

ROAD TO DETROIT: CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIPS



Jim Litke

Young QB is finally growing up

DENVER

The kid always seemed to be in a hurry, as if doing everything faster than everybody else was the only way to prove he belonged. And maybe that's the funny thing about Ben Roethlisberger heading to the Super Bowl as the second-youngest quarterback in NFL history: He got there by learning to slow down.

"It has been like night and day," Roethlisberger said after Pittsburgh dismantled Denver, 34-17, in Sunday's AFC championship game. "I'm seeing things a lot better and really understanding the team."

The education of Big Ben, while hardly complete, is at least firmly back on track.

"Last year, going 15-1, everyone's patting you on the back telling you what a good job you did, it kind of got overwhelming. It can get overwhelming even for veteran guys," said Steelers receiver Hines Ward, who caught five passes and a touchdown.

Last season, Roethlisberger won more games than rookie QBs are supposed to, sold more jerseys than anybody else in the league and became an instant matinee idol in a sports-mad town that waited years before showing any love toward the stars from the Super Bowl dynasty of the 1970s.

Small wonder, then, by the time the AFC championship game against New England rolled around last year that his head was swelled and spinning at warp speed.

"It's good to have confidence, but inside I was thinking, 'We're going all the way,'" Roethlisberger recalled in a midweek interview with *The New York Times*. "That's where people remember you from; they remember who you are in the postseason. I tried to go out and make a name for myself too fast...."

Roethlisberger made a name for himself, all right, "Rookie" being a kinder description for his performance than "Dupe," "Sucker" or "Patsy."

The Patriots counted on Roethlisberger coming down with happy feet once they ratched up the pressure in the Pittsburgh backfield, and he did not disappoint. Coaxed into throwing into heavy traffic on his first pass of the game, Roethlisberger got picked off. That wasn't the only time.

He left Heinz Field bruised and bamboozled, vowing to get better, smarter and more patient. That much was apparent even before he began sticking darts in the Broncos defense Sunday.

Roethlisberger closed out the regular season with four straight wins to help the Steelers grab a wild-card slot, then stepped up his performance in the playoffs. He arrived in Denver not as just the first quarterback to start a conference final in each of his first two seasons, but as one of the hottest postseason passers ever. Even so, Roethlisberger's 124.7 QB rating looked modest once he went to work on the Broncos.

He completed his first five throws in the opening drive, alternating between swing passes and quick outs up the sidelines, taking the Steelers from their own 9-yard line to Denver's 28 for a field goal and the game's first score.

More revealing was Roethlisberger's composure on Pittsburgh's next drive: Roethlisberger marched the Steelers to the Denver 12 in four plays.

Dan Marino made it to Super Bowl when he was 23 years, 127 days old. Roethlisberger will be 23 years, 340 days old when the Super Bowl kicks off Feb. 5.

Last season, when Roethlisberger was rushed into the starting job after Tommy Maddox went down in the second game, Steelers guard Alan Faneca responded this way: "Do you want to go work with some little young kid who's just out of college?"

On Sunday, someone asked whether Roethlisberger was actually just 23.

"If that's what the birth certificate says, that's what he is," Faneca replied. "But he's playing older than that ... he's playing like he's been in the NFL a lot longer than two years."

Running back Willie Parker said: "Believe me, we know he's still the youngest guy in the huddle, but when he says, 'Shut up,' we shut up. He's earned that respect this time around."

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



Seattle safety Michael Boulware, 28, points skyward after intercepting a pass by the Panthers' Jake Delhomme during the NFC championship game Sunday.

Don't expect blowout

Steelers favored early, but teams appear evenly matched

By DAVE GOLDBERG
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEATTLE

The contrasts between the Steelers and the Seahawks make this a fascinating Super Bowl matchup.

Add a few subplots, and Pittsburgh vs. Seattle could be one of the best ever.

When you think Super Bowl, it's hard not to think of the old Steeler dynasties of Terry Bradshaw, Lynn Swann, and Mean Joe Greene. Going into its sixth championship game, Pittsburgh would seem like a seasoned contender.

Seattle, by contrast, is untested. The Seahawks are going for the first time in their 30-year history and last week won their first playoff game in 21 years.

Consider history, and things look good for Pittsburgh. Consider this season, though, and it works the other way.

The Seahawks entered the playoffs as the NFC's top-seeded team. The Steelers were the last seed in the AFC, the first sixth-seed ever to make it to the big game and only the second team ever to get there by winning three games on the road.

The oddsmakers favor the Steelers by 3½ points for the game in Detroit in two weeks, presumably because they are the Steelers, with four titles in six years in the 1970s. Seattle is a historically faceless franchise, even with running back Shaun Alexander easily capturing this year's MVP honors.

There's one sure human-interest footnote: Pittsburgh running back Jerome Bettis will get to play his first Super Bowl in his hometown, a fitting conclusion to a 13-year career that is sure to



Pittsburgh running back Jerome Bettis celebrates a second-quarter touchdown during Sunday's AFC Championship game in Denver as official Derrick Bowers signals the TD in the background. Bettis, a Detroit native, and his Steelers teammates will play in Super Bowl XL on Feb. 5 in Detroit.

end with Bettis in fifth place on the career rushing list.

