KEVIN O'NEILL'S

THE MAX

The Maximum Profit Football Weekly

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NFL Divisional Round. All Four Games Covered

Rematch Winners Almost Sweep: It was entirely plausible to discount the results of the previous week's games in looking at this past weekend's NFL. After all the Bengals and Cardinals weren't trying and the Eagles were, according to some, willing to lull Dallas into a false sense of security by not making adjustments during the game. But the Jets and Cowboys won easily, while the Packers almost got there. Small sample, but worth mentioning.

A College Coaching "Who'da Thunkit?": I don't do any real college football work until after basketball ends in April. Basketball is too consuming. But it was impossible to not notice something in the college football season just past. Certain coaching situations were obviously likely to blow up. Charlie Weis would be fired at Notre Dame and Brian Kelly would take his place, opening the Cincinnati job. Bobby Bowden might be (justifiably for any reason other than fond memories) forced to retire from Florida State. Other underachieving programs would let their coaches go. But who in the world thought that Mark Mangino would be fired at Kansas, Mike Leach would be fired at Texas Tech, and Jim Leavitt would be fired at South Florida? All three of them fired for "abuse of player". Throw the wholly unexpected opening at USC and the "almost-opening" at Florida. Strange things happen in college football.

After Leach, Leavitt, and Mangino, it is safe to say that any coach who is not treating his players respectfully ("with kid gloves" to coaches in the past) will rapidly change his ways for no other reason than as a survival mechanism. But yes, George O'Leary is still the coach at Central Florida. Meanwhile, Marc Richt and the Georgia Bulldogs are enriching defensive coordinators coast-to-coast. Unaccepted offers to Bud Foster of Virginia Tech, John Chavis of LSU, and Kirby Smart of Alabama have led to huge pay raises for those men, with a new salary standard set for top coordinators. The top tier of major college football programs appear to be untouched by any economic doldrums hitting elsewhere.

Max finishes bowls 14-9: The bowl games finished 14-9 in this publication. Everyone did some good work and Matty and Erik both had particularly strong results.

Rough Week Last Week: Last week was one to learn from and put behind us. My two Max plays both lost. I lost in football on the late phones, and lost in basketball on the late phones. Did some poor work and had some bad luck, like the under 23 in the first half in the BCS title affair (thanks for that shovel pass, Mack Brown).

Basketball Newsletter? While we don't have a hoops newsletter, we will be putting some basketball content up at RealWorldSports.com several times a week. If you're interested in additional basketball analysis that is the place to find it.

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SELECTIONS: January 16th & 17th, 2010

NFL

Saturday, January 16th, 2010

Cardinals @Saints
Line: Saints -7, 57
Analysis by Kevin O'Neill

The Saints certainly hope they can turn things on. Because they shut it down for the month of December. New Orleans was dominant offensively and solid defensively all season long in threatening to go undefeated. But after rolling to a Monday night victory over the Patriots on November 30th they have been outplayed by 5 straight opponents, 4 of whom were not playoff caliber. Getting outplayed by the Redskins, Falcons, and Bucs in games where they were making an effort is not a good sign. Though a nice run was made three years ago, this isn't a team loaded with playoff experience. Can they just flick the switch back to on after not playing a decent game since the Sunday after Thanksgiving? We'll see.

The loss of Charles Grant to injury doesn't help the defensive cause here. While never the dominator expected to be when he was drafted out of Georgia, Grant was decent, and defensive linemen don't grow on trees. He's been in the Saints lineup consistently for the past 4 or 5 years after a spotty beginning to his career and a team that gave up 431 yards per game over the last 4 games could use the help. But the rest of the team will largely be healthy, which wasn't the case down the stretch. Given the whole week off last week, a case could be made that New Orleans will be ready to fire. But they take on a hot team this weekend.

Cardinals got out fast, blew their lead a couple of times, then got a ton of pressure on Aaron Rodgers in overtime to win a game that had over 1,000 yards of total offense. Arizona surprisingly gained 6.8 yards per rush attempt, getting 156 yards on 23 carries. While that included a couple of gadget plays, 14 runs for 91 yards was a nice afternoon for Beanie Wells. A problem is the pass defense, which gave up 10 yards per pass attempt to Aaron Rodgers. And that was with a huge home crowd edge, as the folks in Glendale were loud. They had some guys playing hurt, like Dominique Rogers-Cromartie, but Drew Brees has got to be licking his chops. And Tony Romo said that the noise in the Superdome the night of the Saints loss to the Cowboys was the loudest stadium he's ever been in.

