

**Football Weekly - BY MATTHEW HATFIELD**  
**National Football League - Friday, January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005**

**NFL PLAYOFFS --- Conference Championship Round**



**NFC Conference Championship: Sunday - 1-23-05**

Atlanta 11-5 @ Philadelphia 13-3

SU: Atlanta 21-14

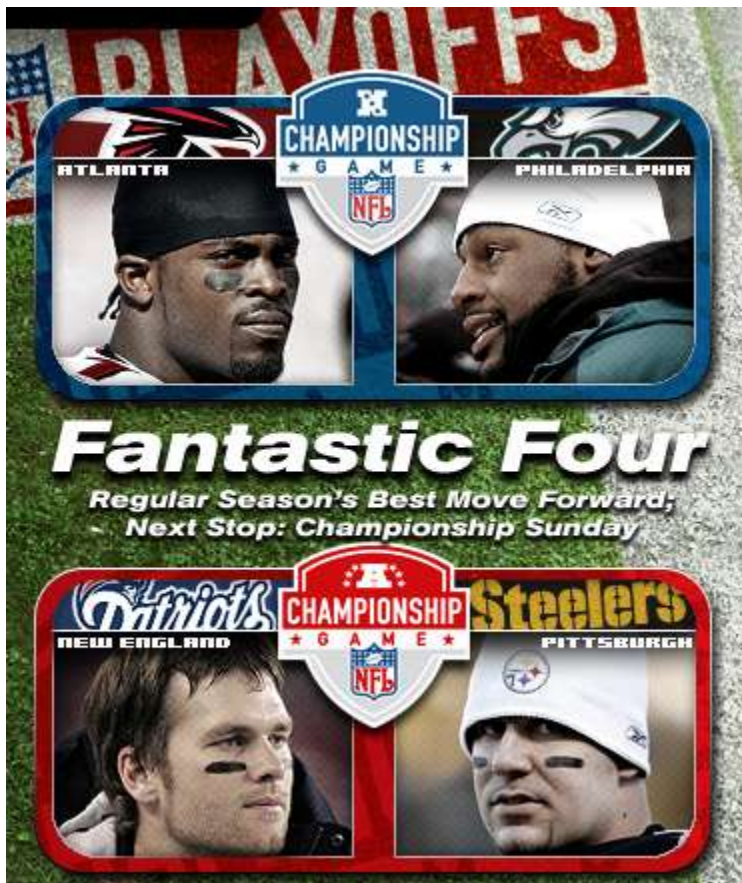
ATS: ATL +5.5

**AFC Conference Championship: Sunday - 1-23-05**

New England 14-2 @ Pittsburgh 15-1

SU: Pitt 16-13 (OT)

ATS: PIT +3



Either Michael Vick of the Falcons or Donovan McNabb of the Eagles will become the first ever \$100M quarterback to play in a Super Bowl. On the other side it will be the rookie Ben Roethlisberger taking on two-time Super Bowl MVP Tom Brady and the Patriots. **Photo Courtesy of [ESPN.com](http://ESPN.com)**

**NFC Title Game --- Sunday, January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2005 --- 3PM (EST) on FOX**



**Atlanta Falcons (11-5; 1-0) @ Philadelphia Eagles (13-3; 1-0)**



**All the pressure in the world is on Philadelphia and QB Donovan McNabb, while the Falcons have nothing to lose because they smell a potential Vick-tory**

Falcons on Offense: Atlanta torched St. Louis on the ground last week with Warrick Dunn, T.J. Duckett and the one-million adjective man Michael Vick combining for 327 rushing yards on 40 carries (8.2YPC Avg.). They will continue to pound the football against the #16<sup>th</sup> ranked run defense during the regular season. For the Falcons to excel offensively the passing game must exist here against Jim Johnson's aggressive blitzing defense. Vick, who threw for 274 yards two years ago in the playoffs vs. Philly, will have to produce big plays with his arm as well as his legs. Tight end Alge Crumpler leads the team in receiving and has favorable matchups. Having that said, one of the receivers, whether it be Brian Finneran, Peerless Price or Dez White, has to make plays.

