

These days, NFL just plain vanilla

Give me an NFL dynasty, please. Give me somebody to sink my canines into. Give me the Yankees of football. Get George Steinbrenner to buy the New York Giants.

I can't believe I'm actually writing this, but while you're at it, give me Terrell Owens. He's a distraction, you say? Better that fate than being bored to distraction.

Tell me what am I supposed to do with the Broncos, the Steelers, the Seahawks and the Panthers. Get in on a group hug? What is there *not* to like about the four teams left in the playoffs? That it has been known to drizzle in Seattle? That Denver has a quarterback with a beard? That Pittsburgh has a cheerful, aging running



Rick Morrissey
In the wake of the news

back? That Carolina embarrassed the Bears?

The playoffs are a smaller version of a bigger problem: The NFL is down. There aren't any great teams, and there aren't as many players with star power as there used to be.

I didn't know I would miss New England and all its winning so much. I'm feeling very

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CHAMPIONSHIP SUNDAY

★ AFC CHAMPIONSHIP ★

STEELERS AT BRONCOS
2 p.m., WBBM-Ch. 2

The line: Broncos by 3
The story line: The Steelers shut down a high-powered offense last week. Can they do it again in Denver?

★ NFC CHAMPIONSHIP ★

PANTHERS AT SEAHAWKS
5:30 p.m., WFLD-Ch. 32

The line: Seahawks by 3½
The story line: Loss of running back DeShaun Foster puts more pressure on Panthers quarterback Jake Delhomme.

MORE NFL COVERAGE

■ Sunday's matchups, starters and stats. **BACK PAGE**

■ Coaching turnover to help Bears. **DON PIERSON, PAGE 2**

Super Bowl XL: 5:30 p.m. on Feb. 5 at Ford Field in Detroit

Soggy Seahawks fans hope for reign

I haven't set foot in Seattle since civic officials there decided to blow up the Kingdome into a million little pieces.

The city's current stadium is called Qwest Field. I am not sure what a qwest is, or if it is a word I can use in Scrabble. I do know this is Seattle's great qwest to be in a Super Bowl, something that happens out there about as frequently as Bill Gates uses an Apple or an iPod.

Sunday's game between the Seattle Seahawks and Carolina Panthers is not a clash between NFL giants and titans. Between them, these franchises have a grand total of three representatives in pro football's Hall of Fame—all of them Seahawks, two of whom are Franco Harris



Mike Downey

and Carl Eller, who played for Seattle just one season each.

The third is Steve Largent, who went straight from football to politics. I believe Largent was successful in running for office because he was that rare NFL wide receiver who never celebrated a touchdown by acting like a complete jack-ass.

I look forward to seeing the

PLEASE SEE **DOWNEY**, PAGE 12



Tribune photo by Jim Prisching



Tribune photo by Scott Strazzante



Tribune photo by Jim Prisching

After the joys of the Illini's Final Four run, the White Sox winning the Series and the Bears making the playoffs, we're ...

In a void to avoid



Tribune photo by Charles Cherney

Chicago sports fans, like this one at Soldier Field, were left in a gloomy mood after the Bears were eliminated from the NFL playoffs by the Panthers last weekend.

And on the seventh day, Ron Madej will rest. Finally.

There is no need for Madej to prepare free food for his loyal Sunday customers at the Chicago Bear Bar & Grill, no overflow crowd to anticipate, no reason to work another consecutive Sunday as he has since before the White Sox's pennant run began last summer.

By David Haugh | Tribune staff reporter

"I think I'll take the day off because it won't be that busy now," said Madej, the bar's owner. "I've talked to a bunch of my regulars. And they just don't want to watch another team besides the Bears in the playoffs against the Seahawks. Everybody is still too sad."

The funeral began last Sunday. On a potential game-

tying drive, Bears quarterback Rex Grossman threw an interception to Carolina Panthers cornerback Ken Lucas with 2 minutes 26 seconds left, and the life drained right out of the bar on South Central Avenue.

Inside, about 125 fans enjoying Madej's complimentary hors d'oeuvres began a mourning process that continued last week all over the city.

PLEASE SEE **DEPRESSION**, PAGE 12

ILLINOIS 58,
NORTHWESTERN 47

Another step in the right direction

Maturing Illini pass challenging road test, writes **Skip Myslenski**

Look first at one Illinois possession late in the first half of Saturday's game at Northwestern.

It began with James Augustine rebounding a missed free throw and passing to Dee Brown, who casually dribbled past half-court.

Then the ball went like this: To Rich McBride at the top of the arc. To Augustine deep in the left corner. To Brian Randle low on the left block. Back out to Augustine deep in the left corner. Back out to McBride at the top of the arc.

On a weave from McBride to Brown to Chester Frazier to McBride outside the arc on the left wing. To Brown cutting through the circle from the right.

Only after 33 of the 35 seconds on the shot clock had ticked off, did Brown go up and hit a 12-footer from the left wing.

That was symbolic of Illinoi's performance in its 58-47 victory, which can be a difficult task for a team in the throes of growing up. And that is the case with these Illini, who took a step in their climb toward maturity.

They are not yet a picture of

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Tribune photo by Nuccio DiNuzzo
Dee Brown hugs Chester Frazier (left), whose three-point basket ended the first half.

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Picking up the pace
Chandler's big night instigates 12-point win at Indiana. **PAGE 3**



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