



Sports

by Jerry Keys

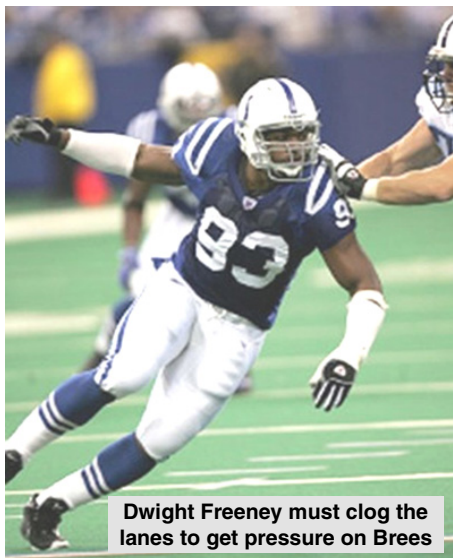
Three games do not sound like much. In the NFL it is the difference between a coach receiving a multi-year multi-million dollar contract or getting the ax. Three games are only 18.75% of the 16-game NFL schedule but it was enough to erase any hopes of the defending Super Bowl champion Pittsburgh Steelers from attempting to eradicate opponents wishing to steal the title.

Since the NFL is my "fix" and the Steelers are my "fixer," I was left with a great deal of head-scratching. Not that this is anything new. It was only three years ago I witnessed the same thing-except in backwards motion. Coming off their 1st Super Bowl victory in 2005 since 1979, the Steelers opened at home with the Thursday night NFL season opener (it has become standard procedure for the Bowl champs to open the season at home on a Thursday night) and defeated the Miami Dolphins. They proceeded to lose six of their next seven games and stand at 2-6 at the mid-season point. They recovered to complete the season with a 6-2 second half mark to stand at 8-8 and the end of their 2006 season.

After viewing the 2006 playoff teams and schedule, I noticed had they beaten the Denver Broncos (the team they destroyed in the previous year's AFC Championship Game) they would have recovered in late season and sneaked into the playoffs. The Steelers racked up 500 yards of offense in the game but coughed the ball up six times (and still trailed only 21-17 after three quarters) and lost 31-20.

A flashback occurred three years later as Pittsburgh hosted and won the season opener and galloped out to a

strong 6-2 mark at the halfway point and were considered the top team in the NFL, just a step behind the two undefeated teams (Indianapolis and New Orleans). For no apparent reason, the wheels fell off as they dropped the following



Dwight Freeney must clog the lanes to get pressure on Brees

five games to hobble into their 14th game with a 6-7 record. The Steelers regrouped and won their last three games to sport a winning record but were shut out of the playoffs yet again...following a Super Bowl victory. After twelve straight wins against the Cleveland Browns, the Steelers ended their season when



Which Reggie Bush shows up may play a pivotal role in the outcome

they began it, on a Thursday night. They would have "controlled their own destiny" with a win that night. Instead they were dependent upon other teams to squeak them in and again, it did not come to be.

They lost to three teams they should have defeated

handily, Kansas City (2-7 at the time), Oakland (3-8) and Cleveland (1-11). They even went to week 16 with a chance at controlling their own destiny by the Colts defeating the New York Jets (Colts started resting their star players during this game and lost) and Miami besting Houston (Miami coughed up a huge lead and almost came

back to sneak a win). This would have set up both teams final game of the year (Steelers and Dolphins) where the winner gets the #6 seed. Well, that is what you get when you depend upon other teams for help.

If you can remember just one year earlier, Pittsburgh was down 10-8 to the San Diego Chargers and mounted a late fourth quarter drive, capped off by a game-winning field goal. They had went all game without a touchdown but when it mattered they drove nearly the entire length of the field (this win put them at 7-3 and stopped a short losing streak where they had lost the previous two of three). Fast forward three weeks later when they were just stopped on a fourth and goal at the 1 by the Dallas Cowboys defense. Although behind 13-3 going into the fourth quarter, a field goal and a late touchdown tied the game a 13 all.

A quick interception sealed the win as Deshea Townsend returned it for the game-winning TD (Steelers improved to 10-3). And last but not least, the division clinching drive in Baltimore. Down 9-6 Big Ben marched the team down the field for the division-clinching score by Santonio Holmes and the infamous "Did the Ball Cross the Plane" catch.

One difference between the 2009 and 2008 teams, the latter did not give up numerous game opening touchdown returns and once the offense built a lead of 10 or more; it was pretty much "lights out" for the opposing team. Five of their seven losses in 2009 came after they

held the lead into the fourth quarter. Therefore, an argument can be made about "five wins." Every team coughs up late game leads during the year...but five? The reason I focused on the three specific games is they were what separated the '09 team from the '08 team, in certain ways.

