

SECOND CHANCES

Rarely in sports does a team or individual get a second chance, but this weekend's Divisional Playoffs provide just that for the Seahawks, Patriots, Steelers and Panthers. After losing to their opponents during the regular season, these teams will get a chance for revenge on a much bigger stage. But passage to the Conference Championships is highly valued and will require mastery of a two-fold challenge.

1. Correct (and expose) mistakes made in the first game.
2. Get the upper hand by securing (and not falling victim to) the element of surprise.

This round of the playoffs has long been dominated by the well-rested home teams, but this year's road teams are among the best in recent memory. Is there an upset in the making? I believe so...

Washington Redskins (11-6) @ Seattle Seahawks (13-3)

Saturday, January 14, 2006 @ 4:30 PM ET on FOX

Not many Seahawks fans were surprised when their team visited FedEx Field on October 2nd and lost to the Redskins in overtime. After all, Mike Holmgren's team has been lousy on the road for years. Depression began to set in for many fans. Two road losses and two home wins sounded far too familiar for 2-2 Seattle. Meanwhile in our nation's capital, the Joe Gibbs bandwagon began to take reservations. The Redskins were 3-0 thanks to the new-found dynamite combination of quarterback Mark Brunell and wide receiver Santana Moss. "I told you the old man would deliver in his second year back!" exclaimed fans who in fact had never said anything of the sort. "I knew it was a good move to get Moss from the Jets!" asserted others who just months before had wondered why the Redskins had paid so much money for a short, aging, under-performing receiver.

Fast-forward to January 1st. My! How things change! The Seahawks have won 11 straight and have earned the right to get Shaun Alexander the single season touchdown record, the season rushing title and then get their star out of the chilly Green Bay air. Meanwhile in the City of Brotherly Love the Redskins are fighting to make the playoffs against a team that's supposed to be demoralized after going from NFC Champions to spoilers. It's the end of the third quarter, though, and the Eagles are up 20-17. To their credit, the Redskins shut out the Eagles 14-0 in the fourth quarter and then slid past the Bucs in last week's Wildcard Playoffs to earn this chance, but you can see quite plainly how close they came to watching this week's games from the comfort of their lavish homes.

The Seahawks made very few mistakes in their Week 4 loss to the Redskins, but that doesn't mean they won't improve. Shaun Alexander will get more than 98 rushing yards, and Matt Hasselbeck will get more than one touchdown pass. More importantly, however, the Seahawks will defend better. Robert Royal and Mike Sellers (Who? Exactly.) will not score touchdowns in Seattle, and more importantly Santana Moss will not be allowed to score. *The **Seahawks** will delight their fans by FINALLY winning a playoff game for the first time since – well, you'll hear that statistic enough on Saturday, so I'll just leave it at that.*

New England Patriots (11-6) @ Denver Broncos (13-3)

Saturday, January 14, 2006 @ 8:00 PM ET on CBS

This may be one of the best games of the year, and I'm so happy that – thanks to TiVo – I won't miss a minute of this game even if "the big one" should happen to shake California like a maid dusting a rug. The Broncos won the last time the Patriots came to town, but that New England squad was battered, bruised and missing some of its key players. This time around the Patriots are healthy, confident and dangerous. They are, after all, the defending Super Bowl Champions, and their coach is one of the most respected and feared minds in the sport. Bill Belichick is not intimidated by anyone, but he does have a tendency to intimidate his foes. Consider that the first time these teams met the Broncos, playing at home, led 28-3 with four minutes remaining in the third quarter, but Belichick's team never quit on him. Instead, they rallied to score a field goal and two late touchdowns, but their comeback came undone when they used their final time out with 2:20 remaining in the game and then allowed the Broncos to get the first down that granted them the right to run out the clock.

The Broncos may be rested and they may be hosting a Divisional Playoff, but this is not a team that can honestly boast that it is just as confident as the visitors. They got the upper hand in their sparring match when the Champions had one hand tied behind their back, but now the Champs are game-ready. Tom Brady's shoulder has healed, and running back Corey Dillon is back in the lineup. Tedy Bruschi is healthy enough to contribute on defense, and the defenders filling in for the starters who suffered season-ending injuries are now wiser and more experienced than they were three months ago.

The key for both defenses will be their ability to make the opposing offense one-dimensional. "Hit the body and the head will fall." If the running game is stymied the quarterback will have less time to throw the ball, and incompletions, sacks and interceptions may follow. If both defenses succeed then the game comes down to quarterbacks. Jake Plummer lost his first and only playoff game with the Broncos last year, but he's made a new nickname for himself this year. "No-mistake Jake" sounds like a cheer when it's true, but if Belichick's defensive schemes succeed the moniker could cross angry lips as a jeer.

