



The Key Matchups

1 RAVENS 16, STEELERS 0

Ravens	10	3	3	0	16
Steelers	0	0	0	0	0

Shades of glory to come. The Ravens don't allow the Steelers to cross mid-field until second half as Pittsburgh is shut out at home for the first time since 1989. Priest Holmes rushes for 119 yards and QB Tom Brady is 16-of-32 for 189 yards for a turnover-free, albeit lackluster Ravens offense. "Sixteen points is not going to beat many teams in this league," says tight end Shannon Sharpe.

2 RAVENS 39, JAGUARS 36

Jaguars	17	6	3	10	36
Ravens	0	7	15	17	39

In their first statement game, the Ravens speak volumes against the defending AFC Central champs. They rally from a 17-point deficit as Banks throws for a career-high five TDs. The Ravens stumble and fumble their way to a 17-0 deficit after one quarter and 22:17 at halftime. But a 32-point second half helps them improve to 2-0 for the first time moving to Baltimore.

3 DOLPHINS 19, RAVENS 6

Ravens	0	0	3	6
Dolphins	3	3	7	6

The offense struggles in a game when the greatest statistical QB of all time, Dan Marino, has his number retired. After coming off a career game, Banks is sacked six times, intercepted once and fumbles twice. But it is the defense that has some Ravens starting. "I know our defense is better than what we showed," DB Duane Starks says of a unit that allows Miami just 258 yards.

4 RAVENS 37, BENGALS 0

Bengals	0	0	0	0
Ravens	10	14	3	37

No better way to get an offense well than to host the Bengals. Rookie Jamal Lewis rushes for 116 yards and a TD and the defense forces four turnovers. Banks leads the Bengals to a 27-0 victory in the second quarter. "We were nervous (three) in the first half. "We need this for our confidence," says DE Rob Burnett, who knocks QB Aki Smith out of the game in the second quarter.

5 RAVENS 12, BROWNS 0

Ravens	3	6	3	0	12
Browns	0	0	0	0	0

The touchdown drought begins. But with a defense like the Ravens', that's not a disaster. They are the first team in 15 years ('86 Bears) to shut out consecutive opponents as kicker Matt Stover does all the offensive work. Cleveland ends up with 23 yards rushing (230 of total offense). "Our defense was magnificent," coach Brian Billick says.

6 RAVENS 15, JAGUARS 10

Ravens	3	3	3	6	15
Jaguars	3	0	0	7	10

Eight quarters and counting without a TD, but the defense forces eight fumbles, recovering three, and intercepts three passes. They knock another QB out of a game, Mark Brunell, but this time it's because of poor performance (18-of-28, 167 yards, 2 INTs). "It was an ugly game, but somebody has got to take the ugly gift to the prom," Sharpe says.

7 REDSKINS 10, RAVENS 3

Ravens	0	3	0	0	3
Redskins	0	3	0	7	10

Make that 12 quarters without a TD, and this time it catches up with the Ravens. Banks continues struggling, throwing for 135 yards and one costly interception with time running out in the first half at the Washington 1. The offense doesn't reach the 200-yard mark, but the defense remains strong with LB Ray Lewis leading the way. He makes 13 tackles, six more than any other player.

8 TITANS 14, RAVENS 6

Titans	0	7	7	0	14
Ravens	3	3	0	0	6

The Ravens knock Eddie George out of the game and hold the Titans to seven first downs and 191 yards. But when your offense doesn't score a TD for the fourth straight game, that's a problem. Banks throws three INTs and Trent Diller throws one in his first relief appearance. "This is not a crisis, this is something you work through," Billick says of the offensive woes.

9 STEELERS 9, RAVENS 6

Steelers	0	0	9	0	9
Ravens	0	6	0	0	6

New QB, same result. Diller starts in place of Banks but can't end the TD drought, now five games. The offensive problems and mounting criticisms are starting to gnaw at the Ravens. "If anyone wants to intimidate that all of a sudden I don't know what I'm doing, and that my 25 years is a sham, and I faked my way to this point, they can have it," says Billick says.

