

THE AIR UP THERE

It was bad enough that my team's offense couldn't find a way to score on Sunday night. I certainly didn't need to endure ESPN's three stooges on top of it all. Some of you are well aware of how annoying I find the three commentators who cover the Sunday night games for the aforementioned division of Disney, so you will not be surprised to discover that Joe Theismann (even more than Paul Maguire and Mike Patrick on this occasion) annoyed me to the point where I just had to put the game on mute.

ESPN's producers cut to a good shot with clear audio in which McCown was talking to Kurt Warner about how differently the ball travels through the air at 7,200 feet than in the Arizona desert. Granted, it wasn't the most eloquent explanation ever given for lack of accuracy, but it was a point that Theismann, as a former quarterback, could have absorbed, processed and commented on logically. "What he's talking about," he could have said, "is an even more exaggerated problem than the documented one that visiting quarterbacks have had for years at Denver's altitude of 5,280 feet." Perhaps he could have even appealed to his own ego while simultaneously defending him by saying something like, "I've won Super Bowls, but I've never thrown a ball through air nearly as thin as it is here in Mexico City. I can see that the ball seems to float or sail just by the fact that San Francisco's kicker Joe Nedney launched one all the way through the opposite uprights on a kickoff." Viewers would have connected such a statement with the visual evidence, and they would have understood that McCown had a valid excuse for his inaccuracy.

Instead, Theismann dismissed McCown's remarks as mere excuses for what he perceived as an inability to complete certain types of passes that an NFL quarterback "simply *must* have in his repertoire." I was hating Theismann for ignoring the obvious and was wishing that someone would bring him down a notch when – in the very moment that Theismann asserted that McCown simply wasn't capable of completing a touch pass to the sideline – young Josh McCown did just that. He wasn't done, either. McCown adjusted nicely to the thin air and completed 32 of his 46 passes for 385 yards and two touchdowns. And wouldn't you know it? He completed passes of just about every kind, too – the little touch passes, the zinging quick passes and even the tricky sideline passes. He may not have been playing against a very good pass defense but he beat an NFL defense just the same, and that's not a claim that can be made by many recent Cardinals quarterbacks.

In fact, the Arizona Cardinals have won just eight of their last 28 games. During that stretch they've started four different quarterbacks, but only one of them has a victory to his name. Care to guess? Yep. Josh McCown. I know that last season McCown said or did something that angered Coach Green to the point of benching him and signing Kurt Warner in the off-season, but even Warner has failed to win with the Cardinals. The franchise has been losing for too long, and here is a young man who gives them what the game is all about – victories. It's time for Cardinals fans and for the Cardinals organization to speak up and join me in demanding of Dennis Green, "For the love of victory! Let Josh McCown play!"

Pittsburgh Steelers (2-1) @ San Diego Chargers (2-2)

Monday, October 10, 2005 @ 9:00 PM ET on ABC

I had a revelation on Monday. Aren't you curious to find out what it was? I'll tell you. It turns out that not everyone reads UFR! OK, stop it. You don't have to act surprised for my sake. I knew it before, but it was emphasized early this week by all the people whom I overheard commenting, "Can you believe that San Diego beat New England?!" I'd like to think that readers of UFR weren't among those uttering such expressions of disbelief, but I'm sure there were a few of you who saw my picks and still thought the Patriots would overcome the injuries and find a way to win. Well, they've done it before and they did it in Pittsburgh two weeks ago, so that's not an unreasonable assumption, but this time it was too much.

Interestingly enough, injuries come into play when picking this game's winner, too. Willie Parker has been filling in for injured running backs Jerome Bettis and Deuce Staley, but now the Steelers have emerged from their bye week with a completely healthy group of running backs. Strangely, this new wealth of health has created somewhat of a problem for Pittsburgh coach Bill Cowher, who traditionally dresses three running backs for games. He's assured Parker that he'll continue to be the starter, and he needs Verron Haynes for his pass blocking and special teams expertise. Full back Dan Kreider could be benched if Cowher decides to play all four running backs, but doing so could cripple blocking schemes on both passing and rushing downs. It's a conundrum, but as coach Cowher said on the official Steelers website, "It's a good problem to have."