And look for other subplots: the coaching similarities, the Seahawks' outstanding rookie linebackers and a close, hard fought game.

The way these teams are playing now make that seem like a real possibility: Seattle's 34-14 victory against Carolina in the NFC title game Sunday was its 13th win in 14 games. The only loss was the regular-season finale, when the Seahawks rested their starters for most of the

game in Green Bay.

And Pittsburgh's 34-17 win in Denver was its seventh in a row, and the Steelers consider every one of them a playoff game, they started 7-5 and needed every win just to get in.

Start with the quarterbacks. Pittsburgh's Ben Roethlisberger, who had five interceptions in two playoff games as a rookie last season, has only one in three postseason games this year and has thrown for three touchdowns.

"It has been like night and day," Roethlisberger said after

delivered some big runs as the crowd chanted "M-V-P, M-V-P." Hasselbeck finished off the Panthers (13-6) with a gorgeous pump fake that had cornerback Chris Gamble on all fours.

Darrell Jackson caught the 20-yard pass for a 27-7 lead, and it was time to celebrate in the Pacific Northwest.

Several players did a Qwest Field leap into the stands at the end as the crowd chanted "Super Bowl, Super Bowl." Their 30-year-old team, which tried to leave Seattle for Los Angeles a decade ago, is, indeed, headed for the big game.

Alexander grabbed the George

Halas Trophy and carried it down the field as majestically as he totes a football. He only stopped when he reached the end zone, surrounded by photographers and cheerleaders.

Seahawks owner Paul Allen raised the team's 12th man flag, then waved a white towel to whip the crowd of 67,837 into a frenzy. What really got the fans going was when Holmgren sent in backup quarterback Seneca Wallace as a wideout, then Hasselbeck threw to him. Wallace, one of the better athletes in the NFL, made a superb over-the-shoulder catch for 28 yards.

Roethlisberger ran to the sideline and celebrated by pretending to fire six shooters from his hip. Yep, he was on target all day in this one: 24 yards to Heath Miller, 17 more to Wilson, 21 to Ward and 18 to Wilson again, all after being given ample time against Denver's ill-timed blitz.

Midway through the fourth quarter, Denver pulled within 27-17 and got the ball back at its 20. But Plummer lost a fumble on fourth-and-10 and that pretty much made it official: The Steelers would be back in the big game, searching for that long-elusive fifth world championship to add to the 1970s legacy of Bradshaw, Swann, Stallworth and Harris.

how we got here, we're a different team," Cowher said. "We're a focused team, no matter what's happened, we've stayed together. We've got a resilient group."

Plummer, who had played so well in the lead all season, finally faced some comeback pressure and failed miserably. He went 18 for 30 for 223 yards with two lost fumbles and two interceptions.

He threw one pass underhanded, scrambled for his life and, though valiant as always, proved what had been proved many times before: that he can't do it by himself.

Trailing by two touchdowns, Jake the Snake lobbed a terrible pass into the flat that was easily intercepted by Ike Taylor. Moments later, Bettis ran it in from 12 yards for an apparent touchdown on third down.

A penalty nullified that, but it only set up Roethlisberger for his best throw of the day, a 17-yard

Sunday's game. "I'm seeing things a lot better and really understanding the team."

Seattle's Matt Hasselbeck, who had lost his first two playoff games as a starter, has also blossomed in these playoffs. He was 20 of 28 for 219 yards and two touchdowns Sunday; the week before, when Alexander went out with a concussion in the first quarter, Hasselbeck carried the Seahawks past Washington.

Alexander showed no ill effects of the injury Sunday, carrying 32 times for 132 yards and two TDs.

And the defense? The Steelers have been traditionally known for it and were all over Denver's Jake Plummer on Sunday, forcing two interceptions and sacking him three times.

But Seattle's defense, overshadowed by the NFL's highest-scoring offense in the regular season, showed Sunday what it can do Sunday by shutting down the league's hottest postseason QB, the Panthers' Jake Delhomme.

Overall, they shut out the Carolina offense — Smith's 59-yard punt return was the only score until the game was out of hand — and Delhomme, who had thrown only two interceptions in six games, threw three.

The coaches are another even match.

Seattle's Mike Holmgren and Pittsburgh's Bill Cowher both became head coaches in 1992, and are the league's two longest-tenured in that position. Cowher has been with Pittsburgh for his whole career; Holmgren moved to Seattle in 1999.

Holmgren won one Super Bowl with the Packers and lost another. Cowher's Steelers lost the 1996 Super Bowl to Dallas and are 2-4 in AFC title games.

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 34, Denver 17
Seattle 34, Carolina 14

Super Bowl
Sunday, Feb. 5

Pittsburgh vs. Seattle, 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 Denver

Pittsburgh 21 0 10-34
Denver 0 3 7-17

First Quarter

Pit—FG Reed 47, 4:11.

Second Quarter

Pit—Wilson 12 pass from Roethlisberger (Reed kick), 14:54.

