



WINDSOR: STOP-AND-GO EFFORT COULD LEAVE IZZO, SPARTANS AT HOME IN MARCH 4B

MORE SCORES, 9B

EMU.....41
 CMU.....38
 U-M women57
 Purdue.....45
 MSU women ...66
 Minnesota.....54

The road to XLV



Steelers vs. Packers



Kickoff: 6:30 p.m. Feb. 6
 Where: Cowboys Stadium, Arlington, Texas
 TV: Fox
 Line: Packers by 2½

Key players

AARON RODGERS

QB, PACKERS
 Rodgers has been hot in the playoffs. The Bears held him in check, but the sixth-year quarterback has accounted for eight passing and rushing touchdowns combined.

CLAY MATTHEWS

LB, PACKERS
 Matthews, the son of Pro Bowl linebacker Clay Jr. and nephew of Hall of Fame lineman Bruce, led the Packers with 13.5 sacks this season, then added 3.5 sacks in his three playoff games.

BEN ROETHLISBERGER

QB, STEELERS
 Roethlisberger was suspended for the first four games of 2010 for violating the NFL's personal conduct policy, but he made up for it, piling up 3,200 passing yards and 17 touchdowns in the remaining 12.

TROY POLAMALU

S, STEELERS
 You might know this big-haired Californian from his shampoo commercials, but it's his turnover-generating potential that could have Rodgers and the Packers tearing out their hair.

Overheard

Aaron Rodgers: "It's what I've dreamt about since I was a kid, growing up in Northern California watching Joe Montana and Steve Young."

Our pick

The matchup seem pretty even, with two dominate QBs and strong defenses. But this will be the Steelers' third Super Bowl in six years, so we will give them the edge. Steelers 24, Packers 20

NFL conference championships



GREEN BAY 21, CHICAGO 14



PITTSBURGH 24, N.Y. JETS 19

Gold rush

STEELERS, PACKERS ADVANCE TO THE SUPER BOWL



Steelers QB Ben Roethlisberger beats Jets LB Bryan Thomas (58) and DT Sione Pouha (91) on a 2-yard touchdown run.



DREW SHARP THINKS THE DECENT GUYS WIN OCCASIONALLY

Rodgers hangs tough and rightfully earns trip to the big game

Sometimes, there's justice. Those who quietly persevere rightfully earn their due.

Aaron Rodgers kept his mouth shut and his focus clear during the Brett Favre melodrama in Green Bay. He didn't act like a fool or embarrass himself or his employers once he got the starting job. His reward three years later is a Super Bowl, as well as official entry into the elite quarterback club.

The decent guys win occasionally. It'll be Green Bay versus Pittsburgh in Super Bowl XLV. From a more narrow perspective, it'll be Rodgers versus Steelers' quarterback Ben Roethlisberger. And you'll hear the word "redemption" thrown around quite liberally in the next two weeks regarding Roethlisberger, who missed the first four games of the season serving a league suspension for a pattern of off-field conduct detrimental to the NFL's image.

I'm always amused at how some deem an athlete's successes as somehow more heroic when it comes following off-field problems of their own creation. How does getting back to the Super Bowl almost a year following allegations of sexual assault in Georgia prove that Roethlisberger now "gets it" and has matured?

It doesn't. Rodgers' road taken is more a redemptive story because he found himself wrapped in a conflict not of his own doing. He could've crumbled under the duress of replacing franchise icon Favre. If Rodgers failed, the front office and coaching staff that sided with him over Favre would've crumbled as well.

People got so swept up in the Michael Vick "redemption" nonsense that they ignored Rodgers' truly remarkable work with a Green Bay offense that lost its leading rusher, Ryan Grant, in the season opener for the entire year and its rising star tight end, Jermaine Phillips, not long after that with another season-ending injury. There were times this season when Rodgers was Green Bay's most reliable running threat.

Vick got the starting Pro Bowl nod over Rodgers.

I don't think Rodgers minds such a ridiculous slight now. He's aiming for the bigger prize.

Rodgers ran for a touchdown in the Packers' 21-14 NFC Championship victory at Chicago. Perhaps more important, he made a touchdown-saving tackle on the Bears' Brian Urlacher following one of Rodgers' two interceptions.