Going against a team off a win in which they gave up a lot of points is a winner more often than not. And the Cardinals may have left a lot out on the field, not just physically, but emotionally as well. They played the last game Sunday and now have to turn things around pretty quickly. But while I don't trust them to come out and play well, neither do I trust a Saints team that played pretty poorly down the stretch and has been victimized by poor special teams play. Since I don't trust the Cardinals to not be flat and I don't trust the Saints based on their horrific December I guess I'll have to **pass** this one.

Ravens @Colts
Line: Colts -6, 44½
Analysis by Kevin O'Neill

The Colts have lost their first playoff game in 6 of their last 9 seasons. They're as the rested home team off a playoff bye in the Peyton Manning era. That makes giving away their final two games after a 14-0 start even more curious. The "rest 'em" approach is proven not to work. And there seemed to be some genuine controversy not just in the fan base (largely outraged by not playing to win) but in the locker room as well. Not ideal, but probably not something that influenced the preparation for this game.

While the Colts ability to take nearly a month off and then turn it on is certainly an open question. Other than guys who have pretty much missed most of the season (Bob Sanders, Anthony Gonzalez, and Marlin Jackson), the Colts are pretty healthy right now. Logic dictates that a rested, healthy, team that won every game they tried would possess a significant advantage. The history of the Colts doesn't necessarily suggest that.

That Ravens win on Sunday was not a natural 47 total point ballgame. Yardage was 268-216. 17, 25, and 16 yard TD "drives" were joined by FG "drives" of 0 and 18 yards. Flacco showed why they are reticent to let him throw the ball a whole lot with a dreadful 34 passing yards on 10 attempts including an interception that would have gone a long way to keeping the Patriots in the game had they chosen to fight a little bit. Baltimore physically manhandled New England. They outcoached them, outschemed them, outprepared them, and dominated them on offense, defense, and special teams.

The Ravens 52 runs and only 10 passes was dictated by the shape of the game, with a 24-0 first quarter lead they goal was wisely to simply run clock and grind out a few first downs along the way (their 10-16 on third downs, with the bulk of those being runs, showed the heartlessness of New England). It was interesting when Phil Simms at the start of the game said he asked Coach Harbaugh what the offensive game plan and Harbaugh replied "you know what it's going to be". We know what it's going to be here, too. It's going to be run, run, and run some more. If the game plays out like a normal one and not like the strange one on Sunday, there shouldn't be much. Look for the Ravens to do everything in their power to avoid a shootout.

The Ravens haven't thrown the ball effectively, and the Colts have a passing edge, as the Ravens cornerbacks aren't great. It is imperative for the Ravens to get the kind of pressure on Manning that they got on Brady. But you can't ignore the fact that 9 of the last 10 Raven regular season games had fewer than 45 points scored in them. And the fact that their game Sunday had any more than about 34 points scored was a fluke. Despite playing a number of overs down the stretch, the Cots had 7 of their last 10 games play under this total. And now their defense is healthy. With both teams playing lower scoring games than 45, and a Baltimore team certain to try to win with running and defense, this total is a high one. Go **under**.

Sunday, January 17th, 2009

Cowboys @Vikings
Line: Vikings -2½ (-115), 45½
Analysis by Kevin O'Neill

Nobody figures to gain more by being at home than the Vikings. While Minnesota has lost their last three road games, Vikings are 8-0 at home, including wins in their last 5 by 17, 26, 26, 20, and 37 over the putrid Giants on Sunday. The aging Metrodome may lack the amenities found in newer stadiums but it is the loudest venue in the league. With their livest shot at making a playoff run in a decade, their fans will be ready to blow the roof off today. And both the week off and the venue help Brett Favre, who has struggled in cold weather in recent years. Favre had a month-long lull but in his final two games he threw for 6 TD's and no interceptions. He appears to be as healthy as could be expected considering his age and the time of year. The Vikings are a pretty complete team. They've got a lot of defensive talent and in rookie of the year Harvin and RB Peterson a fantastic core of young skill position players. They hit a lull in November and December but finished strong.

