

Mark Kiszla: Broncos' Porter may be odd man out at corner

Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
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As a stark reminder the NFL is a brutal business, we offer Broncos cornerback Tracy Porter, who doesn't know when he will be a starter in the league again and can no longer be certain his opportunity will come in Denver.

"The NFL is a what have you done for me lately league," Porter said Wednesday, while sitting in his locker at Dove Valley.

Porter has not played since Oct. 7, missing the last two games as he sought medical treatment to correct the same dizziness and racing heartbeat that were symptomatic of a single, still-unexplained seizure he suffered nearly three months ago, during training camp.

But let's not mask the real football issue here: The Broncos have lost confidence in Porter. The emergence of young Denver cornerbacks Tony Carter and Chris Harris could not only keep Porter from regaining his job as a starter, but ultimately push him out of town after only one season.

Without a trace of anger, Porter told me the team's dissatisfaction with his performance dates to a home loss against Houston when Texans quarterback Matt Schaub passed for 284 yards and threw for two touchdowns against Porter's side of the field.

"They didn't say they were disappointed in my play. But obviously you can tell they were disappointed in the Houston game, because I was," Porter said.

"It's never a good thing when you give up two touchdowns on your side, whether you were supposed to have a safety there or you weren't supposed to have the safety there. At the end of the day, it's your side and you're a corner."

Porter joined the Broncos in March as an unrestricted free agent. His one-year, \$4 million contract showed a lack of heavy interest in him throughout the league, despite starting 45 NFL games for New Orleans, including a Super Bowl victory that saw him return an interception 74 yards for a touchdown against Peyton Manning and Indianapolis.

Starting opposite all-star cornerback Champ Bailey, ensuring his skills would be tested frequently by opposing quarterbacks, Porter quickly won raves from Broncomaniacs by returning a interception for a touchdown to clinch a 31-19 victory in the season opener. But Porter fell out of favor with the coaching staff

before health issues were cited for leaving him off a mid-October trip to San Diego, where Carter and Harris both scored touchdowns during Denver's remarkable comeback victory.

"The only thing I can do is go into practice, week in and week out, and showcase why they brought me here. The other two guys, Chris and Tony, they're doing an excellent job in my place," Porter said.

"It's a competitive business. They're being productive. They like the chemistry with the team, and it's up to the coaches. If they feel they're going to go with those guys, then it's something I have to live with."

Cornerback is the NFL's high-wire act. Fail to defend a pass that goes for a touchdown, and everybody in the stadium sees you fall.

"It's similar to playing quarterback. If you're playing great, if you're playing like Peyton Manning, everything's good. But if you're playing like Michael Vick, it's a tough deal. You get all the praise one minute and all the criticism the next minute. Same at cornerback," Porter said.

"Every cornerback is going to get beat. Deion (Sanders) got beat. Champ (Bailey) has got beat. DeAngelo Hall, he's gotten beat. Asante Samuel has gotten beat. Even Hall of Fame corners get beat. If you haven't gotten beat as a corner in this league, then you haven't played in this league."

Porter told me he joined the Broncos for two reasons: 1) He wanted to win; 2) He couldn't find a long-term deal elsewhere in the league.

"Yeah, I'm on a one-year deal," Porter said. "But I'm not going to walk on eggshells, thinking I have to do everything perfect, because in the end, you're not going to be perfect."

Now on medication after doctors could not pinpoint the cause of his health issues, Porter is confident there won't be another seizure in his future. Regaining confidence of the coaching staff might be a tougher task.

The NFL trade deadline looms at 2 p.m. Thursday.

Does Porter have a future in Denver beyond this season?

"You want to get a long-term deal. But that's just the adversity I'm facing," Porter said.

"Regardless of what kind of deal you have, if one team doesn't want to re-sign you, there are still other teams you can shop around to. All it takes is one team to like you."

Stokely, Broncos return to scene of the Immaculate Deflection in 2009

Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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It's all good now for Brandon Stokley.

He's an NFL wide receiver again, working the slot. He's teaming with Peyton Manning again. He's back playing at home for the Broncos.

But for a while there, his famed Immaculate Deflection catch seemed to lead into more difficult professional days than good.

"Batted up. Oh, God! Stokley!"

"Yeah, Gus, he's the man," Stokley said. "I've got to give him a big hug. That was a great call by him."

The Immaculate Deflection was memorable for several reasons, not the least of which was the maniacal play-by-play call of television announcer Gus Johnson. For the first time since that 2009 season-opening miracle victory, Stokley and the Broncos return Sunday to the scene of that game-winning play, Cincinnati's Paul Brown Stadium.

The Broncos, 4-3 and leading the AFC West, play the Bengals, 3-4 and in third place in the AFC North. The Bengals are coming off a bye week, giving their coach, Marvin Lewis, plenty of time to remember the Stokley play.

"Brandon runs through my mind all the time," Lewis said while laughing during a conference call Wednesday with Denver reporters.

A little more than three years ago — forgive Broncos fans if it seems like 20 years ago, as the 2009 game against the Bengals marked the start of the Josh McDaniels era in Denver — Cincinnati scored with 38 seconds remaining to take a 7-6 lead. The Broncos got the ball back after the kickoff at their 13-yard line, which was bad enough. Worse, quarterback Kyle Orton was playing with a badly damaged finger on his right (throwing) hand, so he couldn't throw the ball very far. On second down, he threw it as far as he could down the left sideline — where Broncos wide receiver Brandon Marshall was surrounded by Bengals. The cornerback in front, Leon Hall, leaped and tipped the ball — up in the air and toward the middle of the field.

There, Stokley was in the clear and grabbed it.

"Down the sideline. Can they catch him? Stokley! Wow!"

Stokley ran along the 1-yard line, perpendicular to the goal line, so he could kill a few more seconds of clock time before crossing into the end zone.

"That was a tough year"

So much has happened to Stokley since that 87-yard touchdown play that gave Denver a 12-7 victory. So much has happened to the Broncos.

It was Stokley who nose dived first. He played in the next game, catching five passes for 70 yards in an easy victory over Cleveland. Then, in what was one of the first of many misjudgments by McDaniels, Stokley was benched.

"I kind of got everything taken away from me as far as opportunities," Stokley said. "I didn't really understand why. I wouldn't say I was down, but you wonder if you're going to get the opportunities any more. And then it got tough there, team-wise. We started losing. So, yeah, that was a tough year."

The Broncos started 6-0, then lost 24 of their next 31 games, a rut that lasted into the 2011 season. Stokley didn't make it to the start of the 2010 season with the Broncos; he was among their final cuts. He caught on with Seattle and made 43 catches, plus two more touchdown receptions in the playoffs. But he had trouble catching on with an NFL team a year ago. He played briefly for the New York Giants, but tore a quadriceps and thought his career might be over.

Stokley grew up in Lafayette, La., but he and his wife, Lana, and their two sons, Cameron and Carson, had long decided the Denver area was home, Broncos or no Broncos.

"I was rehabbing at Steadman-Hawkins up until two or three weeks before Christmas," Stokley said. "That's when I said I'm going to Louisiana for Christmas. I haven't been back home in 14 years to spend Christmas with the family. I tried to run on it and it still was not good. So I told myself: Done. Done with football. I'm not going to get another chance. I shut it down until Peyton called in whatever that was, February in Duke."

Rescued by Manning

Manning, who had played with Stokley with the Indianapolis Colts, said he dangled courtside tickets to a Duke-North Carolina men's basketball game if Stokley helped the quarterback through his three-day, twice-a-day, passing rehab session.

There was no quad pain as Stokley ran routes. Duke coach David Cutcliffe, Manning's position coach at Tennessee who monitored the passing sessions, was impressed not only with his former quarterback, who was trying to come back from four neck surgeries, but Stokley too.

"He talked to Brandon about what he saw," Manning said. "He said, 'You look good, you look quick. You ought to give it a shot.' All I told Denver, I showed them some film and 'You ought to consider bringing him in and working him out at least.' "

When Manning signed with the Broncos in March, Stokley's football career was rescued. Manning hasn't played favorites with his receivers this season. Stokley has been good for at least two catches a game, but Manning distributes first to Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker and Jacob Tamme.

It's seemingly at the most critical times that Manning zeros in on his friend.

"I'm not complaining," Stokley said. "I'm enjoying it. You know where I was last year, my state of mind last year."

Stokley has survived long enough to relive, as an active player, one of the most famous catches in Broncos history. And wouldn't you know it? His quarterback again has an injured digit on his throwing hand. Manning suffered a bruised right thumbnail during the Broncos' victory Sunday night against New Orleans.

"Touchdown, Denver! Unbelievable! Oh, my goodness, what a play!"

Oldie but goodie

At 36, Denver's Brandon Stokley is the second-oldest NFL receiver and among the most productive of those 33 and older:

Player, Team	Age ...	C ...	Y ...	TD
Donald Driver, Packers	37	6	55 ...	2
Brandon Stokley, Broncos ...	36 ...	21 ...	235 ...	1
Randy Moss, 49ers	35 ...	13 ...	235 ...	2
Reggie Wayne, Colts	33 ...	54 ...	757 ...	2
Steve Smith, Panthers	33 ...	35 ...	589 ...	0
Santana Moss, Redskins	33 ...	23 ...	311 ...	5
Deion Branch, Patriots	33	5	50	0

Broncos' Tracy Porter waiting to regain his starting job

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
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Porter waiting to regain his starting job

Broncos cornerback Tracy Porter has returned to practice, but it appears his return to the starting lineup will be a longer wait.

Porter suffered a seizure in August and was held back from the Broncos' trip to San Diego when he experienced similar symptoms the day before the game. He missed the game against the Chargers on Oct. 15, practiced on a limited basis last Wednesday, then didn't practice Thursday or Friday and was held out of the lineup Sunday against the Saints.

Porter practiced on a limited basis Wednesday and said he felt good, but seemed resigned to the fact that Chris Harris would remain the starter at right cornerback, with Tony Carter coming into the game in the Denver defense's nickel and dime packages.

"Yeah, I feel better than I did the previous couple weeks when I sat out," Porter said. "I'm starting to come back into my own, looking forward to being back out there. But coaches are going to make their decision, and they feel comfortable with the guys they have out there.

"So I just have to wait (for) my opportunity."

Porter said he was prescribed medication to prevent future problems. Asked if he was nervous about suffering another seizure, he said: "No, because the doctors took the necessary steps and did all the tests. I have confidence in them because they made the right diagnosis. They gave me the right medicine that I need to take, and it won't happen again."

Coach John Fox said of Porter's status: "It's kind of day to day. Sorting out, making sure the medication's taking effect."

Manning update. Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning was wearing a small piece of tape on the nail of his sore right thumb, but practiced fully Wednesday.

Denver's season could have taken a sour turn if Manning had hit his knuckle on a New Orleans defender's helmet just before halftime Sunday. Had Manning fractured a knuckle on the thumb of his throwing hand, the chances for missed playing time would have risen drastically.

"It's OK. It's OK. It's sore," Manning said after Wednesday's practice. "But it's more of an irritant than anything."

After the victory over the Saints, Manning said he had been "pretty lucky."

Champ fan. Bengals coach Marvin Lewis was the Redskins' assistant head coach and defensive coordinator in 2002, which was Champ Bailey's fourth of five seasons with Washington before a 2004 trade brought him to Denver.

Lewis said in looking at the Broncos' defense in recent days, he sees the Bailey he saw each day in practice a decade ago.

"I love Champ, how he plays, what he does. And he's still doing it," said Lewis, whose team hosts the Broncos on Sunday. "Just fun to see him doing it."

Lewis also was on the Steelers' coaching staff when Hall of Famer Rod Woodson was playing cornerback for the team. Asked to compare, Lewis said of Bailey: "He's right there with a Rod Woodson. (Bailey) is that kind of player. He knows the offense — a very heady player, a smart, instinctive player."

Injury report. Porter was the only Denver player who didn't participate fully in practice Wednesday.

Bengals wide receiver Marvin Jones (knee) and linebacker Dontay Moch (illness) didn't practice and running back Brian Leonard (ribs) was limited.

Footnotes. In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, Manning said he talked to his younger brother, Giants quarterback Eli Manning. "I've checked with Eli. He's OK. His family is OK. I think all of our prayers and thoughts are with the people in the New York area, the East Coast area," Peyton said. ... Denver linebacker Wesley Woodyard was named the AFC defensive player of the week for his 13 tackles, a sack, a forced fumble and an interception in the Broncos' victory over the Saints. He became the first player since 2007 (Napoleon Harris) to have at least 10 tackles, a forced fumble, a sack and an interception in the same game.

Bengals' Andy Dalton to A.J. Green presents major problem for Broncos

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
November 1, 2012

One of the biggest tasks for the Broncos defense Sunday will be to push Bengals' quarterback Andy Dalton over the line.

The line between Dalton doing what the Bengals want him to and what he's actually comfortable with in his second year as a starter is the question — no matter how the defense in front of him is aligned.

When he's on, and he was certainly on a year ago in his visit to Denver, he has the capability of dropping 332 passing yards on the Broncos (when Denver held on for a 24-22 victory).

When he's pushes a little too hard, takes a few too many chances, he finds himself in position to make mistakes, along with several of his offensive teammates, in the Bengals' current three-game losing streak.

Dalton has thrown six interceptions in those three losses, though Bengals coach Marvin Lewis was quick to point out that several of those, including all three against the Browns, were not necessarily Dalton's fault.

So, instead of dialing Dalton back to try to stop the losing streak, Lewis said Wednesday he wants Dalton to do a little more.

"We want Andy to take control of the football team, this is his offensive football team, take control ... and let's drive this thing forward," Lewis said. "A year ago everything was new and now he has an understanding of what he needs to do, let's go do it and be great at it."

Dalton's primary target has been wide receiver A.J. Green. And that makes complete sense — any pass thrown within an area code of Green will be caught by him and turned into a play a defense will have to go over on film later.

And quarterbacks always have their favorites, receivers they trust in any situation. That's how the game works, important players are asked to make plays in important times.

But Dalton has targeted Green at least 11 times in five of the Bengals' seven games. In all, 30 percent of Dalton's pass attempts have gone toward Green.

To put that into perspective, the Patriots' Tom Brady and Wes Welker are generally considered the most active pass-catch combination in the league by personnel executives.

Brady has targeted Welker on 25.9 percent of his attempts this season and targeted tight end Rob Gronkowski on 14.3 percent of his attempts this season.

So, defenses have taken to doing whatever it takes to keep the ball away from Green — the Steelers limited him to one catch in Cincinnati's last outing and the Bengals had just 105 passing yards in the game — and force Dalton to either keep trying to jam the ball into Green or go elsewhere.

Too often Dalton has kept trying to go to Green. And in Dalton's second year behind center, defenses have forced him out of his comfort zone.

That's what defenses do and that's what the Broncos will do, likely with 11-time Pro Bowl selection Champ Bailey in the mix, if not directly across from Green no matter where Green lines up in the formation.

