

# Rams eager for Bucs' Challenge

by Rod Kloekner  
Knight-Ridder Tribune  
January 17, 2000

ST. LOUIS - Tight end Ernie Conwell savored St. Louis' 49-37 playoff victory over Minnesota for about five minutes Sunday before thoughts of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers filled his head.

"It's hard not to be thinking about Tampa Bay," said Conwell of the Rams' opponent Sunday in the NFC Championship game. "We're going to enjoy the fact that we get to play next Sunday. Knowing that alone is enough to hold most guys over, but I think a lot of guys — including myself — can't wait to get into work this week and get ready to go.

"I'm going to go in Monday and Tuesday, and I'll be lifting and running and watching film trying to get a jump on them. They already have an extra day on us to get themselves ready and prepared."

The Rams (14-3) and Buccaneers (12-5) will meet at 3:15 p.m. at the Trans World Dome, with the winner earning a berth to Super Bowl XXXIV in Atlanta on Jan. 30.

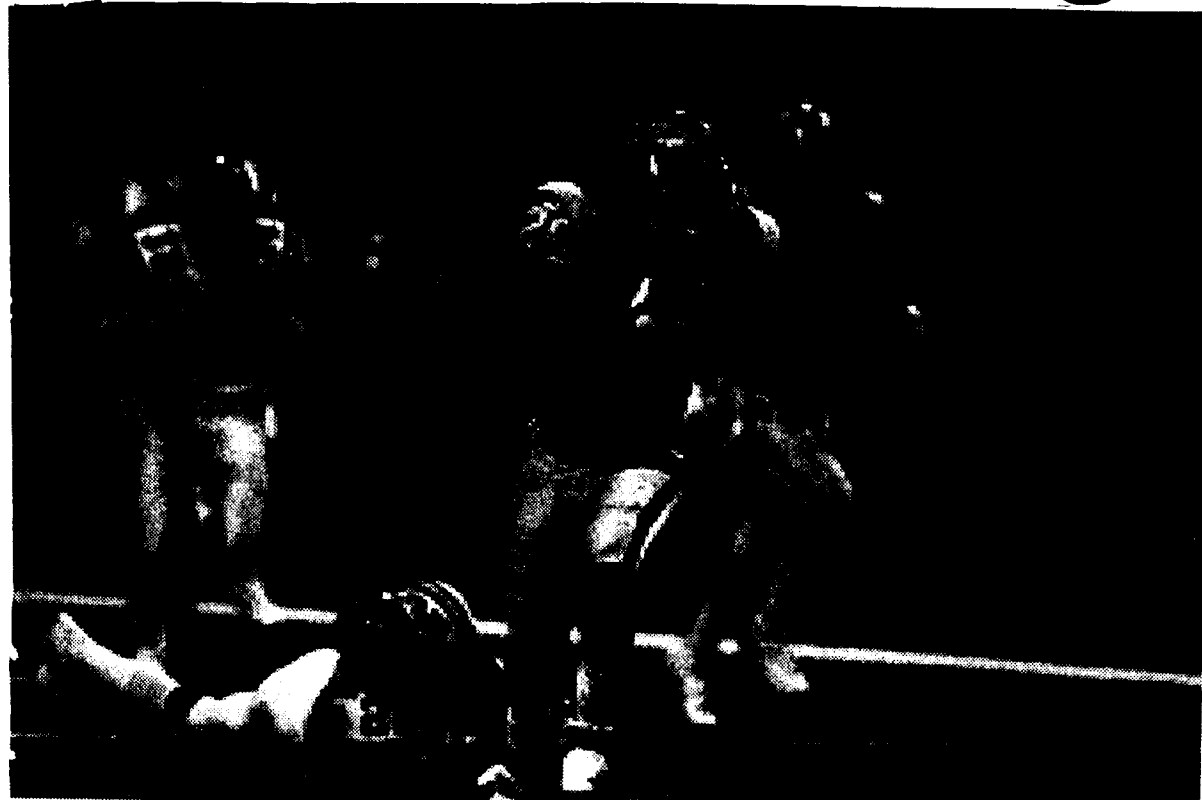
The game is a rematch of the 1979 NFC Championship game, won 9-0 by the Los Angeles Rams. That historical fact, or St. Louis' impressive victory over the Vikings, mattered little to defensive tackle Ray Agnew.

