

# **SUPER BOWL LIV: WHO WILL PARTY WITH THE LOMBARDI**

Who will win the Super Bowl on Groundhog Day?

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## **CHAMPIONSHIP SUNDAY TRASH TALK**

Last Sunday of football before the Super Bowl, so only two games today. But they should be great ones. Couple of other things in the news too.

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## **COLLEGE FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP MONDAY**

Monday is the fun day this extended football week. I intentionally did not put this in the Division Weekend post. Oh, and as to that, as usual, my off the cuff picks were not, shall we say, exactly right. You get what you pay for. Niners won as expected. Cool! But the Titans totally clocked the Quoth the Ravens. Did not see that coming! Chefs looked moribund and cooked, and then went on a roll like I have never seen before. Goofy, but got that right. I really thought the Squawks would upset the Pack. But Lambeau and Rodgers held on. That was my upset special, and, boy, was I wrong.

Enough of those bygones, tonight is the, at long last, college championship. LSU and Clemson.

Both 14-0. Hard to see how either could be more impressive at this point. Clemson has not lost a game in two years. That would be 29 games in a row. That is stupid good. And they are not only defending champions, Clemson has won it all two of the last three years. And did so on the back of Nick Saban and the winners of the world (thanks Steely Dan!) Nick Saban's Crimson Tide.

So, coming in undefeated, after an undefeated championship year last year, makes the Clemson Tigers the absolute favorite, right? Nope. The "other" Tigers, the ones from LSU are unquestionably the favorite. LSU's QB, Joe Burrow, won the Heisman Trophy. And he deserved it and by the biggest margin in history, which he got. If both came out for this spring's draft, who goes first? A year ago it would have been unconscionable to say anybody but Clemson's Trevor Lawrence. Not now, the Bengals will be taking Joe Burrow at number one.

So, what's up tonight? Yeah, I dunno. Some of the newer people here seem to be slow learning that my picks are nominally common sense and mostly follow standard logic and odds. And that I rarely gamble with my own money. I still have a house, because I have never bet it.

Sooooo.....Tonight! The Tim McGraw song ESPN opened their coverage with was pretty damn good. As a red blooded gut, nowhere near his wife, Faith Hill's, SNF opener. Sorry folks, that one from nearly ten years ago seriously rocked.

As to the game. The right two teams are clearly playing. LSU seems, qualitatively, the much better team. But how Ohio State ever got seeded ahead of undefeated defending champs Clemson is seriously insane. To the point of being a joke. People like to make fun of the diminished relevance of the PAC-12, but the Big-10 has been overrated bullshit since I was a kid and any random 7-3 PAC champion regularly kicked Bo and Woody's ass in the Rose Bowl. But, wait, I digress....

Tonight LSU is favored, and they should be. Joe

Burrow is the real deal. Trevor Lawrence is too, but, wow, Burrow has been insanely good. Both can throw. Both can run too. Both defenses are really good. Dabo Swinney has the hardware. But how can you not simply love the Ragin Cajun Ed O'Connell?

I have no prediction, just hope for a game that can live up to the moment as potentially one of the best ever.

It all rolls in Nola, and let there be good times rolling. So, some gumbo music from an old friend Janiva Magness (one of the finest blues singers you have never heard of) playing zydeco with her Louisiana pal Tab Benoit (who is fucking great by the way).

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## NFL DIVISIONAL PLAYOFF WEEKEND

The wildcards have been played, and resulted in a couple of surprises. The Vikings took out the heavily favored Saints in New Orleans, and the Titans took out the Patriots in Foxborough. The latter less shocking given how well the Titans played closing out the regular season and how poorly the Patriots did.

But now we head into the Divisional rounds. I found this from PFT kind of interesting:

In 1990, the NFL expanded the playoff field from 10 to 12 teams, resulting in four (not two) teams earning a bye. More often than not, the home team that has had a week off wins. But the road teams still have a chance to get lucky.

