

PAIN TO PLAY

Injuries are a part of any sport – especially professional football. In the NFL a big part of a team's success has to do with how it prepares for and handles injuries to its key players. Last year the Patriots won the Super Bowl despite losing a large portion of their roster to injuries throughout the season. It's been well documented that wide receiver Troy Brown filled in on defense and that defenders like Mike Vrabel played some downs on offense. Some rookies and former members of their practice squad also stepped up their game and played better than they ever had before to ensure the team's success. It was a true team effort, and it proved that a season isn't necessarily lost just because some key players are injured.

Some injuries, however, are harder to overcome than others. The loss of a starting quarterback is possibly the most devastating blow that a team can suffer. I will refer again to the lost season the Falcons endured because of the loss of Michael Vick in the preseason two years ago. The Titans – were it not for Steve McNair's tendency to sustain multiple injuries by mid-season – might have made it deep into the playoffs once or twice. And Chad Pennington – sans injuries – might have led the Jets to a Super Bowl in recent years.

For Pennington and the Jets (in the words of John Fogerty) it's déjà vu all over again. Just seven months ago he had surgery to repair a tear in his right rotator cuff, and now he's torn the same one again. The injury could keep him out for the remainder of the season, and judging from his performance through the first three games this season, it could also threaten to end his career. Making a bad situation even worse for the Jets, backup quarterback Jay Fiedler (former starter for the Dolphins) was injured in relief of Pennington on Sunday. He'll be sidelined by a dislocated right shoulder, so that leaves the Jets with third string quarterback Brooks Bollinger as their starter this week as they travel to Baltimore. Of course, a team can't leave itself with just one quarterback and no healthy backups, so this week the Jets signed veteran quarterback, and former Jet, Vinny Testaverde as well as former Texas Tech star Kliff Kingsbury.

Some of you may be thinking back to a season-ending injury to Trent Green that left the Rams with an untested quarterback named Kurt Warner and the fact that the Rams went on to win the Super Bowl with Warner at the helm. Others may be thinking of the rise of Tom Brady from Drew Bledsoe's ashes in New England. I acknowledge that great things can come from these trying circumstances, but it would be foolish to say that such positive outcomes are the norm. I expect the Eagles to struggle if Donovan McNabb and Terrell Owens aren't able to play through their painful abdominal strains. McNabb's has already been diagnosed as needy of surgery, but he's decided to forego the knife and play through the pain. Baltimore hasn't managed to even look respectable on offense since Kyle Boller went down with a broken foot. Finally, the Arizona Cardinals signed Kurt Warner in the off-season because they didn't think that Josh McCown was the answer at quarterback. But now that Warner has to sit out with a groin injury, it'll be McCown at the helm again for the Cardinals. I'll have more on him later in the column. For now, let's get to this week's featured games.

San Diego Chargers (1-2) @ New England Patriots (2-1)

After close losses to the Cowboys and the Broncos, the Chargers took out their frustrations on the Giants last Sunday night, but things don't figure to be quite as easy in Foxboro. The Patriots managed to beat the Steelers in Pittsburgh last weekend even without three key defenders. Safety James Sanders and corner backs Tyrone Poole and Randall Gay all missed the game with ankle injuries, but the Patriots still managed to hand Big Ben his first regular season defeat. The win, however, came at a high cost. Corner backs Duane Starks and Chad Scott were injured as was defensive lineman Marquise Hill, and all-pro corner back Rodney Harrison tore all the ligaments in his knee. Harrison will need surgery and will miss the rest of the season. The Patriots may have been able to fill in for other injured starters, but Harrison was the physical and emotional leader of the defense and will be sorely missed. The Patriots also suffered some serious losses on offense. Offensive tackle Matt Light and running back Kevin Faulk will be out for up to eight weeks. The Patriots know that it will be difficult to run the ball without those two key players, so they'll ask their other tackles to step up to the task of run blocking. Since asking Corey Dillon to carry the complete running load would probably result in serious injury, they also signed former Pittsburgh running back Amos Zereoue. With so many injuries to key players, this season has to start feeling a lot like last season to Bill Belichick. The question in my mind is, "Can he pull off this tandem magic/juggling act one more time?" Honestly, I don't know, but his past success makes it hard to pick against his team regardless of their injured state.

