

NFL

Seahawks defense peaking at right time

By TIM BOOTH
Associated Press

NFL's stingiest D

	Pts Allowed
1, Seahawks	277
2, Bengals	279
3, Chiefs	287
4, Broncos	296
5, Vikings	302
6, Panthers	308
T7, Texans	313
T7, Cardinals	313
9, Jets	314
10, Patriots	315

RENTON, Wash. — The questions and concerns that dogged the Seattle Seahawks' vaunted defense in September and October were silenced by the end of the season.

That's because the Seahawks accomplished something that hadn't been done since the 1950s.

Seattle heads into Sunday's wild-card game at Minnesota on a roll defensively. The pinnacle of their late-season success was holding Arizona to six points in the regular-season finale to end up leading the NFL in scoring defense for the fourth straight season. According to STATS, Seattle is the first team since the Cleveland Browns (1953-57) to lead the league in scoring defense in four or more consecutive seasons.

Over the final five games of the season, the Seahawks allowed only 55 total points. And two of the touchdowns scored during that time were special teams and defensive scores by their opponents.

However long this post-season run lasts for Seattle, it

will be a new, but somewhat easier task for the Seahawks defense. After playing all their NFC playoff games at home the past two seasons, the Seahawks will be exclusively on the road this time around where it's far easier for Seattle to communicate on the defensive side.

"Maybe we focus better on the road, I don't know what it is. I just think we're a better road team than we are a home team this year," Seattle linebacker Bruce Irvin said.

Seattle also led the league in rush defense at 81.5 yards per game, giving up the exact same amount of yards it did a season ago when the Seahawks were third-best in the league at stopping the run. Their first task in the playoffs could be their most



AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin
Seattle Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman (25) celebrates a stop against the Arizona Cardinals during the first half of an NFL football game, Sunday, Jan. 3, 2016, in Glendale, Ariz.

difficult, trying to slow down Adrian Peterson, who led the NFL with 1,485 yards rushing this season.

But Seattle's already stopped Peterson once this

season, holding him to 18 yards on eight carries in Week 13.

"You can't expect a guy like that to get eight touches again. They're going to find

different ways, whether handing the ball off, or getting him screens or checking it down to him," Seattle linebacker Bobby Wagner said. "I definitely feel like he's going to try to have a bigger presence in this game."

Getting the scoring defense title was particularly important, but seemed unlikely going into the final week. With Cincinnati having allowed 16 to Baltimore in its finale earlier in the day, the Seahawks could give up only eight points to Arizona to at least share the scoring title.

Enter DeShawn Shead with the Seahawks holding a 36-6 lead in the closing minutes and Arizona deep in Seattle's end.

The Seahawks had already gotten one break when Chandler Catanzaro's field goal attempt at the end of the first half hit the upright and ricocheted back onto the field. On fourth-and-10 from the Seattle 12 with 5:25 left, the Cardinals opted to go for it rather than kick a meaningless field goal. Drew Stanton's forced pass was intercepted by Shead, igniting a huge celebration

on the Seahawks sideline.

"I was not aware at all. I heard them talking on the sideline in the fourth quarter about it but I didn't really pay no mind to it until I got the interception and I came back to the sideline and Earl (Thomas) and (Richard Sherman) came up to me and were like, 'Thank you, you saved the record,'" Shead said. "I didn't realize until then how significant the interception was. For my first interception at the last possible defensive drive in the regular season it could not have come at a better time. It's a great feeling to know that I have legitimately been part of history."

Sherman was completely aware of what was at stake. He knew even before the game started how much the Seahawks could afford to allow.

"It's cool. I think it means we're consistent in what we do. We're really diligent in our preparation, and all our hard work has come to fruition," Sherman said. "Everything we've wanted and everything we've tried, strived to do has come to fruition. We appreciate seeing the fruits of our labor."

Every NFC team has fatal flaw but also major reasons for hope

By ARNIE STAPLETON
Associated Press

Carolina didn't make it to the playoffs perfect, and maybe that's a good thing as they rest and recalibrate for the playoffs.

