

FULL DISCLOSURE

The question of the week is this: Is it cheating to withhold key personnel information until the last minute?

Both the Falcons and the Bills participated in this somewhat shady practice last weekend, and some office discussion inspired me to bring it up in this week's column. The situations were different, so they require some examination.

The Falcons had listed Michael Vick as "probable" during most of the week leading up to their game against the Patriots, so New England prepared and practiced assuming that Vick would be the starting quarterback they would face. But Saturday night Vick's status was changed to "questionable," and at game time coach Jim Mora finally named Matt Schaub the starting quarterback.

Mike Mularkey, coach of the Buffalo Bills, had a similar approach, but his hand was not forced by injuries. He was simply deciding between a young, underachieving quarterback – J.P. Losman – and a veteran – Kelly Holcomb – who might give his team a better chance to win. But Mularkey also held off on making that decision until just before game time.

Both coaches robbed the opposition of the right to fully prepare for their opponent, but they both did so – technically – within the rules. As reader Ron Wilhelm pointed out, there was a time when coaches were fined by the league for failing to fully disclose injury information. So should Mora be fined for withholding information regarding the extent of Vick's injury? In my opinion – yes. It is extremely rare for a player listed as "probable" to not play a single minute of the up-coming game, so I can only assume that Mora knew in advance that Vick wouldn't play but held off on downgrading his status until the last possible moment. In so doing, he forced the Patriots to spend a large amount of their time preparing defensive schemes to contain Vick. Unfortunately for Mora, his move didn't lead to a victory for the Falcons, but it may have been one of the reasons for Schaub's success as the team's quarterback. As far as Mularkey and Holcomb are concerned, I've been unable to find any record of a coach being fined for failing to name a starting quarterback when injuries weren't involved, but it still seems like what is commonly called *gamesmanship* to me. What do you think? I welcome e-mails on the topic: artirwin79@yahoo.com

An interesting thing happened to me the other night when I was thinking about last week's and this week's match-ups. Many of the outcomes have become quite hard to predict, so my thoughts turned to ranking teams based on their record, the number of points their offense has scored, the number of points their defense has allowed, and the relative strength of the opponents they've faced. After plugging in numbers and deciding which criteria should be weighed the heaviest, I came up with a ranking system that I believe is satisfactory for now but may require a tweak or two as the season progresses.

The most intriguing part of my equation is the strength of schedule (SOS) portion. The SOS score for each team is a representation of their opponents' cumulative record (their number of games above or below .500). Jacksonville (11) has the highest SOS score, followed by San Diego (9), Minnesota (6) and Chicago (5). On the low end, Indianapolis (-5) has faced relatively weak teams, as have the other teams with the best records: Tampa Bay (-7), Cincinnati (-7), the New York Giants (-6) and Pittsburgh (-5).

New England Patriots (3-2) @ Denver Broncos (4-1)

The Patriots, widely regarded as one of the top five teams in the league, have an SOS score of 1 and a winning record, which is commendable given the fact that they have allowed 3.6 points per game more than they've scored. Their opponents this week, the Broncos, have an SOS score of 2 and have outscored their opponents by an average of 2.8 points per game. They're 4-1 but could have been 5-0 if they would have just not lost to Miami in Week 1. That's something I've read a lot of on the web this week, "Mike Shanahan has to explain that Week 1 loss to Miami." It's written in a manner that would lead the reader to believe that the Dolphins are nothing but diced tuna, but according to my figures the Dolphins and Broncos are not so far apart. Don't believe me? Check it out: Miami's SOS score is also 2 and their points per game figure is +2.7. That's almost identical to Denver! If two teams are of relatively equal strength then the home team should have the edge, so it shouldn't be surprising that Miami won at home in Week 1. Right? I'm not saying the formula is gospel – I'm not that naïve – but it *will* evolve as the season progresses, and I'll be watching it closely.

The Patriots pulled out a close one last week in Atlanta thanks – *again* – to Adam Vinatieri's foot and also because of a renewed dedication to heavy use of their running backs and tight ends who accounted for 311 of the team's 483 total yards. It was a formula they hadn't employed so far this season, so it caught the Falcons a little off guard. Bill Belichick will find, however, that he'll have to change things up against a

Broncos defense that ranks fifth in the league against the run, allowing 30 fewer rushing yards per game than the Falcons. The Patriots will still need to show a dedication to the running game, but they'll expect to beat the Broncos by exploiting their 25th ranked secondary.

