

HOW WE SEE IT

The Daily Journal sports staff predicts the outcomes of this weekend's NFL playoff games:

Jeff Decker

Assistant sports editor
Washington at Tampa Bay

The Redskins have steamrolled their way into the playoffs, winning their final five regular-season games. They'll stay on a roll as Clinton Portis and Washington's big offensive line run over Tampa Bay's overrated defense.



DECKER

Redskins 31, Buccaneers 14

Jacksonville at New England

I keep hearing Colts fans say they want the Patriots. Be careful what you wish for; you just might get it. Had the Steelers and Bengals met Saturday, and had Cincinnati defeated Pittsburgh, then there would have been the chance New England, with Indianapolis on the horizon, could have been caught looking past the Jaguars in a Sunday game. That's not about to happen with this schedule, though.

Patriots 27, Jaguars 13

Carolina at New York Giants

Many a pundit wants to see an all-Manning Super Bowl. But if the Giants are to hold up their end of the deal, they'll ride the running of Tiki Barber and not the arm of Peyton's brother, Eli. This being his first playoff game, the younger Manning would be well-served to hand off more than he throws.

Giants 21, Panthers 10

Pittsburgh at Cincinnati

Talk about a team looking ahead. The Bengals practically have themselves penciled in as the Colts' opponent in the AFC Championship game. Unfortunately for them, Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger is back at full strength. And a punishing ground game goes farther in the playoffs than a lot of idle talk, end-zone antics and a defense that takes too many chances.

Steelers 28, Bengals 24

John Groth

Staff writer
Washington at Tampa Bay

Chris Simms has been doing just enough for Tampa Bay to win. Simms follows his game plan, and the Bucs' defense shuts down Clinton Portis and Mark Brunell.



GROTH

Buccaneers 20, Redskins 10

Jacksonville at New England

Jacksonville is out of its element in New England. Byron Leftwich is back, but the Jaguars can't beat the surging Patriots. Tom Brady steers the Pats into the next round.

Patriots 27, Jaguars 10

Carolina at New York Giants

New York has been unpredictable all year. With Carolina steamrolling Atlanta last week, it seems they are ready for the playoffs. But the Giants are 7-1 at home. Tiki Barber runs wild through the Panthers' defense as the Giants advance.

Giants 24, Panthers 17

Pittsburgh at Cincinnati

Did the Bengals even care about last week's game at Kansas City? I sure didn't look like it. Pittsburgh has won four straight games, and Jerome Bettis is plowing through opponents. Not even a Chad Johnson touchdown dance can help the Bengals. Too much rest hurts Cincinnati, as Pittsburgh scores the only upset of the wild-card round. But is it really an upset?

Steelers 27, Bengals 21

Paul Hoffman

Special publications editor
Washington at Tampa Bay

Tony Stewart plays for Joe Gibbs, right? Well, there you go. Any team that can drive like Tony Stewart has to be favored. I'd get out of his way. Last time these teams met in the pirate ship stadium, the Bucs won on two-point conversion in final minute. Here's guessing the surging Redskins don't turn the ball over three times like they did back in mid-November.



HOFFMAN

Redskins 28, Buccaneers 14

Jacksonville at New England

The big, bad team from Boston isn't quite as big and bad as they have been the past few years. Still, they won the AFC East and are playing at home in January, which should be bad for a warm-weather team such as Jacksonville. The Jags have played in anonymity this year because they were in the Colts' division. They're an excellent team (two of their four losses this year were to the Colts by a grand total of 15 points), but they're a bit dinged up and they have to go to Foxborough.

Patriots 24, Jaguars 21

Carolina at New York Giants

Some say the Giants had an edge because they played nine home games. So what? The extra one came against the Saints. Any team that played the Saints anywhere this year had an edge. Carolina has a bunch of weapons and has more overall skill. But the Panthers have been up and down. I'd like to go with the Giants because, let's face it, it's just fun to say "Tiki."

