

NFL 2008 - Wild Card Playoffs

by Joe Mulder

Week 17: 7-8-1

Overall: 114-136-7

Well, there's always next year.

The Smartest Thing I Said Last Week:

PATRIOTS @ Bills +6.5

6.5? Really? If I could, I'd bet on the Patriots covering this spread in each individual quarter of play.

[Technically I wasn't quite right about the each individual quarter thing, but the Patriots won 13-0 and the Bills didn't have a chance]

The Dumbest Thing I Said Last Week:

I think the Cowboys are going to make the playoffs somehow, just to bug us.

[Not these Cowboys. Not this year. Dallas to the Eagles by 38 points in what had become, by kickoff time, a winner-makes-the-playoffs, loser-goes-home affair]

FALCONS @ Cardinals +2

All of the road teams are favored in this weekend's Wild Card action. I think we can assume that all four of them aren't going to win, so the trick is picking out which ones will and which ones won't.

Let's start with an easy one: the Falcons will.

In one of the most baffling, delightful bits of sports trivia to come along in quite some time, the Cardinals are hosting their first playoff game since 1947. That's right: 1947. It's always fun to read those factoids where, like, the last time the Cowboys won a playoff game there were no such things as mp3 players, or the last time the Lions won in Green Bay the Season 3 "Simpsons" episode where Bart uses his radio to pretend that he's a little boy stuck at the bottom of a well hadn't aired yet... but you don't even have to do that with the Cardinals. You can just say that the last time they hosted a playoff game was in 1947.

And it's not like you have to be all that great to host a playoff game; I won't even use this year's 8-8 Chargers as an example, because that's a freakish occurrence that you can't really count on happening again, but take this year's uninspiring 10-6 Vikings team: they're hosting a playoff game. It's not like you have to be that great.

And for some reason, I've heard quite a few times this week

that this is the first playoff game that the Cardinals will be hosting since they moved to Arizona in 1988. And while this is technically true, it strikes me as quite a misrepresentation of the amount of time it's been. Yes, they haven't hosted a playoff game since 1988; they also hosted no playoff games in the 41 years prior to 1988. That's just bad reporting; it would be like saying Barack Obama is the first black man to be elected president in the 21st century. Accurate, but hardly the real story.

In any case, the Cardinals are 7-0 against teams with losing records this year (including 6-0 against fellow members of the NFC West, all of whom had sub-.500 seasons), and 2-7 against teams that were 8-8 or better. Not the stuff that playoff victories are made of, I'm afraid.

Besides, Atlanta is darn good. And who would have thought? With the shadow of the Michael Vick dogfighting scandal looming over a franchise that was coming off a dreadful 4-12 season, with a rookie coach (Mike Smith) and a rookie starting quarterback (Matt Ryan), the Falcons seemed about as likely to experience a major resurgence in 2008 as Britney Spears.

And it turns out that was true.

COLTS @ Chargers +1

I like this one because we get to say "Colts and Bolts" a lot. "Colts and Bolts." It's fun, see?

I'm a little surprised that this line is only one point; these are the Colts we're talking about, right? Winners of nine in a row? I guess the fact that they've had some trouble in San Diego of late; they lost twice to the Chargers last year – once in the regular season, once in the playoffs – and beat them this year in San Diego in Week 12. The Colts are a threat to win the Super Bowl this year; the Chargers are better than their 8-8 record (at least one game better, since a blown call famously cost them a guaranteed win in Denver in Week 2), but they're not in the Colts' class. Not this year.

Besides, I'm not certain that the San Diego home field advantage counts for much. I've been to one NFL playoff game in my life, and it was in San Diego a few years ago when the Chargers hosted the Jets. During key moments when San Diego had the ball, the Chargers had to put messages up on the scoreboard asking fans to quiet down so that the home team could, you know, hear the snap count and stuff. I suppose they've hosted another couple of playoff games in the years since then and they might be a little bit more used to it by now, but, still. When you're talking hostile environments for a visiting team, Qualcomm Stadium is not exactly the "cage" gym in Cedar Knob, where Coach Dale called that opposing player a gorilla and then Rade punched him. Now *that* was a tough place to play. Man, I've got to watch *Hoosiers* again.

