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NFL PLAYOFFS

ELIZABETH FLORES • liz.flores@startribune.com
Vikings QB Case Keenum has thrown 40 postseason passes. Tom Brady has thrown 1,378.

QBs crash Brady's playoff party

◄ CRAIG from C1
position, we've never seen such lopsided experience as what we'll see this weekend.

Brady is playing in a conference title game for the seventh consecutive season and the 12th time overall. Both are records. Before Brady came along, Oakland Hall of Famers Gene Upshaw and George Blanda held the record of playing in 10 conference title games.

Conference title games played for Keenum, Foles and Bortles: zero heading into Sunday.

Brady is 26-9 in the postseason, including 5-2 in Super Bowls. The other three are 4-1 in the postseason, with all four victories coming this postseason. Brady has thrown 1,378 postseason passes. The other three: 152.

Brady also threw three touchdowns in last week's rout of the Titans. That extended his record for most multi-touchdown games in the postseason to 21. Brett Favre is second at 15.

Keenum, Foles and Bortles' total: 1, by Foles with the Eagles in a loss during the 2013 season.

And this might be the most amazing stat of all:

Brady played his first postseason game on Jan. 19, 2002. Keenum was 14 years old, Foles 12 and Bortles 9.

Bortles' play hasn't quieted speculation that his days in Jacksonville are numbered. Win or lose, Foles heads back to the bench once Carson Wentz's knee heals. And Keenum, well, who the heck knows what's going to happen and where it's going to happen for this soon-to-be free agent?

Having played all but six quarters for a team that's 14-3, one thing is certain: The best free-agent bargain in 2017 is going to fetch a lot more than $2 million in 2018.

But first, there's the matter of playing an NFC Championship Game between two old friends who spent 2015 with the St. Louis Rams. Keenum went 3-2 that year, while Foles went 4-7.

"It's pretty wild," Foles said Wednesday. "We were on the same team not too many years ago. But Case's success and the way he plays doesn't surprise me because he and I were together. We prepared together and were around each other every day."

After that season, Foles spent an entire week contemplating retirement. He said that was "the best thing" he ever did because it forced him to think about why he was playing football.

He signed with the Chiefs that offseason, reuniting him with Andy Reid, who was in Philadelphia during Foles' first stint with the Eagles.

And now one of these two overlooked journeymen could be facing the Patriots in Brady's eighth Super Bowl.

"I think the big message is no matter what happens, keep believing in yourself," he said. "Keep working hard and never give up."

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Five Vikings games that stunned me

◄ REUSSE from C1
nel 11, from Sioux Falls, I looked bug-eyed at the Philco console with one thought: "How in the Wide, Wide World of Sports did this happen?"

We are in the 57th season of the Vikings, and for all the alleged heartbreak with what's largely been a winning franchise, I've had five of those moments watching the Vikings.

I'm not talking about Blair Walsh missing a chip-shot field goal, or Brett Favre throwing an interception on a short pass over the middle, or Drew Pearson pushing away Nate Wright to eliminate the '75 Vikings, or even Ahmad Rashad gathering Tommy Kramer's Hail Mary to put the '80 Vikings in the playoffs.

I'm not talking about being surprised. That's not the standard here. I'm talking about being absolutely stunned by what had been witnessed, whether on a black-and-white Philco, in person or on a modern wide screen.

My five moments of stunned disbelief in 57 seasons, chronologically:

Sept. 17, 1961: Tarkenton runs Bears ragged in Vikings' first game ever.

Jan. 11, 1970: Joe Kapp. That unmovable defense. I'm telling you, from the Twin Cities to the Minnesota hinterlands, there was no doubt the Vikings would defeat Kansas City and win Super Bowl IV.

In retrospect, Kansas City was loaded with exceptional talent and Hall of Famers, but at the time … our mighty collection that had scored 379 points and allowed 133 in a 12-2 season being dominated 23-7 by the Chiefs was incomprehensible.

Jan. 9, 1988: The 1987 season was a mess because of three games played by strikebreakers that counted in the standings. The Vikings went 0-3 in those; they lost on Saturday of the final weekend and needed a St. Louis Cardinals loss the following day to back into the playoffs.

They went to New Orleans and throttled the Saints 44-10. OK, that was the Saints.

A week later, on Jan. 9, the Vikings went to San Francisco to face the dynastic 49ers. Anthony Carter caught 10 passes for 227 yards, Joe Montana was booed off the field after throwing a pick six to Najee Mustafa, and the Vikings won 36-24. Burnsie's long shots just missed the Super Bowl, losing at Washington 17-10.

