



Rick Morwick

Tough choices ahead

MIAMI

As sweet as the moment still is for the Colts and their fans, it's nice to think that maybe it won't be their last. It is, of course, a big maybe.

Even with no personnel shakeups, defending a Super Bowl title, or even winning another within the next five years, is a colossal challenge.

Doing it with a roster rife with soon-to-be restricted and unrestricted free agents, like the one the Colts have, makes it all the more difficult; not impossible, but exponentially more difficult.

That's why guys like Bill Polian make the big bucks.

With a total of 19 free agents, including eight Super Bowl starters, the decisions he makes this offseason will determine whether the Colts have a chance to repeat or will regress.

There really is no margin for error. The difference between a dynasty and doom can be the difference between Peyton Manning and Ryan Leaf.

Choices are tough, to say the least.

With salary-cap restraints, chemistry nuance and star-driven egos, this is a tricky business. Fortunately for the Colts, Polian, love him or loathe him, conducts it brilliantly.

In a perfect world, Polian and his pugnacious personality would never be displayed for public consumption. But the tradeoff is, this general manager knows what a Super Bowl roster looks like.

More importantly, he knows how to put one together. He did it four times in Buffalo, and now he's done it here.

Only this time, he found a winning combination.

There's no reason to believe he can't do it again. Change might be striking at first, to the point where you can't help but say, "How can they win without that guy?"

You know, the same immediate reaction when Edgerrin James wasn't re-signed. And David Thornton. And Larry Triplett.

Through foresight, and, yes, a little luck, the Colts won a Super Bowl without them.

Make no mistake, there are a few pieces Indianapolis can't do without. Exhibit 1A is Peyton Manning. 1B is Tony Dungy.

They are the heart and lifeblood. The Colts aren't champions without them.

But Manning and Dungy aren't going anywhere. Neither are Marvin Harrison, Reggie Wayne or Joseph Addai. They're all under contract, and Dungy has all but declared his intention to return.

But Dwight Freney, Cato June, Dominic Rhodes, Nick Harper, Rob Morris, Ryan Lilja, Jake Scott, Jason David and other notables might be different stories. Their returns are anything but certain.

Tough decisions have to be made. The impact, good or bad, will be felt for years to come.

Dungy was right Monday morning when he said that in order to repeat, the status quo isn't good enough. The Colts will actually have to be better. The slightest "little slippage" will create a major consequence.

Can the Colts win another Super Bowl in the five years, which would make them the modern day equivalent of a dynasty? Are they one-hit wonders? Will they be good enough to contend for the Super Bowl but not quite good enough to win it? It's pretty much up to Polian now.

He doesn't pass, run, tackle, kick, block or coach. But he assembles the pieces that do. And so far, you can't quibble with the results.

Championships are about as good as it gets.

So whatever happens in free agency, it has to be taken on blind faith that Polian knows what he's doing, which means when the first big name signs elsewhere, one should resist the temptation, no matter how strong, to wonder in panic, "How can they win without that guy?" They'll find a way.

Love him or hate him, Polian always has.

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MIAMI

If Dominic Rhodes resents his role, he hides it well. He not only considers Joseph Addai a friend, but he has no problems splitting carries with, or being a backup to, the Indianapolis Colts' rookie running back.

"That's fine. Let's play some football," said Rhodes, who started every game in the regular season but has come off the bench in the playoffs.

"Really, the whole year we have been switching on and off anyway, so both of us have been the starter, regardless.

"It hasn't been a big deal to me. I'm just going out there trying to help my team win, and that's the bottom line."

In that regard, Rhodes has kept his end of the two-back bargain.

With Addai providing speed and agility and Rhodes lending power and burst, the Colts have outrushed all three opponents in the playoffs.

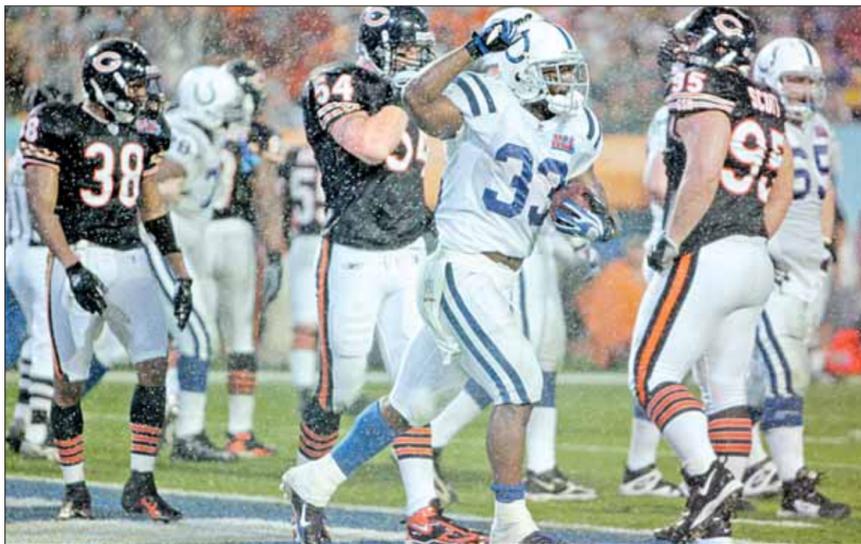
Addai has started all three games, but Rhodes has almost the same number of yards.

