

Monday Morning Analysis – BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

NFL – Monday, September 8, 2008

What an exciting first weekend to kick-off the 2008 NFL campaign. Plenty of storylines to touch on, much of which centers around the quarterback position. One signal suffered a significant injury, another quarterback struggled in his return from surgery, one returned from injury and won in dramatic fashion, two rookie QB's were victorious and another quarterback won his debut with his team. More on Tom Brady, Peyton Manning, Jake Delhomme, Matt Ryan, Joe Flacco, Brett Favre and others below...

Brady Goes Down, Cassel Comes On: New England 17, Kansas City 10

“The worst nightmare for the New England Patriots has come true.” That’s what most television analysts, radio talk show hosts and writers around the country were saying yesterday, and it’s what many are saying this morning. Franchise quarterback Tom Brady, a two-time Super Bowl Most Valuable Player and the reigning league MVP, injured his left knee on a hit by Kansas City Chiefs safety Bernard Pollard. At first, his return was said to be questionable, but later we found out that he’s likely to be out for the remainder of the season.

In Brady’s absence, reserve quarterback Matt Cassel, a career backup who played behind Matt Leinart part of his collegiate career at USC, entered the game and completed a 51-yard pass to Randy Moss on third down and long from inside their own five-yard line. That play proved to be critical as the game went on. New England lost two fumbles in the first quarter, three in the entire first half and failed to get the offense going like they’ve come accustomed to doing so in the past with Brady at the helm of their vaunted offensive attack. Trailing 7-3 at the half, the Chiefs made things interesting in the second half as Damon Huard connected with second-year man Dwayne Bowe for a touchdown early in the fourth quarter to cut New England’s lead to 14-10.

New England hung on, thanks in large part due to their defense and KC’s inability to score in the red zone at the end. Huard, who came on for Brodie Croyle after Croyle injured his shoulder, hooked up with Devard Darling, a Washington State product, for a 68-yard pass down to the Patriots’ five-yard line late in the fourth period. The Pats stopped them four straight times. Moss and corner Ellis Hobbs were the heroes in this one for New England; Moss totaled five receptions for 111 yards in the first half while Hobbs had big a punt return and made an interception.

Now the question for New England as they get ready to face the Jets in a key Week 2 matchup is where do they go from here? It’ll be the first time someone other than Brady starts at quarterback in an awfully long time, going back to Drew Bledsoe in the 2001-02 campaign. Interestingly enough, Bledsoe got hurt against the Jets, Brady entered and the rest as they say is history. Patriots Head Coach Bill Belichick hasn’t fared too well without Brady by his side, compiling a career record of 41-57 with only one

postseason victory. With Brady, Belichick has gone 87-24 and 14-3 in the postseason with three Super Bowl titles. Enough said.

Rookie QB's & HC's Get Rousing Results: Baltimore 17, Cincinnati 10

Atlanta chose Boston College's Matt Ryan with the third overall pick in this past April's NFL Draft, and another first round selection was made by the Baltimore Ravens when they tabbed Joe Flacco out of Delaware as their quarterback for the future with the 18th overall pick. Both were winners on Sunday as the Falcons sprinted out to a 21-0 lead in the first quarter and defeated the Lions 34-21, while the Ravens beat the Bengals 17-10.

Flacco's quarterback rating after one game is only 63.7, but that doesn't matter because he got great support from an experienced, stingy defense and solid rushing attack. Not to mention, to go with Baltimore's tremendous defense spearheaded by middle linebacker and Super Bowl XXXV (35) MVP Ray Lewis and corner Chris McAlister, who made an interception and recovered a fumble, the Ravens provided some outstanding blocking. Some of it came as a small surprise with Jonathan Ogden no longer at left tackle and retired. Of course, Flacco did his best to block too, throwing a couple of blocks, even on a creative double-reverse drawn up by new Head Coach John Harbaugh where Mark Clayton scored. And the Bengals played very poorly on defense, considering Flacco broke off a 33-yard touchdown run to give the Ravens the cushion necessary for a season-opening victory.

