

NFL 2011 - Week 1

by Joe Mulder

Welcome, my dear reader(s?), to the return of my glorious, weekly, sure-to-be-mostly-inaccurate football picks.

I didn't do these picks last season because, well, I'm lazy.

And I'm still lazy, but I'm more excited than ever about the NFL, both because the summer lockout made it look for a brief moment like we might have to live without football for a few weeks in September, and because I can enjoy the upcoming season free from the burden of any expectation that my team, the Vikings, will be good.

So let's jump right in, shall we?

Saints @ PACKERS - 4.5

When there are Thursday night games I'll Tweet my picks, just to have them sort of time-stamped so you can see I'm not cheating when I routinely pick them incorrectly.

Not this week, though, although it hardly counts because the defending champs always win that Thursday home opener. That pick is usually a gimme.

What a game, though, huh? You hate to generalize after only one isolated experience, but I think we can assume that based on Thursday's Packers/Saints game the entire season is going to be the most fun thing to watch, ever.

And all that fretting about moving kickoffs from the 30-yard line up to the 35 seems to be for naught; sure, the game set a record for most touchbacks ever in Lambeau Field, but I'd be willing to bet that that 10-touchdown, 42-34 shootout also contained more *kickoffs* that just about any game in Lambeau Field history, so it's not as remarkable a statistic as it might seem.

We might also see more kick returners follow the lead of Packers rookie Randall (and if his nickname isn't "Tex" by now, it soon will be) Cobb and take some chances, as he did in returning a kick eight yards deep in his own end zone and taking it all the way for a score. Because if the vast majority of the kickoffs you receive are going to be touchbacks, maybe you'll decide it's worth it to take a chance here and there to try to gain an advantage in the field position war. Who knows? What we *do* know is that, for one night at least, all this talk about special teams play being a greatly diminished factor was unfounded, and that helped make for an incredibly thrilling game.

Last night, by the way, Randall Cobb became the first person born in the 1990s to play in an NFL game. I just include that factoid to remind us all that we're getting really old, and are going to die sooner than we'd care to admit to ourselves. But have a good weekend, in any case.

Actually, I just decided that if my name was Randall Cobb, and I had a very impressive physique (as I imagine Cobb might, being a young professional athlete and all), I'd want to be known as Randall "Pecks" Cobb. So, if anybody knows him, feel free to pass that on. He can have that one.

FALCONS @ Bears +2.5

The Falcons were *Sports Illustrated* football writer extraordinaire Peter King's Super Bowl champion pick this year. The Bears, who almost made the Super Bowl last year before honking away the NFC title game at home, are expected by everyone to be pretty bad this season. Bad enough to go from hosting the conference championship in one game to being underdogs at home the next?

Well, people seem to think so. And who am I to disagree with people?

COLTS @ Texans -9

Peyton Manning is hurt, and he had surgery yesterday so it doesn't look like he'll be able to funny-commercial his way out of this situation. Newly signed Colts starter Kerry Collins is so old that he actually remembers the very first ever "Vinny Testaverde is so old" joke. Indy's running backs are suspect, their receivers are either old or can't stay healthy, and it seems like something's got to give seeing as how they've made the playoffs nine straight years (I think I read somewhere that if they made it for a tenth straight year that would be an all-time NFL record, but I don't feel like Googling it so either believe me or don't).

And yet. The Texans are in their 12th or 13th year of being everybody's breakout pick at the start of the season (which is weird because they've only played nine seasons since they came into the league). They've had one winning year, ever, and they've never made the playoffs. I know they opened up last season with a big win against the Colts, but, nine points? The Texans? Considering that their star running back, Arian Foster, is dinged up? I wish I could, but I just can't. Not until they prove they're good. And I won't pick the Colts, even these battered, broken Colts, to lose by more than nine until they prove they're bad.

And there's a distinct possibility that they'll do that in Houston on Sunday. But still.

BILLS @ Chiefs -6

Last year's Chiefs beat the favored* Chargers at home during a Noah's Ark-level rainstorm in Kansas City in Week 1, rode that momentum to a 3-0 start, but fell to 5-4 after getting shellacked in Denver by a Broncos team that ended up being pretty bad. Then they beat five losing teams in the second half of the season to eke out the division title over the Chargers, their wacky, fluky Week 1 victory being the difference in the standings.

POOP READING

* I assume the Chargers were favored; again, don't feel like looking it up.

This year's Chiefs have a banged-up quarterback, a tougher schedule (they play the formidable NFC North instead of the pitiable NFC West) and a mean that's just begging to be regressed to.

The Bills aren't any good and have almost ceased even trying to be, so this is more of a pick against the Chiefs than for Buffalo. The Chiefs shouldn't be giving away six points to anybody.

