

SUPER BOWL LV | February 7, 2021

SUPER BOWL LV PREVIEW

BATTLE FOR THE AGES

SUPERSTAR QBs BRADY, MAHOMES TO FACE OFF IN SUPER BOWL LV

BY ARNIE STAPLETON
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Tom Brady vs. Patrick Mahomes. The ageless quadragenarian quarterback and the magnificent millennial are the superstar attractions in Super Bowl 55 at Raymond James Stadium, the pinnacle of the NFL's pandemic season marked by Zoom calls, juggled schedules, nasal swabs and mandated masks.

Mahomes is the defending Super Bowl MVP who will become the only quarterback to start two Super Bowls by age 25. He'll try to secure a second straight title for the Kansas City Chiefs (16-2), who ended a half-century drought last year with a furious fourth-quarter rally to beat San Francisco in Super Bowl 54.

A week after beating scrappy Cleveland 22-17 in the divisional round for their eighth consecutive victory by six points or less, the cardiac Chiefs earned a return trip to the Super Bowl by rolling over the Buffalo Bills 38-24 in the AFC championship.

Brady is seeking his record seventh ring but first with Tampa Bay after leading the Buccaneers (14-5) to their first NFC title in 18 years. It's his first Super Bowl without Bill Belichick, whom he teamed up with in New England to make nine Super Bowl appearances over two decades of dominance in the AFC.

In beating Green Bay 31-26 in the NFC championship at Lambeau Field behind Brady's three touchdown passes and Shaq Barrett's three sacks of Aaron Rodgers, the Bucs became the first team to get to play a Super Bowl in their home stadium.

"That's not where history has to end," Barrett said. "We could be the first team to win it, as well, and that's the key."

At 43, Brady will be the oldest player at any position to play in the Super Bowl.

Mahomes and Brady have squared off four times before, including once in the playoffs.

That was in the AFC championship at Arrowhead Stadium two years ago when the Patriots won 37-31 in overtime.

Mahomes nearly prevailed that night but Charvarius Ward's game-sealing interception of Brady's pass in the final minute of regulation was negated by Dee Ford's offsides penalty when he lined up in the neutral zone. Brady went on to lead the Patriots past the Los Angeles Rams 13-3 in Super Bowl 53.

Chiefs coach Andy Reid said he appreciated Brady coming into the Chiefs' locker room after the conference championship to console a young Mahomes, who never got his hands on the ball in overtime.

"He talked to Patrick, and Patrick responded like a young guy would respond to the G.O.A.T.," said Reid, using the sobriquet that stands for "greatest of all time."

Mahomes said Brady's gesture meant the world to him.

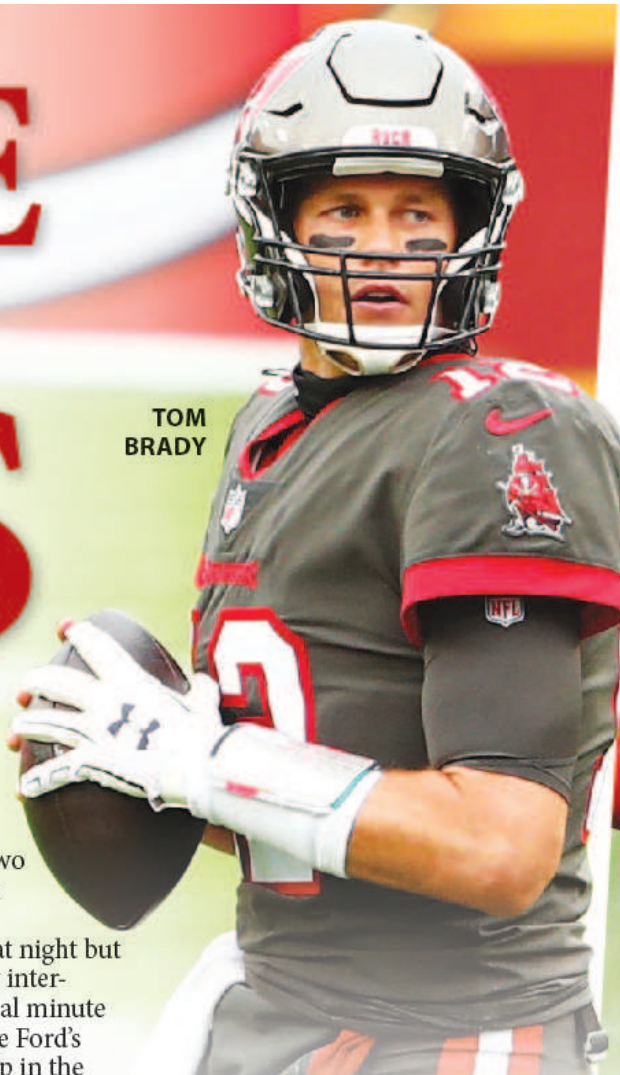
"He just kind of re-emphasized that I was doing things the right way, that I would have more opportunities to be in these games," Mahomes recounted. "I've been lucky enough to be in two more of them since and win both of those."

