

BENGALS PAY THE PRICE FOR CHARACTER OF PLAYERS

CINCINNATI: Vontaze Burfict was having the game of his life when he ran into the bowels of Paul Brown Stadium with what appeared to be a clinching interception, trailed by Adam "Pacman" Jones and several teammates eager to celebrate.

Had Burfict and Jones only stayed there, the Cincinnati Bengals might still be playing next week. That irony will probably not be lost on Bengals fans as they cope with yet another playoff meltdown, this one unlike any other. They'll spend a miserable offseason wondering what might have been had Burfict and Jones exhibited just a modicum of self-control in the final seconds against a Pittsburgh team with a quarterback who could barely lift his right arm.

It happened at the worst time and on the biggest stage. But no one can say the Bengals didn't see it coming. A team that gambled on a pair of players with well-known issues got beat precisely because of those

issues. Burfict went head hunting, Jones went after Steelers assistant Joey Porter, and the Bengals went off into the rainy night as losers once again.

Blame owner Mike Brown and team management for taking a chance on volatile players no one else would touch. Blame coach Marvin Lewis for not controlling them at the most critical time in the game.

Do, however, give them credit for this: At a time the NFL says it is trying to cut down on cheap shots and head injuries, they helped showed how little has really changed in the league. Heads are still being hunted. Defenseless players are still being knocked silly.

And all the fines and suspensions - Burfict will almost surely get one to start next season - are simply accepted as a cost of doing business. Just last month, Burfict got involved in a pregame altercation with Steelers players and was fined \$69,454 by the league for three different plays in the game. Yet the linebacker who is the star of

the Bengals defense was still allowed to spiral out of control when the teams met once again. Ugly isn't the word for how this one played out in prime time on a Saturday night. From fans throwing garbage at an injured Ben Roethlisberger to the brutal hit by Burfict that spun Antonio Brown's head around in a frightening moment, the rough edges of the NFL were on display.

VIOLENT GAME

"A vicious, violent game," said CBS announcer Jim Nantz, normally an apologist for any sport he covers. "What a disgrace an embarrassment," former Bengals quarterback Boomer Esiason tweeted.

Indeed, this was much like the NFL of old, where everything goes and only the strongest survive to play again the next week. Two teams that despise each other in a game decided by two personal foul penalties - there were seven total in the game - on the same play.

The Steelers aren't exactly innocent victims themselves. Ryan Shazier crumpled Giovanni Bernard with a hit that looked to be initiated by Shazier's helmet. Shazier wasn't penalized, and the Steelers recovered Bernard's fumble. That hit seemed to turn up the anger of the Bengals. Jones complained that Porter - known for some big hits of his own as a player - was on the field illegally when Jones was penalized.

There's not anything wrong with good, hard football. In this case, though, there wasn't a lot of good on the field. This could have been remembered as a game where AJ McCarron made his mark by leading the Bengals to the go-ahead touchdown in only his fourth NFL start. It could have been a game made memorable by Roethlisberger heroically coming back from being knocked out of the game by Burfict to rally his team despite hardly being able to throw. Instead, it will be remembered for all the wrong reasons. — AP

AFGHANISTAN'S CRICKET TEAM RETURNS HOME VICTORIOUS

KABUL: Afghanistan's national cricket team returned home yesterday after securing a second Twenty20 win over Zimbabwe in three months, propelling the squad into the top 10 in both the one-day and T20 formats. Hundreds of fans gathered at the airport in Kabul to welcome the team back from Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. They lined the capital's main roads, cheering, whistling and waving Afghanistan's black, red and green flag.

"Our cricket heroes continue to surprise us with the amazing performance. We proudly thank you for all the efforts and hard work," Afghan President Ashraf Ghani tweeted. Cricket is rapidly gaining a solid fan base in Afghanistan, which has been at war for almost 40 years. Most members of the team learned to play while growing up in refugee camps in bordering Pakistan.

The Afghans clinched the two-game series Sunday after Mohammad Shahzad hit the fourth-highest score in the format's history with 118, taking his team to an 81-run victory. Shahzad was also a key part of the earlier five-match ODI series in Sharjah, which Afghanistan won 3-2. The humiliation for Zimbabwe was complete, after losing an ODI series to Afghanistan on home turf in October.

That thrilled fans across the country when Gulbadin Naib hit a six with only three balls remaining to propel Afghanistan to their target of 254 and a victory that was greeted with celebratory gunfire across Afghanistan. Sports have become one of

the few bright spots for Afghanistan, as the Taliban insurgency intensifies and spreads across the country, killing thousands of troops and civilians. The cricket victory made up for the disappointment of Afghanistan losing the final of the South Asian Football Federation championship days earlier to India.

The team has the support of the International Cricket Council, which put Afghanistan 10th in its one-day international and ninth in the T20 international rankings. The ICC promoted Afghanistan to associate member in test cricket in 2013.

Nazeem Jaar Abdurahimzai, the domestic manager with the Afghanistan Cricket Board, said the national team had earned the support of the public and the government. Bringing in foreign coaches, including former Pakistan captain Inzamam-ul-Haq as head coach, has boosted the professionalism of the team, he said.

