

# 'Any given Sunday' no longer true for NFL

Difference between good and bad teams in the NFL much more noticeable this year

By MATT SUGAM

Over the years the NFL has been the premier league when it comes to creating parity.

The saying "any given Sunday" held true. Any given week, any team could beat another.

Until now. This past Sunday, 28 points or more decided six of the 12 games.

The differences between teams looking to make the playoffs and teams already looking toward April's draft are about as drastic as ever in the salary cap era.

There are several reasons as why this disparity has occurred. Some of the major ones are discussed herein.

## OWNERSHIP

When it comes to bad ownership, Oakland Raiders owner Al Davis and Washington Redskins owner Daniel Snyder are two prime examples.

Even though Davis won three Super Bowls with the Raiders, the sun has set on him but he vows to remain the Raiders owner until they win another Super Bowl or he dies. Based on where the Raiders have gone over the last several years, fans will have to wait for the 80-year-old Davis to do the latter.

Since reaching Super Bowl XXXVIII, Oakland has gone 26-77. With that track record, the Raiders have gotten high draft picks year after year, and Davis has picked bust after bust.

Tackle Robert Gallery hasn't lived up to the hype and never will.

Quarterback JaMarcus Russell is on the fast track to being a bust.

The selection of wide receiver Darrius Heyward-Bey in the 2009 draft remains a head-scratcher.

As the first wide receiver taken off the board, Davis could have taken the likes of Michael Crabtree but went with the speedster out of Maryland instead. Crabtree has five catches in his one game. (He missed the first five games due to a contract holdout.) That's one more than Heyward-Bey has all year.

And then there's Snyder. Despite picking up high-priced free agents year after year and pushing the salary cap to its limits, Snyder can't get a winning team on the field.

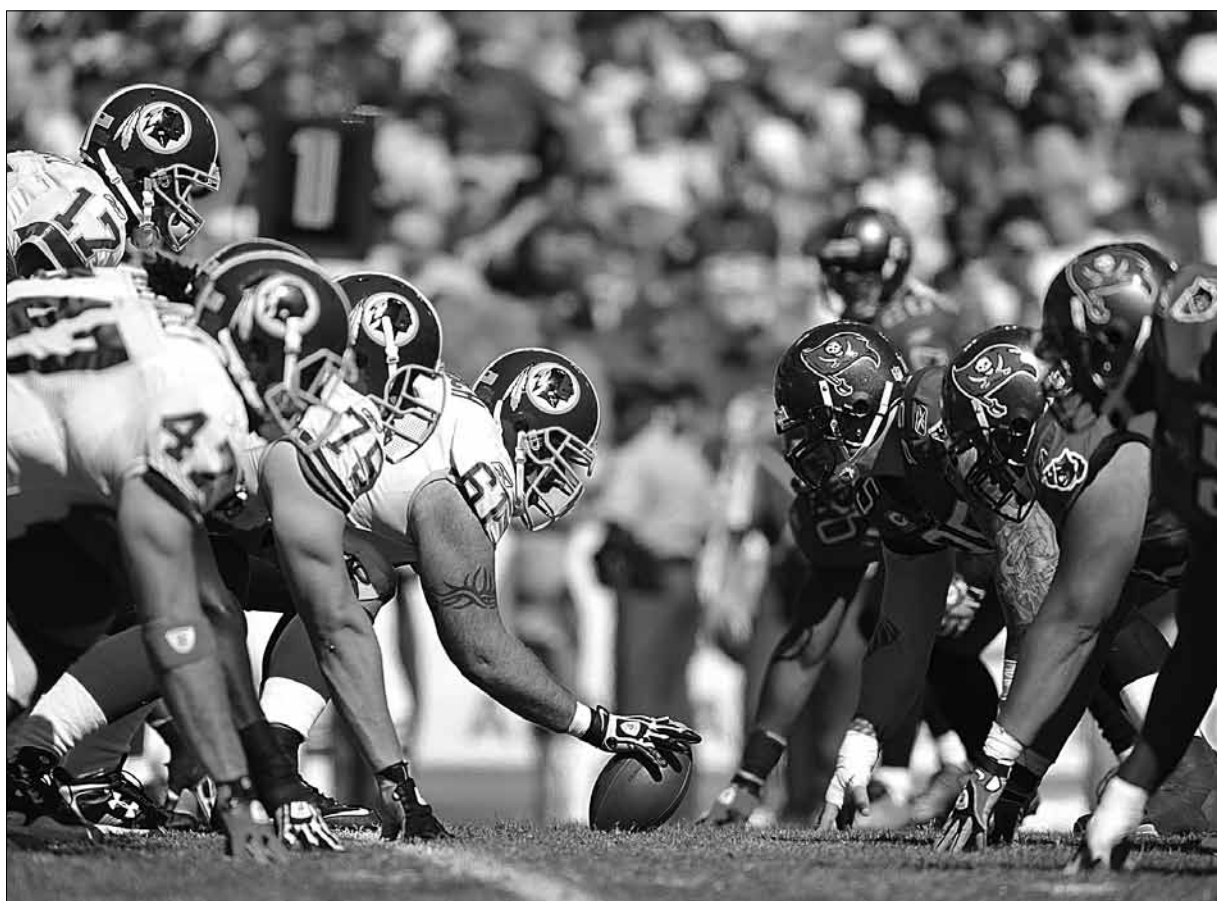
Since Snyder bought the team in 1999, we've seen a coaching and quarterback carousel. You need your hands and feet to count the head coaches and starting quarterbacks since Snyder took over—for the record, six head coach changes and 10 different starting quarterbacks.

