

ROAD TO DETROIT: DIVISIONAL PLAYOFFS

AFC

NFC



Tim Dahlberg

Series of errors doom Patriots

DENVER
The dynasty ended in an ugly manner, as dynasties tend to do. Tom Brady couldn't save this one, and neither could the coaching genius on the sideline.

The New England Patriots didn't disintegrate Saturday under the pressure of a three-peat or the difficulty of winning a game before a hostile crowd. They didn't fall apart because of nerves or bad coaching.

They did learn a difficult lesson on why no NFL team has ever won three straight Super Bowls. So smooth for so long, the Patriots imploded in a series of the kind of mistakes other teams make in the playoffs, not this one. Five turnovers in one night can take down any dynasty.

That is, of course, if you consider three Super Bowl wins in four years a dynasty. Bill Belichick, for one, apparently doesn't.

The Patriots coach wasn't in much of a mood for talking about dynasties or much else after the game.

"There were different guys on that team," Belichick said. "It was a different team."

The Patriots came to Invesco Field winners of 10 straight playoff games and two straight Super Bowls. They left wondering how so many things could go wrong.

Losing was bad. The way the Patriots lost was even worse.

"When you lose you want to go down fighting," Brady said. "You want to go down playing your best and we didn't do that. We made it easy for them."

For those keeping score at home, the final tally was 27-13. But the real score was two fumbles, two interceptions and one muffed punt to win its first playoff game in seven years.

New England had fumbled the ball away nine times all year. No one expected the Patriots to do it three times in one game.

Worse yet, the giveaways came at the worst possible time. Two fumbles late in the first half gave Denver 10 points, and Champ Bailey's third-quarter interception in the end zone and 100-yard scamper blunted New England's bid to take control of the game.

Little wonder Belichick was swinging his arm in disgust as the Patriots kept giving Denver the ball back.

How bad of a night was it for New England? So bad that Adam Vinatieri even missed a field goal.

Last week, the Patriots dismantled Jacksonville 28-3 and played almost flawlessly. Around the league, the word was New England was back, and just in time.

For a time in the third quarter, it looked as though the Patriots were back. Trailing 10-6, they had third-and-goal on the 5-yard-line and a chance not only to take the lead but quiet the boisterous Broncos crowd.

You expected Brady to find a receiver in the end zone, because that's what he always did in winning 10 straight playoff games. You expected the Patriots to dominate the second half, because that's what they do in the postseason.

This team, though, may have expended all its energy — or luck — in coming back from a 4-4 start to make the playoffs.

Now, players with three Super Bowl rings will go home to a long offseason, wondering like other teams that faced them used to wonder what just might have been. "Every play of this game is going to be on my mind the entire offseason," said receiver Troy Brown, whose muffed punt cost the Patriots three points. "I didn't give my team a chance to make a comeback and it is going to stick with me."

The locker room was filled with disappointed players and a coach who insisted he never gave the dynasty a second thought.

His quarterback, though, apparently did.

"I think we realize what a special opportunity we had," Brady said. "And the opportunity is not in front of us anymore."

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Panthers quarterback Jake Delhomme, left, celebrates with teammate Mike Minter after Carolina's win Sunday against Chicago.

Steelers, Panthers must win on road

Pittsburgh, Carolina each need one more away victory

By **DAVE GOLDBERG**
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Denver Broncos celebrated Sunday for the second time in as many days. Less than 24 hours after Denver ended New England's quest for its third straight Super Bowl victory, Pittsburgh held on to beat Indianapolis 21-18. That ensured that not only will the Broncos will be home for the AFC title game next Sunday, but that they won't have to visit the RCA Dome, where they allowed 90 points in playoff losses to the Colts the past two seasons.

Carolina, which was in the Super Bowl two years ago, will go to Seattle to play for the NFC title after winning 29-21 in Chicago. Both the Steelers and Panthers will be trying to get to the Super Bowl by winning three road games, something accomplished only by New England after the 1985 season.

