

Line between Super Bowl glory and getting run out of town is a fine one

INSIDER DAN WIEDERER



INDIANAPOLIS - You can only wonder what was spinning through Eli Manning's mind that Sunday afternoon not

that long ago, his expression so very glum and pensive.

It was a week before Christmas and Manning's Giants fell 23-10. At home. To the lowly Redskins. Without scoring a touchdown until the final minute.

Manning was outdueled by Rex Grossman. His Giants were 7-7. His oft-blasted coach Tom Coughlin was again being shoved toward the guillotine.

Forty-nine days remained before Super Bowl XLVI, and not a single expert envisioned these Giants anywhere near Indianapolis.

The day after that faceplant, the Giants' play was labeled shameful and embarrassing.

Wrote New York Post columnist Steve Serby: "If this is the clueless, heartless, uninspired product the Giants give their 12th Man, if the 11 men on the field with their season on the line make the Redskins resemble the best of the Joe Gibbs Era, then Santa should feel compelled to slide

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LIONEL HAHN • Abaca Press

Giants coach Tom Coughlin held up the Lombardi Trophy for the second time in five seasons; both times, his team had to come up with one road victory after another to advance in the postseason.

Giants didn't look so super in mid-December

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down Tom Coughlin's chimney with a pink slip."

The boos at MetLife Stadium cut deep. Manning seemed flustered.

So how in the world did we get from there to Sunday night, not even two months later, with the Giants quarterback standing in a futuristic pod near midfield of Lucas Oil Stadium collecting the Lombardi Trophy?

How is Manning suddenly grouped with Bart Starr, Terry Bradshaw, Joe Montana and Tom Brady in an elite fraternity of two-time Super Bowl MVPs?

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The Post's headline Monday: "Super!"

That should be the sentiment of every NFL team now, this Giants' run the latest evidence that historical excellence doesn't require anything near perfection — simply a well-timed hot streak.

The team with the regular season's best record has only won the Super Bowl twice this century. By contrast, teams seeded fourth or lower in the playoffs have won it five times.

The Giants captured this one despite being swept by Washington and despite losing five times between Weeks 10 and 15, including a 49-24 beatdown from New Orleans.

And after a pass-happy season with so many quarterbacks igniting the fireworks, somehow Manning was the last standing — despite the records shattered by Drew Brees; despite the MVP precision of Aaron Rodgers; despite shoo-in Hall of Famer Tom Brady obstructing his path in the biggest game of the season.

This is the NFL, glory and misery separated by a thin partition, by a series of fate-twisting moments that shroud decent seasons with a legendary gleam while simultaneously blemishing reputations once thought to be untouchable.

There's no other way to explain New York emerging as the first Super Bowl champion ever with seven losses while once indomitable New England copes with yet another galling finish.

"I don't know if you can explain it, to be honest with you," a euphoric Coughlin said Monday.

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In winning their second Super Bowl in five seasons, Manning's Giants were like an invincible action hero, inconceivably sprinting away from every explosion with little more than a charred cheek.

On Sunday, New York survived three fumbles. The first, dropped by receiver Victor Cruz and recovered by New England, was erased because of a 12-men-on-the-field penalty on the Patriots. Two plays later, Cruz scored a touch-

The Giants' two second-half fumbles, by Hakeem Nicks and Ahmad Bradshaw, both magically squirted back into teammates' hands.

The Giants also survived a late replay challenge, the one requested by Patriots coach Bill Belichick after the night's longest play, that instantly iconic 38-yard reception by Mario Manningham.

And yes, New York also lived through two critical Brady incompletions in the final 4:06. The first came on a throw to wide-open Wes

Welker, the quarterback and his favorite receiver just barely out of sync. In a breath, what would have been a minimum gain of 24 went for naught. A potential game-sealing drive ended with a punt.

Not much later, after New York went ahead 21-17 on Bradshaw's last-minute touchdown, the Giants dodged a final bullet, the Hail Mary by Brady that was batted down before tight end Rob Gronkowski could snag it.

Glory and misery. Just a few inches apart.

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This NFL test of exactitude has become a recurring demonstration that even the most miniscule differences in execution often result in drastically different emotions. In recent years, Super Bowl championships have been decided in part by Kevin Dyson's arms being a few inches too short; by Antonio Holmes' brilliant ballet; by David Tyree's helmet strength.

Brady? That near-miss to Welker had the harshest critics insisting that one play and this one loss instantly stained his legacy.

The "What if?" factor seemed more fascinating than ever. If just one moment unfolds a tad differently, history detours.

Say, for example, Dallas protected its 34-22 lead over the Giants with less than

5 minutes to play in Week 14. With one more victory, the Cowboys would have snuck past New York as NFC East champions. The Giants' season would have ended on New Year's Day.

Instead of Coughlin now being hailed as a potential Hall of Famer, he would have been skewered as an overbearing underachiever.

Instead of Manning showering in Super Bowl confetti, perhaps it would have been the Patriots or even the Packers or 49ers instead.

Late Sunday, Manningham revisited his remarkable catch and joked that if his size 11 feet had required a size 11½ shoe, he wouldn't be a hero right now.

Manning, whose throw was spectacular, described the sequence with thoughts that could easily apply to the Giants' final six victories and the philosophy needed in today's NFL.

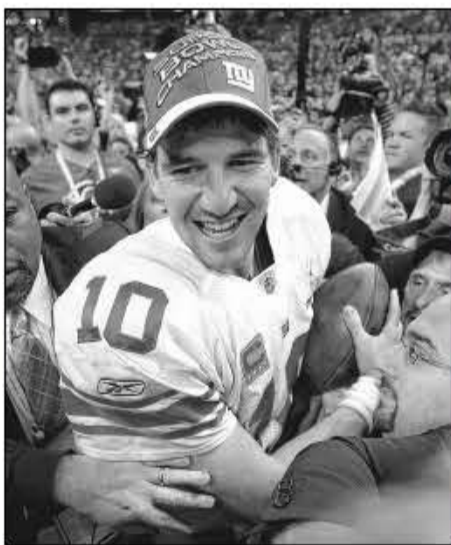
"I saw a window," Manning said. "And I felt confident about it."

His expression was far more elated than pensive. In seven weeks, misery had turned to glory.



BILL KOSTROUN • Associated Press

THE LOW POINT The Giants and quarterback Eli Manning fell 23-10 at home to the Redskins on Dec. 18, dropping New York to 7-7 and making any Super Bowl talk seem ridiculous.



PAUL SANCYA • Associated Press

THE ULTIMATE PAYOFF Manning could celebrate his second Super Bowl title Sunday night, after the Giants defeated the Patriots to complete a run of six consecutive victories.