

Old friends square off in NFC championship game

Steve Mariucci said his experience with Brett Favre will not be an advantage for the 49ers

By Dennis Georgatos
The Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — The way Steve Mariucci sees it, he and Brett Favre grew up together in the NFL.

And what began as a working relationship and evolved into a friendship becomes a rivalry Sunday.

"In his own way, he's pulling for me because we know each other so well, and when we're not playing them, I guess I'm pulling for him," Mariucci said. "But we all know now that we're on opposing sidelines. We're rivals in every sense of the word. He wants to beat me. I want to beat him. It is very competitive right now."

The bond between the two developed during Mariucci's four-year stay in Green Bay as quarterbacks coach. He arrived prior to

the 1992 season at about the same time the Packers swung a trade with Atlanta to acquire Favre and helped the quarterback get through his sometimes awkward and painful formative years.

Mariucci left following the 1995 season, after Favre won the first of his three straight MVP awards, to become head coach of the University of California. Favre tried to convince Mariucci to stay by offering to pay him the difference between his quarterback coach's salary and his new job.

Mariucci spent one season at Cal before becoming head coach of the 49ers (14-3), who play Favre and the Packers (14-3) Sunday in the NFC championship game at 3Com Park.

"I'm still close to him," said Favre, who had Mariucci over for a couple days during the offseason at his Green Bay home, which was decorated by Mariucci's wife, Gayle. "He's a great friend and a great coach. What he has done out there is unbelievable. They're a great team, and it will be the

toughest game we've played all year."

Perhaps no coach knows Favre better than Mariucci. But the 49ers coach said neither his friendship nor knowledge of the quarterback give him any competitive advantage because of Favre's improvisational style of play.

"He's not a predictable guy," Mariucci said. "He is going to run around and make it happen and [the ball] could go anywhere. You just never know what he's going to do."

That includes Favre, who also shrugged off suggestions Mariucci might be able to come up with certain insights that could throw off his game.

"I don't think anybody knows anything about me, including myself," Favre said.

That's what makes defending him so difficult, Mariucci said.

"Over the last few years, he has probably made more big plays, more sensational, run-around, fling-it-up-there kind of plays for touchdowns but also with that

goes certain risk," Mariucci said.

"So we have to stay in coverage. We have to be perfect back there all day. Not most of the day, all day. We have to get to him — we have to get people in his face. And we have to get him improvising so that maybe he throws one to us."

Favre has started for the Packers since 1992, entering the lineup in the third game that season after Don Majkowski was injured. By no means was he an overnight success, and Mariucci served not only as coach and confidant to Favre but as a buffer between the quarterback and Green Bay coach Mike Holmgren.

"As many times as [Favre] was booed out of that stadium — and there were many — and criticized in the papers or in the parking lot, he knew I was in his corner, and Mike stayed in his corner, too," Mariucci said.

"You hear the talk shows, 'Change quarterbacks, put in [Mark] Brunell, put in Ty Detmer. And there was some temptation

to do that. But Mike never did and that proved to be the right thing to do."

After throwing more interceptions (24) than touchdowns (19) in 1993, Favre has come back to throw for 145 TDs in the last four seasons, leading the league in each of the last three, including 35 this year. He has 46 interceptions in that span, including 16 this year.

"He and I really grew up in the NFL," said Mariucci. "I had been there before but my first real job was with the Packers and he had a redshirt year with the Atlanta Falcons."

"He had a tough second year and he had a tough beginning of his third year. It wasn't happening the way he wanted it to so he was a little bit at a crossroads. He was very frustrated and he was either going to go into the tank or be the best quarterback in the league. He chose to let'er rip and he played very well the rest of that year and he hasn't looked back."

Denver confident after opening-round win over Chiefs

A win over the Chiefs gave the Broncos renewed confidence to carry into Pittsburgh

By John Mossman
The Associated Press

DENVER — The Denver Broncos will hit the road this weekend without some of their usual baggage.

Having at last proved capable of winning a tough road game in the playoffs, they are confident they can do it again in Pittsburgh.

Denver's 14-10 victory Sunday in Kansas City — where the Chiefs had been unbeaten this season — helped erase a record of road futility in the postseason.

The Broncos hadn't won on the road in 11 years, since John Elway engineered "The Drive" to beat Cleveland in the AFC championship game on Jan. 11, 1987. That was their only breakthrough in six playoff games away from Mile High Stadium.

"Going into Kansas City and doing what we did, that was a big confidence-booster," Elway said.

"We hadn't won a big game against a good football team in a tough situation in a long time. By winning a big one on the road, we were able to get over the hump."

"It kind of got another skeleton out of the closet, got another monkey off our backs."

Two of Denver's most memorable playoff victories have been characterized as "The Drive" and "The Fumble." Asked if he had an appropriate nickname for the latest win, Elway said, "The Relief."

With a 9-1 start this season, the

Broncos were on the verge of clinching both the AFC West title and homefield advantage throughout the playoffs.

But after losing three of five games, including back-to-back road losses to Pittsburgh and San Francisco, the Broncos ceded the division title to Kansas City.

"I knew we had the talent," Elway said. "But it's a little scary when you're not playing well, especially when you're not playing well at the end of the year. We didn't play well against Pittsburgh, and we didn't play well

against San Francisco. So, yeah, there was concern there."

"But we were able to bounce back against San Diego (a 38-3 victory in the regular-season finale), and then Jacksonville after that (a 42-17 wild-card playoff win). So we're playing our best football at the right time."

To get to the Super Bowl for the fifth time, the Broncos will have to win another road game, on Sunday in the AFC championship at Pittsburgh, where they lost 35-24 on Dec. 7.

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