

## Fraud Protection

Written by {ga=mrburns}

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This week the Cleveland Browns (8-5) will face off against the Buffalo Bills (7-6) in a game with enormous playoff implications. These are two teams that no one pegged for playoff spots. While we know the factors that have contributed to making the Browns a contender, how have the Bills gotten to the point where a win this week over the Browns puts them in the catbird seat for a playoff spot? Nick Allburn takes a look at the Browns next opponent.



This week the Cleveland Browns (8-5) will face off against the Buffalo Bills (7-6) in a game with enormous playoff implications. If the Browns win, they will extend their lead on the Bills to two games, while also holding the head-to-head tiebreaker over Buffalo with only two regular season games remaining. In other words, if the Browns beat Buffalo, their only concern will be the Tennessee Titans, currently 7-6, who have two tough matchups left on their schedule (at Kansas City, and at Indianapolis).

So this game is the big one for the Browns. If they beat the Bills, they can essentially start printing playoff tickets, and start worrying about catching Jacksonville to avoid a first round showdown with Pittsburgh on the field that condiments built. But for now, the focus needs to stay on this Sunday's game.

When all 32 teams embarked on their quests for the Lombardi Trophy back in September, nobody circled the week 15 pairing of Buffalo and Cleveland. Hell, until recently, tickets for this game could have been had for significantly under face value on various ticket resale sites. But in the NFL we've learned to expect

the unexpected, and the Bills and Browns are textbook examples of how things can be turned around in just one season. The Bills have already matched their 2006 win total (seven), while the Browns have already **doubled** their '06 victories (four).

So how did this happen? How did these two teams who were given little respect or attention outside of their respective cities, play their way into contention? We know the various reasons for Cleveland's improvement; relatively good health, a friendly schedule, a revamped offensive line, great receiver play, a rejuvenated running back, sound offensive play calling, a Cinderella story at quarterback, and a defense that has risen up to make some key stops when necessary. But what about Buffalo? What winds their collective clock?

Honestly, the Bills are a lousy team on offense (ranked 28<sup>th</sup>). They're right in the middle of the league running the football (16

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-110.5 yards per game), but they can't pass worth a lick. Rookie quarterback Trent Edwards seems to have beaten out the disappointing JP Losman, but Edwards has looked very rookie-like, and thus the Bills have averaged only 173 yards per game through the air (28

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Nobody has suffered from Edwards winning the starting job more than wideout Lee Evans, the Bills' most explosive player. Last season, Evans caught 82 balls and racked up nearly 1,300 yards, but he hasn't so much as sniffed those numbers this year (47 catches, 768 yards). Nevertheless, Evans is probably Buffalo's best player, and he's a threat to go for 150 yards and multiple touchdowns if Trent Edwards can get him the football. The Browns need to use a safety to double cover Evans whenever possible.

As mediocre as the Bills are on offense, they're ranked lower on defense (30<sup>th</sup> overall). Weather permitting, Derek Anderson should put up monstrous numbers against a Bills secondary that gives up 251.4 yards per game through the air (29<sup>th</sup>). The Bills have trouble stopping the run, as well (16<sup>th</sup>

-112.4 ypg). Somehow, Buffalo has managed to stay in the middle of the pack in points allowed (16<sup>th</sup>

-22.4 points per game), as they aim to play rubber band defense; bending for big chunks of yardage but refusing to break in the red zone.

Roscoe Parrish is the only Buffalo special teamer worthy of recognition. Parrish leads the league with an intimidating average of 17.5 yards per punt return, and has returned one punt for a touchdown. Unfortunately for the Bills, their defense doesn't force many punts.

So here's the lowdown: the Bills score 17.1 points per game, allow 22.4 points per game, and have been outscored by 69 points total this year. Yet, the Bills are 7-6. How can this be?

The answer is simple: a cushy schedule. Buffalo plays in an AFC East that, minus the Patriots, is an absolute joke. Four of the Bills' seven wins have come against Miami and the New York Jets. Two of Buffalo's wins are against Baltimore and

Cincinnati, a pair of teams having tough seasons. And Buffalo notched one win against the grieving Washington Redskins on the week of Sean Taylor's passing. The Redskins are a mediocre team even by NFC standards. You can search high and low for a quality win, but you won't find one on Buffalo's schedule.

On the flipside, when the Bills have had to face a playoff-caliber foe, they haven't been up to the task. Buffalo has lost four games by 23 points or more (Pittsburgh, Jacksonville, New England twice), and they couldn't beat the Cowboys in Orchard Park in spite of six Tony Romo turnovers.

Folks, this is not a playoff football team. The Buffalo Bills are a complete fraud, and like Jacksonville, New England, and Pittsburgh before them, the task of exposing the Bills now falls to the Browns.

This is the cliché "statement game" for the Browns. It's at home, it's December, and a win would give the Browns a stranglehold on a Wild Card spot. The Browns need to draw a line in the sand, come out of the tunnel, and absolutely buffalo the Bills. Here's a chance for the Browns to develop some killer instinct, a chance to get ahead of a mediocre team early and stomp on their figurative throat in the second half

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This is a game that the Browns should win handily. A blowout win would send a message not only to the Bills but to the rest of the league that Cleveland Browns football is no longer a punch line, that this team has arrived, and that this team has no intention of going quietly in first round of the playoffs. It's time for the Browns to take care of business.