"It was sweet to win it, but we're staying focused," Agnew said. "That's not our ultimate goal is to beat Minnesota. That's the first step in where we're trying to get to be, and that's champions of this league."

Tampa Bay advanced to the NFC title game with a 14-13 victory over Washington on Saturday, rallying from 13-0 second-half deficit with a pair of touchdowns set up by Washington turnovers.

For the most part, Tampa Bay has survived on its superior defense, led by the NFL Defensive Player of the Year Warren Sapp, all season. They've proven that an effective blend of sporadic offense and consistently menacing defense can be successful.

In the win Saturday, Tampa Bay's third-ranked defense shut down Washington's second-ranked offense, holding Washington to 157 total yards, including just 46 on the ground. Washington averaged 372.8 yards per game and 27.7 points per game during the regular season.



TMS CAMPUS  
Rams running back Marshall Faulk runs past Viking defenders for a touchdown in the first quarter making the score 14-3. The Rams meet Tampa Bay next week in the NFC Championship game after defeating the Minnesota Vikings 49-37.

"They have a great defense," said Rams wide receiver Ricky Proehl. "It's going to be a great challenge for us, but we're excited. We're a very confident football team offensively, and they pose a lot of great match-ups for us."

The Buccaneers' defense will be trying to stop the highest-scoring offense in the NFL, one that strafed Minnesota for 476 yards and 49 points Sunday.

"I know they have a good front seven on defense and have a young quarterback who's been making plays," said wide receiver Tony Home. "But, they have to come to our dome and try and stop us. Whatever happens, happens."

Tampa Bay's offense is triggered by rookie quarterback Shaun King, a 22-year-old native of neighboring St. Petersburg who is trying to become the first rookie at his

position to get his team into the Super Bowl.

Bruising fullback Mike Alstott and speedy tailback Warrick Dunn form Tampa Bay's backfield.

"I have seen them some," said St. Louis coach Dick Vermeil. "I have seen them look awfully good, and I have seen them not look too good. I watched a tape before playing Detroit when Detroit took them apart, but that is not typical of the type of football team they are."

"They are a very sound, solid defensive team with a big, strong running attack that can pound on you and they will be a good football team."

Rams quarterback Kurt Warner expects a tough fight. "I know they're great," Warner said. "They have the best defense in the league. It will be a great test — our strength against their strength. It's going to be fun."

# No Shock: Dolphins make changes

by John Mullin  
Knight-Ridder Tribune  
January 17, 2000

Dave Wannstedt began his second turn as an NFL head coach Sunday with one particular resolution: to avoid repeating some of the same mistakes that doomed him in his six years as coach of the Bears.

How well he succeeds will be one of the NFL's most closely watched sagas over the next three years, the length of Wannstedt's new contract with the Miami Dolphins.

"Whatever business you're in, you're better doing it the second time," Wannstedt said Sunday. "Having a strong staff and being real strong in the personnel area is real important. That was the thing that got me in trouble in Chicago."

"We didn't have the supporting cast in certain areas that we have here."

The NFL's sixth coaching shakeup this year became the first to produce a replacement, with Wannstedt succeeding good friend Jimmy Johnson.

Johnson, 56, resigned less than 24 hours after the worst loss in franchise history, a 62-7 defeat in the divisional playoffs to the Jacksonville Jaguars.

Johnson's decision gradually was reached over the last couple of weeks, culminating in the aftermath of the Jacksonville loss. Talks Sunday morning with Dolphins Chairman Wayne Huizenga resolved any remaining questions about the Wannstedt succession.

