

GAMES AT A GLANCE

AFC Championship

Pittsburgh (13-5) at Denver (14-3)
3 p.m. Sunday
WISH-Channel 8



Opening line: Broncos by 3½
Record vs. spread: Steelers 11-7; Broncos 12-4-1
Series record: Broncos lead 14-8-1
Most recent meeting: Broncos 17, Steelers 14, Oct. 12, 2003, at Denver
Last week: Steelers beat Colts 21-18; Broncos beat Patriots 27-13
Steelers offense: Overall (15T), rush (5), pass (24)
Steelers defense: Overall (4), rush (3), pass (16)
Broncos offense: Overall (5), rush (2), pass (18)
Broncos defense: Overall (15), rush (2), pass (29)
Key matchup: Pittsburgh's defensive line vs. Denver QB Jake Plummer. The Steelers have beaten the NFL's top two rated quarterbacks, Carson Palmer (101.1) and Peyton Manning (104.1), in the playoffs. Palmer tore up his left knee on his first throw, and backup Jon Kitna eventually succumbed to the Steelers' pressure after building a 17-7 lead. Last week, the Steelers applied constant pass rush pressure on Manning, sacking him five times and upsetting his rhythm. Pittsburgh has held the AFC's top scoring teams, Cincinnati and Indianapolis, to 17 and 18 points. Plummer has the second-highest postseason completion percentage (62.3) among active players with at least 100 attempts. Throwing interceptions at inopportune moments was practically a Plummer trademark until Denver coach Mike Shanahan convinced his quarterback he was trying to do too much. He gets his biggest test against the best defense in the AFC (284.0 yards per game).
Strengths, stats and notes: The most recent playoff meeting between these teams was the 1997 AFC championship game. Denver won 24-21 in Pittsburgh and went on to win the Super Bowl. ... Pittsburgh is the first sixth seed to make a conference cham-

pionship game. ... Steelers are 5-7 in AFC title games. ... Steelers are averaging 28 points in their past seven games. ... Pittsburgh is 8-2 on the road this year and attempts to become the first team to win the Super Bowl after winning three road playoff games. Until this season, the Steelers had won only two road playoff games in 30 years, none under coach Bill Cowher. ... In eight road starts this season (including postseason), QB Ben Roethlisberger has 12 TDs vs. 4 INTs, completing 108 of 165 passes (65.5 percent) for 108.3 passer rating. ... Steelers allowed only eight TDs on road during regular season, fewest in NFL. ... Steelers have a six-game winning streak. ... Joey Porter led NFL LBs with 10½ sacks, tying career high. ... LB James Farrior posted game-high 10 tackles and career-high 2½ sacks vs. Colts. ... WR Hines Ward had 11 TD catches, tied for second in AFC. ... Pittsburgh is 26-18 in the postseason. ... Denver's defense has allowed only 50 points during the team's current five-game winning streak. ... Denver is 12-2 at home in the playoffs and is 6-1 in AFC title games. ... Broncos are 3-2 vs. Steelers in the playoffs. ... Denver and Seattle are tied for the longest current home winning streak, 11 straight. ... Broncos, who forced the Patriots into five turnovers, forced 36 turnovers in the regular season. ... Broncos had a plus-20 turnover margin, second-best in the league. ... Denver has the third-best offense in the AFC (360.4 yards per game). ... Plummer passed for 3,366 yards, completing 60.7 percent (277 of 456) with 18 TDs and seven INTs. ... Denver is 17-14 in the postseason. ... CB Champ Bailey, with eight INTs in the regular season, recorded second-longest postseason interception return against New England (100 yards). ... K Jason Elam is Broncos' all-time leader in postseason points (79).

By **EDDIE PELLIS**
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DENVER

Home-field advantage. From the time training camp begins, the good teams talk about it, play for it, stress over it.

They say they'll do anything to have it when this week, the week when trips to the Super Bowl are won and lost, comes around.

Funny thing is, home-field advantage in the AFC doesn't give a team anything better than a coin flip's chance of winning the conference championship game. In fact, worse than a coin flip.

In six of the past 11 AFC title games, the road team has won.

Nobody has played a more important role in that surprising trend than the Pittsburgh Steelers. With a 1-4 record at home in the AFC title game since 1995, the Steelers have a legitimate reason to say they're happy to be on the road this time, Sunday at Denver, with a trip to the Super Bowl at stake.