And Jim Zorn's days as the head coach are dwindling even though Snyder has said he will remain at the position for the rest of the season.

Snyder stripped Zorn of his play calling duties last week and hired Sherman Lewis.

Lewis was calling bingo games when he got the offer to become the offensive play caller. If only picking up a ping-pong ball and saying B4 was as easy as calling plays in the NFL.

And then there's just how to build a



TWO BAD TEAMS: The Washington Redskins and Tampa Bay Bucs are just two of at least half a dozen NFL teams that are really, really bad. LARRY FRENCH/GETTY IMAGES

team in the first place, which brings up my next point.

## THE FORMULA

There are different ways to build a team in the salary cap era.

First and for most, a team has to draft well.

If your high first-round draft pick is a bust, you'll be picking there again.

And if you're like the Raiders, it becomes a vicious cycle of doing so over and over again.

This kills teams in the salary cap era.

Teams have to pay unproven rookies astronomical contracts—which is a completely different issue—making them unable to pick up high-priced free agents.

It's also important to draft well in

the later rounds.

To build a good team under the salary cap, teams must draft well to have young players that they can mould into good NFL players at an inexpensive price. For a player selected outside the first round, it's all about getting to that second contract because that's when he can make big money.

Teams can then decide if they want

to pay these now high-priced free agents that they molded or let them go to another team.

Then comes the franchise quarterback. Successful teams usually have one.

Sure there are examples of guys who wouldn't be considered franchise QBs that won Super Bowls—Trent Dilfer with the Ravens in Super Bowl XXXV and Brad Johnson with the Bucs in Super Bowl XXXVII—but they are few and far between. And they had dominating defenses that won games.

But typically, when it comes to winning Super Bowls, a team needs to be able to generate some offense, like Tom Brady and the Patriots or Peyton Manning and the Colts.

A forgotten component of successful offenses is the offensive line. Hard to miss when you consider these guys are typically the largest players on the field.

The guys up front never get enough credit. And if you look at good teams across the league, they have good offensive lines anchored by a Pro-Bowler.

A good line protects your quarterback and paves the way for the run game. Without that, teams cannot generate much offense.