Marty Shottenheimer may not have the same reputation as a genius that Belichick has, but he's a good, proven coach who knows how to prepare his team for any opponent. He should be able to instruct Drew

Brees to exploit the depleted New England secondary, and he should be able to recognize the need to use LaDainian Tomlinson to his maximum capabilities both in the running and short passing game. If the Chargers play their best on offense and put up a fight on defense then they have a good chance to upset the defending champions in their own stadium. The Patriots haven't lost a home game since December 22, 2002, so they have a huge home field advantage and psychological edge that will make them very hard to beat. But the Patriots are more vulnerable now than ever, and the Chargers match up very favorably against the replacements that will have to fill in for New England's injured starters. *It's tempting to pick the Patriots at home just by rule, but I'm taking a chance and picking the **Chargers** in an upset.*

Philadelphia Eagles (2-1) @ Kansas City Chiefs (2-1)

Last week I wrote that I didn't know how much stock to put in Kansas City's two wins. Well, after last week I'm no less confused. The Jets took the Jaguars to overtime, proving that they were a good team when they had a healthy quarterback, and the Raiders forced the Eagles to kick a last second field goal to win in Philadelphia, proving that they're a team to be feared. But the Chiefs didn't turn momentum from wins over those two squads into any kind of mojo in Denver. They were humiliated by the Broncos in an all-too-familiar manner in front of the entire nation on Monday Night. Their offensive line seemed completely incapable of protecting Trent Green or opening any running lanes for Priest Holmes and Larry Johnson, and their defense seemed so porous against the run that it was no surprise to see Mike Anderson, who is usually a power running back rather than a speedy back, sliding untouched through their secondary on a 44-yard scamper to the end zone. Perhaps this was an illustration of a coaching match-up where one guy simply has the other figured out. It seemed like Mike Shanahan was listening in on Dick Vermeil's play calling, and Vermeil clearly did not have his men prepared for Denver's defense. His Chiefs looked completely disoriented at times and were penalized 13 times for 118 yards. Will the comforts of home prove to be the remedy for what ailed the Chiefs, or will the Eagles continue to expose their supposedly improved defense as a fraud?

The task will be made harder for the Eagles by the fact that their two stars, McNabb and Owens, will be playing through pain. If the game is close and comes down to a field goal, they also have to wonder how much pressure Todd France can take in replacement of David Akers who tore his hamstring on a kickoff against the Raiders. I was a little concerned by the ease with which Kerry Collins and the Raiders were able to move the ball against the Eagles last week. Were it not for a couple of key dropped passes by Randy Moss and a missed field goal by Sebastian Janikowski, the Raiders very well could have come away with the victory. The Eagles have Brian Westbrook to thank for their victory. He was responsible for 228 of their total yards of offense, and it's his ability to be effective both as a running back and a receiver that makes the Philadelphia offense so dynamic and hard to defend. But how effective can Westbrook and Owens be in the passing game if McNabb is in too much pain to deliver the ball?

Allow me, for a moment, to address Mr. McNabb. "It's brave to say that you can play through the pain, Donovan, but sometimes the body doesn't agree. Above the belt you have a sternum injury that you suffered in the first game of the season which has continued to cause you pain. At belt level you have a sports hernia that will require surgery when you can spare a few weeks to recover. And below the belt you have a shin contusion that limits your mobility. You're 'taking one for the team' by playing through it, and that's admirable to an extent, but look at Steve McNair, a quarterback very similar in build and style of play. He has played through injuries throughout his career, and that has only led to a tendency to re-injure himself. For your sake and for the longevity of your career with the Eagles, Donovan, I beg you to rest your body, recover from your injuries and return to the field as a healthy player before you do irreparable damage to yourself." I know that McNabb has probably heard this and other conflicting arguments from his family and training staff, but the decision for a quarterback is usually a simple one. If he can stand up and throw a ball... he'll play.

The Chiefs will not be sympathetic. They'll blitz the living daylights out of him. They'll test his mobility and his mental toughness. Will he be willing to stand in the pocket and get hit repeatedly if he's unable to scramble? Usually McNabb is at his most dangerous when he's on the move, so a pocket-bound McNabb could mean interceptions or at least three-and-outs for the Kansas City defense. I know that Westbrook could have a huge game if the Eagles can catch the Chiefs' defense focusing too much on McNabb, so I'm tempted to pick the Eagles. But I'm still haunted by the ease with which the Raiders moved the ball and were able to score in Philadelphia. *I expect the **Chiefs** to bounce back from their miserable performance in Denver, and on their home field they should be able to send the Eagles home with a loss.*

Dallas Cowboys (2-1) @ Oakland Raiders (0-3)

There could be riots in Oak-town if the Raiders don't win a game sometime soon. They nearly beat the Patriots in New England, nearly beat the Chiefs at home and nearly beat the Eagles in Philadelphia. Raiders fans across the nation are scoffing at their slogan "Commitment to Excellence," so it's time for Al Davis's men to deliver on that mantra. The defense has improved greatly from last year and the passing game is excelling thanks to the addition of Randy Moss, but the running game has been lacking. LaMont Jordan has just 148 yards rushing through the first three games, so Norv Turner needs to fix his running game if the Raiders are going to shake that moniker of being the best winless team in the league.