"In the current situation, with the war, few jobs available for young Afghans and many people leaving the country, cricket is certainly something that can grip the imagination of Afghans, as well as teach them patience, focus and tolerance because both are needed to play the game well," Abdurahimzai said. Afghanistan's cricket team secured a berth at the World Cup in Australia and New Zealand last year. They dropped out during the first round, after beating Scotland but losing the rest of their group matches. The tournament was won by Australia. — AP



MINNEAPOLIS: Minnesota Vikings kicker Blair Walsh (3) reacts after missing a field goal during the second half of an NFL wild-card football game against the Seattle Seahawks, Sunday, in Minneapolis. The Seahawks won 10-9. — AP

SEAHAWKS ESCAPE WITH 10-9 WIN OVER VIKINGS

MINNEAPOLIS: Russell Wilson and the Seattle Seahawks needed more than three quarters to warm up at Minnesota, their quest to avenge last year's Super Bowl loss nearly frozen before it began.

The Vikings, after gritting through this grind-it-out wild-card round playoff game, booted their chance to beat the two-time defending NFC champions. Blair Walsh's 27-yard field goal try into the frigid wind hooked left with 22 seconds remaining, handing the Seahawks a 10-9 victory over the stunned Vikings on a Sunday in below-zero weather that tied for the third-coldest NFL game on record.

"A lot of people would've folded up and said, 'That's it,' but we've got a team full of fighters," Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman said.

The Seahawks (11-6) didn't score until Russell Wilson's short touchdown pass to Doug Baldwin early in the fourth quarter. Then, a fumble by Adrian Peterson for the Vikings on the next possession set up a field goal by Steven Hauschka.

The Vikings (11-6) took the ball for the deciding drive with 1:42 left at their 39 and, aided by a pass interference penalty on Kam Chancellor, drove deep into Seattle's territory. After draining the clock for the seemingly inevitable win, Walsh simply missed the winner after making all three of his earlier attempts.

"That's called grace," Chancellor said. "That's all it is." Seattle will play next weekend at Carolina, where the Panthers had a first-round bye in balmy mid-50s weather.

"I think we were fortunate that we got the win," Seahawks coach Pete Carroll said. "A lot of those times, guys make those kicks. There's a high percentage that they make them, but you've still got to do it." Walsh didn't hide. Holder Jeff Locke had the laces turned in, not out, but there were no excuses to be made.

"You're confident, but you never think that you have it or take it for granted," Walsh said, subdued with glassy eyes in the locker room afterward. "I just didn't put a swing on it that would be acceptable by anybody's standards."

Huddled around sideline heaters and wearing huge capes on the shaded side of the stadium, the Seahawks were subdued themselves for much of the game. Trailing 9-0 at the 13-minute mark, Wilson nearly took a huge loss on first down when he fumbled a shotgun snap he wasn't ready for. But the guy Vikings coach Mike Zimmer called "Houdini" during the week darted right, dodged a sack and found Tyler Lockett wide open for a 35-yard completion to set up the score to Baldwin.

IMPROBABLE WIN

"Just tried to extend the play," said Wilson, who went 13 for 26 for 142 yards. "Find a way." Chancellor, who ripped the ball away from Peterson that Ahtyba Rubin recovered, missed a tackle on tight end Kyle Rudolph's 24-yard reception that let the Vikings advance to the 18 with 1:26 left. But Peterson's next three carries

left the Vikings a yard short of the first down. Walsh, whose third kick was nearly blocked by Sherman, jogged out for the defining moment. And the Seahawks were suddenly celebrating an improbable win, not unlike their rally past Green Bay in the NFC championship game last year.

"It's a chip shot," Zimmer said. "He's got to make it." The Seahawks left their last visit to Minnesota with a 38-7 victory, pure domination on both sides of the ball that left no doubt that Dec. 6 afternoon they'd be a legitimate contender to reach their third straight Super Bowl even without the ear-splitting advantage of their home by the bay at CenturyLink Field.

For all their skills, experience and swagger, though, the combination of these conditions and a well-prepared, embarrassed-by-the-previous-performance Vikings team proved to be quite the challenge. This was a fittingly frigid finish for Minnesota's two-year stint outdoors at the University of Minnesota's TCF Bank Stadium during construction of the new covered downtown stadium. For the first natural postseason game here since the NFC championship game in 1976, the grizzled coach of that team, Bud Grant, served as an honorary captain. He strolled out for the coin flip in a Vikings cap and a purple short-sleeved polo shirt, looking ready for a round of golf.

The 88-year-old Grant got a roar of approval

from the crowd, most of which was dressed in as many layers as those purple replica jerseys would allow. The announcement of the minus-25 degree wind chill factor a few minutes later drew an equally loud cheer.

