

A SMALL GIANT

Story by John Stolnis - PhillySportsline.com

I think it's about time the country got better acquainted with Mr. Brian Westbrook.

Lost amidst the hoopla of Jeff Garcia's surprising renaissance, Brian Dawkins' recent MVP-like performance, and Andy Reid's amazing coaching job over the last six weeks, is perhaps the most important component of this amazing late-season Super Bowl run by the Philadelphia Eagles.

B-West.

In Brian Westbrook, the Eagles possess one of best running backs in the NFL.

Sunday's 23-20 Wild Card win over the New York Giants at rainy Lincoln Financial Field was primarily the handiwork of the 5'8"; 203 pound little man from Villanova (can a guy who weighs over 200 pounds be considered "little"?).

His 141 yards on 20 carries, which included a 49-yard TD run to tie the game at 7-7 early in the second quarter, a 65-yard 3rd quarter punt return for a TD that was nullified by a penalty, and four runs on the Birds' final drive of the game, each of which moved the chains and put the Eagles in position for David Akers to kick the game-winning 38-yard FG as time expired, are the main reasons the Eagles will move on to play the New Orleans Saints in the Big Easy next Saturday night.

At some point, football aficionados must start including Westbrook in the conversation of "best running backs in the NFL." While it was easy to dismiss him before (mainly because of Reid's unwillingness to run the football) that excuse no longer holds water.

Since Donovan McNabb's injury in Week 11, Westbrook has not only taken on the responsibility of an increased workload, he's also stepped up as a vocal leader in the locker room. This season, he has rushed for a career-high 1,271 yards (averaging 5.1 yds/carry), caught 77 balls for 699 yards, and scored 11 TDs.

His runs are game-changing. He single-handedly reverses momentum. He is the most important player on the Philadelphia Eagles.

And his play, as well as the brilliantly balanced play-calling of offensive coordinator Marty Morningwhig, has made the Eagles a legitimate Super Bowl contender.

But while the star of Sunday's ugly win was clearly the diminutive running back, he was not alone in providing heroics.

There was David Akers, kicking three field goals (19, 48, 38), including the dramatic game-winner.

There was newly-signed holder Koy Detmer, who, just one day after watching Dallas QB Tony Romo fumble the snap on a sure game-winning FG against Seattle on Saturday night, gathered in a high snap from holder John Dorenbos and placed the ball perfectly for Akers, on a rainy, muddy, wet night.

There were WRs Reggie Brown and Donte Stallworth, who didn't have huge games statistically, but made clutch catches for important first downs, blocked incredibly well downfield for Westbrook, and, in Stallworth's case, caught a go-ahead 28-yard TD just before halftime.

And there was QB Jeff Garcia, who didn't have a spectacular game on the scoring sheet (17/31 153yds. 1TD) but did not throw an interception or cause any turnovers.

For the Giants, the loss does nothing but raise a slew of questions. How do they replace the retiring Tiki Barber, who ran extremely well in his final hurrah (26car/137yds.)? How do they deal with a collection of head cases and me-first personalities? How do they evaluate the up-and-down play of QB Eli Manning (16/27 161yds. 2TD, 1INT)? And will Tom Coughlin remain the head coach of the New York Giants in 2007?

Up next for the Eagles, the high-powered New Orleans Saints. And while the Eagles managed to get out of Dodge with a sloppy win on Sunday night, they will need to play much crisper on the road next week against an opponent far superior

than the Giants.

But in the playoffs, a win is a win, especially against a divisional rival, in the third meeting of the season. Games like those are usually wars of attrition, and this was no different.

And so, this magical run continues, mainly due to the inspired play of perhaps the most underrated player in the NFL, Brian Westbrook. That he has gone so unnoticed in this league for so long is a travesty.

A travesty that is slowly getting rectified with each scintillating performance.