Panthers 20, Giants 20

Pittsburgh at Cincinnati

For years, the team in southwest Ohio was referred to as the Bungles. Now, that moniker applies only to its defense. Cincy rose to the top of the AFC North with an awesome offense and by forcing a gazillion turnovers. The turnovers haven't been coming lately, Chad Johnson talks too much, and the defense can't stop a bus ... as in Pittsburgh's Jerome "The Bus" Bettis. The wheels on the Steelers' bus will go round and round all the live-long day.

Steelers 20, Bengals 17

Rick Morwick

Sports editor
Washington at Tampa Bay

It took Joe Gibbs less than two seasons to get the Washington train wreck on playoff track. Old Mark Brunell looks a lot like the old Mark Brunell, and young Clinton Portis looks a lot like the old Clinton Portis. The Redskins have dynamite defense, to boot.



MORWICK

Redskins 21, Buccaneers 10

Jacksonville at New England

Colts fans don't want to hear it, but the Patriots are getting awfully close to being on Super Bowl footing. Never underestimate Bill Belichick or write off Tom Brady. Plus, the Jags might be taking a losing gamble on Byron Leftwich, who hasn't played in six weeks with a broken ankle. They've just done fine with David Garrard, but he probably won't get the starting nod.

Patriots 35, Jaguars 14

Carolina at New York Giants

This is a toughie, but give the edge to the G-men. Tiki Barber is the reason here, not Eli Manning. Tiki has been nothing shy of awesome the past several weeks. Jake Delhomme steered the Panthers to the Super Bowl two years ago, but their offense is inconsistent. Steve Smith is the real deal, but the backfield has been a revolving door of players and a mixed bag of effectiveness.

Giants 17, Panthers 10

Pittsburgh at Cincinnati

Everything points to Cincinnati: Carson Palmer, Chad Johnson, Rudy Johnson, home-field advantage and an underrated defense. But the smart money's on the Steelers, who've survived injuries to several key players (Ben Roethlisberger, Willie Parker and Jerome Bettis, to name a few) and now more closely resemble the team that started the year 7-2. Look out, Indy, here they come.

Steelers 31, Bengals 28

Bears' Urlacher honored

Linebacker named top defensive player

By BARRY WILNER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK

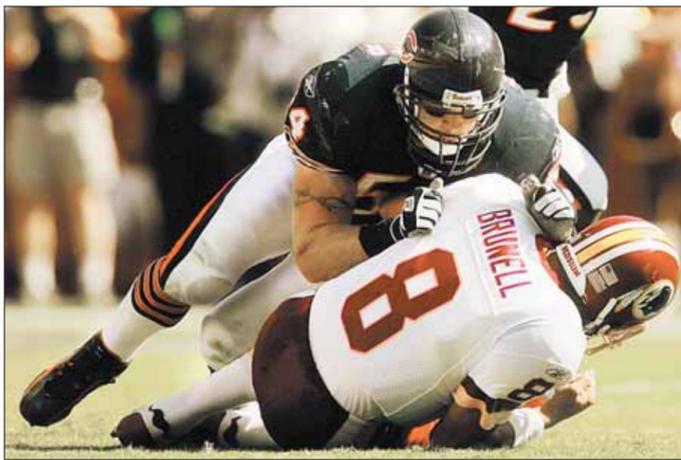
Brian Urlacher, the latest leader of the Monsters of the Midway, won The Associated Press NFL Defensive Player of the Year award Friday.

The Chicago Bears' star middle linebacker and the face of a ferocious defense that allowed the fewest points in the league this season, Urlacher adds the honor to his 2000 AP Defensive Rookie of the Year award.

Chicago's turnaround from the bottom of the NFC North pack to 11-5 and division winner was paced by the defense, which yielded 202 points, 45 fewer than Indianapolis, the next-stingiest team. He had 121 tackles, six sacks and a fumble recovery, but stats don't define Urlacher. Full-field coverage, intimidating hits and big plays do.