This season, it seems that the factors that make a team bad are acting up all at the same time—with disastrous consequences.

I'm no GM and getting all of the above right is much easier said than done. But clearly, there are some franchises in this league that need to get back to the basics of building a team.

If not, the phrase "any given Sunday" could become a thing of the past.

Matt Sugam also writes for The Daily Targum at Rutgers University.



TAKING THE LEAD: Denny Hamlin (right) edges past Jimmie Johnson's 48 Lowe's Chevrolet with Greg Biffle on their backs last Sunday at Martinsville. JOHN HARRELSON/GETTY IMAGES

## Hamlin beats Johnson at Martinsville

Johnson still leads NASCAR chase

By JAMES FISH

Epoch Times Staff

An odd thing happened at Martinsville Speedway last Sunday. NASCAR raced there and Jimmie Johnson did not win. Instead Denny Hamlin came back from an early-race pit lane collision to take the victory, making up for losing to Johnson at Martinsville in March.

Hamlin collided with Dale Earnhardt Jr., in pit lane on lap 46, damaging the nose of the car slightly, but the damage only seemed to make him faster.

Hamlin took over the lead on lap 183. He fought off Kyle Busch, but lost the lead in the pits on lap 254. Then Hamlin worked his way back to the front, finally passing Jimmie Johnson to retake first place on lap 363.

For the rest of the race Hamlin was untouchable, pulling away on the restarts and running ahead of the battles in the pack. At the last Martinsville race, Jimmie Johnson pushed Denny Hamlin aside to take the win. This time Hamlin didn't let Johnson get close enough to try it again.

"I knew all those guys were going to be aggressive and try to get the win, but we just had the best car there at the end," Hamlin said. "The 48 [Johnson] didn't do anything that he shouldn't have, he made sure he protected his points lead, and gave us a little bit of respect as well."

Hamlin thanked his fans for sticking by him after he finished 37th and 42nd in the last two races.

## BATTLES APLENTY

Jeff Gordon, who led early in the

race but dropped back when his two-tire pit strategy proved unwise, got beat up and battered by Juan Pablo Montoya. Montoya seemed determined to push Gordon aside even though he had the speed to pass cleanly. The pair fought for several laps, with Montoya finally muscling his way ahead.

From there, Montoya passed Jimmie Johnson cleanly for the lead, but he could not hold it. Montoya still managed a respectable third.

Kyle Busch drove a great race, coming from 41st position to lead briefly, finally finishing fourth. Jeff Gordon ended up finishing fifth.

Joey Logano and A.J. Allmendinger jostled for a few laps, with Allmendinger ending up in the wall. Such is NASCAR.

Dale Earnhardt Jr. had an even worse day than usual. After getting rammed in the pits by Denny Hamlin, Junior had a series of tire failures which put him into the wall a couple of times. Apparently he was melting beads due to brake overheating. He eventually finished 29th. After announcing last week that he was at the end of his rope, it is hard to know where he will go from here.

The race saw 14 cautions; 15 actually, as the Green-White-Checkered finish turned into a Checkered/Yellow finish.

Scott Speed spun and hit the wall hard on lap 495, bringing on the G/W/C. But on the restart, John Andretti bounced off the inside wall, coming to rest in the middle of the track, just short of the start/finish line.

The stewards decided to let them race, waving the yellow and checkered flags simultaneously as the pack weaved around Andretti to end the day.

Though Jimmie Johnson didn't win—only the third of six Chase races he didn't—his second-place finish stretched his lead over Mark Martin to 118 points. Martin finished eighth. Jeff Gordon's fifth-place finish kept him in third, 150 points down.

The Chase is a three-way fight going into Talladega. Only Martin and Gordon have a real chance to catch Johnson, and the way Johnson has been running, many think the Chase is already over. But Talladega is a wild card. Absolutely anything can happen on this high-speed, high-banked restrictor-plate track.