Ryan's rating was better than Flacco – 137.0. But he too got plenty of help from the likes of Michael Turner, who rushed for over 200 yards and a couple touchdowns, as well as pass rusher John Abraham, who sacked Lions quarterback Jon Kitna three times. In fact, Ryan's first career pass in the NFL went for six points as he hit Michael Jenkins for a touchdown, measuring 62 yards. Best of all though, while Ryan was 9-for-13 with 161 yards, he didn't throw an interception, something new Head Coach Mike Smith has to love most about his QB's stat-line. Others that contributed to the Falcons edging the Lions were safety Lawyer Milloy with his 38-yard interception return; kicker Jason Elam, booting through a 50-yard field goal in the third quarter; and Jerious Norwood rushing for 93 yards on 14 attempts. Atlanta rolling up 474 yards is a sign that they are improved on offense, but I wouldn't go crazy and predict them to be playoff-bound considering Detroit's defense looked really sub-par.

Broadway Brett Beats Fish: NY Jets 20, Miami 14

Few quarterbacks in NFL history have accomplished what Brett Favre has. While ESPN and many media outlets talk at nausea about him, he truly is one special football player. He's thrown for more touchdown passes (442), yards (61,655) and won more games (160) than any other starter at the QB position in league history. After Sunday's 20-14 win over the Dolphins in Miami, his consecutive starts streak is now at 276 when you include playoff games.

Is Favre the best in the sport anymore? No. Does he take risks at time as a gunslinger that make even the average viewer occasionally wince? Yes. That being said, he's an upgrade over Kellen Clemens and Chad Pennington, the Dolphins' starting signal caller on Sunday that had a pretty decent day overall. Pennington and Clemens combined to throw for 19 interceptions between them last year and neither provided the deep ball threat he does. As we saw, although he has decided to throw more check downs and short passes the last few years, Favre's still not afraid to sling it deep down the field. His 56-yard touchdown pass to Jericho Cotchery indicated just that, and his other touchdown was a 22-yard connection with Chansi Stuckey. His school-yard, backyard football, razzle dazzle type mentality makes him fun to watch, dangerous too of course, but also gives the Jets a chance to beat anyone with his rocket arm.

On the Miami side of things, even though the Dolphins aren't a playoff contender for 2008, they are improved some. A couple of Bill Parcells guys in tight end Anthony Fasano and linebacker Akin Ayodele made valuable contributions as Ayodele recovered a fumble and Fasano was on the receiving end of a touchdown. Shortly after Pennington hit tight end David Martin for an 11-yard touchdown with 3:27 remaining, the Dolphins got the ball back and drove down the field, only to see their hopes end when Darelle Revis intercepted a pass in the end zone to preserve the victory.

Delhomme's Heroics Familiar? Carolina 26, San Diego 24

One of the big surprises came when the Carolina Panthers rallied to defeat the San Diego Chargers on the road, 26-24. The way they did it was eerily similar to the season the Panthers reached the Super Bowl in 2003-04. That year, Carolina brought over Jake Delhomme from the New Orleans Saints, a backup prior to that, to be their new starting quarterback. Carolina came from behind to defeat the Jacksonville Jaguars on a game-winning drive engineered by Delhomme in the fourth quarter.

For most of the game, the Panthers were in control. Kicker Jon Kasay, an 18-year veteran, drilled a 44-yard field goal early on and tacked on a couple more later. San Diego responded with Philip Rivers finding Chris Chambers for a 44-yard touchdown pass. Despite leading 9-7 at the half, the Panthers didn't feel overly confident because they were driving down the field on San Diego's defense, but often struggled to punch it in for a touchdown. Their running game was superb with DeAngelo Williams carrying the rock 12 times for 68 yards and rookie Jonathan Stewart out of Oregon adding 44 yards on seven attempts. Chris Gamble recovered a fumble and returned it 31 yards for a touchdown to give the Panthers the lead. Rivers answered, connecting with tight end Antonio Gates for a 24-yard touchdown pass down the right sideline.