When Dalton was asked Wednesday how he needs to adjust when defenses want him to go elsewhere with the ball, he said;

"We still have to find ways to get (Green) the ball," and when asked about how Green would approach a potential match-up with Bailey, Dalton added; "I know A.J.'s looking forward to it, it'll be a good test for him to play against a guy like that,. I'd put A.J. against anybody."

And just how well the Broncos fare in that task will go a long way in determining if they put together their first three-game winning streak of the season.

Broncos figure to work D.J. Williams into lineup quickly, creatively

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
November 1, 2012

Today's question about the Broncos comes from Bill Meyers in Arlington, Va. To submit a question for consideration, send an e-mail to The Denver Post's Jeff Legwold.

Q: I'm as frustrated at the D.J. Williams issues as anyone, but I also recognize his talent. And given how well things are going for the Broncos now, it's exciting to think that we could be making a midseason "acquisition" of a linebacker with Williams' skills. Where do you see him fitting into the lineup and how much of an impact can he have given the amount of time missed?

A: Bill, the Broncos are frustrated with Williams' suspensions as well. But with the NFL rules regarding suspensions involving substance abuse (alcohol and/or illegal drugs, etc.), Williams has been able to attend team meetings and meetings with his position group of late.

He can also work out with the Broncos strength and conditioning staff. With his six-game suspension for violating the league's performance-enhancing substance policy, that was not the case. Williams could not go to the Broncos' Dove Valley complex during that suspension.

During the current three-game suspension, which ends the day after the Broncos play the Panthers in Charlotte, N.C., Williams can be in the building. So, he won't be as far behind in terms of his conditioning and ability to work in the Broncos' new defensive scheme when he is reinstated.

He was also in training camp, so he's been around the team when things were installed.

So, if he's ready physically, and after three weeks with the team's strength and conditioning staff there is no reason he shouldn't be, Williams should be able to quickly contribute in some way.

That said, the question will be how. Wesley Woodyard has played in what was once Williams' weakside spot in the 4-3 base defense. Woodyard is the team's leading tackler and is coming off his best game as a pro with 13 tackles, a sack, forced fumble and an interception in the Broncos' win over the Saints.

To take him off the field to play Williams on the weak side doesn't make sense. And to take Von Miller out of the strong side to play Williams doesn't make sense,

though when Williams sent some items from the playbook on Twitter in the preseason about his "position change," it had to do with the strongside spot.

The Broncos like what Keith Brooking has done at middle linebacker. Williams has started a full season at each of the three linebacker spots in a 4-3 defense during his career with the Broncos, but in the past he has consistently said publicly it's his least favorite spot to play.

Which is why upon his return it would be no shock, in fact look for it in some situations, for the Broncos to play a 3-4 look once in a while and simply play all four of the linebackers with Miller and Woodyard as outside linebackers, Brooking and Williams on the inside.

The key to making that work, especially on early downs, would be to find a way for Elvis Dumervil to play in the defensive line. Dumervil would be undersized for that duty in any 3-4 look, so the Broncos could go with a more traditional three-man look up front with Derek Wolfe, Kevin Vickerson and Justin Bannan up front and use Dumervil in a rotational role, with the focus being on passing downs.

Dumervil also led the league in sacks, with 17, as an outside linebacker in the 3-4. He then played down in a three-point stance for most of those sacks.

The Broncos align themselves at times like a 3-4 defense, even though their scheme is a 4-3, with multiple fronts and personnel packages. That will only increase with Williams' return.

They also have a three-linemen, three-linebacker package they use in their nickel defense (five defensive backs), and Williams would certainly be a candidate in that look as well.

Beyond Miller, Broncos coach John Fox has said Williams is potentially one of the impact players the Broncos have at the position. So, Fox figures to use Williams plenty just as soon as the veteran is in uniform.

Thursday night's game: Chiefs at Chargers

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
November 1, 2012

Thursday night's game

Chiefs (1-6) at Chargers (3-4) 6:20 p.m., NFL Network

The skinny: Most of America may take a pass on this game, but it brings together two of the NFL's most drama-filled franchises. Both head coaches and general managers are under increasing pressure for their lack of success. The loser of this game will be at the boiling point. The Chargers have won nine of their past 12 games against the Chiefs, including a meeting this season when the mistake-prone Chiefs committed turnovers on their first two possessions in a 37-20 victory for the Chargers. Matt Cassel, who has missed one game this season because of a concussion, will start at quarterback again for the Chiefs in place of Brady Quinn, who is out with a concussion.

The difference will be: Which of these turnover-prone teams can handle their business most effectively. QB Philip Rivers didn't throw an interception in bad weather in the Chargers' loss at Cleveland last weekend, but it was the first game since the season opener that he didn't throw an interception.

Cassel has a staggering 16 turnovers this season — 10 interceptions and six lost fumbles — and the Chiefs are last in the NFL in turnover margin at minus-18. Cassel has thrown three touchdown passes and six interceptions in his past three starts.

The call: Chargers 24-17.

Broncos' Peyton Manning shows no ill-effects from smashed thumbnail

Tom Kensler
The Denver Post
October 31, 2012

According to reports from the team, Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning threw well with no adverse effects during Wednesday's practice, which no doubt allowed everyone within the organization to exhale.

Manning wore a piece of tape on his right thumbnail, which had collided with the helmet of Saints defensive end Martez Wilson after Manning threw a pass Sunday night in the Broncos' 34-14 home victory.

It's not that the Broncos appeared overly concerned about Manning thumb after the game. But one never knows how an injury of any degree to the throwing hand of a quarterback — even a cracked or smashed nail — might affect his ability to pass the football.

Manning practiced full on Wednesday, Broncos coach John Fox said.

"It's OK, it's OK," Manning said Wednesday. "It's sore, but just more of an irritant than anything."

Denver (4-3) plays at Cincinnati on Sunday. Had Manning hit Wilson's helmet with the knuckle on that thumb instead of the nail, the Broncos might be without their star for this weekend and beyond.

"It just shows that with injuries, it's a matter of inches — or centimeters," Broncos receiver Eric Decker said Wednesday.

Manning said Cincinnati's 3-4 record does not reflect the Bengals' talent.

"Their defense is very physical," Manning said. "They play in a physical division (AFC North). The teams they play are good running teams and have a physical defense. Cincinnati matches that mold.

"Their record is misleading. I'm not sure what's going on with their offense, but their defense is playing solid. I think they're second in NFL in sacks (actually third, with 23), which has come in four-man rushes. They have multiple blitzes."

Manning said he has "great respect" for Bengals defensive coordinator Mike Zimmer. In 2011, Cincinnati finished seventh in the NFL for fewest yards allowed (316.2) per game. This season, the Bengals rank ninth in the AFC, yielding an average of 357.1.

Zimmer, in his 19th season as an NFL coach, also served on staffs at Dallas and Atlanta.

"I've played against (Zimmer) a bunch when he was at different places," Manning said. "They're a (2011) playoff team. I don't know what their record is, but all we see is what's on film, and I think their defense is good."

Broncos' Tracy Porter participates in some drills wearing full pads

Tom Kensler
The Denver Post
October 31, 2012

Broncos cornerback Tracy Porter, on the inactive list for the past two games, was in full gear for Wednesday's practice but did not participate in all drills.

Porter, a starter since joining the Broncos for this season as a free agent (from the Saints), has been held out of full-contact work during recent practices. He has shown similar symptoms to those that he had prior to suffering a seizure in August.

Broncos' Wesley Woodyard named AFC defensive player of the week

Mike Klis
The Denver Post
October 31, 2012

This is almost getting monotonous. Another week, another player-of-the-week honor for the Broncos.

This time it was Broncos linebacker Wesley Woodyard who was named AFC defensive player of the week after his dominating performance in a 34-14 win Sunday night against the New Orleans Saints.

Woodyard had 13 tackles (9 solo), one sack, one interception, two passes defended and one forced fumble. He became the first NFL player in five years (Kansas City linebacker Napoleon Harris) to record double-digit tackles, a sack, an interception and a forced fumble in a single game.

Woodyard leads the Broncos this season with 58 tackles while also posting three sacks, two interceptions, three passes defended and one forced fumble. He joins Cleveland linebacker D'Qwell Jackson as the only two NFL players this year with at least 50 tackles, three sacks and two interceptions.

Woodyard follows quarterback Peyton Manning, who received the AFC offensive honor in Week 7, and cornerback Tracy Porter, who was honored in Week 1, as Broncos who have won a weekly award this season.

Only eight other players in the past 30 years have filled the defensive boxscore as Woodyard did Sunday. (Check out the game former CU Buff Chad Brown had):

Player Opp (Date) Tk .. Sk .. Int .. FF

Wesley Woodyard, Den.vs. N.O. (10/28/12) 13 ... 1 1 .. 1

Napoleon Harris, K.C. at Chi. (9/16/07) 12 ... 1 1 .. 1
DeMeco Ryans, Hou. at Oak. (12/3/06).... 15 ... 1 1 .. 1
Eric Barton, NYJ vs. Sea. (12/19/04) ... 11 ... 1 1 .. 1
Willie McGinest, N.E. at NYJ (12/20/03). 11 .. 1.5 ... 1 .. 1
Greg Wesley, K.C. at Min. (12/20/03)... 11 1 1 .. 1
Rodney Harrison, S.D. at Buf. (10/15/00) 12 1 1 .. 1
Chad Brown, Pit. vs. Cin. (10/13/96) ... 11 .. 4.5 ... 1 ... 1
Bryan Cox, Mia.at N.E. (9/10/95) 13 1 ... 1 ... 1

Mike Adams' hometown of Paterson, N.J. ravaged by Sandy

Mike Klis
The Denver Post
October 31, 2012

Broncos starting safety Mike Adams was born and raised in Paterson, N.J. At his locker Wednesday, Adams was looking at a picture on his phone he received from his brother.

It showed the street he grew up on strewn with broken-down trees and remnants of flood damage from the storm of Hurricane Sandy that pounded the Eastern Seaboard starting Monday.

"Everybody's good," Adams said of his family. "The problem is they've been without power. My brother sent me a video of a car lifted off the road (by water). And that car was parked. It was serious."

Broncos among NFL teams closing the deal in the red zone

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
October 31, 2012

Seven teams in the NFL have scored at least 16 touchdowns on their possessions inside an opponents' 20-yard line, including the Broncos.

Six of those teams have a winning record and four lead their respective divisions.

In other words, you gotta score in the red zone.

Team	TDs inside the 20	Record
New England	24	5-3
Atlanta	18	7-0
Green Bay	18	5-3
Broncos	17	4-3
Houston	16	6-1
N.Y. Giants	16	6-2
New Orleans	16	2-5

Broncos' Woodyard named AFC defensive player of the week

Tom Kensler
The Denver Post
October 31, 2012

In an announcement that should have surprised no one, Broncos linebacker Wesley Woodyard was named AFC defensive player of the week Wednesday.

Sunday night in a 34-14 home victory over New Orleans, Woodyard recorded 13 tackles (nine solo), a sack, an interception, a forced fumble, tackle for loss and two passes defensed.

According to the NFL, Woodyard became the first player since Kansas City's Napoleon Harris in 2007 to get double-figure tackles, a sack, interception and forced fumble in the same game.

Bengals are team “that scares you,” Broncos safety Leonhard said

Tom Kensler
The Denver Post
October 31, 2012

To a man, the Broncos say they believe upcoming opponent Cincinnati is more talented than the Bengals' 3-4 record might suggest.

Denver (4-3) plays Sunday at Cincinnati, a team that has lost three straight after opening the season with three victories in its opening four games.

“They’re a team that’s extremely talented,” Broncos safety Jim Leonhard said Wednesday following practice. “That scares you. That puts you on alert.”

There are no sure wins in the NFL, Leonhard said.

“You can’t just throw it out there,” he said. “They’re a team that they can get it any given week. You don’t want it to be you. You want to kick a guy when he’s down on every given week. You don’t get too many opportunities to play teams that are struggling a little bit.

“You just have to put pressure on them early because you know they’re hungry and will keep fighting.”

Broncos' Eric Decker: Manning's sore thumbnail "didn't affect him" Wednesday

Tom Kensler
The Denver Post
October 31, 2012

Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning said Wednesday following practice that he threw with no problems and that the sore thumbnail on his right, throwing hand didn't give him any problems.

Manning wore a piece of tape over the thumbnail.

"It's OK. It's OK," he said Wednesday after practice. "It's sore, but just more of an irritant than anything."

Knowing the football players often shrug off injuries, I always like to cross-check those kind of things. So, along with other reporters, we asked wide receiver Eric Decker how Manning threw during practice.

"It didn't affect him at all," Decker said. "He was out there. I actually didn't even know he did it."

During the Broncos' 34-14 home win over New Orleans on Sunday Night, Manning's thumbnail collided with the helmet of Saints defense end Martez Wilson after Manning threw a pass. Had the impact been with the knuckle on Manning's thumb, the Broncos may have been without their star player for Sunday's game at Cincinnati, and perhaps beyond.

"It shows with injuries it's a game of inches, or centimeters," Decker said Wednesday.

Manning says right thumb sore but OK

Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
October 31, 2012

DENVER (AP) — Peyton Manning's right thumbnail was covered with white tape and put under a media microscope upon his return to the football field Wednesday.

The tape didn't wrap all the way around his thumb, leaving him able to grip the football like normal, and teammates said his throws and hand-offs at practice were unaffected by his injury in his first action since smacking his throwing hand on a defender's helmet Sunday night.

For the first time, Denver coach John Fox listed his quarterback on the team's injury report — "Peyton Manning, right thumb, full" — but said he noticed no lingering effects.

Manning, who threw two second-half touchdowns in Denver's 34-14 win over New Orleans after getting hurt just before halftime, said after practice that his thumb was "sore, but it's more of an irritant than anything else."

Manning gets all this scrutiny.

After all, he missed all of last season in Indianapolis with a nerve injury in his neck and now plays in a city that 24 years ago argued about the quality of Halloween candy handed out to trick-or-treaters by a young John Elway.

Now, the discolored right thumbnail on the four-time MVP who's playing like he's hungry for a fifth is certainly a big deal in media circles, both traditional and social.

Manning acknowledged he was "probably a little bit lucky" that he banged the nail and not the knuckle of his right thumb on New Orleans defensive end Martez Wilson's helmet just before absorbing his only hit of the night.

Another half-inch, and all bets would have been off for the rolling Broncos (4-3), who lead the AFC West, are finally hitting their stride behind Manning's spectacular play and steady leadership and look every bit like a team ready to take off.

Another half-inch and this is rookie Brock Osweiler's offense. Or Caleb Hanie's.

"They say it's a game of inches," wide receiver Eric Decker said. "Maybe it's a game of centimeters."

The league's leading passer at age 36, Manning is playing better than anyone — the Broncos and their quarterback included — could have hoped for over the season's first two months.

"Well, certainly, it was a lot of unknown before this season," Manning said. "I think there still is. This is a new team and nobody knew how this team would form chemistry-wise. I didn't know what my situation would be. I mentioned early on that I'm feeling my way out. We're finding out our identity. I think we are still doing that. I think we have it in some places."

Even though they're not all the way there yet, Elway, the Broncos' vice president of football operations, said during his weekly podcast on the team's website that Denver is coming off its "most complete game of the year."

