

Frankly Plank

By Duane Plank

First off, an apology was asked for by *NASCAR Guy*, who scoffed at my prediction that the Air Force- Blue Bruins would get worked in Tennessee last weekend. Think I made the bold prognostication that coach Neuheisel and his charges would get stomped by about 20. Turns out that the Bruins actually won the game 19-15. But lost their starting quarterback to a busted jaw after some late-game, inane play-calling by the Bruin brain trust.

No apology here, but I was wrong. Which is all right. Sometimes it is all right to be wrong, right? You ever been wrong? Thought so. Ask your spouse, kind readers. It is what it is, so let's move forward.

Can't believe that Tennessee coach Lane Kiffin allowed his team to get rolled, but he did. Also found out a bit of trivia--that Kiffin used to occasionally drop in to the spot down the road where I do my research. So said an unimpeachable column supporter.

Ran into another column fan the other day. Ha, ha, that makes three! Sort of a supporter. She was kind enough to say she perused the ramblings, but asked how *Brother Chris* had the time to sell tons of real estate and pen three masterful columns each week. Pointed out to her that it was *Duane Plank* who writes the three brilliant tomes, not *Chris*. She said something akin to "whatever."

Help me out, folks. What the heck is "reality TV?" Is it dumping a bunch of folks onto a desert island, hoping that they will nearly kill each other or sleep with each other as they chase some big monetary prize sponsored by one of the TV network conglomerates? Is that reality? Whose reality? Sounds like contrived pablum to me.

Reason I ask is because of an incident that blighted the sporting world last week involving San Diego Charger linebacker Shawne Merriman and alleged reality TV chick Tila Tequila. Reports have referred to Ms. Tequila as a "star." Gimme a break, folks. Call me old fashioned, unhip, uncool, call me whatever, but a chick whose claim to fame appears to be hosting some type of bisexual dating show on MTV ain't no "star."

Now Meryl Streep, that's a star.

Anyway, there are many, many labels that I can use in discussing Ms. Thien Thanh Thi Nguyen (Tequila's real name) and her important accomplishments on the way to "stardom," but this is a family-oriented column (sometimes), and I'll let you come up with your own verbiage to describe the 27-year-old opportunistic gold digger.

Back to the Merriman story. Typical he said, she said brouhaha probably involving a little of this and a little of that. Reports are that Merriman and Ms. Nguyen were hanging out at Merriman's pad very early one fine morning when a dispute arose, and, according to the Tequila chick, Merriman tried to stop her from leaving the premises

by choking the "star." The linebacker claims that Tequila was intoxicated, and he attempted to dissuade her from leaving the home. Just being a good guy.

Tequila signed a citizen's arrest warrant against Merriman, charging him with false imprisonment and battery. Maybe this saga should have played out in the courts, or maybe not. Turns out the law folks didn't believe the allegedly over-served bimbo, and decided not to pursue the case. And waste a lot of taxpayer money.

Either way, Merriman appears to be on very thin ice with those in the Charger hierarchy, who seem to have tired of the hit-man's Hollywood act. Don't expect to see the linebacker in a San Diego uniform in 2010.

Remember folks, what your mother said back in the day? Nothing good happens after 2 a.m. Because this is the world we now live in, Tequila was blasting out tweets to her Twitter followers, disparaging Merriman and his football team. Checked out her Twitter page and saw that she has 251,270 followers. Wow, lots and lots of folks with a lot of time to waste, apparently. Did I tell you that I have a Twitter account? Haven't tweeted yet, but maybe the time has come.

Anyway, Ms. Nguyen was still blasting away at Merriman. Here is a sample of her brilliant tweeting: "Where in the law does it say if ur friend is drunk, make sure to beat her and choke her? No!" And she also let her followers know that she was rooting for the Raiders in Monday night's game against the Chargers. Seems to me she would be a perfect fit in the "Black Hole" up in Oakland.

