

## Monday Morning Analysis - BY MATTHEW HATFIELD NFL - Monday, January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2005

We've now gone from the elite eight, to the sterling seven, to the sensational six, to the fabulous five and now to the final four. Pittsburgh will play New England on Sunday at 6:30 (EST) on CBS, while just a few hours before that we find out who's king of the NFC as Atlanta visits Philadelphia, who will be making their fourth straight NFC Conference Championship game appearance. It's this time of year in the National Football League.... let's get it on, and find out which two teams will be playing for the Vince Lombardi trophy two weeks from this coming Sunday....

### Indianapolis @ New England Recap:

No arrogance or cockiness here. We just go out and play the game and you guys can do all the talking. That's the championship motto, or mentality if you will, of the reigning champion New England Patriots, who smacked Peyton Manning and the Indianapolis offense in the mouth, 20-3. The Patriots went from 27<sup>th</sup> overall in rushing offense last year to 7<sup>th</sup> this season thanks to Corey Dillon. Mr. Dillon ran the football 23 times for 144 yards and had one touchdown run called back on a Matt Light false start penalty. Had it not been for that penalty and had Eugene Wilson picked off Manning in the red zone, the final score would've been a 24-0 shutout.

Manning, just like usual, crumbles when the chips are up on the table and the pressure is directly on him. The loss on Sunday dropped his career playoff record to 3-5. Most importantly he is 1-4 on the road with the lone win away from home at Kansas City last year in this round. And how would I describe his act following the game? Wishy-washy to a tee! **Indy was held to 276 total yards of offense, committed three turnovers and Archie Manning's oldest football son failed to complete one pass of 20 yards or more.** This from a guy that had an NFL best 68 completions for 20+ yards and 11 last week vs. Denver. What is it about the playoffs and Bill Belichick that he cannot figure out? Maybe Belichick and his coaching staff, his players and his quarterback Tom Brady are just smarter than him. What really gets me the most about Peyton is every time he loses to New England (now 0-7 vs. Belichick's Pats) he says they did nothing different. Really? Seems to me they show a new wrinkle here, plug a guy in here and a plug a guy there to stomp on the Colts time after time after time. Richard Seymour, their best defensive lineman, Ty Law - team's best corner and #2 corner Tyrone Poole were all out for Sunday's game. You mean to tell me you can't even score one touchdown against a banged up defense/secondary after throwing 49 during the regular season? By the way, that idiot, liquor kicker of yours at least kicked one through for the Colts' only three points. Let me also make it clear that is **not all Manning's fault (just most of it)**. Edgerrin James had 14Car. for 39 yards and did not carry the ball nearly as well as Dillon did. He was able to grab seven balls and that helped them minimally. Wide receivers Marvin Harrison and Reggie Wayne couldn't get the job done against two young cornerbacks in Astante Samuel (late draft pick last season) and the undrafted Randall Gay out of LSU. Samuel and Gay each did a great job on Harrison and Wayne, making slot receiver Brandon Stokley the Colts' top option.

Belichick (54-27 in five seasons in NE) got spectacular play from linebackers like Tedy Bruschi, Willie McGinest and Mike Vrabel. In addition, safety Rodney Harrison came up big when he had to. Last year it was Harrison sealing the deal by picking off Manning. In this game he drilled Indy's Reggie Wayne, causing a fumble that was recovered by Bruschi. Also, Harrison sealed the deal once more by picking off Manning in the end zone. Since the merger - Tom Brady has the most consecutive playoff starts won (7). Brady was 18-27 for 144Yds., a TD pass, 0Int. and 1TD run Sunday. It raises the question that could the Patriots' offense be a bit underrated now that they've got a guy to control the clock like Dillon? Maybe, and this time when they face Pittsburgh Dillon will be available to make them not-so one dimensional.

**Sunday Stat: Time of Possession: NE 37:43 IND 22:17**

**Bottom Line: Colts are too soft and too dome friendly to beat a tough, playoff primed team like New England, even with a number of injuries on defense.**

**Minnesota @ Philadelphia Recap:**

Right off the bat you could tell that Donovan McNabb was more with it than Vikings QB Daunte Culpepper. To me, Culpepper looked rather fazed. Not all with it in the early on and it showed as Brian Westbrook set the tempo for the game from the get go. **In fact, Westbrook lined up in seven different variations or formations in the Eagles' first ten plays.** All day long much of the media stated that the Vikings were playing that "where's Waldo game."

