

ROAD TO DETROIT: DIVISIONAL PLAYOFFS



AP PHOTO

A Steelers fan waves his terrible towel in a sea of Colts fans the divisional playoff game Sunday in Indianapolis.

Wait until next season

By JOHN GROTH
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INDIANAPOLIS

Terry Isles had seen enough. The 37-year-old Indianapolis Colts season-ticket holder left Sunday's playoff game against Pittsburgh when the Steelers went ahead 21-3 in the third quarter.

Just in case the Colts had some magic, he walked to a downtown restaurant near the RCA Dome, still wearing his Peyton Manning jersey.

The Colts made the game interesting, but in the end, their dream season ended with a 21-18 loss to Pittsburgh.

"I hated to see it happen right here," said Isles, a Terre Haute resident who watched most of the second half at Houlihan's. "This was our chance to do it. ... But I'll still be buying my season tickets next year."

Colts fans couldn't believe the normally dependable Mike Vanderjagt missed a 46-yard field goal with 21 seconds left that could have sent the game into overtime.

They were equally shocked that the Colts, who started the season with 13 straight wins and the league's best record, trailed 21-3 heading into the fourth quarter.

"(Vanderjagt) hasn't had that much time to kick this year," said Kokomo resident Karen Criswell. "We've been making touchdowns all year. But we'll be back next year. It was a rusty time for them."

Indianapolis' starting offense hadn't played a full game in nearly a month. The Colts had only three points through the first three quarters before erupting for 15 in the fourth.

"I think having two weeks off hurt," Fishers resident Michele Pitts said. "They got out of their rhythm. They weren't driving, or throwing or running good. Peyton's throws weren't even close (in the first half)."

Larry Morris was shocked that Indianapolis still had a chance to tie or win the game in the fourth quarter.

"I was very discouraged by our offense during the first three quarters," Morris said. "I was amazed with the fumble in the end zone at the end of the game."

But he still believes Peyton Manning can win important games. "(Manning) won several big games this year," he said. "Pittsburgh needed four quarters to beat us. We only needed one quarter to come back and almost beat them."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Tough weekend for top QBs

Erratic play by two of league's biggest stars capped by Manning's anemic performance

By JASON MARTIN

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INDIANAPOLIS

Not the best weekend for players regarded as the NFL's best quarterbacks.

On Saturday, New England's Tom Brady was erratic and threw an interception that contributed to the Patriots' 27-13 loss in Denver.

A day later, Indianapolis' Peyton Manning started 2 for 9 passing before finishing 22 of 38 for 290 yards and a touchdown.

Manning had an interception by Troy Polamalu overturned on an instant-replay challenge.

He was sacked five times and pressured as much as any time during the season.

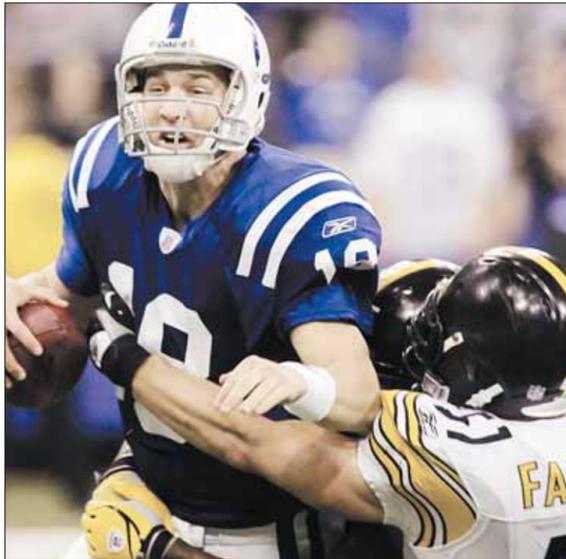
The Colts didn't crack the scoreboard until their final drive before halftime with a field goal and trailed Pittsburgh 21-3 in the third quarter before coming as close as 21-18.

Manning stopped just short of singling out any of his teammates for blame but repeatedly said that the Colts suffered breakdowns in blocking protection and picking up Pittsburgh's pressure.

"We couldn't get much momentum," Manning said.

Manning said he has to handle another year of criticism that he's never won a championship despite two league MVP awards and many passing records and accolades.

