

Written by Patrick Mayo

Friday, 08 January 2010 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 02 March 2010 13:10

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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 LATE

#### Green Bay @ Arizona (-1) [47.5]

This game has been scheduled at the back end of Wild Card weekend, but don't let that diminish the importance or intrigue it provides. Sometimes a loss is better than a win. It never seems that way at the time, but every championship team will always hearken back to a devastating loss as a rallying point, not a triumphant victory. A particularly shocking and mortifying loss does crazy things to a team. How a team responds to one of these losses tends to dictate their final destiny. Delve no further into the past than 2007. The Giants were sitting pretty at 7-3 when they hosted the 4-6 Vikings in East Rutherford. The much maligned Tarvaris Jackson was the Vikings starting quarterback that day, usually a good indicator of a terrible team, but it was Eli Manning that sealed the win for Minnesota. Manning threw for four touchdowns that day. Unfortunately, three of them counted for the Vikings. A 41-17 trouncing could have been a volatile situation for the Giants, but they were able to regroup and have a playoff spot wrapped up after a Week 16 win against Buffalo. As memory serves me, the Giants went on to win three straight road games which led to the upset of the millennium and a Superbowl victory.

The Giants proved that a crippling loss can be used as an excellent motivation tool that can propel a team to new heights, but the reverse is also true. Take the Super Bowl champion Steelers for example. After a tough loss to a good Bengals team, the Steelers made a trip down to Arrowhead for a clash with the 2-7 Chiefs. A heartbreaking 27-24 overtime loss to Kansas City set the table for a historically terrible run which included losses to the 3-8 Raiders and the 1-11 Browns. A late-season turnaround couldn't salvage the five game losing streak set in

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motion by a particularly odious defeat.

The Packers have had a decade's worth of devastating losses this season, despite only losing five games. Rodgers and company lost both of their high profile matches to Brett Favre and the Vikings, including the the most watched game in the history of cable. A walk-off touchdown pass from Ben Roethlisberger to Mike Wallace delivered a crushing 37-36 defeat at the hands of the aforementioned Steelers, losers of their previous five games. But the real kicker came in Week 9 when Green Bay suffered their shameful whitewashing to the previously winless Buccaneers. This setback left the Packers reeling at 4-4, leaving most to write them out of the playoff picture. That's when the turn-around began. The Pack finished year winning seven of eight games and are the hottest playoff team of anyone not named the Chargers.

So what's the problem? It's the Cardinals standing in their way. This pick would be relatively simple if 2008 had never happened. We would be talking about how Arizona backed into the playoffs and are just happy to be making a long awaited playoff appearance. As a Bills fan, this is precisely how I anticipate feeling if Buffalo ever makes the playoffs again. But we have such recent evidence that Arizona is capable of almost anything. A friend recently offered his two cents on this game while we be bickering about our picks. In pure Vulcan style, he offered this logical conclusion, "the Boldin injury isn't even all that major, insofar as Arizona didn't have Boldin at Carolina last year and still beat up on the Panthers. All the intangibles added with the bandwagoning I'm seeing on Green Bay makes me believe the Packers will stumble... one thing is for certain: one underestimates the Cardinals at their own peril." That last line is the real kicker. This is seemingly the exact situation we were all presented with at the beginning of the playoffs last year. Atlanta won five of six to end the season, and it seemed like a foregone conclusion that they would dispatch of the Cardinals in short order. As you may recall, the Kurt Warner-led Cards proved to be too much for the inexperienced Falcons. Experience matters.

How much does experience matter? Well I've found it's tough to measure something that's unquantifiable. Let's just say this immeasurable quality tends to lend itself to success in sports. So this leaves me in quite the conundrum. What is the prevailing characteristic: Momentum or Experience? In this situation I'm led to believe that these intangibles provide us with a zero sum game. So with all things being equal, I'm left to make my prediction based on the state of both teams at game time.

The Cardinals are hampered by major injuries on both sides of the ball. Boldin is suffering from a high ankle sprain and a sprained MCL. I have no doubt that the warrior-like Boldin will tough it out, but his effectiveness remains a question. Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie looks like he'll play, but he is having problems back-peddling and cutting. These problems are essentially the

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equivalent of car that works, but has faulty steering and brakes. Good for drag racing, but a F1 circuit may present a new series of problems. While I refuse to change my tune on DR-C (despite the acronym, he does not possess any sort of doctorate, but rather just six credits towards a communications degree from Tennessee State), I believe that he's one of the most overrated corners in all of football, but let's face it, Arizona isn't know for it's defensive depth. He's their best option. Luckily for Arizona, they do have offensive depth. The Cards have a cluster of capable receivers in Steve Breaston and Early Doucet, who I can only assume was named for his premature birth, to compliment Larry Fitzgerald if Boldin can't go. They have a two-headed rushing attack that can be a force in the passing game if need be. Most importantly, they have Kurt Warner. Warner, a veteran of three Superbowl appearances, just seems to know how to win in the playoffs. Despite having the 5th-ranked pass defense, Green Bay has been prone to allowing some gigantic passing days. In the Packers' five losses this season, they've been absolutely victimized through the air, allowing 281.6 ypg and 3.2 TDs to opposing quarterbacks. Kurt Warner is definitely apt of having this type of game. The problem is, he's also more than capable of a meltdown.

Green Bay is the statistical favorite in every way. In the stats battle, the Packers rank higher in both rushing and passing, while defending the pass and run at a higher level. Their aerial attack should make mince meat of a penetrable Cardinals' secondary. The key to victory for the Packers will be to get consistent pressure on Warner and force him into the mistakes he can be prone to make.

I apologize for the length of this preview, but this game has really thrown me for a loop. There is no outcome of this game that would shock me. I've spent hours analyzing game tape and stats (and even simulated the game in Madden), leaving me more befuddled than when I started. I truly believe the winner of this game will be the NFC representative in the Super Bowl, which makes this even harder. There's no pick I can make that will leave me satisfied, but since I'm forced into a prediction, I'll take the healthier, statistically superior team. Go Packers!

**GB 34, ARI 24 (Pick: Green Bay +1, over 47.5)**

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