

Brady dominates in Pats' season-opening win

BY FRANK PINGUE
REUTERS

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — Tom Brady moved past a stormy offseason throwing four touchdowns as the Super Bowl champion New England Patriots scored a season-opening 28-21 win over the Pittsburgh Steelers on Thursday in front of a frenzied home crowd.

Brady, whose status for the first four games of the season was in doubt until last week because of an NFL-imposed “Deflategate” ban, led his team onto the field to rousing cheers before putting on his silver helmet and delivering a stellar performance.

“It was a pretty special night so I was excited. Our whole team was excited,” the 38-year-old quarterback said.

“It is always fun getting out there and getting the opportunity to go play and we took advantage of it, it was a good win, I thought our guys played hard.”

On New England’s opening possession, Brady completed his first three passes to get New England into Pittsburgh territory. He then threw pair of incomplete passes and was sacked, forcing the Patriots to punt.

Brady eventually opened the scoring in the second quarter when he capped a 13-play, 90-yard drive with a 16-yard touchdown pass to tight end Rob Gronkowski. He finished the game having completed 25 of 32 passes for 288 yards.

“He was an unbelievable performer tonight,” said Gronkowski, who caught three touchdown passes in the win, “He’s our leader. He’s just a great player and it’s fun playing with him.”

Even a constant rain could not dampen the party atmosphere as fans showed support for one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time by sporting replica Brady jerseys, T-shirts with slogans like “Vindicated” and holding up signs reading “In Tom We Trust.”

It was the first time Patriots supporters were able to show-er Brady with adulation since a federal judge vacated his four-game ban a week ago as part of the “Deflategate” saga that engulfed the nation’s most popular sport over the last nine months.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, who normally attends the first game of a season, was absent and perhaps it was a wise move as fans would no doubt have given him a



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New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady (12) and tight end Rob Gronkowski (87) react from the sideline after a touchdown against the Green Bay Packers during the first half in a preseason NFL football game at Gillette Stadium.

hostile reception as he was the one who upheld Brady’s ban in July.

That didn’t stop the fans in attendance from jeering him as they joined in unison with a “Where is Roger?” chant during the fourth quarter while

the Patriots held a comfortable 28-14 lead.

When Brady came out for pregame warmups, he ran the length of the field and then fist-pumped voraciously. He then was all smiles as he made time for a brief on-field em-

brace and dialogue with Steelers counterpart Ben Roethlisberger.

Thousands of fans arrived hours before kickoff for pregame festivities outside the stadium in Foxborough, Massachusetts, where the usual

celebratory mood that accompanies season-opening games was in overdrive given the excitement over Brady.

Brady, a four-time Super Bowl champion who is a sure-fire first-ballot Hall of Famer player when he becomes eligible for induction, was the focus of a probe into his alleged role in a scheme to deflate footballs used in a playoff win last season that sent New England to the Super Bowl.

A league investigative report initially determined Brady was most likely aware that two team equipment staff members deflated balls in an apparent bid to give him a better grip. His suspension was ultimately tossed out as a judge said Goodell’s ruling was plagued by “several significant legal deficiencies.”

But while Brady had a largely unimpressive preseason, he seemed to flick a switch when the season kicked off shortly after the Patriots unveiled their fourth Super Bowl banner, this one commemorating last season’s triumph.

“You don’t really forget how to play football in the seven months,” said Brady. “It’s a little bit different than the preseason.”

Knee injury doesn’t hurt Denny Hamlin’s confidence for Chase

THE SPORTS XCHANGE

RICHMOND, Virginia — How confident is Denny Hamlin that he’ll advance to the Championship 4 **NASCAR** Round of the Chase for the NASCAR Sprint Cup at Homestead-Miami Speedway?

So much so that he hasn’t even contemplated the prospect of surgery to his injured right knee if he’s eliminated in one of the earlier rounds of the Chase.

“Actually, had not even thought about being eliminated — that’s how confident I am right now that we’re not going to (be). If we do, I don’t know. You want to finish the year strong and I think the way the points all work out you still can move up to fifth or something like that.

“I think, either way, off-season is going to be the best option (for surgery) as long as I can make it that long.”

Hamlin tore the ACL in his right knee playing basketball on Tuesday night. It’s not the first time his ardent pursuit of hoops has interfered with his NASCAR Sprint Cup Series career. In the spring of 2010, Hamlin tore the ACL in his left knee and had surgery during an off week but didn’t miss a race.

