

New Orleans prep rookie Book for maiden start

Dolphins, Saints weathered skids on way to high-stakes clash

NEW ORLEANS, Dec 25, (AP): Perseverance has paid dividends for the Miami Dolphins and New Orleans Saints, placing them on a collision course for a high-stakes game in late December.

The outlook for the Dolphins (7-7) and Saints (7-7) looked bleak while each were mired in extended losing streaks. Now both are on the fringe of their respective conference playoff races when they meet in the Superdome on Monday night.

But the challenges keep coming - on and off the field.

Saints starting quarterback Taysom Hill and backup Trevor Siemian were among at least 15 New Orleans players testing positive for COVID-19 this week, leaving their availability in doubt while the Saints prepared rookie Ian Book for a maiden start.

"It's been a wild week," said Book, a fourth-round draft choice out of Notre Dame. "I didn't expect things to happen like this, but with COVID, you never know."

It's just the latest hurdle for the Saints, who began their first season since Drew Brees' retirement displaced from New Orleans for nearly a month after Hurricane Ida struck Louisiana in late August.

The Saints' home opener was moved to Jacksonville, Florida, where Jameis Winston won his first game as Brees' successor over Green Bay. New Orleans started 5-2, only to lose Winston to a season-ending knee injury during a Week 8 win.

The Saints then started Trevor Siemian for four games - all losses - before giving Hill the nod.

The losing streak grew to five before Hill won his past two starts, including last week at Tampa Bay with both of his starting offensive tackles out with injuries and with coach Sean Payton not making the trip because of COVID-19 protocols.

The identity of a team kind of forms as a season goes on," said Saints offensive lineman James Hurst, who has been thrust into a starting role because of injuries. "You might play a tough stretch of games where it's one-score loss after one-score loss, having dumb mistakes that you know you can't make, but then realizing what you are and how you're going to win games. Getting that formula down pat and finding ways to win games is all that matters."

Miami was 1-7 and seemingly going nowhere under third-year coach Brian Flores after losing seven straight. Now the Dolphins are trying to become the first NFL team to win seven straight after losing that many in a row.

For Miami linebacker Jerome Baker, the turnaround stemmed from the team's growing trust in Flores. "We trust 'Flo' with everything," Baker said. "We believe what he is

said. "Many of their yards are their catch-and-run yards, (and) many of their rushing yards are yards after contact. Many of their big plays are yards after the catch."

With Joe Bachie joining Logan Wilson and Akeem Davis-Gaither on the injury list, the Bengals are thin at linebacker. Clay Johnson is returning from the COVID-19 list for Sunday's game, and Keanre Jones was brought up from the practice squad. Germaine Pratt and Markus Bailey, who also has been slowed by an injury, will start.

"We've got some guys at that position to hold down the fort for us," Taylor said.

Jackson missed more practice time this week. Huntley did a good job filling in, throwing for two in last Sunday's 31-30 loss to Green Bay.

"The biggest thing is that you'd never know that he's a backup QB," guard Kevin Zeitler said. "He owns the huddle. He's smart, he's calm, he's cool. He doesn't let anything rattle him."

Bengals running back Joe Mixon has eclipsed 1,000 yards for the season, but he'll find it tough going against the Ravens' run defense, which is tops in the NFL. He ran 17 times for 58 yards against the Broncos and hasn't had a 100-yard game since Nov. 28. He suffered a minor ankle sprain last week.

"I don't think there's a better running back in the league than him," Harbaugh said. "He runs hard. He's powerful. He has great lateral quickness (and) body control."

That's just the top of a long list of Ravens who are hurt or unavailable because of COVID-19 protocols.

Baltimore has lost three in a row by a total of four points, including their failure to make 2-point conversions that could have won games against Pittsburgh and Green Bay.

Last Sunday, the Ravens went for 2 with 42 seconds left, and backup quarterback Tyler Huntley's pass was incomplete. They lost to the Packers 31-30.

"Across the board - defense, offense, everything - this team has been through a ton," tight end Mark Andrews said.

"You look at the guys who are not playing and then the guys that are stepping up - that's a positive

thing," he said. "We have a deep team. We have a team that fights. We have a team that never quits. Not many teams have gone through what we've gone through."

Jackson and Huntley (illness) were both listed as questionable for this weekend's game after missing practice Friday. That means veteran Josh Johnson, who joined the Ravens earlier this month, could be pressed into action.

The Bengals haven't managed to string together more than two consecutive wins all year. They halted a two-game skid by grinding out an ugly - but turnover-free - 15-10 vic-

tory over Denver last Sunday. "We've known all along that we were a good football team and had to avoid the critical mistakes," Cincinnati coach Zac Taylor said. "That's what has gotten us lately, and we did that (in the Denver win). It wasn't a sexy game on offense. It was pretty dang sexy on defense and special teams. That was a game we needed to play. Just avoid the critical mistakes, and you're going to find ways to win."

Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow said the team is approaching the important game in the usual way. "I think the best teams and players

have been inactive for all 14 regular-season games of his rookie season out of Notre Dame.

