

COMMENTARY: Kevin Dern

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[Keys to Surviving the Meat-Grinder](#)

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I remember the early summer of 2008, going down to work the Jason Taylor Youth Football Camp in Miramar, this of course, prior to his trade to the Washington Redskins. Having lived my entire life in either Cincinnati or Dayton, Ohio, save one year in New Jersey at the age of 3, it's safe to say that I've never experienced the type of heat and humidity that South Florida has to offer.

That was in June, and I remember losing over 10lbs in 3 days just from running around working a kids' football camp.

Obviously, I'll never be as used to that kind of heat and humidity as the Florida natives that belong to the site, and especially not world-class NFL athletes like the

Miami Dolphins players.

But this “tweet” - sorry, I don’t use Twitter, but David Canter, the agent for Sean Smith said that, “The stamina and fitness of the Miami Dolphins players will never be tested.

No one in the NFL in more painful and brutal climates.” Kudos to FinAtic8480 for finding this little nugget.

This got me to thinking - what other team does experience these types of conditions, both from a physical regimen and climate standpoint (I’m going Wannstedt now!)? The Buccaneers and Jaguars are close in proximity, but you don’t really hear about the grueling regime and weight training much. Maybe the Texans climate-wise, but having been there for 2 Dolphins losses, they only keep the roof open when it’s not raining and the temperature is between 50-80 (Obviously last year with the hurricane damage it was open due to repairs).

Just off the top of my head, it’s hard for me to come up with a

team that is subject to these types of conditions and offseason program, are there any out there?

For all the blustering that the ESPN talking-heads and the media outlets do about our brutal schedule, I for one think that barring a rash of freak injuries, the Dolphins have the potential to survive this “meat-grinder” if you will, and still come out resembling something looking like Dolphin, or Tuna - whichever you prefer. Even one the interns in my office asked me the other day if I heard that Skip Bayless even mentioned the Dolphins as one of the top AFC teams.

Now I despise Skip Bayless, but I think he’s right more than he’s wrong when he’s not defending the Brett Favre’s of the world - he’s been pretty on point with guys like T.O. and LeBron James as of late, even if he’s as arrogant as they come - but I’ve got to give him some respect for acknowledge the Dolphins.

Even last year, we saw a team that's well-known for it's toughness face the hardest schedule of the league and come out winners.. The city in which they call home, the attitude that carries over from the players to the coaches to the fans has always been know for those traits.

It isn't Miami, but we should know it, heck, the greatest player in our beloved franchise history called it home.

Yes, the Pittsburgh Steelers faced the toughest schedule in the league in 2008 and came out as Super Bowl Champs. They faced an opponent's combined winning percentage of .598 (153-103) 12 games vs. opponents who went at least 8-8 in 2007, and 8 games against playoff teams from 2007.

That's darn impressive to go 12-4 facing those numbers.

But that's all they are, numbers.

The Dolphins face similar "numbers" this year. The Dolphins face an opponent's winning percentage of .594, a record of 102-54, and facing 6 playoff teams from 2008. Not to mention the Patriots going 11-5 and missing the playoffs without Brady, so let's call it 7, after all the only reason they didn't make it was because they lost to the Chargers and we didn't. But what do those numbers really tell us?

I thought about this all day during work - what's the best way to compare just exactly how tough Miami's schedule is for 2009, and what qualities teams in the past have had that have helped them navigate precarious schedules like the Dolphins will see.

Let's take a look at the 2007 season's toughest schedules:

**** I've listed the opponents winning percentage, games against teams that finished .500 or better in 2007 including the playoff teams in parentheses and their 2007 record to show how they finished ****

Buffalo: .539 opponents winning percentage with 12 games against teams .500 or better (8 playoff teams) Record: 7-9

Oakland: .539 opponents winning percentage with 11 games against teams .500 or better (6 playoff teams) Record: 4-12

New England: .535 opponents winning percentage with 10 games against teams .500 or better (8 playoff teams) Record: 16-0

Tennessee: .520 opponents winning percentage with 10 games against teams .500 or better (6 playoff teams) Record: 10-6

Kansas City: .516 opponents winning percentage with 11 games against .500 or better teams (5 playoff teams) Record: 4-12

New York Jets: .516 opponents winning percentage with 10 games against .500 or better teams (7 playoff teams) Record: 4-12

Cincinnati: .512 opponents winning percentage with 10 games against .500 or better teams (6 playoff teams) Record: 6-10

Miami: .512 opponents winning percentage with 10 games against .500 or better teams (8 playoff teams) Record: 1-15

Pittsburgh: .512 opponents winning percentage with 10 games against .500 or better teams (5 playoff teams) Record: 10-6

For the record, the New York Giants, Super Bowl Champs in 2007, had numbers that looked like this:

New York Giants: .496 opponents winning percentage with 8 games against .500 or better teams (7 playoff teams) Record: 10-6

Well, let's look at how the top 10 fared. The Bills, Raiders, Chiefs, Jets, Bengals and Dolphins all missed the playoffs. Ne
w England went to the Super Bowl, Tennessee, Indianapolis, and Pittsburgh all made the playoffs.

