

**NFL PLAYOFFS** | AFC CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

# Chiefs' Reid, Bills' McDermott match wits

BY DAVE SKRETTA  
Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Ten years after firing Sean McDermott as his defensive coordinator, Kansas City Chiefs coach Andy Reid will stare across the field inside Arrowhead Stadium on Sunday and see his protégé trying to spoil his hopes of a Super Bowl repeat.

Funny thing: Even after firing him, Reid suspected deep down that McDermott was destined for big things.

"Very organized, very smart and very tough," he explained this week. "He came from a coaching family — his dad was a heck of a coach. Sean just kind of picked up right from there. Very solid, very good."

In fact, downright exceptional.

McDermott has the long-suffering Buffalo Bills playing in their first AFC championship game since beating Kansas City on Jan. 23, 1994, when they advanced to their fourth straight Super Bowl.

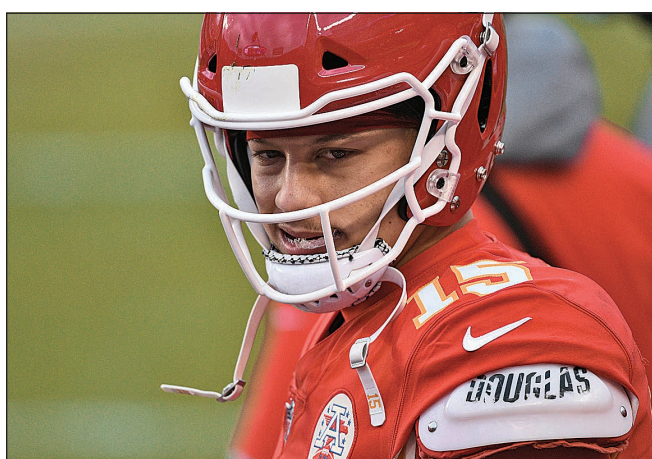
They have won 11 of their past 12 games since losing to the Chiefs in Week 6, beating the Colts in the wild-card round and the Ravens in last week's divisional round.

"He deserves coach of the year, man. He's taken a franchise there, both he and his general manager, have put this thing together with some bold moves and production now," Reid said.

"I think he's done a tremendous job. What a great thing for the NFL and for Buffalo. They love football in Buffalo and he's really done a nice job with that whole program."

Not surprisingly, the job McDermott has done with the Bills neatly parallels the job Reid has done in Kansas City.

Both took over downtrodden organizations and quickly built them into juggernauts. Both have bright young quarterbacks in the Bills' Josh Allen and the Chiefs' Patrick Mahomes. Both have surrounded them with playmakers, such as the Bills' Stefan Diggs and the Chiefs' Tyreek Hill and Travis Kelce. And both have built defenses to not only complement two of the best offenses in the NFL, but capable of clinching



**Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes walks on the sideline during the divisional round game against the Cleveland Browns on Jan. 17 in Kansas City. Mahomes, who was ruled out for most of the second half with concussion symptoms, cleared protocol and is set to play Sunday against the Buffalo Bills.**

wins under pressure, as each did last weekend.

Mahomes, who sustained a concussion last week against Cleveland, is poised to play after practicing all week.

McDermott never harbored any animosity toward Reid when he was fired from the Eagles on Jan. 15, 2011. Instead, he went to Carolina and over the next five years honed his craft and built his reputation to the point the Bills — who at the time had not made the postseason since 1999 — were willing to give him a shot in charge.

Buffalo reached the wild-card round in 2017 and again last year before reaching the brink of a Super Bowl this season.

"It's always an honor to go up against great coaches, and Andy will be a Hall of Fame coach here in the future sometime down the road," McDermott said. "I've learned a lot from Andy in my time with him in Philadelphia, so I have a tremendous amount of respect for him and his family, the way they helped guide me then and still do today."

**Moment on Mahomes**

The Chiefs' quarterback, who was knocked out of last week's game against Cleveland with a concussion, was cleared to practice on Wednesday and took the majority of first-team reps Thursday. Mahomes still needed clearance from team doctors and an independ-

ent neurologist, but all signs pointed to him being under center on Sunday.

