

## PICKING FAVORITES

Every week I ask myself a lot of the same questions when picking winners in these games. Should I pick the home team? Should I pick the team with the better defense? The better running game? That knack for causing turnovers? Should I pick *against* a team that finds ways to lose on the road? Should I pick a team to extend its winning streak or should I pick their opponent to end that streak? Should I pick a team with playoff aspirations over one that's already playing for the future? How about a team that's playing for respect after its coach got fired? Or should I just pick the team with the best record?

There are seemingly infinite combinations of reasons for picking any one team over another in the NFL, but the one that enters into most people's consciousness the most is, "Which team is favored?" Ultimately, each pick comes down to deciding whether to pick the favorite or the underdog.

Things get tricky, though, in divisional games. The teams involved know each other so well from playing twice per year in the regular season that just about anything can happen. That's why I'm so excited about this week's slate of games. A remarkable twelve of this week's sixteen games are between teams in the same division, including the first four in this week's set of features games. As the title of this week's UFR suggests, I like the favorites in most of this week's match-ups, but I do anticipate a few upsets.

### Dallas Cowboys (7-4) @ New York Giants (7-4)

With both Washington and Philadelphia struggling at 5-6 this game's outcome will have a major impact on the battle for the NFC East title. The Cowboys currently have an edge by virtue of their 3-1 record against divisional foes, including a home overtime victory over the Giants back in Week 6. The winner of this game will not only control the division, they'll also have a shot at getting a first round playoff bye or even home field advantage throughout the playoffs (if the Seahawks stumble down the stretch).

Before embracing their futures, however, both teams must overcome the disappointment of last week's overtime losses. On Thanksgiving Day in Dallas the Cowboys allowed one big running play (a 55 yard run by Denver RB Ron Dayne) that put the Broncos in position to kick the game-winning 24 yard field goal. Until that point the Cowboys had held Denver's powerful running game (their 165.6 ypg average is 2<sup>nd</sup> in the league) in check. Mike Anderson and Ron Dayne had combined for just 74 yards, and the Cowboys had dominated the time of possession battle. A few days later the Giants lost in Seattle when kicker Jay Feely missed three field goals, including two in overtime, that could have won the game. Then this week the NFL admitted that Eli Manning's two touchdown passes should have been ruled incomplete.

I expect the Giants and the Cowboys to take out their frustrations on each other this week in New Jersey, but I don't know exactly what kind of game to expect from them. Back in Week 6 the Cowboys were missing their starting running back Julius Jones but still managed to dominate time of possession by running Marion Barber and Anthony Thomas and by keeping Tiki Barber in check. If they hadn't allowed Jeremy Shockey to spring free for five key catches – including the game-tying touchdown – they wouldn't have had to win in overtime. The Giants have proven that they are capable of playing spectacular football on their home field, but I wonder if their 24<sup>th</sup> ranked, injury-depleted defense will be able to play tough enough to keep the powerful Dallas offense in check. Cornerback Will Peterson is out as are five players who combined for 16 tackles the last time these teams met: defensive tackles William Joseph and Kendrick Allen, linebacker Nick Greisen and strong safety Shaun Williams.

The Giants are favored by three points which is the standard line for a home team in what would be considered a toss-up on a neutral field. *A few weeks ago I would have probably picked the Giants because of the way they dismantled the Redskins at home, but the Redskins and Giants have combined to lose 5 of their last 6 games so I'm picking the **Cowboys** to pull off the upset in the Meadowlands.*

### Cincinnati Bengals (8-3) @ Pittsburgh Steelers (7-4)

Have the Bengals been hardened at all by their last four games? How much stock should I put in the 37 points they scored on the Colts when the Steelers posted only seven? It's always hard to figure out games in the AFC North, so it doesn't help that these two teams play completely different styles of football. The Steelers are all about brut strength both on defense and offense. The Bengals are all about speed, agility and quickness. Their defense may be soft (they rank 21<sup>st</sup> overall), but their +20 turnover margin is by far the best in the league. If Carson Palmer and company get an early lead it will be very hard for the Steelers to come back and win. Ben Roethlisberger is playing with a sore thumb, and his offense is built more for protecting the lead than chasing it. The Steelers will try to win this game the way they won their last meeting with the Bengals – by running the ball on offense and by overpowering

