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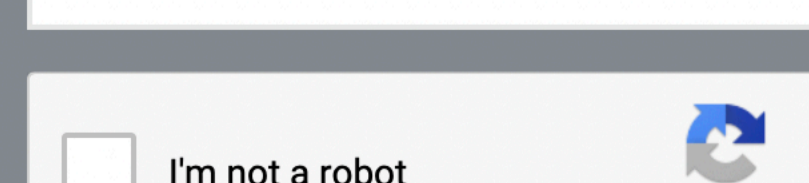


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NFL WEEK 5 WINNERS AND LOSERS

Chargers bolting up, Jaguars spiraling

Lorenzo Reyes
USA TODAY

Week 5 in the NFL was a wild one. Three of the early-window games – not counting the Falcons topping the Jets in the really early window in London – came down to electric finishes. And the Packers, Patriots and Vikings won their games on field goals at or near the end of regulation or in overtime, on a day in which placekickers struggled at historic levels.

We also saw an upstart team with a rookie coach, the Chargers, outlast another powerful AFC opponent in the Browns in what could end up being a potential playoff preview. The same went for a rematch of last year's AFC championship game, though this time it was the Bills who prevailed over the Chiefs in convincing fashion.

Elsewhere, a rough week got tougher for embattled Jaguars coach Urban Meyer, who saw his team drop to 0-5.

The Week 5 winners and losers:

WINNERS

The (AFC West favorite?) Chargers

In the track meet that was a 47-42 victory, the Chargers outslugged a worthy contender in the AFC, the Browns. Questions about defensive lapses abound for both teams, but that the Chargers had to battle back from a 14-point, third-quarter deficit shows how far Los Angeles (4-1) has come in Brandon Staley's first season as head coach.

First, let's highlight what the Chargers *did* do well on defense. One of the main reasons Los Angeles was able to keep the deficit manageable was because in three of Cleveland's first five trips inside the red zone, it clamped down and forced the Browns to settle for two short field goals and forced one turnover on downs. But quarterback Justin Herbert is quickly becoming one of the young star passers in the entire NFL. Herbert is on a historic pace in his young career, bolstered by his 26 of 43 performance against the Browns for 398 yards with four touchdowns. He also added a rushing score. He could be on a track to insert himself in the MVP conversation. More important, with the Chiefs looking vulnerable – especially on defense – the Chargers could even threaten for the division crown.

Not only offense in Arizona

A team coached by Kliff Kingsbury always was going to have dynamic playmakers on offense. But the Cardinals have remained the lone undefeated team in the NFL also because of a really talented and efficient defense. Going up against a dynamic athlete and passer in 49ers rookie Trey Lance, who was making his first career start, the Cardinals prevailed 17-10.

Arizona was excellent in high-leverage situations. The Cardinals limited the 49ers to 3 of 11 conversions on third downs, kept the Niners out of the end zone in their only goal-to-go scenario of the game and stopped San Francisco on fourth downs on four out of five tries. According to Elias Sports Bureau, it was the only time in at least the last 40 seasons that a team recorded four fourth-



First-year NFL head coach Urban Meyer's Jaguars fell to 0-5 on Sunday and Jacksonville has lost 20 consecutive games. BOB SELF/THE FLORIDA TIMES-UNION

down stops in a game. The Cardinals will start to have a target on their backs, but having a now-improved defense makes this team that much more dangerous because it won't be incumbent on quarterback Kyler Murray and the Arizona offense to carry the team.

The losing Lions

Yes, they fell in heartbreak, again. And players and coaches in the NFL almost never want to hear about silver linings. But what rookie coach Dan Campbell is doing in Detroit, getting his team to punch above its weight and nearly pull off two improbable upsets in two weeks, should be admired. The Lions lost to the Vikings 19-17 on a crushing game-winning field goal after Detroit had battled back from a 10-point deficit with a little more than five minutes left to play. This came one week after the Lions lost (also 19-17) when Ravens kicker Justin Tucker set an NFL record with a 66-yard, game-winning field goal.

In both cases, the Lions gave up big passing plays to put their opponents near field goal range. Those are issues the team needs to clean up. This Lions roster is still young and has a lot of holes. Jared Goff is not a long-term answer at quarterback. But Detroit ranks second in third-down defense (27.78%) and has become a high-effort team. That has kept it in these games. If Campbell can keep developing the talent the Lions have and if the Lions improve their roster over the next couple of seasons, Detroit could be a team to watch in the near future.

