

NFL Super Bowl LIV Preview

The Big Game is almost here! We are a few days away from crowning a champion for the 100th season of the NFL as two competitors remain in the field of 32. The AFC will be represented by the Kansas City Chiefs, while the NFC will be represented by the San Francisco 49ers. This feels like the appropriate Super bowl matchup if you've watched these team's progression throughout the season. Both teams have hit their peak as the Niners and Chiefs have looked outstanding this postseason.

49ers Breakdown

The Niners saw a breakout performance from RB Raheem Mostert in the NFC Championship Game with 220 rushing yards and four touchdowns. He's part of a backfield that features Matt Brieda, Tevin Coleman, and Jeff Wilson Jr. All four of these running backs have game-changing speed and are utilized to the best of their abilities thanks to Head Coach Kyle Shanahan's zone blocking scheme. He frustrates defenses with his success in Power and Stretch run play calls. Fullback Kyle Juszczyk is a crucial part of their offense with his powerful lead blocks, opening holes for the running backs. When those backs get into the second level, they become a nightmare for the back seven to contain. The 49ers running backs average 13.27 mph per play, which leads the league. Now RB Tevin Coleman is still a question mark for the big game after suffering a shoulder injury in the NFC Championship Game. If he can't suit up for Sunday, expect Jeff Wilson to get some more touches than we are used to seeing from him.

Quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo's performance this season has resulted in mixed opinions about whether he can win this game or not. Does his time in New England preparing for those Super Bowls and watching how Tom Brady prepare help? No one knows right now, but Garoppolo has shown that he's able to make crucial plays in big moments. His late game drives against the Rams and Saints in the regular season show that he can stay calm and collected in tough spots. That being said, he is still prone to turning the ball over in the middle of the field. He has thrown five of his 15 interceptions from the regular season are between his own 20-yard line up to midfield. Six of his 15 picks happen within his first 10 pass attempts in the game. That's why it's important to get the ball out quickly to his playmakers like he has all year.

George Kittle is the main target for Garoppolo as Kittle went for over 1000 yards receiving as a tight end for the second year in a row despite missing two games. Of his 85 catches, 53 of them have been accumulated in the first half. It will be key for the 49ers to find their star early, and it should be easy if they establish the run like they have all season. Emmanuel Sanders is a veteran receiver who's been in this situation before and should be a reliable target in this game. WR Deebo Samuel has taken on a bigger role in the offense as the season has progressed and could play a big part in this game.

The Offensive line is the most important position besides the quarterback, and the 49ers have an offensive line that's effective for their system. LT Joe Staley is a future Hall of Famer and is still one of the best in the game as he has only given up a pressure rate of 2.9 percent (2nd lowest). LG Laken Tomlinson has been equally effective in the run and pass blocking game, and OL Mike Person has been a nice fill-in after the Weston Richburg injury. RT Mike McGlinchey has improved his pass blocking this season as his Pro Football Focus grade is at 67.9 percent for pass blocking, three points higher than last season. He is an average tackle who works for their system like most of their guys on offense. This unit should have success against an inconsistent Chiefs defense as long as they execute.

The real calling card for the 49ers is their defense, and more specifically the defensive line as it's the best in football. While Nick Bosa gets most of the publicity as the star of this group, you can make a case that Arik Armstead is the most important piece of this puzzle. Armstead is a force in the run game, recording an 88.5 grade in run defense for Pro Football Focus (PFF). He has also become just as prominent of a pass rusher as Nick Bosa in the second half of the season with 42 pressures between weeks 10 through 17. He has made some big plays in the Postseason against the Vikings and Packers and should continue against Kansas City. Deforest Buckner is another key player on the line that has been consistent for this Niners team with three straight seasons with a grade of 80 or higher on PFF. Dee Ford is the Pass rusher opposite Nick Bosa, and he has benefited greatly from it when healthy. His pass rush win rate is at 19.8 percent, ninth in the league. He will be hungry to get a sack against his former team after the Chiefs fan base ran him out of town after his offsides penalty that costed them a chance at a super bowl last year. With Nick Bosa rounding things out with a 17.2 percent pressure rate (5th overall), the Niners can challenge the Chiefs and Patrick Mahomes to get rid of the ball quickly with only four pass rushers, giving them freedom to double up WR Tyreek Hill.