"People are realizing we have some good players here," Urlacher said. "Anytime you lose, nothing really matters except winning. ... People realize that when you win, you obviously have some good players on your team."

Chicago has enough of them on defense to draw votes for four. Urlacher's 34 votes from a nationwide panel of 50 sports writers and broadcasters who cover the NFL gave him a runaway victory. Teammates Alex Brown at end, Lance Briggs at outside linebacker and Nathan Vasher at



AP PHOTO

Chicago linebacker Brian Urlacher, top, shown tackling Washington Redskins quarterback Mark Brunell, was named The Associated Press NFL Defensive Player of the Year on Friday.

cornerback each received one vote. Chicago's defense has been so good that it has covered for one of the league's least-productive offenses.

"Best player on the best defense. He should be the defensive MVP," Pro Bowl safety Mike Brown said. "He makes a lot of impact plays, but just him being on the field, teams have to scheme against us. They have to do different things to stay away from him. He's the leader of our team."

Second to Urlacher was Colts DE Dwight Freeney with four votes. Also receiving votes were Steelers safety Troy Polamalu (3), Cardinals safety Adrian

Wilson (2), Giants end Osi Umenyiora (2), Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey (1) and Jaguars tackle Marcus Stroud (1).

But Urlacher was unchallenged. "He's the best linebacker in the league," said Briggs, who plays next to Urlacher and had a breakout season himself. "He's making it happen all day, every day."

Added DE Adewale Ogunleye: "I don't think anyone in the league deserves that award more than him. 'He's busted his tail inside and out."

"Everybody's saying he's overhyped and overrated. He really did everything he had to do to be a leader."

His brother, Eli, will quarterback the Giants in their wild-card game Sunday.

For one weekend, at least, Peyton will shirk a bit of his reputation as an obsessive game-film devotee.

"My brother is playing Sunday, so I'll watch him," Manning said. "I watch more as a fan of football to see good teams play and good situations. Football players just like watching other teams play."

Defensive lineman Montae Reagar is one of the few Colts who plans to travel out of town, but he has good reason.

"I'm going home to Texas to see my family and eat some of grandma's cooking," he said.

Reagar said, however, that just because the Colts are on cruise control doesn't mean they won't be raring to go when they get back to work Monday.

"You see the fire in the eyes, and you know the playoff atmosphere is here," he said.

Manning also cautioned that the Colts can't become complacent.

"I think (a bye) is only a good thing if you use it wisely," he said. "If you use it to get some guys healthy and you have good practices, guys get a chance to get rested and another week to study yourselves and our potential opponents."

"It's important to use it the right way, and hopefully we will."

• Rest

"I think (a bye) is only a good thing if you use it wisely. ... It's important to use it the right way, and hopefully we will."

Peyton Manning

Indianapolis Colts quarterback on starting the playoffs with a weekend off

you're playing," he said. "I'll just watch to enjoy the games."

Safety Mike Doss said the command for the Colts to lay low comes from even higher than Dungy.

"(Team president Bill) Polian told us the most important thing is to get our rest," Doss said.

Brackett said he's staying put in Indy rather than going back home to southern New Jersey, where his itinerary would be non-stop.

"If you go home, everybody wants to see you and talk to you and party and do this and that, so it's a better idea to stay here and take full advantage of the chance to relax," he said.

Quarterback Peyton Manning, of course, has more on his mind than just the AFC playoffs when he plops down in front of his television this weekend.

