

SPORTS

Gophers get to play on New Year's Day

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The prestige of taking the field on New Year's Day has faded with the expansion and evolution of the bowl system. The national focus has fallen squarely on the four teams in the inaugural College Football Playoff. The championship game will be held more than a week into January.

This matters not to Minnesota. The Gophers will be playing on New Year's Day for the first time in 53 years, quite the feat for a program that has mostly languished in the bottom half of the Big Ten for the last half-century.

"I think it's huge in terms of exposure. You have 16, 17, 18-year-olds all across the country sitting in their livingrooms, watching Minnesota play meaningful football," senior defensive tackle Cameron Botticelli

said.

The Gophers were picked Sunday to play Missouri in the Buffalo Wild Wings Citrus Bowl in Orlando, Florida. The destination itself was warmly welcomed by the coaches eyeing a critical recruiting area, by the 13 players on the roster who are from the Sunshine State and by long-frustrated fans used to late-December bowl games in Houston, the Phoenix area or Nashville.

The fact that the game will be played on Jan. 1, well, that was as good as the Gophers could have hoped for after losing the Big Ten West Division to rival Wisconsin and missing out on



Jerry Kill

the conference championship game.

"I grew up that way," coach Jerry Kill said, reflecting on his Kansas roots. "Your mom puts a ham in the oven, you get your cheese dip and whatever and you sit there, you get your blanket and start watching football, am I right? That's what you've done for years."

The last New Year's Day game Minnesota played in was the 1962 Rose Bowl, a 21-3 victory over UCLA. That was the second straight trip to Pasadena, California, for those Gophers, who lost 17-7 to Washington the year before but were still picked as national champions for the 1960 season.

Minnesota has played in 14 bowl games since those back-to-back Rose Bowls. Only one, the 2000 Micronpc.com Bowl in Miami Gar-

dens, was in Florida. Of the last nine times the Gophers have gone to a bowl game, three were in Texas, three were in Arizona and three were in Tennessee.

With Florida tied for Wisconsin as the second-most represented state behind Minnesota on the roster, this will be an extra special trip for several key players.

"Playing here in the Midwest, you don't get many opportunities to play back home in Florida," said defensive end Thieren Cockran, who is from Homestead, a suburb of Miami. "I'm trying to get some tickets for all of my family members, so it's been a little chaos."

Call that a good problem to have.

"We've talked about taking steps. This is another step forward," Kill said.

Vikings race past Harvin, NY Jets 30-24 in overtime

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The game was over, the Minnesota Vikings were celebrating, and all Sheldon Richardson could do was sit down in the end zone, take off his helmet and stare off into space.

The New York Jets have been beaten all kinds of ways this season, but this had to be one of the most difficult to swallow. After playing well by their modest standards and pushing a better team into overtime on the road, their defensive expert head coach lost a battle of wits with a rookie quarterback in the game's critical moment.

Teddy Bridgewater saw Rex Ryan's all-out blitz coming a mile away, changed the play and Jarius Wright turned the screen pass into an 87-yard touchdown to give the Vikings a 30-24 victory over the Jets on Sunday.

Wright caught Bridgewater's quick pass, broke a tackle and beat Richardson in a foot race to the end zone to stun the Jets (2-11) with the second-longest overtime receiving touchdown in NFL history.

"We didn't hold our water," said Richardson, who had three sacks and a safety in the game. "He faked us out a little with a pre-tuck (snap). And he made a check."

It was a veteran move from the rookie quarterback, and it made all the difference for the Vikings (6-7). Bridgewater completed 19 of 27 passes for 309 yards and two touchdowns and Wright had four catches for 123 yards.

Bridgewater also threw a 56-yard touchdown to Charles Johnson, who had four catches for 103 yards.

"That game's clearly on my shoulders," Ryan said. "Calling that third down, trying to get off the field on cover-zero (blitz). He hadn't hit anything against it all day. Probably showed our hand a little too early there."

Jets quarterback Geno Smith overcame an interception that was returned for a touchdown on the first play of the game and gave a solid performance. After attempting just 13 passes last week against Miami, Smith was 18 for 29 for 254 yards with a 35-yard touchdown to former Viking Percy Harvin.

But Chris Ivory fumbled just as he was reaching the goal line, Jeff Cumberland dropped a pass in the end zone and the Jets' offense failed to score a touchdown on five trips inside the 20-yard line to let another game slip away.

"I know how badly everyone wants to win and I know that it means a lot to our community, to the fans, including myself and everybody," Smith said. "But it's hard to have to keep losing this way."

Other takeaways from Minnesota's victory:

HURT-ING HARVIN: Harvin was playing in Minnesota for the first time since he requested a trade from the Vikings before last season. He was booed every time he touched the ball but delivered his best performance as a Jet: six catches for 124 yards and four kick returns for 109 yards. But he needed crutches as he left the stadium after leaving the game in the fourth quarter with an injured left ankle.