Coach Shanahan would love to have injured Pro Bowl cornerback Champ Bailey back to help defend the speedy New England receivers, but he won't risk losing Bailey for the season by bringing him back too early. Instead of trying to take away the passing game, expect the Broncos to do what they do best – stop the run. In the football equivalent of throwing punches to the body of a champ in a title fight, the Broncos will attack the line of scrimmage and exhaust New England's offensive linemen so that not only will their running game falter, but so will their pass protection. *It's the same method that led Carolina to victory in Week 2, and if the **Broncos** execute it for 60 minutes on Sunday they could also emerge victorious.*

Jacksonville Jaguars (3-2) @ Pittsburgh Steelers (3-1)

I had been greatly anticipating this match-up because of the impact it could have on my rating system. The Jaguars have the highest SOS score of 11 compared to a measly -5 for the Steelers. Does that really mean much? I desperately wanted both teams to be at full strength so I could find out. But, alas! It will not be so. Our beloved Big Ben hyperextended his knee in the final minutes of Pittsburgh's win over San Diego last Monday Night and he will not be playing this week. The Steelers are happy that his injury does not appear to be serious enough to threaten his season, but they are conflicted over whom to start in his stead. Tommy Maddox is the team's backup quarterback, but he's been sidelined with a calf injury. If Maddox can't go, it seems that Charlie Batch will be the man.

Now there's a name that hasn't been typed in UFR before! Charlie Batch made a name for himself in 1998; the same year that Peyton Manning – also in his first year – threw 28 interceptions for the 3-13 Colts, when he piloted the Lions to a 5-11 record. He threw for 2,178 yards, 11 touchdowns, and six interceptions while running for 229 yards. The next year he led the Lions to the playoffs, but a shoulder injury in 2001 cost him his starting job, and he hasn't started a game since. Now, after four years with the Steelers, Batch could finally get the opportunity to take the field as the leader of his team instead of toiling in anonymity as the quarterback of the practice squad. It's not like any NFL player to wish calamity upon a teammate, but I have to believe that Batch is hoping that Maddox will not be game-ready come Sunday. Regardless of who starts the game, the Pittsburgh coaching staff will have to figure out a way to get past Jacksonville's 2nd ranked pass defense.

The challenge for the Jaguars will be two-fold. First, they must improve their 29th ranked run defense. Going up against the dangerous one-two punch of Jerome "The Bus" Bettis and "Fast" Willie Parker with a lackluster run defense has probably kept Jaguars coach Jack Del Rio awake at night all week, so I'll be interested to see if he has found a way to inspire his young team to play above the level they've shown so far this season. Second, they must improve their 23rd ranked passing offense, and that means finding a way to do a better job of protecting quarterback Byron Leftwich. If they were playing at home I would give them a chance to win and I'm still tempted to do so because of how well they played against the Colts in Indianapolis, but that was a division game and those are usually close. *This is Pittsburgh, and the **Steelers** – even without Big Ben – will punish the Jags physically and come away with a win.*

New York Giants (3-1) @ Dallas Cowboys (3-2)

While I may not be sure if either of these teams is really good enough to make the playoffs this year, one thing I'm sure of is that both of them have great quarterbacks who are having break-out seasons. In his second NFL season, Eli Manning is finally living up to his last name for the Giants. And in Dallas, Drew Bledsoe is having the kind of break-out that only veterans can have. Back in 2001 when he was with the Patriots, he suffered a chest injury that sidelined him for the rest of the season and ultimately launched Tom Brady into the spotlight. Bledsoe had great bookend seasons with Buffalo in 2002 and 2004 but failed to take the Bills to the playoffs. Now back under his former New England coach Bill Parcells, Bledsoe is once again at the top of his game and is giving the Cowboys a chance to win every game. If there is one thing that's standing between the Cowboys and the playoffs right now, it's their running game. Through five games, they haven't had a single 100-yard rusher despite the presence of star running back Julius Jones. Now that Jones is questionable with an ankle injury, it will be even harder for the Cowboys to be successful. A solid running game is needed not just to set up the passing game but also to help prolong offensive drives and keep the defense fresh for four quarters. Last week the Cowboys had success using the passing game to set up the run against the Eagles, and with rookie running back Tyson Thompson (from San Jose State) and veteran Anthony Thomas filling in for Jones that will probably be Bill Parcells' strategy again this week.

