KEVIN O'NEILL'S

THE MAX

The Maximum Profit Football Weekly

• Volume 10 Issue 21 January 9th & 10th, 2009 •

Incredibly, Fezzik Repeats in Hilton SuperContest. *Max* Hot Streak Cools, As We Crash in NFL. But Bowls Good.

Fezzik beats 300+ Hilton Contestants….Again: Our man Fezzik won the Hilton contest for the second consecutive year. The Hilton contest has bettors put up $1500 and pick 5 games per week. Just like last year, he beat a field of over 300. It's a simply unbelievable achievement and one that will not be properly appreciated. I've learned a lot from the guy and couldn't be happier for him. He needed the Titans -4 (his main competitor had Seattle, the other side) and the line steamed to 6. The late push game him the win by half a game. Haven't spoken to him about it yet, but I'm sure he hedged heavily on the Seahawks at +6, and that covered. So his profits likely exceeded the quarter million first prize. That's the work of one sharp cookie.

Max Pulls 1-4 NFL Week: Max had a tough week in the NFL, going 1-4. I split with the two bad teams from Missouri. The other guys' games all lost. Everyone had a hand in the nice hot run. Everyone had a hand in it going down. The bowls are doing OK for us so far, 13-8 heading into the Fiesta Bowl.

Decent NFL Year on Phones: We had a decent year in the NFL. After a 2-2 week (2-1 sides, lost our teaser when the Tampa Bay half spit the bit late), our overall win rate (counting teasers) was nearly 57%. We did really well with our sides, going over 61%. Teasers were good, but totals were bad. We had bad luck with our totals in the NFL, and good luck with them in the colleges.

Bowl Observations: I'll wrap up the college bowl season after things wind down. Still incredible to me that there are only 4 games remaining as I write this prior to the Fiesta Bowl. Some observations.

- The only handicapping you needed to do in the majority of the games was "who is more excited to be there?"
- You must be very, very, very, very sure of yourself before betting a bowl favorite.
- The Big Ten teams surprised me. Guess they were sick and tired of hearing how dreadful they were.
- SEC teams were terrible offensively. Very poor QB performances from South Carolina, Arkansas, Ole' Miss, LSU, Tennessee, and Kentucky led to offensive scoring of 20 or less in regulation by those teams.
- Unless it's in the single digits or lower, cold weather usually doesn't lead to low scores unless accompanied by precipitation and/or wind. But that wasn't the case this year. Games in Orlando, Nashville, Birmingham, Memphis, and Charlotte all were low scoring in conditions that were cold but not windy or wet.

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Published by Strategic Sports Publishing
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SELECTIONS: January 9th & 10th, 2010

NFL

Saturday, January 9th, 2010

Jets @Bengals
Line: Bengals -2½, 34
Analysis by Kevin O'Neill

So what do you value in the NFL? Do you prefer the hot team or the more impressive body of work. The Jets are an interesting case study. Winners of three straight, they were the toast of the big apple. They then proceeded to lose 6 of 7, including to some bad teams, before rolling to 5 wins in their last 6 games. But those last 6 games were against 6 dead teams. The first 4 teams were out of the playoff hunt (Carolina, Buffalo, Tampa Bay, Atlanta) and then the last two games were against teams who were mailing it in.

The good? New York has the #1 defense and #1 running game according to NFL raw statistics. They allow only 4.2 yards per play and only 5.4 yards per pass defensively. Revis is the shutdown cornerback of shutdown cornerbacks, and it would be repetitive to list all the top receivers he's held to 35 yards or less. The running game generated the most raw yardage, but they ran the ball 5 times per game more than anyone else in the league and they are 7th on a yards per rush basis. They're passing game isn't terrific. You would expect that a team that runs so much would have an excellent yards per pass figure. In fact, the Jets are in the league's bottom half in that statistic. Sanchez played like a rookie often, even while winning, and the lack of trust in him helps account for the Jets high number of runs.

Interestingly, the Bengals are built similar to the Jets overall. They are also a run-first outfit and in this game we have 2 of the 4 teams that ran the ball over 500 times this season. Like the Jets, they are in the top 10 in the league in "yards per" against both the pass and the run. So you have two running teams and two very solid defenses. But that's priced into this under, which is pretty low.

