

Dolphins' 23rd ranked total yardage D vs. Jets' 26th ranked total yardage O
Dolphins' 30th ranked scoring D vs. Jets' 25th ranked scoring O

I feel like we've been here before. In September of 2005, I wrote a preview for the Dolphins' season opener against the Denver Broncos. The quality of the opponent may have changed, but the main factors remain the same. The Dolphins picked #1 overall in the draft, while the Jets picked #6 overall due to some tie breaks. . Comparing offense for offense and defense for defense, the primary differences between the Dolphins' 1-15 and the Jets' 4-12, were probably a few coaching points and a few lucky/unlucky breaks. Both teams needed an overhaul during the off season.

Off Season Agenda: Trench Warfare

There is no denying that the Dolphins entered into a full and unabashed rebuild during the off season. They badly needed one. Good coaching absolutely requires that you not use the "r" word in speaking about your team, unless you're using the ever-more popular "retooling" in its place, but the reality was plain as Tony Sparano's accent. The Dolphins took a wrecking ball to their condemned house and started laying concrete foundation.

The Jets have taken a different approach. You might more accurately refer to it as "retooling" as opposed to Miami's "rebuilding". There was much more urgency in their off season, and it has created a sense around the league that the Dolphins and Jets are not really in the same boat with each other, even though that sentiment may not be accurate. The Jets focused on a number of very high profile additions, doling out nearly \$100 million in fresh guaranteed money for big names like Alan Faneca, Damien Woody, Brett Favre, Calvin Pace, Kris Jenkins and Vernon Gholston.

Both teams clearly wanted to renew their focus on the offensive and defensive fronts. Jets' General Manager Mike Tannenbaum is an old Parcells disciple and that connection was evident in how the two teams focused their energy in the same areas. It has become a cliché, but football is won in the trenches, and when you do not control the line of scrimmage on either side of the ball, your job becomes a lot more difficult. Even though the teams focused on the same areas, they attacked them with different strategies. The difference reminds me of back when the Carolina Panthers and Jacksonville Jaguars entered the league as expansion teams, with the Jaguars focused on getting better with younger players while the Panthers focused on borrowing some established legs on the back nine.

Defensive Approach

There were stylistic differences in the ways that the two teams attacked the offensive and defensive fronts. While both teams focused on finding veteran help at the nose tackle position, the Jets spent a heavy amount of resources (draft pick compensation as well as a large contract) on Kris Jenkins. The Dolphins merely sent a future sixth round draft pick for Jason Ferguson. The disparity seems very risky from the Dolphins' point of view, however the Jets are

taking on a healthy amount of risk themselves, and it would not be surprising for the Dolphins to come out with better play at the position very early in the evaluation period. This is not simply blind homerism talking. Jason Ferguson has played the nose guard position in the 3-4 defense for about seven years. Kris Jenkins is getting his first taste of it in 2008. The position plays almost like a middle linebacker on the defensive line, in that you have to constantly read the backfield and direct yourself toward the action. As Ferguson has been quoted, "From B to B, it's up to me" (referring to the "B" gaps between guard and tackle). If the runner strings out wide to the guard-tackle gaps, he is out of the nose guard's jurisdiction, so to speak. However, if he is running directly behind either guard, into either guard-center gap, or directly behind center, the nose guard is expected to make the play on the ball carrier. This position doesn't just demand that you take on double teams, it requires that you command them. If the offense only puts one man, presumably the center, on your nose guard during a run play, your nose guard must turn that play into a broken play.

The two-gap defense is a thinking man's defense. Even the big uglies have to be reading the action and predicting the movement of the ball constantly. Kris Jenkins has hailed from a one-gap scheme where the theme has always been to attack, and the emphasis has not been on reading the action and thinking like a linebacker. This could mean the Dolphins have an advantage at the position in the early runnings (emphasis on 'early'). Before Dolphins fans begin gloating, it would also be well to keep in mind that in this league, you generally get what you paid for, and paying just a sixth round pick for Jason Ferguson means that he carries high injury risk. He is also nearly five years older than Kris Jenkins, and Jenkins will have plenty of time over the long haul to acclimate to the 3-4 defense, where Ferguson will likely begin fading within a few years.

