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Patrick Mahomes leads Chiefs to first Super Bowl victory in 50 years

Maybe Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes goes on to play in many Super Bowls, which at this point seems a sure thing. But, it's unlikely any of those will top Super Bowl LIV.

Mahomes, after having a most frustrating game for three-plus quarters, rallied the Chiefs with two touchdowns in the last half of the fourth period to give the Chiefs a lead. They would go on to a 31-20 victory over the San Francisco 49ers for their first Super Bowl championship in 50 years.

Mahomes was pressured much of the game, and the 49ers, until the latter portion of the game, neutralized Kansas City's speed at wide receiver. But the 49ers could only contain Mahomes for so long, and the quarterback's burgeoning reputation as perhaps the best quarterback ever received a major boost. He finished 26-of-42 for 286 yards, two touchdowns and two interceptions. Mahomes also had a rushing TD.

Mahomes' season seemed lost one other time this season, on the night of Oct. 17. While successfully executing a quarterback sneak on a fourth-down play in a Thursday night game against the Broncos in Denver, Mahomes' right kneecap was dislocated. Tight end Travis Kelce described the gruesome nature of the injury: "His knee didn't even look like a knee. It was all out of whack. I couldn't even describe it."

Mahomes' injury led the Chiefs to think the worst about where their season was headed without the NFL's reigning MVP.

But the dislocated kneecap was quickly popped back into place by the Chiefs' medical staff, the speed of that procedure perhaps shaving weeks off the time Mahomes would have to miss.

The Chiefs beat the Broncos that night and won one of their two subsequent games with veteran journeyman Matt Moore replacing the injured Mahomes.

Patrick Mahomes threw two interceptions in Super Bowl LIV, but then led the Chiefs back to victory. Rob Carr/Getty Images



Mahomes returned as good as ever in Week 10 against the Tennessee Titans. He threw for 446 yards and three touchdowns. The Chiefs lost, but they would go on from that point to win nine consecutive games, including three in the playoffs, as they advanced to and won the Super Bowl.

Mahomes had two spectacular playoff games. His 27-yard touchdown run late in the first half to give the Chiefs the lead for good in the AFC Championship Game against the Titans will be remembered for generations in Kansas City. He led the Chiefs in rushing both games and passed for 615 yards, eight touchdowns and no interceptions.

His regular season wasn't as spectacular as 2018, when Mahomes became the second quarterback in NFL history to throw 50 touchdown passes and more than 5,000 yards. But he still threw for 4,031 yards with 26 touchdowns and he cut his interceptions from 12 in 2018 to five this past regular season.

The Chiefs scored about one touchdown per game less than they did last season, but the reasons were many. Mahomes dealt with injuries all season: In addition to the dislocated knee cap, he sprained an ankle early in the year and bruised his passing hand later. The Chiefs went through a rash of offensive injuries that kept star wide receiver Tyreek Hill out for four games and forced the Chiefs to start five different offensive line combinations.

"It really put in perspective how hard it is to go out there week by week and put up numbers and get wins," Mahomes said. "You know it's a struggle in this league. Teams are coming with their best effort, playing us really hard."

"I realized this year that it's better just to find ways to win rather than try to put up all these numbers."

Offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy listed some ways Mahomes was a better player this season than last.

"He's learning how to win when things aren't perfect," Bieniemy said. "He's making plays with his feet in the pocket. He's making a call at the line of scrimmage and giving us an opportunity to pick up pressure from a late-rotating safety."

"Don't get me wrong: You always want to see those games where we can have 400, 500 yards passing and a lot of points. But you have to know how to win when things aren't perfect."

Mahomes won't be 25 until September, after the 2020 season has started. That's one reason the Chiefs could just be starting their run of Super Bowl appearances.

Many of the Chiefs' best players are not much older than Mahomes. Tyreek Hill and Chris Jones are 25, Frank Clark is 26 and Tyrann Mathieu 27. Travis Kelce is the senior member of the bunch at 30.

