

NFL PLAYOFFS | AFC CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

Young, hungry Bengals in Kansas City to face grizzled Chiefs

BY DAVE SKRETTA

Associated Press
KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The Kansas City Chiefs have been in this position before. Walking across the cold Arrowhead Stadium parking lot, dressing in their revamped locker room, strolling through the narrow tunnel and spilling onto the field for the AFC title game.

In fact, the Chiefs have done it each of the last three years.

It will be a wholly new experience for the Cincinnati Bengals, though, when they follow the same path Sunday with a trip to the Super Bowl on the line. Only a couple special teams players were alive, and coach Zac Taylor just starting out in elementary school, when they beat the Bills in January 1989 in their last trip to a conference championship game.

“I think it helps this time of year having a pretty good idea of what this is all about,” acknowledged Chiefs coach Andy Reid, who can tie Tom Landry for second in NFL history with his 20th playoff win. “They know how we go about our business, the intensity, whether it’s practice or what we expect out of the game.”

That experience came in handy last Sunday, when the Chiefs went 44 yards in 13 seconds to kick a field goal and force overtime against Buffalo. Patrick Mahomes and Co. proceeded to win the coin toss, and

Next up



Cincinnati at Kansas City

When: noon Sunday

TV: CBS

ultimately the game, by marching right downfield for a touchdown without giving the Bills another chance with the ball.

It was the kind of unforgettable, heart-stopping victory that can give an NFL team plenty of momentum for the rest of the postseason — provided they get over it quickly enough to prepare for the next one.

“It was an awesome game and win that we’ll remember forever,” Mahomes said, “but we’re not done. We’re trying to get out there and win an AFC championship and try to get to the Super Bowl.”

The Bengals had a thriller in their own right to get past top-seeded Tennessee last weekend. They blew a 16-6 second-half lead, then put rookie Evan McPherson in position to kick a winning 52-yard field goal as time expired.

It was the first road playoff win in franchise history. Now, they’re after another in Kansas City.



Charlie Riedel/AP

Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes (15) throws a pass during overtime in a divisional round playoff game against the Buffalo Bills Jan. 23 in Kansas City, Missouri.

“We’re excited about the opportunity,” Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow said. “If you want to do the things that we want to do, that’s a team that you’re going to have to beat every single year. The AFC has run through them for four straight years.”

“So, you know, we’re excited about the opportunity. We’re gonna have a great week of practice and be ready to go.”

Familiar faces

The Bengals beat the Chiefs on Jan. 2 in Cincinnati in a back-and-forth thriller that ended when McPherson drilled a 20-yard field goal as time expired. Burrow threw

for 446 yards and four touchdowns, most of it going to wide receiver Ja’Marr Chase, while Mahomes threw for 259 yards and two scores against the lightly regarded Cincinnati secondary.

“The Chiefs do a good job of employing a variety of schemes to try to keep you off balance,” Taylor said. “I thought Joe and Ja’Marr did a good job of being on the same page in that game.”

Star power

The two teams combined to send nine players to the Pro Bowl this season, six from Kansas City and three from

Cincinnati, and there’s another half-dozen players from each team that probably had a good argument to make it.

As it stands, the Chiefs have Mahomes joining wide receiver Tyreek Hill, tight end Travis Kelce, defensive tackle Chris Jones and safety Tyrann Mathieu along with new left tackle Orlando Brown Jr. The Bengals are sending Chase along with running back Joe Mixon and defensive end Trey Hendrickson.

Of course, players for the winner Sunday will be heading to the Super Bowl instead.

Dynamic duo

Burrow and Chase are 6-0 when playing together in post-season games, including their four games together at LSU, when Chiefs running back Clyde Edwards-Helaire was a teammate. Burrow has averaged 381.8 yards passing with 22 TD throws during those six games, while Chase is averaging 106.8 yards receiving and has four of the scores.

Keeping Joe clean

Figuring out how to better protect Burrow has been a priority for the Bengals this week. They’ve struggled all season, especially against the better pass-rushing teams, and Burrow was sacked a stunning nine times by Tennessee.

“There’s a lot of things that

play into it, starting with me putting him in the best position, putting our guys in the best position to block the other team and be prepared for pressures and all that kind of stuff,” Taylor said. “We spend a lot of time and effort talking through that. Some games, it’s great. Some games, we’re going to need to improve.”

Two teams, one season

Lost amid the playoff chaos last weekend was the fact that few people outside Kansas City thought the Chiefs would even be in this position. They dropped three of their first seven games, including an embarrassing 27-3 loss in Tennessee, and an overhauled defense was allowing yards and points in staggering numbers.

The Chiefs turned things around quickly, though, and have lost just once since that October day — to Cincinnati.

“I think I just saw the persistence and the championship swagger, I guess you would say, of the team we have,” Mahomes said. “Guys didn’t hang their head. They just wanted to get better. I think that process of every day getting better and better has put us in this situation now, and we don’t want to come up short. We want to keep this process going, and get better, and try to leave our best football out there on the football field.”



