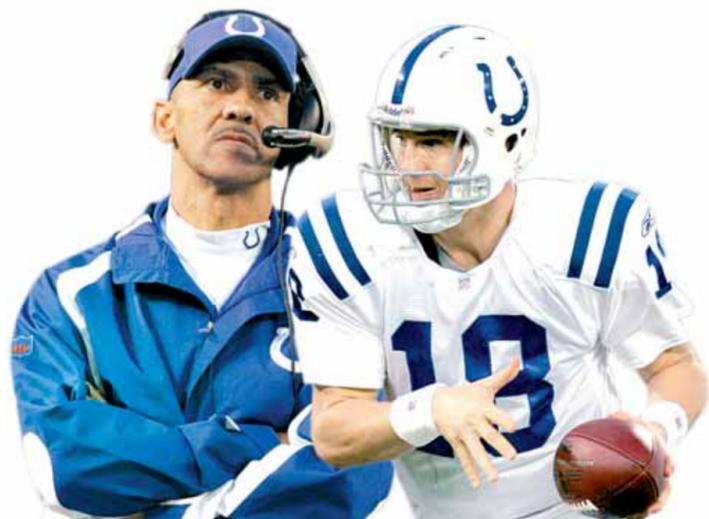
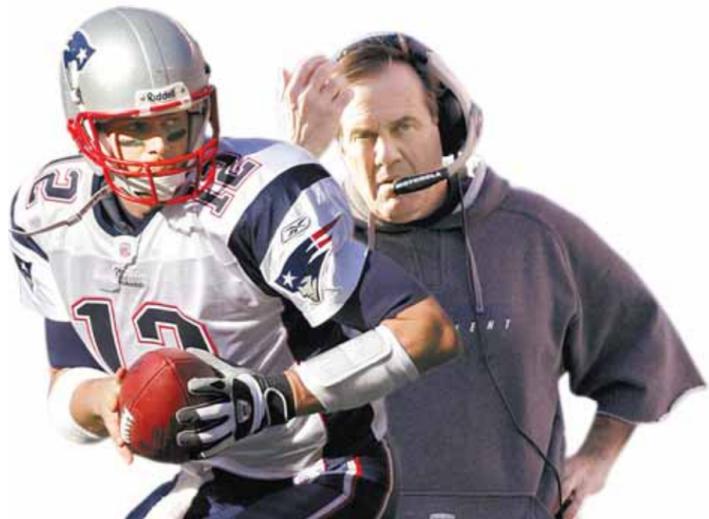


The Patriots' mystique



Patriots quarterback Tom Brady and coach Bill Belichick, right, have won the Super Bowl four times, while Colts coach Tony Dungy and quarterback Peyton Manning haven't made a single trip to the NFL title game.



Indianapolis has been baffled by New England when it really counts — in the playoffs

STORY BY RICK MORWICK ■ ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOS

INDIANAPOLIS

Given a choice, the Indianapolis Colts would rather not discuss the past. But given the opponent, they have no choice.

New England has been the main barrier between the Colts and the Super Bowl the past four seasons. And until, or unless, they break through it, players know questions about their inability to do so are inevitable.

Irrelevant, perhaps, but inevitable.

"We are not worried about the past, to be honest with you," said defensive end Dwight Freeney, echoing a collective Colts sentiment about Sunday's AFC Championship Game against the visiting Patriots.

Although Indianapolis (14-4) has won the past two regular-season showdowns, including a 27-20 triumph in Foxborough, Mass., on Nov. 5, New England (14-4) has bounced the Colts from the playoffs three times in the past four years.

Players insist none of the above matters. But New England does project an ominous postseason aura that coach Tony Dungy acknowledges the Colts must ignore. He admits it's not easy.

San Diego, the AFC's top seed, fell victim to it Sunday in a 24-21 divisional playoff loss. The host Chargers squandered numerous opportunities to win, giving quarterback Tom Brady enough second chances to rally the No. 4 seed Patriots to an improbable win.

The comeback only fueled perception that the Patriots, winners of three of the past five Super Bowls, are invincible in the playoffs.

"You have to play them and not their mystique," Dungy

said. "But that's hard to do, because all you hear about is their mystique, and you see the (Super Bowl) rings, and you know how good they are.

"But every game is different."

That's why the Colts aren't overconfident or overwhelmed.

Their regular-season success against the Patriots breeds optimism. But their playoff failures foster respect.

"They are a championship team, and they have played in a lot of championship games," Colts linebacker Cato June said. "It really doesn't matter what happened in the past. That's just the past.

"It's not going to help us on Sunday that we beat them in the regular season. It's just one of those things where we're not worried about what happened in the past."

But the Colts do admit that if they break through to the Super Bowl, it is fitting that it happens at the expense of New England, the source of so many playoff heartbreaks past.

