
A Passing Fantasy Issue 128

NFLBP Player Newsletter 2003 Week Two

ed Robert Crowther

The address for contributions is:

35a Dukes Avenue
Finchley
London
N3 2DE

Or email at 'gameplan@crowther.info'. If you want to discuss Gameplan with other coaches have a look at the Yahoo! Group:

<http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/gameplan/>

WEEK ONE REVIEW

Miami got off to a slow start in Cleveland, indeed their offense never really got going all day but they took advantage of some turnovers and big special teams plays to make the game close in the fourth quarter, despite struggling to run out the clock the Browns held on for the win. New England also fell behind early but a big fourth quarter saw them past the Ravens in Baltimore. Buffalo could get nothing going in Oakland and found the Raiders' offense difficult to peg back – they played for the run but left themselves open to some big plays in the passing game. Contrasting styles went head to head in Kansas City with the passing game of the Jets managing to overtake the ground based Chiefs in the fourth quarter – KC had to settle for five field goals and will be ruing missed opportunities. Seattle got steamrollered by the Bengals, they managed to keep up through the first half but their defense just had no answer to the Cincy offense. Denver got off to an impressive start, converting 13 of 21 third down attempts and getting some big plays on special teams to see off the Titans.

Philly got an early lead in Green Bay, but then the offense went to sleep and the defense wasn't up to the task of holding the Packers out for three quarters. Dallas saw off Chicago, but quite how the Bears only managed to get 10 points out of over 400 yards of offense is something of a mystery. The Rams started their title defense with a comfortable victory over the Cards, three first quarter touchdowns put the game out of sight early on. The 49ers also got off to a winning start against New York and, although they still look to be struggling with offensive production, they put 30 points on one of the better defensive units in the league. New Orleans got blown away by Tampa Bay who staked an early claim to be one of the teams to watch in the NFC with an impressive showing on both sides of the ball. Detroit had too

much for the Panthers, two third quarter touchdowns sealed the victory.

Offensive performance of the week goes to Cincinnati for racking up nearly 500 yards and over 50 points. Defensive performance of the week goes to Oakland for recording the only shutout. Special teams performance of the week goes to Denver for getting a kick return touchdown, returning punts impressively, and missing one less field goal than the Dolphins.

PATRIOTS' WEEK 1 NEWS CONFERENCE

Coach Pinder was upbeat after Sunday night's game despite criticism from some sections of the New England press being less than impressed with the Patriots defensive display.

"We've played week 1 and we're 1-0, what more can you ask, sure we had a few problems against the deep ball, but nothing that we can't work out on the training field. If you concentrate on the pluses, Tom (Brady) looked good in his first regular season outing, we protected him very well and we overcame a very slow start."

It's true to say, the Ravens hit the ground running, with the Patriots making plenty of mistakes, "we started badly, it's the first game of the season, we're all a little rusty and with the personnel and defence changes it took a few minutes to settle down. The big, noisy Baltimore crowd didn't make life easy either. I'm just thankful that it didn't take a few quarters, or a few weeks for us to get to grips! We were very effective on the ground today, which is obviously a large part of our game and being able to run the ball enabled us to gain momentum and strike back as we needed. To have won by 10 points after trailing by 14-6 at the end of the first half is pleasing."

On the matter of the Jets in week 2, Coach Pinder expressed his caution over the game. "They're a much improved side, they beat the much-fancied Chiefs in week 1 and that's no mean achievement. It would be dangerous to underestimate their potential at this stage of the season, but we are also confident in the ability of our players. Our fans will be looking for a big performance to start the season and that's just what we aim to deliver."

2003 SEASON PREVIEW – NFC

Team by team comments from Dave Pinder,

summaries from Martyn Williams, other predictions from myself.

NFC East

Arizona Cardinals (Last Season 9-7) – The untimely departure of Coach Jenkinson a couple of years back has left the Cardinals fairly directionless and were it not for reasonably weak divisional opponents, its unlikely that they would have attained their winning season. The draft saw them focus on the future, adding DT Barron Tanner, with a view to him replacing veteran NT Marcus Bell who is not considered a long term option. Brian Gilmore adds to the special teams and pace at WR, whilst new RB Jones will be used as cover for star RB Joe Makovicka. Same problems as haunts a number of NFC teams, the lack of clear leadership at manager level may restrict their ambitions. A lot rests with QB Jake Plummer and Makovicka as the rest of the squad looks ordinary. Should be enough to hold their own in a lightweight division.

