Payton's reinstatement is one more step for the Saints to return to normalcy, but for Vitt, said it doesn't bring closure to the bounty scandal.

NEW YORK (AP) -- Sean Payton is back as coach of the New Orleans Saints.

Payton's season-long suspension for his role in the Saints' bounty program was lifted by NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell on Tuesday, nearly two weeks earlier than expected.

The decision allows Payton to attend the Senior Bowl in Mobile, Ala., on Saturday, where some of the top college players available for the NFL draft will be competing.

Payton, along with assistant head coach Joe Vitt, general manager Mickey Loomis, and four players including Jonathan Vilma, was suspended after an investigation found the club had a performance pool offering cash rewards for key plays, including big hits. The player suspensions eventually were overturned.

"I clearly recognize that mistakes were made, which led to league violations," Payton said in a

statement. "Furthermore, I have assured the commissioner a more diligent protocol will be followed."

The suspension was scheduled to end after the Super Bowl on Feb. 3, but was moved up after Payton and Goodell met on Monday.

"Coach Payton acknowledged in the meeting his responsibility for the actions of his coaching staff and players and pledged to uphold the highest standards of the NFL and ensure that his staff and players do so as well," Goodell said in a statement. `"Sean fully complied with all the requirements imposed on him during his suspension.

"More important, it is clear that Sean understands and accepts his responsibilities as a head coach and the vital role that coaches play in promoting player safety and setting an example for how the game should be played at all levels."

Saints owner Tom Benson welcomed back his coach.

"We are all thankful that Sean Payton has been reinstated," Benson said. "We have a lot of work to do and we are in the middle of it right now."

Payton also needs to fill a key position on his coaching staff following the departure last week of offensive line coach and running game coordinator Aaron Kromer, now the offensive coordinator in Chicago.

Loomis and Vitt are in Mobile evaluating players. Loomis said he was caught off guard by the news of Payton's return. But he said having Payton back sooner than expected will help the Saints.

"Every day makes a difference. We've certainly missed Sean in terms of the football team and all the things that go with our business and the game. But look, I miss his friendship. We all

miss his friendship. We miss him as a person. I'm excited that he's going to be back here and fired up that he's back."

Vitt said he talked to Payton Tuesday morning and that he should join the Saints' contingent in Alabama on Wednesday.

"We just found out on the way to practice," Vitt said. "Mr. B called Mickey and we're all excited. Sean went and spent the day in New York (Monday). He just got back in Dallas. I talked to him on the phone about 5 o'clock this morning. He's packing his bags so we'll expect he'll be here some time" Wednesday.

Vitt agreed with Loomis that the timing of Payton's return is good for the team.

Payton is "going to hit the ground running with both feet. His jaw is going to be set. He'll have a note pad full of thoughts and ideas and he's going to have to get himself caught up with the evaluation process of our team and looking at film, which he'll do. This is perfect, getting him back now, because he's going to be here for the readings of our players. He's going to be here for the readings of these college seniors. We start handing out unrestricted free agent tape on Thursday and Friday of this week.

"This is where you're building the foundation of your football team, with the evaluation process of these draft eligible juniors and seniors and the free agents that are out there."

There remains one outstanding issue for the Saints stemming from the bounty probe: What will become of the Saints' second pick next spring. As part of the bounty punishment, Goodell fined the Saints $500,000 and took away second-round picks in 2012 and 2013. However, Goodell left open the possibility of restoring the 2013 second-rounder and instead docking the team a later-round pick if he is satisfied with the club's level of cooperation in the bounty matter.

What the Saints do know is that the 49-year-old Payton is set to return to New Orleans for the next five seasons. Earlier this month he signed a contract extension running through the 2017 season.

The coach is the last person punished in the bounty probe to return to work. Before Tuesday, Payton had not been at work since mid-April, when Goodell rejected the coach's appeal of his suspension.

Loomis was suspended for eight games, Vitt for six and former defensive coordinator Gregg Williams remains suspended indefinitely

Vilma and current Saints defensive lineman Will Smith, along with former Saints Scott Fujita and Anthony Hargrove, were given suspensions of various lengths, but never served a game. Their punishments were overturned after lengthy appeals which also coincided with exhaustive litigation in federal court.

The litigation included Vilma's defamation lawsuit against Goodell, which was dismissed by U.S. District Judge Ginger Berrigan last week.

Payton's reinstatement is one more step for the Saints to return to normalcy, but for Vitt, said it doesn't bring closure to the bounty scandal.

"It doesn't for me. You're going to have ask Sean that question, Mickey that question, Vilma that question. It certainly doesn't for me. I can forgive. I'm not going to forget. It is what it is."