

Youthful exuberance
Young women's basketball
hoping to build on
overtime victory.
See story p. 22

SPORTS

Injury Depleted
Men's basketball tries to
right itself, earn first
conference victory.
See story p. 23

This week in sports ...

Saturday

Women's basketball vs. Appalachian
State, 4:30 p.m.
Men's basketball vs. Georgia
Southern, 7 p.m.

Sunday

No games scheduled.

Monday

Men's basketball @ Furman, 7 p.m.

Tuesday

No games scheduled.

Wednesday

Women's basketball vs. Longwood,
noon



Mason honored

Brandon Mason, center for the Elon University football team, continued to rack up awards and recognition well after the season's end. So far this offseason, Mason has been named to the "ESPN The Magazine Academic All America First Team, Seventh Annual Division I-AA Athletics Directors Association Academic All-Star Team, 2004 CollegeSportsReport.com First Team All-America and the 40-player 2004 I-AA.org All-Star football team

And then there were four ...

New England Patriots could extend modern-day dynasty

Mike Demos
Columnist

On Sunday, both conferences in the NFL will conduct their yearly title games with the ultimate prize to the respective victors being an all expenses paid trip to Jacksonville, Fla., for a chance to play in, and possibly win, Super Bowl XXXIX.



Demos

In the AFC, an intriguing rematch, as the defending Super Bowl Champion New England Patriots travel to (Teresa) Heinz Field in Pittsburgh to play the Steelers. The Patriots and Steelers have played twice in the new stadium, with each team earning a win.

In 2001, the heavily favored Steelers hosted the Patriots in the AFC Championship Game only to lose to backup quarterback Drew Bledsoe who filled in most of the game for the injured Tom Brady and led the Pats on their game winning touchdown drive, his last as a member of the Patriots. The Patriots went on to play in Super Bowl XXXVI, where they defeated the St. Louis Rams for their first NFL Championship.

Then this season, the Patriots took an NFL record 21-game win streak into Heinz Field on Halloween night only to be outmatched and outplayed by the healthier Steelers, 34-20.

This game will have historic implications as well, as two of the AFC's most successful franchises over the past 10 seasons match up on the gridiron. For Bill Cowher and the Steelers, this will be their fifth AFC title game in the last 10 seasons, most of any team in the NFL. However, like their cross-state rival the Eagles, the Steelers have struggled in these games. All five games have been in Pittsburgh, all five times Pittsburgh has been favored, but they have only advanced to the Super Bowl once in that time. Sunday will be another chance for redemption for Cowher, the NFL's current longest-tenured head coach.

For Bill Belichick and the Patriots, this will be their third AFC Championship game in four years, and fourth in the last 10, the second most in the NFL in that time to the Steelers. The Patriots have maintained all along over this tremendous four-year run (in which

they've posted an NFL best 55-16 overall record including the playoffs) the mindset of an underdog, letting the other teams talk a big game and the national media not give them the credit they deserve.

Coming into this game, both teams are fairly even and both sport the two best records in the league, with Pittsburgh winning their last 15 games under the direction of rookie phenom Ben Roethlisberger. However the Steelers showed some kinks in the armor against the Jets, and if not for two missed late field goals by kicker Doug Brien, the Jets may have been watching this game from their homes.

Meanwhile the Patriots are coming off an emotional high. Everyone across the country had finally written them off against the unstoppable Colts offense, then the Pats defense, with a little help from the New England weather, held one of the greatest offenses of all time to a mere three points. More impressive was that the Patriots did it all with a secondary anchored by a converted wide receiver and an undrafted rookie.

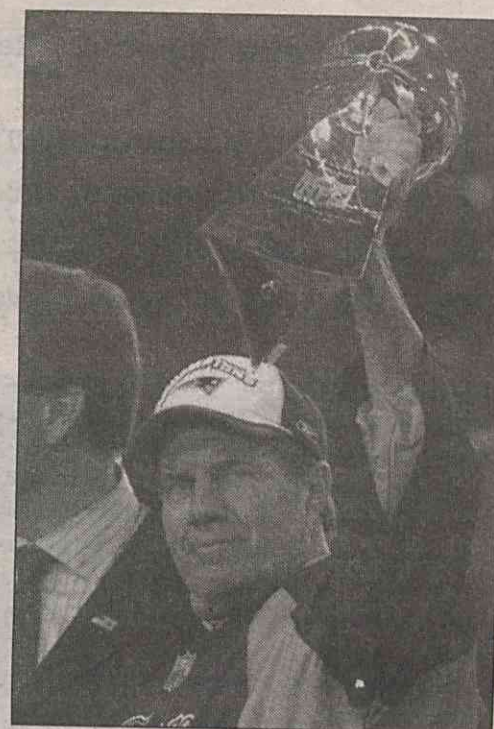
The Patriots seem to be the more polished team. Pittsburgh players have been outspoken all season long, and as history would dictate, that usually comes back to bite a team in the playoffs.

Also, you saw what Belichick did against one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time last week, so it is hard to think he cannot do the same against a rookie who greatly struggled in his first playoff game.

The Pats want payback for Halloween and payback they will get. Pats win this one going away, 20-16.

Now to the NFC where it's the Philadelphia Eagles hosting the Atlanta Falcons. The Eagles are playing in their fourth straight conference championship game, one short of the NFL record of five straight held by John Madden's Raiders back in the 1970s. For the dirty birds (a.k.a. the Falcons) this will be their first championship game since 1998, when they went on the road and upset the Vikings before losing in the Super Bowl to John Elway and the Denver Broncos.

In this game, it's all going to rest on the quarterback's arms, or quite possibly, the feet. Michael Vick and Donovan McNabb have been two of the most mobile quarterbacks in NFL history and whoever has more yards on the ground could very well be the winner. Last



KRT Campus

Patriots coach Bill Belichick, above, will look to hoist another Super Bowl trophy in Jacksonville.

week Vick ran for an unbelievable 119 yards on the ground, a playoff record for a quarterback. It broke the previous record set last year by none other than McNabb.

The the Falcons, which used the combination of D-V-D (Dunn-Vick-Duckett), obliterated a porous Rams defense.

Against Ed Donatell's revamped Atlanta defense, the dink and dunks to Brian Westbrook won't be enough for the Eagles sans Terrell Owens. For the fourth year in a row, Philly will go home in shock. The Buffalo Eagles, err, I mean Philadelphia, drop this one, 24-17.

So that sets up a New England-Atlanta Super Bowl. This one will be a one-sided affair. The Falcons will need to take advantage of the Patriots depleted secondary, but the one dimensional Falcons will try and run, run, run, which suits the Patriots defense. Pats win their third Super Bowl in four years and achieve modern day dynasty status, 31-13.

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