Dallas Cowboys (Last Season 9-7) – Very close competition for the Cardinals, they are also hamstrung by the lack of coach. Squeaked into the playoffs for the second successive year, they just don't have the class to threaten the big boys, yet sit pretty above the mediocrity which blights much of the NFC. Their draft was criticised by some as lacking focus, they added another DL when maybe the o-line could have done with more help. Others pointed out that Dallas have a fairly full roster, albeit weak, to which they simply added the best pick available. FS Roy Williams will add much needed cover to long yardage situations and TE Tony McGee will bolster the rushing attack. Dallas may just end up in the playoffs again this year, but with the lack of a coach, they wont be doing anything else. The emergence of other coaches would be the main reason that may see Dallas miss out this year.

New York Giants (Last Season 0-15-1) – Coach Steele has now had a full season to pull the Giants into shape, however there have not been many encouraging signs yet. The NFCs #1 ranked defence last year, but not much on offence, the stats were perhaps a bit kinder to the Giants than their record. #1 pick in the draft and with many lps to play with, its therefore very surprising that the Giants wasted such a good opportunity to bolster their flagging offence. They passed up the Heisman winner in favour of outstanding LB Dhani Jones, and added high quality CB Will Allen to complete a fearsome, if inexperienced defense, free agency also added DT Cornelius Griffin. What, however of the offence. TE Jeremy Shockey will doubtless help both passing and rushing games, but the problem will be getting the ball upfield. The Giants glaring problem is on the O-line, which is

the worst in the NFC. Its hard to see Collins staying upright for long enough to pass, or any holes emerging for runners that might lead to Giants having offensive success with such a small group. Big-D Teams such as the Eagles will have a field-day against them. No great improvement this year, although the huge D may win a few at least, expect another favourable draft pick for the Giants.

Philadelphia Eagles (Last Season 12-4) – The second best team in the NFC, the Eagles have made the Eat their own since the Cardinals faded. They only have one remaining problem: How to beat the Rams (although that is a problem shared by many). The Eagles standout defence was not added to in the off-season, all draft picks heading to the O. The O-line received T Jermaine Mayberry, a key protection guy who will start at RT and third WR Freddie Mitchell, who will probably step in on 3 or 4 WR sets and special teams. The Eagles have a very talented receiving corps, with Johnston, Pinkston and Mitchell being helped by RB Duce Staley who is a certainty to get good receiving numbers out of the backfield this season. Staley will also feature on the ground behind a solid if unspectacular line. The Eagles should maintain their lofty heights as no real contenders have emerged (yet) to take their crown, but the tough D may need to look for more subtlety if they are to have a serious shot at the NFC crown this year. The talent is there... its all down to Coach Gaines.

MW – Once again the Eagles should win this division without too much opposition. Recent signs of diversification to their gameplan is a good thing and will make them an even tougher team to beat. The new coach at the Giants failed to turn the team around last season but it's likely he was just feeling his way into the league, and even though the team still has too many holes to be competitive with BP's big guns, they should be good enough to finish second in the East, albeit a good few games behind the Eagles. The Cardinals and Cowboys have hovered around the wildcard places these last two seasons, but failed to take the next step and will now start to decline.

Predicted Final Standings:

DP – Eagles, Cowboys, Giants, Cardinals
 MW – Eagles, Giants, Cowboys, Cardinals
 RC – Eagles, Cardinals, Giants, Cowboys

NFC Central

Chicago Bears (Last Season 2-13-1) – Another team struggling to make an impact under a relatively new coach. The Bears struggled on O and D last year and failed to make any headway despite a good draft pick last time round. The draft did at least address some of the most pressing needs, the key selection being LG James Williams, who will

add strength to a very weak o-line. FS Reggie Austin and RB Daimon Shelton will also assist weak parts of this team, which has very good features on O and D. The linebacking corps, led by RILB Sean Harris, are an athletic unit, who will make running the football difficult for opponents. Whilst the 4 wideouts offer a potent mix of catching and pace, which will trouble a few this season. A big step up from Coach Godfrey is needed if the Bears are to become challengers, they are in an even, if not desperately tough division, but the Packers, lions and Buccs will not want to lose ground. Hard times are most likely ahead.

