

Comeback for the ages

Kansas City quarterback Mahomes leads late fightback at Super Bowl to help team shock San Francisco

ASSOCIATED PRESS
MIAMI GARDENS, FEBRUARY 3

THEY WERE celebrating the passage of time as much as football at this Super Bowl: 100-year-old war veterans at midfield for the pregame coin flip, a 50-years-young pop diva handling halftime, and, of course, a quarterback who turns 25 this year saving the best part of the show for last.

That quarterback is Patrick Mahomes of the Kansas City Chiefs.

It is easy, especially after the improbable, blink-and-you-miss-it escape act he engineered to win the title Sunday, to say Mahomes is a mobile, dual threat with a rocket arm — is what the perfect quarterback will look like as the NFL gets ready to embark on its second century of football next season.

But what Mahomes did on a cool, crisp evening in South Florida was grounded in the most basic of sports concepts, one that harkens to the days of leather helmets and long bus rides to the games.

"My mindset," Mahomes said, "is always to play and compete to the very end."

And so he did. He injected life into a stymied offense that looked all but done-for, coaxed three touchdowns out of that offense over the short span of 5 minutes, 1 second late in the fourth quarter and pulled out a 31-20 victory over San Francisco in a game that seemed all but lost.

Three times during this postseason, Mahomes and the Chiefs have trailed by 10 points or more, and all three times they've come back to win by double-digits themselves. That's a first. But even that history-making feat doesn't do justice to what Mahomes pulled off in the final game of the NFL's much-celebrated centennial. After Mahomes threw the first postseason interception of his three-year-old career — "I hit him right between the '5' and the '4,'" he said of the pick to linebacker Fred Warner — the 49ers drove 55 methodical yards to take a 20-10 lead.

There was 2:35 left on in the third quarter and the Chiefs, used to buzzing up and down the field to the tune of 51 and 35 points in the two earlier games this postseason, had gained 187 yards and amassed only 136 passing. They had scored a measly touchdown and a field goal and hadn't cracked a single play longer than 19 yards.

"I wasn't feeling good about it at all," said receiver Tyreek Hill, who would soon prove critical in turning around the game. "I told Pat,



Kansas City Chiefs' Patrick Mahomes celebrates with the Vince Lombardi trophy after winning the Super Bowl. Reuters

We never lost faith, I think that's the biggest thing. Everybody on this team, nobody had their heads down. Coach Reid told me after both of 'em to keep firing. Keep believing and keep firing."

PATRICK MAHOMES
ON HIS MATCH-WINNING PERFORMANCE

"It's 20-10 with seven minutes left... c'mon bro, And all Pat did, he just told me to believe."

Hill believed. And he started running. Up against a defense that had allowed a total of eight completions on downfield throws all season, the receiver with track-star speed somehow found a soft spot deep in the 49ers secondary.

Mahomes, harassed all night into quick, off-target throws, dropped 13 yards behind the line of scrimmage, surveyed the field — then stepped up and heaved it. The ball dropped soft as a feather into Hill's arms. Four plays later, Kansas City, only moments earlier thinking of concession speeches, was within three points. There was 6:13 left in the game.

"I'm not sure exactly what happened,"

49ers coach Kyle Shanahan said, when asked to reflect on the play that swung the momentum. Rarely has a game turned so rapidly. Rarely has a team still behind on the scoreboard seemed so destined to win.

It all happened so fast, in fact, that everything before it felt like a mirage.

Hours earlier, to celebrate its 100th year, the NFL brought four centenarian World War II veterans to midfield to preside over the pregame coin flip.

Halftime featured a hip-shaking, pole-climbing celebration of Latina heritage, courtesy of 43-year-old Shakira and Jennifer Lopez, who hardly looked like the 50-year-old she is, where has the time gone?

Chiefs fans had been asking the same question for a while now.

It had been 50 years since their team last appeared in, and won, the Super Bowl. Mahomes, the quarterback who coach Andy Reid handpicked and traded away draft picks to get, was supposed to change all that.

But when the smoke cleared from J-Lo and the third quarter started, he was no better. "We knew it would be a close game, and there would be some challenges," Reid said. "He kept firing. That's what he did. The guys around him

just believed in him. We all did."

After the touchdown that made it 20-17, it took all of three plays for the Chiefs defense to get the ball back to Mahomes.

On the next possession, he struck for another long play — this one to receiver Sammy Watkins who torched the 49ers premier defensive back, Richard Sherman, at the line of scrimmage and got behind him for the easiest 38-yard catch he'll ever make. Three plays later, it was 24-20.

Less than 90 seconds after that, it was 31-20, and long-suffering Kansas City had won the Super Bowl.

It didn't take long for the questions to start coming about a young team with a young quarterback and a grizzled old coach in Reid who thinks young: Could this be the first of many?

