

Arizona names new coach

The Associated Press

PHOENIX

Ken Whisenhunt helped the Pittsburgh Steelers and their young quarterback win a Super Bowl.

Now he will take over for the Arizona Cardinals, where another youngster is at the controls of the offense, but the franchise has made losing a way of life for a long, long time.

The Cardinals hired Whisenhunt, Pittsburgh's offensive coordinator, on Sunday to replace head coach Dennis Green, who was fired after going 16-32 in three seasons.

The 44-year-old coach signed a four-year contract with a team option for a fifth, and is to be introduced at a news conference on Tuesday.

"In the end, we felt that Ken was the best fit for this organization," said Rod Graves, Cardinals vice president for football operations, "and we felt that because of the leadership that he portrayed. He presented a well-organized and thorough plan moving forward. We liked it."

Whisenhunt becomes the Cardinals' eighth coach since the franchise moved to Arizona in 1988. He was one of eight candidates interviewed for the job, but one of only two who got a second interview. The other was former Green Bay Packers coach Mike Sherman.

He also interviewed for coaching jobs in Pittsburgh, Miami and Atlanta. Whisenhunt and fellow Pittsburgh assistant Russ Grimm had been considered leading candidates to replace Bill Cowher with the Steelers.

Whisenhunt's second interview with Arizona began Friday and stretched into Saturday.

"It became apparent to us, particularly when we got into the second phase of our interview process, that Ken began to separate himself from the other candidates," Graves said.

The new coach inherits plenty of young talent, including quarterback Matt Leinart and a pair of the top receivers in the NFL, Anquan Boldin and Larry Fitzgerald. However, he also joins a franchise with a legacy of losing unprecedented in this era of NFL parity.

In other coaching news

Mora, Gailey candidates for Dolphins' job

MIAMI — Former Atlanta Falcons coach Jim Mora Jr. has been invited to a second interview with the Miami Dolphins, who also plan to meet again with Georgia Tech coach Chan Gailey and New York Jets offensive coordinator Brian Schottenheimer, a person familiar with the team's search said Sunday.

The person requested anonymity because the Dolphins have declined to identify candidates.

The Dolphins reached an agreement with their defensive coordinator, Dom Capers, on a new three-year contract. He may remain in contention for the head coaching job vacated when Nick Saban left for Alabama on Jan. 3.

Dolphins officials pared down their list of candidates over the weekend. The team met with 12 coaches during the first round of interviews, which ended Wednesday.

Last week, the Dolphins said they planned to narrow the list to five candidates, then to two before making an offer.

Mora went 26-22 in three seasons with Atlanta before he was fired after this season. He led the Falcons to the NFC championship game in his first season, but the past two years they went 4-13 during the final two months, missing the playoffs both times.

Gailey is a former Dolphins offensive coordinator and former head coach of the Dallas Cowboys. He just completed the first year of a five-year, \$5 million contract extension that ties him to Georgia Tech through 2010.

• Chance

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

Saturday also brought the revelation that the Manning-era Colts can win without him having an otherworldly performance.

Before the Chiefs game two weeks ago, Indianapolis had never won a playoff game unless Manning threw for 300 or more yards.

He had done it three times and failed six other times. Postseason record: 3-6.

Perhaps it should not be a complete surprise that Manning is finding ways to will his team to victory despite a well-chronicled porous defense.

In terms of statistics, he again was near the top of the NFL in



Saints running back Deuce McAllister scores on an 11-yard touchdown reception in the third quarter as Philadelphia's Sheldon Brown defends during a divisional playoff game Saturday.

Saints help New Orleans keep the faith

STORY BY NANCY ARMOUR, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW ORLEANS

This weekend's raucous party at the Superdome is over; the city is quiet and New Orleans is once again immersed in the endless process of putting itself back together.

Look closely, though, and the New Orleans Saints' presence is everywhere. From the black and gold that's now standard wardrobe to the mention of them during Mass at historic St. Louis Cathedral to the small store-window sign that says: "Faith."

The Saints' sway reaches far beyond gameday in this beleaguered city. "We've got a lot of hard work that needs to be done. The Saints coming in and winning the way they have has just lifted all of us," Gov. Kathleen Blanco said Sunday. "It's lifted us emotionally and it's energized us. "It's given us hope."

The Saints will play the Bears in Chicago next Sunday for the NFC championship, another chapter in the most unlikely and heartwarming story of the NFL season.

The Saints tortured their fans for most of their 40 years in New Orleans. It took 21 seasons before their first winning record, and playoff appearances were as rare as a modest Mardi Gras. Their fans may have mocked them as the Aints, but it didn't lessen their love for them.

