

HORN O' PLENTY

I guess it's fitting that on Thanksgiving weekend our table is overflowing with juicy match-ups. Despite having just had my gallbladder removed on Monday, I'm ready and salivating for this week's action.

Denver Broncos (8-2) @ Dallas Cowboys (7-3)

Thursday, November 24, 2005 @ 4:00 PM ET on CBS

Finally we have a Thanksgiving Day game that's really worth the arguments with the family over the remote control. The Broncos have been absolutely dominant at home and have established themselves as one of the top teams in the league, but their performances on the road have left a little to be desired. They opened the season with a loss at Miami, followed that up with a convincing win over the Jaguars, but then they allowed the Giants to beat them with a late surge. They man-handled the Raiders in Oakland two weeks ago, but that has come to be expected from this particular division rivalry. Four of Denver's final six games are road games (beginning with this one), and I doubt they'll all be easy wins.

The Cowboys are in a very tight race against the Giants for the NFC East, and they're now back to full strength thanks to the return of running back Julius Jones. In Jones's absence they discovered the talents of Marion Barber, so now they have a two-headed running attack that rivals Denver's combo of Mike Anderson and Tatum Bell. Drew Bledsoe and Jake Plummer have both been excellent quarterbacks and are ranked sixth and seventh respectively in passer rating, but the story of the year has been the reversal of Plummer's tendency to turn the ball over. In fact, he's now being called "No Mistake Jake" by some in the media due to his new found care with the ball. *My initial feeling was to ride the Broncos, but I have decided that the **Cowboys** will exploit Denver's 28th ranked pass defense, that Dallas's defense will hold the Broncos in check and that Plummer, forced to try to win the game with his arm, will turn the ball over.*

Chicago Bears (7-3) @ Tampa Bay Buccaneers (7-3)

I was more impressed with Chicago's victory over the Panthers than with any other team's win last week. They held one of the league's top scoring offenses to just three points. How did they do it? They looked at Carolina's rushing numbers for the season (26th in the league) and decided to that shutting down the passing game would also limit their running. The scheme worked. The Panthers rushed for just 55 yards as a team, and Jake Delhomme – who was sacked eight times – threw two interceptions. They may think that the same plan of attack will work against the Buccaneers because of Chris Simms's lack of experience, but this Tampa Bay team has a much better running game than the Panthers and a defense that rivals Chicago's in yards and points allowed per game. *Expect a low-scoring game, but look for the **Buccaneers** to come out on top thanks to their defense, home field advantage and "Cadillac" Williams.*

San Diego Chargers (6-4) @ Washington Redskins (5-5)

It's been a long, hard season so far for the Chargers. They've outscored their opponents by 9.8 points per game, but they've played against such tough opposition that their 6-4 record is barely good enough for second in the division behind the Broncos. The Chargers have are unanimously picked as one of the best teams in the league, yet they appear to be fighting for a Wild Card berth in the playoffs, a berth that is by no means guaranteed. After this weekend's trip to the East Coast, they return home to host the resurgent Raiders and the Dolphins before once again traversing the continent to battle the Colts and the Chiefs. The Chargers then host the Broncos for their season finale, a game that could be for the division title or for a wild card spot (or even for nothing at all) depending on how the rest of the season plays out. First, though, the Chargers must concern themselves with beating the Redskins on their home field. Last week the Raiders became the first team to do so this season, so expect the entire Washington organization to be in full battle mode for this contest. *The **Chargers** have looked weak without Antonio Gates in the past so I'm a little afraid to pick them without knowing the status of his foot injury, but I've felt all season long that the Chargers would mount a late playoff run so I'll pick them to ride LaDainian Tomlinson to victory.*

New York Giants (7-3) @ Seattle Seahawks (8-2)

Could this be a preview of the NFC Championship game? The short answer is, "Yes." Therefore, this single game could determine which team in the NFC ends up with home field advantage throughout the playoffs. If that level of significance wasn't lost on the Seahawks in practice this week then they could be in danger of losing this home game. Why do I say that? Well, history teaches us that the Seahawks dominate at home unless it's in a playoff level game, in which case they choke under pressure. But just when I am about to pick the Giants to spite the Seahawks, I'm reminded that the Giants have only really won one road game – over the 49ers – this year. (Their other "road" win was Week 2 over the Saints at

Giants Stadium.) *The **Seahawks** have the league's top ranked offense and its most dominant rusher in Shaun Alexander (and they're always dangerous at home), so I'll pick them to outscore the Giants.*

Pittsburgh Steelers (7-3) @ Indianapolis Colts (10-0)