Detroit Lions (Last Season 7-9) – Detroit have been a mid-table side for the last few years, not being a rollover, but not really pushing forward either. Last season would have disappointed Coach Torpey as the Lions failed to grasp what looked a good opportunity for post-season football. A solid draft saw Detroit add big RT Kerlin Blaise, as well as OLB Donte curry and lightning fast WR Bill Schroeder. No great moves were made to address the Lions big weakness – in the secondary. The Lions rush defence stats were great for last season, ranked at #3, however this was largely due to the emphasis opponents put on passing the ball, where the Lions only managed #19. This is not likely to improve much, as the Lions look very light on short pass defence. They will once again depend on big production (in sacks) from their D-line, to slow opponents down. The Lions can seriously challenge in the NFC Central, but need similar performances against the run, but more importantly against the pass.

Green Bay Packers (Last Season 5-11) – The Packers represent the best possibility of a new challenger in the NFC. They have a huge squad in general, big o and d lines and are well represented on special teams. Looking around the league, there isnt another squad which has all bases covered so well. Last year was a rebuilding year, this promises to be so much more. The Draft was used well, fitting players into vacant gaps, but adding quality in all cases. FB Ahman Green is likely to fit in well as a blocking back for HB Dorsey Levens, but is likely to pick up the mantle as feature back within a few seasons. RILB Hardy Nickerson is a blitz specialist, whose extra speed will doubtless be used in coverage situations. Ross Verba will increase protection and blocking in the line. The only remaining question is – is the Coach up to the job? Comments from previous jobs is that theres certainly plenty of talent, but there's only one way to find out, in week 16 looking at the final standings. My tip is that the Pack will be right up there, possibly winning their division.

Tampa Bay Buccaneers (Last Season 11-5) – Lack of really threatening opposition permitted the Buccs

to dominate the NFC Central last season, without really setting the world alight. Their stats were good, but when it came to the big games, they were not able to match up to the Rams and Eagles when it mattered. The Buccs took LILB Nate Webster in the first round, an all rounder who will supplement a fading Lineback corps and add steel in the middle of the defence. TE Ken Dilger and Punter Tom Tupa will add finesse to an already strong looking team in most other departments. The Buccs look to have plenty on O. They have a massive o-line and with veterans Alstott and Pittman in the backfield, rushing production should be good. The big doubt is QB Brad Johnson, who has not improved over recent years. On D, the line and linebackers look adequate, if not spectacular, but the DBs look beatable by the long ball. Tampa will have to work hard to repeat last years success, as Green Bay, Detroit and even Chicago will improve to test them, but they will almost definitely be looking at the playoffs, in some form or other.

MW – This division is always a difficult one to predict, with the title swapping between the Packers and Buccaneers the last four seasons. Even without taking this into account, I feel the Packers will rebound from a disappointing first season for Coach Odgers to reclaim the division title. The Buccaneers will finish a close second to them, with the Bears finally starting to turn things around by finishing above the Lions.

Predicted Final Standings:

DP – Packers, Buccs (WC), Lions (Possible WC), Bears
 MW – Packers, Buccaneers, Bears, Lions
 RC – Bucs, Packers, Bears, Lions

NFC West

Carolina Panthers (Last Season 7-9) – Oh how the mighty have fallen. Since Superbowl victory under Coach Coleman two years ago, the Panthers have returned from whence they came – the bottom of the NFC West. Traditionally an 'offence and no defence' team, they have become a 'no offence and no defence team' dead last on D and only 18th on O with the bottom rated rushing offence last season. At least the draft was reasonably positive. The addition of Lamar Smith at HB and Chris Weinke at BQ adds some depth to the offence, especially the running game, the o-line still looks very lightweight and although it should protect Peete, few large running lanes will be opened. The West will be the toughest NFC conference, with two of the top three NFC teams in it, the Panthers will not be threatening them this year.