Jan. 17, 1999: Minnesotans were as certain of these Vikings beating Atlanta in the NFC Championship Game in the Metrodome as we were of beating the Chiefs three decades earlier. I can't forget Bob Ryan of the Boston Globe saying to me pregame in the press box, "It's bad karma that Gary Anderson hasn't missed a field goal. That could come into play."

How did he know?

Jan. 14, 2018: Stefon Diggs is running down the sideline for a touchdown. There is no Saints defender left to beat. This is on a large TV carrying endless stations but the question is the same as 57 years earlier in front of the Philco:

"How in the Wide, Wide World of Sports did this happen?"

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TENNIS AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Wimbledon champ Muguruza ousted

By JOHN PYE
Associated Press

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA – Wimbledon champion Garbine Muguruza struggled with the heat in an upset second-round loss to Hsieh Su-wei that left just three major winners in the Australian Open women's draw on Day 4.

Two of them will meet in the third round.

With a forecast high of 102 degrees, 2008 Australian Open winner Maria Sharapova hurried through the first set on Rod Laver Arena in 23 minutes before beating No. 14-seeded Anastasija Sevastova 6-1, 7-6 (4).

Temperatures hovered close to 104 degrees as 2016 champion Angelique Kerber set up a meeting with Sharapova with a 6-4, 6-1 win over Donna Vekic in a 70-minute afternoon match at Margaret Court Arena.

The crowd sang Happy Birthday and gave three hoorays to celebrate Kerber's 30th birthday. It was her 11th win, including the Sydney International title last week.

Muguruza had little to celebrate after her 7-6 (1), 6-4 loss to No. 88-ranked Hsieh, who has been No. 1 in doubles but had only previously beaten one top 10 player in singles.

"She's definitely a very tricky opponent — she played well," said Muguruza. "I could have done things better, but at the end, she deserves to win."

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Pitts making early impact at U

The freshman from Detroit is among the keys to a high-scoring offense.

By HEATHER RULE
Special to the Star Tribune

Gophers women's basketball freshman Destiny Pitts drained a three-pointer to tie the score with 15 seconds left against then-No. 21 Rutgers last weekend.

Pitts

"She has no doubt in her ability at that moment," coach Marlene Stollings said.

The Gophers forced overtime but lost 80-70.

They'll shift focus to rivalry week at Williams Arena, where they're 8-1, against Wisconsin and Iowa. The Gophers (14-5, 3-3) will seek a 10th consecutive victory over the Badgers (7-12, 0-6) on Thursday night. The Gophers beat the Badgers handily last year, 88-60.

The Badgers are in the midst of a seven-game losing streak and have dropped nine of their past 11 games.

Pitts, a 5-10 guard/forward from Detroit, played all 45 minutes against Rutgers, and scored 22 points, tying senior Carlie Wagner for the team-high. Pitts has reached double figures in points 12 times and has four double-doubles.

"What's working well for me is just staying true to myself and what the team needs me to do," Pitts said. "Just being in the right position for my teammates."

She has been named the Big Ten Freshman of the Week five times already this season. As Stollings pointed out, former Gopher Amanda Zahui B. received that same honor a team-record seven times — and she was taken No. 2 overall in the 2015 WNBA draft. Former Gopher Rachel Banham earned the freshman honor five times.

"So to put that in perspective, you don't get someone to perform at that level very often in your career," Stollings said. "This is my 19th year at Division I, and I have to say that she is performing as poised and as mentally tough as any freshman that I've coached."

Pitts is third on the team in scoring, averaging 13.7 points per game. She leads the team in rebounding by far with 148 (34 offensive, 114 defensive), an average of 7.8 per game. She's two behind Wagner for the team lead in three-point shots made with 53, and is shooting 40.5 percent from that range.

Stollings credits Pitts with the time she puts in after hours to absorb all the information she has to — everything from nutrition to the pace of play and basketball fundamentals. Pitts is willing to learn and grow, honing her craft on a daily basis, Stollings said.

"You don't get a lot of freshmen that are ready to do that," Stollings said. "They think that they're already good enough."

Pitts is part of an offense that averages 85.4 points per game, second in the Big Ten.

Shooting free throws and taking shots from beyond the arc continue to be strong categories for the Gophers. They rank seventh in the nation with 283 free throws made and 179 three-pointers.

Wagner also pointed to another reason for the Gophers' success: Rebounding. They're second in the Big Ten with 294 offensive rebounds and fourth with 535 defensive rebounds.

"We're one of the top rebounding teams in the country," Wagner said. "… We've got to keep that train rolling."

