

## NFL Conference Championships

## The final four all overcame injuries to star players

By ARNIE STAPLETON  
Associated Press

The list of players sitting out this weekend's conference championships is almost as impressive as the starting lineups: Julian Edelman. Carson Wentz. Dalvin Cook. Dont'a Hightower. Allen Robinson. Sam Bradford.

Following the NFL's season of carnage that claimed the likes of, among others, Aaron Rodgers, Richard Sherman, Kam Chancellor, J.J. Watt, DeShaun Watson, Odell Beckham Jr. and Joe Thomas, this year's final four all overcame not only the odds — "Minneapolis Miracle, anyone?" — but devastating injuries to key starters.

"We have a tough and resilient team," Philadelphia Eagles defensive end Chris Long said of the NFC's top seed, which is missing its second-year QB in Wentz, an MVP hopeful when he blew out a knee in December.

Even before Wentz's injury thrust backup Nick Foles into the starting job for the playoffs, the Eagles lost nine-time Pro Bowl left tackle Jason Peters, playmaking middle linebacker Jordan Hicks, versatile return specialist Darren Sproles, and special teams captain Chris Maragos.

Yet, here they are, 60 minutes from Minneapolis and Super Bowl 52.

"I think that starts at the top with Doug, because he sets the tone for being

resilient and even keeled," Long said of his coach, Doug Pederson. "At the end of the day, we have a tough group of guys."

So do the Minnesota Vikings, who are trying to reach their first Super Bowl in more than four decades and fulfill mantra to "Bring it Home" and become the first NFL team to play the title game in its own stadium.

And they're doing so behind Case Keenum, who crashed Tom Brady's playoff party along with fellow perennial backup Foles and Jacksonville Jaguars QB Blake Bortles.

Together, the four quarterbacks left standing have a combined five Super Bowl rings, two NFL MVP awards and four Super Bowl MVP trophies. Brady, of course, owns all of that hardware himself.

Such is the panorama of these playoffs following a season of pain in which so many superstars were rendered sideline spectators with broken bones, snapped ligaments, torn muscles.

Keenum replaced an injured Bradford, who had replaced an injured Teddy Bridgewater. Bradford, now back in uniform as Keenum's backup, blew out a knee in the first month of the season, as did rookie running back in Cook, who needed reconstructive surgery to repair a torn ACL.

Behind resilient coach Mike Zimmer, who resisted



In this Jan. 14, 2018, file photo, Minnesota Vikings quarterback Case Keenum, left, celebrates after a 29-24 win over the New Orleans Saints during the second half of an NFL divisional football playoff game in Minneapolis. Keenum replaced an injured Sam Bradford, who had replaced an injured Teddy Bridgewater, all three of whom have expiring contracts after the Super Bowl.

AP Photo/Jeff Roberson

the urge to quit just before he got the Vikings' head coaching gig in 2014, Minnesota rolled right along. Keenum deftly took over for Bradford, and Jerick McKinnon and Latavius Murray became a productive backfield tandem.

"We've got a bunch of fighters on this team," Zimmer said. "They've been a resilient bunch all year long. I expect it to continue to be that way."

The Patriots are also a bunch of fighters; they reached their seventh straight AFC title game despite

losing Edelman, Brady's top target, to a torn ACL in the preseason, and Hightower to a torn chest muscle in November.

Play caller Josh McDaniels and Brady, who led New England to a fifth Super Bowl title last year despite the absence of Rob Gronkowski, adjusted accordingly to Edelman's absence with another terrific year.

Linebacker Kyle Van Noy stepped in for Hightower and ranked third on the team with 73 tackles and second with 5½ sacks despite missing three of the final five games

with a calf injury.

Van Noy's sack total was just a half-sack shy of Hightower's career high set in 2014.

"The thing about K.V. is he's very versatile," said Patriots safety and defensive captain Devin McCourty. "So we've used him a bunch of different ways. ... He's been a big asset to our team."

The Jaguars are the healthiest of the remaining playoff teams. They have only one opening-day starter on injured reserve: former Pro Bowl receiver Robinson, who tore his left ACL on

Jacksonville's opener.

Four months removed from reconstructive surgery, Robinson is now traveling with the team, so he'll be on the sideline Sunday at New England, serving as a mentor to a raw receiving corps.

"Every person in this locker room put in a lot of work to get to this point, with me being one of them," said Robinson, who was poised for another big year after dominating the league's best secondary in training camp.

