NFL Divisional Round

The good news is last week's plan went 8-2 (in stars) so that should create a stash to use for the rest of the playoffs. Remember, while it seems like "just the first round", but the 6 games on the menu in "Super Wild Card" weekend made up nearly half of the 13 NFL playoff games! The bad news is that the card gets smaller and the lines get tougher. It's doubtful that there will be a 2nd "Rubber Band Game" (3 stars) coming in the next 7 games, but we will see. I don't force up shots. If you are new, a "Rubber Band game" is the handful each year where Dano coined the saying years ago: *Go to the top drawer of your dresser and pull out the wad of cash. Take the rubber band off and let it roll!"* San Fran was that rare 3 star last week. I'd hope there's more, but since I only give out what I actually bet myself, I have to say that it's not likely. I'm not sure I will feel as strongly about a game as the "2 star" NYG/Min OVER that was the 2nd best last week.

So, my caution is always, don't press up simply because the end of the season is staring us in the face! I'm not going to raise up units just because the season nearly over. I will bet them, but will stay with the discipline and we will see what happens!

After the OVERs crushed it last week, I expected a little inflation in the totals this week. The first 5 games went over (4 by a lot and even though Bal/Cin went over by just ½ point it went over with nearly a full quarter to go, so wasn't really ever in doubt.) Dallas win stayed UNDER by ½ point thanks to K Maher missing 4 out of 5 PATs!)

Saturday Games

Jaguars +8.5 (52.5) at Chiefs, 430 pm

X Notes: Chiefs (14-3 SU) were only 6-10-1 ATS this year, one of the league's worst teams against the number. OVER's went 8-9 in KC games. They only covered in 2 of the final 8, including the finale vs. the Raiders once Carr was set free. They weren't better at home, going 3-4-1 ATS (7-1 SU losing only to Bills.) That's not a great stretch run for the #1 seed even though 14-3 is still impressive. The average spread at home this year was -9 and they won by avg of 5.8. KC fared much better on the road where avg line was -5.5 and they won by average of 9. The general perception is Mahomes leads this high flying offense - but it didn't cover the number often, especially late in year. Jags (10-8) evened their ATS record at 9-9 after the big comeback LW vs. the Chargers. Jags are actually a better OVER team on the road (6-3) than at home (3-6). They did just travel to west coast, back to Jax, and now out to KC, so while they are playing on back to back Saturdays, there could be fatigue especially after such an emotionally draining comeback win. Total did move up from 51.5 to 52.5 fairly quickly. Public NOT

backing the home favorite heavily, which they usually do, as only about 52% on KC so far. Chiefs did win 27-17 vs Jags in midseason, at KC, when they were laying -9.5.

Analysis: The extra rest surely helps the Chiefs especially after the Jags emotional win and coast to coast travel. I can't see the Chiefs not advancing, it's Reid and Mahomes, at home, and maybe I don't need to go much further than that. But the lack of ability to put teams away has been there all year. Probably a key reason is they can't really run the ball (ranked 20th in league this year), but they don't seem to really ever WANT to run anyway. They still have the top offense (yards and points) while Jags are average. Both defense seem very average to me, although the Jags really stifled the Chargers in 2nd half last week, with season on the line. Kinda hard to assess Jags first half defense, because 4 quick INTs certainly put them in ridiculous position. It's cliché of course, but I think Jags will TRY to run Etienne a lot and "keep Mahomes off the field". I know, everyone SAYS that. Easy to say, but when you fall behind early, that goes away so quickly these days. I also get this feeling with Mahomes that he really tries to spread the ball around and get the offense balanced, but when it's crunch time, it could just be Kelce and more Kelce. Jags have lots of weapons, most notably WR Kirk and TE (yeah, he's technically a TE) Engram to go with Etienne.

PICK: While concerned with the travel, the Chiefs haven't been able to cover big numbers all year so why would I expect that now – vs. this year's "destiny" team? I think the Jags can cover this one, even if it's a back door late, but it's only a shaky 1 star on Jags +8.5.   They lost by 10 in KC before they had started to play well, back when they were playing more like…well, the Jaguars.   I do lean to the OVER here, but am not playing it. I see the final as something like 30-24, KC. BUT – KC is a great teaser here, taking them to -2.5. **See below for that write up (KC/Phil).**