Now Mahomes gets another crack at beating Brady with the Lombardi Trophy on the line.

The superstars separated by 18 years, one month and 14 days have split four previous matchups, with Mahomes winning the last two: 23-16 over New England in 2019 and 27-24 in Week 12 at Tampa Bay.

Brady is playing in his 10th Super Bowl of a 21-year career and not only can he strengthen his claim as the greatest QB in history by winning one without Belichick, he can join his pal and one-time rival Peyton Manning as the only starting quarterbacks to win Super Bowls with two different teams.

Manning won Super Bowl 41 with the



TOM BRADY



PATRICK MAHOMES

Indianapolis Colts and Super Bowl 50 in his fourth and final season with the Denver Broncos a month before he retired.

Brady faded down the stretch in his final season with the Patriots in 2019 but his departure from New England and subsequent signing with Tampa Bay stunned the NFL.

While Brady had led the Patriots to 17 AFC East titles in 18 seasons as a starter (he was a backup as a rookie and suffered a season-ending knee injury in the 2008 opener), the Bucs hadn't reached the playoffs since 2007, five years after winning their only Super Bowl.

Moreover, Brady had to adjust to head coach Bruce Arians, offensive coordinator Byron Leftwich and his new teammates save for old buddy Rob Gronkowski without the benefit of a normal offseason because of COVID-19.

Despite some early stumbles, Brady led his star-studded cast that included wide receivers Mike Evans, Chris Godwin and Antonio Brown, running backs Ronald Jones and Leonard Fournette and tight ends Gronkowski and Cameron Brate to an 11-5 record and a return to the playoffs.

A 1-5 mark against teams that reached the playoffs made the Bucs a longshot to win the George Halas Trophy as the NFC's champ, but behind a terrific defense and Brady's steady leadership on offense Tampa Bay joined the 1985 Patriots, 2005 Steelers, 2007 Giants, and 2010 Packers as the only teams to reach a Super Bowl by winning three road playoff games.

The Bucs dispatched Washington 31-23

and New Orleans 30-20 before beating the Packers for their eighth consecutive road win.

Not that Brady saw any of this coming as he steered the Bucs through one obstacle after another in earning the first wild-card berth of his 21-year career.

"This is a goal, but at the same time it's a week-to-week league. We were at 7-5 seven games ago, not feeling great," Brady said.

"We felt like we needed to find our rhythm and (we) played four great games down the stretch the last quarter of the season. After that, it was all bonus. We just had to go play well."

Now, they're the first team that won't have to hit the road for the Super Bowl.

"That's the scary thing about having the Super Bowl at home — we've been playing so good on the road," said Arians.

This is Arians' first Super Bowl appearance as a head coach at age 68.

"I don't think about what it means for me," Brady said. "I do think about what it means for everyone else."

Like Arians, a three-time cancer survivor who stepped down as Arizona's coach in 2017 and came out of retirement two years ago, leading the Bucs to a 7-9 record in 2019 before Brady's momentous arrival.

