

This preview includes a lot of in-depth statistics, analytics and attempts to make the game more predictable. I packed it with a lot of statistics that can help you form your own opinion about how this game could play out. My prediction will be at the end if that's all you care about.

Opening line: Patriots -6

Opening total: 46

When Philadelphia has the ball:

The Eagles offense had a lot of moving pieces in 2017 with the injury to All-Pro LT Jason Peters in Week 7, the acquisition of Jay Ajayi in Week 8, and the season-ending injury to potential MVP Carson Wentz in Week 14. The shuffling and adjustments of the offense makes it difficult to predict their approach and success in the Super Bowl, but there are some important factors to look at.

The Eagles rank 17th in rushing efficiency this season and will be similar to many of the teams the Patriots have played during the year in that aspect. In those games, the Patriots didn't really seem to be very concerned with how well the other team ran the ball, allowing the second worst yards per carry (4.6) in the league. But this is different. If Carson Wentz was healthy, you know the Patriots' goal would be to slow down the Eagles passing attack. With Nick Foles at the helm is it really necessary to have lighter boxes and try and stop the pass? This is really what this game could boil down to in my opinion. Which Nick Foles and which type of offense will we see? Will it be the Nick Foles who had a miserable 39% passing success rate¹ in Weeks 15-16 against an easy schedule? Or will it be the Nick Foles who had a whopping 65% passing success rate against two solid pass defenses in the playoffs? The answer to those questions should largely guide your thoughts on how this game plays out.

Notice I left out explaining what "type of offense they played" in the paragraph above because once it changed, Foles' success followed. In Weeks 15 and 16, the Eagles had a 62%-to-38% pass-to-run ratio overall and a 63%-to-37% pass-to-run ratio when it was a one-score game. Remember in those games, Foles struggled and had a 39% success rate passing and an 87.6 passer rating. Compare this to the Divisional and Conference round games against the Falcons and Vikings where they entirely switched their philosophy. In those games, the Eagles had a 51%-to-49% pass-to-run ratio overall, and a 55%-to-45% pass-to-run ratio when it was a one score game. Foles excelled in those matchups with a passer rating of 122.1 and a 65% passing success rate.

¹ Success Rate is a metric that measures the frequency a play generates required yardage (based on down and distance) to grade as successful.

I'm not entirely sure why the Eagles went pass-heavy in those games as they had a 54%-to-46% pass-to-run ratio overall and 57%-to-46% pass-to run ratio in one score games when Carson Wentz was healthy (Weeks 1-14). Regardless, Nick Foles and the Eagles were clearly more successful when they went with an extremely run-heavy approach.

Earlier I mentioned that the Eagles rank just 17th in rushing efficiency on the year, but it's important to note they are 1st in Explosive Rush Rate (Rate of rushes that go 10+ yards) and 6th since Week 15 (Foles at QB). This is largely due to Jay Ajayi racking up explosive runs and boasting the 4th highest Yards Above Successful % (YAS%)² among all backs with 100 or more carries in the NFL. Since going to the Eagles, he accounted for exactly half of the Eagles explosive runs despite receiving only 35.6% of their carries. Contrary to the regular season, they have rode Ajayi pretty heavily in the playoffs giving him 18 and 21 touches in two games. He will likely see another heavy dose of work against the Patriots 30th ranked run defense in terms of efficiency.