I am making the assumption that your Raiders started out the season 0-1, thumped by the Chargers. If, by some miracle, the Raiders were victorious, well, my bad. Probably need to apologize to Raider fan next week.

Interesting group of ballers up in the beautiful city of Oakland. You are familiar with the training camp incident in which head coach Tom Cable allegedly punched assistant coach Randy Hanson in the jaw, sending the defensive assistant to the hospital, right? Or that the team cut veteran, reliable, winning quarterback Jeff Garcia from the squad, probably because he is actually a better QB than numero uno draft pick JaMarcus Russell? So now the Poise Boys will rely totally on the unproven, fat, overpaid QB from LSU. Sorry, LSU guy *Randy*, but I don't believe that you read this column, do ya? Maybe a friend will let you know that you were referenced?

Speaking of not reading the column, shout out to my alleged good friend *Steve W.*, who I dunderheadedly allowed to be in my wedding 18 years ago. Anyway, Steve never reads my stuff, says it is not available in the fine city of Lawndale. Which is a crock. Lots of dirt on Steve could be revealed down the road.

Not a Raider hater, by the way. Would

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Steelers Start Title Defense in the AFC

By Duane Plank

Last week, you were all treated to my Carnac-type predictions regarding the NFC. Sure that you saved the column for future reference material, right? Put it next to those recipes Aunt Clarabelle left you before she was carted off to the funny farm?

Guess what, football fans? You get another dose of the football gospel according to *Plank*. This week, we will helpfully preview the 16 teams vying for the AFC championship. Okay, 15 teams have a shot, but we will also mention The Pride and Poise up north. RIP, Al Davis.

New England Patriots, AFC East (12-4): The Pats somehow missed the playoffs in '08 even though they finished the season 11-5. Jovial head coach Bill Belichick had to play basically the entire season without surefire Hall of Fame QB Tom Brady, who went down with a season-ending knee injury in the first 15 minutes of the regular season. Brady is back, but his backup Matt Cassel has moved on to Kansas City, so if Brady goes down again, 12 and 4 could easily flip-flop to 4 and 12.

Miami Dolphins (9-7): The Fish were the surprise team in the NFL regular season in '08, swimming from the trash heap of a one-win season in '07 to notch 11 wins and the division title. A first-game playoff loss to the Baltimore Ravens still smarts; the Dolphins won't be able to sneak up on any of their opponents this year. They have been given the toughest schedule in the NFL, so while the 'Fins may actually play better this season, they won't see an uptick in wins.

New York Jets (8-8): New coach Rex Ryan took a look at the quarterback roster when training camp commenced and basically gave the job to USC's Mark Sanchez. Sanchez looked tentative and skittish at times in the preseason, but what the heck, the only other option was starting Kellen Clemens, who has done nothing to distinguish himself in his three prior seasons.

Buffalo Bills (6-10): Coach Dick Jauron is strapped in to the cliched hot seat after his team finished the '08 season with only two wins in the final 10 contests. A slow start for the Bills and the fourth-year coach will be toast. Jauron better hope that QB Trent Edwards and malcontent receiver Terrell Owens hook up early and often. If Owens is a factor, look for wide out Lee Evans to have a big year, much like in '06 when the speedster corralled 82 passes.

Pittsburgh Steelers, AFC North (13-3): The defending Super Bowl champs actually have an easier schedule this season than the one they faced in '08. And that includes a walkover against the Raiders in early December. QB Ben Roethlisberger and most of his friends are back, and 20 of the 22 starters return for Pittsburgh, who will be taking aim on hoisting a seventh SB trophy in February. As long as complacency doesn't set in, and it shouldn't with coach Mike Tomlin and all of his assistants returning, the Steelers should be still playing ball late in January.

