

Sports

NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE

49ers, roiled by COVID-19 closure, top Rams to sweep season series

■ San Francisco learns it won't be able to practice or play in its home stadium

By Greg Beacham
AP Sports Writer

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — The San Francisco 49ers have no idea where they'll be living, practicing or playing next week, thanks to new coronavirus restrictions issued in Santa Clara County while the team was on its flight to Los Angeles.

With the latest wave of turmoil in a season rocked by injuries and disappointing results, all the defending NFC champions could control Sunday was the game in front of them — and the Niners have been in absolute control of their rivalry with the Rams for two full seasons.

Robbie Gould made a 42-yard field goal as time expired, and the 49ers snapped their three-game losing streak with a 23-20 victory over Los Angeles that completed a sweep of their season series for the second straight year.

Nick Mullens passed for 253 yards and led two late scoring drives in his first victory as a starter since September for the Niners (5-6), who stoked their flickering playoff hopes by becoming the first team to beat the Rams (7-4) at new SoFi Stadium. San Francisco forced four turnovers and committed three of its own, but eked out enough points to beat the Rams' top-ranked defense.

"It was the exact type of game that we were hoping for," Niners coach Kyle Shanahan said. "We (knew) we had to run the ball and do all those things we wanted to make it a grimy-type game. When we have those three turnovers on offense, it's very tough to win that type of game, and that's what made it so close. But when the defense ends up getting four turnovers, then it gives you a chance."



Wally Skaltij/Los Angeles Times-TNS

Los Angeles Rams quarterback Jared Goff fumbles the ball as San Francisco 49ers defensive back Jimmie Ward makes the tackle in the second quarter at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood on Sunday, Nov. 29. The 49ers recovered the ball.

The 49ers were taken aback by the county's decision to essentially ban practices and games in the county for the next three weeks, with Shanahan calling it "extremely disappointing." Players and coaches fielded worried phone calls from their families on the plane.

"We were in LA, and we had a game ahead of us," said Richard Sherman, who had an interception and led the Niners with seven tackles in his first game since Week 1. "That's all we could focus on. When we get off the field, we'll focus on where we're going to go and what we're going to do. We focused on the Rams."

Los Angeles went ahead early in the fourth quarter on rookie Cam Akers' TD run set up by his own 61-yard run, but Gould hit a 44-yard field goal with 3:11 left before San Francisco stopped a clunky drive by the Rams near mid-field with 2:10 to play.

Fullback Kyle Juszczyk then converted a fourth-and-1 with 28 seconds to play during a 56-yard drive to set up Gould, who nailed his third field goal.

Rookie defensive lineman Javon Kinlaw returned an interception 27 yards for a touchdown for San Francisco's defense, which largely dominated with big plays. The Niners forced Malcolm Brown's first fumble since 2017 before getting two interceptions and a fumble from Jared Goff, who has committed 10 turnovers in four games.

"Our quarterback has got to take better care of the football," Rams coach Sean McVay said in a rare public criticism of Goff, who is tied for second in the NFL with 14 giveaways.

"We have to take better care of the football, or else I am going to keep coming up here and saying the same thing week in and week out," McVay added. "They deserve their

respect, but in a lot of respects for us, it was simple execution. Guys didn't make plays in crunch time. We need guys to step up in certain spots."

Aaron Donald forced a fumble and Troy Hill returned it 20 yards for a touchdown late in the third quarter, but the Rams' top-ranked defense couldn't keep the Niners out of field goal range late. Los Angeles allowed only 135 yards in the second half, but Gould hit three field goals.

Goff passed for 198 yards for the Rams, who slipped out of first place in the division after managing just 34 yards on their final two drives.

"The defense played lights-out all day," said Rams receiver Cooper Kupp, who had just two catches. "What they were able to do to the Niners was incredible. As an offense, we have to capitalize on those upswings. We have to do a better job."

NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE

Late blunders costly to Chargers during comeback

By John Wawrow
AP Sports Writer

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — The Los Angeles Chargers added another chapter to their second-half woes on Sunday.

This time, they didn't blow a lead in a 27-17 loss to the Buffalo Bills. But the Chargers found various ways to squander numerous scoring opportunities in a loss that featured a handful of questionable decisions.

"I'm not saying that it's been perfect at all. But what happened today at the end of the game was miscommunication," quarterback Justin Herbert said.

The Chargers (3-8) scored three points — Michael Badgley's 27-yard field goal — on their final five possessions, including three that ended inside Buffalo's 30. And they wasted a defensive effort in which the Chargers forced the Bills to turn over the ball on each of their first three possessions of the fourth quarter.

The troubles were encapsulated on an empty final possession for Los Angeles after it had first-and-goal at the Buffalo 2 with 25 seconds left — courtesy of Herbert's 55-yard pass to Tyron Johnson.

With no timeouts remaining, rather than spike the ball to stop the clock, Herbert handed off to Austin Ekeler, who was stopped at the 1.

The clock ran down to 6 seconds when Herbert threw an incompletion. After initially sending out the field goal unit, the Chargers changed course and ran another play with the game ending on Herbert being stopped for a 2-yard loss.