Monday, November 28, 2005 @ 9:00 PM ET on ABC

The Steelers probably could have beaten the Ravens last week if they weren't saving up Big Ben for this showdown in Indianapolis. The problem for the Steelers, however, is that the Colts are running at full horsepower on both sides of the ball for the first time in... well, maybe for the first time *ever*. Pittsburgh's head coach Bill Cowher will try to make this an old fashioned running battle and will hope that his guys can control the line of scrimmage and wear down the Colts enough to stymie any late offensive surge they may expect to mount. But Indy's Tony Dungy will not shy away from that battle, and he'll counter with a much better and more explosive passing game that can be held in check in stretches but will eventually be the undoing of the Steelers. *Peyton Manning has heard all about his inability to win the big games all throughout his career, so this Monday Night he'll find a way – any way – to lead the **Colts** to victory.*

Up The Gut

- Atlanta (6-4) @ Detroit (4-6): A two-game losing streak has dropped the **Falcons** behind the Panthers and the Buccaneers in the race for the NFC South, so they'll rebound with a big win in Detroit.
- Baltimore (3-7) @ Cincinnati (7-3): I was impressed with the **Bengals** last week even though they lost to the Colts. They'll stay in the race for the AFC North with a big home win over the Ravens.
- Carolina (7-3) @ Buffalo (4-6): The Bills are 4-1 at home this year, so it's tough to pick against them. I just can't see the **Panthers** not rebounding from last week's loss, though this could be a tight one.
- Cleveland (4-6) @ Minnesota (5-5): Ruben Droughns is a real powerhouse running back, and I think the Browns will be good next year, but this year they still have some work to do. I'll pick the **Vikings**.
- New England (6-4) @ Kansas City (6-4): This would have been a featured game this week if either team had much of a defense. I foresee a lot of points but not many rushing yards, and if the injury reports are correct then the Chiefs should win. However, I don't think the injury reports are correct. I think they're padded, and I think the **Patriots** will catch the Chiefs looking ahead to the Broncos.
- San Francisco (2-8) @ Tennessee (2-8): I'd love to pick the 49ers, but I can't pick against Steve McNair's **Titans** at home, especially after the way they performed against the Jaguars last week.
- St. Louis (4-6) @ Houston (1-9): The **Rams** are allowing a league worst 30 points per game, but I can't get burned by Houston again. I'll pick Steven Jackson to end St. Louis's two game skid.
- Jacksonville (7-3) @ Arizona (3-7): The **Jaguars** may be the league's least inspiring 7-3 squad, while the Cardinals may be the most dangerous 3-7 home team. This could be a tight one in the desert.
- Miami (3-7) @ Oakland (4-6): I've got to pick the **Raiders** after the way they played in Washington last week and after the way the Dolphins rolled over and played dead in Cleveland. No hay de otra.
- Green Bay (2-8) @ Philadelphia (4-6): The Eagles are so thrilled that T.O.'s suspension was upheld by the arbitrator that they won't care so much about the **Packers** beating them at home. Ouch!
- New Orleans (2-8) @ NY Jets (2-8): That was some nightmare game for the Jets last week. Their quarterbacks were bruised and battered and intercepted. It's interesting to note that their last victory was at home over the Buccaneers back in Week 5. Does Brooks Bollinger have what it takes to beat the **Saints**? I don't think so. In fact, I think it will take a miracle for the Jets to win another game.

Statistics

- I was a miserable 1-4 in my featured games last week, but my overall record withstood the madness (there were 6 upsets this week!) and ended up at 9-7. My season record now stands at 99-61 (61.88%), and my all-time record is 390-230 (62.90%).
- UFR Formula: 10-6; Dr. Z's Power Rankings on SI.com: 10-6; ESPN.com Power Rankings: 10-6
- Last week's locks were Denver (-13), Seattle (-13) and St. Louis (-9.5).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 1-2 last week (67-65-3 all-time). The Broncos are proving to be the most reliable "lock," while the Rams suffered the loss of Bulger (again) and the Seahawks nearly succumbed to a late surge by the upstart 49ers.

Week 12 Locks

Atlanta (-3)
Cincinnati (-9)
Oakland (-7)

Keys

Run. Pass. Run. DEFEND. It's time for the Falcons to play up to their potential.
The Carson (and Johnson) Show will be airing on all channels.
Finally! A weak opponent for the Raiders to prey upon.

Standings

AFC East

New England (6-4)
Buffalo (4-6)
Miami (3-7)
N.Y. Jets (2-8)

AFC North

Cincinnati (7-3)
Pittsburgh (7-3)
Cleveland (4-6)
Baltimore (3-7)

AFC South

Indianapolis (10-0)
Jacksonville (7-3)
Tennessee (2-8)
Houston (1-9)

AFC West

Denver (8-2)
San Diego (6-4)
Kansas City (6-4)
Oakland (4-6)

NFC East

Dallas (7-3)
NY Giants (7-3)
Washington (5-5)
Philadelphia (4-6)

NFC North

Chicago (7-3)
Minnesota (5-5)
Detroit (4-6)
Green Bay (2-8)

NFC South

Carolina (7-3)
Tampa Bay (7-3)
Atlanta (6-4)
New Orleans (2-8)

NFC West

Seattle (8-2)
St. Louis (4-6)
Arizona (3-7)
San Francisco (2-8)