"We've been underdogs pretty much every week since we got into this thing," Steelers coach Bill Cowher said. "We don't take ourselves too seriously."

Don't believe it. Including playoffs, they are 15-3 on the road the past two years. No team in the NFL has a better record than that.

They are trying to become the first No. 6 seed to make the Super Bowl and the first team since the 1985 Patriots to win three road playoff games en route to the Super Bowl (Carolina also has that chance in the NFC.)

The Steelers are built for the



AP PHOTO

From left, the Steelers' Casey Hampton, Joey Porter, watch from the sidelines during Sunday's AFC divisional playoff game at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis.

road, with a pounding running game they use 57 percent of the time, which figures to cut down on the number of plays that need to be changed at the line and the number of overall mistakes.

They also are on a team that, for whatever reason, has had trouble getting it done in the biggest games at home, with the Terrible Towels flying and the expectations soaring.

"It was kind of more of a distraction than anything; more ticket requests, a lot of people want to come and watch," receiver

Hines Ward said. "With us going on the road, we really don't have to worry about that too much. We just go out there and just concentrate on football."

Last week, the Broncos talked about what a big deal home-field advantage would be. It was, after all, their first home playoff game since their most recent Super Bowl year, 1998. They used home field to beat the Patriots and were stunned when Pittsburgh won at Indianapolis, ensuring them another game at Invesco Field.

But while it was something to

celebrate last week, the Broncos are downplaying it this week.

"I think sometimes you get teams who are playing at home and they think since they have that edge, they don't even have to go out and play," coach Mike Shanahan said. "You've still got to go out and play."

Denver is one of the four teams to hand Pittsburgh a home loss in the title game. The Broncos are 3½-point favorites in this game. Three points is the amount oddsmakers normally give a team with home-field advantage.

NFC Championship

Carolina (13-5) at Seattle (14-3)
6:30 p.m. Sunday
WXIN-Channel 59



Opening line: Seahawks by 5½
Record vs. spread: Panthers 10-7-1; Seahawks 10-6-1
Series record: Tied 1-1
Most recent meeting: Seahawks 23, Panthers 17, Oct. 31, 2004, at Seattle.
Last week: Panthers beat Bears 29-21; Seahawks beat Redskins 20-10
Panthers offense: Overall (22), rush (19), pass (17)
Panthers defense: Overall (3), rush (4), pass (9)
Seahawks offense: Overall (2), rush (3), pass (13)
Seahawks defense: Overall (16T), rush (5), pass (25)
Key matchup: Carolina RB Nick Goings vs. Seattle's run defense. Goings, Carolina's No. 1 back, with DeShaun Foster and Stephen Davis sidelined, is familiar with the job. When the Panthers were hit hard by injuries to their running backs last season, Goings went from sixth-stringer to starter and finished the year with five 100-yard rushing games. Carolina needs to establish the run to keep the Seahawks from stacking their defense against All-Pro wide receiver Steve Smith. Seattle, which ranked fifth (94.4 yards per game) against the run, held Clinton Portis to 41 yards and the Redskins to 59 total yards rushing last week.
Strengths, stats and notes: Carolina looks to become the first team to win five straight road playoff games. ... Carolina is 8-2 away from home this season. ... John Kasay has connected on 21 of 23 FGs in the playoffs. ... Carolina coach John Fox is 5-1 lifetime in the playoffs. ... Smith's 218 yards receiving last week ranks fourth all-time in the playoffs. Smith set franchise records with an NFL-best 1,563 yards and 103 receptions, tied for most in the league. Smith also finished tied for the NFL lead with 12 TDs. ... Carolina becomes the third No. 5 seed since

