

Football Weekly - BY MATTHEW HATFIELD
National Football League - Thursday, September 6th, 2007



NBC Season Opener: Thursday - 9-6-07

New Orleans @ Indianapolis SU Pick: New Orleans 31-27 ATS Pick: NO +6

WEEK 1 PICKS: Sunday - 9-9-07

Atlanta @ Minnesota	SU Pick: Atlanta 13-10	ATS Pick: ATL +3
Denver @ Buffalo	SU Pick: Denver 28-16	ATS Pick: DEN -3
Carolina @ St. Louis	SU Pick: Carolina 24-21	ATS Pick: CAR +1
Pittsburgh @ Cleveland	SU Pick: Pittsburgh 20-0	ATS Pick: PIT -4.5
Philadelphia @ Green Bay	SU Pick: Green Bay 16-13	ATS Pick: GB +3
Kansas City @ Houston	SU Pick: Houston 30-14	ATS Pick: HOU -3
Tennessee @ Jacksonville	SU Pick: Jacksonville 35-13	ATS Pick: JAG -6.5
Miami @ Washington	SU Pick: Washington 17-7	ATS Pick: WSH -3
<u>New England @ NY Jets</u>	<u>SU Pick: N. England 24-8</u>	<u>ATS Pick: NE -6.5</u>
Chicago @ San Diego	SU Pick: San Diego 27-9	ATS Pick: SD -6
Detroit @ Oakland	SU Pick: Detroit 28-13	ATS Pick: DET +2
Tampa Bay @ Seattle	SU Pick: Seattle 21-6	ATS Pick: SEA -6
NY Giants @ Dallas	SU Pick: Dallas 23-14	ATS Pick: DAL -6

ESPN Monday Night Football PICKS: Monday - 9-10-07

Baltimore @ Cincinnati	SU Pick: Cincinnati 24-10	ATS Pick: CIN -2.5
Arizona @ San Francisco	SU Pick: San Fran 31-24	ATS Pick: SF -3

LOCKS: San Diego (POTW), Denver -3, Pittsburgh -4.5, New England -6.5 and Cincinnati -2.5

UPSET SPECIALS: Green Bay SU & +3 (UPOTW) and Atlanta SU & +3

INSIDE THE MATCHUPS:



New Orleans Saints @ Indianapolis Colts

Two electric offenses collide in this prime-time season opening meeting between the defending Super Bowl Champion Colts and NFC runner-up Saints. For the first time in team history, the Saints led the league in scoring and passing yards per game. They did it with a new Head Coach in Sean Payton, a new starting quarterback named Drew Brees and two very talented rookies – Reggie Bush and Marques Colston. New Orleans certainly has dreams of being a Super Bowl contender and it all starts with this road test. In order to win the NFC, they'll need to get better on defense. Last year the Saints gave up more plays of over 30 yards than anyone else in the NFL, but with a solid pass rush and the addition of ex-Indianapolis corner Jason David, this team could be improved on that side of the ball. Of course, Indy is led by the prolific QB/WR duo of Peyton Manning and Marvin Harrison, sprinkled in with some great plays by Reggie Wayne, Dallas Clark and Joseph Addai – who now shoulders the rushing load without Dominic Rhodes. Rhodes was one of several off-season departures by the Colts. Others included LB Cato June, OT Tarik Glenn (retired) and the aforementioned David. Furthermore, the team's defensive line at the d-tackle position remains a question mark. An upset by the Saints is a great possibility, but for it to happen, RB Deuce McAllister must be productive on the ground.



Atlanta Falcons @ Minnesota Vikings

With the Michael Vick stuff out of the way, the Atlanta Falcons try to move on and play football. Their new starting quarterback is Joey Harrington, who after stints in Miami and Detroit, tries to jump-start his career under first-year Head Coach Bobby Petrino, formerly of Louisville. The Vikings don't exactly have a start quarterback themselves anymore as Tarvaris Jackson makes only his third career start. Harrington has a couple of dependable targets on his side with Joe Horn and TE Alge Crumpler (56Rec. 780Yds.), which is more than what Jackson can say with a receiving core that's average at-best. Atlanta also has had the best running attack over the past few years, and even without Vick's legs, can manage behind the likes of Warrick Dunn and Jerious Norwood. Against Minnesota, Dunn has three career 100-yard games and 5TD's, while Norwood averaged 6.4 yards per carry on 99 attempts a year ago. What's really interesting is that Minnesota was tops in the league in run defense last season, led by DT's Kevin and Pat Williams. Atlanta CB DeAngelo Hall will be looking to victimize the young Jackson on any pass thrown his way and he could be a difference maker for the Falcons.



