



8-2 IN GREEN SHEET PLAYOFF PICKS 37-14 IN NFL PLAYOFF SIDES THE LAST FOUR+ SEASONS

NFL CLOSE CALLS – DIVISIONAL PLAYOFFS

Philadelphia Eagles (+2½) 15, Atlanta Falcons 10 (40½): Atlanta took advantage of two Eagles turnovers to lead 10-6 but Philadelphia cut the margin to 10-9 just before halftime, having missed an extra-point in the second quarter. Philadelphia took a 12-10 lead in the third quarter and had to settle for a 21-yard field goal with six minutes remaining, unable to put the game away. The five-point margin set-up for a wild finish relative to the spread as if Atlanta scored a touchdown they would certainly go for two with a one-point lead, meaning that a two-point conversion would have decided the spread outcome on a line that was at +3 much of the week before dipping to +2½. The Falcons converted a 4th down play just past midfield with just over three minutes remaining and eventually reached 1st-and-goal with 1:19 to go. Incomplete passes occurred on 1st and 2nd downs. The Falcons completed a short pass in bounds on 3rd down to reach the 2-yard line. Philadelphia took a timeout to preserve some time if they surrendered the lead and the game came down to a 4th down throw with Julio Jones unable to haul in the high pass with Matt Ryan under pressure as the home underdog Eagles held home field to advance to the NFC Championship. **New England Patriots (-13½) 35, Tennessee Titans 14 (48):** The Titans looked like a viable threat in this game with a 7-0 lead after the first quarter but the Patriots would score three touchdowns in the second quarter to take control. Tennessee's offensive line lost right tackle Jack Conklin and a banged-up Marcus Mariota was under great pressure in the second half. The Patriots had the outcome in hand with a 35-7 edge with 10 minutes remaining but the total remained in play. Tennessee got the ball back with about six minutes remaining and converted a 4th-and-11 at the New England 29-yard-line with just over three minutes remaining in a play that could have effectively sealed the 'under'. Eventually facing 4th-and-9 after the two-minute warning the Titans narrowly struck the end zone with a completion to Corey Davis, with the extra-point sealing the 'over'. That close sideline play withstood review as did another big play for the Titans on the drive which was too little too late for a Titans team that was burned by a couple of very questionable calls in New England's favor early in the game. **Minnesota Vikings (-5½) 29, New Orleans Saints 24 (46½):** The Vikings led 17-0 at halftime with those on the 'under' getting both teams to miss on field goal attempts before halftime. The 'under' pace remained strong with a 17-7 score through three quarters and a 20-14 score well into the fourth quarter. Some of the wildest minutes in playoff history would follow however as the Saints took a 21-20 lead at the 3:01 mark following a blocked punt. Minnesota reached the edge of field goal range at the 1:47 mark but continued to throw with a pair of incomplete passes and a completion out of bounds allowing very little time to come off the clock before Kai Forbath made a 53-yard field goal to put Minnesota up 23-21. The Vikings had a chance to seal the win and the 'under' but the Saints converted a 4th-and-10 throw with 45 seconds remaining and then delivered a 43-yard field goal to take the lead, hitting the 'over' in the process as well. With just 10 seconds on the clock the Vikings faced 3rd down from their own 39-yard-line with no timeouts remaining. Hoping to get a chunk of yardage to set up a field goal try Stefon Diggs hauled down a pass near the sideline and avoided a diving defender to have a clear path to the end zone for a miraculous finish. The Vikings eventually would take a knee on the conversion attempt following a long celebration as the final margin landed at five, in between an opening spread of -3½ and a closing number that hit -5½ at many outlets.

Between the Lines...

