

## THE MANE MAN-NING

*Mufasa.*

*\*shudder\**

*say it again...*

*Moo-FASSA!*

*\*SHUDDDDDER\**

Eli Manning.

What? No shudder? While his name (an open invitation to defenses last year) doesn't yet carry with it the same fear factor as his older brother Peyton's does, Eli's performances this season have certainly caught the attention of defensive coordinators around the league. The most impressive victory of his young career was capped last Sunday afternoon by a game-tying two yard touchdown pass that Amani Toomer caught with five seconds on the clock. The extra point by Jay Feely made it 24-23 and instantly vaulted the Giants out of the ranks of the "pretty good teams who haven't beaten a team with a winning record."

Eli's two yard toss didn't break any records, and it wasn't the kind of throw that makes your jaw drop, but it *was* the kind of pass that great quarterbacks complete in the final seconds when a game, a season or The Game is on the line. It was a pass that some might have called ill-advised. Eli was back-pedaling and sidestepping with blitzing Broncos safety John Lynch just a fraction of a second from sacking him for a nail-in-the-coffin loss when he ducked his head, extended his arm and flipped his wrist. The ball spiraled toward a crowd of foes in the end zone. "Interception!" I exclaimed. It had been a miserable day of results for UFR, so I was hoping the Broncos would throw me a bone by stifling the Giants' comeback.

With just 10 seconds on the clock when the ball was snapped, I expected Eli to either throw a quick pass or throw the ball out of bounds to stop the clock. The quick throw didn't happen, and then Eli's off-balance pass wasn't nearly high enough to be intentionally thrown out of bounds. I reached for my pencil to circle the X next to *Denver Broncos* on my tracking sheet when the shriek of "touchdown!" from my surround sound speakers snapped my head up in time to see the exultant Toomer emerge, ball in hand, from a sea of white jerseys. "What the...? How did he...?" I wondered. I hadn't even seen Toomer running across the end zone, and after replaying it a couple of times with my TiVo I was still amazed that Eli spotted his target and completed his pass despite the inevitable shot from the blitzing Broncos safety John Lynch. Thinking back on it now as I write this, I know that the coach wouldn't have called such a slow-developing play with 10 seconds left in the game, meaning that Toomer couldn't have been Eli's primary target. He must have been the second or even third option on the play, and that means Eli recognized that he had beaten his defender even though the end zone was crowded with Broncos defenders.

That kind of confidence, presence of mind (commonly called game sense) and ability to succeed under extreme pressure are traits possessed by champions. He's not nearly a champion yet. In fact – if you'll allow me to continue with my Lion King theme – Eli is still a cub working on his roar, but if he continues to play at this high level he won't have to wait long to be king. I'm not sounding the trumpets for the coronation yet, but it's safe to say that Eli is now a Manning in his own right.

### Washington Redskins (4-2) @ New York Giants (4-2)

Not only is this a match-up between two good teams with good records, it's also a divisional game that could play a big part in deciding the NFC East. The Giants are already 0-1 in the division and can't afford a let-down after last week's dramatic comeback victory over the Broncos. Tom Coughlin has to be concerned that his team has given up a lot of yardage (411.8 yards per game – 31<sup>st</sup> in the league) and a lot of points (22.8 points per game – 24<sup>th</sup> in the league). That's especially concerning since...

The Redskins seem to have traded in their arrows for muskets in the off season. OK, I'm sorry; that wasn't very PC, but it did nicely illustrate Washington's dramatic rise from 30<sup>th</sup> in total offense last year to 2<sup>nd</sup> in the league so far this year. Led by Mark Brunell and Clinton Portis – and combined with the league's 4<sup>th</sup> stingiest defense – the Redskins have had one of the league's most impressive starts. Don't make the mistake of discounting their offensive success because of the strength of opponents such as the lowly 49ers. Their SOS score is a respectable +5, and Week 2 win in Dallas has given them a 1-0 record in their division. With Philadelphia battling injuries and having to travel to frigid Denver this week, the Redskins are in position to take an early lead in the race for the NFC East title.

I've thought long and hard about this pick. I'm trying to decide if I should follow my guideline of picking the home team in divisional games or if I should go with the statistics. The Redskins rank higher than the Giants in every statistical category with one major exception – the Giants have a +9 turnover margin while

the Redskins' margin is -6. The interesting thing about that statistic is that both teams have turned the ball over 10 times, but the Giants have obviously done a much better job of creating turnovers. Just when I'm about to pick the Giants, however, a little voice in my head reminds me that their opponents (excluding Denver) have a combined turnover margin of -22 while the Redskins' opponents (again, excluding Denver) have a combined turnover margin of -6. How much credit should the Giants get for beating teams that are so willing to cough up the ball? Do they get more points for beating the Broncos by one point at home than the Redskins get for coming within a two-point conversion of overtime in Denver? Clearly I'm conflicted over this one, so I'm going to hesitantly inch my way out onto a limb and say that the Giants are due for a let-down against a team that will smack them in the mouth for four quarters and won't let them come back like they did against the Broncos. Did I really? *Yes, I just picked the **Redskins** on the road.*

