

# Tough assignments await Broncos' Ramirez

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 8, 2012

Manny Ramirez is a shy guy.

At least around reporters. He declined an interview request Wednesday, as he has all season. But around defensive tackles? Those he will take on.

Ramirez will be taking on a good one Sunday in Dwan Edwards, an eight-year veteran who already has a career-best five sacks through eight games in his first season with the Carolina Panthers.

Ramirez will replace the injured Chris Kuper at right guard Sunday when the Broncos begin the second half of the season at Carolina.

At least the challenge is not the first for Ramirez. He started the first five games this season in place of Kuper, who was out with a broken left forearm.

"He's a very good player," Kuper said of his replacement. "Nothing to worry about."

There has to be some concern, because Kuper is one of the best interior pass protectors in the league. In the three games Kuper started, Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning never was sacked. In the five games Kuper didn't play, Manning was sacked 10 times.

Not that Kuper was the only reason Manning stayed clean in the previous three games and Ramirez was the problem in the first five.

"There have been some different guys in there playing, and whoever's been in there stepped up to the plate, so I'm grateful for their effort," Manning said. "Those guys practice well. We spend a lot of time together talking during meetings, watching film together. The one thing between a quarterback and his offensive line is constant communication. You're always talking. We treat practice like a game, treat meetings like a game where we're constantly talking, trying to be on the same page, especially when you play on the road."

Cam is no Tebow (maybe a little.) Integrating Ramirez back into the offensive line will be one factor in the game between the Broncos and Panthers on Sunday. Figuring out how to stop the dual threat athlete that is Panthers quarterback Cam Newton is another.

The Broncos hope their time running the spread option offense with Tim Tebow last season will help them against Newton. Difference is, Newton is a more capable passer, a larger and faster runner. The Panthers run some read option plays for Newton.

"I like to think we were doing it first," Panthers coach Ron Rivera said in a conference call with the Denver media Wednesday, "but I think some of the things that we do are similar to what the Broncos were doing last year with Tim Tebow. I think we line up and do some more conventional stuff as opposed to constantly using that zone read scheme that Tim ran so well for Denver."

Footnotes. Broncos cornerback Tracy Porter was again absent from practice Wednesday because of symptoms relating to a summer seizure. ... Carolina isn't just John Fox's former team. Most of his current Broncos' staff worked there too, including his three coordinators (Mike McCoy, Jack Del Rio, Jeff Rodgers), his offensive line coach (Dave Magazu), secondary (Ron Milus), receivers (Tyke Tolbert), linebackers (Richard Smith) and assistant secondary (Sam Garnes).

# Wide receiver Eric Decker trending up in Broncos offense

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
November 8, 2012

This may be the first of Eric Decker's three seasons in the NFL when he is on track to be all he can be as a wide receiver. His 46 receptions and seven touchdowns lead the Broncos, and his seven scores have come over the past five games. He's doing all this after carrying a large question mark while recovering from a left foot injury when he arrived in Denver in 2010 as a third-round draft pick.

"It wasn't until my second year here I started to feel good, had my strength, that I wasn't thinking about it, it wasn't hurting after practice," Decker said. "It was about a year and a half after the injury."

The injury ended Decker's final season at Minnesota and pushed him down, or off, some team's draft boards. He had suffered a Linsfranc injury — a fracture or dislocation of the small bones in the mid-foot — in the fifth game of his senior season with the Gophers, a season he still finished as his team's leader in receptions, receiving yards and touchdowns.

It's an injury that can be notoriously tricky to treat and heal, especially at a position where speed and quickness are at a premium. Decker still was recovering when the Broncos made him the 87th pick of the draft, and still trying to regain his form as his second NFL season opened in 2011.

"Reading studies (after a surgery), there was mixed results as far as people coming back or not coming back," Decker said. "It was something obviously on my mind, but I knew that I couldn't control that, so what I had to do was key in on my rehab and making sure I was doing what the doctors told me to do, what the training staff told me to do and just focus on that."

He had a difficult rookie season, catching only six passes. "You try to find your way with a new team, try to establish yourself, (but you've) got the foot injury and I'm definitely not as strong, not as fast, afraid I'm going to hurt it, a lot of things."

Decker, 6-foot-3, 218 pounds, finished with 44 receptions last season and felt better as the season progressed. However, his production went down after a strong start. Thirty of his receptions came before the Broncos went to a read-option offense with Tim Tebow at quarterback. Decker had only 14 receptions over the final nine games. This season, good health, a future Hall of Famer at quarterback in Peyton Manning and the new offensive playbook that came with him have converged for a possible 1,000-yard season.

With half a season to play, Decker's 16 career touchdowns in his first three seasons are more than any player the team has signed as a rookie.

"Right now, I see a big body, a big athlete, a good football player, a smart football player who understands what Peyton is looking for, what he's looking at," Carolina Panthers coach Ron Rivera said. "I think any time you have that rapport with a quarterback and a receiver, you can have that success."

Decker was one of the regulars who participated in workouts with Manning after Manning signed with Denver and before the players were allowed to practice at the team's Dove Valley complex.

Manning has tried to work as often as possible, in as many situations as possible, with all of the Broncos' receivers in order to build rapport.

Over the course of the season's first half, Manning has targeted Decker a team-leading 69 times, with Demaryius Thomas second at 65.

The two also lead all receiving duos in the league with a combined 1,339 yards — 756 for Thomas and 583 for Decker.

"Experience is your best teacher," Manning said. "You learn what certain guys like as a receiver, how his body moves, when he's going to come out of a break. The more repetitions the better."

"I think, obviously, all the work you do — individually, extra, as a team — has paid off," Decker said. "Peyton grabs everybody, and we all work on it together. That's something that's finally paying off."

"I think any relationship, whether it's a significant other or a teammate, the more time it gets, it helps."

### **More to come**

*Broncos wide receiver Eric Decker, who has seven touchdown receptions in the past five games, has more touchdowns in his first three years with the franchise than any player the Broncos signed as a rookie. He still has eight games remaining in his third season:*

### **Player: TDs (three years)**

Eric Decker: 16

Brandon Marshall: 15

Rod Smith: 15

Riley Odoms: 14

*Source: Denver Broncos*

# Peyton Manning says Panthers have one of NFL's most improved defenses

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
November 8, 2012

Since the 8-0 Falcons edged the Panthers 30-28 on Sept. 30 in the Georgia Dome, the Carolina Panthers defense has slugged it out just fine despite having two starters — cornerback Chris Gamble and linebacker Jon Beason — on injured reserve.

The Panthers are indeed 1-3 over their last four games, but there isn't a blowout among the three losses. They just haven't had the finishing kick when they've needed it. They've had a four-point loss to the Seahawks (5-4), a five-point loss to the Cowboys (3-5) and a one-point loss to Chicago (7-1).

In those last four games, the Panthers are fifth in the league in points allowed per game at 17.9. And they have been particularly effective limiting opposing passers.

Of course, the Panthers haven't faced the likes of Peyton Manning over their last month of work. The Falcons' Matt Ryan has been to the Pro Bowl. Jay Cutler has been to the Pro Bowl. But those two QBs are not Manning when it comes to deciphering a defense.

The last quarterback the Panthers have faced who has the ability to carve a defensive game plan like Peyton Manning was one Eli Manning.

Eli Manning finished 27-of-35 passing for 288 yards with a touchdown Sept. 20 in the Giants' 36-7 victory over the Panthers. And it's a good bet Eli Manning will share a thought or two with Peyton Manning this week about what the Panthers defense had to offer.

But overall, the Panthers have been able to overcome the losses of Beason and Gamble with some strategic efforts to go with a productive rookie. Rookie Luke Kuechly, the ninth pick of last April's draft, moved from weakside linebacker to middle linebacker when Beason went to injured reserve.

He's averaged just over 15 tackles a game since he entered the starting lineup and currently is on pace to break the team's single-season record for tackles.

"He's been outstanding," said Panthers coach Ron Rivera. "... He really has started to step up and emerged as that leader."

Opposing scouts say, like most young linebackers, Kuechly will react too strongly to play action at times. Quarterbacks have found some room behind him as a result of that tendency in the passing game. Given there is no one better in the NFL at play action than Peyton Manning, expect a good dose Sunday as the Broncos throw the ball out of some run looks.

The Panthers, because they have a rookie at one cornerback spot in Josh Morgan and a backup at the other in Captain Munnerlyn, also play far more zone coverages in the secondary than they will lock up in man-to-man on the outside receivers. So, Peyton Manning will have to play with some patience, and the receivers will have to find the available gaps.

It also means the Panthers generate much of their pass rush with four-man looks, putting seven into coverage. They still have reached opposing quarterbacks in streaks as Charles Johnson had 3 ½ of his 7 ½ sacks this season in one game, while Greg Hardy had three of his 6 ½ sacks in one game this season.

Rivera attributed the team's improved play in the defensive front to the work defensive tackles Dwan Edwards and Ron Edwards have done so far.

"Last year we didn't have that inside push, this year we do," Rivera said. "The guys inside have been outstanding. If the quarterback can't step up, he can't avoid that hard outside rush that we're getting on the edge," Rivera said. "It's not about what those two have done, it's about what our front has done as a group."

Peyton Manning said Wednesday he believes the Panthers' record is deceiving on many levels, one of those being the team's defensive improvement over the last five weeks.

# Panthers' Ron Rivera hopes team can find winning way vs. Broncos

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
November 8, 2012

Consider it an honest answer to a difficult question.

Panthers coach Ron Rivera, who was a defensive coordinator for the Chargers and Bears before he took over in Carolina, was asked how a team can stop Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning.

"Boy, I tell you what, hope he has a bad day," Rivera said. "He is who he is."

Rivera has a 2-6 team set to face Manning and the Broncos in Charlotte, N.C., Sunday, that has a story behind the football headlines. The Panthers are 1-5 in their past six games, a stretch that included a five-game losing streak before last weekend's victory over the Redskins. But their past four losses have been decided by a combined 12 points, including a one-point loss to the now 7-1 Bears when the Panthers failed to hold a 19-7 lead in the fourth quarter.

"And if this doesn't show it to you, prove to you, just how close the margin is, it's sickening," Rivera said. "You watch our last five games, obviously we won the last one, but the previous four we lost it comes down to a couple of plays."

Rivera said he believes the Panthers have kicked too many field goals when they've had chances for touchdowns and been subpar on third down, both offensively and defensively, in the losses.

"Believe me, it's great to win, it takes a lot of the pressure off, but we're right back to work getting ready for this one," Rivera said.

The Broncos haven't played in Charlotte since 2008 when a John Fox-coached Panthers team beat the Broncos, 30-0.

# Thursday's NFL game: Colts at Jaguars

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
November 8, 2012

## **Colts (5-3) at Jaguars (1-7) 6:20 p.m., NFL Network**

**The skinny:** The Jaguars have won the last three games between these two AFC South rivals, including this season as well as the 2011 season finale. But Colts quarterback Andrew Luck isn't just some rookie in his third NFL start like he was the last time the Jaguars saw him.

No, Luck is now a full-blown prodigy who has the Colts in the playoff discussion with four wins in the last five games since that loss to the Jaguars. Luck is also coming off a game in which he threw for a rookie-record 433 yards last Sunday in a win over the Miami Dolphins.

Luck's four 300-yard passing games this season have tied Peyton Manning's rookie franchise record, set in 1998.

**The difference will be:** Can the Jaguars muster any sort of offense? Jacksonville continues to reside at the bottom of the league rankings in every major offensive category.

They are last in yards per game (254.4), last in points per game (14.6), last in passing yards per game (170.4) and 29th in rushing yards per game (84.0). And in what may be the worst bit of bad news in all of it is the Jacksonville defense is also last in the league in sacks with eight.

If they can't rattle Luck or match him touchdown for touchdown, that sets up to be a tough night.

**The call:** Colts 23-12.

# Broncos' Chris Gronkowski has played less than expected on offense

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
November 8, 2012

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

**Q:** I am really confused why (fullback Chris) Gronkowski was acquired and has seen no playing time. I was happy that (the Broncos) got a fullback to help with short-yardage and goal-line situations, but he has not been used, what gives?

**A:** Robert, in part, Gronkowski was acquired in an offseason trade by the Broncos because they felt they had a surplus of cornerbacks and that Cassius Vaughn wasn't going to make their roster when things were all said and done.

So, for a player they most likely would have cut in Vaughn, the Broncos were able to acquire Gronkowski from the Colts. And the Broncos certainly believed Gronkowski could have an impact as their fullback when they made the trade.

The two-back formation is still very much a part of their playbook. And the Broncos, despite Gronkowski's limited duty on offense thus far, have still played in a two-back set far more than the Colts did in Peyton Manning's tenure as starting quarterback in Indianapolis.

But Gronkowski was also considered a quality addition by the Broncos because of his abilities on special teams. He has played 150 snaps on special teams thus far, or 65.5 percent of the team's plays this season on those units.

Only safety David Bruton, with 163 special teams snaps in the Broncos' first eight games, has played more on those units than Gronkowski. So, Gronkowski has a prominent role there, so much so he would be considered a key part of the way the Broncos do things there.

Offensively, however, he has played less than expected and less than the Broncos outlined when the team was going through its offseason workouts and training camp. Gronkowski has played just 29 offensive snaps this season, including just two against the Bengals last Sunday and three snaps on offense against San Diego.

He has not played more than six snaps on offense in any game this season and hasn't played six snaps since the season opener against the Steelers.

Some of that is a function of the Broncos being in severe catch-up mode against the Falcons, Texans, Patriots and Chargers — half of the team's games. Those situations are not conducive to the traditional two-back offense.

And when the Broncos feel like they are in comeback mode, they usually go right to a three-receiver look almost exclusively. They've also juggled some of their personnel looks in some of their power formations as well.

The first adjustment being the Broncos like tight end Virgil Green's potential as a receiver and they like his progress as a blocker. Since Green's return from a four-game suspension for violating the league's policy on performance-enhancing drugs in Week 5, the Broncos have steadily worked him into more and more things.

