
THE SPORTIER

Super Bowl LV Preview: The GOAT vs. The Kid

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Immediately after the conclusion of Super Bowl LIV on February 2nd, 2020, in which the Chiefs defeated the San Francisco 49ers, ESPN posted a "Way-too-early" power rankings article, predicting each team's chances at competing for the Lombardi Trophy the following year. After a 7-9 season, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers ranked 19th, which was only good for 3rd in the NFC South division. A key note that was featured in the short blurb about the team was that "the quarterback situation is currently unsettled with Jameis Winston." Winston was coming off of a career year in terms of passing touchdowns, ranking second in the league with 33, yet it was truly a nightmare of a season. Why? Because Winston also led the league in interceptions with 30. Winston is currently the only player to have thrown for 30+ touchdowns and 30 interceptions in a single season. As a clear change was needed at the quarterback position, there was a candidate that was increasingly became a target: Tom Brady. Brady, who had ended the 2019 Patriots season in the playoffs on a sour note, with a game-sealing pick-six against the Titans in the first round, was growing more and more disgruntled with coach Bill Belichick and the Patriots organization, who continued to surround Brady with mediocre talent, most notably in his wide receiving corps. In March of 2020, Brady's problems had been relieved, as the then-42-year-old quarterback inked a deal to sign with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Just a month after Brady's signing, former teammate and future Hall of Fame tight end Rob Gronkowski came out of retirement for the Patriots and was traded to Tampa Bay. With a defensive core that was beginning to blossom, and with a legendary quarterback to throw to the great receiving corps containing one of the best receivers in the league in Mike Evans, the Buccaneers leapt to the number 6 spot on ESPN's August pre-season power rankings. After adding former number 4 overall pick Leonard Fournette as merely a backup running back, the Buccaneers offense was full of promise for the upcoming season. Luckily for the Bucs, their preseason projections were met. Even after a rather disappointing first game against the Saints ended in a 34-23 defeat, the Bucs and Brady turned in a fantastic season. The 43-year-old quarterback leading Tampa Bay turned in one of his best seasons, ranking third in the league in passing yards (4,633) and tied for second in passing touchdowns (40) with Russell Wilson. Much of his success can be attributed to his receiving corps, highlighted by Mike Evans' 7th straight 1,000 yard receiving season, but also the sneaky addition of former star wideout Antonio Brown, who has been suspended in the summer of 2020 while still out of the league, allowing for an extreme variety of options for Brady. Further, Brady's offensive line has been crucial to his success. Brady, who has been pressured on only 24% of his drop backs (4th lowest in the league), has also been able to successfully utilize his weapons so that he can get rid of the ball quickly. Don't forget about the defense, though. With one of the better pass rushes in the game, defined by their 42.3% blitz rate (ranking third in the league), the Buccaneers had the fourth most sacks in the regular season with 48. The Buccaneers, finishing 11-5 in the regular season, were pitted against the Washington Football Team in the Wild Card round of the playoffs. After easily defeating a Taylor Heinicke-led Football Team, the Bucs took on the Saints, who had defeated Tampa Bay during their two regular season meetings. Even though neither Brady nor the beaten up Brees performed exceptionally well, Brees' three interceptions cost his team the game, as he retired on a sour note after losing yet again in the playoffs, this time to Brady. The Bucs' final hurdle to leap was the Green Bay Packers, led by league MVP Aaron Rodgers. Rodgers, who has only appeared in one Super Bowl, has been able to consistently lead his teams deep into the playoffs, but only once the full distance. After a red hot start for the Buccaneers, three straight drives ending in interceptions opened the door for Rodgers. Unfortunately, a combination of poor play calling and untimely penalties stopped the Packers just short of reaching the Super Bowl again. On the flip side, Brady's defense was able to halt the highest-scoring offense in the NFL on countless occasions, which may be a good sign for the Buccaneers' matchup against the Chiefs. While there was much to like about the Buccaneers this season, their glaring weakness all season long has been running the football. Ranking 28th in the league in both total rushing attempts and total rushing yards, it is clear that the Buccaneers are an extremely pass-heavy offense that relies on Brady and the receiving corps to push them to win. With two running backs that have shown that they can contribute on certain levels, it will be key that both Tampa Bay running backs, Ronald Jones and Leonard Fournette, are able to make the running game a legitimate threat during the Super Bowl, which can potentially skew the Chiefs defensive play calling. The spotlight is no doubt shining brightest on Tom Brady during this game. Can the 43-year-old pull off a fantastic run and win a Super Bowl after having just signed in the prior offseason, or will Brady be passing the torch into the hands of the exciting Patrick Mahomes?

