

FOOTBALL

PITTSBURGH

Steelers coach Cowher expected to resign today

Bill Cowher is returning to the Pittsburgh Steelers to say goodbye.

The Steelers will begin a coaching search today to replace the departing Cowher, a person familiar with Cowher's status said Thursday night.



COWHER

Cowher called owner Dan Rooney on Thursday to tell him of his decision, and the team announced not long after that a news conference will be conducted today. Cowher is expected to attend.

The 49-year-old Cowher, one of the NFL's most recognizable faces and most successful coaches for 15 seasons, has weighed resigning since shortly after the Steelers finally won the Super Bowl in February following numerous near misses.

Cowher has talked of wanting to spend more time with his family, especially now that they are living in a new home in Raleigh, N.C., where he and wife Kaye attended North Carolina State. Cowher's two oldest daughters are at Princeton, and the youngest has only 2½ years of high school remaining, time Cowher apparently doesn't want to spend away from her.

While Cowher would be resigning with one season left on his contract, there is no indication he would retire from pro football. He said recently he is not close to being burned out and still likes coaching and dealing with players.

DENVER

Police find SUV linked to Denver player's death

Investigators scoured a spray-painted 1998 Chevrolet Tahoe impounded early Thursday for clues that might lead them to Darrent Williams' killer.

Police said they believe the SUV might have been used in a New Year's Day drive-by shooting that killed the Denver Broncos cornerback and wounded two other people.

Passers-by spotted the vehicle, parked south of Denver International Airport, and called police anonymously, police spokesman Sonny Jackson said.

Detectives were canvassing the remote neighborhood of snow-covered empty lots and industrial buildings under construction.

"We figure somebody might have seen this vehicle on the street or might have seen someone getting out of this vehicle," Jackson said.

The SUV, which was hauled away, will be inspected by crime lab investigators, he added, declining to discuss specifics of what they would look for or what tests they might conduct.

ALAMEDA, Calif.

Report: Shell out after one season with Raiders

Art Shell's second stint as coach of the Oakland Raiders will end after just one season, the franchise's worst in more than four decades, ESPN reported Thursday night.

Shell met with owner Al Davis on Thursday to discuss the future of the team following a 2-14 season that was the worst for Oakland since 1962.

Shell planned to tell his coaching staff at a meeting today that he would no longer be coach, ESPN reported on its Web site.

The report said it was unclear whether Shell was fired or resigned.

The Raiders declined to confirm the story and attempts to reach Shell were unsuccessful.

BASEBALL

NEW YORK

Yankees agree to send Johnson back to Arizona

Randy Johnson is headed back to the Arizona Diamondbacks after two unfulfilling years with the New York Yankees.

The Yankees reached a tentative agreement with Arizona on Thursday to trade Johnson to Arizona for reliever Luis Vizcaino and three minor leaguers, a move that allows the Big Unit's agents to get him a contract extension.

Arizona general manager Josh Byrnes confirmed what he called an agreement in principle but did not identify the players that would go to the Yankees.

New York would receive Vizcaino and minor-league right-handers Ross Ohlendorf and Steven Jackson, and shortstop Alberto Gonzalez, a baseball official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. The Yankees also would pay \$2 million of Johnson's \$16 million salary this year.

Colts' fans cautiously optimistic

By MATTHEW GLENESK

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Six weeks ago, Ted Ellis was all set to book his flight to Miami and Super Bowl XLI.

Ellis, an Indianapolis Colts fan, was rooting for a team that had the best record in the NFL at 10-1 and was the first team in league history to record back-to-back 9-0 starts to a season.

Now, the Indianapolis resident is glad he didn't call his travel agent.

Heading into Saturday's AFC wild-card playoff game against Kansas City (9-7), Colts fans' confidence has been shaken as the team lost four of its final seven regular-season games. They also are concerned with the team's glaring defensive deficiencies.

Many fans question whether or not the Colts (12-4) can get past the Chiefs, never mind reach the Super Bowl.

"I think they're in dire straits right now," Ellis said. "They're in big trouble. They can't stop the running game, and they've got Larry Johnson coming up, and they're not going to be able to stop him."

Indianapolis ranks last in the NFL in rushing yards allowed, surrendering 173 yards a game. Kansas City boasts the league's second-leading rusher in Johnson, who finished the regular season with 1,789 yards, 26 yards shy of LaDainian Tomlinson's mark.

How the Colts' weakness matches up against the Chiefs'

Associated Press football writer Dave Goldberg sizes up the Colts-Chiefs matchup in Saturday's AFC wild-card game at the RCA Dome.

When a series of fortuitous circumstances put Kansas City into the post-season and matched the Chiefs with Indianapolis, it almost certainly guaranteed one thing: a lot of points.