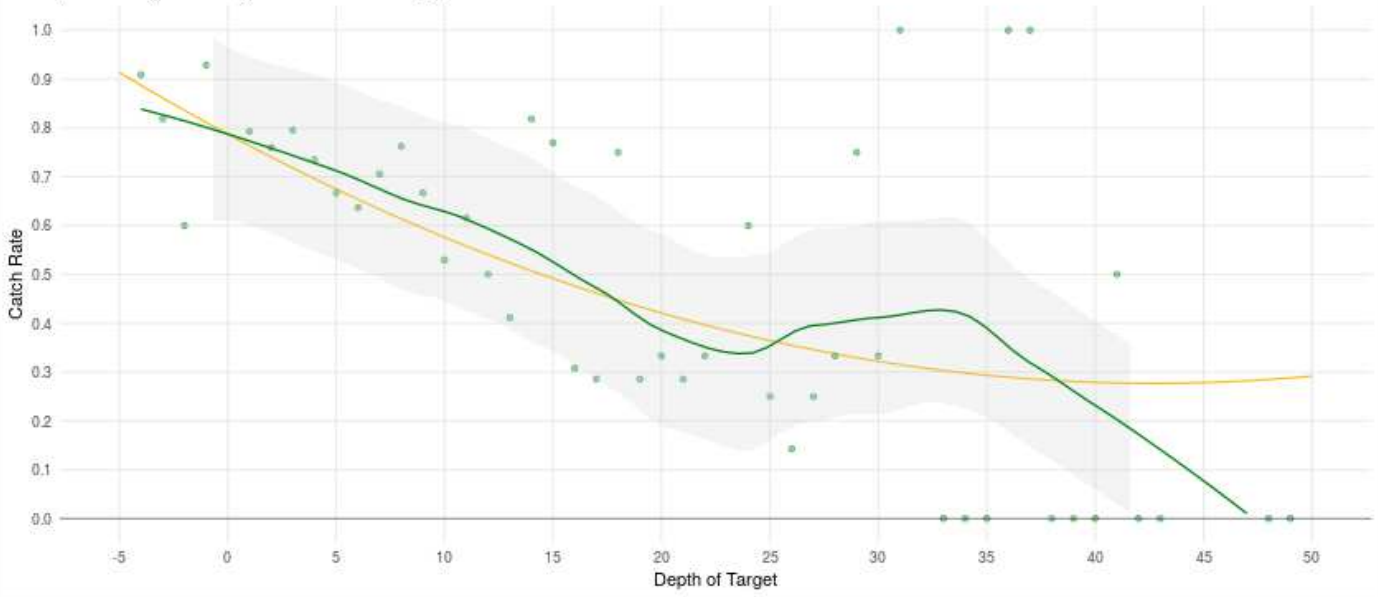
This seems like a slam dunk for the Eagles, a run-heavy game plan that just worked against the team with the 4th best run defense, but this time against a team with one of the worst run defenses in the league. Not only did the Patriots struggle to stop the run, it came against the 3rd easiest schedule of opposing run offenses.

The problem with this thinking is the Patriots are a rare team that actually specifically gameplans to stop opposing teams strengths and tendencies instead of sticking to a scheme and expecting that to win out. The last two weeks they have played against the Jaguars (#1 run-heaviest team, 12th in rushing efficiency) and the Titans (8th run-heaviest rushing team, 8th in rushing efficiency). Both teams run often, and are effective at it. Against those teams, the Patriots were stellar against the run allowing success rates of just 25% (Titans) and 28% (Jaguars). So while the Eagles may not be a great team at rushing the ball, the Patriots will likely key-in on their tendency to run early and often and make an effort to force Foles and the Eagles into tougher 3rd downs.

The Eagles best bet at success will be through creative play-calls and a lot of play-action to catch the Patriots off guard. It will have to be similar to what they did against Minnesota and what the Jaguars did in the first half against New England. The best way to attack the Patriots defense is through passes to the running back and wide receiver. In one score games they rank 30th in success rate allowed to both RB and WR as well as being last in yards per attempt (YPA) to running backs (8.5) and second to last in YPA to wide receivers (9.1). It's not like they are great at defending the tight end (12th in success rate, 15th in YPA allowed), but they are much worse at defending other positions. Corey Clement is an under-the-radar play against the Patriots in a matchup that was recently exploited last week by Corey Grant of the Jaguars. While Clement isn't nearly as explosive as Grant, they are used in similar situations.

² Yards Above Successful is a metric which isolates only the yardage on a successful play which was in excess of required. Think explosive plays.

