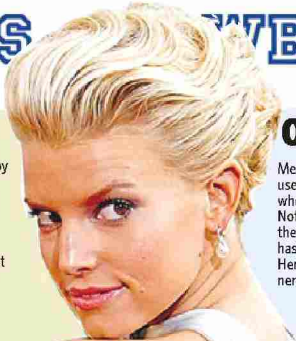


GIANTS vs. COWBOYS

Does Fox have blonde ambition?

Bodog, an online gambling site, set the over/under for Jessica Simpson mentions by Fox at 6.5, which does not include pregame, halftime or postgame shows. So listen carefully. Joe Buck offered this hint Friday on WFAN: "We are Fox, so obviously that will be the focus of what we're doing the entire day, and if a game breaks out, then heaven help us." Sarcastic? We'll see. And if not... rumor has it the Cowboys still deploy scantily clad cheerleaders at home games. Unlike the Giants, who are all about focus and concentration under coach Tom Coughlin.



Oh, say can you see TC?

Merrick's own Artie Kempner, director for Fox's lead NFL team, used to have a reliable go-to reaction shot in Tom Coughlin, who last season often appeared on the edge of a breakdown. Not anymore. Coughlin's calmer demeanor has been better for the Giants and presumably better for the coach's health, but it has been deflating for directors looking for dramatic pictures. Here is a handy rule of thumb for Giants fans: The more Kempner shows Coughlin, the less good it is for Big Blue.

T.O. is star of this show



This is a case in which the most important figure in the game in football terms is the most compelling figure in the game in general, so there is no question who will get the most camera time in Big D: Count on endless T.O. isolation shots as he tries to run and cut on his bum ankle, as he rides a bike on the sideline, as he yells at coaches, as he takes off his shirt and does sit-ups while cheerleaders hold down his legs, as he models a pink No. 9 jersey, as he dumps popcorn on Tom Coughlin's head...

Cowboys-Giants shoot for 20

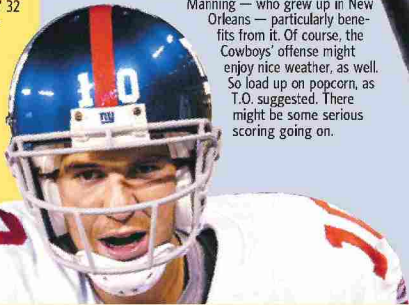
The Cowboys are proven audience grabbers and the Giants represent a very large market. Combine that with the ratings sweet spot that is the early Sunday evening slot, and the game has a good chance to crack the 20 percent of U.S. households milestone in the ratings. The past three years in the divisional round, Fox's Sunday game has drawn 19.9 percent for Seahawks-Bears, 19.7 for Panthers-Bears and 19.4 for Vikings-Eagles.

Rough decade for Cowboys

The Cowboys and Giants each have been in the playoffs 29 times, tied for the most in the NFL, but this is their first postseason meeting. The Pokes' 32 playoff victories are the most in league history, but the last one came on Dec. 28, 1996. (The Giants' last postseason win came Jan. 6, 2008.)

Eli has fun in sun

The forecast for Irving, Texas, is sunny and about 60 degrees, which probably is a good thing for the Giants. Eli Manning has flourished the past two weeks under excellent conditions for this time of year. Any quarterback, even Brett Favre, would prefer warm, calm, dry weather in which to pass, but it does seem Manning — who grew up in New Orleans — particularly benefits from it. Of course, the Cowboys' offense might enjoy nice weather, as well. So load up on popcorn, as T.O. suggested. There might be some serious scoring going on.



The last time Dallas won a playoff game . . .

◀ The average price of regular gas in the U.S. was \$1.26 . . .



▶ . . . "Beavis and Butt-Head Do America" still was basking in the glow of a debut weekend in which it ranked No. 1 at the box office.

◀ Patrick Ewing's 27 points led the Knicks to a 96-85 victory over the Magic that improved them to 20-8 en route to a 57-win season . . .



▶ . . . Eli Manning was looking forward to his 16th birthday the following weekend.

