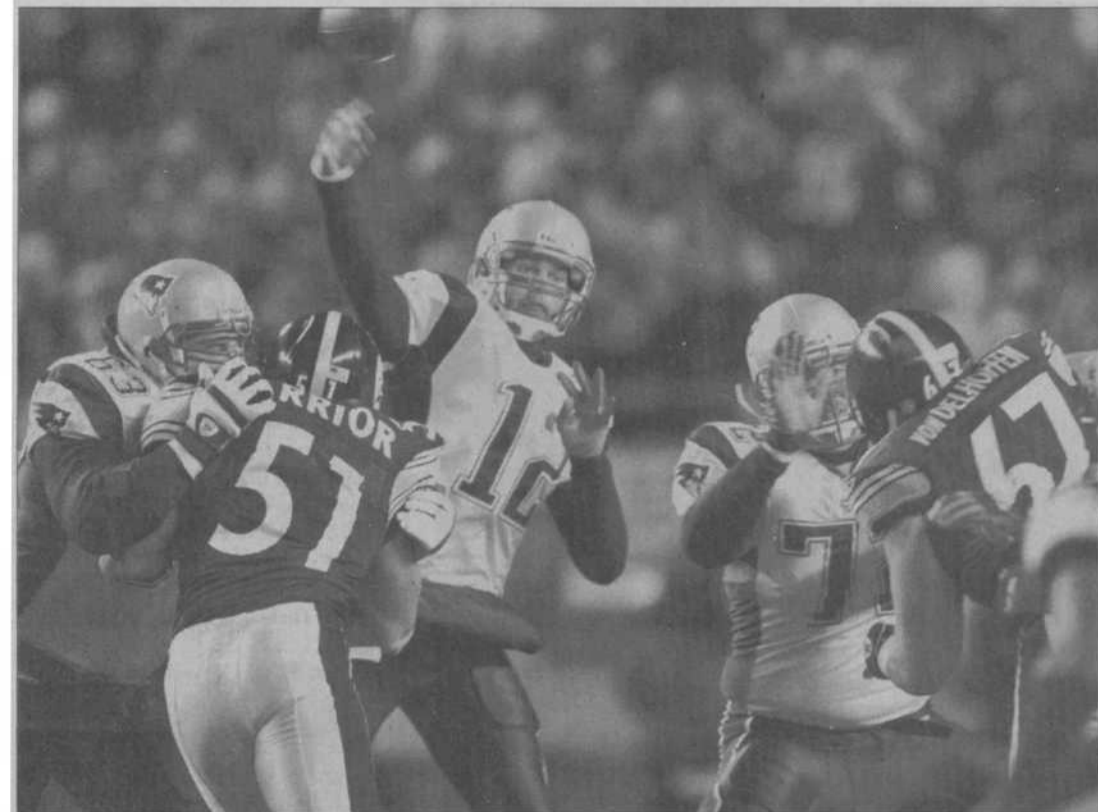


NFL CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIPS

# Super Bowl set after Eagles, Patriots dominate



WINSLOW TOWNSON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, center, fires a pass to Corey Dillon during the second quarter of the AFC Championship game against the Pittsburgh Steelers in Pittsburgh.

By ALAN ROBINSON  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**PITTSBURGH** — Nobody beats Brady and Belichick in a big game, not even Big Ben.

Tom Brady and Bill Belichick were an unstoppable combination again for the New England Patriots, exposing all of the Steelers' weaknesses to end their 15-game winning streak and win the AFC championship 41-27 Sunday night.

Brady gave the inexperienced Ben Roethlisberger a lesson in quarterbacking a championship game, throwing two touchdown passes — one to Deion Branch that gave New England a 10-0 lead in the first quarter.

Belichick also upstaged can't-win-the-big-one Steelers coach Bill Cowher, improving to 9-1 as a playoffs coach and matching Vince Lombardi's NFL-best playoff coaching record.

Brady has a record of his own: 8-0 as a postseason quarterback, bettering Troy Aikman's 7-0 record at the start of his playoff career.

Now, the defending champions will play the Philadelphia Eagles in the Super Bowl on Feb. 6 in Jacksonville, Fla. New England was installed as an early 6-to-6 1/2 point favorite.

The Patriots can become the first team to win three Super Bowls in four

seasons since Dallas did it between the 1992-95 seasons.