**Four Consecutive Conference Championships:**

<b>Team</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Record</b>
Philadelphia Eagles	2002-05	0-3
Dallas Cowboys	1992-95	3-1
Buffalo Bills*	1990-93	4-0
Oakland Raiders**	1973-77	1-4
Dallas Cowboys	1970-73	2-2
Oakland Raiders	1967-70	1-3

- \* denotes team lost four straight Super Bowls
- \*\* denotes team appeared in five consecutive conference title games

Greg Lewis came up with a monster reception for monster yardage (52 yards) in the middle part of the game. That kind of helped McNabb establish a real good rhythm. Donovan played looser and with a lot of poise in this game than in past playoff contests. He finished with 286 passing yards, 2TD passes and no interceptions. Meanwhile, Culpepper was harassed the whole day as he was sacked a few times, linebackers Jeremiah Trotter and Ike Resse devastatingly intercepted him twice and he was unable to connect with Randy Moss (3Rec. 51Yds.) enough. Brian Dawkins, Jevon Kearse and the rest of the Philly defense performed fabulously. It's worth noting that the Vikings led the NFL during the regular season on 3<sup>rd</sup> downs, completing over 50% of their attempts. But yesterday they went 7-17, whereas Philadelphia only had 11 third downs. I thought L.J.

Smith made some key catches (4Rec. 52Yds.) and Vikings defenders Kevin Williams and Antoine Winfield did not make big-time, game-changing plays defensively for Mike Tice's Minnesota ball club.



**Eagles linebacker Jeremiah Trotter has manned the middle of the Philadelphia defense all season long earning himself a trip to the Pro Bowl.**

Photo Courtesy of:

<http://archive.profootballweekly.com/content/archives/images/jtrotter.jpg>

**Why Minnesota Lost: When Freddie Mitchell has a better game than Randy Moss --- you know you're going to lose.**

#### **St. Louis @ Atlanta Recap:**

**In my opinion, of all four team that won this week – Atlanta played the best.** I though they played better than even New England, who absolutely waxed the Colts offense. Atlanta's defense showed they are very underrated by keeping the Rams to 17 points. **Give GM Rich McKay credit for going out and adding DT Rod Coleman from Oakland, corner Jason Webster from San Francisco and drafting DeAngelo Hall in the first round out of Virginia Tech.** Plus, McKay also got a couple of other pieces such as Nebraska linebacker Demorrio Wiliams, a great value pick in the fourth round of the '04 draft, selecting Jim Mora Jr. as the Head Coach and getting Greg Knapp as offensive coordinator. But believe it or not, the two best moves they may have made were Alex Gibbs as the new offensive line coach and brining over Ed Donatell from Green Bay to be the defensive coordinator. **Last season the Falcons ranked dead last in total defense and passing defense.** Donatell has a defensive line that is the best in football, very similar to how Carolina got to the Super Bowl last year. Gibbs is doing what he did in Denver – getting a relatively small offensive line to perform using zone blocking and

**Atlanta won this game because of their overall team speed.** Vick gives them the fastest quarterback in the league, Dunn can turn the jets on, Allen Rossum showed what he could do on special teams (setting a postseason record for return yards in a game) and DeAngelo Hall is the speedy rookie corner on the perimeter. That d-line also is fast off the edge with Coleman, Patrick Kearney and Brady Smith. Many thought the Rams were going to win with their speedy receivers, but that was not the case whatsoever. **So**

am I saying that Atlanta might be faster? No. I am saying that Atlanta **IS** faster than the Rams, period. No ands, ifs or but's about it --- they schooled St. Louis in every facet of the game.

