



AFC Championship Game: New England Patriots at Indianapolis Colts

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



Pressure no problem for rookie kicker

Gostkowski filling Vinatieri's big shoes in New England

By HOWARD ULMAN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FOXBOROUGH, Mass.

Pressure rolled off Stephen Gostkowski's back as smoothly as the football flew off his foot and sent New England to another AFC Championship Game.

Bill Belichick didn't hesitate to send Gostkowski out for the winning field goal at San Diego. The Patriots coach had done that so many times with Adam Vinatieri.

And, just like Vinatieri, the cool rookie came through in a big playoff game.

Gostkowski easily made his 31-yarder with 1:10 left Sunday, giving the Patriots a 24-21 win and stunning the favored Chargers in their home stadium Sunday.

The first "k" in Gostkowski is as silent as the crowd, screaming for the Chargers throughout the game, fell when his kick sailed through the uprights.

"He's doing great," Tom Brady said. "Cross your fingers, hope it lasts another week."

The kick, as important as it was, was a prelude to an even bigger game Sunday against Vinatieri and the Indianapolis Colts, with the winner going to the Super Bowl.

Vinatieri's kicks already have won two of them for the Patriots, one on the final play of a 20-17 win against St. Louis in 2002, the other in a 32-29 victory against Carolina in 2004.

That's what Gostkowski had to follow when the Patriots chose him in the fourth round of the draft, one month after Vinatieri ended 10 seasons in New England by signing as a free agent with the Colts.

THE GOSTKOWSKI FILE

Name: Stephen Gostkowski
Team: New England Patriots
Number: 3
Position: Kicker
Height: 6-foot-1
Weight: 210 pounds
Born: Jan. 28, 1984, in Madison, Miss.
College: Memphis
NFL experience: Rookie season
Statistics: Made 20 of 26 field-goal attempts and 43 of 44 PATs for 103 points during the regular season. Is 6 of 6 on field-goal attempts and 5 of 5 on PATs during the postseason.

So far, so good for the 22-year-old rookie.

He's made all six of his field-goal attempts in the playoffs after connecting on 12 of his past 14 in the regular season. His leg is stronger than Vinatieri's, and he even did something his predecessor never did in the playoffs. His 50-yard field goal that gave the Patriots a 3-0 lead against the Chargers is the longest in the team's postseason history.

The distance didn't surprise his coach at Memphis, Tommy West. But the accuracy took a lot of hard work from the day he walked on to the college team after receiving a baseball scholarship.

"When he came to Memphis, strong leg, no accuracy," West said Tuesday while on a recruiting trip in Alabama. "It was dangerous to stand on the other side of the line. He made himself into the kind of kicker he is."

Gostkowski's winning field goal was his first since a 35-yarder with 6 seconds left gave Memphis a 38-35 win at East Carolina. The stage is much bigger now, but he considers every attempt a pressure kick.

"If you can't handle pressure, you shouldn't be in the business," he said the day he was drafted. "You want to be able to kick that game-winning kick, because that's where people fall in love with you, kicking the ones that count. Everybody can make a million field goals and then miss the big one, and that's all (people) think about."

Gostkowski beat out veteran Martin Gramatica in training camp and made a clutch kick in his first pro game, a 32-yarder with 9:33 left that tied Buffalo 17-17 in a game the Patriots won 19-17.

"Stephen puts pressure on himself to make every kick," West said, "so he probably doesn't feel added pressure in big situations."