Arizona fended off Seattle, which came storming back from a stumbling start.

The Vikings overtook the Packers in the North but Green Bay reached the playoffs once again, and the Redskins capitalized on a bad division and a good quarterback decision to return to the postseason party.

Each of the half-dozen NFC teams still standing have reason to believe they'll put their fingerprints on the Lombardi Trophy next month. But each also has a major flaw that could derail those dreams.

The NFC gets going Sunday when the Seahawks (10-6) visit the Vikings (11-5). Then, the Redskins (9-7) host the Packers (10-6).

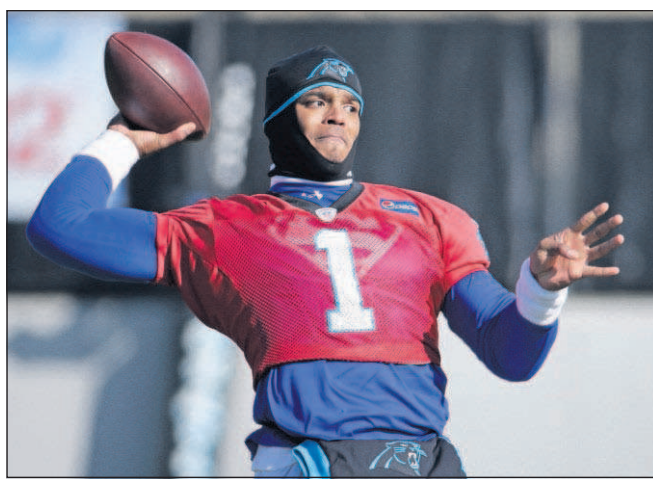
The Panthers (15-1) and Cardinals (13-3) each earned a bye.

Here's a look at the biggest strength and weakness of each of the six NFC playoff teams:

1. PANTHERS:

—Why they'll hoist the Lombardi: Cam Newton. The Panthers scored more points than any team in the league this season behind the versatile Newton, a leading MVP candidate. He became the first NFL quarterback to throw for 35 touchdowns and run for 10 scores in the best season of his five-year career.

—Why they won't: Health. The Panthers are struggling in recent



AP Photo/Chuck Burton
Carolina Panthers' Cam Newton throws a pass during practice for the NFL football team in Charlotte, N.C., Thursday.

weeks with their pass rush and lost starting cornerback Charles Tillman for the season in Week 17 to a torn ACL. Tillman is the second cornerback to suffer a season-ending injury in the last week.

—We find our edge in playing in front of our home crowd. Everything feels just right. We don't have to travel to a hostile environment."

—Newton on having home-field advantage, and playing in a stadium where they have won 11 in a row.

2. CARDINALS:

—Why they'll hoist the Lombardi: NFL's best offense. Carson Palmer set franchise records for yards (4,671) and TDs (35). Larry Fitzgerald and John Brown surpassed 1,000-yards receiving and Fitzgerald's 109 catches broke the franchise mark he set a decade ago. Rookie David Johnson has a team-high 13 TDs and is a big-play threat as both a runner and receiver.

—Why they won't: Protecting their passer and pressuring the

other QB. If Arizona can't run, the O-line could be overwhelmed by the pass rush. Pressuring the opposing quarterback, especially without a blitz, has been a problem. The mid-season addition of Dwight Freeney helps, but he's not an every-down disruptive force.

—It brings some guys down to earth and get back to work." Palmer on the Cardinals' 36-6 loss to Seattle last week.

3. VIKINGS:

—Why they'll host the Lombardi: Defense. With 14 sacks, seven takeaways and two touchdowns over a three-game winning streak to close the regular season and win the NFC North, this group is in a groove. It'll be even better if nose tackle Linval Joseph, who missed four of the last five games with a toe injury, returns to the lineup.

