



Steelers running back Jerome Bettis, center, celebrates with teammate Hines Ward after Bettis scored during Sunday's playoff game at Cincinnati. AP PHOTO

• Ready

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is that the Colts are healthier than they have been in a long time.

Among those helped by the long layoff were three Pro Bowlers — safety Bob Sanders, linebacker Cato June and defensive end Dwight Freeney; run-stuffing defensive tackles Corey Simon and Montae Reagar; and right tackle Ryan Diem, who has missed three weeks with a sprained ligament in his left knee.

"I should be able to practice (Wednesday) as long as I come back tomorrow with no pain," Diem said. "It's hard not to get rusty, so I need a solid week of practice."

Other teams have had mixed results with extra rest.

The Denver Broncos lost in the

divisional round at home in 1996 after holding out their starters for the final three regular-season games. Last year, though, the Philadelphia Eagles won the NFC title after using the same approach.

And the Colts lost both of their previous playoff games after having a first-round bye.

But Dungy believes his players' experience and work ethic will help them avoid any rustiness against the Steelers.

Since returning to the team Dec. 28, after the death of his 18-year-old son, James, Dungy has liked what he's seen at practice.

"I thought Wednesday and Thursday were two of the best practices we've had in a long, long time," Dungy said. "We didn't put the ball on the ground, we had no repeats, so I think we'll be sharp."

Dungy believes the bye week is actually a bigger advantage than playing at the RCA Dome, where

the Steelers struggled with crowd noise in a 26-7 loss to the Colts on Nov. 28. Pittsburgh had a handful of false starts and later complained that the Colts were piping in extra noise over the speakers.

"The crowd noise killed us, no question," Pittsburgh running back Jerome Bettis said last month. "It killed us."

"You can never say what it means, how valuable it is. The sound is valuable. It's tough for you to do anything. Offensively, it was tough for us to get going."

Dungy wasn't about to enter that fray Monday, saying only there are ways to handle the noise. For now, he will keep his focus on making sure the Colts are not only rested but also motivated and sharp.

"It's fun to be back in earnest, knowing who we are going to play. It's very exciting," Dungy said. "If we have our focus, we'll be all right."

Four Colts honored

Sanders helped change the image of the Indianapolis Colts defense with a few big hits.

The sports writers and broadcasters rewarded the Colts safety Monday by making him among the Colts' league-high four players on this year's Associated Press All-Pro team.

"Knowing the way I play and the attitude I have for this game, I felt like I was the guy who should take it to another level," Sanders said. "It has to do with being physical and being aggressive."

Joining Sanders on the first team were Manning, center Jeff Saturday and defensive end Freeney.

Seattle also had four players named to the first team.

Wide receiver Marvin Harrison and linebacker June were both second-team selections from Indianapolis.

• Cowher

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the week leading up to the game, "You realize we're in a performance-now business."

But after Pittsburgh pounded AFC North rival Cincinnati 31-17 to wrap up the wild-card weekend, job security was the last thing on his mind.

"There was a lot that was being said leading up to this game, none of which I want to get into. We understood," Cowher said, "that this was a rivalry game."

Small wonder the Bengals were so eager to measure themselves against the Steelers.

The rivals had met 71 times since the NFL-AFL merger in 1970 deposited them in the same division but never before in the playoffs, due to a postseason drought that stretched 15 years in Cincinnati.

In one of the more interesting historical footnotes, among Cowher's first hires after he got the Pittsburgh job in 1992 was Marvin Lewis, his counterpart Sunday on the Bengals' sideline.

Cincinnati, coincidentally, had an opening that same year and hired David Shula. He struggled to win a quarter of his games, and Bruce Coslet and Dick LeBeau, who had the job before Lewis became the Bengals' head coach in 2003, didn't fare much better.

A better attitude wasn't the

only upgrade since Lewis' arrival.

Known for his miserly ways, Cincinnati boss Mike Brown borrowed a page from the Rooney family playbook and plowed some cash back into the franchise. After two stabilizing 8-8 seasons, the Bengals were conducting their affairs like a real professional organization and playing in a new stadium to boot.