All are under contract at least through 2021, except Jones, who is a potential unrestricted free agent this year. The Chiefs could keep him off the free-agent market by naming him as their franchise player.

Mahomes, having finished his third NFL season, is eligible for a contract extension this offseason. He will likely emerge as the NFL's highest-paid player, but that's a price the Chiefs would happily pay.

USA vs. Costa Rica: What we Learned

The USMNT put up a seriously young side in their January camp match against Costa Rica and the youngsters were able to walk away with a 1-0 victory. Here's what we learned.

The United States wrapped up January camp with a 1-0 victory over Costa Rica in Carson, California. As is the case every year, the USMNT fielded a roster made almost exclusively of MLS players who are out-of-season because January camp does not fall on a FIFA date and clubs in Europe are not required to release their players. This

year, Gregg Berhalter called in an especially young and experimental roster and a number of those young players came out and performed in this game. As a whole, the US was able to control the match, keeping just over 60% of possession, but the Stars and Stripes weren't able to convert that into many threatening chances. Costa Rica almost exclusively played for counters and set pieces, nearly scoring in the 24th minute off of an elaborate free kick only to be thwarted by the goal post. The US was able to take the lead in the second half and then capably held on for the win. Here's what we learned.



Boys Amongst Men

Normally, I have to make a disclaimer about the quality of the talent for these January camp games. Just as the US can't call up the best players playing in Europe, the opponents cannot either. But, in Costa Rica's case, even though they were limited to players from Costa Rica, MLS, and the American lower divisions, the starting eleven they fielded actually had quite a significant amount of experience. It most certainly was not a young and experimental side, with half the outfield players on at least their 50th cap.

In contrast, the USMNT starting eleven had almost a quarter as many caps between them as the starting Costa Rican players. For this January camp, Berhalter had made a deliberate choice to call in a very young squad. In the spring, the U-23 men's team will have to qualify for the Olympics. Just like January camp, clubs are not required to release players for the Olympic qualifiers. As a result, we can expect senior players who are within the age requirements like Christian Pulisic, Tyler Adams, Weston McKennie, and Sergiño Dest, to miss out, while MLS based players and players still with their youth teams still available. As a result, this camp gave a number of the players the opportunity to make an impression and get their name on that roster. Indeed, six players eligible for the Olympics started: Jackson Yueill, Jesus Ferreira, Ulysses Llanez, Sam Vines, Brenden Aaronson, and Reggie Cannon.

Of course, playing so many young players against a team of experienced CONCACAF veterans is a risk. But, this time around, it paid off. The team generally looked good, holding possession very well and almost completely stifling the Costa Rican side when they were in possession. While some of them stood out, none of the U-23 eligible players had a bad game. Indeed, I would say that the weakest performance came from their most capped player on the field, Paul Arriola, and even then, he was an important part of the build up that led to the penalty.

The one thing the team didn't have was that final bit of polish. While the passing and organization was very good, the team had trouble generating chances. All too often, the ball would get stuck at someone's feet, or the pass would be made too late, or the through ball would be hit a little too long. The team was able to get into the box and the final third, was able to get set pieces, but they weren't able to turn those into loads of shots on target. But that's ok. January camp always looks a little rough. With how young so many of these players are, there's plenty of time for them to develop that sharpness. It just wasn't here on this day, but that doesn't mean it won't be here some day soon.

Ready the Cannon

Speaking of the penalty, we should probably touch on the player who actually won the darn thing. Reggie Cannon has been excellent since he came into the lineup during the knockout stages of the Gold Cup, and this game was no exception. Cannon repeatedly demonstrated positional awareness on defense, choosing the precise moments for when to tuck in to block a passing lane or cover a weakness. As a result, he repeatedly snuffed out dangerous situations before they really had a chance to develop. Because of Cannon, the Costa Rican left side was essentially muzzled for the entire game.

But Cannon wasn't merely a solid defensive presence. He was also excellent going forward. Cannon repeatedly got into space and presented a wide option that helped the team relieve pressure while in possession. And Cannon also helped push the attacking momentum forward, repeatedly driving into the final third on the overlap. It wasn't an accident that Cannon was the one who won the penalty. He had been making similar overlapping runs for the whole game. And it was good to see him get reward for it.



