

Monday Morning Analysis – BY MATTHEW HATFIELD **NFL – Monday, September 11th, 2006**

Nine road teams won on Sunday. Welcome to the inaugural edition of Monday Morning Analysis for the 2006-07 NFL season. We'll be shelling out stats like that one and I'll be sharing my thoughts on everything that happened in the week that was in the National Football League. Let's recap all of the games from this past Sunday.....

New England 19, Buffalo 17 – Did Patriots Head Coach Bill Belichick and QB Tom Brady dodge a bullet, or what? They received quite a scare from a Bills team that was the largest underdog in Week 1. On the game's first play, linebacker Takeo Spikes stripped Brady of the ball and LB London Feltcher recovered it for the TD. Troy Brown, a 14-year veteran for New England, tied it at seven apiece, but Rian Lindell made a 55-yard field goal and Anthony 'A-Train' Thomas ran 18 yards for a touchdown to put the Bills up ten, 17-7 at the half. Buffalo's defense has taken on a stronger identity with the return of Spikes and made it tough on Brady in the first half as he went 3-11 for 30 yards and a TD. In the second half, NE adjusted by giving the ball to the tandem of Corey Dillon and rookie Laurence Maroney. They were superb and what also helped was a better second half by Brady. NE's 12-play, 93-yard TD drive that resulted in a Kevin Faulk score gave the Pats all the momentum they needed to win in my opinion.

Baltimore 27, Tampa Bay 0 – Nobody saw this one coming; certainly not 27-0. Guiding the way for the error-free Baltimore offense was QB Steve McNair. On the opening possession, RB Jamal Lewis got involved early, rushing for 34 on the drive, breaking off a 12-yard run [*did he do that all of last year with the Ravens' terrible run blocking?*] and a four-yard TD. They've got depth behind him in Mike Anderson and Musa Smith, and that'll help in case of injury/ineffectiveness. As Deion Sanders put it on the NFL Network, "he didn't forget how to run for 2000 yards." Judging from this game alone, you wouldn't have known that it was Tampa who had the league's top-rated defense a year ago. You would've thought it was Baltimore, who got a 60-yard interception return for a touchdown to put the team up 14-0 and Oregon DT Haloti Ngat added a 60-yard interception of his own that setup a score. Bringing in Ngata keeps blocker off Ray Lewis and it showed with an excellent showing by the future Hall-of-Fame linebacker. Not only did Ed Reed get his 23rd career interception in this game as the Ravens D' picked off Chris Simms three times, but Lewis came up with a loud hit on Michael Pittman on 3rd & Goal, and on 4th & 4 deflected an errant Simms pass in the end zone. Ray Lewis simply showed once again why he is the best LB of this generation, perhaps any generation. The Ravens victory ended a seven-game road losing streak.

Seattle 9, Detroit 6 – Two Seahawks field goals were blocked early on, including one that underrated Lions DT Shaun Rogers got to; the other one that was blocked was a 53-yard attempt. Jason Hanson hit a field goal to put the Lions up 3-0 early and shortly thereafter, Corey Redding recovered a fumble. Was the third time a charm for Brown? Yes. It tied the game at 3-all and Seattle went up 6-3 at the break on another Brown field

goal. In this defensive struggle, the Lions were able to tie it with 6:05 to go, despite having the Seahawks sack them three times in the first half. Didn't see the Detroit offense, now under highly respected coordinator Mike Martz, do a whole lot. On the flip side, their defense stymied Shaun Alexander, forcing Seattle to cause most of its damage through the air. A 42-yard game-winner by Brown helped the Seahawks avoid becoming the eighth straight Super Bowl loser to fall in the opening game the next season.

Philadelphia 24, Houston 10 – Houston, which went 3-1 during the preseason, appeared to be on its way for a season-opening upset of the Eagles. Their first drive under new Head Coach Gary Kubiak, a sharp offensive mind back from his days in Denver, looked good; Eric Moulds did some positive things at wide receiver; and QB David Carr had a re-built offensive line in front of him. Carr found Moulds for a TD, the team's first opening touchdown drive in their last 17 games. My concern following a 10-play, 77-yard scoring drive was the running game, where they used Wali Lundy and Vernand Morency – neither of which is capable of carrying the load for 100+ yards in a game. Sacked 208 times in the first four years of his career, Carr couldn't stay upright and the Texans defense failed to prevent Donovan McNabb from hooking up with Donte Stallworth on several occasions. Stallworth got off to an excellent start with 124 yards receiving at the break. And as for Texans defensive end and first overall draft choice Mario Williams, he struggled. On a key 3rd & 2 play, Williams bit on a pitch to Brian Westbrook and it cost them with the Eagles picking up a first down. Williams doesn't have that fast twitch or change of direction. He's physical and will be a good player down the road, but not worthy of going ahead of Reggie Bush like he did.

