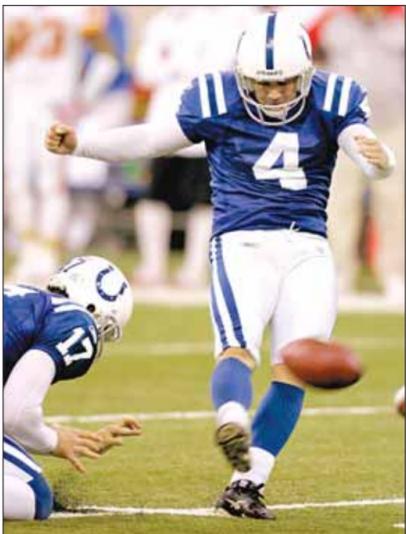


# In hindsight, Vinatieri chose right



The Colts' Adam Vinatieri kicks from the hold of Hunter Smith during the wild-card playoff game against the Kansas City Chiefs on Jan. 6 in Indianapolis.

## MIAMI

Money was certainly part of the equation, but it wasn't the deal-closer.

For Adam Vinatieri, the chance to get back to the Super Bowl carried as much weight as the Indianapolis Colts' checkbook.

Now, he's really cashing in. For the fourth time in his 11-year career, the greatest clutch kicker in NFL history will play in the Super Bowl.

The opportunity reaffirms his decision to put the Colts at the top of his wish list when he became a free agent at the end of last season.

"At that point I guess I considered what my best options were and where I would like to play," said Vinatieri, who spent his first 10 seasons with the New England Patriots. "When I sat down and thought about it, there was one team in this league that I wanted to play for. It was this organization."

He was apparently the one kicker the Colts wanted. After parting ways with Mike Vanderjagt, they made the first overture. And Vinatieri didn't play hard to get. Money was important, but it wasn't

his sole consideration. He knew he would get a lot of it no matter where he went. But only a few suitors had a legitimate shot at the Super Bowl.

He guessed correctly that the Colts had the best chance.

"When I got that phone call, I was pretty excited about it and did everything I could to make it happen," Vinatieri said. "I looked at it as a business thing for myself and my family. Where can we be successful? Where can we win another championship?"

"You weigh your pros and cons, and it just seemed right for me when the Colts called."

So far, it's been a mutually good fit. Vinatieri is going back to the Super Bowl, and the Colts are getting a premium return on their five-year, \$12 million free-agent investment.

Outstanding during the regular-season and perfect in the playoffs, Vinatieri made 25 of 28 field-goal attempts in the regular season and is 11 of 11 in the postseason.

His finest hour was during the AFC divisional playoffs, when he accounted for all the Colts' points in a 15-6 win at

Baltimore. He booted five goals in less-than-ideal outdoor conditions, connecting from distances of 23, 42, 51, 48 and 35 yards.

For Vinatieri, it was, and is, all in a day's work for a kicker who's booted 19 game-winners, including two in Super Bowls.

"For a kicker, you have to stay mentally prepared throughout the entire game, not just at the end when it comes down to it," he said. "It just comes down to me doing my job."

"At that point you just clear your mind and concentrate on the kick itself."

His focus now is on the Super Bowl, a pleasant reminder that he made the right choice in free agency.

"I'm very, very fortunate to have a job that I love, to be able to put on a football helmet, walk out on the field and be with such a great group of guys, not to mention they pay me pretty good already," Vinatieri said. "I have no complaints whatsoever."

"This opportunity to play in the Super Bowl, I have no complaints at all. I'm very excited about being here."

STORY BY RICK MORWICK,  
DAILY JOURNAL  
SPORTS EDITOR

PHOTO BY  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

## DID YOU KNOW?

### Captain Clutch

The Colts' Adam Vinatieri has hit game-winning field goals in two Super Bowls, both with the New England Patriots. He has hit better than 82 percent of the field-goal attempts during his 11-year career.

# Special teams play could sway game for Bears

STORY BY MATTHEW GLENESK, DAILY JOURNAL SPORTS WRITER ■ PHOTO BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

It's called an X-factor, an under-the-radar phase of the game that can help decide the outcome.