When Hurricane Katrina stormed through Aug. 29, 2005, it looked as if the Saints might break New Orleans' heart once again. Dislocated like so many residents, the Saints moved to San Antonio and many feared that's where they would stay.

But the team returned, and has been the one thing that's held the city together when everything else conspires to pull it apart.

"It's just been a great diversion from the daily problems we see with the crime and the still unfixed portions of the city," said Lloyd Aucoin, who is still helping his mother-in-law repair the home they share, a home where a Saints flag hangs from the balcony.

"I wouldn't have traded last night for anything," Aucoin said. "Except maybe a new city."

Unless you live in New Orleans or have visited recently, it's hard to grasp how much the team means to the city and why.

Parts of New Orleans look much as they did before Katrina, and the city still has its uniquely eclectic air. Tourists are filling the French Quarter streets again; maybe not quite to the old numbers, but enough so the beads and booze are flowing.

But Katrina's scars remain deep and angry, and it will be years before the city fully recovers. Early Sunday morning in the Garden District, two men tackled one of the many debris piles that dot the city. A few blocks away, a man had set up sawhorses on the sidewalk and was cutting boards.

In Lakeview and the Lower Ninth Ward, two of the hardest hit areas, neighborhoods are still empty and rubble sits where houses once stood. Martin Manion had his Lakeview street pretty much to himself Sunday as he cut the grass in front of his home and the concrete slab that is all that remains of his neighbors' home.

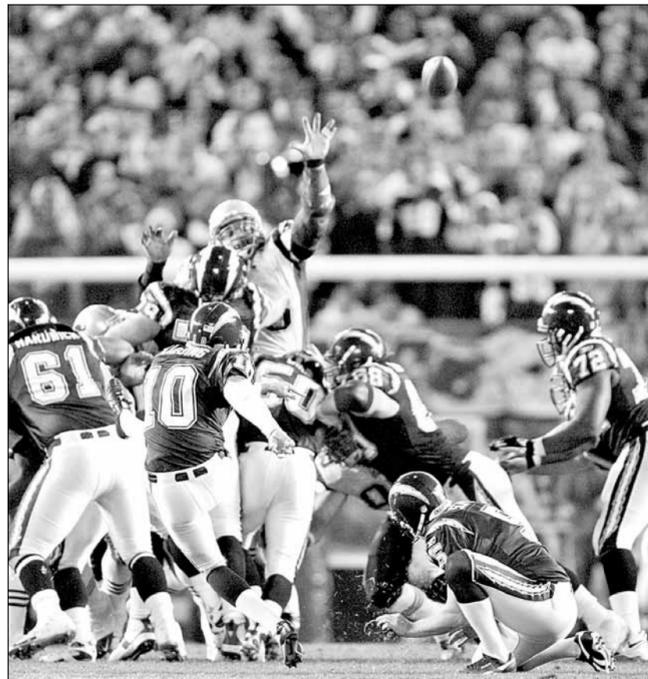
Manion recently moved out of the FEMA trailer in his Lakeview yard, but he is no closer to being home. The house that's been in his family for 40 years will be bulldozed in the next few weeks, and Manion hopes a new home will be finished by Christmas of 2008.



NFC CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

New Orleans Saints (11-6) at Chicago Bears (14-3)

Time: 3 p.m. Sunday TV: WXIN-Channel 59



San Diego's Nate Kaeding misses the potential game-tying field goal during the fourth quarter of the Chargers' loss Sunday to the Patriots in their AFC Divisional Playoff game. The missed kick gave New England a 24-21 victory.

Patriots shock top-seeded San Diego

STORY BY BERNIE WILSON, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAN DIEGO

The San Diego Chargers gave Tom Brady one chance too many, and that's exactly what the three-time Super Bowl-winning quarterback needed.

Brady and the New England Patriots shocked league MVP LaDainian Tomlinson and the Chargers on Sunday, winning 24-21 to move within one win of their fourth Super Bowl trip in six seasons.

Brady overcame three interceptions, his career playoff high, to lead the Patriots to 11 points in 3:26 late in the game. He and coach Bill Belichick now have a 12-1 postseason record and are heading to Indianapolis for the AFC championship game next Sunday.

"That was as tough of a game as I can ever remember playing," Brady said.

While the Chargers respected the mystique Brady and the Patriots had built with Super Bowl wins following the 2001, 2002 and 2004 seasons, they hoped to be the ones raising the Lombardi Trophy in Miami on Feb. 4.

San Diego had nine players voted to the Pro Bowl team and five to the All-Pro team. And it had been supercharged by Tomlinson, who became the most prolific scorer in one season in NFL history with 31 touchdowns and 186 points while winning the rushing title with 1,815 yards.