Green played one play on offense in his first game back, five in his second game back, followed by 34 against the Saints and 13 against the Bengals.

In Cincinnati this past Sunday, that included a selection of snaps when Green lined up as the fullback in the backfield, a total that included four plays combined in back-to-back possessions in the second quarter.

On those four plays the Broncos threw the ball twice and ran the ball twice, so it's obviously a look where they think it gives them some kind of versatility. It's also clear they believe Green is a better receiver in that situation than Gronkowski and a good enough blocker to make it work.

When the Broncos decision-makers have talked about Green, they have often talked about how much his blocking has improved since he arrived as a draft pick in 2011.

And while the Broncos haven't shown it much this year, they did use another two-back look for one play in Cincinnati that affects Gronkowski's potential playing time as well. They lined up Willis McGahee and Ronnie Hillman, the team's top two running backs, in the same formation when the Broncos were forced to start a drive at their own 1-yard line Sunday. McGahee carried the ball for two yards on the play.

They went right to a two-TE look on the next play. Last season, they often put Knowshon Moreno in the same backfield as McGahee. If they do it more and more with Hillman this year, that will continue to limit Gronkowski's snaps on offense.

# Broncos' Peyton Manning appreciative of offensive line sack streak

Tom Kensler  
The Denver Post  
November 8, 2012

Nobody had to remind Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning on Wednesday that Denver has not allowed a sack during the past three games.

"I appreciate the effort," Manning said of Denver's offensive line. "Certainly every quarterback appreciates when you don't get sacked. And I really didn't get hit a whole lot against Cincinnati.

"I appreciate the effort those guys have made week after week. (Because of injuries) they've used some different guys. And whoever is in there has stepped up to the plate."

Manning said the hard work in practice has paid off.

"We spend a lot of time together in practice and in watching film together," he said. "The important thing between a quarterback and the offensive line is constant communication.

"So we treat practice like a game, meetings like a game. We talk and try to be on the same page, especially when you're going to play on the road (with the crowd noise)."

Denver's upcoming opponent, Carolina, ranks second in the NFC in sacks per play so it may be strength vs. strength on Sunday in Charlotte.

"They have active guys up front," Manning said. "And most of their sacks have come when they (just) rushed four, which tells you something. I think we have a real challenge up front running the ball and pass protecting."

# **Broncos' Tracy Porter absent Wednesday from practice**

Tom Kensler  
The Denver Post  
November 7, 2012

Broncos cornerback Tracy Porter was absent from the early portion of practice Wednesday that was open to the media.

Porter, in his first season with the Broncos after leaving New Orleans and signing with Denver as an unrestricted free agent, has been inactive for the past three games and has not played since the Oct. 7 game at New England.

A star of the season-opening victory against Pittsburgh with a 43-yard interception return for a touchdown with 1:58 to play, Porter has undergone medical tests after showing similar symptoms to those he had before suffering a seizure in August.

Porter was a starter in four of the Broncos' first five games.

# Lunch Special: Draft your own executive order for the betterment of sports nation

Patrick Saunders  
The Denver Post  
November 7, 2012

Suppose you woke up this Wednesday morning and were president.

No, not *The President*. I wouldn't wish the weight of that world on you.

Rather, I'm talking about the United States of American Sports. Given the power, what would you change? I'm not talking about major, dramatic changes. That would require overhauling our sports constitutions.

Rather, I'm talking about a tweak here, a nip and tuck there. Think of the changes as executive orders, issued to eliminate stuff that bugs you.

Here's my initial list. Feel free to disagree. Chime in with executive orders of your own. After all, this is a democracy.

- In the event of a strike or lockout, ticket prices shall be reduced should the season resume.

For example, the current NHL lockout is now in Day 53, and 326 games have been lost. The product is losing value by the day. Ticket prices should reflect that when, or if, the players return to the ice.

- No beer served at a sporting event shall cost more than \$5, no hot dog shall cost more than \$2.50, and the price of popcorn can never rise above \$1.
- Eliminate "the wave" at Major League Baseball games. It has nothing to do with the play on the field and is a major distraction for those who are actually watching the game.

An exception can be made for "fireworks games" when many fans are attending the game for the pyrotechnics, not the baseball.

- No defensive player is allowed to do his "sack dance" if his team is trailing by 10 or more points. Enough said.
- Limit the number of times a hitter can back out of the batter's box. Baseball games are getting longer and longer. It's getting ridiculous and tedious. It drives me crazy when the batter steps out after every pitch to adjust his batting gloves, helmet and crotch area.

- Limit the number of times a pitcher can step off the mound, adjust his uniform, step off the rubber, go to the rosin bag and wipe sweat off his brow. Just throw the dang ball!
- Sideline reporters at football games are hereby forbidden from asking coaches questions at halftime.

Here's an example of something that will no longer be tolerated: The breathless reporter, usually an attractive female, runs down the coach and breathlessly asks, "Coach, your team is down by three touchdowns, how do you come back from that deficit? How do you restore their confidence?" To which the coach glares, bites his tongue and mumbles a cliché before heading into the locker room.

- Neon green will no longer be allowed in uniforms. It must be a Northwest thing, but both the Oregon Ducks and Seattle Seahawks have incorporated the gaudy color into their uniforms. It's just plain ugly. Kind of like parachute pants from the '80s. For sure, like, totally, the color must be banned.

OK, it's your turn to issue some executive sports orders of your own.

# **Chargers not guilty but fined \$20,000 for sticky towel against Broncos**

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 7, 2012

The NFL determined the San Diego Chargers did not cheat when they used a towel with a tacky-like substance during their Monday night game against the Broncos on Oct. 15.

The league discovered many clubs were using the towel. The Chargers were fined \$20,000, though, for not completely cooperating with officials when asked for the towel during the game. And no team can use the sticky towel from now on.

Whatever. I'm all for the slap on the wrist.

All the gouging, scratching, tackling, blocking, head-butting, cutting, grabbing and high-speed collisions that goes on in football, all the sticky gloves, skin-tight undergarments and eye black — and a sticky towel gives a team a competitive advantage? Much was made about something that doesn't mean very much.

# **Broncos' Jacob Tamme says Peyton Manning "is the same guy" since before surgery**

Tom Kensler  
The Denver Post  
November 7, 2012

Speaking with reporters Wednesday, Broncos tight end Jacob Tamme was, in no surprise, asked about Peyton Manning.

They go back a ways.

Tamme is in his first season in a Broncos uniform. Before that, he played four seasons at Indianapolis and caught 67 passes from Manning in 2010. Manning sat out the 2011 season with neck surgeries.

"I expected Peyton to be the same (after missing a season), and that's what he's been," Tamme said. "He's the same guy. Always pushing himself. Always pushing his teammates to do our best. And that's what I've seen."

Tamme said the Broncos' slow start (winning two of the first five games) was not due to Manning being rusty.

"I think as a whole, we were trying to figure out what to do as an offense," Tamme said. "We're still kind of doing that, but we're getting into a little groove. We have to keep preparing for Sundays, and if we stay in that groove, we'll be pretty good."

# **Broncos returner Holliday named AFC special-teams player of week**

Tom Kensler  
The Denver Post  
November 7, 2012

Weekly and monthly individual honors tend to follow team success, and that's been the case recently for the Broncos.

On Wednesday, Broncos return specialist Trindon Holliday was named AFC special-teams player of the week after setting a franchise record Sunday with a 105-yard kickoff return at Cincinnati.

A week earlier, Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning was named AFC offensive player of the month and Denver linebacker Wesley Woodyard was named AFC defensive player of the week.

# Holliday makes fast impact for Broncos

Eddie Pells  
Associated Press  
November 7, 2012

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — The linebacker sprawled out and barely got a hand on Trindon Holliday.

Not enough of a hand.

Eight seconds later, Holliday was gone. The NFL's shortest — and quite possibly fastest — player says he has never been caught from behind and it didn't come close to happening last Sunday, either. The 105-yard kickoff return for a touchdown against Cincinnati went down as the longest play in Broncos history.

"After I broke the first wave, and then I saw that one of my guys had made a block on the kicker, I just pushed it to the outside and that was it," Holliday said.

This was, actually, the fourth time the 5-foot-5 Holliday had returned a kick for a score this year. The first three came in the preseason with the Houston Texans, which is why the second-year player made the team.

But when the regular season started, Houston struggled in its return game. It is currently ranked last in the NFL in kickoff returns. Holliday's lack of versatility — at 5-5, he can't really be an effective receiver — didn't help his cause, and on Oct. 10, the Texans had to cut ties with their sixth-round draft pick from 2011.

"By no means is it a statement that what we thought of Trindon," Texans coach Gary Kubiak said on the day they cut him.

The Broncos, still in the hunt for a bona fide returner after losing Eddie Royal to free agency in the offseason, knew about Holliday because they had prepared to play the Texans in September. They decided to take a chance.

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

Make no mistake, there is room for improvement.

The first time Holliday touched the ball for the Broncos, a teammate blocked an opponent into his line of vision and Holliday muffed a punt, which led to a field goal for San Diego. That was the game in which the Chargers took a 24-0 lead but the Broncos rallied for the win.

Only a few minutes after Holliday's big return against the Bengals last Sunday, he and Lance Ball got crossed up on a kickoff that bounced at the 3-yard line and checked up. The Broncos started that drive from their 1.

"It was poor judgment on that one," Holliday said.

Excusable, however, especially considering the way he can change a game.

"He's obviously got some explosive capabilities," Peyton Manning said.

As a college recruit, Holliday's 40 times were so fast — he once cracked 4.3 in high-top basketball shoes — that stories circulated of coaches recalibrating their stopwatches to make sure they were reading things right.

In 2007, Holliday finished second in the 100 meters to Tyson Gay at U.S. track and field championships. He could have gone to world championships, but instead chose to attend LSU, where he returned four kicks for touchdowns and won the NCAA title at 100 meters in 2009.

His winning time at NAAs, 10 seconds flat, made him the fastest player to ever play college football — faster than Willie Gault, Herschel Walker and "Bullet" Bob Hayes, the receiver who gets much of the credit for forcing NFL defenses to start playing zone.

Players with that kind of speed almost always get a chance if they decide to go the football route, and instead of pursuing a track career, Holliday tried for the NFL.

Among the problems return specialists face these days, however, is a drastically reduced number of opportunities.

In an attempt to reduce injuries caused by players sprinting the full length of the field on special teams, the NFL moved kickoffs up five yards at the start of 2011.

That year, the number of kickoffs returned in the league fell from 2,033 to 1,375 — by 32 percent, according to STATS LLC. Halfway through 2012, the league is on pace for 1,292 returns.

Not surprisingly, the number of game-changing kickoff returns, and returners, has decreased dramatically, as well. There were 23 kickoff returns for touchdowns and 57 others into opponents' territory in 2010 but only nine TDs and 27 across the 50 in 2011. Holliday's was the seventh return for a touchdown in 2012, as the season reaches its halfway point.

The 105-yard sprint was Holliday's first NFL touchdown.

"I think it can come in bunches," he said.

The Carolina Panthers are next, Sunday in Charlotte.

"He's a guy we liked and looked at at one time, too," Panthers coach Ron Rivera said. "But when he was on the waiver wire, we didn't have room and I think Denver did a nice job. He's shown he was explosive last week. And now I've got an upset stomach having to worry about him, as well."

Notes: WR Eric Decker (thigh) was limited in practice. He joined WRs Brandon Stokley (knee) and Demaryius Thomas (knee) on the injury report, though Stokley and Thomas each participated fully. ... CB Tracy Porter missed practice for medical reasons related to seizures he had during the summer. ... LB Von Miller needs half a sack to tie DEs Elvis Dumervil and Rulon Jones for the most (21) by a Bronco over his first two seasons.

# Newton looks to borrow page from Manning's book

Steve Reed  
Associated Press  
November 7, 2012

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) — Cam Newton knows he can learn a thing or two from Peyton Manning, beginning with his ability to win close football games.

With his swagger back after outplaying one of the NFL's bright young quarterbacks last week in Robert Griffin III, Newton faces one of the all-time great signal-callers Sunday when the Panthers host Manning and the Denver Broncos.

Manning closes out games better than anyone — something the second-year Carolina QB has struggled to do.

Newton said Manning is "transcending into a God of the game. ... He's a Hall of Fame quarterback and the records he's set are extraordinary."

Last week against Cincinnati, Manning engineered his 48th game-winning drive in the fourth quarter or overtime, surpassing Dan Marino for the most in NFL history — after bringing the Broncos back from a 20-17.

"When we get up in a game it's like having a coach out there," Broncos linebacker Von Miller said of Manning. "Sometimes you're on teams where it's a close game and the quarterback throws the ball and you kind of hold your breath. But when Peyton is out there we have full confidence in him."

Newton would like his teammates to have that same confidence in him when the game is on the line.

The Panthers lost four straight games after leading in the fourth quarter before finally snapping that streak last week by holding off the Washington Redskins 21-13.

But Newton wasn't exactly pleased with how the Panthers won it.

Carolina led by 15 in the fourth quarter when the offense went into a bit of a funk and failed to pick up a key first down when it had a chance to bury the Redskins and seal the win.

"I have to do a better job of finishing," Newton said. "There are things we as a team have to do better. ... I think it is more our psyche than anything. I think it's more mental than physical."

He knows the Panthers can ill afford any of their fourth quarter lulls against Manning and company.

It seems no lead is safe against the Broncos, who have outscored their opponents 103-23 in the fourth quarter.

At the midway point of the season, neither Carolina's numbers nor his own stats are what Newton would have liked. Carolina owns the worst record in the NFC at 2-6 and Newton ranks 29th in the league with a quarterback rating of 77.7.

While he leads the Panthers in rushing with 347 yards and four touchdowns, he sees plenty of room for improvement. Newton has fumbled eight times this year, losing it three times. And he's thrown more interceptions (8) than touchdown passes (6).

