

NFL 2008 - Super Bowl XLIII

by Joe Mulder

Conference championship games: 1-1

Playoffs overall: 3-7

One more game, and then no more football until the fall. Not to bum everybody out.

Our regular reader(s?) will notice, of course, that The Weekly Log – the Friday feature I recently introduced to fill the football column void – is on temporary hiatus. Not to worry; it'll be back next week. But for now, we're here to talk about Super Bowl XLIII.

STEELERS @ Cardinals +7

[note: the game is obviously played at a neutral site, as are all Super Bowls, but the Cardinals are officially designated as the "home" team, which matters only in that they get to select whether to wear their home or road uniforms]

Not to give away everything right up front, but I see the Steelers beating the Cardinals handily, and winning the Pittsburgh franchise's unprecedented sixth Super Bowl title in the process. And I don't think it will be close.

Comparisons have been made to Super Bowl XXXV, in which the Baltimore Ravens beat the New York Giants 34-7, and I find those comparisons to be apt. The Ravens, like the Steelers, were a 12-4 team with a limited offensive attack but an all-time great defense. The Giants, like the Cardinals, were in the Super Bowl largely as the result of fluky good luck, didn't really belong in the game and were clearly overmatched.

One might think the similarities aren't as great because the 2000 Giants were 12-4 and the top seed in the NFC playoffs while this year's Cardinals went 9-7 and, going by record alone, the eighth best of the 16 NFC teams (I heard somebody say that, if you forget the fact that the Cardinals won their division and just apply the NFL's playoff tiebreakers to all NFC teams, the Cardinals rank behind the 9-7 Bears and Buccaneers but ahead of the 9-7 Cowboys). I would point out, however, that after ten games the 2000 Giants were 6-4, and the 2008 Cardinals were 7-3. The 2000 Giants happened to finish the season with five straight wins against teams ranging from average to lousy to God-awful, and in the NFC title game were lucky enough to draw a Dennis Green-coached Vikings team that had managed to close out the year with three straight losses to piss away home field advantage (Giants 41, Vikings 0. Pretty much the low point of my sports fan life).

Those Giants we so unimposing, I remember, that *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* sports columnist Patrick Reusse, in a late-season piece indented to reassure Vikings fans that

they didn't have anything to worry about (I have to believe that it was the last such piece ever written by anyone, anywhere), assumed that the Vikings would secure the top seed in the playoffs and proceeded to break down potential opponents who might come into the Metrodome for the NFC title game. One by one, he listed the reasons why each team couldn't beat the Vikings. Finally (and this is to best of my recollection, but I'd stake my considerable reputation and standing in the community on the notion that I'm remembering it very accurately), he wrote, "and if you really see this Giants team coming into the Metrodome and beating the Vikings in the playoffs, you are not a pessimist. You are a fatalist."

That's the Giants team that ended up going to Super Bowl XXXV. And I, for one, don't think this year's Cardinals are any better.

But, of course, just because there are parallels between the teams involved doesn't mean that Super Bowl XLIII will necessarily play out anything like Super Bowl XXXV. So why did I burn all those calories comparing the two when all it accomplished was to take a small chunk of time out of your day? Well, taking a small chunk out of your day is the entire reason for this website's very existence, so, if I were you I'd quit complaining.

Onto the game at hand, then. Before we get to any actual analysis (which we might, because I am not particularly interested in – or particularly qualified to give – analysis), I'd like to say that I really don't want the Cardinals to win. Why not, you might ask? They're the underdog, they haven't had a title in 60-odd years (the second-longest current championship drought in major North American professional sports, the longest being the Chicago Cubs' century of futility), they're a great success story... well, I don't buy it. The NFL should make more sense than this; if the 9-7 Cardinals – who, as I said, would be the eighth-ranked team in the 16-team NFC going by record alone – can win the Super Bowl, then, as legendary broadcaster Bill King once said after the Raiders beat the Chargers on the inexplicable, last-second "Holy Roller" play in 1978, there's nothing real in the world anymore.

[Incidentally, you listen to King's original radio call of that very play [here](#):

http://www.bayarearadio.org/sports/raiders-chargers_sept-10-1978.shtml

and I highly recommend that you do. It gets good at about the eleven minute mark; listen from there to the end. Really, having just now heard it again, I can say for certain that this is the greatest moment in the history of sports broadcasting]

These Cardinals lost by 40 points to the Patriots in a game that they seemed to have no intention of trying to win, and that was barely more than a month ago. These Cardinals won

POOP READING

the 2008 NFC West division, which is widely considered to be one of the worst divisions in the history of the NFL, by a whopping *two games*. These Cardinals, it seems to me, are somehow perceived as having steamrolled through the NFC playoffs, when in fact they just barely hung on to beat both the Falcons and the Eagles, at home no less. If these Cardinals can make the playoffs over better teams and finish the season as (unquestionably the worst-ever) Super Bowl champions, then the regular season starts to seem awfully meaningless and arbitrary. Nothing real in the world anymore, indeed.

And I'll tell you why else I don't want the Cardinals to succeed: false hope. Suddenly, fans of every team with a history as bad as the Cardinals – or, I should say, fans of every team with a *recent* history *nearly* as bad as the Cardinals, since a team with a history as bad as the Cardinals doesn't exist – will think that their team could well be just a season or two away from greatness (never mind that the Cardinals are hardly "great," by any measure). The Cardinals are just two years removed from a streak of eight straight losing seasons; if they can do it, why can't my team?

Well, first of all, the Cardinals should in now way be "doing it;" their playoff run defies all known laws of God and nature, and should – *must* – come to an end on Sunday.

Second of all, what would make a fan of, say, the Lions or the Bengals or the Raiders or the Chiefs, think they could replicate the Cardinals' formula for success? Hm, let's see... to turn your failing NFL team around, it's as simple as following the Arizona model. First of all, make sure you have the best wide receiver in the NFL. Then, get a Hall of Fame caliber quarterback and the NFL's 11th all-time leading rusher. That's all it takes! Then just wait for a couple of seasons until you luck into the playoffs and happen to put together a couple of decent games in a row, and you too can play for a Super Bowl title.

But despite the fact that a Cardinals win would, in effect, ruin the NFL for ever, people seem to be talking themselves into the idea that the Super Bowl will be a close game. Pittsburgh's Hines Ward, a key offensive weapon for the Steelers, is hurting, they'll say. Pittsburgh can't run the ball effectively, and anything can happen once Steelers QB Ben Roethlisberger is forced to try to make plays behind a subpar offensive line, and with a depleted receiving corps. You repeat that enough, you can start to believe it.

No one, though, has been able to suggest just where, exactly, the Cardinals' points are supposed to come from. Yes, Arizona's Larry Fitzgerald is having the best postseason of any wide receiver ever. Yes, Arizona head coach Ken Whisenhunt spent several years with the Steelers, and knows them well. But you can bet that the Steelers defense – which, as has been mentioned, is one of the best in modern NFL history – will make sure that Fitzgerald can't beat them, and you can bet that Steelers defensive coordinator/mad genius

Dick LeBeau will have prepared some tactic or another that the Cards won't see coming.

Bottom line: the Arizona Cardinals – the Arizona Freaking Cardinals – can't win a Super Bowl before my Vikings do. They just can't. It can't happen.

Come on, Steelers; it's up to you.