10 RAVENS 27, BENGALS 7

Ravens	3	21	0	3	27
Bengals	0	0	7	0	7

Once again, the Bengals are just what an ailing offense needs. Diller throws three TDs, two to Sharpe. The streak grows to 21 quarters—matching the 11 Colts for the longest since the 1970 NFL merger—before Brandon Stokley catches his first pass of the season, a 14-yard TD to spark a 21-point second quarter. "I was just thrilled to get the monkey off our backs," Stokley said.

11 RAVENS 24, TITANS 23

Ravens	7	10	0	7	24
Titans	0	14	0	9	23

They end the Titans' record of 12 regular-season games without a loss at a new stadium. Diller passes for 281 yards, two TDs and rolls up 361 yards of offense against the NFL's fourth-straight defense. "I'm getting too old for this," DT Tom Stringer says. "It's like a roller coaster and I don't even go on roller coasters... anymore because of my heart."

12 RAVENS 27, COWBOYS 0

Cowboys	0	0	0	0	0
Ravens	10	7	0	10	27

Billick calls on the dogs after the Ravens go up 17-0 in the first half. "Let's show them how relentless we can be," he says to his team. Jamal Lewis runs for a career-high 187 yards (6.7 a carry). He is five yards short of equalling the Cowboys' total offense in the game. Diller passes for two TDs and the defense posts its fourth shutout of the season, one shy of the '76 Steelers' record.

13 RAVENS 44, BROWNS 7

Browns	7	0	0	0	7
Ravens	7	24	6	7	44

They clinch their first winning season since the franchise moved to Baltimore in '96. Lewis runs for 170 yards. Diller throws for two TDs (nine in four games). "I hope we're not satisfied," safety Rod Woodson says. "But we're heading in the right direction." And how are opponents feeling about the Ravens these days? "I don't think we quit; I think we got beat up," Browns coach Chris Palmer says.

14 RAVENS 24, CHARGERS 3

Chargers	0	3	0	0	3
Ravens	3	7	14	0	24

Plays, here they come. Diller throws two TDs and they use five turnovers to clinch their first playoff berth. Only a 47-yard field goal prevents them from tying all-time shutout record. "At the beginning of the year, we stood up and said, 'Anything less than the playoffs would be unsuccessful,'" Billick says. "To... live up to what you said you were going to do is sometimes undervalued."

15 RAVENS 13, CARDINALS 7

Ravens	3	0	10	0	13
Cardinals	0	0	7	0	7

Chalk this one up to a playoff hangover: Only the Ravens' defense, and Arizona's woeful offense, are enough to top the Cards. "Here is my story," Diller says of his 70-yard passing day. "I was in the locker room before the game and some guy hit me across my face and tapped me in my locker, took my uniform and went and played. I don't know what happened."

16 RAVENS 34, JETS 20

Jets	14	0	3	3	20
Ravens	0	20	20	7	34

The defense gives up 524 yards but sets an NFL record for fewest points allowed in a 16-game season. Its 165 points easily tops the 187 of the '86 Bears. "That should last a long time," Woodson says. They do intercept Vinny Testaverde three times and force him to fumble twice. The offense has only five first downs but Jerome Lewis bats them out with two punt returns for TDs.

17 RAVENS 21, BRONCOS 3

Ravens	0	3	0	0	3
Ravens	0	14	7	0	21

In a wild-card game, they shut down the NFL's second-ranked offense. It's the first time the Broncos are held without a TD in 28 playoff games. "We were like a pack of deer being chased by wolves," Siragusa says. "I didn't really believe they ever saw a defense like ours," Ray Lewis says. The backbreaker is Sharpe catching a deflected Diller pass and running 58 yards for a 14-3 halftime lead.

