

# Wild Card Round Preview (The NFL on REO)

## Tennessee at Kansas City

The Tennessee Titans are big underdogs in the Wild Card match up with the Kansas City Chiefs. This is not surprising. The Titans are without their starting running back, they have played poorly on offense for most of the season, and they are short on playoff experience. The Chiefs, on the other hand, have an explosive offense, a very successful head coach, and are playing at home. Even as a Titans fan I admit that it makes sense that the Chiefs are a 9 point favorite.

Maybe it is the homer in me, but I expect this game to be close. The Chiefs have not won a home playoff game since 1993. This will be their sixth try and my sources are telling me their fans are nervous. On the Titans side QB Marcus Mariota is looking healthier than he has most of this season. In their playoff clinching victory last week he ran the ball several times with a good amount of success. Something he has not done most of this season due to injury. The Titans defense has also played well, especially against the run, in the majority of games this season.

The Chiefs are a streaky team. They started off 5-0 and looked to be the best team in the NFL. They went into a 1-6 tailspin and appeared to be choking away their playoff spot. Then they rebounded and finished 4-0 to win their division and get a home game in the playoffs. Unfortunately for the Titans they Chiefs are on a hot streak right now and should win a tightly contested game. Final score prediction – KC over TN 24-20.

– Mike Lytle

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## Atlanta at Los Angeles (Rams)

Last year at this time we would have all been surprised to find that the LA Rams were even in the playoffs. The fact is, they are not only in the playoffs, but are expected to beat the reigning-NFC-champion Falcons by a touchdown. The new-in-town Rams have taken the NFL by storm and are trying to recreate the greatest show on turf. The Rams offense has been able to put up over 30 points in 8 games this year and over 25 points in 12 games. They average a league-high 29.9 points per game. They are a well-balanced offense that has only failed to execute a handful of time. Jared Golf has proven to be a quality quarterback and as long as Todd Gurley gets plenty of touches, the Rams should be able to put up points on Atlanta. Their defense, for the most part, has gotten the job done. With defensive genius Wade Phillips calling the shots, there is reason to have confidence that they can keep the Rams in the game.

Despite being the underdogs, I am picking the Falcons to win this game. The Falcons struggled early in the year, but they seemed to turn it around starting with week 10 against the cowboys. They have only lost two games since that time and both to strong teams. When push comes to shove, I have more confidence in Matt Ryan than Jared Golf. Ryan's experience in the playoffs will be invaluable in picking apart the Wade Phillips' defense. Perhaps more importantly, I trust Julio Jones to make big catches for his team. Sure, he has struggled to find the end zone this season, but big players live for big games. Julio was made for this moment.

Regardless of who wins, I expect this one to be a shootout. Falcons over Rams 35-30.

– David Lytle

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## **Buffalo at Jacksonville**

The Buffalo Bills enter the playoffs as the darlings of the NFL. For this storied franchise, it has been a long time (1999 season) since they have played postseason football, and it took a number of seemingly miraculous things to happen for them to finally break through this season. It is a great story and while I am happy for the team and their fans, great stories do not equal great teams, and the Bills are not a great team. They were a bottom half of the league team in both offensive and defensive statistics. They don't do any one thing really well, and do most things just good enough to get by. And LeSean McCoy being less than 100% is a back breaker.

On the other side, the Jacksonville Jaguars have been objectively good this season. They are one of the top two defenses in the league by any measurements that matter. And not to be outdone, they are the number five scoring team in the league. Their weaknesses are inexperience and Blake Bortles. While Bortles has been mostly solid this season, is there anyone out there that has any real confidence that Bad Bortles won't rear its ugly head at a critical moment?

Bortles will Bortle, the Bills are average, but the unit with the most talent on the field, the Jags defense, will dominate. Jags 30 Bills 10.

