

Champs? The Saints, Dat's Who

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MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — The New Orleans Saints almost left when their city flooded and their stadium had been turned into a shelter, a disaster seeming to provide the perfect escape route for a team in search of a better stadium and a bigger market.

Displaced and disheartened, the Saints haltingly returned to a repaired Superdome after Hurricane Katrina. And a team so awful that its fans used to wear bags on their heads came to symbolize and be embraced by a battered but rebuilding community.

On Sunday, with a quarterback who had hitched his career to resurrecting the Saints and with a team that played nearly flawlessly, the Saints gave New Orleans a reason to do what it does better than any other American city: celebrate. In the franchise’s first Super Bowl, the Saints beat the Indianapolis Colts, 31-17, sending New Orleanians into the streets for a party.

“Who Dat?” Saints fans ask about which opponent might beat their team.

Now they have their answer: nobody. The Saints are the N.F.L.’s champions, after 42 seasons of futility.

Confetti fell on the Saints here, but back in New Orleans, where Mardi Gras begins in less than two weeks, Bourbon Street erupted in joy, four and a half years after the city was nearly engulfed by despair when the levees broke.

“Louisiana, by way of New Orleans, is back,” said the Saints’ owner, Tom Benson, clutching the Lombardi Trophy. “And it shows the whole world.”

The play that sealed the victory, a comeback from a 10-0 deficit, came with a little more than three minutes to play at the expense of a New Orleans native. Colts quarterback Peyton Manning, a son of the beloved former Saints quarterback Archie Manning, was intercepted by Saints cornerback Tracy Porter — a Louisiana native, too — when the Saints blitzed. Porter jumped in front of the intended receiver and returned the interception 74 yards for a touchdown that gave the Saints their winning margin.

“Four years ago, whoever thought this would be happening?” quarterback Drew Brees said. “Eighty-five percent of the city was under water. All of the residents evacuated across the county. Most people not knowing if New Orleans could ever come back or if the organization or team would ever come back.”

Brees has described signing with the Saints, after the 2005 season, as a calling. He moved his family to the city and has devoted himself to helping it recover. At the same time, he has made himself one of the league’s elite quarterbacks — he was the runner-up to Manning for the league’s Most Valuable Player award this season — and he was almost perfect in the final three quarters of Sunday’s game.

Over all, he completed 32 of 39 passes for 288 yards and 2 touchdowns, tying the Super Bowl record for completions. Brees, like the rest of the league’s signal-callers, stands in the shadow of Manning in the hierarchy of quarterbacks.

But he was 7 of 7 on the drive that gave the Saints a fourth-quarter lead, completing a 2-yard touchdown pass to Jeremy Shockey, the former Giants tight end who watched them win the Super Bowl two years ago from a luxury box while injured. And then, with luck on their side after so many years, the Saints won a replay challenge on the 2-point conversion to go ahead by 24-17.

Brees was the M.V.P. of the game, but Saints Coach Sean Payton made the most valuable — and the gutsiest — decision. With the Saints trailing by 4 points and kicking off to the Colts to open the second half, Payton called for an onside kick. The Saints call the play “ambush,” and that was what it was. Colts players admitted after the game that they did not see it coming.

Thomas Morstead, the kicker on the play, said: “I wasn’t worried. I was terrified.”

If the kick failed, Manning would have had a short field to start the third quarter. But the Saints are a team that travels with nuns and priests in the owner’s entourage, and after years of horrible football and terrible tragedy in New Orleans, the city’s prayers were answered at long last.

The ball bounced off the helmet of the Colts’ Hank Baskett and was recovered by the Saints, keeping Manning off the field. It was just part of the Saints’ pedal-to-the-metal play-calling.

“We were going to be aggressive,” Payton said. “When you do something like that, you just put it on the players and they were able to execute. It turned out to be a big change of possession and ended with a score.”

By then, Brees, who set an N.F.L. season record for completion percentage, had found the rhythm that had defined the league’s best offense during the season. He was aided by the slowing Colts pass rusher Dwight Freeney, who had played well early on an injured ankle.

On the drive that followed the onside kick, Brees threaded passes through the Colts’ defense. A screen pass to Pierre Thomas turned into a weaving run for a 16-yard touchdown that gave the Saints a 13-10 lead.

When Manning finally got the ball again — the Colts had only six offensive snaps in the second quarter — he reminded everyone why he was the league’s most valuable player. On third down, he arced a pass over three Saints defenders into tight end Dallas Clark’s hands, as perfect a pass as he has thrown. Joseph Addai pinballed his way through an obstacle course of missed tackles to the end zone from the 4 to give the Colts the lead again, 17-13.

The game had turned into the predicted shootout, if an unusual one. The Saints got three field goals of more than 40 yards from Garrett Hartley, the first time that had happened in a Super Bowl. And the Colts, who had looked on their way to a blowout when they opened a quick 10-point lead, grew oddly conservative when the Saints even let them have the ball.

Early in the fourth quarter, the Colts held a 1-point lead and were driving into Saints territory. But on fourth-and-11 from the Saints 33, the Colts opted for a 51-yard field-goal attempt from Matt Stover that was wide left.

The Colts were criticized for not trying for a perfect record when they rested their starters late in the regular season. But it was not a lack of momentum that upended their championship run. It was an offense that eclipsed their own and a defense that made Manning look mortal at the most inopportune time.

“We probably never got into a great rhythm,” said Manning, who was 31 of 45 for 333 yards, a touchdown and an interception.

Manning was asked several times if he could imagine the emotions of New Orleans on Sunday night. Pained by his own loss, he said he knew how happy the Super Bowl had made the Colts and Indianapolis when they won it three years ago.

Manning did not have to explain further. When the Saints returned to the Superdome on Sept. 25, 2006 — a year after Katrina struck — they were serenaded by an old punk rock song, “The Saints Are Coming.”

At long last, the Saints have arrived, and they brought New Orleans back with them. [Living Story Super Bowl XLIV](#) The Times's N.F.L. coverage of Super Bowl XLIV and the 2010 playoffs with background, analysis, timelines and past articles from [NYTimes.com](#) and [Google](#). (The New York Times)