

Not every Super Bowl QB has to be super

Brad Johnson and Trent Dilfer both won a Super Bowl in the past five years. Stan Humphries, Neil O'Donnell, Chris Chandler and Kerry Collins all started one in the past dozen. Coach Joe Gibbs won the NFL's showcase three times with three different quarterbacks. None found his way into the Hall of Fame, either.

We've been spoiled by Tom Brady and his late-game heroics in three of the previous four Super Bowls.

But in 2001, the year before Brady arrived on the league's biggest stage, the matchup was Dilfer vs. Collins. And the hiccup in the Patriots' dynasty produced the equally forgettable Johnson vs. Rich Gannon showdown in 2003.

Look at the leaders of the NFL's final four teams this season: Denver's Jake Plummer, Pittsburgh's Ben Roethlisberger, Carolina's Jake Delhomme and Seattle's Matt Hasselbeck. With personnel turning over faster than ever and exotic defensive schemes all the rage, we may be ushering in an era of the quarterback-as-caretaker.

They're praised as quarterbacks who've learned to minimize their



Jim Litke

mistakes and "manage" the game, to do just enough and turn over the heavy lifting to the running backs and linebackers. Less certain is how these QBs would fare if the coach's instructions were to forget about caution and win one with moxie and their arms.

In 39 previous Super Bowls, quarterbacks took home the MVP award more than half the time (20), and nearly three times more often than the next-closest position player (running backs, seven). Joe Namath became a legend by guaranteeing a win beforehand; Brady by engineering two in the final minutes. Joe Montana burnished his legacy with an impossibly cool comeback.

Beginning at his own 8 with barely three minutes left in the 1989 game against Cincinnati, he

SUPER BOWL CONTENDERS

Here's a look at the season statistics for the four starting quarterbacks whose teams are still alive in the playoffs:

			
Jake Delhomme Carolina	Matt Hasselbeck Seattle	Jake Plummer Denver	Ben Roethlisberger Pittsburgh
TD: 24 Interceptions: 16 QB rating: 88.1	TD: 24 Interceptions: 9 QB rating: 98.2	TD: 18 Interceptions: 7 QB rating: 90.2	TD: 17 Interceptions: 9 QB rating: 98.6

glanced out from the huddle and over toward the sidelines.

"Hey look," Montana said, cracking up his 49er teammates during a timeout, "there's John Candy!"

Then, he went back to work, connecting on eight of nine passes, the final one a 10-yard TD strike to John Taylor that gave San Francisco a 20-16 win.

"Sometimes a guy's just a normal guy, but he's got a Microsoft brain," teammate Ronnie Lott once said about Montana, by way of explanation.

Among this year's contenders, who would you drop into the same spot?

Delhomme is an adequate regular-season performer with a nose for the playoffs. He's 5-1 in six postseason starts, the sole loss coming against Brady in the Super Bowl, and his quarterback rating is a revealing 24 points better in the playoffs. He may need every one of them, though, after losing tailback DeShaun Foster because of a broken ankle suffered in Sunday's road win against the Chicago Bears.

Roethlisberger is the only other QB in the final four with a winning postseason record. He's 3-1 after dispatching the Colts and Peyton Manning, the league's

other marquee quarterback. And as the youngest member of the surviving quartet, he may have the biggest upside.

Playing against type, Roethlisberger and the Steelers came out firing early against Indianapolis. He completed 6 of 7 passes in the opening drive, then hooked up with receiver Hines Ward for 45 yards after a masterful play fake on a gutsy third-and-10 call on the second drive en route to a 14-0 lead.

"In a lot of respects, we are going to be able to go as far as he is going to take us," coach Bill Cowher said. "I'm not trying to put any pressure on him. That's the fact, and he likes that, he knows that."

Hasselbeck already had his Namath-like moment in the 2004 playoffs. He played a brilliant second-half against Green Bay — completing 15 of 22 passes for 195 yards, including a TD throw to Shaun Alexander to force overtime — and kept the roll going by correctly calling heads on the overtime coin flip.

Then, a microphone picked up Hasselbeck telling referee Bernie Kukar, "We want the ball, and we're going to score."

Instead, on Seattle's second possession in the extra period, Hasselbeck called an audible, and his pass for Alex Bannister was grabbed by the Packers' Al Harris and returned 52 yards for the winning score. If the Super Bowl comes down to a final drive, he might want to skip the predictions and do some stargazing instead.

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.