Fortunately for Oakland fans, the Cowboys have surrendered over 110 rushing yards per game so far, and last week they let the 49ers run for 124 yards in what proved to be a narrow victory. After an impressive season-opening win over the Chargers in San Diego and three good quarters against the Redskins, the Cowboys have looked pretty average in their last five quarters of football. They let Washington come back to beat them at home and then nearly let lowly San Francisco out-score them last week. Bill Parcells has to be furious with his defense for giving up 23 points per game, so he'll expect them to play with renewed purpose in the Black Hole on Sunday. He knows that they won't come away from Oakland with a win if they play the way they did in San Francisco. After the way the Cowboys have struggled against inferior teams lately I can't see them putting it all together on the road against a team that's as hungry for a win as the men in Silver & Black. *I'm picking the **Raiders** to get win number one.*

Denver Broncos (2-1) @ Jacksonville Jaguars (2-1)

I'm licking my chops for this game. If it's not on local TV then I think I'll make my first trip of the season to Jerseys Cheesesteaks to watch it. The Jaguars have only lost to the Colts this year, and they're really looking like a team that could go all the way if it can stay healthy. They've got a good defense, a tough and capable quarterback in Byron Leftwich, a group of talented receivers and the reliable, powerful running of Fred Taylor. They will all be tested this week against a stable of Broncos who are riding an emotional high following their domination of the Chiefs last week. It's different, though, playing against a non-division rival with several unknowns. There is no history of dominance here for Denver, and certainly the comforts of home will not be afforded the Broncos in Jacksonville. *I expect a close game, but I anticipate that the **Jaguars** will find a way to win.*

St. Louis Rams (2-1) @ New York Giants (2-1)

Are you ready for a high scoring affair? Here are two teams who are capable of surrendering a lot of yardage and the points that go along with them, and it just so happens that both teams also have offenses capable of exploiting less-than-great defenses. The Rams narrowly avoided a home loss against the Titans last week, so I'm concerned that they might not be able to contain the Tiki Barber, Eli Manning combination of the Giants. The Giants, on the other hand, surrendered a huge quantity of rushing yards to the Chargers last week, so I'm concerned that they won't be able to contain the two great running backs from St. Louis, Marshall Faulk and Steven Jackson. I'm willing to cut the Giants a little slack, though, since the Chargers were playing in San Diego last week and had a little extra motivation to defeat Manning & Co. after the way they were snubbed by Eli's family in last year's draft. Now that the Giants are back at home with their own fans cheering for them, they should play better on both sides of the ball. The Rams will be without dynamic all-pro wide receiver Isaac Bruce who was injured last week, making things a little easier for the G-men on defense. *It should be a shootout, but I'm picking the **Giants**.*

Up The Gut

- Buffalo (1-2) @ New Orleans (1-2): The Saints finally get to play "at home" in San Antonio. It may not be the Superdome, but they don't have to get on a flight and stay in a hotel. They should also have plenty of fan support, but none of that will help if they can't raise their level of play from where it's been over the last two weeks. I think fumbling the opening kickoff and giving up touchdowns within the first thirty seconds of the game two weeks in a row has to be some kind of record. I expect the **Saints** to avoid making that mistake again, jump out to an early lead and hold on to win.
- Detroit (1-1) @ Tampa Bay (3-0): Coming off a bye week won't do the Lions much good in Tampa. The **Bucs** are benefiting from what has turned out to be a pretty easy early schedule. The trick will be to carry that momentum into the second half of the season to make a playoff run.
- Houston (0-3) @ Cincinnati (3-0): Here are two teams headed in opposite directions. The way the Texans have looked both at home and on the road so far, it's pretty easy for me to pick the **Bengals** to dance in the end zone a few times on their way to a 4-0 record.