Late in the game the Panthers trailed and could've been satisfied with playing competitively as a nine-point underdog against a Super Bowl contender on the road without their best offensive weapon, receiver Steve Smith, who was suspended by the team two games. Delhomme had none of it, threading the needle to find tight end/fullback

Dante Rosario, another Oregon product, in the back of the end zone for the winning score as time expired.

Is this a premonition of what's to come for the Panthers? Might be.

Turner The Burner: Atlanta 34, Detroit 21

Last year the Atlanta Falcons were a dormant franchise as their star player, quarterback Michael Vick, was put in jail for his involvement in dog fighting and their Head Coach Bobby Petrino quit late in the season, eventually taking a job to return to the college ranks at the University of Arkansas. To say the Falcons have been an organization in a state of flux may be an understatement.

Their major off-season acquisition was bringing in running Michael 'Burner' Turner from the San Diego Chargers. Turner, once a star at Northern Illinois, gave quite a first impression in a leading role, carrying the ball 22 times for 220 yards and two touchdowns. In the first half alone, Turner ran ten times for 135 yards and both of those scores, including a 66-yard scamper that made the Lions' defense look silly (*as if they don't do that enough on their own already*).

Several other teams in the league, such as Denver, Detroit and Seattle in particular, should've made a stronger play for Turner. Last year the New York Giants attempted to sign him to be their starting running back to replace Tiki Barber, who's now retired and part of NBC's *Sunday Football Night In America* studio team. Turner elected to re-sign with the Chargers, continue to backup Tomlinson and wait for the big bucks and starting opportunity down the road. That time has come, and the Falcons are glad it has.

Other Action:

NY Giants 16, Washington 7: Thursday night's NFL opener between the defending Super Bowl Champion Giants of New York and the Washington Redskins wasn't all that competitive, even though the final margin of victory was just nine points. The Giants controlled this game from start to finish, mainly with their much improved defense that was the key to their turnaround a year ago and title run. With Michael Strahan retired and Osi Umenyiora out for the season due to injury, Justin Tuck stepped up and provided six tackles and a sack. He was helped out by Aaron Ross, who led the team's secondary with eight tackles. On offense, the highlight performers were receiver Plaxico Burress and running back Brandon Jacobs. Burress, out of Virginia Beach's Green Run High School, caught ten passes for 133 yards, while Jacobs rushed 21 times for 116 yards. Despite not committing a single turnover, Washington's offense was very ineffective at times, and the Redskins experienced some clock management issues in Jim Zorn's coaching debut as they were out-gained 354-209.

Buffalo 34, Seattle 10: Believe it or not, Seattle was no match for Buffalo. The Bills put on quite a special teams show in front of their passionate home fans, Championship-hungry fans (*hey, they are hungry for a title considering they are 0-4 all-time in the Super Bowl*). In front 20-7 at the half, Buffalo really was energized by a 63-yard punt return for a touchdown courtesy of Roscoe Parrish. The tandem of Parrish and Terrence McGee, who made an interception on Sunday, gives them a pair of deadly return men. No Deion Branch and Bobby Engram at the receiver position really affected the Seahawks, which relied on Nate Burleson until he injured his knee in the third quarter. Quarterback Matt Hasselbeck went 6-for-20 with 84 yards and a touchdown in the first half of play. The Seahawks were 3-for-16 on third down, and if the ground attack doesn't get it turned around, they may be put in a lot of third-and-long situations all season. Kudos to Bills Head Coach Dick Jauron for his clever call that sealed the win. On fourth down and 17 from the Seattle 19-yard line, punter Brian Moorman threw a 19-yard touchdown pass to Ryan Denney on a fake field goal.

