

NFL

Chiefs to start Henne against Herbert, Chargers

BY DAVE SKRETTA

Associated Press
KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Justin Herbert had just turned 10 years old when Chiefs quarterback Chad Henne was drafted by the Dolphins.

Think that's wild? The Chargers QB was still in high school the most recent time Henne started a game.

That makes quite the matchup Sunday when the 22-year-old Herbert, who has surpassed just about all expectations during his breakout rookie season, starts for the Chargers in Kansas City.

Opposite him will be the 35-year-old Henne, who takes over for Patrick Mahomes as the Chiefs (14-1) rest their starters with the No. 1 seed in the AFC playoffs already secured.

"I mean, it's the opportunity to go out there and be a starter in the NFL. You don't take it for granted," said Henne, whose previous start came on Sept. 21, 2014, when he was benched by the Jaguars in favor of rookie Blake Bortles.

"Play like you're 20," Henne added with a wry grin. "Go out there and be you."

Or at least like you're 22 — Herbert won't turn 23 until March. Yet his first year with the Chargers (6-9) has been a success everywhere but the win-loss column, where they will once again miss the playoffs.

Since taking over for Tyrod Taylor for their Week 2 game against Kansas City, Herbert has thrown for 4,034 yards with 28 touchdowns, setting an NFL rookie record for TD



Kelvin Kuo/AP

Los Angeles Chargers quarterback Justin Herbert (10) throws against the Denver Broncos on Dec. 27 in Inglewood, California. The Chargers are looking for their fourth straight win to close out the season against a Chiefs team that will be resting its starts after it locked up the top seed in the AFC last week.

passes in a season. He's also set a rookie record with seven 300-yard passing games, and he needs 340 yards passing against the Chiefs — who figure to rest most of their starters — to break Andrew Luck's rookie record of 4,374 yards set during the 2012 season.

"You blink and you realize you're in Week 17," Herbert said, "and it feels like it was just yesterday we played the Kansas City Chiefs. I just think it's gone by so fast; this season has gone by so fast. It seems like yesterday."

Just because the Chiefs are resting most of their starters, including quarterback Patrick Mahomes, and the Chargers are out of playoff contention, there is still plenty of reasons

for both teams to put forward their best effort.

The Chiefs can match the 2011 Packers with the best record by a Super Bowl champion with a win, not to mention break the franchise record by winning their 11th consecutive game. They also would feel a lot better going into their coveted bye knowing they played well, given that they struggled mightily on offense in last week's win over Atlanta.

The Chargers, meanwhile, have won their past three games behind winning drives in the fourth quarter or overtime, and knocking off their biggest impediment to progress in the AFC West would cap a strong finish heading into the offseason.

Next up

L.A. Chargers (6-9)
at Kansas City (14-1)
When: 1:25 p.m.
Sunday



"We've always had a good plan against these guys," said Chargers coach Anthony Lynn, whose team took the Chiefs to overtime in Week 2. "They're a tough opponent. We've had some success against them when we haven't turned the ball over, but that's why they're the world champs. They have those guys that cause havoc."

Health check

Both teams will likely sit anybody with any sort of injury. For the Chiefs, that means wide receivers Sammy Watkins (calf) and Tyreek Hill (hamstring), running backs Clyde Edwards-Helaire (ankle) and Le'Veon Bell (knee), offensive lineman Mike Remmers (back) and linebacker Ben Niemann (hamstring).

For the Chargers, defensive end Joey Bosa (shin and concussion), offensive tackle Bryan Bulaga (foot), safety Rayshawn Jenkins (ankle) and cornerbacks Casey Hayward Jr. (hamstring) have been ruled out. Wide receiver Keenan Allen and Hunter Henry will also miss the game after being placed on the reserve/COVID-19 list.

Charging to the finish

Los Angeles has not won three straight division games since closing the 2013 season with wins over the Broncos,

Raiders and, coincidentally, the Chiefs, who also rested several starters in that game. A victory Sunday would accomplish that along with giving the Chargers their first four-game win streak since the 2018 season.

Paging EB

The Chiefs' Eric Bieniemy figures to be among the hottest names on the coaching carousel next week, and coach Andy Reid indicated he could give his offensive coordinator a bigger role on Sunday as an audition. "Whatever needs to be done there will take place," Reid said. "I have no problem with all that stuff."

