

NFL

# Rematches set for conference championships

By BARRY WILNER  
Associated Press



**Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers waves to fans after an NFL divisional playoff football game against the Dallas Cowboys Sunday, Jan. 11, 2015, in Green Bay, Wis. The Packers won 26-21.**

AP Photo/Matt Ludtke

You again. Not that the Patriots and Seahawks are likely to mind seeing who has joined them in the NFL's conference championships. Remember, New England routed Indianapolis 42-20 and Seattle romped over Green Bay 36-16 to open the season.

Rematches at the final step to reaching the Super Bowl have been common recently. In the AFC, from 2009-14, only in 2011 was the conference championship not a repeat meeting. In the NFC, it happened in 2010, 2011, 2013 and this season.

Twice in the NFC, intradivision matchups meant a third game between rivals: 2010 when Green Bay won at Chicago, and 2013, when Seattle beat San Francisco.

Not one of the others has involved teams from the same division. Excluding 2014 — if you know now who is going to win next Sunday, please clue us in — in those rematches, the regular-season winner also won the AFC playoff game only once: Baltimore over New England in 2012.

In the NFC, the Giants lost to the 49ers during the regular schedule, but beat them in overtime in the conference title match.

Rematches are a dou-

ble-edged sword. The victor in the first meeting has the confidence of already owning a win and the knowledge that more than enough worked during that regular-season game to handle the opponent. The loser has the revenge factor — and maybe a touch more motivation.

"I'd like to think I'm a better quarterback and we're a better team and more well-equipped to handle the unknown and the unforeseen," Colts QB Andrew Luck said.

"I think we've got a bunch of good football players, and a chance to go up New England and play them and get another crack at it is awesome. We'll make sure to take full advantage of it

and do what we can."

The Colts did plenty on Sunday in dominating Denver, avenging their opening loss of 2014. They also saw the Patriots struggle, twice falling into 14-point holes before rallying to defeat Baltimore on Saturday.

As Patriots coach Bill Belichick noted, dryly of course: "I don't think that's a formula to win a lot of playoff games. They're a tough group and they never give up, no matter what the situation is."

The upcoming situation is simply this: Luck and the Colts have the look of a rising power after two highly impressive postseason performances. New England showed some vulnerability

that Luck, who led the NFL with 40 TD passes, and a rapidly improving defense just might be able to take advantage of.

Of course, after vanquishing Peyton Manning and the Broncos, Indy gets Tom Brady, the most accomplished postseason quarterback of his era.

"That's how it works in the playoffs," safety Mike Adams says. "Everybody we play is top-tier. Everybody we play is big time. We got to step our game up and be ready."

Even more intriguing might be the NFC matchup.

Seattle was on a, well, Super high for the season's traditional kickoff game, and the defending NFL champs

dismantled Green Bay. Then the Seahawks went into a funk and, at one point were 3-3.

They are now 13-4 and have that mean, hungry, determined, versatile and, yes, invincible air about them.

"Guys are playing selfless. There aren't any egos, there aren't any agendas, and guys just want to do whatever it takes to win," All-Pro cornerback Richard Sherman said.

"If that means making a tackle, then make the tackle; if that means catching the football, we're going to catch the football. Guys are playing for one another, they don't care about stats, nor do they care about anything else."

Sounds a lot like Green Bay, which displayed the resilience of a championship contender in its scintillating comeback victory against Dallas at Lambeau Field. An ailing All-Pro QB Aaron Rodgers, still battling an aching calf, got everyone involved, including two rookie targets who scored touchdowns in the second half.

Just like the Seahawks, the Packers are vastly improved from midseason.

And equally as hungry. "Looking forward to going back up to Seattle," coach Mike McCarthy says, "and looking forward to winning the NFC championship."

# Seattle avoids playoff curse of Super Bowl winners

By TIM BOOTH  
Associated Press

SEATTLE — In the buildup to their playoff opener, the Seattle Seahawks never acknowledged the history of flameouts that followed Super Bowl champions that made the playoffs the following season.

Then again, the entire second half of this season has been about the Seahawks putting history in the past and focusing on the present.

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"If that means making a tackle, then make the tackle; if that means catching the football, we're going to catch the football. Guys are playing for one another, they don't care about stats, nor do they care about anything else."

Seattle used a bevy of big plays in its 31-17 win over Carolina on Saturday night in an NFC divisional playoff game, becoming the first defending Super Bowl champion to win a playoff game since New England in January 2006.

The Seahawks used two of the longest scoring plays in franchise postseason history and a virtuoso passing performance from Russell Wilson to overwhelm the Panthers and advance to the NFC championship game for the second straight season.

