

Sports

Seahawks rally past 49ers

■ Seattle will play host to division rival L.A. Rams in a wild-card playoff game Jan. 9

By David Brandt
AP Sports Writer

GLENDALE, Ariz. — Russell Wilson connected on two fourth-quarter touchdown passes to Tyler Lockett and the Seattle Seahawks rallied for a 26-23 win over the San Francisco 49ers on Sunday to end the season on a four-game winning streak.

Seattle (12-4) had a chance to earn the No. 1 seed in the NFC playoffs but stayed at No. 3 after the New Orleans Saints and top-seeded Green Bay Packers both won. The Seahawks will host the division rival Los Angeles Rams in the wild-card round on Saturday, Jan. 9.

Seattle had a slow start and appeared in serious trouble when Jeff Wilson Jr. ran for a 7-yard touchdown early in the fourth quarter to push the 49ers ahead 16-6.

But the Seahawks responded with their first touchdown when Russell Wilson avoided pressure and hit Lockett for a diving 6-yard touchdown in the back of the end zone. Jason Myers missed the extra point and the Seahawks trailed 16-12.

Seattle forced the 49ers to punt on the ensuing pos-



Ross D. Franklin/Associated Press

San Francisco 49ers quarterback C.J. Beathard (3) is sacked by Seattle Seahawks safety Ugo Amadi (28) during the first half on Sunday, Jan. 3, in Glendale, Ariz.

session and then methodically marched 85 yards on 14 plays and scored the go-ahead touchdown on fourth down on Wilson's 4-yard throw to Lockett. Wilson finished 20 of 36 passing for 171 yards. Lockett had 12 catches for 90 yards.

Alex Collins ran for an 8-yard touchdown with 1:49 left to put the Seahawks ahead 26-16.

The 49ers (6-10) were

eliminated from playoff contention a few weeks ago and have been based in Arizona for more than a month because of coronavirus restrictions in their home county. The team still pushed the playoff-bound Seahawks all afternoon.

Third-stringer C.J. Beathard completed 25 of 37 passes for 273 yards and a touchdown but fumbled late in the fourth quarter, which

set up Collins' touchdown. Tristan Vizcaino made his first three NFL field goals after being signed by the 49ers earlier this week.

Both teams got off to slow offensive starts. Seattle had two promising drives stall in the red zone and had to settle for field goals from Myers, who connected from 36 and 30 yards to push the Seahawks ahead 6-0 midway through the second quarter.

Hot Curry: Star's 62 points lead Warriors over Blazers

By Janie McCauley
AP Sports Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — Stephen Curry twirled an arm in the air to acknowledge a small cheering section of family members in a near-empty arena, then gleefully disappeared down a tunnel to celebrate his best scoring night yet.

Curry let it fly from way out under pressure with a minute-plus left for another perfect swish on the way to a career-high 62 points, and the Golden State Warriors beat Portland 137-122 on Sunday night to split the two-game set with the Trail Blazers.

"I love it. I love everything about what this game offers, the competitiveness and the fire," Curry said. "I never run from it. Just excited to be in that atmosphere where I get to play at the highest level and do what I do."

Curry delivered the highest-scoring game in the NBA this season early in his 12th campaign, finishing 18 for 31 and 8 of 16 on 3-pointers after beginning with a 21-point first quarter. He had his 10th career 30-point half to help the Warriors take a 66-54 at the break, then doubled his total exactly with his teammates telling him his count at every chance.

"He was making every shot within like 10 seconds and we couldn't even keep up," rookie James Wiseman said.

One small blemish in his brilliant night: Curry had his streak of free throws snapped at a franchise-record 80 in the first. The run dated to March 29, 2019, vs. Memphis.

"And then he just choked. It's just incredible," cracked coach Steve Kerr, who jokingly offered the game ball to Wiseman before handing it over to the most deserving recipient.

Against Portland, Curry made a career-high 18 of his most attempts yet at 19. No fear, the 6-foot-3 Curry even took it right at imposing 7-footer Jusuf Nurkic.

"He did a little bit of everything," Trail Blazers coach Terry Stotts said.

NFL playoffs feature powerhouses, and a 7-9 team

By Barry Wilner
AP Pro Football Writer

From the rested in Kansas City and Pittsburgh to the relieved in Cleveland, Chicago and Los Angeles, the field for the Super Bowl chase is set. There are some powerhouses and some pretenders — and a team with a losing record.

The reigning Super Bowl champion Chiefs (14-2) and Green Bay (13-3) earned each conference's lone bye in the expanded playoffs. And no, adding a third wild-card entrant is not why a 7-9 club will be playing next weekend. Washington "earned" that spot by winning the abysmal NFC East that displayed in the finale of the regular season why NFC Least has been so appropriate a moniker.

So while New York Giants fans scream that Eagles coach Doug Pederson didn't truly play to beat Washington on Sunday night, it should be emphasized that the Giants went 6-10, a record more in line with relegation than reward.

Besides, coach Ron Rivera dealing with skin cancer and quarterback Alex Smith returning from an injury that nearly cost him his leg,

those are redemptive and rewarding plots.

"This one's special just because of how hard it was," Rivera said. "How tough everything was, how it's been on the guys, the organization. There's a great group of young men in there and we're trying to do things the right way. It's really a cool thing to come out and get the division."

As for the spoils, here's who plays next weekend and how it might look.

SATURDAY, JAN. 9

- Indianapolis (11-5) at Buffalo (13-3)

Frank Reich has been a hero in Western New York since engineering the great comeback in NFL history while replacing the injured Jim Kelly in a 1992 opening-round matchup with the Houston Oilers. Reich now coaches the Colts, and he'll remain heroic in Buffalo if they go quietly against what has been the league's most impressive team the last month.

