

NFL

Jaguars don't fear Patriots' history in AFC title matchup

By KYLE HIGHTOWER
Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — The week started with a little trash talk from the underdog. The rest of it was dominated by speculation about a certain 40-year-old quarterback's injured throwing hand.

Plenty of intrigue for when the Jaguars and Patriots meet in Sunday's AFC championship game?

New England (14-3), the defending Super Bowl champion, is favored heading into its seventh straight conference title game. But the polished veneer it normally displays at this time of year is showing flecks of imperfection after Tom Brady injured his right hand during practice.

The injury kept Brady limited in workouts to begin the week and caused him to sit out practice entirely on Thursday.

Brady has never missed a playoff start during his 18-year career that includes four Super Bowl MVP honors. He said a bit contentiously only "We'll see" on Friday when asked if he would play Sunday.

He wore red gloves and responded to other questions about the hand's status by saying "I'm not talking about that."

The Patriots' top-ranked offense will need another signature performance from Brady against the Jaguars' second-ranked defense.

Jacksonville (12-6), trying to earn a trip to its first Super Bowl, has scored eight defensive touchdowns this season, three more than any other team. That's the most defensive touchdowns in a season by one team since the 2012 Bears.

Brady has faced a top-2 scoring defense in the playoffs three times, going 3-0 with a passer rating of 100-plus in each game.

Jaguars defensive end Calais Campbell said their



New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady warms up during an NFL football practice Friday in Foxborough, Mass. AP Photo/Bill Sikes

AFC Championship



• Sunday, noon (CBS)
• at Foxboro, Mass.

respect for Brady is high. Then he dismissed the notion that anyone in Jacksonville felt like the Jags were simply playing with "house money" after surprising Pittsburgh in the divisional round.

"We have earned the right to be here," he said. "We have put a lot of time and effort in, so this is an opportunity we feel like we deserve and we have prepared for. I can honestly say I expected to be here."

Jacksonville will also be up against history: The

Patriots have won the past seven meetings with the Jaguars and two straight in the postseason. Since Jacksonville entered the NFL in 1995, it is 1-10 against the Patriots, including playoff games.

"We are going to go out and there do everything possible to stay alive and earn the right to be in the Super Bowl," Campbell said. "They say you have to beat the best to be the best, so I can't wait to get out there and try."

Quarterback Blake Bortles, who has been the subject of criticism at times during his career, said Sunday isn't about trying to prove anyone wrong.

"I don't think so. Personally, I do not care," he said.

Here are some things to watch for:

FOURNETTE'S HEALTH: Jaguars rookie RB Leonard Fournette said he is feeling "good" after he was rear-ended in what authorities say was a minor three-car crash early in the week.

Fournette ran for 109 yards and three touchdowns against the Steelers despite reinjuring his right ankle in the first half. It was his most productive game in three months.

BULLETIN BOARD MATERIAL? All-Pro cornerback Jalen Ramsey caused a stir when he told thousands of fans awaiting the team's return after their win over the Steelers that the Jaguars "are going to the Super Bowl and we are going to win that (expletive)."

What matters more than a QB this year? A good defense

By HOWARD FENDRICH
Associated Press

Four of the five teams that gave up the fewest points during the regular season are the last four left with a shot at the Super Bowl, something that had never happened since the NFL-AFL merger nearly a half-century ago.

And three of the four toughest to gain yards against are still around, too.

Still think that all a team needs to succeed in the modern game is an elite QB? Go ahead and take a close look at Sunday's matchups for the conference championship games.

Sure, Tom Brady (assuming his injured right hand is good to go) and the New England Patriots will be playing for the AFC title, just like they always do, but they'll be going up against Blake Bortles and the Jacksonville Jaguars. Over in the NFC, the Philadelphia Eagles will send Nick Foles out to face the Minnesota Vikings and Case Keenum, hardly a marquee matchup between quarterbacks, and one set up by injuries to other signal-callers.

What this quartet of teams does have in common is solid defense, showing once again that while everyone is paying so much attention to one side of the ball, it's the other that might truly matter the most. The more league rules and officiating tend to favor offenses, the more figuring out ways to slow that down is imperative.

