



## Horton's NFL Game Film Analysis

### Week 1

*Film room observations by Gary Horton, former college coach and NFL scout.  
Complimentary edition courtesy of The Sports Xchange*

#### Horton's NFL Film Looking Back Week One Game Film Observations

- Was the sloppy play of the Atlanta-Philadelphia NFL opener a result of the new trend in the league of not playing the front-line players very much in the pre-season? We saw 26 combined penalties, lousy QB play, little passing game chemistry, and questionable play calling (especially in Red Zone). If this game was the result of four pre-season games to get ready for the regular season...then something is missing!
- Until the Eagles get Carson Wentz on the field they will likely rely on their swarming defense to control the flow of the game. This unit is deep, physical, and athletic. Have we vastly overrated Nick Foles because of his Super Bowl heroics?
- There seems to be no flow to the Atlanta offense and coordinator Steve Sarkisian is already under pressure. Former coordinator Kyle Shanahan was terrific at scripting his first 15 plays and also being creative in the red zone and we didn't see that vs. Philadelphia. This offense needs to be more than forcing the ball from Matt Ryan to Julio Jones! Five RZ trips and only nine points won't get it done.
- Nobody in the NFL is better at "sight adjustment" than Steelers' duo Big Ben and Antonio Brown. They are always in sync at the LOS at reading the same defensive looks that they get and they adjust the route accordingly. A lot of their big plays come as they snap the ball...and not what is called in the huddle, versus Cleveland, Big Ben forced too many balls into coverage and he took too many chances and he must try to play with better discipline.
- Obviously, Pittsburgh's Le'Veon Bell is a terrific back and his value as a receiver is really underrated and his ability to stay in the game on third down gives the Steeler offense versatility. Young James Conner is being asked to fill in for Bell until he ends his holdout, but Conner is not an experienced pass catcher and that could hinder them on third down (but it did not versus Cleveland).
- Neither Rob Gronkowski or Tom Brady participated in OTAs for the Pats, but their Chemistry versus Houston was at mid-season form. Gronk continuously exploited coverage by a LB and he is unstoppable on the high ball when he is surrounded by defenders.
- The New York Giants are looking for creative ways to get the ball to O'Dell Beckham Jr., in space...and they seem to like "rubs and picks" to wall off defenders and free him up with mostly single man coverage and that is a recipe for success.

- San Francisco corner Richard Sherman may not have the turn and run speed that he used to but he really tries to be physical with WR's and he will test the referees to see how much contact he can get away with – It looks like opposing QBs no longer fear him.
- Young Steelers' RB James Conner looks like the real deal – He has natural inside run skills, his second effort and instincts are good, and he is decent on screens and dump offs. His workload and solid play vs. Cleveland give Pittsburgh more flexibility with how they deal with Le'Veon Bell...and all the work he got in OTA's and the pre-season with Bell absent has to help.
- The Pats passing game looks as good as ever. Tom Brady is a genius at the line of scrimmage in reading defenses and identify favorable coverages. He will exploit man turn and run coverages and if a defense drops into zone looks he is content to throw underneath – and nobody reads progressions like he does.
- New Orleans has a great playmaker in Alvin Kamara, but they must be careful to not “overuse” him in the first four weeks while Mark Ingram serves his suspension. Drew Brees loves to use spread sets to stretch defense and give Kamara more room (and better angles) to run inside.
- Houston QB Deshaun Watson looks rusty, with marginal timing and accuracy, and after one week he doesn't look like the “electric” guy that we saw a year ago – although his underneath throws are okay. He needs more time to get into a groove...Play calling? Red zone creativity?
- San Francisco OL right side struggled in pass pro vs. the excellent Minnesota defensive front and the Vikings seemed to concentrate on attacking that side with some overload blitzes...Also Kyle Shanahan is great at using his FB in the passing game, who usually draws the worst defender in coverage and that leads to good matchups with FBs who are not recognized as big receiving threats.
- We know the Minnesota defense is deep and terrific but the more film you watch the more you realize how good safety Harrison Smith is. He can play centerfield in zone, he can play man, he can blitz...and he is a genius before the snap at recognizing the offensive tendencies and adjusting accordingly (eight tackles – one INT – one sack versus San Francisco) – The 49ers tried to fool Smith and the Vikings defensive pass rush with a lot of misdirection but it did not slow down Minnesota...and their defensive speed vs. wide plays is really good.
- Buffalo looks like the biggest mess of a team we thought would show progress from a year ago. QB Nathan Peterman was awful (he looked as bad as he did a year ago), their OL can't pass pro or run block, and rookie QB Josh Allen doesn't look close to being ready (especially behind this OL). The Baltimore defense recorded six sacks and they did anything they wanted to vs. the hapless Buffalo offense...The Bills' defense was awful in pass coverage vs. Joe Flacco and they look like a team that is in real trouble...or maybe Baltimore is better than we thought?
- It is easy to overact but the Tampa Bay offense looks better with Ryan Fitzpatrick at QB instead of Jameis Winston (not back from suspension until week four). Fitz has total command of this offense, he reads his progressions, he throws a terrific deep ball, he uses all of his targets, and he really maneuvers defenders with his eyes to get his preferred matchup (417 yds passing vs. New Orleans). Is this still Winston's team when Fitz generated 48 points vs. the Saints?
- San Francisco appeared to not be close to Minnesota in terms of overall talent, but at least they play hard (probably above their skill level). QB Jimmy Garoppolo showed flashes of the solid play that we saw last season, but the Minnesota defense gave him fits and it led to several mistakes. With RB Derick McKinnon out for the season, no receiver that really scares a defense, and a makeshift OL, there is too much pressure on Garoppolo to carry this team. Even though this is a one week sample, the 49ers may be a team that is overrated because of their late 2017 season play and their progress may be slower than expected.

