

ONE & DONE

That's what I get for saving it up. I'm referring – of course – to picking the Colts to lose. I was saving that pick for this week at Seattle when I figured they'd play their second string and use only half of the play book so as not to tip their hand to their potential Super Bowl opponent. But the Chargers had more fight in them than I anticipated. They gave an inspired defensive performance that Indy's foes will surely attempt to mimic in the playoffs.

Now that the dream of a perfect season is history, I have no doubt that the Indianapolis coaching staff will treat the remaining two regular season games as pre-season games – resting key players for most (if not all) of the game while running a much shorter and simpler version of their play book.

The tragic death (an apparent suicide) of James Dungy, head coach Tony Dungy's 18-year-old son, will inspire the Colts to play well regardless of their position or rank, but they will not pursue victory this week at the expense of their ultimate goal which is obviously to win the Super Bowl.

Last weekend we got a small dose of Saturday football, and this week that dose has been increased significantly since Sunday is Christmas Day. Enjoy your second straight three-day weekend of football. Oh, yeah... and Merry Christmas!

New York Giants (10-4) @ Washington Redskins (8-6)

This is the first of some very enticing match-ups on this week's schedule. The Giants are looking to wrap up the NFC East title while the Redskins are hoping to keep their playoff hopes alive by avenging their 36-0 loss from Week 8. After the Skins barely beat the Cardinals 17-13 two weeks ago I was sure they'd blown a 3-0 start and would miss the playoffs, but last week's 35-7 deconstruction of the Cowboys was an undeniable reminder that the Redskins have the talent and the potential to beat just about any team. A 7th ranked defense and 12th ranked offense make them hard to stop and hard to beat, but the Giants are confident coming off their dramatic 27-17 win over the Chiefs in which their re-shuffled offensive and defensive lines played far better than most pundits anticipated. Tiki Barber had a career day with 220 yards rushing, and it could take that kind of an effort from him for the Giants to win this week since Eli Manning has yet to prove that he can handle the pressure of big games on the road. Coach Tom Coughlin will try to call plays that will get Manning in an early groove, but the outcome of the game will ultimately hinge on Eli's ability to make smart decisions under pressure in a hostile environment. *He's learned a lot in his first full NFL season but not enough to keep me from picking the **Redskins** to keep their playoff hopes alive through the very last week of the season.*

San Diego Chargers (9-5) @ Kansas City Chiefs (8-6)

Congratulations! You've just knocked off the last undefeated team in the NFL. What are you going to do now? I'm sorry; did you just say that you're going to the land of frozen wheat fields? Bummer, dude.

The Chargers face their biggest challenge of the season this week at Arrowhead. Coming off one of the biggest wins in any of their careers, the members of Marty Schottenheimer's rugged crew must erase that accomplishment from their memories and play against the Chiefs as a team hungry for wins and glory. Division games are always tough, but this one will be even harder-fought since a playoff berth is on the line. The Chiefs are one of the toughest teams to beat on the road, and they're even more dangerous coming off a loss. A loss would eliminate the Chiefs from playoff contention, and the Chargers know that losing reduces their playoff chances to the "slim-to-none" range. But this game isn't just about playoffs. There are a couple of sub-plots worthy of attention.

First: Once again the Chiefs will face one of the league's elite running backs. Last week they were gashed by Tiki Barber, and this week they'll have to try to find a way to keep LaDainian Tomlinson in check. The Chargers face a similar challenge, though. Kansas City's Larry Johnson ran for 167 yards last week against the Giants and he has amassed 1418 yards this season despite starting just 7 games.