The last time Doug Marrone faced the Patriots as a head coach his Bills won 17-9 at New England late in the 2014 season. It was a meaningless Week 17 game for the Patriots with Jimmy Garoppolo playing much of the game. In 2015 Marrone was on the Jacksonville staff for the 51-17 win for the Patriots in the last meeting between these teams. The one head coach that has had the upper hand on Bill Belichick is with the Jaguars organization as former Giants head coach Tom Coughlin is an executive vice president with the team. Coughlin beat Belichick in a pair of Super Bowls but also lost to the Patriots as the Jaguars head coach in the 1997-1998 AFC Championship (Bill Parcells). Coughlin led the Jaguars to a playoff win over the Patriots (Pete Carroll) in the 1998-99 wild card round as well though both of those games were pre-Belichick/Brady. These teams met 10 years ago in the playoffs as well with New England winning 31-20 in the divisional round on the way to the Super Bowl XLII loss to the Giants, ending the perfect season.

The notion that it takes an elite quarterback to win a Super Bowl will be tested this season as Tom Brady stands alone as the proven signal-caller among the quartet of Blake Bortles, Nick Foles, and Case Keenum. Bortles had some success in mixed fourth season while Foles is obviously an injury replacement but does have plenty of wins on his resume as a former starter. Keenum has had a pro-bowl caliber season statistically in the most unexpected breakout season. One of the former Rams teammates Foles or Keenum will be starting in the Super Bowl as the Eagles or Vikings will have to advance despite a miserable NFC Championship track record for both franchises.

The Vikings have lost the last five NFC Championships they have been a part of with the most recent result the heartbreaking overtime loss to the Saints in the 2009-10 season, a game the Vikings had a massive yardage edge in but had five turnovers including the infamous Brett Favre interception. The Eagles have lost four of their last five NFC Championship games, only advancing to the Super Bowl in the 2004-05 season. Philadelphia, like Minnesota and Jacksonville, has never won the Super Bowl while the Patriots will look to tie Pittsburgh with a sixth title.

The Patriots are an outlier in a negative way in this final four grouping however as Minnesota, Jacksonville, and Philadelphia all rate among the league's top four total defenses with New England 29th. All four teams finished in the league's top 5 in scoring defense however. New England allowed 457 yards per game in the first four weeks of the season and 336 yards per game in the final 12 games as New England's defense certainly has looked the part of late.

A pair of late January outdoor games in the Northeast seems to suggest some potential weather concerns but the early week forecasts in Foxborough and Philadelphia are balmy with kickoff temperatures in upper 40s with clear conditions and limited wind for this time of year.

The past three NFC Championship home underdogs have all been +3½-point home underdogs with all three games being single-score results with the road favorites winning and covering in the two most recent instances (San Francisco 28-24 in '12-13, Green Bay 21-14 in '10-11) while Arizona bested the Eagles as a home underdog 32-25 in '08-09, the last championship appearance for Philadelphia. Since Jacksonville (-7) lost to the Titans 33-14 in the 1999-2000 AFC Championship, favorites of 7 or more in the AFC title game are on a 3-5 ATS run with three outright upsets, most recently with the Ravens (+8) winning 28-13 at New England in the 2012-13 AFC Championship. Best of Luck and on to this week's slate...

