

# No-names litter rosters of Super Bowl competitors

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game. It's a testament to the coaching savvy of Bill Belichick that, in this era of rotating players, he has taken the Patriots to the Super Bowl twice in three years. If ever there was evidence that a head coach can be more important than a player, the Patriots proved it after acquiring Belichick four years ago with a compensation package to the New York Jets that included a first-round draft pick.

The flip side of the fall of

dominating teams in recent years was the rise of the most ragged losers. Even the lowly Cincinnati Bengals nearly made the playoffs. The new laws of the NFL jungle made it possible for a team like the Panthers, 1-15 two years ago, to make one of the quickest turnarounds in sports history under the guidance of coach John Fox.

Third, the absence of stars on the Patriots and Panthers hardly matters - either to the teams or the fans. What might seem on the surface a TV ratings disaster in the

Super Bowl may not turn out so bad after all if the game is close, as it figures to be.

"America doesn't want us, but it's going to be a game," Carolina defensive tackle Brentson Buckner said Monday. "Because right now in the NFC, we're the best thing going."

They are exactly that, and America will settle for whoever shows up Feb. 1 in Houston.

Super Bowl Sunday is America's unofficial holiday, as much a part of the

nation's culture as Thanksgiving Day and the Fourth of July. No matter who is in the game, millions of families will gather round their TV sets or join friends and relatives for the annual feast of football. The parties will go on even if the game is a stinker and little more

than background noise.

If the ratings for the playoff games the past couple of weeks are any indication, the NFL is on a roll. New England's 24-14 victory over Indianapolis on Sunday got the highest overnight rating of any TV program - sports or not - since last year's

Super Bowl. The NFC championship game between Carolina and Philadelphia wasn't far behind.

The Super Bowl, like the two teams playing in it, has eclipsed the stars.

STEVE WILSTEIN is a national sports columnist for The Associated Press.

## Toyota's Tundra thaws out in to compete in truck wars

WINFRED B. CROSS

Test Drive



If you don't make a big honking truck you're not with the program. Just ask Toyota. As good as the Tundra is, it's not big enough to satisfy those who need to tower over everyone else on the road.

Until now, Toyota has stretched and widened the Tundra to near Titanic proportions with mixed results, most of which are good.

The Tundra's chassis has been changed completely. The Tundra Double Cab's frame is made by another Japanese firm specializing in heavy duty trucks. It's long enough to accommodate a

full-size bed. How big is this thing. It's nearly the same size as a Ford F-150 and that's plenty big.

Unfortunately, not much was changed in the interior. Not that this is a bad place to be, but it's getting long in the tooth. The fit and finish is extraordinary but the fake wood could be toned down from a glare to a mere gleam.

Toyota also didn't spend any more bucks on the engine. The I-Force V8 is a jewel of a workhorse and it's also as smooth as some luxury car power plants, but 230 horses pales to the 300-340 horsepower available in the competition. Still, there's not much smoother.

Despite those drawbacks, the Double Cab works well. Get the truck rolling and it hums along like a luxury sedan. Punch the gas and it will pass anything - slowly, but with vigor.

And there's the matter of the extra room. This thing is cavernous. The rear area will hold three adults or a lot of stuff. The rear seat has been improved and is no longer rock hard.

The greatest advantage Toyota has is price. A fully loaded Tundra is about \$37,000, that includes leather and a rear-seat DVD entertainment system.

My test truck was a 4x2 SR5. Snazzy wheels, an in-dash CD changer, Monroe, alarm system and towing package brought the \$25,645 base price to \$29,785.

The next generation Tundra isn't far away. It will be built in a new factory in San Antonio, Texas. That new truck will address the Tundra's shortcomings. Until then, the Double Cab fills the bill. You need a big honkin' truck? Here it is.

## NASCAR changes its scoring system

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CONCORD - In a bid to add excitement and put more emphasis on winning, NASCAR changed its scoring system Tuesday by setting up a showdown for the Nextel Cup championship over the season's last 10 races.

"I'm confident it is going to work and the drivers and teams are going to like it after they hear all the details," NASCAR chairman Brian France said.

NASCAR has been criticized in recent years for using a points system that rewarded consistency more than winning. Matt Kenseth won the 2003 championship despite finishing first in just one race. Ryan Newman was sixth in the standings despite winning a series-high eight races.

France said the changes to the system that had been in place since 1975 are aimed at increasing attendance and TV ratings that usually drop in the fall because of competition from the World Series and NFL.

The new format will take effect after the first 26 races. The drivers in the top 10 and any other within 400 points of the leader will earn a berth in what NASCAR has dubbed the "Chase for the Championship."

Those drivers will have their point totals adjusted. The first-place driver will begin the final 10 races with 5,050 points, the second driver 5,045 and so on, with incremental drops of five points for all those involved in the championship showdown.

The drivers not involved in the championship will keep the points they have earned to that point in the season.

"This new model will provide all title contenders an opportunity to compete and contend for the championship," NASCAR president Mike Helton said.

He pointed out that no driver outside the top 10 in points with 10 races remaining has ever won the championship.

"This is not a playoff," Helton said. "Every one of our events will continue to be a Super Bowl and all 43 drivers will be trying to win every race."

The champion will be guaranteed a minimum of \$5 million, while each of the other drivers who finish in the top 10 will earn \$1 million. The 11th-place finisher will get a \$250,000 bonus.

NASCAR also will award a race winner an additional five points, beginning with the season-opening Daytona 500 on Feb. 15

## No sister, no problem for Venus at Australian Open

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She returned Tuesday after an absence of more than six months because of an abdominal injury, showing little rust and a lot of composure in a 6-2, 6-1 win over Ashley Harkleroad.

"Afterward, it was just like a breath of fresh air: 'Oh, yes, I'm back,'" she said.

Kim Clijsters, seeded second, has some injury problems of her own but had no trouble in beating Germany's Marlene Weingartner 6-3, 6-2. Other women advancing were No. 6 Anastasia Myskina, No. 8 Ai Sugiyama and No. 9 Chanda Rubin.

Among the men, No. 5 Guillermo Coria was ousted, but moving on were No. 2 Roger Federer, No. 3 Juan

Carlos Ferrero, No. 8 David Nalbandian and No. 10 Mark Philippoussis.

Venus Williams, seeded third, has won four Grand Slam titles and lost in the final to Serena in five of six, most recently at Wimbledon in July. Neither played in an official tournament until this week.

"It's just not the same. We're always together," Venus said. "It's like a piece of the link is missing."

She has time to think about her own game.

"I'm alone in the room," she said. "I miss her. No doubles."

Serena, who had surgery in August, was on the phone during the Harkleroad match, exchanging text messages with mother Oracene

Williams, a coach for both sisters.

The messages from Down Under were good.

Venus converted five of six break-point chances and gave Harkleroad only one look at a break, which she conceded with a double-fault. She served at up to 119 mph, although she did double-fault five times.

Venus twisted her right ankle in the fourth game but said it was minor.

"I was pretty clear on what I wanted to do," Venus said. "It was really just a matter of me going out there and executing."

She's learned the value of patience.

"In the past, I have kind of rushed too much," she said. "And that doesn't work."

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