

American Football Super Bowl LI



Patriots show impossible is nothing with comeback for ages

Tom Lutz
at NRG Stadium, Houston

With little over 10 minutes left, Brady's side come from 25 points down in most dramatic Super Bowl of all time

So America hasn't changed that much in the last few months after all: the New England Patriots are the Super Bowl champions once again. They beat the Atlanta Falcons 34-28 in overtime amid a frenzied, brain-frying climax in Houston. At one point New England had trailed 28-3 with little over a quarter to play.

For the quarterback Tom Brady, it was a stunning conclusion to a season that ended in redemption and possibly cemented his position as the greatest player of all time. Brady, arguably the most famous athlete in the US, had missed the first four games of the season due to a suspension for his part in the Deflategate scandal. On his return, he led the Patriots on a charge towards their fifth Super Bowl title in remarkable circumstances.

"We all brought each other back," said Brady. "We never felt out of it. Tough battle. They have a great team. I give them a lot of credit. We just made a few more plays than them."

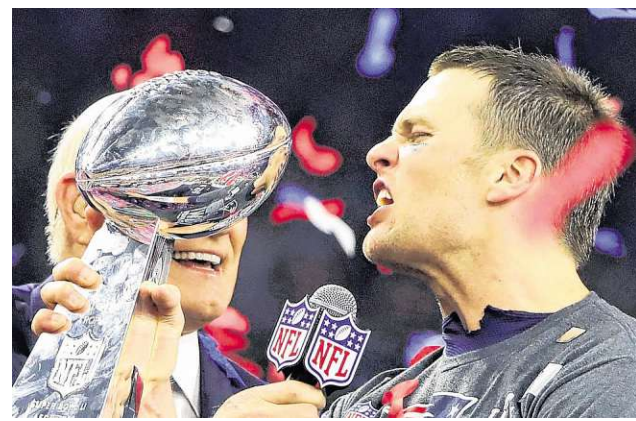
The game had been billed as the experience and will of Brady and his head coach Bill Belichick against the explosive offense of the Falcons, led by Matt Ryan and the extravagantly talented wide receiver Julio Jones. But the high-scoring contest nearly every expert had predicted refused to emerge and the first quarter ended scoreless – the two best quarterbacks in the league this season had managed just 59 yards of passing between them.

Shortrun
It was the Falcons who finally scored. Given the unspectacular play so far, it was fitting that it came from a short run by Devonta Freeman. But Ryan has developed a taste for the limelight after what had been, until this remarkable season, a career of mild underachievement.

In his first Super Bowl, it was Ryan's seventh pass attempt before he failed to find a receiver: he made up for that on his eighth, a beautiful pass to the rookie Austin Hooper to make it 14-0. The Falcons were running, the Patriots gasping.

A quick glance of the record books showed the task ahead of the Patriots: no team had ever won the Super Bowl after trailing by more than 10 points. The task went from challenging to positively vertiginous when Brady, under pressure from Atlanta's pass rushers, was intercepted by Robert Alford, who had a long time to savour the highlight of his career as he trotted 82 yards into the end zone

largely unopposed. The Patriots cheerleaders were surely smiling through gritted teeth as they danced in the end zone during the break for the two-minute warning. A Stephen Gostkowski field goal to end the half was as good as it got for the four-time champions as they went into half-time 21-3 down.



While much of the attention was on Ryan's accuracy, it was the swashbuckling Falcons who had been models of efficiency – they had scored on both of their trips into the red zone – while the Patriots, a team known for their brutal professionalism, had been sloppy, turning the ball over twice. What's more Atlanta had averaged 9.6 yards per carry in the first-half; New England just 2.5.

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in the end zone and a two-point conversion made it 28-20. The impossible had gone to improbable and then on to possible all too quickly for the Falcons. A holding penalty stifled the Falcons' next drive and put them out of field-goal range, leaving the Patriots with plenty of time to score the tying touchdown. They would start a season-defining drive in their own nine-yard line with 3:38 to play.

