



BIG GAME PREVIEW

Inside the Big Game



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The No. 4 seed Los Angeles Rams (12-5) take on the No. 4 seed Cincinnati Bengals (10-7) in the 56th edition of the Super Bowl.

Quarterback Matthew Stafford pulled off late-game wins in each of the Rams' last two playoff games to reach the big game, giving him an astounding 34 career fourth-quarter comebacks. (That's No. 5 in NFL history.) He brings a pair of talented receivers in Cooper Kupp and Odell Beckham Jr. to the game against Cincinnati. But Rams coach Sean McVay will have to be a better game manager than he was in his previous NFL championship appearance, as Los Angeles fell to the New

England Patriots in Super Bowl LIII.

Meanwhile, the Bengals had the worst record in football in 2019, earning a first-round draft pick that they spent on rising star Joe Burrow. No other top NFL pick has led his team to a Super Bowl so quickly. He also showed he could find receivers beyond favorite target Ja'Marr Chase in the AFC championship game, connecting with Tee Higgins six times for 103 yards. Cincinnati was nimble on defense in that win over the Kansas City Chiefs, making key adjustments at half-time, which paved the way.

The Rams win Super Bowl LVI if a defensive front four, led by Aaron Donald and Von Miller, takes advantage of mismatches with Cincinnati's spotty offensive line. Still, Burrow showed he could withstand a furious rush in the

Bengals' earlier playoff win against the Tennessee Titans, and they ultimately emerged victorious. He then completed 7-of-12 passes while under pressure against the Chiefs in the conference title win to advance to the Super Bowl, and converted a trio of third downs by scrambling.

The question of who wins might just come down to momentum: The league's best teams don't always win the Super Bowl. Some don't even advance for a chance to claim the Lombardi Trophy. More often, teams with the most confidence end up as the last ones standing. In this instance, the inexperienced but extraordinarily upbeat Bengals have a distinct edge over the Rams, who are still trying to overcome the sense that they can't win the big one.

About the Game

DATE: Sunday, Feb. 13

TIME: 6:30 p.m. ET

LOCATION: SoFi Stadium in the Los Angeles suburb of Inglewood

WATCH: NBC, or stream via Peacock, NBC Sports App, NBCSports.com, SlingTV or fuboTV

HALF-TIME PERFORMERS: Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Eminem, Mary J. Blige and Kendrick Lamar

How they Got Here

The Rams are 1-3 in the Super Bowl, representing two different cities along the way.

They lost to the Pittsburgh Steelers in Super Bowl XIV, and to the New England Patriots in Super Bowl LIII — both while based in Los Angeles. The Rams won Super Bowl XXXIV over the Tennessee Titans during a stint in between at St. Louis, then lost to the Patriots in Super Bowl XXXVI before moving back to California.

The Bengals are 0-2 in the Super Bowl, having lost a pair of title games (XVI and XXIII) to Joe Montana and the 49ers in the '80s. They finished 4-11-1 last year, after rookie quarterback Joe Burrow went down with a horrific knee injury. That left coach Zac Taylor with a record of just 6-25-1 over his first two years in Cincinnati.

Burrow returned, but Cincinnati remained underdogs all season — including against the Chiefs in the AFC championship match. The resilient Bengals came back to tie the Kansas City game in regulation, and then won it all in overtime with a field goal from rookie Evan McPherson. The Chiefs were trying to go to the Super Bowl for the third straight time; this was just the third AFC title game ever to go into overtime.

The Rams won 20-17 over the San Francisco 49ers to claim the NFC title, and their game was in some ways just as exciting: Los Angeles was tied 17-17 before scoring the winning

points with less than two minutes to play in regulation. Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford had never won a playoff game during an earlier 12-season stretch in Detroit. He won three in just 20 days to punch the Rams' ticket to Super Bowl LVI.

Sean McVay is leading Los Angeles to the club's second Super Bowl in his fifth year as coach. The Rams will follow the Tampa Bay Buccaneers as the second consecutive home team to play host to the NFL title game — a feat that had never previously happened in Super Bowl history. Taylor, the Bengals' head coach, oversaw quarterbacks for the Rams when they lost in Super Bowl LIII. Burrow is trying to join Joe Namath and Montana as the only quarterbacks who have won a college national championship and a Super Bowl.