"The goal is to have Patrick," Hill said, "but I really don't know. I feel like it doesn't matter who is out there. Whoever steps in at quarterback, we're going to put our confidence behind them in the same way."

**Other Chief concerns**

Chiefs cornerback Bashaud Breeland, who also sustained a concussion last Sunday, practiced this week while awaiting clearance from doctors and neurologists. Running back Le'Veon Bell was held out Thursday because of a swollen knee.

On the flip side, Clyde Edwards-Helaire could return for the first time since a high-ankle sprain in Week 15 and Sammy Watkins could be back from a calf injury that he sustained the following week. The rookie running back and the veteran wide receiver both practiced this week and moved around well in the portion of practice open to reporters.

**Grounded game**

The Bills don't run often — in fact, they called just one running play in the first half against the Ravens last week. They finished with 16 carries, including four kneel-downs by Allen, for 32 yards in their lowest rushing output since a game in Minnesota in 2002. The Bills' total of 1,482 yards this season was their fewest

**AFC championship game**

Buffalo at Kansas City  
**When:** 3:40 p.m. Sunday  
**TV:** CBS

since 2014, which they balanced out by setting a franchise record with 4,786 yards through the air.

"We're not going to change who we are," Allen said. "It's the biggest game because it's the next one, but we understand that we don't have to be anyone different that who we are."

**Star struck**

Though the Bills would love to have Star Lotulelei enjoy this playoff run with them, cornerback Tre'Davious White and several teammates continued backing the starting defensive tackle's decision to opt out because of COVID-19 concerns.

"You can't make a wrong decision in this thing," said White, who contemplated opting out before signing a \$70 million, four-year extension in September and earning second-team All-Pro honors. "Obviously he chose his family over a game and the things that he had going on. I don't think that he's necessarily missing out on anything."

**Sleeping on Bieniemy**

One of the hottest names on the coaching carousel was Chiefs offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy, who interviewed with just about every team with an opening. But the only job left after the Eagles hired Nick Sirianni on Thursday was with the Houston Texans, where the Bills' Leslie Frazier is also among the front-runners for the job.

"It's always good to be mentioned and have an opportunity to pursue your dreams," Bieniemy said. "I want to be a head coach, but when it's said and done, I have to make sure I'm not taking away from the goals were trying to accomplish."

**NFL****Continued from B1**

"I think that would certainly cement his legacy as one of the greatest to ever play the game in my opinion. Not that he needs it, but I'm just telling you that's probably how he's wired."

**Turnover watch**

Green Bay has committed a league-low 11 turnovers this season, including only two during its current seven-game winning streak. The Bucs have scored 27 points off five takeaways during their two playoff victories.

**Long time coming**

Tampa Bay ended a 12-year playoff drought this season. The journey to the NFC championship game has been especially gratifying for ninth-year linebacker Lavonte David, eighth-year defensive lineman William Gholston and seventh-year receiver Mike

**NFC championship game**

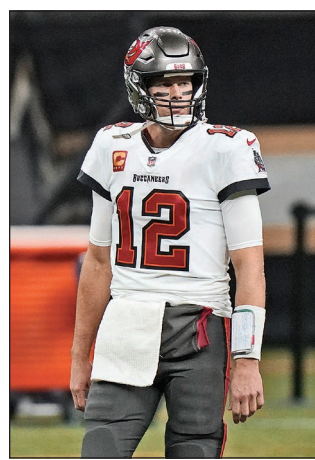
Tampa Bay at Green Bay  
**When:** 12:05 p.m. Sunday  
**TV:** FOX

Evans. They've spent their entire careers with the Bucs.

"It just goes to show throughout the hard times, the people upstairs and around the building believed in me," David said. "Obviously, I believed in them, as well. It's just an honor to still be here, to still be able to live out my dream as a Tampa Bay Buccaneer."

**Protecting Rodgers**

The Packers have allowed just 21 sacks all season and didn't give up any sacks last week against the Los Angeles Rams, who had 53 sacks during



**Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback Tom Brady (12) warms up before the divisional round playoff game against the New Orleans Saints on Jan. 17 in New Orleans.**

the regular season. But they allowed five sacks in their regular-season loss to Tampa Bay.

