



Sports

by Jerry Keys

With ten weeks in the books, six weeks remain as we head into the Holiday season. Baseball season is over, basketball and hockey have just started (and so many teams make the play-offs the regular season is almost pointless) and college football takes its month-long hiatus until New Year's Day. Pro football captures center stage as teams attempt to position themselves for a play-off berth.

The defending Super Bowl champion Steelers seem to have succumb to the injury bug and possibly some Super Bowl hangoverisms (swagger from being champions but not realizing the next year every other team circles their date with them to "KO" the defending champs). Their path to repeat looks quite dim as two teams are posting perfect 10-0 marks.

All four AFC division races are almost clinched; with the Patriots (7-3) leading by two games in the East, the Bengals (7-3) by one game in the North (to be specific two games since the one team a game behind the Bengals lost to them twice this year; therefore the Bengals automatically win the division if the two teams are tied at the end of the year), the Colts (10-0) by four games in the South, and the Chargers (7-3) by one game in the West.

The Chargers sole competitions in the West, the Broncos, are going in opposite directions. The Broncos won their first six games and have promptly lost their last four; where as the Chargers began their year 2-3, have reeled of five consecutive wins. With all things considered, any team

with less than five wins should not be considered serious play-off contenders. This leaves ten teams from the AFC vying for six positions.

Besides the four teams previously noted as having "all but wrapped up their division," six teams remain in contention for two spots. Three of these teams are at 5-5 (Dolphins, Ravens and



Peyton Manning

Texans). The other three are at 6-4 (Steelers, Jaguars and Broncos). The team with the toughest remaining schedule is Miami, who faces five playoff teams (current division leaders, contenders, and one special team) in the six remaining. The two teams with the weakest remaining schedule are the Broncos and Ravens who only face three.

None of the six teams have a decisive advantage for the remainder of the season. Because the Dolphins and Texans are already one game behind the three 6-4 teams and have brutal schedules over the last six weeks, they do not appear to be play-off possible teams. The Broncos have recently imploded and no one knows when it will end. A similar thing happened to the Broncos last year; where they were 8-5 and needed one win to clinch the West and went on to lose their remaining three games.

With these three teams not considered play-off bound, there are three teams remaining. The Jaguars face two locks (Colts at home, Patriots on the road), two contenders (Dolphins and Texans, both at home) and two also-rans (49'ers and Browns both on the road). The Ravens face two contenders (Packers on the road and Steelers -both home and away) and three also-rans (Lions and Bears at home, Raiders on the road). The Steelers face three contenders (Packers at home, Dolphins on the road and the Ravens both home and away) and two also-rans (Raiders at home and Browns on the road).

If either team wins both games against one another (Steelers and Ravens) it is very possible the loser will be watching the play-offs in January in their living room. I personally picked the Jaguars to go to the Super Bowl last year, usually those teams do reach the Bowl BUT a year or two later. My guess is the Jaguars will finish the year 2-4 and finish at 8-8. The Ravens will go 4-2 and finish at 9-7 and the Steelers will finish 4-2 and finish at 10-6. There are two intangibles for the Ravens and Steelers. If the Ravens tie the Broncos for a wild-card position, the Ravens are in because they beat the Broncos head-to-head. The Steelers also beat the Broncos head-to-head and beat the surprise team head-to-head as well. The reason this is proposed is the Broncos may avoid the late-season swoon and finish with a 4-2 or 3-3 record. Their remaining schedule is not exactly devastating.

The surprise team I referred to is the Tennessee Titans (see last month's article) who stand at 4-6 after a 0-6 start. Can the Titans win ten straight? I seriously doubt it but they will definitely play the spoiler for several teams. The six play-

NFL Pigskin Preview

off teams from the AFC will be: #1 Colts, #2 Patriots, #3 Chargers, #4 Bengals, #5 Steelers, and #6 Ravens.

Three of the four NFC divisions have all but officially been decided. The Vikings (9-1, ahead by three games and beaten the second place team twice) have wrapped up the North, the Saints (10-0, ahead by five) the South and the Cardinals (7-3, ahead by three) the West. The East is a toss-up between the Cowboys (7-3), Giants (6-4) and Eagles (6-4).

The contenders to the remaining play-off spots will be (by default of record) the Giants, Eagles, Packers (6-4) and Falcons (5-5). Two or three of these four teams will see action in mid-January. The Packers have the inside track to the #5 wild card with an easier remaining schedule facing one lock and two contenders (Ravens at home, Steelers and Cardinals on the road) and three also-rans (Seahawks at home and Bears and Lions on the road). The Falcons face one lock and one contender (Saints and Eagles at home) and four also-rans (a home and away with the Buccaneers, the Bills at home and the Jets on the road).

The three NFC East teams still have one round-robin left. The Cowboys face two locks (Chargers at home,

Saints on the road), two contenders (Eagles at home, Giants on the road) and two also-rans (Raiders at home, Redskins on the road). The Giants face one lock and three contenders

ish their six games at 4-2, compiling a 10-6 record and a play-off berth. Both the Giants and Eagles will defeat the Cowboys in their second head-to-head game and the Eagles will defeat the Giants a second time to win the NFC East.

The six NFC play-off teams will be: #1 Saints, #2 Vikings, #3 Cardinals, #4 Eagles, #5 Packers, and #6 Giants. The #3 Cardinals will host the #6 Giants and the #4 Eagles will host the #5 Packers. The Giants and Eagles will advance. The #1 Saints will host the #6 Giants and the #2 Vikings will host the #4 Eagles. The Giants and Vikings will advance to the NFC Championship Game. The Giants were supposed to be the last team Brett Favre was to face after his "first retirement". Revenge game...you can bet on it!

The #3 Chargers will host the #6 Ravens and the #4 Bengals host the #5 Steelers. The Ravens and Steelers will advance. The #1 Colts will host the #6 Ravens and the #2 Patriots will host the #5 Steelers. The Colts and Steelers will advance to the AFC Championship Game. If the Steelers are healthy, it will be a trench warfare game; if the Steelers are banged-up...a QB named Manning will venture to the Super Bowl for the third year in the last four.



Drew Brees

(Cowboys and Eagles at home, Broncos and Vikings on the road) and two also-rans (Panthers at home and Redskins on the road). The Eagles face four contenders (Broncos at home and the Falcons on the road, Giants and Cowboys on the road) and two also-rans (49'ers and Redskins at home).

The Falcons will finish the year 3-3, completing the year at 8-8 and missing the play-offs. The Packers will wrap the season up at 4-2, finishing at 10-6 and reaching the play-offs. The Cowboys will conclude their year at 9-7 with a 2-4 mark for the last six games, missing the play-offs. The Giants will finish the last six games at 4-2, completing a 10-6 season and a play-off berth. The Eagles will fin-

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