

NFL

Andrew Luck seeks next step in promising career

By HOWARD ULMAN
Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — Step by step, Andrew Luck has climbed into the upper echelon of NFL quarterbacks.

In each of his three seasons, he and the Indianapolis Colts got one game closer to the Super Bowl. Now he can reach that destination if he beats Tom Brady and the New England Patriots in the AFC championship game Sunday night.

“I want to beat the best,” Luck said. “There’s a competitive spirit in all of this: ‘Hey, the harder it is, the better. Let’s go try and make it happen.’”

If the Colts (13-5) upset the Patriots (13-4), Luck will have accomplished a difficult feat: beating Peyton Manning and Brady in consecutive games on the way to the Super Bowl.

But a win against the 37-year-old Brady, 12 years his senior, won’t be a major measuring stick for Luck’s progress.

“That’s not a benchmark,” he said. “He’s a great role model for any quarterback at any level playing the position, but it’s a team game. To me, it’s as simple as that.”

Luck has piled up impressive statistics since being drafted with the first pick out of Stanford in 2012.

This season, he led the NFL with 40 touchdown passes and surpassed Manning’s single-season franchise high with 4,761 yards passing. He’s also the only player to throw for at least 250 yards in each of his first five playoff games.

In his three seasons, the Colts lost in the wild-card round, then reached the division round and now are play-

ing for the AFC title after Luck threw for 265 yards and two touchdowns in a 24-13 divisional round win over Denver and Manning.

“He’s just stayed with the process,” Colts coach Chuck Pagano said. “Right now he probably feels as good as he’s ever felt.”

And that’s not good for the Patriots.

“He was pretty good when he came in and he’s even better now,” New England coach Bill Belichick said. “He’s got a lot of strengths, no weaknesses.”

Sounds like Brady.

The 15-year veteran will play in his ninth AFC championship game and fourth straight, but the Patriots lost two of the previous three. In last Saturday’s 35-31 divisional win over the Baltimore Ravens, Brady led the Patriots

back from two 14-point deficits. His three touchdown passes gave him 46 for his career, breaking Joe Montana’s record of 45 in the postseason.

“We’ve shown a lot of improvement and it all leads to this moment,” Brady said, “so we’ve got to be at our best.”

CATCHING ON: When they drop back, Luck and Brady have plenty of reliable receivers to choose from.

Luck connected with eight against Denver. And one who didn’t catch a pass, Reggie Wayne, needs 36 yards receiving to move past Cliff Branch for No. 3 in NFL postseason history.

Brady completed at least four passes to six different receivers against Baltimore, including one touchdown each to Rob Gronkowski, Danny Amendola and Brandon LaFell.



SEAHAWKS: Chancellor knocked Lacy out of last meeting

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and rumbling for extra yards.

It is Lynch’s specialty.

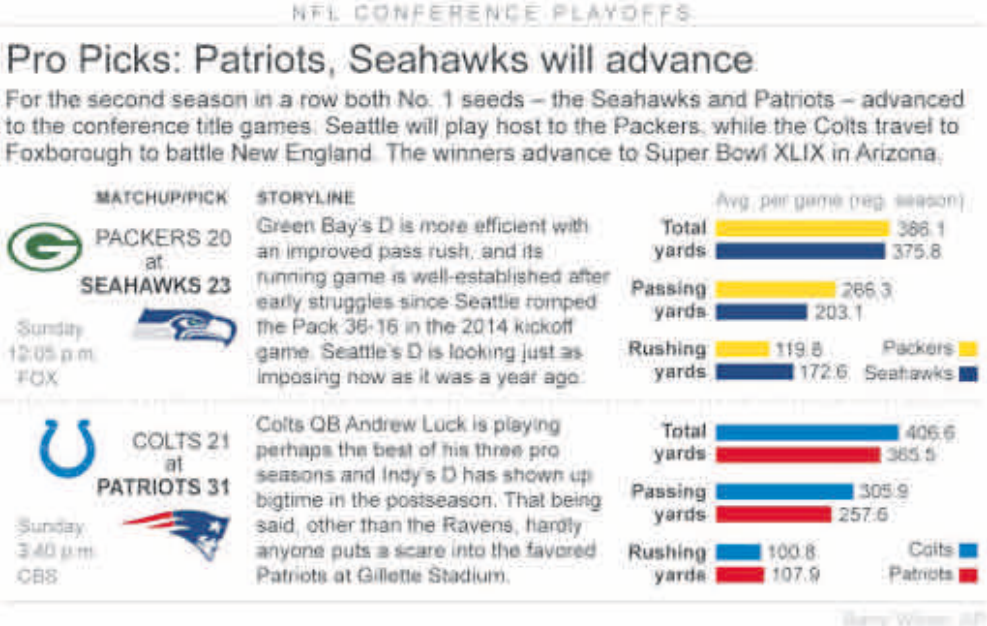
“He’s a dog — his whole demeanor,” Seattle safety Earl Thomas said. “He’s a man amongst boys out there.”

