

Gurley meets Elliott in big-time showcase for NFL's top RBs

By GREG BEACHAM
Associated Press

THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. — Todd Gurley roots for running backs when he watches football. A playoff duel between arguably the two best ball-carriers in the NFL would be irresistible to him as a fan.

Gurley won't be watching the Los Angeles Rams' playoff game against the Dallas Cowboys from his couch, however. He'll be in the Coliseum on Saturday night to go up against Ezekiel Elliott in a tantalizing matchup that should play a large role in deciding which team moves on to the NFC championship game.

"It's not really about us," Gurley said Wednesday night. "It's a team game. Obviously, we've got to hype it up, Zeke versus Gurley, but it'll be a good game. He's a great back, and I guess I'm not too bad myself."

The good feelings are mutual between these elite running backs when the Cowboys (11-6) visit the Rams (13-3). Gurley and Elliott are friends who realize they have a remarkably similar style of play, adding an extra bit of intrigue to an already compelling matchup.

"He's a big, fast back," Elliott said about Gurley. "He can run inside. He can run outside. He can run through you, jump over you, around you, make you miss. He's a great asset out of the backfield. Just a guy who has a well-rounded game and really doesn't have any weaknesses."

Indeed, no backs in the



In this Oct. 1, 2017, file photo, Los Angeles Rams' Todd Gurley, left, and Dallas Cowboys' Ezekiel Elliott, right, swap jerseys after an NFL football game in Arlington, Texas.

league exemplify the current ideal combination of power, speed and versatility better than Gurley or Elliott, who have established themselves as destroyers of defenses behind two of the league's best offensive lines.

Gurley and Elliott are dangerous as ball-carriers and as pass-catchers. They're the centerpieces of their respective offenses, with Elliott's 381 touches leading the NFL and Gurley ranking fourth with 315 touches after sitting out the Rams' past two games with a knee injury that appears to be healing well.

Although they've played only seven combined NFL seasons, they've already compiled individual accolades to back up their stature. Elliott won the NFL rushing title last month for the second time, while Gurley led the league in touchdowns and finished third in the rushing race this season after winning the NFL's Offensive Player of the Year award last season.

"He has everything you want in a running back," Cowboys coach Jason Garrett said of Gurley. "He's quick, he's fast, he's explosive, he's strong, has great

instincts for the game, great feel for the game, outstanding vision. He can beat you with speed. He can beat you with power. He can beat you cutting back. He can beat you when they hand him the ball. He can beat you when they throw him the ball. He's great running after the catch. He plays with a competitive spirit. He's just a fantastic player."

Garrett then realized he knows another back with very similar qualities.

"In some ways, I probably did describe Ezekiel Elliott," he said. "Both big-time players who can do

everything you want them to do on the field and embrace carrying the burden for their team."

Their skills aren't limited to taking handoffs, either.

Elliott was also the Cowboys' leading receiver this season with 77 catches for 567 yards. He has touched the ball at least 20 times in each of his past nine games.

Gurley made 59 catches for 580 yards this season, his numbers declining only slightly after Sean McVay turned him into a huge target in the Rams' passing game last year. Gurley played a role of increased

sophistication, lining up in new spots and learning new skills in McVay's innovative schemes.

Elliott and his offensive line are particularly daunting challenges for the Rams' defense, which yielded 5.1 yards per rush this season — worst in the NFL.

"It's a big challenge to stop their running game, especially (Elliott)," Rams defensive coordinator Wade Phillips said. "But all our guys know that, so that's a challenge. We've challenged our guys with, 'Hey, we can't let him run the ball, or certainly run wild on us.'"

Gurley hasn't played in four weeks after taking the final two regular-season games off to rest his balky knee. He is easing back into practice this week, with the Rams trying to keep him fresh for the challenge presented by a Cowboys run defense that held backs to 3.8 yards per carry, fifth-best in the league.

Gurley doesn't look at Saturday as a personal competition with Elliott — but if he did, he would have plenty of motivation.

While Elliott won the NFL rushing title as a rookie in 2016 and again this year, Gurley has yet to claim the title. Elliott also earned his first playoff victory last week, rushing for 137 yards against Seattle, while Gurley is still looking for his first postseason win.