Cincinnati 23, Kansas City 10 – Nothing stood out more in this game than the injury of Chiefs quarterback Trent Green. Courageously, Green took off on a run play and Cincy defender Robert Geathers flat out nailed him – something that can only be described as a vicious hit. Dirty hit? Matter of opinion. League will decide and I'd expect some kind of fine from the NFL offices. Without Green, the already trailing Chiefs called on Damon Huard and that is a significant downgrade for a team that never really saw Larry Johnson get on track all day. When Green was in there, the offensive line showed they clearly missed Willie Roaf as the tackle tandem of Kyle Turley and Jordan Black isn't quite All-Pro material. They were flushing Green out of the pocket very well and the d-line was able to collapse on him to the point that the Chiefs seldom had a chance to test the middle of the field with tight end Tony Gonzalez. On the day, the Bengals recorded nine sacks, three of which belonged to end Justin Smith. First half TD runs by Rudi Johnson and Kenny Watson put this one away early.

New Orleans 19, Cleveland 14 – Reggie Bush's rookie debut as a member of the New Orleans Saints got off to a stellar start. While Bush didn't score his first career NFL touchdown, he did change the complexion of the game with 141 all-purpose yards. They flexed him out as a receiver a couple times and even the Browns corners couldn't cover him. That being said, DB's Sean Jones – who made an interception – Gary Baxter and Leigh Bodden were decent to say the least. Scott Fujita was all over the field for the Saints at linebacker, and that's a good sign since that position clearly appeared to be a weakness going into the season. His 19-yard interception and constant hustle kept the

Browns, who got a good season opener from TE Kellen Winslow Jr., on their toes. Browns QB Charlie Frye scored a TD run to cut New Orleans' lead to 16-14, though a Josh Bullocks interception sealed a second straight season opening win on the road for the Saints. What I think will be a key for the Saints this year is protection for signal caller Drew Brees.

Atlanta 20, Carolina 6 – Even though the Carolina defense was active and displayed its usual quickness chasing Atlanta quarterback Michael Vick, it didn't matter all too much. That's because the Panthers are a totally different team without WR Steve Smith, particularly on the offensive side of the ball. Only once last year, coming in a 13-3 loss at Chicago on November 20th, did the Panthers score less than ten points in a game. Their six points, and somewhat ineffective rushing attack headed by DeShaun Foster – not talented Memphis rookie DeAngelo Williams (who barely saw the field for some unknown reason) – gave them little chance of winning. What I took most out of this game, besides the fact Vick still can be a dangerous weapon on any given Sunday and that their run game still is among the league's most dominant (had 252 team rushing yards and 132 via Warrick Dunn) is that their defense is back. Veteran newcomers Lawyer Milloy and Grady Jackson contributed, as did John Abraham, who made his presence felt with five tackles, two sacks and a couple of forced fumbles.

St. Louis 18, Denver 10 – Last year Rams kicker Jeff Wilkins went 27-31 on field goals. For a little while, we were wondering if he would attempt one-third of that amount in the opening game alone. Despite pushing a 44-yard field goal no good, Wilkins made six field goals to set a club record. The last time he made five came in 2000 against the Chargers. Denver turned the ball over five times (most by Denver since 2000), including three times in the opening half, but the Rams were only able to capitalize with nine points off those first three miscues. Jake Plummer didn't play well at the QB position, so the rumblings that we might see Vanderbilt rookie Jay Cutler soon – they're getting louder. Fakhir Brown, Corey Chavous and Clemson rookie Tye Hill each intercepted Plummer once, and Leonard Little forced a fumble that was recovered by Pisa Tinoisamoa. Will Witherspoon was another factor for the Rams, who broke in a new defensive coordinator in Jim Haslett and Head Coach in Scott Linehan. Defensively, the Broncos gave up a bunch of rushing yards to Steven Jackson, though the secondary played very solid and didn't allow a single touchdown.

