

PARKED

I didn't get to see the overtime conclusion of the Giants at Cowboys on Sunday because I had set my TiVo to switch over from FOX to CBS at 4 PM to catch what I felt was last week's top match-up: Patriots at Broncos. Fortunately, CBS first showed the conclusion of my number two game: Jaguars at Steelers. As many of you already know, the Jaguars won the game in overtime when Rashean Mathis ran back Tommy Maddox's third interception 41 yards for a touchdown. What you don't know is that long before that Maddox mistake I had already begun hollering at Pittsburgh coach Bill Cowher. What incited my tirade? Here is the chronicle:

"Woo-hoo! Quincy Morgan rides again!" I exclaimed. Morgan had just returned the opening overtime kickoff 74 yards to the Jacksonville 26 yard line. Overtime is sudden death in the NFL, and the Steelers have a good field goal kicker so – in my head – the game was wrapped up. Standing in my living room, I narrated my instructions to coach Cowher, "Alright, run The Bus up the middle a couple of times and kick the field goal on third down so you'll have an extra down in case something bad should happen. Nice and safe, Bill. Quincy just won it for you."

The Steelers lined up for first down, and I surveyed their lineup. "What? No Bettis?! Alright, well, Willie Parker can handle it. Just run it right up the middle to keep the ball in the center of the field for the kicker." My irritation was mild but soon turned to indignant disbelief. "It serves you right for running a stretch play!" I scolded as I watched Parker fumble while running to the left right into a sea of Jaguars defenders. Miraculously, the ball bounced back up into his hands and he smartly fell on it for a loss of three yards. The Steelers had just dodged a huge bullet. Surely Bill Cowher would be so relieved that he didn't just fumble away his chance to win that he'd do the right thing. He'd get the rattled Parker out of the game, put in the massive, reliable veteran Jerome Bettis and let him pound it to the right side, setting up Jeff Reed for a game winning field goal of around 40 yards.

The furthest thing from my mind – because of the sheer lunacy the decision would require – was that Cowher would allow Maddox (who had struggled all day and had already thrown two interceptions against the league's 2nd ranked pass defense) to do anything other than hand the ball off to a running back. You will understand, then, why I first yelled and then laughed hysterically when – to my amazement – Maddox attempted to execute a play-action pass and wound up fumbling the ball. The Jaguars recovered the fumble but, unable to score, they were forced to punt. Maddox then threw one incomplete pass followed by the game-winner to the opposition.

I was still standing in my living room laughing, and Jerome Bettis was still standing on the sideline. I'm still baffled. Missing their starting quarterback and playing against a team with the league's 29th ranked run defense, the Steelers handed the ball to Jerome just four times in the entire game and not once during overtime. What an atrocity. No, Bettis wasn't injured or winded. Illogically, The Bus was parked.

Mailbag

Last week's "Full Disclosure" topic stirred up some interesting replies from readers. Here are snippets from both sides of the argument.

Vern Edwards doesn't object to deception.

"Every play in football is an exercise in deception. 'Hit 'em where they ain't.' The bootleg. Why give the upcoming opponent the advantage of knowing how to prepare to beat you by whom you plan to play? I say, keep 'em in the dark. Just part of the game."

Ed McJay shares my opinion.

"Good points on withholding info on starting QB's. In the Buffalo Bills case, who cares? It's not like their decision was between defending against a great scrambling, throwing QB as opposed to a non-scrambling drop back passer (six of one, a half dozen of another). Mora, on the other hand, should be held responsible. Not only do you have arguably the most dynamic QB in football, you also have a southpaw which means your general direction for rolling out is the opposite of that of a right handed QB. BIG difference. If you practice all week for a QB who rolls out left then at the last minute end up with one that rolls out predominantly the opposite direction – big difference."

Thanks for the well thought input, gentlemen. Allow me to add another aspect to this discussion. The game is played for the fans, right? Without fans the league wouldn't exist, stadiums wouldn't be built, teams would not have uniforms, and players and coaches would certainly not be paid millions of dollars. Withholding key injury information not only affects opponents, it also affects the fans who participate in

fantasy football leagues, office pools, and various other forms of betting. True, rules shouldn't be written to accommodate such activities, but such fan activities are – for better or worse – a big part of why the NFL is the most successful sports league in this country.

