



IMPACT GUARANTEED
Clockwise from left:
Adrian Peterson
Clay Matthews
Aaron Rodgers
Jared Allen

The Vikings have defied all odds all season, and their high-stakes matchup today offers another chance to predict the outcome.

ONCE MORE WITH MEANING

VIKINGS INSIDER
DAN WIEDERER



Give this matchup a long, hard look. Break out every metric possible to aid the analysis.

Dissect the matchups. Digest the stage and the stakes.

Vikings-Packers, 3:25 p.m. Sunday at Mall of America Field.

Playoff implications for both teams.

So what is it that most catches your eye? Do you see the hottest team in football, the one from Green Bay looking to record its 10th victory in the past 11 games? Or do you sense the continuation of the NFL's most underrated underdog story, these Disney-movie Vikings who continue following the lead of a star running back and an always-positive head coach who have encouraged them to dream big?

If you're playing the odds, perhaps you'll take note that the official Vegas line on the game pegs the Packers as 3½-point favorites.

Then again, if you're playing the odds with the 2012 Vikings, you obviously haven't been paying any attention all year long.

The odds said a team that struggled

THE VIKINGS WILL MAKE THE PLAYOFFS ...

- If they beat the Packers today.
- If they lose today and Chicago, the N.Y. Giants and Dallas also lose.

IF THE VIKINGS MAKE THE PLAYOFFS ...

- They will be a wild card, and the sixth seed, and play the No. 3 seed in the first round.
- Green Bay will be the No. 3 seed if it loses to the Vikings and either San Francisco or Seattle wins.
- San Francisco will be the No. 3 seed if it wins and Green Bay wins; or if it loses and Seattle loses.
- Seattle will be the No. 3 seed if it wins, Green Bay wins and San Francisco loses.

to scratch out three wins in 2011 and then overhauled its roster would need more than a year to catapult back to relevance. Yet here the Vikings are one win away from sneaking into the playoffs — like a movie's made-over misfit who somehow lands the supermodel.

Insider continues on C8 ►

Peterson is indescribable, but why not give it a shot?

By MARK CRAIG • mcraig@startribune.com

Years ago, Browns Hall of Famer Jim Brown was sitting in a small interview room in Berea, Ohio, trying to forearm shiver some sense into a young reporter too caught up in comparing great running backs.

"Why," said the man generally considered the greatest running back of all time, "would you want to take away from one great running style by trying to compare it to another great running style?"

Because, um, that's kind of what we nonrunners without great styles like to do between opening kickoffs.

"You can't make comparisons," Brown said. "A great running style is like a fingerprint or a voice on the phone that you know without having to look at the person's face. You should recognize it and enjoy the greatness without judging it against greatness that came before it or the greatness that will come later on."

Great running styles often can be summed up in one word. Brown was overpowering, like a man among children. Barry Sanders was nimble, like a ballerina in a bowling ball's body. Gale Sayers slashed and O.J. Simpson dashed. Earl Campbell was unbridled while Eric Dickerson was smooth.



Brown, circa 1963

Vikings continues on C10 ►

ONCE MORE WITH MEANING

◀ INSIDER FROM C1

The odds said that running back Adrian Peterson wouldn't be anywhere near the same explosive playmaker after undergoing reconstructive surgery on his left knee last December. Logically, a 1,000-yard campaign this season would have been quite the feat. Yet here Peterson is on the verge of history, needing 102 yards to hit 2,000 and sincerely asserting he'll go for at least 208 to break Eric Dickerson's 28-year-old single-season rushing record.

"In order to accomplish it," Peterson said, "you've got to believe it."

This is the Vikings' best player casually summarizing a team's contagious mindset, one that has been present for the first 364 days of 2012 and will be needed in full on Day 365. Who needs odds, right?

The odds said that when Jacksonville's Cecil Shorts hauled in a 39-yard touchdown catch with 20 seconds left in the season opener that the Vikings were doomed and that the thousands of dejected fans who flooded the exits at Mall of America Field were right to feel such "Here we go again" doubt.

Yet then an unproven second-year quarterback completed two passes for 32 yards



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Vikings quarterback Christian Ponder celebrated after running in for a touchdown in the second quarter of the Sept. 23 game, when the Vikings made an early statement by beating San Francisco 24-13.

in 10 seconds and a rookie kicker subsequently crunched a 55-yard field goal to force overtime. Where, of course, the Vikings won 26-23.

The odds said beating San Francisco in Week 3 was an outlandish aspiration. Yet the Vikings delivered a 24-13 pounding, a win that would have gone down as the season's most

impressive before last week's 23-6 mauling in Houston.

The odds said that the Vikings' unnerving 23-14 loss in Green Bay on the first Sunday in December should have been the lever that released the trap door on an heartening season. After all, that was the Vikings' fifth stumble in seven games; it came a week after a lopsided 28-10

loss in Chicago, and it exposed passing game deficiencies rarely seen on the NFL level.

Yet the Vikings quickly cleared the frustration away and saw a bigger picture, one that enabled them to keep playing meaningful games so long as they just kept winning them.

Now? Since leaving Lambeau Field, they've trailed for less

PLAYOFF PICTURE

NFC

- **Atlanta** (13-2) has clinched the South title and home-field advantage throughout the playoffs.
- **Green Bay** (11-4) has clinched the North and can clinch a first-round bye with a victory over the Vikings or losses by Seattle and San Francisco.
- **San Francisco** (10-4-1) has clinched a playoff spot. Can clinch the West with a victory over Arizona or a Seattle loss to St. Louis. Can clinch a first-round bye with a victory and a Green Bay loss.
- **Washington** (9-6) can win the East by beating Dallas. Can clinch a playoff berth if the Vikings and Chicago lose.
- **Seattle** (10-5) has clinched a wild-card spot; can clinch the West with a victory over the Rams and a San Francisco loss, and can clinch a first-round bye with a win and losses by Green Bay and Seattle.
- The **Vikings** (9-6) can clinch a wild-card spot by beating the Packers on Sunday. The Vikings also can make the playoffs with a loss if Dallas, Chicago and the New York Giants lose.
- **Chicago** (9-6) can make the playoffs with a victory at Detroit and a Vikings loss.
- **Dallas** (8-7) can win the East by beating Washington.
- The **New York Giants** (8-7) can make the playoffs with a victory over Philadelphia and losses by the Vikings, Dallas and Chicago.

AFC

The six-team field is set but not the matchups.

- **Houston** (12-3) is the South champ and can clinch No. 1 seed with a victory over Indianapolis or a loss by Denver.
- **Denver** (12-3) is the West champ and can clinch first-round bye with a victory or a New England loss; can clinch No. 1 seed with a victory and a Houston loss.
- **New England** (11-4) is the East champ and can clinch a first-round bye with a victory and a Denver loss. New England also can clinch No. 1 seed with a victory and losses by both Houston and Denver.
- **Baltimore** (10-5) is the North champ.
- **Indianapolis** (10-5) will be the No. 5 seed as a wild card.
- **Cincinnati** (9-6) will be the No. 6 seed as a wild card.

than five minutes, delivering dominant victories over the Bears, Rams and Texans.

"It was all a sense of urgency, I guess," defensive tackle Kevin Williams said. "Plus, we've seen the flashes of how well we can play if we do what we're supposed to."

Added linebacker Jasper Brinkley: "We know what we have inside this locker room. It's about guys with heart, guys

who are not scared to take on all challenges. When you have a team full of guys like that, man, sky's the limit."

Urgency and heart. Fearlessness and belief.

Consider them all intangibles against the odds.

Now assess today's game. What is it you see?

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