The problem for San Diego will be stopping whatever three-headed running attack Cowher decides to employ. So far this season the Chargers have allowed just 91 rushing yards per game, but they're

surrendering very high totals of 340 yards and 22 points per game. That will have to change if they hope to come away with a victory over a Pittsburgh team that has allowed just 12.3 points per game. Marty Schottenheimer and Bill Cowher will both preach defense and the running game to their teams this week, so I can see this ending up as a defensive battle with both teams' field goal kickers heavily involved. If that's the case and the game ends up being close, then I give the edge to the Steelers' Jeff Reed who beat the Jets with an overtime field goal in last season's playoffs just one week after the Chargers' Nate Kaeding missed a field goal in overtime that could have sent the Jets home. If the game doesn't end up being close, then it will probably be because Pittsburgh's running game simply tired out San Diego's defense to the point where they couldn't defend either the run or the pass. *Either way, the **Steelers** win.*

New England Patriots (2-2) @ Atlanta Falcons (3-1)

The Falcons rolled over the Vikings last Sunday in a game that, were it a boxing match, would have been called after the second round. Fortunately for Coach Jim Mora, his 24-0 half time lead was enough to allow him to rest Mike Vick in the second half after he sprained his knee in the second quarter. All tests this week came back negative for serious damage, so expect Vick to start for the Falcons on Sunday. That means Atlanta will have its own three-headed running attack (Vick, Dunn and Duckett) in tact, and that could spell trouble for the Patriots who finally succumbed to injuries in their loss to the Chargers. The Falcons lead the league with a massive 209 rushing yards per game, a whopping 50.7 more yards per game than the second place Chargers! After giving up 183 rushing yards to San Diego last week, the Patriots will need a miracle to control the line of scrimmage in Atlanta this week. Of course, Bill Belichick has worked miracles with his team before, but this time I don't think he has the personnel that can fill the gaps adequately. *The **Falcons** will treat the home crowd to another home victory.*

Washington Redskins (3-0) @ Denver Broncos (3-1)

The Redskins have remained undefeated with increasingly impressive defensive performances. First they outlasted the Bears 9-7 at home, and then they held the Cowboys to 13 points in Dallas to pave the way for Mark Brunell's two fourth quarter touchdown passes to speedster Santana Moss. Last week their defense contained the high-powered Seahawks offense enough for the offense to put up 20 points and secure an overtime win. Every highlight show I see mentions that the last time the Redskins were 3-0 was the last time their season was capped with a Super Bowl victory. Well, forgive me for raining on their parade, but any talk of Super Bowls had better be put on hold until the Redskins beat a team with both a good offense and a good defense. To that end, this week's match-up in Denver will be a good measuring stick. The Broncos, since their season opening loss at Miami, have performed consistently in wins over the Chargers, Chiefs and Jaguars. Their defense ranks sixth in the league overall and an impressive fourth against the run, allowing just 79 rushing yards per game. In the last two weeks, Denver has dominated the line of scrimmage on both sides of the ball, so it will be interesting to see how their running game will fare against another great defense. My gut feeling is that it will fare well. *Jake Plummer will take his knocks from the ferocious Washington defense, but the **Broncos** will come away with the win.*

Philadelphia Eagles (3-1) @ Dallas Cowboys (2-2)

I must say that I was impressed with the way the Eagles came back from a 17-0 deficit to beat the Chiefs in Kansas City last Sunday. I was ready to sing the praises of Philadelphia corner back Sheldon Brown for turning the tide of the game with his 40 yard interception return for a touchdown, but then Kansas City's Dante Hall ran the very next kickoff back for an equally exciting six points and the score was 24-6. The Eagles advanced only one yard on the possession that followed Kansas City's kickoff, so it would have been easy for the Philadelphia defense to be discouraged that they were once again taking the field after a poor series of downs by their offense. With only 2:48 left in the first half, Kansas City had been moving the ball at will, but then Javon Kearshe got his mitts on KC running back Larry Johnson and ripped the ball loose. The Eagles got the ball on the 50 yard line with 2:40 remaining, but they only needed 1:28 to run five plays that culminated with a 28 yard pass to Terrell Owens and a seven yard touchdown pass from Donovan McNabb to – whom else – Terrell Owens. Feeling much better about themselves than they had just a few minutes before, the Eagles went into the locker room at half time down 24-13 and emerged with a sense of entitlement that showed through as they outscored the Chiefs 24-7 in the second half. The lesson here is that they may all be banged up and in pain, but the Eagles can never be counted out.