1990 to advance to the championship game. ... In six career playoff games, QB Jake Delhomme has 108.4 passer rating, 10 TDs vs. two INTs and 1,446 yards passing. Delhomme passed for 3,421 yards and tied for the NFC lead with 24 TD passes. ... Panthers have a plus-16 turnover differential. ... WR Ricky Proehl averaged a career-best 17.6 yards per catch in regular season (25-441) and averages 16.6 yards per catch (19-316) in 12 career playoff games. ... DE Julius Peppers posted the third 10-sack (10½) season of his four-year career. ... Carolina's defense ranked third, allowing a 41.0 red zone TD percentage (16 TDs, 39 trips) in regular season. ... Seattle is 23-4 at Qwest Field since the end of the 2002 season, including 9-0 this season. Seattle and Denver are tied for the longest current home winning streak, 11 straight. ... Mike Holmgren is looking to become the fifth coach in NFL history to lead two teams to the Super Bowl. ... RB Shaun Alexander set NFL single-season record with 28 TDs and led league with 1,880 yards rushing, ninth-highest total in NFL history. ... Seahawks have a plus-10 turnover differential. ... Seattle finished second in the NFL with 369.7 yards per game on offense. ... QB Matt Hasselbeck has won 21 of past 25 home starts, with 64.6 completion rate (498 of 771), 40 TDs, 16 INTs and 96.3 passer rating in that span. ... WR Joe Jurevicius had career-best 10 TD catches. Jurevicius averages 21.2 yards per catch (10-212) in five career playoff games, with two TDs. Jerramy Stevens set club record for TEs with 554 yards receiving (45 catches). ... WR Darrell Jackson had nine receptions vs. Washington, becoming club all-time leader with 26 postseason catches. ... Rocky Bernard ranked second among NFL DTs with 8½ sacks. ... LB LeRoy Hill ranked third among NFL rookies with 7½ sacks.

By **BARRY WILNER**
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



AP PHOTO

Carolina Panthers running back Nick Goings runs through a drill in Charlotte, N.C., on Thursday.

SEATTLE

Jerramy Stevens could be the one. Or Rocky Bernard.

Maybe Al Wallace or Marlon McCree, or perhaps Nick Goings.

OK, pick up your lineups and check them out. Their names don't jump off the page or onto the front pages very often.

But conference title games don't always come down to the superstars.

The New England Patriots certainly proved that in recent years, when a Tom Brady was complemented by a Kevin Faulk or a Patrick Pass. Dexter Jackson wins the Super Bowl MVP award for Tampa Bay, even though teammate Dwight Smith probably deserved it.

And neither of them were close to household names.

So why not Wallace, the versatile defensive end who spells Julius Peppers and Mike Rucker

and could be an important player if Peppers' sore shoulder slows or sidelines him for Sunday's NFL title matchup?

"If I play 15 or 20 snaps a game," Wallace said, "I want to make a game-changing play, whether it's getting my hand on a fumble, making a sack or an interception, something to make a difference."

The Panthers (13-5) have gotten solid performances from their D-line in two road victories, particularly their 23-0 rout of the Giants. They've also received strong play from the rest of the defense, including strong safety Marlon McCree.

McCree, signed as a free agent and expected to be a backup, moved into the starting lineup when first-round draft pick Thomas Davis struggled in the season opener. Playing next to one of Carolina's more recognizable defenders, free safety Mike Minter, McCree has been just as effective.

Put him down as another possible surprise star, especially after his two interceptions off Eli Manning in the Meadowlands.

Carolina's Nick Goings also should play a key role after being thrust into the lineup at running back by injuries.

Or how about Bernard? Well, if his sore foot is healed.

The defensive tackle, something of a journeyman who needed motivation before the season, ranked second on the team in sacks with 8½. He was second to Rod Coleman of Atlanta in the league among all interior linemen. Seattle led the NFL with 50 sacks.

Bernard also had 52 tackles, making his fourth year his best in the NFL.

He's part of a four-man rotation featuring Chuck Darby, Marcus Tubbs and Craig Terrill that has far exceeded expectations.

Stevens, like Tubbs a one-time first-round draft choice, had a career-best 45 catches for 554 yards this season.

Strong interviews help Linehan get Rams' job

By **R.B. FALLSTROM**
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ST. LOUIS

New St. Louis coach Scott Linehan promises an aggressive offense, something that will look familiar to the Rams.

Linehan was introduced Friday, a day after signing a four-year contract. The former Miami Dolphins offensive coordinator plans on calling his own plays, but he pledged not to forget about the defense.

"Sometimes you get that little brother syndrome," Linehan said. "A lot of that is bringing them into the fold.

You've got to have the same goals in reverse order."

The 42-year-old Linehan was offensive coordinator of the Dolphins last year, and the Minnesota Vikings' offensive coordinator the two seasons before that. Rams president John Shaw described Linehan as one of the young, bright offensive minds in the NFL.

Shaw said Linehan stood out during a 17-day interview process.

