

GROWING PAINS

Last Sunday morning I had the pleasure of watching one of the year's most entertaining football games. It was supposed to be Ben Roethlisberger's chance to avoid his first ever NFL losing streak. It was supposed to be Pittsburgh's chance to assert themselves as the true rulers of the AFC North, but instead it became a coming out party for the team formerly known as the Bungles. After their home loss to the Steelers back in Week 7 the Bengals were supposed to have been exposed as a "soft" team that couldn't stand up to an opponent's physical defense and powerful running game. They were two point underdogs in their home stadium, but they lost by two touchdowns.

Early in their game in Pittsburgh last Sunday it looked like the Steelers had picked up right where they left off in Cincinnati. But this time the Bengals had an answer for everything the Men of Cowher threw at them. With a relatively easy final stretch ahead (Cleveland, at Detroit, Buffalo, at Kansas City) the Bengals should wrap up the AFC North title soon. And if Denver loses its season finale at San Diego the Bengals could end up earning a first round bye and a free pass to the divisional playoffs.

Indianapolis Colts (12-0) @ Jacksonville Jaguars (9-3)

Here is another game that will influence playoff scenarios. The Colts can clinch a first round bye and home field advantage throughout the playoffs with a win over the Jaguars. Easy, right? The way they've been playing lately it surely seems that way, but keep in mind that the Jaguars went to Indianapolis back in Week 2 and held the Colts to just 10 points. But that was before Peyton Manning really got in synch with his receivers. Through the first three weeks of the season the Colts averaged just 15.7 points per game, but they have since regained their form and have averaged 35.4 points per game over their last nine games. It will be hard for the Jaguars to contain this offense now that it's firing on all cylinders, especially since they haven't faced a team of this caliber in quite some time. In fact, in their last six games the Jaguars have allowed teams with a combined record of 22-50 to score 16.7 points per game against their defense. But it's not just their defense that worries me. Quarterback Byron Leftwich is out with an ankle injury and David Garrard will be filling in for him. While Garrard is a talented and mobile quarterback, he lacks the experience he'll need if the Jaguars hope to put the ball in the end zone against one of the league's top defensive units. Last week Garrard got off to a slow start against the Browns but played well enough to lead the Jaguars to a comeback victory. *Coach Jack Del Rio needs Garrard to grow up fast because a slow start this week will leave the Jaguars eating the **Colts'** dust.*

Chicago Bears (9-3) @ Pittsburgh Steelers (7-5)

The Bears are on an eight game winning streak thanks to their defense and the running of Thomas Jones, but they'll need more production from rookie quarterback Kyle Orton if they hope to extend that streak. The problem, however, is that Lovie Smith doesn't have enough confidence in Orton to ask him to step out of his comfort zone and attempt to beat the Steelers with long passes like the ones Carson Palmer threw so successfully last week. Pittsburgh coach Bill Cowher can't be happy about his team's first three game losing streak since November 2, 2003. He tried to surprise the Bengals by passing against them last week, but even Ben Roethlisberger's record-setting day wasn't enough for the win. This week I think he'll go back to what his team does best – running the ball. Look for Big Ben to use the short passing game to open up the running game for Willie Parker, Jerome Bettis and Deuce Staley who should all see action against Chicago's powerful defensive front. Pittsburgh's playoff hopes will live or die with this game's result, so the Steelers hope it's a good sign that the Bears are 1-2 against AFC teams this season. *Expect playoff level intensity from both teams and a much needed victory for the **Steelers.***

Tampa Bay Buccaneers (8-4) @ Carolina Panthers (9-3)

The final weeks of the season will be exciting in the NFC South. After their domination of the Falcons last week the Panthers have the lead in the race for the title, but that could all change with three of their last four games coming against divisional foes. Back in Week 9 the Panthers dominated the Bucs in Tampa, but that was a rough time for Jon Gruden's team. Brian Griese, who had led them to a 5-1 start, had just been lost for the season with a knee injury, and Chris Simms was reeling after losing his first start against the lowly 49ers in San Francisco. To make matters worse, Cadillac Williams still hadn't fully recovered from his early season injury issues and the Bucs were floundering offensively without a running game. Since then, however, Simms has settled into his role and Williams is once again running at full speed. The Bucs are a missed 29 yard field goal away from being undefeated in their last four games, and the offense has lifted its production to a respectable 21.5 points per game over that stretch. But will the young Simms have what it takes to beat one of the league's hottest teams on the road? That's a tall order. The