But as a whole, the top 10 didn't fare very well.

We'd all like to get the debacle that was Cam Cameron's 1-15 season, and there were a

myriad of 4-12 records in that top 10 group.

Now, here's the telling matter, The Colts, Steelers, and Patriots ranked 1,2,and 3 respectively in points allowed in the AFC and 1, 2, and 4th respectively in the NFL

(Tampa Bay was 3 overall).

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All of the total defense numbers were pretty well represented by those teams as well.

I'd list the offensive and defensive stats, but that's just too many numbers to look at in one column.

I will say that in 2007, I was particularly surprised that successful running didn't really translate to those teams who made the playoffs with a top 10 SOS -

Pittsburgh finished 2

nd

in the NFL, but the Patriots and Colts were decidedly lower.

For 2008, the top 10 strength of schedule looked like this:

**** Same listings as before ****

Pittsburgh: .598 winning percentage, 12 games against over .500 teams (8 playoff teams) Record: 12-4

Indianapolis: .594 winning percentage, 12 games against over .500 teams (8 playoff teams) Record: 12-4

Jacksonville: .559 winning percentage, 10 games against over .500 teams (6 playoff teams) Record: 5-11

Baltimore: .551 winning percentage, 12 games against over .500 teams (8 playoff teams) Record: 11-5

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Minnesota: .551 winning percentage, 9 games against over .500 teams (7 playoff teams)

Record: 10-6

Cincinnati: .547 winning percentage, 12 games against over .500 teams (8 playoff teams) Record: 4-11-1

Cleveland: .547 winning percentage, 10 games against over .500 teams (8 playoff teams) Record: 4-12

Houston: .547 winning percentage, 10 games against .500 or better teams (8 playoff teams) Record: 8-8

Detroit: .543 winning percentage, 10 games against .500 or better teams (7 playoff teams) Record: 0-16

Tennessee: .543 winning percentage, 10 games against .500 or better teams (6 playoff teams) Record: 13-3

Just at first glance, you see it is possible for a team with the hardest schedule in the league to have success, and even win the Super Bowl as the Steelers did last year for a 6th time. Does that mean Miami will do the same? Well, we'll see.

An overall look shows us that 5 teams (Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, Baltimore, Minnesota, and Tennessee all made the playoffs) and the rest of the teams, minus the Texans at 8-8, fared about the same (as poorly) as the teams that missed the playoffs in 2007 with a top 10 SOS. Special thanks to Detroit for not making that 1-15 feel quite as badly.

So, just based on the last two years, an average of 4 teams make the playoffs who face the top 10 strength of schedules. This year's top 10 includes 5 teams (Miami, Carolina, Atlanta, Philadelphia, and the New York Giants) that made the playoffs, 1 team (New England) that should've

(hey they went 11-5) and 4 teams that didn't weren't exactly slouches (Jets, Bills, Buccaneers, and Saints) so it's a pretty tough litter to think who among that group would be the "4" (again, the average based on '07 and '08 - not that it means anything) that would make the playoffs.

Again, to look back at the teams who made it from 2008 - Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Minnesota, and Tennessee all play tough defense, stop the run well, and don't give up a lot of points. They also win the tight games; which Miami did a lot of last year.

So, just looking back at two years, obviously it's a small sample size so I'll let you look even further back if you like, but what can we tell from those teams with a top 10 strength of schedule slate that made the playoffs?

1) They don't give up a lot of points

2) They do win the close games

3) They run the ball effectively - according more to the 2008 season than 2007.

4) They stop the run effectively

5) By virtue of points 3 and 4, they control the clock.

It's these 5 keys that will make or break Miami's 2009 playoff hopes. If they're able to hit these factors, I think the odds are pretty good for a 10-6 or 11-5 season. If they go above and beyond hitting these factors, and are dominant in facilitating these components of a football game, then I think they can do better than last year's 11-5 barring a rash of injuries.

Well, let's take a look at how our beloved Dolphins stack up shall we?

**** All my statistical references are from the site below ****

<http://www.pro-football-reference.com/years/2008/opp.htm>

1) Points Allowed

In 2008 the Steelers, Titans, and Ravens were tops in points allowed surrendering 223, 234, and 244 respectively. Miami clocked in at 9th with 317 points allowed. Take out the second New England game and the Arizona game and you're looking at 238 points allowed, which would've been good enough to finish 3rd in the league.

