

## SCRUM!

The playoffs are just a few weeks away yet even we who follow the NFL closely do not have a clue which teams (with two notable exceptions) will be playing when the second weekend in January rolls around. By contrast, at this point last season the Patriots, Steelers, Colts, Eagles and Panthers had clinched their respective division titles, and the Chargers had a two game lead over the Broncos in the AFC West. Only two divisions were really up for grabs: the NFC North and NFC West where the Packers and Seahawks held slim one game leads over the Vikings and Rams.

I've heard it said that there are a few good teams and a lot of bad teams this year in the NFL, but the fact is that there are a lot of good teams *and* a lot of bad teams. A whopping 17 teams currently have winning records, and the Dolphins at 6-7 still have a shot at their division title if New England falters. That leaves 14 teams with records of 5-8 or worse. It's an intriguing chasm to be sure, but what does it mean about the future of the league? Well, it probably doesn't mean much. The teams at the bottom have had injury woes in some cases and are breaking in new, young talent in other cases. The injury playing field will level out in the off-season, and young players learn and grow up fast from one season to another. The draft will also help many of the teams that have struggled to be competitive this season, so expect next year to level back out. As always, some teams will stay good, but I expect that next year we will once again see a large number of teams rising to and others falling toward the 8-8 plateau.

This season, however, is far from over, so let's look at the playoff picture in more detail. In the AFC the Colts have clinched their division, a first round bye and home field advantage up to the Super Bowl. In the NFC the Seahawks have clinched their division and need just one more win to secure a first round bye and home field advantage. The scrum is happening behind them where 16 teams are fighting for only six remaining playoff spots. I'll get into more detail in the paragraphs that follow. These final three weeks of the season are going to offer football fans some very exciting and meaningful games!

### Tampa Bay Buccaneers (9-4) @ New England Patriots (8-5)

Saturday, December 17, 2005 @ 1:30 PM ET on FOX

Despite enduring an injury-plagued season, the Patriots are once again in the playoff picture. With only the resurgent Dolphins chasing them, the Brady Bunch (and the Patriots are – now more than ever – Tom Brady's team) controls its own destiny. "Win and you're in" was undoubtedly Bill Belichick's mantra this week, so I'm sure he's glad that his team will be playing at home in very cold weather against a team that historically plays far below its potential in such frigid conditions. Complicating matters for the Buccaneers, the Patriots have gotten significantly healthier over the last couple of weeks. Last week Corey Dillon rushed 22 times for 102 yards in a Buffalo blizzard and reminded the league how much better the Patriots are when they have a running attack at their disposal. However, questions still remain as to whether the New England defense is good enough this year to carry them into the playoffs, let alone the Super Bowl. There are no such questions about Tampa Bay's defense, a unit that is playing its best football since the 2002 season when they won the Super Bowl. Instead, the questions surround Chris Simms. How will the third year quarterback from Texas handle the near-freezing temperatures? And more importantly, will he be able to avoid turnovers against Bill Belichick's defensive schemes? *If the game were being played in Tampa I'd probably pick the Bucs to squeak by, but with so many unanswered questions I'm compelled to pick Brady's (and Adam Vinatieri's?) Patriots to find a way to wrap up the AFC East with a home victory.*

**NOTE:** Just before distribution, I found out that Tom Brady is questionable for this game because of his knee. While the word "questionable" has been cryptic at best when appearing on New England's injury list this season, I'm so intrigued by the idea of 43 year old Doug Flutie leading the Patriots over the Buccaneers that I'm leaving my pick unchanged.

### Kansas City Chiefs (8-5) @ New York Giants (9-4)

Saturday, December 17, 2005 @ 5:00 PM ET on CBS

These teams represent two of this season's toughest divisions – the AFC West and the NFC East – where, in both cases, only two games separate the first place team from the third place team. The Chiefs are two games behind the Broncos and are (are you ready for this one?) kicking themselves for shanking their chance to move ahead of the Chargers and within one game of the Broncos last Sunday in Dallas. With only 22 seconds remaining the Chiefs had the ball on their own 28 yard line and needed only a field goal to send the game into overtime. The hardest part is moving the ball within the field goal kicker's range, right? Wrong. Two plays later the Chiefs found themselves on the Dallas 24 yard line with one second left on the clock. Kicker Lawrence Tynes doinked the kick wide right and reminded us all why the Scottish national soccer team hasn't won a World Cup match since he was 12 years old. (This brings up

an interesting question, "The NFL has got a Scot and an Aussie, but why aren't any teams pursuing Brazilian soccer stars?" I'm sure even 39 year old Romario can still kick a ball 90 yards. Sign him up!

