

NFL PLAYOFFS: DIVISIONAL ROUND

SATURDAY'S GAME

Indianapolis Colts (13-4) at Baltimore Ravens (13-3)
Time: 4:30 p.m. TV: WTHR-Channel 13 Radio: WFBO-94.7 FM

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Colts must figure out how to win away from home

By MICHAEL MAROT
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS

Tony Dungy understands how a loud crowd affects playoff games. Home teams get off snaps quicker, players feed off the energy, and visiting teams tend to make more mistakes.

Indianapolis took full advantage of its home field Saturday, but next weekend, in their former hometown of Baltimore, they'll contend with same issues from a different perspective. The Ravens now will have the home field edge.

Dungy believes his team, one of the league's best road teams in recent years, is experienced enough to know what it will take to win.

"We've won in tough venues before, so I don't think we fear going on the road," Dungy said Sunday, a day after advancing to the divisional round with a 23-8 victory over Kansas City. "We've just got to find a way to play better."

Sounds simple enough. Through Dungy's first 4½ seasons as coach, the Colts (13-4) proved masterful road warriors, going 28-8 and never losing more than three road games during a regular season. Some even argued Indy was better outside the RCA Dome than inside it.

Earlier this season, they won at two of the NFL's toughest venues — Denver and New England — in back-to-back weeks and also won twice in four weeks at The Meadowlands, which is notoriously windy.

Recently, though, they've struggled. Indianapolis enters next week's game trying to snap a four-game road losing streak that includes two losses on long field goals as time expired.

While the stumbles didn't prevent the



Baltimore Ravens running back Jamal Lewis, right, tries to pull away from Buffalo safety Coy Wire, top, and Ko Simpson during the second half their game Sunday in Baltimore. The Colts will travel to Baltimore for a divisional playoff game Saturday.

Colts from winning their fourth straight AFC South title or becoming the second team in league history with four consecutive 12-win seasons, it did cost them a first-round bye.

Dungy believes it won't take much for Indy to revert to its old form.

"I think it is a fine line," Dungy said. "We have struggled lately, but what we've got to do is find a way to duplicate what

we did yesterday — and play better."

The perception around the league is that the Colts' style isn't conducive to playing outdoors in the cold, blustery weather typical of January.

Past playoff performances have reinforced that image.

In nine seasons, two-time MVP Peyton Manning is 3-2 in home playoff games, 1-4 on the road, with the lone victory coming on a mild, sunny day in Kansas City three years ago.

Going to Baltimore, however, creates additional problems.

The Ravens (13-3) won the AFC North with an aggressive defense that thrives on mistakes and uses quick, hard-hitting players to shut down opposing offenses.

Add to that a crowd that will likely include many fans who are still bitter about the way the Colts departed Baltimore in March 1984, leaving the city without an NFL team for more than a decade.

The Colts have played in Baltimore twice since moving to Indy with mixed results. They lost 38-31 in 1998, Manning's rookie season, and won 24-7 in the 2005 season-opener.

