

Written by Patrick Mayo

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Below, we explore what should happen in this week's NFL games. Of course, in the NFL, only half of what should happen actually does happen, but playing the percentages gives you the best chance of winning. Remember, think twice before benching a stud based on match-ups! We list the Vegas odds spread in parentheses and the Over/Under number in brackets.

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SUNDAY EARLY

Dallas @ Minnesota (-3) [45.5]

Tough game to call. It's been so long, I really can't remember if the Vikings are good or not. They rolled the Giants in the season finale, but the Giants clearly didn't show up for the game. Before that, it was back to back losses to the Panthers and Bears, where Favre got out dueled by Jay Culter, whose blood sugar must not have been down that night. Minnesota is a true enigma in this year's playoffs.

If the Vikings are the unknown variable, Dallas is the constant. Since their win over the Saints at the Superdome, they've been on quite the roll. There are many adjectives to describe the Romo-led offense, but 'high-octane' is the best. In part because they've been running on a full tank for a month now, and partly because they're highly combustible. Romo has taken strides to reach the next level this season, but he's been to this point in the playoffs before -- a devastating loss got the Giants in 2007 -- and continued questions about his ability to win when it counts persist. A playoff win should elevate his confidence, but until he makes a deep playoff run, there will be few that fully trust him.

Both teams have potent offenses, so that's negligible. The defensive match-up on the other hand, is very intriguing. On their current four game winning streak, the Cowboys have been a juggernaut defensively. They tamed the league's high scoring offense, holding the Saints to 17 points. That was followed by back-to-back shutouts of the Redskins and Eagles. Last week,

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they we're able to clip the Birds again, holding Philly to 14 points. Now, you can make excuses about all this defensive domination... the Saints didn't care, Washington is no good, and the Eagles just don't match up well with Dallas. But none of those excuses will play with me (expect the "Redskins terribleness". That has a level of truth to it). There is a common theme among these teams, though. In fact, it's been a theme almost all the Cowboys' opponents have shared all season long -- a lack of an elite running back. Adrian Peterson is such a back, and he'll be the one that buries Dallas, if the Vikings let him loose. But that's a big *if*.

This has become Brett Favre's team, and they've been better because of it. While Peterson still gets his yards and touchdowns, this is a pass first team that uses the threat of the run as a decoy. 'All Day' set career lows in rushing yards this year and frankly didn't have the same type of game-breaking speed we've seen from him in the past. That's not to say he doesn't still have it, we just haven't seen it in a while, though it's through no fault of his own. He's so good that merely his presence on the field was good enough scare defenses into crowding the box, allowing Favre to have his way with opposing secondaries. But against Dallas, it will be Peterson that needs to shoulder the load.

Dallas has made mincemeat of quarterbacks. They're ability to create pressure without blitzing has been the perfect match for a very speedy group of linebackers and DBs. There's no dispute that Favre is one of the greatest to ever play the position, but sometimes we forget the type of meltdown he can be famous for. He's essentially an older version of Romo, at his best he'll kill ya, but he can just as easily win a game for the opposition. Although I anticipate a good game from Favre with his extra week to rest and preparation, I don't think the Vikings can win a shootout with Dallas.

This should be a fun game to watch solely based on the fact that there is no outcome that would come as a shock to anyone. If Adrian Peterson gets 25+ carries, things are looking up for the Vikings but in a more realistic world, I see Favre's ego coming into play. He'll drop back most of the time, trying to elude the pressure coming his way, forcing passes into small spaces. That's not the way you beat the Cowboys.

DAL 31, MIN 27 (Pick: Dallas +3, over 45.5) □

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