

NFL Lynch may be leaning toward retirement

By **TIM BOOTH**
Associated Press

SEATTLE — Seattle Seahawks running back Marshawn Lynch may be “leaning toward retirement,” general manager John Schneider said in a pair of radio interviews Friday.

Schneider said in separate interviews with KIRO-AM and KJR-AM that he believes Lynch is leaning toward calling it a career after an injury-filled 2015 season.

Schneider first appeared on KIRO, the team’s flagship station, saying the team was going to give Lynch time and leeway to decide what he wants to do, but added he was “under the impression,” Lynch was leaning toward retirement.

Later on KJR, Schneider hedged his comments slightly, but reiterated that he thought Lynch was considering stepping away.

“I really, honestly don’t know at this point,” Schneider said. “If you put a gun to my head I would say he is leaning toward retirement. But I think with Marshawn you never really know. He’s a fierce competitor. We just have to handle it the right way in terms of showing him as much respect as we possibly can for everything he’s done for this organization.”

Lynch was limited to just seven regular-season games in 2015, first bothered by hamstring and calf issues and later missing the final seven regular-season games with an abdominal injury that required surgery. Lynch returned for the NFC divisional playoff game at Carolina but was mostly a non-factor with the Seahawks falling behind 14-0 in the opening moments of the loss.

Lynch was limited to just 111 carries and 417 yards in the regular season, the first season of his career where injuries have been a significant factor. He has contemplated retirement in the past and will turn 30 in April. And Seattle appears to have an heir apparent after rookie Thomas Rawls had four 100-yard games filling in for Lynch.

There’s also the financial consideration. Lynch would cost the Seahawks \$11.5 million against the salary cap for the 2016 season, a massive number for a running back of his age. Schneider indicated that if Lynch wanted to return for another season, there would need to be changes to his contract.

“Sure if he were to want to come back and play we would have to adjust some things,” Schneider said. “But at this point it’s so early we’re not in that train of thought yet.”

Brady-Manning XVII likely last meeting

Aging quarterbacks meet in AFC Championship

By **ARNIE STAPLETON**
Associated Press

DENVER — The final chapter of the greatest quarterback rivalry in NFL history plays out in all likelihood Sunday with the 17th meeting between Tom Brady and Peyton Manning.

New England and Denver play again next season, but Manning is expected to have received his gold watch — and maybe another silver trophy — by then.

In that case, Sunday’s showdown in the AFC championship between the Patriots and Broncos would mark both the crest and the culmination of a clash that defines the two quarterback greats who transformed the game and transcended the sport.

“This is Jesse James and Wyatt Earp standing out in the street at high noon for the last showdown,” Joe Theismann said. “You’ve got arguably the two greatest players that ever played the position. Peyton revolutionized the game and Tom, through his championships, has proven he’s the best that’s ever played the game.”

Their respectful rivalry — they’re neither best buddies nor mortal enemies — began on a cloudy afternoon in Foxboro Stadium on Sept. 30, 2001, and grew into something on par with Arnold Palmer vs. Jack Nicklaus or Wilt Chamberlain vs. Bill Russell.

“Our sports society is built around stars, and stars draw people to the game, those are the players they want to watch. You want to watch Ali and Frazier, Bird and Magic, Brady and Manning,” said Tony Dungy, the coach of the Colts for Manning’s only Super Bowl win. “We are seeing two just top-tier guys and everyone will root for one and against the other and pick sides and argue who is the best. It draws



people, and it especially draws the casual people to the game.”

This generation of football fans may never see anything like it again.

“Every football fan should watch this game because very seldom in life do you get to see two competitors as great as they are with this much at stake,” Theismann said. “It’s what’s at stake that makes this one more interesting.”

At stake: a shot at history and sweet revenge.

With a seventh trip to the Super Bowl, Brady, still on top of his considerable game at age 38, would get a crack at a fifth Super Bowl ring, something no starting QB has ever accomplished. He’d also put himself one win away from the satisfaction of seeing Roger Goodell hand him another Lombardi

Trophy. This, less than a year after the commissioner suspended him in the scandal over deflated footballs, a ban that was overturned in federal court last summer.

With a fourth trip to the Super Bowl, Manning, two months shy of 40 and a shadow of his five-time MVP self, would have a chance to become the first starting quarterback to deliver a Lombardi Trophy to the headquarters of two franchises. He’d also have a shot at recouping every penny of the \$4 million pay cut he took last winter and get the chance to ride off as a champion into that orange sunset — like his boss, John Elway, did nearly two decades ago.

