

# BIG GAME Preview

## The Rams Go Marching In

In a nail-biting, overtime victory, the Los Angeles Rams punched their ticket to Super Bowl LIII. While Jared Goff and company didn't lead the NFC Championship game until the clock ticked zero, they defeated the Saints after an incredible 57-yard field goal from kicker Greg Zuerlein. The Championship game in New Orleans set the stage for a rematch from Nov. 4, 2018. In the previous matchup, the Saints handed the Rams their first loss of the season with a 45-35 victory. The Los Angeles Rams would go on to complete the regular season with only three losses. They now aim to bring a Super Bowl trophy back to L.A. for the first time since the Raiders won it all in 1984.

**Little Worry**  
While most of the sports nation feared the Rams had burned out with two late-season losses, the team adamantly studied their opponents and made a successful playoff push. After closing out the regular season with dominant victories over the Cardinals and 49ers, the Rams would obtain their first playoff win since 2004 against the Dallas Cowboys. Their hard-fought victory over the Saints proves their offense, defense and special teams can show up when everything is on the line.

**Big Moves**  
The Los Angeles Rams relied on several key additions to win



the crown of NFC Champions. Here are a few of the key additions and free-agency moves that paid off.

**Brandin Cooks:** The Rams acquired Cooks from the New England Patriots and instantly added a downfield threat to their stellar offense. He ended the 2018 regular season as 14th for most receiving yards at 1,204.

**Ndamukong Suh:** The oversized defensive lineman added a new level of terror for opposing offenses. Teaming up with powerhouse Aaron Donald has proven to be a successful mixture of distraction and yard-stopping tackles. His regular season stats include 36 solo tackles.

**C.J. Anderson:** While star-running back Todd Gurley was dealing with a knee injury, the Rams signed the veteran Anderson on Dec. 18. After unsuccessful stints with both the Panthers and Raiders this year, Anderson became a key contributor to the Rams offense, creating an interesting depth alongside Gurley.

## Running Back Matchups

Both the Rams and Patriots have extensive weapons when it comes to passing. Tom Brady and Jared Goff relied on an impressive stable of receivers to reach Super Bowl LIII. The Patriots added depth to their stellar offense when choosing Sony Michel as the 31st overall pick in the 2018 NFL Draft. The Rams also have a balanced running game thanks to Pro-Bowler Todd Gurley and the recent acquisition of C.J. Anderson. While the competing quarterback's arms may get much of the glory, don't count out the importance of the impressive stable of running backs.

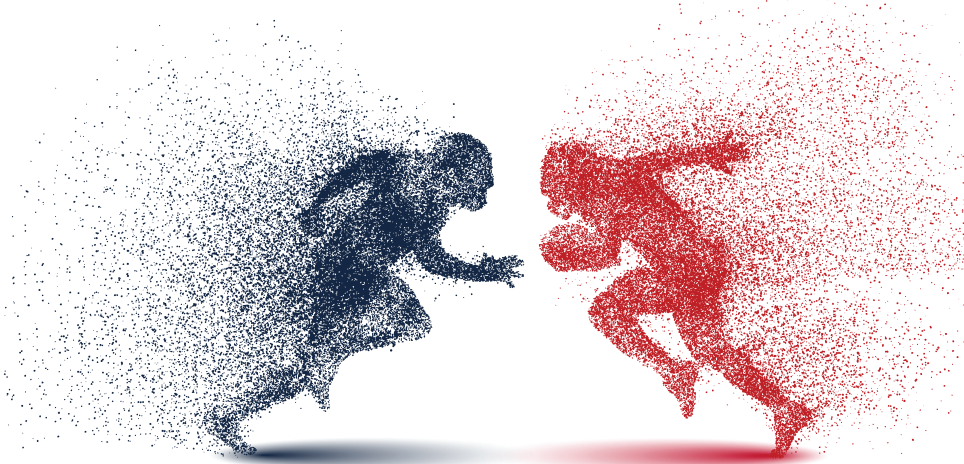
**Sony Michel**  
Michel's first season as a professional was limited after suffering a knee injury in training camp. In addition to missing the entire preseason, he wasn't cleared for action until Week 2, when the Patriots were upset by the Jacksonville Jaguars. Two weeks later, the running back would become the first rookie RB for the patriots to top 100 yards on the ground. Then, during the regular season match-up against the Kansas City Chiefs, he would add two-rushing touchdowns to the high-scoring 43-40 victory. His role in the post-season was just as impressive as he would rush for 129 yards and score three touchdowns against the Los Angeles Chargers in the Divisional Playoff game. In the AFC Championship game, he was able to put up 113 yards and two touchdowns against Kansas City's defense. He should have a good match-up against the Los Angeles Rams, who were ranked 23rd for their rushing defense.