"This time is final and forever," Johnson said before giving his unqualified endorsement to Wannstedt. "Dave is a fantastic football coach and people are going to find out how great he is," Johnson said.

"When you get right down to it, he is a better football coach than what I am. He has got the passion for the game. He loves dealing with the players and I really believe the players love dealing with him."

Wannstedt, 47, was hired by Miami Jan. 14, 1999, as assistant head coach.

He was promoted to Johnson's job with a contract one year shorter than the standard for head coaches and initially will exercise much of the same authority Johnson had in personnel.

While personnel decisions in the draft and free agency were the chief causes for Wannstedt's failure with the Bears, he took the Miami job with the same assurances that he would have the dominant say in personnel as he did initially in Chicago.

The difference is that Miami has a personnel department with the structure and staffing denied to Wannstedt and personnel director Rod Graves from the start of free agency in 1993.

"He just didn't have the support," Dolphins President Eddie Jones said.

"I'll be in the middle of it as will the coaches," Wannstedt said. "When Jimmy asked me to come down here, it was because of the organization and the way Wayne runs things. It gives you all the resources to be the very best."

The Miami move is expected to save the Bears as much as \$1 million, the going rate for head coach salaries.

The Bears owe Wannstedt \$1.3 million in 2000, the final year of his Chicago contract, minus whatever salary he receives in a new position.

Wannstedt coached the Bears from 1993 to '98 and compiled a 41-57 overall record, including 1-1 in the playoffs. He was voted NFC Coach of the Year after the Bears reached the playoffs following the 1994 season and was second runner-up in NFL Coach of the Year voting. His 41 wins are third most in Bears history behind George Halas (324) and Mike Ditka (112).

As he did when he took over the Bears, Wannstedt faces a quarterback decision in Miami.

When he arrived in Chicago in 1993, Jim Harbaugh was a free agent and the favorite of then-President Michael McCaskey, who gave Harbaugh a four-year contract worth \$13 million, including a \$5 million signing bonus.

Now Wannstedt must deal with the future of Dan Marino. Huizenga met privately with the 38-year-old quarterback last week to discuss Wannstedt, with whom Marino has a far better relationship than with Johnson. Marino and Wannstedt both played at the University of Pittsburgh and are western Pennsylvania natives with their Pittsburgh accents still firmly in place.

Marino's favorable opinion of Wannstedt carried considerable weight with Huizenga, who had begun assembling a list of possible successors to Johnson a month ago. Wannstedt said he will meet with Marino this week to discuss both his own plans and those of the NFL's all-time leading passer.

"It's going to be Danny's decision," Wannstedt said of Marino's future with the Dolphins.

Wannstedt has admitted that one of his major mistakes when he took over in Chicago was not committing to younger players, instead staying too long with aging veterans from the Super Bowl XX team.

Although the Dolphins are one of only three teams to go to the playoffs each of the past three seasons, Wannstedt has a mandate to make changes wherever he determines necessary.

"We're going to look at everything," Wannstedt said. "Obviously we struggled in some areas on offense. We'll look at what we're doing on offense and evaluate that. That will probably be our first focus."

Wannstedt had several job opportunities as a defensive coordinator after his Dec. 28, 1998, firing by the Bears but chose to join Johnson. Huizenga agreed to Johnson hiring Wannstedt barely two weeks after Wannstedt was fired by McCaskey. That Wannstedt would succeed Johnson was expected; the only question appeared to be when. That time came Sunday.

"I guess you might say it's my time," said Johnson. "I've had my time in the sun. I've had my time in the spotlight and now it's time to spend time with my family."

# Titans upset Colts for AFC championship

by Knight-Ridder Tribune  
January 16, 2000

INDIANAPOLIS - Jeff Fisher was doing some pre-game math Sunday morning. The Tennessee Titans' coach was trying to calculate just how many points his team would need to beat the Indianapolis Colts in their divisional playoff battle.

