

NFL Playoffs

Romo seeks playoff breakthrough

Veteran passer looks to shed letdown image

By SCHUYLER DIXON
Associated Press

IRVING, Texas — Aaron Rodgers has a Super Bowl ring, the prize that keeps Tony Romo going through the heartbreaking endings and accumulating back injuries in Dallas.

Still, the hunger is growing for Rodgers heading into Sunday’s divisional playoff because Green Bay hasn’t reached the NFC championship game since winning it all four years ago on Romo’s home field. And Romo has never even been that far.

“You realize very quickly, it’s so difficult to do that,” Rodgers said. “A lot of things have to come together. We’ve come up short the last couple of years and it just kind of fuels the fire a little bit more.”

Romo knows about coming up short.

There was his infamous flub of the hold on a field goal that could have beaten Seattle in a wild-card game eight years ago, then a loss to New York as the No. 1 seed in the NFC a year later when the Giants went on to beat undefeated New England in the Super Bowl.

The past three seasons ended with losses that left the Cowboys at 8-8 and out of the playoffs. Now here’s Romo returning to the state where he grew up a fan of Brett Favre, trying to get past this round of the playoffs in his third try in Dallas’ first postseason trip to storied Lambeau Field since the Ice Bowl loss 47 years ago.

“I’d love to give you a headline, but it’s really just



Dallas Cowboys quarterback Tony Romo passes the ball during the first half of an NFL football game against the Washington Redskins in Landover, Md. At left, in an Aug. 22, 2014, file photo, Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers (12) throws a pass against the Oakland Raiders during the first half of an NFL preseason football game in Green Bay, Wisc.

another week in the preparation side of it,” said Romo, who signed with the Cowboys in 2003 as an undrafted free agent out of Eastern Illinois. “I know it’ll be fun for my family and friends and that stuff. But for me, it’s a playoff game and you’ve got to play your best.”

These were the two highest-rated quarterbacks in the NFL this season. Rodgers hasn’t thrown an interception at home in more than two years, while Romo had 20 touchdown passes and two interceptions in leading Dallas (13-4) to an 8-0 road record.

Whether it plays out as a battle of elite quarterbacks remains to be seen. First, the temperature at kickoff likely will be in the teens.

NFC Divisional



Dallas Cowboys



Green Bay Packers

• Sunday, 10:05 a.m.

• at Lambeau Field

Second, Rodgers is playing through a calf strain that limited him in practice all week even though the Packers (12-4) had a bye after beating the Lions.

Rodgers was listed as probable Friday after declaring earlier in the week he would start despite an injury sustained three weeks ago against Tampa Bay and aggravated in the regular-season finale against Detroit.

“I think the fact he went through the opportunity Tampa, Detroit where he had to play through the situation where you had to be smart in the pocket, he has that experience,” Packers coach Mike McCarthy said. “He looks like he’s moving fine to me right now. We’re not going

to change anything or our approach of how we want to attack Dallas’ defense.”

Romo’s health was the talk of the preseason with the 34-year-old coming off back surgery. He sustained an unrelated back injury on a sack in a loss to Washington and looked ragged playing on short rest in another loss to Philadelphia.

Otherwise, he put together one of his best seasons after declaring in training camp that fans would see “the best version of me” — a statement that surprised Troy Aikman, the three-time Super Bowl winner who had back surgery early in his Dallas career.

Besides Romo’s back issue, Aikman figured a weak Dallas defense would be a problem. But the defense has been better, and the Cowboys helped Romo with a more balanced attack featuring NFL rushing leader DeMarco Murray.

Colts hoping to find stability up front

By MICHAEL MAROT
Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Anthony Castonzo has watched the faces come and go along Indianapolis’ offensive line all season.

He sees no reason to doubt the replacements now.

With three of the team’s projected starters on injured reserve, Castonzo is convinced this changing cast can come up with a good enough performance Sunday to send the Colts to the AFC Championship game.

“Obviously, we would rather have the continuity,” Indy’s starting left tackle said Friday. “But the guys who have filled in all season have done a really good job. I don’t think there’s a guy on this team that we don’t trust to play.”

The theory has been tested repeatedly all season.

Indy has plugged 10 linemen into 11 starting combinations and has used the

AFC Divisional



Indianapolis Colts



Denver Broncos

• Sunday, 1:40 p.m.

same lineup in back-to-back weeks just two times since Week 4 — Oct. 19 and 26 and Nov. 30 and Dec. 7. With coach Chuck Pagano announcing Friday that everybody was “ready to go,” it appears it will happen again in Sunday’s divisional-round game at Denver.

Somehow, the Colts (12-5) still managed to win the AFC South title, a wild-card game while limiting opponents to just 27 sacks on Andrew Luck, the lowest of Luck’s career.