For the 29 postseasons since the change was made, the home teams have swept the divisional round eight times. That's 27.5 percent of the years utilizing the

12-team format. So in 72.5 percent of the years since the current formula was adopted, at least one road team has won in the divisional round.

Specifically, 13 times the home teams have gone 3-1 in the divisional round. Seven times, there has been a split. Once, in 2008, the visiting teams won three of the four games.

In the 10 seasons from 2005 through 2014, the road teams had a remarkably good stretch, winning 16 of 40 games (40 percent). Over the past four postseasons, however, the home teams have gone 13-3 collectively.

All four home teams are favored to win this weekend, as they usually are. In the 30th year of the current format, chances are at least one will lose. One of these years, all four will.

Regardless, the home teams are more likely to feel the pressure. Some could be feeling a little rusty. And one lucky punch early in the contest could turn a potential blowout into a close game, and if the game stays close into the fourth quarter, anything can happen.

If there is an upset of a home team, which game or games will it be in?

The first game up today is Minnesota at San Francisco. Obviously the Niners have the top seed in addition to home field today. The Vikes looked extremely good against the Saints. Their defense is really solid, and Kirk Cousins playing very well. Dalvin Cook gives them a well balanced offense, and SF is likely to focus on Cook and make Cousins try to beat them. Can they do that? It may be easier said than done given that Minnesota's O-Line is good. There is certainly upset potential here, and there is history from the 1988 game where the Vikings bounced the heavily favored 13-3 Niners in SF in

the Divisional round. It could happen again, but not betting on it.

The second Saturday game is Tennessee at Baltimore. The Titans are on a pretty solid roll ever since they switched from Mariotta to Ryan Tannehill at QB. They are a good team, especially when Derrick Henry gets untracked. But not predicting an upset of the Ravens today.

First up Sunday is Houston at the KC Chiefs. Up to six inches of snow is expected in KC today, although should be well over by tomorrow's kickoff. Ground crew gonna be busy, and there are heating coils under the field, so they should be good to go. Frankly, I have a hard time seeing the Houston offense keep up with Pat Mahomes and the Chiefs. And with Honey Badger Mathieu now on the Chiefs instead of the Texans, decent bet he has given some advice to KC as to how to defend Deshaun Watson.

The final game of the weekend is the Squawks at the Cheeser's. The Pack is my favorite team going back to childhood, and my trusty cheesehead that Phred gave me is out and ready to roll. The Packers' defense is sneaky good, with free agent pickups Preston Smith and Za'Darius Smith really anchoring the D-Line, with the always good secondary still there. Seattle is no longer really the Legion of Boom it once was, but they are still very solid. So the outcome probably turns on who has the better offense, and who plays better, Russell Wilson or Aaron Rodgers. The Frozen Tundra is going to be cold as ice, and the Packers have already put out a call for people to show up at 6 am Sunday to help shoveling out the stadium. This is the kind of game Beast Mode is made for, and Russ Wilson too. As much as I hate to say it, I fear this is the real upset special of the weekend, and I think the Squawks likely do just that.

Okay, rock and roll, and have a great weekend full of great football. Speaking of rock and roll, this weekend's music is a fantastic little piece, Slippin and Sliding, by John Lennon. People forget how good Lennon really was at

rockers. Give it a listen, and crank it up.

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## **THE JOKER IS WILDCARD WEEKEND**

The college season is down to one game, not to be played for another week. Wildcard weekend it is. Will the Pats survive, or is the end?

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## **ELI IS LEAVING, AND BOWL SEASON FOR REAL TRASH TALK**

There has been a joke here at Emptywheel from longer than you can imagine. Good Eli versus Bad Eli. There has been so much of both. But Easy Eli Manning is, arguably, going into arguably his last game as a Giant, if not in the NFL, an incredibly important player in the NFL.

It seems there ought be a bit more reflection on that. Eli Manning was controversial when he entered the league. He will be as he leaves. The better question is whether he is a Hall of Famer, or not.

