

Gridiron Gold Sheet Football Newsletter

Dennis Stagliano's Gridiron Gold Sheet
An Award Winning Football Newsletter Since 1981



For the first time ever a sports service went the entire season without a single losing week. Ron Sataloff, President Sports Features Syndicate

Volume 39 Issue 8

October 27, 2020



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Recap

Okay, the Big Ten opening weekend of play is in the books. There was quite a contrast between the teams performance. There are three teams of national consequence – Ohio State, Michigan and Wisconsin. Next level are Rutgers, Indiana, Purdue and Northwestern (last in the Big Ten West a year ago after winning the division in 2018) are potential feel-good stories but aren't good enough to make an impact otherwise. Maryland, Illinois and Michigan State look like bad football teams. Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota and Penn State are already disappointments after week one. Let's see if they can shake the rust off this week.

Four very "2020 halloween" things happened last Saturday. FAU was without 43 players who began fall camp for its game against Marshall, managing to bring just 57 players on the trip – barely above the minimum of 53 required to play. The Owls have had five of their first six games canceled due to COVID-19.

Army improved to 6-1 and accepted a bid to the Independence Bowl in Shreveport, La., to face a team from the Pac-12, even though the Pac-12 hasn't started playing yet.

Chattanooga lost to Western Kentucky, 13-10, in the only game the Mocs will play this fall. They are scheduled to play an eight-game schedule in the Southern Conference in the spring.

Ohio State's game against Nebraska was limited to 1,344 fans in 105,000-seat Ohio Stadium due to COVID-19 restrictions. It's believed to be the smallest crowd to see the Buckeyes play since before 1910.

How about the Big 12? We know this about the 4-0 Mullet Men: They play terrific defense and have one of the best running backs in the country. This is a defense that is good well beyond the Big 12's ridiculously low standards of judging that side of the ball. Saturday's 24-21 victory over conference wannabe contender Iowa State kept the Cowboys in the hunt for a playoff spot – if they can get through the rest of the schedule unbeaten. The upcoming three-game stretch (Texas explosive offense, Kansas State good on both sides and at Oklahoma where the Sooners rarely lose) will tell a lot more about Mike Gundy's squad.

Big 10 crazy game Penn St and Indiana, Wow! Did Indiana QB Michael Penix Jr. actually cross the plane of the goal line during his controversial two-point run that gave the Hoosiers a 36-35 upset of No. 8 Penn State in overtime? With video replay the call on the field is always the tiebreaker when there is not indisputable evidence. But did Penix do enough on his stretching, air-borne dive to have his two-point conversion upheld? From the side angle it appears the ball may have hit the ground before it touched the pylon as he was stretched out. It's also a matter of dispute if he ever broke the plane of the goal line (from this vantage point it

appears he did not). Penn State coach James Franklin seems to have a legitimate beef, though there is not much recourse. He should be more upset at the sloppy play of his team.

As for the decision to go for two when it wasn't necessary to do so, Indiana coach Tom Allen – whose program had a 42-game losing streak against Top 10 teams entering the game – said he was “tired of being close.” Cigar time, coach.

AAC - How about Cincinnati gradually working its way into the playoff conversation. After mauling previously-unbeaten and 16th-ranked SMU in Dallas in an impressive 42-13 victory, the Bearcats are 4-0 and the lone unbeaten team in the AAC. But just how good are they? In non-conference play Cincy has beaten Austin Peay and 6-1 Army, but how much weight the latter carries nationally remains to be seen. A game against pesky Tulsa was postponed. There's also a victory over 1-5 South Florida. So the SMU win, especially the way it was accomplished, is particularly significant. A few more tests are coming, starting Saturday when a dangerous Memphis team visits. Houston follows and there's a game at UCF on Nov. 21 that will be challenging. Does an 11-0 Cincinnati (counting the league championship game) have a case for a playoff spot? It's going to be a longshot for sure.

On the Rise

Rutgers (1-0) - The Scarlet Knights snapped a 21-game Big Ten losing streak with a 38-27 victory over Michigan State in coach Greg Schiano's debut, Part 2. Seriously, who could have predicted that this Saturday's Rutgers-Indiana game would find the winner 2-0 in Big Ten play?

Coastal Carolina (5-0) - The Chanticleers already have three Sun Belt Conference wins for the first time since moving to the FBS level four years ago following Saturday's 28-14 victory over Georgia Southern. Coastal won the game without injured starting QB Grayson McCall too, with backup Fred Payton throwing for 252 yards and three TDs.

Wake Forest (3-2) - After losing to Clemson to start the season, then suffering a three-point loss to N.C. State, the Demon Deacons have won three straight. The latest was a 23-16 upset of No. 19-ranked Virginia Tech. With Syracuse next Wake should beware after the Orange starting scoring against Clemson last week.

On the decline

Pittsburgh (3-4) - Maybe opening with victories Austin Peay, Syracuse and Louisville wasn't such a good gauge of this team. Yes, the Panthers are without starting QB Kenny Pickett, and probably for the rest of the year. But they were not even competitive against Notre Dame and have lost four straight for the first time since 2007.

Maryland (0-1) - Terps look to be vying for the title as the Big Ten's worst team after a 43-3 loss to a Northwestern team that was last in the Big Ten West a year ago. They were 1-8 in league play last year and haven't had a winning season since 2014. In Year 2 under Mike Locksley it doesn't look as if anything has changed.