New Orleans 24, Tampa Bay 20: Through two periods of action, Tampa Bay was in front by a count of 10-7. Linebacker Bo Ruud had eight tackles, safety Tanard Jackson had four solo tackles and corner Phillip Buchanon made the key play with a 26-yard interception return for a touchdown. In the second half, however, Tampa's defense couldn't slow a New Orleans offense that came to life. Saints signal caller Drew Brees threw for over 300 yards and three touchdowns, including an 84-yard strike to Devery Henderson that gave them a 17-13 advantage. After a Buccaneers touchdown, the Saints were able to answer with Reggie Bush making some big plays on the drive, both rushing and receiving, offering much-needed versatility. Bush turned an ordinary screen pass into a 42-yard touchdown. On defense, the Saints still have room for improvement, but like what they got from linebacker Jonathan Vilma, who registered seven tackles in the first half. What puzzled me in this game was the fact the Bucs threw 41 times and ran 20 times for 146 yards with all but one of the carries by Earnest Graham and Warrick Dunn. A little more running could've won them the game and kept that New Orleans offense off the field. Quarterback Jeff Garcia is doubtful for the Bucs' next game with a sprained ankle, and that could be a big blow since he distributed the ball nicely to seven different receivers in the first half.

Philadelphia 38, St. Louis 3: Think the Eagles are for real? Think the Rams are bad? Both looked true in this one. Donovan McNabb was simply unstoppable in the first half for Philadelphia as the Eagles' veteran quarterback completed 16 of 24 pass attempts for 297 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions. Going off those numbers alone, it's no surprise that they jumped out to a 21-0 lead at the break. St. Louis' run game with Steven Jackson never fully got on track, and Marc Bulger could've used the big-play capability of Torrey Holt in this game. An injury is just what the Rams didn't need. Last year they sorely missed left tackle Orlando Pace for practically the entire year, and sure-handed possession receiver Drew Bennett went down with an injury in the opener. Rookie DeSean Jackson brings speed on offense and special teams that the city of brotherly love will absolutely love. Jackson returned a punt 60 yards. Hank Baskett may benefit from Jackson being on the other side of him; he broke off a 90-yard touchdown.

Defensively, the Eagles got several tackles, a sack and a forced fumble from the hard-hitting Quintin Mikell, who brings that physical presence they've lacked when Brian Dawkins isn't at 100%.

Pittsburgh 38, Houston 17: This game wasn't even as close as the final score indicates. Pittsburgh jumped out to a 21-3 lead at intermission, and at one point, Steelers starting quarterback Ben Roethlisberger was 13-for-14 with 137 yards passing, two touchdowns and no interceptions. Efficient play at that position was the difference from Pittsburgh winning the AFC North a year ago and missing the playoffs two seasons ago when he was still trying to get fully healthy from his motorcycle accident. Hines Ward caught a pair of touchdowns, and of course, the Pittsburgh run game did its part, too. Tailback Willie Parker, who got injured late last year against St. Louis, showed no signs of slowing down, scoring on three touchdown runs. Defensively, safety Troy Polamalu picked off Texans quarterback Matt Schaub, and LaMarr Woodley made plays all over the field; he might be the most unheralded defensive player in the conference. As for Houston, the positive to take out of a tough road loss is the promising of their young defense with end Mario Williams, linebacker DeMeco Ryans and corner Fred Bennett. Offensively though, the Texans still have a ways to go before they start seriously contending for the playoffs, and challenging Indy and Jacksonville in the AFC South.

Tennessee 17, Jacksonville 10: At the half, Tennessee led 10-7 despite a pair of turnovers from quarterback Vince Young. Rookie Chris Johnson out of East Carolina rushed for 61 yards and added 34 yards receiving in the half. Meanwhile, Jacksonville's ground attack got off to a rocky start, tallying a meager 11 yards on 12 carries with both Fred Taylor and Maurice Jones-Drew kept in check. Cortland Finnegan made two big interceptions for the Tennessee defense, and considering the Titans were 0-for-7 at one point on third downs, they needed them badly. Under five minutes to play in the game, Young got hurt and in came Kerry Collins, who was able to march the team down the field with the key play being a dump off to tight end Bo Scaife when the Jacksonville defense decided to go with an all out blitz. Young could be out 2-4 weeks, and while Collins is a more experienced, established passer, the Titans' air attack only will improve if their receivers allow them to (i.e. - they start making more catches and drop fewer balls). I'm not going to take much out of this loss for the Jaguars because last year they started off slow with a Week 1 loss to the Titans. They should be able to rebound, but it would be a big help if one of the wide receivers steps up and separates himself from the rest of the group as quarterback David Garrard's go-to guy.

