Daily Sports

WILKER'S WEEKLY:

PATRIOTS SUPER BOWL PREVIEW

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As unbelievable as it sounds, the New England Patriots are set to make their 12th Super Bowl appearance on Sunday. Their matchup against the Seattle Seahawks will give New England the opportunity to claim their first ever ring post-Bill Belichick and Tom Brady, with Drake Maye and Mike Vrabel each looking to claim the first of their careers.

New England is staring down the barrel at an impressive Seahawks squad. Beginning with their offense, Sam Darnold hasn't seen ghosts this season. The former Jets quarterback had 25 total touchdowns to 15 turnovers during the regular season: respectable, no doubt, but not elite. He didn't have to do much in Seattle's dominant win over the 49ers in the divisional round, but his performance against the Rams should infuse the 12th man with plenty of confidence. Darnold finished with nearly 350 passing yards and three touchdowns with a 69.4% completion rate. His passing yard total was his highest all season.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that Jaxon Smith-Njigba stepped up when it mattered most. The likely OPOY caught 10 of his 12 targets for 153 yards and a touchdown. Across three games against the Rams this season, he averaged 118 yards. He's been Seattle's best player by far. In the nine games that he did not get in the end zone during the regular season, the Seattle offense averaged 23.1 points per game. Across the other eight matchups, they averaged 34.4 points per game and never scored less than 20 points.

Aside from Smith-Njigba, Rashid Shaheed's Pro-Bowl season as a return man shouldn't overshadow his offensive role. His ability as a deep threat should be noted, and with Christian Gonzalez potentially following Smith-Njigba, Carlton Davis's lack of long speed could be taken advantage of. Cooper Kupp nabbed a touchdown in the NFC Championship, so don't be surprised if they go back to that well. It was just four seasons ago that Kupp caught the game winning touchdown in a Super Bowl MVP performance. There's no doubt he has the experience.

While the running game has been contained since Zach Charbonnet's injury (Kenneth Walker 3.3 YPC), both Walker and George Holani, Ashton Jeanty's Boise State predecessor, were active in the pass game. The pair combined for seven catches for 76 yards in the last game.

Defensively, the Seahawks are the league's best unit by points per game. The defensive line leads the charge, with Leonard Williams and Byron Murphy being one of the league's best interior duos. Pressure off the edge is by committee, led by Demarcus Lawrence and Uchenna Nwosu, while Boye Mafe and Derrick Hall are rotational pieces.

At the second level, Ernest Jones IV and Drake Thomas each had 95+ tackles this season. Thomas was injured last week, but it seems he won't have much trouble playing on Sunday.

The defensive backfield is the team's crown jewel. Devon Witherspoon is among the league's best cornerbacks, while Riq Woolen and Josh Jobe man the other two posts. Nick Emmanwori, a competitor for DROY, has played linebacker, slot corner and safety as a versatile chess piece for Mike McDaniel's defense. The deep part of the field is manned by Coby Bryant and Julian Love. The unit doesn't have many weaknesses, and as a whole, the defense allowed only 17.2 PPG. Other than the Buccaneers in Week 5 and the Rams in Week 16, no team has scored 30+ against them.

As it stands, New England is a 4.5-point underdog. Despite the teams sharing a 14-3 record, there's little doubt Seattle has played superior competition. For the Patriots to mount an upset, they'll need an offensive performance infinitely better than what they've shown over the last three playoff games. They've scored just 15.7 offensive PPG this postseason; a total Seattle has eclipsed in 17 of their 19 games. Both times they did not were against the 49ers, who they went on to beat by 35 last month in their third matchup of the year.

The key player to look out for is Maye. While a boring selection, the MVP candidate will need to post a legendary Super Bowl performance to make up for the offense's lack of difference makers. Stefon Diggs has largely been a non-factor in the postseason: while he nabbed a touchdown against Houston, he has 73 yards through three games. The Patriots are 5-0 and average 32.4 PPG this season when Diggs hits the century mark, so it shouldn't come as a surprise that eliminating Maye's most talented receiver is the gameplan.

While Maye will need to pick up the slack on Sunday, he'll need help from the supporting cast. Hunter Henry had 17 yards in the last three games after catching the only touchdown scored by either team in the wildcard round. In the backfield, TreVeyon Henderson has played second fiddle to Rhamondre Stevenson, and for good reason. The former OSU Buckeye has taken 24 carries for 57 yards this post season, less than 2.4 YPC. The Patriots average 33.2 PPG when he has a rushing touchdown this season, so seeing the rookie make the most of his touches will be key to a New England victory.

Defensively, Christian Gonzalez and the defensive backfield's coverage on Smith-Njigba will be the game changer. If the defense can force Darnold to other targets, the Seahawks won't have the horses light up the scoreboard as they have over the last two weeks. It's easier said than done but containing Smith-Njigba will be the key in this matchup.