This time, it’s the right knee, which faces less stress with the gas pedal than the left leg does with the brake. With the Chase looming, Hamlin has chosen to postpone surgery and put up with the discomfort outside the car. He showed up in the media

center at Richmond International Raceway on Friday as he prepared for Saturday’s Federated Auto Parts 400 (7:30 p.m., NBCSN), aided by a single crutch.

In a league basketball game, Hamlin hit a driving layup at the end of regulation to send the game into overtime. He tore the ACL in the extra period. But the mishap hasn’t quelled his optimism about his chances for a championship, a confidence that extends to the entire Joe Gibbs Racing roster, which includes Kyle Busch, Matt Kenseth and last week’s Darlington winner, Carl Edwards.

“I think our cars are obviously very good right now,” Hamlin said. “And, yeah, there’s no reason why ... we all said in January that our goal is to have four cars at Homestead with a chance to win, and I don’t see — except for bad luck — anything that can keep that from happening.”

Bowyer just happy to have a shot at Chase

Three months ago, Clint Bowyer probably would have considered earning a Chase for the NASCAR Sprint Cup spot for lame-duck Michael Waltrip Racing a lost cause.

But an uptick in performance after a crew chief swap began to bear fruit has Bowyer poised to claim the last of 16 spots in NASCAR’s 10-race playoff.

Bowyer has several routes to the Chase. If he wins Saturday night’s Federated



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Sprint Cup Series driver Denny Hamlin walks to the garage before practice for the Federated Auto Parts 400 at Richmond International Raceway on Friday.

Auto Parts 400 at Richmond International Raceway, he’s in. Two of Bowyer’s eight career victories have come at RIR.

If of the 15 other drivers currently in Chase-eligible positions wins Saturday, Bowyer makes the Chase if he remains ahead of Aric Almirola in the standings. Bowyer leads Almirola by 29 points entering the final regular-season race, with each point equaling one position on the track.

Even if a driver outside the top 16 takes the checkered flag, Bowyer can still qualify for the playoff by

moving ahead of one of the drivers in front of him in the standings. Closest within reach are Paul Menard (10 points ahead of Bowyer) and Jeff Gordon (18 points ahead).

“I’m telling you, two months ago I didn’t see this even being a shot, and they (the No. 15 team) really dug deep and worked hard. We switched crew chiefs (before the June race at Michigan), we switched some key components of the organization around and, boom, it took off and we marched our way into the Chase talk.”

Giants

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downs and averaged more than 11 yards per completion in two wins over the Giants last season.

With Victor Cruz out with a calf injury, the Giants will pair Rueben Randle opposite Manning’s new favorite weapon, Odell Beckham Jr., who made the highlight reel one-handed grab as a rookie against the Cowboys. Manning should have time to throw underneath as Dallas’ Cover-2 lacks a great pass rusher. But behind a worrisome offensive line, the challenge becomes consistently converting on the ground.

Matchup to watch: Giants LT Ereck Flowers vs. Cowboys DE Demarcus Lawrence: Projected as a better right tackle by NFLDraftScout.com, Flowers is on the left side in the first game of his NFL career against Lawrence, whom the Cowboys traded up to draft in the

second round of the 2014 draft. Lawrence came on late last season and is viewed as the top pass rusher on the Cowboys’ roster beyond suspended DE Greg Hardy.

Player spotlight: Cowboys LB Sean Lee: Lee missed all of last season with a knee injury after an injury-shortened 2013 and will play weak-side linebacker for the first time, helping shadow Giants TE Larry Donnell and new RB Shane Vereen.

Around the league: The rest of the NFL schedule is: 1 p.m. — Green Bay at Chicago, Kansas City at Houston, Cleveland at N.Y. Jets, Indianapolis at Buffalo, Miami at Washington, Carolina at Jacksonville, Seattle at St. Louis; 4 p.m. — Detroit at San Diego; 4:25 p.m. — Tennessee at Tampa Bay, Cincinnati at Oakland, Baltimore at Denver; Monday — Philadelphia at Atlanta (7:10 p.m.) and Minnesota at San Francisco (10:20 p.m.).

