

AFC teams look like Super Bowl champions

By JIM JENKINS
SACRAMENTO (CALIF.) BEE

One thing is certain: There will be no Pittsburgh-like, rags-to-riches playoff run to the Super Bowl this season.

COLUMN

In a rarity, none of the four wild-card teams advanced past the first round, so all the matchups this weekend are between division champions.

There can be little argument the most intrigue lies with the AFC, with Indianapolis at Baltimore on Saturday and New England at San Diego on Sunday. The winner of Super Bowl XLI, Feb. 4 in Miami, could well be any of those four.

Home teams are 4-0 so far, a departure from what transpired a year ago, but it wouldn't be a huge surprise if that changes.

New Orleans, which hosts Philadelphia on Saturday in an NFC game, is the best story of the season. But the Eagles are playing as well as any team at the right time, and their four consecutive conference championship-game appearances from 2001-04 can't be ignored.

NFC top seed Chicago also raises questions. The Bears also had a first-round bye last year as division champions yet were knocked off by wild card Carolina.

The excuse can be made that perhaps quarterback Rex Grossman wasn't at full strength starting that game after missing most of the season because of an ankle injury.

This time, Grossman is healthy but appears to have regressed from his early-season form. That has to make coach Lovie Smith a bit nervous entering Sunday's game against Seattle, even though the Seahawks don't necessarily travel well and would have relinquished their NFC title last week but for a fumbled snap on a late Dallas field-goal attempt.

Back to the AFC: Indianapolis seemed to be everyone's preseason choice, but that was before the Colts' run defense began showing serious flaws. Against the Kansas City Chiefs and Larry Johnson last week, that glaring deficiency appeared to be patched up.

Trouble was, Peyton Manning was off his game. The Colts ran well, but only two receptions for 48 yards for Marvin Harrison? Can a better performance be expected against Baltimore and the consensus best defense in the league? Conversely, are the Ravens improved enough offensively with Steve McNair at quarterback that they won't have to rely on their defense?

The Chargers finished with the NFL's best record (14-2) and were the most consistent team most of the season. But what everyone must be wondering is: Is this the year Marty Schottenheimer finally shakes the playoff jinx and gets as much out of a talented squad as he should?

As good as LaDainian Tomlinson has been, the Patriots, with all their experience, have a way of making life miserable for young quarterbacks, and this will be Philip Rivers' first playoff start.

By the numbers

Realistically, who would have expected that at the end of the regular season, two former Chargers teammates would have ended up at the top of the offensive scales?

Tomlinson as the NFL's leading rusher (1,815 yards) and scorer (31 touchdowns) wasn't a shock. The stunner, though, was for Drew Brees to rebound from a devastating shoulder injury at the end of last season with San Diego, resurface in New Orleans and lead the league with 4,418 passing yards.

Officially, the passing title goes to the quarterback with the best proficiency rating, which was Manning's 101.0 off 4,397 yards and 31 touchdowns vs. nine interceptions. But Brees, at or near the top in that category much of the season, finished No. 3 at 96.2 with 26 touchdown passes against 11 interceptions.

Meanwhile, Shawne Merriman's four-game suspension for a positive steroids test didn't derail the Chargers linebacker from winning the sacks title with 17.

Jim Jenkins covers sports for the Sacramento (Calif.) Bee. Send comments to letters@thejournalnet.com.

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS



Indianapolis Colts defensive end Dwight Freeney reacts after making a play against the Kansas City Chiefs in their AFC wild-card playoff game in Indianapolis on Jan. 6. Freeney and the Colts face the Baltimore Ravens on Saturday.

Colts' Freeney ready for showdown with Ravens

Indy defender to face one of league's best tackles

By MICHAEL MAROT
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS

Dwight Freeney relishes the opportunity to spin away from NFL tackles and track down elusive quarterbacks.

This week's test comes against two of the NFL's best: Jonathan Ogden and Steve McNair.

"It's about the guy who goes out there and has that 'A' game on," Freeney said. "It just brings out the best in me."

The showdown between last season's sacks champion and the perennial Pro Bowl left tackle Ogden could prove more than an intriguing subplot. It could dictate who advances from Saturday's divisional-round playoff game at Baltimore.