While most of the talk about the Super Bowl focuses on how the high-powered Indianapolis Colts' offense will match up with one of the league's top defensive units, the Colts can't overlook the play of Chicago's special teams, namely rookie return man Devin Hester.

"Devin Hester is a good player, a dangerous player," Colts defensive back Antoine Bethea said. "He can turn the momentum of a game real quick."

Hester is not just a game-breaker, he's a game-changer.

Against Arizona on Oct. 16, it was Hester's punt return for a touchdown that saved the then-unbeaten Bears the embarrassment of losing to the Cardinals.

His 108-yard return of a missed field goal against the New York Giants on Nov. 12 swung momen-

um in the Bears' favor and led to their 38-20 victory.

Hester, a second-round pick in last year's draft out of Miami (Fla.), ranks first in the NFC in kickoff returns (26.4 yards per return) and punt returns (12.8). His six returns for touchdowns this season are the most in league history.

Limiting big returns hasn't been a forte of the Colts' special-teams unit. Indianapolis ranks 30th in opponents' kickoff returns, allowing an average of 26 yards a return, and ranks 31st in opponents' punt returns, allowing 12.8 yards a return.

In the AFC Championship Game against New England, Patriots return man Ellis Hobbs III ran a kickoff back 80 yards.

Indianapolis head coach Tony Dungy admitted that slowing down Hester, who is headed to the Pro Bowl, is going to be a big challenge for the Colts.

"We faced it a couple of weeks ago with (Kansas City returner) Dante Hall, where every time you kick to him you feel like that can be a momentum changer in the game," Dungy said. "You have to be on it every single time, whether you kick off three times or six times, whether you punt once or 10 times. Every time you have to be ready."

"Hester has been the difference-maker in several of our games this year, so our guys know what a challenge it is and what's in front of us."

Colts special teams standout Darrell Reid said coaches haven't had to remind them about how dangerous Hester can be. They've been watching his highlights all season long.

"He does a great job for them," Reid said. "He's young, but he's turned into a great returner. He's dangerous every time he has the ball in his hands."

Linebacker Rob Morris said tackling Hester early during returns is going to be key because he can make a defender miss and can use his speed to race toward the end zone. Morris also said the Colts can't be complacent or assume Hester is going to be brought down by first contact.

"You'll see him where it looks like a dead play, and he'll turn around and take it all the way across the field and make yards," Morris said. "So we have to be very strict on our assignments, be very conscious of where he's at and get off blocks and tackle."

Hester leads the league in punt returns longer than 20 yards with 11. Playing on a team with a stingy defense, Hester often provides the Bears' offense with a shorter field in which to score.

Colts safety Matt Giordano said the team's special-teams unit is going to have to be consis-

tent in its coverage and not allow Hester any open space.

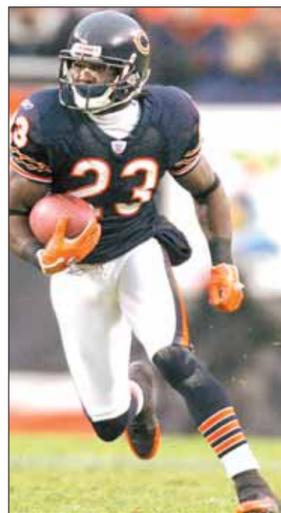
"We're definitely going to have to be on our game," Giordano said. "We can't have a couple inside the 20 and then let him get out for 80 yards. We have to make sure we contain him and stop him."

"It's going to be a hard task because he's a great returner. They block well, and he just has great vision so he can find the open hole, and he has the speed to take off."

Freddy Keiaho, a rookie special-teams performer for Indianapolis, said he knows trying to slow down Hester is going to be priority No. 1.

But he warns Colts players aren't going to try too hard to make a play and get caught out of position. If they do that, it might be a long day for the favored Colts.

"If you make one mistake, he's going to make you pay for it," Keiaho said.



The Bears' Devin Hester returns a kick against the New Orleans Saints during the NFC Championship Game on Jan. 21 in Chicago.

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