

NFL Season Opener – Thursday, September 7th, 2006
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD



Miami Dolphins @ Pittsburgh Steelers
8:30PM EST on NBC

Saban & Cowher Coaching Matchup Front & Center In Season Opener

Setting The Stage: New Commissioner. New network affiliations. We embark on the 2006-07 NFL season tonight with NBC kicking off the coverage as the upstart Miami Dolphins visit the defending Super Bowl Champion Pittsburgh Steelers. The last six Super Bowl winners have won their season opener the following season. The 1999 Broncos were the last not to, simply because they didn't have John Elway, who retired after winning his second ring. In order for Pittsburgh to keep the trend going, the team wearing the black and gold will have to do it without quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, expected to probably miss next week's game against Jacksonville due to the appendix as well. During the off-season, the Champs lost receiver Antwaan Randle to Washington, safety Chris Hope to Tennessee and powerful back Jerome Bettis to retirement. Coach Bill Cowher [*and his famous chin*] of the Steelers, searching for a new contract extension, finally got the hardware last February. Meanwhile, Miami, under fiery Head Coach Nick Saban – the same guy that turned down an invitation to go to dinner with President George W. Bush – finished last season on a six-game winning streak. The Dolphins feel they can take that next step to the postseason with the arrival of new quarterback Daunte Culpepper from Minnesota. What remains to be seen is can Culpepper make them reach and elite level, unseating New England atop the AFC East and seriously challenge for a Super Bowl trip?

Inside the Game: Without Big Ben in the fold for this critical opener, the Steelers turn to Charlie Batch, a former member of the Detroit Lions out of Eastern Michigan University. Batch went 2-0 last season and is kind of a less-effective NFC version of Brad Johnson in that he manages the game, but won't produce a lot of big plays with his arm. Nor does he have the mobility to make plays on the move. Since Hines Ward is not 100% healthy at the wide receiver position, the Steelers will need either Cedrick Wilson or Santonio Holmes, a rookie out of Ohio State, to step up catching passes. Both teams have a rookie at wideout with the Dolphins likely to put Arizona St. draft choice Derek Hagan in the slot. Furthermore, both teams feature the tight end quite a bit in their offense with Miami going to Randy McMichael and Pitt calling on 2nd-year Virginia product Heath Miller. My main concern with the Steelers on the offensive side

of the ball is, without the Bus, can Willie Parker carry the rushing load? Veron Haynes and Duce Staley are there in case he needs help. But after breaking onto the scene last year as a surprisingly good young player, now Parker needs to emerge/elevate himself into a marquee player.

Where the Steelers get a slight advantage in this game in my opinion is pass rush. You know defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau will cook something up – whether it's exotic or not – blitzing wise to bother his opponents' offense. All-Pro caliber talents such as safety Troy Polamalu, Joey Porter and nose tackle Casey Hampton are at the forefront of one of the league's most aggressive defenses. Culpepper will have to counter by hitting his offensive difference makers/playmakers in running back Ronnie Brown and go-to receiver Chris Chambers. Protection could be a key for them. They brought in L.J. Shelton to go with the likes of Seth McKinney, Vernon Carey, Jeno James and Rex Hadnot. Pitt has a sound o-line, headlined by guard Allen Faneca.

Defensively, these are two pretty evenly matched teams. Each has come accustomed to running a 3-4 at times, particularly the Steelers. How well the Steelers defend the pass could decide the outcome of this game, because outside of Polamalu, I'm not thrilled with any of their other DB's. Ryan Clark was brought in at free safety to fill the shoes of Hope and that is a potential downgrade, while none of the corners may be able to take away Chambers, and might struggle to cover Marty Booker. Miami's front seven got a boost with the addition of Big Daddy - Dan Wilkinson. They've got youth in second-year players Channing Crowder and Matt Roth. They've also got some proven vets in Jason Taylor, Keith Traylor, Vonnie Holliday, Kevin Carter and linebacker Zach Thomas. In the defensive backfield, Miami has some fresh faces, including Tennessee first round draft pick Jason Allen. Although the secondaries will be tested, I highly doubt this game becomes a shoot-out. Look for the Dolphins to focus in on stopping the run. Saban's Dolphins could very well force Batch into some costly mistakes.



Wideout Chris Chambers could propel Miami past Pittsburgh in the NFL's Thursday night season opener on NBC.

My Pick: Miami 17, Pittsburgh 10

ATS: Miami +1.5-2