LOSERS

Kickers

The NFL, when it changed its rule in 2015 to push back the extra point, wanted the play to have more drama. In Week 5, the league got its wish. There were 12 missed extra points before Monday's game. Extra points weren't the only kicking struggle. There have also been 12 missed field goals. This shouldn't necessarily be chalked up to any big-picture issues or problematic trend; every now and then, a week comes by

where this just seems to happen. This one, however, was the worst kicking performance since the rule change.

What makes this case interesting, though, is that weather typically plays a factor in poor kicking. This week, games were not affected by inclement weather. In particular, the Packers' 25-22 overtime victory against the Bengals offered a study of kicking comedy. At one point, Mason Crosby of the Packers and Evan McPherson of the Bengals combined for five consecutive missed field goal kicks in a stretch of fewer than eight minutes of game time – and it happened in the fourth quarter and overtime. And, if there were a missed extra point in Monday's game between the Colts and Ravens, it will set a record for the most combined missed extra points across the entire league in a week.

Urban Meyer

With each passing day, Urban Meyer is showing that the head coaching job of the Jaguars is too big for him. It wasn't so much that the Jaguars lost to the AFC South rival Titans 37-19. It was the effort they showed. Early in the third quarter, with Tennessee holding an 11-point lead, the Jaguars defense did not look interested in tackling Titans running back Derrick Henry on a 9-yard TD rush.

It's no surprise that effort was an issue. This entire week was shrouded in controversy over Meyer's decision to stay in Ohio after a loss to the Bengals, missing the team flight. He was later filmed at a bar, where a woman who was not his wife danced on him. It would be natural for players to question his commitment.

After the incident in Ohio, owner Shad Khan issued a strong statement and said Meyer "must regain our trust and respect." Yet Meyer has repeatedly failed to hold himself accountable and routinely blames others for mistakes, even his players. After Sunday's loss, reporters asked him about a 4th-and-1 call and why Trevor Lawrence didn't keep it on a quarterback sneak. Meyer said Lawrence was "not quite comfortable with that yet" and added "I don't micro-manage who is in the game." Minutes later, Lawrence disagreed and said that while it wasn't something they had done

in a game yet, that he was "comfortable." This team has had bouts of mental mistakes and communications issues, careless penalties, carelessness with the ball. And it all falls on Meyer.

Brian Flores and Chris Grier

Memories of Miami's surprise 10-win season in coach Brian Flores' second season with the Dolphins feel so long ago. And after the defending Super Bowl champion Buccaneers throttled the Dolphins 45-17, both Flores and general manager Chris Grier have some significant questions to answer. The Tampa Bay roster is better than Miami's. It might be the best in the entire league. But Flores, a coach with a specialty on defense, spent 15 seasons on the Patriots coaching staff, each of those when Tom Brady played in New England. He should have at least a decent idea of how to fluster Brady.

Instead, Brady completed 30 of 41 passes for 411 yards with four TDs. The Bucs failed to convert only three of their 11 third-down attempts. And Tampa Bay gained 558 yards of total offense in what was simply a defensive collapse for Miami (1-4). While Grier has hit on some of his recent draft picks, his inability to fix holes at running back, linebacker, offensive line and quarterback are concerning. Though second-year passer Tua Tagovailoa has been sidelined with broken ribs, Grier will always have to face questions of how Miami passed on Justin Herbert, who has been a revelation for the Chargers and was taken one pick after Tagovailoa was. It's too early for a total cleaning house, but if more performances like this follow, that time may be quickly nearing.

The Panthers as NFC disruptors

They had a hot start to the season, but after consecutive losses Carolina has regressed to the mean. Granted, last week's defeat came against a powerful Cowboys team and both have been with star running back Christian McCaffrey sidelined. But Carolina (3-2) blew a 12-point lead it held in the second quarter and squandered several chances to extend their lead in a disappointing 21-18 loss against the Eagles.

Carolina's defense held its end of the bargain early in the game. Other than the three first downs the unit gave up on Philadelphia's end-of-half drive in the second quarter, the Panthers had allowed the Eagles to move the chains just twice in their other 10 possessions to start the game. The Panthers defense constantly put the offense in great field position, but Carolina stalled when it got into plus territory. Quarterback Sam Darnold has now thrown five interceptions in the last two weeks after tossing three against the Eagles. Though there were other shortcomings, his inability to move the ball when Philly brought pressure doomed the Panthers. The special teams unit allowing the Eagles to block a punt with four minutes left in the game set up the game-winning touchdown. But don't lose sight of the throw Darnold missed to receiver Robby Anderson on third down. These are the games Carolina needs to win to be a contender in the conference. This loss shows the Panthers still have some work to do to get there.