"It was a group of people playing together and playing extremely hard," Shanahan said after the Broncos sent New England packing. "Hopefully we can continue to do that and do something special as a team."

He got no argument from Plummer. Bailed out several times by Denver's defense, the quarterback didn't sound as though he was in a hurry to be tested.

"I kind of don't like grades. We got a 'W,'" Plummer said smartly, "and that's all that matters."

Jim Litke is a national sports columnist for The Associated Press. Send comments to jlitke@ap.org

Payton's place: Saints introduce new coach

By BRETT MARTEL
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW ORLEANS

The latest Bill Parcells protege to get an NFL head coaching job is Sean Payton. The New Orleans Saints are hoping he can be as good a turnaround specialist as his mentor.

Payton, a Dallas Cowboys assistant the past three seasons, was introduced Wednesday as the Saints' new head coach, inheriting a team that won three times last season and played all its games on the road because of Hurricane Katrina.

Payton, 42, is taking on his first head coaching job. In Dallas, he worked with quarterbacks and also held the title of assistant head coach. Before that, he was a New York Giants assistant, a stint that included that team's NFC



AP PHOTO

New Orleans Saints coach Sean Payton answers questions at a news conference Wednesday in New Orleans, where he was introduced as the Saints' new coach.

championship in 2000.

Payton succeeds Jim Haslett, whose tenure lasted six years. The Saints went 3-13 in 2005 but were a

.500 team during Haslett's first five seasons combined. The victories include the team's only playoff win.

Payton, the Saints' 14th head coach, acknowledged the problems caused by Katrina, for the team and the New Orleans area.

"Obviously 2005 was a traumatic year for this area; it was a tough time for this team. I hope that in some small way the effort of this team in 2006 and beyond will represent this city and this region well," Payton said.

"Some people would say, 'Stay in Dallas. The situation there is good.' We're three-quarters of the way through building a brand new house in Dallas," Payton said. "Hopefully I'm not viewed as a young, naive coach coming into a situation here. I'm excited about this opportunity. I know it's a challenge, and we're going to roll our sleeves up."

Payton said being a part of the region's recovery from Katrina was more of a draw than a drawback, making the opportunity with the Saints "unique."

"We can impact people's lives in a positive way as they go through this transition," Payton said. "I think this area, this community, this region is tough, and our team better reflect that, too."

In addition to coaching quarterbacks, Payton had a brief pro playing career at that position in the CFL and as a Chicago Bears replacement player during the 1987 strike.

Aaron Brooks, the Saints' starter for most of the past six seasons, had his worst season in 2005 and was benched for the final three games. If the Saints keep Brooks they would owe him about \$6.5 million in salary next season.

• Father

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

what's happened in the last four months — Peyton's hometown (New Orleans) getting hit by (Hurricane Katrina), then the tragedy with Coach Dungy's son (who died in December), Peyton understands that it really is just a game," Archie said.

If misery loves company, Peyton can call Eli, who's Giants were blanked 23-0 by Carolina in an NFC wild-card game Jan. 8.

Suffering through a game in which he threw for only 118 yards with three interceptions, the youngest Manning's Giants became the first home team to be shut out in a playoff game since 1980.

"Eli knows where he's at in his development and what stage he's at," Archie said of Eli's second year in New York. "He'll learn from his mistakes and try to correct them and build on the positives ... He'll handle it. He's a little more even-keel than Peyton, so he's been OK in New York so far."

Though his sons won't be playing in Super Bowl XL in Detroit Feb. 5, Archie Manning will be there to promote Mastercard's new Pay Pass program. Manning will host a tailgate party at Ford Field with items bought along the way using Pay Pass' contact-less

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Archie Manning
Father of NFL quarterbacks
Eli and Peyton Manning

payment program.

"Its real convenient — just a tap-and-go kind of thing for small purchases at convenience stores, movie theatres and places like that," Manning said.

After doing New Orleans Saints game on radio for 12 years, Manning left that post seven years ago when Peyton went to Indy.

But he worries about the post-Katrina future of the team in New Orleans.

"Next year will be pivotal for the team," Manning said of the franchise he quarterbacked for 11 years. "They have to get the bodies back in the seats and — most importantly — the corporations behind them. I'll give a lot of credit to (NFL commissioner) Paul Tagliabue and the league. They're going to give the team all the opportunity they can to make a go of it down there. I just hope it all works out."

John Lindsay is a columnist for Scripps Howard News Service. Send comments to lindsayj@shns.com.

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