

Meet the Street

Meet the Street: Handicapping Super Sunday

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Hedging your bets on the market lately? How about laying down some paper on Sunday's Super Bowl instead?

Today's Meet the Street talks to Cesar Robaina, senior oddsmaker with gambling site VegasInsider.com, to get his take on the big game.

According to Robaina, the consensus now -- that the St. Louis Rams are probably going to defeat the New England Patriots by at least 14 points -- is probably right on the money. Robaina, a native Las Vegas who's been a bookie there for the past 16 years, says the Patriots' biggest handicap going into the game will be their disadvantage on artificial turf. The Rams and their vaunted passing game are used to playing in a domed stadium with artificial turf while the Pats' home field was archaic Foxboro Stadium and its real grass. Sunday's game is in the New Orleans' Superdome, an indoor facility with artificial turf. But Robaina expects it still will be an exciting game, with the over/under figure reaching as high as 53. (An over/under bet means you wager that the total points scored in a game will be either below or above a number predetermined by the book.)

The oddsmaker explains why he believes as much as \$10 billion could be riding on Sunday's game, and talks about some of the more unusual bets he's seen.

TSC: Who's your favored team for Sunday, the Rams or the Patriots?

Robaina: Well, for the Super Bowl, all regular line figures go out the window because the general public gets involved in betting, and unlike the professionals, they tend to bet the favorite and whatever is the most common number. So, Rams minus 14 is the number that's out there. It's not a good matchup for New England against the Rams, and I think by kickoff, the number could go up a little bit higher, maybe to 14 1/2 points.

There're also intangibles to think about. The Rams' home stadium is on AstroTurf ... while New England's home stadium is outside on grass. Both teams are built for these topographies. New England is more like a power team; they're not very fast, especially on the defensive side. The Rams are built for turf, and therefore they're a very fast team -- both on offense and defense.

TSC: What is your over/under number, or the total expected points to be scored by both teams? Since both teams have strong defenses, as you say, do you think we are going to be seeing a lot of scoring on Sunday?

Robaina: The over-under is 53, which is a pretty high total for a football game. The average NFL football game is around 41, 42. Yeah, it should be a pretty high-scoring game. Indoors, on turf, it'll be a fast-paced game, really fast, especially from the Rams' end. New England, I suspect, will probably try and slow them down and could start the game sluggishly -- they'll probably try and run the ball, get the Rams off their game and keep the Rams' offense off the field.

But the Rams have a great defense this year. That's another thing that people don't realize. The Rams have the No. 1 offense in the NFL. Everybody knows that. But their defense is

very improved, too, and they're up to the No. 3 or No. 4 defense in the NFL. Teams end up moving the ball on them a little bit, and end up getting field goals. But when the Rams get the ball, they get touchdowns ... almost every time they get the ball.

By the time the game is over, you look up at the scoreboard and they've got 35 points, and you've got 17, or something like that.

TSC: Patriots coach Bill Belichick announced this week that Tom Brady would be the starting quarterback for the Patriots, not Drew Bledsoe. Do you think that was a good choice?

Robaina: It's obviously the right decision -- if Brady's 100%, even 98%, 97%. Anything less than that, [on] AstroTurf [he] could really take a beating on that sprain. They've been practicing outside on grass the last few days, which factored in their decision to start him. Another problem I have with that, is that it's his left ankle, and it's a high-ankle sprain, which don't heal that quickly.

TSC: So where is most of the money going right now?

Robaina: A slight majority is going to the New England side right now. But that's really still the early money. Only about 30%, 40% of the money has been bet on this game now. ... Most of the bets are going to be made late Friday, Saturday and Sunday -- right up to kickoff.

The sports books will probably be needing New England to cover the point spread, just because there will be a lot of people with the Rams, minus 14.

TCS: Your company says \$67 million was bet legally on the Super Bowl last year in Nevada alone. Is there any way to estimate how much money, both legally and otherwise, is riding on this year's game?

Robaina: You could take the \$67 million official figure for Nevada alone and extrapolate that to the rest of the country by multiplying it by 50 and come up with \$3.4 billion. ... No illegal bookie, obviously, is going to report this. But if I had to guess, I would say it's really more like 10 times that amount. And with the Internet and offshore gambling, it's gotta be astronomical. There could be as much as \$10 billion riding on the game each year.

TSC: What's the largest -- and the weirdest -- wager you've ever seen?

Robaina: One of the casino owners here in town bet \$10 million on the Super Bowl a couple of years ago. Can't remember, even, which game. He lost.

I gotta tell you. We get a lot of calls from people asking us if we'll put the odds on how long a movie star's marriage will last, and that kind of thing, but not only do we think that's in poor taste, but we stick to sports here.

But what we call "proposition wagering," "props" or exotic bets -- which we come up with here at VegasInsider.com -- are getting pretty interesting. This is when you bet on anything other than the outcome or the point spread of the game. For example, you can bet on how many touchdowns or points a player is going to get, or one player against another player in a certain category, or how many yards a player will get.

It all got started with the '85 Super Bowl, with the Bears and the Patriots, oddly enough. Back then, the Bears were a very popular team with [William] "Refrigerator" Perry and Jim McMahon, the quarterback. For some reason, all the fans were enamored with "Refrigerator" Perry, that a man that heavy was that agile ... he caught people's fancy. Anyhow, the prop that year was, would "Refrigerator" Perry, a defensive lineman, score a touchdown?

And guess what, he scored, even though the original odds were 20-1 that he would and that fell to 5-1. Yes, he did score.

TSC: Do you invest in the stock market at all?

Robaina: I dabble in just a few stocks that either I acquired through company stock options at a cut rate, or that were given to me for free. That's not something I follow too much. It's very funny how correlated betting and the stock market are, because you essentially are dealing with very similar things.