Another fan tradition is to rank teams. Both ESPN and Sports Illustrated publish “power rankings,” and just last week I began my own rankings method using a formula that I devised (and mentioned last week) that weighs a team's record, points scored, points allowed and strength of schedule. Human ranking systems are good because they can take into account such things as injuries to key players and narrow losses to worthy opponents. Formulas are good because they avoid certain human pitfalls like clinging to preconceived notions. Which method is better? I intend to find out by tracking the records of higher vs. lower ranked teams in each system over the course of the season. Look for the tally in the Statistics section of UFR every week, just ahead of the Lock of the Week round-up.

Pittsburgh Steelers (3-2) @ Cincinnati Bengals (5-1)

I'm sure you've already heard all you want to hear about the Steelers this week, so I'll just say one more thing. Ben Roethlisberger will be back for the Steelers this week, and he's never lost to anyone other than the New England Patriots. The Steelers beat the Bengals twice last year thanks to their physical defense and the power running of Jerome Bettis and Deuce Staley.

But things got complicated for Big Ben in his second meeting with the Bengals, and they'll be looking to take that one step further this year now that they've improved in virtually every aspect. Perhaps the most instrumental improvement they've made has been in the turnovers department. Cincinnati has an AFC best +16 turnover ratio, double that of the next closest teams: Jacksonville (+8) and Indianapolis (+8). Coach Marvin Lewis will try to get his Bengals out to a lead that will force Big Ben to make some plays – and hopefully some mistakes – in a comeback effort. The win would give them the kind of momentum they'll need to beat the Packers and Ravens and then emerge from their bye week well rested with an 8-1 record that would make them virtually impossible to dethrone in the AFC South. Does it sound like I'm getting ahead of myself? Maybe. But I'm sure that Cincinnati head coach Marvin Lewis has thought about that scenario and is using every known motivational tool to make sure his squad is as prepared and pumped up as an NFL team can be come game time. *The fans will be raucous, too, so I'll pick Carson Palmer, the Johnsons and the **Bengals** to justify their early success with a huge divisional win.*

San Diego Chargers (3-3) @ Philadelphia Eagles (3-2)

For the Eagles, the bye week couldn't have come at a better time. All the talk about playing through the pain sounded great when they beat the Raiders and the Chiefs with second half comebacks, but things looked pretty ugly two weeks ago in their loss to the Cowboys. Now that they've had two weeks to heal, rest up and prepare for the Chargers you'd think that I'd be confident in their ability to win at home. But the truth is that I've been very disappointed with the Eagles all season. After winning the NFC last year, they opened their season with a loss to Atlanta. Sure they bounced back to blow out the 49ers in San Francisco the next week, but they followed that dubious honor with the aforementioned wins that required late-game heroics from Donovan McNabb paired with late-game ineptitude from their opponents. In fact, the Eagles haven't beaten a team with a winning record and have lost to both winning teams they've played. They rank 19th in overall defense. Where is that speedy and physical defense that intimidated quarterbacks last season? They rank 32nd – *last in the league!* – in rushing offense. Where is the running game that kept pressure of McNabb and opened things up for Terrell Owens last year? Coach Andy Reid had better have found some magical potion to regenerate those missing ingredients or the Eagles and their fans will soon realize that the Super Bowl is once again nothing but a dream in Philadelphia.

The first six weeks of the season have been a nightmare for the Chargers. They have the league's second highest strength of schedule score (+8) and have still managed to score more points than any other team. They've averaged 8.3 points per game more than their opponents, but their record is 3-3 and they're only in third place in the AFC West behind the Broncos and Chiefs. That must mean that their defense is bad, right? Well, their run defense is the third best in the league, but that 27th ranked pass defense that's dragging them down. I will cut them some slack for having played against some of the league's best passing quarterbacks, and I'll also consider that they had such huge leads against the Giants, Patriots and Raiders that those teams all but abandoned the running game. The Chargers lost by four points to the Cowboys in Week 1, by three points to the Broncos in Week 2 and by two points to the Steelers in Week 5. Does that mean that they'll lose by one point to the Eagles this week? I don't think so. *The **Chargers** will win using a heavy dose of LaDainian Tomlinson, Drew Brees and Antonio Gates.*

Denver Broncos (5-1) @ New York Giants (3-2)

That was a close one for the Giants in Dallas, but I honestly think it was only that close because letting the opposition hang around at the end of games (or even win) has become a habit for the Cowboys. The good news for Tom Coughlin's boys is that despite giving being out-gained 385 yards to 270 yards, and despite managing just 11 first downs to Dallas's 25, and despite converting just a single, solitary third down while allowing the Cowboys to convert nine of them – despite all those shortcomings – the game came down to an overtime coin toss. Yes, I honestly believe that the Giants would have won if they would have won the coin toss. They had just scored a touchdown on a two-play drive to tie the game, and the drive before that (a 12-play beauty) had been stymied at the Dallas 1 yard line when rookie running back Brandon Jacobs fumbled away his first and only carry of the game. I had picked the Cowboys, so I was partially glad to see them win on their first possession in overtime. Simultaneously, however, I was reminded why I so greatly dislike the NFL's overtime system. But I refuse to let that get me down.

