

**NFL Season Opener - Thursday, September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2005**  
**BY MATTHEW HATFIELD**



**Oakland Raiders @ New England Patriots 9PM EST on ABC**

**Moss & Harrison are the keys to victory for their respective club**

Football is a game of matchups, maybe more so than any other sport. One of the matchups I'll be zoomed in on tonight when I get home and turn on the tube is that between the Raiders receivers and the New England Patriots defensive backs. Oakland strengthen an already strong core of wideouts when it traded linebacker Napoleon Harris to Minnesota in the off-season for the disgruntled, yet unbelievably talented Randy Moss. Moss stretches the defense like nobody else and it'll be up to Randall Gay and Asante Samuel [along with their helpers] to keep him from breaking out for a big time play.

Rodney Harrison now becomes the heart and soul of the Pat with coordinators Charlie Weis and Romeo Crennel gone as well as linebacker Tedy Bruschi. Question Harrison's ability to hit somebody? Harrison has three Super Bowl rings, a reserved ticket to the Pro Bowl, and has recorded 85+ total tackles in seven of the past nine seasons. Question his leadership skills? This guy was looked up to more by some people when he was in San Diego than linebacker Junior Seau - arguably the best at his position during the mid-90's. He'll be coming across the middle to hit Ronald Curry, Jerry Porter and Doug Gabriel in addition to Mr. Moss if they meet pathways. New Raiders running back LaMont Jordan also might find it hard to run thought this guy, even though the Maryland Terrapin product Jordan has a reputation of being a strong inside the tackles runner.

Offensively there aren't too many questions about Norv Turner's Oakland team that may all of the sudden be the closes thing to the Indianapolis Colts in the AFC. I'll be expecting the Patriots defense to rush quarterback Kerry Collins early and often to establish the game tempo. By doing that, they could then drop into zone coverage later on with a lead and on passing downs. Asides from second-year offensive tackle Robert Gallery, the Raiders don't have a group of All-Pro caliber guys on the line like they once did. Richard Seymour is an All-Pro defensive lineman for New England that can get a favorable one-on-one matchup whether he plays end or tackle. Patriots quarterback Tom Brady has two Super Bowl MVP's and will rely on his feature halfback - Corey Dillon - in the late stages of this ball game to pull out the victory.

**How the Patriots Win: Put the ball in Brady's hands against a suspect Raiders defense. Do so on 3<sup>rd</sup> & 6 and 2<sup>nd</sup> & long, too. He's got capable receivers and in last year's opener it was David Patten that had a big game. Super Bowl MVP Deion Branch out of Louisville might be the guy in for six or seven grabs for 100+**

yards. Dillon has to be the horse for New England, a team that should ride him coming out of the half. Keep the offense short and simple. Vets Mike Vrabel and Willie McGinest know how to come up with a big play on defense when it's needed most.

**How the Raiders Win:** It's paramount that defensive linemen Warren Sapp, Derrick Burgess and Ted Washington make not only an impact vs. the run, but pressuring Brady. New England doesn't turn the ball over often at all, though by forcing Brady to force things it could open up a turnover opportunity for star corner Charles Woodson. Penalties and turnovers are the worst things when you play at Gillette Stadium. Commit many and you'll be done before it really gets started.



Last season the Raiders were dead last in football in time of possession. In order to have more success on the ground and hold onto the ball longer, the acquired LaMont Jordan from the Jets in the off-season. They, like everyone else, is following the model the Patriots have set out. They signed veteran running back Corey Dillon - shown pictured - who helped them win a third Super Bowl in four seasons, (Photo Courtesy of WireImage.com)

*My Pick: New England 31, Oakland 17*     **LOCK: NE -7.5**