Brady has won 11 of the 16 previous meetings, but they’re 2-2 in the playoffs, including Denver’s

Panthers struggling with keeping leads, closing out games

By **STEVE REED**
Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — The Carolina Panthers problem hasn’t been building big leads this season, it has been keeping them.

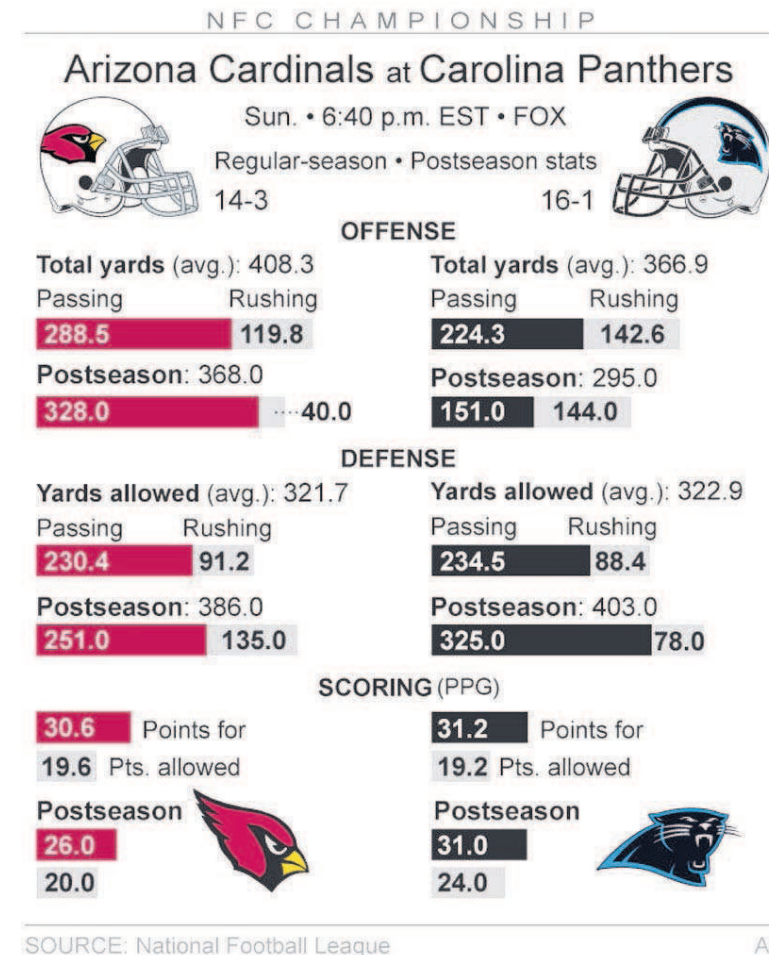
Four times the Panthers have led by 17 points or more in the second half, only to watch an opponent storm back. All four games the Panthers have escaped with wins, but far too often it has been too close for comfort.

Coach Ron Rivera said he’s “concerned” about his team’s struggles closing out games, but refused to dwell on it as the Panthers stepped up preparations for Sunday’s NFC championship game against the Arizona Cardinals.

“I’ll be honest, I get it, I understand,” Rivera said after the Panthers nearly squandered a 31-point half-time lead last weekend but held on to beat the Seattle Seahawks 31-24 in the divisional playoffs.

“But, shoot, we won those football games and look at who we played against. If this was someone that was 2-14 that did this to us, then I’d be really concerned. But it wasn’t. Am I concerned? Yeah. But are these things correctable and fixable? Most certainly. Let’s stay focused on what we did — we won the football game.”

Sunday wasn’t the first time the



Panthers have flirted with an epic collapse.

Carolina surrendered a 17-point

fourth quarter lead in Week 8 to the Indianapolis Colts, falling behind by a field goal in overtime before

rallying to win 29-26.

The following week against Green Bay a 23-point fourth quarter lead dwindled to eight before Thomas Davis sealed the win with a pick in the end zone in the final two minutes.

And in December Carolina let an entire 28-point lead slip away before Cam Newton led a late drive to set up the winning field goal as time expired.

Rivera said the common denominator in those four games was facing a top-tier quarterback, referring to Wilson, Aaron Rodgers, Andrew Luck and Eli Manning.

“When you get a big lead like that, one of the things is you have to learn to not relax,” Rivera said. “You have to learn to continue to attack.”