One who had his fourth straight season of at least 1,200 yards rushing. Lynch finished the regular season with 1,306 yards on 280 carries and 13 scores.

The Seahawks led the league in averaging 172.6 yards rushing per game, with mobile quarterback Russell Wilson also posing a threat on the ground.

“We’re kind of just reaping the benefits of the philosophy but then how the players go out and execute it,” Seahawks offensive coordinator Darrell Bevell said. “We got as good of guy you’d ever want to hand it to with handing it to Marshawn.”

Packers linebacker Julius Peppers, a 13-year veteran, described Lynch as “one of the hardest runners I think in



football in my opinion. Very physical and violent runner.”

It sounds a lot like trying to tackle Lacy.

“Those guys are similar in the sense that you have to have multiple defenders trying to get those guys down,” Peppers said.

Whereas Lynch and Wilson

share top billing in the Seattle attack, Lacy and his production can get overshadowed by Aaron Rodgers. The quarterback is having an MVP-caliber year, even after being slowed by a strained left calf.

The injury makes Lacy an even more important piece to Green Bay’s offense. As evi-

dence, Lacy was added to the injury report as a precaution on Thursday as a limited participant because of a sore knee.

“I was just being conservative, so I pulled him in about the middle of practice,” coach Mike McCarthy said on Thursday. “I think Eddie will be ready to go on

Sunday. Just the coach was nervous, all right?”

The running game stalled in a 1-2 start, when Green Bay played Seattle, the New York Jets and Detroit to open the season — three of the top defenses against the run in the league.

The Packers were also a bit more conservative early on in giving Lacy carries, while putting added emphasis on catching passes out of the backfield.

He has turned into Green Bay’s third-leading receiver as a check-down threat for Rodgers, while the production on the ground has steadily increased behind an effective offensive line.

Lacy finished with 1,139 yards on 246 carries with nine touchdowns. Counting last week’s playoff win against Detroit, Lacy is averaging 99 yards in his past seven games.

“His ability to be a three-down player is of primary importance to us,” McCarthy said. “He’s breaking tackles, but we’re going against an

excellent tackling defense, so this will be a big challenge.”

The Seahawks figured out Lacy in the 36-16 win over Green Bay in the league opener in Seattle. Lacy was held to 12 carries for 34 yards before leaving the game with a concussion following a hit from safety Kam Chancellor.

At least that’s how it was reported in injury report.

“Uh I remember it wasn’t a concussion. It was ‘got rung my bell,’” Lacy said with a laugh to a gaggle of reporters. “So I ran into Kam! That’s what happened.”

Notes: Rodgers was limited in practice for a second straight day. “Went through pass under pressure and went through two team periods. So getting ready to play,” McCarthy said. ... The Packers are traveling to Seattle on Friday. McCarthy said he’s still looking for an indoor facility in the Seattle area for practice on Saturday, but “it’ll be as close as we can get it to our normal Saturday practice.”

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