#### Philadelphia Eagles (4-2) @ Denver Broncos (5-2)

The Eagles are lucky that the Chargers are unlucky. Sure they held LaDainian Tomlinson to seven yards rushing on 17 carries and did a pretty good job of frustrating Antonio Gates, but they still needed a blocked field goal returned for a touchdown (by Matt Ware) to win beat San Diego. It would be a mistake for coach Andy Reid to get too excited about holding the Chargers to 21 total rushing yards since his own team managed to rush for just 24. If his team continues to trail the entire league (by a lot) in rushing yardage, Donovan McNabb will not be healthy enough to play for much longer. McNabb has been banged up all season and last week set a franchise record for completions with 35, but in order to do that he had to throw the ball 54 times. He had success against the league's 29<sup>th</sup> ranked pass defense and he may think that he'll have similar success this week against the 26<sup>th</sup> ranked pass defense, but that is not an assumption he should make.

The Broncos may have given up a lot of passing yards to Eli Manning in New York, but the air at Mile High gives the Broncos a distinct home field advantage. Jake Plummer is used to throwing in thin, cold air but that isn't always the case for visiting quarterbacks. The Broncos have one of the league's best run defenses and know that the Eagles have been an inept running team, so they'll concentrate on disrupting Philly's passing game and making McNabb and his receivers hurt as much as possible. Expect Denver's defensive players to be speedy and expect them to hit hard. *Expect the **Broncos** to rebound and win.*

#### Kansas City Chiefs (4-2) @ San Diego Chargers (3-4)

Should the Broncos lose to the Eagles, and should the Chiefs beat the Chargers, we might be forced to report a crime in the AFC West. Why? The Kansas City Chiefs would be on top of the division thanks to a favorable schedule that has seen them face just three opponents with winning records (their current SOS score is 0), and it doesn't figure to get much harder. Of their remaining 10 games, the Chiefs will face only four teams that currently have a winning record. Meanwhile the Chargers have played one more game since they haven't yet had their bye week, and they've played one of the league's hardest schedules. Having faced just one opponent with a losing record, their SOS score is +8 and could go even higher since they play five of their remaining nine games against winning teams. You won't hear the Chiefs making any apologies, though. They remember the way the Chargers took advantage of a weak schedule last season on the way to an 11-4 record and the playoffs.

"OK, Art, thank you for that lovely information, but what about *this game?!*"

I hear you. Well, the Chiefs got the best of both worlds last week when their game was moved from Sunday to Friday. The Dolphins were forced to play without some injured players who might have been ready by game time if they'd been given another two days to heal. By Saturday morning the Chiefs were back in Kansas City enjoying a couple of days of rest before beginning to prepare for the Chargers. Will the extra rest make a difference? I believe it could. The Chargers played a physically punishing game in Philadelphia and returned home not only physically battered but also emotionally drained after dramatically surrendering a 17-10 lead late in the fourth quarter. Their injury list contains 10 players who are listed as questionable for this week's contest. Among the walking wounded on offense: kicker Nate Kaeding, tight end Antonio Gates, center Nick Hardwick, guard Mike Goff and tackle Roman Oben. Yikes! That list contains the heart of their running game, the keys to their pass protection and their kicker. But the list goes on: linebackers Donnie Edwards, Steve Foley and Randall Godfrey and corner backs Drayton Florence and Sammy Davis are also listed as questionable. I don't think their injuries will hold them all out of the game, but I'm sure the San Diego coaching and training staff wishes their players had an extra two days to heal up for the game. After all, their opponent is well rested and basically injury-free.

The Chiefs were supposed to have an improved defense this year to go with last year's most productive offense, but through their first six games the Chiefs are giving up just 18 yards less per game than they

did a year ago. Even though they're going up against a banged up team in San Diego, that propensity for giving up yardage could end up catching up with them. The Chargers have had all week to hear about the way the Eagles held LaDainian Tomlinson to just seven yards on 17 carries, so they will be fired up and eager to show their home crowd that they are indeed one of the top teams in the league. *I'm a little concerned by their injury list but in this modern era of misdirection through injury reports it is easier for me to assume that many of those players will be on the field on Sunday when the **Chargers** win at home for the first time over a month.*

#### Jacksonville Jaguars (4-2) @ St. Louis Rams (3-4)

I'm not conflicted over this pick at all, but I wanted to make it a featured game because of an interesting statistic that I came across. Coming off their bye week and boasting a winning record despite having played the hardest schedule in the league so far (their SOS score is +15), the Jaguars are now looking forward to a closing stretch in which they face just one winning team before the end of the season. That game will take place on December 11<sup>th</sup> when they host the Colts. If they can win all their other games (and they should), the Jaguars just might have a chance at the division title on that Sunday in December. First things first, though. *The **Jaguars** are healthy and rested and should beat the Rams this Sunday.*

#### Buffalo Bills (3-4) @ New England Patriots (3-3)

It's time for the Patriots to prove a bunch of people right... or wrong. Many online "power rankings" still have New England ranked higher than such winning teams as Carolina, Washington, Kansas City and Dallas. In fact, every major rankings site (www.si.com, www.espn.com, cbs.sportsline.com) has the Patriots perched higher than two of the teams that beat them fair and square. I know what they're thinking, "I can't knock a Bill Belichick team too far down in case he pulls another Houdini with third string and practice squad players." I agree to an extent and I do think that the dramatic return of Tedy Bruschi will give them a boost, but I think the Patriots have simply suffered too many injuries to be the same team at any point this season that they were last year.