18 RAVENS 24, TITANS 10

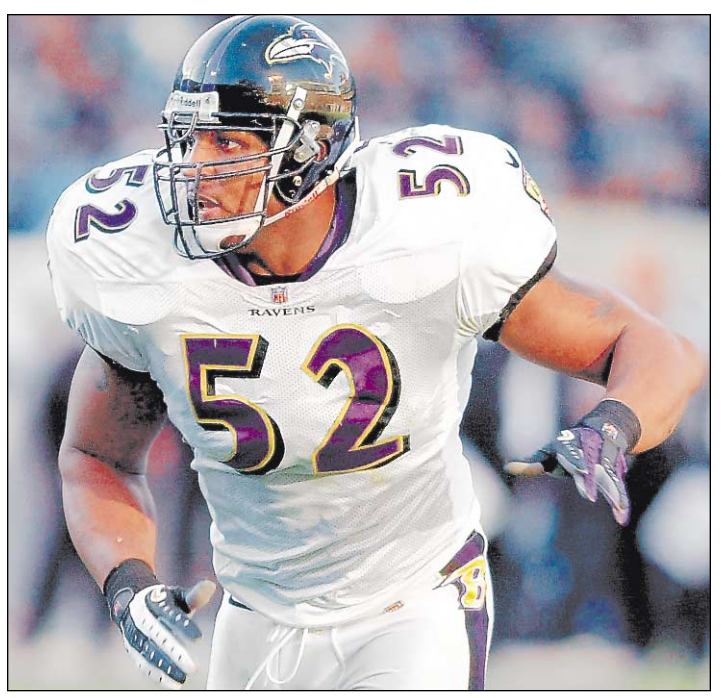
Ravens	0	7	3	14	24
Titans	7	0	3	0	10

Six first downs? 134 yards of offense? On the roads in the divisional playoffs? No problem for the Ravens. All they do in the fourth quarter is return a blocked field goal for a touchdown and have Ray Lewis return an interception for a score. "He's one of the best linebackers ever to play," Titans quarterback Steve McNair says.

19 RAVENS 16, RAIDERS 3

Ravens	0	10	3	3	16
Raiders	0	0	3	0	3

In Oakland, in the AFC title game, the run was supposed to end. But just like the week before, and most of the season, the Ravens win with defense. The only offense needed comes on third and 18 from the Oakland 4 as Diller hits Sharpe on a short alert that becomes a 99-yard score. The defense does the rest. "What does crowd taste like?" Sharpe asks a doubting world. And Trent Turner



Times photo — JAMES BORCHUCK
Ray Lewis leads a Ravens defense that set an NFL record for fewest points allowed in a 16-game regular season.

Ravens LB Ray Lewis vs. Giants RB Tiki Barber

The NFL's defensive player of the year has had few moments this season. He leads a stifling defense by virtually smothering any ball or ball carrier daring to advance past the line of scrimmage in the middle of the field. Therein lies an intriguing possible showdown with the Giants' all-purpose back. Barber has had a splendid season and set a team record with 2,089 all-purpose yards. He is as elusive running the ball (1,006 yards) as he is catching it (719 yards). The Giants love to mix up Barber's role to keep line-backers honest, and they likely will do the same against Baltimore. Lewis seems perfectly suited to stonewall Ron Dayne's power running style but will have to adjust quickly to chasing down Barber in open space.

Giants LDE Michael Strahan vs. Ravens RT Harry Swayne

Strahan didn't make his fourth consecutive Pro Bowl, but he certainly had another stellar season. He led the Giants with 9 1/2 sacks. Swayne likely got a good look at Strahan's ability to dominate the line of scrimmage in his impressive performance against the Vikings in the NFC Championship Game. When he had two solo tackles and a sack. Swayne, however, is no rookie to the Super Bowl scene. This is his fourth title game, and that experience should help neutralize Strahan's dominance.

Giants CB Jason Sehorn vs. Ravens WR Qadry Ismail

Face it: The Ravens offense isn't going

to blow anyone out of the water, so a matchup between a receiver and a cornerback would appear to lack luster. Not so in this case. Though the Ravens often turn to the tight end for the important play, that room underneath is created by Ismail's downfield threat. Sehorn, one of the premier corners in the game, simply can't allow "The Missile" to abuse him on the outside. Giving the Baltimore offense any breaks, especially down the field, is a prescription for pain.