That's a point for Bill Parcells to hammer home with his Cowboys this week as they prepare to host their division rivals. The game will be a test for a defense that hasn't played up to its potential so far this season. Dallas has surrendered 115 yards per game on the ground, 225 through the air and a whopping 22 points per game. With that kind of defense, the only way they've been able to win games is by

outscored their opponents in shoot-outs. But their most recent 34-31 victory in San Francisco is a far cry from their season opening 28-24 victory in San Diego. In order for the Cowboys to beat another respectable team and finally treat the home crowd to a victory, they'll need some coaching magic from Bill Parcells and much better execution from their players.

It's still early in the season, but at 2-2 the Cowboys are in danger of falling seriously far behind in the race for the NFC East. The Redskins are an undefeated 3-0, and the Eagles and Giants are both 3-1. I wouldn't rule out a Dallas victory simply because they're the home team, and this is a division rivalry. *But I can't pick against an **Eagles** team that showed me last week that they can play through just about anything – even when needing a huge comeback in one of the toughest environments in the league.*

Cincinnati Bengals (4-0) @ Jacksonville Jaguars (2-2)

Sunday, October 9, 2005 @ 8:30 PM ET on ESPN

I know it's not very nice of me, but I can't help but wonder when I will once again need to use the term "Bungles" when referring to the Cincinnati Bengals. How much longer can they lead the league in turnover margin? Yes, you heard right. The Bengals have a +13 turnover margin – currently the best mark in the league. It's the type of statistic that materializes when a great offensive team is backed up by a good defense, and that's not something that has been said of the Bengals for some time now. In fact, the Bengals have surrendered just 9.5 points per game – second only to Indianapolis – while scoring a healthy 26 points per game on the strength of running back Rudy Johnson, quarterback Carson Palmer and a group of talented and speedy wide receivers. Palmer's 112.2 quarterback rating is second best in the league and better than McNabb's, Manning's, Manning's and Brady's. But just when I'm getting geared up to shower accolades on Palmer and the rest of the Cincinnati offense, I find myself asking the question, "Who have the Bengals beaten?" Suddenly my balloon deflates... Cleveland, Minnesota, Chicago, Houston. That's hardly an elite list of vanquished foes.

The Jaguars may have the more humble record of 2-2, but they lost to two very good teams – the Colts and the Broncos – and defeated the Seahawks in Week 1 and the Jets (before the Chad Pennington injury) in Week 3. Last week's 20-7 loss in Denver will certainly light a fire under this young and talented team, so I expect them to play with a lot of intensity on Sunday night. Despite having had a much tougher schedule so far this season, the Jaguars rank third in the league in yards allowed. I'm reminded of their visit to Indianapolis, in which they shut down Peyton Manning and the Indy passing game, allowing the Colts to score just 10 points. *If the **Jaguars** can avoid turnovers and frustrate the Cincinnati receivers, they could be the first team to make the Bengals look more like the Bungles. I'll chance the pick.*

Up The Gut

- Baltimore (1-2) @ Detroit (1-2): Some of you may have seen Detroit's game-winning touchdown that was overturned by the officials in Tampa Bay last Sunday. It's been publicized so much this week that I decided not to rehash it all here in UFR. It's enough to say that Detroit should be 2-1 and on top of the NFC North while Tampa Bay should be 3-1 and tied with Atlanta on top of the NFC South. But alas! What is done is done, and the games go on. I'll be interested to see how the Lions respond to the disappointment and anger they have surely felt this week, but I'm more interested to see how they play without their talented wide receiver Charles Rogers who this week will begin serving a four game suspension for violating the league's substance abuse policy. Through their first two games, the Ravens scored just 17 points because the offensive line allowed nine sacks and Jamal Lewis ran for only 57 yards. Things looked better against the Jets last week, but I refuse to give them too much credit for a 13-3 win over a team that is reeling from injuries. I'm expecting the **Lions** to play angry and play hard, and if they can get an early lead I'm expecting them to eek out a win at home.
- Chicago (1-2) @ Cleveland (1-2): When two teams are both coming off their bye week it makes for an interesting pick. This one is even more interesting since both teams have lost only to teams that are currently undefeated (Cincinnati & Indianapolis for Cleveland and Washington & Cincinnati for Chicago). I'd like to use the Bengals as a measuring stick, but I can't because both teams lost by similar margins. In situations like this I've just got to go with my gut. I like Thomas Jones more than Ruben Droughns at running back, and I like Kyle Orton better than Trent Dilfer at quarterback. I'm a little intimidated by the revamped Cleveland defense that held the Colts to just 13 points in Indianapolis, but overall I like the Chicago defense better. Ya hear that? It's my gut picking **Da Bears**.
- Miami (2-1) @ Buffalo (1-3): After a season-opening win over Houston, the J.P. Losman era in Buffalo has been loss after loss, man. Those losses have only gotten uglier as the season has progressed,