The Cardinals have done a much better job of putting teams away after building big leads. But they did surrender a 19-point advantage against Seattle this year before coming back to win 39-32.

“As coaches, you tend to guard against the bad things that can happen and you don’t want that to happen, so you’ve just got to keep your foot on the gas,” Cardinals coach Bruce Arians said.

That isn’t always easy to do. “It’s a fine line in keeping it wide open and also trying to call plays that are really good that also will keep the clock moving,” Panthers offensive coordinator Mike Shula said.

Australian Open

Federer becomes first man to win 300 singles matches at Grand Slam

By **JOHN PYE**
Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — The countless records and accolades accumulated over a long and illustrious career don’t in any way diminish Roger Federer’s satisfaction when he sets yet another benchmark.

Federer became the first man to win 300 Grand Slam singles matches when he beat Grigor Dimitrov, a player formerly dubbed “baby Fed” for the likeness of their styles, in the third round of the Australian Open on Friday.

The 34-year-old Federer already tops many “most of” lists in men’s tennis — from the number of major titles won (17) to the number of consecutive Grand Slam tournaments contested (65). Yet he still gets a thrill from the numbers.

“It’s very exciting, I must tell you,” Federer told the crowd following his 6-4, 3-6, 6-1, 6-4 victory over

Dimitrov.

He compared the latest milestone to his 1,000th win in tour-level matches, which he sealed 12 months ago in Brisbane. “It was a big deal for me.”

Federer is now 67 wins ahead of No. 2 and long-retired Jimmy Connors in terms of Grand Slam singles wins, so the mark is safe for a while.

“It’s not something I ever aimed for but when it happens, it’s very special,” he said. “You look deeper into it, where it’s all happened and how. So it’s very nice.”

Federer’s next aim is to break a Grand Slam title drought that dates back to Wimbledon 2012. He reached two major finals in 2015, losing them both to Novak Djokovic, who has replaced him as the most dominant man in the draw. He could meet Djokovic in the semifinals.

Djokovic took care of the man who ended Federer’s run in the third round here



AP Photo/Aaron Favila
Roger Federer of Switzerland makes backhand return to Grigor Dimitrov of Bulgaria during their third round match at the Australian Open tennis championships in Melbourne, Australia, Friday, Jan. 22, 2016.

last year, the Swiss star’s worst run at the Australian Open since 2001.

The No. 1-ranked Djokovic needed only 25 minutes to win the first set against No. 28-seeded Andreas Seppi but had a tougher time in the next two, saving two set points in the tiebreaker before winning

6-1, 7-5, 7-6 (6). The five-time Australian Open champion was playing at the same time as Serena Williams, a six-time Australian Open winner, so he shuffled over to Margaret Court Arena.

He noted how he liked the renovation — the No. 2 stadium has had a roof installed since his last outing there.

“I played a quality player who took out Federer last year here and who has been on the tour for many years,” Djokovic said. “It was a great test. It was a physical match. I’m just glad I got through.”

After extending a streak of making the fourth round or better at every major since a third-round exit at the 2009 French Open, Djokovic will play No. 14 Gilles Simon in the Round of 16. Federer will play David Goffin.

Williams raced to a 6-1, 6-1 win in 45 minutes over 18-year-old Russian Daria Kasatkina on Rod Laver Arena to set up a fourth-round match with Margarita Gasparyan, whom she beat early at Wimbledon last year.

If the fourth-round results go on rankings, she’ll meet No. 5 Maria Sharapova in a quarterfinal match that will feature both of last year’s finalists. While Williams’ form has been good, it hasn’t drawn quite the same attention as her bright yellow crop top and pleated mini-skirt.

“I just wanted to push the envelope again, just bring pop culture to tennis, kind of make it really fun,” she said. “It’s definitely not built for warmth, but it’s built for speed.”

Sharapova had a milestone victory when she beat Lauren Davis 6-1, 6-7 (5), 6-0 to record her 600th win at tour level, becoming the 17th and only fourth active women’s player to reach the mark.

“I think it’s a proud number,” the 2008 champion and four-time Australian Open finalist said. She next plays No. 12 Belinda Bencic.

No. 4 Agnieszka Radwanska advanced to a fourth-rounder against Anna-Lena Friedsam, who beat Roberta Vinci — the Italian player who ended Williams’ bid for a calendar-year Grand Slam in 2015.

Also progressing were No. 10 Carla Suarez Navarro and Russian-born Australian Daria Gavrilova, who held off No. 28 Kristina Mladenovic 6-4, 4-6, 11-9.