Steelers assistant coach accused of attacking Pats fan

THE SPORTS XCHANGE

NFL security is investigating Pittsburgh Steelers tight ends coach James Daniel for allegedly attacking a New England Patriots fan at halftime of Thursday night’s game.

A league official confirmed to ESPN’s Adam Scheffer that the NFL is aware of the incident and is looking into it. A Steelers spokesman said NFL security has informed the team about the incident and the Steelers are investigating.

The incident while Daniel was on his way to the locker room at halftime of the Steelers’ 28-21 loss on Thursday night, according to ESPN. Daniel was seen allegedly kicking a Patriots fan in the back of his leg and yelling at the fan in front of witnesses.

Daniel returned to the coaching booth after halftime, and police and NFL security were waiting for him. Once the coach was identified by witnesses and police approached him about controlling his behavior, Daniel began shouting at the police officer, according to witnesses.

NFL security interviewed Daniel afterward about the entire incident, according to ESPN sources.

MMA

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“MMA for women is not hugely different than it is for men,” said Angela Young in a news release. “Obviously MMA is a predominantly male sport, but successful women in the MMA world are on the rise. Through this fight camp I have grappled, sparred and wrestled with the Young’s MMA fight team and they have been unrelentingly supportive. Being one of the first female fighters out of Young’s certainly has its pressures, but it’s also a spotlight I’m hoping will inspire other women who otherwise wouldn’t have pursued MMA.”

And while Reinheimer hopes to spoil Young’s initial foray in the cage, she shares a similar philosophy about the growth of women’s MMA in the region.

“The pool of women fighters in New England is deepening fast, and the fact that there are more women’s bouts on fight cards reflects that,” she said. “My opponent and I are both from serious, hardworking camps. We are both mothers, and it takes a lot of determination and drive to do this sport while juggling work and children. I have been working tirelessly with my team since my last fight to improve my game in every aspect.”

The second women’s bout

The 62-year-old Daniel is in his 12th season on the Steelers’ staff and has more than 20 years of NFL coaching experience. He also spent time on the staffs of the New York Giants and Atlanta Falcons.

Game averages 27.4 million viewers

The New England Patriots’ 28-21 victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers on Thursday night averaged 27.4 million viewers to rank as the second most-watched “NFL Kickoff” game in the 14-year history of the event.

The Super Bowl-champion Patriots’ victory — led by quarterback Tom Brady (four touchdown passes and a team-record stretch of 19 consecutive pass completions) and tight end Rob Gronkowski (three touchdown receptions) — is television’s most-watched show since the 2015 NCAA Men’s Basketball Championship (28.3 million viewers on April 6).

With Deflategate behind him, Brady set an NFL record with his 161st victory with one team (he had been tied with Brett Favre, who won 160 games with the Green Bay Packers). Brady finished 25 of 32 for 288 yards and his 23rd career four-touchdown game.

on the card matches Young’s teammate, Kira Innocenti, against Hannah Sparrell of Newcastle and First Class MMA of Brunswick in a clash of debuting competitors.

Innocenti became involved in combat sports two years ago as a means of staying in shape.

“Testing myself in a mixed martial arts bout is important to me in many regards,” she said. “Two years ago, I was overweight and struggling to find a healthy, fulfilling path. One day, I woke up and took life by the reins and in half a year lost 60 pounds on my own.”

Innocenti subsequently was invited to check out Young’s MMA — and was hooked.

“I enjoy challenging myself and pushing limits that are thought to be impossible to achieve,” she said. “Living the mixed martial arts lifestyle is tough. It requires more dedication than I ever imagined possible. It breaks you and builds you back up into the person you truly are.”

Sparrell discovered MMA after signing up her daughter for jiu-jitsu classes and subsequently taking up that discipline herself.

“I think MMA training for women is a great outlet for many reasons,” she said. “It physically is a great workout and is also a good form of ‘therapy’ at the end of a possibly stressful day.”

Headsets

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The NFL released a statement Friday morning explaining that coaches’ communications equipment, including the headsets, is provided by the NFL for both teams’ use on game day, but that the home team “is responsible for the installation and maintenance of that equipment.”

“Every team’s game-day communications personnel are required to work with the NFL communications consultants to ensure wireless equipment is free and clear of interference and address any problems,” said Michael Signora, the league’s vice president of football communications. “Technological and stadium infrastructure issues of this type happen at many stadiums around the league, and whenever there are issues of this nature, we do a thorough review.”