

NFL

Unsung heroes often emerge in playoffs

By **ROB MAADDI**
Associated Press

While quarterbacks and other big-name, high-priced players get most of the attention, unlikely heroes often emerge to help their teams win in the NFL playoffs.

Three of the past four Super Bowl winners played in the wild-card round and each team got help from a surprise performer during its championship run.

Packers rookie James Starks had 123 yards rushing in Green Bay's 21-16 win over Philadelphia on Jan. 9, 2011 after running for just 101 yards the entire season.

Giants No. 3 receiver Mario Manningham caught touchdown passes in each of New York's first three playoffs wins in January 2012, nearly equaling his total of four TDs in the regular season.

Ravens cornerback Corey Graham matched his season total with two interceptions in one game against Peyton Manning, including a pick in overtime to set up the winning field goal in Baltimore's 38-35 win at Denver on Jan. 12, 2013.

One of the top defensive performances came from unknown safety Vernon Perry in a playoff win. Perry



In this Aug. 28, 2014, file photo, Pittsburgh Steelers running back Josh Harris (40) runs away from Carolina Panthers defensive back Colin Jones (42) in the fourth quarter of a NFL preseason football game in Pittsburgh. While quarterbacks and other big-name, high-salaried players get most of the attention, unlikely heroes often emerge in the playoffs to help their team win. Philly Brown, Josh Harris and Cole Beasley are among the lesser-known players who could step up this wild-card weekend.

AP Photo/Don Wright, File

intercepted four of Dan Fouts' passes and blocked a field goal in Houston's 17-14 victory over San Diego on Dec. 29, 1979.

Here are potential unsung heroes for each team this wild-card weekend:

CARDINALS: Outside linebacker Alex Okafor led the Cardinals with eight sacks and could be the key to pressuring Cam Newton and limiting his scrambling. Mobile quarterbacks Russell Wilson and

Colin Kaepernick hurt the Cardinals recently, so they have to keep Newton in check.

PANTHERS: WR Philly Brown has turned into Carolina's deep threat and has been used on running plays late in the season. While Kelvin Benjamin will likely go against Patrick Peterson, Brown's speed and playmaking skills could make the difference.

RAVENS: Cornerback Lardari-

us Webb has a difficult assignment covering Steelers All-Pro Antonio Brown in a matchup that could determine which team advances. Brown had an excellent season, but Webb isn't backing down.

STEELERS: RB Josh Harris had nine carries this season, but the rookie is being asked to replace the injured Le'Veon Bell. Fellow rookie Dri Archer along with newly acquired Ben Tate also are in the mix,

Seattle had own Super Bowl hangover to overcome

By **TIM BOOTH**
Associated Press

RENTON, Wash. — Where others saw discord and dissen-

sion, and another Super Bowl champion headed down the path of an early end to their season, Pete Carroll saw a challenge.

A challenge not much different from what Seattle went through on its way to the title a season ago. Call it the Seahawks' version of the Super Bowl hangover.

"There's an obvious effect because you're unique in what you've done, and we addressed it from the first meeting we got back here and ... we figured it out; it just took us a long time," Carroll said. "It just took us longer than we would like, but the thing that happened this year just happened in different order than it did last year."

After starting the season 3-3, the Seahawks closed with a six-game win streak to finish 12-4 and earn home-field advantage through the playoffs. The Seahawks will host either Detroit, Arizona or Carolina in the divisional round next Saturday.

It was a stunning turnaround, considering Seattle's pedestrian start to the season and the surprise October trade of Percy Harvin to the New York Jets.

"I hate to keep going back to last year, but we did win the Super Bowl last year. And through that process at the end of the season when you go through the parade and get the ceremony and get the ring, it makes you forget how hard it was to get to that point, to reach the mountaintop," Seattle wide receiver Doug Baldwin said. "I think a lot of that pressure we had at the beginning of the season when we were 3-3 — from the



AP Photo/Tony Avelar, File

In this Nov. 27, 2014, file photo, Seattle Seahawks head coach Pete Carroll, second from left, and quarterback Russell Wilson (3) celebrate during the fourth quarter of an NFL football game against the San Francisco 49ers in Santa Clara, Calif. Carroll saw a challenge not much different from what Seattle went through on its way to the title a season ago. After its own version of a Super Bowl hangover, Seattle made unlike other past champions and overcame its problems to be in position for another title run.

media, from ourselves — we kind of let that feed into the negativity and forgetting that it wasn't easy last year."

Seattle has already bucked the recent trend as the first Super Bowl champion to reach the post-season since Green Bay won the NFC North in 2011. That was the first layer of history the Seahawks had to overcome. Now is the chance to be the first team since New England in 2004 to repeat.