But statistically, this hasn't been one of Freeney's better seasons.

He's been banged up with a bad shoulder and a sore leg muscle and simply hasn't had many opportunities to showcase his pass-rushing skills because so many teams exploited Indianapolis' most glaring weakness, run defense.

After menacing opponents for four seasons with nifty spin moves, unparalleled quickness and an uncanny knack for forcing fumbles, Freeney finished with a career-low 5½ sacks and missed the Pro Bowl for the first time since his rookie season.

Coach Tony Dungy thinks numbers alone don't reflect Freeney's true impact. Despite being the Colts' most target-

ed defender, Freeney fought through an array of double-teams and even triple-team blocking schemes to produce 45 tackles, two short of his career-high.

But when it mattered most, in last week's playoff game, Freeney reverted to his old form. He had three tackles, two sacks, two more hits on Kansas City quarterback Trent Green and forced a fumble in a 23-8 victory that helped the AFC South champs advance to the second-round game.

That performance also correlated with the best defensive performance of the season for Indy (13-4).

"Dwight's played pretty well all year, and he hasn't had a lot of games like that," Dungy said. "You can't block him one-on-one all the time and not win a few."

Ogden is one of the few who has had some success against Freeney.

When healthy, Ogden is regarded as one of the league's top blockers. Next month, he'll make his 10th consecutive Pro Bowl appearance, and he's long been the anchor for Baltimore's traditionally strong ground game.

At 6-foot-9 and 345 pounds, the first draft pick in Ravens history dwarfs Freeney, who's 6-1 and 268, and he's proven as adept at keeping the defenders like Freeney out of the backfield and off his quarterback as he has creating holes for Jamal Lewis.

Freeney and Ogden have battled three times with mixed results.

Ogden easily dominated Freeney in 2002 and didn't allow Freeney to become a major factor in the 2005 season opener. In 2004, Freeney beat Ogden for two sacks and caused major chaos in the Ravens' backfield.

One factor this week could be Ogden's health.

A hyperextended big toe on his left foot has kept him out of the past two games and off the field for nearly a month. Baltimore coach Brian Billick expects Ogden to play Saturday, knowing he needs him to be his usually dominant self for the Ravens (13-3) to reach their first conference title game since 2000.

"I'm not going to lie to you, I'm just happy the game is here," Ogden said. "I mean, I don't think any offensive tackle would want to go to Indy and play him or (Robert) Mathis there on their turf with that noise. But at home, I think it is to my advantage."

Freeney has reasserted himself during the past month. He had three sacks in a victory against Cincinnati on Dec. 18 and another good game against Kansas City last week.

The common denominator was that Indy had big leads both times, allowing Freeney and Robert Mathis to come off the edge without much regard for defending the run.

Billick realizes that the AFC North champions can't allow that to happen again Saturday.

• Role

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

our business, get ready for the game and prepare to win."

A graduate of Center Grove and Indiana University, Halterman is with his fourth NFL team. He spent last season on the Houston Texans' practice squad, was allocated to NFL Europe during the summer, then had spent stints on the Miami Dolphins' and San Diego Chargers' practice squads after being released in the preseason by Houston.

Halterman signed with the Colts just before Christmas and his been part of their daily preparation ever since.

His primary role is to mimic the opponent's starting tight end. This week, he's Baltimore's Todd Heap. Last week, he was Kansas City's Tony Gonzalez.

"It's good, because it allows you to do different things," said Halterman, noting that most NFL teams utilize tight ends in varying ways. "It lets me kind of do a lot of different things and show the coaches that I can do different things."

"So hopefully, maybe next year they'll want to keep me around."

Halterman, whose locker is near those of tight ends Dallas Clark and Ben Utecht, is confident he's made a good impression so far.

"Things have been really good. Everybody's been really supportive," Halterman said. "There are really great guys here. It's a good system. I'm trying to pick up what I can. This is my fourth offense this year, but things have been good."

"I feel like I've contributed, and I hope I can keep contributing and help us keep winning."

And, in the process, earn a regular roster spot in the NFL.

"For me, personally, it's a good experience and something I can definitely learn from," he said. "I hope to be around and be a part of this for many more years to come."

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