The Kansas City Chiefs

The Kansas City Chiefs need no introduction, as they were on this same stage just a season ago. Somehow, the franchise boasting the best offense in the league got even better, winning all but 1 (not including Week 17's loss, where Chad Henne started at quarterback and Chiefs fourth string running back Darwin Thompson led the team in receiving yards) regular season game. Mahomes, who rested in Week 17, still managed to place second in regular season passing yards with 4,740, further showing just how dominant he was throughout the regular season. Last season, just like the Buccaneers, the Chiefs were in the bottom ten in terms of rushing yards per game (98.1). After drafting LSU running back Clyde Edwards-Helaire in the first round of the 2020 NFL Draft, then signing former All-Pro running back Le'Veon Bell in mid-October after the New York Jets cut him, the Chiefs ended the season as a middle of the pack rushing offense, averaging 112.4 yards per game. Now, back to the focal point of the offense, the passing game. Tight end Travis Kelce turned in his best season to date, recording 1,416 receiving yards (2nd in the NFL) and 11 touchdowns (5th in the league) during the 15 games he played during the regular season. With this season, the All-Pro tight end is separating himself as one of, if not the, best tight ends in the NFL, and if he is able to continue on this trajectory, he will end up as one of the best tight ends to ever play the game. As if Kelce alone was not enough for the offensive juggernaut that is the Chiefs, they also have Tyreek Hill, the fastest wide receiver in the NFL. Hill trailed Kelce in yards with 1,276 on the season, but led the team in receiving touchdowns with 15. Tyreek was extremely explosive all throughout the regular season, which was perfectly displayed by his ridiculous 269 receiving yard and 3 receiving touchdown day against none other than the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in November. Better yet, both of these pass-catchers are in their prime, Kelce being 31 and Hill being just 26, showing that it is fully possible that this duo can continue to win for years to come. Outside of these key contributors, there are other receivers that also play important roles. Mecole Hardman and Demarcus Robinson have been utilized more than they were last season, which can be attributed to Chiefs receiver Sammy Watkins missing significant time with hamstring and calf injuries. With so many offensive weapons, head coach Andy Reid has the freedom to call a wide range of plays to throw opposing defenses off. Now, onto the Chiefs defense. The Chiefs' secondary has seen improvements over last season, credited in large part to the play of cornerbacks Charvarius Ward and Bashaud Breeland. The Chiefs secondary, which forced the 10th most turnovers in the league including the 5th most interceptions forced, has proven to be a consistent part of the team that has carried over from last season. Taking a deeper dive into the Chiefs performance, there are two games that stick out on their regular season schedule, one of which has already been mentioned. The most important one, considering their opponent tonight, is the Week 12 matchup between the Chiefs and Buccaneers in Tampa Bay, a game in which the Chiefs won narrowly by just 3 points. Even though the score was close, it was clear who was going to win early on. In one of his best performances of the year, Patrick Mahomes tallied 462 yards with three touchdowns and no interceptions. Two of these touchdowns came in the first quarter of the game, both to Tyreek Hill, who became just the third player since 1980 to record 200+ receiving yards in the first quarter of a game. Mahomes clearly outplayed Brady, who threw for 345 yards with three touchdowns but notched two interceptions. The Chiefs held a 17-0 lead at one point in the first half, and they led the Buccaneers at the half 20-7. Even though the Chiefs only scored one more touchdown the rest of the game, Brady's two picks, both of which occurred in the second half, allowed the Chiefs to run out the clock. The Chiefs ended with 13 minutes and 34 seconds more possession time compared to the Buccaneers, which really tells the story of the Buccaneers not being able to capitalize early in the game. For the Chiefs, their great early start in this game might foreshadow some first quarter magic in the Super Bowl against the very same team, which no doubt is promising. The Bucs game was fantastic for Mahomes, but another game that really stands out on the regular season schedule for the Chiefs was the Week 16 matchup against the Atlanta Falcons. A 17-14 win for Kansas City, this may have been Mahomes' worst game of the season. Throwing for only 278 yards and two touchdowns, with one interception, against what is widely considered one of the worst passing defenses in the league, the Chiefs defense was forced to hold Atlanta's top notch passing offense (minus Julio Jones, who was out with an injury) to very few points. The Chiefs defense was able to force the Falcons to punt on several occasions, and they were able to force a key fumble in the fourth quarter. Unfortunately, the offense was not clicking, with no receivers reaching the 100 yard mark, and the Chiefs were ultimately bailed out by slip ups by the Falcons (dropped interception in the end zone for the Falcons, missed field goal by the Falcons that would have sent the game into overtime). This game, which clinched the Chiefs the number one seed in the playoffs, was a complete 180 from their game against the Buccaneers. The Chiefs possessed the ball for less time than the Falcons, in large part due to several quick drives resulting in punts, and Mahomes was unable to capitalize on the defense stepping up time and time again. This proves that the primary weakness of their team is that if Mahomes has an off day, they will struggle to find much success. The Buccaneers, who saw Tom Brady throw for just 199 yards against the Saints in the Divisional Round of the playoffs, and then for three interceptions in the NFC Championship game, were able to rely on a consistent defense to assist in their victory. The Chiefs, while possessing a great secondary, have a defensive line that is on the weaker side, one that ranked 19th in sacks, 16th in pass attempts allowed, and 21st in rushing yards allowed. Patrick Mahomes is no doubt one of the most talented quarterbacks that has played the game of football, and, at such a young age, it is extremely impressive how well he has performed. In the AFC Divisional game against the Buffalo Bills, just a week after leaving the Divisional Round game with what initially appeared to be a serious concussion, Mahomes threw for 325 yards with three touchdowns and no interceptions. Even though he is so extremely talented, every player has off days. Proven by the Falcons game, a game in which the Chiefs relied on a great secondary but a poor pass rush to beat an eventual 4-12 team, it is unfair to assume that Mahomes can perform at his max level every single night. When facing Tom Brady, what you certainly don't want to do is allow him time in the pocket to make throws with ease, especially with all of the weapons that he has now. There only remains one question for this team now: will the Chiefs be able to back up the narrative of an emerging dynasty on Sunday night?

