

NFL

BEST BET

*ATLANTA (-4) over DENVER

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 8 – The Falcons last played on Thursday and the coaches have extra time to game-plan, while the players have a few extra days to recover physically. The Broncos last played on Sunday, a 60-minute gut-buster against division-rival LA Chargers. They won the game on the last play. Head coach Vic Fangio then gave the team Monday and Tuesday off. On Wednesday, they had to cancel the week's first practice because of a few virus positives. Those positives have had the effect of putting starting DE Shelby Harris and starting OT Graham Glasgow on the "can't play" list for this. The team is already one of the leaders in number of players on injured reserve. The Broncos returned to a live practice for the first time this week on Thursday.

Says head coach Vic Fangio: "It's distracting [and] it's not ideal. I'd be lying to say that it wasn't."

Here is a little insight on Denver's 31-30 win against the Chargers, and how unlikely it all was given how things were transpiring:

- Denver was assessed 7 offensive penalties on their first 45 official-logged snaps, within 11 series with the football.
- On their twelfth and final series, trailing by 6 points with about 2:30 to play when a touchdown drive would win the home game, they were flagged 0 times in 14 plays covering 81 yards, a drive with 4 times as many plays as their drive-average to that point, at an average of a mere 5.7 yards per play.

This offense needs a tow truck to move it. ATLANTA, 33-13.

BET BET TOTAL

OVER 51.5

LAS VEGAS at LA CHARGERS

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 8 – In last week's Sports Reporter, when we noted that the highest combined points total in a Raiders' game had been 54, we also advised to "check the weather forecast" for Cleveland, OH. Turns out, the Raiders and Browns played the game in 30-ish degree cold, with some rain, and lots of wind. Ball movement suffered. The teams adjusted. Final score: 16-6. The Raiders shift road venues, to Los Angeles, where there will be no crowd noise to interrupt signals and the weather forecast is partly cloudy and 61 degrees – cool for SoCal but still mighty fine weather for 2020 NFL-brand football. There was a stated preference for the Total established in the original Sports Reporter forecast for this game. Ergo, we have more to go "over" via the following update. An ESPN writer helps kick it off for us with one of their typical "woe is them" articles headlined: "When will the Raiders' massive, and expensive, O-line get back together?":

"A first-round pick, No. 15 overall, was used on left tackle in Kolton Miller in 2018. Richie Incognito... earning a two-year, \$14 million extension with \$6.365 million in guarantees last winter. Rodney Hudson's three-year, \$33.4 million extension with \$24.4 million guaranteed in the summer of 2019... made him the highest-paid center in the game in terms of average annual pay at \$11.13 million. Gabe Jackson, a third-round draft pick in 2014, received a five-year, \$56 million extension in 2017... And Trent Brown?... the highest-paid offensive lineman in NFL history, courtesy of his four-year, \$66 million free-agent contract with \$36.75 million guaranteed in the spring of 2019.

"After starting just five games together as a unit last season, the Raiders' expensive and much-ballyhooed O-line has played just three snaps together this season. Three. Snaps.

"Yeah, it's been tough," Raiders coach Jon Gruden acknowledged. "We've had a lot of adversity. With Tyrell Williams, a guy we thought was going to be a big part of our offense going down. The Antonio Brown thing didn't work out. Right now, Incognito and ... Trent Brown, are out of the ball game. It's tough. It's disappointing..."

Yes, sir. It is so tough, so disappointing, that the Raiders are averaging 25.7 points per game through eight, 25.3 ppg in their last three, compared to 19.6 ppg overall in 2019. That's a touchdown plus a missed extra point more scoring than they averaged in 2019. The offensive unit has been on the field for an average of a minute-and-a-half longer per game (32:39) than last season (31:01). They were 3-4 after seven games in 2019, but are currently 4-3 as they prepare for this second straight road trip. We should all have it so "tough," so "disappointing," right? Leave it to a sportswriter to focus and report on something one way, while the reality is actually going the opposite way.

Meanwhile, in an effort to ramp up the learning curve of rookie quarterback Justin Herbert, the Chargers have thrown defense out the window. They're obviously willing to live (or die) with that. A year ago at this time, they fired offensive coordinator Ken Whisenhunt mid-season and head coach Anthony Lynn said he wanted better complementary football between the offense and defense, with a renewed, dedicated focus on the running game. That's the guy's preferred way to play. When a head coach abandons his preferred way to play, and his preferred way to play was the way we just described, it creates a fast and loose on-field environment that results in more points on the board for both sides and maybe, if they're lucky, a win every now and then, which, given that they are 1-5 since Herbert began playing (falling in love with his offensive stats while losing 83% of the games), the luck mostly hasn't shown up. LA's average points differential per game last season was 21.1–21.6. It's now 25.6–26.4, including 32.0–30.0 last three. Chargers' DE Joey Bosa is in concussion protocol and unlikely to be cleared for Sunday. LA CHARGERS, 34-31.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

POSTPONEMENTS

Louisville at Virginia... Tulsa at Navy... Purdue at Wisconsin...
Washington at California... Florida International at UTEP...
Louisiana Tech at North Texas.

BEST BET

TEXAS TECH (+9) over *TCU

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 7 – This is an under-the-radar rivalry game, as they play for the “Saddle Trophy.” TCU is coming off a win in which they led 30-0 at halftime. Texas Tech is coming off a loss in which they trailed 48-14 at halftime en route to a 66-28 deficit after four quarters. Instant perception is TCU is very good, Texas Tech is very bad. But it’s really just a game between similar-level programs. The Horned Frogs of TCU have averaged 25.6 points per game over their last three, none of the games against a ranked opponent. The pointspread and Total are setting the game at 35.5 to 26.0 for TCU, which is asking the favorite to score 10 more points than they’ve averaged in those last three games, while laying two scores in it despite not scoring a touchdown in six of their last 12 quarters. Seems like it will be a real chore for TCU to hit either one of those bars that have been set.

