

Green Bay's kick returner takes home MVP trophy

■ SUPER BOWL MVP:

Desmond Howard, a former Heisman Trophy winner, returned a 99-yard kickoff

The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Desmond Howard didn't need another Heisman pose. This time, he flashed the Super Bowl Strut.

Just when the New England Patriots were envisioning an upset, Howard assured the Green Bay Packers of their first championship in 29 years — in the mere seconds it took for him to run from one end of the Superdome field to the other.

Howard's 99-yard kickoff return late in the third quarter of Green Bay's 35-21 victory over the Patriots was the biggest play in a game filled with big plays.

He finished with a Super Bowl-record 244 yards on kickoff and punt returns, becoming the first special-teams player to win the game's MVP award.

It was astonishing to watch a player who actually gets on the field so little make such a huge contribution.

The 1991 Heisman Trophy winner returned three punts for touchdowns during the regular season,

then got another in a divisional playoff victory over San Francisco. But he had never brought a kick back all the way during his five-year NFL career.

Until Sunday.

The Patriots, a 14-point underdog, had just scored what seemed to be a momentum-changing touchdown on Curtis Martin's 18-yard run, shrinking the Packers' lead to 27-21.

Howard dropped back at the goal line to take the kick from Adam Vinatieri, while the New England fans, though outnumbered, made the place sound like Foxboro Stadium. So much for that blowout nearly everyone was expecting. This game was going down to the end.

Howard cradled the ball at the 1, burst up the middle, bounced off a tackle by Hason Graham at about the 30 — and that was it.

He was gone. Touchdown.

And though there was still 3:10 left in the third, the game was basically over.

Howard didn't run one step further than he had

to. He stopped at the goalline and began strutting a Deion-like dance, a grin showing through the face mask.

For the first time in NFL history, a player has returned both a kickoff and a punt for touchdowns in the same postseason.

No longer will Howard be remembered for the touchdown pose he struck during his Heisman-winning season at Michigan.

No longer will he be remembered for being a first-round flop at Washington.

No longer will he be remembered for a forgettable season in Jacksonville.

No longer will he be remembered as the Packer who almost was cut in training camp.

The next time Howard dropped into return position after his touchdown, New England's Tom Tupa punted the ball out of bounds.

By then, though, it was too late. Howard's legacy was assured.

Game: Packers just too much for Patriots to handle

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from becoming the first coach to win a Super Bowl with two different franchises.

"I'm disappointed, because I do think we had a chance there for a moment," said Parcells, rumored to be leaving the Patriots. "We played hard, we just cracked a little bit under pressure."

The Packers won the trophy named for their storied coach. It was Lombardi's teams that won the first two Super Bowls.

"Vince Lombardi had a wonderful legacy for the rest of us. Now we're just trying to do our part, and we hope we can do it for a long time to come," Packers coach Mike Holmgren said.

There was, of course, time for sentiment.

The team that wanted to win one for Reggie White did it and he contributed — getting two straight sacks of Drew Bledsoe after Howard's return, and a third late in the game.

That ensured that the Patriots wouldn't strike back at the Packers the way Howard had struck back at them.

It started like a blowout by the Packers, who fulfilled the high expectations with which they entered the season — only Holmgren, who referred to the Super Bowl as "that game" rather than by its name, tried to hold down the exuberance.

First there was the TD pass to Rison from Favre, who finished 14 of 27 for 246 yards. It was 10-0 just 6:25 into the game after Doug Evans' interception set up Chris Jacke's 31-yard field goal.

But by the end of the highest-scoring first quarter in Super Bowl history, New England led 14-10 on TD passes by Bledsoe of 1 yard to Keith Byars and 4 yards to Ben Coates.

And even after a 17-point second quarter by the Packers that included the 81-yard bomb to Freeman and 2-yard TD run by Favre, New England was still in it at 27-14.

And when Ted Johnson stopped Dorsey Levens for a 7-yard loss on fourth and one at the Pats 37 on the first drive of the fourth quarter, New England gained momentum.

They cut it to 27-21 on Curtis Martin's 18-yard burst up the middle with 3:27 left in the third quarter.

But Howard took the kickoff, burst up the middle and went nearly untouched to the end zone — only Hason Graham got a hand on him.

Parcells didn't hesitate when asked the game's turning point.

"Desmond Howard. The kickoff return," he said. "I thought we might have had them rocking just a little bit, 27-21. But he made the big play and I credit him for it."

Then Favre hit Keith Jackson in the back of the end zone for a two-point conversion to give the Packers a 14-point lead.

Bledsoe tried to rally the Patriots in the fourth quarter, but could not. He finished with four interceptions, going 25 of 48 for 253 yards.

The first half was so explosive that the only time to come up for air was on Green Bay's third

touchdown drive, a nine-play 74-yard march that took up 5:59 and gave the Packers a 27-14 lead at halftime.

Favre capped it with a 2-yard bootleg into the end zone on which he extended the ball over the goal line with his right hand as he went out of bounds. Levens ran four times for 33 yards in the drive, the first time in the game either team was able to move on the ground.

Otherwise, it was punch and counterpunch.

The Packers got in the first blow, when Rison turned around Otis Smith and took Favre's perfect pass over the middle for a 54-yard score. He duckwalked into the end zone, one reason why Holmgren first said when he heard of Rison's availability: "He may not be our type of player."

It became 10-0 on the next series after Doug Evans' interception of Bledsoe set up Jacke's 37-yarder.

Just when it looked like the rout was on, New England came back.

On the next series, Byars broke two tackles and rumbled 32 yards with a screen pass, then Martin took a short pass for Bledsoe and went 20 more. After Green Bay's Craig Newsome was called for pass interference in the end zone on Shawn Jefferson, Bledsoe found Byars for a 1-yard score that made it 10-7.

On New England's next possession, Terry Glenn made an acrobatic catch over Eugene Robinson to complete a 44-yard play that put the ball on the Green Bay 4.

On the following play, Bledsoe found Coates at the rear of the end

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— Bill Parcells
New England head coach

zone and it was 14-10 with 2:35 still left in the highest-scoring first quarter in Super Bowl history. The most notable thing on that drive may have been a 2-yard run by Martin that ended a run of 11 straight pass plays by the Patriots.

The New England defense continued to persevere, holding the Packers without a first down on four possessions after the Favre-Rison touchdown until early in the second period.

But that ended quickly in the first minute of the second quarter.

The Packers had a first down on their own 19 when Favre spotted safety Lawyer Milloy alone on Freeman in the slot. Sprung by loose by an audible, Freeman streaked past the defensive back, Favre found him perfectly and suddenly it was an 81-yard touchdown — the longest play from scrimmage in Super Bowl history — and a 17-14 lead for Green Bay.

Jacke's 31-yard field goal made it 20-14. Then came the long drive, set up by Mike Prior's interception of Bledsoe.

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