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**BEST GIFT THIS WEEKEND? A PLAYOFF BERTH!;**  
**PATS SEEK FIRST 15-0 START IN HISTORY**

The weather outside is frightful...and so is the scrambling inside the NFL.

With two weeks to go, the battle for playoff berths is still full-tilt.

"It's already the playoffs for us," says Cleveland Browns linebacker **WILLIE MC GINEST**, speaking, really, for all clubs in the playoff cauldron. "That's the way we've been looking at these games and that's what we have to keep doing."

"These games" that McGinest cites came in the first three weeks of December and certainly include the final two of the season – this week and next. It is definitely crunch time.

With two weeks to go, seven clubs have made the playoffs, all by winning their divisions. Nine teams are vying for the remaining five playoff spots. All told, 16 clubs are in contention for Super Bowl XLII with two weeks to go.

"It's pretty much like the playoffs for us right now," says Tennessee Titans center-guard **EUGENE AMANO**. "We have to win every week to stay alive."

Of course, a team that has done just that -- win every week -- can add to that string this week. The 14-0 New England Patriots can become the first team in history to win the first 15 games of a season when they host the Miami Dolphins. The Patriots also can tie the NFL record they set in 2003-04 of 18 consecutive regular-season victories. New England won its final three games of 2006.

So as winter officially begins this Saturday and Christmas is around the corner, the NFL has a big, nicely wrapped gift for its millions of fans – four national TV games on the holiday weekend and a schedule packed with playoff pressure:

**PITTSBURGH STEELERS (9-5) at ST. LOUIS RAMS (3-11) (Thursday night, NFL Network, 8:00 PM ET)**

**STORYLINE: Steelers can set themselves up for NFL's last division title.**

But on their heels are the Cleveland Browns, winners of four of their last five. In fact, the Browns are tied with Pittsburgh for first in the AFC North, but the Steelers hold the tiebreaker, having won the season series.

After going 5-1 from late October through early December, Pittsburgh has lost its last two. "Who cares about momentum," says Steelers **LB LARRY FOOTE**. "We just have to win Thursday and get in the tournament."

St. Louis will not be an easy step in the Steelers' push. Rams **RB STEVEN JACKSON** has rushed for at least 90 yards in each of his past five games, including 143 last week (it will be an attractive RB night, because Pittsburgh's All-Star **WILLIE PARKER** leads the NFL in rushing with 1,317 yards). And Pro Bowl **QB BEN ROETHLISBERGER** will have to be his pin-point best. Rams **S OSHIOMOGHO ATOGWE** picked off **BRETT FAVRE** twice last week and ties for the NFC INT lead (7).

It will indeed be a big RB night: At halftime, the Rams will retire the uniform number (28) of NFL Network analyst **MARSHALL FAULK**, 2000 NFL MVP and the club's all-time TD leader (85).

**DALLAS COWBOYS (12-2) at CAROLINA PANTHERS (6-8) (Saturday night, NFL Network, 8:00 PM ET)**

**STORYLINE: Homefield?**

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**NFL HOLIDAY FACTOID**

**HO-HO-HO!** Quarterback **JAY CUTLER**, who leads the Denver Broncos against the San Diego Chargers on Monday night, December 24, was born in Santa Claus, Indiana.

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That's what the Cowboys will be going for Saturday night. Top the Panthers and have 12-2 Green Bay lose Sunday and Dallas will wrap up its first NFC top seed since 1995. The Cowboys -- already with a first-round bye -- hold the tiebreaker advantage with a 37-27 November win over the Pack.

"We still have a chance to do what we are trying to do," says Dallas Pro Bowl **QB TONY ROMO**, who will try to lead the Cowboys to their 13th win, tying 1992 for the most in club history.

The Panthers are in the race, too, and are two games out of the sixth seed. Plus, they have some extra familiarity with the Cowboys.