AFC CHAMPIONSHIP

SUNDAY, JANUARY 21, 2018

NEW ENGLAND (-9½) Jacksonville (46½) 2:05 PM

The Patriots will be playing in a seventh consecutive AFC championship, going 3-3 the past six seasons and 8-4 in the Brady/Belichick era. New England is 6-1 hosting the AFC Championship in that span with the lone loss in the 2012-13 season against the Ravens. Jacksonville went to the AFC Championship twice in the first five seasons of the existence of the franchise but this is the first return visit since the 1999-2000 season. Jacksonville's rise to being a top contender comes after failing to win more than five game in six straight seasons as one of the NFL's worst franchises in the last decade. Led by a defense that produced some of the league's best numbers particularly against the pass, the Jaguars allowed 42 points and 545 yards last week in Pittsburgh despite hanging on for the win. It is only the third time (back to 1980) that a team allowed 40 or more points in the playoffs and won. In the past two instances those teams allowed 40+ again the following week in losses. The excellent numbers for the Jaguars can be met with some suspicion given the marginal quarterback play in the AFC South but in going 4-0 against Ben Roethlisberger, Russell Wilson, and Philip Rivers the Jaguars had 10 interceptions. The Rams beat the Jaguars but Jared Goff had just 124 passing yards in that game as the defense has fared well against some of the league's top offenses, though obviously Brady and the Patriots are on another level. The size in the Jacksonville secondary also figures to give the Jaguars a more credible opportunity to shut down the biggest weapon for New England in Rob Gronkowski. Both teams have been better in run defense in the second half of the season than the season numbers suggest and in the last six home games the Patriots have allowed just 12.2 points per game after allowing 108 points in the first three home games of the season. The Jaguars won outdoors in cold weather last week though the current weather projection will call for unseasonably warm and calm conditions for Sunday at Gillette Stadium. This line will be the largest conference championship game spread since New England won but failed to cover in the 2007-08 season with a 21-12 win over San Diego at -14 with the Patriots 17-0 at the time before eventually losing in the Super Bowl. These teams had nearly identical scoring margins and both had strong positive turnover differentials while catching some big breaks in the divisional round wins. New England caught a pair of incredibly favorable calls early last week that dramatically changed the trajectory of the game while the Titans lost their best offensive lineman and had Marcus Mariota unable to rush at full strength due to a leg injury. Jacksonville meanwhile jumped out to a huge early lead thanks to scoring off turnovers and just barely held on while Pittsburgh posted huge numbers in the comeback bid. The Patriots have some distractions with the rumored conflict between key figures while both coordinators look likely to be in line for head coaching jobs. Jacksonville hasn't proven they can handle success and immaturity in the aftermath of last week's big win is cause for concern versus the stoic Patriots organization with New England also having a clear scheduling edge with an extra day and another home game. There is a lot to like in the numbers to support Jacksonville, as there also was for Tennessee last week but ultimately with the stakes and circumstances the experience and track record edges for the Patriots with a dramatic quarterback disparity makes it difficult to fade the defending champions, even with a steep favorite price. New England's defense held Tennessee to just 4.4 yards per play, effectively stopping the run and Jacksonville benefitted from playing with the lead last week and not needing to lean on Blake Bortles to make plays. New England displayed a great pass rush last week and despite the numbers suggesting a possible ground edge for the Jaguars, in the past four home games New England has outrushed its foes by 381 yards. Pittsburgh is the only quality team Jacksonville beat on the road this season and the great run for the Jaguars looks likely to end. **PATRIOTS BY 13**

TOTAL OF THE WEEK

NFL: 'UNDER 46½ Jacksonville at New England

The Jaguars have playoff wins in a 13-point game and an 87-point game for a great contrast but ultimately the big plays via turnovers and the huge early lead shifted a lot of things in last week's game at Pittsburgh. New England's defense is much better than the season numbers suggest as the first four weeks skew the numbers and there were only seven scoring drives in last week's win for New England that barely went 'over' as all the scoring came via touchdowns with no field goals with New England converting 11 3rd down plays. Jacksonville was one of the NFL's best on 3rd down defense and both teams will likely be cautious seeking to avoid a big early mistake in this game. 'Under' has hit in 5 of the last 6 AFC Championships and 6 of the last 7 AFC title games in Foxboro although the 'over' is 6-0-1 in the last seven New England home playoff games.

