

SPORTS

Saints snap three-season play drought

Panthers, Rams and Chiefs clinch post-season berths

NEW ORLEANS, Dec 25, (AP): Rookie cornerback Marshon Lattimore corralled an unusual, momentum-turning interception off his back, New Orleans made two defensive stands from inside its 2-yard line, and the Saints clinched their first playoff berth since 2013 with a 23-13 victory over the rival Atlanta Falcons.

Ted Ginn caught a 54-yard pass for a touchdown, which came a few plays after Lattimore's interception and shortly before halftime. Mark Ingram used a sharp cutback to break loose for a 26-yard touchdown for New Orleans (11-4), which kept its tenuous hold on



Lattimore

first place in the NFC South heading into the final week of the season.

While the loss eliminated the Falcons (9-6) from the NFC South race, Atlanta can clinch a wild-card berth by beating Carolina in the final regular-season game on New Year's Eve.

The Falcons entered the game with a second straight division crown in their grasp, but they needed to beat the Saints. They squandered chances spectacularly, much to the delight of a deafening Superdome crowd and certainly to the chagrin of scattered fans wearing Falcons red. The Falcons were taunted on their way to the game by a plane towing a banner that read "28-3 Merry Xmas," a reference to Atlanta's Super Bowl collapse.

Atlanta trailed 6-0 when Lattimore's interception of Matt Ryan set the Saints up to double their lead.

But early in the third quarter, Atlanta linebacker Deion Jones intercepted a pass that deflected off of Ginn's hands and returned it 41 yards to the New Orleans 2. Devonta Freeman fumbled on a hit by Tyler Davison two plays later and linebacker Manti Teo recovered.

FOOTBALL

Drew Brees completed 21 of 28 passes for 239 yards. Brees became the third quarterback in NFL history to eclipse 70,000 career yards passing, joining Peyton Manning and Brett Favre.

Ryan was 22 of 36 for 288 yards. He was sacked five times, twice by Cameron Jordan.

Panthers 22, Buccaneers 19

In Charlotte, NC, Cam Newton scored on a 2-yard run with 35 seconds remaining to lift the Panthers into the NFC playoffs.

The Panthers (11-4) trailed most of the second half, but Newton drove them 59 yards, completing 4 of 7 passes for 52 yards in the final three minutes before scoring on a what could have been a game-ending play. Newton fumbled the snap from the shotgun, alertly picked it up and then dived across the goal line for the go-ahead score.

Newton celebrated the score by using the football as a prop, pretending to light a candle on a cake in celebration of his son Chosen's 2nd birthday.

Carolina can clinch the NFC South championship with a win over Atlanta and a New Orleans loss to Tampa Bay.

The Panthers sealed the game when Kawann Short sacked Jameis Winston on Tampa Bay's final drive, and forced a fumble that Julius Peppers recovered. Winston threw for 367 yards and a touchdown but was sacked six times and fumbled three times. The Bucs are 4-11.

Seahawks 21, Cowboys 12

In Arlington, Texas, Justin Coleman put Seattle in front for good with a 30-yard interception return for a touchdown and the Seahawks won a playoff elimination game against Dallas, beating the Cowboys in Ezekiel Elliott's return from a six-game suspension.

Dak Prescott threw two interceptions and the Dallas offense didn't score a touchdown despite the reunion with his backfield mate, the one he shared a remarkable rookie season with a year ago when Cowboys had an NFC-best 13 wins.

Now Dallas (8-7) is eliminated from the postseason with the end of its three-game winning streak, and the Seahawks (9-6) still have a chance to keep their five-year playoff streak alive after Russell Wilson threw for two touchdowns despite a career-low 93 yards passing.

Coleman gave Seattle a 14-9 lead in the third quarter when he reached down to catch Prescott's badly overthrown pass to Elliott and ran untouched 30 yards for a touchdown.

It was the fourth pick-six of the season for Prescott, who threw just four interceptions last season when he was the NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year. He has 13 interceptions for the season.

Rams 27, Titans 23

In Nashville, Tenn., Jared Goff threw a 14-yard touchdown pass to Cooper Kupp in the fourth quarter and the Rams held off Tennessee to clinch their first NFC West title since 2003.

