

While Wagner leads Seattle D, Lee fights for Cowboys' scraps

By SCHUYLER DIXON
AP Pro Football Writer

FRISCO, Texas — Seattle's Bobby Wagner and Sean Lee of Dallas were the All-Pro leaders of their defenses at linebacker the previous time the Seahawks and Cowboys made the playoffs.

Little has changed for Wagner's group in two years. Not much is the same in the middle of the Dallas defense going into the first postseason meeting between these teams since the 2006 season.

Wagner is still among the NFL leaders in tackles, according to SportRadar, and perhaps headed to his third straight All-Pro selection. Joining him among those leading tacklers? Not Lee, but Cowboys rookie Leighton Vander Esch.

And that's only the half of it with Dallas (10-6), which will host the Seahawks (10-6) in a wild-card game Saturday night. Jaylon Smith is the other under-25 linebacker getting most of the attention, while Lee's presence almost feels like an afterthought in another injury-plagued year for the two-time Pro Bowler.

"I think when you have two young guys who are playing at a Pro Bowl caliber, in years past, missing the time, you'd probably be, 'Hey I need to be back to help this team,'" Lee said. "When you have guys like that playing that well, you know you can take your time."

The 28-year-old Wagner, drafted two years after Lee but four years younger, doesn't sound like someone willing to wait around for anyone anytime soon. Asked if he was ever a sloppy tackler, Wagner started his reply



In this Sept. 30, 2018, file photo, Seattle Seahawks linebacker Bobby Wagner (54) gestures at the line of scrimmage during an NFL football game against the Arizona Cardinals in Glendale, Ariz.

with, "Sloppy tackler?"

"Maybe when I was an infant and I was barely walking," said Wagner, the only player with fewer than five missed tackles (he has one) among those with at least 100 tackles this season, according to SportRadar. "Legs weren't fully developed yet."

It was never Lee's style for that sort of brash answer, even in his prime.

But now the questions are about how many snaps he needs to feel comfortable in a playoff game after missing six of the last eight games in the regular season and nine overall with two hamstring injuries. Or about whether he will even have a prominent role now that



In this Sunday, Dec. 10, 2017, file photo, Dallas Cowboys middle linebacker Sean Lee (50) runs the ball after intercepting a pass from the New York Giants during the fourth quarter of an NFL football game in East Rutherford, N.J.

he's healthy.

"Sean Lee is someone who can have a huge impact

well also, so we'll work it out as the week goes on."

In the past, there wasn't anything to work out when Lee was ready to return from injury. While a knee injury sidelined him for all of the most recent season in which the Cowboys won a playoff game (2014), Lee was the best defensive player for the NFC's top seed in 2016.

Dallas lost a divisional playoff to Green Bay at home to finish the only one of Lee's nine seasons in which he didn't miss a game because of injury, while the Seahawks fell in the same round to Atlanta.

Lee has missed nearly half the games since then because of hamstring issues,

but is praised for how he has mentored Vander Esch and Smith, by far the team's top two tacklers.

"You come into the meetings so excited because you see these young guys at the beginning of their career wanting to do everything to help this team," Lee said. "And you see yourself in them when you were young. I try to help them, but they also help me with their energy."

Smith was a rookie rehabbing a knee injury from his final game at Notre Dame when Dallas made the playoffs two years ago. Vander Esch still hadn't started a game at Boise State, just a couple of years removed from walking on there after playing eight-man high school football in tiny Riggins, Idaho.

Now the Cowboys are just trying to find Lee playing time among those two.

"You go to one side of the field and one guy is flying over and making a tackle for loss and then you try the other side, and the other guy is making a tackle for loss," Wagner said of his young counterparts. "Every time one of them makes a play, they're the first one congratulating them and to me, that's fun to watch."

Don't think the Cowboys haven't noticed Wagner, particularly since they have just one touchdown combined the past three times they've faced his defense.

"Turn on the tape," quarterback Dak Prescott said. "He's an elite linebacker, and he's been that way for a long time. He's the quarterback of their defense. He knows for the most part the offense's formations and the things that they like to do out of that and that puts him ahead of the game."