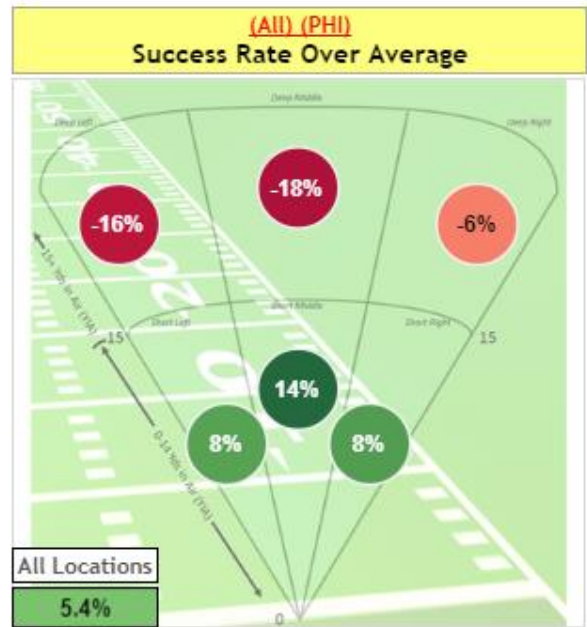
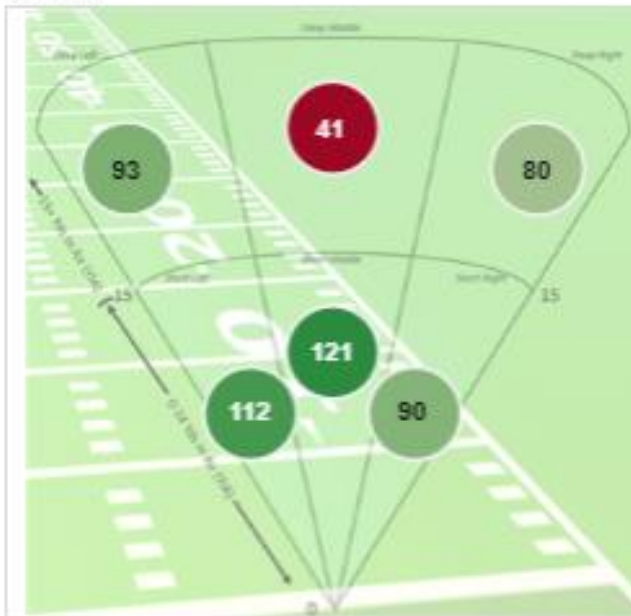
NE - Opponent Catch Rate by Depth - airyards.com
 (Note: league average catch rate in orange)



Looking more specifically where the Eagles could succeed, per Airyards.com, the Patriots allow a catch rate at or above the league average for passes thrown between 0-to ~ 17 yards.

Foles directional passer rating happens to match up extremely well against the Patriots' deficiencies. Within 15 yards he boasted a passer rating of 103.7 and had a success rate of at least 8% better than the league average.

Overall



Making short, quick throws will be vital for the Eagles' offense not only to attack the Patriots weakness, but to avoid allowing Nick Foles to be under pressure. Per Pro Football Focus' Pat Thorman (@Pat_Thorman), "Against the Vikings, Nick Foles' passer rating while under pressure was 152.1. Before Sunday (game vs Vikings), Nick Foles' passer rating while under pressure was 34.0."

Not only has Foles been bad under pressure this season, Thorman also explains its always been bad:

"2017: 64.2

2016: 52.6

2015: 49.9

2014: 51.5

2013: 83.1 ('13, only year w/ + PFF grade)

2012: 68.9"

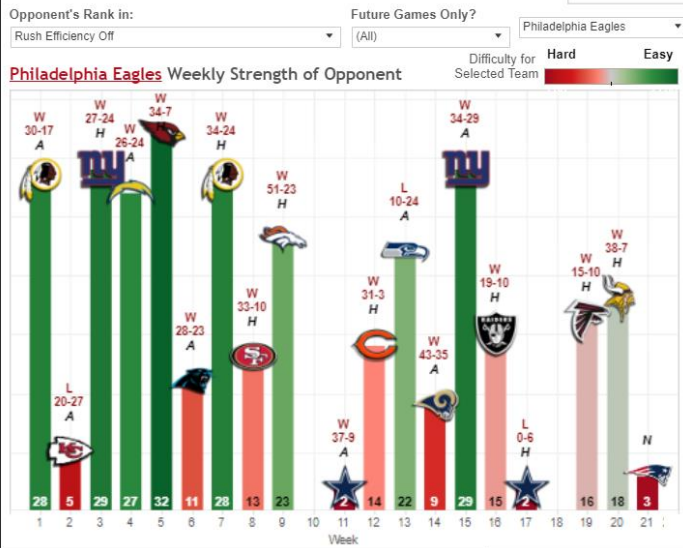
Foles clearly had his best performance of the season and that remained true for deep passing. Evan Silva(@evansilva) noted in his matchup column before the game that "Foles is 2-of-15 (13.3%) passing for 52 yards (3.4 YPA) and an interception on throws attempted more than 20 yards in the air." Foles went on to complete 3-of-5 passes of 20 or more yards for two touchdowns against the Vikings. To further illustrate how much better Foles played than normal, he had the 13th best passing game in playoff HISTORY against the Vikings according to Chase Stuart (@fbgchase): <https://t.co/e9NNf9Tjxq>. It was like vintage "27 Touchdowns, 2 interceptions" Nick Foles stepped fresh out of a time machine from 2013 and continued his brief but impressive reign of dominance. It's pretty likely that Nick Foles won't play as well as he did in the conference championship, but not out of the realm of possibilities.