This weekend will be a different challenge.

The AFC West champs are heading into the playoffs with a week of rest, the No. 3 overall defense and an intimidating group of pass rushers such as defensive end DeMarcus Ware and outside linebacker Von Miller, who combined for 24 of the Broncos’ 41 sacks and could cause havoc all day for the Colts’ makeshift line.

“It’s going to be an all-day job be-

cause if you lose to any one of these guys, they’re going to get the quarterback,” said Castonzo, the only lineman to start each of the first 17 games.

Castonzo understands.

A year ago he and right tackle Gosder Cherilus were the pillars on a line that went into the playoffs after using six different starting lineups over the final six weeks of the regular season. Indy followed a wild-card round him over Kansas City with a 43-22 loss at New England in the divisional round.

Cherilus won’t be around Sunday. He was placed on injured reserve last week with groin, hip and shoulder injuries.

Also out will be right guard Hugh Thornton, who went on injured reserve this week with a shoulder injury, and Donald Thomas, who was expected to start at left guard, sustained a season-ending torn right quad in training camp. Thomas’ absence gave second-round draft pick Jack Mewhort a chance to play, and he’s played well in 14 starts -- 13 at left guard and one at right tackle.

Ravens hope for more playoff success

Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. (AP) — The temperature drops, friendly fans roar and the Patriots pile up victories.

New England has the best home record in the NFL in Bill Belichick’s 15 seasons as coach, playoffs included.

Watch out, though. Here come the road-tested Baltimore Ravens for a divisional game Saturday.

“There’s nothing that the

crowd can do to help you make the plays that you’re supposed to make,” Patriots quarterback Tom Brady said.

The Ravens aren’t likely to get rattled even against the AFC’s top-seeded team. Not with cool Joe Flacco at quarterback and a 2-1 playoff record at Gillette Stadium in the past five seasons.

Baltimore has 10 postseason road wins, all since 2008 and tied with Green Bay for most in NFL history.

Why so many?

“Well, shoot, we can’t get ourselves any home (games), I guess,” Flacco said. “We’ve obviously had a lot of chances at (road games), a lot of experience with it, and reacted well in it.”

The Ravens won three road playoff games and the Super Bowl in the 2012 season. Last Saturday they won a wild-card game 30-17 in Pittsburgh while the Patriots had a bye.

“We could be going to

play on Mars and I’d still be very confident,” Ravens wide receiver Torrey Smith said.

Since Belichick became coach in 2000, the Patriots are 1-2 in the playoffs against the Ravens and 11-1 against all other teams.

New England lost AFC championship games to Baltimore in the 2009 and 2012 seasons and beat them in the 2011 season before losing the Super Bowl to the New York Giants.



Seattle Seahawks wide receiver Paul Richardson, top, makes a leaping reception against the defense of St. Louis Rams’ Janoris Jenkins (21) in the second half of an NFL football game in Seattle. Richardson had 10 receptions for 119 yards in Seattle’s last two games after catching 19 passes the first 14.

Unsung players could determine playoff winners

By ROB MAADDI
Associated Press

From Dennis Thurman to Blair Thomas, unlikely players have stepped up to help the Dallas Cowboys beat the Green Bay Packers in past playoffs.

Don’t be surprised if the star of Sunday’s divisional playoff game at Green Bay isn’t Tony Romo or Aaron Rodgers, DeMarco Murray or Eddie Lacy, Dez Bryant or Jordy Nelson.

Many lesser-known players have produced plenty of clutch postseason performances over the years. Thurman and Thomas are just two examples in this series alone.

When Emmitt Smith went down with an injury against the Packers on Jan. 8, 1995, Thomas replaced him and ran for 70 yards and two touchdowns to lead Dallas to a 35-9 win. Thomas had just 137 yards rushing and two TDs the entire season split between New England and the Cowboys.

A decade earlier, Thurman intercepted three of Lynn Dickey’s passes to help Dallas beat Green Bay 37-26 in a playoff game on Jan. 16, 1983. He returned one of those picks 39 yards for a TD.

Here are potential unsung heroes for each of the NFL teams playing this weekend:

RAVENS: Joe Flacco may be the new Joe Cool in the playoffs, but safety Will Hill could be the key to victory for Baltimore. Hill is responsible for trying to stop Rob Gronkowski. If Hill keeps the All-Pro tight end in check, the Ravens have a better shot at the upset.

PATRIOTS: Shane Vereen’s numbers have steadily declined this season, but the Patriots need one of their running backs to deliver against a run defense that allowed the fourth-fewest yards in the league. LeGarrette Blount and Jonas Gray are also part of New England’s committee backfield. Vereen has extra motivation Saturday night facing former college teammate Justin Forsett.

