

Frankly Plank

By Duane Plank

Hey, folks. Thanks to a column supporter, folks are reading this wonderful stuff in Chicago. So do you have any friends/relatives out there? Send 'em the paper. We can always use some more friends of the column.

ESPN has been touting their 30-year anniversary recently. Remember when the all-encompassing sports network debuted? Think the first time I viewed ESPN, I had to travel to the beautiful Hermosa Beach and hang out in what passed for the basement of a friend's place. Course we were all about 20-years-old then, so we were living with our folks, minding all of the rules that the folks had put down. You know, "If you live under my roof..." blah, blah blah.

Didn't have cable yet at the folks' mansion, so I trekked to HB to my friend's house. Remember sitting in the basement, which also seemed to serve as the potty room for my friend's dogs. Seemed like doggie poop everywhere.

But we had cable TV, which was a miracle at that time. It was 1979, remember. Probably watched some tractor race or something like that, but man, what a revelation. A 24-hour sports network. Speaking of dog poop, will someone, anyone, please pay off the clown Chris Berman and relieve us of his sophomoric stupidity? Think he was with the network back in the day, probably was a credible reporter, but he has become such an unbearable buffoon that I mute the tube whenever his fat face shows up. He is a caricature of a caricature.

Kinda reminds me of the launch of MTV. Remember when the phenomenally successful network used to actually play music videos? First time I remember seeing MTV was on a bootleg satellite dish, back in 1981 or so. We used to watch the early stages of the fledgling network from a certain tennis club in Torrance, where we would enter the club somewhat afterhours and hold an MTV party. Yes, ladies, I could dance then, and I can dance now. Just haven't found the appropriate local venue to unleash my talents. Unless you count the end-of-season volunteer party after the local Little League season wrapped up in June. Ask Mrs...That's right, I always protect the innocent in my columns. Oh, the memories.

Nice to see University of Michigan football coach Rich Rodriguez is still trying to rationalize his stupid behavior. The contract-breaking coach left a nice job at the University of West Virginia to come to the historic campus in Ann Arbor and guide the student athletes masquerading as football players straight in the dumpster last season to a record of 3-9, if memory serves me.

Now Rich Rod has been accused, by some of his ex-charges, of breaking NCAA rules regarding practice time. Like it matters how much a 3-9 team practices, right? And it also surfaced that Rich Nim Rod is in trouble for allegedly defaulting on a loan. Something about a condo project that went down the tubes in Virginia.

The coach's mouthpiece, financial adviser Mike Wilcox, released a statement: "Coach Rodriguez is the victim of a fraudulent real estate Ponzi Scheme that has unfortunately affected many Americans."

I am fairly sure that the people he lied to and misled in West Virginia, the coaches that he canned at the U of M, and the players that he has run out of Ann Arbor feel very badly about Nim Rod's misfortune.

Dude shoulda just stayed in West Virginia, honored his contract, stayed honest with the kids he recruited, and lived happily ever after. You know, big fish, small pond. But nooooooo! Guy had to outthink himself, wreck the mighty program of the Maize and Blue. What'cha think about your coach, Michigan alumni and MB girl, April B?

Tough week on the unemployment line for many Americans, including three NFL offensive coordinators who were canned before the regular season started. Kansas City Chief coach Chan Gailey, Tampa Bay Buc coach Jeff Jagodzinski, and Buffalo Bill coach Turk Schonert were all "relieved of their duties." Used to be that teams would wait until they had lost a few games before throwing coaches under the bus...

Okay, I know that you can't wait to hear about my selections in the family fantasy football league. Well, got my man-crush guy, QB Kurt Warner. And running backs Matt Forte, Steven Jackson, and, inexplicably, Raider Darren McFadden. Selected wide receivers Steve Smith, Marques Colston and T.J. Houshmandzadeh. Riveting stuff, eh? I'll keep you informed on the travails of my team, especially if I happen to win a few games.