TCU (1-3) - Remember when Gary Patterson was considered a good coach? He's 13-16 the past three years and could be headed for his third losing record over the past five seasons after the Horned Frogs were manhandled by Oklahoma. Oklahoma was our Private Gold Pick winner. That's two straight losses for TCU since beating Texas, though there are plenty of winnable games left on the schedule. Where they'll never lose is at Buffalo Bros restaurant just off their campus. OMG! Best wings and pizza in Texas.

Who's hot

Nick Anderson, S, Wake Forest - The walkon had three interceptions in the Demon Deacons' 23-16 upset of No. 19 Virginia Tech, with two stopping deep drives by the Hokies. The third one ended Tech's final possession.

Desmond Ridder, QB, Cincinnati - The 6-4, 215-pound junior came up big in the Bearcats' biggest game so far, rushing for 179 yards and three touchdowns on eight carries while passing for 126 yards and a score in a 42-13 rout of No. 16 SMU.

Graham Mertz, QB, Wisconsin - The first freshman to start a season opener for the Badgers since 1978 showed what all the fuss was about during his recruitment, going 20-of-21 for 248 yards and five TDs in the 45-7 rout of Illinois. Mertz tied a school record by completing his first 17 passes and got a shout out from Patrick Mahomes. If Mahomes was impressed, this kid must be special.

Who's not

Collin Riccitelli, PK, Rice - The grad transfer from Stanford went viral when his potential game-winning 45-yard FG in OT bounced off all three bars of the goal post, twice hitting the crossbar, before falling into the end zone. A quadruple doink. Then his 40-yard field goal try in the second OT in a 40-34 loss was blocked.

Tualia Tagovailoa, QB, Maryland - What's in a name? Not much, apparently. Tua's younger brother made his debut a forgettable one in a 43-3 loss to Northwestern, throwing for just 95 yards with three interceptions with minus-16 rushing yards on three carries.

This Week

Memphis at Cincinnati, ESPN or ESPN2, Noon - Another test for the unbeaten Bearcats, who have quick turnaround after manhandling previously-unbeaten SMU. Memphis QB Brady White has been on a roll the past two games and will be a major test for the Bearcats defense.

Indiana at Rutgers, BTN, 3:30 p.m. -Only because the winner here will be 2-0 in Big Ten play – who saw that coming? – and unbeaten in the conference heading into November. Go figure.

Texas at Oklahoma State, FOX, 4 p.m. - Unbeaten Cowboys have to gear up again after a big victory over Iowa State with their defense likely to be tested by Sam Ehlinger and the Longhorns' explosive offense.

Ohio State at Penn State, ABC, 7:30 p.m. - Buckeyes will look to strengthen their playoff credentials with a road win over a Penn State team that has to be seething after the OT loss to Indiana. Penn St is a different beast when playing in Happy Valley. They will be extremely angry and hungry this week.

Last Week's Top Performers

- Malik Willis (LIB vs. USM): 24/31, 345 yds, 6 TD; 12 rush, 97 yds, 1 TD
- Desmond Ridder (CIN vs. SMU): 13/21, 126 yds, 1 TD; 8 rush, 179 yds, 3 TD
- Zac Thomas (APP vs. ARST): 16/23, 216 yds, 4 TD; 7 rush, 82 yds, 1 TD
- Dillon Gabriel (UCF vs. TULN): 26/40, 422 yds, 5 TD
- Najee Harris (BAMA vs. TENN): 157 yds from scrim, 3 TD
- Marlon Williams (UCF vs. TULN): 9 rec, 174 yds, 3 TD
- Zach Wilson (BYU vs. TXST): 19/25, 287 yds, 4 TD
- Javonte Williams (UNC vs. NCST): 19 rush, 160 yds, 3 TD
- Sean Clifford (PSU vs. IND): 24/35, 238 yds, 3 TD; 17 rush, 119 yds, 1 TD
- Travis Etienne (CLEM vs. SYR): 16 rush, 86 yds, 3 TD

This Week's Passing Leaders

Dillon Gabriel (UCF)	26/40, 422 yds, 5TD
Carson Strong (NEV)	39/52, 420 yds, 4TD
Mac Jones (BAMA)	25/31, 387 yds, 0TD
Anthony Russo (TEM)	41/63, 387 yds, 4TD
Jarret Doege (WVU)	32/50, 347 yds, 1TD

Last Week's Rushing Leaders

Breece Hall (ISU)	20 att 185 yds, 1TD
Desmond Ridder (CIN)	8 att 179 yds, 3TD
Javian Hawkins (LOU)	16 att 174 yds, 3TD
Sincere McCormick (UTSA)	37 att 165 yds, 3TD
Greg McCrae (UCF)	25 att 162 yds, 1TD

Last Week's Notable Team Numbers

Most Yards: UCF vs. Tulane, 689 yards ...
Most Takeaways: Rutgers vs. Michigan State, 7 takeaways
Most Combined Yards: UCF (689) vs. Tulane (340), 1029 combined yards ..
Most Points: Liberty vs. Southern Mississippi, 56 point

COLLEGE FOOTBALL BEST BETS

South Alabama + 6½ Over Georgia Southern by 7 **Thursday Night Game**

The South Alabama Jaguars look for a statement road win after splitting their last four games. The South Alabama Jaguars have lost six of their last seven road games. Desmond Trotter is completing 66.7 percent of his passes for 560 yards, three touchdowns and two interceptions. Trotter and Chance Lovertich have combined for eight touchdown passes and three interceptions. Jalen Tolbert and Kawaan Baker have combined for 707 receiving yards and seven touchdowns while Jalen Wayne has 15 receptions. The South Alabama Jaguars ground game is averaging 126.7 yards per contest, and Carlos Davis leads the way with 385 yards and two touchdowns. Defensively, South Alabama is allowing 27.5 points and 415 yards per game. Riley Cole leads the South Alabama Jaguars with 40 tackles, Jeremiah Littles has two sacks and Keith Gallmon has four pass deflections.