When New England has the Ball:

The Patriots are a well-rounded offense that strives to relentlessly attack an opponent's greatest weakness. Overall, they are the most efficient offense in the NFL and rank 2nd in both rushing and passing success rate. They square off against what's perceived to be one of their toughest tests of the season as the Eagles rank 5th in overall defensive efficiency, 7th in pass defense efficiency and 3rd in rush defense efficiency.

2017 NFL Schedule & Strength of Schedule

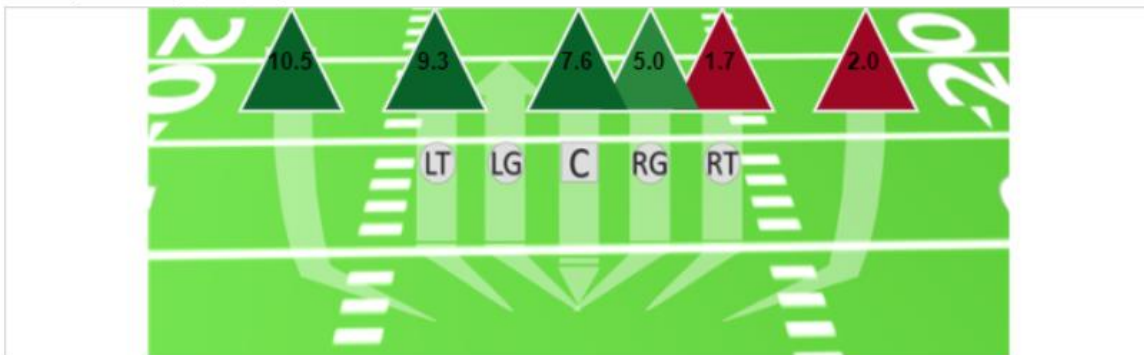
(Using Actual Metrics Year-to-Date)



One of the most notable matchups is in the trenches where Football Outsiders has the Patriots ranked as the #1 team for offensive adjusted line yards³ and the Eagles #1 in defensive adjusted line yards. Since the Eagles run defense has been getting a lot of hype as being an elite unit, digging into their strength of schedule is important.

As you can see, the Eagles schedule was littered with poor rushing teams, adding up to the 8th easiest schedule of opposing run offenses. This isn't bad, but there's more to the story. In Week 11, the Eagles played against the 2nd best rushing team in the Cowboys. Which would have been another great test for them, except Ezekiel Elliott didn't play, skewing the strength of schedule. They played each other again in Week 17 where Zeke did play, but the game didn't really matter for either side as the Eagles had already clinched the top seed in the NFC. Eliminating those two games leaves the Eagles with the second-easiest strength of schedule in the league. They played only two games against teams similar to the Patriots in rushing efficiency (3rd), the Chiefs (5th in rush efficiency) and the Rams (9th in rush efficiency). In those games, Kareem Hunt and Todd Gurley combined for 177 rushing yards on 26 carries (6.8YPC) for four touchdowns and a 62% success rate. Here's the Eagles YPC allowed by direction in those games:

Yards per Carry (YPC) by Direction



Directional Frequency



Explosive Runs (10+ yds)



³ Adjusted Line Yards is a formula that takes all running back carries and assigns responsibility to the offensive line based on the lengths of runs.