"I mean, obviously, I've had a great start to my career," said Mahomes, who finished with 286 yards, two touchdowns and two interceptions, in flicking it away.

Does he see himself as the new face of the NFL? "There are a lot of young quarterbacks, and still a lot of veteran guys that are playing at a very high level," he said. "So, I just try to be the best Patrick Mahomes I can be."

Quarters given, quarter snatched back

Chiefs trailed Niners 10-20 after three quarters, but a Patrick Mahomes show was inevitable. With his first Super Bowl ring now secured, the question is how many more.

GENERATIONAL TALENT

Son of former Major League Baseball pitcher Pat Mahomes Sr., Junior — a top prospect for the 2014 MLB draft — could have easily taken the mound too. He chose football, and NFL's all the richer for it. In essentially his second season (Mahomes got one game in 2017), the 24-year-old became the youngest Super Bowl MVP on Sunday, one year after he had become the youngest league MVP. He had an erratic 3/4th of the game but nobody dared rule out the league's best quarterback (along with Baltimore Ravens' Lamar Jackson). Speaking of, what exactly makes...

...A QUARTERBACK?

A quarterback can never be flawless. Not even Tom Brady, he of eternal youth and six Super Bowl rings, made every pass on those manic Sunday nights. Rest of the team is responsible for their own actions. A quarterback, the leader of men, has to orchestrate and oversee every play. Relying on a concoction of arm strength, accuracy, speed, dexterity, rapid visual processing and decision making, a quarterback has to figure out the best course of action to drive his team up field within seconds — all while the 6'5, 120kg pass rushers — paid millions a year to flatten a quarterback — hulking after him. Mahomes is 6'3, the average but not the ideal height for a quarterback. But it's his quick offensive play and the ultrafast receivers that have helped the Chiefs excel.

TURNAROUNDS

What would have been a great escape for many was a routine prison break for Mahomes, and he had pulled off two coming into Sunday's final. In the first post-season game against the Houston Texans, Chiefs fell behind by 23-0 and won 51-31. In the AFC (American Football Conference) championship game against the Tennessee Titans, the Chiefs were down 17-7 before winning 35-24. After completing the trifecta on Sunday, Kansas City became the first NFL team



The game is just too slow for him. He can make any play he wants, he never panics, he never gets rattled. We were down 20-10 in the fourth quarter, and he routed off 21 points. That kid is special."

TERRELL SUGGS, CHIEFS DEFENSIVE END ON MAHOMES

to overturn a 10-point (or more) deficit in three different games during the same postseason.

SPARE A THOUGHT

The numbers must have been flashing hard for Niners' coach Kyle Shanahan: '28-3'. That was the lead his Atlanta Falcons blew three years ago as Brady's Patriots architected the largest comeback ever.

His father Mike was the offensive coordinator in the San Francisco 49ers 1995 Super Bowl win and head coach for the Denver Broncos' 1998 and 1999 wins. Following in his father's footsteps and becoming the first father and son Super Bowl champion coach duo remains a dream for now. "Those guys are hurting in there, just like I am," Shanahan said. "It's tough when you lose a Super Bowl... It's tough that it had to end today in the way it did." ENS

Nagal wants to learn the hard court way

SAHID JUDGE
PUNE, FEBRUARY 3

"REPETITION IS the mother of learning," goes a Latin proverb. Doing the same thing over and over again till it becomes perfect. On a tennis court, it becomes a weapon. Sumit Nagal had made it very clear that his forehand is his killer shot. He goes inside out, inside in, cross court — playing it all with pace, topspin, and more often than not, impressive accuracy.

He had learnt that skill on courts in Canada, where he'd belt entire buckets at the end of each practice session. Against Roger Federer at the US Open last year, he hassled the 20-time Grand Slam champion with his biggest weapon.

But in that match, when all the odds were stacked against him, the idea was to go on court to have fun, 'enjoy the game,' as they say. On Monday, in the first round at the Tata Open Maharashtra, the intent before the match was different; he wants to learn the art of playing on hard courts. And repetition will help him understand it better — repetition of playing the shot he understands the most, and repetition of playing on that surface.

At centre court of the Balewadi Tennis Stadium in Pune, he came up against former world no 12 Viktor Troicki. Nagal, a clay court frequenter, launched forehand after forehand, winners at most, against the veteran Serbian, making the match difficult for a Davis Cup and ATP Cup winner who is looking for a ride back up the ranking ladder (he's currently 191 in the world due to a string of injuries). If this match was to go in Troicki's favour, the 22-year-old was not going to go down too easily.

And after a three-setter that took two hours and 20 minutes to complete, Nagal eventually folded 2-6, 7-6, 1-6.

In the 2019 season, Nagal decided to play clay tournaments to help consolidate his return to the tour after a long bout with shoulder problems. It helped him rise in the rankings — from 361 at the start of 2019 to a career high 125 on Monday. But as he gets closer to the top 100 mark, he acknowledges the need to get out of his comfort zone.