Jason Behnken/AP

L.A. Rams wide receiver Cooper Kupp (10) pulls in a pass from quarterback Matthew Stafford during a divisional round playoff game against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers Jan. 23 in Tampa, Florida.

49ers

Continued from B1

Chapter 11

Shanahan has won seven of his 10 meetings with McVay in their concurrent half-decade careers. Preparing for this showdown was no challenge for both coaches, and they say execution will win the NFC title, not trick plays or surprises.

“You know each other so well,” Shanahan said.

“We knew what the tape was going to look like before we turned it on, and they are the exact same way. ... We are going to see who makes the most plays and who makes the least mistakes.”

Not rocket science

The 49ers’ formula for beat-

ing the Rams has been fairly simple.

San Francisco generates four-man pressure from its vicious defensive front to slow LA’s offense. When the Niners have the ball, Jimmy Garoppolo executes a quick-hit passing game designed to avoid the Rams’ vaunted pass rush while exploiting Los Angeles’ unimpressive linebackers and safeties in coverage.

McVay and his players know all of this. Whether they have any correct answers to the same test they’ve already failed twice this year will be revealed Sunday.

Gold rush

San Francisco’s defensive front four has been dominant recently, generating five sacks three weeks ago against

the Rams, and again in both playoff games. Arik Armstead has 5½ sacks, and Nick Bosa got three. The Niners’ depth up front has been difficult to match: San Francisco is the first team to have back-to-back playoff games with at least five sacks in the same season since Washington did it in the 1991 playoffs on the way to the title. The only team ever to do it three straight times in a season was Washington in the 1987 playoffs, also on the way to a championship.

“Usually the teams at this point in the year all have good pass rushes,” Shanahan said. “I think it’s pretty hard to get to this point when you don’t have one.”

Passing thought

Stafford earned his first two

Next up



San Francisco at Los Angeles Rams

When: 3:30 p.m. Sunday

TV: FOX

career playoff victories over the past two weeks, playing nearly flawlessly and justifying his move to LA after a dozen seasons in Detroit. But he has never beaten Garoppolo, the much-maligned San Francisco passer whose occasional mistakes haven’t stopped him from going 4-1 as a starter in his playoff career and 3-0 against Stafford.

Sea of red?

The Niners will become the first team to play 12 road games in a single season on Sunday.

After winning eight of the first 11, they can become the first team to win road games in four straight weeks since Kansas City did it in the 1966 season in the AFL.

The winning stretch started with a Week 18 victory in Inglewood where they had so many of their own fans at the game that the Rams needed to use a silent count on offense at times. The Niners are hoping for a repeat on Sunday, though the Rams will hope their fans show.

“Hopefully we’ll have a sea of red down at SoFi and turn it into Levi’s South,” kicker Robbie Gould said.

Swimming

Continued from B1

Grace Benson led the way for the Bend High girls team, winning the 200 individual medley (2:13.90) and the 100 breaststroke (1:08.17); she also helped the Lava Bears’ 200 medley relay (1:54.66) finish first. Makalu Ostrom also emerged victorious in a pair of individual races for Bend, winning both the boys 500 freestyle and the 100 backstroke (59.61).

Mountain View had first-place finishes from Elli Williams in the 50 freestyle (25.36), Lexi Williams in the 100 freestyle (55.12) and Sienna LeFeber in the 100 backstroke (1:01.89).

Both Williams and LeFeber were also part of the first-place finishing 200 freestyle relay (1:46.38).

Caldera, a school still with only freshmen and sophomores in its first year of existence, had a strong showing, finishing second among boys teams with 302 points. Freshman Campbell McKean won both of his individual events,



Ryan Brennecke/Bulletin photos

Bend High’s Grace Benson competes in the 200-yard individual medley during the Bend City Meet Friday night at Juniper Swim & Fitness.

touching the wall first in the 200 freestyle (1:52.50) and the 100 breaststroke (1:02.27). Calvin Schwarz won the boys 100 freestyle in 57.49.

Perhaps the most thrilling moment of the meet came in the boys 500 freestyle, which turned into a duel between

Bend High’s Ostrom and Summit’s Liam Gilman.

After nine laps, the marathon turned into a sprint in which both swimmers touched the wall and immediately looked up at the scoreboard to see who got there first.