The Rams (11-4) came in needing a win or a loss by Seattle to secure the division. They took care of business



Los Angeles Rams tight end Tyler Higbee (89) makes a diving catch while covered by Tennessee Titans linebacker Jayon Brown (55) during an NFL football game on Dec 24, in Nashville, Tenn. (AP)

NFL Results/Standings

WASHINGTON, Dec 25, (RTRS): Results and standings from the NFL games on Sunday.

Seattle	21	Dallas	12	Chicago	20	Cleveland	3
Arizona	23	NY Giants	0	Carolina	22	Tampa Bay	19
San Francisco	44	Jacksonville	33	New Orleans	23	Atlanta	13
Cincinnati	26	Detroit	17	Washington	27	Denver	11
Kansas City	29	Miami	13	LA Rams	27	Tennessee	23
New England	37	Buffalo	16	LA Chargers	14	NY Jets	7

American Football Conference

AFC East							
	W	L	T	OTL	PF	PA	PCT
y New England	12	3	0	0	432	290	.800
Buffalo	8	7	0	0	280	343	.533
Miami	6	9	0	0	265	371	.400
NY Jets	5	10	0	0	292	356	.333

AFC North							
	W	L	T	OTL	PF	PA	PCT
y Pittsburgh	11	3	0	1	344	278	.786
Baltimore	9	6	0	1	368	272	.600
Cincinnati	6	9	0	1	259	322	.400
Cleveland	0	15	0	2	210	382	0

AFC South							
	W	L	T	OTL	PF	PA	PCT
y Jacksonville	10	5	0	1	407	253	.667
Tennessee	8	7	0	0	319	346	.533
Houston	4	10	0	0	319	380	.286
Indianapolis	3	12	0	2	241	391	.200

AFC West							
	W	L	T	OTL	PF	PA	PCT
Kansas City	9	6	0	1	388	315	.600
LA Chargers	8	7	0	1	325	262	.600
Oakland	6	8	0	0	281	324	.429
Denver	5	10	0	0	265	355	.333

Note: 'y' denotes division winners, 'x' denotes playoff berth and 'z' denotes first-round bye.

National Football Conference

NFC East							
	W	L	T	OTL	PF	PA	PCT
z Philadelphia	12	2	0	0	438	279	.857
Dallas	8	7	0	0	348	332	.533
Washington	7	8	0	1	332	370	.467
NY Giants	2	13	0	0	228	378	.133

NFC North							
	W	L	T	OTL	PF	PA	PCT
y Minnesota	12	3	0	0	359	242	.800
Detroit	8	7	0	0	375	365	.533
Green Bay	7	8	0	0	309	349	.467
Chicago	5	10	0	0	254	297	.333

NFC South							
	W	L	T	OTL	PF	PA	PCT
x New Orleans	11	4	0	0	424	295	.733
x Carolina	11	4	0	0	353	305	.733
Atlanta	9	6	0	0	331	305	.600
Tampa Bay	4	11	0	1	304	358	.267

NFC West							
	W	L	T	OTL	PF	PA	PCT
y LA Rams	11	4	0	0	465	295	.733
Seattle	9	6	0	0	342	306	.600
Arizona	7	8	0	0	269	337	.467
San Francisco	5	10	0	2	297	370	.333

themselves, with Todd Gurley and Goff leading the way again.

Gurley bolstered his argument for NFL MVP with 118 yards rushing and 158 yards receiving with two TDs. Goff finished with four touchdowns and 301 yards passing.

The Titans (8-7) lost their third straight game, damaging their chances of ending their own playoff drought stretching to 2008.

The Titans had the ball and a chance to win late in the game. On fourth-and-4 at the Rams 44, Marcus Mariota rolled right and chucked the ball incomplete under pressure from Connor Barwin.

Chiefs 29, Dolphins 13

In Kansas City, Mo., Alex Smith threw for 304 yards and a touchdown, Kareem Hunt ran for 91 yards and a score and the Chiefs clinched back-to-back AFC West titles for the first time in franchise history.

Tyreek Hill had six catches for 109 yards, and Harrison Butker converted five field goals, as the Chiefs (9-6) dashed what faint postseason hope the Dolphins (6-9) still harbored.

Jay Cutler threw for 286 yards and a touchdown, but a chunk of that came on a 65-yard toss to Jakeem Grant late in the first half. Otherwise, Miami struggled against a defense that has been stingy and opportunistic the past two weeks.

That's coincided with the return of Marcus Peters from his disciplinary

suspension.