"I have to protect the ball better, running the football and throwing it," Newton said.

Miller, who was drafted second overall in the 2011 NFL draft one spot behind Newton, has no doubt Newton will figure it out.

He considers Newton one of the best quarterbacks in the game, even calling himself "one of Cam's biggest fans."

"Coming out (in the draft) with him last year I saw him have to fight through all of that adversity and battle all of the naysayers," Miller said. "But to be able to throw the ball and run the ball and being the overall superstar that he is, if I had children that wanted to play quarterback I would tell them to watch Cam Newton."

As players, Manning and Newton couldn't be much different.

Manning has made his living off a strong arm and his ability to read defenses, something Newton admits he has to improve upon for the Panthers to take the next step.

"I have to get better just at making better decisions as far as getting through reads and checking the football down," Newton said. "It's a steady process that has to happen. It's a constant reminder that has to be in my head."

"Even though I go into the game focusing on that I have to remember it when it comes to, say, the third play of the third quarter for example."

# Denver at Carolina

Associated Press  
November 7, 2012

Peyton Manning has made all the offseason speculation surrounding whether he'd ever return to his MVP-form a distant memory.

Manning looks to direct the AFC West-leading Denver Broncos to a fourth straight win when they visit the Carolina Panthers on Sunday.

After missing the entire 2011 season due to several neck surgeries, Manning is putting together an MVP-caliber season for the Broncos (5-3).

"In his case, every time he goes out there, he's got a chance to do something special," said John Fox, who'll be facing the team he coached from 2002-10 for the first time.

The four-time league MVP came up nine yards short of his sixth consecutive 300-yard passing game when he went 27 of 35 with three touchdowns and two interceptions in last Sunday's 31-23 win in Cincinnati.

For the first time since 2004, Manning has thrown three touchdown passes in five straight contests, and if he can get two more Sunday, he'll surpass Dan Marino's total of 420 for second most in NFL history.

The 14-year veteran leads the NFL with a career-best 69.5 completion percentage and a 108.6 quarterback rating, and is on pace to throw 40 touchdowns.

As a result, Denver's receiver tandem of Eric Decker and Demaryius Thomas has shined. Decker has caught seven touchdown passes in his last five games, while Thomas ranks fourth in the NFL in receiving yards per game at 94.5.

"I can't emphasize enough what (Manning) means to all those guys," Fox said.

Although they've averaged 31.6 points over a 4-1 stretch, the Broncos could have trouble against a Carolina defense that has allowed one passing touchdown or less in seven of eight games.

The Panthers (2-6) have surrendered an average of 212.3 passing yards over their last four games, and haven't given up a 300-yard passing game since Matt Ryan put up 369 in a Falcons' win on Sept. 30.

"We've settled in defensively," Carolina coach Ron Rivera insisted. "We've found our intensity."

Denver's Willis McGahee looks for a bounce-back performance after managing 66 yards on 23 carries for a season-low 2.9 yards per attempt against the Bengals. He could find some room against a Carolina team that gave up 151 yards on the ground in last Sunday's 21-13 win over Washington.

The Panthers, who have the worst record in the NFC, hope to carry some momentum from last week's victory after finally closing out an opponent. Carolina led in the fourth quarter in three of its previous four games but wound up losing.

Cam Newton completed 13 of 23 passes for 201 yards against the Redskins and showed flashes of his sensational play from his rookie season by throwing for one touchdown and running in another to help his team break a five-game skid. He didn't turn the ball over for just the second time this season, and the Panthers improved to 7-1 when he doesn't have one. They're 1-15 when he has at least one turnover.

"Winning solves a lot of problems, and losing puts you under a microscope," receiver Steve Smith said.

Smith, who hauled in his first touchdown catch of the season last week, and the rest of the Carolina receivers face a tough test against the Broncos' stingy secondary.

Denver cornerbacks Chris Harris and Tony Carter have allowed just 23 completions in 59 attempts on the season. Carter is allowing a league-low completion percentage of just 28 (7 receptions in 25 attempts) among cornerbacks who have been targeted at least 15 times.

"We haven't had young corners play like this in a long time," said Champ Bailey, another one of the team's top corners. "You might get one here, one there. But two like this, it's hard to find that."

The Broncos haven't faced the Panthers since a 30-10 loss in 2008, their only defeat in three meetings.

# Secret of Peyton Manning's skill

Peter Keating  
ESPN The Magazine  
November 7, 2012

Last weekend, the great Peyton Manning led the Denver Broncos to a 31-23 win over the Cincinnati Bengals. Manning has taken the Broncos on three game-winning drives in the fourth quarter this season, and he leads the NFL with a Total Quarterback Rating (QBR) of 85.4; in fact, the gap between Manning and the league's No. 2 quarterback (Tom Brady) is greater than the difference between No. 2 and No. 5 (Aaron Rodgers).

The man is 36, coming off four neck surgeries and an entirely missed season. How the heck is he doing this?

Ask most fans and a good chunk of sports writers and you'll hear about Manning's intangibles -- his confidence, high expectations, leadership, love for the game, work ethic -- all kinds of things that many believe are critically important but can't find on traditional stat sheets.

Some numbers guys, the Richard Dawkins-types of the stats world, will argue that those factors don't matter much because their impact can't be measured. Nobody ever won a game by scoring an intangible touchdown. But the cool thing about advanced metrics is that we can track the specific effects that a player with particular mental or emotional strength has on his team. We can start, anyway. And the numbers say that three of Manning's traits are producing results for the Broncos that are very tangible indeed.

## **Discipline**

First, some context. When I began studying quarterback play, I assumed I would find that rushing yards are the most important aspect of quarterback performance that the traditional passer rating overlooks. I was wrong. From 2008 to 2010, the average starting quarterback added about half a point per 100 plays to his team by rushing or scrambling, and just a few quarterbacks added significantly to their offense by running the ball.

On the other hand, the combined impact of sacks, fumbles and penalties -- none of which factor into passer rating -- was much greater, an average of minus-4.91 points per 100 plays. As passing yards have increased in recent years, avoiding this category of plays -- maintaining ball discipline -- has grown even more important.

Now, check out the chart to the right. Manning actually gains points.

This is no coincidence. Manning led the league in avoiding ball-control errors from 2008 to 2010, losing just 0.81 points per 100 plays. (Eli Manning was fifth.) But it's pretty incredible: Peyton Manning never fumbles (OK, once this year), doesn't take avoidable sacks and induces penalties that are far worse for opponents than the ones he commits himself.

That's how disciplined Manning is. Add up his negative plays and he comes out positive.

## **Adaptability**

With the Indianapolis Colts, Manning became famous for running three-wideout offenses. In 2010, his final active season in Indianapolis, the Colts ran 762 plays out of three-WR formations, 18 percent more than any other team in the league.

Despite a role that's just as commanding in Denver, and the presence of longtime buddy and security blanket Brandon Stokley, Manning is distributing the ball far differently this season. The Broncos have used two or more tight ends on 35.9 percent of their plays, and Manning has passed 84 times out of those formations, almost as much as he did during the entire 2010 season.

Further, Manning's accuracy throwing outside the numbers declined sharply in his final days with the Colts, and so did the proportion of his attempts. In 2010, he completed 71.6 percent of 395 attempts inside the numbers but 57.6 percent of 243 attempts outside. Maybe his neck hurt already, his arm was tired, or he missed Marvin Harrison. But whatever was off, Manning has flipped the switch. This season, he is the top quarterback in the NFL throwing outside the numbers, completing 91 of 126 passes (72.2 percent) for 8.66 yards per attempt and nine touchdowns, all best in the league.

On an overlapping point, Manning actually had a lot of trouble tossing anything but short passes in 2010. On attempts of 11 to 20 yards, he was 68 for 131 (51.9 percent) with seven touchdowns and eight interceptions. On throws of 21 or more yards, he completed just 28.2 percent of his passes (20-for-71), again with more picks (six) than touchdowns (five). Manning's problems with the long ball led to a noticeable decline in his overall stats, which, combined with his injuries, led to various perfectly sensible projections that his downward trend would continue. Instead, he has posted a QBR of 97.9, fifth best in the NFL, on throws of 11 to 20 yards, and a QBR of 99.7, ranking third in the league, on attempts of more than 20 yards.

Manning seems to feel better than he has in years. But successful surgery doesn't guarantee success at the kind of overhaul he has put his game through. Neither does switching out Reggie Wayne, Austin Collie, Pierre Garcon and Jacob Tamme for Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker, Joel Dreessen and Jacob Tamme. We're watching an extraordinarily adaptable quarterback reconfigure his talent.

## **Cool**

Evaluating clutch performance is a dicey proposition that often leaves analysts chasing statistical ghosts. But there are two paths where great leaders can leave their tracks in the data. First, there is a strong predictable relationship, known as the Pythagorean expectation, between how many points a team scores and gives up and how many games it wins and loses.

Over the long haul, clubs shouldn't over- or underperform their expected winning percentage. If they do, it's probably a sign that the team is unusually good or bad in close games. During Manning's tenure with the Colts, Indianapolis exceeded its Pythagorean expectation again and again, nine times in a row from 2002 to 2010.

On average, the Colts won 1.4 more games than they should have per season, partly because they were 52-17 -- 52-17! -- in games decided by a touchdown or less. I'm sure there are counter-arguments, but these numbers suggest that having Manning at quarterback is like having Mariano Rivera on the mound -- if Rivera pitched nine innings every game instead of one.

Second, the game-winning drive Manning led last weekend was the 48th of his career in the fourth quarter or overtime, breaking a tie with Dan Marino for the most by any quarterback since the 1970 merger, according to ESPN Stats & Information. You have to play for good teams for a long time to rack up that many victories, but Manning is showing this season that he can turn around otherwise bad performances by his team.

The Broncos have had games where they've fallen behind 10-7, 20-7, 21-11 and 17-7 by halftime. Manning has responded by throwing 10 touchdowns and zero interceptions en route to a QBR of 96.4 when trailing in the second half. Maybe leadership in sports is simply the ability to maintain your performance under stress rather than declining as most humans do naturally. If there's evidence of cool, Manning's numbers are probably what it would look like.

My Insider colleague Chris Sprow has shown that Manning's physical skills are holding up surprisingly well. If you know where to look, the stats show his mind games have remained just as dominant, leading to this MVP-caliber season.

# NFL musical midseason report: Part 1

John Clayton  
ESPN.com  
November 7, 2012

Unfortunately, now that the first half of the NFL regular season is over, I don't see Roger Goodell joining me in turning on some Slayer and yelling to retired commissioner Paul Tagliabue, "Hey, Paul, we're done with this segment."

These actions are reserved for "This Is SportsCenter" commercials. In honor of that commercial, we're going to grade the first half of the season a little differently this season. Normally, I put on my professor gear and pass out grades. But my recent "SportsCenter" spot created a positive buzz, so we'll use a musical theme.

This year, we're breaking the league into four categories. I'm not using the label "elite" or identifying the next group as Chad Penningtons, as I do in my quarterback ratings.

Slayer doesn't do Chad Pennington.

Instead, we'll call the best teams "Heavy Metal." The next group is "Classic Rock," the teams good enough to fill an arena but not a stadium. The third classification is "One-Hit Wonders." The worst teams make up the "Elevator Music" category. No one wants to spend three hours listening to Muzak ... or watching the Kansas City Chiefs try to play catch-up.

Let's rock.

## 1. Atlanta Falcons (8-0)

The Falcons might not deafen your ears, but like Van Halen, they haven't disappointed. Matt Ryan has truly been Matty Ice. He keeps this team cool in case a fourth-quarter comeback is needed. The offense bounces between no-huddle and regular sets, but it beats you with a steady diet of passes to Julio Jones, Roddy White and Tony Gonzalez. Head coach Mike Smith has gotten out of predictable zone schemes and, thanks to coordinator Mike Nolan, been more creative on defense. Using three defensive tackles on early downs has helped slow opposing runners, and the secondary has been solid.

Arrow is pointing: up

## 2. Houston Texans (7-1)

Wade Phillips might love country music, but his defense evokes Slayer. The Texans will rock an opposing offense until it bleeds. Defensive end J.J. Watt is the Texans' "Angel of Death." He's been the league's best defensive player in the first half of the season. He sacks quarterbacks and creates interceptions by deflecting passes like few others out of

a 3-4 scheme. Running back Arian Foster is like "Raining Blood" as he wears down defenses. This team rocks.

Arrow is pointing: up

### 3. Chicago Bears (7-1)

Lovie Smith's defense is the Jimmy Page of the NFL this year. Few picked the guitar better than Page did for Led Zeppelin. Likewise, this Bears team has been making music with its pick-sixes, having produced seven interception returns for touchdowns. Chicago is on pace for a plus-32 turnover differential, and teams with those numbers usually win 12 games. Jay Cutler might not be lighting up the scoreboard, but he doesn't have to. If he can generate 20 points, an additional seven points a game from defense and special teams can make an average offense look like a great team.

Arrow is pointing: up

### 4. New York Giants (6-3)

Judas Priest, will you stop settling for field goals? The Giants are in a great spot to win the NFC East, and they have shown they might have the 49ers' number, but the offense needs to stop playing "football." Lawrence Tynes has 26 field goals in nine games on an offense that seems a little off. No need to worry, though. The Giants went to a Super Bowl with a nine-win team last year, and they will finish with a better record this season in a division that has flatlined in Philadelphia and Dallas.

Arrow is pointing: sideways

### 5. San Francisco 49ers (6-2)

Jim Harbaugh has assembled a running attack that is Megadeth to defenses. The 49ers are averaging 5.6 yards per carry, and their persona fits the name of their best runner - Gore. Harbaugh loves to gore a defense with Frank Gore and an onslaught of runners. The running game has been so good they haven't needed to activate free-agent signing Brandon Jacobs, a big banger himself. Harbaugh reconfigured the receiving corps to get the most out of Alex Smith's 16 completions a game.