"We thought it was going to be a track meet and we'd really have to keep up with them," Elway said. "The compliment goes to (defensive coordinator) Jack Del Rio, his staff and the defensive players. They really answered the bell."

Drew Brees was limited to 137 yards through the air until the Saints' final drive, when he threw for 76 yards with several Broncos backups in the game.

Weakside linebacker Wesley Woodyard, an undrafted fifth-year pro from Kentucky, won AFC Defensive Player of the Week honors Wednesday for a monster game that included 13 tackles (9 solo), a sack, an interception, two pass breakups and a forced fumble — exceeding or matching his career high in every category.

Despite losing linebacker Joe Mays (broken leg), the Broncos could get cornerback Tracy Porter back this week. He's missed the last two games after experiencing light-headedness and a racing heart — the same symptoms he had before suffering a seizure during training camp.

He returned to practice on a limited basis Wednesday and said he hopes to play Sunday at Cincinnati: "It's a matter of me getting my conditioning back, getting my legs back up under me," Porter said. "As far as seizure-wise, I don't have any problem."

The last time the Broncos visited the Bengals (3-4), Brandon Stokley's 87-yard "Immaculate Deflection" touchdown catch on a batted pass with 11 seconds left gave Denver a farfetched 12-7 win in the 2009 opener.

"Brandon runs through my mind all the time," Bengals coach Marvin Lewis lamented during a conference call with Denver reporters. "But I wish we had more guys here that were on that team. I think we have about seven guys that were actually in that game."

Believe it or not, Stokley also has had bad dreams about that play in which he cradled cornerback Leon Hall's deflection at midfield and raced untouched into the

end zone — but not before he headily took an extra couple of precious seconds off the clock by running along the goal line before stepping across for the score.

"I just kind of saw that nobody was behind me chasing me. I saw a guy kind of give up on it. I knew there wasn't a lot of time left, so I thought, why not try to run some time off?" Stokley said. "And then the next day, I kind of started having nightmares about it. What if I'd have gotten caught? What if I had fumbled? What if somebody would have hit me?"

"I think next time I'll probably just get in the end zone."

Notes: Manning said that "being from New Orleans, knowing firsthand what hurricanes can do," his thoughts were with the victims of superstorm Sandy. ... Woodyard is one of just nine players to record double-digit tackles, a sack, an interception and a forced fumble in a game since sacks became an official NFL statistic in 1982. ... Sunday's game at Cincinnati snaps a streak of 12 straight games in which the Broncos drew the networks' top broadcast team, first because of Tim Tebow and then because of Manning.

Broncos-Bengals Preview

Jeff Bartl
Associated Press
October 31, 2012

The Denver Broncos have surged into the AFC West lead as quickly as the Cincinnati Bengals have watched their promising start disappear.

It may not be a coincidence given the rise of Peyton Manning's play and the recent struggles of Andy Dalton.

Manning has never lost the Bengals, and his Broncos seek a third straight victory while dealing host Cincinnati a fourth consecutive defeat Sunday.

Denver got off to a disappointing 1-2 start as Manning's 85.6 QB rating ranked 11th in the NFL. The future Hall of Famer has been stellar since, though, posting a league-best 127.9 passer rating while throwing 12 touchdowns to only one interception as Denver (4-3) has won three of four to take sole possession of the division lead.

Manning went 22 of 30 for 305 yards and three touchdowns in last Sunday night's 34-14 blowout of New Orleans, becoming the first quarterback in NFL history to pass for at least 300 yards, throw three TDs and complete 70 percent of his passes in four straight games. He battled through a thumb injury to pass for at least 300 yards in a career high-tying fifth straight game after banging it on a defender's helmet in the second quarter.

"Quarterbacks, probably the biggest fear is always the thumb on the helmet of the defensive lineman," said Manning, who has won each of his seven career starts versus the Bengals while throwing 17 touchdowns to three interceptions. "It'll be sore, but I'm probably a little bit lucky."

Though luck seems to have little to do with Manning's latest surge, Dalton and the struggling Bengals (3-4) likely would welcome some coming out of their bye week.

Dalton finished 14 of 28 for 105 yards in a 24-17 loss to Pittsburgh on Oct. 21, tossing his sixth interception during Cincinnati's three-game skid. He's thrown at least one pick in every game this season.

"You have to play (well) at quarterback in order to win. That stands out," said coach Marvin Lewis, whose team held a 14-3 lead against the Steelers. "You have to take care of the ball on offense. You have to play efficiently at quarterback. That's the way it is when you look at the games across the league. Turnovers beat you."

Cincinnati has turned the ball over eight times during its losing streak which has wiped away a promising 3-1 start, but Lewis hopes the bye week helped the Bengals regroup.

"I thought we were very, very good at stinking up October and we need to do a cleanse," Lewis said. "We have an opportunity to fix a lot of the things that are ailing us right now, and that's what we've got to do."

Cornerback Leon Hall said the current slump may provide some motivation.

"We like that position, to be honest," Hall said. "No one gives us a chance after losing three games in a row and Denver is playing really well. You have to give it to them, but we like that position."

Cincinnati allowed 167 rushing yards versus Pittsburgh, which may not bode well against a Denver team that finished with a season-best 225 yards on the ground last week.

Willis McGahee ran for a season-high 122 yards and a touchdown for the Broncos, who had combined for 127 rushing yards over their previous two games.

"We just showed glimpses of what our offense can do when we all work together," McGahee said.

The Bengals' ground game hasn't been nearly as good, averaging 78.7 yards over the last three. They haven't had a 100-yard rusher this season, and BenJarvus Green-Ellis' 3.4 yards per carry average ranks 38th in the NFL among 49 qualifying players.

Denver held New Orleans to only 51 yards rushing as Wesley Woodyard led a strong defensive effort with a sack and strip, an interception and 13 tackles to earn the league's defensive player of the week honor.

"We've still got to continue to get better," said Woodyard, who's the first Denver defender to record 50 tackles with multiple sacks (three) and interceptions (two) before the midway point of the season. "We don't want to be satisfied with what we did (Sunday). We want to come back next week and show the same thing."

It's a similar message coach John Fox is trying to instill in his team during its surge.

"You're never as good as they say you are, you're never as bad as they say you are," Fox said. "The key to this thing is getting better each and every week. That message won't change with our group."

McGahee rushed 28 times for 101 yards and a score in last season's 24-22 win over Cincinnati, marking Denver's third straight victory in the series.

Potential suitors for Mike Wallace

Adam Schefter
ESPN Insider
October 31, 2012

*Adam Schefter answers reader questions in his mailbag on Wednesdays during the NFL season. Got a query of your own? **Submit it here.***

Q: *How good are the Denver Broncos right now, Adam? To me, they seem like the best team in the AFC and, with no disrespect to Matt Ryan, I think Peyton Manning is the MVP so far.*

-- Jared (Louisiana)

A: That argument could be made, Jared. That's how good Peyton has been. But you're also talking about him in that light after two of his best games of the season, at San Diego and at home against New Orleans. Ryan has been strong all seven weeks, including a game against Denver in which he outplayed Manning. But here's the deal: We're only seven games into the season. There still are nine more weeks to figure out which MVP candidate is more worthy. The best players make the biggest plays in November and December. As for Denver, the night it beat the Chargers was the night the Broncos unofficially clinched the AFC West. Nobody in that division -- and I don't care how close they are in the standings now -- is overtaking the Broncos. I said it that night and still believe it now.

Q: *It seems like the writing is on the wall that Mike Wallace will leave Pittsburgh after this season. What teams might be interested?*

-- Devin (Pennsylvania)

A: Any team that needs a wide receiver, Devin, and even the ones that don't. You always start with division rivals: Would it make sense for Cleveland, Cincinnati or Baltimore to throw big money at Wallace? It would make sense that all three might. Then there are other receiver-needy teams such as the Miami Dolphins, Seattle Seahawks and San Diego Chargers that also will throw some cash at Wallace. And some teams, such as Kansas City, could lose a player like Dwayne Bowe that would alter their needs. The bottom line is that Wallace would make any team in the league better. The better question is: What teams would be willing to dole out all the money it's going to take to get him? I think the team that does is one mentioned above.

Q: *It doesn't seem like the Indianapolis Colts are getting enough credit. This is a team that won two games last year and is now above .500 and in the playoff race. Is it all Andrew Luck?*

-- Liam (Colorado)

A: How much credit do you want them to get, Liam, and in what form? They've done a great job. They've already won double the number of games they did last year and they've been saluted everywhere. Should we call off the season and award them a trophy or something? They've done a great job and will for years to come because they do have a quarterback who is going to be great for this franchise over the next decade. But nobody gets anything in the NFL after seven games, other than a position to make a run at the postseason. Indianapolis deserves to be where it is right now.

Q: *I saw Ron Jaworski had his list of the 10 scariest defense players. Who would your 10 scariest offensive players in the NFL be right now? Guys who are just matchup nightmares? Thanks!*

-- Herb (Texas)

A: Wow, Herb, you got me there. Off the top of my head, here are 10 players that are really difficult to game plan for, in no particular order: Matt Ryan, Peyton Manning, Aaron Rodgers, Robert Griffin III, Drew Brees, Tom Brady, Arian Foster, Calvin Johnson, A.J. Green and Jimmy Graham, I'm sure Brandon Marshall, Marshawn Lynch, LeSean McCoy, A.J. Green, Eli Manning, Victor Cruz, Adrian Peterson and others would make a strong argument that they belong -- and they do. It's hard to pick only 10.

Q: *My Chicago Bears escaped with a win on Sunday against Cam Newton and Carolina. Did Carolina expose anything in the defense, or should I not be worried because the Bears still won the game?*

-- Ashley (Illinois)

Don't worry, Ashley. The sign of a good team is pulling out a game it plays against an inferior opponent on a day when its level of intensity is not exactly what it is for a divisional opponent. Chicago pulled it out the way it has pulled out so many games this season: with help from the defense. Be happy with the W, know that it wasn't the Bears' best performance and expect more in the next month or so, when the Bears have a much tougher schedule.

Schefter's Top 5 teams

1. Atlanta Falcons (7-0)

Still unbeaten and, with Cowboys coming to town, still standing strong.
Next game: vs. DAL

2. New York Giants (6-2)

Seem to always find a way to win when the game's on the line.
Next game: vs. PIT

3. Houston Texans (6-1)

Bye week to get ready for the season's second half.

Next game: vs. BUF

4. Chicago Bears (6-1)

Defense does it again in Chicago.

Next game: at TEN

5. San Francisco 49ers (6-2)

Past two weeks have honed in on winning the West.

Next game: vs. STL (11/11)

NFL honors Wesley Woodyard

Bill Williamson
ESPN.com
October 31, 2012

Wesley Woodyard led the Denver Broncos' defensive attack as it shut down Drew Brees on Sunday night and the linebacker has been rewarded for it.

The NFL has named Woodyard the AFC Defensive Player of the Week for his efforts in a 34-14 Denver win against New Orleans.

Woodyard had 13 tackles, a sack, an interception, two passes defended and a forced fumble in the game. Woodyard became the NFL player since former Kansas City linebacker Napoleon Harris (2007) to record double-digit tackles, a sack, an interception and a forced fumble in a single game.

Woodyard is a former special teams ace who has taken over during D.J. Williams' nine-game NFL suspension for multiple violations. Williams has two games remaining on his suspensions.

It's difficult to believe Woodyard is going to be taken out of his role anytime soon.

In other AFC West news:

In a radio interview, Kansas City tackle Eric Winston stood by his comments about some fans who he thought cheered when Chiefs' quarterback Matt Cassel was hurt earlier in the month. Still, Winston has no regrets about signing in Kansas City. He calls it an "honor" to play in the city.

Denver quarterback Peyton Manning remains atop Mike Sando's MVP Watch this week. I can't argue with it. Who's been better?

Poll results: Denver is in control

Bill Williamson
ESPN.com
October 31, 2012

Is the AFC West race over?

No, of course not. There are nine weeks remaining in the regular season. However, according to our AFC West poll this week, the race is over.

We asked if Denver is in control of the division. The Broncos are 4-3. Oakland and San Diego are 3-4 and Kansas City is 1-6.

As of 5:45 p.m. ET Wednesday, 83 percent of voters believe Denver is in control of the division, while just 17 percent believe the race is still on.

I think the race is still on. Yes, Denver is in first place and it currently looks like the best team in the division. But there's still plenty of time left. Thanks to everyone who played along.

By the numbers: Best in West

Bill Williamson
ESPN.com
October 31, 2012

Here is a look at the division leaders in some key statistical categories after Week 8:

Passing yards

Player: Peyton Manning, Denver

Yards: 2,113

Comment: Manning's season is becoming more amazing by the week.

Rushing yards

Player: Jamaal Charles, Kansas City

Yards: 595

Comment: Charles became a forgotten man in Week 8 against Oakland.

Receptions

Player: Demaryius Thomas, Denver

Yards: 679

Comment: Thomas is starting to show consistency.

Tackles

Player: Wesley Woodyard, Denver

Total: 61

Comment: Woodyard had a stunning game against New Orleans.

Sacks

Player: Justin Houston, Kansas City; Von Miller, Denver

Sacks: 6

Comment: Neither player got to the quarterback in Week 8.

Interceptions

Player: Several are tied.

Interceptions: 2

Comment: This logjam will eventually sort itself out.

Broncos CB Tracy Porter practices again

Bill Williamson
ESPN.com
October 31, 2012

The Denver Broncos got some good news regarding cornerback Tracy Porter. He practiced on a limited basis Wednesday in preparation for Sunday's game at Cincinnati.

Porter missed the past two games because he had symptoms similar to ones he experienced after having a seizure in August. Porter practiced on a limited basis last Wednesday, but he suffered a setback. He will be monitored through the week to determine whether he can play Sunday.

Chris Harris has done a terrific job as Porter's replacement in the starting lineup.

In other AFC West news:

Oakland defensive tackle Richard Seymour (ankle) did not practice Wednesday. Kicker Sebastian Janikowski (groin), linebacker Rolando McClain (toe) and center Stefen Wisniewski (ankle) were all limited as the team prepares to host Tampa Bay on Sunday.

AFC West Stock Watch

Bill Williamson
ESPN.com
October 31, 2012

Falling

Patience in Kansas City: Fan fury is rising along with the Kansas City Chiefs' chances of earning the No. 1 overall draft pick next April. The team was demolished at home by the Oakland Raiders on Sunday and is showing no signs of life. If this season continues to unravel, Kansas City ownership will have a difficult time trying to keep the current leadership structure.

Hope in San Diego: Bad weather be dammed, playoff teams win at Cleveland. Losing 7-6 to the Browns to give the Chargers three straight losses further increases the angst in San Diego. This thing is a ticking time bomb.

Raiders' penalties: The Raiders were not penalized much in the three games with the replacement officials. However, they were flagged an average of four more times a game after the officials' lockout. The Raiders improved in this area on Sunday, being called for just two penalties at Kansas City. Take that Tamba Hali, who called the Raiders a dirty team last week.

