Former Broncos receivers Three Amigos revel in 25 years of fun, games

Terry Frei  
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LONGMONT — The line was long and lengthening. Many of the people waiting weren't born when the men signing autographs at the downtown Longmont Broncos Country Caravan stop wore orange uniforms. So there was time for the adults to explain and tell stories.

Mark Jackson, he's wearing the tan shirt, and Vance Johnson, he's in the white hat, were part of this deal called the "Three Amigos." They caught John Elway's passes, including a very famous one in Cleveland at the end of this thing called "The Drive" and . . .

Ricky Nattiel, the third member of the Amigos, was at home in Gainesville, Fla., and didn't make the Caravan swing through northern Colorado last week.

"We knew when this Amigos thing started, it was going to way outlive our careers," Johnson said. "It's standing the test of time. It's been a lot of fun for Mark and me especially to be talking again and get reacquainted. Not a whole lot has changed — except for our ages."

Johnson, 49, has been through personal tribulations, and tearfully discussed past spousal abuse issues on "Oprah." But he has straightened out his life. He has lived on the Western Slope since 2004, and he opened a barbecue restaurant, VJ's Outlaw Ribbs, in Parachute in 2007.

Jackson, 48, is a leadership trainer for Rapport Leadership International in Las Vegas and also maintains the markjackson.biz website.

"This is the 25th anniversary of the Three Amigos," Jackson said. "We're going to be doing a new Three Amigos poster this year, and the Broncos are talking to Taco Bell about doing a Three Amigos commercial. This has been great. People have loved this. The time we played in was pretty much a decade of great Bronco football when the NFL was much more personal. It was before free agency and fans got to know and love the players, with a deeper relationship."

Elway's comment starts it all

In 1987, the Broncos were coming off their second Super Bowl appearance — a loss to the New York Giants — and their first with Elway at quarterback. At Mile High Stadium in mid-November, Denver pulled out a wild 31-29 victory over the Chicago Bears on "Monday Night Football." Johnson, Jackson and Nattiel (then a rookie)
caught touchdown passes from Elway, who said afterward, "I couldn't have done it without my amigos."

Lights went on.

Soon, hustling hawkers were selling sombreros near the stadium on game days and the Three Amigos were posing for a famous poster. Jackson, who finished up with brief stints with the Giants and the Colts, and Nattiel both played for Denver through 1992. Johnson was with the Broncos through 1995. The Three Amigos were gone by the time Denver broke through with a Super Bowl victory in January 1998.

"Being a part of the three Super Bowls we went to actually made the ones John won sweeter," Johnson said. "Our time had passed, but we still felt part of that team because of what we had help build."

Johnson laughed and added, "The only thing I regret is that I didn't make the money they're making nowadays."

Said Jackson: "I just count it all good, to be able to play in the NFL. I wear my AFC championship ring. I have it on today. People ask if that's a Super Bowl ring and I say, no, it's an AFC championship ring. And I leave it at that. Would things have been different with a win in any of those three Super Bowls we lost? I'd be lying if I said it didn't matter. It did matter. But I don't feel like there's any void in my life because of it. It was just a missed opportunity."

**The Catch never gets old**

Jackson, of course, is best remembered for catching the 5-yard touchdown pass from Elway at the end of the 98-yard drive in the final minutes of the fourth quarter in the Jan. 11, 1987, AFC championship game at Cleveland. The TD, plus the conversion, sent the game into overtime, and the Broncos used a Rich Karlis field goal to win 23-20 and advance to the Super Bowl against the Giants.

Jackson said that on a recent trip to Colorado, he turned on the television in his hotel room, and voila! Elway was scrambling for 9 yards to the Cleveland 5, leading to ... yes, The Catch.

"Vance said if he had any regrets it would be not getting paid what they get paid now," Jackson said with a wry smile. "My regret would be that I don't get a nickel, just a nickel, every time that play is on TV. Not a dollar, not a thousand dollars, just a nickel!!"

The former receivers both endorsed their former quarterback's move to the Broncos' front office.

"I don't think Pat Bowlen could have made a better decision for someone to be the general of this team," Johnson said. "The decisions he's making right now are very
gutsy. He's acting the same way as when we played football with him. He went for the long ball quite often to get that touchdown, and that's what he did with Peyton Manning."

Jackson said Elway has come into his own.

