

Green Bay gets spotlight, but Pats could get glory

■ **SUPER BOWL:** It could come down to whose defense is best in Sunday's NFL title game

The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — The NFL's best late-season defense will be on display in the Super Bowl. It may not be the Green Bay Packers.

They allowed the fewest points and yards during the regular season, but the New England Patriots' defense has held its two playoff opponents to just three field goals and its last seven opponents to only four touchdowns.

In the last four minutes of their 20-6 AFC championship game win over Jacksonville, the Patriots forced three turnovers.

Afterward, defensive end Willie McGinest spoke up for a defense that was vulnerable to long passes early in the season and was blown out 34-8 by Denver in the 11th game.

"No one's been giving our defense the respect that we deserve, no matter who we play," he said. "We're the no-name defense, but we get the job done and that's all that counts."

McGinest, in his third pro season, doesn't have the notoriety of Green Bay defensive end Reggie White. And free safety Willie Clay, whose interception with 3:43 left stopped a potential tying drive

by the Jaguars, isn't an All-Pro like Packers' strong safety LeRoy Butler.

Yet in their last seven games, the Patriots have allowed 73 points, just one more than the Packers.

Green Bay's offense, led by Brett Favre, is more dangerous



than the ones the Patriots faced in the playoffs against Pittsburgh and Jacksonville. The Packers were the NFL's highest scoring team.

But New England's confidence and cohesion on defense have grown dramatically since the loss to the Broncos. The Patriots haven't allowed more than 300 yards in any of their seven games since then.

"It was kind of a rude awakening for us," middle linebacker Ted Johnson said. "It seems like we still can't stop talking about that Denver game, but from that point on we've improved in all phases."

"Expectations grow and, with that, everybody on our side of the ball feels like, 'hey, we did it last week, we've got to do it again.'"

Head coach Bill Parcells says the return of injured players in the secondary and a platoon system in which players divide time at a position and keep fresh, has helped.

Packers' receiver ready for game

■ **GREEN BAY:** Split end Antonio Freeman is very much on the ball after early season failures

The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Antonio Freeman cringes at the memory. In the biggest game of his life, he dropped the ball.

Then he dropped it again. And again.

Three times against the San Francisco 49ers on Oct. 14, Green Bay's second-year split end missed flawless throws from Brett Favre, who lost his favorite receiver, Robert Brooks, to a season-ending knee injury on his first snap.

"Brooks went down early and it kind of put all the pressure on me at once," Freeman said. "And I think it kind of got the best of me."

So, Favre turned to Don Beebe, who had 11 catches for 220 yards, and the Packers won 23-20 in overtime.

With the bye week that followed, Freeman had plenty of time to think about his eight drops through seven games.

And he had plenty of time to consider coach Mike Holmgren's assurances that despite all that, he was going to be Favre's go-to guy, with all of 39 receptions in the NFL.

Freeman flew home to Baltimore and had a heart-to-heart with his older brother, Clarence III, who had attended the game.

"He's in the Marines. He's a drill instructor. So, you know he has a way of saying things," Freeman said. "And being his brother, I don't really see too much of that. But when he saw my confidence slip, he went into that mode."

That's what best friends are for. "It was just some kind of way he said it and it really dawned on me that, hey, I can really be as good as I want," Freeman said.

The message was simple: wallow in your failures or use them as kindling to turn your career around.

"Are you going to stick your head in the dirt? Or are you going to say, 'OK, I dropped five balls. I'll have to live with the criticism



and I'm going to become better?" "And when he told me that, it really rang a bell in my head.

People are going to talk about those dropped balls, but let's make them forget that," Freeman said. "My biggest problem sometimes in my game was lack of concentration," he said in his typically candid style. "I just got back to basics, running the routes, looking the ball in, watching it go into my arm."

But Freeman's trying times weren't over.

In his first game back against Tampa Bay on Oct. 27, he broke his left forearm, had surgery and missed a month. The time off actually helped.

"I was determined to come back not only as a better player, but a big-play guy," Freeman said.

Returning with a cumbersome cast, Freeman was just that — catching 25 passes for 452 yards and four TDs during the Packers' 4-0 December run. He finished with a team-best 56 receptions for 933 yards.

General manager Ron Wolf, whose savvy pickups this year included Beebe, Desmond Howard

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— Antonio Freeman
Green Bay Split End

and Andre Rison, said those additions pale next to Freeman's arrival.

"Probably the best move that happened didn't have anything to do with the injury to Robert Brooks, and that's the emergence of Antonio Freeman," Wolf said.

Rison was plucked off the waiver wire during Freeman's absence and thrust into the flanker position.

In the six games they have been paired as starters, Freeman had 60 passes thrown in his direction compared to Rison's 24.

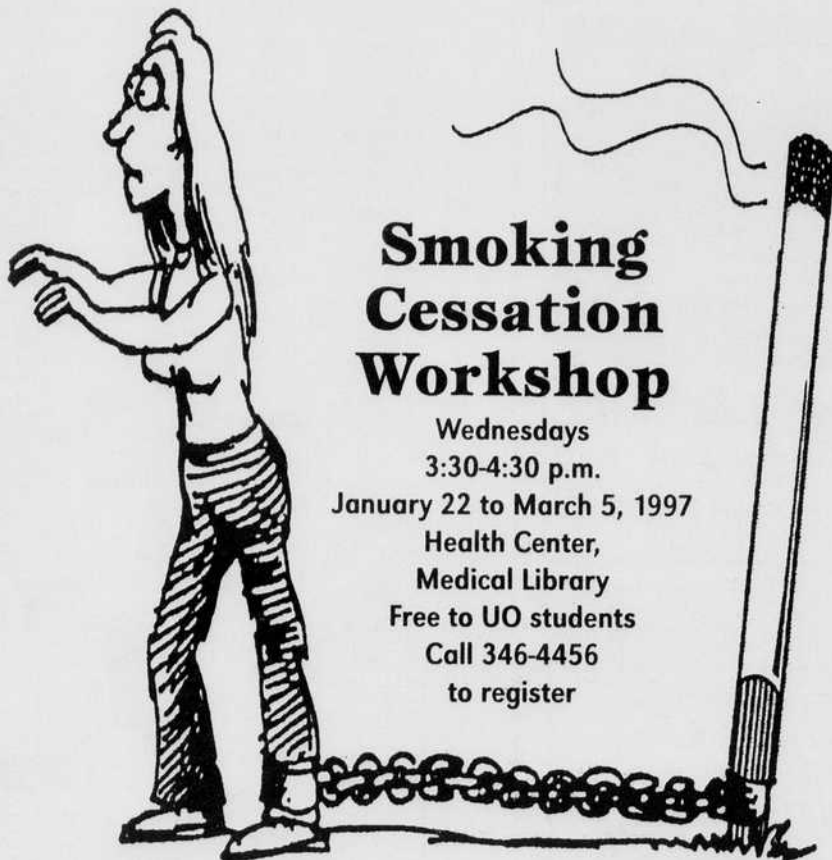
"I remember this summer I came across a magazine, and it said that I would more than likely be the starter at split end," Freeman recalled. "And I told someone, 'Split end? They don't catch the ball.'"

"All we do is run. I'd better get my legs ready. The flanker catches all the balls."

Except when the split end is a second-year sensation who learned his lessons well, thanks to some brotherly advice.

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