For my money, I thought Cannon was the Man of the Match in this game. And I know I'm not the only one.

Future USMNT @FutureUsmnt

Everyone will be talking about Llanez (and for good reason), but I thought Reggie Cannon was the man of the match today. Made some excellent defensive plays and was good going forward. The US outside back situation is something to be very excited about in the coming years.

It blows my mind that Reggie Cannon is still only 21. He's basically an established pro with FC Dallas and a serious option for the USMNT as the starting right back. It feels like he's been with the team for a very long time. Indeed, Berhalter talks about his leadership as if he's one of the veterans. At this point, Cannon's probably the most prominent name going on that Olympic qualifying roster.

My Name is Nobody

There's a final name that I went to discuss from this game. Ulysses Llanez came into this squad and really stood out. The winger, who plays for Wolfsburg's reserve team in the German fourth division, started the game and immediately stood out. He was smooth on the ball, and he combined very well with the left back, Sam Vines. He wasn't afraid to take players on and beat them on the dribble. Like the rest of the squad, he didn't quite have that sharpness that we expect from the full national team, but at just 18, there's a lot of promise that is readily apparent to see. Llanez wound up taking and scoring the penalty. You can't say he didn't deserve it.



Kansas City Chiefs win Super Bowl: Hunt family's first NFL title in 50 years



The Hunt family, owners of MLS club FC Dallas, hoisted the NFL championship trophy in Miami after winning Super Bowl LIV with the Kansas City Chiefs, who beat the San Francisco 49ers 31-20.

The Chiefs last made a Super Bowl 50 years ago which was also the last time they won the NFL title in Super Bowl IV against the Minnesota Vikings in 1970.

The late Lamar Hunt and the Hunt family launched FC Dallas ahead of the MLS inaugural season in 1996. They also founded the Chiefs when they were called the Dallas Texans in 1960. The team moved to Kansas City in 1963 and they have since become an institution in the city.

Kansas City has another sports title to celebrate after Sporting Kansas City's MLS Cup championship in 2013, the Major League Baseball World Series title with the Kansas City Royals in 2015 and now the Super Bowl with the Chiefs. Clark Hunt is the current FC Dallas chairman and CEO and his brother Dan Hunt is the club's president.

CREDIT: Simon Borg Editor-in-Chief

Inter Miami close in on signing Mexico international Rodolfo Pizarro

TRANSFER TRACKER STATUS: Reports



UPDATE (Feb. 2): Per ESPN.com's Tom Marshall, Rayados head coach Antonio Mohamed relayed that Monterrey is currently in the process of negotiating a buyout clause with Inter Miami, although the completion of the deal is evidently contingent upon Pizarro agreeing to the move. Stay tuned.

UPDATE (Feb. 1): Rodolfo Pizarro's rumored move to Inter Miami CF looks closer to fruition, with MedioTiempo and beIN Sports' Fernando Cavallos indicating that a deal with the player and his club, Monterrey, was nearing completion.

UPDATE (Jan. 31, 3 pm ET): The Rodolfo Pizarro saga has taken another turn, as The Athletic's Paul Tenorio reported that Inter Miami are in talks over personal terms with the Monterrey midfielder and that they hope to soon finalize a transfer for the player.

Inter Miami sporting director Paul McDonough also confirmed the club's pursuit of Pizarro to reporters on Friday afternoon, though stated that reports of a \$19 million fee to acquire him were "false":

UPDATE (Jan. 31, 12 pm ET): It would appear that the Rodolfo Pizarro-to-MLS links have not quite been put to bed yet. TUDN's Diego Medina is reporting that Inter Miami have made a final offer of \$19.6 million to secure the player's services.

Rumors are abound linking Liga MX midfielder Rodolfo Pizarro to a possible move to MLS, but it appears as though the Monterrey man will be staying put at his current club for the time being.