His injury on Jacksonville's third offensive snap created a huge void for the offense. Marqise Lee and Allen Hurns tried to pick up the slack, but they ended up on the sideline at one point with injuries, too, leaving rookies Keelan Cole and Dede Westbrook to assume bigger roles.

Cole, an undrafted rookie from tiny Kentucky Wesleyan, had 42 catches for 748 yards and three scores in the regular season. He added a clutch 45-yard catch that set up a late TD in Jacksonville's 45-42 stunner at Pittsburgh last week.

"I wish I could just wake up tomorrow and feel like I did Sept. 9," Robinson said, "but I understand it's going to be a process. I know I'll be back to that point and better."

Like so many other stars, Robinson will be in street clothes Sunday, cheering on his teammates in hopes of getting a sideline pass to the Super Bowl.

## Auto Racing

## Robert Yates' lifetime dedication to NASCAR to be honored

By JENNA FRYER  
Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — It took four times on the ballot for Robert Yates to be elected to NASCAR's Hall of Fame. When he finally received enough votes, the championship-winning car owner and engine builder burst into tears.

"He gave up his life for this sport. That was his choice but that was what it takes to be great at something and he did that," said Doug Yates, who succeeded his father in their engine business.

Yates was in a grueling fight with liver cancer when he was elected last

May following a vote at the NASCAR Hall of Fame. When his name was announced, he was mobbed by supporters thrilled for another tribute for one of NASCAR's stalwarts.

"It was the most gratifying moment of his whole career," Doug Yates said.

Yates died five months later at the age of 74, and his family will represent him Friday night as he's posthumously inducted into the NASCAR Hall of Fame along with Red Byron, Ray Evernham, Ron Hornaday Jr. and Ken Squier.

Yates started as an engine builder who learned from

Waddell Wilson and Junior Johnson. He built the powerplants for Bobby Allison's 1983 Cup championship team, and the engines used when Richard Petty drove to the 199th and 200th victories — his last — of his career. As a team owner, Yates won a championship with Dale Jarrett in 1999. Davey Allison won Yates his first race as a car owner in 1989. Yates won 57 Cup races as an owner, including three Daytona 500 victories with Allison and Jarrett.

"I'd say my dad felt very blessed to be involved in the sport of NASCAR and the time he was involved really lent itself to opportunities," Doug Yates said.

Also going into the Hall of Fame on Friday night are:

## RED BYRON

He was NASCAR's first crowned champion in the Modified Series and Strictly Stock Series, which is now called the Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series. Byron served in the Army Air Corps in the Pacific during World War II. He suffered a severe injury to his left leg while flying in a combat mission and later had to wear a specially created steel leg brace while racing. A version of the brace, which had to be attached to the clutch pedal of his race cars, is mounted in one of his cars displayed in the NASCAR Hall of Fame.

## RAY EVERNHAM

He led Jeff Gordon to three of Gordon's four championships and changed NASCAR with innovation,

a focus on fast pit stops and engineering. Evernham was crew chief of the famed "Rainbow Warriors" when Gordon won 47 races in seven seasons. Evernham then transitioned into a team owner and spearheaded Dodge Motorsports' return to NASCAR in 2001. Hall of Famer Bill Elliott earned Evernham Motorsports its inaugural victory that season, and Evernham collected 15 wins as a team owner.

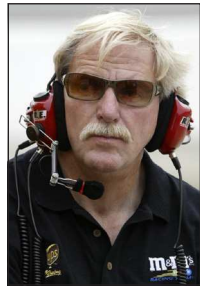
## RON HORNADAY JR.

He is a four-time NASCAR Camping World Truck Series champion. He also won four times in the Xfinity Series and finished third in that series' 2004 championship. He is known for helping young racers make their way to

North Carolina to attempt a career in NASCAR. Many racers, including future Cup champions Jimmie Johnson and Kevin Harvick, came from California and lived on Hornaday's couch as they chased rides.

## KEN SQUIER

The co-founder of the Motor Racing Network and a longtime voice of the sport, Squier is the first broadcaster to be elected to NASCAR's Hall of Fame. He worked NASCAR's flag-to-flag network television debut in the 1979 Daytona 500. He had co-founded MRN in 1969 before moving to television. He's also credited with helping develop the sport's first "in-car camera" now widely used in today's telecasts.



Yates

## 2018 Winter Games

## No-NHL 2018 Olympics makes for unique preparation strategies

By STEPHEN WHYNO  
Associated Press

When Brian Gionta last played in the Olympics in 2006, his final NHL game before the break allowed him just three days to fly to Italy and get acclimated before suiting up for Team USA.

