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NFL-POST-3 1/13/09

ONE AWAY FROM TAMPA BAY! CARDINALS TAKE ON EAGLES, STEELERS CONFRONT RAVENS IN CHAMPIONSHIP GAMES

Hot clubs looking to book travel to a hot climate.

It has all come down to the final four teams of the 2008 NFL playoffs -- the streaking Arizona Cardinals, Baltimore Ravens, Philadelphia Eagles and Pittsburgh Steelers -- and their quest this Sunday to play in sunny Tampa Bay, Florida in Super Bowl XLIII on February 1.

But first, there is the hurdle of the conference championship games on Sunday when the Eagles visit the Cardinals at 3:00 PM ET on FOX and the Ravens play at the Steelers at 6:30 PM ET on CBS.

"We've got another week of work," says Eagles quarterback **DONOVAN MC NABB**, gladly. Indeed. There's another big day looming, and those teams that have taken these playoffs and turned them upside down will be ready to produce more surprises and then some in the championship games:

- The teams are hot! Since their midseasons (their final eight games, plus the playoffs), Arizona has won six of its last 10, Baltimore eight of its last 10, Philadelphia six and a tie in its last 10, and Pittsburgh seven of its last nine. That adds up to a combined .705 winning percentage heading into Championship week.
- The championship quarterbacks have an impressive playoff record -- even the "Unflappable Flacco," as he is being called. They pack two Super Bowl titles (**BEN ROETHLISBERGER** and **KURT WARNER**), four Super Bowl appearances (McNabb, Roethlisberger and Warner), and eight championship game appearances (the latter three). The fourth quarterback in action Sunday? That's Baltimore's **JOE FLACCO** -- the "Unflappable Flacco" -- who has become the first rookie QB to win his first two playoff games.
- These guys are relentless! They don't seem to care *where* they were seeded -- they keep coming! "We're not through yet," says Baltimore linebacker **BART SCOTT**. This is the first time since the NFL went to 12 playoff teams in 1990 that two No. 6 seeds (Baltimore and Philadelphia) have made the championship game round. Recent history is on their side. In 2006, sixth-seeded Pittsburgh won Super Bowl XL, winning all their games on the road. The fifth-seeded New York Giants won all road games, too, last season in taking Super Bowl XLII.
- Road warriors? That they are. So far, the road team has won five of the eight playoff games, tying the 2005 playoffs for the most in those two rounds since 1990 when the NFL went to 12 playoff teams.

So here they go, one away from Tampa Bay. How the AFC and NFC Championship Games break down:

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES (11-6-1) at ARIZONA CARDINALS (11-7) (Sunday, FOX, 3:00 PM ET)

STORYLINE: Better with age.

That's how Eagles head coach **ANDY REID** described his quarterback **DONOVAN MC NABB** the day after the Divisionals. That description stands for *both* QBs in this game. And how they go will be key to whether their teams go on.

McNabb has been on fire since he was sat down at halftime of the Eagles' November 23 game against Baltimore. The next week on Thanksgiving night he faced -- guess who? -- Arizona, and was the old firing Donovan, throwing for 260 yards with four touchdowns and no interceptions. Including that night, the 32-year-old McNabb has thrown for 11 TDs through the Divisionals with a 91.3 passer rating.

NFL CHAMPIONSHIP GAME FACTOID

BIG FOLLOW-UP: Sunday will mark the second time in NFL history that a stadium -- Arizona's University of Phoenix Stadium -- has hosted a conference championship game the year after hosting a Super Bowl (Miami's Orange Bowl, 1971 AFC Championship after Super Bowl V).

His counterpart, 37-year-old **KURT WARNER**, with a Super Bowl title under his belt, flung it this season like his young days in NFL Europe. From October 26 to November 23, he had five consecutive games of 300 yards passing (one shy of the NFL record he shares with **RICH GANNON** and **STEVE YOUNG**).

These guys can light it up! They ignite the league's No. 2 (Cardinals) and No. 6 (Eagles) passing games. Everyone knows Arizona's three fleet receivers – **LARRY FITZGERALD**, **ANQUAN BOLDIN** (hamstring) and **STEVE BREASTON** – who became this year only the second teammate trio in history with 75 catches apiece.

The Eagles' receivers are somewhat unheralded, but "are stepping up" for McNabb, says Reid. **DE SEAN JACKSON** (Eagles' rookie record 912 receiving yards) can be their game-breaker, but the Cards also have to be wary of possession **WR KEVIN CURTIS** (two key first-down receptions in the Divisional) and **TE BRENT CELEK** (nine catches, one TD in the playoffs so far).

And let's not forget the run game. Eagles **RB BRIAN WESTBROOK**, who has shown he can do it all over the field, registered four TDs against Arizona in that Thanksgiving game. His peer with Arizona, **EDGERRIN JAMES**, quiet for a good part of the season, has rushed for 230 yards in the past three games.

