

NFL 2008 - Week 11

by Joe Mulder

Week 10: 6-8

Overall: 63-79-3

When a 6-8 week represents a marked improvement, I think it's safe to assume it's not your year.

The Smartest Thing I Said Last Week:

Raiders stink.

[Carolina played pretty dreadfully and still managed to cover a 9.5-point spread in Oakland]

The Dumbest Thing I Said Last Week:

RAMS @ Jets -9

[The Jets won by 44 points. You'd think I would learn to stop picking against them. Maybe next week...]

Jets @ PATRIOTS -3

The Jets won 34-31 in overtime; it looks like we can look forward to me picking the Thursday night game wrong as a new weekly feature.

Broncos @ FALCONS -6.5

Four games is a pretty small sample size; nevertheless, the Falcons have yet to lose at home. The Broncos' winning record is almost some sort of bizarre joke; they're like a mocked-up version of a good team, like those fake cars that Michael Keaton and George Wendt try to pass off at the end of *Gung Ho*. That's right: *Gung Ho*. That's the reference I went with. It's a brand new week, kiddies, and I'm feeling good about things.

Texans @ COLTS -8

"How I Met Your Mother" – which, if you aren't watching, you must – introduced another new and immediately indispensable phrase into the cultural lexicon this week: The Cheerleader Effect. The Cheerleader Effect occurs when a group of women, as a whole, combines to look much better than the sum of its parts. None of the individual women might be particularly good-looking upon closer inspection, but from across the room they appear to be a group of hot chicks.

That's what the 2008 Colts are: a Cheerleader Effect of a football team. From across the room you see the winning record, you see Peyton Manning and Marvin Harrison and Reggie Wayne, you see Bob Sanders and Dwight Freeney, you see Tony Dungy over on the sidelines; why, they hardly

look any different than the team that won the Super Bowl a scant 21 months ago. But take a look at the parts: Manning is battling injury and isn't quite himself, Harrison is aging faster than Tom Skerritt, Sanders is always banged up, Freeney isn't the dominant player he was a few years ago, Dungy might be thinking about retirement and have one foot out the door, and the team, while 5-4, has actually trailed by double-digits at some point in three of its five wins.

It would be hard to make the case that the Colts should be favored by eight, but, luckily for them, they're playing the Texans this week. As I pointed out last week, the Texans looked like they might be in the mix after a three-game winning streak against the Dolphins (decent), Lions (really bad) and Bengals (really, really bad), but after two losses against two decent teams since that streak, I think we can declare the Texans' season a lost cause. Sorry, guys. I really thought the fact that one of your players celebrated a touchdown with the Conan O'Brien "string dance" would have been a harbinger of great things for you.

Raiders @ DOLPHINS -10

The Dolphins haven't beaten anybody by as much as ten points since Week 3, but, the Raiders are certainly the team against which you'd expect them to buck that trend.

Miami's "Wildcat" offense – in which a running back takes a direct snap from center – has been the talk of the NFL thus far in 2008, and other teams have run their own versions of it in recent weeks. The degree to which the NFL is a copycat league never ceases to amaze; every NFL coach and coordinator knew that this particular football tactic existed prior to the Dolphins' unveiling of it in Week 3, and yet nobody was using it at all. It has been around essentially as long as football itself, but, now that the Dolphins are using it, other teams suddenly thought, "oh, yeah, let's try it too?" If it's so great, why weren't you already doing it? What the heck are they paying you for? Huh?

Ravens @ GIANTS -7

Atlanta's rookie quarterback Matt Ryan is getting a lot of attention this season, and deservedly so; the Georgia Dome was a mausoleum last season, and Ryan, along with new coach Mike Smith, have helped resurrect the Falcons franchise much more quickly than almost anyone thought possible.

But let's save some rookie quarterback love for Baltimore's Joe Flacco, who was playing for the Fightin' Blue Hens of the University of Delaware this time last year, facing off against the likes of Towson, Monmouth, New Hampshire and James Madison. Flacco has survived a rough start (one touchdown against seven interceptions as the Ravens opened the season 2-3), the quantum leap in the quality of competition he's facing, and the fact that he looks like Adam Carolla's little brother and has become the type of solid,

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mistake-free quarterback (six TDs, zero INTs and one fumble during Baltimore's current four-game winning streak) that these Ravens have always depended on in order to win.

That said, Flacco and his mates face the best team in football on Sunday in the defending champion New York Giants. The Giants run the ball better than any other team in the league, while the Ravens stop the run better than anyone. It should be a tough, physical, grinding kind of game, and I hate to give away seven points, but the Giants are just so darn good, so let's take them.