Comparing the Quarterbacks

This will be the first Super Bowl since 2012 in which neither quarterback is considered a favorite for later enshrinement in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

That doesn't mean, however, that there aren't intriguing storylines, despite the fact that marquee names like Tom Brady and Peyton Manning aren't going to take the field in Los Angeles.

Matthew Stafford finally beat the San Francisco 49ers, stopping the Rams' six-game losing streak against their in-state rivals. Huge wins are the expectation, however, after Los Angeles radically rebuilt their roster. They brought in Stafford and defender Von Miller, then signed receiver Odell Beckham after his tenure with the Cleveland Browns came to a close. These trades left Los Angeles — which already lost a Super Bowl under coach Sean McVay — without a first-round pick until 2024. So, Los Angeles has a win-now attitude. They've bet it all on Stafford, and the pressure to succeed is enormous.

Cincinnati quarterback Joe Burrow arrives without any such pressure. As the 2022 campaign began, Bengals coach Zac Taylor had only won six total games over two years, and Burrow was return-



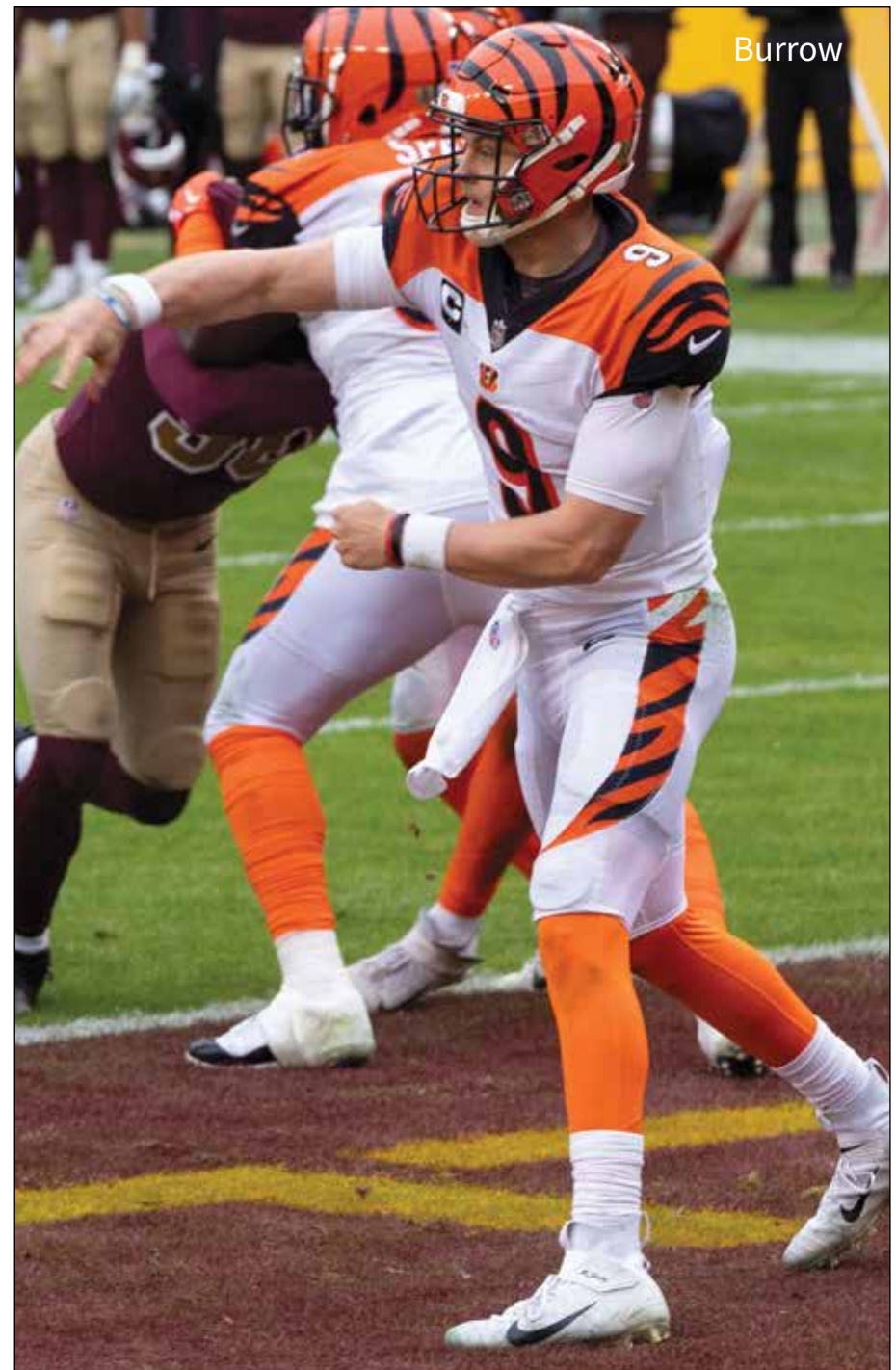
Stafford

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ing after undergoing major knee surgery as a rookie. Fifth-rounder Ja'Marr Chase was merely considered a promising prospect at wide receiver, but certainly not enough of a presence to carry the offense while his quarterback healed. More than that, Burrow once again faced a meat grinder of

divisional games: The AFC North sent three clubs to the playoffs last year.

Instead, Burrow has helped the Bengals to their first NFL title match since 1989, seven years before the LSU product was born. They hadn't won a postseason game in more than 30 years before Burrow



Burrow

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led them to a road win over the far more celebrated Chiefs to advance to Super Bowl LVI. He'll have to win one more time before a hostile crowd, as Stafford tries to erase a career's worth of frustration on Los Angeles' home turf.

Stafford had a trio of multiple-turnover games to end the

regular season, recalling a difficult 12-year stint in Detroit that included just three playoff appearances — and no post-season wins. But Stafford has only thrown on interception since, often connecting with Cooper Kupp to create one of the most dangerous tandems in the game.

Fun Facts about the Big Game

Super Bowl LVI is going to be a game of firsts — many of them, in fact.