- New Orleans corners Marshon Lattimore and Ken Crawley were supposed to give an improved 2017 pass defense even more production in 2018, but vs. Tampa Bay WR's Mike Evans and DeSean Jackson they were awful and virtually no pass rush didn't help the back-end. Giving up 48 pts to a back-up QB (TB) is cause for concern.
- Cleveland showed stretches of real improvement in their loss to Pittsburgh and they had to be encouraged by the play of their two young defensive players, DE Myles Garrett (two sacks and two forced fumbles) and DB Denzel Ward (two INTS)...However, we also saw some of the same old Browns, as they had six takeaways but they just couldn't turn them into points.
- The New York Giants' OL was no match vs. a talented Jacksonville defensive front and they could not give Saquan Barkley any room to run and their lack of pass pro forces Eli to go to a short passing game (ball out quick) that is easy to defend – Most of Barkley's success were on plays where he bounced off a defender and gained second effort yards. This OL could be a real problem.
- Indianapolis QB Andrew Luck looked really comfortable vs. a solid Cincinnati defense – Nine different targets, good pocket mobility, and strong accuracy. With no run game he was forced to throw the ball 53 times, so he obviously was not on a "pitch count." It is great to see him back!
- New Minnesota QB Kirk Cousins looks comfortable in this offense. He was not sharp late in the game but he has excellent passing targets (and excellent route runners at receiver) and a promising run game (Cook) and this offense will only get better.
- A big reason that New England always has the ability to adjust to changing personnel is the complexity of their offense. A skill player who has a big role in this weeks' offense may be only a supporting piece next week! With Bill Belichick it's all about this week's opponent and favorable matchups...and it can change from week to week.
- Dallas may be in real trouble with limited room for error. Their passing game scares nobody, a defense can single cover all of their receivers (and that means being able to load up the box to stop the run), and with a banged up OL (that can be elite) they have no chance on offense unless Ezekiel Elliott runs wild. If the run game isn't great, play action is not a factor and all of these factors put too much pressure on Dak Prescott to carry this offense. They desperately need explosive playmakers.
- New Carolina offensive coordinator Norv Turner let Cam Newton be Cam in their win over Dallas and all of his "off the chart" physical skills were on display. He didn't fill up the stat sheet, but when he is a threat to run the defense is forced to count him as a back and that can open up the outside passing game. Cam looked comfortable in this attack...on the other side of the ball, the Carolina defensive front seven dominated the Dallas OL and the trenches.
- Washington looked much better on offense than expected. RB Adrian Peterson had fresh legs and flashed as a runner and receiver...but the key was the efficiency of QB Alex Smith – He controls the flow of the game and he does not make mistakes (70% completion, 30 first downs, complete TOP dominance, with a lot of safe passes to backs and tight ends).
- This Kansas City offense will be fun to watch – They have all sorts of gadget plays and formations, they will spread the field, they use a lot of misdirection to confuse the defense, and the play calling is really creative (especially in the red zone), a lot to like here...and young QB Mahomes looks like the real deal! His deep ball is really special.
- Seattle QB Russell Wilson is adjusting to new targets and his passing accuracy is excellent, but the same old OL problems and the lack of a run game force him to carry the entire offense. He was sacked six times versus Denver and was forced to scramble all day. Is this a potentially fading team?
- The Denver offense has a chance to be pretty good if QB Case Keenum limits his mistakes (three INTs vs. Seattle). They are not good enough to play without discipline and still be successful.

