

Battle of the Unbeatens in New Orleans on Monday Night Football

Contributed by Tony Simmons
Sunday, 29 September 2013

The Miami Dolphins, 3-0 for the first time since 2002, will travel to New Orleans for a primetime Monday Night Football showdown with the 3-0 New Orleans Saints. The Dolphins are coming off a hard fought 27-23 win in Miami against the Atlanta Falcons, while the Saints are coming off a 31-7 win at home against the Arizona Cardinals.

Let's see how these teams matchup going into the Monday Night battle.

Miami comes into the game ranked 26th in total offense generating 319.3 yards per game. The Dolphins rank 14th in passing offense at 249 yards per game, while ranking 28th in rush offense at 70.3 yards per game. They rank 12th in scoring at 24.7 points per game and rank dead last in sacks allowed with 14. They will be facing a Saints defense that ranks 4th in total defense, giving up 295.7 yards per game. They rank 4th in passing defense giving up 184.3 yard per game, and come in 20th in rush defense giving up 111.3 yards per game. They rank 5th in points allowed at 12.7 points per game while coming in 16th in sacks with 8.

Miami will be facing a much improved Saints defense, a defense that was ranked dead last in the NFL in 2012. New DC Rob Ryan has come in and had a dramatic effect on the Saints and their defense. They do a good job of creating pressure with their front four, but most of their damage comes in blitz packages, as LB David Hawthorne leads the team in sacks with 3. This has been a major problem area for the Dolphins, and that has to improve if they are going to have a chance in this game and keeping Ryan Tannehill around for the entire season. After a putrid performance in the 1st game of the season at Cleveland with 20 yards, the Dolphish running game has produced 101 & 90 yards in the last 2 weeks. Miami still needs more, and they will need to have more in this game to give the Dolphins the balance they need to keep this Saints defense off balance. RB Lamar Mille and Daniel Thomas are going to be key, not only in the run game, but the pass game in blitz pickup, an area that both have had their struggles in doing. In the pass game, the Dolphins have multiple weapons that can be used, from WR Mike Wallace, Brandon Gibson and Brian Hartline all have had big games for the Dolphins, and TE Charles Clay has really taken a quantum leap in his play and has to be accounted for. The big key to this offense, besides better pass protection for QB Ryan Tannehill is the improved play of one Ryan Tannehill. He is completing 66.4 percent of his passes and is converting 3rd downs at a phenominal 50 percent. His play has been a big part of the offensive success the Dolphins have had, and he will be the key to this game. You can't hide your QB when the QB on the oppostie side line is Drew Brees. Ryan will have to play a very good game for the Dolphins to get this win.

The Dolphins defense, just coming off of a big challenge in the Atlanta Falcon offense, now take on a New Orleans offense that offers just as much of a challenge, if not more because of one Drew Brees. While the run game has not been anything to write home about for the Saints, Brees and the passing game come in 4th in the league at 318.7 yards per game, and his big weapon is without a doubt TE Jimmy Graham. He is their leading receiver with 23 catches for 358 yards and 4 touchdowns. They have other dangerous weapons in WR Marques Colston and RB Darren Sproules, but Graham has been the main weapon and Brees favorite target. Stopping the run has been a strength of the Dolphins for the last few years, but in 2013, they rank 18th in stopping the run and gave up 146 yards to an Atlanta run game minus RB Steven Jackson. To make matters worse, it likely that massive DT Paul Soliai will miss his 2nd straight game with a knee injury. Miami has to make the Saints one dimensional in this game, which means stopping the run, which means DT Jared Odrick, Randy Starks along with LB Phillip Wheeler & Darnelle Ellerbe need to step up their play. Right now, DE Cameron Wake is listed as questionable, but Wake is pushing to play on passing downs. That said, Miami will still need 2nd year DE Olivier Vernon and rookie DE Dion Jordan along with pleasant surprise 2nd year DE Derrick Shelby to provide heat off the edge. Once again the Dolphins will need Starks and Odrick to get push up the middle and Miami will have to be smart with the blitz, as Brees is very good against the blitz. With a QB like Brees, pressure on him is critical. The secondary will have their hands full, and will need to be sound fundamentally and solid from a tackling standpoint. The Saints are going to make plays, but Miami has to keep the damage to a minimum.

When you are trying to win in a place as tough as the Superdome, you need your Special Teams to be solid. Rookie placekicker Caleb Sturgis has been perfect on his 6 attempts, 2 from over 50 yards. He has also consistently put the kickoffs in the endzone. Punter Brandon Fields is averaging 49.2 yards per punt, 6 inside the 20. Return man Marcus Thigpen could provide the Dolphins a big spark in the return game, and he has shown he has the ability to do that. Miami has to win the special teams battle.

This is game 4 of a brutal 5 game gauntlet that the Dolphins had to navigate to start the season. They are coming into the game with some key injuries. If the Dolphins were healthier going into this game, I would feel a lot better about their chances. I still believe the Dolphins have a chance to win this game, but in a tough ball game, I think the Saints pull it out 27-24. That said, I would love to be wrong.

Go Dolphins.

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