

BY ROGER BROWN ANALYSIS

 35  31

Patriots edge Ravens in nailbiter

Although it was far from their best effort, the Patriots showed they could absorb a punch — a couple of near-knockout blows, really — and still win the fight.

New England fought back from a pair of 14-point deficits and advanced to its fourth consecutive AFC Championship Game by beating Baltimore on Saturday. The Patriots made life tough on themselves in many ways, but managed to pull out a 35-31 victory in a game that went down to the final play.

The Ravens scored on their first two drives to grab a 14-0 lead, and, after the Patriots pulled even, Baltimore regained a 14-point lead in the third quarter. The Patriots never led until quarterback Tom Brady hooked up with wide receiver Brandon LaFell for a 23-yard pass that resulted in the game's final touchdown with 5:13 to play.

"We didn't expect to come in here and be down 14-0, but this team's a fighting team," Patriots safety Devin McCourty said. "We just kept battling, kept battling — just waiting for the game to turn on big plays and getting stops, and then our offense taking advantage. That's what playing football is."

"We have a veteran group. We have

guys who have been in crazy games. We've been in some games where it seemed like we were out of it. You just keep playing."

In addition to falling behind by two touchdowns twice, the adversity the Patriots had to overcome included the loss of center Bryan Stork, who left the game in the second quarter with a knee injury; another strong postseason performance by Ravens' quarterback Joe Flacco; and a Patriots running game that was limited to 14 yards on 13 carries.

Baltimore bottled up New England's running game so well that the Patriots opened the second half with 20 consecutive pass plays.

"I thought our guys really hung in there," Patriots coach Bill Belichick said. "Down by 14 to start the game. Down by 14 in the third quarter. We just battled back. They hung in there. Got a lot of plays from a lot of different people."

"Certainly wasn't our best game. We're going to need to play better next week, but it's good to win. Good to win."

Flacco began the game by completing nine of his first 10 passes for 109 yards and two touchdowns. His day ended with 28 completions in 45 attempts for 292 yards and four touchdowns. He completed passes to 10 receivers, but was intercepted twice

in the second half.

McCourty's interception in the third quarter ended Flacco's streak of 197 pass attempts in the playoffs without an interception. Flacco's final pass was batted to the ground just shy of the Patriots end zone as time expired.

Flacco entered the game having won seven postseason games on the road, and having thrown 20 TD passes without being intercepted in Baltimore's last nine playoff games.

"I thought we played a sound football game," Flacco said. "Just weren't able to come away with it."

Two things that played a large role in New England's victory: The Patriots defense allowed one first down in nine third-down situations, and the Patriots scored three touchdowns in their three trips to the red zone. The Ravens had the NFL's No. 2 red-zone defense during the regular season.

New England also received a strong game from wide receiver Danny Amendola, who may have played his best game since he was acquired by the Patriots before last season. Amendola caught five passes for 81 yards and two touchdowns. He also averaged 25 yards on five kickoff returns.

If any play provided New England with the spark and momentum it needed, it was likely the double pass that resulted in Amendola's 51-yard touchdown catch from Julian Edelman that helped make it a 28-28 game in the third quarter. Brady fired a backward pass to Edelman, who was a quarterback at Kent State, and Edelman hit Amendola in stride with a pass down the left sideline.

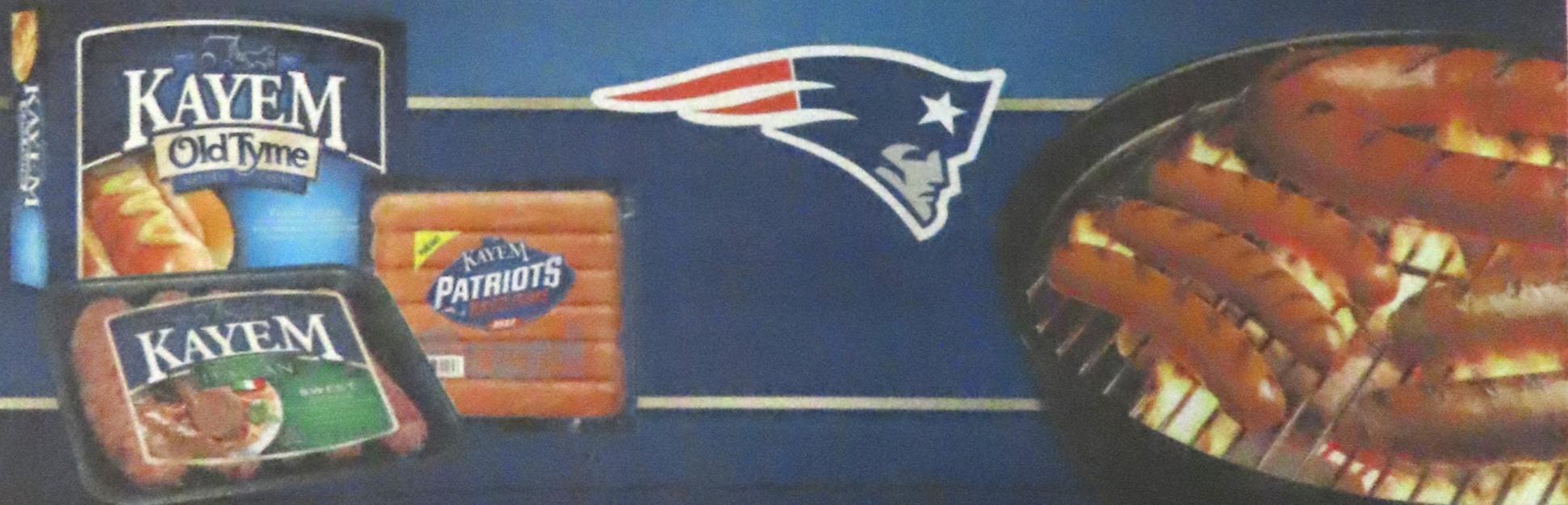
"That double pass has been in all seasons," Brady said. "Great play. Josh [offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels] called it at the perfect time. We actually got the perfect look [from the Baltimore defense]. We saw a blitz right off of it, they bit up. Obviously they tried to tackle [Edelman]. Danny slipped behind them and Jules threw a dime. Pretty sweet play. We needed it. We needed a lot of plays."

Brady finished the game 33-of-50 for 367 yards and three touchdowns. The Patriots outscored the Ravens 21-10 in the second half.

"We played from behind, which is not the way we wanted to play," Brady said. "Getting behind twice by 14 wasn't necessarily in the plan. It took a lot of execution to overcome it. A lot of guys fought through." PFW

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