

Past follows player to Super Bowl

■ PATRIOTS: History of great plays highlights the career of Dave Meggett

The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — One by one the games went by, and Dave Meggett still hadn't returned a punt or kickoff all the way to the end zone.

He made the Pro Bowl as a rookie in 1989 and scored at least one touchdown on a kick return in each of his first six seasons, all with the Giants. Then he followed coach Bill Parcells to New England, and suddenly the end zone became foreign turf.

Meggett never got there in his 16 games in 1995 or in his first 15 games and the first three quarters of his 16th in 1996. But he said it didn't bother him.

"Oh, no. Oh, goodness gracious no," he insisted Wednesday. "My job is to put the offense in the best field position possible."

He's done an excellent job of that this season. And, when he finally took a kick back all the way, it was a turning point in the Patriots' march to Sunday's Super Bowl against the Green Bay Packers.

The Patriots went back to Giants Stadium for the final regular-season game. A victory would give them a playoff bye, but that seemed highly unlikely when the Giants took a 22-3 lead into the fi-

nal quarter.

New England cut that to 22-10, then forced the Giants to punt. Meggett waited. He knew how badly the Patriots needed a big play. The ball settled into his hands at the 40-yard line.

"He's fearless," Patriots punter Tom Tupa said. "He'll catch the ball, really, when he shouldn't. He doesn't fair catch too many balls, and he doesn't fumble either."

Meggett eluded the first rush of defenders, weaved through others and outraced punter Mike Horan down the left side.

"It was a big play. That's the history of our team: coming up with big plays when plays are needed," Meggett said. "I think the guys on that team have done a very good job all year."

Meggett made the AFC Pro Bowl team as a kick returner but will have a tougher time making big plays against the Packers. In the NFC title game against Carolina, they held Pro Bowl returner Michael Bates to a 12.3-yard average — 18 yards below his league-leading average.

Green Bay's Desmond Howard led the NFL with a 15.1-yard punt return average and scored on three of the 58 punts he handled in the regular season. He also returned a punt for a touchdown in the Packers' opening playoff game against San Francisco.

"I wouldn't say he's a young Dave Meggett," said 30-year-old Meggett. "He's faster than I was."

Howard, the former Heisman Trophy winner who is flourishing at age 26, returned the compliment.

"Meggett is an explosive returner," he said. "We have our hands full."

Meggett was fourth in the AFC with an 11.3-yard punt return average and eighth with a 23-yard kickoff return average.

"I'm not playing against Desmond Howard. We have a scheme that I will have to stay within," he said. "I can't jeopardize our game plan just because I have a one-on-one match-up with Desmond Howard."

Meggett hasn't had an exceptional postseason. His longest returns are 14 yards on punts and 18 on kickoffs.

Chances are he'll have to do better than that against a team whose returner has made a habit of crossing the goal line, something Meggett has done just once in his 34 games with New England.

"Every time I'm on the field, I'm always trying my best to get into the end zone," Meggett said. "Me not returning one all last year really didn't phase me. I really don't set personal goals. My only goal is to be competitive week to week."

49ers owner charged with battery

■ FIGHT: The altercation between Edward DeBartolo and fans occurred after San Francisco lost to Green Bay in a playoff game

The Associated Press

GREEN BAY, Wis. — San Francisco 49ers owner Edward DeBartolo Jr. and a friend were charged with battery Wednesday for a post-game scuffle in which a Green Bay Packers fan was punched and another head-butted.

The fans were charged with disorderly conduct, Police Chief James Lewis said. The charges for all four are issued as city citations, which can be paid through the mail, Lewis said.

The incident outside a Lambeau Field gate occurred after Green Bay's 35-14 victory over the 49ers in a Jan. 4 playoff game.

Guy Courchaine, assistant city attorney, said the citations carry a \$500 fine, plus about \$140 in court costs.

"The opinion of the city attorney is that both charges (battery and disorderly conduct) should go forward so we're going to do that," Police Commander Jerry Williams said. "We've interviewed approximately 12 people in connection with this incident."

Witnesses, including an off-duty sheriff's deputy, told police DeBartolo punched a Packers fan, who then fell backward over a garbage can. The deputy said another man head-butted another fan.

Edward Muransky, 37, of Atherton, Calif., also was charged with battery, while the fans, Dale Nault and William Scharlas, both of Waukesha, were cited for disorderly conduct, Lewis said.

Outagamie County Sheriff's Sgt. Michael Heenan witnessed the exchange as he was leaving the stadi-

um near the 49ers buses. He said DeBartolo punched the fan and DeBartolo's companion head-butted another.

DeBartolo did not immediately return telephone messages left Wednesday at his Youngstown, Ohio, office. There was no telephone listing in Atherton for Muransky.

Williams said police attempted to contact DeBartolo during his investigation, but were told by legal counsel that he had no comment.

"Our relationship with the San Francisco 49ers has been great and this is unfortunate," Williams said of the Lambeau Field incident.

Nault, 64, and Scharlas, 30, told police they were hit, but could not identify who struck them. They were among Packer fans waiting for the 49ers players to come out so they could heckle them, Scharlas said in January.

"Everybody was yelling '40-whiners' and things like that," Scharlas said.

Scharlas' phone number is unlisted. Nault was not home when called by The Associated Press.

Williams said DeBartolo's involvement increased public interest in the case, and that was impetus to get through the investigation more quickly than other battery cases.

"It probably forces us to put a little more time into it," he said.

But he said from an investigator's standpoint there are more important cases.

"We do have other things to do than worry about a battery that occurred at Lambeau Field," he said.

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