

NFL 2008 - Week 1

by Joe Mulder

And we're off and running with another season of the NFL and, perhaps even more importantly, another season of my NFL picks column!

With the caveat that I believe you can't really know anything until about Week 5, here are my picks for Week 1.

REDSKINS @ Giants -4

Yes, the Giants are the defending Super Bowl champions. You sort of have to keep reminding yourself of that, don't you? It's not every season where the Super Bowl champ ends up being a team that no one – and I mean no one – was talking about until the end of the conference title games. Many times last year I referred to the Giants' annual late-season Tom Coughlin choke job; I think it's fair to say that in December '07 and January '08, it did not materialize.

But the Redskins made the playoffs last year at 9-7, only one game worse than the 10-6 Giants. Plus, they beat the Giants on the road. In fact, last year, the Giants lost their last four home games. This year is not last year, to be sure. But the Giants have lost key players, and those who are paid to say such things say that the Redskins seem to have improved. Good enough for me.

BENGALS @ Ravens +1.5

The Ravens are starting a rookie quarterback, the University of Delaware's own Joe Flacco. Now, it's been a decent few weeks for guys named Joe from Delaware, and Rich Gannon showed us that a former Fightin' Blue Hens QB can go on to become league MVP (yes, Rich Gannon is a former NFL MVP. Between this and the revelation that the Giants won the Super Bowl last year, I'm really dropping some knowledge on you, aren't I?).

But the Bengals, for all of their troubles, can score. And the Ravens defense isn't getting any younger (though, in the defense of those individuals who make up the Ravens defense, few people do). The fact that the birds are 1.5-point dogs at home tells me that nobody feels good about them, so, neither do I.

Jets @ DOLPHINS +3

I believe the Jets have offensive line issues, which is not the best scenario when you've got an aging quarterback who's been with the team for just a few weeks. Throw in the Madden cover jinx, and the Jets and Brett Favre are doomed.

And, in a historic occurrence, I will now type the sentence, "Plus, Team X really has a great chance to win this week because they've got Chad Pennington at quarterback..."

Plus, the Dolphins have a great chance to win this week because they've got Chad Pennington at quarterback. After spending his entire career with the Jets, Pennington knows them like the back of his hand. Look for the Dolphins to match last year's win total in Week 1.

Chiefs @ PATRIOTS -16.5

It's more that I think the Chiefs will be bad than I think the Patriots will be anywhere near as good as they were last season. And we know the Patriots are not above running up the score after the outcome of the game has effectively been decided. It's not so easy when you're playing a great defensive line (like that of, say, the 2007 New York Giants), but luckily for them (and me!) the Chiefs traded their one great defensive lineman to the Vikings.

Texans @ STEELERS -6.5

I'd love to tell you that the Texans are finally going to make the playoffs this year, but I'm just not sure I can do that. Yes, they were 8-8 last year and will probably be better. But in the brutal AFC in general, and the especially brutal AFC South in particular, 10-6 didn't even make the playoffs last season. Look at Houston's schedule: at Pittsburgh, hosting Baltimore, at Tennessee, at Jacksonville, hosting Indianapolis. It's pretty easy to imagine them sitting there at 1-4, even if they're good. Which they probably are.

They might even be better than the Steelers. But Pittsburgh (the team and the city) will really be up for the game, and it can be a tough place to play. It's not that difficult to imagine the Steelers winning by a touchdown.

Jaguars @ Titans +3

The Jaguars are supposed to join the NFL elite this year. It seems to me like teams that are forecast to become elite eventually do (as opposed to team that are forecast to be playoff sleepers; those teams usually flop. Of course, maybe it's just that the frequency with which the Cardinals are chosen as a sleeper pick ends up skewing the numbers).

The Titans were awfully tough last season; this is really a marquee Week 1 matchup in the aforementioned especially brutal AFC South.

LIONS @ Falcons +3

Last year's Lions were like Tara Reid: they started out sort of hot, but then it just became a disaster. Still, Detroit has some talent on offense, and – unless somebody on the Atlanta roster has some sort of plate-spinning or machete-juggling abilities that I'm not aware of – the Falcons don't.

SEAHAWKS @ Bills -1

The Seahawks have made the playoffs the last five years.

POOP READING

The Bills haven't made the playoffs in a year that starts with "2." Last season is not this season (by definition, in fact), but, I'm not sure what makes anyone think the Bills will be better than the Seahawks. Although generally playing at home is seen to be worth a 3-point advantage, I think, so the Bills being favored by 1 means people think the Seahawks are actually better.

Anyway, take the Seahawks.

Buccaneers @ SAINTS -3

The Saints were such an up-and-down team last year; who the heck knows what they'll do? Especially now, before Week 5?

But I think the Buccaneers, who make the playoffs last season, weren't that great and will regress toward the mean (which is actually a pretty specific prediction if you think about it, considering that they went 9-7 last year).

Rams @ EAGLES -7.5

You don't really have much choice when a team everyone thinks will be pretty good hosts a team everyone thinks will be pretty bad, do you?

The Eagles will be in the mix; they went 8-8 and missed the playoffs last year, their season derailed by a three-game losing streak to the Patriots, the Seahawks and the Giants. That's a team that finished the season undefeated, a division title winner, and the Super Bowl champs. Tough draw. This year the sailing is somewhat smoother.

COWBOYS @ Browns +5.5

The Cowboys were essentially the class of the NFC last year. They may not have won a playoff game since the internet (that's not a typo; they haven't won a playoff game *since the internet*), but they're a hell of a team and everyone thinks they'll play in the Super Bowl this year.

Cleveland had a promising 2007 but looked pretty bad in the preseason, especially when they wore those solid-brown-colored pants that, at the risk of being indelicate, made them look like their legs were made of poop.

PANTHERS @ Chargers -9

The Panthers have been away too long; it seems like they've got to be in it every few years. I'll miss Vinny Testaverde and David Carr from a comedy standpoint, because Panthers QB Jake Delhomme is neither super-duper old nor looks exactly like Superman. But in all other respects, a game and healthy Delhomme serves the team better.

And I don't trust the Chargers; never really do.

CARDINALS @ 49ers +2.5

Kind of a dog of a game, huh?

Bears @ COLTS -9.5

It pretty much depends on how healthy and ready to play Peyton Manning is. Even if he's at 75%, the fact that the Colts are opening up a new stadium and the fact that the Bears are starting a white guy named "Kyle" at quarterback should make for a big win for Indy.

Don't start a white guy named "Kyle" at quarterback. You'd think teams would have learned that by now.

VIKINGS @ Packers -2.5

If the Vikings secondary is any good – and I mean *any* good – the Packers could be in for a long, long Monday night. I think the Vikings offensive line will hold even with Bryant McKinnie serving a suspension, I think Adrian Peterson will be huge this year, and I think – at least I hope – that Packers QB and Brett Favre replacement Aaron Rodgers will get rattled.

I'm trying to temper my excitement for the 2008 Vikings, because history suggests that they will not win the Super Bowl (them never having won the Super Bowl). But I expect big things, Minnesota. Big things!

Broncos @ RAIDERS +3

Yeah, I'm picking the Raiders. Deal with it.