Of course, all these guys will be going against formidable defenses. Philly defensive coordinator **JIM JOHNSON** can and will sent his blitzes from anywhere at any time. Sixteen Eagles recorded a sack this year, including six by safeties and two by cornerbacks. Arizona's defense is speedy, as in rookie **CB DOMINIQUE ROGERS-CROMARTIE** (nicknamed "DRC" by teammates), who already has two interceptions in the playoffs.

Matchup to watch: Cardinals acrobatic wideout Fitzgerald against Eagles **CB ASANTE SAMUEL**, with two '08 playoff INTs (for one TD). "You've got to be able to jump to the highest point with Fitzgerald," says Samuel.

BALTIMORE RAVENS (13-5) at PITTSBURGH STEELERS (13-4) (Sunday, CBS, 6:30 PM ET)
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STORYLINE: There are rivalries, then there's "Ravens-Steelers."

"It's going to be a battle," says Steelers **QB BEN ROETHLISBERGER**. "I have a feeling it's going to be one for the ages."

Wow, that puts it in perspective! Indeed, these two tough teams – ranked first (Steelers) and second (Ravens) in NFL defense this year – are *serious* competitors. They meet twice a year in the AFC North and it always seems to be a pitched battle. This year, Pittsburgh swept both games – barely. They won in overtime 23-20 on September 29 and then 13-9 on December 14.

If the Steelers win Sunday, it would be only the 12th time in the 56 instances that teams have met three times in a season since 1970 that a three-game sweep occurred.

Think **RAY LEWIS** and the boys will be pumped not to let that happen? The Ravens led the league in takeaways this year (34) and won the turnover battle (8-1) against Miami in the Wild Card and Tennessee in the Divisionals. Roethlisberger will have to contend with ball-hawking safety **ED REED**, who led the NFL in pickoffs this year (9).

Meanwhile, the Steelers will be "blitzburghing" rookie **QB JOE FLACCO**, who threw only five interceptions over the Ravens' final 11 games. Including the playoffs, the first-round draft choice from Delaware is 7-3 on the road. "You look in his eyes at big moments and you try to read his eyes but there's nothing to read," says Baltimore **TE TODD HEAP** of the unflappable Flacco. "He's always the same."

Flacco will be harassed by a stellar Steelers linebacking crew led by the Associated Press' 2008 NFL Defensive Player of the Year **JAMES HARRISON**, who set the club's sack record this year (16.0). But Harrison is not the only potent weapon on the Steelers' LB corps. **LA MARR WOODLEY** had 11.5 sacks in his first year as a starter and **JAMES FARRIOR** led the team in tackles (146) for a defense that gave up the league's fewest points (223), allowed only one team to gain 300 yards and did not permit a 100-yard rusher or 300-yard passer.

And if it's a cold, bitter Pittsburgh day? That's OK. Each team's running game seems to be well in gear. Steelers **RB WILLIE PARKER** looks to be healthy again and comes off a vintage Parker 27-carry, 146-yard, two-TD day Divisional. The Baltimore RB load will be carried by Pro Bowl **FB LE' RON MC CLAIN** and **WILLIS MC GAHEE**, who evenly shared 24 carries last week.

So the final playoff game before Super Bowl XLIII will be a big-time rivalry matchup. "It would be a big game if it was a scrimmage," says Steelers head coach **MIKE TOMLIN** of Sunday's grudge meeting. "This is for the AFC Championship."

Twosome to watch: The starting AFC Pro Bowl safeties – Baltimore's Reed and Pittsburgh's **TROY POLAMALU** -- will be all over the field. "It's about playing a physical football game and causing turnovers," says Reed. Between them, they had 16 interceptions this season (Reed, 9; Polamalu, 7).