—Why they won't: Iffy offense. Teddy Bridgewater is 17-11 as a starter but he passed for 250 yards

just four times this season. If they fall behind quickly, their run-first formula featuring Adrian Peterson implodes and protecting Bridgewater behind a so-so O-line gets harder. Exhibit A: their 38-7 home loss to Seattle a month ago.

—We're excited about the opportunity to play those guys again in our house. They embarrassed us the last time we played them." —wide receiver Mike Wallace, on facing the Seahawks again.

4. REDSKINS:

—Why they'll hoist the Lombardi: Believe it or not, Kirk Cousins. The fourth-year QB is playing the best football of his career at the most opportune time — heading into the playoffs and heading into free agency. He led the NFL in completion percentage at 69.8, ranked fifth in passer rating at 101.6, set a franchise mark with 4,166 passing yards, and threw for 23 TDs and only 3 INTs over the last 10 games.

—Why they won't: This team is flawed in a number of ways, including a suspect running game and a shaky defense. And if Washington beats Green Bay in the wild-card round, it would be the first victory all season for the Redskins against a team that finished above .500.

—He's been a great leader for us on offense. He's exactly what we need right now. We're going to keep fighting behind him." —tight end Jordan Reed, speaking about Cousins.

5. PACKERS:

—Why they'll host the Lombardi: No one wants to face

Aaron Rodgers in the playoffs. When healthy, the offensive line is capable of opening holes for bullish running back Eddie Lacy. The defense and special teams have been strengths for most of the year.

—Why they won't: The offense has been searching for consistency all season, especially since they were exposed by the Denver Broncos on Nov. 1, sending them tumbling through a 4-6 finish after a 6-0 start. The chances of finding a fix for their big-play woes after 17 weeks are slim and injuries have ravaged their O-line.

—We're 16 games in, so you kind of are who you are, but we've got to find a way to put it all together for four quarters." —Rodgers.

6. SEAHAWKS:

—Why they'll hoist the Lombardi: Russell Wilson is hot and Marshawn Lynch is back from abdominal surgery. The two-time defending NFC champs know what it takes to win in the playoffs even if they have to hit the road to do it. They've won six of seven, including all three road games. Wilson has 24 TD passes and one interception in that streak.

—Why they won't: St. Louis showed the blueprint for stopping the Seahawks with its Week 16 win in Seattle. The Rams hounded him, dominated the line of scrimmage and disrupted the entire Seahawks offense. Seattle faces a difficult road at Minnesota in frigid conditions and, if it wins, at Carolina, both for early West Coast starts.

—These guys are confident that we can go wherever we got to go," coach Pete Carroll.

AFC playoff squads have glaring imperfections to overcome

By ARNIE STAPLETON
Associated Press

DENVER — Each of the NFL teams still standing has reason to believe confetti, a nice parade and some really big rings are headed their way. Each also knows the locker room clean-out could come this month.

The AFC gets wild-card weekend started Saturday when the Kansas City Chiefs (11-5) ride a 10-game winning streak into Houston to face J.J. Watt and the Texans (9-7), who upended the injury-ravaged Indianapolis Colts to win the South.

Then, the Pittsburgh Steelers (10-6), who slinked into the playoffs when the New York Jets stumbled against Buffalo last weekend, visit longtime adversary Cincinnati, where the Bengals (12-4) are seeking their first playoff win in a quarter-century.

Denver (12-4), which is knee-deep in a quarterback quandary, and New England (12-4), with a hobbled quarterback, get the weekend off.

Here's a look at the biggest strength and weakness of each of the six AFC playoff teams:

1. BRONCOS:

—Why they'll hoist the Lombardi: Dominant defense. The Broncos

finished No. 1 in total defense for the first time in franchise history. They led the league in sacks and were tops against the pass, and finished 33 yards shy of being best against the run, too.

—Why they won't: Their O-line can't protect the passer, whether it's Peyton Manning or Brock Osweiler. Tyler Polunbus replaced reeling right tackle Michael Schofield when Manning supplanted Osweiler on Sunday, and cracked that he thought the crowd was cheering for him. It should have been. He kept Manning upright and keeps the job.

