

OFF TO THE RACES

I realize that I may be risking the wrath of whichever football god mandated that every article this week should focus on how inspired the Giants were by the passing of Wellington Mara, but that's a risk I'm willing to take. The way the Broncos ran away from the defending NFC champion Eagles got me to thinking about the playoffs, so since most teams have completed half of their season I've decided to examine the league for its best playoff prospects and those who could rise from the mire to rule the roost.

AFC East: Though the defending champion Patriots are on top, they're still only one game over .500 and are having a hard time on both offense and defense because of injuries. The Dolphins and Bills are both capable squads, but I think they're both too young and prone to mistakes to be around come playoff time. The Jets had all kinds of potential, but losing their offensive line is lethal for any quarterback they choose.

AFC North: The last couple of weeks have given us plenty of reasons to doubt the Bengals. They're currently 1-1 in the division with 4 of their next 5 games coming against division opponents. The other game in that stretch is against the Colts, so I'd consider the Bengals a contender if they can go 3-2 and head into Week 15 at Detroit with a 9-4 record. The bad news for Cincinnati fans is that the Steelers are 2-0 in the division and face only 3 winning teams in their remaining games. The Ravens played well on Monday night, but I doubt they've improved enough to come back from 2-5 to make the playoffs.

AFC South: Can anyone catch the Colts? I used to think the Jaguars had a shot at it, but after the way they sputtered and died in St. Louis last week I've given the division to Peyton Manning & Co. The Jags still have plenty to play for, though. They need to finish strong if they hope to secure a wildcard berth.

AFC West: The Broncos are looking very intimidating at home, but they've shown weakness on the road. That could pose a problem as they play 5 of their remaining 8 games away from Mile High. That would be good news for the Chiefs and Chargers if it weren't for the fact that they, too, have extremely difficult schedules ahead of them. The Raiders appear to be on the verge, but they'll likely finish the season that way (and, I suspect, with a 7-9 record at best). The team that wins the AFC West, probably the Broncos, will probably be the most battle-tested, but it remains to be seen if that will mean they are stronger or just physically exhausted come playoff time.

NFC East: This one's a doozy. No team in the NFC East will have a losing record at the half-way mark, so the division is up for grabs. The Cowboys have the best division record so far, but the Giants are really starting to show their strength. The Eagles appear to have fallen apart, and the Redskins proved too easy to shut down in last week's loss to the Giants. Unfortunately for the Cowboys, their remaining schedule includes just one game against a team with a losing record (Week 11 vs. Detroit). Things aren't much easier for the Giants, but they'll probably be 7-2 (after beating San Francisco and Minnesota) when they go through their season-defining stretch (Philadelphia, at Seattle, Dallas, at Philadelphia, Kansas City). UFR predicts that – barring serious injuries – the Giants will emerge at 10-4 and will win the division.

NFC North: Technically, no team is out of it in this division – even the 1-6 Packers – but the race for the title seems to be between the Bears and Lions. I hate to think that an 8-8 team could make the playoffs as a division winner (even though it's likely), so I'll pick the Bears to trump the trash and end up at 9-7.

NFC South: While the NFC East is stealing all the “most competitive division in the league” glory, the NFC South is flying under the radar with three 5-2 teams. The Panthers were the media darlings before the season started, and after a slow start they've now begun to justify the hype. The Falcons are what most would call “a shaky 5-2,” but their record seems much more justified after the way the Buccaneers lost to the 49ers in San Francisco. But Atlanta fans should hold in those jeers and sneers. If Mike Vick suffers a serious injury like Tampa Bay's Brian Griese did, the Falcons could be in the same boat. If Vick can stay healthy, though, the Falcons should finish 12-4 ahead of the Panthers who may wind up 10-6 at best.

NFC West: Once again, this division will belong to either the Seahawks or Rams. Injury problems and a shaky coaching situation will keep the Rams at or below .500, so I expect the Seahawks to win the division with an inflated 11-5 record and then lose to Dallas or Carolina in the first round of the playoffs.

Before getting to the games, let's dip into the...

Mailbag

Vern Edwards is sick of holding penalties on kick returns.

"I would think that coaches could find a way to teach return teams to reduce what seems like a 50% likelihood that holding will be called, negating some substantial returns. Just now, one team got called for holding while calling for a fair catch. Seems inefficient to me."

Vern, I'm also sick of holding on kick returns. The standard excuse is that blockers on special teams have their backs to the runner and can't see when he changes direction. The truth is that special teams players are usually the second and third string players at other positions, and they change from week to week depending on injuries. Coaching a constantly changing group of guys whose specialty is something else is a hard thing to do. Coaches hate holding, but since it happens far more frequently than it's caught – even on those "penalty-free" returns – I suspect they'll take the odds on the risk vs. the reward.