- Indianapolis (3-0) @ Tennessee (1-2): The Colts beat up on the Titans pretty good last season whether it was in Indy or in Nashville, so it doesn't help the Titans that their starting running back Travis Henry has been suspended for four games for violating the league's substance abuse policy. The **Colts** have been winning on the strength of their defense so far, but this week the offense will come out of its shell and put up those numbers we all got so used to seeing last season.
- Seattle (2-1) @ Washington (2-0): The Seahawks have rebounded from the season opening loss at Jacksonville with home wins over the Falcons and the Cardinals, so that would lead me to believe that they are on the right track and should have no problem knocking off the Redskins. Well, that's what I'd believe if I didn't know that the Seahawks have been a completely different team at home than on the road in the last few years. Washington has one of the best defenses in the league and an offense that finally found its rhythm in the comeback win over the Cowboys two weeks ago. Coming off a bye the **Redskins** are rested and eager to treat their home fans to another win.
- NY Jets (1-2) @ Baltimore (0-2): I've already documented the injury woes of the Jets, so it should be no surprise that I'm picking the **Ravens** to get their first win of the season coming off their bye week.
- Minnesota (1-2) @ Atlanta (2-1): After opening the season with two miserable performances, Daunte Culpepper finally put together a good passing game at home against the Saints last week, but the defense he faces this week in Atlanta is a bird of a different feather. Back at home for the first time since their season opening win over the Eagles, and Mike Vick & Co. can't wait to show the home fans some more of that dynamic offense that makes the **Falcons** so much fun to watch.
- San Francisco (1-2) @ Arizona (0-3): Tune in to ESPN on Sunday night to watch this contest from Mexico City. There should be somewhere around 100,000 fans in attendance, and they'll all be cheering loudly for the only game of professional football they get to see in person this year. That will probably change in the future, but for now both teams are the visitors even though this is technically a home game for the Cardinals. Mike Nolan is facing some of the typical NFL tests early in his first year as the 49ers head coach, but this will be a unique opportunity for him. He'll be taking his team to play in a foreign country while trying to improve a two-win team and also dealing with some serious injury problems. Cornerback Ahmed Plummer is out for six weeks and free safety Mike Rumph has been placed on injured reserve. Julian Peterson – the heart and soul of the 49ers defense – has a hamstringing injury, too. For the Cardinals, Josh McCown will be starting in place of the injured Kurt Warner. Some of my readers might remember my displeasure with Arizona coach Dennis Green for benching McCown last season when it was clear that he was the only quarterback who was giving them a chance to win. I think the Cardinals will be better off with McCown at quarterback since he's more mobile and more durable than Warner, but I don't know if his presence will make an immediate impact. The Cardinals have some injured linebackers and cornerbacks and may have trouble keeping the 49ers out of the end zone. The fans in Mexico City will be entertained, the **49ers** will win.
- Green Bay (0-3) @ Carolina (1-2): This is the type of scenario in which I like to pick the 0-3 team because I know how motivated a winless team can get, even on the road. But the Panthers are coming off a disappointing loss to Miami that will have them just as fired up and hungry. Stephen Davis has only 194 yards rushing through the first three games of the season, but I expect him to have a break-out game this week and lead the **Panthers** to victory.
- Bye Week: Chicago (1-2), Cleveland (1-2), Miami (2-1), Pittsburgh (2-1)

Statistics

- I went 3-2 in my featured games last week with a much improved overall record of 10-4. My season total now stands at 25-21 (54.35%), and my all-time record is 316-190 (62.45%).
- Last week's locks were Indianapolis (-13.5), Philadelphia (-8) and St. Louis (-6.5).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 0-3 last week (54-54-3 all-time). All of my locks won, but none of them covered the spread. That's a fate that I hope to avoid this week.

Week 4 Locks

Indianapolis (-7)
Atlanta (-5.5)
San Francisco (+3)

Keys

It's time for that storied offense to make its first big appearance of the season.
Mike Vick at home = good. Vikings on the road = bad.
It's a gut feeling that the Cardinals are too banged up to win in another country.

Standings

AFC East

Miami (2-1)
New England (2-1)
Buffalo (1-2)
N.Y. Jets (1-2)

AFC North

Cincinnati (3-0)
Pittsburgh (2-1)
Cleveland (1-2)
Baltimore (0-2)

AFC South

Indianapolis (3-0)
Jacksonville (2-1)
Tennessee (1-2)
Houston (0-2)

AFC West

Denver (2-1)
Kansas City (2-1)
San Diego (1-2)
Oakland (0-3)

NFC East

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

NFC North

Detroit (1-1)
Chicago (1-2)
Minnesota (1-2)
Green Bay (0-3)

NFC South

Tampa Bay (3-0)
Atlanta (2-1)
Carolina (1-2)
New Orleans (1-2)

NFC West

Seattle (2-1)
St. Louis (2-1)
San Francisco (1-2)
Arizona (0-3)