"When you have a defense that can shut that type of firepower down," said Brian Robison, a linebacker on the Vikings defense that ranked No. 1 in yards and points allowed, "it allows you to win ballgames."

Minnesota gave up 15.8 points per game. Jacksonville was No. 2 at 16.8, followed by No. 4 Philadelphia's 18.4 and No. 5 New England's 18.5.

"There's teams that have really good defenses that aren't talked about," Patriots linebacker Kyle Van Noy said. "We're one of them."

It's the first time since the 1970 merger there has been that sort of defensive dominance among the NFL's final four. The closest was at the end of the 2010 season, when teams that ranked No. 1 (Steelers), No. 2 (Packers), No. 4 (Bears) and No. 6 (Jets) in points allowed reached the conference title games.

"The most heralded guys on the field are the quarterbacks. So I would say, nine times out of 10, your detail goes into your offensive planning and things like that," said Jacksonville's leading tackler, Telvin Smith, who returned a fumble 50 yards for a touchdown last weekend. "Offense sells tickets, and defense wins championships. I'm happy I'm on the defensive side."

He is part of a young, talented and speedy D that rose to prominence quickly via a combination of shrewd drafting (linebackers Smith and Myles Jack, defensive ends Yannick Ngakoue and Dante Fowler Jr., cornerback Jalen Ramsey) and free-agent signings that panned out (defensive lineman Calais Campbell, cornerback A.J. Bouye, safeties Barry Church and Tashaun Gipson).

Take a look at the regular-season rankings in various defensive categories, and you can't miss the Jaguars. That helps explain how they made it this far with Bortles, whose 84.7 rating ranked 22nd among QBs with at least 100 pass attempts and whose 13 interceptions were exceeded by only six players.

Campbell tied for second in NFL with 14.5 sacks, while Ngakoue added 12 and led the league by forcing six fumbles. Bouye tied for third with six interceptions, while Ramsey, Gipson and Church each had four.

Jenkins made sure Eagles knew they can win without Wentz

By ROB MAADDI
Associated Press



• Sunday, 3:40 p.m. (FOX)
• at Philadelphia

PHILADELPHIA — Shortly after franchise quarterback Carson Wentz left the field with a torn ACL, Malcolm Jenkins gathered his teammates following a comeback win that clinched a division title. He gave an emotional speech, imploring them to believe they can win the Super Bowl without the guy who got them to that point.

The Philadelphia Eagles are two wins away from their goal. First up is the NFC championship game Sunday against the Minnesota Vikings.

"Carson being out of this, that sucks," Jenkins told the team in the locker room after a 43-35 win at the Los Angeles Rams on Dec. 10. "But dig this, we set this up for whoever (is) in this room, that's who we ride with, man. We said, 'we all we got, we all we need.' Believe that.... We got bigger goals ... championships and that's it."

Wentz is the franchise quarterback and a leader by example. Jenkins, the two-time Pro Bowl safety, is the in-your-face leader. He's the first one to address the group after coach Doug Pederson gives his post-game speech.

"He's embraced it and guys look forward to it," Pederson said. "He's got a lot of profound messages. He speaks from the heart and he speaks truth. So that's been a positive."

Jenkins says he always has a purpose when he speaks.

"I kind of try to analyze the situation of where we are as a team, do a little bit of reflection, but make sure

that it's not just an emotional response to keep everybody in perspective," he said. "A lot of times I'm talking to myself to be most honest."

As the underdog Eagles (14-3) prepare to host the Vikings (14-3), Jenkins reflected on his inspirational message following Wentz's injury.

"Knowing that the media was getting ready to come in right after and those seeds of doubt, words of doubt were getting ready to come, I wanted to make sure there was a message of confidence and perspective before they had to actually address the media," Jenkins said. "Obviously, we all hurt

for Carson. It's a huge blow to the team, but in no way does it change our goals. No way does it change our demeanor. Nothing's changed, and that was kind of the message."

Wentz's injury was the latest and biggest blow for a team seeking its first NFL title since 1960. The Eagles lost nine-time Pro Bowl left tackle Jason Peters, versatile running back/return specialist Darren Sproles, playmaking linebacker Jordan Hicks, and special-teams captain Chris Maragos to season-ending injuries.