The Giants are coming off their bye week without any injury problems at all, but they still have one major problem – their 31st ranked defense. They're giving up 425.3 yards and 24.5 points per game, but believe it or not there is a silver lining. Their run defense is a respectable 14th (giving up 103.3 ypg), and they're facing a team that'll be missing its starting running back. Coach Tom Coughlin will need to make the most of his defense's strengths while getting mistake-free football from Eli Manning if the Giants hope to come away from Texas Stadium with a win.

The Cowboys have a -3 SOS score, but that includes San Diego and Oakland – two opponents who are better than their losing records. The Giants, on the other hand, have a -6 SOS score that is certainly representative of their foes. Home wins over the Cardinals and Saints are hardly bragging points, and their defeat of the Rams is looking less and less noteworthy as the season progresses. Their only road game ended in a resounding 45-23 defeat at the hands of the Chargers, a figure that should cheer up the Cowboys since they can boast a win over the Chargers in San Diego. *Comparative wins don't always mean anything in this league, but I'm still calling for Parcells to lead his **Cowboys** to victory.*

Washington Redskins (3-1) @ Kansas City Chiefs (2-2)

By simple opponent comparison this one should be a cake walk for the Redskins, right? The Broncos killed the Chiefs, and the Redskins came up short of beating the Broncos by a safety that was disallowed because of the famous tuck rule. I won't even start on what I think of a rule that allows a quarterback's fumble to become an incomplete pass whenever it's convenient. I hate the rule, the Raiders hate the rule, and now the Redskins hate the rule, too, but we all just have to accept it and move on. So... cake walk for the Skins? I don't think so. Sure the Chiefs gave up a 24-6 lead to the Eagles two weeks ago, but that was not only before their bye week, it was when left tackle Willie Roaf was still injured and when cornerback Eric Warfield was out due to a four-game suspension. Roaf's return will pave the way for better run production from Priest Holmes and Larry Johnson, and the addition of Warfield to the secondary will help the Chiefs better defend Washington's passing and running game.

Give Joe Gibbs credit for turning around a team that seemed destined for another season of mediocrity. Not only has his defense continued their superb play (the Redskins rank 5th in total defense), his offense has also improved to 8th in the league thanks to a powerful running game that's averaging 133.5 yards per game on the shoulders of former Broncos running back Clinton Portis. And in case you think that their 3-1 mark is inflated, you should know that the Redskins have an SOS score of 3 (the Chiefs' score is 1).

The deciding factors in this game, however, are things that don't show up on stat sheets. The Redskins are banged up. Portis is nursing a shin injury, and backup running back Ladell Betts has been downgraded to questionable with a strained groin. There are troubles at cornerback, too. Shawn Springs is expected to play, but Walt Harris will be sidelined with a calf injury. Two starting defensive tackles, a defensive end and an offensive guard are listed as probable but won't be at full strength, and place kicker John Hall is doubtful with a quad injury. *Conversely, the **Chiefs** are the picture of health coming off their bye week and are playing at home. After a 2-0 start to the season, they dropped their next two games and should be extremely motivated to return to their winning ways.*

San Diego Chargers (2-3) @ Oakland Raiders (1-3)

As a 49ers fan it pains me to say that I actually feel sorry for the Raiders. Their schedule so far has been brutal. First they traveled to Foxboro to face the reigning Super Bowl Champs, then they hosted perennial rival Kansas City, traveled to the home of last year's NFC Champs and then hosted the Cowboys. Realistically they could have been happy about a 2-2 record after that stretch, so 1-3 really isn't as bad as it looks. Unfortunately for the Raiders, things don't get any easier this week with the division rival Chargers making the short trip up the coast. The Black Hole is still Raider country, but there will be plenty of San Diegans in town for the game who will pretty much negate home field advantage in Oakland. The Raiders, coming off their bye week, will need to bring their absolute best in every facet of the game if they hope to notch their second win of the season. That means flawless decision making by quarterback Kerry Collins, punishing running from LaMont Jordan and relentless defensive pressure from Warren Sapp and company. Anything short of their best effort will leave them at 1-4 with very little hope of making the playoffs no matter how well they perform the rest of the season.