2008 NFL STANDINGS

American Football Conference - 2008 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
z- Miami Dolphins	11	5	0	.688	345	317	28	40	5-3	6-2	4-2	.667	8-4	.667	3-1	5W	5-0
New England Patriots	11	5	0	.688	410	309	101	43	5-3	6-2	4-2	.667	7-5	.583	4-0	4W	4-1
New York Jets	9	7	0	.563	405	356	49	48	5-3	4-4	4-2	.667	7-5	.583	2-2	2L	1-4
Buffalo Bills	7	9	0	.438	336	342	-6	35	3-5	4-4	0-6	.000	5-7	.417	2-2	1L	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
z- Pittsburgh Steelers	12	4	0	.750	347	223	124	38	6-2	6-2	6-0	1.000	10-2	.833	2-2	1W	4-1
y- Baltimore Ravens	11	5	0	.688	385	244	141	42	6-2	5-3	4-2	.667	8-4	.667	3-1	2W	4-1
Cincinnati Bengals	4	11	1	.281	204	364	-160	20	3-4-1	1-7	1-5	.167	3-9	.250	1-2-1	3W	3-2
Cleveland Browns	4	12	0	.250	232	350	-118	20	1-7	3-5	1-5	.167	3-9	.250	1-3	6L	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
*- Tennessee Titans	13	3	0	.813	375	234	141	41	7-1	6-2	4-2	.667	9-3	.750	4-0	1L	3-2
y- Indianapolis Colts	12	4	0	.750	377	298	79	45	6-2	6-2	4-2	.667	10-2	.833	2-2	9W	5-0
Houston Texans	8	8	0	.500	366	394	-28	40	6-2	2-6	2-4	.333	5-7	.417	3-1	1W	4-1
Jacksonville Jaguars	5	11	0	.313	302	367	-65	35	2-6	3-5	2-4	.333	3-9	.250	2-2	2L	1-4
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	8	8	0	.500	439	347	92	51	5-3	3-5	5-1	.833	7-5	.583	1-3	4W	4-1
Denver Broncos	8	8	0	.500	370	448	-78	42	4-4	4-4	3-3	.500	5-7	.417	3-1	3L	2-3
Oakland Raiders	5	11	0	.313	263	388	-125	27	2-6	3-5	2-4	.333	4-8	.333	1-3	2W	2-3
Kansas City Chiefs	2	14	0	.125	291	440	-149	35	1-7	1-7	2-4	.333	2-10	.167	0-4	4L	1-4
National Football Conference - 2008 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
*- New York Giants	12	4	0	.750	427	294	133	45	7-1	5-3	4-2	.667	9-3	.750	3-1	1L	2-3
y- Philadelphia Eagles	9	6	1	.594	416	289	127	45	6-2	3-4-1	2-4	.333	7-5	.583	2-1-1	1W	4-1
Dallas Cowboys	9	7	0	.563	362	365	-3	43	6-2	3-5	3-3	.500	7-5	.583	2-2	2L	2-3
Washington Redskins	8	8	0	.500	265	296	-31	27	4-4	4-4	3-3	.500	7-5	.583	1-3	1L	1-4
NFC North Team	W	L	T	▼Pct	PF	PA	Net Pts	TD	Home	Road	Div	Pct	Conf	Pct	Non-Conf	Streak	Last 5
z- Minnesota Vikings	10	6	0	.625	379	333	46	41	6-2	4-4	4-2	.667	8-4	.667	2-2	1W	4-1
Chicago Bears	9	7	0	.563	375	350	25	42	6-2	3-5	4-2	.667	7-5	.583	2-2	1L	3-2
Green Bay Packers	6	10	0	.375	419	380	39	48	4-4	2-6	4-2	.667	5-7	.417	1-3	1W	1-4
Detroit Lions	0	16	0	.000	268	517	-249	29	0-8	0-8	0-6	.000	0-12	.000	0-4	16L	0-5
NFC South Team	W	L	T	▼Pct	PF	PA	Net Pts	TD	Home	Road	Div	Pct	Conf	Pct	Non-Conf	Streak	Last 5
z- Carolina Panthers	12	4	0	.750	414	329	85	47	8-0	4-4	4-2	.667	8-4	.667	4-0	1W	4-1
y- Atlanta Falcons	11	5	0	.688	391	325	66	43	7-1	4-4	3-3	.500	8-4	.667	3-1	3W	4-1
Tampa Bay Buccaneers	9	7	0	.563	361	323	38	38	6-2	3-5	3-3	.500	8-4	.667	1-3	4L	1-4
New Orleans Saints	8	8	0	.500	463	393	70	57	6-2	2-6	2-4	.333	5-7	.417	3-1	1L	2-3
NFC West Team	W	L	T	▼Pct	PF	PA	Net Pts	TD	Home	Road	Div	Pct	Conf	Pct	Non-Conf	Streak	Last 5
z- Arizona Cardinals	9	7	0	.563	427	426	1	51	6-2	3-5	6-0	1.000	7-5	.583	2-2	1W	2-3
San Francisco 49ers	7	9	0	.438	339	381	-42	36	4-4	3-5	3-3	.500	5-7	.417	2-2	2W	4-1
Seattle Seahawks	4	12	0	.250	294	392	-98	32	2-6	2-6	3-3	.500	3-9	.250	1-3	1L	2-3
St. Louis Rams	2	14	0	.125	232	465	-233	20	1-7	1-7	0-6	.000	2-10	.167	0-4	10L	0-5

x - Clinched playoff
 y - Clinched Wild Card
 z - Clinched Division
 *- Clinched Division and Homefield Advantage

LAST WEEK'S NFL RESULTS (DIVISIONAL ROUND– JANUARY 10-11)

(Home team in CAPS)

Saturday, January 10

Baltimore 13, TENNESSEE 10

Arizona 33, CAROLINA 13

Sunday, January 11

Philadelphia 23, N.Y. GIANTS 11

PITTSBURGH 35, San Diego 24

CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIP SCHEDULE – JANUARY 18

(All times Eastern)

Sunday, January 18

Philadelphia at Arizona, 3:00 PM (FOX)

Sunday, January 18

Baltimore at Pittsburgh, 6:30 PM (CBS)