"We always focused on the guys we had in the huddle," Jenkins said. "Losing the

amount of guys that we've lost and facing a lot of the adversity that we have, to have that mentality that we are sufficient, that the guys we have in this room can get it done, no matter what's in front of us, has kind of been the story line of this team. Obviously I think everybody has kind of embraced that mentality."

Jenkins spent his first five seasons with the New Orleans Saints and won a Super Bowl his rookie year. He joined the Eagles in free agency four years ago and has started every game, developing into one of the league's best players at his position.

USA Gymnastics

Olympian wishes for ex-doctor to have 'a life of suffering'

By DAVID EGGERT AND MIKE HOUSEHOLDER
Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. — Olympic gold medalist Aly Raisman on Friday confronted her former doctor who has pleaded guilty to multiple sexual assaults, warning him that the testimony of the "powerful army" of 140 survivors at his sentencing will haunt him in prison.

Roughly 80 of the women and girls whom Larry Nassar abused under the guise of medical treatment have stood before the court during a marathon sentencing hearing that began Tuesday, describing with eloquence and sometimes tears the harm Nassar did and the impact he has had on their lives.

"You have not taken gymnastics away from me," Raisman said. "I love this sport, and that love is stronger than the evil that resides in you, in those who enabled you to hurt many people."

Facing pressure over how it handled allegations made

against Nassar when he was employed by Michigan State University, the school's board of trustees on Friday asked the state's attorney general to investigate. The board also was holding a closed-door meeting amid calls for school president Lou Ann Simon to resign or be fired.

Raisman said if just one adult had believed Nassar's accusers and had "the courage and character to act, this tragedy could have been avoided. I and so many others would have never, ever met you. Larry, you should have been locked up a long, long time ago."

Nassar pleaded guilty to molesting girls at his MSU office, at home and at a Lansing-area gymnastics club, sometimes with a parent present. Already sentenced to 60 years in prison on a separate federal child pornography conviction, the 54-year-old man can expect to be behind bars for the rest of his life. Raisman hoped the testimonies of her fellow survivors will never leave him.

"All these brave women



Former Olympians Aly Raisman, left, and Jordyn Wieber sit in Circuit Judge Rosemarie Aquilina's courtroom during the fourth day of sentencing for former sports doctor Larry Nassar, who pled guilty to multiple counts of sexual assault Friday in Lansing, Mich. Matthew Dae Smith/Lansing State Journal via AP

have power, and we will use our voices to make sure you get what you deserve — a life of suffering spent replaying the words delivered by this powerful army of survivors," Raisman said.

Under a plea deal, Nassar faces a minimum sentence of 25 years in prison, but the judge could set the minimum as high as 40 years. State

prosecutors requested a maximum 125-year sentence, reflecting the number of women who at that time had come forward with allegations against Nassar.

Nassar also used to be a team doctor at the Indianapolis-based USA Gymnastics, which trains Olympians. Earlier Friday another member of the 2012 U.S.

"You should have been locked up a long, long time ago."

— Aly Raisman, former U.S. Olympic gymnast

Olympic gymnastics team — known as the "Fierce Five" — said she refused to let Nassar's abuse ruin her dreams.

"Even though I'm a victim, I do not and will not live my life as one," Jordyn Wieber said. "I'm an Olympian despite being abused. I worked hard and managed to achieve my goal. But I want everyone — especially the media — to know that despite my athletic achievements I am one of over 140 women and survivors whose story is important."

Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette, who is running for governor, said he would provide "a full and complete review, report and recommendation" of Michigan State's actions over Nassar, but only after the ex-doctor's victims have had "their day in court."

The university fired

Nassar in 2016, as allegations against him stretching back years came to light.

"After watching many of these heartbreaking statements and reading accounts about them, we have concluded that only a review by your office can resolve the questions in a way that the victims, their families, and the public will deem satisfactory and that will help all those affected by Nassar's horrible crimes to heal," the university's board said in a letter to Schuette requesting his help.

The criminal cases against Nassar followed reports last year in The Indianapolis Star about how USA Gymnastics mishandled complaints about sexual misconduct involving the doctor and coaches. Women and girls said the stories inspired them to step forward with detailed allegations of abuse.