

4 of 6 NFL divisions unsettled

Week 15 tightens races

United Press International
It may be parity, but it sure ain't pretty. With just one week remaining in the NFL's regular season, the playoff picture remains as fuzzy as an out-of-focus snapshot: four of the six divisional titles are still up for grabs as are six of 10 playoff berths.

While the NFL congratulates itself for a schedule that is keeping nine teams grasping for post-season life, fans throughout the league are dusting the cobwebs off the adding machine to figure out the possibilities.

They are endless. On Sunday, Minnesota grabbed its 11th NFC Central title in 13 years with a stunning 28-23 triumph over Cleveland and Atlanta clinched the first division crown in its 15-year history with a 35-10 drubbing of San Francisco.

"We have a flair for the dramatic, don't we?" quipped losing Cleveland coach Sam Rutigliano after Ahmad Rashad's catch on a deflected desperation pass gave the Vikings a dramatic victory as time ran out.

The Browns have come back to win four times this season and eight of their 10 victories have been by margins of seven points or less, but they received a bitter taste of their own medicine when Tommy Kramer — who passed for 455 yards — lofted a high pass toward the right corner of the goal line with five seconds remaining.

"It looked like there were about 35 guys going for the ball," said Rashad, who also snared a TD pass with 95 seconds left as Minnesota notched a 19-point fourth quarter. "I just thought it made sense to hang around the 5-yard line and look for the tip."

The Vikings, 9-6, clinched their seventh division title in eight years while the Browns, 10-5, fell into a first-place tie with Houston atop the AFC Central. Brian Sipe, the NFL's top-rated passer, threw for

one touchdown and scored another for the Browns.

Steve Bartkowski threw three second-half TD passes and scored himself as Atlanta, 12-3, won its ninth straight. With the victory, the Falcons snapped the Los Angeles Rams' seven-year stranglehold on the NFC West, but Coach Leeman Bennett isn't celebrating, yet.

"We're saving the champagne until after the Super Bowl," said Bennett.

In the AFC East, Buffalo, 10-5, leads New England by a game, but the Bills can still lock up their first division title since 1966 with a victory or tie in San Francisco next week. Whichever team doesn't win the division title can still qualify for a wild card berth.

Houston and Cleveland are tied in the AFC Central and the Browns can clinch the division title with a victory in Cincinnati Sunday. Pittsburgh, 9-6, can still qualify for the playoffs as a wild card team.

In the AFC West, Oakland and San Diego are 10-5 and if the Raiders beat the New York Giants next Sunday and the Chargers beat the Steelers next Monday night, both teams qualify for the playoffs. The division title, however, would go to San Diego because the tie would be broken on the basis of best net points in division games. If both teams lose next week, Oakland wins the division on the basis of a better conference record.

In the NFC East, Philadelphia, 12-3, leads Dallas by a one game heading into this Sunday's game. Both clubs have clinched at least a wild card berth and the Cowboys must defeat the Eagles in the season finale to tie at 12-4. The division tie would then be broken on the basis of best net points in division games.

Detroit, 8-7, cannot pull out a NFC wild card spot because of the Rams' 38-14 win over Dallas Monday night. Los Angeles clinched the last wild-card spot because of that win.

Cowboys stunned by Rams

United Press International
ANAHEIM, Calif. — Vince Ferragamo threw three touchdown passes and a swarming Los Angeles defense throttled the Dallas Cowboys Monday night to give the Rams a 38-14 victory and a wild card berth in the NFL playoffs.

Los Angeles dominated the Cowboys from the start of the nationally televised game, bolting to a 28-0 halftime lead and blanking Dallas until early in the fourth quarter.

Los Angeles gained 517 total yards, barely missing the Dallas record of 527 yards given up by the Cowboys against St. Louis in 1962.

Dallas, which had already clinched a playoff berth, fell to 11-4 and trails Philadelphia by one game in the NFC East. The Cowboys and Eagles meet Sunday in Dallas to decide the division championship.

The Cowboys must win by at least 26 points to clinch the title or Philadelphia wins the crown with Dallas getting the wildcard berth.

The victory gave the Rams a 10-5 record. Their seven-year reign as NFC West champions was broken by Atlanta Sunday. The Rams and Falcons play in Anaheim Sunday in the regular-season finale.

Ferragamo, playing with heavy padding to protect the badly bruised ribs he suffered in last week's loss to Buffalo, completed 15-of-25 passes for 275 yards and the three touchdowns without throwing an interception. He had 229 yards and a pair of TDs in the first half.

His TD passes were a 40-yarder to Billy Waddy, a 34-yarder to Preston Dennard, and a one-yarder to Victor Hicks. The Rams' other touchdowns

came on a four-yard run by Cullen Bryant, a 34-yard run by rookie Jewel Thomas and a 27-yard field goal by Frank Corral.

The Cowboys' points came on a 36-yard touchdown pass from Danny White to Tony Hill and a 17-yard TD pass from reserve Glenn Carano to Butch Johnson with just 31 seconds remaining in the game.

White completed just nine-of-23 passes for 147 yards and was intercepted three times, two of them leading to Los Angeles touchdowns.

Waddy caught five passes in the game for 124 yards, all in the first half, and Dennard also caught five for 99 yards, also in the first half.

In the first half, the Rams racked up 333 total yards to just 91 for the Cowboys, including a passing advance of 229-60.



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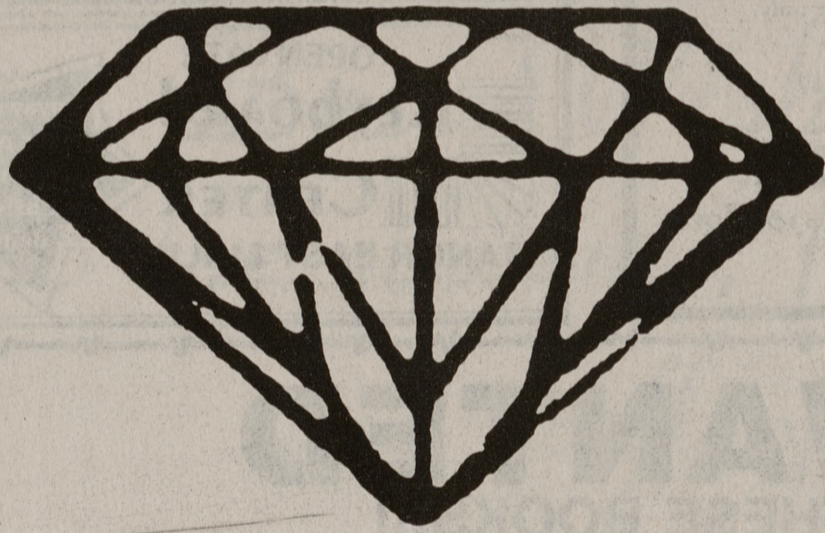
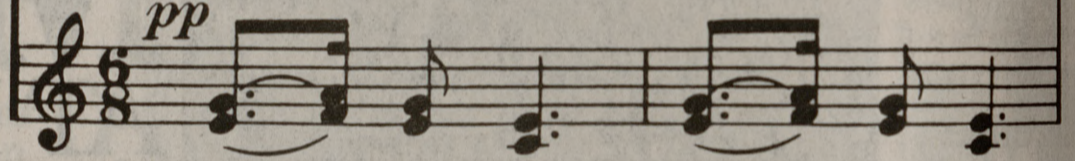
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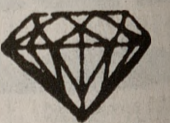
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