

Disaster In The Desert

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, January 29 2008 7:00 PM -

It was a little over a year ago when an undefeated team with but a few close calls during the regular season found its way playing for a championship in the Arizona desert. That team featured the top quarterback, indeed the top player in the game at least that season, and enough skill players surrounding him to make opposing coaches drool. We all know what happened last year at this time out in Arizona? Will it again? Gary Benz says not to count on it.



The scene is eerily familiar, only this time the local fans don't have the same rooting interest.

It was a little over a year ago when an undefeated team with but a few close calls during the regular season found its way playing for a championship in the Arizona desert. That team featured the top quarterback, indeed the top player in the game at least that season, and enough skill players surrounding him to make opposing coaches drool. To the extent that the media can ever reach a consensus on anything, it did this time. No doubt this team would finish what they had started and would be anointed one of the great teams of all time.

Making matters seem all that much more inevitable, its opponent was not highly regarded and was thought, at best, to be maybe a year or two away from being a serious contender for a championship. The opponent featured some intriguing players, to be sure, but had barely won its conference. There was also a double digit point spread to contend with. In short, but for a few contrarians dotting the landscape, mainly in the team's hometown, no one else gave them much of a chance.

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But the Florida Gators turned into the little team that could and handily wiped the carpet with the Ohio State Buckeyes at the University of Phoenix Stadium in Glendale, capping an improbable year for the Gators and its coach, Urban Meyer.

In many, many ways, this Sunday's Super Bowl featuring the New England Patriots against the New York Giants is playing to all these same themes. New England is the consensus number one team in the league with the consensus superior talent. The Giants seem lucky to be there.

The parallels, of course, don't all work. For example, in most ways, Buckeyes head coach Jim Tressel is the anti-Bill Belichick. Tressel isn't exactly a quote machine himself, but he is very accessible to the media and hardly treats reporters' questions as if they are an intrusion. As passionately as he wants to win, Tressel hardly seems motivated by the kind of hate and rage that tends to fuel Belichick's engine. Probably because he's coaching college kids, Tressel maintains a much healthier perspective on not only what a game means, but what it doesn't.

Meyer, too, is hardly Tom Coughlin, the Giants head coach. Where Meyer is cool and collected in every situation, Coughlin wears his emotions on his sleeve. Meyer has been nothing but successful at each stop along the coaching trail with no one ever threatening to run him off. Coughlin's career has had at least as many downs as ups. When the Giants lost their first two games this season, the New York media and Giants fans were already calling for Coughlin to be fired, particularly coming off an 8-8 season that should have been much better but wasn't because so often the coach and his players seemed to be at each other's throats all the time.

Improbably, though, the Giants turned it around enough to finish at 10-6, the same record as the Browns, and now find themselves in the Super Bowl mainly because they got hot at the right time. The remaining question, of course, is whether the Giants are laying in wait, like the Gators, to deliver another disaster in the desert to what many consider to be an incredible mismatch.

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This is where it gets tricky. In the first place, the differences between college and pro football are so vast that at times the only thing the two games seem to have in common is that the scoring plays in each count the same. For example, barring injury you're never going to see either Belichick or Coughlin use a two-quarterback system just to give the other team a different look.

But the big difference is that it is much easier to make apples to apples comparisons in pro football than it ever will be in college. When the Buckeyes and Gators finally met in the national championship game, what they knew about each other is what they could see on film alone. Not only didn't they play each other during the regular season, they didn't have any common opponents. Thus, despite all the talk about the difference in speed in the SEC vs. the Big Ten, it was nearly impossible to tell if that really was the case with respect to these two teams.

Moreover, the talent level from team to team in college football, even when played at its highest levels, is wildly inconsistent. Even really good teams in college aren't good top to bottom. Thus, what a coach observes on tape about his opponent is difficult, at best, to translate. That stud defensive lineman who seems to dominate may just be a case of facing relatively weak offensive linemen from week to week. That quarterback who never seems to get sacked may just have been playing against relatively poor pass rushing teams most weeks.

In the NFL, the talent level is far more consistent. In a sense, every NFL team is a college all star team. There are differences in talent levels from team to team, but they aren't substantial. Using this year's Browns team as Exhibit A, the difference between a team with a losing record and one who went 10-6 is usually one or two players, not 10-12.

But perhaps the biggest difference is that it is not all that unusual for the Super Bowl participants to have played already played each other in the regular season, and if not the current season, then the previous one. One of the most memorable games of this year was the Patriots/Giants game during the final week of the

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regular season. It not only had historic overtures, but it also essentially sparked a resurgence of the Giants, even in defeat.

But the larger point for this discussion is that each team is well aware of what the other can do, having just played each other a few weeks ago. Each team knows the other's strengths and weaknesses not just based on what they see on film but what they personally experienced. For each team, their game plan for the Super Bowl will be based far more on actual knowledge than mere guess work than either Tressel's or Meyer's game plan for the national championship game.

In a way, Sunday's Super Bowl is but a continuation of that final regular season game, with the two week run-up to it serving as an extended halftime. Given what each team already knows about the other, the difference maker is less likely going to be pure emotion, as it was when the Gators faced the Buckeyes, and more so on which coach can make the right adjustments.

Indeed, if that is the criteria, the Patriots have a decided advantage. Using just this season as an example, the Patriots have outscored their opponents by a large margin in every quarter. They were +93 in the first quarter, +103 in the second, +46 in the third, and +73 in the fourth. The Giants, on the other hand, were a remarkable -24 in the first quarter, +28 in the second, +1 in the third and +21 in the fourth.

Some simple conclusions that can be drawn from this are that the Patriots were a far more dominant team than the Giants, within each game and from game to game. It also tells you that the Patriots were not often challenged whereas the Giants often played from behind and that their 10 victories were highly dependent on their ability to eke out close games.

It's also fair to suggest that these figures also underscore that Belichick's teams were far better prepared for their opponents going into each game than the Giants given the point differentials in the first quarter. Coughlin and his staff eventually

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made adjustments throughout that helped them ultimately be successful, but Belichick and his staff got off to great starts each week and kept the pressure on throughout. By doing so, the Patriots were able to dictate the tempo of the game and force teams to adjust to them, not the other way around as was the case with the Giants.

It also says something about the game-day coaching abilities of Belichick and Coughlin. An interesting [article](#) posted last summer on the web site NFL Stats sought to quantify the impact of game-day coaching by taking the number of wins that a team could expect in a season based on its on-field statistical performance and comparing it to actual wins. When actual wins exceeded expected wins on a consistent basis, the author surmised, one differentiating factor was the head coach and his ability to squeeze more out of the talent at hand.

In that analysis, which did not even include the 2007 season, Belichick in New England (as compared to Belichick in both Cleveland and New England) led the pack. In New England, his teams consistently win over two games more per season than on-the-field performance otherwise bears out. Indeed, anyone watching the Patriots this season had to marvel at the team's ability to win when not playing its best. Coughlin's teams, in both Jacksonville and New York, tended to win slightly less games than expected. Neither of these results is much of a surprise.

None of this means that Coughlin is a lousy head coach and thus the Giants have no chance. But it does point to an X factor to consider when placing your Super Bowl wagers. And while all this may be just another elaborate set up for the ultimate downfall of the seemingly superior team, this isn't Ohio State vs. Florida either. There very well could be a disaster in the desert. Just don't look for it from the underdog this time.