Ravens TE Shannon Sharpe vs. Giants LB Michael Barrow

If it seems as if every time the Ravens needed a big play in the playoffs, they got it against the Broncos and against the Titans, then provided the only true offensive

highlight of the game against Oakland with a 96-yard touchdown catch. Though listed as a tight end, Sharpe is more a true receiver, and that means Barrow will need to call on his rather speedy linebacking feet. Safety Sam Garnes will provide support, but it'll be Barrow's job to keep Sharpe dull.

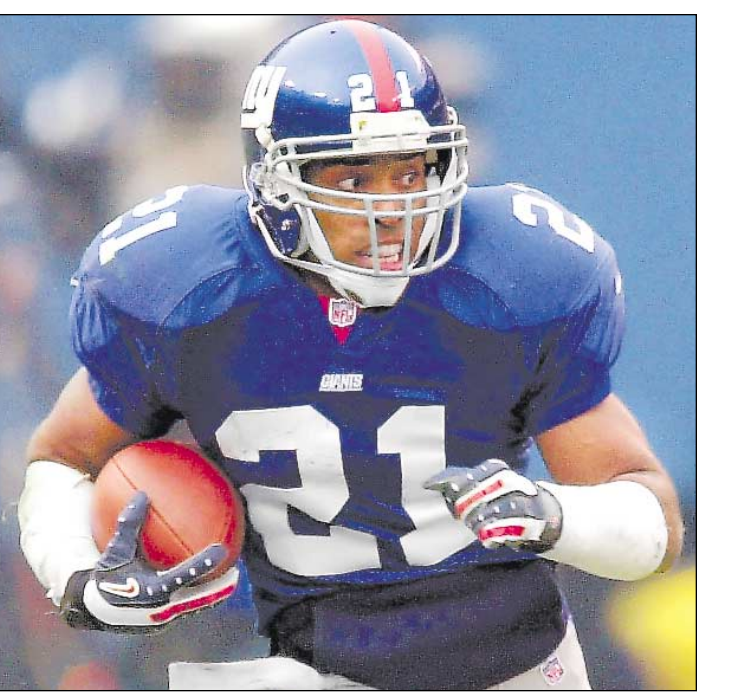
Giants LT Lomas Brown vs. Ravens RDE Michael McCrary

In his 10th season, Brown has experienced it all. There is little McCrary can bring that Brown hasn't seen. But McCrary's 6 1/2 sacks and 103 tackles indicate the eight-year veteran has some skills and smarts as well. As effective as Giants quarterback Kerry Collins was against the Vikings, McCrary's ability to disrupt New York's offensive rhythm will prove critical.

The Ravens can stop the run. Can McCrary help them stop the pass?

Ravens QB Trent Diller vs. Giants QB Raymond James Pass

Redemption? Poetic justice? Whatever the catch phrase, Diller's appearance at Raymond James Stadium in the Super Bowl is begging for movie rights. But before proclamations of "I'm going to Disney World!" Diller must exorcise some demons. When last he faced the Giants at Raymond James, his fumble on the third play from scrimmage led to a 38-yard recovery for a touchdown by Christian Peter. Then, just before halftime, he threw an interception that was returned 8 yards for a touchdown by Andre Weathers. Get the point? —ROGER WILLS



Times photo — JAMES BORCHUCK
Running back Tiki Barber set a Giants team record for most all-purpose yards in a season.

1 GIANTS 21, CARDINALS 16

Cardinals	0	0	3	13	16
Giants	7	7	0	7	21

The Giants open with a strong 1-2 punch in the backfield as Tiki Barber rushes for a career-high 144 yards and two TDs and top rookie Ron Dayne powers for 79 yards and a score. "There is nothing you can do to adjust to thunder and lightning," says Barber, the lightning part of the tandem. The defense contributes with three interceptions and fumble.

2 GIANTS 33, EAGLES 18

Giants	3	17	7	6	33
Eagles	0	3	9	6	18

QB Kerry Collins gets into the act, going 21-of-29 for 220 yards and two TDs, as the Giants start the season 2-0 for the first time since 1994. "I feel better than I've ever felt," he says. "It's a fun offense. I'm much more confident." In the first of three matchups against the Eagles, the Giants sack QB Donovan McNabb three times.

