



AFC Championship Game: New England Patriots at Indianapolis Colts

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



Pats always win big games; Colts beware

By BILL REYNOLDS
THE PROVIDENCE (R.I.) JOURNAL

I have three observations to make about the New England Patriots:

Patriots fine

Should we really be surprised? Should we really be surprised that the Pats went into San Diego on Sunday and beat the

COLUMN

team that was supposed to be the best team in all of football?

Should we really be surprised that, once again, like they have done so many times in the past, they won a playoff game that many people thought they could not win?

Should we really be surprised that here are the Pats in the conference final when just a few weeks ago on the road against the Dolphins, the day when they got shut out, their flaws were all but imbedded in stone. No, we should not.

This is what this team has done on this marvelous ride toward immortality that started back in 2001, this sense that somehow, someday, they will find a way to win games when it appears they are not going to win. Call it will. Call it coaching. Call it heart. Call it luck. Call it smart. Call it anything you want.

Other teams make key mistakes? The Patriots don't. Other teams make brain-dead plays? The Patriots don't. Other teams seem to snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory? The Patriots don't.

Sunday was just the latest example.

For there they were on an afternoon in sunny San Diego when nothing seemed to be going right. Poor field position much of the day. Behind much of the game. LaDainian Tomlinson doing a Walter Payton imitation. Tom Brady less than great. The sense that this season was going to end on Sunday, end in a loss to the Chargers.

Until, of course, the Chargers self-destructed and gave the Pats a chance to do what they've done so many times before. Until Troy Brown makes the play that gave them a chance, and there was Brady doing what we've come to expect, taking an NFL playoff game and turning it into some personal flag football game, his ball, his show, his game, the Brady of legend.

Should we be surprised? No. Not anymore.

LaDainian whines

So now we have Tomlinson saying that the Patriots showed no class after winning Sunday's game. Please.

Maybe LT should spend a little more attention on his team, the one that self-destructed like some 12-year-old brat having a temper tantrum.



AP PHOTO

Patriots running back Kevin Faulk, center, is congratulated by teammates after completing a two-point conversion against the Chargers on Sunday.

The only problem is where to begin?

Is it with the dropped passes? Is it with the time Marty Schottenheimer went for it on fourth-and-11 on the Pats' 30 instead of attempting a field goal? Is it with the incredibly moronic Charger cornerback Drayton Florence who tried to head-butt Daniel Graham after Brady was sacked and gave the Pats a big first down? Is it when Charger cornerback Marlon McCree fumbled after he intercepted a Brady pass with about six minutes left and his team up eight, when all he had to do was bat the ball down and the game probably would have been over?

And whatever happened to Shawne Merriman anyway, the nearly invisible pass rusher? You would think that these would be Tomlinson's concerns, not some gibberish about the Patriots showing no class. Enough, already.

Colts next in line

Somehow you knew it would come down to this.

The Pats and the Colts. Brady and Manning. Belichick and Tony Dungy. These two teams that seem like each other's alter-egos, the pass-happy Colts against the blue-collar Pats, the team that wins all the regular-season games and the team that wins the playoff games.

That's the story line anyway, and if we all know it's more complicated than that, that's the perception. Once again, the Colts are going to have to prove they can play smash-mouth football with the team that seems to have invented it. Once again, Manning is going to have to prove that he can beat a Belichick defense, no matter that the Colts have won the past two regular-season games against the Pats, including this year. Once again, Manning and the Colts are going to have to prove they can beat the Pats in a game that counts. So here we go again. Brady and Manning. Manning and Belichick's defense.

A skill team versus a physical team. The Pats and the Colts. Again.

Bill Reynolds covers sports for The Providence (R.I.) Journal. Send comments to letters@thejournalnet.com.



AP PHOTO

New England quarterback Tom Brady directs his team against the San Diego Chargers in their AFC divisional game in San Diego on Sunday.

Against Colts, Brady must be cautious

By HOWARD ULMAN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FOXBOROUGH, Mass.

