

BIRDS OF A DIFFERENT FEATHER

All this news about Terrell Owens over the last week and a half has me humming a song by Louis XIV. The chorus goes like this, "Me-me-me-me is all you say that I care about, and me-me-me-me is all I ever want to talk about." It's a catchy tune that describes T.O.'s attitude to – well – a T. But before we demonize Owens for his me-first words and actions, let's put this all in the correct context. This is the NFL, a league that is in no way a stranger to controversial stars. With such a history of bad-boy stars, I would think that the media would have learned to deal with each scandal objectively.

Instead, they make each controversial story seem like it's the worst of its kind. I've seen and heard other journalists say that Owens should be barred from ever playing in the league because he's a bad teammate and a distraction in the locker room. Online polls even indicate that Owens is less popular with fans than convicted felon Mike Tyson! Such a backlash from the public indicates not that Owens is a more condemnable human being than Tyson but that football fans are easily swayed by the media.

Folks, Terrell Owens may be a loudmouth and a volatile teammate, but he is *not* a criminal. He's not anywhere near as bad as Tyson and not even as bad as another high profile star in the NFL. Have our attention spans been so shortened that we don't remember the Ray Lewis sagas of 2001 and 2005?

In January of 2001 the Ravens beat the Giants 34-7 in Super Bowl XXXV. Their defensive dominance was such that Ray Lewis was named MVP of the Super Bowl. He was generally considered the best all-around athlete in the league, an outstanding honor for a defensive player. But it was not his great skill, confidence or arrogance that made headlines in the months following that Super Bowl victory. And it was not Lewis's continued dominance at his position that once again put him on the front of the sports pages just this summer. Need a refresher? Here you go:

January 2000

Ray Lewis, the Super Bowl MVP for the Baltimore Ravens, was charged with murdering Richard Lollar and Jacinth Baker after the fatal Jan. 31 street fight that erupted after a post-Super Bowl party. –AP.01

NFL star Ray Lewis pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor today under an agreement that drops murder charges in the stabbing deaths of two men outside a Super Bowl party. Defense attorney Ed Garland said Lewis' only crime was to tell his companions after the brawl that led to the deaths, "Keep your mouth shut," and giving an incomplete statement to police. The NFL said Lewis might be fined but will not be suspended. –AP.03

Ray Lewis was fined \$250,000 by the NFL for obstructing an Atlanta police investigation of a double murder after the Super Bowl. The fine is believed to be the largest ever levied by the NFL against a player other than in cases involving substance abuse. "When an NFL player engages in and admits to misconduct of the type to which Mr. Lewis has pled here, the biggest losers are thousands of other NFL players, present, past and future," said NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue. "Such admitted misconduct clearly contributes to the negative stereotyping of NFL players." –AP.02

January 2001

Ray Lewis handled media day in the same fashion in which he plays football: confident, defiant and always in control. He chuckled at some questions, and danced around some of the questions regarding his ordeal in Atlanta. "The real truth is this was never about those two kids that were dead in the street. This is about Ray Lewis, and that's not right," he said. "Don't be mad at me." Then Lewis tried to change the subject. "We need to go somewhere else," he said. –AP.04

October 2005

Ray Lewis spent four months in jail this summer and two months in a halfway house for using a cellular phone to facilitate a cocaine deal. –USAToday.01

I'm not saying we should excuse Owens's actions just because they weren't as bad as someone else's, but let's at least not let the major media outlets delude us into thinking that Owens is the worst kind of player this league has seen or that his verbal faux pas will be enough to end his career. Ray Lewis served his jail time and resumed making millions for his play despite his antics, so there is no reason to believe that Terrell Owens will do anything other than make millions of dollars playing football for years to come.

Dallas Cowboys (5-3) @ Philadelphia Eagles (4-4)

Monday, November 14, 2005 @ 9:00 PM ET on ABC

It would be silly to say that the absence of Owens won't hurt the Eagles on the field. He's one of the few players in professional football with the capability to single-handedly change the outcome of a game and an entire team's defensive scheme. The lack of their best receiver, however, is not Philadelphia's only problem. The Eagles rank dead last in the league with just 58.6 rushing yards per game. With that kind of rushing inefficiency it's no wonder that Donovan McNabb sustains or aggravates some kind of injury in virtually every game he plays. It's a testament to McNabb's mobility and game sense that the Eagles have a moderately respectable +2 turnover margin.