Den—FG Elam 23, 9:23.

Pit—Bettis 3 run (Reed kick), 1:55.

Pit—Ward 17 pass from Roethlisberger (Reed kick), :07.

Third Quarter

Den—Lelie 30 pass from Plummer (Elam kick), 3:36.

Fourth Quarter

Den—Anderson 3 run (Elam kick), 7:52.

Pit—Roethlisberger 4 run (Reed kick), 2:59.

A—76,775.

TEAM STATS

Pit Den

First downs 20 16

Total Net Yards 358 308

Rushes-yards 33-90 21-97

Passing 268 211

Punt Returns 1-15 0-0

Kickoff Returns 2-42 5-121

Interceptions Ret. 2-15 0-0

Comp-Att-Int 21-29-0 18-30-2

Sacked-Yards Lost 2-7 3-12

Punts 4-37.0 2-43.5

Fumbles-Lost 1-0 2-2

Penalties-Yards 8-61 4-20

Time of Possession 36:07 23:53

INDIVIDUAL STATS

RUSHING—Pittsburgh, Bettis 15-39, Parker 14-35, Roethlisberger 3-12, Ward 1-4. Denver, Anderson 9-36, Bell 5-31, Plummer 7-30.

PASSING—Pittsburgh, Roethlisberger 21-29-0-275. Denver, Plummer 18-30-2-223.

RECEIVING—Pittsburgh, Wilson 5-92, Ward 5-59, Randle El 4-52, Parker 3-20, Miller 2-31, Washington 1-13, Haynes 1-8. Denver, Bell 5-28, Smith 4-61, Putzier 4-55, Anderson 3-11, Lelie 2-68.

MISSED FIELD GOALS—None.

At Seattle

Carolina 0 7 0 7-14
Seattle 10 10 7 7-34

First Quarter

Sea—Stevens 17 pass from Hasselbeck (Brown kick), 5:31.

Second Quarter

Sea—Alexander 1 run (Brown kick), 14:53.

Car—S. Smith 59 punt return (Kasay kick), 9:05.

Sea—FG Brown 39, 4:03.

Third Quarter

Sea—D. Jackson 20 pass from Hasselbeck (Brown kick), 11:09.

Fourth Quarter

Sea—Alexander 1 run (Brown kick), 6:00.

Car—Carter 47 pass from Delhomme (Kasay kick), 5:09.

A—67,837.

TEAM STATS

Car Sea

First downs 11 27

Total Net Yards 212 393

Rushes-yards 12-36 51-190

Passing 176 203

Punt Returns 1-59 2-7

Kickoff Returns 7-143 2-51

Interceptions Ret. 0-0 3-67

Comp-Att-Int 15-35-3 20-28-0

Sacked-Yards Lost 2-20 2-16

Punts 7-34.7 5-38.8

Fumbles-Lost 1-1 0-0

Penalties-Yards 5-57 7-63

Time of Possession 39:09 41:51

INDIVIDUAL STATS

RUSHING—Carolina, Robertson 4-19, Delhomme 3-15, Goings 5-2. Seattle, Alexander 34-132, Hasselbeck 6-27, Morris 7-24, Strong 4-7.

PASSING—Carolina, Delhomme 15-35-3-196. Seattle, Hasselbeck 20-29-2-219.

RECEIVING—Carolina, Robertson 5-37, S. Smith 5-33, Carter 2-88, Proehl 1-19, Mangum 1-10, Hoover 1-9. Seattle, D. Jackson 6-75, Stevens 6-66, Ingram 3-34, S. Wallace 1-28, Hannan 1-7, Jurejivicus 1-6, Strong 1-3, Alexander 1-0.

MISSED FIELD GOAL—Seattle, Brown 49 (SH).

Texans pick new coach

The Associated Press

The Houston Texans will hire Denver offensive coordinator Gary Kubiak to take over the worst team in the league and help decide what to do with the first pick in the draft.

Texans owner Bob McNair said during a news conference Sunday that the hiring won't be completed until later in the week. The Texans couldn't negotiate a contract with Kubiak until the Broncos were eliminated from the playoffs.

McNair's announcement came about an hour after Denver lost to Pittsburgh in the AFC championship game.

"Hopefully we'll have him down here by the middle of the week and he will then be assembling a staff," McNair said.

McNair said he planned to speak with Kubiak later Sunday.

There's been speculation for weeks that Kubiak would become the Texans' second coach, replacing Dom Capers.

Capers was fired a day after Houston finished its season 2-14. He had led the team since its inception four seasons ago.

The Buffalo Bills were close to hiring Dick Jauron as head coach, and the former Chicago Bears coach was in town Sunday to finalize the deal, a person familiar with the negotiations said.

Reached on his cell phone, Jauron confirmed that he was in Buffalo but declined to comment, referring questions to the team.

A person with direct knowledge of the decision told the AP that Jauron arrived to finish up some contract details. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the official announcement had not yet been made.

A message left with Bills spokesman Scott Berchtold was not immediately returned.

Jauron went 35-46 in five seasons with the Bears and was the NFL Coach of the Year in 2001, following a 13-3 finish.