

Football Weekly - BY MATTHEW HATFIELD
National Football League - Friday, September 9th, 2005

WEEK 1 PICKS: Sunday - 9-11-05

Houston @ Buffalo	SU Pick: Buffalo 20-17	ATS Pick: HOU +5.5
New Orleans @ Carolina	SU Pick: Carolina 27-7	ATS Pick: CAR -7
Chicago @ Washington	SU Pick: Washington 17-6	ATS Pick: WSH -6
Cincinnati @ Cleveland	SU Pick: Cincinnati 26-13	ATS Pick: CIN -3.5
Denver @ Miami	SU Pick: Denver 18-12	ATS Pick: DEN -4.5
Seattle @ Jacksonville	SU Pick: Jacksonville 13-3	ATS Pick: JAG -3
Tampa Bay @ Minnesota	SU Pick: Minnesota 28-14	ATS Pick: MN -6
NY Jets @ Kansas City	SU Pick: Kansas City 35-31	ATS Pick: KC -3
Tennessee @ Pittsburgh	SU Pick: Tennessee 21-20	ATS Pick: TN +7.5
Arizona @ NY Giants	SU Pick: Arizona 24-16	ATS Pick: AZ +2.5
Dallas @ San Diego	SU Pick: San Diego 20-15	ATS Pick: SD -4.5
Green Bay @ Detroit	SU Pick: Detroit 31-24	ATS Pick: DET -3
St. Louis @ San Francisco	SU Pick: St. Louis 28-10	ATS Pick: STL -5.5
Indianapolis @ Baltimore	SU Pick: Baltimore 24-21	ATS Pick: BLT +3

Monday Night Football PICK: Monday - 9-12-05

Philadelphia @ Atlanta	SU Pick: Atlanta 21-13	ATS Pick: ATL +1.5
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LOCKS: St. Louis -5.5 (*POTW*), Washington -6 (Under 33), Carolina -7, Minnesota -6 and Over 45.5 DET-GB

UPSET SPECIALS: Tennessee SU & +7.5 (*UPOTW*) and Baltimore SU & +3_



Houston Texans @ Buffalo Bills



Domanick Davis was fourth among all rushers in rushing yardage the final eight weeks of the season. He squares off against a Bills defense that was superb at the end of last season and has two Pro Bowl caliber linebackers: Takeo Spikes and London Fletcher. Buffalo lost corner Antoine Winfield to the Vikings the off-season before last and this past off-season Minnesota took their stud defensive tackle Pat Williams away. How they respond in this game without him is critical for them as they begin their season. Knowing they have capable receivers and a potentially awesome running back in Willie McGahee, it all hinges on the play of new quarterback J.P. Losman and the guys protecting him up front. Same goes for Houston, who has a more tested guy in David Carr, but a very shaky o-line. Buffalo's at home and can apply more pressure to win this game I think.



New Orleans Saints @ Carolina Panthers



Unlike the Houston-Buffalo game, this is no coin flip in my opinion. New Orleans doesn't have a home right now and you know that has to be in the back of their heads as they play Week 1 in Carolina, a place they ended the season with a win. Beginning 2005-06 with a win there seems doubtful. Carolina's defense should haunt Aaron Brooks and the Saints gang all day. Am not sure about their defense stopping the Panthers vertical passing play in addition to the ground game Coach John Fox loves so much.



Chicago Bears @ Washington Redskins



Don't expect a lot of passing yards as we have the 32nd ranked passing team in Chicago with a rookie quarterback going up against the 29th ranked aerial attack from the nation's capitol. If you are a defensive purist, though, you'll absolutely love watching this game. The Bears were devastated with injuries on that side of the ball, but still were stingy enough to rank 13th overall in points allowed. Redskins defensive coach Gregg Williams installed an attack system that allowed his team to get pressure on the QB and rank 7th or better in the four biggie defensive categories. You've got pretty good secondaries, a pair of star tremendous blitzing linebackers in LaVar Arrington (WSH) and Chicago's Brian Urlacher, and defensive lines that won't lose you ball games. Since my guess is Washington will hand Clinton Portis the rock upwards of 25 times, the Redskins should blitz enough and not turn the ball over to have yet another opening week win.



Cincinnati Bengals @ Cleveland Browns



In the battle for Ohio pro football bragging right, the Bengals come in possibly holding an advantage. They bring in with them an offense that scored 58 on the Browns last November and averaged 31.9PPG in their final six contests. Cleveland's defense and offense struggled much of last year as they lost nine straight before winning the season finale over Houston by a mark of 22-14. You have to feel more comfortable with Carson Palmer throwing the ball to Chad Johnson and T.J. Houshmandzadeh. Not so much comfortable about the Browns running the ball and stopping the run effectively.