Improving their shortcomings on offense, however, will unfortunately be difficult if not impossible. Philly's injury list includes starting center Hank Fraley and offensive tackle Jon Runyan as well as tight ends Stephen Spach and LJ Smith. With a depleted offensive line the full backs and running backs will need to become more involved in blocking the pass rush, and with a depleted corps of reliable receivers McNabb will have a harder time finding open targets fast enough to get rid of the ball before taking a big hit. Did you think that was it? It's not. The Eagles are giving up 347.9 yards per game (bad enough for 26th in the league) and 23 points per game (bad enough for 23rd in the league).

Those are just the kind of numbers that Dallas coach Bill Parcells can turn to his team's advantage. The Cowboys are rested coming off their bye week and are in hot pursuit of the Giants for the NFC East title. They rank 6th in the league on the offensive side of the ball and 5th on defense. Drew Bledsoe is enjoying a rejuvenating season under his former coach and has the NFL's 4th best passer rating (1st in the NFC). The Cowboys will also get star running back Julius Jones back from injury this week – a bonus they'll enjoy even more having discovered the talents of rookie backup Marion Barber during Jones's absence.

*I wish I could pick the Eagles to rally around their quarterback, coach and organization for a big home win on Monday Night Football, but I just can't pick them over a **Cowboys** squad that finally has it all together.*

St. Louis Rams (4-4) @ Seattle Seahawks (6-2)

Are the playoffs already here? No; it's only mid-season, but here is another division rivalry that might as well be a playoff game. The Rams travel to Seattle knowing that their playoff hopes will live or die depending on their ability to avenge their Week 5 home loss to the Seahawks. St. Louis has overcome a lot of adversity in the last few weeks, but how much is too much? Coach Mike Martz is out for the season with a heart condition and will probably never return to coach the Rams. His replacement, interim head coach Joe Vitt, underwent a cardiac catheterization a week and a half ago in the same hospital where Martz was having a sinus operation. "We looked like grumpy old men," said Vitt whose spirits should be lifted by the return of wide receiver Tory Holt and quarterback Marc Bulger. After losing in Indianapolis in dramatic fashion, backup quarterback Jamie Martin exceeded expectations by leading the Rams to victories over New Orleans and Jacksonville in Bulger's absence.

It's odd to say that an injury to a starting quarterback actually helped a team, but I think that's the case for the Rams. Without Bulger's arm to rely on, the St. Louis coaching staff turned to running backs Steven Jackson and Marshall Faulk and wound up finding a balanced attack that helped them secure victories over the Saints and Jaguars. Vitt will need to remain dedicated to the running game this Sunday if he hopes to emerge victorious from Seattle. The best way to beat the Seahawks is to keep their offense off the field by running the ball and controlling time of possession – something the Rams have done only twice through eight games this season.

The Seahawks have always been extremely tough to beat at home, and this year is no exception. They're once again undefeated at home, including victories over the Falcons and Cowboys. Their offense is averaging 26.8 points per game thanks to the addition of receivers who actually catch the ball, and the defense has been relatively stingy in giving up just 18.3 points per game. In order for the Seahawks to get into playoff form, however, they need to do a better job of creating turnovers. They've coughed up the ball the fewest times of any team in the NFC, but their turnover margin is a measly +1. Look for the Seattle defenders to be flying to the ball carrier and making a definite effort to create turnovers. *The **Seahawks** will achieve that goal, will win the game and will gain a virtual strangle-hold on the NFC West.*

Denver Broncos (6-2) @ Oakland Raiders (3-5)

Wow! Another divisional showdown! What have we done to deserve such blessings from the football gods? Well, that's probably not what the Raiders are thinking. They're probably thinking something more along the lines of, "Oh, no! Not again!" Though this is Oakland's first meeting with Denver this season, it is their second straight divisional game. Last week they nearly pulled off what would have been an upset and a huge victory in Kansas City. The Raiders were probably already feeling the warm fuzzies that come with climbing out of the ranks of the losers with a comeback victory over a long-time rival in their home stadium, but then Chiefs coach Dick Vermeil called two plays that changed not only the course of his team's season but also the ultimate fate of this year's Oakland Raiders. You've probably already heard about the second one – the game winner – but the first was just as important and impressive.