Baltimore Ravens (10-6): The Ravens surprised many folks last year, advancing to the AFC Championship Game with a rookie head coach in John Harbaugh and rookie QB in Joe Flacco. Can they do it again? Probably not, but the Ravens should be testy enough to push the Steelers and be in the battle for a wild card spot. They have a punishing, big play defense, filled with studs who think touchdown once they have forced a turnover. And they play the Raiders in the final week of the regular season.

Cincinnati Bengals (6-10): Don't know how coach Marvin Lewis, entering his seventh season in charge, keeps his job. A four-win season in '08, buffoonish if not law-breaking, off-the-field behavior by many of the miscreants that have besmirched the Bengal roster during the Lewis tenure, and

the coach still has a job? QB Carson Palmer had better rebound from his elbow problems of last season, or even the Raiders might be favored over the Bungles when the two meet at a near-empty stadium in Oakland around Thanksgiving. Turkeys for all!

Cleveland Browns (5-11): New head coach Eric Mangini, jettisoned by the Jets, waited until a few days before the home opener against the Minnesota Vikings to name Brady Quinn as the starting QB. Course those of you who follow pinheaded Terrell Owens on *Twitter* were apparently alerted to the monumental signal-caller decision *before* the announcement became official. And to think, some folks think *Twitter* is a waste of time. I know when one of the Brownies wins will come. Guess who they play a couple of days after Xmas?

Indianapolis Colts, AFC South (10-6): The Colts have a breather on October 25 when they play my St. Louis Rams, who are picked by some Las Vegas wise guys to be the underdog in *every* game they play this season. Sheeeesh, talk about lack of respect. Anyway, the Colts return signal-caller Peyton Manning, who will now look to receiver Reggie Wayne as his number one option to stretch the field. Injuries struck Indy in '08, but they seem to have sufficient depth to take the division this time around.

Tennessee Titans (10-6): Don't know that the Titans were a mirage last year. After all, they did start the season 10-0 before falling to the Jets and plummeting to a 13-3 record, which still nabbed them a home playoff game, which they gagged to the Ravens, 13-10. Coach Jeff Fisher lost behemoth D-lineman Albert Haynesworth to the Washington Redskins, but Fisher is astute enough to plug the holes in the dike. Look for running back Chris Johnson to thrive in his second year playing for payola.

Houston Texans (8-8): Hit the scheduling daily double, with contests against both Oakland and St. Louis. Time for the Texans to take the next step and make a concerted playoff run. Their offense was ranked third overall last season, and if QB Matt Schaub stays healthy, should be able to take advantage of opening the season with three of their first four games at home. But an opening loss to the Jets doesn't help. Look for stud D-lineman Mario Williams to continue terrorizing QBs.

Jacksonville Jaguars (4-12): Could be a long season for coach Jack Del Rio. Or, if as expected, the Jags stink, it could be a very short season for the ex-Trojan, entering his seventh season at the helm in Jacksonville. An 0-5 start is a distinct possibility, what with games against Indy, Arizona, Houston, Tennessee and Seattle on the first part of the schedule. Del Rio could be gone before the Jags play host to St. Louis on October 18.

San Diego Chargers, AFC West (12-4): Should be able to waltz through their divisional games, what with Denver and Kansas City rebuilding, and Oakland being Oakland. Nothing less than an appearance in the AFC Championship game is expected by the Charger faithful, who see an offense featuring QB Philip Rivers, running back LaDainian Tomlinson, and tight end Antonio Gates, and expect points-a-plenty. Must deal with road games at Pittsburgh, New York (Giants), Dallas and Tennessee.

Denver Broncos (7-9): A new head coach in Josh McDaniels and a new QB in ex-Bear Kyle Orton. Coach Mike Shanahan was canned after 14 years at the helm in Denver, opening the door for the young McDaniels to take over. And take over he did, shipping 25-year-old Pro Bowl QB Jay Cutler to Chicago. Pouting wide receiver Brandon Marshall, who spent the preseason moping and walking through workouts, was suspended for a short time prior to the start of the season. Seems to kid wants a bigger paycheck. Don't we all?

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