Arrow is pointing: up

### 6. Baltimore Ravens (6-2)

It's not true that the Ravens have gotten as old as the Rolling Stones, but they do have the wisdom that comes with age. Despite the loss of Ray Lewis, the Ravens are still pulling out victories, even though Joe Flacco has become a 50-50 proposition for being effective on the road. The 6-2 record puts them in the top six, but they have to play better in the second half to stay ahead of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Arrow is pointing: sideways

## 7. New England Patriots (5-3)

Like James Hetfield and Kirk Hammett of Metallica, Tom Brady plays fast. His game is tempo. He runs an Oregon pace for the running game. His three-receiver set has incredible tempo. This offense has no problem producing long drives and 80-play games. Problems in the secondary, though, force Brady to be the source of the Patriots' success. But hasn't that always been the case?

Arrow is pointing: up

## 8. Green Bay Packers (6-3)

If the Packers suffer many more injuries, this group might become a solo act: Aaron Rodgers. But Rodgers is good enough to carry an injured team, and he is doing just that. After this week's bye, the defense might still be without Clay Matthews and Charles Woodson. But Green Bay plays five of its six NFC North games in the second half, which offers the Packers a great chance to get back to the playoffs and be a factor once they get in.

Arrow is pointing: up

## **9. Denver Broncos (5-3)**

Peyton Manning isn't heavy metal, but his return has turned an 8-8 Tim Tebow-led team into the AFC West front-runner. Manning listens to XM Outlaw Country, but the league hasn't found a way to outlaw the way he carves up defenses. He is more dink and dunk these days after four neck operations, but he's the surgeon on the field, and that is a pain in the neck to opponents.

Arrow is pointing: up

## 10. Pittsburgh Steelers (5-3)

Ben Roethlisberger has gone from Guns N' Roses to The Beatles. Offensive coordinator Todd Haley has Big Ben throwing smarter and shorter. He's dinking and dunking where he used to be gunning the ball downfield. Ben might not bring roses to his offensive staff meetings, but his body isn't getting pounded as badly as in the past, and the offense is exceptional on third down.

Arrow is pointing: up

# John Clayton's midseason All-Pro team

John Clayton  
ESPN.com  
November 7, 2012

## *Clayton's Midseason All-Pro Team*

ESPN.com NFL senior writer John Clayton picks his 2012 midseason All-Pro team:

### *OFFENSE*

Position	Player	Team
WIDE RECEIVER	Percy Harvin	Minnesota Vikings
WIDE RECEIVER	Reggie Wayne	Indianapolis Colts
TIGHT END	Rob Gronkowski	New England Patriots
LEFT TACKLE	Joe Thomas	Cleveland Browns
LEFT GUARD	Mike Iupati	San Francisco 49ers
CENTER	Maurkice Pouncey	Pittsburgh Steelers
RIGHT GUARD	Jahri Evans	New Orleans Saints
RIGHT TACKLE	Anthony Davis	San Francisco 49ers
QUARTERBACK	Matt Ryan	Atlanta Falcons
HALFBACK	Adrian Peterson	Minnesota Vikings
FULLBACK	Vonta Leach	Baltimore Ravens

### *DEFENSE*

Position	Player	Team
DEFENSIVE END	J.J. Watt	Houston Texans
DEFENSIVE END	Cameron Wake	Miami Dolphins
DEFENSIVE TACKLE	Geno Atkins	Cincinnati Bengals
DEFENSIVE TACKLE	Randy Starks	Miami Dolphins
OUTSIDE LINEBACKER	Clay Matthews	Green Bay Packers
<b>OUTSIDE LINEBACKER</b>	<b>Von Miller</b>	<b>Denver Broncos</b>
INSIDE LINEBACKER	Patrick Willis	San Francisco 49ers
INSIDE LINEBACKER	Daryl Washington	Arizona Cardinals
CORNERBACK	Richard Sherman	Seattle Seahawks
CORNERBACK	Charles Tillman	Chicago Bears
SAFETY	Jairus Byrd	Buffalo Bills
SAFETY	Earl Thomas	Seattle Seahawks

*SPECIALISTS*

Position	Player	Team
KICKER	Greg Zuerlein	St. Louis Rams
PUNTER	Thomas Morstead	New Orleans Saints
SPECIAL TEAMS	Corey Graham	Baltimore Ravens

# Poll results: Fox-Panthers is biggest reunion

Bill Williamson  
ESPN.com  
November 7, 2012

It's a landslide.

John Fox's trip to Carolina is the most important reunion in a reunion-filled week in the AFC West.

Fox and the Denver Broncos go to his former team, Carolina, on Sunday. In other AFC West reunions, the Chiefs travel to face former coach Todd Haley at the Pittsburgh Steelers on Monday and San Diego travels to see former receiver Vincent Jackson and Tampa Bay on Sunday.

In our AFC West poll, as of 6:30 p.m. ET Wednesday, 52 percent of the votes believed Fox's trip to Carolina is the biggest deal. The other two reunions each received 24 percent of the vote.

I agree with the masses. Fox was in Carolina much longer than Haley was in Kansas City and Jackson was in San Diego. Plus, Fox is going back to Carolina while the other reunions are being held at Haley's and Jackson's new homes.

Thanks to everyone who played along.

# Tracy Porter still not practicing

Bill Williamson  
ESPN.com  
November 7, 2012

Tracy Porter is still having problems. The Denver cornerback remained out of practice Wednesday.

He is adjusting to medication he is taking after he suffered a seizure in August. He has missed three straight games. He has been replaced by Chris Harris, who has been excellent.

As expected, guard Chris Kuper did not practice after suffering a severe ankle sprain Sunday. He could be out a while. Receiver Eric Decker was limited by a thigh injury Wednesday. He will be monitored throughout the week.

In other AFC West news:

U-T San Diego reports former Kansas City cornerback Stanford Routt has drawn interest from three teams, but not the Chargers at this time. He was cut Monday.

Oakland coach Dennis Allen said he will determine on Friday whether Darren McFadden and backup running back Mike Goodson can play at Baltimore on Sunday. Both players didn't practice Wednesday because of high ankle sprains. At this point, it seems like a long shot they will play. Marcel Reece and Taiwan Jones will be the running backs if they can't play.

Oakland cornerback Ronald Bartell is hopeful of playing Sunday. He has been out since Week 1 with a shoulder injury. Oakland tight end Brandon Myers was limited with a shoulder injury.

San Diego receivers Eddie Royal and Robert Meachem practiced Wednesday. Both players missed last week's game with hamstring injuries.

# Chargers cleared in Towelgate

Bill Williamson  
ESPN.com  
November 7, 2012

After a three-week investigation, the NFL has found that the San Diego Chargers have not done anything wrong in using a sticky towel, Gorilla Gold. The league began to investigate the Chargers after a referee took the towel from an equipment manager during the team's Week 6 loss to Denver.

San Diego coach Norv Turner passionately denied any wrongdoing. A representative from the Idaho-based towel company has maintained every NFL team has used their product in the past decade.

The Chargers didn't come away completely clean in this matter. They will be fined \$20,000 because their employee failed to comply with the request of the officials. U-T San Diego reports the Chargers will appeal the fine and they will not discipline the team employee.

The league will not allow any NFL players to use the towel for the rest of the season. The league will review the issue after the season. ESPN's Chris Mortensen said he believes several quarterbacks in the league will be upset they can't use it in poor weather that affects games late in the season. It would be ironic if Denver quarterback Peyton Manning was one of those upset quarterbacks since it was his team that was on the field that night.

A Gorilla Gold spokesman said the company has not been in contact with the NFL during the investigation.

As the investigation went on, it became clear this wasn't a serious issue and it appeared the Chargers wouldn't be overly disciplined. Still, I'd expect the Chargers to have some extra motivation against the Broncos next week. San Diego visits Denver on Nov. 18.

# Mailbag: Sean Payton to AFC West?

Bill Williamson  
ESPN.com  
November 7, 2012

Mid-week mail call:

**Eric from Cincinnati wants to know** if New Orleans coach Sean Payton could end up coaching in the AFC West in 2013.

**Bill Williamson:** I'd doubt it. It sounds like he's staying in New Orleans. If he does bolt, the Dallas Cowboys have to be considered the favorite landing spot. There could be openings in both San Diego and in Kansas City, but I doubt either team would win a bidding war for Payton, who looks like he could be the coaching prize of the offseason.

**Matt McBeth from El Cajon, Calif., wants to know** if I think quarterback Alex Tanney has a future with the Chiefs.

**BW:** Probably not. He is on the injured reserve now, so the team will likely give him another look in the offseason. He doesn't project as a potential starter, but stranger things have happened. The Chiefs will probably need to look elsewhere for a young quarterback.

**Steve Blecha from San Francisco wants to know** if I think D.J. Williams could be used some at middle linebacker when he returns from his NFL suspension next week.

**BW:** It's a possibility since Williams can play all three spots. He is versatile and Denver will likely sprinkle him where he is needed as he shakes off the rust. Williams is better at weakside, but with Wesley Woodyard playing at a high level, having Williams get some snaps in the middle may not be a bad idea.

# NFL honors Trindon Holliday

Bill Williamson  
ESPN.com  
November 7, 2012

Trindon Holliday didn't wait long to make an impact in Denver.

Holliday was named the AFC special teams player of the week after he set a team record with a 105-yard kickoff return in Denver's 31-23 win Sunday over Cincinnati. It was Holliday's third game as a Bronco. He was claimed last month off waivers from Houston.

In other AFC West news:

CSN Bay Area is reporting that Oakland running backs Darren McFadden and Mike Goodson are not practicing Wednesday because of high ankle sprains. Still, it doesn't appear Oakland has signed a running back yet. If McFadden and Goodson can't play, fullback Marcel Reece and Taiwan Jones will likely carry the rushing load. It will be interesting to hear what Oakland coach Dennis Allen says later Wednesday about the situation.

Meanwhile, Oakland defensive tackle Desmond Bryant is practicing. That is great news. Bryant was taken to a local hospital Sunday during the Raiders' loss to Tampa Bay with a fast heartbeat.

- Check out John Clayton's midseason report.
- Check out Tailgate32's trip to Oakland. Quality stuff.
- Denver quarterback Peyton Manning remains atop Mike Sando's MVP Watch.
- Kurt Snibbe's midseason logo changes are out. Always worth a chuckle.

# By the numbers: Best in West

Bill Williamson  
ESPN.com  
November 7, 2012

Here is a look at the division leaders in some key statistical categories after Week 9:

## Passing yards

- **Player:** Peyton Manning, Denver
- **Yards:** 2,404
- **Comment:** Manning's brilliant first season in Denver is continuing.

## Rushing yards

- **Player:** Jamaal Charles, Kansas City
- **Yards:** 634
- **Comment:** Charles has just 43 yards in the past two games combined.

## Receptions

- **Player:** Demaryius Thomas, Denver
- **Yards:** 756
- **Comment:** Thomas is doing the little things right.

## Tackles

- **Player:** Wesley Woodyard, Denver
- **Total:** 75
- **Comment:** Woodyard is playing out of his mind right now.

## Sacks

- **Player:** Von Miller, Denver
- **Sacks:** 9
- **Comment:** Miller is now tied for the second-most sacks in the NFL after a three-sack game at Cincinnati.

## Interceptions

- **Player:** Several are tied.
- **Interceptions:** 2
- **Comment:** This logjam will eventually sort itself out.

# All-AFC West midseason team

Bill Williamson  
ESPN.com  
November 7, 2012

We present our 2012 AFC West midseason team.

A few notes before we get to the list.

I used a 3-4 defense because half of the division (Kansas City and San Diego) uses it as a base defense and I thought the linebackers were stronger in the first half so I wanted to recognize four of them. This list features the best players at the position, so I used two left tackles instead of forcing a right tackle, two tailbacks instead of a fullback, etc.

The list features 10 Broncos, eight Chargers, five Raiders and three Chiefs. Coincidentally, that is the order of the division standings halfway through the season.

Let's point out some picks of note. Some may be surprised to see Denver defensive lineman Kevin Vickerson on the list. If you talked to NFL scouts, you wouldn't be. He's been strong.

I really like this group of linebackers. I wanted to find a place for the Chiefs' Justin Houston and Derrick Johnson, but I felt like I needed to get San Diego's Donald Butler, Oakland's Philip Wheeler and Denver's Wesley Woodyard on the list. Again, this was a very tough position to choose from.

I could have gone in several directions at receiver. Many receivers in the division are having terrific seasons. Can't go wrong with Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker, though.

Mike Scifres over Shane Lechler? Yes, Lechler is an all-time great, but Scifres is having a better season.

This isn't a great year for returners in the division. I was going to go with San Diego's Richard Goodman, but he is out for the season. Holliday returned a touchdown for a score in Week 9, so he's your winner despite playing just three games with Denver.

On to the list. I'm sure you'll have a lot to say in the comments section below.