So, does that mean that I expect the Bills to go into Foxboro and come away with a division win? Quite simply: "No." *I might contemplate the upset if the Bills were the home team and if the **Patriots** weren't coming off their bye week, but I'm not nearly brave enough to pick against a Bill Belichick team that's had two weeks to game plan for a team that was embarrassed by the Oakland Raiders.*

#### Up The Gut

- Arizona (2-4) @ Dallas (4-3): That was a tough loss for the **Cowboys** in Seattle last week, but this is a team that is better than its record and certainly better than last place in the NFC East.
- Chicago (3-3) @ Detroit (3-3): Who will emerge victorious and take control of the NFC North? I like Jeff Garcia's Lions but I don't like them enough to overlook the **Chicago** defense and running game.
- Cleveland (2-4) @ Houston (0-6): I said at the beginning of the season that Trent Dilfer wasn't the answer for the Browns at quarterback. This week he'll prove it by giving the **Texans** their first win.
- Green Bay (1-5) @ Cincinnati (5-2): The **Bengals** proved they're soft against the run, but a lot of teams can look that way against the Steelers. They won't look soft against the Packers this week.
- Minnesota (2-4) @ Carolina (4-2): Despite coming off their bye, the **Panthers** still have an extensive injury list that contains key players, but they should still be able to squeak out a win over the Vikings.
- Oakland (2-4) @ Tennessee (2-5): Is the return of QB Steve McNair from injury and RB Travis Henry from a substance abuse suspension enough for the **Titans** to win at home? I honestly don't know.
- Miami (2-4) @ New Orleans (2-5): I'd love to pick the Saints since this game is in Baton Rouge in front of home state fans, but playing at LSU is also a homecoming for Dolphins coach Nick Saban. The Dolphins need to improve after playing horrendously against the Chiefs last week, so they'll try to take advantage of the fact that the Saints give up 28.7 points per game and have one of the league's worst run defenses. The Saints also have an extensive injury list that contains most of their key players, but they still managed to jump out to a 14 point lead in St. Louis last week and came within a couple of mistakes of holding on to win. I thought about picking the Dolphins to finally put something together, but the more I think about it the more I get the feeling that the **Saints** will find a way to win.
- Tampa Bay (5-1) @ San Francisco (1-5): The 49ers traded Tim Rattay to the Buccaneers who lost Brian Griese for the rest of the season, but it will be Chris Simms at quarterback for the Bucs this week. Alex Smith is also injured, so the 49ers will be starting Ken Dorsey. This one will come down to defense and the running game. I expect the **Buccaneers** to dominate both categories and win easily.
- Baltimore (2-4) @ Pittsburgh (4-2): The Ravens will be without Ray Lewis and Ed Reed which is unfortunate since they're playing against the **Steelers** on Monday Night. Can you say blowout?

➤ Bye Week: Atlanta (5-2), N.Y. Jets (2-5), Indianapolis (7-0), Seattle (5-2)

### Statistics

- I went 2-3 in my featured games last week with an overall record of 7-7. My season total now stands at 59-43 (57.84%), and my all-time record is 350-212 (62.28%).
- UFR Formula: 7-7; Dr. Z's Power Rankings on SI.com: 8-6; ESPN.com Power Rankings: 8-6
- Last week's locks were Indianapolis (-14.5), Washington (-12) and Denver (+2).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 3-0 last week (62-58-3 all-time). The Broncos lost but only by one point, so they just managed to avoid spoiling this year's first perfect weekend for my Locks.

### Week 8 Locks

Cincinnati (-7.5)  
Tampa Bay (-10)  
Pittsburgh (-8.5)

### Keys

Can be beaten on the ground, but the Packers can't run without Ahman Green.  
Best D in the league + the return of "Cadillac" Williams = victory.  
Run. Force turnovers. Run. Pass. Run, run, run.

### Standings

#### AFC East

New England (3-3)  
Buffalo (3-4)  
Miami (2-4)  
N.Y. Jets (2-5)

#### NFC East

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

#### AFC North

Cincinnati (5-2)  
Pittsburgh (4-2)  
Baltimore (2-4)  
Cleveland (2-4)

#### NFC North

Chicago (3-3)  
Detroit (3-3)  
Minnesota (2-4)  
Green Bay (1-5)

#### AFC South

Indianapolis (7-0)  
Jacksonville (4-2)  
Tennessee (2-5)  
Houston (0-6)

#### NFC South

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

#### AFC West

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

#### NFC West

Seattle (5-2)  
St. Louis (3-4)  
Arizona (2-4)  
San Francisco (1-5)