3 GIANTS 14, BEARS 7

Giants	7	0	7	0	14
Bears	0	7	0	0	7

They won't accrue many fair points, but the Giants win with an offense familiar to a certain pewter team. Barber leads 170 yards of offense. The defense gets four sacks and holds Bears to 48 yards rushing. "Three games doesn't make a season, but it's great," DE Michael Strahan says. "You told me we were going to do this at the end of last season, I would have said you were crazy."

4 REDSKINS 16, GIANTS 6

Redskins	0	10	6	0	16
Giants	0	0	0	6	6

The first matchup against their chief Eastern Division rival doesn't pan out. "I think we got lulled into thinking it was pretty easy, and if there is a lesson here, it's that it isn't easy," says Collins, who is sacked four times. "We simply didn't play like a championship team. Washington is one of the best teams in the league and they kicked our butts." Barber and Dayne combine for 88 yards.

5 TITANS 28, GIANTS 14

Giants	0	0	7	7	14
Titans	7	14	0	7	28

The Giants enter No. 2 in NFL in time of possession but get a taste of their own medicine. The Titans hold the ball nearly 43 minutes, gain 436 yards and force four turnovers. The Giants give up TDs on three of the Titans' first four drives. The NFL's top rushing attack has just 1 yard at halftime, finishing with 24. "We're going to make up our minds where we're going," coach Jim Fassel says.

6 GIANTS 13, FALCONS 6

Giants	10	3	0	0	13
Falcons	0	3	3	0	6

Super Bowl has to be on their minds after a lackluster performance. "We weren't that impressive, but we got the win," says Dayne, who scores the only TD in the first quarter after a Falcons lineman is penalized for using illegal leverage to block a kick. The defense remains strong with two INTs and four sacks, including one that knocks CB Chris Chandler out of the game.

7 GIANTS 19, COWBOYS 14

Cowboys	0	0	14	0	14
Giants	0	7	6	6	19

The defense intercepts Troy Aikman five times and Dayne rushes for 108 yards and a score. And even with that Dallas hold-up, the Giants lead the final seconds from the Giants 14, but LB Jessie Armstead bats away the final pass in the end zone. "There are things that we're going to have to continue to do better," Fassel says. The biggest score: CB Jason Sehorn fractures a rib.

8 GIANTS 24, EAGLES 7

Giants	0	0	0	7	7
Eagles	7	7	0	0	24

They reverse their luck coming off bye weeks. The win is just their third in 12 games after a bye and moves them into first in the East. "We know we got their backs," says Sehorn. "We're going to have to continue to do better." Fassel says. The biggest score: CB Jason Sehorn fractures a rib.

9 GIANTS 24, BROWNS 3

Giants	0	10	7	7	24
Browns	3	0	0	0	3

They win their fourth straight and are off to their best start since opening the '90 season 10-0 on route to winning the Super Bowl. Collins throws two of his three TDs to Toomer. The offense holds Cleveland to 41 yards rushing and has four sacks, two by DE Michael Strahan. "There might be a lot of critics, and a lot of ghosts we're still fighting," DT Lomas Brown says, "but we're winning."

10 RAMS 38, GIANTS 24

Rams	14	14	10	0	38
Giants	0	7	10	7	24

With another chance to prove something against one of the league's elite, the Giants fall against the no-warrior-to-fool Rams. Trent Green burns them for five TDs. "We heard all the ray-sayers say we hadn't beaten anybody," Brown says. "We wanted to... silence them. We didn't." Collins throws three TDs, two to Ike Hilliard, but the offense falters. Sehorn's return is a bright spot.

11 LIONS 31, GIANTS 21

Lions	0	21	7	3	31
Giants	0	0	14	7	21

The watershed game. Hardly what you expect from a loss that drops you out of first, but brings you from first to second. "You got the loss, you can put it right on my chest. I'm raising the stakes right now. This is a poker game, I'm showing my chips to the middle of the table, I'm raising the ante, anybody wants in, get in, anybody wants out can get out. This team is going to the playoffs, okay?"