What's the best way to fix the problem? I think it would have to be increasing the allowable size of active rosters (and salary caps) so that coaches can have more players available for such specialized tasks.

Philadelphia Eagles (4-3) @ Washington Redskins (4-3)

The Eagles are the only team in the NFC East that doesn't have a victory over a division opponent, so a loss to the Redskins would put them in an early hole in the race for the division title. While normally that would be enough for me to give a talented team the edge, I'm extremely reluctant to put any faith in the Eagles after watching them give up 49 points to the Broncos last week. The Redskins, however, gave me even more pause by failing to score even a single point against the Giants. So, which is it, Art? Which team will bounce back and give its playoff hopes the most life? *I'm going to have to go with the **Redskins**, and I'll tell you why.* They could have scored on the Giants if they had been content to surrender the game and just kick field goals for the sake of erasing the goose egg from the scoreboard. Instead, they went for touchdowns and fourth downs and (even though the lopsided 36-0 final score doesn't prove it) played valiantly on defense right until the end, forcing the Giants to kick five field goals. The Redskins will be highly motivated and will be playing in front of their home crowd where they're 3-0 so far. The Eagles are banged up, demoralized, 1-3 on the road and 1-2 against NFC opponents. *I'll stick with my pick.*

Indianapolis Colts (7-0) @ New England Patriots (4-3)

I was uneasy picking against the Patriots last week, so I didn't. But the Colts are not the Bills. They are the league's only undefeated team, the owners of the league's stingiest defenses and one of the league's most explosive offenses, and they are rested and virtually injury-free coming off their bye week. If that's not enough, the Colts are also extremely motivated to finally get a win over the team that has stood in their Super Bowl path so frequently over the last four years. *I wish I could say that Bill Belichick will find a way to make it close, but I honestly think the **Colts** will dominate the Patriots in every way imaginable.*

Oakland Raiders (3-4) @ Kansas City Chiefs (4-3)

From a simple glance at the scoring summary one would not guess that the Titans deserved to beat the Raiders last Sunday, but watching the game left me with a distinct feeling that the Titans had given away a game they had every chance to win. An extra point was missed. A lame blocking out of bounds penalty annulled a Pacman Jones touchdown off a punt return. A two point conversion pass was dropped. And then Jones struck again – or rather, he didn't. Trailing 27-25, the Titans just needed to force the Raiders to punt so they could have a chance to win the game with a field goal. But any hope of a comeback faded when Jones, apparently attempting a tackle, gave Oakland wide receiver Jerry Porter a love tap and his blessing before watching Porter run 44 yards to the end zone. The Raiders should not expect the Chiefs to treat this as a "two hand touch" game. Not only is this an old division rivalry, it's also Kansas City's first home game in three weeks and a chance to stay ahead of San Diego in the AFC West. *The **Chiefs** beat the Raiders in Oakland back in Week 2, so I expect them to complete the sweep at home this week.*

Carolina Panthers (5-2) @ Tampa Bay Buccaneers (5-2)

The Panthers and Buccaneers faced similarly lowly teams last week, but the results were drastically different. The Panthers humiliated the Vikings while on the opposite coast the Bucs managed to lose to the worst team in the NFC. Based on that alone I should pick the Panthers and move on, but this is a division game that could play a huge part in determining who wins the NFC South. I have to believe that Tampa Bay head coach Jon "Chucky" Gruden will at least have his defense in better form for such an important game. Gruden sent defensive end Simeon Rice home before the San Francisco game as punishment for violating an undisclosed team rule, and it may have cost him the game. Rice will be back

in the lineup and fired up this Sunday, but that may not matter if the Buccaneers can't get reliable passing from Chris Simms. To keep the game's outcome out of his young quarterback's hands, Gruden might try to use a high percentage of running plays, but that could be hard against Carolina's 2nd ranked run defense. *I'm leery of picking against an angry home team with a winning record and a good defense, but I'm still going to pick the **Panthers** to extend their winning streak to an NFC-best five games.*

Atlanta Falcons (5-2) @ Miami Dolphins (3-4)

"A mind is a terrible thing to use," I thought to myself on Sunday as I recorded Miami's 21-6 victory in my results tracking notebook. In last week's UFR I had written two lines picking the Dolphins to beat the Saints on the strength of their running game and based on the fact that the Saints were playing yet another "home" game that required them to get on an airplane. Just before posting my column, however, I held down the delete key and, through eight wishy-washy lines, publicly convinced myself to pick the Saints. Was I hoping for an inspirational victory that would give me another chance to write something nice about the way Jim Haslett's men respond when asked to inspire their demoralized fans? Maybe, but that's no excuse for crossing out my initial pick. Do I seem a bit upset? Pardon me, then. It's just that I didn't just do that once last week. No. I did it three times! So here I sit, writing this week's column while occasionally shooting irritated glances at those crossed out X's next to New York Giants, Oakland Raiders and Miami Dolphins. Oh, right. I have to pick someone. *The Mike Vick **Falcons** will win.*

Up The Gut

Now sans second-guessing!

