

### NFL 2008 - Week 12

by Joe Mulder

Week 11: 6-10

Overall: 69-89-3

The Smartest Thing I Said Last Week:

Rams @ 49ERS -6.5

Peeee-yew.

[the 49ers won 35-16, and the game pretty much stunk]

The Dumbest Thing I Said Last Week:

The Eagles are damn good, but they play in the brutal NFC East. As such, they can't possibly afford to lose winnable games if they want to have any shot at the playoffs. I suspect they'll come out Sunday and tear the Bengals limb from limb, just to be safe. They know they can't afford to take any game for granted.

[the Eagles pretty much played like crap and, after their game with the Bengals ended in a tie, Donovan McNabb admitted that he had no idea ties could happen in the NFL. This despite the fact that in the 2002 playoffs he quarterbacked the Eagles against the Falcons, who had a tie on their record that year]

Before we get to the picks, let's talk about a disturbing trend in the NFL.

Last Sunday's Steelers/Chargers game marked the second time in as many weeks that NFL officials prominently blew a relatively easy interpretation of the rules.

Referees – like other, regular people – make errors in judgment; until that glorious day when games are officiated by artificial intelligence, removing human error and allowing the players – and only the players – to determine outcomes once and for all, this will remain a fact of life. Sports fans have no choice but to live with, and hopefully to tolerate, blown judgment calls (such as holding, pass interference, etc.). What should not be tolerated is apparent ignorance, or incorrect interpretation, of basic rules.

Two weeks ago, the Vikings were awarded a safety after Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers was whistled for a penalty in his own end zone. So far, so good; the problem was that the officials announced the penalty as an "illegal forward pass." Now, if you've watched much football, or if you've ever seen any football, or if you've even heard of football, or *if you have feet*, you probably know that teams are allowed one forward pass per play, and that pass must be made behind the line of scrimmage, and you can throw the ball pretty much any way you want, including underhanded,

like Rodgers happened to (I imagine a few other obscure rules governing forward passes exist, but they're not relevant here). Rodgers was in his own end zone, which means that he was, by definition, behind the line of scrimmage. It goes without saying that no Green Bay player had thrown a previous forward pass in the course of that same play as Rodgers scrambled away from the Vikings pass rush. As such, the officials' call of an illegal forward pass was indeed a bizarre one, because in that specific situation Rodgers couldn't possibly have thrown an illegal forward pass even if he had suddenly been seized with the overwhelming desire to do so.

Apparently the league later altered the game log to state that the officials had called intentional grounding; this would have been an incorrect call, as there was a receiver in the general vicinity of Rodgers pass, but at least it would have been merely an error in judgment and not a misinterpretation of basic NFL rules.

A week later, an officiating mistake at the end of the Steelers/Chargers game didn't affect the outcome but caused an estimated \$64 million swing among sports bettors. The Steelers, five-point favorites, led 11-10 in the closing seconds as the Chargers lined up for a last-second play that, in effect, had no chance of working. But why not try, right? After a completed forward pass and a lateral, a second Chargers lateral was broken up, hit the ground, and was scooped up by Pittsburgh's Troy Polamalu and returned for a touchdown. This made the score 17-10, which meant that the Steelers had covered the spread on a freaky, last-second fluke play. This might have stood as one of the greatest moments in sports gambling history, something like the Music City Miracle and Robin Ventura's game-winning grand slam single combined.

Replay officials looked at the play again, and initially the referee signaled that the touchdown was good. Just as the game's broadcast ended, though, CBS showed the final score as 11-10, with little explanation. We'd all just seen Troy Polamalu score a touchdown; why on earth had it been disallowed?

The NFL confirmed shortly after the game that the touchdown should have counted, which was cold comfort for those who had bet on the Steelers, seen their bet come through on one of the craziest plays in recent memory, and then had the touchdown erroneously disallowed (the NFL is officially unconcerned with point spreads, but common sense tells us that a large measure of the league's popularity is due to gambling, and such popularity is unlikely to last if the integrity of the league's final scores is called into question).

Still more frustrating is the revelation that stupid, lazy miscommunication turns out to be the culprit. I'll explain, since to the best of my knowledge nobody anywhere else really has. The play was relatively simple: Chargers QB Philip Rivers threw a garden-variety forward pass to

LaDainian Tomlinson, who caught it and then lateralled to Chris Chambers, who attempted to pitch it back to a teammate. The Chambers lateral was broken up and hit the ground before it was returned for a touchdown.

The NFL released a statement attempting to clarify the error; in part, it read that the Tomlinson pass "was initially ruled a legal backward pass but then reversed in replay to an illegal forward pass," and that "[t]he officiating crew mistakenly determined that the backward pass that Polamalu legally recovered and returned for the touchdown was the pass that was reversed in replay to being forward and illegal."