"There were times when I never thought it would happen," Arians said. "I never thought I would get a head coaching job. After the cancer scare in Arizona, sitting out that year and coming back, this has been the most rewarding year of coaching in my life."



KEYS TO THE GAME



FACTS & FIGURES

From Tom Brady becoming the oldest player at age 43 to ever play in a Super Bowl to Patrick Mahomes becoming the first quarterback to start in two Super Bowls by age 25, there are plenty of subplots in the Buccaneers-Chiefs showdown at Raymond James Stadium. Here are some fans should keep an eye on:

SEVENTH HEAVEN

Brady is shooting for his record seventh NFL championship, which would break a tie he shares with three members of Vince Lombardi's great Green Bay Packers teams of the 1960s. Herb Adderley won five titles in Green Bay, including the first two Super Bowls, plus another with Tom Landry's Dallas Cowboys after the 1971 season, as did fellow Hall of Famer Forrest Gregg. Their teammate, Fuzzy Thurston, won his first title as a rookie with the Baltimore Colts in 1958 before winning five championships in Tipton. Brady won each of his half dozen rings in New England with coach Bill Belichick.

TORCH PASSING



Coming out of retirement for a reunion with Brady, Rob Gronkowski had a solid season with 623 yards and seven TDs on 45 receptions but has been quiet in the playoffs (two catches for 43 yards and no TDs). Travis Kelce has succeeded Gronk as the league's top tight end. He had a record-setting season with 105 catches for 1,416 yards and 11 TDs and has collected another 21 catches for 227 yards and three TDs in two playoff games. That gives Kelce 1,643 total receiving yards in the regular and postseason, passing Gronk's 1,585 yards in 2011. Kelce's nine postseason TDs are second all-time to Gronk's dozen.

SHOOTOUT SHOUTOUT

The game is a rematch of the Chiefs' 27-24 win on Nov. 29 at Tampa Bay in Week 12 when Mahomes threw for 462 yards and connected with Tyreek Hill 13 times for 269 yards and three TDs. The Chiefs built a 27-10 lead before Brady threw for a pair of fourth-quarter touchdowns to Mike Evans. Mahomes completed 37 of 49 passes and Brady was 27 of 41 for 345 yards and three TDs but was picked off twice. The only time Mahomes piled up more passing yards was on Nov. 19, 2018, when he threw for 478 yards in a 54-51 loss to the Rams. Hill is coming off a franchise-best 172-yard performance in the AFC championship.

PILFERING PIRATES

The Buccaneers lead the NFL with 41 points off seven takeaways in the playoffs. That included 14 points off two Green Bay turnovers in the NFC championship that gave Tampa Bay a big enough cushion to withstand a furious rally by Aaron Rodgers. Scotty Miller sped past Kevin King to haul in a 39-yard TD pass from Brady with 1 second left in the first half following an interception by Sean Murphy-Bunting. Brady's next pass was an 8-yard scoring strike to

tight end Cameron Brate that followed Aaron Jones' second fumble — both forced by safety Jordan Whitehead.

TWICE IS NICE

Brady can become the first starting QB to win a Super Bowl in both conferences. Peyton Manning is the only starting QB to win titles with two different franchises (Indianapolis over Chicago 29-17 in Super Bowl 41 and Denver over Carolina 24-10 in Super Bowl 50). Before Brady, the only starting QB to lead teams from the NFC and AFC to the Super Bowl was Craig Morton, whose Cowboys lost to the Baltimore Colts 16-13 in Super Bowl 5 and whose Broncos lost to Dallas 27-10 in Super Bowl 12. Kurt Warner led the St. Louis Rams past Tennessee 23-16 in Super Bowl 34 but lost Super Bowl 43 to Pittsburgh 27-23 as the Arizona Cardinals' starter.