Catching Kelce

There's a good chance Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce gets Sunday off after dealing with some nagging injuries the past few weeks. At this point he is second in the league with 1,416 yards receiving, which means he will fall short of becoming the first tight end to lead the league. He already has set the Chiefs record with 105 catches this season.

Rookie returns

Herbert isn't the only rookie to make a big impression in Los Angeles. Fellow first-round pick Kenneth Murray needs two tackles to pass Derwin James for most by a Chargers rookie since 2000. The linebacker has started every game and played 92 percent of defensive snaps, and he trails only the Panthers' Jeremy Chinn for most tackles among all rookies.



Ross D. Franklin/AP

Oregon coach Mario Cristobal during the Fiesta Bowl on Saturday in Glendale, Arizona.

Fiesta Bowl

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The Ducks lost two fumbles, an interception and a pooch kick. They also turned it over when a punt hit a blocker's helmet and had a touchdown wiped out by a penalty.

The Cyclones had been building toward this moment.

Iowa State won three games its first season under Matt Campbell before playing in three straight bowl games. The Cyclones earned their first New Year's Six bowl with the best regular season in school history.

Iowa State took a methodical offensive approach in the Fiesta Bowl, scoring its first two touchdowns on drives of 14 and 15 plays. Hall scored for the 12th straight game on a 1-yard run and Charlie Kolar caught a 14-yard TD pass from Purdy.

The Cyclones were stuffed on a fourth-and-goal from the 1 in the second quarter, but went right back to marching on Oregon's defense.

Purdy scored on a 1-yard run and Hall made it 28-14 with a 1-yard run after Iowa State recovered a pooch kick.

The Cyclones bogged down in the second half, settling for two field goals by Connor Assalley, but their defense shut down Oregon.

The Ducks were a replacement in the Pac-12 championship game after Washington pulled out, and Oregon beat Southern California for its second straight title.

Oregon had some early offensive success against the Cyclones, scoring on touchdown runs of 6 and 16 yards by Brown. The Ducks had a 27-yard touchdown pass from Brown to Mycah Pittman wiped out by a holding penalty, settling for a field goal instead.

Shough returned for several plays in the second half, but he nor Brown could get much going. Oregon had 88 yards of offense in the second half and a pass by Shough was intercepted by Mike Rose late in the fourth quarter.

The takeaway

Oregon labored offensively at times and was hurt by costly mistakes to end a strange season with a loss.

Iowa State used its ball-control offense to cap the best season in program history.

Up next

Oregon has one of the youngest teams in the country this season and should get nearly everyone back next year.

Hall is a sophomore and will be back and Purdy is a junior, so he still has a year of eligibility left. Iowa State will have to replace several key players on defense, but Rose is just a junior.

Raiders and Broncos are jockeying for draft position, not playoffs

BY ARNIE STAPLETON

AP Pro Football Writer
DENVER — The Las Vegas Raiders and Denver Broncos are jockeying for draft position, not the playoffs.

The Raiders' once promising season was derailed by five losses in the last six games following a 6-3 start, and their playoff hopes were extinguished by Jon Gruden's dubious decision in the closing minutes last week that resulted in a 26-25 last-second loss to Miami.

That leaves the Raiders (7-8) outside the playoffs for the 17th time in the past 18 seasons. All that's left to play for is a win in the finale to avoid their fourth straight losing season.

"If we can show that our team is improving with getting that eighth win, even if it's slight, it still shows improvement," quarterback Derek Carr said. "As a team, that's what we're striving for."

Denver's season was arguably derailed before it even began. Von Miller suffered a freak season-ending ankle injury six days before the opener, and the cavalcade of injured teammates who followed included Courtland Sutton, Jurrell Casey, Mike Purcell and

Albert Okwuegbunam.

In December, the Broncos (5-10) lost starting cornerbacks Bryce Callahan (foot) and A.J. Bouye (suspension) and then watched their top three backups suffer season-ending knee injuries within two weeks.

The injury epidemic and the coronavirus pandemic were the primary drivers in Denver's fourth consecutive losing season and fifth straight year without a playoff berth.

That, and the league's worst turnover differential — minus-20, double that of the next worst team, the 49ers, at minus-10.

Denver has managed only a dozen takeaways, one shy of the franchise low set in 2008, to go with 32 giveaways, including an NFL-high 23 interceptions.