Atlanta on Defense: No team improved more defensively this season than the Falcons under new defensive coordinator Ed Donatell. Donatell helped turned them from the worst defense overall in yards allowed to one of the fiercest, if not best in the NFC. It all starts up front where the defensive line is eerily like Carolina's from last season. Ends Brady Smith and Patrick Kearney are like Julius Peppers and Mike Rucker, Rod Coleman gets after QB's like Kris Jenkins and Brenston Buckner's role is played by Ed Jasper. Because of these men I do not think Freddie Mitchell has the time to get open on offense.

Eagles on Offense: Donovan McNabb will be more scrutinized than ever before if he has another three INT. game like he did last season vs. Carolina. Even if he plays well and the Eagles lose he will also probable receive much criticism. Without Terrell Owens he will see a lot of pressure from that awesome Falcons d-line and will need to scramble around and run for a few first downs. Philly's top weapon is Brian Westbrook, though the o-line (allowed 37 sacks) must protect McNabb from that underrated defense (48 sacks).

Philly on Defense: What the Eagles need more than anything defensively is stops on first down to force 3<sup>rd</sup> and longs. Take the Falcons out of what they do best and that is run the football. Jim Johnson will rush seven, eight guys on many occasions and make Vick throw the football. Both outside linebackers Dhani Jones (shoulder) and Mark Simoneau (ankle) are banged up, but will more than likely play since this is playoff time. Three guys lead this defense and need to make a statement: safety Brian Dawkins, middle linebacker Jeremiah Trotter and defensive end Jevon Kearse, all star material.

Special Teams: Allen Rossum has the jets to burn Philly on returns and give his team exceptional field position. J.R. Reed, rookie out of South Florida, has also done a fine job setting the Eagles offense up to score points. Kicker David Akers is second in NFL history in field goal percentage (83%) and Jay Feely is just as reliable for the ATL.

**AFC Title Game --- Sunday, January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2005 --- 6:30PM (EST) on CBS**



**New England Patriots (14-2; 1-0) @ Pittsburgh Steelers (15-1; 1-0)**



**New England playing the role of Indianapolis from last weekend: surprise road favorite facing an undefeated home team**

**Patriots on Offense:** Last time these two teams played New England's patchwork offensive line was exposed, their run game was non-existent without Corey Dillon and because of all that the Patriots 21-game win streak was snapped in front of delirious Steelers fans. New England's most dangerous offensive weapon down the stretch is really a special teams player - kicker Adam Vinatieri. Remember, Pitt. D' held NYJ to 275Yds.

**Patriots on Defense:** Versus Indianapolis the linebackers - Tedy Bruschi, Willie McGinest, Mike Vrabel and others played marvelous football. They confused Peyton Manning and safety Rodney Harrison also came up with some inspiring work defensively. Pittsburgh is going to run the football more so those same players look to stuff the Pittsburgh ground game. Richard Seymour's status for this game is important in my mind because the Steelers rectified o-line does an outstanding job of pulling around and laying a thud on opposing defensive players. Most of all - put the ball in Roethlisberger's hands.

**Steelers on Offense:** I believe Pittsburgh can match them physically pound for pound on both sides of the ball. Don't be ultra conservative... take a couple shots down field with rook' Ben Roethlisberger. That's what Indy did not do last week and it showed. Hines Ward, slot man Antwann Randle El and the home-run threat Plaxico Burress are going to have to test the Pats secondary on deep, precise routes. Jerome Bettis and Duce Staley are going to try and run between the tackles with Alan Faneca and Jeff Hartings paving the holes inside. Scoring first will be key for the Keystone State teams this week.

**Steelers on Defense:** 3-4 setup has to get after Pats QB Tom Brady from the outside. Dwight Freeney got him a couple times last week and the Steelers linebackers - Joey Porter, Kendall Bell, inside leader James Farrior and Clark Haggans are the guys to go after him. Those players must concentrate on covering short throws as well. The CB's have failed to produce in the past so Ricardo Colclough may get a Ricky Manning Jr. shot.