"He's been successful in the things he's done in business," Jackson said. "But he had such a passion and played at such a high level in the game, I think the success he's going to have with this is going to even be higher than what he's done with other things. ... The teams that are perennial playoff and Super Bowl contenders have stability, and I think that's what John brings the most — a stability the Broncos organization definitely needs. Now the players and their performance will have to step up to that pace."

The Two Amigos and the Broncos' Country Caravan made stops in Estes Park and Greeley in addition to Longmont, and there are plans to bring in Nattiel for a full Three Amigos reunion at western Colorado stops next month, perhaps tied to the opening of Johnson's second restaurant — Vance's Epicurious — in Grand Junction.
AIR OF UNCERTAINTY: Manning looks to recreate glory with Mile High expectations

Chris Corbellini
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ENCEWOOD, Colo. — As Peyton Manning begins to reinvent himself at 36 years old, trading a horseshoe on his helmet for an entire horse, it’s easy to distinguish Manning the leader from Manning the passer.

Through the high walls that separate the Denver Broncos practice fields and facility parking lot, the first voice a visitor hears is Manning’s — firm, familiar, not quite a southern drawl, not quite heartland gravel — as he asks questions at the start of a mandatory June minicamp. Later, during a morning session the quarterback makes his customary hand gestures at the line of scrimmage, directing traffic and pointing out defensive coverages. On breaks, he pulls aside receivers Eric Decker and Demaryius Thomas to chat. Finally, after practice, Manning worked on a short route into the end zone with Decker, repeating the throw several times. Here’s an elite quarterback as conductor, in action.

“He wants to make sure everything we do is perfect,” Decker said. “There’s no gray area. You be in the right spot. You run the route the way he wants it. And again, no gray area, so he definitely tests you every day you come out.”

“What we’re trying to do now is form our identity,” Manning said. “I don’t think that necessarily happens over 14 practices in May and June ... but I do feel we have a lot of options. We have a lot of guys who can bring certain things to the table.”

This is the cerebral, perfectionist Manning that fans, coaches and ex-teammates would recognize over his career with the Indianapolis Colts, only in different colors. But the physical makeup of a drop-back QB in his mid-30s is a concern even under the most optimal of circumstances, and after missing all of the 2011 season after several neck surgeries, no one knows for certain how Manning the passer will perform in Denver.

A scar snakes down Manning’s neck before slipping beneath his jersey collar — evidence of his spinal fusion operation last September and perhaps proof that while the mind is willing, the flesh and bone is not the same and may never be.

The consensus after organized team activities and minicamp practices is that Manning’s arm strength isn’t quite there yet. In fact, the strongest thrower in Day 1 of the minicamp was rookie Brock Osweiler, a 6-foot-7 project who rifles his passes around the field. Still, Manning looked sharp in spurts. He mixed speeds and hit
receivers nicely on short and intermediate throws, which was the quarterback’s specialty in Indianapolis. Manning’s one deep toss to Thomas in 7-on-7s was wobbly, but the 35-yard completion fooled veteran corner Champ Bailey.

Bailey, walking off the field afterward with new defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio, grinned and exhaled when asked about the play.

“It’s been a good week, so to speak,” he said, admiringly.

There were some shaky moments for the first-team offense overall. The Broncos led the league in rushing last season, but Manning’s presence will obviously alter offensive coordinator Mike McCoy’s schemes. The four-time NFL MVP did a lot of work out of the shotgun, missing several throws while others were dropped or tipped, including one picked off by free-agent signee Tracy Porter, who famously intercepted Manning in Super Bowl XLIV.

“It’s hard to give a summary on that. Certainly, we’re working on our timing in our passing game, and we probably had a few tipped balls,” Manning said. “As quarterbacks, it’s our job to put the ball in the perfect spot.”

With the completion of these offseason workouts last Thursday, NFL facilities will go dark until the start of training camp in late July. But the team believes Manning is ready for a full workload during the preseason. Under head coach John Fox, Denver typically plays the starting quarterback in the first three exhibition games, and then holds him out in the finale.

“I think he’s been tremendous,” Fox said. “We still have a lot of work to do. Our measuring stick is wins and losses, and we’re not there yet.”

Over the next few weeks, Manning will continue to rehab his triceps nerve in his right arm, and work with his receiver group when he can. As always, Manning the quarterback makes smart, sensible decisions. Manning the passer is still wait-and-see.