Score Prediction

28



VS.

31



Super Bowl MVP - Leonard Fournette

Why the Buccaneers?

The famous saying goes "Never count Brady out." Or something like that. Either way, Brady's leadership, intelligence, and intensity make up for his disadvantage in athleticism at the quarterback position. These characteristics are also what have allowed him to sustain a career for two decades and counting. Even though Brady is most likely past his days of 25-point comebacks in the Super Bowl, especially now that he is facing a team that has the potential to be one of the greatest of all time, that does not take away from the "intangibles." In these playoffs, over three games, Brady has played a fantastic game against the Football Team, a poor game against the Saints, and a game in which Brady had many ups and downs against the Packers. Even though it is the Super Bowl, I don't think that Brady can carry a team like we are used to seeing; that's also part of the reason why he is not my pick for Super Bowl MVP if the Buccaneers win. I do think that the Buccaneers defense, one of the better pass rushes in football, will be able to pressure Mahomes enough to make him uncomfortable. The Buccaneers' run game and defense has been a key factor in the success of the team as of late, and I see both of these elements faring better for the Buccaneers tonight compared to Kansas City. The key for the Buccaneers is pressuring Mahomes, and forcing him to get rid of the ball quickly, which will prohibit his receivers from being able to get open downfield for large chunks of yardage. For the Chiefs, their objective is exactly the opposite: their offensive line must hold up against a tough pass rush and allow Mahomes time to throw. In reality, this game is a tossup, with both teams boasting very similar strengths and weaknesses, which is why the predicted score above is so close, with a supposed home field advantage included for the Bucs. It is simply too hard to pick against Brady, who has proven to be a player who is able to ignite a roaring fire in key situations, and who is now playing on one of the better teams he has played on in his career.

Why Leonard Fournette?

As I mentioned before in reference to the most important factors for Tampa Bay, they will need to establish a running game to have a good shot at winning this game. Fournette, who has served as more of a power back for the Buccaneers during the regular season, has leaped over Ronald Jones as the lead rusher for the Bucs in the playoffs. Averaging a tad over 70 rushing yards per game in three playoff games, plus 34 receiving yards per game, Leonard Fournette is performing well above his averages for the regular season (~31 rushing per game, ~19 receiving yards per game). Tied for the most receptions throughout the playoffs and the fourth most receiving yards in the three game span for the Buccaneers, it is clear that Brady has been utilizing Fournette as a dual-threat back, using him as a quick option to divert attention from the elite receivers that the defense is primarily focused on. Since Fournette has been a critical piece to the success of the Buccaneers in the playoffs, not only in the rushing game but also in the high-powered passing game, it is essential that he has a big game in order for the Buccaneers to be able to find success on offense. If Fournette is able to continue his playoff run against a Chiefs rushing defense that allowed upwards of 120 rushing yards per game throughout the regular season, he can make a legitimate case for being Super Bowl LV MVP (if the Buccaneers win the game, of course).

Did You Know?

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers are the first team in NFL history to play in the Super Bowl at their home stadium.

Additionally, Commissioner Roger Goodell has allowed for 7,500 vaccinated health care workers from the Tampa Bay Area to be given free tickets to the Super Bowl.



Sources

The Kansas City Chiefs: [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#), [Fansided](#), [Pro Football Focus](#), [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#), [Lineups](#),

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers: [ESPN](#), [Pro Football Reference](#), [The Football Database](#), [ESPN](#), [Buccaneers](#), [Bleacher Report](#), [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#), [NFL](#), [Pro Football Focus](#), [Pro Football Focus](#), [NFL](#), [TeamRankings](#)

Why Leonard Fournette?: [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#), [TeamRankings](#)

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