

HOME AGAIN

Earlier this week I began thinking about the concept of home. It's important in sporting events, and it's a common theme in music, too. A quick search of Gracenote (the online CD database) turned up 78,842 albums that contain songs with the word "home" in the title. Phil Collins memorably pleaded "Take Me Home," Lynyrd Skynyrd extolled the wonders of "Sweet Home Alabama," and we all want to be "Home For Christmas." We identify with songs about home because the concept comforts us the same way it did the songwriter. Seldom does the same calming effect accompany thoughts of the road. We might say that we "can't wait to get on that road again" but in time we'll find ourselves feeling unexpectedly like Ozzy Osbourne must have felt when he wrote "Road To Nowhere" and "Mama, I'm Coming Home."

For the Steelers and the Panthers, it's been a "Long And Winding Road" from fighting for a Wildcard to the Conference Championships, but they have still not achieved their ultimate goal of winning the Super Bowl. The road to that goal takes both teams westward where they must attempt to unseat the only two teams that finished the regular season without losing a single game at home. It's a lot to ask of any team, but it's an even taller order if you consider that no Wildcard team has ever won the Super Bowl.

AFC CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

Pittsburgh Steelers (13-5) @ Denver Broncos (14-3)

Sunday, January 22, 2006 @ 3:00 PM ET on CBS

After last week's win in Indianapolis I muttered the phrase "team of destiny" to myself, and for the first time in a very long time I was not saying it sarcastically. Too many things seemed to come together for the Steelers to win. The most notable was Nick Harper's wife having stabbed him in the thigh with a knife earlier in the week causing him to run slow enough that Ben Roethlisberger was able to trip him up and prevent him from scoring a touchdown off Jerome Bettis's goal line fumble. Then the most accurate field goal kicker in NFL history completely shanked a 46-yard field goal attempt and sealed Pittsburgh's victory. All of this came one week after Cincinnati's MVP candidate, Pro Bowl quarterback suffered a torn ACL on his second play from scrimmage. Jon Kitna proved a poor substitute, and the Steelers won easily. And let's not forget that the Steelers needed help to get into the playoffs in the first place and were pleasantly surprised when the Dolphins beat the Chargers in San Diego and when the Chiefs allowed Tiki Barber to run virtually untouched for a season-high and franchise record 220 yards.

If the Steelers truly are the team of destiny this year then it will take a super-human, flawless performance by the Broncos to beat them. I say that because a team of destiny by definition cannot beat itself, thereby shattering the very principles upon which destiny itself is built. Keeping this in mind, let's look back to the last time a team genuinely and legitimately beat the Steelers in their current incarnation. By that I mean, let's ignore games in which Tommy Maddox played quarterback and those in which Ben Roethlisberger played but was really only 70-80% healthy. On December 4, 2005 the Steelers hosted the Bengals and were beaten fairly and squarely 38-31 by a perfect combination of Carson Palmer's quick-strike aerial attack and Rudy Johnson's unrelenting running. It was a high scoring game partially because of Cincy's offensive success but also because the Bengals created turnovers. Big Ben uncharacteristically threw three interceptions to go with his season-high 386 passing yards. The Steelers also fumbled the ball a whopping four times, but (again, uncharacteristically) only Hines Ward's fumble resulted in a turnover. I have reached a conclusion, and that is that a team must play flawlessly and cause the Steelers to make multiple mistakes in order to beat the team of destiny.

I was impressed with Denver's defensive and offensive persistence in last week's victory over the Patriots, and I know that Jake Plummer's mobility and accuracy on the run have created problems for defenses all year long. However, the Steelers have extremely physical, speedy and intelligent linebackers, including ball hawk Troy Polamalu, who should be able to make Plummer pay for running too much and may even come up with a couple interceptions. Pittsburgh should also be able to keep the Denver defense off balance by combining the rushing talents of "Fast" Willie Parker and Jerome "The Bus" Bettis with Big Ben's accurate short and deep passes. Don't rule out a trick play involving Antwaan Randle El, either. Last year the Steelers were 15-1 in the regular season, and they only lost the AFC Championship game at home because the Patriots were still the ruling team of destiny. *They weren't as good throughout the regular season this year because of injury problems, but now the **Steelers** are healthy and playing the best football in the league at precisely the right time.*

NFC CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

Carolina Panthers (13-5) @ Seattle Seahawks (14-3)

Sunday, January 22, 2006 @ 6:30 PM ET on FOX

Many scoffed at the notion of the Panthers making it to the Super Bowl this year after their 1-2 start to the season, but it became very hard to question them over the course of the last few weeks. After ending their age-old losing streak to the Falcons by beating them twice down the stretch, the Panthers shut out Eli Manning and the Giants in the Meadowlands and then outscored Rex Grossman and the Bears in Chicago. But this week the Panthers must travel across the country to face a new challenge in Seattle.

The Seahawks are not led by a second year quarterback (as their previous two foes were), but they do have a history of post-season mediocrity. If the Panthers are hoping that the mistake-prone "Seabags" will show up this Sunday they have another thing coming. The Seahawks have weathered the storm of having to win a playoff game without their star running back. Shaun Alexander's early exit from last week's game against the Redskins concerned me, but I was pleasantly surprised that Mike Holmgren's crew was able to adapt and play tough defense against Joe Gibbs's squad. Sure Mark Brunell put up some good numbers (22 of 37 for 242 yards and a touchdown), but the Seattle's defense held Clinton Portis to just 41 rushing yards and ultimately only gave up a field goal and a touchdown.

Shaun Alexander will be back in the starting lineup for the Seahawks this week, and I know he'll be chomping at the bit to run, run, run. His running will open up the passing game for Matt Hasselbeck and his group of underrated receivers enough that the Seahawks will score at a steady pace. Unfortunately for the Panthers, their "throw it to Steve Smith and hand it to DeShaun Foster" offensive game plan took a huge hit last week when Foster broke his ankle. Nick Goings and Brad Hoover won't combine for enough rushing yards to keep pressure off Jake Delhomme, and that will lead to more than a few punts and a couple of interceptions. In case you hadn't already noticed, I'm picking the Seahawks to win comfortably.