

# Broncos' defense off to promising start

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
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There was an early five-game stretch in 2006 when the Broncos' defense was a combination of the 1985 Chicago Bears and 2000 Baltimore Ravens.

After losing the opener at St. Louis, the Broncos won five in a row thanks to a defense that allowed six, seven, three, three and seven points. Remember?

Probably not, because that Denver D would fold like a lawn chair in a windstorm. Ranked No. 1 in scoring defense through the first six games, the Broncos tumbled all the way to No. 32 in scoring defense in the final 10 games.

The collapse cost Larry Coyer his job, and the Broncos were on their way to having seven defensive coordinators in seven years.

Champ Bailey was there in 2006, on his way to a career-best season with 10 interceptions. The rest of that defense could not follow.

Bailey was there again in 2009 when Mike Nolan, the fourth of four defensive coordinators, orchestrated a new 3-4 system that had safety Brian Dawkins blowing up ball carriers when Elvis Dumervil wasn't sacking quarterbacks. Through six games, the Broncos ranked No. 1 in scoring defense and third-down percentage. Remember?

Probably not, because that defense caved like a pool of water during a sumo high-dive competition. In the final 10 games, the 2009 Denver D ranked 26th in points allowed and 28th in third-down percentage.

Which brings us to the 2012 Broncos defense. The six-game mark has passed with the defense getting stronger, tougher, faster. Bailey is the only member of the Broncos who played through those great early runs in 2006, 2009 and now halfway through 2012. (Dumervil was a deactivated rookie in the first three games of 2006, and D.J. Williams is a suspended veteran in 2012).

Yes, the Broncos' current defense has been making it possible for Peyton Manning to become the hero at the end. Strongside linebacker Von Miller is a near superstar as a pass rusher. Weakside linebacker Wesley Woodyard is a sideline-to-sideline tackling machine. Chris Harris and Rahim Moore are flying around the secondary. Kevin Vickerson and Justin Bannan are clogging the middle.

But any defense can play well for a segment. Can the 2012 Denver D, ranked No. 12 in scoring defense, sustain its stinginess through its final regular-season game Dec. 30 against Kansas City?

"The difference with this defense compared to those other two you talked about is this one is getting better," Bailey said. "I think when you look at it, our young guys are playing well. That's the key, because you don't know what you're going to get with young guys. Von is playing well. Rahim looks like a different person. That's really what elevates your defense is young guys. And they're all playing great."

Early this season, the Broncos were atrocious at stopping teams on third down. Remember? It's easy to forget, because the Broncos' defense has gone from among the worst in the league at stopping opponents on third down to one of the best.

"A lot of it sometimes is who you're playing," Broncos coach John Fox said. " We've played some pretty good teams offensively that were good on third down, in particular early. It's not an excuse, it's just a reality."

Instead of playing against third-down monster Ben Roethlisberger, the almost perfectly run-pass balanced Houston Texans, certain Hall of Famer Tom Brady and emerging star Matt Ryan, the Broncos have played their past two games against a still-developing Andy Dalton and the coachless New Orleans Saints.

A softening schedule is but one reason the Broncos' defense has improved. Another is that Jack Del Rio, No. 7 of seven defensive coordinators, has lived up to his reputation of instilling a more stout, physical front. The Broncos have stuffed the running games of Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Oakland, San Diego, New Orleans and Cincinnati.

There have been personal changes: Keith Brooking at middle linebacker, Harris and Carter at defensive back. And the defense might be able to become even better if the Broncos' offense can learn to stop turning the ball over.

"It's totally different scenarios from the defenses we had in the past," Dumervil said. "Our offense is completely different. We have a different quarterback. We have a different defensive coordinator. Different defense. Everything works together."

"Part of it's being healthy or staying healthy," Fox said. "That's probably true in any phase of the game. The next thing is the mind-set to get better every day. You're always tweaking, adjusting your scheme. Sometimes it might be player related — changing players — but all in all, I think just that mind-set to improve every week. There's been a lot of rough starts in this league, and it's not where you start, it's where you finish."

# Tuesday Morning QB: Another change at the top

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 5, 2012

*As the season passes its halfway point, how can you deny the quarterback of the 8-0 Atlanta Falcons? Josh Freeman continues to soar while Eli Manning tumbles. The NFL's week 10 quarterback rankings according to Denver Post reporter Mike Klis:*

## **1. Matt Ryan, Falcons (4)**

How to top a 7-0 start? By throwing for 342 yards, with no picks in win against the desperate Cowboys in prime time. Now 8-0. And who beat who in week 2?

## **2. Peyton Manning, Broncos (1)**

Guess who leads the NFL in yards per attempt (8.23). So much for arm strength concerns. Turned what could have been a third quarter catastrophe into a hiccup with two fourth quarter TD passes.

## **3. Aaron Rodgers, Packers (2)**

A day of rare inaccuracy (14-of-30) but usual impact (four TDs) in win versus Arizona. Leads the league by five with 25 TD passes.

## **4. Tom Brady, Patriots (3)**

Bye week. Hosts Bills in AFC East contest Sunday.

## **5. Ben Roethlisberger, Steelers (6)**

Considering the injuries to Troy Polamalu, James Harrison, Rashard Mendenhall, and Mike Wallace's long hold out, Big Ben should start getting some MVP consideration.

## **6. Josh Freeman, Bucs (10)**

Has the league's best new running back in Doug Martin and the pairing has been electric. Has 11 TD passes, one interception in last four games.

## **7. Drew Brees, Saints (9)**

Bounced back from off game in Denver to play well at home in win Monday night against Eagles. Completed 21-of-27 for 239 yards and two TDs for 128.2 rating.

### **8. Matt Schaub, Texans (7)**

Operates the league's most balanced offense. Had sterling game against Bills, completing 19-of-27 for 268 yards, two TDs, zero picks, 126.8 rating.

### **9. Alex Smith, 49ers (8)**

Bye. Plays host to Sam Bradford's Rams in NFC West game Sunday.

### **10. Jay Cutler, Bears (13)**

Nice and tidy three touchdown passes to 2006 draft mate Brandon Marshall in road rout against Titans. Had the league's best efficiency in week 9 with 138.1 rating.

### **11. Andrew Luck, Colts (14)**

Threw for a rookie record 433 yards with two TDs and no picks while leading Colts to another fourth quarter comeback victory against Ryan Tannehill's Dolphins. He and the QB he replaced, Peyton Manning, each have exactly 2,404 passing yards.

### **12. Matthew Stafford, Lions (11)**

Has played well the past two weeks, going 2-0 while regaining his accuracy (56-of-82 for 68.3 percent) for 637 yards.

### **13. Eli Manning, Giants (5)**

The defending Super Bowl champ is struggling through a pronounced slump. Has zero TD passes in his last two games while completing just 25-of-53 (47.2 percent) and averaging 158.5 yards. Has one TD and four INT's in [past three games.

### **14. Cam Newton, Panthers (23)**

Outplayed his protégé RG III in the nation's capital. Will test the Broncos' defense with his option run-pass plays Sunday in Carolina.

### **15. Robert Griffin III, Redskins (12)**

He can say he wants to be compared to Aaron Rodgers. But like it or not his style makes him the second coming of Cam Newton. And his mentor outplayed him Sunday.

### **16. Russell Wilson, Seahawks (21)**

The rookie has nine TDs, zero interceptions 120.2 rating and 4-0 record at home. He's the fourth guy in what could be the best QB class since 1983.

### **17. Joe Flacco, Ravens (15)**

After a maddening inconsistent stretch, John Harbaugh put the handcuffs on his QB at Cleveland. Completed just 15-of-24 for 153 yards in hard-fought win against Browns. Came through with fourth-quarter, go-ahead TD pass.

### **18. Ryan Tannehill, Dolphins (25)**

Showed toughness in coming back from injury to take every snap in rookie showdown with Luck. Played well on the road, throwing for 290 yards and no picks.

### **19. Philip Rivers, Chargers (19)**

Completed 18-of-20 in nice win against the awful Chiefs. But he still threw an ugly, Rivers-like interception in the end zone.

### **20. Tony Romo, Cowboys (22)**

Had a huge statistical game at Atlanta, throwing for 321 yards and a TD with no picks. But couldn't finish off drives. A rare QB who is much better on the road (eight TDs, three INT, 100.0 rating) than at home (two TDs, 10 INT, 60.7 rating).

### **21. Carson Palmer, Raiders (18)**

Ranks 8th with 294 passing yards a game. Threw for 414 and four TDs in comeback attempt against Tampa Bay but was doomed by three picks.

### **22. Andy Dalton, Bengals (16)**

He's OK. Not bad. But doesn't throw well on the move and tends to lock in on his receivers longer than most. It helps to have arguably the league's most dangerous receiver in A.J. Green.

### **23. Michael Vick, Eagles (26)**

It's incredible how dysfunctional this offense is. And he's right, it's not all his fault. But as the QB, it's mostly his fault. A red zone nightmare Monday night at New Orleans.

### **24. Ryan Fitzpatrick, Bills (20)**

Had a decent dunk-and-dink, no-mistake game against tough Houston defense, but couldn't finish off drives and lost 21-9.

### **25. Mark Sanchez, Jets (27)**

Bye week. Returns to hot seat next week at Seattle, where Seahawks are 4-0.

## **26. Brandon Weeden, Browns (29)**

Talk about not finishing. Down 14-0 against Ravens, he directed five unanswered field goal drives to take 15-14 fourth-quarter lead. But two picks against zero touchdowns eventually was the wrong ratio.

## **27. Matt Hasselbeck, Titans (17)**

Didn't prevent angry owner Bud Adams from popping off. First four possessions where Kenny Britt fumble, blocked punt, punt and pick six. A 37-year-old QB should not be playing against the Bears defense.

## **28. John Skelton, Cardinals (32)**

Exhibit A of how anybody can throw for 300 yards in an NFL game. Needed 46 attempts for his 306 yards at Green Bay.

## **29. Sam Bradford, Rams (30)**

Bye. He and team resume their slump with NFC West game at San Francisco.

## **30. Blaine Gabbert, Jaguars (31)**

Getting real good at picking up garbage stats after falling way behind. Averaging league-worst 179 yards and 5.83 yards per attempt.

## **31. Christian Ponder, Vikings (28)**

I know it's impossible to win in Seattle but 11-of-22 for 63 yards? That's not even trying to pass the ball.

## **32. Matt Cassel, Chiefs (33)**

What's bad is not his ranking among the 32 NFL quarterbacks. What's bad is he's nowhere close to being the worst player on his team.

# **Broncos' Chris Kuper to miss 2-4 weeks with severely sprained ankle**

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
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Broncos right guard Chris Kuper will be out two to four weeks with a severely sprained left ankle.

Kuper suffered his injury in the third quarter of the Broncos' 31-23 win Sunday at Cincinnati and had to be helped off the field.

"No fracture involved," said Broncos coach John Fox. "There will be some rehab."

Just because the injury doesn't involve any broken bones doesn't mean it's not serious. Kuper is as tough, and unlucky, as they come. He suffered a gruesome dislocation to the same left ankle on Jan. 1 that resulted in ligament tears, fractures and major surgery.

He also suffered a fractured left ulna in training camp that required surgery.

As Kuper recovers from his latest injury, Manny Ramirez is expected to replace him at right guard. Ramirez started the first five games this season as Kuper recovered from his left arm injury

Kuper, 29, is the longest tenured member of the Broncos' offensive line as he was a fifth-round draft pick in 2006 and has been a starter since the sixth game of the 2007 season.

There aren't many long striders in NFL locker rooms on Monday.

After a tough, physical game Sunday in Cincinnati, many Broncos players moved through the locker room Monday in a slow shuffle.

"It doesn't matter how old you are, you feel this game the next day," said Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey, who spent his Sunday chasing around one of the NFL's most dangerous receivers in the Bengals' A.J. Green.

Fox said at his Monday news conference that other than Kuper his team got out of Cincinnati in good shape.

# Inside the game: Broncos had plenty of self-discovery against the Bengals

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
November 6, 2012

EDITOR'S NOTE: NFL reporter Jeff Legwold analyzes the Broncos' 31-23 victory over the Bengals at Cincinnati on Sunday and looks ahead.

Through the years, those with plenty of hard-earned gray around the temples have said you can learn a lot about a pro football team when things don't go well. That could be one play, one day or one season — or even one stumble-filled quarter filled with bad news on the road, against a team grinding to keep its season from spiraling to the point of no return. That's exactly where the Broncos were in the third quarter Sunday.

Denver had seen its happy-time momentum of a 105-yard kickoff return for a touchdown from Trindon Holliday to open the second half dissolve into two Peyton Manning interceptions, a mishandled kickoff and an injury to one of its team captains, guard Chris Kuper.

"It was a lot of things," Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey said. "Sometimes you get those things back to back to back, and the team doesn't respond. Those teams don't go anywhere. This team responds. You never know how it's going to turn out, but we know now this team will respond."

Manning is at the heart of the Broncos' first-response unit. After he threw two interceptions in the third quarter, Manning led two scoring drives in the fourth quarter, going 6-of-6 passing for 69 yards with two touchdown passes in the game's final 15 minutes.

The Broncos' defense held the Bengals to 1-of-4 on third down in the final quarter and closed things out with an Elvis Dumervil sack on the Bengals' final drive.

Manning has always said his father, Archie, told him when bad things happen in a game it's best to find your way to "level zero." Because that's where the clean slate resides, a little fresh start in the middle of the ups and downs. Sunday, the Broncos showed they can get there and climb back out with a hard-earned victory.

"You don't want to make a bad play, like I did on the kickoff I didn't get," Holliday said. "Nobody wants to do that. But if you just worry about it right then, it affects you if you're trying to bounce back. I think good teams get their minds right after something bad. They bounce back."

## Key matchup

This week, everyone gets to see whether the Broncos' defense was paying attention during practice last season. The Broncos were the NFL's leading practitioners of the read option with Tim Tebow at quarterback.

And the Broncos were good enough at it, coached well enough in it, to lead the league in rushing and put together a six-game winning streak after their 1-4 start.

Sunday they get the team and the quarterback running it the most now in the Carolina Panthers and Cam Newton. Newton has not kept his torrid scoring pace of 2011 this season. He produced 18 touchdowns, rushing and passing, in the first eight games last season, compared with 10 this season. He still leads the NFL's quarterbacks in rushing this season with 347 yards. That total is 100 yards more than the next quarterback on the list, the Eagles' Michael Vick.

The Broncos have to find a way to pressure Newton, but not get too far upfield in doing it on the edges. The rule of thumb for defending a mobile quarterback on passing downs is not to rush any deeper in the backfield than the quarterback, so he does not have escape lanes to the inside of the edge rushers.

The Broncos must be disciplined there and in the run game this week, and hold the edges. They know better than most the damage an option play can do against a defense that doesn't play old-school assignment football.

### **Comparison shopping**

Manning, at a 69.5 percent completion rate, is one of five quarterbacks in the NFL who have completed at least 67 percent of their passes this season. The Packers' Aaron Rodgers, the Falcons' Matt Ryan, the 49ers' Alex Smith and the the Steelers' Ben Roethlisberger are the others.

Those teams are a combined 30-11.

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### **Sack masters**

*Broncos linebacker Von Miller is one of four players in the NFL with at least nine sacks. He also is the only player among the NFL's top four who plays in a 4-3 base defense:*

#### **Player, sacks**

J.J. Watt, DE, Texans, 10½

Clay Matthews, OLB, Packers, 9

Von Miller, OLB, Broncos, 9

DeMarcus Ware, OLB, Cowboys, 9

# Broncos coach John Fox not stirring things up against Panthers

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
November 6, 2012

It's his story and he's sticking to it.

But before coach John Fox was hired by the Broncos, he was fired after nine seasons as a Carolina Panthers coach with four playoff appearances, two NFC championship games and one trip to the Super Bowl.

This week, the Broncos will travel to Charlotte, N.C., to face the Panthers for the first time with Fox as Denver's coach. The Panthers are 2-6.

"I have a lot of great relationships there," Fox said. "It was the place that gave me my first opportunity as a head coach, so I'll always be indebted for that. I still have a home there. My sons live that way. It will be good to be back. But again it's the NFL, this game's only fun when you win."

Fox was asked if the game held any special significance given the team let him go, much as when former Broncos coach Mike Shanahan faced the Raiders, a team that had fired him.

"It's the most important game, because it's the next one. You don't get but 16 of these opportunities. Right now we're 5-3, and the only guarantee we have is 5-11. So, you know, it will be just like any week from the standpoint of it's the Denver Broncos against the Carolina Panthers at their place.

"That's the only real thing I know. How we prepare will determine that outcome."

Asked if that was going to be his response all week Fox said, "Yes, put that in a quote and you'll hear it many times."

**Kuper update.** Broncos right guard Chris Kuper could miss a month with a severely sprained left ankle.

It is a painful injury that will require plenty of time and attention from the Broncos' trainers to heal. Kuper has had ankle troubles before, missing some time in training camps in his career, even before he suffered a dislocated left ankle in the 2011 regular-season finale.

Kuper also suffered a fractured bone in his left forearm in training camp that kept him out of the Broncos' first four games and limited him to three special-teams snaps in a fifth.

"(Kuper) is such a great guy," Fox said. "He's well liked by his teammates. They voted him captain. He's had a bad streak of some luck lately, but it's good to see it's not as serious as the other injuries he's had this season."

**Do your homework.** No NFL team may have used the read option better than the Broncos did last season with Tim Tebow at quarterback. But the Broncos' defense gets a dose of it Sunday with Panthers quarterback Cam Newton running plenty of the option these days.

"(There) are a lot of similarities, and those are things that will help us in our preparation," Fox said. "They've got some gifted players on offense. I know that team pretty well."

**Injuries.** Fox said he didn't believe the other injuries the Broncos suffered Sunday were too serious. Tight end Jacob Tamme (elbow) and wide receiver Demaryius Thomas (knee) left the game with injuries, but returned.

Fox said he did not have an update on cornerback Tracy Porter, who did not make the trip to Cincinnati.

**Footnotes.** Fox said the Broncos would ask the NFL's officiating department to take a look at a play just before halftime Sunday when the Bengals appeared to be in an illegal formation that wasn't flagged. The drive ended with a missed field goal. ... The Broncos did not surrender a sack Sunday. It was the third consecutive game the Broncos have not allowed a sack, and the fourth in the past five.

# Broncos see plenty of potential in speedy Trindon Holliday

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
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When Trindon Holliday went to the NFL's scouting combine in 2010, he was measured at 5-foot-5 ¼ inches tall. He weighed in at 166 pounds.

And most scouts said at first blush those numbers would be considered hilariously outside of the NFL's mold. At least until Holliday ran.

Holliday also authored one of the fastest 40-yard dashes in combine history — electronically timed at 4.29 seconds — which is tied with several players as the third fastest since electronic timing was first used in 1999.

But what Holliday also has is what scouts call "long speed." As in he isn't just fast for 40 yards, or 50, or even 60. No, Holliday is as fast as the field is long.

His resume as an All America sprinter at LSU is more than proof of that. Holliday was the NCAA 100-meter champion in 2009. And in 2007, he finished second in the 100 meters — to Tyson Gay — at the USA Outdoor Track and Field Championships.

He would have had the opportunity to represent the United States at the World Championships that year in the 100 meters as well as be in the pool for the 4x100 meter relay, but Holliday surrendered his spot on the team to continue his football career at LSU.

"I consider myself a football player, who can run track," Holliday said.

What it means for the Broncos is they now just might have the fastest guy in the league — or at least a guy on the shortest list — handling the ball for them on special teams.

And the Broncos, under special teams coordinator Jeff Rodgers, are considered by many in the league as a well-rounded, fundamentally-sound unit. Which means they often get things blocked up well.