The Georgia Southern Eagles also look for a win after splitting their last four games. The Georgia Southern Eagles have won their last six home games. Shai Werts is completing 52.6 percent of his passes for 558 yards, five touchdowns and three interceptions. Werts has three touchdown passes in his last three games. Malik Murray and Wesley Kennedy III have combined for 266 receiving yards and one touchdown while Beau Johnson has five receptions. The Georgia Southern Eagles ground game is averaging 248.8 yards per contest, and J.D. King leads the way with 490 yards and four touchdowns. Defensively, Georgia Southern is allowing 20.8 points and 361.2 yards per game. Rashad Byrd leads the Georgia Southern Eagles with 34 tackles, Raymond Johnson III has 2.5 sacks and Derrick Canteen has two interceptions.

The Georgia Southern Eagles have a history of beating up on South Alabama and have been solid at home dating back to last season, but the Eagles have had issues this year when playing decent competition and I'm not 100 percent sold on this club. The South Alabama Jaguars are battle tested, they're more balanced on the offensive side and have combined for 68 points in their last two games. South Alabama is also 4-1 against the spread through five games this season. Georgia Southern just hasn't impressed me all that much up to this point and I don't care where this game is being played. **Give me South Alabama and the free touchdown.**

Projected Score: South Alabama 30, Georgia Southern 23

Marshall - 22½ Over FIU by 31 **Friday Night Game**

The Marshall Thundering Herd look for another victory to start 6-0. The Marshall Thundering Herd have won four of their last five road games. Grant Wells is completing 64 percent of his passes for 1,110 yards, eight touchdowns and four interceptions. Wells enters the game with 125 career pass attempts under his belt. Broc Thompson and Corey Gammage have combined for 395 receiving yards and one touchdown while Xavier Gaines has 12 receptions. The Marshall Thundering Herd ground game is averaging 197.6 yards per contest, and Brenden Knox leads the way with 556 yards and seven touchdowns. Defensively, Marshall is allowing 9.4 points and 272.8 yards per game. Tavante Beckett leads the Marshall Thundering Herd with 47 tackles, Darius Hodge has five sacks and Steven Gilmore has one interception.

The Florida International Panthers need a victory here to prevent their first 0-4 start since the 2016 CFB season. The Florida International Panthers have won six of their last eight home games. Stone Norton is completing 53.1 percent of his passes for 207 yards, three touchdowns and zero interceptions. Norton enters this game with 32 career pass attempts under his belt. Bryce Singleton and Nate Jefferson have combined for 152 receiving yards and two touchdowns while Sterling Palmer has five receptions. The Florida International Panthers ground game is averaging 170 yards per contest, and D'vonte Price leads the way with 303 yards and three touchdowns. Defensively, FIU is allowing 28.7 points and 458.3 yards per game. Richard Dames leads the Florida International Panthers with 24 tackles, Tevin Jones has two sacks and Josh Turner has one interception.

The Marshall Thundering Herd are the team to beat in the C-USA this season, and they've done nothing but impress up to this point. The Florida International Panthers seem to be getting worse and worse offensively, and they're coming off an outright home loss to FCS Jacksonville State. While you can argue FIU should be up for this game with a ranked team coming to town, it's hard to get behind the Panthers with any confidence.

Marshall is simply the better team across the board and is led by one of the better defenses in college football. I'm not sure how FIU is going to score. Marshall will certainly want to impress on national TV. Boatload of points, but it's Thundering Herd will stampede the Panthers. **Take Marshall and lay the lumber.**

Projected Score: Marshall 41, FIU 10

Michigan - 25 Over by Michigan State by 15

The Michigan State Spartans look to rebound from their season opening loss to Rutgers while beating their first ranked team since October of 2018. The Michigan State Spartans have lost three of their last four road games. Rocky Lombardi is completing 70.5 percent of his passes for 319 yards, three touchdowns and two interceptions. Lombardi has three touchdown passes on his last 65 pass attempts. Jayden Reed and Jalen Nailor have combined for 212 receiving yards and three touchdowns while Matt Dotson has five receptions. The Michigan State Spartans ground game is averaging 60 yards per contest, and Jordon Simmons leads the way with 43 yards on 14 carries. Defensively, Michigan State is allowing 38 points and 276 yards per game. Antjuan Simmons leads the Michigan State Spartans with 11 tackles, Tre Person has one sack and Shakur Brown has one interception.

The Michigan Wolverines look to build on their win over Minnesota and start 2-0 for the fourth time in the last five seasons. The Michigan Wolverines have won six of their last seven home games. Joe Milton is completing 68.2 percent of his passes for 225 yards, one touchdown and zero interceptions. Milton has two touchdown passes on his last 29 pass attempts. Ronnie Bell and Roman Wilson have combined for 108 receiving yards on six catches while Erick All has two receptions. The Michigan Wolverines ground game is averaging 256 yards per contest, and Hassan Haskins leads the way with 82 yards and two touchdowns. Defensively, Michigan is allowing 24 points and 326 yards per game. Josh Ross leads the Michigan Wolverines with nine tackles, Kwity Paye has two sacks and Gemon Green has two pass deflections.

