



BIG GAME Preview

The Rams Go Marching In

In a nail-biting, overtime victory, the Los Angeles Rams punched their ticket to Super Bowl LIII. While Jared Goff and company didn't lead the NFC Championship game until the clock ticked zero, they defeated the Saints after an incredible 57-yard field goal from kicker Greg Zuerlein.

The Championship game in New Orleans set the stage for a rematch from Nov. 4, 2018. In the previous matchup, the Saints handed the Rams their first loss of the season with a 45-35 victory. The Los Angeles Rams would go on to complete the regular season with only three losses.

They now aim to bring a Super Bowl trophy back to L.A. for the first time since the Raiders won it all in 1984.

LITTLE WORRY

While most of the sports nation feared the Rams had burned out with two late-season losses, the team adamantly studied their opponents and made a successful playoff push.

After closing out the regular season with dominant victories over the Cardinals and 49ers, the Rams would obtain their first playoff win since 2004 against the Dallas Cowboys.

Their hard-fought victory over the Saints proves their offense, defense and special teams can show up when everything is on the line.

BIG MOVES

The Los Angeles Rams relied on several key additions to win the crown of NFC Champions. Here are a few of the key additions and



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Jared Goff

free-agency moves that paid off.

Brandin Cooks: The Rams acquired Cooks from the New England Patriots and instantly added a downfield threat to their stellar offense. He ended the 2018 regular season as

14th for most receiving yards at 1,204.

Ndamukong Suh: The oversized defensive lineman added a new level of terror for opposing offenses. Teaming up with powerhouse Aaron Donald has proven to be a

successful mixture of distraction and yard-stopping tackles. His regular season stats include 36 solo tackles.

C.J. Anderson: While star-running back Todd Gurley was dealing with a knee injury, the Rams signed

the veteran Anderson on Dec. 18. After unsuccessful stints with both the Panthers and Raiders this year, Anderson became a key contributor to the Rams offense, creating an interesting depth alongside Gurley.

Superstars of the Rams

While every NFL team relies on their entire staff to pull their weight over the course of a successful season, not all players are made equally. The Los Angeles Rams were dominant this season thanks to superstars with special sets of skills on each side of the ball.

The intense combination of a high-energy offense and efficient defense led the Rams to be the only team this season to sweep their division. In fact, this is the first time the team has accomplished this feat since 1999.

The well-rounded team will be challenging to defeat. Here are a few of their key players to keep an eye on during the big game.

JARED GOFF

The man behind center was the first overall pick by the Los Angeles Rams in the 2016 NFL Draft. He wouldn't be the starting QB until week 10 against the Miami Dolphins. While he didn't get the win during his debut, his role as starter was established.

In 2017, Goff led the L.A. Rams to a playoff run but fell short to the Atlanta Falcons. This year, he finished the regular season fourth overall with 4,688 passing yards and an impressive 32 touchdowns.

TODD GURLEY

Gurley entered his professional football career with the Rams as the 10th overall pick in the 2015 NFL Draft. He was awarded the Offensive Rookie of the Year by the Associated Press, and later, the 2017 NFL Offensive Player of the Year.

While a knee injury would stop him from participating in the final two games of the regular season, he still managed over 1,200 yards and 17 touchdowns.

AARON DONALD

Donald acquired the richest defensive deal in NFL history when the Rams signed him to a six-year contract extension, amounting to \$135 million.

He was a first-round draft pick in 2014 and, according to ESPN, is a three-time All Pro, four-time Pro Bowl Selection and Defensive Rookie of the Year.

This year, his contributions to the Super Bowl path included 59 solo tackles and 20.5 sacks.



MARIO957 AT ENGLISH WIKIPEDIA/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Todd Gurley

McVay vs. Belichick

The Super Bowl coaching matchup will be the veteran vs. new blood. Sean McVay became the youngest coach in the modern NFL era in 2017 at the age of 30. Bill Belichick has already built an illustrious career including five Super Bowl wins and eight appearances.

Will experience influence the outcome, or will the desire of a young coach trying to prove himself be the difference maker? Take a look at how each of these team leaders moved his way up the ranks and led his team to the big game.

SEAN MCVAY

Only 10 years before McVay would take on his first NFL team, he played as a wide receiver at the Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He was awarded the Miami's Scholar-Athlete Award in 2007.

His first role on a professional football team was as a wide-receiver coach with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 2008. He would take on a different set of skills when he coached the tight ends of the Washington Redskins from 2011 to 2013.