He didn't lack for confidence in his defense. But hey, they weren't playing the Cincinnati Bengals or the Pittsburgh Steelers or the Baltimore Ravens.

It was the Colts and their lethal-weapon offense. It was Peyton Manning and Edgerin James and Marvin Harrison. It was an offensive line that had given up a league-low 14 sacks.

"I thought that if we were able to tackle and play great defense, somewhere in the 24 to 27 (point) range would get it done," Fisher said. "I definitely thought we'd need more than 19. It's a credit to our defense that we won with 19."

The Titans held the Colts and their explosive 26.4 points-per-game offense to a touchdown and three Mike Vanderjagt field goals as they earned a spot in next week's AFC Championship Game with a 19-16 victory.

They did an impressive job of muzzling the Colts' Pro Bowl-bound triplets. They pressured Manning into a season-worst 19-for-43 performance, held James, the NFL's rushing champion, to 56 yards on 20 carries. Harrison, who led the AFC in receiving yards, was held to 65 yards on five catches.

"Our whole defense played well," Fisher said. "We attacked their run game. We tackled well. You have to tackle against them with the type of people they put out there on offense."

"Our approach going in was to play man-to-man coverage. We wanted to challenge their receivers, and be close when the ball was caught. They did an excellent job all season of attacking zone defenses. We didn't want to give them opportunities to run after the catch."

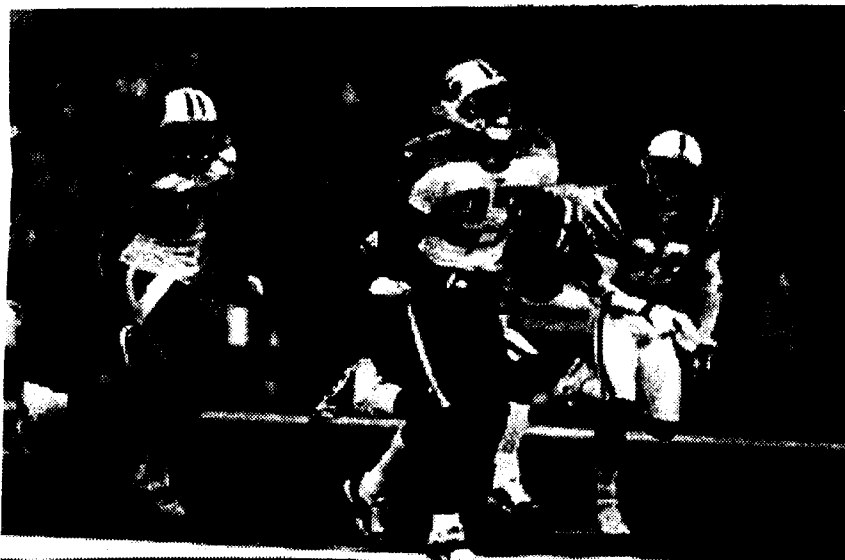
Ruining back Eddie George, who rushed for 106 yards in last week's come-from-behind 22-16 first-round playoff win over Buffalo, rang up 162 on 26 carries Sunday, including a huge 68-yard third-quarter touchdown run that gave the Titans a lead they never relinquished.

The Titans also got a major assist from the league's new instant-replay system, which erased an 87-yard fourth-quarter punt return by the Colts' Terrence Wilkins when it was determined that Wilkins had stepped out of bounds.

"We kind of won it our way," said Fisher, whose team needed a controversial last-second kickoff return for a touchdown by Kevin Dyson last week to get by the Bills. "It wasn't pretty. But it's kind of the way we've done things the last couple of weeks."

The Titans face the Jaguars in Jacksonville next Sunday at 12:35 (CBS-TV) for the AFC title.

George and defense. Defense and George. That's how the Titans went 13-3 this season. That's how they beat next week's opponent, the Jaguars, twice. And that's how they beat the Colts. They ran the ball 33 times and threw it just 24. Quarterback Steve McNair had all of 112 passing yards.