Carolina rookie **QB MATT MOORE** spent training camp with Dallas -- compiling a 100.1 passer rating in three preseason games -- and was one of their final cuts. Claimed by Carolina, he made his starting debut last week, taking the club to a 13-10 win over NFC West champ Seattle. Moore wasn't sacked and threw no interceptions. "It's good to see young guys starting their career," says Carolina **DE MIKE RUCKER**. "The future is huge for them." Especially this week.

#### PHILADELPHIA EAGLES (6-8) at NEW ORLEANS SAINTS (7-7)

##### **STORYLINE: Saints alive!**

That they are. New Orleans is tied with Washington one game behind sixth-place Minnesota in the NFC rankings. They, too, like the Vikings and Redskins, never gave up on the season and have won seven of their past 10. "We're fighting still," says New Orleans head coach **SEAN PAYTON**. "We're scratching."

The man who is leading a great deal of that fighting for New Orleans is **QB DREW BREES**, who directs the league's fifth-ranked offense and is second in the league in completion percentage (68.7). "He has played at a very high level the last two-thirds of the season," says Payton.

These teams are familiar with each other, so this should be a tight game. They met twice last season, with both games being decided by identical three-point scores (27-24) in New Orleans' favor, including a Divisional Playoff meeting.

The Saints' eighth-ranked NFL rush defense will have to find a way to stop the league's scrimmage-yard leader (1,896), **RB BRIAN WESTBROOK**, just voted to his second Pro Bowl. New Orleans may get back **RB REGGIE BUSH** (leg).

#### WASHINGTON REDSKINS (7-7) at MINNESOTA VIKINGS (8-6) (Sunday night, NBC, 8:15 PM ET)

##### **STORYLINE: Both clubs in the hunt!**

The Vikings, who have resurrected their season by winning five in a row after being shut out 34-0 by Green Bay on November 11, can clinch their first playoff berth since 2004 with a win and a New Orleans loss or tie. The Redskins, another turnaround team that has won their last two after a four-game losing streak, are tied with New Orleans, one game out of the sixth seed behind the Vikings.

"You've got a chance to make the playoffs," says Washington head coach **JOE GIBBS**. "It's a big deal. It's motivation."

Redskins **RB CLINTON PORTIS** (No. 8 in NFL rushing with 1,082 yards) and his OL will certainly be motivated -- what else could they be? -- by trying to crack open the Vikings interior line of mammoth **DTs KEVIN** and **PAT WILLIAMS**. The duo -- which combines for 115 tackles -- has been named as starters on the 2008 Pro Bowl squad.

The Vikings are No. 1 in rush offense -- thanks to rookie All-Star **ADRIAN PETERSON** and **CHESTER TAYLOR** -- and No. 1 in rush defense. "And we are facing Minnesota in their dome," says Gibbs. "It's going to be a tough deal for us."

#### DENVER BRONCOS (6-8) at SAN DIEGO CHARGERS (9-5) (Monday night, ESPN, 8:00 PM ET)

##### **STORYLINE: No. 3 coming up?**

That's the Chargers' quest. Win their next two games and San Diego will claim the No. 3 seed in the AFC. Not bad for a team that started 1-3 and has now won its third division title in the past four years. "Sometimes," says Chargers **RB LA DAINIAN TOMLINSON**, "you just have to let the course of a season play out."

That the Chargers have done, winning five of their past six and four in a row. They started their season turnaround on October 7 with a 41-3 victory at Denver, the first of three wins in a row.

An interesting matchup to watch will be Broncos **QB JAY CUTLER**, No. 5 in the league in third-down passer rating (102.6) against All-Star **CB ANTONIO CROMARTIE**, who tops the NFL in INTs with 10 -- all coming in the last nine games.