NY Jets 23, Tennessee 16 – Eric Mangini's coaching debut in New York proved to be a successful one as the Jets hold on for a seven-point win over the Titans of Tennessee. Down in Nashville, Jets QB Chad Pennington began on fire in the first half. He was 16-22 for 189 yards and a touchdown with the Jets on top 13-0 at intermission. They went on to extend their lead to 16 points, but saw Tennessee make a rally. Titans rookie QB Vince Young spelled Kerry Collins, who had an awful day, for a few plays. Young completed his first three passes before being picked off; the consensus is he will be used on certain situations (i.e. two-point conversions, goal-line formations, shotgun, etc.) until the time comes when he is named the starter. While Andre Dyson played a fantastic game against his ex-team on the road, kicker Mike Nugent had a rough day for the Jets with a missed PAT and field goal. Down, the Titans knotted the game at 16-all,

however, Pennington led the down the field for the winning score. He finished with over 300 yards passing and 153 of them went to Laveranues Coles. These two have been good together in the past, and as long as both remain healthy, that combo isn't half bad.

Arizona 34, San Francisco 27 – For the first time since 1999, the Arizona Cardinals won their regular season home opener and they did it on Sunday in front of thousands of fans in their brand new stadium. QB Kurt Warner, who entered the game with an NFL-best career 65.7% completion mark, enjoyed a resurgence with 300+ passing yards and touchdown strikes to Anquan Boldin, Troy Walters and tight end Adam Bergen. Edgerrin James made his debut in a Cardinals uniform, and although his yards per carry average was fairly low, he carried the rock enough to make the 49ers defense stay honest and respect the run. He also ran for a touchdown, something the Cardinals team did just twice all of last season. One of the strengths the Niners thought they had going into the season was the offensive line. They saw Larry Allen be helped off the field only a few plays into the game, and later on LT Jonas Jennings went down. RB Frank Gore ran the ball like a bull, while Alex Smith found rookie tight end Vernon Davis and wideout Antonio Bryant enough to keep this thing close. In the end, Arizona's passing offense was way too much to stop, and credit Warner. Arizona's defense needs some work, but they were able to keep San Fran to 0-4 on third downs in the first half.

Jacksonville 24, Dallas 17 – No game, other than the Manning vs. Manning contest later on in the evening, grabbed more of the nation's attention than the Cowboys visiting Jacksonville. Terrell Owens hauled in six passes for 80 yards and a late touchdown in his Dallas debut. Dallas jumped out to an early 10-0 lead and looked like they would cruise until Byron Leftwich (237 pass yards, TD pass, TD run, Int.) and the Jags offense caught on finally about midway through the second period. They went into the half tied at 10-apiece. The three playmakers they needed to step up around Leftwich – Fred Taylor, Matt Jones and Reggie Williams – did as Williams scored a TD, Taylor (21Car. 74Yds.) too, and Jones used his height as an advantage to bring down five balls for 71 yards. Three Drew Bledsoe interceptions, going to Nick Griesen, Mike Peterson and Rashean Mathis, cost Dallas on the road. Kudos to Jack Del Rio and the Jags for showing some poise, composure and getting after it defensively without Marcus Stroud.

Chicago 26, Green Bay 0 – Brett Favre and the Green Bay Packers had scored in 233 straight games. That streak came to an end with Chicago shutting them out, marking the first time the Packers went scoreless since 15 years ago in 1991. With two brand new starting guards, the Pack was unable to protect Favre, who threw for less than 200 yards and was picked off twice. Chicago may have found themselves their game-breaker on special teams in Miami of Florida rookie Devin Hester. Hester ran back a punt 84 yards for a touchdown. Defensively, we know how good the Bears are and they were led by Lance Briggs' nine tackles and a sack. On offense, Rex Grossman got off to a 5-5 starts with 104 yards and lengthy touchdown pass to a wide open Bernard Berrian. Grossman didn't cool off; neither did the Bears.

Indianapolis 26, NY Giants 21 – The battle between brothers Peyton and Eli Manning went down to the wire, but a questionable offensive pass interference call on the

Giants on the game's final possession prevented the home team from rallying to defeat Indianapolis. Indy led at the half 16-7, in spite of the fact they were out-gained 9-23 on the ground. The running game is going to be a problem for them as might be their defense, which went out there without safety Mike Doss. Both Plaxico Burress and Jeremy Shockey made some critical errors, but also grabbed touchdowns. Tiki Barber went for over 100 yards rushing, and New York's Brandon Jacobs displayed some power. Penalties, including five false starts, hurt the G-Men enormously. Defensively, the Giants cannot allow any offense to convert 69% of their third downs, let alone one as efficient through the air as the Colts'. Because Indy converted 11 of their 16 tries on third down, they won and that was the difference in my mind. Also, seeing new, clutch kicker Adam Vinatieri connect on four field goal tries went a long ways.

HATFIELD SAYS: Don't read TOO much into Week 1 in the National Football League. Seattle reached the Super Bowl last season, despite being beat by Jacksonville in the season's opening week. One year, New England was shutout in its opening week, yet found a way to get to and win the Super Bowl.