

A real team player

Wayne happy with own success, wants more for Colts

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INDIANAPOLIS

Reggie Wayne has had his finest season as an Indianapolis Colts player, setting career highs in catches and receiving yardage and earning a Pro Bowl appearance. Although he plays the NFL's most individualistic position, Wayne still has team success on his mind. His primary destination is not Hawaii but Miami.

"I haven't even gotten into enjoying the Pro Bowl because I still feel like we have unfinished business," he said Friday in front of a national media contingent at the downtown Hyatt in Indianapolis. "We have the opportunity to go somewhere where a lot of these guys have never been."

Of course the Colts have played games in Miami before but never in a Super Bowl since relocating to Indianapolis in 1984. While in Baltimore, the franchise lost Super Bowl III and won Super Bowl V, both played in the Orange Bowl.

Indianapolis (14-4) can reach the NFL's final game with a defeat of visiting New England (14-4) at 6:30 p.m. Sunday in the AFC Championship Game.

Despite personal accolades that stretch back to his time as a member of the Miami Hurricanes in college and as a New Orleans prep phenom, Wayne said he has never won a team championship.

"As a team, we all think this game is going to be electrifying," he said. "We think it's going to be a great show."

Wayne caught 86 passes for 1,310 yards and nine touchdowns this year and has added 10 receptions for 87 yards and the Colts' lone passing touchdown in the postseason.

He has increased his receptions total each year he's been in the NFL and has emerged as a strong option for quarterback Peyton Manning to go along with Marvin Harrison.

"Obviously, there hasn't been a day that's gone by that I haven't been glad to call Marvin and Reggie teammates," Manning said. "Both of their work ethics are second to none."

Wayne said the challenge for Sunday's game will be to treat the atmosphere as a normal game and not get wrapped up in the hype.

"If you put too much pressure on yourself and treat it like it's the biggest game ever, then you'll struggle," he said. "But if you just relax and let it come to you like you have all your life, you'll be fine."

"We've done a pretty good job staying focused."

Against New England, Wayne will be matched up primarily against Ellis Hobbs, a second-year pro out of Iowa State who plays right corner for the Patriots and started 11 games this season.

Harrison usually will draw coverage from



Indianapolis Colts wide receiver Reggie Wayne, left, catches a five-yard touchdown pass while being defended by Chiefs cornerback Patrick Surtain an AFC wild-card game in Indianapolis on Jan. 6.

opposite corner Asante Samuel, who tied Denver's Champ Bailey for the NFL lead with 10 interceptions.

Both players continue New England's tradition of physical play from its defensive backs. Colts general manager Bill Polian complained this week that similar rough tactics past the customary 5-yard zone were holding down offense in the playoffs. The rivalry between the teams has been heightened considerably after several games in which Patriots defenders have bullied Colts receivers off routes.

"New England's going to do what they do," Wayne said. "The corners are going to play football because it's a contact sport."

"They're doing what they're taught to do, and I just have to continue to fight through whatever they do. It doesn't bother me; I like contact anyway."

Wayne said his focus will be on his routes

and Hobbs instead of looking toward the officials anyway.

"I've got enough to worry about before I worry about how many flags the officials will throw," Wayne said. "I want to go out and play football and not put it in the hands of the officials."

After falling to the Patriots seven straight times, including playoff losses in 2004 and 2005, the Colts have won regular-season games in New England both of the past two seasons.

Wayne doesn't think the reason for the turnaround is much of a mystery.

"It's nothing different; it's just us protecting the ball and not going out there and making mental mistakes," Wayne said. "We know the team that has the most mistakes probably will be the team that loses this game."

"They pretty much have a dynasty going, and you just don't want to be another part of that dynasty."

"He's not someone you want to stand on the sideline and watch with the ball at the end of the game because you know what he can do."

Tom Brady
New England Patriots quarterback
on Colts quarterback Peyton Manning

• Legacy

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and he's come through," wide receiver Reggie Wayne said Friday. "Who decides what's a big game?"

His New England counterpart said the same.

"Peyton is a great quarterback. We all know that," Tom Brady said. "He's not someone you want to stand on the sideline and watch with the ball at the end of the game because you know what he can do."

The knocks on Manning stem in part from the comparison to Brady.

The New England quarterback is 12-1 in the playoffs and has won three titles with the Patriots, twice driving them into range for the winning field goal in the final seconds. That has won him two Super Bowl MVP awards.

Manning has two regular-season MVP trophies and a host of NFL records, including 49 touchdown passes in 2004.

But his postseason won-lost mark is just 5-6, and this year he has thrown just one touchdown pass with five interceptions in wins against Kansas City and Baltimore.

He noted after the 15-6 win against the Ravens last week that he would take five more picks in the next two games if the Colts won them because that

would mean they'd have a Super Bowl victory.

That's where the word "validate" comes in again.

Manning's coach, Tony Dungy, has a regular-season winning percentage of .644 and is still trying to get to his first Super Bowl. He has coached teams to championship games in both conferences and has a Super Bowl ring as a player with the 1978 Pittsburgh Steelers.

He noted during the week that like it or not, quarterbacks are defined by titles, noting that Hall of Famers Bart Starr, Terry Bradshaw and Joe Montana are singled out for their Super Bowl wins and that Dan Fouts and Dan Marino, also Hall of Famers, are there despite winning a ring.

Manning is 30 and has time to make it into the former category rather than the latter.

But he also is aware that nothing is guaranteed in an era of free agency and the salary cap, noting that teams change quickly. Just 18 Colts remain from the team that lost the AFC title game three years ago.

That's why he thinks in the present.

"There's nothing we can do to change the outcome of those games," he said. "I think one thing this team has been able to do is bounce back from what happened the year before and the year before that."

The next test comes Sunday evening. Could validation be on the horizon?

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• Shot

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

Brady simply doesn't have a Super Bowl supporting cast. Bill Belichick can only do so much with limited playmakers.

The defense, for example, isn't equipped to put the kind of required pressure on Colts quarterback Peyton Manning to force mistakes.

Moreover, the offense isn't built to win a shootout if the Colts finally get uncorked on that side of the ball. And I'm thinking they will.

But here's the No. 1 reason the Patriots won't win.

They're playing in the dome against a ravenous opponent that finally knows how to win in the playoffs.

The knock on Manning has always been he can't win the big game. But as the AFC divisional playoff demonstrated, he doesn't have to win the big game. The Colts have to. And that's what they did.

Baltimore was the breakthrough game. It was the supreme confidence builder.

Manning didn't have to be great. He didn't even have to be good.

The Colts simply had to find a way to win. And they did.

That particular day required heaping helpings of defense and Adam Vinatieri.

In the past, it certainly would have required vintage Manning for the Colts to even have a chance.

Which brings us back to the Patriots and their nil chances of winning.

Everyone knows what Manning

and the Colts' offense can do. Now we know what their defense can do.

We've always known what Vinatieri can do, and now it's a simple matter of doing collectively what they know they can do: beat the Patriots.

"As long as we continue with that confidence, everything else will take care of itself," linebacker Cato June said. "We (the defense) are not looking to carry the team. We are not looking for Peyton Manning to carry us. We are looking to go out there and win."

"However we have to get that win, that's what we're prepared to do."

This time, I believe them. More importantly, they believe.

Rick Morwick is sports editor of the Daily Journal. Send comments to morwick@thejournalnet.com.

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