Denver Broncos @ Buffalo Bills

Buffalo is in a trick spot in this game. They lost their top three defensive players over the off-season in CB Nate Clements (San Francisco), LB Takeo Spikes (Philly) and LB London Fletcher-Baker (Washington) – all of whom went to the NFC. In addition, the Bills saw Willis McGahee depart to Baltimore, so they will be using a rookie by the name of Marshawn Lynch to run against a Denver defense that is pretty solid at the linebacker position and revamped its defensive line for the second year in a row. Throw the ball on the Broncos, right? Wrong. Denver's secondary consisting of Pro Bowlers Champ Bailey, Dre Bly and John Lynch ranks with any in the entire NFL. Although they are at home and have a chance to catch the visiting Broncos off guard, J.P. Losman will have his best target – Lee Evans – blanketed for most of the afternoon and be an interception waiting to happen. Jay Cutler and the Broncos should start 1-0.



Carolina Panthers @ St. Louis Rams

Last November the Panthers shutout the Rams 15-0, marking the first time St. Louis failed to score in a game since 1998 – the year before Kurt Warner led them to a Super Bowl. St. Louis put up only 111 total yards of offense, whereas Carolina RB DeAngelo Williams – then a rookie – rushed for a career-best 114. This time the game will be at St. Louis and the Rams feel they made some improvements during the off-season, enough to be a playoff contender. They're kind of a trendy sleeper/surprise pick as WR Drew Bennett came in from Tennessee to be part of an offense that already includes rushing title hopeful Steven Jackson and a pair of potential Hall-of-Fame receivers in Isaac Bruce and Torry Holt. Defensively, they drafted Adam Carriker out of Nebraska with their first round pick and he moves over from DE to DT. Marc Bugler doesn't throw many interceptions as he had the fewest per attempt in the NFL last season, but that being said, Carolina's defense will be coming after him with constant pressure, headed by DE Julius Peppers. Jake Delhomme and Steve Smith also are set to have a field day against a defense that still has to prove itself.



Pittsburgh Steelers @ Cleveland Browns

Physicality. The Steelers' will be too much for a young, inexperienced Browns team to handle – even at home with high hopes for the future. Willie Parker is coming off a career-year and receivers Santonio Holmes and Hines Ward give Ben Roethlisberger the weapons to test Cleveland's defense deep on occasion. On defense the Browns are led by Kameron Wimbley, who made a franchise rookie record 11 sacks in 2006 and has to be get to Roethlisberger to force some long third down throwing situations where Cleveland can sit back in zone. That's unlikely to happen with Allen Faneua and company holding up a wall for Big Ben to throw and opening up lanes for Parker to plow through against a 3-4 defense with some age. Look for the coaching debut of Mike Tomlin to be a successful one.



Philadelphia Eagles @ Green Bay Packers

Two of the game's most successful and popular quarterbacks take center stage when Donovan McNabb and the Philadelphia Eagles go into Lambeau Field to take on Brett Favre and the Green Bay Packers. Green Bay finished up well last year, winning four straight to conclude the season, including a road win at eventual NFC Champion Chicago. While McNabb and Favre are the headlines – this game is more than just those two parallel figures. The intriguing matchup to me will be Green Bay's defensive line – considered to be one of the top units in football – against another top unit in Philly's offensive line. Whoever wins that great battle in the trenches may decide the outcome. Brian Westbrook and Philly's ground attack could be kept in check by Pack linebackers Nick Barnett and A.J. Hawk. The Green Bay DB's Charles Woodson and Al Harris did a nice job last year and matchup well with the Eagles' wideouts.



Kansas City Chiefs @ Houston Texans

Houston seems improved, whereas Kansas City appears to be going the other way. Sure, the Chiefs have a 1800-yard rusher in Larry Johnson. But KC no longer has a dominant offensive line like they have in the past as tackle Willie Roaf and guard Will Shields – two future Hall-of-Fame players – have retired. Herm Edwards is going to turn to a young QB in Brodie Croyle if Damon Huard doesn't win the job and perform well. Huard hasn't started many games in his career either. Houston brought in a new starting quarterback as David Carr left for Carolina and the Texans brought in Matt Schaub. We'll soon find out whether Schaub is another Rob Johnson or the real deal as he showed in brief moments when backing up Michael Vick in Atlanta. Schaub does have an established running back in Ahman Green and the AFC's reception leader in Andre Johnson to test a KC defense that doesn't play as well on the road as they do at Arrowhead.