With a guy like Holliday, that means one crease could be enough to make a touchdown. The kinds of touchdowns that are of the lightning-strike, morale-crushing variety to almost any opponent.

The kind of touchdowns where all of the hard work in a game disappears in the time it takes for the returner to go the distance against you.

Sunday, to open the second half, Holliday said an outside return was called for the kickoff, but as the ball came down — Holliday fielded it five yards deep in the end zone — he said he could see the blockers make a gap to the inside.

"And I just hit it," Holliday said. "I feel like if I get past the first wave, I've got something."

That he does. Most special teams coaches will say the key to defending the league's shortest player is to make Holliday cut, to have to make a move. Because if he gets through the first wave on the dead run, there is no defender who can turn, after running downfield to cover the kick, and chase him down.

Holliday was tough enough to have been a running back at LSU. The Texans saw enough to take him in the sixth round in the 2010 draft. And his career may have gotten a little more traction right out of the gate had he not suffered a fractured thumb in that rookie season.

He spent part of 2011 on the Texans' practice squad, largely a specialist in a time when most teams have a difficult time using roster spots on specialists. But the Broncos see potential.

So while Holliday has also fumbled a punt against San Diego and mishandled a kickoff Sunday that forced the Broncos to start a drive at their own 1-yard line — "My mistake, I just can't do that," Holliday said — the lure of what might happen when he has the ball is strong.

And what might happen is Holliday will show just how tall he can stand. Any time he touches the ball.

# Broncos' late additions to roster demonstrate value against Bengals

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
November 6, 2012

*Today's question about the Broncos comes from Ken H. in Ohio. To submit a question for consideration, send an e-mail to The Denver Post's Jeff Legwold.*

**Q:** I was in (Paul Brown Stadium) Sunday to see the Broncos get the win. It seemed like they were playing a lot of the new guys they picked up after (training) camp opened. By design or necessity?

**A:** Ken, probably a little of both, but mostly by design.

Linebacker Keith Brooking didn't participate in most of training camp and missed all four preseason games with a hamstring injury. Nonetheless, the Broncos kept him on the 53-man roster to open the season. It was then clear that the defensive staff had specific plans for him.

They liked what the five-time Pro Bowl selection showed in his workout. The original plan was for him to provide depth at middle and weakside linebacker as well as play as a situational player in the base defense. However, the Broncos then moved him into the starting defense, at middle linebacker, because of his experience.

Broncos defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio said Brooking brought "great anticipation" to the position. Then Joe Mays suffered a fractured ankle just after Brooking was moved ahead of him into the starting lineup, so the Broncos need Brooking now more than ever.

Jim Leonhard, too, coming off of knee surgery, was a limited participant in training camp and the preseason games. But the Broncos also signed him in August with some specific things in mind.

And as the season progresses, Del Rio just keeps finding Leonhard more to do in the defense.

Sunday, Leonhard lined up with the starting base defense at times, usually when the Bengals have moved the ball inside the Broncos' 20-yard line. He also played in the nickel (five defensive backs), at times, in place of Rahim Moore, and played in the dime (six defensive backs) as well as a seven-defensive back formation the Broncos used in the fourth quarter.

Broncos coach John Fox and Del Rio have each spoken of the value of experience. And while Fox always says, "It's a young man's game," they like having the security

blanket of sorts that Brooking and Leonhard give them with moderate salary-cap implications.

Both were working out on their own as unrestricted free agents, available to anyone, when the Broncos signed them. The Broncos' pro personnel department can certainly call those additions two wins.

And a third, returner Trindon Holliday, has been with the team less than a month and has already authored the longest play in Broncos franchise history with his 105-yard return for a touchdown Sunday. Holliday was released by the Texans when they felt the roster squeeze a bit after they had to put linebacker Brian Cushing on injured reserve.

The Broncos put in a waiver claim and were awarded Holliday on Oct. 11 over the Colts, who also put in a claim. Had Holliday's release and the waiver claim that followed come a week earlier, however, when last year's records were used to set the claim order, Holliday would have been with the Colts instead.

The Colts finished a league-worst 2-14 last season compared to the Broncos' 8-8. But after five weeks have passed in a season, the claiming order goes to the current season's records — worst records with first priority down to the best records.

At the time of Holliday's appearance on the waiver wire, the Colts were 2-2 and the Broncos were 2-3. So, Holliday ended up on the Broncos roster.

The Broncos believe Holliday can give them kind of impact in punt and kickoff returns they've been missing a bit — rookie Omar Bolden's touchdown return in the preseason notwithstanding — since Eddie Royal left in free agency.

Holliday has fumbled a punt — against San Diego — and misplayed a kickoff Sunday that resulted in the Broncos starting a drive at their own 1-yard line. But his speed makes him a potential threat to score on every play in the kicking game, if the Broncos can make him some space.

"When you come to a new team, and everybody's been there awhile, and knows their roles, you have to show what you can do," Holliday said. "I said all along, I just want to help."

# Broncos' Jack Del Rio using full depth chart and myriad defensive looks

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
November 5, 2012

Eight games into his first season as Broncos defensive coordinator and Jack Del Rio has been anything but bashful about using the full Denver depth chart.

As a result, the Broncos, at least according to some offensive coaches around the league, take a little more time to review because of the numerous personnel groupings Del Rio has used already this season. Sunday, the Broncos even dropped a formation that included seven defensive backs on the Bengals.

That look — with the Broncos moving around the line of scrimmage, players seemingly at every angle — resulted, over three consecutive plays in the fourth quarter, in a false start penalty, a holding penalty on Bengals center Jeff Faine, and Champ Bailey's interception.

"Anything you can do to make the offense hesitate, to not be sure, that's good for us," Broncos safety Mike Adams said.

"I think guys know to be ready to do the job, no matter what it is. But whatever you can to get turnovers, get stops and get the ball back for our offense."

The Broncos had added safeties Jim Leonhard and David Bruton to the formation. The Broncos were protecting a 24-20 lead at the time so it wasn't just something Del Rio broke out to rush the passer with the game out of hand.

And after the defense forced Bailey's interception, quarterback Peyton Manning took the Broncos 46 yards in eight plays for a touchdown, a drive that featured six running plays. The score pushed the Broncos' lead to 11 points with 3:36 to play.

The Broncos also used Leonhard at safety, in place of Rahim Moore, in some of their nickel (five defensive backs) packages in the game as well as in their base defense at times, particularly when the Bengals moved inside the Broncos' 20-yard line. The Broncos also used rookie cornerback Omar Bolden for a snap in the dime on a third-and-12 situation in the second quarter as well as a third-and-7 situation in the third quarter.

All in all it was especially difficult for a second-year quarterback like the Bengals' Andy Dalton to digest at times. And the Broncos get another second-year quarterback across from them this week in Carolina's Cam Newton.

# Eye on: The Carolina Panthers

Tom Kensler  
The Denver Post  
November 6, 2012

## Eye on ...The Panthers

### Denver at Carolina, 11 a.m., Sunday, KCNC-4

**For the record:** Panthers snapped a five-game losing streak Sunday with a 21-13 win at Washington. At 2-6, Carolina sits in last place in the NFC South.

**Streaking:** Since current Broncos coach John Fox guided the Panthers to the 2005 NFC championship game, Carolina has finished with a winning record only once (12-4 in 2008) in the past six seasons, and chances of reversing that trend this year appear dim.

**What's hot:** Big-play ability. Second-year Carolina QB Cam Newton needed only 23 attempts (13 completions) to throw for 201 yards against the Redskins. He had an 82-yard completion to Armanti Edwards, and running back DeAngelo Williams scored on a 30-yard run.

**What's not:** The Panthers' defense is doing its part. Carolina entered the game at Washington ranked 15th in the NFL in total defense (343.9 yards allowed per game) and surpassed that average by yielding 337 to the Redskins. The Panthers stopped Washington on fourth-and-goal at the 2-yard line in the second quarter.

**Key stat:** Newton did not throw an interception vs. Washington. That must be encouraging to Panthers fans, because he entered the weekend with eight interceptions against only five TD passes through seven games.

**FYI:** Second-year coach Ron Rivera (8-16) must wonder about his long-term future with the franchise, because longtime general manager Marty Hurney was fired two weeks ago after a home loss to Dallas.

**Injury report:** WR Kealoha Pilares (shoulder).

**Coach speak:** "The biggest thing is, we have to be trending up. People have to see we're competing. And I think these last few weeks, you can see there is a reason (to believe we are)." — Rivera, to Yahoo Sports.

# Peyton Manning and Andrew Luck are neck-and-neck in a key stat this season

Nick Groke  
The Denver Post  
November 5, 2012

Amazingly, after eight games and hundreds of passes, Peyton Manning and Andrew Luck have the same number of passing yards — each are exactly at 2,404 yards.

The Broncos and Colts are also both 5-3.

Are they fated for a playoff matchup?

Of course, passing yards don't tell the entire story. Manning's passer rating is much better than Luck's. And Luck matched Manning's yards total only after he set the rookie record Sunday with 433 passing yards — on 30-of-48 completions and with 2 TDs.

Manning, for the first time in four games, fell short Sunday (by just nine yards) of a 300-yard and 3-TD game. He was 27-of-35 for 291 yards and 3 TDs.

Here is how Manning and Luck compare this season, including their identical passing mark:

	<b>Manning</b>	<b>Luck</b>
Comp.	203	190
Att.	292	336
Pct.	69.5	56.5
Yards	2,404	2,404
TDs	20	10
INTs	6	8
Rating	108.6	79.0
W-L	5-3	5-3

# Manning now the all-time comeback king

Eddie Pells  
Associated Press  
November 5, 2012

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) - It was early November in Cincinnati. The Broncos quarterback dropped back to pass, found a receiver open for a 30-yard gain.

Four plays later, Denver scored the winning touchdown and John Elway, in his 16th and final season, had the 39th game-winning drive of the 40 he would engineer in the fourth quarter or overtime.

Fast forward to 2012: Early November. At Cincinnati. Elway is the general manager and the quarterback he brought to Denver, 15-year veteran Peyton Manning, directs a five-play, 80-yard drive to give the Broncos the lead in the fourth quarter. It was his 48th game-winning drive. Manning now holds the NFL record in a category Elway once defined.

"I think he thrives on it," Broncos coach John Fox said. "I think most competitors do. They want the ball in their hands."

He could have been speaking about Elway. In this case, he was speaking about Manning.

The quarterback's latest escape act, which included four completions, including one of his three scoring passes against the Bengals, was more efficient than dramatic, more just another touchdown drive than, say, The Drive.

Yet for all the gaudy numbers Manning is putting up this season - 2,404 yards, 20 touchdowns, the 108.6 passer rating - it's the three fourth-quarter game-winning drives, against Pittsburgh, San Diego and Cincinnati, that show what he's really all about.

"I think all football players, when the fourth quarter comes around, that's when the pressure's on, that's when you want to rely on your fundamentals and techniques," Manning said. "I think we can draw on this type of game."

Though any NFL quarterback will take what Manning got Sunday - a win - it will not go down as one of his best statistical performances, mainly because of the two interceptions he threw, both of which contributed to a 14-point lead turning into a three-point deficit early in the fourth quarter.

There was no sense of panic, said tight end Jacob Tamme, who played for three years with Manning in Indianapolis.

"He takes responsibility when he does something he feels wasn't good enough and we all take responsibility when we do something we feel wasn't good enough," Tammé said. "That's how we operate as an offense. It was just kind of a sense of, let's go out there and do our job a little bit better and we'll win."

They did. Eight minutes later, with the help of a Champ Bailey interception, Manning led another touchdown drive to make it 31-20. The Bengals kicked a field goal but didn't recover the ensuing onside kick.

"If you run into an adverse situation, it's no reason to get down," Bailey said. "You just keep playing ball. Keep going out and doing your job because you know you're going to have a chance. You see other players doing that on this team. There are a lot of leaders on this team."

Top on the list: Manning.

After the slow start so many predicted for him, coming onto a new team and after missing a year while his surgically repaired neck healed, he is playing as well as he ever has.

The Broncos are on a three-game winning streak. They've reached the midpoint of the season leading the AFC West at 5-3. Manning leads the NFL in completion percentage (69.5), average gain per attempt (8.23) and with that passer rating of more than 108. That last stat, loosely translated, means he's playing quarterback better than anyone in the NFL right now.

"In his case, every time he goes out there, he's got a chance to do something special," Fox said.

He's making memories in the fourth quarter - a time that used to belong to Elway in this city.

It was against the Colts in 1983 that Elway made his first comeback. From 19-0 down to a 21-19 win, with all the touchdowns coming in the fourth quarter.

After another particularly impressive comeback - two touchdowns over the last two minutes to beat the Chiefs 20-19 in 1992 - Elway said he never gave up, no matter how dire the situation: "No. When I think we've lost is when the game is over," he said.

With Manning at the helm, the impossible seems possible again in Denver. A 24-point deficit in San Diego turns into a 35-24 win that goes down as the first time a team has won by double digits after trailing by so much. A blown lead in Cincinnati turns into a 31-23 win that, somehow, feels routine.

Of course, nobody goes into a game hoping to need a comeback. But when things play out this way, Manning said, it's not such a bad thing.

"The more you can go through it as a unit, the more you can draw on it later in the season," he said. "Anytime you can win going through those scenarios, that's a plus."

NOTES: Fox said there was no update on OL Chris Kuper, who left the game with an injured left ankle. "No fracture involved," Fox said. "There'll be some rehab." ... Tamme, who left the game briefly with an injury, said he tweaked a nerve in his elbow when he hit it on the turf and it felt OK on Monday. ... The Broncos gave no update on CB Tracy Porter, who missed his third straight game because of problems related to a seizure over the summer. ... The Broncos lost two turnovers and picked up only one against Cincinnati, falling to minus-4 for the season, 23rd in the league.

# Midseason NFL draft preview

Mel Kiper Jr.  
ESPN Insider  
November 5, 2012

Sunday Night Football represented essentially the halfway point of the NFL season. And at this stage, personnel folks for NFL teams are quite aware of where the biggest voids on the roster exist. They've seen plenty of reps against good and bad competition, and injuries have allowed them to go deeper into the roster for help. So while the scouting process is a perpetual one, at this point you can start to get a better sense of what you'll need to look at in the offseason.

So let's take a first look, as if the NFL draft were being held tomorrow. The draft portion of this is mostly for fun -- all juniors mentioned here aren't even guaranteed of being in the draft -- but we'll put a name in for each team just to get you more familiar with some of the top prospects in my rankings.

## **The ever-important parameters:**

- Having spoken to folks from a number of teams and evaluated the teams, I'll take a look at some emerging needs.
- I'll suggest a prospect who could fill a void if the draft were held tomorrow -- these are not based on value or draft position, just a good fit.
- Because "picks" are more about need, a few top prospects are passed over.

Again, the draft element here is just for an introduction to prospects, because for all teams, the draft board is a long, long way from complete -- just like mine. But here's to getting way ahead of ourselves ...

## **Denver Broncos**

**Top emerging needs:** G, CB, DT

**Analysis:** Just as I saw it on draft day in 2012, you look at the Broncos and don't see one area to be called a glaring deficiency. On offense, Peyton Manning covers up so much. You might think you lack talent at wide receiver, but everybody he throws the ball to produces. You could question the offensive line in spots, but Manning gets the ball out so quickly -- he's rarely being touched by pass-rushers -- and checks into the right run calls so consistently, the run game produces. On defense, they could use a true run-stuffer at defensive tackle, and I think guard play on offense could improve. As well, how long will the ageless Champ Bailey stay ageless? They could go a few different ways if they drafted tomorrow.

**Drafting tomorrow:** Sylvester Williams, DT, North Carolina

# Moving on: Denver Broncos

Bill Williamson  
ESPN.com  
November 5, 2012

Here are some areas the Denver Broncos need to focus on after a 31-23 win at the Cincinnati Bengals on Sunday:

**Recap:** The Broncos improved to 5-3 and stayed in first place by themselves with the road win. Denver saw a 17-3 lead early in the third quarter become a 20-17 deficit early in the fourth quarter. Denver came roaring back with two fourth quarter scores to seal the win.

**Biggest area to fix:** Running game. Denver had just 68 yards on 26 carries. Peyton Manning is tremendous, but he needs help. Denver can't afford to be one dimensional on offense.

**Biggest area to build on:** Manning was perfect on his underneath throws, according to ESPN's Stat & Information. He completed all 18 attempts thrown within five yards of the line of scrimmage. Only Green Bay's Aaron Rodgers (Week 4 of this season) was perfect on underneath passes with at least 18 attempts in the past five seasons.

**What to watch for:** Denver coach John Fox brings his team to Carolina, where he was the head coach for nine seasons. Carolina fired him after the 2010 season and he was hired by the Broncos shortly later.

# Power Rankings: Explosive Bucs on the rise, back to being relevant

Pete Prisco  
CBSSports.com  
November 6, 2012

Want to stump your friends?

Ask them to name the NFL team that is first in yards per play on offense this season? Limit them to three guesses, and that's it.

They won't get it. I promise.

It's none of the usual suspects. Not the Green Bay Packers. Not the New England Patriots. Not the New Orleans Saints.

It's the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

The Bucs have won consecutive games to get to 4-4 and none of their losses have come by more than seven points. First-year coach Greg Schiano has the Bucs in the playoff hunt.

Tampa Bay is up to No. 16 in the CBSSports.com Power Rankings and has a real chance the next two weeks to go higher. They play at home against San Diego this Sunday, and then play the Panthers on the road next week.

If they get to 6-4, it would be time to start believing that the playoffs -- which seemed remote a month ago -- is a real possibility for the Bucs.

Say what you want about Schiano's crazy antics -- and there are plenty of them -- he has done a top-notch job so far.

It starts with the offense. The Bucs are ranked ninth in total offense and fifth in scoring. Rookie running back Doug Martin is second in the NFL in rushing, coming off a 251-yard, four-touchdown game against the Raiders.

Martin's ability to run has helped quarterback Josh Freeman rebound from a slow start. Freeman has four games with a passer rating over 100. Freeman has 16 touchdown passes and five interceptions. His 8.09 yards per attempt average is second in the league.

They've needed every bit of that offense. The defense has struggled. They are 29th in the league, and last in pass defense. That could make for a lot of high-scoring games coming up in the second half.

The Bucs are fun to watch. More than that, they are relevant again.