***AFC West Midseason Team: Defense***

<b>Position</b>	<b>Player</b>	<b>Team</b>
DE	Elvis Dumervil	Denver Broncos
DT	Kevin Vickerson	Denver Broncos
DE	Corey Liuget	San Diego Chargers
LB	Von Miller	Denver Broncos
LB	Wesley Woodyard	Denver Broncos
LB	Philip Wheeler	Oakland Raiders
LB	Donald Butler	San Diego Chargers
CB	Champ Bailey	Denver Broncos
CB	Brandon Flowers	Kansas City Chiefs
S	Eric Weddle	San Diego Chargers
S	Tyvon Branch	Oakland Raiders

***AFC West Midseason Team: Offense***

<b>Position</b>	<b>Player</b>	<b>Team</b>
T	Ryan Clady	Denver Broncos
T	Branden Albert	Kansas City Chiefs
G	Mike Brisiel	Oakland Raiders
G	Louis Vasquez	San Diego Chargers
C	Nick Hardwick	San Diego Chargers
QB	Peyton Manning	Denver Broncos
RB	Jamaal Charles	Kansas City Chiefs
RB	Willis McGahee	Denver Broncos
TE	Brandon Myers	Oakland Raiders
WR	Demaryius Thomas	Denver Broncos
WR	Eric Decker	Denver Broncos

***AFC West Midseason Team: Specialists***

<b>Position</b>	<b>Player</b>	<b>Team</b>
P	Mike Scifres	San Diego Chargers
K	Sebastian Janikowski	Oakland Raiders
ST	Darrell Stuckey	San Diego Chargers
Returner	Trindon Holliday	Denver Broncos

# AFC West Stock Watch

Bill Williamson  
ESPN.com  
November 7, 2012

## Falling

**Brian Daboll's control of the Kansas City offense:** We're not suggesting that Kansas City head coach Romeo Crennel is going to take over the Chiefs' offense from Daboll. But when Crennel removed himself as the team's defensive coordinator and replaced himself with linebackers coach Gary Gibbs, Crennel said he thought there was a perception by some young players on the team he was spending too much time on the defense. Expect Crennel to try to spend more time with the offense as he tries to save everyone's job in Kansas City.

**Raiders' running backs:** Oakland starting running back Darren McFadden and his backup Mike Goodson both had to leave the Tampa Bay game last week with high ankle sprains. There is no word yet how long they will be out, but high ankle sprains are tricky and the Raiders may have to adjust.

**Chiefs' ball security:** The Chiefs have committed 29 turnovers in eight games. It's the most in the NFL through eight games in 15 years. The Chiefs had 28 turnovers all season last year.

## RISING

**The Chargers in the fourth quarter:** The Chargers hadn't scored in the fourth quarter for three straight games before scoring three touchdowns in a Week 9 win over the Chiefs. Two of the scores were defensive touchdowns.

**Denver's offensive line:** Denver quarterback Peyton Manning has not been sacked in four of the past five games. Everything is starting to click for the Broncos. Manning helps his offensive line with his quick release, but the unit is getting comfortable playing with him and it is showing.

**Raiders late in the first half:** The Raiders have scored in the final two minutes before the end of the first half in all eight games this season. The problem for the Raiders(3-5): it seems they lose momentum in the second half.

# Pleasant and unpleasant surprises at midway point

FoxSports.com  
November 7, 2012

AFC West: Denver (5-3)

**Pleasant:** Peyton Manning (pictured) isn't the only veteran making a successful comeback. Wide receiver Brandon Stokley's career appeared over after he spent most of last season out of football. But the four seasons that the 36-year-old Stokley spent as Manning's main slot target in Indianapolis (2003 to 2006) paid dividends. Stokley joined Manning in Denver and has scored on three of his 24 receptions.

**Unpleasant:** The Broncos having gotten outscored by a 108-69 margin in the first half. Such slow starts played a big part in Denver's three losses. When the Broncos do finally get warmed up, there are few teams better. Denver has enjoyed a 103-23 advantage in the fourth quarter.

# Peyton says scouting help from little brother Eli 'doesn't hurt'

Lindsay H. Jones  
USA Today  
November 7, 2012

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – Sometimes, even Peyton Manning could use a little extra help when it comes to getting ready for his next opponent. Luckily for Manning, he can lean on his younger brother, Eli.

The Manning brothers realized during a phone conversation last week that their teams play eight common opponents this season – each of the four teams in the AFC North and the NFC South.

This week, Peyton's Broncos play Carolina – a team Eli's Giants beat 36-7 in September, while the Giants play Cincinnati, whom the Broncos beat 31-23 last Sunday.

"I talked to him [Tuesday] about their game," Eli Manning said. "Just seeing if there are any tips on certain things."

Well, here's one that likely came up: Watch out for Bengals cornerback Terence Newman. He twice jumped in front of Denver receiver Eric Decker to intercept a pair of Peyton's passes in the third quarter. One of those interceptions was in the end zone.

Eli's advice about the Panthers, though he declined to disclose exactly what he revealed to his brother, might not be as helpful right now, with the Panthers showing significant improvement, in Week 10, than when the Giants ran away with a Thursday night game in mid-September.

"I mean, you've still got to go play the game. Sometimes a team will play us differently than they did the Giants or whoever," Peyton Manning said. "But it's just good to talk football with someone who's played them before. There's something about playing a team instead of just seeing them on film, to give you a little first-hand talk."

This week won't be the last time the brothers share scouting reports this season. The Broncos will play three more games against teams previously on the Giants' schedule: Carolina, Tampa Bay, and Cleveland. The Giants won all three of those games.

The Giants still have to play the Bengals, the Falcons and the Saints. Denver went 2-1 in those games earlier this season.

Both teams have yet to play the Baltimore Ravens, and will do so on back-to-back weeks in December, starting with Peyton on Dec. 16, and Eli on Dec. 23.

"I don't know if it helps a ton, but I know it doesn't hurt," Peyton said.

Peyton Manning is 13-5 when he's played an opponent (in the same season) after his brother. Eli's teams have had fewer chances, and his teams are 4-5. So that either means that Eli is a better teacher, or Peyton is just a better listener.

"That's two very talented quarterbacks who excelled at what they do in this league, and in this game," said Broncos tight end Joel Dreessen. "I'm sure it helps a lot."

# See who made our Week 10 NFL All-Pro Team

Chris Strauss  
USA Today  
November 7, 2012

Many sites have started publishing their midseason All-Pro teams this week, but it's something we've been doing here on a weekly basis each Wednesday.

There hasn't been a ton of change among last week's first team, but this gives us the chance to which players would make our All-Pro team at any point of the season moving forward. Here's where we stand heading into Week 10.

First team:  
Offense

QB: Matt Ryan, Atlanta Falcons

It's Ryan, not Drew Brees, who enters Sunday's Falcons-Saints matchup as the game's marquee quarterback.

RB: Adrian Peterson, Minnesota Vikings

Another week and Peterson keeps getting better, running for 182 yards and two scores against Seattle.

Marshawn Lynch, Seattle Seahawks

Lynch now has three straight 100-yard running games.

FB: Vonta Leach, Baltimore Ravens

His blocking skills make life a lot easier for Joe Flacco and Ray Rice.

WR: Reggie Wayne, Indianapolis Colts

Wayne said one of the reasons he stuck around Indy was the chance to help Andrew Luck grow. His play is helping give Indy the chance to return to the playoffs.

Brandon Marshall, Chicago Bears

For years the Bears offense struggled without a big time playmaker. Not anymore.

TE: Rob Gronkowski, New England Patriots

For the first time in three Sundays, Gronk didn't have a multiple touchdown game. Granted it was a bye week.

**T: Ryan Clady, Denver Broncos**

According to Pro Football Focus, Clady has allowed 0 sacks, 2 hits & 4 hurries all year on 306 pass blocking snaps.

Duane Brown, Houston Texans

Brown gave up only his first sack of the season on Sunday against Buffalo.

G: Marshal Yanda, Baltimore Ravens

The Ravens right guard continues to have a standout year.

Jahri Evans, New Orleans Saints

The seven-year vet hasn't given up a sack yet this year. He's a pretty good run blocker too.

C: John Sullivan, Minnesota Vikings

Adrian Peterson's return to form has been spurred along by Sullivan's play up front.

Defense

DE: J.J. Watt, Houston Texans

Didn't suffer any letdown coming off his bye week, adding another sack against Buffalo.

Cameron Wake, Miami Dolphins

Wake continues to have a career year, notching the team's only sack against Andrew Luck on Sunday.

DT: Brandon Mebane, Seattle Seahawks

The Cal grad continues to improve and has become a major cog in the Hawks' defensive line.

**OLB: Von Miller, Denver Broncos**

Miller sacked Bengals quarterback Andy Dalton three times on Sunday.

Clay Matthews, Green Bay Packers

Matthews' stellar season will take a hiatus as he's expected to miss a few weeks with a hamstring injury.

ILB: Daryl Washington, Arizona Cardinals

Not many people get to see him play in Arizona but Washington continues to make his name known among opponents.

Patrick Willis, San Francisco 49ers

Willis comes off his bye week looking to take advantage of a weak St. Louis line.

CB: Charles Tillman, Chicago Bears

He forced four fumbles against Tennessee last week. Yes, you read that correctly.

Tim Jennings, Chicago Bears

The NFL interception leader rivals his defensive backfield mate for best corner in the game right now.

S: Stevie Brown, New York Giants

Brown continues to star in a fill-in role, notching eight tackles against Pittsburgh.

Eric Weddle, San Diego Chargers

Weddle has been the team's impact player on defense all season.

K: Blair Walsh, Minnesota Vikings

The rookie has made 19-20 field goals this season including a 55-yarder.

P: Thomas Morstead, New Orleans Saints

Leads the NFL with 45 yards net per punt.

KR: Percy Harvin, Minnesota Vikings

Harvin leads the league with 35.9 yards per return, but will likely be cooling his jets for a game or two due to an ankle injury.

Second team:

Offense

**QB: Peyton Manning, Denver Broncos**

RB: Doug Martin, Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Arian Foster, Houston Texans

FB: Henry Hynoski, New York Giants

WR: Calvin Johnson, Detroit Lions, A.J. Green, Cincinnati Bengals

TE: Jason Witten, Dallas Cowboys

T: Joe Thomas, Cleveland Browns, Sebastian Vollmer, New England Patriots

G: Mike Iupati, San Francisco 49ers, Rob Sims, Detroit Lions

C: Mike Pouncey, Miami Dolphins

Defense

DE: Jason Pierre-Paul, New York Giants, Justin Smith, San Francisco 49ers

DT: Geno Atkins, Cincinnati Bengals

OLB: DeMarcus Ware, Dallas Cowboys, Lance Briggs, Chicago Bears

ILB: NaVorro Bowman, San Francisco 49ers, Sean Weatherspoon, Atlanta Falcons

CB: Richard Sherman, Seattle Seahawks, Casey Hayward, Green Bay Packers

S: Ryan Clark, Pittsburgh Steelers, Reshad Jones, Miami Dolphins

K: Sebastian Janikowski, Oakland Raiders

P: Andy Lee, San Francisco 49ers

KR: Josh Cribbs, Cleveland Browns

# Andrew Luck's Colts, Jay Cutler's Bears among title contenders

Bucky Brooks  
NFL.com  
November 7, 2012

The NFL season has hit the halfway point, yet there isn't a clear-cut favorite in either conference. In fact, I would suggest that more than half of the league has a legitimate shot to win the Super Bowl this season. After taking some time to study the game tape, analyze the schedule and assess the chances of possible hot streaks, here is a list of viable contenders that can get to New Orleans in February, ranked from least likely to win the title to most:

## 17. Indianapolis Colts

Why they're legitimate contenders: Andrew Luck is playing at an MVP level. The No. 1 overall draft pick is tied for fourth in the NFL in passing yards and leads the league with 37 completions of 20-plus yards. While those numbers are certainly impressive, the fact that he has produced four 300-yard games despite directing an offense with four rookies (running back Vick Ballard, tight end Coby Fleener and receivers Dwayne Allen and T.Y. Hilton) playing prominent roles says a lot about Luck's ability to make his teammates better. Luck has shown he can carry his team with the game on the line (having engineered four fourth-quarter/overtime game-winning drives in eight starts), meaning that the Colts are always competitive, which is critical to postseason success.

## 16. Miami Dolphins

Why they're legitimate contenders: The Dolphins are currently sitting at .500, but a strong defense and an emerging running game give them a chance to take a shot at the title. Miami ranks sixth in scoring defense (allowing 18.6 points per game), and the Dolphins' 23 sacks are tied for 10th-most in the NFL. More importantly, the unit has adopted a physical brand of football that would play well in the postseason. Offensively, running back Reggie Bush has become a dangerous workhorse in the backfield. Although he has recorded just one 100-yard game this season, the fact that Bush averages 4.4 yards per attempt is enough to command eight-man fronts on a consistent basis. With rookie quarterback Ryan Tannehill capable of picking apart single coverage on the outside, the Dolphins have just enough balance to make life difficult for any potential playoff opponents.

## 15. Dallas Cowboys

Why they're legitimate contenders: The Cowboys are in the midst of a disappointing start, but they can still make a serious run at the NFC East crown. Although the

offense has failed to play at a high level in recent weeks, the eventual return of DeMarco Murray should instantly reignite the Cowboys' sagging running game, alleviating some of the pressure on Tony Romo in the pocket. If coach Jason Garrett can further relieve some of the burden on Romo by managing the game better and implementing a more diverse game plan, the Cowboys' offense might catch fire, sparking a run down the stretch.

#### 14. Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Why they're legitimate contenders: New coach Greg Schiano has quietly put together one of the NFL's most explosive offenses. Fueled by the explosive running skills of Doug Martin and the burgeoning chemistry between quarterback Josh Freeman and receivers Vincent Jackson and Mike Williams, the Buccaneers have averaged 36 points per game over the past four weeks. More importantly, the unit has displayed the kind of versatility that can create headaches for defensive coordinators, who will have a hard time attempting to neutralize the Buccaneers' most explosive weapons. The Buccaneers also have an emerging defense that can stop the run; this squad can force opponents into wild shootouts, making them a dangerous team to face in a "one-and-done" scenario.

#### 13. San Diego Chargers

Why they're legitimate contenders: Their inclusion on this list might raise a few eyebrows, but the Chargers have a legitimate shot to make a run at the Lombardi Trophy, based on their history of finishing strong under Norv Turner. After Nov. 1, Turner's Chargers teams have won 72.7 percent of their regular-season games (a 32-12 record), including an impressive 21-3 mark in December and January. Veterans like quarterback Philip Rivers, tight end Antonio Gates, linebacker Shaun Phillips, safety Eric Weddle and cornerback Quentin Jammer are accustomed to winning games down the stretch. The Chargers' confidence will make them a tough out for any team vying for a playoff spot.