The Michigan State Spartans were one of the most disappointing teams in the country last season, as they lost to Rutgers as a two-touchdown favorite despite out-gaining them. Michigan State turned the ball over seven times and was an extremely frustrating watch. With that said, this line feels like an overreaction to that game, as Michigan State is still a solid defensive group and I don't think the offense is not as bad as it was against the Scarlet Knights. Michigan looked good in its opener against Minnesota, but the Wolverines are also just 3-11 against the spread in their last 14 games when favored of 20 or more points. This is also a heated rivalry that has a history of coming down to the wire. The Spartans are 5-1 ATS in their last 6 meetings in Michigan and 10-2 ATS in their last 12 meetings. This line doesn't make a ton of sense so **give me Michigan State and the boatload of points.**

Projected Score: Michigan 35, Michigan St. 20

Georgia at Kentucky Under 45 Total by 9

Georgia enters this game at 3-1 on the season. The Bulldogs opened up with three straight wins over Arkansas, Auburn and Tennessee but fell in their last game to Alabama 41-24. As for the Wildcats, they're 2-3 this year. Kentucky has wins over Mississippi State and Tennessee but has otherwise dropped to Auburn, Mississippi and Missouri.

Georgia opened up well this season with three convincing victories in a row. The Bulldogs beat Arkansas 37-10, then Auburn 27-6 and Tennessee 44-21. Georgia's first loss came October 17 versus Alabama 41-24 in a pretty sobering blowout.

In the loss to the Tide, Georgia quarterback Stetson Bennett put up 269 yards with two touchdowns and three interceptions. James Cook was the leading receiver for the Bulldogs with four catches for 101 yards and a TD, and Zamir White led the rush with 57 yards and a score off 10 carries.

Over on the Kentucky side, there have been quite a few ups and downs already this season. The Wildcats fell 29-13 to Auburn and 42-41 to Mississippi (overtime) before getting two big wins over Mississippi State 24-20 and Tennessee 34-7. Kentucky was back in the loss column against Missouri last weekend though, 20-10.

In the loss to the Tigers, Kentucky quarterback Terry Wilson posted 35 yards and one touchdown. Three completions went to Josh Ali, who finished with 44 yards and a score. Chris Rodriguez was the top rusher on 48 yards from nine carries.

The Bulldogs are 4-1 ATS in their last five games as a favorite and 16-5 ATS in their last 21 games after an ATS loss. Georgia is 20-8 ATS in their last 28 road games and 2-5 ATS versus a team with a losing record.

Meanwhile, the Wildcats are 4-0 ATS in the last four games after an ATS win and 6-0 ATS versus a team with a winning record. Kentucky is 4-1 ATS in the last five games after a straight-up loss and 4-1 ATS in their last five as an underdog.

Kentucky is very inconsistent. Up and down like a roller coaster. I'm not going to lay over two touchdowns on the road, but Kentucky is kind of difficult to trust right now, considering how badly they were beaten in every facet of the game last weekend. The Wildcats had just 145 total yards, eight first downs and ran just 36 total plays to Missouri's 92. Provided the Bulldogs can match the defensive effort of Mizzou last week, they could keep the Kentucky offense off the field, I don't see any reason not to think Georgia can't stifle the Wildcats offense. So rather than lay the lumber I'm recommending that we go under the posted 45. **Take the Bulldogs and Wildcats UNDER 45.**

Projected Score: Georgia 26, Kentucky 10

Iowa - 2½ Over Northwestern by 13

The Northwestern Wildcats are coming off a beat down victory over Maryland and look for their first 2-0 start since the 2015 CFB season. The Northwestern Wildcats have lost four of their last five road games. Peyton Ramsey is completing 76.7 percent of his passes for 212 yards, one touchdown and zero interceptions. Ramsey has one or less touchdown passes in six of his last eight games. John Raine and Ramaud Chiaokhiao-Bowman have combined for 102 receiving yards on 10 catches while Malik Washington has two receptions. The Northwestern Wildcats ground game is averaging 325 yards per contest, and Drake Anderson leads the way with 103 yards and one touchdown. Defensively, Northwestern is allowing three points and 207 yards per game. Brandon Joseph leads the Northwestern Wildcats with seven tackles, Adetomiwa Adebawore has one sack and JR Pace has one interception.

The Iowa Hawkeyes were upset by Purdue in their season opener and hope to avoid their first 0-2 start in over a decade. The Iowa Hawkeyes have won six of their last seven home games. Spencer Petras is completing 56.4 percent of his passes for 265 yards, zero touchdowns and zero interceptions. Petras has zero touchdown passes on his last 49 pass attempts. Sam LaPorta and Nico Ragaini have combined for 132 receiving yards on nine catches while Tyler Goodson has five receptions. The Iowa Hawkeyes ground game is averaging 195 yards per contest, and Goodson leads the way with 77 yards on 16 carries. Defensively, Iowa is allowing 24 points and 386 yards per game. Jack Koerner leads the Iowa Hawkeyes with 13 tackles, Barrington Wade has one sack and Matt Hankins has one interception.

The Northwestern Wildcats looked really impressive in their season debut, and they're a team I've backed a ton over the years in the underdog role. Northwestern isn't the most talented team in the world, but solid coaching goes a long way in the college ranks. The Iowa Hawkeyes losing to Purdue may have surprised many, but not us.