NFC CHAMPIONSHIP

SUNDAY, JANUARY 21, 2018

Minnesota (-3½) PHILADELPHIA (38) 5:40 PM

The Vikings won three NFC Championships in four years in the late 1970s but they have now lost five straight NFC Championship appearances with a few memorable collapses. After blowing a 17-0 lead last week the Vikings erased some playoff demons with a miraculous finish but the test will be more difficult outdoors on the road with a spot in the Super Bowl in Minneapolis at stake. The Eagles lost three consecutive NFC Championships in the early 2000s before finally getting to the Super Bowl in the 2004-05 season while also losing the 2008-09 NFC Championship, beating the Vikings in the wild card round that season for the last playoff meeting between these franchises. The storyline will lead with two unproven quarterbacks who both picked up their first playoff wins last week with Case Keenum and Nick Foles teammates with the Rams two years ago. Both did some things well last week but also had miscues and one of the journeymen will be playing in the Super Bowl in February. While the quarterbacks will get most of the attention this matchup is about two elite defensive teams. While Minnesota led the league in total and scoring defense Philadelphia wasn't far behind and has better overall numbers in regards to scoring, turnovers, and rushing production. The 10 points Atlanta scored last week came directly off two Philadelphia fumbles with the Eagles allowing an average of just 7.3 points per game in the last four home games, three of those games being after the Carson Wentz injury. Foles was very efficient last week against a strong Atlanta defense, completing nearly 77 percent of his passes for 8.2 yards per attempt despite only leading one touchdown drive. The Vikings only beat one playoff team on the road this season, scoring only 14 points in a win at Atlanta in November with limited production and a 4th quarter go-ahead score. The emotions for Minnesota off an incredible finish Sunday night could be difficult to restrain with a shorter week and travel while the Eagles punched their ticket Saturday and will stay at home. The weather doesn't look likely to be a big factor in the early week forecast but any cold or windy conditions will favor an Eagles running game that has posted 4.5 yards per rush this season. Philadelphia didn't have great rushing production last week and Minnesota is an even stronger defensive threat but it is a consistent attack that will compliment the passing game. As dominant as the Minnesota defense was in the first half the Saints were able to make great adjustments to post big numbers on the Vikings in the comeback and one of the early Minnesota touchdowns came off one of the Drew Brees interceptions. For his limitations Foles has just two interceptions in 101 passing attempts this season while in the past four outdoor games Keenum has five interceptions. Even with a shutout at Green Bay in Week 16 the Vikings allowed nearly 21 points per game in outdoor road games, going 0-2 with 57 points allowed in the two outdoor road games Minnesota played against playoff teams. The line is just set a half point above Atlanta's road favorite spread last week with the Falcons one play away from winning in Philadelphia last week and the Vikings winning in Atlanta in the regular season as well as featuring a significantly stronger overall profile. Last week's win was the first of four games with Foles starting that Philadelphia out-gained its opponent and they did catch the Falcons in a challenging spot with Atlanta coming off a west coast wild card win and in a fourth road game in five weeks. The Eagles won 21-10 in October of 2016 in the last meeting however that was with a 282-239 yardage deficit. **VIKINGS BY 1**

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

Jacksonville is 4-7 vs. NE since '96 – Jacksonville is 7-2 the last 9 as an underdog
 New England is 15-8-1 at home in the playoffs since '97 – NE is 15-7 as a 7+ fav. since '16
 Minnesota is 16-25 as a R/F since '01 – Minnesota is 8-13 in the playoffs since '89
 Philadelphia is 10-3 vs. Minnesota since '88 – Philadelphia is 16-21 as a dog since '12

NFL PLAYOFFS	Line	Final	FD	Rushing	Passing	TO			
TITANS	44	22	23	31	202	19	31	195	2
CHIEFS	-9	21	19	16	69	24	33	256	0
FALCONS	48.5	26	20	39	124	21	30	198	0
RAMS	-6	13	19	16	115	24	45	246	2
BILLS	39.5	3	20	32	130	18	40	133	2
JAGUARS	-9	10	15	34	155	12	23	75	0
PANTHERS	47.5	26	24	26	107	24	41	306	0
SAINTS	-6.5	31	21	22	41	23	33	369	1
FALCONS	-2.5	10	19	20	86	22	36	195	0
EAGLES	40.5	15	22	32	96	23	30	238	2
TITANS	48	14	15	16	65	22	37	202	0
PATRIOTS	-13.5	35	31	27	101	35	53	337	0
JAGUARS	41	45	22	35	164	14	26	214	0
STEELERS	-7	42	28	18	83	37	58	462	2
SAINTS	46.5	24	23	24	80	25	41	278	2
VIKINGS	-5.5	29	24	29	95	25	40	308	1