

Packers still No. 1 . . . how odd is that?

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NFL Grapevine Our eyes scan Cesar Robaina's list of Super Bowl XXXIII odds and two thoughts come to mind:



Why are the Green Bay Packers the best shot on the board at 5-2 and why are the Super Bowl champion Denver Broncos third at 6-1?

Andy Fenelon In essence, the Super Bowl XXXII result -- a 31-24 Broncos victory over the Packers -- was a fluke, according to Robaina, the odds manager of the Las Vegas Sports Consultants.

"Despite the fact the Broncos won the Super Bowl last year, they were 10-point underdogs or something like that," said Robaina, who was then reminded that Denver proved him wrong. "Yes, they did go out there and play a great game, and it may very well be that we do have it wrong again.

"The fact that the AFC (flopped in past Super Bowls) until last year when they won it, there has been this rule that they shouldn't get the respect that the NFC does. It would be impossible to make (the Broncos) the favorite right now. But if they go out and win it again this year, that would be a whole different story and they probably would have to be the favorite."

But Robaina, whose job it is to recommend odds to Las Vegas casinos based on intense research, is sticking to his guns on the 5-2 odds he has given the Packers to win Super Bowl XXXIII in Miami.

"I think the perception with people is that the Packers were so loaded last year, and also, as long as they have (Brett) Favre, he is by far the best quarterback right now in the league. It's like the years when (Joe) Montana was around, everybody assumed that nobody could beat the Niners because they had Montana. And I think that's the situation (with the Packers) we have here right now."

San Francisco is the second-best bet to win the Super Bowl on Robaina's board at 7-2, followed by Denver, Jacksonville and Kansas City (both at 8-1), Pittsburgh (12-1), Tampa Bay and New England (both at 15-1), and Minnesota and Seattle (both at 20-1).

"I know they lost some free agents in the off-season," Robaina said, referring to the Packers, "but I don't know if the Niners have passed them.

"Everyone talks about how the Niners have improved themselves, but the Niners lost (defensive tackle Dana) Stubblefield. He's a big loss for them. I'm not so sure the Niners are that much more improved. I think the Packers dropped a little bit. I think the Niners dropped a little bit. But they're still the (No.) one and two teams in the NFL as far as when it comes to odds."

Robaina gives the 49ers greater odds than the Broncos not because he considers them a better team, but because "the perception would be if the Niners could beat the Packers they're going to be a pretty good team."

Detroit has respectable odds at 30-1, and the Bears, or the poor and lowly Bears, as Robaina refers to them, are tied with Mike Ditka's New Orleans Saints for the worst odds at 200-1.

Exhibitionists

Dallas' odds of winning the Super Bowl are a middle-of-the-pack 35-1. Robaina says part of the reason for the Cowboys' free-fall from the top of the board is not only because of their 6-10 record last season, but also because of their 0-5 mark in exhibition play.

So while some may pooh-pooh the Packers' 2-3 record in the exhibition season, Las Vegas takes it more seriously.

"There's a lot of credence we put in the exhibition season," Robaina said. "The last few years more so because there's good substantial evidence that teams that do well in exhibitions do well in the regular season. At least the public bets 'em that way anyway."

Wyche or Holmgren?

Team management also affects odds. In fact, Robaina says his top-10 list would probably remain the same if he were ranking the front offices of each team. In other words, Robaina has great respect for the job Ron Wolf has done as the Packer general manager.

"Ron Wolf is just a genius," Robaina said.

Packer coach Mike Holmgren, on the other hand, affects odds less than one might think.

Robaina was asked how the odds would change if, say, Sam Wyche were coaching the Packers this year instead of Holmgren.

"I would suspect if it happened in the off-season, they fired Holmgren and Sam Wyche took over, projection-wise I don't think it makes that much of a difference," he said. "You may think deep down inside that, yeah, maybe there would be a difference. But you can't knock it (the odds) down too far because they still have the talent.

"Unless Sam Wyche and their management goes out and starts releasing players left and right you have to assume that even this guy (Wyche) can't botch it up. Until he would start messing it up, the odds would not change very much."

Central issues

We asked Robaina to assess the two teams expected to give the Packers the most fits in the NFC Central Division this season, Tampa Bay and Minnesota.

Buccaneers: "The downside to Tampa Bay, the reason they aren't in the top three, the way the odds work you have to give some leverage to the AFC because they don't have to play the Packers and the 49ers in the playoffs. So, basically they would have to beat the two favorites (in the NFC) to get to the Super Bowl."

Vikings: "They're certainly the hot commodity. Coincidentally, I am a Vikings fan. I've been one for 20 years. They do look like they have potential. But I don't know if they're not a year away or so. I'm not so sure about Brad Johnson's health, if he can do it for the whole 16 weeks. (Randall) Cunningham's looked OK . . . that might help them. (Johnson's health) and the defense really are the big question marks, especially in the secondary. I know they played well in the exhibition season but I'm not so sure that answers all of their questions."