"He's a big back, like myself," Gurley said. "Basically fast, strong, catches the ball. He goes out there and proves it every week. He gets it done."

Offensive star power headlines Colts-Chiefs showdown

By DAVE SKRETTA
Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Eric Ebron has seen the forecast for Saturday's divisional playoff game between the Indianapolis Colts and Kansas City Chiefs, where even the most optimistic of meteorologists are pegging the chances of rain or snow at about 50 percent.

It doesn't bother him. The Colts tight end played in plenty of cold games in the NFC North.

"You get past it once you get out there," said Ebron, who started his career with the Detroit Lions and remembers frigid games in Green Bay and Chicago. "The worst is the TV timeouts. Once that's over you will warm back up, but other than that it should be fun. Snow, whatever — I love snow games."

Even if the cold, wet weather puts a damper on two star-studded offenses.

Most of the attention this week has been on the quarterback showdown between the Chiefs' Patrick Mahomes and the Colts' Andrew Luck, and rightfully so. Mahomes shattered records by the dozen this year, throwing for more than 5,000 yards and 50 touchdowns, while Luck tossed 39 touchdown passes while taking the Colts from a 1-5 start to the second week-end of the playoffs.

But neither quarterback would have posted such gaudy numbers had he not had a plethora of weapons at his disposal, along with creative offensive minds to design plays to get him the ball.

Chiefs speedster Tyreek Hill set a franchise record with 1,479 yards receiving this year, pulled in 12 touchdown passes and had a league-leading 22 catches of at least 25 yards. Five times he had plays of at least 50 yards, including a 91-yard punt return touchdown against the Chargers in Week 1.

Hill should have his top running mate back, too. Sammy Watkins practiced this week after missing a handful of games with a foot injury, potentially giving Kansas City its No. 2 wide



In this Dec. 30, 2018, file photo, Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes (15) breaks a tackle-attempt by Oakland Raiders defensive end Arden Key (99) during the first half of an NFL football game in Kansas City, Mo.

receiver again.

Then there's Travis Kelce, the All-Pro tight end, whose value comes both as a blocker and a dangerous downfield target. Kelce had 103 catches for 1,336 yards this season, briefly setting the NFL record for a tight end, and has caught at least one pass in 79 consecutive games.

"I have a big advantage here that I have a lot of great teammates that can make a lot of plays. I don't have to try to do too much," Mahomes said. "Just get the ball out of my hands. Get it to Tyreek, get it to Kelce, get it to all these guys who can make plays and let them do what they have been doing all season long. That's the biggest thing, not trying to do too much."

Especially considering what they've done all season has been good enough.

"I mean, just their weapons — they've got several All-Pro players. They have a lot of good players that didn't get that recognition," Colts defensive coordinator Matt Eberflus said. "There's a lot of skill on that side of the ball. The scheme is a little bit unique, too, in terms of what they do and how they do it. It's going to be a big challenge."

It's not unlike the challenge the Indianapolis offense presents to the Chiefs, who have been ferocious at rushing the passer but have struggled in just about every other aspect.

T.Y. Hilton shredded the Chiefs defense with 13

catches for 224 yards and two touchdowns during their 2014 playoff game, when the Colts rallied from a 38-10 second-half deficit. He had 76 catches for 1,270 yards and six touchdowns in another Pro Bowl-caliber season.

His running mate, Dontrelle Inman, has scored in three consecutive games.

And much like the Chiefs, the Colts have one of the league's most versatile and dangerous tight ends in Eric Ebron. He had 13 touchdown catches during the regular season, trailing only the Steelers' Antonio Brown for the league lead, and added another in the Colts' playoff win in Houston.

Making it all work? An offensive line that allowed just 18 sacks this season.

"Based on the numbers, it's going to be very challenging," Chiefs defensive coordinator Bob Sutton said. "It's like anything, we will have our chances. We have to take advantage of it."

Notes: SS Eric Berry (heel) did not practice for the second straight day Thursday, and Chiefs coach Andy Reid refused to say whether he would play Saturday. ... WR Sammy Watkins (foot) practiced and appears likely to play. "He's had a good week," Reid said. "Looks pretty good." ... OLB Dorian O'Daniel (calf) did not practice, potentially depriving the Chiefs of a player on four special teams units. "These are day-to-day things," Reid said.