"After all of these interviews, it was clear to us that coach Linehan should be the next coach of the St. Louis Rams," Shaw said.

Linehan replaces Mike Martz, who

was fired one day after the Rams finished a 6-10 season. This is Linehan's first head coaching job at any level.

"I don't think anybody can tell you or prepare you for all the things I need to be told and prepared to be a head coach who's ready to go out there today," Linehan said. "You really don't know what path it's going to take you, but you're always preparing yourself for this day."

The hiring was finalized after Linehan met with majority owner Georgia Frontiere in Arizona.

"I feel very honored to be selected," Linehan said.



Scott Linehan, a former offensive coordinator for the Miami Dolphins, is the new head coach of the Rams.

HOW WE SEE IT

Members of the Daily Journal staff predict the outcome of Sunday's NFL conference championship games.

Paul Hoffman (7-1)
Special publications editor
Carolina at Seattle

With DeShaun Foster breaking his ankle last week, the Panthers are forced to go with tailback No. 3, Nick Goings "nowhere." With no breakout threat in the backfield, that leaves Steve Smith as the only major weapon to get the Panthers somewhere. The Seahawks aren't dumb, nor are they particularly bad at playing defense; they'll be ready for Smith. Shaun Alexander will play the entire game, meaning Seattle will go play somewhere in two weeks while Carolina goes somewhere else —



HOFFMAN

home. Now, say it with me: "Lofa Tatu-pu." Sure, that's a fun name to say.

Seahawks 28, Panthers 17
Pittsburgh at Denver

As long as Big Ben (we call him that so we don't have to spell his last name) keeps his newly acquired facial growth through the weekend, this has to be the best matchup of bearded quarterbacks ever in an NFL playoff game (Dan Fouts and Ken Stabler never met in the post-season). With defenses as good as these teams have, moving the ball could get a little hairy. Denver QB Jake Plummer has been working on his beard for a lot longer than that other guy, so we're going with the Snake (Plummer, not Stabler). I hope Darryl "Mousse" Johnson will be calling the game. Meanwhile, we're still combing the ros-

ters for fun names to say.

Broncos 24, Steelers 21
Jeff Decker (6-2)
Assistant sports editor
Carolina at Seattle

As much as I think Seattle quarterback Matt Hasselbeck is highly underrated, and as dominating as Shaun Alexander will be if he knows where he's at this week, and as much as Seattle is a difficult place to get to, let alone play at, I'm guessing the Seahawks are going to pull a Colts and fold in front of the home crowd because of the pressure.



DECKER

Pittsburgh at Denver

Everything's heavier at high altitude, so that makes Jerome Bettis, what, 550 pounds this week? And no telling what that thin air might do to Joey Porter's brain, which doesn't seem to operate before his mouth does anyway. I must be honest: I really don't care who wins this game since Indianapolis isn't in the picture despite the NFL's best efforts to help them advance.

Broncos 24, Steelers 20
John Groth (4-4)
Staff writer
Carolina at Seattle

Jake Delhomme and Steve Smith have been masterful in the playoffs. Delhomme has the highest playoff passer rating of any NFL quarterback ever.

And Smith had one of the best games ever by a wide receiver last week. Does

it matter that Carolina's top three running backs are now Nick Goings, Jamal Robertson and ... Rod Smart, aka "He Hate Me"? It should. A running game will be needed in rainy and windy Seattle. The Seahawks have one with Shaun Alexander, and now Maurice Morris and Mack Strong. Matt Hasselbeck is quietly evolving into a top quarterback, and Darrell Jackson's performance last week, playing hurt and all, was almost as impressive as Smith's. But I don't care. I'm jumping on the Carolina bandwagon. The Panthers are



GROTH

unstoppable right now.

Carolina 28, Seattle 14
Pittsburgh at Denver

Thanks to its defense, Pittsburgh has won two straight road playoff games. After injuring Carson Palmer and shutting down Cincinnati, the Steelers blitzed the Colts all afternoon and sacked Peyton Manning a season-high five times. And they've shut down Marvin Harrison and Chad Johnson, two of the best wide receivers in the league. Next up, Rod Smith. Short fields all game made Denver look way too good last week. I still don't buy that Jake Plummer will ever win a Super Bowl. Winning three straight on the road is tough. Only one team, New England in 1985-86, has ever done it. Time to make it two.

Steelers 21, Broncos 17

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