

NFL Gameday

Compiled by Desmond Bieler, Matt Bonesteel, David Larimer and Christian Swezey

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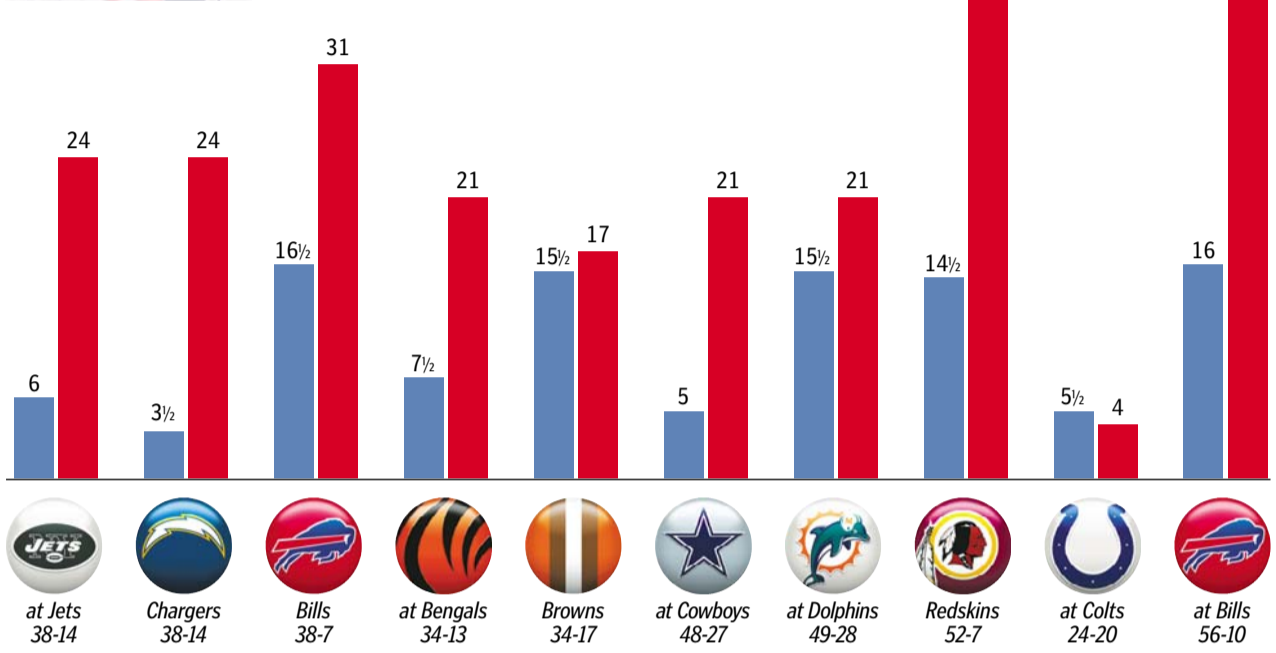
Philadelphia at New England
8:15 p.m.
WRC-4
WBAL-11



Season of Giving (the Points)

Point spreads of 20 points or higher are a rarity in the NFL, happening five times since 1980. Or at least they were, if the unstoppable Patriots and Tom Brady, left, have anything to say about it. They are an astounding 24-point favorites (the biggest NFL point spread since 1993) tonight against the Eagles, who at 5-5 aren't exactly a pushover. With some struggling teams remaining on the schedule, we could see the first 30-point spread in modern NFL history.

KEY
Spread
Margin of victory



3
Teams that have clinched the division title by the 11th game of the season since 1978. The 1985 Bears, 1997 49ers and 2004 Eagles were the others. The Patriots can join them tonight.

9
Consecutive wins over NFC teams for the Patriots

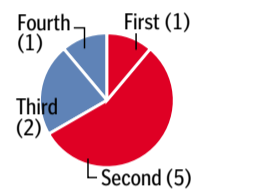
REMAINING GAMES

The Gameday crew couldn't help but look ahead and predict future spreads for the unbeaten Patriots:

Game	Date	Line
At Ravens	Dec. 3	-19
Steelers	Dec. 9	-16½
Jets	Dec. 16	-28
Dolphins	Dec. 23	-30
At Giants	Dec. 29	-15

QUICK WORK

The Patriots are 9-1 against the spread, and in those nine games, only once was the cover not secure before the fourth quarter (Oct. 7 against the Browns). New England has wrapped things up before half-time six times this season.