Giants +7.5 (48.5) at Eagles, 815pm

X Notes: Philly is coming off the bye week which is key for Hurts getting rest for the injured shoulder. Still hard to tell how close he is to healthy, and I don't trust most of the reports. Too much gamesmanship this time of year. The Eagles (14-3) were only 8-9 vs. the number including dropping last four. We can probably attribute that to the QB situation. Eagles did go OVER 10 of 17 games. They do have a lot of weapons on offense and while AJ Brown is still the #1, Devonta Smith quietly started to get more looks as the year winded down. Toss in a top TE and underrated backfield, this team is very solid on offense. The Eagles defense was 2nd in ypg, trailing leader SF by just 15 yards! Maybe it's just my circles, but there's something about NYG (uniforms? History?) that leads people to think their defense is decent. It's not, they are 25th in ypg! They didn't play well down the stretch, but last weekend the best QB performance was Daniel Jones. Playing for a contract surely helps too, but he was excellent. Oh wait, the Vikes can't stop anyone and how a team with a defense that is 2nd to last in ypg and 3rd to last

in points goes 13-4 is amazing. Philly dominated NYG in mid Dec (at NYG) 48-22 in a game they controlled easily. The rematch in week 18 is a throw away as Hurst came back but NYG rested most and played practice squad QB. Score was misleading as Eagles first 6 drives were a TD, 4 FG and a EZ int in route to a 19-0 lead. NYG ended up covering somehow 22-16 but neither side put up much effort in 2nd half. Public is on NYG so far, #1 this week with about 66% so that's looking like the square dog here.

Analysis: I'm not sold on NYG. I'm more a believer that Cousins and the Vikes moved the ball easily until the end of the day while the Vikes defense couldn't stop anything and couldn't give the Vikes the ball. Offenses were even better than the score indicated, as there were few possessions because neither defense could slow anyone down. Giants scored on first 4 possessions (24 points) and didn't start the 5th until middle of 3rd quarter. They scored on 5 of 7 turns (I don't count end of half). You could make a case their offense was very good, but I'm not buying it. I think it was Vikes league worst defense that drove that success. They say they've finally settled on WRs, but it's still a mediocre group, at best. Jones is OK, but it's all about Barkley and he will be the focus of Eagle D. Hurts was the MVP until injury sidelined him. He may still be, but it's all about stats so now it's Mahomes. If he's still tentative bc of his shoulder, they have plenty of weapons and will score on NYG, but if he's back to himself, they score a lot. While it's true that "divisional opponents know each other so well" that leads to usually taking a divisional dog. I know I nearly always take a TD dog in a division game. But knowing someone and stopping them are two different things. I think Philly will score and their aggressive nature will allow them to cover too. I am a little worried about a late back door cover here, but I will say Philly 30-17**.** I like the fact the public is heavily taking NYG yet the line holds**. Philly is a solid 1 star play at -7.** I almost always buy the ½ point if it's at 7.5, so I'd recommend taking -7 at -120 rather than -7.5 at -110 here.

But, the best play on Saturday is a 2 team (6.5 pt) teaser with KC (-2.5) and Philly (-1.5). In addition to the reasons above, this is a classic teaser spot. The criteria I always want to see to bet a teaser is 1) big game (no letdown spot), 2) at home, and 3) cross the 3 and 7 with the teaser. All boxes checked here for both games. This also is the spot where you can appreciate the value in such a teaser. EXAMPLE: if you just said "I want to just bet both teams to win". Both are coming off a bye and are better teams that should win games as #1 seed, right? But if you did a parlay, a $100 bet would pay you only about $54 if take both favorites on the $line. No thanks. But by teasing them to ALMOST the $line (1.5 and 2.5) you get $91 for that same $100. (A regular -110 for $100 bet is same as -100 for $91.)   Of course it's true that either could win the game by 1, but it's a small enough chance that I'd rather get nearly double the $ by teaser vs. parlay. Also, it's even better here to take a 6.5 point teaser getting them to -1 & -2. Some places call it 6.5 point teasers, other call it 6 point teasers and "buy ½ point". The normal 6.5 pt teaser is at -115 instead of -110, so it makes sense to buy that half here.

 2 Stars: KC -2 and Philly -1 in a 2 team teaser. I chose that over each one individually.

Sunday Games

Bengals +5.5 (49.5) at Bills, 3pm (oh I love the later Sunday starts!)

<u>X Notes:</u> This is the matchup we wanted. Defending champ vs. this year's favorite. Both put up very disappointing games last week against division rivals. While a division rivalry is usually tough, it should not have been when it was QBs Huntley and Skylar Thompson. Ugh. Borrow and the Bengals were difficult read. Offense looked in sync first half with 2 nice drives for scores and the 3rd ended with a fumble (about to punt, if not). But that was it! Only 3 first half possessions and 2 long scoring drives. When they opened the 2nd half with yet another long drive it seemed like they were ready to pull away. But that was the end of the offense for the day as they got just 13 yards on 3 possessions rest of way. Ravens really should have won that game if not for the qb sneak that the wrong team scored on. I was sure the Ravens would score on last drive and it would be decided on a 2 pointer (not a QB sneak.) But the timeout fiasco didn't help and they came up short. When Team Huntley outgains Team Burrow 364-234, you should lose. But they didn't. We were on the wrong side of that one, but glad we got away with a teaser WIN. Very disappointing performance. Similarly for the Bills, but in very different way. Also facing an inexperienced backup, they couldn't put the Fins away, trailed late before eeking out a 34-31 win when Dolphins wasted all 3 timeouts and then couldn't get a play called in 54 seconds. Bills problem is becoming an all too familiar story. Josh Allen may be sensational, but he's becoming reckless. Too many picks and always seems to be in red zone! He had 3 more turnovers. The Bills are very solid team, continue to underperform and not cover often. I know it sounds strange, but at 14-3 how long are we going to think they can play better than they are? Bills are #2 in offense behind KC (yards and points) and defense also great (2nd in points and 6th in yards.)

