

Playing at home no guarantee

Colts say dome not the difference maker

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INDIANAPOLIS

Ben Utecht won't admit he was rooting for New England to beat San Diego last week. But he certainly had an interest in the game.

A win by the Patriots meant Indianapolis would play host to the AFC Championship Game for the first time in franchise history.

New England obliged and pulled out a three-point victory.

"When they won, I was just filled with excitement that the AFC Championship is going to go through Indianapolis and the RCA Dome," Utecht said. "That's definitely a plus."

A plus, maybe, but not a guarantee the Colts are Super Bowl-bound.

The Colts are undefeated at home this season, but so were the Chargers before the Patriots were able to buck that trend last week.

Last year's home playoff loss to Pittsburgh is proof enough for Colts players that home-field advantage won't be the deciding factor in Sunday's game.

"We know that the crowd doesn't win the game for you," tight end Dallas Clark said. "It definitely gives you some advantage, but the outcome of the game doesn't have anything to do with where you're playing at. We still have to go to work and work hard and do our job."

"It's not going to win the game for us, but it is a great opportunity for the fans to see it first hand and make some noise."

Crowd noise has been a problem for Colts' opponents in the past, but Indianapolis' defenders have too much respect for Patriots quarterback Tom Brady to think Sunday's atmosphere will rattle the three-time Super Bowl champion.

"We could use the crowd noise, but they're a great team and their quarterback is poised," Colts defensive lineman Raheem Brock said. "I don't think it will affect them that much, but it might."

Since the start of the 2004 season, the Colts are 22-2 at the RCA Dome in the regular season.

The primary beneficiaries of the home-field advantage are the Colts' defenders. This season Indianapolis' defense allowed 17.3 points a game at home compared to the 24.2 points it allows on the road.

"We play a lot faster. It's our turf, it's our home; and just the support of our fans, the way they stand behind us, is great," safety Bob Sanders said. "You want to play at home, and whenever you have the opportunity to play at home, it's a good thing. We look forward to the challenge and the opportunity."

Hosting a conference title game is a rare opportunity. Linebacker Rob Morris said it will probably only happen once in a player's career, and that's if he's lucky.

For Colts players, playing at home provides a certain comfort level. They don't have to worry about a travel schedule, and they know their precise routine.

It's also going to be nice to be cheered rather than booed, cornerback Jason David said.

"It's going to be unbelievable. Our fans are going to be so charged out there," he said. "It's going to be exciting. I'm very excited. Every home game that we've had has just been electric out there. There's no place like the RCA Dome."

"We expect our fans to go crazy. I can't wait to play."



Saints artwork is for sale for on Magazine Street in New Orleans on Thursday. The Saints will play the Chicago Bears for the NFC championship Sunday.

Saints worshipped in troubled city

Team's success giving Big Easy confidence

By ALAN SAYRE

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW ORLEANS

Given a murderous crime wave, unrelenting red tape and vast stretches of neighborhoods that remain post-hurricane wastelands, it would be understandable if confidence were in short supply.

But Terry Saucier, whose home was wiped out 16 months ago by Hurricane Katrina, along with those of her brother and her father, sees it spreading.

And the once weebegone New Orleans Saints, who can reach their first Super Bowl with a victory against Chicago in Sunday's NFC title game, have much to do with that.

"This is the most confident team I've ever seen," said Saucier, a business consultant. "They just brim over with confidence. Their confidence rubbed off on everyone else."

"I feel like when I was 4 or 5 years old and you couldn't wait for Christmas Day," said Carl Huling, who runs Fat Harry's, a bar and grill in the city's Uptown section. "The whole city is abuzz. Everyone wants the game played today."

After last year's 3-13 performance, almost no one once believed the Saints could go this far. In fact, many believed the Saints, then with only six winning seasons in their 40-year history, would go elsewhere, judging by a joke from a year ago: "The Rose Bowl: Future Home of the Los Angeles Saints."

Now, all over the city flags with a fleur-de-lis, the Saints' symbol, adorn front porches, windows and vehicle antennas, dominate conversations in elevators and outside buildings where smokers congregate and, in some cases, push aside regular business.

A church in the Carrollton neighborhood had to push up its annual business meeting

Sunday to accommodate game time. New Orleans Judge Ernest L. Jones decided it might be impossible to put together a jury the day after the game, so he signed a defense motion to delay an asbestos liability trial until Wednesday "to accommodate all fans, including the great majority of the jury pool, the parties involved in this case and the counsel involved in this case."

Stores carrying Saints merchandise — shirts, jerseys, caps and jackets — had lines out the door Thursday and struggled to keep enough merchandise in stock.

"I think the days of seeing Saints merchandise on the clearance racks are a thing of the past," said Kent August, who scrambled to find a Reggie Bush jersey for his 13-year-old daughter at Academy Sports and Outdoors in suburban Gretna.

Dennis Naquin had been looking for a Bush jersey for his 10-year-old son for two days. He called Academy so many times he finally put the number on speed dial on his cell phone.

Some fans are heading to Chicago. To accommodate them, Amtrak added another sleeping car and coach to its City of New Orleans train to Chicago on Thursday, Friday and today.

Among about 100 passengers departing on the train Thursday afternoon was Sheryl Lewis, a Saints-fan-for-life who sported a fleur-de-lis T-shirt adorned with "Offensive & Proud of It." She didn't have tickets yet, leaving that chore to her brother, a Chicago resident.

"We'll get them," she said before starting the 19-hour journey to Chicago. "I'm as confident of that as I am that we'll go on to Miami," the Super Bowl site.

Jim Pratt, owner of Eagle Travel, said he was putting together weekend travel and hotel packages, sans tickets, for \$1,000 to \$1,200.

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AT A GLANCE

New England (12-4)
at Indianapolis (12-4)

6:30 p.m. Sunday, WISH-Channel 8
Opening line: Colts by 3
Record vs. spread: Patriots 10-6-2;
Colts 10-8

Series record: Patriots lead 43-26
Playoff record: Patriots 19-11; Colts
15-16

Most recent meeting: Colts 27,
Patriots 20, Nov. 5 at New England
Last week: Patriots beat Chargers
24-21; Colts beat Ravens 15-6.

Patriots' offense: Overall (11), rush
(12), pass (12)
Patriots' defense: Overall (6), rush
(5), pass (12)

Colts' offense: Overall (3), rush (18),
pass (2)
Colts' defense: Overall (21), rush
(32), pass (2)

Streaks, stats and notes: This is first time in AFC history neither top seed advanced to conference title game. Indianapolis is third seed, and New England is fourth. Colts are first No. 3 seed to host conference title game since third-seeded Washington hosted fifth-seeded Minnesota in 1987. ... Teams meet for seventh time since Indianapolis moved from AFC East in 2002.

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