

# ***CASE NFL***

## ***NFL WEEK 15***

### ***1. Cowboys -7 at Buccaneers (3 units)***

Banged-up, demoralized and leaderless, Tampa Bay is a dead team.

The Cowboys are off a tough home loss and need a big victory in their quest to capture the NFC East Division.

The talent gap between these two teams - especially considering the Buccaneers' banged-up defense - is much wider than a touchdown. The combination of a huge talent edge and motivation is more than enough for the Cowboys to romp.

The Buccaneers are surrendering an average of 32.5 points in their last nine games. Their run defense has absolutely fallen apart since star tackle Gerald McCoy was lost for the season with a bicep injury. In the seven games McCoy has missed the Buccaneers have allowed 956 yards rushing and 14 touchdowns on the ground.

The Cowboys certainly have the firepower to exploit such defensive shortcomings ranking in the top 10 in points, total yards and passing. Felix Jones is more than a capable replacement for DeMarco Murray, who was behind Jones in the depth chart until Jones was hurt earlier in the season.

It's not just the Buccaneers' defense either that has fallen off. Josh Freeman has had a dramatic regression. He's turned the ball over 13 times in the last five games.

Dallas is in a foul mood after losing at the end to the Giants this past Sunday night. Cowboys coach Jason Garrett has taken justifiable heat for his conservative coaching. He and his Cowboys will be taking their frustrations out on the Buccaneers.

Tampa Bay has lost seven in a row and eight of its last 10. The Bucs last won a game in mid-October. They've only covered one of their last seven games and that was a nine-point loss to Green Bay on the road. The Buccaneers have been horrible at Raymond James Stadium going 4-13-1 ATS, including 2-4 ATS this season.

The Buccaneers are a young team with a young coach and they have bad chemistry. Raheem Morris doesn't have the experience nor the acumen to turn the Bucs' lost season around. The Buccaneers are the perfect team to fade right now when backing a superior team with an explosive offense that has far more motivation.

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## ***2. Saints -6 1/2 at Vikings (3 units)***

The Saints were flat last week, but managed to escape with a road win against Tennessee. New Orleans has now won and covered five in a row.

The Saints have struggled on the road, but they are in a natural dome setting on carpet facing a decimated secondary. New Orleans is averaging 35.7 points in eight dome games this year.

Drew Brees has a 19-to-3 touchdown-to-interception ratio in his last seven games accounting for 20 touchdowns during this span. Brees has passed for 300 yards in 10 of 13 games and should have no problem putting up huge numbers against a Minnesota secondary minus its two top cornerbacks - Antoine Winfield and Chris Cook - and top cover safety Husan Abdullah.

The Vikings aren't going to be able to keep up even with Adrian Peterson back in the lineup. Peterson says he's about 85 percent after missing the last three games with an ankle injury.

Rookie Christian Ponder is struggling and has limited mobility with a hip injury. The Saints are going to be aggressively blitzing the now immobile Ponder.

The Vikings could turn to Joe Webb, who is very mobile but not an accurate passer.

The Vikings have played hard the last two weeks losing at home to Denver by three points when they blew a late lead and nearly upsetting the Lions on the road this past Sunday after trailing 31-14 midway through the third quarter.

I don't see the Vikings having enough in the tank physically and mentally to stay with a red-hot Brees, who will find the pickings easy against such a beat-up secondary and playing on a fast indoor track.

## ***3. Redskins +7 at Giants (1 unit)***

The Giants aren't strong enough defensively to be laying this big of a number to a division foe.

New York has given up an average of 40.3 points during its last three games. The Giants rank 30th in total defense and 29th in passing defense. Both their secondary and defensive line has key players injured.

Rex Grossman threw for 305 yards and had two touchdowns with no interceptions when the Redskins beat the Giants, 28-14, opening week.

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Roy Helu has stepped up to rush for 100 yards in each of the last three weeks. Helu's excellent running takes the pressure off Grossman, who still has a dangerous deep threat in Santana Moss.

The Redskins have covered five of their last six NFC East games. The Giants are 4-10-1 ATS as a home favorite of between 3 1/2 and 10 points. New York also is 1-11 ATS when hosting an opponent with a losing road mark.

The Giants often play up or down to the level of competition. In the last two weeks, the Giants nearly dealt the Packers their first loss and then pulled out a dramatic victory this past Sunday night on the road against Dallas. Up next for the Giants is an in-state grudge match against the Jets.

The Redskins are loose with nothing to lose. They host Minnesota next week. So Washington's full focus should be on this matchup against a long-time hated rival.

## ***4. Panthers +6 at Texans (2 units)***

Sure the Texans are still alive for best record in the AFC, but their intensity level has to be down after clinching their first division title and playoff berth in dramatic style last week. They edged the Bengals on the final play from scrimmage.

It's going to be difficult for the Texans to cover a touchdown spread with a third-string rookie quarterback without a strong effort against a feisty underdog.

Cam Newton makes Carolina dangerous. The Panthers have had the lead in every one of their games except one. They are a respectable 3-4 in their last seven games.

Newton is a monster accounting for 28 touchdowns. He's averaging 5.2 yards per rush, same as DeAngelo Williams. A rejuvenated Steve Smith is second in the league in receiving yards. He's the best wideout on the field with Andre Johnson unlikely to play after straining his hamstring.