Arizona 23, San Francisco 13: Judging from one game, Cardinals Head Coach Ken Whisenhunt made the right decision by deciding to go with savvy veteran Kurt Warner over youngster Matt Leinart as the team's starting quarterback. Warner's first pass of the afternoon went 21 yards to Larry Fitzgerald, and after that the Cards uncharacteristically were a bit on the conservative side, even punting on 4th & 1. Whisenhunt did later go for it on fourth down twice, and proved to be successful with rookie running back Tim Hightower scoring his first career touchdown with 4:03 remaining in regulation, putting Zona up 20-10. While on the subject of running backs, it

appears that the Niners are going to depend greatly on Frank Gore, whose 41-yard touchdown put them on top early, but turnovers and giving the Cardinals excellent field position eventually doomed San Francisco. On defense, two players gave the Cards a spark. One was safety Adrian Wilson, who had an interception and the team is glad to have back after his 2007 campaign was cut short due to injury. The other was defense end Travis LaBoy; he collected four tackles, two sacks and forced a fumble.

Dallas 28, Cleveland 10: A trendy pick by many to be a surprise team in the AFC, the Cleveland Browns didn't live up to that hype in Week 1 as the Dallas Cowboys put a hurting on them. Cleveland, the third most penalized team in the league last year, knew they were in for a long afternoon when receiver Braylon Edwards, their best playmaker along with tight end Kellen Winslow Jr., dropped a big pass in the first quarter. Edwards, a Pro Bowl level performer, had 20 drops last season, but that was still seven fewer than Terrell Owens, whose 27 drops were the most in all of football. Speaking of T.O., he notched his 130th career touchdown catch in this game, tying Cris Carter for second most all-time. Quarterback Tony Romo got off to a solid start for the Cowboys, completing each of his first six passes for 84 yards and finishing the first half 13-of-16 for 175 yards and a score. Cleveland struggled to stop the Dallas passing attack, Marion Barber and didn't get much on the ground early from Jamal Lewis, making them a little one-dimensional at times. Worst of all, the Browns' defensive line generated no pressure, failing to record a single sack. Dallas' offensive line may very well decide how far they go this season, and if they play like they did on Sunday, a Super Bowl dream can become a reality.

Chicago 29, Indianapolis 13: Maybe the most stunning result on Sunday came on NBC Sunday Night Football where the Chicago Bears hammered Indianapolis in what was the opening of Lucas Oil Stadium for the Colts. Rookie running back Matt Forte out of Tulane gave the Bears the boost they needed early, breaking off a 50-yard touchdown run to put his team up 7-3 during the first quarter. Forte ran for precisely 100 yards on 14 attempts in the first half, enjoying a better debut than Walter Payton did with the Bears (*now if he can just play like Payton did the rest of his career - the Bears could claim a Vince Lombardi Trophy in the very near future*). On 3rd & 15, second-year tight end Greg Olsen caught a 29-yard pass to put the Bears in field goal range, enabling them to go up 15-6 at half-time. What had to make Chicago Head Coach Lovie Smith smile was the fact his team played mistake-free football, not turning the football over as quarterback Kyle Orton was 7-for-13 with 91 yards in the first half, completing a pass to seven different players. In addition, they were able to come up with a crucial second half takeaway when Indy appeared to be on their way to making a comeback. Linebacker Lance Briggs ran in a fumble 21 yards for a touchdown after Charles Tillman stripped Marvin Harrison of the ball. A September home loss is a bit alarming for Indy, but even more so is that Peyton Manning looked rusty, and he seldom does.