The next key difference in the two teams' approaches toward strengthening their respective defensive fronts showed in their attitudes toward outside linebackers and defensive ends. Both teams went hard and heavy after 270 pound outside linebacker Calvin Pace in free agency. The Jets lured him away from Miami. However, the Jets went one step further by also grabbing Vernon Gholston with the sixth overall draft selection, to skip ahead of former first round pick Bryan Thomas on the depth chart. Meanwhile, they virtually ignored the defensive end position in their 3-4 defense. They seem content with players like Shaun Ellis, Kenyon Coleman, C.J. Mosley, and Mike DeVito.

After losing out on Calvin Pace, the Dolphins seemed to switch gears entirely by grabbing defensive end prospects like trick-or-treaters at an unsupervised candy dish. They signed Randy Starks, long regarded by his own Tennessee coaches as being more fit for defensive end in a 3-4 than defensive tackle in their 4-3 alignment. They drafted the 290 pound Phillip Merling at #32 overall, and then they went two steps further, drafting Kendall Langford at the top of the third round and Lionel Dotson in the seventh round. It would be one thing if they did all of this as an excuse to cast off the players they inherited at the position, but rather they embraced both Vonnie Holliday and Matt Roth, working them as starters since the first days of training camp. At outside linebacker, one would think that if you miss on a Calvin Pace, you regroup and find someone else at the position. The Dolphins, however, did the opposite. Not only did the perennial backup Charlie Anderson become the "crown jewel" (using the term derisively) in the off season's outside linebacker haul, but the front office also traded Jason Taylor to the

Redskins for a second round pick.

One big reason for the disparity has become evident throughout camp and preseason. The Dolphins view the defensive end and outside linebacker positions to be a lot more fluid in their 3-4 defense than most teams. At various points in training camp and preseason, the Dolphins have lined up Vonnie Holliday, Matt Roth and Phillip Merling in space with their hands off the ground as outside linebackers. Matt Roth seems to be the favorite to start on the strong side of the defense at that position. Fans should see this as a kitchen sink measure aimed at stopping the run, at the cost of the ability to cover in the short areas.

There was also a difference in how both teams approached their secondary, but this seems mostly to do with the resources that both teams had at their disposal heading into the off season. The Jets had a very promising corner in Darrelle Revis, but little else at the position. So, they smartly drafted Dwight Lowery in the fourth round, as Lowery very well could have the quickest read and react abilities in the draft at his position. At safety, they seemed relatively well off with standout Kerry Rhodes, as well as Eric Smith and Abram Elam.

The Dolphins' safety position in 2007 was atrocious. Fittingly, they collected safeties by the dozen during the off season. Jeremiah Bell was once a promising young safety, but coming off an Achilles tendon tear, one could hardly count on him. Jason Allen showed that he could make big plays and use his extreme range to rack up tackles in 2007, but he also showed himself to be prone toward peeking into the backfield and being slapped around by the likes of Chad Johnson. Renaldo Hill has always been a solid football player that straddles the line between starter and backup quality, but coming off an ACL tear, he was a big question mark. So, the Dolphins grabbed experienced players like Keith Davis (now cut) and Chris Crocker, while holding onto the leftovers from a year ago and letting everyone compete in camp. At cornerback, very surprisingly, the Dolphins looked at the film and discovered that not only did they have one of the top cover corners in the league in Will Allen, but that Michael Lehan and Andre Goodman were reliable performers (when healthy) as well. As such, they really did not focus on the position during the off season.

Offensive Approach

On the offensive line, both teams started out with similar parts. Nick Mangold is a highly promising former first round pick heading into his third season, while Samson Satele is a highly promising former second round pick heading into his second season. Vernon Carey and D'Brickshaw Ferguson are both former first round picks, Ferguson a high first, with neither having become 'ideal' at the premium left tackle position. The Dolphins decided not to wait on Vernon Carey to see if he could grow into a Flozell Adams at left tackle. They spent the #1 overall pick on left tackle Jake Long to man the spot as a rookie, while Vernon moves over to the less-elite right tackle position. The Jets have decided to keep waiting on Ferguson, choosing not to go over the top as the Dolphins did at the tackle position, instead signing Damien Woody to man the right tackle spot while the Ferguson experiment continues into its third season. That was one key difference. The Jets did, however, choose to go over the top with a mega contract given to left guard Alan Faneca. The Dolphins chose to spend fewer resources on the position,

signing Justin Smiley to a contract that is valued more closely to that of Damien Woody. That was a second key difference.

