

WEEK 14

JETS vs. RAIDERS

Giants Stadium ■
1 p.m. ■
TV: Ch. 2 ■
Line: Raiders by 3 ■WEATHER
Partly cloudy
Skies.
High 38.

GAME BREAKDOWN

BY DAVE HUTCHINSON · STAR-LEDGER STAFF

JETS ON OFFENSE

The Jets are on the verge of having their worst offensive season in franchise history. They're averaging just 11.9 points per game (their all-time low is 12.1 in 1976) and there's little reason to believe things will get better. RB Curtis Martin (sprained right knee) has been downgraded to questionable. If he can't go, rookie Cedric Houston will get his first career start. Third-year RB Brooks Bollinger (0-5) will make his sixth career start today. The Jets have scored just one TD in their past 38 possessions (sur-plus games). Bollinger had a rough time last week against New England (15-of-37 for 135 yards, one INT). Veteran QB Matt Ryan Testaverde (12 turnovers this season) has dropped hints that he's ready to go after missing time with an injured calf. The injury-decimated offensive line must stop Raiders DE Derrick Johnson (11 sacks). The WRs have just three touchdowns between them. That's hard to do.

RAIDERS ON OFFENSE

RB LaMont Jordan will be pumped up. Not only is he going against his former team, he's coming off one of his worst games of the season in a 34-10 loss to the Chargers last week. He had 15 carries for 55 yards and his first-quarter fumble led to a San Diego TD. Jordan has rushed for 844 yards and nine touchdowns on 233 carries (3.6-yard average) this season. He also has team-high 61 receptions for 493 yards and two TDs. Fifth-year RB Marques Tuiasosopo will replace Kerry Collins as the starting QB. Tuiasosopo, 26, has appeared in just eight career games. Making only his second career start, he has completed 11 of 49 passes for 358 yards, no TDs and three INTs. He's more athletic and mobile than the veteran Collins and the Raiders hope he can provide a spark. WR Randy Moss is third in the team in receptions with 45 for 771 yards and five TDs. WR Jerry Porter (56-770-4) is playing well. The Raiders' offensive line has struggled this season.

SPECIAL TEAMS

JETS: Rookie K Mike Nugent hit a 38-yard FG against the Patriots last week, his only attempt. He connected on four of five against the Saints two weeks ago at Giants Stadium. P Ben Graham (8.8-yard net average) is having a strong season.

RAIDERS: K Sebastian Janikowski is struggling, having hit just 1 of 25 this season. His 72 percent conversion rate ranks 29th in the league. He was picked 17th overall in the 2001 draft.

INJURIES

JETS: RB Derrick Blaylock (foot) is out. RB Curtis Martin (knee)

Awesome Aussie

Rookie punter Graham has made major impact

BY MATT BEARDMORE
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

HEMPSTEAD, N.Y. — Kick after booming kick, Jets punter Ben Graham shows off his technique during return drills, stepping forward and launching perfect left-footed spirals into the white roof of the team's indoor practice bubble.

"It's a little strange (kicking in the bubble), but what it does is it gives you more of an opportunity just to work on your stepping pattern and technique, not worrying about the exact result of the ball," Graham said.

Kicking inside may be a new experience for Graham, but after starting the season as the oldest rookie (31) to ever make an NFL opening-day roster, and making an uncertain journey from Australia with his family to begin his second football career, nothing seems to phase this now 32-year-old punter.

"You wouldn't think he's a rookie by his mindset," place-kicker Mike Nugent said. "Yeah, this is a new game to him, but the kind of pressure with people watching you when you're out there, he has dealt with that before."

Before this year, Graham competed for 12 seasons for the Geelong Football Club in Australian Rules Football. After being selected by the Cats, his hometown team, as the 40th pick in the 1992 draft, the 6-5, 230-pound Graham developed into one of the game's premier players, participating in 219 games and earning captain status from 2000-2002.

But after watching fellow Australian Darren Bennett punt his way to success with the San Diego Chargers and Minnesota Vikings, Graham retired last year and signed a free-agent contract with the Jets with no promises of a spot on the team.

"There were people who thought I should have played another year back home, so they were a little skeptical at first," Graham said.

Not anymore.

With Game 13 in this bleak Jets season today against the Oakland Raiders, Graham remains one of

the few bright spots for a team still in search of win No. 3 after seven straight losses.

"He hit a punt back in October ... in all my 20-something years (in the NFL), it was the best single punt I've ever witnessed," Jets special team coach Mike Westhoff said. "The highest, the furthest, the best hang time. I've never seen anyone hit one like this. That includes Reggie Roby and Rohn Stark.

"He's headed toward the top echelon of punters in the league."

All this praise directed at a man who just nine months ago attended a kicking boot camp in Reno, Nev., to develop the punting style that would earn him an NFL job.

"He's a physically gifted individual," Westhoff said. "For him to learn a whole new technique has been a difficult thing. There's been some ups and downs, but his gradual progress has been forward."

Graham's average of 44.2 yards ranks eighth in the NFL. And for a rookie who didn't know if he'd make the team when competing against Micah Knorr in training camp, Graham now has an opportunity to make a permanent mark in the Jets' record book. With four games remaining, Graham's 38.8 net average is well within striking distance of Curley Johnson's team record of 39.7 set in 1965.

"That's a goal of mine, to be right up there in the Jets' history, but (also) to stamp myself on the NFL," Graham said.

He has already made quite a mark.

Last week in the Jets' 16-3 loss to the Patriots in Foxboro, Mass., Graham placed half of his six punts inside the 20, including two inside the 5-yard line. His 36-yarder with 5:34 remaining in the first quarter pinned New England at its 1, and his kick in the opening minutes of the fourth quarter left the reigning Super Bowl champs 2 yards from their goal line.

"I see myself as a top-10 punter and the numbers will show that," Graham said.