While obviously a small sample size, the Eagles run defense hasn't played very well against good rushing teams this season. It's fair to question if the reverse holds true for the Patriots rushing offense as they have had a fairly easy schedule as well. Against the three teams they played against in the top-10 of rushing efficiency, they averaged only four yards per carry but still had an incredible 60% rushing success rate. This bodes well for Dion Lewis who led the team in carries during the regular season and has been their workhorse in the playoffs so far. A fumble against the Jaguars is slightly concerning, but he re-entered on the last drive and ripped off a game-sealing run. Lewis should remain the lead back in this one and have plenty of success.

While the Eagles run defense is probably overrated, the Eagles pass defense performed well against multiple good opponents. The Eagles defense allowed 300 or more passing yards only three times all season and ranks 10th in passing success rate allowed. They did have a few specific weaknesses against those good opponents however, allowing a 54% passing success rate to running backs. This would have graded 30th over the course of the whole season. This calls for potentially another Target solid day of receiving for Dion Lewis.

Something the Patriots likely noted is the recent domination of the third-ranked Vikings passing offense. As Matt Williamson (@WilliamsonNFL) said on twitter "Case Keenum was under pressure on 24 of his 50 dropbacks!" Keenum has struggled under pressure throughout his career, something which makes the Vikings lack of offense unsurprising. Luckily for the Patriots, Tom Brady has the best passer rating in the NFL when under pressure this season (96.6).

As I stated earlier, the Eagles have the 7th best pass defense in terms of efficiency. The Patriots played against five teams of similar strength (top 10) in pass defense efficiency. Brady played well in these difficult matchups, throwing for 290+ yards and 1+ touchdown in every game.

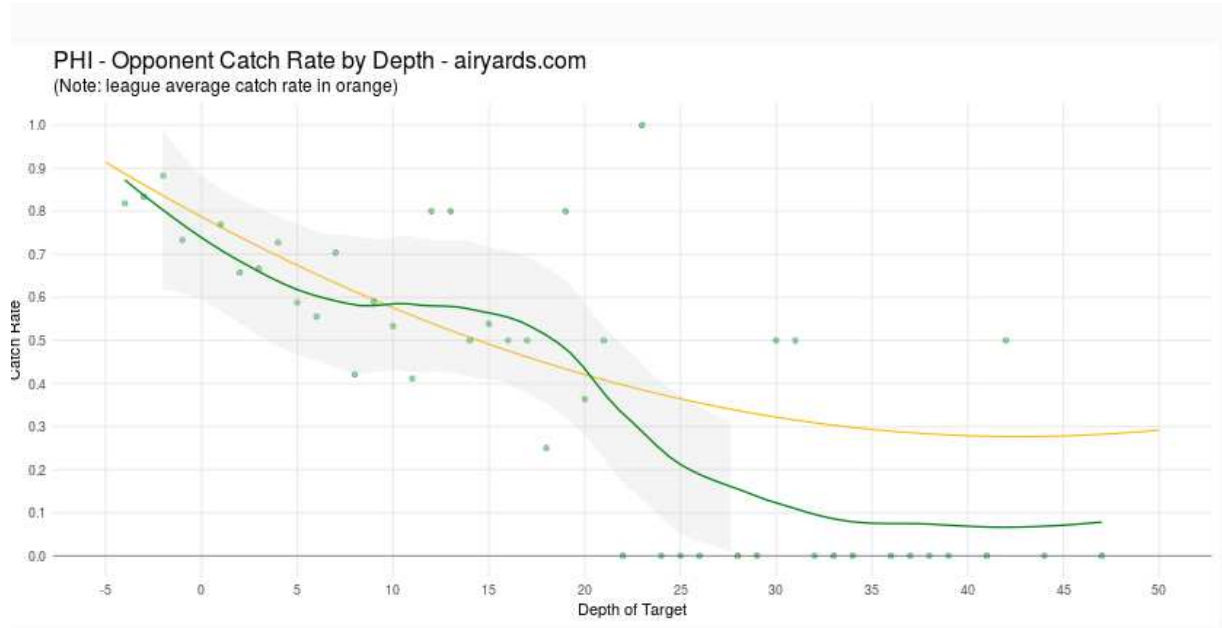
Something to look for in this game will be the Patriots use of the no-huddle. The Eagles have been destroyed by opposing passers in that situation and Tom Brady's passer rating when going no-huddle is 120.1. The Eagles' passer rating allowed when opposing teams are in the no-huddle look like this:

It's extremely conceivable that the Patriots will start many drives in bigger packages with multiple RB's, then go no-huddle, lining fullback James Develin out wide against the Eagles best cornerback Ronald Darby. This would allow for other Patriots pass-catchers to have easier matchups. The Patriots actually did exactly this against the Jaguars at times, lining up Develin in



the backfield on a run play, then proceeding to go no-huddle and matching him up against Jalen Ramsey.

In addition to struggling against the no-huddle, the Eagles allow an above average average catch rate to passes thrown 10-to-20 yards.



Looking at Patriots pass-catchers Average depths of targets (ADOT), Brandin Cooks (15.4), Rob Gronkowski (12.1), and Chris Hogan (13.2) all seem to be likely beneficiaries of the Eagles weakness. They have been stout against the tight end position this season, ranking 6th in success rate allowed. Facing Gronk is a different story however, and the only player with a similar skillset and athleticism to him in Travis Kelce went for 8-103-1 against the Eagles in Week 2. As long as he plays, Gronk should be a significant factor. If he doesn't play, Tom Brady's splits are something that should be considered:



Tom Brady Splits 2010 - 2017

Per Game / Full Season Pace

Statistic	In Split	Out of Split
Games	99	25
paATTS	36.63 / 586	38.4 / 614
paCOMPS	24.1 / 386	22.8 / 365
paINTS	0.44 / 7	0.68 / 11
paTDS	2.21 / 35	1.8 / 29
paYA	8.06	6.82
paYDS	291.39 / 4662	258.24 / 4132

In Split: Rob Gronkowski played, *out of split evaluates to all games the subject player played that don't meet the in-split criteria.

Both Hogan and Cooks are moved throughout the game, making it difficult to know which will draw the better matchup against Jalen Mills for the majority of the game. Using Left/Slot/Right as a percentage of where they lined up this season, Hogan lined up 18/48/34 while Cooks lined up 55/19/26. Neither receiver spends enough time in one position to take make solid conclusions of an advantage using WR/CB matchups.

Another factor that should be considered is the Eagles defense home/away splits. They were absolutely stellar at Lincoln financial Field allowing only 12.4 points per game, but on the road allowed 23.5. The Patriots were much less dependent on home field advantage this season, allowing 20 PPG at home and 16 away on defense while averaging 29.4 at home and 27.9 away on offense. The Super Bowl is obviously a pretty neutral location in Minneapolis, so it doesn't give anyone much of a home field advantage.

Prediction

This game will likely come down to Nick Foles and the Eagles ability to maintain offensive success in the second half. The Eagles have scored 62% of their total points in the first half the past two games, largely due to Doug Pederson's play-calling and preparation for the game. While the Eagles have started fast, the Patriots have started slow, being down the majority of the game against Jacksonville and allowing an early lead for the Titans.

I expect the Patriots to key-in on the Eagles 60% run-rate on first down over the past two weeks and run-heavy game plan in general. This will put a lot of pressure on Nick Foles to consistently move the chains. I don't expect him to have another performance like he did against the Vikings, but I also don't think he will play poorly.

The Patriots should have plenty of success on the other side of the ball, running for 4-5 yards consistently and using the no-huddle to perfection. Brady is a good bet to throw for close to 300 yards as the Patriots cruise to victory.

Final Score

Patriots: 27

Eagles: 20

My Bets: With money continuing to pile on the Eagles and the spread shifting towards them , I will look to grab the Patriots as low as possible.

Patriots -4.5

Prop Bets:

Dion Lewis O 29.5 receiving yards

Dion Lewis longest run O 12.5

Jay Ajayi O 14.5 rushing attempts

(More prop bets will be announced later in the week on twitter)

Thanks for reading, you can find me @ConnorAllenNFL on twitter. Here's my write up from last year if it interests you: <https://connorall5.wixsite.com/ffmatrix/single-post/2017/01/27/Super-Bowl-51-Preview-and-Prediction>