The third and last key difference, though innocuous, really highlighted for me the different attitudes of the two teams toward the rebuilding process. The Dolphins could have settled for veteran sub-mediocrity at their final guard position, having laid down above average investments in four of the five line positions. They had Chris Liwiensky and Cory Lekkerkerker last season. They could have had either back into the fold to man the final guard spot this season. They chose to scrap those players, instead spending fourth and sixth round draft picks on the promise that perhaps one of them would step up and be more than a sub-mediocre player. The plan has worked out better than they could have hoped. While fourth round selection Shawn Murphy struggled in camp, sixth round selection Donald Thomas has excelled to an extent that Miami fans are not used to seeing out of rookie linemen. The comparisons to Baltimore Ravens guard Chris Chester are apparent. The Jets' answer to this final line position was to continue on with the sub-mediocre Brandon Moore at right guard, rather than spending draft resources to take a chance at getting younger and better at the position.

Once you get beyond the offensive line, the comparisons start to run a lot thinner.

The Jets walked into the off season already having Jericho Cotchery and Laveraneous Coles at their disposal, so it is not that surprising that they did not focus heavily on adding receivers. The Dolphins had nothing but unproven underperformers at that spot, and yet, they seemed to focus just as little attention on the receiver position as the Jets.

Running back was the opposite case. The Dolphins walked into the off season with Ronnie Brown and Ricky Williams at their disposal, while the Jets had a broken-down Thomas Jones and an undersized Leon Washington. Yet, if you can believe it, the Dolphins actually focused more resources toward the position with their dual sixth round selections of Jalen Parmele and Lex Hilliard, while the Jets' crowning achievement at the position was adding free agent backup Jesse Chatman.

At tight end, the Dolphins focused on snagging a blocker in Anthony Fasano, by sending a fourth round pick to the Cowboys. The Jets, meanwhile, picked up a highly athletic pass catcher in Dustin Keller via the draft.

The quarterback position is what will draw viewers to their television screens for this game. Both teams placed a heavy emphasis on improving the position, but once again the differences were evident in the ways that they attacked the position. The Dolphins had a second round pick in his second year, John Beck. The Jets had a second round pick in his third year, Kellen Clemens. Neither player had shown much promise to date. The Dolphins decided to cover their bases by selecting another second rounder, Chad Henne. The Jets waited until the fifth round to grab Eirk Ainge, and then sent a conditional third rounder to the Packers for 38 year old Brett Favre. You can't get more opposite than that. The Dolphins clearly sacrificed performance of today on the promise of a better future, while the Jets clearly sacrificed the promise of the future for performance today. The Jets now have a weapon for 2008, and possibly 2009...but their pipeline beyond seems a bit vacant, with as little promise as Clemens has shown and not

having anyone compete with his status as the future. The Dolphins gladly accepted Chad Pennington as a gift from the Jets, as he was clearly better than the guys they had fumbling around in their own camp. They may lack a significant weapon for today, but they make up for it by having done more to ensure a better future by hedging the previous regime's bet on John Beck with a similar bet on Chad Henne.

Early Returns

Preseason results have a way of making you think that you have learned more than you truly have. As such, I won't spend a great amount of time reviewing the trends. When looking at preseason data, I generally only look at first half data. This provides you with about eight quarters of information, with reasonable confidence that the starters were in the game for about five of the eight, and that the primary role players were involved for most of the other three.

What you see in the data is that the Dolphins are making gains in the areas upon which they've focused during the off season, while the Jets do not appear to be benefiting from the same early (emphasis on early) returns. On the ground, the Dolphins' running backs (not counting receivers or quarterbacks) are averaging about 3.5 yards per carry. Their primary ball carrier, Ricky Williams, is averaging about 4.2 yards per carry on 29 carries. Meanwhile, the Jets' primary ball carrier, Thomas Jones, has averaged 2.4 yards per carry on 12 carries. When the defense is on the field, the Dolphins are allowing a very nice 2.6 yards per carry to opposing running backs. The Jets are allowing a not-so-nice 6.0 yards per carry. They also have allowed 2 touchdown runs where the Dolphins have yet to allow one.

In the air, the Jets have distinguished themselves a little better. They allow more sacks than the Dolphins (one per 13 pass attempts for the Jets, as opposed to one per 19 pass attempts for the Dolphins), and they get fewer sacks on defense (one per 24 pass attempts, compared with the Dolphins' one per 10 pass attempts), however they have done a good job picking off passes and not allowing touchdowns. The Dolphins' secondary has done a slightly better job keeping things in front of them, with a very low 4.2 yards per pass attempt on 67 passes. The Jets have done a similarly good job, allowing 5.8 yards per pass attempt on 73 passes.