– Phill Lytle

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## **Carolina at New Orleans**

In my humble opinion this is the most crucial game of the weekend. Simply because a strong case can be made for the winner being the NFC favorite even if they will not have home field. Many people would look at Philly, Minnesota and the

L.A. Rams and point to either struggles or playoff inexperience at QB as cause for concern. As is well documented on REO by now, not me. I have less faith in the Top 3 NFC seeds mainly because none of them have won a playoff game literally since George W. Bush lived at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

That is not the case for the Panthers and Saints. On the road side you have a team that just went to the Super Bowl two years ago and were steamrolled by one of the more impressive defensive efforts by Denver we have ever seen in a game that significant. Carolina isn't as good an offense as their Super Bowl year but they do have Christian McCaffrey now, and Cam Newton still plays with a swagger that belies his less-than-elite stats and it makes a difference.

On the home side, you have a team with a very unique weapon in former-SEC two-headed monster RB Mark Alvin Ingram Kamara (combined 1850 yards rushing, 139 receptions and 25 total TDs). And also for only the third time in Drew Brees' 12 years with the franchise, the defense finished in the Top 10 in fewest points given up. It's uncanny how Brees has played with a Top 13 defense by this criteria five times in New Orleans and has made the playoffs every time and has played with a 25th or worse defense by this criteria six times and missed the playoffs every time. The one exception to this trend was the year NO won the Super Bowl with the 20th ranked defense.

In addition to being at home, I give New Orleans the advantage because of Brees. He has exceptional playoff stats in his career (320 YPG, a 4:1 TD:Int ratio) and has lost numerous times because his D could not get a stop, most notoriously against San Francisco in 2011 when he led them to 18 fourth quarter points and still lost (Let it be noted that Drew Brees has far and away the most 4th TD passes in NFL history to give his team the lead in a game his teams would lose, nearly twice as many as the #2 guy). Their D is nowhere close to Denver in 2015 or even Minnesota this year, but they will be good enough

to help New Orleans win this game and probably at least two more. I'll say New Orleans 31, Carolina 20.

– Gowdy Cannon

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## Random Musings (The NFL on REO)

### Goodbye Fitz!

Earlier this year, a few of us from the REO staff worked on a Power Rankings for Nashville Sports Talk Radio. We assigned points to every show in four categories, we took the averages of each of those ratings, and then we used that data to come up with our final rankings. Before we had a chance to finalize the article to present our rankings, one of the major radio stations in Nashville made some major changes to their lineup, which obviously rendered our previous rankings pointless. We decided to go back to the drawing board, allow the new iterations of shows some time to come into their own, and then re-rank everyone. Sadly, that delay is costing us again as one of the local shows – [Braden and Fitz on 102.5 The Game](#) is coming to an end. Jason Fitz is moving to a nationally syndicated show with ESPN Radio and Braden Gall will probably be part of whatever show 102.5 The Game puts together once Fitz departs.

I hate this. Not to get too deep into the inner workings of REO, when we conducted our original rankings, Braden and Fitz came out as the number 2 show in Nashville. Braden and Fitz were a new show – they have barely been on the air for a year

– and they already were doing a show that was smarter, funnier, and more enjoyable than some of the long-standing local shows. Fitz is very good at keeping the conversation moving and he worked really well with Braden Gall.

So, I am happy for Fitz because this is obviously a huge career opportunity for him but I am sad for our Nashville market because we are losing a good show. I hope that whoever they get to replace Fitz will be able to keep the show as interesting. (On a personal note, I would love for them to move Willy Daunic to mornings but I realize that is probably impossible with his Nashville Predators responsibilities.)

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## Skycam?



On Thursday Night Football, the NFL Network and NBC decided to use Skycam as the primary camera angle. It was a big deal, as no other game had been purposely covered that way before. From what I can tell, it received a mixed response from fans. There was no mixed response in my house: We all hated it. My sons watch football with me, particularly my two oldest who are

fourteen and thirteen. The thirteen-year-old loves to play Madden. He is probably the perfect audience for the Skycam view and he was not particularly thrilled. My fourteen year old has never been a big gamer so his negative response was much more predictable to me.