Coach Anthony Lynn reiterated Herbert's comment, calling it a "complete miscommunication."

Patriots nip Cardinals, still in playoff contention

By Kyle Hightower
AP Sports Writer

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — The Patriots' comeback started with a goal-line stand to end the first half and ended with yet another big win to keep alive their playoff hopes.

Nick Folk kicked a 50-yard field goal as time expired, and New England rallied in the second half to beat the Arizona Cardinals 20-17 Sunday.

James White rushed for two touchdowns for the Patriots (5-6). It was the second time this month that Folk hit a last-second game-winning field goal. His 51-yarder beat the New York Jets 30-27 on Nov. 9.

Cam Newton struggled, finishing 9 of 18 for 84 yards and two interceptions. But New England won the game despite finishing with 179 yards by taking advantage of mistakes by the Cardinals (6-5).

"I'd rather have an ugly win than a pretty loss," Newton said. "We didn't play our best game offensively. But when we needed it, we got the job done and that's all that counts."

New England's defense was solid throughout, holding Arizona's top-ranked offense, which entered the game averaging 414 yards, to 298 yards.

NFL struggling with surge in COVID-19 cases

By Barry Wilner
AP Pro Football Writer

In every NFL season, there are losing teams who hit December and just want to get to January, get the schedule done and go home.

In 2020, it's all about the league itself getting to January during a pandemic that daily is becoming harder to deal with.

If Week 12 is a harbinger, NFL executives will be doing more scrambling than Lamar Jackson and Kyler Murray. They've already twice postponed the Thanksgiving night showcase game between Baltimore and Pittsburgh, and it's still in jeopardy for tonight with more than 20 Ravens on the COVID-19 list. Denver, thanks to protocol violations by its quarterbacks, started an undrafted rookie wide receiver at the critical position and, unsurprisingly, barely moved the ball.

There also were hefty fines to the Saints and Patriots for not being as diligent about the coronavirus protocols as they need to be.

The NFL deserves praise for getting this far with minimal disruptions compared to what we are seeing in the college game. Yet there is a foreboding environment right now.

Teams have been ordered to steer clear of their facilities on Monday and Tuesday as the pandemic rages across the country. Pro football tries to soldier on, but for how long?

"I think we have to really consider a bubble," says Bill Cowher, the Hall of Fame-bound coach and now a CBS Sports analyst. "When you think about the country right now, we're going through a second wave. You have to be flexible in your thinking."

"We're talking about shutting down facilities. We're talking about teams that may not be able to practice all week. I start to think about teams later on as we go through this, that they get out of the playoffs. They become more reckless and careless with their actions off the field."

"I think right now from a competitive and balance standpoint that's out there, and from a safety standpoint that's out there, go to a bubble. Go to a city right now, identify a hotel, take all the staff members, put them in there, and make sure from that point they bus to and from practice. They fly to and from games. It worked in hockey. It worked in basketball. I think the time is now. Protect the integrity of the game. It's the fairest thing to do. And it's the safest thing to do."

In some ways it also is the most difficult thing to do. Don't think that the NFL hasn't discussed the bubble idea, though it has concentrated on creating one or more for the playoffs. Doing so for the final six weeks of the schedule, it's a logistical challenge tantamount to scoring on the 1985 Bears or 2000 Ravens.

As the number of COVID-19 cases rises across the league, the potential for more postponements — even cancellations or forfeits, neither of which the NFL truly wants to ponder — also rises.

One option that seems more logical by the day is for the league to create a Week 18 for the second weekend in January. With outbreaks within teams a higher likelihood than ever — and having a week to play with because the bye between the conference championships and the Super Bowl could be eliminated — instituting a Week 18 has its merits.

Certainly it would lessen the chance of mismatches such as what happened Sunday in Denver; a 31-3 Saints romp that never was in doubt; is that the way NFL games should be? And it could help avoid what could be a similar lopsided contest in Pittsburgh on Tuesday night, should that game be played.

"I don't think weird is the right word," said Saints coach Sean Payton, whose team was fined \$500,000 and docked a seventh-round draft pick for repeatedly defying NFL protocols. "Look, everything about this season's unusual. So, we kind of tune out the things we can't control. ... And then what it is we can control? And let's find a way to get our next W."

Do coaches really want that next W, or next L, to come because they or their opponent is severely undermanned due to the invisible enemy that is the coronavirus? If so, that's as cold as Lambeau Field in the midst of winter.

Browns center JC Tretter, the president of the NFL Players Association, last week addressed the issues pro football is facing.

"As you see, we said it from

the beginning, we are kind of susceptible to what the country and what our local communities are going through," he said. "We are seeing huge spikes in cases around the country, which just increases the likelihood of cases coming from the outside into the building. That is what you are seeing is, as the cases around the country have spiked, so have our cases. Our cases have gone up league-wide, and that is why the protocols are so important about keeping the season going and keeping guys healthy and not allowing that virus to spread once it gets into the building."

There are five more weeks of trying to do so, and recent results have been distressing.

AP sports writers Brett Martel and Tom Withers contributed to this story.

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