Every mistake and break was magnified in a game like this, and the Vikings benefited for the majority of the first three quarters. Punter Jon Ryan had to pick up a low snap on Seattle's first possession and, avoiding a potential block, tried to run up the middle before being upended by Jason Trusnik well shy of the first down. Ryan landed on his face, breaking and bloodying his nose, and the Vikings turned the shortened field into their first field goal.

Wilson, who led the NFL in passer rating after racking up a remarkable 24 touchdown passes with only one interception over the last seven games, was essentially reduced to a scrambler in the deep freeze. Facing the wind in the second quarter, he had Baldwin wide open behind the safeties at the goal line, but the ball hung in the air and was easily batted down. Headed the same direction toward the open end of the stadium in the third quarter, Wilson overthrew Chase Coffman, and Trae Waynes intercepted the deflected pass to set the Vikings up for another field goal. Cliff Avril's roughing-the-passer penalty gifted Minnesota 15 yards on that drive. — AP

AUSTRALIA NEW BOYS PARIS, BOLAND TO FACE INDIA

PERTH: Australian pacemen Joel Paris and Scott Boland will make their international debuts but Shaun Marsh will miss out when the one-day series opener against India starts in Perth today. Western Australia's Paris and Victoria's Boland get their chance following the retirement of Mitchell Johnson and injury to Mitchell Starc.

Australia captain Steve Smith said Paris's left-arm swing in his home conditions swayed the selectors in his favour. "Traditionally we like to play a left-armed hero who can use the breeze and move the ball so hopefully he'll be able to do that for us tomorrow," Smith told reporters yesterday.

"He's been very impressive in the (one-day) Matador Cup in the last couple of years and in the T20 Big Bash this year. We look forward to seeing how he goes. "It's a good opportunity for him and some other young quicks around the country. So it's an exciting time for Joel to make his debut at the WACA." Boland gets the nod after being on the fringes of the Australian Test team this season.

"His death bowling has been very impressive," said Smith of Boland's efforts with the Melbourne Stars in the BBL. "I think he hits a yorker as well as anyone at the moment. He's got a bit of pace to him so hopefully he can

hurry up the Indian batters a bit." Smith said he would decide who takes the important final overs of the Indian innings on the day.

"We've got a few options, all of our fast bowlers in this game can perform a role at the death," Smith said. Marsh, who has scored 218 runs in five matches for the Perth Scorchers in the BBL at 72.67, could not force his way back into the Australian team with George Bailey filling the batting spot left by the retirement of former captain Michael Clarke.

"It's very difficult but Shaun's been exceptional," Smith said. Marsh has been unlucky this season after scoring his highest Test score of 182 in the first Test against the West Indies in Hobart, only to make way for the return from injury of Usman Khawaja in the second Melbourne Test. "He hasn't whinged once, he's taken it on the chin and he's been great around the group," Smith said.

"He's been really impressive and hopefully every time he goes back (to state cricket) he can continue to dominate, keep scoring big runs and to put his name up there."

Australia - David Warner, Aaron Finch, Steve Smith (capt), George Bailey, Glenn Maxwell, Mitchell Marsh, Mathew Wade, James Faulkner, Joel Paris, Scott Boland, Josh Hazlewood. — AFP



KABUL: Afghans hold a trophy as they celebrate the victory of the national cricket team over Zimbabwe as the team returns and celebrates in Kabul, Afghanistan, yesterday. Afghanistan's national cricket team returned home victorious Monday after securing their second Twenty20 win over Zimbabwe in three months in a compelling series that propelled the Afghans into the world top ten in both the one-day and T20 formats. — AP

INJURED STEYN OUT OF THIRD TEST

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa paceman Dale Steyn was ruled out of the third test against England yesterday after failing to recover from a shoulder injury, depriving the Proteas of the world's top-rated fast bowler as they attempt to even the four-match series.

Steyn missed the drawn second test in Cape Town with the injury, but was retained in the squad for the final two matches and was expected to be available. He was hurt during the first test, won by England.

South Africa coach Russell Domingo said Steyn is not ready to return and will undergo further scans, although downplayed any long-term concerns about a player who will be missing his fifth test in his team's last seven. "I don't think it is the end of Dale Steyn's

career at all," Domingo said. "All players are going to experience some type of niggles at some stage. He's just had a few of late. "He's a great athlete. These things happen and I'm sure he'll get through it."

Kyle Abbott is fit to return to South Africa's squad for the match in Johannesburg starting Thursday after a hamstring injury, and will compete with fellow pacemen Morne Morkel, Chris Morris, Kagiso Rabada and Hardus Viljoen for a place in the team. Vernon Philander has already been ruled out for the series. England also said former national team spinner Robert Croft will join the coaching staff to work with the one-day squad for its five-match series against South Africa next month. — AP



PESHAWAR: Pakistani One Day cricket captain Azhar Ali (C) holds ICC 2016 World Twenty20 as he poses for a photograph with students from the Army Public School (APS) which was the scene of the deadliest terror attack in Pakistan's history, in Peshawar yesterday. The International Cricket Council (ICC) 2016 World Twenty20 trophy has reached Pakistan for a two-day tour. — AFP