Obviously our pass defense was torched both games, an obvious reason for the signing of Gibril Wilson, and the drafting of Vontae Davis, Sean Smith, and Chris

Clemons.

However, a word of caution here - Miami is facing even more of the top passing offenses in the league in 2009 than in 2008. We face New Orleans this year, who had an '08 average of 311 yards per game, which was tops in the league a year ago; Houston (266 ypg); San Diego (241 ypg); Tampa Bay (226 ypg); New England, with Brady (223 ypg still in '08 with Cassell); and Atlanta (208 ypg).

Keep in mind, all those teams, plus Jacksonville who was right behind Atlanta were all in the top half of the leagues passing offenses a year ago - which could spell trouble even with the new secondary as Miami was 25th

in the league a year ago yielding 227 ypg on average.

Big passing teams put up big points on Miami last year, so stopping them would seem to be the primary key in 2009.

I'll say, I'd make a shaky wager to say Miami improves to between 15th

and 20th

in the league in passing defense this year.

2) Winning the Close Games

This is something Miami did with regularity last year - pretty much every win except the week 3 romp of New England was close. 17-10, 25-16, 26-17, 21-19, 17-15, 16-12, 16-3, 14-9, 38-31, and 24-7.

Remember those scores? Of the 10 wins that weren't the week 3 game, only 3 of them were decided by more than 1 score, and a lot of those were against pretty mediocre teams like Oakland, St. Louis, Seattle, and Kansas City.

As Joey Porter said, the NFL gave us a schedule and we played who was on it. Well, that's what the good teams do - they win games no matter who they're

playing, no matter the record, the conditions, the style of play - I'm confident that Miami went through enough last year to help curtail losing to teams they should have beaten.

Only the losses to the Jets and Texans did we lose games we should've beaten; both games having come down to the very last play.

If Miami is able to do this in 2009, we should at least hit 6-8 wins.

3) □ Run the Ball Effectively

Miami was 11th in the league last year in terms of running the football, churning out a respectable 118.6 yards per game. However, the Wildcat had something to do with it - just take a look:

<http://www.nfl.com/videos/miami-dolphins/09000d5d81167761/Evolving-the-Wildcat>

Miami had a yard per carry average of merely 3.8 when outside of the Wildcat formation, but a 6.1 ypc average in it. It just goes to show that Miami struggled from its base formations. Gone is Samson Satele, who I think was the major factor in us not being able to run effectively.

Enter Jake Grove, who tussled with Vince Wilfork, Kris Jenkins, Marcus Stroud, and Jamal Williams, all of whom we'll see in 2009.

Hopefully he remains healthy, otherwise I fear we could be in trouble.

Justin Smiley was probably the most effective lineman throughout the year until breaking his leg against the Rams.

And we still don't know who is going to plug the hole at RG (my money is wagered heavily on a healthy Donald Thomas at the moment, if not...).

Looking at some of the playoff teams from last year, 6 of the top 7 rushing offenses made the playoffs, the other being the Patriots, so essentially, the top 7 rushing attacks made the playoffs. There, I'm a little more satisfied that running the football actually gets you somewhere. My
steriously, the Pittsburgh Steelers checked in 23
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overall in rushing - so I guess it doesn't apply nearly as much as I thought (105 ypg) it might; but overall, if you can run it, you're going to make the playoffs as the Giants, Falcons, Vikings, Panthers, Ravens, and Titans all did in 2008 - all of whom averaged over 130 ypg.

If I were Tony Sparano, I'd set that 130 ypg as my target to hit in 2009.

All those teams recorded over 500 rushing attempts; Miami had 448.

4) Stopping the Run

7 of the top 10 rushing defenses in 2008 made the playoffs, including Miami, who finished 10th while still surrendering a 4.2 ypc allowed mark, which isn't very good compared to Minnesota and Pittsburgh who were at 3.3 ypc - nearly a full yard less, and both under 81 ypg allowed - Miami was at 101.3 ypg in 2008.

Who will we see that can run effectively in 2009 you ask?

Miami will see 5 of the top 10 rushing offense from 2008 on this year's schedule, including Atlanta (2nd overall) and Carolina (3rd overall) who both averaged slightly over 152 ypg in 2008. New
England, Tennessee, and the Jets also made the list and all were able to garner 125+ ypg in 2008.

Personally, I think this might be the biggest key in 2009. How well does Jason Ferguson hold up? More recently, we've discovered that Matt Roth has tweaked his groin; the left side of our defense, normally with Kendall Langford and Matt Roth, was very stout at stopping the run last year - will it be as good? It certainly won't be with Jason Taylor manning the SOLB if Roth isn't good to go.