The Heat Index: Will the Advantage Return?

A key factor playing into this game will be the heat and humidity of South Florida. During September and October, Miami is one of the most humid areas of the entire country, leading to some of the most consistently high heat index ratings in the nation.

Until the Houston Texans waltzed into Dolphin Stadium (then Pro Player Stadium) for the opening game of the 2003 season, the Dolphins had not lost a September home game since 1993. It was perhaps a bit less of a shock than it should have been that the Texans would break that streak. After all, Houston is one of the only areas of the country that boasts more humidity than Miami, and the Texans come out of their training camp just as ready for hot weather as the Dolphins.

Then, in 2004, the wheels pretty much blew off everything, and the Dolphins dropped two September home games under the leadership of A.J. Feeley. In 2005, Nick Saban's highly regimented training camp and Gus Frerotte's low error quarterbacking helped the team reclaim a 2-0 September home game advantage, including an upset of the Broncos that saw several Denver players leaving the field with dehydration issues. But, in 2006, the anything but error-free Daunte Culpepper helped the Dolphins drop another September home game. In 2007, Cam Cameron ran the easiest, most senior-friendly training camp Dolphins fans can ever remember. As a result, the players weren't even prepared for the heat and humidity of Washington, DC, let alone their own back yard.

Even during this period of turmoil (2004-07), the Dolphins' 3-5 (.375) September home record was still better than their record outside of the heat (.303). The question is, now that the Dolphins have returned to the days of grueling two-a-days, faster-paced and regimented camps, with a relatively error-free quarterback leading the charge, will the unbeatable September home advantage return? The Jets are less fearful of Miami's weather than, let's say, the Broncos. However, word out of New York is that Eric Mangini has placed a greater emphasis on keeping his veterans fresh during camp and taking a lot of days off. Could this play into the hands of the heat-tested Dolphins?

Payback's a <Female Dog>

Among the many angles from which to view this game, there is little doubt that the country will have interest in the game mostly due to Brett Favre and Chad Pennington. Favre's debut in a Jets uniform is sure to cause some stir, but it is Pennington's facing his former team that should have Dol-Fans more interested

We have seen this before. It has worked for the Dolphins and against the Dolphins. In 2006, when the Dolphins were struggling with Joey Harrington at the helm, they traveled up to Detroit to play the Lions on Thanksgiving Day. The crowd jeered Joey, and the stadium sound crew played 'Piano Man' on the PA. Joey Harrington went on to have perhaps the best game he has enjoyed in his entire underachieving career. There was little doubt that Daunte Culpepper had some hard feelings after the way he was held hostage and then unceremoniously dumped by the Dolphins prior to the 2007 season. He caught on with the Raiders and came back to Miami for some payback, racking up five touchdowns with his arm and legs, taunting the Miami crowd the whole way.

When a quarterback is upset and wants a little bit of payback, it can draw out the best in him. However, indications are that the Jets' own players are still upset about the team's dumping Pennington. I doubt they will pull any punches when facing their ex-teammate and leader, but on the other hand, it might be easier for Chad to get inside their heads.

Key Players and Matchups:

RB Ricky Williams vs. SS Kerry Rhodes: There is no secret to the Dolphins, offensively.

They're going to run the ball at you. They grabbed Jake Long, Justin Smiley, Donald Thomas, Anthony Fasano and Ernest Wilford to that end. The Jets know Chad Pennington's limitations better than anyone, and they will have both Kerry Rhodes and Eric Smith creeping up to the line of scrimmage trying to make plays in the short areas. The Dolphins' blocking schemes will generally get a hat on a hat, leaving Ricky Williams to match up on a safety one-on-one, and I think that safety will be Rhodes more often than not. This is a big time matchup and if Ricky can get wide enough to use that stiff-arm, he could make a few big plays.

LT Jake Long vs. ROLB Vernon Gholston: Word out of New York is that Vernon Gholston has had a lot of trouble getting use to his outside linebacker position, as well as the step up in skill at the pro level. But, when he goes up against Jake Long, he will be seeing a very familiar face. The two met several times in college, and Gholston famously got the better of Long in their final match. It could be payback time for Long, or it could be an easy way for Gholston to buy him some credibility with his team by victimizing a guy he's victimized before. If Gholston gets something going against Long, then Pennington will run into a lot of the same issues he had in New York which led to his eventual ouster.