BRAGGING RIGHTS

The NFL Gameday crew picks their locks of the week, listed with this year's record:

PITTSBURGH (-16) over Miami
After last week's ugly loss at the Jets, the Steelers are madder at themselves than Swezey apparently is at "hipsters." What's the matter, Sweze, did your tales of Cornhusker football not exactly wow 'em at DC9? Anyway, just like our boy at Martin's Tavern in Georgetown, Pittsburgh is back at home, where it is much more comfortable.
— Desmond Bieler (5-6)

NEW ENGLAND (-24) over Philadelphia
Certain touts (see below) would rather prove their manhood by picking historically doomed franchises instead of the greatest spread-covering colossus of our time. A real man laughs at one of the biggest point spreads in NFL history — especially when the underdog is starting A.J. Feeley — content that he soon will be basking in the beige-colored glow of a .500 record.
— Matt Bonesteel (5-6)

CLEVELAND (-3) over Houston
As I have said before in this space, you, the reader, do not come here to gain any insight into what team might win today. You come here for a cheap laugh at our incompetence. So why would I, the floundering tout, bore you by taking the chalk-covered Patriots week after week in an attempt to rid myself of this mediocre record? Hear this: I will not pick New England again this season. Like Kellen Winslow, I'm a soldier!
— David Larimer (5-5-1)

JACKSONVILLE (-8) over Buffalo
From first place to the bottom of the world in three weeks — the scenario in which I find myself should sound familiar to Mets fan Bieler. Yet my comeback starts today. The Jaguars' running game is as unstoppable as a hipster trying to get to a free juke box. Meantime, the Bills' offense is weaker than a \$1 rail drink. Des knows all about those, too.
— Christian Swezey (4-6-1)

2

Houston at Cleveland
1 p.m.

BREAKDOWN

0
Three-game winning streaks in Texans history. Houston would have its first if it wins today.

So Much Tied Up in One Game

The Browns, who haven't sniffed the postseason since 2002, are doing their best at trying not to get ahead of themselves. Or, as Coach Romeo Crennel told the Akron Beacon Journal of his message to his players, "Tell them if you look too far ahead, then what's right in front of you will kick you in the butt."
Physically improbable? Perhaps. But today's game is an important one for Cleveland, which is currently tied with Tennessee for the AFC's sixth and final playoff spot. Since the Browns and Titans will not play in the regular season, their tiebreakers are conference record (Cleveland is 4-4, Tennessee 3-3) followed by record against common opponents (of which Houston is one).
The Texans, whose 5-5 mark is the franchise's best after 10 games, have found confidence with the return of Andre Johnson. The wideout had six catches for 120 yards in a win against the Saints, his first game after missing seven games with a sprained knee. Houston has won its last five games in which it has played Johnson, who is averaging just over 127 receiving yards in three games this season.
The Browns rank 32nd overall in total defense and points allowed per game, and 31st in pass defense.



Andre Johnson's return has given Houston a boost.

3

Buffalo at Jacksonville
1 p.m.

BREAKDOWN

"You hate to lose. You hate to lose like that. You hate to lose like that at home."

Bills WR Lee Evans, about a 56-10 loss to the Patriots last Sunday

Jags Can Run It Up, Too

The Bills talked this week about forgetting their 56-10 loss to the Patriots last Sunday. (They might want to forget the first meeting, too — it was a 38-7 loss, meaning New England outscored the Bills 94-17 this season.)
Anyway, teams that have lost to New England have fared relatively well in their next game: Those teams are 4-5 this season. The Bills rebounded from their first loss to New England with a win over the Jets.
The Jaguars have a strong running game led by Fred Taylor (604 yards, 1 TD) and Maurice Jones-Drew (569, 6). That prowess has helped the Jaguars attempt a league-high 25 fourth-down conversions; they have made 13.
By way of comparison, the Jaguars have not attempted more than 26 fourth-down conversions since 2000.
Buffalo is likely to counter with a lot of eight-man fronts. Those formations will put pressure on SS Donte Whitner (62 tackles) to play closer to the line of scrimmage. Also, LBs Keith Ellison (17 tackles) and John DiGiorgio (73 tackles) may be in for a long day — each weighs less than Taylor.

4

Tennessee at Cincinnati
1 p.m.

BREAKDOWN

6
Receptions needed by Bengals WR Chad Johnson to break the franchise record for career catches, held by Carl Pickens

Bengals' Offense Quieted

What can you say about the collapse of the Cincinnati Bengals? Perhaps nothing speaks louder than Chad Johnson's silence.
The fun-loving wideout, responding to suggestions his antics are part of the reason for the team's start, has not talked to reporters in a month. It hasn't helped, as his touchdown drought has stretched to eight games, and the Bengals have fallen to 3-7. They have lost 10 of their past 13.
"I don't think he's ever had anybody bad-mouth him in the media before in his career," QB Carson Palmer told reporters of Johnson. "It's tough to go through."
In addition, Johnson has been nagged by knee, ankle and neck injuries at various points and harassed by defenses focused on not letting him get behind them for big plays.
But while Cincinnati's high-powered passing game is accustomed to not getting much help from its perennially mediocre defense, it has been further hampered by the disappearance of the running game.
The Bengals have 71 carries for 170 yards over their past three games. They rank 26th in the NFL with 84.9 rushing yards per game, and only three teams average fewer than the Bengals' 3.5 yards per carry.

THE RUNDOWN

Minnesota (+7) at N.Y. Giants, 1 p.m.

It's a measure of the Giants' mounting injury problems that when linebacker Mathias Kiwanuka was placed on injured reserve earlier this week with a broken leg, he was replaced by . . . a running back. Patrick Pass was brought in because backs Brandon Jacobs and Derrick Ward have their own health issues.

Oakland (+5) at Kansas City, 1 p.m.