Easy Eli won Super Bowl victories, and Super Bowl MVP awards, over the GOAT, Tom Brady. Eli did that, and deserves credit for it. But, let us put things in perspective. Eli never played for Bill Bel. So, it is hard to compare him with Brady. Fun, but very hard.

But Eli, whether good or bad, has been a staple here. If this is Easy Eli's last game in the NFL, I, for one, will miss him.

Add them all up, and the Manning brothers still have two fewer rings than Tom Brady. But they have been ubiquitous seemingly forever. And remember that Eli's two rings came over no less than Brady, Bill Bel and the Pats themselves.

People have been discussing whether Eli gets in the HOF for a while already. Honestly, I'd say no, except that when he made it to the biggest stage in sports, twice, the Super Bowl, Eli Manning showed up in style, and then some. And flat pulled wild things out of his butt both times. If it was just once, then it would be hard to make the case. But twice, and the way he did it? I dunno, there is a case to be made there.

Easy Eli may have never been the flashiest QB, not even the flashiest Manning QB, what with Peyton and Archie, but he had himself quite a career. And he did it all with a large dollop of quiet grace. In New York of all places. The time has come for the Giants to move on, but I have a feeling they are about to realize what good fortune and stability they enjoyed with Easy Eli for all those years.

Two titles, 210 straight starts, one Eli: How Manning conquered New York is a great piece from ESPN:

Eli Manning always drank beer on the team bus. It was a Broadway Joe kind of thing to do, and a fact that might run counter to an image Manning spent absolutely no time crafting. But win, lose or draw, Manning would find someone on the road to buy him a six-pack or 12-pack that he would carry to the back of the bus, on ice, and share with some veterans as they discussed the game on the ride to the airport.

Even then, Manning's consistency stunned his New York Giants teammates. "It was unbelievable," said Lawrence Tynes, the kicker who won two championships with the quarterback. "He had a guy in every

f-ing stadium in the league to get him that beer."

Should Eli Manning make the Hall of Fame? As NFL experts putatively cast their votes, Manning will miss those bus rides as much as he will miss anything else after he dresses Sunday for the final time as a Giant, and likely for the final time as an NFL player. Easy Eli. Say what you will, but the man made 15 years in the hot bed of NYC look, well, ....easy. That is something.

He will not miss the constant dissection of his public personality, or lack thereof, and the fascination with what has been a near-perfect marriage between the world's loudest marketplace and a quiet child of the South who spent his career projecting that oblivious vibe he wore as clearly as his jersey No. 10.

Eli is leaving. Adios Easy Eli. He made it easy living when it it was almost impossible to do so.

Ahem, the two BCS games are tonight. There are all kinds of "bowl" games on the last few days, mostly because ESPN demands content. But, tonight, the real deal starts. First, Oklahoma takes on LSU in the Peach Bowl in Hot Lanta. The Boomer Sooners are pretty good. Have a hard time seeing them overcoming the Tiger's defense, much less the offense run by Joe Burrow. And that is not to sell Linc Riley short, he is young, hot on market and really good. Riley has coached the Sooners up, and they are really good.

But the second is right here in Phoenix in the Fiesta Bowl, and that is Clemson versus Ohio State. Thought about going, but it is a seriously long haul from here to the stadium. So, the TV will have to suffice. Both teams are undefeated at 13-0, and it is not easy to say which is greater or lesser. But Clemson is the reigning national champ, and has still gone undefeated so far this year. The Tigers also beat OSU in a similar CFB semi-final game in the



Fiesta Bowl in 2016. Think tonight's game will be far closer, but sleep on Clemson at your own risk.

In the Pros, few games are overly exciting. Jets at Buffalo looks boring, but the Jets Jets Jets, once they got Sam Darnold back have been better than you think. I'll still take the Wagon Circlers, but expect a good game. Scribe's Steelers at the Ravens, who are sitting all their key players, is another one to watch. Not sure how far the Stillers can go with Duck Duck Go Hodges, but would very much like to see. Titans at Texans is a huge game. Against better judgment, think BOB, the Texans, and Watson are on a real roll, so there you go. Similarly difficult call, but think the Iggles roll the Giants. The Rams are toast. The Cardinals still playing to show that they have a promising future. Right now, the Rams still have a clearly better team. Does it translate to a win at the end of the season? That is a lot better question, and I have no clue, and thus rate it a curious tossup.

