

NFL 2008 - Divisional Playoffs

by Joe Mulder

Last Week: 0-4

Once again, I maintain that I must know *something*; a person could hardly go 0-4 by just guessing randomly. So it's not that I know nothing about the NFL; it's just that everything I *do* know is wrong.

The Smartest Thing I Said Last Week:

n/a

The Dumbest Thing I Said Last Week:

(I think the column as a whole qualifies)

Anyway, we can still go 7-4 in the playoffs, people. That's not spectacular but it's better than nothing. Let's rally!

I love the divisional playoffs, by the way. There are usually at least a couple of really exciting games, all of the good teams are finally playing, you get to see who's for real, for the most part, and the notion that this team or that team doesn't "deserve" to be in the playoffs is rendered moot (the Cardinals and the Chargers, for example, might be lousy teams who benefitted from playing in even lousier divisions, but they both won their opening-round playoff games. And, no matter how bad you are, if you win a playoff game it can probably be said that you belong in the playoffs).

Ravens @ TITANS -3

Since the NFL went to its current playoff format in 1990, home teams in the divisional round – i.e., teams with a first-round playoff bye – are 55-17. I'm not sure what they are against the spread, but 55-17 amounts to almost a sure thing as far as winning the actual game is concerned.

Lately, though, the last three Super Bowls have been won by teams that were active on Wild Card weekend (two of those three teams, the '07 Giants and the '05 Steelers, were on the road throughout the entire playoffs and still won the Super Bowl). Now this could well be nothing more than a statistical aberration, but, as they say, two is a coincidence, three is a trend.

I bring this up because of the teams that were active on Wild Card weekend, two of them seem to be emerging as very trendy picks to make deep playoff runs, and possibly even reach the Super Bowl. And the trendiest of these picks is perhaps the Baltimore Ravens. The Ravens have used this great defense/unspectacular-but-mistake-free offense formula to win the Super Bowl as a Wild Card team before, back in 2000, and based on their destruction of the Dolphins last week, plenty of people seem to think that they could very well do it again.

But Tennessee was the best team in the NFL this year, they've already beaten the Ravens in Baltimore this season, and, with the Ravens bandwagon filling up faster than a hackneyed Rick Reilly-type reference to something that fills up particularly fast, the Titans can play the all-important "disrespect" card as well.

And, this is the first playoff game in Tennessee seven years. The Titans had some good seasons when they first became the Titans, but they haven't really been in the mix in quite some time; now they've got a legitimate shot to go all the way. The place will be going nuts. The Ravens defense is, of course, legendary, but I think the Titans get it done.

What we learned from Wild Card weekend that may or may not apply this week: Apparently, to hear the sports-talk establishment tell it, Ravens safety Ed Reed is the greatest athlete in the history of the world. If Jim Thorpe and Jackie Joyner-Kersey had children together, even those children would not be worthy to lick the toilet bowl that Ed Reed poops in.

Cardinals @ PANTHERS -10

Could last week's Cardinals victory – their first home playoff win in something like 143 years – be one of those games that completely redefines our very perception of the franchise? Like the Patriots in 2001 or the White Sox in 2005, could this year's Cardinals irrevocably and completely change the thoughts that spring to mind when the team's name is mentioned?

Probably not; I think their win over the Falcons last week was smoke and mirrors, and much has already been made over the fact that the Cards were 0-5 on the East Coast this season (though, to be fair, the closest of those losses was their 27-23 defeat at the hands of the Panthers). The Cardinals came out running last week, using "Huh; He's Still Playing?" Award Winner Edgerrin James to great effect early and holding onto their lead late. I'm not sure they'll be able to replicate their success against Carolina; they'll have lost the element of surprise, and while the Panthers' run defense isn't stellar, it is better than Atlanta's. Also, the Cardinals are unlikely to be at full strength even if injured wide receiver Anquan Boldin does play.

Add in the fact that Carolina running back DeAngelo Williams somehow turned into the second coming of Gale Sayers over the second half of the season, and it ought to be a tough week for the Cardinals. But look at it this way, Cardinals fans: isn't it better to have your hopes dashed in January as opposed to the way it goes every other season, when your hopes have been pretty much dashed by Halloween?

What we learned from Wild Card weekend that may or may not apply this week: those with HDTV in particular learned that Anquan Boldin "dresses left."

POOP READING

EAGLES @ Giants -4

Remember how we were talking about the last three Super Bowl winners being active on Wild Card weekend, and about trendy picks to replicate that feat? Well, the Eagles have not only become such a trendy pick, but they've been compared a great deal this week to the 2007 Giants, who went 10-6, peaked at the right time, and then knocked off the undefeated Patriots in the Super Bowl.

The Eagles play the Giants tough (losing to them 36-31 in Philadelphia in Week 10), and may well have their number (beating them 20-14 at Giants Stadium in Week 14). Normally, this is where I would do the thing where I tell you not to get too excited about the Eagles based on their one previous game, when for the first 50 minutes they struggled to beat a mistake-prone Vikings team with a lousy quarterback; but I did that last week, telling you not to get too excited about the Eagles based on their huge win over the Cowboys the week before that. Well, now I'm going to go ahead and give you permission to get excited about the Eagles.

The Giants, meanwhile, might be that team we see every year that peaked too early and gets upset in the playoffs at some point (or that team might in fact be Tennessee; I'm sort of going on a limb and assuming it's the Giants). The G-Men finished the season losing three of their last four, although the finale was a meaningless (for them) game against the Vikings during which most of their key players rested for much of the second half. Still, 1-3 over your last four games is 1-3 over your last four games, any way you slice it.

Could it be that, after a one-year respite, the Giants are once again falling victim to the Annual Late-Season Tom Coughlin Choke Job? I suppose only Sunday's game against the Eagles will tell.

What we learned from Wild Card weekend that may or may not apply this week: Eagles running back Brian Westbrook can absolutely kill you. Although I suppose we didn't learn that last week; we knew that all along.

Chargers @ STEELERS -6

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... lucky, lucky, lucky. The Colts may have been the team with the horseshoe on their helmet, but the Chargers were the team with the horseshoe up their butt.

Much was made – and rightly so – of Chargers running back Darren Sproles's monster game against Indy, with his 328 all-purpose yards filling in for the banged-up LaDainian Tomlinson. Much has also been made – and rightly so – about Chargers punter Mike Scifres, who set playoff records in averaging 51.7 yards per punt and in pinning the Colts

inside their 20 yard line six times. It has been called the greatest game by a punter in NFL history, and I doubt that anybody knows (or cares) enough about punting to dispute that distinction.

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.

What we learned from Wild Card weekend that may or may not apply this week: a punter can be almost universally agreed upon to have been the key determining factor as to the outcome of a playoff game. I guess if you live long enough, you'll eventually see everything.