Second: Expect all kinds of rosy speech on the topic of Dick Vermeil. The 69-year-old coach will probably not return to Kansas City (or to coaching at all) next year if his Chiefs fail to make the playoffs. Vermeil is one of the best-liked coaches in the league, so expect the players wearing red to appear faster, bigger and more physical on the field this Saturday. *The playoff race will get even more interesting when the **Chiefs** outscore the Chargers and keep their slim playoff hopes alive with a win at Arrowhead Stadium.*

Atlanta Falcons (8-6) @ Tampa Bay Buccaneers (9-5)

Here's an interesting fact: The only team that scored more than 9 points against the Bears in Chicago this year is... (drum roll, please) ...the Cincinnati Bengals! What does that have to do with this game? Well, I'm just trying to cheer up the Falcons. They've got to be feeling pretty miserable after managing only a field goal in single-digit temperatures last week at Soldier Field. Unfortunately, things don't look much better for the Falcons this week. The Tampa Bay defense has always played well against Michael Vick, and they'll be playing for their honor in front of home fans who want to see them rebound from the 28-0 shutout they suffered in New England last week. Cadillac Williams certainly wasn't happy with the 23 yards he racked up on 14 carries, so expect him (and his offensive line) to step it up a notch against an Atlanta defense that can give up big plays against the running game. Both of these teams still have a shot at winning the division if Carolina falters, so this will be another game with a playoff feel. *I think this may be the first time this season I've picked against the Falcons, but I just can't see them beating the Buccaneers in Tampa when their last road victory was in Detroit nearly a month ago.*

Dallas Cowboys (8-6) @ Carolina Panthers (10-4)

Who are the Cowboys – really? When I try to explain their uneven play and their 1-3 record over the last month, it all comes down to this: the Cowboys are a bad running team. Julius Jones was supposed to be their savior, but his best performance this year was Week 1 when he rushed for 93 yards in the win at San Diego. Drew Bledsoe has done his best to keep his team in the playoff hunt, but he's been under more and more pressure every week as the playoffs approach. Defenses are beginning to understand that the Cowboys can't run the ball effectively, so Bledsoe's efficiency rating has dropped off as his interception total climbs. Remarkably, it's still possible for the Cowboys to make the playoffs, but they need to win their remaining games to have that chance.

The Panthers have been very good since losing to New Orleans in Week 1, but they showed vulnerability in their losses to Miami, Chicago and Tampa Bay. All three of those teams won because of relentless, physical defense and a powerful and persistent running game. The Cowboys have the defense for the job, so they need only to re-dedicate themselves to the ground game in order to win. The ideal formula would be for Julius Jones to get 20-25 carries and for Marion Barber III to get 10-15 carries. With that kind of a ball control offense they'd be able to score points while keeping Carolina's offense off the field. Sounds great, right? Yeah, but I don't think it will happen. *Bill Parcells is a pass-happy coach. The Panthers know that and will exploit it to win the turnover battle and the game.*

Pittsburgh Steelers (9-5) @ Cleveland Browns (5-9)

These teams last met in Cleveland when Ben Roethlisberger was injured. Charlie Batch won his second straight start in relief of Big Ben, and the Steelers scored 34 points (their season-high). Now that Ben is back this should be a walk in the park, right? Wrong. Since that game the Browns have gone 2-3 against teams with a combined 40-30 record. They shut out the Dolphins at home and squeaked by the Raiders in Oakland. Most impressively, the Jaguars and Bengals both needed late comebacks to beat them. Charlie Frye is starting to look like an NFL quarterback, and Ruben Droughns is a reliable and powerful running back. That the Browns have posted a 5-9 record so far despite having lost tight end Kellen Winslow, wide receiver Braylon Edwards and center Jeff Faine to season-ending injuries is a testament to the coaching prowess of Romeo Crennel (formerly the defensive coordinator for the three time Super Bowl Champion New England Patriots). It's important to keep Crennel in mind when discussing this game since he's largely responsible for the Steelers failing to follow up their 15-1 season with a Super Bowl victory last year. *His defense will make things hard on the Steelers but not for four quarters.*