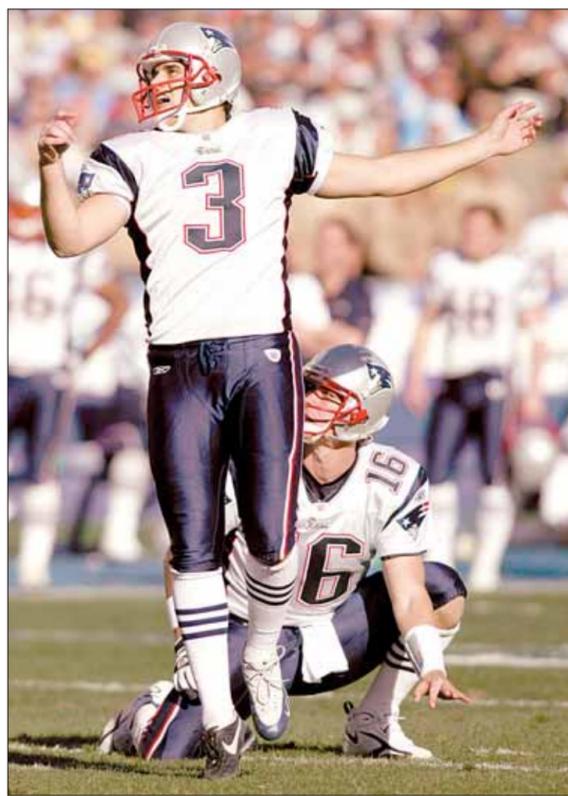
As the season wore on, though, Belichick went for a first down rather than try a field goal on fourth down more often than in past seasons. That sparked speculation he might not have enough confidence in Gostkowski.

"Why wouldn't you get closer, no matter who your kicker was?" he asked the week before the Patriots 37-16 first-round playoff win against the New York Jets.

But might he be more likely to approach a winning kick differently for a proven veteran like Vinatieri than a rookie?

"No, not this one," Belichick said before the Jets game, "because I have confidence in him."

A few days later, Gostkowski was perfect on field goals of 20, 28 and 40 yards.



Patriots kicker Stephen Gostkowski watches the ball on a field goal in the first half of Sunday's 24-21 win in an AFC divisional game at San Diego.

• Vinatieri Quarterbacks get the glory, but playoff games will be decided by kickers

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

Saturday. "You try to go out there and focus in on what you're doing and hope for the best."

During the past decade, nobody's been better than Vinatieri when it matters most, and his résumé is filled with testimonials backing up that image.

Last weekend he made all five field-goal attempts to break the career record for most postseason field goals (34). He's made two last-second kicks in Super Bowls for the Patriots in addition to a 42-yarder to force overtime against Oakland in a blizzard and a 35-yarder to eventually win that AFC playoff game.

On Sunday, Vinatieri's shoe will be on the other sideline.

Jilted Boston fans have endured this kind of bitter breakup before, usually with maddening results.

When Babe Ruth left the Red Sox for the hated New York Yankees, it haunted them for decades. It was a similar story last year when Johnny Damon joined the Yankees, who made the playoffs while the Red Sox went home.

They're hoping Vinatieri does not add another chapter to that painful legacy Sunday.

But Vinatieri has been comfortable kicking indoors for the Colts (14-4), and his soft-spoken, cautious demeanor seems perfectly suited to pressure situations, a stark contrast to Indy's former kicker, the brash Mike Vanderjagt.

Still, New England coach Bill Belichick thought he could find a better bargain and a younger foot to provide longer kickoffs in the offseason. So when the Patriots didn't re-sign free agent Vinatieri quickly, he found a new home with one of New England's main rivals.

The split has featured some tension. Patriots fans gave Vinatieri a chilly reception when he returned to Foxborough, Mass., in November, and the reaction from the coach hasn't been much warmer.

Belichick refused to use Vinatieri's name when asked about him, and Vinatieri initially referred to the Patriots as "his former team" when he arrived at Colts training camp. He later changed that philosophy.

Indianapolis couldn't be happier with the results.

A year ago, the Colts were knocked out of the playoffs when Vanderjagt, the NFL's most accurate kicker, shanked a 46-yard field goal that would have forced overtime against Pittsburgh. Instead, they went home with a 21-18 loss.

Vinatieri changed the equation this year by hitting all eight field goals in the playoffs, including a crucial 51-yarder that clipped the top of the crossbar and bounced across in Saturday's win.

"Once you get to this level, every game seems like it's one or two plays that make the difference," he said. "If you can weather the storm, you've got a good chance of beating them."