Tom Brady is... well... he's Tom Brady. He went from being a no-name back-up quarterback to being a three-time Super Bowl winner and almost assuredly a future inductee into the NFL Hall of Fame. He's 10-0 in playoff games, and he never seems to lose his cool. His completion percentage was just 52.2% the last time he played the Broncos, so expect that to improve now that he'll have a running game to abate some pressure.

Mike Shanahan will try to bludgeon the Patriots with his running schemes, and if that doesn't work he'll try to surprise them with trickery and oddly timed long passes. But ultimately Shanahan must either stop Tom Brady or find an answer for him if he hopes to secure victory for the Broncos. *He may succeed at times, but I don't think the Broncos can beat this version of the **Patriots** for four quarters. I'm picking the upset.*

Pittsburgh Steelers (12-5) @ Indianapolis Colts (14-2)

Sunday, January 15, 2006 @ 1:00 PM ET on CBS

On Monday, November 28th the Colts needed less than two minutes to make their point. Five seconds into the game they were penalized 15 yards because they were so eager to show the nation how dominant they could be. A minute and nineteen seconds later their defense left the field content to have forced the first of what they expected to be many three-and-outs over the course of the night. Ten seconds later Peyton Manning took his first snap, dropped back to pass and hit Marvin Harrison for an 80 yard touchdown. The final score was 26-7, and it proved that the Colts – even when they're beating you with their defense – always find ways to beat you with their offense.

That's why it is imperative for the Steelers to possess the ball on Sunday. Willie Parker must run, run, run. Jerome Bettis must RUN. Deuce Staley (if he's suited up) and Verron Haynes must run the ball as though their very lives depended on every yard they gain. Sure, Ben Roethlisberger will have to throw the ball some to keep the Indianapolis defense honest, but if we're talking about honest... let's be. Honestly the only way the Steelers can beat the Colts is by keeping their offense off the field. They can't be behind or even on time of possession. They need to limit the Colts to less than 20 minutes with the ball, and when the Steelers have the ball they need to put points on the board.

The problem for the Steelers is that the Colts have essentially had an entire month off. While the Steelers were fighting for their playoff lives the Colts were deciding to rest starters after losing their first game of the season to the Chargers on December 18th. There are those who say that certainly the Colts have accumulated "rust" because of their long break, but the Colts are quick to point out that they lost every pre-season game but then started 13-0 in the regular season. Frankly, I fear for the psyche of the entire proud city of Pittsburgh. Steelers fans will not soon recover if their team falls flat on its face, but the team reflects its city so I'm expecting Bill Cowher's crew to fight hard to the bitter end. Unfortunately, I do think it will be a bitter end for Steelers fans. *The **Colts** are just too good and too motivated to lose this one.*

Carolina Panthers (12-5) @ Chicago Bears (11-5)

Sunday, January 15, 2006 @ 4:30 PM ET on FOX

There isn't much to love about the Bears unless you're from Chicago or the type of person that holds a special place in your heart for "good old-fashioned smash-mouth football." I am not from Chicago, and I regret to say that defensive dominance only gets my pulse racing when it generates points off turnovers. Hey! Whaddya know?! I may just be in luck. Both of these teams score with their defenses. But in order to score with your defense you have to first cause the opposition to make a mistake on offense, and that leads us to the play that made the difference in the game when these teams met back on November 20th.

Less than two minutes into the game the Panthers found themselves facing 3rd and 10 from their own 37 yard line. Not yet knowing just how good the Chicago defense was, the coaches called for quarterback Jake Delhomme to pass for the first down. Instead his pass to Ricky Proehl was intercepted by Nathan Vasher, and three plays later the Bears had scored a the game's only touchdown on an 8-yard drive.

The Panthers know exactly what they need to do in order to have a chance to win this game. They must avoid turnovers and be patient on offense while stuffing Thomas Jones and the Chicago running game so they can put pressure on the young quarterback Rex Grossman. The Bears – while seeking turnovers with their defense – will certainly run the ball but will also look for the perfect moment to surprise the Panthers with long passes. Lovie Smith knows that the Panthers will be focused so much on stopping Jones and getting pressure on Grossman that there could be some cracks for Grossman to exploit with his strong arm. If the Bears get a touchdown or two they will simply smother the Panthers and hang on for dear life until the clock runs out. *I foresee more scoring than last time but the same result: **Bears** by a bit.*