#### 12. Detroit Lions

Why they're legitimate contenders: The Lions have bounced back from a dismal start, re-entering the NFC race as a viable threat. Led by quarterback Matthew Stafford and the NFL's top-ranked passing game, the Lions can post a "40-burger" on any defense that lacks the personnel to match up with their explosive perimeter weapons. In addition, the rapid development of Mikel Leshoure as the feature runner has given Detroit's offense just enough balance to allow it to thrive in rough and rugged games down the stretch. Ndamukong Suh and Co. are also starting to impose their will in the defensive trenches. The Lions are a dangerous team with enough confidence and talent to catch fire heading into the postseason.

#### 11. Seattle Seahawks

Why they're legitimate contenders: Coach Pete Carroll has put together a hard-hitting defense with the size, speed and athleticism to match up with any opponent

in any environment. The Seahawks' secondary in particular poses a serious challenge for opponents who rely extensively on the passing game to move the ball. Brandon Browner, Richard Sherman, Kam Chancellor and Earl Thomas challenge and torment receivers with their physicality; the toll that takes eventually induces turnovers in bunches. The Seahawks also have an athletic frontline that regularly wreaks havoc on quarterbacks in the pocket. Few contenders will want to face Seattle, particularly in the confines of Century Link field, where the 12th Man makes a substantial impact.

#### 10. Baltimore Ravens

Why they're legitimate contenders: The Ravens were once considered AFC favorites until injuries robbed the defense of its leader (Ray Lewis) and lockdown corner (Lardarius Webb). While the unit can still slow down most of the explosive offenses in the NFL, the Ravens remain contenders because of their offense, which is led by quarterback Joe Flacco and running back Ray Rice. The duo has keyed a no-huddle attack that befuddles opponents with its tempo and balance. Baltimore's offense has slumped in recent weeks, but the combination of a hard-nosed runner, a pinpoint deep-ball thrower and talented pass-catchers (Anquan Boldin and Torrey Smith) could propel the Ravens on a deep run through a weak AFC.

#### 9. Green Bay Packers

Why they're legitimate contenders: The presence of the reigning league MVP, quarterback Aaron Rodgers, makes the Packers a threat in the NFC despite a host of injuries that have diluted the potency of one of the NFL's most explosive offenses. Rodgers has been on fire since Week 4, passing for 22 touchdowns while giving up just three interceptions in six games. Those numbers are especially remarkable when one factors in injuries to Greg Jennings and Jordy Nelson on the perimeter, as well as the lack of a credible running game, with Cedric Benson on the sideline. The trio is set to return at some point this season, and Rodgers' sensational play should continue down the stretch, making the Packers' offense a scary unit to face in the postseason.

#### 8. Pittsburgh Steelers

Why they're legitimate contenders: The Steelers are always a threat to take the crown, thanks to a defense that pummels quarterbacks the pocket. This season, however, the Steelers' revamped offense will make them a tougher out down the stretch. Offensive coordinator Todd Haley has helped Ben Roethlisberger become an efficient "dink and dunk" playmaker, and as a result, he's been taking fewer hits in the pocket. Pittsburgh has also rediscovered a power running game behind Jonathan Dwyer and Isaac Redman. The Steelers can play "big boy" football against anyone, including the heavyweights in the NFC, and it's hard to discount their chances of winning the title.

#### 7. New England Patriots

Why they're legitimate contenders: Tom Brady gives the Patriots a chance to win every game with his exceptional play from the pocket. He rarely puts his team in bad situations by making poor decisions; his ability to avoid turnovers allows the Patriots to operate at a high level, regardless of their opponent. New England has also added passing weapons (Brandon Lloyd) and developed a power running game behind Stevan Ridley, creating a diverse, balanced attack that will take the pressure off Brady in the pocket and make for more big-play opportunities. Their leaky defense remains a concern, but the fact that they can put 30-plus points on the board against anyone should make them tough to beat in the postseason.

#### 6. New York Giants

Why they're legitimate contenders: The Giants are maddeningly inconsistent during the regular season, but no team rallies down the stretch like Tom Coughlin's troops. The core of the roster has won two titles in five seasons; these players understand what it takes to win in the postseason. Quarterback Eli Manning has developed into one of the best performers in the clutch, which is imperative when it comes to winning tightly contested playoff games. With their experience and their quarterback, the Giants will be undaunted by any situation or circumstance, making them the favorites to come out of the NFC.

#### 5. Atlanta Falcons

Why they're legitimate contenders: The Falcons are the NFL's only unbeaten team, but observers have been reluctant to jump on the bandwagon due to concerns about how they'll perform in the postseason. Atlanta hasn't won a playoff game in the Mike Smith era, and no one is sure how the Falcons will respond when the pressure rises in January. Those concerns are legitimate, but there's something different about this year's team: the continued development of Matt Ryan, who is playing at an MVP level. He has four game-winning drives, suggesting he has the moxie to lead the Falcons to big wins when the stakes are high.

#### **4. Denver Broncos**

Why they're legitimate contenders: John Elway gambled by banking that Peyton Manning would return to the ranks of the elite after missing an entire season following multiple neck surgeries, and he won big. The four-time MVP has been outstanding over the first half of the year; Manning's ability to dramatically improve the Broncos' offense has made them a serious contender in the AFC. The veteran quarterback is in the midst of a sizzling run, notching 17 touchdowns while giving up just three interceptions over the past six games. Most importantly, he's orchestrated several improbable comebacks that have created an incredible resolve in the Broncos, who now believe no deficit is too big to overcome. Given their confidence and offensive prowess, the Broncos are destined to be in the mix at the end.

#### 3. Houston Texans

Why they're legitimate contenders: The Texans are the most complete team in the AFC. They have an explosive offense led by quarterback Matt Schaub and running back Arian Foster and a stingy defense that is peaking behind the rapid development of J.J. Watt. Losing linebacker Brian Cushing will certainly impact the Texans' ability to get after pass-happy offenses with the blitz, but otherwise, they haven't skipped a beat without their defensive leader, and that should be a scary thought for future opponents. If the Texans can win home-field advantage and ensure themselves multiple games in front of their boisterous fans, they'll have the inside track on making their first Super Bowl appearance.

## 2. San Francisco 49ers

Why they're legitimate contenders: Jim Harbaugh has built a team that is ideally suited for postseason play. The 49ers' smash-mouth offense can move the ball through the air or on the ground, and their suffocating defense knocks opponents around at the point of attack. Some question Alex Smith's ability to thrive in a situation that demands precise passing, but his consistency and effectiveness in Harbaugh's system suggest he'll be fine when the chips are pushed to the middle of the table. Adding Randy Moss and Mario Manningham gave Smith more weapons on the perimeter, and the 49ers have turned their biggest offensive weakness into a strength that just might propel them into the Winner's Circle.

## 1. Chicago Bears

Why they're legitimate contenders: The Bears are the front-runners in the NFC due to a prolific defense that scores points at will. The unit has posted seven return touchdowns and seems to generate turnovers by the bushel. Few opponents can match the Bears' physicality and toughness; any game against Lovie Smith's squad is destined to turn into a bar fight that tests the mettle of all involved. Offensively, the connection between quarterback Jay Cutler and receiver Brandon Marshall has added a new dynamic to a unit that also torments opponents with the talents of Matt Forte in the backfield. The leaky offensive line could derail the Bears' title hopes, but Chicago's overall balance and versatility make them the team to beat in 2012.

# Peyton Manning appreciates Denver Broncos' O-line

Kareem Copeland  
NFL.com  
November 7, 2012

Peyton Manning knows how good he's got it. Anyone who's watched the offensive lines of the Arizona Cardinals or Philadelphia Eagles know this too.

The Denver Broncos haven't allowed Manning to be sacked in the last three games. By comparison, Michael Vick was sacked seven times on "Monday Night Football."

"I appreciate the effort," Manning told The Denver Post. "Certainly every quarterback appreciates when you don't get sacked. And I really didn't get hit a whole lot against Cincinnati."

"I appreciate the effort those guys have made week after week. They've used some different guys (because of injury). And whoever is in there has stepped up to the plate."

The Broncos have given up 10 sacks in 2012 -- the second-lowest mark in the NFL. The Cardinals are chasing down the NFL record with 41, and have had two quarterbacks knocked out of games.

"We spend a lot of time together in practice and in watching film together," Manning said. "The important thing between a quarterback and the offensive line is constant communication."

"So we treat practice like a game, meetings like a game. We talk and try to be on the same page, especially when you're going to play on the road."

Manning couldn't have landed in a much better situation. The one thing he didn't need after those neck surgeries is a shaky offensive line that gives up big hits on a weekly basis. The protection has allowed him to return to an MVP-type level of play.

# **KLEE: No need to dress it up, Broncos receivers are quite a pair**

Paul Klee  
Colorado Springs Gazette  
November 7, 2012

ENGLEWOOD • For Halloween, Demaryius Thomas dressed as a replacement ref.

Eric Decker blogged about his plan to be a lobster.

We know this much at the midway point of the season: There isn't a more prolific receiving duo in the NFL. The league doesn't keep stats on costume originality.

Rolling into Denver's game at Carolina on Sunday, Decker and Thomas have combined for 1,339 receiving yards — 2 more than Atlanta's Roddy White and Julio Jones.

Decker has made 46 catches; Thomas has made 45. Decker has 16 career touchdowns, tying Lionel Taylor for the most by a Bronco through his first three seasons. This season, Thomas leads the NFL with 12 receptions of more than 25 yards.

Decker is 6-foot-3, 219 pounds, with a full head of flowing hair. Thomas is 6-3, 229, with no hair. On Wednesday, Decker had 75,568 followers on Twitter. Thomas had 61,279.

Decker turns 26 on March 15. Thomas will be 25 on Christmas Day.

Decker and Thomas are tight. As rookies they roomed together. They coordinate touchdown celebrations together. But this isn't a joined-at-the-hip thing.

In terms of personalities, there seems to be more different than similar.

Decker has (at least) four commercial spots and a weekly appearance on a Denver radio show. He embraces the spotlight. During Thomas' rookie season, when media hordes first ascended on his locker, his natural reaction was to locate the quickest exit.

Neither fits the stereotype that wide receivers must be brash and the center of attention.

"Every day we push each other. That's the best thing about our relationship," Decker said Wednesday. "We really respect one another. We're good friends. We're at the same position and we want to be great. Whether it's by design in drill work or just in performance, there's always that competitive spirit that's there. And it's helped us grow as young receivers."

Now that both are healthy at the same time, the Broncos are witnessing rapid growth in both, and the offense is sizzling. During the three-game winning streak, Denver has scored 35, 31 and 34 points, with a stern challenge coming against Carolina.

Peyton Manning said months ago it would take time for the offense to click.

Click, click, click.

"I think (Manning) is more comfortable with our routes," Decker said.

"Experience is your best teacher. I think I do know more about my teammates and what certain guys like," Manning said. "(With) a receiver, you kind of know how his body moves and when he's going to come out of a break. The more repetitions you get, the better."

Decker is on a touchdown tear. He's scored a receiving TD in five straight games, one shy of tying the Broncos record. In that stretch, Thomas is on a yardage tear (534, an average of 106.8).

"I think the guy that's really started to benefit from this is Demaryius," Carolina coach Ron Rivera said.

A pair of veterans are beneficial for both. The first one, Manning, is obvious. The second one, Brandon Stokley, stunted their TD celebration against the Saints but has been huge for their development.

Statistically speaking, how big can this receiving corps go?

In Denver, simply for comparison sake, Rod Smith and Ed McCaffrey had their biggest season in 2000 (2,919 yards, 17 touchdowns). The 1998 season, in which the Broncos won the Super Bowl, wasn't shabby, either (2,275, 16 TDs).

In Carolina, where Fox is returning this weekend, he had the tandem of Muhsin Muhammad and Steve Smith. In 2003, that duo had 1,947 yards and 10 TDs. The Panthers went to the Super Bowl.

In Indianapolis, Manning had Reggie Wayne and Marvin Harrison. In 2006, that duo had 2,676 yards and 21 TDs. The Colts won the Super Bowl. (Out of reverence, it's worth noting Manning's pass-catching trio in 2004. Harrison, Wayne and Stokley combined for 3,400 yards and 37 TDs.)

Decker and Thomas are on pace for 2,679 yards and 22 TDs.

"I think in any relationship, whether it's a significant other or a teammate, the more time you get, it always develops," Decker said.

Those numbers don't need a costume to impress.

# Wednesday's 60-second rant: Elway deserves credit for more than Manning

Kevin Fishbain  
ProFootballWeekly.com  
November 7, 2012

John Elway made the free-agent signing not only of the spring, but of the decade. Heck, signing future Hall-of-Fame QB Peyton Manning, who is playing at a high level and is an MVP candidate, could be the best free-agent signing ever.

Signing Manning while ridding the franchise of Tim Tebow, who, as polarizing as he was, had quite the following in Denver, was more than enough to make an argument for Elway to be the front-office executive on PFW's Midseason All-Pro team.

There are some detractors regarding that decision. For one thing, while Elway certainly was instrumental in getting Elway to sign with Denver, naysayers will point out that going after Manning and trading Tebow was a "no-brainer," a decision that anyone in Elway's shoes would have made.

One comment that circulated on Twitter on Tuesday came from columnist Bob Kravitz of the *Indianapolis Star*. Kravitz tweeted, "Pro Football Weekly named Elway as top midseason exec. He's 5-3 WITH Manning. Colts 5-3 without him. Make mine (GM Ryan) Grigson."

The fact that the Colts are 5-3 with that roster coming off a dismal season and are starting a rookie QB *is* more impressive than a 5-3 Broncos team that made the playoffs last year and has Manning at quarterback. And Grigson *should* be lauded for keeping Reggie Wayne and Robert Mathis in Indy, while adding veteran starters such as OT Winston Justice, WR Donnie Avery, C Samson Satele and CB Vontae Davis. His rookie class has performed well outside of Luck, too, with solid contributions from Coby Fleener, T.Y. Hilton and Vick Ballard.