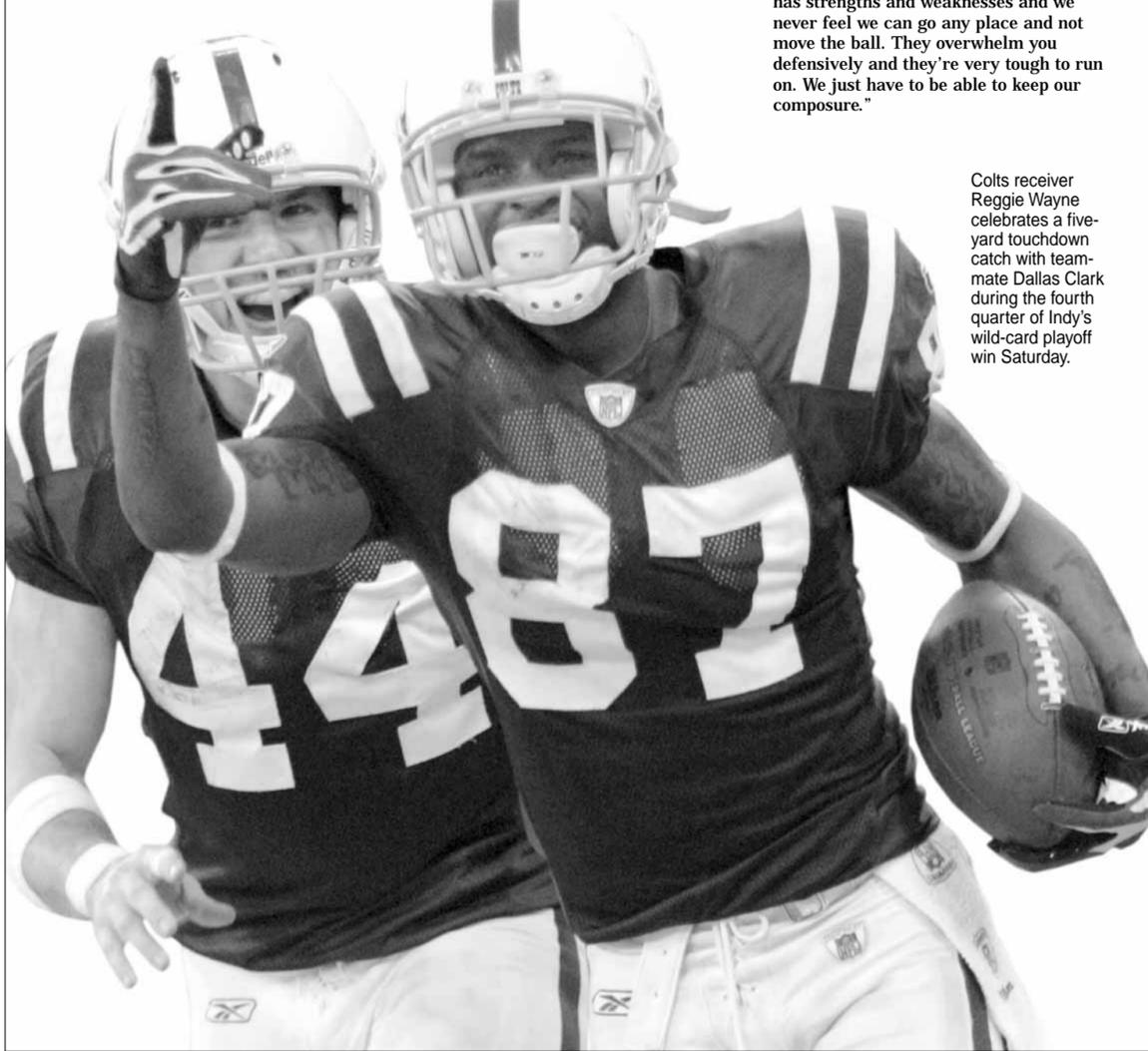
But this is the first time they've been back for a playoff game, and the high stakes are likely to evoke strong emotions.

"Playing Baltimore is tough enough," Manning said after Saturday's game. "Add to that the fact you have to go there, which I think is one of the tougher places to play. It will be a tremendous challenge."

Dungy spent Sunday urging his team to play with the same energy, focus and aggressiveness it did against the Chiefs. He also added one caveat: Playing error-free.

"You have to like what they do on defense," Dungy said. "But every defense has strengths and weaknesses and we never feel we can go any place and not move the ball. They overwhelm you defensively and they're very tough to run on. We just have to be able to keep our composure."

Colts receiver Reggie Wayne celebrates a five-yard touchdown catch with teammate Dallas Clark during the fourth quarter of Indy's wild-card playoff win Saturday.



Patriots pull away for win against Jets

Field goal gives Eagles victory

The Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass.

Bill Belichick and Tom Brady won three Super Bowls with Eric Mangini on their side.

The Patriots' coach taught his former student that maybe he can win another without him, especially with his quarterback in championship form.

Brady capped long scoring drives with short touchdown passes to Daniel Graham and Kevin Faulk, and Asante Samuel sealed it with a 36-yard interception return for a score with 4:54 left as New England beat Mangini's New York Jets 37-16 Sunday.