## 2007 NFL STANDINGS

### AFC - 2007 Regular Season

#### AFC East

Team	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	Net	Pts	TD	Home	Road	Div	Pct	Conf	Pct	Non-Conf	Streak	Last 5
*- New England Patriots	14	0	0	1.000	523	232	291	67	7-0	7-0	5-0	1.000	11-0	1.000	3-0	14W	5-0	
Buffalo Bills	7	7	0	.500	222	299	-77	22	4-3	3-4	4-2	.667	6-6	.500	1-1	1L	2-3	
New York Jets	3	11	0	.214	249	335	-86	24	2-5	1-6	2-4	.333	3-7	.300	0-4	2L	2-3	
Miami Dolphins	1	13	0	.071	235	371	-136	25	1-6	0-7	0-5	.000	1-9	.100	0-4	1W	1-4	

#### AFC North

Team	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	Net	Pts	TD	Home	Road	Div	Pct	Conf	Pct	Non-Conf	Streak	Last 5
Pittsburgh Steelers	9	5	0	.643	331	218	113	38	7-1	2-4	5-0	1.000	7-4	.636	2-1	2L	2-3	
Cleveland Browns	9	5	0	.643	368	356	12	42	6-1	3-4	3-2	.600	7-4	.636	2-1	2W	4-1	
Cincinnati Bengals	5	9	0	.357	323	346	-23	34	4-3	1-6	2-3	.400	4-6	.400	1-3	1L	2-3	
Baltimore Ravens	4	10	0	.286	242	336	-94	24	3-4	1-6	0-5	.000	1-10	.091	3-0	8L	0-5	

#### AFC South

Team	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	Net	Pts	TD	Home	Road	Div	Pct	Conf	Pct	Non-Conf	Streak	Last 5
z- Indianapolis Colts	12	2	0	.857	402	231	171	48	5-1	7-1	4-0	1.000	8-2	.800	4-0	5W	5-0	
Jacksonville Jaguars	10	4	0	.714	334	251	83	39	5-2	5-2	2-3	.400	7-3	.700	3-1	2W	4-1	
Tennessee Titans	8	6	0	.571	275	281	-6	26	4-3	4-3	3-2	.600	5-5	.500	3-1	1W	2-3	
Houston Texans	7	7	0	.500	322	318	4	35	5-2	2-5	0-4	.000	4-6	.400	3-1	2W	3-2	

#### AFC West

Team	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	Net	Pts	TD	Home	Road	Div	Pct	Conf	Pct	Non-Conf	Streak	Last 5
z- San Diego Chargers	9	5	0	.643	359	264	95	44	6-1	3-4	3-1	.750	7-3	.700	2-2	4W	4-1	
Denver Broncos	6	8	0	.429	295	367	-72	32	4-3	2-5	3-2	.600	6-5	.545	0-3	1L	2-3	
Oakland Raiders	4	10	0	.286	255	319	-64	27	2-5	2-5	2-3	.400	4-6	.400	0-4	2L	2-3	
Kansas City Chiefs	4	10	0	.286	196	297	-101	20	2-6	2-4	2-4	.333	3-8	.273	1-2	7L	0-5	

### NFC - 2007 Regular Season

#### NFC East

Team	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	Net	Pts	TD	Home	Road	Div	Pct	Conf	Pct	Non-Conf	Streak	Last 5
z- Dallas Cowboys	12	2	0	.857	429	285	144	52	6-2	6-0	4-1	.800	9-1	.900	3-1	1L	4-1	
New York Giants	9	5	0	.643	300	292	8	34	3-4	6-1	3-3	.500	7-5	.583	2-0	1L	3-2	
Washington Redskins	7	7	0	.500	275	283	-8	28	4-3	3-4	2-3	.400	5-5	.500	2-2	2W	2-3	
Philadelphia Eagles	6	8	0	.429	281	268	13	31	2-5	4-3	2-4	.333	4-7	.364	2-1	1W	2-3	

#### NFC North

Team	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	Net	Pts	TD	Home	Road	Div	Pct	Conf	Pct	Non-Conf	Streak	Last 5
z- Green Bay Packers	12	2	0	.857	394	243	151	44	6-1	6-1	3-1	.750	8-2	.800	4-0	2W	4-1	
Minnesota Vikings	8	6	0	.571	325	257	68	38	5-2	3-4	3-3	.500	6-5	.545	2-1	5W	5-0	
Detroit Lions	6	8	0	.429	308	390	-82	34	4-3	2-5	3-2	.600	4-7	.364	2-1	6L	0-5	
Chicago Bears	5	9	0	.357	266	316	-50	26	2-4	3-5	1-4	.200	2-8	.200	3-1	3L	1-4	