And his per-rush postseason average (4.7) is nearly a full yard better than Addai's (3.8).

But the backs aren't in a statistical contest, nor do they compete for recognition.

Both are working toward the

This story originally appeared in the Daily Journal on Jan. 30. Rhodes ran for 113 yards and a touchdown in Super Bowl XLI.



Colts running back Dominic Rhodes celebrates after scoring a touchdown during Super Bowl XLI in Miami.

same objective: winning the Super Bowl.

"It's not about one individual person," Rhodes said. "It's about all of us. That's why we're right now still playing, because we don't have a lot of guys that are selfish."

"We take pride in helping this team win, and that's what it's about."

Still, Rhodes wasn't sure what type of message was being sent when the Colts took Addai in the first round of the April 2006 NFL Draft.

Conventional wisdom suggested Rhodes, a seven-year veteran and former 1,000-yard rusher, would become the feature back following Edgerrin James' free-

agent departure in the offseason.

But Addai's arrival signaled the Colts had other plans.

Initially, Rhodes wasn't sure what they were. Had the Colts lost faith in his ability? Was a rookie going to get the job he coveted? Would he even be on the roster past training camp?

Rhodes did, after all, miss the 2002 season with a torn ACL. He had only 130 combined carries during the past three seasons and was six years removed from his 1,104-yard season in 2001, when he became the first undrafted free-agent rookie in NFL history to top 1,000 yards.

Rhodes soon had his answer: He not only figured prominently

in the Colts' offensive scheme, but he was the opening-day starter and veteran leader of what coach Tony Dungy had planned all along, a two-back rotation.

"Joseph's done a great job, and Dominic Rhodes has done a great job," Dungy said. "We felt it was going to take a couple of people to replace Edgerrin, that you weren't going to get a guy who could carry the ball as often as he did and hold up."

In that regard, Rhodes welcomes, or is at least at peace with, the situation.

Backfield-by-committee is the trend in the NFL, in part because it allows teams to exploit different strengths of different

backs and reduces wear and tear on each.

"The good part of it is that right now me and (Addai) are still real healthy," Rhodes said. "(Our) bodies are feeling really good, and we are able to get out there and run faster than other people that took a pounding all year."

"This two-back deal, I never would have expected it to be this way, but it's been an awesome thing."

Addai, who ran for a team-high 1,081 yards in the regular season, also embraces the time share. And he credits it for his successful rookie season.

"A great running back like Edgerrin is going to be hard to replace," Addai said. "I didn't have a lot of pressure on me because you still have a veteran like Dominic Rhodes that understood the system. It wasn't coming in like, 'OK, you have to start.'"

"Dominic kind of helped me out. We kind of took the load off of each other. We kind of fed off of each other."

They still do. Indianapolis has outrushed opponents 413 yards to 220 in the postseason. Addai has 57 carries for 217 yards; Rhodes has 41 for 193.

The collective effectiveness not only gives defenses different looks to prepare for, it creates opportunities for quarterback Peyton Manning and his explosive receiving corps to carve up secondaries.

"Me and Joe get along real well, and we kind of feed off each other and tell each other what's going on out there on the field. It's been a pretty good and unique situation."

Harrison not slowing down

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MIAMI

Marvin Harrison insists he doesn't mind interviews, even though he rarely grants them.

He picks and chooses his moments carefully. And he figures the Super Bowl is as good a time as any to break his virtual season-long silence.

"I don't mind doing interviews, especially when there's something good to talk about," said Harrison, notoriously mum when reporters are around. "I think this week is definitely worth the while to talk about."

And Tuesday, he had plenty to say.

