

NFL CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIP PREVIEWS

Broncos backup QB Stidham steps in for Nix to face former team

BY ARNIE STAPLETON
AP PRO FOOTBALL WRITER

DENVER — If any opponent is familiar with Denver Broncos fill-in quarterback Jarrett Stidham, it's the New England Patriots, who drafted him in 2019 to serve as Tom Brady's backup.

When Josh McDaniels took the Las Vegas Raiders' head coaching job, he traded for Stidham, who backed up Derek Carr for two years before signing with Denver, where he served as Russell Wilson's No. 2, then as Bo Nix's right-hand man.

After McDaniels returned to New England for his third stint as offensive coordinator last offseason, the Patriots were interested in a reunion with Stidham, but he chose to stay in Denver.

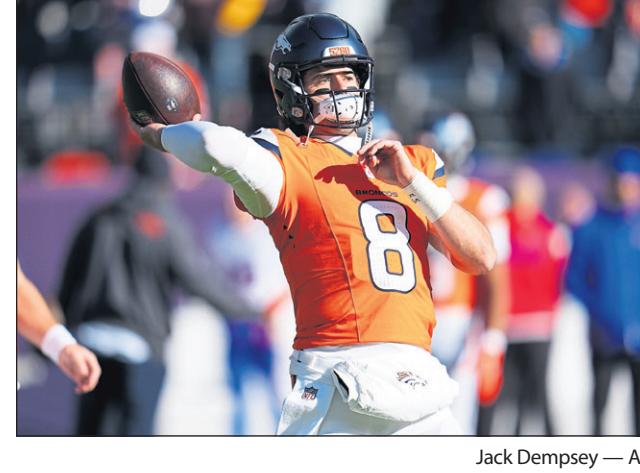
With Nix recovering from surgery after breaking his right ankle on Denver's game-winning drive in overtime against Buffalo last weekend, Stidham steps in Sunday when the Broncos (15-3) host Drake Maye and the Patriots (16-3) in the AFC championship game.

Although Nix was integral to Denver's success this season — he engineered six comebacks in the fourth quarter or overtime and led Denver to an NFL-best 12-2 record in one-score games — his coaches and teammates insist they're equally confident Stidham can lead them to the Super Bowl.

"We're lucky to have him," right tackle Mike McGlinchey said, "because not everybody has a quarterback waiting in the wings as talented as Jarrett."

Although the Patriots brass knows Stidham well, defensive tackle Milton Williams didn't mince his words when asked what he knew about the sixth-year QB who hasn't thrown a pass in two years.

"Nothing. I ain't going to lie," he said. "Nothing. We're going to watch the tape on



Jack Dempsey — AP

Denver Broncos quarterback Jarrett Stidham warms up Saturday, Jan. 17, before an NFL divisional round playoff football game against the Buffalo Bills in Denver.

him and figure out what he likes to do. But they didn't like him over Bo, so."

Of course, no team likes their backup QB more than their starter, but Broncos coach Sean Payton insists Stidham could start for any number of other NFL teams.

Stidham may not have quite the resume of Nix, but he's no slouch, said Patriots cornerback Christian Gonzalez.

"He's in the NFL for a reason," Gonzalez said. "They believe in him, they brought him up, so we've got to prepare and be ready for him. They're in this game for a reason, too. They've got a lot of weapons on the offensive side."

And they might get running back J.K. Dobbins back from foot surgery. The Broncos' backfield has averaged one fewer yard per carry and 29 fewer yards per game since Dobbins got hurt Nov. 6. His return could take a big load off Stidham's shoulders.

"He's been a great back in this league for a long time," Patriots linebacker Robert Spillane said. "He's a physical downhill runner who breaks tackles and makes big, explosive runs for them. If he's out there, we're just going to have to do great at building a wall and swarming to the tackle."

Maye had an MVP-caliber season in his second year in the league and first one under McDaniels' tutelage. But he's had an puzzling postseason, getting sacked 10 times, throwing two interceptions, fumbling six times and losing half of them but still beating the Chargers and Texans handily.