**Jones vs. Jones**

Green Bay's Aaron Jones rushed for 1,104 yards in the

regular season and ran for 99 more against the Rams, but he was held to 15 yards on 10 carries when the Packers lost to Tampa Bay in mid-October.

Tampa Bay's Ronald Jones rushed for 113 yards and two touchdowns in that Oct. 18 victory over Green Bay. He split carries with Leonard Fournette in Tampa Bay's triumph at New Orleans last week.

**Road back home**

Tampa Bay is seeking to become the first team in league history to advance to a Super Bowl that will be played in its home stadium.

"We don't play that game this week. That's the message to everybody," coach Bruce Arians said. "We play the Packers in the NFC championship game. If you start thinking about the Super Bowl, you get beat and (will) be packing your bags on Monday."

**College hoops****Continued from B1**

While Gov. Kate Brown has granted exceptions for Oregon's four Division I basketball programs to compete during the pandemic, the rest of the state's programs remain grounded, their sport deemed a "high-risk activity" and unsafe to play.

The measure is designed to keep college students and Oregon residents safe and curb the spread of the virus. But for the student-athletes and coaches at Bushnell and the rest of the state's small schools, they can't help but wonder why it's safe for Division I programs to play but unsafe for them.

"It's been so frustrating," Bushnell sophomore Aspen Slifka said. "We're right across the street from UO, literally less than a mile away, and it's been hard to watch them practice and play. It feels like we are being discriminated against because we're a small school. And that's really tough. It's like our coach says: 'If it's safe for some, it's safe for all.'"

For months, Bushnell administrators and players have been pushing Brown and the Oregon Health Authority for the same rights as their peers at Oregon, Oregon State, Portland State and the University of Portland.

"Oregon's exception for collegiate sports currently applies only to NCAA Division I schools," Charles Boyle, Brown's deputy communications director, told The Oregonian in a statement. "No other collegiate institutions are eligible to submit protocols to OHA for review at this time."

So while the state's largest programs play on, emboldened by influential regional conferences and buoyed by the power of lucrative television contracts, Bushnell and its peers have been relegated to bystanders, forced to watch with envy from the sidelines. But they refuse to watch quietly.

**'This has been our lives for over 10 years'**

It takes only a few moments of a chat with Slifka to grasp how passionate she is about fighting for the season. For the Beacons' seniors. For the sanity of her and her teammates. For the basic tenet of fairness.

"We understand there are a lot more important things than sports right now," said Slifka, who is from Banks. "But this has been our lives for over 10 years. It's part of who we are."

The Beacons and the Cascade Collegiate Conference submitted a return-to-play proposal to the OHA on Oct. 8, including enhanced safety measures, regular COVID-19 testing and other protocols similar to those submitted by Oregon's four Division I schools. The OHA, according to school and conference officials, reviewed the proposal and passed it along to Brown's office. Weeks passed with no movement and little input. Around this time, UP and PSU ran into similar hurdles with Brown's office.

On Nov. 13, Brown ordered a statewide holiday "freeze" in hopes of stemming the spread of COVID-19. Nine days later, near the end of the two-week restrictions, Brown granted UP and PSU exceptions to resume all basketball activities and, within days, the schools played their first games. Shortly thereafter, Brown's office told Cascade officials the state would not be accepting any more return-to-play proposals.

"The severity of this virus and the challenges of life right

*"It feels like we are being discriminated against because we're a small school. And that's really tough. It's like our coach says: 'If it's safe for some, it's safe for all.'"*

— Bushnell sophomore Aspen Slifka

now are not lost on us, and we've said this from the very beginning," said Robert Cashell, the conference commissioner.

"We recognize there's a lot going on. But the frustrating thing has really been the lack of overall communication and just the understanding of the basic guidelines. We all would have been better served had we been told, 'Look, here are the thresholds you need to meet to participate. If you can meet these, go forth. If you can't, you can't.' We've been offering up solutions, but not really knowing if it's what they're looking for."

The loudest voices in the push to play have come from Slifka and other Bushnell players. They've touched base with news organizations and written op-eds pleading their case. They've sent letters — and a signed basketball — to Brown asking for clarification. They've emailed government officials for information. Slifka even reached out to 12 members of the Oregon House who hail from districts that include small colleges to lobby for help. She's heard back from only two: Raquel Moore-Green and Paul Holvey.

