

Steelers clinch first-round bye with blowout win over Texans

By KRISTIE RIEKEN Associated Press

HOUSTON — Ben Roethlisberger told his teammates they didn't need to make up for Antonio Brown's absence.

"I know everyone was thinking about A.B. not being out there and trying to fill those shoes, but you can't fill those shoes," Roethlisberger said.

Roethlisberger threw for 226 yards and two touchdowns in the first game since Brown injured his calf, and the Steelers clinched a first-round playoff bye with a 34-6 win over the Texans.

"It just kind of shows how many weapons we actually have in our offense ... everybody played well," Le'Veon Bell said.

The Steelers led 20-0 at half-time after taking advantage of two turnovers by the Texans. Bell added a 10-yard TD run late in the third quarter and rookie JuJu Smith-Schuster made it 34-6 with an 18-yard touchdown grab in the fourth.

Bell finished with 14 carries for 69 yards and Smith-Schuster had six receptions for 75 yards.



AP Photo/Eric Christian Smith Houston Texans running back Alfred Blue (28) is wrapped up by Pittsburgh Steelers' T.J. Watt (90), Cameron Heyward (97), Bud Dupree (48) and Stephon Tuitt (91) during the second half of Monday's game in Houston.

burgh coach Mike Tomlin said. "Our last regular-season road game, finishing 7-1, getting our 12th win, securing a ticket to the second round. All very positive things, but it's kind of the culmination of being singularly focused on the next opportunity."

T.J. Yates was 7 of 16 for 83 yards and a touchdown for the Texans, who lost their fifth straight game and for the eighth time in nine

games. "It's brutal," coach Bill O'Brien said of Houston's skid. "It's been a tough year." Yates made his second straight start since Tom Savage sustained a concussion. Yates left the game briefly on Monday to be evaluated for a concussion, and his replacement, Taylor Heinicke, sustained a concussion on his only full possession.



Roethlisberger was replaced by backup Landry Jones with about six minutes remaining and the game well in hand.

The Steelers hurried and harassed Yates all day with Mike Hilton leading the way with three sacks and three quarterback hits, Cameron Heyward adding two and forcing a fumble. Hilton became the first cornerback with three sacks in a game since sacks became an official statistic in 1982.

The Texans couldn't do much right on a day their home stadium was overtaken by vocal Steelers fans waving their Terrible Towels. One of the few highlights came on an acrobatic 3-yard touchdown reception by DeAndre Hopkins in the fourth quarter. Hopkins deflected the ball with his right hand, reeled it in with his left and got both feet down before falling out of bounds for his NFL-best and franchise-record 13th touchdown reception.

Hopkins may have been the only one who wasn't impressed with the grab.

"I'm mad I didn't catch it the first time," he said. "Like me, who I am, I was supposed to catch that one the first time with my right hand."

The Steelers took a 10-0 lead when Roethlisberger connected with Justin Hunter on a 5-yard touchdown pass in the first quarter. Alfred Blue had a 48-yard run on

the first play of the second quarter to get the Texans to the Pittsburgh 18-yard line. The Texans got to the 1 on second down later in that drive, but couldn't do anything on the next two plays before Yates was intercepted in the end zone.

Pittsburgh added a touchdown on a 1-yard run by Roosevelt Nix on the ensuing possession. Heyward sacked Yates three plays later and caused a fumble recovered by Bud Dupree to give the Steelers the ball right back.

Pittsburgh added a 36-yard field goal on the next drive to push the lead to 20-0.

Yates was sacked again on Houston's next possession and injured on the play. He left the game to be evaluated for a concussion, forcing the Texans to play Heinicke.

Heinicke finished that possession and remained in the game for the first drive of the third quarter while Yates was being evaluated. But Heinicke took a hard hit on a sack on the last play of that drive and had to be evaluated for a concussion, too.

FAMILY TIME J.J. Watt didn't get to play on Monday as he recovers from a broken leg, but spent some time pregame with his brother, Pittsburgh rookie linebacker T.J. Watt. Houston's defensive end threw the ball around with T.J. and the brothers also posed for some pictures with their parents before the game.

T.J. was disappointed that his brother didn't get to play on Monday, but is looking forward to seeing him return next season.

"I wish he was out there just to be a dominant force for them," T.J. said. "But I know he'll come back bigger, faster and stronger."

Hockey

Parity catching up to powerhouse Canada at world juniors hockey

By JOHN WAWROW Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Canada has more than one score to settle. The United States has a title to defend. And don't discount Sweden.

The 10-nation World Junior hockey championship tournament opens in Buffalo on Tuesday with numerous subplots. The most notable involves the question of whether parity is finally catching up to the Canadians.

Bring it on, says Canada manager and two-time world junior gold medalist Joel Bouchard.

"I played in '93 and '94, and it was not even close to what it is right now," Bouchard said.

"Every country is pushing it. And it's our job to keep bringing the bar higher and higher," he added. "We know everybody is looking at us. And that's good. That's what you want."