"Really impressive," Payton said. "He's extremely fast and those come from obviously pocket scrambles, but he can run. We had that challenge a week ago. It seems like every third week you have that challenge of someone that you have to make sure your pocket rushes are on point."

Denver's defense led the league in sacks with 68 but they had a dearth of takeaways until collecting five against the Bills last week.

That defense and a good ground game could make a world of difference for Stidham as he faces his former team in the biggest game of a career that features just four starts and one victory, on Dec. 31, 2023, against the Chargers.

"I'm very appreciative of New England for giving me a shot in this league, drafting me," said Stidham, whose only play-callers in his NFL career have been Payton and Payton.

The Seahawks and Rams meet for the third time this season

BY ANDREW DESTIN
ASSOCIATED PRESS

RENTON, Wash. — To some extent, Seahawks defensive lineman Leonard Williams was anticipating that the NFC championship game would shake out this way, with Seattle facing the division-rival Los Angeles Rams for a third time this season.

Williams, a key contributor on the league's top-ranked scoring defense, has seen firsthand how talented the Rams' top-ranked offense is. The Rams racked up 581 yards against Seattle in December in a game the Seahawks ultimately won 38-37 in overtime.

Williams feels good about the players around him and how they will respond Sunday in Seattle.

"I was just expecting it to happen this way," Williams said. "I think it's interesting that the only two teams we played in what feels like over a month is the Niners and the Rams. But I think it's a testament to how good this division has been this year. A lot of respect for both of those teams, but I have even more respect for my team and confidence in my team, and just the way we make it about us is special to me."

Just over a month after that epic overtime game, the Rams have a shot at redemption against the top-seeded Seahawks with a Super Bowl berth on the line.

"We're not immune to understanding the circumstances and what the game means to the outside world, and whether or not we get to continue to keep playing football or not, (but) from a daily standpoint, we operate as normal and get ready to play," said Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford, a finalist for The Associated Press 2025 NFL Most Valuable Player award.



Stephen Brashear — AP

Seattle Seahawks defensive tackle Leonard Williams (99) reacts Saturday, Jan. 17, after NFL football divisional play-off game against the San Francisco 49ers in Seattle.

The Rams took the first meeting of the season in November, led by a defense that intercepted Seahawks quarterback Sam Darnold four times in the 21-19 victory.

Williams feels good about the players around him and how they will respond Sunday in Seattle.

Seattle got the better of Los Angeles in the second game in December with a fourth-quarter comeback and became the first NFL team to win on an overtime 2-point conversion.

"I think every week obviously, no matter how many times we've played them, we're trying to find new ways to attack them and ways to get after them," Williams said. "At the same time I think our team does a great job making it about us every day."

COACHING CLASH

One day after his 40th birthday, Rams coach Sean McVay will attempt to win the NFC title for the third time with the Rams. The youngest coach to win a Super Bowl was profoundly frustrated after his team blew that late 16-point lead in Seattle last month, but he doesn't want his players thinking too much about these teams' two recent thrillers during their preparations for the rubber match.

"You want to be careful not to chase ghosts,"

McVay said. "It is about good execution and good fundamentals. They're a great team and they're great in all three phases. We'd like to think when we're humming and we're at our best, we're pretty good too."

The offensive wizard reached the Super Bowl in his second season with the Rams. Mike Macdonald would match that achievement Sunday if the defensive guru can lead the Seahawks to the franchise's fourth Super Bowl.

The Rams will be facing their Super Bowl 56 MVP on Sunday when Cooper Kupp squares off against his former team again. Kupp won the 2021 AP Offensive Player of the Year award and the receiving triple crown during that championship season in his eight prolific years with the Rams.

Kupp had the second-fewest receiving yards of his career for Seattle this season, yet he stayed healthy nearly all year after injury struggles contributed to his release by the Rams last year and he led Seattle with five catches for 60 yards last weekend in its playoff win over the San Francisco 49ers.