But Brady is the one who's been there before in January. And nearly always has won; it was Brady's 24th career game-winning drive.

He left behind some frustrated Chargers, including Tomlinson, who went after an unidentified Patriots player when the game ended. Tomlinson ran for 123 yards and two scores, and caught two passes for 64 yards.

Tomlinson said he was upset that some Patriots were dancing on the Chargers logo at midfield after they had silenced the record crowd of 68,810 at Qualcomm Stadium and wrecked the Chargers' season, which included an NFL-best 14-2 record and 8-0 home mark in the regular season.

"I would never react in that way. I was very upset," Tomlinson said.

"When you go to the middle of our field and start doing the dance Shawne Merriman is known for, that is disrespectful. They showed no class and maybe that comes from the head coach."

Merriman, nicknamed "Lights Out," did a spasmodic dance to celebrate each of his NFL-high 17 sacks.

"We lost to a better team today," Tomlinson said. "Hopefully the next opportunity we have we'll learn something from this."

The winning points came on a 31-yard field goal by Stephen Gostkowski with 1:10 left. That capped a 72-yard drive highlighted by a 49-yard pass to Reche Caldwell, who left the Chargers as a free agent after last season.

Coincidentally, the man the rookie Gostkowski replaced, Adam Vinatieri, kicked five field goals for all of Indianapolis' points in a 15-6 win at Baltimore on Saturday.

With the Patriots trailing 21-13, Brady threw a 4-yard touchdown pass to the wide-open Caldwell with 4:36 to play. The Patriots tied it on a tricky 2-point conversion, snapping the ball directly to running back Kevin Faulk, who was standing next to Brady and ran through the middle of the line.

San Diego's Pro Bowl kicker Nate Kaeding was short on a 54-yard field-goal try with 3 seconds left.



AFC CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

New England Patriots (14-4) at Indianapolis Colts (14-4)

Time: 6:30 p.m. Sunday TV: WISH-Channel 8 Radio: WFBQ-94.7 FM



most categories, although this hasn't been his best season.

But closer examination shows that Manning this year has developed an ability to make the plays in the clutch that he didn't necessarily make in years past.

He has delivered passes on the money while taking shots to the chest, holding the ball until the last and best possible second in situations where his previous instinct was usually just to get off a quick flick of the wrist.

Make no mistake: Manning's performance against Baltimore's top-rated defense was more than adequate. Few visiting quarterbacks could have fared as well or better in Baltimore.

The result was substandard only because of the standards he has set.

Manning moved the Colts into field-goal range five separate

times, and although he took chances in the middle of the field, he didn't endanger any scoring opportunities once in Adam Vinatieri's range.

Actually, Manning did more than was required Saturday. To win an NFL playoff game by more than a touchdown is a luxury.

His clutch throw to Dallas Clark and his desperation heave to Reggie Wayne that both set up scores were, in their own ways, more impressive than many of the long touchdown strikes he's delivered over the years.

The NFL's king of statistics and efficiency succeeded in a slightly unconventional fashion for him.

In 155 career games, he's completed 3,369 passes out of 5,280 attempts. He's thrown for 40,485 yards, 291 touchdowns and 152 interceptions.

His average game: 22 for 34 (64.7 percent) for 261 yards with two touchdowns and an interception.

Compared strictly to those numbers, his 15-of-30, 150-yard, no-score, two-pick day against the Ravens was a major letdown.

In fact, few of his performances since a sack-and-mistake filled rookie season were as gnarly as the victory in Baltimore.

And yet, Manning is back in the AFC Championship for a second time, one more ugly afternoon from an image makeover that will have nothing to do with his stats except the one that he desperately lacks: Super Bowl appearances.

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• Time

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

For the Colts, it just doesn't get any better.

They're 9-0 at home this season, and the opportunity to vanquish their bitterest playoff rival in the title game is ideal way to get to the Super Bowl.

And, yes, the Colts are going to the Super Bowl. They won't wilt this time. They're simply better than the Patriots.

Much better.

This time, the Colts have the better defense. They've always had the better offense. And this time, they've got the swagger.

The only thing more shocking than the number of gifts San Diego gave the Patriots on

Sunday night would be if Peyton Manning doesn't rise to the challenge with this, his best shot at getting to the Super Bowl and quite possibly sealing his legacy as the greatest quarterback in the history of the league.

He can do it if the Colts get there and win. He might even do it if they get there and lose. But they have to get there.

And thanks to a bizarre series of playoff events, the path is wide open.

As impossible as the reality seemed three weeks ago, the Colts don't have to win in San Diego to get to Miami. They simply have to take care of business in the dome.

It's unnerving to imagine the fallout if they don't.

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