Iowa is a different Hawkeye at home and the favorite is 7-2 ATS in their last 9 meetings. The under is 11-4 in the last 15 meetings. Iowa will be better with a return home, and I expect the Hawkeyes physicality in the trenches to be the deciding factor here. **Give me Iowa Hawkeyes in a bounce back at home.**

Projected Score: Iowa 30, Northwestern 17



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Recap

Last Week's Top Performers

- Tyler Lockett* (SEA): 15 rec, 200 yds, 3 TD
- Justin Herbert* (LAC): 27/43, 347 yds, 3 TD; 9 rush, 66 yds, 1 TD
- Davante Adams* (GNB): 13 rec, 196 yds, 2 TD
- Kyler Murray* (ARI): 34/48, 360 yds, 3 TD; 14 rush, 67 yds, 1 TD
- Tom Brady* (TAM): 33/45, 369 yds, 4 TD; 1 rush TD
- Joe Burrow (CIN): 35/47, 406 yds, 3 TD; 1 rush TD
- Jeff Wilson (SFO): 17 rush, 112 yds, 3 TD
- Russell Wilson (SEA): 33/50, 388 yds, 3 TD; 6 rush, 84 yds
- Baker Mayfield (CLE): 22/28, 297 yds, 5 TD
- James Robinson (JAX): 22 rush, 119 yds, 2 tot TD

Week 7 Passing Leaders

Joe Burrow (CIN)
35/47 406 yds, 3TD

Russell Wilson (SEA)
33/50 388 yds, 3TD

Tom Brady (TAM)
33/45 369 yds, 4TD

Kyler Murray (ARI)
34/48 360 yds, 3TD

Carson Wentz (PHI)
25/43 359 yds, 2TD

Week 7 Rushing Leaders

Antonio Gibson (WAS)
20 att 128 yds, 1TD

James Robinson (JAX)
22 att 119 yds, 1TD

Jeff Wilson (SFO)
17 att 112 yds, 3TD

Daniel Jones (NYG)
4 att 92 yds, 0TD

Russell Wilson (SEA)
6 att 84 yds, 0TD

Week 7 Receiving Leaders

Tyler Lockett (SEA)
15 rec 200 yds, 3TD

Davante Adams (GNB)
13 rec 196 yds, 2TD

A.J. Brown (TEN)
6 rec 153 yds, 1TD

Keenan Allen (LAC)
10 rec 125 yds, 0TD

Brandon Aiyuk (SFO)
6 rec 115 yds, 0TD

The Lions pulled out an impossible victory over the Falcons with a last-second touchdown. The Steelers held off the Titans in a battle of the unbeaten. The Panthers made the Saints sweat it out. Baker Mayfield beat Joe Burrow in a back-and-forth battle of No. 1 picks. For a little while it looked as if the Jets might upset the Bills.

If you missed the Cowboys' game, congratulations. It was pure garbage. They were out of it almost immediately, falling behind 2-0 -- quarterback Andy Dalton fumbled into the end zone on a sack -- and never really challenged. Dallas ended up with 142 total yards, which is a lower number than the individual Sunday yardage totals of Davante Adams (196), A.J. Brown (153) and Alvin Kamara (148). The Cowboys possessed the ball for 23 minutes, 36 seconds of the game's 60 minutes and had 12 first downs to Washington's 21. They were outclassed, uninterested and embarrassed. Oh, there are plenty of excuses. Dallas is missing four starting offensive linemen and its starting quarterback. Backup quarterback Andy Dalton got knocked out of the game because of a concussion on a dirty hit and was replaced by rookie seventh-round pick Ben DiNucci. The Cowboys clearly have not picked up new defensive coordinator Mike Nolan's scheme, which must involve

some sort of hyper-advanced calculus that Nolan just invented this past March or something. There are plenty of reasons why the Cowboys are 2-5 and ahead of only the Giants in the weak NFC East, but regardless of any or all of them, they expected to be a lot better than this. McCarthy was brought in, after a year off from coaching following his firing in Green Bay, to replace longtime coach Jason Garrett. The issue with Garrett was that his teams were generally good but not good enough. McCarthy was supposed to get them over the hump. This team has somehow got itself stuck under the hump.

The Patriots need to bench Cam Newton and find out what they have in Jarrett Stidham. Newton was terrible on Sunday, for the second game in a row, and he didn't have two weeks' worth of COVID-related rust to blame this time. The 49ers scored 33 points in Foxborough -- five more than the total number of points the Patriots have scored over their past three games combined. In those three games, New England has turned the ball over 11 times and scored only two touchdowns. The run game that was so impressive in the season opener mustered only 94 yards on the ground Sunday. Newton didn't even finish the game -- it was so out of hand in the fourth quarter that Bill Belichick put Stidham in at quarterback. Asked after the game whether Newton was still the starter going forward, Belichick said, "Yeah, absolutely." But the Patriots are 2-4, in third place in the AFC East, 2.5 games behind the first-place Bills, whom they play next week in Buffalo. If they lose that game, they could be too far behind to think about the postseason. And if that's the case, they need to think about whether they need to draft a quarterback or find one in free agency. Knowing what they have in Stidham could help them make that decision. What it does at quarterback next year remains a mystery. Newton is on a one-year deal and Stidham hasn't shown much, so all options are on the table. But a team that has won its division 11 years in a row and 17 of the past 19 isn't in a position to give up on its season and think about the future while it's still mathematically alive in the playoff race. Oh how New England misses Brady.