There is nowhere safe to run and nowhere to hide. The "Big One" can happen anywhere and at any time, and anyone can get caught up in it.

POINTS STANDINGS		
Driver	Points	Gap
1 Jimmie Johnson	6,098	-
2 Mark Martin	5,980	118
3 Jeff Gordon	5,948	-150
4 Tony Stewart	5,906	-192
5 Juan Montoya	5,898	-200
6 Kurt Busch	5,858	-240
7 Ryan Newman	5,786	-312
8 Greg Biffle	5,748	-350
9 Denny Hamlin	5,746	-352
10 Carl Edwards	5,685	-413
11 Kasey Kahne	5,659	-439
12 Brian Vickers	5,568	-530

## Penguins avoid Stanley Cup hangover

Crosby and Malkin slowly waking up

By KARL YU

Epoch Times Staff

With the good, there comes the bad.

The Pittsburgh Penguins defeated the Detroit Red Wings in seven games to win the Stanley Cup last June. That's the good thing for the Penguins.

The bad thing was that they and the Wings had a much shorter off-season and weren't able to lick their wounds and rest up like the other 28 teams in the NHL—a small price to pay for winning the Stanley Cup.

Winning the Cup is an arduous task and even if a team goes all the way, they could have trouble replicating that success in the early stages of the following season—suffering from the Stanley Cup hangover, as it is known.

After winning their franchise's first Cup in the spring of 2007, the Anaheim Ducks struggled going 4-7-2 through the first month of the 2007-08 regular season. And it wasn't until the middle of November before the team cracked the .500 mark.

Not only did the Carolina Hurricanes start the season with a record of 0-3-1 following their 2006 championship, they also missed the 2006-07 playoffs altogether.

Technically speaking, the Tampa Bay Lightning didn't defend their 2004 Stanley Cup title at all thanks to the 2004-05 lockout, but when play resumed, they started off



GETTING GOING: Evgeni Malkin (left) and Sidney Crosby (right) haven't had to be superstars for the Penguins to do well this year. PAUL BERESWILL/GETTY IMAGES

strongly going 7-3-2 through October. They began November with six straight losses though.

Not all recent Cup winners suffer the hangover.

The Detroit Red Wings, who defeated the Penguins in the 2008 final, jumped out to a 15-4-4 start last season and didn't reach double-digit losses until near the end of January.

The Pens, for the most part, haven't missed a beat either and are clearly not suffering from any kind of hangover.

At the start of the week, Pittsburgh (9-2) not only owned the best record in its division and conference, they led the NHL in wins, and were tied with the Colorado Avalanche for most points with 18. Goalie Marc-Andre Fleury

was tied for the league lead in wins among goalies with eight, and he is in the top five in goals against average.

While no one is going to complain about the Pens' start, not everyone is firing on all cylinders through the first month of the season.

Pittsburgh's 1-2 offensive punch of Evgeni Malkin and Sidney Crosby finished last year first and third in league scoring with 113 and 103 points respectively—Malkin won the Art Ross Trophy for most points.

The dynamic duo is off to a slightly slow start, at least by its standards, at the outset of the 2009-10 season.

Again, at the start of the week, Malkin had four goals and nine assists for 13 points through 11 games, which placed him 12th in the scoring leaders. With six goals and five assists, Crosby was tied for 25th in NHL scoring. Crosby did score a hat trick against Montreal on Wednesday, though.

Support players are picking up the slack though.

Centre Tyler Kennedy, who has averaged 7.5 goals in two seasons with the Penguins, is second behind Crosby in team goal scoring, bulging the mesh five times so far.

Young defenseman Alex Goligoski, who only played 45 games last year, has racked up nine points and is a stellar +9 in plus/minus rating.

The Penguins don't even seem to miss Max Talbot who became such a huge playoff performer last year. Despite Crosby and Malkin's "slow" starts, the team is still rolling like it did last playoff season and is not feeling the effects of the Stanley Cup hangover.

