Bengals must avoid Vikings upset to stay on track

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By JOE KAY

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Since the day the schedule was released, the Bengals have been looking forward to a comfy finish.

After leading the AFC North most of the way, Cincinnati (9-5) has a chance to finish off an unprecedented season at home. The Bengals get to host the Minnesota Vikings (4-9-1) on Sunday, followed by another home game against the second-place Baltimore Ravens (8-6).

A 2-game sweep would give them the division title and perhaps the No. 2 seed in the AFC playoffs. It would also put them in the playoffs for the third year in a row, a franchise first.

"It's a real advantage because you can really create momentum going into the postseason, just to win those games," safety Chris Crocker said. "And then if you win your division, you're going to get a home game also."

The Bengals are 6-0 at Paul Brown Stadium, their best home record since they won all eight and two playoff games in 1988 on their way to a Super Bowl loss to San Francisco. They haven't won a playoff game since the 1990 season and getting one at home would go a long way to dispel that streak of futility, which is tied for seventh-longest in NFL history.

So, why the worry?

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Ask the Eagles. And the Bears.

The Vikings put a severe crimp in Philadelphia's path to the playoffs by winning 48-30 last Sunday even though running back Adrian Peterson was out with a foot injury. Peterson is expected back against the Bengals.

It'll be the third time in four weeks the Vikings have played a team either leading or tied for a division lead. They also beat Chicago 23-20 in overtime. Their other game was a 29-26 loss to the Ravens.

They're no pushovers.

"Well, we don't use that word 'spoiler' in our conversation," coach Leslie Frazier said. "We're trying our very best to work as hard as we can to get a win for our team and it's nothing to do with the impact it would have on any other team."

Five things to watch on Sunday:

FAMILIAR TIES: Frazier was coach Marvin Lewis' first defensive coordinator in Cincinnati. Lewis wasn't happy with how the defense performed and even took over calling plays for one game. He fired Frazier after two seasons. Lewis now takes full blame for what happened, attributing it in part to being a first-time head coach.

"A little bit of that, and me just not being supportive enough of him in the right ways," Lewis said. "I'm a lot better now than I was then."

BIG NUMBERS: The difference between the Bengals' offense at home and on the road is enormous. They've averaged 19.4 points per game on the road, 33.2 per game at Paul Brown Stadium. They've scored 49, 41 and 41 points in their last three home games, the first time they've topped 40 in three straight at home. And they're facing a defense that ranks next to last

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in the NFL, allowing 30.4 points per game.

PETERSON'S BACK: Peterson missed the win over the Eagles with a sprained right foot. The Vikings held Philadelphia's LeSean McCoy to 38 yards last Sunday, leaving him with an NFL-leading 1,343. Peterson is 122 yards behind with two games to play — a lot to make up but all it would take would be one big game. The Bengals have missed 16 tackles in the last two weeks and have made that a point of emphasis with Peterson ahead.

SIMPSON'S HOMECOMING: Receiver Jerome Simpson was the Bengals' second-round pick in 2008. He didn't get a lot of playing time in Cincinnati but had one of his most memorable moments at Paul Brown Stadium: a heels-over-head flip while scoring a touchdown in 2011.

"They stuck by me for my years there," added Simpson, who is second on the Vikings with 44 catches for 689 yards. "Showed me a lot of love and support. It's just going to be fun times to go back and play in 'The Jungle."

NEW PUNTER: The Bengals signed former Bills punter Shawn Powell to replace Kevin Huber, who had his jaw broken in a loss at Pittsburgh on Sunday night. Powell will punt and hold on field goals and extra points. It'll be interesting to see how guickly he gets acclimated.

AP Pro Football Writer Dave Campbell in Eden Prairie, Minn., contributed to this report.