The Panthers catch a break, too, in that Texans defensive coordinator Wade Phillips won't be coaching following a surgical procedure. He's this year's defensive coordinator of the year. Phillips called the defensive plays for the greatly-improved Houston defense.

The Panthers have covered 15 of their last 21 games in December.

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## 5. Packers-Chiefs Under 46 (1 unit)

The Kansas City Chiefs don't move by yards. They don't even move the ball by feet. Try inches. Their offense is absolutely brutal minus Matt Cassel, Jamaal Charles and Tony Moeaki.

The Chiefs have managed only two touchdowns in their last four games - and one of these came on a lucky Hail Mary pass. They are averaging 7.5 points in their last six games!

This lack of offense certainly figured in offensive-minded Todd Haley getting the boot this week. Defensive-minded Romeo Crennel is the Chiefs' interim coach now. You know he'll have a very conservative game plan.

The Chiefs obviously want to keep the ball out of Aaron Rodgers' hands as much as possible. The problem for Crennel are three-fold: His offensive line is horrible. His running backs are way below average with playmaking Charles gone for the season and his quarterback choice is Tyler Palko, rookie Ricky Stanzi and Kyle Orton.

Palko has a 2-to-8 touchdown-to-turnover ratio in his four starts. He's clearly not the answer. Stanzi isn't close to being ready and Orton, Crennel's best choice, has a badly damaged right index finger.

The Packers give up yardage, but they rank a respectable 15th in points allowed. They are extremely opportunistic with 32 takeaways. If you discount their game against the Giants and a hot Eli Manning, the Packers are giving up an average of 16 points in their last four games.

Green Bay won't have its best running back James Starks, nor its best wide receiver, Greg Jennings. The Packers have tremendous wide receiver depth, but none of their other wideouts has Jennings' versatility and ability to play each receiver spot.

Rookie Randall Cobb and erratic James Jones will be seeing more action now with Jennings out. Rodgers doesn't have the timing with them like he had with Jennings. Neither Cobb nor Jones are consistent.

The Chiefs will be motivated to play hard at home for the likeable Crennel. Tamba Hali is an elite pass rusher and rookie Justin Houston is coming on with four sacks during the last two weeks. They give the Chiefs two dangerous edge pass rushers. Green Bay's pass protection has just been mediocre.

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The Packers aren't going to be inclined to open up their attack. They want to hone their ground game for the playoffs, which means a heavy dose of Ryan Grant and fullback John Kuhn, two mediocre runners.

Mike McCarthy showed last week that he will pull Rodgers early if the Packers jump out to a commanding lead. The combination of the Packers being less explosive than normal by their own design and the Chiefs' total lack of offense should spell under the total.

## ***6. Patriots -7 at Broncos (1 unit)***

The marketplace has been all over the Patriots so far. I agree with the steam.

Denver's defense is much improved, but it has faced only one good quarterback during the past six weeks and that was Philip Rivers, who is having a down year.

The only two other outstanding quarterbacks the Broncos have faced were Matthew Stafford and Aaron Rodgers and Detroit put up 45 points and Green Bay scored 49 points on Denver.

Only once during their last five games have the Broncos even broken the 17-point barrier. Denver is beaten-up in the secondary. Tom Brady should have a field day against the Broncos' depleted secondary.

I don't see Tim Tebow being able to trade points with Brady. The Patriots are last in pass defense, but Tebow lacks the accuracy and downfield touch to burn New England.

If there's a defensive guru who can effectively defend Tebow for all four quarters it's Bill Belichick.

The Patriots lost the last time they visited Denver two years ago. Belichick will have his team fired-up for this matchup, which has become a marquee game. The Patriots have covered in eight of their last 11 road games.

The Broncos can't hold New England to less than three touchdowns, which has been the key for them in building a six-game winning streak. The explosive Patriots are No. 2 in total yards at 424.7 and No. 3 in scoring at 30.5 points per game.

New England is hitting its stride offensively averaging 34.8 points in its last five games. Denver's defense isn't nearly good enough to keep Brady in check. Tebow's a great story, but he doesn't have nearly the passing skills to take advantage of New England's patchwork secondary, or overcome Belichick's defensive acumen.

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## ***7. Browns-Cardinals Over 36 1/2 (1 unit)***

Weather sometimes can be a negative factor in December games. But that won't be the case here in the desert with temperatures in the high 50s, no wind and just a slight chance of rain.

Now the question is can these two teams produce enough points to get over this low total?

The answer is yes. The Cardinals can take advantage of Cleveland's 31st-ranked run defense that is worn down and vulnerable to a bruising inside runner such as Beanie Wells. The last time Wells went up against such a bad rush defense he ran for 228 yards against St. Louis three weeks ago.

I'm fine no matter who the Cardinals' starting quarterback is. They are 4-1 with John Skelton as their quarterback. He's off his finest performance going 19-for-28 for 282 yards and three touchdowns with a quarterback rating of 106.5 in an upset last week of San Francisco.

The Cardinals have gone over 18 of the last 26 times in December.

Cleveland is expected to start backup Seneca Wallace at quarterback instead of Colt McCoy, who has a concussion. I like Wallace better because he's more mobile and has a stronger arm.

Arizona's defense has improved, but the Cardinals defense still is far from an elite unit. The Browns have had extra time to prepare Wallace and game-plan having last played on Thursday.

Both teams also have dangerous kick and punt return specialists.