PANTHERS: Luke Kuechly and Seattle’s Bobby Wagner are All-Pro linebackers so most of the focus is on them.

But another linebacker, Thomas Davis, will play an integral role for Carolina’s defense. Davis has to help slow down Marshawn Lynch and contain Russell Wilson. While Kuechly draws the attention, Davis’ performance can go a long way toward lifting the Panthers to a major upset.

SEAHAWKS: Rookie wide receiver Paul Richardson had 10 receptions for 112 yards in Seattle’s last two games after catching 19 passes the first 14. Richardson has big-play talent. The Seahawks had only one player — Doug Baldwin — catch more than 40 passes this season, so Wilson spreads the ball around.

COLTS: Tight end Coby Fleener had 291 yards on nine of his receptions and gained first downs on 40 of his 51 catches. Andrew Luck and the Colts have a deep threat in T.Y. Hilton and the dependable, veteran hands of Reggie Wayne. Fleener, Luck’s teammate at Stanford, is a go-to type of guy who can make a difference in a shootout.

BRONCOS: Rookie cornerback Bradley Roby knocked down Luck’s fourth-down pass to Wayne to seal Denver’s 31-24 win over Indianapolis in Week 1. Now Roby has a chance to be the star in his first playoff game. Luck will likely target Roby more than the formidable duo of Chris Harris Jr. and Aqib Talib.

COWBOYS: New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie has turned into Jerry Jones’ good-luck charm. Christie governs a state filled with fans of the Giants and Eagles, but he grew up rooting for the Cowboys and sat with Jones in the owner’s suite last week. His awkward, celebratory hug of Jones when the Cowboys sealed a win against Detroit was the punch line for quite a few jokes this week.

PACKERS: Fullback John Kuhn earned All-Pro honors for doing the dirty work to help Green Bay’s offense soar this season. Kuhn doesn’t get the ball much — 24 carries, 4 catches — but he’s vital to the Packers’ success because he’s an excellent lead blocker and pass protector.

SEAHAWKS: Panthers trying to become 1st losing record team to reach conference championship

Continued from 1B

cult on the Seahawks. None of the three games were decided by more than five points and neither team scored more than 16.

Carolina is trying to become the first team to reach the conference championship game after making the playoffs with a losing record. Seattle knows the road Carolina is trying to travel. The Seahawks won the NFC West in 2010 with a 7-9 mark and beat New Orleans in the wild-card round before falling to Chicago.

“The truth of the matter is it doesn’t matter how you get in, just get in, and then see what happens,” Carolina coach Ron Rivera said.

“It’s what happened to Seattle a few years back, they got hot. They got hot, they won a game, that’s kind of the way we look at it. We got hot, we won a home field playoff game, but we just go from there.”

Here are other things to watch as Seattle seeks an eighth straight playoff win at home:

CAM AND RUSS: Cam Newton has never played well against Seattle and all those games have been at home. Newton has a passer rating of 70.6 and been sacked eight times in three games against the Seahawks.

“It’s about going into a hostile environment and not only proving to people, but proving to ourselves

that we belong here,” Newton said.

Russell Wilson hasn’t been perfect, but has managed to make key plays to go 3-0 against Carolina. This season, Wilson hit Luke Willson on a 23-yard TD in the final minute to pull out the victory.

PANTHERS ON THE RUN: The Panthers are averaging 196.6 yards rushing per game during their current win streak.

Jonathan Stewart has carried the load, averaging 104.8 yards per game with two touchdowns during that span.

Newton is averaging 56.2 yards per game with three TDs during the stretch. One of the main reasons for

the improved play is the Panthers have found consistency on the offensive line, starting the same five players for the past six games.

SUFFOCATING: When All-Pro linebacker Bobby Wagner and safety Kam Chancellor returned from injuries, Seattle’s defense became suffocating. The Seahawks didn’t allow any fourth-quarter points during their six-game winning streak. They allowed 39 total points and an average of 202.2 total yards.

GANO STRUGGLING: Carolina’s Graham Gano parlayed an outstanding season in 2013 into a big contract this past

offseason. He’s 30 of 37 this year, but has struggled in recent weeks with missed field goals in three of the last four games. He’s also struggled in the fourth quarter, converting just 8 of 12 attempts.

EAR PLUGS: Newton and his Carolina teammates have never experienced CenturyLink Field and its notorious noise. Sherman called the first experience for any opponent in Seattle “unnerving.” Including the postseason, Seattle has won 24 of 26 at home.

“I never think you can be a championship team unless you have a great advantage when you play at home,” Carroll said.