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Here's a look at some of the fun facts surrounding the big game.

SAVE THE DATE

The longest pro football season to date will end with the latest Super Bowl ever to be played, after the NFL extended the regular season to 17 games. That created an 18-week season since every club gets a regularly scheduled week off. In the end, the Super Bowl got pushed to Feb. 13.

PICKED FIRST

They've taken very different paths to the NFL title match, but opposing Super Bowl LVI quarterbacks Matthew Stafford and Joe Burrow share one important thing in common: They were both picked first overall in the NFL draft. This is just the second time that's ever happened, following Peyton Manning's win over Cam

Newton in Super Bowl 50.

WORST EVER?

Technically, the Rams' contest against Cincinnati will be the worst matchup ever. A wild postseason finish indicates that Super Bowl LVI will be a fun game anyway, but the two teams actually arrive as the lowest-ranked competitors since seeding began.

They both entered the playoffs as a No. 4 seed. Every previous Super Bowl included at least one team that was a higher seed.

HOME SWEET HOME

For 54 straight years, the home team never advanced to the Super Bowl. Then the Tampa Bay Buccaneers did it last year. Now, the Rams will become the second consecutive home-team competitor, concluding the 2022 season at SoFi Stadium in

the Los Angeles suburb of Inglewood.

A LOSING COMBINATION

The NFL has also never seen a pair of Super Bowl teams with as many combined losses, at 12. Cincinnati enters the game at 13-7, while Los Angeles is now 15-5. Two earlier Super Bowls featured combined loss totals of 11, Super Bowl XIV (which also featured the Rams) and Super Bowl XLIII.

WHAT ARE THE ODDS?

The Cincinnati Bengals began the 2022 season with 200-1 odds to win the Super Bowl, trailing only the lowly Houston Texans, according to Caesars Sportsbooks.

They're now the first team with more than 100-1 odds to make the title game since the Rams did it in 1999 — but even then, the odds were only 150-1.

Breaking Down the Defenses

Joe Burrow arrives as Cincinnati's confirmed headliner, but the Bengals never would have gotten to Super Bowl LVI without a defense that's made big improvements as the season has gone on.

At the same time, Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford's quest for career redemption has dominated headlines. Yet Los Angeles' tough defense ranked third in the league last season with 50 sacks. Here's how these underrated defenses stack up.