If the Colts need Vinatieri to make a winner Sunday, coach Tony Dungy remains confident the 34-year-old can produce one more big kick.

"When he walks out there, you always feel like he's not going to miss," Dungy said.

Sure Peyton Manning, Tom Brady Drew Brees and Rex Grossman will undoubtedly have a lot to say in the outcome of the AFC and NFC championship games on Sunday.

But finding the games' true difference-makers shouldn't be hard. They'll be standing by themselves on the sideline, helmet in hand, eagerly awaiting the call.

Adam Vinatieri, Stephen Gostkowski, John Carney and Robbie Gould will be heard from and most likely decide which teams are Super Bowl-bound or headed to the nearest golf course.

So far this postseason, NFL kickers are putting the foot back into football.

Only two kickers have missed field goals in the eight games played.

As a whole, kickers have converted 34 of 36 field-goal attempts this postseason.

With five of the eight games being decided by three points or less, kickers, and even holders, have begun to share some of the spotlight usually reserved for pretty-boy quarterbacks.

With weapons like Manning, Joseph Addai, Marvin Harrison



Matthew Glesnek

and Reggie Wayne, it was Vinatieri who was responsible for the Colts' scoring output against Baltimore.

He accounted for all 15 of the team's points. So much for that offensive juggernaut we've come to know.

In New Orleans, Carney was two for two and proved to be the difference as the Saints held off the Eagles 27-24.

Bears fans are toasting Gould, who equaled his career-long kick of 49 yards in overtime to give the Bears their first postseason victory since 1994.

Gostkowski, still plying his trade in the shadow of Vinatieri, converted all three of his attempts Sunday, including a 31-yard attempt with less than two min-

utes remaining to give New England the win.

In the regular season, kickers often go unnoticed.

They'll miss a kick here and there, and maybe an overtime winner gets some publicity. But it's the playoffs where kickers make their mark.

Ask Vinatieri.

He was just another kicker prior to the Patriots' dynasty days. Now, after kicking two game-winning Super Bowl field goals, Vinatieri is viewed as the game's pre-eminent clutch kicker.

Since joining the Colts, he's done little to dispel that.

He is 34 for 42 in the postseason; and after his performance against Baltimore, he surpassed Gary Anderson as the league's all-time leader in playoff field goals.

But the life of a kicker isn't easy. Sure they don't have to bang heads and collect bruises during training camp, but the kicker is often the pariah of a football team. Cast aside from the rest of his teammates, the kicker is left only to chat with the punter and the water boy. But when their number is

called, kickers are expected to do something no one else on their team can do. Their importance to their respective teams cannot be understated.

And if they fail, they're out of a job faster than Mike Tyson can get in trouble.

Finding reliable kickers is an inexact science. For most teams, it's trial and error.

Vinatieri came to the league out of South Dakota State and began his career with Amsterdam of the World League in 1996. He signed as a free agent with New England that year, and the rest, as they say, is history.

When Carney graduated from Notre Dame, he was the storied program's all-time leader in field goals. Despite his collegiate success, Carney went undrafted in 1987 and signed with Cincinnati. After three months, the Bengals released him, and he signed with Tampa Bay. The Buccaneers signed and released Carney five times before he settled in San Diego for seven seasons before arriving in the Big Easy.

Gould was undrafted out of Penn State and signed with New

England in 2005. He was waived by the Patriots and latched on with Baltimore's practice squad before being let go less than a month later.

The Bears, in need of kicking help, took a chance on Gould; and in his second season with the team he earned All-Pro honors.

Of the kicking quartet, Gostkowski was the only one drafted.

New England went in search of an heir to Vinatieri and selected Gostkowski in the fourth round of last year's draft.

The rookie kicker has filled in nicely, but fans still hold their breath when the game is on the line and their beloved Vinatieri isn't eyeing the uprights.

On Sunday, forget the Colts vs. Patriots. It's Vinatieri vs. Gostkowski.

The postseason can make or break a kicker's career.

And if the first two weeks of the playoffs are an indication, the NFL's kickers will continue to put their best foot forward.

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