Speaking of winning games, congrats to the Trojans and Bruins for boat-racing obviously inferior opponents last weekend. The Matt Barkley era started a tad bit slowly for the fellas from Figueroa Street, and a discerning listener may have even heard a few boos at the Coliseum as the men of Troy fell behind San Jose State 3-0. But, shockingly, the pros at USC regrouped, tallying the next 56 points to escape with the win. The Ohio State, which barely beat the kids from Navy 31-27, is next on the docket, Saturday at 5 p.m. I will make a bold prediction that the Trojans won't beat the Buckeyes by 53... Maybe 10. USC 28, The Ohio State, 17. Which is actually 11, but the math thing passed me by a long, long time ago.

The Bruins, playing at the Rose Bowl, also started slowly, maybe feeling the heat from the devastating fires that ravaged the area. They fell behind San Diego State 7-0, before waking up to rout the little guys from the South, 33-14. But Bruin fan, don't expect a repeat Saturday when the Bruins travel to Tennessee to tangle with coach Lane Kiffin and the Volunteers.

You might remember Kiffin as the erstwhile coach of the Oakland Raiders, or one of the O-coordinators for the juggernaut at SC. Don't think Kiffin would live to kick some Bruin tail in a game that is being beamed back to L.A.? See Tennessee winning by about 20 points.

And did you catch any of the U. of Washington vs. LSU contest on the tube Saturday night? Ex-SC coaches Steve Sarkisian and Nick Holt, now the men in charge of the Washington program, sure got a lot of face time on the broadcast, didn't they? The fellas are trying to turn around the Husky fortunes, and their kids did put up a good fight, succumbing to the Tigers 31-23.

Haven't forgotten about the baseball stuff, folks. Both of the local MLB'ers seem to have fairly safe divisional leads, though my Halos still make me a tad bit nervous.

And, finally, my L.A. Kings are going through rookie camp just down the street, preparing to start full-squad workouts. Will this be the year they finally return to the NHL playoffs? Si!

Football Forecast, NFC Version

By Duane Plank

The NFL's regular season kicks off Thursday night with an AFC tussle between the defending Super Bowl champion Pittsburgh Steelers and the visiting Tennessee Titans. Should be a nice night out for the fans, who are usually looking for any excuse to mingle with their compatriots and catch a little football on the big screen plasmas. Hope to start out the prognostication side of the column with a victory. Picking the Steelers to win, 24-16.

So there are 32 teams in the big boy league that is the NFL, and all 32 probably harbor Super Bowl dreams. Even the league laughingstock team up in Oakland. And why not? Any of you geniuses out there think that the Arizona Cardinals were on their way to the Super Bowl last season? Or how about you Ram fans, myself included, who were completely caught off guard years ago when the Rams rebounded from a pathetic 1998 season and not only captured the NFC championship the next year, but continued the dream ride with a victory over the Titans in the Super Bowl?

Point is, while there are at least 10 or so serious contenders to advance to the SB as the season starts, the rest of the fellas in the league have playoff aspirations, too.

Which can't be said of most of the teams in the MLB, the NBA or the NHL. Think the Washington Nationals were fathoming World Series when they threw out the first pitch in April? Or that the bumbling Clippers are contemplating still playing hoops next May? Or how about my L.A. Kings' hockey team, which hasn't made the playoffs since April of 2002? Think they realistically entertain hopes of hoisting the Stanley Cup early next summer?

Back to the guys with the football helmets and pads. Thirty-two teams, 32 possibilities. Here is a Nostradamus-type rundown, starting this week with the NFC, with the exact number of games that each team will win in the regular season. According to me. Can't get better than that, can you?

New York Giants, NFC East (11-5): Tough, contentious divisional battles loom. QB Eli Manning will have to start connecting with his new wideouts, now that Plaxico Burress will be wearing a pinstriped uni on Sundays, and Amani Toomer may also spend the season in limbo, having left the Giants and just been cut by the woebegone Kansas City Chiefs. The Giants lost D-Coordinator Steve Spagnuolo, who inexplicably decided to take the head job with my Rams. Play the Raiders, so a sure win there. Wife's team, what can I say?

Philadelphia Eagles (10-6): Coach Andy Reid hopes the season doesn't go to the dogs, now that the Philly brain trust has decided to add the controversial QB Mike Vick to the roster. Which probably ticked off the incumbent QB Donovan McNabb. Play the Raiders, so a sure win there. Running back Brian Westbrook, who is ready to spit the bit, better have a good year or the record could easily slide to 8-8.