Pittsburgh (13-5) at Denver (14-3)

This will be Pittsburgh's sixth AFC title game in 12 seasons.

But this also will be its first of those on the road, not necessarily a bad thing, considering that the Steelers are 1-4 at home in those previous championships. They are the first sixth-seeded team to reach a championship game since the NFL went to the current lineup of six playoff teams from each conference in 1990.

But they are no ordinary sixth seed.

Remember that they were 15-1 last season and lost to New England in the championship game at Heinz Field, no disgrace given what the Patriots have been doing this century. And remember that they started 7-2, and seemed headed for a division title and no worse than a second or third seed when Ben Roethlisberger hurt a knee and then a thumb and they lost three straight.

"Everybody was ready to put Denver and Indianapolis in the championship game," wide receiver Hines Ward said. "We're the same team that went 15-1 last year and made it to the championship game. We're coming from a different perspective now, being on the road playing two tough road games. We all believed in one another, even if no one else did."

Roethlisberger was a hero Sunday on both offense and defense, making what was probably a game-saving tackle when Nick Harper



Denver Broncos safety John Lynch celebrates an interception against the New England Patriots during the fourth quarter of their AFC divisional playoff game Saturday in Denver.

seemed headed for a touchdown after picking up Jerome Bettis' fumble in the wacky final minutes of the win in Indy.

Hopefully, he'll be limited to offense next Sunday against the Broncos in what could be a quick game: Denver was second in the NFL in rushing this season and Pittsburgh was fifth.

The Broncos may also be a tougher test for Pittsburgh.

The Steelers beat an Indianapolis team that hadn't played a meaningful game in a month. The rust showed early as Pittsburgh jumped to a 21-3 lead and kept Peyton Manning out of his rhythm until two touchdown drives in the fourth quarter.

Carolina (13-5) at Seattle (14-3)

In the very even NFC, these could very well be the two best teams. Seattle had the conference's best record, but Carolina was probably the preseason favorite.

One problem: both lost key players to injury in their wins this weekend.

Shaun Alexander, the league's leading rush-

er and MVP this season, left the Seahawks' 20-10 victory against Washington on Saturday with a concussion. Indications are he will play Sunday at Seattle.

Carolina lost starting running back DeShaun Foster for the season with a broken ankle. Pro Bowl defensive end Julius Peppers injured his shoulder but said he expects to play next week.

On paper, this is a matchup between Seattle's offense and Carolina's defense — the Seahawks led the NFL this season with 452 points. But that can be simplistic — the Panthers and Bears both moved the ball well in a game that was supposed to end up something like 6-3 or 10-6 instead of a contest with 50 points and 716 yards between the two teams.

It's also a matchup between two of the NFL's more underrated quarterbacks — Carolina's Jake Delhomme (5-1 in the playoffs in his career) and Seattle's Matt Hasselbeck, both Pro Bowlers. Delhomme threw for 319 yards and three TDs in Chicago; Hasselbeck carried the Seahawks against the Seahawks went out in the first quarter.

NFL PLAYOFF SUMMARIES

Wild-card round
Saturday, Jan. 7
Washington 17, Tampa Bay 10
New England 28, Jacksonville 3
Sunday, Jan. 8
Carolina 23, New York Giants 0
Pittsburgh 31, Cincinnati 17
Divisional playoffs
Saturday, Jan. 14
Seattle 20, Washington 10
Denver 27, New England 13
Sunday, Jan. 15
Pittsburgh 21, Indianapolis 18
Carolina 29, Chicago 21

Conference championships
Sunday, Jan. 22
Pittsburgh at Denver, 3 p.m. (WFSH-Channel 8)
Carolina at Seattle, 6:30 p.m. (WXIN-Channel 59)
Super Bowl
Sunday, Feb. 5
Detroit
AFC champion vs. NFC champion, 6:30 p.m. (WRTV-Channel 6)

Pro Bowl
Sunday, Feb. 12
At Honolulu
AFC vs. NFC, 6 p.m. (ESPN)

Sunday's summaries
At Indianapolis
Pittsburgh 14 0 7 0-21
Indianapolis 0 3 0 15-18

First Quarter
Pit—Randle Ei 6 pass from Roethlisberger (Reed kick), 9:25.
Pit—Miller 7 pass from Roethlisberger (Reed kick), 3:12.
Second Quarter
Ind—FG Vanderjagt 20, 1:20.
Pit—Bettis 1 run (Reed kick), 1:26.