In 2014, McVay took over as the Redskins' offensive coordinator, under Jay Gruden. He quickly focused on turning a lackluster offense around and ranked third best in the league in passing by 2016.

The Los Angeles Rams hired the coach to lead their team in

2017 after a miserable 4-12 season from his predecessor, Jeff Fisher. In his rookie season, the Rams won the NFC West and finished 11-5, but ultimately lost 26-13 to the Atlanta Falcons.

The 2018 season found the Rams dominating the league early by beginning the season at 8-0, before losing to the New Orleans Saints. He would eventually lead the team to 13-3 and will be contending in the franchise's fourth Super Bowl appearance.

BILL BELICHICK

Belichick's impressive coaching career began in 1975, when he landed a job with the Baltimore Colts. He would later become the head coach of the Cleveland Browns in the early 90's before eventually calling New England home since 2000.

When accomplished quarterback Drew Bledsoe was injured in 2000, Belichick put his faith in a young Tom Brady. Under his coaching guidance, the team would win the Super Bowl in 2001.

The QB-coach duo will be entering its ninth Super Bowl in February.



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Bill Belichick



KEITH ALLISON/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Sean McVay

The Battle Under Center

The stage is set for Super Bowl LIII in Atlanta. After a historical night in which both conference championships went into overtime for the first time in NFL history, the Los Angeles Rams will face off against the New England Patriots.

The Rams will be faced with unfamiliarity with a game of this magnitude, while the Patriots will go into the game with experience. With both teams featuring explosive offenses, it will be up to the defense to maintain the quarterbacks under center.

Here's a look at how the two competitors led their teams to Super Bowl LXIII.

BRADY DOES IT AGAIN

Tom Brady is no stranger to late-fourth quarter comebacks in big games. In the Conference Championship game, he found his team trailing to the Kansas City Chiefs with just under two minutes left.

After strategically picking apart the defense with short completions, the Patriots would ultimately score and lead the game 31-28. In an incredible turn of events, the Chiefs were able to tie the game with a field goal in under a minute.

Going into overtime, the 41-year-old quarterback received the ball and steadily sent his team downfield, eventually scoring a game-winning touchdown with the efforts of his running back.

Brady's ability to find open receivers and his time-management skills make it impossible to count him out.

After two embarrassing losses

early in the season, critics and fans had already begun dismissing the Patriots as Super Bowl contenders. However, after a steady stream of impressive wins, Brady and company clinched their 10th straight AFC East division title and will find themselves on the grandest stage on Feb. 3.

Tom Brady finished the regular season with 4,355 yards and 29 touchdowns.

JARED GOFF'S FIRST SUPER BOWL

Goff gained the reigns of the Los Angeles Rams in 2016 and quickly led his team to a playoff run in 2017 before winning the conference championship this year.

It will be interesting to see how the pressures of the big game and experience of the opposing quarterback will affect his performance.

In the NFC Conference game, the Rams didn't lead the Saints until the game-winning field goal in overtime.

However, Goff had an impressive night under the lights of national television with 297 yards and a passer rating of 83.0. The quarterback and coach combination for both teams should be widely acknowledged as each team featured seasoned veterans or first-time contenders.



JEFFREY BEALL/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Tom Brady



JEFFREY BEALL/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Jared Goff



Running Back Matchups

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Both the Rams and Patriots have extensive weapons when it comes to passing. Tom Brady and Jared Goff relied on an impressive stable of receivers to reach Super Bowl LIII.

The Patriots added depth to their stellar offense when choosing Sony Michel as the 31st overall pick in the 2018 NFL Draft. The Rams also have a balanced running game thanks to Pro-Bowler Todd Gurley and the recent acquisition of C.J. Anderson.

While the competing quarterback's arms may get much of the glory, don't count out the importance of the impressive stable of running backs.

SONY MICHEL

Michel's first season as a professional was limited after suffering a knee injury in training camp. In addition to missing the entire pre-season, he wasn't cleared for action until Week 2, when the Patriots were upset by the Jacksonville Jaguars.

Two weeks later, the running back would become the first rookie RB for the patriots to top 100 yards on the ground. Then, during the regular season match-up against the Kansas City Chiefs, he would add two-rush-

ing touchdowns to the high-scoring 43-40 victory.

