

NFL CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIP TRASH TALK

Back by popular demand, and in the face of kudzu like anti-sports grumps, it is Emptywheel's Famous Football Trash Talk! The field is now down to four Green Bay at Seattle, and Indianapolis at New England.

The early game is the one that Phred and I will be glued to the TV for. The Packers return to the hostile confines of Seattle's Century Link field to face the Seahawks. This is exactly where the first NFL regular season game was played this year. In that meeting, the Squawks owned the Packers. Green Bay's defense looked unable to cope with Russell Wilson, and Rodgers refused to throw a single pass to Richard Sherman's side of the field and Seattle waltzed away with an easy 36-16 win.

But a lot has changed in the interim. Seattle has developed their young receivers, but has lost the game changing explosiveness of Percy Harvin. And Green Bay has changed their defense around a bit with Clay Matthews being moved inside much more frequently, especially on obvious passing defense downs. But late in the season, Matthews was playing inside even on run defense because AJ Hawk just wasn't physical enough to get it done. It seems like a small change, but the difference has been palpable. The Pack's defense is far better than it was early in the season. Green Bay's offense seems to be healthy and firing on all cylinders. Except one, and that is a big one, of the Discount Doublecheck variety.

I expect Rodgers will be slightly more mobile, and confident of his ability to move laterally, this week than last week against the Cowboys. He will need to be, because Seattle's defense is a lot more lethal than Dallas' was. The key will be whether Eddy Lacy can get untracked early and

establish the run to a reasonable extent. Lacy has been healthy and very solid of late, so there is hope. If Cliff Avril, Bruce Irvin and Michael Bennett are allowed to constantly pressure Rodgers, it will be the end of the line for the Cheese. However, if the Green Bay O-line and Lacy can take some pressure off, Rodgers has the downfield accuracy to beat Seattle. That's a big if. The Squawks are 7.5 point favorites, and I think that is maybe low. Seattle is headed here to the Super Bowl.

In the second game, the Colts go east to tilt with the Patriots. Frankly, I didn't think Indy could beat the Broncos at Mile High. But they did, and it was not as close as the 24-13 score indicated. Andrew Luck was everywhere, extending plays and throwing darts. And the Colts' defense was spectacular in their ability to wrap up and tackle relentlessly. There are not a lot of known names on the Indy defense, but they have been pretty impressive in this postseason.

The Pats. What is left to be said about the Patriots at this point? Tom Brady, Darrell Revis and the best coach in football, they have all of that and a Gronk. But if the Patriots want an eighth Super Bowl appearance, which would tie them for the most in NFL history (Pittsburgh and Dallas), they will likely have to do it without center Bryan Stork, who injured a knee last week. The Pats will likely go back to emphasizing their rushing attack against Indy, after gaining a historical low of 14 net yards rushing against Terrell Suggs and the Ravens. And the Pats have lit up the Colts on the ground in the past, so expect Belichick to go back to LeGarrette Blount and Bolden far more heavily Sunday. The Colts are game I am sure, but the Pats are a 6.5 point favorite and I think they will cover that and win easily.

There you have it. This is our last Sunday of football before Super Bowl XLIX, which happens to be right here in Phoenix. Time will tell who gets to Phoenix. Drink and chat it up people. Music by Phoenix's own Glen Campbell.