Lions @ PANTHERS -14

It's not that Carolina is incapable of honking a game here or there ("here" being Minneapolis and "there" being Tampa, if you look at their schedule so far this year), but they're not going to do it at home against the worst team in the league.

Meanwhile, Daunte Culpepper is back in the NFL and starting for the Lions, and, take it from a lifelong Vikings fan: Daunte Culpepper does not go on the road and beat good teams.

EAGLES @ Bengals +9

The Eagles are damn good, but they play in the brutal NFC East. As such, they can't possibly afford to lose winnable games if they want to have any shot at the playoffs. I suspect they'll come out Sunday and tear the Bengals limb from limb, just to be safe. They know they can't afford to take any game for granted.

Bears @ PACKERS -3.5

The Bears really don't have any bad losses (the four teams that have beaten the Bears are a combined 28-8 this season) this season. The Packers haven't lost to a team without a winning record, either... tell you what: let's go with the Packers, just because they probably need this one more. You don't want to fall two games out of first place with only six more to play.

[note: originally, the above read "let's go Packers, just because they probably need this one more." I changed the wording, because I'll be damned if I'm ever going to write the words "let's go Packers" in any context. So there]

SAINTS @ Chiefs +5.5

The Chiefs have actually been in their last three games, against three decent-to-excellent teams. The Saints are slipping, their playoff hopes getting slimmer by the minute (yes, even *this* minute, while they're not even playing. I know; it's weird). Still, I couldn't feel good picking the league's worst defense, Kanas City, against the league's best offense, New Orleans. I'd like to pick the Chiefs this week to beat that spread at home, but I just can't.

Vikings @ BUCCANEERS -4

Back when the Vikings and Buccaneers used to be in the same division, and would therefore play each other twice every season, they used to split those two games almost without fail. The year the Vikings went 15-1 in the regular season? That one loss was, of course, to Tampa Bay; they even split that year.

These two teams could both wind up in the playoffs (if the Vikings get exceedingly lucky), so I'll hope that Tampa Bay wins this one. That way, if they play again, the Vikings are a shoo-in.

Rams @ 49ERS -6.5

Peeee-yew.

Cardinals @ SEAHAWKS +3

The Seahawks are pretty much out of it, so hosting first-place Arizona this week is about as close as they're going to get to a playoff game. They're playing for pride at this point. Seattle QB Matt Hasselbeck ought to return from injury this Sunday, and something tells me that the Cardinals are due to honk one here.

Titans @ JAGUARS +3

This should be a heck of a game; the Jaguars really need it to keep their slim playoff hopes alive and avoid having 2008 turn into a crushing disappointment after coming in with very high expectations.

The Titans come in at 9-0, and I have a feeling that this could be the game after which everyone does that spin where they say it's actually good that they finally lost, because now they don't have to worry about winning streaks and being undefeated and whatnot. I never really bought into all of that until last year, when, as we saw, the Patriots came into the Super Bowl at 18-0 looking really uptight and ended up giving the game away. Now, I suspect there might be something to it. Am I saying the Titans will lose on purpose? No...

Wait, why not? Screw it: I guarantee that the Tennessee Titans will lose Sunday's game in Jacksonville on purpose. Why not? I'm 63-79-3 this year; what have I possibly got to lose?

Chargers @ STEELERS -5

I don't know what to make of these Steelers; not at all. The Chargers should be able to throw the ball on them, but, who knows? Ben Roethlisberger is still banged up and the Steelers secondary is depleted, but, who knows?

I think, ultimately, I'm going to have to get over my

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suspicious that the Chargers are going to turn things around and be an elite team again this year. Let's start by picking against them right here, okay?

COWBOYS @ Redskins +1.5

The Redskins are banged up at running back, and haven't looked particularly impressive for the last month or so. The Cowboys are getting Tony Romo back, albeit with a balky finger on his throwing hand. A loss to Washington would go a long way toward completing Dallas's free-fall from "consensus best team in football" to "on the outside of the playoff race, looking in." Dallas coach Wade Phillips even got the dreaded "the coach's job is perfectly safe" kiss of death from owner Jerry Jones this week.

Can I abstain? Can I just pick neither team? No? Well, I'll take Washington, with much trepidation.

No, wait: Dallas. I just realized I feel just a little bit better about Dallas.

Browns @ BILLS -5

The Bills need this one desperately. Hopefully that'll be a good enough reason to take them.