Though I am no longer a gamer, when I was younger I did play video games a lot. In fact, I spent hours playing video games. I concentrated mostly on sports' games, with lots of Baseball Stars and Joe Montana Football. (You see, we had the Sega Genesis and never owned any Nintendo after the original, so we were unable to play Madden unless we were at a friend's house.) Mostly though, we played Tecmo Bowl and Tecmo Super Bowl. And for my money, football video games hit their peak with those two and have been going downhill ever since. So my preferred camera angle is whatever camera angle looks the closest to how Tecmo displayed the action. And that is certainly not Skycam!

What did you, my dear readers, think about Skycam? Would you be okay with more broadcasts using it as the primary camera angle or would it work better if used as part of the rotation?

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### **Three Takes on Marcus Mariota**

Mariota has had a very uneven season. Perhaps you are having a hard time figuring out why he seems to have regressed this season. I am here to help. Here are the hater, the homer, and the halfway take. We will start with the hater.

#### **Hater**



Marcus Mariota is not a good NFL QB. He cannot play from the pocket, as his stats in 2017 bare out. He has only thrown 8 touchdowns this season and 10 interceptions. The Titans added weapons to the offense and somehow he has gotten worse. He

is uncomfortable under pressure, cannot throw to the outside, and has a less-than-average deep throw. In addition, he is not a good leader. He does not talk. He does not rally his team by getting in their faces and pushing them to be better. He is too timid, too quiet, and too mild-mannered to ever be an elite QB in the NFL.

### Homer



Marcus Mariota deserves the benefit of the doubt for this season. His critics like to forget that he missed the entire offseason, rehabbing a broken leg. He was unable to do football activities until right before training camp started.

Missing all of the offseason work and preparation put him behind from the opening game. Then, to make matters worse, he injured his hamstring the fourth game of the season and has not been anywhere near 100% since that game. In addition, do not forget that many of his interceptions this season have been on his receivers running the wrong route. Yes, the team added weapons this offseason, but becoming familiar with each other takes time and with Mariota missing time due to injury, they have not been able to gel the way the need to. We just need to give it time to work. Mariota is still capable of being an elite QB in the NFL.



## Halfway



Marcus Mariota has been inconsistent this season. While he has not been anywhere near as bad as his detractors will claim he has not been blameless in the Titans offensive struggles. He has been less comfortable in the pocket, for a variety of reasons. He has been less decisive and accurate in third down and red zone opportunities. He has made a few throws that were just plain awful. However, he has also had his share of bad luck with multiple touchdowns either dropped or taken off the board due to bad calls. Those things affect his final stat line in ways that critics and national media people simply do not acknowledge or recognize. This will be a frustrating season for Titans fans though because as it stands, it does not appear that Mariota will have enough time to truly heal and feel comfortable with his new offensive weapons. That does not mean this will be a lost season. Even with a less than 100% effective Mariota, the Titans should still be a playoff team which is a huge step forward for a team that has missed the playoffs for nearly a decade. Right now, Mariota is a middle-of-the-pack QB with the ability to take strides to make it close to the top 10 by the time the season ends. Will he do it? I am leaning ever so slightly to yes.

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In a couple of weeks, we will be posting the  $\frac{3}{4}$  season Power Rankings. This time around, I hope to be joined by Gowdy Cannon and Mike Lytle in coming up a more definitive Top Ten. The next two weeks are going to be huge for so many teams as far as playoff implications are concerned. People might complain and criticize the quality of teams in the NFL this season, particularly in the AFC, but right now, there are 13

teams in the AFC with legitimate hopes for the playoffs. And the NFC has 13 as well. That is 26 teams out of 32 that are still holding on to hope for a postseason berth. That is insane. I realize the product is a bit watered down this season but at least this is not like some other sports where the outcome seems set in stone two weeks into the regular season. Hope springs eternal in the NFL.

See you next week.