—As long as this football team is winning games, shoot, I don't care who's playing quarterback." —Brock Osweiler.

2. PATRIOTS:

—Why they'll hoist the Lombardi: Tom Brady and Bill Belichick. The four-time Super Bowl-winning coach and quarterback know what it takes to win it all. With a healthy Rob Gronkowski, nothing else matters. Plus, they're still mad about that thing with the air in the footballs during last year's playoffs.

—Why they won't: Well, something else matters. The offensive line has been shuffled through injuries, leaving Brady vulnerable.



AP Photo/Rick Osentoski, File
In this Sept. 27, 2015, file photo, Denver Broncos quarterbacks Peyton Manning (18) and Brock Osweiler (17) get ready for the Broncos' NFL football game against the Detroit Lions in Detroit.

The receivers and running backs on the field come from deep among their backups.

—It isn't really important how one year relates to another year or some other game or some other season from way back when. What difference does it make?" —Bill Belichick on whether the team's injury problems have made this path to the playoffs more difficult than in the past.

3. BENGALS:

—Why they'll host the Lombardi: Defense wins championships, and the Bengals have one of their best ever. It yielded the fewest points in franchise history and led the AFC in fewest points allowed. Vontaze Burfict is all the way back from knee surgery, Carlos

Dunlap had 13 1-2 sacks and Geno Atkins added 11.

—Why they won't: Quarterback, whoever it is. Andy Dalton broke his right thumb on Dec. 13 and it looks like AJ McCarron will get the nod. Although the Alabama alum has had some big-game experience on Saturdays, the NFL is another animal. He was 2-1 as the starter, but showed his lack of experience at times.

—We've been there before. It's time to right the ship. You know — exorcism." —Coach Marvin Lewis.

4. TEXANS:

—Why they'll hoist the Lombardi: J.J. Watt. With his NFL-best 17 1-2 sacks, he joined Reggie White as the only players with 15-sack

seasons in three of their first five years. Unit came on strong down the stretch, allowing just 12.7 points over the final nine games. Whitney Mercilus had a career-high 12 sacks, and Jadeveon Clowney is healthy and disruptive again.

—Why they won't: Lack of an elite QB. Houston has played musical chairs with the quarterbacks all season, starting—and winning—with four different players. Brian Hoyer is back in the starting role but the 30-year-old has been a backup for most of his seven-year career. They haven't really replaced Arian Foster since he got hurt, and they lost left tackle Duane Brown to a season-ending thigh injury Sunday.

—This is do or die, so guys' attention is a little higher than it would normally be." —wide receiver DeAndre Hopkins.

5. CHIEFS:

—Why they'll hoist the Lombardi: Because they've already established themselves as miracle workers. After a 1-5 start, they won a franchise-record 10 consecutive games to reach the playoffs. They did it with a ferocious pass rush — All-Pro linebacker Justin Houston should be back from a knee injury — and a balanced, versatile offense

that rarely makes mistakes.

—Why they won't: Their luck has to run out eventually. They won a series of close games during their remarkable winning streak, taking advantage of a soft late schedule. But there are no soft opponents in the playoffs.

—I couldn't honestly care less about what anybody says outside of this locker room. We know that when we line up against anybody, we're confident that we're going to get the job done." tight end Travis Kelce.

6. STEELERS:

—Why they'll hoist the Lombardi: They have Antonio Brown and Ben Roethlisberger and you don't. Brown caught 136 passes for 1,834 yards and 10 touchdowns, numbers that could have been even better if Roethlisberger hadn't missed a month with a sprained left knee. Forget that no receiver has ever won the honor, Denver coach Gary Kubiak said he'd vote for Brown as MVP.

—Why they won't: An all-or-nothing defense. The Steelers posted their most sacks (47) and interceptions (17) since 2010, when they won the AFC title. The problem? When they aren't getting to the quarterback, they're not doing much. Pittsburgh finished 30th against the pass.