Seattle will host Green Bay in the conference title game next Sunday, a rematch of the first game of the regular season when the Seahawks outscored the Packers 19-6 in the second half for a 36-16 victory.

"It's going to be one of those for the ages," Wilson said. "You look forward to that, and I definitely look forward to playing at home."

The biggest play of Seattle's victory was Kam Chancellor's 90-yard interception return for a touchdown midway through the fourth quarter that gave the Seahawks a 21-point lead. But that was just part of a night of big plays from the Seahawks, especially in the pass game.



**Seattle Seahawks strong safety Kam Chancellor (31) runs in front of Carolina Panthers tight end Ed Dickson (84) to score on an interception 90 yards for a touchdown during the second half of an NFL divisional playoff football game in Seattle, Saturday, Jan. 10, 2015.**

AP Photo/John Froschauer

Seattle had six offensive plays of 25 yards or more, five of those coming in the pass game. Jermaine Kearse had the best day of his career with 129 yards receiving, including a 63-yard touchdown where he pulled in the pass from Wilson with one arm while shielding the defender.

Kearse had two other catches of 33 yards, and Luke Willson had receptions of 29 and 25 yards in the fourth quarter, the second for a touchdown.

The five passes of 25 or more yards tied the most in Wilson's career. He threw for 268 yards, but 199 of those came on third downs where Wilson was a perfect 8 for 8 passing.

His passer rating of 149.2 was the fifth-highest in postseason history and Wilson now has a career passer rating of 109.6 in the playoffs, the highest all time for any QB with at least 150 pass attempts.

## Touchdown after interception was seismic

SEATTLE (AP) — An interception and 90-yard touchdown by

Kam Chancellor was the biggest play of the Seahawks' playoff victory judging from seismic equipment that monitored the shaking at CenturyLink Field.

A Richard Sherman interception and Marshawn Lynch run on Saturday also jogged the needles on the Pacific Northwest Seismic Network.

## WR Richardson out with torn ACL

RENTON, Wash. (AP) — Rookie wide receiver Paul Richardson will miss the rest of the playoffs for the Seattle Seahawks after suffering a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee.

The team confirmed Richardson's injury on Sunday night. Fox Sports first reported the injury.

Richardson was injured in the second half of Seattle's 31-17 win over Carolina in an NFC divisional playoff game on Saturday night. Richardson landed hard on his left knee jumping for a deep pass from Russell Wilson and walked off the field with a significant limp. He did

not return.

Richardson also tore the ACL in his left knee in college at Colorado.

Richardson had become more involved in Seattle's offense as the season progressed. Richardson had 13 receptions in the final three games of the regular season, including his first NFL touchdown. He had one reception against the Panthers.

## Seahawks expect Unger, Maxwell to go vs. Packers

RENTON, Wash. (AP) — The Seattle Seahawks expect center Max Unger and cornerback Byron Maxwell to be fine for Sunday's NFC championship game versus Green Bay.

Seattle coach Pete Carroll said Monday that Unger appeared to be fine after having the back of his legs rolled up on in the fourth quarter of the Seahawks' win over Carolina on Saturday. The concern was that Unger had re-aggravated a high-ankle sprain.

Maxwell was ill last week and was limited to just four snaps on special teams. Carroll said it seems like Maxwell has recovered.

# Packers rally past stunned Cowboys; Colts raise questions for Manning

Associated Press

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Slowed by injury but perfect in the clutch, Aaron Rodgers used his accurate arm to help the Packers move one step closer to the Super Bowl.

An officiating call that went Green Bay's way also helped in a 26-21 win Sunday over the Dallas Cowboys.

Rodgers went 9 of 9 in the fourth quarter, including a laser-like 13-yard touchdown pass to Richard Rodgers for the go-ahead score with 9:10 left of the fourth quarter. The final period also featured the officials overturning what was initially a brilliant catch by Dallas' Dez Bryant.

Bryant jumped high for the 31-yard grab to the Packers' 1 over cornerback Sam Shields, who had solid coverage on fourth-and-2 with 4:42 left in the game. But the play was ruled incomplete on replay review

after Packers coach Mike McCarthy challenged the call.

The NFL rule states the receiver must maintain control all the way to the ground. Replays showed Bryant bobbled the ball as he rolled into the end zone, with part of it touching the field.

Hours after the game, Bryant tweeted: "as I went to the ground I rolled over and I tipped the ball to gain better control. We lost and I accept it but please change that rule."

**NEW ENGLAND 35, BALTIMORE 31** — At Foxborough, Mass., Tom Brady dug the Patriots out of two 14-point holes — the first team to do that in NFL playoff history — to reach the AFC championship game for the fourth straight year with a 35-31 win over the Baltimore Ravens on Saturday.