The Giants have also had kicking woes this season. Just three weeks ago Jay Feely missed three field goals late in a game in Seattle. He may have redeemed himself, however, with a perfect performance in Philadelphia last week. The Giants found themselves in a tougher fight than they'd anticipated against a team that is decimated and demoralized by injuries, but thanks to Feely's clutch day they came away with an overtime road victory that kept them one game ahead of the Cowboys in the NFC East. Road games have been a struggle for the Giants this season – probably because Eli Manning is still only a second year quarterback without the experience necessary to be as brilliant in hostile arenas as he is at home. He's credited with a 3-3 road record, but one of those road victories came over the Saints in New Jersey. Truthfully, then, Manning is 7-1 at home (where the Giants have averaged a +13.9 point differential) and 2-3 on the road (where that figure is -1.4). *That statistic is eerily similar for the Chiefs, which is why I'm playing it safe and picking the **Giants** to win this one at home and keep their lead in the NFC East.*

#### Pittsburgh Steelers (8-5) @ Minnesota Vikings (8-5)

There has been much made of the dramatic resurgence of the Minnesota Vikings over the last six weeks, so by now you probably know that they've won six games in a row and are now just one game behind the Bears in the NFC North. Is it possible? Can they really come back from that dismal 1-4 start to make the playoffs? Is Brad Johnson really the antidote to Daunte Culpepper? Not so fast. Sure the Vikings are 5-1 at home, but who have they played? St. Louis, Cleveland, Detroit, New Orleans – all wins; Tampa Bay in Week 1 was the loss. Let me get this straight: The last time a good team with a physical defense and a good running game visited the Metrodome the result was a 13-24 loss. "But, but, but!" Yeah, I hear you. Culpepper threw three interceptions in that game, and the Vikings rushed for a whopping 33 yards. Things are different now under Brad Johnson. He takes care of the ball better, and the running game has become a bigger part of their offense. Still, something concerns me. The Vikings have the league's 23<sup>rd</sup> ranked rushing attack, 26<sup>th</sup> ranked defense, and have managed to be outscored by 3.1 points per game this season even though they have a winning record. Those are not statistics that inspire confidence.

The Steelers, on the other hand, rebounded from a three game losing streak with a hard fought win over the league's stingiest defense last week. They did it with physical play on defense and physical play on offense, holding the Bears to 83 rushing yards while riding The Bus to 190 of their own. They know that chasing down the Bengals for the NFC North title is a tall order, but they also know that winning their final three games (at Minnesota, at Cleveland, Detroit) guarantees them a playoff berth. That's just the kind of carrot that, when dangled in front of a proven winner, sparks a late season playoff charge. *That's why I'm picking the **Steelers** to keep their playoff hopes alive and end Minnesota's streak.*

#### Dallas Cowboys (8-5) @ Washington Redskins (7-6)

Bill Parcells is still sore over the way the Redskins beat his Cowboys in front of the whole nation (well, those of us who were still awake, anyway) on Monday Night Football. For three and a half quarters the Cowboys dominated, and they took a 13-0 lead when Jose Cortez (yes, you read that right) kicked a 41 yard field goal with 6:01 left in the game. But then something funny happened. The Redskins decided that they wanted to win the game. Mark Brunell took every snap from the shotgun and passed on every down. It was desperation, and the Cowboys read it as such. "We have them beat!" they gloated collectively. So desperate were the Redskins that on 4<sup>th</sup> and 15, after a false start and three incomplete passes, they called the all-or-nothing play of their season. The result was a 39 yard touchdown pass to Santana Moss.

Down by only six points, the Redskins felt as though they'd been given a second chance at life. Their re-energized defense forced the Cowboys to punt on the next possession, and Brunell got the ball back on his own 20 yard line with 2:52 left in the game. Still in the shotgun, he completed a 10 yard pass to running back Clinton Portis that secured a first down. The Cowboys hunkered down to prevent the Skins from executing a long scoring drive that would use up the clock and leave them with no time left to go for the win. But the Cowboys had another thing coming, and that *thing* was a 70 yard touchdown pass on the very next play to (whom else) Santana Moss.