**The duh! Stat: If you don't think the Steelers can win this game then maybe this will convince you.... Pittsburgh has not lost a single game at home this season and the last time a team came into Heinz Field and won it was November of 2003. New England on the other hand suffered both of their defeats this season (and last year for that matter) away from Gillette Stadium.**

**Bottom Line: Steelers can play ball control, too, and unlike Indy have a strong defensive front and a playmaking safety named Troy Polamalu (x-factor).**

### **Game Film Simulation Breakdowns:**

**My little experiment this week was to simulate the game's between the Falcons-Eagles and Patriots-Steelers in EA Sports' Madden 2005 video game. Here's some of the pictures of how it all went.**

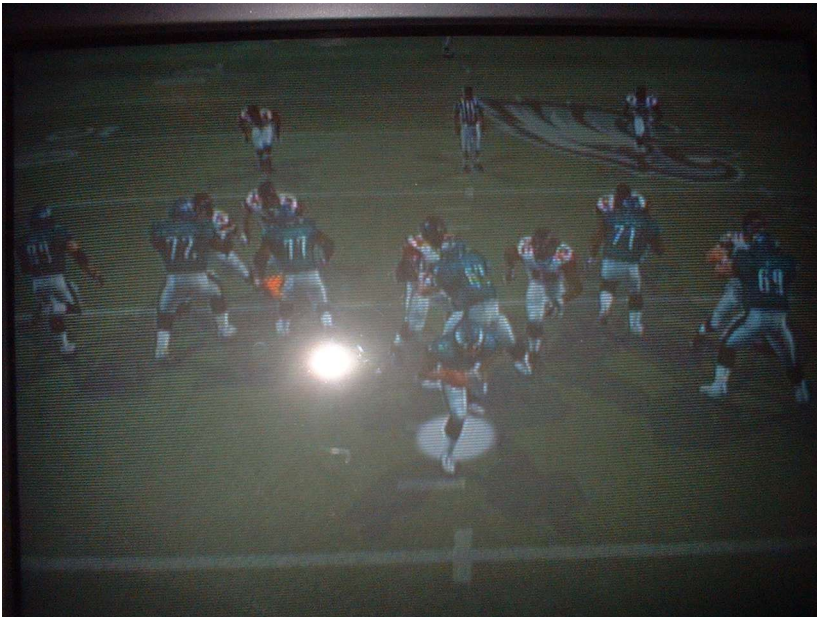
The Falcons are on their fourth fullback of the season in Fred McCrary. McCrary plays an instrumental role in the Falcons' ground attack, which ran for the 3<sup>rd</sup> most yards in a single season since 1990. Philadelphia's Brian Westbrook is one of the keys to this week's game as is wide receiver Freddie Mitchell..... find out how they did in EA Sports' Madden 2005.



**Flexed out to the left is Eagles receiver Todd Pinkston, who runs a shallow crossing pattern across the middle. In the slot is Freddie Mitchell, who runs a 12-15 yard skinny post. Orange dotted is Aaron Beasley and he slowly moves in acting as if he is blitzing. Beasley----- consumes a block to confuse Donovan McNabb.**



**Jason Webster bites on the cross pass and Donovan McNabb throws a costly interception. McNabb will have to work on making adjustment throws, something he was unable to do vs. Carolina in last year's NFC Title Game.**



**This running play is sniffed out for a short gain by Rod Coleman. The linebackers Keith Brooking and Chris Draft get the guards' attention. The center is blocked by Ed Jasper and each tackle, LT Tra Thomas and RT Jon Runyan, are busy with Smith and Kearney. This frees up Coleman to stop Brian Westbrook on the exchange for a short two yard gain, bringing up 3<sup>rd</sup> & 6.**



**Despite Brian Dawkins unloading on Warrick Dunn a few times, the Falcons walk away victorious from this one 27-17.**

Two superb defenses take center stage Sunday evening when the Steelers play host to the reigning Champs from New England. They are so close statistically that the Steelers held the Jets to 275 total yards of offense last week and New England kept Indy's high powered attack to 276. Only Don Shula has been to more Title Games than Steelers Head Coach Bill Cowher. His coaching counterpart on Sunday - Bill Belichick - will try to join the list of coaches that have won three Super Bowls. Tom Brady has won the most consecutive playoff starts(seven) and the Pats are #2 in scoring defense. Pittsburgh ranks #2 in rushing offense and top the list in points allowed and total defense.... find out the outcome in EA Sports' Madden 2005.



**Steelers wide receiver Plaxico Burress has the option on doing one of two things on this play. Either run a fly route or do an out play near the sideline. Instead, Burress fakes the out and gives the New England secondary little time to adjust, creating a 22Yd. completion.**



**Pittsburgh running back Deuce Staley feels the wrath of S Rodney Harrison and the Patriots defense. Two Roethlisberger turnovers and eight tackles by Harrison results in a 16-10 win for Bill Belichick's crew.**