The Falcons batted Brady's passes a few times but the ball simply refused to fall to them, and the Patriots marched up the field thanks in large part to a brilliant catch from Julian Edelman, who twisted his body to haul in a deflected ball. When White tunneled through for a short rushing touchdown a few plays later the Patriots needed a two-point conversion to level the game. Lesser teams may have lost their nerve but the Patriots made it look easy as Brady found Amendola with a short pass.

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half. Somewhere Donald Trump, a friend of Brady and Belichick, must have allowed himself yet another smile. And so we went to overtime, the first extra frame in the game's 51-year history. The Patriots had the first possession, knowing a touchdown would win them the game. It looked like they had won it when Brady floated a pass towards Martellus Bennett in the end zone, but pass interference was called on the Falcons and the Patriots only needed to drive it home from two yards out.

For once, Brady didn't have the final say: White won it with a plunge near the pylon. There was a huge, palpable whoosh in the stadium as 71,000 people inhaled and exhaled in astonishment. And then a surge of noise. The greatest Super Bowl of all time had ended.

"No doubt that was a tough one for us," said the Falcons head coach, Dan Quinn. "That's a hard one in the locker room... I love [my players], they battled. Tonight we came up short."

Super Bowls aren't supposed to be decided with such stupefying excitement. Teams aren't supposed to come from 25 points down to win the title. Maybe America really is a different place these days after all. Guardian Service

Toughness
"Unbelievable," said Edelman of his team's comeback to tie the game. "It's the microcosm of our life, our season. Mental toughness, believe, do your job, work hard and we'd be champions in the championship game."

Now we would see what Ryan was made of. Time and again, his temperament in the biggest occasions has been questioned, separating him from the very best quarterbacks in the league. A field goal would win the Falcons the game but they could not get out of their own

■ **New England Patriots'** Julian Edelman makes a catch in the fourth quarter, while Tom Brady (right) enjoys victory. PHOTOGRAPH: EZRA SHAW/GETTY/ADREES LATIF/REUTERS

How does New England's miracle compare?

Here's a reminder of five of the most memorable comebacks in the history of sport

the Masters in 1996. He trailed Greg Norman by six strokes going into the final round and went on to win by five after a flawless round of 67.

Red Rum
1973 Grand National
The first win of Red Rum's Grand National treble came in 1973, in the most remarkable of circumstances. Australian horse Crisp was leading by 30 lengths at one stage, and by 15 lengths at the last fence.

However, Red Rum who was carrying 23 pounds fewer than Crisp, and his jockey Brian Fletcher never gave up and they went on to win by three-quarters of a length and set a new record time of 9:01.9. The birth of a legend.

Dennis Taylor
The Crucible, 1985
Dennis Taylor wasn't given much chance against World number one Steve Davis ahead of their World Snooker Championship final in 1985.

The Tyrone native didn't do much to rebut those predictions when he found himself trailing 8-0 after the first session.

Taylor showed true character though to win seven of the next eight frames, and then tie matters at 17 frames each. At its peak, a TV audience of 18.5 million UK viewers watched as Taylor edged the final frame after a memorable battle on the final black. It was the first time the title was decided on the black.

Rugby World Cup
semi-final 1999
You never know which France is going to show up. A bit of an overused cliché to say the least but the Rugby World Cup semi-final of 1999 was a perfect example of how quickly things can go from bad to brilliant for the French.

Trailing against the mighty All Blacks, by 14 points with little over 30 minutes left on the clock, things were looking ominous. The French though responded with 26 points in just 13 minutes to go on and win an absolute classic, 43-31.

Then there's Leinster's Heineken Cup triumph over Northampton in 2011.

The Saints led 22-6 at half-time at the Millennium Stadium, but with Johnny Sexton dictating matters in the second period the Irish province went on to score 27 unanswered points and win the game 33-22.

