

NFL PLAYOFFS

NFC: Frozen tundra of Lambeau Field chills Carolina

■ Continued from Page 9

had beaten second-year Carolina 30-13 in the NFC championship game to reach the Super Bowl for the first time since Lombardi's Packers beat Dallas in the "Ice Bowl" 29 years ago.

The Packers even got coach Mike Holmgren to utter the words "Super Bowl" for the first time this season.

"All of us were dreaming about this game all week. It was like we were being tormented," said Reggie White, whose dream of getting to a Super Bowl has been the Packers' inspiration all season. "Now we can go home and have pleasant dreams."

Along with White, this game's

heroes were Brett Favre and Dorsey Levens, Antonio Freeman and Gilbert Brown, none born when Lombardi's last team gave "Tittletown, USA" its fifth NFL championship in seven seasons.

"God always has the last laugh," said White, an ordained minister who was the NFL's first big-name free agent signed with Green Bay for \$17 million for four years in 1993.

"When I made the decision to come here four years ago, people laughed. They asked if I thought we had a chance to win the Super Bowl. I said yes because we had a quarterback who could get us there and a coach who could get us there," he said.

Nostalgia was everywhere, especially in the locker room afterward, where several players from Lombardi's championship teams gathered.

Said Willie Davis, the Hall of Fame defensive end: "We can all enjoy it. Reggie White getting his first championship has to be the greatest thing in the world. We can all identify with it."

Said a jubilant Ray Nitschke, star middle linebacker of that era: "They deserve it. This is the year of the Pack."

Lambeau came through again for the Packers, who improved to 9-0 in the playoffs at their storied stadium and won their 18th straight overall there.

Carolina's loss also ended any chance for an Expansion Bowl championship. A few hours later, second-year Jacksonville also lost, at New England.

"Obviously, we weren't at championship level yet," said cornerback Eric Davis, who earned a Super Bowl ring with San Francisco two years ago. "But we're going to get there. We'll get there."

"The best team won," wide receiver Willie Green said. "That's the bottom line. We can't make excuses. But we're proud of what we've done. You can't take that away from us."

"The Packers were the best team we played this year," said coach Dom Capers, whose team beat San

Francisco twice and then chased the Cowboys 26-17 last week.

The score was about what was expected, but it took almost a half for the Packers to get going. The Panthers also gave the Packers competition for nearly a half.

The weather at 40-year-old Lambeau Field wasn't as big a factor as expected.

It was 3 degrees at gametime with a wind-chill of minus-17 — 20 degrees warmer than that January day in 1968 when Bart Starr's quarterback sneak behind Jerry Kramer put the Pack in the second Super Bowl.

Favre, whose two turnovers helped Carolina to an early lead, was 19-of-29 for 292 yards.

AFC: Patriots defense clamps down on Jacksonville QB Brunwell

■ Continued from Page 9

ty," said coach Bill Parcells, who gets a shot at a third NFL title. "These players have given me everything."

The Packers, 30-13 winners over Carolina in the NFC title game and 13 1/2-point favorites for the Super Bowl, can't be too intimidated about that prospect, because the Patriots were nearly as inconsistent on offense as the Jaguars. But New England's defense, which has allowed one touchdown in the last four games, was superb.

"We just had to be poised and patient," said Smith, signed during the season after being cut by the New York Jets. "The plays started coming to us in the fourth quarter."

The Patriots kept constant pressure on Mark Brunell. The Jacksonville quarterback led the league in yards passing this season, but he rarely had time to set up and look downfield.

When the Jaguars tried to run, Natrone Means usually found nothing but blue jerseys in his way.

And when Brunell guided the Jaguars 58 yards to the Patriots 5 late in the game, Clay stepped in front of Derek Brown in the end zone for the big interception.

The Jaguars got the ball back at their 42 with 2:36 remaining, but Otis Smith came up with a fumble from James Stewart and went 47 yards for the clinching touchdown.

For further defensive emphasis, there was Bruschi's interception.

"The things that have not plagued us hurt us today," Jaguars coach Tom Coughlin said of the turnovers.

It was the first conference crown for New England since 1985, when the Patriots went on to lose 46-10 to Chicago in the Super Bowl.

New England's scoring came on Curtis Martin's 1-yard run after an aborted Jacksonville punt, and field goals by rookie Adam Vinatieri of 29 and 20 yards.

It wasn't much, but the defense, ranked 19th in the NFL and 28th against the pass, made sure it was enough. It held Means to

43 yards rushing — he had 315 in the previous two playoff games — and limited Brunell to 190 yards while intercepting two passes.

Mike Hollis made field goals of 32 and 28 yards for Jacksonville, which won its final five games just to make the playoffs, then stunned the Bills in Buffalo and the Broncos in Denver.

But the Jaguars will be going home, just like their expansion cousins, the Panthers.

And Parcells, 3-0 in conference title games, gets to improve his 2-0 record in Super Bowls; he won as coach of the New York Giants after the 1986 and 1990 seasons.

Date Rape: Guilty or Not?

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