WILD-CARD GAMES AT A GLANCE



NFC
Washington (10-6)
at Tampa Bay (11-5)

4:30 p.m. today, WRTV-Channel 6
Opening line: Bucs by 1½
Record vs. spread: Redskins 9-6-1; Bucs 8-8

Series record: Tied 7-7
Most recent meeting: Bucs 36, Redskins 35, Nov. 13, 2005, at Tampa Bay
Last week: Redskins beat Eagles 31-20; Bucs beat Saints 27-13

Redskins offense: Overall (11), rush (7), pass (21)
Redskins defense: Overall (9), rush (13), pass (10)
Bucs offense: Overall (23), rush (14), pass (25)
Bucs defense: Overall (1), rush (6), pass (6)

Key matchup: Washington RB Clinton Portis vs. Tampa Bay run defense. Tampa Bay's defense finished the regular season No. 1 in the league, allowing 277.8 yards per game, but its worst defensive performance at Raymond James Stadium came against the Redskins, allowing 389 yards and 35 points. Portis has posted rushing totals of 148 and 144 yards in two career games against the Buccaneers. Portis has five 100-yard rushing games to go with the Redskins' current winning streak.

Streaks, stats and notes: The game is a rematch of the Bucs' 36-35 win off Mike Alstott's 2-point conversion run with 58 seconds remaining. ... Washington, which went 6-10 last year in Joe Gibbs' first season back as coach, has won five straight and is in the post-season for the first time since 1999. ... Washington's most recent playoff game six years ago was a 14-13 loss to the Buccaneers, when a bad snap from the late Dan Turk thwarted a potential game-winning field goal in the final minutes. ... Gibbs' playoff record is 16-5, including 4-0 in wild-card games. ... QB Mark Brunell had 3,050 yards passing and 23 TDs. ... WR Santana Moss had 84 receptions, 1,483 yards receiving and nine TDs receiving. ... Redskins have a 22-15 postseason record. ... Chris Cooley tied for second among NFL TEs with seven TD catches and finished fourth among TEs with 71 receptions (774 yards). ... The Redskins had 11 takeaways and 18 sacks in their first 11 games, but have 17 takeaways and 17 sacks during the past five. ... Washington defense finished third in league allowing 16.1 first downs per game. ... Tampa Bay has five straight wins, including playoffs, at home against Washington. ... Tampa Bay is 4-1 all-time in home playoff games. ... The Bucs' 36 points against the Redskins were the most they scored all season. ... Chris Simms threw for 279 yards and three touchdowns in that game, including a 30-yarder to Edell Shepherd that set up Alstott's winning conversion.



AFC
Jacksonville (12-4)
at New England (10-6)

8 tonight, WRTV-Channel 6
Opening line: Patriots by 7½
Record vs. spread: Jaguars 10-5-1; Patriots 8-7-1

Series record: Patriots lead 4-1
Most recent meeting: Patriots 27, Jaguars 13, Dec. 14, 2003, at New England
Last week: Jaguars beat Titans 40-13; Patriots lost to Dolphins 28-26

Jaguars offense: Overall (15T), rush (10), pass (19)
Jaguars defense: Overall (6), rush (14), pass (7)
Patriots offense: Overall (7), rush (24), pass (2)
Patriots defense: Overall (26), rush (8), pass (31)

Key matchup: Jacksonville pass defense vs. New England QB Tom Brady. Brady finished the regular season with 4,110 yards passing, becoming the first Patriot to lead the league. He set a career mark for attempts (530) and fell percentage points shy of a new high in passer rating (92.3). He also enters today's game with a 9-0 record in the postseason. Brady is 20-1 (.952) as starter when kickoff temperature is 40 degrees or colder. The Jaguars allowed 290.9 yards per game, including 184.1 in the air. The defense also got 47 sacks, tied for third in NFL. Jacksonville also has four players with three or more interceptions for first time in franchise history: CB Rashean Mathis (5), CB Terry Cousin (4), S Deon Grant (3), and LB Mike Peterson (3).

