

NFC CHAMPIONSHIP RAMS 26, SAINTS 23, OT

REFEERING UNBELIEVABLE

Blown no-call robs New Orleans of NFC Championship, sets up tainted Super Bowl LIII between Rams and Patriots



Before the ball reaches Saints receiver Tommylee Lewis, Rams cornerback Nickell Robey-Coleman slams into him, late in the fourth quarter. No referee called a penalty for pass interference or for helmet-to-helmet contact. The move prevented the Saints from running out most of the clock before taking the lead with a field goal. Robert Gauthier, Los Angeles Times

Ram jammed: Saints' dream season deserved a better ending than this

Jeff Duncan jduncan@nola.com
You thought the Minnesota Miracle was bad. This was worse. Much, much worse.

The New Orleans Saints have suffered their share of stunning losses over the years, but Sunday's shocking setback in the NFC Championship Game will forever live in infamy. If the Minnesota Miracle felt like a rug was pulled out from under the Saints, this felt like a fist to the face, a repugnant Ram job for the ages.

The Saints were one step away from the Super Bowl. They were the best team in football, the No. 1 seed in the entire NFL playoffs. They were playing at home and had a 13-point lead after the first quarter. They were two minutes and one play away from finishing off the Los Angeles Rams and taking over Super Bowl LIII for two weeks in Atlanta.

Then it all came unraveled in heartbreaking, mind-boggling fashion. One of the most egregious non-calls in NFL history gave the Rams the life they needed to stage a comeback, and they took advantage of it, completing a stunning rally with a 26-23 victory on Greg Zuerlein's game-winning 57-yard field goal in overtime.

Coach Sean Payton spoke for Saints fans everywhere when he said, "We'll probably never get over it."

What made the loss so difficult to take for Payton, the Saints and their fans was that it was felt out of their control.

The Vikings loss a year ago was something entirely different. The Saints had to own that one because it was largely their own doing. It still stunk, but at least there was no one to blame but themselves.

But the no-call is something entirely different. It was so bad, so overtly obvious that it was nearly inconceivable.

Saints fans won't let go of this one for a while.

Referee Bill Vinovich and his crew will take their place alongside Vernon Davis, Stefon Diggs and Marshawn Lynch in Saints lore.

Nickell Robey-Coleman's ill-timed hit on Tommylee Lewis was so violent it dislodged Lewis' mouthpiece. It was so egregious that even Robey-Coleman himself said, "I thought I was going to get flagged ... and they would have scored on the next play."

Dean Blandino, the league's former vice president of officiating, said afterward, "That was clearly pass interference."

Afterward, Vinovich didn't provide much in the way of an explanation. When interviewed by our Amie Just, he said he didn't see the play and that it was a judgment call by side judge Gary Cavaletto and/or down judge Patrick Turner. Both officials were in position to make the call. Both inexplicably swallowed their whistles.

SEE DUNCAN, A2



Coach Sean Payton reacts to the Rams' early hit to Lewis. Payton said it was perhaps the most obvious pass interference call ever. David Grunfeld, dgrunfeld@nola.com



DREW BREES

Not the end of the line for No. 9

After falling short in overtime in the NFC Championship Game, Saints QB says he'll back for the 2019 season to take another crack at a second Super Bowl. **B9**



2018 SEASON

'We had that opportunity'

Saints lament missed chances to put the game away, but all the talk after Sunday's game centered around the blown call at the end of the fourth quarter, leaving defensive stalwart Demario Davis to sit in silence at his locker. **B4**