

# The Lowell Sun

## Pats-Steelers: A renewal of hostilities Sept. 9

**By John Ingoldsby**  
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When the New England Patriots raise their Super Bowl flag in front of the Pittsburgh Steelers a week from tomorrow night at the Grand Opening of Gillette Stadium, they will be adding insult to the injury they inflicted on the Steelers in last year's AFC championship game.

With the proud Steelers still licking their wounds from January's bloodletting at Heinz Field, the potential for a cataclysmic battle before a national audience in the Monday Night Football opener looms large.

We should expect nothing less since it will be a continuation of what arguably has become the best rivalry in the NFL today, succeeding the San Francisco 49ers-Dallas Cowboys rivalry that lasted into the mid-1990s.

Consider these facts:

The two teams have met in the playoffs three times since the 1996 season, with the Patriots winning twice and going to the Super Bowl both times. They have met four times in the regular season since 1993, with the Steelers winning thrice. All four regular season games were played in December, with two being played as Saturday national TV games. Each year they met in December, one of the two teams made the playoffs, and both made it in 1997. The Steelers hold a 4-3 edge in the seven games overall since 1993.

Quite simply, no other pair of NFL teams have played as many important games with so much on the line during the past decade, particularly in this era of parity.

However, it's not only the tight won-loss record in these big games that sets this rivalry apart. It's that the playoff games have been unforgettable and the regular season games have been both meaningful and memorable. Each contest has had its own identity with action on the field and story lines off the field.

The playoff clashes have been so momentous that they have an actual name attached or can be recalled with one phrase: The Fog Bowl in Foxboro, the Vrabel-forced fumble, and last year's "Can I have your hotel room in New Orleans" nastiness.

The regular season games also are easily remembered: The Kevin Henry Interception game, the Bledsoe failed quarterback sneak ending, the Bledsoe broken finger stretch, and the rookie Curtis Martin Pittsburgh homecoming.

Some constants have remained through all seven games, such as Patriot receiver Troy Brown and Pittsburgh Coach Bill Cowher, now the longest-tenured coach in the NFL. Other constants will be missing for the first time Sept. 9, such as Foxboro

Stadium itself and, most notably, former Pats quarterback Drew Bledsoe, who played a major role both good and bad in most of the seven games.

But constants don't seem to matter at this point only a knock-down-drag-out recent history with plenty of familiarity and war stories on both sides.

The turning-point game that began to elevate the series in stature would undoubtedly be The Fog Bowl on Sunday, Jan. 5, 1997.

It was a certifiably big event, even as playoff games go. Both teams were 11-5 and the powerhouse Steelers were the defending AFC champions, having lost to the Cowboys in the Super Bowl the previous year. The Patriots were in year three of the Bill Parcells regime, and had just clinched the AFC East championship two weeks earlier with a pulsating comeback victory over the New York Giants.

Against that backdrop, everyone in the Foxboro area awoke to an unseasonably warm, eerily foggy morning that was more suitable to a Vincent Price horror film than an NFL playoff game. But from the opening gun, it was the Steelers who were to find themselves trapped in a horror chamber known as Foxboro Stadium.

On the game's first play from scrimmage, Bledsoe hit rookie record-holding receiver Terry Glenn (remember him?) with a bomb to the Steelers' two-yard line, the first of seven straight completions to open the game, and set the tone for the day.

Curtis Martin punched it in moments later for the first of his three touchdowns on the day, and the 28-3 rout was on. The next week the Pats beat the Jacksonville Jaguars en route to their Super Bowl loss to the Green Bay Packers.

However, 363 days later, the Men of Steel would exact their revenge by ending the Patriots' season with a 7-6 playoff victory in Three Rivers Stadium.

Again, the temperature and the emotions were both high as defense dominated. And it was defense, or lack thereof, that produced the game's two most memorable plays. The first and only touchdown occurred in the first quarter when quarterback Kordell Stewart tiptoed down the sidelines for a 40-yard score. It's remembered by all in New England as the play where linebacker Todd Collins shockingly failed to simply push Stewart out of bounds when he had him squarely in his sights near the beginning of the run.

The other decisive play came at the end when all Pats fans were feeling it a comeback victory that is until Steeler rookie linebacker Mike Vrabel barreled into Drew Bledsoe, forcing a fumble that was recovered by Steeler linebacker Jason Gildon. Game over, season over.

Vrabel, now a Patriot, reflected on the hit a few weeks ago, saying: "Looking back, things never seem as big at the time, but people up here sure know me for that hit and it stands out. I was just looking to make a play."

Just 20 days prior to Vrabel's game-saving hit against Bledsoe, home field playoff advantage had gone to the Steelers when they and the Pats staged their penultimate regular-season slugfest.

It was a 4 p.m. Saturday national TV extravaganza as one of the most boisterous crowds ever in Foxboro stood practically the entire game. That was the game when Bledsoe was simply protecting a lead at the end and inexplicably threw the ball into

defensive lineman Kevin Henry's waiting hands, and the Steelers capitalized on the stunning turnover to win 24-21 in overtime.

Four years earlier, the Patriots had lost an equally frustrating 17-14 game at the gun when Bledsoe was stuffed on a quarterback sneak from the one-yard line. He was a rookie then, but it was the early warning signal that the Patriots probably weren't going to be winning many games with Bledsoe's running.

Two years later, on Saturday, December 16, 1995, the Patriots lost 41-27 in Pittsburgh as Curtis Martin returned to his hometown with a big game, but the Steelers were already flashing their soon-to-be Super Bowl form.

The last regular season game between the teams was in 1998, two weeks after Bledsoe had broken his finger and led the Pats to two breakthrough comeback victories over Miami and Buffalo. He kept it going in Three Rivers that day as he hit Glenn with an 86-yard TD to ignite the 23-9 victory.

The next time the Pats and Steelers would meet was last January, when Bledsoe returned from his Mo Lewis injury to lead the Patriots to the AFC title. In the aftermath, his teammates were screaming at the Steelers and Cowher for their New Orleans hotel rooms after their ill-advised reservations earlier that week. The hard feelings carried over the next day when Kordell Stewart said, "The best team doesn't always win."

"When the two teams play, it's always a great game and we are always looking to see what they are doing knowing it may have playoff implications," said Patriot safety Lawyer Milloy. When apprised of the Niners-Cowboy rivalry comparison, Milloy showed he hasn't forgotten last year's theme, saying: "Finally, someone's giving US some respect."

Even understated Patriots coach Bill Belichick, acknowledged the rivalry, saying, "There is no doubt about it. There have been a lot of important games between the Patriots and Steelers."

And there will be another one to start the 2002 season on the biggest stage of all: Monday Night Football's season opener before a national TV audience.

Are you ready for some football?

(John Ingoldsby is a former Sun news editor and a Patriots season ticket holder)