There you go folks. Say goodbye to Easy Eli. And enjoy the college semi-finals and the last week of the NFL.

Happy Holidays, and Happy New year, from all of us here at Emptywheel. We truly truly love you, and thank you.

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## YAKETY YAK TRASH

A big weekend of NFL football this week, with great games on Saturday, Sunday and Monday night. Soak it in!

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# THE BLACK HOLE

Time is closing on the joy that is the Black Hole in Oakland. The NFL will not be the same without it.

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## NCAA CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIP WEEKEND TRASH TALK

In the Pros and Joes discussion, this weekend features the Joes. It is the conference championship weekend, and the final action before the Final Football Four are selected. So, let's start there.

Utah was well on its way to a potential Championship final four appearance for the Pac-12. Nope. The Oregon Quackers made the Utes Duck. Bigly. Oregon undoubtedly goes to the Rose Bowl, and who knows about Utah. Their extremely good defense was shredded by the Ducks. Ouch. There are five more critical games on the schedule today, and Cincinnati and Memphis for the AAC is the lesser of them, though it may well be a fantastic game. It is in Memphis at Liberty Bowl stadium, so I will roll with the Tigers at their home.

With the Utah fail, that means Baylor versus Oklahoma (shoutout to our departed friend Freepatriot, who loved the Sooners), may well mean a final four berth. It is a neutral site. Something smells of a Baylor upset, but the Sooners are now coached by Line Riley as opposed to Bob Stoops, so I don't think so. Sooners. The BIG Championship is played in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. Would be a fantastic story if Wisconsin could beat the Bucks, but that is a bad bet. Virginia may get Cavalier and upset Trevor Lawrence and Clemson, but it would be

shocking. Clemson and Lawrence started a little slow this year, but are undefeated and are averaging 50 points a game since mid-October.

That leaves the big one, i.e. the SEC championship, played in HotLanta. Georgia, the current numbers 4, versus the Tigers of LSU, the current number 2. Without much question the most anticipated game of the day. Frankly, it is hard to see how Ohio State ever jumped above LSU, in fact by the record as of now, it is a joke. LSU has the likely Heisman winner, Joe Burrow, at QB, and he has been lighting people up. Georgia is really good. The defenses are both great, but the offenses, and specifically the QB's will likely determine this. Burrow just looks a lot better than Jake Fromm, I'll take the Bayou Tigers.

So that leaves the Pros. Da Bears already beat the Cowboys, which likely makes Scribe smile wildly. Dallas just does not look good, and Garrett has to be gone at the end of the season. Baltimore is at Buffalo, and the Ravens seem a good bet. But every time people write the Wagon Circlers off this year, they surprise. I'll take Jackson and the Ravens, but don't sleep on the Buffalo defense, they might contain him. Would not be surprised if the Broncos upset the Texans in Houston, but that is also not a good bet. The Steelers are here at the Cardinals. The Cards are improving, but still not that good. Duck Duck should go go against them, even in the Bird's Nest. The Rams are resurgent, and are hosting the Squawks, and that could be a great game.

There are two truly great games. The first is the Chefs of KC visiting Foxborough to see Bill Bel and the boys. Frankly, the Pats offense has looked old and bad lately, and are putting so much pressure on their excellent defense that the D is starting to falter. My bet is that Pat Mahomes engineers more points than Brady, and that is that. The second is Niners at Saints. Both teams are 10-2, and this game is almost certainly for home field in the NFC. Wow, this

should be a game! Stars everywhere. Jimmy G is not up to Drew Brees' level yet, but he has established himself as a frontline QB in the NFL, and his tight end, George Kittle is the new Gronk. On offense, the nod has to go to Brees with Michael Thomas and Alvin Kamara. The SF defense, with rookie stud Nick Bosa and veteran Arik Armstead up front, is really good though. The Saints are hosting in the Superdome, and for that reason only, they get the call. Who dat?

