

Sports

Rodgers, Brady duel as Bucs target Super Bowl curse

Chiefs boost as Mahomes fit for Bills clash

LOS ANGELES: Aaron Rodgers takes on Tom Brady in a first-ever NFL playoff game between the two quarterback titans today when the Green Bay Packers host the Tampa Bay Buccaneers at Lambeau Field for a place in the Super Bowl. For the legion of admirers who argue that Rodgers' natural talents make him the best quarterback of all time, Sunday's NFC championship showdown is a chance to put one over Brady, regarded by many as the undisputed G.O.A.T.

In raw statistical terms, Rodgers' resume pales into comparison when contrasted with the achievements and honors amassed by the 43-year-old Brady over the course of his 21 trophy-laden seasons in the NFL. Rodgers is bidding to reach the Super Bowl for only the second time in his career since leading Green Bay to victory over Pittsburgh a full decade ago in 2011.

Brady, meanwhile, is looking to extend his record number of Super Bowl appearances to 10, with dreams of adding a seventh championship ring to those won with the New England Patriots in 2002, 2004, 2005, 2015, 2017 and 2019.

A win today would see Brady become the first quarterback to reach Super Bowls in three different decades, and only the fourth after Peyton Manning, Kurt Warner and Craig Morton, to lead two different franchises to the NFL's championship showpiece. Blocking Brady and the Bucs' path, however, are Rodgers and a multi-faceted Packers team who shrugged off a 38-10 drubbing by Tampa Bay in week six of the regular season to enter the playoffs as top seeds.

The greatest?

At the center of the Packers revival has been Rodgers, who has delivered an Most Valuable Player-worthy season en route to this weekend's battle at Lambeau. "I say this all the time," revered former Packers quarterback Brett Favre said in a recent interview. "Tom Brady is the greatest player ever if we're measuring from a Super Bowl perspective. But, believe me, the Packers are good year in and year out because of Aaron Rodgers."

The 37-year-old Rodgers, who started the season against a backdrop of uncertainty after the Packers swooped for quarterback Jordan Love in the first round of the NFL Draft, says he is not thinking about his long-term future or personal milestones. "I'm always just trying to stay present, especially this year as much as any-



Aaron Rodgers

thing, and enjoy the moments," Rodgers said. "I'm going to enjoy these moments for sure, and just not worry about what happens down the line."

Brady heads to Lambeau hoping to extend Tampa Bay's dominant record on the road. The Buccaneers advanced to the NFC title game with a 30-20 defeat of the Saints in New Orleans last Sunday — their seventh straight win away from home this season.

"Let's keep that streak going," Brady said. "That would be pretty sweet. Let's get another one. We're going to be challenged to get it because we're going up against a great football team."

The Buccaneers are also going up against the weight of history. If they are victorious in Green Bay on Sunday, they would become the first team in NFL history to play a Super Bowl at their home venue, with Tampa's Raymond James Stadium the site for the February 7 title game.



Tom Brady

Bills eye 'dogfight'

While Rodgers and Brady are duel for NFC honors today, in the AFC, the reigning Super Bowl champion Kansas City Chiefs host the Buffalo Bills with uncertainty surrounding the fitness of quarterback Patrick Mahomes. But Mahomes confirmed Friday he is fit to start today's AFC Championship clash with the Bills following his concussion last weekend. "I just got out of the protocol," Mahomes said. "This week has just been a bunch of testing, and a bunch of different things to make sure that I'm good to go and there's no lingering effects or anything like that. But everything has been good, three or four different doctors have said everything looks well, so I'm out of it now."

Mahomes has spent this week in the NFL's concussion protocol after being knocked out of last Sunday's divisional round nail-biter over the Cleveland Browns

following a heavy blow to the head. The 25-year-old reigning Super Bowl MVP returned to practice on Wednesday, however, and is expected to start at Arrowhead Stadium against a Bills team targeting its first Super Bowl appearance since the franchise's ill-fated losing streak in the early 1990s.

The Bills appeared in four straight Super Bowls — and lost all four — between 1991 and 1994. Buffalo's miserable streak of playoff futility ended this season, however, with rapidly maturing quarterback Josh Allen and receiver Stefon Diggs leading the way in post-season wins over the Indianapolis Colts and Baltimore Ravens.