"Before we drafted him, there were a lot of things that we saw on film that we really liked," Carmichael said. "He's smart. He had a very productive college career. He's accurate. He's mobile."

"He's been really sharp in meetings, and we've been impressed with what he's done on the field with the practice squad," Carmichael added.

The COVID-19 absences for the Saints this week included several prominent regulars, including starting linebacker and defensive captain Demario Davis, starting safety Malcolm Jenkins, starting tight end Adam Trautman, starting right tackle Ryan Ramczyk and reserve offensive tackle Jordan Mills.

Payton, however, was able to return to coaching in person Friday after isolating for about a week.

The Dolphins were having better luck. Sixth overall draft choice Jaylen Waddle was re-activated from COVID-19 reserve, and is set to continue his pursuit of an NFL rookie record for catches. He's caught 86 passes this season. Anquan Boldin set the record of 101 in 2003.

While the Saints signed veteran QB Blake Bortles to back up Book, they've also expressed confidence in dynamic running back Alvin Kamara as an emergency backup.

Bengals and depleted Ravens meet in crowded AFC North playoff race

CINCINNATI, Dec 25, (AP): Depleted by injuries and COVID-19 protocols, the Baltimore Ravens have dropped three straight but remain in the thick of the crowded AFC playoff race.

The inconsistent Cincinnati Bengals are tied with the Ravens for the lead in the AFC North, but the potential post-season field is so crowded that a loss will send one of them tumbling back into the pack.

Sunday's game between the rivals, both 8-6, could hardly be more important.

"This game is going to go a long way in terms of determining who wins the division," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said.

Baltimore could be without star quarterback Lamar Jackson, who missed last week's loss to the Packers because of an ankle injury.

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Book



Cincinnati Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow (9) throws under pressure from Denver Broncos defensive end Shelby Harris during the first half of an NFL football game, on Dec. 19, in Denver. (AP)

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Cleveland Browns running back Nick Chubb (24) runs for a first down as Las Vegas Raiders defensive back Keisean Nixon (22) reaches for him during the second half of an NFL football game, on Dec. 20, in Cleveland. (AP)

Packers seek 1st Super Bowl berth

Browns face plenty of uncertainty

GREEN BAY, Wis., Dec 25, (AP): The Cleveland Browns are residing in the AFC North basement, dealing with COVID-19 complications and playing two road games in a span of six days.

Yet they remain in the mix for a second straight playoff berth.

The Browns (7-7) can give their fading postseason hopes a major boost by winning Saturday as they attempt to hand the NFC North champion Green Bay Packers (11-3) their first home loss of the season.

Cleveland is attempting to bounce back from a 16-14 loss to the Las Vegas Raiders that was decided by a field goal on the game's final play.

"We have to go out there, forget what happened, understand the situation to win and understand that we can't have any more mess-ups," Browns defensive tackle Malik Jackson said. "That is it. Just live in that reality."

The Browns were missing coach Kevin Stefanski and about a dozen usual starters - including quarterback Baker Mayfield - who were on the reserve/COVID-19 list for the Raiders game.

Stefanski has since returned. The Browns also expect to have some players back who weren't available for Monday's game, maybe even Mayfield, who might not travel with the team to Wisconsin, but is expected to start.

He remained on the COVID-19 list through Thursday, and Mayfield

hasn't practiced since going on the COVID-19 list Dec. 15. His 10-day quarantine period ends Saturday, and Stefanski said he'll likely start despite not practicing.

"If he's healthy as he's been and he's cleared and ready to go, then I anticipate him playing."

With the late kickoff, the Browns will have a walk-through before the game, which will give Mayfield a chance to go over the game plan and throw after being limited to virtual meetings the past two weeks.

It has been a challenging two weeks for the Browns, who have dealt with numerous obstacles while preparing for one of the NFL's top teams.

"The challenge is facing a really good Packers team," Stefanski said. "You know they have star players. They are very well coached. We have our work cut out for us. Who is available to us and all of those type of things, we will just deal with it day by day."

While the Browns are trying to stay in the playoff picture, the Packers also have plenty at stake in this Christmas

Day contest.

Green Bay already has secured its third straight NFC North title, but is competing for the top seed in the conference playoffs, which would give the Packers a first-round postseason bye. The Packers are seeking their first Super Bowl berth since their 2010 title run after losing in the NFC championship game each of the last two years.

The Arizona Cardinals, Dallas Cowboys and Tampa Bay Buccaneers are

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all one game behind Green Bay in the conference standings.

"We can't take these next three opponents lightly because we still have a lot left out there for us," Packers wide receiver Allen Lazard said.

"Yes, we've had success. Yes, we've won division titles. We've gone to the NFC championship the past two years, but ultimately when the season's over with, we didn't reach our goal."

Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers' next touchdown pass will be his 443rd, which would overtake Hall of Famer Brett Favre for the franchise lead. Favre threw 508 touchdown passes, but that total includes 22 with the New York Jets in 2008 and 44 for the Minnesota Vikings from 2009-10.

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