It'll be the Packers' first Super Bowl since 1998 when, as the defending champions, they lost to John Elway and Denver.

They should be the dominant team in the NFC North for the foreseeable future, considering Rodgers is only 27 years old and two of their top defensive players, linebacker Clay Matthews and defensive tackle B.J. Raji, are second-year players.

That doesn't bode well for the Lions. But Championship Sunday once again underscored the importance of making the right decision regarding your franchise quarterback.

Green Bay general manager Ted Thompson tasted the sweet nectar of exonerated with Rodgers leading the Pack back to the Super Bowl. Thompson stood his ground, never once blinking when Favre changed his mind about retirement again ... and again ... and again. Others along the Frozen Tundra froze in fear as Favre matriculated to the neighboring enemy Minnesota Vikings in 2009 and — but for a vintage late-game Favre interception — nearly saw him get another Super Bowl before Rodgers would see his first.

But it all worked out. Both Rodgers and Thompson are certainly entitled to rub it in, if they choose.

The NFC

WHAT HAPPENED: It turns out everyone who thought Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers would be the game-changer was right. He just did it on defense. With a 14-0 lead in the third quarter, Rodgers threw an interception to Brian Urlacher on third-and-goal but ran him down near midfield and just barely prevented him from scoring by throwing him off-balance with his attempt at a tackle. All Chicago QB Jay Cutler could do was watch as little-known backup Caleb Hanie actually made it a game, leading the Bears on two touchdown drives in the fourth quarter.

A CUT BELOW:

Cutler left with a knee injury early in the third quarter. The Bears struggled without him, turning first to former Michigan QB Todd Collins, who lasted two possessions before Hanie, a 2008 undrafted free agent out of Colorado State, came in. The Packers were surprised Cutler didn't return.

"You know if he doesn't come back it had to be serious, not to come back and play in this game," Charles Woodson said.

B.J. AND THE BEAR(S):

Hanie and Co. had a chance to tie the game after the Bears' defense finally got a few stops, but the quarterback threw a ball straight to Packers defensive lineman B.J. Raji, who lumbered 18 yards into the end zone to give the Packers a 21-7 lead.

OVERHEARD:

"You have to give credit to our defense. I didn't play my best game," Rodgers said.



Packers QB Aaron Rodgers runs for 25 yards during the second quarter. He rushed for 39 yards and one TD.

Road warriors

With their win Sunday, the Packers became just the fourth NFL team since 1940 to win three road playoff games in a single season (the Jets, if they won Sunday, would be the fifth). The list:

YEAR	TM	SB W/L
1985	N.E.	L, 46-10
2005	PIT	W, 21-10
2007	NYG	W, 17-14
2010	G.B.	W, 21-14

Football bonanza

More coverage of the NFC and AFC Championship games. 6B

The AFC

WHAT HAPPENED: The Steelers silenced Rex Ryan's wild bunch with a fumble return for a touchdown and a goal-line stand in the fourth quarter. Pittsburgh was dominant in the first half, jumping out to a 24-3 lead. Rashard Mendenhall had 95 of his 121 yards and a touchdown in the first two quarters. New York scored 19 straight points, which included a safety and a 4-yard touchdown reception by Jericho Cotchery with 3:06 to go in the game. But the Steelers got two first downs to chew up the rest of the time remaining.

MISCUE:

The Jets had only one turnover, but it was costly. With 1:13 left in the first half, quarterback Mark Sanchez was sacked by Ike Taylor, who also forced a fumble. William Gay scooped up the ball and ran 19 yards for the touchdown.

LIKE CLOCKWORK:

Big Ben Roethlisberger wasn't at his best, but he saved his best pass for last. He finished 10 of 19 for 133 yards and two interceptions, though his mobility did give the Jets trouble.

Late in the fourth, he rolled right and hit Antonio Brown for a 14-yard gain with less than 2 minutes left to seal the win.

FAMILIAR TERRITORY:

The Steelers advanced to their eighth Super Bowl, tying the mark set by the Cowboys, the team hosting this year's big game.

OVERHEARD:

"We knew we were going to have a chance to run the ball well," Mendenhall said.

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