This time around, the semi-retired U.S. captain and his Olympic teammates will get four whole practice days before opening the tournament against Slovenia on Feb. 14.

"With the NHL setup, you fly over there, you have a small window to practice in and then you're right into the games," Gionta said. "We've had the added benefit of being able to go over to the Deutschland Cup and be together for that week. A lot of the guys that were there are on the team and have a good understanding of each other. But I think that's a nice change, I guess, from previous Olympics."

Still, the U.S. lost all three games at that tournament in November and didn't score more than two goals in any of them. Preparation under a new coach, learning the nuances and habits of new teammates are certainly key, but every men's hockey team going to South Korea is in a much different situation from

any previous Olympics.

Before NHL players began participating in 1998, national teams were centralized and spent months together — much like women's teams do now. In contrast, the past five Olympics featured quick turnarounds when it came to training because so many players were also in the NHL, which decided this time around not to pause its 82-game regular season.

However, no NHL didn't automatically translate into more practice time as the teams were put together.

Almost everyone on an Olympic roster is playing professionally or in college, so there isn't much of an opportunity for training camps — though Canada, Russia and other countries are making the most of any time they have to get together. Russia's Kontinental Hockey League has its final games before the Olympic break Jan. 28, and other European leagues will release players shortly after that so they can prepare.

Chock full of stars from the KHL, including former NHL players Ilya Kovalchuk and Pavel Datsyuk, Russia should be the first to have its full team together and will play exhibition games in Moscow on Jan. 30 and



In this Feb. 24, 1988, file photo, a loose puck lies outside of the Canadian goal as Canadian goaltender Sean Burke and Soviet Union's Sergei Svetlov, left, go for it during an Olympic ice hockey medal round match at the Saddledome in Calgary.

AP Photo

Feb. 4. Canada is gathering as many players as possible in Latvia on Jan. 28 and will play two exhibition games there and one more in South Korea before the Olympics begin as it tries to win a third consecutive gold medal.

"We have access to our players very early, and we're going to take advantage of that," said Scott Salmond, Hockey Canada's vice president of hockey operations and national teams. "We're actually going to simulate the first two games of the Olympics with the ice times and the game times and try

to get used to that kind of quick turnaround from a 9 p.m. game and a day off and a noon game."

Sweden, which has a handful of former NHL players and projected 2018 No. 1 draft pick Rasmus Dahlin, will gather in Seoul for four days of practice before facing Canada on Feb. 12. The Czech Republic will hold training camp in Prague from Jan. 29-Feb. 6 before practicing in Seoul and playing an exhibition game against Finland on Feb. 11, while the Swiss are scheduled to play Germany in

Kloten, Switzerland, on Feb. 6 and Norway in Goyang, South Korea, five days later.

USA Hockey general manager Jim Johansson said his team won't play any exhibition games with most U.S. players arriving in South Korea on Feb. 8. Johansson said the U.S. will practice Feb. 10-13 and get in a game-day skate Feb. 14, which coach Tony Granato feels will be enough preparation.

"We've all been parts of multiple tournaments like this, so we're not unfamiliar with them," said Granato, who played 49 games with the U.S. national team prior to the 1988 Olympics and currently coaches at the University of Wisconsin. "A lot of the excitement and build-up leading up to it makes it that much better — you're going to get there, we're going to jump on the ice, we're going to practice and then a few days later we'll be center stage and ready to play."

Seventeen of the 25 U.S. players were at the Deutschland Cup in November and won't be back on the ice together until nearly three months later. The U.S. women's team? They gathered in Florida in September, played a series of games against top Olympic

rival Canada and have been together since.

"It's a huge bonus and a huge advantage to be together all year," forward Meghan Duggan said. "(It's) a difference from a world championship year, a non-Olympic year where we play with our pro teams and our club teams or college teams and get together for certain periods of time whether it be for world championships or Four Nations Cup or training camp."

Canada's men's team took part in several Olympic tune-up tournaments for evaluation purposes. GM Sean Burke, who played in goal for Canada in the 1988 and 1992 Olympics, is trying to make the most of this hybrid schedule to put coach Willie Desjardins and his team in the best position to succeed.

"We've had a lot of time to not only evaluate our players but have them together to do some team-building and we're going to get a good two-week training camp. I like the process," Burke said. "Our coaching staff can really get down to working on our systems and having everything in place that they're comfortable with. That's a real nice luxury to have."