"Sometimes when you get out of whack that way, it's one side or the other being the major culprit, but it's been a team problem this year on both sides of the ball," Broncos coach Vic Fangio said, "and obviously we have to rectify it."

Smitten Witten

Raiders tight end Jason Witten will break Hall of Famer Tony Gonzalez's record for

Next up

Las Vegas (7-8)
at Denver (5-10)
When: 1:25 p.m.
Sunday



tight ends by playing in his 271st career game. Witten has missed only one game in 17 NFL seasons and ranks second all-time at the position with 1,228 receptions and 13,046 yards, and is fifth with 74 TDs.

"To have an opportunity like this, I think that's just the way I tried to play," Witten said. "I think in this league, the minute you feel like you've arrived or you belong, you're going to get passed up. I think my advantage and kind of my edge for me was that every day of every moment, I never felt like this game owed me anything. I had to go earn it."

Wondrous Waller

Darren Waller is putting the finishing touches on one of the most productive seasons in Raiders history. He has 34 catches for 537 yards the past four weeks, giving him 98 catches for 1,079 yards on the season. Waller needs seven catches to break Hall of Famer Tim Brown's single-season franchise record of 104 set in 1997.

Seahawks

Continued from B1

Seattle clinched the division last week and is still in the running for the top seed and the lone bye in the NFC in the expanded seven-team playoff format.

The Seahawks will earn the top seed with a win and losses by Green Bay and New Orleans. They can move up to the No. 2 seed with a win and a loss by the Packers or the Saints, which would guarantee them a home game if they advance to the divisional round.

Coach Pete Carroll made clear the Seahawks are "going for it" even though the odds might be against them to get the top seed.

"We're competing," Carroll said. "Either you're competing or you're not. If you're letting up, you're letting up. We ain't letting up. We're going."

Record watch

DK Metcalf and Tyler Lockett are likely to set team re-

cords for Seattle. Metcalf needs 5 yards to move past Steve Largent for the most yards receiving in a single season. Largent set the record of 1,287 back in 1985.

Metcalf seemed set to zoom past the mark much earlier, but has just one game over 100 yards receiving in the past seven. Earlier this season, Metcalf had 12 catches for 161 yards and two TDs against the 49ers.

Lockett needs 36 yards receiving to reach 1,000 for the season. It would make Lockett and Metcalf the second duo in franchise history to have 1,000 yards in the same season, joining Joey Galloway and Brian Blades in 1995. It would also be the second straight 1,000-yard season for Lockett, something done by only five players in team history.

Better Beathard

C.J. Beathard made his first start at quarterback in more than two years last week for the 49ers with Jimmy Garop-

olo and Nick Mullens out with injuries. Beathard looked more comfortable than in his two stints as starter in 2017-18, completing 13 of 22 passes for 189 yards and three TDs. Most importantly, he threw no interceptions after having 12 in his first 12 starts.

"I felt like I didn't have to do much, which was nice," he said. "We didn't throw it a bunch of times, that's just the way the game played out. I just knew I had to take care of the ball and, the way the guys were playing, just be smart with the ball, take care of the ball and we'll put ourselves in a good position to win the game once the game comes down to the end."

Feel the heat

Seattle's Week 8 victory over the 49ers was the start of its defensive turnaround and an uptick in its pass rush. The Seahawks had three sacks, which to that point was a big day from the pass rush. But it proved to be a spark, and including that game, the Sea-

hawks have 34 sacks in the past nine outings, the most in the league.

Seattle has at least two sacks in every game and it's been a wide range of players getting to the quarterback.

Jamal Adams leads the way with 9½ on the season, but six others have at least three sacks. Bobby Wagner had two of his three sacks on the season in the last meeting with San Francisco.

Just for kicks

The kicking game could be a bit of an adventure for the 49ers after placing kicker Robbie Gould and long snapper Taybor Pepper on the COVID-19 list. San Francisco signed Colin Holba and planned to bring in former Minnesota practice squad kicker Tristan Vizcaino for placekicking once he passed coronavirus protocols. Vizcaino has never appeared in an NFL game but made 12 of 19 field goals in college in 2017 at Washington.



Elaine Thompson/AP

Seattle Seahawks wide receiver DK Metcalf (14) evades a tackle attempt during a game against the Los Angeles Rams on Dec. 27 in Seattle. Metcalf is on the verge of breaking Seahawks' legend Steve Largent's 35-year-old record for receiving yards in a season for a Seahawks player.