- Cincinnati (6-2) @ Baltimore (2-5): The Ravens made it close in Pittsburgh by stuffing the run and forcing turnovers, but they lived by the passing game and still turned the ball over themselves. The Bengals run and pass extremely well and have the league's highest turnover margin. The Ravens may play tough again, but they'll turn the ball over too many times to beat the **Bengals**.
- Detroit (3-4) @ Minnesota (2-5): The loss of Daunte Culpepper means the Vikings will now fail to protect a quarterback who can't take the abuse. Ouch! The **Lions** get Charles Rogers back, too.
- Houston (1-6) @ Jacksonville (4-3): Last year the Texans beat the Jaguars 20-6 at home and 21-0 in Jacksonville. Ouch! The **Jags** will rebound from last week's loss while avenging that embarrassment.
- San Diego (4-4) @ NY Jets (2-5): It looks like Vinny Testaverde will start again for the Jets following their bye week. Bad idea. The **Chargers** know they're better than their 4-4 record and they'll prove it.
- Tennessee (2-6) @ Cleveland (2-5): Beware the bad team that lost to a worse team and returns home to play a bad team. OK, that's not a rule, but it's reason enough for me to pick the **Browns**.
- Chicago (4-3) @ New Orleans (2-6): The **Bears** have won three straight! Alert the media! Oh, they already know? Right. Do they know that the Saints have lost four straight? Really? *Know-it-alls!*
- NY Giants (5-2) @ San Francisco (2-5): First let me congratulate Mike Nolan and the San Francisco 49ers for putting together the best effort they possibly could have against the team with the best record in the NFC. The lowly Niners put up 158 yards rushing on the league's top ranked run defense, held the Buccaneers to 43 yards on the ground and snagged two interceptions. The 49ers found a way to win despite getting just 50 passing yards from two guys – Ken Dorsey and Cody Pickett – who were the third and fourth string quarterbacks just a couple weeks earlier. Now, five Joe Nedney field goals may have been enough to beat the Bucs, but that won't be nearly enough to topple Eli Manning and America's Team (v2.0). The New York Football **Giants** will win in San Fran.
- Seattle (5-2) @ Arizona (2-5): I'm always very careful when picking against the Cardinals at home. The Seabags reared their ugly heads in Arizona last year, but this year they'll be **Seahawks**.
- Pittsburgh (5-2) @ Green Bay (1-6): Bill Cowher will fix the turnover issues and will get the **Steelers** back on track with their running game, but he'd also better warn his secondary that Brett Favre will be looking to bounce back from his 5 INT game in Cincy. Careful with the blitzes, Cowher... *ya hear?*
- Bye Week: Buffalo (3-5), Dallas (5-3), Denver (6-2), St. Louis (4-4)

I just realized that I've only picked four home teams this week. That's not good considering that an average of 9.5 home teams win every week. Oh, well. I'm not second-guessing myself this week!

Statistics

- I went 3-2 in my featured games last week with an overall record of 9-5. My season total now stands at 68-48 (58.62%), and my all-time record is 359-217 (62.33%).
- UFR Formula: 9-5; Dr. Z's Power Rankings on SI.com: 7-7; ESPN.com Power Rankings: 11-3
- Last week's locks were Cincinnati (-7.5), Tampa Bay (-10) and Pittsburgh (-8.5).

- "Lock of the Week" Update: 0-3 last week (62-61-3 all-time). The Steelers sputtered, the Bengals were uninspiring and the Buccaneers simply flopped. From 3-0 to 0-3 in one week. Ouch!

Week 9 Locks

NY Giants (-10)
Indianapolis (-3)
Kansas City (-4.5)

Keys

Tiki, torch 'em. Manning, maul 'em. Strahan, sack 'em.
Guess who rules the AFC now? Revenge is sweet.
I needed a home team in my locks. The Chiefs inspire the most confidence.

Standings

AFC East

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

AFC North

Cincinnati (6-2)
Pittsburgh (5-2)
Baltimore (2-5)
Cleveland (2-5)

AFC South

Indianapolis (7-0)
Jacksonville (4-3)
Tennessee (2-6)
Houston (1-6)

AFC West

Denver (6-2)
Kansas City (4-3)
San Diego (4-4)
Oakland (3-4)

NFC East

N.Y. Giants (5-2)
Dallas (5-3)
Philadelphia (4-3)
Washington (4-3)

NFC North

Chicago (4-3)
Detroit (3-4)
Minnesota (2-5)
Green Bay (1-6)

NFC South

Atlanta (5-2)
Carolina (5-2)
Tampa Bay (5-2)
New Orleans (2-6)

NFC West

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