

Bettis' final fling a rare thing

DETROIT (AP) — Jerome Bettis returned for one more chance to make a run at a championship. Against long odds, he got it.

Many stars in all sports go entire careers without playing for a ring. A few — Bettis, Mark Grace, Oscar Robertson, Ray Bourque come to mind — finally get a shot at one as they're heading for the exit.

It doesn't happen often or easily. "In sports, you're going to have players who are great but haven't won championships," said Robertson, a Hall of Famer who got his NBA title with Milwaukee near the end of his career. "That's true. You only get one winner a year, and the rest of the guys don't win."

They sure try. Like Bettis, who decided to play another season for the Steelers in hopes of reaching the Super Bowl, athletes will push their bodies as far as they'll go — and sometimes hang on longer than they should — to get the thing that sets a winner apart. The ring.

"You look at me — I played 17 years and didn't get one," quarterback Warren Moon said. "That had a lot to do with how long I played. I was still chasing that elusive, one last goal that I had left to accomplish in my career. Unfortunately, it never happened. But I'll tell you what: I did try."

Pro Football Hall of Fame spokesman Joe Horrigan notes that it's commonplace for stars to miss out on a shot at a championship. Before free agency changed the dynamics of sports and gave players freedom to pick their teams, a player could be stuck on a struggling franchise for a long time.

Archie Manning is Exhibit A. He spent his first 11 years with New Orleans, becoming the face of misery for 'Aints fans who hid their own faces with paper bags. Now, it's up to sons Peyton and Eli — quarterbacks for the Colts and Giants, respectively — to do what their father never could.

"I never got close," Archie Manning said this week at a Super Bowl function. "Everybody just wants to get here, and I hope both of my boys get to do it."

Folks around these parts know that greatness doesn't translate into glory. Running back Barry Sanders spent 10 years with the Lions, but had only one playoff victory to show for it.

"It's a reality of the game," Sanders said. "Coming into the NFL, my assumption was that this is the NFL and, naturally, I'll get to the Super Bowl because all you have to do is win three games in the playoffs. That was a mistake I made, because I later found out how tough it was." It's universal.

Robertson was already a superstar — the only player to average a triple-double for a season — during his 10 seasons with the Cincinnati Royals when the struggling franchise traded him. With Kareem Abdul-Jabbar — then Lew Alcindor — as his teammate, he got an NBA championship in his first season with Milwaukee.

"It meant that the critics who needed something negative to say about my career couldn't say something negative about it," Robertson said.

Grace spent the first 13 years of his career with the Chicago Cubs — enough said — before heading to Arizona and getting his long-awaited chance. He was 37 years old when it finally came.

Grace's single started a ninth-inning rally that swept the Diamondbacks a 3-2 victory in Game 7 of the 2001 World Series against the Yankees.

That same year, Bourque got his last-chance Stanley Cup title with Colorado. The Hall of Fame defenseman spent the first 21 years of his career with the Boston Bruins, never getting to hoist the Cup over his head.

For each of these late-in-life success stories, there's dozens who fail.

Again, the Cubs provide a benchmark. Ernie Banks put together a Hall-of-Fame career during 19 years in Chicago, but never even came close to the ultimate prize.

"Some guys are more fortunate to be in the right place at the right time, part of that right chemistry on that right team," Moon said. "And other guys aren't. You look at Ernie Banks in baseball — he never even played in a playoff game his whole career."

Even in the era of free agency, going to a winner doesn't guarantee getting a shot at becoming the ultimate winner.

"Look at A-Rod with the Yankees," Robertson said, referring to Alex Rodriguez. "It doesn't mean that you're going to win. I'm sure he thought when he went to the Yankees that they were going to walk through the World Series."

Now, it's Bettis' turn to make that one, final stab at a title. He considered retiring after the Steelers lost in the AFC title game last season, but came back in part because this year's Super Bowl is in his hometown of Detroit.

"Jerome Bettis had 13 years to prove how great he is," said the Hall of Fame's Horrigan. "If he wouldn't have made the decision to play this year, we would be talking about 'poor Jerome.'"

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APSports Writer Larry Lage contributed to this report.



JOHN VAN NOSTRAND/Colby Free Press
Colby Eagles head coach Derek Bissitt, watches action during the Orange and Black Tournament. Ethan Stover and assistant coach Tom Bowen are seated. Colby boys and girls team play tonight at Oberlin. Colby wrestling faces Oberlin 6:30 p.m. tonight in Colby.

Junior varsity girls lose first game

The Colby High School girls junior varsity basketball team split games Tuesday, in a home tournament, bringing their record to 12-1.

They lost their first game of the season 35-22 against Sharon Springs in the first round.

Leading scorers were Taylor Young with nine and Kiri Kendrick with four.

In the second game, they came from behind to beat Garden City 56-52.

Leading scorers for the Lady Eagles were Aubrette Stephens with 20; Taylor Young, 15; April Weaver, nine; Paige Stephens, seven.

The Lady Eagles also beat Ulysses Jan. 27 37-33. Leading in scoring was Aubrette Stephens with 15; April Weaver with nine; Paige Stephens with eight and Taylor Young, five.

