

TRASH TALK: THE RETURN OF THE HUBCAP!



bmaz hasn't given out a hubcap yet this year, so I've wrested control of the trash reins from him to offer up this shiny hupcap for the person(s) who correctly predicts this weekend's winners.

Before I get into my choices, though, I gotta congratulate JimWhite's Gators on a superb game on Thursday. Actually, I'd like to congratulate freep's Sooners, too, even if they're in Norm Coleman recount land. It was a great game, but—as should happen—some kickass defense won the game.

Also, WTF are the Brownies thinking, hiring Mangy Mangini? I kind of ~~like~~ liked the Brownies in recent years. Yet they had to go replace a consummately likeable BillBel protege—Romeo Crennel—with the snitch who tried to turn Brett Favre into a hand-off machine? Really? Well, I guess that'll make it easier for me to decide which of the several excellent teams in the AFC North to cheer for next year.

BAL-TEN: (Tennessee won in Baltimore in week 5, 13-10) Speaking of which, I'm predicting the hot Ravens will beat masaccio's Titans today. This is the game that pits experience (Collins) against youth (Flacco), and two great defenses against each other. In the end, I think the game will be close, but after you add in the touchdown that Ed Reed seems to believe he's entitled to each week, the Ravens will pull out ahead.

ARI-CAR: (Panthers beat the Cardinals in Arizona 27-23 in week 8) My bet against bmaz's home team was the only thing that sunk me last week, but I feel much safer this week in rooting against the Cards. Yeah, the Cards have discovered they have a Hall of Fame caliber

runner they've been ignoring. Yeah, the Cards showed some superb D last week—and I do think that D will be able to somewhat contain Carolina's running game. But I just got a feeling that the Panthers—and not either of the NFC East teams—will be heading to the Super Bowl this year. Steve Smith will make a couple of big plays against the Cards, which will lead them to obsess over him and leave Mushin Mohammed open to keep a lot of drives alive. Plus, Carolina is at home and Arizona is away—two more strikes against the Cardinals.

PHI-NYG: (The home team lost each of the regular season match-ups, with Giants winning 36-31 in week 10, and the Eagles winning 20-14 in week 14) I'm tempted to say the Eagles will win this. I say that not just because the away team has won each of the games played this year. And not just because the Giants have sucked since their star wide receiver got picked to be IL's next Senator. And not just because the Manning boys do better **without** a week off. But the Eagles have the momentum here. That said, Brandon Jacobs is much healthier than he was in week 14. And to win, the Eagles would have to look like the screen-throwing team they used to be. Given the potentially crappy weather for the game, I reluctantly go with the Giants (even if I expect Bad Eli to show up for the game—god I hate predicting Manning wins).

SD-PIT: (Steelers won at home 11-10 in week 11) When's the last time you saw a game in which the punter was the MVP? Because that's certainly what happened last week, with SD's Mike Scifres single-handedly compensating for Peyton's ability to gain ground on the Bolts. And for that reason I'm calling this game for randiego's Bolts. They got rid of their East Coast curse in week 16. Rivers was playing truly inspired football at the end of the season. And Rotty tends to play even more inconsistently every first game back after he bangs up his noggin. Yes, kicking anything at Heinz Field is a dicey proposition on the best of days (though Scifres did well in similar weather in week 11). But

Pittsburgh's O has just been struggling too much of late—even before Rotty's latest blow to the head—to win what will be a field position game. Add in the fact that the weather will probably have cleared up enough by game time to allow Rivers to be effective, and I think the Bolts win a close one.

(Hubcap picture by jillciardy)