

Super Bowl XLVI Offers Chance for Patriots to Finally Exact Revenge **-Matt Lieberson**

On February 3, 2008, in Super Bowl XLII, the New England Patriots were two minutes and forty-two seconds away from history. What ensued during this time period was nothing short of shocking. I don't think I need to get into details, but it involves some dude named Tyree on the Giants with pine tar on his helmet making the luckiest catch ever, Plaxico Burress scoring a TD, and me almost throwing up the 3 pounds of shrimp cocktail I ate throughout the night. This was the most gut wrenching loss in Boston sports history, and potentially in Super Bowl history.

On February 5, 2012, the New England Patriots will have sixty minutes of football to erase the haunting memories from that harrowing evening in Arizona. The same two teams from that night, the Patriots and the Giants, will square off in Super Bowl XLVI in Indianapolis.

Looking at the Giants, their run to the Super Bowl has been eerily similar to their run from the 2007-2008 season. They were sluggish through the regular season, and they caught fire late. Their formula for success this season worries me most. What they do best attacks what the Patriots do worst- The Giants throw well and rush the passer well.

This season, Eli Manning has played on a higher level than he has throughout his career. What has made him so successful this year has been who he is throwing the ball to. The Giants have three receivers playing top-tier football right now in Hakeem Nicks, UMass alum and salsa-dancing aficionado Victor Cruz, and Mario Manningham. Cruz scares me the most. While Nicks is big and physical, Cruz has the ability to break away at any instant and score on a deep ball. With a suspect Patriots secondary, New York could exploit this matchup. The ragtag Patriots secondary needs to play to the top of their game in the Super Bowl to stop these three receivers. Safety Patrick Chung needs to be all over the field to keep them from breaking loose.

The New York Giants have always had a fearsome pass rush, and this season is no different. With usual standouts Osi Umenyoria and Justin Tuck, along with emerging star Jason Pierre-Paul, the Giants have tortured quarterbacks throughout the season and through the playoffs. They got potential MVP Aaron Rodgers to play off of his game in the divisional round, and they were able to force 49ers QB Alex Smith into bad throws in the NFC Championship game. Like I've said before, when the Patriots lose, Tom Brady gets beat up. This is what happened in Super Bowl XLII, and if it happens again I worry for New England. It's not like the Patriots have a bad offensive line. They played great against Baltimore and limited high quality pass-rushers like Haloti Ngata and Terrell Suggs from the Ravens. But the Giants are a different animal, and if the O-Line is not at their best, New England is in trouble.

The Patriots still have a lot to take advantage of on the Giants. Beyond the defensive line, the Giants' defense is not extraordinary. The Patriots have enough weapons to abuse the Giants' defense if the offensive line can keep the pass rush in check. The big offensive question is if Rob Gronkowski will be at full strength. I'm not so sure it matters as much as many fans think. If he is, then he is the same beast he's been all year. If he's not, then the Giants move their

better coverage man to equally dangerous Aaron Hernandez, and I think a slightly hobbled Gronk can beat a poor coverage man. Unless this is a serious injury, I don't know how much this will matter.

This brings me to my two X-factors for New England. First, I think that the Patriots run game is key to a victory for New England. Last week BenJarvus Green-Ellis played one of his best games this season. If he has success, the Giants' pass rushers can't focus all of their energy on hitting Tom Brady and will have to put some effort into stopping the run. Kevin Faulk, potentially in his last game as a Patriot, could have a big role. He is always a great receiver out of the backfield, and if Brady needs checkdown options he could have Faulk open to dump the ball off to and pick up yards on broken plays.

My off-the-board choice for X-factor is Julian Edelman. Edelman has become a jack of all trades lately, through playing defensive back, wide receiver, and punt returner. On special teams, Edelman is shifty and dangerous, and he is liable to bring a punt back for big yards. On offense, the Giants don't have the manpower to cover Edelman as well as Welker, Branch, Gronkowski, and Hernandez, so Edelman potentially has some ability to get open looks. On defense is where I expect big things. Don't get me wrong, he is liable to get torched. But Mario Manningham of the Giants recently said that New York plans to test Edelman. With his receiver ball skills, Edelman could possibly make a huge play. Keep in mind that the last three Super Bowls, as well as four of the last five, have had defensive touchdowns. If Edelman plays big on the big stage, that streak could continue.

My Broncos-Patriots preview had no prediction, and that worked, so I don't plan to make one here. But I do think we are in for a classic game this Sunday, and hopefully the Patriots can exact some revenge on the Giants and get the bad taste of shrimp cocktail out of my mouth from four years ago.

Comment with your own predictions!