The bitterest was the 2004 AFC Championship Game. The Patriots won 24-14 in Foxborough. They stacked on the disappointment the following year, beating the Colts 20-3 in the divisional playoffs.

The Patriots went on to win the Super Bowl both times. Indianapolis would love nothing more than to reverse fortunes this time.

"I think we all felt in our heart of hearts that we'd see New England at some point in the playoffs," Dungy said. "For us to get where we want to go, we're going to have to beat them. It's probably poetic justice.

"We're going to need our best game, and we're looking forward to it."

So are the Patriots, who also have come to view meeting the Colts in the playoffs as a rite of passage.

"It seems like we are in the same division, doesn't it?" Patriots coach Bill Belichick said. "It seems that we play the Colts more than once a year, every year, but it's tremendous competition. I have all the respect for Tony, his staff and the entire Colts team and the way they performed this year and every year.

"They have been very consistent, they win a lot of games, and they play extremely well on a very consistent basis. There isn't a team we have more respect for than the Indianapolis Colts."

The feeling is mutual, but the Colts are confident of a breakthrough.

"Historically, we have had our problems with New England in the playoffs," Freeney said. "It's kind of funny that we are playing them right now; but at the end of the day, it doesn't matter (who we play).

"We are going to go out there trying to win the game, regardless. If you look at the past, you can't move forward."

Dungy agrees.

"I don't think history is going to be much of a factor," he said. "The last couple of times we played them, we've been able to play with minimal errors, and that's what you have to do to have a chance to beat them.

"It's going to play out that whoever plays the best on Sunday night is going to win."

Pats' game plan: Shake up Manning

By JASON MARTIN

DAILY JOURNAL SPORTS CORRESPONDENT

In the aftermath of last week's playoff loss to New England, San Diego running back LaDainian Tomlinson accused the Patriots of being classless and laid the blame specifically on coach Bill Belichick.

If New England suffers from a lack of sportsmanship, it hasn't shown in the comments originating from Foxborough, Mass., this week.

Belichick and the Patriots' defense have been a fountain of praise toward the Colts, whom they visit for the AFC Championship Game at 6:30 p.m. Sunday at the RCA Dome.

The Colts (14-4) have won two straight in the series after dropping seven in a row to the Patriots (14-4), who have won both recent playoff meetings.

"We got beat up the last two times we played them," Belichick said. "You go talk to somebody who doesn't think they're any good, but it's not going to come from here.

"They're playing their best football right now, they're in the AFC Championship Game at home, and they earned it."

Unlike the Baltimore Ravens, who lost to Indianapolis 15-6 last week after Ravens defensive coordinator Rex Ryan declared the Colts a "soft" team, New England is quite familiar with and complimentary of the problems Indy presents.

The Colts won 27-20 at New England on Nov. 5. Peyton Manning threw for 326 yards and two scores to Marvin Harrison and delivered several passes on the money despite getting the Patriots' best pass rush.

"We looked at that game, and

you look back and think, 'Well, I didn't rush that bad personally, and neither did Rosey (Colvin) or anybody else, and his numbers were still pretty good,'" Patriots linebacker Mike Vrabel said.

"You've just got to do more; you've got to get there quicker, whether you're rushing or whether you're covering.

"This is a game where you're just going to have to do more, and you're just going to have to play better."

Also unlike the Ravens, the Patriots are not content to write off the Colts' resurgent running game as a fluke. And they haven't tried to discredit the emergence of rookie Joseph Addai.

"I think that Addai and (Dominic) Rhodes both are quality backs," Belichick said. "They're quick; they're strong; they break tackles; they have good run vision.

"I would say both Rhodes and Addai are very good in the passing game as well, both as receivers and in protection. Whichever guy is in there, I think they can do whatever they want to do."

Vrabel said the way the Colts have split the carries between Rhodes and Addai is noticeable to him on film in both backs' freshness during the playoffs.

"There's a lot of power and a lot of speed through the hole," Vrabel said. "They did a good job last week when they needed it late in the game against arguably the best defense in the league, running the ball 12 out of 13 plays and chewing up the clock and winning that game for them down the stretch."

As always, however, the opposition's focus is on Manning and the passing attack. New England defensive tackle Richard Seymour said Manning's ability

to improvise is not limited to his pre-snap reads, as the Patriots learned in the most recent meeting when several of Manning's completions came from well outside the pocket.

"I think when you look at the offense, you always think of Peyton Manning as a pocket passer, which he is, but he does have ability to get outside of the pocket and can make plays on the run and ad-lib at times," Seymour said. "And then when you also look at the receivers, they are not just standing waiting on the ball but are still running routes, and they are still moving around."

New England sacked Manning three times in the most recent meeting, but Vrabel said the Patriots are not necessarily counting on a repeat, nor are they relying on the Colts to drop passes as San Diego did in its

AFC divisional loss to the Pats.