Buccaneers need to run the ball successfully to keep pressure off Simms and to chew up the clock so that their defense can keep the game close. The Panthers, however, have the league's second best run defense and have held their last six opponents to an average of just 9.7 points per game. *Though it seems like this game should be won by the team with the best execution in the running game, I anticipate that the team that wins the turnover battle will win the game and that team will be the Carolina **Panthers**.*

Kansas City Chiefs (8-4) @ Dallas Cowboys (7-5)

It seems like I'm saying this a lot this week, but maybe it's just that time of year. This is a playoff game for the Chiefs and Cowboys. While both teams have good records, they both recognize that this year (unlike last year) there will be no 8-8 teams in the playoffs. The Chiefs have rebounded impressively from their fiasco of a loss (they scored just three points) in Buffalo four weeks ago. I don't think it's any coincidence that their resurgence has coincided with the return of offensive tackle Willie Roaf. Kansas City's results with and without him are enough to make him an MVP candidate, but it's unlikely that an offensive lineman would win that award. Though if any team understands the importance of such a player, it's the Dallas Cowboys who started the season with impressive offensive production but (as noted by ESPN's John Clayton) have struggled to a 3-3 record since offensive tackle Flozell Adams went down with a season-ending knee injury. The Cowboys usually play better at home, but this season they've surrendered two key home games to the Redskins and the Broncos – both teams the Chiefs have vanquished. *Bearing that in mind, I'll pick the **Chiefs** in what the Vegas odds deem a minor upset.*

New England Patriots (7-5) @ Buffalo Bills (4-8)

After the first half of Buffalo's game last week in Miami I was getting ready to write about the long-awaited emergence of J.P. Losman as the quarterback the Bills hoped he'd be all season long. His three touchdown passes to Lee Evans vaulted the Bills to a 21-0 lead by the end of the first quarter, but the Dolphins didn't panic. They got a field goal before half time and then hunkered down on defense in the third quarter. All hope of a comeback seemed lost when Miami quarterback Gus Frerotte was forced to leave the game after being sacked for a safety by Buffalo linebacker London Fletcher. The Bills were about to score on the next possession, but then Sam Madison intercepted Losman at the Miami 1 yard line and Sage Rosenfels took over the quarterback duties for the Dolphins. Employing a quick-strike, no-huddle offense and utilizing the running game effectively even within the confines of a hurry-up offense, Rosenfels helped the Dolphins put up a 21 point quarter of their own. The remarkable comeback was fittingly capped by an equally impressive leaping touchdown catch by Chris Chambers on 4th and Goal from the Buffalo 4 yard line with just 6 seconds left in the game. A day that started as Losman's coming out party instead became a career receiving day for Chambers (15 receptions, 238 yards, 1 touchdown) and provided a glimpse into what the Dolphins can do with an effective running game, a fearless and capable quarterback and an opportunistic defense.

The question in my mind is, "How will Losman handle the disappointment of losing that game?" My inclination is assume that playing at home will be enough to help him overcome the disappointment. The Bills are 4-2 at home and 0-6 on the road so far this season, but that may not mean as much against a divisional foe like the Patriots who will be well prepared to play in the cold and windy conditions. I see that New England's injury list is just as long as ever, but you'll remember that I've noted that players listed as "questionable" on Bill Belichick's injury list frequently see a good deal of playing time come game time. These teams last met in Foxboro with Kelly Holcomb playing quarterback for the Bills and Willis McGahee running for 136 yards in what appeared to be a victory for the Bills until Tom Brady rallied his team for a late comeback. Does that seem like a pattern to you, too? *Yeah, that's why I'm picking the **Patriots** to clinch the AFC East title with a win among the snow flurries in Buffalo.*