Another great golfing comeback was Nick Faldo's win at

EAMON DONOGHUE



■ Philippe Bernat-Salles celebrates scoring against the All Blacks in 1999. PHOTOGRAPH: BILLY STICKLAND/INPHO

Rugby Guinness Pro12

Erasmus dismisses return to South Africa

JOHN FALLON

Rassie Erasmus has dismissed any suggestion he might be leaving Munster and heading back to South Africa to take over from beleaguered Springboks' coach Allister Coetzee.

The director of rugby put to bed any notion that he is being lined up for a return to his native country and confirmed that his future is with Munster, where he is in the first of a three-year deal.

Just over a fortnight ago his lawyer back in South Africa, Frikkie Erasmus, told media there that reports linking the 36-times Springbok with a return home.

Yesterday, Erasmus, speaking at a media briefing in Limerick, confirmed that his future is with Munster, who he has guided to top of the Pro12 and into the quarter-finals of the Champions Cup since taking over in the summer.

"There is so much speculation with things normally at this

time of the year with players, but I just think the South African set-up is obviously going through a little bit of a rough patch which they will definitely get out of, I am pretty sure they will.

"When that happens there is always a lot of speculation around different coaches. I am definitely not in the mix there."

Juggling
He has enough on his plate to deal with at the moment with 14 of his players away with the Ireland squad, while a couple of the young players, Bill Johnston and Calvin Nash, are juggling duty with the Irish Under-20s and Munster.

Erasmus, who is preparing for a Pro12 clash with the Dragons in Cork on Friday evening, said that while some players may return from the national set-up he was working on the basis that he might have none of them.

And he said he was pleased that Ian Keatley's form had



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been rewarded with a call-up as the uncertainty around Jonathan Sexton continues.

"We are planning with the idea that we are getting nobody back. That's the best way to do

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it because you're never quite sure with guys doing fitness tests. Their major training session is on Tuesday so we will train with the mind that we have none of them available.

"I have done well for us this year. He himself told me that he went through a rough season last year and so it was nice that he won games for us this year with drop goals and important penalties.

"He has helped out at full-back, at 12, even 9. He's a guy who is always positive and I'm always happy when a player gets an opportunity like this," added Erasmus.

Kearney admits to frustration as competitive return nears

DAIRE WALSH

As he prepares to make his long-awaited return to competitive action against Benetton Treviso on Sunday, Leinster winger Dave Kearney admits that the past four months have been very frustrating for him.

The Louth man's most recent provincial appearance was in the away win against Cardiff Blues on October 1st of last year, and after initially hearing that he would have a short lay-off, Kearney explained how he discovered his injury was more severe than he initially realised.

"It has been very frustrating. It's 16 weeks now. It was from the astro in Cardiff. I just felt something nip off my ankle. I strapped it up at half-time and tried to run, but just couldn't really," Kearney said yesterday.

"I got a scan, and we thought it was two to four weeks. Eventually we found out that there was just a little chip off my bone

that was catching my ligament. Unfortunately we couldn't see that in the scan. Then eventually I went under the knife to get that out."

Opportunities
In Kearney's absence, Leo Cullen offered opportunities to



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Adam Byrne and Rory O'Loughlin to stake their claim.

Kearney said Byrne and O'Loughlin had been extremely impressive and was able to draw parallels with his own elevation from the Leinster Academy up to the senior ranks.

"The two wingers have done a great job and really put their hands up. I suppose it's no dif-

ferent when I came in here as a young lad. You're competing with the older lads," he said.

"As you move up the ladder and get a bit older, you start to compete with the younger lads. It just goes in those circles and that's just the way it is."

Kearney is available for selection on Sunday alongside fit-again international trio Joey Carbery, Mike Ross and Fergus McFadden, but Leinster backs coach Girvan Dempsey confirmed that Rhys Ruddock was currently out of action with a torn quad injury.

"It's not significant [Ruddock's injury]. It's a slight tear on his quad. He's doing rehab at the moment, he's doing a good bit of work," Dempsey said yesterday.

"It's something that he has just picked up a couple of weeks ago. He's been fortunate enough that we've had that time off, and he's had that opportunity to work through it. He's out this weekend."