Philadelphia has St. Nick but New Orleans has lots of Saints

By BARRY WILNER
AP Pro Football Writer

The Philadelphia Eagles have St. Nick, and he hasn't let them down in the clutch. The problem on Sunday is that New Orleans has a lot of Saints — and a stronger team.

Nick Foles has been nothing short of superb in replacing Carson Wentz, first in the 2017 season when he guided Philly to its first NFL championship since 1960. And now, with Wentz again injured, Foles helped the Eagles slalom their way to an NFC wild-card berth.

Then, as in last February's Super Bowl win over New England, he drove the Eagles to a late winning touchdown at Chicago.

Can he keep it up? He'll have to against Drew Brees & Co. in the Superdome, where the Saints annihilated the Eagles 48-7 on Nov 18, Philadelphia's only loss by more than seven points all season.

From there, the Eagles have won six of seven, counting the 16-15 decision over the Bears last week.

"It's a credit to the players and the coaches for just kind of staying in the moment, just trying to win the week, starting with today," coach Doug Pederson says. "Just win today and then win tomorrow, try to go 1-0 each week. That's been the mentality and the mindset all season, even during those couple weeks of adversity in there."

"You still have to have a belief that we can get it done. The players do believe. They just come to work every day ready to go. There's great leadership on the team. It's really kind of held us together and pulled us through this stretch, and really the last three games of the regular season, I mean, they were all must win. Guys really understood what we needed to do, came together. They've jelled and here we are today."

Where they are is ranked No. 12 in the final AP Pro32 and 8-point underdogs against No. 1 New Orleans. It's hard not to share the



AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh
Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Nick Foles (9) passes during Sunday's NFL wild-card playoff football game against the Chicago Bears in Chicago.

faith in Foles and the Eagles after seeing what they have done. Then again, looking at their secondary and how Chicago found lots of open room, it's impossible not to believe in the home team.

Saints, 31-20

No. 5 (tie) Los Angeles Chargers (plus 4) at No. 5 (tie) New England, Sunday

Let's begin by mentioning that the Chargers are the better team. Right now, they might be the best overall team in the league. Should they win at Gillette Stadium, Pro Picks will be tempted to ride them all the way to and through Atlanta.

However, Philip Rivers never beats Tom Brady (0-7 is quite an ugly number) and the Patriots are the only unbeaten home team this season. Plus, the weather could be a factor, which always favors New England.

Best bet: Patriots, 23-16

No. 8 Indianapolis (plus 5) at No. 4 Kansas City, Saturday.

Last weekend's most impressive squad? The Colts, by far.

Indeed, over the last two months, it's difficult to find any team that has been more dangerous and dynamic than Indianapolis. Andrew Luck, finally healthy, is playing at his highest level. The offensive line is a wall, the defense has become a force, and the coaching is first-rate.

The Chiefs have so much going for them when they have the ball, led by Patrick

Mahomes' passing in Andy Reid's brilliant schemes. They have hardly anything except a pass rush going for them on defense, and Indy doesn't allow sacks or even much pressure on Luck.

Plus, the Colts are 4-0 in the playoffs against Kansas City, which hasn't gotten to a conference title game since the 1993 season.

Upset special: Colts, 26-24

No. 11 Dallas (plus 7) at No. 2 Los Angeles Rams, Saturday night

Another prime-time showcase for Ezekiel Elliott, and he'll need to be extremely productive, as he was vs. Seattle.

So, though, will his counterpart, Todd Gurley, likely back from a knee injury and crucial to the Rams advancing.

Dallas has a solid enough defense to keep the creative Rams off-balance, especially if Gurley is limited. Los Angeles has not looked like a power in the last month and needed to straighten out some issues in the bye week.

Still, we can't see an upset here.

Rams, 23-17

2018 record:

Last week: Against spread (4-0). Straight up (2-2)

Season totals: Against spread (133-110-9). Straight up: (171-87-2)

Best bet: 7-11 against spread, 12-6 straight up

Upset special: 10-8 against spread, 9-8-1 straight up