I know, I know, how dare I question Jason Taylor's run stopping abilities? Well, he was decent at it as a RE with Miami for a long time, but just pop in any Redskins game last year; he was putrid as a LDE - obviously playing with your hand in the dirt is a little different, but I still don't trust him to dance around a tackle and a tight end, nor do I expect him to set the edge nearly as well as Matt Roth did.

Then you have the other side. KC Joyner pointed out in one of his articles that Joey Porter was pretty bad against the run, and I see his point.

If he was that bad with a smooth vet like Vonnie Holliday protecting his inside, how will he be when it's Phillip Merling full-time, or Tony McDaniel or Randy Starks? I hope you're starting to see the picture I'm painting here.

Paul Soliai doesn't strike me as full ready yet, or that he ever will be fully ready.

Having Joe Cohen and Louis Ellis in camp doesn't ease my concern either.

This is the one area I think Miami needs to be overly concerned with. Now, I think it's a great thing that we have two safeties in Gibril Wilson and Yeremiah Bell that can come up and lay some lumber and make the sure tackle.

Hell, if your into fantasy, and play with individual defensive players, ESPN rated Gibril Wilson as the top defensive back, corner or safety for 2009.

That's got to mean something right?

Any way you slice it, I still think that this is Miami's main concern defensively, and

stopping the run, and running effectively, as already stated, lead to point #5...

5) **Controlling the Clock**

Sometimes the best defense is an offense that doesn't let the other team's offense onto the field. That means long, sustained, 8+ play drives, and no turnovers.

Miami was very effective at this in 2008, surrendering a league low 13 (tied with the Giants) will maintaining a plus 17 turnover ratio, which was tops in the NFL.

With

Chad Pennington at the controls, it's possible to do this again.

Do I think it'll be as low as 13 again? No, probably not - not with the number of tough, physical defenses we'll see; but I think we can be pretty effective.

I tried to find a page that listed out the top "time of possessions" for 2008, but was unsuccessful. I'd like to imagine that Miami was in the range from 8 to 12, as we were pretty effective in closing out games with long drives. See the San Diego and Denver last year.

There was also the Texans game when we left too much time on the clock (or if Jeremiah Bell had held onto the ball) and lost the game.

Against the opponents this year, this key is a must, and it all circles back to points 3 and 4, which is essentially what every casual fan of football assumes you must do to win games from high school on up.

If only it were that simple...

Other Thoughts

□ Having one won 5 games in a row to close out 2008, 4 of which were on the

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road has me a little less worried about that stretch of 6 of 8 on the road coming a few weeks after the bye.

□ No cold weather games save for maybe Tennessee - one of the few perks the schedule-makers did give us.

□ We must stay healthy this year. My one overwhelming concern with this team is the lack of overall depth.

□ This is especially true on defense. If one of the front 7 on defense goes down, do we have the talent to fill in that would be a certifiable weakness? I don't think we have that everywhere. Starks and Taylor are about all I see.

□ When does Chad Pennington get the hook if we start out poorly?

□ When/If are extensions coming for Pennington, Brown, Bess, Fasano, and Roth?

□ Last thought - a lot of people have been trying to predict the 53 man roster, so here's my shot without adding players that are cut from other teams - which I think we'll do.

QB: Pennington, Henne, White (3)

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RB: Brown, Williams, Cobbs (3)

FB: Polite (1)

WR: Ginn, Bess, Camarillo, Turner, Hartline (5)

TE: Fasano, Martin, Haynos (3)

OT: Long, Carey, Gardner, Garner (4)

OG: Smiley, Thomas, Alleman, Murphy (4)

OC: Grove, Berger (2)

25 Offensive players total.

DE: Langford, Merling, Starks, McDaniel, Dotson (5)

NT: Ferguson, Soliai (2)

OLB: Porter, Roth, Anderson, Taylor, Walden, Wake (6)

ILB: Crowder, Ayodele, Torbor (3)

CB: Allen, Green, Davis, Smith, Jones (5)

S: Wilson, Bell, Clemons, Culver (4)

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25 Defensive players total.

K: Carpenter
P: Fields
LS: Denney

3 Special Teams players total.

My wildcard for last man on the team, one more offensive lineman for Coach Sparano, and that'll be Nate Garner. I know we probably don't that 10th lineman, but we kept 10 all of last year, and reports lately have been positive about Garner.

Well, that's all for this column, hopefully you enjoyed it. I'll try to keep them coming with some more regularity throughout the season.

PM me ideas you have for potential columns and I'll try and write one about your topic.

Kevin is a columnist for FinHeaven.com and has been a long time member of the site. He is an avid fan and brings a real fans perspective to you through his commentary. You can find him around on our boards as RoninFin54. Send him a PM and let him know what you think

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of his article