

Fassel predicts Giants will return to Super Bowl

■ New York coach Jim Fassel guarantees his team will get back to the big game soon

By Tom Canavan
The Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — You didn't think New York Giants coach new Jim Fassel was through making guarantees, did you?

A day after being humbled by the Baltimore Ravens in the Super Bowl, Fassel guaranteed on Monday that the Giants would return to the NFL championship game, and soon.

Fassel, whose playoff guarantee on Nov. 22 ignited the Giants run to the Super Bowl, said the nucleus of the team is solid and that, if the players continue to work hard and play with the same unselfish attitude, they can succeed again.

"I'm going to take the same approach as last year," Fassel said. "I want tough guys, hard-working guys, guys who are committed to coming in here and being together. That way we can climb right back up on top and try to get back to this game, because I think we will. We'll get back to this game. We have a better team right now."

When asked if that was a guarantee, Fassel didn't hesitate.

"Yes," he said in a calm, clear voice.

He was just as quick when asked how long it would take the Giants to get back to the Super Bowl?

"It ain't going to take 10 years, like it took last time," Fassel said referring to the decade between the Giants last two Super Bowl appearances.

The Giants never were in this Super Bowl in losing 34-7. They fell

behind early and spent the rest of the game watching Kerry Collins struggle against the Ravens' awesome defense. The quarterback was intercepted four times. His right shoulder was partially separated in the third quarter with the game out of reach, but he finished the contest.

"I've always been able to put things behind me," Collins said. "I've faced bigger challenges in my life. I'll just circle the wagons again and come back."

Over the next week, Fassel will meet with his players and coaching staff and finalize an offseason training program. He may lose defensive coordinator John Fox, if he lands a head coaching job.

Fassel said he would like to get the contract situation off his mind as soon as possible.

"I don't see it as being a big, diffi-

cult mess," he said. "They have expressed to me that they want me here, and they want me to stay here, and I'm a New York Giant. I never floated my name or threatened about this or that or played the politics of it. I want to be a New York Giant."

Like most coaches, Fassel spent the early morning hours on Monday replaying the game.

Having Collins throw an interception late in the first half was crucial, as was the interception return by Duane Starks in the third quarter, Fassel said.

Fassel was like a proud parent talking about Collins, even through the quarterback played his worst game of the season, throwing the four interceptions. The two talked at a team party after the game.

"I told him I was proud as hell of him," Fassel said. "I am proud of

everything he has done, the way he has handled himself this year, and I'm darn glad he is our quarterback and that we'll be around here together for a long time."

If there was one topic that made Fassel emotional on the day after, it was the team party.

When he walked in, everyone gave him a standing ovation.

"It felt very good," Fassel said, his eyes watering as he recounted the story. "That was very nice, probably as good as I felt."

"It's a hard pill to swallow. We had a great year and a bad day. It hurts right now, but I am not going to let that take away from everything that was accomplished this year. We got to the Super Bowl."

And the Giants are going back, if Fassel's new guarantee is as good as his last.

Atlanta strikes out in offseason trading

■ Atlanta loses out on key offseason trades but stays focussed on next season

By Paul Newberry
The Associated Press

ATLANTA — After getting swept in the first round of the playoffs, Atlanta had big plans for the offseason. Alex Rodriguez was in its sights. So was Mike Hampton.

But A-Rod went to Texas, Hampton signed with Colorado and Atlanta was left to ponder what might have been.

Atlanta settled for some minor tinkering rather than a major overhaul. Andres Galarraga is out. Rico Brogna is in. John Smoltz, Quilvio Veras and Eddie Perez are back.

Otherwise, the team that reports to spring training next month to begin the quest for a 10th straight division title will largely be the same group that took the field last year.

The quiet offseason had sparked some grumbling among Atlanta fans, who wonder if their team's amazing postseason run is nearing an end.

"We have a very good team, a team capable of winning our division and playing for the league championship again," general manager John Schuerholz said.

After winning another NL East title, Atlanta lost 3-0 to St. Louis. It was its earliest exit from the playoffs since the postseason run began in 1991.

"I don't think failing to play for the league championship series once in a consecutive string of 10 years means the end is near," Schuerholz said.

Atlanta made strong pitches for both Rodriguez and Hampton, only to find itself unwilling to meet the market demands.

Rodriguez agreed to a record-setting \$252 million, 10-year contract with the Rangers. Hampton, a 15-game winner for the New York Mets, signed a \$121 million, eight-year contract with Colorado.

"We were not going to spend \$252 million for a player and we were not going to guarantee a pitcher eight years under any circumstances," Schuerholz said.

Atlanta has pledged to keep its payroll — one of the highest in baseball — under \$90 million. Still facing arbitration hearings with Andruw Jones, Kevin Millwood, John Rocker and Veras, the team is committed to at least \$82.5 million in salaries, which doesn't account for a few fringe players who will fill out of the 25-man roster.

A year ago, Atlanta had an \$84.5

million payroll on opening day and finished at \$95 million.

"The notion that some might have that weren't active this winter is as far from the truth as can be," the GM said. "There was an awful lot of activity we were involved in. It just didn't develop into final action this time."

Atlanta's major acquisition — yawn — turned out to be Brogna, a first baseman who had only two homers and 21 RBIs last season. He'll replace Galarraga, who went to Texas after hitting .302 with 28 homers and 100 RBIs.

Atlanta is counting on Brogna to recapture the form he had from 1997-99, when he averaged 21 homers and 96 RBIs for the Phillies. Last year, he was hampered by a broken left forearm.

Comeback will be a theme of spring training, which begins Feb. 16 at Kissimmee, Fla.

Smoltz missed all of last season with an elbow injury. Perez, a valuable backup at catcher, was out most of the year with a shoulder injury. Veras, who played well at second base, tore up a knee just after the All-Star break.

"If all the guys we have on the roster and added to the roster are at their healthy best, we'll have a very strong team coming out of spring training," Schuerholz said.

Smoltz will get the most attention, especially since Atlanta decided to exercise an \$8 million option. Atlanta's best clutch pitcher, he had surgery last spring to repair a chronic elbow problem.

"He's told me on a number of occasions that his arms feels spectacular and he can't wait for spring training," Schuerholz said. "But it makes sense to be cautious."

To cut costs, Atlanta didn't resign Bobby Bonilla and Wally Joyner. Atlanta did pick up 36-year-old outfielder Dave Martinez and infielder Kurt Abbott.

But those two, combined with Paul Bako and Keith Lockhart, won't exactly strike fear in opposing teams.

"Last year might have been the strongest bench we've had in years," Schuerholz said. "But I feel like we have a good solid bench."

Schuerholz figures the biggest battle will be for the last three spots in the bullpen. Atlanta didn't bring back Terry Mulholland, going the low-cost route by signing Matt Whiteside, Joe Slusarski, Marc Valdes and Jake Robbins.

"The middle relief pitching," Schuerholz said, "is where we'll spend most of our time making decisions this spring."

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