I'll give Kravitz all of that, and this is not to take anything away from what is happening in Indianapolis, or from what Grigson has done in his first year. But it's short-sighted to ignore Elway's moves beyond the addition of one of the greatest quarterbacks of all-time. Let's take a look at how the other Broncos pickups have fared this season:

**S Mike Adams** — Replacing Brian Dawkins is no easy task, but Adams is second on the team with 49 tackles and leads the club with eight passes defensed and two fumble recoveries. He rarely misses a snap.

**CB Tracy Porter** — Porter started 4-of-5 games before running into some health issues. He had six passes defensed, two tackles for loss and an interception, and was the AFC's Defensive Player of the Week in Week One, as his pick-six clinched a win over the Steelers.

**MLB Keith Brooking** — Brooking took over as Denver's starter in the middle in Week Six and the team has not lost since. He has 29 tackles and a forced fumble.

**S Jim Leonhard** — Now healthy, Leonhard is able to contribute as a reserve safety and he has a tackle for loss and interception. He also is a trusted, though undynamic, punt returner.

**C Dan Koppen** — Added as insurance, the former Patriot has filled in admirably for the injured J.D. Walton as the starting center. The veteran has not allowed a sack and has only one penalty this season.

**TE Jacob Tamme** — In eight games (five starts), Tamme, who played with Manning in Indianapolis, is third on the team in receptions and fourth in receiving yards.

**TE Joel Dreessen** — The former Texan has started all eight games for Denver and is tied for fifth in receptions with 21. He is tied for second on the team with four touchdown grabs.

**WR Brandon Stokley** — Manning's former slot wideout in Indy is third on the team with 278 receiving yards and has three touchdown catches.

**RS Trindon Holliday** — The newest Bronco, Holliday returned a kickoff 105 yards (a club record) for a touchdown against Cincinnati and is the team's punt returner as well, upgrading both units significantly.

**DE Derek Wolfe** — The team's first pick in April, Wolfe has exceeded expectations as a rookie, starting every game and recording 25 tackles, five for a loss and three sacks.

**LB Danny Trevathan** — The Broncos' sixth-rounder, Trevathan has seen his playing time increase steadily over the past few weeks — he played in 42 percent of the team's snaps in Week Nine. He has 16 tackles and one sack.

**RB Ronnie Hillman** — Hillman needed time to get acclimated, but did break out for 86 rushing yards against New Orleans in Week Eight. He is the team's No. 2 back.

In sum, Elway brought in eight starters (including Manning) via free agency and the draft, and five other steady contributors. The aforementioned players have combined for 48 starts this season. Sure, some of the Broncos' top players are holdovers — Von Miller, Champ Bailey, Ryan Clady, Willis McGahee, Eric Decker,

Demaryius Thomas and Elvis Dumervil — but Elway's additions have made a huge difference.

All midseason awards are tough to hand out, and Elway's Broncos still have half a season to go, but all signs indicate this will be a playoff team, and a tough out at that. Elway signed an MVP candidate who is good enough to bring the Broncos back to the Super Bowl, and that's significant enough. If the Broncos make it to the promised land, Manning will be quick to defer credit to his teammates, and Elway deserves all the credit he gets for putting those pieces around Manning to keep Denver atop the AFC West for a second straight season.

# John Fox on Panthers game: 'It's a business trip'

Ron Green Jr.  
Herald Online  
November 7, 2012

Now in his second season as the Denver Broncos head coach after nine years with the Panthers, John Fox said he and his team are treating their Sunday visit to Bank of America Stadium as another business trip.

Still, it will be different for Fox, who is returning to the city where he still owns a home and led the Panthers to the Super Bowl a decade ago.

"I've been at this for 25 years and I've had a lot of homecomings so it'll be good to get back and see some old friends and relationships I built over nine years there," Fox said on a conference call Wednesday. "It's a business trip and we're getting our team ready. We had a good practice today. We'll see where it leads us."

Fox's time in Carolina ended badly with his final team going 2-14 before he was released after the 2010 season. Asked if he remembers more good times or bad times during his run with the Panthers, Fox leaned to the positive side.

"I tend to approach things as the glass half full," Fox said. "We did get to the Super Bowl and we got to a couple of championship games, had three playoff appearances so by most people's calculations that's pretty good."

With the Broncos scheduled to arrive in Charlotte Friday, Fox said he intends to make a stop at the house he built and still owns at Quail Hollow Club.

"I'm sure I'll get there at some point," Fox said.

Read more here: <http://www.heraldonline.com/2012/11/07/4396274/john-fox-on-panthers-game-its.html#storylink=cpy>

# **Trindon Holliday wins AFC special teams player of week**

Darin Gantt  
ProFootballTalk.com  
November 7, 2012

The Texans got tired of waiting on Trindon Holliday to replicate his preseason magic, and the Broncos were the beneficiaries.

Holliday's 105-yard kickoff return for a touchdown last week helped the Broncos beat the Bengals, and it earned Holliday AFC special teams player of the week honors.

The 5-5 speedster had three return touchdowns in the preseason for the Texans, but they waived him earlier this year when he failed to carry that over into the regular season. The Broncos were quick to claim him, and needed the boost.

# Winning in the Trenches

Stuart Zaas  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 7, 2012

The play of the offensive and defensive lines has played a key role in the Broncos' current three-game win streak.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- As the men up front go, the rest of the team follows.

In the Broncos' case, that's been a good thing, as the play of the offensive and defensive linemen has set the tone for the team's current three-game win streak.

During that span of games, which began with Denver's Week 6 win at San Diego, the Broncos are the only team in the NFL to not allow a sack.

"They have done a great job and certainly every quarterback appreciates (them)," Manning said about his offensive linemen. "That way you don't get sacked. Really, I didn't get hit a whole lot against Cincinnati. I appreciate the effort those guys have made week after week. There have been some different guys in there playing and whoever's been in there stepped up to the plate, so I'm grateful for their effort."

Keeping the quarterback from getting sacked involves all 11 offensive players. The line has to do its job, running backs have to pick up blitzers and anybody running a route has to get open.

Then, the quarterback has to be able to recognize where blitzes are coming from and unload the ball in a timely fashion.

"The O-line's been doing a tremendous job," tight end Jacob Tamme said. "Tight ends, we take a lot of pride — we're not in there as much as they are, but we take it very seriously, and Peyton does a great job of getting the ball out when he needs to."

"It's really a combination of the whole offense doing things well in the passing game and getting better. If we can continue to do that, we'll be good."

Tackle Ryan Clady, who is the only starting left tackle to have not allowed a sack this season, credited Manning's ability to get rid of the ball quickly with playing a major role in keeping the quarterback clean.

"I think we're just kind of in a rhythm right now," Clady said. "Peyton Manning, he's been getting rid of the ball fairly efficiently. That always helps and we've just been able to sustain guys back for long enough for him to get the ball out."

Since giving up a total of eight sacks over the team's first three games, Manning has only been sacked twice. In that span, he's compiled an NFL-best passer rating of 114.3.

Manning attributes that improvement to an increased comfort level between himself and an offensive line with which he's in his first year working behind.

"Those guys practice well," Manning said. "We spend a lot of time together talking during meetings, watching film together. The one thing between a quarterback and his offensive line is constant communication. You're always talking. We treat practice like a game, treat meetings like a game where we're constantly talking, trying to be on the same page, especially when you play on the road."

On the other side of the ball, Denver's defensive line has been making itself at home in opposing backfields.

Since the win streak began, teams have run for an average of 77.3 yards per game against the Broncos, which ranks second in the NFL.

Dropping back to pass hasn't worked much better for opponents, as Denver is tied for second in the league with 10 sacks in that span. That pressure up front has helped the secondary, forcing opposing quarterbacks into hurried passes under pressure.

The secondary has capitalized, tying for second in the league with 25 pass breakups and ranking third with six interceptions over the past three games.

"We're supposed to complement each other," safety Mike Adams said. "That's how it's supposed to be. If the rush is good, the back end plays well; if the back end plays well, the front seven plays good."

Getting reps against one another in practice dating back to training camp has helped both sides of the line continue to improve.

"That's probably true in any phase of the game," Head Coach John Fox said. "The next thing is the mindset to get better every day. You're always tweaking, adjusting your scheme. Sometimes it might be player related – changing players and what not – but all in all, I think it's just that mindset 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 and that could be as a team, a defense, an offense, even special teams."

# Notebook: Panthers Pack Punch

Tyler Everett  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 7, 2012

The Broncos believe Carolina is better than its 2-6 record, players discuss Head Coach John Fox returning to Carolina and the Broncos take on a formidable pass rush.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – Even though the Panthers bring a 2-6 record into this week's matchup, the 5-3 Broncos won't be taking anything for granted Sunday in Charlotte.

Everyone in the Denver locker room knows that given the amount of talent in the league, any team is dangerous.

"Never judge a team by their record," safety Rahim Moore said. "I don't care if they're 0-11, 0-16, 16-0, it doesn't matter. You watch the film and every team has big-time players. They have a great two backs that can run you over, (joke) you, they can do it all, great quarterback, (wide receiver) Steve Smith, (wide receiver) Brandon LaFell, the tight ends make big-time plays. When you're watching film, they're good versus Chicago, versus Atlanta, they show some signs of play-making ability so you always have to be aware of that."

A closer look at many of Carolina's six losses shows that the Panthers have been far more competitive than their record indicates. Only one of the team's losses has come by more than six points. Carolina's ability to keep games close has caught the attention of quarterback Peyton Manning.

"We are all about the Carolina Panthers," Manning said. "I think their record is misleading to the kind of team they have. They're coming off a big win on the road. They'll be fired up at home and so it's about trying to get better every week."

Despite sitting in last place in the NFC South, the Panthers have shown that they can play with anyone, including the class of the NFC.

Carolina led the undefeated Atlanta Falcons for nearly the entire fourth quarter until a 40-yarder by Atlanta kicker Matt Bryant with five seconds to play spoiled the upset.

Just two weeks ago, the Panthers again led one of the league's top teams, the Chicago Bears, until the final seconds, as the Bears needed a game-winning field goal as time expired to pull out the victory. It was a particularly notable effort against a 7-1 Chicago team that has won by 16 or more points in five of its seven victories.

"Right now we're not judging the Carolina Panthers by their record," safety Rahim Moore said. "We're watching film and they make big plays. A lot of times they came close to winning some big-time (games)... so it's going to be a tough challenge for us this weekend."

## **FOX RETURNS TO CAROLINA**

One of the most prominent storylines going into Sunday's Broncos-Panthers matchup is Head Coach John Fox's return to Charlotte to face a team he coached from 2002-10.

Fox has admitted he looks forward to seeing family and old friends, but has said that come gameday, it will be like any other week.

"I've been with so many teams that I've had a lot of homecomings, so it'll be another one," Fox said of returning to Carolina. "I think if you're in this business long enough, you have a lot of them. I still have a home there. I have a lot of close friends. I've had a lot of great relationships there over a nine-year period. It's always good to see old friends."

Though Fox has said more than once that Sunday will be just another game, his players believe that taking on his former team will add something to the table.

"I definitely understand what he's saying as far as you have to prepare like it's any other game," tight end Joel Dreessen said. "But it's going to be emotional on Sunday for him. Any time you spend a lot of time at a place, you're going to have some emotional attachment."

Fox's return to Carolina will undeniably be a factor in Sunday's game. Just not a big one.

"I guess there's always something there in that sort of thing, but it's like he told us today, it's just about the game," tight end Jacob Tamme said. "A lot of people will try to make things that aren't really there sometimes. When you spend a lot of time in a place, there's always that little factor. At the end of the day, it's about going and winning a game. That's what our goal is for this Sunday."

Sunday against Carolina, the Broncos will look to earn a victory for their head coach who was at the helm for the Panthers for nearly a decade. But it's not because of the opponent or the circumstances. Playing for Fox is a big part of Denver's motivation every week.

"He's our leader," Manning said. "Every week you want to win for your head coach. I've always believed that players should want to win for many reasons but one of them should be for their head coach. I can't speak for him, for what his emotions are or whatnot but it's an important game because it's the next game for us and it's

a tough team on the road against a defense that's probably improved more than anybody the past few weeks."

## **PREPARING FOR THE PASS RUSH**

Another week brings another imposing defensive front for Manning and the Broncos offense.

After shutting out a Cincinnati pass rush that ranked among the league's best going into last week's game, Denver takes on another formidable front four this week against the Panthers, who are currently tied for sixth in the NFL with 24 sacks.

What makes Carolina's rush notable is that it has shown the ability to get to the quarterback with just its defensive line. Defensive ends Charles Johnson and Greg Hardy have recorded 7.5 and 6.5 sacks, respectively, with defensive tackle Dwan Edwards adding five.

"I think all defenses, you kind of start up front," Manning said. "They are active guys up front, they have a lot of sacks. Most of those sacks have come just by rushing four, which tells you they can get pressure with just rushing four. But they have all the blitzes as well. I think we've got a real challenge up front, running the ball and pass-protecting against their front seven. Hopefully we will step up to that challenge."

The Panthers' pass rush has been at its best in recent weeks, as Carolina brought down Bears quarterback Jay Cutler six times in Week 8, including three by Hardy. In the Panthers' last game, a win over the Washington Redskins, they recorded four sacks of Robert Griffin III. The increase in quarterback pressure has played a big role in the team's recent success as a defensive unit. Carolina is allowing just under 18 points per game over its past four contests.

"Carolina is tough," wide receiver Eric Decker said. "They are one of the teams that seems like, defensively, is always keeping teams under 20 points. We have a big challenge ahead of us. They've really improved, as well, from the beginning of the season until now. We have to make sure we take care of our jobs. You can never be overconfident because every Sunday you have to show up and play and these guys can play. We have to make sure we take care of our business."

Taking on a unit that seems to be hitting its stride means the Broncos will need another strong week of practice and preparation.

"They're very talented on both sides of the ball," Tamme said. "Their defense has a lot of talented guys up front. They've got some guys that can make some plays over there, and we need a good week of preparation."