Raiders lead 23-20. Chiefs' ball at the Oakland 37 yard line with nineteen seconds on the game clock and only one time out left. Eighth play of a drive that started just 79 seconds ago at their own 28 yard line. The

Raiders are in playing soft to make sure they don't allow Trent Green to throw anything longer than 10 yards on the outside where a receiver could catch the ball and get out of bounds to stop the clock. Recognizing the coverage, coach Vermeil called for a little screen pass to running back Larry Johnson. Perfect call! Johnson took the pass 36 yards down field, and the Chiefs immediately called their last time out. Time to trot out the field goal unit for the tying kick, right? Conventional wisdom says, "Yes." Dick Vermeil said, "The heck with it. I've got one of the most feared running games in the league. I'm going for the win the old-fashioned way right here, right now."

Raiders lead 23-20. Chiefs' ball at the Oakland 1 yard line with five seconds on the game clock and no time outs left. If the run is stuffed by 365 pound, 6'-5" run stopper Ted Washington then the Raiders will win. If 300 pound, 6'-2" defensive tackle Warren Sapp makes yet another big play the Raiders will win. Vermeil lines his guys up in the I-formation and instructs Johnson, "Just make sure you get up and over the top of their big guys." Down. Set. Hike. Handoff. Leap. Touchdown!

The Raiders are now back home – emotionally deflated from their heartbreaking loss to the Chiefs – and they face a division foe that has defeated them the last two times they've played in Oakland. *The Broncos are rested coming off their bye week and boast one of the best teams they've fielded since the John Elway era thanks to Jake Plummer playing some of the best football of his career.*

Washington Redskins (5-3) @ Tampa Bay Buccaneers (5-3)

I'm guilty. I admit it. I gave Chris Simms and the Buccaneers far too much credit. As one of my featured teams last week they were supposed to put up a better fight against the division leading Panthers, but the game was never even close. The Tampa Bay offensive line was so porous that the running game was almost non-existent and Simms was under constant pressure. He's not experienced enough to know how to deal with that pressure, so he threw two interceptions that pretty much sunk the Bucs. The Redskins, on the other hand, weathered an early surge by Philadelphia to come back and beat the Eagles in a hard fought Sunday Night game. They have one of the league's best defenses and a dynamic offense that features running back Clinton Portis and rejuvenated quarterback Mark Brunell, but they've lost the last three times they've played away from home. *It's time for the Redskins to win another road game.*

New England Patriots (4-4) @ Miami Dolphins (3-5)

It's lonely at the top, isn't it, Bill Belichick? After winning the Super Bowl three of the last four years, the Patriots were touted as the model franchise. They were the envy of not only the NFL but also of college football teams. Offensive coordinator Charlie Weis was paid top dollar to be the head coach of Notre Dame (and he's doing a bang-up job, by the way), and defensive coordinator Romeo Crennel is now the head coach of the Cleveland Browns. Key players were also lost to higher paying contracts and injuries, but after the New England's Week 3 victory over the Steelers in Pittsburgh there were many who refused to get off the bandwagon. They continued to expect Bill Belichick to guide his team through the pillaging and to emerge victorious. But their last two games have revealed the true caliber of this team. They were dominated at home by the Buffalo Bills but found a way – thanks to Tom Brady – to eek out a 21-16 win. Then they hosted the Colts in a Monday Night affair that was a shoot-out at first and a 40-21 massacre by the end. The question now is, "Can they beat an improved division opponent on the road?"