Defensively, Von Miller can almost carry the defense (three sacks – two forced fumbles – one fumble recovery vs. Seattle).

- Arizona is still a mess on offense – No explosive plays, no long drives (too many three and outs) and play calling that doesn't seem to be very creative. When you watch them their just doesn't seem to be a lot of "sizzle" in their play.
- Los Angeles Chargers have some nice pieces on both sides of the ball and they should get better each week if they can cut down on their dropped passes. Philip Rivers has weapons, but when he is forced to throw every down when they are in a hole (which happens too often) this offense is not as good as it can be.
- New Bears' defensive star Khalil Mack was nearly unblockable in his first game for Chicago – He was in the Green Bay backfield all night even though his number of plays was limited because of his lack of practice time. He gives the Chicago defense a much different look than we have seen in the past and he will keep offensive coaches awake late at night when they prepare their game plans for him. This is a young team who lost a heartbreaker at Green Bay, but they have a different look and positive feel heading into this season. Solid improvement is very noticeable.
- The Packers were awful vs. the Bears in the first half, but Aaron Rodgers put on one of his patented comebacks in the second half for a narrow victory. This is not a loaded Packers team and unless Rodgers is terrific each week they are going to struggle to be elite. He must stay healthy (knee?) and his thin supporting cast on both sides of the ball must have career years because without Rodgers this looks like a below .500 team!

#### Looking Ahead to MNF Games

New York Jets @ Detroit – Jets QB Sam Darnold face a Detroit secondary that is vulnerable in pass defense, so this is a good situation for the talented rookie if his pass pro holds up in their west coast/zone blocking scheme. Look for quick passing and safe throws (a lot to RBs) with play action...The Jets will show versatile looks on defense and a lot of movement to confuse the Detroit offense...and they will put a lot of 3-3-5 (3 safety looks) and they match up well vs. Matthew Stafford. The Lions will run a ton of short passes (slants and crossing) and until they discover a real running game their passing game will be their run game, but no run threat limits play action. They want more "splash" plays but will they let Stafford take more big shots versus a decent Jets defense? Defensively, they will look like NE, where Matt Patricia came from. We will see every look in the world (fronts and coverages) and Darnold will have to be solid at the line of scrimmage in his pre-snap reads because the Patriots will really try to confuse him. The Lions will stay in sub packages most of the night and won't take a lot of chances in coverage so Darnold will be really challenged to put big passing numbers together.

Los Angeles Rams @ Oakland – Are the Rams "loaded" like most people think they are after a big off-season in free agency? Do the Raiders have enough "pieces" on both sides of the ball to be competitive in the AFC West as they rebuild in Jon Grudens' desired "smashmouth" image? Look for a run first Raiders' offense to control the clock and keep the explosive Rams' offense off the field to set up much improved play action that has been missing in Oakland for years. Their key is the play of Derek Carr and his support with a receiving corp that is not dynamic and Gruden will give him a lot of freedom at the LOS to call audibles. Los Angeles is big and physical up front and they are deep and talented in the secondary, but at LB they have question marks. Def Coordinator Wade Phillips will bring a lot of blitzes with man coverage behind it and Oakland QB Carr will have his hands full at the LOS before the snap reading the defense. Offensively, the Rams have rebuilt their OL and Oakland will be hard pressed to get

any pressure on Jared Goff. A good Gurley game sets up solid play action and they will be in 11 personnel 75% of the snaps (one back – one tight end – three wide receivers). Both Goff and head coach Sean McVay are excellent at reading the defense and they will likely get out of the huddle quickly to give them more time to see what the Raiders are doing before the snap. McVay is an excellent play caller and Gruden was terrific at it in the past and it should be interesting to see two guys who know each other well go head to head in this area.