

Once rivals, Seahawks, Panthers head in different directions

By STEVE REED
Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Not too long ago the Carolina Panthers viewed the Seattle Seahawks as their biggest rivals in the NFC.

Now the franchises are headed in vastly different directions.

While the Seahawks have posted eight straight winning seasons under coach Pete Carroll, the Panthers have been inconsistent. Coach Ron Rivera was fired last week.

On Sunday, the Seahawks (10-3) will try to clinch a playoff berth for the seventh time in eight seasons when they visit the Panthers. They need a victory over Carolina and a loss by the Packers, Rams or Vikings to secure a spot in the postseason.

The Panthers (5-8) have been relegated to the role of spoiler. They have dropped five in a row and will miss the playoffs for the third time in four seasons.

Rivera had talked for years about the mental hurdle of “getting over the hump” and beating the Seahawks, who dominated Carolina earlier in the decade



AP Photo/Ted S. Warren

Seattle’s Russell Wilson’s MVP case has taken a hit in the past few weeks. After a sterling first nine games of the season, the past four have been more pedestrian.

with four straight wins. That message resonated loudest after the Seahawks beat the Panthers in the NFC divisional playoffs in 2014.

The Panthers ultimately would get over the hump, beating Seattle in the 2015 regular season and then again in the divisional playoffs en route to the Super Bowl.

But while the Seahawks

have remained a steady contender for the NFC title, the Panthers have fallen on hard times. They have failed to win a playoff game the past four seasons in part because of injuries to Cam Newton.

Panthers interim coach Perry Fewell said he believes the difference, in part, is the Seahawks have been able to maintain consistency at the quarterback

position with a healthy Russell Wilson.

“Their stability at the quarterback, he’s been healthy for the most part,” Fewell said. “Obviously his leadership permeates throughout the team.”

Fewell said Wilson is playing at a “MVP level.”

“Watching him on tape, you’re saying, ‘I hope he has a bad day,’” Fewell said.

1-2 punch

Seattle had a pretty good set of complementary running backs with Chris Carson as the primary option and Rashaad Penny as the change of pace. But Penny suffered an ACL injury on his first offensive touch last Sunday against the Rams.

While Carson likely will see even more action going forward, there will be increased focus on C.J. Prosise and whether he can fill Penny’s role. Prosise has shown flashes during his four seasons, but his career has been defined more by nagging injuries and being inactive on game days. Prosise has played in just 23 of a possible 61 regular-season games in his four seasons.

“C.J. has always done well when you give him a chance,” Carroll said. “Now, he’ll know he’s in the game plan and all of that. I’m hoping he’ll contribute in a big way.”

Better Russ

Wilson’s MVP case has taken a hit in the past few weeks. After a sterling first nine games of the season, the past four have been more pedestrian.

After posting a 118.2

passer rating through the first nine games, Wilson is at just 82.7 over the past four. He has four touchdown passes and four interceptions during the stretch. While Wilson has been hampered by some drops and errors in pass protection, he also has held onto the ball too long at times. Clearly, the Seahawks would like Wilson to find that early season form.

“He could do a little bit better and we need to help him. We need to contribute,” Carroll said.

Under pressure

Seattle’s pass rush barely sniffed Rams quarterback Jared Goff last week. The Seahawks had zero sacks and just four QB hits in the loss. Seattle thought it had corrected some of the pass rush issues from earlier in the season, but the performance against the Rams was a step back.

Seattle could get some help if defensive end Ziggy Ansah and linebacker Mychal Kendricks are able to play. Ansah missed last week with a shoulder injury. Kendricks is an excellent blitzer off the edge but missed last week with a hamstring injury.

Plenty of quarterbacks with a pedigree should be available in 2020

By ROB MAADDI
AP Pro Football Writer

PHILADELPHIA — Several quarterbacks with impressive resumes could be looking for new teams in 2020 after disappointing performances this season.

The list of QBs who could be available includes guys with MVP trophies on their mantels, former No. 1 draft picks and longtime starters.

Eli Manning is the most accomplished of the group. The two-time Super Bowl MVP already has some Hall of Fame credentials. Philip Rivers also has built a case to have his bust enshrined in Canton.

Cam Newton was the 2015 NFL MVP. Nick Foles

and Joe Flacco were Super Bowl MVPs.

Jameis Winston and Marcus Mariota were selected Nos. 1-2 in the 2015 draft.

Andy Dalton is a three-time Pro Bowl pick with 130 career starts.

Ryan Fitzpatrick has started 136 games in his 15-year career. Case Keenum led Minnesota to the NFC championship game two years ago.

Tom Brady, Drew Brees, Dak Prescott and Ryan Tannehill are potential free agents, but it’s unlikely they’re going anywhere. Teddy Bridgewater went 5-0 filling in for Brees this season, so he vastly improved his value on the open market.

Here’s a look at some of

the players:

Manning: The Giants benched their franchise icon in Week 3 to start first-round pick Daniel Jones, who has been inconsistent — hey, he is a rookie after all. Manning returned to the starting lineup last week because Jones has an ankle injury. He played well in the first half, throwing two touchdown passes in a 23-17 overtime loss at Philadelphia. Manning turns 39 next month and is in the final year of his contract. He may have to settle for a backup role to prolong his career.

Rivers: Like Manning, he’ll be a free agent after the season after spending his entire career with one team, the Chargers. Indeed, they basically were traded for

each other at the 2004 draft.

Unlike Manning, Rivers hasn’t lost his starting job and Los Angeles hasn’t drafted his successor. Rivers, who turned 38 last week, has 20 TD passes and 15 interceptions. His passer rating is down to 90.7 while his picks have gone up. He could end up staying to groom his replacement and play in the team’s new stadium for a season.

Newton: He’s owed \$18.6 million in 2020 but hasn’t played since Week 2 because of a foot injury that required surgery this week. Newton has been Carolina’s starter since 2011 and is 68-55-1 in his career. His future with the Panthers depends on his health and the preference of the new owner and the new

coach the team has to hire to replace Ron Rivera. Kyle Allen hasn’t taken advantage of his opportunity to fill in for Newton. He’s lost five straight games after starting off 5-1. Allen has 16 TDs, 12 picks and a 82.9 passer rating.

Foles: The Jaguars gave Foles a four-year, \$88 million contract in free agency that included \$50.125 million guaranteed. But the 2018 Super Bowl MVP with the Eagles broke his collarbone in Week 1. He struggled in three games after returning and was benched for rookie Gardner Minshew last week.

Flacco: The 2013 Super Bowl MVP with Baltimore was only 2-6 in his first season in Denver before a her-

niated disk ended his season. Second-round draftee Drew Lock is making his case to be the man for the Broncos. Flacco turns 35 next month and should end up on the open market. Cutting Flacco will free up \$10.05 million in cap space.

Winston: Tampa Bay has a tough decision to make on Winston, who becomes a free agent after the season. Winston has thrown for over 4,000 yards this season for the third time in five years, but he also has a career-high 23 interceptions. He’s only had one winning season and the Buccaneers need to win the final three games to match that 9-7 record from 2016. Winston is playing in his first season under coach Bruce Arians,

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