

Saints, Colts gear up for Big One

By **BARRY WILNER**
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A 40-yard field goal in overtime by a little-known kicker could become as famous as jambalaya in these parts.

The New Orleans Saints, a team with no home and an uncertain future five years ago, are heading for their first Super Bowl. By battering Brett Favre and beating the Minnesota Vikings 31-28 Sunday, they set off celebrations on Bourbon Street that locals never could have imagined in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

"This is for everybody in this city," said coach Sean Payton, the architect of the Saints' turnaround. "This stadium used to have holes in it and used to be wet. It's not wet anymore. This is for the city of New Orleans."

And it came courtesy of Garrett Hartley and the Aints — who surely ain't the Aints anymore.

"In reality, we had to lean on each other in order to survive and in order to get where we are now," quarterback Drew Brees said. "The city is on its way to recovery, and in a lot of ways has come back better than ever. We've used the strength and resiliency of our fans to go out and play every Sunday and play with the confidence that we can do it, that we can achieve everything we've set out to achieve."

Favre threw away Minnesota's best chance to win, tossing an interception deep in New Orleans territory in the closing seconds of regulation. Then the Saints won the coin toss and ended it on Hartley's kick 4:45 into OT.

"Just helping my team get to Miami," he said. "Just doing my part."

A team of nomads after Katrina ravaged its city and the Superdome, overcame a slew of mistakes in the biggest game the Big Easy has ever seen.

Forget the paper bag masks and that long history of losing that started in 1967. Moments after Hartley's kick, they were toasting their hometown winners in the French Quarter and making plans for South Florida.

The Saints (15-3) will meet Peyton Manning and the Indianapolis Colts

(16-2) in the Super Bowl in two weeks in Miami. The Colts opened as 4-point favorites.

"Brett prepared us, but now we've got another challenge in Peyton," safety Darren Sharper said.

And in the Superdome, once a squalid refuge after Katrina, they boogied in the aisles as confetti covered the field.

"It's a moment I've been waiting for for a long time and obviously we're not done yet," said Brees, Payton's hand-picked QB for the Saints' renaissance.

It's the first time the top seeds in each conference made the big game since the 1993 season.

There were nine fumbles and two interceptions, and the biggest mistake belonged to Favre. Flushed from the pocket in the final minute, he seemed to have room to run to set up a field goal. But hampered by a left leg injured in the third quarter, he threw cross-field and was intercepted by Tracy Porter at the 22.

That finished off Minnesota's chance for its first Super Bowl trip in 33 years — and opportunity to win it for the first time after four defeats. The Vikings have

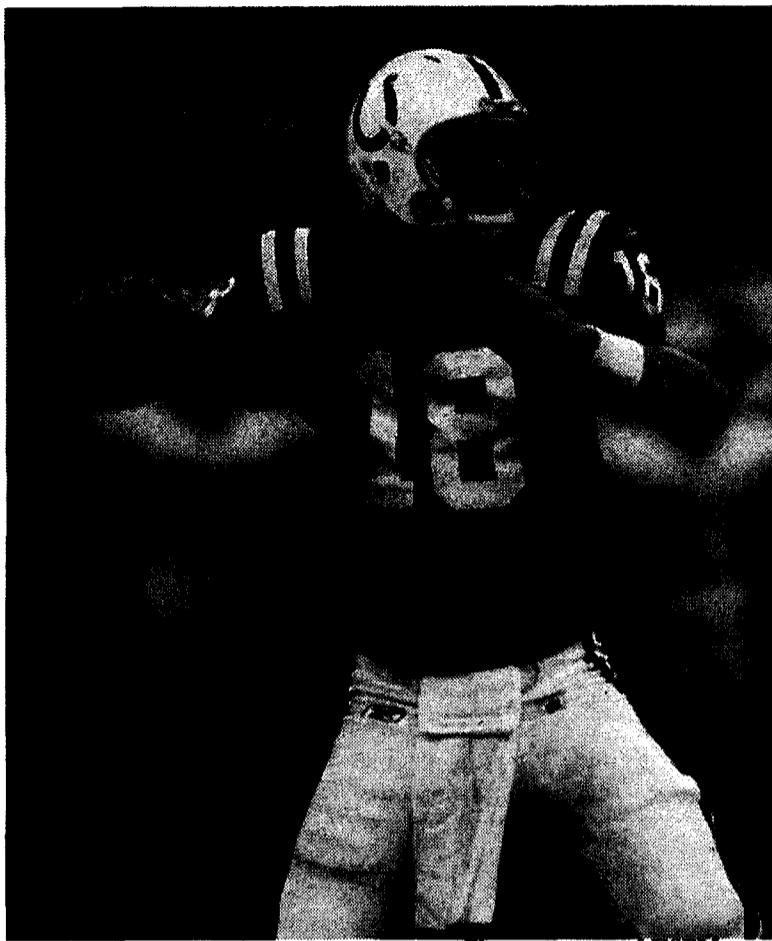


Photo courtesy of ESPN.com

lost five straight NFC title games.

"I've felt better," said Favre, who looked every bit his 40 years. "It was a physical game. A lot of hits. You win that and you sure feel a lot better."

New Orleans won the coin toss, Brees guided it to the Minnesota 22 after converting a fourth-and-1 on Pierre Thomas' leap over the line, and Hartley — suspended at the start of the season for using a banned stimulant — split the uprights.