Rising

Peyton Manning, Denver Broncos, quarterback: Manning has said he is still not fully healed from a neck injury that caused him to miss all of last season. Despite Manning's claim, there is no denying he is playing out of his mind. Manning has thrown for 2,113 yards and is on pace for his highest yardage total in any season of his career. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, Manning is the second player in NFL history with 300 passing yards and three pass touchdowns in four straight games in a single season. Steve Young did it in five straight games in 1998.

Raiders' no-huddle offense: Oakland has found some nice offensive rhythm while using the no huddle. Expect to see the Raiders use it to help them continue to get in a groove for the rest of the season.

Wesley Woodyard, linebacker, Denver: Woodyard had a tremendous game as the Broncos' defense stymied Drew Brees and New Orleans. Woodyard was all over the field as he had 13 sacks, an interception and a forced fumble in the game. It was a message to D.J. Williams that he may have a hard time finding playing time when his NFL suspension is over after two more games.

Bengals looking to end Peyton's dominance

Jamison Hensley
ESPN.com
October 31, 2012

The Bengals can only hope that Peyton Manning changing teams can result in a change of fortune for them.

When Manning was with the Colts, he posted a 7-0 record against the Bengals with a 106.9 passer rating. He has completed 154 of 237 passes (65 percent) for an average of 261.0 yards per game with 17 touchdowns and three interceptions.

In those seven meetings, Manning completed more than 80 percent of his passes twice and exceeded a 104 passer rating four times. Manning has averaged 33.5 points scored against Cincinnati.

The last time Manning played in Cincinnati was November 2005, when he threw for 365 yards in a 45-37 win at Paul Brown Stadium.

A look at Manning's game-by-game performances against Cincinnati:

1998: Beat Bengals, 39-26. Manning completed 65.4 percent of his passes for 210 yards with three touchdowns and no interceptions (128.7 passer rating).

1999: Beat Bengals, 31-10. Manning completed 51.5 percent of his passes for 284 yards with two touchdowns and one interception (88.4 passer rating).

2002: Beat Bengals, 28-21. Manning completed 61.8 percent of his passes for 224 yards with two touchdowns and one interception (88.4 passer rating).

2005: Beat Bengals, 45-37. Manning completed 60 percent of his passes for 365 yards with three touchdowns and one interception (104.7 passer rating).

2006: Beat Bengals, 34-16. Manning completed 80.6 percent of his passes for 282 yards with four touchdowns and no interceptions (136.3 passer rating).

2008: Beat Bengals, 35-3. Manning completed 81.3 percent of his passes for 277 yards with three touchdowns and no interceptions (134 passer rating).

2010: Beat Bengals, 23-17. Manning completed 55.6 percent of his passes for 185 yards with no touchdowns and no interceptions (69.8 passer rating).

Prisco Picks: Week 9

Pete Prisco
CBSsports.com
October 31, 2012

DENVER BRONCOS AT CINCINNATI BENGALS - 1 P.M.



23

The Broncos are riding high, but this is a tough game against a team coming off a bye. The Bengals must win here to have a chance to win the division. The one thing the Bengals can do is



17

rush the quarterback, which is a must against Peyton Manning. This one smells like an upset.

Broncos WR Demaryius Thomas pays homage to replacement refs for Halloween

Ryan Wilson
CBSSports.com
October 31, 2012

We have no idea what all but two NFL players will be for Halloween but we don't need to declare Demaryius Thomas' costume the winner. That's him on the left dressed as a replacement ref. We know this because of the blacked out shades and the huge sign around his neck that says "Replacement Referee."

The only way that Thomas loses our made-up costume competition is if Matt Birk goes as Chris Kluwe or Roger Goodell dresses up like DeAngelo Hall (Rex Ryan dressed as Tim Tebow, who was dressed as Mark Sanchez would also get consideration).

Any guesses on who that is on the right up there?

If you had Purple Jesus as green Hulk you win. Yep, that's Vikings running back Adrian Peterson.

Adrian Peterson
@AdrianPeterson

Vikings Halloween Party last night! Hosted by Jared Allen I think or Kevin William anyway we had a BLAST! Cat/vampire woman lol & D obvious
30 Oct 12

And while you might not be an NFL player or have invites to NFL players' Halloween parties, you can do the next best thing: trick people into thinking you're important. That's right, for the low, low price of \$11.99 you too can be confused for Mark Sanchez, Michael Vick or (our personal favorite) a very angry Marshawn Lynch.

And if that doesn't fit your budget there's always the unintentionally hilarious eHow instructions on making a generic football uniform for Halloween. "Begin with a pair of sweatpants..."

Could Broncos run the table?

Peter Schrager
FoxSports.com
October 31, 2012

It's the midway point of the 2012 NFL season and Peyton Manning's Broncos are quietly lurking in the middle of the AFC conference standings with a 4-3 record. They've only won one game on the road, the Patriots and Texans each scored 31 points on them, and both of those teams seem to be getting a lot more media attention as the "teams to beat" out of the AFC this week.

But watch out for Denver. Its road to New Orleans — Peyton Manning's hometown — just got a lot clearer.

Let me explain.

Manning brings in the TV ratings. Add in the intrigue around the fact that he hadn't played in 18 months, and the NFL knew No. 18 — in his new Broncos digs, no less — would be a big draw come the start of the 2012 season. So, they front-loaded Denver's schedule with primetime games against big-time opponents.

Look at the Broncos' slate thus far:

Week 1 vs. Pittsburgh — Sunday night

Week 2 vs. Atlanta — Monday night

Week 3 vs. Houston — 4 p.m. ET national CBS game

Week 4 vs. Oakland — 4 p.m. ET national CBS game

Week 5 vs. New England — 4 p.m. ET national CBS game

Week 6 vs. San Diego — Monday night

Week 7 — BYE

Week 8 vs. New Orleans — Sunday night

The Broncos have played seven games and every single one has been on national television. They've yet to play in a single 1 p.m. ET game.

Their schedule is about to lighten up a whole bunch. Look at what's ahead for Manning and his Broncos teammates:

Week 9 @ Cincinnati (3-4)

Week 10 @ Carolina (1-6)

Week 11 vs. San Diego (3-4)

Week 12 @ Kansas City (1-6)

Week 13 vs. Tampa Bay (3-4)

Week 14 @ Oakland (3-4)

Week 15 @ Baltimore (5-2)

Week 16 vs. Cleveland (2-6)

Week 17 vs. Kansas City (1-6)

That is nine games in a row with eight of those nine coming against teams with losing records. The one team with a winning record — the Baltimore Ravens — is no doubt trending downward after the losses of Ray Lewis and Lardarius Webb. You can make a solid argument that not only will Denver be favored in every game from here on out, but that it will be a major upset if it does not “win out” the rest of the way. Now, the NFL’s tough and there are strange things — injuries, upsets, freak occurrences — that happen on a weekly basis. I get that. But on paper? There’s no reason Denver can’t win its next nine games.

As for Peyton Manning? He’s long since silenced any of his critics. At this point, he’s just shoving it in their faces. Since throwing three interceptions in the first half of Denver’s Week 2 loss to the Falcons in Atlanta, Manning has thrown just one interception. He’s already tossed for more than 2,000 yards and has 17 touchdown passes on the year.

Is he back? Hell, he may be better than he ever was.

If you were tired of seeing the Broncos on national television every weekend over the first half of the NFL season, don’t worry. Those days are over.

But the Broncos’ run through the AFC? Well, that could just be getting started.

Week 8 record: 5-9

Overall season record: 67-54

WEEK 9 CHEAT SHEET TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Three quarterbacks — Eli Manning (27-5, .844), Tom Brady (34-11, .756) and Ben Roethlisberger (25-8, .758) — improved their October winning percentages among starting quarterbacks (minimum 20 starts) in the Super Bowl era (since 1966) as all three led their teams to victory in Week 8. All three quarterbacks are among the top 5 quarterbacks with at least 20 career starts in terms of winning percentage. Daryle “The Mad Bomber” Lamonica is on the top 5 list, too. Which ex-Steelers and Bears QB is second all-time in October win percentage with a 16-4 career record as a starter in the season’s second month?

See below for answer.

Week 9 Fantasy Football Waiver Wire Pickup: Ryan Broyles, WR, Detroit Lions

Thursday night

Kansas City at San Diego: My initial reaction when I saw this one on the schedule for Thursday night? An old fashioned, “Ugh.” If you’ve been looking for a night to catch up on “Homeland” or “The X Factor” (guilty pleasure), this might be the one. The Chiefs haven’t led for a single second this entire NFL season and the Chargers have been outscored by their last two opponents 42-6 in their last six quarters. So, yeah, this isn’t exactly an AFC Championship preview. Give me the bad Chargers over the worse Chiefs. Ugly, ugly game.

The Pick: Chargers 20, Chiefs 16

Sunday, 1 p.m. ET games

Denver at Cincinnati: It’d be just my luck that the same week I write seven paragraphs about the Broncos running the table from here on out they’d go out and get beaten up by an angry, motivated Bengals team in Cincinnati. Anything’s possible. I just don’t see the Bengals’ defensive backfield finding a way to stop Manning. Not with him playing the way he’s been the past few weeks.

The Pick: Broncos 31, Bengals 23

Baltimore at Cleveland: My big upset special of the week! The script last week for San Diego-Cleveland was the following: “Bad loss, but they’ve had a bye week to prepare and a trip to Cleveland where they can right themselves.” Sure enough, the Browns didn’t exactly roll out the red carpet and have some cookies and milk waiting. Cleveland is tough as nails. They’re a 2-6 team, but they’ve lost only one of those games by more than two scores. They played Baltimore tough in Week 4 and they’ll play them tough in their own building on Sunday. Trent Richardson can run all over this beleaguered Ravens D. Give me the Browns.

The Pick: Browns 24, Ravens 20

Arizona at Green Bay: My, how times have changed. Just three seasons ago, the Packers and Cardinals played in the highest-scoring playoff game of all time. The two teams combined for 96 points and a mind-boggling half of the 124 plays called from scrimmage went for first downs. We're dealing with a slightly different Cardinals offense this time around. That game nearly topped 100 total points. I'd be surprised if this one topped 40. I like the Packers in one with slightly less offensive fireworks.

The Pick: Packers 24, Cardinals 10

Chicago at Tennessee: Talk about a tale of two teams from a week ago. Chicago trailed the Panthers at home for an entire game, only to find a way to rally late in the fourth quarter and steal a win from Carolina's grips in Soldier Field. Down in Indy, the Titans held a touchdown lead late over the Colts, only to give what looked like a sure-fire win away in overtime. The Bears are first in the league against the rush. I don't see Tennessee's offense finding much success against this unit. Chicago's dream season keeps on keepin' on.

The Pick: Bears 24, Titans 13

Miami at Indianapolis: If the playoffs were to start today, these two teams would be the AFC's two wild-card squads. Who saw that coming back in August? The Dolphins had their way with the Jets last weekend and the Colts just seem to find ways to win in dramatic fashion. Who are your three AFC Pro Bowl quarterbacks this season? Manning? Yes. Brady? Yes. The third? You can go with Ben Roethlisberger or Matt Schaub. Give me the rookie, Andrew Luck. I think Miami wins this one, but the two teams are still in the thick of the playoff hunt come December.

The Pick: Dolphins 27, Colts 23

Carolina at Washington: Everybody loves the new baby. Go on Facebook and you'll see the latest newborn baby getting hundreds of comments and likes on any/all photos. But what about the baby that's now a year old? Those comments and likes seem to dwindle down quite a bit, right? Well, Cam Newton was the new baby last year. RG3 is the guy everyone's falling in love with this season. Just how well you perform when those likes and comments dwindle down show me a lot. There are very few in Cam Newton's corner these days. I'm one of them. I'm with you Cam. Last year's baby is going to have a rare day to relish in some media love on Sunday. He's going to tear up this horrendous Redskins defense.

The Pick: Panthers 34, Redskins 24

Detroit at Jacksonville: The Lions may have some fight in them, after all, huh? I prematurely wrote Detroit off after looking sloppy, shaggy, and ragged against Chicago in its Week 7 Monday night loss. Down three points at home to the Seahawks on Sunday, Matt Stafford led the Lions on a 16-play game-winning drive that started at Detroit's 20 with 5:27 remaining, and ended with a Titus Young

touchdown reception. The Lions converted first downs on 12 of 16 third downs on Sunday and Stafford actually looked like the guy who threw for 5,000 yards a season ago. He should have another big day against Jacksonville. Watch out for the Lions. The media spotlight — bright, large and looming back in August — has long moved on to other teams. Some teams thrive on that.

The Pick: Lions 34, Jaguars 23

Buffalo at Houston: The Mario Williams Bowl! The NFL's first \$100 million defensive player left Houston for Buffalo this offseason, but the Texans haven't missed him. Houston's D has moved on just fine, while Buffalo's D has been roasted continuously this year. The Bills defensive line — a \$200 million investment that looks like a worse way to spend money than marketing for that "John Carter" movie last summer — can't stop the Houston running game. Give me the Texans.

The Pick: Texans 35, Bills 20

Sunday, 4 p.m. ET games

Tampa Bay at Oakland: Way back when, these two teams played in a Super Bowl. Way, way, way back when. I loved what I saw out of the Buccaneers — this team, not the 2002 version — last Thursday night. Coming off a tough loss to the Saints in Week 7, the Bucs bounced back on four days rest and beat the Vikings in Minnesota. Doug Martin, Mark Barron and Lavonte David — the first three picks of Tampa Bay's tremendous 2012 NFL Draft — are all playing huge roles. I'm all about the Baby Bucs. Give me the Bucs in another road game they're listed as underdogs.

The Pick: Buccaneers 32, Raiders 23

Minnesota at Seattle: I see these two teams playing and I can't help but wonder if Tarvaris Jackson — the one-time "franchise quarterback" for both teams — sneaks in a glance of the score while his Bills wrap up their 1 p.m. ET game with the Texans. Jackson has come and gone from both teams, as both have attached themselves with new, younger quarterbacks. Minnesota had a nice start to the season, but the schedule gets a lot rougher starting this weekend. Trips to Seattle are never easy. After this, Minny plays Detroit, Chicago twice, and Green Bay. It was a nice story for a while, 2012 Vikings. We'll see you next year.

The Pick: Seahawks 24, Vikings 16

Pittsburgh at New York Giants: The Giants got out of Dallas and beat Hurricane Sandy back to Newark late Sunday night, but it was by no means a regular work week for the Giants. Any other team? I'd doubt them. Too much distraction. Too much agony. The Giants? They thrive on this. And so do their fans. Sunday will be a welcomed distraction for Big Blue and the crowd at MetLife. Give me the Giants in an inspired effort.

The Pick: Giants 27, Steelers 23

Sunday night

Dallas at Atlanta: Both of these teams fascinate me. Everyone is expecting the Falcons to suddenly come back down to Earth and lose, while most watching the Cowboys this year expect them to wake up and snap back out of this funk at some point. I don't see either happening on Sunday night. The Falcons are 7-0 for the first time since in franchise history, they've scored at least 23 points in each game, and they've won both close games and blowouts. I don't see the Cowboys beating them in Atlanta.