Streaks, stats and notes: The most recent meeting in playoffs between these teams (AFC divisional, Jan. 3, 1999) was last time New England lost playoff game, as Jaguars won 25-10. ... Jacksonville is 4-4 in the playoffs. ... Jaguars have a plus-11 turnover margin. ... Jacksonville has won eight of the past 10 road games. ... Including the playoffs, Jacksonville is 1-4 against New England, including 0-3 in Foxborough. ... Jaguars are 8-1 in their last nine games, but none of the teams they beat had winning records. ... Jaguars were 7-3 with QB Byron Leftwich and 5-1 with David Garrard. ... Garrard has not thrown INT in past 133 pass attempts. Jaguars QBs have thrown fewest INTs (6) in NFL. ... WR Jimmy Smith (1,023) posted 1,000 yards receiving in nine of past 10 seasons. Smith has at least five catches in five consecutive playoffs and has five TD catches in past four postseason games. ... New England is 16-10 in the playoffs. ... Patriots have a minus-6 turnover margin. ... A win would give Patriots an NFL-record 10th consecutive playoff win, surpassing Green Bay (1961-62; 1965-67). ... New England has won 25 of past 28 games at Gillette Stadium. ... Coach Bill Belichick (10-1, .909) owns NFL's highest playoff winning percentage in history.



NFC
Carolina (11-5)
at New York Giants (11-5)

1 p.m. Sunday, WXIN-Channel 59
Opening line: Giants by 2½
Record vs. spread: Panthers 8-7-1; Giants 10-5-1

Series record: Panthers lead 2-0
Most recent meeting: Panthers 37, Giants 24, Dec. 28, 2003, at New York
Last week: Panthers beat Falcons 44-11; Giants beat Raiders 30-21

Panthers offense: Overall (22), rush (19), pass (17)
Panthers defense: Overall (3), rush (4), pass (9)
Giants offense: Overall (4), rush (6), pass (11)
Giants defense: Overall (24), rush (12), pass (27)

Key matchup: Carolina WR Steve Smith vs. New York pass defense. The Giants' defense has been outstanding at times this season, going one stretch of nearly 16 quarters without allowing a touchdown. At other times it has been porous, especially against the pass, exemplified last week when it surrendered 21 catches, three touchdowns and 292 yards to Oakland's Randy Moss. Doug Gabriel and Jerry Porter. Smith led the NFL with 1,563 yards receiving and finished tied for first with 103 receptions. He averaged 15.2 yards per catch and scored 12 TDs. Smith has averaged 101 yards receiving (22.4 yards per catch) in four playoff games.

Streaks, stats and notes: Carolina is one of three teams to rank defensively in the top 10 overall, against the run and against the pass. ... In four postseason contests, QB Jake Delhomme has a 106.1 passer rating, with six TDs, one INT and 987 yards passing. He is 3-1 in the playoffs. ... Panthers have a 4-2 record in the playoffs. ... Carolina has a plus-16 turnover differential. ... Coach John Fox spent 1997-2001 as defensive coordinator for Giants. ... RB DeShaun Foster had career high 1,251 yards from scrimmage (879 rushing, 372 receiving). He's averaged 4.7 yards per carry in four career playoff games (42-196). ... Foster also leads NFL RBs with 30-plus catches, averaging 10.9 yards per catch. ... WR Ricky Proehl averaged a career-best 17.6 yards per catch (25-441). ... DE Julius Peppers posted the third 10-sack (10½) season of his four-year career. ... New York is 7-1 at home. ... Giants have a plus-12 in turnover margin. ... Giants are 16-21 in the postseason. ... New York finished with NFL's No. 4 offense (361.7), club's best offensive ranking since No. 4 in 1972. ... Giants' 422 points rank second in franchise history (448, 1963). ... QB Eli Manning's 24 TD passes are most by club QB since Fran Tarkenton tossed 29 in 1967. ... RB Tiki Barber set franchise record with 1,860 yards rushing, 11th-best single-season total in NFL history.



CHILDRESS



EDWARDS

Vikings pick new coach; Chiefs talk to Edwards

The Associated Press

NEW YORK

The Minnesota Vikings didn't waste any time naming their new head coach, while the Kansas City Chiefs have made a move to begin negotiations with New York Jets head coach Herman Edwards.

Philadelphia offensive coordinator Brad Childress was named the Vikings' coach Friday.