"When I went into this year with the thought that this is a very unique chance at showing that you can handle all of that," Carroll said. "It's been difficult for people, and the history of it shows you that it's hard to come back and get yourself back into this kind of position again."

But being a Super Bowl winner has not equated to postseason success recently for those that have gotten back to the playoffs.

The last defending champion to win a postseason game was New England in 2005. The Patriots beat Jacksonville in the wild-card round before being ousted by Denver in the divisional round. Since the Patriots' win in 2005, four other defending champions have reached the playoffs. Three were division champions — Indianapolis in 2007; the Giants in 2008; Green Bay in 2011 — who were knocked off at home in the divisional round. New Orleans was a wild-card team in 2010 and lost at Seattle.

That's the next piece of history for the Seahawks to try to over-

come.

Many have pointed to the trade of Harvin as the turning point for Seattle's season. The deal went down on a Friday as the team was leaving for St. Louis, and the Seahawks struggled in the first half of their 28-26 loss to the Rams. In-season trades in the NFL are scarce enough. Even rarer is an elite team giving away a key player rather than acquiring a need.

Only four trades were made in-season in 2014, including Harvin being sent to the Jets. New England made a pair of deals, getting linebackers Jonathan Casillas from Tampa Bay and Akeem Ayers from Tennessee. St. Louis acquired safety Mark Barron from Tampa Bay.

The only other team in the last three seasons to trade away a starter in-season and make the playoffs the same year was Philadelphia. It sent defensive tackle Isaac Sopoaga to New England in late October 2013.

It would be far too simplistic to say Seattle's turnaround was tied solely to the Harvin trade, but it did refocus the team offensively. Through the first five games with Harvin on the roster, Seattle averaged 28.2 carries and 149.8 yards rushing per game. In the 11 games after the trade, with the Seahawks relying more on the running of Marshawn Lynch, they averaged 34.9 carries and 183 yards rushing.

Not surprisingly, the Seahawks went 9-2.

"I think we returned to the strength of knowing our guys, how to use them, and how to implement their strengths," Carroll said. "We always talk about unique qualities that players have, and we may have lost connection with some of that."

2014 All-Pro Team

The Associated Press 2014 NFL All-Pro team selected by a national panel of 50 media members:

FIRST TEAM

OFFENSE

Quarterback—Aaron Rodgers, Green Bay.
Running Backs—DeMarco Murray, Dallas; Le'Veon Bell, Pittsburgh.
Fullback—John Kuhn, Green Bay.
Tight End—Rob Gronkowski, New England.
Wide Receivers—Antonio Brown, Pittsburgh; Dez Bryant, Dallas.
Tackles—Joe Thomas, Cleveland; Tyron Smith, Dallas.
Guards—Marshal Yanda, Baltimore; Zack Martin, Dallas.
Center—Maurkice Pouncey, Pittsburgh.
Placekicker—Adam Vinatieri, Indianapolis.
Kick Returner—Adam Jones, Cincinnati.

DEFENSE

Ends—J.J. Watt, Houston; Mario Williams, Buffalo.
Tackles—Marcell Dareus, Buffalo; Ndamukong Suh, Detroit.
Outside Linebackers—Justin Houston, Kansas City; Elvis Dumervil, Baltimore.
Inside Linebacker—Luke Kuechly, Carolina; Bobby Wagner, Seattle.
Cornerbacks—Richard Sherman, Seattle; Darrelle Revis, New England.
Safeties—Earl Thomas, Seattle; Eric Weddle, San Diego.
Punter—Pat McAfee, Indianapolis.

SECOND TEAM

OFFENSE

Quarterback—Tony Romo, Dallas.
Running Backs—Marshawn Lynch, Seattle.
Fullback—Anthony Sherman, Kansas City.
Tight End—None.
Wide Receivers—Jordy Nelson, Green Bay; Demaryius Thomas, Denver.
Tackles—Jason Peters, Philadelphia; Andrew Whitworth, Cincinnati.
Guards—Josh Sitton, Green Bay; Kyle Long, St. Louis.
Center—Travis Frederick, Dallas.
Placekicker—Stephen Gostkowski, New England.
Kick Returner—Darren Sproles, Philadelphia.

DEFENSE

Ends—Calais Campbell, Arizona; Cameron Wake, Miami, and Fletcher Cox, Philadelphia.
Tackles—Gerald McCoy, Tampa Bay; J.J. Watt, Houston.
Outside Linebackers—Von Miller, Denver; Connor Barwin, Philadelphia.
Inside Linebackers—C.J. Mosley, Baltimore; DeAndre Levy, Detroit, and Lawrence Timmons, Pittsburgh.
Cornerbacks—Chris Harris Jr., Denver; Brent Grimes, Miami.
Safeties—Kam Chancellor, Seattle; Glover Quin, Detroit.
Punter—Johnny Hekker, St. Louis.