They won't come out and say it, but, clearly, here's what must have happened: at some point, after initially reviewing the play and calling the touchdown good, the officials on the field got word that "the lateral" was, in fact, an illegal forward pass. Officials must then have concluded, without bothering to think much about it, that "the lateral" in question was the one made by Chambers, the one eventually scooped up by Polamalu. One problem: that pass had clearly, even to the naked eye, gone backwards, by at least two or three yards. Any officials watching the play as it happened should have had no trouble seeing this. But, hey, they replay guy just said that "the lateral" was, after further review, an illegal forward pass. Who are you gonna trust, the replay booth or your own lyin' eyes? Apparently, in all the hoopla, everyone on the officiating crew just forgot that there had been another lateral on the play that the replay booth could have been – in fact, was – referring to. "Well," the officials must have thought, "the replay booth says that the Chambers lateral was an illegal forward pass. We could have sworn we saw it go backwards by a good three or four yards, but oh well." Obviously, no one of the officiating crew thought to ask the all important question, "are you sure we're talking about the same lateral?"

When a legal backwards lateral, like the one attempted by Chambers, hits the ground, that's simply a fumble. When a forward pass – legal or not – hits the ground, the play is dead. Since they thought Chambers' lateral was an illegal forward pass, officials ruled that once it hit the ground the play was dead and the game was over. What should have happened, as confirmed by the NFL, was that San Diego should have been penalized for *Tomlinson's* illegal forward pass. Pittsburgh would have had the right to decline that penalty, which they certainly would have, since no team would ever voluntarily give up even an inconsequential garbage-time touchdown.

Two major foul-ups in two weeks. As I said, fans have no choice but to live with blown calls (for now). We shouldn't have to live with ignorance and incompetence.

On to the games... can I avoid getting into double-digits in the loss column this week? Only time will tell. Also, since I clearly have no aptitude for picking NFL games – maybe since I don't really watch very much football anymore – and

since I've already blathered on long enough, in lieu of analysis I'll just provide you with my pick for each game, followed by what I would imagine to be each team's most prominent "Zooperstar" (Zooperstars are weird, mascot-like characters that derive their names from animal puns of famous athletes. Whale Gretzky, for instance. Or Clammy Sosa. Snail Earnhardt, Jr... you get the idea).

Bengals @ STEELERS -11

[you'll notice that I finally picked a Thursday night game correctly]

Bengals: T.J. Houshmandzadeh – T.J. Houshmandzebra  
Steelers: Ben Roethlisberger – Ben Mothlisberger

Texans @ BROWNS -3

Texans: Mario Williams – Mariorangutan Williams  
Browns: Kellen Winslow II – Pelican Winslow II

Bills @ CHIEFS +3

Bills: Lee Evans – Bee Evans  
Chiefs: Larry Johnson – Dromedary Johnson

PATRIOTS @ Dolphins -1

Patriots: Matt Cassel – Rat Cassel  
Dolphins: Ronnie Brown – Ronnie Brown Bear

Jets @ TITANS -5

Jets: Brett Favre – Brett Larvae  
Titans: Kerry Collins – Kerry Collie

Eagles @ RAVENS -1

Eagles: Brian Westbrook – Lion Westbrook  
Ravens: Ray Lewis – Manta Ray Lewis

49ers @ COWBOYS -10

49ers: Frank Gore – Frank Boar  
Cowboys: Tony Romo – Pony Romo

BUCCANEERS @ Lions +7.5

Buccaneers: Warrick Dunn – Warrick Dung Beetle  
Lions: Daunte Culpepper – Doggie Culpepper

Vikings @ JAGUARS -2.5

Vikings: Gus Frerotte – Gus Ferret  
Jaguars: Maurice Jones-Drew – Maurice Jones-Kangaroo

BEARS @ Rams +8

## POOP READING

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Bears: Kyle Orton – Crocodile Orton  
Rams: Marc Bulger – Shark Bulger

Raiders @ BRONCOS -9.5

Raiders: JaMarcus Russell – JaMarcus Mussel  
Broncos: Champ Bailey - Chimp Bailey

PANTHERS @ Falcons -1

Panthers: Jake Delhomme – Snake Delhomme  
Falcons: Matt Ryan – Bat Ryan

GIANTS @ Cardinals +3

Giants: Plexico Burrese – Plexico Burro  
Cardinals: Kurt Warner – Kurt Wormer

REDSKINS @ Seahawks +3.5

Redskins: Clinton Portis – Clinton Porpoise (or, if you prefer, Clinton Tortoise)  
Seahawks: Matt Hasselbeck – Cat Hasselbeck

COLTS @ Chargers -2.5

Colts: Peyton Manning – Pigeon Manning  
Chargers: LaDainian Tomlinson – Pomeranian Tomlinson

PACKERS @ Saints -2.5

Packers: A.J. Hawk – ... (sorry; I couldn't think of one for him)  
Saints: Reggie Bush – Reggie Bush Baby

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