"We keep playing like that, we can make it a long ways," wide receiver Reche Caldwell said.

New England (13-4), the only team to win a playoff game in each of the past four seasons, will play at AFC top seed San Diego (14-2) next weekend. The Patriots are going for their fourth Super Bowl title in six seasons.

"I think our players stepped up and just made a few more plays, and that was obviously the difference in the game," Belichick said.

The loss ended a surprising run by the Jets, who won their final three regular-season games to get into the playoffs. This was supposed to be a rebuilding season under Mangini, their rookie coach.

"You look at the big picture and say it was a good job on our part," Jets linebacker Jonathan Vilma said. "But if you're competitive, if you're a player, you don't want to go 10-6 and lose in the first round of the playoffs."

Mangini, Belichick's former assistant, showed he learned a lot in his six years in New England. But the mentor still had some lessons left.

After the game, the two coaches, whose relationship has cooled since Mangini left to become coach of the Jets, met at midfield and Belichick hugged Mangini. It was a bit warmer than the loose, businesslike handshakes the two exchanged following their two regular-season meetings.

"I'm not going to get into a postgame analysis here," Belichick said. "Really, I've had enough of that."

Added Mangini: "I've got to tell you, I wasn't focused on that moment. It was nice, but I honestly wasn't thinking about that."

Brady improved to 10-2 against the Jets (10-7), and played much better than in the teams' most recent meeting, when New York frustrated the quarterback with blitzes and won 17-14.

"I'm beginning to experience it on this side," Mangini said. "He's a great player. He can hurt you at all times."

In Sunday's other game

Eagles 23
Giants 20

PHILADELPHIA — The snap was there, the hold was good and the kick was perfect.

David Akers hit a 38-yard field goal with no time remaining to give the Philadelphia Eagles a win against the Giants in a wild-card playoff game.

A day after Dallas lost to Seattle when quarterback Tony Romo fumbled the

NEXT WEEKEND'S GAMES

Saturday

Indianapolis Colts
at Baltimore Ravens

Time: 4:30 p.m.
TV: WISH-Channel 8

Philadelphia Eagles
at New Orleans Saints

Time: 8 p.m.
TV: WXIN-Channel 59

Sunday

Seattle Seahawks
at Chicago Bears

Time: 1 p.m.
TV: WXIN-Channel 59

New England Patriots
at San Diego Chargers

Time: 4:30 p.m.
TV: WISH-Channel 8

hold on what could have been a go-ahead field goal, the Eagles executed a seemingly routine play that has cost teams important games in recent weeks.

Brian Westbrook had 141 yards rushing, including a spectacular, slashing 49-yard TD run in the second quarter. His 65-yard punt return for an apparent score in the third quarter was nullified by a penalty on rookie Torrance Daniels.

Jeff Garcia threw for 153 yards, one touchdown and played efficiently enough to win for the sixth time in seven starts since replacing an injured Donovan McNabb. Eli Manning threw two touchdown passes to Plaxico Burress, including an 11-yard strike that tied it at 20 with 5:03 left.

In what probably was his last game, Tiki Barber ran for 137 yards for the Giants. A three-time Pro Bowl running back, Barber plans to retire after 10 seasons in the NFL.

The Eagles are far from finished, though. Counted out after a knee injury ended McNabb's season in Week 11, the Eagles (11-6) have won six straight games. They'll play at New Orleans (10-6) next Saturday night.

The Giants overcame a second-and-30 on their tying scoring drive as Manning completed consecutive passes of 18, 14 and 11 yards to Burress.

But the Eagles drove right down the field, mixing in short passes and Westbrook runs.

That set up Akers' winning kick, a moment with a little extra drama in the wake of the botched hold in the Dallas-Seattle game and a bad snap on a critical extra point in a late-season game between Cincinnati and Denver.

● Ravens

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

poor dog that won't fight in its own back yard," the Colts defensive tackle said. "We stopped a really good running back.

"And it shows us if you if you keep continuing playing as a team, do the little things and try not to turn the ball over so much, you can go a long way in the playoffs."