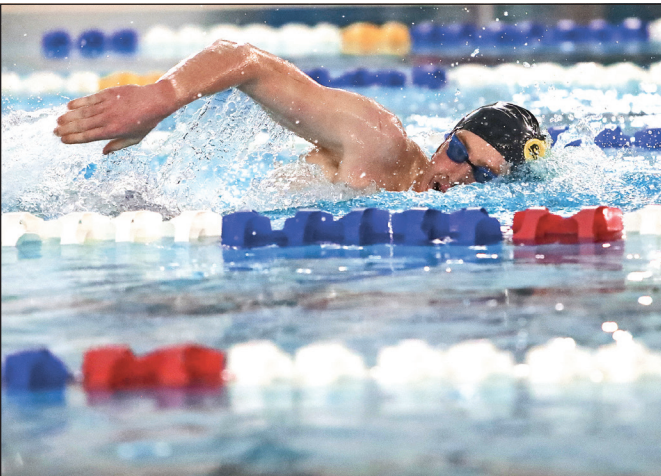
In the end, by a fraction of a second, Ostrom touched the wall first, winning in 5:00.57 over Gilman’s 5:00.72.

“It was really close,” said Gilman. “It gives you a lot of motivation when it is that close.”

After its strong showing on Friday, Summit looks toward having a successful Mountain Valley Conference district meet on Feb. 11 followed by the state meet the week after.

“We are really excited,” said Robeson. “I think we have a good team with a lot of depth and we are excited to see what they are capable of doing at district and state.”

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Bend High’s Makalu Ostrom competes in the 500-yard freestyle during the Bend City Meet Friday night at Juniper Swim & Fitness.

Brady

Continued from B1

That post was removed, and Yee released this statement: “I understand the advance speculation about Tom’s future. Without getting into the accuracy or inaccuracy of what’s being reported, Tom will be the only person to express his plans with complete accuracy.

He knows the realities of the football business and planning calendar as well as anybody, so that should be soon.”

Brady led the NFL in yards passing (5,316), touchdowns (43), completions (485) and attempts (719), but the Buccaneers lost at home to the Los Angeles Rams last Sunday in the divisional round.

Brady won six Super Bowls with the New England Patriots in 20 seasons playing for coach Bill Belichick. He joined the Buccaneers in 2020 and led them to the second Super Bowl title in franchise history.

Brady would leave the sport as the career leader in yards passing (84,520) and TDs (624).

He’s the only player to win more than five Super Bowls and was MVP of the game five times.

Widely considered the greatest quarterback to play the game, Brady won three NFL MVP awards, was a first-team All-Pro three times and was selected to the Pro Bowl 15 times. He was 243-73 in his career in the regular season and 35-12 in the playoffs.

Overlooked by every team coming out of Michigan, Brady was eventually selected by the Patriots in the sixth

round of the 2000 NFL draft with the 199th overall pick. He replaced an injured Drew Bledsoe as the starter in 2001 and led New England to a Super Bowl victory over the heavily favored Rams that season.

Brady went on to lead the Patriots to Super Bowl victories over the Carolina Panthers following the 2003 season and Philadelphia Eagles after the 2004 season. No team has since repeated as champions.

But New England wouldn’t win another one for a decade, twice losing to the New York Giants in the Super Bowl, including a 17-14 defeat on Feb. 3, 2008, that prevented the Patriots from completing a perfect season.

Brady earned his fourth ring when the Patriots held off Seattle thanks to Malcolm Butler’s interception at the goal line in the Super Bowl after the 2014 season.

Two years later, in the biggest Super Bowl comeback, he led the Patriots out of a 28-3 deficit in the third quarter against Atlanta to win in overtime.

After losing to the Eagles and backup quarterback Nick Foles the following year, Brady got his sixth championship when New England shut down the Rams following the 2018 season.

He joined the Buccaneers in 2020 amid a pandemic, instilling a winning culture for a franchise that hadn’t won a playoff game in 18 years. With his old friend Rob Gronkowski joining him in Tampa, Brady helped the Buccaneers become the first team to play in a Super Bowl in its stadium. Naturally, Brady won again.

Brady threw more touchdown passes in his 40s (168) than in his 20s (147).

In the 20 seasons he finished as starter, Brady reached the playoffs 19 times, won 18 division titles, went 10-4 in conference championships and 7-3 in Super Bowls.

He played in the conference championship eight times in his last 10 years.

Since starting his first game on Sept. 30, 2001, Brady was under center for every game except when he suffered a season-ending knee injury in Week 1 in 2008 and the first four games in 2016 when he sat out a suspension because of the deflated footballs scandal.

After leaving New England, the stoic Belichick and Patriot Way, Brady’s personality shined in the Florida sun.

He was personable, engaging and entertaining, and he displayed his wit on social media while promoting his brands.

During the Buccaneers’ victory celebration, Brady, perhaps a bit inebriated, chucked the Lombardi Trophy from one boat to tight end Cameron Brate on another.

Known for his work ethic, intense exercise and nutrition regimen, Brady found a funny and unique way to congratulate Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger on his retirement earlier this week.

Brady wrote: “Ben defied the TB12 Method in favor of the “Throw Some Ice On It” method his whole career, and ended up an all-time-great with 6 Pro-Bowls and 2 Super Bowls. There’s more than one way to bake a cake!”