

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

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

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

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