Vikes defense has some strengths. They allowed the second fewest first downs allowed in the NFL. This is a team that knows how to get opposing offenses off the field. The pass defense is not statistically strong, but the Vikings had a lot of big leads this season, and defensive intensity relaxes when that happens, allowing opponents to get a lot of production throwing against a relaxed scheme.

Cowboys have been outstanding in their four game winning streak, outgaining those opponents 1732-1122. They've outgained their opponents in 7 consecutive games. They're red hot, but they're going against a team that can do a lot of good things. The playoff win over the Eagles is important in Big D. The Cowboys now have the monkey off their back, a dozen years without a playoff win until Saturday night. That's a stunning fact for a franchise that the media treats like a defending Super Bowl champion year-in and year-out is pretty impressive. And know that there has been a ton of focus on that very fact in Big D for a long, long time now. That was behind the pretty constant strutting and celebrating that Dallas did during their win over Philly. At times it almost looked as though they believed they had achieved their goal. While impressive, Dallas had some good fortune on Sunday. Donovan McNabb had a dreadful game, and the game plan was a unique one. Bryant Westbrook, agreed by most to be the key cog to the Eagles offense, had just a single touch in the game, 1 reception and no carries. Maybe he's still dinged up from his concussion earlier in the season. Or maybe the Eagles just had a poor game plan. It is very surprising that with all the double-teaming of Eagles receivers being done by Dallas, that Eagles running backs got only 10 carries. No way the Cowboys can do all that doubling against the Vikings. Too much explosiveness in their running game for that. The Vikings are an excellent team and Favre is fresh right now. As the only NFL team to go undefeated at home, the site is a big advantage. The Cowboys may be overvalued right now, as they clearly match up well with the Eagles and just took advantage of that twice. The Vikings do everything well, look for a solid win on a strong home field. **Vikings by 10.**

Jets @Chargers
Line: Chargers -7½ ,42
Analysis by Kevin O'Neill

The Chargers may benefit less from their time off than other teams, as the majority of their key players are in the absolute prime of their careers. It figures aging players would be helped by a bye week but San Diego really doesn't have that many of those. Guys like David Rivers, Vincent Jackson, Antonio Gates, Shaun Phillips, and Quentin Jammer have been immense all season, and this core of youngish talent may be ready to put their stamp on the league.

After their usual disappointing start, losing 3 of their first 5 games, the Chargers have torn off an 11-game win streak. This is not a team that anyone wants to get in the way of right now, yet this core of talent has been together for a few years and haven't made it to the Super Bowl, but all appears to be in place right now, though a history of postseason heartbreak has shadowed this franchise, including under Norv Turner.

Good running back situation for the Jets, with Thomas Jones going for 1400 yards yet having a rookie like Shon Green to call in big situations as well. The Jets may match up pretty well with the Chargers, as their pass defense is second to none. San Diego provides a unique challenge with all their 6-4 and 6-5 receivers. Obviously, it is imperative for the Chargers to protect David Rivers, as the Jets have inflicted some havoc upon opposing quarterbacks in recent weeks, getting tons of pressure. If the Jets are able to control the Chargers passing game, they may be in pretty good shape, as San Diego can barely run the ball.

Offensively the Jets were very impressive on Saturday. Mark Sanchez, who entered the game with 12 TD passes and 20interceptions, played a wonderful game, avoiding mistakes and connecting for some big plays. He played with confidence and enthusiasm, and you'd know he'd like to make a big splash on his return to Southern California. But it's difficult to trust him, despite the fact that the Chargers don't have a great defense, allowing 4.5 yards per rush on the season and 6.7 yards per pass attempt. Both of those numbers are subpar compared to the rest of the league. The only real statistical strength of the Chargers is their massive 8.7 yards per pass attempt number, which is simply otherworldly. If the Jets can slow that down with their fantastic pass defense, then maybe they can stay in this game for a long while.

Historically, teams that are off an upset win and then play on the road are very poor in the playoffs, but the profit that angle enjoyed in the 80's and 90's hasn't been there in recent years (technical handicapping has been poor in NFL postseason over the past 6 years or so). But after weeks of putting forth a top effort, this second straight playoff road affair may hit the Jets hard. Jets match up better with the Chargers than a lot of teams do. But the situation is tough for the New Yorkers. I'm torn on this game in my initial analysis, so I'll **pass** for now.