Instead, I'll thank the Broncos – coaching staff, players, trainers, ball boys, everyone! – for making me look like a savant. I've awarded "Best Use of UFR" prizes in the past, and I can't think of a better time to hand out another. OK, I realize that the Patriots didn't have Corey Dillon healthy enough to play and help them with their running game, but I am still thrilled to see a good defense execute a game plan the way the Broncos did last Sunday. Their pressure on Tom Brady may not have resulted in any sacks, but it did unsettle him to the point of throwing the ball at his receivers' feet on many occasions. The result was a very un-Brady-like completion percentage of 52.2%. Meanwhile, the Broncos racked up 178 rushing yards that allowed Jake Plummer to complete 70.8% of his passes for 262 yards, two touchdowns and (very importantly) zero interceptions.

The Giants (with an SOS score of -7) have been impressive only in wins over lowly opponents, while Denver has won five straight games over these respectable opponents: San Diego by 3, Kansas City by 10, at Jacksonville by 13, Washington by 2 and New England by 8. *This week it'll be **Broncos** by 10.*

Dallas Cowboys (4-2) @ Seattle Seahawks (4-2)

Other than their interestingly lopsided victory over the Eagles, the Cowboys have been in close games every week. They even required a late touchdown to beat the lowly 49ers and followed that up with a loss to the Raiders. You just finished reading about how they outplayed the Giants in every aspect but still required overtime dispatch them, so you won't be surprised or offended – I hope – if jump right to the...

Seahawks. If you look up the term in a football dictionary, here's what you'll find:

\Sea" hawk\ Noun. A jager gull.

I looked up the word jager. It means "a hunter" or "a sportsman." How fitting! The Seahawks happen to be sportsmen who are in the hunt for the Super Bowl. In fact, they've been hunting for the Super Bowl for quite some time now. Last year was supposed to be their year, but they didn't live up to the hype. This year there is no hype, but they're still in the hunt atop the NFC West. I'll walk you through the way I've drawn my conclusion about the Seahawks. Ready? OK. Good teams beat other good teams when they're at home. The Hawks beat the Falcons at home. Good teams humiliate bad teams when they're at home. The Hawks blew out both the Cardinals and the Texans at home. Good teams play tough enough on the road against good teams to win 30-50% of the games they play away from home (the *great* ones win upwards of 50-70%). The Hawks lost at the Jaguars and in overtime at the Redskins, but they managed to beat the division rival Rams in St. Louis. *That all adds up to the **Seahawks** making the grade required to be a good team, and I think they're good enough to send the Cowboys home with a loss.*

New York Jets (2-4) @ Atlanta Falcons (4-2)

Vinny Testaverde looked great in his first game with the Jets two weeks ago when he helped knock the Buccaneers from the ranks of the unbeaten, but last week in Buffalo he just looked old and slow. Vinny completed just 46.2% of his passes and threw two interceptions while getting sacked five times. Things will only get worse now that his starting center Kevin Mawae is expected to miss the rest of the season with a torn tricep muscle. The Jets also have key injuries on defense. Linebacker Eric Barton and cornerback Ty Law are among those listed as "questionable." The loss of such smart and speedy players will be felt even more this week as the Jets attempt the nearly impossible: smothering Michael Vick.

Vick was himself in San Antonio last week. He didn't have a stellar completion percentage or a high passing yardage total, but he did throw a touchdown pass (and an interception) and he did run 8 times for 51 yards. I saw a highlight of the Falcons trapped near their own goal line. Vick scrambled right, spun around and then scrambled to the left. He was brought down hard and appeared to hurt his knee, but he

re-entered the game soon thereafter and had the legs to scramble for a first down on the drive that ultimately won the game for the Falcons. Much has been made of the holding penalty that gave Atlanta kicker Todd Peterson a second chance at the game-winning field goal that he'd just missed wide left, but everything I saw indicates that the officials called it by the book and the Falcons won fair and square. Perhaps New Orleans coach Jim Haslett – instead of saying publicly cursing the call – should have acknowledged that the Falcons simply did a better job of taking advantage of their opponent's mistakes.