The Pick: Falcons 30, Cowboys 24

Monday night

Philadelphia at New Orleans: Philly's in a tailspin. The Eagles have now lost three straight games and the callers are lighting up the WIP phone lines. From a friend down in Philly, there was this exchange on Monday afternoon:

Caller: "I'd rather have Donovan McNabb than Michael Vick."

Host Angelo Cataldi: "If I had to choose between Vick and McNabb I'd choose tennis."

These aren't fun times to be an Eagles fan. It'll only get worse. I'm taking the Saints.

The Pick: Saints 34, Eagles 27

OH, AND BY THE WAY...

1. Love him or hate him, Mike Shanahan's usually pretty good for a quote. His thoughts on putting Robert Griffin III at wide receiver on Sunday? "After looking at that play, you feel like a complete dumbs***," Shanahan told reporters during the team's media conference call on Monday. Don't change, Shanny. Don't ever change.

2. Though I'm sure some health and wellness folks have a problem with Peyton Manning — one of the most recognizable athletes in the country — buying 22 Papa John's franchises last week, I'm cool with it. But I'd have a huge problem if they didn't give him unlimited garlic sauce, crushed pepper packets, and jalapeno peppers in the deal. Huge.

3. There have been several low moments for Chiefs fans this season, but it almost got really, really bad on Sunday. The NFL did away with its long-standing "Emergency Quarterback" rule last offseason, meaning that teams could carry just

two quarterbacks on their game day rosters. Sure enough, Brady Quinn went down with an early injury. When backup Matt Cassel went down hard in the second half, there were questions of "Umm ... OK, so who now?" The Chiefs had no answers. CBS producers asked the Chiefs PR staff. Their answer? "No comment." Yikes. Fortunately, Cassel got up and finished the game. Though, based on Cassel's 2012 campaign thus far, perhaps a run with Dexter McCluster at quarterback for a few drives wouldn't have been the worst thing.

4. J.J. Watt's "I've eaten bigger burritos than you" line about Ray Rice two weeks ago was pretty funny. But on a serious note, I'd like to try one of those burritos. I think I'd really enjoy a human-sized burrito. Sour cream, guacamole, the whole thing.

5. There was a lot of frustration from Giants fans over the fact Dallas managed to get three plays off in 10 seconds. Why not add a tenth of a second to the clock? They have it in basketball and it seems to work. There's no reason a clock operator should have so much power when the technology is so advanced. And I also think robots should ref the games, too. But I'll keep that suggestion in my back pocket until the 2034 owners' meetings.

WEEK 9 CHEAT SHEET ANSWER: Kordell Stewart owns the second-best career winning percentage in games played in October for any starting quarterback with at least 20 career starts in the month. With the Steelers and Bears, "Slash" was 16-4 as a starter in the season's second month.

NFL midseason grades: Did your favorite team get an A? FOXSports.coms Alex Marvez hands 'em out

Alex Marvez
FoxSports.com
October 31, 2012

12 Denver (4-3): B-

Summary: The Broncos are reflective of their new team leader. After a rough start, Denver and Peyton Manning are both clicking with wins in three of the past four games.

MVP: Manning is on one of the greatest four-game runs of his Hall of Fame career. He has completed 75.4 percent of his passes with 14 touchdowns and two interceptions while also crossing the 300-yard mark against Oakland, New England, San Diego and New Orleans.

Biggest disappointment: Outside linebacker D.J. Williams is on the verge of ruining his NFL career with deviant off-field behavior. Williams recently had three games added onto a six-game drug suspension because of his second DUI offense since 2004. When he does return, Williams will likely have one final chance for redemption with the Broncos needing linebacker depth now that Joe Mays (leg) has landed on injured reserve.

Outlook: With a far easier schedule in the second half of the season, the Broncos look ready to start pulling away in the AFC West title race.

Peyton Manning deftly directs explosive Denver Broncos offense

Bucky Brooks
NFL.com
October 31, 2012

Uh oh!

That's what defensive coordinators around the NFL are uttering after watching Peyton Manning find his groove as the quarterback of the Denver Broncos. The four-time MVP has been on a sensational run over the past five games, completing 68.5 percent of his passes for 1,619 yards and 14 touchdowns with only one interception. He has posted five straight 300-yard games, helping the Broncos (4-3) surpass the 30-point mark in three of those contests.

While Manning has performed at this level for most of his career, there were great concerns about his ability to re-emerge as an elite quarterback following multiple neck surgeries, a season-long absence and a move to Denver. With Manning performing like a Pro Bowler again, I thought I would pop in some All-22 Coaches Film to see what the Broncos are doing to help the veteran overcome his shortcomings, while maximizing the talent around him.

Here's what I discovered:

1) The Broncos have become a no-huddle offense.

After attempting to utilize a conventional approach during the first few games of the season, the Broncos have exclusively featured the no-huddle offense in recent weeks. Part of the decision could be attributed to the Broncos facing significant deficits against the New England Patriots and San Diego Chargers, but I believe the switch was intended to make Manning more comfortable as the leader of the offense. By operating at a quicker pace, the Broncos are able to limit defensive substitutions, resulting in fewer exotic schemes and pass-rush packages. This also causes the defensive line to fatigue quicker, taking away the ferocity and effectiveness of the pass rush by the end of the game.

The move to the no-huddle offense also discourages defensive coordinators from blitzing, due to communication concerns in the back end. (Defensive play callers are reluctant to call pressures against hurry-up teams for fear of a blown assignment by a cornerback or safety that didn't hear the play call.) This allows Manning to attack a static defense without the fear of a heavy rush. For a pinpoint passer with extraordinary anticipation and awareness, the game transforms into a 7-on-7 contest, with all of the odds tipping in the offense's favor.

Finally, the Broncos' utilization of the no-huddle allows Manning to take control of the game at the line of scrimmage. The veteran will step to the line, read the alignment of the defensive front and the coverage and get the Broncos into the proper call to exploit the look. Given Manning's experience and exceptional football IQ, the Broncos are rarely in a bad play, which leads to fewer negative plays for the offense.

2) Heavy utilization of "11" and "12" personnel packages makes Denver difficult to defend.

One of the overlooked aspects of Denver's offense has been the clever utilization of personnel to create mismatches at the point of attack. The Broncos accomplish this task by routinely featuring "11" (one back, one tight end, three wide receivers) and "12" (one back, two tight ends, two wide receivers) packages in the game plan.

While most teams will use various one-back personnel groupings to generate favorable matchups, the Broncos have shown the capacity to run or pass out of each package, making it difficult for defensive coordinators to anticipate what is coming when substitutes are running on the field. In looking at Denver's 34-14 win over the New Orleans Saints on Sunday night, I was impressed by the play-calling balance (41 runs, 30 passes) and the variance of personnel, regardless of down. By routinely switching personnel groupings, while utilizing the same formations and plays, the Broncos have the capacity to thrive against any defensive scheme.

In the screengrab below, the Broncos are in an ace formation with "12" personnel on the field:

This package balances up the set with tight ends on both sides of the line, thus eliminating the effectiveness of a defense loading up the box. Additionally, the balanced formation has a "four verticals" threat (the receivers on the outside run go-routes down the numbers, while the tight ends run down the hashes) that puts defensive coordinators in a play-calling quandary.

In the following screengrab, the Broncos are still in a "12" personnel package with tight end Virgil Green aligned in the slot:

This creates an alignment issue for the defense (lack of a run supporter) against a potential run to Green's side, while also posing the same "four verticals" threat in the passing game.

And in the next screengrab, the Broncos have "11" personnel in the game with Brandon Stokley aligned in the slot:

While the formation is similar to the prior screengrab with Green in the slot, the speed and quickness of Stokley creates a dilemma for the defensive coordinator in deciding between base or nickel defense.

3) Mike McCoy wisely implemented parts of the old Colts' offense into his playbook.

The NFL's top offensive coordinators are willing to tailor their schemes to fit the talents of their best players. Not only is Manning Denver's top player, but he is one of the most accomplished quarterbacks in NFL history. Part of his success can be attributed to playing in the same scheme for most of his career. This has allowed Manning to master the nuances of the system and develop counters to most defensive tactics. McCoy appreciated Manning's effectiveness within his previous system and implemented several of his new quarterback's favorite concepts into the Broncos' attack.

In studying Denver's offense on tape, I've noticed a few carryover concepts from the Indianapolis Colts' playbook in the Manning era.

THE STRETCH

The Broncos have started to feature the stretch as their No. 1 running play over the past few weeks. The design of the play gets the runner to the corner before he is instructed to bounce to the outside or cut back into an open seam off tackle. While this requires Manning to sprint to the outside to meet the running back for the handoff, it eventually sets up an effective play-action pass fake that nets big yards.

In the following screengrab, the Broncos are lined up for the stretch to the right, with Willis McGahee running behind center Dan Koppen and right guard Chris Kuper, who are both pulling on the play:

McGahee takes the ball to the corner and looks for an open crack:

With his lead blockers clearing a path, McGahee makes a hard cut inside and hits the open seam for a 17-yard gain.

Click here to see full video of the play.

Here is another example of the stretch play, with running back Ronnie Hillman taking the ball to the outside:

The Broncos block the play perfectly and Hillman scoots through an open lane for a 31-yard gain.

Click here to see full video of the play.

WIDE RECEIVER SCREEN

The Broncos sparingly used the wide receiver screen in the past, but it has become a staple of the game plan since Manning's arrival. The veteran signal-caller routinely fires the ball out to Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker or Green on quick screens to take advantage of soft coverage on the outside. In addition, Manning will use the bubble screen to offset blitz pressure from opponents sending crashers off the edge. With the ball quickly coming out of Manning's hand, defenders are unable to put a shot on the veteran and are forced to tackle the Broncos' big, physical playmakers in the open field. This is a daunting task against most pass catchers, but particularly against the Broncos' aforementioned trio; Thomas, Decker and Green all possess the size and strength to run through arm tackles.

If Manning senses a blitz coming off the edge, he will check to the bubble screen to exploit the tactic and avoid taking a hit in the pocket. Against the Saints, he routinely checked out of his original play and quickly dumped the ball to Green on the perimeter:

Click here to see full video of the play.

The Broncos have started to incorporate more variations of wide receiver screens since Manning's arrival. As diagrammed in the following screengrab, Manning increases the effectiveness of the play by really selling a run-action fake before firing the ball outside to Thomas:

With the linebackers pulled inside by the threat of a run, Denver creates more space for Thomas on the perimeter, leading to a big gain.

Click here to see full video of the play.

PLAY-ACTION EXPLOSIVES

Denver enters each game with a few play-action passes designed to produce big gains on vertical throws. While every team in the NFL attempts to feature complementary play-action passes, the Broncos are one of the best teams at building play-action passes that match their favorite runs. By making the initial part of the play look like a stretch run or draw (with the coordination of the offensive line and running backs), the Broncos are able to lure linebackers and defensive backs to the line of scrimmage, creating huge voids down the field. Manning enhances the organized deception by selling the run with clever ball fakes in the backfield. With the veteran adept at picking on the out-of-position defender, the Broncos have been able to consistently produce explosive plays on play-action passes.

In the screengrab below, the Broncos are aligned in an ace formation with Decker and Thomas aligned on the outside. Manning will execute a play fake and wheel around to find Thomas breaking to the outside on the corner:

[Click here to see full video of the play.](#)

In the following screengrab, the Broncos are aligned in a dubs formation. Manning takes the snap and fakes the draw before looking downfield for an open receiver on a four verticals route:

Tight end Joel Dreessen breaks open down the right hash in front of the safety for a 22-yard touchdown.

Broncos' Demaryius Thomas hit by Halloween spirit

Marc Sessler
NFL.com
October 31, 2012

The NFL's replacement officials were more trick than treat, but we've finally found a use for them.

At least Demaryius Thomas has.

The Broncos wide receiver is wandering the streets of Denver dressed as a fill-in zebra for Halloween. Larry Brown Sports got a hold of his getup, which comes complete with spectacles and a cute yellow hankie.

Possibly a dangerous choice in the Green Bay area, but Thomas never has been more popular in Denver.

He wasn't the only one diving into the spirit of the day.

The "NFL AM" crew got funky, led by co-host Nicole Zaloumis, who donned what appears to be a Tebowcat outfit (Tebow jersey meshed with assorted feline accessories). Meanwhile, our friend, Steve Wyche, wore an outrageous mullet and beard to become Brett Keisel; Mark Kriegel popped on a Tebow mask; and co-host Brian Webber -- refusing to dress up -- was strong-armed into sporting a Ron Burgundy 'stache.

The rest of us in the newsroom wear street clothes while staring at keyboards, pondering society.

NFL Week 8 Power Rankings – Dolphins, Colts make giant leaps

Don Banks
Sports Illustrated
October 31, 2012

Well that's a first. Hurricane Sandy had such a wide-ranging effect on the nation this week that the impact was even felt in SI.com's NFL power rankings. Imagine trying to produce the power rankings without, you know, power, which is what we've been dealing with at our house in suburban Philadelphia since the lights went out just before the 49ers-Cardinals Monday Night Football game kicked off.

But the show always goes on in the NFL, even if the lights don't. So here's our Halloween version of the NFL power rankings, which ironically enough were written largely in the dark. (And more so than usual, with a nod toward those fans who disagree with our logic and judgment). The order of things at the very top didn't change much this week, but teams like the Broncos, Steelers, Dolphins and Colts are on the move, playing their way into our line of vision and beginning to resemble legitimate playoff contenders in the AFC. That much we can tell even without illumination.

Now onto this week's rankings...

NFL Power Rankings

Atlanta Falcons (7-0)



1

Love the level of domination I saw from these Falcons last week in Philadelphia, but with only one game remaining on their schedule against a team with a winning record -- Week 15 vs. the Giants -- will they be able to stay sharp and hungry with a huge division lead and an early playoff clinching? In recent seasons we've seen that it doesn't really serve a Super Bowl contender's purpose to coast in to the postseason. It's under the heading of a good problem to have, but it bears watching how Atlanta self-motivates in the season's second half.

Last Week:

1

New York Giants (6-2)



2

The Giants found a way to hang on for dear life and get a win in Dallas, but they have to give the save to instant replay review. Before instant replay ruled the NFL and allowed scrutiny of every inch of the field, I wonder how many game-changing calls like that Dez Bryant-knuckle-out-of-bounds ruling were never made and never seen? Technology

Last Week:

2 has brought a level of incredible exactitude to officiating, and rarely has it ever made the difference between winning and losing as dramatically as it did in Dallas last Sunday.

Houston Texans (6-1)



Last Week:
3

With a big-stage Sunday night game at Chicago looming in Week 10, the rested and hopefully healed up Texans must be wary of a trap game this week at home against the 3-4 Bills. The Mario Williams homecoming will be a nice sub-plot to the game, but Buffalo's defense has been a punching bag so far this season, allowing 32.4 points per game. Having quickly dismantled Baltimore in its most recent home game, the Texans need to show a similar killer instinct against a Buffalo team that has been prone to blowout losses.