"I have to develop my game on the hard court as well. It's the right thing to do right now," he says.

"I'm still young, still learning. So, for me picking hard court (in Pune) over clay (the Cordoba Open) is something big."

Of the 25 tournaments he played last year, including two Davis Cup ties, 18 events were on clay. This time though, he aims to play more on hard courts.

"Normally if someone asked me what I'm comfortable playing, I would say going to South America (for clay events). This year I'm going to be on hard courts till the end of



Nagal, eager to improve his hard court game, went down fighting to Troicki in the Tata Open on Monday. Daniel Stephen

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SUMIT NAGAL
INDIA NO. 2

March," he says. "I have to keep in mind that a lot of Slams and a lot of big events are also on hard courts. So I have to at least be able to play on two surfaces. Grass, there's one slam and two ATP events. But if you look at it, it's either hard or clay. That's why I pushed myself to play the first three months on hard."

Accordingly, he took a longer pre-season to prepare himself for the long, multi-court haul, he's hoping to play this year.

"Last year what I did in Thailand (for pre-season) was literally 10 days. That's all the time I had," he says. "This year was more around like three, three and a half weeks. So that was a good thing. It was about keeping my body in shape, just staying healthy, just working on every aspect of the game, doing it in reps."

Reps. That's the trick. He's practiced the same stroke countless times in practice, making it strong enough for even Federer to compliment it. Now the repetition will be outside the comfort zone. But for Nagal, that's the way forward.

Mbappe undermines boss Tuchel's authority

ASSOCIATED PRESS
PARIS, FEBRUARY 3

PROBLEMS OFTEN seem to occur before important games for Paris Saint-Germain.

Brazil star Neymar was ruled out of Champions League matches against Real Madrid and Manchester United because of injuries over the last two seasons. Now Kylian Mbappe is at the center of controversy only two weeks ahead of a crucial European meeting with Borussia Dortmund.

Usually praised for his down to earth attitude, frenetic pace and exciting dribbles, Mbappe showed a less attractive side this weekend at the Parc des Princes.

He sulked. After scoring a fine goal during a lopsided 5-0 French league win against Montpellier, Mbappe looked furious when coach Thomas Tuchel replaced him with Mauro Icardi midway through the second half. Mbappe barely acknowledged Icardi, giving him only a perfunctory handshake.

Ahead of a busy period, including a trip to Nantes on Tuesday and just a fortnight before the first leg of the last-16 Champions League match against Dortmund, Tuchel's decision looked logical. Especially since he made a double substitution, also bringing on Edinson Cavani. Since the arrival of Icardi, there has been much less involvement for Cavani, the club's record scorer with 198 goals, so it was wise for Tuchel to bring him on.

Considering Cavani almost left the club to join Atletico Madrid, it may have been more appropriate for Mbappe to encourage him — and Icardi — when they came on.

But the 21-year-old Mbappe appeared not to like it at all with the cameras picking up every reaction. France's World Cup-winning forward ignored Tuchel and tried to walk past him on his way to the substitutes bench, and the German coach had to force him to stop twice to listen to his explanations. After the final whistle, Mbappe did not celebrate the win in front of PSG fans. It is the third time this season he has reacted with public dissatisfaction after being substituted by Tuchel, who dropped him from an away match at bitter rival Marseille last season because Mbappe arrived late for a team talk. Mbappe's apparent tantrum on Saturday tarnished the win and undermined Tuchel's authority at a time when PSG needs to be united, having experienced three last-16 Champions League exits in a row.

It's unclear whether Mbappe will be sanctioned for his behavior, but Tuchel expressed his disappointment at his striker's attitude — all the more so because it eclipsed a sixth straight win in all competitions for PSG, which is now unbeaten in 19 games.



MISS LOVELY
A STORY ABOUT AMBITION.
A DISCUSSION ABOUT THE COST PEOPLE PAY FOR IT.

Director: Ashim Ahluwalia | Curator: Shubhra Gupta, Film Critic, The Indian Express
Screening Date: 7th February 2020 | Time: 7:00 PM
Venue: Stein Auditorium, India Habitat Centre

To register, scan the QR Code or SMS - IEFILM <space> "PD" <space> "your name & email id" to 56161.

Confirmation SMS will be your ticket. Limited seats available on first-come-first-served basis.



Here are some comments shared by our readers about the unique format of The Indian Express Club.



"The post screening discussion gives a beautiful opportunity for exchanging insights and view points, compelling us to stop and dig deeper into ourselves and engaging into reflective thinking".

Yashna Dewani
Student of Indian Classical Music



"The post screening discussions are quite interesting as people coming from different backgrounds add value and flavour to the film interpretation".

Amit Gupta
Government Official