They kicked off this season with four straight wins and beat the Steelers in early December, a win that all but locked up the division. It also prompted Cincinnati receiver Chad Johnson to boast, "Times have changed, you know? Like black-and-white TVs, and then along comes color. It was Pittsburgh, and now it's Cincinnati."

"That's the way it's probably going to be for a while now," Johnson added, "so everybody just get used to it."

Instead, the Steelers tore off four straight wins to claim the wild-card slot, a run that brought them back to Cincinnati as that rarest of road warriors, a 3-point favorite.

Then they caught a huge, if unfortunate, break when Bengals Pro Bowl quarterback Carson Palmer went down with a bad knee on the second play of the game. But they made their own luck the rest of the way.

Behind a stiff defense and a punishing running game, trademarks of Cowher's run in Pittsburgh, the Steelers scored 27 unanswered points. One score came on a flea-flicker, off a

direct snap to receiver Antwaan Randle El, who ran right and threw back across the field to quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, who then heaved a 43-yard TD strike of his own to a wide-open Cedrick Wilson.

The camera predictably zoomed in on Cowher's wide smile, just as it did later in game to capture the coach's scowl when a similarly high-risk trick play backfired near the goal line. Despite the different results, both plays showed Cowher's well-earned comfort level on the job.

Most coaches run plays like that only in the most desperate situations.

Cowher's teams, on the other hand, take their cues from their coach. They never play scared. He's made wacky calls a trademark of his game plans, so much so that the Bengals had seen enough to put together their own highlight reel dating to the beginning of Cowher's tenure.

If they're smart, the Colts, who play host to the Steelers on Sunday in Indianapolis, are rewinding their version even now.

Cowher didn't promise anything special, but he's got a history of special wins.

"We're just going to go to the next game where they send us, and we're going to try to find way to win this next game," he said.

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quarterback scream them.

Roethlisberger also expects to play better than he did in the earlier loss to the Colts, when he was intercepted twice and was limited to 133 yards passing in his first game following a three-week injury layoff.

This time, the Steelers are on a five-game winning streak during which Roethlisberger has thrown five TD passes and only two interceptions.

Roethlisberger threw for three touchdowns and wasn't intercepted during a 31-17 comeback victory Sunday in Cincinnati, when he looked relaxed, poised and in control, all the things he wasn't as a rookie QB in the playoffs a year ago.

"Ben has been working hard in practice to develop some timing and continuity with the receivers," coach Bill Cowher said. "That will be the biggest difference against Indianapolis this time."

The Steelers also promise to have a different mind-set after being visibly bothered by the RCA Dome noise, even when their defense was effectively controlling Colts QB Peyton Manning during

most of the final three quarters.

Sunday's game will be their third in a dome stadium in the past eight games, which they also think is to their advantage.

"We know what to expect," safety Troy Polamalu said. "It is a very different situation than earlier in the season ... but it will be very tough for us."

The Steelers traditionally are tough on the Colts, beating them nine consecutive times and 13 times in 14 games dating to 1978 before this season's game. Their only victory in five AFC Championship games under coach Bill Cowher also came against the Colts 10 years ago this month, a down-to-the-last play 20-16 win in Three Rivers Stadium.

What is different about this playoff game is the Steelers are big underdogs, something they almost never are under Cowher in January.

Of course, this is the first time in Cowher's 14 seasons as coach that the Steelers have played consecutive road playoff game. Before Sunday, they were 0-3 in postseason road games under his leadership.

• Noise

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Tagliabue warned in a memo that any club that tried to influence play by enhancing the crowd noise, such as by pumping it through the public address system, was subject to fines or losing draft picks.

"We aren't going to be able to hear," running back Jerome Bettis said when asked what the Steelers expect Sunday. "I think that is an important part of the game."

"We understand that it is going to be deafening, and we aren't going to be able to hear, but I think it helps us having played there earlier this season."

The Steelers also think it helps they beat the Vikings 18-3 in the Metrodome on Dec. 18, their first victory in an enclosed stadium in nine years.

They made numerous adjustments that day because of the noise problems in Indianapolis, such as running plays on a silent count rather than by having the

confidence.

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