RIDING SHOTGUN

Both teams have defensive coordinators who used to be NFL head coaches: Tampa Bay's Todd Bowles and Kansas City's Steve Spagnuolo. Bowles went 26-41 as Jets head coach from 2015-18. When Bruce Arians came out of retirement in 2019 he quickly hired Bowles, whom he coached at Temple in the 1980s and who had been his DC in Arizona from 2013-14. The Bucs have led the NFL in rushing defense the last two seasons. Spagnuolo went 11-41 with the Rams from 2009-11 and as Giants interim head coach in 2017. He joined Andy Reid in 2019 and played a big role in turning around the Chiefs' defense in their championship season a year ago.

CHAMPIONSHIP CHOPS

Arians is making his first Super Bowl appearance as a head coach and Reid is making his third. Reid is the only coach in NFL history to coach a team that hosted three consecutive conference championships, and he's done it in both Kansas City and Philadelphia. His Eagles hosted the NFC title games following the 2002-04 seasons, losing to Tampa Bay and Carolina before beating Atlanta prior to their loss to New England in Super Bowl 39. Reid's Chiefs lost to New England in the AFC title game at Arrowhead Stadium following the 2018 season before beating Tennessee last year on their way to winning Super Bowl 54.

PRECISION PASSING

Mahomes, whose 17 TD throws in seven playoff games are the most by a QB in his first four seasons in the NFL, has been insanely accurate in these playoffs, completing 73.5% of his throws (50 of 68) for 580 yards with four touchdowns and zero interceptions in wins over the Browns and Bills. He's been sacked one time. Brady, on the other hand, has completed just 55 percent of his throws (60 for 109) in three playoff games for Tampa Bay. He's thrown for 860 yards with seven TDs and a trio of interceptions, all in the NFC championship at Lambeau Field. He's been sacked five times in this postseason.

AT STAKE

National Football League Championship for the Vince Lombardi Trophy. The Chiefs are seeking their third trophy and second in a row after a 50-year drought; the Buccaneers are seeking their second trophy to go with the one they hoisted after the 2002 season.

KICKOFF

Sunday, Feb. 7, at 3:30 p.m. Pacific

PARTICIPANTS

Tampa Bay Buccaneers (NFC) and Kansas City Chiefs (AFC). This is the fourth appearance for the Chiefs (2-1), who lost to the Green Bay Packers in Super Bowl 1 in 1967, then beat Minnesota in Super Bowl 4 in 1970. It took them 50 years to get back but they beat San Francisco in Super Bowl 54 last year in Miami. The Buccaneers (1-0) are making their second appearance. They beat the Oakland Raiders in Super Bowl 37.

VENUE

Raymond James Stadium, Tampa, Fla., home to the Buccaneers, the first team ever to play a Super Bowl in its home stadium. This is the third Super Bowl at Raymond James and fifth in Tampa.

SEATING CAPACITY

The stadium seats 65,000 normally and is expandable to 75,000 but attendance will be limited to 22,000 because of the pandemic, with 7,500 tickets going to health-care workers who have received the COVID-19 vaccine.

HALFTIME SHOW

The Weeknd (yes, that's spelled correctly) will perform in his first Super Bowl halftime

show. The Canadian singer-songwriter is a three-time Grammy winner whose given name is Abel Makkonen Tesfaye. Billboard named his song "Blinding Lights" as the No. 1 song of 2020.

NATIONAL ANTHEM

Country artist Eric Church and R&B vocalist Jazmine Sullivan with singing "The Star Spangled Banner."

FIRST FEMALE SUPER BOWL OFFICIAL

Down judge Sarah Thomas will become the first woman ever to officiate a Super Bowl. She also was the first woman to officiate a major college football game before being hired by the NFL in 2015. "Her elite performance and commitment to excellence has earned her the right to officiate the Super Bowl," said Troy Vincent, the NFL's executive vice president of football operations. Carl Cheffers, a 21-year veteran NFL official, will referee his second Super Bowl. He also was in charge during Super Bowl 51 in 2017, when Brady and the Patriots overcame a 25-point deficit and beat the Falcons in the biggest comeback and first overtime game in Super Bowl history.

GAME COVERAGE

Game can be watched on CBS television affiliates and on the CBS All Access app.

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