

DETROIT STEEL CITY

The Seahawks and the Steelers will contest Super Bowl XL (40) on Sunday in Detroit, a city that is just 280 miles from Pittsburgh but 2350 miles from Seattle. As those distances suggest, the Steelers will finally be playing a playoff game in a "home" type of atmosphere. The terrible towels will be out in full force, and the stands will be full of blue collar workers who've maxed out their credit cards, taken out a second mortgage on their house or maybe even sent their children to work illegally for Ford's Hybrid Motor's division. My point is this: Steelers fans are in Detroit in full force, and they'll make their voices heard because they believe in Bill Cowher; they believe in Jerome Bettis; they believe in Ben Roethlisberger. They believe this is finally their year to win the Super Bowl again.

But while Steelers fans are hoping to add another Lombardi Trophy to their mantle, Seahawks fans are hoping this will be the first of many to come. The Seahawks have never been to a Super Bowl before, so this is a milestone not only for the team and for its city but also for the NFL itself.

How fortuitous for the league that in its fortieth iteration the Super Bowl has real meaning for two teams that are so very different. The nation's premier sporting event will showcase two of the league's longest tenured and most successful active coaches who represent two of the hungriest teams in the NFL.

Seattle Seahawks (15-3) vs. Pittsburgh Steelers (14-5)

Sunday, February 5, 2006 @ 6:00 PM ET on ABC

For Mike Holmgren, it's a hunger that he'll recognize from 1997 when his Packers beat the Patriots 35-21 in New Orleans. The rest of the Seahawks, however, may find this to be an unfamiliar hunger, a hunger that injects adrenaline into even the simplest activities, a hunger that wakes them in the night, a hunger that intensifies with every passing day, a hunger that will be satisfied on Sunday evening. But will they be left with a sour tang in their mouths? Or will the sweet taste of victory be theirs to savor for a lifetime?

The outcome, of course, depends largely on their ability to execute their game plan. Matt Hasselbeck must lead his offense calmly, completing a large percentage of his passes while avoiding costly turnovers. Shaun Alexander must run patiently and confidently and – most importantly – repeatedly without allowing the ball to abandon his grasp in favor of the hands of the enemy. The receivers must catch the ball when it is thrown to them, a task that sounds easy but can prove difficult in big games as Seahawks fans are well aware. Finally, Seattle's defense must impose its will upon the Pittsburgh offense or the Seahawks could find themselves with very little say in the game's outcome.

One last note on the Seahawks. The MVP of Super Bowl XXXI in 1997 was punt and kick returner Desmond Howard whose 99 yard touchdown return of an Adam Vinatieri's kickoff put an end to New England's comeback and sealed victory for the Packers. The Seahawks don't have a player this year who is as electric and unstoppable on returns as Howard was throughout that season, but that doesn't mean that Mike Holmgren won't find some tricky way to make special teams a factor in this game's outcome.

I used to think that the Steelers were a straight-forward football team that won the old-fashioned, hard-nosed way with equally brutal, punishing and persistent running and defense, but in the playoffs the Steelers changed that perception. They beat the Bengals, Colts and Broncos (the AFC's top three seeds) on the road to reach this game, and they did it with a balanced and unpredictable offensive game plan that perfectly compliments their speedy and intelligent defense.

That defense must be at its best to stop the Seahawks on Sunday. Matt Hasselbeck gets great protection from his offensive line and is an accurate passer. Shaun Alexander has deceptive speed and is known for patiently hiding behind his blockers until he spots an open running lane. In the NFC Championship game it looked like the Panthers were doing a good job of containing him, but he still gashed them for 134 yards on 32 carries. Stopping Alexander is a four quarter endeavor and the key to victory for Pittsburgh. That isn't to say that the Steelers should discount the Seahawks' own defensive ability. They led the league in sacks this year and have speedy and sure-handed linebackers and safeties who can cause nightmares for quarterbacks who take them lightly.

Ben Roethlisberger, however, isn't taking anything lightly. The memory of his self-destruction in last year's AFC Championship game is still fresh in his young mind, and he's done his part to vindicate himself by playing the best football of his young career under immense pressure in this year's playoffs. He's got the benefit of a powerful offensive line and the one-two punch of running backs Jerome Bettis and Willie Parker as well as talented receivers Hines Ward and Antwaan Randle El. But the players who could have

the biggest impact on the game for Pittsburgh are the ones Seattle is aware of but may leave off their radar once the game is revved to high speed. Watch for tight ends Heath Miller and Jerame Tuman, full back Dan Kreider and second- and third-team receivers Cedric Wilson (a former 49er), Sean Morey, Nate Washington and Lee Mays.

There are a lot of unknowns in this game, but there are also some great story lines. If the Seahawks win their first Super Bowl they will be able to carry that momentum into next year and could conceivably be back in the big game at this time next year. The same can be said of the Steelers, but there are a couple more story lines on their side. The much ballyhooed return of Jerome Bettis to his home town for what could be the final game of his illustrious career is a heart-warming story, but it has overshadowed the fact that Ben Roethlisberger is the first quarterback to make it to the Conference Championships in his first two seasons in the NFL. He's been the key to Pittsburgh's success over the last two years. The Steelers are 26-5 with him and 3-3 without him. If his team wins the Super Bowl, the hype surrounding him will be deservedly unmatched in the league next year. But even if he doesn't win... aww, who am I kidding?

*The Pittsburgh **Steelers** are going to win the Super Bowl.*