These teams, after all, met three years ago in a playoff game at Arrowhead Stadium in which there were no punts. The Colts won that one 38-31.

This could be the same kind of contest when they begin the wild-card weekend.

strength has Colts fans worried.

Dale Guinn, 34, of Indianapolis, said after watching Houston's Ron Dayne run for a career-high 153 yards in Week 16, facing one of the league's top running backs is a frightening proposition.

"They're not making the tackles. They're letting offenses run all over them, and it's disappointing to watch our team do that," Guinn said. "They went from being all-stars to looking like a bunch of chumps. It's crazy."

Don Clarkston, 58, of Franklin, said he felt two months ago that the Colts were well on their way to the Super Bowl. Now, he's not so sure.

"I think they're in an even race right now," he said. "It can go either way right now. It just depends on how well they play."

Ellis, 37, said he believes the Colts need to retool their person-

IN HIS OPINION

The Indianapolis run defense was by far the worst in the league, allowing 173 yards a game.

The Chiefs have Larry Johnson, the NFL's second-leading rusher with 1,789 yards.

Nonetheless, Indianapolis is favored by 6½ points, largely because it is 8-0 at home and has Peyton Manning and Marvin Harrison to match anything Johnson can do, even though the Chiefs' defense under Herman Edwards is certainly better than it was in January 2004.

For those who dabble in such things, the over-under is 51, a very reachable

figure unless the Chiefs keep the clock running with their rushing game.

Funny thing about the Colts: Nobody expects much of them this year, unlike last season, when they entered the playoffs as the top seed in the AFC. So maybe they'll go farther than most people believe.

"I think we're definitely under the radar," Tony Dungy said of his team. "But that's not really a good thing. Usually when everyone thinks you're playing well, it's because you are."

Indianapolis certainly isn't playing well on defense. But the Colts are home.

Pick: Colts 31, Chiefs 27

nel and subtract a bit of their star power on offense to help aid the reeling defense.

"I think they've peaked with this group," he said. "I hate to say it, but I'd start with getting rid of some of the receivers. I think Peyton (Manning) can make anyone look good. So start with the receivers and build a defense."

Bill Turner, a Greenwood resident, isn't ready to say the Colts have peaked, but he agrees with the notion that they need to improve on defense if they wish to advance to the franchise's first Super Bowl since relocating to Indianapolis.

"I think the window may be closing," he said.

Turner, 33, said he still believes the Colts have the defensive talent to win, and he's not in favor of an overhaul. He's quick to point out injuries have taken a

toll on this year's group.

Defensive tackle Corey Simon hasn't played all season and is on the non-football injury/illness list, and the Colts have been without starters Mike Doss, Bob Sanders and Montae Reagar for much of the season.

While fans are quick to pile on the defense, many refuse to blame head coach Tony Dungy for the team's shortcomings.

"I just don't think we're playing to the level we're capable of," Chris Wineland, 17, of Indianapolis, said. "A lot of people say that's coaching, but the coaches aren't out there playing the game, the players are."

"So if the players don't make the tackles, that's on the players, not the coaches."

Morgantown resident Mea Faris knows there are fair-weather fans out there. She doesn't consid-

er herself one and said she believes the Colts still can reach the Super Bowl this year.

"I think that a lot of people stand behind them as long as they are winning, and when they don't, they lose trust," she said. "I don't think those people are real Colts fans."

Wineland's family has season tickets, and while some fans might be disheartened by the late-season hiccups experienced by the Colts, he holds out hope.

"I know the diehard fans are always backing their team up. They're always thinking Super Bowl. How realistic that is, I don't know," Wineland said. "I know that we're capable of going to the Super Bowl. I know I'm looking at it like that. I want them to win, I want them to do great, but you have to be real about it."

"It's up to the players, and anything can happen, but I think most fans are optimistic if they are real fans."

Clarkston doesn't understand why so many Colts fans have been quick to criticize. In his eyes, the Colts are a good team and have been for a number of seasons. Anything on top of that, such as a Super Bowl trip, would be a bonus.

"They've had four 12-win seasons in a row. I don't see where fans can really gripe other than the hype about winning the big one," he said. "As far as seasons, they've had 12-win seasons for the last four years."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

• MVP

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

had one of the greatest seasons in NFL history. He rushed for a league-high 1,815 yards on 348 carries, had 56 receptions for 508 yards and was 2 for 3 as a passer, both completions for scores, giving the Chargers running back six in his six-year career, tying him for second among non-quarterbacks.

"It just kind of got on a roll," Tomlinson explained. "Touchdowns, as they say, come in bunches. That was kind of the way it happened."