"It was as loud as I have ever heard it in the dome," Brees added. "It feels so good to know we have given our fans an NFC championship. We have another championship to go after in two weeks."

It was anything but easy for the Saints, in only their second conference championship game; they lost at Chicago three years ago.

They had to withstand yet one more comeback by Favre, who returned to the NFL with the Vikings (13-5) after another brief retirement. He was alternately spectacular and pedestrian Sunday, finally betrayed by his gambling style and,

perhaps, an aging body.

Porter's pick sent it into overtime, the third time an NFC title game has needed extra time and the second in three seasons. Two years ago, Favre's interception in OT set up a field goal that sent the Giants past the Packers and into the Super Bowl.

The Saints can only hope they have the same happy ending as New York did back then.

"Yeah," said Reggie Bush, who scored a touchdown. "One more step."

The seesaw game saw All-Pro Adrian Peterson score three touchdowns for Minnesota and Saints running back Pierre Thomas get two. The Vikings handily won the possession and yardage battles — Peterson rushed for 122 yards and Minnesota gained 475 overall. But the Vikings were undone by five turnovers, including

three fumbles.

"We really gave those guys the game," said Peterson, who peeked at the rousing celebrations on the Superdome floor. "Too many turnovers. It's eating me up inside."

The seemingly indestructible Favre was hurt on one of those turnovers, on a combination hit by Bobby McCray and Remi Ayodele while throwing his first interception. And, despite being the closest Viking to the ball, he was helpless in the scramble to recover Percy Harvin's fumble that seemingly turned the game in New Orleans' favor early in the fourth period.

The Saints took over at the 7 and, on third down, Bush caught Brees' rollout pass by the right pylon. He was ruled out at the 1, but Payton sprinted almost to the goal line to throw the red flag. The challenge was upheld, and the dome rocked like never before — until Hartley's winning field goal.

But Favre has been in enough hostile environs to be able to shrug at such challenges. He hit tight end Visanthe Shiancoe for 16 yards, Peterson ripped off a 20-yard run, and a pass interference against Porter set up Peterson's tying 2-yard rush with 4:58 to go.

"I would have loved to represent the NFC," said Favre, who grew up in Mississippi a Saints fan. "But, as I told Sean throughout the year when we talked, if it's not us, I hope it's you guys."

The crowd of 71,276 was the largest in the Superdome for a Saints game.

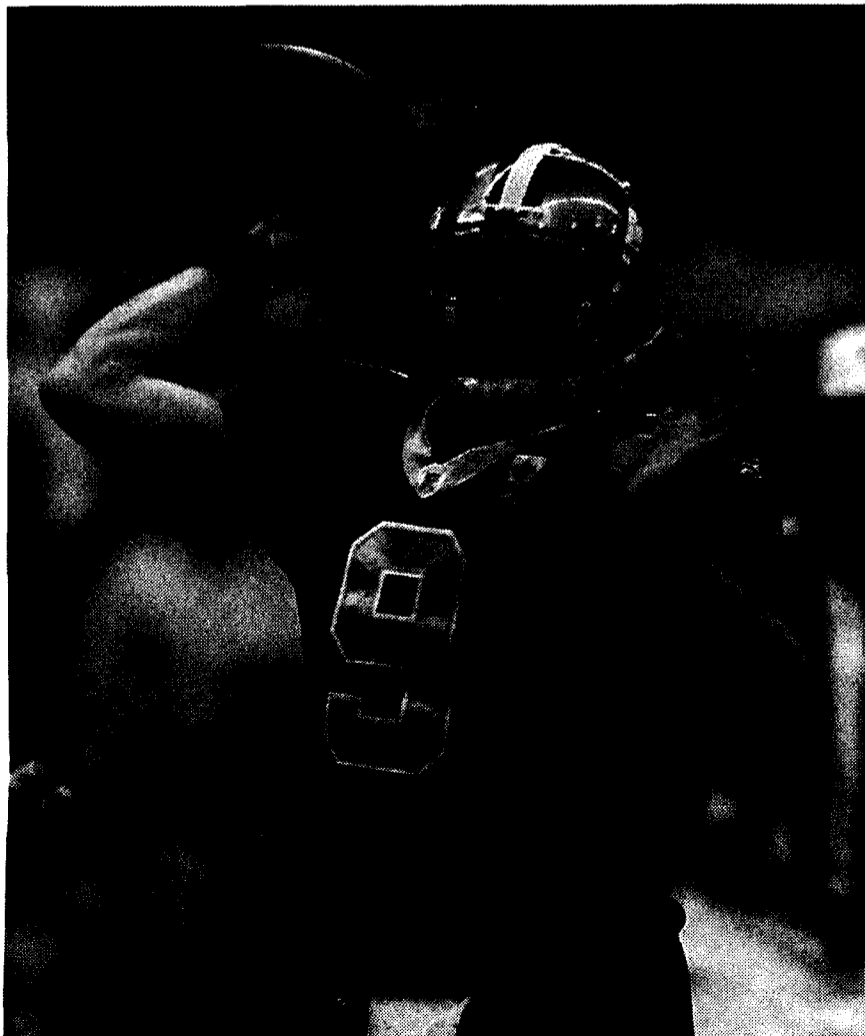


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