

THE RUNDOWN

This is it – the last weekend of the regular season! This year's Week 17 slate of games is much more meaningful than it has been in past years. Instead of just one or two games having an impact on the playoff picture, this week's schedule is dominated by games that will contribute either directly or indirectly to the post-season destiny of those teams that are still "on the bubble."

In the AFC Pittsburgh and Kansas City are the only teams left in contention for the final Wildcard spot. Things are simple for the Steelers: "Win and you're in." With Detroit coming to Three Rivers this week, that's the scenario that seems most likely. Should calamity befall the Steelers, however, the Chiefs can still make the playoffs (if the Chargers lose to or tie the Broncos) with a win over the Bengals. I really hope you didn't find that confusing because this is crystal compared to the mire of the NFC picture.

In the NFC there are five teams (all from the East and South divisions) with uncertain playoff destinies. The Redskins, Cowboys, Giants, Panthers and Buccaneers are fighting for their respective division titles and the two NFC Wildcard berths. Only the Giants have assured themselves a playoff spot of some kind, and they can clinch the NFC East title with a victory in Oakland on Saturday. A loss there would open the door for the Redskins to win the division with a win in Philadelphia. The Cowboys can't win the division because of their inferior record against division opponents, but a win over the Rams Sunday night in the final game of the NFL's regular season would give them a Wildcard berth if the Redskins lose or the Panthers lose to the Falcons or (are you ready for this?) the Buccaneers and Giants both lose and the Buccaneers end up with a lower "strength of victory" score than the Giants and Cowboys. Whew!

Speaking of the Buccaneers, they can clinch the NFC South title with a victory over the Saints. It sounds simple, but the Saints have shown in the past that they love to spoil things for their division rivals. If the Saints manage to win in Tampa, the Panthers can win the division with a victory in Atlanta. If both the Bucs and Panthers win then the Panthers would make the playoffs as a Wildcard team. The Panthers can make the playoffs even if they lose as long as either the Cowboys or Redskins also lose. Got it? Wait. There's more! The Buccaneers can make the playoffs even if they lose as long as either the Cowboys or Redskins lose or if the Giants win. Aaaaaaand I'm spent.

Many thanks to the NFL's playoff scenarios page for the analysis: <http://www.nfl.com/news/story/9055604>

New York Giants (10-5) @ Oakland Raiders (4-11)

Saturday, December 31, 2005 @ 8:00 PM ET on CBS

As you just read, a lot of things will be quickly cleared up in the Giants can just win this game. If they do, the Redskins will know that they're playing for a Wildcard instead of the NFC East title, and the Buccaneers will know that they're assured of at least a Wildcard berth. First things first...

The Giants have won just two road games this year, and – as I wrote last week – victories in San Francisco and Philadelphia aren't impressive this year. That might be enough to make me pick Oakland except that the Raiders haven't won a home game in 10 weeks and have looked pretty bad losing seven of their last eight games. They lost all confidence in quarterback Kerry Collins, but Marques Tuiasosopo played even worse in his one start, so now Collins is back in. Running back LaMont Jordan is out with a toe injury and the offensive line is beat up, so as much as I'd like to pick the upset I just can't.

Eli Manning knows that he needs to step up and inspire some confidence in his team before the playoffs. The best way to do that would be to play his best game in weeks and to leave Oakland with a road win and some much needed momentum. *There will be Tiki Barber a-plenty, but Eli will win it for the **Giants**.*

Carolina Panthers (10-5) @ Atlanta Falcons (8-7)

The Panthers overcame a 1-2 start to the season and just four weeks ago they were 9-3 coming off an impressive home victory over the Falcons and seemed like a lock to win the NFC South. But then they dropped one to the Buccaneers and another to the Cowboys last week, and now the Panthers may need outside help just to make the playoffs. That kind of desperation is usually just the kind of fire that a good team can use to win a playoff berth, but the Falcons don't want to be a footnote to that story line. As far as coach Jim Mora, quarterback Mike Vick and running back Warrick Dunn are concerned there is very important business to handle even though their playoff hopes died with their overtime loss last week in Tampa. The Falcons not only want to avenge their earlier loss to the Panthers, they also want to end their season with a home victory in order to carry something positive into the off-season. *The **Falcons** will – as they say – "leave it all on the field" this Sunday in hopes of complicating Carolina's playoff chances.*