They're still feeling the high from last season.

TENNIS RANKINGS				MEN'S GOLF RANKINGS			
Women				Men			
Name	Points	Name	Points	Name	Avg. Points	Name	Avg. Points
1. (2) Dinara Safina (Russia)	7,731	1. (1) Roger Federer (Switzerland)	10,305	1. (1) Tiger Woods (U.S.)	15.80		
2. (1) Serena Williams (U.S.)	7,576	2. (2) Rafael Nadal (Spain)	9,095	2. (2) Phil Mickelson (U.S.)	7.93		
3. (3) Svetlana Kuznetsova (Russia)	5,772	3. (3) Novak Djokovic (Serbia)	7,950	3. (3) Steve Stricker (U.S.)	7.55		
4. (6) Caroline Wozniacki (Denmark)	5,485	4. (4) Andy Murray (Britain)	6,890	4. (4) Paul Casey (Britain)	6.17		
5. (5) Elena Dementieva (Russia)	5,415	5. (5) Juan Martin del Potro (Argentina)	6,165	5. (5) Lee Westwood (Britain)	5.97		
6. (8) Victoria Azarenka (Belarus)	4,451	6. (6) Nikolay Davydenko (Russia)	4,700	6. (6) Padraig Harrington (Ireland)	5.78		
7. (4) Venus Williams (U.S.)	4,397	7. (7) Andy Roddick (U.S.)	4,670	7. (7) Henrik Stenson (Sweden)	5.67		
8. (9) Jelena Jankovic (Serbia)	3,555	8. (8) Jo-Wilfried Tsonga (France)	3,930	8. (8) Kenny Perry (U.S.)	5.54		
9. (7) Vera Zvonareva (Russia)	3,550	9. (9) Fernando Verdasco (Spain)	3,330	9. (9) Jim Furyk (U.S.)	5.38		
10. (10) Agnieszka Radwanska (Poland)	3,340	10. (10) Robin Soderling (Sweden)	2,900	10. (10) Sergio Garcia (Spain)	5.32		
11. (12) Flavia Pennetta (Italy)	3,150	11. (11) Fernando Gonzalez (Chile)	2,780	11. (12) Martin Kaymer (Germany)	5.08		
12. (11) Marion Bartoli (France)	3,105	12. (12) Gilles Simon (France)	2,655	12. (11) Geoff Ogilvy (Australia)	4.96		
13. (13) Samantha Stosur (Australia)	2,945	13. (13) Marin Cilic (Croatia)	2,355	13. (13) Stewart Cink (U.S.)	4.76		
14. (15) Maria Sharapova (Russia)	2,820	14. (14) Radek Stepanek (Czech Republic)	2,165	14. (14) Sean O'Hair (U.S.)	4.73		
15. (16) Li Na (China)	2,541	15. (15) Gael Monfils (France)	2,125	15. (16) Lucas Glover (U.S.)	4.22		
16. (17) Nadia Petrova (Russia)	2,440	16. (16) Tommy Robredo (Spain)	2,110	16. (17) Rory McIlroy (Britain)	4.11		
17. (24) Francesca Schiavone (Italy)	2,375	17. (17) Tommy Haas (Germany)	1,845	17. (15) Vijay Singh (Fiji)	4.09		
18. (18) Kim Clijsters (Belgium)	2,340	18. (18) David Ferrer (Spain)	1,805	18. (18) Camilo Villegas (Colombia)	4.07		
19. (20) Yanina Wickmayer (Belgium)	2,310	19. (19) Tomas Berdych (Czech Republic)	1,760	19. (19) Retief Goosen (South Africa)	4.06		
20. (19) Virginie Razzano (France)	2,300	20. (22) Lleyton Hewitt (Australia)	1,600	20. (20) Zach Johnson (U.S.)	4.02		

Rankings as of October 27, previous rankings in parentheses