Allen says the Bills have improved since being outclassed 26-17 by the Chiefs in October. "I think we've gotten a lot better since that game," Allen said. "So it's good teams that are going to go out there and compete, and it's going to be a four-quarter dogfight." — AFP



CLEVELAND: Collin Sexton #2 of the Cleveland Cavaliers shoots the ball during the game against the Brooklyn Nets on Friday at Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse in Cleveland, Ohio. — AFP

Cavs beat Brooklyn again, Celtics lose to Sixers

LOS ANGELES: Collin Sexton carried the Cleveland Cavaliers to their second straight win over Brooklyn on Friday, scoring 25 points and dishing out nine assists in a 125-113 win just two nights after posting a career high of 42 points against the same Nets. Sexton once again outplayed Nets big guns James Harden and Kyrie Irving, just as he did in the Cavs' thrilling 147-135 double overtime victory on Wednesday.

Cleveland dominated the paint and seized control in the third quarter by exploiting the Nets porous defense to record their third straight victory. Sexton scored eight points in the third quarter, when Cleveland outscored the Nets 37-24 and forced eight turnovers. Andre Drummond posted his 13th double-double with 19 points and 16 rebounds, and Larry Nance added 15. Former Net Taurean Prince tallied 14 for the Cavaliers, who outrebounded the Nets 50-29 at the Rocket Mortgage Fieldhouse arena in Cleveland. "When we're a whole, healthy team, we're very tough to beat," Drummond said.

Kyrie Irving scored 38 points in his second game after a two-week absence, while James Harden scored 19 points and had 11 assists. Brooklyn could have used Kevin Durant, who did not play because the team wanted to give him a rest.

The Nets shot 48 percent from the field and made just 14 of 43 three-point attempts. "I don't want to overreact, but we need the guys to clean things up because we underperformed in two games," Nets coach Steve Nash said. "People are excited to play against our team and will bring it every night. I feel

like we need a little more and we have to take more pride in what we're doing."

"Our problem isn't offence. We're not worried at all about offence. It's our defense," said Harden. Cleveland will try to snap an eight-game losing streak to Boston when they face the Celtics in their next game today.

Curry returns

Elsewhere, Joel Embiid scored 38 points and grabbed 11 rebounds as the Philadelphia 76ers beat the Celtics 122-110. The Sixers beat the Celtics for the second straight game thanks to Tobias Harris who scored 23 points on 10-of-12 shooting.

Seth Curry returned from missing seven games due to coronavirus protocols and scored 15 points for the 76ers, who improved to 9-1 at home. Ben Simmons also had 15 points and added 11 assists. Jaylen Brown led the Celtics, matching his career high of 42 points to go along with nine rebounds, while Marcus Smart added 20 points and seven assists.

The Celtics went on a 8-0 run halfway through the fourth quarter. Brown nailed his fifth three pointer with just under five minutes remaining to close the gap to 103-100. Simmons answered with a three-point play then a steal and dunk. Harris added a three pointer for a 111-100 lead. Simmons made another key late basket and the lead ballooned to 13 points with 3:15 left.

Also, Luka Doncic finished just shy of a triple double with 36 points, 11 assists and nine rebounds to power the Dallas Mavericks to a 122-117 victory over the San Antonio Spurs. In Tampa, Norman Powell scored 14 of his game-high 23 points in the first quarter and the Toronto Raptors beat the Miami Heat 101-81. Powell, who was starting in place of injured Kyle Lowry, shot 10-of-18 from the field. In Los Angeles, Kawhi Leonard scored 31 points and Paul George added 29 as the Los Angeles Clippers won their sixth straight game with a 120-106 victory over the Oklahoma City Thunder. — AFP

Baseball mourns death of long-time homer king Aaron

NEW YORK: Long-time Major League Baseball home run king Hank Aaron was remembered for his character and dignity as well as his sporting achievements following his death Friday at age 86. Aaron shrugged off racism and death threats to pass the record 714 homers hit by Babe Ruth in 1974, finishing on 755 for his career and becoming a pioneer in front office opportunities for black players after their careers.