CINCINNATI

The Bengals have forced seven postseason turnovers, highlighted by huge stops against Kansas City in the championship game that determined who would represent the AFC in the Super Bowl. They had to overcome some notable injuries as the playoffs unfolded, losing tackle Larry Ogunjobi before their divisional-round win over Tennessee to a foot injury. But the Titans were still held to only 16 points. The Chiefs then rushed out to a 21-3 second-quarter lead, before Cincinnati stiffened. They allowed just 83 post-halftime yards, while notching two interceptions and four sacks. Key plays made all the differ-



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ence: Cincinnati's Eli Apple stuffed Tyreek Hill at the one-yard line to change the momentum against the Chiefs. Von Bell's pick then led to Evan McPherson's game-clinching field goal in overtime.

LOS ANGELES

The Rams' Top 5 sack

defense will face a struggling Bengals line that ranks third in the NFL for sacks allowed — with 55. Cincinnati will have to find a way to contain Los Angeles' All-Pro tackle Aaron Donald if Burrow is going to lead them to an underdog championship. But a mid-season trade for Von Miller has also paid off hand-

somely, and Los Angeles has a consistent opposite-edge threat in Leonard Floyd. Burrow isn't going to be an easy out, despite the Bengals' issues up front. Tennessee sacked him nine times in their divisional matchup, an NFL record, and Burrow still somehow completed more than 75% of his passes. And there

was some good news for Bengals fans, as they only gave up one sack against the Chiefs. Still, Cincinnati hasn't yet seen a front four with the Rams' level of talent. Even if the defensive line doesn't get to Burrow, he'll still have to confound a secondary led by Jalen Ramsey, one of the NFL's top cover men.

Other Key Matchups

Football fans know there are always storylines within the storylines of any big game — and Super Bowl LVI is no exception.

Here's a look at some other critically important matchups to watch.

MENTOR FACES OFF WITH MENTEE

The edge in experience for this big game would seem to go to Sean McVay, who led a team to the Super Bowl three seasons ago and gets to enjoy the rare experience of playing for the trophy at home. But Bengals head coach Zac Taylor served as quarterbacks coach for McVay prior to taking over in Cincinnati. That gave him both a small taste of the pressures of a Super Bowl run and some unique insight into how to attack McVay's system. Taylor will have to make sure quarterback Matthew Stafford doesn't get off to a fast start, while McVay will also have to avoid some decision-making mistakes that have plagued Los Angeles — notably squandering timeouts.

STOPPING A BREAKOUT RECEIVER

Kansas City may have finally provided a blueprint for containing eye-popping Bengals receiver Ja'Marr Chase. He's become an All-Pro in his first

year in the NFL, setting a record for receiving yards in the post-season. But the Chiefs held Chase in check, using a pair of safeties to limit him to just 54 yards in the AFC Championship Game. Los Angeles seems more likely to use Jalen Ramsey as a spy, shadowing Chase wherever he goes. That's because the Bengals' receiving weapons

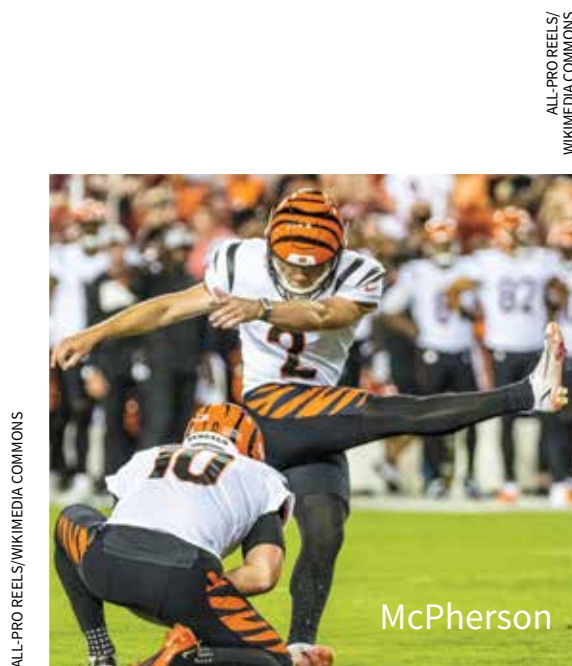
aren't limited to Ja'Marr Chase. Tee Higgins, Joe Mixon or Tyler Boyd must also be defended. Luckily, Ramsey is the rare defender who might be able to single-cover Chase.