His role in the post-season was just as impressive as he would rush for 129 yards and score three touchdowns against the Los Angeles Chargers in the Divisional Playoff game. In the AFC Championship game, he was able to put up 113 yards and two touchdowns against Kansas City's defense.

He should have a good matchup against the Los Angeles Rams, who were ranked 23rd for their rushing defense.

GURLEY AND ANDERSON: A PACKAGE DEAL

Todd Gurley had an impressive outing in the regular season, racking

up over 1,200 yards. A nagging injury caused him to miss the last-two games of the year and seemed to limit him in the victory over the Saints in the NFC Conference competition, where he only rushed for 10 yards on four attempts.

In late December, the Rams acquired C.J. Anderson to provide insurance while Gurley healed. In the Divisional Championship game, he achieved 123 yards and two touchdowns.

His performance against the Saints was limited to 44 yards while never making it in the endzone.

The Rams will be faced with creating a strategy to employ both running backs to keep up with Brady's high-octane offense.



JEFFREY BEALL/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS
Rob Gronkowski



JEFFREY BEALL/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS
Rex Burkhead

3rd Straight Patriots Showing

After a stunning overtime victory, the New England Patriots have clinched their spot in Super Bowl LIII.

In a fourth quarter that featured four lead changes, the Kansas City Chiefs were eliminated after an amazing technical showcase from Brady and friends.

Rex Burkhead is credited with rushing for the game-winning touchdown from the goal line. However, the Patriots had plenty of help from stars like Rob Gronkowski and Julian Edelman, who managed to be open for big third-down plays.

The Patriots will be heading to their 11th Super Bowl in franchise history, nine of which were achieved since 2001, when Brady took over as the team's quarterback.

BRADY DOES IT AGAIN

The Kansas City Chiefs took a four-point lead in the fourth quarter of the AFC Championship Game, giving Brady just over two minutes left on the clock. The Patriots quickly stormed down the field with precision passing and strategic rushing to wind down the time.

With only 39 seconds left, Brady put the ball in Rex Burkhead's hand and took a lead of three.

The Chiefs would tie it with a 39-yard

field goal, sending the second championship game of the weekend into overtime.

After winning the coin toss, the 41-year-old quarterback quickly led his team to a game-winning touchdown. Brady's meticulous leadership during tense moments has earned him the title of number two QB in fourth-quarter comebacks, only behind Peyton Manning.

IS GRONK BACK?

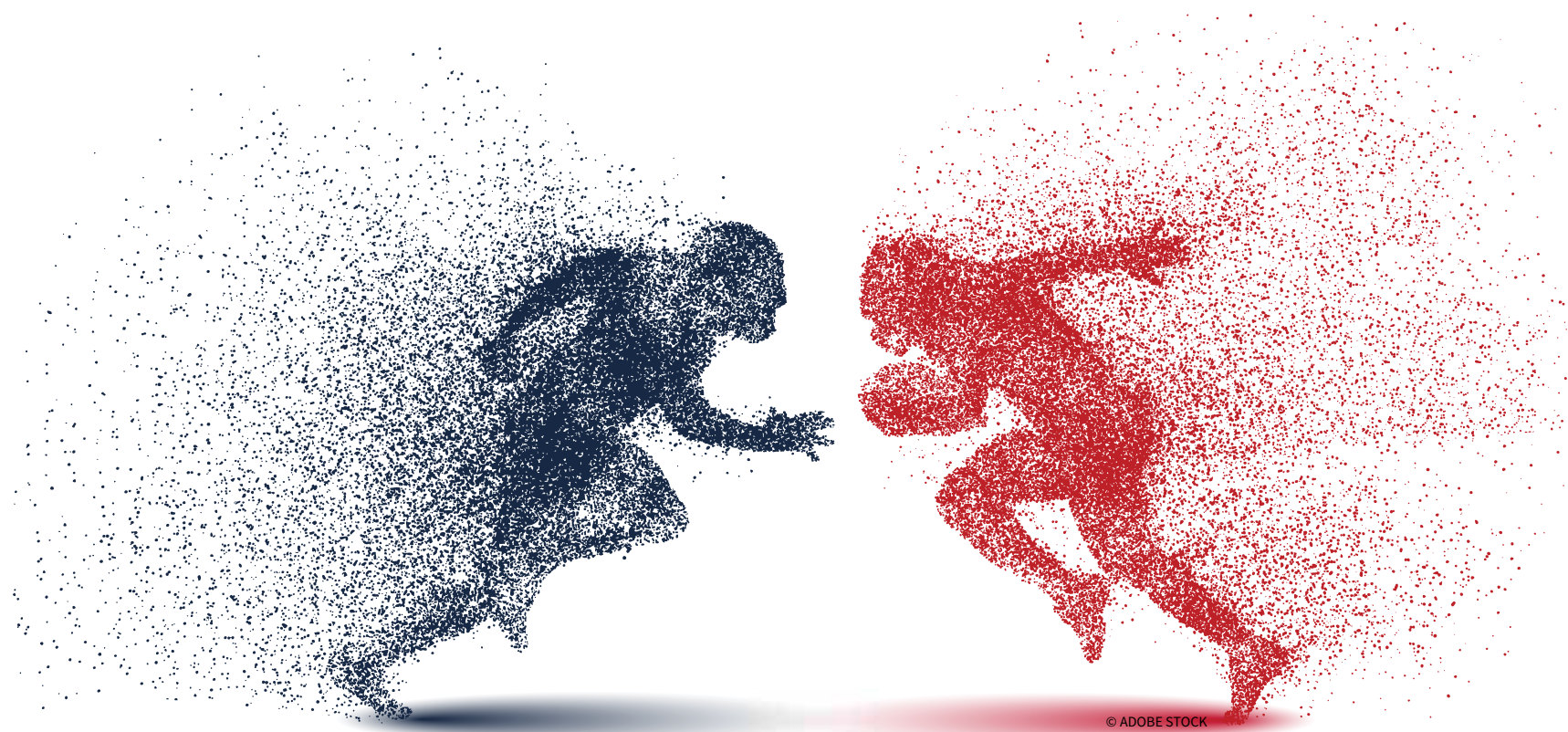
Rob Gronkowski had a mediocre season at best. He only received for 682 yards while scoring three touchdowns. To put this year's statistics in perspective, consider his performance in 2015 — 1,176 yards and 11 touchdowns.