The back seven of the Niners has benefited greatly from their front four. LB Fred Warner struggles as a run defender, but has been exceptional in pass coverage, which is great for this game against the pass heavy Chiefs. LB Dre Greenlaw hasn't allowed a touchdown on 59 targets, and LB Kwon Alexander is a similar mold to Warner as he's a much better coverage linebacker than run stuffer. The Secondary is led by CB Richard Sherman who has had a great season and reminded us that he's still one of the premier cornerbacks in football. His 29 completions and 301 yards allowed are both league lows among eligible corners. K'Waun Williams has improved this season at the nickel-back slot with a 69.3 passer rating on targets against him. The other outside corner spot opposite Sherman has been a mix of Ahkello Witherspoon and Emmanuel Moseley. Moseley has taken the majority of snaps away from the struggling Witherspoon. Moseley/Sherman and Safety Jarquiski Tartt will play a high-low on Tyreek Hill most likely, depending on what side hill is lined up on. Tartt has been inconsistent this year in his role as the box safety and sometimes free safety, so getting some extra help from the corners can help him in this spot. Safety Jimmie Ward will be the deep safety as he has been one of the more underrated players on this defense. The defense only gave up 10 completions of 20 or more yards in the regular season, the fewest in the NFL, which is thanks in part to Ward.

Chiefs Breakdown

Short Version: Patrick Mahomes

Much Longer Version:

The Chiefs are led by Head Coach Andy Reid. His legacy comes down to this game after 20 years of falling just short. Right now, he is arguably the greatest coach to have never won a super bowl, but he can change that in one game. He has the quarterback to do it with too in Patrick Mahomes. Mahomes has a 116.8 passer rating on 3rd downs in the regular season, which will be important against a 49ers defense that's given up 32.4 percent of third down plays, 2nd lowest in the league. In the Niners three losses however (Ravens, Seahawks, Falcons), the defense gave up nearly 45 percent of third down plays. Mahomes and the play-calling of Andy Reid can make that possible. Mahomes is lighting it up this postseason with 8 touchdowns and zero interceptions with a quarterback rating (QBR) of over 94. Another elite performance should be enough to bring home the Lombardi to Kansas City.

Mahomes has two elite targets to work with in speedster Tyreek Hill and TE Travis Kelce. Kelce works as an outside receiver just as much a traditional tight end as he has 38 catches for 572 yards when lined up on the outside. That will be a matchup nightmare for the Niners. Hill is the fastest player in the league and will need to be doubled in order to contain him from destroying the Niners super bowl hopes. That leaves WR's Mecole Hardman, Sammy Watkins, and Demarcus Robinson to win the one on one matchups. All three of the receivers mentioned have had their breakout games in certain spots through the season, so if one of them can step up in that role then the Chiefs will be completely unstoppable like they have been most of the season.

OL Mitchell Schwartz has the biggest role of the entire Chiefs offense besides Mahomes, as he will need to block Nick Bosa well to keep the Superstar QB upright. Schwartz has a 4.2 percent pressure rate given up, 3rd lowest among right tackles. Veteran Stefan Wisniewski has stepped up after the Andrew Wylie injury in week 16. Wisniewski has a 2.1 percent pressure rate allowed from the Left Guard spot, second best in the league since he started. Laurent Duvernay-Tardif is the biggest question mark for the Chiefs o-line as his production has dipped this season with only 51 run blocking grade on PFF. LT and former number one overall pick Eric Fisher has really helped the Chiefs Pass-blocking since his return in the second half of the season after Cam Erving's struggles earlier on. Center Austin Reiter is another sturdy pass blocker as he has only given up 1.4 percent of pressures, second in his position.

The Chiefs defense has improved throughout the season but still has some clear holes present that Kyle Shanahan can exploit. Derrick Nnadi has the role of being the space eater in the interior line yet is dead last in run defense (66th out of 66th) on PFF's grades. He doesn't offer much as a pass rusher either. Expect IL Mike Pennel to get more snaps this game after a solid showing against the Titans and Derrick Henry. The main guy on the defensive line is Chris Jones, but he's was still limited in the playoffs as he is still dealing with his calf injury from earlier in the season. It will be interesting to see if they continue to rotate him with Pennel or if they let him loose with the biggest game of his career a few days away. Edge Rusher Frank Clark had a rough regular season after being only 46th in the league in pressure rate after the Chiefs traded away future draft picks for him. The postseason however has seen him make an impact at the perfect time, with four sacks in the two postseason games.