**Bold Statement: I said it in the preseason and I'll say it again --- Michael Vick makes the Atlanta Falcons defense better because of his ability to drive them down the field to score points so that the defensive guys are off the field. Staying fresh on defense and grinding teams out through the running game on offense could and should put the dirty bird back in the Super Bowl!**

Atlanta's offense was also upgrade during the off-season as they brought in Dez White from Chicago, Eric Beverly to play some guard/tight end, chose Michael Jenkins out of Ohio State with the 29<sup>th</sup> overall pick in the 2004 NFL Draft and Vick returned. Marc Bulger did the best he could as he took some punishing hits from Smith, Keith Brooking and the rest of that defense. There were three differences that I found in this game and they are as follows:

1. Difference between these Rams and the one's that won the Super Bowl? Linebackers - Mike Jones and London Fletcher stopped the run, St. Louis' LB's are struggling to stop players such as Dunn, Duckett and Vick.
2. Atlanta's rushing attack is far and beyond better than St. Louis'
3. Special teams factored in to the outcome enormously. Jeff Wilkins drilled what was about a 55-yard field goal, but the punting was poor, returns very average and Atlanta's Rossum burned them.

And before I forget, the Falcons have done an excellent job at fullback. They had Justin Griffith, George Layne and Stanley Pritchett all go down due to injuries. Fred McCrary has played real hard for them since he was signed. St. Louis' best source of offense was through #3 wide receiver (#2 for this game) Kevin Curtis. Torry Holt did not make as many outstanding catches in this game as he did vs. Seattle. Isaac Bruce did not play and the injury to the left guard of the Rams did not help matters.

**Ya' Big Dummy! St. Louis began with the football in the second half after the Falcons torched them for 239 yards on the ground. Brandon Manumaleuna ran into Avion Cason for the opening kickoff in the second half. As Fred Sanford (Redd Foxx) so eloquently put it in the hit TV show *Sanford & Son* --- You Big Dummy!**

#### **New York Jets @ Pittsburgh Recap:**

I've been thinking.... What is there to say to all the Jets fans out there? This was one of those crushing losses. A loss like the Chicago Cubs are used to suffering, the Utah Jazz felt vs. the Chicago Bulls, the Boston Red Sox would suffer almost every time against the Yankees and so on. I'm not going to criticize Herm Edwards because his team did not give up down 10-0 as they scored 17 unanswered on the **#1 total defense and scoring defense in the league**. However, I would have liked to see them try to get

closer for a field goal or try for the touchdown late. The first field goal Doug Brien missed --- I was not surprised. The second was a little stunning. After he missed that one with four seconds wide, and I mean wide, left --- you had to be shaking your head. What is Herm to do? Not go for the field goal and try to get the first down? If he does that and does not get it, then he is being killed by all sports talk shows the entire week. If it is successful then he is the toast of the New York town. Edward was in a tough spot and his offensive unit just did not perform up to par. The only thing that disturbed was how they returned to their conservative, predictable play calling after gaining the lead. Pittsburgh did not blow me off my socks offensively either. Ben Roethlisberger interception in the red zone that Reggie Tongue got his hands on and took back 86 yards for six points could've been a moment Big Ben looked back on and regretted. Even worse was David Barrett picking him off with less than two minutes to go. But Big Ben was not the only one who made mistakes. Jerome Bettis, who had over 100 yards rushing, fumbled the ball away (forced by Shaun Ellis and recovered by Erik Coleman) in Jets territory with his team trailing.

**Interested to see what the Jets do with..... LaMont Jordan --- He gave New York a burst of powerful of expressiveness right before the end of the first half. The Jets probably cannot afford to keep Jordan and Curtis Martin and both be satisfied. Jordan could be well on his way to a place out west like Oakland or Arizona where a tailback is needed.**

Kevin Mawae and the Jets offensive line was able to open up holes for Jordan inside, not outside against the Steelers aggressive 3-4 scheme. On defense the Steelers played pretty well, especially second-year safety Troy Polamalu out of USC, who intercepted a Chad Pennington pass and made some key hits. In overtime it was that two headed rushing monster of Bettis and Duce Staley that won the game along with an eight yard first down run by Veron Haynes. Alan Faneca stood out with the wonderful blocks he made throughout the course of the contest.

**Jets Set A Record: Playing in their third straight road overtime game, Herman Edwards' 2004-05 version of the New York Jets set a record that set in fatigue.**



**Steelers kicker Jeff Reed has made 19 consecutive field goals dating back to the regular season, including the 33-yard game-winner in overtime that ended the Jets' 2004-05 regular season.**

**Photo Courtesy of:** [http://media.theinsiders.com/Media/Player/39864\\_jeff\\_reed.JPG](http://media.theinsiders.com/Media/Player/39864_jeff_reed.JPG)