"It seemed like once we started scoring that we couldn't stop."

Of all his records and accomplishments this year, L.T. said the highlights were breaking Paul Hornung's single-season scoring record — Tomlinson finished with 186 points — and winning the rushing title.

Noting that Hornung was also a kicker, Tomlinson said, "To be able to break that record that stood for 40-some years by scoring touchdowns, I think for me is a huge accomplishment. I think leading the league in rushing solidifies your position as being a running back."

All of those are merely numbers — impressive numbers, but just stats. Tomlinson's attributes go way beyond that as a solid citizen and a player who lets his on-field actions represent him.

"It couldn't happen to a better person, a man who is the face and the perfect representative of the National Football League," fullback Lorenzo Neal said. "He represents what every player should be."

Few players have approached what Tomlinson achieved as San Diego won its final 10 games. Alexander, last season's MVP, understood what L.T. did.

"He won't realize it until after the year is over. Because when you're in a groove, you're just about winning games," Alexander said late in the season. "Their season almost looks like ours last year; it's kind of funny. He won't recognize it until it's all over with, and then he'll be like, 'Dang that was sweet.'"

So sweet that he received 44 of the 50 votes from a nationwide panel of sports writers and broadcasters who cover the NFL.

Former teammate Drew Brees, now starting quarterback for the New Orleans Saints, got four votes, and Indianapolis Colts QB Peyton Manning got two.

Tomlinson rushed for at least 100 yards 10 times this season, including nine in a row.

• Pieces

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

defense an emotional lift heading into the playoffs.

"We made a couple of strides," cornerback Jason David said. "We've got some things to correct, but it's going to be a good challenge for us going into the playoffs."

Coach Tony Dungy agrees. "We still have some work to do," he said. "We've got to tighten up still a little bit more on defense. We've got to tighten up our kickoff coverage. There may be some different guys involved in that."

"We'll have some things to work on, but all in all, I think it was a good way to end the regular season."

Dungy: Reports of interest in other jobs are 'way off'

The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS

Tony Dungy insists he is not taking another coaching job.

For the third time in three days, Dungy denied interest in any coaching position other than the one he currently holds with the Indianapolis Colts.

A report out of Minneapolis linked Dungy with the job at the University of Minnesota, where he was a star quarterback in the 1970s. There also have been rumors regarding Dungy's interest in the Atlanta Falcons' opening, where general manager Rich McKay and Dungy worked together at Tampa Bay.

Dungy tried to clear things up again Thursday.

"He's way off, as far off as you could be," Dungy said, referring to the Minneapolis report that cited a consultant who is helping conduct the coaching search. "I don't know who's saying that, but whatever's being said, it's way off."

But Dungy's most definitive comments about his future in Indy came Wednesday, when he was asked about the Falcons' job.

"That's not credible, since I have a contract here," Dungy said. "This will be the last place I'll be coaching."

Dungy, 51, had said earlier in his career he hoped to be finished coaching by age 50.

He signed a three-year extension with the Colts last year that will keep him on the sideline through 2009.

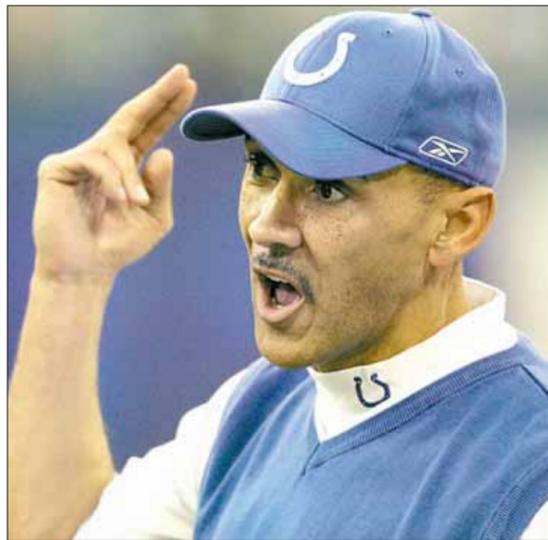
The Minnesota job opened Sunday when Glen Mason was fired, two days after the Gophers blew a 31-point lead in the Insight Bowl. It was the largest comeback in Division I bowl history.

The Falcons' job opened Monday when Jim Mora, the son of the former Colts coach, was fired after a 7-9 season.

Sanders misses practice

Former Pro Bowl safety Bob Sanders was held out of practice Thursday as a precaution, but Dungy still expects him to play Saturday against Kansas City.

The return of Sanders would give the Colts' leaky run defense a huge boost when they face one of the NFL's most dangerous runners, Larry Johnson.