			
RANK	TEAM		MOVE (LW)
1	 They are undefeated, halfway home, but some still wonder if they are really that good. I don't. They are, but they have to prove it in the postseason.		—(1)
2	 Defense. Special teams. Running game. Some passing. They can do a lot of different things to score.		—(2)
3	 They came off their bye looking a little rusty, but it didn't matter against the Bills. It will against better teams.		—(3)
4	 Want to know what isn't gobble, gobble, turkey? This team is nasty on defense.		▲1(5)
5	 They might be the only team in the league where the quarterback throws four touchdown passes and you still think there is more. Scary.		▲1(6)
6	 They come off their bye week with a firm grasp of the AFC East. That won't change in the second half.		▲1(7)
7	 Things looked dicey in the fourth quarter against Cleveland, but good teams find a way. Joe Flacco did it when he had to do it.		▲1(8)
8	 <b>They have the quarterback and the pass rushers, which is a formula for success. Peyton Manning is the same guy.</b>		▲1(9)
9	 The Giants have struggled on offense some the past two weeks. They have to get more from Eli Manning like Tom Coughlin said.		▼5(4)
10	 That's a statement game winning on the road against the Giants. Does it matter who's running the ball? They all pick up chunks.		▲1(11)
11	 Andrew Luck is special. We all thought that. Now we know it. The Colts are for real.		▲1(12)

# POWER RANKINGS

RANK	TEAM		MOVE (LW)
12		Russell Wilson is much better at home than on the road. At 5-4, they are in the thick of the playoff race.	▲2(14)
13		At 4-4, they're still in the playoff chase. That was a tough one to lose at Indianapolis. But halfway home they are better than expected.	▼3(10)
14		The Chiefs were the perfect tonic for a team that needed it. Too bad they can't play the Chiefs every week.	▲3(17)
15		It's too bad they aren't healthy on defense. They are a year away on that side of the ball.	▲13(28)
16		I don't care what their record is so far. They are dangerous in the second half. If they beat the Falcons this week, watch out.	▲9(25)
17		They are falling fast. What has happened to Christian Ponder? He has thrown for less than 75 yards the past two weeks.	▼4(13)
18		The past two weeks have them back in the playoff race. With that passing game, they will be a tough foe every week.	▲1(19)
19		They are essentially playing for their season at Philadelphia this week. Win that, followed by two homes games, and they can turn things around.	▼3(16)
20		With that offensive line, Nick Foles might get killed if he plays. Mike Vick's feet are essential now.	▼5(15)
21		So much for any playoff talk. They are in the middle of a three-game losing streak and in what should be termed a disappointment.	▼3(18)
22		It's so obvious that they are limited on offense, and it's starting to wear on the defense. They need a quarterback.	▼2(20)

# POWER RANKINGS

**RANK TEAM**

**MOVE  
(LW)**

23		Coming off the bye, their second half will be about building for next season. They're playing a lot of young players, so it makes sense.	▼2(21)
24		Cam Newton played mistake-free football at Washington, and look what happened. The defense played better too.	▲6(30)
25		The Robert Griffin III magic is wearing off. He just can't carry this team yet.	▼3(22)
26		It's games like they had against the Bears that remind folks of how far they have to go. They need Jake Locker back to get experience.	▼3(23)
27		They come off the bye with two road games and a chance to turn their season around. If not, jobs will be lost.	▼3(24)
28		So the defense shows some improvement coming out of the bye and then the offense goes limp. It's one of those seasons.	▼2(26)
29		At least Carson Palmer showed up against Tampa Bay. What is wrong with that defense?	▼2(27)
30		The difference between the Browns and Ravens is one team knows how to win tight games. They are making progress, though.	▼1(29)
31		At some point the coaching staff will realize that they can't just line up and win with their defense and running game. When? Who knows?	—(31)
32		This is a disaster. Heads will roll after the season, and they should.	—(32)

# Monday Musings: Falcons still remember Drew Brees insult

Pete Prisco  
CBSSports.com  
November 5, 2012

-- Less than a year ago, the Atlanta Falcons went to the Superdome and were blown out by the New Orleans Saints. In that game, the Saints put quarterback Drew Brees back in the game to allow him to break the single-season record for passing yards, even though he had one more home game the next week to do it. That angered Falcons players and coaches. They remember. As I made my way through the locker room on Sunday night after the Falcons beat the Cowboys, I asked players about it. They say it will be brought up this week for sure. They also remember when the Saints danced on their logo two years ago at the Georgia Dome after beating them in a key Monday night game. "All of that stuff is right here," one player said, pointing to his head. The Saints are down, but this is still a hot rivalry. The Falcons' ultimate insult would be to win the Super Bowl on the Saints' field.

-- I don't believe Sean Payton will leave the Saints. Why? That's his team. He is the one who built it into a contender. So even if he can get out of his deal, which is still a big if, I don't think he leaves to go to Dallas. There is something to be said of a team being yours. The Saints are his team. He and Drew Brees work together. The Cowboys job is enticing, and Payton's ex-wife and kids now live there, but I think in the end Payton will go back to what he knows, his team. The other thing is, in New Orleans, he doesn't have Jerry Jones butting in when it comes to decisions. Payton works well with Mickey Loomis. The Cowboys might be America's Team, but the Saints are Payton's team. That matters. I think it will when it comes to any potential decision. Then again, Bill Parcells jumped from team to team for the money. Who did Payton learn his coaching lessons from the most?

-- The Falcons were impressed with the Cowboys during Sunday night's tough game. "That's not a 3-5 team," one player said. In other words, how are they?

-- Steelers coach Mike Tomlin owes his defensive players some time off. They bailed him out against the Giants. The Steelers had a fourth-and-1 inside the Giants' 5 trailing by three in the fourth quarter. Instead of taking the points or going for it with his offense, Tomlin called for a fake field goal that was stuffed. But his defense forced a three-and-out, and his offense went down and scored the game-winning touchdown. Tomlin even admitted after the game that his defense bailed him out. That was a strange call. Kick the field goal and tie the score, or run the ball behind your powerful interior line.

-- Andrew Luck is special. The kid throws for 433 yards, two touchdowns and no interceptions to lift the Colts past the Dolphins. It's tough to run on Miami, so the

Colts beat them through the air. Luck has a nice veteran target in Reggie Wayne, but he's also getting a lot out of rookie T.Y. Hilton, a tiny speedster from Florida International University. It helps that Luck puts the ball where it needs to be. The Colts will be a contender for a long, long time. This is Peyton Manning II.

-- Bengals right tackle Andre Smith was abused by **Von Miller** on Sunday. Smith has made progress as a player but had a major regress against the Broncos. Miller had three tackles for loss -- three sacks -- against Cincinnati. He was impressive.

-- Speaking of the **Denver defense**, I love corner Chris Harris. He is normally the nickel corner, but he is starting with Tracy Porter out with issues related to seizures. Harris is playing a nice version of corner opposite Champ Bailey. It must be nice to have good cover players and good pass rushers.

-- Does any team in the league do a better job at getting a defense to go one way and then throwing back to the other way than the Texans? They did it on their opening score on Sunday against the Bills, when Matt Schaub hit Owen Daniels for a touchdown.

-- Wow. Wow. Wow. Tampa Bay running back Doug Martin was sensational against the Raiders, rushing for 251 and four scores. Martin had touchdown runs of 70, 67, 45 and one yard in the victory. His ability to run the ball has really helped Josh Freeman and that passing game. The Bucs are making big strides. They will not be an easy out for any team. But watch out in 2013. They are building something special there.

-- Aaron Rodgers now has 25 touchdown passes. Still think he's in a slump?

-- Bucs rookie linebacker Lavonte David had 16 tackles against the Raiders. He might be the best rookie defensive player in the league.

-- **Jack Del Rio** is doing a nice job with his defense in Denver. It helps that he has two speed rushers in Miller and Elvis Dumervil and his team is playing with the lead, but he is doing a good job. Having a nice group of cover corners helps as well.

-- The **Broncos** have outscored their opponents by 80 points in the fourth quarter. That's impressive.

-- The Robert Griffin III vs. Cam Newton game didn't produce the fireworks that we expected. Both were solid -- not special. But neither turned the ball over, which is key for young quarterbacks.

-- Packers receiver Randall Cobb had two touchdown catches against the Cardinals and is getting better by the week. When the Packers get Jordy Nelson and Greg Jennings healthy, they will be even more explosive in the passing game. Just what the league needs, right?

-- Do the Bears even need to do anything on offense with all the defensive and special-teams scores they are getting? One thing about them: When they get a team down, they go for the throat. That is a good sign.

-- Bears corner Charles Tillman forced four fumbles. Do you know how hard that is for a corner? He is having a great season.

-- So Andre Johnson can still get 100 yards in a game? He had 111 against the Bills this week. That's a good sign for the Texans moving forward. Some scouts say he's slowing down, but the second half will tell.

-- Did Christian Ponder really throw for 63 yards? Has he been figured out?

-- People say I can't admit I am wrong. Well, here goes: Marshawn Lynch is a much better runner this season than I expected. Guy is running hard.

# Monday Observations: Just past midway point, 10 of 12 playoff spots look set

Jason La Canfora  
CBSSports.com  
November 5, 2012

Having digested half of this NFL season -- OK, slightly more than half -- it's becoming apparent to me that despite this era of rampant parity the playoff picture is virtually set. I'm willing to guarantee five of the six spots in each conference, and I really don't think I'm going out on a huge limb by doing so.

I will concede that the hunt for the second wild card in both the AFC and NFC could come down to a wild scramble, and that will be fun. In the AFC, in particular, it could be quite some time before some very poor football teams are mathematically eliminated. So we've got that going for us. ...

But the bulk of the teams, if not the most of the division races, are more or less clinched. It would take some epic fold jobs for teams like the Falcons, **Broncos**, 49ers, Texans and Giants not to take their divisions, and you're going to have a hell of a time trying to convince me the Patriots still aren't going to take the AFC East, or that the Bears and Packers both won't make the playoffs (obviously, one of them is going to take the NFC North). And, for their many flaws and ugly wins, the Ravens will be back in the postseason for a fifth straight year. And, news flash, the Steelers are still damn good and they're going back to the playoffs, too.

Don't believe me? Let me prove it to you.

We can all agree that the Falcons will run away with the NFC South. Sorry, Buccaneers fans, you aren't making up that kind of ground (though you are definitely in the wild-card hunt). The 49ers are going back, another obvious one. The Bears at 7-1 are in, and the Packers still get to play four of their final seven games against division foes after their bye and have been winning games without Charles Woodson and Jordy Nelson and Greg Jennings and a bunch of other guys they expect back.

The Giants let one slip away against the Steelers during what was a bizarre week for them, and sure, they have been prone to slides in the past, but the Super Bowl champs retain the inside track for the NFC East. Even if somehow the Giants let the Eagles or Cowboys back in it, do you really think they aren't at least in as a wild card? And, even though they are "only" one game back, do you really think the Dolphins can catch the Patriots in the AFC East?

New England comes out of the bye next week and gets the Bills, Colts, Jets and Dolphins (they have both Miami games remaining). They also get to take a bite out of the Jags. They're going to win at least 10 games; they're going to take that

division. **Denver** is "only" a game ahead of the Chargers, except they already beat San Diego once and the Broncos have a cupcake schedule the rest of the way.

The Ravens, already at 6-2, are dominant at home, they still get the Raiders, Redskins and Bengals (though games against Denver and the Giants are at home), and even 9-7 will be good enough for them to get in. The Ravens' only conference loss to far is to the Texans.

The Steelers are finally hitting their stride, Ben Roethlisberger is playing better than ever, the defense and run game are a force again, and they haven't even faced the Ravens yet. If Pittsburgh sweeps Baltimore you know it's getting in, and it still gets Kansas City ... and Cleveland (twice!).

And the Texans may get a light push from the Colts, but they are going to win that division easily (Jacksonville, Tennessee, Minnesota and two tilts with Indianapolis still loom for the AFC's top seed to this point).

So let's not kid ourselves. Things are getting kind of set. So, who is really in this thing outside of those 10? Well, the Colts' head-to-head win over Miami on Sunday could prove to be a huge tiebreaker, and the Chargers (4-4) could still make a playoff run, despite their issues. I'll call those three teams the contenders for the final wild card. I don't see anyone else. The Bengals are just 2-5 within the conference and I don't see any of the three-win teams getting back in this thing.

In the NFC, I think that last spot comes from Seattle, Detroit, Dallas or Philadelphia. The Seahawks (5-4) must likely sweep their three home division games to get there -- and that loss to Detroit could be another huge tiebreaker -- but they are so tough at home and that defense and run game should travel well as the weather turns. Detroit's defense has been very good, the offense is finding its legs again and the wins over Seattle and Philly are big. The Lions face a tough schedule, and will have to win within their demanding division, but they are good enough to get back to the playoffs.

I'd like the Cowboys' chances more if linebacker Sean Lee wasn't out for the season and if they were more consistent mentally and physically, and didn't undermine themselves in the clutch with such regularity. But the Cowboys still have two games left against the Eagles and Redskins, and they get the Browns, Bengals and Saints still as well. And the much-maligned Eagles, if they beat the Saints on Monday night, can still control their own destiny as well, with five divisional games still left. They already hold a win over the Giants, and the Bengals, Bucs and Panthers are their only non-divisional games remaining.

As for the rest, the Vikings are in a spiral, Christian Ponder has been pretty awful since September, they play in the toughest division in football and Percy Harvin is getting dinged up. The second half could be quite cruel. I love the strides the Bucs have made, but that defense wilts late, Tampa is only 2-4 within the NFC and I think the upstarts fall short. The Cardinals may not win two more games; Mike Shanahan has already waved the white flag in Washington (a sentiment I totally

agree with, but one no coach ever makes in the first week of November for goodness sake. Unreal. Always drama in DC, even with them finally having a real quarterback).

So there you have it. Two spots remain, and by my calculations, three teams in play for it in the AFC and four in the NFC. Lots of other juggling for seeds, but 10 of these 12 playoff openings are as good as filled.

### **Shurmur's mistake likely seals fate**

Pat Shurmur, whose job security was already tenuous at best, may have dealt himself a crushing blow Sunday. His Browns played another spirited game and, after falling behind 14-0 quickly to the Ravens, dominated the second and third quarter, took a 15-14 lead and faced fourth-and-2 around their own 30 with just under four minutes to play.

The defense had suffocated the Ravens for much of the game, Joe Flacco looked awful, and they had bottled up Ray Rice after his torrid start in the first quarter. They had two timeouts. Yet Shurmur opted to go for it, and, rather than give it to bruising back Trent Richardson, who was giving the Ravens fits, he put it in the hands of rookie quarterback Brandon Weeden, who was not having a great day and who throws to receivers who generally drop the football. The play missed horribly, as you might expect, and the Ravens were already well within field goal range for potent rookie kicker Justin Tucker.

It made no sense in real time and makes no sense now.

Baltimore milked the clock, forced the Browns to use their timeouts, Tucker made the field goal and it was a two-possession game when the Browns got the ball back with about two minutes to go. Shurmur's defense was carrying the day, but he never put them in position to impact the end of the game, and he didn't put any pressure on Baltimore's feeble road offense to move the ball or try anything to get in range for Tucker.

In a game during which Cleveland often dominated field position, he ended up giving away that battle in the most crucial time. And, in what is always a personal game for Browns fans (Baltimore stole their team, and all), no doubt this loss will resonate with new owner Jimmy Haslam and new CEO Joe Banner.

### **Shanahan to hear it after Carolina loss**

The drafting of Robert Griffin III basically buys Mike Shanahan at least one more season, despite what will be another woeful win-loss record in this, the third year of his tenure there, but I would be pretty shocked if Jim Haslett is back there as defensive coordinator, and things are going to have to improve there in 2013.

It was beyond bizarre that Shanahan would make postgame comments about 2013 now being about player evaluation only nine games in (3-6 record or not), and he is only 5-15 at home since coming to Washington and 14-27 overall there. For all of the hope that RG3 engenders, Washington's defense needs significant repair and FedEx Field has to become a place teams fear (and it hasn't been more or less since the day it was built).

Shanahan must find a way to both exploit, and protect, his young quarterback, given his immense gifts but the limitations of his relatively slight frame. Also on Sunday, he was one of several coaches to have a fourth-down gamble go awry.

Washington had been 10 of 11 in fourth-down chances this season, largely thanks to Griffin, then went for it on a fourth-and-goal, failed, and watched as Cam Newton completed a bomb out of his own end zone a few plays later -- the Redskins' secondary fails majestically each week -- that keyed a 98-yard scoring drive that pretty much put the game away.

All in all, it was another brutal home Sunday afternoon for the veteran head coach, who now enters a bye week surely to be skewered for the better part of two weeks for his ill-advised comments following the damning loss.

### **Extra points**

- Most NFL coaches are given more than one season -- though not much more -- to show what they can do. With each passing week I doubt that Mike Mularkey will. The Jaguars have no discernible strength, quarterback Blaine Gabbert looks every bit like a coach (and general manager) killer and I can't imagine sweeping changes aren't coming for the Jags. They are one Cecil Shorts moment-of-brilliance away from being the league's only winless team. They've allowed 102 more points than they've scored, lost five in a row and have yet to register a home win for new owner Shahid Khan.
- The Titans might avoid sweeping changes -- ownership there is reluctant to eat contracts to make moves -- but I would expect coordinator changes to be very possible for 2013, if nothing else. And I also have a feeling Jake Locker's shoulder feels a heck of a lot better and he starts getting the bulk of practice reps and is back starting soon.
- The Raiders have been outscored 109-24 in the third quarter this season after getting blanked, 21-0, by Tampa in that quarter Sunday (which cost them the game). Something needs to change in that locker room at halftime.
- Watching the Bears block punts and make plays on special teams, I can't help but wonder if this is the year their special teams coach, Dave Toub, gets a head coaching gig? I expect he will have multiple interviews again this offseason.
- Teams seem to be squatting on some of the sideline routes Andy Dalton throws. He got away with a few bad passes early Sunday that could have easily been picked

off, then bounced back to have an excellent second half ... but it wasn't enough. All in all he took Marvin Lewis's chiding from this week in stride, though. What may not be so easy to take would be losing coordinator Jay Gruden to a head coaching job, which I expect to be the case (the Eagles are one possibility generating some buzz should Andy Reid's long ride there finally come to an end).

- Andrew Luck made some simply magical plays Sunday. His footwork, coolly sliding away from the pass rush, was superb. He made plays while falling down, nearly to his knees. He has a supreme chemistry already with veteran receiver Reggie Wayne. He has proven that the fourth quarter is not too big for him and he was made to play games in that dome, a dominant performer at home. And he owned the Dolphins on third down, going 12 of 16 for 184 yards and a touchdown on third down. He converted on third-and-12, third-and-14, third-and-9, third-and-20, third-and-10, third-and-11. Of the five third downs he did not convert three were very long range -- third-and-12, third-and-13, and third-and-25.

Not your average rookie performance as Luck broke the single-game rookie yardage mark one season after Cam Newton set it. With the 2-14 Colts from a year ago now firmly in the playoff hunt, you can't help but wonder if Luck ends up getting some MVP consideration, particularly if he gets better on the road and the Colts keep this run going.

# Broncos Report Card: Not always efficient, but good enough

Andrew Mason  
CBSSports.com  
November 5, 2012

After digging out from a 24-0 hole at San Diego in Week 6 and nearly overturning 20-point deficits against Atlanta and Houston in Weeks 2 and 3, the idea of being down three points early in the fourth quarter probably seemed pleasant to the Broncos.

All it took was one play to turn the game, which the Broncos found when QB Peyton Manning hit WR Eric Decker, who eluded Bengals CB Terence Newman, LB Rey Mauluga and S Chris Crocker, turning a 4-yard gain into a 30-yard catch-and-run. Two plays and a pass-interference penalty later, the Broncos were in the end zone, and they never trailed again; the Bengals' lead had lasted just 143 seconds.

The next step in the Broncos' evolution is being able to overcome lengthy stretches of sub-par play. Obviously, the Bengals and Chargers aren't on par with the Falcons, Texans and Patriots, but Denver's growing ability to shake off struggles will serve them well going forward.