San Francisco 49ers (6-2)



Last Week:
4

What was that noise about Alex Smith's starting job being up for discussion and debate in San Francisco? Perhaps not. Smith was a ridiculous 18 of 19 for 232 yards and three touchdowns in that dissection of the Cardinals Monday night, and he even got Randy Moss involved in the scoring with a 47-yard third-quarter touchdown catch. Pretty good week for the 49ers to take their bye, too, because now they can take in the Giants' World Series victory parade and see how it might be done next February.

Chicago Bears (6-1)



Last Week:
5

The Bears improved to a cool 4-0 at home this season with that escape job against Carolina, but their next four games at Soldier Field ultimately will tell the story of their season: against Houston in Week 10, Minnesota in Week 12, Seattle in Week 13 and Green Bay in Week 15. That's a clear-cut step up in competition in the second half of their schedule, and it'll take more offensive rhythm and consistency from Chicago to run that gauntlet and match its success rate of September and October.



Green Bay Packers (5-3)

6

It wasn't pretty for even a second against the Jaguars at Lambeau on Sunday, but the Packers have shown a penchant to play down to the level of their opponent at times this season. They've got another opportunity to correct that issue with the floundering Cardinals headed for Green Bay this week, four-game losing streak intact.

Last Week:

6

New England Patriots (5-3)



If the NFL ever had a real shot at establishing a team in London, it would have to be the only one with "England" in its name, and we know that's not happening. The Patriots do play like they're at home over there, humiliating the Bucs (2009) and Rams (last Sunday) by a combined 80-14 over the span of four seasons. And as ambassadors of American football go, you can't do better than Rob Gronkowski with his quirky end zone dances against St. Louis.

Last Week:

8

Denver Broncos (4-3)



We looked it up and an NFL team technically has never clinched its division with a one-game lead and nine games remaining, but that's how the state of the AFC West race feels about now. The Broncos are on a 69-14 roll in their past six quarters, and I don't see it cresting any time soon with the schedule Denver faces from here on out. Eight of the Broncos' final nine opponents are currently under .500, with only a Week 15 trip to Baltimore bucking that trend.

Last Week:

11

Baltimore Ravens (5-2)



We've dropped the Ravens to try to get their full attention after that disaster in Houston two weeks back. Let's see if Baltimore used its bye week to re-focus and figure out what the problem is when it takes to the road. This week's trip to Cleveland is no piece of cake. The Browns have won two in a row at home and are playing sound defense, and a Trent Richardson-led ground game could pose trouble for a Ravens team that has been gashed by the run.

Last Week:

7

10  Pittsburgh Steelers (4-3)
With Ben Roethlisberger starting to do his whatever-it-takes-to-win thing on a weekly basis, and Jonathan Dwyer cranking out 100-yard rushing games, the Steelers are getting positively Pittsburgh-like as we hit midseason. This week's showdown against the Giants at MetLife Stadium is a glamor matchup that should tell us how far Mike Tomlin's team has come since its grasping 1-2 start.

Last Week:
12

11  Miami Dolphins (4-3)
The ascending Dolphins are building some mojo for themselves, and things like last week's special teams triple crown against the Jets (blocked punt, blocked field goal, successful onside kick) help make believers out of everyone in the locker room. Miami at Indianapolis this week pits the two biggest surprises in the AFC this season against each other, but win or lose, both teams will remain in the thick of the wild-card chase.

Last Week:
14

12  Indianapolis Colts (4-3)
After all those years of their Colts playing the heavy in the AFC South, it probably feels pretty refreshing for Indy fans to be on the other side of the dynamic. The underdog role is always more fun, and getting results without the burden of big expectations makes a team play loose and aggressive. The meaningful Chuck Pagano storyline just adds to the feeling that this is a young team on a mission.

Last Week:
23

13  Minnesota Vikings (5-3)
The Christian Ponder questions are back, and now we don't know which was the aberration: Ponder starting the season without an interception in his first four games, or throwing seven over the course of his next four? But the Vikings defense owns a chunk of the blame too after being carved up at home by Doug Martin and the Tampa Bay offense. And don't look now Minnesota fans, but this week's trip to Seattle's CenturyLink Field has become one of the toughest road

Last Week:
10

assignments in the NFL.

Seattle Seahawks (4-4)

14 

Close, frustrating losses on the road have become the Seahawks' calling card this season, but with the struggling Vikings and punch-less

Last Week: Jets headed to Seattle in the coming two weeks -- before a Week 11
9 bye -- Pete Carroll's club has the chance to steady itself and climb back into NFC playoff contention.

Dallas Cowboys (3-4)

15 

The Cowboys are annually one of the most exasperating teams in the NFL, and they put their fans through rollercoaster rides aplenty every season. But last week's gut-wrenching failure against the Giants might have been the worst yet. You absolutely can't lose a game after you've managed to erase a 23-0 lead by the defending Super Bowl champions. You just can't. Not at home. Not on the road. Not ever. And Dallas did. By the length of a Dez Bryant finger tip or two.

Last Week:
17

Philadelphia Eagles (3-4)

16 

The Eagles' problems at offensive line create so many ripple effects, but one of them is a passing game that doesn't seem to challenge anyone vertically any more. Most of what Michael Vick has time to complete is underneath these days, and that means it takes Philly going on long and methodical drives to score. And given Vick's penchant for mistakes in the season's first seven games, long, methodical drives are in short supply.

Last Week:
13

Detroit Lions (3-4)

17 

With two wins in their past three games, the Lions are alive, and this week's trip to Jacksonville presents an opportunity to climb to the break-even mark and go from there. Matthew Stafford's fourth-quarter work has been superb this season, with comeback wins over the Rams, Eagles and Seahawks. But why can't he feel the same sense of urgency

Last Week:
25

in the game's first three quarters?

Washington Redskins (3-5)



18

Last Week:
16

The dropped passes in Pittsburgh killed any chance the Redskins had of staying in the game and pulling the upset against the Steelers. DeAngelo Hall's late-game outburst drew some of the attention away from the fact the Redskins are a familiar 3-5, halfway to roughly the same record Mike Shanahan had in each of his first two seasons in D.C. (6-10 in 2010, 5-11 in 2011). The Redskins are a hopeful 3-5, but last place is still last place.

Arizona Cardinals (4-4)



19

Last Week:
18

The Cardinals, in the mind-blowing stat of the year, had seven yards rushing on nine attempts against San Francisco on Monday night. Seven. When you mix in another four sacks allowed by Arizona, it can't possibly matter much who plays quarterback for the Cardinals if their offensive line continues to be almost historically bad.

Tampa Bay Buccaneers (3-4)



20

Last Week:
27

The Bucs' offense has looked more than legit now for three consecutive games (averaging 34 points), and Doug Martin's breakout showing at Minnesota gives Tampa Bay a blueprint to victory it can follow certain weeks, against certain opponents. I would think this week's trip to Oakland is one of those.

San Diego Chargers (3-4)



21

Last Week:
20

Chargers receiver Robert Meachem didn't catch a single pass at Cleveland, but the one he dropped when he was way in the clear would have gone for a 51-yard touchdown pass and likely won the game for San Diego. It reminded me of when I covered Sam Wyche's Bucs teams in the early '90s, and Alvin Harper had a key drop that cost Tampa Bay a game. Wyche made it a point to hand out the paychecks in the locker room the next day, and not-too-gently reminded Harper

not to drop it. I'm guessing that's not Norv Turner's style.

St. Louis Rams (3-5)



Last Week:
21

That was a trans-Atlantic butt-kicking the Rams endured at the hands of the Patriots on Sunday in London, and I'm sure it made for a long flight home and a tough way to start the bye week. But three wins in the season's first half already represents progress in St. Louis, and the Rams just don't have the talent yet to match up with the league's upper tier teams.

Cincinnati Bengals (3-4)



Last Week:
24

If the Bengals are to climb back into the AFC North race and the playoff chase, they're going to have to do it against two of the hottest teams in the league: Denver this week, the Giants next week. Both are at Paul Brown Stadium, but Cincinnati has dropped two in a row at home and hasn't won there since Week 2 against Cleveland.

New York Jets (3-5)



Last Week:
15

It's almost a little unsettling to see Rex Ryan stripped of the bravado he has brought to the job for the past three-plus years in New York. He can still talk big and bold at times, but his team rarely backs him up any more, the way it did in 2009-2010. I'm still convinced Ryan is a quality head coach and he'll work in the league for a long time. But some schticks have a relatively short shelf life, and that might be the case here.

Oakland Raiders (3-4)



Last Week:
28

The Raiders are at least giving their fans a little reason to stay interested, mounting a modest two-game winning streak against the one-win wonders from Jacksonville and Kansas City. This week's home date against Tampa Bay will be a tougher task, but if Oakland gets to .500 at midseason, rookie coach Dennis Allen's first half-season in black and silver will have been a success.

26  New Orleans Saints (2-5)
So much for the theory Joe Vitt's return will make a difference. I don't think that logic should apply when Peyton Manning is the opposing quarterback. Manning made all the difference in Denver's beat-down of New Orleans, and now the Saints draw a Monday night visit from the desperate Eagles, losers of three in a row.

27  Tennessee Titans (3-5)
Looks like the Titans are a tease again. After two straight wins raised expectations, Tennessee dashed them once again with that overtime home loss against Indianapolis. Now it won't be easy to get the bleeding stopped, because games against Chicago and at Miami await before the Titans take their Week 11 bye.

28  Buffalo Bills (3-4)
Let's hope the surgery to Mario Williams' wrist fixes the problem and he emerges as the dominant pass rusher the Bills paid for this offseason. With Buffalo traveling to Houston this week, what better time for Williams to start looking like his old self?

29  Cleveland Browns (2-6)
The Haslam era in Cleveland is at least off to a hopeful start in recent weeks, with a pair of home wins to build on. But while beating the Bengals and Chargers says one thing, an upset of the first-place 5-2 Ravens would register on a whole new scale.

30  Carolina Panthers (1-6)
The Panthers have invented new, excruciating ways to lose since that Week 4 fourth-quarter collapse in Atlanta, and their past four defeats have been by a combined 12 points. This week, it's Cam Newton against Robert Griffin III at FedEx Field, and maybe that particular

30 matchup will bring out the best in last year's rookie phenom quarterback.

31 Jacksonville Jaguars (1-6)

Last Week: With Jacksonville scoring a league-low 103 points, I'm starting to think Jaguars first-year head coach Mike Mularkey made some sort of typo and banned touchdowns, not just touchdown end-zone celebrations.
32

32  Kansas City Chiefs (1-6)

I'm confident the Chiefs will again some day take the lead in a regular season NFL game. It might even happen Thursday night, at San Diego, in a game the football nation can't wait to see. If there's a team that looks as lifeless as Kansas City, it would have to be Norv Turner's swooning Chargers.
Last Week:
31

Peyton Manning practices for Broncos despite sore thumb

Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
November 1, 2012

For the first time this season, Peyton Manning's name is on the Denver Broncos' injury report.

Relax, Broncos fans.

Manning was able to go through the entire practice Wednesday and make his full complement of throws despite a sore right thumb. Manning hit the thumb on the helmet of a New Orleans Saints defensive lineman in the second quarter of Denver's 34-14 win Sunday night. There was no damage to the digit beyond a cracked nail. Painful, yes, but not debilitating.

"It's OK. It's sore, but just more of an irritant than anything," Manning told news reporters after practice Wednesday.

Manning is earning early MVP talk after five consecutive 300-yard passing games – tied for the longest streak of his career. He deflected that buzz Wednesday, preferring to focus on a Cincinnati Bengals team that Manning said is better than its 3-4 record indicates.

"I've always had a great respect for Mike Zimmer, their defensive coordinator. I've played against him a bunch in some different places," Manning said. "It's a playoff team. Like I said, whatever their record is, all we see is what we see on film, and in my opinion, their defense is good."

NFL midseason grades

Mike Garafolo
USA TODAY Sports
October 31, 2012

Denver Broncos (A)

That's quite the grade for a 4-3 team, we know, but the record is indicative of Peyton Manning needing a few weeks to get comfortable again. And he's most certainly there. Kudos to the Broncos for making the aggressive push to sign him and dump Tim Tebow and everything that comes with him on the New York Jets.

How they can get better: Pray Manning's neck keeps getting better. Because beyond that, we see no holes on their roster, particularly on that outstanding defense.

Prediction: This incredible comeback story ends with Manning lifting the Lombardi Trophy for the second time.

Peyton Manning says his thumb's just an irritant

Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
October 31, 2012

The Broncos practiced for the first time Wednesday since Sunday night's victory over the Saints.

That means it was the first opportunity to see if there were any aftereffects from the thumb injury he sustained when he banged his hand on Saints linebacker Martez Wilson's helmet while throwing a pass. Manning was able to practice fully, prompting coach John Fox to say "no" when asked if there were any lingering issues from the injury. Manning was a bit more expansive when he was asked the same question.

"It's OK, it's OK, it's sore, but it's more of irritant than anything," Manning said during a media session on Wednesday.

Manning's play didn't seem to be affected all that much by the thumb in the second half on Sunday night, so his full participation at practice is a pretty good indication that he will be in the lineup when the team takes the field in Cincinnati in Week Nine. If Manning plays as well as he did in Week Eight, the Broncos are a good bet to improve to 5-3 and possibly extend their AFC West lead over the Chargers, Raiders and Chiefs.

Wesley Woodyard named AFC defensive player of the week

Darin Gantt
Pro Football Talk
October 31, 2012

Broncos linebacker Wesley Woodyard filled up a stat sheet Sunday night, and now has something to fill his trophy case with.

Woodyard was named AFC defensive player of the week, after leading the Broncos to a dominant win over the Saints.

He had 13 tackles, a sack, an interception, a forced fumble and broke up two passes in the 34-14 win. All those either set or matched career highs.

Since the stats have been tracked in 1982, he's just the ninth player to record 10 or more tackles, a sack an interception and a forced fumble in a single game.

Tracy Porter returns to practice, hopeful to play

Curtis Crabtree
Pro Football Talk
November 1, 2012

After missing his second straight game due to lingering symptoms associated with a seizure suffered in August, Denver Broncos cornerback Tracy Porter returned to the practice field on Wednesday.

Porter missed practice twice last week and was held out of last week's matchup with the New Orleans Saints. Porter hasn't played since the Broncos' 31-21 loss to the New England Patriots in Week 5.

Porter has been on medication to control the light-headedness and racing heart that have been causing him problems. The medication has apparently helped enough in order to get Porter cleared to return to practice. Porter was held to limited participation during the Broncos' practice Wednesday.

According to Arnie Stapleton of the *Associated Press*, Porter hopes to be able to play against the Cincinnati Bengals this Sunday.

"It's a matter of me getting my conditioning back, getting my legs back up under me," Porter said. "As far as seizure-wise, I don't have any problem."

Porter has compiled 21 tackles for the season and had an interception return for a touchdown in the Broncos season-opening 31-19 win over the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Porter was the only player to be limited during Wednesday's practice. Mike Adams (knee), Chris Kuper (forearm), Peyton Manning (right thumb) and Jacob Tamme (hip) all fully participated for the Broncos.