Giving big money to NFL QBs guarantees nothing in return

By ROB MAADDI
AP Pro Football Writer

Giving quarterbacks big money doesn't guarantee success or even playoff appearances.

The NFL's six highest-paid quarterbacks in 2018 will be spectators this postseason. Green Bay's Aaron Rodgers (\$33.5 million), Atlanta's Matt Ryan (\$30 million), Minnesota's Kirk Cousins (\$28 million), San Francisco's Jimmy Garoppolo (\$27.5 million), Detroit's Matthew Stafford (\$27 million) and Oakland's Derek Carr (\$25 million) couldn't lead their teams to the playoffs.

Only Cousins had a winning record (8-7-1), and he failed in a do-or-die game in the regular-season finale. Cousins, who received a three-year, fully guaranteed, \$84 million contract, struggled in a 24-10 loss to the Chicago Bears that eliminated the Vikings.

Of the top six on the salary list, only Rodgers has won a Super Bowl. Ryan is 4-6 in the playoffs, Stafford is 0-3 and Cousins is 0-1. Carr and Garoppolo haven't made a postseason start.

Among the 12 starting quarterbacks still playing, six are still under their rookie contract and another — Nick Foles — is a backup.

Here's a look at a few more numbers entering wild-card weekend:

Setting records: New Orleans quarterback Drew Brees broke his own record with a 74.4 completion percentage, the highest in a season in NFL history. ... Philadelphia's Zach Ertz set a record for most receptions by a tight end (116). ... San Francisco's George Kittle set a record for most yards receiving by a tight end (1,377). ... Teams combined to score 1,371 total touchdowns, the highest total in a season. ... Eight quarterbacks had a passer rating of 100 or higher, most in a season.



In this Nov. 15, 2018, file photo, Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers looks to pass against the Seattle Seahawks during the first half of an NFL football game in Seattle.

Last man standing: Philadelphia's Doug Pederson is the only one of seven coaches hired in 2016 still with his team. Adam Gase (23-26, Miami), Chip Kelly (2-14, San Francisco), Hue Jackson (3-36-1, Cleveland), Mike Mularkey (19-17, Tennessee), Dirk Koetter (19-29, Tampa Bay) and Ben McAdoo (13-16, Giants) all were fired, some sooner than others.

Worst to first: The Bears (12-4) and Texans (11-5) won their divisions after finishing in last place in 2017. The Eagles won the Super Bowl last year after going worst-to-first in the NFC East.

The newcomers: Seven teams who weren't in the playoffs last season qualified this year. All seven — Baltimore, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Indianapolis, the Los Angeles Chargers and Seattle — will play this weekend. Since the 12-team playoff format was adopted in 1990, at least four teams have qualified for the playoffs in every season that were not in the postseason the previous year.

Wild-card champs: Nine teams who played wild-card games have won the Super Bowl, including the

1980 Raiders, 1997 Broncos, 2000 and 2012 Ravens, 2005 Steelers, 2006 Colts, 2007 and 2011 Giants and 2010 Packers.

Toughest road: The Eagles and Colts are each trying to become only the third No. 6 seed to win a Super Bowl, joining the 2005 Steelers and 2010 Packers.

Easiest road: Since 1975, 49 of the 86 teams (57 percent) to reach the Super Bowl were No. 1 seeds. In that span, 20 No. 2 seeds, four No. 3, nine No. 4, two No. 5 and two No. 6 made it. Over the past five years, nine of 10 No. 1 seeds played in the Super Bowl. Only the 2016 Cowboys didn't get in.

Welcome to the dance: Four quarterbacks will make their postseason debut as starters. Baltimore's Lamar Jackson, Chicago's Mitchell Trubisky and Houston's Deshaun Watson play this weekend. Kansas City's Patrick Mahomes has a bye.

Stingy defense: In three of the past four seasons, the teams with the stingiest regular-season scoring defense have advanced to the Super Bowl. The Bears led the league with the fewest points allowed per game (17.7) this season.

Tickets for College Football Playoff title game available for cheap

By JOSH DUBOW
Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Qualifying for the college football championship game never has been harder for teams other than Alabama and Clemson.