Tennessee Titans @ Jacksonville Jaguars

Down the stretch last year, Tennessee caught fire as they were able to get to .500 (8-8) with Vince Young, the NFL's Rookie of the Year, engineering their attack from the quarterback position. Jacksonville was as inconsistent as anyone in the sport last year, winning games they weren't expected to win and losing games they were supposed to win. Unlike the Titans' Jeff Fisher, the longest tenured Head Coach in the NFL, Jaguars Head Coach Jack Del Rio had a quarterback controversy to settle in the off-season and made a somewhat surprising decision to move on with David Garrard as the starter in favor of Byron Leftwich, a former first round pick of the franchise. Tennessee's defense has three 100-tackle guys on their team in LB's Keith Bulluck and David Thornton and SS Chris

Hope, who led all strong safeties in the league in tackles with 128. That's good news for the Titans because the Jaguars have a great 1-2 rushing punch with Fred Taylor and Maurice Jones-Drew. There are three differences in this game in my mind. First one is the Jags' running game and ability to stop the run – with DT's John Henderson and Marcus Stroud plus a healthy Mike Peterson at linebacker – will hurt a Titans team still unsure about their starting running back situation. Secondly, Tennessee is going to miss having a dual-threat like Pac-Man who could intercept passes and return punts for scores. Lastly, the game is in Jacksonville.



Miami Dolphins @ Washington Redskins



Joe Gibbs enters his fourth season in Washington and tries to avoid missing the playoffs for the third time since returning. Jason Campbell begins his first full season as the Skins' starting quarterback and will face one of the tougher defenses around in a Dolphins group led by LB Zach Thomas and DE Jason Taylor, the reigning NFL Defensive Player of the Year. Miami's defense is great, but their offense was terribly anemic in 2006, failing to score 30 points in a game even once. In comes new Head Coach Cam Cameron, the offensive coordinator of the San Diego Chargers, to fix a group that lost TE Randy McMichael over the off-season and didn't do much to improve its offensive line. Trent Green returns to face the team that once drafted him. He's the Dolphins' new starting quarterback. In order to go into D.C. and win, Ronnie Brown has to match or exceed what Clinton Portis and Ladell Betts do for Washington on the ground. My thinking is we'll see a good effort from a Redskins defense which generated the fewest number of turnovers and sacks in the league last season. Also, they will keep things simple and safe for Campbell, making him go to Santana Moss and TE Chris Cooley for short chunks of yardage.



New England Patriots @ New York Jets



What has become a rivalry, the Patriots and Jets square off for AFC East bragging rights to begin the season. It was the last opponent the Jets faced last year when New England hammered them in Foxboro in the playoffs. Eric Mangini is New York's version for New England Head Coach Bill Belichick and neither is that fond of the other as we saw during the one win in three meetings the Jets had over the Patriots. Obviously one of the keys in this game is Chad Pennington can't afford to turn the ball over and let New England's new and improved explosive offense – with receivers Randy Moss, Donte Stallworth and the speedy Wes Welker – make them pay. The Jets have to keep it on the ground and let Thomas Jones operate between the tackles, then spell him every now and then with the quicker, younger Leon Washington when they need to get outside. Missing from the Pats' defense are the likes of Richard Seymour, who will sit out six games, and

safety Rodney Harrison, who won't return until Week 5. In the end, Belichick, Tom Brady and company have too much firepower for the Jets to overcome.



Chicago Bears @ San Diego Chargers

On paper this looks like a great game. The Bears, led by LB's Brian Urlacher and Lance Briggs, have one of the league's most feared defenses. They go up against a lethal, potent San Diego offense which features All-Pro players Antonio Gates at tight end and RB LaDainian Tomlinson, the NFL MVP from 2006-07. What keeps Chicago from going to the West Coast and coming out with a victory? Quarterback Rex Grossman. He committed more turnovers than half of the teams in the sport and San Diego's aggressive defense, anchored up front by nose tackle Jamal Williams and elite pass rusher Shawne Merriman, are going to cause serious problems for him – even with center Olin Kreutz controlling the middle. If you are looking for someone to have a breakout performance then look no further than Chargers receiver Vincent Jackson. Norv Turner, the Chargers' new Head Coach, is going to be under the microscope this season, but he does have a history of producing some top-notch offenses. With so much focus on Gates and Tomlinson, QB Phillip Rivers and Jackson each could have banner years in helping San Diego advance in the postseason.