Thanks to three touchdown passes by Brady and one by college

quarterback turned receiver Julian Edelman, the resilient Patriots kept their season alive.

Brady led a masterful march — completing eight of nine passes and running for a first down — to the decisive 23-yard touchdown completion to Brandon LaFell with just over five minutes left to give the Patriots their first lead.

Brady completed 33 of 50 passes for 367 yards for an offense that picked up just 14 on the ground, the second fewest in team playoff history. His 46 career playoff touchdowns surpassed Joe Montana's 45 for most in NFL history.

**INDIANAPOLIS 24, DENVER 13** — At Denver, Andrew Luck displaced Peyton Manning in Indianapolis, and now he might have sent his predecessor into retirement, too.

Manning was murky about his

future following Denver's 24-13 loss to the Colts in the AFC divisional round Sunday, the Broncos' first loss at home in 13 months.

After saying last month that he planned on coming back for an 18th season, the five-time MVP wasn't so certain after his latest playoff fiasco.

Luck, the top pick in the 2012 draft following Manning's tearful divorce from the Colts, has Indy one win away from its first Super Bowl since 2009. Luck threw TD passes to Dwayne Allen and Hakeem Nicks and Daniel Herron ran for a score.

Manning, meanwhile, kept overthrowing Emmanuel Sanders and Demaryius Thomas deep.

"You never see Peyton overthrow guys," Colts defensive tackle Jean Francois said. "He usually puts the ball right on the numbers. And when we he kept overthrowing it, we knew we had him."

# Former fullback recounts ocean escape

By STEVEN WINE  
Associated Press

PLANTATION, Fla. — The former NFL fullback entered the room with a wobble in his walk, and needed assistance climbing a podium so he could face a media throng and discuss his death-defying 16-hour swim to shore.

Rob Konrad sipped from a bottle of water, his efforts to rehydrate ongoing four days after the episode. His wife sat at his side rubbing his leg in support, and tears welled in their eyes as he spoke Monday.

"Happy to be here," he began with a wry smile.

"I shouldn't be here," he said later, his voice cracking.

The 38-year-old Konrad's escape was a testament to willpower and world-class athleticism. The first reports of his adventure last week received worldwide attention.

Even endurance swimmer Diana Nyad was impressed.

"It's an incredible story," Nyad said. "Taking his life in his hands and deciding he was going to save himself, I admire him."

Konrad, who played for the Miami Dolphins from 1999 to 2004, had been around boats since his childhood on Boston's North Shore. So he knew what it meant when he fell off his 31-foot Grady-White while fishing alone nine miles from land.

"A boater's nightmare," he said.

He swam to Palm Beach, covering a distance of 27 miles before ringing the doorbell of an oceanfront home for help at 4:30 a.m. Thursday.

The U.S. Coast Guard last week provided a brief summary of the events. Konrad, still weak after several days in the hospital for treatment of hypothermia and dehydration, held a news conference to fill in the details.

They were hard to believe, he and his wife agreed.

"It was a miracle he made it home," Tammy Konrad said.

Her husband said he was taking his boat for servicing last Wednesday and decided to do a little fishing along the way. He had caught a large fish and was tending to the rod when a large wave hit, flipping Konrad into the ocean.

His boat was on autopilot and headed east. There were no other boats in sight. Konrad wasn't wearing a life preserver. It was 12:30 p.m.

"I realized I was in some real trouble," he said.

Konrad quickly decided to swim toward shore, although he figured the trip would take more than 10 hours, and feared succumbing to hypothermia or cramps after two or three hours. The ocean temperature was in the low 70s — far from frigid, but a lot colder than his body temperature.

So Konrad decided he'd better keep moving. He took off his shirt and began alternating between a breaststroke and backstroke.

Konrad said he got bit "by a whole bunch of stuff." A shark circled before moved along.

"There was a lot of stuff glowing at night, probably some jellyfish," he said.

He could also see lights along the coast and pick out landmarks. As he tired, he gained emotional strength.

"Five or six hours in I realized, 'Maybe I can do this,'" he said.

Twice he was nearly rescued. A recreational fishing boat approached to within 50 yards, but Konrad couldn't flag it down. Then a Coast Guard helicopter searching for him flew overhead.

"They had their lights on me and kept going. They didn't see me. That was a difficult time."

But the ex-Dolphin kept swimming, thinking of his daughters, ages 8 and 10.

Then the sound of the ocean changed. He could hear waves hitting the shore, and finally he reached land as well.

"The problem was I couldn't walk. My body was shaking uncontrollably. I crawled up on the beach and warmed myself up enough to be able to walk."