No doubt, few still predict the Colts will go far. Baltimore looks

the end of the line — just like Larry Johnson's stat sheet was supposed to read 150-plus yards and multiple touchdowns.

He had 32 yards and no to trips to the end zone.

Which brings us back to Baltimore.

Without question, the Colts have an exponentially more difficult challenge on the road against the Ravens (13-3), than they did at home, where they're 9-0, against the inept Chiefs.

Yet the Colts' optimism isn't totally unfounded. Had their offense carried the day against

Kansas City, then it definitely would be.

But in one of those rare cosmic occurrences, the defense rescued the offense, and Peyton Manning, in particular:

On another day, against arguably any opponent but the Chiefs, Manning's three interceptions would have spelled doom. Before Sunday, the Colts were 0-11 when Manning completed three or more passes to the wrong team.

But on this day, the picks weren't lethal. The Colts' defense was.

The irony wasn't lost on players who read the same headlines

everyone else in the NFL universe did.

"We have the worst run defense that has ever been assembled," June said. "I don't know what to say."

He did have an answer, however, for where that effort has been all season.

"We purposely were sand-bagging all year," June said. "We wanted everybody to say that we had the worst defense ever and all that, so it was just a sand-bagging technique."

So the Colts have a sense of humor and confidence that might

make them all the more dangerous. They've got attitude. They've got swagger.

And they've already got a sense for outside expectations.

They know they won't be given much of a chance this week, just as they were given no chance to so much as slow the Chiefs, let alone stop them dead in their tracks.

So their approach to Saturday will mirror last week's: Tune-out, turn-on and defy conventional wisdom.

"I don't read the papers. I haven't read the papers all year," cornerback Nick Harper said. "I

don't even watch ESPN, because I already know I'm going to see the same thing I see in the papers.

"I knew they were talking bad about us, and I didn't want to hear it because I knew we could step up and shut a good back down, and we did."

Confidence and attitude. They can carry overachievers a long way. San Diego, here they come? Stay tuned. Things might get interesting, after all.

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

● Spark

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

Indianapolis (13-4) not only shut down one of the NFL's elite running backs in Larry Johnson, limiting him to 32 yards on 13 carries, it yielded a franchise playoff-record low 44 total rushing yards against an opponent that was expected to run circles around its

32nd-ranked rushing defense.

Sanders had an interception and only three tackles. But his presence was reassuring for a maligned defense that has been ravaged by injuries, especially in the secondary.

"He's a Pro Bowl player. He played in the Pro Bowl last year," said defensive end Dwight Freeney, who had two of the Colts' four sacks against the Chiefs. "All season we've been playing with our third- and fourth-string safeties.

"We take nothing away from those guys, but when you have a guy like Bob, he makes big plays."

Indianapolis can use all the big plays it can muster Saturday afternoon at Baltimore, where the host Ravens feature a red-hot quarterback in Steve McNair and a punishing running back in Jamal Lewis.

Sanders, who had no health issues after Saturday's game, insists he's ready to do his part in the AFC Divisional playoff.

"I felt excellent," he said. "It's been a long road for me just taking it day by day, but now I'm looking forward to it."

"I'm a lot stronger, and I feel a lot more confident in myself being able to go out and be Bob Sanders."

Coach Tony Dungy didn't attribute the Colts' surprising defensive gem specifically to Sanders' return. Rather, he credited the defense's ability to play mistake-free in a scheme designed

to exploit the Colts' primary strengths: Speed and mobility.

"Our whole group just played faster, played with a little more energy than we had," Dungy said. "We didn't have any of those mistakes where we are going along pretty good, and then we give up a 30-yard run."

"We hustled and tackled pretty well."

Sanders' return was beneficial on both fronts.

"Obviously, Bob Sanders made

a difference with his energy," Dungy said. "I think we just played better."

Sanders sees no reason why the Colts can't play as well against the No. 2-seeded Ravens (13-3), who should be well-rested after a first-round bye.

"This is the way we should play," Sanders said. "We've got the talent. It's out there. We showed it (Saturday). We showed the world that we can play well, and we can play with anybody."