That's the same kind of acknowledgement that Atlanta coach Jim Mora will have to make if he doesn't address the flaws in his defensive scheme that allowed the Saints to put up 211 rushing yards even though their starting running back was injured. Curtis Martin proved that he's still a marquis running back when he ran for 148 yards on the Bills, so stopping him should be the main focus for Atlanta this week. *My gut tells me that the **Falcons** won't have the same kind of trouble at home against the Jets that they had with the division rival Saints on the road.*

Up The Gut

- Detroit (2-3) @ Cleveland (2-3): The Lions are depressed over letting the Panthers come from behind and beat them at home. The **Browns** are at home and angry over being dominated by the Ravens.
- Green Bay (1-4) @ Minnesota (1-4): "Pick the home team in division rivalries! Pick against Brett Favre on artificial turf!" Shut up, voices in my head, I'm picking the **Packers** no matter what you say.
- Indianapolis (6-0) @ Houston (0-5): Danger! Danger! Beware the divisional road favorite! It usually screams upset-in-the-making, but I can't see the Texans getting their first win against the **Colts**.
- Kansas City (3-2) @ Miami (2-3): This one could end in overtime if the Dolphins play their best, but if they don't – aw, heck... even if they do – I'll pick the **Chiefs** to find a way to win.
- New Orleans (2-4) @ St. Louis (2-4): The Saints have felt like they've gotten the short end of the stick all season, so it's coach Haslett's job to make sure that the "us against the world" mentality doesn't turn into the kind of loathing that can eat away at a team's competitive spirit. If the **Saints** can somehow focus and block out their frustration and disappointment, they just might manage to take advantage of the Bulger-less Rams and come away with a much-needed road victory.
- San Francisco (1-4) @ Washington (3-2): The **Redskins** have always had the defense to stay in games, but now they have the offense to win them. The 49ers are too banged up to make it close.
- Baltimore (2-3) @ Chicago (2-3): Thomas Jones was upgraded on Sunday morning last week and cost me a pick, so I'll hope he's healthy enough this week to once again get a win for **Da Bears**.
- Buffalo (3-3) @ Oakland (1-4): Oakland's Randy Moss will miss this one with a rib injury, so I'll pick Kelly Holcomb and the **Bills** to not only win their third straight game but also to take sole possession of first place in the AFC East. Wow! I never would have thought I'd write that sentence this season.
- Tennessee (2-4) @ Arizona (1-4): The Titans tried to sway me with their tough play against the Bengals, but I'm still going with my "pick the **Cardinals** at home over mediocre teams" philosophy.
- Bye Week: Carolina (4-2), Jacksonville (4-2), New England (3-3), Tampa Bay (5-1)

Statistics

- I was just a Jeff Reed field goal shy of going 5-0 in my featured games last week. In the end, though, I went 4-1 in my featured games with an overall record of 10-4. My season total now stands at 52-36 (59.09%), and my all-time record is 343-205 (62.59%).
- UFR Formula: 10-4; Dr. Z's Power Rankings on SI.com: 9-5; ESPN.com Power Rankings: 9-5
- Last week's locks were Atlanta (-4.5), Seattle (-9.5) and Indianapolis (-13.5).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 2-1 last week (59-58-3 all-time). Indy recovered from a first quarter lapse to blow out the Rams, but the Falcons allowed the Saints to hang around and didn't cover the spread.

Week 7 Locks

Indianapolis (-14.5)
Washington (-12)
Denver (+2)

Keys

Just be yourselves.
Just let Brunell and Portis do their thing. The 49ers can't keep up.
Let's compare SOS scores. Denver: +3. NY Giants: -7.

Standings

AFC East

Buffalo (3-3)
New England (3-3)
Miami (2-3)
N.Y. Jets (2-4)

AFC North

Cincinnati (5-1)
Pittsburgh (3-2)
Baltimore (2-3)
Cleveland (2-3)

AFC South

Indianapolis (6-0)
Jacksonville (4-2)
Tennessee (2-4)
Houston (0-5)

AFC West

Denver (5-1)
Kansas City (3-2)
San Diego (3-3)
Oakland (1-4)

NFC East

Dallas (4-2)
N.Y. Giants (3-2)
Philadelphia (3-2)
Washington (3-2)

NFC North

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

NFC South

Tampa Bay (5-1)
Atlanta (4-2)
Carolina (4-2)
New Orleans (2-4)

NFC West

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