Cincinnati Bengals (11-4) @ Kansas City Chiefs (9-6)

There's no question that this is a "must win" game for the Chiefs. It's fortunate for them, then, that this is a home game. They haven't lost a home game since Week 4 when the Eagles left every last ounce of their season on the field at Arrowhead. It's also fortunate for the Chiefs that the Bengals could actually benefit from losing this game. How so? Pay close attention. The Bengals have clinched the AFC North title and know that they'll play a Wildcard team in one week's time. They also know that the Steelers will clinch the final AFC Wildcard berth with a win over Detroit this week. Therefore, if the Bengals win they would be the number three seed in the AFC and would face the Steelers in the first playoff game. However, if the Bengals lose and the Patriots win, the Bengals would hose the Jaguars in the first playoff game. Even though the Jaguars are the higher seed with a better record, it's pretty clear that they aren't as feared as the Steelers – especially with David Garrard filling in at quarterback. Another interesting story line here is that the Chiefs can make the playoffs only if they win and the Steelers and Chargers both lose. I'm not saying the Bengals will throw the game to eliminate the Steelers or at least to make sure they won't play them in the first round, but I do think that this is a classic case where it's perfectly justifiable for a coach to rest his key starters for the majority of the game. *The **Chiefs** will take the win any way they can get it.*

Washington Redskins (9-6) @ Philadelphia Eagles (6-9)

Joe Gibbs has got to be wondering what happened to his team during an eight week stretch in the middle of the season when they went 2-6. Granted, the Redskins had a tough schedule. They lost at Denver, at Kansas City, at the Giants and at Tampa Bay. All the road losses took so much of a toll on them that they then lost home games to Oakland and San Diego. The good news is that they woke up, won their last four games and can qualify for the playoffs with a victory in Philadelphia. The Eagles may seem like a walk-over, but don't forget that their roster includes a lot of proud, talented players – guys that were able to topple the Giants in overtime three weeks ago. *The **Redskins** know that they'll need to play tough defense and employ a physical running game with Clinton Portis in order to secure a playoff berth.*

Miami Dolphins (8-7) @ New England Patriots (10-5)

Raise your hand if you remember the winning streaks the Patriots rode to their last two Super Bowl victories. I see you in the back... and you by the window. No one else? How short our attention spans are in this modern age! I bring up the 20+ game winning streaks to point out that the Patriots are not in the habit of allowing momentum to slip away in the interest of resting players. That's why I think that, even though they have very little to gain in terms of playoff position, the Patriots will play their starters at full capacity for at least three quarters this week against the Dolphins. Bill Belichick knows that losing a home game against a division rival would not only be demoralizing to the fans but would also stymie the late season momentum his team has built now that they're getting some players back off the injury list.

Miami coach Nick Saban has already done all the Dolphins organization could have asked of him in his first season as an NFL coach. He took a team that was 4-12 last year and 3-7 after Week 11 of this season and somehow got them to play like a playoff team down the stretch. His Dolphins are on a five game winning streak thanks to some unlikely heroes named Gus Frerotte, Sage Rosenfels, Chris Chambers and Ricky Williams. Those guys owe Saban a lot, and they'll try their best to get him a winning season. I'm going to have to find a place to watch this one since it's not going to be on local TV out here in California. *I think the **Patriots** will win unless Belichick decides to rest his starters for some reason.*

Up The Gut

- Denver (12-3) @ San Diego (9-6): This one looked delicious until the Broncos wrapped up a first round bye. Now the schizophrenic **Chargers** will get an easy victory to round out their brutal season.
- Arizona (5-10) @ Indianapolis (13-2): Something tells me the **Colts** don't want to end their storied season with three-game losing streak, particularly if it involves rolling over to the Cardinals at home.
- Baltimore (6-9) @ Cleveland (5-10): If you live in an area where this game is being televised then you'll be fortunate enough to see two teams slugging it out with only the honor of victory on the line. The Ravens have looked pretty good over the last couple of weeks, but I'm calling this one for the home team coming off an embarrassing 41-0 loss. The **Browns** will end their season the right way.
- Buffalo (5-10) @ NY Jets (3-12): I wish I had it in me to pick the Jets, but I don't. It's the **Bills**.
- Detroit (5-10) @ Pittsburgh (10-5): The **Steelers** know what they want, and the Lions can't stop 'em.
- New Orleans (3-12) @ Tampa Bay (10-5): A few weeks ago in Baton Rouge the Saints confounded Chris Simms and stalled Cadillac Williams but still lost 10-3. This time it'll be the **Bucs** by 20 or more.

