

Predicting the NFL is a fool's game

Written by Staff Reports

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By BARRY WILNER

The Associated Press

So you think you know the NFL?

Perhaps you can predict the future, tame the weather and forecast winning lottery numbers, too.

Those claiming to know what will happen in pro football need only look at what went on this wild weekend, which featured a half-dozen super matchups that didn't turn out quite so super.

Nothing could be juicier than the defending champion New York Giants at Atlanta.

Oops: Falcons 34, Giants 0.

OK, then Denver at Baltimore. Delicious.

Sorry: Broncos 34, Ravens 17.

Houston, coming off an embarrassing Monday night rout at New England, against Indianapolis

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for AFC South supremacy.

Pffft: Texans 29-17 to clinch the division.

For something even more absurd than the lack of competitiveness in those games, try this one: San Francisco 31, New England 3 in the third quarter.

And this: Patriots 31, 49ers 31 with 6:43 left in the fourth quarter.

Just when the Patriots were on their way to matching the greatest regular-season comeback win in NFL history, the Niners turned around and won 41-34.

"It's a little bit crazy, a little bit surreal," said 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who threw for a career-best four touchdowns in his fifth start since replacing Alex Smith.

A little bit? That's the NFL this season.

If anyone thinks the weirdness has ended with two weeks remaining, well, don't count on it.

"The season's not over," Tom Brady said after his team that doesn't lose at home in December (20 straight wins heading into the San Francisco game) or in the second half of the schedule (21 straight victories anywhere) lost. And committed four turnovers, nearly half the 10 it had given away beforehand. "There's still a lot of football to play."

Plenty of meaningful football. About the only thing predictable is that there will be lots of surprises in those remaining games, too.

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Here's what everyone can look forward to.

NFC

Atlanta (12-2 in the South) and Green Bay (10-4 in the North) are division winners, with the Falcons in position to get home-field advantage throughout the playoffs.

San Francisco (10-3-1) will earn the West with a victory at Seattle (9-5) next Sunday. But the Seahawks are 6-0 at home, have a dynamic defense to match the 49ers' unit and are oozing with confidence thanks to a 3-game winning streak and five victories in the last six outings.

The league moved that game to the prime-time telecast and NBC must be salivating after the Seahawks scored 50 points for the second straight week.

"What's important is that you continue to execute really well regardless of the circumstances and who you're playing," coach Pete Carroll said.

The East is in a 3-team deadlock: New York, Washington and Dallas, all at 8-6. If either the Redskins or Cowboys win out, they'll take the division. They meet at Washington in the season finale.

Meanwhile, after three straight road losses, the Giants need help to repeat in the division.

Very alive for the wild card are all three East teams, the runner-up in the West, plus Minnesota and Chicago, also 8-6. But the Bears are skidding and banged-up. With the way Adrian Peterson is playing, counting them out would be foolhardy.

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AFC

Houston (12-2), despite that flop at Foxborough, is in good shape to remain at home throughout; one more victory earns the South champion that advantage. However, both remaining opponents, Minnesota and Indy, are chasing wild-card slots.

Denver (11-3) has won nine in a row and is a far superior team to the one that lost earlier this season to the Texans and Patriots. Peyton Manning has gotten more in tune with his teammates as the season has progressed and the defense is fierce.

Plus, the West-winning Broncos finish with home games against weaklings Cleveland and Kansas City.

New England's strange loss to the 49ers puts it in a precarious position for a club that certainly looked like the league's best before Sunday. If it beats Jacksonville and Miami, it will finish 12-4, but that might get only the third seed and no bye for the East champ.

It also could mean a trip to the Mile High City in the divisional round.

The North has three teams struggling to reach the finish line. Baltimore (9-5) has lost three in a row, yet secured a playoff berth Sunday. It leads Cincinnati by one game and finishes with the Bengals after meeting the Giants next weekend.

Cincinnati and the Steelers (7-7) face off next week at Pittsburgh. A loss pretty much eliminates the Steelers.

The Colts (9-5) have the best shot at a wild card and a win at Kansas City next week should do it.

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Not that we're predicting any such thing these days. __PUBLIC__