Third Quarter
Ind—Clark 50 pass from Manning (Vanderjagt kick), 14:09.
Ind—James 3 run (Wayne pass from Manning), 4:24.
A—57,449.

TEAM STATS

	Pit	Ind
First downs	21	15
Total Net Yards	295	305
Rushes-yards	42-112	14-58
Passing	183	247
Punt Returns	5-50	2-(-2)
Kickoff Returns	3-55	3-52
Interceptions Ret.	0-0	1-5
Comp-Att-Int	14-24-1	22-38-0
Sacked-Yards Lost	2-14	5-43
Punts	5-41.6	6-45.3
Fumbles-Lost	1-1	1-0
Penalties-Yards	2-8	9-67
Time of Possession	34:52	25:08

INDIVIDUAL STATS
RUSHING—Pittsburgh, Parker 17-59, Bettis 17-46, Haynes 2-8, Kreider 1-2, Roethlisberger 5-(minus 3). Indianapolis, James 13-56, Rhoads 1-2.
PASSING—Pittsburgh, Roethlisberger 14-24-1-197. Indianapolis, Manning 22-38-0-290.
RECEIVING—Pittsburgh, Ward 3-68, Miller 3-61, Randle Ei 3-30, Parker 3-19, Tuman 1-19, Haynes 1-0. Indianapolis, Wayne 7-97, James 5-26, Clark 4-84, Harrison 3-52, Fletcher 2-18, Stockley 1-13.
MISSED FIELD GOAL—Indianapolis, Vanderjagt 46 (WFL).

At Chicago
Carolina 7 9 7 6-29
Chicago 0 7 7 7-21

First Quarter
Car—S.Smith 58 pass from Delhomme (Kasay kick), 14:05.
Second Quarter
Car—FG Kasay 20, 14:57.
Car—FG Kasay 38, 6:26.
Chi—Peterson 1 run (Gould kick), 1:57.
Car—FG Kasay 37, :00.

Third Quarter
Chi—Clark 1 pass from Grossman (Gould kick), 11:21.
Car—S.Smith 39 pass from Delhomme (Kasay kick), 2:07.
Fourth Quarter
Chi—McKie 3 run (Gould kick), 12:23.
Car—Mangum 1 pass from Delhomme (kick failed), 8:04.
A—62,209.

TEAM STATS

	Car	Chi
First downs	21	23
Total Net Yards	434	282
Rushes-yards	31-123	27-97
Passing	311	185
Punt Returns	2-(-1)	2-1
Kickoff Returns	4-100	6-132
Interceptions Ret.	1-1	2-20
Comp-Att-Int	24-33-1	17-41-1
Sacked-Yards Lost	1-8	1-7
Punts	5-41.2	7-35.1
Fumbles-Lost	3-0	0-0
Penalties-Yards	9-50	4-19
Time of Possession	33:25	26:35

INDIVIDUAL STATS
RUSHING—Carolina, Foster 16-54, Goings 10-34, S.Smith 3-26, Delhomme 2-9, Chicago, T.Jones 20-80, Peterson 5-9, Grossman 1-5, McKie 1-3.
PASSING—Carolina, Delhomme 24-33-1-319. Chicago, Grossman 17-41-1-192.
RECEIVING—Carolina, S.Smith 12-218, Proehl 3-28, Carter 2-43, Hoover 2-13, Goings 1-14, Colbert 1-9, Foster 1-3, Mangum 1-1, Robertson 1-(minus 10), Chicago, Bierman 5-68, Muhammad 3-58, T.Jones 3-30, Gage 3-28, Clark 2-5, Peterson 1-3.
MISSED FIELD GOALS—None.

