

Which Teams Will Be In Super Bowl XLVII?

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Today's NFL games represent my favorite weekend of games each year. The Super Bowl always seems to be more about guacamole, your friends' annoying girlfriends, and commercials. This weekend seems more about football. Plus, with two games, there is a better chance of one being an all-time great game.

So which teams will be in Super Bowl XLVII? I'll tell you what I'd do, if I were going to pick straight up or against the spread.

San Francisco at Atlanta

This game opened with the 49ers as a 3 point favorite, but quickly moved to 3.5 or even 4. It seems rare to me that Atlanta would be the 1 seed and continue to be a home dog this postseason. But I'm too lazy to find an exact statistic on that one! Let's just go with "#1 seeds are usually favored" for the rhetoric here. I don't think the exact percentage would be that much more enlightening.

Last week, Atlanta and Seattle played a very close game. Seattle and San Francisco feel like similar teams, to me. And at one point Atlanta was up by 3 TDs. To me, the narrow escape last week tells me more about the Falcons conservatism than about which team was superior. I am not sure why, given the coin-flip nature of the end of last week's game, or even given the first half dominance by Atlanta, 74% of people on my Yahoo Sports Pick'Em are picking San Francisco to win outright. I think Atlanta has a better than 26% chance here to win outright, and if I can find them as 3.5-to-4 point underdog, I think I'm grabbing the points. I think the 49ers love has a lot to do with recency bias, where we saw Colin "The Angry Ostrich" Kaepernick run all over Green Bay, and saw Atlanta struggle in the second half last week, so the national bandwagon has 49ers flags flying in the windows.

That said, I am picking the 49ers to win here, in my aforementioned pick'em. However, this game is a true toss-up in my mind. My selection of San Francisco is more of a strategic move. I've been leading this particular pick'em in total points for most of the NFL season. So in order to maintain a lead this late, the smart move is to pick most (if not all) favorites. This is because the majority of my competition (74%, if the national average also applies to my smaller group) will also be picking San Francisco. If I'm wrong, they are wrong with me, and there is no net gain on my lead. The same is true if the Niners win. Down the stretch I have forced my opponents to try to take more underdogs to pad into my lead, and as a result my lead has actually grown. That said, I would still not be surprised to see Atlanta win outright (and/or cover), so I am giving this game the lower confidence rating of the two.

Baltimore at New England

This game represents the Patriots' current AFC rivalry, at least in terms of playoff outcomes. In the earlier part of the Belichick-Brady dynasty, it seemed every year brought another Colts-Pats rematch. These days, it's been the Ravens, and even though this line opened at Pats -9.5 (and moved to -7.5), the Ravens won't be coming into this game thinking about anything other than winning (and sending Ray Lewis into retirement with a Super Bowl appearance).

However, I think Baltimore has been kind of overrated this season. I understand that New England's second-best offensive player (Rob Gronkowski) is out for the remainder of the year. I understand that taking the Pats also represents some sort of recency bias, as they scored 40+ points against the Texans (for the second time in about a month) just last week. All of these reasons (and the fact that New England is a team that gets a lot of public money) are just a reason for me to try to find a lot of points and consider taking the Falcons. They certainly could win outright (my same pick'em has been taking New England at the same rate as San Francisco, 74%), and a close game in another cold setting is likely on the horizon for the Ravens again this week.

In the end, I think the Pats are too good, and that the Ravens have been doing it with the mysterious mojo, the equivalent of George Mason making a run to the Final Four (to be fair, the Ravens were a top 5 AFC team this season and George Mason was something like the 50th best NCAA team that year). My point is, most of the time, betting on the mojo continuing another week is folly, as it is not sustainable. Sometimes, such as when Jerome Bettis' retirement tour resulted in a Super Bowl win as the 6 seed, that mojo lasts long enough for a Super Bowl win. But sometimes, as with the Arizona Cardinals in the Super Bowl a couple of years ago, it is just not enough to finish this thing off.

I like the Patriots to end the Baltimore mojo this week, though I am not comfortable laying 9.5 points!