense – a unit that held Peyton Manning to a completion percentage of 46.4%, 122 yards, zero touchdowns and one interception last week on his home turf. You may have seen Jacksonville quarterback Byron Leftwich hobbling to the line of scrimmage in his attempt at a late-game comeback, and that could very well be the sight on the field again this week. Leftwich has been upgraded to "probable" for the game, and he's proven in the past that he can play through injuries. That's why I'm picking the **Jaguars** to win this hard-fought game.
- New Orleans (1-1) @ Minnesota (2-0): The old football adage is to beware the winless team who is playing at home, but I'm haunted by the miserable play of the Vikings in the last two weeks. Their offensive line seems nonexistent, and Daunte Culpepper seems lost without Randy Moss. He's thrown eight interceptions and zero touchdowns in the first two games! There are coaching problems, personnel problems and severe confidence problems, and I just can't see them all getting fixed in one week's time. The **Saints** will be tired from traveling so much in the first few weeks of the season, but they're fighters and they'll overcome the obstacles to win again on the road.
- Oakland (0-2) @ Philadelphia (1-1): The Raiders are probably the best 0-2 team in the league, but that is not a moniker they will embrace. Unfortunately, they're headed into the belly of the beast. The Eagles are coming off a shellacking of the 49ers and would love to dismiss another California team in similar fashion. I doubt the result will be as lopsided as last week's, but the **Eagles** will win again.
- Tampa Bay (2-0) @ Green Bay (0-2): "My Bay's better than your Bay! Nanny-nanny-boo-boo!" OK, you're right. That's probably not the kind of taunting that will be heard on Lambeau Field this Sunday, but it's funny to imagine 350+ lb. offensive linemen jeering that way at the opposition just before the snap. Snap out of it, Art! Just pick a winner! Oh, right. Well, Green Bay let me down by letting the Browns beat them at home last week, while the Bucs have shown that they can win on the road (even in a dome!) or at home. Until the Packers show me more, I've gotta go with the **Buccaneers**.
- Arizona (0-2) @ Seattle (1-1): It's a divisional rivalry, so it should be close... but I expect the **Seahawks** to win pretty easily since they're at home.
- Dallas (1-1) @ San Francisco (1-1): I didn't like the 49ers defensive players talking smack about Terrell Owens before their visit to Philadelphia, and I don't like Julian Peterson guaranteeing a 49er victory this week, either. The Cowboys know they flushed a great opportunity when they let

Washington come back and beat them in the final minutes on Monday Night, so expect Bill Parcells to have the Cowboys in tip-top shape for this week's game. I'm sorry to say it, but the **Cowboys** will win.

- Bye Week: Baltimore (0-2), Detroit (1-1), Houston (0-2), Washington (2-0)

### Statistics

- I was a miserable 1-4 in my featured games last week with a very "ugh" overall record of 6-10. My season percentage is now down to 46.88%. I must improve immediately! My all-time record stands at a respectable 306-186 (62.20%).
- Last week's locks were Green Bay (-6.5), Baltimore (-3.5) and Cincinnati (-3).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 1-2 last week (54-51-3 all-time). Who would have predicted that the Bengals would be the only one of my locks to pull through?! Wow. The Packers look like a shell of their former selves, and Lambeau's fabled mystique seems to be long gone. Meanwhile, Tennessee seemed to find a defensive presence against the run that no one thought they'd have. Go figure!

### Week 3 Locks

Indianapolis (-13.5)  
St. Louis (-6.5)  
Philadelphia (-7.5)

### Keys

The Browns are lambs to the slaughter.  
Titans on the road – can't stop a pretty good show on turf.  
Raiders just don't have enough weapons to beat the Eagles in Philly.

### Standings

#### AFC East

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

#### NFC East

N.Y. Giants (2-0)  
Washington (2-0)  
Dallas (1-1)  
Philadelphia (1-1)

#### AFC North

Cincinnati (2-0)  
Pittsburgh (2-0)  
Cleveland (1-1)  
Baltimore (0-2)

#### NFC North

Chicago (1-1)  
Detroit (1-1)  
Green Bay (0-2)  
Minnesota (0-2)

#### AFC South

Indianapolis (2-0)  
Jacksonville (1-1)  
Tennessee (1-1)  
Houston (0-2)

#### NFC South

Tampa Bay (2-0)  
Atlanta (1-1)  
Carolina (1-1)  
New Orleans (1-1)

#### AFC West

Kansas City (2-0)  
Denver (1-1)  
Oakland (0-2)  
San Diego (0-2)

#### NFC West

San Francisco (1-1)  
Seattle (1-1)  
St. Louis (1-1)  
Arizona (0-2)