The Chiefs' star cornerback had two interceptions and forced a fumble against the Chargers last week, a win that pushed them to the brink of the playoffs. He recovered a fumble and forced another on Sunday, giving Peters a hand in five turnovers the past two weeks.

Patriots 37, Bills 16

In Foxborough, Mass., Tom Brady passed for a pair of touchdowns and the Patriots stayed on track to claim home-field advantage throughout the AFC playoffs.

Dion Lewis caught a touchdown pass and rushed for a 4-yard score. He carried 24 times for a career-high 129 yards. It was just his second-career 100-yard game. Mike Gillislee, active for the first time in six games, added a 1-yard rushing touchdown.

New England (12-3) can lock up first-round bye with either a Pittsburgh or Jacksonville loss.

Even with the loss, the Bills (8-7) remain in contention to break their 17-year playoff drought. It is longest active streak in North America's four major professional sports. It is the longest postseason absence since NFL merger in 1970.

New England has won at least 12 games in eight straight seasons an NFL record.

Buffalo stayed close throughout and went into halftime locked in a 13-13 tie. But the Bills managed just three

points in the final 30 minutes, after a touchdown at the end of the first half was taken away.

Trailing 13-10, Buffalo was in position to take the lead, but an apparent 4-yard touchdown pass from Tyrod Taylor to Kelvin Benjamin in the corner of the end zone was overturned after an official review.

NFL vice president of officiating Al Riveron said in a Twitter post Benjamin was juggling the ball and was only able to get one of his feet down before completing the catch.

Chargers 14, Jets 7

In East Rutherford, NJ, Philip Rivers threw a touchdown pass to Antonio Gates and Melvin Gordon ran for a score, and the Chargers stayed alive in the AFC playoff race.

The Chargers (8-7) entered the weekend needing to win both of their remaining games including next Sunday at home against Oakland and get lots of help elsewhere to remain in the mix. Rivers & Co. held up their end of things, but barely.

Los Angeles, which started the season 0-4, had a tough time getting much going against a spirited effort by the defense of the Jets (5-10). Rivers finished 22 of 40 for 290 yards.

Gordon had 81 yards on 19 carries, but left late in the game with an ankle injury. He remained standing on the sideline as the Chargers tried to run out the clock.

Bryce Petty, making his second start



Arizona Cardinals wide receiver Larry Fitzgerald (11) can't make the catch as New York Giants defensive back Darryl Morris defends during the first half of an NFL football game, on Dec 24, in Glendale, Ariz. (AP)



New England Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski (left), runs from Buffalo Bills safety Micah Hyde (23) after catching a pass during the second half of an NFL football game, on Dec 24, in Foxborough, Mass. (AP)

this season in place of the injured Josh McCown, struggled all game. He missed open receivers and repeatedly flexed his right hand, which he banged up early in the game. But he remained in, going 15 of 28 for 119 yards and an interception.

Bilal Powell was the bright spot for the Jets' offense, rushing for 145 yards, including a 57-yard TD, on 19 carries.

Bengals 26, Lions 17

In Cincinnati, Giovani Bernard ran for 116 yards and a clinching touchdown in the closing minutes that eliminated the Lions from playoff contention and gave Marvin Lewis a good moment in what was possibly his final

home game as Bengals coach.

Matthew Stafford and the Lions (8-7) couldn't take advantage of an injury-depleted team that gave indifferent performances the last two games. It was a fitting finish for Detroit, which opened the season 3-4 and repeatedly wasted chances to move to the forefront of the playoff chase.

Tion Green's 5-yard touchdown drive put the Lions ahead 17-16 early in the fourth quarter, but defensive penalties extended Cincinnati's drive that led to Randy Bullock's go-ahead kick with 4:42 left.

Given one last chance, Detroit self-destructed with a holding penalty, a false start and a short punt, allowing the Bengals (6-9) to finish it off in front of a half-empty stadium.

Bears 20, Browns 3

In Chicago, the Browns got pushed to the brink of a winless season, hurt by two more interceptions by DeShone Kizer and two turnovers in the red zone against Chicago.

One more loss and the Browns will join the 2008 Detroit Lions as the only teams to go 0-16. Last year, Cleveland was 0-14 before getting its only victory on Dec 24.

And the Browns will wrap up the season at AFC North leader Pittsburgh next week. Then again, the Browns (0-15) keep racking up losses no matter whom they're playing.

They're 1-30 in two seasons under coach Hue Jackson.