After a season marked by ticket scalping and scandalous boat parties off the field, and a disappointing 9-7 record on it, the Vikings wanted a steady presence.

Childress replaces Mike Tice, whose four-season tenure was plagued by player malfeasance and only moderate success. Tice was fired less than an hour after Minnesota's final game Sunday.

Childress, who signed a five-year guaranteed contract, knows what lies ahead. He quoted former football coach Gene Stallings that, "the fun in this business is winning." But he added a caveat.

"The mandate is clear; however, that it needs to be done with the class and dignity that the Wilf family exudes," said the 49-year-old Childress, who becomes a head coach for the first time in his NFL career.

The Chiefs cleared the way for Edwards to become their new coach, agreeing to a compensation deal with the Jets.

The Chiefs would give the Jets a surprisingly low fourth-round pick if they hire Edwards, who has ties to the team and general manager Carl Peterson. Because Edwards was still under contract with the Jets, the Chiefs needed to give up something to get him.

Also Friday, the Dallas Cowboys announced that head coach Bill Parcells had agreed to a new contract through 2007.

Parcells, 64, had a year left on the four-year, \$17 million contract he signed in January 2003. However, he left his three previous coaching jobs mid-contract, and there was speculation he might do so again.



AFC
Pittsburgh (11-5)
at Cincinnati (11-5)

4:30 p.m. Sunday, WISH-Channel 8
Opening line: Steelers by 3
Record vs. spread: Steelers 10-6; Bengals 8-7-1

Series record: Steelers lead 42-29
Most recent meeting: Bengals 38, Steelers 31, Dec. 4, 2005, at Pittsburgh
Last week: Steelers beat Lions 35-21; Bengals lost to Chiefs 37-3

Steelers offense: Overall (15T), rush (5), pass (24)
Steelers defense: Overall (4), rush (3), pass (16)
Bengals offense: Overall (6), rush (11), pass (5)
Bengals defense: Overall (28), rush (20), pass (26)

Key matchup: Pittsburgh vs. the road. The Steelers went 6-2 on the road, including a 27-13 win in Cincinnati on Oct. 23. Pittsburgh has reason to feel similarly, going into Paul Brown Stadium as a favorite, the only road team in the NFL playoffs that's favored. Besides having won their past four games at Cincinnati, the Steelers have opened with a victory in their past seven trips to the postseason. The Steelers are 6-0 all-time in playoffs vs. division opponents. The Bengals were 5-3 at home. Cincinnati notched its first winning season and playoff berth since 1990. The Bengals could have set a franchise record for victories with wins in the final two games, but lost at home to sub-.500 Buffalo and were blown out in Kansas City. The Bengals went 4-3 in the final seven games.

Streaks, stats and notes: Pittsburgh's defense gives up only 3.4 yards per carry and has allowed one 100-yard rusher, Indianapolis' Edgerlin James, all season. ... Bill Cowher is 20-8 vs. the Bengals, his most wins vs. any team. ... Since they won their most recent Super Bowl during the 1979 season, the Steelers have won only two of eight road playoff games. They won at Denver in 1984 and Houston in 1989. ... QB Ben Roethlisberger owns 99.1 passer rating, completing 70 of 101 (69.3 percent), with seven TDs vs. four INTs in four games against Cincinnati. ... Steelers' defense is tied for third-fewest points allowed in league (16.1). ... Willie Parker was the only undrafted running back among the NFL's 16 1,000-yard rushers, and his 1,202 yards were the most by a Steelers player since Jerome Bettis ran for 1,341 yards in 2000. ... Steelers are 24-18 in the playoffs. ... Cincinnati has a plus-24 turnover margin, best in the league. ... Bengals have 10 victories for first time since 1988, when club was 12-4 and advanced to the Super Bowl. ... QB Carson Palmer set club record in 2005 with NFL-leading 32 TD passes (Ken Anderson, 29, 1981). Palmer finished season with second-highest passer rating (101.1) in NFL.