Offense: B

Ho-hum, another three-touchdown day for Manning. Although he came nine yards short of extending his league-record streak of consecutive games with 300 yards, three touchdowns and a completion percentage of at least 70 percent, his metronomic consistency allowed the offense to account for at least 21 points for the eighth consecutive game -- three more times than they did during the entire regular season last year. The offensive line also kept Manning out of trouble; he was never sacked by a Bengals defense that came into the game leading the AFC. But Manning threw back-to-back third-quarter interceptions, and RBs Willis McGahee and Ronnie Hillman had little running room, combining for just 70 yards and 2.9 yards per carry. *Previous game's grade: A*

Defense: B

Cincinnati racked up the yardage, outgaining Denver 366 yards to 359, but the Broncos held them to field-goal attempts on four of six drives that advanced beyond the Denver 35-yard-line. The Broncos bent, allowing Jermaine Gresham and A.J. Green to combine for 207 yards on 13 receptions, but rarely broke -- and pressured Andy Dalton into five sacks and an errant throw that CB Champ Bailey intercepted. The Bengals were willing to throw at Bailey, who shadowed Green, and he gave up his first touchdown since last year and a 37-yard pass that was the longest gain against him this season. Few teams have a receiver the caliber of

Green, but it will be interesting to see if future foes decide to test Bailey more often than they did in the Broncos' first seven games this year. *Previous game's grade: A-*

Special teams: A-

PR/KR Trindon Holliday offers little middle ground. When things go wrong, the failure is complete, as with a fumble in Week 6 and a kickoff return Sunday, where he hesitated to go after a bouncing kickoff, leading Lance Ball to turn back and try to field it; the confusion resulted in a drive that began at the Denver 1-yard-line. But it's hard to criticize Holliday when he used his wind-aided 9.98-second speed for the 100-meter dash to its maximum effect, sprinting through a hole for a 105-yard kickoff return that was the longest in Broncos history. The only other issue? Matt Prater had four of six kickoff returned, allowing Cincinnati's Brandon Tate to average 35.3 yards per return. *Previous game's grade: B+*

Coaching: B

John Fox opted to take his team to Cincinnati on Friday to allow them to focus and acclimate to the early kickoff time. The early departures have worked more often than not; the Broncos are 4-3 when leaving two days early the last two years. Further, the Broncos were well-prepared and grounded; there was no overconfidence from their play of the six quarters leading up to the game, when they outscored the Chargers and Saints 69-14. *Previous game's grade: A*

# Behind Pagano appearance, Colts continue Hollywood-worthy season

Peter King  
Sports Illustrated  
November 5, 2012

Current events: This morning, Chuck Pagano checks into an Indianapolis hospital for a second round of leukemia treatment. Tomorrow, we vote. And for a long time -- weeks, months, years -- the New Jersey/New York/Connecticut region battered by Hurricane Sandy rebuilds and heals.

We start with the story in Indianapolis that seems too surreal -- and good, for now -- to be true. Six weeks ago, after the Colts lost to Jacksonville to fall to 1-2, coach Chuck Pagano was diagnosed with leukemia. On Sunday, before the Colts faced Miami in what had suddenly become a game with playoff implications, Pagano showed up in front of the team for the first time since his diagnosis. He spoke to the team before the game, and then after the 23-20 win, and if you haven't seen the video of his postgame speech, I'd advise getting a couple of tissues before you do.

Appearing tired and slightly thinner than when the team last saw him, Pagano spoke, his voice quivering at times. "I've got circumstances. You guys understand it, I understand it," Pagano said. "It's already beat. It's already beat. My vision is that I'm living to see two more daughters get married, dance at their weddings and then lift the Lombardi Trophy several times."

And then the interim coach and friend of Pagano, Bruce Arians, had all the players put their hands in the middle, enveloping Pagano. Kids on third-grade soccer teams do the thing Arians called for next.

"Chuck on three!" Arians shouted. "One-two-three CHUCK!!!!!"

Somebody has to make a T-shirt of that. It's the coolest saying in sports right now.

"Coach Pagano's a inspiration," Andrew Luck told me after the game. "When I found out this morning he'd be here, I was giddy. Excited. Jacked to see him in the flesh. We all were. I love him. We all do."

The Colts often this year have looked like colts, just learning how to gallop. Chicago pasted them. The Jets, who don't rout anyone, embarrassed them. But since Pagano got sick, the Colts, somehow, are 4-1. Margin of victory in those four wins: three, four, six and three points. They find a way. I'll write more about Luck's record-setting day -- with an NFL-rookie-record 433 passing yards -- and how the Colts are winning tomorrow. It's Hollywood Day today.

"The whole story's for Spielberg," Arians, sounding a little misty himself, told me Sunday night. "I can't explain it. No one can. I just know this: I tell Chuck, 'You coach your ass off from the couch, and we'll handle the rest. Don't worry. The job's gonna get done.' "

The story doesn't have a happy ending. Yet. Not for the Colts, and not for Pagano. "This next round of treatment's going to be brutal," Arians said. "He could be down and out for a while. But he felt good today, and so he wanted to come in and see the guys. It helped, big time. It's good for him, good for us."

Then Arians gave me a surprise.

"The goal is to get Chuck on the field December 30th," Arians said. "I don't know if it can happen, but that's the goal."

Final home game of the year. Houston at Indianapolis. The new power of the AFC South coming to town -- maybe with a playoff spot on the line for the little-engine-that-could Colts.

Memo to my bosses at *SI* and NBC: Whatever I'm doing Dec. 30, make sure I can do it from Lucas Oil Stadium.

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### **The Sean Payton Saga**

On Sunday, ESPN's Adam Schefter reported that the contract extension Sean Payton purportedly agreed to in 2011 never was approved by the league office, and Payton will become a free agent at the end of this season, when his year-long league suspension for involvement in the Saints bounty scandal expires. On FOX, Jay Glazer, who is close to Payton, quoted Payton as saying he "absolutely plans" to stay with the Saints, and the Saints, angry that the story leaked in the first place, insisted Payton was going nowhere other than on their coaching payroll in 2013 and beyond.

But the fact that the story got out tells me a few things. It's no lock that Payton will stay a Saint; if it were, he'd have agreed to a rewritten deal by now. Payton, despite his charred reputation from being the only coach in league history to be suspended for a year, would be sought after in the offseason if he chose to enter the market, with possible head-coaching vacancies in Dallas and Philadelphia looming largest.

And if he does leave, owner Tom Benson will likely feel betrayed -- unless Payton convinces him for family reasons he is best off in Dallas, where his family has relocated. Benson has been hugely supportive of Payton this offseason, leasing him an office and making sure he's tethered to the organization so he can make a smooth transition back to the team once his suspension is up.

Many of the possible coaching openings would be good fits for Payton. I doubt sincerely the Chargers could compete financially in Payton's \$8-million-a-year league. I doubt sincerely Payton and the conservative Clark Hunt, Kansas City's owner, would be a good match. Ditto Payton and Carolina's owner Jerry Richardson. He has no connection with new Cleveland owner Jimmy Haslam, though Haslam could be very aggressive if he decides to go all-in to try to get him.

That leaves New Orleans, Dallas and Philadelphia. If Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie fires Andy Reid at the end of the season, Payton, who coached quarterbacks in Philly in 1997 and '98, would be intriguing to him, and I believe Lurie would try hard to get him. It's a Lurie kind of move, trying to head off Dallas at the pass and take the kind of jump with a playoff-ready team that would give them a chance to break out of their recent malaise.

Schefter reported the league quashed the contract submitted by the Saints last year because it contained a clause that said if GM Mickey Loomis left the team, Payton could be free to leave too, even if his contract still had time on it. That'd be a bad precedent for the league, a coach having the right to void his deal if some member of the front office were no longer in the house.

Would Payton be willing to trade that clause for money? Would Payton really consider abandoning Drew Brees with four years left on the great Brees' new contract when the coach returns in 2013? Could the Saints' current situation -- a troubled defense with a bloated future salary cap -- have a major impact on what Payton does? Will the Saints, battered and bruised by the mass suspensions and awful defensive performance through the first half of the season, feel pressured to do a new deal with Payton soon, with its rabid fan base in full panic mode at the thought Payton might leave? Does Payton feel it's time for him to be near his children every day, instead of being a commuter dad? I'd have liked to ask Payton or his agent, Don Yee, those questions on Sunday, but neither returned my requests for comment.

I do know this: From the time he was suspended last spring, Payton was not afraid of his job prospects. I believe he knew if Benson decided to part ways with him because of the bounty stain, which I don't think Benson wants to do at all, he'd be well-positioned to get a lucrative gig somewhere else.

Payton's a tremendous coach. He's imaginative, and he's a quarterback guru, and he can get players to follow what he says because they know what he says works. In this day and age, modern owners might not like the baggage of the suspension history, but Payton's so good at what he does that they'd deal with it. Happily, for many of them.

Now for the Cowboys. If you saw Jerry Jones' interview with Bob Costas Sunday night on NBC, you saw the Dallas owner give what I'd call a tepid endorsement of his current coach, Jason Garrett. I know Jones really likes Garrett, but the owner also has to be frustrated with the fact that Garrett's just 16-16 in his short career as coach, and 3-5 this season following a soft offensive performance in a 19-13 loss

at Atlanta Sunday night. Awful clock management likely cost the Cowboys a good shot at a win at Baltimore three weeks ago, and Tony Romo and his receivers sometimes look as though they're all college freshmen going through orientation together. Jones liked Payton when Payton was on the Dallas staff coaching quarterbacks and the passing game from 2003 to '05, and they're similar people. They work hard and play hard.

Case in point, which you may remember from the 2010 Scouting Combine, from a Monday Morning Quarterback item I wrote then:

*On Friday night, the Saints' staff at the Combine gathered in a private room at St. Elmo Steakhouse, the 108-year-old Indy foodie landmark, for a final celebratory nod to the Super Bowl won over the Colts. This is a group that likes its wine, and likes to have fun. At the restaurant, word passed that Dallas owner Jerry Jones would have his Dallas group in this exact room Saturday night for a team dinner. Jones, one of the waiters told the Saints' group, even phoned ahead to make sure a magnum of a wine he loved, Caymus Special Selection cabernet sauvignon, was ready to be served at dinner.*

*Sean Payton told the waiter he'd like to have that wine, too. The waiter told him: Sorry, sir. We've got only one bottle of it left, and it's reserved for Mr. Jones.*

*Payton said he'd like to have the bottle nonetheless. I assume there was much angst on the part of the wait staff at that point. My God! Who do we piss off? One of the most powerful owners in the NFL, or the coach who's the toast of the NFL, the coach who just won the Super Bowl?*

*Here came the bottle of Caymus Special Selection, and the Saints' party drained it.*

*But drinking Jones' wine wasn't enough. Payton gave the waiter some instructions, took out his pen ... and, well, the Cowboys party found at the middle of their table the next evening an empty magnum of Caymus Special Selection cabernet sauvignon, with these words hand-written on the fancy label:*

*WHO DAT!  
World Champions XLIV  
Sean Payton*

*That's the kind of thing Jones will get a big laugh out of. And remember.*

I don't know how this story ends. But with the Cowboys on the ropes, and the specter of Lurie facing a nutty fan base tired of the same old story, and with the Saints tired of being the NFL's punching bag, Payton could turn the biggest nightmare of his life into the biggest payday. Stay tuned.

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## **What the Bears are doing is extraordinary.**

Charles Tillman forced the 33rd, 34th, 35th and 36th fumbles of his illustrious 10-year NFL career Sunday in Nashville, where the Bears humbled the Titans 51-20. (It wasn't that close.) At 31, if this is possible for a cornerback, Tillman is an ascending player.

Where I watch the games on Sundays, in the NBC viewing room, I sit next to Tony Dungy, who once had Bears head coach Lovie Smith and defensive coordinator Rod Marinelli with him for five seasons on his Buccaneers coaching staff. "We used to have a turnover period every day in practice," Dungy said. The Bears do the same thing now, which is a very good reason why they forced six fumbles Sunday, intercepted one pass (Brian Urlacher returned it for a touchdown) and blocked a punt for a touchdown. The five takeaways pushed the season total through eight games to a league-best 28. Chicago is plus-16 through eight games, a vital reason they're 7-1 and the defensive scourge of pro football right now.

It was intriguing to listen to Tillman afterward discussing the turnover philosophy that runs through the defense, one that SI detailed in January. "This week," he said, "our whole motto was, 'Let's start fast. Defense, let's force a turnover on the first play of the game.' "

And he did, punching the ball out from wideout Kenny Britt's grasp -- on the first Tennessee offensive play. Tillman is expert at punching the ball when a ballcarrier seems to have it securely held. He did it later in the game with running back Chris Johnson and tight ends Craig Stevens and Jared Cook. The Bears recovered three of the fumbles, turning two into touchdowns. "I guess I have gotten good over the years at punching," Tillman said. "And if I don't get the punch or the forced fumble, the majority of the time I get the tackle."

Urlacher told Tillman he wanted to score a touchdown Sunday. (Why not? Seemingly everyone else on defense has this crazy season.) Tillman said he told Urlacher, "Call it, man. The tongue has the power of life and death. Call it, say it, speak it, believe it. He did, and he got in the end zone."

Then Tillman channeled his inner Iverson. "Our whole motto on defense is 'score,' " he said. "We practice it every single day. Practice."

He sounded like Allen Iverson just then, but no one in the media crowd got the message.

"You like that reference?" he said. "You're supposed to laugh!"

I have a feeling the Bears laughed most of the flight home to Chicago.

## **A day in the life of the Steelers**

"We're treating it just like a home game," Steelers coach Mike Tomlin said during the week, once it became apparent that Hurricane Sandy wreaked havoc with the power grid in New Jersey, and therefore the Steelers couldn't be guaranteed that their Jersey City hotel would have power when they arrived on Saturday.

Tomlin didn't make a big deal of it, which was smart. "A lot more people have a lot more adversity than what we had on this trip," Tomlin said. Not only was it not a particularly difficult hardship, it would have sounded absurd to complain about logistics when thousands of people had homes and property destroyed.

Here, then, was the Steeler Sunday schedule:

7 a.m.: Players wake up at Omni William Penn Hotel, downtown Pittsburgh, eat, and drive individually to the airport, 25 minutes away.

9:28 a.m.: Take off from Greater Pittsburgh International Airport.

10:21 a.m.: After a 53-minute flight, land at Newark (N.J.) International Airport.

10:33 a.m.: Team boards buses for ride to Newark Airport Marriott

10:55 a.m.: Pregame meal begins.

11:30 a.m.: Players lay on couches and sit on chairs, trying to rest before leaving for the stadium.

12:30 p.m.: Team boards buses for nine-mile trip to MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J.

12:55 p.m.: Arrival at stadium.

4:26 p.m.: Gametime.

7:29 p.m.: Game ends. Steelers 24, Giants 20.

8:35 p.m.: Buses leave MetLife Stadium for nine-mile trip to Newark Airport.

9:29 p.m.: Takeoff from Newark International Airport.

10:18 p.m.: After a 49-minute flight, land at Greater Pittsburgh International Airport.

Time from morning takeoff in Pittsburgh to nighttime landing back in Pittsburgh: 12 hours, 50 minutes.

"It was a challenge for us, because it was different," one of the stars of the game, Mike Wallace, told me afterward. "It just seems like a long day. Normally, you have

a late game, and you get to sleep a little more and you're more rested for the game. When we got to the hotel, we really were just laying around on the floor or wherever we could find. But it all worked out."

It's a mark of how meaningless the odd travel day was that the Steelers played their best game of the year. The artistic part of the game might have been better in wins over the Jets and Washington, but this was against the Super Bowl champs, on the road. The Steelers outscored the Giants 14-0 in the fourth quarter and throttled Eli Manning (10 of 24, 125 yards, no touchdowns, one interception) all day.

It had to be a sweet day for Ben Roethlisberger winning the head-to-head with Manning, who was drafted higher than him in the 2004 draft. Roethlisberger played significantly better (21 of 30, 216 yards, two touchdowns and an interception). His well-timed throw to Wallace, who finished it with a 51-yard touchdown, brought the Steelers within 20-17, and then Roethlisberger led a 51-yard drive that ended in an Isaac Redman touchdown run to win it.

"I love this team," said Wallace. "We're fighters. This win says we're rolling now."

Rolling, yes. Almost detoured by officials' calls, a big yes. A Keenan Lewis interference call on Victor Cruz gave the Giants 41 free yards when Lewis hardly brushed Cruz. The 70-yard "fumble" return by Michael Boley that gave the Giants a 14-7 lead should have been ruled an incomplete pass out of Roethlisberger's hands -- and the Giants surely should have been called for an illegal clip downfield on the Boley return. For a while, it looked like everything would come up Giants, to salve the wounds of a wounded region for three hours. But in the end, the better team, on this day, at least, won.

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### **Let's not forget the game Alex Smith played in Arizona**

It's always easy to dump on Alex Smith. Is there a young quarterback in NFL history who, in the first 16 games he played as a pro, lost by 39, 35, 38, 41 and 31 points; a quarterback who'd been given up for dead time after time in his star-crossed career; a player who -- after leading his team to the conference title game -- watched his team flirt with another quarterback to take his place, and, in response, took a forlorn free agent trip to the last place he ever wanted to be?

Smith didn't play Sunday; the 49ers had their bye this weekend. But I didn't want the week to get away from us without extolling his virtues after his performance last Monday. His numbers were alarmingly good: 18 of 19 for 232 yards, with three touchdowns and no interceptions -- and the one incomplection was a clear drop by Delanie Walker.

There was something else notable about his game: Not one of his 19 throws (20, actually, if you count one that was negated by penalty) was off-target. His

accuracy, in a word, was stunning. I watched the game again on NFL Game Rewind, focusing on each of the 20 throws, and watching each one several times, running it back and forth. Though he threw short much of the night, he did have completions that traveled 10, 11, 15, 20 and 22 yards past the line of scrimmage. Here's how I graded the 20 throws:

A (perfectly accurate, hitting his receiver in stride): 15 throws

B (accurate, but receiver reached slightly away from body): 3

C (passable, catchable throw; if missed, would have been a drop): 2

D (poor throw that would have been a great catch): 0

F (significantly off target): 0

Smith's two Cs came on his eighth and ninth passes of the game, early in the second quarter. The first was a sliding-on-his-knees catch by wideout Kyle Williams on a low throw that led him well. The second: a crossing route dropped by Walker - slightly behind him, but Walker erred because he tried to run with it before concentrating on securing it. The final 11 passes (10 As and a B) were all thrown the way quarterbacks are taught: leading the receiver, throwing so the receiver can make significant yards after the catch.

"It's good you noticed that," Smith told me. "Putting the ball in the right spot, in the right time, when he's expecting it, is a crucial part of the passing game, I think. So many guys talk about yards after the catch, and I've always believed the quarterback has a huge responsibility there -- it's not just the receiver. A quarterback has to put it on the receiver and give his guys the opportunity to make plays downfield. Joe Montana was great at that. I have a lot of respect for Tom Brady with that now. Watch how he gets the ball to [Wes] Welker in stride, so he can run after the catch."

It stands to reason, then, that Smith would have a good yards per attempt average. Just how good, I didn't know until I looked. I interrupt this note to bring you ...

## **Stat of the Week**

### **Comparing the quarterbacks**

Player	Yds/Att.	Comp
<b><u>P. Manning, Denver</u></b>	8.23	69.5
Freeman, Tampa Bay	8.09	55.7
Newton, Carolina	8.09	57.0
Ryan, Atlanta	7.96	68.9
Smith, San Francisco	7.94	69.4
Schaub, Houston	7.70	63.9

E. Manning, NY Giants	7.63	61.0
Griffin, Washington	7.61	65.6
Brady, New England	7.53	65.3
Romo, Dallas	7.53	66.4
Dalton, Cincinnati	7.47	63.9
Roethlisberger, Pittsburgh	7.39	67.1
Brees, New Orleans	7.33	59.7
Rodgers, Green Bay	7.29	67.0
Flacco, Baltimore	7.21	59.8

**Rating the best quarterbacks in football in yards per attempt and accuracy through nine weeks (not including Eagles-Saints tonight) shows Smith, at the NFL's midpoint, is second in completion percentage and fifth in yards per attempt, two key indicators for quarterback play. Guess who's first in each category? Peyton Manning.**

Two other points to make from watching the 49ers passing game:

Randy Moss is a significant presence in the offense, despite have 13 catches in eight games. Perfect example: Late in the first half, Moss took two defenders deep on a corner route -- a coverage error by the Cards -- and left Mario Manningham alone to catch an easy seven-yard out route in stride. Smith threw a nine-yard TD pass to Michael Crabtree on the next snap.