- Seattle (13-2) @ Green Bay (3-12): The Seahawks will be Carrier Pigeon-ing it in (Yes! I just coined a new phrase!) since they've already accomplished their regular season goals. Brett Favre and the **Packers** will end their miserable season with a win in front of their extremely loyal home crowd.
- Houston (2-13) @ San Francisco (3-12): It was supposed to be the [Reggie] Bush Bowl, but the 49ers went and beat the Rams last week. Now it's Streak Gate. Can the **49ers** win two in a row? Yep.
- Tennessee (4-11) @ Jacksonville (11-4): I've got to tell you that I don't know what to make of this game. All I can figure is that the **Jaguars** will win because they're the home team in a divisional game. Does it matter that they've already secured a playoff berth? Maybe. I guess we'll see...
- Chicago (11-4) @ Minnesota (8-7): A few weeks ago I thought this would be the top game of the week, but the Bears surprised us all by clinching a first round bye and the **Vikings** surprised no one by falling apart down the stretch. As reader Ron Wilhelm put it, "Chicago will Bear-ly show up."
- St. Louis (5-10) @ Dallas (9-6): Though I've reserved the "schizo" moniker for the Chargers, the Cowboys were a close second in the degrading nick name sweepstakes. I have it on good authority that after reading UFR last week (Hey! It could happen!) Bill Parcels shouted, "Pass-happy, huh?! I'll show you pass-happy." He stormed out of his office, got on the team plane and instructed Julius Jones to run for 194 yards just to shut me up (and to make me wish I hadn't benched him on my fantasy football team). Well, Bill, you're going to have to do that more than once to keep me quiet. I still think you're a pass-happy coach, but that won't stop me from picking the **Cowboys** to win.

Statistics

- I went 4-1 in my featured games last week with an overall record of 11-5. My season record is now 156-84 (65.00%), and my all-time record is 447-253 (63.86%).
- UFR Formula: 9-7; Dr. Z's Power Rankings on SI.com: 7-9; ESPN.com Power Rankings: 7-9
- Last week's locks were Cincinnati (-13.5), Denver (-13) and Pittsburgh (-7).
- "Lock of the Week" Update: 2-1 last week (77-70-3 all-time). The "Carson Palmer for MVP" talk took a week off after his last-minute interception gave the Bills a victory in Cincinnati.

Week 17 Locks

Pittsburgh (-14)
Washington (-7)
Dallas (-12.5)

Keys

Overpower the Lions and the playoffs are yours.
I like road teams that are favored, especially when their playoff life is at stake.
A running game? Inconceivable! Show it to me again...

Standings

AFC East

New England (10-5)
Miami (8-7)
Buffalo (5-10)
N.Y. Jets (3-12)

AFC North

Cincinnati (11-4)
Pittsburgh (10-5)
Baltimore (6-9)
Cleveland (5-10)

AFC South

Indianapolis (13-2)*
Jacksonville (11-4)
Tennessee (4-11)
Houston (2-13)

AFC West

Denver (12-3)
Kansas City (9-6)
San Diego (9-6)
Oakland (4-11)

NFC East

NY Giants (10-5)
Washington (9-6)
Dallas (9-6)
Philadelphia (6-9)

NFC North

Chicago (11-4)
Minnesota (8-7)
Detroit (5-10)
Green Bay (3-12)

NFC South

Tampa Bay (10-5)
Carolina (10-5)
Atlanta (8-7)
New Orleans (3-12)

NFC West

Seattle (13-2)*
St. Louis (5-10)
Arizona (5-10)
San Francisco (3-12)

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.