"Hank Aaron was one of the best baseball players we've ever seen and one of the strongest people I've ever met," former US President Barack Obama said. "Michelle and I send our thoughts and prayers to the Aaron family and everyone who was inspired by this unassuming man and his towering example." Inspired by a meeting with Jackie Robinson, MLB's first black player, Aaron turned his talents to baseball and became an iconic sportsman while greeting intolerance with class and grace. Newly-elected US President Joe Biden has fond memories of watching Aaron hit home runs. "I knew I was watching someone special," Biden said. "With courage and dignity, he eclipsed the most hallowed record in sports while absorbing vengeance that would have broken most people. But he was unbreakable. He stemmed the vicious force of white supremacy, in death threats, hate mail, and in hardened hearts. What I deeply admired and respected about him is that each time he rounded those bases — an astonishing 755 trips home — he melted away more and more of the ice of bigotry to show that we can be better as a people and as a nation."

Aaron played 23 MLB seasons from 1954 to 1976, starting with the Milwaukee Braves, moving with them to Atlanta in 1966, leaving for the Milwaukee Brewers in 1975 and retiring in 1976. Aaron joined the Braves as an executive, became vice president of player development and a senior vice president for the club in 1980. "We are absolutely devastated by the passing of our beloved Hank," Braves chairman Terry McGuirk said. "Henry Louis Aaron wasn't just our icon, but one across Major League Baseball and around the world." Aaron was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1982, where his steadfastness and courage in the face of death threats made him elite even among baseball immortals. "Hank Aaron is near the top of everyone's list of all-time great players," MLB commissioner Rob Manfred said. — AFP



ATLANTA: Fans pay tribute after the death of MLB Hall of Famer Hank Aaron at The Battery Atlanta on Friday in Atlanta, Georgia. — AFP

News in brief

Mbappe unsure on future

PARIS: Kylian Mbappe says he is still "thinking about" whether to agree to a new contract at Paris Saint-Germain, with the France superstar's existing deal set to expire at the end of next season. "We are in discussions with the club to try to find a suitable project. I said I was thinking about it because I think that...if I sign it would have to be a long-term commitment to Paris Saint-Germain," Mbappe told TV channel Telefoot after Friday's 4-0 win over Montpellier in Ligue 1. "I am very happy here. I have always been very happy. The supporters and the club have always helped me and for that alone I will always be grateful." — AFP

Messi ban appeal rejected

MADRID: Barcelona's appeal against Lionel Messi's two-match ban following his sending-off in the Spanish Super Cup final was rejected on Friday, sources from the Spanish Football Federation told AFP. It means the Argentine will not be able to play for Barcelona in today's game away at Elche in La Liga. Messi served the first match of his suspension as the Catalans won 2-0 in extra time away to near neighbors Cornella, of Spain's third-tier Segunda B division, on Thursday in the Copa del Rey. He was sent off late in extra time in Sunday's Super Cup final in Seville against Athletic Bilbao, which Barcelona lost 3-2. Messi saw the first red card of his Barcelona career, on his 753rd appearance, for lashing out at Athletic's Asier Villalibre. — AFP

Ferrari sign female driver

PARIS: Ferrari on Friday signed up 16-year-old Maya Weug, the first female to join their academy which has nurtured the talent of Formula one drivers like Charles Leclerc. Weug, born and raised in Spain, will compete in Formula 4 this year backed by the academy which also counts Formula One rookie Mick Schumacher among its success stories. The teenager of Dutch-Belgian origins began racing in a secondhand kart shared with her brother at the age of seven in 2011. While a number of women drivers have attempted to qualify for a Formula One Grand Prix the last to succeed was Italian Lella Lombardi in 1976. — AFP

Tomori loaned to Milan

LONDON: Chelsea defender Fikayo Tomori joined AC Milan on loan for the rest of the season on Friday. Serie A leaders Milan are believed to have retained an option to buy Tomori for £25 million (\$34 million) when the loan expires at the end of the current campaign. Thiago Silva's move to Chelsea in the close-season pushed Tomori down Frank Lampard's list of center-backs. Kurt Zouma, Toni Rudiger and Andreas Christensen were all competing with Tomori to partner Silva at the heart of Chelsea's defense. — AFP