Speaking of Brady, the Buccaneers don't need Antonio Brown. While his old team was getting smoked by the Niners, Brady was in Vegas throwing four touchdown passes in a 45-20 victory over the Raiders. (He ran one in, too.) Nine different players caught passes from Brady on Sunday. Four different Bucs caught touchdowns. He's not even using Mike Evans, really. The leading receiver in Sunday's win was Scotty Miller. But the rich get richer, and last week the Buccaneers agreed to terms with Brown, the former Steelers, Raiders and Patriots receiver who's serving an eight-game suspension for violating the league's personal conduct policy. Brown, who was the best receiver in the NFL not long ago, is eligible to join the Bucs in Week 9 assuming no more league discipline is coming. Brown is a luxury in Tampa, not a necessity. Coach Bruce Arians can say whatever he wants about "Tom had nothing to do with this," but the facts are that Brady and Brown have stayed in touch and Brady was so impressed with Brown in the one game he played with him last season that he's eager to work with him again. What that means for the rest of the Buccaneers' receivers is anyone's guess. Brady probably will keep throwing to whom ever's open, and more games where he spreads it around like this are likely with or without Brown. What it means for the Bucs' competition probably isn't very good. If Brown is even 80 percent of what he was two or three years ago in Pittsburgh, he's the final Infinity Stone to get the Bucs to the Super Bowl.

Baker Mayfield is just fine. After a week in which outside speculation had Mayfield in danger of being benched for Case Keenum, the Browns' quarterback started Sunday's game against the Bengals 0-for-5 with an interception. Worse, wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr. left the game early because of a torn ACL. Mayfield rebounded and went 22-for-23 after that rough start, including 21 completions in a row, with five touchdown passes. The last of the five put the Browns ahead for good with 11 seconds left after Burrow had put the Bengals ahead a minute earlier. It was the kind of game the Browns need to see from Mayfield -- one in which he put the team on his back and delivered in the clutch without his running game carrying him and without his best receiver. Mayfield isn't going to complete 21 passes in a row and throw five touchdowns every week. And the Browns' offense will function better when running back Nick Chubb returns from injury and they can lean on the ground game. The Browns are 5-2 and in the hunt for the postseason. There's no reason to do anything with Mayfield but keep working to make him better and more consistent.

Todd Gurley is the reason the Falcons lost Sunday Let's set the scene: Atlanta trailed Detroit 16-14 with the ball at the Lions' 10-yard line and just over a minute to go in the game. The Lions had used all of their timeouts, which meant that the Falcons could run down the clock run to almost zero, call their own timeout, and kick a winning chip-shot field goal. Instead, Gurley ran 10 yards for a touchdown -- he tried to stop at the goal line -- to put the Falcons ahead. A 2-point conversion gave them a 22-16 lead, but it also left Matthew Stafford

the 1:04 he needed to take the Lions down the field for the winning touchdown. It was the Falcons' third loss this season in a game in which they had at least a 98% chance to win, according to ESPN's win probability metric. Todd Gurley bursts up the middle toward the end zone and tries to stop himself from scoring in an attempt to run time off the clock, but the ball breaks the plane of the goal line for a touchdown.

I never like the idea of not scoring when you're behind. The short field goal is nearly automatic, sure, but it's not actually automatic. What if the snap goes wrong? What if it's blocked? You're behind and you have a chance to take the lead, you do it. Plus, there's nothing in the rules that says the Falcons' defense isn't allowed to stop anybody in a big fourth-quarter situation. The Falcons told Gurley not to score there, so yeah, that's a bonehead play by him. But it's tough to rein in a player's instincts (especially one who scores as much as Gurley does) to get to the end zone. And again, they were behind in the game. If they were tied or ahead, I see the logic. But when you're behind and you have a chance to take the lead, I have always thought the right thing was to do it.

PRO FOOTBALL BEST BETS

Minnesota at Green Bay Over 54 Total by 7

Minnesota enters this one at 1-5 so far. The Vikings' lone win came October 4 over the Texans, and since then Minnesota has fallen to the Seahawks and Falcons. As for the Packers, they're sitting at 5-1 this year. Green Bay suffered a 38-10 loss to the Buccaneers on October 18 but bounced back last weekend with a win over the Texans 34-10.

Minnesota hasn't been able to find much success this season, and looking at the final scores it's not too hard to see why. The Vikings have given up at least 23 points in every game this season, including a combined 67 over their last two games. Minnesota hasn't been bad at scoring though; they've got at least 23 points in five of six outings.

In the Vikings 40-23 loss to the Falcons a couple weeks back, quarterback Kirk Cousins threw for 343 yards with three touchdowns and three interceptions. Alexander Mattison led the rush with just 26 yards on 10 carries, and Justin Jefferson managed 166 yards and two scores from nine catches.

Over on the Green Bay side, it's been a pretty productive season so far. The Packers have scored at least 30 points in five of six games this year; the one "off" game was a 38-10 blowout by the Buccaneers. Green Bay bounced back after that with a 35-20 win over the Texans last weekend, though.

In the win over Houston, Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers put up 283 yards and four touchdowns, while Jamaal Williams collected 77 yards and a score off 19 carries. Davante Adams was the top receiver there for the Packers with 13 catches for 196 yards and two touchdowns.

The Vikings are 11-4 ATS in their last 15 games after an ATS loss and 38-14 ATS in their last 52 after a straight-up loss. Minnesota is 7-15 ATS versus a team with a winning record and 5-11 ATS in the last 16 games in Week 8.