Often ignored, the special teams eliminating Shaheed from the game as a return man will be key to New England's success. Seattle mounted an impressive 16-point comeback win over the Rams following a Shaheed punt return touchdown, and the opening kickoff against the Niners went for six as well, the same game in which Seattle won by 35. Brenden Schooler, Marte Mapu and ST coordinator Jeremy Springer will have to be at their best to keep him contained.

All signs point to a Seattle win, but I'm a believer in Vrabel and company. It won't be a high scoring game should New England come out on top, but I think they could do just that. In a multiple-turnover performance from Darnold, the Patriots win a 16-14 slugfest to come out on top, winning the franchise's seventh Super Bowl.



Drake Maye, quarterback for the New England Patriots, stands in front of the crowd at Gillette Stadium. Maye has shown outstanding skill during his second season in the league, looking to win his first championship ring this weekend at Super Bowl LX. PHOTO COURTESY OF @DELICATETREES ON PINTEREST.

LOMBARDI LINEUP:

WHY SUPERSTARS ARE MISSING THE WORLD BASEBALL CLASSIC

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The finalized 2026 World Baseball Classic rosters are set to be announced tonight at 7 p.m. on MLB Network, after months of speculation of how each country will stack up. However, many fans will be disappointed to see many of their favorite players will be missing out on the highly anticipated event.

The WBC exists to celebrate the international reach that baseball has developed over the years, where the biggest stars suit up for their own countries in place of spring training. Since its creation in 2006, the tournament has produced some of the most iconic and highest rated baseball games of all time, showcasing the national pride that comes with the sport, especially outside the US. But this year, one of the biggest storylines may not be who's playing in the event, but who can't.

New insurance requirements exclude players

In the past, the main controversy over the WBC was the risk of injury to players. Edwin Diaz and Jose Altuve are prime examples of this from the 2023 event, with both missing significant time for their respective MLB teams.

These concerns have sparked changes to salary insurance, which is now required for any major leaguer participating in the event. This policy is intended to protect a player's salary if they sustain an injury and must miss regular season games. However, this year, insurance has become far more difficult to obtain.

The tournament's official insurer, National Finance Partners, has taken a stricter stance on who is eligible for insurance during this WBC. Players with recent injuries, procedures or even those of advanced age have been deemed too risky to insure. As a result, numerous marquee players are being denied coverage and will be excluded from the event.

Who won't be there, and why?

Among the biggest absences from the tournament are Houston Astros stars Altuve and Carlos Correa. Altuve has already faced a WBC-related injury in the past, and after an injury-riddled 2025 season, is considered too risky to insure. Correa's situation stems from a series of past injuries which have forced him to miss significant time for the past few seasons, which led to him also being denied coverage. Both were denied insurance and will miss the chance to represent their countries, Venezuela and Puerto Rico, because of their questionable injury history and large contracts on the line.

Another compelling case is Dodgers infielder Miguel Rojas, who, going into his final major league season, hoped to represent Venezuela for the first time. Approaching age 37, he was denied coverage because the insurer chose not to cover players over a certain age threshold, eliminating his chance to represent his flag as his career nears its end.

The list of players is not limited to just these examples, with many other players feeling the impact. Elly De La Cruz (Dominican Republic) and Marcelo Mayer (Mexico), have faced similar troubles, leaving roster spots unfilled and increased uncertainty as the tournament nears.

Puerto Rico's roster woes

Arguably, the biggest victim of this development is Team Puerto Rico. Initially seen as the early favorites in Pool A, the team has seen over seven of its top players become ineligible over insurance issues. This includes would-be captain Francisco Lindor, whose offseason elbow procedure led to his insurance denial, offering a massive blow to the team. José Berríos, Victor Caratini, and a few others must also miss the event for similar reasons.

The situation has become so severe that Puerto Rico has even considered withdrawing from the tournament entirely if they cannot field a competitive team. This would be a major disappointment for a team that was set to host first-round games in San Juan, and a passionate baseball culture within the country eager to cheer on their stars.

As Puerto Rico must face difficult decisions in the coming days, it has become clear that these insurance troubles are damaging the WBC and effectively destroying a perennial powerhouse for off-the-field reasons.

Looking ahead

Despite the setbacks, the World Baseball Classic is still expected to deliver intense and memorable moments this March. But many are left to wonder what this event could look like if teams could actually field the best rosters possible. Much still needs to change for the WBC to truly be taken seriously alongside the likes of the World Cup, and not just as an exhibition as many executives currently see it.

These insurance debacles are undoubtedly holding a tournament with so much potential back, and fans across the world deserve a tournament driven purely by national pride, not actuarial calculations. The moment that we become willing to accept the risks of a tournament like the WBC, the event may skyrocket into one of the biggest international sporting events in the world.