This game was a near-replay of Pittsburgh's breakthrough 34-20 win Oct. 31 that ended New England's record 21-game winning streak. Again, an under-pressure quarterback kept making mistakes as a team seized a 24-3 lead in the first half.

For the Steelers, it was their fourth loss in five AFC championship games at home since 1995 under Cowher and, at least psychologically, the worst. They were on a franchise-record winning streak and, with their seemingly can't-be-beaten rookie at quarterback, thought they had what it took to get back to the Super Bowl for only the second time in 25 years.

The Steelers publicly toed the Cowher-dictated corporate line, saying they understood New England's role as a 3-point favorite despite their 15-game winning streak and NFL-best 16-1 record. Privately, they were motivated by the perceived slight and linebacker Joey Porter promised they wouldn't flop in a title game again.

New England didn't have an injured Corey Dillon during that Halloween game, and the presence of the 1,635-yard rusher was supposed to make a big difference in the rematch. Instead it was Branch, also injured and out of the first game, who made the big plays with a

touchdown catch, touchdown run and another long reception that set up a score.

Branch got behind cornerback Deshaea Townsend for a 60-yard scoring pass on the play after Jerome Bettis fumbled on a fourth-and-1 at the Patriots' 39, and it was 10-0 New England halfway through the first quarter. It was Bettis' second fumble in 10 carries over two games after he went more than a season without fumbling.

Branch, a tough matchup for the Steelers' average secondary because of his speed, came back in the second quarter with a 45-yard reception to the 14 when Brady alertly found him between defenders in Pittsburgh's cover-2 defense.

With the Steelers driving for the first time in the half, Roethlisberger made yet another rookie mistake, and it all but finished off Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh could have gotten to within a touchdown early in the fourth quarter, but was turned aside on three straight plays after having first-and-goal at the 5 and settled for Jeff Reed's field goal.

By PAUL NEWBERRY  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**PHILADELPHIA** — Yo, Philly. Lose those jitters and relax. Your Eagles made it to the Super Bowl.

Donovan McNabb and company ignored the burden of three straight losses in the NFC championship game and warmed a frozen city's heart, stuffing Michael Vick and the Atlanta Falcons 27-10 on Sunday.

Philadelphia moves on to its first Super Bowl in 24 years — the only acceptable outcome for the Eagles and their rabid fans after so many close calls. They will meet either defending champion New England or cross-state Pittsburgh in Jacksonville, Fla., on Feb. 6.

McNabb threw a pair of touchdown passes to Chad Lewis, including the clinching score with 3:21 remaining. That turned the final minutes into a delirious coronation, the 67,717 fans — most of whom never sat in their seats on a 17-degree day — saluting a team that finally fulfilled its destiny.

The only warm-weather team left in the playoffs went cold in its biggest game of the year. Vick was sacked four times by the fearsome Philly defense, which also came up with a crucial interception that set up David Akers' second field goal.

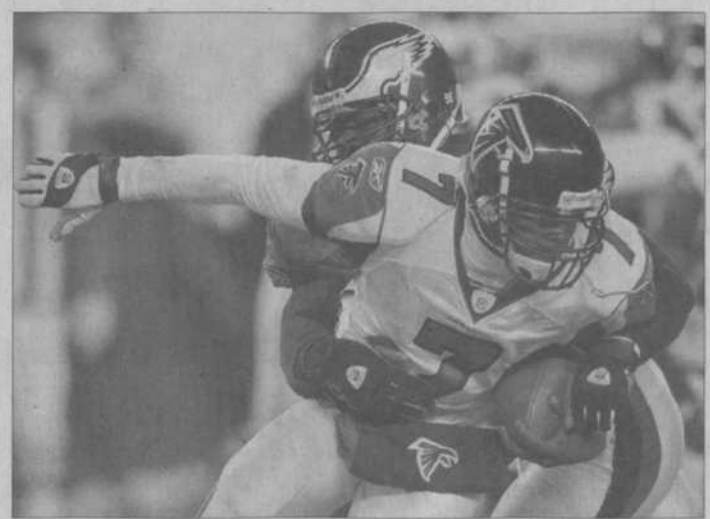
McNabb completed 17-of-26 passes for 180 yards, a workmanlike performance that solidified his position as one of the game's best quarterbacks.