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NFL WEEK 6 WINNERS, LOSERS

Cowboys looking like Super Bowl contender

Lorenzo Reyes
USA TODAY

Week 6 in the NFL, frankly, was rather underwhelming.

It was marked by blowouts and a lack of drama, but there were still plenty of takeaways to be gleaned. And perhaps no one has more to celebrate than the Cardinals, who took down the Browns and remained the NFL's lone unblemished team at 6-0.

But the Cowboys also have plenty to be happy about, too, after they beat the Patriots for the first time since 1996 and continued to roll on offense. They have star power all throughout their team, but franchise quarterback Dak Prescott is the catalyst that has Dallas looking like a Super Bowl contender.

Here are the winners and losers of Week 6.

WINNERS

Dak Prescott as an MVP candidate

Perhaps more so than any recent season, the early battle for the MVP race seems to be filled with several contenders. From Kyler Murray of the Cardinals, Josh Allen of the Bills, Tom Brady of the Buccaneers, Matthew Stafford of the Rams to Lamar Jackson of the Ravens, the list is full of passers with different skill sets. After the Cowboys battled the Patriots to overtime and then prevailed 35-29, add Cowboys quarterback Dak Prescott to that list.

Prescott has completed 73.1% of his passes (which ranks second in the NFL) for 1,813 yards (fifth), with 16 touchdowns (tied for third), with a QB rating of 115 (fourth). Prescott has been especially reliable for the Cowboys (5-1) in the clutch. And while the Dallas roster is exceptionally talented, Prescott has elevated the play of the young players – especially the young receivers like CeeDee Lamb, who caught the game-winning touchdown pass against New England. Prescott's understanding of the Dallas offense under coordinator Kellen Moore is remarkable and his ability to make downfield throws while on the move makes him so difficult to defend. Not only is Prescott playing at an elite level, he has the Cowboys looking like a problem for the rest of the NFC.

The Bengals offense with Ja'Marr Chase

These are not the same Bengals that we had seen over the last half decade. This young team took another step in a dominant 34-11 victory against the Lions. Second-year passer Joe Burrow has been excellent, but it's his former LSU teammate and rookie No. 5 overall pick Ja'Marr Chase who has electrified this offense. Chase now has 553 yards and five touchdowns on 27 catches this year. His receiving yards are second most in NFL history for a player through his first six games.

Just watch the effort that Chase made on the Joe Mixon touchdown to make the key block down the field. These are the effort plays that good teams make. The Bengals have become one of the most reliable red-zone teams in the NFL. They entered Week 6 ranked third in the league (80%) and converted



Dak Prescott threw for 445 yards and three TDs in the Cowboys' overtime win over the Patriots. DAVID BUTLER II/USA TODAY SPORTS

both their trips inside the 20. Are the Bengals a playoff team? It's still far too early to tell. While they toppled a capable Steelers team in Week 3 and an inconsistent Vikings squad in the season opener, their other victories have come against the Lions and Jaguars, who have combined for a 1-11 record. They need more games like this against playoff-caliber opponents. At the very least, it's safe to say this team just being in the conversation shows how much it has grown.

LOSERS

The entire Week 6 slate

As far as parity and entertainment goes, Week 6 was a dud. Only one of the 1 p.m. ET games was a one-score game with any drama, that was between the Panthers and the Vikings. Even then, it only became that way late in the game. The best game of the week, far and away, was the one between the Patriots and the Cowboys in the later afternoon window. Other than that, the only other one-score games Sunday were between the Dolphins and the Jaguars in London, which took place in the morning, and the Steelers-Seahawks matchup in prime time.

The average margin of victory in Sunday's games was 15.4 points. Even the night game, which is usually the marquee matchup of the week, was dulled because Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson was sidelined against the Steelers because of a finger injury. And while the game ended up being decided in overtime, the primary source of drama came down to an odd officiating sequence and several turnovers. NFL Sundays are typically wild and this sometimes happens. The good news is that Monday night's game should have been an interesting look at a pair of teams in the AFC that should be up for playoff spots in the Bills and the Titans.