# A Dynamic Duo

Sam Davis  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 7, 2012

Peyton Manning and Eric Decker have formed a connection and produced big numbers in recent weeks, a credit to the commitment that both have made and kept.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Patience and practice are what have helped Peyton Manning and Eric Decker become one of the most efficient quarterback-receiver tandems in the NFL.

The pair has connected on seven touchdowns in the last five games and four in the last two. It's not a coincidence that they seem to be getting more difficult to stop with each game that passes.

"I think in any relationship, whether it's a significant other or a teammate, the more time you get the better it always develops," Decker said. "I think the more we get on the same page, the more we understand nonverbal cues, certain routes and how to read defenses. All of those things, you can use to your advantage offensively. We're definitely clicking more as a unit offensively."

It starts on the practice fields, where Manning and his receivers use repetition to create chemistry and consistency. The pass-catchers learn exactly how Manning wants things done, and Manning learns how and where each receiver is most effective.

Even during training camp practices in the August afternoon heat, not a moment was wasted. While the coaches worked with the special teams units, Manning would grab a receiver or two and head to the opposite end zone to work on timing routes. Months later, it's paying off in big ways.

"I'd say (our chemistry) is a lot better than where it was Week 1," Decker said.

It might start on the practice fields, but it certainly doesn't end there. Part of what makes Manning so special - and what is making the Broncos offense something special - is the work put in when coaches aren't watching.

"When we have certain things we need to work on, Peyton grabs everybody and we all work on it together," Decker said. "We're finally in that groove and finding that it's paying off -- all the little details that always help you in big situations."

Opponents - such as Panthers Head Coach Ron Rivera - are taking notice.

"(Decker is) a smart football player and a football player that understands what Peyton is looking for," Rivera said. "I think any time you have that kind of rapport with a quarterback and a receiver, a quarterback and a (running) back, a quarterback and a tight end, you'll have success. I think that's what happened. They developed."

The communication has also improved, both in-game and in the film room. Decker said the way the offense communicates on the sidelines between drives has become more fluid and efficient. In the film room, the way the group analyzes game tape is a more collaborative effort.

With that comes a greater learning capacity, as all of the players on the offense can digest new information at a faster rate.

"The idea is being able to add more to your offense as the season progresses," Manning said. "'Hey, we can handle that. We can handle that change,' or that type of communication. You certainly want to prevent overloading guys and not letting them think too much. You want these guys to be able to play fast and play aggressive but the more games you play, the more experienced you should be and the better off you should be."

Four wins in the last five outings with an average of 31.6 points per game prove Manning's words to be true.

"We have a better understanding for one another," Decker said.

It's a relationship that, with a lot of time and effort, has come a long way since day one. While it might seem like they've reached their peak, there's still a long way to go before that happens.

"It takes a little while to get to know guys," Manning said. "I'm learning every week about my teammates and about myself in this new role. I think that's going to be ongoing the entire season. If you can have some success while you're learning, winning games, that's obviously a positive thing."

# Finishing Strong

Gray Caldwell  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 7, 2012

Through nine weeks, the Broncos have done the majority of their damage in the third and fourth quarters.

In the second half of games, Denver has outscored its opponents 166 to 67.

The team hopes that formula holds true for the second half of the season.

"It's all about these next eight games," tight end Jacob Tamme said. "Now it's on to the second half of the season and on to the Panthers. You look at it through sort of that lens, and you're able to see where you kind of stand, but then you come back and get ready to go one week at a time."

As the team enters the third quarter of the season, it will try to — at least — match its 3-1 performance in the second quarter of the slate.

Fox said that's the goal each quarter, and the Broncos are only one game off that pace in the first half of the campaign.

"This next quarter has two road games, that's the first thing that jumps out at you, and two division games," quarterback Peyton Manning said. "Even though it's a quarter, you still take those one at a time. We are all about the Carolina Panthers."

Overall, Fox said he has been pleased with the team's performance thus far, especially with all the excitement surrounding the addition of Manning before the season began.

Each of the Broncos' first eight opponents have featured a Pro Bowler at quarterback, part of an early stretch the team knew would test its mettle.

"Of course we looked at the first half of our schedule and six opponents were playoff teams from a year ago out of the eight (games), so we knew there were going to be some bumps," Head Coach John Fox said of his 5-3 squad. "We still have a whole half to play, and most times they count the full season, so we'll see what that brings us in the second half."

Riding a three-game win streak into Bank of America Stadium this Sunday, the team will look to perform in the second half of the season the way it has in the second half of games.

"Winning will always give you confidence, but at the same time you've got to always make sure you never get complacent," safety Rahim Moore said. "Every week, the games get bigger and bigger. Last week was a big game for us and this week's even better. We're ready, we're working hard and overall we're focused."

# Panthers Week: Wednesday Injury Report

Stuart Zaas  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 7, 2012

Below are the injury reports for Denver and Carolina after Wednesday's practices.

## DENVER BRONCOS

<b>PLAYER</b>	<b>INJURY</b>	<b>WEDNESDAY</b>
G Chris Kuper	Ankle	Did Not Participate
CB Tracy Porter	Illness	Did Not Participate
WR Eric Decker	Thigh	Limited
TE Virgil Green	Hamstring	Full
RB Willis McGahee	Knee	Full
WR Brandon Stokley	Knee	Full
WR Demaryius Thomas	Knee	Full

## CAROLINA PANTHERS

<b>PLAYER</b>	<b>INJURY</b>	<b>WEDNESDAY</b>
DE Antwan Applewhite	Hamstring	Did Not Participate
LB Thomas Davis	Knee	Did Not Participate
DT Dwan Edwards	Ankle	Did Not Participate
T Jordan Gross	Non-Injury Related	Did Not Participate
C Geoff Hangartner	Knee	Did Not Participate
DE Charles Johnson	Hip	Did Not Participate
DE Thomas Keiser	Elbow	Did Not Participate
RB Mike Tolbert	Head	Did Not Participate
DE Frank Alexander	Knee	Full

# Holliday Earns Weekly Honor

Stuart Zaas  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 7, 2012

When wide receiver Trindon Holliday fielded the kickoff to start the second half at Cincinnati on Sunday, he expected running back Lance Ball to tell him to take a knee.

Instead, Ball let him take a shot, and 105-yards later, Holliday was into the end zone and the Broncos' record book with the longest play in team history.

On Wednesday, the NFL named Holliday its AFC Special Teams Player of the Week, marking the first time the second-year player has earned that honor.

Holliday becomes the 23rd all-time AFC Special Teams Player of the Week in Broncos history, and the second this season after Matt Prater took home the honor for Week 4.

The award is the fifth individual weekly accolade for the Broncos this season, as following each of the team's wins, someone on the roster has earned an individual weekly honor. The Broncos' five weekly awards are tops among all NFL teams through nine weeks of play.

## 2012 DENVER BRONCOS WEEKLY AWARDS

WEEK	OPP	PLAYER	AWARD	STATS
1	vs.	CB Tracy	Defensive	Recorded eight tackles, five pass
4	Pit.	Porter	Special	breakups and an INT-TD
6	vs.	K Matt Prater	Teams	3-3 FGs and 4-4 PATs with touchbacks
8	Oak.	QB Peyton	Offensive	on all eight kickoffs
9	at	Manning	Defensive	Threw for 309 yards with one TD and
	S.D.	LB Wesley	Special	a 129.0 passer rating
	vs.	Woodyard	Teams	Made 13 tackles, one sack, one
	N.O.	WR Trindon		interception and one forced fumble
	at	Holliday		Returned a kickoff 105 yards for a
	Cin.			touchdown

## 2012 WEEKLY AWARDS

RANK	TEAM	AWARDS
1	Denver	5
2	N.Y. Giants	4
	Green Bay	4
5	Chicago	4
	Three Teams	3

# Panthers Prep for Peyton

Sam Davis  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 7, 2012

A strength for the Carolina Panthers in 2012 has been their defensive front four. On Sunday at Bank of America Stadium, Panthers Head Coach Ron Rivera will look for a continued push on the inside of the defensive line, hoping to be the first team to sack quarterback Peyton Manning in more than a month.

"Last year we didn't have that inside push," Rivera said in a conference call Wednesday. "This year, we do. I think the guys that are rushing for us on the inside have been outstanding. I think (DT) Dwan Edwards and (DT) Ron Edwards give us two stout bodies that can push the pocket and not allow the quarterback to step up. If the quarterback can't step up, he can't avoid that hard outside rush we're getting on the edge."

The outside rush that Rivera speaks of mainly consists of defensive ends Charles Johnson and Greg Hardy, who have combined for 14 sacks in 2012. As a team, the Panthers' 24 sacks — one more than Cincinnati had coming into last week's game — puts them in a tie for seventh in the NFL.

Behind the defensive line is rookie linebacker Luke Kuechly, one of the front-runners for the Defensive Rookie of the Year Award. The former Boston College Eagle and ninth overall draft pick ranks third in the NFL with 77 tackles, and leads all Panthers in that category by 25.

Rivera said Kuechly has been "tremendous" and is "emerging as a leader" of the Carolina defense.

In terms of coverage, Rivera knows it won't be easy to keep Manning from lighting up the scoreboard.

"Hope he has a bad day," Rivera said of how to beat the four-time NFL MVP.

Other than that, the Panthers defense will try to make it as difficult as possible for Manning to identify the defensive scheme, so that the quarterback is unable to adjust to what he sees.

"One thing that Peyton does is he tries to see what you're in, and once he knows it and has a good feel for it, he'll put his team in the best position to have success," Rivera said. "What you have to be able to do is you have to prevent that. You have to do the best you can in terms of moving around, disguising that and not giving him the same look or a true look."

Another aspect that presents a challenge for the Panthers to prepare for is the Denver return game. With wide receiver and return man Trindon Holliday making his impact felt last week against Cincinnati, Rivera will try to make sure the same thing doesn't happen to his club. He knows Holliday's abilities well because Carolina once considered adding him.

"I know he is a guy that we liked and looked at one time, too, but when he was on the waiver wire, we didn't have room," Rivera said. "I think Denver did a nice job. He has shown it. He was explosive last week. Now I've got an upset stomach having to worry about him as well."

# Broncos Continue to Earn Midseason Recognition

Sam Davis  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 7, 2012

On Tuesday, DenverBroncos.com posted a list of the many accolades the team has received at the halfway point of the season and in weeks prior.

On Wednesday, ESPN.com's Bill Williamson gave Denver some more recognition as he included a total of 11 Broncos on his All AFC West Midseason Team. The 11 Broncos — five on offense, five on defense and one on special teams — were the most players that Williamson selected from any team in the division.

The list of players include defensive end Elvis Dumervil, defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson, linebackers Von Miller and Wesley Woodyard, cornerback Champ Bailey, tackle Ryan Clady, quarterback Peyton Manning, running back Willis McGahee, receivers Eric Decker and Demaryius Thomas and return man Trindon Holliday.

Holliday was also named the AFC Special Teams Player of the Week on Wednesday for his performance at Cincinnati.

# Broncos at Bengals: Participation Breakdown

Sam Davis  
 DenverBroncos.com  
 November 7, 2012

## Playtime Percentage

A breakdown of Broncos' players participation in Sunday's Week 9 win at Cincinnati

<b>PLAYER</b>	<b>OFFENSIVE PLAYS</b>	<b>DEFENSIVE PLAYS</b>	<b>SPECIAL TEAMS PLAYS</b>
T R. Clady	63 (100%)	-	5 (16%)
G Z. Beadles	63 (100%)	-	5 (16%)
T O. Franklin	63 (100%)	-	5 (16%)
C D. Koppen	63 (100%)	-	2 (6%)
QB P. Manning	63 (100%)	-	-
WR D. Thomas	58 (92%)	-	1 (3%)
WR E. Decker	56 (89%)	-	1 (3%)
TE J. Dreessen	50 (79%)	-	-
G C. Kuper	47 (75%)	-	12 (39%)
WR B. Stokley	45 (71%)	-	3 (10%)
TE J. Tamme	34 (54%)	-	-
G M. Ramirez	28 (44%)	-	7 (23%)
TE V. Green	18 (29%)	-	5 (16%)
RB R. Hillman	13 (21%)	-	19 (61%)
WR M. Willis	13 (21%)	-	-
FB C. Gronkowski	12 (19%)	-	19 (61%)
RB L. Ball	2 (3%)	-	19 (61%)
T C. Clark	1 (2%)	-	20 (65%)
LB W. Woodyard	-	76 (100%)	5 (16%)
CB C. Harris	-	76 (100%)	9 (29%)
CB C. Bailey	-	76 (100%)	6 (19%)
S M. Adams	-	75 (99%)	-
DE E. Dumervil	-	73 (96%)	7 (23%)
S R. Moore	-	71 (93%)	-
LB V. Miller	-	70 (92%)	-
DE D. Wolfe	-	68 (89%)	6 (19%)
CB T. Carter	-	53 (70%)	16 (52%)
DT J. Bannan	-	34 (45%)	6 (19%)
LB D. Trevathan	-	32 (42%)	6 (19%)
DT K. Vickerson	-	29 (38%)	3 (10%)
S J. Leonhard	-	26 (34%)	-
DE R. Ayers	-	24 (32%)	10 (32%)
			6 (19%)

LB K. Brooking	-	23 (30%)	6 (19%)
DT M. Unrein	-	19 (25%)	12 (39%)
DE M. Jackson	-	6 (8%)	-
S D. Bruton	-	4 (5%)	26 (84%)
CB O. Bolden	-	2 (3%)	14 (45%)
LB N. Irving	-	-	26 (84%)
LB S. Johnson	-	-	17 (55%)
K M. Prater	-	-	11 (35%)
WR T. Holliday	-	-	9 (26%)
P B. Colquitt	-	-	8 (26%)
LS A. Brewer	-	-	8 (26%)
S D. Ihenacho	-	-	7 (23%)