Denver Broncos @ Miami Dolphins



A 29th ranked offense that Nick Saban has in Miami better step up if they want any chance of coming away with a victory in Week 1. The Broncos have issues and plenty of them, but the Dolphins defense got so worn out by the end of last year. We saw it coming too as Ricky Williams' abrupt retirement put the offense in shambles. Now Williams has to sit out the first four games of the regular season and watch Auburn rookie Ronnie Brown try to jump start a run attack that placed 31st out of 32 teams. You've got to believe that some how, some way the Broncos will find a way to dominating the battle in the trenches, translating into a satisfying amount of ground yards. Although I do think

this game is coin flip per say, a couple of Jason Elam field goals has Denver pulling it out.



Seattle Seahawks @ Jacksonville Jaguars



Here we've got maybe the most evenly matched game from a talent perspective the entire day. Problem is Seattle has had loads of trouble executing when the game is on the line. It cost them games during the regular season and cost them from advancing vs. St. Louis in the postseason. Jacksonville has a distinct edge because they know how to close out games and play stronger as the game goes along. **Eight of Jacksonville's nine wins were decided by a touchdown or less.** Running backs Fred Taylor and Shaun Alexander were play key roles in the game without a doubt. Jaguars defense win the game by gearing to stop Alexander from averaging over 4YPC.



Seahawks RB Shaun Alexander should find it tough to go over 100 yards on the ground with tough d-tackles like John Henderson and Marcus Stroud clogging the middle on Sunday. (AP)



Tampa Bay Buccaneers @ Minnesota Vikings



Upset? Tampa Bay is a year away in my opinion. Brian Griese had some positive moments towards the end of last year at the quarterback position, but which Griese will we see? The one who had some success in Denver or the one that got run out of the place where his dad won a Super Bowl - Miami? Matchup to watch is how the Vikings corner combo of Fred Smoot and Antoine Winfield do on second-year wide receiver Michael Clayton out of LSU. The edge in my mind goes to the Vikings because they have good safeties, decent linebackers and a fierce defensive line that strengthened itself in the off-season. One would think Minnesota now without Randy Moss would struggle throwing the ball vertically down the field against a Buccaneers defense that was first overall in pass defense. Therefore, Jon Gruden and Bucs defensive coordinator Monte Kiffin might force Minny to beat them on the ground. I think they do one play of major yardage, which helps them open the game up and separate in the third quarter.



New York Jets @ Kansas City Chiefs



This may very well be the best game of the entire NFL weekend. The Jets were one successful Doug Brien field goal away from playing New England in the AFC Conference Championship. Instead, he missed and they drafted Ohio State's Mike Nugent to handle the kicking duties. New York also upgraded the secondary with the additions of Ty Law and Clemson rookie Justin Miller. Meanwhile, KC improved the area of the ball that had to be improved: defense. They got defensive backs Patrick Surtain and Sammy Knight from the Dolphins, drafted Texas linebacker Derrick Johnson, and added LB Kendrell Bell from Pittsburgh. Both quarterbacks - Trent Green (Chiefs) and Chad Pennington (Jets) have questions to answer heading into the '05-06 season. Priest Holmes may not be a much fresher running back than league rushing Champ Curtis Martin, but he has a better guy spelling him now in Larry Johnson and a better offensive line to run behind now that Kareem McKenzie has left the Jets for the Giants.



Tennessee Titans @ Pittsburgh Steelers



Pittsburgh's chances of easily sweeping by the Titans in Week 1 decreased when it was announced in late August that neither Jerome Bettis nor Duce Staley would be ready for the opener. It means Willie Parker, an outside the tackles runner, must try to fill the void vs. Tennessee, who has one of the best linebackers in the game in Keith Bulluck. This Oilers/Titans franchise also has won an NFL best 45 road games since 1994-95. Believe it or not, that stat really spells trouble for the Steelers, especially if Norm Chow gets the Tennessee offense firing on all cylinders. That'll hinge on how well the o-line protects QB Steve McNair from the Dick LeBeau blitzing steel D'.



Arizona Cardinals @ New York Giants



Revenge can be a sweet thing. Don't think for one second Kurt Warner knows this team should've kept in him at quarterback instead of going to rookie Eli Manning midway through last year. Warner, a genuinely nice person, was one of the game's best quarterbacks at the start of the decade in St. Louis. He may be able to re-capture some of the things he did there with a talented receiving core that consists of Larry Fitzgerald, Anquan Boldin and Bryant Johnson. New York's chances of winning this game are good if Tiki Barber and Jeremy Shockey make big plays for the offense, while Michael Strahan causes havoc off the edge and the corners (Will Peterson and Will Allen) don't get beat. My pick is Arizona simply because the Giants couldn't block well for either quarterback last season, as shown in their 17-14 loss to the Cards last November. Bertrand Barry made 14.5 sacks a season ago and now has a defensive end running mate in Chike Okeafor (8.5 sacks), formerly of the Seattle Seahawks.