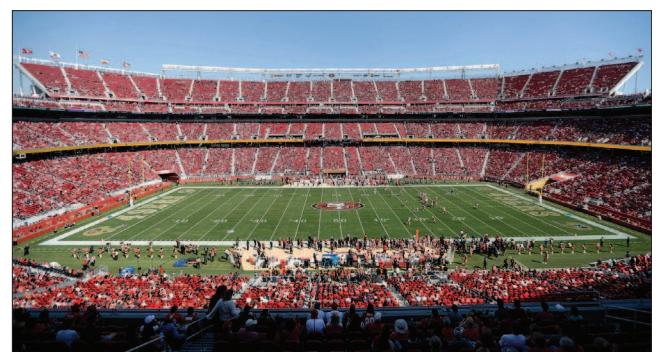
Getting into the stadium to watch the Crimson Tide and Tigers play for the title for the third time in four years has perhaps never been cheaper.

With the College Football Playoff final located thousands of miles away from the two campuses, possible fatigue for fan bases of teams that have become annual participants in the playoff and a game site in an expensive market lacking college football die-hards, prices for tickets for Monday night's championship in Santa Clara have been plummeting the past few days.

"It's sort of a perfect storm of factors at play this year," said Jesse Lawrence, the founder of TicketIQ, a secondary ticket market. "It's a big ask for fans to come and that's why we're seeing the prices the way they are."

Tickets for the championship game are now available for just \$135 on the secondary market, according to TicketIQ, less than half of what the price was before the semifinals and well below the face value price of \$475. StubHub had even cheaper tickets available Wednesday night, with seats priced at \$115 — less than double the cost of a parking pass on the ticket resale site.

The CFP picked Santa Clara as its site for this year in part out of hope of broadening college football's fan base. The Bay Area is much more of a pro sports region and it appears that not enough locals want to brave rush-hour traffic to attend the game Monday night. Games at California and Stanford struggle to draw big crowds and the annual Pac-12 championship game needs tarps to cover unused sections at



In this Oct. 7, 2018, file photo, fans watch an NFL football game between the San Francisco 49ers and the Arizona Cardinals at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, Calif.

Levi's Stadium.

Tickets for the championship game are considerably cheaper than those for the SEC championship game last month in Atlanta between Alabama and Georgia and both CFP semifinal games.

With both schools still having tickets available and the secondary market filled with relatively cheap seats, there's a distinct possibility of empty seats for college football's biggest game.

"It's actually not surprising," Lawrence said. "I think it's predictable or expected based on two factors."

The main factor is the location of the game. The two schools are an average of 2,428 miles away from the game site, the longest distance since TicketIQ first began tracking the distance in 2011.

Flights from South Carolina and Alabama were running around \$1,000 round-trip and hotels in the Bay Area are notoriously expensive, making the trip costly even if the tickets aren't.

With the two schools having been to this game so often so recently, demand for tickets is very soft.

The previous mark for cheapest ticket for the college championship since 2011 was \$202 in 2016, when Alabama and Clemson met for the first of two straight playoff meetings in Glendale, Arizona — another city more than 2,000 miles away from the schools. In contrast, last year's

title game in Atlanta between Alabama and Georgia was the closest location to the schools at an average of 136 miles, and the most expensive ticket, with the get-in price on the secondary market reaching \$1,752, according to TicketIQ. That was just slightly higher than the prices for the Alabama-Clemson rematch in Tampa, Florida, in 2017, and the Oregon-Auburn title game in 2011 in Glendale, Arizona.

Lawrence said he believes the prices would have been in the middle of the pack had Oklahoma and Notre Dame won the semifinal games, but even then it would have been hard to top games where the teams were closer to the site.

"You can overcome the lack of novelty if the location is good but even in a situation where there is novelty, location will trump," Lawrence said. "The best example of that is Alabama-Clemson I, which was in Glendale, Arizona. That was first time Clemson had been, there was a lot of novelty there. Alabama had been there before, but still it was the first of the matchups and highly anticipated and that was a \$200 get-in price."

Location is a much bigger factor for the CFP title game than the basketball Final Four, where ticket prices are less susceptible to fluctuations based on the proximity of the teams because there are four schools involved and more casual fans plan trips for that event.