#### NFC South

Team	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	Net	Pts	TD	Home	Road	Div	Pct	Conf	Pct	Non-Conf	Streak	Last 5
z- Tampa Bay Buccaneers	9	5	0	.643	292	218	74	32	6-1	3-4	5-0	1.000	8-2	.800	1-3	1W	4-1	
New Orleans Saints	7	7	0	.500	331	317	14	42	3-4	4-3	3-3	.500	6-4	.600	1-3	2W	3-2	
Carolina Panthers	6	8	0	.429	223	304	-81	23	2-5	4-3	2-3	.400	6-4	.600	0-4	1W	2-3	
Atlanta Falcons	3	11	0	.214	188	343	-155	18	2-5	1-6	1-5	.167	2-8	.200	1-3	5L	0-5	

#### NFC West

Team	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	Net	Pts	TD	Home	Road	Div	Pct	Conf	Pct	Non-Conf	Streak	Last 5
z- Seattle Seahawks	9	5	0	.643	325	241	84	36	6-1	3-4	5-1	.833	8-3	.727	1-2	1L	4-1	
Arizona Cardinals	6	8	0	.429	326	353	-27	40	4-2	2-6	2-3	.400	3-7	.300	3-1	2L	2-3	
San Francisco 49ers	4	10	0	.286	191	325	-134	20	2-5	2-5	3-3	.500	3-8	.273	1-2	1W	2-3	
St. Louis Rams	3	11	0	.214	220	349	-129	22	1-6	2-5	1-4	.200	3-8	.273	0-3	2L	2-3	

x - Clinched playoff, y - Clinched Wild Card, z - Clinched Division

\* - Clinched Division and Homefield Advantage

## LAST WEEK'S NFL RESULTS (DECEMBER 13, 15-17)

(Home team in CAPS)

### Thursday, December 13

HOUSTON 31, Denver 13

### Saturday, December 15

SAN FRANCISCO 20, Cincinnati 13

### Sunday, December 16

CAROLINA 13, Seattle 10

CLEVELAND 8, Buffalo 0

Tennessee 26, KANSAS CITY 17

MIAMI 22, Baltimore 16 (OT)

NEW ENGLAND 20, N.Y. Jets 10

### Sunday, December 16, Cont.'d.

NEW ORLEANS 31, Arizona 24

Jacksonville 29, PITTSBURGH 22

Green Bay 33, ST. LOUIS 14

TAMPA BAY 37, Atlanta 3

Indianapolis 21, OAKLAND 14

Philadelphia 10, DALLAS 6

SAN DIEGO 51, Detroit 14

Washington 22, N.Y. GIANTS 10

### Monday, December 17

MINNESOTA 20, Chicago 13

## WEEK 16 SCHEDULE – DECEMBER 20, 22-24

(All times local)

### Thursday, December 20

Pittsburgh at St. Louis, 7:00 PM (NFL Network)

### Saturday, December 22

Dallas at Carolina, 8:00 PM (NFL Network)

### Sunday, December 23

N.Y. Giants at Buffalo, 1:00 PM

Green Bay at Chicago, 12:00 PM

Cleveland at Cincinnati, 1:00 PM

Kansas City at Detroit, 1:00 PM

Houston at Indianapolis, 1:00 PM

### Sunday, December 23, Cont.'d.

Oakland at Jacksonville, 1:00 PM

Philadelphia at New Orleans, 12:00 PM

Atlanta at Arizona, 2:05 PM

Tampa Bay at San Francisco, 1:05 PM

Miami at New England, 4:15 PM

Baltimore at Seattle, 1:15 PM

N.Y. Jets at Tennessee, 3:15 PM

Washington at Minnesota, 7:15 PM (NBC)

### Monday, December 24

Denver at San Diego, 5:00 PM (ESPN)