Vick is, too, but his first appearance on the Super Bowl stage will have to wait. He completed just 11-of-24 for 136 yards, while the Eagles' stifling defense kept him from pulling off one of his signature runs.

He ran it just four times for 26 yards, but gave up even more yards on the sacks. Derrick Burgess dropped the elusive quarterback twice.

Philadelphia led only 14-10 at halftime, a bit to close for comfort for a team that had lost to St. Louis, Tampa Bay and Carolina in the last three NFC title games. Even more galling — the last two losses were at home.

But, as the sun gave way to a nearly full moon over "The Linc," the Eagles dominated the final two quarters. Akers connected from 31 and 34 yards, then McNabb and Lewis teamed up to



RUSTY KENNEDY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Philadelphia Eagles' Derrick Burgess sacks Atlanta's Michael Vick in the fourth quarter during Sunday's game.

finish off the Falcons with their 2-yard touchdown play.

Then, it was time for the party — Philly-style.

"For those about to rock, we salute you," AC-DC screamed over the sound system. Fireworks went off above the stadium. And tons of glitter fluttered over the field, recreating the blizzard that swept through the city a day earlier.

Philadelphia scored on its second possession after Chris Mohr managed just an 8-yard punt into a stiff wind. The Eagles appeared to go three-and-out, but a holding penalty on rookie cornerback DeAngelo Hall kept the drive alive.

Westbrook broke off a 36-yard run, scooting through a huge hole on the right side and breaking through Brian Scott's attempted tackle. Dorsey Levens finished it off with a 4-yard touchdown run, appearing to be stopped at the 2 but getting a shove into the end zone from offensive guard Jermaine Newberry.

The Falcons responded by holding the ball for almost nine minutes, also benefiting from a defensive holding penalty on third down that kept the drive alive. But Philadelphia stiffened on first-and-goal from 2, throwing TJ Duckett for a loss — only the second negative run of the season for the 254-pound back. Atlanta was forced to settle for Jay Feely's 23-yard field goal.

Back came the Eagles for another touchdown, set up by another big play. McNabb lofted a pass to Greg Lewis, who was covered by undrafted free agent Christian Morton. Lewis slowed up to catch the ball while Morton stumbled out of position, the result being a 45-yard completion to the Atlanta 4.

Two plays later, it was another Lewis, tight end Chad, making a spectacular catch in the corner of the end zone. He somehow managed to drag both feet inbounds after leaping to pull down the high throw. Atlanta challenged, but the replay clearly backed up the refs' call.

The Falcons followed with their most impressive offensive display. In only five plays, they shredded the Eagles for 70 yards, capped off by Warrick Dunn's 10-yard touchdown with 2:02 left in the first half.

But Atlanta's offense never warmed up over the final two quarters.

Leading up to the kickoff, there was another Philly moment.

The "Rocky" theme blared from the speakers, sending the crowd into a towel-waving frenzy. The video board showed clips from the movie interspersed with highlights from the Eagles' season.

Now, they've got a chance to show the biggest highlight of all — a Super Bowl championship.

Finally.

WOMEN

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problem that has plagued the team all season.

The Gamecocks have several difficult opponents remaining, including their Thursday night matchup with one of the nation's best, the Tennessee Lady Volunteers. Additionally, the Gamecocks will have to play host to No. 2 Louisiana State in mid-February, a team that is 18-1 and 5-0 in the SEC. The Tigers solidified themselves as a truly formidable opponent again last night in a 79-68 victory over No. 17 Vanderbilt.

Coming into its game with the Gamecocks Thursday, the No. 7 Lady Vols are 16-3 and have won six straight games. During this streak, Tennessee's

average margin of victory is nearly 12 points per game. The stretch began following a loss to Rutgers with a win over Old Dominion and was highlighted by a victory over No. 13 Connecticut in Hartford.

As the Gamecocks remain winless in Fayetteville, they also stare at a zero in the SEC win column. Also, many challenging games remain before the regular season's end. While USC only has one upperclassman on the team in junior forward Olga Gritsaeva, the team must find consistent play and leadership in its core of sophomore guards. To have any hope of being a presence in the SEC Tournament, the team will look to decrease its average number of turnovers and increase its shooting percentage.

Comments on this story? E-mail [gamecocksports@gum.sc.edu](mailto:gamecocksports@gum.sc.edu)

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