U WOMEN'S GAMEDAY
7 p.m. vs. Wisconsin • No TV, 93.3-FM

Gophers hope dominance goes on

Preview: After playing three of their past four games on the road, the Gophers (14-5, 3-3 Big Ten) return to Williams Arena to face the Badgers. The Gophers are coming off a 80-70 overtime loss at then-No. 21 Rutgers on Saturday. Wisconsin (7-12, 0-6) is looking for its first conference victory. The Badgers are coming off a 69-62 loss at home to Penn State on Sunday. The loss was the seventh consecutive for the Badgers. The Gophers have defeated the Badgers nine consecutive times dating to 2012.

Players to watch: Gophers G Kenisha Bell is averaging 19.3 points and 6.4 assists per game. G Carlie Wagner is averaging 18.1 points per game and has scored in double figures a team-high 18 times. The Badgers have three Minnesotans among their top six players. Senior G Cayla McMorris leads the team in scoring (13.7 points per game). Sophomore G Suzanne Gilreath is averaging 9.6 points and sophomore F Courtney Fredrickson 9.2 points. McMorris and Gilreath are from Brooklyn Park and Fredrickson is from Minnetonka. Junior F Marsha Howard averages 10.7 points and 7.5 rebounds.

Numbers: Wagner, who needs 60 points to reach 2,000 for her career, is the 10th-leading active scorer in Division I women's basketball.

JOEL RIPPEL

MLB

Morneau lived his dream, now he'll be Twins special assistant

A 2010 concussion led to the first baseman retiring early as a player at 36.

By La VELLE E. NEAL III
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Twins owner Jim Pohlad shook hands with former Twins first baseman Justin Morneau before his news conference officially announcing his retirement on Wednesday afternoon.

Justin Morneau scribbled notes all over a piece of paper before he spoke Tuesday. He wanted to make sure he didn't forget something during his speech. After all, you want to nail your retirement news conference.

As he talked, the experience and wisdom he accumulated over a 14-year career rendered most of those notes useless. He was candid, reflective, modest and humorous as he officially ended his playing career before joining the club as a special assistant to Baseball Operations.

"I was fortunate to live my dream every day," said Morneau, 36. "It wasn't taken for granted. To achieve that goal and that dream is really something special.

"All I did was play baseball. I really never wanted to do anything else."

Twins President Dave St. Peter described Morneau as, "one of the most significant players in the history of our franchise."

Morneau is third all-time on the club's home run list, sixth in RBI and doubles, eighth in hits and walks and ninth in runs scored and games played.

He spent 11 seasons with the Twins before playing a year in Pittsburgh and two with Colorado then finishing with the White Sox in 2016.

Back with the Twins, Morneau will assist with spring training instruction in both the major league and minor league camps, tour the minor leagues during the regular season, contribute to draft preparation, be a resource for players in the clubhouse — he has a couple swing tips for Max Kepler — and cover about 10 games as an analyst for Fox Sports North.

His role is similar to what former Twins players Torii Hunter, LaTroy Hawkins and Michael Cuddyer do for the club.

"We welcome you back home," St. Peter said to Morneau.

Included in the audience was Morneau's wife, Krista, and daughter, Evelyn. Former teammates Joe Mauer and Corey Koskie were on hand, as well as one of his hockey-playing buddies in former Wild player-turned-radio personality Mark Parrish.

Drafted as a catcher but immediately switched to first base, Morneau, born in New Westminster, B.C., often twirled his bat over his head during his follow-through. His swing was unique, and damaged many baseballs.

He was the 2006 AL MVP and was named to four All-Star teams. He also won the 2014 NL batting title with Colorado, batting .319. He was a solid defensive first baseman, too.

But his career will be known for at least two concussions he suffered during his Twins tenure. The second was career-threatening, as his head collided with the knee of Blue Jays infielder John McDonald as he attempted to break up a double play on July 7, 2010. It ended a season in which he was batting .345 with 18 home runs and 56 RBI in 81 games. He only played in 69 games the following season as the effects lingered.

"There were times when I didn't know if I was going to be able to play again," Morneau said. "I didn't know if I was going to be normal again. If I was going to be able to remember simple things."

He played 134 games in 2012, batting .267 with 19 homers and 77 RBI. And while he did win a batting title with Colorado in 2014, he was never the power hitter he was earlier in his career. Keep in mind that takeout slides are now illegal.

"It's almost a tale of two careers," Morneau said. "It was this … but this. What could have been. Where could it have gone if there wasn't the injuries. I try not to go down that road because it could be very difficult and very painful to think about."

He referred to his notes just once: "Don't break up a double play with your head. I wrote that down."

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