**Gurley and Anderson: A Package Deal**  
Todd Gurley had an impressive outing in the regular season, racking up over 1,200 yards. A nagging injury caused him to miss the last-two games of the year and seemed to limit him



in the victory over the Saints in the NFC Conference competition, where he only rushed for 10 yards on four attempts. In late December, the Rams acquired C.J. Anderson to provide insurance while Gurley healed. In the Divisional Championship game, he achieved 123 yards and two touchdowns. His performance against the Saints was limited to 44 yards while never making it in the endzone. The Rams will be faced with creating a strategy to employ both running backs to keep up with Brady's high-octane offense.

## The Big Game Matchup



Both the New England Patriots and Los Angeles Rams fought difficult battles during their Divisional Championship games. While the Rams' game featured a potentially controversial missed call for pass interference, the team earned its way into Super Bowl LIII. The Rams' impressive 8-0 beginning into the season showcased their adversity on the field in both offense and defense. It was special teams who really shined during the NFC Championship game after a fake punt led to a first down and a booming 57-yard field goal clinched the win in overtime. The Patriots struggled early in the season with a few losses that embarrassed them and led many to believe their reign as a dominant force in the NFL was threatened. It didn't take long for the team to pull together and beat out enough of the competition to secure a playoff berth and a first-round bye. Now that the stage is set for Atlanta, here are a few exciting factors that the teams must overcome to hoist the trophy.

### Experience

The New England Patriots are well-versed in the Super Bowl experience, while most of the forces behind the Rams will be making their first visit. There are vast differences in age and football experience between both quarterbacks and coaches. It should give an interesting edge to how each team calls plays and executes. One person the Rams can look to for guidance is their knowledgeable defensive coordinator, Wade Phillips. He was a contributor to the Broncos' victory in Super Bowl L. **Defense**  
The Rams have a powerful entity on their defensive line in Aaron Donald and

Ndamukong Suh. The Patriots line will have trouble keeping them contained to give Brady enough time to execute the precision passing he is known for. On the other side, New England found a way to put pressure on Patrick Mahone during its championship competition, ultimately

sacking him four times.

### Kicker

Big games sometimes come down to the leg of a kicker. This year, the season was plagued with missed opportunities, like Cody Parkey from the Chicago Bears and the now infamous, "Double Doink" kick that eliminated them from playoff contention. The Rams' Greg Zuerlein proved himself to be efficient under pressure by knocking in a 57-yard winner. New England's Stephen Gostkowski has been with the Patriots since 2006 and proved to be valuable under pressure.

## The Battle Under Center

The stage is set for Super Bowl LIII in Atlanta. After a historical night in which both conference championships went into overtime for the first time in NFL history, the Los Angeles Rams will face off against the New England Patriots. The Rams will be faced with unfamiliarity with a game of this magnitude, while the Patriots will go into the game with experience. With both teams featuring explosive offenses, it will be up to the defense to maintain the quarterbacks under center. Here's a look at how the two competitors led their teams to Super Bowl LXIII.

**Brady Does it Again**  
Tom Brady is no stranger to late-fourth quarter comebacks in big games. In the Conference Championship game, he found his team trailing to the Kansas City Chiefs with just under two minutes left. After strategically picking apart the defense with short completions, the Patriots would ultimately score and lead the game



clinched their 10th straight AFC East division title and will find themselves on the grandest stage on Feb. 3. Tom Brady finished the regular season with 4,355 yards and 29 touchdowns. **Jared Goff's First Super Bowl**  
Goff gained the reigns of the Los Angeles Rams in 2016 and quickly led his team to a playoff run in 2017 before

winning the conference championship this year. It will be interesting to see how the pressures of the big game and experience of the opposing quarterback will affect his performance. In the NFC Conference game, the Rams didn't lead the Saints until the game-winning field goal in overtime. However, Goff had an impressive night under the lights of national television with 297 yards and a passer rating of 83.0. The quarterback and coach combination for both teams should be widely acknowledged as each team featured seasoned veterans or first-time contenders.

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