Cincinnati's offensive line on defense. *Bill Cowher's squad will be highly motivated after having lost back-to-back games for the first time since November 2, 2003, so I'll pick the **Steelers** to rebound at home.*

#### Atlanta Falcons (7-4) @ Carolina Panthers (8-3)

The Falcons have never lost to the Panthers with Michael Vick at quarterback. Really? Yes. Really. In the six times that Vick has taken the field against the Panthers since his rookie season in 2001, the Falcons are 6-0 and Vick has put up impressive rushing numbers (378 yards and four touchdowns on 43 carries). This year more than ever before Vick is playing the quarterback position more like a passer, but he's certainly not lost the ability to make game-changing plays when he runs with the ball. The Falcons are confident in Vick's abilities, but their defense inspires far less confidence. Having allowed 30 or more points in two of their last three games, they must raise their level if they hope to contain Carolina's offense. Neither team has any injury concerns, so I expect this to be a well-played, physical contest with a playoff feel. *The Falcons have won 9 of the last 10 meetings between these two teams, and you already know that Vick has been involved in six of those victories so you shouldn't be surprised that I'm picking the **Falcons** to win on the road and make things even more interesting in the NFC South.*

#### Denver Broncos (9-2) @ Kansas City Chiefs (7-4)

I admit it. I have been down on the Chiefs ever since they managed to score just three points in Buffalo three weeks ago. To their credit, they've responded admirably with back-to-back wins over the Texans and Patriots, but victories over a one-win team and a once-great team with a weak defense are not enough to seduce me into picking the Chiefs to knock off one of the most dominant teams in the league. Back in Week 3 the Broncos shut down the lauded Kansas City running game and blanketed their wide receivers in a convincing 30-10 victory. Since then the Chiefs have gone 5-3 against teams that are a combined 36-52 while the Broncos have gone 7-1 against teams that are a combined 44-44, including wins in Jacksonville and Dallas. *You all know what happened when I picked against them last week, so I'm not going to pick against the **Broncos** again for quite some time.*

#### Seattle Seahawks (9-2) @ Philadelphia Eagles (5-6)

Monday, December 5, 2005 @ 9:00 PM ET on ABC

The Eagles like every other football team in that they are a proud bunch of guys who play hard every week and hate to lose. Unfortunately for them, however, this season has been full of distractions due to Terrell Owens and disappointment due to Donovan McNabb's inability to continue playing because of injury. It's evident that they won't repeat as NFC Champions, but it would be a mistake to assume that they have nothing left to play for. The Eagles are playing for their honor, and they are playing to win. Mike McMahon proved two weeks ago when he passed for 298 yards against the Giants that has the arm to play quarterback in the NFL, and last week Brian Westbrook ran for 117 yards and reminded us of his capabilities as a running back. The Eagles will be dangerous if they can play tough enough defense to make this a low scoring game, but the Seahawks are not easily contained. They have the league's top ranked offense and a defense that is allowing just 18.9 points per game. *Mike Holmgren is gunning for home field advantage throughout the playoffs, so he'll has his **Seahawks** geared up and ready to win.*