Up The Gut

- Cleveland (4-8) @ Cincinnati (9-3): Burnt orange Browns versus bright orange **Bengals**. Gotta love it!
- Houston (1-11) @ Tennessee (3-9): I still think the Texans will win another game, but it wasn't last week and I doubt it will be this week either. Steve McNair is *the Titan* in Tennessee.
- Oakland (4-8) @ NY Jets (2-10): Marques Tuiasosopo will get his first start of the season at QB for Oakland. The **Jets** have a decent defense and Curtis Martin should be well enough to play by game time, so I'll pick them to get win number three unless the Reggie Bush bug bites.
- St. Louis (5-7) @ Minnesota (7-5): Fitzpatrick, meet the dome. It's going to be loud! The Minnesota fans will be excited to watch the **Vikings** keep their playoff hopes alive with a seventh straight win.
- NY Giants (8-4) @ Philadelphia (5-7): How things change! Last year the Eagles would have been a lock in this game, but now they're reeling and will be unable to stop or score on the **Giants**.

- San Francisco (2-10) @ Seattle (10-2): I only ask for the **Seahawks** to win by 20 points or less. Please, have mercy on the poor, injury-ravaged 49ers!
- Washington (6-6) @ Arizona (4-8): The **Redskins** have had the league's toughest schedule (SOS=+22), so it's pretty easy for me to pick them to beat the Cardinals even though this one is in Arizona.
- Baltimore (5-7) @ Denver (9-3): I don't think Kyle Boller will handle the thin Denver air very well, and I'm not impressed at all by Baltimore's defense anymore. The **Broncos** will bounce back with a win.
- Miami (5-7) @ San Diego (8-4): One week you're up, the next your down. Sorry, Sage. **Chargers** win.
- Detroit (4-8) @ Green Bay (2-10): The Lions play in a dome at home, so they won't be nearly as equipped to handle the cold as the **Packers** who relish hosting games at their "Frozen Tundra."
- New Orleans (2-10) @ Atlanta (7-5): Another week, another road trip for the Saints. They won't have much luck against the **Falcons** who will be treating this as the "win-or-go-home" type game that it is.

Statistics

- I picked the wrong upsets and ended up 1-4 in my featured games last week. Thankfully the rest of the games brought my overall record to 11-5. My season record is now up to 121-71 (63.02%), and my all-time record is 412-240 (63.19%).
- UFR Formula: 15-1; Dr. Z's Power Rankings on SI.com: 13-3; ESPN.com Power Rankings: 15-1
- Last week's locks were Tampa Bay (-3), Indianapolis (-15) and Washington (-3).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 3-0 last week (72-66-3 all-time).

Week 14 Locks

Cincinnati (-11.5)
Indianapolis (-7.5)
NY Giants (-2)

Keys

Note to the Browns: beware a very good team with lots left to play for.
The Colts are averaging a 13.5 point margin of victory.
I don't see where the Eagles will get enough offense to win – even at home.

Standings

AFC East

New England (7-5)
Miami (5-7)
Buffalo (4-8)
N.Y. Jets (2-10)

AFC North

Cincinnati (9-3)
Pittsburgh (7-5)
Baltimore (5-7)
Cleveland (4-8)

AFC South

Indianapolis (12-0)
Jacksonville (9-3)
Tennessee (3-9)
Houston (1-11)

AFC West

Denver (9-3)
San Diego (8-4)
Kansas City (8-4)
Oakland (4-8)

NFC East

NY Giants (8-4)
Dallas (7-5)
Washington (6-6)
Philadelphia (5-7)

NFC North

Chicago (9-3)
Minnesota (7-5)
Detroit (4-8)
Green Bay (2-10)

NFC South

Carolina (9-3)
Tampa Bay (8-4)
Atlanta (7-5)
New Orleans (2-10)

NFC West

Seattle (10-2)
St. Louis (5-7)
Arizona (4-8)
San Francisco (2-10)

ITALICS indicate that a team has clinched a playoff berth.

BOLD indicates that a team has clinched its division title.