Detroit Lions @ Oakland Raiders

The top two picks from April's NFL Draft square off against one another as quarterback JaMarcus Russell and the Oakland Raiders host Calvin Johnson and the Detroit Lions. Only thing is Russell won't be playing, while Johnson is. The matchup to watch will be receivers Roy Williams, Mike Furrey and Johnson for Detroit facing an Oakland pass defense that ranked first overall last season. The Raiders are without RB Dominic Rhodes and I think they are making a major mistake starting Josh McCown, a former player for the Lions, at quarterback instead of Daunte Culpepper. Lane Kiffin makes his NFL coaching debut for Oakland. Pretty much everything points to Detroit getting a road win to start their season off on a high note after a disappointing year one under Rod Marinelli.



Tampa Bay Buccaneers @ Seattle Seahawks

On the hot seat, Jon Gruden turns to Jeff Garcia to start at quarterback for Tampa Bay as they visit a Seattle team that two years ago went undefeated at home at Qwest Field. Now healthy, the Seahawks, led by RB Shaun Alexander and QB Matt Hasselbeck, might have what it takes to make another run at the Super Bowl. For that to happen though, their offensive line must get adapt better without Steve Hutchinson at left guard, which often was a problem for them during 2006. Furthermore, the receivers can't keep

dropping passes left and right and they'll need to have a premiere pass rush to hide a pass defense that struggles quite a bit defending the deep ball. To have any chance at an upset, Tampa Bay must have its defense get off the field on third down and on offense pound the rock with Cadillac Williams.



New York Giants @ Dallas Cowboys

Both the Giants and Cowboys had disappointing ends to their season with Dallas losing at Seattle in the first round when quarterback Tony Romo bobbled a snap on a potential game-winning field goal. For New York, they were playing well vs. the Eagles, but couldn't hold on and had a first round postseason exit for the second year in a row. Without Terry Glenn, more falls on the shoulders of Terrell Owens and Jason Witten through the passing game for Dallas. Eli Manning no longer has Tiki Barber to lean on in the backfield, so that means the Giants are likely going to put a larger emphasis on passing the football with Jeremy Shockey, Plaxico Burress and Amani Toomer serving as Manning's main targets. Offensive line play is the key. Whichever line can do a better job at protecting their quarterback that team will come out on top. Dallas' defense wasn't all-word, certainly not against the pass last year. That said, their front seven looks to be pretty strong and I can see them frustrating Manning some in this game.



Baltimore Ravens @ Cincinnati Bengals

One team wins with defense while the other relies heavily on its offense. Baltimore will bring the heat, thanks to Ray Lewis, Ed Reed and Chris McAlister among others. Even with Adalius Thomas now in New England, this defense has to be considered one of the top groups in football until the day Lewis retires or no longer starts at a high level. Cincinnati should be playing quite a few shoot-outs this year with Pro Bowl players all over the offensive side of the ball, including QB Carson Palmer, RB Rudi Johnson and WR's Chad Johnson and T.J. Houshmandzadeh. The Bengals also are missing a key part of their offensive group in guard Eric Steinbach, who left for division rival Cleveland. Simply, what could tell the story in this game is Baltimore's offense against Cincy's defense because the Ravens great defense vs. the Bengals' dangerous offense seems like a wash. Willie McGahee was added to the Ravens offense. For Cincinnati to win, getting off to a fast start is necessary because if they don't then that will allow Baltimore to dictate tempo and make it a low scoring game. Also a couple of interceptions of Steve McNair would be huge and enable them a chance to get up by more than one score, which if that happens, then Baltimore could be in trouble.



Arizona Cardinals @ San Francisco 49ers

The second game of a Monday Night Football doubleheader on ESPN features two teams that feel they are improving and making a move towards bigger and better things, possibly even the playoffs. San Francisco finished strong last year, beating division Champ Seattle twice, including on the road where the Seahawks seldom ever lose. Meanwhile, the Cardinals, despite some meltdowns and hard to swallow defeats, had the best record (4-2) among teams in the NFC West, sweeping their season series with the Niners. Arizona's defense, which begins undergoing a switch to a 3-4 defense, could be what holds them back as they have plenty of offensive talent, most notably receivers Larry Fitzgerald, Anquan Boldin and Bryant Johnson as well as QB Matt Leinart and RB Edgerrin James. Unless they can get pressure on Alex Smith and improve vs. the run, where they have to stop Frank Gore, then it might not be a great debut for new Head Coach Ken Whisenhunt. That being said, it has the makings to be a close high scoring affair.