TMS CAMPUS  
Titans' running back Eddie George scampers 68 yards for a touchdown on the third play of the second half to lead the Titans to a 19-16 win over the Indianapolis Colts. The Tennessee Titans meet the Jacksonville Jaguars next week in the AFC Championship game.

"That's our philosophy," Fisher said. "We run the football. There's no secret there. We run the football when we're not supposed to be able to run it. When everybody thinks you're going to run it."

The Colts' ability to stop George was a major concern for Coach Jim Mora going into the game. They had allowed a far-too-generous 4.2 yards per carry this season and were without their top tackler, linebacker Cornelius Bennett, who injured his knee in the final regular-season game against Buffalo.

But they held George to a mostly harmless 38 yards on nine carries in the first half as the Colts clung to a 9-6 lead, compliments of three Vanderjagt field goals.

Then, on the third play of the second half, George took a handoff from McNair and sprinted 68 yards down the middle of the field for a go-ahead touchdown.

"It was a counter," George said. "We hadn't run it all game. But at the half, we made a decision to use it. The middle of the field was wide open. I just took off."

Said Fisher: "I talked to Eddie before the game. I told him that we took him (in the first round of the '95 draft) to win games like this."

If the Titans' defense hadn't been able to muzzle Manning, James and Harrison as well as they did, they wouldn't have won this one, even with George's 162 rushing yards.

Manning, who had thrown for 4,135 yards this season, had 227 Sunday, but averaged a season-low 5.2 yards per attempt.

The Titans didn't sack him a single time or intercept any passes, but they put enough consistent pressure to force him to throw sooner than he wanted. They also used mostly man-for-man coverage to reduce the Colts' opportunities for extra yardage after the catch.

"That's our style of defense," Titans strong safety Blaine Bishop said. "We line up and play mano a mano. We do that against everybody. We wanted to press them, get in

their face. We felt our style was conducive to beating them."

Manning is a master of the play-action pass. But the Colts were able to foil it by stopping the run. James averaged just 2.8 yards per carry. He also was ineffective as a pass receiver, catching just one pass for 8 yards.

"We matched up one of our defensive backs on him (rookie cornerback Donald Mitchell) on third down," Fisher said. "We tried to avoid the linebacker match-up he usually gets. He's too fast to cover with a linebacker."

Mora's biggest concern going into Sunday's playoff game was his defense's ability to stop George. He respected Tennessee's defense, but didn't expect them to throttle Manning and Co. as effectively as they did.

"We had a hard time coming up with anything big or getting any big chunks of yardage," Mora said. "We have a very, very young offense that is not near what it is going to be at some point. Sometimes, you do things and expect it to happen every game. Today, we just got outplayed by a better football team."

Got outplayed, but still might have won if the field were an inch or two wider. Early in the fourth quarter, with the Colts trailing, 16-9, Wilkins took a Craig Hentrich punt and returned it 87 yards to the Tennessee 4-yard line.

The officials didn't notice that Wilkins had stepped out of bounds at the Colts' 33. But the Titans' bench did. They alerted Fisher, who used a replay challenge, and the ball was brought back.

"That was a huge swing," Mora said. "To have the opportunity to have the ball on the (4-yard) line and have to move back to the 33 hurt our momentum. But it was the right call. He stepped out. There's nothing we could do about it."

The Colts finally found the end zone late in the fourth quarter when Manning bolted 15 yards for a touchdown with 1:51 left to make it 19-16. Out of timeouts, their only hope was an onside kickoff. But Titans wide receiver Yancy Thigpen caught the ball and they were able to run out the clock.

"In the playoffs, all it takes is one or two big plays without giving up a couple of big plays, and you should be in position to win," said McNair, who didn't do much with his arm, but did rush for 35 yards, including a couple of key third-down runs.

"Eddie's touchdown run was the one and only big play today, and fortunately, it came on our side of the ball."



Super Bowl Sunday  
January 30, 2000  
6:00 ET (ABC)