After last week's sloppy loss to the Vikings, Raiders defensive tackle Warren Sapp went on a rant, calling his team "an undisciplined unit." He may be on to something — Oakland leads the league in false starts (31). Incidentally, Sapp wasn't disciplined for his remarks.

Seattle (-3) at St. Louis, 1 p.m.

The Seahawks held quarterback Matt Hasselbeck out of practice all week with sore ribs, but he'll be in the lineup to face a team against which he's thrown eight touchdown passes the last four times he's faced it.

Houston (+3) at Cleveland, 1 p.m.

His NFL career has never justified the moniker Ron "The Great" Dayne, but the Texan's performance the past two games (211 yards rushing) in relief of injured Ahman Green has teammates calling him the "Dayne Train." Not a bad nickname but, you know, not great.

Buffalo (+8) at Jacksonville, 1 p.m. (WUSA-9, WJZ-13)

Another running back with a locomotive connection, Anthony "The A-Train" Thomas, is set to start for the Bills if rookie Marshawn Lynch stays out with a bad ankle. Where's former Chargers dynamo Lionel "Little Train" James when you need him?

Tennessee (-2) at Cincinnati, 1 p.m.

Fight! Fight! Fight! Or maybe not, but would it be any surprise if something suspension-worthy happened between these teams, which, even with Adam "Pacman" Jones out of action, comprise many of the league's foremost troublemakers? As if to prepare for the showdown, there apparently was a literal Clash of the Titans just last week between Albert Haynesworth and — who else? — Jones.

New Orleans (-2½) at Carolina, 1 p.m.

Much of the blame for the Panthers' plummet from 4-2 to 4-6 has fallen on the team's sketchy quarterback situation in the wake of Jake Delhomme's season-ending elbow surgery. But the guys paid to rush the passer have been equally terrible. Defensive ends Julius Peppers and Mike Rucker have combined for 3½ sacks, despite being in fine health.

San Francisco (-10½) at Arizona, 4:05 p.m.

Embattled 49ers Coach Mike Nolan made a point of insisting he has "a very strong staff, very good staff." Then the team brought in veteran coach Ted Tollner as an offensive assistant. Read into that what you will.

Baltimore (+9) at San Diego, 4:15 p.m. (WUSA-9, WJZ-13)

The Chargers' LaDainian Tomlinson needs 29 yards to become the latest member of the 10,000 rushing yards club. Two rushing touchdowns also vault Tomlinson past Walter Payton (110) for third place all-time. But the Ravens are second in the NFL against the rush.

Denver (+2) at Chicago, 4:15 p.m.

The Broncos' offense could get a boost if wide receiver Javon Walker, who has been out since Week 4, is back in the lineup. Meantime, fellow wide receiver Brandon Marshall has picked up the slack, averaging nearly 80 yards over the past six games.

Philadelphia (+24) at New England, 8:15 p.m. (WRC-4, WBAL-11)

Not all the offensive stars in this game will be shining for the Patriots. Eagles running back and DeMatha High product Brian Westbrook leads the league in yards from scrimmage. In order to have a chance tonight, though, Philadelphia probably will have to hypnotize Westbrook into thinking he's a man among WCAC boys.

Miami (+16) at Pittsburgh, 8:30 p.m. tomorrow (ESPN)

If the Dolphins weren't so bad, the story line would be ex-Steelers Joey Porter's first game against his former mates. Or maybe rookie quarterback John Beck's challenge facing Pittsburgh's blitz-happy defense. But since the Dolphins are oh-for-the-season, the story line is how unlikely it is they'll be less putrid after this contest.

AMERICAN FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

EAST	W	L	T	Pct.	SOUTH	W	L	T	Pct.	NORTH	W	L	T	Pct.	WEST	W	L	T	Pct.
New England	10	0	0	1.000	Indianapolis	9	2	0	.818	Pittsburgh	7	3	0	.700	Denver	5	5	0	.500
Buffalo	5	5	0	.500	Jacksonville	7	3	0	.700	Cleveland	6	4	0	.600	San Diego	5	5	0	.500
N.Y. Jets	2	9	0	.182	Tennessee	6	4	0	.600	Baltimore	4	6	0	.400	Kansas City	4	6	0	.400
Miami	0	10	0	.000	Houston	5	5	0	.500	Cincinnati	3	7	0	.300	Oakland	2	8	0	.200

NATIONAL FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

EAST	W	L	T	Pct.	SOUTH	W	L	T	Pct.	NORTH	W	L	T	Pct.	WEST	W	L	T	Pct.
Dallas	10	1	0	.909	Tampa Bay	6	4	0	.600	Green Bay	10	1	0	.909	Seattle	6	4	0	.600
N.Y. Giants	7	3	0	.700	Carolina	4	6	0	.400	Detroit	6	5	0	.545	Arizona	5	5	0	.500
Philadelphia	5	5	0	.500	New Orleans	4	6	0	.400	Chicago	4	6	0	.400	St. Louis	2	8	0	.200
Washington	5	5	0	.500	Atlanta	3	8	0	.273	Minnesota	4	6	0	.400	San Francisco	2	8	0	.200