Saturday's summaries
At Seattle
Washington 0 3 0 7-10
Seattle 0 7 7 6-20

Second Quarter
Was—FG Hall 26, 8:59.
Sea—D.Jackson 29 pass from Hasselbeck (Brown kick), 3:22.
Third Quarter
Sea—Hasselbeck 6 run (Brown kick), 9:35.
Fourth Quarter
Sea—FG Brown 33, 14:16.
Was—Moss 20 pass from Brunell (Hall kick), 11:59.
Sea—FG Brown 31, 2:54.
A—67,551.

TEAM STATS

	Was	Sea
First downs	11	15
Total Net Yards	289	334
Rushes-yards	25-59	33-119
Passing	230	215
Punt Returns	1-3	4-(-1)
Kickoff Returns	5-95	3-49
Interceptions Ret.	0-0	0-0
Comp-Att-Int	22-38-0	16-26-0
Sacked-Yards Lost	0-0	2-12
Punts	7-42.7	5-42.4
Fumbles-Lost	1-1	5-3
Penalties-Yards	7-50	2-10
Time of Possession	32:15	27:45

INDIVIDUAL STATS
RUSHING—Washington, Portis 17-41, Brunell 4-12, Betts 3-5, Moss 1-1, Seattle, Morris 18-49, Strong 3-40, Hasselbeck 6-21, Alexander 6-9.
PASSING—Washington, Brunell 22-37-0-242, Portis 0-1-0-0, Seattle, Hasselbeck 16-26-0-215.
RECEIVING—Washington, Moss 7-103, Cooley 4-85, Betts 3-21, Jacobs 3-19, Royal 3-3, Portis 2-11, Seattle, D.Jackson 9-143, Stevens 2-13, Ingram 2-11, Jurevicius 1-31, Morris 1-16, Hannam 1-1.
MISSED FIELD GOAL—Washington, Hall 36 (WFL).

At Denver
New England 0 3 3 7-13
Denver 0 10 7 10-27

Second Quarter
NE—FG Vinatieri 40, 3:48.
Den—Anderson 1 run (Elam kick), 1:42.
Den—FG 50 Elam, :43.
Third Quarter
NE—FG Vinatieri 1 run (Elam kick), :43.
Den—Anderson 1 run (Elam kick), :43.
Fourth Quarter
Den—Smith 4 pass from Plummer (Elam kick), 8:38.
NE—Givens 4 pass from Brady (Vinatieri kick), 8:05.
Den—FG Elam 34, 3:20.
A—76,238.

TEAM STATS

	NE	Den
First downs	15	16
Total Net Yards	420	286
Rushes-yards	21-79	32-96
Passing	341	190
Punt Returns	4-37	1-10
Kickoff Returns	6-150	4-73
Interceptions Ret.	1-0	2-105
Comp-Att-Int	20-36-2	15-26-1
Sacked-Yards Lost	0-0	2-7
Punts	3-48.7	6-45.7
Fumbles-Lost	3-3	1-0
Penalties-Yards	8-82	4-24
Time of Possession	28:12	31:48

INDIVIDUAL STATS
RUSHING—New England, Dillon 13-57, Faulk 7-23, Plummer 7-8.
PASSING—New England, Brady 20-36-2-341. Denver, Plummer 15-26-1-197.
RECEIVING—New England, Branch 8-153, Givens 5-54, Faulk 2-20, A.Davis 1-51, T.Brown 1-33, Graham 1-18, Dillon 1-9, Evans 1-3, Denver, Smith 6-96, Lelie 5-50, Puzter 3-37, Anderson 1-14.
MISSED FIELD GOAL—New England, Vinatieri 43 (WFL).