- so it's easy for me to pick the **Dolphins** who have beaten the Broncos and Panthers and are now rested and coming off their bye week. By the way, only one more week until Ricky Williams returns.
- New Orleans (2-2) @ Green Bay (0-4): The Saints haven't liked the road much, and the Packers finally looked like they could put something together in the second half of that Carolina game last Monday Night. Finally! Brett Favre and the **Packers** will put a W on the board.
 - Seattle (2-2) @ St. Louis (2-2): I guess I could have featured this game out of respect for tradition, but honestly my pulse hasn't been raised by this match-up even though this is an early showdown for the NFC West. Seattle plays bad on the road, and St. Louis plays better at home. Plus, this is a division rivalry, so I'm picking the **Rams** in what I like to call a "formula pick."
 - Tampa Bay (4-0) @ N.Y. Jets (1-3): *Va-Va-Va-Vinny and the Jets...* I'm humming a great song, while preparing for the **Buccaneers'** march through New York on their way to 5-0. Undefeated Bucs? Wow!
 - Tennessee (1-3) @ Houston (0-3): "I wanna be the worst team in the AFC." "No! I wanna be the worst team in the AFC!" "Hey! You kids work it out or go to your rooms!" "OK, *fine!* **Houston**, you can win this time, but only 'cause you haven't won yet."
 - Indianapolis (4-0) @ San Francisco (1-3): The 49ers have named Alex Smith the starting quarterback. Poor guy... behind that offensive line he's like a lonely lamb surrounded by wolves. Being a 49ers fan, I've decided to put my head under a rock on Sunday or at least try to ignore any updates that may flash across the screen while I'm watching other games. I have a bad feeling that Peyton Manning and his stable of **Colts** will be running wild at Monster Park on Sunday afternoon.
 - Carolina (2-2) @ Arizona (1-3): I'm intrigued by this match-up now that Josh McCown is in for the Cardinals. I think the home town fans will actually turn out to watch him play, and if the Arizona heat shows up, too... well, let's just call this a hopeful vote of confidence in the **Cardinals**.
 - Bye Week: Kansas City (2-2), Minnesota (1-3), N.Y. Giants (3-1), Oakland (1-3)

Statistics

- I went 3-2 in my featured games last week with an overall record of 11-3. My season total now stands at 36-24 (60.00%), and my all-time record is 327-193 (62.88%).
- Last week's locks were Indianapolis (-7), Atlanta (-5.5) and San Francisco (+3).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 2-1 last week (56-55-3 all-time). Someone should have told the 49ers' offense not to drink the water in Mexico City – or at least to show up to the game.

Week 5 Locks

Indianapolis (-14.5)
Tampa Bay (-3.5)
Denver (-6.5)

Keys

The 49ers' offense couldn't score on the Cardinals, so this could be ugly.
The Jets are just hoping to wake up soon from this nightmare.
"Undefeated Redskins" is something I won't have to type again this season.

Standings

AFC East

Miami (2-1)
New England (2-2)
Buffalo (1-3)
N.Y. Jets (1-3)

AFC North

Cincinnati (4-0)
Pittsburgh (2-1)
Baltimore (1-2)
Cleveland (1-2)

AFC South

Indianapolis (4-0)
Jacksonville (2-2)
Tennessee (1-3)
Houston (0-3)

AFC West

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

NFC East

Washington (3-0)
N.Y. Giants (3-1)
Philadelphia (3-1)
Dallas (2-2)

NFC North

Chicago (1-2)
Detroit (1-2)
Minnesota (1-3)
Green Bay (0-4)

NFC South

Tampa Bay (4-0)
Atlanta (3-1)
Carolina (2-2)
New Orleans (2-2)

NFC West

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