While his season was lackluster, his presence counted when it was needed most during the AFC Championship game. Brady found him open on more than one play, leading to 79 yards. His size and agility make him a serious problem for contenders. If he is healthy on Feb. 3, look for Gronk to make significant plays to propel his team.

BILL BELICHICK

The mastermind behind the New England Patriot's continuous winning seasons will have a matchup with a young coach in Sean McVay.

It will be interesting to see how the coach strategizes against a youthful Rams team that knows how to put up big numbers against their opponents.



The Matchup

Both the New England Patriots and Los Angeles Rams fought difficult battles during their Divisional Championship games. While the Rams' game featured a potentially controversial missed call for pass interference, the team earned its way into Super Bowl LIII.

The Rams' impressive 8-0 beginning into the season showcased their adversity on the field in both offense and defense. It was special teams who really shined during the NFC Championship game after a fake punt led to a first down and a booming 57-yard field goal clinched the win in overtime.

The Patriots struggled early in the season with a few losses that embarrassed them and led many to believe their reign as a dominant force in the NFL was threatened. It didn't take long for the team to pull together and beat out enough of the competition to secure a playoff berth and a first-

round bye.

Now that the stage is set for Atlanta, here are a few exciting factors that the teams must overcome to hoist the trophy.

EXPERIENCE

The New England Patriots are well-versed in the Super Bowl experience, while most of the forces behind the Rams will be making their first visit.

There are vast differences in age and football experience between both quarterbacks and coaches. It should give an interesting edge to how each team calls plays and executes.

One person the Rams can look to

for guidance is their knowledgeable defensive coordinator, Wade Phillips. He was a contributor to the Broncos' victory in Super Bowl L.

DEFENSE

The Rams have a powerful entity on their defensive line in Aaron Donald and Ndamukong Suh. The Patriots line will have trouble keeping them contained to give Brady enough time to execute the precision passing he is known for.

On the other side, New England found a way to put pressure on Patrick Mahone during its championship competition, ultimately sacking

him four times.

KICKER

Big games sometimes come down to the leg of a kicker. This year, the season was plagued with missed opportunities, like Cody Parkey from the Chicago Bears and the now infamous, "Double Doink" kick that eliminated them from playoff contention.

The Rams' Greg Zuerlein proved himself to be efficient under pressure by knocking in a 57-yard winner. New England's Stephen Gostkowski has been with the Patriots since 2006 and proved to be valuable under pressure.