This might be Colts QB Philip Rivers' final game, but it's the Indy defense that must stand tall here.

That's a tall order the way Josh Allen, Stefon Diggs and the Bills are going.

- Los Angeles Rams (10-6) at Seattle (12-4)

A third go-around for the NFC West rivals who split during the regular season. Both have strong defenses and have been spotty on offense, LA far more so than Seattle.

The Rams clinched their spot in the playoffs without the inconsistent Jared Goff (thumb surgery) at quarterback. The Seahawks have no issues at that position with Russell Wilson, though his first half of the season was far better than the last two months.

- Tampa Bay (11-5) at Washington (7-9)

For sure, the Washington story is uplifting, particularly the way Rivera is leading a change in culture for a franchise so desperately needing it. And the last three teams to capture division titles without a winning record also pulled off upsets in the wild-card round.

Don't look for much of that in prime time, not with Tom Brady leading the Buccaneers, who are balanced enough to threaten anyone. You remember

Brady. If not, tune in to this one and see him likely dismantle Washington's impressive but inexperienced defense.

SUNDAY, JAN. 10

- Tennessee (11-5) at Baltimore (11-5)

A year ago, the Titans rode Derrick Henry's rushing power, agility and underrated speed to a stunning upset in Baltimore. They still are riding Henry, who became the eighth player to gain 2,000 yards on the ground in a season. Tennessee also can throw the ball better than it could last season.

Alas, the Titans barely play any defense. So, with the Ravens having a more diverse but just as effective running game and a sturdy D — not to mention the memories of that beatdown last January — Henry and Co. have an even bigger task ahead in Baltimore this time.

- Chicago (8-8) at New Orleans (12-4)

The other NFC interloper, perhaps, the Bears almost belong in the Least, uh, East. They went from 5-1 to 5-7 before finishing strongly enough to sneak in. Their defense is dangerous if not quite Monsters of the Midway,

and when they run the ball well, they can compete.

If the Saints get some of their running backs back from the COVID-19 list — particularly scoring machine Alvin Kamara — they will be heavily favored. This could be Drew Brees' last shot at a second NFL title, too. And New Orleans has a defense to match Chicago's.

- Cleveland (11-5) at Pittsburgh (12-4)

This had to be the topper for the weekend's action. One of the grand rivalries of the sport, and it was just played out in Week 17 — albeit with the Steelers resting a bunch of regulars. Yet Pittsburgh pushed Cleveland to the limit before the Browns snapped the league's longest playoff drought, dating to 2003.

Can the Browns win again in the wild-card matchup? Sure, as long as they get their ample running game going and don't have another COVID-19 outbreak like the one that hit in the last two weeks. The Steelers have lost four of their last five, but they also have won 17 straight at home against Cleveland. Ben Roethlisberger will be back and he's 23-2-1 in his career against the Browns.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP GAME: OHIO STATE VS. ALABAMA, JAN. 11

Buckeyes, Crimson Tide set up rematch from 2015

By Stephen Hawkins
AP Sports Writer

ARLINGTON, Texas — When Ohio State upset Alabama in the semifinals of the first College Football Playoff on the way to the Buckeyes' last national title, it seemed like the start of budding post-season rivalry between the two traditional powers.

Instead, Clemson became the Crimson Tide's nemesis and the biggest challenger to Nick Saban's Alabama dynasty over the next five years.

Six years later, Ohio State and Alabama meet again,

the Tide still rolling and the Buckeyes again looking for an upset.

After the SEC champion Crimson Tide rolled past Notre Dame 31-14 in a Rose Bowl played deep in the heart of Texas, the No. 3 Buckeyes of the Big Ten beat Clemson 49-28 in the other CFP semifinal at the Sugar Bowl on Friday night behind Justin Fields' six touchdown passes.

How Fields is feeling will be the main story line heading into the title game. He took a hard shot to the side in the second quarter against

Clemson, but managed to play through the pain.

"He couldn't do everything, but what a gutsy performance, what a tough and special young man Justin Fields is," said Ohio State coach Ryan Day, in his second season after taking over from Urban Meyer.

Clemson was trying, like Alabama, to get to the title game for the fifth time in the seven seasons of the four-team playoff. It would have been the fourth Tigers-Tide game for the CFP championship.

Instead it's a matchup of

storied programs playing Jan. 11 in suburban Miami to determine the champion of this most unusual season played in the shadow of a pandemic.

Alabama was the top seed in the first four-team playoff after the 2014 season, but Ohio State beat the Tide 42-35 in the semifinal Sugar Bowl behind Meyer, Ezekiel Elliott and Cardale Jones.

Those Buckeyes faced doubters of their playoff worthiness like these. In 2014, Ohio State had to come back from an early season loss to Virginia Tech to slip into

the final playoff spot on the last weekend of the regular season.

After beating Alabama, the Buckeyes went on to win the national title 42-20 over Oregon that year, but they had lost twice to Clemson in the semifinals since.

While this season's CFP has provided a third consecutive title-game matchup of undefeated teams, this one is a little different.

Alabama has played 12 games, getting through a conference-only regular season before holding off Florida

52-46 in the SEC championship game and then winning the relocated Rose Bowl.

That semifinal was moved from Pasadena because of COVID-19 restrictions that would have kept family — or any fans — from attending the game.

Ohio State's overwhelming win in the Sugar Bowl was only its seventh game this season.

The Buckeyes had three regular-season games canceled because of virus issues after the Big Ten didn't start its season until late October.

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