The landscape has dramatically shifted since 2009, when the Canadians set a world junior record by winning their fifth straight title.

In the eight years since, Canada has won just one gold medal — in 2015 with a team featuring Edmonton Oilers captain Connor McDavid.

By contrast, the U.S. has won three times, including a 5-4 shootout win over Canada — and in Canada no less — in the championship game in January. Finland has won twice and the Swedes and Russians once each.

No one is discounting Canada's chances of winning its 17th gold medal this time, especially with a roster stocked with eight first-round NHL draft picks.

And yet, as Russian defenseman and New Jersey Devils prospect Yegor Zaitsev said through an interpreter: "Canada is not more favored than Russia."

It's a trend even Toronto Maple Leafs coach Mike Babcock, who coached Canada to win the 1997 world junior title, couldn't help but acknowledge.

"On population base alone, the U.S. should take over one day eventually," Babcock told The Associated Press. "But I'm going to get my passport and flag out and I'll be cheering for Canada to get back on track."

One drawback is Canada's inability to draw upon the nation's entire pool of players 20 and younger because the top talent is already competing in the NHL. McDavid, for example, could have represented Canada for two



Paul Chiasson/The Canadian Press via AP, File In this Jan. 5, 2017, file photo, United States players celebrate their victory over Canada in the final of the world junior championship in Montreal. The 10-nation tournament is being played at Buffalo, N.Y., and opens on Tuesday, Dec. 26. It will feature Canada and the U.S. playing an outdoor game at the NFL Buffalo Bills' New Era Field on Friday, Dec. 29.

more years, but was instead busy producing at more than a point-a-game pace while winning last season's NHL MVP honor during his first two years in Edmonton.

USA Hockey is enjoying a golden era by doubling its medal count from five to 10 (four gold, one silver and five bronze) since 2010. The surge reflects a rise of nationwide registration, and attributed to the NHL's expansion into non-traditional markets such as Arizona, where 2016 No. 1

draft pick Auston Matthews grew up rooting for the Coyotes.

The test for the Americans is becoming the first U.S. team to win consecutive titles, and first nation since Canada's five-year run to repeat as champions.

"Honestly, I would never say pressure," U.S. coach Bob Motzko said. "I would be foolish to waste energy having those feelings. I love the process. I'm more nervous about what we're going to do at practice

tomorrow." The Americans' 23-player roster features seven returnees, and nine first-round picks.

The U.S. is in the same pool as Canada, and the two will meet in international hockey's first outdoor game, which will be played at the NFL Buffalo Bills' New Era Field on Friday.

Sweden might finally be in line to medal after finishing fourth in each of the past three years.

The Swedes' roster is particularly strong in the back end with three goalies already drafted by NHL teams. The defense features Rasmus Dahlin, a potential No. 1 pick in next year's draft.

"He's good, but he's going to have a tough tournament," coach Tomas Montén said. "Everyone's going to be on him. But I think that's going to create more space for others."

Sweden got a boost last week when the Buffalo Sabres assigned prospect Alexander Nylander to represent his country for a third consecutive tournament. Nylander finished tied for the world junior lead last year with 12 points (five goals, seven assists) in seven games.

The Russians are

considered somewhat of an unknown, despite having won medals for seven straight years. That included the 2011 title when the tournament was also held in Buffalo. Russia rallied from a 3-0 third-period deficit to beat Canada 5-3 in the final.

"The comeback was crazy. And I just felt so proud," said Russian defenseman Nikolai Knyzhov, who watched the victory on TV. "And now we're back here trying to do the same thing."

The loss marked the third time Canada has settled for silver since 2010, with its other two title-game defeats against the U.S.

This past year's shootout loss to the Americans still stings for Canada's returning players.

"There's no point in trying to avoid it. It's obviously there," defenseman Jake Bean said. "It kind of fills you every day to be on the ice, just make sure you do everything just that much more intensely, that much more focused and just try not to leave it down to a question or a chance."

AP Hockey Writer Larry Lage, in Detroit, and AP Sports Writer Mitch Stacey, in Columbus, Ohio, contributed to this report.

SCOREBOARD

Local slate

Table listing various prep basketball games (Boys and Girls) with teams and times.

Convention, 3 p.m.

Table listing football games including Lone vs. Nixyaawii, Pendleton vs. Lake Washington, and others.

New Orleans 17 16 515 8 1/2

Table listing NFL games: New Orleans vs. Minnesota, Dallas vs. Oakland, and others.

No. 8 Texas at Oklahoma, 5 p.m.

Table listing NHL games: Edmonton at Winnipeg, Arizona at Colorado, and others.

Edmonton at Winnipeg, 5 p.m.

Table listing NFL scores: Pittsburgh 34, Houston 6.

New England 37

Table listing NFL scores: New England 37, Arizona 23, and others.

Week 16 Results: Baltimore 23, Indianapolis 16, Minnesota 16, Green Bay 10, Chicago 20, Cleveland 3.