I counted three times in the game that Moss almost magnetically took coverage away from sideline throws and gave 49ers receivers big openings. "You definitely have a point there," Smith said. "On that play to Mario, I'm reading from the top down there -- Randy on the corner route, where he draws coverage, and then down to Mario, who's open. Since the beginning of the season, we've seen DBs [defensive backs] give Randy respect, and he gets safety help. The last few weeks, he and Vernon Davis, as well, have forced teams to concentrate on taking the big play away. So the money to be made in our offense is underneath."

Hard to pass judgment on this just from watching every play in the passing game one week, but I didn't see receivers show any sign of ego or anger for not getting the ball when open. You know how you see, on iso-camera replays, receivers sometimes waving for the ball, or jumping up and down when they don't get it, or showing some emotion when they think the ball should have come to them? None of that here. Again, don't draw any conclusions based on one rout of the Cardinals.

"I'm telling you, we have a lot of selfless guys, and a great example is Randy," said Smith. "Everyone knows he's a first-ballot Hall of Famer, but he has a role here. He blocks in the run game. He does what he's told to do. He's set the tone for our receivers."

I asked Smith how often Moss has come back to the huddle saying he had an edge on a corner, or how often in an offensive meeting he talked about how some route

would be perfect for him against a certain coverage. "Not a single time," said Smith. "Never once. Never says, 'I saw this out there -- get it to me.' Nothing like that. The honest truth is he's taken so much pride in things that no one would notice, like the run game, that the other guys have no choice but to follow his lead."

There's a lot to like about the Niners. They've allowed six points or fewer in four of their last five games. The offense knows what it is -- a move-the-chains deal with a smart quarterback who, most importantly, knows who he is. Smith had a crummy game against the Giants and contributed to San Francisco's downfall in a major way that afternoon. But I really like what I've seen out of him this year, mostly. He's as accurate an intermediate passer as I've seen this season. I think he's going to be asset, not a question mark, as the 49ers make a Super Bowl push.

## **The Deep End**

Each week, thanks to play-by-play game dissection by ProFootballFocus.com, I'll look at one important matchup or individual performance metric from one of the Sunday games.

This week it's Andrew Luck, who completed 30 of 48 passes for 433 yards (151 yards after the catch), two touchdowns and no interceptions, good for a 105.6 rating. The numbers don't tell the whole story, but in this case they come pretty close. A number of things that make this performance one to remember:

**Playing under pressure.** What the numbers do miss is the fact that Luck ended the day with a new center and right tackle, missing his most experienced linemen, Samson Satele and Winston Justice, forced out with injuries.

Though he was only sacked once, Luck was hit five times and hurried on many others. Some of his best plays came in the face of pressure as he either evaded it and made a great throw (in the first quarter, stepping away from Olivier Vernon and completing a pinpoint pass to Reggie Wayne on an out) or scrambled and threw on the move, as he did to pick up the first down with 40 seconds left in the second quarter. Overall, under pressure, Luck was 9 of 14 for 165 yards and a touchdown. Rating: 128.6. Outstanding.

**Playing without much of a running game.** Although the stats show 26 rushing attempts for 97 yards, the first-half numbers of 11 attempts for 22 yards are much more indicative.

**Third-down passing.** Miami entered the game best in the NFL in third-down efficiency on defense. The Dolphins did a good job of getting the Colts into third down (often 3rd-and-long) but somehow Luck seemed to have a knack for knowing exactly where to go with the ball. His numbers were remarkable. On third down he completed 13 of 17 for 204 yards and a touchdown for a rating of 135.4 and converted all but one of these into a first down. He converted on 3rd-and-11, -12, -14, -16 and -20.

**Yards in the air.** One of the trends recently has been for quarterbacks (particularly novices) to throw short passes and let the receiver do the work. That hasn't been the case with Luck. He threw a few of those (four), but only 35 percent of Luck's 433 yards came after the catch against an NFL average of 45 percent. He also had another 72 yards in the air and a touchdown lost due to dropped balls.

**In summary.** To put this performance in the category of "rookie" record only would be wrong. It was so much more than that because without much semblance of a running game Luck took a good defense apart, particularly on third down. In short, there are not many quarterbacks in the NFL who could have won this game for the Colts.

## **Fine Fifteen**

1. Houston (7-1). The 14-2 Showdown next Sunday night at Soldier Field: Twin 7-1 teams, the Texans and Bears.

2. Atlanta (8-0). Falcs are 4-0 at home, 4-0 on the road, 4-0 against the NFC, 4-0 against the AFC, 4-0 in games decided by six points or fewer, 4-0 in games decided by a touchdown or more, 4-0 when Matt Ryan's completion percentage is in the 60s, 4-0 when his completion rate is in the 70s.

3. Chicago (7-1). The two most impressive individual games in the league this year: 1. Giants 26, Niners 3 ... 2. Bears 51, Titans 20. How about this: Chicago ran for 160. Jay Cutler threw three touchdown passes. Chicago forced six fumbles. Brian Urlacher returned an interception for a touchdown. Chicago's a fearsome-looking team right now.

4. San Francisco (6-2). Bye week note: I had to do a double-take when I saw Alex Smith, Patrick Willis and Jim Harbaugh in that Visa commercial. Not so much about Smith and Willis; the commercial got shot at Candlestick in the day off between the final preseason game and the start of prep week for the first game of the year. But Harbaugh ... didn't know he had the levity in him.

Then I come to find out Harbaugh, as part of something called the Visa NFL Fan Offers, is going to allow one fan the chance to sit in on a pregame speech to the team. Those, I'm told, can get rather fiery. I always viewed Harbaugh as a clannish, insulated coach who would want his locker room a sanctum. "Coach is an outside-the-box guy, full of surprises," Smith told me. For me, this is one.

5. Pittsburgh (5-3). In the last month the Steelers are 4-1, including wins over every team in the AFC East save Dallas. I was down on this team after its losses to the Raiders and Titans -- well, duh! -- but Pittsburgh's a dangerous team on both sides of the ball.

6. New York Giants (6-3). Tough loss for a hurting region, and Eli Manning put it best after the game when he said the Giants haven't been playing well on offense, and it finally caught up to them.

7. Green Bay (6-3). The Packers need a bye like America needs to be rid of political ads. Green Bay needs to get Charles Woodson, Jordy Nelson, Jermichael Finley and about 16 other guys healthy. Heal, men. Lions in Detroit in 13 days, Giants in Jersey in 20.

8. New England (5-3). The problem with setting the bar where Tom Brady has set it is the shades of greatness. Brady is on pace for 32 touchdowns, six interceptions, 4,818 passing yards, 65.3 percent completions and a 100.6 rating. Every one of those five statistical categories but the interceptions (he had 12 last year) would be worse than last year. Incredible.

### **9. Denver (5-3). Denver 100, Foes 37 in the last two-and-a-half games.**

10. Baltimore (6-2). Another unimpressive day -- for 50 minutes -- from quarterback Joe Flacco, who will be needed by Baltimore if it hopes to win big in January. Now: Raiders next week, then what that football-mad corridor between western Pennsylvania and the eastern shore of Maryland has been waiting for -- two Baltimore-Pittsburgh games in a 15-day span.

11. Seattle (5-4). Russell Wilson at home: 4-0, nine touchdowns, no interceptions.

12. Indianapolis (5-3). Don't try to explain. Just sit back and enjoy the story of the year through nine weeks. Chuck on three! One-two-three CHUCK!!!!!!!

13. Miami (4-4). No .500 team with eight games left is out of it when the schedule includes Tennessee, Buffalo twice and Jacksonville, particularly in this year's AFC.

14. Tampa Bay (4-4). Doug Martin is making a horse race out of the Offensive Rookie of the Year competition. He has 386 rushing yards in the last two games, at 7.1 yards per rush. He's an incredible inside- and outside-the-tackles back.

15. Detroit (4-4). Weirdest stat of the year (reiterated on the Red Zone Channel Sunday): Calvin Johnson hasn't caught a touchdown pass from Matthew Stafford this season, through eight games. His one TD catch was from Shaun Hill. Not that Stafford hasn't hit Megatron in the hands a couple of times.

## **The Award Section**

### ***Offensive Players of the Week***

Doug Martin, RB, Tampa Bay. The greatest day a Buccaneers running back has ever had -- 25 carries, 251 yards, four touchdowns -- carried the red-hot Bucs over the

Raiders in Oakland. Martin, who is from northern California, scored all four touchdowns in the second half.

Andrew Luck, QB, Indianapolis. Not just the numbers (30 of 48, 433 yards, two touchdowns, no interceptions), but time after time, play after play in the 23-20 win over Miami, you had to wonder how a rookie quarterback could be so composed, so nonplussed in the face of a heavy rush.

### ***Defensive Players of the Week***

Charles Tillman, CB, Chicago. In the 51-20 rout of the Titans in Nashville, Tillman had the kind of day his turnover-happy coach, Lovie Smith, and defensive coordinator, Rod Marinelli, live for: nine tackles and four forced fumbles. Chicago recovered three of the fumbles and turned two into touchdowns.

Terence Newman, CB, Cincinnati. He hit the lottery against Peyton Manning Sunday at Paul Brown Stadium. Imagine intercepting Peyton Manning on consecutive throws, in the process turning what appeared to be a Denver rout into a close game late. "Terence is an old savvy veteran," Manning said on CBS afterward. But, as Manning noted, "[Wide receiver Eric] Decker and I kind of got him back on that last one," connecting on a touchdown pass with Newman in coverage. But Newman's two picks got the Bengals back in a game they weren't going to be in without him.

### ***Special Teams Players of the Week***

Olivier Vernon, DL, Miami. Miami 17, Indy 10, late second quarter. Adam Vinatieri lines up for a 54-yard field goal attempt. Vernon, a rookie third-round defensive end from The U, leapt over the offensive line -- an incredibly athletic play -- and blocked the field goal try straight up in the air.

Sherrick McManis, CB, and Nick Roach, LB, Chicago. Roach and McManis combined to make a great play, a touchdown-producing play to start the Bears' rout at Tennessee. As the two men on the far right of the Bears punt-rush team, Roach engaged the Titans left tackle while McManis sprinted around him and leapt in the air to block the Titans punt. Corey Wootton recovered and took it into the end zone for the first score of Chicago's 51-20 win. This was a notable play, I thought, because it doesn't happen without the teamwork of the two men. If Roach doesn't take the tackle out of the play, McManis would have gotten knocked off his path to the block. And McManis made a terrific block, enabling the touchdown.

Phil Dawson, K, Cleveland. Twenty-three straight field goals, 21 of them this year, and his consecutive kicks of 32, 28, 29, 33 and 41 in a 32-minute span between the second and fourth quarters gave the Browns a 15-14 lead late against Baltimore. Dawson's an unsung player, in part because so often his kicks are in losing causes. But a kick's a kick, and he did his part Sunday against a division rival that owns the Browns.

### ***Dr. Z Unsung Man in the Trenches of the Week***

*The award for the offensive lineman who was the biggest factor for his team in the weekend's games, named for my friend Paul Zimmerman, the longtime SI football writer struggling in New Jersey to recover from three strokes suffered in November 2008. Zim, a former collegiate offensive lineman himself, loved watching offensive line play.*

**Kyle Rudolph, TE, Minnesota.** Adrian Peterson got great support from center John Sullivan in his 182-yard rushing day, but I thought the unsung Rudolph helped get Peterson's day off to a superb start on his 74-yard run on the first drive of the day. Rudolph, matched against 323-pound defensive end Red Bryant on the right side of the Vikings line, walled off Bryant as Peterson ran around right end and upfield. On Peterson's subsequent touchdown run, Rudolph neutralized a quicker defensive end, Chris Clemons. Rudolph's not the best blocking tight end in football, but he's a willing one, and on Sunday performed like a sixth offensive lineman when Peterson needed it.

### ***Coach of the Week***

Greg Schiano, head coach, Tampa Bay. At 1-3 in the first quarter of the season, and then having Aqib Talib, his best cover corner, suspended on the eve of the Bucs' fifth game, Schiano faced the prospect of an embarrassing first season as he tried to transform a soft team into a competitive one. But in the next four weeks, Schiano, with an assist from GM Mark Dominik, continued to remake the team, dumping Talib and a seventh-round pick on New England for a fourth-rounder in 2013 and winning three of four games.

The 42-32 victory in Oakland continued to show that Schiano's way on offense can work. He's determined to be able to run the ball for big chunks in a league where offense seems to be increasingly measured by how gaudy their passing numbers can be. After half a season, Schiano has made his mark in a way the Bucs could have only dreamed of when they made him their surprising hire to replace Raheem Morris last winter.

### ***Goat of the Week***

Carson Palmer, QB, Oakland. Hue Jackson traded for Palmer 55 weeks ago -- but not to do what he did late in the fourth quarter Sunday against Tampa Bay. With the Raiders coming back to within 35-32 and the crowd in the Black Hole going nuts, Palmer lofted up a duck to no one in particular that first-year Buc safety Ahmad Black picked off to ice the game. Can't do that, Carson.

### ***Quote of the Week I***

"It looks like we've been bombed."

*-- New Jersey governor Chris Christie, on a Saturday tour of Bay Head, N.J., a shore enclave -- Giants guard Chris Snee has a beach home there -- that suffered massive damage from Hurricane Sandy.*

Christie could have been talking about many different areas between Long Island and the Jersey shore.

### **Quote of the Week II**

**"You're givin' 'em the game!!!!!"**

**-- Cincinnati quarterback Andy Dalton, to referee Scott Green, captured by a field mic, after a long fourth-quarter completion was negated by a holding penalty on center Jeff Faine, with Denver up 24-20 over the Bengals.**

### **Quote of the Week III**

"Well, I think so."

*-- Dallas owner Jerry Jones, asked by Bob Costas on Football Night in America on NBC last night if Jerry Jones the owner would have fired Jerry Jones the general manager by now.*

### **Quote of the Week IV**

"This isn't tennis or golf or even basketball, where three great players, together, can win a championship. This is the ultimate, ultimate team sport, with 22 guys on the field at once, where you need all three phases of the game working for you to win big. For people to say my career's been diminished because I haven't won a playoff game, I say bulls\*\*t! I'm a frickin' tight end, not the quarterback. My career will mean nothing less if I'm never on a team that wins a playoff game."

*-- Atlanta tight end Tony Gonzalez, in my Sports Illustrated story on Gonzalez this week, on his frustration with the perception that his career won't mean as much if he doesn't win a playoff game. Gonzalez, 36, has never won one, and he says he will very likely retire at the end of the year, regardless what happens with Atlanta in the postseason.*

### **Andrew Luck Factoid of the Week That May Interest Only Me I**

**Luck and Peyton Manning have a little connection in football history, which you probably can understand. They also have this connection: After eight games, Luck and Manning have each passed for 2,404 yards.**

### **Andrew Luck Factoid of the Week That May Interest Only Me II**

Precocious Rookie Quarterback Note of the Week: In Indianapolis Sunday, Luck and Ryan Tannehill dropped back to pass 89 times and threw no interceptions.

## **Factoid of the Week That May Interest Only Me**

Heath Shuler has retired from two incredible careers, and he's only 40.

After Washington drafted him in the first round in 1994 as a quarterback, he lasted four mostly failed seasons in football before retiring in 1998. Back home in his native North Carolina, he ran for Congress in 2006 and won election as a moderate Democrat in the state's 11th Congressional District. He was re-elected in 2008 and 2010, and earlier this year decided to retire at the end of his third two-year term in January.

In a statement announcing his refusal to run again, Shuler said: "I have always said family comes first, and I never intended to be a career politician. I am ready to refocus my priorities and spend more time at home with my wife, Nikol, and two young children." The Shulers have a daughter, Island Shuler, and a son, Navy Shuler.

Hmmm. Four years in the NFL. Six years in Congress. The next career should be eight years. But what?

## **Mr. Starwood Preferred Member Travel Note of the Week**

Had some business in Baltimore early Wednesday morning. Left BWI Airport at 6:55 a.m., drove through light traffic back to Manhattan, and got through the Lincoln Tunnel at 10 a.m. sharp. It is 2.4 miles to my apartment on the East Side of Manhattan. I got there at 11:25. Which means:

I drove the first 193 miles in 185 minutes.

I drove the last 2.4 miles in 85 minutes.

There was a lot of traffic in Manhattan Wednesday, as you're well aware, because of the mass-transit shutdown because of Sandy, and the snarl in midtown because of a collapsed crane on a skyscraper. But as I listened to the radio with the horror stories from around New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, and as I sat for four and five minutes at a time, I couldn't have my usual emotion -- spittin' anger -- at the traffic.

## **Tweet of the Week I**

"The fix is in."

-- @JamesFarrior, the former Steeler linebacker, after ref Bill Leavy, on replay, confirmed a Giants touchdown that will live in infamy for the Steelers.

## **Tweet of the Week II**

"I cannot express how impressed I am with Luck. This guy is the real deal. Clearly he has been groomed well to play ball his whole life."

-- *@ryandiem, who retired as a Colts guard in March -- and sounded at the time of this tweet Sunday afternoon as though he wishes he would have played a season or two longer.*

## **Tweet of the Week III**

"I'm surprised the presidential candidates haven't promised a couple of high NFL draft picks to the Cleveland Browns."

-- *@nprscottsimon, the weekend host on National Public Radio, with a nod to the intensity of the presidential race in Ohio.*

## **Tweet of the Week IV**

"Now flipped over to LSU/ALA & this is a great game... Can't go to sleep even tho I have a 3:40am wake up call! #whyilovefb #fb"

-- *@kurt13warner, at 11:07 p.m. Eastern Time Saturday, after LSU scored to take a fourth-quarter lead over Alabama. Warner had to get up early Sunday because of his NFL Network pregame show in Los Angeles.*

## **Tweet of the Week V**

"Part # 1: LOYALTY: loy•al•ty: noun, plural loy•al•ties: The state or quality of being loyal; faithfulness to commitments or obligations.

"Part # 2: There are 17 teams with the same record or worse than us. Thanks for being loyal fans..... We'll get it right"

-- *@JasonBabin93, the Philadelphia defensive end, angry at what he said were vile comments from fans at Lincoln Financial Field last week during the Eagles' third straight loss.*

## **Ten Things I Think I Think**

Because this has been a different week where I live, it's a different time for the Ten Things, with the feelings of some Giants fans who went to the game and some who couldn't even think of going Sunday.

**1.** This is the voice of Giants fan Benji Raisman: "My apartment in Far Rockaway is on the water, evacuated the second last week's Giants game was over. I still cannot return. I work for a company that is involved with senior care facilities, and I've

been sleeping in my office to monitor the radio 24/7. I sleep on chairs when backup can come for an hour here and there. I have not showered in days. I am going to miss my first Giants game this week. Our office cable is down, and health of our residents comes before any entertainment. I am constantly getting to a state of near-depression. That may be a harsh word, but the feeling is that. I am dealing with it by reminding myself how lucky I am to have made it out of harms way when countless families and lives will never be the same."

**2.** This is the voice of Giants fan Brendan Murphy: "My home in Rockaway Beach is destroyed. Friday, we were emptying houses of people's entire lives and putting it on the curb as garbage for collection. There's anger, laughter, desperation and hope. I don't see season-ticket holders leaving Rockaway peninsula to go to the Giants game. We don't have power or gas to run generators for cleanup, let alone gas to drive to New Jersey. We hope they win but we can't watch on TV with no power and with batteries running low probably won't listen on radio either."