Ravens @ DOLPHINS +3.5

Like the Falcons, the Ravens are 11-5 and in the playoffs with a rookie quarterback, Joe Flacco, at the helm. It kind of makes you feel bad in advance for the personnel people at any team with quarterback problems that doesn't solve those problems by, say, Week 3 of the 2009 season. "Why didn't you just draft a quarterback and have him be good right away?" one can imagine the fans of that hypothetical team (probably the Lions; let's be honest) asking.

In contrast with the Falcons' flashy, do-it-all Mat Ryan, who has been mentioned as a possible MVP candidate, Flacco may be more of a "game-manager" type, which is football talk for "a warm body who, best-case scenario, tends to avoid killing you with costly turnovers." Still, the Ravens won a Super Bowl years ago with a guy – Trent Dilfer – who could charitably be described in those terms, and they might be able to do it again with Flacco. They've still got the dominant defense; Ray Lewis, at 33, is playing like he's 25 again (and, although you didn't hear this from me, he's helping his buddies get away with murdering people like he's 24 again).

But, can I pick a rookie QB on the road in a playoff game (I mean, I know I just did, earlier, but a playoff game against the Cardinals hardly counts)? Against a Dolphins team that has won nine of its last ten and has momentum on its side?

I cannot.

Eagles @ VIKINGS +3

Falcons/Cardinals is a foregone conclusion, so, not counting that game, this game seems to be the one game all weekend in which one of the two teams is being given almost no chance. Nobody seems to think that the Vikings can win this one, even Viking fans; at this writing the game was not yet a sellout, and was in danger of being blacked out on TV in Minnesota (the same situation is apparently true in Arizona, but who can blame Cardinals fans?).

I think the Vikings are going to win, though. We know what they can do when they play a good game – witness their 35-14 thrashing of the Cardinals in Arizona three weeks ago, or their decisive 20-10 win over NFC #2 seed Carolina in Week 2. All the Vikings have to do is not beat themselves, and I think they'll do that. Or not do that, as it were. Whatever; they'll win, is what I mean to say.

I still don't think quarterback Tarvaris Jackson is the long-term answer (count me among the many who suspect that the Vikings will take a nice long look at Patriots QB Matt Cassel in the offseason), but he's got some talent and can throw a really nice ball if he puts his mind to it. All the Vikings' offensive line has to do is keep the Eagles off of him just long enough to let him complete a few long ones. The Eagles, supposedly, will try to blitz a lot, but what worked on the Cowboys' aging, dysfunctional offensive line

last week won't work as well against the Vikes.

And sure, the Eagles are coming off of a 44-6 wipeout of the Cowboys, but let's not make the mistake of forgetting everything that's happened this season based on one game. This is an Eagles team that tied the Cincinnati Bengals this year. This is an Eagles team that, in Week 16, with their playoff lives in the balance (as far as they knew at the time), went out and scored three points against a going-nowhere Redskins squad. This Eagles team is capable of stinking up the joint. I see something akin to the out-of-nowhere 31-17 whupping that the 8-8 Vikings put on a superior Packers team in January of 2005 (this was the game where Joe Buck almost had an aneurysm when Randy Moss mimed mooning the Lambeau Field crowd after a touchdown. Hard to believe that was already four years ago, isn't it?).

So... do I really believe any of this? Hell, I don't know. But the Vikings haven't been in the playoffs in four years, and haven't hosted a playoff game in eight; I've got to talk myself into believing they have a chance, don't I?

And, you know, I think they actually do. At the very least they'll be able to keep it close enough to eke out an excruciating one-or-two point loss at the last second, in which case picking them to cover a three-point spread is definitely the way to go.