#### Up The Gut

- Buffalo (4-7) @ Miami (4-7): The Bills have yet to win a road game this season, so I'll pick the **Dolphins** to win at home for the first time since beating Denver and Carolina in Weeks 1 and 3.
- Green Bay (2-9) @ Chicago (8-3): The Packers are tougher than their record shows, and I'm dying to pick them over Chicago... but I just can't justify picking against **Da Bears** the way they're playing.
- Houston (1-10) @ Baltimore (4-7): Will Houston win another game before the season is over? Maybe Week 15 when they host the Cardinals, but this week belongs to the famed **Ravens** defense.
- Jacksonville (8-3) @ Cleveland (4-7): These are two tough teams with injury problems. The **Jaguars** will be without quarterback Byron Leftwich, but I expect David Garrard fill in well and get the win.
- Minnesota (6-5) @ Detroit (4-7): I don't like the idea of picking against a home team the week after their coach is fired, but the Lions have some serious injury issues that make it almost impossible to pick them. For instance, can anyone other than the injured Kevin Jones run the ball? I usually don't like to pick the Vikings on the road, but they seem to be a new team with Brad Johnson at the helm. He's 4-0 as their starting quarterback, so I'll pick the **Vikings** (gasp!) to win their fifth game in a row.
- Tampa Bay (7-4) @ New Orleans (2-9): The Saints once again play a home game that requires a plane trip, and they get to host a hopping mad Tampa Bay squad that lost last week because Matt Bryant missed a 29 yard field goal. I'll pick the **Bucs** to keep pace with the Falcons and Panthers.
- Tennessee (3-8) @ Indianapolis (11-0): I see the spread is 15 points. It should be 28. **Colts** win.

- Arizona (3-8) @ San Francisco (2-9): I remember the way the **49ers** rallied to nearly force overtime against the Seahawks in their last home game, so I'm picking them to upset the Cardinals this week.
- Washington (5-6) @ St. Louis (5-6): Ryan Fitzpatrick had a dream debut in the Rams' amazing comeback victory over the Texans last week, but the **Redskins** have a much better defense that will remind him that he's a rookie and that this is not the Ivy League. Harvard grad, meet the turf.
- NY Jets (2-9) @ New England (6-5): It seems that Tom Brady is the only player not on New England's injury list, I have a feeling that the **Patriots** will find a way – any way – to beat the Jets.
- Oakland (4-7) @ San Diego (7-4): The Raiders impressed me in their road victory over the Redskins and then depressed me in their home loss to the Dolphins. Who are the Raiders – really? I'd appreciate it if they'd just prove me right and get obliterated by the **Chargers** this week. Thank you.

### Statistics

- I was 3-2 in my featured games last week with an overall record of 11-5. My season record now stands at 110-66 (62.50%), and my all-time record is 401-235 (63.05%).
- UFR Formula: 13-3; Dr. Z's Power Rankings on SI.com: 14-2; ESPN.com Power Rankings: 14-2
- Last week's locks were Atlanta (-3), Cincinnati (-9) and Oakland (-7).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 2-1 last week (69-66-3 all-time). The Falcons and Bengals kindly annihilated their opposition, but the Raiders baffled me by losing to the Dolphins in Oakland just one week after beating the Potomac Drainage Basin Indigenous Persons (to quote Gregg Easterbrook).

### Week 13 Locks

Tampa Bay (-3)  
Indianapolis (-15)  
Washington (-3)

### Keys

Remember "Cadillac" Williams? No? You will...  
The Colts own the Titans – first away, now at home.  
Three interceptions in a game will now be called the Fitz-hat-trick. Ha! I kill me!

### Standings

#### AFC East

New England (6-5)  
Buffalo (4-7)  
Miami (4-7)  
N.Y. Jets (2-9)

#### AFC North

Cincinnati (8-3)  
Pittsburgh (7-4)  
Baltimore (4-7)  
Cleveland (4-7)

#### AFC South

Indianapolis (11-0)  
Jacksonville (8-3)  
Tennessee (3-8)  
Houston (1-10)

#### AFC West

Denver (9-2)  
San Diego (7-4)  
Kansas City (7-4)  
Oakland (4-7)

#### NFC East

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

#### NFC North

Chicago (8-3)  
Minnesota (6-5)  
Detroit (4-7)  
Green Bay (2-9)

#### NFC South

Carolina (8-3)  
Tampa Bay (7-4)  
Atlanta (7-4)  
New Orleans (2-9)

#### NFC West

Seattle (9-2)  
St. Louis (5-6)  
Arizona (3-8)  
San Francisco (2-9)