Meanwhile, the Packers are 4-0 ATS in their last four home games and 5-1 ATS in their last six games overall. Green Bay is 9-4 ATS in their last 13 games in Week 8 and 1-3-1 ATS in their last five games in September.

These teams met back in Week 1, and it ended up being a pretty good game in a 43-34 Packers victory. Minnesota should score pretty well again here, and we know Rodgers is gonna put up points. I like the totals play on this game rather than the side bet. I expect another shootout between these two, weather willing.

Take over 54 points.

Projected Score: Green Bay 34, Minnesota 27

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New England + 3½ Over Buffalo by 4

The Patriots are sitting at 2-4 overall this season. New England is currently riding a three-game losing streak, falling to the Chiefs, Broncos and 49ers during that time. As for the Bills, they're currently 5-2 on the year. Buffalo lost in consecutive games to the Titans and Chiefs but managed a win last weekend over the Jets.

New England hasn't been quite as effective as usual this season, and it's really showing in the record column. Over this three-game losing streak the Patriots have scored a max of just 12 points, and they've given up a combined 77 points across that trio. The latest defeat came in an ugly 33-6 affair versus San Francisco last weekend.

In the loss to the 49ers, Patriots quarterback Cam Newton put up just 98 yards and three interceptions on 9-of-15 passing. Damien Harris led the New England rushers on 58 yards from 10 carries, and Jakobi Myers added four catches for 60 yards to lead the receivers.

Over on the Bills side, they've fared better this season. Buffalo opened up with four straight wins over the Jets, Dolphins, Rams and Raiders but then dropped a couple of tough matchups versus the Titans 42-16 and the Chiefs 26-17. The Bills got back on track in Week 7 with an 18-10 win over the lowly Jets, though.

In the victory over New York, Bills quarterback Josh Allen had 307 yards on 30-of-43 passing while also leading the rush with 61 yards from 11 carries. Cole Beasley was the leading Buffalo receiver in that one with 112 yards from 11 catches.

The Patriots are 8-0 ATS in their last eight games in Week 8 and 16-5 ATS in their last 21 games on turf. New England is 3-7-1 ATS in their last 11 versus the AFC and 2-5 ATS in their last seven after an ATS loss.

Meanwhile, the Bills are 4-0 ATS in their last four at home as a favorite and 6-0-1 ATS in their last seven games in November. Buffalo is 1-3-1 ATS in their last five versus the AFC East and 1-4 ATS in their last five versus the AFC.

What in the world is going on with the Pats? Life without Brady has been depressing for Pats fans who are used to winning practically every week. The pandemic and now this is way too much to handle. So how good of a coach is Belichick now without Brady? This is a strange line to see, as Buffalo hasn't been favored versus the Patriots for the last five years. That said, the Bills haven't been scoring well over their last three games, with a max of 18 points in that span. They looked horrible against the Jets last week. Josh Allen looks like a better version of Cam Newton. New England isn't a pushover like the Jets, so I'm gonna take a shot with the Pats to rebound against the Josh Allen do everything offense.

Projected Score: New England 24, Buffalo 20

Kansas City - 19 Over NY Jets by 27

The New York Jets are desperate for a victory, as they're 0-7 on the season and have the worst record in the NFL. The New York Jets have lost five of their last six road games. Sam Darnold is completing 58.4 percent of his passes for 912 yards, three touchdowns and six interceptions. Darnold has one or less touchdown passes in seven straight games. Jamison Crowder and Braxton Berrios have combined for 559 receiving yards and four touchdowns while Breshad Perriman has 11 receptions. The New York Jets ground game is averaging 104.4 yards per contest, and Frank Gore leads the way with 310 yards on 86 carries. Defensively, New York is allowing 29 points and 385 yards per game. Neville Hewitt leads the New York Jets with 59 tackles, Quinnen Williams has three sacks and Pierre Desir has three interceptions.

The Kansas City Chiefs look for another victory to build on their impressive 6-1 record. The Kansas City Chiefs have won six of their last eight home games. Patrick Mahomes is completing 65.7 percent of his passes for 1,899 yards, 16 touchdowns and one interception. Mahomes has two or more touchdown passes in eight of his last 10 games. Travis Kelce and Tyreek Hill have combined for 940 receiving yards and 10 touchdowns while Mecole Hardman has 15 receptions. The Kansas City Chiefs ground game is averaging 134.7 yards per contest, and Clyde Edwards-Helaire leads the way with 551 yards and two touchdowns. Defensively, Kansas City is allowing 20.4 points and 361.6 yards per game. Anthony Hitchens leads the Kansas City Chiefs with 47 tackles, Chris Jones has 4.5 sacks and L'Jarius Sneed has two interceptions.

The Jets are 1-5 ATS in their last 6 road games, 1-5 ATS in their last 6 games as an underdog and 1-6 ATS in their last 7 games overall. The Chiefs are 8-1-1 ATS in their last 10 home games, 12-3-1 ATS in their last 16

games as a favorite and 18-7-1 ATS in their last 26 games overall. The under is 4-1 in Jets last 5 games overall. The over is 5-2 in Chiefs last 7 home games. The Jets are 2-6 ATS in their last 8 meetings. The home team is 4-0 ATS in their last 4 meetings.