Pizarro was first linked to Inter Miami CF in a Thursday report from ESPN.com citing a source that said several MLS teams were making a play for his services, with Miami at the forefront of the suitors. The connection seems obvious enough, as Miami coach Diego Alonso coached Pizarro when he manned the sidelines at Monterrey for two seasons before making the move to the 2020 MLS expansion side.

That speculation was dampened, however, with Univision's Vladimir Garcia reporting on Thursday that Chicago Fire FC actually had an offer turned down for the player, and that he would remain with Rayados for at least the remainder of the in-progress Clausura 2020 season, which runs through May.

If an MLS team can wind up landing Pizarro somewhere down the line, it'd be another big get for the league from Liga MX. The 25-year-old attacker is a versatile player who has lined up all over the field during his career, but has done some of his best work as a crafty attacker both as a goalscorer and facilitator. He also five goals in 25 career senior caps for the Mexican national team.

CREDIT: Ari Liljenwall Contributor

Niki Jackson brace leads Colorado Rapids in win over Orange County SC

Up against USL Championship side Orange County SC on Saturday in Fullerton, California, the Colorado Rapids secured a 4-0 victory to book their first win of the 2020 preseason.

The headliner was reserve forward Niki Jackson, who scored twice in the second half to seal the result. His first strike came in the 55th minute from atop the box, then he made it 4-0 in the 69th minute after being played through by Nicolas Mezquida.

Before Jackson revved up, Colorado opened the scoring in the 23rd minute via Homegrown midfielder Cole Bassett after a scramble in the box. Up 1-0, the Rapids doubled their lead in the 39th minute via forward Kei Kamara after his initial penalty-kick effort was denied. Andre Shinyashiki, the 2019 MLS Rookie of the Year, drew the PK.

The Rapids are entering their first full season under head coach Robin Fraser, who was hired last August after Conor Casey steadied the ship on an interim basis. Colorado ultimately finished ninth in the Western Conference standings, six points shy of earning an Audi MLS Cup Playoffs spot.

Up next, Colorado will face Toronto FC in a 120-minute scrimmage on Feb. 8.



Goals

23' – COL – Cole Bassett

39' – COL – Kei Kamara

55' – COL – Niki Jackson

69' – COL – Niki Jackson

CREDIT: Jonathan Sigal Contributor

Chicago Fire FC signing Dejan Ljubicic from Rapid Vienna for 2.5 million Euros

TRANSFER TRACKER STATUS: Report

Chicago Fire FC will pay Rapid Vienna a \$2.7 million transfer fee to sign 22-year-old central midfielder Dejan Ljubicic, according to a report from Austian outlet Kurier.

If completed, the move would be the Fire's second this off-season for a player who spent time at Rapid Vienna after inking Robert Beric to a Designated Player contract from Ligue 1's Saint Etienne.

The Austian-born Ljubicic, of Bosnian-Croatian heritage, has been a regular for Vienna's first team over the last three seasons, making 91 first-team appearances and scoring seven goals in all competitions after coming through the club's youth academy.



Last season, 12 of those games came in the UEFA Europa League, where he helped Rapid reach the second round after finishing second in a group that included Villarreal, Glasgow Rangers and Spartak Moscow.

Internationally, Ljubicic has appeared for Austria's U-21 side but has yet to be capped by the senior team.

CREDIT: Ian Quillen Contributor

Pity Martinez scores as Atlanta United tie Elfsborg 1-1

Gonzalo 'Pity' Martinez scored his third goal of the preseason as Atlanta United continued their Concacaf Champions League preparations with a 1-1 draw against Swedish side IF Elfsborg at the IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida.

The two teams played out a scoreless first half before Martinez, the Argentine playmaker, connected on a well-taken strike with his weaker right foot in the 55th minute.

Martinez, who is entering his second season with the Five Stripes, now has three goals in his last two pre-season games after he picked up a brace in a comprehensive win over Philadelphia on Jan. 29. Elfsborg would find an equalizer in the 67th minute.

