

NFL

Seattle overcomes challenge of early bye week

By **TIM BOOTH**
Associated press

RENTON, Wash. — When the NFL schedule was released last April, the early date of the Seattle Seahawks' bye stuck out as potentially more of a challenge than a closing stretch of six games against mostly NFC West foes.

So in reality, the biggest victory this past weekend for the Seahawks had nothing to do with getting matched against Carolina in the NFC divisional playoff this Saturday.

It was getting a chance to sit at home and do nothing after 13 straight weeks of games.

"Last year it was a little different only because we had a week later in the season. I think we had a bye Week 12 or Week 13. And this year we had it maybe Week 5. That makes for a very, very, very long season," Seattle cornerback Richard Sherman said. "This one, I guess we needed it more, it helps us more this time around. Guys are banged up. Guys need a break on their bodies. I think we understood the sense of urgency throughout the season that we would need this. That's why we fought so hard those last couple of



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. earlier this season.

(AP Photo/Tony Avelar, File)

games. We want to win them regardless, but we recognized as a team what we needed to get to, to get that rest we needed."

The Seahawks took the weekend off before returning to practice Tuesday to begin preparations for hosting the Panthers. And there might not be a team outside the NFC West that Seattle has more familiarity with than the

Panthers. The teams have met four times since coach Pete Carroll took over the Seahawks in 2010, including each of the last three seasons in Charlotte.

While Seattle has won all three of those trips East, none have come easy. The Seahawks won 16-12 in 2012; 12-7 in the 2013 season opener; and earlier this season needed a touchdown in

the final minute for a 13-9 victory.

The Seahawks would be the first defending champion since 2005 to win a playoff game the following season if they can get past the Panthers.

"Our bye being early in the year ... that's tough. It could have gone either way," Seattle QB Russell Wilson said. "It could have been a bad thing for us or a really good thing for us and I was telling the guys back then that it could be a really good thing for us because hopefully we could get on a roll and stay on that roll and sure enough we did."

Seattle should be close to full health when the Panthers arrive. The most important addition could be the return of center Max Unger after he missed the final six regular-season games with knee and ankle injuries suffered in the Week 11 loss at Kansas City.

Seattle has used Patrick Lewis and Lemuel Jeanpierre at center with Unger out. But Unger is Seattle's most experienced offensive lineman despite playing in just six games this season.

The Seahawks expect cornerback Tharold Simon and tight end Cooper Helfet to also be available after missing games at the end of the regular season.

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