

CASE NFL

NFL PLAYOFFS

1. Lions-Saints Over 59 (1 unit)

Forget about previous seasons and any old sayings about how you should never go over a total this high in the NFL. Not that there ever was a higher playoff total than this Lions-Saints over/under. But this is the new NFL where passing and offense reign supreme and the past means nothing. Defense is trumped by offense not visa versa anymore and neither Detroit nor New Orleans have much of a defense. But both possess great offenses thanks to Drew Brees and Matthew Stafford. Brees threw for 5,476 yards and 46 touchdowns. Stafford was right behind him passing for 5,038 yards and 41 touchdowns, including a 14-to-2 touchdown-to-interception ratio in his last four games. Still think this is your dad's NFL?

I expect this total to hit 60. So what. The Saints average 41.1 points at home. Detroit should be good for at least three touchdowns. There's 62 points right there. The Lions' defensive front four can apply heat. The Saints, however, were tied for second in fewest sacks. Detroit has injuries in its secondary and its linebackers are weak in coverage. Brees isn't going to miss a beat in carving up the Lions. Lions coach Jim Schwartz has been forced to use more zone coverage due to his team's defensive backfield injuries. There isn't a defense that can fully stop Brees, but this type of defense is even more vulnerable to New Orleans' high-powered attack. Marques Colston is brilliant in finding holes in the zone. There's also no better tight end in the NFC than Jimmy Graham in exploiting zone defenses by catching passes in the middle of the field. If Brees can't find a downfield receiver he still has a dangerous receiving weapon out of the backfield in Darren Sproles. The Lions have to respect the Saints' ground game, too. New Orleans has a very underrated ground attack. The Saints could have the deepest set of quality of running backs in the NFL with Pierre Thomas, Sproles, Mark Ingram and Chris Ivory. The Lions give up five yards per carry.

Detroit is going to get its points, too, with Stafford and the unstoppable Calvin Johnson, who led the NFL in receiving yards with 1,681 and in touchdown receptions with 16.

2. Cincinnati Bengals +4 (1 UNIT)

This is a rematch of the week 14 game that took some late game heroics from quarterback TJ Yates for to Texans to win. That was the last game that Houston has won as they ended the season on a three game losing streak. I like the Bengals chances at payback in this game. Yes, this game is being played in Houston where it will be very loud, but I think Cincinnati actually plays better on the road. They have already won at Seattle which has the loudest stadium in the NFL, so I do t expect that to be a factor. In the first match up the Bengals had rookie wide receiver AJ Green open for some big plays, but

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due to pressure quarterback Andy Dalton couldn't get him the ball. I look for a change in the Bengals blocking scheme which should allow the Bengals to connect on some big plays. If Cincinnati jumps out to a lead, the Texans could be in trouble. Houston's game plan is so conservative with Yates at quarterback that the Bengals defense will load up the box to stop Foster and Tate keeping the Texans in 3rd and long situations. Even if Cincinnati doesn't jump out to the lead the close to the vest Houston play calling will keep this one close. I think Houston will play this game very tight and play not to lose instead of playing to win. Take the points.

3. Atlanta Falcons @ NY Giants Atlanta Falcons +3 (1 UNIT)

The Atlanta offensive line will struggle at times with the defensive line of the Giants, but I expect the Falcons to control the tempo of the game with some no huddle offense and quick three step drop throws by quarterback Matt Ryan. The Giants will struggle with coverage on the Atlanta receivers Roddy White, Julie Jones and tight end Tony Gonzalez and when New York goes to a nickel package I expect Falcons running back Michael Turner to pound away with the running game. On the other side of the ball Eli Manning has been outstanding and Victor Cruz has emerged as one of the top receivers in the NFL, but I expect Atlanta to use a similar game plan that the Redskins used a few weeks ago with success. The Redskins stuffed the Giants receivers at the line of scrimmage and threw off the timing of the routes by getting pressure on Eli with just a four man rush. Atlanta can take the same approach because they are a team that rarely blitzes and can get good pressure on opposing quarterbacks with star pass rusher John Abraham. New York has struggled in this role as they are just 1-6-1 against the spread in their last eight games as a home favorite of three points or less. Take the points.

4. Steelers -8 at Broncos (2 units, lock in now as the price is going up)

I know some team has to represent the AFC West in the playoffs, but Denver being in is an absolute joke. The Tim Tebow magic is long gone. There are at least 22 teams better than the Broncos. In the last three games, the Broncos have averaged 13.3 points. They managed that puny total against the Patriots, Bills and Chiefs.

Now Denver is looking at an elite defense: Pittsburgh. The Steelers give up the fewest points and yards. They are tops against the pass and rank in the top 10 in run defense. The line opened much lower than I thought because Pittsburgh is banged-up. Rashard Mendenhall is out and Ben Roethlisberger has a bad ankle. Still, Roethlisberger on one leg is far better than a healthy Tebow. The Steelers also have the much better receiving corps with game-breakers Mike Wallace and Antonio Brown. Roethlisberger's injury gets the attention, but the Broncos also have several key injuries. They could be down to their third string guard with starter Chris Kuper definitely out. Fullback Spencer Larsen is hurt as is safety Brian Dawkins their most experienced

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defensive back and leader of their secondary. The Broncos' defense is worn down from having to carry such a weak offense for so long. Star rookie linebacker Von Miller hasn't had a sack during the last three weeks.

The Steelers are playoff tested having gone 9-2 SU and ATS in the postseason since 2005. The Broncos last made the playoffs in 2005. Pittsburgh has covered 10 of its last 11 January games. The Steelers hold every edge except home-field advantage. But that certainly can't save Denver. The Steelers are at least two-touchdowns better no matter where this game is played.

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