Hafley took the hard road toward coaching the Dolphins

BY TIM REYNOLDS
ASSOCIATED PRESS

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Jeff Hafley was a football coach before he was a football coach.

The new coach of the Miami Dolphins played his college football at Siena, with home games before small crowds at what was a decaying minor-league baseball field in a suburb of Albany, New York. Hafley dealt with multiple injuries in those years but was eager to stay involved, so he helped coaches break down film and even was in the booth with them on many game days.

Little did he know he'd found his calling.

Those Siena teams weren't very good. The program folded in 2003 for financial reasons. Even the field that the team called home has long since been demolished.

But the lessons that Hafley learned there — and other small schools at the start of his professional journey — still resonated within him on Thursday, when he was introduced as the new coach of the Dolphins.

"I learned what it's like to hold people to an extreme level of accountability," Hafley said of those early days. "I learned what toughness is about and I learned how to grind."

He'll have to grind again in Miami. The Dolphins are coming off a second consecutive losing season, going 7-10 this past season in the finale under former coach Mike McDaniel, have serious questions about who their quarterback will be in 2026 and haven't won a play-off game since Hafley was still a student at Siena more than a quarter century ago.

After interviewing, talking to people who were

all really great candidates, I think the enthusiasm, the knowledge, the background, Jeff stood out amongst them all," Dolphins owner Stephen Ross said. "So, we were really fortunate that he was available."

Hafley was a lightly recruited quarterback from New Jersey who committed to Siena, converted to wide receiver and caught one pass in his senior year. The numbers meant nothing. The experiences meant everything.

His first college coach was Ed Zaloom, someone who continues to mentor Hafley today. Zaloom left Siena and went to Division III's Worcester Polytechnic Institute, eventually giving Hafley a \$2,500-a-year job there.

Hafley lined the field. He did the laundry. He cleaned the helmets. He loved every second of it.

"What I learned was there's no job too small,"

Hafley said. "And that's what you're going to get from me every single day, because I learned how to work hard — like, really hard — and there's no replacement for that. And there won't be here."

Zaloom then got Hafley a job at the University at Albany, under another upstate New York coaching legend in Bob Ford. Albany was a well-respected program, and Ford is still revered in that area for not just the wins but how he treated people.

As he did with Zaloom, Hafley listened to every word Ford offered.

"It laid down my foundation," Hafley said of those years. "It taught me how to work hard, it taught me how to treat people, and it taught me how to coach the game of football, the fundamentals, the technique. And it taught

me there was no shortcuts. I wasn't a guy who all of a sudden started coaching and I was sitting here in the NFL. I had to work, and I had really good role models to look to do that. I would do it no other way."

SALE - Clearance Used Business Items

ALL SALES FINAL - ALL CASH SALES - no checks or credit cards

TIME- Saturday, January 24th, 8:00 AM to 1:00 PM

LOCATION: Former Nation's Medicines building located at

3030 Burley Blvd

ITEMS: Business Equipment-File cabinets, Printers, Scanners, Fax Machine, Furniture- Chairs (ladderback), Oak Dry Sink, Book Shelves, Rex Rocker, Oak Tables

MISC: Office Supplies (free stuff), Dinner Bell (1880 C.S. Bell Company) (cast iron)

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LEGAL NOTICE

PUBLIC NOTICE

The U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA) is considering a request for Federal assistance from The City of Owensboro to construct a Water Main Expansion in Owensboro, Daviess County, Kentucky. Pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), EDA is conducting an assessment of the potential of the proposed project to affect the environment and/or historic properties. Notice is hereby given that the project is proposed to be located in, or may affect, a floodplain and/or wetland as defined by Executive Order (EO) 11988 and/or EO 11990.

The project includes construction of a new 2,200 linear foot twenty-inch ductile iron water main. The project will be located at 1901 Ragu Drive, Owensboro, KY. Project information is available for review at the Green River Area Development District, 300 GRADD Way, Owensboro, KY.

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