Teddy Bridgewater

"Especially at the end of the game, you've got OT, the offense is playing well, the game on the line, I definitely, definitely didn't want to be on the sideline," he said. "I wanted to be in that battle with my guys to finish this thing out. But I couldn't go."

MR. VIKING: Zimmer on Bridgewater: "This franchise is Teddy's. I know that was a good headline for you. That's what he needs to do. He needs to take it over. This is his team now."

QUIET OWNER: Jets owner Woody Johnson left TCF Bank Stadium without answering any questions after the game, with many expecting some big changes when this painful season finally comes to a close in three weeks.

"Woody's competitive. He wants what's best for this football team," Ryan said. "He's passionate and he wants to put a great product on the field and obviously, today, he wants to win. Like anything else, so I'm responsible for this and I'll tell Woody and our fans and everybody else that. This is on me."

"But one thing. Obviously, I deserve a lot of criticism for the way this team's performed this season. I get that. But Woody doesn't. I can tell you that much. The Jets are in good hands with him as the owner, that's for sure."

HODGES CASHES IN: The Vikings played without star rookie linebacker Anthony Barr, who missed the game with a knee injury. Second-year pro Gerald Hodges stepped in and made an athletic interception on the first play of the game, then ran 27 yards for the touchdown to get the Vikings out to a quick 7-0 lead.

JOHNSON'S BIG GAME: Charles Johnson's big day could have been even bigger. Johnson fumbled just has he was going in for his second touchdown of the day, but he was bailed out when fullback Jerome Felton fell on it in the end zone for a 21-12 lead in the second quarter.

"Teddy wants me to buy him steak dinner since I didn't get him that touchdown," Johnson said.

Charles Johnson now top Vikings target

EDEN PRAIRIE (AP) — Charles Johnson joined the Minnesota Vikings two weeks into this season, two days after the release of Jerome Simpson because of continuing off-the-field troubles.

Signing a player off Cleveland's practice squad in mid-September is not the type of transaction that causes a stir. This was simply a move by the Vikings to give a young wide receiver a try, with an opening at that position following Simpson's release.

Little did anyone around the league realize then that the Vikings had actually acquired their primary pass-catcher.

"I'd never heard of him. I'd never seen him before," teammate Jarius Wright said. "But I've played receiver for a long time, so you know good receivers when you see them. We knew he definitely had a talent and that he could help us out."

Johnson was a seventh-round draft pick by Green Bay last year who finished his college career at NCAA Division II power Grand Valley State in Michigan.

In two seasons for the Lakers, Johnson had 128 receptions, 2,229 yards and 31 touchdowns in 22 games. At GVSU's pro day workout for NFL scouts, Johnson ran a couple of 40-yard dashes under 4.4 seconds. With a 6-foot-2, 215-pound frame, he had the physical potential.

There's that whole small-school thing, though. Was the success he had more because of the level of competition?

"I know some small-



FILE PHOTO

From right, Vikings wide receiver Charles Johnson (12) runs with the football while being pursued by Bears cornerback Demontre Hurst (30) in the Nov. 16 game at Soldier Field.

school guys are great, just like myself," Johnson said, adding: "I just go out there and play my game. They'll see how it is. Once they line up and they have to guard me, they'll see how I can play."

Not here. Johnson has been targeted 30 times over the past four games by Teddy Bridgewater for a team-high 26.5 percent. Johnson has 15 catches for 283 yards and two touchdowns and was inches from another score on Sunday against the New York Jets when he fumbled at the goal line and

Jerome Felton recovered for the touchdown.

That gaffe was quickly forgiven.

"He made some plays the first week or two and then I was like, 'This guy might be able to play,'" said Felton, who hadn't heard of Johnson, either, when he signed. Felton added: "It's always cool to see a guy come in that comes in from nothing and gets an opportunity and takes advantage of it."

Johnson has overtaken Cordarrelle Patterson, one of the team's first-round draft picks last year, at the

Bronco 3-4 graders girls hoops opener

The Bronco girls basketball season began Saturday for third- and fourth-graders with a pair of games in the four-team league.

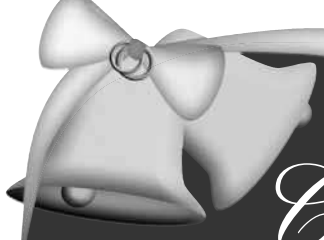
In the first game, the Sparks defeated the Comets, 18-8. Kourtney Stal-

lard led the Sparks with 14 points with Graci Bissonette and Josie Mason adding two points each. Nissa Beck and Mya Gilbertson scored four points apiece for the Comets.

The Lynx won the second

game in overtime over the Sun, 12-10. Ellie Windels led the Comets with eight points, while Summer Hessel-dahl and Danika Zahn added two points each. Tessa Cann scored all 10 points for the Sun.

Action resumes next Saturday at the Backus Community Center with the Sparks facing the Sun at 9 a.m. and the Comets against the Lynx at 10 a.m. The Sparks and Lynx lead the league at 1-0.





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