

Sports

NFC CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

49ers run over Packers

By Josh Dubow
AP Pro Football Writer

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Coach Kyle Shanahan received the NFC championship trophy from his Super Bowl-winning father Mike and raised it to the sky.

The San Francisco 49ers have gone on a surprising journey from No. 2 pick in the draft to one of the last two teams standing. They have one of the most unlikely playoff heroes to thank for it.

Journeyman Raheem Mostert rushed for 220 yards and four touchdowns to make quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo mostly a spectator; Nick Bosa harassed Aaron Rodgers from the start and the 49ers beat the Green Bay Packers 37-20 for the NFC championship on Sunday.

"I did have a lot of doubters and naysayers," said Mostert, who has been cut seven times in his career. "Now I get to actually tell them, 'Look where I'm at now.'"

"I never gave up on my dreams."

The Niners (15-3) also had their skeptics after winning just 10 games in the first two seasons under Shanahan and general manager John Lynch.

But they put pieces and



Ezra Shaw / Getty Images-TNS

Head coach Kyle Shanahan of the San Francisco 49ers celebrates with the George Halas Trophy after winning the NFC Championship game against the Green Bay Packers on Sunday.

systems in place during those rough two seasons and now have advanced to the franchise's first Super Bowl in seven years. The Niners will play the Kansas City Chiefs in two weeks in Miami when Shanahan tries to join his father as coaching champions.

"It was pretty special," Shanahan said of getting handed the trophy from his father at the postgame ceremony. "To get a trophy handed to you by anyone is really cool. ... It was pretty cool it happened there at the end."

After giving a second thorough beating of the season

to Rodgers and the Packers (14-4), the 49ers are the third team to make it to the Super Bowl a year after winning four or fewer games.

Cincinnati did it in 1988 and the Rams 1999, with the Rams the only team to go from four wins to a championship in one year.

"It's still kind of surreal," linebacker Fred Warner said. "With the stuff this team has gone through, this organization, it's special. It's the pinnacle of football right here."

Bosa, the prize for last year's rough season as the No. 2 overall pick, helped set the tone

when he ended Green Bay's second drive of the game with a 13-yard sack of Rodgers.

Mostert, a former special teams standout, did much of the rest in a remarkable redemption story for a former surfer who carried the ball only eight times in his first three seasons in the NFL while bouncing between teams.

But he has become a key part of the NFC's top team this year, leading the Niners with 772 yards rushing in the regular season and delivering a performance for the ages in the NFC title game.

He had the second-most yards rushing in a playoff game to Eric Dickerson's 248 for the Rams on Jan. 4, 1986, and was the first player to rush for at least four TDs and 200 yards in a playoff game.

He got started when he burst 36 yards on a third-and-8 trap play to open the scoring on San Francisco's second drive and kept ripping off long runs behind impressive blocking.

"He's so fast," tackle Joe Staley said. "He's incredibly fast. He's fearless going through the hole. He has trust in the linemen to block it up. He's a great running back."

AFC CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

Chiefs end half-century Super Bowl drought

By Barry Wilner
AP Pro Football Writer

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Patrick Mahomes tip-toed down the sideline for a game-turning touchdown, added three TD passes, and the Kansas City Chiefs made their first Super Bowl in a half-century by beating the Tennessee Titans 35-24 Sunday for the AFC championship.

In two weeks in Miami, they will play the winner of the NFC title game between Green Bay and San Francisco.

Mahomes did his usual superb job

passing, but it was his 27-yard tap dance down the left sideline late in the first half that gave the Chiefs their first lead. From there, they outran the run-oriented Titans and star back Derrick Henry.

At last, for the first time since 1970 and the third time overall, the Chiefs (14-4) are Super Bowl bound.

Adding to the joy of the achievement, coach Andy Reid and owner Clark Hunt accepted the Lamar Hunt Trophy — named after his father — emblematic of the AFC title.

Next up: Chasing the Vince Lombardi Trophy.

As they had done in their past three "elimination" games, the sixth-seeded Titans (11-8) got started quickly. The difference at Arrowhead as opposed to Houston, New England and Baltimore was that the Chiefs had Mahomes, Tyreek Hill, Sammy Watkins and Damien Williams on offense, and a vastly upgraded defense from when they lost in last year's AFC title game.

A week after they overcame a 24-0 deficit against Houston, the Chiefs had to rally again.

Down 10-0 and 17-7, Kansas City

didn't flinch, building a 35-17 lead while controlling the clock with a strong ground game. Naturally, Mahomes complemented that with sharp passing, spreading the ball on short and deep throws. The dagger came with a 60-yard completion to Watkins for the Chiefs' 28th straight point midway in the final period.

Mahomes thrust both arms in the air as the crowd sang "I Want To Dance With Somebody."

That somebody will be either the 49ers or Packers in two weeks. They were deciding the NFC crown later

Sunday in California.

After taking a 3-0 lead on Greg Joseph's first field goal — with Tennessee's penchant for scoring in the red zone, he hadn't been called upon in his previous four games with the team — the Titans got a huge break. Bashaud Breeland appeared to make a diving interception, but replay review showed the ball hitting the ground.

Helped by consecutive offside penalties and a fourth-down pass to Adam Humphries for his first career playoff reception, the Titans converted on, what else, Henry's 4-yard run.

Paul leads Thunder past short-handed Blazers

By Cliff Brunt
AP Sports Writer

OKLAHOMA CITY — Chris Paul had become annoyed with Oklahoma City's recent slow starts, so he did something about it.

He scored 21 of his 30 points in the first half, and the Oklahoma City Thunder beat the short-handed Portland Trail Blazers 119-106 on Saturday night.

Forward Danilo Gallinari, Oklahoma City's No. 2 scorer, rested. That prompted Paul to look for his shot more.

"Just trying to be aggressive," he said. "You know, without Danilo, we've got to find scoring. So I tried to come out and pick my spots early and made a few shots early."

Portland coach Terry Stotts has seen it all before during Paul's 15-year NBA career.

"Paul was a really good player tonight," Stotts said. "Well, he's been a really good player for his career, but he had a really good game tonight. He managed the game, scored."

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 22 points and 10 rebounds and Den-

nis Schroder and Nerlens Noel each added 15 points for Oklahoma City.

The Trail Blazers had just eight players available. Portland's Kent Bazemore and Anthony Tolliver were not with the team, and coach Terry Stotts declined comment amid reports that the players were to be traded to Sacramento in exchange for Trevor Ariza, Wenyen Gabriel and Caleb Swanigan.

Portland guard C.J. McCollum was out with a sprained left ankle. He ranks second on the team, averaging 21.5 points.

Damian Lillard, who played despite dealing with an upper respiratory illness, led the Trail Blazers with 34 points. Gary Trent Jr. scored a career-high 30.

The Thunder led 64-57 at halftime, a switch from recent games with big deficits against the Los Angeles Lakers, Toronto Raptors and Miami Heat.

"We just didn't have to play from behind," Gilgeous-Alexander said. "We knew what we needed to do going into this game. We are coming off a back-to-back. We knew it would be a little bit tough, but if we wanted to win, we

had to do it, and we did it tonight."

Lillard scored 24 points in the first half to keep the Trail Blazers in it, but Oklahoma City pushed its lead to 87-77 after three quarters and cruised in the fourth. Stotts wasn't sure if his team wore out.

"That's possible," he said. "You know, we were hanging close. They made some runs. I don't know if we ran out of gas or not. The minutes were kind of under control, but like I said, I thought it was mostly Chris Paul's impact on the game more than anything else."

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