Atlanta continue their preseason preparations next Saturday when they'll take the short trip to Alabama to face USL Championship side Birmingham Legion. They kick off Concacaf Champions League play on the road in Honduras against Motagua on Feb. 18.



Goals

55' — ATL — Pity Martinez
67' — ELF — Unknown

Lineups

Atlanta starting XI (3-4-2-1): Brad Guzan; Miles Robinson, Franco Escobar, Fernando Meza; Brooks Lennon, Eric Remedi, Emerson Hyndman, Edgar Castillo; Ezequiel Barco, Pity Martinez; Josef Martinez

CREDIT: MLSsoccer staff

Chicharito Hernandez sits courtside next to seats left for Kobe, Gianna at Lakers game

In one of the most emotional sporting events in recent memory, the LA Lakers played their first home game at Staples Center since the tragic passing of Lakers legend Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gianna in a helicopter crash.

The game turned into a celebration of their lives with moving musical tributes, an address by current Lakers star LeBron James and two courtside seats left empty and draped with Gianna's Mamba Academy jersey and her father's No. 24 Lakers jersey. They were the same seats they filled for a Dec. 29 Lakers game.



Newly acquired LA Galaxy star forward Javier "Chicharito" Hernandez happened to be seated right next to those courtside seats for the game.

Chicharito Hernandez @CH14_
#GigiForever #MambaForever

The Lakers played the Portland Trailblazers and lost the game 127-119. But the game itself was an afterthought.



CREDIT: Simon Borg Editor-in-Chief

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Austin FC announce Manuel Junco, formerly of Liverpool and Crew SC staff, as chief scout

Austin FC announced on Friday that Manuel Junco has been appointed as the club's chief scout, joining the 27th club in MLS from his most recent role as sporting and technical director at Polish stalwarts Wisla Krakow.

Junco previously served as the top scout for Columbus Crew SC and now US national team manager Gregg Berhalter from 2013-2016. Prior to his Crew tenure, he worked at Liverpool as an Eastern European scout under manager Rafa Benitez.

Junco will remain based in Poland as he conducts his new role under another name familiar to US-MNT fans, Austin sporting director Claudio Reyna.

Austin FC @AustinFC

Our soccer operations team continues to grow – now we welcome Manuel Junco, Chief Scout.

"I am very excited and happy to be able to be part of Austin FC, a Club that is putting in place the foundations for success in the wonderful city of Austin," Junco said in a statement. "It is a unique, incredible project and it is a privilege for me to have the opportunity to work and learn under the direction and leadership of Claudio Reyna and Josh Wolff. They are two top professionals of the highest level, whom I admire and respect."

Under Junco's leadership, Wisla Krakow qualified for Ekstraklasa Championship play-offs each season during his tenure (2016-2018), while achieving a net positive balance on incoming / outgoing transfers for one of the leading clubs in Poland.

"Manuel is another significant appointment for Austin FC," Reyna said in a statement. "He has an excellent track record, from what he achieved with Liverpool, how he has helped Wisla Krakow achieve sustained success in Poland, and with Columbus Crew SC. Manuel will lead the identification and evaluation of players around the world, bringing the right players to Austin FC who will fit not only how we want to play, but those who want to be part of what we are building in Austin."



CREDIT: MLSsoccer staff

Carlos Vela and Brian Rodriguez connect, LAFC down New York City FC

In a connection MLS fans are likely to see repeat itself many times during the 2020 season, Carlos Vela set up Brian Rodriguez for an opening goal in LAFC's 3-1 pre-season victory over New York City FC on Friday.

Adrien Perez and LAFC 2020 MLS SuperDraft selection Jorge Gonzalez also scored for the winners of the closed-door friendly at Banc of California Stadium. It was the second win in as many preseason games for the hosts.

NYCFC academy player Osaze De Rosario, the son of MLS legend Dwayne, got a late goal for the Cityzens in defeat, their third in as many preseason matches.

Both LAFC and NYCFC will open their competitive campaigns in the Concacaf Champions League on Feb. 18 and Feb. 20, respectively.