New Orleans Saints (Last Season 7-9) – Another West side with little coaching input and few prospects. The Saints had another poor season last

time out despite reasonable rankings of #11 on O and #6 on D. Poor decision making still haunts them however and looks set to continue to do so. The draft was baffling. The Saints O didn't need another TE, when veteran Kris Mangum looked sufficient, they didn't really need a backup quarterback, or another receiver. They needed help on both lines, but they didn't get it. The Defensive line in particular looks badly undermanned NT Grady Jackson seems to have lost a step and he has very little help to make up. The O line is a little better, Fontenau, Bentley and Folau are all extremely good, but considering some of the big defences in the NFC, they may still struggle. All the Saints can look forward to this year is fighting the Panthers to avoid the wooden spoon.

San Francisco 49ers (Last Season 10-6) – The 49ers have not been the force of previous seasons in recent years, but have been rebuilding and much is hoped for of Coach Devine and his team this year. Reasonably solid in defence last year, their real problem was on offence, particularly passing the ball. However last years stats were not the only problems facing Coach Devine, big changes in the D were afoot, which included the drafting of defensive tackles Andre Carter and John Engleberger and the move to the 4-3 defence. The move was driven by the faith shown in MLB Lee Woodall, the nine year veteran who has drastically improved his blitz capability in the offseason and who is looking healthy for years to come. The 49ers D looks in great shape now and will pose big questions of their rivals this year. The 49ers have to match up to the Rams if they want to top their division, or challenge for Bowl glory. They Coach seems to have a plan and great determination, will they be enough? – watch this space.

St Louis Rams (Last Season 15-1, Superbowl Champions) – Clearly the best team in the NFC last year, it was no surprise to many that Coach Williams finally broke his Superbowl duck. They led the NFC on offence and were second on defence, had the best turnover ratio and many other stats which only asserted their dominance. That the team went on to beat the best of the AFC was a great credit to both the coach and his team. Coach Williams response to success was to supplement his team in luxury positions. The second star QB in two years was drafted, although he was cut in training camp as other priorities were considered more pressing. New wideouts Proehl and Wilkins will add depth to the receiving line-up, especially as the health of Torry Holt has now improved. It could be argued that an extra DB or OL would have helped more, but most expect the salary cap space freed by the release of Warner will permit strengthening in key areas. As for this season, who knows. They are the Champions, the team everyone wants to beat, but who can beat them? Maybe only

themselves!

MW – Well this is very unlike me (I hate predicting good things for my teams), but I find it hard to go against predicting another successful season for my Rams. My team is overall stronger than last season, although the retirement of a veteran NT may have an effect, but after four seasons in charge this team is pretty near to how I want it now. I expect to win the West and again challenge for the NFC Championship, but for it to be a tougher season than last year. Everyone in the NFC has seen my gameplan now so I'll have to mix things up a bit, and of course with experimentation can come defeats. Also with a new starter at QB there is the possibility of mistakes being made. The 49ers should push me hard for the division, last season was a poor one by Coach Devine's high standards, and I expect better from the 49ers this season. Their D looks like it could cause me problems, but the main concern in San Francisco will be the offence which is still struggling if the pre-season is anything to go by. More of the same can be expected from the Saints and Panthers.

Predicted Final Standings:

DP – Rams, 49ers (WC), Saints, Panthers

MW – Rams, 49ers, Saints, Panthers

RC – Rams, 49ers, Panthers, Saints

MW – Playoff Predictions

AFC: Patriots, Bengals, Raiders, Wildcards – Two of Dolphins, Chiefs and Browns

NFC: Eagles, Packers, Rams, Wildcards – Buccaneers and 49ers

Super Bowl Prediction: A repeat of last season, but with the Patriots beating the Rams. Bengals and Eagles to push them all the way though...

WEEK TWO PREDICTIONS

Predictions this week from Dave Pinder:

Bills at Dolphins. MD by 14

Browns at Bengals. CI by 3

Ravens at Titans. BA by 7

Broncos at Chiefs. KC by 14

Seahawks at Raiders. Raiders by 21

Cardinals at Eagles. Eagles by 10

Giants at Cowboys. Giants by 3

Packers at Buccaneers. Packers by 3

Bears at Lions. Bears by 2

Panthers at 49ers. 49ers by 10

Saints at Rams. Rams by 21