CB Will Allen vs. WR Laveraneous Coles: Jericho Cotchery is emerging as the top receiver in Jetland, but that has never mattered a whole lot when it comes to playing the Dolphins. Coles has a staggering 10 touchdowns against the Dolphins in his career (the most for him against any one team), and fans absolutely know him as a Dolphin killer. Yet, he was the teammate most upset by the dismissal of Chad Pennington, to the point where Coles' relationship with both the media and Brett Favre has become strained. The circumstances are extreme and emotional enough that this question could really flip in either direction.

SOLB Matt Roth vs. TE Dustin Keller: This one kind of scares me. Keller may be a rookie, but Matt Roth is not prepared to hang with this kid athletically. The Jets will spend most of their time in the passing game looking for favorable personnel matchups, and Dustin Keller on Matt Roth is one of the bigger ones to watch. If they are able to catch a man to man matchup or two between Keller and Roth, that could create a big play. One or two big plays could be the difference in this game.

OC Samson Satele vs. NT Kris Jenkins: Satele won't have to face this problem alone. In the running game, he'll have help from RG Donald Thomas. No offense to the Jets but, based on Jenkins' newness to the position and the way they've played through preseason, I don't believe the duo will have much issue with Jenkins in that respect. The issue will be pass protection. The quickest way to get a quarterback antsy is by allowing pressure through the middle, and Jenkins hails from an attacking one-gap scheme. If Satele doesn't watch out, his single matchups on Jenkins in pass protection could get ugly.

Keys to the Game:

Play Dolphins Football – Cliché, I know. But, the off season plan was clear: improve the run defense, improve the run offense and improve the special teams. Run the ball, stop the run, play solid special teams, don't turn the ball over or create stupid penalty situations, and you'll

win more than you lose. The Dolphins have attempted to exemplify this philosophy in four dry runs during the preseason. Now it is time to try it out for real.

Don't get caught flat-footed – The Jets will no doubt attempt to catch the Dolphins' front seven flat-footed. Miami is running a heavy-bodied scheme with Matt Roth playing as a linebacker. The Jets will attempt to use the speed of Leon Washington and Dustin Keller to catch guys like Roth and Ayodele flat-footed, creating big play opportunities that leave Leon and Dustin shooting into the secondary and becoming an issue for Jason Allen and the cornerbacks.

Finish the game – Last year the Dolphins only finished one game, and they barely managed that one. Cameron's Club Med approach to training camp proved to be his most costly mistake as a one-year Head Coach. It is nice to talk about the heat index and how it might make it easier for the Dolphins to finish than for the Jets, but the reality is that with how awful the Dolphins were at finishing ball games in 2007, they really do need to prove that they can out-pace another team in the fourth quarter. Once they prove that they are capable of doing it, we can start to get on board with the idea that the team may win a half-dozen games this year. Finishing the ball game will be a gauge for how much the trio of Parcells, Ireland and Sparano have actually changed the culture of the team.

Prediction:

There is every reason to be skeptical that the Dolphins will make any significant noise this season. They don't have an ideal quarterback situation (for now), their entire passing game is kindergarten level, they neglected the pass rush during the off season, continue to rely on corners that may be overrated by their statistics from a year ago, and their coverage on special teams still appears to have some kinks. For all the improvement in the ground game, Ronnie Brown still only averaged 3.1 yards per carry during the preseason, and is coming back from ACL surgery.

That said, the Jets have serious issues as well, and I am not sure they adequately addressed them. Every year there seems to be one team during the off season that makes a whole lot of waves with big acquisition after big acquisition, and I do not know that history favors those teams. It would seem that the mega resources spent on Alan Faneca, Kris Jenkins, Vernon Gholston, Damien Woody and Brett Favre have made people forget that one year ago, the New York Jets were not THAT much better than the Miami Dolphins. They went 4-12, the Dolphins were 1-15. The Jets had five games decided by a field goal, the Dolphins had six games decided by a field goal. The Jets managed to win a few of those close ones, where the Dolphins too often didn't have the stamina to do the same.

The Jets surely realized they needed a lot of improvement in order to compete better, however their improvements strike me as ornamental, not fundamental. Alan Faneca is fading to where he is not the star caliber lineman he once was, and in the end he's still just a guard. Kris Jenkins is playing a brand new position. Damien Woody has a paucity of experience at the position he was paid top dollar to play. They grabbed these two big time offensive linemen without pairing them up with any physically talented pounders that could make the big fellas feel rewarded

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Want to contact Chris or give him comments directly? ☐ ☐

Contact: ckparrothead@yahoo.com