The Patriots advanced to the AFC Championship Game despite Tom Brady's three interceptions. One pickoff even helped them.

He can't count on being as fortunate Sunday against the Indianapolis Colts. They already beat him 27-20 on Nov. 5 when two of his four interceptions led to 10 points.

So after his streak of five games without an opponent catching one of his passes ended in last Sunday's 24-21 AFC divisional playoff victory at San Diego, he needs to be more careful.

"There's no quarterback I'd rather have," New England coach Bill Belichick said. "Nobody's going to play a perfect game."

The Patriots will be on the road for the second straight week. Brady certainly will be aware that the Colts' once shaky defense has improved dramatically in the playoffs. Indianapolis has allowed one touchdown in two games, outscored opponents 38-14, intercepted four passes and recovered three fumbles.

Brady was impressed while watching the Colts beat Baltimore 15-6 Saturday.

"It was the type of game with two very good defenses slugging it out," he said. "It just comes down to a few plays here or there, and the Colts got those plays."

One day later, it was the Patriots who got those plays in San Diego.

The Chargers intercepted passes in the second and third quarters but had to punt after each one. Their third interception was probably the biggest play of the game. Oddly, it was the Patriots who benefited.

San Diego was leading 21-13 with 6:25 left when Brady dropped back on fourth-and-5 at the Chargers' 41-yard line. He fired the ball down the middle, where safety Marlon McCree was waiting.

"If it's incomplete, it's their ball anyway, so you're trying to squeeze it in there," Brady said.

McCree had three choices: knock the ball down and the Chargers would take over on downs at their 41; intercept the ball and simply fall on it; or grab it and try to run it back. He made the wrong choice.

After catching the ball, McCree ran with it and was almost immediately hit by receiver Troy Brown, who pried the ball loose. Another receiver, Reche Caldwell, recovered. Five plays later, Caldwell was wide open for a touchdown pass, and Kevin Faulk tied it with a 2-point conversion run.

"I saw it get picked, but I saw the safety running with it loose," Caldwell said. "Troy did a great job of stripping it, and I just saw it on the ground and got the ball. I think that was the key. That was the big play of the game."

Just like that, a play that could have helped clinch the game for the Chargers instead gave Brady a chance to turn a mediocre performance into a memorable one.

• Sanders

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

surgery in September and was bothered by pain and swelling right up until the playoffs.

He returned for the Colts' 23-8 wild-card win against Kansas City and was their top tackler in Saturday's 15-6 AFC divisional playoff victory at Baltimore.

The Colts' defense paved the way in both wins.

Arguably the Colts' most physical player and certainly one of their best tacklers, Sanders acknowledges his presence provides a lift.

But he denies it has resulted in a wholesale turnaround of a defense that was routinely embarrassed the second half of the regular season.

Sanders attributes the resurgence to a higher sense of collective urgency and the fact the capability has always been there.

"If you look at the first play of the (Kansas City) game, I wasn't even close to the play," Sanders said. "They stopped it in the backfield, and they made a great play. So I think it has a lot to do with being in the playoffs."

"It's important just to know that every team is 0-0, and we just have to make sure we focus on getting better."

Defensive end Dwight Freeney agrees.

"It's playoff time. Forget about what happened in the regular season," said Freeney, who has two sacks in the postseason. "All this is about guys making plays."

"When you get the opportunity to make plays, make plays." Sanders certainly has.

He ranks seventh in the playoffs in tackles with 13, including 10 solos. He also has an interception and has deflected two passes.

Equally important, he brings intensity and physicality to a defense that had neither commodity before the playoffs.

"I just try to do what I'm supposed to do," Sanders said. "When I go out and play, (teammates) expect me to go in and play like I've been playing all year. ... That's just the way I'm going to play, regardless of whether I didn't play the last game of the (regular) season, whatever it may be."

"I have to make sure that I do my job and not hurt our defense."

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