The Chiefs linebackers are by far the biggest weaknesses of this team and the biggest mismatch of the whole game. Damien Wilson, Ben Niemann, and Anthony Hitchens have all struggled in pass coverage. Wilson has allowed a 115-passer rating when thrown to. Anthony Hitchens has had his own battles in pass coverage, especially against running backs as Aaron Jones and Austin Ekeler were able to get separation from him on multiple occasions. Niemann has been slightly better, but not by much. He has allowed 38 catches on 45 targets, which is not a healthy ratio. You would think that means that they are a run specialty core, well not really. The linebackers have allowed 1.84 yards after contact, fourth worst in the league. They did a good job against Henry in their second matchup, but are they trusted to do that again? I wouldn't bet on it against a Shanahan led offense on the other side.

The Secondary consist of a lot of younger players working alongside veteran Tyrann Mathieu. The Honey Badger has played the box safety, free safety, and at nickel corner this season. They allow him to play at various different position towards the middle of the field to utilize his playmaking ability from both sides of the field, and it usually works. Mathieu allows five yards per target in the slot, which is 2nd best in the league. With Jimmy G's tendency to throw dangerous passes in the middle of the field, watch out for Mathieu to make a key play in this game. CB Charvarius Ward has been a solid corner on the outside as he has allowed a passer rating of only 73.8. He has had some lucky breaks however as he has had 29 dropped or off-target footballs into his coverage which is more than any other corner in football,

meaning that he's not invincible if a receiver wakes up on the right side of the bed. DB Kendall Fuller has taken up more of his time in the safety position since Tyrann Mathieu's success at the nickelback spot. His production has slipped over the past two seasons in KC after transitioning away from slot coverage to outside coverage and deep safety help with a 63.2 PFF grade. CB Bredshad Breeland is a solid corner with a 74-passer rating against and only 45 percent of passes completed, but also has 13 penalties on the season and 21 drops or off-target throws in his direction.

Matchups

KC also has mismatches with their playmakers. We will see a lot of trips wide receiver sets with Kelle on the backside in either one-on-one spots that he can win easily, or a double with the linebacker, leaving the speedy core of receivers with space in the middle. The Chiefs can put him against Sherman, which gives the Niners a better chance of containing Kelce with Sherman's 6'3 body, or they can line him up against Moseley who is 5'11 and doesn't have a lot of experience in that situation. If they decide on the former, then Moseley has to deal with a cluster of receivers on his right side that can confuse him.

For the 49ers offense, they will need to attack the linebackers in the middle of the field, especially in zone coverage. The Packers were able to beat the Chiefs earlier in this season thanks to isolating Damien Wilson and Anthony Hitchens on mesh plays that have the Tight End clearing out the linebacker as they over commit, leaving the underneath drag route open. Offensive motion also left them confused on a screen play that went for six for the Packers. With RB Mostert and TE Kittle at the helm, the Niners can pick the linebackers apart easily if Kansas City doesn't adjust. I expect the Chiefs to send one of the linebackers on a blitz more often than not to try and disrupt Jimmy G in the pocket and mask their weakness.

So, who wins?

This game is tough to call as there are valid reasons to be made for both units. The Chiefs have the best Quarterback talent we've seen since prime Aaron Rodgers, and he can make any throw in the book. We saw the comeback in the divisional round against the Texans where he took it to another gear after being down 24. The Niners have also shown their ability to win in tough positions at the end of the regular season against teams like the Saints and Seahawks. After researching the analytics and tendencies of both these teams, I decided to go with the San Francisco 49ers as the winner. The 49ers have destroyed every below average run defense they have played this season, and the Chiefs 29th ranking has me concerned if they are down late. I expect a high scoring game which made me consider the Chiefs in this one, as the better QB is the safer bet, but the 49ers have played in a lot of those close games this season, and they showed up prepared for those moments. The Chiefs have had it easy over the latter half of the season and may start out slow. Kyle Shanahan's west coast zone run scheme can also take time for defenses to adjust to on the field, and with the weaknesses of the Chiefs on defense, that could be a huge problem early. Pat Mahomes and Andy Reid will make this a close game as that combo will figure out some ways to get space for those receivers, but in the end, I'm going with the better overall team in the Niners.

I'm glad these two teams are in the Super Bowl to give us a compelling matchup with a lot of speed on the field. Expect a good matchup and enjoy the game this Sunday (or the commercials, or halftime show.... whatever floats your boat.)