

PATRIOTS, RAMS TO COLLIDE IN SUPER BOWL



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KRT CAMPUS

Left: Drew Bledsoe, in relief of injured Tom Brady, led the Pats to the AFC title. Right: The Rams' Isaac Bruce evades a defender.

Bledsoe takes charge in surprise 24-17 win

BY DAVE GOLDBERG
ASSOCIATED PRESS

PITTSBURGH — It's nice to have a \$100 million backup quarterback.

Drew Bledsoe replaced an injured Tom Brady and led the New England Patriots to the Super Bowl with a 24-17 upset of the Pittsburgh Steelers in the AFC championship game Sunday.

It wasn't a perfect performance by the man who lost his job to Brady after being injured Sept. 23 in the season's second game. And Bledsoe got plenty of help from Troy Brown, who returned a punt 55 yards for a touchdown and was the middle man on a 60-yard return of a blocked field goal that put New England ahead 21-3 early in the third quarter.

But Bledsoe, a three-time Pro Bowl selection, still did what few backups could do in a championship game — enter with the experience and arm of one of the better starters in the NFL.

He threw 11 yards to David Patten for a touchdown shortly after Brady injured his left leg toward the end of the first half, put the Patriots in position for Adam Vinatieri's fourth-quarter field goal, and allowed his team to hold the ball enough to avoid constant pressure late in the game.

"You never want someone to get hurt, but you prepare yourself for that, and I was ready when it happened," said Bledsoe, who

signed a 10-year, \$103 million contract in the offseason.

Brady said he felt fine but didn't know yet if he could play next week. If he can, it probably will create a quarterback controversy unlike any other at a Super Bowl.

"It's quite a credit to him," Brady said, referring to Bledsoe. "For 14 games, he watched, and then he comes in and has that kind of game."

Bledsoe, 10-of-21 for 102 yards, also got a lot of help from some old-timers, like Willie McGinest and Ted Johnson, who shut down Pittsburgh's running game.

Steelers running back Jerome Bettis, who returned after being out eight weeks with a groin injury, carried nine times for 8 yards, forcing Kordell Stewart to try to carry the team.

Stewart was 24-of-42 for 255 yards but also threw three interceptions, two in the last three minutes — by Tebucky Jones and Lawyer Milloy — that helped seal the Patriots' victory.

Stewart also threw three interceptions in the 1997 AFC championship loss to the Denver Broncos, who went on to win the Super Bowl.

Rams keep running with 29-24 victory

BY BARRY WILNER
ASSOCIATED PRESS

ST. LOUIS — The St. Louis Rams can be held down for just so long before Kurt Warner, Marshall Faulk and Isaac Bruce take over.

When they did in the second half of the NFC championship game, the Rams earned their second trip to the Super Bowl in three years.

Their 29-24 victory Sunday over the Philadelphia Eagles sent the Rams to New Orleans to meet the surprising New England Patriots. Two years ago, St. Louis beat Tennessee for its first Super Bowl title.

The trip south didn't look likely early in the game as the Eagles' stingy defense kept the Rams off-balance. But in the second half, Warner, the league's MVP; Faulk, a three-time Offensive Player of the Year; and Bruce, Warner's favorite receiver, were too much.

Things turned in the third quarter when the Rams dominated the clock and scored 10 points. They ran 22 of the 28 plays in the period, getting Jeff Wilkins' third field goal, a 41-yarder, and Faulk's 1-yard touchdown run.

With his helmet ripped off on the play, Faulk fell into the end zone and the raucous crowd sensed the Eagles were through. So did the St. Louis defense, which forced a second and third straight three-and-out series.

It was a powerful display by the Rams, who forced eight turnovers the previous week against the Green Bay Packers, returning three interceptions for touchdowns. There were no such big plays against Donovan McNabb, but St. Louis was unyielding for much of the second half.

McNabb did lead Philadelphia 48 yards and run for a 3-yard

touchdown with 2:56 to go. After forcing a punt, the Eagles had one last comeback try, but All-Pro cornerback Aeneas Williams got his sixth career playoff interception.

Williams then ran all the way to his own end zone, flanked by jubilant teammates, to celebrate his first Super Bowl trip.

Faulk set a career playoff high with 159 yards rushing — his 84 at halftime was a personal mark — and Bruce had eight receptions for 84 yards and a touchdown.

They did so against a defense that didn't allow more than 21 points all season and led the league in red-zone efficiency.

Warner, apparently not bothered by the sore ribs that forced him to miss practice Thursday, didn't need to be spectacular. He let Faulk and Bruce take care of that and went 22-for-33 for 212 yards and a 4-yard TD pass to Bruce.

When Faulk dived in from the 1 with 6:55 remaining, he was headed home to New Orleans.

McNabb was effective at times but had little chance in the decisive third quarter as his blocking fell apart. He finished 18-for-30 for 171 yards and ran for only 26 yards — his fewest in these playoffs.

Swimming

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was the winner in the 100-yard freestyle with a mark of 51.50.

The Gamecock divers added to their win column with victories in the men's and women's competitions. Senior diver Brandon Hulko won the 1-meter and the 3-meter springboard for the men. The Gamecocks took the top three spots in the 3-meter, with senior Brad Brown coming in second and freshman Dean Emmerton finishing third.

For the women's competition, the Lady Gamecocks finished in the top three slots on both boards. Sophomore Holly Hodges won the 1-meter event with a score of 292.05. Freshman Tracey Richardson came up big in the 3-meter by scoring 314.25 for the victory. Freshman Allison Brennan placed third in both.

USC will play host Friday to Georgia, the defending national champions. Alabama comes into town Saturday at 3 p.m.

Comments on this story? E-mail gamecocksports@hotmail.com

Men's

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Powell, starting for the second game in a row, was limited to two points — a sharp difference from the 19 he scored against the Vols. No matter what defense the Gamecocks tried, Mississippi found ways to put the ball in the basket.

It won't get any easier for the Gamecocks, as they have another

big game Wednesday night against the No. 15 Georgia Bulldogs. Georgia will enter Frank McGuire Arena coming off a tough two-point loss to Vanderbilt on Saturday.

"We've got to recover and go back to practice on Monday and play a tough Georgia team on Wednesday," Odom said.

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