Brown, who did not respond to Bushnell's signed basketball, has remained unmoved.

Boyle told The Oregonian in that statement:

"Governor Brown understands that this is a difficult time for all of Oregon's athletes, from the youth level to college sports. But to expand Oregon's sports exception would put more communities at risk. In the meantime, the best way we can all work together to bring back youth and more college sports in Oregon is to drive down the spread of COVID-19 by continuing to wear masks, maintain physical distance, avoid indoor social gatherings, stay home when sick, and get vaccinated when it is our turn."

**Athletes and activists**

Meadors has watched with amazement as his players have turned into activists to fight for their cause, and he applauds that they've done so in a "real positive ... and civil way at a time when many people aren't really civil."

But while students at Bushnell continue to fight and hope, the conference has effectively accepted defeat. At this point in the season, Cashell said, it would be difficult for Oregon teams to squeeze in the minimum number of conference games required to qualify for the national tournament. So conference officials are instead focusing on non-contact sports like baseball and softball, which are preparing for seasons, and keeping their fingers crossed that the virus will wane enough to allow for some kind of truncated exhibition basketball season in March or April. But that's little consolation for Slifka and the women at Bushnell.

"Aside from the mental health aspect — and that's big — this is their identity," Meadors said. "... If it's safe for some, it should be safe for us. If it's not safe for some, it's not safe for anybody, and they shouldn't be playing."

**Meet****Continued from B1**

Doyle has assembled a star-packed field of mostly North Americans. There's Cunningham, the bronze medalist at the 2019 world championships, along with De Grasse, a three-time Olympic medalist for Canada. There's also 2016 Olympic shot put champion Ryan Crouser, who trains at Arkansas, and Omar McLeod, the Olympic 110-meter hurdles champion representing Jamaica who once starred at Arkansas.

There will be plenty of exposure, with all four competitions — held on consecutive Sundays — televised on ESPN networks. The lineup of events changes, too, with a few — men's and women's 60 meters — contested all four weeks.

The amount of support for the meet has astonished Doyle. From fellow agents to athletes to coaches, everyone's

on board.

"Athletes that would typically be getting \$20,000 to \$30,000 to show up and race are coming just because they want to race," Doyle said. "They're actually thankful for the opportunity, which blows my mind and makes me really humbled."

Doyle hoped to line up enough sponsors to reward the winners because it's "never the intention to have athletes run for free." But in this economy, it didn't pan out.

To save on expenses, he's actually hauling track and field equipment from Atlanta to Fayetteville, Arkansas, in his camper.

Anything to stage a meet.

Usually around this time, athletes are starting to prepare their calendars for European meets and the Diamond League series. Given the travel restrictions, lining anything up has been increasingly difficult.

This meet also provides good expo-

sure for the athletes' sponsors — and potential sponsors.

"A lot of athletes are in limbo, with contracts that ended," explained Crouser, who renewed a deal with Nike. "They're wanting to compete and show sponsors, 'Hey, I haven't just been sitting on the couch for the last 10 months. I've been working hard.'"

It's also a chance to "dust these cobwebs off," said American sprinter/hurdler Keni Harrison, especially with the Olympic Trials just five months away. This will be Harrison's first competition since July.

She's looking forward to racing in the 60- and 300-meter events Sunday to test her new sprint technique, the one she's been honing during the pandemic.

"I've been putting in some great work and it will be nice to finally see where we're at and then get ready for the outdoor season," said Harrison, the world record holder in the 100 hur-



**Vashti Cunningham won the women's high jump at the 2016 indoor world championships in Portland.**

Elaine Thompson/AP file

dles who trains in Texas. "It's really important to get back to the competition again."

Her goal: To win, of course.

Crouser's staring at a number: 22.66 meters, which happens to be the long-standing world indoor shot put record.

The 28-year-old threw 22.58 meters

at a meet in Manhattan, Kansas, on Dec. 5.

"I'm in good shape to throw far," Crouser said. "For me and the other athletes, we're all just happy to compete and showcase the diligence and dedication we have through this difficult time."