Broncos Notebook: Tracy Porter still baffled by the cause of his seizure symptoms

Andrew Mason
CBSSports.com
October 31, 2012

Broncos CB Tracy Porter returned to practice Wednesday after missing two sessions last week, but his health concerns continue to baffle him and the team.

Porter was cleared to do everything in practice, Broncos coach John Fox said, but the team opted to limit his work during Wednesday's two-hour, 15-minute practice.

"He's kind of day-to-day, sorting out and making sure the medication is taking effect," Fox said.

Porter was put on medication in recent days to deal with light-headedness and a rapid heartbeat. Those were symptoms that in August were a prelude to a seizure; after they recurred in the last 17 days, the Broncos held him back from two games as well as practices on Oct. 25 and 26.

"I've been doing everything right. They ran all the tests that they can run. They couldn't find what caused it," Porter said.

"It's a good and bad situation. It's a good sign that they couldn't find out, but you also want to know why it happened, and they couldn't figure it out. Hopefully it won't come up again."

Had doctors been able to ascertain the cause, Porter said, it would have meant a serious, perhaps life-jeopardizing condition such as a brain tumor. That possibility has been ruled out, Porter said.

"If it's not something like a tumor or something real serious like that, then they won't know what caused it," Porter said.

Medication will help, Porter said, but it will take longer for him to work back into game shape.

"It's a matter of getting my conditioning back, getting my legs back under me," Porter said. "Seizure-wise, I don't have any problem; I feel like my old self."

"If the coaches feel like putting me back in there Sunday, they will."

But there is little pressure to do so with backups Chris Harris and Tony Carter playing so well in expanded roles. The two have combined for three interceptions and two touchdowns off returns in Porter's absence, which bumped Harris up to starting right cornerback and moved Carter to the nickel slot, which Harris previously held.

Other injuries: QB Peyton Manning (right thumb), RG Chris Kuper (left forearm), S Mike Adams (knee) and TE Jacob Tamme (hip) all had full participation in practice.

Tracy Porter back at Broncos practice

Andrew Mason
Mile High Sports
October 31, 2012

ENGLEWOOD – Cornerback Tracy Porter was on the field and in full pads when the Broncos began practice Wednesday.

Porter last practiced Oct. 24 on a limited basis before being held out the following two days because he had a recurrence of symptoms that were a precursor to a seizure in August.

He was held out of Sunday's game, which was the second in succession that he'd missed.

Quarterback Peyton Manning was also at practice, three days after incurring an injury to his right thumbnail. Manning appeared to have a piece of tape on one side of his thumb, but it did not wrap around.

Hurting right thumbnail no problem for Broncos' Peyton Manning

Andrew Mason
CBSSports.com
October 31, 2012

Denver Broncos QB Peyton Manning's right thumbnail was taped Wednesday for the Broncos' practice, three days after he banged it on the helmet of Saints DL Martez Wilson.

But the hurting digit was of no great concern to Manning or the Broncos, who listed him on their injury report but saw him fully participate in Wednesday's work.

"It's sore, but it's more of an irritant than anything else," Manning said.

His teammates didn't seem to notice anything unusual Wednesday.

"It didn't affect him at all. I actually didn't know he did that," said WR Eric Decker.

The Proof That Peyton Manning Is Back And Silencing His Skeptics

Andrew Tredinnick
Business Insider
October 31, 2012

All season long, Peyton Manning has received cynical reviews from insiders who believe the quarterback will never be as effective as he once was.

They all said that Manning's multiple neck surgeries was causing his arm strength to deteriorate.

But over the last few weeks, Manning's numbers have debunked that logic.

On the season, Manning is 47-of-66 (71.2 percent) for 568 yards and eight touchdowns on passes between 21 and 30 yards and 30-of-51 (58.8 percent) for 351 yards and three touchdowns on passes between 31 and 40 yards.

Entering last week, Manning was the best quarterback in the NFL based on three statistical measures. He leads the NFL in passer rating (109) and has five consecutive games with more than 300 yards and at least two touchdowns. He has just one interception during that stretch.

And the only player that has been on the receiving end of passes from Manning during the height of his career in Indianapolis and now in Denver, Brandon Stokley, hasn't seen Manning's skills waver.

Here what Stokley told The Denver Post:

"Almost every time he plays, he does something you'll remember," Stokley said. "I've been saying all along he looks the same to me, and I don't think there's any doubt what he brings."

Catching up with ... Broncos DT Derek Wolfe

Paul Dehner Jr.
GoBearcats.com
October 31, 2012

University of Cincinnati product Derek Wolfe will return to town this weekend for the first time since capturing a share of the Big East title last season at Nippert Stadium.

The No. 36 overall selection and first pick of the Denver Broncos will take on the Cincinnati Bengals at Paul Brown Stadium. Wolfe finished first in the Big East and fifth in the nation last year with 21.5 tackles for loss and provided the dominant force on the Bearcats defensive line with 9.5 sacks.

His rookie year with Denver (4-3) opened with a bang as he racked up three sacks and stands second on the team behind Von Miller in tackles for loss with five. He spent the year playing half his time at defensive tackle and the other half at the defensive end position.

For Sunday's game he anticipates busloads trekking from his hometown of Lisbon, Ohio and filling up PBS for his homecoming.

I had the opportunity to catch up with him this week to talk about the whirlwind of being drafted, chip still residing on his shoulder and his take on close friend, former teammate Walter Stewart.

Rookie year what you expected?

DW: Obviously, I would like to have a few more snaps, but, you know, other than that it has kind of gone how I thought it would. It started off a little slow and starting to get the hang of things now. I'm starting to kind of get it. The game is starting to slow down for me a little bit and plays are starting to come my way.

What was it like getting that phone call on draft day?

DW: It feels like a house being lifted off your back because it's the most stressful thing I've ever been through. Where you are going to be, where you are going to live, what kind of job are you going to be doing, what kind of defense are you going to be playing in. It's just a big monkey off your back when you get that phone call.

Then it's kind of like a surreal moments because you are doing nothing but doing phone interviews and talking to coaches and talking to media for two days straight. When it's all said and done, OK, now the real work starts. It's not time to take a break it's time to put the foot on the gas pedal and work even harder.

Any chance to reflect on your rise from off the radar junior year to first pick of the Broncos following your senior season?

DW: Honestly, no. To me it's just nothing but eyes forward. Don't look at what you've done and what you have been through

Kind of a homecoming here after going to UC, any extra juices to play at PBS?

DW: It's kind of, listen, everybody you know is going to be there so make sure you don't look stupid. Make sure you perform. Because, obviously, growing up there were a lot of people that doubted me. I'm sure some of those people will be in the stands rooting for me, but don't give anybody any reason to say, 'See, I told you he didn't belong here.' That's kind of like the thing on my back. I always want to make sure I belong and do what I have to do to do that.

That's what motivates you?

DW: I love to prove people wrong. Oh, you are just one of those guys that works hard you are not really a good pass rusher. OK, so that's what motivates me. Obviously I was the first pick and everything but falling out of the first round, that is a chip on my shoulder, too. I just have to prove everybody wrong that I would have been worth that pick. So, all the people that passed up on me that is something I work to prove them wrong.

Feel like with what done so far you have proven you belong?

DW: I haven't proven anything yet because I'm not even done with my rookie season. After I've played a few years then I'll know I belong.

You say you talk to those guys at UC a couple times every other week, have you been able to talk with Walter Stewart since his injury?

DW: I haven't gotten to talk to Walt about it but that is a tough situation. I am pretty close to the kid anyways just from we came in together, went through that growing process together and he's putting a great year together then something like that happens. It just shows you that you have to play every snap like it is your

last because you never know if it is going to be over. Breaks my heart. It really does. Talk about a guy that does everything right. He's a great leader, he does everything right. When something like that happens, it just - I don't know how to explain it, it just doesn't make sense to me.

Notes: Nate frames Peyton reference

Geoff Hobson
Bengals.com
October 31, 2012

Peyton Manning has thrown 89 passes over the last 10 quarters against the Bengals without an interception, dating back to the second half of the Colts' wild 45-37 victory at Paul Brown Stadium in 2005.

But two guys the Bengals have now, safeties Reggie Nelson and Nate Clements, have picked him off in a previous life. Both got the wily veteran as rookies. Clements picked off Manning for his first career interception in his first NFL road game for the Bills for a 48-yard touchdown in Indianapolis. Six years later Nelson got him for the Jaguars, although he didn't take it to the house.

"My first pick and it was to the house, too," Clements mused before Wednesday's practice. "I was guarding Marvin Harrison and it was an out route. I kind of anticipated it. I knew it was coming."

But Clements didn't have much time to savor it. Manning still picked on the rookie.

"The next series they gave me the same look and I'm thinking, 'I'm about to get it again.' They got me with an out and up. He probably saw how I anticipated that route," he recalled.

Clements is going to be helping first-round pick Dre Kirkpatrick feel his way around Manning if he indeed makes his debut Sunday against the Broncos in the 1 p.m. game at Paul Brown Stadium. But Kirkpatrick already figures he'll get the same treatment Clements got 11 years ago.

"If I am out there, I already know he's going to see the weak link," Kirkpatrick said. "He's going to picture me as the weak link because it's my first game out there. So I'm pretty sure he's going to try to come over my way."

As complicated as Manning makes it look at the line of scrimmage, Clements says it's really quite simple.

"He's a very smart guy. He's got a real high football IQ," Clements said. "It basically comes down to execution. He's going to know what to expect, what to anticipate as far as defensive looks he gets from opponents."

Clements believes Denver's offense has a "totally different philosophy," than what Manning had in Indy.

"There are some similarities, but it's not exactly it," Clements said. "One thing I will say that stands out to me is that the run game, as far as personnel and the way they're getting after it, is starting to gradually improve."

Clements says the Broncos may not run the fastest no huddle offense they've seen this year, but it's unique because Manning is so adept at the line of scrimmage. He says if the trend a few years ago was the Wildcat, then this year it's the no huddle and he says the Bengals are used to it since they run against it every day in practice.

"It's no secret he wants to have as much as time as he can so he can get the defense to show its hand so he can get the offense into the best play possible," Clements said.

SLANTS AND SCREENS

» With no extension announced Wednesday, the indication is the Bengals are close to selling out Sunday's game. The announcement figures to come Thursday, the normal 72-hour local TV deadline.

» Also Wednesday, Lewis said wide receiver Marvin Jones (knee) has a slim chance of playing Sunday and defensive tackle Pat Sims (hamstring) is returning to practice for the first time this season. Jones was the only player not practicing when the Bengals took the field inside PBS on a dank, rainy 44-degree day.

Jones and defensive end/SAM backer Dontay Moch (illness) didn't practice. Running back Brian Leonard (rib), who missed the Steelers game last week, was limited. Center Jeff Faine (hamstring), who sat out last week's two workouts after missing the second half of the Steelers game, went full. Sims didn't appear on the report.

The only player on the Broncos report under DNP or limited was cornerback Tracy Porter, battling an illness the past few weeks and he was limited. Quarterback Peyton Manning, who banged the thumbnail on his throwing hand Sunday night, went full.

» Wide receiver A.J. Green said he began going up against Kirkpatrick a lot more last week when the club stepped up Kirkpatrick's snaps.

"He's long, he's physical, and he can run," Green said. "I can't wait to get him back out there."

» The Broncos gave up no sacks and one hit on Manning last Sunday night in New Orleans and was named John Madden's offensive line of the week.

Manning Looking for Consistency; Thumb 'OK'

Gray Caldwell
DenverBeoncos.com
October 31, 2012

Quarterback Peyton Manning appeared on Wednesday's injury report, but said his thumb is 'OK' as the team looks for a third straight win this Sunday.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- For the first time this season, quarterback Peyton Manning was listed on the injury report.

But Manning downplayed any fears right away, saying his right thumb is just fine after he hit it on the helmet of a Saints defender last Sunday.

"It's OK," he said. "It's sore, but just more of an irritant than anything."

After hurting his thumb in Week 8, Manning led two more touchdown drives in the second half en route to his fifth consecutive 300-yard game.

Through eight weeks of the season, Manning leads the NFL with a passer rating of 109.0, part of a resurgence in Denver after spending the 2011 season out of football with a neck injury.

For that reason, Manning was asked on Wednesday about talk surrounding a potential NFL-record fifth MVP trophy. But the 15th-year quarterback deflected the conversation to the team's growth.

"Certainly, there was a lot of unknown before this season -- I think there still is," he said. "Any time you can make some strides, some progress, some wins while you're figuring out who you are, that's a good thing."

The Broncos have a chance to win their third consecutive game this Sunday when they head back on the road to take on the 3-4 Cincinnati Bengals.

The Bengals, coming off a bye week, have lost three straight games, but Manning said that doesn't take away from the caliber of challenge they present.

"They play in a physical division," Manning said. "The teams that they play are good running teams, physical defense and Cincinnati matches that mold. I think their record is misleading. ... It's a playoff team. Whatever their record is, all we see is what we see on film, and in my opinion, their defense is good."

That defense, Manning said, is led by a talented defensive line, which has helped rack up 23 sacks on the year -- tied for third-best in the league -- often using just four-man rushes.

With a potent offense featuring the likes of wide receiver A.J. Green, Denver knows it will have to work hard in every phase of the game to keep its win streak alive.

"It's been two good wins in a row," Manning said. "We're looking for consistency. We're not looking for two good games and then a lull. This is a really good test, going on the road."

"(Coach) Fox breaks the season into quarters, and it would be nice to finish this quarter 3-1."

BLUE-DEVIL BRIBE

This offseason, as Manning was preparing to potentially enter the free agent market, the quarterback needed some help from a few of his former teammates as he rehabbed from a neck injury.

So he called up wide receivers Brandon Stokley and Austin Collie and tight end Dallas Clark and asked them to head down to Durham, N.C., for some workouts at Duke University.

But he needed to entice them first.

"I said, 'I can get you courtside tickets to Duke vs. North Carolina, but you've got to come and throw for three days with me,'" Manning smiled. "I said, 'You've got to throw all three days, otherwise, no tickets. I can call somebody else in relief.'"

Was that enough to get the three pass catchers onto campus?

"Easy sell," he laughed. "The Duke-Carolina game is a bucket-list thing for a lot of them, so they knew. But that was the deal. It was all three days. It wasn't 'half a day here,' or 'I can't go Friday.' You had to go Thursday, Friday and Saturday for tickets to the Saturday night game. It was good. It was Stokley and Collie and Clark. I knew it might be potentially the end of being with those guys, so it was a fun weekend."

As it turned out, it wasn't the end of the Manning-to-Stokley connection, as the 14th-year receiver was signed by the Broncos in the offseason.

"They brought him in and they were impressed with the workout," Manning said. "I think that workout did give him some encouragement and give him some life."

"I'm certainly glad he's been a big part of our team this year."

Hurricane Hits Home

Stuart Zaas
DenverBroncos.com
October 31, 2012

Hurricane Sandy's effects were felt by some of the Broncos with friends and family on the East coast.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – Despite being more than 1,000 miles away from where Hurricane Sandy made landfall, the devastating damage from the storm hit close to home for some Broncos.