"Very rarely do you see guys running free, where Peyton is just confused," Vrabel said. "You're going to have to beat somebody, I think, and get back there and cause pressure.

"You're not just going to be able to draw things up and say, 'Well, we're going to get a guy coming right up the middle untouched.'"

Belichick said he thinks the key to the game will be which side performs better on third down.

The Colts led the NFL in third-down efficiency as an offense at 56.1 percent. Dallas was next, at 48.8 percent.

"Just watching the Colts on third down, it's pretty impressive, really," Belichick said. "Nobody does it better than they do."

"We've tried to put in some extra work in on that and hope we can be competitive in that area."

HOW WE SEE IT: CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIP GAMES

The Daily Journal sports staff makes its bold predictions for this weekend's AFC and NFC title games.



Rick Morwick, sports editor, 7-1

New England (14-4) at Indianapolis (14-4)

The Colts have what they've long coveted: home-field advantage for the AFC Championship Game. With it, the Colts are more outwardly confident than in recent playoff memory. Moreover, this is the first time they've played the Patriots in the postseason when they clearly look like the better team. They won't let this opportunity slip away.

Colts 28, Patriots 17

New Orleans (11-6) at Chicago (14-3)

A pretty good offense against an excellent defense. At Soldier Field. Hmm. Sounds like a Bears win, to me. The Colts and Bears in the Super Bowl. Is it a dream come true or what?

Bears 21, Saints 10



Matthew Glenesk, sports writer, 7-1

New England (14-4) at Indianapolis (14-4)

Is it destiny? Was it meant to be? Do the Colts finally get to the Super Bowl and do so by beating arch-nemesis New England? Enough questions? Here is the answer: yes. Sure the Patriots know how to rattle Peyton Manning and win in the postseason, but two factors win this game for Indy: Adam Vinatieri and the RCA Dome.

Colts 27, Patriots 20

New Orleans (11-6) at Chicago (14-3)

Rex Grossman is a nightmare. The Bears' defense is vulnerable. Their schedule was soft. Despite all the negatives surrounding the Bears, one thing has been clear all season: Chicago is the best team in the NFC. The Bears have the conference's stingiest defense (allowing 15.9 points a game) and highest scoring offense (averaging 26.7 points a game) and are playing at home. New Orleans has been a great story with Drew Brees' comeback from injury and how the city rallied behind the team in a time of crisis. But the fairy tale ends here.

Bears 31, Saints 17



Jeff Decker, assistant sports editor, 5-3

New England (14-4) at Indianapolis (14-4)

I don't even want to pick this game. If I don't pick the Colts, I'm not fulfilling my obligation to be a cheerleader for "our team." If I pick the Colts, I'm jumping on the bandwagon, which I'm guessing is already loaded down with "true blue" Colts fans who seem to exist only to point out who among us isn't a true blue Colts fan. I guess I'll just pick this game based on a hunch and a passion for irony. Rookie Stephen Gostkowski, Adam Vinatieri's replacement, kicks the game winner for New England.

Patriots 27, Colts 24

New Orleans (11-6) at Chicago (14-3)

It took the Bears overtime to dispose of a banged-up Seattle team, and the Seahawks aren't nearly as good as the Saints. That doesn't bode well for the Bears. Everyone is focusing on how Chicago quarterback Rex Grossman is playing, but has anyone noticed that the Bears' injury-riddled defense, which was dominant early in the season, hasn't been all that great of late? New Orleans has a tendency to give up big plays, but it also has the ability to make them.

Saints 31, Bears 20



Paul Hoffman, special publications editor, 5-3

New England (14-4) at Indianapolis (14-4)

The defense carrying the offense? Indy can't score a touchdown yet wins? Peyton Manning throwing five times as many interceptions as touchdown passes? What is this, Bizarro World? Bizarro was an imperfect duplicate of Superman in the comic books, just as the Bizarro Colts are an imperfect duplicate of all other recent Colts playoff teams. If the RCA Dome had a window, they'd throw all logic out of it this weekend. Because in Bizarro World, the Bizarro Colts give up their old ways, beat their No. 1 nemesis, the Bizarro Patriots, and go to the Bizarro Super Bowl.

Colts 20, Patriots 17

New Orleans (11-6) at Chicago (14-3)

Windy City, there's a new Brees in town. The Saints are marching into Chicago, where they're going to cook up a little Cajun dish called jam-bear-laya. It's a spicy number featuring plenty of steamed Urlacher on a bed of wild Rex with several dashes of red-hot Reggie (Bush) sauce to kick it up several notches. Oh, I just Love it! And as the late Cajun humorist and chef Justin Wilson used today on his TV show, "I gar-own-tee!"

Saints 21, Bears 10