Up The Gut

- Buffalo (4-10) @ Cincinnati (11-3): The **Bengals** have clinched the AFC North, but they're still playing for a first round bye. The Bills... aww, who am I kidding. The Bills don't stand a chance.
- Detroit (4-10) @ New Orleans (3-11): These teams (as Ben Folds would sing) are fighting "the battle of who could care less." The Lions didn't seem to care much last week, but I think the **Saints** care.
- Jacksonville (10-4) @ Houston (2-12): The **Jaguars** may be the least confidence-inspiring 10-4 team this league has seen in quite some time. I think they'll find a way to beat the Texans but barely.
- San Francisco (2-12) @ St. Louis (5-9): The 49ers started their season with a win over the Rams. Since then both teams have been decimated by injuries, but the **Rams** aren't hurt quite as badly.
- Tennessee (4-10) @ Miami (7-7): I'm impressed with the job Nick Saban has done in his first year as an NFL head coach. The **Dolphins** are a legitimate threat every week even without many big names.

- Philadelphia (6-8) @ Arizona (4-10): It's Josh McCown time again in Arizona, and that's usually enough for me to pick the Cardinals. Not this time. The **Eagles** are playing for self-respect (8-8).
- Indianapolis (13-1) @ Seattle (12-2): I don't see how the Colts can justify playing their starters for longer than a series or two. The **Seahawks**, however, still want to wrap up home field advantage.
- Oakland (4-10) @ Denver (11-3): It doesn't affect my pick, but I should tell you that Oakland running back LaMont Jordan is out with a toe injury. The **Broncos** should wrap up the division pretty easily.
- Chicago (10-4) @ Green Bay (3-11): I wouldn't put it past Brett Favre to have a great game at the least likely time, but I think the Bears have far too good of a defense and maybe even an offense now that Rex Grossman is their quarterback. How about 17-9? Add a defensive touchdown? OK. 24-9.
- Minnesota (8-6) @ Baltimore (5-9): I liked what I saw from the **Ravens** on Monday Night. In fact, I liked it enough to pick them to remind the Vikings that mediocrity is their tradition.
- New England (9-5) @ NY Jets (3-11): I'm not sure what Bill Belichick will do with his starters in this one since the Patriots have already wrapped up their division and probably can't get home field advantage. Something tells me the **Patriots** will win no matter what – even if Doug Flutie is the QB.

Statistics

- I went 3-2 in my featured games last week with an overall record of 11-5. My season record is now 145-79 (64.73%), and my all-time record is 436-248 (63.74%).
- UFR Formula: 14-2; Dr. Z's Power Rankings on SI.com: 12-4; ESPN.com Power Rankings: 12-4
- Last week's locks were Seattle (-7), Cincinnati (-8) and Miami (-9).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 1-2 last week (75-69-3 all-time). Once again my locks all won, but only the Bengals covered the spread against the demoralized Lions.

Week 16 Locks

Cincinnati (-13.5)
Denver (-13)
Pittsburgh (-7)

Keys

Chasing that first round bye.
Ditto.
There's a huge carrot dangling in front of the Steelers – the playoffs.

Standings

AFC East

New England (9-5)

Miami (7-7)
Buffalo (4-10)
N.Y. Jets (3-11)

NFC East

NY Giants (10-4)
Washington (8-6)
Dallas (8-6)
Philadelphia (6-8)

AFC North

Cincinnati (11-3)

Pittsburgh (9-5)
Baltimore (5-9)
Cleveland (5-9)

NFC North

Chicago (10-4)
Minnesota (8-6)
Detroit (4-10)
Green Bay (3-11)

AFC South

Indianapolis (13-1)*

Jacksonville (10-4)
Tennessee (4-10)
Houston (2-12)

NFC South

Carolina (10-4)
Tampa Bay (9-5)
Atlanta (8-6)
New Orleans (3-11)

AFC West

Denver (11-3)
San Diego (9-5)
Kansas City (8-6)
Oakland (4-10)

NFC West

Seattle (12-2)
St. Louis (5-9)
Arizona (4-10)
San Francisco (2-12)

Italics indicate that a team has clinched a playoff berth.

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.