<u>Analysis:</u> I keep expecting more from the Bills. They blew out 3 of the first 5 opponents and then won the game they'd been wanting AT KC. But from then on, I feel they are mistake prone. Yes, you can make the claim that great teams can overcome those mistakes, but I sure don't like Allen's turnovers. And where they occur! It is a nice advantage being at home for sure. FYI, I don't buy the "Cincy is mad about the rule changes take". Do you really need "extra motivation" this time of year, or is it just something to write about? Bengals are that "bend but don't break" defense, 6th in points but very average in yards allowed. Weapons everywhere on both offenses. I do think the Bills find a way to get a Win at home, but a Bengals win wouldn't surprise me either. I don't like this game and if this was regular season, I'd just sit back and watch it, but it's not so I won't. I lean to OVER 48.5 but I see the loser getting to at least 21, so lots more chances of over than not. But I'd never play a Bills total this time of year before game day! While it's supposed to be a good weather day, a change and storm is always a possibility and if the line drops you don't want to be already "in". It shouldn't go back up, so I'd

wait. This is the classic conflict of my "football brain" vs my "gambling brain". Football brain says Bills making way too many mistakes to lay -5.5 points here. Cincy can win this game, so I always take the points, not lay the points. BUT, with public all over the Bengals (65%) and yet the line is creeping higher? Opened at -4, went quickly to -4.5 and now up to -5.5 despite the action being on Cincy, so my "gambling brain" says don't think meat, you'll only hurt the ballclub! Bills -5.5 is the play. So what do I usually do when conflict between gambling brain and football brain? I ask myself WHY is it moving like it is, and do I feel strongly that my football brain is right? I can't see why this line moving in "wrong direction" and no I don't feel that strongly on Bengals, so stick with gambling info.

Pick: Bills -5.5 for 1 star.

Cowboys +3.5 (45.5) at 49ers, 630pm

X Notes: Both teams won and covered in opener. SF struggled for a half before dominating 2nd half. Glass half full or empty? In first half Purdy missed a lot of big plays. They were there and he missed reads and gave away a couple TDs. But half full would look at coaching, again, in that they had big plays drawn up and they were there for the taking. Dallas showed yet again last week that they are a very good defense, but a top defense with a lead. Once they start teeing off on the pass, they are very dominating. With tight game, you never know if Diggs about to give up a bad TD or get a pick 6, but once they get ahead, it's sacks and picks coming. Line moved from 4 to 3.5 then even 3 before seemingly settling at 3.

Analysis: While talk will be about QBs Purdy and Dak, this is going to be decided by defenses. SF is likely the best overall def unit this year and they just don't give up points in 2nd half. Dallas can really get after the QB and that is major test for a young QB with a handful of starts. I'm sure many will say a seasoned veteran (Dak) is more prepared for this test than Purdy, and that's reasonable. If both teams bring their A game, I lean to SF to win this matchup. Even though there'd be nothing surprising if Cowboys defense pressures the rookie, I'd be more worried about Dak. He has been very good or very bad. That's hard to predict which will be there this week, but given on the road vs the best defense in NFL, it'd reasonable to think we could get Bad Dak.   It seems like a SF by a FG, but then comes the coaching. I still think Shanahan is near the top and his teams are so well prepared each week. He will find a way to take the pressure off the QB and neutralize the pass rush, at least a little bit. Maybe by getting Samuel carries on the edge, but it will be something. He's always got them prepared, even when down to 3rd QB. While all eyes are on the exceptional start by Purdy, Shanahan puts him in position to succeed each game. On the other side is a coach that Cowboy backers hope stays kind of invisible and does not BLOW the game with

usual mistakes. Even though it's all about the players, that's an advantage I can't overlook. **Pick:** I like the 49ers here, 24-17 for 2 Stars!

Mr X's Best Picks

> **2 Stars**
>
>> Chiefs -2/ Eagles -1
>>
>> 49ers -3
>
> **1 Star**
>
>> Bills -5.5

All games (if I had to pick them all in a pool or something):

> Jax +8.5 and over 52.5   Philly -7.5 and UNDER 48.5
>
> Bills -5.5 and over 49.5   SF -3 and Under 46.5

Notes on Teasers

I've said previously I tend to tease way more in playoffs than during season. I think there are 2 main reasons: 1) I throw out the "flat games" concern. During the regular season I limit teasers to a big matchup like a divisional game where the chances of a look ahead are slim, and 2) during the season if I don't love a team enough to bet them without the teaser points, then I say "find another game"! But with fewer on the menu, and not wanting to pass, it can be the best option during playoff time.