If it were simply a matter of lining up the injury reports, the Dolphins (who reported no injuries this week) would win handily. The Patriots have listed 14 players as "questionable" and have more key players who are sidelined either for 6-8 weeks or the rest of the season. How can they compete? Well, I expect they will find a way to compete quite well. In fact, my initial feeling was that they'd bounce back from their loss to the Colts with a win over the Dolphins, but I was counting on at least some of their players to be listed as "probable" or even "expected to play." Is that enough to switch my pick to the Dolphins? After all, Ricky Williams and Ronnie Brown are a dynamic running back duo that seem to be gaining momentum as the season progresses. True, but *I just can't get behind Gus Frerotte to decipher the Belichick defensive schemes no matter who the bodies are for New England. Can you? I didn't think so. You'll understand, then, why I'm picking the Patriots to bounce back with a win in Miami.*

Up The Gut

- Arizona (2-6) @ Detroit (3-5): Joey Harrington throws a lot of passes for a lot of yards, but he also throws a lot of interceptions. The **Cardinals** will win unless they turn it over more than the Lions.
- Baltimore (2-6) @ Jacksonville (5-3): I'm a bit confused by the **Jaguars** right now. Their only home loss this season is to the Broncos, though, so I'll give them the benefit of the doubt over the Ravens.

- Houston (1-7) @ Indianapolis (8-0): I've never seen as high a spread as this: **Colts** -18.5. Clearly they're favored to win, but will they win by more than 19 points? Yeah, probably...
- Kansas City (5-3) @ Buffalo (3-5): The loss of RB Priest Holmes will hurt the **Chiefs**, but they still have Larry Johnson. The Bills are rested and at home, but their run defense ranks 31st in the NFL.
- Minnesota (3-5) @ NY Giants (6-2): The Vikings aren't at home this week, and aren't facing Joey Harrington. Eli Manning, Tiki Barber and the **Giants** will win their fourth in a row.
- San Francisco (2-6) @ Chicago (5-3): If this one were in SF I'd make the 49ers my upset pick, but I don't think the **Bears** will be overly threatened by inexperienced 49ers quarterback Cody Pickett.
- NY Jets (2-6) @ Carolina (6-2): The Jets' Brooks Bollinger nearly pulled off a huge comeback against the Chargers, but their 30th ranked run D won't stop the **Panthers** from winning their sixth in a row.
- Green Bay (1-7) @ Atlanta (6-2): I was impressed with the way the Packers played against the Steelers last week, but that was at Lambeau (not in a dome). The **Falcons** will win this one at home.
- Cleveland (3-5) @ Pittsburgh (6-2): I talked extensively about **Steelers** backup quarterback Charlie Batch in [UFR 59](#), so I'm extremely pleased that he will be 2-0 as a starter this season after this one.
- Bye Week: Cincinnati (7-2), New Orleans (2-7), San Diego (5-4), Tennessee (2-7)

Statistics

- I went 5-0 in my featured games last week with a near-perfect overall record of 13-1. My season total improved to 81-49 (62.31%), and my all-time record is 372-218 (63.05%).
- UFR Formula: 13-1; Dr. Z's Power Rankings on SI.com: 11-3; ESPN.com Power Rankings: 11-3
- Last week's locks were NY Giants (-10), Indianapolis (-3) and Kansas City (-4.5).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 2-1 last week (64-62-3 all-time). The Giants and Colts once again proved to be reliable lock picks, but the Chiefs needed a spectacular late touchdown to win and didn't cover.

Week 10 Locks

Denver (-3)
Carolina (-9)
Atlanta (-9)

Keys

Rested Broncos run over ragged Raiders.
Panthers (hottest team in NFC) at home will beat disheartened Jets.
Never bet against Mike Vick at home.

Standings

AFC East

New England (4-4)
Miami (3-5)
Buffalo (3-5)
N.Y. Jets (2-6)

AFC North

Cincinnati (7-2)
Pittsburgh (6-2)
Cleveland (3-5)
Baltimore (2-6)

AFC South

Indianapolis (8-0)
Jacksonville (5-3)
Tennessee (2-7)
Houston (1-7)

AFC West

Denver (6-2)
Kansas City (5-3)
San Diego (5-4)
Oakland (3-5)

NFC East

N.Y. Giants (6-2)
Dallas (5-3)
Washington (5-3)
Philadelphia (4-4)

NFC North

Chicago (5-3)
Detroit (3-5)
Minnesota (3-5)
Green Bay (1-7)

NFC South

Atlanta (6-2)
Carolina (6-2)
Tampa Bay (5-3)
New Orleans (2-7)

NFC West

Seattle (6-2)
St. Louis (4-4)
Arizona (2-6)
San Francisco (2-6)

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