**3.** This is the voice of Giants fan Thomas Hourihan: "My wife and I had to evacuate our building. We grabbed a few things and left. Our car was completely totaled. We stayed with friends in Hoboken on Tuesday and then were rescued by my sister-in-law on Wednesday. We haven't been allowed back since. I am going to the Giants game with four friends. It's an annual trip as we pick out one game a year and make a day of it. We all can use a little bit of fun, good food and football. We'll worry about [the future] Monday."

**4.** This is the voice of Giants fan Steve Suhocki: "Our power [in Bedminster, N.J.] came back [Sunday] morning ... I was without power since Monday. I've slept in a different bed every night this week, taking advantage of generous offerings from people with warm beds and showers. I have three-quarters of a tank of gas left, but I've been saving it to drive to the game on Sunday. After driving all the way to Pennsylvania Thursday night just to get gas, and to see the crazy lines and people for gas and food, it will be nice to just get away for a bit and focus on my favorite team for three hours."

**5.** This is the voice of Giants fan Bill Smith: "We are going to the game despite having no power or electricity. Trying to give my three sons some sense of normalcy and provide a few hours of distraction and my wife some relief as the week has been a bear for her. My 79-year-old father and 78-year-old mother ... have no power either. I have them in a local hotel trying to get warm and keep them safe. Only apprehension for us is getting home at 9 p.m. or so after the late start, but we're committed. We won't be tailgating as this is no time to celebrate. The amount of destruction and death is mind-boggling."

**6.** I think, before finishing the rest of the column, I'd just like to ask everyone who's feeling fortunate today to visit [www.RedCross.org](http://www.RedCross.org). Give what you can. In the metropolitan area, we have thousands, and I mean thousands, of people who have no idea where they're going to live, who have no clue where they'll be a month from today. Thanks for anything you can do. Now, back to football.

**7.** I think Bud Adams sounds like he's in no mood to be patient in year two of the Munchak Era. "In my 50 years of owning an NFL franchise, I am at a loss to recall a regular season home game that was such a disappointment for myself, and fans of the Titans," Adams told *The Tennessean*, after the Titans lost to Chicago by 31. "We were grossly outcoached and outplayed from start to finish today. At this time, all aspects of the organization will be closely evaluated, including front office, coaches and players over the next seven games. If performance and competitiveness does not improve, I will look at all alternatives to get back to having the Titans become a playoff and championship football team."

Sounds Modellian.

**8.** I think I understand the emotion Mario Williams must have after the Texans let him go without a fight in free agency. Logically, he'd want to have a great game for the first time against the Texans. But for him to sack Matt Schaub and then point a wagging finger at the Houston bench, as if to say, "You never should have gotten rid of me," well ... that was a great play, Mr. Williams. But if you think the Texans should be regretting NOT paying you \$16 million a year, you're living in a different reality from mine.

**9.** I think, for all the times Cam Newton has been bashed this year, he deserves more than a little praise for engineering Carolina's 21-13 win at Washington. He was decisive, accurate and knew when to run and when to stay in the pocket. I thought his game was a step in his progression that was sorely needed.

**10.** I think these are my non-football thoughts of the week:

a. Thank you for re-signing, David Ortiz.

b. I wouldn't take a chance on Josh Hamilton for more than three years, \$33 million. That would mean I wouldn't get him, which would be OK with me. I'd be able to sleep at night.

c. Not a fan of Pitt quarterback Tino Sunseri saying after his kicker, Kevin Harper, missed a 33-yard field goal in overtime, "We missed a field goal. That's why we lost the game." What a teammate Sunseri is. Pitt blew a 20-6 lead in the fourth quarter, and Harper made four of five field goals in the 29-26 loss. But he missed the one field goal that would have won it in the second overtime. Everyone who watched the game, and everyone in the Pitt locker room, understands a makeable field goal would have won the game. But to put the spotlight on one guy -- that's not what the quarterback on a team should do.

d. There's a reason I never hear Les Miles' name when there's talk of how certain college coaches would fit in the NFL.

e. LSU leads Alabama in the 59th minute and gives the Tide the best game, by far, it's had to survive in over a year. And the coaches poll in *USA Today* drops LSU

from fifth to ninth in the top 25. Totally, ridiculously preposterous. And the coaches rip us for our occasional cluelessness.

f. Congrats to Mark Waller and his crew at the NFL for putting together, on very short notice, the 30-second PSA urging TV and web viewers to send money to help the recovery efforts. These were the PSAs narrated by Osi Umenyiora and Eli Manning that were invented Thursday and Friday by Waller and his staff.

It started when Roger Goodell called Waller into his office Thursday morning and said he wanted to do something special for a PSA on Sunday. "Great," said Waller. "Which PSA do you want to run?" Goodell said: "The one you're going to create." So Waller got a 30-second spot together, and Tracy Perlman from his office got Manning and Umenyiora to record narrations at Giants offices Friday afternoon. Let's hope the stark images of the PSA get people to give.

g. Coffeenerdness: I couldn't figure out why, walking Bailey around Tuesday afternoon in the desolate city, after the storm, I saw 10 or so people outside a Starbucks with their laptops in one hand, or seated on the sidewalk with laptop in lap. Then I figured they must be using the wireless. Good citizenship by Starbucks, if it indeed was intentional to leave the WiFi up and running for desperate people to use.

h. Beernerdness: Had a chance the other night to sample a couple of Flower Power IPAs from the Ithaca (N.Y.) Beer Company, and it's one of the best IPAs I've ever tasted. Dry, easy to drink, with a faint scent of pine. Great beer.

### **Who I Like Tonight, and I Mean Steve Politi**

Steve Politi, the entertaining, often poignant, terrific sports columnist for the *Star Ledger* of Newark, N.J., wrote an inspirational Sunday column about the undefeated high school football team in Point Pleasant Beach, N.J. The column is about what community is about. You may have gotten to know Point Pleasant Beach from the storm pictures you've seen in the last week. So Politi accompanied the Point Pleasant Beach Garnet Gulls football team -- the entire team -- on its walk through town Saturday, the players going house to house and removing debris and helping neighbors do what needed to be done. Running back Danny Tighe told Politi: "It's not about football now. It's about our town." A terrific story.

As for the game tonight: Philadelphia 33, New Orleans 31. On Saturday, after the Eagles' final full-scale practice of the week, I asked Andy Reid a few things.

**Q:** How close did you come to benching Michael Vick?

**Reid:** "There really wasn't a decision to make. I was upset after the game last week. We didn't play well, and I needed to take a step back. I needed to look at everything, which I did. And Michael actually had one of his better games. There's probably three plays he'd like to have back. But as for replacing him, I wasn't there. I never was going to do that."

**Q:** Are you worried that with Vick saying things like he has to get his swag back and play like the old Michael that he's not going to follow the game plan?

**Reid:** "Not at all. I don't worry about that. He feels he's the leader of the team and he has to take control, and that's good. He's the most competitive guy. He's got an inferno of competition inside him. He feels like he can make plays, and we want him to make plays."

**Q:** When you're driving home, or have some quiet time, or thinking about the future, do you ever worry about getting fired?

**Reid:** "Listen, you know me. I don't care about that. I control what I can control, and after that, it's out of my hands. I understand what the deal is in the NFL. But all I think about now is Monday night. I'm all in for Monday night. You ask me what I think about driving home -- I think, 'The sun sure looks nice. Those trees are beautiful.' I'm not one to worry about the other stuff."

### **The Adieu Haiku**

Morning, Jersey Shore.  
Staten Island and Queens too.  
We won't forget you.

# Mandatory Monday: Cast Your Vote

Mike Tanier  
Sports On Earth  
November 5, 2012

Election season, like the Week 9 midpoint of the NFL season, is a time for citizens to decide once and for all whom they most disbelieve in.

It would be wonderful to think that voters and fans are deciding whom to *believe* in as America heads for the polls and NFL teams head into the second half of the season. It's also wonderful to think that Jimmy Stewart is filibustering for the greater good in some government hall, somewhere. Unfortunately, elections and football seasons too often come down to who you doubt the least, not who you trust the most.

(This may just be the natural pessimism bubbling to the surface after enduring 7,000 political advertisements in one day. Watch the same ads cascade from telecast to telecast on the satellite feed, and it's like the wave of negativity that hits you at the end of every Romeo Crennel press conference. You see so many images of Americans looking downward with that hang-dog look of discouragement and defeat that you would think you were watching a Cam Newton sideline montage of the last two months.)

Week 9 offered tests of faith for many constituencies across the nation:

Do you believe the Texans and Falcons are Super Bowl caliber teams? Or are they just business-as-usual midseason contenders who are bound to disappoint you in the playoffs?

Do you believe the Giants can get the job done? Or are they just riding on their reputations?

Can the Ravens win it all, or are they doomed by their inability to compete in Ohio - or Pennsylvania, or Texas, or any place five miles beyond Baltimore's Inner Harbor?

Do you believe that the Peyton Manning recovery is strong? Do you still believe in the Bengals, who looked superior in September but lost momentum in October? Both? Neither?

In the fine tradition of the democratic process, Week 9 offered some answers, but they were equivocal. There were few mandates. Victories felt like uneasy compromises. Losses brought disillusionment and second-guessing.

**Late Precincts.** The Giants embody many of the elements of the modern political candidate. They can point to some obvious recent successes, but how much credit

do the 2012 Giants deserve for the achievements of the 2007 and 2011 Giants? And is the 10-win, playoff-hot-streak model truly sustainable?

In the last three weeks, the Giants needed a late-game Victor Cruz touchdown to beat the Redskins, coughed up a 23-0 lead to the Cowboys but came back to win, and gave up two late touchdowns to lose to the Steelers, 24-20. If you are a supporter, you point to the results. If you are a doubter, you fret about the underlying fundamentals. Everyone claims to be right, but no one claims to be satisfied.

The Giants possess the one thing every candidate craves: the benefit of the doubt that comes with a solid track record. They can fall back on the "trust us now, because you trusted us before" message. The Giants have pulled through these recessions in the past. But with so much on the line, and the 49ers, Falcons, Bears and Packers looking like formidable opponents, that message may prove unconvincing.

The Texans had no chance to convince doubters on Sunday. Beating the Bills is like winning a New England state for a Democrat, carrying the Bible Belt for a Republican, or doing whatever it is third-party candidates do on election night (accepting moist-eyed-but-quietly-thankful sympathy from the universe's most understanding spouses, mostly). The Texans' 21-9 win over the Bills was not so much "narrow" as "uncontested."

Similarly, the Falcons could only hurt themselves by playing the Cowboys, because if you beat the Cowboys, you don't win: the Cowboys lose. Sure enough, Tony Romo spent much of Sunday night throwing footballs to Falcons defenders (who dropped them or had picks called back by penalties) or players on the sidelines (who reached to catch them). But the score was tied 6-6 at halftime, and the Cowboys had yet another chance to win in the final drive of a narrow 19-13 Falcons escape. The late Falcons field goal was a cute touch, but it did nothing to sway undecideds.

**Early Returns.** The Ravens took a 14-0 lead against the Browns, then realized that it was a road game and went into a crab-cake coma, with six straight three-and-out drives in the second and third quarters. The Browns answered with five short field goals, and briefly held a 15-14 lead before Joe Flacco received an IV full of Old Bay seasoning and threw a touchdown pass to Torrey Smith. The Ravens won 25-15 but would have lost to three-quarters of the teams in the NFL, given the same performance.

**Peyton Manning** had the chance to spread his message of recovery in Ohio, but he nearly bungled it away with two sloppy interceptions, one in the Bengals end zone, one deep in Bengals territory. The Bengals stayed competitive, and indeed held a 20-17 lead, before Peyton reasserted himself with two late touchdown drives.

The Broncos' 31-23 victory was even closer than the score suggests; the game hinged on a 19-yard Andy Dalton pass to A.J. Green deep in Broncos territory that was called back for a holding penalty. Champ Bailey intercepted the next pass, setting up the second of Manning's two late drives. That close call widened the Broncos' lead in the AFC West and all-but buried the Bengals in the AFC North, an example of a tiny miscue that can have sweeping long-range repercussions. The Broncos remain one of the best fourth-quarter teams in the NFL, which is something of a backhanded endorsement of their performances in the other three.

**The Bellwether.** The ultimate football-as-politics game, of course, was Panthers at Redskins. The Redskins Rule states that if the Redskins lose their final home game before Election Day, the incumbent party loses the White House. It's magic, really: The Redskins lose, and thousands of undecided voters suddenly have a hankering for change. People who don't follow football at all suddenly find their worldviews flip-flopping; a group of hippies ran straight from a Jefferson Airplane concert to their local draft board after Sonny Jurgensen's 7-of-25 passing performance against the Giants in 1968. There are many complex forces at work in the Redskins Rule, including the overlap of the Ronald Reagan and Joe Gibbs eras, but it all boiled down on Sunday to the fate of the free world resting in Cam Newton's hands, which may have been the bee in the Mayans' bonnet when they created their calendar.

The Redskins obligingly wore brown faux-leather helmets for the occasion. Depending on your tastes, the helmets either made Robert Griffin look like Sammy Baugh or like he was wearing a tablet cover on his head. The Redskins then launched into their full-house, pistol-option offense, completing the throwback illusion: If they were going to win this election for anyone, it was going to be Eisenhower.

Soon, the Redskins fell into their predictable 2012 pattern. Griffin looked great. The play-action, option offense moved the ball. Then everything ground to a halt around the 20-yard line, where the Redskins settled for a field goal or failed to convert on fourth down. Cries of "Wait Until 2016" fell briefly silent in Washington, however, as Griffin (who needed rib x-rays after the game; results were unknown at press time) finally got the team into the end zone at the end of a fitful drive to cut the Panthers lead to eight.

It all came down to an onside kick. At precisely the same time, the Bengals kicked a desperate field goal to cut the **Broncos** lead to seven and attempt their own onside kick. It was time for desperation tactics, the kind American politicians never stoop to (sarcasm).

The simultaneous onside kicks gave fans a choice of competing ideologies. The Redskins took a conservative approach, lining up in a traditional formation and asking rookie kicker Kai Forbath to squib the ball over a swarm of Panthers defenders. The Bengals tried something more progressive, sending their punter and kicker onto the field to perform an elaborate fake-out before kicker Mike Nugent nudged the ball toward the wary Broncos. Finally: real choice!

The Redskins' kick bounced straight into the arms of Steve Smith, about the last man on the Panthers you want to onside kick to. The Bengals feigns had little effect; Nugent's kick was weak and ineffectual, and David Bruton of the Broncos flopped on it. The problems of a seven- to eight-point deficit late in the fourth quarter are almost always too big for any one man, team or strategy to overcome.

If that isn't a metaphor for American politics, nothing is.

The Redskins Rule, for the record, has only failed once: In 2004, George W. Bush defeated John Kerry despite the fact that Brett Favre and the Packers defeated Mark Brunell and the Redskins, 28-14, a few weeks earlier. It is important to point out, for historical purposes, that Bush and Favre were still popular in 2004. Gibbs coached that Redskins team, having replaced Steve Spurrier in 2003. It's a good thing Spurrier was not around to test the Redskins Rule in an election year. We could have wound up with President Dwayne Elizondo Mountain Dew Herbert Camacho.

These political analogies can be taken too far. The point of being a football fan is to love imperfect teams, just as it is the duty of every citizen to embrace imperfect candidates, platforms, and solutions. It is also important to find optimism and consensus whenever possible. Optimism could be found in the flurry of exciting finishes in Week 9, and in great rookie performances by Andrew Luck, Doug Martin, Russell Wilson, Griffin, and others. Consensus could be found in Nashville, where the Bears took a 28-2 first-quarter lead against the Titans, expanded it to a 35-5 lead, and held on for a 51-20 laugh.

In contentious times, the Titans have given the nation what it needs most: the football version of Walter Mondale.

## **The Spooky State**

Monday is Jerseyween, a holiday created by state governor Chris Christie in response to Hurricane Sandy. The hurricane forced the governor to postpone Halloween so children in some communities can trick or tweet on lighted, passable roads, while police/fire/rescue forces from less-affected counties could help with rescue efforts in storm-ravaged areas instead of making sure little Johnny didn't run into the middle of US-30 in his all-black ninja costume last Wednesday.

Many members of the Sports on Earth team are law-abiding New Jersey residents, so in compliance with the governor's orders, we moved the obligatory "Halloween-themed NFL content" to Jerseyween. So here's a roundup of some of the scariest things that happened during Sunday's games. Stay tuned for our "New Year's Resolution" gags, coming in late February.

**SCARY:** How good Andrew Luck and Ryan Tannehill can be.

Kids don't just dress up like superheroes or The Fonz anymore. Many go out trick or treating as if George Romero lived in their basements. There's nothing quite like

giving a Kit Kat bar to a 6-year-old in a "Scream" mask with actual pulsating blood effects, or a third-grader with realistic-looking, flaking zombie flesh falling into his pillowcase full of Almond Joys.

Similarly, rookie quarterbacks look very grown up lately, and while Robert Griffin and Russell Wilson have gotten most of the attention, Andrew Luck and Ryan Tannehill entered Sunday as the most likely rookies to appear in the postseason. The duo dueled until the final moments of a 23-20 Colts victory, and both looked impressive. Luck was 30-of-48 for 433 yards and two touchdowns, breaking the rookie record for passing yards in a game. Tannehill was 22-of-38 for 290 yards and a touchdown. Neither threw an interception.

Luck was the more impressive quarterback on Sunday, and not just because he won, set a new record and faced a better defense. The Colts were 13-of-19 on third downs, with Luck converting first downs on third-and-12, third-and-14, third-and-10, and third-and-11, plus numerous third-and-mediums and another completion that came just inches short on third-and-20. He looked like the ball-distributing, defense-dissecting decision maker scouts expected him to become, but he also looked like he had fast-forwarded through his first two NFL seasons.

Tannehill looked solid early in the game, finding Charles Clay for a touchdown on a crossing route and threading several passes to Brian Hartline against tight coverage. Short, smart passes to Hartline and Davone Bess set up the field goal that tied the game and forced Luck into some late-game heroics. But Tannehill looked like a real rookie on the final drive. He overthrew Daniel Thomas on a short dump-off on second down, then overthrew an open Bess on a corner route on third-and-15. Tannehill used his exceptional athleticism to scramble from the pocket and complete a pass to Thomas across his body on fourth-and-15, but a) Jake Long held a Colts defender and b) the pass would only have netted 14 yards.

Luck and Tannehill are going to grow into real playoff-caliber quarterbacks. If they aren't already.

**SCARY:** Doug Martin coming straight at you.

The thing about those kids with their Pinhead costumes is that most of them are really nice once you look past the costume. And no nice guy was scarier on Sunday than Doug Martin, who politely gashed the Raiders for 251 rushing yards, the third-highest rushing total for a rookie in NFL history. Martin did most of his damage in the second half, with runs of 45, 67 and 70 yards for touchdowns. After a Carson Palmer interception that ended a late Raiders rally, Martin iced the game with a one-man drive of three rushes for 22 yards and a touchdown.

Adrian Peterson holds the rookie record with 296 rushing yards, with DeMarco Murray second at 253 yards. Martin was actually ahead of Murray, but Greg Schiano called three more Martin rushes instead of kneeling at the end of the game, and Martin lost 15 yards. Schiano really, really needs to stop devoting all of his mental energy to the end-of-game kneel. It is getting into "No Wire Hangers" territory.

With his No. 22 jersey, compact one-cut running style, surprising open-field power, and gentlemanly demeanor, it was easy to tell who Martin dressed up as for Jerseyween: He was a dead ringer for Emmitt Smith.

