NFL 2008 - Conference Championships
by Joe Mulder

Last Week: 2-2

Playoffs Overall: 2-4

The Smartest Thing I Said Last Week:

> The Chargers got luuuucky, folks. Lucky to make the playoffs in the first place, lucky to draw the Colts, whom they always play tough for some reason, lucky to win the coin toss in overtime...

> So as long as Darren Sproles runs wild for 300+ yards and the Chargers have the greatest special teams playoff game in league history, San Diego should have a chance against the mighty Steelers. If not, things don't look so good.

The Steelers won handily, a 62-yard touchdown catch-and-run by Sproles with under two minutes to play cutting the margin of victory to a somewhat-respectable-looking 11 points. But it wasn't close.

The Dumbest Thing I Said Last Week:

> [I]t ought to be a tough week for the Cardinals.

I mean, we all thought that, so it wasn't that dumb of a thing to say. But the Cardinals whupped the Panthers by 20 points, on the road.

Before we get to Sunday's games, let's talk about overtime. At long last there seems to be momentum developing against the NFL's current overtime system, to the point that we may see a change in the rules soon. This is good; such a change is long overdue. NFL overtime games are "sudden-death," in which the first team to score wins the game (if neither team scores after fifteen minutes of overtime then the game ends in a tie, a rule Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb admitted not knowing after his team tied the Bengals earlier this season).

The major problem with this format, as seen two weeks ago when the Chargers beat the Colts in the first round of the playoffs, is that a coin toss determines which team gets the ball first in overtime, and the team that gets the ball first wins 64% of overtime games (that stat, like the next one I'll cite in just a second, applies to overtime games since 2006, and was reported by *Time Magazine* in November as having come from the Elias Sports Bureau). In fact, the coin-toss winner won 44% of overtime games on the first possession, without the opposing team ever getting a chance on offense. Almost half the time, the winner of the coin flip marches down the field and scores without the other team getting to touch the ball.

There seems to be a growing consensus against this system, and an urge to fix it before a conference title game or a Super Bowl is decided in such a random, unsatisfying manner (conference title games have gone into overtime before – ask a Vikings fan about the 1998 NFC title game, and if you can still hear with all of the blood pouring out of your ears from the savage beating you just endured, he'll tell you all about it – but to the best of my knowledge no team has ever marched down the field on the opening possession of overtime and scored to win a trip to the Super Bowl. The Super Bowl itself has never gone into overtime). The problem is that few people can agree on the right solution. I have it, and I'll give it to you in a minute, but first let's examine why the lesser ideas won't cut it.

The Idea: A system like college football has, where one team, then the other, starts at the 25 yard-line and gets an offensive possession. Whichever team is leading after both teams have had an equal number of possessions is the winner.

The Drawback(s): It's sort of recess-y. Apart from field goal kicking, it takes special teams – an important part of football – out of the equation. It makes for inflated final scores and skewed offensive numbers. A college-style overtime wouldn't fit in the NFL, I don't think.

The Idea: Play sudden-death, but simply change the rules so that each team gets the ball at least once.

The Drawback(s): While this would be preferable to the current system, it would still confer an unfair advantage on the coin toss winner. Let's say Team A wins the coin toss and gets the ball first, and scores a touchdown. Team B answers with a touchdown. Team A, on its next possession, kick a field goal to win. Well now, by virtue of the coin toss, they've had the ball twice, while Team B only got the ball once. Granted, from Team B's perspective, getting the ball once gave them a better chance to score than getting the ball zero times (actually, if my math checks out, Team B's chances are infinity percent better if they get the ball once than if they never get the ball at all). But, in this scenario, the game still ended with one team getting more chances to score because they won a coin flip, and that's still unsatisfactory.

The Idea: Play a full 15-minute quarter for overtime, no matter what.

The Drawback(s): That's a lot of extra football to be putting guys at risk for injury. That's a lot of extra football to ask networks to work schedules around. And those games would be much more likely to end in ties; a tie in the NFL right now is a novelty, something that happens maybe every four or five years. Nobody wants a bunch of ties every season.

** The Idea**: Eliminate any kind of kicking – kickoffs, punts or field goals – from overtime.

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The Drawback(s): At that point, it hardly resembles NFL football anymore. I think there's an argument to be made that placekicking could be eliminated from the NFL and only 32 guys would miss it (I refer here to the 32 current NFL placekickers), but that's not what we're here to discuss. It doesn't make any sense to play one game for 60 minutes, and then play a rather different game for 15.

The Idea: Do sudden-death exactly like it's done now, but eliminate the coin flip. Instead, prior to the start of overtime, each team submits a secret "bid" of how far away from the opposing team's goal line they'd be willing to take possession of the ball. The bids are revealed, and the team whose bid is the deepest into its own territory – i.e., the team willing to go the farthest to try to score – gets the ball first.

The Drawback(s): Virtually none; this method would be completely awesome. Unfortunately it would never, ever go, and I only included it as a joke because I read it somewhere and found it hilarious, and I suppose now that I think of it, it doesn't really solve the problem of one team getting the ball and scoring first and the other team not having a chance to get the ball. Still, I love it.

So what's the answer? Well, it's an idea that I came up with, although I've read similar (if not identical) ideas elsewhere. Sadly it's not the only fix that anybody writing about the NFL overtime system proposes, but it should be because it's the only one that makes sense.

The Real Solution: Overtime ends when one team leads another, *after both teams have had an equal number of possessions.* You play regular NFL football, the kind we all know and love. If Team A gets the ball first and kicks a field goal, then Team B can win with a touchdown, extend the game with a tying field goal, or lose by failing to score. Let's say Team A gets the ball first and punts; well, now any score will win it for Team B. Team A gets the ball first, but fumbles the opening kickoff of overtime, which is returned for a touchdown by Team B? Team B wins, obviously, because Team A had its chance.

The Drawback(s): Significantly fewer than any other overtime system imaginable. The only one I can see: the team getting the ball first in this system – let's keep calling them Team A – would actually be at a bit of a disadvantage, because Team B would, upon getting the ball, know exactly what type of score it needed to win or tie. But no system apart from "playing an entire extra quarter of overtime no matter what" – which we've already agreed is untenable – could be completely competitively fair; mine comes closest. You could still give the winner of a coin toss the option to kick off or receive at the start of overtime (I'd bet most teams would then opt to kick), but winning the coin toss wouldn't give a team the enormous advantage it does now.

So there you have it. On to the picks:

EAGLES @ Cardinals +4

Ravens @ STEELERS -6

Sorry; I wasted all my energy on that overtime thing.

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