Goals

First half	LAFC — Brian Rodriguez	LAFC — Adrien Perez
Second half	LAFC — Jorge Gonzalez	NYC — Osaze De Rosario

CREDIT: Ian Quillen Contributor

Five must-watch teams as opening day approaches

Preseason preparations are in full swing across Major League Soccer, with just over two weeks remaining until the five Concacaf Champions League participants get things started.

All 26 clubs have plenty of storylines worth watching, of course, and questions to answer in the weeks ahead. But these five stand out for me, whether it be for the promise they've shown entering 2020, the scale of the challenges in front of them or the personalities onboard.

Chicago Fire FC

Where to begin? The Fire have a new coaching staff, new brand, new NFL-sized stadium and, to a large extent, a new team this year. With just 21 players under contract in early February – including three teenage Homegrowns – the roster still has holes. While they'll undoubtedly add to it this month, as they did with the arrival of striker Robert Beric on a Designated Player deal, the status quo underlines the workload, and time crunch, facing the all-new technical staff.

Beyond that, Raphael Wicky will be a fascinating figure to follow. The Fire's head coach was convinced to leave US Soccer and move across town less than a year into his tenure as the US under-17 national team boss. And though that team's disappointing performance at the 2019 U-17 World Cup dinged his reputation, he largely earned positive reviews for his proactive work with that squad. Wicky's previous stop at FC Basel in his native Switzerland earned high marks, too.

Columbus Crew SC

If the Fire are the definition of a work in progress, their heartland counterparts in Ohio are the inverse. The Crew finished last season on a high note as Caleb Porter & co. found a rhythm down the stretch, and they built on that further with some promising winter moves, highlighted by the arrival of Darlington Nagbe and club-record acquisition Lucas Zelarayan. There was a notable outgoing move, too, with longtime captain Wil Trapp traded to Inter Miami CF.

The Yellow Football Team look to be crafting a fluid, technically-gifted starting lineup with a strong central-midfield core. The challenge is to hit the ground running this spring and prove their bonafides in a crowded Eastern Conference field.

LA Galaxy

Chicharito. Need I say more?

OK, fine, I'll say more. Beyond Javier Hernandez's expected (blockbuster) signing, the Galaxy have reeled in Aleksandar Katai and Sacha Kljestan, extended the loan for Cristian Pavon and re-signed Sebastian Lletget, providing some luxurious attacking options for Guillermo Barros Schelotto as the OGs of El Trafico aim to punch back in the battle of Los Angeles.

Have they fixed that painfully wobbly backline? Ehhh, I'm not so sure about that. LA might just have to win a lot of 3-2 and 4-3 games again this year. But that's just fine for most of us neutral viewers.

Montreal Impact

As a rebuilding side who also happen to be one of MLS's CCL representatives, the Impact face a daunting start to their first season under Thierry Henry, who remains an unproven coach despite his legendary status as a player. And their opening foe, Costa Rican powers Saprissa, will be a very tough out.

That said, Henry's footballing intellect is unquestionable and IMFC have a proud history of punching above their weight in Champions League. Can they get comfortable again at "The Big O," their hulking, historic second home for cold-weather matches?

Seattle Sounders

The defending MLS Cup champs have to figure things out quickly given the early start brought on by CCL, and they have the quality and desire to make a real run at the thing.

Problem is, they've bid farewell to some key figures this offseason and are paper-thin at the back, particularly in central defense, where the freshly-signed Shane O'Neill and Xavier Arreaga are their sole specialist options at present. One boost arrived late last week, though, with the addition of Brazilian midfielder Joao Paulo on a Designated Player deal, a move that also saw Arreaga's budget charge bought down with Targeted Allocation Money.

Their CCL opener, a potentially dicey visit to Honduras' Olimpia, is barely a month away. It's a real job looming in front of coach Brian Schmetzer and his staff as veterans and new faces mesh together.



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FAX: 708.575.3413

1744 W FOSTER AVENUE, CHICAGO, IL 60640

ARCHKINSAGENCY@GMAIL.COM



ARCHKINSURANCE