"I cannot argue with the truth," he said. "I'm not going to counter with any points because that's the fact."



Colts quarterback Peyton Manning, left, is sacked by the Steelers' James Farrior for an 8-yard loss in the third quarter of their game Sunday.

Domestic disturbance

Nick Harper had a much better Sunday than his Saturday.

Harper received three stitches on the upper part of his left knee at St. Vincent Hospital on Saturday evening after reportedly being stabbed by his wife.

"That's a tough deal," Colts coach Tony Dungy said. "We're going to support Nick through this and try to come to some conclusion on this."

Yet Harper was in the starting lineup Sunday and played well. He picked up a Jerome Bettis fumble with a little more than a minute to play in the game and returned it 35 yards to put the Colts in position to win or force

overtime. Harper was tackled on the play by Pittsburgh quarterback Ben Roethlisberger when it appeared he could have jukeed Roethlisberger and cut outside to gain more yardage or even score.

Not Vandy's fault

Colts kicker Mike Vanderjagt pushed the potential game-tying field goal far wide right. In disgust afterward, Vanderjagt grasped his helmet with both hands and slammed it into the turf, drawing a 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty. He is statistically the most accurate field-goal kicker in NFL history, but missed a similar attempt during last year's season opener

COLTS GRADE CARD

Offense
Outgained the Steelers 305-295, but 145 of those yards came in desperation during the fourth quarter. Horrible 3 of 13 (23 percent) on third downs and didn't come close to matching their season scoring average. Blitz pick-ups were non-existent as Manning was sacked five times and rushed countless others.

Defense
Adjusted to Steelers' pass-first offense after two rough drives early. They kept the Colts in the game and produced a couple of turnovers, including a fumble that should have led to a victory or overtime.

Special teams
Vanderjagt may have had his last kick as a Colt. Hunter Smith was all right on punts (37.0 net). The returns were nothing special, and Troy Walters nearly gave away a fumble on a punt catch.

Coaching
Looked unprepared from the start and might have had too much rest. They never were able to adjust for Pittsburgh's many blitzes, which should have been expected after San Diego had similar success. Should have played to move the chains with three timeouts and a second-and-2 instead of trying to get to the end zone and relying on a field goal that never materialized.

that would have defeated New England.

"He hasn't missed very many big kicks since I've been here," Dungy said. "That wasn't the play that lost the game for us, but it was kind of the way the game went. We were just a little bit off all day."

Official explanation

The Bettis fumble wasn't the only gift the Steelers coughed up during the fourth quarter.

The Colts caught their first reprieve with 5:26 left in the game when Dungy's instant-replay challenge overturned an interception by Pittsburgh's Troy Polamalu.

Polamalu appeared to have intercepted the ball but rolled over on the ground upon falling and then fumbled the ball away before finally recovering it.

"I thought I saw the ball out," Dungy said. "And the rule has

been all year that you have to possess the ball through the catch."

Pittsburgh likely would have run out the clock. Instead, Manning rebounded to complete three straight passes down to the Steeler 3, where Edgerrin James punched in the touchdown to cut the lead down to 21-16.

Referee Pete Morelli explained why the play was overturned after the game.

"I had the defender catching the ball," he said. "Before he got up, he hit it with his leg with his other leg still on the ground. Therefore, he did not complete the catch, and then he lost the ball. It came out and so we made the play an incomplete pass."

"He never had possession with his leg up off the ground doing an act common to the game of football. He was losing it while his other leg was still on the ground."

After loss, Colts left to ponder what might have been

By ANDREW SMITH

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INDIANAPOLIS

The Indianapolis Colts' drive to the Super Bowl broadsided a big yellow bus Sunday afternoon.

The home-field advantage they coveted — and spent 3½ months and 13 games fighting for — had been squandered.

A furious finish couldn't overcome a flat start, as Pittsburgh jumped out to leads of 14-0 and 21-3 and hung on at the end.

And suddenly, the season was over.

A 21-18 loss was sealed when Mike Vanderjagt missed a 46-yard field goal with 19 seconds remaining.

But the wounds will linger with the Colts for a long time.

This was their year. They flirted with immortality after a 13-0 start, posted the NFL's best record at 14-2 and had home-field advantage throughout the AFC playoffs.