**SCARY:** The Panthers with a rushing attack

Lost in the "Everything is Cam's Fault" storyline that has defined the Panthers season is how little production they have been getting from DeAngelo Williams and Jonathan Stewart, the running back tandem that has been a mainstay of the Panthers offense since the Jake Delhomme days. Williams and Stewart both made contributions on Sunday: Williams tight-roped up the sideline for a 30-yard touchdown, while Stewart had a 17-yard run to set up Williams' score and a 21-yarder to help the Panthers out of second-and-22 deep in their own territory. The pair combined for 88 yards on 16 carries. The Newton option works better when opponents think Newton has actual options.

**SCARY:** The Lions with a rushing attack

Mikel Leshoure rushed for 70 yards and three touchdowns. Joique Bell – Joique Bell! – added 73 yards and a touchdown. This wasn't garbage-time production in a 31-14 win, unless you count anything done against the Jaguars to be "garbage time" (you really shouldn't; their defense is pretty solid). The Lions rushed 21 times for 69 yards in the first half -- not great, but good enough to give the Lions receivers time to catch their breath and hold the Jaguars to a time of possession of just 7:55 in the first half. Then again, keeping the Jaguars' offense off the field may actually be a counterproductive strategy.

**SCARY:** The Packers with a sort-of rushing attack.

The Cardinals were hanging with the Packers early in the game, with one Packers drive ending in a missed field goal and another in an interception as Mike McCarthy's team struggled to move downfield without the pretense of a running game. With the score tied 7-7, McCarthy got serious about balancing his offense, calling six straight runs: two to speedy all-purpose player Randall Cobb for 23 yards, four to resurrected 2010 hero James Starks for 19 yards. The runs set up a Packers touchdown, and Starks, Cobb and Alex Green combined for 143 yards on 31 carries. There was some garbage-time piling on in those numbers, but the Packers will take what they can get. And if Starks can return from oblivion, who's next? Edgar Bennett is warming up.

**SCARY:** Colts cheerleaders in perky WAC-inspired uniforms.

These are not scary at all. They are an inspiring tribute to our nation's troops that should be continued indefinitely. *(Heavy sigh.)*

**SCARY:** Presidents in the Stands.

Fans in Ohio no doubt have politics on the brain, what with both parties spending an estimated nine trillion dollars to shatter citizens' belief in democracy itself in that battleground state. Two fans wore Obama and Romney masks in the stands, which is bipartisan enough, but the fellows behind them wore Nixon and Reagan masks. Republicans outnumbered democrats 3-to-1 in that section of the stadium! Of course, there are only so many presidential masks available – good luck finding a Jimmy Carter – so the guys may not have been making so precise a political statement. Teddy Roosevelt might have livened things up, but he was pooped after the Nationals' playoff run. For true party neutrality, the guys should have opted for some Whig wigs.

**SCARY:** Brian Urlacher's Foot Speed.

Have you ever arrived early for a football game and watched as the police escort the team buses to the stadium? The buses rumble through traffic at an amazingly slow speed, looking powerful but plodding, as police control traffic and pedestrians scramble out of the way of the slow-moving convoy. That's what Urlacher's pick-six touchdown against the Titans looked like.

### **Inspiration**

No Week 9 roundup would be complete without Chuck Pagano's post-game speech to the Colts. Pagano, of course, is on leave of absence from the Colts while he receives treatment for leukemia, but the head coach left the hospital to attend Sunday's game. Here are his words to his team, with no commentary, or editing:

"I mentioned before the game that you guys were living in a vision and you weren't living in circumstances. Because you know where they had us in the beginning. Every last one of them. But you refused to live in circumstances and you decided consciously, as a team, and as a family, to live in a vision. And that's why you bring things home like you brought home today. That's why you're already champions, and well on your way. I got circumstances. You guys understand it. I understand it. It's already beat. It's already beat. My vision that I'm living, see two more daughters getting married, dancing at their weddings, and then hoisting that Lombardi several times and watch that confetti fall on this fucking group right here. Several times, we're going to hoist that baby. I'm dancing at two more weddings. And we're hoisting that trophy together man. Congratulations."

### **Get Involved**

Hurricane Sandy caused devastation in the New York/New Jersey area; as mentioned earlier, it ruined a minor holiday in the process. Don't let it ruin a major one.

New Jersey food banks lost much of their stores, including thousands of turkeys, to flood damage. The Community Food Bank of New Jersey has distributed 100,000 pounds of food per day in storm-ravaged areas. They need more resources now,

and they will keep needing them through the end of the month, when many families will still be displaced.

The CFBNJ recommends that you send money, not canned goods, so they can meet precise needs as they happen, instead of just handing out whatever is available. (It is also holding canned food drives specifically in affected counties; New Jersey residents can find that information on their website). Your donation could help a family now, or it could put a turkey on the table of a needy/displaced family at Thanksgiving.

Click [here](#) to find out how to donate to the Community Food Bank of New Jersey. The American Red Cross, of course, also needs your help. Don't be a jive turkey gobbler: Help a neighbor in need.

# Peyton Manning, Andrew Luck throw Week 9's best

Gregg Rosenthal  
NFL.com  
November 5, 2012

Just watch Andrew Luck's entire highlight package this week. It's silly. As our home-page editor, Henry Hodgson, notes, Luck converted third downs of 10, 11, 12, 14, 16 and 20 yards against the best third-down defense in the NFL.

My two favorite throws: The 25-yard bullet under extreme pressure to T.Y. Hilton and the play to Reggie Wayne below. Now that's how you ignore the pass rush around you.

This third down set up the Indianapolis Colts' game-winning field goal against the Miami Dolphins.

(video)

Jacquizz Rodgers is an increasingly important third-down weapon for the Atlanta Falcons. I've seen him make defenders miss and break tackles to keep drives alive a lot this year. This missed tackle from Cowboys cornerback Orlando Scandrick is what Dallas' season has been all about. When they have a chance to make a big play, they usually don't.

(video)

Prediction: The moment below will be chosen by "NFL Turning Point" this week to define the New York Giants-Pittsburgh Steelers game. It really might be the turning point of the Steelers' season. After their 24-20 win, they're back.

(video)

Remember those arm strength concerns about Peyton Manning? Those were cute.

(video)

We usually try to spin positive, but Minnesota Vikings quarterback Christian Ponder's struggles for a contending team have become a huge story. He had 58 yards a few weeks ago, struggled against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and then had 63 yards in a 30-20 loss to the Seattle Seahawks. It is 2012.

(video)

Let Doug Martin run wild. Chuck the ball up to Vincent Jackson and Mike Williams. We like this Tampa Bay Buccaneers offensive personality.

(video)

# RUNNING THE TABLE

James Merilatt  
Mile High Sports  
November 5, 2012

Mike Shanahan (and probably every other NFL head coach) liked to break down the regular season into four quarters. During his time in Denver, he'd gauge how his Broncos teams were faring by evaluating them in four-game increments.

A 4-0 or 3-1 stretch was a success. Going 2-2 was staying in the race. And 1-3 or 0-4 was a sign that things were careening dangerously off course.

Using this time-tested logic, the 2012 version of the Broncos are definitely headed in the right direction. They avoided disaster early in the season, posting a 2-2 mark during the first four games while settling into an entirely new system and getting Peyton Manning comfortable after 18 months of not playing. And in the season's "second quarter," they've been even better, going 3-1 to put themselves in prime position at the midway point.

That's a great start. In fact, it's better than most people expected; few had the Broncos going 5-3 through eight games, even those who picked Denver to win the AFC West. So in many ways, the season is ahead of schedule.

But it's time to start thinking bigger. Shooting for 10 wins and a division title are no longer the goal; in fact, merely reaching those accomplishments would be somewhat of a letdown at this point.

The Broncos need to set their sights higher. They need to aspire for more grandiose things.

Moving forward, the final eight games of the regular season should be all about one singular goal: Getting one of the top two seeds in the AFC.

There's a huge difference between simply making the playoffs and being a No. 1 or 2 seed. It's a much easier path to the Super Bowl, having to only win two games instead of three and playing at least the conference semifinal at home. It's why the last five Super Bowl teams from the AFC have been a one or two seed. So if the Broncos are to have genuine championship aspirations, finishing as one of the conference's top two teams is critical.

It's safe to assume that Houston is uncatchable at 7-1; they sit two games ahead of the Broncos, plus they hold the tiebreaker on the strength of their Sept. 23 victory in Denver. But the Ravens seem less than daunting, despite their 6-2 record; they're not playing their best football, as injuries have mounted, and the Broncos get their shot at them head-to-head on Dec. 16.

So more than likely, snatching the No. 2 seed will mean passing New England in the standings (although Pittsburgh, a team Denver beat in the opener, is in the mix at 5-3, too); Right now, both teams are tied with 5-3 records, but the Patriots hold the tiebreaker because of their victory over the Broncos on Oct. 7. So in order to beat out Bill Belichick and Company, Denver is going to have to finish with a better overall record.

How doable is that? It's once again time to break out the Mastermind's strategy of breaking the season into four parts.

If the Broncos can go 3-1 in both the third and fourth "quarters" of the season, they'll finish 11-5. The first batch of games features a trip to Carolina, a home game against San Diego, a visit to Kansas City and Tampa Bay at Sports Authority Field; three wins seems very attainable. And the second batch includes trips to Oakland and Baltimore, followed by back-to-back home games against Cleveland and Kansas City; Denver will be favored in at least three of those games.

But that might not be good enough. Looking at New England's remaining slate of games, the Broncos probably can't count on the Patriots losing three more games. In the second half of the season, the Pats play five times at home (Buffalo, Indianapolis, Houston, San Francisco and Miami) and have three road trips (New York Jets, Miami and Jacksonville). Two losses isn't guaranteed; three is a stretch.

So that means the Broncos have to shoot for the moon. They need to set their sights on doing something beyond good; they have to strive for greatness.

If Denver can get the second seed, they have a legitimate shot at making a trip to New Orleans in February. They'd get a first-round bye, play the Divisional Playoff game at home, and then either host the AFC Championship game or have to travel to Houston for the title tilt; it's hard not to like the Broncos' chances in that scenario.

If they don't finish No. 2, they'll host a Wild Card game, travel to New England in round two and then be on the road for the second week in a row with a Super Bowl berth on the line. Even the biggest optimist can see that road is daunting.

So the mission the rest of the season needs to be 7-1 or 8-0. If the Broncos want this season to be special, they need to be almost perfect the rest of the way.

Every team wants to win every game. But that's not a realistic goal for most of them. In Denver, however, it is attainable.

The Broncos are playing good football on both sides of the ball. The schedule is very favorable the rest of the way. And the guy playing quarterback in Denver has made a habit of stretching together long winning streaks in the NFL.

It's time to think big. It's time to run the table.

# Peyton Manning's comeback versus Bengals echoes Tim Tebow? Not exactly

Michael Roberts  
Westword  
November 5, 2012

Last week, after the Broncos blew out the New Orleans Saints, we suggested that Peyton Manning had finally exorcised Tim Tebow from the souls of Denver fans. But then, the very next week against the Bengals, Manning was called upon to execute a Tebow specialty -- the fourth-quarter comeback. He managed to do so successfully en route to a 31-23 victory. But that's where the comparisons end.

Despite the Broncos being on the road against a desperate team that's better than its record indicates (a playoff squad last year, Cincinnati had lost three straight coming into yesterday), the game was still Denver's to lose -- and for a while, it looked as if the squad would find a way to do so.

After getting an opening-possession stop against Andy Dalton and company, Manning and his charges countered with an ideal initial drive -- until an inexplicable third and six run by Willis McGahee came up five yards shy necessitated a Matt Prater field goal.

The next Denver possession netted even less thanks to dropped passes and a penalty, after which the Bengals managed a tying three-pointer -- and while Manning and company were able to cash in the next time around via a thirteen-yard strike to the increasingly indispensable Eric Decker, those were the only additional points the Broncos racked up in the first half. Had Bengals kicker Mike Nugent not pushed a late field goal try to the right, the Denver 10-3 lead would have been even more slender.

The second half started out much better, with Trindon Holliday's stupid decision to return a kick five yards deep in the end zone suddenly transformed into brilliance when he streaked through the Bengals' stunned special teams players for a 105 yard score. But Denver apparently couldn't handle that much good fortune. The defense, which had previously been fairly stout (especially sack-master Von Miller), allowed Cincy to march down the field after the ensuing kickoff, with A.J. Green beating defensive stopper Champ Bailey badly for six. Then, Manning was picked at the goal line by Terence Newman -- a gaffe the Bengals converted into three points. And Newman got another interception deep in Denver territory (Holliday and Lance Ball misplayed Nugent's next boot), leading to another touchdown and a 20-17 deficit.

Had Tebow still been the Broncos quarterback at that point, he likely would have offered up a couple more three-and-outs to add drama to the proceedings. But not Manning.

The next time he got the ball, Manning put on his Peyton Face and got to work on redemption, quickly engineering a scoring drive set up by a thirty yarder to Decker and paid off via a one-yard toss to Joel Dreessen. Then, after Bailey got some redemption of his own by grabbing a Dalton heave meant for Green, he dialed up McGahee, whose lack of success earlier had still managed to wear down the Bengals D, then hit Decker for another touchdown, putting Cincinnati into an eleven-point hole from which the team couldn't escape.

The results weren't nearly as suspenseful as the Tebow comebacks of last season. In fact, there wasn't much suspense at all. Although Manning had thrown two interceptions, there was never a moment when Denver fans doubted his ability to reverse these curses -- and he didn't need unwise prevent defenses and other mental errors on the part of his opponents to do it. He may not have performed as flawlessly as last week versus the Saints, but he's still playing at a very high level, ensuring that the Broncos came out of what seemed like a trap game with another W.

That, Timmy, is how it's done.

Look below to see excerpts of Manning, Bailey and Brandon Stokley at the post-game press conference, followed by a clip of Holliday's amazing kickoff return.

# Broncos hitting their stride at the right time

Jeff Sauer  
Glenwood Springs Post Independent  
November 6, 2012

Always save the best for last.

That's what master archers used to tell their students before they methodically flung arrows at the opposing army.

The Denver Broncos always seem to save their best for last too, shooting straight arrows into the hearts of their opponents during the second half of games this year and unexpectedly thrusting their name into the AFC favorites conversation in the process.

On Sunday, they continued their usual ways, racking up another 21 points to go along with the 145 points they had previously tallied in the third and fourth quarters this season.

It's safe to say they're making some good halftime adjustments. That, and the fact that Peyton Manning is figuring out opposing defenses with relative ease as each game progresses.

With the offense clicking and the defense starting to jell, the Broncos are in a prime position to not only win the AFC West, but possibly win one of the top seeds in the conference, although those losses to New England and Houston may come back to haunt them eventually.

## **Time for a fantasy football Hail Mary?**

How's that fantasy football thing working out for ya?

Take a bow if you took a flier on Adrian Peterson and the uncertainty surrounding his surgically repaired knee going into your draft.

Head to the back of the class and put on the dunce cap if you fell for all of the pre-draft hype on Ryan Mathews.

There's a fine line between genius and insanity.

If you're still treading water with five weeks to go before the playoffs start in most leagues, you might need to consider drastic measures based upon your position in the standings and strength of schedule going forward. It is, after all, do-or-die time if you want a shot at that elusive trophy your friends have been parading around

for years.

Here are some quick tips if your team is on the outside looking in:

### 1. Make the quarterback switch

If you're still hanging on to Philip Rivers, Cam Newton or Joe Flacco as your starting quarterback, look for teams in your league that have two top-notch quarterbacks and initiate a trade immediately.

You'd be surprised how many teams overdrafted at the QB position on draft day, thinking it would be wise to carry both Tom Brady and Peyton Manning as a backup. Now that the byes are essentially over, they'll be interested in dropping some perceived dead weight, while adding a player they're sorely lacking, maybe one of the marquee tight ends on your roster that you can still win without.

Remember: Anything to get in the playoffs at this point.

### 2. The backup (running back) plan

Speaking of dead weight, the extra wide receiver averaging 50 yards per game is useless sitting on your bench at this point. Why not grab a Ben Tate, Jacquizz Rodgers or Ronnie Hillman type backup running back just in case the injury bug bites the starting backfields in Houston, Atlanta or Denver? Tate has proven he can shoulder the load (although banged up at the moment), and I suspect the other two I've mentioned would thrive if they were inserted into the starting role. It's worth the gamble at this point.

### 3. Befriend the league chump

What do you have to lose? With the trade deadline looming (Friday in most leagues) you can buddy up to the poor sap in last place and swing a deal, assuming he/she has something to offer. Offer a future draft pick if you're in a keeper league, along with one of your lesser players for whatever value is left of their mess.

Disclaimer: Some leagues make the last-place team buy the beverages for the following year's draft, so you might have to pony up and offer to pay part of the beer tab. It might seem tacky, but I've seen far worse.

If you're on the other end of the spectrum, feeling flat-out smug because you're already sitting at the top of your league standings, enjoy the view while you can because the fantasy Gods will surely see to it that you bust in the first round of the playoffs.

Happens every time.

# Who is having the better season, Peyton Manning or Andrew Luck?

Los Angeles Times  
November 5, 2012

Writers from around the Tribune Co. debate who is having a better season: Denver Broncos' quarterback Peyton Manning or the guy who replaced him as the Indianapolis Colts' QB, rookie Andrew Luck. Join the conversation by voting in the poll and leaving a comment of your own.

## **Sam Farmer, Los Angeles Times**

It's a bizarre coincidence that at the midway point of the season, Peyton Manning and Andrew Luck have identical passing yardage totals (2,404, tied for third) and team records (5-3).

Overall, Manning has better numbers with the league's best completion percentage (69.5, compared with Luck's 29th-ranked 56.6) and passer rating 108.6 (Luck is 25th at 79.0). What's more, Manning has twice as many passing touchdowns (20 vs. 10) and six interceptions to Luck's eight – and remember, three of Manning's picks came in the first quarter of that jolting performance in Week 2 at Atlanta. So, strictly looking at the numbers, Manning is having a better season.

But this question is still splitting hairs because the sport is more than numbers, and what Luck is doing in Indianapolis is phenomenal. Not only has he lifted a franchise that looked to be headed for a multi-year rebuilding period, but he's done so with a midstream change at head coach and surrounded by largely mediocre talent (although the Broncos aren't overflowing with Pro Bowlers, either.)

Manning's story is amazing, inspirational and unexpected ... but the fact that the Colts are in the playoff hunt? In this case, the tie goes to the rookie.

## **Dan Pompei, Chicago Tribune**

Andrew Luck is having an outstanding rookie season, but Peyton Manning is having an MVP season. Just because they have passed for the same number of yards doesn't mean they are performing equally. In fact, Manning has been far superior to the young man who replaced him as the quarterback of the Colts.

His passer rating is 108.6 compared to 79 for Luck. He has completed 69.5% of his passes; Luck has completed 56.6. Manning is averaging 8.2 yards per completion, a full yard per completion more than Luck. And Manning has thrown twice as many touchdown passes — 20 to 10. One day, Luck may be talked about as being in the same category as Manning. But that day should not be today..

## **Aaron Wilson, Baltimore Sun**

Go ahead, hand this figurative crown to Peyton Manning , and not just based on his superior numbers.

Manning has 2,404 yards, 20 touchdowns and six interceptions for a 108.6 quarterback rating compared to rookie Andrew Luck's identical passing yards, 10 touchdowns, eight interceptions and 79.0 rating.

What Manning is doing is remarkable considering all of the trauma and surgical repair his neck has endured. He has energized a Broncos squad that needed an experienced hand.