Safety Mike Adams grew up in Wayne, N.J., and went to college at the University of Delaware, both of which are in the area hit hard by the storm. His family still lives in that area, and although he was able to fly his grandmother to Denver before it struck, his brothers and sisters stayed behind.

"I just got pictures sent of the old street I used to stay on, just flooded, trees falling on all type of cars and everything," Adams said. "It's tough because I'm walking outside with short sleeves on and flip flops. And my brothers and sisters are in the house with no power. That's a tough thing to swallow, and I can't get them out here because there are no flights or anything."

Running back Lance Ball hails from Teaneck, N.J., and went to school at Maryland. His family was also in the area that absorbed the brunt of the storm's force, but made it out safely.

"Luckily, they're at a higher elevation," Ball said. "So they didn't get that much water, but they're still in the thick of things."

Ball and Adams were both able to talk to family members, which helped put their minds at ease some, but both said all of those affected by the weather were still in their thoughts.

"I'm still worried," Adams said. "I try to call back home back and forth. Sometimes I can get through, sometimes I can't. I just do what I can."

"You just keep them in your prayers," Ball added. "Keep your family, friends and close ones in your prayers make sure everything turns out all right."

Quarterback Peyton Manning can empathize with those displaced by the storm, having witnessed destruction from Hurricane Katrina in his native New Orleans.

Manning's brother, Eli, found himself in the middle of Hurricane Sandy, which damaged his apartment in the New York City area.

"I've checked with Eli," he said. "Certainly from a football standpoint, their schedule has kind of been affected but he's OK. His family's OK. I think all of our prayers and thoughts are with the people in the New York area, the East coast area. Being from New Orleans, knowing first-hand what hurricanes can do, it's not a pleasant experience by any means."

Porter Making Progress

Sam Davis
DenverBroncos.com
October 31, 2012

Cornerback Tracy Porter returned to the practice field on Wednesday afternoon at Dove Valley.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. --Things are looking up for cornerback Tracy Porter, who has been fully cleared by the team's medical staff to return to the field.

Suffering from symptoms of an August seizure, Porter was a late scratch from the team's trip to San Diego in Week 6 and practiced just once - as a limited participant - leading up to the team's win against New Orleans last week, a game he also missed.

While Head Coach John Fox confirmed that Porter was cleared to do "everything," he remained a limited participant at Wednesday's practice as the coaching and training staff tries to ease him back into football mode.

"We're bringing him back," Fox said. "It's kind of day-to-day, sorting out, making sure the medication's taking effect. I think we had a good day today."

Porter, who recorded 21 tackles, six passes defended and an interception returned for a touchdown in the first five weeks of the season, said he is feeling as good as he's felt since he missed the San Diego game. He expressed patience in waiting to get back into the full swing of things until the coaches are sure he is ready.

"I'm starting to come back in my own again," Porter said. "I'm looking forward to being back out there, but the coaches are going to make their decision. They feel comfortable with the guys they have out there so I just have to await my opportunity."

Most importantly, the fifth-year cornerback trusts that the issues that sidelined him are completely in the past.

"The doctors took the necessary steps and ran all of the tests, so I have confidence in them that they made the right diagnosis," he said. "They gave me the right medicine that I need to take. I'm confident that it won't happen again."

Another good sign for Porter, he explained, is that his doctors found no cause of the seizure, which means it isn't an even more serious issue and isn't likely to repeat itself.

"Seizures are something where if it's not something really serious like a tumor or something like that, then they won't know what caused it," Porter said. "Thankfully, I don't have a tumor. It's not life-threatening. I'm on the right medication and I'm doing all of the things I need to do that the doctors advised me to do and we'll take it from there."

With only positive signs of late, the coaches, trainers, medical staff and Porter will all work together to determine the best course of action for the player. Coming off an extended period of absence, they will lean on the safer side and hope to have him back on Sunday against the Bengals.

The team is fortunate to have two cornerbacks behind him in Chris Harris and Tony Carter that have filled in adequately.

"It's a matter of me getting my conditioning back, getting my legs back under me to where I don't have any problem and I feel like my old self," Porter said. "It's just a matter of getting my feet back under me. If the coaches feel comfortable putting me out there on Sunday, I will. If not, we have the confidence in the three guys that have been doing it the last two weeks."

Woodyard Named AFC Defensive Player of the Week

Stuart Zaas

Denver Broncos.com

October 31, 2012

After turning in one of the top statistical performances in NFL history, linebacker Wesley Woodyard has been named the AFC Defensive Player of the Week.

Against the Saints, Woodyard became just the ninth player since sacks began to be tracked in 1982 to record at least 10 tackles, one sack, one interception and one forced fumble in the same game.

He finished with a game-high 13 tackles, tying a career high. He set career marks in sack yards (12), interception return yards (8) and pass breakups (2), while matching career bests in tackles, interceptions, sacks and forced fumbles in Denver's 34-14 win.

Woodyard is one of just two players in the league to tally 50 tackles, three sacks and two interceptions this season, and is the first Bronco in franchise history to reach 50 tackles and multiple sacks and interceptions by the midpoint of the season.

Through seven games, the fifth-year linebacker has already set several career highs for a single season. His three sacks, two interceptions and three pass breakups already represent single-season bests. His 58 tackles this season are the second most in his career.

Woodyard is one of just six undrafted players to win the AFC Defensive Player of the Week Awards since he entered the league in 2008.

The award is the first of Woodyard's career and the second for a Broncos player this season (Tracy Porter, Week 1). Denver leads the AFC with four weekly conference honors this season (2 defensive, 1 offensive, 1 special teams). Overall, it marks the 24th time a Broncos player has earned the conference defensive player of the week.

Decker, Thomas Impacting On, Off Field

Stuart Zaas

DenverBroncos.com

October 31, 2012

On the field, wide receivers Eric Decker and Demaryius Thomas have joined forces to emerge as one of the NFL's most dangerous receiving duos. The pair ranks second in the league with 1,163 combined yards through Week 8 this season.

Off the field, they're making their impact felt in the Denver community.

The third-year wideouts are teaming up to raise money for Uncork for a Cause, a event that will benefit Judi's House, which helps children and families that are grieving the death of a loved one find hope and healing within themselves.

The event will be held at 7 p.m. MST on Nov. 28 at Four Seasons Hotel in Denver and is centered around release party for Judi's House 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon. Guests will also enjoy an enticing menu specially prepared by Executive Chef Simon Purvis and Four Seasons' award-winning kitchen, plus an auction packed with local and national sports items, fine wine lots and VIP tours from many of California's elite producers. Tickets are available to purchase at UncorkforaCause.com.

Founded by former Broncos quarterback Brian Griese and his wife, Dr. Brook Griese, Judi's House is a tribute to Brian's mother, Judi, whom he lost to breast cancer when he was 12. As Brian grew up grieving this loss, he made a commitment to use his resources to positively impact grieving children. At Judi's House, an environment of acceptance and understanding allows children and adults in grief support groups to share the experience of loss with others.

Woodyard Reflects on Recognition

Tyler Everett
DenverBroncos.com
October 31, 2012

Linebacker Wesley Woodyard's first priority is the success of his team.

"I only care about winning and getting to the Super Bowl," Woodyard said. "That's the only thing that matters to me."

With Sunday night's 34-14 defeat of the New Orleans Saints giving the Broncos back-to-back victories, Woodyard was able to leave the stadium on a high note. When the NFL recognized Woodyard on Wednesday as AFC Defensive Player of the Week, he said the honor wasn't his alone.

"First, thanks to my D-line," Woodyard said. "They were in the right position and made me be able to run around and make plays. With great team play come awards like this."

"It means a lot for my team — me and my team," Woodyard added. "We just go out there and play hard."

Sunday's game marked the best statistical performance of Woodyard's career, as he tallied a game-high 13 tackles, a sack, an interception, a forced fumble and a pass breakup.

"It was good for him," Head Coach John Fox said. "He's a guy that's worked really hard. He's always been a great guy in that locker room. He's a fun player to be around. He was community guy of the year last year. It's good to see good things happen to good people. Wesley's definitely that."

His big night was not only the best of his career, but was also one for the record books.

Since the NFL began tracking sacks in 1982, Woodyard became just the ninth player with 10 or more tackles, a sack, an interception and a forced fumble in a single game. He is also the first Bronco to record 50 tackles, multiple sacks and forced fumbles halfway through a season.

Woodyard's strong performance Sunday night highlighted one of the defense's best efforts of the season, as it limited the NFL's top-ranked passing attack to just 213 yards through the air.

"We continue to buy in every week and get better," Woodyard said. "That's the thing, come out here every week and get better at practice every week. Everybody is

just continuing to buy in and just flying around and having fun. The D-linemen are doing what they have to do up front, the linebackers and the secondary, so it all goes hand-in-hand."

O-Line Named Most Valuable Protectors

Tyler Everett
DenverBroncos.com
October 31, 2012

Tackles Ryan Clady and Orlando Franklin, guards Chris Kuper and Zane Beadles and center Dan Koppen, the Broncos' starters on the offensive line, play an important role every week, but one that doesn't often draw much attention or recognition.

But the Broncos' unsung men in the trenches received a bit of spotlight with Wednesday's announcement that the group took home Week 8's Madden Most Valuable Protectors Award, which honors the league's top offensive line.

Winning this week's award also makes the unit eligible to win the annual honor, which will be revealed during this year's Super Bowl. The award "serves to celebrate the loyal teammates in the trenches that most consistently provide the time and protection that is critical to their teammates' and overall team's success."

Sunday night against the Saints, the group was every bit as valuable in the ground game as in the passing game, helping the Broncos rush for a season-high 225 yards in addition to 305 yards through the air by quarterback Peyton Manning. The success on the ground featured season-bests for Willis McGahee and Ronnie Hillman, who rushed for 122 and 86 yards, respectively.

In addition to the recognition for the line as a whole, Clady earned Sports Illustrated's Peter King's Offensive Lineman of the Week award.

A big part of Manning's success through the air was his ability to get comfortable in the pocket, as Manning was not sacked once in 30 pass attempts.

"The Broncos offensive line provided consistent protection for Peyton the entire night," John Madden said in a statement.

Broncos Talk Halloween Costumes

Tyler Everett
DenverBroncos.com
October 31, 2012

On Halloween, several Broncos players reflected on their favorite costumes from childhood or recent memory. With practice tomorrow, the consensus in the locker room was that this evening would be a quiet one, but that didn't stop players from thinking about previous years' costumes and about how they would dress up if they were going to.

One player with a special Halloween memory is safety Rahim Moore, who recalls getting a pleasant surprise from actor John Travolta while trick-or-treating in Beverly Hills one year as a child.

"He ran out of candy and he gave me a \$100 bill," Moore remembers. "I literally just left. I didn't tell anybody."

Below is a list of a number of players' favorite costumes and ideas of how they would dress up if they could.

Cornerback Tony Carter: Superman and Leonardo the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle

Fullback Chris Gronkowski: Army Soldier, wrestler Mankind, SpongeBob SquarePants (along with his brother Rob, who dressed as Ivan Drago from Rocky IV)

Running back Ronnie Hillman: Flava Flav (if he celebrated, which he hasn't in the past)

Tight end Virgil Green: The Hulk (if he celebrated, which he hasn't in the past)

Safety David Bruton: Ironman

"I'm talking about a legit Ironman suit," he smiled. "Not the one that's just drawings, but little plastic details to it. I'd be all-out. It would take a lot of work. I'd probably have to start working on it this year for next year."

Tight end Joel Dreessen: The Ultimate Warrior

"My wife helped me," he said. "I had face paint, a wig, the cool streamers, wore some spandex. I stayed in character for most of the night, I was pumping up the crowd and shaking the ropes and putting on wrestling moves."

Defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson: Batman

Defensive end Ben Garland: Lumberjack

Safety Rahim Moore: Leonardo the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle

Safety Duke Ihenacho: Construction worker or Superman

Cornerback Mario Butler: The red Power Ranger

Bengals Look to Neutralize Broncos Edge Rush

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

October 31, 2012

The Bengals enter Week 9 coming off a bye week and three consecutive losses. With a 3-4 record, Cincinnati is in third place in the AFC North and is looking to get back on track at home against the Broncos.

"We feel like we need to come out and we need to get a win," quarterback Andy Dalton said in a conference call Wednesday. "We have had three losses in a row but we've got to find a way to turn that around. This is a make-or-break part of the season. We've got to really come out and play our best."

Dalton said a key for the offense on Sunday will be to establish consistency in its possessions. A problem throughout the recent losing skid has been that the Bengals have strung together long, efficient drives but followed them up with several three-and-outs.

"That can't happen," he said. "We just need to be more consistent, that's the biggest thing."

Another priority for the Bengals offense is to limit the impact that the Broncos' edge rushers make on the football game. Linebacker Von Miller and defensive end Elvis Dumervil have combined for 11 sacks in seven contests, but Cincinnati Head Coach Marvin Lewis is hoping his experienced offensive tackles can keep the pair of Pro Bowlers from constantly disturbing Dalton.

"It's going to be a big matchup," Lewis said in a separate conference call. "Those guys are big players. You have to have some different plans of attack when you're playing good edge rushers."

While tackles Andre Smith and Andrew Whitworth, former first and second-round picks respectively, have combined for more than 100 starts in the NFL, Dalton said it will be necessary to help them out against Denver.

"You have to find ways to chip them, or get two guys on them," he said. "Whatever we can do to slow those guys down."

The Alley-Oop Attempt

Eric Decker
DenverBroncos.com
October 31, 2012

You guys might have heard about a plan Demaryius and I had last week. We had this idea to throw an alley-oop after his touchdown. Salt and Pepper, one guy throws to another guy, just to have some fun. I don't think we realized the repercussions or the consequences of something like that. We joke and laugh about calling Brandon Stokley "Daddy" in the locker room, but to have a guy that kind of in the heat of battle has that understanding to stop us and say it's not good right now, I'm very thankful obviously that we saved a penalty in a big situation and probably a fine, too.

He grabbed the ball from me and goes, "What are you doing? You're going to get fined and you're going to get a penalty." At that point I knew, OK, that was dumb.

But rest assured the lob would have been right on target. I've had some experience in high school lobbing it up to a couple teammates.

As far as this week, I think my message would be we talked about the fact that great teams string together wins. That's our focus, but obviously one at a time. We want to be more consistent toward the end of the year and really pick up what our strengths are, create that identity and just play together as a team, not as individuals. More as a unit and as a team.

Cincinnati definitely matches the physicality of the rest of the AFC North. We played them last year and it was the same thing — we have to strap them up and play a physical game. It's going to be the same at their house. They do play in a very physical division and we know they want to come downhill and hit people on defense and run the ball on offense. We've just got to make sure we match that intensity and match that physicality.

Today's Halloween, and I am more wrapped up in it now because Jessica loves Halloween. We've got our house pretty decked out for the kids. I don't know, we'll probably have like five kids come visit. I'm definitely getting more into the holiday season with her around. I'll probably dress up — I think I'm going to be a lobster. She's going to be a mermaid. So we'll see how it goes.

Happy Halloween and talk to you next week.