

Super Bowl 2004 Predictions

Brady's bunch will be victorious

Kurt Cavanaugh

Sports Editor

He takes that non-athletic, robotic drop. His feet move quicker than those of a puppy who needs to go outside. The ball leaves his right hand, rather than spiraling, turns nearly end-over-end. The ball falls into the opponents' hands four times. And he's the NFL MVP.

Peyton Manning's career has been full of choke fests since his days at the University of Tennessee, where he never beat Florida or won a national title. In the AFC title game against the most complete team in football, Manning choked yet again. You could see the look of dread on his face as he thought to himself, "Oh no, daddy's going to be mad. Is little brother (Eli Manning, considered to be the top quarterback taken in this year draft) really better than me?"

His flop in Foxboro opens the door for the New England Patriots to do what most football experts deemed impossible when the playoffs began: win 15 straight games and become champions of the NFL.

Patriots quarterback Tom Brady is everything Manning isn't. He's a graceful athlete and is not a statue in the pocket. He was underrated at Michigan and was unheralded on draft day, chosen only to backup proven veteran Drew Bledsoe.

Manning has better talent surrounding him than Brady. Manning has the best receiver in the league in Marvin Harrison, as well as up-and-comer Reggie Wayne, not to mention talented but oft-injured Edgerrin James. Somehow, though, Brady works with his players (receivers Deion Branch, Troy Brown, and backs Antowain Smith and Kevin Faulk) and makes them better.

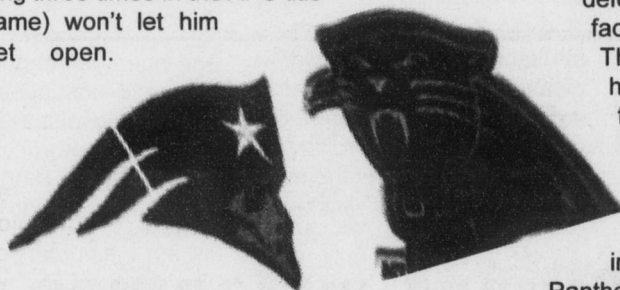
Wait, this column is on who I think will win the Super Bowl, not on how overrated Manning is. But does anyone else notice how much Peyton resembles Gummy?

The Carolina Panthers upset the

Rams in St. Louis then stormed into Philadelphia and pounced on Donovan McNabb to represent the NFC in the big game.

If we simply look at the matchup on paper, the Pats dominate the feel-good Cats at quarterback, receiver, linebacker, secondary, special teams, and coaching. Carolina does have the edge at running back (Stephen Davis and DeShaun Foster are tough) and both the offensive and defensive line.

Steve Smith is Carolina's big play guy, but Ty Law (who intercepted Manning *three* times in the AFC title game) won't let him get open.



The Patriots do play a lot of downs in zone schemes, but put Law one-on-one with elite receivers. Smith will have about three catches in the game, none going more than 15 yards. If Law can shut down Marvin Harrison, he can stop Smith in his sleep.

The Panthers will try to get to Brady, but the Pats run short routs very well. Joe Theismann called Brady the best thrower in football, he always makes the right decision and rarely throws a short pass long or a long pass short (both lead to interceptions, Peyton).

The thing I see happening is the Pats get up 10-0, forcing Jake Delhomme and the Panthers to throw more than they want. This will take Davis and Foster out of the game, negating their strength. The Patriots will win their second Lombardi Trophy in the Tom Brady era 27-17, raising Brady's career record in games after Nov. 1 to 28-4.

I wonder what Manning's record is?

Fear the Panther pride

Matt Geiger

Columnist

The Carolina Panthers will beat the New England Patriots this Sunday to win the Super Bowl. How can I make such a bold statement? I am a Philadelphia Eagles fan and if the Panthers can beat my Eagles, they can certainly take the Patriots. But that is not my only reason to predict Panther success this Sunday.

To start, one of the arguments that you hear is how hard it is to beat the Patriots' defense, but they will be the second best defense the Panthers will face this post-season.

The Dallas Cowboys had a higher rated defense than the Patriots; in fact, the Cowboys had the best defense in the NFL and what happened in that game?

Panthers quarterback Jake Delhomme threw for 273 yards and one score. Running back Stephen Davis ran for 104 yards and one score as well. Wide Receiver Steve Smith also had a big day gaining 135 yards while Muhsin Muhammad gained 104 receiving yards.

One of the keys to winning a Super Bowl is having a good defense and being able to effectively run the ball. While both defenses in this game are very good, there is no doubt that the Panthers have a far superior running game. The two Patriots backs, Antowain Smith and Kevin Faulk, combined for approximately 1,300 yards while Panther backs Davis and DeShaun Foster combined for about 1,900 yards during the regular season. For the Panthers to win this game they are going to need to control the ball effectively, and running the ball is a key part of controlling the clock.

If this game turns out the way most people expect it to, this should be a relatively low-scoring game with neither team scoring more than 24 points. This is going to make field position and special teams that much more im-

portant.

I believe if you compare Panther kicker Jon Kasay to Patriot kicker Adam Vinatieri you get pretty much the same thing; two solid, reliable kickers with good range. Vinatieri is probably the best clutch kicker in football, but in the regular season he was ranked only 10th in the league, while Kasay was ranked 4th.

The Panthers do have a distinct advantage in the punting department, which should give them an advantage in field position. Todd Sauerbrun is undoubtedly the best punter in the game which is why he is a two-time pro-bowler and the highest paid kicker in the NFL. Ken Walter, the punter for the Patriots, is one of the most inconsistent punters in the league and was actually released from the team in November for one week after a horrible performance against the Kansas City Chiefs.

Perhaps the most important thing for the Panthers is to play mistake-free football. The Patriots live on forcing turnovers and if the Panthers turn the ball over more than once they will lose, no questions asked. For the Panthers to be victorious, they need to (and I believe they will) play smart football.

Tom Brady is a nice quarterback, but at this point, he is still a system quarterback on a team that relies on its defense more than it relies on offense. I can name five better quarterbacks in football (Manning, McNair, McNabb, Favre, Vick) and what these names have in common with one another and what makes them different from Brady is that they are the most valuable member of their team, while Brady is not (Pats MVP is Ty Law).

Of course, Delhomme is not the most important member of the Panthers either, but they have an excellent defense and they are clearly superior in the running game. The most consistent trend in which team wins the Super Bowl are teams with a good defense and a team that can run the ball and the Panthers do both.

Prediction: Carolina - 20 New England - 17