This is a ton of points to leave on the table, but there may not be a bigger mismatch in the league this season. The Jets are the worst team in the NFL led by one of the worst head coaches. The Kansas City Chiefs are a scoring machine with a defense that's getting better and has allowed 20 or less points in six of their first seven games. I have no confidence in the Jets or their coaching staff. Ino matter what the line is, the trend are your friend in this game and so is the deplorable Jets. Give me the Chiefs in a blowout.

Projected Score: Kansas City 37, NY Jets 10

Dallas at Philadelphia Over 43 Total by 7

The Dallas Cowboys need a feel good victory here after losing four of their last five games. The Dallas Cowboys have lost six straight road games. Andy Dalton is completing 61.2 percent of his passes for 452 yards, one touchdown and three interceptions. Ben DiNucci could get the start here with Dalton dealing with a head injury. Amari Cooper and CeeDee Lamb have combined for 1,080 receiving yards and four touchdowns while Michael Gallup has 19 receptions. The Dallas Cowboys ground game is averaging 101.9 yards per contest, and Ezekiel Elliott leads the way with 458 yards and five touchdowns. Defensively, Dallas is allowing 34.7 points and 408.1 yards per game. Jaylon Smith leads the Dallas Cowboys with 75 tackles, Aldon Smith has four sacks and Chidobe Awuzie has one interception.

The Philadelphia Eagles look for back-to-back victories for the first time this year to keep their lead in the NFC East. The Philadelphia Eagles are 3-3-1 SU in their last seven home games. Carson Wentz is completing 58.6 percent of his passes for 1,760 yards, 10 touchdowns and 10 interceptions. Wentz has two or more touchdown passes in seven of his last 12 games. Travis Fulgham and Greg Ward have combined for 590 receiving yards and six touchdowns while Richard Rogers has 15 receptions. The Philadelphia Eagles ground game is averaging 118.6 yards per contest, and Miles Sanders leads the way with 434 yards and three touchdowns. Defensively, Philadelphia is allowing 28 points and 350.9 yards per game. Nathan Gerry leads the Philadelphia Eagles with 57 tackles, Brandon Graham has six sacks and Alex Singleton has one interception.

The Cowboys are 0-5 ATS in their last 5 road games, 13-4 ATS in their last 17 vs. NFC East and 0-7 ATS in their last 7 games overall. The Eagles are 0-5 ATS in their last 5 games as a favorite, 1-4 ATS in their last 5 home games and 2-6 ATS in their last 8 games overall. The over is 15-6 in Cowboys last 21 vs. NFC. The under is 19-7 in Eagles last 26 home games. The Cowboys are 6-2 ATS in their last 8 meetings in Philadelphia and 4-1 ATS in their last 5 meetings. The favorite is 7-2 ATS in their last 9 meetings.

The Dallas Cowboys are going nowhere fast, as they're one of the worst defenses in the league and now their offense takes another major blow with Dalton in concussion protocol. The Cowboys offense didn't have much going for it with Dalton at quarterback, but if he's not cleared for this game, that makes rookie Ben DiNucci the starting quarterback, a guy who had just 167 pass attempts at Pittsburgh in college. It's all bad right? Well, who is this Ben DiNucci kid.

High School: USA Today Second Team All-American... Pennsylvania Gatorade Player of the Year... Pennsylvania Sports Writers Class AAAA Player of the Year... Pennsylvania Football News Class AAAA Offensive Player of the Year...ESPN rated him No. 10 overall prospect in the state and nation's No. 27 pocket-passing QB. Sound familiar? An Italian kid from Pittsburgh who went to U of Pittsburgh. Getting the picture now? Yes he only had 167 pass attempts in college, but when given the chance he torched Oklahoma State. With little playing time, he transferred to JMU after spending three seasons at Pitt.

He started in all 16 games at quarterback as a senior and he was named... AFCA First Team All-American... HERO Sports Second Team All-American... CAA Offensive Player of the Year... First Team All-CAA quarterback... VaSID Second Team All-State... CFPA FCS National Performer of the Year Midseason Watch List... He completed 268-of-378 attempts for 3,441 yards and 29 touchdowns with six interceptions... Also rushed for 569 yards and seven touchdowns, averaging 4.7 per carry... Led the nation with a 70.9% completion percentage... Also ranked second nationally in pass efficiency (169.5), sixth in yards per pass attempt (9.1) and 11th in the FCS and third in the CAA in passing touchdowns... Led the CAA in yards per play (8.0) and total offensive yards (4,010) while also ranking third in total offensive touchdowns (36) and seventh in rushing touchdowns... Ranked second in JMU single-season history in passing yards and total offense, tied for second in passing touchdowns and third in completions... Completed better than 75% of passes in eight

outings, including career-high 88.9% at Rhode Island (Nov. 23)... Had at least three total touchdowns in six games... Rushed for at least 80 yards twice, including season-high 82 at Rhode Island... One of three Gary Clark Offensive MVP Award recipients... CAA Football Commissioner's Academic Honor Roll (Fall 2019). This kid is very smart and it wouldn't surprise me if he plays better than the Red Rifle.

The Philadelphia Eagles have injuries of their own and have had issues getting out of their own way, but this is a game that they should have success on offense. I just can't make a logical case for the Cowboys right now without seeing how DiNucci will perform in his first outing, but I can make a case that he may very well put up more points than the experts expect so give me the Eagles i& Cowboys to sail over the totals number. Is this the second coming of Dan Marino. Let's see what happens with this kid from the same Burgh neighborhood.

Take Eagles/Cowboys Over 43.

Projected Score: Philadelphia 27, Dallas 23



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