Spotlight shines bright on refs on Super Bowl Sunday

DETROIT (AP) — They're the guys in black and white. No names needed.

Unless they make a bad call. Then, everyone finds out who these NFL officials are. Criticized and vilified, their eyesight and sanity are called into question. And a lot of them are making names for themselves lately.

In a postseason filled with questionable calls, the spotlight will be harsher than ever for referee Bill Leavy and his officiating crew when Pittsburgh plays Seattle on Super Bowl Sunday.

"What we want to do is to pick up the paper Monday and read about the game, not the officiating," said Mike Pereira, who oversees NFL refs. "We all want to be anonymous."

That can be tough sometimes. With more than 130 million people watching the Super Bowl in 234 countries around the world, a wrong move can lead to outrage.

"There's no such thing as perfection. Mistakes happen," Jerry Markbreit, the only person to be the head referee in four Super Bowls, said Wednesday. "Officials are so hard on themselves. When they make a mistake, nobody feels worse than they do."

Pete Morelli and his seven-man crew found out firsthand while working the Indianapolis-Pittsburgh playoff game last month.

Morelli overturned an interception by Steelers safety Troy Polamalu on video review late in the game, and it nearly cost them. Pittsburgh held on to win 21-18 — linebacker Joey Porter later said the officials tried to cheat them out of a victory, and the NFL said Morelli made a mistake.

A few days later, a rock was thrown through the front window at Morelli's home in Stockton, Calif.

Police said it was unclear whether the vandalism was related to his school job or his role as a referee.

In Denver's 27-13 win over New England on Jan. 16, the Broncos' first touchdown was set up by a 39-year pass interference call on Asante Samuel in the end zone. Replays showed contact by both players and Patriots coach Bill Belichick was irate.

"I don't really complain about the refs too much," Seattle cornerback Andre Dyson said. "We're all human. They don't get to see instant replay on every play. The biggest thing is not to make a crucial call to change the outcome of the game."

Super Bowl officials are picked based on their regular-season performance. They must have worked five full seasons in the NFL, and cannot work consecutive Super Bowls.

Most officials wait about 10 years before getting called up to the big game. Many never make it there.

Retired official Bob McElwee, the head referee for three Super Bowls, recalled being on the road in Maryland when he got the news that he got his first assignment.

"I must have jumped out of the phone booth," McElwee said this week while on vacation in Hawaii. "My dad was sitting in the car looking at me, he saw me holding my fist in the air."

Like the players, officials can get nervous. But that can also make them better, McElwee said.

"The pressure raises you a level," he said. "Sure you know what it is. But doggone it, I always felt if I was properly prepared and I was ready, I was going to be OK. The nature of this business is you're not always going to be right."

"But do you see a quarterback who is right all the time? Of course not. If you're properly prepared,

you'll do a good job. If not get out of the business."

Markbreit said he was "scared to death" before his first one in 1983. He wept on the sideline before his last one, realizing that would be his final Super Bowl. He retired in 1998.

Jerry Seeman worked two Super Bowls and later was head of officiating. He especially remembered the New York Giants' 20-19 win over Buffalo in 1991 when Scott Norwood missed a field goal at the end.

"You didn't even know we were on the field," Seeman said in a telephone interview from his winter home in Rancho Mirage, Calif. "That's what you love to have happen. You understand what your role is, you contribute to the success of the game, but you're not out there to get the credits or the discredits or what it is that happens. You want to stay out of it."

JV boys 6-7

The Colby High School boys basketball junior varsity team won both of their games in their tournament, bringing their record to 6-7.

They beat Oakley 52-33 on Monday and Garden City 42-36 Tuesday.

Leading scorers against Oakley were Levi Schlick with 18 and Ryan White with 12. They were followed by Cade Carter with nine; Eric Blanton and Tyson Miller each had five and Cory Sager had three.

Against Garden City, leading the Eagles in scoring was Tyson Miller with nine. He was followed by Levi Schlick, eight; Cade Carter and Eric Blanton each had seven; Ryan White, five; Cory Sager, four and Anthony Rohr, two.

On Friday, Jan. 27, the Eagles beat Ulysses 42-40.

Leading Eagle scorer was Levi Schlick with 16. He was followed by Cade Carter with 10; Cory Sager, eight; Ryan White, four, and Mitchell Tuma, three.

Brewster girls win

The Brewster High School Lady Bulldogs won 54-46 against Quinter Jan. 24.

Head coach Dean Anderson said the team had its best defensive effort of the season.

"Quinter played us very hard," he said. "It was a very good team effort."

The team met its goal having fewer than 15 turnovers, and was productive at the free throw line. Brewster had 11 turnovers to Quinter's 18.

Leading scorers for the Bulldogs

were Dani Bedore with 14 points, followed by Avery Schultz with 13 and Jalyn Reid with nine. Megan Allen and Caitlan Rush each had each points.

The Lady Bulldogs out-rebounded Quinter 29-14.

Schultz was the leading rebounder with 12; Bedore had nine; Rush, four; Allen, three; and Sarah Flanders, one.

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