Rookie QB Kizer threw for 182 yards and ran his league leading-interception total to 21. One of those was to a wide-open Kyle Fuller in the end zone in the second quarter.

Defensive end Myles Garrett had what looked like a 42-yard interception return for a touchdown early in the third quarter wiped out because Carl Nassib was offside.

Rashard Higgins lost a fumble near the goal line that Chicago (5-10) recovered in the end zone.

49ers 44, Jaguars 33

In Santa Clara, Calif., Jimmy Garoppolo threw two touchdown passes and ran for a third score against one of the NFL's stingiest defenses and the 49ers won their fourth straight behind their new quarterback, beating the Jaguars.

The day wasn't a total loss for the Jaguars (10-5), who clinched their first division title since 1999 earlier in the afternoon when Tennessee lost at home to the Rams. But the defeat dealt a big blow to Jacksonville's hopes for a first-round bye. The Jaguars need to win next week and hope Pittsburgh loses twice to get a bye.

The 49ers (5-10) saw their playoff hopes die a long time ago during an 0-9 start but the mood and play around the team changed dramatically after Garoppolo was inserted into the starting lineup earlier this month following a midseason trade from New England.

He has led San Francisco to four straight wins but this one might have been the most impressive, considering the quality of Jacksonville's defense. The Jaguars came into the game having allowed the fewest points and yards passing in the league, while recording the most sacks.

Cardinals 23, Giants 0

In Glendale, Ariz., Larry Fitzgerald had a big day in what might have been the final home game of his prolific career and the Cardinals shut out an opponent for the first time in 25 seasons in a victory over Eli Manning and the Giants. Fitzgerald, an 11-time Pro Bowl selection in his 14 NFL seasons, caught nine passes for 119 yards and a touchdown. He even completed a pass for the first time (in three career tries), a 21-yarder to Jaron Brown.

Manning, on the other hand, could not get the offense moving for the Giants (2-13) and got no help on the ground. The 36-year-old quarterback completed 27 of 45 passes for 263 yards and was intercepted twice, both by Antoine Bethea. Manning also had the ball stripped by Deone Bucannon and returned 21 yards for a touchdown by Robert Nkemdiche.

Redskins 27, Broncos 11

In Landover, Md., Kirk Cousins threw for 299 yards and three touchdowns in what could be his final home game for the Redskins.

Cousins was 19 of 37 with TD passes to Jamison Crowder, Josh Doctson and Vernon Davis and an interception. He became the first quarterback in Washington history with three seasons of 25 or more TD passes, and needs 65 yards for his third in a row with 4,000-plus yards.

Washington's 386 offensive yards are third most by a Denver opponent this season, behind only Philadelphia and New England. The Broncos came in giving up an average of 276.8 yards a game.



San Francisco 49ers running back Carlos Hyde (28) celebrates with fans after scoring a touchdown against the Jacksonville Jaguars during the second half of an NFL football game in Santa Clara, Calif., on Dec 24. (AP)

League reveals concussion protocol changes

NEW YORK, Dec 25, (AFP): Several changes to the NFL concussion safety protocol, including an unaffiliated neurotrauma consultant at the league command center for all games, were revealed Sunday by league officials.

The adjustments, backed by the NFL and its players union, were agreed upon December 11 by the NFL head, neck and spine committee and implemented last weekend.

"We are constantly looking at the protocol and how it's applied and trying to get better. The process happens throughout the season," said NFL chief medical officer Allen Sills.

A December 10 incident involving Houston quarterback Tom Savage and another last month involving Seattle's Russell Wilson are among the controversies that helped motivate the late-season changes.

The consultant at the command center will monitor games by broadcast coverage and assist in implementing protocol, including contacting team medical staffs on the sidelines to ensure they are aware of situations as they

develop.

An extra neurotrauma consultant will be at all NFL playoff games and next February's Super Bowl in Minnesota so that one will be available even if another is occupied with a previously injured player.

Among other changes, an impact seizure will be treated as a loss of consciousness and force removal of a player from a game.

A player who stumbles or falls to the ground trying to stand, unrelated to an orthopedic injury, will be sent directly to the locker room for examination. If a player passes the exam, he could be allowed to return to the game.

Injured players are to be taken directly to a medical team member for a concussion assessment.

All players who undergo any concussion evaluation in games will have a follow-up evaluation conducted the next day by a member of the medical staff.

Entering Sunday, there have been 540 game day concussion evaluations conducted this season with two reviews.