SOME VERY SPECIAL TEAMS

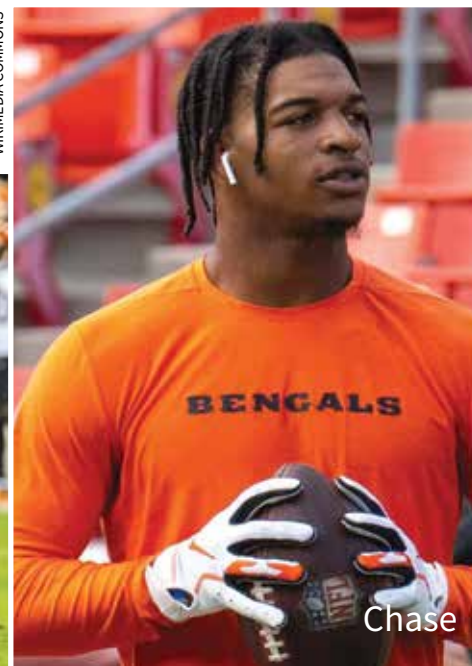
In any other game, the Rams special-teams tandem of kicker Matt Gay and punter Johnny

Hekker would be getting more attention. After all, Los Angeles' Pro Bowl kicker once again led the team in scoring. Hekker has already punted to inside the 20 some 23 times this year. But they will be sitting on the opposite sidelines from one of 2022's great success stories in rookie kicker Evan McPherson. He became the only kicker to be drafted

last year after forgoing his final year of eligibility at Florida. It's certainly paid off this postseason: McPherson was perfect against Las Vegas, perfect against Tennessee and perfect against Kansas City — including the game-winning OT kick to send Cincinnati to the Super Bowl. A rookie kicker has never made 12 field goals in a single offseason.



McPherson

ALL-PRO REELS/
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Chase



Ramsey

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Taylor

ERIK DROST/
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

McVay

THE 621ST CONTINGENCY RESPONSE WING/
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The Game's Biggest Surprises

Most people assumed that Kansas City would be the AFC's representative in the Super Bowl for a third straight season — then the Bengals pulled off a huge upset.

Cincinnati had already ended a decades-long drought for playoff wins, and notched their first-ever playoff win on the road. Then an 18-point overtime comeback hurtled the Bengals to an unexpected Super Bowl appearance. Here's a look at four other times we've seen similarly surprising teams advance to the big game.

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS (1981)

Talk about surprises: San Francisco was a paltry 6-10 in 1980, only to start the next year 1-2. Then coach Bill Walsh, along with future Hall of Famers Joe Montana and Ronnie Lott, reeled off 12 wins on the way to the Super Bowl. Their postseason was defined first by "The Catch," when a Dwight Clark reception secured the NFC championship title — and then by their resiliency in holding off the Bengals for a 26-21 win in Super Bowl XVI.

ST. LOUIS RAMS (1999)

The Rams were clearly positioning themselves for a title run, after making a flurry of moves that including bringing



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in Pro Bowl running back Marshall Faulk. But then newly acquired quarterback Trent Green went down in the pre-season. Nobody could have guessed that they had a championship-caliber backup in Kurt Warner, who came out of nowhere to lead the Rams to a stunning 13-3 record. He capped off the season with a key 73-yard pass to Isaac Bruce that helped win one of the

most exciting Super Bowls in history.

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS (2001)

The Patriots were **also rans** in the era after they lost Super Bowl XXXI, then a previous unknown named Tom Brady joined them under center. He promptly led the Patriots to the first of six titles, beating the favored Pittsburgh Steelers in

the AFC title game and then the Rams' legendary "Greatest Show on Turf" team in Super Bowl XXXVI. Brady was clutch late in the game, positioning Adam Vinatieri for the game-winning field goal.

CAROLINA PANTHERS (2003)

The Panthers had been dead last in the standings two seasons earlier, then became the

second team behind the 1981 49ers to go from worst to a Super Bowl. Coach John Fox and a squad that included Pro Bowl rusher Stephen Davis went 7-9 in 2002, then 11-5 in 2003. They gave the favored New England Patriots all they could handle in Super Bowl XXXVIII, as both teams combined for 29 fourth-quarter points before Vinatieri made a clutch field goal.