Dallas Cowboys (9-7): Coach Wade Phillips is a goner if the Boys don't make it to the NFC championship game. Quote me. And Tony Romo, all the tabloid garbage aside, probably should have to win a playoff game to keep his job in 2010. But they play the Raiders, so a sure win there. And who is the person who designed the new stadium for the Cowboys, but forgot that punting is part of a football game? Lordy, lordy!

Washington Redskins (7-9): Play the Raiders, so...Added behemoth D-lineman Albert Haynesworth, who has a checkered past, but is considered one of the best lineman in the league. Need QB Jason Campbell to play out of his mind, or coach Jim Zorn may join a lot of his fellow Americans on the unemployment line.

Green Bay Packers, NFC North, (11-5): The Pack are the kid's favorite team, and now that they are presumably over the Brett Favre hangover, could be poised to win the division when the waffler Favre implodes up in Minnehaha. Coach Mike McCarthy blew up last season's pathetic defense, jettisoning most of the coaches, and has implemented a 3-4 scheme. Which would seem to leave the Packers about four guys short on defense, but what the heck do I know?

Minnesota Vikings (9-7): Did you notice that last week I picked the Vikes to win the division, and now I waffled, just like the old-geezer playing QB? Who looks great when he is throwing three-yard dump-off passes to the magnificent Adrian Peterson, or to Chester Taylor, who then run 30 yards down the field with the flutter-ball.

Chicago Bears (9-7): New QB in crybaby Jake Cutler, new offensive tackle in Ram parolee, Orlando Pace. Coached by the debonair Lovie Smith, who guided da Bears to a Super Bowl appearance a few years back. Running back Matt Forte kicked butt last year, accounting for 35 percent of the team's offense. They have a somewhat easy schedule, although they don't play the Raiders.

Detroit Lions (0-16): Okay, realistically, the Lions can't go winless again, right? Do they play the Raiders? Nope. But they do host my Rams.

Carolina Panthers, NFC South, (10-6): Disappointed their home fans by flaming out in their first playoff game, losing to the Cardinals 33-13. Jettisoned their D-coordinator and most of their defensive assistants after allowing 30-plus points in five of their last seven games. Stud running back DeAngelo Williams returns, but so does down-sliding QB Jake Delhomme.

Atlanta Falcons (10-6): The Falcons won't be able to sneak up on anyone this year. Had a very good offensive showing last season, led by Rookie of the Year QB Matt Ryan and running back Michael Turner. Will need to improve on the defensive side of the ball if they hope to make a playoff run.

New Orleans Saints (9-7): Prolific QB Drew Brees returns to lead the Saints' high-powered offense. Time for Reggie Bush to produce in a big-time way, or be labeled a big-time bust. The Saints reshuffled the deck defensively, which was a necessary move, considering that the team led the league in points and total offense in '08, yet finished 8-8.

Tampa Bay Buccaneers (2-14): New 32-year-old coach, Raheem Morris, new GM in Mark Dominik, recycled starting QB in Byron Leftwich. Could get ugly in Tampa. And they already fired their offensive coordinator, Jeff Jagodzinski. No panic move there, right?

Arizona Cardinals, NFC West, (11-5): Defending NFC champs should light up the scoreboard, with the likes of QB Kurt Warner tossing the pigskin to Larry Fitzgerald, Anquan Boldin and Steve Breaston. New coordinators on offense and defense. Should have enough firepower to win the West, which couldn't be as pathetic a division as last year, right?

San Francisco 49ers (9-7): Team that should be on the upturn under coach Mike Singletary, who demands players be held accountable. Frank Gore keys the running game. Rookie wide receiver Michael Crabtree was supposed to make an impact as a pass catcher this season, but Crabtree, for some insane reason, never signed with the 49ers, who will somehow still suit up and play their opener Sunday at Arizona anyway.

Seattle Seahawks (9-7): Finally got rid of coach Mike Holmgren, who appeared to be retired last season as he "led" the Hawks straight into the dumper and a 4-12 season. QB Matt Hasselbeck needs a bounce-back season after missing nine games in '08. Open

See NFC, page 20