PAYTON: Elder Payton led Oregon State to last NCAA tournament appearance

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different ways; he played his way when he was here and I'm playing my way," he said.

Eleven games into his first season with the Beavers, Payton is attempting to build his own legacy. Earlier this month he had a triple-double in a 71-43 win over Grambling State, with 10 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists.

It was the just the second triple-double in Oregon State history. And yep, you guessed it, Gary Payton got the first one back in the 1988-89 season when he had 20 points, 14 rebounds and 11 assists against Portland at Gill.

The Paytons are believed to be the first father-son duo to both have triple-doubles for the same school.

The younger Payton leads Oregon State (8-3) with an average of 12.4 points, 8.6 rebounds and 3.1 assists this season. He leads the Pac-12, and ranks 10th in the nation, in steals with an average of 2.9 a game.

Payton has been a highlight on a rebuilding team under first-year coach Wayne Tinkle. The Beavers had just four returning players and held open tryouts in October to help round out a roster. They currently have just nine scholarship players.

Payton was one of the newcomers after transferring from Salt Lake Community College, where he averaged 14.1 points, 7.9 rebounds, 3.8 assists and 1.9 steals per game last season.

"My strengths are rebounding, you know, facilitating, getting other people involved," he said. "I'm starting to get better off the dribble and offensive-wise. But I'd say rebounding is my biggest strength. Sometimes I don't think I have as many as I do. It just comes natural."

Payton's dad is the most celebrated player in Oregon State history, and still holds school records for career points, assists and steals. He is the Pac-12's all-time leader in assists (938) and steals (321).

A consensus All-American, the elder Payton led the Beavers to their last NCAA tournament appearance in 1990. He went on to an 18-year career in the NBA. Known as "The Glove," he spent 13 seasons with the Seattle SuperSonics.

"I'm very proud of him. He's doing a wonderful job," the proud father said. "He's playing the way that I like him to play. He's playing all-around basketball. That's what every team needs, all-around basketball players, who can run the point, who



AP Photo/The Register-Guard, Andy Nelson

Oregon guard Joseph Young knocks the ball from the hands of Cal State Northridge forward Steven Maxwell during the first half of an NCAA college basketball game in Eugene, Ore., on Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014.

can play the two (position), who can rebound the basketball and who can defend."

Payton didn't push his son to follow in his footsteps. And the younger Payton said he didn't even really start getting into the game until he was a junior in high school.

"I didn't really go at him like that. Now that I come to the games and he hears me on the sidelines, I tell him things like what he's doing or not doing," the elder Pay-

ton said. "After the games I'll give him my comments and tell him what he needs to know, what he needs to look at and what he needs to work at. And then we leave it alone, we move on."

Tinkle would like to see Payton emerge as a leader.

"He's been really big for us," Tinkle said. "He's played a lot of minutes, he's our leading scorer, he's our leading rebounder. We've got to get him more comfortable

at giving leadership more consistently and really adopt a mentality of going hard every day."

Those stumbles are there for the young Payton. In the Beavers' last game, a 60-52 loss at Quinnipiac, Payton was held scoreless and fouled out. Oregon State has one more non-conference game, Tuesday night against UC Santa Barbara, before opening the Pac-12 season at rival Oregon on Saturday.

Payton admitted he's got a lot to work on, but he talks mostly about the team collectively. The big challenges still lie in front of the Beavers in a conference that includes three ranked teams: Arizona, Utah and Washington.

"Once we get to the Pac-12 it's a whole other level, it's going to be a battle once we get into conference," he said. "But we're learning more every day, and it's up to us."

but Harris will keep getting the ball if he's productive.

BENGALS: TE Jermaine Gresham averaged a career-low 7.4 yards per catch on 62 receptions while Pro Bowl receiver A.J. Green and Mohamed Sanu make the big plays for Cincinnati's offense. Andy Dalton likes dumping the ball off, so Gresham could be quite active.

COLTS: LB Jonathan Newsome set a franchise rookie record with 6 1/2 sacks, including two last week that built his case for more playing time. The Colts had trouble pressuring quarterbacks, so they'll need Newsome to disrupt Dalton's rhythm.

LIONS: S James Iheigbo had a career-best four interceptions in his first season with the Lions. He is coming off being benched in the second half in last week's loss at Green Bay, so he'll have even more motivation to make plays. Iheigbo also knows what it takes to win in the playoffs. He played for the Ravens two years ago.

COWBOYS: WR Cole Beasley is easily overlooked on an offense that includes Dez Bryant, DeMarco Murray and Jason Witten. But Beasley has a knack for making a tough catch and slipping through the defense for a key first down.