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Sunday Night Football Selections

NBC Sunday Night Football is a weekly television broadcast of Sunday evening National Football League games on NBC that began airing on Sunday, August 6, 2006. It features a matchup of two NFL teams, and it is normally expected to be the best matchup of the weekend. It is played at a time when no other games are happening, and NBC wants as many viewers as possible. People want to see a “good” game. No one is going to tune in to watch the Browns play the Jaguars. But how does the NFL (and maybe NBC) decide which teams should participate in that game?

I believe that these matchups are selected based on the previous matchups in the regular season and playoffs. If teams previously met in the playoffs or if they are perennial playoff contenders, the chances of them seeing an SNF game are very high. If two teams seem to be well-matched or have a history, then these are expected to be “good” games as well.

I think these “good” games can be determined using network analysis. If each game is represented by an edge between two teams, the teams with the highest degree and centrality during the playoffs are most likely to be featured in a SNF game. If a team doesn’t fall into the first category, but it has a short path length to a team from the first category, it too has a good chance of seeing an SNF game.

The degree and centrality measures are less useful in regular season analysis because every team plays the same amount of regular season games. However, not every regular season game is a good one. I want to use a “good”-ness measure based on the final score to map the regular season matchups. So a link with a high “good”-ness measure is worth more and will give a node a higher degree. I think this degree measure will also be effective in selecting SNF matchups.

I hope to track regular season and postseason success in relation to SNF matchups over the last 20 years of play. Then I will see how it relates to the last 6 years of SNF.