The Cowboys now trailed 13-14, but a great kick return by Tyson Thompson gave them the ball at the Washington 48 yard line with 2:28 remaining. That's an eternity in the NFL, so surely the Cowboys wouldn't panic. Surely they'd stick to their game plan that had worked for so much of the game. No such luck. Shell-shocked, the Dallas coaching staff turned to each other and gasped, "We've got to advance the ball a whole 20 yards in two and a half minutes! What ever shall we do?!" Dumfounded by each other's silence, they accepted the first idea that was thrown out, "Hey, the shotgun formation seemed to

work for them, so let's try that!" Just then two badly animated Germans showed up. "Brilliant!" they quipped. Heartened by this approval, the Cowboys went on to lose the game without calling even one more running play. Even though they got the ball back once more after forcing the Redskins to punt, the Cowboys remained dedicated to abandoning their game plan when it mattered the most. They couldn't possibly mess up worse than that, could they? I don't think so, and *that's why I'm picking the **Cowboys**.*

#### Atlanta Falcons (8-5) @ Chicago Bears (9-4)

Sunday, December 18, 2005 @ 8:30 PM ET on ESPN

The first half of last Monday Night's game between the Falcons and the Saints had me a bit concerned. The Atlanta defense was making Aaron Brooks look like John Elway, and the game seemed destined to be a shootout. At half time I asked myself, "Why is Brooks picking apart this secondary?" As I am wont to do when faced with such quandaries, I logged onto the internet and was reminded that when the Falcons last played the Saints they surrendered 211 yards to the New Orleans running backs. "Of course," I noted out loud, "they're overcompensating." I was pleased, therefore, to see that the coaching staff made the necessary adjustments at half time, and the Falcons kept the Saints off the scoreboard in the second half.

The Bears pose an interesting challenge for Mike Vick this week. They are – as you know – the owners of the league's stingiest defense, but last week the Steelers proved that it is possible to score against them. Granted, the Falcons don't have Jerome Bettis on their roster, but they do have the league's top rushing attack which means their offensive line is pretty good. Their runners aren't too shabby, either. Warrick Dunn usually carries the bulk of the load, but don't be surprised if you see a lot more of T.J. Duckett this week. Vick will get some rushing yards despite having banged up ribs, but the primary order of business for him this week is to avoid turnovers. Coach Jim Mora knows that his team has a good chance to win if they don't let the Chicago defense put points on the board, so I expect he's instructed his players to protect the ball at all costs. The Bears don't do much on offense – especially not if you take away Thomas Jones and the running game – so look for the Falcons to dare Kyle Orton to beat them with his arm. I don't foresee a lot of passing yards being piled up since the temperature will be in the teens or twenties, and that could play into Chicago's hands.

There's an old football saying that "defense wins championships," but last weekend we saw what happens to a team that has *only* a defense. The Bears will need a big rushing day from Jones and a mistake free day from Orton along with a stellar defensive effort if they plan on derailing Atlanta's playoff hopes. The Falcons are an indoor team that isn't used to playing in such frigid temperatures, but I harken back to January 4, 2003 when the Falcons dealt the Packers their first ever home playoff loss and their first home loss of the season. And I remember earlier this season when the Bengals got an early 10 point lead and then intercepted Orton five times as the rookie quarterback attempted to get his team back in the game. *If the **Falcons** can score early and make the Bears play from behind, they'll not only keep their chances in the NFC South alive but they'll also shake up the NFC North considerably.*