The Chargers are coming off a nail-biting home loss to the Steelers on Monday Night. The offense played well against a tough defense, and the defense came within one third down stand of securing victory. Were it not for tough play down the stretch from Jerome Bettis and Big Ben and a game-winning 40-yard field goal by Jeff Reed with 6 second left, the Chargers could be clear of a very tough early schedule with

a winning record. *Having lost only to teams that currently have winning records (and having a sky-high SOS score of 9), the **Chargers** are better than their 2-3 record and should beat the Raiders on Sunday.*

Up The Gut

Now shorter and sweeter!

- Atlanta (3-2) @ New Orleans (2-3): Saints fans will continue to be upset that no bars are open in San Antonio on Sundays. Mike Vick will play, and the **Falcons** will further depress Saints fans.
- Carolina (3-2) @ Detroit (2-2): I'm more impressed with Detroit's win over the Ravens than Carolina's win over the Cardinals. The Panthers are banged up, so I'll pick the **Lions** to win at home.
- Cincinnati (4-1) @ Tennessee (2-3): Wins over Baltimore and Houston fail to impress me, so I'll pick the **Bengals** to bounce back from their loss to the Jaguars this weekend in Nashville.
- Cleveland (2-2) @ Baltimore (1-3): Narrow losses to the Bengals and Colts and wins over the Packers and Bears put the **Browns** back on the map. It's a division game, but I'll pick the roadies.
- Miami (2-2) @ Tampa Bay (4-1): Ricky Williams returns for Miami but so does Carnell "Cadillac" Williams for Tampa Bay. The **Bucs** have the league's best defense again, too, so they're my pick.
- Minnesota (1-3) @ Chicago (1-3): Healthy Bears (SOS score 5) would be my pick, but without Thomas Jones I'll have to go with the healthy **Vikings** (SOS score 6) coming off their bye week.
- NY Jets (2-3) @ Buffalo (2-3): The Replacements 2 – Vinny & the Jets visit Holcomb & the Bills. This one's got tons of unknowns and is too close to call, so I'll go with the hometown **Bills**.
- Houston (0-4) @ Seattle (3-2): No one gets sacked more than Houston quarterback David Carr, and Seattle plays best on defense when they're home. I'll pick the **Seahawks** in a blowout.
- St. Louis (2-3) @ Indianapolis (5-0): The Rams are giving up 29.6 points per game. The **Colts** are giving up 5.8 points per game. Peyton Manning loves Monday Nights, too. Need I say more?
- Bye Week: Arizona (1-4), Green Bay (1-4), Philadelphia (3-2), San Francisco (1-4)

Statistics

- I went 3-2 in my featured games last week with an embattled overall record of 6-8. My season total now stands at 42-32 (56.76%), and my all-time record is 333-201 (62.36%).
- Last week's locks were Indianapolis (-14.5), Tampa Bay (-3.5) and Denver (-6.5).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 1-2 last week (57-57-3 all-time). The Colts predictably covered the spread, but the Bucs fell to Vinny and the Jets while the Broncos barely bucked the Skins.

Week 6 Locks

Atlanta (-4.5)
Seattle (-9.5)
Indianapolis (-13.5)

Keys

Vick's back.
Seahawks play best at home. Texans can't protect Carr.
I'd pick the Indy offense over the Lambs any day. New Colts D makes it easier.

Standings

AFC East

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

AFC North

Cincinnati (4-1)
Pittsburgh (3-1)
Cleveland (2-2)
Baltimore (1-3)

AFC South

Indianapolis (5-0)
Jacksonville (3-2)
Tennessee (2-3)
Houston (0-4)

AFC West

Denver (4-1)
Kansas City (2-2)
San Diego (2-3)
Oakland (1-3)

NFC East

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

NFC North

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

NFC South

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

NFC West

Seattle (3-2)
St. Louis (2-3)
Arizona (1-4)
San Francisco (1-4)