I understand statistical handicappers who love the Jets here, and those who, even understanding the disparity in effort, just can't get over the domination exhibited in the Jets blowout over this team Sunday night. I understand people who think that a team with the "me first" Chad 85 will never win anything meaningful.

I understand people who are looking to buck the Jets due to the huge advantage they had down the stretch in playing two teams that were not trying. I understand those who don't like the Jets due to their cakewalk of a schedule down the stretch. (I actually haven't talked to people who hold all of these views, but they are all defensible views of this game).

About the only thing that would surprise me in this game would be if it were a high scoring shootout. But with the total priced so low, I'm not ready to play it under. Gonna have to **pass** for now.

Eagles @Cowboys
Line: Cowboys -4, 45
Analysis by Kevin O'Neill

Wade Phillips was gone less than three weeks ago, you know. He was all but fired. The Cowboys had lost two straight to fall to 7-5 and the buzzards were circling. But the Giants collapse and the fact that nobody else was rising up kept the Cowboys in the mix. A three-game winning streak later, here the Cowboys are, division champions facing the team they just vanquished on Sunday, hosing the Eagles for the second consecutive week. Sunday's 24-0 win over Philly was as easy as the final score indicated, with edges of nearly 200 yards, 11 first downs, and a 7.0-4.6 yards per play edge. Each team had a turnover. This wasn't a fluky loss at all. The Cowboys had a pair of 91 yard runners and a solid day from Tony Romo. Donovan McNabb was under pressure all game long, sacked 4 times. The Eagles gave up on the running game and made things easy on the Cowboys, as the Dallas secondary just smothered Philly.

The 474 yards that the Eagles allowed was a little surprising, as Philly's D had been solid, allowing 303 yards or less in 5 of their previous 6 games. The shutout was even more surprising, as Bryant Westbrook is back in the lineup for the Eagles so they had their multitude of weapons available. There's a chance the Eagles aren't that good. When you look back at their schedule, you see that not only are they the only playoff team not to beat another playoff team, but they only had a single win against a team with a winning record. That win was over Atlanta at a time when the Falcons were crushed with injuries, including not having Matt Ryan in the lineup.

But despite the lack of quality wins, the Eagles have been impressive all year. The variety of offensive weapons that McNabb has to work with is among the best groupings in the league. The defense was strong down the stretch. And the Cowboys are far from the most trustworthy bunch in the league. When you think they have it all together they throw in a clunker. As a result, they haven't won a playoff game in a dozen years, which given their resources, hype, history, etc. remains one of the most incredible facts in all of sports.

One area where the Eagles may have an edge is in the kicking game. Deshaun Jackson is an explosive kick returner, while David Akers has made 20 of his last 21 postseason field goals. The Cowboys Shaun Suisham has never made a postseason kick and missed a 30-yard field goal (though from an angle) on Sunday.

If you're wondering about the fact that the Cowboys beat the Eagles twice this season and what that means historically, there isn't a ton to go on. This is only the second time that has happened since 2004. The other occurrence was two years ago when the Cowboys (of all teams) lost to the Super Bowl-bound Giants after beating the New Yorkers twice during the regular season.

Hate to leave you with so little to work with on Saturday, but I don't see that there's much that I'm thrilled with here. Forced to **pass** this one.

Sunday, January 10th, 2009

Ravens @Patriots
Line: Patriots -3½ , 43
Analysis by Kevin O'Neill

The loss of Wes Welker is big, big, big. The Pats are a "move the chains" offense, averaging over 23 first downs per game, which is nearly 2 more than anyone else in the league. And a big part of that was Welker. 123 catches were made by the prototypical possession receiver, with 71 of those going for first downs. His knee injury is obviously a big blow. Rookie Julian Edelman has been a suitable replacement when needed, but now doubling Randy Moss is a no brainer and the Ravens will dare another inside receiver to step up. It'll be tough to match Welker, who is the best in the game. And let's not forget that Brady is playing with a broken finger and bad ribs.