AP PHOTO

Colts coach Tony Dungy has denied reports he is a candidate for open positions with the University of Minnesota and the Atlanta Falcons.

Dungy said he hadn't planned for Sanders to practice Thursday despite Sanders having two good days.

"I still anticipate him playing Saturday," he said.

Sanders has missed 12 of the past 14 games since having arthroscopic surgery on his right knee and is considered one of the Colts' best tacklers and most aggressive defenders.

Indianapolis (12-4), the four-time AFC South champion, finished this season as the NFL's worst run defense after allowing 173 yards per game.

"I'm going to play unless something just crazy happens," Sanders said.

Pro Bowl wide receiver Reggie Wayne, listed as questionable with a quadriceps injury in his leg, and tight end Dallas Clark, questionable with a right knee strain, both practiced for the third straight day Thursday and are expected to start against Kansas City.

The Colts also got good news on a couple of other injured players.

Dungy said he expects cornerback Nick Harper and linebacker Keith O'Neil, a key player on the Colts' coverage units, to play Saturday, although both are listed as questionable.

Harper missed his third

straight day of practice with an ankle injury, while O'Neil returned to practice after missing Tuesday and Wednesday with a knee injury.

Indy's biggest concern is left guard Ryan Lilja, who has a strained right knee. He hasn't practiced all week. If Lilja, who was with the Chiefs in training camp in 2004, can't play, second-year guard Dylan Gandy likely would replace him in the starting lineup.

Gandy has started 11 games this season.

Green ready to go

Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Trent Green went through a full practice Thursday and said he would be ready Saturday.

Green, who missed eight games earlier this year with a severe concussion, injured his left ankle Sunday in Kansas City's playoff-clinching victory against Jacksonville.

After the Jacksonville game, in which he committed three turnovers, Green described his ankle injury as a "snap, crackle and pop."

"All of that cracking that I described after the game was probably more scar tissue than anything, just because I've done it a few times," he said.



PHOTO BY JOSHUA MARSHALL

Colts quarterback Peyton Manning, left, sidesteps the rush of the Dolphins' Zach Thomas during Sunday's game in Indianapolis.

• Friends

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

coach will go home for the offseason while the other begins preparing for his next opponent.

The stakes, nor the emotions, can't get much higher.

"They're not fun games," said Colts coach Dungy. "It's always tough when we play each other because you always want your team to do well, and 99 percent of the time, I want Herm's team to do well, too."

It's the second time in five years Dungy and Edwards have met in the playoffs, and Dungy has jokingly called this payback time. In the 2002 playoffs, Edwards' Jets won 41-0, handing the Colts their worst playoff loss ever in the NFL's first postseason game between black coaches.

This time, much to Edwards' pleasure, skin color has barely been mentioned.

"The last time we met, it was kind of a newsworthy deal," Edwards said. "Now no one is even saying that, and that's great. I think Tony looks at it that way, and I look at it that way."

Instead, the focus has turned to issues Dungy and Edwards believe more appropriate: the implications of the game, the players who will be on the field and the chummy relationship between the coaches.

How close are they? Consider that after a Monday night loss 13 months ago, Edwards did what many NFL coaches might consider unthinkable during a short week of preparation. He took Tuesday off and went to Tampa, Fla., to support his grieving friend.

"I walked out of the stadium at about 1 a.m., and my wife (Lia) and I looked at each other and said, 'We're going,'" Edwards said. "We had to be there. I would have walked there if I had to."

Dungy and Edwards first met three decades ago during a college all-star game, and their personalities seemed an unlikely match. Edwards' fiery, passionate, emotional style contrasts sharply with Dungy's measured, stoic demeanor.

Somehow they hit it off and have remained friends for nearly 30 years. After working together briefly in Kansas City, Dungy and Edwards were reunited in 1996 at Tampa Bay, Dungy's first head coaching job.

"We needed to change the mind-set and the thought process there, and that's a big reason I wanted Herm," Dungy said. "I knew he could help us do that."

Edwards eventually relented, becoming one of Dungy's assistants. Soon, though, Edwards had second thoughts.

With expectations building and a stadium vote looming, the Bucs hosted Green Bay in the season opener. Brett Favre shredded the Bucs' defense in the first half, and it didn't take long for the sometimes outspoken Edwards to express his concerns.

"Herm came down (the sideline) and said it might not be as easy as we thought," Dungy said, laughing.

Edwards remembers it a bit differently: "I walked down by Tony and said, 'Why did you do this to me?'"

It was in Tampa where Dungy again showed Edwards that football embraces the human side, too.

When Lia Edwards was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, Dungy was his usual understanding and accommodating self.

"Anytime I needed to do something with her, he was very good to me," Edwards said.