

# STARS & STRIPES

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## JIM HENDERSON: ON DECK

It's no secret that there's no love lost between NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and Saint coach Sean Payton. No other coach in the NFL has been suspended for a single game much less a whole season that Goodell put Payton in the "sin bin" for in 2012 for "Bounty Gate."

And so -- loving conspiracy theories as we do in South Louisiana -- you looked at the Saints' 2014 schedule and concluded, "Roger nailed us again." But a recent article in the Associated Press on how the NFL schedule is set and applying the guidelines to the Saints' schedule leads one to conclude, "not really." Computers -- dozens of them running 24 hours a day for 2 weeks -- spit out the NFL schedule taking nearly 20,000 rules and guidelines into account before doing so. Goodell passes the final judgement on their efforts.

Here are some of the things he wants the schedule to accomplish or avoid. How did he do for the Saints?

He and the owners want high-profile games on national tv for the ratings which translate into additional television revenue when negotiations roll around again. This season the Saints got prime time exposure against the Cowboys, Packers, Panthers, Ravens, and Bears. Two at home. Three on the road.

Every team in the NFL must play a dreaded Thursday night game. The schedule-maker tries to separate the mini-bye week that follows with the other true bye week to maximize the rest and recovery period for each. This year the Saints had their bye week in week six and their mini-bye following week nine. Not ideal.

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The primary gripe Payton acknowledged about the schedule was forcing the Saints to host Green Bay on Sunday night then travel to Carolina to face the Panthers Thursday night. No other team in the NFL was asked to accommodate such a short turnaround. The league makes that Thursday night opponent a divisional one to minimize preparation and travel..

The Saints answered the challenge by beating both the Packers and Panthers but then went on an extended losing streak with injuries proliferating.

When the Saints hosted the Bengals, Cincinnati was beginning a three-game road trip. Teams asked to do so should not have had that burden in recent years. The Saints had no three-game road trips. Just one two-game road trip to open the season -- both losses. The Saints last three-game road trip occurred in 2011 when they would go on to win the NFC South with a 13 and 3 record.

The Saints saw a lot of well-rested teams between their tenth and fourteenth opponents. I was surprised to learn that there is no advantage for either the home team hosting a visitor coming off a bye or the well-rested visitor.

But if you have to go on the road to face a team coming off a bye your winning percentage goes down by more than one-fifth. That's what the Saints had to do in traveling to Pittsburgh in week 12 and yet they overcame that statistical disadvantage with an upset of the Steelers.

Did the schedule beat them? Saints' fans would like someone to blame and Goodell is an easy target. But upon closer inspection of the 2014 schedule, he didn't deserve to be --- this time.

*Merry Christmas and Happy New Year  
from*



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