It completely changes the Pats offense. And when you've got a head coach as smart as Bill Belichick, maybe it's a little less debilitating. Brady hinted at that in a Monday radio appearance. Said the quarterback: "We're going to evolve a little bit as an offense now. It was a very Wes Welker-oriented offense. Maybe part of the advantage is Baltimore doesn't really know what they're going to see from us now. We're going to have shift focus and they're really not sure where that focus is going to go."

The Pats are likely to run the ball more. They kept Laurence Maroney off the field on the inactive list to freshen him for this week. Fred Taylor and Sammy have been injured for good portions of the season, but they're healthy now. As always, Kevin Faulk will be available to catch passes out of the backfield and run some. But this looks like more ground-oriented attack. And they're going against a solid defense.

The Pats defense has played well down the stretch. The Ravens present some challenges. Ray Rice is certainly on the improve but Willis McGahee had a huge day Sunday and is certainly worthy of some carries. The general consensus is that Joe Flacco has disappointed but in fact he's had a better year than last year, with a higher completion percentage (63% vs. 60%), better TD/INT differential (21/12 vs. 14/12) , and higher yards per pass attempt (7.2/6.9). But it's still tough to see Harbaugh not mainly trying to win it on the ground.

Ravens allowed 17 or less in 8 of their last 10 games. New England's young defense developed late, allowing 10, 10, and 7 points prior to their game in Houston where substitutes were used liberally. Baltimore figured to run a lot no matter what. They were a run-first team in the playoffs last year with 23 passes, 33 runs against Miami, 22 passes, 30 runs vs. Tennessee, and 30 passes vs. 27 runs against the Steelers in a game that they were coming from behind.

While Belichick could surprise, New England figures to run due to the injury to Welker. With both teams probably running a lot, the clock will be running as two defenses in good form help keep this game **under the total**. Note that the Patriots attack and score buckets of points at home in the snow, so weather may actually hurt this more than help.

Packers @Cardinals
Line: Cardinals -2½, 47
Analysis by Kevin O'Neill

First of all, let's not consider the result of the game between these two teams on Sunday. The Packers wanted to stay sharp and perform well, the Cardinals didn't care. Kurt Warner played little. But despite giving plenty of time to backups, three important 'zona starters were hurt, including offensive playmakers WR Anquan Boldin (hurt in second half) and defensive playmaker CB Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, whose replacement was attacked effectively by the Packers. Cromartie was carted off. DE Calais Campbell was also injured, but that was just a finger, and what self-respecting football player misses a playoff game with an injured finger?

The Packers were strong statistically early, but the wins didn't really follow. Meanwhile teams were roaring toward undefeated marks. It was easy to ignore the Packers, particularly after the two losses to Favre. But after performing so poorly in their two most-high profile games, this team really cranked it up down the stretch. Only the last-play TD pass in Pittsburgh keeps them from being undefeated, and only that game keeps the Packers from outgaining each of their last 9 opponents.

The numbers are strong. Green Bay gains 5.8 yards per play while allowing only 4.8. They gain 21 first downs per game while allowing only 17. As good as Manning, Brees, and Favre have been, is there a quarterback roaring into the playoffs in any better form than Aaron Rodgers. Rodgers has passed for 14 TD's and only 2 interceptions during the second half of the season. Obviously the defense has been outstanding as well. They were excellent 2 years ago, were poor last year, and now are elite once again. Only the Jets defense is statistically better. Charles Woodson left Sunday's game with a shoulder injury, but could have gone back into the game. Woodson has had a fantastic year after fading from prominence for a while. Not sure if being with a meaningful franchise inspired him, or he's found a chemical/hormonal fountain of youth, or what, but he's been spectacular.

I'm hearing people liking the Cardinals because of their run last year. But it says here that was simply a case of "lightning in a bottle". I'm far from convinced that they'll be able to do that again. They're hardly tested, as only 3 of their 16 games were against teams in the playoffs (big loss to Colts, bit win over Vikings, big meaningless loss to Packers). Cards were only 4-4 straight up on their home field in Glendale this season.

So impressed by the Packers second half form. But other than their meaningless win here Sunday, as well as wins over the Ravens and Cowboys, there wasn't a lot of quality on that schedule. But you play who you can and perform as you can and it is impossible not to be impressed by the results delivered here. **Packers by 4.**