TITANS @ Jaguars -1

Call me crazy, but now that the Colts are down and potentially somewhat out, the Titans are going to win this division. Everyone thinks it's going to be the Texans. It's not. It's going to be the Titans. And the only other team in this division is the Jaguars, so either way the odds of a team your girlfriend has never heard of winning the AFC South this year are very, very high.

Bengals @ BROWNS -6.5

Having the Bengals be bad at football is kind of like having Notre Dame be good at football; it just sort of feels right. And proper.

As for the Browns, one has to worry a bit about running back Peyton Hillis, who appears on the cover of this year's Madden '12 video game. The "Madden Curse" has claimed so many players that at this point we've got almost no choice but to believe that it's real.

Or to believe that consistently excellent players are less exciting and therefore less likely to spark consumer interest by being featured on the cover of the Madden video game and thus players who have had statistically unlikely excellent seasons will be disproportionately featured and can be counted on to underperform the next year, and that playing NFL football at an elite level takes such a toll on the human body that *any* given player – featured on the cover of Madden or not – is at least somewhat susceptible to suffering an injury of some severity during any given season, perhaps even more so if his body endured the rigors of a full 16-game schedule the year before, which it almost certainly did if he's finding himself featured on the Madden cover.

Either way.

EAGLES @ Rams +4.5

This will be an interesting test for a Rams team that seems to be the odds-on favorite to win the NFC West (if only because somebody has to). They don't necessarily even need to beat the Eagles, they just need to show that they can hang with them.

The Eagles, meanwhile, assembled something of an all-star team in the offseason, and we'll see how that pans out. Me, I decided it was Michael Vick or bust as far as fantasy football goes this season, so I'll be watching the Eagles as closely as anybody and hoping against hope that Vick holds up.

Which I'm sure you care about deeply, by the way. I know that's why you come here; for detailed updates about my fantasy team.

STEELERS @ Ravens -1

Much has been made of the fact that the Steelers have won seven straight games over the Ravens when Ben Roethlisberger starts for Pittsburgh at quarterback.

So, I don't really need to make that much more of it here.

Lions @ BUCCANEERS -1

The Lions are this year's Texans (and so, incidentally, are the Texans), everybody's preseason breakout darlings. Clearly the oddsmakers agree, or at least think they're better than the Buccaneers (home field advantage is generally considered to be worth about three points, so if a home team is favored by less than three it basically means they're thought of as worse than their opponent).

The Buccaneers, meanwhile, were sort of 2010's NFC answer to the Chiefs, capitalizing on more than a little luck to finish above expectations at 10-6. Many think they'll backslide this year. I'm not so sure. They'll be the youngest team in the NFL for the second season in a row, and I think they'll be able to build on last year's success.

Listen; a lot of these Week 1 picks are just so much blindfolded dart tossing, because we don't know who's good yet (that'll be my excuse for a little while; stay tuned until about Week 5, when I'm forced to come up with another one to justify my crappy predicting record). Could the Lions make the leap that so many expect of them? Sure. It's possible. I don't quite expect it, though, so I'll take the Buccos.

Vikings @ CHARGERS -9

I never pick the Vikings correctly. I'm just too close to things. I hope they're good; I'm not sure they will be. Should they be nine point underdogs? I don't know. Probably not. But this way if they get blown out, at least I get a check in my personal "win" column this week. Let's just move on.

GIANTS @ Redskins +3

The Giants are a regular triage unit on defense. The Redskins should still be worse; that they're three point underdogs at home to the ailing Giants should tell you something about how good people think they'll be.

POOP READING

Panthers @ CARDINALS -7

Many signs point to Carolina being competitive in this game. And they may well be; I just don't want to back Heisman Trophy-winning rookie Panthers QB Cam Newton in his first career start on the road in a season opener (the last Heisman Trophy-winning rookie Panthers QB in his first career start on the road in a season opener won, after all, and what are the odds of that happening again?).

Seahawks @ 49ERS -5.5

A person should probably pick the Seahawks; I've just seen too much of Tarvaris Jackson in my Vikings fan career to ever trust him, especially on grass on the road. Not that I trust San Francisco quarterback Alex Smith, either; he's been in the league for seven years and his greatest accomplishment remains managing to look almost exactly like former "American Idol" contestant Elliott Yamin.

But the 49ers defense should be relatively stout, and that should be more than enough to stop Seattle.

Cowboys @ JETS -4.5

The Cowboys are another hot pick this year. We'll see.

PATRIOTS @ Dolphins +7

The Patriots have this weird habit of occasionally losing to the Dolphins (which would be understandable, except in the last decade the Patriots hardly ever lose to anybody). But the Dolphins are not going to be any good this year, and the Patriots are going to be Super Bowl contenders yet again. All that adds up to a relatively easy pick.

Raiders @ BRONCOS -3

Ouch. Since you can't pick "neither," I'll pick Denver.

And there you have it. Week 1 picks, in the books. I look forward to another season of missing trends, misleading readers and mis-picking games. I wouldn't have it any other way.