12 GIANTS 31, CARDINALS 7

Giants	7	7	7	10	31
Cardinals	0	0	7	0	7

The Giants respond to Fassel's guarantee with their most lopsided victory of the season. Collins completes 20-of-30 for 232 yards and a score, and LB Ronald McKinnon racks up 14 tackles (11 solo) to go along with a sack and a forced fumble. "The main thing for us is to go out with a sense of urgency in every game," Fassel says. Only a half-game separates them from first place.

13 GIANTS 9, REDSKINS 7

Giants	0	6	3	0	9
Redskins	0	0	0	7	7

The Giants take over first place in what turns out to be coach Norv Turner's last game before being fired. Brad Daluiso is the offense with three field goals and the defense has two interceptions and holds Stephen Davis to 28 yards rushing. "We were looking forward to going out there and proving everyone wrong and showing ourselves that we can be a playoff team," Games says.

14 GIANTS 30, STEELERS 10

Steelers	0	3	0	7	10
Giants	3	10	7	10	30

They are starting to make a name of Fassel. Collins passes for 333 yards and two TDs, the first Giants QB since Phil Simms in '93 to pass for more than 3,000 yards. "Guys are starting to believe if we keep it going... we can make some noise once we get to the big dance," Lomas Brown says. Hilliard plays for first time since breaking his sternum and a lung against Detroit.

15 GIANTS 17, COWBOYS 13

Giants	0	0	7	10	17
Cowboys	7	6	0	0	13

They clinch their first NFC East title since '97. Barber, who leads team's comeback from a 13-0 deficit, chucks up 127 all-purpose yards, giving him a team-record 1,832 for season. "It's part of the belief factor," Fassel says of his quarterback coming true. "Everyone on this team bought into it." Now they eye home field in the playoffs thanks to Packers upsetting Vikings.

16 GIANTS 28, JAGUARS 25

Jaguars	0	7	3	15	25
Giants	7	0	0	21	28

Home sweet home. That's where the Giants will be for the post-season. Collins throws fourth-quarter TD passes to Hilliard and Toomer, and Sehorn recovers two onside kicks, returning the first for what proves to be the winning score. "Nobody ever thought we would be here," DT Keith Hamilton says. "We're just going to keep playing hard and they can doubt us all the way to Tampa."

17 GIANTS 20, EAGLES 10

Eagles	0	3	0	7	10
Giants	7	10	0	3	20

The Giants manhandle the Eagles for the third time, this time in the divisional playoff game. Ron Dixon races 97 yards for a touchdown on the opening kick-off and Sehorn tpe a ball to himself and scores on an interception return. "It's fortunate that even today players really play against them when we play against them," Sehorn says sarcastically. "We're not a very good football team."

18 GIANTS 41, VIKINGS 0

Vikings	0	0	0	0	0
Giants	14	20	7	0	41

How could the lackluster offense of the Giants compete with the high-powered Vikings? Easy: just shut them out and score 41 points. "Today, on our field of painted mud, we proved we're the worst team ever to win the NFC championship," Giants co-owner Wellington Mara says. "In two weeks, we're going to try to become the worst team ever to win the Super Bowl."

STARTING LINEUPS

RAVENS OFFENSE

- QB: Trent Diller
- RB: Jamal Lewis
- WR: Qadry Ismail
- TE: Shannon Sharpe
- LT: Lomas Brown
- LG: Glenn Parker
- RG: Mike Flynn
- RT: Harry Swayne
- Center: Jeff Mitchell
- Offensive Line: Edwin Mufaltalo, Sam Gashi, Jonathan Ogden, Trent Diller, Keith Hamilton

RAVENS DEFENSE

- DE: Ray Lewis
- DT: Jason Sehorn
- LB: Brian Billick (Coach), Ray Lewis, Michael Strahan, Matt Stover (Kicker), Shaun Williams (Free safety), Kyle Richardson (Punter)
- CB: Jason Sehorn
- S: Jason Sehorn

GIANTS OFFENSE

- QB: Kerry Collins
- RB: Tiki Barber
- WR: Ike Hilliard</