Texas Tech has played one of the most difficult schedules to this point, as they’ve faced three ranked opponents – as many as anyone else in the nation. The Red Raiders have also faced five of the top six teams in the Big 12 standings to this point. They’re at a spot in their schedule where their remaining foes are 7-13 combined. TCU is 2-3 after facing but one ranked opponent. The teams have a common opponent: Texas Tech was dead-even with Texas after four quarters, TCU was 2 points better than Texas after four quarters. Common-foe result margin comparisons are not the be-all and end-all of selection-making, but it’s one part of the process here. If Texas Tech went into the Oklahoma game last Saturday thinking they could beat the Sooners, that fantasy was squashed early. Texas Tech hardly ever beats Oklahoma. They’ve lost nine straight to the Sooners and allowed more than 60 points in three of those nine defeats, 50 or more two more times, 42 to 49 points three more times. It’s what they do. What they also do is bounce back from being run over by Boomer Sooner, winning the next game outright off a loss to Oklahoma 11 of the last 17 times. The visiting team in this series has won each of the past five meetings.

Two weeks ago, Texas Tech made a prophet of West Virginia head coach Neal Brown, who, in his game-week press conference, said the following about Texas Tech: “They’ll be the fastest tempo team we’ll play all year. A dual-threat quarterback making his first start. He’s played a bunch of games, 15-16 games in his career. I think they have one of the top o-lines in the Big 12. Very good interior-wise. They really controlled the line of scrimmage versus us last year... Talented and tall at wideout, look like a basketball team, they’re 6-3, 6-5, can go up and get the ball, both those guys on the outside have made a bunch of plays, and their slots had a field day versus us last year,” The final score of that game was Texas Tech, 34-27. TEXAS TECH, 34-27.

BEST BET TOTAL

UNDER 44.5

VANDERBILT at MISSISSIPPI STATE

A Mississippi State offense that has been shut out twice in five games doesn’t figure to jump up and light up the scoreboard, not even at Vanderbilt. Quarterback K.J. Costello had a one-hit

wonder game in the opener against LSU and the door has been slammed shut since, while Costello got concussed and replaced by freshman Will Rogers, who never met an interception he didn’t like to throw. Not that Costello has been a ball-security freak: 6-10 TD-INT.

When Mike Leach was head coach at Texas Tech and Washington State, his pass-heavy offenses typically completed 65% to 70% of their passes for about 7.5 Yards per Attempt. So far, the Mississippi State numbers are 65.5% completions -- within range – but only 5.7 YPA. Teams that throw for only 5.7 YPA usually lose a lot of games because they can’t score a lot of points, and that’s what’s been happening to Mississippi State. When you see that Miss State is getting 5.7 YPA but only 4.75 yards per play overall, you realize that they’re getting sacked like crazy and going nowhere with a running game they barely attempt to use.

But here, the opposing offense considers crossing midfield to be an achievement. Vanderbilt is gaining only 4.4 yards per play. The offense lost just about every key skill player from last season’s team – which ranked at or near the bottom of the SEC in just about every offensive category – and had no spring practice and a now-interrupted regular season. Not enough reps! What the Vandy team has had, with recent game postponements, is plenty of time to prepare for an opposing offense that won’t harm them physically at the point of attack, and a defensive-minded head coach who faced Leach in the Pac 12 when he was defensive coordinator at Stanford. That’s another reason why Mississippi State’s offense doesn’t figure to find the big spark for which it desperately searches. MISSISSIPPI STATE, 23-7.

RECOMMENDED TOTAL

UNDER 39.5

WESTERN KENTUCKY at FLORIDA ATLANTIC

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 7 – First-season Willie Taggart offenses are traditionally dormant and Florida Atlantic’s has played according to the guy’s form: 293 yards per game in three games. There have been interruptions of practice, and in the game schedule, to hinder the progress of an offense in its infancy gaining only 4.6 yards per play. But they’re 2-1, in games with scores of 21-17, 9-20 and 24-3. Their opponents played low-scoring games with FAU prior to, or just after, scoring 49, 38, 38, 35, 27 points vs. other C-USA competition. The FAU defense is legit. It’s a conference championship defense.

Western Kentucky’s offense is not legit. They were desperate to take pass-poor grad transfer Tyrell Pigrome from Maryland and insert him as the starting QB, one season after they’d used another grad transfer quarterback – Ty Storey from Arkansas. Try developing a quarterback you recruit! Actually, they tried, when they inserted soph Kevaris Thomas. But that didn’t effect anything different in an offense on a streak of scoring 17, 14, 14, 13 and 10 points in its last five games. Through seven games, the WKU offense averages 275 total yards per game. They have a total of three (3) rushing touchdowns and a paltry 5.2 Yards Per Attempt passing. Tulane has 100 more passing yards in 38 fewer pass attempts than WKU. But their defense is playing okay, giving up 340 yards per game to three conference opponents as it prepares to face one gaining 50 yards per game less than that. Thunderstorms and winds >25 mph in the forecast for a game involving two sub-par offenses and better-than-average defenses. FLORIDA ATLANTIC, 19-9.

BREEDERS’ CUP picks for this weekend in two special editions of the DAILY BRIEF!