Kansas City ball security

The second half of the Chiefs' 31-13 victory against the Washington Football Team showed just how dangerous this team can be when its offense is clicking. The Chiefs scored 21 unanswered points

after halftime to run away with the game. But ball security issues are a major problem for the reigning AFC champions. And if the problem persists, it threatens their chances of making another deep run in the postseason.

With three more giveaways against Washington, the Chiefs now rank dead last in the NFL with 14. Most problematic is that 10 of those have come after the Chiefs have crossed the 50-yard line, essentially wiping out scoring opportunities. The good news is that so many of these have been careless mistakes. Just on Sunday, one of quarterback Patrick Mahomes' interceptions glanced off of receiver Tyreek Hill's hands. Fellow receiver Mecole Hardman fumbled in the second quarter, an issue the Chiefs' skill players have had all season, loose handling of the ball. Mahomes, at times, looks as if he's trying to do too much. He has thrown at least one pick in each of his last five games. He is tied for second most in the league with eight. Last season, he had six in the entire season. The Chiefs are still one of the most explosive and dangerous teams in the league, but if they don't solve their ball security problems, that alone won't be enough to get them out of tough matchups.

Chargers' run defense

The Chargers were a surprise upstart in the NFL this season, and still are, but their 34-6 loss against the Ravens revealed their most concerning flaw. A rushing defense that came into Week 6 ranked last in the entire league (157.6 yards allowed per game) was mastered by Baltimore. To be clear, the Ravens' rushing outfit would cause fits for any defense. But Baltimore used six different ball carriers to total 187 rushing yards. In Los Angeles' only other loss of the season, a Week 2 game against the Cowboys, Dallas rushed for 198 yards, meaning that in the Chargers' losses, they gave up an average of 192.5 yards per game.

In LA's victories, however, that number drops to 147.5. Taking out last week's 47-42 shootout victory against the Browns in which Cleveland rushed for 230 yards, that number drops to 120. When the Chargers give up that many rushing yards, it does two things: The

defense wears down and stays on the field – the Ravens held the ball for 38:07 of game time – but it also keeps the explosive Chargers offense on the sideline.

Sam Darnold and the Panthers' receivers

After starting the season 3-0, the Panthers have been complete opposites and are in the middle of a three-game losing streak after they fell to the Vikings 34-28. All three losses have come with star running back Christian McCaffrey sidelined. McCaffrey was placed on injured reserve Saturday, so he'll be on that for at least two more games. McCaffrey, one of the top pass-catching backs in the NFL, had been a safety valve for Sam Darnold. Without him, Carolina's receivers have underwhelmed. Against Minnesota, the Panthers had six dropped passes, several of which would've extended drives had they resulted in first downs.

Darnold finished the game 17 of 41 passing for 207 yards with one touchdown and one interception for a QB rating of 55.8. His first half was even worse. He finished with a QB rating of 17.8. But the drops appeared to impact Darnold's decision-making and accuracy. While Darnold's play improved in the fourth – he helped the Panthers score 11 unanswered points in the final five minutes of the game – he also missed on several throws he should've completed. Carolina's schedule eases up over the next couple of weeks before it stiffens at the end of the year. But if the Panthers can't figure out how to win without McCaffrey and if they can't stop the self-enforced errors, their hot start to the season may just end up going to waste.

Vic Fangio

The Broncos got cooked at home against a division opponent that just had its head coach resign less than a week before the game because of leaked emails that showed misogynistic and homophobic language. And it was the defense, Fangio's expertise, that let Denver down. The Raiders, coached by interim Rich Bisaccia after Jon Gruden resigned last Monday, beat the Broncos 34-24. Now, Broncos quarterback Teddy Bridgewater did account for four turnovers, but he was playing at a disadvantage because the defense put him in a hole from very early on.

This was a Raiders team that had a new play-caller in offensive coordinator Greg Olson and whose players and coaches had to spend all week answering questions about Gruden. "The best part for me was getting back on the grass," Bisaccia said. "The worst part for me was figuring out the headset." That's how new this was to Las Vegas' staff. The Broncos allowed the Raiders to convert seven chunk plays of 20 or more yards. Denver had only five fewer yards of total offense than Las Vegas gained (426-421), but Denver needed 25 more plays to get there. That means the Raiders averaged an astounding 8.2 yards per play. Denver started the season hot, but its three victories came against the Giants, Jaguars and Jets, who are 3-14 combined. Now, after the Broncos fell to 15-23 since Fangio became their head coach, he's about to start facing questions about his future.

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