AP PHOTO

Colts kicker Mike Vanderjagt watches from the sidelines during the final seconds of Indianapolis' loss Sunday to Pittsburgh in their divisional playoff game at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis.

"Our goal was to win the Super Bowl, not go 13-0," receiver Brandon Stokley said.

"It hurts bad, really bad," he added. "You can see it on everybody's face. Everybody is really disappointed."

"But we just didn't play well enough to win."

They knew they were the team to beat. On Sunday, the Pittsburgh Steelers did just that, parlaying a fast first-quarter start into a victory.

The contest was eerily similar to a divisional playoff game a decade ago involving the Colts. A No. 6 seed, just like the Steelers were this year, the 1995 edition of the Colts went into Kansas City and upset the top-seeded Chiefs, who were a heavy favorite. In that game, Kansas City's Lin Elliott pushed a would-be game-tying field goal wide right in the final minute to clinch a 10-7 Colts victory.

This time, the Colts were a heavy favorite, and on the wrong end of a missed field goal in the final minute.

With another playoff near-miss, there's a chance the Colts could become the Chargers of the early 1980s, the Browns of later in the decade or the Chiefs of the mid-1990s — perennially good teams that couldn't get over the hump and into the Super Bowl.

Quarterback Peyton Manning, now 3-6 in postseason games, understands the window doesn't stay open forever.

"You feel a sense of urgency," Colts quarterback Peyton Manning said. "All I want to do is keep trying to be the best player, the best quarterback and the best leader and give it another shot next year."

"I'm getting tired of saying that. You eventually run out of years. Eventually, there won't be a next year. I play every year as if it's going to be my last game, my last year."

Manning will be back next season, as will many of the Colts. But there will be roster turnover: Two high-profile players, Edgerrin James and Reggie Wayne, will be free agents. The salary cap, draft and other off-season maneuvers likely will retool the team for another run.

"That's just an unfortunate thing about losing. In the playoffs, you love the team you're

playing on," offensive tackle Tarik Glenn said. "You never know if you're going to play with that same group of guys again."

"This team will not look like this team again. It's disappointing we didn't do it this year. I really enjoyed this team. It was a special season. I enjoyed playing with these guys."

All the Colts have to hang on now is the best record in franchise history, and their third straight AFC South division championship.

"It'll take nothing away from the regular season," second-year safety Bob Sanders said. "We know we played well, we know we played hard. We did a lot of great things in the regular season. We just didn't get it done today."

"(The Steelers are) a good team, and this is the playoffs. There's no tomorrow. You can't afford to start slow and expect to win. Some things were happening for us; it was crazy. If we'd have started fast, we'd have put ourselves in a better situation."

Attempt

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

Tony Dungy should have decided to go all-out, go public and say he's trying to play for the record. He could have given his team another target and forced them to play with desire instead of sleepwalking through to the end of the season.

Instead, he gave them the OK to go half-speed and play to avoid

injury without caring about the records or the scoreboard.

They never recovered mentally or emotionally.

The Colts at less than 100 percent commitment weren't enough to beat San Diego. Then the starters sat for all but a few series in a loss at Seattle and a win against lowly Arizona.

Add in a bye week, and that's almost a full month since the last time the Colts starters played when it mattered.

The evidence of that rust was apparent, no matter how much

they denied afterward that the lay-off had no effect.

Peyton Manning was wildly erratic with his throws, high and wide and without his usual timing. Pittsburgh's blitz was part of the problem, but also a symptom.

Manning choked back his words but did all but blatantly blame his offensive line for being unprepared to pick up the myriad Steelers who came hurtling his way. An offensive line needs timing and cohesion that builds up over several full-speed snaps and not from a month of rest.

The receivers' route running wasn't up to its normal premium standard. The defense played a marshmallow-soft zone early as Ben Roethlisberger rolled the Steelers to two quick scores.

"I credit Pittsburgh for taking some things away from us," Dungy said. "We didn't play sharp."

Dungy didn't want to make excuses afterward but the effect of a month's break can't be overlooked.

This isn't totally hindsight, either.

Many NFL observers question the tactic of pulling the starters from regular-season contests and second-guessed Dungy as he was doing it.

After losing in the playoffs in New England the past two years, Indianapolis played all season to get home-field advantage.