None of that is to minimize Luck's achievements. The precocious former Stanford star is having a superb rookie season and is mature beyond his years. Understandably, he's not on Manning's level just yet.

For now, what Manning is doing at his age deserves a bigger nod of respect.

# Peyton Manning, Denver Broncos make Carolina Panthers' celebration short-lived

Joseph Person  
Charlotte Observer  
November 5, 2012

Carolina Panthers coach Ron Rivera was able to soak in Sunday's win against Washington until Monday afternoon, when a reporter asked him about facing Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning this week.

"Well, I wanted to enjoy this a little longer," Rivera said, laughing.

Defensive coordinator Sean McDermott turned the page on the Panthers' victory even sooner.

"I already told my wife, 'I'll see you Saturday before we go to the team hotel. You can thank Peyton Manning for that,'" McDermott said.

Welcome to Denver week.

Fresh off their first win since Sept. 16, the Panthers (2-6) began preparations Monday for the game many Carolina fans have had circled for months – a visit from Manning and former Panthers coach John Fox, who led Denver to a playoff win last year and has the Broncos (5-3) in first place in the AFC West.

Fox coached the Panthers for nine seasons, taking them to two NFC Championship games and their only Super Bowl appearance. But Fox failed to post consecutive winning seasons – none of the four coaches in team history has done so – and went through the 2010 season as a lame duck after the Panthers dumped high-salaried players.

The Panthers went an NFL-worst 2-14 – the only time a Fox-coached team finished worse than 7-9 – and he and his staff were gone the day after the season ended. A little more than a week later, Broncos chief football executive John Elway hired Fox, the winningest coach in Panthers' history with a 78-74 mark, including playoff games.

Fox, 57, has eight former Carolina assistants on his Broncos staff, including all three coordinators – Jack Del Rio (defense), Mike McCoy (offense) and Jeff Rodgers (special teams).

Rivera, who succeeded Fox, tried to downplay the Fox storyline.

"I know coach Fox. I have a little bit of background with him," Rivera said. "But the nice thing about that though is that he and I don't have to go out and line up on the field."

"This week is about the players playing against each other. It'll be our offense against their defense, (our) defense against (their) offense and our special teams playing against one another. Just from my point of view, the less we say about that the better. I really think this is about the players."

Many on the Panthers' roster played for Fox, who still has a house in Quail Hollow.

"It's going to be an emotional game. I was with coach Fox for a long time and I know what kind of guy he is," linebacker Thomas Davis said. "And they have a few other coaches on that staff that we have a lot of respect for. And they have a guy at quarterback in Peyton Manning that's been playing extremely well. So we definitely know we've got to be ready for them."

Since Carolina fell to Atlanta 30-28 in Week 4, the Panthers' defense has been one of the league's best, ranking fourth in total defense (292.3 yards a game) and pass defense (189.0) and fifth in points allowed (17.8).

The stretch has coincided with the loss of a pair of veteran starters – cornerback Chris Gamble and linebacker Jon Beason, who tried to play through injuries the first month. The Panthers shifted rookie linebacker Luke Kuechly from the weakside to the middle and replaced Gamble with Captain Munnerlyn. They have used the same defensive lineup four weeks in a row.

Rivera said that continuity has been key to the improvement.

"Three or four weeks ago, I think we settled in," Rivera said. "We've had to put a couple of guys on IR. We're no longer wondering if they're going to play. We've started the same group three weeks in a row, maybe four. That's been big.

"We've found our identity."

The Panthers held Redskins rookie quarterback Robert Griffin III in check in Sunday's 21-13 win. Griffin's longest completion covered 25 yards, his longest run covered 9 yards, and he finished with his lowest quarterback rating (74.2).

Now the Panthers face Manning, the NFL's highest-rated passer who has thrown for 2,404 yards and 20 touchdowns in his first year with Denver after missing last season after a series of neck surgeries.

"Listen, this is one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time, and that's the challenge," McDermott said. "But it's going to be our team versus their team, not just Carolina versus Peyton Manning. But we have immense amount of respect for what he's done, as well as what he's done this year coming back from the injury. And we're going to have our hands full."

# Dream matchup: Indianapolis Colts currently in line to play Manning's Broncos in playoffs

Phil Richards  
Indianapolis Star  
November 5, 2012

It's too good for fiction, but it's fact.

All together now: "If the playoffs were to begin today, . . ." they would begin with the Indianapolis Colts at the Denver Broncos in an AFC wild card showdown too preposterous to conceive.

It would be Andrew Luck vs. Peyton Manning. Iconic Colts quarterback in training vs. iconic Colts quarterback of the gilded past.

It's true.

The Colts and Broncos are among the four AFC teams with 5-3 records. Denver, leader of the AFC West, has lost head-to-head to New England, leader of the AFC East. So the Patriots would be the conference's No. 3 seed, the Broncos No. 4.

The Colts and Steelers are tied at 5-3 but the Colts take the applicable tiebreaker, better conference record. The Colts are 3-2, the Steelers 2-3.

So the Colts are the AFC's No. 5 seed and No. 5 plays at No. 4 in the first round of the playoffs.

Colts at Broncos. Luck vs. Manning.

Preposterous? Of course, but the season is being played out in the AFC, the NFL's theatre of the absurd, where bizarre is the norm. Consider: Through eight games, Luck has precisely 2,404 passing yards. So does Manning.

Colts safety Antoine Bethea was unaware Monday of where the current scenario would put the Colts, but he sniffed it out like a reverse. He eyed his interrogator warily.

"What?" he asked. "Denver? Yeah, I figured you were going somewhere with that. That would be fun.

"But we got eight more to go. Let's see what happens."

Who were those guys?

As Colts interim coach Bruce Arians noted Monday, there was a point during the fourth quarter Sunday when the Colts were playing five rookies: wide receivers T.Y. Hilton and LaVon Brazill, tight end Dwayne Allen, running back Vick Ballard and Luck.

What the coach didn't note was the presence of a sixth rookie: Bradley Sowell was subbing for right tackle Winston Justice, who went out with a knee injury. A.Q. Shipley was making his second career appearance at center for Samson Satele, who had gone out with a back injury. And second-year tight end Weslye Saunders, signed by the Colts on Oct. 16, was subbing for Brazill in two-tight end situations because Coby Fleener (shoulder) wasn't in uniform.

Similarly, Brazill was in for starter Donnie Avery, who was on the sideline with a hip injury.

So the Colts had six rookies and two newcomers on the field for much of the decisive drive, a 13-play, 69-yard march to Adam Vinatieri's winning 43-yard field goal.

Kickoff moved

The NFL moved kickoff for the Colts' game Nov. 18 at New England from 1 p.m. to 4:25 p.m.

Colts-Patriots used to be a prime time staple with top billing going to quarterbacks Manning and Tom Brady.

It will be the rivalry's first installment of Luck vs. Brady.

# NFL: Broncos' Peyton Manning takes game to new level: Kelly

Cathal Kelly  
Toronto Star  
November 5, 2012

During the press conference in which Peyton Manning was introduced as the new quarterback of the Denver Broncos, team president John Elway was up on his figurative stepladder trying to set the bar.

"My goal is to make Peyton Manning the greatest quarterback ever to play the game," Elway said.

If that was Elway's entire to-do list for the year, he can pop a bottle.

Manning's comeback at age 36 is a second chance at a first impression. Ours. Not his. We took Manning for granted during all those years in Indianapolis, where his relentless pursuit of records — stacked in the corner of Lucas Oil Stadium like human skulls — made him oddly invisible.

The man was too predictably good. There were no valleys to highlight the peaks. There were no meltdowns or slip-ups to lower our opinion in order that it might be raised up again. There was nothing to get hold of but his remarkable ability to outthink the 11 men on the other side of the ball and then make passes.

Aside from the notable letdowns by his team in the playoffs, Manning's personal trajectory was all peak.

His place in the imagination was already secure before the four neck operations that cost him a full season in civvies. Now that he's back, that absence will only bolster Manning's spot in the pantheon's VIP room.

Based on what we are seeing, Manning is not only the best to ever play his position; he may be the finest athlete of his generation playing any team sport.

Manning is in the midst of separating himself from the likes of Marino, Starr and Unitas.

He's entering the company of men like Joe DiMaggio, Bill Russell and Bobby Orr.

Those men didn't just change the game they played; they redefined its place in popular culture. They became bigger than their respective sports, and in so doing began to represent to fans and non-fans alike the best things about the game.

Manning needed a very human moment to reorient our appreciation for his accomplishments. Flirting with a premature end to his career provided it.

It seemed for some time like it was over. What was the point in returning? He was hurt, he was middle-aged and he had nothing to prove. It seemed foolish to try again.

The story began to turn back to something exciting and potent when Manning allowed himself to be pushed out of Indianapolis trailing only kind words for the organization.

At the presser, Manning was flanked by Colts owner Jim Irsay. The team's bean counters had tied the rope, but it was Irsay who pulled the trap door.

"This has not been easy for Jim," Manning said at the time.

He's the unusual sort of man driven to do things well — one who tolerates the failings of others.

In the end, it really was the best thing for everyone. Indianapolis kept No. 1 draft choice Andrew Luck, Manning kept his Super Bowl hopes and Irsay kept his money.

But we couldn't have predicted how powerfully Manning would return, especially considering he has done it on a team that led the NFL in rushing attempts last season.

He seems new now, doesn't he? Standing back in the shotgun, waving his arms around like a guy trying to land planes in a driveway.

He's having an MVP season, though it hit a small pothole on Sunday afternoon. Manning always looks put-out when he's on the job, mostly at himself. The key was always going to be grafting Indianapolis' darting pass offence onto Denver's plodding style. It's still a work in progress.

Manning's Colts never fooled anyone. They consistently beat you with the same half-dozen plays by executing them with Swiss precision. The Broncos receiving corps isn't working on a Marvin Harrison level yet, and so there will be bumps. But on Sunday, Manning came within nine yards of recording his fifth consecutive game with 300 yards passing and three touchdowns.

Balls were dropped, and the frustration became apparent as Manning scolded himself on the sideline after a loose pass ended up as his second interception on the day. But as the end neared, that familiar calm fell upon him. He took hold of the Bengals and choked the hope out of them with a two-minute drill to start the fourth quarter. Denver was never again in danger of losing.

The Broncos are 5-3 now. With apologies to Houston, Denver's in-progress offence and fully functional defence make it the class of the AFC. What makes them something rather more than that is Manning's third act being written here.

We are in the midst of watching something incredible — a legend being created in real time. If Manning rides his weakening arm and this strengthening team to a third Super Bowl, it will be time to begin settling up the debate.

He is the greatest not just because of his physicality. He's a great deal more than just a sportsman. He's an archetype — the fussy perfectionist; the athletic master craftsman; and the last Republican the rest of us can still love in an election year.

He's on the cusp of becoming the greatest ever and has done it at the very end, just as he was about to slip out quietly. That may be his greatest trick of all.

# Broncos guard Chris Kuper has severe ankle sprain

Michael David Smith  
ProFootballTalk.com  
November 5, 2012

Broncos starting guard Chris Kuper is injured again.

Kuper, who suffered a dislocated ankle in January and a broken forearm in August, suffered what is being termed a severe ankle sprain on Sunday in Cincinnati, the *Denver Post* reports.

There's no word yet on how much time Kuper will miss, although an X-ray revealed that he doesn't have any broken bones, and the indications are that the Broncos do expect him back before the season ends.

Manny Ramirez, who started at Kuper's guard spot for the first month of the season while Kuper was recovering, will return to the starting lineup for as long as Kuper is out.

# Next Day Notebook: Protecting Peyton

Sam Davis  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 5, 2012

Peyton Manning hasn't been sacked in three games, Denver begins to size up the Panthers' read-option attack, Trindon Holliday revisits his touchdown return and John Fox provides an injury update.

**ENGLEWOOD, Colo.** -- On Sunday, Peyton Manning's jersey left Cincinnati just as white as it was prior to the matchup with the sack-hungry Bengals.

Not only was Manning not sacked in Sunday afternoon's win at Cincinnati, he wasn't even hit. It was the third straight game the Broncos have kept the quarterback from being sacked, marking the fourth time Denver has accomplished such a streak and the first time since 2008.

Tight end Joel Dreessen believes it's a combination of several different factors that have led to great protection for Manning.

"It's the ball getting out on time, which Peyton is doing a great job with," Dreessen said. "The wide receivers know when to adjust their routes to the hot routes. And obviously, (the front five) are doing a great job of blocking those guys up front. Tight ends and running backs, too, because we're asked to hold up in pass protection a lot."

In each of the two contests before Cincinnati, Manning was hit just once.

Another contributor to the quarterback's safety, Dreessen said, is the play-action pass. By faking the run and selling the defense on it - even if it's just a split second - it keeps the opponent from getting a good jump on his pass rush.

"Any time you can get a little play-action sell, those special pass-rushers aren't just teeing off on you," Dreessen said. "They can't just use the moves they work on over and over again. The play-action stuff definitely helps."

## **PANTHERS' READ-OPTION ATTACK FAMILIAR TO FOX**

With a dynamic, dual-threat quarterback under center, the Carolina Panthers use a read-option offensive attack that Head Coach John Fox believes is similar to what the Broncos used last year.

The prior knowledge of that type of offense, Fox believes will fare well come Sunday.

"Those are things that will help us in our preparation," Fox said of the team's experience using the read-option. "They've got some gifted players on offense."

Still, containing Cam Newton is a challenge that Fox doesn't take lightly. Last year's NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year is coming off one of his most efficient games of the year, compiling 238 all-purpose yards, two touchdowns and zero turnovers in a win at Washington.

The Broncos spent time evaluating Newton's tape from college in preparation for the 2011 draft, in which they held the No. 2 overall selection. Newton went No. 1 overall to the Panthers, then the Broncos snagged Von Miller with the next pick.

"He's a terrific talent," Fox said about Newton. "He's big, strong, fast, and he's got a very strong arm. I think that was indicative of the kind of rookie season he had a year ago."

## **HOLLIDAY TO THE HOUSE**

Reflecting on his record-breaking 105-yard touchdown return that started the second half, wide receiver Trindon Holliday pointed out the opportunity that he saw on the play.

"They overplayed the outside," he said. "When I saw the seam in the inside, I just cut it up in the inside of the seam and that was it."

Once Holliday made the cut inside, the "first wave" of defenders was behind him. That's when he broke it to the sideline and knew nobody was keeping him from the end zone.

"I saw that one of my guys had made a block on the kicker, so I just pushed it to the outside and that was it," Holliday recalled.

In one play, the Broncos' waiver-wire acquisition from a month ago proved to be a wise one. Fox believes the team will continue to reap the benefits of signing the second-year player as he continues to improve throughout the year.

"I think our personnel department did a great job of putting in a claim and we were fortunate enough to get him," Fox said. "I think he'll just continue to get better as we move forward, whether it's punts or kicks."

## **INJURY UPDATE**

On Monday, Fox updated the status of three Broncos who were hurt during the Cincinnati game.

Tight end Jacob Tamme and wide receiver Demaryius Thomas each left the game at some point on Sunday but returned soon after.

Fox said that both players "will be fine" as he called Tamme's injury a "hip bruise" and Thomas' a "knee bruise."

Guard Chris Kuper, who suffered an ankle injury, was the only Bronco to leave the game and not return. Fox confirmed that Kuper has no broken bones.

"It was good to see it was not as serious as the other injuries he's had this season," Fox said. "Kup is such a great guy. He's well-liked by his teammates, who voted him captain. He's had a bad string of some luck here lately."

Kuper's status will be updated after Wednesday's practice.

# Inside the Numbers: Week 9

Stuart Zaas  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 5, 2012

## **-2**

Over the past two games, Broncos opponents have returned four punts for a total of -2 yards. Punter Britton Colquitt ranks third in the NFL with a 43.1 net-punting average this season, and is one of five players to post 15-or-more punts inside the 20 with three-or-fewer touchbacks. Colquitt leads the league with opponents averaging just 3.6 yards per punt return in 2012.

## **3**

The Broncos offensive line didn't allow a sack for the third consecutive game, marking just the fourth time in team history that the line has kept the quarterback clean for three straight games. It is the first such streak since the 2008 season.

Linebacker Von Miller set a career high with three sacks against fellow second-year player Andy Dalton. Miller is now tied with Texans defensive end J.J. Watt for the NFL lead with 17 tackles for a loss through Week 9 of the 2012 season.

## **7**

Wide receiver Eric Decker is tied for first in the NFL with seven receiving touchdowns since Week 4 of the 2012 season. He caught eight passes for 99 yards with two touchdowns at Cincinnati, tying for the most receptions and touchdowns among AFC players in Week 9. Sunday marked the fifth consecutive contest with at least one receiving touchdown for Decker, which is one shy of the Broncos' all-time record. He now has 16 career receiving touchdowns, which ties him for the most receiving scores by a Bronco during his first three professional seasons (Lionel Taylor, 1960-61).

## **14**

Wesley Woodyard finished with a game-high 14 tackles in Denver's win at Cincinnati. Woodyard now has 72 tackles on the season according to press box totals, which ranks eighth in the NFL through Week 9.

## **15**

Linebacker Von Miller and defensive end Elvis Dumervil have combined for 15 sacks through Week 9, which leads all pass-rush duos in the NFL. Miller is tied for second in the NFL with 9 sacks on the season.

## **16.5**

Tight end Joel Dreessen ranks second among NFL tight ends in percentage of catches resulting in touchdowns (16.5% / 14-of-85) since 2010 (min. 30 rec.). He caught a 1-yard touchdown pass from quarterback Peyton Manning that proved to be the game-winning score against the Bengals.

**33**

Cornerback Champ Bailey intercepted his 33rd pass as a Denver Bronco to move into a tie with Mike Harden for fifth-most in franchise history. It marked the 51st career pick for the 11-time Pro Bowler, which ranks third in the NFL since his rookie year in 1999.

**100**

Sunday's win at Cincinnati marked the 100th career regular-season victory for center Dan Koppen. He is now 100-28 in his career, with that .781 winning percentage ranking first all-time among offensive linemen.

**105**

Wide receiver Trindon Holliday took the opening kickoff of the second half 105 yards for a touchdown to mark the longest play in Broncos history. It was his first career touchdown and the first kick return touchdown for the Broncos since the 2010 season.

**1,339**

Decker and fellow third-year receiver Demaryius Thomas have combined to form the NFL's top receiving duo with 1,339 combined yards through Week 9.

# Fox Preparing for Return to Carolina

Tyler Everett  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 5, 2012

The 5-3 Broncos kick off the second half of their season in a familiar place for Head Coach John Fox.

This Sunday, the team travels to Carolina – where Fox was head coach from 2002 to 2010 – to take on the 2-6 Panthers in Week 10.

“I have a lot of great relationships there,” Fox said. “It was the place that gave me my first opportunity as a head coach, so I’ll always be indebted for that. I still own a home there. Some of my sons live that way, so it will be good to be back. But it’s, again, the NFL and this game’s only fun when you’re winning.”

During his nine seasons at the helm in Carolina, he led the team to 73 regular-season wins and three playoff appearances, including a trip to Super Bowl XXXVIII after the 2003 season and an appearance in the 2005 NFC Championship game. But fond memories aside, Fox said Sunday’s game is just like any other.

Fox said he won’t let his Carolina connection have an affect on preparations for Sunday’s game as the Broncos look for their fourth consecutive victory.

“It’s the most important game because it’s the next one,” Fox said. “You don’t get but 16 of these opportunities, and right now we’re 5-3. The only guarantee we have is 5-11. It’ll be just like any week, from the standpoint it’s the Denver Broncos versus the Carolina Panthers at their place. That’s the only real thing I know. How well we prepare will determine some of that outcome.”