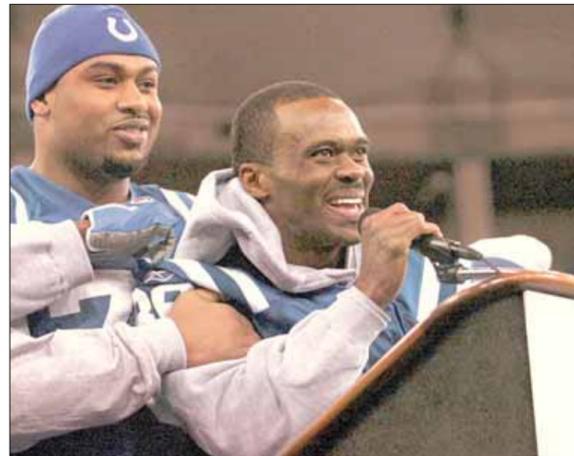
Winding down his 11th season, Harrison's career is not unlike quarterback Peyton Manning's: complete in every way except for a Super Bowl championship.

A sure-fire Hall of Famer, the Indianapolis Colts wide receiver is among the greatest at his position in NFL history. He ranks fourth on the all-time receptions list (1,022), third in career touchdown receptions (122) and sixth in receiving yards (13,697).

His 143 catches in 2002 are an NFL single-season record. He's easily the leading receiver in Colts history, and he's going to his eighth straight Pro Bowl.

But none of the above gets him talking like the Super Bowl, which until now was an elusive destination for a player whose sole objective is winning.

"It's definitely something that



Colts wide receiver Marvin Harrison is pushed to the podium by his teammates during a Super Bowl championship rally Monday at the RCA Dome.

I've always wanted to accomplish in my career," Harrison said.

"Going out and winning football games is always something I've wanted to do, and when I first came here to Indianapolis 11 years ago, I've wanted to get to the Super Bowl and win it."

"That's what we have the opportunity to do right now, and there's no better time to do it."

Although most players his age have retired or are contemplating it, Harrison has no immediate plans to do so.

Why should he?

At 34, he still outsprints most of the league's fastest defensive backs. On any given play, he can outsmart all of them. His hands as sure as any in the game, he's never suffered a serious injury, and his consecutive Pro Bowl streak (which ties Johnny Unitas for the longest in franchise history) proves he's still one of the NFL's best.

But the most compelling reason Harrison plans to hang around is because his body isn't breaking down, which he attributes, at least in part, to his diligent conditioning.

"I don't know how I've lasted so long," said Harrison, who has started all but two games of his entire career. "I guess I've done a great job with my training throughout the course of my career."

So good, in fact, that Harrison expects to, in a figurative sense, turn back the clock.

He had 95 catches for 1,366 yards and 12 touchdowns during the regular season. He predicts he can top it all next year.

"I look forward to playing a lot younger than I currently have," Harrison said. "I've never had a thought that crossed my mind about when I am going to finish playing."



Colts quarterback Peyton Manning, right, celebrates with coach Tony Dungy after the team's win in Super Bowl XLI.

Manning: Let's do it again next season

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MIAMI

If you think Peyton Manning saved his best performance for the Super Bowl, think again.

He's just warming up.

After nine NFL seasons, multiple passing records and seven-time Pro Bowl recognition, the MVP of Super Bowl XLI insists the best is yet to come.

He plans to prove it next season.

"For me as a player, I want to be a better player next year than I was this year," Manning said Monday morning, less than 12 hours after leading the Indianapolis Colts to a 29-17 Super Bowl win against the Chicago Bears in Miami.

By 9 a.m., Manning had already celebrated all night with family and teammates, watched highlights of the game on the NFL Network, fielded a congratulatory call from President Bush, been presented the Pete Rozelle Trophy and a new Cadillac for being named Super Bowl MVP and was already thinking about next year.

The latter was first and foremost on his mind.

He didn't name names, but Manning alluded to quarterbacks whose careers, but not necessarily their reputations, took downward spirals after they won a Super Bowl.

Manning doesn't want to be part of that club.

Whether or not the Colts win another championship, Manning says it won't be because he stopped growing as a quarterback.

"In some cases, I've seen past quarterbacks that have won a Super Bowl that I kind of call 'Getting the pass,'" Manning said, referring to the media's reluctance to criticize a quarterback's legacy after his team has won a championship.

"They kind of get 'The pass,' other years," Manning said. "They had a bad year, they say, 'He won a Super Bowl, we'll give him a pass.'"

"I guess what I'm saying is, I don't want the pass. I want to be held accountable every year."

For Manning, the Super Bowl doesn't validate anything. It's simply a goal he wants to achieve as many times as possible.

And it's why he's not setting himself up for a pass next year or any other year.

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