Our colleague Peter has suggested this article on ESPN be discussed. It involves traumatic brain injury, more commonly known as CTE, but this time in hockey players.

A Minnesota judge on Wednesday ordered that a former member of the "Miracle on Ice" U.S. Olympic team should be committed to a secure treatment facility, saying the hockey star is mentally ill and dangerous.

Mark Pavelich, 61, of Lutsen, was charged with felony assault in August for allegedly beating a friend with a metal pole, breaking several bones.

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According to Cuzzo's order, one psychologist found Pavelich had delusions and paranoia, including a delusion that those closest to him were trying to poison him. Another psychologist found he suffered from a mild neurocognitive disorder due to traumatic brain injury, likely related to repeated head injuries.

Pavelich's family members have said they believe he suffers from CTE, or chronic traumatic encephalopathy, after repeated concussions from his time in the NHL. They said they started seeing changes in him a few years ago and he has refused help.

As sad as this is, it is really important. It is

also something that is starting to be covered. One of the ones who has been on this story from the start is Sheila Dingus, who runs a great spot known as Advocacy For Fairness In Sports. Here is some of her writings on the NHL concussion litigation.

Music today by Pink Floyd. Enjoy the weekend folks.

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## **TURKEY BOWL TRASH TALK**

Think I've recounted this in some previous year, but bmaaz the younger and friends used to have a yearly Turkey Bowl football game on Thanksgiving mornings. Always at one or another local high school field. They were theoretically flag games, but the contact was full and real. And the alcohol was flowing because, well, it was necessary to cover the hangover from Thanksgiving Eve. People got hurt. If you left only a little bloodied, it was a very good day. I kind of miss those days, but not that much. The holiday is much less stressful piloting a comfy couch with a fire and big screen TeeVee.

There are three NFL games today. The stinker is, obviously, the Bears at the Lions. The Bears are just miserable and still have to think, every week, about the quarterbacks they didn't take because they took Trubisky. Every week. The Lions have Matt Stafford, who is actually a very good QB who might well have championships if he had spent his career on a better team. But Matt Stafford ain't walking through that door today, he is out. The Kittes don't even have Jeff Driskel, and will start an undrafted scrub named David Blough. In fairness, the Lions have kept him around all year, and he had a pretty good career at Purdue. There are some pretty good former Purdue QBs over time, think Drew Brees,

Bob Griese, Len Dawson etc. All Hall Of Famers, or in Brees' case, soon to be. So the Kittens have a shot if Blough catches fire, and Detroit might as well let him rip, because they really don't have anything to lose.

Second up is Buffalo at Dallas. Buffalo, at 8-3, has the far better record. Josh Allen is maturing and improving, especially as the Bills have been running their offense up tempo lately, but nobody will mistake him for Jim Kelly anytime soon. Dak Prescott has had himself a year so far, though not against the Pats. Both teams have good defense. I expect the 'Boys will win this, but it will be good to see how the Wagon Circlers play against real competition.

Speaking of Drew Brees, the last course on the menu today is Nawlins at HotLanta. The Falcons have been playing a LOT better of late, and they all need to for their jobs at this point, especially coach Dan Quinn. But I simply cannot see the Saints laying another egg against the Falcons like they did in their last meeting. The Saints, with only two losses are still in contention with the Niners for home field in the NFC. They call him the Brees, and the Saints keep rolling down that road.

Happy Thanksgiving folks. Eat some food, consume some libations, and settle in. And, from all of us here at Emptywheel, thank you. Thank you for being here, thank you for being so smart across the board, and thank you for participating. It is truly what makes us go. By the way, the banner is PuppyQ, aka the White Walker, who is firmly implanted on the bed, and not budging, as I compost this Trash. Music is Carvin' The Bird by the incomparable Charlie Parker.