Yes, the '08 Steelers surrendered leads to the New York Giants and Colts but they also closed out games in the fourth quarter. Had the '09 crew did the same thing, they would have also been 12-4 and hosting at least one play-off game. They could not best Oakland, Cleveland or Kansas City but found a way to beat three top play-off teams, Green Bay, Minnesota and San Diego. I just wonder which version will show up for 2010? An '08 minded team or the "unable to close out a game" '09 unit.

Now that the Super Bowl participants have been decided, we can sit back and listen to the hoopla for the next few days. Either way the NFC title game went, it was going to be a QB-generations game; with Brett Favre one ahead of Peyton and Drew Brees one behind. As each team flirted with a perfect season, it only seems fitting to see them square off for all the marbles. As expected, most pundits call this a high-scoring game. I beg to differ, just a bit. Knowing the opponents offense can score at any given time, turnovers will be a premium (ask Minnesota). You will not exactly see a full ground game but you will witness a number of backs slipping out of the backfield and run short quick-outs.

The top receivers will be blanketed all game, therefore freeing-up the backs and #3 receivers. The key to New Orleans winning the Bowl will be Reggie Bush (he is the extra weapon needed to win the Bowl if he brings his "A" game") on offense and

Tracy Porter on defense (he is not the Saint's best player in the secondary and will be picked on). The key to the Colts victory on offense will be Joseph Addai (just as much for keeping the Saint's

will start completing precision passes and after Indianapolis takes a 24-13 lead, the Saints will begin to implode and make un-veteran like mistakes. The Colts should pull away quickly and hold a 34-13 lead near the end of the game. The Saints may score a late TD and add a two-point conversion but that should be it; Colts 34 Saints 21.

Just like the Steelers Bowl win in '05; they won another three years later, just like the Colts will ('06 and '09). Should we start keeping an eye on the New York Giants next year? They won the Bowl in '07...their next one would be 2010!

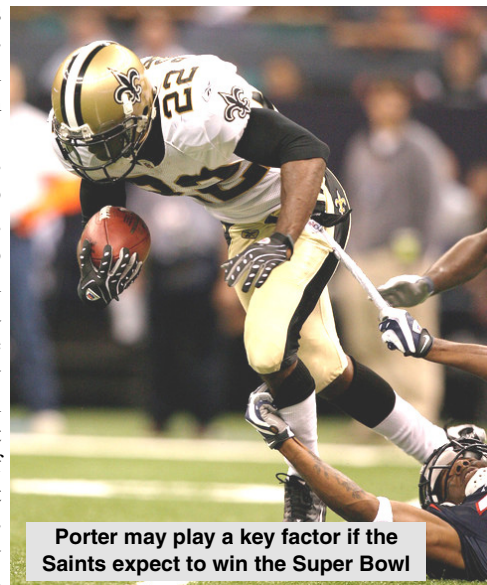
On a final note, what imbecile decided to 1) move the Pro Bowl to Florida (it had been in Hawaii for.....what thirty years?) and 2) to decide to play the game a week before the Super Bowl.

I am so certain both Bowl coaches will send every single All-Pro on their team to play a key role in winning or losing it. There is certainly no way in the world, one of their star players would get injured. I feel very confident the Colts and Saints would

not be the least bit worried if Manning and Brees both took snaps in the Pro Bowl and got injured.

Surely the Saints could still pose a threat with Mark Brunell (was Jacksonville's 1st QB and began play when Joe Montana was still active) at QB and the Colts with sure-handed Curtis Painter (83 career passing yards, zero TD's and two picks). Again, whoever moved the

Pro Bowl location and time slot had to have dollar signs in his/her eyes...and a severe case of cognitive difficulties. This is the most absurd stunt for rating since baseball stopped having World Series day games on the week-end (last one: Game 6: 1987 WS, was one scheduled for 1988 WS but Series ended in five games).



Porter may play a key factor if the Saints expect to win the Super Bowl

D honest and sliding out of the backfield) and on defense Dwight Freeney (if he must be double-teamed he will open up the lanes for the linebackers to get to Brees).

A few teams had marked success running the ball and airing it out against the Colts defense earlier in the year but if you watched Brees in the NFC Title game, his passes were not as crisp as they usually were. Playoff experience may play into being a



Peyton wants to regain the lead in the Manning Brothers Super Bowl Ring.

major factor as we have seen numerous times in the past; where the QB's first trip entails foolish mishaps and lapses of concentration. The first half will be conservative outside of a couple long ball attempts. The score at half-time should be 17-13, Colts. After an intense third quarter of attempting to gain field position advantage, Manning