#### Up The Gut

- Denver (10-3) @ Buffalo (4-9): Last week Denver looked complacent in victory but held onto its two game lead since the Chargers and Chiefs both lost. Expect more fire in the bellies of the **Broncos** this week since a win will give them the AFC West title if the Colts and Patriots both win at home.
- Arizona (4-9) @ Houston (1-12): The **Texans** have heard enough of the accusations that they're losing on purpose to assure themselves the top pick in the draft. They'll finally get win number two.
- Carolina (9-4) @ New Orleans (2-11): Another home-away-from-home game for the Saints will help the **Panthers** avenge their Week 1 home loss and keep their NFC South division title hopes alive.
- NY Jets (3-10) @ Miami (6-7): The Dolphins will know if their playoff hopes are still alive before they play this game, so this is an interesting pick to make. Expect a dominating performance by Miami if New England loses, but if the Patriots are triumphant the **Dolphins** will win with much heavier hearts.
- Philadelphia (5-8) @ St. Louis (5-8): I like the way Mike McMahon plays the game, but I don't see the Eagles winning in St. Louis this week. Something tells me that Ryan Fitzpatrick will protect the ball better this week and that Steven Jackson will carry the **Rams** to victory in front of their home crowd.
- San Diego (8-5) @ Indianapolis (13-0): It's been a rough year for the Chargers, but 2005 may still hold some promise for them. Having gotten all they needed from 2005, the Colts may rest some key players down the stretch so it's hard to say what will happen in this game. I get the feeling, though, that Tony Dungy will go for the win. He doesn't want his **Colts** to give another AFC team a free pass.
- Seattle (11-2) @ Tennessee (4-9): The league's youngest team has improved a lot, but the Titans won't be able to stop the **Seahawks** from wrapping up home field advantage throughout the playoffs.

- San Francisco (2-11) @ Jacksonville (9-4): If this is anything but a gimme for the **Jaguars** then you can call me Santa Claus. Well, you can call me that anyway, but I'm still not bringing you any gifts!
- Cincinnati (10-3) @ Detroit (4-9): A win is all the **Bengals** need to wrap up the AFC North title. It's fortuitous, then, that they face the Lions in a climate controlled stadium! See you in January, Carson.
- Cleveland (4-9) @ Oakland (4-9): I like the way the Browns fought against the Bengals last week in Cincinnati, but that was a division game against a familiar opponent. The **Raiders** have benched Marques Tuiasosopo after he bombed last week, so Kerry Collins will be playing to prove a point.
- Green Bay (3-10) @ Baltimore (4-9): I love the way the Packers are sticking by Brett Favre. He's the brain of the offense. It wouldn't work any better without him. And it's not his fault that the team's two legs were taken out from under them when Javon Walker and Ahman Green were lost to season-ending injuries. Favre won't want to go out like this, so expect him to be back with a vengeance next year. The Packers won't beat the **Ravens** this week, but they'll be a much better team next season.

### Statistics

- I went 3-2 in my featured games last week with an overall record of 13-3. My season record is now 134-74 (64.42%), and my all-time record is 425-243 (63.62%).
- 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 Cincinnati (-11.5), Indianapolis (-7.5) and the Giants (-2).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 2-1 last week (74-67-3 all-time). All my locks won, but the Bengals got into a dog fight with the Browns and failed to cover the spread.

### Week 15 Locks

Seattle (-7)  
Cincinnati (-8)  
Miami (-9)

### Keys

Holmgren's Heroes know they just need this one to secure home field advantage.  
They'll storm back after last week's close call.  
They're hosting the Jets with momentum and a key ingredient: HOPE.

### Standings

#### AFC East

New England (8-5)  
Miami (6-7)  
Buffalo (4-9)  
N.Y. Jets (3-10)

#### AFC North

Cincinnati (10-3)  
Pittsburgh (8-5)  
Baltimore (4-9)  
Cleveland (4-9)

#### AFC South

**Indianapolis (13-0)\***  
Jacksonville (9-4)  
Tennessee (4-9)  
Houston (1-12)

#### AFC West

Denver (10-3)  
San Diego (8-5)  
Kansas City (8-5)  
Oakland (4-9)

#### NFC East

NY Giants (9-4)  
Dallas (8-5)  
Washington (7-6)  
Philadelphia (5-8)

#### NFC North

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

#### NFC South

Carolina (9-4)  
Tampa Bay (9-4)  
Atlanta (8-5)  
New Orleans (2-11)

#### NFC West

**Seattle (11-2)**  
St. Louis (5-8)  
Arizona (4-9)  
San Francisco (2-11)

**Bold** indicates that a team won its division.

**Bold Italics** indicate that a team has clinched its division and a first round bye.

\* indicates that a team has clinched home field advantage up to the Super Bowl.