Dallas Cowboys @ San Diego Chargers



Dallas' chances of winning increased significantly when it was announced that Chargers tight end Antonio Gates would not play in this game. His position counterpart - Jason Witten - lead the 'boys in receptions last season and look for Drew Bledsoe to hook up with him quite a bit. Linebacker play is something I believe is underrated in this

game. Both teams drafted a couple of OLB/DE 'tweeners' in Shawne Merriman (Chargers) and Demarcus Ware (Cowboys). If one can make a big impact then their team might have the upper hand. I'll lean with the Chargers because in their already solid 3-4 scheme, Randall Godfrey can hit, Donnie Edwards is the playmaker (defending the run and pass), and Steve Foley sacks people almost routinely. Bill Parcells' defense lose hard hitting veteran Dexter Coakley so guys like Al Singleton and Bradie James must step up. Was it also mentioned that San Diego has my preseason MVP - LaDainian Tomlinson?



Green Bay Packers @ Detroit Lions



Brett Favre and the Green Bay Packers beat the Lions by a combined score of 54-23 in their two meetings last season. However, Favre has a rough history of playing in a dome. Both Head Coach Steve Mariucci - Favre's QB coach in 1992 - and defensive coordinator Dick Jauron (the ex-Bears Head Coach) have studied #4 for a while. Look for them to draw up some kind of scheme to slow the Packers offensive attack, which ranked third in the league yards, down. Lions Pro Bowl corner Dre Bly might be the guy who comes up with an interception on defense. He got one in the Thanksgiving Day game two seasons ago. One big special teams play... maybe from Eddie Drummond on a kick/punt return would be a game changing moment. Take the Detroit offense here.



St. Louis Rams @ San Francisco 49ers



Rams have no excuse, whatsoever to lose this game. I understand Utah rookie quarterback Alex Smith is No. 2 on the depth chart behind Tim Rattay. So it is possible that a more experienced QB helps San Fran turn the big upset, right? Wrong. St. Louis, albeit a team equipped for dome shoot-outs, shouldn't be scored on big here by an offense that has an unclear situation at receiver and unproven players all over. It's not a good sign when tight end Eric Johnson is your most dynamic offensive player and the o-line might be the strongest position offensively. The Rams are a timing offense, quarterbacked by Marc Bugler. San Fran's only hope is to hope for a surprisingly good day on the ground from Kevan Barlow and watch safety Tony Parrish (Int. leader the past couple years) as well as linebacker Julian Peterson (coming off injury) make points out of turnovers. They still need to shut down WR's Isaac Bruce and Torry Holt, and sack Bulger. The ladder may happen, but an upset most likely won't.



Indianapolis Colts @ Baltimore Ravens



For the second year in a row, the league's most prolific offense takes on the game's most feared defense, only this time it is in Baltimore. I'm actually quite surprised that the Colts are favored to open the season outside the dome. Not to compare the Ravens to the Patriots (although they are the last two AFC teams to win the whole thing), but Indy had trouble opening at New England in '04. Colts MVP QB Peyton Manning had his hardest time in the playoffs vs. those Patriots, while his biggest regular season struggle [if he had one] was vs. Baltimore. Both have great defenses, and like the old saying goes, defenses win Championships. It's no cliché either. Indy has tried improving

its defense with the drafting of Michigan corner Marlin Jackson and recent pickup of run clogger Corey Simon. Might help, but I don't think they are enough. Coach Brian Billick has Jim Fassel working with young QB Kyle Boller on offense, where there are some new WR's to throw to on Sunday night. Matchup to watch will be Colts defensive end Dwight Freeney vs. Ravens offensive tackle Jonathan Ogden, who had trouble against Freeney in the last meeting. Jamal Lewis' running and mistake-free special teams play should be enough for Baltimore to squeak out a win.



Philadelphia Eagles @ Atlanta Falcons



Atlanta wants this game because of the sour taste that was left in their mouth after the NFC Conference Championship. They now have the home field advantage and limelight for Michael Vick on MNF. One of the reasons why Philly beat Atlanta to get to the Super Bowl was the punting game. What??? That's right, the punting game. The Falcons at poor field position the entire day and it mainly because of their punting and how the Eagles defense put the clamps on Vick and co. Philadelphia has team speed on defense to match what the Falcons do on offense with Warrick Dunn and some of their other offensive weapons. With the addition of former Ravens linebacker Edgerton Hartwell and a year under DeAngelo Hall's belt, Atlanta is better equipped to win a tight game. Also, one of the Eagles' best special teams players in physical linebacker Ike Reese is now on the other side. Just means Jim Mora's guys will only do better in the field position game.