Dungy probably didn't think notching the No. 1 seed would come so easily.

After 13 weeks, Indy was undefeated and had built a cushion on the rest of the wildly competitive AFC.

They had admittedly accomplished all of their regular-season goals a month before their season ended.

Dungy should have created some more to keep his guys hungry.

Now they have another year to get the bitter taste out of their mouths of another playoff loss and another season short of the Super Bowl.

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Wanted

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

All of Indy felt that way Sunday.

What began as a promising season and then turned into a quest for a perfect one took a tragic detour three weeks ago with the death of Dungy's 18-year-old son, James. All the tough talk about this being the Colts team that would bring long-suffering Indianapolis its Super Bowl title was suddenly muted.

For a while, no one knew what to say. His players struggled to strike the right tone about going back to work in earnest, or else tiptoed around the idea that winning it all would somehow heal a wound that was so painful and still so fresh.

And yet, there was so much anticipation.

After weeks of questions about whether the grieving and the



AP PHOTO

Colts coach Tony Dungy shakes hands with Steelers coach Bill Cowher following Sunday's game against Pittsburgh in Indianapolis.

time off had weakened their resolve, the Colts finally got their chance to answer those questions on the field. Only a day earlier, cornerback Nick Harper's left knee was cut during a domestic disturbance that resulted in his wife being charged with battery

with a deadly weapon and criminal recklessness.

But the Colts, reflecting Dungy's quiet leadership, handled it in typically mature fashion. They weren't looking for excuses, before or afterward.

"We had the table set the way we wanted it," Colts receiver Reggie Wayne said. "Top seed in the AFC, home field, three weeks' rest. Everything was laid out in front of us."

And then it was all snatched away, not once but twice. After playing smart and punishing enough to win comfortably, the Steelers tried to punch in a final score from the 2 with 80 seconds left when Jerome Bettis coughed up a rare fumble. Harper, whose right leg was injured on a play earlier in the game, scooped it up and returned it to his 42.

Five plays later, with Peyton Manning still plagued by inconsistent throws, kicker Mike Vanderjagt stood at the 28 with a chance to send the game into overtime.

"He's made so many big kicks

for us," Wayne said, "that whenever he steps on the field, you always think that."

This was a half-hour after the game. Across the aisle, Vanderjagt sat in front of his locker still wearing his uniform. He was staring straight ahead, as though by force of will he could make that final kick bend to the left, just inside the upright.

"I have no idea why it went where it went," Vanderjagt said. "As far as I was concerned, I hit it right."

Everyone in town had their own least favorite playoff memory before this one.

The 41-0 pounding by the Jets on the road in Dungy's first year. Or 1999, when Indianapolis had a bye and the home field, only to have the Tennessee Titans come in hanging by their fingernails a week after the "Music City Miracle" and still have enough left to beat the Colts.

Or the past two seasons, when Indianapolis had the NFL's most potent offense only to run smack

into the Patriots and Bill Belichick's defensive spider web in New England.

Now, there's no argument. These Colts showed early in the season they could win games relying on their defense, that they could win shootouts late on Manning's arm, and hang on in close ones by relying on Edgerrin James' legs to grind down the clock.

Now all those wins, 14 in all, seemed like increasingly distant memories. The residue was less anger than sadness.

"A loss is a loss, they're all the same," Colts president Bill Polian said finally, and he should know. Before taking the Colts job, he was the architect of the Buffalo Bills teams that went to four straight Super Bowls and returned each time empty-handed.

"They're all awful, and the finality of it is the worst. A great season ends on a sour note and that's how it's going to be remembered."

"But," he added, "we've had a lot worse things happen around here lately."

Polian was already thinking ahead to next season. But a long look down the hallway sparked one more memory.

"It shows you how sometimes the ball bounces. We get a break and a guy with two bad legs scoops up the fumble. If that was Bob Sanders," he said, "who knows where we are?"

The Colts now know only where they won't be going, to the Super Bowl. When that still seemed likely, James Dungy, who often spent Sunday afternoons on the Colts sideline, asked his father whether he could arrange a pass in Detroit.

Not long ago, Tony Dungy remembered answering that would be the easy part. The hard part, he always told his son, would be getting there.

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